



Could you love
a villain?

THE
BAD
GUY

c e l i a a a r o n

THE BAD GUY

CELIA AARON

CELIA
AARON
DANCE WITH THE DARK

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THE
BAD
GUY
c e l i a a a r o n

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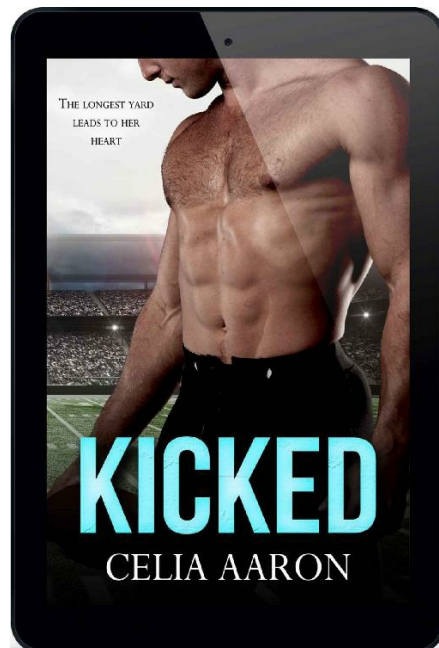
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MY NAME IS SEBASTIAN Lindstrom, and I'm the villain of this story. I'd like to tell you that I try to be good, to do the right thing. That would be a lie. As with most powerful men, the truth is a minor inconvenience that can be bent like a circus stripper into whatever form I want.

But I've decided to lay myself bare, to tell the truth for once in my hollow life, no matter how dark it gets. And I can assure you, it will get so dark that you'll find yourself feeling around the blackened corners of my mind, seeking a door handle that isn't there.

Don't mistake this for a confession. I neither seek forgiveness nor would I accept it. My sins are my own. They keep me company. Instead, this is the true tale of how I found her, how I stole her, and how I lost her.

Her—Camille Briarlane. The one I'd been searching for. When I found her, she was already in the company of her white knight. He'd claimed her for himself, planting his flag and showing her off like the treasure she is.

A fairy tale romance by all accounts.

But every fairy tale has a villain, someone waiting in the wings to rip it all down. A scoundrel who will set the world on fire if that means he gets what he wants. That's me.

I'm the bad guy.

“**A**RE YOU SURE THIS looks okay?” I pulled the hem down on my midnight blue dress as I stepped from the limo, my hand in Link’s.

He smiled down at me, his perfect white teeth gleaming in the low lights along the front of the swank New York hotel. “You outshine everyone else here. Trust me.” His black tux gave him the look of Hollywood glamor, every smooth line of his body perfectly wrapped in the fabric.

I squeezed his hand as he led me up the stairs. “You haven’t seen everyone else yet.”

“Don’t have to. I already know you’ll put them to shame.” He wrapped his arm around my waist as the doorman ushered us into the hotel lobby.

I welcomed the blast of warm air that dispersed the early winter chill.

“May I?” An attendant offered to help with my coat.

“I’ll handle it.” Link smiled and slid his hands into my collar and down my arms, peeling the wool coat from me. He passed it to the attendant and wrapped his arms around me from behind. “I might just take you back to my apartment and ditch this party altogether.”

I craned my neck to look at him. “I don’t think that would be a wise move for Lindstrom’s newest VP of marketing.”

His dark blond hair tickled along his forehead as he leaned down and nipped at my neck. “Maybe it would be nice to make a bad decision for once.”

“Link!” A rotund man strode up, his eyes already glassy from too much wine.

Link released me and led me over to him where the men shook hands.

“Is this *the* Camille I’ve heard so much about?” He took my palm and placed a messy kiss on the back of my hand.

I wanted to wipe it on something. Link grabbed my hand in his and pressed it against his pants leg, scrubbing the saliva without making it obvious.

“Camille, this is Hal Baxter, VP of finance at Lindstrom. Hal, this is the one and only Camille.” The pride in Link’s voice sent heat rushing to my face.

Hal nodded, his chubby face widening into a grin. “Well, she’s a beauty. Teacher, right?”

“Yes.” Link spoke before I could. “She’s at Trenton Prep—about two hours outside the city. The best biology and life sciences teacher they have.”

“Trenton, eh?” Hal took a large gulp of champagne. “One of my nephews goes to school there. Minton Baxter. Do you know him?”

I cringed inwardly. Minton “Mint” Baxter had turned into one of my worst students—he spent more time trying to undermine me than he did learning. I forced a smile. “Yes, he’s in my senior biology class.”

“Go easy on him.” Hal finished the drink in his chubby paw then swiped another from a passing tray. “If he’s anything like his uncle”—he pointed a thumb at himself—“he may need a little after hours instruction. Though they didn’t make teachers like you when I was in school.” He gave me an elevator look as our conversation veered from awkward to unbearable. I wished I was still wearing my coat over the strapless dress.

Link’s grip tightened. “Good to see you, Hal. Enjoy the party.”

We walked away, weaving through the crowd of people drinking and talking. My heels clicked on the marble floor, and I counted my steps to avoid thinking about my mortification. Women pranced by, their designer dresses and breakneck heels reminding me that this wasn’t my scene. But when Link asked me to be his date, I couldn’t turn him down. He’d recently been promoted to VP and wanted to impress his coworkers at the annual Lindstrom gala.

He pulled me into a small alcove in between the lobby and the ballroom. “I’m sorry about that. Are you all right?” He ran a hand down my cheek.

“I’m fine.” I pulled at my hem again, wishing it fell to my knees instead of mid-thigh. “He was drunk.”

“He was an ass.” He swept my light brown hair off my shoulder. “I’ll have a word with him at the office on Monday.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it.”

He smiled and kissed my forehead. “It’s my job to worry about you. Because I lo—”

“Link.” A cold voice cut between us.

Link stepped back and straightened. “Mr. Lindstrom.”

I stared up into dark green eyes flecked with hazel. This had to be the younger Lindstrom. Sebastian. His father owned the company, and Sebastian served as the CEO. Based on what little Link had told me about him, I’d expected a man in his forties, but Sebastian looked early thirties. Tall and dark, he had an air of command. I wanted to drop my gaze, but something in his eyes held me.

His nostrils flared for a moment, his dark eyebrows lifting, but then he gave a polite smile and shook Link’s hand. “Link, glad you could make it. And this is?”

“Camille Briarlane.” Link beamed. “My girlfriend.”

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Lindstrom.” I held out my hand to shake.

“Please call me Sebastian.” He took my hand and dropped a kiss on my knuckles, though he kept his eyes on mine. His touch was soft, intimate, and my skin warmed where his lips grazed against me. Unlike Hal’s kiss, I was fine with leaving this one right where he’d placed it.

“Looks like it’s going to be a great party.” Link gave his all-American smile and pulled me to his side.

Sebastian kept his eyes on me and did nothing to return Link’s small talk. The sound of the party faded as his cold eyes kept me captive. Link’s fingers dug into my waist, and the hackles rose on the back of my neck as Sebastian’s stare veered into awkward territory. It was too direct, as if he was trying to see my thoughts.

Link cleared his throat. “So, are you going to give some sort of speech, Mr. Lindstrom?”

He blinked. “Not a chance.”

I dropped my gaze and tried to play off my discomfort by accepting a flute of champagne from a passing server. I sipped it and examined my shoes.

“Sebastian.” An older man walked up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Did I just hear something about you giving a speech?” His hair was a steely gray, and he was almost as tall as Sebastian, though his eyes were a light blue instead of emerald.

“Absolutely not.” Sebastian crossed his arms over his broad chest, his

fitted tux no match to his will.

The older man turned to us. "Link, good to see you."

"Thank you, Mr. Lindstrom. This is my girlfriend, Camille."

He smiled warmly and took my hand in both of his. "So good to meet you. I think some of the VPs were beginning to take bets on whether Link here was just making you up."

His smile appeared genuine, and he seemed far more friendly than his son.

"Teaching takes up so much of my time, especially now that the fall semester is in full swing. I haven't been able to get to the city as much as I'd like." I preferred the quiet life at the prep school to the constant sound and fury of New York City, though I'd never tell Link that. He wanted me to look for a job at one of the schools in town and move into his penthouse apartment.

"You teach?" Sebastian's cool voice cut through the friendly conversation.

Link answered for me again. "Yes, she teaches biology at Trenton Prep."

Sebastian's gaze flickered, and a slight frown pulled at the corner of his lips, as if irritated that Link had spoken instead of me. "So you don't live in town?"

"No." I responded before Link could.

"Not yet." Link squeezed my upper arm, pressing me into his side. "I hope I can convince her to move after fall term is over."

I clenched my teeth shut. Link knew I wanted to go on a research trip during the holidays. Moving to the city wasn't included in those plans. Besides, I couldn't leave my students in the middle of the year. I thought I'd made all that clear, but he was still trying to get his way. One of his most endearing traits could sometimes be the most annoying.

"Are you going to move, then?" Sebastian asked the question with a sharpness in his tone that almost made me wince.

"I, um..." I was on the spot, both men looking at me for an answer. "Well, I intend to do some traveling over the Christmas break. Maybe I can decide while I'm up to my elbows in research. Sort of clear my head."

"Research?" Sebastian leaned closer.

"A science teacher who actually does research?" Mr. Lindstrom smiled. "Now that's something to be proud of." He waved at a small group of older men standing in the open foyer. "Looks like business never ends around here."

I have elbow rubbing to do. Nice to meet you, young lady. And good job, Link.” He gave a conciliatory wink before striding toward the power circle.

“What sort of research?” Sebastian pressed.

He’d asked the one question Link couldn’t answer for me. “I’d like to visit the Amazon. One of my former professors is there right now conducting a study on a certain type of deciduous fern that he thinks may have a role in explaining why a particular species of frog is able to switch sexes and impregnate itself.” My passion spilled into my voice as I talked faster than usual. “He doesn’t have any spots available for me, but there are a few other expeditions going on that I could possibly join. One investigating a rogue species of belladonna and another focusing on the upper canopy, harvesting the various plants that grow there to determine any pharmacological uses.”

Link laughed. “She’s my little explorer.”

Sebastian cut his gaze to Link, his frown deepening before his expression returned to neutral. “What was your professor’s name?”

“Stephen Weisman. Do you know him?”

“No. I’m afraid I studied business. It’s more of an art than a science.” He smiled, though his eyes never warmed. “We should go in.” The dismissal in his tone was unmistakable.

He showed interest one moment, and became taciturn the next—I couldn’t figure him out. Link had told me Sebastian could be “off-putting,” and he wasn’t kidding.

“Right. I suppose we’ll see you inside.” Link led me away from the alcove and toward the ballroom. Music swirled through the air as a live band played, drawing the partygoers forward.

A chill raced down my spine, and I looked over my shoulder. Sebastian hadn’t moved, his arms still crossed, his stern expression focused on me. I shivered, though the ballroom was even warmer than the lobby.

Link pressed his palm to my back and led me forward, sweeping me onto the dance floor.

“What a fucking weirdo.” He pulled me close and swayed me to the beat.

“He seemed nice.” The word stuck on my tongue, as if unwilling to describe Sebastian Lindstrom. My gaze strayed toward the alcove, though I couldn’t see beyond the other couples dancing to the slow song.

“He’s an asshole.” He gripped me tighter. “And I didn’t like the way he was looking at you.”

“I think he’s just sort of, I don’t know, maybe awkward? I’m sure he

means well.”

He leaned back and caught my gaze. “Why do you always think the best of people?”

“Why not?”

His stare dropped to my mouth, then lower to the neckline of my dress. He wetted his lips. “Because I’m having some particularly bad thoughts right now.”

“At a company function?” I opened my eyes wide with mock surprise. “How very impertinent of you.”

“I can’t help it. I’m hot for teacher.”

I rolled my eyes as he spun me, then pulled me close again. “Never heard that one.”

“Do you have any idea how hard all those teenage boys wank to you every night?”

I slapped his arm. “Eww!”

“It’s true. You are a wet dream for them.” He leaned in closer and nipped at my ear. “For me, too.”

“Would you mind if I cut in for a moment?” The cool voice sliced through our flirting and stopped us mid-sway.

LINK WANTED TO PROTEST, his body tensing as I moved closer to Camille. But there were quite a few perks to being Lindstrom Corp.'s CEO. I stared him down, waiting for his inevitable acquiescence.

"Be my guest." His tone wasn't as inviting as his words, but I didn't care. He could sulk in the corner for the rest of the night, and it would suit me just fine. I had to get closer to Camille, and I wasn't above using my position as Link's boss to get my way.

"Thank you." I dismissed him and focused on his date. "If it's all right with you, of course."

She looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes fringed with dark lashes. "Um, sure."

She'd drawn me in the moment I saw her standing next to him. Her demure attempts to pull her dress down, the heavenly curve of her neck, the raw intelligence that sparkled in her eyes. I had to know who she was, even if it meant breaking out of my cold shell to approach her. It was impulsive, but necessary.

"Shall we?" I held out my hands, well aware of the slight shake in them.

So close to something I wanted, I couldn't help the surge of adrenaline that pooled in my brain. *Take her.* The sensation was as strange as it was forceful. What was happening to me? The need to take her, steal her, almost overwhelmed me, but I kept it at bay.

Hiding my true intentions was the most important facet of the personality I showed to the world. If people knew what I truly was, I'd be a pariah. Instead, I was the CEO of a vast forestry company that had been in my family

for three generations.

She shot an unsure glance to Link, who gave her a nod of approval. She seemed to stand straighter and moved forward into my arms. The touch of her silky dress beneath my fingers, the slide of her warm palm into mine—I was greedy for all of it. I kept a look of disinterest on my face, the most-used mask in my repertoire, even though every gear and cog inside me turned and clanked as if I were a machine waking up after a long, dark sleep. Her energy was like gasoline in my veins, powering me up for some mysterious purpose.

We moved to the slow song, melding into the other dancers. She tightened in my arms, no longer at ease the way she was with *him*. She needed to be comfortable with me, to open up so I could see all her inner workings. Her eyes hid from mine as she looked everywhere but at me. I wanted to force her to tell me every thought that flitted through her mind. But that wouldn't work. My father had worked on my finesse, as he called it, for years, to the point that I was the puppet of perfect manners, a marionette on a genteel string. Pull here, I smiled. Pull there, I offered condolences. No string led to a kidnapping option. But I still had a few tricks of my own.

The song switched to another slow dance, the singer crooning an old Smoky Robinson tune. Though she was in my arms, her silence kept a wide expanse between us, one I intended to cross. I performed a brief calculus, trying to decide what a normal man would say in this situation, which string to pull. It was an equation I'd learned from my earliest days—figuring out what people expected so that no one would notice there was something wrong with me.

She'd mentioned her job and seemed to enjoy it. I started there. "How many students do you have?"

Her eyebrows arched, and she finally met my gaze. "Each class is about ten students, and I have five classes a day."

"Seems like a small class size?" I didn't know since I'd been home schooled after the first grade. Apparently, the incident where I'd informed another first grader that I intended to disembowel him the next time he tripped me on my way to class was frowned upon by my parents and my private school.

"It is. Trenton has an entire department devoted to fundraising to keep the educational standards top notch. We have a lot of legacies whose parents are one percenters living in the city. I sit on the financial aid board and make sure that we offer scholarships to children from underachieving areas, even if

some of our alumni disagree.”

“So you’re a teacher and a social justice crusader?”

She stiffened. I didn’t like it.

“I just care about every child getting a great education.” Her defensive tone told me I’d made a misstep.

“I didn’t mean any offense.” I tried to solve her puzzle and choose the correct response to keep her talking. “I’m impressed, actually.”

“Oh.” She blushed that delicious shade of pink. “Sorry. I guess I’m just used to blowback from parents on the need-based scholarships.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I leaned closer, pretending I had to speak into her ear to be heard over the music. “What’s your favorite thing about teaching?” Inhaling her scent, citrus and floral, ignited an even stronger buzz inside me. Like bees building a hive in my brain, each of them humming for me to take my queen.

“The students. Some of them are...let’s just say entitled. But there are quite a few who love learning as much as I do, which is saying something. And there are a few who I think could be first-rate scientists one day, or at least real movers and shakers in the STEM professions. They make me proud.” The tension in her body eased a bit more, and she smiled up at me. “What’s your favorite part of your job?”

Her smile worked to unravel the black wire that wrapped around my heart. The sensation of falling and soaring melded into one. How could the slight upturn of her mouth create so much chaos? I wanted more.

“Control.” I tightened my hand at her waist, feeling her move beneath the fabric. Her skin would be even softer, my fingers leaving red marks along the pale flesh. My teeth would bruise her, my marks lasting for days until I made fresh ones. But I was jumping ahead, which was unlike me. And I was thinking about bedding a woman, also unlike me. I’d been with women, taking my pleasure and then moving on, but I’d never sought one out. They always came to me, and if I was interested, I’d let them have a few hours of my time.

“Sebastian?” Two lines appeared between her eyebrows. Had she been speaking and I’d missed it? *Fuck.*

“I apologize. What were you saying?”

The creases eased. “I was just saying that you must get quite a bit of control as CEO.”

“Yes. It’s the family business, and my father has entrusted me with

running it. I keep an eye on all departments, make sure they are sticking to the plan.” Father had to keep me occupied somehow, to make sure I didn’t end up in an institution. Little did he know that psychopaths made the best CEOs.

“Link’s mentioned how involved you are in every little thing.” She stopped moving and frowned. “Oh, I probably shouldn’t have said that.”

You’re right. You should never speak his name again. “It’s perfectly all right.” I pulled the string that set my lips into a practiced smile. “I’m sure my methods are a common complaint among the VPs. People think I became CEO solely because of my father. But I worked for it, spending time with the roughneck crews who cut trees for us, then at the sawmills, and finally touring retail sites.”

“So you were a lumberjack?” Her eyes twinkled with interest.

“I wore flannel and everything.”

She laughed and began to move again, her body melting against mine as her fears eased. “That would be an interesting sight.”

“I enjoyed it. At first light, I’d grab my chainsaw and head out with the crew. We didn’t talk much, just worked.” I told her the truth, a rarity for me. I was a creature of solitude, one who didn’t need or care for the restrictions of society. Being a CEO was its own sort of prison, but I owed it to my father to keep up appearances. “I think I got more done in those two months than I have in the five years I’ve been CEO.”

Camille didn’t notice we’d moved away from the stage and into the darker area at the side of the ballroom. “I don’t know. Seems like you’ve done a lot. Link tries to tell me all the numbers, how much the company has grown and his ideas for how to make it even more successful on the marketing front.”

I leaned in closer, my lips close to her ear. “I take it all that bores you?”

Her breath hitched for a moment, but then she steadied herself. “I wouldn’t say it’s boring, just not my thing.”

I pressed my lips against the shell of her ear and enjoyed the shiver that shot through her curvy body. “Then what is your thing?”

“Plants.” Her voice trembled, setting the animal inside me alight. I wanted to devour her.

“Ah, the Amazon trip.”

“Yes.” She didn’t pull away as her words grew breathy. “It’s a dream of mine.”

You're a dream of mine.

She took a deep breath and leaned her head back to catch my gaze. "I think you've danced me into a stupor. Heavy-handed in the boardroom, but light on your feet in the ballroom." That smile again, the warmth blooming in her eyes and transferring to me. Did she even know the power she had?

"Let's test that theory." I twirled her around, and she held onto me, her breasts pressing against my chest and her head tucked under my chin. I lifted her with one arm and spun. Her laugh against my throat woke up every nerve ending in my body until all I could feel was her. Euphoria, the closest I'd ever gotten to the sensation of happiness, washed over me. All it took was her, one taste of whatever magic she wielded.

The song slowed to its end, and I reluctantly set her back on her feet. Pink highlighted her cheeks, and I couldn't miss the sparkle in her eyes. She was exquisite, a treasure hidden in plain sight. One that I wanted for myself.

"Thank you for the dance." She ran her hand across my bicep and rested her palm on my chest.

"My pleasure." It was. And I didn't want it to be over. I kept her small hand in mine and pressed my palm against her lower back.

Her breaths came in shallow flutters as the skin along her chest and neck turned a matching pink to the shade on her cheeks. Arousal. She found me attractive, enjoyed my touch.

"There you are." Link stepped up to us as a faster song began to play. He'd been watching the entire time. I could feel his possessive tendrils streaking through the crowd and trying to wrap around my Camille. He was foolish enough to think he still had a claim on her. The moment I saw her, his flimsy hold on her began to slip. I intended to sever it completely, by any means necessary. I'd heard about love at first sight, though I couldn't claim that emotion. The need to *possess* her was what fired through my veins, not the sentimental nonsense of hearts and flowers.

She dropped her hand. I had to let her go, even though murdering Link and tossing her over my shoulder seemed like the more expedient option. My father and the rest of the attendees would likely frown on my behavior. Camille backed away, the loss of her heat returning my insides to their usual barren state.

Link wrapped an arm around her waist. A growl rose from my throat but got lost in the music. She shifted from one heeled foot to the other, nervous. I made her uncomfortable. She had no idea.

“Great party.” He offered again, then pointed through the crowd to the hor d’oeuvres table. “I think we’ll see what’s on the menu.” He took her elbow and steered her away.

An uncomfortable feeling settled in my chest. Acid reflux, perhaps, or some other form of indigestion.

Link slid his hand to her lower back. My hands balled into fists, and I fought the urge to follow them. Her chestnut brown hair cascaded down her back in loose curls, the sway of her hips magnetic. But she was with *him*, when she should have been with me.

The ache in my chest intensified. I’d have to stop by the pharmacy on the way home.

Right before I lost sight of her, she turned and smiled at me, as if sending me a spark of hope.

The spark lit an inferno. It blazed up and promised destruction for anything that got between us.

She was mine. Even if I had to steal her.

“**W**HAT DOES THE PRESENCE of these four micronutrients tell us about the specimen’s biochemistry?” I flashed the chlorophyll formation onto the screen, each molecule drawn by hand and labeled for iron, zinc, and copper.

“That you have a nice ass.” A low voice from the back of the room.

I spun as half the class laughed and the other half looked anywhere but at me. Minton Baxter, it had to be him. He grinned and pretended to be typing notes on his laptop.

My heartbeat thudded in my ears, and I knew I had to take charge of the situation or else it would take charge of me. “Minton, may I see you outside for a moment?”

A chorus of “oooohs” broke out across the room as he stood and sauntered through the desks.

“Take out a piece of paper, all of you. When I get back, I expect each of you to have perfectly drawn examples of *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*.”

I followed Minton into the hall and closed the door on the students’ groans. Blue lockers lined the empty hallway, and the gray tile floor gleamed under the fluorescents. Minton leaned against the wall next to the classroom door, his hands in his pockets and a cocky grin on his face.

“What is going on with you?” I crossed my arms. “When you started the semester, you were engaged and doing well. Now, you cut class and create constant disruptions. Your grades have tanked. What am I missing here?”

He shrugged. “I was just telling the truth.”

“I think you know that your behavior is inappropriate, but you keep doing

it anyway.” I needed to get inside his head, figure out the problem, and come up with a solution. There had to be a reason why he’d gone from top marks to class clown. “What’s the deal?”

“Nothing.” He dropped his gaze and picked at the messy knot of his tie.

“Is it your parents?”

His fingers froze. “No.”

“What is it that you’re not telling me?” I softened my voice. “I want to help you, Mint, if you’ll let me.”

He met my eyes again, and I couldn’t mistake the pain that flashed across his face. Then it was gone. “I can think of a few ways you can help.” He licked his lips as his gaze roved up and down my body.

I knew what he was doing—hiding behind inappropriate behavior to deflect from the real problem. But I wasn’t going to get through to him like this. “Get back to your desk. I expect you to turn in your drawing first thing tomorrow.”

He huffed and returned to the classroom, closing the door too hard behind him. I chewed on my thumbnail as the slam reverberated down the hall. I wanted to contact his parents, but that was obviously the sore spot. Maybe his uncle who worked with Link knew something? But it wasn’t like I could just call him up and start quizzing him on his nephew.

I fished in my pocket for my cell phone, but hesitated before texting Link. I’d just seen him the previous weekend at the Lindstrom party. He’d taken me back to his apartment. When I’d told him I wasn’t ready to sleep together, he’d accepted it, though I could sense the tension underneath. We’d been dating for months, and he’d been more than patient, but I still didn’t know if it was time for the next step. I wasn’t a virgin, but it had been a long time. Did I even know what to do anymore?

The bell rang, pulling me from my thoughts. If I wanted to help Mint, then I needed to get back to the city and have a chat with his uncle. I pulled up Link’s number and texted.

Are you up for another visit this weekend? Maybe we can get together with some of your work friends.

My classroom door opened, and the students streamed into the hallway, their backpacks slung over one shoulder as they chatted and laughed. The phone vibrated.

Link: I’d love to see you. But since when do you care about my work friends?

I might as well tell the truth.

Since Minton Baxter started acting out in class. I'm hoping his uncle might know what's going on with him.

Once the last student left my room, I went back in and closed the door behind me. It was my free period before lunch.

Link: A recon mission. And here I was hoping you just wanted to see me.

I frowned and sank into the chair behind my desk.

I do want to see you, but I'm multi-tasking.

The three dots jumped at the bottom of the text box. Disappeared. Then jumped again.

Link: All right. I'll see if I can set up drinks Friday night. Sound good?

Relief washed through me. He wasn't mad.

Thank you. Yes.

Link: I'm looking forward to seeing you.

Me too.

I stowed my cell phone and listened to the noisy students mill around in the hallway until the bell rang. The school quieted, though I could distinctly here Dr. Potts next door giving a lecture extolling the beauty and simplicity of the quadratic formula for finding any solution. I wished it would solve the problems that meandered around in my head. Whether to take my relationship with Link further, what to do about Mint, and the biggest problem of all—why I found my thoughts straying back to Sebastian Lindstrom whenever I had a free moment.

I shifted in my chair, my memories of him making me uncomfortable and warm at the same time. Closing my eyes, I pictured him, the sharp line of his jaw, the imposing weight of his voice. The way he'd held me as we danced, as if I were a lifeline. Link hadn't cared for the way Sebastian looked at me or the dance we shared. He kept his jealousy in check, making jokes about how odd the CEO of Lindstrom was, the rumors that swirled around his love life. Link posited that Sebastian was gay, which explained why he was never seen with women. But that dance told me different. Sebastian was a lot of things, but gay wasn't one of them.

A sharp rap at my door made me jump. The wood swung inward on a squeaky hinge, and Gregory waltzed in, his eyes on the stack of mail in his arms.

“Jeez, Gregory. A little more warning next time.” I stowed my thoughts of Sebastian and gave the assistant headmaster a hard look.

“Oh, lighten up.” He perched on the edge of my desk. “After all, I knocked.” He smiled, his boyish good looks overtaking my irritation.

“Did you have a good weekend?” I took a stack of letters from him and tossed them on my desk.

“Excellent. Went into the city on a blind date. Came out of it sore but satisfied.” He winked.

“Did he have potential at least?”

“For long term?” He scratched his clean shaven jaw. “Not even close. I’d have to be a power bottom to keep up with him. I’m more of a ‘lay on my stomach and let him have at it’ sort of bottom. One night only, my dear. And stop trying to distract me. You spent the weekend with Link, right? Some company function? Did you get down and dirty? Give me all the icky hetero details.”

I glanced to the door. “Keep it down. Just because you’re living *la vida loca* doesn’t mean I want everyone to know about my sex life.”

Gregory had been out since high school and had no qualms being himself even in the stuffy atmosphere of Trenton Prep. He’d been a good friend to me since the day I’d arrived, fresh-faced and ready to shape the youth of tomorrow.

“I’ll keep it down, but give me the details and leave nothing out.” He pointed a thin finger at me. “*Nothing.*”

I plucked at the high collar of my forest green dress top. “No, we didn’t...” I fidgeted. “You know.”

“You denied that handsome man again?” He straightened his already perfect bowtie. “If he were batting for my team, I’d already have taken him on a tour of everything this toned body has to offer.”

“That’s you. I’m a little more cautious.”

“He’s perfect for you. Tall, handsome, rich family, big hands, good hair, and I can tell you right now that he’s got it where it counts.”

Crimson flamed through my cheeks. “You mean—”

“A package, yeah. He’s got a big one.”

“You can’t tell that by looking.”

“*You* can’t.” He grinned. “I certainly can.” He waved a hand at me. “If that was the end of your weekend tale, I am very disappointed in you.”

I chewed my thumbnail while I debated whether I should tell him about

Sebastian.

“Ah ha!” He pointed at my thumb. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“Whenever you go Bucky Beaver on your thumbnail, something’s bothering you. Out with it.”

“That’s not true.” I dropped my hand to my lap where it joined its sister in a death grip.

“It is.” He dropped the rest of the mail he’d been holding on the corner of my desk and crossed his arms over his navy blue sweater vest. “Spill.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

He glowered as much as the Botox allowed. “My last boyfriend was a liar, and you know what happened to him.”

“I was there, remember? I’m the one who helped you hide sardines under his driver’s seat and Saran wrap his car.”

“Keep that in mind. Now tell me your tale before Headmaster Grinsley notices I’ve been gone too long and orders me back to be her little bitch.”

“It’s nothing.” When his frown deepened, I hurried along, “Well, there was this guy.”

“Yes.” He fist pumped. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Go on.”

“He’s the CEO of the forestry company where Link works.”

Gregory rubbed his palms together. “Money, money, money. Continue.”

“We danced. He was, I don’t know...” How could I describe the murky feeling? “There was something about him.”

“Good looking?”

“Yes, in a dark sort of way. But there was more. Like he has secrets bubbling beneath his surface.”

“I love a man with a past.” He sighed. “How old?”

“I don’t know. Probably early thirties.”

“Mmm. He sounds tasty. Are you thinking of ditching Link for this guy?”

“Whoa.” I held my hands up. “Your imagination is running wild. It was one dance with Link’s boss. No. Link and I are—”

“Not doing the deed.” He crinkled up one side of his mouth in disapproval. “That says a lot.”

“No it doesn’t. And I intend to take that step soon, but not until I know I’m ready.”

“When will you know?”

I leaned forward and began flipping through my mail. “I just will.”

“Sure. Sounds legit.”

“Your sarcasm is noted.” I pulled a letter from the stack. “Interesting.” Rainforest Fund was stamped at the top, and my name and address were written in a bold hand.

“I’ve got to finish my deliveries.” Gregory scooped up the rest of the mail as I slid my finger down the flap. “I’ll see you after school for some much needed liquid refreshment and Mexican food. La Conchita’s at six.”

“All right. See you there.” I slid out a letter, the paper heavy in my hands.

The door clicked closed as I unfolded the paper. I read each word, my eyes growing wider as I went. When I finished reading, I sat back and stared at the cream paper and matching envelope. My dream expedition had just landed in my lap. An offer to work as a staff biologist on a mission to the Amazon rainforest that would focus on a particular area of the canopy. It even included airfare, thanks to some extra funding from big pharma.

With shaking hands, I re-read the letter. Dr. Weisman had recommended me so highly that the expedition’s lead scientist had “no choice” but to hire me right away. I squeed so loud that Dr. Potts paused in his lecture next door before resuming his monotone.

This was it. My chance. The one I’d been waiting for. And there was nothing that could stand in my way.

“**W**HY DO YOU ALWAYS dress like a schoolteacher?” Veronica pranced around her bedroom in a thong with a matching red bra. Her long blonde hair flowed down her back in an unruly mane of waves and curls.

“Because I *am* a schoolteacher.” I sat on her bed as she walked into her closet. “And I’m not going out to find a date. I already have one.”

“Sure, but you dressed like that before you and Link even got together.” Her voice floated out of her closet and into her bedroom. “You dress like your mom.” She cursed quietly, then poked her head out of the closet. “I’m sorry. That was stupid. I was just trying to make you laugh. You know I always thought Freesia had a great sense of style, perfect for an older dame like her.”

“It’s okay.” My mother, Freesia, had passed a year ago from cancer, and my father just six months after. He’d always been so tangled up in her, their love one for the storybooks, that he seemed to fade a little more each day after her funeral. One cold fall day, he disappeared, too.

I’d mourned them in my own way, and I still thought of them every day. My mom’s green thumb was the main reason I became interested in plants when I was a child. Link and Veronica had been my support system since their passing. Veronica’s worried eyes spurred me to add, “Mom did have her own brand of style. Cornered the market on vegetable-print scarves.”

Relief washed over her face, and she ducked back into the closet. “She was a one-of-a-kind.”

“No doubt.” I stared out at the fading sunlight over the tops of the buildings across the street. Veronica and I had been roommates in college,

though she focused on partying more than anything else. After a few fights over missing food and her late night booty calls, we'd managed to become best friends. Once we graduated, she'd moved to the city to work as an editorial assistant at Vogue while I settled in at Trenton.

She reappeared wearing a short black dress with slits along the waist on either side. I glanced down at my modest cream top, gray skirt, and black flats.

"Yeah, are you sure you don't want to change?"

"I'm sure." I lay back on her bed and followed the ducts of the heating and cooling system with my eyes. "You're going to freeze your lady bits off in that outfit."

"It's Friday night, and I want to have some fun after we get done with Link and his pals." She bent over and zipped up some stiletto-heeled boots. "I'm still single, ready to mingle. How are things with Link, anyway?"

"They're fine." I drummed my fingers on my stomach.

"Fine?" She sat next to me. "That's what people say when I ask them how their trip to pick up dry-cleaning went, not what you should say when I'm asking about your boyfriend."

Guilt cascaded through me. "I meant they're great. Things are going well at his job, and we spend time together whenever we can. He's been really patient with me on the whole sex thing, so that's good."

"Why are you still holding out?" She lay next to me, both of us staring at the ceiling.

"I don't know." I shrugged.

"Don't you want to do it?"

"Yes. We've gotten pretty hot and heavy a few times. He's gorgeous and kind..."

"But? There's definitely a but in there." She grabbed my hand and laced our fingers together. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong per se. I just don't want to make a mistake. If I take that final step, I feel like he'll turn up the pressure on me moving to the city and giving up my job at Trenton."

"That's a valid concern." She squeezed my fingers. "Once he gets a hit of that pussy, he'll want it all the time."

I laughed. "Thanks, V. I don't know what's wrong with me. I guess I'm just being too cautious." There was no way I was going to tell her about Sebastian. Though she was hiding it, she never cared too much for Link. Any

possibility—even one as remote as Sebastian—would flip her busybody switch.

“You do you. If you’re not ready, then he can wait. He’s done a good job so far.”

“Right. Do you think he’s going to get mad about the Amazon trip?” I’d already told Veronica all about it. We talked at least twice a week and texted constantly. She’d encouraged me to fill out the expedition forms and return them so that I’d be all set to make my dream come true.

“Maybe, but if he loves you, then he’ll want you to go.”

Do you want him to love you? I swatted the unwanted thought away. Of course I wanted it. “I’ll talk it over with him tonight.”

“Good. Winter break will be here before you know it. I can’t wait to go shopping and buy all the shorty-shorts in this city for you to wear on your tropical vacay.”

I snorted. “I’ll be working the entire time. Maybe climbing trees, maybe providing analysis on the ground. And have I mentioned all the bugs? I’m not sure shorty-shorts are a wise choice.”

“Wrong.” She sat up. “Shorty-shorts are always the perfect choice.”

“Would it do any good for me to argue?”

“None.” She slapped my thigh. “Now let’s get going. I need liquor in these veins stat.”



The Slush Bar was already buzzing by the time Veronica and I walked in. Only one block from Link’s office building, the spot was perfect for after-work drinks. Patrons sat on benches along the mirrored walls and at the high-top tables scattered through the dark space. Music bumped and whined in the

background to a techno beat. The bar was crowded, but Link waved us over to where he and Hal were stationed.

Link pulled me into his arms, his familiar aftershave washing over me. “I feel like it’s been months since I’ve seen you.” His hands roved to my ass and squeezed.

I jumped and stared up into his eyes. “Are you drunk?”

“Nah.” He pointed to a stack of empty shot glasses on the bar. “Just a little pre-gaming before you ladies arrived.” He glanced over to Veronica. “Nice to see you.”

“Sure.”

“Holy smokes.” Hal grinned. “Who do we have here?” He gave Veronica a once-over.

“Nothing for you.” She slid past Link and whistled to the bartender.

“Spicy, I like it.” Hal slid his credit card to the bartender. “Whatever she wants, man.”

Link leaned down to my neck, his warm lips leaving wet kisses. “Missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” I stood on my tiptoes to whisper in his ear. “Let me talk to Hal for a minute?”

“Right, the plan.” He slid his hands to my waist and dropped a final kiss on my lips. “I need to hit the head,” he announced far more loudly than necessary, then walked toward the back of the bar.

I slid onto the stool next to Hal.

He pried his gaze away from Veronica. “If I’d know you had friends like that, I would have insisted on taking you all for drinks a lot sooner.”

I couldn’t tell if it was a compliment, so I just smiled and nodded. Veronica slid a cocktail in front of me—something in a martini glass with curls of lemon and orange hanging along the sides.

“How are things at Trenton? Did you tell Mint I said hi?” He yanked down his wide tie and undid the button at his thick throat.

“I’m glad you mentioned him. Can I ask you something?” I sipped my drink. It wasn’t bad, just a bit tart.

“Shoot.” He clinked his lowball glass to mine.

I decided to cut to the chase. “Has anything changed over the past few months? Maybe with Mint’s parents?”

He set his glass down before taking a drink, then twisted it in a circle. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” I kept my tone light. “Just anything going on at home.”

“No.” He took a big swallow, then held up his finger to order another.

I leaned closer, though I didn’t enjoy getting in his space. “I was just curious. Mint is a particular favorite of mine, and I want to make sure he’s getting the best education possible at Trenton.”

He smiled, though the look was strained, and shook his head. “No, nothing I know of. Everything’s fine at home.”

“Okay. I was just curious.”

He fumbled his glass. “I mean, his parents are busy. My brother is out of the country a lot. So, Rhonda gets left alone here in the city.” His wide cheeks started to flush, and understanding dawned in my mind. Hal and Mint’s mother must have been having an affair.

He looked away. “Why do you ask? Did he say something?” His fingers tightened around his glass.

“No.” I leaned back. “I’m probably being over-protective. I sometimes go overboard when looking out for students. Sort of an occupational hazard for me.”

“Right.” He seemed to relax. “Yeah, Mint’s fine. Don’t worry about him.”

I sipped my drink. Mint must have found out somehow, which led to his falling grades and bad attitude.

Link reappeared and clapped Hal on the back. “Let’s get another round.”

Hal’s mood lightened, and he drained his glass. “I’m all for it.”

CAMILLE TURNED TO SPEAK with the blonde she'd come in with, both of them easily the prettiest pair in the entire bar. The blonde was tall, leggy, and wearing a dress that didn't leave much to the imagination. I ignored her and focused on the real prize. Camille wore a demure skirt and top, nothing as flashy as her dress at the gala. Even so, the top hugged the curves of her breasts, the narrowing of her waist, and the flare of her hips.

Link ran his hands along her waist, and bloodlust darkened my vision. Why had I come here? When I'd overheard that moron Hal bragging about going for drinks with Link and his girl, I wanted to shake him and demand the information of where Camille would be and when. Instead, all I had to do was wait for him to give all the details about the bar and their plans during his loud boasting. I'd left work early and claimed a seat toward the back of dark bar, which gave me an excellent view.

I catalogued every move she made, from the way she pulled her hair over one shoulder to the slight jut of her hips when she favored her left foot. My need to possess her thrummed along with the steady beat of my heart, but I counseled patience. The trap was set and couldn't be sprung until the appointed time. So I had to wait. But time couldn't stop my growing obsession. I gave myself this little morsel of her until I could devour her completely. It would have to be enough.

But it wasn't. I watched her—a butterfly unaware of my web—as she disentangled herself from Link and made her way toward the restrooms at the back of the bar. She skirted past me, only a few feet away, and her eyes were troubled. I needed to sit still, to meld into the crowd of social drinkers and

drunks. Instead, I stood and followed her into the back hallway.

I caught the flutter of her cream blouse as the ladies' room door closed. Leaning against the wall, I pulled my phone from my pocket and waited. I typed a message to my secretary about my father's upcoming trip to the Pacific Northwest, but my true attention was focused on the door that separated me from my prize.

The door opened and she stepped out. About to walk past me, she paused. "Sebastian?"

I glanced up from my phone and smiled. "Hello..." I let the word trail off, as if I was having trouble placing her.

She didn't miss a beat. "Camille, from the gala."

"Right." I shook my head. "Sorry about that. It's been a long day."

"No worries." She stepped closer as a pair of women in short skirts pushed past us and into the restroom. "What brings you here?"

"I was supposed to meet a friend, but he had to cancel at the last minute." Playing to sympathy had always resulted in positive outcomes. "Since I was already at the bar, I figured I'd have a drink and call it a night."

"Do you want to sit with us at the bar?"

Yes, I want to keep a hold on you. "No, I couldn't impose."

"It's not imposing, unless you don't want to socialize with employees or something. Link and Hal are with my friend Veronica and me. I'd understand if that wasn't your thing." She shrugged, then squeezed my forearm. "But I'm certain we'd all love to have you."

Her touch was just what I needed. The devil inside me roared to life, greedy for more contact from the angel standing in front of me.

"Well." I drew out the word as if this were a tough decision for me. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips as she stared up at me, doe-eyed and completely unaware of the danger I posed.

"Come on. Let's get a drink." She tugged my arm, and I let her pull me toward the bar.

We maneuvered past several people, and I enjoyed the view of Camille turning her hips to slide through the crowd ahead of me. She was like a Christmas gift that needed to be unwrapped and enjoyed. I'd take my time with her when the moment came.

Link saw me first, his mouth turning down at the corners as his eyes deadened. He plastered his fake as hell smile on his face to try and hide it. Unlike Camille, he sensed the threat.

“Sebastian, what are you doing here?” He held his hand out and we shook, his grip telling me that he wanted supremacy. He would never get it. I had an inch and maybe twenty pounds on him, and I would fight dirty.

“Just getting a drink before heading home.”

“He was meeting a friend who ditched.” Camille leaned into Link, and he slid a hand to her waist. Touching *my* property right in front of me.

“Mr. Lindstrom.” Hal’s meaty palm met mine.

“Hal.”

“Hello there, tall, dark, and handsome.” The blonde spun away from the bar and eyed me like a hungry predator.

“Veronica.” Camille’s sweet voice turned stern. “This is Sebastian, Link and Hal’s *boss*.”

“What are you drinking?” Veronica held up one finger, and the bartender walked right over.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having.” I smiled, feigning interest as Link stared daggers at me. I needed to throw him off, make him think my interest lay elsewhere.

Veronica nodded. “Good choice.”

“I think I’m going to call it a night.” Hal stood and retrieved his credit card from the bartender.

“So soon?” Link clapped him on the back. “We just got here.”

Hal glanced to Camille and signed his tab in a hurry. *Interesting*. “I’ve got a tennis lesson set first thing tomorrow. I forgot about it.”

“You? Tennis?” Link popped a toothpick between his lips. “Seriously?”

“Yep.” Hal tucked his wallet into his back pocket and gave a small wave. “Nice to see you ladies. And gents, I’ll catch you at the office on Monday.” He hurried away through the crowd.

“What was that all about?” Link claimed Hal’s seat at the bar and pulled Camille between his thighs.

“Tennis, I guess.” Camille answered a little too quickly, then took a gulp from her martini glass.

“That guy playing tennis?” Link rested his fingers along Camille’s hips. “Not a chance.”

I followed the movement of his fingertips, the slight pressure he exerted on her. A vision of him with a knife protruding from his neck made me smile.

Link returned my grin. “You imagining him on the court too?”

“Yes, funny.” I took a high ball glass from Veronica and sipped at the

smoky liquor inside. It burned on the way down, but I'd always enjoyed pain. It was one of the few things that made me feel human.

Camille set her half-full glass down. "I think I've already had enough. That thing was strong."

"You kidding?" Veronica took the drink and tossed it back, a twisted lemon rind dangling from the side. She slapped the glass down and leaned one elbow against the bar, her eyes roving me. "Tell me more about being the boss."

Flirting was not a particular skill in my repertoire, mainly because it required me to appear warm and interested in people who bored me. But, to get Link off my scent and keep Camille in my sights, it was a necessary evil.

I adopted what I hoped was a devilish smile. "I enjoy taking charge, if that's what you're asking."

"Meow. Aren't these uncomfortable?" Veronica slid her hands up my tie. "Wouldn't you like me to get it off?"

I cycled through my possible responses and settled on: "Hit me with your best shot."

She licked her lips and worked her fingers into the perfect double Windsor at my throat.

Camille hissed, "Link's boss."

Veronica made quick work of the top button, her fingertips dancing along my skin. There was no spark, no attraction like there had been with Camille. I didn't need to own Veronica, didn't feel the need to leave my marks on her tan skin.

"Much better." Veronica smiled up at me, her red pout begging for attention I wouldn't be giving.

"Thank you."

Link nuzzled into Camille's hair and whispered in her ear. She shifted to her right foot as her skin flushed crimson.

I snap up the empty martini glass, smash it on the bar, and jab the sharp end into his chest. He screams. Blood gurgles from his wound, coating my hand with crimson. Camille looks at me with horror as I smear Link's blood across my face, then pull her in for a kiss.

"Sebastian?"

I heard my name and blinked twice. "Yeah?"

"Where'd you go there, buddy?" Link stood, taking Camille's hand in his. "Just thinking of good times."

“I know what you mean.” He nodded. “If you two don’t mind, I think I’d like to take Camille out for a quiet dinner.”

“Ditching already?” Veronica wrinkled her nose.

“I thought you were going clubbing?” Link pressed his lips to Camille’s hair as he spoke to Veronica.

He always had to touch her, and it was getting under my skin.

“Trying to get rid of me?” Veronica handed the bartender a nice tip.

“No.” Link’s hands said otherwise, roving along Camille’s waist and stomach. The fucker was torturing me. “I thought you had plans. And I was under the impression Camille wanted to spend some time with me tonight.”

Camille paused. “Actually, Link’s right. We’ve got some things to discuss.” She shot Veronica a look that I couldn’t decipher.

Though I was in the dark, Veronica picked up on the cue. “Right. Since Link wants to get our darling Camille alone, do you have plans, Sebastian?” Veronica hooked her arm through mine.

Fuck. I wanted nothing to do with Veronica, but Link had already staked his claim on Camille for the evening. I couldn’t tip my hand, not this early. I would have to let her go.

“I’m afraid I have a pile of work to get started on tonight, so please accept a raincheck.” I patted her hand and slid it off me.

“Your loss.” She leaned over and kissed Camille on the cheek. “Text me later.”

“Okay.” Camille hugged her friend, who turned and sauntered out of the bar, leaving several men gawking in her wake.

Link stood and helped Camille with her coat. I marked each point of contact, determined to cover over every spot where he touched her with my own firm hands.

“Can you get us a taxi?” Camille squeezed Link’s bicep.

He gave me a wary look, but agreed. “Sure thing. I’ll be outside. Good to see you, Sebastian.”

“Same here.”

Once he was out of earshot, Camille leaned closer, her sweet scent dulling my senses. “Sorry about this. I’d love to have dinner with you and Veronica, but I have some stuff to discuss with Link about Christmas break. And he might be, um...” She chewed on her thumbnail. “I don’t know how he’ll react.”

“No apology needed.”

“Sorry if that was TMI.”

“TMI?”

“Too much information.” She gave a wry smile.

“Not at all.”

“Well.” She glanced toward the front door. “I’d better go.”

I caught her hand in mine and pulled it to my lips, kissing her knuckles gently. “Always a pleasure, Camille.”

Her cheeks pinked, and someone elbowed past me to claim our vacated seats. I released her hand, and she backed away.

My heartburn kicked in again. It was becoming a real problem. I had a stash of Tums in my penthouse for when these little episodes hit, though they didn’t seem to do much good.

“I guess I’ll see you around.” She turned and maneuvered through the crowd.

I closed my fist, retaining all the heat from her small hand as I watched her disappear. “Yes, you will.”

VERONICA'S APARTMENT WAS EMPTY when I arrived back there after a long dinner with Link. I dropped my bag on the table next to the door and headed to her bedroom. Sinking onto her queen sized mattress, I let out a long sigh, grateful for the relative quiet.

Link had taken the news of my Amazon trip as well as I could have hoped. He'd been disappointed, complaining that it was time for me to move to the city. So sincere and caring, he'd meant well, but I wanted to do a little more exploring before I settled down.

I turned and buried my face in the pillow when I remembered how he'd almost begged me to come home with him. His hands on my body, the way he crushed his lips against mine—it was like he was trying to cage me. My body reacted, but not to the point of losing control. I couldn't figure out what was holding me back. Link was perfect: great job, smart, handsome, and patient. So why wouldn't I give him what he wanted? I didn't have an answer.

I'd ended up back where I'd begun my evening, worrying myself to pieces while lying in Veronica's bed. A set of keys jangled in the lock, and the click clack of Veronica's heels met my ears.

"You back already?" I rolled over and looked down the hallway.

"Yeah, I wasn't feeling the scene tonight. Too many hipsters are invading further uptown. Skinny jeans everywhere, and not on the women." She made a gagging noise and flopped on the bed next to me. "How did Link handle the Amazon news?"

"Pretty well. He wasn't thrilled, but he eventually said he understood."

“That doesn’t sound so great.” After unzipping her boots she tossed them to the foot of the bed.

“It wasn’t at first, but by the end of the night, he was asking me to go home with him.”

“But you didn’t.” She threaded her bra out from beneath her dress.

“No.”

“Hmm.” She settled in next to me.

“What?”

“I don’t know. I just think maybe you and Link will benefit from being separated over Christmas.”

“How so?”

“I assume you aren’t going to have very much phone access, if any. You’ll be completely cut off from each other. If, when you get back, you *still* can’t take the plunge.” She turned to look at me. “I think that means that he’s not the one. On the other hand, if you run back into his arms the moment you step off the plane, then you’ll know he’s it.”

“Based on your scientific analysis, if I have sex with him the day I get back from the expedition, he’s my one true love, huh?”

“Yes. Scientific. I’ll tell you another fact, too. If Sebastian the boss had asked me to bend over and show him my Brazilian, I would have done it in a heartbeat.”

Sebastian had been flitting around the edges of my mind all night while I was at dinner with Link. When Veronica had made a pass at him, an unusual sense of jealousy had trickled through me. And, if I were being honest, I was relieved when he’d turned her down for the evening.

“He seems sort of private.” I shrugged. “I only met him last weekend at the Lindstrom Gala. He was nice there, but reserved for the most part. We danced.”

“There’s something about him. I can’t put my finger on it, but I can assure you he’s the worst sort of trouble.” She stretched her arms over her head and closed her eyes. “The kind I like.”

“Link doesn’t care for him.”

“Of course he doesn’t. Sebastian stared at you every chance he got. I only hit on him to take some of the heat off Link. I could feel the testosterone churning between them.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I almost put my thumbnail between my teeth, but stopped at the last second.

“No, it’s not. They were both keyed in to you. I can sense these things. For one, even when I was up against Sebastian’s rock hard body, his cock didn’t seem even a little bit interested. Odd. For two, he got sort of—I don’t know—twitchy when Link was getting handsy with you.”

“Maybe he’s anti-PDA.”

“Or maybe he wants to be the one feeling you up.”

“I think your imagination is getting out of hand. This was only the second time I’ve ever seen the man.” Despite my words, I heard the ring of truth in what Veronica was saying. I’d felt it, too.

“It doesn’t take a week-long interview to get the hots for someone.” She turned over and sighed, her familiar whiskey-breath oddly comforting.

“You’re about to fall asleep in your makeup.”

“That’s okay. I got this ridiculously expensive crap from Nordstrom’s that I’ll put on in the morning. Make me look five years younger in fifteen minutes. Best part was that I used Dad’s credit card.”

Veronica and her father had a rough relationship, given that he’d left her and her mother to run off with his secretary when Veronica was eleven. Once the secretary had left for a younger man, Veronica’s father showed back up, wanting to be in her life. Veronica agreed, but exacted monetary vengeance whenever she saw fit.

“Does he know about that purchase?”

She smiled, eyes still closed. “He won’t get the credit card bill till the fifteenth.”

“You’re a piece of work.”

“Thanks.”

I snorted. “I don’t know if I was complimenting you or not.”

“Thanks anyway, bitch.”

She could always make me smile.

A slight snore stuck in her throat as she fell asleep. I rose and washed my face, then threw on my sleep shirt before crawling back into bed.

She roused a bit. “Stay away from him though.”

“Who?” I clicked the lamp off, shrouding the room in darkness.

“Tall, dark, and deadly.”

“Sebastian?”

But she was already asleep again, her snores sawing through the quiet.

ANXIETY COURSED THROUGH ME as Anton wove through New York City traffic toward my high-rise penthouse. I'd become more and more of a wreck as the days passed and I didn't have any contact with my prize. But I did have something that could take the edge off, if only Anton would do his fucking job and get me home.

My land attorney droned through the speaker phone. "The acreage in the upper basin isn't for sale. We've tried at length to get Mr. Sartain to negotiate with us, but he wants to keep the land and raise sheep. Won't even talk about splitting up the parcel and selling the wooded parts, and definitely won't entertain a lease. He's resolute in his refusal." His voice shook the slightest bit. Telling me "no" was never a good thing, and like any well-trained dog, he knew the price for disobedience.

"Resolute in his refusal?" I kept my tone even as Anton turned onto Fifth Avenue.

"Yes sir."

I could imagine the sheen of sweat on the attorney's pasty brow, the dread in his eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, doesn't Lindstrom own the tract to the southwest of Mr. Sartain?"

"Yes sir."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and spoke slowly so he could follow. "Is there not a narrow river there flowing from our property to his? The Green Branch?"

"Yes sir." No clarity, no light bulb going off. Just a dead affirmation from him.

“Would you say, Travis, that he relies on that river to water his sheep?”

“Yes sir. Oh, I see.” *Fucking finally.* “I’ll make some calls. Surely we can divert the river for a while. I’m not sure if we’ll need permits or what, but—”

“Permits?” I wasn’t entirely sure that I wouldn’t backhand the man if he were sitting in front of me. “Block the fucking river. Starve him out. If he complains, tell him it’s a beaver problem. Tell him it’s the dry season even if it’s pouring rain. Tell him we’re working on it. I don’t care what excuse you use.”

“Yes sir. He’ll file suit over it, though. I just wanted you to know that before we started down this road.”

“Of course I know that!” I took a deep breath as Anton pulled up in front of my building. “His sheep will be dead and gone before he can even get so much as an injunction against us. Cut the water. When he comes to the table, get me a lease on his timber. I want it now, and I want it when the next stand comes of age thirty years from now.”

“Yes sir. I’ll handle it as soon as—”

I clicked off the call and climbed from the car. My doorman greeted me as I hurried past and toward the elevator deck. I felt like a bomb ticking down to its last seconds. The elevator opened, and I used my key to access the penthouse level. Standing close to the silver doors, I sighed with relief when they finally opened onto my living room. The lights of Central Park shone through the night, and the skyscrapers across the way gleamed in the moonlight.

I tossed my jacket and tie on a side chair and turned left, past the kitchen and into what was supposed to be a guest room. Flat screen monitors hummed with soft life, though their screens were black. Sitting down in my leather chair, I tapped a key on the laptop and watched as my obsession came to life.

“Fuck.” She was at Link’s place. A million tiny bugs crawled beneath my skin as I saw them sitting together on his couch, his arm around her shoulders. They were watching a movie, a discarded popcorn bowl sitting on Link’s coffee table. His apartment was easy enough to have wired. A little cash in his super’s palm got my men inside with cameras and microphones. Camille’s cottage near Trenton was even easier.

Was it wrong? Yes. Did I give a shit? No.

I settled in, staring at her as she smiled or laughed at something she saw on screen. She was so expressive, her eyes telling the story for me such that

there was no need to watch the movie. I followed along with her emotions, matching my expressions to hers.

For over an hour, I simply stared, immersing myself in her. Ignoring the dolt beside her was easy until he decided to make idiotic sounds with his mouth.

“Why do you do that?” Link paused the movie and grabbed the empty popcorn bowl.

“Do what?” Once free from his grasp, she leaned on the sofa’s arm, finally looking relaxed.

He walked toward the kitchen. “You sort of fidget whenever the bad guy’s on screen.”

“No I don’t.”

I clicked a button so I had them both in view. Grabbing another bag of popcorn, he popped it into the microwave.

“You so do. Remember Avengers? Loki?”

She shrugged. “Not really.”

“You fidgeted then, too. The Joker—I’m talking Heath Ledger *and* the Jared Leto one. Fidget.”

“No I didn’t.” She turned to glare at him.

“Ramsay Bolton, *Game of Thrones*? Fidget.”

“Okay, now I know that one’s a lie.” She shook her head. “I wanted him dead just like everyone else.”

“But you fidgeted.”

“Maybe I was itchy.” She turned and settled back into the sofa as the soft pops of the corn tinkled through my speakers.

I leaned forward, touching her image as she denied her attraction to black hats, villains, and demented devils. Her white knight was onto something for once in his useless life. She was made for me, just as I’d been fashioned from the darkest materials for her. Her light would temper my shadow.

“That serial killer in *The Fall*.”

“Oh, please. Jamie Dornan. That was Jamie Dornan. You were probably fidgeting over him, too.”

He laughed and poured the fresh popcorn in the bowl before strutting back over to her. Because that’s what he was, a strutter. No fucking substance.

Sitting, he flicked the movie back on and crowded her again. She pretended not to mind, but I knew she wanted his touch about as much as I

wanted a stint in a padded room.

The rest of the movie went along without incident—until he started kissing her neck. Fire ripped through my mind, setting reason alight and torching my self-control. He ran his hand along her waist then moved up to cup her breast through her shirt.

She rested one hand on his arm and closed her eyes as he kissed her, but she wasn't there. Not really. She was here with me. His touch was just a placeholder. I told myself that on repeat.

My father had taught me little rhymes when I was a child. They were meant to remind me how to be human when people were watching me or when I felt nervous.

Smile when they smile. It'll take you miles.

When in doubt, wait it out. Emotions will always show what they're about.

I hummed the simple singsongs to try and calm my rage. It didn't seem to be working, not when Link was pushing Camille down onto the couch and covering her with his body.

"What did I do wrong?" I replayed the conversation I'd had with my grownup neighbor over again in my head. "She was smiling, so I thought maybe I should laugh." I kicked at the grass as the summer sun beat down on me.

Dad knelt to get to eye level. "I know. Sometimes emotions can be confusing. You have to look for context, Sebastian. The rhymes aren't enough anymore. People are too complex, and you need to understand the nuances now that you're older."

"Like what?" I'd done what I'd been taught. What was the big deal?

He shook his head, his eyes tired. "The nuance of your conversation with Mrs. Penny was that she was discussing her daughter who died last year."

"And she smiled." I nodded as vindication welled in me. "So that means I should smile or maybe laugh, right?"

He squeezed my shoulders and squinted his eyes. "No, son. No. She was smiling because she was thinking of a fond memory of Rose. But, the truest emotion, the one beneath the smile, is grief. When someone we love dies, we feel sad."

"Like when Mom died?" I'd felt more confused than anything. One day, she just didn't get out of bed. Dad had told me about death, but I didn't realize it was real. Not until Mom left.

“Yes, like that.” His mouth turned down at the corners, and his eyes watered. I recognized his sadness easily, so why was Mrs. Penny’s so hard to see?

He tilted his head back, then returned his gaze to mine. “You have to look beneath the surface. Find what’s true in a person. See what they need, what they expect from you. That’s what makes you human. Trying to connect. Does that make sense?”

No, not in the least, but I decided to stow away his words until later, when I’d have time to think about them. “I think so.”

“Good.” He stood, his shadow blocking out the sun. “The next time Mrs. Penny mentions Rose—”

“I won’t laugh.”

He patted my shoulder. “That’s a start.”

I stared at Camille, looking for her nuances. She spoke to me, her body, her eyes—all of her. I could read her, no guesswork needed. Perhaps that was what drew me to her in the first place, the way she telegraphed her emotions directly to me, as if we were connected by a thin, invisible wire.

Link was still on top of her, his mouth on hers. I rubbed my sweaty palms down my pants and considered calling him and making up a work issue. Anything to get him away from her. But I didn’t have to. My Camille must have somehow sensed my anger, because she pressed against Link’s shoulders.

He pulled back. “Would you like it better if I was more of a bad guy?” Frustration colored his words.

“Where did that come from?” She looked stricken. “No, of course not. You’re the best man I’ve ever met.”

“Then why do you keep pushing me away?” He kissed her again, still too gently. She didn’t want polite. My Camille wanted the sort of darkness only I could give her.

Link could never be anything other than a moron in a white hat. No matter how hard he tried, he wouldn’t be able to save Camille from me, because, in the deep recesses of her heart, she *craved* me. The fair maiden wanted the monster more than she needed the knight.

She shook her head and pushed on his shoulders again. He sat back and pulled her up so she sat next to him. His back stiffened in what I knew to be anger, but he kept his voice too low for me to hear. I smirked as I thought about how blue his balls must have been.

She crossed her arms over her chest in a defensive movement. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He shifted his hips—and his useless boner—away from her. “I shouldn’t have pressured you.”

Pussy.

They spoke a little more, then she stood with a resigned air that told me she was leaving for the night. During the few weeks that I’d been watching, I’d been pleasantly surprised each time she refused to sleep with Link. When we’d first met, I’d taken for granted that they were fucking, but I’d been wrong. It was as if Camille knew that she was waiting for me.

He walked her to the door, gave her one final kiss, and then watched her walk away. She would go to her friend Veronica’s apartment. I had it wired right along with everything else. Whenever Camille was in the city, she spent her nights there, so I needed to know what went on.

Link closed the door and leaned against it, then snaked a hand down his pants. He headed toward the living room and opened his laptop. I’d learned he had a particular thing for anime porn. True to form, he opened what seemed to be his all-time favorite wank flick—a big-breasted girl with anime eyes getting gang-banged by several different men. Cartoon bukkake coming right up.

I made a disgusted sound and flicked the screen off before his solo session got into full swing. He was a moron. If I had a girl like Camille, I’d masturbate to her every fucking night. No, actually, if I had a girl like Camille, I’d be eating her pussy like it was a competition and then shoving my cock deep inside her every chance I got.

I popped a Tums.

Link couldn’t close the deal because he wasn’t right for my girl. And so he was destined to spend his nights jerking it to cartoon characters while I fantasized about how perfect Camille would feel on my cock.

“DON’T FORGET TO WORK on your photosynthesis projects over the break. I want some groundbreaking science on my desk before the Christmas holi—” The bell rang, drowning out my voice, and the class rose in a wave of nervous energy.

My students fell into conversations about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday as they cleared the room. Mint lagged behind, his tie in a messy knot and his pants wrinkled. I’d wanted to talk with him about what I’d learned, but every time I tried to break through to him, he cracked wise or attempted a lukewarm come-on. Always deflecting.

I steeled myself for another attempt and strode up to his desk.

He shook his head and didn’t look at me. “Don’t start today. I can’t deal with it.”

“Mint, please. I only want to help you. You are so bright, and you could have an amazing future ahead of you, but not with the grades you’ve been getting this semester.” I edged closer. “You can talk to me, you know?”

He met my eyes, and for the first time I saw the vulnerable young man beneath his swagger. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“Because your future is important to me.”

He sank back into his seat and stared up at me. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re relentless?”

“Not lately.” I sat down in the desk opposite him, the wooden seat still warm from its last occupant. “What’s going on with you?”

He sighed, the sound far too heavy for a boy to carry. “I don’t want to go home for Thanksgiving.”

“Why not?”

He glanced to the door, perhaps weighing his opportunity for escape. I stayed silent, not wanting to spook him now that he'd finally opened up.

“My uncle will be there. And my dad. And my mom.” He grabbed a pencil and bounced it on the desk, the eraser making a small thud with each impact.

“And that's bad because...”

“Because my parents hate each other, and...” More pencil bouncing. “And because my uncle has been doing it with my mom.” His face flamed red. “I, um, I caught them. I went home for the weekend in October. His car was at the house. I walked in, heard noise, and saw them. They have no idea that I know. I left—walked out and haven't been back or spoken to Mom since.”

The bell rang again, and Dr. Potts' monotone floated through my classroom.

Mint shifted in his chair. “I guess I had this idea that my parents would start getting along again, the way they used to. Before my dad got his new job and went traveling all the time, we were a tight family. He used to take me fishing. And all three of us would go to the beach once a year. It was sort of like a ritual.” He gave a sad smile. “I even got irritated about going a couple of years ago, because I wanted to stay and party with my friends instead. That was the last year we went, and I spent the whole time sulking like an asshole. We're never in the same room anymore.” The eraser bouncing stopped. “And Uncle Hal is always sniffing around. Dad has no idea what his brother's been up to.”

I wanted to reach out and take his hand, but that sort of contact might give him the wrong idea. “Carrying a secret like that is a heavy burden.”

“Yeah.” He blew out his breath in a low, steady exhale. “I want to tell my dad, but...” He shrugged. “I don't want my mom to leave. She's always been there for me, way more than Dad.” He glowered. “I know I sound like a pussy when I say that.”

“No, you don't.” I squeezed his shoulder before folding my hands in my lap again. “I know you don't want to believe this, but you're still a young man who needs his parents. Heck, I'm twenty-four, and I wish I could tell my mom all my problems.”

A ghost of a smile traced his lips. “Twenty-four? You're older than I thought.”

I laughed. “Thanks.” I couldn’t decide if that was a good thing, but it didn’t matter. He’d finally opened up and given me a chance to help him, and I’d count that as a win.

He sobered. “Do you think I should tell Dad what I saw?”

This was the hard part. “No, but I do think you should tell your mom.”

He blanched. “I can’t talk to her about that.”

“I know it sounds awful. But the guilt you’ve been having, the pain her actions have caused—she would want to know about it. I can tell she loves you from the way you talk about her.”

“Yeah, she’s been calling, but I’ve been avoiding her. I sent her a few texts to get her to back off, but I know she’s hurt and doesn’t understand why.” He rubbed his eyes.

“This is my new assignment for you for the Thanksgiving holiday. Sit your mother down and have the talk with her, okay?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“You can. I promise. You don’t have to get into details. Just give her the general picture and see where it goes. No matter how she reacts, you won’t feel the same burden that you do now.” I motioned toward his biology textbook. “You can’t focus with this weighing on you. I need you to work harder than ever before for the rest of this school year. Your grades have to make a drastic improvement for you to get into a good university.”

“I know.” Fatigue dulled his words.

“Healing this rift with your mom is the way to do it.” I gave in and squeezed his hand before standing. “You’ll see.”

“All right.” He rose and shouldered his backpack. “I’m going to do it. Or, at least I’m going to try.”

“Good.” I walked to my desk and wrote down my cell on a piece of scratch paper. “If you need any moral support, give me a call or send a text.”

He smiled, some of his cockiness filtering back in. “I got the hot teacher’s number.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Mint—”

“Okay, okay. I’m kidding.” He hurried to the door, then paused. “But seriously, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He disappeared into the hallway, and I caught a “Hey, watch where you’re going!” from him before the door slid shut.

I wedged my thumbnail into the small space between my two front teeth,

worrying away at it. Giving students home life advice wasn't exactly in my job description, but then again I was supposed to mold them into decent human beings. I only hoped that my advice to Mint was solid.

A knock sounded, and Gregory entered, a too-big grin on his face and no mail in his arms.

"Why are you smiling like th—"

The door opened wider, and Sebastian strode in, his emerald eyes finding mine as soon as he stepped into view.

Gregory mouthed "*he wants me*" as he stopped at the edge of my desk. "And this is a fine example of one of our classrooms. Ms. Briarlane teaches biology, with a particular interest in botany, and also sits on our scholarship board."

"I believe we've met." Sebastian offered his hand, and I took it in a daze.

"Hi."

Gregory looked back and forth between us and cleared his throat. "You two know each other?"

"Yes. I, um, I mean, this is Sebastian Lindstrom, Link's boss."

Recognition fired in Gregory's eyes. "The one you danced with?"

Sebastian smiled and gripped my hand a little tighter. "You've been talking about me?"

I wanted to crawl under my desk and stay there until the last bell rang. "No, not really." I glared hate fire at Gregory.

"It's all right." Sebastian's gaze flickered to my lips. "I found it to be quite memorable too."

His scent, the same sophisticated mix of sandalwood and leather from the gala, ignited the memory of what it felt like to be in his arms. My heart stutter-stepped forward, then took off as if it were running a race.

"Whew." Gregory fanned himself with his hand. "We need to see about getting the heat fixed in here. It's on overdrive."

I pulled my hand from Sebastian's as a knowing look played across his face. Did he realize how off balance he threw me with just a few words?

"You won me over with your little speech about helping the less fortunate students via scholarships. I intend to donate to the need-based fund, and the headmistress insisted I come for a visit." He ran his hand down the smooth front of his charcoal-gray suit coat. "And Gregory has been kind enough to give me the tour."

"My pleasure." Gregory smiled up at him, clearly smitten.

“That’s very generous of you.” My tongue began to cooperate, barely. “We appreciate any funds we can get.”

“So this is your domain?” Sebastian walked to the window, the afternoon sunlight flowing around him and casting his tall shadow far along the floor. “And these plants are yours?” He inspected the row of sprouts in the window.

Gregory made a “go on” motion with his hands, mischief in his eyes. “*Sell it,*” he hissed.

I followed Sebastian and pointed to the first row of green shoots. “These are a hybrid tomato species that my students worked on. They’re a particularly special variety created right here in my lab.”

“What’s special about them?”

“The hybrid is between an heirloom variety known for its sweet taste and a modern variety known for bigger fruits and stronger vines. I gave my students the choice of having sweeter tomatoes that ran smaller, bigger but not as sweet, or medium-sized tomatoes crossed with another type of tomato known for insect and fungus resistance.”

He stroked his index finger down one of the bright green leaves and held my gaze. “So they chose the sweeter version?”

My voice tried to die in my throat, but I continued despite his direct stare. “They did. And based on some creative hybridization, they chose traits for sweetness and hardiness. I was surprised by what they came up with.” I smiled. “And pleased. The proof will be in the tomatoes these plants produce in our small greenhouse.”

“They sound like smart kids.”

If I could have puffed my chest out with pride without looking like a peacock, I would have. “They are. Once I get back from my trip over Christmas break, we’ll transfer them to individual plantings and record each step of their progress.”

A shadow passed across his eyes. “Your trip?”

“Oh, I got accepted on an expedition to the Amazon.” Even more pride seeped into my voice, along with a touch of excitement. “I’ll be leaving right when school lets out for the holiday.”

“Sounds exciting.” He smiled and, for some reason, a shiver shot down my spine. “I imagine you’ll learn a lot on your trip, though I hope you’ll be safe while you’re out there.”

“I will. I’ve spoken to the lead scientist, Dr. Williams, a couple of times by phone, and he seems competent to lead the group, though he’s not as into

the botanical aspects as I would have expected.” In fact, he’d shied away from talking about the specifics of the expedition, but that was likely because he had spotty cell service and could only talk for a few minutes at a time.

“Perhaps he’s leaving those areas up to you?”

I shrugged. “I hope he gives me plenty of latitude to follow my instincts.”

“Just be safe.” One corner of his lips quirked. “Keep an eye out for predators.”

“I will. There will be security for us at our camp site and in the forest, according to Dr. Williams.”

“I’m glad.” He tucked my hair behind my ear in a too-familiar motion. “Wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.” His fingers paused at the sensitive spot right below my ear.

His touch started a chain reaction. Desire sparked inside me and flowed out to the edges of my senses. My stomach tightened, and I wondered what happened to all the air in the room. His pupils expanded, the black swallowing up the indulgent green until only a slight rim of color remained. There was something animalistic in it, as well as the way he loomed over me. My breath quickened as he let his fingers trail down the side of my neck to my shoulder.

I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I got the acute feeling that some part of me had just cheated on Link. The part that longed for Sebastian’s fingers to rove farther, to explore more than was allowed on school grounds. His cool smile hid a darkness, one that I could feel seeping from him and caressing me with terrible promises.

Gregory cleared his throat. “We need to finish the tour and get back to the headmistress’ office.”

The spell broke, and I stepped away from Sebastian.

“It was a pleasure, as always.” He gave me a small nod before turning to follow Gregory, who gave me a wide-eyed look before disappearing down the hall.

I sank into the chair at my desk as my door clicked closed. My heart still thundered, beating to a frenetic rhythm. How did he do that to me with nothing more than a simple touch?

Veronica’s warning whispered through my mind. “*Stay away from him.*” Maybe she was right.

MY HANDS BALLED INTO fists as I watched Link kiss her goodbye on her front stoop. Him and his fucking pink Polo shirt and khaki pants with the pleats, daring to touch my property as if it were his. My need to annihilate him rose up and crashed down like a heavy ocean wave. I was still toying with the idea of killing him, though I'd decided against it...mostly. The enjoyment I'd get from watching him squirm would be worth it. What little joy I'd found in my life usually came at the suffering of someone else.

Anton loaded Camille's bags into the back of the limo as I waited impatiently for my new toy to arrive. Link finally released her, and she strode down the sidewalk of the small cottage only a few hundred yards from the entrance to Trenton. Her hips swayed in her simple jeans, and her jacket hid most of her curves. I almost salivated at the thought of having her naked and under my control.

She was so close, but then he called something to her that made her step falter, and she stopped. Impatience swelled in me, right along with curiosity. What had he said?

She winced, then turned and waved. Her response must not have been what he expected, because he crumpled a bit as she reached the car. I grinned and imagined how heartbroken he'd be in a few weeks when he received the report of her fatal accident in the Amazon.

I turned my head to look out the opposite window lest Link get a view of me as Anton opened the door. The car shifted, and a cold draft of air brought her sweet scent to me. Once Anton closed her door, I turned to her.

"Sebastian?" Her eyebrows shot up high on her forehead. "What are you

doing here?”

Anton got into the driver’s seat and pulled away from the curb. The trap was closing around my Camille, but she didn’t sense the danger. Fear didn’t pass across her eyes, only confusion.

“I’m close friends with Dr. Williams.” Only half a lie. I was well acquainted with Timothy, my servant who played Dr. Williams on the phone a few times. “So I figured I’d see you off.”

“Oh.” Her fingers tangled together in her lap and she fell silent for a moment. Then she pinned me with a sharp look. “Are you the reason I got invited to this expedition?”

I smiled. “You could say that.”

Her eyes brightened, her whole demeanor opening up to me. “That is so...oh my god...so *generous* of you!” She took my hand, her warmth flowing into me. I greedily accepted it, as if I were a vampire leeching away her life.

“Think nothing of it. I was impressed with your dedication and knowledge. It seemed only natural that I pull what strings I had to get you on the right path.” *The one leading to me.*

“This is too much, really.” She pulled her hand from mine. “Sorry about that.”

“You can touch me.”

Pink flared in her cheeks and she inspected the floor of the limo. “I just had no idea.” Her forehead wrinkled. “And I thought I got the spot on my own merit.”

“You did.” Pride was an emotion I actually understood. It was part of self-preservation, a series of protocols at the monstrous core of every human. “You are uniquely suited to this expedition. In fact, no one else will do.”

She pressed her palms to her cheeks. “I’m just blown away right now.”

“Because your dream is coming true?” I had no shame. Playing with my food and watching it bleed before I devoured it was nothing new.

“Yes. And you helped.” She turned her wide eyes back to me. “Why?”

“Like I said, I took a particular interest in you.”

“Does Link know?”

I gritted my teeth. His fucking name shouldn’t be on her lips. Only mine.

“No. I’m afraid he doesn’t know much of anything. Wouldn’t you agree?” He was a fool to ever let her out of his sight.

She cocked her head to the side, as if she hadn’t heard me correctly. “I,

um...”

Anton hit the freeway, heading away from the city and toward my estate on the southern edge of the Catskills.

She peered out the window and shook her head. “This isn’t the way to the airport.”

“No.” I loved this part. She could finally feel the web around her. Granted, I’d never kidnapped a woman before, but I’d sprung plenty of traps in my thirty-two years. None of them had been this high-stakes, and the thrill of it started a buzz in my veins.

“Where are we going?” She ran her fingertips down the glass and turned to me. “A different airport?”

“No.”

“Do we need to pick someone else up?” Her hopeful tone was still in place.

“No.”

She stared into my eyes, but she wouldn’t find any comfort there. Just me, a man dead set on possessing her.

“What’s going on?” She swallowed hard and glanced around. The fear that welled in her was sweeter than anything I’d ever tasted. It filled me, reminded me why I needed her. She made me feel, gave me life. I wanted to take every sensation from her, sample each one until I’d gorged myself on emotion.

Something she saw in my eyes had her shrinking back against the door. “Where are we going?”

“Does it matter?”

She winced, as if my voice cut her. “Yes. Please, what’s going on? Sebastian?” Her hand eased to her jacket pocket—the one where she kept her cell phone.

I grabbed her wrist and pinned it to the seat by her head. She gasped as I pulled her phone from her pocket and tucked it into mine.

She opened her mouth to scream.

“Shhh.” I wrapped my palm around her throat, giving just enough pressure so she knew I was serious. She dug her nails into the back of my hand, so I squeezed harder until she stopped. “All you need to know is that you belong to me.”

“What?” She tried to shake her head. “No.”

“You were always meant to be mine.”

“Please, let me go.” Her blue eyes watered.

“Never.” I loosened my grip just enough for her to breathe.

“You can’t do this.”

“It’s already done. You’re on a month-long trip to the Amazon. Very little cell service, if any. No one will know you’re missing until you fail to show back up in January.”

“What are you saying?” She fought the truth, but realization slowly dawned on her perfect face. A tear rolled down her right cheek. “Oh my god. You, you set this whole thing up.”

“Guilty.” I leaned forward and licked the sadness from her, the salty taste a tease on my tongue. “You’re even beautiful when you cry.”

A switch flipped inside her, disbelief turning into resistance. She tensed and launched against me. Her free hand struck harmlessly against my arm as she kicked and squirmed. A choked roar escaped her throat as she hit me with everything she had. The car rocked, but Anton kept on driving as instructed.

I held her in place, keeping steady pressure on her throat. I didn’t want to strangle her, not really, and I rather enjoyed the fight she put up. When she raked her nails across my cheek, I grinned and pressed my chest to her, pinning her as she struggled.

“Keep going.” I whispered in her ear.

Another roar and she arched her back, going wild to try and escape. She twisted and slammed her knee into mine. The pain rocketed along my leg as she kicked my shin, her ineffective tennis shoes failing to do any damage. Her nails raked across my scalp, and she seized my hair in her hand. Yanking with all her might, she pulled my mouth away from her ear and head-butted my nose.

“Fuck, this is fun.” I tasted blood, the warm rush spilling over my lips and dripping onto her white coat.

“Stop!” She shoved me, but I was unmoving.

“You’re mine. Your violence, your anger—all mine.”

A knot began to form on her forehead where she’d hit me. *Shit*. I didn’t want to hurt her. Not yet, anyway.

“Calm down.” I stared into her panicked eyes.

She struggled, still trying to escape my grasp. Soon enough, she’d understand that she couldn’t. But I could see that getting to that conclusion would take a lot of work, and I was more than ready for it. My cock had been hard from the moment fear coiled around her heart. Because I was a monster.

Her knee connected with mine again.

“You’re hurting yourself.” I tsked.

“Get off me!” she screamed in my face.

“I thought it might come to this.” I reached into my suit pocket and pulled an embroidered handkerchief from it.

A cloying smell swirled in the air, and she stopped struggling, her eyes searching for the source of the scent. “Don’t.”

“I fear I have to.” I pressed the cloth to her face. “But don’t worry. You’ll see me again soon.” She tried to turn her head away and managed to hold her breath for a few seconds. But her exertions had her breathing too hard to stop. She inhaled, and her eyelids fluttered.

“Let me go.” Her words slurred on their way to me.

“I told you.” Her eyes closed, her breathing slowing as I stroked her hair. “Never.”

When she was out, I wiped the blood from my nose, then pulled Camille into my lap. She was limp, like a perfect doll. I tucked her head under my chin and wrapped my arms around her.

She slumbered peacefully as the monster in my chest hummed in anticipation of its next meal.

SOFT SHEETS. I ROLLED over and buried my face in my pillow. But something was off. The pillow smelled different than usual. Instead of my shampoo, it had the scent of woods and leather and something sophisticated.

I opened my eyes and sat up. *Him*. The pillow smelled like *him*. The sheet fell off me, and I realized my skin was bare. Panic hit me like a blow to the chest. I yanked the sheet back into place and peered around into the gloom.

“You’re awake.” His deep voice slithered around me, but I couldn’t see him.

“Where am I?”

“Our room.” He was sitting somewhere off to my right.

“Did you take my clothes off?”

“Yes.”

I cringed and eased toward the edge of the bed opposite him. Panic blared in my ears, and everything seemed to go cold. I’d awoken naked in his bed. What had he done to me while I was out? I did a mental check, and my body didn’t feel any different.

“Did you—” I choked on my own question.

“What?” Had his voice moved closer?

I squeezed my thighs together, searching for any pang of pain. There was none.

I caught movement in the darkness. He was walking around the bed toward me.

Scurrying back, I hit the headboard and clutched the sheet to me. “What

did you do to me?” I tried to inject hatred into my voice, but it still shook.

“You mean, did I rape you?” He came into view, his bare body illuminated by a faint light through a door at his back.

He was strong, well-muscled and loomed huge like a recurring nightmare. His eyes pierced through the shadows, a slight glint telling me that he was enjoying this too much.

“Did you?”

He put a knee on the bed. “No.”

“Let me go.” I wanted to look away from his nudity but was too afraid to let him out of my sight.

“No.” He moved closer, the wide bed shifting under his weight.

I bolted away from him, but I didn’t even set foot on the floor before he grabbed my ankle and yanked me back. A scream ripped from my lungs as he covered me with his body.

“Shh.” He clapped a hand over my mouth. “No one can hear you anyway.” His thick cock pressed into my thigh, but he made no other move, just restrained me as fear thundered through my being. He pulled his palm away and stared down at me. “That’s better.”

My eyes burned as tears welled. “Why are you doing this?”

“I told you.” He cocked his head, as if surprised he had to explain. “Because you’re mine.”

“I’m not yours.” My voice cracked.

“You’ll see.” The certainty in his words chilled me. “We’re bound, you and me. You’ve felt it. I could see it in your eyes when we danced, when I visited your classroom. Every time you’re near me, you give yourself away.”

“No.” I burned with shame that some part of his words rang true. But that was before he’d drugged and kidnapped me. Those embers were now dark and cold. “You can’t keep me here.”

“I can. You haven’t noticed yet, but you’re wearing a stunning accessory. An anklet with a tracker. If you take it off, I’ll know. If you try to leave the house, I’ll know. This estate has been in my family for a hundred years. There are over five-hundred acres around the house. You won’t get far before I catch you and bring you back here, where you belong. You can’t escape. There are no phones, no internet, no one who will help you.”

Every word that left his lips sent a shard of ice tearing through my heart. “You’re a monster.”

“I know.”

“Someone will find me.”

He leaned closer, the tip of his nose brushing mine. “Someone already has.”

“What are you going to do to me?” I swallowed hard, my mouth dry.

“Keep you safe. Keep you close.”

My chin trembled. “Kill me?”

“What?” He seemed genuinely surprised by the thought. “You think I’d kill you?”

“How could I not?” I bit the inside of my cheek. Was he just toying with me again?

“I never want to hurt you.” He shook his head. “I’ll kill anyone who does.”

“You’re deranged.”

He smirked, the quirk of his lips cruel. “You aren’t the first to call me that, though I prefer high-functioning psychopath.”

I struggled, trying to buck him off. He was immovable, a mountain of intent crushing me with each passing second. “You can’t just keep me here! I’m not a pet.”

“No.” He paused, his eyes searching my face. “Not a pet. But you’re mine. I can *feel* it.” He sat back and took my hand in his, pressing it over his heart. “In here. Where there’s nothing. When I saw you, something happened. And now I can *feel*, but only for you.”

