



TAMMING SCARLET

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

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Taming Scarlet

Jessica Gadziala

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“None of this book was written using AI tools. Each word was crafted with human hands.”

DEDICATION

To Hozier.

For writing the sluttiest yet most poetic music ever.

I mean... I'd crawl home to you if you want me to.

Just sayin'.

CHAPTER ONE

Julian

Playing babysitter to some spoiled heiress wasn't the career path that I had in mind for myself.

I wasn't even sure why I was entertaining this meeting with her billionaire father.

That's a lie.

I knew why.

The seven-figure paycheck was the only reason I'd agreed to at least speak to the man.

I didn't like to think of myself as driven by money, but you'd be a fool to turn down that kind of paycheck without at least hearing the details of the job opportunity.

That logic was what had me standing on the street staring up at the black steel and tinted, gleaming windows of Chandelier Industries.

Right there on the top floor, possibly looking down at me right now, was the CEO. Marcus Chandelier. A man who seemed to have a hand in just about every profitable business in the country from steel and oil to renewable energy and organic grocery stores.

I'd looked up the man's net worth when I'd gotten the email, thinking that the salary was a joke.

I figured, to a man worth eighty-two *billion*, a couple million bucks a year to watch his kid was chump change. Hell, it was almost ungenerous. But I guess you didn't get that rich by overpaying everyone who worked for you.

I made my way into the building ten minutes early, going through a surprisingly lengthy security checkpoint to step into the private elevator that led to the top floor.

On the ride up, I took the visitor's badge they'd affixed to my suit pocket and clipped it to my belt instead.

The doors slid open with a soft chime, welcoming me to the offices of Marcus Chandelier.

It was an enormous, empty space, save for the oversized reception desk manned by two young, attractive women in black dresses and subtle makeup, both their hair pulled back—one in a low ponytail, the other in a loose braid.

To the side of their desk was a seating area with only two chairs and a coffee table.

No TV.

No magazines.

Nothing.

"Mr. Flynn," one of the women, the brunette, greeted me with a hospitality smile. "Mr. Chandelier is expecting you," she said as she moved out from behind her desk and walked me past the seating area toward a door that blended in so well into the high-gloss oak wall that I hadn't seen it at first. "Go right in," she invited.

"Thanks," I said before moving into the office.

It was twice the size of the reception area with gleaming floors, floor-to-ceiling windows, its own seating area with four chairs and a coffee table, a mini bar, a TV, and, finally, a massive solid wood executive desk with a wall of full bookshelves behind it. All the books had been re-covered, though, to have a neutral tan palette.

Behind the desk was the man himself.

Marcus Chandelier was somewhere in his fifties with a tall, fit frame he had dressed in a suit that probably cost the downpayment on a luxury car. We weren't even going to talk about his watch. Or cufflinks.

He had classic good looks with dark hair streaked with some salt and pepper and piercing blue eyes.

"I didn't think you would come," he said by way of greeting.

"I didn't think I would either," I admitted as I approached his desk, reaching my arm across it for a handshake.

"And, yet, you're here," he said, waving to the chair to my side.

"Seems that way," I agreed, lowering down into the seat as he hit a button on his desk.

Not ten seconds later, the door was opening, and the blonde receptionist was pushing in a silver coffee cart.

"Can I get you a cup?" she asked.

Only because she seemed eager to get the task done, I nodded. "Black."

She was quick to get us each a cup before scurrying back out, leaving the cart behind as she went.

"So, you have a job offer for me," I said when Marcus finally sat.

At the mention of the job, though, he... sighed.

"I do," he agreed, reaching for his coffee, but just turning the mug in his hand on the surface of the desk.

“This is where you’re supposed to tell me about it, sir,” I invited.

“Ex-military, right?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Special operations, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes,” I said, not volunteering more since I couldn’t even if I wanted to.

“That’s good. I think that experience will be vital to this position.”

My brows furrowed at that.

“To protect your daughter?” I asked. “From whom?”

“Herself, mostly,” he said with a smile that went nowhere near his eyes. “There are threats, of course. On my life. And, by extension, hers. When you get to a certain stature in the world, someone is always out to blame you for something, to want you to pay for some real or imagined slight. I’ve always had my own security for any social events.”

“And your daughter hasn’t?” I asked.

“She has. She certainly has,” he added on a sigh. “The thing is, Mr. Flynn, no one has lasted. I need someone who is serious about this job, and won’t leave me in the lurch because they had a bad day.”

Christ.

His daughter sounded like a fucking nightmare.

But if I could put up with the whiny new recruits while serving, I was sure I could tolerate some bratty rich kid.

“I understand. I’ve never been one to quit when things get hard,” I said.

Quite the opposite.

Everything I have ever lost in my life had claw marks on it.

“That’s good to hear. As for the job itself, it is simple work, really. Being wherever my daughter is, keeping an eye

on her, making sure no one hurts her or gets into any... sticky situations.”

Did he have no control over his kid?

What kind of ‘sticky situations’ could a child be getting into?

“Alright,” I agreed.

“In case this was not made clear in the email, this is a live-in position.”

A live-in position?

Meaning that if I chose to do this, I would be committing to a year, at least, of nonstop work. Never getting time off. No way to get some space.

That was a big ask.

Though, yeah, the salary make a lot more sense.

Could I do that?

Lose a year of my life for a fat paycheck at the end?

I thought I just might be able to do that.

“All expenses are included, of course. You will have no expenses while in this position.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “What about time off?”

“You may choose one day a week, so long as it is not a weekend.”

That was an odd request.

But maybe he liked to go out on weekends, and wanted a man around to keep his little girl safe.

It didn’t matter.

It wasn’t like I had anywhere to be on the weekends myself.

“Will there be other hired help around?” I asked, thinking maybe the kid would have a nanny or something, and just me as an extra set of eyes.

“A driver, of course,” Marcus said. “Twice weekly cleaning staff. And the occasional in-home massage or facial.”

In-home massage and facial?

For a child?

The lifestyles of the rich and famous, I guess.

“You will, of course, have your own room and private bath. But the common areas will be shared.”

“Will your wife be around?” I asked, not thrilled at the idea of having no one else around to take care of the kid. I was no au pair.

“My wife passed many years ago,” Marcus said, eyes going sad in a blink.

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling like I’d ripped open a wound. “What are your hours then, sir?” I asked.

“My hours?”

“When will you be at work and at home?”

“I can’t imagine why that would be relevant.”

Christ.

Was he dense or just that detached from his daughter’s care? No wonder she was such a handful.

“It would be good to know when you would and wouldn’t be around.”

To that, Marcus’s brows pinched.

“Around? No. No. My daughter has her own condo, Mr. Flynn.”

“You don’t live with your child?” I asked, trying to keep the outrage out of my voice, and mostly failing.

“Mr. Flynn, may I call you Julian?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“Julian, how old do you think my daughter is?” he asked.

“I have no idea. But I’m starting to think a lot older than I originally figured.”

To that, Marcus let out a dry little laugh as he leaned back in his chair.

“I was wondering, given your line of questioning,” he said, leaning forward to snag a picture off of his desk. “Scarlet is twenty-four,” he said, turning the picture for me to see.

The girl in the picture wasn’t twenty-four, but maybe in her early teens. All arms and legs with a big smile and icy blue eyes like her father’s.

“Twenty-four,” I said, brows going low. “Why does she need live-in help then?” I asked.

“Scarlet keeps... her own hours,” he said, choosing his words carefully. A little *too* carefully. There was something he wasn’t saying.

And I wasn’t about to take a job without knowing what I was getting into.

“And by that, you mean...” I invited.

Another sigh from Marcus.

And more mug swirling.

“Okay, son. Here’s the thing. Scarlet has become a bit... wild since she became a legal adult. She parties a lot. She’s out at all hours of the night. For her own safety, our family’s reputation, and my own peace of mind as a father, I need to know she isn’t getting too out of control. So I have been hiring people to keep an eye on her since she finished college.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t found someone who is up to the task as of yet. Scarlet can be... a lot. I need someone who can handle that.”

“I understand,” I said, my mind racing as I tried to wrap my head around this new information, and how I felt about a much different sort of position, on the spot. “Was Scarlet the one to fire the previous guards?”

“Technically, she can’t fire any of you,” Marcus said. “She understands very well that there are consequences if she doesn’t agree to this arrangement,” he said.

That was rich-person-speak for he would cut her off. And spoiled princesses like that couldn’t exist without their monthly allowance. Even if they did nothing to earn it.

“And yet?” I prompted, knowing the position was presently vacant.

“Scarlet can make things... difficult if she doesn’t get her way. I believe the former guards simply had enough and left.”

“So, if I take this position, and she tells me at some point to leave, to get out of her apartment...”

“You’re under no obligation to do so. She might complain and be miserable to be around, but she won’t call the police or even the doorman to try to get you thrown out. She knows better.”

“I see,” I said, taking a deep breath.

She sounded like a nightmare.

The question was, though, could I tolerate that for a year to be able to have a good chunk of my retirement stashed away?

I’d served in the military.

I’d dealt with extreme conditions, being stuck in small places for extended periods of time with people I didn’t even like. I’d been miserable and frustrated day in and out.

But I’d gotten through that.

There was no way one pampered little heiress could be too much for me to tolerate for a year.

At my silence, Marcus’s head tipped to the side, watching me. “You’ve never heard of my daughter?” he asked.

“Why would I have?” I asked. “Is she famous?” Not that I was all that familiar with who was famous these days either.

“She’s... famous in the way a lot of young people are famous these days,” he said, waving a hand like he thought

that was ridiculous.

“I don’t understand,” I admitted, making Marcus reach for his phone, tapping around for a moment, then clucking his tongue.

“She has about two-point-five million followers on her social media accounts.”

“And that’s a lot?” I asked, having no idea what was enough to be considered famous these days.

“For someone who isn’t famous *for* something, yes.”

“So, she’s famous for what?”

“Being young, beautiful, and privileged,” he said. “For having opportunities and sharing them on her social media.”

What a vapid way to live.

But, I guess, when you got addicted to that external validation, it was a real bitch of a drug. Always seeking strangers’ approval. Feeling like nothing is really “real” unless two million people see and approve of it.

“Does she earn an income from that?”

“She gets brand deals. And she gets many, many free things.”

“That’s ironic,” I mumbled to myself.

“What is?”

“That she, someone who can afford to get anything she wants, gets sent free things.”

“That it is, son. I won’t pretend to understand her social media... thing. But it seems important to her. And I just want to make sure that what others share of her is somewhat as carefully cultivated as what she shares of herself.”

Something went down.

I didn’t know what it was.

Panty-less paparazzi shots.

A sex tape.

Something.

Otherwise, dear old Dad wouldn't feel the need to fork out so much money.

"Is Scarlet your only child?" I asked.

"She is," he confirmed. "My hope was to leave this to her someday," he said, waving around his office. "But the shareholders won't hear of it if she doesn't start at least *appearing* more in control."

"I understand your concerns," I said, nodding. No company wanted to be connected to an out-of-control young woman who spat in the face of her family legacy.

"Do you have any questions?"

"I do."

"Such as?"

"If I am with your daughter, say in a nightclub of some sort, and she is being what I deem to be inappropriate, what am I permitted to do?"

"Do you get to pull her out of that situation, is what you are asking."

"Yes."

"Well," he said, exhaling. "Not by her hair," he said with a small smile. "But I feel an... extraction is appropriate if she is not toeing the line."

"And, again, the ramifications..."

"There will be none. Not unless Scarlet wants to learn what it is like to work for minimum wage. And believe me, son, she does not want that."

"Okay," I said, nodding. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"Is your passport up to date?" he asked.

"My passport?"

"Scarlet has been known to fly anywhere in the world on a whim. I need to know you will be able to travel with her."

“I have all my documents.”

“Okay. Then I guess I only have one question left.”

“Do I want the job?” I filled in for him.

“Well, Julian, do you?”

Hell fucking no, I didn't want the job.

But that didn't mean I wasn't going to take it.

“Yes,” I agreed, saying a silent prayer that I wasn't making the worst decision of my life. I had half a dozen other possible jobs lined up. Ones that would require significantly less of my time. And cause only a fraction of the frustration.

But I was trying to look at the big picture here.

I wanted that money.

And if I had to babysit a wild rich girl for a year, then so be it.

“Wonderful,” Marcus said, getting to his feet, relief clear on his features.

“I would like for you to start today, if you can have your arrangements settled by this evening.”

“I can,” I said. How hard was it to pack a few bags?

“Then my secretary will have all your paperwork waiting for you, as well as Scarlet's address, elevator and room keys, a credit card for your expenses, and information regarding her driver.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed, accepting his hand shake.

“I have a good feeling about you, Julian. I think you might be the only man in the world capable of taming my Scarlet.”

I had no idea at the time just how right he would be about that.

Or what lengths I would need to go to to accomplish that goal.

CHAPTER TWO

Scarlet

There was an incessant buzzing noise that had a grumble escaping me as I rolled over in bed.

“Ugh. Shut up,” I grumbled to myself, not placing the sound as it stopped, then continued again.

The sun was screaming in my bedroom, making me squeeze my eyes shut as soon as I attempted to open them.

In retrospect, those last two shots of tequila had not been a great idea.

It had been a bachelorette party. It wasn't like I could say no.

“What?” I barked as the noise stopped and began again.

I'd been louder than I'd intended, making my dog let out a little yip of objection.

“You probably need to go potty,” I said to him without opening my eyes.

Hugh let out another yip that had me folding up in bed, arms going high up over my head.

My mascara was sticking together, desperately trying to keep my eyes closed. But after a few blinks, I looked over at Hugh, sitting there in all of his three-pound glory, his gorgeous merle fur still perfect after rolling around in bed for hours.

I was sure I was not so lucky.

“Okay. Come on, buddy,” I said as I swung my legs off of the bed.

Hugh made a mad dash for his steps, flying down them with a speed he shouldn’t have been capable of with his tiny legs.

I caught a look at myself in the mirror as I moved out of my bedroom and into the common space.

I’d been right.

I was not as lucky as Hugh.

I *looked* like I’d had one too many tequila shots.

My pink silk sleep mask was up on my forehead, making my dark brown hair push up as well. The rest of it was all tangled.

My black liner and mascara were smeared under my eyes and what was left of my red lipstick was a violent slash across my cheek.

As I let Hugh out onto the patio with his specially designed little potty spot full of wood mulch, I lifted my ever-present phone, zooming in on my smeared lipstick, and taking a picture.

I posted it to my story.

*No smear, twenty-four-hour wear, my ass. What gives
@LaurieLoreCosmetics*

By the time I finished posting, the damn noise started up again.

And I was finally awake enough to recognize it for what it was.

The intercom.

Someone wanted to be let up.

Had I ordered food before I passed out?

Or have an appointment? A massage? Nails?

I had no idea.

I marched over to unlock the elevator then made my way over to the kitchen, turning on my espresso machine.

I was still tamping down the grounds into the portafilter when my door slid open.

When no one greeted me, I turned to look over my shoulder to see who'd come in.

"I don't know you," I said, slipping the portafilter into place, then turning on the machine.

"And yet you let me in," he said.

That was a sexy voice.

All deep and smooth.

It was the kind of voice that shivered over you.

My gaze looked over him with more interest.

And, yeah, the rest of him went with that voice.

Sexy as all hell.

He had to be around six-three or four with wide shoulders under his navy suit—decent quality, but definitely not designer. I bet if you peeled those clothes layers off of him, you would find corded muscle and washboard abs.

As for the face, well, it belonged on billboards.

Chiseled jaw, a stern brow, etched cheekbone hollows, and these deep, dark brown eyes surrounded by the kind of thick

lashes I had to pay for.

“Who are you?” I asked as the smell of espresso filled the open space.

“It’s freezing in here,” he said instead of answering, his gaze moving over toward where the door to the balcony was open.

“My dog is out there,” I objected when he walked over there to close the door.

“Your dog, if you can call it that, is on the couch,” he corrected me.

“Oh, Hugh, do you want munchies?” I called, watching him fly off the couch and rush toward me, doing his little dance in a circle as I pulled one of the bags of his prepared fresh food out of the fridge, emptied it onto a plate, warmed it, then set it on the floor for him.

“There is a strange man standing in your home, and you’re not concerned.”

I couldn’t tell if that was a question or a statement.

I grabbed my espresso, then went to the fridge to plop one of my coffee ice cubes into it, so I could chug it.

I hated espresso.

But my hangover wasn’t willing to wait for me to go out to get, or have someone deliver, one of my favorite mixed drinks.

“I’m assuming you are my new babysitter,” I said.

They had a look, all of them.

I had no idea where my father found them all, but they were all dressed well, with good posture, and that stern, disapproving look to them. Like it offended them on a personal level to be working for my father, like someone was forcing them to do it instead of paying them handsomely for the task.

It seemed like it didn’t matter how many of these guys I scared away, more were always at the ready.

“You could say that,” he agreed. “I’m Julian Flynn,” he said.

“I doubt you’ll be around long enough for me to learn that,” I said, reaching for my phone on the counter as it chimed time and time again.

New message from LaurieLoreCosmetics.

That sounded about right. Nothing got the attention of a company faster than a subpar review from someone with a few million followers.

I decided to let them sweat that, checking the comments on my most recent selfie from the night before.

It was all normal stuff. Both love and hate. Nothing strange.

Until my eyes found those two words that had my stomach dropping.

My dove.

I had a whole-body reaction to those words, my body stiffening as I clicked over to the poster’s profile.

There was no personal information, as usual. Just reposts of all of my posts with his own long, rambling diatribe about how I needed to stop ignoring him, how I didn’t know how good he could be for me.

Blah blah fucking blah.

I blocked that account, fully aware that doing so was like beheading a hydra. But I figured this would at least make his life more difficult.

“Are you listening?” the bodyguard asked, making me glance up from under my lashes.

“No,” I admitted. I hadn’t even been aware he’d been speaking.

It wasn't rudeness on my part, per se. It was just that anytime I saw those words—*my dove*—it created this ringing in my ears that drowned out everything else.

“Charming,” he scowled.

“Your room is down the hall,” I said, waving toward the hall I'd just emerged from. There were only two bedrooms. Originally, there had been three, but I'd taken one over as a walk-in closet. It wasn't like I needed guest space. No one stayed over.

When I looked up again, I saw the bodyguard glancing around the open space.

There wasn't much in life I loved quite as much as my penthouse.

While the floor-to-ceiling windows were tinted to keep too much heat out, they still managed to soak the place in sunshine.

It was a very *white* space. White paint on the walls, white fireplace, white-washed hardwood floors, off-white sofas around my glossy, round, ash wood coffee table.

There was a white dining table and chairs that separated the living and kitchen.

The kitchen was all white cabinets and quartz countertops.

It wasn't everyone's thing, but I found the white to be clean and comforting.

I couldn't help but wonder, though, what this man thought as he looked at it.

Cold. Sterile.

I'd heard those things more than a few times in the past.

Whatever.

It wasn't their house.

It wouldn't be his for long, either.

No one ever lasted. There was no reason to believe this one would.

I waited for him to disappear, then made my way down the hall as well.

My bedroom continued the white aesthetic. My king-sized bed was white and tufted, the bedsheets off-white linen, even the carpet was mostly white with a light tan pattern.

Moving through my room into my bathroom, I found more quartz, a massive soaking tub, and a walk-in shower.

Walking in front of the mirror, I yanked off my sleep mask, then reached for my makeup wipes, cleaning up the mess of my liner, mascara, and lipstick. Finished with that, I ran a brush through my tangles before pulling my hair up and away from my face.

I just wanted to go get some good coffee.

But I'd already missed my nighttime skincare routine, so I took the extra five minutes to get my morning one done, leaving my skin dewy and fresh looking. You'd never know I'd spent the night dehydrating myself.

I brushed my teeth then went into my closet to grab an outfit.

There was no choice to just throw on yoga pants and a sweatshirt. Not when I was leaving the house. Not when every private citizen was now practically a paparazzo, snapping pictures, dragging you in the caption, then shamelessly tagging you when you looked the slightest bit less put-together than usual.

I still cringed when I remembered the pictures someone had snapped of me as a teenager, right after I'd walked in on my boyfriend cheating on me. Makeup running, nose red, eyes puffy.

I never let myself slip in public like that again.

No true emotions, no matter how shitty I was feeling.

I opted for a pair of on-trend loose leg clean denim—*cut-outs are out this year*, claimed all the experts—and paired it with a bright pop of pink sweater—*Barbiecore is still all the rage*—before grabbing a pair of ballet flats. I grumbled as I

slipped them on. I was a heel girl. But heels, apparently, were also out.

I reminded myself that it was still okay to wear heels on a night out. It was just a fashion-no to wear them during the day now.

Finished, I grabbed my wallet and key, then scooped up Hugh, and made my way out of the door.

I was only maybe halfway down the street when I heard my name being called out.

I ignored that.

It wasn't uncommon for someone to call out to me, but I didn't feel under any obligation to turn around and walk back to someone on the street. If they were ahead of me or next to me or something, that was different. But I was trying to remind myself that I didn't owe them backtracking time.

Not two minutes later though, I felt a strong hand close around my upper arm, pulling me to a stop.

"The fuck are you doing?" that deep, sexy voice growled at me.

He had a good growl, too.

"Going to get coffee," I said, trying to yank my arm away, but his hand only gripped me tighter.

"I need to be with you," he insisted.

"That's not my problem," I said, yanking away a little harder this time.

I think the only reason he released me was because it was a crowded street, and some people were looking.

"It's your job to keep your eye on me. So... do your job," I said, then turned and started walking again.

Bitchy?

Yes.

Did he deserve it?

Probably not.

I was just resentful about having these never-ending babysitters. It seemed like as soon as I got rid of one, a new one popped back up. I didn't think I ever got longer than two or three days between them.

It was like I'd never left home, like I was still a damn child.

The thing was, I couldn't exactly put my foot down, and insist they leave my house, my life. Because if I did that, my father would financially cut me off. It was his trust. He could change the terms on a whim.

Sure, I *did* earn my own money. And by many people's standards, it was a lot of money.

It simply wasn't enough to keep my penthouse, to continue to eat all my meals out of the house, to go wherever I wanted on vacation, to buy whatever clothes I desired.

Maybe that made me spoiled, but if my father wanted to point fingers on whose fault that was, he'd have to direct that finger toward himself. I was a product of the childhood he'd provided. I got everything I wanted. I went on luxurious vacations with him and my mom.

Then, of course, after my mom died, leaving me all alone save for my wretched nanny, since he was always at work, he overcompensated for his absence with monetary things.

If he didn't like who I'd become, the blame was squarely on his shoulders.

And yet, I was forced to deal with these invasive bodyguards.

Not to sound like a complete twat, but some of them were fucking creeps. It didn't matter that some of them were old enough to *be* my father, I'd caught several of them peeping in on me when I changed or when I was in the shower.

Even the ones I thought were decent guys ended up doing something that pissed me off or made me uncomfortable enough to become such a monster that they had no choice but to quit.

The last one, a guy I'd caught taking pictures of me when I had a face and hair mask on in the privacy of my own damn home, had been run out of the penthouse thanks to extended and relentless sleep deprivation. I waited until he passed out, then woke his ass up with some loud noise or another.

Three days was all it took to send him packing after that. Not before telling me exactly what he thought of my *spoiled*, *bratty*, and *selfish* behavior, though.

There hadn't been a single 'good guy' in the bunch so far, so I was under no delusions about this one.

All that handsome probably let him get away with shit that the other, less attractive, men who'd been pushed into my life couldn't.

I had my eye on him, that was all I could say.

He would do something shady as hell eventually.

They all did.

Then I'd have to figure out how to run him out.

Something about the way he carried himself, though, made me think he wouldn't be as easy as the rest.

I reached for the door at the coffee shop, only to see his arm shoot out over my head, grabbing it instead, and pulling it open for me.

Good manners didn't mean he was a good guy, I reminded myself as I moved inside without so much as a *Thank you*.

As I waited in line, I caught him in my periphery. Not behind me, expecting me to pay for his coffee like most of the others would, even though I knew they all had their own expense cards, but standing over near the door.

His dark eyes scanned the room. Almost like he was looking for threats.

What was this guy, ex-military?

Did he expect someone to shoot up the place?

Or, maybe, to rush in and kidnap me for ransom?

I mean, that wasn't that far-fetched, actually.

Once, while on vacation abroad, there had been a near-miss incident meant to extort my father.

I'd been twelve and shoved into a car as I walked past the open door.

Luckily for me, and unluckily for them, I was smart enough to just... scoot across the backseat and exit the other side door then scream bloody murder.

Last I heard, they were *still* serving time for attempted kidnapping and extortion once they found a letter in their car.

You didn't fuck with my father's lawyers.

They nailed those guys to the wall.

That said, there hadn't been any issues like that since.

It was a lot easier to kidnap a beanpole twelve-year-old than it was a grown-ass woman.

I grabbed my caramel iced coffee, and my whipped cream cup for Hugh, and made my way back out onto the street.

As we stood there waiting for Hugh to finish eating his treat, my gaze slid to the bodyguard.

"You should have gotten a coffee," I said, taking a long sip of mine. "It's going to be a late night," I informed him.

His gaze slid down me, then back up, eyes full of a million judgments.

"I'm sure it will be."

That was it.

Most of the other bodyguards at least, you know, acted like human beings. Engaged me in conversation on occasion. Some even tried to kiss my ass, to be on my good side. Hoping that, I don't know, my father would give them a bonus because I liked them.

This guy didn't seem to give a shit what I thought of him.

Despite myself, I liked that about him.

I picked up and tossed Hugh's cup, then picked up Hugh himself, and turned in the direction of home.

I needed to finish my coffee, down some electrolytes, recover a little bit from the night before, then go through the exhaustive routine of getting myself ready for another night on the town.

"Miss Chandelier!" the doorman, Henry, greeted me with his grandfatherly warmth. I mean, at least, I imagined it was grandfatherly. My own grandfather had been a cold, detached, judgmental asshole. "Someone left these for you," he said, holding out a small bouquet of pink roses with a note attached.

My dove.

That was what was on the front of the envelope.

My stomach plummeted as my heart lodged up in my throat.

Twice in one day.

And this time, at my damn home.

It wasn't like I thought I had even the illusion of privacy. I was a public figure. You could literally look up my address online.

That was why I lived in a manned building.

At least no one was getting in without permission.

That didn't mean they couldn't leave me gifts, though.

"Thanks, Henry," I said, forcing a smile that ached, it was so fake as I took the flowers.

I could feel the bodyguard's gaze on me as we climbed in the elevator together, then as we exited on the top floor.

I didn't even go into my apartment to get rid of the flowers.

I tossed them right in the damn garbage chute.

Again, I could feel his gaze on me.

But he said nothing.

Maybe this one wouldn't be that frustrating after all.

I couldn't believe just how wrong I would turn out to be on that, though.

CHAPTER THREE

Julian

She surprised me in one way only.

She was unexpectedly... quiet.

Maybe that was because she lived alone, but some part of me had been expecting her to talk my damn ear off about frivolous shit endlessly.

But she hardly even spoke to me.

Hell, she almost never even looked at me.

Sure, that was rude in its own way. But I definitely preferred the silence to her pestering me nonstop.

I also noticed that she was a different person in her home than on the street. At home, she was a little scattered, always having to backtrack and double-check things. On the street, she was cool, calm, and collected. An heiress, through and through.

I guess when you had a public persona, you needed to have that air about you.

I wondered if she even noticed the little trio of young women who'd gaped at her and tried to snap quick pictures when she was waiting for her dog to eat its whipped cream.

As for the flower thing, well, I thought it was maybe from an ex trying to win her back. She hadn't even read the card, which made me think she already knew who it was from, and wanted nothing to do with them.

When the buzzer rang that evening, it turned out to be a massive chopped salad and three different kinds of wraps.

I had no idea if she ordered so much to feed me, or if she was simply that indecisive. But she really only picked at the food as she walked around the apartment with these fucking gold stickers under her eyes and her freshly washed and dried hair in big ass curlers on top of her head.

She did this, I might add, in nothing but a t-shirt and panties.

I get that she was likely used to having people around the house, invading her privacy, so she started to almost see all of us as furniture, but I wasn't exactly immune to the sight of her long legs and half her fucking ass exposed in her cheeky panties when she reached up above her head for something in a cabinet.

I wasn't made of stone.

And she was drop-dead motherfucking gorgeous.

I honestly hadn't been prepared for all that pretty when I made my way into her penthouse and found her standing there looking like she'd just gotten up, despite it being past ten in the morning.

Sure, her makeup was smeared, and she looked bleary-eyed and dehydrated, but, fuck, pretty.

That gangly kid in the picture Marcus had on his desk had curved out in all my favorite ways. Long, soft thighs, flare of hip, high ass, and a great rack.

