



THE
HATE
VOWW

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C. HALLMAN

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To Josi,

*My best friend, partner in crime,
writing soulmate and imaginary wife.
I like you even when you forget shit.*

*Love Always,
Cassy*

PS: If you put ranch on it, it's a salad.

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Penny

I used to think that I was better than him. I thrived at a private school for gifted children, and he barely made it through the public school system. I was smarter, and I didn't miss an opportunity to let him know it. Then, I told a lie to get him in trouble and out of my way.

Turns out, karma is a bitch.

Five years later, my once oh so promising life is nothing more than a fading memory. I've hit rock bottom. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, fate has one more cruel twist in store for me.

Ryder

I hated her from the moment we met. My hate has only grown over the years. I lost everything because of her, went to jail and became the man I am today.

So, when she shows up at my club, unable to repay her debt, I can't believe my luck. She owes me more than the five grand, and I'm going to enjoy making her pay.

PENNY

*M*y arm hurts where the guy three times my size, holds on to it. His fingers digging into my skin so harshly that I am sure I'll be left with a beautiful array of blue and purple bruises. My legs can barely keep up with his pace as he drags me inside the loud biker bar.

Rock music blares through the speakers, making the inside of my ears vibrate. It's dark, and the air is thick with smoke that makes my throat itch. It's crowded, and all eyes are on me as the guy brings me to the back of the large room.

With my skinny jeans, white sneakers, and a pink sweater, I stick out like a sore thumb. Slung around my shoulder is a purple backpack that holds everything I own.

Most people here are men dressed in black, wearing heavy boots and a wicked expression on their faces. Every guy I see has their arms and necks covered in tattoos, some I find pretty, but most are appalling and offensive. Just like you would expect a bunch of bikers to look like.

There are a handful of women here; all of them are half-naked or completely naked. We pass a girl on her knees, sucking off a guy like it's the most normal thing in the world. Two more girls are dancing naked on a table with guys groping their bodies. I try to look away, but it's just impossible to ignore it. The music is not as loud back here, but the guy beside me still has to raise his voice.

“Boss, I found the bitch who owes you that money.”

A scary-looking man sitting at the table raises his head to look up at me, his expression showing only a vague interest in my presence. He is wearing a black T-shirt under a black leather vest that’s decorated with a bunch of patches. One patch reads *The Iron Sights*. Almost every person in here has one of those on their vests and jackets.

Peeking out from under his clothes are tattoos and scars. The most noticeable scar is the one on his face. Running from his eyebrow down to his cheek. His eyes immediately roam up and down my body, and suddenly I feel exposed.

Until now, I expected them to beat me up since I can’t repay what I owe. The fact it didn’t occur to me they could do other things to my body makes me angry. I’m so screwed.

“Five grand, huh? I don’t suppose you have the money in that backpack of yours?”

My throat is currently home to a tennis ball-size lump, making it impossible to get a single word out. I shake my head and hold on to the strap of my backpack as if my life depends on it.

“You know what we do to people who don’t pay back our money?” He pauses, raising an eyebrow expectantly. Pretending he just asked me a rhetorical question, I wait for him to give me my sentencing.

When he tires of waiting, he continues, “We make an example out of them. Usually, that would entail a few broken bones and losing some teeth, but you’re in luck, pretty girl.” His lips tug up into an evil smile while his eyes gleam with lust. “I’m nice enough to let you work off your debt instead.”

I glance around the room and find half of the guys staring at me like I’m the perfectly cooked turkey presented on a Thanksgiving dinner table. My stomach makes a somersault, and for a second, I think I might puke.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” a familiar voice quiets the room. I look around, trying to locate the voice that has always made my skin crawl. I find him standing ten feet away from me. He is taller and more muscular than when I last saw him. A beard covers the lower half of his face, and from what I can see, tattoos conceal most of his body. His eyes are still the same

piercing blue as I remembered. For a moment, I forget how to breathe.

“Ryder?” His name passes my lips as barely more than a whisper.

“You know this chick?” the guy who apparently holds my fate in his hands asks.

“Oh yeah, we go way back. Isn’t that right, little owl?”

Little owl.

He lived with my family for over a year, and not once did he call me by my name. Little owl is actually one of the nicer pet names he had for me.

“How long has it been? Five years?” He takes a few steps toward me, and I want to take a few steps back. The guy behind me is built like a tank, making it impossible to get away. “I think I’ll take care of this one myself.”

“I’d rather you just beat me up and let me go,” I say, not joking one bit.

The entire bar erupts in laughter.

“Still a smart-ass, I see.” Ryder stalks up to me, grips my arm with bruising force, and drags me through the crowd and to a door beside the bar. The sign on the door says, *Employees Only*. Either he works here or doesn’t care.

We end up in a brightly lit hallway. As soon as we are alone, he pushes me against the wall with my cheek flat against the cold bricks. His mouth is right next to my ear when he whispers, “I almost didn’t recognize you without your glasses and fucked up front teeth.” His breath smells of cigarettes and booze. Both I am very familiar with. My body instantly stiffens, associating those smells with getting hurt. I close my eyes and wait for some kind of pain to come next, but Ryder just holds me still.

“Don’t worry, you can work your debt off with me.” He runs his hand through my hair, catching a lock between his fingers. I wait for him to pull on it harshly, but he just keeps playing with it as if he is testing its softness. “You smell nice.”

He leans in even closer, his nose brushing against the skin on my throat.

“Are you scared, little owl?” I think I’m beyond scared. I have been scared for so long, sometimes it’s hard to tell what I’m feeling. “Answer me,” he growls into my ear, making me jump.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Good, you should be. Because I’m going to make you pay for what you did to me... I’m going to break you.”

I almost laugh at his words. *He is going to break me?* There is nothing left to break. I’m already broken beyond repair. My life shattered in so many pieces it’s impossible to find all the parts again. I can never glue the pieces back together.

“Hey, I want a turn with that fine piece of ass,” some guy yells from somewhere down the hall.

Ryder leans away from me but leaves one hand between my shoulder blades, keeping me pinned to the wall. “You know how this works, Buck.”

“Yeah, yeah, you get first dibs,” the guy name Buck says grumpily. “Doesn’t mean I can’t have some later, though...” My blood freezes in my veins. *Please, god, no!*

Ryder spins me around abruptly. “Come on, little owl, we’ll go somewhere private.”

Never taking his hand off me, he leads me to a room at the end of the hall. It’s small and dark, with a queen-size bed and a chair in the corner. A concrete floor and bare walls with no decoration make this room look more like a prison cell than a bedroom. He closes the door and locks it behind us before sitting down in the chair.

“Strip!” he commands, looking at me like a king on his throne.

Wrapping my arms around myself, like that could protect me, I shake my head. “I can’t do this, Ryder. I can’t do this with you.”

“Okay.” He shrugs. “There is the door.” He lifts his chin to the only exit out of this room. “I’ll even let you slip out the back this time. But after that, you’re on your own. If one of my guys catches you, you’re fair game.”

Karma has a way of getting back at you, and I think this is a prime example. I've made mistakes, many... and now it's time to pay up.

I'm out of options, and he knows it. It's either him or some guys I've never met. Ryder might hate me, but at least he is not some stranger. I can give him this, maybe that will make up for what I did. Maybe this will ease the guilt eating me alive.

I can do this; I just can't do this with someone else.

"If I do this with you, will you tell your men not to touch me?"

"I haven't decided yet. We'll see how tonight ends."

My heart is beating so fast, I think I might pass out. With shaking hands, I pull my shirt off and over my head. When I unbutton my jeans and pull the zipper down, my body trembles. I slip out of my shoes, push my pants down my legs, and step out of them. With a puddle of clothes on the floor, I'm left in panties and a bra.

"Everything," he orders, looking nothing but smug.

I reach back to unclasp my bra and let it slide off of my arms. The cool air in the room has my nipples hard and tingling. Pushing the sensation aside, I pull down my panties—the final piece of clothing protecting me from his taunting eyes and the wicked grin plastered on his handsome face. Clearly, he is enjoying himself.

"Come here, kneel between my legs."

Thanks to Tommy, I'm used to following orders without a second thought. I close the distance between us with three steps and kneel on the floor in front of him. The concrete is cold and unforgiving on my bare skin. I can't help but wonder how many other girls have kneeled here before me. Were they thinking about the icy floor too? Probably not.

I put my hands in my lap, waiting for his instructions. Somehow, I feel better now that I'm kneeling so close to him than I did when I was standing up on display. He unzips his own jeans, and his erection springs free. I gulp down nervously. I'm guessing he wants me to give him a blow job. Should I tell him I've never done this before?

“Don’t look so nervous, owl. I’m just going to fuck your face for a little. Then, your cunt... and probably your ass after that.”

“I’ve never done this before,” I blurt out.

“Which one?” He chuckles.

“Any of it,” I confess.

He looks at me in shock for about two seconds before he laughs so hard the chair skids on the floor. “Are you fucking serious?”

I nod, looking at some imaginary spot on the wall. My cheeks are on fire, and I don’t know why I’m more embarrassed now than I was ten minutes ago.

“Well, if you think that that’s going to stop me from fucking the dog shit out of you, then you’re very wrong. You owe me in more than one way.”

I know. God, I know.

He grabs hold of my upper arms and lifts me up a few inches, pulling me toward his lap. Automatically, my hands fly up to brace myself on his legs. His hands move up to the sides of my head. “Open your mouth, and for your own good, keep your teeth to yourself.”

As soon as I do, he pulls my head all the way to his groin, filling my mouth with the tip of his rock-hard erection. He is warm and smooth on my tongue, sliding himself in and out a few times.

“Relax your throat and breath through your nose.” That’s all the warning I get before he pushes my head all the way down. He is at the back of my throat now, making me gag. I instinctively dig my fingers into his thighs, trying to push myself away, but he has a tight grip on me. He keeps thrusting into my throat, making it impossible to breathe. Tears spill out and run down the side of my face. In my panic, my jaw locks up, and my teeth graze on the upper side of his shaft.

“Watch it!” He yanks my head up by my hair and pulls out all the way to let me suck in a deep breath. The pain on my scalp makes me wince, and I panic even more. Closing my eyes, I try to calm myself.

“Look at me,” Ryder orders, but my eyes remain shut. “Look at me,” he repeats, his voice taking on a different tone. Calmer maybe.

I pry my eyes open and stare at him. His eyes look different up close. They are darker and more intense than I’ve ever seen them before. I could get lost in those eyes, maybe not necessarily a good lost, more like a lost in the dark forest, about to get eaten by the wolves.

He holds my gaze while he pushes himself back into my mouth, a little hesitant this time. In and out, a little deeper every time, but never breaking eye contact.

“I think you’d like being my little fuck toy. I bet you are already wet for me.” At his crude words, my thighs press together, and an unfamiliar feeling builds deep in my lower belly.

No! He is wrong, there is no way I like this.

A moment later, he is back at the earlier pace, continually pushing my head up and down, deep-throating me. With my throat more relaxed, I don’t gag or panic like I did before.

He keeps doing that for I don’t know how long. Fucking my mouth relentlessly and only letting me take a few deep breaths in between. By the time he stops and lets go of me, I’m lightheaded and disoriented. I sit back on my heels, swaying to the side. I’m still trying to catch my breath when he gets up, towering over me.

He leans down and grabs me under my arms like an adult would pick up a small child. Pulling me up like I weigh nothing, he throws me onto the bed, making me bounce on the mattress. “Lie on your back and spread your legs.”

I scramble on the bed to do as he says and get on my back. I spread my legs, and to my utter shock, I realize that I am wet down there.

Am I turned on right now?

I’m so out of tune with my body that I don’t even know if I am or not. I don’t have time to linger on the thought. The next thing I know, Ryder is pulling two fingers down my folds, smiling triumphantly. “I knew you would be wet. You like this?”

No! I yell inside my head.

Ryder lowers his head, all the way down until he is between my legs. Before I know it, his tongue is on the most sensitive part of me. The warm, wet sensation is foreign, and I have no idea what to make of it. I expected a beating when I got here. My body hasn't gotten the memo of this turn of events. I can't help but expect to be hurt at any minute. Not able to relax, I lie there stiffly, trying to numb myself.

With both of his hands under my thighs, Ryder spreads them even more to get better access. Using his tongue to caress my clit, he sends a weird jolt through my body. It takes everything out of me to not move or make a sound. I push all those unwanted feelings of pleasure away and ban them from my body just as Tommy taught me.

Ryder keeps licking me, using more pressure with every stroke of his tongue, and the feeling in my core intensifies. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from making a noise, and I lock up my muscles to stop myself from making my body move.

Ryder straightens up and glares at me. "Well, fuck, now I'm downright offended." All I can do is stare at his wet, glistening lips.

"I'm sorry," I say, even though I don't know what exactly I'm apologizing for.

He shakes his head. "You're so weird." He grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it off in one swift move, revealing a well-defined upper body. My eyes stay glued to his muscular chest and how his muscles flex as he moves.

Suddenly, he's on top of me, pushing me into the mattress. He is all around me, crowding me in, leaving me no room to breathe. He lays his head next to mine and rests his elbows next to my body, caging me in.

To my annoyance, he smells nice—like clean soap and some kind of masculine spice. I don't want to find anything nice about him. I need to hate him, and I need that to be the only feeling I have for him because I know that is the only feeling he will ever have for me.

I feel his smooth head nudging at my entrance, making me suck in a sharp breath preemptively. He pushes himself in just a little. Feeling my inner walls

struggle to adjust and take him, I do my best to relax. That's what they always say, right? Just relax, it will hurt less. Just got to relax.

Without warning and with one hard thrust, he buries himself deep inside of me. A pained whimper escapes my throat. The fullness and the pain are almost unbearable. I try to push him off, but he doesn't move an inch.

"Shh, relax," he says, almost soothing, but I can't, not when I'm so confused. Confused by what I'm feeling, and what he is doing to me.

"Did you save yourself for a fairytale prince from one of your stupid books?" His voice is strained and raspy now, like he is holding himself back, only hanging on by a thread. "Or were you just too good for anybody else to spread your legs?" he taunts. His face is so close to mine that I can feel his breath on my skin.

Even if I knew what to tell him, I couldn't get a single word out right now. My breaths are shallow and quick, and I have to force myself to relax before I hyperventilate. I take a deep, calming breath and realize that he hasn't moved inside of me. The pain between my legs is already subsiding, and when he finally moves, there is only mild discomfort. The pain is replaced with a new feeling. I still feel full, but also, there is a warmth. I feel pleasure.

He keeps thrusting into me, and the feeling gets stronger, spreading through my body like cancer. A few minutes pass, and all the pain disappears, replaced by pure bliss. I try to push it away, but my body seems to have developed a mind of its own. I'm simply the co-pilot looking out of the window. My legs wrap around Ryder, and my hands hold on to his biceps. Instead of pained whimpers, soft moans I barely recognize as my own are coming out of my mouth.