Tears slid down my temples and pooled in my ears. “But don’t you feel how wrong this is?”

“No.” He squeezed my hand. “This is the only thing I’ve ever done that feels right.”

The conviction in his words slowed my racing mind. “How long do you intend to keep me here?”

“Forever.”

“What?” Horror ripped through me, tearing up my thoughts and skirting along my dreams like a rusty razor blade.

“You were meant for me. Don’t you understand?”

“Get off me.” Acid churned in my stomach, and I yanked my hand away from him.

He stared down at me, as if trying to read my thoughts. “I will, but if you try to run, I’ll capture you. There is no way out of this room except *my* way.” He moved off me and lay down on the bed, his body languid, like a predator

at rest. “The sooner you accept that, the better off you’ll be.”

I sat up and turned away from him. Though tears blurred my vision, my eyes had become accustomed to the gloom. Several wide windows lined one side of the room. We were on what looked like the second floor of a grand home. The moonless night beyond was dark, and I couldn’t see anything except dense forest in the distance. The bed was large, each corner topped with a carved wooden poster. A faint light filtered into the room from an adjacent bathroom. Two other doors in the room were closed, and undoubtedly locked.

The sleek décor had a masculine edge to it that mixed with the antique furniture to give an opulent air. I didn’t care about his sense of style. *What can I use as a weapon?*

“Get back under the covers. The nights get cold out here in the foothills.” I could feel his eyes on me. “Though I’m quite enjoying the view.”

“Where are my clothes?”

“Gone.”

I stared at the closed doors, my thoughts still fighting with the reality of my situation. “I have to go.”

“You aren’t going anywhere. Every night we’re together, you will sleep with me. And you’ll be naked. If I, for some unfortunate reason, have to leave on business, you will sleep in our bed alone until I return.” He patted the mattress.

Everything in me told me to run, but there was nowhere to go.

“I can make you comply, if that’s what you want.” His dark chuckle pelted me like sleet. “I’d rather enjoy that, actually.”

“No.” Goose bumps raced along my skin as I crawled under the blankets and scooted to the far edge of the bed. None of it seemed real. My mind tried to make sense of it, but it was as if I were trying to complete a puzzle while the pieces kept disintegrating in my fingers. I shook, my body revolting against its sudden captivity.

“You can come closer.” His low voice rumbled over me.

“No.” *Not a chance.*

He sighed. “This doesn’t have to be unpleasant for you.”

I glanced at him over my shoulder. “Are you kidding?”

“No.” He rose on an elbow, the edge of the sheet hovering along his abs. “I know you find me attractive.”

I turned away and rested my head on my folded hands. “I *did*. Now? Not

so much.”

“That’s not something that just disappears.”

“It does when you kidnap someone.” My eyes still searched in vain for some sort of weapon.

“Think of it as more of an elopement.”

“Marriage?” I clenched my eyes shut, trying to clear them of useless tears.

“No.” He shifted toward me, his body heat buffeting my back. “Not yet, anyway.” He rested his hand on my shoulder, but I rolled away from him, perilously close to falling to the floor.

“I told you I’d never hurt you. I don’t want to take anything from you that you aren’t ready to give.” As if proving his words, he edged away from me, his warmth fading.

“What if I’m never ready to give you a damn thing?”

“You will be.” His smug satisfaction rankled.

“You so sure?”

“Yes. You and me. The end.” He pulled the blanket up and tucked it around my shoulder. “You’ll see.”

I didn’t respond, just stared into the murky room.

“And one day, sooner than you think”—his voice dropped—“you’ll give me everything.”

SHE DIDN'T SLEEP, NOT until the sun began to peek around the edges of the heavy curtains along my wide windows. So many times I wanted to touch her, pull her into my arms. But she'd fight me, which I didn't mind. She could also hurt herself, which I did mind.

I had to wait for her to come to me. It was agonizing to think of the time we'd waste with her being angry, the eventual escape attempts, and the recriminations about me stealing her. Her feelings were warranted, at least that's what my dad would have said. I had no idea if they were or weren't.

At least she was near me and away from the douchebag who was foolish enough to think he'd ever have a claim on her. I couldn't even think his name. I balled up his memory and threw it into the wastebasket of my mind. Maybe I'd set it on fire later.

Biding my time would be difficult, but Camille needed me to be patient with her. She had to accept her situation. There was no getting out. Once she understood that, she would begin to see that this wasn't so bad, and in fact, was optimal.

Would I enjoy toying with her a bit while she tried to find a way out? Of course. After all, I was still a psychopath.

"What are you doing in there, son?" My dad knocked at my door.

I petted Frankie, her fur smooth under my palm. "Just playing with Frankie."

He swung the door open and surveyed my typical ten-year-old's room. Posters of athletes plastered my wall, and a thorough collection of Star Wars Legos lined my shelves.

“What’s up, Dad?”

The color faded from his face. “Son? What happened to Frankie?”

“Not sure.” I kept stroking her, happy to have a chance to pet her. I’d loved her from the moment my father had brought her home, and she’d taken to me. Sleeping in my room and curling up in my lap whenever I sat still. “I went downstairs this morning and found her on the floor in the kitchen. Stiff.”

His eyes widened as they darted from me to the cat and back again. “She’s dead, son.”

I kept stroking her fur. “Yeah. I think so.”

He walked in and sat next to me on my bed. “Did you do it?” He put one hand on my shoulder. “I-I won’t be mad. I just need to know the truth.”

I couldn’t understand the question. Did I do what? But then it became clear. My father thought I’d killed her, my darling cat. “You mean did I kill Frankie?”

“Yes, son.” He squeezed my shoulder, though I could feel the shake in his hand. “Did you?”

“No.” I met his eyes. “I swear. I found her like this. I loved her, Dad. I’d never hurt her.”

He nodded, some of the fear draining away. “You promise? I won’t be mad.”

“I promise.” I gave him my most “grownup” look. I didn’t lie to my dad. Not ever. Whenever my childhood brain suffered from a mature moment of clarity, I could see that Dad was the only thing standing between me and an institution. He’d told me as much on a few occasions.

“Thank god.” He sighed. “I was worried you’d—”

“Turned into a pet murderer?” I laughed.

“Right. I know.” He stood and scooped Frankie off my bed. “I shouldn’t have thought it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. I’m sure going to miss Frankie.” I wasn’t sad, or at least I wasn’t “sad” the way people in books and movies were. I didn’t cry or feel anything. But I didn’t like losing her, either.

“I wish she didn’t have to die.”

“She was a good cat. I’ll have Timothy bury her out near the tree line.” He hesitated at the door. “Sorry again, son. I should have known you’d never do anything like that.”

“Don’t worry.” I waved my last goodbye to Frankie.

Once Dad was out of sight, I flopped back on my bed and counted my

blessings that he hadn't asked me about Colonel RedSpur, the neighbor's "missing" pet rooster.

Camille turned onto her back, one hand draped on the pillow next to her. Her breaths came in a soft rhythm.

She'd compared herself to being a kept pet, but she was more. So much more. I'd never longed to touch someone the way I did her. I followed the curves of her body beneath the covers. She was gorgeous. Round breasts, a tapered waist, flaring hips—I closed my eyes and pictured the strawberry mole on her hip.

I wanted to lick it, to put my mouth on every inch of her delectable body. My cock roared to life with my imaginings. I'd already attended to myself before getting into bed with her. Letting my animal instincts take over would ruin everything. But staring at her in the morning light woke the beast.

This wasn't the optimal time to rub one out, but fuck, it was better than jump on her. I eased out of bed and slipped into the en suite bathroom. Her breathing remained steady, her cadence never changing. The gray marble floors were warm beneath my feet as I grabbed a hand towel from the bar next to the sink. My cock was more than ready to get down to business. Leaning against the wall next to the door, I kept an eye on Camille via the mirror along the wall above the vanity. She still hadn't moved.

I gripped my cock and did a long slow stroke. Closing my eyes, Camille appeared before me, her body spread and ready for me. She smiled and lifted her arms above her head, the stiff peaks of her nipples begging for my mouth. Lowering myself between her legs, I licked along her pussy, tasting what was mine for the first time. She bucked beneath me, her eyes opening wide as I pressed my mouth to her, devouring her tender flesh with steady strokes from my tongue.

A groan rose from my throat, and I cracked an eye open to make sure she was still asleep. Satisfied I hadn't woken her, I imagined how she'd writhe beneath me, how my fingers would sink into the soft skin of her thighs as I stabbed my tongue inside her. I licked her clit, strumming it mercilessly as her body tightened. She raked her hands through my hair, pressing my face against her as she seized and called my name as she came.

"Oh fuck. Camille." The image of her coming on my tongue pushed my load up my shaft. I came with a deep grunt, shooting into the hand towel as I stroked every last drop from my cock.

When I was done, I wiped myself clean and glanced at the mirror. I could

still see Camille, but instead of being ten feet away, she was standing right outside the door, her eyes wide.

I TURNED AND RAN back to the bed, diving under the covers. Wrapping myself up tight, I stared at the doorway where I'd seen Sebastian and heard him call my name as he came. I buried my face in my pillow to try and stamp out the warmth in my cheeks.

When Sebastian had climbed out of bed, I'd pretended to sleep. After a while, I didn't hear anything and hoped he'd left or become otherwise occupied. I'd crept from my bed and tried the doors in the room—all locked, and one with a digital keypad. Then I'd heard him in the bathroom. God, the look on his face as he stroked himself into release. I clenched my eyes shut and tried to erase the image, and more importantly, erase the thrill that had run through me as I watched.

The bed shifted. "Sorry about that."

I clutched the blanket tightly to me. "Sorry?" I choked out and unburied my face so I could watch him.

He shrugged, his muscled shoulders hard in the morning light. "I didn't intend for you to see that, but I didn't mind it either. Did you enjoy it?"

I re-buried my face in my pillow. "No!"

A low laugh rolled over me, the velvety tones trying to seduce me. "You don't have to admit anything, but I know you did."

"No." I pulled my knees up beside me and felt along my calf until my fingers met a thin metal chain. The anklet monitor.

"Yes. Would you like to know what I was thinking about?"

"No!" My face still buried in the pillow, I breathed in warm air, the oxygen depleting as I stayed in my cocoon where he couldn't see me, where I

felt stupidly safe from the monster right beside me. Like a child who covers his face and believes he's invisible.

"Eating your pussy. Teasing your clit until you exploded all over my face. You called my name." A slight tug on my hair told me he was running his fingers through it. "When you came, so did I."

I should have been filled with disgust. Instead, my mind followed along with the image he painted. Then I came to my senses and re-focused on how I might escape. Maybe I could climb down from the window if he left the room.

"Let me go."

"Not happening." His calm certainty spiked my blood pressure.

I screamed into my pillow and thought for a moment about scratching his eyes out. But the corded muscles of his body told me that would be a losing effort. I was no match for him.

There had to be a way out. Maybe he was just punking me. Maybe Ashton Kutcher was going to jump out from behind the curtains with a film crew, and we'd all laugh about it over breakfast.

A knock at the door sent a line of tension through me. Another person in the house meant the possibility of escape.

"Come in." Sebastian yanked the blanket higher on my back. Hiding me?

The voice had me turning toward the door. The digital locking mechanism clicked, and a man strode inside. Mid-twenties, blond hair, and handsome—he wore dark butler's attire and pushed a cart.

"Morning, Timothy." Sebastian sat up on the edge of the bed and leaned over to click something on his nightstand. The curtains along the windows separated, allowing warm light to suffuse the room.

"Sir." Timothy rolled the cart up to the bed, only sparing a brief glance for me.

"Help me." I sat up and clutched the sheet to my chest. "He's keeping me prisoner here."

Timothy didn't look at me. It was as if I'd never spoken.

Sebastian inspected the plates atop the cart. "Has everything in the house been arranged?"

"Yes sir." Timothy poured two cups of coffee. He added the amount of sugar I liked, then poured my favorite creamer. "Rita knows the situation, and Gerry will abide by all the rules without issue." His slight British accent stirred something in my mind, a memory that I couldn't place.

“Did you hear me?” I raised my voice. “He’s keeping me against my will. Call the police!”

Sebastian seemed satisfied with the plates. “That’ll be all, Timothy.”

Timothy nodded and strode to the door. Without so much as acknowledging my existence, he entered a code and left. The locking mechanism clicked as soon as the door shut.

“That won’t work.” Sebastian peered at me, studying every move I made.

“You have them trained to keep prisoners?”

His dark hair, tousled from sleep, shone in the hues of morning that poured through the windows. “They obey me without question. I treat them well and pay them better.”

“You pay enough for them to go along with this sick game?”

His emerald eyes glittered. “It’s not a game. Come eat. You’ll feel better.”

“No way.”

“You’re hungry. I heard your stomach growl a few moments ago.”

“I don’t want anything you’re offering.”

He sighed. “You have to eat.”

“I’m not coming anywhere near you. How do I know the food isn’t poisoned?”

“Why would I go to all this trouble just to poison you?” He grabbed a piece of bacon from one plate and downed it in one bite, then grabbed a pancake from the other plate, ripped a piece off, and ate it. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in a sharp movement. “Convinced?”

So it wasn’t poisoned. That didn’t mean I wanted to have breakfast with him. “And I’m naked.”

He arched a brow. “You won’t eat because you’re naked?”

“I don’t care what you think, but I’m not eating a single thing until I’m wearing clothes.”

“That makes zero sense.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is.”

Sebastian rose, the sunlight gracing his chiseled body. I looked away as he stalked into the bathroom.

“Come in here.” The command in his voice had a hint of irritation, as if I were getting under his skin. Good.

“I can’t. I’m naked.”

“Get in here or, so help me, I will drag you.” Definitely under his skin.

A thought occurred to me, an ill-formed burst of inspiration that would shape how I would get out of this prison. If Sebastian thought I was perfect for him, that we were meant to be together, perhaps if I proved him wrong by being a disagreeable shrew, he'd change his mind. For the first time since I woke up in his bed, I felt a shred of hope.

"Fine." His footfalls retreated toward me. "I'll carry you."

"I'm coming." I stood quickly and yanked at the enormous cream duvet until I'd wrapped it all around me like a puffy wedding dress.

"I've already seen you naked, Camille." He leaned against the bathroom doorframe, his hard body something that I'd only seen in scandalous messages from Veronica. Broad chest with dusky nipples, washboard abs, and the 'V' leading down to his semi-hard cock. I gawked for a moment, unable to help myself. It was thick, almost unbelievably so. Prying my eyes away, I stared at the space above his head.

"I saw that, Camille." His smirk twisted my insides.

"You didn't see anything."

"You can deny me all you want, but I know you feel it, too." He rubbed his chest over his heart. "For the longest time, I actually thought I was suffering from acid reflux. Every time I saw you and had to let you go, I felt it. Like a pit of lava that was burning me from the inside out. No amount of meds could stop the ache. Only one thing did—you. Just being near you. The feeling is gone and something else lives there, something that fills me up and leaves me needing more of you. Always more."

I kicked my chin up and kept my tone cold. "That's cute."

He winced, and what could have been pain flashed across his eyes. Then it was gone. I'd been cruel, and for once, I was glad. Whatever unhappiness he felt was nothing compared to the ocean of sorrow he'd drowned me in.

"Get in here." He turned and disappeared through the door.

I followed, dragging the blanket behind me. The bathroom was huge, every surface covered in gray and white marble. Chandeliers burned above a whirlpool tub that looked as though it could fit at least six people. Iridescent tiles created a sea mosaic behind it, the blues swirling as they rushed toward a sparkling shore.

A woman flashed across the mirror. I stopped, then blinked hard. It wasn't a woman. It was me.

"You *dyed* my hair?" I plucked up a lock of blonde hair and gaped at it.

"Had to." His voice came from somewhere deeper in the bathroom. "Just

in case.”

“Just in case what?” For the first time since I’d arrived, I was fuming. I’d never dyed my hair, not so much as touched it with even temporary color. The woman in the mirror was foreign, though her blue eyes sparkled against the backdrop of honey-colored waves.

“In case someone gets a glimpse of you or a photo gets snapped.” Dressed in a pair of boxers, he walked from a darkened room next to the bath and across to another doorway. “I didn’t want to do it. I love your hair as is, but it was the smart move. If it makes you feel any better, I hired one of the best colorists in the city. He came out, and I told him you had an intense fear of hair stylists and had to be sedated to get your hair done.” He flicked the light on and waved me over. “I got the feeling it wasn’t even close to the weirdest story he’d ever heard.”

“But it was *mine*.” Seeing myself changed, transformed into his captive, broke a piece of my heart. I leaned on the vanity, trying to right myself in this strange new world.

“It was necessary, or I wouldn’t have done it.”

“You had no right.” My vision blurred as more tears tried to force their way to the surface.

He sighed. “We’ll both get used to it, and once things settle down, we’ll change it back.”

“We?” My voice was hoarse, empty.

“Yes. From now on. Now come here. I want to show you something.”

I ripped my gaze away from the stranger in the mirror. The warm tile failed to heat me as I edged toward him. I stopped in the doorway and stared around at the clothes and accessories hanging or folded on all sides. A rack of shoes ran along the back of the closet. More shoes than a department store in neat rows. Heels, flats, trainers, boots—everything one person could ever need, all brand new. Toward the top, I noticed a few sets of shoes that didn’t quite match the shine of the rest.

I walked forward as he leaned against a high set of drawers, the wood a soft honey color. “These are mine.” Reaching up, I ran my hand along a pair of flats that I often wore to school.

“Everything in here is yours. I also had all your personal items brought along. Your medications, birth control, feminine items, cosmetics—all in your cabinets next to your sink. I didn’t collect all your clothes, just the ones fitting the season. We can get the rest later.”

I turned and found several items of my clothes hanging on the rack to my right. Mixed in were new clothes. Pulling the tag down, I checked the nearest shirt. My size. I pulled another tag. My size. One look at the shoes told me they were all close to my size. The clothes were similar to the sorts of colors I'd choose for myself. It was as if he already knew what was in my cottage closet, then multiplied it and added designer tags.

"If you don't like these things, we can donate them and get you whatever you like."

My knees went weak as I realized how serious this was, how serious *he* was. The blood drained from my face, and I couldn't catch my breath. My hair, the clothes, all of it—he truly intended to keep me prisoner forever.

"Camille." He gripped my elbow before I hit the floor.

"Can't—breathe." Darkness encroached on the edges of my vision. The blanket slid to my hips, pooling there as he pulled me close.

His arms encircled my back like steel bars molding to me.

"Don't." I tried to push away, but he held me tight.

"Shh." He stroked my hair with one hand while keeping his other arm around my waist. "It's difficult right now, but it won't always be like this."

"Please." I pressed my cheek to his chest, his skin warm despite the coldness inside him. "Just let me go home."

He kissed the crown of my head. "You are home."

SHE ATE SILENTLY AS I did my best not to crowd her, though every instinct I had told me to pin her beneath me. Instead of giving in to my darker desires, I sat in a side chair near the window and responded to some Lindstrom Corp. emails on my phone. I watched her from the corner of my eye. She'd dressed in the clothes Timothy had unpacked from her bag and hadn't touched any of the new things I'd bought for her. Even in jeans and a baggy fleece sweater, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. The ache in my chest started up, reminding me how important it was that I convince her of how right this was.

Picking at her food, she shot me furtive glances every so often. Probably making designs on getting my phone. The odds of her guessing my combination before locking herself out were infinitesimal, and I'd added a second layer of security that had to be entered each time the phone was used. It was a pain in the ass, but necessary for a while.

Though she only ate a few bites, she drank almost all of her coffee.

"Would you like more?" I asked, not looking away from my email to the head of purchasing. I'd dressed casually for the day—jeans and a gray t-shirt. I didn't expect to go far, and I'd once read that dressing down tended to put others at ease.

"No, thank you." She cursed under her breath, perhaps angry at being polite to what she saw as her jailor.

"If you're finished, I'd like to show you around." I sent the email—an ass-chewing that would ruin the purchasing director's weekend—and stood.

"Why?" She crossed her arms over her stomach.

“Would you prefer to stay here?” I walked to the door and entered the code, making sure to block her view with my body.

“No.” She stood and took a few tentative steps toward me as I pulled the door inward. I walked out and held the door for her. Peeking back and forth along the upstairs hallway, she stepped out, and I let the door close behind us.

“This door automatically locks as soon as it shuts. Only Timothy and I have the code, and I’ll change it regularly.”

“Thanks for that.” She gritted her teeth and strode past me to look into the bedroom across the hall. “Who sleeps here?”

“No one. We’re the only ones in the house except for Timothy, who you met, and Rita, the cook.” Other than my father, I was the last of the Lindstrom line. He’d turned the house over to me several years earlier as part of a tax shelter plan, and I’d made it my home away from the city.

“Do you always stay out here?” She kept walking, the hypnotic sway of her hips drawing my eye.

“No. I have a penthouse in the city where we’ll stay during the week once you’re ready.”

She spun. “When will I be ready?”

When you accept that you are mine. “I don’t know. That’s up to you.” It seemed like lying was the wisest course at this point. Anything to keep her talking. When she’d almost hyperventilated in her closet, I’d had a moment of doubt. Could I keep her here without breaking her? But then, as I held her in my arms, my doubt faded. The simple contact of her skin on mine told me the truth—unwavering and bright. I needed her. One day soon, she’d realize she needed me, too.

“What, when I bow down to you?” Her bare feet made no sound on the heart pine floor as she peeked into the next bedroom.

“That’s not what I want.”

She spun and put her hands on her hips. “Then what do you want?”

“You.”

Her lips narrowed into a pressed line and her tone came out bitter. “Well, I guess you already got your wish.”

The indigestion was back, but different, as if a small fissure opened in my heart. What was this? “I’d like to show you something.”

“A way out?”

I considered her question for a moment. “Of sorts, yes.”

She shifted from foot to foot, uncertain. “Then show me.”

I motioned for her to walk down the hall toward the stairs. She took a few tentative steps, then hurried past me. Her scent swirled through the air in a vortex of anger and *her*. The pain in my chest intensified as I watched her storm down the hallway. I followed her.

She stopped at the top of the stairs and looked out the two-story windows that graced the foyer. Through the paned glass, the grounds shone under a warm sun. Despite the cold air, the grass still retained a faint green from the summer months, and the driveway slithered through the lawn like a long black snake.

“This place is huge.” She peered down at the foyer below, the walls lined with priceless art collected by several generations of Lindstroms. The chandelier dangled from the third floor turret overhead, the crystals casting prisms high above us.

She tilted her head back, her delicate neck calling to the primal part of me that wanted to mark her as mine. “Did having all this money make you this way?” She brought her gaze down to mine. “Is that it?”

“Nothing made me this way.” I’d spent countless hours in therapy sessions, thanks to my dad, and each doctor and psychologist had come to the same conclusion. On the spectrum of personality disorders, I was the most psychopathic person they’d ever counseled. It was hard wired into me. Nature, not nurture, had created my monster. “What did you say earlier? ‘It is what it is’? This is who I am, who I’ve always been. It can’t be fixed.”

Her eyes softened for a moment, and she seemed to be on the verge of saying something. Then she appeared to think better of it and abruptly descended the stairs.

What I wouldn’t have given to know what she was thinking at that moment.

Her golden hair shined like a halo as she entered the foyer, and just having her with me eased the ache between my ribs. This was right. It had to be.

Once we hit the landing, the marble floor felt cool beneath our feet, I led her around the flared staircase toward the back of the house.

“Sitting room, dining room, and an office.” I pointed to each doorway we passed.

She followed, only pausing for a moment to peer into the office.

I turned into the last door on the right. “The kitchen. It’s always fully stocked, and if there’s anything in particular you want, I’ll be happy to get it

for you.”

Rita bustled out of the pantry, her dark hair in a neat bun and her nurse shoes squicking along the tile floor. “Mr. Lindstrom.” She looked up and stopped. “Good morning. Was there a problem with breakfast?”

“It was fine. I wanted you to meet Camille. She’s the one you discussed with Timothy.”

Camille stared around at the large kitchen, double ovens and stoves, granite counters, and the built-in fridge and freezer.

“Pleasure to meet you.” Rita’s voice was welcoming, but her smile faltered somewhat.

“I suppose you won’t help me either?” Camille’s cutting tone had Rita looking at me, then back to Camille.

“She won’t.”

“Fine.” Camille ran a hand through her newly blonde locks. “Rita, be a dear and show me where the knives are.”

“She’s already locked them away in a safe in the pantry.”

“Yes sir, just as Timothy instructed.” She leaned on the sink, her age showing in the hunch of her back. “Sir?”

“Yes.” This was likely the most we’d ever interacted in the dozen years she’d worked for me.

“You won’t hurt her, will you?” Rita dropped her gaze to the floor and clasped her leathery hands together.

“Never.”

“Good.” She nodded, but still didn’t look up. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Camille.”

“Just Camille.”

“I hope breakfast was all right? I can make whatever you prefer from now on.”

“Breakfast was delicious, thank you.” Despite her attempts at being rude, Camille always reverted back to the real her, the one with warmth and life in every word and movement.

Rita offered a smile before grabbing a scrub sponge and wiping down the already-clean counters.

I motioned back toward the door on the hall. Camille scowled as she walked past.

“This way.” I continued along the back of the house.

The wall gave way to wide windows looking out onto the pool. “It’s

heated and covered during the winter, so you can swim anytime you like.” The light blue water rippled, and the waterfall splashed quietly at the far end.

I caught her reflection in the glass. She was taking it all in, but didn’t say a word.

Instead of leading her through the music room, I turned and showed her toward the other wing of the house.

“This place is even bigger than I thought.” She trailed her fingers along the wainscoting. Her voice descended into bitterness. “But I suppose the size of the prison doesn’t matter. Just the bars.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” I don’t know why I enjoyed goading her, but then again, any emotion I felt remained a mystery—one that only she could solve. “This is the last room you’ll see on the tour today.” I pushed through a heavy black door and flipped the switch. Lights began to glow far overhead, and an iron chandelier flickered to life in the center of the room.

She followed and stopped. I turned and backed up a step so she could get the full view. Two tiers of books, bright windows, comfortable chairs, and a warm fire—the house’s library was one of the first rooms constructed over a hundred years prior.

I gestured to a brand new bookcase I had installed in the center of the room. “This is for you.”

Her wide eyes tried to take in the entire space as she walked deeper into the room. She trained her gaze on the bookshelf in the center. “These are mine.”

“Yes.”

She kept walking. “And these are new.”

“It’s a varied selection that I thought might interest you. The newest botanical treatises from various expeditions to the Amazon plus several ancient texts that I had recreated from the Library of Congress. I noticed in your collection that you particularly preferred the journals of Pedro Teixeira, but you only had bits and pieces.” I pulled a hand bound edition from the end of the middle shelf. “This is the recreated journal.” I grabbed the larger book adjacent to it. “And these are modern, cross-referenced maps that correspond with his discoveries.”

She stared at me as if I were speaking another language, confusion flirting with disbelief along her pleasant features.

I re-shelved the books I’d plucked. “The bottom two rows are mostly botany. The middle two are Amazon specific. And the top two are a

smattering of texts hand-picked by the phytology scholar in residence at the National Archives.”

The fire crackled and hissed as she walked around the bookcase, her gaze flicking from spine to spine.

Another weird feeling erupted in my chest. Not the burning or the fissure, but something different. My palms turned clammy. Nerves? Was this nerves?

“This is...” She walked around to my side again and stared at the wide bookcase.

I waited, my world revolving around her response.

Her face softened, the flimsy mask she attempted to put up slipping off. She reached out and stroked the spine of the recreated Teixeira journal.

I’d tempted her curiosity, given her the smallest taste of what I could give her, what I *wanted* to give her.

“What do you think?” The words sounded odd coming from my mouth. I never cared what anyone—other than my dad—thought about anything.

She stepped back and shook her head, my spell broken. The soft look disappeared, and she scowled up at me. “I think an actual trip to the Amazon would have been a million times better.”

I WANTED TO PUSH his buttons, to make him realize he didn't want me around anymore. But the way he deflated when I insulted his amazing bookcase cut me. It shouldn't have. After all, I was his prisoner. Even so, the disappointment in him ate at me.

"I'd hoped you would like it." He shrugged. "But I suppose not. I'll have Timothy get rid of it." Turning on his heel, he strode to the door.

I stared at the priceless texts arrayed before me, many of which I'd never in my wildest dreams thought I'd get the chance to see firsthand. These were copies, but it didn't matter. They were here at my fingertips.

"Wait." The word slipped from my lips on a hasty breath.

He paused, but didn't turn around. "Yes?"

"Don't get rid of them."

"I thought you didn't care for them?" He turned and strode back to me, the fire in his eyes rekindled.

"I didn't say that."

He smiled, giving him an almost boyish look that couldn't be further from the truth. "You didn't. And I'm generally not so great at inferring emotion, but I could sense your disdain."

"I guess if I have to be a prisoner, I may as well have something to do." I kept my answer as nonchalant as possible despite the fact that I wanted to go over every text, scan every map, and read every scrap of information written by Teixeira.

He studied me, his eyes searching mine. "This is going to require a deal."

"What?" I backed away a step. "You just said you were giving these to

me.”

“That was before.” He followed. “Now that I have something I know you want, I need something from you in return.”

“No.” I shook my head.

“Fine.” His smile turned into a grin. “I’ll have Timothy start a bonfire outside our bedroom window so you can see it.”

Monster. “You wouldn’t.”

“I will.”

My insides twisted, and I ground my teeth. “What do you want?”

“Just a kiss.”

A thrill shot through me, and I hated myself for it. He was horrible, a kidnapper, a stalker—every bad guy rolled into one. So why did he bring my emotions to the surface far easier than Link ever did?

“No.” I despised the tremor in my voice.

“You sure?” He ran his fingers along the spines and grabbed one book from an upper shelf. “This one is *Phytology of Iris sibirica*.” He opened the front pages and stopped on a hand drawn, vividly colored portrait of a Siberian iris. “You likely wouldn’t miss it.” He pulled on the page, the beautiful drawing ripping under his deliberate destruction.

“Stop!” I steeled my spine. “One kiss on the cheek. That’s it.”

His hand paused. “Not quite.”

My throat tightened, and the air in the room seemed to dissipate.

“What then?” I wanted to snatch the book from his grasp.

He stepped toward me, and I backed up until I could feel the waves of heat from the fireplace.

“I want a kiss.” He reached out and dragged his thumb along my lower lip. “A real one. And then you can keep the books.”

“And if I say no?” My ears went hot, then cold as he loomed above me.

He gestured toward the flames with the book. “I’ll let the staff roast marshmallows over the fire.”

I fisted my palms. “One kiss. That’s it.”

“That’s all I want. Will you give it to me?” He moved even closer, his scent intoxicating me right along with his evil words.

This was a mistake. I knew it in the deepest part of my soul. Deals with the devil always came back to bite. But I’d be damned if he’d burn my one escape—the one place where I could still be me despite the chains he’d wrapped around me.

I took a deep breath and signed in blood. “Yes.”

He swooped down like a bird of prey. The book dropped to the floor. Resting one hand on my cheek and the other at my waist, he pressed his lips to mine in a rough kiss that took my breath away. I squeaked with surprise, and he slid his palm to my lower back and clutched me to him as his tongue darted along my lips.

I grabbed fistfuls of his shirt as he bent me back. Caught between a raging fire and the flames at my back, I clung to him. He slipped past my defenses, using my surprise against me. When he slid his tongue against mine, he groaned, the sound vibrating into my chest and sending sparks of heat skittering across my skin.

He consumed me, taking every bit he could. His mouth was a weapon, and he used it to break me down until I closed my eyes and returned his touch. God it was wrong, so wrong, and I hated him, but I couldn't stop my nipples from tightening or the goose bumps that danced along my body as he kissed me. A moan slipped from me, and he ran a hand to my hair, pulling my head back and slanting his mouth over mine.

Owned. This was what it felt like to be owned by someone else. I'd never felt anything like it. Not with Link. The thought sent a crushing wave of shame through me.

I pushed against his hard chest. He didn't let up, still taking everything he wanted. It felt so good, but I knew it was wrong. Everything in me revolted, and I turned my head away. He growled, but pulled me into a standing position and released my hair. His eyes flicked to my lips, then to my eyes, and he seemed to be on the edge of coming back for more.

More. No. I buried the desire that tried to burn through my reason.

“Leave the books alone.” I side-stepped him and hugged myself. “You got what you wanted.”

He ran his fingers along my exposed neck, and I shivered.

He moved closer, but dropped his hand. “That wasn't even close to what I want from you.”

SHE SPENT THE REST of the afternoon in the library. I should have left her alone so she could get comfortable, but I couldn't. Being near her had become a biological imperative, which was ludicrous. Still, I couldn't shake my need for her.

Our kiss only intensified it, and instead of wondering what her lips felt like, now I wondered what sort of sounds she'd make while I was buried between her thighs. I wanted to explore all of her. But she kept her distance, refusing to even meet my eyes. My mind clicked through our interaction, the way she reacted to me—her tongue tangled with mine, her sweet moan, the way she held onto me. All the signs told me she'd enjoyed it, but instead of taking it further, she'd turned cold and pushed me away. What was holding her back?

The white knight. It had to be. He was a moron on all fronts except his taste in women. I hated every second he'd had with her. Maybe I'd miscalculated when I'd decided to leave him alive. If she loved him, he'd be dead. But I knew with an unwavering certainty that she didn't.

She sat in a chair near the fire, a notepad in one hand and a book in the other. As she read and scribbled notes, she seemed to be in a different world, one where her captivity didn't chafe. Eventually, I wanted her to feel this relaxed all the time. And one day, there would be no need for the ankle bracelet or the surveillance I'd set up through the entire house.

I pretended to study more contracts from a chair near one of the windows. Instead, I accessed her text messages via a specialty program that allowed me respond in such a way that it appeared the signal pinged from Brazil. Keeping

up the appearance that she was fine was an integral part of my plan to make her eventually disappear.

Mint Baxter: Ms. Briarlane. It's me, Mint. I wasn't going to text you again so soon, but things have gotten kind of heavy with my parents. I know you're in Brazil, but you told me I could text you and you'd respond as soon as you had cell service at your camp. I need to talk to you. Please text or call me back when you can.

Camille Briarlane: I'm sorry, Mint. I'm very busy with my new projects. We can speak when I return.

Veronica Singer: You had to have landed a while ago. Text me and let me know you weren't eaten by angry Amazon tiger things.

Camille Briarlane: Everything here is fine. I'll text when I can.

Link Stewart: I miss you, baby. How was your flight? I love you.

Camille Briarlane: Great. Won't have much cell service. Will text when I can.

Leaving Link hanging gave me a delicious sense of satisfaction. The other two would be easy enough to throw off the scent. Link was the only real threat to my plan, but he'd stay in the dark just as he'd done for most of his senseless life. Once satisfied with my subterfuge, I switched to reviewing contract documents for timberland deals, but my eyes couldn't focus on the endless legal terms, not when she was so near. I started off just stealing glances, but when I'd realized she was engulfed in her book, I'd stared.

A loud crash of shattering glass shot down the hallway from the opposite wing.

She jumped and peered at me with troubled eyes. "What was that?"

"Nothing to worry about."

A few shouts and then the sound of hastily approaching footsteps tapped down the long back hall.

"Mr. Lindstrom?" Timothy knocked at the library door.

Bitter to give up my view, I rose and strode out into the hall and closed the door behind me. "What was that?"

"Some of the workmen dropped the final wall pane." His light eyes had dark circles beneath them. "It shattered, but they have another to replace it."

"It has to be finished tomorrow."

"It will be." He glanced at the door behind me. "How's she doing?"

"I think she's getting used to—"

My phone vibrated, and an incessant beeping raised the hackles on the

back of my neck. “Fuck.”

I swung the library door open just in time to see her jump out the window and take off across the lawn.

A thrill coursed through my veins, and a buzz started in my brain. The need to chase her overrode every other concern. Even though she had nowhere to go, I still wanted to track her down and drag her back so she’d *know* there was no other reality but this one. And I would.

Timothy blanched as he stared into the empty library. “Shall I—”

“No.” I flexed my fists. “I’ll handle it.” Striding past him, I pushed out the door to the pool and skirted it on my way to the rear door beyond the waterfall. The cold air greeted me with a bitter chill as I walked into the cloudless day. Turning right, I entered the code to raise the rear garage door. The lights overhead clicked on as soon as it opened. Motorcycles and ATVs filled the room, with the car garage along the other wing of the house.

I chose the nearest ATV, a black four-wheeler. Slingshotting a leg over the leather seat, I started it up, the engine coughing and then purring to life. Guiding it from the garage, I hit the grass and stopped, just watching her in the distance. She ran hard, desperate to escape me. The fissure in my chest opened again, lava surrounding my heart and charring the edges. No amount of antacids could cure the feelings she brought to my surface. Though I couldn’t be sure, I suspected the feeling was a mix of rage and pain. My phone vibrated and beeped a different set of sounds, telling me that she’d passed the first barrier away from the house.

What she didn’t understand was that there were six more barriers, each one farther than the last. I gunned the engine and leaned forward as I raced across the sea of grass. Her retreating form pulled me forward like an arrow. The ache in my chest intensified. I had to have her.

She aimed for the tree line, seeking shelter in the foothills of the Catskills. I rocketed through the chill air, straight toward my prey. Her hair flew out behind her in a golden ribbon, and she chanced a look over her shoulder.

I couldn’t see her face, but I imagined the panic that must have widened her eyes, perhaps made her jaw go slack. Instead of giving up, she poured more fuel on her fire, her legs pumping as she pushed herself toward the woods. She wouldn’t make it. A hundred yards dwindled to fifty. Then less.

Gunning it, I cut a wide arc around her and got ahead of her, cutting her off. She slowed, her chest heaving as she eyed me.

“Nowhere to go, Camille,” I called over the purr of the motor. “Hop on,

and I'll take you back to the house." I smirked. Why? I knew she didn't like it. But I did it anyway. I analyzed my thoughts and realized I *wanted* her to run. It would make the catch all that much sweeter. And then she'd know there was no way out.

"I can tell when you go robot." Her words came on a whoosh of air as she tried to catch her breath. "Right then, your cogs were turning. Because you're a psycho."

I shrugged. "Get on."

"What were you thinking?" She edged to the right.

I kept her in my sights like a hawk watching a field mouse. "That I rather enjoy it when you run."

She narrowed her eyes. "You haven't seen anything yet." She broke hard right, darting behind me and toward the trees.

I climbed off the ATV and took off after her. My long strides ate up the ground between us. She was fast, but I was far faster. She'd almost reached the edge of the grass when I wrapped my arms around her and yanked her back.

Her exquisite scream awoke something new inside me, a different face on the monster I knew so well. She kicked and threw elbows. I stumbled under her onslaught and fell, cradling her to my chest to keep her safe. My back landed on the turf, sending my air out in a whoosh, and she tried to scramble away from me.

I grabbed a handful of her shirt and dragged her onto the ground, then pinned her. She slapped and tried to add to the claw marks she'd already left on one side of my face.

"Let me go!" she screamed as I captured her wrists and pinned them over her head.

"I will never let you go." I squeezed them almost to the point of pain. "Never."

"Bastard!"

My eyebrows popped to my hairline. Camille didn't curse. The thought that I brought out the worst in her made something akin to glee bubble up in my chest. I wanted to bring everything out of her—good, bad, ugly, beautiful—everything that made her *her*.

She still struggled, her chest pressing against mine. My cock hardened at the first moment she screamed, and if I hadn't been straddling her, she would have felt it.

“You have to calm down.” I leaned closer, resting more of my weight on her. “I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

“I hate you.” A tear escaped her right eye. I wanted to taste it.

“You don’t.”

She turned her head away, staring back toward the house, and settled down. “You can’t keep me here forever.”

“I don’t intend to.”

She faced me, her eyebrows pressing together in confusion. “What?”

“I intend to keep you forever, but not always here.”

“What?”

I let go of her left wrist and smoothed some of the wild blonde strands out of her face. “I have several properties all over the world. And I’d hoped you would one day see how right you and I are. When that happens, I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.” I eased my palm to her neck and rested it there, feeling her pounding heartbeat. “But I can see that will take time.”

She shook her head. “What if I want to go by myself?”

“You won’t.” I glanced to her lips, desperate for another taste. “You’ll see.”

Her pulse quickened, but she scowled. “Get off me.”

“Are you going to behave?”

“Are you going to let me go?” She shoved at my shoulder.

I pressed into her, enjoying the feel of her hard nipples against my chest. “No.”

“So, that’s a no for me, too.”

I sighed. “Will you at least stop running for the afternoon?”

“What, aren’t you going to threaten my books again to keep me in line?” Her defiant tone lit all sorts of fires inside me. I wanted to taste her anger, maybe wear it like a second skin.

“That deal is done, sealed with a kiss. Your books are safe.” I increased the pressure on her throat. “But I have other methods at my disposal if you enjoy being threatened.”

Another jump in her pulse. Fuck, even her blood turned me on.

“I don’t. Now get off.”

“I’ll need your word, Camille.”

She stared into my eyes. “I promise I won’t run again *today*.”

“Good girl.” I sat back and rose to my feet, then offered her my hand.

She ignored it and climbed to her feet, then brushed the grass from her

clothes.

I walked to the ATV. She followed, her silence an accusation. One that I didn't care about.

"Get on." I slung a leg over and patted the seat in front of me.

"I'll walk." She stepped around the ATV and headed toward the house.

People didn't refuse me. If they tried, I made them suffer. But I never wanted to hurt her. It was as if my gears ground to a halt and started smoking wherever she was concerned. A word floated to the tip of my tongue, one that was more foreign to me than ancient Farsi.

But I was compelled to say it. "Please?"

She halted and put her hands on her hips, her back still to me.

I idled over to her.

She chewed her thumbnail.

"Come on. It's getting colder." It was true, but I wanted the feel of her against me. And more than that, I needed to know she was warm and safe.

"Fine, but only because you said please." She sighed and kicked her leg over the seat behind me. Her arms wrapped around me tentatively.

I smiled and gassed it. She gripped me tight, just as I'd intended, and we sped off across the brittle grass.

WE ATE DINNER DOWNSTAIRS in the large dining room. Rita served us with pride, and I ate more than I had at lunch. Her pork tenderloin and new potatoes could tempt even the most stalwart of stomachs.

Sebastian sat at the head of the table, and I perched on the chair to his left. The rest of the room remained barren, too much open space to be comfortable.

I sipped my wine and pondered the butter knife on my plate. Would it do any damage?

“If you’re going to stab me, I’d use the fork. It would leave a better impression. More badass than a dull butter knife, don’t you think?” His face was calm, but I could feel him laughing at me.

“You’re an asshole.”

“You’re a name caller.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin and lay it neatly next to his plate. “And quite the cuss, as well.”

“I wasn’t.” I took a deep, calming breath. “Until you imprisoned me.”

“It’s only been, what, a day?” The edge of his mouth quirked up. “Just imagine how horribly you’ll treat me tomorrow.”

My blood turned into lava. “How *I* treat *you*?” I seethed and seriously considered taking his advice with the fork.

Rita walked in from the kitchen with two plates, each laden with a large slice of layered cheesecake. Chocolate and cream cheese combined to form the most decadent dessert I’d ever seen—and one I recognized.

“Is this from Delatoni’s?” I scrutinized the delicious confection as Rita placed it in front of me.

“Of course not.” Sebastian took his plate from Rita.

“I made it for you.” Rita blushed.

I wanted to crawl under the table. “I meant no offense, Rita. I’m sorry. It looks so good.”

“Please, enjoy.” She waved away my apology and returned through the side door to the kitchen.

It had the exact same caramel drizzle along the top, even the same dollop of whipped cream, as my all-time favorite dessert—the layered cheesecake only available at Delatoni’s in Brooklyn.

I arched an eyebrow at Sebastian. “Did you do this?”

“I’m not much of a baker. So, no.” He grabbed his dessert fork.

“You know what I mean.” My mouth watered, but I wouldn’t touch my cheesecake until he explained what was going on.

“If you’re asking me about the recipe, yes. I paid Mr. Delatoni handsomely for it and entrusted it to Rita.” He sliced a triangle of deliciousness from the front edge and slipped it into his mouth.

His eyes closed, and he made an “mmm” sound that made my stomach tighten. He chewed and swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing against the collar of his button down. I had to look away. Every emotion that should have been dead inside me sputtered to life. How could I feel anything for Sebastian other than disgust?

“How did you know it was my favorite?”

He pointed to my slice. “Take a bite, and I’ll tell you.”

The caramel swirl along the side drizzled down the layers. I licked my lips.

“Think of it this way. If you don’t even try it, Rita will blame herself for not making it well enough.”

I resisted the urge to call him another name. It just seemed to play into his hands, as if he wanted me to give in to every cruel thought that flitted across my mind. Not that I had a lot of them. But the fact that he wanted me to act on my negative thoughts threatened to undermine my plan of “out-nastying” him into releasing me.

I plucked my dessert fork from the table and slid it through the velvety layers. Surely it wouldn’t be as good as Delatoni’s, no offense to Rita. The perfect flavors of cheesecake, chocolate, and caramel hit my tongue. *Oh my god.* It was *better* than Delatoni’s. I tried another bite, testing my theory and finding it to be true. It was so good.

“What’s the verdict?” He watched me, satisfaction creeping across his handsome face as I failed to hide my enjoyment.

“Rita has outdone herself.” I forced myself to set the fork down. “Now how did you know that was my favorite?”

“I overheard that imbecile Link talking about how he was going to take you to Delatoni’s for your birthday a few months ago. He was bragging to everyone in my conference room right as I arrived.” He shrugged. “I hadn’t met you yet, but I recalled that bit of info after we met.”

“Yeah, because that’s not the least bit creepy.”

“Where you’re concerned, I’ll be as creepy as necessary to make you happy.”

I bit my tongue, though I wanted to remind him that what would make me happiest was freedom. It wouldn’t do any good.

“Don’t stop now. Get all the sweetness you want.” He licked the tines of his fork, his tongue doing things to me that I refused to acknowledge. “I intend to.”

I pulled my napkin from my lap and slapped it on the dark wood table. “I’ve had enough.”

“Off to bed, then?” He rose. “I’m game.”

“I’d prefer to go back to the library.”

“So you can fall asleep in front of the fire, alone?” He tsked. “I think not. Your place is with me.”

He’d seen right through me. *Damn him.*

I plucked my fork from the plate and took another bite. “In that case, I think I’ll enjoy a leisurely dessert. Is there coffee?”

He sank back into his chair, amusement brightening the depths of his unfathomable eyes. “Of course. Anything you want.”



I'd waited him out, eaten almost all of my cheesecake, and drank my coffee until the last cup began to go cold. The large clock in the foyer struck midnight, and I desperately wanted to curl up somewhere and sleep away this nightmare of a day.

"Have you had enough?" He lounged comfortably, though his large frame made the ornate dining chair squeak whenever he shifted.

"I'm tired."

"I know." He stood. "It's past your bedtime."

I needed to rest, to think, to get a clear idea of how I was going to get out of this mess. Even if that meant I'd have to sleep in his bed. I'd just hug the edge again as I'd done the previous night.

"You win." I rose, hoping he hadn't noticed that I'd tucked the fork inside my sleeve.

"I won the moment I found you." His tone was soft, and his eyes were uncharacteristically warm, as if he believed I was some priceless treasure he'd stumbled upon.

I took a step, and my ankle twinged. I stopped and grabbed onto the back of my chair. The run must have irritated an old tennis injury I'd gotten in high school.

He grabbed my elbow. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." I took another step, testing my ankle. "I'm fine." It hurt more with the second step, so I stopped.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." I took a halting step.

He swooped me into his arms in a quick movement. I squeaked my surprise.

“Hey!” I glared up at him.

“Rita, have Timothy bring some ice to my room,” he called toward the kitchen as he carried me into the hallway.

“I can walk.”

“You’re in pain.” He clutched me to his chest, carrying me as if I weighed no more than a toddler. “I don’t want that.”

Confusion reigned in my mind as he ascended the stairs. “You don’t make any sense.”

“Don’t I?” He climbed to the first landing, then turned left toward his room. “I tend to find I’m effortlessly logical.”

“I’m in pain because you’ve kidnapped me. But you don’t seem to mind that pain at all.”

“That’s not real. It’s passing.”

“You don’t know that.”

He used the hand under my legs to enter the door code. “I do. The pain you feel now is just a pale ghost compared to the happiness you’ll feel once you realize the truth like I have.”

“What truth?”

“That you and I are two parts of a whole.” He sat me on the bed and knelt. His warm hands slid along my foot to my ankle.

“First, that’s insane. Second, I’m fine.”

He ignored me and pulled up my jeans leg to get a better look. “You have some bruising.”

“It’ll go away.” Somehow, him being kind was the worst of all. “Please stop.”

He looked up at me, his brow furrowed. “Why?”

“I don’t want your help.” I scooted back on the bed and crossed my legs.

“You’re getting it anyway.”

A knock sounded at the door, followed by the button presses.

Timothy walked in, his eyes bleary from sleep, a bucket of ice in one hand and a bag of frozen peas in the other. “Rita insisted on the peas.” He handed all of it to Sebastian.

“I take it you haven’t reconsidered helping me?” I asked.

Timothy didn’t even look at me.

“That’s all.” Sebastian dismissed him and turned to me. “Take your pants off. In fact, strip all the way.”

“No.” I hugged my middle.

Sebastian sighed and set the bucket and peas on the floor next to the bed. “Why do you have to do everything the hard way?”

“Just leave me alone.” I moved farther back and pressed the fork against my skin, its presence reminding me I had the semblance of a weapon.

“Not going to happen.” He stalked me around the bed. “I need to ice your ankle.”

“Get away.” I tried to skitter to the other side of the bed, but he grabbed my good leg and yanked me to the edge, then held me in place by my upper arms.

“If you let me ice your ankle, I’ll let you get away with wearing underwear to bed. One night only. If you keep fighting me, I’ll strip you, tie you, and ice your ankle all the same.” He released my arms and backed away. “Your choice.”

I sat up. He’d cornered me. I was tired and hurt, with no chance of fighting him off if he made good on his threat. “Underwear and a t-shirt.”

He ran a hand through his dark hair. “My t-shirt.”

“Underwear and your t-shirt?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

This was the second deal with the devil I’d made. How many more before he owned my soul? “Agreed.”

“Take your pants off.” He retrieved the ice and peas as I shucked my jeans onto the floor.

I pulled my shirt down to cover my panties.

“I’ve seen all of you.” He hit the floor at my feet and took my ankle in his hands again.

“Doesn’t mean you have a right to see any more of it.”

“I have every right.” He pressed the peas to my skin. “How’s that?”

“Cold.”

“Good.”

“And you don’t have every right.” I couldn’t let it go.

“Does it make you feel better that you have every right to me, as well?” He looked up at me, his eyes guileless.

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

I scoffed. “If that’s true, then strip.”

He balanced the peas on my ankle and stood. His fingers made quick work of the buttons on his shirt. He whipped it off and let it fall to the floor.

He pulled his white undershirt off, giving me a front row view of his abs and the trail of dark hair leading into his pants.

When his hands went to the button of his jeans, I balked. "Wait."

He paused. "It's yours if you want it." The innuendo was heavy in his voice, and it sank deep inside me, landing between my thighs.

I fidgeted, and the peas dropped to the floor with a thwop. "I don't."

"If you say so." He dropped to his knee again and repositioned the peas. "I'll get a sport bandage to keep this in place and a t-shirt for you to wear. Be right back."

I watched him disappear into the bathroom, his broad shoulders flexing beneath perfectly smooth skin.

"Oh, by the way." His voice floated back to me. "You missed the perfect chance to fork me when I was leaning down to see about your ankle."

Damn him.

HER GOLDEN STRANDS TICKLED along my arm, each sweet exhale from her lips breathing new life into me.

She'd perched along the edge of the bed at the start of the night, refusing to succumb to her fatigue. Eventually, though, her body had given up and fallen into a deep sleep. Over the course of the night, I'd moved closer to her, invading her space and watching her chest rise and fall beneath the blanket. It was torture to keep my hands off her, but I managed it...barely. My self-control was hanging by a thread by the time the sun peeked through the windows, giving the room a warm glow despite the dropping temperatures outside.

I risked running my fingers along her smooth brow, pushing some stray strands from her face. She sighed and rolled toward me, her eyes still closed. Her palm rested on my bicep, her forehead pressing against my shoulder.

My body heated—her touch was like a shot of adrenaline, waking up every part of me until I was aware of her every movement, no matter how slight. Her slow pulse was like a lullaby, each beat of her heart an even sweeter note than the last. But I couldn't sleep when what I wanted was so close.

Slowly, I rolled to my side so that we were facing each other. Her eyes moved behind her pale lids, then stopped. Taking a deep breath, she settled against me, her lips grazing my chest and her smooth knee pressing against my thigh. Her sweet scent tantalized me, silently urged me to touch her, to take what I wanted. But that was a sure way to fuck this whole thing up. She would give me everything she had, but only after I'd earned her trust. Given

the fact that I'd imprisoned her, trust would be hard to come by.

All my logical calculations were spot on, my hypothesis beyond reasonable. But none of these considerations sated my need to feel her. Moving as gently as possible, I eased my hand beneath the blanket until I made contact with the thin t-shirt material along her waist. She was warm, and I could only imagine how heated her skin would turn beneath my hand. Oh fuck. Or my *mouth*.

Sliding my hand lower, I stilled when my palm met her soft skin where the t-shirt had ridden up. Just that little bit of contact sent my mind spinning, and my cock pointed at her like a dog on a fox's scent. Neither it nor I would be satisfied this morning. Not by her, anyway. It didn't stop me from moving my hand lower, the waistline of her smooth panties teasing me. I knew what lay beneath, the delicious parts of her that I'd yet to taste. My mouth watered at the thought, but I kept my hand in place.

A cost-benefit analysis came down hard on the cost side of the equation at this point. Trust, I reminded myself, was the real end game. The rest would come along with it.

"You don't intend to marry this girl, right?" Dad sat back in his usual leather chair, a book open on his lap. The cavernous library dwarfed him, though it was his favorite room at our house in the Catskills.

"No." I sank onto the sofa across from him.

"But you two hit it off?" He seemed a little too interested. Almost optimistic.

"Not quite."

He peered at me over his reading glasses. "Then why do you want to date her?"

"Date? No." I shook my head. "I just want to have sex with her."

Dad closed his book and took his time placing it on the small table next to him. The fire hissed through the grate, and Dad cleared his throat. "Don't you think maybe, ah..." He took a deep breath, the skin next to his eyes crinkling like a paper bag, and tried again. "You're only seventeen, son. I'm not sure this is a good idea. There's pregnancy to worry about, diseases—"

"I've thought about all that." I stretched one arm along the back of the sofa, my body still gangly, but filling out enough for several girls in the nearby town to notice me. "I bought condoms."

"When?"

"When I was in town today."

“Okay.” He shifted in his seat, though he didn’t seem any more comfortable once he stilled. “So, how long have you known this girl?”

“I don’t know her at all.”

A wrinkle appeared between his eyebrows. “So, what makes you think she wants to, to…” He cleared his throat again.

“She looked at me when I was walking to my car, then whispered to her friend, and they laughed.” Obvious. I’d gone right to the drug store at the end of the block and bought a box of condoms.

“Son, that’s just something girls do. It doesn’t mean that she wants to be in a relationship with you.”

He still wasn’t getting it. “Dad, I don’t want a relationship. I just want to have sex with her. That’s all. I’ve been wanting to have sex for a while, and I finally found a girl who’ll do. Based on the way she was dressed, I’d say she comes from a middle class to lower middle class family. She was clearly impressed with my car, and by extension, me. She enjoyed her friends’ approval, given their whispering and laughter, so she’ll be swayed by their opinion of me, which I will ensure is favorable. All I have to do is express a mutual interest in her, buy her a few gifts, and flirt with her in front of her friends, and she’ll be ready to give me what I want. She’s an excellent opportunity for practice.”

He stared at me and blinked a few times, as if the correct way to continue his conversation with me was written on the inside of his eyelids like a “how to raise a psychopath” cheat sheet.

“Dad, I’m ready.” I tried a conciliatory tone. “I think about girls…well, their parts, all the time. I jerk off at least twice a—”

He held a hand up to silence me. “That’s plenty. And I understand all that, son. I was a teenager once myself.” His brows lowered. “But, what did you mean when you said ‘parts’ right then?”

I cocked my head to the side. “Their pussies mostly. Tits, too.”

“But attached to them, of course. Right?” He acted nonchalant, but it wasn’t the first time he’d asked me some softball serial killer questions.

“Yes, Dad. I’m not into dismemberment. I haven’t even ordered a Fleshlight. That’s what I’m saying. I want the real thing.”

“Fleshlight? What’s that?”

I held an imaginary Fleshlight in my hand and centered it over my crotch. “It’s this sort of tube that you can stick your di—”

“Okay. I follow.” He seemed to grow more uncomfortable by the second.

“You want to have sex. That makes sense at your age. I don’t like it, but it was bound to happen sometime.” His expression softened. “You’re turning into a man right in front of me. Your mom would be so proud.” He laughed. “Well, she might not have been so proud of your Fleshlight knowledge, but the rest of it—great grades, stellar extracurriculars, and a future in the Ivy League. You’ve grown up better than I could have hoped.”

Something twinged inside me, like a rubber band snapping against my ribs. “You seem surprised.”

He shrugged. “Just honest. I’ve done the best I could, but kids don’t come with a manual. And you? You’re a one-of-a-kind, so definitely no manual.”

The rubber band inside me stretched tight again. “I never want to disappoint you.”

“You don’t. Never have.” He scooted forward, to the edge of his seat. “But there’s still a problem with your plan to woo this girl.”

I let the “wooing” comment go. “What’s the problem?”

“Women don’t act like you just described.” He scratched the gray stubble on his cheek. “Things would be a lot easier if they did.”

“No? How do they act, then?” I matched his posture, leaning forward. “What do I need to do to reach this goal?” He’d always taught me to set goals for myself. This was just another one.

“A woman can’t be a goal.” His tone was explanatory, but his words didn’t make sense to me. “Not the way we’ve used that term.”

“Why not? I’ve laid out a clear plan of how to achieve what I want. This girl will have sex with me if I do the things I just said. That’s the plan.”

He wrung his hands. “I’m not sure how to explain this.”

“Why not?” I’d never had a problem getting help from him before.

“This is different.”

“How?”

“It just is.” His tone changed, took on a note of irritation—one that was new to me. “Women are tough to read, especially in the context you’re looking at.”

“Are you mad?” I never wanted to upset him. He was my one true ally.

He sighed and dropped his gaze. “No, it’s just that I don’t want you to get in trouble, and I’m trying to figure out the best way to help you while at the same time give you some room to grow up. I just don’t want you to treat this girl like a goal.” He caught my eye again. “Like something to overcome. Do you understand?”

Though reading between the lines wasn't my forte, I understood what Dad was trying to say for once. "Dad, I'd never do anything without her consent."

He nodded. "Good. That's...good. But you're so young—"

"How old were you when you had sex for the first time?"

He coughed. "That, ah, that doesn't matter."

I smiled. "Younger than me, huh?"

He waved a hand at me and sat back, his papery cheeks turning pink even at his age. "None of your business, young man."

The tension eased in the room, and I could tell from the way he pressed the tips of his index fingers together that he intended to help me. Classic Dad tell.

"So, what is my plan missing?"

"God, this brings up some old memories." He almost smiled, and a cocky glint shone in his eyes. "Or as I used to call them—strategies."

Now that was a word I could get behind. "Did they work?"

A full-blown smile lit his face in the orange glow from the fireplace. "I landed the prettiest woman in the state of New York, your mother, so I would damn well say so."

That must be what love looks like. I made a note of the warmth that suffused him when he remembered my mother and catalogued it away in my mental filing cabinet. That look meant love. Check.

I was more than ready to learn the ways of women. "So, what's the strategy?"

"It'll seem simple when I tell you." He chuckled. "But I promise you it isn't. The one thing you absolutely must have before you bed a woman? Trust."

I pulled my hand away from Camille, though it took all the willpower I possessed—quite a considerable amount. I rolled onto my back, jostling her the slightest bit as I put a narrow strip of space between us, though her hand still lay on my bicep.

Her eyes fluttered open. She jerked back, withdrawing her hand from me as if burned.

"You touched me." I couldn't keep the grin off my face.

"I was asleep." She yanked the blanket up and tucked it under her chin. "I could have cozied up to a porcupine when I was unconscious."

"But you didn't. You cozied up to me."

She popped her head up and scanned the area behind me. “Because you’re on my side of the bed. You creeped over here while I slept.”

“Maybe, but you’re the one groping my arm in your sleep.”

“Let me go and you won’t have to worry about it.”

“And miss this friendly morning banter?” I tucked my hands behind my head. “Certainly not.”

“Ugh.” She pulled the sheet over her head.

“How’s your ankle?”

“Stiff.”

You and me both. “How about a warm bath?”

“With you?” Her scoff was muffled by the fabric. “No way.”

“With me would be nice, but I assumed that was a no.” I rose and walked into the bathroom. “I’ll run you a bath. I have something to take care of in the shower.”

She grumbled something unintelligible into the sheet. I hadn’t jumped her like I wanted, and I wasn’t even going to insist on bathing with her.

Trust. I’d get it. And once I did, I’d take my time and savor her.



I checked Camille’s messages as Rita served breakfast. My eyes almost rolled when I read the message from poor little Minton Baxter.

Mint Baxter: Did I do something wrong?

How would Camille respond? I was glad I only had to keep up the texting for a few more weeks before Camille had her “accident” in the Amazon. A quick web search told me the name of an endangered plant that would get Mint off Camille’s back.

Camille Briarlane: No. I’m busy researching *Epipogium Aphyllum*.

I'm sorry, but I don't believe I'll have much cell service for the rest of the trip. We'll talk when I return.

I fired off the text, quite pleased with myself for including the rare plant reference. Continuing through her messages, I kept up the ruse.

Veronica Singer: Any hot guys on the expedition? I miss you. If there's a hot one, bring him home with you. And where are my pics? You promised pics of exotic shit. Pay up.

Camille Briarlane: I dropped my phone and cracked the lens, so I can't take any pics. Everything here is great. I miss you too.

Link Stewart: I've been thinking about you a lot. I can't wait for you to get back. You've only been gone a few days, but it feels longer. Everyone is getting into the Christmas spirit, but without you, I'm not feeling it. Send me some pics when you can. I'd appreciate something a little more risqué than plants, though. I love you.

Camille Briarlane: I don't sext. We've set up a Christmas tree in the main tent here. Very festive. I'm really feeling the Christmas spirit. In fact, this may be the best Christmas ever. The expedition is going deep into the forest over the next week, so communication will be spotty.

A smile crept across my face as I fired off that little missive to Link the prick.

"Why are you smiling like you just drowned a kitten?" Camille sipped her coffee as Rita bustled around us with plates.

I shrugged as Rita set a glass of orange juice in front of me. "That creeper sloth meme gets me every time."

She arched a brow. "Sure." She muttered something like a curse under her breath, then spoke up, "Are you going to work tomorrow?"

"Of course." I fucking hated it. The thought of leaving her was like a burr under my skin.

"I'm going to stay here?"

"Yes." I took a vicious bite of bacon as I imagined her here without me.

"That's a relief." She settled into her chair and gave me a sassy smile. "A whole week without you sounds great."

"Oh, darling Camille." I returned her smile. "I'm taking the helicopter to and from the city all week. I'll be home in time for dinner. And certainly in plenty of time for bed."

Her smile faltered as Rita placed a plate of apple streusel pancakes in front of her. "Maybe you could take me to the city with you." Her hopeful

tone played like sweet notes in my ears.

I drained my coffee. “No.”

Her eyes fell, and she retreated inside herself.

The heartburn kicked up a notch, but I pushed past it. “Eat up. I have something else to show you today.”

“I’m not hungry.” She pushed her plate away.

“Don’t be that way. Rita made those pancakes special for you.”

She canted her head to the side and stared at the plate. Realization bloomed across her face. “These look just like Friar’s pancakes.”

“Your favorite.” I pushed the plate closer to her. “Give them a taste.”

“You can’t buy me off with my favorite foods.”

“I don’t intend to. I just want to make you happy.”

Her brow crinkled as if my words were distasteful to her. Yes, I understood that letting her go would make her the happiest at that moment. But what she didn’t understand yet was that *I* was the only one who could make her happy for the rest of her life. Why was that so hard for her to see?

“At least try them. For Rita.” I shot a look toward the door to the kitchen.

“You can’t keep using Rita against me.” Despite her words, she picked up her fork and ate a bite. Her eyes closed as she chewed. “These are so good.”

Rita pushed back into the room, a fresh carafe of coffee in her hand. “Everything all right?”

“Perfect.” Camille took another bite. “Thank you.”

“I’m so glad you like them.” She poured fresh coffee. “The recipe called for Granny Smith apples, but I used the sweeter Ambrosia variety. I hope that didn’t throw it off.”

“They’re *better* than Friar’s.” Camille said and wiped her mouth with her napkin in her singularly adorable way.

Rita beamed. “I’m glad.”

After Camille ate almost all her pancakes and finished another cup of coffee under Rita’s watchful eye, she declared herself full and thanked Rita again. She turned to me. “What did you want to show me? The well where you keep the lotion?”

“Your knowledge of movies starring psychopaths says more about you than me.” I reached out to brush a crumb from her chin, but she smacked my hand away and did it herself. “Just show me already.”

“As you wish.” I stood and offered to help her up.

“I got it.” She rose and tested her ankle.

When she winced, I stepped closer. “I’ll carry you.”

“No. I’m fine. I need to use it for it to feel better.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want you to be in pain.”

She gave me a strange look. One I couldn’t quite place. Confusion, perhaps, given the vein in her right temple pulsed a bit more quickly than usual. “I’m fine.”

“Can I at least help you—”

“No. Just lead on. I’ll follow.” She gestured toward the hallway.

“All right.” I sauntered ahead of her, walking slowly so she wouldn’t struggle to keep up. I wished she would have just let me carry her. If she hurt, I wanted it to be from my hands—the sort of hurt she’d enjoy. She wouldn’t admit it, but I could *feel* the heat in her touch, the warmth in her gaze. I recognized a piece of myself inside her, and thankfully, it was a piece with darkened edges.

We passed Timothy coming from the back hall.

“We good?” I asked.

“Everything’s ready.” He nodded and flattened his back to the wall as we passed.

“What’s ready?” Camille shuffled along next to me.

“You’ll see.” My palms turned clammy and began to sweat as we turned down the corridor that ran along the back of the house. What if she didn’t like what I had in store?

I pushed through the music room that ran under the opposite wing of the house and stopped. “This next thing is…” I coughed. “It’s my best approximation of what you would want. Don’t expect excellence right away. But with your guidance on what you’d prefer, I *will* make it perfect for you.”

A soft look passed across her eyes again before her jaw tightened and she shook her head. “Just show me already.”

“All right.” I took a deep breath and pushed the heavy mahogany door open.

She stepped inside and gasped.

GLASS REFLECTED HIGH OVERHEAD, the panes joining in a peaked roof two stories above us. Clear walls rose to create a cathedral of sunlight and blue sky above. Four long rows of tables sat on a floor covered in small river rocks. Each table was equipped with misters and fans at intervals, and almost every inch of space was taken up by some bit of life—greenery, flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Fertile earth, the scent that made my blood sing in my veins, met my nose as I walked forward.

The sun streamed in from the right, but the air inside remained cool. Large vents ran along the back of the greenhouse, and huge fans hung along the four corners of the massive structure. My mouth dropped open as I took it all in.

“Like I said, it’s not perfect, but they just finished construction yesterday, and it was a rush job.” He walked past me. “These are some samples from your classroom. And I had these taken from your section of Trenton’s greenhouse.” He pointed to a line of pots with various green shoots sprouting through the dark soil. “The ones along the outer wall are all special varieties that I had flown in from the Amazon. The heaters”—he pointed to smaller fans along the back of the row—“keep the temperature optimal for them, or so I’m told. Also, they have a misting timer that functions more often than the others.”

I hadn’t moved, could only stare at the walls of glass and the long rows of plants.

“The entire place is customizable any way you’d like. My groundskeeper, Gerry, will be at your disposal. Anything you need, he’ll get it.”

I walked down the long row of plants, right down the center of the greenhouse. The smooth rocks settled under my feet with each step, and I trailed my fingers along the waxy tropical leaves, then the softer stems of the young vegetables. The mister next to me kicked on, spraying a long row of young tomato plants with a fine sheen of water. Rainbows fanned into view as the sunlight had its way with the moisture. I'd never seen a more beautiful greenhouse.

"I know it's not what you're used to..."

If I were honest, it was far better than the dinky greenhouse at Trenton that I'd been trying for years to revamp. Funding had never come through, despite my repeated requests to the headmistress and our board. My mind vibrated with the possibilities laid out before me, the experiments I could perform, the sheer variety of the materials arranged on the tables. Some of the plants in the room were nearly priceless, harder to get than precious jewels.

I turned and peered up at him, his emerald eyes highlighted by the greenery surrounding us. "You did all this for me?"

"Yes." His gaze didn't leave mine. "I'd do anything for you. Except let you go."

"This is insane." I was falling, yet standing still. He made me feel things I didn't want, awakened my senses even as I shied away from him.

"No." He moved closer, heat coming off him in waves. With the scratches I'd put along his face and neck the previous day, he was more wild animal than man. "This is exactly as it should be."

I swallowed hard and took a step back. He followed, looming over me with those strange, intense eyes that seemed to miss no detail.

"When did you start building this?" I feared his answer, though I already knew it. Something like this would take time and forethought.

"I called my designer for a builder recommendation the night of the gala."

I flattened my palm on the table to my right. "You planned all this starting that night?"

"Yes." He shrugged. "I knew it was you. I saw you." He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "And you saw me too."

Pulling my hand away, I shook my head. "We had one dance. *One dance.*"

"That was all I needed."

My ire rose as I tore my gaze from him to stare at the rows of flowers. "It wasn't all I needed."

“In time—”

“Time?” I stepped back. “Time to accept that I’m a prisoner and what, fall in love with you?”

“Love?” He followed me again, refusing to give me any distance. “I don’t know what that means.” His eyes darted to my lips, and a hungry glint flashed in his eyes. “I just know you’re *mine*.”

Something sparked in my chest, an echo of his madness finding a match inside me and striking it. I glanced to his mouth and, for just a moment, pondered how well he’d kissed me in the library. How amazing his hands had felt on me. Disgust roared to life in my heart, though I didn’t know if it was for him or me.

I took a deep breath and pushed my disturbing reaction down, burying it deep and hoping it wouldn’t sprout and grow when I turned my back. “I’m not yours.”

“You are. You always have been.”

“Stop saying that!” I swiped my hand along the table in an arc, sending pots and plants cascaded to the floor where they shattered among the rounded stones.

“You’re mine.” He advanced and grabbed my upper arms, his palms sending a jolt through my system. Bending down to me, he hovered at my mouth. “I’ll say it as many times as I need to.”

I shuddered, but not with revulsion. What was he doing to me?

He smirked. “It’s okay if you don’t want to admit it, but you want this. Us. You know it’s true.” Pushing me back, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked me close, his hard body bending my soft one to his will.

I clawed his arms. “Get off me.”

“No.” He still hovered right above my mouth.

I leaned up and bit his bottom lip hard, but when I drew blood, he moaned and crushed his mouth to mine. Copper teased along my tongue as he kissed me with a rough intensity I’d never experienced. My nails dug harder into his arms, but I was trapped in his embrace.

His tongue pushed between my lips, slid along my teeth and pressed entry deeper inside. Opening my mouth to protest was a mistake, because he pushed his tongue against mine. A groan rumbled from his chest as he devoured me, every stroke of his tongue like a delicious poison from an exotic bloom. My eyes fluttered closed. This kiss was even more insistent than the first, like a tidal wave bowling me over despite my attempts to stand

tall.

He ground his hips against mine, his erection hard and thick between us. Our tongues warred as his grip tightened on my hair, and he bent me back even farther, leaving me completely at his mercy. It was so wrong, but I couldn't deny the heady buzz that shot through my body like electricity through a power grid. He lit me up—his mouth, his hands, his taste.

But I was his prisoner. *What are you doing?* I stiffened and fought to turn away from him.

He kept me facing him, but backed up far enough to peer into my eyes. "Where'd you go?"

I tried to shove him off. "I went crazy right along with you for a minute there, but I'm back now, so get off me."

Frustration furrowed a crease between his eyes, but he leaned back and released me. "You were there. We both were."

"No." I brushed the dirt off my ass and stared at the mess I'd made.

He let out a frustrated sigh and cocked his head. "When you make that face, I can't tell what the appropriate response is."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "What?"

"Most of the time, you're so expressive." He reached out to touch my face, but I backed up a step, the dirt squishing between my toes. He frowned even more. "But when you're like this, I can't tell what's going on in your head or what my reaction should be."

"What are you talking about? Is that what your robot brain tells you to do?"

"No, not as simple as that. It's just that people like me—"

I let out a harsh laugh. "I'm pretty certain there is *no one* like you."

"See, that's easier. You're angry." He backed up a step. "I should give you space."

"I was angry a minute ago, and you didn't give me space." I couldn't contain my confusion. It was as if he were speaking in a programming language, but it didn't quite match up to his actions.

"I know." He scrubbed a hand down the light shadow on his jaw. "But you're different."

"How?"

"I don't know." Now he was the frustrated one. "I can't explain other than I just *know*."

"You know what, exactly?" I tried to keep my tone even. Maybe if I

could figure out what drove him, I could short circuit his programming. “That I was destined to be your prisoner?”

He shrugged. “Not in so many words.”

“Then what?” My insides twisted as I said my next thought out loud. “Love? You think you’re in love with me?”

“I told you I don’t know anything about that.”

“You’ve never loved anyone?”

“Love is an emotion.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“I don’t have emotions, not like that.”

“What does that even mean?” My head swam.

“It means that you are right where you need to be.”

Fury boiled up inside me, and I shoved him as hard as I could. “You don’t get to decide what I need!”

He barely moved. “Definitely anger. I’ll leave you to it.” And with that, he turned on his heel and strode out.

“**I**S THERE SOMETHING YOU’D like to ask me?” I flipped through a proposal on my tablet for 300 acres of timber along the edge of the Yakama Indian Reservation in Washington State. Camille had been sitting on our bed, staring at me, and chewing on her thumb nail for almost three minutes straight.

“Yes.” She hugged her knees to her chest and wouldn’t meet my eyes. I wanted to tell her it was all right that she was angry, wanted to hold her in my arms while she talked to me about nothing and everything. But her withdrawn air told me I’d best keep my distance.

“Ask away.” I wrote a notation on the map, pointing out where we could illegally cut timber on the reservation without garnering notice.

“Why did you build the greenhouse if you’re going to keep me in this room all day?”

“The greenhouse is a reward.” I made another notation.

“For what?”

“Good behavior.”

She scowled. “Are you going to use it against me in some sort of deal?”

“No. I just want you to be you. You don’t have to act in any way to please me, because when you’re being yourself, you already do. I don’t need a deal for that. But I’m sure there will be plenty more of those.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Don’t be so shortsighted.” I dropped the tablet in my lap and stared at her. “My world runs on deals. I make an agreement to get what I want. You do the same. You wanted your books, so you made a deal for them.”

“Can we make another deal?”

My heart jumped at the prospect, but I kept my game face on. “What for?”

She leaned forward, her eagerness whetting my appetite for her even more. “If you let me go—”

“No deal.” I returned my attention to the tablet.

She fisted her small hands. Delightful. Though I was curious what she’d trade for that, it was out of the question. We were forever.

“What does *good behavior* entail?” She spat the words as if they were bitter.

“You follow my rules. Don’t try to escape. It’s quite simple. Once you’ve accepted that this is your life, a whole new world of opportunities will open up to you. The greenhouse, visits to the city, travel, anything you’ve ever dreamed of. I’ll give you everything. I *want* to give you everything. But I can’t do that till I trust you.”

“No sex?”

“Not until you ask nicely.” I swiped to the next contract on my tablet. “But you will sleep with me at night, naked, without complaint. Though I realize you prefer pajamas, especially ones with cats on them.”

“How do you know that?” Her eyebrows lowered, and I could sense her flipping through pieces of information in her mind, putting the picture together. She blanched, horror falling over her sweet face like curtains on a stage. “In fact, how do you know so much about me, right down to my favorite foods, the colors I prefer to wear, and what I like to sleep in?”

“I know everything there is to know about you.”

“How?” She seemed to shrink inward, making herself into the smallest possible version of herself.

I shrugged. “I went through your cottage a few days after we met—your computer, your contacts, your—”

“Oh my god.” She bolted and ran to the bathroom.

I followed, my steps muffled by the sound of her vomiting. She knelt over the toilet in the water closet. I reached out to pull her hair away from her face.

“Don’t you fucking touch me!” she shouted into the bowl.

I didn’t see what the big deal was. Going through her belongings was the smartest move—research. Was it so repulsive? As I watched her heave her lunch into the toilet, I supposed it must have been.

A foreign set of words tumbled around in my chest. Ones I’d only uttered

at the urging of my father, and I'd definitely never meant them. I grabbed a hand towel from next to the sink and handed it to her.

She sat back on her ass and leaned the back of her head against the tiled wall next to the toilet. I didn't like her color, didn't like that I'd caused this reaction in her.

The words rattled around again, demanding their freedom almost as vehemently as Camille had done.

I took a chance. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Her incredulous eyes peered into mine. "Sorry for invading my privacy in the worst way?"

I made a mental note to never tell her about the cameras in her house. "It seemed logical."

"Logical?" Her eyes closed, and she wiped her mouth with the white hand towel again. "Why do you act like a robot?"

"I'm not a robot." I sat down near her, the tile warm beneath me. "I'm a psychopath."

"Right." She laughed, the sound strained and off key.

"I'm not as bad as you think." I could taste the lie, acrid on my tongue, before the sentence was out of my mouth.

"I know." She nodded. "You're worse."

I considered lying to her, but decided against it. "That's accurate."

She clenched her eyes shut, and a tear slipped down her cheek. "Just let me go."

Her soft plea would have broken anyone else. It had the opposite effect on me. The more she tried to fly away, the harder I wanted to clip her wings. She was the most precious thing I'd ever found.

I rose. "I'll be back in a few hours."

"Let me guess." She swiped the tears away with the back of her hand. "You need to return some videotapes?"

"Once again, I find the fact that you can quote *American Psycho* quite telling." *It tells me I'm the only man for you.*

She didn't answer, just stared at me with her watery blue eyes, beautiful even as her tears continued to flow—or possibly because of them.

THE ANIME PORN WASN'T doing it for me. My cock wasn't cooperating. I closed my laptop and leaned back in my chair. It was time for my pre-work jerk, but I couldn't seem to get my usual mojo going.

The problem wasn't the overdrawn tits or the odd Asian words pouring from the pouty lips as the cartoon girl was reamed from behind. It was Camille. Her messages had been so cold ever since she'd left. And when she hadn't returned my "I love you," it stung.

I rose and walked to the wide windows looking out on the city. What was her deal? I inspected my reflection in the glass. Flexing my bicep, I posed and turned to get a look at my profile. I still had it. Hell, women hit on me all the time. But they weren't Camille, so I didn't bother with them except for the few times I'd accepted a blow job. Those didn't count. Not really.

My phone beeped. I returned to my desk and picked it up, hoping for a sext from Camille. Instead, it was a message from an unknown number.

"What the hell?"

Hi Link, this is Mint Baxter, a student of Ms. Briarlane's. I know this is going to sound weird, but have you spoken to her since she left?

Why is some little shit from her class texting me? I hit the button to call the number.

It rang once before he picked up.

"Link?"

"Yeah, why are you texting me?" I hit the speaker button and dropped to the floor to do some pushups. "And how'd you get this number?"

"My Uncle Hal works with you. He left his phone here after he came

to”—he coughed—“visit this weekend. Anyway, I, um, I’m sorry about this, but have you talked to Ms. Briarlane since she left?”

“No. She doesn’t have voice service where she is.” I squeezed my back muscles with each push away from the floor. This horny teen didn’t have a chance with Camille, if that was what he was after.

“I know, but she texted me and it seemed sort of...off. Did you take her to the airport?”

“Look, kid. She’s fine. She’s been texting me. I saw her get into the car that was taking her to the airport.”

“Okay. That makes me feel a little better I guess.”

I rolled my eyes. Like I cared how this pipsqueak felt. “Great. I have some important stuff to do today, so if that’s all...” My biceps began to get the good burn going.

“So her texts to you have been normal?” His voice still carried uncertainty.

“Yeah.” I pushed up and held it. Come to think of it, she’d been colder than usual. Sort of brushing me off? I shook my head. Not possible. “Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Yeah, what did she text to you?” I tucked one hand behind my back and began one-handing it, pushing my breath through my teeth with each lift.

“She was sort of, I don’t know, abrupt.”

“What were you texting her?” *Better not be dick pics.*

“I just had a homework issue I wanted to talk about. Nothing big.” His voice cracked on the last word.

“Right.” I switched hands. “Look, she’s my girl, okay? Whatever little crush you may have on her, forget about it. Your horny teenage dick will never get anywhere near her. You got it?”

He groaned. “That’s not what this is about.”

“Unless you have something to tell me other than ‘my teen hormones are raging and I want to dick down with your girl, but she isn’t responding favorably to my texts,’ this conversation is done.” She wouldn’t even dick down with me. This kid didn’t have a fucking chance.

“Don’t talk about her like that.” His tone took on a sharp edge, and for a moment he sounded more man than boy.

I dropped to my elbows and planked. “Dude, she’s mine. I’ll say what I want.”

“I can’t believe she’s dating you. Look, asshole, she sent me a text earlier today. I’m screenshotting it and sending it to you.”

“Better not be a dick shot.” I tapped on the message and a text thread appeared—the kid bellyaching about his family and Camille blowing him off.

“Do you see the important part?”

I stared at the screen. “Nothing’s jumping out at me.”

Mint Baxter: Did I do something wrong?

Camille Briarlane: No. I’m busy researching *Epipogium Aphyllum*. I’m sorry, but I don’t believe I’ll have much cell service for the rest of the trip. We’ll talk when I return.

“Look at how she capitalized *Aphyllum*.”

“Okay. So?” I rolled to my back on the cool wood floor and began doing crunches.

“Seriously, you’re her guy? *You?*”

“Kid, you’re pissing me off. Get to the fucking point. And for the record, I’m a great guy.”

“Ms. Briarlane would *never* capitalize the species name in a binomial classification.”

“Come again?” I lost count of my crunches but kept on doing them.

“During our very first week in her class, she gave a lecture on the proper way to classify living things. The first word is the genus. The second is the species. The species is never capitalized. She would never make a mistake like that.”

“Have you heard of autocorrect?” My abs burned. I wondered if the kid had a point. Camille was super into the science of things, especially when it came to plants.

“What is wrong with you?” His voice rose. “It wasn’t her. Couldn’t be. She’d never do that. And her texts haven’t even *felt* like her.”

I paused and dropped the back of my head to the floor. “Her texts to me have been sort of weird, too.” The Christmas thing, where she’d practically said she was having a ball without me—that couldn’t possibly be true.

“See?” He crowed with triumph. “Who are her other friends? Will you ask them if she’s been in contact?”

“Yeah, I’ll text Veronica. But don’t get too excited just yet. I’m sure she’s trying to adjust to the new environment.”

“I’m not excited. I’m worried.”

“You’re too young to worry.” I sat up and swiped my phone off the floor.

“I’ll make some calls.”

“Please text me back if you find out anything.”

“Sure thing.” I clicked off the call and opened a text window.

Link: Hey Veronica, you heard from our girl?

The three dots bopped along.

Veronica: She’s my girl and yeah.

Link: She sound weird to you?

Veronica: Um, her responses were sort of short, I guess, but nothing weird in them. Why?

Link: I was just checking. Her responses have been short to me, too.

Veronica: She’s on a grand adventure. Probably doesn’t have time for us when there are plenty of muscly, half-naked natives there to help her out.