Then that face.

Christ, that face.

She had somewhat square features with a very defined jaw, pillowy pink lips, and those ice-blue eyes surrounded by dark lashes.

Then all that long, silky hair that I couldn't help picturing wrapping around my fist and pulling.

“Fuck,” I hissed, raking a hand down my face as I made my way down the hall toward my room, wanting to put some of my shit away now that I was reasonably sure she wasn't going to rush out without me.

But to get to my room, I first had to pass hers.

Her door was wide open.

And there she was with her back to me, pulling off the shirt she'd been wearing all day. It was a task that took longer than usual since she was trying not to dislodge her curlers.

Which meant I got a long moment to let my gaze move over her with nothing but her panties on.

She'd already changed those for the night.

She seemed concerned about panty lines because she'd opted for a fucking thong that left nothing to the imagination.

My cock stiffened as I imagined her bent over my knee, that perfect ass splayed over my lap, and my hand coming down on one of her ass cheeks as she gasped and writhed into the pain and pleasure sensation.

Shaking my head, I continued down the hall, partially closing the door to my room as I stood there for a moment, head tipped back, trying to bring some order to the chaos in my body.

This job was not going to be easy if I was walking around with a semi half the fucking time.

Rolling my neck, I turned my focus away from her, looking around my new home for the foreseeable future.

I'd lucked out that she hadn't taken her all-white-everything aesthetic out on the guest room.

Sure, the walls were white, but it didn't seem like anything in the penthouse was painted any other shade. It was probably how it had been when she'd moved in.

But the bed itself was similar to her white tufted one, only this one was black. As was the bedding.

There was a framed TV on the wall across from the bed, a walk-in closet, and a bathroom the size of my entire damn apartment.

Again, the bathroom had white walls, but the floating sink cabinet was black, as were the tiles in the stall shower.

I knew that the all-white thing was popular among influencers, but it all came off like a hospital to me. I was glad for a little darkness in my personal space.

By the time I finished hanging up my suits, and putting my toiletries away in the shower and sink drawers, I could hear the click of heels in the hallway.

I damn sure wasn't letting this woman sneak out on me again.

I grabbed my phone off of the charger, then made my way into the hall, finding her letting her dog out on the balcony again.

She didn't seem to have a dog walker or anything like that. But for a dog as minuscule as Hugh, her massive penthouse was like walking a damn football field several times a day.

As for Scarlet, she was clearly ready to party.

Because that was a fuckuva lot of skin on display.

She'd gone with an emerald green skintight dress that showed off most of her legs, and was cut low in the back.

I hated how I noticed there was no way she could wear a bra in a dress like that.

"That's my good boy," she cooed at Hugh as he ran back inside, all proud of himself. "Are you gonna take a nap while I

go out?” she asked as Hugh ran toward the couch and made his way up his steps to plop down on a pillow.

It seemed the dog was used to his owner’s out-all-night schedule.

I, on the other hand, was going to need to adjust.

Farm life as a kid and teen, then life in the service, made me a very strictly up-with-the-sun sort of person. Even without an alarm clock set, I was up by five in the morning. Out of the service and off of the farm, that was convenient enough to allow me to get a workout in before the day really got going.

The problem was, being up at five meant I was usually dead on my feet by ten at night.

It was nine-thirty as Scarlet checked the contents of her wristlet, then attached her phone to it, ready to go out for the night.

“Here,” she said, finally turning to me for the first time, giving me a look at the front of her dress and the way it hugged her soft curves.

I forced myself not to focus on the way that, even without a bra, her tits were sitting high, just aching to have a man close his hands around and squeeze, to tease with his fingers and tongue, to slide his cock between.

No.

Fuck.

I needed to focus.

“What is this?” I asked as she thrust something rectangular at me. As I took it, it was heavy in my hand.

“A battery bank,” she said. “I don’t have anywhere to hold it. You have pockets.”

“And by that you mean *Do you mind carrying this for me, right?*” I asked as I shoved it into my pocket.

“Whatever,” she said, then turned to her dog again. “You be a good boy and I’ll give you a yummy you-know-what

when I get home, okay?” she asked, rubbing his head, and then making her way toward the door without another word to me.

When she passed, I got a whiff of her perfume.

That was good, too.

Unexpected.

Not cloyingly sweet.

But almost smoky. Rich. Intoxicating.

I could barely hold myself back from leaning in closer and taking a deep breath.

Lucky enough for me, we were in an enclosed elevator not long after, and I got as much of it as I could want.

On the way down, Scarlet pulled out her phone, then held it up high as she threw up a peace sign and did a fake smile so big that her eyes closed.

Then snapped a picture.

I made a mental note to find her social media in my downtime, finding myself interested in what she was saying online, how she was projecting herself.

Because that picture was a complete facade as the smile immediately fell and she tapped away at her phone to, I imagine, type up a caption for the image.

“What?” she asked, making me realize she’d finished and noticed I was looking at her.

“Where are we heading?” I asked, not wanting her to think I’d been eye-fucking her.

“A bunch of places,” she said with a shrug, then moved out of the elevator car and through the lobby of her building.

“Don’t wait up for me,” she called to the doorman, a different one from the morning. “Where is... oh, hey,” she said, giving a small smile to the man standing beside the town car parked a few yards away from the door.

“Miss Chandelier,” he greeted her with a much more genuine smile.

He was an old man to be pulling a night shift like this. But he seemed unbothered by the situation as he waited there in his black slacks, white shirt, and black suit jacket—I was almost surprised he didn't have to wear the stereotypical little hat—and waited for Scarlet to slip inside.

She did so with a grace I hadn't expected, her wristlet pressed to her chest, so she didn't show too much tit, her ass hitting the seat first, then swinging her legs in, knees pressed together tight.

No up-skirt pantyless paparazzo shots like I'd assumed, then.

Or, perhaps, she'd simply learned from past mistakes.

"No," she snapped at me as I approached the door. "You sit up front."

Her driver, whose name I knew was Eric from the paperwork Marcus had provided me, gave me an apologetic smile as he slammed her door.

You sit up front.

That phrase had so much snobbery in it, I was actually frozen there on the sidewalk for a second, looking at the car, staring daggers at her through the heavily tinted window. I couldn't see her. But I knew she was looking. And some part of me needed her to know she was dangerously close to overstepping a line.

"Best be getting a move on," Eric called, clamping a hand on my shoulder as he passed. "It is going to be a long night."

With that, I climbed into the front passenger seat, having to move one of those airport neck pillows out of my way before I sat down.

I guess that was how he survived the long nights on the town. By sleeping in the car while Scarlet was clubbing.

Suddenly, I kind of wish I'd gotten the job as her driver instead of her bodyguard.

There was a partition up between us and the backseat, but I could hear Scarlet's muffled voice as she, I presumed, called a

friend. Or maybe she was posting videos on her socials. Who the fuck knew.

“So, you’re the new one, eh?” Eric asked as he pulled away from the curb.

“Julian,” I said, nodding at him.

“Eric, but you already knew that.”

“How long have you been with Scarlet?” I asked.

“Me? Oh, since she was about... thirteen,” he said. “Just after her mama passed. Mr. Chandelier needed someone to drive her and the nanny around. Been driving her around ever since.”

That was, what? Ten years or so?

“How many guards has she gone through in that time?” I asked.

His lips tipped up slightly at that.

“I stopped counting,” he admitted. “But between me and you, those others... she was right to drive them off.”

Curiosity piqued, I tried to school my voice, so it didn’t come across too eager when I spoke again.

“Were they not good at their jobs?”

“They were not good *men*,” was all Eric would tell me, and I felt like he wasn’t giving me an opening to ask more than that.

An old-timer like Eric, though, that really only meant one thing. That he felt their interests weren’t what they should have been.

Had they been inappropriate with Scarlet?

Was that why she’d made them so miserable? Because she knew she couldn’t fire them or report them, else she’d lose her income, so she did the only thing she could? Acted like a complete spoiled brat to make them leave of their own volition.

“Got a good feeling about you, though,” Eric said.

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because you looked like you wanted to take her over your knee to teach her some manners when she was rude to you back there.”

“I did,” I admitted.

He didn’t need to know that it wasn’t in a parental way. That if I was going to have Scarlet over my knee, she was going to have her skirt hiked up, and her bare ass right there for me to give a good spanking to, watching her skin go pink as the slaps kept landing, feeling her pussy get wet as...

Fuck.

No.

I had to stop letting my mind go there.

This was a job.

And I was going to keep my damn hands to myself.

“You know where we’re going?” I asked, since Scarlet hadn’t actually spoken to him.

“Miss Chandelier texts me her plans. She and her friends are going to Click to start their evening.”

“On average, how many places does she go to on a night out?”

“Two or three, typically. Sometimes less if it is a new club. But two or three seems average.”

“Let me guess, we will be out until three or later.”

“That sounds about right,” he agreed, sounding apologetic. Then, at my silence, he added, “You’ll get used to it.”

I didn’t want to get used to it.

But it seemed as though there would be no choice in the matter as the town car pulled up to the curb in front of Click.

The line wrapped down around the corner of the block. Men in suits. Girls in barely-there dresses and no coats or sweaters to fight the early spring chill.

None of this looked appealing to me.

Eric was out of the car before I could think to move, rushing around the car to open the door for Scarlet as I finally climbed out myself.

I peeked in the backseat to find Scarlet staring forward, gaze seeming far away, face blank.

“Scarlet!” a voice called.

And just like that, I watched a transformation take over her.

A big, fake smile plastered on her face as she climbed out of the car. She flashed that smile to a trio of women waiting on the sidewalk.

There I found a tall, thin blonde in a tight red dress that let her hipbones stick out. Beside her was a shorter Black woman with long braids, and a bright orange dress that would have looked absurd on anyone else. And, finally, a pixie-cut brunette wearing wide leg trousers and an oversized blazer completed the trio. Like she was coming from work... and didn't know what size she actually wore.

“There she is!” the blonde cheered, arms out toward Scarlet, then grabbed her wrists and forced air kisses to her cheeks.

“Fashionably late, as always,” the pixie-cut chick said, and I couldn't help but think there was a hint of disdain in her voice.

Scarlet didn't respond to that. Instead, she turned to the woman in orange, telling her how ‘on-trend’ her outfit was.

If I wasn't mistaken, judging by Scarlet's tone and the way the pixie-chick's jaw hardened, this was somehow a dig to the trousers and blazer outfit.

“Are we ready?” she asked as the blonde linked her arm through Scarlet's.

It seemed to me that Scarlet was the leader of this crew somehow, that she had more social weight than the others. She

might have been why they were stuck out on the street in the cool early spring air, waiting for her.

As soon as she arrived, they walked right up to the bouncer, who immediately let them in.

“Ugh, he’s with me,” Scarlet grumbled when the bouncer tried to stop me from following.

“Right. Sorry,” the man said, looking worried that he might get in trouble for delaying me for even a second, for inconveniencing Scarlet Chandelier in any way.

Once I had some free time, likely after some much-needed sleep, I decided I needed to look into not only Scarlet’s social media, but that of all of her friends as well.

In the grand scheme of things, I guess it didn’t matter who they were and what their connection was to her. But I found myself too curious not to do a little research.

The inside of the club was dark and loud, the crowd a major crush that the girls fought their way through to get to a table in the raised VIP section.

“So, who’s the new guy? He’s cute!” the blonde whispered to Scarlet.

“Bodyguard,” Scarlet said, accepting a round of shots from a scantily-clad server.

“Does he have a name?” the blonde pressed.

“Doesn’t matter,” Scarlet declared as she reached for a second shot.

“Do you really even need a bodyguard?” the pixie-cut girl asked, but Scarlet ignored that as she asked the blonde and the woman in orange what their ‘drink of the night’ should be.

I stood against the wall in the VIP area with another bodyguard—this one so large he was practically a wall himself—both of us silent as we watched our charges.

He was a man who looked vaguely familiar. Maybe a footballer or something like that. A guy so large that having a bodyguard almost seemed ridiculous.

It wasn't long before the girls I was watching were five, six, seven drinks deep. Getting louder as they got drunker.

Every now and again, Scarlet's gaze slid to me, and the facade fell for a second before she was smiling and laughing with the girls again.

Drinks led to dancing, picture taking, more drinking, more selfies, then another club. And another.

The blonde was looking green by then.

"She needs a break," I said after snagging Scarlet's arm as she tried to pass me on the way back to the dance floor.

"What?" she asked, her gaze pointedly going to her arm in a way that said *Are you really putting your hand on me?*

I didn't release her though, but pulled her the tiniest bit closer.

"She's going to be sick all over the rest of you if you don't get some food in her."

Scarlet's bleary gaze slid over to her too-skinny blonde friend. One who likely hadn't put anything in her stomach for all that liquor to land on.

"Fine," she snapped, yanking her arm from my grip, and making her way back to the table, bending forward enough that I was worried her ass might peek out as she whisper-yelled at her crew.

It didn't escape my notice that it was Scarlet who laid down her card to pay for all of their drinks before she wrapped an arm around the blonde, then led the crew out to her car parked down the street.

Unfortunately for the crew, they waited too long to feed the blonde. And by the time they ordered food at an all-night Italian place, the blonde was rushing to the bathroom, and getting sick.

Afterward, she laid against Scarlet as the others picked at their food.

“What are you doing?” I asked after, yet again, she paid for everyone, then half-dragged the blonde outside as the other two girls went to the bathroom.

“Sending her home,” she said, waving at Eric who rushed out of the car to come and take the blonde from her, and half-carrying her to the town car.

“And?”

“And going to Sparkle.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?” she snapped.

“You need to call it a night.”

“You’re not my fucking father,” she snapped, swaying on those icepick heels of hers.

“You need to go home. You’re about to be just like your blonde friend,” I told her.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, yanking her chin up.

“You’re sweating,” I told her, then watched as her brows furrowed as she reached up to touch her hairline where the beads of perspiration were forming. “I doubt it would be good for your image to be sick all over the place.”

Her face hardened but her hand went to her stomach that must have been sloshing around.

“Fine,” she snapped, then marched back into the restaurant to tell the other girls she was calling it a night.

Unsurprisingly, without their Queen Bee to pay for it all, the others decided to head back home as well.

By the time we dropped off the blonde to her doorman, who seemed adept at carrying her inside, then got back to Scarlet’s building, she was not looking great.

“Don’t touch me,” she snapped, yanking away from me as I tried to help her up onto the sidewalk.

She actually didn’t seem *that* drunk. Not like the blonde. And considering how much she’d actually had to drink.

But she looked fucking *green*.

I barely got her into the penthouse before she was running in her heels toward her bedroom.

From the living room I could hear her violently throwing up.

Was this going to be the job?

Standing in loud clubs for hours, watching her making bad decisions, then forcing her to go home before she got too messy?

I guess that was what Marcus had meant when he'd said his daughter needed to be protected mostly from herself.

With a sigh, I reached for my phone, getting some ginger ale delivered to the penthouse.

I took the dog out.

Then dragged my tired ass to bed, not sure how the fuck I was going to make it through a year of this shit.

Even as I lay in bed, though, I couldn't seem to stop my mind from drifting back to her.

Back to her learning some damned respect.

But the ways I wanted to teach her that were never going to fucking happen.

So I needed to stop thinking about it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Scarlet

I wasn't like Drea.

I actually did know my limits.

I might push them relatively often, but I never got so sloppy that I was on my knees on a filthy restaurant bathroom floor. I didn't black out and not remember how I got home.

I wasn't sick from the alcohol.

The way my stomach cramped as I ran to my bathroom and dropped down on my knees beside the toilet told me that it was likely something that I'd eaten, not drank.

Was it the salad I'd picked at earlier?

The food at the Italian place?

I didn't know.

All I knew was that I threw up so long and so hard that my stomach was aching as if I'd done a thousand sit-ups.

I'd texted the girls—Drea, Leona, and Di—about the food poisoning.

I was left on read.

On read.

Sure, Di was likely out cold, but Drea and Leona hadn't been that out of it.

I dragged myself from the toilet to the sink to wash my mouth out before climbing up into the tub, stripping out of my clothes as the water filled.

Alone.

God, so utterly alone.

Not even the people I'd spent almost a thousand dollars on that night would answer me, would offer to come bring me ginger ale or saltines.

Tears pricked my eyes and I had to work to blink them away as I reached for my phone, snapping a bath selfie, taking a picture of my legs poking out of the blood-red water, thanks to the bath bombs I'd dropped in.

Time for some R&R with @SunnySuds Bloody Mary bath bombs.

Fake.

It was all so fake.

Highlights and tall tales.

While I lay in the tub trying not to cry about my fake friends and the deep well of loneliness that seemed to stretch wider with each night out.

If I let myself introspect too much, I would take to my bed and never rise again.

I drained the tub and wrapped myself in my robe before making my way to the kitchen, hoping some plain water might help settle my stomach.

But I stopped short at seeing an entire twelve-pack sleeve of ginger ale sitting on the kitchen counter.

I ripped open the box, and pulled out a can as my gaze drifted down the hallway.

I hadn't heard a peep from the bodyguard since we'd come into the apartment.

He was kind of an asshole.

But he was an asshole who'd taken a minute to order me ginger ale when he'd known I was sick.

That was more than I could say for any of my so-called friends.

I cracked the ginger ale, and started to sip, then decided to grab the whole sleeve and take it to bed with me.

"Hey, buddy," I cooed at Hugh as I got into bed with him. "You love me, right?" I asked as he did a big yawn and stretch before moving across the bed to climb up on my stomach to sleep.

I'd impulsively bought Hugh the morning after a 'friend' of mine was caught sending me a text shit-talking me by mistake.

That one had been gutting.

Because I truly did believe that she, out of all of my 'friends,' was a real one.

I'd bawled my eyes out for a few hours, then iced my lids, put on a full face of makeup, plastered on a fake smile, and took selfies of me going to get my puppy at the breeder.

It was the best decision I've ever made.

Though shunning that fake friend had also been a nice high. The girl couldn't get into a single decent club in the entire damn city for a year. And she'd lost a hundred thousand followers overnight when some gossip page posted about an 'insider' who knew she was two-faced.

Was it immature and petty to spend precious time bringing someone else down? Probably. But I never regretted it either.

She's totally not even as hot as she thinks she is. If it weren't for her daddy's money, no one would be liking all her selfies. No one would want anything to do with her at all.

I finished two ginger ales, and my stomach seemed to settle enough for me to roll over and get some sleep.

I passed out feeling just slightly less alone than usual.

Because at least the bodyguard gave a shit. Even if he was being paid to do it.

I woke up to something I wasn't sure I'd ever smelled in my apartment.

Food cooking.

“Ugh,” I grumbled, pressing a hand to my stomach, not sure I'd ever be able to keep food down after all that sick. “Hugh?” I called, finding the other side of my bed empty.

What time was it?

I rolled over and reached for my phone, ignoring the notifications for the first time in a long time.

Eleven.

Late.

But it had been a rough night.

I made my way into the bathroom, washing my face, pulling back my hair, then throwing on some yoga pants and

an oversized sweatshirt before making my way into the common area of the apartment.

And there he was.

Sexy bodyguard guy.

Jacket off.

His black shirtsleeves rolled up.

Standing over an oven I actually didn't know worked since I'd never turned it on.

I wasn't even sure where the frying pan he was using came from. Maybe the woman I'd hired to help me decorate had purchased that kind of thing as well.

"There you are, buddy," I cooed at Hugh who was sitting in the opening to the kitchen, his gaze fixed on the bodyguard, likely completely at a loss for what was going on in his home, why there were yummy smells coming from that big metal thing.

"He's been out. And fed," the guard said, not bothering to look over at me.

"Oh, ah, thanks," I said, feeling like I was tripping over those words.

"Sit," he demanded, waving to the stool on the other side of the island.

That was bossy of him.

I normally would have bristled, sassed him, something. Anything but actually doing what he demanded.

Somehow, though, my feet were carrying me across the space, and I lowered down onto the stool.

He'd set out a plate and utensils for me.

As well as a big bottle of water.

Once I sat, he turned toward me, grabbed a large electrolyte packet, ripped it open, and poured it into my bottle of water before giving it a good shake.

Did I watch his forearm muscles twist as he did that? Yes, yes I did.

“Drink,” he demanded after slamming it down right by my hand.

“Who do you think you—“ I started.

“Drink your fucking water, Scarlet,” he cut me off, tone brooking no argument.

I mean, not that those tones ever made a difference to me. It was hard to intimidate someone raised around the kind of men my father always had in his circle. Big, powerful men used to others cowering and kowtowing to them. I’d learned very young never to back down, never to show signs of weakness in front of men like that.

Still, my hand went to the bottle.

And I lifted it and took a big swig.

“All of it,” he said as he turned back to the stove.

I should have thrown the bottle at him.

I damn sure shouldn’t have tilted it up and downed the whole thing.

Yet... that was what I did.

By the time I finished it, he was turning back to me, dropping two pancakes onto my plate, then a small pile of scrambled eggs.

“Eat.”

“I don’t know what—“ I attempted again as he set the pan down on the stove with a clank before turning back toward me, and towering over me.

“Eat,” he said again, tone much lower, yet somehow even more commanding.

I hated how my hand went automatically for my fork, stabbing a fluffy pile of eggs, and bringing it to my mouth.

“Good girl,” he murmured, voice so quiet that I was pretty sure I’d imagined it.

I did what he wanted, though.

I sat there and slowly put bites of food into my body, watching him as he moved around in my kitchen like it was his own, cleaning up his mess.

He didn't look at me the entire time until, finally, he turned and pinned me with that dark gaze again.

"I can't eat anymore," I explained, shaking my head at my half-eaten pancakes.

His gaze followed mine to the plate then back up, holding mine until it was so uncomfortable that I lowered my own.

"Fine," he said before another bottle of water appeared near my hand. "Drink that," he demanded.

"I'm already floating," I insisted.

"You need it," he said as he took my plate away.

"Whatever," I mumbled under my breath, but somehow, I found myself taking the bottle with me over to the living room where I sat and looked through my phone.

"What?" I asked, seeing him out of the corner of my eye, towering over me.

"You need to start telling me your schedule."

"Why?" I asked, not looking up.

I swear the man made me feel like a little girl being brought down to the headmaster's office when I looked at him and his disapproving eyes.

"Because it's my job to keep an eye on you. I can only do that when I know what you will be up to."

I guess that was reasonable.

"I'm getting my nails done at two."

"Here or out somewhere?"

"Out. Then I'm going to dinner with Lilac Jones."

"The influencer?" he asked, surprising me enough to glance up, seeing nothing but distaste on his handsome face.

“Yes.”

“Fine,” he said.

“Then I am going to the club tonight.”

“You’re shitting me,” he said.

“If you have a problem with the job, quit,” I offered.

“Being a brat isn’t going to work with me,” he told me, and somehow those words made my belly shiver.

“I’m offering you an out of a position you clearly don’t want. If you don’t like the clubs, this is not the job for you. And I have news for you,” I said, getting to my feet, purposely leaving my bottle of unopened water on the couch as I did so, “you are really going to disapprove of this club.”

It wasn’t that I made it a point to go to sex clubs.

In fact, I’d only ever been to one. I’d happened into it by mistake with a friend. And while we’d seen... some things, it hadn’t been anything crazy. We’d backed right out because, quite frankly, we’d been unprepared for it.

But that was kind of the point.

The novelty.

The story.

There was no shortage of sex clubs in the city. Some were kind of a free-for-all, letting in any Joe off the street.

I had no interest in a place anyone could go.

SVNT was an elite club.

The kind that vetted the people who wanted to attend.

For attractiveness.

For reputation.

For your ability to pay the hefty entrance fee.

I would not only have to pay for myself, Drea, and Di, but my bodyguard as well.

They wouldn't have had a chance to vet him, but exceptions would be made.

No one turned me away.

First, because of my father and his wealth.

But also because of the publicity I brought with me. Good or bad, depending on my mood.

I said nothing else to the guard as I made my way to my room. And his pride seemed to prevent him from asking.

It made him moody and silent as he followed me around, though, always looming in the corner of a room, looking miserable and more than mildly threatening.

As the day wore on, I got more and more excited at the prospect of his shock and anger when we pulled up to the nondescript club with its simple, understated sign, through its thick wooden front door, where I'd needed to have a few words with the manager about my unexpected guest, then into a lobby where we had to lock up our phones, and, finally, into the club itself.

And right there, ten feet in front of us, was a woman becoming 'airtight'—one dick in each hole.

Right behind my shoulder, the bodyguard was close enough to me for me to hear him suck in his breath.

"Absolutely fucking *not*," he growled in my ear, his warm breath tickling the shell of my lobe, making a strange shiver course through me.

"Then leave," I offered, linking my arm through Drea's and Di's arms, and moving into the club.

I had no idea at the time that I'd just royally fucked up.

And that Julian was scheming up ways to make me pay for it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Julian

SVNT.

I had no idea what the fuck that could possibly be. And judging from the blank look on Eric the driver's face, he had no clue either as he pulled the car up, then rushed out to open the door for the girls.

I wasn't exactly thrilled that Drea, the girl who'd been so sick the night before, was out again. But found myself glad that Leona, the pixie-chick, was gone.

While waiting for Scarlet to wake up, I'd spent some time scrolling through not only her, but all her friends' social media profiles.

Save for the chick she'd ended up having dinner with—Lilac—Scarlet was definitely the most followed, loved, and hated of her group.

Drea seemed to be a part-time model. Which made her too-thin body make more sense. However, according to the

comments on her posts, no one thought she would be a model if not for her actress mother and her pull in certain circles.

Di was the daughter of a financier and dedicated her socials to her fashion line she was building.

That pixie-cut chick, Leona, had a page full of ‘boss bitch’ type shit. Seeming to push the narrative that all you had to do was #hustle to get everything you wanted in life.

People were quick to point out that it wasn’t #hustle that bought her the Brownstone she was living in, but her grandfather’s real estate empire.

All of the women, though, regardless of how many followers they had, all had the same carefully curated posts and captions.

The only place any of them seemed to get messy was in their stories. That was where peeks of something real came through. But even then, sparingly, carefully.

It was all... fake.

Sure, a picture may have captured a moment of time with the girls, but, hell, I’d seen the smiles myself. The way they fell immediately after snapping the picture. They weren’t actually capturing true joy. They were manufacturing it.

But, I guess, when you had thousands of people in your comments telling you how beautiful, amazing, fun, spontaneous you were, you felt the need to constantly live up to that. You got addicted to their attention and approval.

It seemed like a hollow fucking existence to me.

I brought up the groceries I had delivered and set to making food for her, knowing she’d been sick all night, and likely needed something in her stomach to make it feel even again.

That, and water.

The woman never seemed to drink anything but coffee or alcohol.

I hadn't exactly... meant to boss her around over breakfast. But she was so fucking stubborn. I swear everything she said to me had a bite to it.

It was hard not to see the spoiled brat underneath and want to train it out of her.

Following her around as she ran her errands and she completely ignored my existence had been a lesson in humility for me.

She hadn't even spoken to me when she'd emerged from her room in a little black dress that fit like a fucking glove, another pair of icepick heels, and more dramatic makeup than the night before.

She didn't look at me as we went down the elevator or got to the car.

She didn't even acknowledge my presence at the club, save for when she was talking in hushed tones to the manager who came out because, apparently, they weren't expecting my presence.

I wouldn't pretend to understand how the private clubs of the rich and famous worked, but they clearly prided themselves on their rules.

Still, this was the infamous Scarlet Chandelier.

Everyone eventually bowed to her will.

Then I was following the girls into the lobby, and begrudgingly handing over my phone to a man who locked each of them in their own separate safety-deposit box type locker.

Weird to me.

But what the hell did I know?

I figured that if the girls, whose phones were an extension of their arms, were willing to hand them over, that whatever was inside SVNT was probably worth keeping your focus on the moment.

Maybe it was performance art or some shit.

The music thumped through the walls as I followed the girls toward another guarded door before we were allowed to finally walk inside the main area of the club.

Not much shocked me.

I'd been around.

I'd seen some shit.

I'd *done* some shit.

But walking into what you were expecting to be a regular nightclub to see a woman on a couch with a cock in her pussy, ass, and mouth, while a dozen people stood around and watched had actually shocked me back a step.

This was a sex club?

An exclusive, upper-crust sex club?

My gaze scanned the room, finding couples or groups in various phases of undress. Women on their knees. A woman hopped up on the bar, legs spread with two men between, taking turns eating her out. Another woman bent over the bar, her face inches from the bartender who was mixing shots like it was totally normal that a woman was getting railed right by her.

I took a step forward, towering over Scarlet from behind.

This was exactly the kind of shit her father hired me to keep her from doing.

Chandelier Heiress Attends Sex Club for the Elite was not a headline he would want to see in the morning.

If I wanted to keep my job, I had to get her ass out of here.