Ryder picks up speed, pounding into me deep and hard. I've felt nothing like this, and I don't want it to end, ever. A spark ignites deep in my core. For a split second, I panic because I don't know what it means. Then, the spark turns into a wildfire, scorching every fiber of my body. All my muscles tighten and lock up before releasing again. Pleasure I have never felt before floods my body as I orgasm for the first time in my life. In an effort not to scream out in pleasure, I bite the inside of my cheek so hard I can taste blood.

I'm faintly aware of Ryder grunting as he grinds into me a few more times before he stills. I feel like I'm on a cloud floating through the sky. I'm so warm and relaxed. Oddly, I feel safe with Ryder on top of me, like a two-hundred-pound heated blanket covering me.

I close my eye, enjoying every second of this out-of-body experience. For a moment, I forget where I am and what I'm doing here. I'm so sated I almost feel drunk.

"I was worried I'd lost my touch," he murmurs in my hair. Not sure what he is talking about, I decide to just keep quiet and keep my eyes closed.

"I don't think so. Open your eyes." Ryder gives me a shake, and I open my now heavy eyelids. I look at his face, hovering inches over mine. "No time for a nap. I told you what's on the itinerary."

He gets off of me, and I wince, immediately feeling cold and empty. "Get up, I want you on all fours next."

I sit up and slowly turn around to get on my knees. To my horror, I notice something wet and sticky running down my leg. "Y-You... you didn't use a condom." I can't believe I didn't pick up on this until now. "I'm not on birth control." The thought of getting pregnant makes my stomach churn. I can't even take care of myself. How could I possibly take care of another human?

"You better get the morning-after pill then. Because I'm not taking care of some brat," Ryder says casually while standing in front of the bed. He is lazily stroking himself while watching me. "Bend over."

I do as he commands and get on all fours, wondering how he is already hard again. My mind is so occupied with the whole, not using a condom thing, that I don't get scared of what is coming next. At least not until Ryder positions himself behind me. He reaches between my legs, and the touch to my still sensitive clit makes me jolt. His free hand grabs hold of my hip, and he pulls me back. His fingers drag the wetness from my sex all the way up to my ass. When his thumb rests right over my asshole, I panic.

He tightens his grip on my hip and pushes his thumb against my asshole, drawing small circles, almost like he is massaging it. I tense at the foreign sensation, confused by the way it feels.

Just when I relax a little, he abruptly pulls away. His hand moves from my hip, and he caresses my butt cheeks, and my lower back. I'm so perplexed by his sudden gentle touch, I crane my head around to look at him.

"I changed my mind. I'm done with you." Ryder gets off the bed, tugs himself back in his pants and zips up the zipper. "Let's go. We are finished. You need to leave."

Shocked, I jump off the bed and gather my clothes from the floor. "What about the money I owe?"

"Your debt is forgiven. Get out of here and don't come back," he says harshly and motions toward the door.

"Y-You can do that? Just like that?" Not that I'm complaining, but this seems to be a little too good to be true.

"Leave!" he says through his gritted teeth. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he looks down at me angrily. Now that the afterglow of my orgasm has gone and his dismissive words hit me, I'm left feeling used and disgusted with myself.

Ignoring the sticky mess between my legs, I get dressed in record time. I wonder what I did to make him so mad? When I'm finished, he pushes me out of the door and down the hall in the opposite direction from which we came. He opens another door that leads to the back alley.

"I never want to see your face again." With that, he gives me one last push out the door and slams it shut behind me.

Out of all the potential scenarios I could have imagined, this wasn't one of them.

Getting beat up. I saw it coming.

Having my legs broken. I counted on it.

Getting a finger or a toe cut off. I was prepared for that.

Losing my virginity to Ryder Briggs and experiencing my first orgasm? I couldn't have guessed that in a million years.

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RYDER

If it wasn't for the blood-stained sheets as proof, I'd be positive that I just dreamed about nailing Penny... Penny-fucking-Jenkins.

I was actually looking forward to using her all night and in every way I could. But those round little burn scars all over her ass and lower back deflated my dick faster than I got it up.

Shaking my head, I pull my shirt on and walk back into the bar. Grabbing a beer on my way in, I take a seat next to Maddox.

"That was quick." He looks past me. "Where the hell is she? You had three guys in line after you."

"I sent her off and forgave the debt." I know he is going to be mad about it, but I don't really care. He'll get over it.

He slams his bottle onto the table. "What the fuck, Ryder? That was five grand!"

I shrug my shoulders. "I popped her cherry, though."

"So? That will not bring our money back or keep the other guys happy." He shakes his head and watches me take a long sip of my beer. "If you weren't my VP, I would castrate you right now."

"I don't give a shit about the money. Don't pretend that five grand is making a dent in our income. If you're so worried about it, take it out of my next cut. This was personal. I got my revenge, and now I just want her out of my sight

and as far away as possible.” I look over at Maddox, my best friend, and the president of our MC.

“Don’t give me that look. I can’t deal with you right now.” I get up, almost punching the guy beside me just because I feel like it.

Storming outside, I forget momentarily that my bike is in the shop. I stomp to my truck, yanking the door open so hard that the door handle is at risk of coming off. What a shitty day.

I drive down the road, still trying to wrap my head around what just happened. It doesn’t take me long before I see her, walking on the sidewalk in the middle of the night, with her childish purple backpack and her ridiculous pink sweater. She looks more like a twelve-year-old child than a twenty-year-old woman.

I should let her walk home, she deserves it. Just as much as she deserved me fucking her earlier. Then the image of her scarred ivory skin invades my mind. After what she did to me, I should have nothing but hate for her. But thinking about the small burn scars so similar to my own stirs another unwanted feeling up in me. Rolling my eyes at myself, I slow the truck and roll down the window.

“Get in,” I yell.

Shaking her head, she briefly looks over to me but doesn’t slow down. Matter of fact, she walks faster.

I speed up the truck and drive on the curb, angling it, so it’s blocking her way. “Get in!”

She hesitates for another moment, but then gets in the truck. She buckles up as I pull back onto the road. I smile at this minor triumph, liking the fact that she is obviously uncomfortable and unhappy.

“How is your pussy?”

She looks out the window, doing her best to ignore me.

“You need to scrub between your legs extra good tonight. You probably don’t know this, but cum dries funny.” I feel like a cat toying with a little

mouse, and I'm enjoying it way too much. God, *I'm a bastard*. "Where do you need to go?"

"Just let me out here," she says so quietly, I almost don't catch it. "I'll walk the rest of the way."

I look around. There is nothing here besides some old industrial buildings.

"Don't be ridiculous and tell me where you live, so I can get rid of you. We are nowhere near a residential area. Some psycho is going to skin you alive and leave you in a ditch. I don't want the cops finding a body this close to the club. So, tell me." I'm about to lose my patience.

"The women's shelter."

What. The. Fuck?

The women's shelter? Last time I saw her, she was at the top of her class in some gifted private school, taking college-level algebra classes. I wondered what she was doing borrowing money from us, but I wasn't interested enough to ask. I am now.

"Why are you living in a women's shelter?"

"You must really be enjoying this."

"More than you can ever imagine," I say wholeheartedly. "This is like Christmas, birthday, and winning the lottery, combined in one day."

"I was living with my boyfriend before. It didn't work out. I left him but didn't have any money and no place to go."

This story is making less and less sense. Why didn't she go home to her parents? And how was she living with a boyfriend and stayed a virgin?

"So, let's recap. You lived with a guy, under one roof, who was your boyfriend. Who I'm assuming is not gay, but somehow you manage to not have sex at all? How?"

She goes quiet again, turning her head toward the window, so I can't see her face. I try to solve the puzzle presented to me. I would never tell her, but Penny is a pretty girl. She was pretty when she was fifteen, but now, she is

smoking hot. The guys are going to be mad as hell that I didn't share her. How in the world did a guy live with her and not fuck her senseless? Then I remember the scars on her back, and the pieces slowly come together.

"Your ex couldn't get his dick hard, so he beat you up and put cigarettes out on your skin to make himself feel like a real man?"

Her body slightly shifts, and a low sob comes from the passenger side. Great, now she is crying. Considering her reaction, I'm guessing I was spot on with my theory.

Taking my phone out, I turn on the navigation and search for the women's shelter. It's only ten minutes away. Ten more minutes, then I'll have this mess out of my car and out of my life for good. But first things first. I pull into the twenty-four-hour drug store and park.

"Go in there and buy the morning-after pill. I want to see you take it." When I fucked her without a condom, pregnancy was the furthest thing from my mind. All I heard was *virgin*, and my dick had to be inside of that.

She finally turns her head toward me. Looking pitiful with her red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks, she sniffs. "I don't have any money."

Of course, I shake my head before getting out of the truck and walking inside. The lady up front goes to the back and gets the pill for me. I grab a bottle of water while I wait.

"Your total comes to \$48.59," she says when she rings me up.

I look at the small package the cashier is stuffing into the plastic bag. "Fifty dollars for one pill? There better be a tiny Asian hooker inside."

I throw a fifty-dollar bill down and grab the bag, not feeling like waiting on the change. Back in the car, I throw it in Penny's lap before pulling out of the parking lot. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her take the pill and down the water.

Seeing her throat move while drinking the water makes me realize how badly I want to shoot a load in her mouth. I don't even turn the GPS back on. Instead, I drive my normal route back to my house.

I'm not sure if she doesn't realize that we are going the wrong way or if she's just too scared to say something. Either way, she keeps her mouth shut until I pull into my driveway.

"Where are we?"

"My house. You are going to stay here for a while and work off your debt."

Her eyes go wide, and she clutches onto the backpack on her lap as if that is going to protect her from me. "You said you forgave my debt."

"Well, I lied. You still owe me, and you are going to come with me to work it off."

"You can't do that!"

"What, lie? You better than anyone knows that lying is possible." I can see her swallow hard at the reminder of what she did five years ago. "Matter of fact, I lied a total of three times to you tonight."

"What were the other two lies?"

"That you will have to figure out on your own."

The first time I lied was when I said I almost didn't recognize her. I knew in an instant who she was. She might be older and more mature now. Her glasses are missing, and she's had the gap between her two front teeth fixed, but the rest of her is the same. Big brown eyes, too large for her face. A small snob nose that always reminded me of tinker bell and full lips that seem to be in a constant state of pouting.

The only thing I don't recognize about her is how she's acting. She used to never miss an opportunity for a witty remark, and she fought me tooth and nail on everything. The new Penny is kind of a pushover, and I don't know yet which one I like better.

The second time I lied was when I told her I wouldn't take care of my kid. I'm not fond of the idea of having a little brat running around, but on the off chance that I'd get a girl pregnant, I would take care of the baby. I grew up without parents and wouldn't let my child grow up the same way if I could help it.

“Are you going to walk into the house like a big girl, or do I need to throw you over my shoulders and carry you in?”

She lowers her head in defeat, unbuckles herself, and opens the door. “I’ll walk.”

On the way to the front door, she looks around nervously like she is about to make a run for it. I almost wish she would, chasing her sounds like fun. I unlock the door with one hand and grab Penny with the other. As soon as I open the door, Mojo greets us with a deep growl and a display of sharp teeth. Penny tries to jump back, but I hold her firmly by my side.

“Calm down, Mojo,” I say to my large Rottweiler. He sits down as I walk her in. “Good boy.” Penny walks stiffly, never taking her eyes off the dog. Good, she fears him. I deposit her on my black leather couch, leaving her looking nervous and out of place.

“You watch her now, you hear me. Don’t let her leave,” I order Mojo and smirk at Penny’s shocked expression.

I disappear into the bathroom, take my clothes off, and step into the shower. Turning the water all the way to hot, I let my muscles relax and wash the smell of sex and sweat off of me. When I’m done, I dry off and walk out to the living room, not bothering to put a towel around me.

Penny is right where I left her, it looks like she hasn’t moved an inch. Her eyes widen when she sees me, and I catch her clenching her thighs together. I flop down on the couch beside her and put my arms up to rest them on the back of the couch. “I want another blow job.”

She peeks over to Mojo like she is waiting for his permission. He just sits there looking at her as she slowly gets up and kneels between my legs. She licks her lips. Looking up at me through the thick lashes on her big eyes. The sight of her like that has my body pumping blood to my dick in record time. “Give me your hand.”

She gives it to me without question, and I’m again surprised by how her personality has changed. The old Penny would have given me a swift kick in the balls. I pull her hand to my mouth, suck on my cheeks, and spit in her palm. She makes a small noise of disgust but says nothing. I wonder how far

I can push her before she has had too much, and the old Penny reappears.

I place her hand on my now fully erect dick and make her fingers curl around it. I guide her up and down a few times before letting her hand go on her own. "Just keep doing that." I close my eyes and lean my head back against the couch.

Her unsure hand rubs me for a while, and even though it feels good, I won't be able to come like this. I'm about to tell her to bend over the couch when I feel her plump, warm lips on the tip of my dick. Her hot, wet tongue is next. Caressing my cock softly, she drags her tongue up and down tenderly.

Fuck. Me.

I peek down at her just when she is taking me into her mouth all the way and starts sucking in earnest. Her cheeks hollow out, and her eyes close in concentration. She pushes herself down until I hit the back of her throat, doing on her own, what I made her do earlier. She keeps one hand on the base of my shaft and the other resting on my thigh like it belongs there.

It doesn't take me long before I feel a tingle at the bottom of my spine, and my balls draw together tightly. I debate letting her know that I'm about to come but decide to surprise her with it. A moment later, I'm pushed over the edge. I grab onto the couch cushion as I explode into her mouth with a deep grunt. *Surprise!*

When the last wave of pleasure has rippled through me, I gaze down at her. She keeps me in her mouth until the very last second, and I can see her still swallowing as she licks the rest of my cum off her bottom lip.

"I'm not going to lie. You've just earned yourself some major brownie points." I push her back until she sits on her heels, and I get up. Walking into my bedroom, I tell her, "I'll leave you alone for the rest of the day. You may take a shower now, and you're allowed to sleep on the couch."

PENNY

*M*y eyes linger on his firm ass as he walks into his room, shutting the door behind him. Just when I thought he couldn't be any more of a prick, he says things like, "You *may* take a shower now," and, "You're *allowed* to sleep on the couch." Asshole.

Looking around, I spot another door a few feet beside the bedroom he just went into. I'm guessing that has to be the bathroom. I grab my backpack and head toward it. I'm more than glad that Ryder's hellhound followed him into the bedroom. I wouldn't have moved off the couch if that beast was in the room.

I pull the door shut behind me and turn the lock on the handle. For the first time tonight, I feel like enough oxygen is reaching my lungs.

I brush my teeth, getting rid of the salty aftertaste in my mouth.

After I strip out of my nasty clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor, I take a moment to inspect myself in the large vanity mirror. Even after six weeks, I haven't gotten used to the sight of myself without bruises marking my body. For so long, those were a part of my everyday reflection. I twist around to see the little round scars on my otherwise smooth skin.