Link: Nevermind.

Veronica: Don’t worry. She can take care of herself.

I wanted to let it go at that, but a nagging feeling still ate at me. Camille had left a number for the leader of the expedition. I’d call him up—right after I finished my morning wank.

HIS HELICOPTER TOOK OFF early that morning, the blades slicing through the cold air as I watched from the window of my room. He'd asked me to walk out with him, but I'd refused. He'd looked handsome and powerful in a dark gray suit, but I wanted him gone. The emotions he churned up inside me made me feel as if I was betraying myself. Instead of trying to understand him, I needed to come up with a plan to get away.

The helicopter turned and leaned forward, carrying him farther from me with each passing second. Someone knocked at the door, and then I heard the keypad beeps. Timothy swung the door open and clicked a switch along the closing mechanism. The door remained open.

"Please help me get away from here." I walked over to him.

He kept his eyes downcast.

"Timothy." I stood in front of him.

He wouldn't look at me.

"Hey!" I snapped my fingers in front of his face.

He glanced at me. "I'm not to engage with your escape wishes."

"You're fine with keeping me prisoner here?"

"I'm not to engage." He clasped his hands in front of him. "Your breakfast is ready downstairs."

In his distress, his British accent came through stronger. I recognized it. Everything finally clicked. Anger roared through my bloodstream, poisoning all rational thought.

"Dr. Williams?" I hissed.

His eyes widened, but he didn't respond.

He was the man who'd called and explained the Amazon expedition, the one who'd claimed my old professor recommended me highly for the prestigious spot on the team. It was all a set-up, just part of Sebastian's twisted plan to trap me.

"You lied to me. Played along with his game to get me here. Why?" Fury welled inside me as his silence deepened. "What is wrong with you?" I stepped closer, though he was far bigger. I wanted to shake him. "What has he done to you?"

He finally met my gaze. "He set me free."

"Leave the poor man alone." Sebastian's voice chilled me. It came from a speaker somewhere nearby.

He was watching me, could *hear* me somehow. I whirled and peered around the room, trying to find the camera. Even when I thought I was free of him, he was still here.

"I didn't want to tell you this, but I have a camera system set up throughout the house." Did he actually sound sheepish? I fought the urge to kick and slap Timothy just to get out some of my anger. But it wasn't his fault. Not exactly. It was the fault of the asshole with the disembodied voice.

"You didn't want to tell me about constant surveillance, huh?" I put my hands on my hips and stared at the black chandelier in the center of the room for lack of a better target. "Because it's the most psycho thing you've done yet?"

"In my defense, I had the home wired quite some time ago." The whir of the helicopter blades made a soft *whomp whomp whomp* noise in the background each time he spoke.

"Why?"

"I like to keep an eye on things."

"Where are the cameras?"

"You won't find them. No point looking."

Horror crept up my spine at the thought of him keeping recordings of me. Then another thought smacked me right between the eyes. "Oh, god, are they in the bathroom?"

Silence.

More silence.

"Oh my god!" I screamed and covered my face. After several deep breaths, I dropped my hands. "Turn them off!"

"What will you give me in exchange?"

I didn't want a deal. I wanted privacy. I wanted some semblance of my own space inside this cage he'd created for me. How dare he? Anger made me bold. I returned to Timothy and stopped only a breath away from him. "If you don't turn them off in the bathrooms and this bedroom, I'll kiss Timothy."

Timothy blanched, and his gaze went to the chandelier. *Busted.*

A growl, followed by, "Turn the helicopter around." *Whomp whomp whomp.*

"You won't make it in time." I threw what I hoped was a sexy look over my shoulder to the chandelier. "Maybe I'll make it more than a kiss."

Timothy swallowed hard.

"You wouldn't mind, would you?" I ran my hand along his smooth cheek.

"Turn this helicopter around right this goddamn minute!"

"Agree to my terms or Timothy gets a taste." I lifted onto my tiptoes and flattened my palms on Timothy's hard pecs.

"Please don't." A sheen of sweat broke out along his brow. Pity for him tried to overcome my bravado, but I couldn't let up. Not now.

"All right!" Sebastian's bark startled me. "All right. I'll turn them off in the bathrooms *only.*"

"And the bedroom."

"No."

"Pucker up Timothy." I gripped his cheeks and pulled him down to me.

"Deal!"

I smiled and released the poor man, then turned to the chandelier. "Turn the cameras off *now.*"

"Done."

Timothy sighed with relief and sagged against the doorframe.

"How do I know you aren't lying?" I stared at the chandelier.

"Timothy, dismantle the cameras in my bedroom and all the house bathrooms."

"Yes sir."

"Good." I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling more than a little satisfied with myself.

"Keep going to the city." Sebastian's stern command could have cut glass.

Timothy pulled his black butler's jacket down at the hem, though it was

already straight. “I’ll set to work on the cameras while you’re eating break —”

A buzzing erupted from his pocket followed by a ringtone. He glanced at me. “Excuse me for a moment, please.”

“Sure.” I walked into the hall and turned toward the stairs as the door clicked shut behind me.

“And, Camille.” Sebastian’s voice floated along the hall ahead of me, planting a seed of worry. “I’ll deal with *you* when I return this evening.”



“I think I can get my hands on most of these.” Gerry pushed his worn baseball cap back on his head and surveyed the list of plants I’d given him. “Some of these scientific names I’m not sure of, but I’ll figure them out.”

“Great.” I dug around the roots of the tomato plant I was working with. “How long do you think it’ll take to get them?”

“Some of them today. Some might take a little longer.” His weathered skin crinkled as he spoke, but his dark brown eyes retained a youthful sparkle. “Got big plans?”

I shrugged and pulled the tomato up gently and re-potted in a larger terra cotta. “Just some experiments. I want to do my own drawings and studies on the exotic varieties. The more common ones, I’ll use for hybridization.” I paused. “You wouldn’t be interested in helping me escape, would you?”

“No. I’m not supposed to.” He shifted from one foot to the other. “Has he hurt you any?”

“If I said yes, would you help me?”

“I would, but I’d hate for us to start off on the wrong foot with a lie like that.” He folded the paper and stuffed it into the pocket of his denim

coveralls. “And it would be a lie, wouldn’t it?”

“Other than the obvious mental and emotional damage ...” I wanted to chew on my thumbnail, but my hands were covered in dirt. “No, he hasn’t physically hurt me, but I still shouldn’t be held captive here.”

“No, you shouldn’t. I agree with you there.” Despite his words, he didn’t seem inclined to do a damn thing to help me. He patted the pocket where he’d put my list. “If this is all you need, I best get going.”

I returned my attention to the plant and ignored the useless sting of tears in my eyes. No one here would lift a finger. I was on my own. The urge to cry eased as Gerry’s footsteps faded toward the back of the greenhouse. Though no one would help me, something on my list would allow me to help myself.

“What are you thinking?”

I jumped as Sebastian’s voice came from one of the nearby roof supports. The speaker must have been wired inside it. I placed the tomato into the pot, then poured dirt around it to fill. “I’m thinking it’ll take me all morning to repot the tomatoes, then all afternoon for me to do the complete taxonomy on everything else in here.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

I looked around, wanting to see the camera as I spoke, which was ridiculous. Maybe it was better if I didn’t know and just continued with ghostly Sebastian. “Now you’re an expert on the time it takes to pot and classify plants?”

“No, that part was true. I’m simply saying that wasn’t what you were thinking of.”

I pressed the dark soil around the base of the plant. “Too bad you don’t have a camera in my mind, huh?”

“What I wouldn’t give for such a thing.”

“Psycho,” I whispered as I moved on to the next plant.

“I can read your lips.” His voice dropped lower. “I think about your lips quite a bit, actually. How soft they are. The way you taste. How your tongue is almost as curious as my own.”

“Don’t you have some dirty deals to do?” I wiped a stray hair from my face with a clean section of forearm. “I’m busy here.”

“I have a meeting in five minutes that I’m looking forward to.”

“Why so excited?” I threw in some extra manure at the bottom of the terra cotta pot. “You planning the annual seal clubbing retreat?”

His laugh filled the space around me, electrifying it with unexpected mirth. Something about it warmed me. I couldn't stop the faint smile that crept across my lips, so I tipped my head down so he wouldn't see.

"Thank you for your beautiful smile. I'll carry it with me for the rest of the day." He sighed. "I'm afraid I'll be busy until six or so. And then we're having company this evening."

I paused my work. "Company? Who?"

"My father."

I tried to keep a steady tone. "He knows you have me locked up here?"

"I tell Dad everything."

"And he's *okay* with it?" I almost snapped the stalk of the next tomato plant.

"I wouldn't quite say that. But he's learned to let me do my thing, even if that thing isn't exactly—"

"Legal, moral, ethical, fair, sane?"

His low laugh was darker this time. "I was going to say reasonable."

"He's an enabler."

"Of sorts, yes."

"Great." My deadpan was still as fresh as my gardening skills.

"I must go, but I'll be back soon."

"Take your time."

"And don't think I've forgotten about your little maneuver this morning. That will require a bit more of an intensive discussion."

I lifted my arm toward the sky and extended my middle finger.

His laughter rolled through the rays of sun. "Soon."

I STRODE AWAY FROM the helicopter and toward the library wing of the house. My heartburn had intensified each moment I was away from her. Link's phone call to the home office of "Dr. Williams" had put me on edge. Timothy had posed as a research assistant and reassured the dunce that Camille was fine, just hard at work along with Dr. Williams. Apparently, my texts had raised suspicion, so I needed to up my game to throw them off.

The helicopter took off, heading to the parking pad and hangar on the far side of the property. The house glowed bright in the night, though my gaze focused on the library where she'd just been curled up with a book.

Now, with her close, I wanted to run until I had her in my arms. Not that she'd let me touch her without a deal. Maybe Dad would be able to help me out with that area of finesse. I'd seen his car rolling up the long driveway as the helicopter was landing.

Timothy greeted me at the rear door. "She's in the library with your father. I tried to delay him—"

"Fuck." I barreled past him and down the hall to the library. The black door was open, and Camille's voice carried.

"—can't just expect me to stay here forever!"

"I know." My dad's calming voice tried to overcome her loud notes. "It's not forever. Just give me an opportunity to speak with him."

I walked into the library. Camille stood with her back to the fire, her arms crossed over her chest. The light heather of her sweater gave her a warm glow, and the jeans she'd chosen hugged the lines of her legs. The heartburn eased, the nearness of her like a balm even if she was scowling at me with all

her might.

“My ears were practically burning.” I smirked at her.

Her glower deepened, and her hands curled into fists.

“Son, don’t make it worse.” Dad sank into his favorite chair—the same one Camille favored. “What a mess.”

“It’s not a mess.” I unbuttoned my jacket and slid it off. Camille’s eyes followed my movement. When her gaze lingered on my chest, I drank in the reassurance her attraction gave me. She could fight it all she wanted, but the desire in her gaze was far more truthful than the denials from her lips.

“You’ve kidnapped this poor girl.” Dad rubbed his forehead, his voice quivering with age. “I can’t fix this, son. Everything I’ve taught you, you threw it away. This isn’t going to end well.”

“Everything is going according to plan.” I sat across from him. “Camille belongs here with me. You’ll see. So will she.”

“Standing right here, psycho.” She pinned her thumbnail between her teeth.

I hated the distress on my father’s face, but it couldn’t be helped.

He shook his head, then turned to Camille. “Do you have any family, dear?”

“You mean will anyone miss me?” The bitter tone in her voice seemed to crumple my father even more.

“I’m certain plenty of people will miss you.” He offered her his best attempt at a smile. “No doubt of that. And I’m sorry.”

“If you’re sorry, then tell your son to let me go!”

He looked at me, the worry leaking from him like air from a punctured lung. “You have to let her go, Sebastian.”

“I know it’s hard to understand for both of you, but this is right. I’m not letting her go.”

“You’re insane! You can’t just steal a person.” Camille turned her back to me and cradled her head. “I’m supposed to be in the Amazon,” she mumbled into her hands.

“Son.” My father’s gentle tone—the one he used when he was trying his best to reach the me that he hoped existed inside the psychopath (spoiler alert: there was only the psychopath)—assailed me. “When you told me this morning, I half-hoped you were joking. But I knew you weren’t. I knew it.” He shook his head. “I did my best to raise you, to show you how to be a good man despite everything. This isn’t the way. And now, you’ve bought yourself

a ticket to prison. After all I've done to keep you out of institutions." Tears welled in his eyes. "Son, please, just let her go."

"I don't expect you to understand. But you will." I pointed at Camille. "She makes me *feel*." I pointed at Dad. "Your tears, they should make me sad, right? They don't. I see you upset and I think 'I don't want you to be unhappy' but I don't *feel* your sadness. But her"—I leaned forward, as if proximity might make my dad understand—"when she cries, when she laughs; I feel it in here." I tapped my chest over my heart. "I've never had that, never experienced anything like it. I can't let that go. Don't you see?"

Camille turned back to me, her eyes sad, though I suspected her pity was more for me than herself.

Dad glanced at her, then back to me. Something new had dawned on his face. It seemed almost...hopeful? "Son, step out of the room for a moment, would you? I'd like to talk to Camille alone."

I didn't want to leave her, but I trusted my father. "All right." Standing, I strode to the door, despite the itch to return to her.

Dad waved Camille to the seat on the couch I'd just vacated and followed me to the door. "Son, turn off the camera. Audio, too." He shut the black door in my face, and I was completely in the dark.



They emerged after what seemed like forever, but was technically only one hour and forty-three minutes.

I pushed off the wall where I'd been waiting. When Dad hugged Camille, I wanted to separate them. *Mine*. It was the first time in my life I'd ever thought of harming my father. I stayed put and paid close attention to their cues.

Her eyes were watery, her nose slightly rosy. She'd been crying. My father sniffed. They'd been crying together. When Camille finally looked at me, there was some sort of new understanding in her eyes along with her usual wariness.

"What did I miss?"

Dad headed toward the dining room. "What's Rita cooking up for dinner?"

Camille followed.

"You aren't going to tell me what you two discussed?" I fell into step with her.

"No."

Fuck. I supposed the good news was that she didn't seem any more inclined to run than she did before.

"Have you decided to stop trying to leave?"

She shook her head. "It would take a lot more than a discussion with your dad for me to agree to give up my freedom."

"But you two hugged?" It sounded dumb. I knew it, but I wanted any morsel of what they'd discussed. "So, that's a good thing?"

She paused before walking into the dining room.

Her light blue eyes pierced me, then glanced at my dad. "Let's just say I'm not your only victim."

SEBASTIAN BRUSHED HIS TEETH and watched me in the mirror as I skirted behind toward my closet. It struck me as odd that I already considered it “my” closet. I reminded myself it was only “a” closet as I changed into pajamas.

When I walked out and grabbed my toothbrush from the sink, Sebastian shook his head. “No clothes.”

“I don’t care about your stupid rules.” I squeezed some toothpaste onto my brush and got to work as he glared at me in the mirror. Taking my time, I brushed slowly and methodically as his scowl deepened. When I was done, I turned and headed toward the bedroom.

He grabbed my arm and whipped me around, then pinned me against the wall. “I don’t know what my father told you about me, but I can assure you that challenging me on this isn’t in your best interest.”

“I’m wearing my pajamas to bed.”

“No.” He leaned closer. “You aren’t. I’ll rip them the fuck off if I have to.” His smirk appeared, and I struggled to keep my gaze locked with his.

I wrapped all my confidence into a ball and hurled it into my voice. “I have a deal for you.”

He gripped my t-shirt, fisting the material and pulling me toward him. “It better involve you being naked.”

I swallowed thickly and tried to summon up all the courage his father had given me earlier in the library. “The deal is this. You let me wear what I want to bed, and I’ll willingly let you hold me. *Or* I sleep naked and stay on my side of the bed, no touching. Your choice.”

His eyes flickered to my lips. “You forgot option three.”

I grabbed his hand and tried to pry his fingers loose. They didn’t move.

“Option three is that I could strip you and force you to sleep against me.”

He pressed me into the wall, his body mastering mine. “I already know how you like to be kissed.” His voice dropped even lower. “And I know how much you enjoyed it, no matter how much you lie to yourself.”

I gave up on trying to free my shirt. “I’d fight you all night.” My breathy voice betrayed me, but I wasn’t giving up until I gained some ground.

“Us naked together, our bodies tangled and pressed against each other? Doesn’t sound so bad.”

I shuddered, but not from fear. This had to be textbook Stockholm Syndrome, because his words heated me inside and out.

“My deal is the only one that doesn’t end with my knee in your crotch.” I forced what I hoped was a stern look onto my face. “Hold me or don’t. It’s up to you.”

He licked his lips and relaxed his grip on my shirt. “Get in bed.”

“Pajamas or no?” *Hell, did I just win?*

“You can wear yours.” He tucked his thumbs in the waistline of his boxers and pushed them to the floor. His cock sprang free, thick and hard. “But I’ll be naked.”

I turned and scurried into the bedroom. He hit the light in the bathroom and trailed right behind me.

“Come here.” Though this was *my* deal, the command hadn’t left his tone.

I slid between the sheets and watched his dark silhouette ease down beside me. His hand wrapped around my waist and he pulled me into his side.

A deep sigh left his lungs as soon as our bodies connected. “Why does this feel so right?”

He overwhelmed me—his warmth, the honest wonder in his voice, and the way I reacted to him. I didn’t understand it, and I hated myself for even having remotely positive feelings toward him. It was messed up beyond words.

“I know you feel it, too.” He nuzzled into my hair.

“No.” It was a weak protest given the way my stomach clenched as my breasts pressed into his side, my nipples hardening without my consent.

He rolled to his side and wrapped his arms around me, enfolding me in a toxic embrace. I was caught in the jaws of a venus flytrap. Just like a hapless fly, I thought I’d had the upper hand. But now, with him pressed against me, I

was falling prey to the lure.

“Touch me.” His gravelly voice raked down my body, setting my skin alight.

“That wasn’t part of the dea—”

“You said I could hold you.” He pressed his lips to my ear and whispered, “Just hold onto me, too.”

I left my arm lying on my side, refusing to return his embrace.

“Stubborn.” He smiled against my ear. “How about another deal?”

“I feel pretty good about our current contractual situation.”

“I know you feel good.” He flattened his palm on my back rubbing back and forth. “But maybe I have something to offer.”

“What’s that?” His hands on me were drugging, and I relaxed despite myself.

“If you agree to touch me—”

I shook my head against him. “I’m not giving you a handy.”

His low laugh tried to seduce me. “I’ve already tasted your lips, your tongue. You enjoyed it as much as I did.”

Heat flamed in my cheeks, and I had to force myself to stay put. “I didn’t have much choice in that.”

“You had a choice.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “And you made the decision the *real* you wanted.”

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

“I think you do. A part of you knows that I’m the man for you. That we belong together. That’s the real you. You aren’t some fair maiden that your idiot boyfriend must save and speak for and treat like a princess. You’re light, but you crave the dark. You crave me.”

My heart answered him in hasty thumps, and I wished I’d just stripped and slept on the edge of the bed. His touch was too disarming, his words speaking to me on a level I never even touched. How could he see inside me? Or maybe he wasn’t seeing anything at all. Maybe he was simply projecting what he wanted onto me. But if that were true, why did I feel so conflicted?

“As for the handy, that’s not what I meant. Not that I’d say no, of course. Your part of this deal is that, if you agree, you pretend to like me for the night.”

I craned my head back to look into the dark pools of his eyes. “That’s a tall order.”

His lips twitched. “I’m sure it’s not as tough as you make it out to be.”

“You’re right. It’s worse.”

“Come on.” He kept rubbing my back. “Pretend you’re here because you want to be.”

He was asking for more than his words conveyed. Letting go—that’s what he wanted from me. To forget myself and let this happen to me.

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Why not?”

I stretched my left leg, the bracelet light and warm from my body heat, but still weighing me down. “Because it’s not real.”

“That’s where the pretend part comes in.”

“What are you offering in return?”

“A day in the city.”

My breath hitched. “Are you serious?”

“Do I seem the joking sort to you?”

“Not particularly.” Hope hummed a sweet tune inside me. If I could get to the city, maybe I’d have a chance to get away.

“The deal is that next Monday, you will accompany me to the city. You will stay at my penthouse while I attend to business. I will see you at lunch, and then again at dinner. Timothy will be with you the entire time. If you make a wrong move, I’ll instruct him to drug and bring you back here, where we’ll have to start all over again.”

“Why can’t it be tomorrow?”

He pulled me so that he could rest his chin on my crown. “Too soon. Besides, your part of the deal is that every night this week, you let me hold you and you touch me back. That’s how you get to the city.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Every night?”

“Yes.”

Playing it cool seemed like a wise option, but I wasn’t going to let this chance get away from me. “What do you mean by ‘touch’ you?”

“What do you want it to mean?” He kissed the top of my head.

“Hey.” I leaned away from him. “No kissing.”

A low growl rumbled through his chest as he pulled me back to him. “Stubborn. What I mean is that you have free rein over my body. Treat me like someone you’re comfortable with.” He tensed. “Like...like that moronic dipshit you were seeing.”

“You mean Link?” I knew it bothered him, so I used what small weapons I had to strike back.

His muscles turned to stone around me. “Yes, *him*. But more, I want much more. Be comfortable with me.” He pulled back and stared at me, his body relaxing with each second he looked into my eyes. “You’re safe here. Always safe with me. I’ll never hurt you.” He rested a warm palm on my cheek. “Pretend that you believe me. Pretend you want to be here. Pretend you want me to be yours.” *Pretend you want to be mine*. He didn’t say the words, but I could feel them in the air.

He was being earnest, but his plea struck me as sad. As if he were looking for affection, though he couldn’t quite put it into words. He didn’t know the language, but it didn’t stop him from wanting it. And, despite the circumstances, I couldn’t fault him for that.

Even a twisted tree would reach for the sun.

“You’re making that face. The one I can’t read.” He ran his fingertips down my cheek, then grazed my lips.

“I wear pajamas, you’re allowed to hold me, and I’ll try to be comfortable with you by”—deep breath—“touching you. And then I get to go to the city Monday?”

“Yes.” He pressed his forehead to mine. “Say yes.”

I convinced myself that touching him was a small price to pay for a chance at escape, that giving in to his wishes would help my cause more than his. But just as with our previous deal, I couldn’t deny the basest part of me that warmed beneath his touch, and worse, that wanted to feel him. Saying yes was giving him another piece of my soul, and I could only hope that I’d get them all back whenever I regained my freedom.

“Yes.”

“It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.” He smiled, true delight lighting his angular features. “Now put your hands on me.”

TENTATIVE FINGERS ALONG MY sides, her soft breath tickling my shoulder. I wanted to dive into her, to explore every depth, map out everything that made her tick. But I would settle for this—her gentle touch. I needed to build trust. The newest deal—one of her creation—was a brilliant solution to that little problem.

Just like newborns with their mothers, simple physical contact could create a bond so strong that nothing could shatter it. And here we were, her in my arms and a contentment I'd never experienced filling my mind to bursting.

“Everything here is yours,” I whispered in her ear as her fingers grew bolder, teasing along my back and then farther up to my neck.

She shivered and placed her other palm over my heart. Her touch flowed along my skin, and I never wanted it to stop.

Meeting my eyes, she placed her palm on my cheek. “Are you doing some robot math right now?”

For the first time in my life, I wasn't. I was simply existing, my mind silent except for thoughts of her. “No.”

She ran her fingers to my brow and brushed the hair from my face. “How old are you?”

I smiled. “Thirty-two.”

“Ever been married?” Her fingers continued their inspection, teasing around my ear.

“No.”

“Long-term relationship?”

“No.”

She nodded. “Your dad said you were”—her small white teeth nibbled her bottom lip—“aloof, I think was the word he used.”

“I was until you.”

“Lucky me.”

“I think so.” I slipped my fingers beneath the hem of her t-shirt and rubbed her lower back. “I’ve never taken anyone prisoner before you.”

She crinkled her nose. “The fact that you can say that with a blasé attitude is messed up.”

“Perhaps, but I see it differently.”

“You’ve said. This will all make sense to me eventually, right? And I’ll be fine with it?”

“Yes.” No hesitation.

“Has it ever occurred to you that it won’t work out that way?” She dropped her hand to my shoulder and rested it there.

“No. Because I’m not letting you go, and I know you feel it, too.”

Her nails dug into me. “What does a robot know about feelings, much less *my* feelings?”

“When you were eight, you rescued a porcupine den when a neighbor began clearing land that threatened their habitat. Even though you had to go to the ER after getting quilled by one of them, you still made sure they were relocated and safe.”

She gawked at me. “How did y—?”

“Newspaper article from your hometown paper.” I shrugged. “When you were sixteen, you were named homecoming queen. The homecoming king, your boyfriend at the time, was the all-American sort. Clean cut, athletic, typical good guy. But in photos from that night, your gaze was always drawn to the leather-wearing, motorcycle-riding young man who was eventually thrown out of the dance for drinking and smoking on school grounds.”

Her eyebrows hit her hairline.

“Your yearbook and a few ancient Myspace posts.”

“Stalker.”

“Yes.” I inched my fingers higher up the skin along her back while she was distracted. “Your favorite movie? *The Silence of the Lambs*. Favorite book? *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. I found out all of this *after* we met. Each fact building on the last until I had a solid image of you, one that matched the what my intuition had already told me. You were made for me. Your whole

life, you've played the fair damsel, waiting for her prince charming to sweep her off her feet. But that's not who you are."

"You have no idea who I am." She drew her hand away.

I tsked. "Your trip to the city is in danger."

She scowled and draped her arm over my side, her fingertips brushing against my back.

"Better." I slid my fingers higher, greedily touching as much of her as possible. "When your parents died within six months of each other, Link swooped in to the rescue. You let him. But he was a crutch that turned into something that was never meant to be. You used him."

"No. That's a lie."

"You did. Used him, led him on despite the fact you had no intention of ever moving to the city with him. Wouldn't even let him fuck you—thanks for that, by the way."

Her body turned to stone, her nails digging into my back. She wanted to storm away from me, to give a furious denial, but she wanted to go to the city more. I'd caught her in her own trap. She'd have to stay here, in my arms, while I told her why we were perfect together.

"I crunched the data, and I found you. The real you. The one who wants a monster instead of a man. You enjoy dancing with the devil. Our deals? You play the good girl, but you wanted my kiss." I nuzzled into her ear. "I can't stop thinking about your taste, the sounds you made."

Her nails raked down my back. "Stop."

"That's my girl." I smirked and met her eyes again. Her hard nipples hadn't escaped my notice. Neither had the wet heat between her thighs. "No one knows you. Not really. Not like I do. And I don't judge you. I'm drawn to your spark of darkness the same way you're drawn to the ocean of mine. We aren't magnets pulled together by a weak force; we create our own gravity for each other."

Her eyes narrowed, but the denial in her mind didn't pass her lips. Did she know it wouldn't ring true?

"Have you ever told Veronica how much you wanted me that night we danced?"

Her gaze darted away. "You've manufactured all these conjectures into one big hypothesis that you'll never be able to prove. Scientific method fail."

"We'll see." I hugged her closer, tucking her against my chest.

"And you're cheating with your hand under my shirt."

“What are you going to do about it?” I flattened my palm against her smooth skin.

A sting erupted along my pec, the pain intensifying until I relaxed my hand on her back. She’d bitten me. Hard.

My semi turned into the hardest erection I’d had in my life. “Do that again, and I’ll be forced to bury my face in your cunt until you learn how to behave.” *Please do it again.*

She huffed and settled her head on my bicep. “Go to sleep. I’m tired of your robot analysis and your stalking and—really, I’m just tired of you.”

“Sure you are.” I relished the reverberating pain of her teeth marks. “Next time, draw blood.”

“Psycho.”

I kissed her hair again and relaxed into my pillow. “*Your* psycho.”

“**K**ID, LOOK. I TALKED to the expedition leader guy. Everything is fine.”
“Did he let you talk to Ms. Briarlane?” The concern in Mint’s voice made me prickle. Why was this kid so interested in my girl?

“No, she was up a tree.”

“Doesn’t that seem suspicious?”

“No.” I waved my secretary into my office. She sat in one of my visitor’s chairs, her long legs shining in the morning light pouring through the windows behind me. I followed them all the way up to her skirt and the darkness beneath it. Definitely a thigh gap going on with this new temp. I licked my lips.

“—you even hear me, Link? Hello?”

I’d missed whatever he’d been rambling on about. The temp had put the top of her pen in her mouth, pressing it between her teeth. “I wouldn’t worry.”

“Has she texted you?”

“Not for a couple days, but that’s to be expected.” Why couldn’t this adolescent horndog leave it alone? “Stop worrying. She’s fine.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I do, and I’m the adult. Leave it alone.” I tried to exude authority. The new secretary perked up a bit, so it was working.

The kid grumbled, then stayed silent for a beat. “Wait. You said you saw the car that picked her up?”

“Yeah, so? Look, I have some business to attend to—”

“Just hear me out. What sort of car was it?”

“A black limo. Nothing special.” I’d like to show the blond in my visitor’s chair the inside of a nice limo.

“Is that normal?”

“What?”

“A science expedition to spring for a limo?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been on a science expedition.” My patience reached its limit. “Don’t call again, kid. Everything’s fine.”

“No, Link—”

I tapped the screen and gave the temp my winning smile. She melted right before my eyes. I bet her red lipstick would look hot as fuck on my dick.

I settled back into my chair. “Now, what’s on our agenda for the day?”

GERRY WENT OVER THE plants he'd delivered to the greenhouse earlier in the afternoon. They sat in various produce boxes, green stems and a few blooms mixed in.

"Is this everything?" I surveyed the haul, but I didn't see the main species I was looking for.

He pushed his worn navy ball cap back on his head. "I had to order four of them from Florida. Shipment got delayed. They should be here in a few days."

"Oh." To hide my disappointment, I pulled on some gloves and busied myself with the new arrivals.

He looked around at the orderly rows of plants and the newer seedlings I'd separated into pots. Just in the past handful of days, he'd helped me arrange the greenhouse to my liking and provided me with all the tools I'd asked for—except pruning shears. Apparently, sharp weapons were forbidden.

"Is there anything I can do for you today?" He slipped a toothpick from one side of his smile to the other.

I pointed to another list on the prep table. "I want some seeds, if that's possible."

"Sure." He swiped the list and skimmed it. "These should be easy to get. The heirloom ones will require a bit more searching, but I should be able to scare some up."

"Great."

"Anything else?"

“Not right now.” I squinted at the row of tropical plants. “I think we may have a clogged mister, but I won’t know until this afternoon. I’ve adjusted their watering interval, and one is acting skittish.”

“Just let me know.” He stared through the glass toward the tree line. “I’ll be out in the woods a bit today, but all you have to do is let Timothy know you need me, and I can get back here in a jiffy.”

“What are you doing in the woods?” I reached past him for a smaller hand shovel.

He dropped his gaze to my ankle. “Just checking some lines. Maintenance.”

“Oh.” I grimaced.

“Sorry.” His sheepishness didn’t diminish the fact that he was out checking my prison bars to make sure they’d hold.

“Any chance you’ll turn all those monitors off?”

“None.” Sebastian’s voice cut off Gerry’s reply.

Gerry tapped the bill of his hat before turning and striding out of the greenhouse.

“Getting your creepy jollies by watching me garden again?”

“Just checking in between meetings.”

I glanced toward my tomato plants and frowned. A white spot on one of the stems I’d noticed earlier in the morning had doubled in size.

“Problem?”

I leaned down and inspected the plant. “Some sort of mold, I suspect. I’d need a microscope to know for sure.” Walking down the row, I scrutinized the other tomatoes. None of them seemed to have the infection.

He was silent as I pulled the problem plant and set it on a bare patch of table several feet from the other tomatoes. Did the seedlings still at the Trenton greenhouse have the same issue?

“You slept well last night.” I couldn’t miss the satisfaction in his voice.

“I must have been worn out from all your psychoanalysis. Emphasis on *psycho*.” For the past three nights, he’d held me in his arms and told me bits of information he’d picked up about me during his stalking efforts. Then he explained how each fact meant that we were perfect together while I denied it all until I fell asleep.

He laughed. “You are far more quick-witted than a simple schoolteacher should be.”

“And it’s far easier to run circles around a CEO than it should be.” I

forced my lips to stay in a neutral line, though a smile threatened.

“I have half a mind to come home early today.” His playful tone spurred a mix of emotions inside. Dread wasn’t among them, and I cursed that fact.

I shook my head. “This is my time. I’m busy.”

“You wouldn’t make time for me?”

“Definitely not.” I finished my inspection and returned to the greenhouse’s new additions.

“I’m wounded.” His tone was laughing, but I couldn’t tell if he was laughing at or with me.

“Good.”

“My next meeting is about to begin.”

“In that case, my day is looking up.” I ran my fingers down the satiny leaves of a dwarf rhododendron. Despite my attempts at focusing on anything other than him, I still waited for his voice to pulse through the speakers.

He didn’t disappoint. “I suspect you’ll change your tune once I have you in my arms tonight.”

“You’re right. My tune will change to a snore.”

“I doubt that quite a bit.”

“You keep doubting, and I’ll keep plotting ways to knife you and run.”

His low growl set the air around me on fire. “I’d chase you. Catch you. I think you’d like that. For me to chase you again. But this time, instead of giving you a ride back to the house, I’d let you take your aggressions out on me. Every last bit of energy expended as you worked my cock. Out in the open, fucking like animals.”

Wicked words funneled into my ears and deeper, landing in the dark depths of my soul. I hoped he couldn’t see the heat in my face, the rush of arousal that flooded my skin.

A low laugh wrapped around me like a dark fur stole. “You can’t hide yourself from me. I’m the only one who’s ever seen you.” His voice faded, as though he were speaking to someone else nearby, and I couldn’t make out the words.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves and refusing to entertain visions of the two of us writhing in the grass along the tree line. It was wrong, beyond sick, and just the sort of messed up image that made my insides twist.

“We’ll continue this tonight.” Impatience colored his words, and then he went quiet.

I worked for a little while longer, struggling to focus on my tasks. How could a few coarse words from his lips light such a fire inside me? I couldn't get them out of my mind, and my body reacted as if he were here whispering into my ear, his hands on me like they were every night. I forced myself to focus, going task by task until I had a working rhythm. The thoughts wouldn't stay silent, cropping up whenever I gave my mind a chance to wander.

When I accidentally potted a trailing vine in a mix of clay and manure instead of the sandy loam it required, I ripped my gloves off and tore out of the greenhouse. Thoughts of our bodies twisting together, of him making good on his claims that I was his roiled in my brain. I had to rid myself of the thoughts, to shut them down so I could focus on the bigger picture.

Timothy balanced atop a ladder in the foyer while hanging a wide swag of Christmas greens above the door. He'd been decorating all morning.

"I'm taking a nap," I blurted and took the stairs two at a time.

"All right," he called from behind me. "I won't bother you. Just use the call switch next to the door when you're ready to..."

I didn't look back at him, just sought the bedroom like a missile. After hitting the mechanism that allowed the door to close, I was alone, secreted away from Sebastian's eyes. He wouldn't know. As far as he was concerned, I was taking an early afternoon nap.

My shirt hit the floor first, then my sports bra, jeans, and panties. I lay on the bed and stared up at the chandelier. I'd seen Timothy taking apart the small camera that had been embedded in one of the decorative arms. It was gone. Even so, I pulled the sheet over me, the slight contact with my aching nipples sending a wave of need through me.

I closed my eyes and spread my legs, letting my fingers find their way to the tight bud of nerves. One stroke of my middle finger, and a low moan rose from my lungs.

I was primed, ready to end my torment in an explosion of bliss. My mind created its own scenario, one that was as wrong as it was erotic. Sebastian loomed over me, his perfect body on full display. I was spread beneath him, giving him a show as he watched me touch myself. I stared into his emerald eyes as he stroked his thick cock, the muscles along his neck bulging from the strain.

"Don't come." His voice was deep, hoarse. "Not yet. Your orgasm belongs to me."

I circled my clit, teasing it before delving inside and pulling my wetness onto my hot flesh. My moans grew louder in both fantasy and reality.

Sebastian licked his full lips. “Spread wider for me.” He put his knees on the bed and stroked his cock down the length of my pussy.

I arched, my fingers playing my favorite tune. “Sebastian.”

He smirked. “I told you this was it. That you were mine.” His cock head pressed against my opening. “Now you’re going to feel it.” He pushed inside in a harsh movement, claiming me with a sure stroke.

I cried out and bit my lip. The delicious mental image pushed me to the edge, my body on the verge of letting go.

Sebastian grabbed my hair and pulled, then fastened his mouth to my neck as he pumped into me, each stroke driving me wilder than the last. My legs began to shake, the sensations overwhelming me.

“Sebastian, please,” I whimpered.

“This is just the beginning.” His voice in my ear, his body owning mine—I couldn’t take it.

I came on a long, low moan, my body folding tight before exploding outward like a deck of cards. Parts of me scattered everywhere, though I kept the image of his intense green eyes. It stayed with me until I came back down, my lower back finally hitting the mattress once again. I breathed deeply, the lust fog clearing from my brain. Now I could concentrate, could stop thinking of Sebastian as anything other than my jailor.

“I just came in my office bathroom. Your name was on my lips.” Sebastian’s deep voice was almost breathy. “Fuck, that was hot.”

I froze and yanked the blanket to my chin before anger burst to my surface. “You said you’d removed the camera. You promised!”

“I did.” His sexy laugh relit the fire I thought I’d doused. “But there’s still audio.”

SHE FELL SILENT, AND I wanted so badly to see her. But I'd made a deal, one I couldn't cheat on. There was no camera capability in our bedroom or bathroom.

When I'd received the notification from Timothy that she'd returned to our bedroom, I'd clicked on the audio and popped an earbud into one ear while I listened to a new ad campaign pitch with the other.

Her first labored breath had punched me right in the stomach, and when she'd said my name? I'd walked right out of the meeting and to my office. My secretary had given me a blank look when I'd instructed her to tell the ad company to wait for my return, then I'd slammed my door, locked it, and turned up the volume. Her sounds had almost killed me. And the way she'd said my name? If she did that in person, it would bring me to my knees. It already brought me to climax in my fucking washroom. A first.

She'd gone silent after I let her in on the audio secret, so I'd returned to the meeting. They resumed as if nothing were amiss. But if I'd been mentally absent before, I was on a mental vacation now. My thoughts circled Camille like vultures around a kill. She couldn't deny she wanted me, not anymore. I had so many of the necessary ingredients to convince her to stay, but I was still missing the main one—trust. What would it take to get it?

The room had gone silent, and with the way everyone was looking at me, it had been that way for quite some time.

I stood. "I'll consider it and get back to you within the week."

The lead ad man—a pudgier Don Draper sort—smiled and rose along with me. "Thank you for the opportunity."

Link stood as well and opened the door, an expectant expression on his dumb face as he watched me.

I strode past him, heading for my corner office.

“Sebastian.” He dogged my heels. “Can I have a word?”

No, but you can have a pen in your eye. “What would you like to discuss? I have a full schedule this afternoon.” I did. It was true. But I intended to cancel everything and fly home to Camille. I could beat her orgasm by a mile with just my mouth, and she knew it.

“Mr. Lindstrom, Graffine called to confirm your reservation for Saturday evening?” My secretary held the phone to her ear.

“Cancel it. I don’t have time.” I was supposed to meet Dad, but he’d understand I was too busy for an evening out, not when Camille was waiting for me at home.

“Fine.” She turned back to her desk as I entered my office.

“Graffine? That place is tough to get into.” Link was still at my heels.

“What do you want?” I didn’t bother hiding my irritation.

“It’s about my girlfriend.”

I continued my brisk stride to my desk, though I wanted to grab him by his suit coat and throw him through my window. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Well, there’s this kid who’s been bothering me about her, and he’s sort of getting into my head. And now he’s gone and got a couple of her friends worried, too.”

“I’m sorry, where is your girlfriend in all of this?” I slid off my suit coat as I listened intently to each syllable the imbecile uttered.

“She’s on this expedition to the Amazon to study plants, but she’s been acting weird in her texts and I can’t get her on the phone. I tried calling the leader of her group via satellite phone, but he said she couldn’t talk because she was up a tree, and—”

“What does this have to do with me?” I sat at my desk and opened my emails.

He sank into one of my chairs, unbidden. “Nothing, really. It’s just I know you have ways to get things done, and I was hoping maybe you could pull a few strings—”

My eyebrows rose, and I gave him what I could only call a stony glare of imminent death.

He hurried along, “There are two Lindstrom operations in Brazil, so I

figured—”

“You figured that I would use valuable company resources to track down the girlfriend who doesn’t want to talk to you?” I leaned back in my chair, giving him my full, withering attention. “And just how long has she been gone?”

“She left Saturday morning, and it’s Thursday, so—”

“Six days? You’re in my office asking for favors when she’s only been out of your sight for six days?”

He pulled at the knot in his tie as his cheeks blanched. “You know, you’re right. That kid just got into my head, and then Veronica started asking questions.”

“The blonde?”

“Yeah.” He did his best to smile, though it turned out sickly at best. “You want her number?”

“No, thank you.” I swiveled back to my computer. “If that’s all, I have work to do, and I suspect you do, as well.”

“Yes.” He rose and walked to the door.

I did a rapid calculation and erred on the side of getting as much data as possible. I tried for a compassionate tone. “Hang on a moment. I didn’t mean to be harsh. Look, if more time passes and you still have these suspicions, let me know. I’ll see what I can do about it.”

I smiled.

He flinched.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” He gave me a curt nod and hurried out of my office.

The moron was still in the dark, and I’d gotten a direct line to any suspicions he may develop. I needed him to calm down, though he didn’t seem to be the real problem. It was that brat from her class. He was the one raising a stink. But if Veronica had become suspicious too, I needed to do damage control.

I logged into the cell account for Camille’s phone. She had a dozen texts from Veronica, each one more frantic than the last. On top of that, there were a couple more from Mint. And finally, the dipshit managed to text, “Is everything okay?”

Was I so bad at mimicking a normal human being? Clearly, I was. Given the alarmist tone of Veronica’s texts, which included a threat to call the American ambassador in Brazil, I needed to do something, and I needed to do

it quickly.

My phone beeped, and my secretary's voice cut through my musings. "Mr. Lindstrom is here to see you."

Dad wasn't on my calendar, but it wasn't as if I could turn him away. Damn, I didn't have time for him.

He walked in and shut the door behind him. I'd seen him on the weekend, but he seemed to have aged even more in the five days between then and now.

His tired eyes surveyed me as he took the seat the cretin had vacated. "Have you let her go yet?"

I stifled a sigh. "No, and I'm not going to."

"You have to."

"Dad, I appreciate you coming to talk to me about this, but nothing has changed. She belongs with me."

"Son, please." He leaned forward, his eyes carrying some of the same intensity I saw in the mirror every morning. "You can't do this to her."

"I'm helping her."

"No." He shook his head. "You aren't. You're helping yourself."

Frustration crept along the edges of my voice. "Nothing you say is going to change my mind."

"Don't you trust me anymore?" Pain, the identical sort I'd seen when my mother died, bloomed in his eyes. "After everything?"

"I do." I wrestled with my thoughts and tried to put them in the most logical order. "I always do. You're the one person who's never let me down, the only one who has my best interests at heart. But this is different. *Camille* is different. I can't explain it."

"I can." He scrubbed an age-spotted hand down his face. "You love her."

I scoffed. "I don't even know what that is."

"You may not, but that heart you've got inside you, it does." He leaned back, though the strain in him didn't lessen. "If you don't let her go, you'll never have her. She'll slip through your fingers like sand."

What was he talking about? "I *already* have her. She isn't slipping through my fingers at all."

My phone started buzzing on my desk. I snatched it up and entered the code. *Fuck*. I had a full camera view of *Camille* jetting across the lawn toward the tree line.

"Son, you have to look deeper. You want her, but you want what's inside

her. Her heart. You'll never get it while she's in a cage." His sigh was bone deep, exhausted.

My palms broke out in a sweat. "Dad, I have some work to attend—"

"No, you're going to listen to me." His tone brooked no argument. "The two of you." He pointed at me. "You belong together."

Where the fuck is Timothy. My phone buzzed harder as she passed the next security level. I wanted to bolt, to fly to the house and catch her, but I couldn't.

"Son!" Dad slammed his palm on my desk—the first time I'd seen him this agitated in a long while. Then his expression softened. "When I talked to her in the library, I could see it all, maybe even the same way you do. Her personality, her likes and dislikes, her light to your dark. I—" He stopped and swallowed thickly, then swiped at his eyes. "I even had this brief fantasy of grandchildren—the two of you making a family and being so happy together."

"Exactly." He was finally catching on. Movement from the edge of the screen caught my eye—Timothy on an ATV. Relief coursed through me. She wasn't going to make it to the woods.

"But this is wrong. What you've done won't work." He shook his head. "I want all those things. You two together. Grandchildren. Happiness. I want all of it for you. But this is not the way to get it. You can trap her and hold her all you want, but you'll never have *her* until you set her free."

"That's not true." I had everything under control. Timothy circled her, and she stopped. Before long, she'd climbed on the ATV with him, and they were both headed back to the house. I set the phone down, but kept peeking at the screen. "You're wrong."

"No." He labored to get to his feet, and shuffled to the door. "I'm not. And that's the saddest part of it all." He didn't look back as the door clicked closed behind him.

DARK VEINS FLOWED FROM the tip of my color pencil, the hue giving the appearance of black blood streaking through the leaf. I'd never gotten my hands on a sample of *Tacca chantrieri*, so I was thrilled to find it in the acquisitions Gerry had brought by earlier, once I'd returned from my last failed escape attempt. My subject sat in the middle of the wide wood table near the library windows, and I drew it as accurately as I could. The plant, often called the black bat flower, had a particular beauty that spoke to me. Inky leaves with ever darker veins were accompanied by a light green display of tendrils that appeared like whiskers on an old cat. I only hoped I could translate it onto paper.

A knock at the door drew my eye, and Timothy strode in with a box in his arms.

"What's that?"

"A microscope, slides, mortar and pestle, tools, and a few other items to get you started. I've ordered the rest and will set up a small science area right inside the music room, unless you'd prefer it in the greenhouse or here."

I stopped drawing. "If I said I wanted the moon, do you think he'd get it for me?"

"I daresay he'd try."

I lifted my gaze to the chandelier. "Sebastian, hey."

Silence.

"Hey, I'm about to take my top off. You have any thoughts on that?"

"Camille, please." Timothy closed his eyes. "I don't know if I can handle any more today."

I rose and walked to him so I could help with the box. “I just wanted to see if he was listening.”

He didn’t give me the box, but carried it to the table where I was working.

“Can I ask you something?” I peered into his light blue eyes.

“If it’s about you leaving, I’d rather you didn’t.” He grimaced and took a step back.

“No.” I gestured toward the leather sofa and the comfortable chair I liked. “This isn’t about me escaping. I promise. Can we sit for a minute?”

“I probably shouldn’t.”

“Please?” I perched on the edge of the chair and hoped he’d follow my lead.

He gave a long look at the door.

“Just for a minute, I promise.” I clasped my hands together.

He sighed and moved to the couch where he sat gingerly and threw frequent glances to the chandelier. “What can I do for you?”

“When we spoke last, you said that Sebastian saved you. Could you tell me what you meant by that?” I was looking for any insight into my captor I could find, and Timothy seemed like a direct inroad.

“That’s not something I like to talk about.” He tangled his fingers together and avoided my gaze.

I rose and sat next to him. “I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable. I’m just trying to understand him.” I kicked my leg up, the golden anklet barely visible at the hem of my jeans. “I don’t want to be a prisoner forever. If there was some way I could...I don’t know, trust him, then maybe I could find some better ways to deal with him. Does that make sense?”

“It does.” He sighed and unbuttoned his fitted black jacket before leaning back against the cushion. “He’s not a good man. He’s not a bad man. There’s no direct way to explain a man like him. So much of what you see is the real him, undiluted, but then there are parts he hides away. I didn’t even realize he had that extra depth until you showed up. It was the first time since I met him that I actually saw him change.”

He’d left an opening, and I took it. “How did the two of you meet?”

He pressed his lips into a thin line, as if uttering the answer aloud would hurt him.

“Will you tell me?”

He grew more tense by the second. “I don’t know if I can.”

I took his hand and squeezed it in mine. “Help me understand him,

please. It's the only way I'm going to be able to survive here. Besides, I think you owe it to me, *Dr. Williams.*"

He turned to me, regret in his eyes. "You know that wasn't my idea, don't you?"

"I realize that, but I will use whatever I can to get you to talk, up to and including guilt for getting me into this situation with your telephone trickery."

He shrugged. "I was quite proud that I was able to talk science with you enough for you to fall for it."

I rolled my eyes. "No wonder you and Sebastian are friends."

"Friends?"

"Yeah. I mean, I realize you're his butler or manservant or whatever, but I can tell the two of you have a bond like old friends."

He smiled. "I like to think so."

"It's true." I patted the back of his hand. "Now spill the history or I'll tell Sebastian you made a pass at me."

He snorted. "I don't think he'll find that believable, but you've done enough strong-arming already. I'll tell you. But, please." He squeezed my hand again. "Don't judge me too harshly." Pausing, he closed his eyes, as if collecting his thoughts before handing them to me. "When he found me, I was in an institution. I was only twenty, and I'd been in the system for four years." His voice didn't stop as much as it faltered away into silence. He cleared his throat. "I was there because when I was sixteen, I killed my boyfriend."

I froze, unsure if I wanted him to continue. He seemed just as unsure, but eventually found his voice. "But I loved him, so I didn't see how I could have done it. I still don't remember it. Not all of it." He opened his eyes, though he seemed to be looking far beyond the walls of the library. "I'm bipolar. I'd just been diagnosed a few months before..." He swallowed hard. "Before it happened, but my parents didn't believe in medication or anything like that. When I was eight, we'd moved to the States to join a church with a dirt floor, daily baptisms, and a pastor who had five wives. They thought that my diagnosis was the result of me consorting with the devil. Even though I would fall into these senseless violent rages, they said that prayer was the answer, not pills. They thought that church would cure me." He smiled, though the sadness in his expression made tears well in my eyes. "They thought church would cure a lot of things about me. But they were wrong.

Sam died because they were wrong. And I was thrown into the darkest hole at St. Andrews after the judge found me incompetent to stand trial for his murder.”

The pain in his voice tore at my heart, but there were no words I could say to change it, or make it better. I could only listen.

“I won’t tell you the details of how St. Andrews treated what they deemed as criminally insane inmates. Those four years are like a blank space in my mind now. I had to cover them over or they would have eventually killed me.” He blinked hard and swiped at his eyes. “During my fourth year, the ownership of the hospital changed hands, and Sebastian joined the board. He toured the facility and found me cuffed to my bed, covered in filth, and with open wounds along my face and body. The guards liked to use me for a punching bag.”

“God, Timothy.” I couldn’t imagine how hellish it must have been.

“Sebastian took one look at me, skimmed through my chart, and ordered the new doctors to treat me with the proper medications. He fired the guards and turned the entire place around. After six more months of treatment, he arranged for my release into his care, and I’ve been with him ever since. He still visits St. Andrews once every six months, though it’s a completely different place now.” He laughed, the sound half sad and half amused. “He even donated money so the psychotic ward would be named after him.”

“Fitting.”

“Very.” He nodded.

“Timothy?”

“Yeah?”

I pulled him into a hug. “I’m sorry about Sam. It wasn’t your fault.”

He returned my embrace. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I squeezed him once more before letting him go.

He met my eyes. “So that’s what I meant when I said he saved me. He did. And he’s saved plenty more at St. Andrews since then.”

I arched a brow. “You said he wasn’t a good man.”

“He isn’t, not in the classic sense. Look at my story in the abstract, the way he would. He saw a young man with a treatable mental illness who’d been locked away and mistreated for years. I don’t pretend to know his thought process, but I would assume it went something like ‘if I can rehabilitate him, he’ll be loyal to me for the rest of his life.’”

“Harsh.”

“True.” He tapped his temple. “If you want to understand him, you need to look at things without the lens of emotion.”

“But that just leads me back to him being a robot.”

“Robot? No. That’s too mechanical, even for him. He has motivations that are sometimes, good, sometimes bad, but he is *always* motivated.”

“What motivates him to keep helping the people at St. Andrews?” I made a show of looking around the library. “I don’t see him creating any other loyal friends to help him keep me prisoner around here.”

“That’s a fair point. But look at it without emotion. Or, better yet, look at it as if it’s a deal. What does he get out of helping St. Andrews?”

“Good press maybe?”

He nodded. “Now you’re getting it. Good press and a place that is dedicated to understanding mental illness, including his own.”

“So it’s selfish?”

“Let’s just say it’s in the interests of self-preservation.” He rose and re-buttoned his neat coat.

I got to my feet. “So are you saying you can figure out everything he does just by parsing out the logic of it?”

He smiled, the sadness from his past disappearing back into whatever recess he hid it in. “Everything until you, yes.”



Sebastian arrived home early that afternoon. He spoke with Timothy for several minutes before meeting me in the library. I’d almost finished my drawing of the black bat flower and stared at my color pencil. The tip seemed plenty sharp.

“You better go for the eye if you’re serious.” Sebastian leaned over me

and perused my work. “Shove upward hard if you want to impale my brain. Finish me off or I’ll find you. How was your run this afternoon, by the way?”

“You are sick.”

“That’s what all the professionals say.”

“I could, you know.” I turned to look up at him. “I could stab you right this second.”

“You won’t.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he spoke, the light shadow along his jaw shading him just as sharply as I had the leaves on my drawing.

“What makes you say that?”

“If you were going to make a move, it would have been with the fork two nights ago. At this point, you have grown more used to me.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to my ear. “As I heard earlier today.”

Mortification rained down on me as the memory hit me right in the stomach. How could I have forgotten that? Timothy had thrown me off.

He plucked my drawing from the table. “This is beautiful, by the way. Is it native to the rainforest?”

“No.” I reached for it, but he held it higher. “It’s mine. Give it back.”

“I want it framed.” He smiled down at me. “How about a deal? For each one of these prints you make for me, I’ll give you one orgasm?”

An angry sound lodged in my throat, and I stood so fast I knocked my chair over. “I’m done with your deals.” Turning on my heel, I strode away from him.

“I don’t think that’s true.” He followed me down the hall and into the greenhouse.

The hiss from the sprinkler in the exotics area drew my attention, and I studied the spray from the iffy nozzle. It seemed to be working.

Sebastian edged up behind me, then put his hands on my shoulders.

I shrugged him off and looked around at the small world I’d built over the past week. Disgust rolled through me at how quickly I’d fallen into my own captivity. Here I was, worrying about whether a mister was working correctly in my captor’s glass menagerie. What the hell was wrong with me?

I turned to him. “School starts back in three weeks. People will notice I’m missing. What’s your big plan for that?”

He stared at me, searching my face for some clue about how to respond. It infuriated me even more.

“Surely your robot brain thought of that, right?”

“I have a plan, yes.”

“What is it?”

“I intend to fake your death in the Amazon.”

My mind blanked, and all I could do was stare up at him. I blinked hard, and tried to give his words some meaning other than the obvious one. But there was no alternative. He was going to tell my friends that I was dead.

“I won’t let you.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“I’ll get out of here.”

“Camille.” His warning tone did nothing to stop the torrent that raged inside me.

“I will.”

“You belong here.”

“No. I belong with my students at Trenton. I belong with Veronica. I belong with—”

“Him?” He tightened, his strong body becoming stonier as he peered down at me.

“You mean Link?”

He winced at the name. “Yes, *him*.”

It was a question I’d been avoiding for months. One I still couldn’t answer. Link was everything I should have wanted, but I hadn’t been able to commit. But Sebastian didn’t need to know that. Given the way he asked, an affirmative answer would hurt him. And, oh, how I wanted to hurt him.

I straightened my spine, refusing to yield to him anymore. “Yes. We’re in love.”

He clenched his eyes shut—the same way people did when they’d suffered some grievous injury and were trying to collect themselves.

When his lids opened, the sparkle I’d seen only seconds before was gone. In its place was harsh resolve and a darkness that chilled every part of me.

His voice was so low, I almost missed it. “I’ll kill him.”



I followed him as he stormed up the stairs. “Sebastian!”

He barreled down the hallway toward his room, entered the code, then strode inside.

I managed to catch up just in time before the door clicked shut and locked me out. “What are you doing?”

He vanished into the bathroom and then his closet. “What I should have done months ago.”

I skidded to a stop in his closet door as he swiped up his wallet and ripped a jacket from a hanger. Fear rocketed through my heart. He’d shut down when I’d lied about being in love with Link. And now he was like a dark tornado, twisting and wrathful.

“Stop, please.” Alarm bells sounded in my mind, and I was certain I’d just put Link in grave danger.

“Not until he’s gone.” He snagged a pair of shoes. “You don’t have to love me, but you sure as hell won’t love anyone else.” Brushing past me, he strode toward the hall door.

If he left and the door shut behind him, I’d be trapped here with no way to help Link. Panic erased any care I had for myself as I imagined what Sebastian was capable of. Link wouldn’t see it coming.

I rushed around him and plastered my back against the hall door. “Don’t go.”

“I have to. Don’t you understand?” He rested his fingers on the keypad. “For us. He has to go.”

“I lied.” I peered into his eyes and hoped my confession would be enough.

“Of course you’d say that to protect him.” His sneer sent a blade of fear

deep inside me. He was serious. Link wouldn't see another day if I didn't do something.

"It's true. I've never told him I love him."

He rested his palms against the door on either side of my head, caging me with his body. "Saying it doesn't mean anything. Do you *feel* it for him?"

"No." The truth flew from my lips.

"I want to believe you." He leaned closer, his eyes filling my vision with promises of violence.

I thought fast. "Remember when you picked me up that day I thought I was going to the airport?" It seemed like a lifetime ago. "Link told me that he loved me."

He grimaced. "This isn't helping your case."

"I didn't say it back. I couldn't, because it would have been a lie."

He recoiled, his anger dissipating a fraction. "I saw that." A slight smile teased the edge of his mouth. "He looked like a kicked puppy when you got in the car."

"That's because I didn't say it back."

His frown returned. "But the fact that he said it to you. I should kill him."

"You'll get caught." I had to change my tack.

He moved closer, his presence invading every cell in my body as he leaned his forehead against mine. "I've never been caught. So many dirty deals, so many lives destroyed just because I could. Link would be no different."

"I don't love him." The truth, in all its ugly glory.

"I wish I could believe you." He sighed.

"I'm telling the truth." My voice cracked on the last word as his warm breath ghosted along my lips.

"If only there was some way you could prove it to me." His cruel smirk had returned, and he rested one warm palm at my throat.

"How?" My breath hitched as he squeezed the sides of my neck gently.

"I have a few ideas." He brushed his lips across mine.

Goose bumps raced along my arms. "I'm not having sex with you."

"Not yet, but you will." His lips grazed mine again, and an unwelcome thrill shot through me from the heat of his touch. "So let's make another deal. Though, I'll warn you, this one has higher stakes than your botany books. What will you give me for Link's life?" His thumb stroked back and forth along my jugular.

Could he feel the chaotic beat of my heart?

“Another kiss.”

Heat sparked in his eyes. “Deal, but I get to choose where I kiss you.”

“No.” I pushed against his chest.

His eyes darkened. “Fine.” He moved his hand to the right and started pressing buttons. The beep of the keypad made the panic rise inside me.

“Wait!” I clutched his shirt and wrestled with my next words. “If I give you what you want, will you promise to never hurt him?”

The beeping stopped. “If you let me kiss you here”—he cupped my pussy with one hand—“then I’ll never harm that pathetic white knight unless you ask me to.”

“I have your word?”

“Yes.” He didn’t remove his hand. “But there’s still a problem.”

“What?” I balled my hands into fists. “What now?”

“I need you to tell me you want this.” He rubbed his palm against me, sending a buzz through my clit.

“Since when does it matter what I want?” I gave him a glare that I hoped curdled his insides.

Instead, he smiled. “I like it when you’re feisty. Maybe even more than when you’re sweet.”

“I hate you.” I put all the venom I possessed into the words.

“We’ll see if you still say that when I’ve got my face buried in your sweet cunt.” He slid his index finger up and down the seam of my jeans, sending shocks of desire skittering along my skin. “You can tell me you don’t want this, and I’ll stop.” He bent lower and pressed his lips along my jaw line. “But if you want me to taste you, to devour you until you lose control, I’m going to need you to ask for it.”

“You’re sick.” I gripped his shirt and closed my eyes, trying to be anywhere else but here, pressed against this door, with a devil whispering dark desires.

“And you’re wet.” He claimed my mouth, his tongue delving and exploring, taking my breath and replacing it with his.

I hated him, hated everything he’d already done to me and what he had planned. But more than anything, I hated the way he made me feel—the tightening in my stomach and the heat between my thighs as he took what he wanted. All of it was so wrong. The one man who was right for me never made me burn bright, never set me spinning the way Sebastian did. I was sick

and twisted for enjoying his touch, but I couldn't stop it any more than I could leave this house.

My thoughts vanished in a haze of lust as his tongue stroked mine, teasing and taking as he pressed me against the door. He worked my pussy, sliding his hand over my jeans. Then he pulled back and slapped me right on my sensitive clit.

I bucked and cried out into his mouth, but he swallowed the sound and returned to stroking me. Another slap from his palm made my knees go weak.

He grabbed my ass and lifted me, carrying me to the bed and laying me down with my hips on the edge. "Take off your clothes." His pupils had grown larger, swallowing the green with the same blackness that resided in his soul.

I hesitated. He dropped to his knees between my legs and yanked at the button on my jeans.

"I'll do it." I grabbed his fingers and held on.

"Make it quick." He sat back on his heels.

I sat up and, with shaking hands, unbuttoned my jeans and pulled the zipper down. He watched like a cat stalking a bird—no movement undetected.

"You promise you won't hurt—"

"I gave you my word. Now quit stalling." He reached out again, but I slapped his hand away and pushed my jeans down my thighs and then to my calves.

Impatient, he pulled them the rest of the way off. "Now your panties." He smirked up at me. "I can tell they're already soaked."

Heat bloomed in my cheeks, and I prayed for some miracle to save me from his clutches. But nothing happened, and I would have to comply if I wanted Link to see another day. A dark voice whispered that I was enjoying it, that I *wanted* Sebastian's tongue inside me, but I refused to listen to it. It wasn't true, was it? My fantasy from earlier resurfaced, and the shame of it almost choked me, but I didn't stop. I couldn't.

I hooked my thumbs along my hips and pushed the material down. Keeping my legs together as much as possible, I slid my light blue panties over my knees and let them drop down my calves.

"I want to see all of you. Pull your shirt up."

I narrowed my eyes. "That wasn't part of the deal."

He tore his gaze from my thighs to give me a sharp glare. "Is that how

you're going to play this? If you comply"—he ran his fingers along my knee and higher—"I'll go easier on you."

I wasn't giving him anything extra. This little part of me was all he'd ever have. "Do your worst."

His handsome smile reappeared, and if I looked at him in the right light, I could almost think he was a charming man. But I knew different.

"I like it better this way." He pressed his wide palm to my chest and pushed my back down to the bed.

His hands ran up the insides of my thighs, easily overcoming what little resistance I could give. He spread me wide, cool air hitting my hot skin, and then moved closer so that his shoulders pressed against my legs.

"You're going to enjoy everything I do." His warm breath on my pussy sent a tremor through me. "But I'm going to enjoy it far more. Now, *ask me for it.*"

I clenched my eyes shut.

"You have to ask, Camille." He breathed against me, and I bit back a cry. "Just say please. One simple word."

He was torturing me, every word from his mouth delivering a silky promise of pleasure.

I told myself I had no choice, that I didn't want his mouth on me, but each fevered beat of my heart told me I was a liar. My complicit mouth whispered the one word that sealed my fate, "Please."

His tongue was sudden, hot, and insistent. He groaned as he ran the length of it from bottom to top. I gripped the sheets, twisting them in my palms as I tried to fight off the surge of arousal that shot through me.

"I never want to forget the way you taste." He flicked the tip of his tongue against my clit, then licked me again. "Sweeter than anything I've ever had."

I bit my lip, forcing myself to stay silent. He tasted me, darting his tongue inside me, then up to my clit where he languidly stroked me. I panted and fought the urge to move my hips in time with his attentions.

"How many fingers does my damsel need? How many did you push inside yourself as you came with my name on your lips?"

I stared down at him, his eyes hooded as he feasted on me.

"One?" He slid a finger inside me, and a low moan escaped me. "You're so tight. So fucking delicious." Moving his finger along with his licks, he worked me until I broke out in a sweat and my fingers ached from gripping

the blanket.

“I’m certain your white knight never ate you like this.” He darted his tongue along my clit. “Never savored you the way I do. He couldn’t, because he tried to take something that wasn’t his.” He worked his finger in and out in an unhurried rhythm. “I think I underestimated you.” Another finger joined the first, filling me and stroking the one secret spot deep inside. “That’s it. That’s what you need, isn’t it? He couldn’t give it to you. You had a white knight, but you were waiting for your monster. Here I am.” He seized on my clit, his tongue lashing it in vicious strokes.

His words swirled inside me, turning and twisted, eating away at me like acid. Because they were true. Link was everything I should have wanted, but he wasn’t the one whose name was on the tip of my tongue.

Sebastian’s fingers and mouth drove me to the edge of my control, then broke it. I cried out and moved my hips, dancing with the devil who laughed against me and pushed me closer to release. My resolve shattered, and I became a slave to his mouth. I ran my hands through his dark hair and pulled. He growled against me and increased his tempo, finger fucking me hard as he tongued me.

My breath became shallow, and my legs shook as I ground against his mouth, chasing my orgasm as he chased me. The bogeyman nipped at my heels and drove me toward ecstasy.

“Give it to me. All of it.” He seized on my clit, sucking on the swollen nub. When he grazed me with his teeth and bit down, my back arched off the bed. My body tightened and narrowed into a tiny pinprick of light. And then I exploded in a crash of rolling waves, each one dragging me deeper until I was eye to eye with Sebastian in the darkest circle of hell.

I FELT THE SECOND SHE went limp, all tension slipping from her body like water off rocks. She lay quietly, only her breathing filling the air around us as I dropped kisses along her soft flesh. My cock was hard and demanding satisfaction, but that wasn't part of the deal. Soon, though. Soon, she'd admit she wanted me to claim her pussy with more than just my tongue. And I would leave my marks on her fair skin, claim her again and again.

She took a deep breath, then scooted backwards, pulling my favorite treat away from me. Closing her legs, she hugged her knees and gave me an accusing glare.

"What?" I licked her taste from my fingers as her scowl deepened. "You told me to do my worst."

"Are we done here?"

I stood and smirked as her eyes went to the hard-on that was impossible to miss. "We don't have to be. I've never been the sort to insist on reciprocation, but if you're interested—"

"No." She shook her head, her blonde locks flying.

I laughed. God, she did things to me. Made me *feel* so much more than I ever thought possible. "Fine. If you'd like to watch me take care of it, you can." I swiped her panties off the floor.

"Hey!" She pointed to my palm. "Give those back."

"I think I'll keep them. Wrap them around my cock while I come to the memory of your taste, your sounds, the way your cunt shuddered for me."

She yanked the blanket over her bare legs. "Psycho."

I backed into the bathroom. "Don't go anywhere."

Her eyes flared. I got the feeling that if she'd had something to throw, she would have.



After a dinner during which Camille wore a constant blush, we spent a couple hours in the library—her continuing to draw while I worked on my tablet. My thoughts kept wandering to the problem created by Mint, Veronica, and the moron. I knew the solution. She was sitting a few feet away from me, a red color pencil tucked behind her ear. But for once, I dreaded making a deal with her. What I needed, only she could give, and I knew she'd make me pay dearly for it.

When the clock struck eleven, I locked my tablet and stood. “Let’s get to bed.”

She jolted when I spoke, her pencil scoring an errant mark down the side of her sketch. “Damn.” She plucked an eraser from the table and fixed it.

“Jumpy? I would have thought you were relaxed from our earlier activities.”

She tossed the eraser onto the table and stood. “Maybe you aren’t as good as you think?”

“Impossible.” I walked at her side toward the stairs. “But are you offering me another shot?”

“Not a chance.” She shook her head. “None of that will ever happen again.”

“What part? You coming on my face, or you saying my name, or you having the best orgasm of your life?”

She covered her face with her hands and sped her pace. “Stop.”

“I was just seeking clarification.” Watching her squirm gave me some of

the most enjoyment I'd ever had.

"No, you're being an asshole."

"Better than a psycho, right?" I kept up with her as we took the stairs to the second floor.

"You can be both."

"What other choice names do you have for me?" I shooed her into the bedroom first, then let the door close behind us.

"None that I'll say out loud." She hurried to the bathroom as I stripped.

I strode in behind her as she brushed her teeth. Longing flared inside me. She was so close, but unwilling to give me what we both needed. I wanted to hug her, to press my lips to the lightly pulsing vein at her throat. When I'd come up with my plan to keep her, I'd assumed she'd realize she belonged with me after a short adjustment period. The look she gave me in the mirror told me the adjustment period would be quite a bit longer than I'd anticipated.

"Any chance you'll get naked with me tonight?"

Her crinkled nose told me her answer, though her gaze strayed down my bare chest. My cock expressed its interest, hardening as I stared at her in the mirror.

She tossed her blond locks over one shoulder, then rinsed her mouth and marched into her closet. *Fucking pajamas.*

"What would it take to get you naked in my arms?" I didn't work this way, never showed my hand in negotiations. But the words had just spilled out, desire short-circuiting the logic that ruled my life. Impulse—the naked need to feel her, all of her—had exerted its power over me.

She popped her head out of the closet. "You want a deal?" Her eyes narrowed on me, and for the first time in my life, I didn't feel in control.

She kept surprising me. Her mortification at the dinner table had drained away, and in its place, cold calculation had taken over. Fuck if it wasn't hot. But I couldn't give in. She was an amateur dabbling in an area I'd mastered. Control.

"No." I shrugged. "I just figured it was about time for you to give in to what you really want."

"I'll have to pass." She disappeared into her closet.

The word "fuck" repeated in a profane litany inside my skull. I stalked past her closet door. One look inside, and I froze. She wore nothing but a pair of lacy pink panties. Her hair hung down her back, the strands tickling her

fair skin.

She glanced over her shoulder at me, a devilish look in her eye that had my cock begging me to do something about it. “You sure you don’t want a deal?”

“I...”

My words left as she spun around. Her perky nipples hardened as I watched. *Holy fucking shit.*

She shrugged, her tits giving a light bounce with the movement. “If you’re sure.” She grabbed her godforsaken t-shirt and lifted her arms to slide it on.

I shot forward and grabbed her wrists. Pressing her back against her dresser drawers, I groaned at the feel of her skin against mine.

“No deal, no touching.” She kicked her chin up at me.

I could have taken what I wanted, thrown her down and done everything I’d been fantasizing about. Only one word stopped me. *Trust.* Releasing her wrists, it took everything I had to back away from her.

She let out a shaking breath, her rosy nipples still pearly and in need of my touch. “So, the deal?”

“What do you want?” Did that desperation-soaked voice belong to me?

“This weekend in the city plus the Monday you already promised me.” She snatched her t-shirt and covered her breasts.

I leaned forward, placing one hand next to her head. Her body heat bled into the air between us. I wanted to *taste* it. Though I’d devoured her only a few hours before, I was already starved for her. “When did you cook this up? While you were drawing, on the way up the stairs, while you were brushing your teeth? When?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I’ve been trying to get to the bottom of you, and I still haven’t.”

“I thought you knew everything about me?” Her sass killed. I wanted to lick it from her lips.

“I do, but you have certain anomalies in your personality that mystify me.”

“Maybe you underestimate me?”

“Perhaps.”

“Now, about three days in the city. Deal?”

“That’s a big request.” I couldn’t tear my gaze away from her lips.

“It’s worth it, don’t you think?” She dropped her shirt, her breasts on full

display and so fucking close.

“Naked *and* kissing.” I’d fallen into the negotiation, egged on by the pert nipples taunting me.

“No.” She shook her head, making her tits shudder maddeningly again.

I groaned. “Kissing *on the mouth* and naked, and you can have the weekend and Monday.” My lust fog cleared for a sliver of a second, but it was enough. “And, to sweeten the deal, I’ll relay texts from you to your friends.”

Her eyes widened, and she clasped her fingers together. *Bingo*.

My deviousness knew no bounds, not when the prize was so spectacular. This idea was nothing other than a fucking stroke of evil genius. I’d get to touch her, kiss her, and she’d solve my little problem with her Scooby Doo pals.

“You get to hold me...” She frowned. “But no touching my breasts or below the belt, and—”

“What?” I needed to feel her, every last inch of skin. “I already know how your pussy feels when you come.”

Her frown deepened. “This deal doesn’t include groping. Just holding each other, and I’ll allow the kissing for *tonight*, but only if you give me three days in the city and contact with my friends.”

“Three days at my penthouse where you will sleep naked in my arms *each night*. Kissing for tonight, and I’ll *relay* messages. You aren’t touching a phone. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

She bit her lip. A surrogate for her thumb nail, no doubt. Was she wavering? Losing her at this point in the negotiation wasn’t an option.

I went for the hard sell. “Take it or leave it, but the offer is void the second I walk out of this closet.” Turning my back on her almost broke me in half, but I managed it and strode to the door.

“Deal.” When the word passed her lips, my entire body hummed with anticipation.

I stopped and returned my gaze to hers, hungry for everything coming my way. “Done. Now take your wet panties off.”

I'D WAVED THE RED flag in front of the bull and managed to win so much more than just the match. The thought of texting my friends almost erased the trepidation from my mind. But the way Sebastian looked at me—like a ravenous wolf—overrode that brief joy.

“Do it slowly.” He leaned against the doorframe to my closet, his hard cock on full display.

“Not part of the deal.” I slid my shaking fingers along the sides of my panties and shucked them off. When I stood, he drank me in, his gaze licking my flesh with a heat that threatened to burn me where I stood. I hated how wet I was, but there was no way to hide it. Not anymore.

“Get in bed. Now.” Any hesitation he'd shown earlier was gone. His usual intensity was back, but magnified a hundred-fold. What had I gotten myself into?

He backed away from the door, giving me just enough room to shimmy by. I hurried away from him, but he stayed on my heels and slapped the light off in the bathroom. Leaning over, I ripped the sheets back.

“Fucking hell.” He smoothed his palm down my back, but stopped just above my ass.

I scooted away from him and lay down, pulling the covers up. He followed, sliding into bed right next to me and wrapping me in his arms.

“Sebasti—”

His mouth met mine, cutting off the ground rules I intended to repeat. His tongue set off a chain reaction of desire as it coaxed mine into action. Sebastian didn't just kiss, he overwhelmed. My eyes fluttered closed as he

slipped his fingers into my hair and pulled. He slanted his mouth over mine as he flattened his other hand against my back and pressed me closer.

I'd been kissed plenty of times. Link had shoved his tongue down my throat more times than I could count. But I'd never been truly, deeply, passionately kissed until Sebastian's lips had met mine that very first time. Every stroke from his tongue, each nip from his teeth—it all coalesced into the most potent drug, and I became powerless to resist.

I could blow the deal, resist him and tell him it needed to stop. Because it did. Because I was losing myself in the passion of his kiss and the feel of his hands on me. He'd asked me to pretend. And I had. But at that moment, I wasn't pretending. I didn't have to. I wrapped my arms around him and ran one hand through his hair. I couldn't even lie to myself and say I did it because I had to. I did it because I wanted to feel him, and because it felt better than anything I'd ever experienced. I was lost, spinning in the dark.

When he groaned into my mouth, a shock of delicious arousal skittered down my body and twisted between my legs. I bit his bottom lip. He answered by sliding his thigh between mine, his cock resting against my hip. So hard.

I pulled away. "That's not part of the deal."

"I believe it is. If you recall." He yanked my hair, the slight sting adding to the raucous flood of arousal that pulsed through me. "You said that my *hands* couldn't touch you below the belt. I'm not using my hands." He darted his tongue along my lips and rubbed his thigh against my wet pussy. "So fucking wet." He flipped me, then settled on top of me, his cock against my thigh as his lips found mine again.

I dug my nails into his back as he rested one palm at my throat and continued taking my breath away with his wicked tongue. He stole the protest from my lips and continued rubbing his thigh against me. When he slid against my clit just right, I moaned, unable to keep it locked inside anymore.

"Tell me I can taste you again." He dropped kisses along my jawline.

"Not part of the deal."

"Fuck the deal," he growled and claimed my mouth again.

We kissed until his mouth became my only reference, the only thing I wanted.

He pulled away and stared into my eyes. "Tell me I can taste you again." The demand in his voice spoke to the darkest part of me. I moved my hips against him, grinding on his leg and wishing his cock was deep inside me.

His grip tightened on my hair. "Tell me."

"No."

He roared and dove back to my lips, his drugging kiss sending me even higher as I shamelessly rubbed my pussy on him.

I ran my hands down to his ass and dug my nails into the muscle.

His guttural roar passed my lips. "Let me." His wild eyes met mine, and I wanted to give in, to break and let him have what he wanted, and more. All of me.

But the weight of the chain on my ankle wouldn't let me. The invisible shackles on my wrist told me it couldn't happen. None of this was real. Tears pricked at my eyes, and the fire inside me flickered and died.

"No."

His brow wrinkled and he kissed me again, then stopped when I didn't kiss back. "Why?" He released the grip on my hair and ran his hand along my cheek, all softness, though desire still lit his eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

"Yes." A tear escaped and he swiped it away as he moved off me and pulled me into his chest.

"Where?" Genuine concern colored his question.

The tears came in a torrent. "Everywhere."

"Shhh." He hugged me close as I cried.

"You stole everything from me." I sobbed, but instead of fighting him, I clutched him tighter. "Everything."

He didn't respond, just stroked my hair and held me as I fell apart. I cried until my ribs ached and my tears streaked onto his chest.

When I quieted, he smoothed the hair from my face and kissed my forehead. "I'm sorry."

I withdrew and wrapped my arms around myself. "No you aren't. If you were sorry, you'd let me go."

"I can't." He sighed.

"You're afraid I'll tell?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I don't think I can live without you."

The words would have warmed me if they'd come from anyone else. From him, they were cold prison bars.

"Why?" I sniffled.

"I don't know." He pulled the sheet up and tucked it around me. "Ever

since that dance, you've been embedded deep inside me, in places I didn't even know existed. I didn't know what to do about it at first, but then it hit me. I needed you."

I pressed my forehead to his pec. "You know what most people do when they develop a crush?"

"It's not a crush."

I ignored him. "When normal people have a crush, they ask the crushee on a date. Did that ever occur to you?"

"It did, but you were with that halfwit. And asking for a date wasn't—I don't know—*enough*."

"So kidnapping was your only option?"

"It made the most sense."

"Only for you." I leaned away and glared at him. "Why couldn't you think about me?"

He furrowed his brow. "You're *all* I think about."

"Does that seem healthy to you?"

He shook his head. "That doesn't matter. I knew it then, and I know it now. You belong with me."

"You can't decide that for me."

"I haven't. Don't you understand? I've done all this so you can find out the same thing I already know. It's like a shortcut." The way he said it made it seem so rational, even though the words were far beyond the pale of reason.

I put my palm against his cheek, and he pressed against it. "I don't work that way."

"How do you work?"

I propped myself on my elbow and perused him from above. "You know that's the first time you've asked the right question?"

A smile ghosted along the corner of his lips. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, it's the same with my students. They'll butt their heads against a wall over and over again while trying to understand a concept when all they have to do is ask the right question."

"So what's the answer?"

"I don't work well with captivity."

He smirked. "You just haven't given it a real chance yet."

"Psycho. I also don't do well with deals." I hastened to add, "though the one we just made still stands."

“The captivity isn’t going to change.”

My hope sagged.

“But maybe I can work on my tendency to make deals.”

It wasn’t huge, but it was progress. I’d take it. “All right.”

“But I still want things from you.” He tucked his hands behind his head.

“And if I can’t do deals, you have to make them attainable somehow.”

I eased down and rested my head on his chest. “What things?”

“Your body, your thoughts, your feelings.”

“So, everything. You just want it all.”

“Yes.” Once again, he said it as if it were utterly reasonable to demand all of another person.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He draped his right hand across my shoulder, and we fell into a peaceful silence.

After a while, he said, “I’m sorry I’ve hurt you. It wasn’t my intention.”

“I know.” But his words didn’t change the fact that I had to get away. His touch, his fiery kisses, and the passion he ignited inside me—none of it could ever grow into more unless I was free. The only way I could make him understand was to show him, and that’s just what I intended to do.



“The last one is sent.” He swiped across the screen of his tablet and the screen went blank.

“Will you tell me when they respond?” We’d spent the drive to the city sending carefully worded texts to Veronica, Link, and Mint. Anytime I tried to do something creative, he shut me down. “*I’ve reviewed all your texts. I know your cadence. You can’t throw me off.*” Despite the setback, I could

have cried with joy to hear that my friends were worried about me.

I was certain Sebastian left out several details and texts from what he'd read me, but I could survive on what love they'd sent, even if it was relayed through him. I told Mint to stay strong and that things would be all right, Veronica that there were no hot men in the Amazon, and Link that I missed him. Sebastian had scowled as his fingers conveyed the message, but he sent it anyway. When we were finished, I could have sworn he seemed relieved.

The car maneuvered through traffic, the streets still busy even though it was a Saturday morning. Sunlight glinted from the high rises, and I stared at all the people walking along. They had no idea a prisoner sat inside a gilded cage only a few feet away. The doors had locked the moment I stepped into the car, and Sebastian wasn't going to give me the chance to try and bang on the windows.

"What's wrong?" Sebastian studied me.

"Aside from being held captive while watching the world go on as usual? Nothing."

"If the city is making you unhappy, I'm more than willing to take you back to the house."

"No." I gripped my elbows. "I paid dearly for this, so I'm going to take my time in the city." *And figure out a way to escape.*

"I didn't think you minded the payment that much." His smirk appeared. "When you moaned in my mouth—"

I put my finger to his lips. "Just let me enjoy my time here, all right?"

"Fine by me." He draped his arm across my shoulders.

I should have demanded he stop touching me, but it wasn't worth the effort. It wasn't that I enjoyed his scent or the feel of him against me. Not at all. I just had to give him some room to hope I'd comply with what he wanted. It was all a part of my plan.

He leaned close to my ear, his whisper sending a shiver down my spine. "The deal is still on for the evening, you know."

"I know." This time, I intended to avoid any more interaction than necessary. I'd stay strong.

The car pulled into a private garage at the base of a shiny high rise. When the door closed, Sebastian helped me from the car and walked me to the elevator.

"The penthouse is wired similarly to the house. If you pass the front door, I'll get an alarm. The elevator won't open for you, and the stairwell has a

keypad.”

I stepped onto the waiting elevator. “What if there’s a fire?”

“I’ll save you.” His matter-of-fact tone had me arching an eyebrow.

“You’ll save me? I didn’t think the bad guy ever saved anyone but himself.”

He entered a code for the penthouse, and the elevator doors closed. “You think I’m the bad guy?”

“I know you are.” I leaned against the back wall of the elevator as we moved smoothly upward.

He leaned next to me. “Every bad guy is the hero of his own tale.”

“Seriously?” I gawked at him in the reflective door. “The hero?”

“I saved you from that dimwit, gave you a castle full of your favorite things, and am prepared to lay down my life for you in case of fire or other calamity. What about all that?”

It was so insane that I couldn’t help but smile. “If I were a lit teacher, I would likely comment on the importance of perspective. Sadly, I’m a science teacher, so I can tell you, without reservation, that your facts are baseless conjecture.”

The doors slid open and revealed a luxurious penthouse with views that would take even a New York realtor’s breath away. Dark wood floors, floor to ceiling windows, and rich furnishings. Masculine and polished, the space had been meticulously decorated to fit Sebastian’s tastes. Simple, Spartan, but somehow luxurious at the same time.

I tried to make an unimpressed face, though the sunlight streaming through the windows kept drawing my eye.