“Absolutely fucking *not*,” I hissed in her ear, and I was close enough to feel a little shiver move through her at the fierceness in my voice.

Whether she recognized it or not, some part of her was aching for someone to take control of her, to force her into submission, to teach her how to behave.

But that inner brat inside of her had her stiffening and suggesting I leave before she linked arms with her girls and walked away.

“Fuck,” I growled, closing my eyes for a moment, looking for some self-control when every ounce of me wanted to throw her over my shoulder, and carry her stubborn ass out of there.

“Hey there,” a voice cooed at me as hands slid up my back, then slipped around my shoulders to my chest as a woman appeared in front of me.

She was gorgeous, no doubt. Tall, blonde, somewhere in her thirties with the eyes and grin that said she would know exactly how to make even the most controlled man bust in her mouth within seconds.

I felt nothing, though, as she moved a little closer, smelling my aftershave.

Across the room, my gaze was on Scarlet as she turned, looking back.

Searching for me?

When her gaze found me, her eyes went immediately to the woman, then... hardened.

Hardened?

That was an interesting reaction.

But then she was moving away from her girls, and walking onto an area being used as a dance floor.

It took five seconds for a man to come up behind her, plastering his front to her back, his arm going possessively around her belly.

“You’re gorgeous,” I told her, because she was. And because it took balls to approach a man like she had. “But I’m actually working,” I said, nodding toward Scarlet.

The blonde turned, gaze following mine.

“Lucky girl,” she murmured. “Well, I’m here if you ever aren’t working,” she said before moving away.

Across the room, Drea was on some man's lap, his hand pushing up the hem of her skirt.

Di was chatting up a woman in a red dress.

But I barely spared either of them a glance.

They weren't my concern, aside from making sure no one was actively hurting them.

Scarlet was my focus.

My gaze moved back.

As the man swayed with her, his hand started inching up her belly, toward her breast.

I knew this was a sex club.

I knew that, objectively, the girls hadn't come here just to watch.

They seemed to forever be chasing different experiences.

It wasn't my place to tell them, not even Scarlet, that she couldn't live her life how she saw fit.

Still, as that man's hand closed over her tit, a growl moved through me.

And I was storming across the club, reaching for Scarlet's hip, and yanking her away from him and against me.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she snapped as the guy shook his head at me, likely thinking that I shouldn't have brought my woman to a sex club if I was the sort to get jealous.

And I got it.

This wasn't my first time in a place like this.

It wasn't a place you brought a woman you wanted to yourself.

I understood the rules.

Which was why my reaction to a man with his hands on Scarlet made no sense.

She wasn't mine.

And, sure, it was my job to make sure she didn't bring too much shame to the family name. But this was a club full of consenting adults. And no cameras.

No one would know what she did—or didn't do—here unless she told them.

Even knowing this, my arm tightened around her.

“This is the exact thing I was hired to keep you from doing.”

“What? Having fun?” she asked.

Did her ass wiggle against me purposely?

Or was she trying to move away?

Whichever it was, the way my cock stiffened was completely fucking inappropriate.

I was so distracted by my reaction to her that she twirled away.

That haughty chin of hers raised and her blue eyes flashed as she grabbed a shot off of a tray as it passed, throwing it back as she glared at me.

Then she twirled away into a crowd, and I didn't find her again until she had a drink in both her hands, and Di at her side, the two of them whispering to each other as they watched a man push another man onto his knees.

Needing a moment, I went to the bar myself. I lucked out that no one was getting rammed there while I ordered a single shot to try to ease the frazzled edges of my nerves, to soothe over my urge to go over there and push Scarlet herself onto her knees.

I stayed at that bar, my gaze fixed on Scarlet as she and Di kept watching the goings on, making sure to keep their eyes averted from Drea who'd climbed on that man's lap, and was riding him slowly while another man reached out to expose her breasts and start feeling her up.

Scarlet and Di drank.

Excessively, as usual.

But they were clearly there to watch, not experiment.

The problem was, as they got more visually wasted, the men around them started to get ideas. Moving in close. Hands brushing. Faces leaning in and whispering fuck-knew what into their ears.

I forced my feet to stay in place as the urge to march over there and physically remove those men from Scarlet's vicinity overtook me.

Then, like she sensed my flickering grasp on my control, she moved herself in front of a man old enough to be her father, her arm going back around his neck as her ass ground up against his hips as she moved in a slow, sensual dance.

I would have just let it go.

If her gaze hadn't lifted.

If it hadn't found mine.

If her blue eyes hadn't held so much defiance.

If everything about her wasn't screaming *What are you going to do about it?*

My jaw ticked from how tightly I was clenching it as I balled up my fists as I kept my gaze on hers.

She would look away first.

But even I was surprised with how long it took her to.

We'd work on that.

She was going to learn I was not someone to play with.

This time, when my cock twitched to life, I didn't try to talk myself out of my desire.

Because at that moment, I was sure nothing in the world would be as satisfying as taming this fucking brat.

To see her on her knees, head bowed.

To feel her bent over my legs, begging for more lashes. Because she knew she deserved them. Because she knew she had to learn to behave better.

To hear the way she whimpered and whined as pain and pleasure combined.

Eventually, she moved away from that guy.

And she didn't entertain anyone else's advances.

But it was too late.

The damage was done.

She was going to learn the consequences of her actions.

And I was going to enjoy the fuck out of every moment of it.

CHAPTER SIX

Scarlet

“Is it just me, or is there something even more intense about Mr. Bodyguard all of a sudden?” Di asked when we finally got Drea off that guy’s dick, and out of the club.

I mean, we weren’t judging.

Some part of me had even wondered if I was going to find someone who I clicked with, whose hands I wanted to feel slide over me, whose cock I wanted inside of me. Right there in the open for anyone to see.

The thing was, each time a guy got close to me, my gaze seemed to gravitate toward Julian.

At those moments, desire surged, but I had a sneaking suspicion it had nothing to do with the men who were near me, whispering about all the things they wanted to do to me, and everything to do with the man staring daggers at me from across the room.

I snuck glances his way constantly.

And his gaze never wavered from me.

Not even when a woman slammed another woman against the bar right at his side, and fingered her to what seemed like a screaming orgasm.

Not even as an entire damn orgy started in the middle of the room.

He was laser-focused on me.

Knowing that somehow made me both hot and uncharacteristically unsure of myself.

Probably because the man was a walking wet blanket. Going around silently judging everyone.

As for his attention making desire sizzle through my veins? Well, I was going to go ahead and just chalk that up to my addiction to attention. And, you know, the fact that I hadn't been so close to a man I'd actually found attractive in a long time.

"I don't know," I answered Di. "I guess," I said. "But he's always intense," I added, pulling Drea's head onto my shoulder as she started to whine about how the man she'd fucked in the club didn't want to exchange numbers.

"Maybe," Di said. "It just seemed like he wanted to throttle you."

"He's probably worried my father is going to be pissed about this little outing," I said.

"Isn't he?"

"No one is going to know. No one in that club wants anyone to know they're there. And there was no one on the street when we pulled up or came out."

"True," Di agreed.

Di had five siblings. There wasn't as much pressure on her to behave a certain way.

Unfortunately for me, my mom hadn't been able to have more than me, needing an emergency hysterectomy a few

years after I was born. And my father refused to have another child that wasn't half of her as well.

His love had been ardent and endless.

It was why he had never remarried.

As far as I could tell, he didn't really even date.

Sure, he had a woman on his arm for events at times, but unless I was misreading it completely, there was never anything going on with those women.

As a teenager, I'd been desperately seeking something for myself like my mother had been lucky enough to enjoy. The adoration of a man. Someone who thought the sun rose and set simply for my enjoyment. Someone who would never look at another woman.

Unfortunately for me, I learned really quickly that love like that was more of a fantasy than reality for most women.

So men, as an adult, were an occasional dalliance. Nothing I ever let get serious. And since I didn't want the internet going wild with rumors about me being a slut, I didn't let myself be seen with men often.

"Come on, Drea, honey," Di said as we pulled up to Di's place. "Why don't you come stay with me tonight, okay?" she said, patting her head before wrapping an arm around her, then pulling her out onto the sidewalk.

Alone in the backseat, I let out a breath and tilted my head back on the seat.

I felt... flustered. Off-kilter.

I wasn't sure what the problem was. If maybe the sex club had just been too much for me or what. Not that it mattered. We wouldn't be going again. I tried as often as possible not to repeat destinations. There wasn't usually much of a reason to do so, with the way places changed in the city in a blink.

"Have a good night, Miss Chandelier," Eric called as he held the door open for me.

"Thanks, Eric. You too. Go get some sleep."

I probably should have asked my father to get me a second driver, so Eric got some time off. But I usually wasn't very active early in the day. And if I was, I walked. He rarely had to work until after five or six at night.

"You too, miss," he said, giving me his old, familiar smile. There were more crinkles around his eyes these days.

I ignored the guard as I made my way into the building, choosing to mess around with my phone as we rode up the elevator together, so I didn't accidentally make eye contact with him.

He seemed fine with the silence as I let out Hugh, then checked his water dish before making my way toward my room.

Or so I thought.

Because no sooner than I exhaled a deep breath, I heard his footsteps slow and stop in front of my room.

"What?" I snapped, feeling too wonky to deal with him and his disapproval right then.

"Turn around," he demanded in that voice he'd used when bossing me around about the food and water that morning.

It was a voice that had me immediately doing as he demanded even as my mind screamed at me to do anything *but* that.

So I did turn.

But just, I assured myself, to give him a piece of my mind about his attitude.

"I don't know what you think you are doing in my—" I started.

But he cut me off.

"Get on your fucking knees, Scarlet."

My head whipped back, too shocked to do anything but stare at him, mouth agape, for a long moment.

"Excu—"

He took a step forward, towering over me, his face and gaze so dark that a shiver coursed down my spine.

“I said get on your fucking knees,” he growled.

My legs went immediately wobbly, my knees starting to bend.

But no.

No.

I wasn't going to kneel for this asshole.

Who did he think he—

“Get on your knees, or I will put you there.”

His tone said he was perfectly comfortable making good on that threat.

My knees bent this time.

All the way to the cold wood floor at the edge of my carpet.

No one ever spoke to me like that. Ever told me what to do.

Surely that was the only reason I actually did it.

Because I was too shocked at his audacity to think straight.

This unusual sound moved through him then, almost like a rumble. It vibrated in his chest.

And as weird as this sounded, I swore I could feel it doing the same into my own chest, making my heart and lungs feel shaky.

“That's a good girl,” he murmured in that same low, deep tone as his fingers snagged me under my chin, jerking it up. “Eyes down,” he demanded when mine immediately rose. “Just like that,” he said as his fingers released my chin to drift up my jaw before falling away.

He walked around me then, moving behind me.

“You behaved badly tonight,” he started.

Was that my mattress?

Did he sit on my bed?

That was such a gross invasion for an employ—

“I—“

“Don’t argue,” he snapped. “I didn’t give you permission to speak,” he added.

What the fuck was going on?

And why was I just kneeling there?

I needed to get up.

I needed to...

“Put your hands on the floor,” he demanded.

“What d—“

“Put your hands on the floor,” he growled, enunciating each word like its own sentence.

Why did I do it?

Knowing my ass was pointed at him? That my skirt was likely hiking up almost enough to show him some bare butt cheek.

“Now turn and crawl to me.”

I was absolutely *not* going to *crawl* to a man.

Except, somehow, I was moving.

“That’s a good girl,” he murmured again, and my belly wobbled at the praise as I crawled closer to him. “Now kneel,” he demanded. “No,” he chided. “Chin up,” he corrected me. “Eyes down. Yes, just like that. I always get to look at that pretty face,” he told me. “But you only get to look at me if I give you permission. Do you understand?” he asked.

“Y...yes,” I said, hearing a wobble in my voice. Which I was convinced was because of the way my belly was flip-flopping and my pussy was throbbing. I wouldn’t even pretend to understand that reaction.

Maybe I was drunker than I realized.

Maybe someone had slipped me something.

It wouldn't be the first time.

That was why we always, always went out in groups of three. So someone was always able to get us out of there if we were suddenly stumbling or passed out.

But I felt... normal.

A little fuzzy from the liquor, but not so wasted that I couldn't control my actions.

Why wasn't I, then?

Why was I doing what he demanded of me?

And why was I liking it?

"Yes, what?" he asked.

I didn't have to ask for clarification.

I knew what he wanted from me.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you want to leave?" he asked, gaze boring into me.

"No, sir."

He said nothing for a long moment then, but I could feel his gaze on me, even though I could only see his legs.

"Now," he said, finally, sounding almost resigned. Over what, I had no idea. "As I said, you behaved badly tonight," he said.

I wanted to object.

The problem was, I knew I had.

I knew I'd snapped at him.

I knew I'd purposely provoked him.

I'd watched him as another man ground against my ass, as his hands touched me. Daring him to say something. To do something.

He hadn't though.

Or so I thought.

He'd simply been biding his time.

"And I can't allow that," he told me. "You need to learn," he added. "Stand."

He offered me a hand then, and I took it to get to my feet, feeling more unstable than I should have in my heels.

Once I was standing before him, he pulled me toward the side of his legs.

"Down," he demanded. "Over my lap," he clarified as I felt my brows knit.

My gaze shot up to his face then.

Because, no.

Surely... not.

He didn't want to... spank me.

Because I'd 'behaved badly.'

"Eyes down," he snapped. And my gaze immediately lowered.

I didn't know what was happening to me, why my body felt electric and overstimulated, why he had so much control over me.

"Do not make me tell you again," he said, voice dark. "Or you will regret it."

My knees bent slightly and I... did it.

I lowered myself over his legs, my head hinged downward toward the floor, my ass up, my pelvis on his legs.

"You know why this is happening," he said as his hand started to slide my skirt upward, exposing my bare ass inch by inch.

"Y...yes."

I knew exactly what I'd done to piss him off.

I just never expected to be *punished* for it.

"You need to learn the consequences of your actions," he told me as his fingers whispered over my ass for a second

before disappearing.

I knew it was coming a second before the slap landed by the wash of cold air over my ass.

But knowing it hadn't prepared me for the sting against my flesh.

This wasn't a playful ass slap.

It hurt.

A yelp escaped me.

"No," he said, his other hand pressing down across my shoulders as I automatically tried to stand. "We're not done," he added. "Breathe," he commanded as his hand lifted once again, before slapping down just as hard, but on skin that was already smarting. "Breathe," he demanded again, making me realize the ache in my lungs wasn't from being positioned over his legs, but because I was holding my breath.

I sucked one in.

And right afterward, another slap landed.

"Ow," I whimpered, feeling tears prick my eyes.

"It's for your own good," he said, slapping again. And again. "Now when you think of mouthing off at me, you will feel the sting of my hand on your ass, and make a better choice."

The next slap had the tears spilling over my lower lids and my lip wobbling.

But not necessarily from just the pain.

I didn't understand what was going on inside of me right then.

Because there was pain.

But my sex was aching.

And emotions that I couldn't quite wrap my head around were welling up and spilling out.

"You need more, don't you?" he asked.

No.

God, no.

The skin on my ass felt on fire, felt raw.

“Yes.”

What?

No.

“Yes, what?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

The next slap was even harder, bringing up another flood of emotions that had me sniffing hard.

“Look at me,” he demanded, then reached around my head to gather my hair when I didn’t immediately comply, wrapping it around his hand, and yanking until the pain across my scalp forced my gaze to his, showing him my vulnerability. “That’s what I thought,” he said with a nod. Like he knew. Like he saw all the emotions roiling through me right then. “Are you going to be a good girl?” he asked as he landed another slap, harder, this time watching my face as he did so.

“Yes,” I said, blinking the tears out of my eyes.

“I thought so,” he said, his hand suddenly not slapping, but massaging my aching ass. “I thought this too,” he said, his fingers tracing down the seam of my ass, then finding the material wedged between, just barely covering my pussy. Finding it dripping wet.

“Come here,” he demanded, reaching for me, moving me around until I was sitting on his lap, my back to his chest. “Touch your pussy,” he demanded, making my sex tighten hard at that word coming from between his lips.

“W—“

“Don’t question me,” he demanded as his hands traced up my inner thighs, but didn’t touch me where I wanted it most.

Instead, he snagged my wrist, and pushed my hand between my thighs.

“Touch your pussy,” he demanded again, and my fingers immediately started to move.

His hand stayed on my wrist as the other one moved up, closed around my throat. Not pressing down, just holding me, trapping me.

As if I was going to move away.

I couldn't.

I didn't understand it, but I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything but what he demanded of me.

“You don't get my hands,” he said as I worked myself, feeling the ache that had been deep in my core all through the spanking intensify. “Not until you behave,” he added.

Suddenly, I wanted to do anything, anything he asked of me if he would only push my hand away, and plunge his fingers inside me, rub his thumb over my clit, finger fuck me until I was writhing and crying. “But you need a release,” he added.

Against me, his cock was rock-hard, and I tried to shift, tried to writhe against him.

“No,” he said. “You didn't earn my cock.”

A whimper escaped me, and at the sound of it, that sexy rumble moved through him again.

“That's it,” he said as my breathing got faster, more ragged, as my little whimpers became desperate moans. “Come, pet,” he said.

Like I'd been seeking his permission all along, the orgasm slammed through my system as his hand closed around my throat, making my head go light and my lips go tingly as the orgasm intensified.

“That's a good girl,” he praised as I came back down, his hand loosening on my throat. “Now get on your knees for me again,” he demanded.

I didn't even pretend to object, just slid off of his lap, then turned to face him. Chin up. Eyes down.

“Do you think you deserve to suck my cock?” he asked as his thumb traced under my lower lip.

“Yes.” The word was soft and breathless. Eager. And as insane as it was, that was how I felt right then. Eager. Like I couldn’t think straight if I didn’t have him in my mouth, if I didn’t feel him losing just a little bit of control.

“No, pet,” he said, and the disappointment had a soft plea escaping me. “You don’t deserve it,” he told me. “But I will let you, just this once.”

As he said it, I could hear the slide of his belt and zipper as he reached inside to free himself.

His hands didn’t reach for me then.

They fisted on his thighs, just waiting.

Maybe that was a test, to make sure he wasn’t overstepping, that he wasn’t forcing something I didn’t want to do.

The crazy thing was, I never wanted to go down on a man as much as I did right then.

I scooted closer, and closed my hand around his thick cock, sliding it all the way down to the base, then lowering my head, and sucking him into my mouth.

“No, pet,” he said as I stopped halfway down. “If you want it, you take all of it,” he said as his hand went to the back of my neck, not forcing, but putting slight pressure there. “No, don’t stop,” he said as my gag reflex kicked in. “Choke on my cock like a good girl,” he said, voice thick with his desire.

I gagged hard, and his fingers tightened on my neck.

“Curl your toes,” he said.

I stiffened at the odd request, but curled my toes as tightly as I could in my heels, and immediately felt my gag reflex ease a bit. Not all the way, but enough to keep going, to take all of him.

“There you go,” he groaned, his hips jerking up a bit when he was all the way in, his cock touching the back of my throat.

His hand twisted in my hair as I started working him, refusing to let me go all the way up, for his cock to slide out of my mouth, so I kept working him deep, my eyes tearing, my throat starting to ache.

“No,” he said, yanking me back by my hair suddenly. “You don’t get to swallow my cum. Not yet,” he said, fisting his cock, and jerking it a few times until I felt the heat of his release on my chest. “There,” he groaned when he was done, looking at the mess he’d made of me. “Now be a good girl, drink this water,” he said, pulling a bottle out of his coat pocket. “And get some sleep. Okay?”

“Yes,” I said. At his raised brow, I corrected myself, “Yes, sir.”

With that, he tucked himself away, got up... and left, letting Hugh in before closing the door behind him.

I sat there on my knees beside the bed, mind reeling, until my knees and ankles started aching.

Only then did I grab the edge of the bed and pull myself up. I kicked out of my heels then made my way into the bathroom.

Only then did I see how rough I looked.

I was a deer in the headlights, eyes huge, no idea what the hell was going on.

Truly, I didn’t.

But I reached for the tissues, wiping him off of my chest. After that, I swiped the mascara ribbons off of my cheeks.

Then, finally, I turned, pulling up my skirt, and looking over my shoulder to see my ass.

And there they were.

Pink handprints on my skin.

Reaching down, I touched the skin, feeling how hot it was to the touch. Even the slightest of brushes made it smart, though.

I would be feeling it each time I sat down.

Hell, I would be feeling it each time my pants brushed against my skin.

Turning, I made my way to the bath, running the water hot, and climbing in.

For the first time in I don't remember how long, I didn't reach for my phone.

I didn't read comments.

I didn't even post all day.

And, what's more, I didn't want to.

Something felt fundamentally changed in me right then.

My mind was so... quiet.

I wasn't obsessing over what people were thinking of me, saying about me. I wasn't making mental plans for the next day, trying to figure out of something new to do, how my followers would react to seeing me there.

I was just so... calm.

Present.

And... exhausted.

God.

It was like months of crappy sleep had caught up on me all at once.

I barely took the time to scrub a fancy little soap bar all over me, then rinse, before I was climbing out of the tub, drying off, and falling into bed, bare-ass naked, and pulling the blankets up.

The movement jostled the bottle of water, and I found myself reaching for it, uncapping it, and chugging it down.

Before, finally, falling into a long, deep sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Scarlet

My phone kept up its relentless chimes of likes, comments, and tags on the nightstand, all of it slowly dragging me toward consciousness.

“Ugh,” I grumbled at the light streaming in through the blinds, surprised when a headache didn’t immediately start stabbing me behind the eyes like it usually would.

My hand rose out of the blankets, going toward the nightstand, when something sitting there had me stopping.

A bottle of electrolyte water.

The light blue one.

Arguably, the best flavor.

But I knew for damn sure I hadn’t put it there. I didn’t even have it in the penthouse.

That meant that...

Julian.

I shot up in bed as the memories flashed across my mind.

The club.

The fucking with my guard.

Then us coming home... and him punishing me for it.

Humiliation had my cheeks flaming as I yanked my covers up to cover up my nakedness.

I'd... I'd *crawled* to the man.

I'd climbed on his lap and told him I deserved to be spanked.

I'd fingered myself because he told me to.

I'd... I'd sucked him off for the same reason.

My hands rose to my face as I let out a pained animal sound.

That wasn't quite right.

He hadn't exactly told me to suck his cock.

I'd done that.

Happily.

Greedily.

Even the memory of that had my pussy throbbing again.

What the hell was wrong with me?

How was I going to face the man again?

I climbed out of bed, walking to the bathroom, and looking at myself in the mirror.

My ass was still pink and warm to the touch.

That humiliation flared through me once again, and I watched the strange emotions play across my face.

How was I going to face him again?

With my goddamn head up.

I'd been drinking.

He'd taken advantage of that.

I wouldn't go so far as to call it any sort of assault. I could have walked away at any time. I didn't. But... but surely if I was sober, I never would have gotten on my knees for him, right?

I mean... clearly.

Because in the sober light of day, my cheeks went on fire each time I thought about what was said, what was done.

Obviously, clear-headed me would never.

Because of the embarrassment, though, I could never actually bring it up to him, not without him knowing he got the upper hand—*ugh*—on me.

So my only choice was to pretend that nothing happened.

Then, after that, I had to do what I did best.

I had to run him off.

I had to get him out of my life.

Then, I dunno, take a vacation. Get him out of my mind.

Decision made, I pulled my hair back into a claw clip, did my skincare, then walked into my closet.

If I was going to be a bitch, I needed to dress for it.

A pair of black leather pants, a lightweight black sweater tucked in to expose a gold belt buckle, and chunky heels.

Small, thick gold hoops.

A red lip.

Mascara.

There, I decided as I turned in the mirror for myself. I looked cold and unapproachable.

I grabbed my purse, tossed my phone in, then made my way out into the hallway.

Julian's door was closed, and I could hear the swish of fabric as he, I imagined, got dressed.

"Come on, baby," I cooed at Hugh, squatting down to scoop him up as I rushed through the common area of the

penthouse.

It looked like breakfast was set up for me already.

And there were remnants of food in Hugh's bowl.

"Let's go," I said, kissing Hugh's head, then rushed out of the penthouse before Julian could even think of catching up to me.

My heart was skittering in my chest as I power-walked through the lobby.

It wasn't until I stepped out of the front doors that I paused.

Not because I was having second thoughts.

But because there, around the sidewalk were pink rose petals. They'd been kicked into tree niches and brushed up against the wall of the building by wind and foot traffic, but I had no doubt that someone had spread them there.

For me.

I hadn't checked my socials thoroughly yet.

I would bet that there were dozens of comments and messages again

My dove.

"Scarlet!" a voice yelled from somewhere behind me.

I didn't turn around.

I wouldn't waste a second.

I needed to get away.

I needed a fucking hour to myself.

To think.

To build up the armor I was going to need to deal with him.

Because the commanding sound of his voice had me almost wanting to... drop to my knees again.

And what the fuck was that about?

I stepped off of the curb.

I didn't even have to raise an arm before a cab was slowing.

I wrenched open the door, slid in, then slammed it.

“Drive,” I demanded.

Only then did I dare let myself look.

Julian was on the sidewalk, his dark hair wet, looking good in a dark gray suit.

But the look in his eyes?

Damn near murderous.

I could deal with that later.

Once I had some time to prepare.

I dropped Hugh off at the luxury puppy daycare he loved, getting to play with a bunch of other spoiled small breed pups belonging to the upper echelon.

Then I took myself to my usual spa, treating myself to every treatment I could think of from a deep conditioning treatment, facial, pedicure, and mud bath to a stone and deep tissue massage, just making sure my towel stayed securely around my waist, so no one saw the evidence of what I'd let happen the night before.

Hours passed before I made my way back out of the spa, feeling a little more clear-headed for being able to sit in silence and work through my conflicting thoughts.

I still couldn't exactly wrap my head around why I'd done exactly as he'd demanded of me. Yes, I'd been drinking. But I'd never been so drunk that someone could *make* me do something that some part of me didn't want to do.

Maybe I could just chalk it up to my never-ending pursuit of new adventures.

And getting punished by a man I barely even know was definitely... new.

I reached for my phone, scrolling through my contacts for someone I know would jump at a moment's notice, and having them meet me for a shopping trip then long, lingering dinner.

After that, with no choice but to pick up Hugh, I had to finally take myself home.

"There you are, Miss Chandelier," Henry greeted me with his usual smile. "I have a note here for you," he said, reaching into his breast pocket to produce it.

"Thank you," I said, faking a smile even as my stomach plummeted at the two words on the white envelope.

I carried it with me to the elevator.

I don't know what had me sliding my finger under the seal. I never read the notes.

It was probably just the lingering nerves I was feeling about facing Julian again, and wanting a distraction.

I figured it would be more of the usual shit I always found on my socials. Love words and praise.

But this note had taken a slightly... darker turn.

*You need to stop ignoring me. We are meant to be together.
Don't make me show you how much.*

I tore the paper in half. Then half again. Over and over until the doors opened, and I could fling the little paper shards into the trash chute.

I was so distracted by what felt like a dark threat in that note to remember the concerns that had been on my mind all day.

Until the penthouse door closed behind me.

And I'd walked several feet inward.

Before coming to an abrupt stop.

Because Julian was standing there.

With that same furious look in his eyes as earlier.

It should have been terrifying.

Yet there was that little belly shiver once again.

Hugh made a beeline for his dinner bowl that had been set out.

I didn't move.

I didn't even blink.

“Take off your clothes,” Julian demanded, tone low, full of dark promise.

“Wh—“

“Take off your fucking clothes, or I will do it for you.”

“Who do you thi—“

I didn't get to finish that word before he was stalking forward, before his hands reached out and grabbed my belt, yanking the clasp free, then whipping it out of my pant loops.

His hard gaze was on mine, a muscle ticking in his jaw with some barely suppressed anger, as his fingers went to the hem of my shirt, pulling it out of my pants, then ripping the material up and over my head.

Why was I standing there?

Why was I letting him do this to me?

Why was the anger in his eyes making my belly feel liquid?

His hands went to my waistband next, pushing the button free, then the zip, before pushing the material down.

I stood there, frozen, as he suddenly leaned forward, pulling off each of my heels, then lifting each of my legs to remove my pants fully, before standing again, his gaze once again on my face.

That was the strangest part, wasn't it?

I was standing there in a bra and thong.

And he wasn't even looking.

I thought he was done, he'd paused for so long.

But then he was moving around my body, his fingers grabbing the band of my bra, and unclasping it.

The material loosened and fell forward, then slipped to the floor completely.

A shiver coursed through me.

I wanted to believe it was a chill.

But I felt like I was suddenly on fire.

Julian was still behind me when his fingers slid across my lower back, tracing the thin material of my thong, before grabbing it at the apex of my ass, and dragging it down until it freely fell to my feet.