Is that why Ryder stopped? He must have been appalled by my mutilated skin. Until now, it never dawned on me that Tommy's placement was purposeful. He probably scarred me there, knowing guys would be disgusted with it. Just when I thought I was finally rid of him, he comes back to haunt

me. The proof of years of his abuse will forever be visible on my body.

Trying to forget that disturbing truth, I turn on the shower and step under the spray. Looking down between my legs, I see the evidence of Ryder taking my virginity being washed down the drain. A mixture of the now crusted on cum, with a hint of blood, is running down my thighs.

I stand in the shower for a long time, just letting the hot water caress my skin while my mind replays everything that has happened in the last few hours. When I saw Ryder, and he dragged me into the backroom, I expected him to do horrible things. I thought he would beat, torture, and rape me. Maybe even kill me. He always had a horrible temper, and he is obviously on the wrong side of the law now.

Surprisingly, he didn't hurt me, not really. It would be a big fat lie to say that I didn't enjoy the sex. It was weird at first, especially since it was Ryder, but once I let go, it was nothing like I expected.

I didn't enjoy giving him the first blow job; it was too much, too quick. Although, apparently, my body was fond of it. Just thinking about it makes my inner muscles clench. The second blow job, however, I enjoyed body and soul. He gave me control, which I'm not used to at all. He said that he was going to leave me alone for the rest of the night, like it was a favor. Truth is, I wanted to have sex again.

Shaking my head at that ridiculous thought, I step out of the shower and grab the lone towel hanging up, it's already damp. Not having another option, I dry off with the same towel Ryder dried himself. Oddly, that fact makes me realize how intimate this whole thing is. I'm in his house, naked, using his shower, drying myself with his used towel.

Somehow, this feels more intimate than the sex itself. The sex was very much cold and distant. No kisses or cuddling after, just sex. Being in his house and sharing his things is a whole different story.

I pull on some leggings and an oversized shirt from my backpack and stuff my dirty clothes back inside.

There is no blanket or pillow on the couch, and the air-conditioning is making it chilly in here. I curl up on the couch in a tight ball. That's when my

stomach announces that I need food. I haven't eaten since this morning, and the empty feeling and cramping in my stomach makes me painfully aware of that. Pushing all of those unwanted feelings aside, I squeeze my eyes shut and force myself to sleep.

I'll freeze and starve to death before asking Ryder for anything.



I'M WOKEN by someone pulling a blanket off me. I instantly curl back into myself, trying to keep the quickly escaping warmth. I want the blanket back. Wait. *Blanket?* Where did the blanket come from?

“Rise and shine, little owl.” I cringe at the sound of Ryder’s voice. Awareness hits me like a freight train, and my eyes fly open. They are dry, and my contacts are sticking to my eyeballs. I blink the uncomfortable feeling away.

Ryder stands in front of the couch, and he is, in fact, holding a blanket. Standing tall, wearing gray sweatpants and a black shirt, he looks down on me with a smug grin plastered on his annoyingly handsome face. Before I can say a word, he throws something warm on my chest.

I sit up and look at the wrapped breakfast sandwich. *Food!* I unwrap and greedily start eating. The warm, flavorful sandwich might be the best thing I have ever eaten.

“You always sleep in till noon?”

I’m not too surprised, I haven’t slept well in a long time. “I didn’t get much sleep at the women’s shelter,” I say in between large bites. That’s actually an understatement, I got almost no sleep at all. Having a roommate going through withdrawals made it impossible to sleep. Even before that, I rarely got a good night of sleep. Constantly being scared will do that to you.

“I’m taking Mojo on a run. I got groceries. Put them away and then wait for me on the bed. Naked, of course.” The front door slams shut, and he is gone.

I finish eating my sandwich while looking around Ryder’s house. It’s a simple one-bedroom that screams *single guy lives here*. The furnishings are

sparse, and decorations are nonexistent. The whole house looks like it needs a good cleaning. Dishes are stacked in the sink, and empty cereal boxes are on the counter.

Brown paper bags filled with groceries cover the kitchen table. I take one and carry it in the kitchen. First thing I remove is a vine of tomatoes. Ugh, I hate tomatoes. The second thing I grab is peanut butter, something I am highly allergic to. Then I pull out mayonnaise, aka pus in a jar. Next... avocados. Last time I ate one, I broke out in hives that landed me in the ER.

Oh my god! That jerk!

I dump out the rest of the bag. Doing the same with the other bags from the table, I confirm my revelation. That ass only bought things he knows I'm allergic to or don't like. I'm not sure if I should be furious or simply impressed that he remembers all of this. I want to throw all of it out the window as a big fuck you. But since I'm good at doing what I'm told, I swallow my pride as always and put the groceries in the fridge and cabinet.

When I'm done, I do the other thing he demanded and go into his room. Walking into Ryder's bedroom awakens a plethora of feelings. I'm nervous about what he is going to do to me when he gets back. But I'm also excited that I will probably like some of it. I'm a little giddy he told me to come in here when I was never allowed in his room when we were kids. Also, I'm sad and feel guilty. Sad for what he lost five years ago and guilty because it was my fault.

I take my clothes off and lie on his bed. I don't care what he is going to do, I deserve this. Whatever he has planned, I will let him use my body how he wants, and I won't fight him. It's the least I can do.

I wait, passing the time by letting his soft sheets run between my fingers. This bed is comfortable, I notice. The pillow is soft, and the comforter is plush. I don't remember the last time I slept in something so nice. The beds at the women's shelter are anything but—scratchy blankets, stiff pillows, and mattresses that feel like sheets over springs.

The sound of the door opening echoes through the house, and Ryder steps into the bedroom moments later. "Good girl," he patronizes. Taking off his sweat-stained shirt, he throws it into a hamper in the corner. "If you'd been

half as easygoing five years ago, we might have actually got along.”

No, we wouldn't have, I think to myself. I was too jealous and selfish to even give him a chance.

“What do you mean you are adopting someone else?” I ask, my mind reeling. My parents adopted me when I was four, and I have been their only child ever since. I didn't even know they were looking to adopt more. Why did they hide it from me? Are they replacing me? Am I not enough?

“Not adopting yet, just fostering for now,” my mom explains. “This boy really needs a home, and Marissa said he would be a great fit for us.”

“A boy?”

“Yes, his name is Ryder, and he is about the same age as you,” my dad tells me. He is smiling at me, but there is no way in hell I'm returning that smile. I'm too angry, too scared. Why are they doing this to me? I'm happy with the way everything is. I don't want things to change.

“I don't think it's a good idea,” I shake my head, “I don't want someone else living with us.”

“Penny, it's not your decision to make. Ryder will live with us, and you need to welcome him,” my father warns, his voice stern, a tone he hardly ever uses on me.

“Well, I won't. I hate him already!” And I did, I hated him before I ever met him. Ignoring my parents calling after me, I storm to my room, slam the door shut behind me, and flop onto my bed.

They are my parents and mine alone.

I will do whatever it takes to get rid of him...

“Get dressed and out of my bed. This was just a test.” Ryder's voice drags me out of my memory. His dismissive tone is a stark reminder of what I am to him and what my purpose is. He strips out of the rest of his clothes and disappears into the bathroom.

Getting up, I put my clothes back on and walk back into the living room, taking a seat on the couch.

When he reappears a few minutes later, fully dressed, I ask him the question that's been burning in my mind. "How long do I need to stay?"

"Well, let's see. You owe five thousand. A prostitute around here charges fifty bucks an hour. Today and yesterday combined knocks a hundred off, but I also paid fifty for your pill, and I got you breakfast. You slept here, used my shower, and I got groceries. So, I guess we are back up to five grand."

Leaping off the couch, I almost fall flat on my face. "You can't... You can't do that. I didn't ask you for any of it." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Talking back always gets me into more trouble. I brace myself for him to hit or kick me, but he just starts laughing.

"I can do that, and I will. Now, if you want to take a shower, do it now."

Needing that time alone anyway, I nod and rush past him into the bathroom. Using a hot shower to clean up and try to gather my thoughts. Is he planning on keeping me here indefinitely? I didn't freak out until now because I thought this was temporary. I thought he was going to make me pay and then send me on my way. This is a whole different story. I can't take this for long.

When I'm all clean, I throw on the clothes from yesterday and walk back into the living room. Ryder is lounging on the couch I slept on, playing on his phone. His dog is sprawled out on the floor next to him, not paying me any attention.

Gathering all the courage I have, I sit down on the recliner next to him. "I have a proposal."

"Is that so?" He snickers.

I hold my head high when I say, "I'm worth more than fifty dollars an hour." I have a good laugh on the inside. I don't think this is what the lady at the self-worth class last week was talking about.

"Who says?"

"I do. I want five hundred an hour," I tell him, keeping my voice even and strong.

"Five hundred? Do you think you have some kind of unicorn pussy?"

“No, but I don’t think the other prostitutes gave you their virginity.” Before he can answer, I continue, “Also, instead of charging me to stay here and eat, I’m willing to do other things for you.” I purposely look around the room when I say, “Like cleaning, for example.”

He considers me for a moment. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you five hundred for yesterday and two hundred an hour from now on.”

Containing my joy, I ask, “What about the rest?”

“If you want to be my little maid in exchange for staying here, then knock yourself out. I’ll enjoy having you as my personal slave. Maybe I’ll get you a collar with a leash,” he jokes.

The thought of having anything around my neck dampens the triumph I feel about brokering this deal. I can survive this. God knows I’ve survived much worst.

Proud of myself, I get up to clean the kitchen. Ryder rises with me in unison. “I’m going to be out for a few hours. Feel free to make yourself a tomato-avocado sandwich while I’m gone.”

Funny.

To my relief, he takes Mojo with him when he walks out the door.

The next couple of hours, I busy myself cleaning the house, washing dishes, and starting some of Ryder’s laundry. When my growling stomach becomes too much to ignore, I go back to the kitchen to hunt for something I can actually eat. Not having a lot of options, I decide to fix some spaghetti and use the fresh tomatoes to make homemade pasta sauce.

Just when the sauce is done simmering, and I’m about to drain the pasta, Ryder walks through the door. Stopping in the middle of the room, he looks around at his now clean house. His eyes wander around and end up on the kitchen table set with two plates and silverware. His expression is unreadable, and his silence scares me. Tommy used to be really silent right before he would erupt and turn into a bloodthirsty maniac. I always knew it was coming—like the calm before the storm.

Ryder being so quiet and still triggers a deeply rooted fear in me. I was stupid to assume that it was okay to cook or that he would want to eat with me. “I’m sorry!” I blurt out, my chest already heaving from an oncoming panic attack.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he yells, giving me his full attention now.

Oh god, he is pissed. I’m such an idiot. My lungs cease to work as the panic attack takes hold of me, like a hand around my throat. I stumble two steps back until the cool metal of the refrigerator touches my back. I close my eyes, making the world around me disappear, so I can go to the dark place inside of me, where I’m numb, where no pain can ever reach me.

I try to suck in precious oxygen, but I can’t seem to get anything to my lungs. Shit, I can’t breathe. I’m suffocating. My lungs burn as panic takes full control over my body.

Ice cold water splashes in my face, dragging me back to reality. I suck in a sharp breath and open my eyes. The skin on my face and chest feels like a thousand little needle pricks. I blink rapidly until the water clinging to my eyelashes lets me see again. Ryder is standing in front of me, holding an empty glass of water.

“Wow, that guy really did a number on you,” he says before returning to the kitchen table and taking a seat in front of one of the plates. “Are you going to bring me some food or what?”

Unable to move yet, I concentrate on the water droplets running down my face and dripping onto my shirt in a steady rhythm. I just stand there for a long time. Ryder says nothing else. He just sits patiently at the table.

When I’m finally able to compose myself, I wipe my face down using a kitchen towel and take the baked mozzarella out of the oven.

I finish draining the pasta and place it into the large bowl I prepared. Pouring the sauce on top of it completes my simple meal creation. I take the bowl and the mozzarella to the table and sit down next to Ryder, who is still looking at me patiently. I use the serving spoon to give him a large portion, filling my plate with a much smaller one before adding some mozzarella pieces to each plate.

“You used to not like mozzarella or anything with tomatoes in it,” Ryder points out while I take a bite of the breaded cheese.

“I got over my pickiness with food.” I shrug. I still don’t like either, but I’ll eat them now. Anything is better than starving.

“Why didn’t you stay with your parents after you left him?”

“That would be the first place he would have looked for me and...” I trail off, trying to keep my emotion in check while I talk. “Also, I haven’t talked to them in three years.”

Glancing over at Ryder, I see his features register the surprise, but he asks no more questions. The truth is, I thought about it, about calling them, but I think the damage between us is too extensive. I’m nothing but a disappointment to them now.

We finish our meal in silence, which is fine by me. This is actually nice. Sitting together at the table and eating dinner like this makes me feel like a normal person instead of a slave.

Ryder finishes every bite of the generous portion I gave him before leaning back in his chair.

“That was pretty good. I think I can get used to this.” He motions around the room with his hand. “Coming home to a clean house, food ready to eat, pussy available to fuck.” His eyes land on my still wet shirt. The fabric is clinging to my skin, revealing a lack of bra. Ryder’s eyes linger on my nipples, which are now standing at attention.

He gets up so quickly his chair skids across the floor, making a squeaking noise. “Bedroom. Naked. Now.”

RYDER

I let her walk in front of me on purpose. This way, I can enjoy the gentle sway of her hips and the way her ass rounds into two firm globes when she bends down to slide those leggings off her legs.

Her shirt comes off next, leaving her standing bare in front of my bed. She looks at me shyly, obviously waiting for my instructions. My dick is so hard it hurts. “I want you on your back.”

She climbs on the bed, giving me a magnificent view of her already glistening pussy before lying down just as I instructed. She stays still but watches me like a hawk while I take my own clothes off and get on the bed to climb on top of her.

Hovering inches above her body, I lower my head, taking one of her nipples into my mouth and suck. I can feel the pink peak hardening with my touch as she slightly arches her back, pushing her tits closer in my face. It’s so subtle, I don’t think she even knows she is doing it. I tease her breast until she is squirming under me, unable to stay still, even though I know she is trying, then I give the other side equal attention.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her hand come up as if she is about to grab my shoulder. It stays twitching in the air for a moment, as if she is trying to figure out if she is allowed to touch me. Then, she lets her arm fall next to us, clutching onto the sheets instead. I don’t know how I feel about her touching me. Especially if this is what she wants.

I'm torn between wanting to torture her and wanting to fuck her senseless, but I want my girls to want me. I want to feel them come while I fuck them. I want to hear their moans and pleas.

When I'm tired of sucking her tits, I sit up. Grabbing her legs, I pull them up over mine, so I can watch myself as I bury my cock into her warm hole. Fuck, she feels like heaven. I look down at her face, watching every little expression. She looks uncomfortable, but her pussy is drenched. I know she wants this, at least on some level, but she is too much in her head to admit it even to herself.