“It’s not as nice as your little Trenton cottage, but it’ll have to do.” Sebastian closed the door behind us, then strode into the wide-open living room.

A noise from the kitchen caught my attention.

Rita stood at the expansive granite island and chopped strawberries. Her being here was whiplash on my mind; I’d just seen her at the house for breakfast.

“When did you get here?” I walked over to her.

“Mr. Lindstrom sent the helicopter for me.” She shook her head. “Never again. Dios mio, never again.”

I glanced at him over my shoulder as he fiddled with his phone. “Bringing your cook? You are spoiled.”

“No, I’m spoiling you.” He tapped his screen, and low music filtered through hidden speakers. “I usually order in if I’m in the city, but I brought Rita to make you more comfortable. She’ll stay in the suite below us. Though her services won’t be needed tonight. I’m taking you out.”

Out. Possibilities for escape blossomed in my mind and wilted just as quickly. Sebastian wouldn’t risk losing me in the city.

“Lunch will be ready in an hour.” Rita wiped her hands on her apron, then dropped the knife she’d been using into a metal lockbox.

I pointed at it. “Really?”

Sebastian sank onto a leather couch and put his feet up on the plush ottoman. “Really.” He waved his hand at the stunning view. “Now that we’re here, please regale me with your plan for escape.”

I snagged a strawberry from Rita and strode to the window. The ripe fruit burst in my mouth as I took in the equally mouthwatering cityscape. The sun floated high overhead in an azure sky, and Central Park beckoned from just a few blocks away.

“I’m glad you asked.” I turned and took in the navy polo that sat perfectly on his broad chest and the jeans slung low across his hips. “First thing is to kill you when you’re asleep, then raid your bank account, and finally escape to the Amazon where I will open my own world-class field school.”

He nodded. “Solid plan. I like it. Just one question, though. How are you going to take me out?”

I held my hands out and made a show of inspecting them. “I could strangle you.”

Rita gave me an awkward glance, then disappeared into a large pantry.

“I’m afraid you simply don’t have the strength necessary for that.”

“Oh, I don’t know. When I’m motivated—and I am—I can do just about anything.”

“Want to try it?” He patted his lap. “See if you have the strength before you fully commit to this plan?” The sparkle in his eye was damn sexy even though we were discussing his potential murder.

“No, thank you.”

“Do you have a plan B?” He let his gaze trail down my body. “One that gets even more physical than the strangling scenario?”

“How do you mean?”

“If you sat on my face, I’d be more than happy to suffocate, just so long as you came first. And I can guarantee you would.” He licked his lips.

Jeeeeez. I sank into a side chair with a view out the windows. Not because my legs had gone weak from the mental image of me sitting on his face. I was just tired. “Never mind. You ruined it.”

He laughed. “You’re only saying that because my plan appealed to you.”

“Suffocating you, yes. Sitting on your face, no.” A blush crept into my cheeks at the lie.

“You can admit your desires to me. I’m the only one who would never judge you.”

“That’s reassuring. I desire to be free.”

“You are. With me.” He swiped a wide tablet from the ottoman and, with the click of a few buttons, the music turned off and a large television rose from what had been a bare patch of wood floor. “Since you’ve yet to start your grand escape, how about a movie?”

“A movie?”

“Yeah.” He patted the couch next to him. “I have some calls to make this afternoon, and we’re going out tonight, so let’s watch a flick while we have down time.”

“I don’t know...” I glanced to the doors leading to different parts of the penthouse.

“I’ll show you around after, and you can work on your bedsheet rope while I’m on the phone. All right?” His smirk both infuriated me and temped a smile from my lips.

“I suppose a movie would be okay.” I didn’t move to sit next to him.

“You have to make things attainable, remember?” He patted the sofa again. “Please”—he said the word as if peanut butter coated his tongue and made speech difficult—“watch a movie with me?”

I had promised to try. And a movie was well within the bounds of what I was willing to give. I rose and sat next to him, leaving a few inches of space between us.

“That’s all I’m going to get?”

“You said you wanted a movie. Here I am, ready to watch a movie.” I tucked my feet up under me on the couch and stared at the blank television screen.

He grumbled, but clicked something on the touch screen again. Curtains fell from the ceiling, covering the windows.

“Leave them.” I put my hand on his. “I love the light.”

“If you keep your hand on me during the movie, I’ll leave them open.”

I squinted at him. “That sounds a lot like a deal.”

“Not a deal, just a request.” He tapped the same button on the remote, and the curtains stopped falling.

I should have removed my hand. I didn’t. There wasn’t a transaction between us, but an understanding. If I took my hand away, I wouldn’t lose anything. If I left it, I wasn’t giving in; I was making my own choice.

He tapped a few more buttons, and the TV clicked on, sound pouring through hidden speakers all around us. The Lionsgate insignia flashed across the screen. Music played—the notes of a piano that I knew by heart. A hallway appeared, the walls stark white, the furniture sterile, as if recently bought and never used. Then the flash of a perfect man wearing white briefs. When the narration began, goose bumps erupted down my arms and legs. *American Psycho*.

Sebastian turned his hand over and entwined our fingers. “I know this is your favorite movie,” he whispered.

On paper, my favorite movie was *Pitch Perfect*. But, in truth, Sebastian was right. Christian Bale’s portrayal of Patrick Bateman had enthralled me from the first moment I heard his opening monologue. I’d never bought the book or borrowed it from the library for fear of someone seeing it in my collection. And also for fear that I’d love it even more than the film. But it was just a movie, right? Enjoying an entertaining film that millions of others had enjoyed didn’t say anything about me.

“Stop thinking and enjoy it.” He squeezed my fingers as the psychopath on the screen told us “*I simply am not there.*”

I FINISHED MY PHONE calls as Camille continued her search for an escape from my penthouse. Once she'd exhausted all avenues—except the video surveillance room I'd locked—she reappeared in my bedroom and flopped down on the bed.

“No luck?” I locked my tablet and stood.

“None, you sadistic prick.” Her mouth had grown steadily worse the longer she stayed with me. It was precious as all hell.

I smiled down at her. “I'm beginning to sense a little anger. But only a little.”

“What's in the locked room? Severed head collection?”

“Don't be ridiculous.” I grinned. “That's where I stack the dead hookers.”

“That's only funny if a non-psycho says it.” She rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the white duvet. If she called me more names—and I was certain she did—they were too muffled to understand.

“Come on. It's almost time to go out.”

She rolled onto her side as I knelt at her feet.

“What are you doing?” Propping up on an elbow, she watched my fingers slide up her ankle.

“Freeing you for the evening, but don't get used to it.” I unlatched the golden chain and slid it into my pocket.

She ran her hand over the spot where the anklet had been, the relief in her sigh almost palpable. “Thank you.”

“Like I said, it's going back on later tonight.” I kept my voice stern, though I loved every emotion that telegraphed through her expressive eyes.

Love. I'd never used that word, the very idea of it foreign to me. I sat back on the wool rug. But I'd just thought the word. Thought how much I *loved* her emotions. And I didn't only think it; I *felt* it.

"Are you okay?" She peeked down at me.

The heartburn in the center of my chest threatened to char me to a cinder. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." She scooted to the edge of the bed, then down to the floor with me. "What is it?"

"Nothing." I hastened to my feet and offered her my hand.

She took it and stood, worry creasing the pale skin along the top of her nose.

"Timothy is bringing your dress, and we need to get ready to go." I tapped my watch. "Reservations."

As if he'd heard his name, Timothy knocked on the open doorframe and walked in, a deep crimson gown draped across his arms and a pair of black stilettos hanging from one hand. "Sorry for the delay."

"It's fine."

She walked over to the gown and took it from him. "Wow, this is fancy."

"If you'd prefer something else, I'll understand." Despite my words, I silently willed her to like what I'd chosen for her.

She held it up and looked it over with a critical eye. "I think I like it."

The fiery grip on my heart relaxed the slightest bit. "I'm glad."

She smiled, actual joy on her face, and my ass almost hit the wool rug again. It was the emotion I'd wanted to see, the one I'd been chasing for the past few months. Here it was, bright as day and more exquisite than the sun. And it only happened when the anklet was in my pocket, when she was free.

She snagged the shoes from Timothy, hurried past me, and closed the bathroom door. "Give me a few minutes, and I'll be right out."

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. What was happening inside me?

"It's working." Timothy's low voice cut through my cacophony of confusion.

"Is it?" I stared at him. "You think she's accepted it?"

He chuckled. "No, but I think you're starting to."



I changed into a tux and listened intently to every move Camille made in the bathroom. After a while, she fell silent and opened the door.

If I'd been overwhelmed before, one look at her in that stunning dress crushed me under the spike of her heel. The crimson fabric draped between her breasts and hugged the curve of her hips. The skirt fell mid-thigh, and when I thought of the view I'd get if she bent over, my mouth went dry. *Holy fuck.*

"You look..." She took a deep breath and walked to me, placing one hand over my scorching heart. "So handsome."

Her blonde hair cascaded over one shoulder, and she'd made use of the few cosmetics Timothy had stowed in the bathroom. Her lashes were dark and long, her lips a few shades lighter than the deep hue of her dress. A vision, she took my breath away. Words failed.

The smile, the real one, spread across her pouty lips. "I don't think I've ever rendered a man speechless before, especially not a psychopath."

I gripped her hips, and she didn't move away. The slinky material was smooth beneath my fingertips. Either she wore a thong or no panties at all. How was I going to make it through dinner with this vixen? I already wanted to make her scream. By the time we were done with dinner, I'd be begging her for just a lick along her sweet pussy.

"Fucking hell I've never seen anything as beautiful as you." My words came out in an uncharacteristic rush.

Her blue eyes sparkled. "Thank you."

"Anton has the car waiting, sir." Timothy's voice came from beyond the bedroom door. He knew better than to walk in at this point.

"I hope you're taking me somewhere fancy." She batted her lashes.

“Somewhere with lots and lots of people.”

I pressed my index finger under her chin and pulled her mouth up to mine. I hovered only a whisper away, dying to taste her. “Only the best for you.”

“Good. I’m starving.” Temptress.

My brain scrambled again. She stepped toward the door, the heels giving the impression that her smooth legs went on for miles.

I followed. There was no other option with Camille. Wherever she went, I would go too. We were forever.

SEBASTIAN TOOK MY HAND and pulled me from the limo, then hurried me into the back entrance to a high rise that disappeared into the night above us. Timothy followed behind and closed the door, sealing out the frigid December air. We veered to the right and walked down a long hallway dotted with modern art that ranged from interesting to grotesque.

There wasn't a single soul in sight. Nowhere for me to get help. Sebastian had thought of everything, of course. Near the center of the building, we boarded an elevator and rose so quickly that my ears popped. Sebastian kept my hand in his and watched me in the reflective elevator doors. He was the picture of masculine perfection in a bespoke tux, everything about him imposing, crisp, and impossibly sexy.

The elevator opened, and the most delicious scents swirled past us in a rush of warm air. Sebastian led me through a wide set of frosted glass doors and into a dining room with an expansive view of the city. Timothy locked the doors behind us and headed toward what I assumed was the kitchen. Chandeliers glowed overhead, and the shiny black floor appeared like a pool of cooled glass with light reflected at intervals. A single table sat near the windows, its small shape appearing like doll furniture in the wide room.

I couldn't begin to imagine what it would have cost to reserve an entire swank restaurant on a Saturday night in Manhattan. Reminding myself that he'd only done it to make sure I remained isolated was the only thing that kept me on an even keel.

"I hope you like it." He showed me to the table and pulled out my chair.

I sat, and he took the seat to my left, both of us getting a gorgeous view of

the city. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this high.”

He took my hand and rubbed his thumb back and forth over my knuckles. “I couldn’t agree more.”

His enchantment had worked its way inside me, lulling me. I let it. The beautiful dress, the sparkling night, and the gorgeous man beside me all demanded I buy into the dream for one night. It wouldn’t change my plans for escape.

“Thank you.” I squeezed his hand. “This is amazing.”

“I want to amaze you every day, if you’ll let me.”

The earnest look in his eyes was like a sledgehammer to the walls around my heart. I didn’t want to feel for him. Maybe it would have been better if I were like him—no emotions, no problems. But I wasn’t.

I pushed the feelings down. “Let’s just start here and see if you can keep it up.”

He smiled and kissed the back of my hand. “I assure you that I can keep it up.”

Timothy strode over with a bottle of wine, glasses, and salads. He poured generously, and soon I was eating and drinking as Sebastian asked me questions about teaching.

“The kids are so different. Each one’s personality has different facets. Some are brighter than others, but they all take away different parts of my lessons and apply in their own ways.”

“Don’t you get tired of it?”

“Teaching?” I sipped my wine. “No. It’s actually the one thing that never bores me. A new crop of kids each year, and the sheer variety of them—I love my job.”

“What about moving to the city with ... him?”

“Link?”

His brows lowered. “Yes.”

“He had plans for all that. I never did.” I took a larger swallow of wine. Had Sebastian been right when he’d accused me of using Link as a crutch after my parents died?

“That’s because he didn’t know you.”

“I don’t know if that’s true. We spent a lot of time together.”

He shook his head and slid one hand under the table, resting it on my bare leg. “It was obvious at the gala. He spoke for you, but your voice was the only one that I needed to hear. You knew what you wanted to say, but you

fell to the background to soothe his ego. That's not who you are. The sun doesn't reduce its heat to assuage the frigid moon."

"How do you do it?"

He cocked his head to the side. "What?"

"Say things like that? Pure poetry from someone who never feels."

"It's you." He leaned closer and slid his hand higher on my thigh. "You're the reason. I can assure you I've never said a poetic word in my life until I met you."

Heat bloomed along my cheeks, and he smiled, pleased with himself that he'd won a reaction from me. "I love it when you blush for me."

Timothy strode up and set dishes in front of us, each of our plates as much a feast for the eyes as for the stomach.

"This looks amazing."

"The chef sends his best regards." Timothy backed away and disappeared into the kitchen again.

"Tell me more about school." Sebastian removed his hand from my leg, the heat dissipating, but never truly leaving my skin.

As we ate, I told him about Trenton's greenhouse and how I'd tried to get funding for it, how the current headmaster would love to tear it down and build a nicer auditorium instead. The wine flowed freely, and I drank with a tad more verve than usual. Once I was more than a little tipsy, I suggested he buy the school a brand new one.

"Done. I'll get Timothy on it in the morning."

I almost choked on my wine.

He rubbed my back. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, fine. I just didn't think you'd—" Another cough shook me.

"Give you anything you asked for? Yes, I will."

Except the one thing I want the most. I swatted the thought away as he took my wine glass and set it on the opposite side of the table.

After dabbing my mouth with the napkin, I set it on the table next to my dessert plate. "I couldn't eat another bite."

Sebastian nodded to Timothy. A few moments later, music started playing around us, the same slow song from the gala. My memory of that night no longer had quite the same mystery, perhaps because I'd solved the puzzle of Sebastian. Being devoured by a predator gives you a particularly close-up view of how they work.

"Care to dance?" He stood and offered his hand.

The wine had me rising to my feet and joining him. I reminded myself that I was freer than I had been since the day he'd lured me into his clutches. Enjoying it was all I could do. For now.

He pulled me close and guided my right hand over his heart. His left hand spanned my lower back, and we swayed to the music.

“Interesting music choice.”

“It brings back memories of the most important day of my life.” He pressed his lips to my ear. “It’s become one of my favorite tunes.”

My breath caught as he dropped his mouth to my neck. A protest rose from my lungs, but it never escaped my lips. His warm tongue swept along my jugular, and I melted against him, my curves flowing into the hard planes beneath his tux.

“I should have done this the first night we met.” He kissed to the front of my throat, our bodies still swaying to the music.

My nipples tightened against the fabric of the dress as he leaned me back and trailed kisses down my chest. With the swipe of his hand, he'd pushed the dress off one shoulder, and cool air assaulted my bare breast. His warm mouth followed, licking my nipple and sucking it into his mouth.

I gasped and held onto him as he slipped his other hand beneath the back of my skirt. Sliding up my thigh, he cupped my ass. Heat converged between my thighs as he kissed up my chest and claimed my lips. His mouth intoxicated me more than the wine ever could, his lips firm and insistent as his tongue sought entry. I opened, giving myself up to him.

His kiss was more brand than anything else. Would I ever be able to think of anyone but him the next time my lips met another's? He reached beneath me, both hands on my ass, and lifted. I straddled him, wrapping my legs around his back and my arms around his neck. His deep groan rumbled against my chest. I wanted him, even if it was wrong and sick—I wanted to feel him move inside me.

He walked until my back pressed against the wide window overlooking the city. If I looked down, I'd see a straight drop. I didn't look anywhere but at him. He ground against me, his hard cock pressing on my clit. Easing a hand beneath my thigh, his fingertips grazed my wet folds.

“Fuck.” He stroked me again. “No panties.” He used his teeth to pull my dress from my other shoulder, then sucked my nipple into his mouth.

I moaned and leaned my head against the window as he sucked and stroked me into a frenzy. I ran my hands through his hair as he dragged his

teeth along my stiff peak. Everything in me screamed for him, wanted him inside me more than I'd ever wanted anyone.

Supporting me with one hand, he eased the other between us. I bucked when he slid his fingers past my clit and pressed them inside me.

"So fucking tight." He sucked the pale skin of my breast in his mouth, leaving his mark as his fingers pushed inside me with a hot, fast rhythm.

I held onto his shoulders, the cold glass at my back doing nothing to cool the fire he'd lit inside me.

He kissed to my neck, his touch scorching me to my soul. I shivered, everything in my body in tune with the symphony he was conducting with his fingers.

"I need you, Camille." His voice in my ear melted what tiny speck of resistance may have remained. "I have to feel you, all of you."

I grabbed his jaw and pulled his face to mine.

His green eyes flickered with a desire that matched my own. "I'd never hurt you." He pressed the heel of his palm against my clit, rubbing it in slow circles. "You know that."

I did. He was capable of any number of horrible things, but I knew in the depths of my soul that he would never harm me.

"You're everything to me." A softness entered his voice, a warmth I'd never heard before. It was sincerity, his truth laid bare.

"I want you." I let the words fly, consequences be damned.

He took my mouth and pressed his chest to mine, pinning me to the window. Withdrawing his fingers, he circled them around my clit. I whimpered, the sensation so strong that my legs began to shake.

His other hand worked his pants open. Pulling his fingers away, he replaced them with his hard cock. "I'll try to go slow." His voice shook, his muscles straining.

I bit his bottom lip, and he growled and slanted over me. His cock slid lower and pressed at my entrance. He palmed my breast and squeezed, then pinched the nipple. A multitude of pleasurable sensations lashed me, each one headier than the last. I moaned as he slowly pushed inside, his cock sliding smoothly as my walls stretched to accommodate him.

I dug my nails into his neck when a slight sting erupted. He stopped and pulled away from the kiss. "Are you all right?"

The sting faded, and I moved my hips toward him.

"Oh fuck." He thrust forward, seating himself fully inside me.

I gasped and threw my head back against the window. His lips met my throat as he pulled back and thrust again, slicking himself with my wetness and sliding smoothly.

Pressing my heels into his back, I urged him on. He kept one hand under my ass and squeezed my breast with the other. Each thrust sent me higher, and he never stopped kissing me. I ran my nails across his scalp and gripped his hair as he fucked me against the window, my skin slapping against the glass with each punishing stroke.

My arousal swirled higher. His cock was thick, hard, and hitting the one spot I needed most.

“Fucking perfect.” He pressed his forehead to mine and fucked me even harder, my body trembling with each impact. “You’re everything I’ve wanted and more.” He craned his head back, and I gave in to the urge to bite him.

I licked up the side of his throat, then bit down. His deep growl filled the air, and he dug his fingers into my hip, leaving bruises. I kissed away the sting and ran my tongue along the line of his jaw.

“Fuck.” He fisted my hair and turned my head to the side, his teeth stinging along my skin and creating the perfect cocktail of pleasure and pain. “You like it. The pain.” His low voice against my skin was the strongest aphrodisiac. He bit me again, and I cried out and clawed at the smooth fabric of his jacket.

“That’s it, baby. That’s it.” He pistoned into me so hard I feared the window might break, but I didn’t care if we died—as long as he didn’t stop.

I folded in on myself, each square smaller and smaller until I fit in the pulsing nub between my legs.

“You’re close. I can feel your cunt tightening even more.” He pulled out and lowered me to the floor.

Before my lust fog could clear, he dropped to his knees and slung my thigh over his shoulder. His hot mouth on my clit had me slapping my palms against the window.

“Sebastian.” I breathed, unable to think as his tongue stroked me, his fingers searching for the ridged spot inside me. When he found it, my body tensed, and I ground against his face.

He groaned and kept licking me just the way I needed. My body seized, the wave cresting inside me. When it crashed down, I called his name, my voice reverberating through the space as I came hard, each wave of bliss deeper than the last until, at last, I floated along, all tension gone and every

last drop of desire lapped up by Sebastian's tongue.

With a hard yank, he flipped me to my knees. I cried out as he pushed me face-first against the window. When he entered me from behind, I hissed, but spread my legs so he could get as deep as I needed.

He pressed his mouth to my ear and whispered, "I want to eat your pussy for hours. Hours of you begging me to let you come. But I won't. Not until you ride my cock." He shoved deep inside me and slid out before starting a fast pace. My breasts pressed against the windows as he kissed the back of my neck. His chest pressed to my back, I had a prime view of the city as Sebastian owned me with every sure thrust. I panted, my breath fogging the glass, and moaned as he slid his fingers to my clit.

"Please." My voice was more of a whine than anything else.

"You want to come again?" He bit my shoulder. "Squeeze my cock until I can't take it anymore?"

"Yes." His filthy words sent my spiraling higher.

"It's yours. Anything you want." He pressed two fingers against me, then caressed back and forth.

My hips met his upward thrusts, and he grabbed my hair and wrenched my head back to kiss my lips. We kissed hard and messy, our bodies joined as we both chased release. He grunted, his body tightening by the second.

"I'm there. You need to come." He intensified the pressure on my clit, and that's all it took.

I shook as my second release washed over me. So deep, the orgasm silenced me as I leaned into him.

"I can feel you, your walls squeezing me, wanting my come."

"Oh my god." I shuddered.

He grabbed my shoulders and pushed me down, impaling me on his cock. "It's all yours, Camille." He thrust hard, his cock shooting inside me, his wetness adding to my own. He pumped a few more times, his masculine grunts giving me a satisfaction I couldn't explain.

When he was done, he pulled me back against his chest and wrapped his arms around me. We just breathed for a while. I rested my head against his shoulder and tried to stop the cascade of dark thoughts that began to flood my mind. But they were like water, seeping around whatever walls I tried to throw up. How could I have done this?

He kissed my shoulder, then slid my dress straps back into place. I bit my lip as he pulled out, the sting reminding me of how long it had been since I'd

been with a man like that. He handed me his handkerchief. I took it and cleaned up, then he helped me to my feet.

I tried to walk away, but he stopped me and pulled me into his arms.

Kissing my crown, he whispered, "Thank you."

I wanted to melt into his embrace, but my own self-loathing wouldn't let me. Turning away from him, I caught movement by the frosted glass doors at the entrance.

"Who's that?" I stared. Shock paralyzed me as I focused on the familiar eyes and the dark blond hair. Link. It was Link who peered through the strip of clear glass between the frosted panels.

I GRABBED TINA'S HAND, and we ran back to the elevator. "Oh my god, that was so hot." She looked behind us at the frosted glass doors to Graffine, one of the choicest restaurants in New York. I'd pulled some serious strings—mainly by bribing Sebastian's secretary to give me a reservation Sebastian had wanted canceled—and managed to get a table for the night under his name. But when I'd arrived, it was only to find out the restaurant was closed for a private party. But there was a consolation prize. I may not have gotten dinner, but I'd definitely gotten a show—Sebastian fucking some hot blonde up against the window. I wished I'd thought to record it with my phone.

My cock was waging a war against my boxers, and one of them was going to have to give or I might need to go to the emergency room for a case of strangled dick.

"Come on, come on." I stabbed the elevator call button a few more times. Sebastian hadn't seen me, but his smoking hot date had. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn't quite place it. She'd been too far away for me to get a good view of her face, but she'd certainly taking a licking and kept on ticking. If she was an escort, I'd definitely get the number from Sebastian.

"I'm so horny." Tina licked her puffy lips and ran her palm down my cock as the elevator opened.

Shouting erupted inside the restaurant, and I could see the silhouette of someone trying to unlock the front doors. I dragged Tina into the elevator and rained down abuse on the "close door" elevator button. They shut just as the

frosted glass doors began to swing open. We escaped.

Tina dropped to her knees and scrambled for my zipper.

I pulled her back to her feet. “We have to get out of here. If my boss finds out I saw the show, I’ll be shit canned. So will you.”

The doors opened, and we fled out the front and into the trickle of people walking along the sidewalk. I hailed a cab, and we climbed in. Once we were safely embedded in traffic, I let out a sigh of relief and relaxed.

“Now.” I unzipped my pants, and Tina got to work as I gave the cabbie instructions.

Her sloppy sounds and bobbing head had the cabbie adjusting the rearview so he could get a better view. I didn’t give a shit. The high of watching two people fuck in real time buzzed through my veins.

“My balls,” I gritted out.

Tina reached beneath my shaft and squeezed my sack. She was a real pro. I closed my eyes and let her do her magic. But as my orgasm built, something nagged at me. I couldn’t quite figure out what was holding me back. It certainly wasn’t the crisscrossing motion of Tina’s tongue or the feel of her throat.

Fuck, what was wrong with me? I leaned my head against the pungent vinyl of the back seat. The blonde—there was something about the woman Sebastian had been fucking. But what?

My balls tightened, my load fizzing for release. Tina moaned like a cheap whore around my cock, urging me to get it over with.

I was so close. And then it hit me. The blonde looked a lot like Camille. With no warning, I exploded in Tina’s mouth. She tried to pull back, but I held her head in place and enjoyed the sensation of her swallowing the tip of my dick right along with my come.

When I was done, she sputtered and coughed, then sat up next to me and glared at me with watery eyes.

“Sorry, babe. I just needed all of you. It was so good.” I stroked her cheek, but when she leaned in for a kiss, I backed away. “How about we hit a club or two? You’d like that, right?”

She frowned, her smeared lipstick giving her a “sad joker” look.

I ran my fingers up her thigh. “You’ll get yours.” I wasn’t interested in eating her pussy, but if the empty promise got her to stop giving me that face, I was all for it.

“All right.” She popped open a compact and fixed her makeup.

My thoughts returned to the frosted windows of the restaurant. The blonde. Her eyes. She was thirty feet away, maybe more, but something about her eyes, the slight tilt of her chin. The more I thought about her, the more she looked just like Camille. But that wasn't possible. Camille was up a tree in the rainforest, studying plants and doing all the nerdy stuff she excelled at. Right?

I pulled my phone from my pocket and tapped on my messages. Mint had sent me a dozen more texts in the past few days. I'd ignored them, though I didn't block his number. He was a good kid, and maybe some small part of me bought into his paranoia. After all, I hadn't spoken to Camille since she'd gotten into that limo. It seemed like she would have called at some point, though the last texts I'd gotten from her had been warmer. I just figured she was missing me. Being away from me had to be hard on her, especially with Christmas coming up in a few days.

Skimming through Mint's texts, I found him to be in an ever-heightening state of worry. The fucker had filled my phone with all sorts of crazy claims—the “plants missing from the school greenhouse” accusation really made me question the kid's sanity. Once I got all this straightened out, I would have to have a stern talk with him about laying off my girl. Not that it mattered much. She'd be moving to the city with me at the end of spring term. He'd never see her again.

I clicked back to the main text screen and found a message from Veronica. Apparently, she and Mint were drinking the same Kool-Aid.

Veronica: I checked every scholarly journal, every university, and under every damn rock. There is no “Dr. Williams” in charge of an expedition to the Amazon. Something is wrong. Call me.

Just what I needed, Camille's meddling bestie on my ass. I pocketed my phone as Tina drew a line of coke on the back of her hand. She sniffed like a clogged vacuum cleaner, then tapped out another line from her silver vial. I took the hit and pinched my nose as the cab pulled up to a block lined with clubs.

Camille was in the Amazon, not fucking Sebastian Lindstrom in a New York high rise. It was just too implausible. I took another hit, snorting a line to her wrist. The blonde flashed through my mind. Thing was, I'd never seen that look on her face when she was with me—not the wide-eyed surprise, but the one before it. The sated look of bliss and that wispy intangible that a more poetic person might call love. That alone told me it couldn't have been her. If

she were going to love anyone, it was me.

Even so, the blonde nagged at me. Maybe something screwy was going on, but there was nothing I could do about it right then.

“Let’s party.” Tina grabbed my arm and pointed to the nearest club.

When the cocaine rush hit, all thoughts of Camille were blasted away.

CAMILLE RESTED IN MY arms as Anton drove us back to the apartment. She'd been spooked at the restaurant, and I'd sent Timothy to catch whoever it was that had watched us through the glass. He'd barely missed them, but reported it had been a couple. Camille had gone pale, one hand at her throat as she stared at the glass doors. I'd scooped her up and assured her no one would know it was us. She nodded, but the haunted look hadn't left her eyes.

Once she was in the car, she let me hold her as we returned to the penthouse. No words passed her lips and her eyes were closed, but I knew she was awake. I would have given a substantial portion of my fortune to know what she was thinking during those moments. My thoughts jumbled together in an atypical mess. My logic was pocked with the same sensation I'd felt when I realized I loved parts of Camille's personality. I expected the feeling to fade, for my usual calculation to return. It didn't. After she'd given herself to me, and I'd had the most intense fuck of my life, maybe it was impossible for my brain to heal from its shattered state.

Anton pulled into the parking garage, and Timothy opened my door. I hefted Camille into my arms and carried her to the elevator. She didn't protest as we rose to the penthouse and I laid her in my bed. Too much silence. I did the math with what little faculties I had left. No words meant something was wrong.

A knock at my door filtered through the beat from my headphones. I didn't particularly care for music, but my father insisted I show at least some interest in it since most boys my age did.

*Slipping off my headphones, I turned as he walked in and sat on my bed.
“Good morning.”*

He didn't say anything, simply stared at the wood floor beneath his feet. He clasped his hands between his knees, and his shoulders stooped at a defeated angle.

I waited for him to speak. When he didn't, I put my headphones back on and tapped my foot along to the beat so he could see I was taking his advice.

Minutes passed, but he never looked over at my rhythmic efforts. My foot tired, so I gave up and put the headphones down on my desk, the music tinny and far away. Why was he silent?

It occurred to me all this was odd. If he came to my room, he usually had something to say. Why not this time? I cycled through my list of possible responses, but he'd never prepared me for silence. I needed some sort of a cue. Or was this a test? Was silence a cue in and of itself?

A faint thump-thump added to the hum of the earphones' incessant hum. I flicked off my iPod, killing the noise. It was a plop, not a thump. Dad hadn't moved, but tears were dropping to the floor beneath him. Otherwise, silence.

“Dad?” Tears meant sad, unless it was a wedding, and then tears meant happy. Unless it was a wedding of someone you hated, in which case it could cut either way. I generally just offered a handkerchief and avoided trying to parse the reason behind the tears. But Dad didn't cry, so I couldn't gauge what his tears meant. “Is something wrong?”

Silence. It was oppressive. I'd never minded it before, but this sort of silence seemed to speak. The hackles along the back of my neck rose. Something was off. I couldn't feel it like normal people, but I could sense it on a basic, animal level. Something that had been whole was now broken. But what?

“Dad?”

He cleared his throat and pressed his fingertips to his closed eyes. “Your mother.”

“Is she upset with you?”

“No, son.” He finally met my gaze, his watery eyes throwing emotions I couldn't catch. “She died this morning.”

“Died?” I knew the concept, and not just from my experience with the neighbor's rooster. But I'd never dealt with it like this. So close that it seemed unreal.

“She passed in her sleep. I woke up and she was—”

His voice caught in his throat, and he hung his head again.

“Where is she?”

“Still in bed.” His voice was strained. “Paramedics are coming, but it’s too late.”

“But she’s not there. So where is she? Where did she pass to?” I wrestled with the concept.

“She’s just gone, son.”

“But you said she’s still in bed.” I shook my head.

He broke into a sob. “I can’t do this. I can’t. Not without her. It’s too much.” More sobs followed, each one wracking his body as sirens whined in the distance.

As my father cried, I filed away his behavior in my notebook of human reactions: nothing good comes of silence.

“Camille?” I stripped off my jacket and tossed it to a side chair, then knelt at her feet and removed her heels.

“Yes?” She kept her eyes closed.

“What’s wrong?” After yanking my tie loose, I unbuttoned my shirt, tossed it to join my jacket, then crawled into bed next to her.

“How do you know something is wrong?” She turned her head away.

“Your silence.”

“Did your robot brain do the math on that one?”

I reached up to touch her face, but she flinched away. “Please tell me.”

Fear, sudden and strong, overtook me. Did she regret what we’d done in the restaurant? “Was it the sex?”

She pinned her thumbnail between her teeth. “No. I mean yes.” She rolled away from me. “Not exactly...I don’t know.”

“The people watching, then?” I wanted to touch her, to soothe whatever thoughts plagued her.

“Yes.”

“I can have the security camera footage pulled and find out who they were.”

She groaned and buried her face in the pillow. “Please don’t. I’ll die of mortification.”

Settling next to her, I stared at the blonde strands hiding her from me. “If you don’t explain, I’ll never know. My robot brain, as you call it, simply isn’t capable of seeing into the heart of someone else. It can’t even see into mine, if I have one.”

Her shoulders relaxed a faint bit, and she rolled over so she faced me. “Do you know how disarming that is?”

“What?” I couldn’t help myself. I ran my fingers along her bare upper arm.

“When you admit your flaws like that.”

“Why is it disarming?” I peered into her light eyes.

“Because most people spend countless hours of their lives trying to cover them up.”

“I’m not most people.”

“No.” She rested her palm on my cheek, her warmth flooding my veins. “You aren’t.”

“Neither are you.” I pulled her closer, and she rested in the crook of my arm. “Are you going to tell me why you’re upset?”

“I thought you couldn’t read emotions?”

“I can read yours sometimes, when you let me see them. But other times you hide from me.”

“It’s safer that way.”

A question formed in my mind, one I hadn’t thought to ask. “Will you tell me about you?” Her words came back to me: “*Ask the right questions.*” Maybe this was one of them.

“What do you want to know?”

“I know the mechanics of your childhood—where you went to school, what your parents did, that you loved them, the names of your friends. But would you tell me something you remember vividly?”

“Why?”

Wasn’t it obvious? “I want to know you. All your secrets—I want to keep them. You can tell me anything, and I wouldn’t judge you. Had an unhealthy obsession with One Direction? Fine. Slutted it up senior year to get back at mommy? No problem, though admittedly that wouldn’t be my favorite. Fifty bodies in the back yard? I don’t give a shit.”

She snorted. “I think that last one is more your speed.”

Yes. “But I want to know about you.” I thought I’d collected all the data I needed, but the closer I got to her, the more I realized how much I didn’t know. “I want to see things through your eyes.”

“Empathy. The one thing psychopaths lack.” She shook her head against my shoulder. “You want the one thing that it’s impossible for you to have.”

“Humor me?”

“Fine. Let me think.” She fell into another silence, one that put me on edge. Silence was bad. But when she spoke again, I could hear the smile in her voice. “One summer, my friends and I got into our heads that we were going to be runners. It was this whole craze at the time. I’m not sure why, maybe the summer Olympics or something. Anyway, I don’t know if you’ve noticed from our exercise in the yard, but I’m not particularly suited to running.”

“You looked good to me. I rather liked watching you move, though I had wished you’d been running toward me instead of away.”

“Then it wouldn’t have been a very clever escape attempt, now would it?”

“True.”

She rested her palm on my stomach. “So, one morning, we’re out running around my neighborhood. The sun’s already hot, and I’m hustling along in the middle of the slower girls’ group. We’re making decent time, and turn the corner to pass by my house. My dad is out in the yard setting up the sprinkler before he leaves for work. He pauses and waves at us as we approach. Then my mom steps out of the front door and walks over to the hose pipe. I begin to laugh before she even finishes her mischief. Sure enough, the sprinkler starts up and sprays my dad. He stands there for, I don’t know, like a five-second count.” She giggled and stopped to collect herself, and I found my lips twitching along with her laughter. “He’s wearing his work suit and is soaked. By this time, the slow group has stopped, and we are all laughing. He turns and sees my mom trying to sneak back into the house. Then he takes off running. She screams and tries to hurry up the steps, but he grabs her and hugs her to him, soaking her just the same.” Her laughter infected me, and I smiled at the mental image.

“They sound like a pair.”

“They were.” Her laughter tapered off. “They had me late. A surprise baby to a couple who’d tried a decade prior to have a child. Mom was forty-three when I was born. Dad was almost fifty.” Sadness colored the memory, softening her voice. “I knew, you know? I knew when Mom died that Dad wouldn’t be far behind. They were inseparable, even when she got sick. He never strayed far from her side. It was like he was going through the treatments, too. The chemo was so hard on her, sapping her strength. But her spirit never waned. She always had a smile for me, even when she was too tired to lift her arms to hug me. And my dad was like a plant under her sun. When she burned out, he withered away soon after.”

“I’m sorry.” I squeezed her tighter.

“Me too. I miss them.” She sniffled. “What about your mom?”

“She died when I was a kid.”

She pushed up and rested on my chest, her stunning eyes pinning me.
“That’s all?”

I would have talked for hours if it kept her perched on top of me. “She was sort of cold. Not like my father. They were opposites. My dad was the one who tried to teach me. She sort of...I don’t know. I guess when I look back on it now, she didn’t know what to do with me. Dad was patient and taught me everything I needed to know to pass in the real world.”

“Pass?”

“As a person, just like everyone else. With feelings and empathy, and all those tools that normal people are born with but I lack.”

“Hmm.” She rested her chin on my chest.

“What?”

“I’ve never really thought about it like that, like you were disadvantaged.”

“I wasn’t.”

“If you say so.”

“I had everything. Mom didn’t take an interest in me, but Dad more than made up for it. I think maybe she was his strength. He leaned on her, and I leaned on him.”

“Were you sad when she died?”

I wanted to say yes. That was the correct answer. Instead, I told the truth. “I don’t know. I knew Dad was sad, which wasn’t a good thing. The whole thing just struck me as unbelievably odd. One minute she was there, the next she was gone. Death didn’t make sense to me. Still doesn’t, I guess.”

“I think that’s a common existential issue.”

“So maybe I’m not as odd as I seem?” I threaded her hair through my fingers.

“Don’t get too far ahead of yourself.”

I loved how quick she was. *Loved*. That deep feeling, the one that shot fear and excitement through me in equal measures, roared back to life. And there was nothing else to it. Not really. The simple truth had been there all along. I loved Camille.

She shifted off me.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to get out of this dress.”

My cock woke at her words.

I must have given away my thoughts, because she rolled her eyes. “No. I still can’t believe I—we...yeah.” She covered her face with her palms. “In a public place.”

I wanted her again, her body, her heart, her everything. “It wasn’t public. Except the part where you were up against the window.”

She squeaked beneath her hands. “And you’re a psycho.”

“I think we both know you love my psycho.” *Shit, did I just say love?*

Peeking through her fingers, she said, “You’re overselling it.”

“Don’t be shy now.” I licked my lips and noted her nipples hardening beneath the crimson fabric. “Not after our little understanding earlier this evening.”

“That was a one-time thing.”

“If you say so.” I smirked.

She whirled and retreated into the bathroom. “By the way, no more kissing. Not in the deal anymore, remember?” Her words echoed off the marble tile.

We’ll see about that.

HE KEPT ME AT the penthouse for the rest of the weekend and made sure I had no chance for escape while he worked on Monday. Timothy shadowed my every step, and there were plenty of times when I wondered if he was going to enter the bathroom with me. I slept with Sebastian as required by our deal, but I fought off my desires and his. Being with him at the restaurant had clouded my judgment, but seeing Link brought a new clarity to my situation.

I had to get out and return to my life. Sebastian had warmed to me so much over the past couple of days—and if I were being honest, I’d warmed to him far more than I wanted to admit—that I felt the time was right to ask for my release. Or, at the very least, more freedom than I’d been given so far. I could make a deal with him. I wouldn’t tell anyone about what he’d done, and he’d give me more room to roam.

Time ticked away on Monday evening, and I paced the living room as Timothy read a men’s magazine.

“Do you think he’ll let me go?”

“We’ve been over this.” He turned the page and yawned. “Not happening.”

“You’re no help.”

He arched a brow. “I’m plenty of help, just not in that particular area.”

“I think maybe he’ll let me go.”

“After the restaurant, I would have thought you’d want to stay.”

My cheeks flamed hot, and I gave him an acidic glare.

He shrugged. “What? I couldn’t help but overhear.”

I wrinkled my nose at him and retreated to the kitchen where Rita was cleaning up. When she was done, I had no doubt the kitchen would look brand new. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and plopped down on a bar stool.

When I heard the sound of a key in the front door, I laser focused on it. Steeling myself, I rose and met Sebastian as he walked in. His dark gray suit fit him perfectly, hugging every angle and giving him a debonair look that plenty of men would kill for.

“Hi.” I smiled.

His eyes lit, and he pulled me into a hug. “I missed you.”

I loved his scent. No point in lying to myself about it. His strong arms also had their perks. I’d missed him, too, but I’d never admit it. When he finally released me, I took a breath and blurted out my request. “Can we talk in the bedroom?”

“Sure.” He unbuttoned his jacket and whipped off his tie as he followed me across the living space. Timothy didn’t look up from his magazine, but I got the distinct impression he wasn’t reading a damn thing.

I closed the door behind us and leaned against it. “I want to ask you something.”

“Okay.” He sat on the bed and patted his lap. “If you have a question, I’m going to need you to ask it while you’re sitting right here.”

“Sebastian.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

He started to rise. “Fine, I’ll just go shower—”

“Wait!” I walked over to him and sat crossways on his lap.

“Not good enough.” He pushed me off. “Straddle me.”

“You’re insufferable.” I was wearing a knee length cotton skirt that was a comfortable favorite of mine.

“I’m dying to taste your pussy, but you’ve been cockblocking me ever since the restaurant. I’ll take what I can get.” He smiled, the look more predatory than anything. “And I’ll take it however I can get it.”

He killed in his dress shirt and slacks, the epitome of masculine beauty. My body heated, even though I was trying to stay focused on my request for more freedom. A man like Sebastian made it almost impossible.

“Come on.” He leaned back on his elbows.

“Fine.” I climbed onto his lap and placed my knees on either side of his hips, though I was careful not to scoot far enough forward for him to feel my pussy.

He put his big hands on my hips and pulled me to him, erasing the distanced between us as he sat up. “That’s better. And fuck, your pussy is so warm.”

His cock pressed against me, and I gripped his shoulders to try and keep myself grounded.

“Now what was it you wanted to ask me?” He slid his hands around to my ass, kneading me softly.

“Sebastian.” I grabbed his wrists. “I’m serious.”

“I am too.” His gaze flickered to my lips.

“Stop.”

His fingers stopped, but he didn’t remove his hands.

I’d just have to go with it. “I was thinking that we have become closer over the past few days.”

“Agree.” He dropped his mouth to my neck, hovering just along my skin, his warm breath spreading goosebumps all over me.

“And so I was thinking you could give me a bit more freedom.”

He leaned back. “Like what?”

“Like, let me leave the house, let me teach again, *don’t fake my death*. Things like that.”

“No.”

“But wait, hear me out. I won’t tell anyone about you or what you did. That’s between us. But I want to see my friends and—”

“That’s off the table.” His icy tone was like a slap.

“Why?” I struggled to free myself from his grasp, to no avail.

“I won’t lose you.”

“It wouldn’t be losing me.” I shoved at his shoulders, but he spun and pinned me to the bed.

“That’s exactly what it would be.” He shook his head. “Don’t you see? That moron would come sniffing around you, thinking you’re his. I can’t have that.”

“I’d tell him we were over.”

He barked a harsh laugh. “You think it’s that easy? To just let you go? No man in his right mind would *ever* let you walk away.”

“He’d have to.” I yanked, trying to free my wrists from his iron hold.

“No, he wouldn’t. He’s not the white knight he pretends to be. He’d do everything in his power to keep you. And then I’d have to kill him.”

“You promised.” The more I struggled, the more weight he rested on me.

“I did. But if he ever touched you again, I’d have to kill him. Promise or not.”

“He won’t touch me.” I bucked, but got nowhere. “Get off.”

“I will, but you need to understand that you aren’t leaving.” His intensity was back, no veil covering the darkness inside him. “I can’t let you go.”

“Then we have nothing more to discuss.” I turned my face away to hide the sting of tears.

“Fuck.” He growled and eased off me, then opened the top drawer of his nightstand.

The glint of gold told me what was next.

“Please don’t.”

“I have to.” He knelt and slid the cold metal onto my ankle. “For us.”

In that moment, I knew what I had to do.

FUCKING SILENCE. IT WORMED its way into my brain until everything inside me was blaring a warning despite the total calm all around me. The only noise in the car was the sound of the wind as Anton drove us back to the house. Camille sat against her door, her eyes affixed to the passing scenery as we sped away from the city.

The moment the metal hit her ankle, she'd shut down. All the progress I'd made over the weekend leached away by the thin band of gold. When she'd talked of freedom, all I could see was her in *his* arms. I didn't even care if she went to the police about me or tried to ruin my business. All I could think of what it would feel like to lose her, or to see her in someone else's embrace.

She made me feel, but the problem inherent in that is that she made me afraid of the hurt I'd suffer if she left. Losing her would be a mortal blow. So, I'd wrapped the shackle around her ankle and promised to make it work this time, to make her understand how keeping her was the best thing for the both of us.

"Camille?"

"Yes." She didn't look at me.

"What are you thinking?"

"You don't deserve an answer to that question."

Fair enough. I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to decide between letting the silence steep even longer or trying, once again, to explain to her why I was doing this.

"Have you ever put a puzzle together?" Her low voice had a chilly note I'd never heard there before.

“Yes.”

“Did you force the pieces to make it work?”

“I see where you’re going with this, but if you’d just let me—”

“No. If you intend to tell me why this is the way things have to be, save your breath.”

Everything I’d done boiled down to the simplest desire. “I just want you.”

She finally turned to me, her eyes like hard aquamarine stones. “What if I told you this isn’t the way to get me? What if I told you this is the surest way to lose me?”

“That doesn’t make sense. You felt it in the restaurant. I know you did.”

“So what if I did?” She pointed to her ankle. “This erases all of it.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

She turned back to the window. “I’m done with this conversation.”

We rode in silence the rest of the way home.



I tried to make conversation with her during dinner, but her responses were no better than one or two syllables at most, and she didn’t engage me any more than necessary.

Frustration pooled inside me until I itched to yank her into my lap and force her to talk to me, to be herself. But I had finally learned that the more I pushed against her defenses, the higher she built them. Patience and pressure were the surest ways to get to her.

After the excruciating dinner, she strode toward the library. I followed, but she closed the door in my face.

“If you want to stare, do it from your camera.”

I could have stormed in, thrown her over my shoulder and carried her

upstairs. Fuck, I wanted to so badly that I rested my hand on the doorknob and thought about it for a few minutes. In the end, I gave in to my logic instead of my boiling blood, and I took her advice. I poured myself a large glass of bourbon and headed upstairs to my surveillance room.

The screens woke up, shining a harsh light that took a while for me get adjusted to. I sat down and flipped on a view of her. She sat at the table, a pen in one hand as she flipped through a book with the other. I couldn't see what she was reading, but she seemed engrossed in it. Link's apartment flickered to life on one of the smaller monitors. He was on the couch with a woman, his arm slung around her shoulder with his hand at rest on her tit. Maybe if I showed this to Camille, she'd trust me again. Or it would only hurt her. Fuck.

I sat back and sipped my bourbon. Veronica's apartment was dark. She'd started seeing a man and seemed to spend more time with him than at home. It didn't matter. Watching her held zero interest for me unless it involved Camille. She was the star of my show, and I hoped one day I could be the star of hers.

Doubt crept in as I watched her work. Was she right? Would I lose her by keeping her close? Dad certainly seemed to think so. I moved from sipping my bourbon to taking larger swallows that burned on the way down.

My phone buzzed. Dad was calling. I hit ignore, a rare occurrence for me. But I already knew what he'd ask. I didn't want another go-around of the same argument with a different person. The one thing I wanted—no, the one thing I *needed*—had slammed the door in my face. So I would sit and drink until she came up to bed.

And then I'd hold her. The thing I looked forward to most every day. I didn't care if she wore her pajamas. I took another swig. She could wear a goddamn winter coat with gloves and a hat for all I cared, just so long as she was close.

My phone beeped with a voice message. It could wait till tomorrow. Dad was a smart guy, but he was wrong about this. Wasn't he?

"Yes." Fuck, now I was talking to myself.

Camille stood and walked to the table Timothy had set up near the door. She leaned over and adjusted the microscope, then left the room and headed to the greenhouse. I watched as she inspected the plants. She'd pick leaves off here and there, pruning as she went. Nothing escaped her gaze when she perused her greenhouse kingdom.

Another gulp of bourbon, but this one didn't burn at all. Maybe it was

smoother than I'd first thought. She continued her inspection, and I thought about our future. Christmas was only two days away. Dad would come by for dinner. Maybe then I could explain to both of them how all of this was working as intended...mostly.

My plan made so much sense. The most nonsensical thing was that they didn't see it the way I did. They were wrong. Not me.

I finished off my drink and stumbled down the hallway. The floor flipped like a see-saw, and the walls wouldn't stay still. Thank god the bedroom door was open or I'd never have gotten past the keypad.

I collapsed onto the bed not even bothering to take my clothes off. Snagging her pillow, I inhaled her scent. It quieted my mind. I resolved to stay awake until she came to bed, and then I'd tell her I loved her. Because I did. So much so that the thought of losing her was the one thing that pierced through all my cold calculation and caused a slow bleed deep inside. Without her, I would die.

I would tell her all of it.

HE WAS OUT WHEN I crawled into bed. I watched him for a long time, traced the lines of his face into my memory. His brow clenched at one point, as if he were having troubled dreams. I reached out and ran my palm down his cheek. The tension disappeared, and he'd calmed. My heart ached as I watched him, but my plan was in motion, and I wouldn't turn back.

Even though I saw a spark in him that echoed inside me. Even though his touch made me feel more alive than I ever had. Even though I wanted him. It could never work while I was a prisoner. No matter how many ways I tried to tell him that, he doggedly insisted that this was the only way we could be together. I fell asleep with the thought that the only way I could show him he was wrong was for us to be apart.

I awoke before he did, the slanting rays of sunlight shining in his hair as he rolled toward me and pulled me close. He sighed with contentment, and I didn't have it in me to push him away. Besides, part of my scheme was to draw him closer today. I snuggled up to him, not because I loved the contact. It was necessary for everything to work correctly. It wasn't because I knew this would be the last time.

His eyes fluttered open, and he winced at the light streaming through the windows. "Fuck."

"Good morning to you too."

He buried his face in my hair and ran his hands down my body. "Damn pajamas."

Sliding his hand beneath my shirt, he flattened his palm against my lower back. "Better."

“You smell like a whiskey bomb.”

“Good bourbon.” His muffled voice was scratchy and sexy as hell.

“I drove you to drink?”

He smoothed his hand higher up my back. “Yes.”

“Good.”

“Vixen.” He slid one knee between my thighs, entangling our bodies in the same way I feared our souls twisted around each other. “Are you still mad at me?”

“Of course.”

“No.” He groaned and pressed his lips to my throat. “Please don’t be.”

I let him kiss me, and I ran my hands through his hair. He was so dark, had so much raw intensity to him, that he easily eclipsed every other man I’d known. But in moments like these, he was stripped down to the simple desires inside him. He wanted me to be happy, especially with him.

“I’ll put it aside for the next two days. It’s Christmas and all. But we’re going to have to talk about it.” My core heated as he kissed lower, his teeth nipping at me. “I’m not okay with this.”

“Thank you.” He eased his hand around and cupped my breast.

“Sebastian.” My warning tone turned breathy as he pressed his thigh against my pussy.

“Let me make you feel better.” He slipped his fingers over the stiff bud of my nipple. “Just for this moment.”

I bit my lip as he pulled my t-shirt aside and kissed my collarbone. He sensed my indecision and took full advantage by sliding down my body and capturing a nipple in his mouth.

A fiery tingle of arousal shot through me as he sucked hard enough to bruise and palmed my other breast. I ran my nails along his scalp. He slid his palms beneath me, cradling my back as he sucked first one nipple, then the next. It didn’t take long for my mind to blank, for it to fill with thoughts of him, his cock, his aggression.

He dropped light kisses down my stomach and continued them along the waistband of my pajama pants. With a deft movement, he pulled my pants and panties down my thighs, then shucked them all the way off.

“I’ve needed this.” He kissed my pussy and flicked his tongue along the folds. “Your pretty pussy spread before me like a feast.” He opened my thighs. “Only cunt I ever want to taste.”

I let him, even if it was wrong. The matching darkness inside me wanted

everything he had to give. He licked me slowly, and I gripped the sheets. His low groan vibrated through my hot flesh as he flattened his tongue against me, then dove down and pressed inside me.

When he returned to my clit, his tongue giving pressure and then rapid strokes, my legs began to shake.

He laughed against me. "My damsel needs a release." His tongue swirled as he gripped my ass, pulling me to his face as he sucked and licked.

I reveled in his mouth, but I needed more. All of him. "Sebastian, please."

"What do you need? I'll give it to you." He squeezed my ass. "Name it."

"Fuck me."

If his eyes had been bright before, they practically blazed when I asked for what I should have never wanted. He gave me a few more licks before prowling up my body. Pausing at my breasts, he teased each nipple with the same intensity he'd used on my pussy.

I writhed beneath him, desperate for more. "Please."

"I can't refuse you." He rose to my mouth, sharing my taste as his tongue warred with mine. His cock rested against my pussy and slid down my folds to my entrance. "Here, damsel? Is this where you need it?"

"Yes." I could barely form the word.

He took my hands and pinned me, our fingers laced together, as he pushed inside. I moaned at the minor sting and then the delicious pressure. God, he filled me just right as he slid all the way inside.

"Fucking hot cunt." He dropped to my neck, biting and sucking, giving me fresh marks.

Keeping me pinned, he started a slow rhythm that built with intensity on each stroke. I spread my legs as far as I could, opening up to him, urging him to take what he wanted.

He didn't disappoint, fucking me rough enough to rattle the bed against the wall. I knew I'd be bruised, but I wanted it. I needed to feel him, to sample every bit of him before I could walk away.

I arched against him, my sensitive nipples brushing against his hard chest. He growled and pulled out. Gripping my hips, he turned me onto all fours and surged inside me again.

My scream of pleasure and pain ripped through the room. It seemed to drive him wilder, because he pistoned inside me and slapped my ass hard enough for the sting to add an extra kick to the tightness inside me.

"I know you want it like this." He gripped my hair and yanked me back to

him as his other hand slapped my ass. “Rough, hard. You want all the dark. Tell me.”

I moaned when he slapped me again, the sting making my pussy ache for even more punishment. “I want it.”

“Fucking hell.” He pulled my hair harder and bit down on my shoulder, his hips bouncing against mine, our bodies slapping together with unfettered violence.

He released my shoulder and shoved me forward, pressing his wide palm against my upper back so that I was face down on the bed.

Another slap had me crying into the sheets.

“Look at that perfect asshole.” His feral growl sent a shot of fear through me. “Like a fucking flower.”

I jumped when he ran a finger down my ass. “Sebastian.”

Another slap, this one even harder. “Don’t deny me.”

I moaned, spiraling higher with each word from his dangerous lips.

“That’s it.” He kept his hard rhythm and pressed his wet fingertip around my asshole. The sensation was delicious and wrong, and I wanted more.

I pressed back onto his cock, impaling myself more deeply with each stroke.

“Oh, fuck.” He pressed his finger inside my ass.

I clutched the sheets as my entire body tensed. He pushed farther, and my orgasm exploded from nowhere. I cried out as my hips seized and pleasure rippled through me in deep waves.

“Give it to me. Come all over me.” He slammed harder, his finger in my ass sliding farther as I was still in the throes of my orgasm, each of his thrusts extending the aftershocks.

When the last tremor subsided, I gulped in air.

“You aren’t done, damsel.” He leaned over me, his muscled forearm next to my face, and reached beneath me with his other hand. When he slapped my clit, I bucked against him.

“Sebastian!”

Another slap against my hyper-sensitive skin had me trying to grab his wrist.

“You need to trust me.” He yanked my wrists behind me and held them with one hand, then snaked the other one beneath me again. *Slap.* “I know what this body needs.”

He used my wrists as a way to pull me back onto his cock with each surge

forward. His fingers played against my clit, stroking and swirling, revving me up again. The next time he slapped me, I moaned with utter abandon. Nothing had ever felt so good. His fingers went right back to the spot where I needed them.

“I’m going to work you up so you come right when I shoot inside you. I want to feel your cunt squeeze me, to drain every drop.”

I would have agreed to anything he wanted as long as it involved me coming. Breathing into the sheets, all I could focus on was his cock inside me, his fingers creating an inferno that touched every part of my body and soul.

“Are you ready?” His voice shook, the control he’d exerted wavering.

“Please.” It was the only word I could form.

He intensified the pressure on my clit and thrust hard and deep each time. I was lost, buried beneath the wave cresting above me. It crashed down, drowning me with a release that blasted away everything I’d ever known until all I could think of was Sebastian.

His groan was the background music to my breathless orgasm, each pulse from deep inside me sending sparks shooting behind my eyelids. He surged deep, filling me with his release as my pussy squeezed him just as he’d instructed. I felt every jolt of his cock inside me, and our mutual release was the most erotic thing I’d ever experienced.

I collapsed onto the bed, my knees spreading until I was flat on the mattress with him lying on top of me, his cock still embedded.

His breaths came in hard bursts as he kissed my back, my neck, my shoulders. “Thank you.”

I didn’t know what to say. There was nothing except the lapping waves of release along with the harsh undertow of my captivity. He climbed from the bed. A few moments later, he cleaned me up with a warm washcloth.

Once he slid back between the sheets, he pulled me onto his chest. “That was the best hangover remedy ever invented.”

I snorted.

“Did you enjoy it?” He yanked the blanket up over me and laid his hands on the bare skin of my back.

“Yes, but it was another mistake. Like the first time. Shouldn’t have happened.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” He stroked some stray strands from my face.

I didn’t know what was true anymore. He twisted my reality around me.

But not matter how much he made me question everything, I knew that I couldn't stay. The messed-up thing was, I dreaded breaking what small piece of a heart he had. So many times, he'd told me he didn't want to hurt me. But by kidnapping me, he had the very first day. I didn't want to hurt him either, but I would, on the very last day.

I BUMPED INTO A guy with two kids in tow, each of them with ice skates slung over their shoulders. Tourists on their way to Rockefeller, looking for some holiday magic.

The guy actually apologized—definitely not a New York native. I kept walking as a light flurry fell.

Mint had wanted to meet at a pizza place near his Uncle Hal's apartment. I'd obliged. The more I'd thought about the blonde in the restaurant, the more uneasy I'd become. So here I was, engaging in cloak and dagger bullshit with a teenage horndog.

I pushed into the restaurant and headed toward a table at the back. Looking around, I didn't see the kid. I leaned against the end of the bar and pulled my phone out to text the little shit.

"Link?" A guy stood from a nearby table.

"Mint?"

"Yeah." He waved for me to sit across from him.

Hell's bells. The kid was my height with an even bigger build. What the fuck did he do in his spare time? Lift? It didn't matter, I would make sure he didn't come any nearer to Camille than required for biology class. Calling him a kid didn't seem right anymore.

I sat across from him. "What's with the meeting?"

He pulled a sheaf of papers from a leather messenger bag sitting next to him. A waitress appeared and took our order. She was cute, a little older, but definitely within my fuckable range.

"I've been in touch with Veronica. She wanted to be here, but her mom's

health isn't so great, and she had to fly home to visit for the holidays."

"She'll be missed." I took a sip from the beer the waitress had deposited in front of me.

Mint opened a folder and slapped it onto the table. "Here's what I have. Before Veronica left, she did some digging and couldn't find a Dr. Williams with any expedition to the Amazon."

"That doesn't mean she didn't go. All that tells me is you two need to brush up on your research skills."

"That's fair, I guess." He shrugged. "I was still suspicious, mainly because of the taxonomy capitalization error. So I tried to get information from the airline about whether Camille boarded her flight to Brazil, but they refused to help me because I wasn't a relative."

"So you got nothing?" I took another swig of beer and wondered why I'd even come here. The blonde couldn't have been Camille, and I hadn't even told the kid about it.

"No, I didn't get anything. *But* Veronica called the airline and pretended to be Camille. She knows all Camille's personal info, so it was easy. She was able to confirm that, though a seat had been purchased for Camille, she never actually flew out of JFK." He spun a piece of paper around on the table so I could see it. It was a letter from the airline confirming what he'd just told me.

"Okay, if you had all this information, why not go to the police?"

He retrieved the sheet of paper and tucked it into his folder. "We only called with the impersonation routine yesterday, and we weren't exactly sure what we'd say. Veronica checked to see if Camille could have gotten on another flight with that airline, but they didn't have any further information. She called the other airlines that had flights to Brazil, but none of them were able to give her anything. At that point, all we had to go on was a capitalized letter in a text and a missed flight."

"And you have something new now?" I leaned forward, my beer forgotten.

"Yes." He pulled a copy of a letter from his stack. It was dated the previous day and had a "hand-delivered" stamp on it. "How well do you know Sebastian Lindstrom?"

I grabbed the paper and skimmed it. It was a brief letter from Sebastian to Trenton Prep, wherein Sebastian offered to fully fund an upgraded greenhouse.

"I saw Mr. Lindstrom just a few weeks before Ms. Briarlane left for

Christmas break. He came by the school to supposedly enquire about scholarships, but he seemed to spend a lot of his time in Ms. Briarlane's classroom. Alone with her."

"She never told me that." *Why hadn't she told me?*

"Exactly. I think he's the prime suspect in her disappearance. His sudden interest in Trenton, especially the greenhouse bit. There's something off about him. I've read up on his business, his personality. He's a hard man."

"Don't I fucking know it. I work for the guy."

"There was something about him. The way he looked at her that day at Trenton." He shrugged. "Like he was, I don't know, scheming."

I gave Mint a hard stare. "How do you know? Were you watching?"

Mint dropped his eyes, finally looking more like a kid. "After I bumped into him, yeah, I hung around in the hallway."

I drilled into him with my gaze. "How long have you been watching my girl?"

He sputtered. "It's not like that. Not what you think."

"No? It sure as fuck seems like it. You've been searching for a reason to see *Ms. Briarlane* again ever since she left."

"That's not true." He snatched his papers back and stuffed them into his folder. "I'm just worried about her."

"Tell me, kid. Do you jerk it to her once or twice a day?"

"Don't talk about her like that!" His sudden outburst quieted the restaurant around us.

I glanced around and held up my hands toward him. "Calm down."

"I am calm." He slid his folder back into his bag. "I misjudged you, though."

"No, you didn't." I hailed the waitress and ordered two more beers. "So, let's say your suspicions are true, and Sebastian Lindstrom kidnapped Camille. What are we going to do about it? Police?"

"Not until we know for sure." He shook his head.

"How do we do that?"

He gestured to his bag. "I have a list of all the properties Lindstrom owns. The most likely candidate where he'd keep her is a house in the Catskills. Secluded, lots of acreage. I think we should ride up there and have a look around. What do you think? Does all this sound insane to you?"

"Not as insane as you might think. I'm ready to head up there right now." The beer arrived, and I pushed one across the table to him. "But first, let me

tell you about something I saw a couple nights ago.”

THE GREENHOUSE HUMMED WITH energy, the misters running on the exotic section as I rinsed off my mortar and pestle. Night was already falling beyond the panes of glass.

The back door opened, and Gerry strode in. “I got all your plants in.” He swiped his ball cap off and scratched his forehead. “But I see you’ve noticed.”

I’d taken the new arrivals out and arranged them in their respective spots the previous night. “Yep, they all look good.”

He bent over and scrutinized some of the grafted hybrids that were already beginning to thicken along the stem. “You think these are going to make some sort of Frankencucumber?”

I laughed. “I don’t think so. Probably a medium-sized cucumber with superior pest resistance.” I clapped the dirt off my hands and moved along the row toward him. “But I’ll eventually have to field test. Probably with aphids.”

He stood straight and peered around. “You want to set aphids loose in here?”

“Of course not.” I pointed at the yard. “Maybe sometime in the summer we can put a few test gardens out there.”

“I reckon Mr. Lindstrom would be fine with that. Yeah.” He stared out at the dormant grass, the sunlight fading behind the trees.

“I’m surprised you’re working today. You don’t get Christmas Eve off?”

“I do.” He slapped his worn cap back onto his gray hair. “I just wanted to come by and make sure you were happy with the deliveries.”

“I am.” *I have everything I need.*

“Good. If you want anything else, I’ll be by again soon.”

“Great. See you then.” I smiled. “And thanks for everything.”

“Yes ma’am. Very welcome.” He strode away. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.”

He left me alone with my greenery and my thoughts. The morning with Sebastian had been mind-blowing and unexpected. There was some piece of me inexplicably tangled up in him. I’d been foolish to think I’d ever get these stolen days back, that I’d ever be able to move on as I had before. He’d changed me, and as I returned to the sink and finished rinsing my tools, I couldn’t tell if it was for the better.

The door to the house swung open. “How did Gerry do on the plant delivery?” Sebastian walked to me and wrapped his arms around my waist as I dried my hands.

“Perfect.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

“Anything of particular interest?” He glanced down the rows of plants.

The coil of tension in my shoulders relaxed under his steady touch. “Not really, unless you’re into orchids.”

“I’m afraid I’m not much of a gardener. Nothing like you. If you asked me to point out which plant in here was an orchid, we’d be here all day.”

“Noted.” I turned and looked into his eyes. “But I’m not much for business, so I suppose we’re even.”

He leaned in. “You have any mistletoe?”

“No. Mistletoe is actually a parasite that affixes to trees and feeds from their nutrient systems.”

He smirked. “A vampire plant?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Is there anything you don’t know about plants?”

“I’m sure there is.” His nearness sent my compass spinning. “Someone would have to ask me the right question.”

“Speaking of questions, what do you want for Christmas?”

“I think you know.” It was worth a try.

He sighed. “Other than that.”

“Hmm, let me think about it?”

“All right.” He took my hand, and we walked into the house. “Aren’t you going to ask me what I want?”

I crinkled my nose. "I'm certain it would be an exceptionally explicit sexual favor."

He kissed the back of my hand. "See? You already know me so well."

He led me to the foyer.

"Where are we going?"

"I want to show you something."

"What?" I cocked my head at him as he handed me a coat.

"It's a surprise."

"Is it bodies? It's bodies, isn't it?"

He laughed, a full-throated sound that tried to melt every pocket of resistance inside me. "No. Maybe I'll take you on that tour a little later."

He helped me into my coat, then snugged a knit hat down over my ears. "Warm enough?"

"Toasty."

"Excellent." He grabbed his own coat and led me out the front door. His phone buzzed incessantly, but he silenced it.

"Glad the anklet still works," I said dryly. "Would hate for it to go out."

"I'm glad we agree there." He pressed his hand to my lower back and led me to a black ATV sitting just outside the front door. A cold sweat broke out along my skin. Did he know what I was up to?

"Let's go." He slung a leg over the seat and patted the leather behind him. I followed and climbed on.

Before I could ask where we were headed, he took off down the smooth driveway. Darkness had fallen quickly, the gloom growing deeper with each passing moment.

I clung to him as he gunned it, the cold air cutting past us as we hurtled away from my prison. A fleeting thought of him releasing me scurried through my mind. I swept it away before my heart put any stock in it. Sebastian wasn't going to change his mind. That much I knew. And that's why my course was set. Even so, I pressed my cheek against his strong back and breathed him in.

He slowed as we crested a small rise along the tree line. Turning the ATV, he stopped and switched the motor off.

I took his hand, and he helped me up. The house looked like something from a Bronte novel, all stone and glass, with a façade that spoke of hidden passageways and history. A small herd of deer grazed near the woods along the far side of the lawn.

“What are we doing?” I tilted my head back and inspected the stars that glittered through the blackness.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped away for a moment, then stowed it again. “Come here.”

I melted into his embrace, my back to his chest as he directed me to watch the house.

“Wait for it.”

The lights inside the house faded, leaving the structure shadowy and foreboding. Then something magical happened. White lights sparkled across the eaves, the roof, along the windows, and straight down the corners of the house. Every cornice, every stone outcrop was lined with the twinkling lights that reminded me of holidays spent at home, but on an even grander scale. Like a vista from a snow globe, the lights promised a happy holiday with loved ones.

“It’s all for you.” He kissed the crown of my head.

A tear slipped down my cheek. “It’s beautiful.” Somehow my voice made it past the knot in my throat.

“I knew you’d like it.” The simple joy in his voice threatened to break my resolve. But I couldn’t give up on my plan. Not now.

We stood for a little while longer, watching as the lights glowed into the cold night.

He kissed my neck. “Let’s get you inside before you freeze.”

The ride back to the festive house was over in a few short moments, and he hustled me inside and helped me strip out of the coat and hat. The ATV remained on the front lawn, and I watched from the corner of my eye as he pocketed the key and then hung up his coat next to mine. I hadn’t planned for such an easy getaway, but I’d take whatever opportunities I found. Of course, I wouldn’t get far on just an ATV. I ran my fingers over the small packet hidden in my jeans pocket. I’d need to use it if I had any hope of leaving the grounds.

The scent of dinner wafted down the long hallway.

“Rita made a feast and plans to make another one for tomorrow.” His dark hair fell into his eyes as he smiled down at me.

I brushed the strands away and had the urge to get on my tiptoes and kiss him.

“You can.”

“I can what?”

“Kiss me. You always glance to my lips when you think about it.”

“Psycho.” I bounced up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Thank you for the lights.”

“You’re welcome.”

We walked to the dining room and took our usual places at the table as Rita served more food than a small army could possibly consume. Turkey, dressing, rolls, green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potato with a pecan crust, and more.

Despite the feast, I picked at my food. My stomach roiled, and I wondered if I could go through with it. But I had to. I kept reminding myself that there was no other way. The only way out of this was the one I had to make for myself.

“What’s wrong?” Sebastian took a sip from his glass of red.

“Nothing.” I speared what looked like a delicious green bean, but it tasted like ash in my mouth.

“Something.” He took my hand. “You can tell me.”

It was now or never. I grabbed my wine glass, stood, and stepped over to him. He pushed back from the table, and I sat in his lap.

His easy smile, the one that was true, spread across his lips. “To what do I owe this affection?”

“I just wanted to tell you that I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. The library, the greenhouse, the lights, that night in the city.” My heart swelled with unsaid feelings and smothered thoughts. But this would have to be enough. A simple thank you.

“If any of it made you happy, even for a moment, it was worth it.” He kissed me, slow and soft, a seductive dance that he was far too good at.

I could have stayed there, given in to him, and accepted my fate as his captive. It would have been so easy to just accept it. A dark voice inside me pleaded with me to do just that. Instead of listening to it, I broke the kiss and stood. But when I did, I juggled my glass and dropped it, the shattering sound rocketing around the large dining room.

“Watch it.” Sebastian lifted me and set me on the other side of the table, away from the broken glass.

Rita rushed in and immediately began cleaning up my mess.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Sebastian knelt and handed a few of the larger pieces of glass to Rita.

I slid the packet from my pocket and shook its contents into his drink. The tiny bits of ground leaves sank into the red liquid, all but disappearing before my eyes.

Sebastian rose and walked to the sideboard for another glass. He filled it halfway for me and handed it across the table.

Rita wiped up the wine and returned to the kitchen.

“Thanks,” I called to her retreating back.

Sebastian re-took his seat. “I don’t think I’ve ever eaten so much in my life.” He grabbed his glass and brought it to his lips.

I held my breath.

“Hang on.” He pulled back and peered at me.

My stomach sank.

“Let’s toast.”

“Oh?” I thought I might pass out from the sheer stress of it. “To what?”

“To us.” He held his glass out.

I took mine and clinked it against his.

With a smile, he put the glass to his lips and drank. I followed suit, taking two large pulls of wine.

From my brief study of *Conium maculatum*, commonly known as deadly hemlock, I knew that the most potent toxins resided in its leaves. When I’d asked for the plant from Gerry, I’d hoped no one would pay any attention to the plant that looked like nothing more than a smaller version of Queen Anne’s Lace. My hopes had paid off. When I’d returned from the city, the plant had been included in Gerry’s delivery.

I’d taken only two leaves from the plant, dried them with salt, and ground them down with the mortar and pestle. Six leaves would cause death. Two, though, would cause temporary paralysis.

Sebastian set his glass down. “Would you like to—” He coughed and gripped the sides of his chair.

“Are you all right?” I stood.

“I’m okay.” He blinked a few times. “I’m—” He stiffened and fell with a crash. My heart thumped with a thick beat of dread when he hit the floor, but this was the only way.

Rita rushed from the kitchen, her eyes wide when she saw Sebastian lying on the floor, his eyes closed.

I had to run. I wouldn’t get a second chance. “I’m sorry.” Tears blurred my vision as I dashed to the hallway and into the foyer. Grabbing Sebastian’s

coat, I wrenched the front door open and snagged the keys from his pocket.

The ATV started right up, and I jetted down the front driveway, the brightly lit house at my back. Freedom was right in front of me. All I had to do was brave the icy air, my breaking heart, and the guilt that threatened to crush me.

I crested the hill from earlier and gunned it down the straight shot to the gate along the highway. By some stroke of luck, it was wide open. The ATV whizzed through the dark night, carrying me and all my hopes on its back. When I reached the open gate and sped onto the highway, I almost couldn't believe it.

Turning right, I headed toward the city. No cars passed as I fled, but that was to be expected on Christmas Eve night in the boonies. The road dipped and fell, each mile slightly different than the last. At one point, both sides of the road rose up, gray stone walls shining in the moonlight. After a few more minutes, a sound began to encroach on the hum of the engine. A steady thump. One that I recognized.

All the blood drained from my face as a helicopter flew overhead and began its lazy float to the ground about fifty yards ahead. I looked behind me and saw headlights. A flash of hope died when I recognized Sebastian's limo.

I stopped. All the hope I'd bottled up leaked away and disappeared into the frigid air. He'd caught me, just like he'd always told me he would. There was no escape. It was over.

The helicopter landed, and Sebastian—the same man I thought I'd paralyzed only minutes ago—stepped down and strode over to me.

THE LOOK OF HORROR on her face opened a fiery pit inside me. I'd caused it. She was in pain, and I put her there.

From the moment she'd ordered the hemlock, I knew her plan for escape. I'd wondered if she intended to kill me or simply immobilize me. Given the amount of hemlock she'd dropped into my glass, it was the latter. I supposed I'd have to count that as a win on some level.

She trembled, but otherwise sat motionless on the ATV I'd left conveniently placed for her. It was sick, but I wanted to see how far she'd take it. I should have known Camille would do nothing in half measures.

As she lay in my arms that morning, I'd had a revelation. Beyond the simple fact that I loved Camille, I realized that perhaps she was right. My desperate need to keep her close seemed to be killing what little trust I'd built. And if that died, so would any chance of her loving me in return. That sort of finality wasn't something a person could come back from.

Dad stood beside the grave long after everyone had gotten into their cars and left the cemetery. I stood next to him, unsure if I should say something. Low clouds hovered overhead, promising rain but never delivering.

The gravediggers leaned against a mausoleum in the distance, smoking and talking, but most of all, waiting. As soon as we left, they'd finish the job of burying my mother.

I had a lacrosse match with the boys from town in a couple of hours. If we didn't leave soon, I'd miss it. I had to say something. "Dad?"

He didn't respond. The heavy silence weaved between us, straining what had always seemed like an unbreakable bond. His rhyme played through my

mind: When in doubt, wait it out. Emotions will always show what they're about.

Another ten minutes passed, and even the gravediggers fell silent and simply watched us.

"When I first saw her, she was with another man. Did you know that?"

"No." I'd never asked about their life before me. It didn't seem relevant.

"She had a boyfriend. He was popular, smart, richer than I was at the time. We all went to college together." He smiled, and I was certain it was the sort of smile that meant he was sad but had a happy memory. "I saw her at a dance. We still had those back then. Awkward, terrible affairs really. But not the night I saw her. She was on his arm, smiling and laughing with some other couples that had gathered around them just to soak up all the glory that shone off her like a beam of light."

"What did you do?"

"I decided that she was going to be mine." He wiped at his eyes.

"Makes sense."

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "It did. It sure did. So I asked her on a date. She turned me down."

"Really?"

"Yeah." His smile returned. "She told me she had a boyfriend and wouldn't go behind his back."

"What did you do?"

"The next time I saw them on campus, I walked right up to him and punched his lights out."

I looked at him, unsure if he was serious. My dad barely raised his voice, much less a fist.

"I did." He nodded. "I laid him out right there on the quad."

"What did she do?"

"She called me a psycho and said she never wanted to see me again."

"Oh." That didn't turn out quite like I expected. "So how did you two end up together?"

"After that, I did little things for her. Left her notes, took her flowers, sent her letters over the summer. I never missed a week. I'd send one like clockwork."

"And it worked?"

"It took a little over a year, but eventually, she saw me on campus and walked over to me." He laughed. "She said, 'You sure are persistent.' I said,

'When something's worth it, there's no other way to be.' We were married a year later. And now—" His voice failed on a sob.

I wrapped my arm around his waist. "And now, you're still in love, but she's gone."

"Yes."

"And it hurts you?"

"Yes."

"Was it worth it?"

"What do you mean?" He swiped at his face once more with his handkerchief and tucked it in his pocket.

"Was the time you had with her worth all this pain you're feeling now?"

He stared down at the dark casket as the promised rain finally began to fall. "No question about it."

Timothy climbed out of the car and walked toward us, but I couldn't look at anything except Camille. Her sad eyes peering up at me, the fear written across her expressive features. What had been a fissure inside me opened into a chasm that could only be filled by her. But in order to get what I wanted, I'd have to let her go.

I held my hand out to her. She took it, and I pulled her off the ATV and into my embrace. Her arms hung loosely at her sides as she trembled.

"Camille, please, don't be afraid." I'd never cared if someone feared me. I rather enjoyed it, actually, but not Camille. Never her.

"What are you going to do to me?" Her whisper carried a dread that settled inside me like a weight.

"I'm going to set you free." Just saying the words ripped me apart.

She stepped back and stared up at me. "Don't taunt me."

"It's not a taunt." It's my death sentence.

"You're just going to let me ride out of here?" She glanced behind her at Timothy standing in front of the limo.

"No."

Her knees buckled, and I caught her before she hit the pavement. Scooping her into my arms, I held her close and walked toward the helicopter. "You're going to fly out of here."

She shook her head. "This isn't real."

"It is."

"I poisoned you."

"You thought you did."

“But the hemlock—”

“Did you really think you could order a lethal plant and I wouldn’t know about it?”

She gasped. “You knew all along.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you let me do it?”

“I guess I needed to see if you would. It was the only definitive proof I could get that would show my plan was unworkable.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “Are you saying the only way you’d let me go was if I tried to kill you?”

“Something like that, yes.”

She just shook her head, disbelief in her eyes. “But what if I go to the police?”

“Then you go to the police.” I shrugged. I had a strong hunch that she would do no such thing, but it didn’t matter. This was the only chance I had.

“This has to be a trick.”

I stopped at the helicopter and put her on her feet. “It isn’t.”

“But why?”

“Because I love you.” I leaned down and kissed her, tasting her for what could be the last time. Tangling my fingers in her hair, I slanted my mouth over hers, taking more than I should, but damned if I could stop myself. She clutched the lapels of my coat as the pilot started the rotor.

I broke the kiss, though tested my resolve to do it. Then, before I could change my mind, I lifted her into the helicopter. “Buckle up. The pilot will take you to the Trenton baseball field. Shouldn’t be anyone there. All your things will be delivered to your cottage tomorrow. Also, I’ll have Timothy send someone over to remove all the surveillance.”

“Surveillance? Are you—”

I twirled my finger in the air, and the pilot raised the engine noise. She frowned. I wanted to yank her back down and carry her back to our house. But I’d tried that already. I took her hand and kissed it, then pointed to the seats.

She scooted back and scrambled into a seat. After buckling the belt across her hip, she stared at me. Tears brimmed in her beautiful eyes, and I wanted so badly to know what she was thinking.

The engine noise grew louder, and I backed away. Step by step, I gave up what I wanted more than anything else in my life. Once I was far enough

away, the helicopter lifted off the ground, and I lost sight of her. They flew off into the night, the blinking lights dimming until they disappeared in the distance. Something deep inside me fractured, and the fear of never seeing her again brought me to my knees.

I watched the sky for a long while as the chill wind blew past. It didn't bother me, all the warmth I'd ever had was long gone. She'd taken my heart, my soul, with her.

"Sebastian." Timothy's voice startled me. I hadn't realized he was behind me. "We should get back. It's below freezing out here."

I struggled to my feet, my body leaden. "You take the car. I'll walk."

"It's at least three miles to the house. Take the ATV."

"I said I'll walk." I strode past him, my thoughts with Camille as she flew back to her life—the one that didn't include me.

"Fine." His frustration didn't matter to me. "I'll just stash the ATV and come back for it later."

I didn't care. My feet carried me. One step after another. Eventually, Timothy drove past me in the car at a snail's pace. I ignored him until he took the hint and disappeared ahead of me.

I replayed the months since I'd first seen Camille, analyzing each moment, trying to find at what exact moment I'd failed. The frozen air burned my lungs, and I couldn't feel my face. But any pain my flesh endured was nothing compared to the torment that ripped and raged inside me.

“HEY, SLOW DOWN.” MINT pointed at something in the road ahead.
“What the hell?”

A man walked down the road, his shoulders bunched against the cold. He turned left into a winding drive.

“Is this the house?” I pulled into the mouth of the driveway, my headlights illuminating the man.

Mint checked the GPS on his phone. “Yeah, I think so.”

The man walked through the gate, which began to swing shut behind him.

“Shit.” I jumped out of the car. “Hey!”

He kept walking.

I took a chance. “Sebastian, is that you?”

He slowed and stopped as the gate clanged shut, but didn’t turn around.

“What are you doing out here?”

Mint walked to the gate and clutched the bars. “We’re looking for Camille Briarlane. Have you seen her?”

“Why would I have seen her?” He turned, though the headlights only illuminated up to his chest. His face remained steeped in shadow.

“Because you visited her at school.” I stepped to the gate at Mint’s elbow.

“Because you invested in a greenhouse there.”

“I did. That still doesn’t explain why you think I’ve seen her.”

His snide tone ate through me like acid. “Are you fucking her?”

“Am I fucking your girlfriend?” His laughter chilled me more than the icy air. “You came all the way out here on Christmas Eve to ask me if I’ve been fucking your girlfriend?”

“Answer me, you son of a bitch!” I tried to shake the gate, but it didn’t move.

His laughter ended abruptly. “If you’d like to keep your job, I would suggest you change your tone.”

Fuck. This was not how I planned on this going. I figured we’d stop by, say we were in the neighborhood, and Sebastian would let us in for a few moments despite the blatant lie. This was a clusterfuck.

“Hey, asshole. I don’t work for you.” Mint banged on the bars. “You have her in there, don’t you?”

“I most certainly do not. In fact, if I recall correctly, she informed me she was going to visit the rainforest over Christmas break. Have you tried there?”

“She’s not in Brazil. She’s in your goddamn house!” Mint’s yell ripped through the quiet.

The kid had balls, I had to give him that.

“I think if you investigate elsewhere, you’ll find you’re mistaken.” Sebastian turned on his heel and walked away.

“Let me in!” Mint kicked the gate. “You’ve got her. I know you do!”