“Get on your knees, Scarlet,” he demanded, voice low, but commanding, his breath tickling the shell of my ear.

And I just... did it.

Again.

After talking to myself all day about how it was a fluke, that it was never going to happen again.

“Good,” he murmured as he moved around me and my chin went up as my gaze moved down.

I don't know how long I sat like that.

But it felt like forever.

“Come,” he demanded as he turned away and walked toward the couch, and some part of me wanted to mouth off, to do anything but what he demanded. “Don't make me tell you again,” he said, that growl back in his voice.

Then I... I did it.

I went to him.

On my *hands and knees*.

Bare ass naked.

As soon as I was near him, back in the position I knew he liked, he reached for something I couldn't see, then moved

behind me.

I had no idea what he was planning.

Until I felt something close around one wrist.

Then the other.

Then something close around each ankle.

Cuffs?

Leather cuffs?

I didn't have any time to wonder about that, though, before I heard Julian clip something to one of the wrist cuffs, making a sound like Hugh's leash did when I clicked it on his collar.

My belly wobbled as there was another click.

Then, my body was being pulled backward, my shoulders pinching toward each other, my back arching backward and down.

Another click.

Then a fourth one.

Did he just... did he just... hogtie me?

Did I just *let him* hogtie me?

"If you can't be trusted to stay where you know you are supposed to be..." he said when he was finished, and took a step back to admire his work. I could practically feel his gaze on my back and ass. "You will be restrained," he said.

Then, with nothing else, he walked away.

I was too stunned to say anything, just listening as he took Hugh out onto the balcony to do his business.

When the dog came back in, he made a beeline for the bedroom, likely exhausted from playing with his friends all day. Too tired to worry about why his mom was naked and restrained in the living room.

"When are—" I finally found my voice to start to speak to him after listening to him make himself coffee in the kitchen.

“You don’t have permission to speak,” he cut me off. Tone calm and cool.

And I didn’t... I didn’t try to say anything again.

Not even as he moved back toward me, stepping over me to sit down on the couch with his coffee, scrolling through something on his phone.

Completely ignoring me.

But... wasn’t the point of all this... BDSM stuff about, you know, sex?

Why was he acting like I wasn’t even there?

“What is this—“

“I will gag you if you don’t behave,” he cut me off once again, just scrolling away at his phone.

“You aren’t even looking at me,” I said, hearing a whine in my own voice, and really hating the sound of it.

“You haven’t earned attention,” he told me. “When you learn to submit, you will have as much attention as you want. Right now, you are being punished. You deserve this,” he added, gaze finally cutting over toward me. “Don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered.

Because, in a way, I had expected consequences of my actions. I just hadn’t anticipated that I would submit to them. I thought we were going to yell and fight and that I would eventually run him off.

Julian, it seemed, was not a man who riled that way. He had too much control over himself.

And, it seemed, me.

So I sat there on my knees, the lush carpet starting to bite into my skin at the continued pressure, my shoulders aching from the pulled-back position.

As Julian finished his coffee.

As he scrolled.

Then got up, washed things in the kitchen.

And... walked away from me.

Went into his own room.

Time was fluid then.

It could have been moments I sat there, but it felt like hours. And when the moments turned to hours, it felt like years.

As I was forced to be still.

To be quiet.

To do nothing but think and feel.

Eventually, as unexpected and confusing as the night before, I felt tears well up and pour out, an endless stream fed by some deep inner well I hadn't even been aware was there.

Because the thing was, I wasn't crying because I was physically hurting.

Sore, yes. But not sore enough to whine about it, let alone cry.

This pain was emotional.

Shit I didn't even know existed until it was purging out of me.

But, I guess, I was never truly ever simply... alone with myself.

I filled my days with strangers' attention. I filled my nights with drunken fun.

All to, what? Avoid this? Run from this?

This deep hollowness inside?

I was still sniffing when I heard footsteps coming down the hall toward me.

This time, without shoes on.

And when Julian appeared before me, all I saw were thin black sleep pants.

Had he been... sleeping?

While I'd been naked and bound in the living room?

He let out a deep sigh as his fingers snagged my chin, pulling it up, and inspecting my face that felt raw from crying.

"I thought so," he said, but seemed to be speaking to himself. Then, "Okay," as he moved behind me, and unclipped my wrists from my ankles.

He didn't remove the binds, though.

Instead, he used them to pull me until I understood his meaning and got to my feet.

He released me as he sat down on the couch.

This time, I didn't mind my lowered gaze position because I got a real eyeful of his bare chest and stomach as he sat.

Those washboard abs I knew would be there. The corded arms.

The deep V of his Adonis belt that disappeared into the low-slung waistband of his pants, and pointed, I knew, to his cock.

His big, thick cock that I suddenly couldn't stop thinking about.

In my mouth.

Touching the back of my throat.

How much I wanted that again.

But also to feel it slide inside me, stretch me, make me his.

"Come, pet," he demanded, patting his lap. "No," he said when I started to turn, to sit my ass there.

I turned back, then climbed over him, my body over his legs, my ass up.

His hand landed there as I settled on the couch, letting my shoulders and ankles finally relax as my face pressed into the couch cushions.

There was a long silence as we sat there.

“Your punishment is not over,” he informed me, but his tone was milder. Just giving me the facts. “You will be restrained until you can be trusted,” he added as his fingers started to trace over my bare ass, teasing over the skin he’d turned pink the night before.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Because, incredibly, I was.

Though it was for things he couldn’t possibly know about. Like how I’d been blaming him all day for things that I, clearly, wanted. Even if I didn’t understand it. Even if some part of me didn’t *want* to want it.

The spanking, the forced orgasm, the blowjob, and the bondage. It had all proved... cathartic. It had released things I hadn’t known I’d been holding onto.

And I felt... better.

I felt... lighter.

Less weighed down.

Less... empty.

“I know, pet,” he agreed. “But you have to earn back trust now,” he told me. “You’ve been too coddled,” he went on. “You need someone with a strong hand to teach you,” he added. “To behave. To submit. To feel,” he said, and those words were like a gut punch.

How could he have known that I needed that?

When I hadn’t even known myself?

“Alright,” he said, patting my ass almost playfully. “Let’s go to bed,” he said, and I lifted up and crawled off of him before getting to my feet.

I started to walk, but he caught up, grabbing the X of leather still connected to one of my wrists.

Then pulled me, led me like a dog, away from my room. And into his.

When he flicked the light on, my wide eyes moved around the room, seeing what he'd been doing all day while I'd been gone.

Setting up his room.

Spread across the dresser were various items. A belt. A flogger. A paddle. Beside that, several boxes of newly purchased... sex toys? A vibrator. Plugs. And something else next to a pair of panties.

Before I could wrap my head around that, though, he was pulling me to the bed.

I didn't notice the straps until he was reaching for them.

They weren't the same as the ones in the living room.

These were softer and stretchier, allowing for movement. This was evidenced by how he pulled them toward me, and slid one onto my wrist before removing the old cuff.

“Get on the bed,” he demanded.

And I did, the restraint making my arm go up.

He secured my other wrist before moving toward my feet, and I tested them, glad to find I could pull my arms down near my shoulders without too much discomfort.

But with my ankles bound, I couldn't do more than turn halfway onto my side, and even that made the material rub against my skin.

So I stayed on my back as Julian moved to the foot of the bed.

Then he gave me what some part of me had been craving back in the living room.

His attention.

His dark gaze roamed over my bare body, and I had to press my thighs more tightly together to ease the ache at the intensity I saw in his eyes as they moved back to my face.

“You're beautiful, pet,” he said, and the words made that shiver move through me again. “And you are going to learn to

only need to hear that from me,” he said. “Instead of countless strangers.”

With that, he turned to walk toward the door, flicking off the light, before coming back to bed, climbing in, and seeming to fall right to sleep.

I, however, was awake for a long time.

Looking at him.

Thinking.

Grumbling at my restraints.

Before, finally, when Julian’s hand moved out and landed on my thigh, I drifted off to a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Julian

Even I'd been surprised by how well she submitted.

For a girl who'd gotten everything her way for what seemed like her entire life, stripping away her control had been easier than I'd anticipated.

That said, it was because of something I'd suspected almost from the beginning.

Because she needed it.

Because she'd been running and hiding from everything real. Because she'd been stuffing herself full of experiences and alcohol, and external validation, so that she never truly had to sit with her feelings and realize how empty she felt.

I had to show that to her.

I knew when I'd stripped her then left her, that something had cracked in her world, in her psyche.

This was a woman who based her entire worth around the opinions of people who were inconsequential in her life.

She performed for them.

Their words in response to that show became the sustenance she lived off of.

It was toxic.

It was empty.

And it hurt her when I didn't give her it.

When I'd forced her to face what she thought of as my rejection. Then handle the emotions that brought up.

She needed to learn to release all that bullshit.

Once she stopped fighting me, I could show her how to fill back up.

One step at a time, though.

And I was enjoying the taming stage, so I was in no rush to move past it.

Just because she'd let me restrain her with almost no objection didn't mean she wasn't going to find that spoiled, bratty side of herself again. Especially as the punishment dragged on.

It was going to get more unpleasant for her before it got better.

I climbed out of bed where she was still sleeping, letting Hugh out, then feeding him before setting up a dog walker to give him some enrichment while I worked with his mom for a while.

Finished with that, I made my way back into the room, stopping for a moment while she was still sleeping to let my gaze move over her.

She really was beautiful.

Perfect.

It was a crime that she let strangers decide that for her.

Naked for me, I couldn't help but feel my cock stiffen as I watched her chest rise and fall, her round tits lifting and falling, her rosy nipples slightly pointed from the chill of the room.

Her legs had fallen open slightly at the knees, giving me a view of her perfect fucking pussy, too.

That was the hardest part of this stage.

Not burying my face, fingers, and cock there, feeling her walls tighten, hearing her beg and cry for release.

But she hadn't earned that yet.

I moved around the room, gathering my clothes for the day, and by the time I finished, she was stirring.

"Morning, pet," I murmured, moving over toward her side of the bed, and releasing her ankles. Then wrists.

"Ow," she grumbled as she pulled her arms down by her sides.

"Come here," I said, reaching for her, and was pleased when she immediately folded forward toward me.

My arms lifted, hands sinking into her shoulders, and rubbing at the aching muscles there.

Punishments were important.

So was showing her that I cared.

"I have to—" she started.

"Hugh already went out and ate. And is on a walk with a dog walker," I told her.

"Oh," she said, head lolling forward against my shoulder as my fingers found a sore spot, and started to loosen the knot.

It wasn't long before her pain had morphed into something else, and little whimpers were escaping her.

My cock was throbbing by the time her whole body seemed to loosen up. Except her thighs that she was pressing together hard, trying to ease the need there.

“Come on,” I said, standing, and reaching for her hand, and helping her off the bed.

I had everything I needed in the bathroom already.

“What’s—“

I cut her off by pointing above her head as we stepped into my bathroom.

I’d been busy while she’d been avoiding me the day before.

Running home to grab supplies and my tools, then dragging the dining room chair to the bathroom to install a ring in the ceiling.

Another set of restraints was strung through, somewhere between the bed restraints and the hogties in firmness.

“Give me your arm,” I demanded, holding mine out as the other pulled down one side of the restraint.

And she did.

Without question or complaint.

Maybe she wouldn’t be as difficult as I first thought.

A whimper escaped her as I reached for her other arm, something that made the restraint draw upward, forcing her arm over her head.

“You’ll remember this the next time you think about trying to run away from me,” I said, voice soft because she was being good.

With that, I turned away, walking into the shower niche and turning on the water.

Then, my gaze on her, I shucked off my pants.

Her gaze immediately moved down over me, and I felt a small smile tug at my lips at the way her chest started to rise and fall faster, at her parted lips and heavy-lidded eyes.

She was gorgeous just existing. But she was next-level beautiful when she was turned on.

I moved into the shower, letting the hot water cascade down my body.

It wasn't long, though, before my aching cock couldn't take it anymore, not with her standing there just a few feet away, pressing her thighs together, trying to calm the desire building through her system as I washed.

Unable to take it anymore, I reached down and fisted my cock, my gaze on her as I started to stroke myself.

If I didn't get a release, I was going to drag her in here, and bury my cock inside her. And I didn't want to go there yet. I wanted her to be fucking begging for it.

More than that, she needed to earn it.

A groan escaped me as her thighs started to slide against each other, seeking some sort of friction as her breathing got even faster than my own as I drove myself up.

Close, I moved out of the niche, and made my way over to her, stroking a few more times until I came on her belly.

And, fuck, was it good to see my cum on her pretty skin.

I grabbed a towel to dry myself off, then slung it around my waist before reaching to release each of her wrists.

"Okay," I said as she wiggled her shoulders.

"Go clean yourself up," I told her, waving out toward the room.

"Oka—" she started. Then, at my raised brow, corrected herself, "Yes, sir."

"Good girl," I said, snagging her chin between my thumb and forefinger for a moment, then watching her turn to walk away.

I went back into the kitchen, getting the espresso machine ready, knowing she would want one before she went out to get the coffee she really wanted.

Then I made my way into her bedroom.

I didn't even need to open her bathroom door.

She left it mostly open, the steam from her shower drifting outward.

I moved inside, watching as her gaze shot over to me, her hands frozen, holding the sudsy luffa between them.

“Want some help, pet?” I asked, watching as her lips parted and her eyes went all hazy before she gave me a little nod. “No,” I said, shaking my head as I moved closer. “You have to say it.”

“Yes, sir,” she said automatically.

Again, I shook my head.

“Say what you want, Scarlet.”

“I want you to help me,” she said, voice so low I could barely hear it over the water slapping against the tile floor.

“Of course I will,” I said, flicking off my towel, then moving into the shower with her.

Her gaze immediately lowered as I towered over her.

“No,” I said, pressing her chin up with my thumb. “I want you to look at me unless you are kneeling,” I told her as I reached for the luffa.

She was practically trembling as I started to run the soapy luffa down one arm, then the other, before moving down her chest.

She was so fucking sensitive.

I couldn't wait to show her all the ways I could make her fall apart.

For now, though, I was going to go ahead and enjoy the way she shivered and sighed as I washed her.

By the time I was done with all the tame places on her body, her thighs were shaking.

I know I wanted to wait.

But didn't she deserve a little reward for being good? For taking her punishments without complaint?

Decision made, I reached downward, running the luffa between her thighs.

You'd have thought I'd fucking shocked her by the way her entire body jolted, by how hard she gasped.

A growl moved through me at her reaction.

"You need help with something else, pet?" I asked, hearing her ragged breathing.

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

"What do you want?" I asked, discarding the luffa, then pressing my fingers against her pussy. "This?"

"Yes," she cried. "Sir," she added as her hips rocked her pussy against my touch.

"You're so wet for me already," I said as my fingers moved up her cleft, finding her clit, and starting to circle it. "Feel how much your pussy wants me?" I asked as my thumb worked her clit, and I slid a finger inside of her, feeling her walls tighten around me. "You want more?" I asked, getting a desperate whimper from her in return.

I slid another finger inside of her, grinning a bit at the moan that escaped her.

"Are you thinking about my cock?" I asked. "Here," I added, thrusting. "Like this?" I asked, thrusting harder.

"Yes," she cried, her hips rocking against my touch.

She was already so close.

"You haven't earned my cock yet," I told her as my other hand rose, closing around her throat, and pushing her against the shower wall. "But if you keep behaving, you can feel me just like this," I told her, thrusting faster and harder, driving her up, her moans echoing off of the shower walls as she got closer and closer. "That's it, pet," I murmured. "Come for me like a good girl."

And just like that, as if seeking my permission to do so, the orgasm slammed through her system, making her cry out and her legs go weak.

I moved inward, my body holding her up against the shower wall as I finger-fucked her through the orgasm, dragging it out, milking it for all it was worth.

She clung to me afterward, her breathing ragged, her heart hammering.

I slid my fingers out of her as she moved backward, then slipped my fingers into my mouth, needing to taste her, and finding her just as sweet as I'd been expecting.

"Get dressed, pet," I said, moving out of the stall, drying myself off with my towel, then going to get dressed myself.

I made her the espresso, then brought it into her room, finding her standing at the mirror, swiping a mascara wand over her long lashes.

"Thank you," she said, brows pinching as she looked down at the cup.

I gave her a nod as my hand went around her, finding the tuck of her towel, then loosening it, watching it fall away from her.

"Don't hide from me," I demanded, voice soft, and I was close enough to feel the little tremble that moved through her. "What are your plans today?" I asked.

"I... I can go?" she asked.

"You're not in prison, pet," I told her, unable to stop my hand from sliding around her hip. "You just can't be sneaking away from me."

"Okay. I, ah, I think I'm going out with Leona," she said. "I haven't, ah, checked my phone."

If I wasn't mistaken, this was likely the longest she had gone without looking at it in years. That phone was practically an extension of her arm.

"Just let me know," I said, moving away from her to find her phone, then bring it to her.

"Thanks," she said again. "I want to go get coffee," she said.

“I figured. And you need to eat something,” I reminded her.

She picked at food, but she never ate nearly enough.

Her gaze found mine in the mirror, her lips twitching. “Let me guess... and drink some water?”

Pleased to see she still had a spark even after punishment, I smiled back as I reached up to snag some of her wet hair, and giving it a tug.

“Always,” I said, watching the fire spark in her eyes.

I wrapped her hair around my hand, giving it a harder tug that had her turning more toward me to ease the sting.

I watched her for a moment, seeing the anticipation build, then sealing my lips over hers.

Hard and deep, but moving away as soon as she started to melt into me.

I needed to get some control over myself.

Maybe it was good she had plans.

It would allow me some space to focus.

If we were going to continue this—and I wanted us to—I needed to get to know her better, and she the same for me. That depth of understanding would make her submission, and the intimacy that came with it, more intense.

“You were getting dressed, pet,” I reminded her as she just stood there afterward, confused.

“Right,” she agreed, shaking her head.

If she was that affected from a kiss, I couldn’t fucking wait to see how she reacted when I was inside her.

Christ.

I was getting ahead of myself again.

CHAPTER NINE

Scarlet

He didn't fuck me.

As two days slid to three, and he still hadn't grabbed me, bent me over, and slammed inside of me, I couldn't help but start feeling a little insecure about it.

I mean, it wasn't that he wasn't attracted to me.

He'd had me go down on him.

He'd jerked off while looking at me.

Clearly, there was interest there.

The thing was, he wasn't acting on it.

He was barely touching me at all, in fact.

He tagged along on all my errands. Getting coffee, having my hair or brows done, getting waxed, grabbing lunch and dinner with friends. There he always was, standing in the corner of the room, looking intimidating.

Though only I actually knew just how intimidating he was. But it was in a way that made my belly quiver each time I looked at him.

But as we finally got home after running around, he didn't force me onto my knees. He didn't bind me.

Sure, he made small commands.

Drinking my water.

Getting enough sleep.

Eating what he ordered or made.

But nothing that required me to, ah, submit.

That was what I was doing, right? Submitting.

And he was, of course, dominating.

I thought that was the stuff of books. Or weird, kinky people who gathered in dungeons in all-leather outfits.

Clearly, though, it was something a former military bodyguard and an heiress did in a penthouse apartment in the middle of the city.

All we seemed to be doing lately, though, was talking.

About my past, about his.

About my likes and dislikes.

About my fondest memories.

And my darkest ones.

Honestly, I was kind of over talking.

I wasn't someone who liked sharing so much about myself. I was accustomed to all my interactions with others being either superficial—with the likes of my 'friends'—or very carefully curated—like what I shared with my followers.

No one got to see the real stuff underneath. The less glamorous, uglier parts of myself.

And I couldn't understand why Julian was so obsessed with all of that.

All I knew was that I was tired of it.

Which was why I'd agreed to go out with some friends.

This time, though, with the Lloyd sisters, Mae and Leah, who were in town for a weekend.

I went ahead and didn't tell Julian about Mae and Leah's reputation since he wasn't already in the know.

Besides, it had been almost two years since Mae's orgy sex tape had released. And Leah hadn't been arrested since she'd set her rich boyfriend's car on fire a few years back.

For all I knew, they were reformed.

It was the first night out on the town since, well, things had changed with Julian.

So I wasn't surprised by the way his brow raised when I'd told him what was happening.

"I see," he said, nodding. "And where will you be going?"

"I don't know yet," I told him, avoiding his gaze as I slid my dresses around on the rack in my closet. "Mae and Leah are choosing."

To that, he nodded and walked out.

Only to come back a moment later with a pair of panties in his hand.

The weird thing was... I was pretty sure they weren't mine.

They were cute. Black, lace, a thong so I didn't have lines under my dress. But definitely not mine.

"You're wearing these," he told me.

"Why?"

"Because I told you to," he said, and it was the first time I'd seen a spark of that same Julian who'd made me get on my knees, and bound me.

"They might not go with my outfit," I said, looking away, wanting to provoke him.

“It wasn’t a suggestion, Scarlet,” he said, his voice deep and commanding, making my sex clench hard in response.

When I said nothing, he stalked forward, yanking at the tuck of my robe, and loosening the material before pulling it roughly off, leaving me standing there naked.

“Put the fucking panties on,” he said, holding them out to me.

“Fine,” I said, taking them from him, then shooting him a scrunched brow look.

“Don’t make me tell you again,” he said, not answering the question on my face.

I pulled the panties up, feeling something pressing against my crotch. Something that shouldn’t have been there. Something hard.

When I looked at him again, he had a wicked glint in his eyes as he reached into his pocket for something small and plastic.

Holding it in his hand, he pressed a button down, and my panties vibrated hard enough to make my knees buckle a bit before I stiffened them.

“Oh,” I sighed, sucking in a deep breath.

I watched as he slipped the remote back into his pocket.

“You’ll behave,” he said with a dark little smirk, “or you will be... punished.”

With that, and nothing more, he was gone.

I didn’t have to ask what that meant.

He would relentlessly tease me until he had me at that point of desire that was painful. But he wouldn’t let me have a release.

It sounded miserable, yet there was something undeniably sexy about the idea of him being able to control my desire even from a room away.

Also, I had no freaking idea what he meant about behaving. It wasn't like I was going to be able to ditch him at a club. If nothing else, he could text Eric to scoop him up and bring him to our next location.

And since leaving him was the only thing I'd been punished for, I figured I would be relatively safe while having some fun with Mae and Leah.

We were only maybe two hours into the night when I realized that while Mae and Leah hadn't been making it into the gossip sites these days, they had not calmed down in the least.

My guess was their family had hired a really good PR team for them to help spin stories and a 'fixer' crew to shut down other stories they didn't want to get out.

This was confirmed after we left the first club where they'd drunk me under the table. Because in the backseat of the car, Leah passed me a piece of paper.

I knew an NDA when I saw one.

"Really?" I asked, offended. I mean, we'd been partying together since we were teenagers. We'd done very sketchy shit in the past. And I'd never shared about it. For no other reason than implicating them also implicated myself.

Mae sighed as she pushed her red hair back from her pretty face. "You get it. It's like you with the bodyguard," she said, waving toward the partition. "If we don't agree to make people sign them, our parents cut us off."

"Alright," I said, signing the paper. "I get it."

"Though, we are trying to... get our own thing going," Mae said, folding the paper, and sticking it in her purse.

"Really? Like what?" I asked.

To that, Leah's lips twitched. "Renewable energy."

Which definitely seemed like a purposeful slap in the face to a family legacy in oil.

I wouldn't pretend to understand their family dynamics. But the handful of times I'd been around their father, he'd been cold and judgmental. So if he was like that publicly toward his girls, I couldn't imagine what he was like in private.

"That's amazing. Does your father know?"

"Not yet. We... figured out how to keep our names out of things until we know for sure if it will be a successful venture," Leah said. "But... it's looking like it is going somewhere."

I knew what my trust was like.

And I knew the sisters had money not only from their parents, but also a trust from their grandfather, who'd adored them.

If they were being careful with their money, and investing a decent portion of it, I could see how that money could stack up in investments over time.

"I have my fingers crossed for you. It would be great not to have to live by your parents' rules." The girls were several years older than me, after all, and living under a much stricter thumb than I was.

"What about you?" Mae asked as she pulled out a mirror to swipe on more light pink gloss.

"What about me?" I asked.

"Any business ventures on the horizon?" she asked.

"Oh, well, I have my brand endorsements," I said.

"But even if you are doing the best of the best, what is that... a million a year?" Leah asked. "Don't you want more for yourself?"

I honestly hadn't given it much thought.

Some part of me had been too focused on building my "brand," even though my brand didn't actually sell anything. Save for the items that I was paid to hock to my followers.

And, to an extent, I thought that bringing in any income was ‘good enough’ considering I didn’t *need* to work.

Was that enough, though?

Should I have been striving for more?

I mean, I’d done what was expected of me all my life. I’d been a straight-A student all through school. I’d gone to college like my father demanded.

After that, though, I’d just wanted to... live a little.

That’s what I’d been doing.

I figured there was still plenty of time to sort out my future.

“Whoa, okay. Didn’t mean to give you an existential crisis. Come on, let’s not talk about life stuff. Let’s talk about fun stuff,” Mae said.

“Yeah, like Mr. Yummypants up there,” Leah agreed, pressing a hand to her heart. “How do you stand having him in your place all the time without jumping him?”

Because, apparently, he doesn’t want to fuck me.

I couldn’t say that, of course.

“He’s... very serious,” I said.

“Yeah, but that’s the best part,” Leah agreed. “Seeing him lose control.”

“I’m not sure if Julian is capable of losing control,” I admitted.

“Well... we will see about that, won’t we?” Mae asked as Eric pulled up to the curb of what looked like a dive bar.

“Really? Here?” I asked, frowning.

“It’s a secret,” Leah said, grabbing my hand, and pulling me with her onto the street, through the dive bar, into the back alley, then toward a really sketchy set of steps that led down below ground level.

I couldn’t help myself, I glanced back, wanting to make sure Julian was still there, that things would be okay if this

was as sketchy as it looked.

He was no more than five feet behind, his gaze on me.

At my look, he gave me a nod.

Encouraged, I let Leah and Mae pull me to a big steel door with one of those old speakeasy windows.

Sure enough, when Leah knocked, it slid open.

“Octopus,” Leah said, and the window slid shut for a second before the door slid open.

“What is this?” I asked Mae as we moved into a front room much like the one at the sex club SVNT.

“It’s burlesque,” Mae said. “Kind of. We have to leave our phones. You know the deal.”

I chanced another look back at Julian who was handing over his phone to the attendant, but there was a tension in his jaw that hadn’t been there a moment before.

Was he going to be mad about this?

Would he punish me for it later?

And why did the thought of that make my sex clench hard?

I didn’t get a chance to say anything to him, though, as Mae and Leah linked their arms through mine and led me into the back of the club.

Sure enough, there was a main stage. And a pretty blonde was doing a peek-a-boo dance with big feather fans.

There were several smaller stages, too, though. And on each stage were men and women, most of whom were almost entirely undressed, save for some fancy leather things some wore that didn’t actually cover any significant amount of skin.

That wasn’t the shocking part, though. Lord knew I’d been exposed to more in the world than men and women performing nude.

But they were more than just... performers.

When the women bent over or spread their legs, people gathered around the stage were not only touching—teasing

their nipples, massaging their asses—but penetrating them with their fingers, in both holes.

The male dancers would stroke their own cocks, or allow the men and women standing around to do so. One even leaned over and sucked him into her mouth.

This just felt... different than the sex club. Where the patrons were the ones getting it on. Which felt a little more, I don't know, consensual, to me.

These people were getting paid to be stroked and fingered by literally anyone standing near them.

Sure, sex workers did that all the time. But they could say no, right? This didn't seem to give the performers that option.

“Wait till you see the back room,” Mae called over the music.

I wasn't sure I was prepared for the back room.

“I need a drink first,” I admitted.

They didn't push, just plied me with drinks before gently leading me toward various stages. They kept their hands to themselves, but dropped cash on the stages as one of the men stroked himself to completion, coming on the face of a woman who was begging for it.

At some point, though, while I'd been watching the actual burlesque, Mae disappeared, and Leah walked over to another stage, watching a woman get fingered by three sets of different men's fingers.

“She's beautiful,” a smooth voice said, speaking directly behind my shoulder, making me jolt and turn just as he moved in at my side instead.

“Ah, yes,” I agreed.

He was handsome. Tall, dirty blond hair, an expensive suit, with light green eyes.

“You're more beautiful,” he said. Very matter-of-fact.

“Well, don't be expecting me to get up on that stage,” I said, shooting him a smile.

And it was almost that exact second that my panties buzzed hard, making my knees buckle slightly. I threw out a hand to steady myself, managing only to press said hand into the stranger in the process.