I keep fucking her like this for a few minutes, thrusting into her with slow but deep strokes. Waiting for her to relax, to moan and pant with need, but she just lies there with her eyes squeezed shut. Her body is stiff, almost like she is fighting with herself, trying not to move or make a sound.

She was like this yesterday when I ate her out, but once I started fucking her, she snapped out of it. I know she fucking came. I felt her pussy clamping down on my cock, and I heard the moans slipping from her mouth. I wonder what is different now because I don't like this. It's like fucking a board.

"Tell me how you want me to fuck you," I demand.

She doesn't open her eyes or answer, but I can see her throat move like she is swallowing heavily. I grab her hips and slam into her hard.

"Tell me!" I repeat, and her eyes fly open.

"I-I don't know... I don't know what you mean." She looks at me, confused. "This is fine. I don't want you to... you know... put it in my ass."

I can't help but grin like the asshole I am. "I think you would like it." She stiffens even more at my words, so I ease her mind. "Okay, no anal. So, fucking relax."

She relaxes a bit, but not as much as I want her to. Maybe it's this position. I lower myself back down, so I'm stretched out on top of her, resting my head next to hers on the pillow. I feel her body soften almost immediately. Her tight muscles relax, and her thighs fall apart a few inches more. *Ah, this is better.*

I push all the way back in, hitting the end of her channel. She feels so good like this; I can't hold back. Sliding my arm under her back, I hold her in place as I pound into her harshly, losing myself in her depths.

Just like last time I fucked her like this, she lets go and stops overthinking it. Her small hands clutch onto my arms, and her legs come around, trying to keep me close. She moans softly under me when I feel her inner muscles clench around my dick. Her nails digging into my skin, and her entire body tightening, drives me over the edge with her. I nestle my face into the crook of her neck and breathe her in while I come deep inside of her.

I let most of my weight rest on top of her as I try to regain control over my breathing. She seems to be content with me on top of her like this since her hands are still on my arms with a loosened grip.

When the blood has drained back from my cock into my brain, I get up. As soon as I pull out of her, I realize that I didn't use a condom again. *Shit.*

Noticing my expression, she says, "I think I'm okay, since I took that pill only a few hours ago, but we can't keep doing this."

My head nods in agreement, but my dick is already protesting. She just feels so good bare, and the thought of me being the only one who's been inside of her is a huge turn on. She gets up and walks past me into the bathroom. Putting my sweatpants and T-shirt back on, I take Mojo for a walk.

When I get back, Penny is cleaning up in the kitchen, washing the dishes, and putting the leftovers away. Feeling generous today, I grab an extra pillow from the closet and leave it on the couch. The blanket I used to cover her with this morning is neatly folded on the armrest.

Two good deeds in one day, I'm basically a saint.

"I'll be gone all day tomorrow. I need you to let Mojo out every few hours."

She drops a plate in the sink, splashing water all over herself and the counter. "The dog?"

"No, the seven-foot alpaca," I retort. "Of course, the dog. You don't have to walk him, just open the back door. He'll go do his business and then come right back in."

“Okay,” she says, sounding unsure.

I almost tell her I’ll be leaving ass crack early in the morning and that I am going to bed now, but then I remember I don’t owe her any explanations. With Mojo on my heels, I head into my bedroom and collapse on my bed.



WHEN I GET UP, it’s still completely dark outside. I get dressed, let Mojo out and feed him. Penny, wrapped in her blanket like a burrito, doesn’t even stir on the couch. Her lips are slightly parted, and her face is relaxed, making her look a few years younger.

She looks more like the girl I used to know now—like the Penny, who treated me as if I was nothing more than an annoyance.

Knocking on the doorframe, I take a step into her room.

“I didn’t say you could come in,” Penny scoffs at me.

“The door was open,” I quip, and she rolls her eyes at me.

“What do you want, Ryder?” she asks with a perpetual condescending tone lacing her voice.

“Do you have an extra pencil or sharpener I can use?”

She pushes her glasses up her nose before lifting her chin. “No, I don’t.”

“There are some right there.” I point at her desk, where I see an entire cup with sharpened pencils peeking out.

“I didn’t say that I don’t have any. You asked if I have some you can use... and I don’t. I don’t want you using my stuff. It’s enough that I have to share this house with you. Besides, does anyone even check homework at the school you’re going to?”

Ignoring her snarky comment, I walk to her desk and snatch one of the pencils.

“Hey!” She tries to stop me from leaving the room, but I just keep walking. “I’ll make you regret ever coming here! I hate you!” she sneers and pushes at my back. I guess she decided since she can’t stop me, she might as well help me move faster.

“Thanks, little owl.” Shaking my head, I head back to my room. She bothers me, but I’ll gladly put up with her tantrums as long as I can stay here. This is the first foster home I’ve actually liked. The first one I’ve felt safe. I’ll do anything to be a part of this family, even if it means getting yelled at by Penny.

Little did I know she would succeed in getting rid of me.

The memory feels like a different life, but it still brings back the familiar feelings of hate and frustration, though the emotions are dulled down now.

I originally took her for revenge, I wanted to see her suffer. Although I still want to make her pay in more than one way, I actually like having her here. The thought bothers me, but I can’t help feeling this way. Having pussy available twenty-four-seven is amazing. Being able to do what I want to her and knowing I’m the only one she’s ever had inside of her is the icing on the cake. She is much more tolerable now than she was five years ago. Maybe I’ll send her ex a fruit basket.

This is not a bad deal for me. My house looks nice, dinner was superb, and the sex is, well, the best I’ve ever had... and I’ve had a lot. In the back of my mind, I’m already thinking about some lie I can come up with to keep her here longer.

I drive the truck to the club where Shawn and Tucker are already waiting for me. It’s a two-hour drive to the meeting point, and I’m less than pleased about having to spend four hours in this soccer mom van. Maddox is right, though; this is the most inconspicuous vehicle we could find. Guns are already packed in the back, and as soon as I get there, we pile into the car and hit the road. I want to get this over with and get home. To be honest, I really didn’t want to come today, but I can’t let these two knuckleheads go alone and fuck this up.

“Maddox was pretty pissed at you the other night, what did you do?” Tucker asks.

“I let that chick go who owed us money,” I answer, hoping that his questions end here. Of course, they don’t.

“That was a fine piece of ass, I wouldn’t have minded letting her work that cash off. Why did you let her go so fast? You could have at least given her around one time.” My molars grind together at his words.

“First, I do what the fuck I want. Second, she is working her debt off... with me.”

“So, wait, you didn’t let her go?”

“I did, but then picked her up from the side of the road when I left. I took her home, fucked her again, and decided that she is a decent enough lay to keep around. I’m forgiving her two hundred for every day she plays my little sex slave until she pays off the five grand.”

“How do you know she won’t just disappear before she pays up?”

“I’m keeping her at my place. She has nowhere else to go. Plus, Mojo is watching her.”

They both burst out laughing.

“You have an in-house hooker?” Shawn asks, and again, I don’t like hearing him calling her that.

Swallowing that feeling down, I answer, covering my annoyance with a playful tone, “Pretty much. I’m not going to lie, it is pretty fucking amazing. Sex, however, and whenever you want.”

“Fuck, I need to get one of those,” Tucker exclaims, and when I look over to him, I can see the gleam in his eyes. He is thinking about all the things he could get away with having a girl at his disposal like that. The thought of having complete control over another person has him grinning darkly. Only one thing is running through my head as I watch him.

You can’t have Penny. She is mine.

PENNY

I wake up with this weird feeling that someone is watching me. I open my eyes, and my heart stops before restarting itself into an unnatural rhythm. Three inches from my face, a wet-nosed demon dog with sharp teeth and human-looking brown eyes stares at my face.

Sitting up in slow motion, I never take my eyes off the black and brown dog that has a way too large head on its shoulders. My face contorts into an awkward smile, like I could somehow charm the dog with my lame attempts of flirting. Shaking my head, I slowly get up to look around the house. The bedroom door is open, and I don't see or hear anyone else. Ryder must have already left. I walk to the back door with the blanket wrapped tightly around me and let Mojo out.

Just like Ryder said, he is back at the door and ready to come in a few minutes later. He lazily strolls in and sits in front of me. "I guess it's just the two of us today."

I eat some cereal before hopping in the shower and getting dressed. After I finish the rest of Ryder's laundry, I busy myself reorganizing the cabinets in the kitchen.

Checking the time, I realize it's already noon. I let Mojo out again before making a turkey sandwich. I cut it in half and sit down to eat. Just when I take the first bite, I see Mojo sitting next to me, looking up expectantly. I slowly lower my sandwich and offer it to him. He snaps it out of my hand, luckily without taking my finger with it, and lies down beside me. Maybe we

are friends now.

By the time I'm done eating, I get anxious. I am running out of things to do. I'm alone with nothing to occupy my mind. This can't be happening. If I stop moving, I'm left with nothing but time to think. Thinking about what I've been through and what I'm going through now. Thinking about all the mistakes I've made, all the things I've lost, and all the struggles the future holds.

Desperate, I pace around the living room. Everything is clean, and all the laundry folded. I need something to do. I glance at the living room cabinet and stalk over to it. In the spur of the moment, I wipe the entire contents of the shelf off with a swipe of my arm.

Mojo looks at me, tilting his head sideways like he is trying to figure me out. I clean up the mess I just made, taking my time to make it last as long as possible. The last thing on the floor is some old book with a binding so old that I can't make out the title. I pick up the book and flip it open to the first page. There is a 'this book belongs to' box in the front with Ryder written under it. It's obvious a small child wrote it, since it's in uneven block letters. On the bottom of the same page, it says, *To my sweet boy, love Grandma.*

My heart squeezes in my chest. I know Ryder stayed with his grandma when he was younger. When she died, he ended up in the foster system. When I was fifteen, I was so selfish and self-absorbed that it never even occurred to me what Ryder must have gone through. I was lucky that my parents adopted me when I was so young. They were wonderful parents to me, and they were good foster parents to Ryder—until I messed everything up.

I flip to the next page, which has the title: *Peter Pan's Adventures*. I shut the book with a heavy heart, remembering all the pain I've caused Ryder and my family.

"Penny, come and sit with us," someone calls, and I walk faster past the group of guys hanging out in front of the local gas station. I've seen these guys before, they go to public school with Ryder, and my mom told me to stay away from them more than once. Bad influence, she had said.

I usually don't even walk home this way, but the other way, the safer way, is much longer, and it's raining today. My clothes are already soaked, and my

toes feel like they're about to freeze off.

Because of the heavy rain, I don't hear when one of those guys comes up behind me. He grabs my arm and spins me around abruptly. "I was talking to you."

With shaking fingers, I push my heavy glasses up my nose. "I need to go home," I say meekly.

"Don't be like this, come sit with us." His eyes roam down my body, lingering where the sweater is clinging to my breasts, and I feel my cheeks heat. I'm not used to this kind of attention, and to make matters worse, the guy in front of me is really cute.

"I need to go home," I repeat shyly, trying to take a step back, but he tightens his grip on my arm and pulls me closer to him. So close that I can smell the alcohol on his breath.

"And I need you to come sit with me." He grins, not budging, and only then does actual fear make an appearance.

"Let her go, Keller," a familiar voice calls, and I turn my head to find Ryder walking toward us like he is on a war mission. The guy, which I assume is his friend, lets go of me with a shove, and my shoulders sag in relief.

A moment later, Ryder is by my side, replacing his friend's hand with his own. Holding on to my arm, he drags me away from the gas station and down the sidewalk.

"I didn't need your help. I was fine," I say under my breath as we head to our shared home.

"Didn't look like you were fine," Ryder growls, right before someone shoves him from behind. Ryder lets go of my arm and spins around at the same time. I stumble back and watch helplessly as two of the guys hit Ryder in the face.

Everything happens so fast I have a hard time keeping up. One minute we are walking, the next, Ryder gets attacked, and then Ryder tackles one of the two, slamming his body to the ground harshly. The guy's head bounces off the ground like a basketball, and his eyes roll back before he passes out.

The other guy, Keller, Ryder called him, is still throwing punches. Ryder dodges most of them until he catches one of the flying fists and twists Keller's arm. He groans, his face turning into a mask of agony as he falls to his knees.

Ryder takes this opportunity and starts smashing his fist into Keller's face over and over again until his face is unrecognizable. Until Keller passes out and Ryder's knuckles drip with blood that isn't his own. Until the police sirens are closing in on the scene and the life I knew has ended.

WHEN I SET the book back on the shelf, and the last image of that distant memory leaves my mind, my hands are shaking and unsteady. Why couldn't I have just told the truth about what happened that day? All I had to do was tell the truth.

Something slides out from in between the pages just as I place the book where it was before. I watch the picture float to the floor like a leaf falling off a tree in the fall time. I pick it up and hold it with trembling fingers. Four familiar faces stare back at me: Ryder, myself, and my parents.

The ache in my chest instantly becomes too much. Unable to look at it, I hastily slide the picture back and return the book to its earlier spot. Trying to push all those unwanted memories away, I look around the house for something else to do.

It starts with a single tear escaping and ends with my vision blurring and my head throbbing in pain. I've been doing so good keeping everything bottled up. I've shed some tears here and there, but nothing like I am doing now.

With nobody here and nothing to do, I can't hold back the flood of emotions. I'm on the floor in the fetal position, crying so hard that my whole body shakes. Wave upon wave of sorrow and despair hit me, making me feel like I'm drowning, unable to keep my head above water.

A large wet tongue drags over my face, leaving slobber and dog breath behind on my skin. Prying my eyes open, I find Mojo inches away from my face. I sob as tremors are still shaking my body. Mojo lets out a low whimper and lies down next to me. I put my hand on his back, letting my fingers glide through his soft fur. He scoots closer to me until his large, fluffy body is

pushed up against mine completely.

Putting my arm around him and burying my face in his thick coat, I realize that I've stopped crying. My body is relaxing, and my mind is calming down. I'm almost drifting off to sleep when I hear the front door open and shut. Unable to move, I hold on to Mojo. Luckily, he doesn't seem to want to get up either.

"Traitor!" Ryder's voice booms through the room.

I look up and see him standing in front of us, shaking his head at Mojo. Apparently, unfazed by my wailing on the floor, he says, "You look like shit."

I feel like shit too.

I hate that Ryder is witnessing this. I'm at the lowest point in my life, and he has a front-row seat to the main event. Of course, I'm the creator of this. I can never forget that. I made my bed, and now I have to lie in it. I can't really be mad at him for enjoying this.

Still looking down at us, he orders, "Get up."

Oh god, I don't want to have sex right now. I just want to crawl into a hole and never come out. Despite my aching body, and my havoc mind, I get up just like he wants. My movements are jerky and slow, but Ryder doesn't complain about me moving at a low speed.

"Come on, we'll get some real groceries," he says, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

By the time we get to the grocery store, my face looks almost normal again. My eyes are still red and slightly swollen, but at least I don't look like I just did ten rounds in the boxing ring. I have looked that way before, and it wasn't pretty.