“Mint.” I put a hand on his shoulder as Sebastian disappeared up the dark drive. “We’re not getting anywhere tonight.” The threat of losing my job seemed to knock some sense into me. The blonde at the restaurant couldn’t have been Camille. I’d let Mint drag me into his paranoia, and here I was, standing at the gate to my boss’s house while a teenager yelled threats at him.

“No, I know she’s in there.”

“Let’s go. We’ll—”

My cell phone chirped and vibrated in my pocket.

I pulled it out and stared at the screen. “Holy shit.”

“What?”

“She came back from her trip early. She’s back at her place. Says she’ll see me tomorrow night.”

“No way.” Mint snatched my phone and stared at it. “This doesn’t prove anything. He could have, I don’t know, sent a text right then from her phone to throw us off the scent.”

“I don’t know man.” I stuffed the phone into my pocket right as Mint’s notification sounded.

He pulled it out and read the message.

“Let me see.” I held my hand out.

“No.” He pocketed it. “It’s private. Shit.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“It’s her. The real her. I can tell.”

“What the fuck, man?” I hustled back to the car as the wind picked up.

We both got in and defrosted for a moment before I turned back on the road and headed south.

“I don’t care that she texted. There’s something wrong with that guy.” He held his hands in front of the vent.

“Maybe there is, but it doesn’t fucking matter anymore. She’s home. He doesn’t have her chained in his basement. I ought to kick your ass for leading me on this wild goose chase.”

“He could have let her go or something.”

“Mint.” I banged my palm on the steering wheel. “She’s been in fucking Brazil. Not in upstate New York. Sebastian is a dick, but that’s about all. He’s not a psycho killer or a kidnapper. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re the ones who look crazy right now.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Okay, so why was he out on the street at night in the cold?”

“Why the fuck does it matter?” I wanted to bitch-slap him, though I opted against it. He had at least twenty pounds on me.

“It’s bizarre.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I tried to use my calm grown-up voice. “He’s a weirdo. Camille is home. All is well. And another thing, I want you to stay away from her.”

His eyebrows hit his hairline. “What?”

“You heard me. I’m beginning to think you’re obsessed with her or some shit. You’re never going to fuck her, okay? She’d never dick down with a student. So give it a rest.”

He fell into a stony silence, which was fine with me. I didn’t need any more of his bullshit clouding my judgment.

What had I been thinking? One thing was for certain, I’d never drink with a fucking teenager again unless it had tits and daddy issues.

I WALKED ACROSS THE baseball diamond as the helicopter lifted off, the dull grass shivering beneath the harsh downdraft. It was surreal, to be back at Trenton, the clock tower shining in the darkness beyond the skeletal trees.

The helicopter rose and angled away until it and the sound of its rotor died in the still night air. The area was empty; no one had seen my arrival. I walked through the low fence near the visitor stands and hurried behind the administration building. It didn't make sense, but I felt the need to hide, to secret myself away from anyone and everything.

Once I'd passed through the campus and hit the street to my house, I dodged behind trees and stayed in yards instead of walking along the well-lit sidewalk. Music floated from some of the houses, and more cars than usual parked along the street. Holiday parties with loved ones were in full swing, and every so often I caught the scent of rich food on the air.

My house sat silent in the cold night, only the front porch light shining faintly against the gloom. I walked around to the back, through my small yard, and to the kitchen door. I tried the handle. Locked. Kneeling, I lifted an empty flower pot and grabbed my key. Once unlocked, the door swung inward, and I was home.

I walked into my kitchen and threw the deadbolt behind me. Everything looked just the same as when I'd left. A dish towel draped haphazardly across the drying rack. My houseplants lining the windowsill. It was as if I'd walked into a museum of my life, everything preserved. The house had stayed the same while I'd changed and, at my core, had become a completely different person. As if to prove this hypothesis, I grabbed a knife from a drawer and

carried it with me as I searched the house. It was empty—no Sebastian lurking in a closet with a burlap sack, ready to carry me off again.

A shiver coursed through me, and I turned the thermostat up, then walked to my bedroom. Other than a few missing items and clothes that I knew were in my closet—no, in *his* closet at the Catskills house—the room was untouched. A new cell phone sat on my bedside table. I picked it up and swiped to unlock it. All my information was there, including the texts I'd missed. Sebastian hadn't told me the extent of his texts with Veronica, Link, and Mint, and as I read his cold responses and their mounting panic, I realized he'd needed me to step in to avert suspicion. I felt sick when I realized I'd been tricked, yet again. The worry in the messages spoke to the old me—the kinder one—so I fired off a few missives to let them know I was back from my trip early, then silenced the phone.

I kicked my shoes off and lay down. Sebastian's coat still warmed me, his scent coating the fibers and giving me a sense of comfort that was all wrong. I hugged myself and closed my eyes. Should I call the police? And tell them what? I was kidnapped by a man who kept me in a lavish mansion, never touched me until I asked, and who I had sex with of my own volition twice? I rolled over and faced the small window looking out into the night.

The last two weeks had been a nightmare mixed with slivers of daydream. I pressed my nose to the coat and drew in a deep breath. It was insane—a prisoner who wanted to escape, and now, a free woman who ached for the man who'd held her captive. I would never go back, never be a prisoner again as long as I lived. But the depth of sadness in his eyes when he set me on the helicopter had ripped a hole through my heart. He *felt*. And, in turn, I felt for him.

"It'll pass," I murmured to the empty room. "It has to." I leaned back and set the knife on my nightstand, the hilt close to the edge. If so much as a floorboard creaked, I'd be ready.

When I lay back down, the familiar metal at my ankle tickled along my skin. I drew my knee up and grabbed the golden shackle. With a hard pull, the clasp gave way. Warm in my hand, the metal glinted in the soft moonlight. I closed my palm around the solid proof that it hadn't all been a fever dream.

Sebastian had taken me prisoner, and just as suddenly, had set me free.



The doorbell rang. My eyes flew open, and for a brief moment, I didn't know where I was. Gone were the wide windows with the view of the mountains, the sumptuous bed, and the luxury furnishings. But when I realized I was in my own bed, I sighed with relief.

Someone knocked at my front door and rang the bell again, several times in a row. I grabbed the knife from my bedside table and crept down the short hallway to the living room.

A face peered through the small porthole in the front door. "Hello? I'm freezing my fabulous off out here!"

What the hell? "Who is it?"

"Paul."

"Paul who?"

"Is she kidding? She's kidding, right?"

Muffled responses. How many people were out there?

"I'm *the* Paul of Splendide."

"What's that?" I shuffled to the door.

"Only the finest salon in all of Manhattan." A high-pitched female voice.

I leaned against the wall. "What do you want?"

"She's kidding. She must be." Paul's voice grew more animated by the second. "We were told to be at this address, and we were paid handsomely, might I add. An in-home appointment on Christmas Day doesn't come cheap, even if we don't exactly celebrate. *Hanukkah Sameach.*"

I rubbed my eyes, not entirely sure what was going on. "You were paid to come here and do my hair?"

"Mrs. Lindstrom, if you aren't going to let us in—"

"I am *not* Mrs. Lindstrom." I stared at the face through the porthole.

“My apologies.” He rolled his eyes. “Mr. Lindstrom was the name on the payment. If you aren’t going to let us in, we’ll return to the city.”

He certainly didn’t look like a contract killer or an evil minion. I could just see the edges of bright pink hair along his scalp.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I looked up Splendide. It was legit. Paul was splashed all over the web site wearing various bizarre outfits with even stranger hairstyles.

I studied him with the safety of the door between us. “What did he pay for?”

“Color. Brown, apparently.” He held up a photo of me from last session’s school yearbook. “This color to be exact.”

“Oh.”

Sebastian was clearly trying to set things back to rights. But it would take a hell of a lot more than a change in hair color to do it. Even so, I stuffed the knife behind a pillow cushion and unlocked the door.

Paul pushed through, followed by two assistants with equally bright hair colors. He dwarfed the room and must have been almost six and a half feet tall.

The woman, her eyes painted like a peacock, glanced around and frowned. “Here?”

I should have been offended. Instead, I stared at the rhinestones that dotted her face.

Paul plucked a lock of my hair between his dark fingers and inspected it. “I remember this color. I traveled to do it, too. You’re the one who’s afraid of stylists.”

I shrugged. Given the way he and his assistants dragged in various rolling luggage full of who knew what, I was beginning to agree with that particular lie. “That was me.”

The male assistant with bright green hair pushed my couch, ottoman, and side chair into a snarl on one side of the room and started unpacking his bag.

“This won’t take long.” Paul held up the yearbook photo. “A base of B45 with highlights of A34 and A15.” He stared at my part. “Your roots are already growing back in. Easy to match.”

A sharp sound, like air being let out of a tire, shot through the open front door. A moving truck rolled to a stop in front of my cottage. Timothy jumped out of the passenger side. I pressed my hand to my throat, worry shooting through me like tainted adrenaline. He gave me a wave and a smile, as if to

say, “Don’t worry.”

It didn’t work. My hands trembled. Was he coming to get me? Was this all part of Sebastian’s sick game?

He and the driver met at the back of the truck and rolled up the door. They started unloading things—*my* things—from the back. Sebastian was returning everything he’d taken as well as giving me everything he’d bought for me.

“Have a seat.” The female assistant pointed to a salon chair that they’d put together as I’d stared out the door.

“This is surreal.” I sat as the woman side-eyed my furniture.

“You aren’t kidding.” She started brushing out my blonde strands as Timothy carried an armload of clothes through the front door.

“Can I put these in your bedroom?” At least Timothy asked before coming any farther.

“Yes.” Seeing him here added to the crazytown feel. But he was dressed down in a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt.

“Bless.” Paul watched Timothy walk by with more than just professional interest. He turned to me and stirred some purple gel inside a small paint tray. “Eye on the prize, beautiful. Let’s get this show on the road.”

I FINISHED OFF THE bourbon and tossed the bottle to the far side of the greenhouse. The satisfying crash of glass was the perfect backdrop to opening my next bottle of Pappy. The lid dropped to the ground, and I took a long draw.

Her plants grew around me, and I wondered how long it would take for the vines and leaves to cover me over, bury me in the green she loved so much. Her touch colored everything in here, from the pots and plants to the mortar and pestle she'd used to create my poison.

I knew physical pain. That was an easy sensation to clock. But it was nothing like the excruciating agony of losing her. Everything seemed to stop, and there was nothing in the world that could get it started again. Except her. So, instead of waiting for something that would never happen, I decided to drink. Seemed logical.

Was the pain worse because I'd never felt anything like it? I didn't know, but I wanted it to stop. Therein lay the problem. The only thing that would fix it was a woman who ran from me the first chance she got. I took another swig from the fresh bottle, barely even tasting the amber liquid as it slid down my throat.

"Sir?" Timothy stood next to me. Where'd he come from?

"Yeah." I offered the bottle.

He shook his head. "All her things have been delivered."

"When?" I squinted at the cloudy sky.

"Late this morning."

"What time is it?"

“Five in the afternoon.”

I’d been here for almost a day, but I hadn’t realized it. All I could think of was her, the blue of her eyes, the softness of her skin, the cute way her nose would wrinkle, the sounds she made when she came. I could drown myself in good bourbon and thoughts of her for the rest of my life. It would be more fulfilling than trying to function without her. I took another swig.

“Sir?”

“Still here.” I lay down on the center table as the mister overhead kicked on. The cool water felt good on my hot skin. As I got settled, a few more pots crashed to the ground, but I didn’t care. She wasn’t going to come back and see the mess I’d made.

“What are your plans?” I hated the pinched sound of his voice. Worrying about me was dumb.

“I plan on drinking all the bottles of Pappy van Winkle in my possession, then I’ll move along to the cheaper stuff.” I closed my eyes as water droplets collected on my face and drained away, tickling my ears. “What did she look like?”

He took the bottle from me and took a drink before sputtering and handing it back. “Blonde when I got there, back to brown when I left.”

“Was she happy?”

Please say no. Say no. Say. No.

“Not at all.”

I smiled and swallowed another gulp.

“I think she’s sort of, I don’t know, shell-shocked. And she gave me a vicious stink-eye when I removed all the cameras and microphones.”

“Did she say anything about me?”

“No. She was quiet.”

“Silence. Fuck.” I needed to know more, to peel her apart until I understood everything going on inside her, but that chance had passed. I’d have to ask Timothy. “Do you…”

“What?” He reached up and angled a mister away from my face.

“Do you think she misses me?”

He coughed into his hand as the hiss of the misters began to die off.

“Fine.” I scowled.

“I think she will. She needs time to sort through it all.”

“How is it that I, a fucking psychopath, feel more for her than she feels for me?” Just saying it out loud sent a spike of pain through me.

“I don’t know if that’s true. She has feelings for you. They just aren’t—”

“Was she drinking?”

“No.”

“Being a little bitch like me?”

“No.”

“See?”

He leaned against the opposite table. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No. She has a multitude of feelings. Far more than you can conceive of. You used to have none. Since you’ve met her, you’ve had exactly two. Love and despair. When you flip the switch on despair, that’s all there is. When she’s sad, or despairing, or unhappy, there’s an entire cocktail of other emotions mixed in with that feeling. It’s not as transparent as yours.”

“Nuance.” The fucking bane of my existence.

“Exactly.”

I drank more.

“You’re going to kill yourself.”

I chuckled. “One can hope.”

“If you’re dead, how are you going to get her back?”

I laughed, the sound hoarse and ugly in the beautiful space. “She’s never coming back.”

“She will.” Dad’s voice joined Timothy’s.

“What are you doing here?” I craned my head to search for him through the leaves.

“You invited me for Christmas dinner. Remember?” He took the bottle from me and sipped it. “I’m disappointed. Seems like you would’ve opened the Hirsch first.”

“I think Pappy is a little smoother.” I shrugged and knocked another pot to the ground.

“Son.” He shook his head as I reached for the bottle. “This isn’t the way.”

I stared into his eyes, despite the fact there were two of him. “Dad, it hurts.”

“I know.” He sighed. “I’ve been down this road.”

“So you kidnapped Mom, then let her go, then had to suffer the consequences of your mistakes, all the while not knowing if the mistake was (a) kidnapping her in the first place or (b) letting her go?”

“No.” He took a bigger swig from the bottle, no sputtering this time. “I

know what it's like to lose the one you love. But you have a chance to get her back. Don't you see?"

I flailed for the bottle, but he backed away.

"Letting her go was the smartest move you could have made."

"Tell that to this." I pointed at my chest in the general vicinity of where it felt like Mt. Vesuvius had erupted.

"Heartache." His eyes, all four of them, had a sparkle I hadn't seen in quite some time. "It's good for you, reminds you of what you've got to lose."

"It's already lost."

"Listen to me." He grabbed my shirt, and with more strength than I knew he possessed, yanked me until I was in a sitting position, my long legs dangling over the side of the table. "I didn't spend years teaching you how to fit in, how to be a good person, how to be successful for you to throw it all away right when you're about to get the life I've always wanted for you." He shook me. "Get ahold of yourself, and get her back!"

"How?"

"We need a plan, but we can't do a damn thing until you sober up." He grabbed under one of my arms and motioned for Timothy to get the other. Together, they helped me out of the greenhouse, down the back hallway, and then dumped me onto the couch in the library.

Dad grabbed a throw blanket and tossed it over me. "Sober up. We'll talk in the morning."

"Give me the bottle." I reached for it, but apparently swiped at my father's double and came back with nothing but air in my palm.

"Not a chance. Come on, Timothy, let's have a chat." Dad walked out with Timothy at his heels and killed the lights.

The low fire sent shadows dancing all over the room. Everything reminded me of her. A book still open on the table where she'd left it next to her journal, her fleeting scent in the air, the chair she favored. Every detail built on the last. She was everywhere and nowhere. More stabbing pain, more overwhelming emotion that I wished would stop.

I clenched my eyes shut. She appeared behind my lids, her eyes glittering as she laughed and turned to run. I chased her. Would never stop chasing her.

THE CHINESE FOOD IN my arms sent up curls of steam as I stood on Camille's front porch. I figured there was no way she'd had time to make a grocery run—especially on Christmas Day—since she'd returned from her trip, so I'd picked up her favorite Chinese from town on the way here. I was thoughtful like that.

She opened the door and looked past me, as if searching for someone in the street or the bushes.

“Right here.” I smiled down at her.

She stepped back and opened the door wide. “Sorry about that.”

Her hair draped over one shoulder, and she wore a cozy white sweater and some dark gray pants. My cock twitched with anticipation. Surely, after time away, she'd realized we were meant to be and she'd finally, *finally*, give it up.

“I brought your favorite.” I strode into the kitchen and set the box of food on her table. “Thank god Mr. Xiao's was open.”

“It smells like heaven.” She followed me and opened a cabinet to grab some plates.

I walked up behind her and wrapped her in my arms. “I missed you so much.”

She rested her hands on my forearms as I nuzzled into her fragrant hair. “I missed you, too.”

“Yeah?” I turned her around and kissed her hard. She needed to know how much I felt for her, how every moment without her was torture.

I ran my hands down her sides to her ass, squeezing and lifting her onto

the counter. She pushed on my chest, but I wouldn't be denied. Not this time. Her lips parted on a noise, and I delved inside, tasting her while running my hands beneath her shirt, her body so warm and smooth. I needed more. My thumb grazed the bottom of her tit, the softest skin in the world.

She leaned back and broke the kiss. "Hey, slow down."

"I can't." I pulled her closer so she could feel how hard I was. "I love you."

"Link." She pushed against me. "Please. Just give me a minute, okay?"

Silly me to expect an "I love you" back. *Fuck.*

I tried to measure her unwillingness, testing to see if it was something I could overcome. The hard set of her little jaw told me it was a losing battle. I had to time this just right, find a way to get past her usual skittishness. Our time apart—and the bizarre incident with Sebastian—only reinforced my need to get her under my thumb. Just the thought of her with him burrowed under my skin. She was mine. I'd put in the hours. There was no way I'd let another man step in front of me in line. Her pussy had my claim stamped all over it.

I ran my palm down her cheek and forced a smile. "Sorry, babe. I got a little carried away."

"It's okay." She patted me on the chest. "I'm just hungry and tired is all."

"In that case, lucky for you, your prince has arrived." I lifted her off the counter and scooted her into a chair at the table. "I'm excellent at serving food from Chinese cartons and, even better, I'm kind of a BFD when it comes to tucking you into bed."

She smiled, the strain leaving her face. "My champion."

"You bet." I stowed my disappointment and played the dutiful boyfriend, asking questions about the Amazon and her trip as we ate.

She answered slowly, focusing more on her food than telling me about her expedition. My heart warmed—maybe she didn't have a great time because she'd missed me so much?

I popped the last wonton into my mouth. "So why cut it short?"

"Funding dried up sooner than we thought." She rose and put our dishes in the sink.

"Oh." I boxed up the leftovers and put them in the fridge. "They didn't have all the money sorted out before you left?"

"I thought so, but it didn't last." She yawned, her wide-open mouth giving me lots of ideas.

If I couldn't get into her pussy tonight, maybe she'd give me a blowy before bed. "I guess that's not too surprising. Sending a limo to get you wasn't the most cost-effective move."

She turned and leaned against the sink. "I suppose not."

I bumped my hip into hers, scooting her over, and flipped on the faucet. Doing dishes wasn't exactly my thing, but if it got me closer to my goal, I was all for it.

"You don't have to do that." She grabbed a hand towel and stood at the ready to dry.

"I don't mind." I washed the first dish and passed it to her. "I have something to confess, so I figured getting brownie points was a good idea."

She swiped the dish dry, her small wrist twirling the blue hand towel around the ceramic surface. "What is it?"

"While you were gone, I thought I saw you."

The plate crashed to the counter, but didn't shatter. She swiped it back up and placed it in the drying rack. "Yeah? Where?"

"I took a client to this fancy restaurant, but it was closed. I peeked inside and saw—you'll never believe this—but I saw Sebastian Lindstrom fucking this smoking hot blonde." I cleared my throat and handed her the next dish. "Not as hot as you, of course."

She nodded and continued drying.

"But the crazy thing was, she looked like you." I grabbed a fork and soaped it up. "On top of that, your student Mint kept coming at me with all these conspiracy theories about something happening to you. So, last night, I got to drinking and decided that Sebastian had kidnapped you and was keeping you prisoner at some big mansion in the Catskills." I rinsed the fork and handed it to her.

"That's crazy." Her voice barely made it over the sound of the running water.

"Right? Worse, Mint convinces me to drive up there and check."

"What?" She grabbed my wrist, her face ashen.

"Yeah. We drove up there last night. Found that fucking maniac Sebastian just walking along the road."

"Was he okay?"

I laughed. "Yeah, as okay as a psycho can be."

"What happened?"

"We confronted him about you." I turned the water off and shook my

head. “Crazy accusations, the whole nine yards. He denied it all, and then I got your text. Like, I was on the verge of busting down his gate, searching his house, and getting fired just because Mint convinced me to join in on his Nancy Drew nonsense. Can you imagine?”

“No.” Her voice shook.

“Hey.” I pulled her into my arms. “Don’t worry. He didn’t fire me. I don’t think he will.”

“Right.” She nodded against my chest, though she trembled.

“Seriously.” I pulled her back and looked into her eyes. “If he was going to do it, he would have done it while I was at his house. It was all so bizarre. He’s probably just as confused as I was.”

“Yeah.” She crossed her arms over her stomach. “Probably.”

I kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry.”

She gave me a wan smile as I tossed the dish towel on the counter.

“Now to the bedroom part.” I held out my elbow.

Her eyes narrowed. “Just tucking me in, remember?”

“Scout’s honor.” *Cockblock.*

She took my arm, and we walked down the short hallway to her room. Clothes were stacked on her dresser and overflowing from her closet. Weird.

“What’s with the clothes explosion?”

“Um, Veronica brought over some stuff she’d had in storage while I was gone.” Camille shrugged and sat on her bed.

I took it as an invitation and sat next to her.

“Link—”

“I know.” I sighed. Never in my life had I invested so much in a woman who wouldn’t even let me fuck her. But Camille was worth it. Somehow, I just knew. “I’m not going to ravage you, promise. But I do have a Christmas present for you.”

She winced. “I didn’t have time to get you anything. The whole coming home early thing threw me off.”

“Don’t worry.” I took her hand and kissed the back of it. “You already have what I want.”

“Listen, Link.” She took my hand in hers and turned to face me. “We need to talk.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” The ring in my pocket would seal the deal. Definite blowy tonight, at the very least.

She hesitated, as if picking over her words before saying them. “When I

was gone, I had time to do some thinking about my future.”

“I did, too.” Maybe I was aiming too low with the cock sucking idea. After all, getting engaged should definitely include sex, right?

“And I thought about us, how and when we met, how my parents had just died, and I needed someone to be there for me. And you were.”

“I’ll always be there for you.” I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. “Whatever you need, I’m there.”

“Thank you.” She took a deep breath. “I feel like I owe you an apology.”

“What for?”

“All this time that we’ve been together, I’ve never given you all of me.” She glanced at the bed. “You know what I mean.”

“I do.” My cock hardened, very much interested in where this was going.

“And now, I’ve sort of looked at it through a different lens. I leaned on you but kept you at arm’s length. Maybe that was because I wasn’t sure about us, you know?” She pinned her thumbnail between her teeth. “The more I think about it, the more I realize how unfair that was of me.”

Fuck yes it was. “No, you weren’t ready yet. I understand. And I think I know where you’re going with this.”

Her eyebrows fell, and she cocked her head. “You do?”

I nodded. “I’m already one step ahead, babe. I feel the same way.”

Her nose crinkled. “I’m not sure if I’m being clear—”

“I know exactly what you’re saying.” Here it was, my moment. I dropped to the floor, hitting one knee as I turned to face her. “You are the one for me, Camille. Living without you isn’t an option anymore.” I pulled the ring box from my pocket and opened it.

She paled, her hand going to her mouth. Fuck yes, I’d just shocked and awed her panties right off. I could feel it.

“Will you marry me?”

“**Y**OU JUST LEFT HIM hanging?” Veronica’s voice came through in a screech.

I’d called her as soon as Link had left my house. No one else could walk me through the sinking pit of emotion I was mired in.

I gripped the phone far harder than necessary. “No. I mean, sort of. I told him I needed to think about it.”

“And he was okay with that?”

“No.” I fell back on my bed and stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know. He seemed disappointed, but still hopeful?”

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t know. Worse.”

“Worse than what?”

“I wanted to tell him that I needed some time to myself. You know, to decompress from the trip and to sort things out. Not exactly breaking up with him, I guess. More like doing a trial separation so I could clear my head. But then he got on one knee and proposed, and I sort of panicked.”

When he’d asked me to marry him, my first impulse had been dread. I should have been flattered, maybe even happy. But I didn’t understand myself anymore. There was only one constant in my mind—Sebastian. Thoughts of him pervaded every breath I took. What was he doing now? I glanced to the light overhead where Timothy had removed a tiny camera and microphone. Sebastian couldn’t watch me anymore, but indelible hints of him remained. Not in the light, or his coat, or in anything tangible—he’d gotten inside me. Even though I was free, some part of me was still bound to him.

“—Camille, you there?”

“Yeah, sorry. What were you saying?”

“You know I’m not big Link fan, right?”

“Yeah.” I was fairly certain Veronica wanted to kill him during the first month we were together.

“But you went on this trip, and now, suddenly, you want to separate? It’s not like you. And I’m thinking maybe you need more time to sort out how you’re feeling.” She hummed for a second. “If you *still* want to get rid of him after the cool down period, I’m all for it.”

The urge to tell her the truth about my “trip” rampaged through my skull but stopped before it reached my tongue. If I told her about Sebastian, she’d do something about it—call the police, march down to his office and confront him, set his house on fire—all options were on the table where she was concerned. Though I was angry with him for what he’d done to me, I didn’t want to see him behind bars. Maybe it was the Stockholm Syndrome kicking back in, but the thought of him in an institution made my insides twist.

“You’re probably right.” I glanced to Sebastian’s coat. “I need to sleep on it, at the very least. Oh, how’s your mom?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. Not good. She’s still got a sharp tongue, I can verify. I’ve heard all about how I’m not eating right, dress like a floozy, and need to find a good man to take care of me.”

I laughed. “She’s just the older version of you.”

“Sicker, too.”

Here I was yapping on about my messed-up life while her mother was dying. Guilt sprinkled on top of my other emotions like poison pellets. “I’m sorry.” I wished I could have hugged her. “Is there anything—”

“No, but thanks. You’ve helped me keep my mind off it. All this worrying that you’d been kidnapped by a drug cartel and forced into sex slavery kept me occupied for the last week. Promise me you’ll tell me all about your trip over a bottle or three of red when I get back.”

“I’ll definitely have a story to tell.” I ran my hand down Sebastian’s coat.

“Good. And I know you know, but I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Tears prickled. “Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you.” The line went quiet.

My mind wandered back to the house in the hills. Every day of my captivity was clear in my mind. The kidnapping, the surveillance, the anklet, the library, the greenhouse—the memories created a unique prison.

My captivity was like a peculiar, violent bird; I had to keep it caged and away from everyone lest it tear them to pieces. Including me. I pushed the thoughts of Sebastian down, forcing them to the background. Grabbing his coat, I carried it into the hallway and shoved it in the entryway closet.

I crawled back into bed and closed my eyes. Despite my efforts at locking Sebastian away, images of him lulled me to sleep. His voice and his body pulled me into the darkness—the only place I ever felt truly alive.



“Welcome back.” I loaded my set of PowerPoint slides for the day as the students chattered. A light dusting of snow had fallen overnight, given the Trenton grounds a wintry look for the start of the spring semester.

“How was your trip?” Mint slid into his desk and opened his laptop.

“Great.” I’d tried explaining to him via text that I’d been preoccupied with my work to the point of seeming rude in my texts. He didn’t buy it. No matter how many different points of the Amazon ecosystem I described, how many species of plant I named, he simply refused to believe that I’d ever made it to the airport, much less flown to Brazil. But he seemed appeased that I was none the worse for wear, no matter what he suspected had happened to me.

“Let’s discuss your Christmas break projects on photosynthesis. Jenna, would you like to start?”

A hum began outside, the low sound of several engines approaching.

Jenna stood and adjusted her cat-eye glasses. “Instead of the common photoautotrophs the other students used, I chose a particular version of bacteria that doesn’t synthesize carbon from the atmosphere. Instead, it’s a photoheterotroph, a bacteria that’s able to convert carbon from other sources

to complete photosynthesis.”

Mint stared at Jenna—the same as he did in almost every class last semester—his eyes lighting up. I made a mental note to do some matchmaking.

“Interesting.” I leaned on my desk. “Though photoheterotrophs don’t use carbon from the atmosphere, do they use any other element?”

She shoved a lock of hair behind her ear, a nervous movement that reminded me of myself. “I believe they are nitrogen fixers, but my experiments never yielded a measurable ammonia byproduct.”

Impressed was too mild a word. Maybe I had taught these students as well as I’d hoped. The background hum grew louder, and my pen rattled on my desk.

Heads turned toward the sunny windows. A line of trucks rolled down Campus Drive. Three were laden with building materials—wood, glass, electrical wire. The others carried construction equipment. They pulled up near the greenhouse, the sound of shattering glass cutting through the rumble of engines.

I took off, out my door, down the hallway where I almost bowled Gregory over, and then toward the greenhouse.

“Hey!” Gregory caught up, and we dashed outside as two men in hardhats walked up to the greenhouse’s entrance.

“What are you doing?” I skidded to a stop in front of the men, the icy walk almost spelling my doom.

“Camille.” Gregory didn’t have as much luck with the ice. He slid, stumbled, and fell into me, both of us tumbling to the snowy grass as a cacophony of laughter burst from the classroom windows at our backs.

The nearest man reached down to help me up. I gripped his hand and yanked myself off the ground as the snow melted into the skirt material on my ass.

“You can’t tear this down,” I sputtered.

The second guy in the hardhat scratched his chin. “We aren’t.”

I pointed to the bottom panes of glass that had busted. “What about that?”

“Accident.” The second man shrugged. “We’re going to replace all the glass anyway. It’s part of the expansion.”

Gregory got to his feet and dusted himself off. “Girl, you need to give me a little more warning the next time you go sprinting through the hallway like that. I thought something was on fire.” He adjusted his bow tie back to

perfection.

“Sorry.” My face bloomed with heat when I saw all my students staring at me out the windows. “I just assumed—”

“Don’t worry.” The first man smiled. “We have express orders from Mr. Lindstrom and the headmistress that the greenhouse is to be preserved and expanded.” He waved some of the working men over, and they fell into discussions about how to stage the construction.

“Come on.” Gregory pulled me toward the double doors leading back to the hall. “I think we’ve embarrassed ourselves enough for the day.”

I let him lead me inside.

“And did you catch that name? Lindstrom?”

Yeah, I’d caught it. It threatened to knock me on my ass again.

“He’s taken a shine to this place.” He linked his arm through mine. “I was hoping he’d take a shine to me, but I’m pretty sure he only had eyes for you the last time he visited.”

My head spun. When he’d said he’d build Trenton another greenhouse, I assumed that offer expired the moment I ran from his house. Instead, he was making good on it. Giving my students something I could never deliver on my own.

“You all right?” He stopped and turned to inspect my face. “You went all pale. Did you hurt yourself when we fell?”

“I’m okay. Just shocked.” I smoothed my wet skirt.

“I’m not. I saw how he looked at you.” He plucked a blade of dead grass from my hair. “Get on back to class.”

“Right.” I turned to hurry down the hall.

He laughed. “Just don’t turn around for them, okay?”

I pressed my palm to my cold backside and called over my shoulder. “Noted.”

The noise persisted through the rest of the day—men, machines, deliveries. It was the most beautiful music I’d ever heard. The footprint for the new greenhouse was more than double our current space.

During my afternoon break, I stared at my phone. I didn’t have Sebastian’s direct dial, but I found the Lindstrom, Corp. number easily enough. Could I do this? Actually speak to him on the phone?

I glanced out at the construction. He’d done this for me. I had to say thank you. It wasn’t just because I wanted to hear his voice. Not at all.

I dialed and was transferred to his secretary.

“Sebastian Lindstrom’s office.”

“Hi. Yes. This is, um, Camille Briarlane from Trenton. I was hoping to speak to Mr. Lindstrom? To, um, thank him for the greenhouse.”

“I’m sorry, but he’s out of state on business.”

“Oh.” The depth of my disappointment surprised me. I wanted to hear his voice. No, I craved it, and I hated myself for it.

“May I take a message?”

“No, that’s not necessary.” I clicked the phone off and dropped it as if it had burned me.

What was I doing? One good act by the man didn’t erase everything he’d done to me. I leaned back in my chair, the familiar monotone of Dr. Potts soothing me through the wall. Closing my eyes, I went through Sebastian’s sins—surveillance, kidnapping, the sleeping nude, the deals, the kissing, the sex. His hands on me. The look in his eye when he was between my legs, devouring me. The way his hair would muss when I ran my fingers through it. His scent, the feel of his hard body against me. *When he was inside me.* I shifted in my chair, my panties sticking to me and not because of the melted snow. Now that I wasn’t in his clutches, I could admit he was the sexiest man I’d ever met. A fantasy wrapped in delicious suits with a darkness inside him that burned if you touched it. And I had. I’d luxuriated in it, giving myself to him in a way I’d never done with anyone else. And the worst part—I’d enjoyed every moment of it. He’d gotten to me, reached that secret part inside that scared me. But he’d seen it, tasted it, and he hadn’t judged. Instead, he’d bathed in my own darkness the same way I had in his.

“Camille?”

I jumped as Link strode into my classroom, a bouquet of white daisies in one hand. “Um, hi.” I stood. “What are you doing here?”

He laid the flowers on my desk and pulled me into his arms. “I had an ad meeting out of town, and instead of going back to the office, I figured I’d say the meeting went over.”

“Naughty.” I smiled up at him.

“That’s what you like, isn’t it?” He ran a hand through my hair and kissed me.

I tried not to think about how no flash of desire heated me at his touch, when only moments ago, simple thoughts of Sebastian had set me alight. Guilt tried to drown me, especially when my mind flickered to what I’d given Sebastian, twice—something I’d never offered to Link.

I leaned back. “Not at school.”

His eyes narrowed, but he kept his playful tone. “No funny business at a high school? Please.”

“I wouldn’t put anything past the students, but the teachers have to stick to some level of decorum.” I pecked him on the lips to try and assuage his irritation.

“What about Mint? Have you seen him?”

“Mint? He was in my class as usual. Why?”

“That kid’s horny for you.” He slid a hand down to my ass. “Not that I blame him.”

I slapped his arm. “Hands off, and Mint is just a regular teenager. He doesn’t have any hots for me. But his classmate Jenna? Definitely.”

“Good. He needs to go after girls his own age and leave the women to me.” He smiled, the perfect Abercrombie smile that drew women to him like groupies. “Do you like the flowers?”

“Of course. Plants are my jam.” I didn’t particularly enjoy daisies, but they were pretty enough.

“Good. Coming to the city this weekend, right?”

“Yes.” Maybe having dinner with Link and hanging with Veronica would help me cut through my mixed feelings.

“Maybe we could watch a movie and you could...” He ran his finger down my jawline and stared at my lips. “Sleep over?”

I forced a smile. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask.” He kissed me again, more gently this time, then pulled away as the bell rang. “See you in a few days.”

The door opened, and students trickled in for my next class.

Link grinned and spoke far more loudly than necessary. “Good talking with you about those plants and all, Ms. Briarlane.”

I laughed. He was fooling no one, but at least he was amusing in his attempt. Waving, he stepped out of the classroom and disappeared down the hallway.

“Is he your boyfriend?” Taylor asked in between blowing bubbles with her gum. “He is, isn’t he? He’s cute.”

“Let’s focus on science.” I turned my back to her and fiddled with my laptop. But she was right. Link *was* my boyfriend. Not Sebastian. Maybe I’d been wrong to try and put more space between Link and me.

My phone buzzed. A number I didn’t recognize had sent me a text.

You're welcome. –S

And just like that, Sebastian had once again placed himself at the forefront of my thoughts.



When I arrived home from the first day of spring semester, I found a collection of boxes sitting on my front porch. There were no shipping labels, nothing to give me any hints about what was inside. But I didn't have to guess about who they were from. He may not have been watching me anymore, but I could feel his signature on the mysterious packages.

I hauled each one inside and arranged them on my kitchen table.

Armed with scissors, I attacked the first one. Inside, I found a rare orchid, Coleman's Coral Root. I'd never seen one in person, especially not in bloom. A gorgeous purple bloom highlighted the tip of the longest stem with additional buds radiating down the stalk. I put one hand to my chest, my rapid heartbeat thundering against my palm.

With a quick cut along the seam, I opened the next box. I had to sit down when I found a Ghost Orchid, one of the rarest varieties in the world. Given the complexity of the bloom, scientists still had no idea how the plants were pollinated. My students and I could work on a breakthrough worthy of a scientific journal based solely on this one plant.

I opened the rest, each box containing rare orchids. The contents of these boxes were worth well over the market value of my house. The sun had long since fallen beyond the horizon as I sat and stared at the beautiful plants. I glanced to the already-wilting daisies I'd placed in the sink and then back to the orchids. There was no comparison. But that wasn't fair. Link didn't have the means to give me a garden of rare orchids. *But he could at least make an*

attempt to know your favorite flower. I swatted the thought away and started collecting the empty boxes. An envelope dropped from one, and I recognized Sebastian's sloping script along the front. My name.

I dropped to the floor and sat cross-legged while ripping the envelope open with shaking hands.

Camille,

I apologize for not being in the office to accept your call earlier today. The greenhouse is yours. I've instructed the foreman to report to you instead of the headmistress, and I've also provided a discretionary budget for you to make whatever changes or additions to the design you see fit.

As you know, emotions aren't my strong suit. But I want you to know that you've been in my thoughts every second you've been gone. I went about wooing you the wrong way. I see that now.

With that said, I need you to know that I wouldn't trade our time together for anything. You taught me more about myself than even my father.

Do you remember when you said I was the villain of this story? I think you were onto something. The actions I took to get you were wrong. But I don't regret them. I never will. I'd do them over again in a heartbeat. But the second time around, I might kill Link and whisk you away from here. Take you to the Amazon and set you free in the trees while I wait for you on the ground. Give you everything you ever wanted. Build you a school, burn down a city, design you a greenhouse, destroy an enemy—they're all the same to me as long as they lead to you. And I think that's why you were right. I think that's what makes me the bad guy—that I'd kill or build, destroy or create for you. If you wished it, I'd do it. All that would matter to me is that you wanted it.

I won't take you again. Your life is your own. I can only wait and hope that you see how sincere I am. That you can eventually forgive me for my dark deeds. And even if you can't, I'll still be here waiting and dreaming of you.

Know that what love I have is yours. It always will be.

Sebastian

Tears splashed onto the paper, the words running with emotion wrung from deep within me. A sob shook my body, and I lay on the cold floor, the letter clutched in my hand. Simple words on a page cut more deeply than any weapon ever could. My heart twisted and bled as I cried. Earlier that day, I'd

been set on the right path—the one that led to Link. But with the stroke of Sebastian’s pen, I was spinning out of control, my soul rushing toward him while every molecule of reason I had left pushed me toward Link.

My phone beeped with an incoming text. I ignored it and pressed my cheek to the cold floor as my breathing evened out. It shouldn’t have been a competition. One guy kidnapped me, the other hadn’t. So simple. It wasn’t a choice at all, really. Link was the good guy. He wouldn’t offer to burn down the world for me. That was a good thing, right?

Maybe I should go back to my original plan and push them all away, sit alone in my house, and try to put my life back together on my own.

The phone pinged again. I gave in and reached for it. Another unknown number.

Camille, this is Bill, Sebastian’s father. Would you be available for dinner in the city with me this weekend?

Please?

Mr. Lindstrom hadn’t kidnapped me, but he hadn’t helped me either. Then again, the stories he’d told me about Sebastian’s childhood had been by far the biggest help I’d had in understanding him. Maybe he could help me again. I texted back and agreed to meet.

Once we had our date set, I peeled myself off the floor. Crying about it wouldn’t help. And I was done with tears. I was no one’s captive, no one’s fiancée, no one’s plaything. And I wouldn’t be any of those things unless it was my choice, alone. For the first time in my life, my future was mine, and I didn’t intend to squander it.

“**W**HO ARE YOU HAVING dinner with?” I gripped Tina’s hair as she bobbed on my cock while I spoke with Camille. I’d wanted to pregame given the fact that Camille would probably leave me with blue balls. Again.

“Just a friend. Don’t worry.”

“Is this friend a man?”

Tina gagged, but I shoved her down onto my cock to deaden the sound.

“Yes, but he’s old enough to be my dad.”

“Will I see you later tonight then?”

“I’ll probably go back to Veronica’s after. First week back at school, so I’m beat. How about lunch tomorrow?”

“Sure, but why won’t you just tell me who you’re having dinner with?”

“Because I don’t want to.” The confidence in her tone rubbed me the wrong way. I let Tina get in a gasp of air before shoving her back down again.

“What was that?” Camille asked.

“What?”

“Like a weird air noise.”

“Must be static. Look, you can have this little secret. I don’t care, but can you at least tell me where you’ll be? I don’t want Mint convincing me you’ve been kidnapped again.”

She laughed, though the sound was tight. “Freniere’s.”

“Fancy.” I pulled Tina off my dick, let her catch her breath, then allowed her to set her own pace.

“Yeah.”

“Well, have a good time. I guess I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Thanks. And yes, lunch for sure.” She seemed relieved that I’d stopped questioning.

“All right, babe. I love you.” Tina hesitated, but I shoved her down again.

“Bye Link.”

The line went quiet, and I tossed my phone. “Hurry up. I’ve got somewhere to be.”

Tina glared at me, and the look only helped me get closer to coming down her throat.

“Do it good for me, baby. You know what I like.” My coaxing had her squeezing my balls just right while I thought about Camille, her curvy body and the pussy that belonged to me. She was mine. It was time for her to admit it and come to heel.

When my balls pulled up tight to me, I shoved my hips up and choked Tina with my cock while I emptied down her throat. She sputtered and fell back on the couch, accusation in her mascara-streaked eyes. I didn’t care. We were done. The next woman who got a taste of this dick was going to be my wife.

I’d find out what Camille was up to, put a stop to it, and put a ring on it. She’d put me off at Christmas, but she’d had time to consider it. More than enough time for her to realize she belonged with me. I deserved an answer.

And if I didn’t get the answer I deserved, there would be hell to pay.

“**T**HANKS FOR ACCEPTING my invitation.” Mr. Lindstrom sat to my right in a back corner of the swanky French restaurant, Freniere’s.

“It’s always hard for a teacher to turn down a free meal, Mr. Lindstrom.” I smiled and draped my napkin across my white skirt. “Especially from somewhere as fancy as this.”

“I’m glad, and call me Bill, please.”

The server poured wine for us as I perused the menu. “I’m afraid I’m not up on my French.”

“Neither am I.” Bill handed his menu back to the server. “I’ll have a ribeye, medium, with green beans and mashed potatoes.”

The server frowned, but nodded. “And for you?”

“I’ll have what he’s having.” I passed my menu and sat back in my chair as a string quartet began to play somewhere in the crowded restaurant.

Once the server disappeared, Bill leaned forward. “I’m sure you know why I invited you here tonight.”

“To discuss your son.”

“Yes.” He clasped his hands on the table. “As you know, I didn’t agree with his methods.”

“You didn’t do anything about it, either.”

He grimaced. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I hoped he’d come around to the correct conclusion on his own.” His eyes brightened. “And he did.”

“I don’t appreciate being a teachable moment for your son.” I sort of

liked my pointed tone, though it surprised me, perhaps even more than it did Bill.

“That’s not what you were.” He shook his head. “Not at all. You were so much more than I even knew. That day we talked in the library and I told you about how hard it had been to raise him, about his quirks, his lack of feeling. You took all that information and you solved the puzzle of Sebastian. The thing I’d worked for his entire life to do. You did it like—” He snapped his fingers. “Yes, you learned about him as you went, especially after our talk, but in the end, you’re the one who taught *him*.” His brow furrowed. “Don’t you see? You taught him love. He started at obsession—the moment he saw you, that switch flipped. Hell, it’s still flipped.” He shrugged. “You’re it for him. But after that, you found parts of him that I’ve never seen. Parts that I thought would stay locked away forever. You opened the most important door in anyone, but especially him. Love.”

“And you’re here to talk me into going back?” I tried to keep the emotion from my voice.

“No.” He paused as the server brought a basket of bread and two pats of butter. “I’m here to tell you that you are free. As free as you could ever wish to be. I’ve set up a trust for you. No ties to him whatsoever. This is between the two of us. To show my gratitude.” He opened his weathered hand on the table as tears pooled in his eyes. “To tell you how much what you’ve done has meant to me. I’d given up trying to get to him. But you did it. You gave me a gift that I can never repay. Hope.”

I slid my palm into his. He peered into my eyes. So much like his son, but not. He had a softness that I’d only seen in Sebastian when he was holding me.

“Thank you.” He squeezed my hand. “I mean it.”

I returned his warmth. “You’re welcome. But you didn’t have to set up a trust.”

“I did.” He smiled as a tear trickled down his wrinkled cheek. “You deserve that and more. I’ll have the paperwork sent over to your place next week. And I knew you’d say I didn’t have to do it, but I wanted to. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think of you as a daughter.”

I arched a brow. “You’re laying it on even thicker.”

He chuckled as the server set our plates down, the food sending delicious scents into the air. “I know, but I can’t help it. You’re a dream for my son. But you’re also a dream for me. A chance at family, a future, love.

Everything I've wanted for him and for me."

"It's not that simple." I couldn't just overlook Sebastian's sins against me.

"I know it isn't. I understand." He patted my hand and gestured to my plate. "Let's eat, and I'll see if I can quit crying like a nancy."

I nodded and dug in. The awkward tension drained away as we ate and drank like old friends. Our conversation strayed away from Sebastian and into my interests in botany and the Amazon.

"If you're into trees, I'm sure we'd love to have you on the Lindstrom team."

I sat back and patted my full stomach. "I like trees as much as the next botanist, but the real discoveries are in smaller species, especially ones that haven't been lab tested or otherwise investigated."

He frowned. "Surely, I can think of something to tempt you."

"I love teaching." I shrugged. "It was my true first love. I wouldn't want to do anything else."

"I used to have that sort of passion, for business of course. And then for Mrs. Lindstrom."

My interest piqued, I turned toward him. "Can you tell me more about her? Sebastian never said much."

"Harmony was an amazing woman. Strong-willed, smart, and curious. Beautiful. Any man who had half a brain wanted her on his arm." He laughed. "Convincing her to date me took a while, let me just put it that way."

"I'm sure it wasn't that bad."

"When we had Sebastian, we were both over the moon, of course. Harmony was running a successful cosmetics company at the time, but took some time off with him. He was a happy baby, never too bothered by much. Things that would have set another baby off, he'd just move right along. No tears, no problem. We didn't realize it was a symptom of a much bigger issue until he got older. When he was diagnosed, they characterized it as a version of Asperger's. And sure, he had some of that, but we eventually took him to a specialist who did a series of tests. Psychotic. It sounds scary, right? And as parents, we were terrified."

I couldn't imagine.

"And that's when Harmony changed. Like the light inside her went out. She didn't interact with Sebastian as much anymore. I gave him more

attention to make up for it. I sort of became his single parent.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t wrap my head around a mother doing that to her child, psychotic or not.

“No, sweetheart, don’t blame her.” He patted my arm. “With a situation like we had, everyone reacts differently. She supported me, and I supported Sebastian. When I’d have a breakdown about something he’d done—and there were several times—she’d put me back on my feet. All the encouragement she used to give him, she gave it to me instead. Now, I realize that was the only way it could have worked. I needed her. He needed me.”

“I get it.” I’d never been in that situation, never had to face something so difficult. But I understood tough choices.

He glanced at something behind me and nodded before pushing back and rising from his seat. “Excuse me for a moment.”

The hackles on the back of my neck rose. “He’s here, isn’t he?”

“I couldn’t resist a little gamesmanship.” He kissed the crown of my head and strode past me.

His scent hit me first, the fullness of it giving me a heady buzz. He could bottle it and sell it for any price he wanted.

“Camille.” His voice slid across my skin like silk as he took the seat his father had vacated. “I hope you liked the orchids.” He was a lady-killer in a perfectly fitted suit, light blue dress shirt, and dark blue tie.

I swallowed thickly, unsure if I should storm out or crawl into his lap. “Yes.”

“Good.” He smiled as his emerald eyes flickered to my lips. “I’ve missed you.”

My mind finally clicked into motion. I slapped my napkin on the table and rose.

“Camille,” he called.

“Hey.” I stopped a passing server. “Quickest way out of here?”

He pointed toward the back. “Leads to the alley, though.”

“Fine by me.” I hurried into the dim hallway and burst through the heavy door. The cold air assaulted me as I rushed toward the busy Manhattan street to my left.

“Stop.” Sebastian was at my heels.

When he grabbed my arm and pushed my back against the brick wall, I gasped.

“Get off me!” I shoved at his chest, but he didn’t move.

“Calm down, please.” Genuine concern in his voice felt like a blade to my heart.

“What are you doing to me?” Tears threatened as I stopped fighting and stared up at him. “What is this?”

“Love,” he said it as if it was the simplest answer. What’s two plus two? Four. Why are you holding me against a wall while I’m losing my mind? Love.

“You aren’t capable of love.”

“I would have agreed a few months ago.” He smoothed his palm down my cheek.

God, I was starved for his touch. I wanted more of it, just like an addict wanted the next hit of their eventual death.

“Let me go.”

“I don’t have you.” He kissed my forehead. “You’re free to do what you want.” As if to prove it, he stepped back. “Run if you want.”

I didn’t move, only stared up at him as my world rattled off its hinges.

He returned, pressing against me, one hand at my throat. “But I’ll always chase you. I’ll never cage you again, but I can’t stop my pursuit. It isn’t possible.”

“This is the obsession thing your dad mentioned.”

He grinned, giving him an even more villainous air. “Precisely.” Running his fingertips down my throat, he leaned closer, his lips at my ear. “Your heart is racing.”

“I-I was running from my kidnapper.” I held onto his shoulders.

“Right.” He kissed my throat, his teeth grazing my jugular. “That’s the only reason.”

A shudder shot through me and ended between my legs. I wasn’t falling anymore; I was at the bottom, his arms around me as we sank into the deepest pit of hell, welcoming the damnation together. I turned my head so he could have better access. He took the opening and placed a kiss against my skin that made my knees go weak.

“How about this?” He ran his hand along my thigh. “I give you what you need right here, right now in this dark alley. Then I let you run a little more, if that’s what you want. I’ll let you go. I don’t want to.” His fingers edged higher to the lace of my panties between my thighs. “I want to take you home and fuck you all night. Leave my marks all over you. Watch you suck my cock. Eat your pussy until you beg me to stop. I won’t, though.” His fingers

skirted past the fabric and slid down my wet folds. “Fuck. Just tell me what you want. I’ll do it. You want me to walk away right now? I will. You’re in control. Tell me.”

My eyes rolled back as he sank a finger inside me. “Don’t stop.”

He growled, the sound more animal than man, and claimed my lips with a fierce kiss that seared me in places that had never seen the sun. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he lifted me, my heels digging into his back. His hard cock pressed against me, right in the spot where I needed it. His tongue caressed mine, his lips bruising mine with the force of his passion.

I went up in flames as he drew his finger to his lips and licked my taste, then pressed the same finger into my mouth. One hand between us, he pressed my panties to the side and, after only a moment, his cock head stroked down my slick skin as I sucked his finger.

“Fuck, yes.” He pushed against my entrance, forcing his way in with the most delicious sting of pain and the deepest swell of desire.

Arching off the wall, I pushed my hips against him. His cock slid deep inside, and I bit down on his finger.

He grinned and withdrew it, then took my mouth, fucking me with his tongue to the same rhythm as his cock inside me. With both hands, he grabbed my ass and yanked me onto him with vicious strokes. The sound of flesh slapping ricocheted down the alley, bringing the sordid sound back to my ears. I moaned into his mouth, and he swallowed the sound, then matched it with a groan that sent a skitter of electricity rippling through me.

Every thrust hit me deep, pain and pleasure in a never-ending dance as he owned me, gave me something I couldn’t get anywhere else. He squeezed my breast through my shirt, then yanked it and my bra down and sucked my nipple into his mouth.

I squealed as he bit down and then soothed the sting with his tongue. My hands in his hair, the feel of his cock pounding deep inside me like my own heartbeat, and the pressure of his mouth on my taut nipple had my legs shaking.

When he reached between us and pressed his thumb to my clit through the fabric of my panties, I pressed my head back into the bricks and fought for each gulp of air. He seized the opportunity to bite my throat as he stroked and pistoned into me.

“I know what you need.” His hoarse voice told me he was on the edge of control.

I wanted him to lose it right along with me. Grabbing onto his hair, I yanked his head back and bit his throat right above the collar of his dress shirt.

“Oh fuck, Camille.” His grunt punctuated his pace as I licked the bite, then gave him another.

His thrusts grew more erratic as his thumb strummed me just how I needed. “Fucking shit. Come with me.”

His words threw me over the edge, and I came, my pussy gripping him as I tightened and released in waves of bliss. I pressed my lips to his neck as he thrust deep and came, his masculine groan in my ear as we both gave ourselves over to the recklessness of pure desire. My orgasm surged and rolled until it ebbed and faded away into heaving breaths. He kissed me all over. My face, chest—any inch of bare skin.

“I love you.” His voice in my ear took my breath away.

I felt it. At that moment, if I’d said it back, there would have been nothing truer in the world. But I didn’t. I locked the feeling away to examine later. Scientifically. Without the haze of lust coloring my thoughts.

Pulling out, he lowered me to the ground and handed me a handkerchief from his pocket. I took it and straightened out my clothes while he scanned the alleyway.

“Did someone see?” I glanced up at him.

“Don’t think so.” He tilted my chin up and kissed me. “Your secret is safe with me.”

I smoothed my hair out of my face and tried to orient my thoughts away from what we’d just done. In an alley. In Manhattan. Only a stone’s throw from a busy street.

“Are you going to run more?” He adjusted my top for me.

“I...” Was I? “I’m going to Veronica’s for the night. As planned.”

He wasn’t skilled at hiding disappointment, but he stepped back and offered his arm. “At least let Anton drive you to her place.”

“I can get a cab.” I took his elbow, and we walked out of the alleyway as if nothing unusual had just happened.

“I know. But I’d rather he drive you. I’ll stay behind so you can have it all to yourself.” He gave me a sidelong glance. “Unless you’re into the chloroform play after all.”

I glared at him. “Leave it to you to make jokes about kidnapping someone.”

“It wasn’t a joke.” He helped up his hand to signal Anton, who was parked twenty feet down the block.

“No, psycho. I’m not into ‘chloroform play.’”

He smiled. “Okay, it was a joke, but I rather like it when you get all riled up.”

I slapped his arm as Anton pulled to the curb in front of us. “There is something really wrong with you.”

“I know.” He walked me to the car and opened the back door for me.

I slid in.

He leaned down and kissed me, gently this time. “Until the next time I catch you.” With that, he closed the door and I could finally take a breath.

I WALKED PAST THE maître d at Freniere's and strode to the bar. Dad sat on one end nursing a Tom Collins. He took one look at me and frowned.

"What?" I slid in next to him and ordered a whiskey neat.

"If you're here, that means she's out there without you." His tired eyes drooped.

I clapped him on the back. "All is not lost."

"How's that?"

"Let's just say that she's going to keep running, but she's fine with letting me catch her every so often." I took a draw from my glass, though the whiskey was incapable of touching my high. Camille had given me hope, a chance at a future with her. "I think it's time to celebrate."

A glimmer lit in Dad's eyes, and he smiled and clinked glasses with me. "Well, hell! That's great news. Did you two talk it out? She say she forgave you?"

I took another drink. "Not in so many words."

"The how do you know she—"

"Dad, I just know. Okay?" I gave him what I hoped was a knowing look.

"Oh." He seemed to catch on, because his cheeks pinked. "Oh, I see."

We drank in silence for a few moments, though I couldn't miss the smile on his face as he sipped. "So, where did she get off to?"

"Her friend Veronica's. She stays there when she's in town. Anton's driving her as we speak."

"But she'll see you again?"

"Dad. Calm down. Yes. She didn't say no. That's the same as a blatant

yes.”

He nodded. “And she knows that. Knows you even better than I do.”

“I agree.”

“You did it.” He motioned for another drink. “Or at least it’s a start. She didn’t run away screaming. Always a good sign.”

“She ran, but I caught her. I’ll always catch her.” The new sensation, the one that sent me flying, swelled in my chest. She’d put it there. All the love I had was hers.

“**V**ERONICA?” I CALLED AS I walked into her apartment. Silence greeted me. She was still out with her new boy toy.

Relief washed over me. I needed time to think about what had happened in that alley. I dropped my bag on her entry table and walked into the kitchen, flipping lights on as I went. Leaning against the counter, I laughed and covered my face.

“You’re insane. That was insane.” My giggles turned into a smile. “And now I’m talking to myself. Perfect.” I opened the fridge and grabbed a water.

Drinking it slowly, I replayed everything that had transpired, the feel of his skin on mine, the way he’d said my name. And most of all, his profession of love. Butterflies swooped and spun in my stomach. I’d been in control, and for a moment in that alley, I realized that I was the one pulling his strings. He was the captive, the one tied to me. Not with a golden monitor, but by an invisible link that only we could feel. I couldn’t put words to it, not yet. But I knew it, just as sure as I knew he’d never stop his pursuit—I loved Sebastian. It was wrong and sick, yet so, so right.

I ran my hands down my throat and closed my eyes, imagining his mouth against me, the delicious feeling of being possessed by him. My freedom was sweet. His kiss was sweeter.

“Snap out of it, weirdo.” I finished my water, then switched off the lights in the kitchen and walked into the living room.

“Have a good time?”

I jumped and squeaked. “Link?”

He sat in a side chair, his back to the small window. His face in shadow,

he sat unmoving, but I could feel his gaze on me.

“What are you doing here?”

He didn’t respond. I flipped the light switch. Nothing happened.

My skin crawled as I stared at his dark profile. “Link?”

“All this time I’ve been waiting.” Something snapped in his hand. “Giving you space. Letting you tell me when you were ready for more.” *Creak, snap.* “I respected your need for time. Held you while you cried about your parents, then went home with balls bluer than the fucking Hudson.” *Creak, snap.*

I edged backward toward the hall.

“Stop. Don’t bother.” He held his hand out, the light catching the ring box in his palm. “This should have been yours. You don’t deserve it.” He pulled it back into the shadows. *Creak, snap.* “I was the good guy, waiting for you. But you didn’t want a good guy, did you?”

“Link, you should go.” I took another step back.

The shadow moved, and Link launched at me. I darted down the hallway, but he caught me around the waist and slapped a hand over my mouth. “You wanted a bad guy. You gave *what was mine* to that fucking maniac.” Rage coated his words. “You let him fuck you up against a dirty wall like the piece of trash you truly are.” He walked me forward toward Veronica’s bedroom. “My mistake was treating you like you were special, like you were the one. What you really wanted was to be treated like a whore. Just like all the other whores.”

I fought, scratching at his arms and trying to kick. This wasn’t happening. I wouldn’t let it happen.

He squeezed my face and my waist until I thought he might break me in half. “Shh. Don’t worry. I’m going to give you what you want. I saw how you like it. Rough, filthy. That’s just what you’ll get. No more good guy for you.”

He pushed me onto the bed and pinned me, one hand still on my mouth. “Do you want to explain all this to me?”

I nodded.

“If you scream, I’ll choke you out, and then I’ll do what I want with your body. Understand?”

I nodded again.

He peeled his hand away and grabbed a handful of my hair. “Talk.”

This wasn’t the Link I knew. His eyes were crazed, his face twisted into a

mask of fury. He'd snapped. "Please, don't."

"Shh." He slapped his hand back over my mouth. "I thought you were going to explain to me why I saw that piece of shit Sebastian fucking my pussy. That's what I want to know. Can you tell me that, or should I just get down to business?" He slid one hand under my skirt, hiking it up.

I nodded, my thoughts racing.

"Okay." He dug his fingers into my thigh. "Last chance." He freed my mouth.

"What Mint suspected was true. I never made it to the Amazon. Sebastian had me the entire time."

He shook his head. "What?"

"It's true. He kept me at his house. I couldn't escape."

His fingers dug harder into my thigh. "So are you telling me you gave it to him before tonight?"

"Link, please." I grabbed his wrist. "He kept me captive."

He adopted a thoughtful expression. "Okay, so let's say that's true, and he held you prisoner." His eyes seared into mine. "Were you a prisoner tonight up against that wall?"

My voice broke. "This isn't you."

"That's where you're wrong." He hooked his fingers into my panties at my hip. "This has always been me. I tried to change for you. To be better. To be your white knight." He yanked, the fabric tearing and scraping my skin. "But that's not what you wanted, not really."

"Don't." A tear slipped down my temple.

"Do you love him?" He gripped my hip. "Don't lie to me."

My voice caught in my throat, and I couldn't answer. But the truth was in my eyes, because he tensed and bared his teeth.

He closed his eyes, his jaw tight. "That's what I thought." When he opened his eyes again, he was gone. Only wrath remained.

"Link."

"Shut up." He gripped my throat. "Not another word. You're going to give me what you owe me. Then I'm going to walk away. If you go to the police, I'll tell them all about Sebastian, how he held you against your will—all of it. Your psycho lover boy will go to prison where he fucking belongs."

I struggled, trying to buck him off, fighting and kicking. He was too strong. His body pinned me, and he squeezed my throat, stopping my air. I scratched his face.

“Fuck!” He grabbed a handful of my hair with his other hand and yanked until I thought he’d tear it out.

I still fought, refusing to give in.

“Stop it, you fucking bitch.” He ground his cock into my thigh. “You’re getting all of this whether you’re conscious or not. Doesn’t matter to me. Keep this up, and it’s lights out.”

I couldn’t give up. Grabbing a handful of his hair, I pulled as hard as I could. He groaned and increased the pressure on my throat until black seeped into my vision. My lungs burned, and I couldn’t focus on anything except my next breath. My hands dropped to the bed and Link smiled.

“That’s it.” He let go of my hair and reached between us. The jingle of his belt buckle barely made it over the ringing in my ears.

My vision faded, Link’s cruel face hazing out. A crash. Something breaking. And then I could breathe again. I rolled over and coughed, sucking in huge gulps of air as living fire raced down my throat and into my lungs. My vision popped back, my hearing too.

Fleshy thunks and deep yells filtered through. I sputtered and felt my throat. Curling into a defensive ball on the bed, I sucked in air until my fog cleared. I sat up and intended to bolt for the door, but the way was blocked.

Sebastian straddled Link and was punching him again and again. Link’s face was bloodied, his eyes closed.

“Sebastian!” I ran up behind him and grabbed his arm. “You’ll kill him!”

“Yes.” He didn’t swing again once I put my hands on him. “I will. Stand back so I can finish the job.”

“No.”

He turned to look at me, one of his eyes red and puffy. “You want him to live?”

No. I stared down at Link, at the real man behind the mask. A monster. “I don’t want you to go to prison. If you kill him, they might take you away. To an institution or worse.”

He glanced to my throat, and his gaze darkened. “I don’t care. He deserves to die.”

“I care.” I pulled on his arm. “Please.” I wanted Link dead and gone, but I couldn’t let Sebastian do it. He’d saved me.

He reached up and caressed my cheek. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” I let him go.

He stood and crushed me in an embrace that soothed my hurt and fear.

Scooping me into his arms, he stepped over Link and carried me to the living room.

“Wait.” I pointed to the floor. “Set me down.”

He quirked a brow but put me on my feet. I reared back and kicked Link in the ribs. He grunted and curled onto his side.

“Okay.” I reached for Sebastian.

“Have I mentioned how much I love you?” He smirked and took me in his arms again.

“A few times, but feel free to tell me again.”

“I love you more than anything else in this world.” He sat on the couch and cradled me in his arms. “Where does it hurt?”

“Just my throat.”

He tensed again. “Are you certain I can’t kill him?”

“Yes.” I ran my hand down his chest. Even with Link in the hallway, I knew I was safe in Sebastian’s arms.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to get here.”

I pulled back and stared into his eyes. “How did you know?”

He cleared his throat. “I, ah, well. Remember when I had the surveillance removed from your house?”

“Oh my god, you bugged Veronica’s place, too?” I shook my head.

“I was going to have it all undone, but Timothy hadn’t been able to handle it yet. So, as it happened, it was still here.” His eye had started to swell closed. “I wanted to check and make sure you got here safe, that was all. I wasn’t going to eavesdrop any further than that. But then I saw him lying in wait for you. I came as fast as I could.”

“You need ice for that.” I tried to climb out of his lap, but he held me in place.

“All I need is you.” He turned my chin so he could inspect my neck. “You’re going to bruise.”

“I can barely feel it.” I lay my head on his shoulder. “You’re here. That’s all I need.”

He hugged me tight. “Do you have any idea how beautiful that sounded?” Link groaned in the hallway.

Sebastian set me next to him on the couch. “Give me a second.”

“Don’t—”

“I won’t kill him.” He strode to the hallway. More groans, and then a sliding noise. Sebastian dragged Link by the collar of his jacket, opened the

front door, and shoved him out into the hallway.

“Needless to say, you’re fired. If I ever see your face again, I’ll kill you with my bare hands and bury you in the woods on my estate. Your body will never be found. And it will never be traced to me.”

Link groaned again as Sebastian slammed the door and flipped the deadbolt.

He returned to the couch and sat next to me. Laying back, he pulled me on top of him. “Are you okay?”

Link’s violence would leave a mark on me. I knew that. I could feel that slice of evil coloring a part of my soul, and it would be with me long after today. But it wouldn’t rule me.

I snuggled against Sebastian’s chest as he ran his hands up and down my back. “I think I’m going to be fine. *We’re* going to be fine.”

“We?” A hopeful note in his voice made me smile.

“Yes, we. After all, we’re a team. We took out the bad guy.”

“Hmph.” He smoothed a hand down my hair. “I thought I was the bad guy in your story?”

“I was wrong.” I propped my chin on his chest and stared into his eyes. “You aren’t the bad guy after all. Psycho? Yes. But you’re the hero of my story.”

“I’ve never been someone’s hero before.”

“You’re mine.”

“So I’m the good guy?”

I stretched up and kissed his chin. “Let’s not get carried away.”

He laughed, the sound rich and delicious.

“Sebastian?”

“Yes, my damsel?” His warmth infused my heart.

“I love you.”

“I know.”

“Oh, really?” I cocked my head.

“Your expression. The one I could never figure out. I’ve collected enough data to decide that it’s love.”

“You can’t robot your way into my emotions like that.”

“But I did.” He pulled me up his body and placed gentle kisses on my lips. “It was the one missing element. The part I couldn’t figure out no matter how hard I tried. Not until I realized how much I loved you. And then it all clicked, like the missing piece of the puzzle.” He smirked. “I didn’t even

have to force it, though I certainly tried.”

“You did.” I cupped his face in my hands. “Psycho stalker.”

“You loved it.”

“No.” I kissed him, slow and sweet. “Just you.”

EPILOGUE

CAMILLE

GREEN IN NEW YORK always seemed like, at most, four shades. They were beautiful shades, each one heralding spring or pronouncing the glory of summer. I thought I knew green. I didn't.

The rainforest canopy expanded as far as I could see, a variety of leaves, arboreal plants, parasitic flowers, and any number of random bits of vegetation. Green—it was no longer a color. It was life. A never-ending river of shades that tinted every part of my world.

I reached forward, working my small shovel around the roots of a bromeliad that had grown in the crook of a tree about a hundred feet above the forest floor. The leaves wavered as I scooped and dug. After a careful excavation, I gave a gentle tug at the plant's base and pulled it free, bits of dirt cascading to the forest floor below. I stowed it in my expedition bag, then kicked back from the tree and let out my rope to lower myself to the ground. I eased downward, spinning slightly until my feet hit the leaf litter. I unhooked my carabiner and struck off toward the small camp we'd set up nearby.

"Have you seen this frog?" Sebastian's voice startled me, and I stopped and peered through the fronds and leaves until I caught movement. He stood just off the path, his eyes trained on something in the greenery in front of him.

"Let's see." I walked up beside him and followed his gaze. "Yep." A bright blue frog with swipes of black sat on a wide leaf, its wonky eyes watching us from two different angles.

He reached out toward it. "I almost caught it a minute ago. I was going to bring it to you."

I slapped his hand. “No.”

“You know I love it when you get frisky.” He pulled me close. My favorite shade of green stared down at me.

“I don’t love it when you get dead.” I glanced to the leaf. “That particular frog is in the Dendrobatidae family.”

He kissed my throat and ran his hand into the waistband of my shorts, cupping my ass. “Keep talking that science stuff to me.”

I sighed. “It’s a poison dart frog. One touch would make you violently ill, and depending on what the frog has been eating lately—usually toxic insects—could potentially kill you.”

“You’d save me.” He kissed to my mouth. “Again.”

I laughed against his lips. “If I recall correctly, you’re the one who saved me.”

“You recall wrong.” He glanced around. “Let’s take this conversation to our tent.” He bent down and slung me over his shoulder.

“Hey!” I clutched my bag. “Watch my sample.”

“I want to watch other things.” He trudged through the trees, striking straight toward the small set of tents. It was an offshoot of my much larger field school about fifty miles away. Students from Trenton worked there during the summers, studying the rainforest and conducting experiments right alongside me. Then, once school was back in, we returned to New York and continued our research. I’d used the funds Bill had given me in trust, plus a generous investment from Sebastian, to establish the entire science initiative. Later in the summer, we’d accept students from other high schools, and were well on our way to becoming a prestigious international teaching institution.

Mint and Jenna, summer field school instructors, passed us as we approached. Mint’s home situation had cleared up shortly after I’d returned to Trenton, his parents recommitting to their relationship and Hal stepping out of the picture. It verged on miraculous, but I didn’t question it.

“Not again.” Mint shook his head. “Keep it down or you’ll scare the students.”

I blushed and pounded on Sebastian’s back. “Let me down. This looks terrible.”

“Mrs. Lindstrom fell.” Sebastian half-yelled in a transparent attempt to cover. “No one worry. I’ll doctor her right up in our tent.”

Jenna snickered, and she and Mint joined hands and walked farther down the path and out of sight.

The sound of a zipper cut through the air. I glanced to the right, and Timothy exited Gregory's tent. He smoothed his shirt down and hurried away, not meeting my eye. Walk of shame in progress.

"Did you see that?" I whispered.

Sebastian smacked my ass. "I'm focused on one thing and one thing only."

"Brute."

"Here we are." He deposited me inside the tent, the dappled light creating interesting patterns against the thin, taupe material. "Now, I'll need you to strip so I can inspect your injuries."

"I'm pretty sure you don't need to continue the ruse." I set my pack to the side as Sebastian knelt between my legs.

He unbuttoned my shorts and slid them and my panties down my legs and over my boots. "Tell me where it hurts." He kissed up my thighs.

I ran my hands through his hair. "You're almost there, doctor."

He smiled. "I knew it. You need treatment." Pressing a kiss to my pussy, he growled low in his throat. "Shirt off."

I yanked it over my head as he licked my clit. Cupping one breast, he pushed me to my back and spread my legs wider. My body hummed with heat and need as he slowly licked and sucked my hot flesh.

"How's this?"

"Perfect." I lifted my hips and stared down into his eyes as he devoured me.

"Perfect what?"

"Perfect, doctor."

He grinned and sucked my clit between his teeth. The fire inside me rose higher, and I wanted every stroke of his tongue. I bit my lip to keep my moan to myself. He squeezed my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, driving me wild. I lifted onto my elbows and pulled his hair. "I want you."

He kissed up my stomach, lingering on my breasts, then sucking my throat. I reached to his pants, unbuttoned them, then pulled his thick cock free. It pulsed in my palm as I stroked it long and slow. The need to have him inside me blotted out everything else.

Groaning into my mouth, he pressed his head to my entrance and eased inside. I clawed his shirt up his back. He stripped it off and tossed it, his strong muscles flexing beneath my hands as he sank all the way.

Our mouths met in a torrent of passion, kissing and biting as he started a

hard rhythm, each thrust jarring me and sending sparks through my clit.

“Me. Let me.” I pushed his shoulder.

He rolled so I was on top. I spread my palms on his chest, anchoring myself on him as I rode his cock.

“That’s it. Let me see it.” He palmed my breasts, squeezing as he watched where our bodies joined.

I gripped his wrists, leaning on them as I worked back and forth on his cock, every stroke deep and hard. Leaning up, he captured a nipple in his mouth and pulled a hand away to slap my ass. I moaned, no longer able to keep it quiet. He slapped again, harder this time, and I sped my pace. He switched to my other nipple, sucking and biting as I ground my pussy against him, each movement of my hips growing smaller, more concentrated as my thighs shook.

He leaned back and slapped both sides of my ass. “It’s yours. Take it.”

I threw my head back and rode him. He bore down on my hips, increasing the friction as sweat slicked my body and I slid against him.

“Fuck.” His cock stiffened, thickening even more. “You’re too much.”

I dug my nails into his abs. “Wait for it.”

“Can’t.” He grunted and slapped my ass hard enough to make me cry out. The pain was perfect, sending me plummeting into a strong orgasm.

His name rolled from my lips as my hips seized, and everything inside me centered on the delicious sensation, then burst outwards, sending shards splintering in every direction. He groaned and thrust up hard inside me, his come coating me as my walls squeezed him, taking every last drop he had. I rode the waves of release until I was spent and collapsed onto his chest.

He kissed my forehead and rubbed the spots on my ass he’d lit on fire. “So fucking sexy.”

I rested my cheek on his chest and tried to catch my breath. “You know what that caveman thing does to me.”

He laughed. “I do. That’s why I’m rather fond of it.”

I bit his pec, and his cock pulsed inside me.

“You know what biting does to me.” He flipped me onto my back and kissed me, his mouth owning me as his hips moved at a slow pace.

I answered, my tongue warring with his as our bodies slid against each other, my nipples hardening again. My sensitive clit buzzed with each touch of his skin, each delectable bit of pressure. His cock came back to life, hitting me in all the right spots as he took it slow.

Breaking the kiss, he stared down at me. “Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

“I think I do.” I wrapped my arms around his neck. “So much that you went psycho and kidnapped me and made me love you despite myself.”

He smirked. “I can’t make you do anything. I think the day I realized that is the day you finally started loving me back.”

“Maybe.” I pushed my hips up and wrapped my legs around his back.

He kissed me again, his lips soft and sure as he made love to me.

“Do you remember when you were in psycho training with your dad?”

He bit my lip. “Yes. It made me the fine, upstanding citizen I am today.”

I wrested it free. “Were you in class the day the birds and bees were taught?”

“Of course.” He thrust a little harder. “I like to think I mastered that particular lesson.”

I nodded. “You did. In more ways than one.” I smiled up at him.

“You lost me.” He cocked his head to the side, his quizzical expression making me giggle.

“Never.” I kissed his nose. “I’m yours, and so is the baby.”

He froze, his eyes wide. “You mean you’re...right now...you’re...” He lifted off me, but I grabbed on tighter and pulled him back.

“You can’t hurt it. It’s early. But it’s true. I’m pregnant.”

When he smiled, pure joy writ large on his handsome face, I hugged him close. He stilled as I dotted kisses on his shoulder.

Pulling back, he stared down at me, tears glimmering in his eyes. “But what if—” His voice cracked with emotion. “What if they’re born like me?”

How could my heart threaten to break when it was so full of love? I pulled his face to mine and pressed our foreheads together. “Then they’ll be perfect, as far as I’m concerned.”

His tears met my own, and he kissed me.

Our souls melded and once again danced in the dark...and the light.

A bonus chapter, starring Sebastian, is included at the very end of this book (just like how you have to hang on through the credits at a Marvel flick.) xx

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank heavens, I've reached the easiest part of the book to write!

To the most important person ever, Mr. Aaron. Thank you for hand-feeding me an oatmeal cream pie as I write these acknowledgements. (He wanted to get a good shout-out, obviously). He's always my first reader, and my best typo-finder. He's also the man who introduced me to the true R-rated version of "An Officer and a Gentleman." I had no idea the drill sergeant said "pussy" so much. Thanks, babe.

To Mel, my beta, thank you for helping me with plot holes, dead parents, and sparkly shoes (not all of which played a part in this novel ...)

To Sybil. This cover is fan-fuckingtastic, my love. And the teasers, wonderful. Also, thanks for reading it early and giving me your take. (And sorry about that time I sent you a horrible accidental selfie when I was trying to send you a voice message about a blonde hair nightmare.)

Viv, you're my rock. Always will be. Keep being you. Rachel, you're a sassy little thing who still owes me a pic of pierced nips. Gimme.

Thanks to Give Me Books for promoting The Bad Guy. I couldn't get the word out without them.

Shelly Cross has a special place in my heart simply from sending me delicious baked goods. I think there's a lesson there, folks.

And, most of all, thank you, readers. Sebastian isn't for the faint of heart. He's deeply flawed, but even villains deserve love. Even bad guys should get a happily ever after, right? Thanks for believing in Sebastian's happy ending.

So, what's next from me? I'm not sure. But I hope you read it.

Xoxo,
Celia Aaron

COUNSELLOR



1 SINCLAIR

IN THE HEART of every man is a darkness. Primal. Instinctive.

At its most basic, it's a desirous nature—one that covets, demands, takes. Most men brick it up behind a wall of self-control. They invest time and effort in maintaining the separation. These men, good men, control the darkness until it withers away and becomes nothing more than a shadow haunting their innermost thoughts. Something easily forgotten, dismissed, erased.

I've never been a good man.

My darkness is neither restrained nor buried. It lives right at the surface. The only thing that hides it is my mask.

My mask is the law, the light, the pursuit of justice. It is forthright and airy. It is the appearance of righteousness in a fallen world.

The mask I wear is purely the act of a predator. Theater. Pageantry. Deceptive and lethal. It allows me to get close and closer still until it is time to strike.

I stalk so near that my prey can feel the tickle of my breath, the coldness of my heart, the depth of my depravity. Only a whisper separates me from what I desire.

Then the mask falls away, and all my victim sees is darkness.

2 STELLA

THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY sat completely still at the dark, polished table across the courtroom. My father sat in front of me at an identical table, but he was full of nervous energy. He shifted, ran a hand through his silver hair, and leaned over to whisper to his attorney.

I clasped my hands in my lap until the ring on my index finger dug into my flesh. This was the last chance my father had for freedom, the last day he would be able to throw himself on the mercy of the court. My gaze wandered back to the district attorney, the one who had my father arrested. Investigators scrutinized every last cent the old man ever invested or borrowed. And, just like that, my world became a smoldering heap of ashes. All because of one man.

Sinclair Vinemont was unmoving, like a spider poised on a web, waiting for the slightest sensation of movement from a hapless moth. My father was the moth, and Vinemont was about to destroy him. The investigation and prosecution had been the careful work of a master. Vinemont had woven the cocoon tighter and tighter until my father was caught from all sides. He had nowhere to run, nowhere to try and hide from Vinemont's poison. Dad was being systematically dismantled by the silent monster in a perfect suit.

I wanted to crumble. I couldn't. Dad needed me. No matter the long list of allegations and the even longer list of evidence against him, he was my father. He had always been there for me. Always protected me, stood by me, and encouraged me. Even after what my mother had done. Even after what I had done.

I would not leave his side. He was staring down a hefty prison sentence.

Even if the worst happened, I would visit him, call him, write him, and keep him company until the day he got out. I owed him that and much more.

I stared at Vinemont so hard I hoped he would burst into flames from the sheer heat of my hatred. I'd wished for his demise for so long it had become like second nature to me. I hated him, hated every slick word from his mouth, every breath he took. Vinemont's downfall was stuck on replay in my mind. As I glared at his back, he remained tranquil, completely at ease despite my father coming apart with worry at the table next to him.

I forced myself to drop my gaze, lest anyone see me glaring at him with embittered rage. I couldn't bear for my father to suffer any further torment, especially not if it was based on any of my actions. My hands were pale in my lap, a white contrast to my dark pinstriped skirt. I took a deep breath and settled myself. It would do no good for me to fall apart now. Not in the face of my father's sentencing. I let out my breath slowly and looked up.

Something was different. I darted my gaze to the side. Sinclair Vinemont sat just as still, but now his eyes were trained on me. His gaze pierced me, as if he were seeing more than my exterior. I refused to turn away and, instead, gave him a matching stare full of righteous anger. We were locked in a battle, though not a word was said and no one threw a punch. I wouldn't look away. I wouldn't let him win even more than he already had. I perused his appearance more fully than I had ever dared. He would have been handsome—dark hair, blue eyes, and a strong jaw. He was tall, broad, fit. The perfect man except for the ice I knew coated his heart.

The internet had told me everything I needed to know about him. Single, old money, career in public service, and at twenty-nine years old, he was the youngest district attorney in parish history. The only thing I didn't know about him was why he would dare look at me, why he thought he had any right to pin me with his gaze after he'd ruined my life. I wanted to spit in his face, claw his eyes, and make him hurt the same way he'd hurt my father and me.

The door at the front of the courtroom opened and the judge entered, a stark, elderly man in black robes. Vinemont finally turned away, vanquished for the time being. Everyone in the courtroom stood. The judge shuffled to his seat behind a high wall of wood and state insignias, far above the spectators and lawyers.

"Be seated." Despite his apparent age, his voice boomed, echoing off the dusty shutters and up into the gallery above. "Counsellor Vinemont..." He

trailed off, sorting through the papers on his desk.

My father sank into his chair and turned to grant me a thin smile. I tried to smile back to give him some sort of comfort, but it was too late. He'd already faced forward, watching the judge. I willed the judge to let my father go, to suspend his sentence, to do anything except take him away from me. I had no one else. No mother. No one except Dylan, and I refused to rely on him for anything.

Vinemont stood and fastened the top button of his suit coat before stepping from behind the table. He was tall, and like so many dangerous things, effortlessly beautiful.

The bespectacled, bearded judge was still rifling through sheets upon sheets of documents when Vinemont spoke.

“Judge Montagnet, I have several victims lined up to speak against Mr. Rousseau.” His deep Southern drawl was an affront to my ears. Even so, words spilled off his tongue with ease. He could charm the devil himself. As far as I was concerned, Sinclair Vinemont *was* the devil.

I wished we'd never left New York, never travelled to this backwoods bayou full of snakes. Vinemont condemned my father with airy ease every chance he got. No one spoke against him. No one countered his venomous lies other than the ham-handed defense attorney my father hired. So many of the people we'd met in this town were good, forthright souls—or so I'd thought. They weren't here. They didn't sit on my father's side to give him support against Vinemont's false charges. They hadn't come to testify that my father's sentence should be reduced or that he should be granted mercy. It was only me and rows upon rows of empty, cold pews. We were alone.

On Vinemont's side of the courtroom, two rows full of people, maybe twenty in all, sat and glared at Dad and me. Most of them were elderly men and women who had invested with my father. They blamed him for losing their money when all he did was invest as they requested. He had no control over the market, or the crashes, or the resulting instability. My father wasn't the monster Vinemont had made him out to be.

One of the women, gray and wrinkly, met my gaze and made the sign of the evil eye. I only knew what it was because she'd done it before, the last time I'd seen her in court during my father's trial. I'd looked it up and realized she was cursing me. With each movement of her hand, she was willing destruction down on my head. I looked away, back to the true reason for my father's disgrace and my desperation. Sinclair Vinemont.

The judge nodded. “Bring up your first witness, Counsellor.”

I steeled myself as one by one, the alleged victims walked, limped, or wheeled past me to testify against my father. Their tears should have moved me, their tales of trust broken and fortunes lost should have forced some shred of empathy from my heart. All I felt was anger. Anger at them for getting my father into this mess. More than that, anger at Vinemont as he stood and patted the “victims” on the shoulder or the arm and gave out hugs like he was running for office. Every so often I could have sworn he leered back at me, some sort of smug satisfaction on his hard face.