“Whoa,” he said, reaching for me. “Maybe we should sit,” he suggested, then immediately pushed me toward a chair at a two-seat table near the stage.

I glanced around, but didn’t see Julian.

Had the buzz been an accident? Had he hit it when reaching into his pocket for his wallet or something?

“Looking for someone?” the man asked, head tipped to the side.

“No. I came with some friends. Just... want to keep an eye on them,” I said.

“Mae and Leah?” he asked, making my brows raise. “Don’t worry. I signed my NDA,” he said with a smile. “They’ve been here often. The staff knows them. They’re safe.”

That was... good. I guess.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“What’s in the back room?”

The way he glanced away to smile before flattening it to look back at me told me that it was definitely somehow more scandalous than what was out here. Which seemed hard to believe.

“Do you really want to know, or do you need a drink first?” he asked, giving me a wicked little smile.

“A drink, if that look on your face is anything to go by,” I said, then watched him get the attention of a server, and order us a round of drinks.

“Absolutely not,” he said when I tried to reach for my card. “Elijah,” he said, toasting me with his glass.

“Scarlet,” I said, clinking my glass to his.

The buzz had my body jerking, nearly making me spill my drink all over myself.

“You okay there?” Elijah asked, brows lifted.

“Yeah. Just, ah, vertigo,” I said, figuring it was as good a reason I could come up with without telling this stranger that I was forced to wear vibrating panties. And that I was pretty sure that the man holding the remote was not approving of me spending time with another man. Even just for a drink.

It was the first sign of any sort of interest from him in days, though. So I wasn’t above using that to my advantage.

If he wanted to play, oh, I could play too.

“So,” I said, leaning forward toward Elijah. “What is in the back room?”

Elijah nipped his lower lip for a second, actually seeming a bit bashful. That seemed absurd, giving what was going on around us. But it was endearing.

“So... have you heard of glory holes?” he asked.

“What... like the holes in truck stop bathroom stalls?” I asked.

“Maybe back in the day, sure,” Elijah said. “But I’m thinking more like in popular Czech porn,” he explained.

“I’ll admit that I’m not familiar,” I said.

“There are clubs like this. Except there are holes in walls where, mostly, women’s lower halves stick out. Sometimes mouths too, but mostly waist down. And men pay an entrance fee... and do what and whoever they want.”

“There’s... holes like that back there?” I asked, mouth falling open.

I hadn’t even meant to lean forward toward Elijah when I said it. I was just so shocked that my voice had lowered like we were sharing some big secret.

But I knew it the second Julian thought I'd moved too close to this other man, because another, longer, buzz started, making my breath catch and my thighs press together hard, trying to ease the ache that was growing.

"Yep," Elijah said, likely mistaking my reaction for interest in said glory holes.

"Is it employees—" I started, feeling another buzz, this one pulsating on and off, making me realize I was still leaning across the table.

I made myself sit back, knowing Julian wasn't going to let me come, just edge me until I was literally in pain from the need for release.

It was an act of self-preservation that had me sitting back and reaching for my drink.

"No," Elijah said. "It's fellow partygoers. Which is half of the fun," he added. "You have no idea who you are touching or fucking."

Was that where Mae was?

She'd disappeared ages ago.

And Leah was still making her way around the stages.

I imagined she didn't want to see her sister taking one or several strange dicks.

I wasn't judging.

I mean... who the hell was I to judge?

When I was suddenly getting hot at the idea of being hogtied and spanked.

We all, it seemed, had our yums. I wasn't about to yuck hers.

"Want to check it out?" Elijah asked, leaning forward toward me.

Did I?

Not really.

Did a part of me still want to mess with Julian?

Absolutely.

“Sure,” I said, finishing my drink, and moving to stand as Elijah did.

The second Elijah’s hand grazed my lower back in a very chaste, very gentlemanly way, though, it was clear Julian had enough.

He held down that button, making my legs wobbly, making my heart race, and forcing sweat to trickle out over my skin.

“You okay?” Elijah asked.

“You know... I, ah, I think I need to go splash some water on my face,” I said, trying not to sound as close to the edge as I felt. “That drink went right to my head,” I added, my hands balling into fists.

“Sure. I’ll be around if you change your mind,” he said, giving me a distracted smile, already wanting to move onto someone who was more interested.

Which was fine.

Because I needed to get somewhere more private before I started moaning in the middle of the damn club.

I wobbled—thighs pressed together—toward the hallway where I figured I might find the bathrooms.

It wasn’t exactly private, but it was better than being around the crush of people as Julian kept pulsing the vibrator in longer intervals.

I barely made it halfway down the hallway when I needed to stop walking.

Plastering myself against the wall, I leaned forward a bit, taking deep, gasping breaths as the pressure built up inside, as it threatened to overtake me completely.

Hands suddenly grabbed my wrists, yanking them up, and slamming them against the wall above my head.

A gasp escaped me as my gaze lifted and found Julian towering over me, gaze both heated and furious.

He shifted both my wrists into one hand, freeing his other to reach again for the remote.

He said nothing.

Which was somehow even more intimidating as he stabbed his finger into the remote button.

Long hard buzzes.

Short bursts.

Keeping my body and my climax on edge.

Julian stared down at me, gauging my reaction, never quite letting me get to that edge where I might slip and fall over, crash down into the orgasm my body was crying for.

He kept driving me close, then refusing to let me get relief.

“Please,” I begged, legs feeling shaky.

“You don’t deserve it,” Julian growled at me, pressing the button for longer spells, then just as my body was tensing to come, he backed off.

“I’m... sorry,” I panted.

“For what?”

“For trying to provoke you,” I said as he did tiny little pulses.

“For provoking me,” he corrected. “And, no, pet. You’re not sorry. But you will be.”

With that, he released my arms, and tucked the remote away.

“Go tell Leah that you aren’t feeling well, and you are going home, and that you will send Eric back to drive them home.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a few deep breaths.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, sir,” I said in a small voice, my gaze slipping down.

“Good girl,” he said, waving out toward one of the stages where Leah was practically getting slapped in the face with a

performer's cock. "Now, go."

I had no idea what kind of punishment lay ahead of me.

But I had a sneaking suspicion I was about to find out.

And likely, in a way I still didn't understand, that I was going to like.

CHAPTER TEN

Julian

I was not a jealous man.

Even with women in the past, I wanted their respect and their submission, but I didn't particularly care about who they spent their time with.

For me, this had always been a release, not necessarily an entire lifestyle. I used high protocols only for scenes. It wasn't like me to expect anything from a woman outside of a scene.

Until Scarlet.

It could have been different simply because I was living with her, not just meeting up for some mutual relief.

I had a feeling it was more than that, though.

Especially after working on getting to know the woman better.

The thing was, she wasn't the superficial, pampered, sometimes selfish person she came off as if you only knew her

on the surface.

Underneath that was a lot of depth, a lot of grief and loneliness.

She'd been a young girl who lost her mother. And in doing so, lost her father as well. To his grief for the love of his life. Then to the work that he used to mask his own pain.

She'd been left in the care of a nanny who, by all accounts, seemed to resent everything that Scarlet had been given, making her mean and judgmental. She had never been the maternal figure Scarlet had been needing as a young girl, but instead was someone chasing a check and doing everything in her power to tear down a lonely kid.

It seemed Scarlet's penchant for running babysitters out of her life started with that nanny.

She'd told me stories about all the ways she'd made the woman miserable until even the paycheck wasn't enough reason to stay.

After that, she'd been alone.

Her father worked and traveled nonstop, leaving her alone in his place from age fifteen on.

To make up for his absence, he showered her with gifts.

Which, of course, she didn't want.

But, eventually, she turned all that opulence into a sort of career online.

Those strangers gave her the attention she'd been craving her entire adolescence.

Eventually, she got addicted to it. Then she catered her life to their approval when she could get it, then to their attention when she couldn't get anything else.

It was why she could never be away from her phone, away from those hits of attention she craved.

It was also why when I put her in a kneeling position and left her alone with nothing but her thoughts, she broke down.

She was forced to face the emptiness for the first time.

Seeing that made me want to help fill her up.

But with something better than a stranger's approval.

With her own.

But that was a process.

It came with breaking down her walls, then making her trust me, then learning to trust herself and her own desires and goals.

It was something more than I'd ever attempted with a sub before.

And as I watched her talk to the guy at the club, the jealousy that built in me let me know that this was more than just scenes, more than just a power exchange.

I was invested.

Interested.

I cared about her in a way that extended beyond play.

But I wasn't sure if she was ready to hear that yet.

I'd have to play it by ear.

Contrary to ignorant beliefs, power play between a dom and their submissive was always led by the sub. By their desires and needs. There was no dominating without a their sub's desire and willingness.

So I would have to continue to test her bounds during scenes, then comfort her with aftercare.

See if something came from that for her like it had already started for me.

But first, she had to be punished for toying with me. Because she was a smart girl. She knew what she was doing when she was doing it.

Why... that was what I intended to find out.

It wouldn't take much to get a confession out of her.

She looked about to cry from need when I finally eased off of the remote before shuffling her into the car, and telling Eric to drive us home.

“Wha—“ she started when we were in the elevator.

“Don’t speak,” I demanded, watching as she immediately lowered her gaze.

She was a quick study.

She was craving submission.

“Take off your clothes,” I demanded as we moved into her penthouse. “Then kneel,” I added.

I watched as she removed her heels, dress, bra, then panties, and I couldn’t hold in a smirk when I lifted them off the ground and found them soaked.

“You behaved badly tonight,” I told her as she kneeled for me. “Now, the question is how much you need to be punished,” I said, walking in front of her to snag her chin, pulling it up further, so I could watch her micro-expressions.

“Yes, sir,” she agreed.

“Were you innocent tonight?” I asked, running a finger up her jaw, then over her hair as I walked behind her.

A little shiver coursed through her at the barely there touch.

“Or did you provoke me on purpose?”

“On purpose, sir,” she whispered.

“Why?” I asked, coming around the front of her again. “Answer me,” I demanded, snagging her chin when she tried to hang her head.

But she didn’t.

She wasn’t ready yet.

Saying anything real wasn’t easy for her.

“Fine,” I said, reaching to pull my belt off, folding it in half in my hand. “Up,” I demanded, watching as she got to her

feet. “To the table,” I added, waving toward her dining table. “Flat on your stomach.”

She did exactly that, reaching out to grab the edge of the table, then sucking in a deep breath.

“You will count your lashes,” I told her as I moved to the side of the table. “Until you’re ready to tell me why you misbehaved tonight.”

With that, I pulled back, then swung out with the belt, the leather cracking against the skin of her ass.

A startled cry escaped Scarlet as her body jolted hard at the pain.

“Count,” I demanded.

“One,” she hissed, breath coming in ragged gasps.

A bare hand and a belt were night and day.

I didn’t think she would make it far before she felt ready to confess.

“Do you have anything to say yet?” I asked.

When there was no answer, I swung again. It was the same amount of force, but her cry was louder this time.

“Two,” she gasped.

When nothing else was said, I went for a third.

“Three.”

Then a fourth.

But this one landed on a spot on her ass that had already been struck, making her almost shoot up off of the table.

“How many, pet?” I asked.

“Four,” she hiccuped.

“Do you have something to tell me?”

She sniffled, but said nothing else.

One last one should do it.

“Five,” she cried. “You stopped wanting me!” she added, the words tripping over each other.

What?

“What was that, pet?” I asked, setting the belt aside, and moving up a few steps to squat down next to where she curled herself up in the fetal position on the table.

“All you wanted to do was talk to me,” she said, covering her face with her hands like it embarrassed her to say them. “You weren’t giving me any...”

She trailed off, letting me finish the thought.

“Attention,” I filled in as it dawned on me what the problem was.

“Yes,” she said, sniffing harder, her voice sounding thick.

Real emotions were hard as fuck for her.

I wondered if that was from an absent dad, a nanny who didn’t give a fuck about her, or from the combination of the two that left her feeling like no one gave a shit about how she felt, so she was better off pushing it down, and never admitting to any depth of emotion about anyone or anything.

“Okay,” I said, reaching for her arms, pulling until she followed and slid off of the table, letting me pull her into my arms.

I didn’t say anything for a long moment, just letting her actually *feel* her feelings for the first time in a long time.

My hand rose, holding the back of her head.

“There are different kinds of attention, pet,” I told her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head as her fingers tightened on the lapels of my jacket. “The superficial type and the below-surface type. I wanted to get to know you. That is attention too. Asking you questions. Listening to you when you speak.”

Her body racked slightly as she let out another sad snuffle.

“But I may have forgotten how much you enjoy the other type of attention,” I admitted. We’d get nowhere if I wasn’t

willing to admit to my mistakes.

Of course she needed me to compliment her, to want to touch her. That was how she'd come to acknowledge her value. On the superficial shit.

Her pretty was what she felt she had to offer.

And she thought I wasn't appreciating that.

Like I hadn't been half-hard every single fucking moment I was with her.

"You're allowed to ask me for things, pet," I told her, running my hands through her silky hair. "This doesn't and should never just go one way."

She was silent for a long time, and I pulled her over toward the couch, then lowered her down on my lap.

Waiting it out.

I knew she was looking for the courage to say something.

I had to let her figure out how to do that without prompting.

"Why aren't we sleeping together?" she asked, voice a small whisper.

"Because you haven't been ready," I said.

To that, she finally looked up, shooting me such an exasperated look that I wanted to throw my head back and laugh.

"That's not what I meant," I said, smiling as I ran my hand over her skin.

I didn't know what was in the tub of sweet-smelling body cream she slathered on every night and morning, but the shit made her skin the softest I'd ever felt.

"Trust me, pet, I can't wait to bury my cock inside your perfect pussy. The thought fucking keeps me up at night."

"Then why can't we do it?" she asked.

"What I'm hearing is you are unsatisfied," I said instead of answering.

“Well, the relentless teasing with the panties didn’t exactly help.”

“Edging,” I corrected, cock twitching at the thought of how she’d cried and begged for release.

She’d do that for my cock one day.

Just not quite yet.

“And it was punishment,” I reminded her. “It was meant to be uncomfortable.”

“Mission accomplished,” she grumbled, making a smile tug at my lips.

I got to my feet, making Scarlet squeal as she tried to get to her feet in time.

She managed, but it was useless, because I was already reaching for her, ducking down, and tossing her over my shoulder.

Another shriek escaped her as I stood up straight, slapping her bare ass once as I started walking us through the penthouse.

I dropped her down on my bed, reaching for the restraints, but readjusting them so that her arms and legs were spread wide on the mattress.

“No! Where are you going?” she cried when I turned to walk out of the room.

I didn’t answer her.

Better to keep the mystery alive.

Telling her that the dog wanted to go out wasn’t exactly going to fix the mood. Besides, making her wait like that was going to build the anticipation.

I wanted her aching again before I even touched her.

Once he was let back inside, Hugh made his way toward Scarlet’s bed. A dog who was used to his habits, even if his mom wasn’t in the bed with him.

Finished with that, I made my way back into the room, finding Scarlet already wiggling on the bed, trying and failing to press her thighs together.

I closed the door behind myself then, eyes on her, starting to slip off my clothes.

And fuck if her chest didn't start rising and falling more rapidly as the layers came off.

I kept on my boxer briefs purely for self-restraint reasons.

This was about her.

About giving her what she needed.

To come, sure.

But more so than that, the undivided attention she was craving.

“Julian, please,” she pleaded softly, hips writhing restlessly.

I wasn't done teasing, though.

She would have a fuckuva lot more sweet torture before she got to come.

I moved over to the bed, climbing up, and starting to run my hands over her.

Up her calves, thighs, hips, belly, chest, shoulders.

I took the same path back down with my lips and tongue, then up again, feeling her body practically vibrating with need.

My lips were on her neck, feeling the frantic pulse of her heart there before moving up. Along her jaw, the shell of her ear, between her brows. Then, finally, sealing my lips to hers.

She whimpered against my kiss as I deepened it, as my teeth nipped, and my tongue explored.

I felt her yanking against her restraints, wanting to wrap me up in arms and legs.

I pressed up, looking down, seeing wetness gathered in her eyes.

So desperate for release that she was about ready to cry.

That was exactly where I wanted her.

This time, when my lips blazed a path downward, they didn't stop until they found their intended target.

Her body jolted hard as my lips closed around her clit and sucked, and the sound that escaped her was half pain and half pleasure.

She wouldn't take long.

She was so close.

I couldn't even slip my fingers inside of her before she was arching and shaking, until she was crying out her release, then collapsing back down, panting hard with relief.

"We're not done, pet," I told her, running my tongue up and down her pussy, then around her clit, but not making any contact with the too-sensitive spot until she was whimpering and writhing again.

Only then did my tongue start to circle as my fingers slid inside of her.

The next orgasm was silent as she seemed to hold her breath as her entire body stiffened hard before convulsing through it.

"One more," I said, fingers thrusting lazily inside of her, but leaving her clit alone for the moment.

"I can't," she whimpered.

"You will," I told her, turning my fingers inside of her to stroke against her top wall, engaging her G-spot until I proved her right as she started to climb once again.

Once she was close, I let my lips close around her clit again, sucking in throbs until she was crying out, the sound closer to a scream than a moan as her body shuddered.

"Good girl," I murmured as I kissed my way back up her belly, then sealed my lips to hers once again.

I sat back after, watching her pink skin, her heaving chest, her wet pussy.

Unable to take it anymore, I reached down, freeing my cock, and wrapping my fist around it.

Scarlet's gaze immediately lowered, her lips parting and her lids going heavy as she watched me stroke myself.

"Let me," she said, making my gaze lift to find hers.

"Let you, what, pet?"

Her cheeks went pinker at that.

"Let me suck your cock," she said, making a shot of need move through me.

"Like this?" I asked, my eyes looking toward her restraints, then back to her face.

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

"You want me to fuck your mouth?" I clarified.

"Yes."

Fuck.

I moved over her, getting into position over her, then lowering my hips down until my cock pressed against her lips.

Her tongue slid out, tracing over the head for a moment, lapping up the precum as her gaze held mine.

"You're such a good girl, pet," I said as her lips slid open, inviting my cock in.

I meant to be gentle with her as I started to rock my cock into her mouth.

It wasn't long, though, before the ache was too much to bear, before every molecule in my body was crying out for release.

"You need to take me deeper, pet," I said, voice rough as I started to thrust harder into her waiting mouth.

She gave me the tiniest nod since there was no way to speak with my cock filling her mouth.

I didn't pause then, thrusting my cock all the way in each time, the head tapping against her throat as she made little gurgling noises that only made me fucking hotter.

"You're doing so fucking good," I groaned as I got closer. "Are you going to let me come down your throat?" I asked.

My answer came as a vibrating noise around my cock as she tried to answer.

"Fuck," I cried out as I came so hard that my legs felt weak, my cum dripping down her throat as my hand slammed into the headboard, trying to hold myself upright as the pleasure coursed through me.

I took a steadying breath after, easing back slowly, knowing her throat was already going to be sore, and not wanting to make it any worse.

She gagged a bit as I withdrew, and I watched the cum cover her lips as I slid all the way out. Her tongue moved out, licking it away, taking all of me in.

My hand moved out, wiping the tears from the gagging off of her cheeks.

"You take my cock so fucking good, pet," I said before moving off the bed, then freeing her wrists and ankles before I climbed in the bed with her, pulling her onto my chest.

As she snuggled in and drifted off to sleep, I realized it was the most fucking content I'd ever been in my entire life.

I had no idea what to do with that, though, so I followed her to sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Scarlet

He fed me frozen yogurt for breakfast, somehow knowing that my throat was sore like I was sick from him thrusting hard and deep into it the night before.

I never would have thought I'd be into that.

Oral had always been something that sort of put the power in my, er, hands.

Having that power stripped away, and being at the mercy of exactly how he wanted me to suck him had been an entirely new sort of domination and submission that I couldn't believe how much I'd been into.

I mean, I'd been dripping wet through it, despite the three world-shattering orgasms he'd already given me right before.

But there was no denying there were repercussions from having a man fuck your throat.

So I was happy for the frozen yogurt. Then the ice cream shop he'd dragged me to after dinner as we lazily walked

Hugh down the road to tire him out.

He told me more about himself as we did so, talking about his time in the service, then the rough childhood he'd had before that, full of powerlessness that made his dominant side make a lot more sense to me.

We were still talking, in fact, when we were home and my phone started to ring.

"No clubs tonight," Julian said, half pleading, half demanding.

I was never *not* up for the club.

But, suddenly, I was a lot more interested in just hanging out with him instead.

"It's my father," I said before swiping to answer, feeling really weird doing so while stark naked since Julian was still firm on his 'you don't get to hide from me' thing.

"Hello?" I answered, letting Julian pull me into his lap.

"Scarlet, it's your father," he greeted me, and I just barely managed not to snort at that. Like I hadn't seen his name on the screen.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, since friendly calls with my father were few and far between.

"I'm calling to let you know that I'm taking the yacht with me to Porto Covo, if your busy schedule will allow you to accompany me."

"Portugal?" I asked, brows pinching. "For business?" I clarified, since my father was generally allergic to down time.

"Yes. I will be taking the yacht out, it may as well have more than me on it," he added.

Such a heartfelt invitation, but I bit back my retort.

I glanced at Julian, a question in my eyes.

He simply gave me a shrug.

"Would I be bringing my babysitter?" I asked, getting a hard hair tug from Julian at the turn of phrase.

“To a foreign country where you could get into all sorts of trouble? Yes, Scarlet. You will need to bring Julian. There is more than enough room.”

There were six staterooms, in fact. Each with their own bathroom.

The megayacht was an exercise in extravagance. The ultimate ‘bigger dick’ contest in each marina.

That said, I freaking loved it.

In the past because it allowed for some of the best content for my socials. And opportunities to do sponsored brand deals for everything from bathing suits to scuba gear.

Suddenly, though, I wasn’t thinking about any of those things.

I was thinking about sunbathing with Julian. Of taking dips in the hot tub when my father went to sleep. Which he did at promptly nine o’clock since I was a child. I wanted to hit the beach with Julian, explore the markets with him.

It sounded like paradise.

Even if we would have to be careful about not being seen by my father.

The staff wouldn’t be a problem. They’d been keeping my secrets for me since I was a kid. But I definitely didn’t want my father seeing me sitting on Julian’s lap or his hands on me on the town.

Sure, he understood that I was an adult and had been in relationships in the past. But I was relatively sure that he wouldn’t be okay with my bodyguard banging me... when he was the one paying for it.

“Scarlet?” my father prompted.

“Yes,” I said, feeling excitement bubble up.

“Tomorrow. I need you there at eight.”

“We will be there,” I agreed before hanging up.

“So... Portugal,” Julian said.

“Do you have your passport?” I asked, panicking that maybe my hopes would be dashed.

“It was a stipulation of my employment,” he said, smoothing my hair. “What about Hugh?”

“If my father had given me more notice, I could have brought him.” But it was a process that involved paperwork and vet checks. Or risking quarantine at the other end. Which was out of the question.

I had multiple options depending on how long I planned to be away. For just a weekend, I would board him at his doggy daycare. He could spend all his time with his friends, then sleep in a private room. Not a cage. A room.

But it was eight days minimum each way to Portugal. Plus the time spent there.

I had a dog sitter that would spend the time in my penthouse. But I suddenly felt really protective of my space now that it wasn't just mine.

“Drea,” I said, nodding.

“Really? Drea?”

“I know she can seem a bit wild sometimes,” I agreed. “But she has two rescue chi-mixes. They are treated better than most people's children. They have a dog walker who takes them out three times a day. A chef who drops off their specially formulated dog food once a week. And when she goes out at night, she has a dog nanny.”

“A dog nanny,” Julian repeated, smirking.

“And once monthly visits with a dog psychic, so Drea can know what the dogs are feeling.”

“Christ,” Julian said with a chuckle.

“She makes me feel like a terrible dog mom. But there is no better place for Hugh to be for an extended period of time. He's stayed with them several times before. He won't even miss me.”

“That’s not true. But he will be content while he waits for you,” Julian said. “So, what am I packing for this?”

“Your usual,” I said. “Plus a bathing suit. And maybe something more laid back for when we get to Porto Covo. It’s kind of more of a fishing village than anything else.”

“Your father is doing business in a fishing village?”

“No. He’s probably taking a plane from there to Madrid or somewhere like that.”

“You don’t want to go to Madrid?” Julian asked.

“I want to be alone with you. Without worrying about running into my father.”

His face softened at that, and he pressed a kiss to my temple.

“I guess you should be getting yourself packed now,” he said, scooting me off of his lap, so he could stand.

“I want to resent that,” I said, lips twitching. “But you’re not wrong. But I have to call Drea first,” I said, scrolling through my contacts to call her.

By the time I finished with the call to a super excited Drea, I could feel Julian’s presence in my doorway.

“What’s that look for?” I asked, finding him staring at me so intensely that I almost went back a step.

“I need you to hold onto something for me, pet,” he said.

“What? Like in my luggage?” I asked, brows pinching. “I mean... I’m not going to have much room, but I can tr—“

“I don’t mean in your luggage,” he said, reaching to pull something out of his pocket.

It was small and metal with a pink jeweled edge and the other edge was thick near the jeweled edge, then tapered.

A plug.

I mean, I knew about them. I’d seen them. But I definitely had never used one.

“Is that...”

“Yes,” he cut me off, nodding. “This,” he said, lifting it, and pressing it against my lips, “is what I need you to hold onto for me,” he said. “Open,” he demanded, and my lips parted immediately. “Suck,” he instructed, thrusting it in and out of my mouth a few times. “Now,” he said, pulling it out, “be a good girl and get on the bed for me. On all fours,” he clarified.

Was I going to let him... plug me?

And for what purpose?

I had to admit, though, that curiosity got the better of me. I climbed up on the bed, turning so my ass was facing him.

Walking up behind me, his hand pressed my upper half onto the mattress.

“Fucking beautiful view,” he murmured as I felt the cold metal of the plug tease over my ass cheek.

He moved it over then between.

There was a pause where I heard a pop of a cap, then cool, thick liquid ran over my skin, and the plug moved with it.

“I am going to claim every part of you,” he said, pressing the plug against me. “But I need to train your ass to be able to take me,” he explained as he pressed the plug harder, making it start to penetrate me.

“Breathe,” he demanded when I tensed. “Relax into it,” he instructed. “That’s a good girl,” he murmured as I took a slow, deep breath, then let it out.

The plug slipped in deeper.

Then, when it was buried in, Julian made a rumbling sound as he stepped back, looking at me.

“Fucking beautiful.”

Once the shock of the sensation wore off, I had to admit that there was a strange sort of pleasure in the sensation.

“Now what?” I asked, looking back at him.

“Now... you pack. And every move you make, you’re going to be thinking of having my cock in your ass,” he told me, a wicked glint in his dark eyes. “Then, when you are so wet you can’t take it anymore, I will give you a hint of what that is going to feel like. Now, get packing,” he demanded.

I waited until he walked away to try to move.

Only to find he was right.

Each movement made me aware of the plug. And it wasn’t long before the friction was creating an aching need deep inside as I carefully packed my suitcases.

I loved packing for the yacht because there were no baggage limits, so I could overpack without any issues.

Though as the time wore on, I was starting to regret all the trips back and forth to and from my closet and bathroom.

Like Julian had been listening for it, when I finally zipped my luggage, he appeared in the doorway.

“Are you ready for relief?” he asked, voice husky.

“Yes,” I admitted, too far gone to try to play it off.

“Then come here,” he said as he walked across the hall into his room, waiting for me just inside the door.

He closed the door after me then walked over to the bed, sitting off the end.

“Here,” he said, patting his lap.

Anticipation sizzled across my nerve endings as I walked toward him, the movement of the plug making me almost whimper with need as I lowered myself over his lap.

“That’s a good girl,” he murmured as his hand massaged my ass before his fingers drifted inward, grabbing the jewel of the plug, and pulling slightly, then pushing it back in.

There was a moment of discomfort. Not from pain, just adjustment to a new sensation as he started to fuck my ass with the plug.

It wasn't long, though, before my hands were gripping the bedding and my sighs became whimpers, then moans as he somehow managed to drive me up with just the plug.

"So close," Julian murmured. "Come for me," he demanded.

Not a moment later, I was, the intensity stealing my breath, making my whole body shake.

When I came back down, Julian let out a little chuckle.

"Surprised?" he asked.

"Yes," I admitted, turning my head on the mattress so I could glance back at him.

"You have a lot of nerve endings here," he said, tapping the plug, a move that had my ass jerking upward. "You can stimulate the G-spot and the A-spot, depending on the angle and depth. Some women even say they come harder when fucked in the ass. We will see if you are one of them," he said as he scooted out from under me, then reached to grab the plug, and took it with him to the bathroom.

I didn't even know what an *A-spot* was.