Walking through the aisles of the small-town grocery store next to Ryder is like walking next to a giant billboard saying, *look over here*. He is tall, muscular, and always dressed in black. Tattoos are not only covering his arms but also his hands and neck. Overall, he looks like a criminal, a bad guy—who will destroy everything around him without thinking about it twice.

What nobody knows is that I am the same. Maybe I'm even worse than him.

Ryder makes me push the buggy while he throws random items in as we go.

"You know I brought you along so you could pick some stuff."

"Oh." I was actually wondering why he made me tag along. "You want me to pick stuff to cook for both of us?" I don't want to assume that he wants to eat my food. Having dinner together yesterday was nice for me, but I have no idea if Ryder feels the same way. Maybe he doesn't like my food.

"If everything you make tastes like what you whipped up last night, then yes, cook away."

Nodding, more to myself than him, I put stuff in the cart. When we get to the register, Ryder leans against the magazine stand and watches me unload everything out of the cart. The cashier is a young girl with purple hair and a piercing in her bottom lip. She scans and bags everything on the belt while I deposit the bagged groceries back into the cart.

"That'll be \$128.73," she announces, looking at me expectantly. I look over to Ryder, who is still in the same spot, looking very much amused.

The cashier looks up at me. "Ma'am?"

I glance over at Ryder. "Ryder?"

He grins at me. "Yes?"

Ugh, he is really doing this.

I want to scream as loud and long as my lungs will allow. I want to throw myself on the floor, kicking and screaming like a two-year-old having a tantrum. That's how I feel on the inside. However, on the outside, I plaster my usual stone mask onto my face and ask in the most courteous tone I can manage, "Ryder, could you please pay?"

The cashier, obviously very uncomfortable with our little spiel, looks away like she is trying to ignore us.

After what seems like an eternity, he strolls over and slides his card. Before he types in the pin, he glances at me again. "What do you say?"

Please, someone, kill me now.

“Thank you,” I say. Somehow, I do it without shouting it in his face. He punches in his four-digit code and waits until he is handed the receipt by the poor young girl behind the register.

He gets in the driver’s seat as soon as he unlocks the truck, leaving me to load the groceries and return the buggy. When I get back in the car to buckle up, he snickers. “That was fun.”

Yes... so much fun.

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RYDER

A few days pass, and we fall into some kind of routine. Penny stays at the house, never even asking to leave. She cleans, does my laundry, and has dinner ready when I get home. When I ask for sex, she seems all too eager to oblige.

I have lost track of how many times we've had sex and how much money she's worked off. Hopefully, she still owes a lot. I don't want her to leave.

Shaking that thought away, I concentrate on the now and the fact that I'll get my bike back today.

It's been two long weeks of waiting for my bike to be fixed. So, when Maddox tells me he is going to pick me up to get it, I feel like a little kid on Christmas morning.

"I'll be back in a bit," I tell Penny before heading out the door just as Maddox pulls up in his SUV. It's weird not seeing him on his Harley, but I'm glad he came in a car, because there is no way in fucking hell I would ever ride shotgun on a bike.

As soon as I get into the vehicle, I can tell something isn't right. Maddox is even grumpier than his normal broody self. His frown more prominent, the glint in his eyes a little unhinged, and the grip on the steering wheel a little too tight.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I ask after we've been driving for a few minutes.

“I think someone is skimming money off the top,” he blurts out. “Numbers are low even though business has stayed the same. Someone is fucking with us, and I don’t think it’s one of the people we deal with.”

“What are you saying? That one of our own guys is doing it?”

“I don’t know, Ryder, but I’m going to find out, and I hope you have my back on this.”

I almost snort. “Is that even a question? You know I have your back. Always.” I can’t believe he’s even asking. Maddox and I have been best friends for years. I would do anything for him, and I trust him with my life.

“I know you do, but this is different. We’ve never had to take care of our own. We might have to kill one of our brothers, and even though everybody knows the rules, someone might not agree with it. At the very least, they are going to resent us for doing it, and that brings up a whole other set of problems.”

“Then we deal with them too. We’ll kill whoever needs killing. Like you said, everybody knows the rules, knows what happens if you steal from the club. I don’t give a fuck who gets butthurt about killing one of our own if he broke club law. Besides that, you’re the Prez. You make the decisions, and I’ll be standing by your side no matter what.”

“I figured you’d say something like that, but I needed to make sure before I actually investigate. We’ll find out who’s been stuffing their pockets, and then we’ll cut off his balls.”

“Now, you’re talking.” I grin. My enjoyment of violence has always been unusual. It has gotten me into trouble more times than I can count. This is why I’m the VP of an MC and not a pencil pusher in an office.



WHEN I GET BACK to the house, a plethora of savory smells greets me at the door. She made some kind of chicken with a herb and lemon sauce. I don’t know the name of it, but I don’t really care. All I know is that it’s delicious.

“How did you learn how to cook?” I remember cooking was not her mom’s best attribute, so she must have learned it elsewhere. At my question, her face scrunches up like the memory triggers pain.

This is becoming less fun and more depressing. I like seeing her in pain, but only when I’m the one causing it. Also, I don’t want her so broken that she doesn’t push back at all. I want some kind of reaction out of her other than crying. I keep waiting for her to slip up. Get so mad that she fires back at me with a witty remark or a good insult. I was sure that she was going to break at the grocery store, but I don’t think we even put a crack in that wall of hers.

I wanted her to be mad and yell at me. Instead, she did exactly what I told her to. She didn’t just swallow her pride; somewhere along the past five years, she chewed it up and spat it out.

For a moment, I think she will not answer at all, but then she says, “I used to spend all my time inside our house. He didn’t want me to go anywhere, so I ordered a bunch of cookbooks and learned how to cook.” Her voice is flat and monotone, as if she was rattling off a shopping list and not talking about a memory.

This is getting old. It’s not fun when it’s this miserable. I need to fix her, so I can break here again myself.

After dinner, I watch her clean the kitchen before telling her to follow me to the bedroom. Sex seems to be where she can forget about him. This is the only time I have seen her let go and relax a bit.

My clothes come off, and I lie down on my bed. Standing naked at the bottom of my bed, she waits for direction. “Sit on my face.”

“What?” she asks like she didn’t hear me.

“Sit on my face,” I repeat a little slower and hold out my hand. She takes it, and I pull her on top of me, guiding her pussy to my mouth. She is sweet and soft on my tongue.

Just like last time I was eating her out, she is stiff at first. I let my hands roam over her thighs, and I can feel her body growing softer and needier. With her hands on the wall above me, she is bracing herself. She doesn’t look down at me, but I’m watching her closely. Her face is flush, her eyes are closed, and

her mouth is ajar. She is panting and moaning softly now, but I don't think she is close to coming. For some reason, she can't let go like this.

I'm trying to figure out if she doesn't want to let go or if she doesn't know how. I keep sucking on her clit, letting my tongue glide over it before dipping it inside of her. I can taste her arousal, feel her thighs quiver, but when I look up, her eyes are shut, and her jaw flexed as if she is grinding her teeth. What the fuck is wrong with her? Why can't she come like this?

Giving up, for now, I push her off my face and flip her around, so I can fuck her doggy. I enter her from behind in one swift move, making her gasp. I go slow for a minute, enjoying how tight she is in this position. Her body is still stiff, and it looks like her thin arms are about to give out. I need to feed her more. She is too skinny. She can't even hold her own body weight up like this.

I let my hand travel up her spine, drawing a shiver out of her. When my hand is flat on her back, between her shoulder blades, I push her down. She lets her upper body fall to the mattress with a sigh. I can see her shoulders relaxing, and I can feel her body softening. Now, with her more relaxed, I can get back to enjoying this.

Grabbing her hips with both hands, I fuck her in earnest. Slamming into her over and over again, until I feel my balls tighten, ready to shoot up a load. Her body is rocking forward with every thrust. In the heat of the moment, I pull my hand back and slap her ass with my flat palm. One second, I'm balls deep in her tight pussy. The next, she is across the bed, huddle up by the headboard.

"Don't do that," she whimpers, adding more quietly, "please."

I should have known that she wouldn't like that. But honestly, I wasn't thinking about that when I did it. Spanking is not really a turn on for me. I've done it in the past because girls wanted me to. Most chicks seem to like it, but I don't see its appeal.

"Get back here. My dick is getting cold," I scowl at her.

"I-I'll let you do whatever you want, but you can't hit me."

“*Hit* you?” I can’t help but roll my eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. I didn’t *hit* you. I spanked your ass. There is a big difference. Believe me, if I had hit you, you would know it.”

Her accusation makes my blood boil. Grown ass men get out of my way when they see me coming. I don’t need to hit a woman to make myself feel like I’m stronger than anybody else. I fucking know I’m stronger than everybody else.

“I won’t let you hit me,” she repeats, her voice shaking, and I know she is on the verge of crying again.

I wasn’t planning to keep smacking her ass, but her choice of words gets my attention. “You won’t *let* me?” I smirk. “And how are you going to prevent me from doing whatever I want with you?”

“I will... I’ll fight you.” Her voice is quiet and trembling, even though I can tell she is trying her best to keep it strong and even.

“Maybe I’ll like you fighting me.” I move closer to her, and she flattens herself against the headboard in response.

“I won’t stay here. I’ll leave.”

I move even closer, and she squeezes her eyes shut as if that will make me go away. When I’m an inch away from her face, I whisper, “Then I’ll lock you in, cuff you to the bed, so I can use you whenever I want. Maybe slap you around for real this time.”

Her eyes fly open, meeting mine with pure terror, and I know I’ve gone too far. Shit, this is not how I get to her. This is just fucking her up more. I straighten up, putting some distance between us.

“Get out,” I growl. Her eyes go wide, and then she slowly moves off the bed, keeping her gaze on me as if she is expecting me to pounce on her like a wild animal. I take in her slight frame as she moves. She is so small and skinny, her limbs slender, and her skin pale. She looks breakable to me, like a glass figurine that will break into a thousand pieces if you ever drop it.

“Sleep on the couch and don’t even fucking think about leaving. I’ll find you wherever you go, and then I will lock you up for real, got it?”

“Got it,” she murmurs before exiting the room.

Well, this sucks. Now I have to jerk myself off.

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PENNY

*M*y chest is heaving, and my heart is still racing when I return to the living room. Only when I'm back at the couch, do I notice that I didn't even pick up my clothes. I'm standing in the room completely naked. A shiver running over my entire body as I try to think about what I should do. Do I just go to sleep on the couch like he said, or should I calm down and go back in there?

Part of me knows that he didn't actually hit me. I might be inexperienced in bed, but even I know that spanking while having sex is a thing. Still, it was too much for me. Too close to the pain I used to endure daily. It took so much to get away from that. I will never let it happen again.

I finally lie down on the couch, covering up with the blanket Ryder gave me. I close my eyes and try to go to sleep, but I can't shake the stupid urge to go back to his bedroom and apologize. He looked furious when I accused him of hitting me. I know Ryder hates me, and he might do some fucked up stuff to me, but I don't think he would actually hit me. Ryder likes to mess with my head, but he doesn't physically hurt me. Not like Tommy used to.

I twist and turn, unable to calm my mind. I'm not sure how much time passes, but it must have been a few hours. I cannot go to sleep until I apologize.

I get up and walk to his room; quietly, I open the door. It's completely dark and silent inside. And I realize he is asleep. *Of course, he is sleeping. Why wouldn't he be?* Silently cursing my stupidity, I close the door again when a

low growl has me stopping dead in my tracks. *Mojo*.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Ryder’s sleepy voice meets my ears.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to wake you. I was... about earlier... I-I’m sorry.”

“Go to sleep,” he murmurs, and I hear the rustling of the bedsheets, letting me know he is lying back down.

I tiptoe out of the room and go back to my couch. I’m not sure if it’s because I apologized or because I’m so tired, but when my head hits the pillow, I am out almost immediately.



WHEN I WAKE, I’m alone again. With the blanket wrapped around my body, I walk through the house. Ryder isn’t here, and wherever he is, he took *Mojo* with him. I’m completely alone, and for some stupid reason, I hate it. I wish he would have left his dog here.

After I eat some breakfast, I decide to pass the time by taking a shower. Using some disposable razors I found under the sink, I shave my legs, my lady parts, and under my armpits. When I’m done with that, I get dressed and wipe down the bathroom.

Once everything is clean, including me, Ryder is still not back. There is nothing else to do around here, and I can feel my mind going into overdrive. I need something to do. Shit, I can’t go on like this. I need a plan. I take out the little notebook from my backpack and stare at the list of jobs I could do and classes I could take. Pamphlets of programs and organizations that could help me are stuck in between the pages.

But first, I need to pay off my debt. I write five thousand on the top of an empty page and minus it with the money Ryder promised me every time I sleep with him. I don’t count last night since I made him stop halfway through. As I write the number, I try not to think about the fact that I am basically a prostitute now and instead pretend that I’m just doing book-keeping for some normal job.

When I'm done, I think about my next step. I need to find a job, save up enough money for an apartment, or at least a room somewhere, then college. Maybe I'll apply for some grants or scholarships. I need to get to the library. I can use the computer there and start applying.

Ryder said last night that he doesn't want me to leave, but maybe he'll let me go for a few hours if he knows where I am. I can take the bus back and forth.

My thoughts are interrupted when the back door opens, and Mojo comes running in. He goes straight for his water bowl and starts slurping up water like he just went on a run. A moment later, Ryder walks in. He is wearing running shoes, shorts, and a sweat-soaked shirt that is clinging to his body.

I try not to gawk at him, but it's really hard not to. He is tall, muscular, and there is something about him that commands the room as soon as he steps in. He glares at me but says nothing as he takes his shoes off, walks by me, and into the bathroom. He must still be mad about last night.

As soon as he is out of sight, I panic again. What if our deal's off? What if he is done with me and brings me back to the club to let the other men have me?

I can hear my pulse buzzing in my ears, and I can feel my breathing speeding up, ready to fall into a full-blown panic attack. Before my fear can spiral out of control, Mojo appears next to me, placing his heavy head and one paw on my lap. He looks up at me and whimpers slightly as if he is sorry for me. Maybe even telling me it's going to be okay. I reach out for him and pet him on his neck and behind his ear.

It takes me a moment to realize that the panic has passed, and my breathing has evened out. I almost laugh out loud. Mojo, the hell hound, calms me down.

My moment of peace is short-lived when the back door suddenly swings open. I jump up from the chair, ready to run away, and Mojo growls next to me.

"Whoa, whoa, calm down, Mojo," the guy says, holding up his hands.

Mojo listens to his command and stops growling, but still stays by my side. I stare at the man standing in the kitchen. He is wearing the same clothes Ryder wears, a vest decorated with patches, dark jeans, and black boots. His

arms are covered in tattoos, and just like Ryder, he is tall and muscular. The last thing he has in common with Ryder is the way he looks at me... this guy wants to have sex with me. I see the lust in his eyes.