The day droned on with story after story. With each witness, Dad slumped down farther in his chair, as if trying to melt away into the floor. I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder, tell him things could be fixed. Instead, I sat like a statue and listened.

The accusations stung me like a swarm of hornets. After the sixth or seventh witness, I went numb from their venom. Despite the breadth of the charges, I did not doubt my father. Not for a moment. Vinemont had done all this to ensure his reelection or for some other, similarly vile purpose.

When the last witness finally turned her walker around and shuffled back to her seat, the silence became a separate presence. Heavy, ominous, and draining, like a specter haunting the empty spaces of the room. My father remained hunched forward, his head bowed.

“Well, judge, I think you’ve heard enough.” Vinemont held his hands out beside him, the show at an end.

“I have. I’m going to need the evening to think on the sentence.” He glanced around the courtroom, his impassive gaze stopping on me for a moment longer than anyone else. “I’ll have my verdict in the morning.”

Vinemont turned to the judge and gave him a slight nod. Judge Montagnet returned the nod and then banged his gavel. “Court is adjourned.”



“Just let me make you feel better.” Dylan leaned over me, pushing me sideways onto the ancient leather sofa in my father’s library.

“I can’t do this right now.” I tried to push him off but he pressed harder, overcoming my balance so I fell on my back beneath him.

He put his mouth to my neck, sucking my skin between his teeth. He was large and well-muscled thanks to endless lacrosse and rowing. He crushed me and constricted my chest.

“Please, Dylan.” I gasped. I should have been afraid. I wasn’t. I was still dazed from the courthouse. Dylan was just adding to the long line of disappointments I’d suffered over the past six months.

He pushed his knee between my legs.

“I can make it all go away for you,” he murmured against me. “Just let me make you feel good for a minute. You need a break.”

He forced his hand up my skirt.

“Stella? Where are you?” My father’s voice calling my name had my stepbrother off me in a heartbeat.

Dylan gripped my hand and yanked me into a sitting position as he straightened his button-down and smoothed his blonde hair. He winked at me. The bastard.

When Dad didn’t show up in the doorway, I knew it was the “come here” sort of call.

“I have to go.”

“Later,” Dylan whispered.

Not if I can help it. Dylan had taken one youthful mistake committed years ago and turned it into some sort of lifelong flame. No matter how many times I told him, he just didn’t believe that twenty-five year-old me wasn’t the same as the foolish, needy nineteen-year-old I once was.

When my father and I had moved to Louisiana, we were despondent. Mom had left this world without saying goodbye or giving an explanation. Dad and I were adrift, trying to come up with some way to carry on even though our heart was gone, buried in the cold ground of a New York cemetery.

Dad eventually took a liking to Dylan’s mother and tried to make a new start with her and, admittedly, her family fortune. Neither venture worked out and they divorced after only six months. Dylan and I were mismatched step-siblings if ever there were any. I painted and read. He loved sports and abhorred learning of any sort if it didn’t have to do with Xs and Os on a

whiteboard.

Still, I was sad and desperately looking to feel something, anything, in the wake of my mother's death. Dylan was there and more than willing. So, I did something foolish. It was my first time—my only time—and I didn't exactly regret it afterward, I just didn't think about it. It was a non-event for me. That wasn't the case for Dylan, unfortunately.

I shook thoughts of him from my mind as I followed my father's voice to the back of the house and into his study.

Dad had sunk our last few dimes into this turn-of-the-century Victorian home. The whimsical façade was charming. The leaking ceilings and drafty windows? Not so much. Even so, it had been a safe place until Vinemont's tendrils had begun to invade, first with visits from investigators, then the arrest, then the searches. Vinemont had shown up each step of the way, reveling in the torment he inflicted.

For the millionth time that day, I hoped Vinemont would spontaneously combust. Then I strode into my dad's study.

The fire was crackling, and the room smelled of my father's pipe. The atmosphere in that room always had a way of putting me at ease, making me feel safe. Even now, after all we'd been through, I still felt a familiar comfort when I walked in.

Along the back wall near the high windows, he'd arranged the draft paintings and sketches I hadn't sent to the local gallery. I'd caught him so many times just standing in front of whichever piece he'd decided to peruse for the moment, staring into it as if it held some sort of answer. My mother had taught me to paint. Maybe he was seeing her in the strokes and lines?

My feet hit the soft Persian rug that I used to play on as a child, bringing me back to the here and now. My father sat in his favorite wingback chair near the fire. The room felt fuller, somehow more occupied than usual, as if there was less air or not enough space.

Despite the crackling flames, the room was colder, darker. My familiar comfort drained away. Someone else was sitting in the matching chair facing my father, though I couldn't see who it was.

My pace slowed as I saw my father's stricken look. His wrinkled, yet still handsome face was pale, even in the flickering firelight. The first coils of dread snaked around my heart, constricting it slowly.

"Dad?"

Then I caught the scent of *him*. Whenever I passed him in the courthouse

or when he came too close to where my father and I sat, I'd gotten a taste of this same scent. Woodsy and masculine with a hint of some sort of sophisticated tinge. My knees threatened to buckle but I kept going until I stood behind my father's chair and faced my enemy.

Vinemont's cold gaze appraised every inch of my body. "Stella."

I'd never heard him say my name. He spoke it with his signature arrogance, as if just uttering the word was somehow beneath him.

I scowled. "What is this? What are you doing here?"

"I was just discussing a business arrangement with your father. He doesn't seem inclined to accept my terms, so I thought I would run them past you. See if I got a different result."

"Get out," I hissed.

He smirked, though there was no joy in his eyes, just an inscrutable coldness that radiated out and made my skin tingle.

"I think you should leave." Dad's voice broke on the last word.

"Do you, now?" Vinemont never took his eyes from me. "Before I've had the chance to give Stella the particulars?"

I put my shaking hands on the back of my father's chair. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Mr. Vinemont should be leaving." My father's voice grew a bit stronger.

"Y-you can't be here talking to my father without his attorney." I forced the tremor to leave my voice. "I know the law, Vinemont."

Vinemont shrugged, his impeccable dark gray suit rising and falling with the movement. "If you aren't interested in keeping your father out of prison, then I'll go."

He didn't move, simply watched me with the same dark intensity. Goosebumps rose along the back of my neck and shoulders.

What is this?

"What do you mean?" I asked. "How?"

"As I was just explaining to your father, I have a certain deal to offer. If you accept it, then he'll stay out of prison. If not, then he'll be going away for the maximum sentence—fifteen years."

"A plea deal? But you've refused this whole time to make any deal at all." My voice rose, anger influencing every word. "You were in the papers, telling anyone and everyone that you would do nothing short of seeing my father rotting in prison."

“Plea deal? I never said anything about a plea deal. I didn’t realize you were this foolish.” He steepled his fingers and canted his head to the side. He looked like Satan, the firelight dancing along his strong features. “No, Stella. I already have a conviction, nothing left but sentencing for him. And I have no doubt he’ll get the max. I’ve made sure of it.”

He spoke as if I was a small, slow child in need of extra after-school help.

“Then what? What are you offering?” My hands fisted, my fingernails digging into my palms. “And what do you want in return?”

“Ding ding ding, she finally catches on.” His smirk grew into a wicked grin that chilled every chamber of my heart. His teeth were even and white. If there had been actual warmth in the smile, he would have been beautiful. Instead, he was the monster from my nightmares.

“The deal is simple. Even simple enough for you to understand, Stella.” He reached into his inner suit coat pocket and drew out a folded sheaf of papers with some sort of wax seal. “All you have to do is sign this and your father will never see the inside of a prison cell.”

“No. I’ve heard enough. Get out of my house.” My father stood and came around the chair to stand by my side.

Vinemont finally tore his gaze from me and glowered at my father. “Are you certain, Mr. Rousseau? You do realize that a Louisiana prison is hell on earth as it is, but I have ways to make it even more unbearable. Cell mates and such? It would be a shame for you to get paired with a violent—or amorous—sort, especially at your age. You wouldn’t last long. Maybe a month or two until you broke. And after you’re broken, well, let’s just say the prison system isn’t exactly known for spending medical dollars on old, decrepit thieves.”

“Get out!” My father’s voice rang out stronger than I’d ever heard it, even as he trembled next to me.

Vinemont’s smile never faltered. “Fine. See you in court.”

He tucked the papers back into his coat, rose, and strode from the room. Confidence permeated his movements as he stalked out like some big, dangerous animal. The sureness of his words, the conviction of his gait left me feeling at once chilled yet burning to know why he’d come.

What the hell is going on?

When he was gone, I was finally able to take a full breath. I clutched the back of the chair. “What was that?”

My father pulled me into his chest, his familiar smell of tobacco and

books cutting through Vinemont's more seductive scent. He was quaking violently. "No. Nothing. Forget about it. About him."

"What did he want? What was in those papers?"

"I don't know. I don't care. If it has anything to do with you, I don't want it. I don't want him near you."

I leaned away and looked into my father's eyes. He didn't meet my gaze, only watched the fire behind me the same way he would stare into my paintings. He studied something far away, past the flames and the bricks and the mortar.

Fatigue was written in every line on his face. Not even the flickering orange glow could hide how drained, how frightened he truly was. He hadn't looked this haunted since the night he found me lying on the floor, almost two years ago. I rubbed my eyes, trying to erase his fear and the memories from my mind.

He let out a labored groan and fell back against the chair.

"Dylan!" I called.

My stepbrother appeared in the doorway within moments. "What's going on? Was that the dick prosecutor I passed in the hall?"

"It doesn't matter, just please help Dad to his room. He needs to rest."

"No, no. I'm fine." Dad clutched me to him again, his grasp weaker, fading. "I love you, Stella. Don't forget that. No matter what happens tomorrow."

I forced my heart to stay together. If it shattered, I would be of no use. I couldn't become a quivering heap of regret, not yet. Not until I found out what Sinclair Vinemont wanted from me.

3 SINCLAIR

I TAPPED MY fingers along the top of my thigh as I waited. I hated waiting. Something about it made me itch to do something, anything, to keep my life moving. Good or bad, it didn't matter. Given my history, most likely bad.

I wouldn't have to wait long. I knew she would come. The dutiful daughter, rushing after any salvation for her father she could find. Poor little idiot. Salvation had a price—the highest one imaginable—and I knew she would pay it the moment I first laid eyes on her.

She'd been sitting at her father's side at his arraignment. Her red hair had been pulled back in a tight bun and she wore a black suit, as if she were in mourning. She wasn't. Not yet. She would be soon enough. I'd caught sight of her as I walked through the door from Judge Montagnet's chambers.

It had been immediate—I wanted her. More than that, I wanted to break her, to make her mine and take everything from her until I was the only thing she thought, or dreamed, or breathed.

She seemed easily breakable. Her pale skin and delicate wrists with the tell-tale scars were like a lure to me, and her understated curves would look perfect when reddened by my hand or belt. But my momentary infatuation faded with each step closer I came to her downcast eyes. She'd be too easy, too quickly cowed and brought to heel. She wasn't a challenge, and I wouldn't waste my time.

But then she'd looked at me. Her eyes were fire, heat, hate. I wanted to stoke the flames, to make her despise me with even more ferocity. I knew how to get her there, to drag her down into the darkness and twist her beyond recognition. I would do it, too. There was no longer an 'if', only a 'when'.

Things had been set in motion that were beyond even my control. She was my Acquisition.

I shifted in my seat and willed her to come to me. The sooner the ink dried on our deal, the sooner I could begin her education. The front door of the Rousseau estate opened, casting yellow rays of light onto the wide, curved stoop. Her small figure took the few steps down the stairs, and she strode toward my car with purpose. I couldn't see her face in the dark, but her movements were enough. She had steeled herself for this, strengthened every fiber of her being. I would tear it down piece by piece until she was naked, shivering, and begging for more.

My driver, Luke, got out and opened the back passenger door for her. She slid in next to me, though she took care to come no nearer than absolutely necessary. She still wore the light blue blouse and black skirt from earlier. The coat was gone, and she'd put on some unbecoming flats. I frowned.

"I should've known you'd be waiting out here like a spider."

I smiled at her. She would come to regret that statement. "What can I do for you, Stella?"

"What's this deal?"

I reached into my coat pocket and she jumped. She pressed herself back into the car door. Her fear made my cock spring to attention, annoying me. This wasn't about fucking her. This was about defiling her. Destroying her. Adding her to a gruesome menagerie.

"As I said before, Stella, it's simple." I drew the document from my pocket and handed it to her.

She looked at it as if it were a particularly venomous snake before darting her hand out and taking it.

"Luke." At my command, my driver flipped on the interior lights.

Stella turned the documents over in her hand and stared at the large 'V' wax seal, covered in the classic vines that adorned the Vinemont crest and estate. "What is it?"

"A contract."

Her gaze shot up. She had dark half-moons under her eyes, and her skin seemed almost sallow in this light. She was worn down, or at least she thought she was. This was nothing compared to the coming months.

She studied my mask. Finding nothing there to enlighten her, she broke the seal and unfolded the contract. I'd written it myself in perfect calligraphy. She read through the recitals on the first page, which stated the parties to the

contract, dates, duration, and other boring particulars.

“One year?” She said it to herself more than to me as she flipped to the second page.

Her eyes grew wider with each line she read, until a look of utter horror painted her face. It was beautiful. The paper shook as a tremor settled into her hands. She finished the page and flipped once more. The last page was simply for her signature.

It seemed impossible, but she shrank even further back, melding herself against the leather and metal of the car door. “You can’t do this.” Her eyes were glassy, fearful.

“I’m not doing anything. I’ve simply presented you with terms. You can agree to them or not. It’s up to you.”

“What will happen if I don’t agree?”

“That’s the question of a child, Stella. Worse, you already know the answer to it.”

Her chin shook and her green eyes welled. “You’ll send my father to prison.”

“No, I’ll make sure your father *dies* in prison.”

Her breath left her so quickly it was as if I’d punched her in the gut. And I had, in a way.

She recovered, though her voice was no more than a whisper. “But if I do agree—”

“Then you are mine for one year. To do with as I please when I please. You will live with me at the Vinemont estate. You will do as you’re told. You will serve me and whoever else I want. I will own you, body and soul.”

Though she trembled, she lifted her chin the slightest bit. “No one can own my soul.”

I already do. “What’s it going to be, Stella? This offer is quite time sensitive. Your father’s sentencing is at eight a.m. sharp. And it’s,” I made a show of checking my watch, “ten fifteen p.m. right now. Tick tock.”

“How do I even know you have the power to do this? How do I know you’ll do what you say? I’m supposed to take the word of a man like you?”

A flame of anger licked around my heart. “Are you questioning my honor, Stella? I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She laughed, the sound shaded with exhaustion. “What is the word of a man like you worth? What sort of man presents someone with a slave contract and says ‘sign it or your father dies in prison’? This isn’t even

enforceable. I may not be a *counsellor*, but even I know that.”

She threw the pages back at me, adding more to her punishment. She was already poised to endure more pain in the next twelve months than she had for her entire sheltered life.

I neatly arranged the papers and pulled the final document from my coat pocket. This was sealed with a wax ‘M’. I held it out to her. She ripped it from my hand and tore through the seal.

When her face fell, I was disappointed. No more fight? No disbelief? No amazement at how completely I’d caught her in my trap? Instead, she just looked defeated. She *was* defeated, of course, but would it hurt her to lament her situation a bit more loudly?

“Judge Montagnet?” Her voice was barely audible now.

“Old family friend. You see, in this parish, old money has its own ways. This happens to be one of them. The North may have won the war, but slavery has always been in vogue around these parts. I don’t choose based on color. That’s barbaric. I choose based on certain other factors.”

“Like what? Finding someone who will do anything to save the father she loves? Desperation? Is that it, you sick fuck?” The fire in her eyes was indulgent, alive.

Her punishments were adding up each time she opened her lips. Too bad I wouldn’t taste them for a while yet. Not until she was broken beyond all repair and begged me to take her.

“Not quite. But that’s all you need to know for now. What I need to know is whether you agree to my terms. As you see, Judge Montagnet has agreed to suspend your father’s sentence for the year’s time you agree to be mine. If at any time you breach this contract, Montagnet will immediately sentence your father and have him taken to the prison of my choosing. I rather like Dunwoody—no air conditioning and a widespread rodent infestation.” I waited a beat, just to let the idea of rats crawling over her father while he slept sink into her mind. Then I continued, “So, as I’ve said from the start, it’s up to you. The choice is yours.”

I handed her back the contract. She took it, though I still wasn’t sure if she’d rip it to pieces before my eyes. Her anger was unpredictable, wild. I wanted to taste it, take it in and relish it.

“Choice? You call this a choice?” She pushed her hair behind her ear in a violent movement.

“That’s exactly what it is. Don’t sign. Let your father meet his fate. Or do

sign, and give him a total reprieve.” I relaxed back into my seat, though I kept my gaze on her.

She chewed her lower lip hard enough to draw blood. She didn’t seem to notice. I wanted to run my thumb across her mouth and sample the flavor.

She stared past me, back into the warm light cascading through the front door of her house. “I can’t decide on this right now. I need to get out of here. Away from you.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Stella. I’m an early riser and, what with how late it already is, I’ll need to be getting back home. So, you either stay here and I’ll see you at the sentencing, or you come with me now and put the whole unpleasantness of the court system behind you and your father.”

I smiled.

She cringed. Perfection.

I couldn’t let her out of the car, not now that she was so close to signing. I could tell she was standing at the edge of the precipice, looking over the side and pondering the jump. Would the fall kill her? *Perhaps*.

She dropped her gaze to her lap. “How can you do this? You’re supposed to uphold the law.”

My hand itched to slap her for such a foolish question. For the pure naïve idiocy of it. But she wasn’t mine yet.

“Public offices like mine are just a remnant of the *noblesse oblige*. It means nothing to me or my family. We couldn’t care less if people like you rape and murder each other, or get hooked on drugs, or hurt their own kind. Enough questions. What’s it going to be, Stella?”

“People like me?” Her eyes, shimmering with tears, found mine again.

My anger had reached its zenith. Her futile display of emotion wasn’t going to change my plans. Nothing would. “For fuck’s sake, Stella, sign it!”

She recoiled at my words and turned to open the car door.

Shit. I forced myself to remain still. I wanted to grab her by the hair and drag her to me. I didn’t. I let her finally find and pull the handle before she ran away and back into the house. The door slammed behind her, smothering the yellow light and leaving everything dark.

4 STELLA

I DASHED PAST the library, narrowly avoiding Dylan as he came out into the hall.

“What—”

I ignored him and took the stairs two at a time until I came to my room. I heard his heavy steps behind me but I slammed my door and clicked the lock over. I leaned back against the solid wood, my heart beating so loud that I thought my ears would burst from the pressure.

A hard knock at the door.

“Dylan, go away.” It was more of a plea than a command.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Let me in.” He twisted the handle, the metal parts clicking and scraping but not giving way.

“No. Just go. Please, Dylan.”

“Who was that guy? Do I need to do something?”

Yes, you need to kill Sinclair Vinemont. “No. Just go.”

The floorboards creaked, as if Dylan was walking in a circle outside my door.

“Dylan, please, just go back to your mom’s house. I need to rest. The sentencing tomorrow...”

The creaks stopped and a thump sounded, his hand hitting the door. “I’m sorry, Stella. About earlier. I just thought it would help is all. I didn’t mean to cock things up even worse.”

“You didn’t. Really. I just, I just need to rest is all.”

Another, lighter thump. “Okay. You’re right. I’ll go. See you in the morning. I’ll be there for you.”

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. “Thank you, Dylan.”

His footsteps retreated and I sank down, my legs no longer willing to hold up the weight that grew heavier by the moment. I still clutched the contract to my chest. The infernal sheets of paper threatened to burn me down to nothing more than cold cinders.

I flipped the pages open and stared at the swirls and curves of ink. They had no meaning in the semi-darkness of my room. They were only drawings on a cave wall that told a story of violence and degradation. The elegant curlicues hid nothing from me. The words were stark, cruel—just like the man who’d written them.

I dropped the pages as if they scorched my fingers. The agreement fluttered to the floor and lay there as if it were just harmless paper. I knew better. I pulled my knees up and rested my head on them. How could I sign over my life to a man who I knew would hurt me? I had no doubt of it. The way he’d watched me in the car, as if I was a plaything, still haunted me. I’d been fearful of him before, of something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I still couldn’t explain it, but now I was terrified.

Tears welled and leaked down my nose before landing on my knee and rolling down my leg. I sat like that for a long time. Minutes, hours. However long it took for me to go through my memories of my father. How strong he’d been when my mother had checked out of this life. How much stronger he had to be when I’d tried to do the same thing. Could I let him go to his death, all the while knowing I could have saved him?

One year. It wasn’t so long. I’d wasted a year recovering from my suicide attempt. Would it be such a loss for me to disappear for one year? I’d never graduated college. My mother took her life the summer before I was to attend NYU. My life was put on hold indefinitely. Then Dad had decided to move us here so we could get on with our lives. Dylan’s mother helped ease my father’s pain for a time, though I withered away, locked in my room, painting dark scenes of even darker thoughts until it all became too much.

I shuddered at the memory of what I’d done. I’d vowed to never be weak again, to never let myself get to the point of wanting the oblivion badly enough to run headlong into it. I couldn’t go to that place again. And just as I refused to rush to a dark fate, I refused to send my father to one equally grim.

I stood, my back stiff from resting against the unforgiving door. My

decision made, I dragged a carry-on bag from my closet and began packing clothes, not caring whether they were fashionable. The basics would do—shirts, shorts, jeans, bras, socks, panties. I scooped up some toiletries from my bathroom and snagged the photo of my mother and me from my nightstand. I changed into a pair of jeans, a dark t-shirt, and a navy cardigan to protect against the chill in the fall air. After making quick work of my belongings, I pondered whether I should leave a note.

It tore at my heart not to say any goodbyes. I pulled out my stationery with the swirling ‘S’ along the top. I stood for a while with the pen poised over the page. My hand shook. There was so much to say. Or maybe there was nothing. The pen clattered from my fingertips.

I didn’t trust myself. If I put what I felt down on paper, my resolve could waver. My father would know where I went, anyway. He wasn’t a fool on any count. I only hoped he wouldn’t do anything stupid to try and save me. He had no chance. The look on Vinemont’s face when he’d proffered his bargain was one of certainty. If what I’d read about him was true—his family owning the largest sugar factories in America and some of the most expansive sugar cane plantations in a number of other countries—he had ways to keep my father at a distance. He and that snake Judge Montagnet would no doubt see to it.

I opened my bottom drawer and reached up for the knife I’d stashed there. I’d taped it to the bottom of the second drawer so that I was the only one who’d ever know where it was. It was the same blade I’d used on myself. My blood no longer stained the metal, but I knew parts of me were still there, ingrained in the steel. I shoved it into a side pocket of my bag, hiding it among some toiletries and underwear.

I gave one last glance around my room, saying a quiet goodbye, before creeping down the stairs and out to the garage.

I threw my few belongings into my trunk and started the car. It didn’t take long to find Vinemont’s address on my phone. It was an hour from town, out in the more rural area of the parish. Once satisfied I knew my way, I lay my phone on the small table next to the garage door. I couldn’t risk anyone calling me and changing my mind. A plea from my father could break my resolve, and I was determined to see this through. For his sake.

I reversed down the driveway and settled in for the trip, watching the retreating façade of the house instead of the lane behind me. One year, and I would be back. One year, and my father would be safe.

What was one year to someone who should already be dead?

The drive was somber and dark. Though the moon was high, it was only a sliver in the vast expanse of inky black and scattered stars. The farther I drove from town, the more opaque my surroundings became. Night covered the fields of cotton, the groves of trees, and the brambles cloistering the dark waterways.

Soon the road withered down to two narrow lanes with woods encroaching on either side. I continued onward, though no cars passed anymore. It was just me, alone, being drawn ever forward into Vinemont's trap. I chewed at my lip, the taste of copper the only thing that stopped me from worrying away my flesh.

The road curved around to the left and the GPS told me the turn was up ahead on the right. All I saw were trees and thick underbrush, no sign of a house. I drove a little farther until I saw an opening. There was a drive of no more than a hundred feet that ended at a massive gate. I turned and idled up to it. It was wider than four cars sitting side by side and high. It was black wrought iron with metal vines twining and ensnaring the bars. In the center was a 'V', the vines slithering around the letter and creating an impenetrable barrier.

My breath caught in my chest. I looked around each side and saw the same high wrought iron fence flowing away from the gate and disappearing into the shadowy woods. I stopped and tried to calm my heart, to slow the hammering sensation of blood pounding through my veins.

Fear. There was no other word for it. The cold sweat along my temples, the sinking sensation pulling me down into despair. The deepest sort of dread overtook me, and I reached down to the gear shift, ready to put it in reverse and leave. Maybe there was some other way? Something I could do to save my father that didn't involve Vinemont, didn't involve whatever lurked beyond the sinister gate?

The metal shifted, swinging silently inward. There was no guard tower, no obvious camera anywhere along the unyielding metal fence. Still, he must have been watching me. I knew it just as sure as I knew I would be here, with him, for the next year.

I pulled my hand away from the shifter and rubbed a damp palm along my jeans. With a deep breath, I hit the gas and passed through the gate, lurching unsteadily forward into an unknown and uncertain future.

The driveway was initially hemmed in by the same forest and thick brush

as the roadway. It was claustrophobic, even with the moon still high and clear in the sky. Slowly, the woods began to recede, leaving well-trimmed grass at the sides of the smooth drive. I'd gone what felt like a mile along the road, seeing nothing other than Louisiana landscape. Here and there would be a bridge crossing over dark waters as I flew past.

Ahead, the grass became expansive, a wide river of rippling emerald in the night breeze. Far in the distance, I finally saw lights glowing through the night. It must have been a house. *His* house.

I let off the accelerator, no longer fearing what dwelled in the dense woods and bayou inlets. Vinemont was a real, tangible danger, not one from my imagination.

Even as the grass expanded, more trees loomed ahead, forming an arch over the drive. These were the classic Southern oaks, moss hanging low from their limbs. Beyond the graceful trees was the home, a structure so tall that I couldn't see its roof for the blocking boughs. Three, possibly four stories of antebellum splendor—large columns anchored the palatial home, and it gleamed a ghostly white in the moonlight.

The windows were wide and tall, warm light spilling onto the porches. I could imagine rocking chairs and children playing tag, running through the grass, or having a picnic. But not here, not while Vinemont ruled over this estate. Despite the home's charm, its occupant lacked even basic human warmth. The magnificent façade was just that—charming camouflage for the depraved soul within.

I slowed and pulled up near the front door. The drive continued off to the right, further into the estate grounds. I took my keys from the ignition and was about to drop them into my purse. I stopped. Why? Would this car be sitting out here waiting for me for the year?

The thought made me laugh. My beat up American-made sedan sitting out in front of this mansion for a year, its battery going dead, parts rusting. It was absurd, just like everything that had happened over the past few months. I let the laughter pour from me. Some turn of the century medical pamphlet would say I had a case of 'hysteria' and advise that I be shipped off to the sanitarium. The giggles tapered off, as if I were sobering up. I didn't know if I'd have the chance to smile or laugh at anything again. Not for a year, at least, and something told me this year would leave scars to last a lifetime.

I dropped the keys in the cup holder and looped my purse over my shoulder before stepping out. I grabbed my bag from the trunk and rolled it to

the steps. Mums, perfectly full of fall blooms, lined the flower beds next to the porch. I lifted my bag and rolled over the wide plank floor to the double front doors.

I didn't have to knock. A door swung inward to reveal an elderly butler. He looked stuffy and proper, though he had a smile for me. He was tall and wiry with white hair and light blue eyes. He seemed friendly, if reserved. The only odd thing was that he was getting the door for me at well past midnight.

"Miss." He gave me a small nod.

"Um, hi." I didn't expect this. I expected Vinemont to drag me in and beat me, hurt me, and throw me into a dungeon.

"Would you like to come in?" He smiled the slightest bit, as if amused by my hesitancy on the doorstep.

"I-I thought—"

"You thought what?" Vinemont stalked into the foyer. He wore a pair of dark jeans and a gray t-shirt. I'd never seen him in anything other than a perfectly-tailored suit. He seemed almost human. His chest was somehow broader than I remembered, tapering down to narrow hips and long legs. A five o'clock shadow covered the hard lines of his jaw and fluttered down his neck. His eyes were still cold, though, and as calculating as ever.

And there was something else about him I never thought possible—dark vines of ink snaked from under his sleeves and down to his forearms. He was like the wrought iron gate—cold, hard, and choked with equally unyielding greenery. His unexpected tattoos shocked me more than the surreal nature of my situation.

I closed my mouth, determined not to answer any of his questions.

"Do come in, Stella. We won't bite." He smiled.

I wanted to slap the look right off his face.

"Farns, this is our newest Acquisition."

The butler blanched and swayed. Vinemont put a hand on the old man's elbow to steady him. That one tiny act of kindness made me feel like I'd fallen into some alternate dimension. I didn't think 'kind' was something ever attributable to the spider standing before me.

Farns turned his head from Vinemont then back to me, his friendly smile faltering. "I see." He sighed. "This year? I see. May I?"

He held a shaking hand to take my luggage. I passed it to him.

"Thank you, Miss—?"

"It's Stella Rousseau," Vinemont said. "Go ahead and get the quilt room

ready for her. I would have told you earlier, but I wasn't sure if she'd accept." The cold smile crept back into place as Vinemont continued assessing me.

I bristled. "I think you *were* sure. You knew all along, you bastard."

Farns coughed delicately. "Oh, well, I'll just go get everything straightened out for you, Miss Rousseau." Farns gave Vinemont a strange look, almost pitying, before taking my bag and heading toward the sweeping stairs.

I peered around, ignoring Vinemont. The house was just as beautiful inside as out. Antique wood and plaster work graced every surface I could see. The floors were a warm honey color, reflecting the light of chandeliers and sconces that bathed the rooms in warmth. The furniture was dark, providing a contrast and making everything look even more luxurious.

The room to the right had couches and an elegant writing desk. The one to the left appeared to be a music room. A piano, guitars, and a few other instruments were displayed. I realized the wall paper was actual sheet music, pieces pasted over other pieces until the room was a paper mache made of melody and harmony.

The Rousseau home back in town was large. This house would have swallowed it whole and come back for seconds.

"When you're finished gawking, we can get down to business." Vinemont was still sizing me up, maybe deciding how badly he intended to treat me. I didn't know. Everything was so foreign, so overwhelming. Even so, I forced my spine to straighten. I wouldn't let him intimidate me.

"Fine." I glared back at him.

He turned and walked past the staircase, leading me deeper into the house. The grandeur didn't end. Paintings and rich tapestries lined the halls. Some of the artists I recognized, others were a mystery, but I wanted to stop and inspect each one. Instead, I followed my captor. He drew me into a dining room with two bright crystal chandeliers overhead. The table sat at least two dozen people.

He went to a sideboard with a decanter and glasses atop it. "Have a seat. Want a drink?"

I was confused before. Now I was utterly lost. "A drink?"

He looked at me over his shoulder as he poured perfectly. "Yes, Stella. In everyday parlance it means a liquid refreshment. In this context, I'm suggesting an alcoholic beverage."

Asshole. “Yes.”

“What’s your poison?”

“Whatever you have.”

“We’ll have to work on your tastes.”

I winced at the thought of Vinemont working on anything of mine.

I sank down into the nearest chair and lay my head on the back of my hands.

“What is this?” I mumbled. I wasn’t sure if I was asking him or me.

“This is you and I having a drink as we discuss the contract. I assume you brought it?” He put a glass next to me, setting it down with a slight clunk.

He took the seat across from me.

I dug in my purse and pulled the pages out. “Yes.”

“Good. Have you signed?” He took a drink from his glass, appearing nonchalant. He didn’t fool me. There was eagerness in his eyes, the spider hungry for its next meal.

“No.”

“But you’re here, so I assume you intend to sign it?”

I leaned back and returned his direct stare. “Why won’t you just let my father go?”

“Because he’s a criminal.”

“So are you.”

He drained his drink. “No, I’m not.”

“So slavery is legal all of a sudden? No one told me we’d revoked the Emancipation Proclamation.”

The corner of his mouth twitched the slightest bit, as if his cruel smile wanted to surface. It didn’t. “The real question, the one you keep avoiding, is whether you believe your father is a criminal.” He stood and poured himself another drink before returning to the table.

I took my glass and turned it between my palms, the condensation wetting my fingers. Back and forth. “He’s not.”

“Then you really are as dumb as I think you are.”

“That’s fair, given I already know you’re as evil as I think you are.”

He smirked. “Evil? You haven’t seen anything yet, Stella.”

“Funny, I feel like I’ve already seen more than enough.” I gave him a pointed look.

He pushed back from the table and walked around to my side before picking up the contract. His scent enveloped me. I could feel him, his eyes on

me, as he stood at my back. He bent over and smoothed the paper with his large hand. I noticed a series of scars along the back of his wrist. They were faint, barely noticeable, but there all the same. A crisscross of damage marking his otherwise perfect hand. I had the wild instinct to run my fingertip along the scratches, to see if he really was made of flesh and blood. I didn't. I wouldn't.

"Just so happens I have a pen right here, Stella." He slapped down a fountain pen next to the signature page.

He leaned in closer, his mouth at my ear though he never touched me. "Sign it."

I closed my eyes, hoping I would open them and the nightmare would be over. It didn't work. The paper with my signature line was still in front of me, held in place by his strong hand.

I picked up the pen and poised it over the page. "Are you going to hurt me?" I hated the weakness in my voice, the weakness of the question, but I had to ask.

His warm breath tickled my ear. "Definitely."

My hand began to shake, my resolve faltering.

"But that doesn't mean you won't like it." He reached around me, his hard chest pressing into my back, as he steadied my hand with his own. "Sign it, Stella."

His voice was somehow hypnotic, seductive. Instead of loathing, something else bloomed inside me. It was sick, wrong. Even so, I leaned back into him the slightest bit, searching for some sort of comfort. He didn't withdraw.

His hand was warm, unlike his heart. He pressed down until pen met paper, the ink spreading like blood from a wound.

I should have tried to fight him, to burn the house down and run. But the wall of muscle at my back told me just how futile such thinking truly was. I would have to use other tools at my disposal if I wanted to make it through this ordeal.

I took a deep breath. *For Dad.* I moved my hand under his, making the swirling signature that bound me to Vinemont, that made me his, his to rule and ruin, for a year. When my signature was finished, the last letter inked, he leaned in even closer, the tips of his lips pressing against my earlobe, raising goosebumps down my neck and lower.

"Now you're mine, Stella."

With that, he seized the papers and stalked from the room.

5 SINCLAIR

FUCK. THAT WAS not the way it was supposed to go. I paced around my study as Farns escorted Stella up to her room. What was I doing? It didn't help that my erection was siphoning blood away from my brain. No wonder I couldn't think straight.

I went to the closest half bath and locked myself in. I unzipped my pants, angry at the complication my dick was causing. It wasn't supposed to be like this. This transaction was solely business for me. Something that needed to be done. The same as it had been for other generations of Vinemonts. The same as it had been for centuries. I wasn't a special fucking snowflake. I was a Vinemont.

Of course, the last Acquisition had been done by my mother when I was still a small child, but I don't remember it going so badly straight out of the gate. She had followed the rules, respected the tradition. She was a true Vinemont, whereas I was standing in a water closet with my cock bossing me around. *Motherfucker.*

I pulled the traitorous length from my boxer briefs and began stroking. If I could just squeeze out a release, I would be able to calm down and do this the right way. I closed my eyes and saw her red hair, the way it fell around her shoulders as I'd stood behind her, the way it was begging to be fisted as I fucked her mouth. *No.* I forced my eyes open and looked at my own reflection.

I wouldn't think about her, not like that, not anymore. The time would come when I would fuck her, but not out of any real desire on my part, except for the desire to fully break her.

I fisted myself harder, pumping up and down as my hips bucked. An unwanted image of her guileless green eyes flitted across my mind. It was then my balls drew up tight and my cock jerked, shooting my seed into the delicate, hand-painted sink. Once I was done, I placed my hands on either side of the vanity and took a deep breath.

I had to maintain control. It was the only way to win. This year's Acquisition prize was mine for the taking. All I had to do was stay strong. I stared at myself in the mirror, willing the mask back into place. Once satisfied I was what I needed to be, I straightened.

I cleaned up, rinsed my seed down the drain, and tucked my cock back in. With this little momentary insanity behind me, I knew I would be able to maintain, to win, to ultimately defile Stella Rousseau.

FARNS LED ME to an upstairs bedroom. He flicked on the light and showed me inside. The room was large and somehow light. I thought I'd be led to a cell with shackles and a metal bed. But no, this was a sweet country bedroom, even homier than my drafty room in town. It was along the side of the house, and two expansive windows filled one wall. Quilts hung along the other walls from floor to ceiling.

They were displayed with pride, some folded on racks and some spread out and exhibited. I scrutinized the nearest one with tired eyes. It bore a repeating pattern of a little boy in overalls and a wide straw hat. The fabrics were mixed, though all seemed well used.

"That one dates to 1897, I believe." Farns stood behind me.

"Does he collect these or something?"

"No, miss, he doesn't. His mother did, as did her father, and so on up the Vinemont tree."

"Who made them?"

"This one was done by a great-great grandmother of the late Mr. Vinemont. The rest were done by other Vinemont women and sometimes men, if they had the knack of it."

There were so many others, some done in a similar style, others with art deco influences, some oddly modern. The room was a mix of old and new.

"This one," he pointed to a smaller square of material that was far darker than the others in the room, "was done by Mr. Sinclair's mother."

I ran my finger down a particularly straight seam. There was no pattern to the material, just jagged edges on blue and green fabric. The stitching was a

deep crimson, discordant and striking.

“I didn’t think people who have been rich forever bothered themselves with being useful.”

“Forever is a long time, Miss Rousseau. Most things aren’t quite so constant.” He gave a slight bow and left, clicking the door shut behind him.

I needed more than veiled information, but I was too tired to follow Farns and ask questions. He wouldn’t give me any real answers, anyway. Still, I went to the door and opened it. It hadn’t been padlocked from the outside or anything. They had a strange way of keeping prisoners.

I pressed the door shut and eyed the bed. It was a four poster affair with a fluffy white comforter and welcoming pillows. I went to the closet and found it mostly empty. Farns had deposited my bag inside. Quilting fabric and thread were perched on the upper shelves, far from my reach.

I pulled out some toiletries from my bag and took them to the en suite bathroom. It was large for such an old house. Soaking tub, small walk-in shower, vanity, and toilet. I arranged my items in the cabinet and along the sink before getting ready for bed. It was odd, doing these things in a strange house, but I did them anyway. Brushing my teeth and changing into a t-shirt somehow put a veil of normalcy on the whole sinister affair.

I returned to my bag and dug out the knife. Tape still lingered on the blade. I pulled out the third drawer of the bedside table and affixed the knife to the bottom of the second drawer, just like at home. No one would find it there. It was like an insurance policy of sorts. I didn’t intend for it to ever spill my blood again. But Vinemont’s? That was a definite possibility.

Once satisfied it was hidden, I sat down on the bed. It was plush, luxurious. I was through the looking glass—nothing made sense and everything seemed somehow backwards. Was it a trick? Would Vinemont drag me from my bed after I’d fallen asleep and throw me into a musty dungeon?

I rubbed my eyes, too confused and exhausted to ponder what would happen in the next few minutes, much less in the hours to follow.

I got up and hit the lights. The darkness was almost a comfort to me, like it was cloaking me from prying eyes. I crawled into the unfamiliar bed, sliding between the smooth sheets. They smelled like linen and faintly of detergent. Clean and cool against my skin. These things, this room, they were all meant to seduce me, just like Vinemont’s voice in my ear. I wasn’t in a fairy tale. Vinemont wasn’t my prince.

I snuggled in deeper, hugging an extra pillow against me. It was down-filled, soft and fluffy. I breathed in deeply and let it out. I would enjoy what I could while I could, because I didn't know what tomorrow would bring. Sleep fell like a curtain in front of the stage, slowly obscuring me from view.



A knock at the door jarred me awake. Light streamed in through the windows, giving my cell the appearance of a traditional Southern room.

“Who-who is it?”

“Farns, miss.”

“Oh, come in.” I sat up and pulled my blanket to my neck.

He opened the door and took only a single step inside. “Breakfast is ready downstairs. I wanted to let you sleep for a while longer, but Mr. Sinclair has requested your presence.”

“I haven't even showered.” I pushed my hair back from my eyes, knowing it was a tangled mess.

“Even so.” He didn't look at me. In fact, he looked everywhere but in my direction. Modest much?

“Fine. I'll be down in a few minutes.” I paused, realizing I had no idea which way to go to get down to breakfast.

“I'll wait while you ready yourself and then I'll escort you, if you'd like,” Farns said.

“Yes, please.” I dropped the blanket and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

Farns backed out of the room and eased the door shut with a soft click.

I rose and stretched before going to the bathroom, washing my face, and running a brush through my hair. Presentable. But why should I be? Maybe when Farns said “breakfast” he really meant “guillotine” or “the rack.” I had no way of knowing at this point. Were his kindly words and face just another

put-on like Vinemont's?

I donned another pair of jeans, a tank top, and a cardigan. I wasn't sure about shoes, so I put on some sneakers. I sat for a moment to collect myself, to try and sort through what was true and what was the lie. It was impossible. I only knew one thing for certain—Vinemont was my enemy. Anyone connected with him was suspect, if not an outright danger to me. With that cold thought, I took a deep breath, straightened my back, and went to the door.

Farns was, as he promised, waiting outside. "Right this way, miss."

I followed him down the long hallway. I peered into rooms as I passed. They were all bedrooms in this part of the house, each with a different theme. Some were flowery, others done in rich, dark fabrics.

"So, do you treat all your prisoners like this?" It came off even more snide that I'd meant it to. I was testy, angry, a seething bubble of emotions that seemed to have simmered overnight while I slept and only now erupted at my surface.

Farns stopped and then took another step, as if unsure whether to continue. "I'm not entirely sure how to answer that."

"Why? I'm sure I'm not the first slave Vinemont has owned."

"I, ah. Well, miss, you are the first Acquisition we've had for the past twenty years, if that's what you mean."

"Acquisition? I keep hearing that word. What does it even mean? Is it some code so you don't have to say 'slave'?"

He turned toward me, his eyes kind. He made it hard for me to be cross with him. "I take it Mr. Sinclair hasn't explained the Acquisition trials to you yet?"

"There are *trials*?"

"Yes, there are." Vinemont strode down the hall toward us. "And if you would come downstairs to breakfast, I would explain them to you."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "What's the rush?"

"Farns." Vinemont's gaze darkened and he waved the butler away.

Farns hesitated and then obeyed, retreating back the way we'd come until it was just Vinemont and me. He wore another pair of dark jeans with a black t-shirt, his inked vines snaking down his arms from beneath the fabric. In the morning light, I saw they were a deep green, small leaves done in an emerald, and vicious thorns done in almost black.

He gripped my upper arm and yanked me to walk alongside him.

“Hey—”

“You are testing my patience, Stella.” He stopped and pushed me up against the wall. His eyes bored into me. “Don’t ask Farns questions like that. He can’t help you.”

“I can ask whatever the hell I want.” The cocktail of emotions roiling inside me had made me bold, even in the face of Vinemont’s wrath.

His gaze travelled over my face, down to my lips and then back to my eyes. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

He gripped my hair and pulled my head to the side. His mouth was at my ear again, his Southern drawl whispering darkly to me. “I thought I made it clear that I own you now. You do as I say. If you don’t, I’ll make sure your father feels the brunt of your punishment.”

He stepped into me, pressing my back into the wall and crushing me painfully. I yelped at the sudden aggression. He clapped his free hand over my mouth. I hit ineffectually at his sides, his back. I even tried to knee him, but he took advantage of my efforts and pushed one of his large thighs between my legs and lifted so I was straddling him.

“Fuck.” It was a gravelly whisper.

My heart beat faster and faster, panic welling up inside and drowning out any other emotion. He was going to hurt me. Right here, right now in this sunny hallway.

He pulled my hair harder and harder until I thought he would rip it out. I stopped struggling.

“Better. Here’s how this is going to go, Stella. You are going to stop trying to make trouble. You are going to do as you’re told. This year will pass by much easier for you if you just follow my orders. You can fight me.” His lips moved down to my neck, a hairsbreadth from making contact. “And I’m not going to lie, I like it when you fight. It makes this easier for me. But you won’t like the results.”

He released me and backed away. He ran a hand through his hair as he continued to stare me down. My heart hammered, demanding that I run as far and as fast as I could.

He licked his lips, reminding me of a hungry killer that had scented blood. My blood. I shivered under his gaze, hating that my nipples had hardened from the sensation of him rubbing against me.

Vinemont stabbed a finger in the air in the direction he’d come. “Go.”

I bolted from the wall and tore down the hallway. I found the stairs to my

right and maneuvered down them so quickly I almost fell on the second landing. His steps sounded behind me, heavy and deliberate.

I whirled when I reached the bottom, my stomach growling from the smell of food on the air. I turned right, spotting the front door. I didn't make a choice. My body made it for me.

I ran to the door and wrenched it open. I took off across the porch and down the stairs. The morning sun made the wide expanse of grass seem manageable. The air was crisp, fall had finally settled even this far south.

My sneakers barely touched the pavement of the driveway before I was treading on the soft earth. I ran as hard as I could. I was small. I would make it to the trees and hide. Just curl up somewhere in the roots of a cypress or maybe even climb and hide in the branches. Maybe Vinemont was lying about having the judge in his pocket. Maybe I could go to the police or someone else. I was desperate to believe it as I hurtled through the sunlit lawn.

None of my hopes were true, I knew that, but I didn't care as long as my legs kept pumping, carrying me closer to the salvation of the tree line. I had to get away from him, from the terror, from the flare of unwanted heat he sparked in me.

My lungs began burning, making me painfully aware of my need to stop and take deep gulps of air. I didn't. I pushed myself harder, ignoring the pain in my side, ignoring everything except the approaching sanctuary. I'd made it more than halfway across the emerald field.

I fell. Hard. Arms had encircled my waist and dragged me down so I was lying on my stomach. The grass had softened the fall, but not much. The air whooshed from my already tortured lungs, and my ribs felt on the verge of cracking apart and spearing the organs inside. The smell of fertile earth and verdant green invaded my nose, but his scent mixed in as well.

He was on my back. He gripped my arm and pulled me over roughly. He straddled me, his thighs against my hips. I couldn't see his face. The sun was high behind his head, blinding me. I screamed and tried to slap him, scratch him, draw any sort of blood I could. He captured my wrists easily and pinned them over my head. He leaned over me, blocking the sun yet showing me the scorching anger in his eyes. He was fierce, far worse than he had been upstairs.

"I warned you, Stella. I told you." His breaths were shuddering even as I gasped for air.

He transferred both my wrists to one of his hands and drew back his palm to strike me. I held his gaze. I wanted him to feel it, to know how much I loathed him, to know what I thought of his twisted soul.

His eyes opened a little wider at my stark stare.

“Fuck!” He stayed his hand and, instead, slammed his fist into the ground next to my head. He let out a roar, guttural and full of pent up rage.

He let my hands go and sat back, crushing my thighs. His head was thrown back, as if he were pondering the shape of the lazy white clouds above instead of thinking about how to hurt me. I lay still, once again blinded by the sun.

“You’re killing your father.” He brought his head back down slowly. His face was calm again, as if some switch had flipped.

“N-no.” My breaths were finally evening out, though my head pounded from the adrenaline and lack of food.

“Yes, you are.” He leaned down over me, bringing his face only an inch from mine. His erection was hard against my thigh. “If you had escaped, what do you think I would have done? Nothing?”

“I-I didn’t think—”

“Exactly. That’s your problem.” He drew a hand up and fastened his palm around my throat.

I tried to pry his fingers off, scratching him and pulling. He didn’t move, only squeezed harder the more I fought. It was as if he were pinching my windpipe, stopping even the slightest flow of air. When the edges of my vision started to dim, I relaxed.

“I thought I made it clear upstairs. I guess I didn’t. What do I have to do to get through to you? Hurt you more? Take more?” He ran his free hand down my side, my stomach, and finally to the vee of my thighs.

I whimpered as he rubbed against the seam of my jeans, right over my clit.

“I will, if that’s what you want, if that’s what it takes for you to understand how completely I own you.” He rubbed harder, building a heat inside me. My stomach clenched. I didn’t want his pleasure, not like this, but my body wasn’t discriminating.

“Is that it, Stella?” He eased his mouth closer to mine as his fingers continued to work. He was so close I could feel his warm, minty breath on my lips. “I’ve wanted you from the moment I saw you. Before I even planned on making you my Acquisition. What do you taste like? I wonder. I’ve

wondered it for quite some time. Would you like me to find out?”

His fingers continued their maddening pace, forcing desire to swell where there should have been none, where there should be terror and anger instead. I couldn't stop the breathy sound that erupted from my lips.

He laughed, low and husky. “You would like for me to taste you, wouldn't you?”

My hips rose toward his hand of their own accord, wanting more from him. He froze and blinked, as if realizing what he was doing.

“Shit!” He rose up and fell back as if I'd burned him. He sat in the grass at my feet, looking at me like I was a live grenade.

I sat up, blood rushing to my cheeks at how I'd reacted to his unwelcome touch. I saw movement behind him. I shielded my eyes from the glare of the sun and saw a young man, late teens or early twenties, walking up. He had sandy blonde hair, much lighter than Vinemont's, and his features, though similar, were softer, friendlier. He waved.

I dazedly returned it, not knowing what to do. Vinemont turned and saw the newcomer.

“Teddy, go back inside.” It was a command, but lacking Vinemont's usual viciousness.

“What's going on, Sin?” The young man kept on his path until he stood at Vinemont's back. “Who's she?”

“She's none of your concern.” Vinemont stood and faced him. “Go on in. We'll be in for breakfast in two minutes.”

Teddy looked from me and back to Vinemont. “You sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure. It's nothing. Trust me.”

Teddy's gaze landed on me, no doubt taking in my disheveled appearance. “Okay, Sin, if you say so. It's nice to meet you, um...”

“Stella. Her name is Stella Rousseau.”

“I guess I'll see you at breakfast, Stella.” Teddy wrinkled his brow, but eventually took Vinemont at his word. I was glad to see I wasn't the only one who made the same mistake.

Vinemont ruffled the boy's hair as he turned to trudge back to the house.

Are you shitting me? A hair ruffle from Vinemont?

“Up, Stella. Now.” A growl for me.

I could either keep fighting and running or acquiesce. Vinemont had already threatened my father again. I believed him. He was serious, lethal. The thought of my father in prison grounded me, reminded me of what I had

to do.

I had no choice. I'd signed it away. Running had been instinctive. Now, I needed to calculate, to somehow figure a way out of this mess and keep my father and myself alive.

Vinemont offered his hand with an irritated sigh.

7 STELLA

FARNS GREETED US at the door. He didn't say a word as we walked by, but he gave me a kindly smile. I followed Vinemont past the now familiar stairs and into the main hallway that led deeper into the house. We passed the dining room from the night before and kept going, the smell of bacon and biscuits increasing the farther we went.

"Try and behave yourself for once," he grated, and turned left into a sunny breakfast room. The table here was smaller than the dining room's, able to seat only twelve. Teddy, the young man from the yard, sat toward the far end and chatted with a pretty maid. When we walked in she stiffened and scurried away.

"You know that's not allowed, Ted."

"What? Talking to the staff is a bad thing?" He grinned.

"Talking, no. Anything else, yes. You're a Vinemont. You can't lower yourself."

Teddy rolled his eyes. "C'mon Sin, I was just getting to know her a little. No big deal." He forked a piece of pancake and stuffed it in his mouth unceremoniously. He pointed the tines at me and mumbled something around his food that could have been "who's this?"

"I told you. Stella Rousseau." Vinemont motioned for me to sit across from Teddy while he took the seat at the head of the table.

The young maid from earlier brought in two plates already piled high with grits, pancakes, bacon, and scrambled eggs.

"If you'd like more of anything, or something different, please let me know." She curtsied and smiled, showing a youthful beauty. "Would you like

coffee, tea, juice, or water?”

“I’d love some coffee.” My system needed a jolt of caffeine to recover from the run.

“Yes, ma’am.” She left and promptly returned with a coffee decanter and cups for both Vinemont and me. She asked my preferences on cream and sugar, but didn’t ask Vinemont. She already seemed to know his desires. Once done, she gave Teddy a small smile and returned through the door behind him, to what I supposed was the kitchen. Teddy winked at me. He was a flirt, for certain.

“Okay, now we’re alone. Tell me what’s going on. You’ve never brought a woman to breakfast. Honestly, I don’t think you’ve ever brought a woman to the house.” Teddy stuffed another piece of pancake in his mouth and smiled.

“If you must know, she’s my Acquisition.” Vinemont took a long swig of the coffee, even though it was still far too hot.

Teddy sputtered around his pancake before swallowing hard and almost choking. His face reddened, his eyes watering. “That’s us? It’s us this year?”

I listened intently as I sampled the array the maid had provided. The food was delicious and much needed. I felt like I hadn’t eaten in days. The information flying back and forth was even more satisfying.

“It is.” Vinemont ripped off a piece of bacon and chewed slowly.

“What is it, really? I know sort of what it is, but not the whole thing.” Teddy looked at me, all his prior flirtation gone.

“I’m not going to discuss this right now. I’m the eldest brother so it falls to me to take care of it. You don’t have to worry about it. Needless to say, I want you to treat her with respect, and also to respect my decisions as they pertain to her. Understand, Teddy?”

He put his fork down. “What does that mean?”

“That means you may disagree or even hate some of the things you see or hear, but she is my responsibility and these things must be done.”

“Why?”

Vinemont pinched the bridge of his nose. “Because they must.”

“Okay, but *why*?”

“Goddammit, Teddy!” Vinemont slammed his fist down on the table.

Teddy jumped and seemed genuinely uneasy. Had he never seen his brother act like this? I could give him a lesson or two about the real Vinemont.

Vinemont placed both palms flat on the table and took a deep breath. He seemed as if he were trying to hold himself together somehow. “Let me give you an idea of what I mean.” He turned to face me. “Stella, take off your clothes and stand on the table.”

I stopped mid-chew. “What?”

“You heard me.”

I looked at Teddy. His eyes were wide, the blood fading from his face as it did the same from mine.

“Don’t look at him, Stella. You’re not his. You’re mine. You will do as you’re told or you will be punished. Strip. Unless you’d like me to call Judge Montagnet?”

His threat spurred me into action. I stood.

Teddy did, too. “No, Sin.”

“Teddy, sit down. You need to learn how things are done. I’ve coddled you for far too long.”

Teddy backed away from the table as I lifted the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head with shaking hands. Tears burned behind my eyes, at the back of my throat, but I did what he said. I couldn’t risk not obeying.

“No, Sin, make her stop!” Panic filled Teddy’s plea.

“Sit. Down.” Vinemont’s jaw was tight.

Teddy obeyed. Just like I did. Just like everyone under this roof must.

I unbuttoned my pants and drew down the zipper before shimmying out of them. I took a deep breath, hatred burning in my breast for Vinemont, even though he wasn’t looking at me. He was focused on Teddy, where the real battle for control was being waged.

Now only wearing my bra and panties, I put a foot on the nearest chair to climb onto the table.

“I said all of it, Stella, or did you not hear me?” Vinemont’s cold voice was quiet.

Bastard. A sob tried to escape, but I wouldn’t let it. I reached behind my back and unclasped my bra, a single tear sliding down my face. My mind was screaming, roaring, crying. On the outside, I was placid. Only the uneven fall of tears gave me away.

I pulled my bra off and dropped it in the chair where I’d been sitting moments before. Teddy darted his gaze away. With shaking fingers, I pulled my panties down and kicked them aside.

“Look at her, Teddy.” Vinemont fixated on Teddy. “Look!”

Teddy turned his face to mine, his kind eyes now fearful.

“Up on the table. Stand there.”

I pulled a chair back and stepped into it before climbing up onto the table. The polished wood was slick and cold beneath my bare feet.

“Face me, Stella.” He still stared down Teddy, forcing the boy to watch my every move.

More tears escaped, landing on my breasts and rolling down to my stomach. I dropped my head, fixating on the table beneath me. Humiliation flowed through me like blood, or maybe more like gasoline, fueling my hatred yet explosive at the same time.

“Do you understand now, Teddy? Is it clear?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good. Now finish your breakfast.” Vinemont took another long swig from his coffee and attacked his food.

Teddy picked at what remained on his plate. “Are you just going to make her stand there?”

“I can make her do more, if you’d like.”

Teddy slammed down his fork. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“This is necessary. It’s what has to be done. Get used to it.” That was the Vinemont I knew, cold and unforgiving. Maybe he was right. Maybe the sooner Teddy realized his brother was a monster, the better.

Vinemont still hadn’t looked at me. Coward.

A whistle sounded at my back. Vinemont’s head whipped up, but he didn’t look past me. Instead, he focused on me, taking me in, taking everything from me. His expression turned from anger to something else. He stood and froze, tension rolling off him in waves.

“Lucius, glad you could join us.” Vinemont’s gaze travelled my body. His stare was possessive, desirous.

I wanted to cross my legs, cover myself somehow. I knew he wouldn’t allow it. So I stood, letting the degradation wash over me.

“So this is the Acquisition?” A man, his voice similar in tone to Vinemont’s, yet silkier.

“Yes.” Vinemont’s gaze was still on me, as if he didn’t want to give me up.

I maintained eye contact, damning him for doing this to me. I hoped he felt every flame of my rage. I hoped it charred his already black heart to ash.

A hand running up the back of my leg startled me and I jumped away. My foot tripped over the edge of the table. I hurtled down.

Someone caught me and set me on my feet. Vinemont pressed me into him, my face lying against his hard chest. For once, I was happy to be near him, happy to be at least somewhat covered. His hands were warm on my skin, his palms damp. Had he been sweating my forced exhibition?

“She’s skittish, huh?”

I whipped my head around. Lucius was tall, lanky, and had similar tattoos as Vinemont. He wore a blue plaid shirt, the buttons at the top casually undone and the sleeves rolled up. His hair was a tousled brown, slightly lighter than Vinemont’s and darker than Teddy’s. Another brother?

“She’s mine, Lucius. I was just teaching our little brother that lesson.” Vinemont’s voice rumbled against my ear.

Lucius arched an eyebrow before snagging a piece of bacon from my plate and devouring it. “I think all you taught Teddy was that a wanking is absolutely necessary ASAP.”

Teddy stood. “I can’t take any more of this mindfuck. I’m going into town for the day.”

He fled the room in a huff. I envied him.

Lucius kept his gaze on my ass, the one piece of me that wasn’t pressed against Vinemont. “She’s definitely a prize. Think you’ll get to be Sovereign? I’m still not clear on all the rules, by the way.”

“Only the firstborn knows the rules. You’re just guessing,” Vinemont growled.

The tension in the room took on another dimension, thickening the air like invisible smoke.

“Then tell me already.” Lucius pointedly licked the bacon grease from his index finger as he continued staring at my exposed rear.

Vinemont released his hold and pushed me behind him. I was beginning to agree with Teddy about the mindfuck. First he wanted to exhibit me and now he wanted to hide me?

“That would be breaking the rules. You aren’t a firstborn.”

I peeked around Vinemont.

“Fine.” Lucius shrugged. “I’ll just enjoy the show. I know enough from what Mother told us. This should get entertaining pretty fast. When’s the ball?”

“Friday.”

“You mean tomorrow? Damn. You waited pretty late to collar your Acquisition.” He sprawled in the chair next to mine. “Laura!”

The pretty maid hurried in but stopped as soon as she saw me. Vinemont put a hand on my hip, possessive. She recovered far more quickly than I would have in this situation and poured Lucius a cup of coffee before fetching a plate of food for him.

“Thanks, babe.” Lucius grinned at her.

She retreated, but not before casting another worried glance in my direction.

“I trust you’ll stay out of my way as far as the Acquisition is concerned?” Vinemont’s fingertips dug into me.

“Yeah, what do I care? It would be nice if you’d share, though you’ve never been particularly good at that.”

The pressure increased, his whole hand palming my hip. “Just stay out of my way.”

Lucius waved his fork in the air. “Fine. Carry on with your sadism. Ignore the man behind the breakfast plate.”

“Get your clothes.” Vinemont removed his hand, the warmth gone and leaving goosebumps in its wake.

I crept from behind Vinemont. Lucius watched every move intently as he chewed. I darted around behind him and snagged my jeans, shirt, bra, socks, and shoes, but I couldn’t find my underwear.

I pulled the shirt on over my head and hastily yanked on my jeans. Once covered, I peered around the base of the chairs looking for any sign of my wayward panties. They weren’t where I’d left them, and I couldn’t find them on the floor.

“Lucius, give them up,” Vinemont said.

“Give what up?” He shrugged and turned to me. His eyes were lighter than his brother’s, sky blue instead of the dark depths of Vinemont’s. Lucius gave me lascivious wink.

I didn’t think it was possible to like someone less than I liked Vinemont. I may have been wrong.

Vinemont stabbed his fingers through his hair and let out a particularly vile curse before turning toward the door. “Come on, Stella.”

I followed Vinemont, but before I left the room, I turned. “I haven’t had a shower yet today. Just so you know.”

Lucius smiled. “Mmm, I like it best when they’ve soaked a bit.”

Motherfucker.

“You’re only encouraging him.” Vinemont pulled me down the hall.

“Get your hands off me.” I yanked my arm away from him.

“Fine,” he snarled. “Just go the fuck upstairs. I can’t deal with this right now.”

“You can’t deal with this? Are you kidding me?”

“Stella, I’m warning you.” He advanced, crowding me back into the wall.

“I’m not afraid of you.” I tried to put the force of my conviction into my words. It was a lie. I was scared, confused, and more alone than I’d ever been.

His hand was at my throat in an instant. “You and I both know that’s not true. Get the fuck upstairs. Stay there until I come for you.” He squeezed for emphasis before letting me go.

I slipped away from him, stumbling over the edge of the hall runner before righting myself and hurrying away. I looked over my shoulder. He stood perfectly still and watched me. I got the strange feeling that I was one wrong move away from him pouncing on me.

He was a predator by nature.

Right then I knew. If he acted on instinct, he would rip me to shreds.

THE MEMORY OF her naked body was forever seared into my mind. I was weak, so fucking weak. I'd thought forcing her to stand on the table was a show of strength, some way to teach Teddy the realities of our lives. Instead, I'd made myself almost blind with lust and gave Lucius a reason to torment Stella. She was *mine* to torment, no one else's.

I wanted to destroy every fucking thing in the house, then rage through the grounds like a tornado before lighting the woods on fire. Instead, I stepped out the front door and into the cool air. I needed a ride. Something to clear my mind and get me focused on the Acquisition trials.

I walked the few hundred yards to the shop out back. It was two stories of distraction. Fast cars, even faster bikes, and all the tools needed to repair each one of them. I ran my fingers down the McLaren, thinking it might be the one to take me far away from here—and as quickly as I needed. But the air was too nice to miss.

I snagged my leather jacket from the wall and chose Emelia instead. She was a revved up American stunner, a motorcycle my father and I had brought back to life years ago. I threw a leg over and cranked her up. She rumbled and purred beneath me. I tore from the shop, taking the road deeper into the Vinemont property.

The helicopter waited on the pad to my left as I cruised by. It wasn't an option. I had to keep my feet on the ground. It would be a simple feat to climb into the cockpit and simply fly away from this house, my responsibilities, and my Acquisition. I wouldn't. I needed to stay, to shepherd Stella through the trials.

Despite the setbacks, breaking her would be a singular treat. What I'd shown Teddy had only been a taste, just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. She had no idea what was in store. I wasn't even sure how far I'd go, but I knew I had to win. Losing wasn't an option.

I gunned the engine harder, rushing past the lake, the scattered cattails bleeding into a brown and green blur as I drove to the levee.

But the way she'd looked, the way she'd reacted to me in the grass, her smell, the way she fought. *Fuck*. I was screwed. I had to stop thinking about her as a *her*. She was an Acquisition—my Acquisition—and nothing more. If I didn't get my head on straight, and get her outbursts under control, tomorrow night would be a disaster. The Sovereign needed to leave the party knowing that my Acquisition was the one to beat, literally and figuratively.

I'd never actually attended an Acquisition Ball, but Mother had told me plenty in her attempts to strengthen me. The depravity in her tales had shocked me, intimidated me. She didn't go easy, telling me exactly what I'd have to do to win. In the process, she'd told me what she'd had to do to win during her Acquisition year. How a piece of her had died. She'd wanted me to endure, to make it through unscathed. To be even stronger than she had been.

I slowed to a stop in the middle of the levee, water sparkling on either side. My thoughts strayed back to the scars on Stella's wrists and the knife she'd hidden in her nightstand. I'd almost taken it from her as she slept. My fingers had traced the handle, the blade. Somehow I knew it was the same one she'd used on herself. Ultimately I'd left it there. I shouldn't have. Another mistake.

The engine roared to life beneath me and the bike ate up the smooth road through the woods and over the waterways. Wild turkeys scattered as I raced through their territory. I made the entire loop around the property before cruising down the winding lane and out to the front gate.

Approaching the bottleneck of woods and metal, I saw the glint of something metallic through the bars. A car sat on the outside, foolishly seeking entrance to my territory. I grimaced at the idiocy of the attempt, the sheer lack of understanding this visit revealed. Still, I knew he'd come.

I pulled to the right so I could stand broadside against the wrought iron. When I killed the engine, a heavy silence fell.

"Mr. Rousseau. Nice to see you."

He peered through the bars and vines, his eyes red and watery. There was

nothing to see. Only me.

“Let her go.” His wavering voice made me sick.

“No.”

“You, motherfucker!” A younger man leapt from the car and rushed over. “Bring her out or we’re coming in.”

I laughed. “That’s adorable. If there’s nothing else, I’d best be going. Pressing matters and all.”

He gripped the bars and tried to shake them. Nothing. This fence could withstand a lot more than some prep school prick in lacrosse gear.

“Dylan, stop. We can’t win that way.”

“Listen to the old man, Dylan.” I let the venom that had welled up inside me over the past twenty-four hours infect my words.

“Please.” It was a teary plea from Mr. Rousseau. “Just let her go. I-I’ll go to prison willingly if you’ll just let her go.”

Pathetic. “Too late. The deal’s done. If that’s all the business you have to transact, I’m sorry to say you wasted your trip. Goodbye, Mr. Rousseau.”

Dylan erupted in yells and a respectable amount of profanity.

I cut off his cries with the fire of my engine, and left them standing at the gate as I screamed along the smooth road toward the house.

They were fools.

She was mine. No one could take her from me. Not even her own blood.

9 STELLA

I STAYED IN my room for the rest of the day. There was nowhere I could run, nothing to do. I took a long, hot shower. While I'd been out for breakfast—and the run across the lawn, and the nude exhibition—someone had come in and put luxurious shampoos, soaps, and other thoughtful amenities in my bathroom. The mental image of Farns daintily stacking tampon boxes actually pulled a laugh from me. So, that was something.

After my shower I lay on my bed, cooling off, wearing just a towel around my hair. I clicked on the overhead fan with the remote from the bedside table, letting the cool air waft down over me. The quilts along the walls ruffled with the breeze.

I was warm, relatively well fed, and had a modicum of safety in this room. It didn't erase my unease as much as I would have liked. I was still caught in a web, even if the silken threads that bound me were soft and beautiful.

My eyelids drooped, the heat from the shower and the run from the morning pulling me downward into sleep. But I wouldn't go. Whenever my eyes finally closed, I saw Vinemont's face. His anger. And something else, too. The heat when he'd been on top of me in the grass, his hand between my thighs.

I knew it was a transgression. I shouldn't have wanted it. His voice was a subtle poison, creeping into my system, luring me deeper into his hell. My nipples pearly as I remembered the feel of his hard shaft against my thigh. *What would it feel like inside me?*

I tried to swat the thought out of my mind, but my fingers crept down to

my still damp pussy. I teased my hard clit with the tip of my finger, sending a jolt of need pulsing through my body. I tried to pull my fingers away, hating the image of Vinemont in my mind, looming over me, his mouth cruel and sensual.

How much of him was covered in the vine tattoos? How low did the ink go?

My finger disobeyed, dipping lower, swirling around my aching clit. My hips rocked up to meet each stroke, the tension rising like someone slowly pulling a string taut. My breaths came in quick pants as I continued working myself, visions of Vinemont's face between my legs driving me wild with the need for release. When I imagined his eyes lit with desire for me and only me, I couldn't hold back the wave of pleasure. I bit my cheek to keep from crying out, though I still made some high-pitched noises that couldn't be mistaken for anything else.

Something slammed somewhere nearby in the house, like a heavy book falling from a high shelf. Embarrassment and worry cooled my brief, blissful high. I whipped the blanket over my body. After a few moments, my breathing returned to normal. I wasn't sated exactly, but I had cleared my head enough to remember that Vinemont was my enemy, nothing more.

I began to drift into sleep when there was a knock at my door. I sat up and glanced to the closet where my few clothes were hanging.

"It's just me, miss." A woman's voice.

"Oh, come in?" I didn't know who 'me' was, but she sounded harmless enough.

She entered, a middle aged woman in an understated maid's uniform, black except for the white Peter Pan collar. Her hair was strikingly dark, cascading down her back in a shiny mane. If there were any grays, I couldn't see them. She could have been no older than 45.

She smiled, warm and friendly, despite a distinct look of sadness written in the wrinkles around her dark eyes. "Welcome. I'll be your personal maid during your stay with us. If you need anything, just ask for me. I'm Renee."

"So you're the one who put all the good soaps and things in the bathroom?"

"Yes, ma'am. I also took the liberty of ordering some more clothing items in your sizes. Of course, Mr. Sinclair assisted me in choosing for you."

I frowned. The thought of Vinemont choosing my clothes was beyond irritating. I wasn't his pet or a doll he could dress. I was a prisoner.

She folded her hands in front of her. “I know how you feel. It’s all more than a little off-putting, but things will fall together in time.”

I pulled the towel from my head and rubbed my temple with one hand, the other still holding up the blanket. “You know how I feel? Are you a slave, Renee?”

Her deep brown eyes lit for just a hint of a moment. “I am not, ma’am.”

“Then I don’t think you could possibly know how I feel. No offense.”

“None taken, ma’am.” Her gracious smile returned despite my barb.

I sighed. I’d been an Acquisition for less than a day and parts of me—the kind ones, the gentle ones—were already splintering. “I’m sorry,” I said as she retreated to my bathroom. “This isn’t your fault.”

I was the one who signed the contract. Renee didn’t force me into it.

She came back with a brush and sat down on the bed next to me. “Here.” She put her hands out, offering to brush my hair.

I scooted around to her, still keeping the blanket pressed to my chest.

“It’s fine. I’d be more surprised if you weren’t angry.” She started at the ends of my hair just like my mother used to do. “*The path of least resistance*” Mom used to call it, working out the kinks from the bottom up until my hair was smooth.

“How many of me have there been?”

She kept brushing with careful strokes. “How many Acquisitions?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure if I’m supposed to say.”

I sighed and let my chin fall to my chest.

She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Two that I know of in the Vinemont family in the past twenty years. There were more before that, but I don’t know all the details.”

“So few? It isn’t an annual sort of thing?”

“No, ma’am.”

“You said ‘in the Vinemont family’? Are there Acquisitions in other families or something?”

“Yes.”

“But why? What’s the purpose?” Why would they do this? What could possibly be the reason for enslaving people just for the sake of enslaving them? Maybe that would be the best outcome—a kept slave for a year. No labor, no punishments, no ill treatment. I shook my head. It was all too good to be true. Fear crept up my spine as my question lingered in the air.

Something told me there was more, far more to all of it than I could even guess.

“Just tell me why.” My tone had gone from curious to desperate.

She hesitated, the brush in the middle of my locks. “You’ll see tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” Dread settled like an anchor in my gut.

The brush continued, smoothing the waves as it went. “The Acquisition Ball.”

Lucius and Vinemont had spoken about a ball over breakfast, but I hadn’t realized I would be going.

“A ball? I’m a slave and I’m going to a ball?”

“I really can’t say any more.”

My mind was whirling. What was this ball? Was it the actual reason, however twisted, for Vinemont to have forced me into the contract?

She reached the crown of my head, still easing the bristles down through the strands. “There, I think we’re done.”

She rose and then stopped, noticing the photo of my mother and me on my nightstand. “She’s beautiful.”

I nodded. “She was.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes.” I studied the picture right along with Renee. I’d been trying for years to divine what she was thinking, why she would leave my father and me the way she did. I supposed I shouldn’t have looked too hard, especially given that I’d done the same thing. I just didn’t see it all the way through the way she had.

“I’m sorry.” Renee put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

She gave me a light squeeze and returned the brush to the bathroom. “I’ll have Laura bring your lunch in fifteen minutes if that’s all right. Or you can take it downstairs with Mr. Sinclair and Mr. Luciu—”

“Here is fine.” The thought of having to see either of them in the same dining room turned my stomach.

She gave a slight bow and left. I dressed in a t-shirt and some pajama bottoms and sank down on the window seat, letting the sun bathe me in afternoon light. The trees were starting to give away their leaves, a brown and orange carpet amassing at the edges of the grass expanse. I pushed the window open and let the cool breeze rush into the room. It carried the smells of grass and woods and water.

I breathed it in, reminding myself I was alive. Even if my life belonged to another for some ridiculous expanse of time, I was alive and I would fight to stay that way. I ran my hand along the scars on one of my wrists. I wouldn't break. I wouldn't go willingly into darkness. Never again.



I spent the rest of the day in my room. Thankfully, I was able to talk Laura into bringing me a sampling of books from the library downstairs. The books were older, but well worth reading, especially the few bodice rippers she'd found.

I'd wanted to wander around the house and investigate, but I kept getting the mental image of two knights in armor crossing their swords in front of me and blocking my way. More than that, the thought of running into Lucius without anyone else around was a chance I wasn't willing to take.

Vinemont didn't summon or visit me at all, which was a relief. He'd gone into town, apparently, to handle some official district attorney business. *Sure*. I supposed the work of railroading innocent citizens was a constant, thankless job.

When Laura brought my dinner, I asked if she could get me some painting supplies. She promised to make my request to Renee. If I were going to spend all my time hiding in my room, which was my game plan so far, then I would need plenty to keep me occupied.

The night passed without incident or even a hint of Vinemont.

The next morning, I was already up and dressed in a light sweater and jeans when the knock came at my door.

"Come in."

Instead of Farns, it was Renee. She was still dressed in all black with the white collar, and her dark hair was arranged in flowing waves.

"Good morning, ma'am."

“Morning, Renee. And please call me Stella. What happened to Farns?”

“He’s with Mr. Sinclair all day. I’m with you. I hope that’s all right.” Her gaze dropped to the floor.

“Oh, no, no. I didn’t mean it that way at all. I was just curious. I’m happy to see you again.”

After the words fell out, I realized they were true. I was happy to have someone to talk to. Maybe I could even call her a friend, such as they were in this new world.

She raised her face, her smile making her luminous in the morning light. “I’m happy to see you, too. I must admit, I asked to be assigned to you as soon as I heard about your arrival.”

“Why?”

She put her hands in her skirt pockets. “I just feel like we may have some things in common is all.”

“Oh, so you hate Sinclair Vinemont, too?”

She laughed. It was an open, inviting sound that held nothing back. “I certainly don’t, and I don’t believe you do either.”

I leaned back against my bedpost. “Pretty sure I do.”

“Well, in any case, you have a big day and an even bigger night. I’m here to help you through all of it.”

“You told me about the ball tonight. So, what are we doing today?”

“Getting ready, of course. Mr. Sinclair gave me explicit instructions on how he wants you prepared. He ordered your gown the night you arrived, and he picked out your jewels and accessories with me this morning.” She walked to me and took my arm. “You are going to be the most beautiful Acquisition they’ve ever seen.”

I pulled my arm from her grasp, anger rushing through me like a wildfire. “You’re excited? About putting Vinemont’s property on display before some other loathsome people just like him?”

She returned her hands to her pockets. “I was only trying to...” She shrugged and met my eyes again. “I can’t undo the contract. I can’t stop the ball or anything else that goes on, but I can help you if you’ll let me. I can see you through until the end when your year is up and you can leave. That’s all I want to do.”

The earnestness of her words struck me like a bolt to my heart. She was right. I had signed the contract and now I was bound to it. If she wanted to help, then I would be wise to let her. I only wished I knew more about the

Acquisition. Still, I would take whatever allies I could get.

“I’m sorry, Renee. I’m just...”

Emboldened by my apology, she took my arm again. “I know. Like I said yesterday, I understand. Now, let’s get you to the spa.”

I almost fell back against the bed. “The spa?”

“Here on the property, of course. Mr. Vinemont called in professionals from all over the country for this. You’re going to get the royal treatment.”

She pulled me out into the hallway and down the front steps.

“What does this entail, exactly?”

“First, breakfast.”

I dug in my heels and stopped despite the angry rumble of my stomach. “I don’t want to see them.”

“The boys are already out and about today. Don’t worry.”

“Boys? You mean the two sadistic men who live here with their third clueless brother?”

She walked me into the thankfully empty breakfast room. “I’ve known them since they were wee ones, so I still think of them as boys.”

She called for Laura, effectively cutting off my incredulous commentary with the sight of a breakfast tray piled high with deliciousness.

Renee sipped her coffee as I demolished my breakfast. If she was right about having a big day planned, I certainly had a big enough breakfast to power through it.

I wiped my mouth daintily, though it did nothing to undo my earlier lack of manners.

Renee finished her coffee. “Ready to get started?”

I stood and stretched like a lazy cat. “Lead the way.”

“One more thing.” She showed me down the hallway, leading me deeper into the house than I’d been as of yet. “You are about to meet some new people. They’re outsiders. They wouldn’t understand what’s going on. It would be best if you told them as little as possible in order to avoid any unpleasant complications. They know you’re going to a ball. Just keep it at that.”

“So I shouldn’t tell them that I’m an Acquisition and utterly at the mercy of Vinemont?”

Her quick step faltered for a second but then she regained her pace. “Exactly.”



The spa was in a wing toward the back of the house. It was in what seemed to be a converted sunroom. The walls and ceiling were made of paned glass, letting in natural light and warmth. It was an open area with river stone floors, a sunken hot tub in the center of the room, a large wood sauna set to one side, and massage tables to the other. It smelled wonderful, like expensive bath oils and some sort of woody incense.

Two men and two women stood waiting for us. Renee went in first and introduced me down the row of staff.

“This is Alex. He’s from New Orleans. He’ll be in charge of your hair and makeup for the night.”

He was a young man with a bright orange faux hawk, multiple piercings in his eyebrows, peacock-colored eyeshadow, and colorful tattoos on each arm.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Rousseau. When I’m done, you are going to be the belle of the ball.”

I looked at Renee, my eyebrows high. “Does everyone know about the ball but me?”

Alex placed a well-manicured hand on my arm. “Oh no, honey. I had to sign a non-disclosure agreement longer than my di—um, longer than my arm, just to get this job, and I still have no idea what you’re up to.” He winked. “I just know that whatever it is, you are going to look fabulous.”

Renee moved me along to the next person. “This is Juliet. She’ll be buffing your skin and doing your nails.”

“Buffing my skin?”

“Gets rid of all the dead skin cells, makes your skin look like an 18-year-old’s.” She ran her fingers down my neck and peered at me almost scientifically. “Doesn’t look like you’ve gotten much sun. Perfect. I’ll have you shined up like a new penny.” She took my hands in hers and examined

my nails. They were permanently stained various colors from my paints.

She frowned, her blonde bob falling against her plump cheek as she surveyed the damage. “These will take some work. We may need to use gel to cover the staining.”

“Okay I guess?” I’d never really paid much attention to things like my fingernails.

She flipped my hands over and pushed up my sleeves, inspecting further. When she saw the scars along my wrists, she dropped my hands.

Her light blue eyes found mine. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. That was a long time ago.” I didn’t know these people. Still, they were people, and like Renee, they seemed to want to help me. I smiled at her. “It doesn’t bother me. You can look at them.”

She reclaimed my wrists and ran her fingers over the raised skin. “I think I may have a few tricks to make these less noticeable.” She returned my smile, seemingly at ease again.

The next woman had dark hair, a unibrow, and was by far the shortest person in the room.

“Yong will do your waxing.”

I whipped my head around to Renee. “Wait, waxing?”

Yong nodded and put a hand on my shoulder, pulling me down so she could inspect my face. “Brows need work...lip looks okay...I’ll do full face anyway. Everything else looks fine. When’s the last time you had a Brazilian?”

My thighs clenched together involuntarily. “The wax? Never. I don’t generally wax anything.”

Yong frowned, her unibrow like a dark caterpillar encroaching on her eyes. “I can tell. This will take some work. When I’m done, you’ll be smooth as a baby everywhere.”

“Um, thanks, I guess?”

She grinned. “I’ll go start getting everything ready. It’s going to sting some, but you’ll love the results.”

She passed through an adjoining door, walking quickly and with purpose.

“And this is Dmitri.” Renee introduced me to the last person in the row. He stood almost seven feet tall and seemed built of pure muscle. His head was shaved, though dark hair obviously grew there in abundance. He took my hand, his beefy palm swallowing mine whole.

“Very nice to meet you.” His Russian accent was so thick it made his

words almost unintelligible. But like the others, he had a smile and warmth for me. I appreciated any compassion they had to offer.

“And what do you do, Dmitri?”

He released my hand and held his palms in front of me. “Massage.”

“Oh.” I swallowed hard.

“I no hurt you.” He squeezed my hand encouragingly. “Well, maybe a little. You like. Promise.”

“First, into the hot tub,” Juliet said. “I need your skin nice and pruny.” She stepped toward the massage tables. “Come on, get on in. We have a lot to do.”

“You want me to just strip in front of everyone?” I looked from Renee to Juliet and then up at Dmitri.

I crossed my arms over my chest. They could clean me up and dress me like a doll, but I wasn’t going to run around naked for their amusement.

Dmitri laughed, the sound filling the large room and making it seem somehow small. “Nothing new to me, Miss Stella. But I wait over there if make you more comfortable.” He shrugged and went through the same door as Yong.

“Needless to say, this”—Alex waved his hand up and down at my body—“does nothing for me. But I’ll still be a gentleman and wait in my booth. I’m going to need to send out for a bit more color, anyway. I’m thinking we’re going to make your red a bit more strawberry and maybe a touch of…” His words trailed off as he left the room.

Renee backed up and took a seat near the door before pulling a small book from her pocket. “I’ll stay with you in case you need anything. Just try to relax. Enjoy it. Mr. Sinclair has spared no expense.”

“First class ticket from L.A. and a sweet paycheck,” Juliet agreed.

I smirked. “Well, we definitely want Vinemont to get his money’s worth.” I stripped without ceremony and stepped into the bubbling water in the center of the room.

“I met him for all of five seconds. That man is absolutely dreamy.” Juliet knelt in a corner of the room and began removing various equipment from a large rolling case.

Was she going to use all that on me?

“Yeah, if you like tall, dark, and psychotic,” I said.

Renee snorted.

I slid further down into the enveloping warmth, and lay my head back.

“So are you really going to a ball?” Juliet asked.

“That’s what I keep hearing.”

Juliet squealed a little. “That’s just so, so exciting! And like, romantic. We don’t do stuff like balls in L.A.—I should have been born Southern. I wish I could go with you.”

“No, you don’t.” I closed my eyes and let my whispered words fade into the bubbling heat around me.



Four hours later, I was putty in Dmitri’s strong hands. I lay completely naked—my sense of modesty waxed away right along with all my body hair—and let his magical fingers work me over.

“You so tense, *Krasivaya*.” Dmitri had taken to referring to me as *krasivaya*. I didn’t know what it meant and I honestly didn’t care as long as he kept smoothing his hands over my body and making my muscles sing.

I’d been buffed, oiled, manicured, pedicured, handfed by Renee as my nails dried, and now I was being turned into a limp noodle by Dmitri.