Clearly, Julian had a lot to teach me still.

I couldn't wait to learn.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Julian

The Chandelier megayacht was like a personal cruise ship. Maybe just a little more sleek-looking.

I'd been fucking around on my phone as we ran around in the early morning hours, dropping off Hugh who seemed over the moon about hanging with his buddies, then grabbing some breakfast, and some seasickness items just in case.

And while looking around the internet about megayachts—since I didn't know a damn thing about them, growing up dirt fucking poor—I learned that there was a difference between *super* and *mega* yachts.

Namely, size.

And because of size, cost.

While supers could cost billions, they typically were in the highest end of millions. While most megas almost always cost in the billions.

Billions.

For a house on water that was used, what, a few weeks a year?

It was insane.

But as we pulled up to it, I had to admit that I was excited to see how ‘the other half lived.’ Or, ‘vacationed’ as it was.

“You can leave it,” Scarlet instructed as we stood there looking up at the yacht. “Believe me, the staff doesn’t mind,” she said, nodding her chin toward a row of people in black pants or skirts and white shirts.

“How many staff members are on board when you travel?” I asked, worried about not being able to spend time with Scarlet alone. When things were really getting good with her.

“Um, it depends, I guess. On what my father said he wanted. Sometimes, a masseur will be around. Or a personal trainer. But there is always the crew manning the ship itself. Captains, officers, and deckhands. A few engineers. Then the cabin staff. So... a chef or two, a butler, a stewardess, a maid. And usually a nurse or doctor, depending on availability.”

Christ.

That was a lot of people to have around.

“Where do they sleep?” I asked, glancing at all the tinted windows.

“The staff quarters. Two rooms—one for men and one for women—that have bunks and their own bathroom and tiny kitchenette. Relax,” she said, giving me a small smile. “Part of their job is to be scarce and invisible when anyone is clearly trying to have private moments. They know we all value our privacy. I have gotten away with many, many things over the years that my father never heard about.”

That was somewhat comforting, at least.

“And your room is near mine.”

“What about your father?”

“He’s strange. He likes to take the room at the bow. Which is much smaller than the other rooms, but he claims he sleeps

better there. And... ugh,” she groaned, making me turn to follow her gaze to where her father was on one of the decks—was that the right word?—with another man at his side.

“Who is that?”

“Stephen Moore. The company’s CFO.”

“I take it you’re not a fan,” I said, watching her profile.

Normally, she was good at masking her true emotions. But her lip was curled when she glanced at Stephen Moore.

He seemed around her father’s age with mostly silver hair, a slender build, and a long face.

“Do me a favor,” she said, nipping her lip.

“Sure.”

“Don’t leave me alone with him. It always ends up in a screaming match. Then my father is furious with me for disrespecting someone *he* respects so much. And it just gets ugly and tense when we’re all trapped together.”

Hm.

I didn’t like the sound of that.

Clearly, there was some sort of tension there. A long-running tension.

I would get the truth out of her eventually.

One way or another.

I didn’t pack as heavily as Scarlet.

So I had plenty of room to pack some goodies for our alone time together.

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan to be away from you much at all during this vacation, pet,” I said, watching the way her cheeks went a little pink at the endearment.

But then it was time to go greet her father and his CFO.

Drinks were already waiting for us on the deck lounge where her father and Stephen had settled.

The next few hours as we waited for the staff to settle things, then for the captain to finally get the yacht moving, were a lesson in self-control.

Scarlet was sitting right there in her white slacks and pearlescent blouse, looking all clean and innocent. And I wanted nothing more but to muss her up a bit.

Marcus and Stephen monopolized the conversation with business matters that went mostly over my head. Scarlet seemed to be keeping up, making appropriate comments, or asking questions her father seemed pleased by, but I could tell by the way she kept shifting her position and toying with her hair that she was anxious to get away from the conversation as well.

“Well,” Marcus finally announced as he stood, “lunch should be served soon, so it is probably a good time for everyone to get settled. I’ll see you promptly an hour and a half from now,” he said, and I caught a twinge of condescension there that I had to bite my tongue before I commented on.

It hadn’t gone over Scarlet’s head either. Her spine went straighter and her jaw seemed tight.

But she kept her mouth shut. Even forced an icy smile.

Then she turned and left me to follow.

“It’s good to see you again,” Marcus said to me before I could follow his daughter. “I have to say I’m pleased to note I have not heard of my daughter being involved in any gossip since you started working for her.”

“Happy to be of service,” I said.

I managed to hold back the smile until I turned and strode away from him.

“You alright?” I asked as I followed Scarlet while she practically speed-walked through the yacht, not letting me really soak much of it in.

She made some sort of noncommittal noise, not even looking back at me until she pulled open a door that led to one

of the staterooms.

“This is you,” she said, waving toward the dark paneled, shiny walls. It was a decent sized space, considering it was on a boat, with windows, a bathroom, and a queen-sized bed.

My luggage was already set up near the foot of the bed.

“And this is me,” she said, striding away to wrench open another door.

Her room was easily twice the size of mine. If not more.

Her room had the shiny wood paneling as well, but in a whitewash color instead of the dark kind in my room.

Her bed was a four-poster king with all-white bedding, set upon a semicircle platform.

There was a long cream sofa under the windows, and what seemed like a sprawling bathroom off the side.

Between the oversized furniture, though, was a lot of walking space.

“Hey,” I said, following her into the bathroom where she grabbed the sink counter, head bowed, body lightly shaking. “What’s going on?” I asked as she took slow, deliberate breaths.

“Can you... punish me?” she asked, gaze lifting to find mine in the mirror.

“Punish you? You’ve behaved,” I said, confused.

“I just think... I need...”

“You need the release,” I filled in.

She was still trying to deal with her emotions. And it was possible that by teaching her how to access them, she was struggling with them now that they were coming up instead of getting pushed down where they were easy to ignore.

“Yes.”

I held her gaze, then nodded.

“Take your clothes off,” I demanded. “Then get into position.”

With that, I left her to go across the hall to grab my bag of goodies, bringing it over to her stateroom to find her already naked and kneeling for me just a few feet inside the door.

I reached back to lock it, paranoid about the many staff members around.

“Is there a TV, pet?” I asked. “So no one hears,” I added.

Instead of a TV, she called to some hidden virtual assistant, turning on music to drown us out.

I opened the bag, sifting through the options. She’d already had the belt and a bare hand. So I was debating between the crop, spanker, and flogger.

In the end, I went with the crop, deciding it would be a ‘sharper’ type of pain, which was likely what she needed to get those emotions up.

The flogger would tease more.

The crop was getting right down to business.

“On all fours, pet,” I demanded as I turned toward her, watching as she bent forward. “Ass up,” I told her, smiling as she lowered onto her forearms. “Lower.”

When she was face against the carpet, I moved to the side of her body, taking a deep breath, then swinging out.

Gently at first.

“Count.”

“One,” she said, voice tight.

She needed more.

The next hit was harder.

“Two.”

Three. Four. Five.

She was still shutting down, still fighting it.

And her ass was getting red enough that I was worried about her eventually wearing a bathing suit.

“Up,” I demanded, but grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her up before she could do so voluntarily. “On the bed. Arms and legs wide.”

I grabbed the restraints, silently pleased about the four-poster bed, then securing her into place before approaching with the crop again.

I teased the leather tip of it up her inner thigh, over her belly, between and across her breast.

Teasing.

Getting her hot.

And just when she started to writhe a bit, I swung, the crop landing on one of her tits.

The gasp that escaped her was what I was looking for.

Shock and pain.

That was what would open her up.

“Count.”

“Six,” she strangled out.

I teased some more, around her nipple, over her pelvic bone. Letting her forget the pain before cracking the crop across the sensitive space of her inner thigh.

“Ow,” she cried out, her body jolting. “Seven,” she whimpered as the tip of the crop slid between her pussy lips, grazing over her clit.

She sensed it the second before it happened.

The crop landing on the cleft of her pussy.

“Eight,” she cried as tears pricked her eyes. Another. “Nine,” she gasped as the tears slid down her cheeks. “I can’t. I can’t,” she claimed then.

But I proved her wrong with ten.

“Are you done?” I asked as she sniffled, as the tears flowed.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“Then you’re not, pet,” I said, this time slapping one thigh, then the next, before another strike to her sweet pussy.

“I’m done,” she cried.

“That’s my good girl,” I said, turning the crop in my hand then pressing the handle against her mouth. “Open,” I demanded, slipping it into her mouth as her body shook as the emotions poured out.

I fucked her mouth with the handle for a second, getting it good and wet, before slipping it between her thighs, and finally, pressing it into her. Just a bit. Fucking her with it until she was writhing and whimpering.

Only then did I plunge it deeper, thrusting lazily as her body climbed toward the release she needed so badly.

“Be a good girl and come for me,” I demanded, fucking her a little faster. “Shh, pet,” I hushed her as her moans got loud enough that the music wasn’t going to mask it anymore. “Quiet, or you don’t get to come,” I added when she didn’t immediately behave.

She pressed her lips tightly together just as the orgasm slammed through her system, making her body jolt.

The sound was muffled as I got to watch her body tense and relax as the orgasm gripped, then released her.

Finished, I removed the crop handle, then moved with it to the bathroom, leaving her alone there, knowing she needed the quiet time with herself and her emotions, so she could continue to work through them.

I washed the crop and my hands, then moved back out there, finding her staring at the ceiling, eyes far away.

Coming around the bed, I released her ankles then wrists, before climbing onto the bed, and pulling her up against me.

“What was that about, pet?” I asked, my fingers seeking her hair, and slipping through the silky strands.

“He took every chance he could to dig at me,” she said, sounding suddenly tired.

“Your father? Or Stephen?” I asked.

To that, she snorted.

“Both, I guess. But I was talking about my father.”

“I’ll admit that a lot of that conversation went so over my head that I wasn’t fully paying attention, but I didn’t pick up on that, pet.”

“He’s very subtle about it,” she said, angling her head up at me. “Believe me, I’ve been hearing it my entire life. He will talk about a topic I understand perfectly, then say something like *And by that, Scarlet, I mean that...* and then explain it like I’m a child. Like I didn’t go to college for business like he demanded.

“It’s like he thinks that because I live the lifestyle I do that it somehow erases the four years I spent learning everything that I could possibly ever need to know about how his empire operates.”

“Did you want to know how to run his empire?” I asked.

“It was expected, whether I wanted to or not,” she said, shrugging. “And I’ve used some of the things I learned to help me build my brand. I know he doesn’t see that. He thinks it’s all frivolous. And maybe it is to him. But to an average person, I make a very nice living ‘posting silly pictures,’” she said, air quoting it in a way that suggested her father had used those exact words at some point.

“He told me when I interviewed that he had hopes for you to take over the company. What?” I asked when she let out a dry laugh.

“The only way I would be able to get my hands on that company is if he dies soon. That sounds awful, but it’s true. He’s so invested in it, and he trusts everyone so implicitly, that he doesn’t see that they are slowly but surely trying to get more control in their hands and away from him. So that when he does pass someday, they take it over.”

“And you get nothing?” I asked.

“I get a buyout, most likely.”

“Have you tried to explain this to him?”

Scarlet’s eyes rolled as she exhaled hard.

“I have tried to explain to him, in detail, how Stephen himself is trying to undermine him. He doesn’t believe me. Tells me I’m naive. That I just don’t like Stephen. To be fair, I don’t. He’s a condescending prick and he acts like he didn’t grope me when I was sixteen, when he absolutely did.”

“He what?” I asked, surprised with how quickly rage could bubble up in my system. I found my fingers digging into her flesh, and had to focus to force them to relax.

“On this very ship, in fact,” she said, body tensing again. “Tried to corner me in the hall right outside my bedroom, and reached up to grab my tit. The only reason it didn’t go further than that was because Drea was coming down to my room for us to get pretty.”

“Did you tell your father this?” I asked, feeling any respect I’d used to have toward Marcus slipping away.

“I did.”

“And?”

“He said that he probably just accidentally *brushed* me. When he had a whole handful of my boob. Whatever. I did make it a rule that he’s never allowed to have a room near me again. Which is why we haven’t seen him over here. He’s closer to Dad’s room.”

“That shouldn’t have happened to you. And your father should have believed you.”

“When you grow up in this world, you learn really young that money and power can excuse all sorts of bad behavior among men. I think to the outside, people assume that they only use that power against people who are so much more powerless. House or office staff, for example. Women in the poorer cities they visit. But being wealthy and privileged didn’t protect any of us,” she said, eyes far away.

“Any of you. Meaning your friends,” I said.

“Drea, especially. I’m not betraying a confidence there. She and her mom tried to bring it to trial, but her father forced them to drop it. Spouting off that shit about one bad act shouldn’t bring down a ‘great’ man.”

“Great men don’t abuse women and girls.”

“In this world, apparently, they do. And get away with it. While Drea...” she said, exhaling hard after trailing off.

While Drea got fall-down drunk and acted out sexually, wanting to be the one in control, but somehow only managing to get further victimized.

“Is this why you don’t date? Or don’t date much,” I clarified, since I was sure she’d dated, but it definitely didn’t hit any gossip sites, and not her socials at all.

“Men in these circles are raised by those so-called ‘great men’ who passed on even worse ideas to their sons.”

“What about in college?”

“Do you know what they teach business majors?” she asked.

“What?”

“To get what you want by all means necessary,” she said. “The way the guys I went to college with talked about women was disgusting. Like they were property to be bought and discarded when they lost their value.

“And before you ask... guys not in the general vicinity of the way I was raised... they tend to be really insecure about it. You learn that it’s just easier to be alone. Or have friends who know what it’s like.”

Or, I added silently, to find a man who didn’t base his worth on his income, and wasn’t intimidated by a woman who was never going to need him financially. Because he knew his worth was in what he provided emotionally.

I would show her that.

In time.

For now, it seemed, I had to help keep her regulated while we were all trapped on this yacht together.

“We can avoid them as much as possible,” I suggested.

“My father likes to spend a lot of time in his cigar lounge. Where he knows I won’t step foot. I hate cigars,” she added, wrinkling her nose.

Given her words a moment ago, I figured that was because the smell reminded her of these men who treated her and her friends poorly.

“But would he want me there, is the question,” I said.

“Well, I was thinking...”

“Always dangerous,” I said, getting a smile out of her.

“You could sort of... play the part of an influencer boyfriend. I mean... not that you’re my boyfriend. It’s just what the saying is.”

“Don’t care what title you want to give me, pet. I know what I am to you,” I said, running my fingers over her thigh. “What does an influencer boyfriend do?”

“Take pictures, mostly,” she said, smirking. “Lots and lots of pictures. And if my father asks, I can say it’s an agreement we have. So I don’t try to run you off like all the others.”

Taking pictures of Scarlet wouldn’t be a hardship.

“I’m in.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Scarlet

The trip would be no issue if my father hadn't brought Stephen. My father would still have found occasions to make his little jabs, but without someone else to feed into it, he would have let it go.

Sure, Julian and I tried to stay busy "curating content for my socials," but we were forced to share meals with my father and Stephen. Long meals, unfortunately.

And if it weren't for the little fantasies I played in my mind about going back to my room and feeling Julian spank me, edge me, and go down on me, I wasn't sure I'd have gotten through those damn meals.

We were only two days into the trip when I heard my father's footsteps making their way toward where I was cuddled up in a thick robe on a chaise after taking freezing cold bikini pictures on the deck.

Gorgeous photos.

But fake.

All fake.

It looked like it was the middle of the summer in the warm Mediterranean waters. Instead of still really cold while crossing the Atlantic.

“Everything alright?” Julian asked from where he was perched—because he’d quickly moved off the foot of my chaise—across from me.

To that, my father sighed hard.

To be good at business, you had to be good at hiding your emotions. But I knew him well enough to see the tension in his shoulders and jaw.

“I just spoke to the captain. We are taking it up to thirty knots.”

“Why?” I asked, brows furrowing. The whole point of a yacht was for a leisurely travel pace.

“There are... issues with the deal we are working on. Stephen and I need to get to Madrid sooner than anticipated. As it is, we will be doing an important video call in the cigar room in twenty minutes.”

“So you want us to stay scarce and quiet,” I guessed.

“I wouldn’t have put it in those words.”

“But the sentiment is the same. We will stay at this end of the ship,” I said, waving toward the deck we were currently on, the one toward the back of the ship, situated just above our rooms.

“Thank you. I’m sorry to cut the cruise short, but there is nothing to be done.”

“I understand,” I said, nodding.

Work came first.

Always did.

Always would.

I learned a long time ago not to be upset about it.

My father gave us a nod then turned and walked away just as purposefully as he'd approached. Whatever was wrong, it was big to have him so rattled.

He'd figure it out.

He always did.

"I didn't realize a megayacht could go that fast," Julian said as we listened to my father's footsteps retreating.

"There are a few that can go sixty to seventy knots. Which I personally feel defeats the purpose of a yacht," I said. "But it's convenient in situations like this to be able to go faster than we have been. And I won't pretend to be upset about not having to be on the ship with Stephen for longer. We can just spend more time in Portugal. Maybe head somewhere other than Porto Covo for a few days."

We'd have more privacy off of the ship.

"What are you doing?" I asked a few minutes later when I caught him checking his phone over and over.

"Keeping an eye on the time," he said.

"Why?"

"Because," he said, suddenly reaching out, grabbing each of my ankles, and yanking me lower on my chaise.

Once I was flat, he was moving off of his own, going down on his knees, then burying his face between my thighs, yanking my panties to the side to work my clit with his tongue.

"Oh," I gasped, my hand shooting out to grab the back of his head.

He'd been the one who had insisted on being nothing but chaste when we were outside of my room.

Staff could be anywhere.

But that wasn't stopping Julian as his tongue traced, as his hand went up, working the tuck of my robe free, then exposing my breast, then closing over it with his big hand as he continued to work me with his mouth.

“No!” I cried when the orgasm had been about to crest and he pulled away.

He said nothing, though, just shot me a dark smile as he reached for me, pulling me up until I moved to straddle him, feeling his hardness against the juncture of my thighs.

I didn't ask for permission.

I just ground down against him, trying to get relief from the ache deep inside.

What's more, he let me, as he pushed the robe off of my shoulders, then reached behind me to untie my bikini top, before pulling that off of me as well.

The cool air nipped at my skin as the yacht charged ahead faster than before.

But the heat that was unfurling inside chased the chill away as Julian's hands covered my breasts, squeezing, then moving away to roll my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, before, finally, leaning me back to suck a peak into his mouth. Then the other.

A grumble escaped me at the need for more, at the aching emptiness inside.

Julian's hands slid down my sides, teasing over my ribs, then going to my hips, working the knots free on each side, then reaching between us to yank the material away.

My own hands were greedy then, reaching down to work his belt free, then his button and zipper.

He didn't stop me as I reached inside to free his cock.

It was only when I tried to lift up, tried to take him in, that he suddenly grabbed me, holding me as he got to his feet, then walking me over to the railing.

My back crushed to the cold metal bars.

But the shock of it was fleeting as he shifted his hips, making his thick, hard cock glide against my cleft.

“Drenched for me,” he groaned into my ear as he kept rocking, getting his cock slick as his lips met my neck,

creating little shivers of pleasure.

“Julian, please,” I begged, my legs tightening around his hips, trying to use my muscles to shift up enough to slide down on him.

“You want my cock, pet?” he asked, voice deep.

“Yes,” I cried as the head of his cock teased my clit over and over.

Julian pulled back, gaze on mine as he shifted, then surged inside of me, making me take every thick inch of him in one movement.

The sound that escaped me was almost a cry I was so overwhelmed with relief at him finally claiming me, making me completely his.

“Oh, fuck, pet,” he groaned, pressing his forehead to mine as he took a deep breath, like he was just as overwhelmed as I was. “Feel how fucking perfect you are for me?” he asked as he pulled back to look down at me as his cock slid halfway out, then all the way back in.

There were no words after that, both of us too lost in the moment, in the sensations, in the feel of him inside of me, the way our breathing quickened and our bodies moved in sync.

“There you go,” he said as my pussy tightened around his cock. “Come for me. Let me feel you squeeze my cock.”

Just like that, the orgasm shot through my body, coursing through every nerve ending, making my vision flicker white at the intensity.

By the time I came back down, my legs were shaking.

Julian was still rock-solid inside of me.

His hands moved off of my ass, guiding me back to my feet, then turning me, pressing my front against the rails, then grabbing my hips, so he could glide back inside of me.

The rumbling sound that moved through him as he settled deep again.

His hands slid around and up, teasing my breasts until I was writhing against him, somehow just as needy as I'd been before the orgasm a moment before.

He started to move again.

Harder and faster this time.

His hand slid up my back, sifting into my hair, wrapping it around his hand, and pulling hard.

The pain across my scalp had my walls tightening around his cock as he fucked me.

My whimpers became moans as he drove me up.

“That’s a good fucking girl,” he groaned as I got tighter and tighter around him. “You’re taking it so good,” he added as his other hand moved around my neck, tightening around my throat, quieting me, and intensifying the orgasm that crashed through me. “Oh, *fuck*,” Julian groaned, fucking me faster through it, then jerking hard, coming deep inside me.

His arms wrapped me up, holding me against him after. Until the sweat started to dry, chilling me instantly, making my body tremble.

“Come on, pet,” he murmured, kissing my ear, then pulling me with him back to the chaise, where he yanked up his pants, then helped me into my robe, stuffing my bikini into the pockets.

He closed the front, then tightened the sash, his gaze finding mine once again.

“Fucking love the thought of my cum inside of you,” he murmured, making my belly wobble.

We’d had that talk, of course.

I wasn’t about to take a guy inside me without protection without a discussion. Of test results and birth control.

On the former, we’d both pulled up our most recent results up on our phones while in bed. As for the latter, I’d been on the Pill since I was fifteen just to control a dreadful cycle I’d been dealing with since I was twelve.

We were safe.

And I had to agree with him. The idea of him inside me made my belly flip-flop. Even as I had to do a bit of a waddle all the way back to my room to clean up.

—

“What?” I asked when I came out from the shower on the afternoon before we were about to pull into the port in Porto Covo.

We were being summoned to one last lunch with my father and Stephen before we all went our separate ways.

My father said that he and Stephen weren't going to be taking the yacht back to the States, claiming they needed to be back to New York sooner rather than later. They would be taking my father's jet.

Julian and I were free to take the yacht back, but we hadn't made up our minds about that yet.

We were in no rush. But I think we both preferred to travel on land for a while before we got homesick, then took the jet, or a commercial flight back to the city.

“I have something for you,” he said, and I knew him well enough at this point not to trust the dark look in his eye.

“Uh oh,” I said, but I was smiling as I approached him.

“Pull up your skirt,” he demanded.

I didn't hesitate.

I was always eager to be naked for him.

I gathered my skirt.

“Turn,” he demanded from his seat at the foot of the bed.

I turned away from him, feeling anticipation sizzle up my spine.

He climbed off of the bed, then approached me, his finger tracing the outline of my panties, then sliding them down over my ass, making them fall to the floor at my feet.

“Never get sick of this view,” he said, voice a little thick.

We didn’t have time for sex.

He knew that.

But I still felt the need build.

“Bend forward for me,” he demanded.

Still holding my skirt up, I hinged forward, sticking my ass up at him.

It was then that I felt it.

Something cold, metallic, and familiar.

The plug.

He’d brought the plug.

“What are—“

“Shh,” he hushed me as I heard the click of a cap.

He didn’t pour it over my ass like he had the last time. He just lubed up the plug, then started to press it into me.

“You’re going to keep this in all day,” he told me.

“I can’t,” I said, scandalized more than I probably should have been, considering all the things I let him—and often begged him—to do to me.

“You will,” he said, inserting it all the way, then flicking it before lowering down to pull my panties back into place.

“But—“

“Keep arguing and you’ll wear the panties too.”

“You wouldn’t,” I said, dropping my skirt and turning to face him. The dark promise in his eyes as he reached toward

his bag of goodies on the bed, made me rush backward.
“You’d have to catch me first,” I said, rushing out of the room.

I’d pay for it later.

And I’d enjoy every moment of it.

Once we were seated at lunch, I didn’t notice the plug too often unless I was shifting positions. But just knowing it was there, this little secret between us, had me feeling feverish and flushed.

“Are you getting sick, Scarlet?” my father asked, looking at my pink cheeks.

Julian had to purse his lips for a second to fight back a smile.

“Just a little warm,” I said, fanning myself. “Maybe the speed is getting to me a bit. I’ll be glad to do some, er, walking around,” I said. Even if walking around was only going to make me all the more aware of the plug.

“Have you packed anything?” he asked in that same tone I’d been dealing with since we’d gotten on the yacht. The father to a little girl voice. Like I hadn’t been managing my own life for many years.

I plastered a fake smile on my lips when I felt Julian’s leg press into mine, a show of silent support I needed to keep my words neutral.

“Of course. I’m all ready to go. Ordered a driver and secured a hotel as well.”

“You found two rooms on such short notice?” Stephen piped in, making my spine straighten.

“It’s not exactly high tourist season yet,” I said instead of outright lying. Though I did reach for my white wine to ease my growing nerves.

The sooner this lunch was over, the better.

Stephen stared a moment too long, making Julian stiffen beside me. It was my turn to press my leg against him, a silent

plea to hold it together, even if I knew he had a lot to say about what I'd told him about Stephen when I'd been young.

He didn't say it, but I could immediately see his respect for my father fall away as well.

I'd been furious at the time, of course. And hurt that he wouldn't fully believe me. The rawness of those emotions had dulled through the years, though. Even though it did continue to infuriate me when my father insisted on inviting Stephen to events when he knew my feelings about the slime.

Lunch passed relatively easily when I veered the conversation back toward business. Suddenly, though, I found myself doubling down on my knowledge about the topics we discussed, watching as my father's brows rose, surprised, and Stephen's gaze darkened.

Alarmed.

Because I wasn't the vapid, silly little girl he wanted to believe me to be.

Because I suddenly posed a threat to him and his plans.

"You're quiet," Julian said as we stood waiting for our luggage to be loaded into the car I'd arranged to take us to our hotel.

I'd been staring off at the distance in the direction my father's car had gone, rushing them off to the airport.

My head turned, my gaze pinning Julian's.

"I want to take Stephen and his schemes down," I declared, voice firm.

Julian looked at me for a second before a smile pulled at his lips. His arm went around my hips, pulling me close enough to press a kiss to the side of my head.

"That's my girl."

I could do it, too.

People underestimated me because I chose to direct my attention to things they deem superficial. Like my social media, my brand, and having fun.

But there was no denying that when I set my mind to something, I accomplished it. Straight As all through high school and college. Millions of followers. Six-figure brand deals without breaking a sweat.

I could be just as effective at chasing the snakes out of my father's business. Out of *my* family legacy. Before it was too late.

“But, first, let's go settle in,” I said, mind on getting some relief from the aching need inside from walking around with the plug in.

Julian had other things in mind, though.

I couldn't tell if his desire to take a walk down the beach was because he wanted to torture me, or because he was genuinely excited to see the sights.

Knowing him, it was a combination of the two.

He'd been in a rush to drop off our luggage at the front of the hotel, not even going inside, not giving me a chance to climb on him in private, and get some relief.

I was trying to be patient, reminding myself that while I'd been to this area before, this was his first time. And I couldn't rush the wonder of exploring a new location for him.

Even if desire was making a sweat break out over my skin, despite a slight chill still in the air. My nerve endings felt frazzled. And my pussy was aching with need.

“Ready to check out our room?” Julian asked, his hand rubbing my lower back.

“Yes,” I said leaning into him, not even caring if he knew how exhausting the desire was becoming.

His little laugh said he knew exactly what he was doing to me as we walked back to the hotel—a long, two-floor white stucco and glass L-shaped structure with a giant pool and beach views.

It was the nicest the area boasted, but was small by comparison to other, more luxurious hotels I'd stayed in. But

you couldn't fault them for not wanting to invest in grandeur that wouldn't suit the majority of their clientele.

Our room was maybe the size of my bathroom at the penthouse, but updated with light wood tile floors, white paint, and a queen-sized bed covered in white linens.

But it had a sliding glass doors to a small balcony that overlooked the empty beach, the waves cresting lazily, leaving white foam in its wake.

"That's a good fucking view," Julian said after I opened the door, and leaned my arms on the balcony railing.

I turned my head over my shoulder, not sure if he was talking about the beach... or me.

As I looked, though, he snapped a picture.

This time, though, not with my phone. Not pictures he meant for me to post on my socials. It was his phone. A keepsake just for himself.

That strange, slivery sensation in my chest I'd been feeling more and more around him, I had a sneaking suspicion that was what falling in love might have felt like.

Experienced with keeping men at arm's length, I couldn't be sure.

But it felt like that.

Like my world that had always just revolved around myself started to revolve around him as well.