“I’m a friend of Ryder’s,” he explains, not surprised that I’m here. He takes a stack of folded papers from his pocket and throws them on the table before turning his full attention back to me.

Then it dawns on me. Did Ryder call this guy to pick me up? Oh my god, he is getting rid of me, passing me over to them. I stupidly look to the bedroom door, wishing Ryder would come out now, even though I know he wouldn’t help me. He wouldn’t protect me from this guy, or anyone else for that matter. *Not anymore.*

“Don’t look so scared. I’m Tucker,” he tells me, a grin tugging on his lips. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

For some reason, I don’t want to tell him my name, I really don’t want to tell him, but I end up doing so anyway, “P-Penny.”

“Don’t be so tense, *Penny*,” Tucker says, stepping closer. “I’ll pay you whatever Ryder is paying you. I want a taste of that sweet pussy.”

“No...” I take a few steps back until I hit the shelf in the living room.

He cocks his head to the side. “No?” His eyes darken, glaring daggers at me. “This ain’t pick and choose, bitch. You’re working off club money, so everyone in the club has a right to fuck you.”

Fear grabs me and holds me in place. Unable to move a muscle, I just stand there shaking like a leaf. He raises his hand and grips a handful of my shirt, ripping it. Then he grabs my breast, kneading painfully hard, and that’s when I snap out of it. The pain he causes is enough to get me moving.

I shove him away from me, covering my breasts with one arm while trying to move past him. Unfortunately, I’m not fast enough. He grabs my arm and pushes me back against the shelf.

“Bitch, I didn’t say we were done,” he growls. Before I can make another attempt to get away, his fist connects with my face. My head snaps back, hitting the corner of the shelf. All too familiar pain spreads across my face

and the back of my skull. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for more to come.

An ear-piercing warning growl booms through the room. My eyes pop open just in time to see Mojo's large body come up from the side and snap at Tucker's leg.

"What the fuck?" Tucker backs up, shock and anger written all over his face. I take this opportunity to make a run for the back door. Thanking Mojo in my head for saving me from this asshole, I fly out the door, running as fast as my legs can carry me. I don't know where I'm going or what I'm doing. Right now, I just have one thing on my mind.

Get away.

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RYDER

*A*s soon as I turn the water off, I hear Mojo's loud bark coming from the other room. I pull on my shorts without bothering to dry off before I run out. Tucker is on the floor, trying to protect his face. Mojo is looming over him, still in attack mode, and Penny is nowhere to be found.

"Get your fucking dog away from me!" he yells and kicks his leg out, almost hitting Mojo. His dark jeans have a huge rip, exposing bloody bite marks underneath.

What the fuck? I look around the room. *Where did Penny go?*

"Mojo, come here!" My dog snarls at Tucker but listens to my command and sits down next to my foot. "What the fuck just happened?"

Tucker gets on his feet. "That fucking slut of yours told your stupid mutt to attack me. That's what fucking happened!"

I go from confused to furious, bypassing irritation and anger. Only I get to call Penny names, and nobody calls my dog a mutt. But what really gets to me is that he just lied to my face. I know Penny, and I know Mojo. I'm not sure what happened yet, but I know Tucker is lying about it.

"You better go and clean that up, maybe even get some stitches," I say casually.

Letting him know how I really feel right now is a bad move. So, I play it smart and pretend that this is not concerning me. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, I notice that the back door is open. I sit down on the couch and prop my legs up on the coffee table while watching Tucker inspecting his leg. When he finally gets up with a grunt, he doesn't even look at me.

"Papers are on the table," he growls before limping out.

I listen, waiting for his bike to leave my driveway before jumping up and running out the back door. My next-door neighbor comes out his back door giving me a dirty look. Probably because I'm wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, but I couldn't care less.

Mojo is on my heels when I search the backyard and around the house. "Find her!" I order him, and he sniffs around the yard.

It doesn't take him long to catch her scent and follow a trail. Leading me through the neighbor's yards, he brings me to a small park at the end of the road. Penny is sitting under a large oak tree with legs pulled up to her body, hugging her knees. I can't see her face because her head hangs down, and her forehead is pressed to her knees. Her hair falls to the side like a curtain, making it impossible to see her eyes. Still, I know she is crying by the audible sobs and how her body trembles with each sound.

I watch Mojo nudging her legs with his head, and she unclenches one of her arms to reach out to him. She buries her fingers into his thick fur and moves her hand around a bit. Mojo sees that as an invite and lays his large body next to hers. It's weird watching her with my dog like that. Mojo has always been attached to me, only listening to my commands, and he has never been protective of someone else. I don't know how I feel about this new development yet.

I take a seat next to Penny on the ground. "You going to tell me what happened?"

No answer.

We sit here for a few minutes, and I just let her cry. When she seems to calm down a little, I ask her again, "What happened?"

Instead of giving me an explanation, she raises even more questions by saying, “I don’t want to sleep with him or your friends. Please, I can’t.” Then she lifts her head and looks at me. “Please, don’t make me do that. I’ll be better. I’m sorry about last night. I’ll get over it. I won’t stop you again. I promise, I’ll do whatever you want.”

I can feel my blood pumping at double speed and turning two degrees hotter when I see her face.

That motherfucker.

Her bottom lip is swollen and split open, and the side of her jaw is already turning a bluish shade. She wipes the tears out of her eyes with the back of her hand. I have the irrational urge to hug her right now, but just like with Tucker, it is best not to show her how I really feel.

Keeping my voice even, I ask, “Did you tell Mojo to attack Tucker?”

She shakes her head furiously, strands of her dark blonde hair falling in her face. “No, I swear! That’s not what happened.”

That’s what I thought, but I still wanted her to confirm. I give her a small nod, letting her know that I believe her. She seems to relax a little after that, but tears won’t stop falling down her face. I’ve had enough of this sulking around.

“Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.” I stand, and thank fuck, she follows my lead. Yet another surge of fury runs through my veins when I see her shirt ripped from the collar down to her breasts. Her bra is peeking out, and if I was wearing a shirt right now, I would probably give it to her.

She walks with me, only her legs seem much more unstable than usual. Her steps remind me of a newborn fawn taking its first steps. I put my arm around her and tug her to my side to make sure she doesn’t fall on the way back home. She seems a bit out of it, doesn’t even stiffen when I pull her close.

Back in the house, I deposit her on the couch before making sure all the doors and windows are locked. I rarely do this, Mojo is the best alarm system there is, but I feel like I should now.

After I'm done with that, I go to the bathroom and turn the shower on. I return to the couch to undress a now lethargic Penny. When she is completely naked, I step out of my shorts and pick her up. Carrying her through the house, I see Mojo looking at me funny, and I shake my head at him.

I step under the shower, still cradling her against my chest longer than necessary. Her cheek presses against my skin, and when the water hits us, she turns her face to bury it in my chest.

After a few minutes, I set her down. "Can you stand?"

She nods so slightly that I almost didn't catch it. I set her down and wash her hair first. She doesn't move or say anything, only closes her eyes when I rinse out the shampoo. With a soapy rag, I wash her body, paying special attention to the sensitive part in between her legs. I thought that might drag her out of this trance she is in right now. It doesn't.

Her eyes are open, but I don't think she can actually see or feel anything. It's like she is numb inside and out.

This must be her survival mechanism. When she can't handle something and life gets too much, she just checks out. Somehow, she can numb herself. I'm no psychotherapist, but I can't imagine this is good for her. She needs to let it out. Kick the shit out of something or take a bat to a beat-up car. Instead of letting go of her anger and fright, she keeps it locked away somewhere deep inside her mind. I just need to find that key and unlock that part of her, let the old Penny out. And if I can't find the key, I'll just have to kick in the door.

When we finish in the shower, I wrap her up in a large towel and carry her to the couch. As soon as I cover her with the blanket, she curls up in a ball and closes her eyes. "I guess you don't want to eat lunch then?"

No reaction.

I open the fridge and take out a steak we got from the store yesterday. I throw one at Mojo, watching him catch it midair.

"Good boy." I pat him on the head while he devours the mountain of meat in two large bites. "You deserve that."



PENNY STAYS CURLED up on the couch for the rest of the day, only getting up a few times to go to the bathroom. I couldn't get her to eat anything, but she won't wither away from skipping a meal, so I let it go.

She freaked out a little when I left to go to the gas station, but I assured her no one is coming back, and she settled down. She still looked relieved when I got back, though, which is an odd concept to think about.

When it's almost midnight, I finally get into my bed, even though I know I won't be able to sleep right now. I stare at the ceiling for a while, trying to figure out what to do with that bundle of joy on my couch. This has turned out to be way more work than I had expected. That's the last time I let my dick make decisions. *Yeah, right.*

Ten minutes later, when I'm almost asleep, my bedroom door creaks open, and Penny's silhouette appears in the doorway. The low light coming from the living room highlights every curve of her body, making my dick twitch.

"What?" I bark, not letting her know that I'm actually glad to see her.

She walks up to me, stopping next to my bed. I can't make out her face with the light coming from behind her, but the tone of her voice tells me she is scared and uncomfortable. Well, at least she is walking and talking.

Timidly, she asks, "Can I sleep with you in your bed?"

A huge grin spread across my face. "Why?" *God, I'm such a prick.*

She shifts her weight from one leg to the other nervously. "I... I'm scared."

"Sounds like a personal problem to me."

"Please."

There is something about her begging that has the stupid thing in my chest aching. Something that makes me want to protect her.

"Fine, lie down."

She crawls into the bed and settles next to me under my blanket. This is too close, too intimate. Before I know what I'm doing, I say, "Of course, I'm going to have to tie you up."

She gasps. "What? Why?"

"I don't trust you to sleep next to me. You could stab me in my sleep." Highly unlikely since she walked in naked with no way to hide a knife. But that's not the point of this.

"I would never!"

"Yeah... well, you lost my trust a long time ago. So, either I'll handcuff you to the bed, or you can go back to the couch."

She considers my offer for a moment before agreeing to the handcuffs. I flip on the light on my nightstand and grab the handcuffs from the drawer. I fasten them around her wrists and loop them around one railing on the headboard. I look down at her slender body, naked and tied down. My dick is so hard, I could knock someone out with it.

I run my hand down her body, starting at her neck. My fingers trail over her collarbone, her breasts, and her flat stomach until I end up between her legs. She parts them slightly for me, and I take the invitation and slide two fingers between her folds, finding them wet for me.

"Ryder, I don't want to sleep with your friends," she repeats her earlier statement with a shaky voice.

I consider what I can tell her. Not the truth. I can't let her know how much I want her, and I need something to hold over her head.

"You might have to. I'm getting bored with you, and you have to pay off your debt somehow," I lie. I don't think I'll ever get bored with her body.

"Please, I'll pay you back another way. Please, don't let them," she keeps begging me. She is scared, I think more scared than she has ever been of me, and I can't help but wonder if I just found the key. Maybe if I push her a little harder, she will break, and the old Penny will come out to play.

“Why wouldn’t I let someone else fuck you? Apparently, Tucker really wants some of this,” I say while pushing my finger all the way in. “Two more guys at the club have been asking about you. You could fuck them all at the same time.”

Her eyes go impossibly wide. “No...” Her voice is stern. Strength and resolve taking over her fright.

“You could pay off your debt faster. They’ll give you extra money if you let them fuck you together. I think you would enjoy getting double stuffed.”

I have no plans to share or let anyone else touch her, not even the guys, but I think I’m finally getting through to her. She is struggling, tugging on her restraints lightly.

“Please, Ryder, stop.” Her voice is strained, and I know she is close to the breaking point. I can see her anger winning over her fear. I just need to push her a little further. I hover over her, putting none of my body weight on her because I know that calms her down.

I whisper in her ear, “Matter of fact, I think I’m going to call them right now since you are wet and ready. The guys are going to enjoy you like this, all tied up and helpless. Plus, they can easily flip you around. Use your tight little asshole. You would like that, wouldn’t you? Being used like that. Being treated like you are nothing more than a cheap whore.”

That threat finally drives her over the edge. Her eyes look crazed, her face contorts into pure anger, and she turns into a wild fury underneath me.

“Get the fuck off of me!”

There she is.

She yanks on the handcuffs like a madwoman. Knowing that she is going to hurt herself by pulling on the metal cuffs, I straddle her torso and take the key out of the drawer. I’m barely able to hold her still enough to unlock them. I’m not sure if she even knows she is free, or knows anything for that matter. Her eyes are wild, like those of a lioness about to go in for the kill.

As soon as I’m off of her, she comes for me. Pouncing on me like a feral animal, hitting, kicking, and scratching me. Whatever comes out of her

mouth aren't words, more like primal grunts and screams.

I let her take everything out on me for a while; most of it doesn't even hurt. A few times, she scratches me pretty good in the face. Turning my head up, I cover my face with my arm, so she can't get me like that again.

In between her kicks and punches, one of her knees comes up and hits me on my upper thigh, a few inches away from my balls. *Okay, that's it. Too close to the jewels.*

I throw my arms around her, lift her up, and let us both fall onto the bed. I flatten her out under me and have her completely immobilized in seconds. I can feel her heart beating like a jackhammer against my chest. She is trying to push me away, but she is so weak.

After a while, her wild lion roars turn into the low whimpers of a defeated house cat. Shortly after that, she goes completely quiet.

“You done?”

“Yes,” she answers, her voice raw and raspy.

I slowly get off of her. My chest is wet from her tears, and her face is red and puffy for the same reason. We stay like that, looking at each other for what seems like forever. I can't read her expression; I just know I've never seen her like this, and part of me wonders if I'm going to regret antagonizing her like I did. I have this sinking feeling that whatever she just went through is going to change her state of mind.

The only question now is, will it be for the better or worse?

PENNY

I look up at his face and see the bright red scratches across his cheek. Scratches that I put there. Any moment now, he is going to attack me. He'll grab me and beat the shit out of me. And there is nothing I can do. Tommy is much smaller than Ryder, and I didn't have a chance with him. I'll be lucky if I survive a beating from Ryder, so I'm not going to risk struggling anymore.

The few times I tried to fight back with Tommy, he just beat me up twice as bad. So, I stopped fighting him altogether, and instead, I became the weak person I am now. A doormat, that's what I am. Letting people do whatever they want to me just because they can. I've given up on every single one of my hopes and dreams and let other people dictate my life.

Sitting with this revelation, I wait, counting down the seconds and mentally preparing my body for what's coming. Time stretches on, but he still doesn't move. He just stands there, looking down at me with a blank expression.

When he finally moves, I flinch, scooting back on the mattress a few inches, but all he does is walk around the bed and slide in on the other side.

"Lie down and go to sleep," he mumbles and turns off the bedside lamp.

I'm so confused. It takes me a minute to actually move. In the dark, I slowly ease down the bed and lie next to Ryder. We are not touching, but I can feel his body next to mine. He doesn't tie me up again, and I don't know if it's on purpose or if he just forgot. My head hits the pillow, and a wave of

exhaustion washes over me. If it wasn't for my body trembling, I could probably go to sleep with ease.