“It’s almost my turn. I can’t wait.” Alex clapped his hands as he stood next to me. “You know, I’ve never really cared for the female form, but I might make an exception for yours. It’s actually pretty. If you had a dick, I’d definitely fuck you.”

I snickered as Dmitri’s large palm pressed into my lower back.

“Why so many girl-men in this country? In Russia, we have no such men. Only real men.” Dmitri moved to my ass and rubbed from there down to my thighs in strong strokes, as if squeegeeing my stress away.

“Is that so? I have an ex-boyfriend who came straight from Russia with man love. That St. Petersburg boy could power bottom like a son of a bitch.”

“Truly?” Dmitri squeezed and rolled my thighs.

“I had the orgasms to prove it.”

I moaned as Dmitri's hands worked the tension from me. Had I been afraid of him? He was a massage god.

"Ah, hear that? That is what real men desire to hear. To make woman tremble with desire for him. You need to learn this. Then you be real man."

"Yeah, I'll get right to work on that." Alex patted my behind. "You're mine next. And I promise, unlike some *real men*"—he mimicked a Russian accent—"I won't have a raging boner when I'm touching you."

I giggled. I didn't care if Dmitri was jacking off all over me, just so long as he kept pushing my tension all the way down my body and out my toes. I'd gotten massages before, but nothing compared to this. Not even close.

"How's the Acquisition doing?"

Lucius' voice undid Dmitri's work and made my muscles seize.

Dmitri must have felt the change because he let out a litany in angry Russian. His hands rested possessively on my lower back as Lucius leisurely made his way to me. Whereas Vinemont was a methodical serial killer, Lucius was more of a smooth assassin. His fluid movements and swimmer's body hinted at quickness and wiry strength.

Renee stood and pocketed her book, but didn't move.

I couldn't get up, because Lucius would see me fully naked. His seeing only my ass, once again, seemed like the lesser of two evils.

"Krasivaya doesn't like you, comrade. You interfere with her pleasure." Dmitri's voice was a cautionary rumble.

Lucius stopped next to me, his black boots filling my vision. "I'm certain that's not so. I could give her plenty more pleasure if we had this room all to ourselves."

"Well, you don't." Dmitri stepped around the table and stood chest to chest with Lucius.

"What, because you're here? A hired set of hands?" Lucius placed his hand on my ass and squeezed.

I tried to jerk away from him, but I had nowhere to go. Dmitri yanked Lucius' hand away from me. I scrambled off the table and backed away from them, nudity be damned.

Dmitri and Lucius faced off against each other, neither man backing down.

Lucius smiled up at Dmitri, as if declaring a truce with the bigger man. Instead of walking away, Lucius struck quickly with a vicious haymaker across Dmitri's jaw. A classic sucker punch. Dmitri staggered back. Rage lit

the Russian's face and he swung, catching Lucius on the chin and sending him reeling away. Instead of falling, Lucius seemed emboldened and charged the larger man.

Juliet and Alex each came to either side of me.

"Now this is entertainment," Alex said. "I wish they hadn't confiscated my cell. I'd post a vid of this hunk on hunk action and make a fortune."

"Lucius!" Vinemont rushed into the room. He saw me and stopped, his mouth opening slightly.

I slung an arm across my breasts and crossed my legs, though it didn't do much good. I was completely bare down there now, with nothing left to the imagination.

Lucius turned and looked at me too, his signature lascivious smile returning to his otherwise handsome face. Dmitri took the opportunity to get him in a headlock. They struggled against each other, Lucius trying to buck Dmitri's vice-like hold around his neck. Lucius shoved an elbow back hard into Dmitri's ribs, breaking the Russian's hold and slipping away.

Vinemont appeared to come back to himself and darted between the two men. "Lucius, get the hell out of here!"

"This is my house, too, Sin," Lucius said. "I can go wherever the fuck I want. We're brothers, remember?" He glanced over his shoulder at me. "We share."

"Not this we don't," Vinemont growled.

"We'll see." Lucius dragged his thumb across his chin, wiping the blood from his split lip. He squared off against Dmitri again. "You hit pretty good for a red."

"You hit pretty good for a *devushka*."

"*Ya yebat' etu devochku pryamo pered vami*," Lucius replied with a matching accent. He glanced over at me again.

Dmitri took a threatening step forward, menace oozing from his pores.

I wanted Dmitri to smash Lucius to a bloody pulp, to wipe the self-satisfied grin from his face.

Vinemont pushed each man backward. "Stop!"

"Is it hot in here? It definitely feels hot in here." Alex used his hand as a fan.

"Agreed." Juliet's hand was at her throat as she watched the men, her tongue darting at the corners of her mouth.

Vinemont jabbed a finger into his brother's chest. "Lucius, I'm warning

you. Get out.”

“You aren’t the Sovereign. Stop acting like you are.”

Vinemont advanced on Lucius until both men were almost nose to nose.

“Stand down, Lucius.”

The staring competition lasted for a few tense moments before Lucius blinked and backed away. “I didn’t know you’d get your panties so bunched over an Acquisition. I should have. You’ve always been a royal cockblock.”

Lucius sauntered toward the exit before glancing over his shoulder. “See you around, Stella.”

Alex let out a bated breath. “I want to see him around. More accurately, I want to see my mouth around his—”

“Stella, for Christ’s sake, cover yourself.” Vinemont didn’t move and kept his gaze trained on me.

Yong bustled in from the waxing room—or as I called it, the room of intense pain and humiliation—and tossed me a towel. I grabbed it and wrapped it around myself so fast I almost dropped it.

Vinemont watched every single movement, as if he were attuned to me on some primitive level. He blinked slowly and scrubbed a hand down his face. “How much longer before she’s ready?”

“Three hours,” Alex said.

“Have her ready in two. The seamstress should be here any minute to fit her. I don’t want any delays.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not here.”

Vinemont turned his wrathful gaze back to me. “Fine. Be ready in two hours. If you disappointment me, there will be a high price to pay and *you* will pay it.”

He turned on his heel and left, fury in his steps.

“That. Was. Intense.” Alex leaned on the massage table. “I kind of want to make you late just so you get some sort of naughty punishment. Sweet Jesus, do I want some BDSM lovin’ right about now.”

Juliet sagged with relief. “Both of those hotties want to get with you. You know that, right?”

“That first one does not deserve to even look at you, much less enjoy your kiska.” Dmitri’s face darkened anew with anger.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “my kiska is mine alone, if I take your meaning. By the way, what did Lucius say to you in Russian?”

I didn’t think it was possible, but Dmitri’s glower deepened. “He is, how

you say, confident your kiska will be his.”

“Well.” Alex took my hand. “I may not have a taste for kiska, but if we only have two hours, you’re mine, sugar.”

Dmitri grumbled about not finishing the massage, and promised he would be back to take care of me.

Alex plopped me into his chair and got to work. He was a madman with scissors and chemicals that smelled like a mix of turpentine and overripe fruit. He foiled, heated, rinsed, and cut, turning my scalp into a beauty battleground. My hair was still the same red, but with highlights and lowlights to set off the color. He put it up in big hot rollers and sprayed it down with an obscene amount of hairspray.

He then set about to do my makeup. I was a bit worried, given the peacock colors above his eyes and his bright lips. He made it worse by not letting me look into the mirror until he was done. After what felt like over an hour of brushing, shadowing, highlighting, contouring, and coloring, I finally got a chance to see the finished product.

“Voila!” He whirled me around and held the swivel chair steady before the mirror.

I’d never thought of myself as a ten. I was self-aware enough to know I was pretty by most standards, but nothing about me said movie star or model. When I looked at what Alex had done, there was more than just a tinge of amazement in my stare. He’d highlighted my high cheekbones and plump lips. He’d given me dramatic eyebrows with a killer arch. Most of all, he’d brought out the deep green color of my eyes. They’d never looked so bright.

“Wow,” was all I could muster.

“Wow is right, honey. That right there is the money shot. That face, that hair. One in a million, trust me.” He smiled back at me from the mirror.

Renee walked in and clasped her hands in front of her. “This is... You are... I’ve never...” It ended in no words but a high pitched gleeful sound.

The reserved maid looked positively girlish. “You are absolute perfection.”

“Why, thank you.” Alex gave a small bow.

I laughed. I was beginning to enjoy my ragtag band of beauty assistants. I tried not to think about how I may never see them again after today. It was hard to think of a reason why Vinemont would send for them again. I couldn’t imagine going to too many balls. In fact, I had a suspicion that this “ball” was quite a bit more than it seemed.

It didn't matter what it was. I would go. I would do what I had to so that my father would remain free and alive. There was no going back, only forward. And forward meant I had to get through the ball and the 363 days thereafter.

"The seamstress is outside." Renee calmed herself and motioned for me to rejoin the others in the main room.

The seamstress was an economical woman in a pantsuit and flats, chalk in her fingers and a pencil behind her ears. What she'd brought me to wear wasn't practical in the least. It was perched on a model form. I had never seen anything like it short of the pages in fashion magazines. It was a deep green gown with a plunging neckline, lace straps, and a ball gown skirt made entirely of black peacock feathers.

Alex gasped and ran to the gown. "Oh my god, oh my god. I have never seen anything as fabulous in all my years and, trust me, I've seen more than my fair share of fabulous things. Who's the designer and when can I have one?"

"I designed it and, I assure you, it's a one of a kind." The seamstress eyed me. I got the distinct feeling she was somehow taking my measurements through my towel. She quirked up a corner of her lip, as if pleased. "I think it should be an almost perfect fit with a few tucks here and there."

Alex was gushing as I gaped at the dress. It was extravagant, over-the-top. I wanted to sketch it, not wear it.

Renee walked around the garment, examining it with a hyper-critical eye. I couldn't imagine what a woman who dressed in plain black, wore no makeup, and seemed to do nothing to pretty herself in the least could find lacking in the dream creation before her.

"I think you are very close, Enid." Renee tapped her finger on her chin. "Where's the vine detail?"

"Her cloak." Enid snapped her fingers and what seemed like a harried assistant rushed in, glasses askew, pushing a wheeled mannequin ahead of her. It was covered in a black cloak with embroidered deep green vines twining all around the material.

"And her jewels." Enid motioned the assistant closer. She held a red velvet box under her arm.

Enid took it and undid the delicate clasp, opening the box and blinding me with sparkle. Inside lay a silver necklace with emeralds arranged in the same vine motif. A pair of large emerald earrings completed the set.

Renee's eyes brightened when she saw the fantastic jewels. "I haven't seen these for twenty years." She reached a hand out, as if to touch them, but simply held it above the priceless array.

Enid clapped her hands. "Well, we're burning daylight. Drop the towel, let's get you dressed."

I shifted from one foot to the next. "Did you bring underwear? I'll need to go to my room to get some before I can put all this on."

Enid put her hands on her hips. "Do you think I'm going to let you ruin my splendid gown with some bunchy cotton panties?"

I put a matching hand on my hip. "I can't go to a ball commando, now can I?"

"You can and you will."

"What?"

"Strip." Enid's mouth was set in a firm line.

"Do it, do it, do it!" Alex tried to yank the towel off me. "I have to see it in motion. It may kill me from fashion overload, but I'll die happy."

I glanced over at Dmitri. He sighed, as if hoping I'd forgotten he was there. "Fine, fine. I won't watch. Even though you let girl-man see." He frowned at Alex and turned his back.

I finally let Alex tug the towel free and stepped toward the feathery cloud.

W *HERE IS SHE?* I waited out in front of the house in a black sports car. I was too on edge to even bother with my usual driver. I needed control any way I could get it.

Going to the Acquisition Ball was something I had never done before. All the preparation in the world likely wouldn't ready me for what was about to happen. I would get through it. Making sure Stella performed—that she stood out—was my main goal. I gripped the steering wheel, trying to decide if I needed to go inside and drag her out, when the front door opened.

Renee stepped out first, and then I saw her. The late afternoon sun blinked off the jewels at her throat, barely visible above the dark cloak tied at her neck. Her dress was the signature Vinemont green, and Enid had outdone herself on the skirt. The black peacock feathers would turn more than a few heads. I only hoped one of them belonged to the Sovereign.

If that weren't enough, Stella's face was radiant. Even as she crossed the threshold, uncertainty painting her features, she made something inside me click into a higher gear. Her bright green gaze tried to ensnare me, tried to make me feel something. I didn't. I wouldn't.

Still, I wanted to see her—all of her. Damn that cloak. I imagined ripping it all off her except the jewels, and my cock thickened in my tuxedo pants. *Fuck*. Now was neither the time nor the place.

It was going to take everything I had to get through this night. It was going to take even more out of Stella. Once it was all over, she wouldn't want to have anything to do with me. She probably already felt that way after what had happened in the yard yesterday. Tonight would seal the deal. Not that

she'd have any choice. She would do as I told her. She cared about her father too damned much not to.

She wore a pair of breakneck high heels. I imagined how long her legs would look, bare and smooth, wearing nothing but her stilettos. I shifted in my seat. The large Russian walked out the door behind her and helped her down the front steps. He smiled easily as she spoke to him. I wanted to destroy him for even thinking of talking to what was mine, to take him down and show her I could do it. I could hurt, kill. I could do even worse.

She took the last few steps to my car, and the Russian bastard had the nerve to open the door for her. She maneuvered into the tight space, tucking her dress in and almost falling into the seat.

"Easy *krasivaya*," he said.

A muscle ticked in my jaw as he called her beautiful. She was my pet. If anyone were to give her a special name in Russian or any other fucking language, it would be me.

"I see you when you return." He closed the door and moved away from the car.

No, you won't. I put the car in reverse and backed away from the house. Lucius stood in one of the downstairs windows and watched us leave. Actually, he didn't watch *us*, his gaze was fixed on Stella.

"He creeps me out." Her eyes were trained on the same window.

"Don't talk about my brother like that." He was blood. She was an Acquisition. Even if I wanted to beat the desirous look out of his eyes until all I saw was gore, some bonds were unbreakable.

"Fine." She sank bank in the seat as far as she could and stared out the window. I glanced at her, taking in her stunning profile. Creamy, smooth skin, delicate nose, sumptuous pout... Her lips were painted a blood red, the perfect complement to the emeralds at her throat.

I wore classic black tie. I didn't need to stand out. I was nothing more than background noise. Stella was the attraction, the star.

We fell into an uncomfortable silence as I cycled the gears, sped through the estate, and maneuvered out onto the road. The ball was held at the Oakman estate, and had been for as long as anyone cared to remember. This year's affair promised to be even more extravagant than previous years, given that Cal Oakman was the current Sovereign.

The bastard was revered throughout our community. His winning Acquisition ten years ago had cemented him at the top of Louisiana society. I

hadn't attended that ball, despite the engraved platinum invitation. Now I wished I had. At least I would know more of what to expect. Hopefully my mother's recollections of her Acquisition Ball twenty years ago would still hold true. They should. Tradition and ritual were the bedrock principles beneath the entire system.

"What's going to happen?"

I ignored her question. If I described what I expected to go on at the ball, she might put up enough fight to be a problem. I needed her just as she was, a perfectly tantalizing morsel, wide-eyed and beautiful. I needed her eventual downfall to be spectacular. I needed to win.

Twilight fell as we sped along country roads, past vast estates hidden behind walls of trees and dark bayous.

"I won't run." Her voice was quiet, but resolute.

"What?" I downshifted as we came closer to the Oakman gate.

"If you tell me what's going to happen, I won't run. I know there's nowhere to go and you'll hurt my father if I do. So, just tell me."

I pulled the car over so quickly she yelped. The freshly fallen leaves crunched under the tires as we skidded to a halt.

"You want to know what the most powerful people in the South, maybe the entire fucking country, are going to do to you tonight?"

She winced and then turned her wide, angry eyes to me. "Yes."

"Remember how I said I would hurt you?"

"Yes."

"Tonight, I won't be the only one inflicting the pain. That's all you need to know."

I wanted to be the only one to hurt her, the only one to make her cry or bleed or scream. Instead, Cal fucking Oakman would be sharing the duties, and for an audience. She was mine—not because I cared about her, but because I owned her.

I hit the steering wheel and turned to her, pinching her chin between my thumb and forefinger. "You just have to get through it. No matter what happens."

Her breaths came faster and she leaned toward me, her cloak falling to the side and revealing the swells of her breasts. "But you'll be there? With me?"

She was drawing me toward her somehow until my lips were only a whisper away from hers. She smelled like rosewater and honey, a scent I'd chosen for her for the evening. It was meant to be intoxicating, to draw

people in, but it wasn't supposed to work against me like this. Her eyes closed, her lips in full bloom and ready for a kiss.

Once again, I was letting my family down. She was property. I needed to stop acting like she was anything more than that. But she didn't make it easy. The day before when she'd lain on her bed and stroked herself, making quiet cries and grinding her hips against her hand, it took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to burst into her room and fuck her until she screamed my name. The memory went straight to my dick, making a bad situation even worse.

Her question came back to me. Would I be there with her? Yes. Would she be happy about it? No. Definitely not. Her lips begged for solace I could not and would not give. I pulled away and made a show of wiping my fingers on my handkerchief.

"You must be desperate if you think I offer you any more safety than the strangers you're about to meet. I don't."

She recoiled, stung by my words, by my actions. Good. She needed to hate me. It would make it all easier.

I put the car back into gear and pulled from the shoulder. I was desperate to get out of this enclosed space, away from her eyes, her scent, her lips, her breath.

As I wished for an escape, the wide gates of the Oakman estate loomed ahead of us. Several cars passed through after their occupants showed the guards the distinctive engraved invitation—this year's was solid gold. I hefted the plate from my inner coat pocket and flashed it before I was waved through to the tree-lined lane. The Oakman home rose from the landscape, a French chateau built in the style of Versailles. Stella took a deep, steadying breath beside me. Nervousness? Excitement? Dread? Any one of those, or all at once, maybe.

I mimicked her quietly, trying to calm my nerves right along with hers. So much was riding on this. On her. She would either save the Vinemonts or break us. Tonight was her first step toward either destiny.

THE HOUSE IN the oak grove was ominous despite the fact that the outside was lit up as bright as day. Ballgoers climbed the wide stone stairs to the open and bright front entrance. I shivered.

I'd almost had him only moments before, but the iota of control I wielded over Vinemont wasn't enough. My lips, my words, none of it was enough to make him change his course. I entertained the ridiculous fantasy that if I could get him to care about me, then he wouldn't hurt me. I knew he wouldn't let me go, not until the year was up. But maybe I could convince him to leave me alone, to let me paint, to let me do anything besides standing naked for his amusement or enduring any of his cruel intentions.

But then he'd pulled away, becoming his usual cold self. At the last moment, I'd lost him.

Even though I hadn't been able to shake him, whatever lay within the chateau put Vinemont on edge. I didn't think anything could make him nervous. He tried to hide it beneath his usual snobby veneer, but I saw it clearly. He could hide plenty from me, but not that. Even he didn't look forward to the dark deeds that awaited in this place.

He pulled up to a valet. For the first time, I noticed all of the people walking past the car were wearing masks. I turned back to Vinemont to find he'd already donned a simple black mask covered with the vine motif, his blue eyes showing through the material like patches of dark sky. His jaw was tight, the clean shaven lines perfection beneath his disguise. He pulled a far more extravagant mask from behind my seat, made with the same black peacock feathers on my dress.

“Put it on.”

I slipped the ribbons around my head and tied them in the back. Alex would have had a fit if he had seen me so much as touch my hair. I felt a pang in my breast at the thought of never seeing my short-lived friends again. After Mom had died, I didn’t do much besides keep my father company, paint, and read. I had no friends to speak of, no one to notice I was gone.

Now that I didn’t belong to myself anymore, I realized what a sheltered, useless existence I’d truly had. I was utterly unprepared for the world, for Vinemont, for the shadows that threatened to smother the very life from my body. I could feel it, the darkness, swirling near me, taking the air from my lungs like a greedy parasite.

The valet had been holding his hand out for an awkward moment before I took it and allowed him to help me from the car. He wore a silver mask with what looked like an oak branch pattern in stark black lines.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” the valet said. “Welcome to the Oakman chateau.”

“Not a scratch.” Vinemont threw the keys. The valet caught them easily.

Vinemont came around and offered his arm to me. I would have refused had it not been for the too-high heels strapped to my feet. As it was, I would need help climbing the wide stairs unless I wanted to break my neck.

I pushed my cloak out of the way and took his arm. Warmth radiated from him, seeping through his tuxedo and into my bare arm. With the shoes, I was tall enough to get a good look at his face, despite the mask hiding him from me. His jaw was tight, stress written in the tension.

We began our climb as others crowded around us. I tried to listen to the snippets of conversation.

“—picked this year?”

“I heard the same thing! Cal is apparently very interested in the new Acquisitions to the point he—”

“I hope the Witheringtons win. Have you seen their eldest? He’s still a bachel—”

The blood drained from my face. The tips of my ears went cold. I stopped even as Vinemont tried to tug me along with him. “This is some sort of sick competition?”

A couple of masked people near us turned to look.

“Her first ball,” Vinemont said cheerily.

“Oh, my dear, you’re in for a real treat!” A female ballgoer in a sparkling

mask with a grotesquely long nose took my other arm.

She and Vinemont walked me up the stairs.

“This year is going to be especially interesting,” the beast at my other elbow trilled. “The three families are really the crème de la crème. Top notch. And Cal is going to be the greatest master of ceremonies we’ve ever seen if his Acquisition was any indication. He really set the bar high that year. Have you heard what he has planned for tonight?”

“Don’t spoil it for her,” Vinemont said with a smile in his voice. “I want her to get the full experience.”

I cursed him silently for cutting off my only flow of information.

We reached the top step and fell in line behind some other couples.

“In that case, I’ll say no more. See you inside. I’ll tell you one thing, though, this year’s Acquisitions are going to be much the worse for wear when it’s over.” With that, she giggled and rejoined her party.

I faltered, my heel catching as the corners of my vision darkened. Blood roared in my ears. Vinemont held me up and wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me into his side.

“Keep it together, Stella.” His voice was low.

“Just tell me what’s going to happen.” Desperation colored my words, only hinting at the panic escalating in my breast.

He continued moving me inexorably forward. Panic rose up from within me, threatening to overtake the thin veneer of control I had. I wanted to scream, to run, to do anything but go inside this house with the monster at my elbow.

“Please, Sinclair, please.”

He stiffened as I used his first name. He pulled me to the side and let others pass ahead of us.

“Goddammit, Stella.” His voice was a low growl as his eyes flashed behind the black mask. “Stop asking questions. In fact, don’t speak again until you’re spoken to. Understand?”

“I’ll stop and I won’t speak if you just answer my question. Just tell me.”

He brought me closer to him, pretending we were embracing each other, solely for the benefit of the other ballgoers around us, no doubt.

His mouth was at my ear. “I haven’t told you for a reason, Stella.”

He put a hand to my throat before smoothing it around to the back of my neck in a move of utter possession.

“They will mark you.” He ran his fingers across the skin at the nape of

my neck, making a vivid heat tear through my body from the points of contact. “Here.”

His other hand snaked under my cloak and around to the open back of my dress. His fingers played at my exposed skin. “And here.”

I shook so hard that he spread his large palm against my bare back and pressed me to him. “I warned you, Stella. I didn’t want you to know ahead of time. Fear is your enemy. Fear will make it hurt more than it has to. Now, look at you.” He slid his hand up my spine. “Trembling against me, the one who stole you away from your life, the one who’s going to take everything from you. You are cozying up to the spider you detest.”

His lips brushed my earlobe and the strange heat pulsed through me again, scorching a path straight to my core. His evil words weren’t igniting fear in me. They were making me need him, need his wicked tongue to do things other than taunt me with pain.

I knew I should be afraid. I was. But not of him.

He moved his hand around to the front of my dress and teased my hardened nipple with his thumb. He groaned low in his throat. The cloak hid his movements, but I felt every single touch. When he cupped my breast and squeezed, I hitched in my breath.

“You’d let me fuck you right now, wouldn’t you? In front of all these people. Right here.” He released my nape, grabbed my hand, and guided it to the hard length in his pants. “You’d take this.”

My heart fluttered even faster. I slid my hand along him and his hips jerked toward me. I couldn’t think, couldn’t waste my thoughts on fear when he created an inferno that scorched me in my most secret places.

“Yes,” I breathed. “I would.”

“And I’d take you, too. In fact, I will, but not here. Business first. Get through this, and I’ll grant you a reward.” With that, he let me go and backed away. His step was steady but his eyes were wild.

My skin was needy, demanding his touch and more. What was wrong with me? I *hated* Vinemont. Maybe it was because of what I’d done to myself. Maybe I felt like I deserved some sort of punishment for being so weak throughout my life? I didn’t know. All I knew was that I wanted him to rekindle the same fire in me, to make me burn for him, no matter the cost.

He held out his arm for me again. I took it and allowed him to escort me into the glowing hell of the Oakman chateau.



Masked greeters welcomed us and offered to take my cloak. Vinemont declined and swept me further inside the mansion. It was alight with conversation and alcohol. Servers in harlequin masks wove through the revelers, offering drinks and taking already empty glasses.

One whisked towards us, his tray laden with champagne.

“No, thank you,” I said.

Vinemont grabbed two glasses and handed me one. “Drink. It’ll help.”

I took a sip and then another. We walked further inside. Everything was gilded, golden, and sparkling. Dozens of chandeliers lined the high ceilings, and the walls were covered with intricate murals of romanticized scenes from the old South. It reflected a whitewashed history, the lighter paint hiding a bloody and violent past.

I waved my glass at the images of cotton fields and smiling slaves. “This is disgusting.”

“Thank you for your fascinating art critique. Now, drink,” Vinemont urged.

I swallowed another mouthful of the champagne, my stomach warming. And then the delicious liquid was gone. Vinemont handed the second glass to me.

“Finish it.”

I did as he instructed, suddenly thirsty and starving. My lunch at Renee’s hands seemed to have happened days ago.

“Good.” He passed the empty glasses to a particularly horrific server dressed in complete maudlin. His mask was skeletal even as the bells jingled merrily along his crown.

What sounded like a full orchestra began playing somewhere deeper in the house. Vinemont and I fell into the stream of masked strangers, some of them in gorgeous gowns that seemed to have come right off a runway. The

men were all in staid black tie, the only things marking them as different were the varied masks that hid their faces. Some were pure peacocks, others in simple black. All seemed eager, almost excited. A buzz was in the crowd, elation at what came next, whatever that might be, creating an expectant energy.

A man plucked the edge of my cape and stared down at me.

I cringed back into Vinemont.

The stranger didn't seem to notice, or care. "A Vinemont, I take it?"

The hum of the music grew, the whine of violins echoing down the wide marble hallway before the sound coalesced into beauty along with the other instruments.

"Yes." Vinemont pulled me into his side, forcing the stranger to release my cloak.

The stranger smiled, his eyes lighting behind his midnight blue mask. "There are no female Vinemont heirs. So you must be an Acquisition."

"I'm just—"

"She's mine. Back the fuck off, Charles." Vinemont tightened his grip at my waist, pressing the already tight dress into me even more.

The stranger laughed. "Nice to see you, too, Sinclair." He stared down into my eyes again. "And I'm very much looking forward to seeing you, all of you, very shortly."

The floor lurched beneath my feet. The only thing that kept me upright was Vinemont's arm around my waist. He was a prison made of flesh and blood. My very own cage.

The stranger, Charles, stepped away and whispered something to the woman at his side. She frowned at me, giving me an up and down sweep with a critical gaze, her crimson mask turning her into a particularly vicious foe.

The orchestra was playing some elegant tune, one made for the opera or a symphony, not for this. It was so out of place that I wanted to laugh. I stifled my giggle as I glanced away from the crimson bitch.

I ignored the priceless canvases that graced the walls, and the ornate doors and moldings. Instead of letting the beauty of the house lull me, I stared into the masked faces, many of them now staring back at me as word spread that I was an Acquisition, whatever that really meant. Was I so rare? How many Acquisitions were there?

Though light glanced from every surface and sprang from the bright walls and polished floor, I was in a nightmare. The home was only gilded, gold

covering the rotten core. I was surrounded by ghouls, all of them hungering for a piece of my flesh. The glitz and glamour did nothing to hide their true natures. No mask ever could.

The quick beat of my heart resounded in my ears, deafening even the smooth sound of the instruments. Vinemont didn't stop, didn't say a word, just kept moving forward. Toward what, I didn't know. We passed through a wide set of high doors and into a ballroom. The floor was a light oak and shone like everything else in the vile mansion.

In the center was a high platform that towered over the ballgoers. It was circular and done in brilliant gold. A fabricated oak tree shot up through the middle, the leaves sprouting artificially green and full almost up to the ceiling, which must have been forty feet overhead, if not more.

Vinemont swept me through the crowd, moving closer to the tree. I wanted to dig in my heels, to stop his resolute forward momentum. It was no use. The nearer we drew to the platform, the louder my instinct screamed for me to run. Something metallic along the trunk caught my eye and my knees almost gave way. Three sets of silver shackles hung from the tree, each attached to chains that ascended into the branches above.

"No." I pushed back against Vinemont.

"Calm down." He changed course and led me around the tree and further toward the orchestra.

Another platform was set up toward the back of the room near the floor-to-ceiling windows. Three men sat atop it, each with a table in front of them at knee level. Each was shirtless. Every bare piece of their muscular skin was covered in ink—naked women, skulls, tribal, even flowers. One in a goblin mask seemed to pick Vinemont and me from the crowd.

"He's staring at us," I said. "The goblin, up there."

"Everyone's staring at us."

Vinemont led me toward the goblin. I didn't want to go, but I didn't want to retreat and get any closer to the tree, either. We stopped midway between the two, far too close to the tree for my liking.

The orchestra suddenly quieted and then the hall fell utterly silent. All masks turned toward the platform where a man stood, his arms outstretched, a microphone in one hand. Someone worked up in the rafters of the hall, training a spotlight down on the apparent star of the show. His mask seemed to be an array of oak leaves, the same that decorated the tree behind him.

"Welcome to the twenty-fifth Acquisition Ball!" he shouted into his

microphone.

A cheer went up from the crowd and then they all clapped as if they were at the opening of the Kentucky Derby.

After a ridiculous span of applause, the man held his hands out to quiet crowd.

“This year, we have an amazing slate of competitors.” He gazed around at the people beneath him, clearly a showman. “Though, of course, not as amazing as my Acquisition year. Cal Oakman for the win!”

Laughter sounded through the cavernous hall. Vinemont neither clapped nor laughed, just stood with me at his side. Tension was etched in his bearing just as fear must have been etched into mine.

“It has been an honor to be your Sovereign for the past decade, and I am pleased to say that any of the three firstborns chosen for this year’s Acquisition will make an excellent addition to the Sovereign legacy I leave behind. And now, without further ado, let’s introduce the Acquiring families!”

Another roar from the crowd.

The Acquiring firstborns were *chosen*? Vinemont hadn’t volunteered to ruin me, humiliate me? Of course he had. He was a cruel man who enjoyed hurting me. Wasn’t he? I couldn’t tell what was real anymore. And why were there three? I glanced around. Out of all these masked faces, only two could be my allies.

“First up. Robert Eagleton. Come on up, Bob, and show us what you brought with you!”

Someone moved through the crowd to our right. A middle-aged balding man in an eagle mask led a much larger man wearing a nearly identical mask. They took the stairs to the top of the platform and shared the spotlight with Oakman. The balding man puffed a bit, but the taller, younger man just stood and surveyed the crowd below.

“All right Bob, tell us who we have here.” Oakman should have hosted a game show. He held the microphone out for Bob.

“This is, well, this is Gavin. He’s my, um, Acquisition. And we will win this year.” Bob let out a sigh of relief, as if he’d gotten past the hardest part.

“Ready for the first reveal, everyone?”

Another bloodthirsty cheer. Or maybe the champagne bubbles playing in my mind just thought it was bloodthirsty.

Oakman removed the man’s mask. He looked to be in his early twenties,

dark eyes, pale skin, short brown hair, handsome even from this distance. The crowd twittered and some wolf whistles rang out.

“Looks like we have a competition.” Oakman clapped Bob and Gavin off the stage along with the crowd.

“Up next, the Witheringtons. Red, you out there?”

More cheers.

Another man weaved through the crowd on the opposite side of the platform. He pulled a woman in a feather mask behind him, practically dragging her to the top of the platform.

The man, Red, took the microphone from Oakman. “This is Brianne, this year’s winning Acquisition.”

Red stripped her mask away, revealing a small, scared blonde. Her eyes were huge, and she visibly quaked under the spotlight.

“Oh, my,” Oakman stepped back and gave an over-the-top up and down look. “We’ve got some stiff competition, if you folks know what I mean!”

Hoots and whistles, mixed with laughter, echoed around the hall.

“We’re next.” Vinemont’s voice was in my ear, each syllable laced with rigid determination. Any hint of the heat he’d shown me outside was gone. He released my waist and took my hand. His palms were damp, the only indication that he was at all nervous.

Brianne and Red retreated from the platform.

“Now, last but never least, the Vinemonts. Counsellor Sinclair, show us your wares!”

He strode forward, confidence in every movement, and pulled me behind him. The tree loomed ahead, the shackles glinting in the spotlight. Foreboding rose inside me and blotted out my voice, my heart, and my soul. I followed. There was nowhere else to go.

We took the stairs one at a time, each step adding a weight to my shoulders, a rock to my stomach. Finally, we stood next to Oakman. Everything beyond the glittering stage was a dark blur. The spotlight was a blinding sun, focused on me as if by a cruel child with a magnifying glass.

“Her name is Stella, not that it matters.” Vinemont was cold, his words like frost in my mind.

He untied my mask and yanked it from my face. Then he ripped the cloak from me, my skin tingling from the sudden onslaught of open air. A collective gasp rose up from the crowd, followed by thunderous applause.

“Oh my, my. Now, Sinclair, you know I’ve always had a thing for

redheads. And this is one is too choice to pass up.”

“I’ll tell you what, Cal, when I’m Sovereign, I’ll send you a new redhead each week,” Vinemont said to raucous laughter from the crowd below.

“I like the confidence. I’ve got my eye on this one, ladies and gents. Now, let’s get this party started right. Branding time!”

The orchestra started back up and Vinemont pulled me down from the platform. No longer hidden by the ornate mask or my cloak, I felt naked. The ghouls stared and leered as I walked past, Vinemont dragging me along through the pressing bodies.

Wait, *branding time*?

He was leading me toward the tattooed goblin again. The male Acquisition, Gavin, was already shirtless and lying on his stomach, one of the other artists inking him in front of the masked onlookers.

“Bigger,” Bob directed.

The artist nodded and continued free-handing the outline of an eagle on Gavin’s shoulder blade.

The orchestra changed to a waltz, and many ballgoers paired off to dance, skirts swirling, their laughter melding with the music.

Red led his Acquisition, Brianne, over to one of the tables and shoved her down onto her back. He pulled the strap of her dark purple dress down so her left breast was exposed. “Over her heart. My name.”

Her eyes were squeezed shut, tension written along her vibrating body. I took an unsteady step toward Red, prepared to do my best to knee him in the balls. Before I got the chance, Vinemont’s iron grip encircled my upper arm and pushed me up onto the platform in the same rough fashion. He dropped me onto the table in front of the goblin and pushed me down until I lay prone.

The buzzing noise of the two other tattoo guns, mixed with poor Brianne’s whimpers, reached my ears over the waves of music.

“What’s it gonna be, Sin?”

The goblin knew Vinemont?

“The traditional V,” Vinemont replied.

“Where?”

“Here.” Vinemont’s hand swiped the hair off my nape and let it hang down beside me in a curling cascade. He moved the emerald necklace up and out of the way. Then his cold finger traced a V on the back of my neck.

“Can do.”

I had never gotten a tattoo. I’d thought about it plenty of times, but never

had the conviction to get anything in particular. I used my body to make art. I didn't intend to be the art. And now, I was getting a tattoo forced on me. Nothing was my choice anymore. I'd signed it away.

For the millionth time since this ordeal started, I pictured my father. He was sitting by the fire in his favorite chair—safe, warm, no doubt sad, but alive. I would do what I had to do. I would cover my entire body in ink if it would save him.

Despite knowing this sacrifice was worth it, I wanted to go numb, to stop experiencing the horror of what was happening. I couldn't. I felt the cold table beneath me, felt the eyes of the masked people watching me as I was “branded,” and I felt Vinemont standing next to me, no doubt enjoying my degradation moment by moment.

The goblin leaned down and whispered in my ear. “It's going to hurt, but I'll be as nice as I can.”

“Thanks.” *Did I just thank my torturer?*

The buzzing started close to my ear. I fisted my hands as the first stinging pain erupted at the back of my neck.

“Good girl,” the goblin said. “Just relax. I'm quick.” Some more buzzing pain followed, punctuated by Red telling Brianne to shut her fucking mouth. “Well, at least all the girls say I'm quick.”

Cruelty interspersed with sex jokes. This is what my life had become. I closed my eyes and let my arms fall, my knuckles brushing the floor as more pain ricocheted down my spine. I was an Acquisition, a possession to Vinemont. Nothing more. He would let the goblin mark my skin. He didn't care. He was still the cold spider I'd known him to be since the first time I saw him. I was in his web now, caught and dangling as he fed off me slowly. How would he win this competition? What would victory entail? My death?

I let the pain flow into me, trapping it inside a box in my heart. I'd store it up, feed it, make it grow stronger until it turned into rage. Then I would let it out and bring Vinemont and the rest of these accursed people to their knees.

SHE'D GONE LIMP. Given up. Tony continued his work, making a better V than even the one gracing my chest. He was my personal tattoo artist. His shop in Mobile was the toast of the South. People came from all over the country, all over the world, just to bear his ink.

He finished up the last of the thorns, done in the same deep green as mine, when I leaned down and added a little something extra.

"I want a small spider." I pointed to one of the inner curves of vines. "Here."

I whispered it low enough that Stella wouldn't hear it over the music and the buzzing. She always referred to me as a spider. Now, I would be on her body permanently.

"I like it, man." Tony switched to a deep crimson ink and drew in the small accent. "Nice."

One of the buzzing sounds stopped. Red's Acquisition sat up and yanked her dress back in place over her bare breast. I almost pitied her. That little show of skin was nothing compared to what came next.

I pitied her more for the garish tattoo Red had forced on her—his name in bright red ink with blue flames licking the letters. What a fucking prick to ruin a beautiful woman that way.

I shook my head. No, Red has his head in the game. Ruination was the goal. I was over here dicking around and ensuring Stella's brand was art, not something to mar her perfect skin. I'd told myself too many times to stop thinking of her as a person. But here I was, doing it again and letting my dick lead me around.

I'd already given in to her, promised her a reward for making it through this night. It was foolish. Still, if it worked even a little to keep her in line, it was worth it. This was spectacle, all of it. I needed the families, and especially Cal, to come away from this seeing me as the frontrunner for Sovereign.

Bob's Acquisition didn't fare much better than Red's. At least the eagle on his man's back had some artistry in it. It was nothing compared to Tony's work, but it turned out far better than the travesty on Brianne's chest.

"All right. She's all done." Tony sat back and admired his handiwork before rubbing some salve along Stella's skin.

It was a wasted effort. Her tattoo was the least of her worries.

Stella sat up and gave me the most vicious glare I'd ever seen on her face. Not even after the day in the yard had she flashed at me with such hate.

"Here, angel, check it in the mirror. It's not so bad."

Tony handed Stella a mirror and held one up behind her so she could see the design. Her crimson lips fell open. "That goddamn V? And what's the red thing. It looks like..." Her gaze shot up to my eyes. "A spider."

"Yes, indeed." Tony took her mirror and began packing up his tattoo gear.

"Head on out, Tony," I said. "Money's already in your account."

Tony popped his head up and surveyed the room. "Sure I can't stay and see if I can convince one of these masked freaky chicks to go home with me?"

Tony had no idea what was going on. I'd told him this was a fancy party with paid staff and entertainment, Stella and the other Acquisitions being the entertainment. He thought all this was voluntary and just a night of fun. If he stayed any longer, he would know just how non-consensual the whole thing was. I didn't want to alienate one of the true friends I actually had, and nothing alienates like slavery and whippings.

"No, man. No offense, but you don't have a chance with these women. Well, unless your bank account is bigger than I think."

"Definitely not. Okay, then. I'm out. Thanks again, Sin. And it was lovely working on you." He took Stella's hand and kissed it. "I'd love to see you in my shop sometime. Color you in some other areas."

She smiled at him. Actually smiled. "I'd like that."

Something roared to life inside me. It ripped at my ribs and tried to claw through my chest. Jealousy. Petty, overbearing, jealousy. I took her hand

from his.

Tony laughed and jumped down from the platform. He gave a salute and then cut through the crowd and out one of the side doors.

“Why did you smile at him?” The ridiculousness of the question hit me only after I asked it.

“Because he was nice to me and he clearly had no idea what sort of fucked up shit you all are doing out here,” She held my gaze, challenge in her bearing. “It’s not his fault you dragged him into it.”

“I didn’t drag him into anything. I paid him well to create art on your body, and that’s exactly what he did.”

She raised her eyebrows and straightened her back. “You think the taint of this place doesn’t rub off on people? You think he’s unscathed?”

I grabbed her by the elbow. “He’s a lot more unscathed than you’re going to be.”

“Fuck you.”

Shit. Her anger shot straight to my cock, even in the middle of this crowd of devils. Her eyes flashed at me in unbridled fury.

“In time.” I gave her the smile I knew she hated, the one that got under her skin.

She lifted a hand to strike me. I caught it and pulled it down, squeezing her wrist hard. “Do that again, and I’ll hit back much, much harder. Understand?”

I wanted her to do it again, to knock my mask off so she could see the real me, the one who wanted to make it hurt, to fuck her, to make her scream. Her fear was easier for me to deal with than her anger. Her anger made me want to push her further, to take her to the edge, to make her beg me for something, anything. Her anger spurred me on to break her. Her fear let me know I was getting close.

The music piped down, the circling vultures slowing to a stop as Cal climbed atop the central platform again. “All right folks, brandings are done. Looks like we’re ready for the big show.”

Masked servants rushed in through the side doors with various pieces of equipment and furniture. Whips, chains, clamps, dildoes, spanking benches, couches, and too many beds to count. Once everything was in place, a cavalcade of prostitutes entered through the doors. Masked and nude, there was something for everyone—thin, ample, old, and young; they stood like low-hanging fruit, ready for the taking. The ballgoers flitted out and picked

this one or that one, dragging the choice morsels back to their chosen spot of depravity.

I glanced down to Stella. She stood mesmerized. She'd unconsciously stepped closer to me as the hall geared up for the main event. Now, she was frozen in her horror, perhaps unable to comprehend the well of the evil in this room. It was deep, far too deep for anyone to plumb its depths. Especially not her. Naiveté swirled around her like a priceless perfume. The vein at her neck fluttered in a distressed rhythm. It was beautiful, like the pale wings of a butterfly—and just as fragile.

The orchestra kept playing softly as the dance floor became a sea of debauchery. Only a center strip was left open. The parade route.

“Come on, Acquisitions, don't be shy. Step on up. Time to really show us what you have to offer.” Cal was gleeful.

I took Stella's hand and pulled her through the crowd, many of them already disrobing and setting on each other like wild animals. Fucking, biting, scratching. They left their masks on, as if it made any difference. The guest list was expertly curated. Any number of governors, wealthy socialites, business magnates, and others were congregated here tonight. The entire power structure south of the Mason Dixon was in this room, rutting like pigs and enjoying the show.

I dragged my sacrificial lamb behind me as she gasped at the spectacle all around her. Men and women clawed at her as she rushed past, their hunger bleeding over onto anyone and anything. Stella's purity was like a beacon. I sensed it, too. I wanted to drag her down and feast on her just like they did. But that wasn't what she was here for. Not yet.

We made it to the end of the cleared section of floor that bisected the entire hall and took our place behind Bob, Gavin, Red, and Brianne. The servants had quickly placed risers along the ground in a straight line so the walkway was elevated above the thriving mass of wickedness all around. Cries rose up and were drowned out by others. The orchestra continued playing as if nothing out of place were happening.

“Time to walk the walk, Acquisitions.” Cal was crowing atop the podium as one of the prostitutes sucked his cock.

I hated the idea of him seeing Stella, of any of them seeing her. She was mine. But I kept having to share her.

Bob pushed Gavin up the stairs. “Walk.”

Gavin obeyed, tentatively placing one foot in front of the other. Once

he'd made it a little way across, he was emboldened, holding his head a bit higher, his shoulders back. It made sense. After all, walking was easy.

He picked up his pace. When he got to the end of the walk, he turned to come back. Two men grabbed him, stripped off his coat, and then ripped his shirt away. He started to fight them but stopped when one held up a cattle prod. The other one pointed back down the runway.

Stella trembled next to me as Brianne broke down into gut-wrenching sobs. Red grabbed her by the hair and shook her. She screamed, high and piercing.

Stella reached out, fast as a cat, and gripped Red's arm, trying to wrest his grip from Brianne. Her small hands did nothing to stop him.

"Get your bitch under control, Vinemont, before I do it for you."

I wrapped my arm around Stella's waist and pulled her back. "Stop, Stella. You're making it worse."

She lunged at Red again as Brianne still suffered in his grasp. I held her back and away from him.

"What, you don't like this?" Red asked and shook Brianne again. He used his other hand and ripped down the back of her dress, leaving her top fully exposed. "What about this? Stella, is it? Do you like this?" Red ripped her dress again until the fabric fell to the floor.

"You, son of a bitch!" Stella cried.

"Oh, look over here. We have a wild one." Cal's voice grated on my ears as it boomed around the room.

I put my hand around Stella's throat and squeezed until she fell back against me gasping for air.

"Stop fighting," I hissed in her ear.

"Motherfucker. You, motherfuckers," was all she managed to get out.

Red sneered and stepped toward us.

"Back the fuck up, Red."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll stomp another mud hole in your ass, same as I did at your sister's wedding last year. Remember that?"

"Fuck you, Sin."

"Right back at you, Red."

He returned to his toy, palming her ass so hard it had to hurt as she waited her turn. He leered at Stella as he did it, but she didn't make another move.

"You're all best friends, aren't you?" Stella's voice was quiet. "You're all

the same. Let me go. I'll be *good*." She put an acid inflection on the last word.

Her comment should have stung me, but it was true. Red and I were the same breed. He was just playing the game better than I was at the moment. That would be remedied before the night ended.

I released Stella, but stayed ready to hold her again. I didn't know what Red would do if she actually managed to hurt him. It wouldn't be pretty. Not that I'd let him hurt her. That wasn't his right.

She stood in front of me, careful not to touch me. The back of her dress was open so I could see her smooth skin. She was so pale against the deep green of the dress. Flawless, radiant skin. I stared, knowing that it would never look this way again, not after tonight.

Gavin was on his final run, fully nude and halfway across the walkway back to us. Men and women rose from below to touch him. I froze at the thought of one of them touching Stella. But they would. There was nothing I could do to stop them.

"Go on, whore." Red pushed the shivering Brianne up onto the walkway. She wore only heels as she made her way between the revelers.

Many rushed to her, their fingers reaching to touch her pussy, her ass, her tits. Towards the middle, one man actually pulled her down and threw her on the nearest bed before trying to force her legs apart. Her scream blended with the others. Two servants approached and pulled the man off before setting her back on the platform. Now her shoes were missing and she was sobbing as she walked.

She made it to the other end and tried to stay there. It took a near miss with the cattle prod to get her moving again. By the time she made it back to us, her makeup was streaked from tears and her body shook with sobs.

"Again," Red demanded.

She shook her head. Red advanced on her with a menacing step.

"Go, just go. Get it over with." Stella urged the girl to pass through hell one more time. "You can do it. You have to."

Brianne focused on Stella who was nodding at her, encouraging her.

"I'll be here when you get back, okay? The faster you go, the faster it'll be done. And then it'll be my turn."

Red turned and put two fingers to his mouth in a 'V' before sticking out his tongue at Stella. "I can't wait."

I wanted to take out his knees, pound him into the ground, and then piss

on his fucking corpse. Stella ignored him.

Brianne took the steps back up and made her final pass, far more quickly this time without heels. When she got back, Stella moved to embrace her but Red cut her off.

“Excellent work, whore. Maybe I’ll only beat you once tonight.” He turned to Stella. “Strip, bitch.”

I hit him. I dropped him. I didn’t even think. I just acted. Mistakes always seem to happen that way.

He rolled on the ground, hands to his face. He pushed his mask off and felt around his eye. “The fuck, Sin?”

Shit. This was not the plan. Getting angry and decking one of our number was definitely not part of a winning Acquisition.

Cal’s laughing voice boomed over the sound system. “Now *that’s* a show, ladies and gents!”

RED PICKED HIMSELF up. He was shorter and smaller than Vinemont, but clearly angry. “You want to go outside?”

“No. But I may go over to your mother’s place and release some aggression later.” Vinemont smirked, clearly baiting Red.

Red swung. Vinemont backed out of the way easily and rushed forward, tackling Red to the ground. They devolved into a rolling, punching mass on the floor. I looked around. The nearest guests were focused on the fight. I took a few steps backwards, then a few steps more, then I was in the thick of the masked crowd. Some of them glanced at me and went back to their work. Others couldn’t tear their attention away from the fight.

I turned and ran. I had no thought except escape. It was as if a host of klaxons were ringing in my head, my heart, alerting me to the mortal danger. I cut through the reaching hands and past the servants around the edges. I ran through the first open set of doors, my heels almost going out from under me as I turned the corner. I sped faster until a man stepped in front of me. I slammed into his chest and he wrapped his arms around me.

“Going somewhere, Stella?”

I knew that voice. “Lucius?”

He dragged me sideways into an antechamber off the main hall and kicked the door closed behind us.

“The one and only.” He held me close to him, his hands pressing into the bare skin at my back. A deep emerald mask hid his face, but I could see his eyes, light yet piercing. “Where were you going?”

“J-just away from there.”

“Wouldn’t that kill your father?” He slid a hand lower down my back.

Guilt crashed down on me. I had run from pure instinct, just as if I’d pulled my hand away from the fire. I couldn’t do things like that. I had to leave my hand in the flames until it crisped and charred. My father’s life depended on it.

“Yes.”

“I could save you, you know?” His hand went lower, and slid beneath the fabric of my dress.

“What?”

“I mean, you’ll still be an Acquisition for a year, nothing to be done about that. But you could choose me. You could tell Sin you’d rather be mine.”

“You’re even worse than he is.” I tried to back away, but he held me fast and pinned me against his chest.

“Am I? Am I the one who threatened your father? Who prosecuted him? Who forced you into the contract?”

No. Vinemont had done all those things and more.

“See, Stella. I haven’t hurt you or trapped you.” His hand smoothed along my ass as he put his other hand at my chin and pulled my face up to his. “I could make this whole thing more bearable for you.”

“I don’t trust you.” My voice was so breathy, like he’d taken the air from the room with his seductive words.

“You shouldn’t.” He leaned down, his lips so close to mine.

The door burst open as Vinemont crashed in. “Stella?”

“Another time, then?” Lucius whispered to me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Vinemont rushed to me, a trickle of blood flowing from his busted lip. “Get away from her.”

Lucius released me. “I was just talking to her.”

“Like hell you were.” Anger rippled off Vinemont. “She’s mine, Lucius. Leave her alone.”

Vinemont stood behind me and wrapped a possessive hand around my neck. “Mine.” It was more of a growl than a word.

Two servants rushed in behind Vinemont.

“I think you’ll find this man doesn’t have an invitation. You’ll need to escort him out. Roughly.”

“Come on, Sin.” Lucius smiled.

Lucius’s snake-like charm didn’t work on Vinemont.

“Out.”

Each servant grabbed one of Lucius' elbows and hustled him from the room.

"Later, Stella," he called. His voice echoed along the now-empty marble hallway.

Vinemont turned me around so I was forced to stare up into his unmasked face. "Did he hurt you?"

"Did *he* hurt me? Do you even hear yourself?"

Oakman strolled into the room. "Come on. Can't wait forever. The natives are getting restless for her walk and the rest of the festivities."

"Just another minute, Cal, if you don't mind." Vinemont didn't even turn to look at the host.

"That's all you'll get." The gameshow host tone drained from Cal's voice like water through a sieve. "Tradition can't be broken."

He shut the door behind him as he left.

"You can't run, Stella. I'll catch you. *They'll* catch you."

"The only one who caught me was Lucius."

"And you were lucky this time. You won't be so lucky again. Trust me."

This was such a mindfuck. He acted like he cared one way or another what happened, but I knew all he cared about was winning this twisted competition. He wasn't fooling me. No one was. Fuck him. Fuck all of them. I stepped away from him and walked to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To do my walk of shame. Are you going to help me out of this dress or what?"

I'd never seen shock on his face. If he weren't a monster, it would have been almost cute. He followed me back into the ballroom, new debauches going on all around as the ballgoers got their second wind. I didn't see the other Acquisitions.

Once lined up at the walkway, I reached behind me to unhook my dress. Then I realized I had no idea how Enid had put the thing on me.

Vinemont was at my back then, his fingers pulling the fabric together and unhooking the closures that must have held it together along the center seam. He moved his hands up to my shoulders and inhaled deeply before slipping his fingers beneath the lace straps and letting the dress fall to the floor in a feathery heap.

Cold air rushed over my body, and the nearest revelers stopped what they were doing to watch me.

Vinemont moved his hands down my sides, feeling my curves before his hands settled at my hips. His breath was warm against my shoulder. His familiar scent was oddly comforting.

I took one step, and then another. I kept my head high as I walked. I fixed my gaze far across the room on one of the particularly beautiful chandeliers. Crystal drops hung from it, multi-faceted and shimmering despite the mass of human ugliness beneath it. It was untouched by the hideous inhabitants of the room. Maybe I could be, too.

I slapped away hands and fingers, refusing to let them degrade me any more than they already had. I ignored catcalls and whistles. When I reached the end, I turned and repeated my travel, glaring at Oakman as defiantly as I could. He stared back intently before unzipping his fly and motioning for one of the women below to “assist” him.

I dropped my attention and caught Vinemont staring at me, fire in his eyes like never before. He didn’t look down my body, just held my gaze as I walked, as if he were pulling me toward him with some strange gravity. I reached him and turned, making the circuit one more time under the watchful eyes and the grasping hands.

I reached the far end where a wrinkled man with a protruding erection waited for me.

“Ms. Rousseau, so pleased to see you again.” He grinned, a red mask obscuring his eyes, while his date for the night—a handsome man of no more than twenty—stood close behind him.

I knew his voice. My stomach flipped and soured. “Judge Montagnet?”

The judge’s date reached around and began stroking Montagnet’s cock, though the set of the young man’s mouth was less excited and more apathetic.

“Well, I must get back,” Montagnet said. “I just wanted to congratulate you. Keep up the good work, lovely girl, and I certainly hope the Vinemonts prevail this year. Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on your father for you.” He disentangled himself from the younger man’s grip and knelt down on all fours on a nearby divan. I turned my head away before I saw anything more.

The judge’s threat was a strangling vine around my heart, choking out any love or warmth, leaving only cold fear. I was foolish, so foolish for running. Never again. I was captured, bound by the invisible vise of these people, their power. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to turn. I scanned the crowd, wishing I could burn the chateau down on their heads.

One of the servants motioned toward me with the prod. I took a deep breath and finished my walk. I kept my eyes up, trying to distance myself from the horror of the scene. I refused to give in to the helpless feeling of being nude and on display for the faceless horde. They thrashed around me like damned souls in hell, their breaths hot and their hands clawing at me. I fought them off and hurried my pace.

No one managed more than a brushing swipe against my bare skin. I counted it as a win. Vinemont's gaze was still rapt, though every so often he would stare daggers at the ones who reached out to touch me.

When I made it back to him, he offered his hand to me as I stepped down. I didn't take it.

"Well, now that we've got the easy parts over with, let's get on to the main attraction!" Oakman, as ever, kept the entertainment fresh.

I glared up at Vinemont. "Wait, *that* wasn't the main attraction?"

He showed no emotion, just held my gaze. He was somehow steady even as I felt the storm rising around me.

"Bring them on up," the voice boomed.

Vinemont squeezed my arm and pushed me in front of him, toward the stairs and to the tree. Gavin and Brianne were ahead of me. As they made it to the top, I heard metallic clanging sounds above. Brianne shrieked.

"We haven't even hurt you yet." Oakman's laughter infected the room until it was a cacophony of soulless mirth.

I took the final step. Brianne was sobbing again. Gavin just looked catatonic, as if none of this was registering any more. They were both chained, their fronts facing the tree. Vinemont guided me to the one empty spot against the trunk. He raised my wrists and clamped the shackles down around each one. He pulled the chain down from above and hooked it to the chain in the center of the restraints. Then he fastened my ankles with the restraints at the base of the tree.

I shook. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stay strong in the face of what I knew was coming. Oakman stood and trailed the end of a whip through his hand lovingly. Moving slowly, I bet the leather was smooth and supple. Moving as he swung, it would tear my flesh. My tremor grew until the shackles were shaking, clanging against each other.

"Oh, I can fix that." Oakman yanked on a chain hanging from a pulley next to him. It pulled our arms upward until all three of us were pressed against the tree, the metal digging into our wrists and ankles and our backs on

display.

“Everyone, the years just keep getting better don’t they?”

A smattering of approval rose from below. Even with the spotlight in my face, I could sense they were all still, watching. A tremor roared through me at the realization. What could be so fascinating to stop the roiling beasts from clamoring and rutting?

I tried to turn, to look at Vinemont. To try and will him to free me, save me, let me go. I couldn’t see him. The blinding light and tight bonds mastered me. I was held fast, blood already running down my forearms from the shackles. The pain in my wrists and ankles was growing by the second, the metal cutting deeper with each of my breaths.

“Two-hundred and fifty years of pride. And this year is the best of all. Twenty-five Acquisition Balls, twenty-five strokes of the whip for each of our guests.”

The crowd roared with approval.

I couldn’t stop the sob that rattled up from my lungs. Brianne began screaming, her voice a high, blood-curdling shriek. It died away, muffled by Red’s handkerchief or some similar gag.

My thoughts scattered, unable to focus on anything. I clamped my eyes shut and forced myself to focus on why I was here. Dad. He was there on the back of my eyelids. Standing over me as I awoke in the hospital. He smoothed my hair from my face even as I was bandaged and strapped to the bed. Was this so different? I bled, I was bound, I was wavering between the world I’d known and one I could only imagine. But now, instead of breaking him, my suffering would save him. Tears slid down my cheeks and disappeared. I would endure it. All of it.

“Now, who wants to go first?” Cal broke through my memories.

“That’d be me.” Vinemont spoke, his voice harsh and strong.

“That’s my good man. Here you go. Make them count.” Oakman laughed.

Vinemont stood behind me and ran a lingering hand down my skin, the whip hanging from his other hand. His touch was warm, somehow gentle. I let myself feel it, if only for a second. Let myself imagine he cared for me, that his was a lover’s touch. That he wouldn’t hurt me.

The warmth disappeared. He backed away.

I held my breath. I felt like the entire room held its breath. And then I was awash in pain. I didn’t know I’d screamed until the sound died in my lungs from the force of the next hit.

“He’s really going all out. This may be your next Sovereign ladies and—”

I couldn’t hear his words, couldn’t hear anything except the sound of my pain. It was my scream, eating up the space inside me, bleeding out my ears. Agony like I had never felt before erupted along my back. Lines of destruction. I could feel my skin separating with each of his vicious strokes. Blood leaked and trailed down my legs. It felt the same as I remembered it from those years ago, the same way as my blood felt dripping from my arms. But this time the damage was bigger and offered no promise of release from this life.

I screamed until my voice left me, the air no longer cooperating with my lungs. I burned everywhere. My blood sprayed against Brianne whose stifled scream replaced my own.

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t see. I was gone.

MY MOM STROKED her warm hand down my face. Even in the dark I knew it was her. She whispered comforting words to me, telling me the pain was temporary and would fade. The sharp stings were far away now. Everything beneath me was soft, warm. I was loved. I was content.

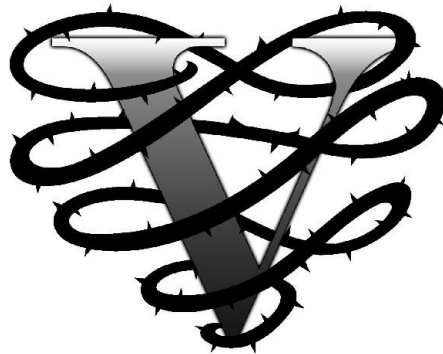
My back was cool, numb. What happened?

I tried to tell her how much I missed her, how glad I was she was back. She'd been gone so long. Where had she gone?

"Shh, sleep now." Mom pulled a blanket up to my waist, making my legs toasty.

"Go ahead and push more before she feels anything." She was speaking to someone else now.

Deep dreamless sleep.



The sound of birds pulled me up from the pleasant darkness. Light streamed in through the windows of the room. I faintly recognized the walls,

the windows, the quilts, all jogging my memories. I was lying on my stomach.

I blinked the sleep away and lifted my head. An aching pain shot through my back. I dropped my head back down with a groan.

“Stella.” It was my mother’s voice. No. No, it was Renee’s. Mom was dead.

“Renee?” I could barely speak, my voice hoarse.

Is there a tube in my arm?

“I’m here. Don’t worry. You’re healing up nicely. Do you want to go back under again?”

“Under?”

“Asleep. The Vinemont family doctor has been staying for the past three days and keeping you asleep so you could recover. I can have him put you out for longer if it bothers you too much.”

My mind was having trouble clicking into the ‘on’ position. An IV was suspended above me, some clear liquid dripping through it at a leisurely pace.

I shifted my head so I could see Renee. Her concerned face brought the flood of horror back. The ball, the tortures, Vinemont flaying the skin from my back.

A sob rose up and stuck in my dry throat.

Renee wrung her hands. “I’ll fetch Dr. Yarbrough.”

“No,” I croaked.

I fought the tears back, though a few escaped and dropped onto my white pillow. We were silent for a long time. The ball replayed through my mind like a particularly vivid nightmare—the masks, the cruelty, the violence, and the pain. More than anything, I remembered Vinemont, how he’d volunteered to whip me first, how he’d swung harder and harder until I blacked out from the pain.

Had I actually almost felt something for him? Each lash killed whatever twisted emotion had grown in my heart. I was glad. My feeling of betrayal was replaced with rage, raw anger. I added these to the box in my chest, the one where I had hidden away my sadness. It was full to bursting with every negative emotion I possessed. Still, I stuffed more inside, poisoning myself by saving the bitterness and hate.

I tried to calm my breathing. Anytime my lungs expanded too fully, my back felt as if it would rip apart. Renee looked almost as white as my pillowcase and kept wringing her hands.

“Vinemont?”

“I haven’t seen him. Not since he brought you back. He was, well, he was in a bad way. Lucius and Teddy had to come get him.”

“Tired out from whipping me, was he?”

“No, not that. It did something to him. I don’t know.”

“Did something to *him*, huh?” I tried to yell, but it only came out in a hoarse burst of sound. The effort made my back scream.

“I meant. I-I meant—” She rose abruptly and came to take my hand.

I wanted to rip it away, but I didn’t dare move.

“I mean, I’ve never seen him like that. He kept begging me to fix it, to heal you. He tried to clean your wounds himself before Dr. Yarbrough arrived. He wouldn’t let anyone else touch you. He sat here with you and told you he was sorry over and over. He wouldn’t leave. Not until Lucius and Teddy came. Only Teddy could get through to him. I haven’t seen Mr. Sinclair since.”

I couldn’t imagine any of what she was saying. Remorse seemed a completely foreign emotion to Vinemont. The way he’d whipped me was an assault on more than just my body. He’d struck at my soul, instilling dread so deeply that I didn’t know if I’d ever recover.

When I’d hurt myself, it gave me a release, a chance at oblivion. When he’d done it, he trapped me even more inside myself. Every lash was a fresh set of bars, hemming me in and holding me captive. If he could do that to me, what else would he be willing to do to win the Acquisition? And what was even required to win?

“I know it’s hard. I know.” Renee’s voice broke through my shadowy thoughts.

“You know? No, you don’t.” I slid my fingers away from her, out of her warm grip.

She knelt by my bed, getting at eye level with me.

“I do, Stella.”

No you don’t.

“How? Have you been branded and whipped? Have you had a year of your life stolen? Have you had to endure a man like Vinemont?” My tears were flowing, making slight plops onto the pillow beneath me.

Renee’s dark eyes were troubled, a storm seeming to rage in her breast. She took a deep breath, as if she had come to a decision. She began unbuttoning her black shirt, her fingers nimble. Then she turned and swept

her hair away from her nape. There in the stark green and black was the same ‘V’ that had been seared into me in ink.

She pulled her top down further so I could see the beginnings of lash marks crisscrossing her fair skin.

“What—”

“I was Mrs. Sinclair’s Acquisition twenty years ago.” She faced me again, her frank gaze disarming me.

If she had hit me, I couldn’t have been more stunned. A million questions tumbled through my mind, one building on the next before stumbling in front of an even bigger curiosity. Why would she stay? What had her year been like? Could she help me?

She stood and refastened her top. When she moved to step away from me, I reached for her. The pain shot like lightning down my back. It went so deep I wondered if my heart hadn’t somehow been lashed right along with my skin. I screamed and dropped my head.

“I’ll get the doctor. Don’t move, sweet Stella. Please don’t.” She rushed from the room.

My mind spun with revelations and harsh sensations. Renee had known all along. She knew what would happen to me at the ball. Why didn’t she warn me? Vinemont’s words came back to me—the more I knew, the more afraid I would be, and the more it all would hurt.

A dark figure rushed through the door, Renee sweeping in behind. Before I could protest—did I want to protest?—he fiddled with my IV and I was out.

This time I dreamed. Vinemont was in there in all of them—tormenting me or loving me. Were they one and the same? Then my father was sitting in his favorite chair telling me a story, though I couldn’t hear the words. Finally, my mother arrived, her hair up in the messy bun I remembered. She was sad. Always sad. Water flowed from her mouth and then it changed to blood, more blood than a person could lose and still live. She was drowning in the very thing that gave her life. I couldn’t save her. I couldn’t even save myself. I sat in a pool of my own blood, the droplets slowing right along with my heartbeat. Steps in the hallway—my father. I dreaded him finding me before it was over. I didn’t want him to see me die. The footsteps grew louder and then stopped.

“Stella?”

I knew that voice. It wasn’t my father’s. It was the voice of a demon, one that made me burn with desire and hate until both emotions mixed in a

funeral pyre of black smoke.

I opened my eyes. He was here. Vinemont.

“Going to hit me again?” It came out as a whisper, but he winced as if I’d yelled at him.

“I don’t know.”

I was still lying on my stomach. My eyes finally adjusted to the dark. He sat near the door, his face unshaven, his clothes wrinkled and disheveled. He looked like I felt.

“What sort of an answer is that?”

“An honest one.” He leaned over, resting his elbows on his thighs.

“You sick fuck.” I refused to cry. *I would not cry.*

“Yes.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. The sound of his palm rubbing against his stubble was loud in my ears.

“What now? Are you going to hurt me some more? Maybe cut some fingers off and send them to my dad? Fuck you. Whatever it is, just get it over with.” Tiredness had settled into every muscle and bone of my body. It must have been the drugs. My back no longer felt so raw; only a low ache emanated from it. My skin felt as if it had stitched back together, but I could already sense the scars forming, solidifying, forever marking me.

“No, I would never...”

I laughed but it was a rough, ugly sound. “You would *never*? Never what? Never enslave me? Never strip me naked and make me bleed for an audience?” My eyes welled with unshed tears. The hurt inside me seemed too much for my body to bear.

He dropped his head, his defeat just as out of character as his unshaven face and mussed hair. “I can’t change what I did, Stella. I would do it again.”

I wanted to scream, to rage at him, to demand to know why he sat here appearing contrite, while at the same time telling me he would do it all over again if given the chance. Was this the mental torture to go along with the physical?

“Do me a favor. When you become Sovereign, how about you make your first decree for you to go royally fuck yourself?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I don’t expect you to understand. I didn’t want—”

“Get out.” I turned my head away from him, my neck stiff and unused to the movement.

He stayed. I could sense him there, unmoving, his gaze still on me.

There was nothing more to say. He'd whipped me like an animal. Worse, really. The memory of Cal Oakman's voice rattled around in my mind. The way he crowed over Vinemont's fevered strokes that drew my blood so easily. My tears went from sadness to rage.

I was a furious tempest of hatred and loathing but I was trapped in my battered body. All I could do was wish my tears away and accept that Vinemont had damned me to this existence. This life of pain and hurt and darkness. So many shadows that I never even knew existed had eclipsed any faint light I may have once had. I had been snuffed out, destroyed by the man who now looked so lost.

After a long moment, the floor creaked, and I heard his retreating footsteps.

"Wait," I said.

He returned with a quicker step, standing behind me now.

"You said I could have a reward if I got through the ball."

"Yes." His voice crackled, almost hopeful.

"I want to see my father and stepbrother."

He shifted and another long silence fell like deep winter snow, muffling and burying us. He touched the edge of my bed, the hesitant movement making me angry, making me want to hurt him.

"Okay." He sighed, resignation in the rush of air.

"You're going to keep your word?"

He ghosted his fingers through my hair. I closed my eyes, wondering if he had any chance of calming the firestorm that raged in my breast.

"I always do." His voice was as soft as his caress.

I wanted to believe this was truly who he was—the man who seemed just as wrecked by what he'd done as my tattered flesh. But which one of him was real? The destroyer or the destroyed? Either way, my tears still fell, my pain still stung, my heart still ached. He had done this and would do it again. I pushed any tender thoughts away.

"I want to see them soon. But not until I'm healed all the way. Or at least as much as I can heal from what you did. I don't want them to see me like this."

"You just tell me when and I'll arrange it." He gave my hair one last gentle stroke. He hesitated. Words were on his lips. I could sense them lingering there in the dark. Instead of voicing them, he turned and strode out, his pace clipped.

I was left alone with my pain, all the varying shades of it. I turned my head back to look at the chair where he'd sat. My gaze roamed further up and seized on the discordant quilt created by Vinemont's mother. What sort of person made it through the Acquisition and won?

I heard more steps, and recognized them as Renee's. She slowed to a quiet tiptoe by the time she reached my door. Her black skirt rustled softly as she sat and folded her hands in front of her.

"I want to get up."

She rose and smoothed my hair over my shoulder. "Sunrise is in an hour. Rest until then."

Comfort was in her movements, her touch. I didn't want comfort. I wanted to stop crumbling, to shore up what pieces of me I had left.

"No, I'm done resting. Help me sit up or I'll do it by myself."

I couldn't lie in bed for another minute. I couldn't stand being helpless and weak. I wouldn't be. Not anymore.



With Renee's help, I recovered over the next few weeks. I didn't see Vinemont or Lucius at all during that time. I would pass Teddy in the hallway sometimes. He would smile and exchange pleasantries. Underneath, I could sense he was troubled. I had too many problems of my own to even begin to care about his. He seemed like a nice guy, but he was born into a pit of vipers. It would be foolish to think he wouldn't bite just as surely as Vinemont and Lucius did.

I began to realize he was the only one who knew less than I did about what was going on. Renee wouldn't tell me anything new, only that Vinemont didn't volunteer for the Acquisition. It was done on some sort of lottery basis.

I'd figured as much at the ball when the names of the families were

called. Oakman made it seem as if it were some “luck of the draw” situation, though it seemed like a stroke of bad fortune to be chosen. Even so, I couldn’t forgive Vinemont. He didn’t have to choose *me*. He didn’t have to threaten my father and force me into the contract. I didn’t wish this on another soul, but I couldn’t excuse his turning a bad stroke of luck on his part into a year-long suffering on mine.

“I honestly still don’t know how they’re picked,” she said one day over a steaming mug of tea after I’d pestered her for the better part of an hour.

The weather had finally turned cooler, leaves swirling in the yard and the grass fading into a dormant brown. I preferred hot chocolate, and stirred the marshmallows around in the foam before taking a scorching sip.

“Well, tell me something, anything. What’s next? Is there something next?” I hoped there wasn’t. I hoped it would be just a year of captivity spent here with her. I wasn’t a total idiot, though. I knew that little fairy tale was too good to be true.

She set the mug down and stared into the rolling steam. “I’ll tell you this and no more. There are more trials. The next one is at Christmas.”

I raised an eyebrow at the all-around fucked up quality of holiday-based tortures.

“And then there’s another in the spring, and the final one in the summer. I won’t give details.”

After that revelation, she was close-lipped, and always answered my questions with a deflection or a suggestion that I get it directly from the source—Vinemont. No matter how many times she reiterated the fact that Vinemont didn’t choose to participate in the Acquisition, I couldn’t forget the verve with which he pursued the Sovereign title, the way he’d played to the audience of masked ghouls. I still didn’t know what it would take for him to win, but if the exhibition of my body and the whipping were any indication, it wouldn’t be a pleasant outcome for me. So, no, I wouldn’t speak to him.

Despite her stonewalling on the Acquisition process, Renee and I fell into a happy pretend friendship, as if we didn’t share a dark secret of slavery and sadism. She was more than happy to discuss just about any subject I could think of other than the one I was desperate to learn about. We’d spend time in the house’s library, reading quietly as the days faded. No one ever stopped us from exploring, and Renee showed me the ins and outs of the kitchen wing, the guest wing, and several other areas that had rooms upon rooms full of remarkable possessions and ornate furniture. Farns was always happy to see

us, and gave us the history of various antiques and treasures scattered around the common rooms.

We even stopped in Vinemont's room once. It had his scent, masculine and clean. It drew me. I wanted to know more about him, to pick him apart in an effort to find out how he ticked so maybe I could somehow gum up the mechanism.

His room was modest, more modern and Spartan than the rest of the house. A king size bed with white duvet, navy walls, and minimal furniture filled the large space. No photos of him or his family graced the walls. I wandered to his nightstand when Renee wasn't looking and pulled the top drawer open.

Instead of skin mags or back issues of "Psychotic Monthly," there was nothing except for a single black feather. I recognized it immediately. It had come from the dress I'd worn to the ball. It mocked me, reminiscent of the forsaken glass slipper. Except Vinemont was no prince. He was the devil.

I slammed the drawer shut.

Lucius' room was more colorful, white walls covered with tons of art—much of it good, to my surprise. He was messier than Vinemont. Books and magazines were scattered across his desk. There was an iPod and earbuds that somehow managed to make their way into my pocket.

"Where are they anyway?"

"Mr. Sinclair is in town for work, I believe. Mr. Lucius is in South America visiting two of the sugar cane plantations. He's in charge of the business while Mr. Sinclair handles the legal issues and keeps up appearances as parish district attorney. He never wanted the position, but the Sovereign decreed that Mr. Sinclair would take the post, and that was that."

"I thought the parish district attorney was elected?"

Renee raised a cynical black eyebrow. "And I thought slavery was illegal."

"Touché. What about Teddy?"

"He's in school still, in Baton Rouge. I'm not sure what he intends to do. It's not as if he has too many options."

"How does a rich, handsome young man like Teddy not have many options?"

"Depends on what the Sovereign says. If Oakman decides Teddy should be a lawyer, then off to law school he goes. If he decides being a doctor would be better, then med school."

“The Sovereign wields that much power?”

“More than you can even imagine. Who do you think decides the winning Acquisition? And it’s worse for the Vinemonts, really. Even though they’ve been part of the ruling faction for well over a hundred and fifty years, some families still remember that it wasn’t always so. The others try and lord it over them. The Vinemonts used to be poor sharecroppers and seamstresses. Worked for the Oakmans for years and years until...” Renee put her hand to her mouth as if that would somehow stop her words from spilling out.

“What? Until what?” I didn’t want her to stop. All this was news to me and I was starved for information.

“Oh, nothing. I shouldn’t have said. It’s all ancient history. It’s just, those things aren’t really talked about. Not in the house, especially.”

“If it’s ancient history, then why can’t you talk about it? What harm could there be?”

“Mr. Lucius should be home in a couple of days.” I’d learned that Renee’s subject change signaled the end of the conversation, despite my many unsuccessful attempts to make it otherwise.

There was only one part of the house we never visited—the top floor.

“It’s mostly shut off and dusty. No one goes up there, really. Not anymore.” Renee always led me away from the stairs to the third floor, even when I had placed a foot hesitantly on the bottom step. The steps weren’t dusty, and I got the feeling Renee’s hurried explanation was hiding something more. Then again, this house was full of secrets—Renee’s not the least among them.

A few days later Renee and I were whiling away the afternoon in the library. I still hadn’t set eyes on Lucius or Vinemont since my recovery. I sometimes caught myself wondering what Vinemont was doing, where he was. Then I reminded myself of the scars on my back and turned my thoughts elsewhere.

Renee sat under a throw blanket and read as I tried to paint. She had ordered every supply I could think of to get my art started again. But for the third day in a row, I just stared at the blank canvas.

Before, I would let whatever I was feeling meld itself to the canvas. Now, it was as if my emotions were in too much of a vicious muddle to do anything other than a Picasso imitation, my pieces scattered in ways that reflected how fragmented I was inside.

My back had healed. It no longer stung or ached, but I knew it was

different, scarred. Renee smeared some sort of specialty cream she'd ordered from Juliet over my back every night. She said my scars had already faded much more than her own. Even then, she wouldn't tell me about her Acquisition, about why she lingered here in this house.

While I was lost in my thoughts, my hands worked on the canvas of their own accord. Before I knew it, I'd drawn out a harsh line, then another, then another. I worked feverishly, sketching a body drawn impossibly tight and covered with the crisscrossing lines. I drew and shaded until the image came forth from the white background just as it had done in my mind.

The canvas was macabre even without color. The woman's head lolled to the side. A hand with a whip reared back as if the aggressor stood where I did, on this side of the easel, ready to inflict more violence. When I finally changed to paint, mixing the colors with a rough hand, I realized it had grown late. Renee slept on the couch, a book resting against her softly rising and falling chest.

I woke her gently and sent her on to bed before returning to my work, intent on finishing what I'd begun. I smoothed on the crimson, letting the painting run in streaky rivers before sweeping through them with the edge of my brush. I let that part dry and worked on the edges and background. I swiped my hand on my long skirt, leaving a streak that I knew would never come out.

Vines in blacks and greens—matted, twisting, and snakelike—grew from my brush strokes. They looked as venomous as I'd intended, threatening from the canvas, seeking to taste the crimson of the foreground. They wrapped around the nude woman's ankles and wrists.

When I finished, I stepped away, giving a critical eye to the piece. It was dark and needed a good deal of touching up, but it was my soul in pencil and paint. The darkness infecting me had leached onto the bristles and then the threads. Would getting it out keep the rot from going any deeper?

"You captured it."

I whirled. Vinemont stood behind me, so close that I didn't know how I hadn't heard him. He was clean shaven again, well put together. He wore a suit, the tie loosened and his top button undone. His eyes, though, were haunted. They were still his deep, turbulent blue. Beneath them were gray circles, unease or worry having left its mark.

"You look well," he said.

"Do I?" I crossed my arms over my chest, not caring that I got paint all

over my shirt. It wasn't the first time. "Maybe you should see my back. It might change your mind."

He finished the job on his tie, pulling it loose so it hung open around his neck. "I did what I had to do, Stella."

A burning rage erupted in my chest, my mind. My anger had simmered for so long that seeing his face forced it to boil over. But what made it worse, what really sent me over the edge, was that some part of me recognized a change in him. The things he'd said to me that night in my room, the way he looked now—none of it fit with what he'd said about willingly hurting me again.

"Why?" I met his gaze.

"Because you're my Acquisition. Because I have to win."

"So you'd do anything it takes to win, to be Sovereign?"

"To win? Yes." His face hardened, becoming the cruel mask I knew so well. "I will do everything in my power to win."

"Then why are you here? Why even come speak to me until it's time for my yuletide whipping?"

"Renee told you?" He shook his head and anger flashed in his tired eyes.

"Yes. She told me I have a very busy holiday schedule over the next few months."

"What else did she tell you?"

"Nothing. You've got her well trained."

He ran a hand through his dark hair. "Not me."

"Then who?"

He took a step toward me. I matched it, stepping backward.

A shadow crossed his face—pain? Then it was gone and he fisted his hands at his sides, hell in his eyes.

"Look, Stella, this is something that neither of us can avoid. I'm doing what I have to do. That's all you need to know about it. Once your year is up, you can leave and never look back. Until that time, I need you to do as I ask and just accept it. No more questions. No more trying to run."

"I'm not running."

"Keep it that way." He took another step toward me, menacing.

I held my ground. He could hurt me, but I wouldn't give him the benefit of my fear. I stared into him, past the blue and deeper, watching as they turned from anger to heat. The air in the room shifted, like an electrical current hummed between us.

All the concern that he'd walked in with was gone. He looked...hungry, as if the moon had emerged from behind a cloud and revealed him to be some sort of ravenous wolf.

His gaze travelled my face, my body. When heat erupted along my skin as if he'd touched me, I knew I was damned. To want the touch of the devil was nothing short of a mortal sin.

I struck him, my open palm whipping across his face with a satisfying slap. He didn't retaliate, just tilted his head to the side until his neck popped in the most unnerving fashion. What had been fire in his eyes was now a raging inferno.

He advanced, only inches from me now. I pulled my hand back to strike him again, but he caught it, squeezing my wrist painfully. I tilted my chin up, meeting his vicious encroachment with defiance. He wouldn't frighten me out of this space. It was mine. I didn't care if the entire place was covered in fucking vines, I would slash and burn them until I'd cleared an area for me, my paint, my books, and my own bit of freedom.

Quick as an adder, he put his free hand to my face. I didn't flinch, though I expected him to strike me. The heat in his gaze spoke of something explosive—violence or desire, maybe a heady mix of both. When his palm touched my skin, my eyes closed involuntarily.

“So soft.” His voice was tinged with wonder.

I was down the rabbit hole, everything topsy-turvy and wrong, because his touch—god, his touch. It was like I'd been starving for it this entire time but didn't know it. When I opened my eyes, he leaned down, his lips teasing mine with the bare millimeters of distance. He was a gorgeous villain, a predator dressed up as a man.

I raised my unrestrained hand to hit him again, but he caught it, too, and wrenched both of them behind my back. He pressed me into his chest, caging me with his body. I could feel the blaze emanating from him, the desire like a heat wave. Could he feel mine? His gaze held me fast, furious and possessive. He looked at me like I was *his*. Not because of a contract, not because of the Acquisition, but because the intensity of his desire made it so. He would have what he wanted. His gaze flicked down to my mouth and he dipped his head lower, his breath grazing my lips.

I burned to destroy him, to leave him in flames as I walked away from the ashes. But first ... just a kiss. I pushed up on my tip toes.

Our lips met.

I was lost.

He wasn't gentle. I knew he wouldn't be. I still wanted him. His lips were soft and firm, taking everything and demanding more. His tongue probed against my lips. When he pulled my hair back, I arched into him and opened my mouth. His tongue was a wicked explorer, caressing mine and tasting me in a way no one ever had.

He groaned and wrapped an arm around me, crushing me against him. His scent was in my nose, floating in my lungs like a whirlwind, putting me even further under his spell. My nipples rubbed against him, the tips hard and wanting. They ached for his touch, his mouth. I had never known the sheer need that welled up inside me, the wetness between my thighs, the desperate feeling of wanting more and still more.

He lifted me and carried me to the sofa, laying me down and looking over his prize. He yanked off his blazer and pulled his shirt away, buttons flying as his hard abs were revealed. The same V as mine was inked over his heart, the intricate vines spreading and roping along his chest and down his arms.

I licked my lips, and his gaze went straight to the movement. He was the spider I'd always imagined him to be, lethal and beautiful.

He stalked on top of me, wedging himself between my thighs. His hands were at the hem of my shirt, pushing it up and peeling it off my body. He hitched in a breath when he saw I wasn't wearing a bra.

"Fuck, Stella," he rasped.

He pressed a hard kiss on each nipple. My stomach tightened and clenched.