He tossed his phone onto the bed, then watched me as he reached to loosen his tie, then tossed it aside. His jacket followed. His belt. His shirt. But he stopped after loosening his button and zipper.

"Lift your skirt for me," he demanded, voice rough as desire pooled in my core.

My scandalized gaze slid toward the beach, finding it empty, but knowing someone could walk down at any time.

"Lift your skirt," he demanded, voice rougher, and my hands immediately started to ruche the fabric in my hands,

exposing an inch or two of skin at a time until my panties were the only thing hiding me.

Julian moved forward, exhaling hard, then reaching to slide my panties down my legs.

“Been soaking wet all afternoon, haven’t you?” he asked, voice a low rumble.

“Yes,” I admitted. There was no use playing coy. He could press his hand between my thighs and feel for himself.

“Been hard as fuck just thinking about you walking around, aching for my cock,” he confessed, his fingers tracing down my pussy, finding my clit, and working it lazily for a moment.

His other hand moved between us, freeing himself, and then it was his thick length pressing against my clit, getting slick with my desire.

“I’m going to make your ass mine,” he said, his free hand massaging my ass cheek. “But I need your pussy first,” he added as his cock slid back, then thrust deep inside me.

His familiar thickness mixed with the plug had an entirely new sensation moving through me, making me cry out, my fingers desperately grabbing the railing as he started to fuck me, not easing me into it, just ruthlessly driving me up toward the orgasm I’d been aching for all day.

“That’s a good fucking girl,” he groaned as my pussy spasmed and a moan escaped me when the orgasm gripped my system, long and hard, making me feel weak and wobbly afterward.

Julian stopped moving, but stayed planted inside of me as he suddenly reached for the plug, and started to fuck my ass with it.

“Oh, my God,” I whimpered, rocking into the sensation as his thrusts got harder.

But before I could feel another orgasm crest, he was pulling the plug out of me, and I was feeling that cool liquid

he must have been storing in his pocket pour over my skin, preparing me.

“Don’t tense on me, pet,” he murmured as he slid his cock out of my pussy and moved it back, as he pressed.

I took slow, deep breaths as the head of his cock started to slide in.

He was different than the plug. Thicker.

And it wasn’t long before he was pressing deeper than the plug ever could, before he was fully inside of me, his cock buried to the hilt.

“*Fuck*,” he groaned, his hand grabbing my hipbone hard as he stayed still, fighting for his own self-control, likely not wanting to hurt me my first time.

But there was a surprising lack of pain.

And it wasn’t long before the strangeness became familiar, before my pussy was throbbing, before my system was begging for movement, for friction, for release.

“Fuck me, Julian,” I pleaded, rocking my ass into him.

A growl moved through him as both his hands grabbed my hips, his control snapping at my words.

He tried to be gentle at first, sliding half out, then all the way back in.

But it wasn’t long before he couldn’t give me that.

I didn’t want it, anyway.

I needed more.

I needed the way he used my hips to slam me back into him as he thrust deep.

The way he released me only to expose my breasts, hands covering them as he fucked me.

“Feel how good you’re taking me?” he groaned as my pussy tightened, getting closer and closer. “Tell me your ass is mine,” he demanded.

“It’s yours.”

“Say it, pet,” he hissed.

“My ass is yours,” I said as one of his hands left my breast to close around my neck as I got closer and closer.

“Fuck,” he groaned as the orgasm screamed through me, making my pussy spasm as my legs shook and a loud cry escaped me, echoing out across the nothingness, swallowed up by the crashing of the waves.

“You’re such a good fucking girl,” he groaned, fucking me through it, then pulling out, and coming on my ass.

My legs wobbled hard after, making me lower down onto my knees as I tried to slow my breathing. I almost felt dizzy from the intensity of that orgasm.

“You okay, pet?” he murmured, reaching down to rest a hand on my shoulder. When I didn’t answer, he gathered a handful of my hair, pulling my head to the side then up until my gaze lifted to his. “Answer me,” he demanded, but his voice was soft.

“Yes,” I said, taking a shaky breath. His eyes softened at that before something caught his eye out beyond me.

“We should probably get your tits away,” he said, nodding his chin toward where a trio of men were starting to walk down the beach. Too far away to really see anything yet, but getting closer by the second.

“This is Portugal. They’re not as puritanical about being topless on or near the beach like we are,” I said.

“Maybe so,” he agreed, reaching down to yank my top back into place. “But no one gets to see you like this but me.”

Maybe some part of me should have balked at that, been insulted that he felt he had ownership over my body.

But if there was ever a man in the whole world I would be okay with saying that, it was Julian.

“Come,” he said, reaching for my hand, then pulling me back into the room with him. “Let’s shower before dinner.”

“You’re not going to make me wear the plug again, are you?”

Oh, no.

He didn’t have a plug in mind.

It was far, far worse.

As I walked out of the bathroom, all pretty for dinner, he reached inside his little bag of tricks and pulled out something pink.

“What is that?” I asked, feeling my pussy throb at the idea of more long-term torment.

“Come over here,” he demanded, sitting on the bed, and waiting for me to approach. “Lift your skirt.”

When I did, he lowered my panties, but only halfway down my thighs.

“Spread your legs for me.”

They moved apart immediately, and he stroked the skin-soft pink thing up and down my cleft until I was wet and writhing.

Then, with it lubed up from my own desire, he slipped the thicker part of it inside me, and I was shocked to find the other end of it almost... clamped against my cleft, holding the penetrative part inside of me.

“Julian!” I gasped, eyes round. “No!” I said, scandalized. I mean... how could I even walk with something inside of me like that?

He ignored that, reaching for his phone, then clicking on something. Then the entire thing—inside and out—started to vibrate.

“Oh God,” I cried, trying to press my thighs together. “No. I can’t.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, shooting a devilish smirk at me. “I believe by that you mean *Yes, sir, please.*”

He emphasized the words with another long pulse of pleasure.

“Yes... sir...” I whimpered, pressing my thighs together. At his raised brow, finger poised over the button, I added, “Please.”

I learned that night that if I ever started to think he'd shown me the best he had to offer, I was likely about to be proven wonderfully wrong.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Julian

I'd been on all sorts of aircrafts in my life.

Even I had to admit that a private jet was the superior way to travel.

Of course, that might have had more to do with the fact that I got to fuck Scarlet forty-five-thousand feet in the air without having to hide in a cramped bathroom to do it.

And while I enjoyed the hell out of the yacht, Portugal, and even the flight back to the States, I was glad to be home.

Scarlet was eager to scoop up Hugh, so we popped right over to Drea's place on the way back from the airport.

She was so distracted by loving on him that the doorman had flagged me down instead of her, passing me a bouquet of pink roses.

"When did these get here?" I asked, not sure how someone would know to send her flowers when she'd clearly been out of the country.

“Early this morning,” he said, rushing toward the door to open it for another resident.

Early that morning.

The flight had been eight and a half hours.

So that would have been sometime when we were on the flight.

She probably posted a departure picture or something before we left the airport.

Seeing Scarlet had gone up ahead of me, I took the elevator up alone, turning the flowers in my hands.

She told me she liked peonies. White ones. Not pink roses. But this was the second time she got pink ones. The other ones, she’d tossed right down the trash chute.

An ex.

That was what I thought the last time.

But with all the talking we’d done, she hadn’t mentioned an ex who might have been holding a torch.

At this point, I was relatively sure she wouldn’t have kept something like that from me.

Curiosity piqued, I glanced at the little white card.

And there were two words there

My dove.

My dove?

The fuck?

“Hugh must have been—where did you get those?” Scarlet asked, eyes going wide as she stared at the flowers.

Every inch of her tensed.

“The doorman,” I said.

She charged across the space, grabbing the flowers from me, but not before I could grab the card off the front as she took it out into the hall, tossing it all—glass vase included—down the chute.

“Julian, don’t,” she said when she walked back in, finding me sliding the note out of the envelope.

She didn’t try to take it from me, even though I could feel it in the tension in the air that she wanted to.

“Scarlet, what the fuck?” I snapped, holding the note up at her.

Clearly, whoever ordered it had shown up in person to fill out the card, filling the four-inch rectangle with tiny, rambling font about how he was sick of her acting like they weren’t meant to be together, that he was going to meet her for a talk.

The talk of a fucking crazy person.

“It’s nothing,” she insisted, trying to grab it from me. Likely to rip it to shreds and toss it.

I was quicker, yanking it away from her.

“Do you know who is sending this shit?” I asked, watching as her gaze slid away.

“No.”

“Why haven’t you reported it?”

“It’s all anonymous,” she insisted, shrugging it off. “Fake online accounts. Scattered petals. Bouquets. None of it ever leads back to anyone.”

“For you. But if you let the police—“

“It’s not that big of a deal,” she insisted, walking off into the kitchen, making herself an espresso shot, even though she didn’t have any of her creamers in the house.

“There are threats in this note,” I told her. “Do they always make threats?”

“I don’t read the notes,” she admitted, standing there watching her espresso drip into a cup. “And I delete and block online. It’s just an... overzealous follower.”

“Who knows where you fucking *live*, Scarlet.”

“He can’t get into the building.”

“You don’t know that.”

“He certainly can’t get up the elevator,” she said, adding sugar to her espresso.

“You don’t understand how relentless men like this can be. He clearly thinks you two are meant to be together. People like that are sick. You have no idea what he is capable of.”

“That’s... the point of having bodyguards, right?” she asked, blowing on, then throwing back her espresso, before trying to rush past me.

“We’re not done discussing this,” I snapped when she tried to breeze past me.

“I am.”

A low growling sound escaped me, making her steps falter.

“Don’t walk away from me,” I said, a warning clear in my voice.

“Or what?” she asked, turning toward me, a smirk toying with her lips as she started to walk backward.

I knew her game.

She thought she could distract me with sex. That she could make me drop this.

Exhaling hard, I tucked the card in my pocket, then removed my jacket, and started rolling up my sleeves.

Moving backward down the hallway, her gaze grew heated, anticipating pleasure.

She was mistaken with that thinking, though. Because as much as I always wanted to fuck her, she wasn’t going to get away with misbehaving, with shutting me down, with trying to keep me out. That wasn’t how things worked with us. We shared everything.

She needed to be reminded of that.

Rolling my neck, I made my way down the hall toward her as she started to move faster, smiling.

Ducking down, I threw her over my shoulder, hearing her squeal, excited for some sweet torment.

Taking her into my room, I lowered her onto her feet.

“Take off your clothes,” I demanded, watching as she started to make a show of it.

But she wasn't getting rewarded with my attention.

So I turned away, going to my drawer full of the goodies I hadn't brought with me on the yacht.

I mulled my options as Scarlet did what she knew I was after. Her stripped. On her knees. Eyes down.

I took the kit over to my bedroom door, connecting the straps that created an over-door cross position kit.

Arms up.

Legs wide.

Standing in a stress position until her resolve weakened.

I walked back to my drawer, grabbing something else to increase the pressure.

Moving in front of her, I slid the thick leather collar around her neck, letting the attached chains slide over her skin, the chill of them making her nipples twist to peaks. Exactly what I needed.

Hooking my finger into the D ring at the front of the collar, I pulled her up onto her feet, then led her to the door, pressing her back against it, then slipping on her restraints.

I waited until she was immobilized to grab one of the chains, letting it slide over her nipple, twisting it into a tighter point.

Then, gaze on hers, I opened the clamp, then applied it, watching her eyes widen as she realized my intention. I let it settle in for a second before closing the clamp around her nipple.

Her whimper of pain had my cock twitching in my pants.

But I ignored it as I slid her other clamp on.

With the way they were attached to her neck, if she tried to move at all, the chains would tighten, then they would pull at

the clamps, increasing the pain.

Finally, because I knew it would be the ultimate torment, I reached for a blindfold, removing her ability to see if I was observing her or not, from being able to know how much time had even passed.

“I’ll give you some time to think about the letter, pet. When you’re ready to talk, let me know,” I said, then turned and made my way out of the room.

Honestly, seeing her like that—immobilized, naked, collared, and clamped—I wasn’t sure I trusted myself to make her finish punishment before I buried deep inside of her.

So I went back into the living room, tossing Hugh’s stuffed lamb across the room a few times before he tired out, before ordering some groceries to have in the fridge again now that we were back.

When that arrived, I put things away, let Hugh out, and silently made my way back into my room, observing Scarlet without her knowing I was looking.

She was struggling already, shifting her weight around on her legs, trying to slacken one arm and raise the other to bring some feeling back into each at a time, but the movement had the clamps pulling, making her hiss and forcing her to adjust her posture again.

Her breathing was quick, her skin pink.

Pleasure was still there, but it wouldn’t be long before the discomfort overtook her.

Only then would she fully submit.

Only then would she be calling me, ready to talk, eager for relief.

Giving her some more time, I grabbed a pair of pajama pants, then went into the bathroom to take a hot shower, washing away the travels, and some of the frustration about the cards.

I got why, at the beginning, she hadn’t said anything. She thought I was just another in a long line of annoyances in her

home, watching her life from the sidelines.

But as things moved forward with us, there was no excuse for not telling me something so serious.

Hell, even on a *professional* level, there was no excuse.

On a personal one, though? This was unacceptable.

As much as most of my punishments lately had been playful, it was good for the opportunity to show her that some of them weren't meant for fun.

By the time I finished my shower, shaved, then went back into the room, I expected almost immediate compliance.

Despite making noise as I moved around the room, though, she stubbornly stayed silent.

So I grabbed my phone and climbed into bed, going right to her socials.

And, sure enough, there the fucker was.

My dove.

It looked like in her earlier posts, she was better about deleting and blocking this guy. But because we'd been... occupied for the past two weeks, she'd clearly slipped.

She still posted daily, using various pictures that I'd taken, and even ones she'd taken herself. But she only seemed to engage with the comments for a few minutes, compared to previous posts.

Which meant the comment sections were full of this *My dove* asshole.

Long, rambling comments about her beauty.

Creepy, but harmless.

But under those comments, because he wasn't getting the attention he wanted, the things he said got decidedly less tame.

Some were more like the note still in my jacket pocket. Starting out loving, then getting bitter and frustrated as they went on.

Others, though, were vile.

Full of a mix of sex fantasies and revenge fantasies for her ignoring him.

This shit wasn't *That big of a deal* like Scarlet claimed.

This shit had to stop.

Once I had her submission on the matter, we were going to find this fucker, and put an end to this.

I couldn't have my girl walking around with other men thinking they had any right to her.

She was mine, case closed.

"Ow," Scarlet whimpered, making my gaze shift up, finding her lower lip quivering a bit.

The part of me that was falling for her wanted to give her an out, wanted to offer her relief.

But I had to remember this was for her own good. And, therefore, for ours. She couldn't be allowed to keep dangerous secrets.

"Julian?" she called, and I set my phone down, but didn't move. "I'm ready to talk," she said.

Then, frustrated, she yanked her arms, making the clamps tug.

"Sir, please," she whimpered.

There was my girl.

I climbed off the bed, making my way to her.

"Do you have something to say to me?" I asked, standing in front of her, but not moving to pull off her blindfold.

"I should have told you," she admitted.

"Yes, you should have."

"I will tell you everything I know."

"Yes, you will," I agreed. "And you will go with me to file a report," I told her.

"Okay."

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, if deemed necessary, we will hire a private investigator to track this guy down.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Because we want the stalking to stop.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s my good girl,” I said, reaching to push the sleep mask up on her forehead. “Do you think you’ve been punished enough?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” she whimpered.

“Maybe you deserve a reward for being a good girl, pet,” I said, reaching to remove each clamp, hearing her hiss in relief as the pain lessened. But blood would be rushing to the peaks right then, making them heat and throb, overly sensitive to even the slightest touch.

So when my finger brushed one, her whole body jolted.

I teased them for a few moments until I had her writhing and whimpering.

Only then did I lower myself down to my knees, pressing my face between her spread thighs, and devouring her pussy as she cried and yanked against her restraints.

I waited until she was close.

Then freed my cock, stood, and surged deep inside of her.

My gaze moved over her, going constantly back to the collar as I fucked her hard and fast.

I needed to get her a real one.

A discreet one, given her public persona.

But something she could wear all the time, a symbol of us, of this.

She said she was going to hit the spa with the girls the next day. I could cut out, hit a specialty store, get her something she

would like. Something worthy of our connection.

Then do what I was dying to do.

Collar her.

Officially make her mine.

“Fuck,” she cried, her whole body tensing as the orgasm slammed through her, taking me with her.

I moved away afterward, not releasing her for a moment, watching her pant and stare at me with those lovesick eyes, seeing my release slide down her thigh.

“Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up,” I said, releasing her, then walking her to her bathroom, cleaning her up, then running her a bath.

We spent the rest of the night eating take-out in her bed with Hugh passed out at our feet.

It was a fucking perfect night.

Right before the worst day of my fucking life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Scarlet

“Oh, come on,” Di said, looking over at me from her pedicure chair. “Something is different with you.”

“I think it has something to do with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Smoldering,” Drea added.

We hadn’t shown any signs that we were together when we’d shown up to pick up Hugh. But the way Drea’s head tipped to the side, and her eyes went intense as she looked between the two of us signaled something.

Had my gaze slid to him as often as I thought it did?

Had he looked at me a little too intensely, or softly?

It was hard to say.

But after the time in Portugal, I was pretty sure our feelings toward each other practically seeped out of our pores.

Clearly, even without being with Julian, I was exuding something that my friends could pick up on.

“Also, your socials are different,” Di said. “Not in a bad way!” she rushed to add. “Just... different. Like, you know that kind of manufactured fake voice we all use online?” she asked, and we all had to nod a bit at that. As much as we tried to avoid it, we all knew it slipped in there. Especially if our moods were low. “Yours isn’t so fake anymore.”

“Which leads us to conclude that you and your bodyguard have been getting... glandular,” Drea said with a smirk.

“It’s... not like that,” I said.

I’d had sex before.

But nothing had ever felt quite as... intimate as things felt with Julian.

Maybe that was because I’d never let anyone know me as well as I let Julian get to know me. He was the person in the world who knew the most about me. Good and bad. He saw it all. And he *wanted* all of it.

Over time, he gave me just as much as I gave him, too. Stories about his awful childhood. The good and bad of his time in the military. His career afterward as a bodyguard, working for mostly the famous sort of people who were in town for engagements or to party.

I wasn’t sure a single relationship—platonic, familial, or otherwise—had ever been anywhere near the depth that I had with Julian.

That said, I wasn’t ready to bring the girls in on that.

“What is different, though,” I said, reaching for my mimosa, and taking a sip. “Is that I am thinking of getting involved in the family business,” I told them.

“Really?” Drea asked, eyes shooting up.

“It’s about damn time,” Di said, shaking her head.

“My father brought Stephen on the yacht,” I said, looking at Drea, watching as her eyes slitted.

Drea had been the first person I’d confessed to when it happened. I grabbed her arm, pulled her into the room with

me, and spilled it all.

She'd been the one who'd encouraged me to go to my father. And when he hadn't taken me seriously, comforted me, believed in me, made sure she never left me alone when Stephen was around.

We'd been kids.

But she still stepped up.

"He didn't," she said, jaw tight. "Did anything happen?"

"Just the usual talking to me like I'm an idiot thing," I admitted. "But it got to me more than usual this time. And now that I know what I know about Stephen trying to nudge me out... I decided I want to take him down."

"Do you need help with anything?" Drea asked.

Maybe I'd been wrong about these girls. About how superficial our relationships were. Perhaps that was only because I kept them at arm's length, because I never opened up to them.

I mean, yeah, I knew some of them weren't real friends, were only there for the connections I offered. People like Leona, for example. She didn't even *like* me.

But Drea and Di, it looked like I'd been wrong about them. They weren't here in this spa for a photo opportunity. This was just for us. And, sure, I was almost always the one to pay. But... I was the one who always had their card out first.

I'd been looking for things that were fake.

But there was real there too.

I just needed to foster more of it.

"I will let you know if I do," I said, giving Di a smile. "Convincing my father is going to be the hardest part. Even with proof, he's so... invested in his so-called friendship with Stephen."

"Go for the jugular," Di said, shrugging.

"He has it coming," Drea added.

“Excuse me, Miss Chandelier?” one of the spa employees said, stepping into the room in her sage green scrubs, looking apologetic. “There’s someone here who says they need to speak to you for a moment.”

We had a rule where we left our phones in our changing rooms. So if Julian wanted to speak to me, he’d have to show up.

He was on such a tear about this stalker thing, that he probably wanted to tell me that we had an appointment with detectives or a private investigator or something.

“He can’t be away from you for even an hour,” Drea said, hearts in her eyes. “That’s so sweet. Does he have a brother?”

“Or a sister?” Di asked.

“Only child,” I said, shrugging, as I drank the last of my mimosa, then stood, drying my wet feet on the towel before climbing off of the chair. “I’ll be right back. Get me another drink,” I demanded, more excited than ever to spend some time with them. Not mindlessly numbing ourselves with booze and partying, but actually *connecting*.

So many things suddenly felt like they were falling into place in my life.

And I had to admit that it all started when Julian first told me to get on my knees. Like somehow in learning to submit, I’d also learned to take control of parts of my life that had been unsatisfying for years.

I knotted my white robe tighter around myself as I walked in my spa-supplied white slides.

“Ah... where is he?” I asked, looking around the lobby, but seeing no one. This was not the kind of place that allowed clients to sit around the front of the establishment. All there was in the waiting area was a table with cucumber water in a dispenser.

“Out back, Miss Chandelier,” she told me, smile hospitality fake.

That wasn’t odd, per se.

This was a spa where wealthy and *famous* people came. Some didn't want anyone to know where they were, so they came in the back.

The spa backed up to an oversized alley where four buildings created a private little rectangle. There were even some tables back there. And an exit for the garbage trucks to come in to empty the dumpsters. But people had their drivers pull in there as well, even though it was against the rules.

Anticipation sizzled across my nerve endings as I moved down the hallway toward the back exit, wondering if Julian would be risqué enough to fuck me in the alley. Right there where people could walk out, or look out a window, and see.

I fluffed my hair, then opened the door, moving out into the air that had finally started to take a turn toward the warm.

I didn't exactly love summer in the city, but spring was lovely.

I had visions of doing silly, sweet things with Julian. Picnics in Central Park. Walking Hugh down Carl Schurz. Hitting the farmer's markets.

Even if they were things I'd done a million times before, it all felt new to be able to do them with Julian.

That was what my mind was on as I heard the door click closed behind me, knowing that to open it again, I would need to ask to be buzzed in.

Maybe if I'd been focused on the present moment, I would have noticed that something was wrong. Like in books and movies, when someone claims the hairs on the back of their necks stood on end or things like that.

I had none of that.

Not until I heard the words.

“My dove.”

I finally understood the practical application of the words “my blood ran cold.”

Everything inside of me froze as my head whipped to the side.

“You?” I hissed, finally putting a face to the anonymous comments and notes.

It was right then that I noticed something else that had my heart shooting up into my throat.

He was standing with a car directly behind him.

The trunk open.

I turned, raising my hand to hammer on the door, when he rushed up behind me, hand going over my mouth, and arm anchoring around my waist, hauling me up and off my feet, leaving me pedaling in the air.

But for just a second, before I found myself slammed down into the trunk.

And before I could try to fight, to claw my way out of this situation, his hand went into his pocket, and came back with a syringe.

With the hand that wasn't still pressed hard over my mouth, he plunged the needle into my skin.

And then there was... nothing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julian

I had the box for Scarlet's new collar in my pocket when my phone buzzed.

Marcus Chandelier.

I need to speak with you. Come to my office.

Great.

I was hoping to get back to the spa before the girls were done. I didn't like the idea of them going somewhere after without me.

But the boss was Marcus, so I couldn't exactly tell him no.

I jumped in a cab, making it to his office building about fifteen minutes later.

“Julian,” Marcus said, standing behind his desk, waving toward the seat across from him.

Alarm bells were going off in my head at his body language. The squared posture, the tightness in his jaw.

“All due respect, I’ll stand. I need to get back to the spa before the girls leave,” I told him.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said, and those alarms started screaming louder. “I’m afraid that it has been brought to my attention regarding an inappropriate relationship between you and my daughter.”

There it was.

I guess it was inevitable.

I figured it would take a little longer, though.

“Let me guess, this information came to you from your pedophile best friend, Stephen Moore.”

If I was going to be fired, I was going to have my say.

Marcus’s face fell for a second before the tightness was back around his eyes.

“My daughter has been talking, I see.”

“And, unlike you, I have been listening,” I said.

Hey, if I was fired, I might as well let him know what a dick I thought he was for not trusting his own kid.

“It takes someone with their priorities really fucking twisted to take the side of a man who groped your daughter and is actively trying to overtake your company over your own flesh and blood,” I added, watching as Marcus’s head jerked back. Like the words had impact.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he insisted, not someone who liked being proven wrong, who would ever admit that.

“I think I am the only one who knows what they’re talking about here, actually, Marcus.”

“I’m not discussing my business with a man who can’t handle his own.”

“I’ll admit it, I fell in love with your daughter. That wasn’t in the plans. But I know how to do my job. All due respect, Marcus, you don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about when it comes to that. For example, did you know she’s being stalked?” I asked, watching as his face fell. “I didn’t think so.”

“Stalked? By who?”

“That’s what I am supposed to be working on today. Tracking down this bastard who has some sick thoughts about Scarlet. Instead, I’m here. Getting fired.”

“Is she in danger?”

“In my professional opinion? Yeah. This guy has been fucking with her for what seems like at least a year. But he’s escalating. He’s sending her pink roses with notes to her building.”

“Pink roses?” Marcus asked, brows drawing down. “She doesn’t like those. I sent her some for her birthday two years ago. She reminded me that pink roses were her mother’s favorite, not hers.”

“Does…” I started, but stopped when my phone started to ring in my pocket. “Excuse me,” I said, reaching for it. “It’s Eric,” I added before answering. “Eric, not a great—“

“We can’t find Scarlet.”

“What?” I hissed. “What the fuck do you mean you can’t find Scarlet? She’s at the spa with the girls.”

“The girls said she had a visitor. They all assumed it was you.”

“It wasn’t me. I’m with her father right now. How long ago was this?”

“Forty-five minutes or so,” Eric said. “The girls—“

“Julian,” a woman’s voice cut him off. No-nonsense. That was Di, not Drea. “The staff said she went to meet someone out the back entrance. But she’s not there. And the staff won’t let us see the cameras.”

A growl escaped me.

“I will be there in ten minutes.”

“Should we call the police?” Drea asked.

“You can try. I don’t know if the cops will come for this if there’s no proof she is missing,” I said, striding out of Marcus’s office.

“Okay. I’ll try.”

I was hanging up as I got in the elevator, Marcus right at my side.

“I only caught half of that, but when I hear the word *cops* in the same conversation as my daughter, I have to assume that it’s bad.”

“She’s missing. The girls said she had a visitor and everyone assumed it was me. She went out the back door... and hasn’t been seen since.”

“Christ,” Marcus said, reaching for his phone. “My driver is down the block.”

I didn’t object to that. It would be easier to make his driver speed than it would some random cabbie.

I’d been involved in a bunch of shit in my life. Life or death shit. But I’d never been as panicked as I was then. My heart seemed to take up residence in my throat, and my stomach was twisting into knots, tightening with each moment that passed.

Thankfully, most of Scarlet’s life existed in a twenty-block radius. So it was a quick drive from Marcus’s building to the spa, where we found Di in the front, pitching a fucking fit at the staff.

“You bring up the camera feed right now, or I will sue this place and every single one of you until your children’s

children are in my debt,” Marcus said, and I felt my lips twitch a bit at the threat I knew he was more than willing to make good on if they didn’t give in.

Luckily, the manager decided to not wait for the owner, bringing Marcus and I into the back room, and rolling back the footage.

And there it was.

A car pulling out of the drive.

A man getting in the car.

A man slamming the trunk.

A man throwing a woman in the trunk.

It was rewinding too fast to make out faces, but I felt my heartbeat hammering against the confines of my ribcage as I saw the moment Scarlet was snatched off the fucking street.

It was far worse watching it in real-time, though.

The excitement on her face. Because she’d been expecting me. Then the confusion. Surprise. And, finally, fear.

But it was too late.

He was already grabbing her, silencing her, throwing her into his trunk.

“What was that?” Marcus asked as the guy pulled something out of his pocket.

“A syringe,” I said, chest hurting until I realized I was holding my breath.

“Who is it?” I asked, talking mostly to myself. “Who is that fuck?”

“Gene,” Di said immediately.

“Gene?” Marcus and I both asked, turning to look at her.

“One of her bodyguards,” she said, frowning at Marcus. “Don’t you remember? You hired him.”

“There’s been so many,” Marcus said. To be fair, the man looked horrified that he’d put this man in his daughter’s path.