Curling into myself, I try to relax as best as I can, so the shaking will stop, but I can't get myself to that point. Not until Ryder moves next to me, draping an arm around my torso and pulling me into him.

For a moment, I think he must be asleep and mistaken me for someone else, but he whispers into my hair, "Go to sleep, little owl." I know then that he is actually doing this consciously.

Despite the throbbing in my jaw, I end up relaxing. I close my eyes and take comfort in Ryder's touch. With my mind and body equally tired, it only takes me a short while before sleep grabs hold of me and pulls me into darkness.



WHEN I BLINK my eyes open the next morning, there is a crust sticking on my eyelashes and a distinct throbbing behind my eyes from crying. The throbbing is even worse than the soreness in my jaw from the punch Tucker gave me.

Besides the pain, I feel like something else is off, and I don't think it's the fact that I'm waking up in Ryder's bed. I feel... different. It takes me some time to figure out what it is. I can breathe a little easier today. I'm a little less scared than I have been in a long time. I just feel like the weight on my shoulders has lessened a bit. It's not gone by any means, but for the first time in a very long time, I feel better than I did the day before.

I notice quickly that Ryder is not in the bed with me, which makes me recall how I felt comfortable with him close last night. I almost laugh. I felt safe with Ryder. I crawled into his bed, letting him cuff me just so I could stay with him. Tucker must have knocked something loose in my head.

I try to push the feeling away, but deep down, I know that it's true. I feel safe with Ryder. He didn't give me away or take his friend's side like I thought he would. He didn't hurt me; the opposite, in fact. He took care of me, helped me undress and shower. He was gentle, his touch careful, nothing like I would expect from him.

Before last night, I was wondering if he would ever beat me. Now I know he won't lay a hand on me, not like that anyway. I fought him, hit him, kicked him, even scratched up his face, and he still didn't hit me back. He just held me down until I was calm.

Getting up from the bed, I wrap the sheet around my naked body. I have nothing to wear in his room, and I don't want to walk out completely nude.

I find him in the kitchen, flipping an omelet. He glances over his shoulder when he hears me approach.

"Last night was a one-time deal. You sleep on the couch or on the floor. The only time I allow you in my bed is to fuck," he growls, and I'm surprised by his bitter tone, even though I shouldn't be.

I might feel different today, but my situation hasn't changed. Whatever kindness he was willing to give me last night is as far as this goes. I should be thankful for that little slither of comfort he gave me. Instead, I'm disappointed that he won't give me more.

"Okay," I whisper before disappearing into the bathroom to put on some clothes. That's when I realize my only clean shirt is ripped. Shit. I might be able to fix it, but I don't want the reminder of what happened, so I toss it in the trash instead. Grabbing my dirty clothes, I walk out in leggings and a bra.

"Can I borrow a shirt until my laundry gets done?"

Ryder, who is now sitting at the kitchen table eating, cocks an eyebrow at me. He looks me over before giving me a small nod. "Just get one from my dresser."

I don't wait until he changes his mind. With my clothes in hand, I walk back to his room. Dropping my pile onto his dirty clothes in the laundry basket. I take my leggings, bra, and underwear off and throw them on there as well before grabbing a shirt from his dresser.

I pull the large, black cotton shirt over my head and pull it down my body. It feels nice and soft, fitting me more like a dress. I pick up the laundry basket and bring it to the washer to start a load.

Walking back into the living room, I find Ryder on the couch, his feet propped up on the coffee table, doing something on his phone. Mojo is lying right below his legs, snoring quietly. Ryder doesn't look at me when I walk past him into the kitchen, grabbing his plate he left on the table on the way. I clean up the mess he made in the kitchen before grabbing an apple for my breakfast.

After I'm done eating, I decide I need to ask him if I can leave today. I need to get to the library to apply for some programs, maybe even find a job. I sit down on the single recliner instead of next to him on the couch.

"I wanted to ask you if it's okay for me to go to the library today?"

"No," he says, without even looking up from his phone.

"It will only take me a few hours, and I can take the bus back and forth..."

"I said, no." His raised voice has the air in my lungs stilling. "I told you, you are not leaving."

Dread seeps into me at his words. He is not letting me go, I fought so hard to get free from Tommy, and now I realize all I did was trade one prison for another.

"Not until you've paid off your debt," Ryder clarifies. "Then you can go wherever the fuck you want to."

I let his words sink in. He is letting me go after he is done with me. At least that's what he is saying now, but he admitted to lying to me before, so I don't know if I can believe him.

"What do you want at the library anyway?"

"I wanted to use the computer there to fill out some applications."

"You can do that when I'm done with you. For now, you are staying here. You got it?"

"Got it."

"You know what? I changed my mind." Ryder grins. I look at him, confused. "You can't borrow my shirt. Take it off."

“All my clothes are in the washer,” I say, knowing damn well that he is aware of that. All he does is give me a smug look as he shrugs his shoulders.

I stand and grab the hem of the shirt, pulling it up and off my body, leaving me standing completely naked in the middle of the living room. I’m already so used to Ryder seeing me naked that I don’t feel uncomfortable with him. However, my eyes flicker to the back door, hoping that it’s locked and that nobody will come in again, especially someone like Tucker.

“The doors are locked. It’s just us,” Ryder says, as if he was reading my mind.

I fold his shirt neatly and take it back to his dresser. I can feel his eyes on me the entire time. Watching every single move I make. Even across the room, I can hear his breathing getting more labored. Goosebumps pebble cross my arms and not because I’m cold. Quite the opposite, I feel like my skin is on fire. Knowing that Ryder wants me and that he is going to have me whenever he wants has my blood heating and my heart racing in my chest.

He doesn’t say anything, and I won’t initiate anything even though part of me wants to. I won’t be admitting it out loud in a million years, but part of me craves Ryder’s touch. He’s awakened something in me I didn’t even know existed.

I walk into the kitchen to dry and put away the dishes I washed earlier before wiping the counters off again, even though I’ve already done it twice.

“Hey, little owl, come here when you’re done cleaning,” Ryder calls for me. The low, seductive tone of his voice sends another wave of goosebumps across my skin.

I gulp, drop the wet rag in the sink, and dry my hands on a towel before walking into the living room area. With each step, the moisture between my thighs grows, and the heat inside my core rises. When I stop in front of where Ryder is sitting, my gaze immediately falls to the sizable tent in his shorts.

“See anything you like?” Ryder teases, and my face turns a shade darker.

Yes. I see something I like.

RYDER

*H*er tongue darts out to moisten her lips, and I feel a bead of precum on the tip of my dick. This control I have over her is like a drug I can't get enough of, a dangerous habit I can't quit. I'm used to controlling people. Most fear me, and rightfully so. But I don't think Penny is actually scared of me—no, there is another kind of control I have over her. More powerful, even. She wants me, she would never admit it, but I can tell she does. She likes my touch, maybe even needs it, definitely wants it. Her body craves me, and I crave the power that it gives me.

Dipping my thumb into my waistband, I pull down my shorts to free my throbbing length.

“Turn around and sit on my dick.”

Still completely naked, she turns, giving me a magnificent view of her perfectly shaped ass. Slowly she bends and sits on my lap, guiding herself onto my rock-hard erection. She is so wet that I slide inside of her with ease—her tight walls surrounding me like a silky-smooth glove tailored to me.

Grabbing her hips, I pull her down, filling her until the tip of my dick hits the end of her channel, and my balls slap against her skin. She gasps, and her hands fly back and land on my thighs to steady herself. For a moment, I just enjoy the feel of her, the way her tightness grabs my dick, and her small hands feel on my legs. She twists her head, craning her neck, and looking at me over her shoulder as if she is waiting for my instruction.

“Bounce up and down,” I order as I push her up an inch before pulling her back down, showing her how I want her to move. She moves hesitantly but tries to mimic the movement.

After a few tries, she falls into a steady rhythm, stroking my cock with her pussy. Placing my hands on her shoulders, I push her down, thrusting my dick even deeper inside. Her tiny nails dig into my thighs in response, and I relish the sting of pain that comes with it.

Her head falls back, and strands of her long brown hair tickle the skin on my stomach. She moans softly, and suddenly I have the urge to look at her face, see how much she is enjoying this.

“Turn around,” I say, pushing her away from me briefly.

She follows my command immediately, getting up to turn around and straddle me again, this time facing me. As soon as she is on my cock, I realize that this was a bad idea. With her face only inches from mine now, this feels too close. I need to stay detached. This is too intimate, and I don’t like it.

What I do like, however, is how she moves now, riding me like her life depends on it. It feels so fucking good; I don’t even care that she has her hands on my shoulders, touching me like we are lovers. Because what matters is her grinding her pussy down on my cock until the tingle in my spine tells me I’m about to come. I close my eyes and let my head fall back to the couch cushion, letting her do all the work.

With my eyes closed, I try to imagine her being someone else, maybe one of the club whores I used to fuck, but when I do, this doesn’t feel as good anymore. Only when I peek at her again and see her flushed face in front of me does the tingle in my balls return.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Somehow my hands have found their way to her thighs, holding her, making sure she can’t get away. To make matters even worse, I can feel her thighs quivering, her walls fluttering around my cock, and I know she is about to come.

Before I know it, she does just that, her slick pussy clamping down on me as moans of pleasure fall from her lips. She leans forward, burying her face in the crook of my neck while I wrap my arms around her torso and thrust up deep inside of her two more times before coming so hard I see stars.

I fill her up with my cum until it drips down my thighs. My balls feel empty, and the rest of me drained. She drapes her body across mine as we remain like this in a hug-like position.

Even though I know I should push her away, shove her off of me, tell her to get lost... I don't, because this feels so fucking good. We stay like this for a while. She doesn't stir, and I pretend to be uncaring, when in reality, I enjoy the way she clings onto me like this, wondering what the hell she is doing to me.



I LET her put my shirt back on after. I have no idea why, but I like her wearing my shirt. Maybe it's the way her small frame drowns in the fabric that is cut to fit me, or maybe it's the fact that it feels like she belongs to me.

After she finishes with the laundry, she dresses in her own clothes again.

"Put your shoes on. We're going somewhere," I tell her without further explanation. To my surprise, she doesn't question me, putting her shoes on like I asked. Only when we are in the truck, and I turn the ignition, does her curiosity get the best of her.

"Where are we going?" There is a slight tremor to her voice, and I know it scares her I'll take her to the club or pawn her off on one of the guys.

"Don't worry about it," I snap back at her, watching her squirm in her seat.

Fuck. I'm an asshole.

"I will not sleep with anyone else," she states, all matter of fact.

"I gathered that much from last night." I point at the scratch across my face. "Question is, why not?" I ask, genuinely curious. "You didn't fight when it came to fucking me." She was reluctant, but she wasn't this scared or

unwilling.

“That was different,” she whispers.

“Was it?” After a long stretch of silence, I grow impatient and continue, “I’ll tell you what, you give me an answer I believe, and I won’t hand you off to anyone else in the club.”

Looking out the window, she wrings her fingers on her lap, probably trying to find the right words. “With you, it’s different... I-I don’t know, I...” she stumbles over her words and leans back in her seat. “I guess because I know you... and part of me knew you wouldn’t hurt me,” she mumbles the last part, but I heard her loud and clear in the truck’s small confines.

Before I can respond, she continues, “Also, if I just do it with you, it feels less like...”

“It feels less like you being a whore?” I see her wince out of the corner of my eye, and I actually feel a ping of regret saying it the way I did.

“You believe me?” she asks after a moment.

“Yeah, I won’t hand you off to my brothers at the club.” I see her shoulders sag, relaxing, and she sighs in relief.

A few minutes later, we pull up at the gynecologist I looked up earlier. Penny looks out of the window and reads the sign.

“Why are we here?”

“You’re going to get checked out and get the pill,” I tell her.

“I don’t have health insurance.”

“Yeah, I figured that much.” That’s why I have a wad of cash in my pocket.



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, you can’t treat her? I’m paying cash,” I growl at the receptionist.

“It doesn’t matter how you pay the bill. We still need some kind of

identification. Driver's license, social security card, birth certificate, anything like that. We can't just prescribe her the pill having nothing that proves she is who she says she is."

"Well, this is bullshit," I yell, slamming my fist on the counter. Not a head in the waiting area is unturned, and I know I'm making a bigger scene than necessary. Glancing down at Penny, I catch her enormous eyes glued to my face, looking at me apologetically.

"I could go get it," she whispers, and I see the fear in her eyes when she says it. I'm sure her shit is at a place she'd rather not revisit, but not being able to take her to the doctor is not okay either. I wonder if the doc for the club can examine her and get her the pill, but then I imagine his meaty fingers between her legs and quickly shove that thought away.

"Fine, let's go," I say, nodding toward the exit.

Penny glances over to the receptionist and mouths *sorry* before we exit and head back to the truck.

"Where is all your shit?"

"At my ex-boyfriend's house," she says timidly. "He should be at work right now. I can get some more clothes while I'm there too." I don't miss the slight tremble in her voice. She is terrified of going back there, probably rightfully so. Still, I let her tell me the address and drive her there. If he is at work anyway, she won't have to deal with him... and neither will I.

PENNY

We pull up to the house that holds most of my nightmares. It hasn't changed at all. The front yard is unmowed and not cared for, the siding is dirty, and the windows are covered with tan curtains.

As I expected, the driveway is carless. Tommy is at work, leaving the house empty. Still, the thought of going inside is more frightening than I expected it to be. I thought I could do it, but now that I'm here, I doubt I'll be able to make my feet work.

"Hurry and get your shit," Ryder mumbles from the driver's side before turning up the music and taking out his phone.

Taking a deep calming breath, I will myself to get out of the car, telling myself repeatedly I can do this. He is not here; I'm going to be okay. I'm just going in there to get my clothes, and then I'll be out of here forever—no need to freak out.

"Let's go. I don't have all day," Ryder orders, raising his voice over the loud music.

Gathering all my courage, I take one final breath before opening the door and getting out of the truck. I walk up to the front door and take out the hidden key from under the flowerpot sitting on the porch. With shaking hands, I slide the key in the lock and open the door.

The first thing I notice when I step inside is the familiar smell of cigarettes and alcohol. They say scents are the most likely to trigger a memory... and they are right.

My stomach turns, and my head swirls as suppressed thoughts and feelings all flood my mind. The memories of endless nights of pain, heartache, despair, and hopelessness all come crashing down on me. I close my eyes, trying to ground myself and concentrate on the task at hand. I just need to get my stuff and get out of here for good.

I briefly consider running back outside and begging Ryder to either buy me new clothes or come inside with me. The idea almost makes me laugh. Almost.

No, I need to do this. Willing my feet to move, I step further into the house. With every step, more dread seeps into me, filling me with deep-rooted fear. If Tommy found me sneaking into the house, he would kill me. He would beat me to death for leaving him. That's what he always threatened, if I ever tried to leave, he'd kill me. And I did it, I left.