I dug my fingers through his hair, scratching him as he took a nipple in his mouth. I arched my back off the sofa. His mouth was hot as he teased the hard tip. He circled his tongue around the pearled peak before pulling it in his mouth against his teeth. The sensation went straight to my pussy, making it pulse with want. When he sucked my nipple hard enough to bruise, I couldn't stifle my cry. He was going to devour me, just like his eyes had always promised.

He relinquished my breast to move up and reclaim my mouth. His hard length rested against my pussy. It promised more pleasure than I'd ever felt. I dug my nails into his shoulders, wanting to hurt him, to mark him just as he'd done to me. I bit his lip, drawing blood. He groaned and kissed me roughly, making me taste his copper on my tongue. I was on fire, rage and hatred mixing with the most primal need. I wanted him bleeding, but I also wanted

him buried deep inside me. I wanted him screaming in pain but also in the most resplendent pleasure.

As our mouths warred, blood welled around my nails where I broke his skin. He rocked his hips against me, making my clit buzz with the power of his stroke. He gripped my hair, pulling until I cried out. When I opened my mouth, he sank his tongue inside me, claiming me. I gave in. I opened for him, letting him taste me, letting him own me. He kissed me so ferociously that my breath was gone and I was breathing only him.

He slid a hand down to my neglected breast and palmed it as he rubbed a thumb over my nipple. I moaned into his mouth, his tongue swirling the sound around before he swallowed it. He was possessing me, branding me far more than any ink on my neck or any scars on my back. His touch, his insistent kiss marked me deeper, surer than any lash ever could. I was betraying myself. I knew it. I didn't care. I didn't want anything other than him, his hands, his body, his kiss. I had never felt more alive.

He pushed a hand between us, yanking my skirt up before roughly pulling my panties to the side. When he touched my wet core, he groaned. I wanted him inside me. I wanted him wild, desperate. I wanted him to come for me, only me.

"You are so wet," he grated. He released my breast and gripped my hair, yanking my head to the side and sucking on the tender skin of my neck.

His fingers strummed me, playing me until I writhed beneath him. Wanton and desperate for his touch. He was the most delicious thing I had ever felt.

"You like that, Stella?" he murmured against me.

"Yes," I breathed.

"How about this?" He sank a finger inside.

I gasped, the breath hitching in my throat at the unbridled pleasure. He withdrew it and pushed it in again. My hips ground up into him.

"Fucking my finger, Stella? Just wait until it's my cock, filling every last bit of your tight cunt."

I thought I might come just from his words. No one had ever spoken to me that way. I needed more.

He sat back on his haunches. "Don't move." A growl to match the animal look on his face.

He pushed my skirt up past my hips. With one hand, he ripped my panties away. Then he fixed his gaze on my pussy. I was bare to him, completely

open and at his mercy in a way I'd never been, not even when I was chained and whipped. This was the most intimate moment I'd ever had.

"I can't stop." He slowly brought his gaze to mine. "I won't."

I swallowed hard, his taste still on my lips. "Don't."

IT TOOK EVERY remaining shred of self-control I had not to rip my fly open and shove into her. Her glistening pink flesh was something I'd fantasized about and now...to have it laid out before me like an offering was almost too much.

I drew down my zipper and pulled my cock from my boxers. It throbbed in my palm. I didn't want my skin. I wanted hers. Every inch of it.

Her eyes grew wide as she saw my cock, hard and ready for her. I slid my tip against her slick folds and almost lost my seed all over her. I gripped up on the base, keeping myself in check.

She scooted back from me. Not happening. I dragged her back down beneath me and caged her throat with my hand.

"It's too big, Sinclair. I-I don't think I can."

She said my name. I always wanted her to call me Sinclair, though she insisted on Vinemont. The former was a surrender, the latter a curse. All I needed from her right now was total surrender, submission. I would have it.

"I haven't done this since Dylan and I—"

I silenced her by forcing two fingers inside. She moaned and closed her eyes. I didn't want to hear about anyone else touching what was mine. After tonight, they would be erased. I would fuck her so completely that I was her first, her last, her everything. My cum on her—in her—would mark her as mine.

Still holding her fast with one hand, I stroked her clit with my fingertips. The fear drained from her as I worked her into a frenzy. Her clit was a delicious little nub that demanded to be sated. I would give Stella what she

wanted, what she needed.

I swirled the tip of my index finger around her clit and rubbed it in increasingly strong strokes. She was going wild, her hips meeting my movements with more and more urgency. She ground against me, begging for a release she wouldn't get until every inch of me was buried in her tight heat.

I brought my wet fingers to my mouth and licked her sweetness from them.

She watched, her eyes glazed with lust, just like I wanted her.

I slid my cock to her opening. Her flesh was no longer hot, but molten. The muscles along my back shook with the need to plunge into her, to take what I wanted just as roughly as I wanted it. I couldn't. I wouldn't hurt her. Not this time. Not yet.

"Sinclair." It was a reverent prayer from her bruised lips.

I pushed inside, my head squeezing into her exquisite velvet. She moaned and clutched at my chest. I couldn't tell if she wanted to push me away or pull me closer. Either way, I couldn't stop. I needed her more than I'd ever needed anything in my life. I watched as I fed myself slowly into her, inch by inch. Further in, then out, then even further. When I was seated as deeply as I could go, her muscles clenched around me, pulling me farther inside. Still, I wanted more. I wanted it all.

I wrenched her hands above her head and pinned them as I drew back and filled her completely.

"Fuck."

"Sinclair, please."

I had never heard a sexier sound in my life.

"Please what?"

She rubbed up against me, her clit begging for release just as her mouth did.

"Please just, just...I want to come."

Fuck. My cock pulsed inside her, perilously close to the edge. I steadied my breathing.

"Do you want me to make you come, Stella?"

"Yes."

I pulled out and slid all the way back in before starting a slow rhythm. Her face was a mix of pleasure and pain as I slowly made her mine.

"Look at me, Stella."

Her eyes were half mast, but locked on mine all the same. I wanted her to

watch me as I brought her pleasure. The fucking barbarian who lived in my breast demanded it, demanded that she acknowledge I was the only one who could give her the release she was begging for.

I licked into her open lips before taking her mouth again. I claimed her fully, my cock and my tongue embedded in her and giving her gratification. I knew my seed was close to bursting, my balls drawn up tight against me. I wouldn't come, not until she did. Once I felt her muscles milking me, I would coat her pussy lips. The picture in my mind almost sent me over the edge.

I pulled out to my tip and kissed down to her hard nipple. When I released her hands, she put them in my hair, pulling until it hurt and I growled against her tender flesh. I bit down on her nipple and fucked her harder, ramming my cock deep into her. Her hips rose up to meet me, marking my rhythm.

I knew she was close, the tension building in her as I'd intended. Each shuddering thrust went right to her clit. She arched off the couch, her gorgeous breasts shaking from my impacts as she rubbed her clit into me stroke for stroke.

"Don't stop! Please, Sinclair. Don't stop." Her voice was sex, raw and low.

As if I had a choice. There was no stopping, not now, not when I was so deep in her slick pink.

"Come for me, Stella. I own this body. Now I want it to come."

"Sinclair." She thrashed her head from side to side.

I couldn't tell if she was refusing me or lost in her own passion. Either way, she needed to focus on me. I gripped her hair and forced her to meet my eyes.

I plunged into her, my skin slapping into her with each vicious strike. The sound reverberated around the room. I fucked her like an animal, vicious and base. Her moans spurred me on harder and faster.

I gripped her hair tightly, the fine strands catching on my fingers. I wanted her to feel nothing but me, think nothing but me. "You're mine. Come for me Stella. Now."

At my words, her pussy convulsed and she cried out my name in a river of release. The sound was unbearable. I pulled from her and lashed her clenching flesh with ropes of cum. My release was ripped from me, my body seizing from head to toe as I fisted my length and coated her with my seed. Her gaze was fastened on me as I came. There in her eyes was something I

never even imagined to see. It was possessive, proud even.

When my last ounce of cum rested on her perfect skin, I sat up and let my head fall back. I gulped in deep breaths as she panted beneath me.

“That was, that was...” She sputtered beneath me, her eyes glassy.

“I know,” I said.

As I stared at the ceiling, invisible guilt and responsibility crashed down on me. What had I done? Weren’t things already complicated enough?

“Don’t do that.” Her voice was soft now, the release liquefying her tension.

“Do what?”

“Regret it. Regret me.”

How could I not?

A sound like a gunshot echoed around the room, then another. I snapped my head back down. Lucius stood in the doorway, slow clapping. I fell back, grabbed my coat from the floor, and covered Stella.

“Very nice, big bro. I’m going to have to go rub one out after that.”

Stella covered her face with both hands.

“Don’t be shy, Stella. I really enjoyed the whole show. Your tits are, in a word, epic. And I can only imagine how sweet that pussy is for Sin here to bust a nut so quickly.”

“Get out.” I stood and yanked my pants up.

“I was just up for a midnight snack, is all. You can’t blame me for making sure there wasn’t a burglar. You know, the kind that fucks really loudly before robbing the place blind.” He smirked. I hated it, mostly because it was almost the perfect mirror of mine.

I advanced on him. He backed away laughing. “I’m going. Because, seriously, going to have to stroke it before I can even think of sleeping again. I’ll, of course, have to replace you with me in the reenactment, but I’m sure you understand.”

I stalked toward him, ready to murder my own blood. How fitting.

He turned on his heel and disappeared down the hallway, his smug laugh shredding my already non-existent composure.

I returned to Stella and used my coat to clean her off. She draped an arm over her tits and then pushed her skirt down to cover herself. When she sat up and turned to get her shirt, I saw the scars on her back.

My guts wrenched, the memory of that night making my stomach churn and bile rise into my throat. So much pain. Her blood had soaked into my

clothes. As soon as the spotlight was gone and the ballgoers' attention was turned elsewhere, I'd carried her out, clutched closely to my breast. I couldn't bear for anyone else to touch her, look at her. Her blood soaked through the vining cloak, painting everything a gruesome crimson and scenting the air with copper.

Her blood still covered my hands, though only I could see it. And now I'd taken even more from her. Remorse wasn't an option for me, not anymore. I'd set out to be this, to do this, to become the monster I had to be.

I reached out and ran my hand across one of the marks. She froze and glared at me over her shoulder. The accusation in her eyes was warranted, more than fair. It still struck me hard, embedding in my chest and spreading its barbs into my heart.

She yanked her top down, hiding what I'd done to her. Her cheeks were red, shame or some other emotion tingeing them with rose.

"It's time for you to make good on your promise. I want to see my father and stepbrother."

"What? Now?" I hadn't seen that coming. I should have.

"Yes. You said you'd arrange it when I asked. So, I'm asking."

I didn't want them here, poisoning her against me. Though that was a ridiculous thought. I was doing it plenty well on my own.

She bristled at my hesitation. "Well, are you going to be true to your word or not?"

My mother would have struck her for such an impertinent question. I didn't move. "I'm always true to my word. What day would you like to see them?"

"Tomorrow, in the afternoon."

"Fine, but only for an hour. No more."

"An hour? That's not enough time to—"

"I never promised you how long they could visit, I just agreed that they could." I hated the thought of her stepbrother here, speaking to her, thinking he had any sway over her. He didn't. He never would again.

She stood and smoothed her skirt down with quick, angry movements. "You know what? I was wrong before. You should regret it. You should regret all of it."

She left, never looking back and taking more of me with her than I should have allowed.

I FIDGETED WITH my hair, pulling it to the back and ensuring it covered the tattoo. I didn't want Dad or Dylan seeing the permanent brand. I wore a simple black sweater and a gray skirt. To their eyes, I would no doubt look the same as I had a month ago. Only I knew that the woman they remembered was long gone.

The front door opened and footsteps approached. I stood, nerves making my movements jerky. I was desperate to see my father, but I worried he would get too worked up. He didn't need to suffer any more than necessary.

Dad rushed in and embraced me. I didn't realize my tears were falling until they rolled down to my lips, salty on my tongue.

"Daddy," was all I could choke out.

Dylan stood a few steps back, bowed up with rage. Vinemont stood behind them, leaning against the wide doorway into the sitting room.

My father held me for the longest time. He stroked my hair and kept saying he was sorry.

I pulled away and looked into his watery blue eyes. "Don't be sorry. I chose to do this. I would do anything to keep you safe."

He shook his head, now covered in even more gray than I remembered. "That's what I'm supposed to do. Not you."

"We're going to get you out of here, Stella." Dylan crushed me in his thick arms, squeezing me to him.

"I will get you back," he whispered in my ear.

I rested my chin on his shoulder and caught Vinemont staring daggers at Dylan.

Jealous, Vinemont?

I placed a chaste kiss on Dylan's cheek and glanced at Vinemont. He fisted his hands at his sides, the impeccable suit and tie he wore doing a poor job of hiding the animal underneath.

Dylan set me back and looked me up and down. "Has he hurt you?"

"I-I—"

Dylan whirled and advanced on Vinemont who just stood and smirked. He was taunting Dylan, drawing him in so he could hurt him. I knew the power in Vinemont's body, the way he could break even a man like Dylan.

"No one has hurt me," I lied. "Please, just, let's just sit down. We only have an hour. Please."

He stopped only a few feet from Vinemont, and the men engaged in a testosterone-laden stare down. I went to Dylan and tried to pull him away.

"Come on, Dylan. Sit with me."

He laid a hand over mine and an arm around my waist. Vinemont crossed his arms over his chest, muscles popping even through his dress shirt.

I led Dylan away before my hour was stolen with pointless violence. I'd already had enough of that for a lifetime.

Dad sank down in a fluffy side chair as Dylan and I sat on the floral sofa. Sun poured into the room, belying the chilly air outside. My father was thinner, though he seemed well put together, his clothes new and pressed. Dylan wore his usual rugby shirt and jeans.

Vinemont didn't move from the door. I glared up at him, willing him away. He smiled back, daring me to ask him to leave. I knew it was useless. Instead, I put my hand in Dylan's and laced our fingers together.

Enjoy the show, asshole.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him shift from one foot to the other, tension in his taut muscles. I'd seen them, intimately, closely. I brushed those thoughts away and focused on my father.

"How have you been?"

He looked at the floor before bringing his gaze back to mine. "I know I keep saying it, but I'm sorry. I should have just let him lock me up. I should have... You never should have come here."

"I don't want to talk about should haves or could haves. We only have a short time and I want to hear about you. How's the house? Have you had any more trouble from your old clients? Did any of my paintings sell?"

I forced a smile to my face, encouraging my father to engage with me like

we were normal human beings, not as a grieving father and an enslaved daughter.

“Oh, your paintings.” He almost managed a smile. “Yes, yes. The gallery called. Just a few days ago, some highbrow collector came in and bought every last one of your works.”

“Someone bought out the gallery?”

“No, not the whole gallery, just your pieces. It was the damndest thing. Paid full for each one and had them shipped. I don’t know who it was, and the gallery kept their information confidential. But the check was real enough.” His gaze dropped again. “I put it in your account. It’ll be there when you get back.”

My heart soared at the thought of my art gracing some collector’s walls. I’d never sold more than a few paintings every so often. Certainly, no one had ever bought two at once. This news was like Christmas... Then I remembered what my real Christmas would entail.

My smile faltered a bit before I plastered it back across my face. “Dylan, how’s school?”

“Same old, same old. My lacrosse team is leading the SEC like it does every year...” He gave the broad strokes of his life outside, the start of a new school year. Instead of making me feel better, it only reinforced my isolation here at the Vinemont estate.

I resolved to get outdoors more, especially now that my back had healed. Renee had spoken of stables on the property. I’d always been a decent rider.

When Dylan wound down, my father leaned forward and took my hands. “Please tell me what you’ve been doing for the past month. I think about you every moment.”

I glanced to Vinemont. His gaze bored into me.

“I mostly stay in the house. I read and paint. There are others here. I have a good friend, Renee. And Vinemont’s brothers are pleasant, especially the youngest, Teddy.” Okay, I may have fibbed a bit—well, a lot—but I couldn’t exactly explain that I was whipped bloody and paraded around naked.

“Has he hurt you? Has anyone? I couldn’t bear to think of them hurting you.” The tears welled in Dad’s eyes again.

I shook my head in vehement denial. “No, no. They’re all very nice here. I’m fine, really. It’s like an upscale prison, really. Food’s good, too. Far better than anything you ever made, Dad.”

That would have made him laugh a month ago. Now, though, he only

smiled sadly.

“If they just keep you around as a pet, what’s the point?” Dylan asked.

“I, um, I don’t really know.” Lies were rolling off my tongue more easily by the minute. “I think it’s just some sort of traditional thing they do here.”

“Why don’t you enlighten us, asshole?” Dylan turned to Vinemont.

“Oh, suffice it to say, I like owning beautiful things. As you know, your stepsister is particularly lovely, especially when unencumbered with trifles like clothing.” Vinemont didn’t miss a beat.

I gripped Dylan’s hand hard, keeping him next to me on the couch instead of challenging the devil in the doorway.

“I have an idea, Stella. Why don’t you show Dylan who you belong to?”

Ice water flowed through my heart. “What?”

“If he wants to know why I keep you and what I do to you, just give him a peek at your neck. I realize he’s slow, but maybe a little demonstration will help him figure it out.”

Dylan was already searching my throat with his gaze. “What’s he talking about, Stella?”

“Nothing.” I smoothed my hair down.

“Did he do something to you?” Dad asked. The sadness in his voice broke off a piece of my heart, leaving a bloody, jagged edge.

“No, he’s just talking.”

“Show them, Stella.” It was a command now, no longer a suggestion.

“No.” I pleaded with him, humiliation rising to color my cheeks.

“Is this a road you want to go down?” Vinemont looked from my father to me, the threat lingering in the air. “Do it.”

“Don’t talk to her like that.” Dylan’s anger mixed with the already-dangerous current of emotions in the room.

“No, I’ll show you. Just don’t antagonize him.”

“I’m not scared of him.” Dylan rose and faced Vinemont. “Of *you*. Let’s take this outside, motherfucker.”

“Wait, no, Dylan. He’s right. He owns me. I let him, okay? I’m his. Look.” I bent my head and pulled my hair to the side. “See? I’m his. I chose to be here, chose to be his.”

My father gasped. “No, Stella.”

“See, *Dylan*?” Vinemont’s self-satisfied tone made me want to claw his eyes out.

“All I see is a pussy who gets his rocks off hurting women,” Dylan

snarled.

Score one for Dylan.

“Let’s not be so reductive. I enjoy hurting men, too, especially dumb brutes like you. Want me to show you?” Vinemont pushed off the doorframe and stood at the ready.

I smoothed my hair back over the mark. “Stop, both of you! Dylan, please, for me, just talk to me a while longer. Ignore him. Don’t you see? He wants you to go outside and fight him.”

“Time’s wasting, Dylan,” Vinemont added not-so-helpfully.

Dad dropped his head in his hands. I’d never seen him so defeated. I sank to my knees at his feet. “Please don’t, Dad. It’s going to be okay. All of it. Eleven months left? That’s nothing. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I’ll never forgive myself.” He shuddered as a sob ripped through him.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I said. “Please don’t torture yourself. I want you to be healthy and happy when I come home. I want you to be waiting for me with open arms. I’ll be there, Daddy. You’ll see. It’s not that long at all.” I pressed my forehead to his.

He offered no more words as his tears overcame him. I wrapped my arms around his shaking frame. I pulled from some deep well of strength inside myself—one I didn’t even know was there—as I held him.

“Time’s up.” Vinemont scowled at us.

“Look at him! Do you truly have no heart?” I hissed.

“In this case? No. No, I don’t. Now, gents, I suggest you get the fuck out of my house.”

“And if we don’t?” Dylan asked.

“Lucius,” Vinemont called.

His brother appeared, the two of them presenting a solid wall of muscle. They were almost a matching set. Both were glowering, their threat palpable. They could beat Dylan and my father senseless, and they would if given the opportunity.

“I’ll walk you out. Come on.” I refused to allow them to hurt Dad or Dylan.

My father rose with difficulty, and I helped him to the front door. Dylan took his other elbow as we maneuvered down the front steps. A black BMW waited out front.

“Did your mom get you a new car?” I asked.

“No, it’s his.” Dylan gestured to Dad.

“Oh.” I supposed his old, beat up Camry finally died.

I gave Dad another long hug. “I’ll see you again soon. I promise.”

He put a shaking hand to my cheek. “I’ll count the moments.”

Vinemont snorted as if Dad had told a joke. I shot him a corrosive glare.

Dylan and I helped Dad into the driver’s seat. Once he was in, I gave Dylan a long hug. Both Vinemont and Lucius smirked, no doubt feeling like they’d won some sort of victory. I’d show them.

When Dylan pulled away, I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth. At first he was surprised, but then he deepened it, bending me back and clutching me to him. His tongue sank in my mouth, trying to get the fullest taste possible. It wasn’t exactly enjoyable, but when he pulled me back upright and I broke the embrace, the fire in the Vinemont brothers’ eyes was more than worth it.

“That was…” Dylan ran a hand through his hay-colored locks. “That was nice.”

“I’ll see you again soon.” I put my hand on his chest, playing it up like an Oscar was hanging in the balance.

He sobered. “I’ll get you out of here. I swear I will.”

I smiled at him, though I knew his oath would be broken. There was no getting out of here. Not for me. Not until my time was up.

Dylan walked to the passenger side and dropped in. I waved them away down the driveway. When the car disappeared in the glare of the sun, I turned and floated back up the stairs.

Vinemont grabbed my arm. “What was that?”

“What?” I fluttered my lashes innocently.

“You know what.”

I shrugged, enjoying the muscle ticking in his jaw. “I’m just an affectionate stepsister. What can I say?” I pulled my arm from his grasp and strode past an equally pissed Lucius.

“Good afternoon, boys,” I called, and closed the front door behind me, my heart full to bursting with my petty victory.

THE NEXT MORNING, I breakfasted with Teddy. He was back from school for the weekend. We actually had a long discussion about his art appreciation class. Like Lucius, he seemed to have an eye for good art.

He started out throwing major shade at Jackson Pollack, but by the end of his second coffee, he was coming around to the idea that all art didn't have to be still lifes and flowers in vases. I was growing fonder of him despite myself. He seemed so normal, like a young man trying to figure himself out and make his way in the world.

I wondered how such a well-adjusted person could have come from the likes of the Vinemont family. Then again, I'd only ever met Lucius and Sinclair. I didn't know what their parents had been like.

"So, now that we've gotten your art classes straightened out," I said, "I have a few questions of my own. I'm tired of being cooped up in here, and I think you can help me out. Are there horses I could ride?"

"Like here, on the estate?" He tore through a piece of bacon and winked at the pretty maid as she refilled my cup.

"Yeah."

"Sure. I'll take you. I can't ride with you, though. I have to finish some homework, and then I have a date." His gaze slid back to the maid, Laura.

"Oh? Something romantic?" I asked.

"We'll see." He stood. "Come on."

I followed him out to the hallway.

"Hang on, Stella. You can't wear tennis shoes to ride. Got any boots?"

I looked down at my outfit. "You're right. I'll meet you back here in five

minutes.”

I rushed upstairs and threw on some jeans, a t-shirt, a light jacket, and boots before returning to Teddy. Laura scurried away when I hit the bottom step. Teddy smiled, his lips a little redder than they were when I left him.

“Don’t say anything to Sin, okay?” He led me through the kitchen and then out through a back hallway.

“I don’t intend to say anything to him, period. So that should be easy.”

“Yeah, you two have some kind of crazy thing going on. I don’t really understand it. I’ve learned just to not ask any questions anymore. They don’t tell me anything, anyway.” He shrugged. His hair was lighter than Vinemont’s but he was just as tall and almost as built. It was no wonder Laura had taken a liking to him.

He led me to some sort of ATV that was parked behind the house and motioned for me to get on the back. He swung a leg over and cranked it up.

“Where are the, um, helmets?” I asked over the sound of the engine.

“Scared?” He smiled, and I realized he was a lady killer hidden in the body of a young, sweet man.

I snuggled up behind him and wrapped my arms around his middle. “Go fast.”

He laughed, a deep rumble I could feel through his back.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The day was uncharacteristically warm, but the breeze created by the speeding ATV was delicious. The smell of fall was in the air, crisp and familiar. Many trees still bore some seasonal color, while others had already given up, their branches bare and dormant.

He gunned it down the curving drive. I squealed with the pleasure of movement and freedom. The barn loomed up ahead, large and classically red. Bales of hay were lined up out front, and chickens pecked around from a nearby coop. It was a lovely picture, really—the sky mostly blue with a few fluffy clouds, the red of the barn, and the color in the trees, all working together to create something idyllic.

We flew past the barn and came to the stables, painted the same iconic red. He parked out front and helped me off the ATV.

“That was fun.”

He smiled again, beautiful. “Anytime. I’ll get you set up. Come on.”

We went into the stables and he disappeared into what I assumed was the tack room. There were several horses in the expansive enclosure. Two struck

my fancy. One, large and dark. He nickered at me in greeting. I held out my hand and rubbed his nose lightly. He was proud but still friendly.

The next was a white mare, so light she looked almost silver. She watched me approach and nuzzled my hand.

“Oh, you’ve gone for Gloria. She’s my favorite. I would have picked her for you, myself.”

“Do you take care of the horses all the time?”

“No. I’d love to, though. Just don’t have the time with school. We have a stable master and a few grooms. They keep the horses and take them to shows and things like that. They’re out at a show right now. Should be back tomorrow.”

Teddy carried a saddle to Gloria’s stall.

“Come on Gloria, how does a nice ride sound?” She nickered and nodded her head.

I laughed. “She certainly knows how to get her point across.”

“You’ll never meet a smarter horse.” He threw a glance over his shoulder at the black gelding. “No offense, Shadow.”

Shadow didn’t respond.

“That’s Sin’s horse,” he explained.

“I should have guessed.”

Teddy led Gloria from the stall and got her all set up for me. Once the bridle was set, he helped me up and adjusted the stirrups.

“Feel good?” He ran a hand down Gloria’s mane.

“Yep. I think this is just right. Thanks, Teddy.” I loved being astride a horse. It made me feel so tall, powerful.

“My pleasure.” He led Gloria and me from the shady stables out into the dappled light.

“Now, like I said, I don’t know the deal, but I’m pretty sure I’d be in big trouble if you rode off into the sunset and never came back.” He squinted up at me.

“Not on your watch, Teddy. I promise.”

“All right then. Head that way if you want to ride past the lake and over the levee. There are some pulp woods over there if you want trees above you, or you could ride back toward the house. It’s up to you.”

“I think I’ll see the lake.”

“Good choice.” He looked up. “Don’t stay out here too long. When it’s warm like this, storms aren’t far behind.”

“I won’t. It’s been a long time since I’ve ridden. My ass will be sore in no time.” I blushed. *What did I just say?*

He chuckled. “Fair enough.”

I set off at a slow trot, following the road. Teddy roared off on his ATV back to the house. I hoped his date went well.

He was right about the day being unseasonably warm. I shed my jacket and tied it around my waist. I spurred Gloria on a little faster and she was happy to oblige. Maybe she’d been cooped up for too long, just like me. She was a smooth ride, her pace perfect. Someone had clearly loved on her and trained her well.

Before long, we were racing through the grass. The wind whipped against my face and my hair flew out behind me. I loved every second of it. Fear mixed with exhilaration as I leaned down and gripped her mane. The sun bathed my face in light and delicious heat.

We’d sped for miles, the stables long gone and only the encroaching woods and the thinner strip of grass next to the road in our view. Out here, away from the house, the grounds were far less manicured, the grass high and wild.

We startled some deer in an open field as we hurtled past, sending them scattering for the trees, their white tails up in alarm. Gloria didn’t seem to mind. She powered ahead, free and fast, the wind a song of liberation in our ears.

After a few more minutes of a full-on gallop, I pulled back on the reins, slowing her down and sitting back upright. I guided her back onto the road and we clip-clopped over a bridge spanning a wide bayou branch. Fish swam in the waters beneath us and frogs sang in the trees. A few hundred yards ahead I caught the sparkle of a large span of water. The levee. We trotted up to the edge. It was a sizeable reservoir, the lake disappearing into wooded inlets far off in the distance.

On the far edge, I could just make out the straight lines of a cottage in the woods.

“Think there are alligators in there, Gloria?”

She nickered and nipped at the high grass.

Cattails grew along the sides of the water and lily pads floated here and there. A ramshackle dock and small wooden boat were abandoned nearby. The water darkened toward the center. How deep was it?

I guided Gloria further up the bank where a small retaining pond split off

from the larger lake. A grassy berm separated the bodies of water. At the top, I dismounted and dropped to the ground. The last few cicadas of the summer played their song in the pines that hemmed in the water on all sides. I always associated the sound with hot days.

I let Gloria eat the high grass as I lay out on the ground, staring up at the passing clouds. I popped in the stolen earbuds and set Lucius' iPod to random, listening to his eclectic mix of music as the sun smiled down, warming me with comforting beams.

I laced my fingers behind my head and closed my eyes.



Gloria's loud whinny woke me. I must have dozed off in the warm sun. It was gone now, dark clouds hovering above, promising a downpour. A rumble of thunder had Gloria nuzzling at my head with her nose.

I got to my knees and then stood. "I'm up. I'm up. We'd better get back."

I stowed the purloined iPod. As I clambered onto Gloria's back, the clouds erupted, huge raindrops pelting us. Then the hail came, larger than anything that should ever fall from the sky. The size of golf balls, the ice hurt with each stinging impact. It would take half an hour, likely more, to get back to the stables. The only other shelter was the cottage in the woods I'd spotted earlier. I couldn't see it anymore for the curtains of rain and the pelting hail, but it wasn't far.

A piece struck my forehead and I felt warm blood running down my face.
Shit.

I couldn't stay out in the open. I made my decision and urged Gloria toward the woods. We would have to ride the storm out in the cottage. The thunder grew louder, the booming reverberating in my chest as lightning streaked across the sky.

We made it to the tree line, the branches above blocking out or at least

slowing down the balls of hail. Gloria whinnied as a streak of lightning led to a deafening crack of thunder. I stroked her mane.

“It’s okay, girl. We just have to make it to the cottage.”

I led her through the trees, heading to where I remembered the cottage sat. Or at least I thought I was. We were in the heart of the storm, gloom and sheets of rain cutting visibility down to nearly nothing.

I urged her on. The cottage had to be nearby. I hoped I hadn’t missed it in the murky woods. We went a little farther, but there was still no sign of the cottage. We must have just passed it. I turned Gloria around to double back.

The rain seemed to let up a little bit, a brief respite. Maybe the storm was passing and we could head back to the stables instead of trying to ride it out? Then, a strange sensation shot through my body, like a tingling. *Oh, no.*

“Gloria, go!” I cried.

Too late. Lightning struck so near us that Gloria reared back and threw me. I hit a tree trunk. The deafening boom of thunder was the last thing I heard.

I MADE IT to the front porch before a heavy rain began to fall. Then came the hail. Good thing I'd parked in the garage. Once inside, I pulled my coat off and handed it to Farns before loosening my tie.

"She in the library?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Sinclair. I believe she and Teddy went out for a ride."

"Not smart." Teddy would take care of her, at least. An image of Stella in a wet t-shirt floated through my mind. The thought of her with Teddy was no longer so palatable. "I guess I'll go see if they made it out of the rain."

"Very good, sir." Farns smiled.

I climbed the stairs two at a time to my room. I stripped out of my suit and dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. I was ripping a raincoat from its hanger when a rhythmic banging wafted to my ears.

Lucius was still at the plant. I'd spoken to him on the phone, so no one else should have been in our wing of the house. I yanked on some boots and headed down the hall, creeping along the runner so my steps were silent.

The closer I got to Teddy's room, the louder the sound grew, and it was interspersed with grunts and feminine moans. My hands clenched. Fire laced around my heart, squeezing like a lasso of flames, drawing me inexorably closer to his door. The image of Stella was back, but this time she was beneath Teddy, writhing in pleasure as he fucked her. I had to lean a hand on the wall as my sight grew hazy, rage coloring everything a shade darker.

No. Well, Farns did say they'd gone for a ride. I would have laughed if anything were funny. Nothing was. Murder might be entertaining, but definitely not amusing. I gripped the door handle, steeling myself for what I

was about to see. The cries grew louder and beneath them was the sound of skin slapping on skin.

I flung the door open. Teddy was on top of the maid from the kitchen, Laura. He rolled off her when he saw me.

“Sin!” Teddy threw his blanket across her naked body.

I let out a pent up breath. Relief washed through me, replacing the bitter taste of hate and rage.

“Don’t you fucking knock anymore?”

“Fuck, Teddy. I thought you were...” I shook my head.

“With Stella?” Teddy asked.

“I should go.” Laura’s voice quavered.

“No, stay.” Teddy smoothed a hand over her knee.

Her face looked pinched as she stared up at me.

I sighed. “I’m not going to fire you, Laura.” *Though I should.*

I should have ordered her to pack up and leave then and there. Instead, my mind was whirring away with where Stella was, what she was doing. Teddy’s discipline could wait.

She let out a pent up breath, the blood returning to her face with a vengeance.

“Of course he’s not going to fire you.” Teddy glared at me.

“Teddy. We’ve talked about this. You can’t fuck the help.”

“Just like you can’t fuck the Acquisition?”

I returned his glare. “Stella is none of your business. I told you to stay out of it.”

“It’s kind of hard for me to stay out of it when you force her to stand naked on the table or whip her so badly—”

“Teddy!” I barked. I glanced to Laura. She looked away, pretending to be deaf.

He shrugged and dropped his gaze. “You know what I mean.”

“Teddy, please believe me when I tell you that you don’t know shit about any of it. Not the Acquisition, and definitely not Stella.” I regretted the words as soon as they were out. Teddy looked stung. Lucius was fair game, but Teddy—he wasn’t like us. He had a good heart.

I balled my anger up and pushed it down before resuming in an even tone. “I’m sorry, Teddy. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I’d know more about it if you’d tell me. Maybe I could help.” He stood and ran a hand through his hair. He didn’t seem to notice his half-mast dick

was waving around.

“You don’t need to know. It’s only for the firstborn.” I’d had this conversation about six times with him ever since Stella arrived.

“Then why does Lucius know?”

“Lucius just thinks he knows. He doesn’t. Trust me. When you’re older and if you have to deal with this shit, you’ll know. And you’ll regret it, okay?”

He grumbled and sat back down. He shot a glance to Laura and his demeanor brightened the slightest bit.

The silence became more than awkward. Laura coughed.

“So, where’s Stella?” The question that had been on my lips from the moment I walked in the door finally broke free.

“She went for a ride.” Teddy turned to look out the window. “Shit. I didn’t realize that was thunder I was hearing. I thought it was—”

“Your bed busting through the wall, stallion?” I needed to break the tension. Teddy was worth protecting and I didn’t want him to feel like I did—caught in an unfair trap.

He smiled, blushing. “Something like that.”

I followed his gaze out into the downpour.

Fuck. If Stella was out in this, she’d be soaked through and lucky if she avoided the hail. The temperature was dropping now that the cold front was moving through. I needed to find her. Fast.

“She was heading to the levee, if that helps,” Teddy said.

“It does. Thanks, Ted. Sorry for the interruption.”

I swung the door closed. As I hit the stairs, the rhythm began wafting from his room again.

I dashed to the garage and started my car. The rain was a milky barrier and the hail pinged off the luxury vehicle. It was painful hearing the damage, but I was too worried to care. I broke through the sheets of opaque water and raced down the slick drive into the back part of the estate. I contemplated driving down toward the levee, but realized if I did and she’d gone off in the woods, I wouldn’t be able to find her. I pulled up into the stables and killed the engine.

I hoped she was inside, warm and dry, waiting for the rain to stop. I ran down the stalls, looking for her. She wasn’t there, and the mare Gloria was gone. Something unsettling and queasy swirled in my stomach. It was a feeling I wasn’t very familiar with, not anymore. Fear.

Shadow whinnied at a particularly loud blast of thunder and stomped his disapproval. The tack room door was open and a saddle was missing. I wasted no time getting my horse saddled and ready. He stood calmly as the thunder rumbled, as if desperate to get out for a ride, storm be damned.

“It’s going to be a wet trip.” I climbed into the saddle and spurred him out of the stables and into the rain. At least the hail had stopped.

The droplets stung as I urged Shadow into the deluge. We set a hellish pace. It wasn’t simply raining, the sky was jettisoning the water, throwing it forcefully earthward. Lightning split the sky above us, the flash and resulting sound making Shadow rear.

“Steady. Steady, boy.” I held onto the reins for dear life and eased him back down. “Keep it together.” I ran my hand along his nape, smoothing his mane as the rain soaked through me, the jacket doing nothing against the onslaught.

He resumed a moderate gallop, and I guided him onto the road as the grass along the sides became muck. It was harder on his hooves, but made it easier for him to maneuver, so he picked up his pace. I felt as if I were racing the clock—a burning need to get to Stella had settled deep in my gut.

What was she thinking going for a ride alone? If she wanted to ride she should have asked me. I would have taken her. Now, she’d gotten herself into a mess. Even as I silently berated her, that same queasy fear overcame my ire.

I saw movement in the gloomy sheets of rain ahead. A horse. My heart rose. I pulled back on the reins. I could lead Stella back to the stables and get her warmed up in no time. I ignored the intense relief that settled over me and squinted against the wall of water. A gust of wind pushed the watery curtain aside for a split second. My heart sank.

Fuck.

Gloria emerged from the downpour and flew past us, back toward the stables. She was riderless and beyond spooked. My momentary reprieve sent me into an even deeper state of panic once I realized it was nothing more than a mirage. Stella was somewhere out in the storm.

My thoughts came in a torrent to match the deluge all around me. Teddy said she went toward the levee. Where would she have wandered?

“Faster, Shadow.” I dug my heels in and he shot forward.

I ignored the bite of the water droplets lashing my face. The cold was seeping into my pores, leeching away my body heat as I urged Shadow forward. The streaking lightning and rolling thunder became just another part

of the blur of scenery. We were full gallop, a breakneck pace, racing into the heart of the raging storm.

We crossed the narrow bridge leading to the levee. I pulled him to the left, up to the top of the knoll where I felt Stella may have tarried. We slowed and turned in a circle around the area. She must have been here. I could barely see, but the grass had been chewed, and some of the blades were smoothed down, as if someone had lain there recently. She'd been here. Where did she go?

Though I couldn't see it, I knew the old hunting camp was nearby. She may have tried to make it to the log cabin. I spurred Shadow up and around the edge of the lake and into the pine woods. I kept a tight hold on the reins. Shadow was spooked, ready to bolt. I kept his gait slow. If Stella were trying to shelter under the branches, I couldn't afford to miss her. Shadow's feet were sinking in the muddy ground beneath the trees and he kept trying to move faster.

"Easy boy. Slow. Keep it slow." The roar of the rain hitting every surface stifled my voice, but Shadow obeyed.

I angled him toward where I knew the log cabin sat in the woods. We'd gone about a hundred yards before the smell of ozone overcame the fresh scent of water in the air. A blackened tree, scarred and hewn in two lay to our right. It must have been struck recently.

Shit. Where is she?

We cantered a little further before I saw her. She lay in a crumpled mass on the ground. My heart, already racing, felt like it could have stopped altogether, never to beat again. I jumped from Shadow, keeping a hard grip on the reins as I dragged him to her.

"Stella!" I yelled against the rain, my voice barely carrying above the howling wind.

She didn't move. Blood streamed from a wound along her brow and she was pale, far too white. I scooped her into my arms, the fear in my soul real, almost palpable.

She was breathing. When her chest moved against me, I carefully draped her limp body across Shadow's back. With one hand holding her secure and the other still squeezing the reins, I led Shadow through the trees, the rumbles of thunder no match for the booming beat of my heart. I pushed forward, ripping my boots from the soaked and muddy ground again and again. After a while, my legs burned from the effort. I ignored the pain. Nothing would stop

me from getting her to safety. I kept pushing until the cabin came into view.

I pulled Shadow up onto the wide porch and fastened his reins to the railing. "You'll be safe here." I hoisted Stella from his back and carried her inside.

The cabin was old, but we kept it up. Recently remodeled with modern amenities, it was much more than a usual hunting camp. I tracked mud onto the Carrera marble floors and laid Stella, dirty and bloody, onto the leather sofa. The storm still raged outside, but the cabin was like a cocoon, muffling the raw fury of the elements.

We were soaked. I brushed matted hair from her face and examined the cut along her temple. It was shallow, but bleeding like a son of a bitch. I felt around through her hair and discovered a golf ball sized knot on the side of her head. *Fuck.*

"Stella, wake up for me. Stella?"

She shivered. I set to work stripping her, yanking her boots off first before getting her down to her bra and panties. I checked her over, looking for blood or any broken bones. The dread left me incrementally, each piece of her that was intact wicked it away.

She seemed fine except for her head. Which was the exact opposite of fine, really. More than anything, I needed to get her warm. I picked her up and lay her down on the fluffy rug in front of the fireplace. I grabbed the remote from the mantle and clicked on the flames, forcing them higher and higher until warmth rushed forward and onto us.

I hurriedly stripped my clothes and pulled her close, her back to my front as we lay in front of the roaring fire. I pulled her hair away from her face and smoothed it down.

"Stella, I need you to wake up for me." I ran my hand down her side. Her skin was clammy and cold despite the blast of heat.

I grabbed the edge of the rug and flung it over us. We were wrapped in sheepskin and directly in front of the fire. We would either warm up or burn to death.

"Come on, Stella." I needed her to be all right. I told myself it was because I needed her for the Acquisition. It was a lie. I wanted her. I cared for her. And wasn't that just a fucking problem of epic proportions.

I kept rubbing my hand down her side, willing my heat into her. Slowly, her skin warmed under my touch. She shifted, her eyelids fluttering, and I breathed a sigh that carried more angst than I knew I was capable of holding.

“Sinclair?”

“Yes. I’m here.”

“What happened?”

“You’ll have to tell me. I found you in the woods. How’s your head?”

“It hurts.” Her voice was small.

I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her around so she faced me. The cut had stopped bleeding, but red still remained along the edges of her hair and in her eyebrow. I ran my hand over the bump on her head. It seemed to have shrunk a bit. I tilted her chin up so I could look into her eyes. The pupils appeared to match. No concussion. Maybe.

I shook my head and pulled her closer to me so her head fell into the crook of my neck. “You are a mess.”

“You should see the other guy.”

I laughed. I hadn’t actually laughed from pure amusement at anyone except for my brothers in so long it felt odd, but also right.

“Mmm, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh. Well, maybe you do whenever you’re drowning puppies or something. I’ve just never heard it.”

I nuzzled into her wet hair. “Puppy drowning is every Thursday. You’ll just have to catch me at the right time.”

She giggled and draped an arm over me. The air between us expanded, somehow becoming bigger, fuller; maybe even a little expectant. We were lying on a rug in front of a fire while the storm raged outside. We should be drinking wine and laughing and fucking. But this wasn’t a romance or a fairy tale. She was my Acquisition.

“Stop thinking.” She lifted her lips to mine and brushed against them softly. A delicious tease.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“If I can then you can. After all, I’m the captive, the slave, the Acquisition, the one you whip and humili—”

I claimed her mouth because, fuck, I wanted to and to shut her up. Hearing her recite my long list of sins was too much truth. At that moment in front of the fire, I wanted the fairy tale. I wanted to be her knight instead of her demon. I kissed her like I meant it, like I felt something more for her than ownership. I let myself go. Just this one time.

She answered with more verve than I had any right to deserve or expect. She had surprised me so many times over the past weeks that I should have been accustomed to it. I wasn’t. When she brought her hand to my cheek and

caressed it lovingly, I was caught up in her more than I could stand. I threw the rug from us and pulled her on top of me, never breaking our desperate kiss.

She straddled me, the fabric of her panties a maddening barrier between her delectable skin and mine. I unhooked her bra. She sat up and took it off, her nipples puckered and hard in the dancing firelight. I palmed her breasts, the weight of each perfect in my hands. She closed her eyes and dropped her head back as I touched and stroked and teased. I leaned up and caught one of the pearled tips in my mouth. She tasted like rain and sweat and sweetness. Perfection. I licked and sucked her in, rubbing the nub against my tongue. Her hips moved against my cock, giving me a glimpse of what awaited me beneath the fabric—hot, wet, and wanting.

I hooked my fingers in the side of her panties and ripped them. I did the same on the other side and yanked them from her. My cock jumped at the promise of euphoria her pussy offered. I knew it was tight, slick, perfect. She rubbed her needy clit over my shaft, giving herself a cheating pleasure just as she gave me the same. I wanted it all.

I gripped her hips and raised her. She wrapped her small hand around my cock. She'd gone from cold to scorching hot in moments, and her touch made me hiss.

“Fucking hell, Stella.” I could barely get the words out through my gritted teeth.

She teased me, rubbing my head against her clit as her hips rocked against me. I wasn't waiting any more. I pulled her forward, positioning my head at her opening. When she slid down on my shaft, I groaned from the demanding need to thrust up into her. My fingertips dug into her soft hips. She gave me a sultry gaze, eyes green and partly hidden beneath her lashes. When she raised up and settled down again, pushing me as deeply as I could go, it took every ounce of willpower I had not to flip her over and fuck her hard and fast.

She leaned down over me, brushing her perfect tits against my chest. She set a slow rhythm, as if trying to get used to my length inside her. It wasn't enough. I thrust up into her, meeting her strokes with pure animal lust to take everything she had. She was panting, each breath hot between her parted lips. I spread one palm over her ass and fisted her hair with the other.

I crushed our mouths together as our bodies melded into one. She moaned and sped her pace, gliding back and forth on my shaft and rubbing her clit

against me. I wanted it in my mouth, but my cock wouldn't relinquish her tight heat for anything. I was rough, claiming her mouth and pulling her hair. She dug her nails into my chest as she rode me, all reservations gone, surrendered to our mutual pleasure.

I couldn't wait any longer. I flipped her onto her back and spread her legs wide beneath me. I sat back and fed each inch into her flushed pussy. It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen, making my balls pull up even tighter against me.

"Fucking beautiful, Stella."

"Sin," she breathed.

She'd never called me that. I would put that one rasping word on replay in my mind every time I stroked off to thoughts of her tight body.

I rammed myself home, all gentleness gone. I needed her, all of her. She gasped as I lay on top of her and pistoned into her. She grabbed tight onto my shoulders as I fastened my mouth to her neck, the slight salt of her sweat delicious on my tongue. She dug her heels into my back as I ground my cock into her softest skin.

Her hips were pinned, but she still managed to push against me, adding even more roughness to our frantic fucking.

"You like that, Stella? My cock deep inside you?"

"God, yes," she cried.

"Not god, Stella." I gave her some longer, harder strokes, and my cock demanded I explode inside her.

"Sin." She arched her back, rubbing her tits against me.

"Better." I bent my head down and pulled a stiff nipple into my mouth, sucking it as I pounded into her.

She scored her hands through my hair. "I'm so close."

I grazed her nipple with my teeth before I raised my head up to meet her lusty gaze. "Yeah?"

I smoothed my hand down her stomach and leaned back, watching her tits bounce beautifully with each impact. I pulled her hips further up to me so I could stay just as deep. Because I was a selfish asshole.

I put one hand on her hip to keep her pinned beneath me then licked my other thumb and pressed the pad against her clit.

She bucked when I touched her sensitive nub.

"Look at me, Stella. I want you to tell me when you come, and I want you to tell me who made you come."

She nodded and gasped when I increased the pressure on her clit, still fucking her hard. My cock demanded release. I wouldn't give in, not until she was clamping around me.

Her gaze locked on mine as I swirled my thumb around her clit in small circles. Her pussy pulsed, and I knew she was near the edge. I pushed her over, rubbing her clit faster until her wet walls tensed and squeezed.

“Sin!” She came with crushing pressure on my cock.

Her pussy convulsed as she gripped the rug and repeated that one word. My cock couldn't take any more, not when I had this beautiful sight before me and her cunt milking me. I gave a final hard thrust and groaned as I shot into her, deep and hard. I filled her, each hot kick of my cock a blissful release until I was spent.

I let myself fall on top of her, feeling her last shudders as I remained buried deep inside.

MY BODY WAS sated. My soul, bereft. What had I done? This man who had just given me the most erotic moment of my life was hell-bent on my destruction.

I turned my head toward the fire as he dropped light kisses along my neck. A traitor was here in this room, and she lived inside my breast. I thought I was playing the game, making Vinemont care about me enough to keep me safe. But an ache in my heart, one that told me I'd taken these stolen moments in too deeply, was an accusatory slap in my face.

I tried to lure him to me, to make him care. I'd done the opposite, and my heart was the one caught in the trap. Even now, I wanted to taste his lips again, to make him hard and wanting under my touch. I let out a deep breath.

"Stop." He dropped kisses along my jaw.

"Stop what?"

"Thinking." He took my mouth again, gentle now, reverent.

I wanted him so much it twisted my heart. I wanted him to want me, to treasure me. But he'd always been upfront. Hell, he'd even told me he would gladly torture me all over again. He swept his tongue into my mouth, trying to erase all thought from my mind and nearly accomplishing it. His scent was all over me, marking me as his. I loved it and hated it at once.

I broke the kiss before I fell back under his spell. "I can't."

"My dick is still inside you, Stella, and now you can't?" He moved his hips for emphasis, sending a thrill back to my clit.

I pushed on his chest and he withdrew, pulling from me. I wanted him back immediately. He took in my body, the bruises coloring my nipples

where he'd bitten me, the marks on my neck, his fingertips imprinted on my hips. He still looked hungry. I wanted to feed him.

I couldn't.

I pulled the fluffy rug up to my chest. He met my eyes.

"This was a mistake," I said.

"I know." He searched around, found his boxers, and pulled them on.

His words stung me more than they should have. The heat from the fire was oppressive now. He grabbed a remote and turned it down to a low flame. He ran a hand through his hair in what I now recognized as the classic "Vinemont man in distress" move.

"This can't happen again," he said. "None of it. We just have to make it through the year. That's all." He put a resolve into his words that I knew he didn't feel. "This was just...circumstances." He waved a hand at the windows where sunlight now poured through.

More pain bloomed in my chest. I ignored it because he was right. I was still his Acquisition, his plaything. He was still my captor. I dropped the rug and searched around for my clothes. He stared hard at my bare skin before looking away, his jaw tight.

The fire had mostly dried my clothes except for my jeans. I pulled them on anyway. He dressed, too, his movements quick and angry.

He led me through the front door.

Shadow stood on the front porch, his head almost brushing the rafters. He nickered as we emerged and nuzzled Vinemont's hand. He was so gentle with the animal, obvious affection in his touches. Shadow responded, resting his head on Vinemont's shoulder. They were a gorgeous set, dark and handsome.

Vinemont led him down the steps and into the wet grass. I followed, and Vinemont helped me up before seating himself behind me.

"Come on, Shadow, let's go home."

We rode in silence. A cold breeze had kicked up in the wake of the storm. Winter wouldn't be far behind. I lay back into Vinemont for warmth, or so I told myself. He wrapped his arms around me, keeping at least some of the chill wind at bay. Shadow maintained an easy pace, none of us seeming to be in a hurry to return.

My thoughts couldn't seem to focus on anything other than the man at my back, his actions and words. I still wanted to believe something was different between us. That our stolen moments in the library and at the cottage meant something more than just sex.

I wondered what was going through his mind. Was he worrying just like I was? He was unreadable at best. I relaxed back into him more, snuggling against his hard chest. He pulled me in closer, barely holding the reins as Shadow leisurely walked home.

As we approached the stables, I remembered my own horse that had bolted.

“Gloria?”

“I’m sure she’s munching on some hay inside. She galloped past us in the thick of the downpour.”

The storm, my accident – Vinemont had seen me through all of it. “Thanks, by the way.”

“For what?”

“For...well, for saving me.”

He leaned away. “I didn’t. I haven’t.”

He pulled his arms from around me, letting the outside chill seep into my bones for the short distance before we trotted into the stables.

We skirted a sleek black car, still wet and slightly dinged. Gloria waited there, just as he’d said, grazing on a hay bale.

Vinemont dropped to the ground and then helped me down. He dug in his pocket and handed me his car key. “Take it back to the house. I need to get Gloria and Shadow settled. You need to warm up.”

“I can stay and—”

“No. Just go.” It was a dismissal. He turned his back and started unburdening Shadow.

Asshole. I opened the fancy car’s door and slid into the driver’s seat. I glanced down at the transmission. It was a stick. I hadn’t driven a stick in years and wasn’t much good at it to begin with. I smirked at Vinemont’s broad back. This would hurt him more than it hurt me. I pushed the button on the ignition and the engine purred to life.

I depressed the clutch and easily put the car into reverse. I hit the gas and let off the clutch. It lurched forward and sputtered.

Not reverse.

Vinemont glanced over his shoulder and shook his head. I moved the gear shift into what was, most likely, reverse and tried it again. This time I slid backward out of the stables so quickly I had to slam on the brakes once I reached the smooth drive.

Vinemont had completely turned now, watching me with his arms crossed

over his chest. I couldn't tell if he wore a look of chagrin or regret. Either way, I was going to make the next gear shift hurt. I ground it into first gear, the transmission screaming an angry noise, and hit the gas. I was off like a shot, leaving Vinemont and the stables behind me.

I moved it into second gear, imagining the look on Vinemont's face as I ground that one even harder, the transmission making a vicious metal on metal sound. I smiled and whipped the rest of the way to the house. I parked out front, satisfied with myself.

Renee was sitting in the library and followed me up the stairs when I dashed in. I stripped in my room as she entered.

"Where have you been? What's happened?" Her curious gaze settled on my neck. "Are those love bites?"

"I, uh, I'm freezing. I need a bath and then I'll tell you about it."

She kicked into maid mode and ran me a hot bath while I tossed off my remaining clothes. As I soaked, letting the warmth soothe my aching body—some of the soreness from the riding accident, some of it from Vinemont's attentions—I told her about my day. I left out most of the sexy details, but she got the picture well enough.

The hand wringing began almost instantly. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the tub.

"Is it really as bad as all that, Renee?"

"Yes, and worse."

"Why?"

"If his mother finds out—"

My eyes shot open and I whipped my head around to her. She clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Vinemont's mother is *alive*? You told me she was dead!"

Epic hand wringing ensued. "I never said she was dead. You just drew your own conclusions."

Realization dawned. "The third floor?"

She nodded, a troubled look overcoming her features.

"Why does it matter? Where is she? Can she do anything about this, about the Acquisition?" My mind raced from thought to thought. Why was Vinemont's mother such a secret?

"It matters, and no, she can't help you. She wouldn't even if she could. She was Sovereign for ten years, you see."

I turned in the water so quickly it sloshed against the sides of the tub and

splashed to the floor. “No, I don’t see. You keep all these secrets from me. How could I possibly have any idea?”

“It’s just that Rebecca doesn’t want to have anything to do with it, with the Acquisition. She can’t.”

“Why not?” This was the most Renee had told me about the Acquisition since she revealed the multiple trials. I needed her to keep talking.

She sank to the floor next to the tub, resting on the bath mat. “I don’t see why I should keep it from you anymore, not now that you and Mr. Sinclair have...”

“Tell me.”

“It’s going to make everything so much worse for you.” Tears welled in her eyes.

I was glad I hadn’t told her about what we did that night in the library. She may have had a total come-apart.

“Rebecca found me at a time in my life when I had no purpose. I-I...” She examined her hands. “I was young and was selling my body in New Orleans.” Red rose from her collar and flowed into her face.

“I’m not judging you, Renee.” I had no right to pass judgment on anything anyone did to get by.

“Well, she found me there. Just happened across me, really. It was almost time for the Acquisition Ball, and the Vinemonts had been chosen that year. She was the eldest, so it fell to her to go through the process. I didn’t realize it then, but she was desperate to find her Acquisition. I was it. I was desperate to get out of New Orleans. So, it was fate.” The sorrow in her voice, the sense of betrayal, tore at me.

“I’m sorry, Renee.”

“Oh, it was a long time ago.” She swiped a tear away. “It was just that Rebecca was so kind and caring. And she truly was, even though the Acquisition was hanging over her head. Her maid at the time became my ally and told me how Rebecca had always been a lovely, sweet person. She was also a doting mother. I saw that myself. The way she loved on those boys of hers was beautiful.”

She paused and took a deep breath. “And she was good to me, too. She really was, until she couldn’t be anymore.”

“The ball?”

Renee nodded and absentmindedly picked at her collar. “Yes, there and then Christmas.” She blanched. “And then spring and summer.”

“What happened, Renee? What happens at those trials?”

“It depends on the Sovereign. My year—” Her voice caught in her throat. “They say my year was one of the most brutal in Acquisition history. They say it with pride, like it was a feather in their cap to enjoy so much suffering.”

Though the water was still warm, chills ran up and down my spine.

“Each trial has the same bent—in accordance with tradition—but the Sovereign can choose to add little twists to ‘enhance’ the experience. Christmas was the worst for me.” Her dark eyes sought mine. They were haunted, immensely sad. “The worst for both of us, Rebecca and me. And now I’m afraid it’ll be the worst for you, too.”

“What happened at Christmas, Renee?” I needed to know but dreaded her answer.

“My year? My year, they chained us out in the cold. It was freezing. The three of us shivered and cried. Have you ever been truly cold, to the point where your skin goes numb, but underneath there are a million needle pricks?” Her voice took on a faraway tone, and I realized she was no longer looking at me. She was still chained, cold, and afraid.

“They sat in heated tents and watched, drinking, laughing, and giving in to their most basic desires while we suffered.” She ran her hands up and down her arms. “Then, when they were ready for us, they brought us inside. We were on the verge of hypothermia. One of us even lost a toe from frostbite, though I heard that losing body parts was a rule violation. Everything in moderation.” She laughed, high and desperate.

“They laid us out on the tables in their tents. I was glad to be in the warmth...and then I wasn’t. They took turns. There were so many.” A tremor shot through her.

Horror welled in me. Is that what Vinemont intended to do to me? Let me be raped by the masked ghouls from the ball?

“They hurt me. I can’t lie. They did. But at some point during it, I sort of...disconnected. I was gone, burned away for the rest of the trial and for quite some time after. Rebecca wasn’t so lucky. We had been, we were...”

I reached out and smoothed her hair away from her face with my damp hand. “It’s okay, Renee. It’s okay. I’m sorry.”

I regretted reopening her wounds, but I needed to know. It was now or never.

She rubbed her tears away on her sleeve. “I loved her. I was certain she

loved me. But that trial, what they did to me. It changed her, made her cold, hard. That's how they win. Do you understand? The only way to win is to become one of them, to *really* be the sort of monster that can rule the entire depraved aristocracy with an iron fist. Do you see? That's what they'll do to Mr. Sinclair. He'll fall. He'll break. But he'll win. And when he does..."

Her sad eyes captured mine, foretelling my own dark future by retelling her past. "Rebecca won, but she lost herself."

“I CAN’T DO anything about it, Lucius.” I sank down into a chair in the study while Lucius paced around the room.

“I’m tired of the Sovereign taking such a huge cut,” Lucius said. “We work our asses off—well at least I do while you’re out playing public servant—and then fucking Cal comes in here and demands a goddamn ransom.”

“You know we have to pay.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “We’ve been over this a million times.”

Being Sovereign came with an untold number perks, the main one being a cut of all the income from the other ruling families. There was a yearly price and it was due within the month. Pay or suffer the consequences.

I was already dealing with far too many consequences to add non-payment to the list.

Lucius kicked the waste basket next to my desk. “We’re working the fucking Brazilians to death and putting even more pressure on our already troubled relations with our Mexican producers. Sugar cane isn’t as lucrative as it used to be. Even a fuckwit like Cal should be able to do the simple math.”

“I’m aware. It doesn’t matter. We have to pay Cal.” I couldn’t say it any other way. The facts were what they were.

He stopped pacing and stared out the window into the deepening night. “What else are we going to have to give him?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean, *who* I mean—Stella.” He turned to me, giving me the same pissed off look he’d worn ever since he realized I was the oldest

and, therefore, in charge of him.

“Stella is none of your concern. She’s mine.”

His eyes narrowed. “She doesn’t have to be.”

I stood, suddenly seething. Did he know? “What are you talking about?”

He crossed his arms over his chest, a self-satisfied grin on his face. “Mom told me some of the rules. She said if Stella chose me, I could take your place in the Acquisition.”

Fuck.

I was bone tired after the long day with Stella. I had a short fuse and Lucius was doing his damndest to light it. “Oh did she? Did she tell you the rest of the rules? Did she tell you what happens if you lose?”

“You don’t get to be Sovereign.” He shrugged. “So what? That’s not a loss. We’d be in the same situation we’re already in.”

I hesitated on the verge of telling him the true penalty, the blood that would be required for us to keep our position. It was an exhausting secret, one that weighed more heavily on me every day. Maybe if I shared the burden, it wouldn’t be so crushing. I opened my mouth to speak the lethal truth when Farns knocked and entered.

“What?” I snapped.

“We’ve had a call from the hospital in town. It seems Ms. Rousseau’s father has taken ill. He is in intensive care. Her stepbrother has requested she come. I wasn’t sure what you would like me to do with this news.”

“I know what *I’d* like you to do.” Stella entered behind Farns, her quiet steps masked by Lucius’ and my argument. How long had she been listening?

“It’s probably some sort of trick cooked up by your stepbrother,” I said. “I forbid you to go.” Surely, she realized it was nothing more than a desperate ruse? Transparent and dumb, just like her stepbrother.

She strode to me and stared into my eyes, my soul. “You can’t forbid me from seeing my father in intensive care.”

I gave Farns a look. He took the hint and backed into the hallway and closed the door.

“I can and I just did. Go back to your room.” I wasn’t letting her out of this house again, not after what had happened in the cabin earlier. She’d gotten to me, lanced through my rotten core and into the one piece of true heart I had left. I didn’t even know it was there until she’d clawed her way in there, too. Goddamn her.

“I’m not going anywhere until I speak to my father.” She kicked her chin

up and put her hands on her hips.

Lucius walked up behind her. “Sin, it’s her dad, maybe you should—”

“Maybe you should shut the fuck up, Lucius.” Seeing them together, standing like a united front against me, finally lit the powder keg. I grabbed Stella’s arm and ripped her away from him, pressing her back into my chest and putting my hand at her throat. She tried to scratch me, but I squeezed harder, cutting off her airway until she complied. I held Lucius’ gaze the entire time.

“She’s mine. All of this.” I slid my hand down her side, around her thigh, and cupped her pussy like the piece of shit caveman I was. “It’s all mine. So, back the fuck off.”

Lucius glowered and tensed. “I’ve had it with your shit.”

I held her fast, taunting him. “What, you want to fight me? Won’t you be embarrassed when I kick the shit out of you in front of your little crush here? Maybe then I’ll fuck her while you’re bleeding on the ground?”

Lucius raised his fists. “Let her go, and I’m going to knock your fucking teeth out.”

A sharp pain in my ribs shocked me out of our stare down. Stella had managed to sneak in an elbow while Lucius had me distracted. She pulled away from me and darted to stand behind Lucius, her hand on his arm. I thought I was a powder keg before. Now I was a fucking black powder factory going up in a blaze of heat and sound. He reached back, put a possessive hand on her hip, and smirked at me.

“I just want to see my father. That’s all. Please, Vinemont.” Her plea, delivered behind my leering brother, pushed me far past my limit.

“You do? Are you sure?” I turned my back and went to my desk, digging for a certain sheaf of papers.

“Yes, I’m sure. Please, I’ll come back. I promise. I just need to see him.”

“I’ll tell you what, Stella.” Venom laced every word. “I want you to do a little light reading. Then tell me if you still want to see him. If you do, you can go and visit him. How about it?”

“Fine.” She sounded relieved.

I laughed, the sound cruel and harsh even on my ears. I found the papers I was looking for and held them in my hand. She’d have to come to me.

“Hand them over,” Lucius said.

“Go fuck yourself. Stella, come here.”

She stepped out from behind him and tentatively approached me. She

wasn't fearful, but she wasn't trusting, either. I gripped the papers tighter.

Lucius trailed his hand down her arm. I wanted to pummel his face until he was no longer capable of begging me to stop.

Her fear was back. I needed it. I ate it up. It reminded me of what I needed to do, what I *had* to do. Even so, it tore at my heart, leaving a part of me shredded and raw. I wanted to say I'd never hurt her. Never give her reason to fear me. But it would be a lie.

I passed her the papers and then held my hands up to show her I meant no harm. But I did. The papers were the dagger, her reading them would twist the blade deep into her back. She took them over to one of the sofas next to a bright lamp. Darkness had fallen outside, painting the grounds in somber gray tones.

She read the first page, then flipped to the second. I knew when she understood. I knew the exact moment when she read the words, when she flipped to the third page to see her father's signature.

"He sold you to me, Stella."

Her gaze rose to mine, horror shining in her eyes along with myriad other emotions—all black, all painful.

"Before you even came in that night, into the room where he and I sat, he'd already signed that contract in your hands. One million dollars. I was so pleased with my good fortune. That was a pittance for a woman like you. He eagerly agreed, signing the paper and sending you to me. He even told me how to phrase my offer to you before you came in. Very helpful, really. And it worked. Oh, how it worked. You came out to the car as planned. Then you came here, as planned. He knew you'd sacrifice yourself for him. The one man you thought loved you was actually the one man who sold you to me. And, just so you know, he was guilty of every single charge against him. I give you my word."

Her hand rose to her face, covering her mouth as she gasped for air. I hadn't hit her, hadn't touched her, but I knew as surely as she sat there that I'd destroyed some deep piece of her heart. It was blasted away, spoiled so that nothing could ever grow there again. Loathing rose in me—for myself, for her father, for everything.

She dropped the papers and stood, turning her back on me and staggering to the dark windows. Lucius rushed to her, steadying her by the shoulder. I could do nothing but wish him harm and wish her comfort. After all I'd done and all I would have to do, I still just wanted her to look at me again the way

she had in the cabin. It was only hours ago, but now seemed like a lifetime.

I thought I'd seen love in her eyes, or something like it, as if I knew. I didn't know anything about that particular emotion, not really. But, I didn't remember anyone ever looking at me that way, with so much genuine feeling. It was guarded, but it was there. I wanted it back. I'd strangled any fledgling feelings she may have had with the documents that now lay on the floor, but I still wanted her. I wanted her to come to me for comfort, for support.

Lucius pulled her into his side as her sobs rose and fell. I willed her to leave him and come to me, to return to me and throw her arms around my shoulders. I would hold her while she cried. I would whisper sweet words into her ear. I would soothe her and bring her out of her despair.

My heart swelled, as if drunk on her tears. I could make it right. Somehow. I would try.

Her sobs stopped and her breathing slowed. She lifted her head, staring out into the inky gray of night.

I would tell her. I didn't care if Lucius heard. I was sorry, so fucking sorry.

“Stella—”

“I choose Lucius.”

“What?” Her words were a jolt to my system—unbelievable, false. She couldn't mean it, not after what we'd been through, what we'd shared in the cabin.

She turned to me, her tear-streaked face bearing an expression that was a mix of heartbreak and hatred.

“I said I choose Lucius as my owner instead of you,” she spat.

“You can't—”

“You heard her, Sin.” Lucius wrapped his arm around her waist. “She chose me. She's mine now.”

She stepped back from him, pushing his arm away in disgust. “Don't touch me. Leave me alone, both of you.”

She rushed through the room, running as if demons were at her heels. We both watched her go—one brother destroyed, and the other exhilarated.

She wouldn't look at me, though she was all I could see. She retreated down the hallway, disappearing from my view. My soul seemed to have left with her; my legs were no longer strong enough to hold up the empty shell of my body. I sank into the chair.

What have I done?

After a few moments of silence, a door slammed somewhere far away in the house. Her door.

The sound jarred Lucius into motion. He followed Stella's trail like a seasoned hunter, smooth and focused.

I wanted to stop him, to work the same violence on him that I had on Stella's heart.

"Leave her alone, Lucius." Though my soul was gone, my rage still burned.

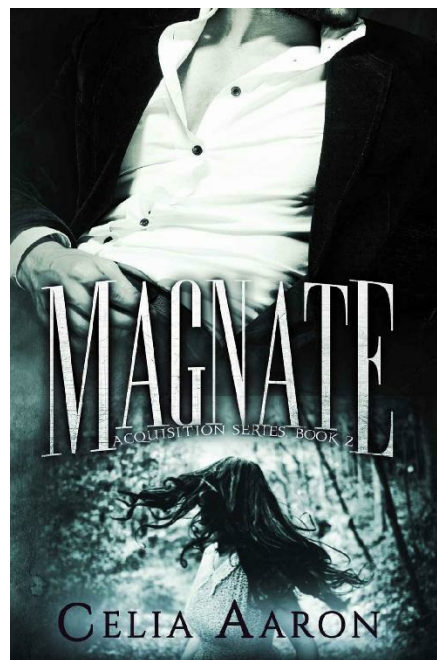
He glanced over his shoulder, triumphant and vicious. "She's mine now. I know the rules. I call the shots, and I have no intentions of ever leaving her alone."

"I will fucking end you." I forced myself to move and followed him into the hall.

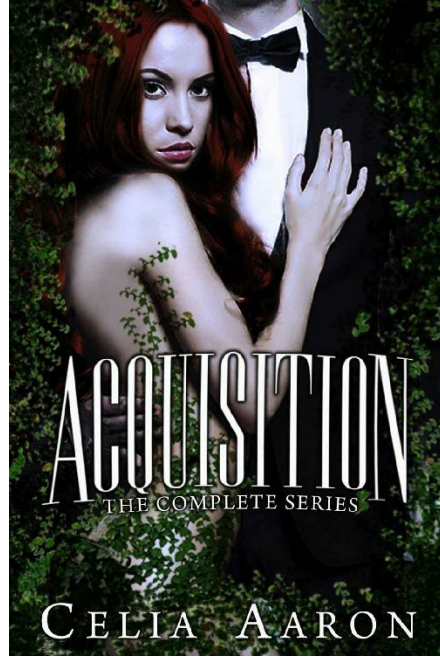
He flipped me off and took the stairs two at a time.

"Game on, big brother."

[Click here to continue The Acquisition Series](#)



[Or buy the entire set](#)



ALSO BY CELIA AARON

Contemporary Romance

Kicked

Trent Carrington.

Trent Mr. Perfect-Has-Everyone-Fooled Carrington.

He's the star quarterback, university scholar, and happens to be the sexiest man I've ever seen. He shines at any angle, and especially under the Saturday night stadium lights where I watch him from the sidelines. But I know the real him, the one who broke my heart and pretended I didn't exist for the past two years.

I'm the third-string kicker, the only woman on the team and nothing better than a mascot. Until I'm not. Until I get my chance to earn a full scholarship and join the team as first-string. The only way I'll make the cut is to accept help from the one man I swore never to trust again. The problem is, with each stolen glance and lingering touch, I begin to realize that trusting Trent isn't the problem. It's that I can't trust myself when I'm around him.

Tempting Eden

A modern re-telling of Jane Eyre that will leave you breathless...

Jack England

Eden Rochester is a force. A whirlwind of intensity and thinly-veiled passion. Over the past few years, I've worked hard to avoid my passions, to lock them up so they can't harm me—or anyone else—again. But Eden Rochester ignites every emotion I have. Every glance from her sharp eyes and each teasing word from her indulgent lips adds more fuel to the fire. Resisting her? Impossible. From the moment I held her in my arms, I had to have her. But tempting her into opening up could cost me my job and much, much more.

Eden Rochester

When Jack England crosses my path and knocks me off my high horse, something begins to shift. Imperceptible at first, the change grows each time he looks into my eyes or brushes against my skin. He's my assistant, but everything about him calls to me, tempts me. And once I give in, he shows me who he really is—dominant, passionate, and with a dark past. After long days of work and several hot nights, I realize the two of us are bound together. But my secrets won't stay buried, and they cut like a knife.

Bad Bitch

Bad Bitch Series, Book 1

They call me the Bad Bitch. A lesser woman might get her panties in a twist over it, but me? I'm the one who does the twisting. Whether it's in the courtroom or in the bedroom, I've never let anyone - much less a man - get the upper hand.

Except for that jerk attorney Lincoln Granade. He's dark, mysterious, smoking hot and sexy as hell.

He's nothing but a bad, bad boy playing the part of an up and coming premiere attorney. I'm not worried about losing in a head to head battle with this guy. But he gets me all hot and bothered in a way no man has ever done before. I don't like a person being under my skin this much. It makes me want to let go of all control, makes me want to give in. This dangerous man makes me want to submit to him completely, again, and again, and again...

Hardass

Bad Bitch Series, Book 2

I cave in to no one. My hardass exterior is what makes me one of the hottest defense lawyers around. It's why I'm the perfect guy to defend the notorious Bayou Butcher serial killer - and why I'll come out on top.

Except this new associate I've hired is unnaturally skilled at putting chinks in my well-constructed armor. Her brazen talk and fiery attitude make me want to take control of her and silence her - in ways that will keep both of us busy till dawn. She drives me absolutely 100% crazy, but I need her for this case. I need her in my bed. I need her to let loose the man within me who fights with rage and loves with scorching desire...

Total Dick

Bad Bitch Series, Book 3

I'm your classic skirt chaser. A womanizer. A total d*ck. My reputation is dirtier than a New Orleans street after a Mardi Gras parade. I take unwinnable cases and win them. Where people see defeat, I see a big fat paycheck. And when most men see rejection, it's because the sexiest woman at the bar has already promised to go home with me.

But Scarlett Carmichael is the one person I can't seem to conquer. This too-cool former debutante has it all—class, attitude, and a body that begs to be worshiped. I've never worked with a person like her before—hell, I've never played nice with anyone before in my life, and I'm not about to start with her.

This woman wasn't meant to be played nicely with. It's going to be dirty. It's going to be hot. She's about to spend a lot of time with the biggest d*ck in town. And she's going to love every minute of it...

Filthy and Rich: A Billionaire Menage Romance Box Set

Sensually dirty and filthy rich, these five smoking hot billionaire ménage stories will leave you breathless. Includes stories by New York Times bestselling author Opal Carew, Sheryl Nantus, Celia Aaron, Charlotte Stein, and Calista Fox.

Legally Screwed

When a lawyer goes into a mundane appointment for estate planning, she has no idea she's about to meet two super hot best friends who do everything—everything—together. And that what they want more than anything is to have her in their bed, over and over again...

Dark Romance

SINCLAIR

The Acquisition Series, Prologue

Sinclair Vinemont, an impeccable parish prosecutor, conducts his duties the same way he conducts his life--every move calculated, every outcome assured. When he sees something he wants, he takes it. When he finds a hint of weakness, he capitalizes. But what happens when he sees Stella Rousseau for the very first time?

COUNSELLOR

The Acquisition Series, Book 1

In the heart of Louisiana, the most powerful people in the South live behind elegant gates, mossy trees, and pleasant masks. Once every ten years, the pretense falls away and a tournament is held to determine who will rule them. The Acquisition is a crucible for the Southern nobility, a love letter written to a time when barbarism was enshrined as law.

Now, Sinclair Vinemont is in the running to claim the prize. There is only one way to win, and he has the key to do it—Stella Rousseau, his Acquisition. To save her father, Stella has agreed to become Sinclair's slave for one year. Though she is at the mercy of the cold, treacherous Vinemont, Stella will not go willingly into darkness.

As Sinclair and Stella battle against each other and the clock, only one thing is certain: The Acquisition always ends in blood.

MAGNATE

The Acquisition Series, Book 2

Lucius Vinemont has spirited me away to a world of sugar cane and sun. There is nothing he cannot give me on his lavish Cuban plantation. Each gift seduces me, each touch seals my fate. There is no more talk of depraved competitions or his older brother – the one who'd stolen me, claimed me, and made me feel things I never should have. Even as Lucius works to make me forget Sinclair, my

thoughts stray back to him, to the dark blue eyes that haunt my sweetest dreams and bitterest nightmares. Just like every dream, this one must end. Christmas will soon be here, and with it, the second trial of the Acquisition.

SOVEREIGN

The Acquisition Series, Book 3

The Acquisition has ruled my life, ruled my every waking moment since Sinclair Vinemont first showed up at my house offering an infernal bargain to save my father's life. Now I know the stakes. The charade is at an end, and Sinclair has far more to lose than I ever did. But this knowledge hasn't strengthened me. Instead, each revelation breaks me down until nothing is left but my fight and my rage. As I struggle to survive, only one question remains. How far will I go to save those I love and burn the Acquisition to the ground?

ACQUISITION: THE COMPLETE SERIES

Darkness lurks in the heart of the Louisiana elite, and only one will be able to rule them as Sovereign. Sinclair Vinemont will compete for the title, and has acquired Stella Rousseau for that very purpose. Breaking her is part of the game. Loving her is the most dangerous play of all.

*includes Sinclair, Counsellor, Magnate and Sovereign

Blackwood

I dig. It's what I do. I'll literally use a shovel to answer a question. Some answers, though, have been buried too deep for too long. But I'll find those, too. And I know where to dig—the Blackwood Estate on the edge of the Mississippi Delta. Garrett Blackwood is the only thing standing between me and the truth. A broken man—one with desires that dance in the darkest part of my soul—he's either my savior or my enemy. I'll dig until I find all his secrets. Then I'll run so he never finds mine. The only problem? He likes it when I run.

Dark Protector

From the moment I saw her through the window of her flower shop, something other than darkness took root inside me. Charlie shone like a beacon in a world that had long since lost any light. But she was never meant for me, a man that killed without remorse and collected bounties drenched in blood.

I thought staying away would keep her safe, would shield her from me. I was wrong. Danger followed in my wake like death at a slaughter house. I protected her from the threats that circled like black buzzards, kept her safe with kill after kill.

But everything comes with a price, especially second chances for a man like me.

Killing for her was easy. It was living for her that turned out to be the hard part.

Short Sexy Reads

The Hard & Dirty Holidays

A steamy series of holiday-inspired novellas that are sure to warm your heart and your bed.

[A Stepbrother for Christmas](#)

[Bad Boy Valentine](#)

[Bad Boy Valentine Wedding](#)

[F*ck of the Irish](#)

The Forced Series

These are just as filthy as they sound. Scorching stories of dubious consent, all with a satisfying twist.

[Forced by the Kingpin](#)

[Forced by the Professor](#)

[Forced by the Hitmen](#)

[Forced by the Stepbrother](#)

[Forced by the Quarterback](#)

The Sexy Dreadfuls

A series of erotica novellas starring Cash Remington. Not romance, but something hotter and a bit more risqué.

[Cash Remington and the Missing Heiress](#)

[Cash Remington and the Rum Run](#)

The Reaper's Mate

This job. Boring is too colorful a word for it. I've been escorting humans to the afterlife for millennia. I'm over it. But when you're the son of the two greatest reapers of all time, reaping is in your blood. My latest appointment is with one Annabelle Lyric, a twenty-eight year old New Orleans party planner. Snoozefest. But there is one bonus to this assignment: it's Halloween night. In New Orleans. And she's attending a posh party whilst unaware of her impending demise. I've been tasked with taking Annabelle's soul right after the masked ball. The good news? I'll fit right in with all the costumed

partygoers. The bad news? That hits me when I realize Annabelle is much more than my next victim, she's my fated mate.

Christmas Candy

A Christmas novella where everyone gets their just desserts.

Olive had a major crush on Hank in high school. She was the too-smart, slightly chubby girl who gawked as Hank ran track and made all the cheerleaders swoon. After high school, the two went their separate ways. Olive opened a yoga studio and swore off sweets while Hank traveled the world. No problem, right? At least there wasn't a problem until Hank moved back to town and opened a candy shop across the street from Olive's studio. Now, Olive will do everything she can to shut her old crush down. But Hank has other plans, and all of them end with an Olive sundae.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Celia Aaron is a recovering attorney who loves romance and erotic fiction. Dark to light, angsty to funny, real to fantasy—if it's hot and strikes her fancy, she writes it. Thanks for reading.

Sign up for my newsletter at celiaaaron.com to get information on new releases. (I would never spam you or sell your info, just send you book news and goodies sometimes). ;)

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THE BAD GUY BONUS CHAPTER

SEBASTIAN

HAL STRODE THROUGH THE hotel, confident he was about to meet Mint's mother for a little afternoon delight. I sat at the bar and watched him pass. Over the past few weeks, Camille had spent several minutes—seventeen in fact—of our alone time texting Mint and reassuring him that his home situation would get better and that he wasn't alone.

My caring, amazing Camille. Of course she would do anything in her power to try and help the kid. But those stolen minutes they spent texting were *mine*. If I grumbled about it, Camille would just laugh and tell me I was the “cutest possessive psycho” she ever met. But I was much more than a psycho. I was a problem solver.

Timothy leaned against the wall near the elevator, a black messenger bag strapped around him. I gave him a nod, and he followed Hal into the carriage. That was my cue. I paid my tab and rose, smoothing my tie and striding toward the elevator bank. A few minutes later, I entered a cheap room on the second floor.

Hal, a black bag over his head and his hands zip-tied behind his back, sat on the bed. His large stomach pressed against the buttons of his dress shirt and gave him a decidedly Humpty Dumpty appearance.

Timothy dug in his bag and littered the bed with giant dildos, lube, and a delightful selection of anal beads. He pulled out Hal's wallet and flipped his ID onto the bedspread, then took a few pics.

I checked my watch. An hour left before I had to be in Trenton to surprise Camille for lunch. Plenty of time to get my message across to Hal. I could have just fired him, but that wouldn't have been a thorough solution to the

problem. Hell, unemployment might make him cling even more tightly to Mint's mother. This was the right plan. No nuance necessary.

Hal huffed, his breath coming out through his nose in rapid bursts. The tape over his mouth seemed to be doing its job. I slapped him in the back of the head and he squealed beneath the tape. This would be easy.

"Hal, I know everything about you—where you live, your net worth, your credit score, your family tree, the combination to the hidden safe in the floor beneath your bed, how many pieces of bread are in the half loaf in your pantry—eleven, by the way."

He cocked his head, listening intently to every word.

I leaned close. "More importantly, I know you're screwing your brother's wife."

He shook and made "mmf" noises beneath the tape.

"Don't deny it, Hal." I slapped him in the back of his head again, eliciting another pathetic squeal. "Nod if you admit you're fucking your brother's wife."

He froze, then slowly nodded.

"That creates a problem in your life, her life, and the lives of people who have any connection to your lives. That includes *my* life." I gripped the fabric of the black hood and twisted it in my fist. "I don't like your mistakes interfering with my life. Not one bit, Hal."

He groaned and tried to lean away from me.

I yanked him forward. "So we're going to fix this right now. Sound good?"

He nodded against my grip.

"Good." I let go and patted him on the head.

"You are going to stay away from your brother's wife. You will tell her it's over. And you will make sure it is. If you try to meet her, talk to her, tell you her you miss her, or so much as sneeze in her fucking direction, I'll drag you right back here to have this conversation all over again."

Timothy pressed the harmless back of a knife blade to Hal's throat.

I walked to the door. "But next time, I'll let the knife do the talking."

Hal shrieked beneath the tape, and his entire body shook.

"Oh, and if you mention this little interlude to anyone, photos of you will make the rounds amongst all your friends and business associates. Apparently, you're into some seriously kinky kidnap fantasies, big black dildos, and anal play the likes of which is only to be found in the most

adventurous of fetish circles.”

I gave Timothy a nod. He shoved Hal sideways on the bed and followed me to the door.

We returned to the front desk and slid over a wad of bills to the assistant concierge. She’d make sure any video of us on the property was never found, just in case Hal decided to do something stupid.

“What if he recognized your voice?” Timothy slid into the back of the waiting limo with me.

I smiled. “I hope he suspects me. When I see him at Lindstrom, I want him to be jumpy, worried, and—most of all—I want him to walk the straight and narrow. I think the fear of it being me will assist with all those things. He can’t prove it, but some part of him will know, and he’ll be afraid. Perfect.”

Timothy laughed. “Brilliant.”

After a while, he turned to me, a quizzical expression on his face. “But what if it doesn’t work?”

I smirked. “Have I ever told you the story about my neighbor’s pet rooster?”