Put him in her house. Forced her to tolerate him. Until she managed to push him out again.

“Get your office on the phone. Get his employment forms,” I told Marcus.

“Right. Right. Yeah,” he said, already reaching for his phone as I moved through the spa and back out front.

“Hey, Gene. The bodyguard. Do either of you know where he lives?” I asked.

“Gene. The creep,” Drea snapped, jaw tight.

“No. I never drove him anywhere personally,” Eric said. “Never liked him, though. He used to sit in the back with the girls,” he said, lip curling at the idea of an employee overstepping professional boundaries.

He would really not approve of me.

That was an issue for another day, though.

When Scarlet was safe.

“Why did you think Gene was creepy?” I asked Drea as Di and Marcus came out of the spa, Marcus talking rapidly to someone on the phone, Di on the phone with someone else.

“I didn’t *think* he was creepy. Scarlet said she used to catch him trying to watch her shower or change.”

Great.

“How did Scarlet manage to get him to leave?”

“I threatened him,” Drea admitted. “I don’t think Scarlet even knew that. But I just... I couldn’t stand by and watch another asshole think he could get away with taking advantage of one of us. So I... threatened to turn him over to the police for spying on her and taking pictures of her in her own home. I should have actually *done* it.”

“It’s not your fault. You were protecting your friend. And you did get him out of her apartment. Who the fuck knows what might have happened if you didn’t get him out of there when you did.”

“I have an address,” Marcus said, heading toward his car.

“The cops are coming,” Di said, eyes wide.

“Stay and talk to them. I’ll text Eric the address to tell the cops,” I told them, rushing to slide into Marcus’s car before he could peel off without me.

“This is all my fault.”

“You can fall into a guilt hole later,” I said, shooting him a look. “Right now, you need to be fucking pissed off and ready to take on this bastard. I’m assuming he had some kind of military background.”

“He was a cop.”

“He was *what?*” I snapped.

“A cop. He said the money was shit, so he retired early.”

“Christ,” I hissed.

“What?”

“He didn’t fucking retire. Not that young. He had to be fired. Probably failed a psych exam or was a creep on a case. Did you even call his precinct to check?”

The way Marcus’s gaze slid out the window gave me all the answers I needed.

A former cop meant that this wasn’t just some nobody with an obsession. This was a guy who was likely armed and trained in at least some hand-to-hand combat.

Not as much as I got, of course. But enough to be a problem. Especially when we interrupted his plans to complete some sick fantasy with Scarlet.

We were about at the hour mark.

And hour that fuckhead had her.

A lot of bad shit could happen in that timeframe.

I prayed she was keeping her wits about her, was trying to placate this guy instead of pissing him off, was maybe even trying to engage him in conversation to bide herself time.

She had to know I was coming for her.

That I would move heaven and fucking Earth to bring her home.

“Come the fuck on,” I growled when we hit the third light in a row.

“How could he drag an unconscious woman into his apartment?” Marcus asked. “Assuming that’s what the drugs did.”

“Normally, I would like to think that someone would stop him or say something or call the cops. But I think with the current drug epidemic, people would simply assume the woman is too high to walk. And New Yorkers just... notoriously mind their own business. It’s possible. Or, who the fuck knows, maybe this place has a back entrance or some shit like that where he wouldn’t be as seen.”

“Do you... carry a weapon?” Marcus asked.

“I won’t need it,” I said, hearing the threat in my voice as I envisioned grabbing this fuck by the back of his neck, and slamming his face into the wall until it flattened for daring to put his hands on Scarlet.

The drive felt impossibly long, but it was likely only fifteen minutes before we were pulling up to an apartment building beside what looked to be a closed down old bar.

“Where are you going?” Marcus asked when he went toward the apartment building, but my instincts had me going toward the abandoned bar instead.

No one to see.

To hear.

To know what he wanted to do to Scarlet.

“Go and check the apartment,” I invited. “I’m going in here,” I said, stepping in front of the door.

Reaching out, I carefully turned the knob, but it didn’t budge.

Taking a deep breath, I took a step back, then rammed my full weight against the door, feeling it crack and swing forward, letting me into the dark space.

I had to go get my girl.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Scarlet

Consciousness came slowly, my mind sticky as molasses, making each thought struggle to fully materialize.

There was a headache hammering behind my eyes, and my body felt heavy, immovable.

I'd never had a hangover so intense before.

But that was because...

My eyes shot open as panic swelled in my system.

I hadn't been drinking.

Well, two mimosas.

It wasn't the liquor.

It was whatever had been stabbed into my skin; it was the cold liquid that brought with it almost instant unconsciousness.

The last memory I had was lying in the trunk, staring up at the face of a man who I'd been forced to endure the presence

of in my home for several weeks before, suddenly, he was gone.

I didn't even know what I'd done to scare his creepy ass off, but I'd been so relieved when he was gone.

It was really ridiculous to have to close and lock all my doors in my own damn apartment to get some privacy. Or to just be sitting on the couch, and know someone is taking pictures of you without asking.

But I'd honestly never given Gene a single thought again after he was gone. Within three days, I had a new babysitter. One who was less creepy, if a lot more anal and annoying about cleanliness considering it wasn't *his* home, technically. So Gene's memory just... disappeared.

He definitely never called me *My dove* or anything like that when he'd been with me, or I would have known in an instant that it was him when the comments and letters started.

One thing did make sense, though.

The pink roses.

My father had sent me a bouquet when Gene had been staying with me. And I guess he assumed that was my thing.

Had I maybe given that situation two moments of thought, I would have come to that conclusion.

It was too late now.

I tried to move my head to get a better look around. The movement made my cheek grate against a dirty floor. Undoing all that work at the spa. Not that my facial was really a big concern right now. Not with the way my shoulders were aching.

Thanks to Julian, I knew that sensation in a heartbeat.

Even before I realized my wrists were bound.

I hated Gene at that moment for taking something that had become kind of sacred to me and turning it into something ugly.

Wherever I was, it was quiet, filthy, and freezing.

My robe had split down the chest, the sash holding on for dear life, but losing the battle. One whole leg was now exposed, and I was suddenly thankful for the fact that I'd chosen actual full-cheek panties instead of my usual thong.

Though I was without a bra, and if I shifted too much, my tits were going to be on display, with no way for me to cover them up again.

I forced myself to take slow, deep breaths, trying to tamp down the anxiety that was slithering up my chest and closing around my throat, constricting tighter by the second.

It was going to be okay.

I was someone who would be missed.

Especially because the girls would be waiting for me.

And Julian would be waiting for me to be done.

Julian.

I had to focus on him.

Julian, with years of active military service. A man who knew how to fight and to shoot and to track down people he needed to find.

And those were just people.

I was his girl.

He'd move heaven and Earth to find me.

I believed that down to my bones.

I just had to... stay calm. Stay sharp. Try to... distract Gene.

Because, let's face it, men didn't drug and kidnap women to have them over for a spot of tea and talk about their favorite TV shows.

Men drugged and kidnapped women to fulfill their sick fantasies.

I was not going to let that happen.

So I had to... I don't know... act like I was shocked that he was binding me. Maybe even insulted. Act like I had no idea it was him who had been sending me gifts, that I would have been open to it had I known.

Stroke his ego.

Let him think that I could actually be interested.

Get him to untie me.

Then, well, just keep distracting him, or find an opportunity to hit him or simply run.

This was the city.

I wouldn't have to go far to find someone with a phone to call the police with.

Resolve solidified, I carefully started to pull my knees to my chest, mindful of exposing more of myself. Then, carefully getting to my knees, feeling the gritty filth on the floor biting into my legs instead of my face.

But this way, I could look around the empty space.

It looked like... like a back room at some sort of restaurant.

There were long stainless steel counters, stacks of old milk crates, and a window that fed into the front of whatever this was. A restaurant or bar. Maybe even a coffee place. It was impossible to tell.

Wherever it was, it was abandoned, which was why it was so damn cold.

I rocked my legs, trying to keep my blood flowing, attempting to fight off the chill. I didn't want to be trembling when he came in, to have him mistake my chill for fear.

There was fear.

Of course there was.

But as the moments stretched, it was anger that was overtaking me.

“My dove,” Gene’s voice said from the side of me, making me turn to find him coming in from the front of the building through a swinging door. “I didn’t think you’d sleep so long.”

Sleep.

Like I’d had a choice in the matter.

I fought back the venom I wanted to spit at him, and forced a smile to spread.

“Gene!” I said, sounding a mix of pleased and relieved. “Was it really you all along?” I cooed at him. In my experience, if you laid it on thick enough, men were really gullible. That was likely even more accurate for someone with a delusional obsession like Gene was clearly dealing with. “Why didn’t you say so?” I added, pouting out my lower lip. “You made me think it was someone scary.”

“Scary?” he asked, looking taken aback.

“Yeah. Like a fan who’s never even met me,” I said. “You know how they can be,” I added.

He hadn’t been around long, but I was sure someone had asked to take a picture with me, or had taken one without permission. That was just how things were when you had a certain level of recognition.

“You never signed your notes,” I reminded him. “I was so scared someone was going to try to hurt me.”

“Hurt you? No,” he said, looking suddenly younger, less threatening.

I knew better, though.

This was a man who’d grabbed me, tossed me in a trunk, and drugged me.

Aside from that, he was a big guy. Not quite as tall as Julian, but close. A little less built, too. But still strong. He’d lifted me up when I’d been flailing like I was as light as a dried leaf.

One misstep, one wrong word, and this man could easily overpower me.

I had to be really freaking careful.

Let some time pass.

The girls would tell Eric. Eric would tell Julian. Maybe even my father. Half the city's police force would be looking for me within an hour or two.

I just had to keep Gene calm and distracted that long.

He wanted my attention.

Now he had it.

"My notes were not cruel," he said. Clearly having forgotten the thinly veiled threats. "I sent you flowers."

"But because I didn't know it was *you*, it was scary. Why didn't you sign the notes?" I asked, working to make my eyes look round, doeish. Sweet and innocent. *No ulterior motives here.*

"I... I thought you would know," he admitted, brows going down. "I guess... I didn't think that through."

"Why did you leave me?" I asked, laying it on thick, letting my lip tremble. Though it was really just from the damn cold. The tile floor on my bare legs wasn't helping. "One day you were there, the next you were moving out."

"You wanted me to go."

"I never said that."

I hadn't. That I could be sure of. I never gave them the satisfaction of saying out loud that I didn't want them there, knowing that I couldn't make them leave. It made me seem powerless. Better I freeze them out with cool indifference.

He couldn't argue with me on that.

And I got to watch as his gears turned, as he tried to come up with a response to something he knew was true, even if he'd based his reality on some other made-up memory.

"You didn't try to make me stay."

Again, true.

I'd completely ignored him as he packed and stormed out.

“My feelings were hurt!” I said, pushing some passion into my voice. “I didn’t want you to reject me a second time.”

“Reject you?” he repeated, green eyes looking a little crushed at the idea. “But you had your friend say terrible things to me.”

“What friend?” I asked, and I didn’t have to conjure up fake confusion this time. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Drea,” he said, spitting her name like a curse. “She cornered me and told me that I was a creep. And I needed to go before she called the police.”

“Why would she do that?” I asked.

“Because you told her I was a creep.”

Okay.

Guilty there.

“I said you were watching me,” I said. “I think... I think she must have taken that the wrong way. I didn’t mean that I didn’t... like it,” I said.

That felt like it came off on a false note.

So I wanted to rush to change the conversation.

“Gene, do you have a sweater? Or a jacket?” I asked. “I’m so cold,” I said.

“Oh,” he said, looking me over, and I didn’t like the way his gaze lingered on where my robe split.

“Or a blanket, maybe?” I asked, letting my voice go small and sweet. I let myself tremble harder, and watched as he looked a mix of sympathetic and frustrated.

I could deal with frustrated if it just gave me five extra minutes. Each one counted.

I had no clue how long I’d been knocked out for.

Hopefully more than half an hour.

Someone would know I was missing by then.

Steps would be taken to find me.

The spa had cameras. Someone would request to see them. Drea would definitely recognize Gene if she'd been the one to threaten him.

Then, well, I would imagine my father had his address, or the police could find it.

Though, yeah, I was clearly not in his *home*.

Maybe I was hoping for too much that someone would find me before Gene got ideas about doing the things to me he'd clearly been obsessing about for years at this point.

"Fine," Gene said with a sigh. "I'll be right back."

With that, he disappeared out the swinging door he'd entered through, and I was finally alone to look around again, wondering if there was anything around I could use as a weapon. When he came back with the sweater or blanket, I could complain that my shoulders hurt, and see if he would take off my binds.

Then, if I could distract him, and maybe grab for what looked like an old glass bottle of vodka, I could crack him on the head with it and run.

If this wasn't Gene's home, then I couldn't reasonably assume Julian would find me.

I had to try to save myself.

Decision made, I deliberately kept my gaze off of the bottle as Gene came striding back in, holding a freaking bath towel in his hands.

"This is all I could find."

"Oh, that's okay. It will help. But... but I can't hold it around me," I said as he draped it over my shoulders. Like the towel was on my side, it slid right off my shoulders. "Could I... could you..." I said, wiggling my hands.

"Um..."

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, rolling my eyes with a smile. Like he was the silliest guy in the world to even think

that. "I just want to hold the towel and warm up, so we can talk more. My teeth are starting to chatter," I insisted.

He looked conflicted for a moment.

And when he pulled a switchblade out of his pocket and flicked it open, I felt my stomach plummeting as my pulse accelerated.

But I forced a relieved smile.

"Thank you," I said as he went for the zip ties binding my wrists, and cut them free.

My shoulders immediately eased forward, curling in toward my chest for a second as the pain eased.

Pins and needles assaulted my arms and hands as Gene reached for the towel again. When he draped it, I focused hard to make my weighted, numb hands raise and close over the material, holding it in place.

"That's so much better," I said, nodding at him as he moved back over toward the counter, setting down the switchblade.

Well, that made two weapons.

"Why are we in this kitchen?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Don't you remember?" he asked, looking hurt.

"This kitchen? No," I said, shaking my head.

"Not this kitchen, but this bar," he said.

"Well, ah, I haven't seen the bar," I reminded him. He'd carried me in here unconscious. But if I had a chance to have him move me closer to the street, I was going to take it. "I'm sure I'll remember it, though."

Yes, I was usually drunk at bars, but that didn't mean I was so wasted that I didn't remember them. I did.

"Yeah?" he asked, head cocked to the side.

"Yeah," I said. "It sounds like it was special to us."

"It was," he agreed, puffing up. As if I could ever want this freaking lunatic. "Come on. I'll show you," he said, holding

out an arm, but waiting for me to get to my own feet.

I did it carefully, trying not to flash him, then moved slowly across the floor, praying he would turn forward before I got past the counter.

I tried to relax my features, but I felt the tension building until, finally, he turned.

My hand shot out, scooping up the knife, and tucking it into the material of the towel in my hand.

I'd never had to do anything violent before.

But I knew down to my marrow that I could hurt someone if I needed to, if it came down to my life or theirs. Especially if the other life belonged to a stalker, kidnapping creep.

Gene pushed open the swinging door, and I walked into a slightly brighter room, thanks to some of the paper that was plastered on the windows of the bar had fallen down.

There would be people out there.

Within screaming distance, maybe.

But every girl knew better than to scream. People rarely ever came. Better to break away. To find someone and beg them for help.

“Well?” Gene asked, voice like a whip.

I guess I'd pissed him off by not immediately gushing about my fond memories of the place.

“Sorry, it's so dark,” I said, slow blinking like I was trying to make my eyes adjust. “Oh!” I gasped, turning in a slow circle.

There was a hint of familiarity.

I'd been here at some point.

But the way the memory was so fuzzy made me think that it was only for a moment, that I hadn't chosen this location, that I'd been made to stop in for some reason.

I mean... I wasn't exactly a dive bar kind of girl.

Think.

I had to think.

I'd clearly been here with Gene.

But... why?

"Your birthday," I said, saying a silent prayer of gratitude for the last second memory. "We came here for your birthday."

It had been such an unexpected request that I'd felt like I couldn't say no. Not on a man's birthday. He'd just wanted to drop in to have a drink with his father.

Who... who owned it.

Right.

That was it.

This was his family bar.

"What happened to it?" I asked, eyes going big and round again. "It was such a great place."

"It was," Gene said, nodding, gaze far away. "Dad died. And the bank... well... they didn't want to work with me on a plan to take it over."

Meaning he was broke and likely didn't have great credit.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked. "I could have helped you! I mean, if it's not too late, we could still bring it back to its glory," I insisted.

Something I said right then was wrong, though.

I could feel it like a cool breeze suddenly in the air, chilling me all the more.

His eyes slitted.

His jaw went tense.

"I don't want your money," he hissed.

"No, not like that," I rushed to assure him. "I meant, you know, that we could invest in it. For our future."

Something had changed in him, though.

I'd screwed up.

And each time I spoke, I seemed to make him all the more angry.

“You think you can bullshit me?” he roared, turning on me.

“What? No. I—“

“I’m not fucking stupid. I know when you’re being fake,” he told me. “You’re playing with me.”

“I wouldn’t—“ I started, but he was rushing toward me.

“I’ll make you pay for it,” he promised.

I didn’t stop to think.

I didn’t even really... aim.

I just held the knife tightly, and started jabbing with everything in me.

I didn’t stop.

Not even when the front door flew open.

And Julian rushed inside.

“Motherfucker,” Julian roared, rushing forward, grabbing the back of Gene’s neck, and yanking his whole body away.

The movement made the knife slide back out of Gene’s flesh again, and I looked down to see the bright red blood covering my hand.

Shocked by it on me, on the blade, I dropped the knife, hearing it clatter even as the noise of Julian and Gene’s fight intensified.

“Scarlet!” another voice yelled, making me look up to see my father standing in the doorway, the light streaming around his body.

He was in front of me a second later, reaching for my face.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Is that... is that your blood?” he asked, eyes huge, skin going white.

“No,” I said, shaking my head, feeling oddly numb now that it was all but over.

“We’re going to get you out of here,” my father assured me, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Julian, enough!” he barked, making me jump. “The police are here. You can’t kill him,” he insisted.

But Julian just kept slamming Gene’s head into the wall.

It wasn’t until I spoke that he froze.

“I knew you would save me,” I said.

Then I watched as he turned, all the rage washing out of him like a wave pulling back as he released Gene to rush toward me.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, though, just ran his hands all over me, looking for injuries.

“I’m okay,” I said, but my gaze was on my bloody hand.

His own went downward, and a small smile tugged at his lips.

“Looks like you saved yourself, pet,” he said, voice soft.

It was the name that had me falling forward into him, my legs seeming to lose all their strength in an instant.

I didn’t need to be strong anymore.

Julian could always be trusted with my softness, with my weakness.

The police were rushing in then, guns raised.

“It’s okay. You’re okay,” Julian said. “Marcus, give her your jacket,” he instructed as he lifted me up into his arms, careful to have my robe tucked under my body, so I was covered.

My father draped his jacket over my front, giving me more modesty as they both silently agreed to get me out of there.

I turned my face into Julian’s chest as we moved outside. Not wanting to see who might be watching. And not wanting them to see much of me either as Julian walked me over toward my father’s town car, then slid in the back with me.

My father didn't immediately join us, so I figured he was likely speaking to the police.

"You're okay, pet," Julian assured me, pressing a kiss to my temple. "We're going to get you home as soon as we can. We probably need to go to the precinct first, though. To give a statement. Can you do that?" he asked. "I'll be right there in the next room."

"Yeah," I said, still feeling a little too numb to muster up any feeling in the words.

"It won't be long, right, Marcus?" he asked, making me realize my father had joined us without my hearing.

"Half an hour, tops, they assured me."

"Let's get it over with then," Julian said voice laced with concern.

—

True to his word, my father started throwing a fit the second the questioning went over half an hour, insisting that any further information could be provided after I recovered.

"Do you want to come back with me?" my father asked as we climbed back in his car.

"I want to go home," I said, letting Julian pull me up against his side, then reaching to drape my legs over his.

"Okay," my father said, watching us, then looking at Julian.

"Your father fired me today," Julian said, making my head shoot up.

“What?”

“He caught wind of our... inappropriate behavior. From Stephen,” Julian added.

Anger started to boil, but I found myself still a bit too detached to muster full emotion.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re staying with me,” I said, leaning back into him. “Forever,” I added quietly.

“Yeah, I am, pet,” Julian agreed, giving me a squeeze.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Julian

If Marcus hadn't stopped me, I never would have stopped. Not until skull and brain matter were splattered everywhere. Until his blood was painting the walls.

I guess I had to be thankful to the man for being there, for reeling me in, for refocusing me.

Because more important than making Gene pay, was assuring Scarlet that she was safe.

She was a bit in shock afterward, lost in her head. Even when she spoke to the police, recounting everything about Gene from him moving in with her, to the stalking, and, finally, the kidnapping, her voice had been robotic.

I couldn't begin to pretend to know what was going on in her head. What she'd felt when she'd been trapped with that psychopath. The kind of cunning she'd needed to convince him to trust her. Then the bravery it took to be able to stab the bastard four times before I took him from her.

I got a text as I was carrying Scarlet to her bathroom, running her a hot bath, and dropping some of her bomb things

into the water before stripping her, and lowering her in.

There were scrapes and grit on her legs from being on the floor. And some bruises on her skin from where the bastard had grabbed her.

But she was unharmed.

It could have been so much worse.

I reached for my phone as I turned out of the bathroom to go grab her a drink.

Drea had already dropped by to scoop up Hugh for us for the night, so I didn't have to let him out or feed him.

Apparently, Marcus had heard back from the hospital.

Gene would live.

And he'd likely get a solid twenty-five years or more for what he'd done. Marcus's lawyers would make sure of it.

He wouldn't be a problem for us again.

I came back with the wine, watching as Scarlet sipped it in silent contemplation.

"Talk to me," I begged as I knelt down beside the tub, reaching to brush a soap bubble off of her shoulder.

It was another long moment before her gaze slid to me.

"Can you do something for me?" she asked, voice hesitant.

"Anything."

"Can you... fix this?" she asked, putting down her glass, then raising both of her wrists toward me.

Where there were two bruises forming in the shape of bracelets.

I knew from her report to the police that she'd been zip-tied.

"Fix it?" I asked, not understanding.

"He took something that means something to me, to us, and he made it ugly," she said, eyes getting watery. "I need you to fix it."

Fix it.

Meaning... she wanted me to... reclaim it? To bind her?

“Pet, I don’t know if that’s a good idea. You’re still in shock.”

“Please,” she begged. “I don’t want him to ruin it.”

I wanted to insist she needed to sleep on it.

But who the fuck was I to tell her if she was ready for this or not? If she thought she was, I needed to trust her.

“Okay,” I said, voice soft.

It didn’t have to be punishment.

It could be something softer, something sweeter.

Scarlet opened the drain, and the water whirled down as I helped her stand, then carefully dried her body before helping her out, and leading her into her bedroom.

“Wait here for me,” I demanded as I set her on the edge of the bed.

I grabbed the soft restraints, and came back to attach them to the bed.

As soon as I did, she scooted up the bed, raising her arms over her head, and silently inviting me to close the binds around her wrists.

There was no apprehension in her face, no tension in her body.

Just blind trust on her face.

That was all the encouragement I needed as I went down to bind her ankles.

Then started the ritual.

Running my lips and tongue and hands over every inch of her, making her feel all mine again, erasing anywhere that bastard might have touched or even simply looked without her permission.

It wasn't long before her numbness was replaced by desire, before she was writhing and whimpering as my tongue traced her nipples, as my lips sucked the skin of her neck, leaving little marks, then moving back down her belly.

I stopped at the triangle just above her pussy, looking up to find her looking down at me, eyes heated.

"I love you, pet," I said before ducking my head and working her pussy with my lips and tongue and fingers until she was moaning and coming over and over.

I didn't let up until her thighs were trembling.

Until her whole fucking body was racked with aftershocks.

Only then did I release her ankles, then her arms, and pulled her against me as I sat against the headboard.

"I love you too, Julian," she said, voice soft.

And, fuck, did that sound good to hear.

"I bought something for you today," I told her, watching as she turned up toward me immediately.

She might try to play it off, but the woman loved getting gifts. And I would love to spoil her.

But this, this was the most important thing I could ever give her. More so than a ring on a certain finger, even. This symbolized a level of trust not even a wedding ring could mean.

"Really?" she asked, eyes bright.

"You want it right now?" I asked, still feeling the box in my breast pocket.

"Yes. Obviously," she added.

That *obviously* was so much like the Scarlet I knew and loved that I felt she really was going to be alright after her ordeal.

I reached for the box as she sat up to take it from me, opening it to find a double o-ring necklace. Platinum. Dainty. A collar with a chain that slid between her breasts a bit as

well, making it look more like a normal piece of jewelry, so no one but us would know what it truly was.

“A collar,” I told her. “Seeing you in that one temporarily made me realize how much I wanted to see you in my collar all the time.”

Her gaze focused on the collar for a long time before it lifted to my face.

“This is a big deal,” she said. Because we’d talked extensively about rituals, protocols, and the lifestyle involved in the activities we’d been engaged in.

“The biggest,” I agreed. “I’ve never collared anyone before. This is just for you. Just for us. But you need to really think—“

“Put it on me,” she demanded, fingers ripping at the box, trying to free the collar. “Now,” she said when I hesitated to take it from her. “I want to wear it. Always.”

My smile was soft as my heart swelled in my chest.

“This means you and me, pet,” I said as I slid it on her. “Forever.”

Her hand went to it, her smile soft, her eyes all wet again as her gaze lifted to mine.

“Aren’t you glad I was such a brat when we first met?” she asked.

“I’ll be thankful for it every fucking day of my life,” I assured her, pulling her to me, and sealing my lips to hers.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Socialites and Scandals

Your favorite gossip site for all things rich, famous, or infamous.

THE HEADLINE:

***Billionaire Party Girl Heiress Stepping Into Her
#BOSSBABE Era***

You guys know her.
Queen of the callout.
Dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty.

Master of the social media caption.

Mother to everyone's favorite Pomeranian - Hugh.

Crazy stalker stabber.

Well, it looks like we will have to give her a new title now.

And a new *name*.

Yeah, you read that right.

Scarlet Chandelier, only daughter to Marcus Chandelier, the multi-billionaire, got *married!*

To whom, you might ask?

Her former bodyguard!

Don't ask for my sources (you know I'm taking them to my grave). But I hear that this bodyguard was actually hired by Scarlet's father to keep an eye on her partying ways. Likely trying to keep the family name from getting dragged into some scandal (we're looking at you, Lloyd Sisters! *Side note: we have news on their father's reaction to their booming renewable energy venture - but you have to tune in another day for that one!*)

Anywho.

It seems Scarlet got sweet on "the help."

And who could blame her?

Scroll down for pictures of this particular hottie.

My source tells me that sometime between him being hired and her trip on her father's yacht to Porta Cova, things really heated up between these two.

And it has been all heart-eyes since.

Now we learn that Scarlet has tied the knot.

In a small fishing village in Portugal.

Wearing a *gorgeous* custom creation from her good friend, Di Warner (*Did you guys see her fashion line premier? Drea*

looks like she's left her hard partying days behind her. She was glowing on that catwalk!).

Scarlet Chandelier is now officially Scarlet Chandelier-Flynn.

Yes, very sweet.

But practically old news at this point.

So why are we here, you ask?

Because Scarlet Chandelier-Flynn just shocked the whole gossip community.

Admittedly, we all underestimated her.

And for that, we offer... *absolutely no apologies.*

Apparently, under all that perfectly styled, gleaming dark hair, Scarlet has been hiding a big old brain for business.

In a move no one saw coming, Scarlet has somehow ousted her father's long-time CFO, and close personal friend, Stephen Moore, for trying to stage a coup and plotting to push the entire Chandelier family out of the business that has been in their family for generations.

No one is mourning his loss (word on the street - Stephen's a creep).

And with a new opening in the business, Scarlet has decided to step into her #BossBabe era.

Could she be working toward taking over for her father one day?

Does she have a bun in the oven?

Why is she *always* wearing that same necklace these days?

Only time (and amazing sources) will give us the answers we are craving.

But, rest assured, as soon as I know anything, you will too.

Tune in tomorrow for an exposé on the city's two most elite upper-echelon sex clubs: SVNT and some place known only as "Club Octopus." You will be clutching your pearls. And wishing you had a few million to your name, so you could see their sizzling secrets for yourself!

Until then, remember, when in doubt - do the crazy shit.

You're keeping me in business.

XOXO

A huge thank-you to Fern for her keen eyes and light hand.

And also a thanks to Ashley, Sonya, Gabi, and Cherie for helping make this book shine.

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The Winter Queen

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<3/ Jessica