I step into the bedroom on shaky legs and quickly find a bag in the closet. Setting it on the unmade bed, I randomly start grabbing clothes and stuffing them in the bag in a hurry.

"Well, look who it is," Tommy's voice fills the room, and I freeze. Fear grips me so tightly that my muscles lock up, and I'm literally unable to move an inch. The only thing moving is my wildly beating heart. It's so rapid I might have a heart attack. The floorboards creak as Tommy moves, taking a few steps, so he is right beside me.

"What did I tell you would happen if you ever tried to leave me?" His voice is like venom, paralyzing me and making it hard to breathe. "Nothing to say?"

"I-I'm sorry," I force out.

"Sorry? I don't think you're sorry, but don't worry, you will be," he threatens, a twisted smirk on his face.

This is the part where I usually check out, numb my body as best as I can, try to have my mind go anywhere but here. But today something is stopping me,

something is different. I've never had a reason to fight or scream before, because I didn't have anyone who would help me, and I had no place to go. Today, I only have to get to the truck. I only have to get to Ryder. He would help me, I think.

Tommy takes a step toward me, his lip curled up in a snarl, his hands curled in fists at his side, and his eyes go even darker than their normal shade of brown. Instead of cowering in front of him and letting him hit me, I take a step back. His eyebrows raise at my move, and I use his momentary surprise to my advantage. I turn around and sprint out of the room, running down the hall as fast as I can.

I'm almost at the door, my fingers inches from the brass knob. So close, I can practically feel the cold metal on my skin. Just one more inch, and I'm there, but I never get the chance to even touch it. Tommy grabs me by the arm and yanks me back so roughly, I think it might come out of the socket. I would normally swallow my scream or at least try to muffle it, but knowing Ryder is sitting out in the car has me screaming at the top of my lungs.

Pain ripples through me as Tommy forces me deeper into the house. Grabbing a handful of my hair, he pulls me by it into the kitchen and throws me onto the floor. I land roughly on my back. The air is knocked out of my lungs, and before I can suck in a breath, Tommy is on me.

"You fucking bitch!" he yells and starts punching my face. The back of my head bounces off the unforgiving tile floor as he keeps hitting me relentlessly. I try to cover my face and head, but he keeps pounding at my arms and hands anyway.

My head throbs in pain, and my vision goes blurry. I'm not even sure if it's from the tears or if I have head trauma already. All I know is that I wish for Ryder to be here, to hear my screams, to get me out of here and away from Tommy.

Please, Ryder. I say a silent prayer in my head. Please, let him come in and look for me.

Please!

RYDER

I blast the music on the car stereo, hoping to annoy people in this neighborhood while waiting for Penny to return. Scrolling through my phone out of boredom, I realize I've missed a few messages and calls from a girl I used to fuck frequently at the club. She was my favorite booty call before I had convenient pussy at the house around the clock. I delete all the messages and tuck my phone back in my pocket.

Looking up and toward the house, I still don't see Penny. I'm getting slightly annoyed about her taking so long to gather her shit when a different feeling creeps up on me. Could she be stupid enough to try to get away from me? The thought has small hairs on the back of my neck rising. She wouldn't.

Before I can think about it any longer, the song ends. There is a small stretch of silence between this song finishing, and before the next one starts. In those two seconds, I hear something that sounds a lot like a scream coming from the house.

My head snaps up, my eyes glued on the house as I turn the radio off with one hand, the other on the door handle. When I hear the second high-pitched scream, my body moves on its own. I'm out of the car and at the front door in the blink of an eye.

Not bothering to check if the door is unlocked, I use my run's momentum to kick in the piece of shit door as I go. The wood gives way easily, the whole thing coming off its frame as I enter the house.

More screams echo through the house, and I follow the sounds until I'm standing in a kitchen. Penny is on the floor, her arms trying to protect her face. Some guy in on top of her, straddling her torso as he rains down punches on her.

An all-consuming rage shoots through me, filling every fiber of my being as I take in the scene before me. I feel my muscles vibrate as my body gets ready for a fight. The next instant, I'm across the room with my hands around the guy's neck. He was so busy beating up Penny, he didn't even see or hear me coming.

I drag him off of her by his neck, throwing him against the closest wall, and readying to beat the ever-living hell out of him when I see his face.

What the fuck? Thomas Keller?

His chest is heaving, and his eyes are wide with shock, and I imagine I look exactly the same to him. I release him with a shove, and he sags against the wall, gasping for air.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” He spits in my face when he finds his voice again.

For a moment, I'm so shocked to see him I just stand there, staring at him. This is her boyfriend? Him? The guy who got me kicked out of school. The reason I got sent away from the only foster family who ever gave a shit.

Like an old wound ripped open again, Penny's betrayal cuts through me like a dull knife.

I turn and look at her, still lying on the floor. She's propped herself up with one hand and is cradling her bleeding face with the other. Tears are running down her face, and even from a few feet away, I can see her body shaking. With red-rimmed eyes, she looks up at me, a barrage of emotions reflecting back at me. I'm so lost in the depth of those blue orbs that I'm only vaguely aware of Thomas making a run for it.

The back door opens and slams shut, leaving Penny and me alone inside the house. The only sound remaining is the sound of her ragged breathing.

It takes me a moment before I can compose myself enough to ask, “Him? You’ve been living with him?” All she does is nod as more tears run down her already swelling face. I should fucking leave her here... with him. She deserves it. And yet, I can’t get my stupid legs to move.

Sobbing, she collapses back onto the floor and curls up into herself. I try to force myself to leave and enjoy seeing her fall apart, broken, and beaten on the floor. All I need to do is walk out of here and leave her behind, be done with her... but I fucking can’t, and I hate her even more for it. Hate her for making me care.

When my limbs decide to work again, I stomp past her and through the house, trying to find the bedroom. When I do, I see the half-filled bag sitting on the bed. I open the closet and grab some more clothes, shoving as much as I can in the bag. When it’s stuffed full, I zip it up and swing it over my shoulder.

I walk back into the kitchen and over to her. Bending down, I slide my arms under her small, trembling body and pick her up. Without looking down at her face, I carry her out to my truck. Somehow, I open the door without putting her down. Depositing her on the passenger seat, I make my way to my side of the truck, throwing her bag on the bed as I pass.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” I ask when I get behind the wheel. I keep my voice monotone on purpose, not wanting her to know how much this whole thing affected me.

“No,” she whimpers as I pull out onto the road. *Thank fuck.* Getting a doctor would be a real inconvenience right now.

We drive home in silence, and I still can’t look at her, can’t even bring myself to glance over at where she’s sitting.

By the time we pull up to my house, even her whimpers and sobs have quietened down. I park the truck, kill the engine, and get out. Grabbing her bag from the back, I ignore her getting out of the truck and following me inside.

Mojo bypasses me and heads straight for Penny, whining when he sees her. I throw my keys on the counter and head to my room, slamming the door shut

behind me. I can't fucking believe this. Why would she be with that cocksucker?

God, I should have known it was him; she sold me out and lied to protect him. Of course, she stayed with him. She probably loved him even back then. Probably still does. Why else would she do this? Why else would she let him treat her like this? Fuck him and fuck her.

When pacing my room is not enough any longer, I lose my boots and jeans, replacing them with shorts and running shoes. Leaving my room, I hurry through the house to get out the back door. As soon as the door shuts behind me and my feet hit the grass, I run.

I pump my legs until my muscles scream at me to stop, but even then, I keep going. I run until my lungs burn, and my heart feels like it's about to explode. Only then, when I've pushed myself right up to the edge of passing out, do I slow down and walk back home.

When I get back to the house, it's already dark, I have no idea how long I ran for, but I'm pretty sure it's been the longest run of my life. Inside the house, everything is quiet, and only one lamp is on in the living room. Penny is curled up on the couch, Mojo sprawled out in front of her, not even moving when he sees me coming.

I kneel on the floor beside him and run my fingers through his fur. For the first time since I found her on that kitchen floor, I bring myself to look at Penny, really look at her.

She is sleeping, her hands tucked under her cheek, and her split lips slightly parted. The swollen right side of her face is turning black and blue. Strands of hair stick to her forehead, and I can't help but brush them away. Some dried blood covers parts of her face, but most worrisome is that her breathing seems labored. Shit, maybe I should have taken her to a doctor after all.

I retrieve the first aid kit from the bathroom and wet a washcloth while I'm there. Quiet and gentle, I sit down on the floor beside the couch and start cleaning her face. Luckily, she doesn't wake up. I don't think I could handle her looking at me while I'm doing this. Fuck, I don't think I could handle her looking at me at all, and again, I don't understand why.

Why is this so hard for me? Seeing her like this, it should make me feel better. Knowing that she's been with Thomas for the last few years shouldn't matter to me. None of this should matter to me. *She* shouldn't matter to me.

When I'm done cleaning her wounds, I get up to my feet and bump into the coffee table behind me. The noise wakes her, and her eyes flutter open. She looks up at me like she is about to say something, but her lips never move. So, I decide to speak instead.

"You sure you don't need a doctor. You're breathing funny. I don't need you dying on my couch."

"I'm fine. It's just a bruised rib. It will be fine," she says, her voice cracking at the end. "I won't die from this. I'll be fine." I'm not sure if she's trying to convince herself or me.

I'm about to turn around and leave when she coughs. Her face contorts into a mask of pain as she covers her mouth with her hand. As soon as she pulls her hand away, I see the bright red stain on her palm. *Fucking Christ.*

"You're not fine. You're coughing up blood. Let's go, I'm taking you to the ER."

"I'm sure it's fine—"

"Get up," I growl, not letting her finish. When she tries to get up on her own, I can see how much she is struggling. Barely able to push herself up to her feet, I grab her under the arms like a child and gently pull her up.

I help her to the truck, having to lift her into the seat. She winces at the movement but doesn't complain.

"You fell down the stairs, got it?" I ask her when we are almost there. "I can't have the cops involved. They're looking for anything to pin on me at this point."

"Got it," she confirms right away. I'm not worried about Penny sticking to the lie as much as I am about some goody two shoes nurse calling the cops, thinking I beat her up.

I want to ask her why. Why she stayed with him, and why would she let him get away with beating her up. Did she really love him that much?

All these questions, but I don't dare ask one out loud, because truthfully, I don't want to hear the answer, mostly because I'm not ready to hear it.

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PENNY

As soon as the lady at the front desk sees us, she leads me to a private room in the back. I'm not sure if it's Ryder or me she didn't want in the waiting room. Probably a combination of us both. My face looks like I just did ten rounds with a heavyweight. Ryder is dressed like his usual self in boots, jeans, a dark shirt showing off all his tattoos, and a vest with patches telling everybody he is the VP of a biker club.

I'm pretty sure the only reason no one has called the cops is that Ryder doesn't have bruised knuckles. Which makes me actually glad he didn't hit Thomas.

We have been alone in a small room for what seems like an eternity. I'm lying on the narrow hospital bed while Ryder is in the room's corner in a chair that looks too small for his large frame. He also looks extremely pissed and annoyed to be here.

The silence between us stretches on like the endless tiny white tiles that make up the ceiling. I started counting them a while back, and I've already had to start over twice because I forgot what number I was on.

The door finally opens, and a woman in scrubs enters the room. She looks to be my age, which is a stark reminder of the future I could have had instead of where I am now.

"Hi, I'm Amy. I'll be your nurse for today," she says.

"Hi," I say so quietly, I don't think that she heard me at all.

“We’re going to start an IV and get you some pain meds. Then the doctor will come and see you as soon as she gets a chance,” the nurse says, giving me a tight-lipped smile. “But first, we need you to give us a urine sample.”

“Okay...” I push myself off the bed, ignoring the sharp pain in my side.

“I’ll help you get to the bathroom,” the nurse announces, which has Ryder sighing in obvious annoyance. The nurse either didn’t hear or doesn’t care. She continues to help me up and walks me out of the room. I have the urge to glance at Ryder on my way out, to assure him I’m not going to say anything, but I don’t because I can’t stand to see the hatred and disappointment in his eyes anymore.

The moment the bathroom door shuts behind us, the nurse grabs my shoulders and pulls me closer.

“You can tell me what’s going on. Don’t be scared. We can have the police here in no time. I can get you out of here right now—”

“It wasn’t him,” I interrupt her. “He didn’t beat me up, and neither did any of his friends if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Someone did, though. You didn’t fall down the stairs. No one here is going to believe you.”

“They need to because that’s the only story they’re getting from me.”

The nurse sighs deeply, shaking her head. “The only way I’m letting this go is if you swear that you are safe with this guy.”

“Yes.” I don’t need to think about the answer because I know that I am and always will be safe with him. “He would never hurt me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. He was the one who got me out and brought me here, even though I didn’t want to come.”

“Well, I’m glad he brought you. We’ll take good care of you here.” She gives me a genuine smile, and for the first time in a long time, I smile too. I haven’t smiled in such a long time that the notion feels foreign to me.

She helps me use the bathroom, and even though I know it is her job to care for people, I get the feeling she would do this even if it wasn't. It's in the way she gently holds me, making sure I don't feel pain as I move. Her touch is so soothing and kind, the sincerity of it overwhelms me, and I hold back tears. Her caring nature and honest concern for me, a person she doesn't know, has my heart swelling with unexpected joy.

When we are done, she helps me back into the room and onto the bed. I sneak a peek at Ryder, who gives me a stern look.

"I need you to get undressed and put this sexy number on," she tells me, handing me a white and green striped hospital gown. "Do you need help to get changed?"

"No, thanks. I can do it." She's already done enough, and I'm sure she has better things to do.

"Okay. I'm going to take this to the lab. They're just going to run a pregnancy test. Standard procedure, before getting x-rays."

At the work *pregnancy*, the air whooshes from my lungs, and my throat tightens. We had unprotected sex more than once, and I only took the plan-b pill that first time.

Amy must notice my concern written all over my face. "Do you think you might be pregnant?" she asks.

"I-I don't know," I admit, not daring to look over at Ryder.

"Well, that's what the test is for." She places her hand over mine and gives it a light squeeze before turning around to leave. She exits the room, leaving Ryder and me to dwell in our painful silence and dreadful tension once more.

RYDER

*P*regnancy test. Two simple words that have my heart beating in an unnatural rhythm. Pregnancy means baby, kids, being a parent... me being a parent. The small hospital room suddenly seems even smaller, the walls threatening to swallow me whole.

I'm not stupid, I know what we've been doing. I know that unprotected fucking results in pregnancy, but when I'm with Penny, the thought is pushed so far out of my mind. No matter how obviously connected they are, the two ideas didn't connect inside my head until this very moment.

Staring at the clock on the wall, I watch the handle going around. Each tick taunting me, reminding me of how much time I've wasted... how much time I'm wasting right now. Sitting here in this room with a woman who destroyed my life and who is possibly growing a baby inside of her... our baby.

I watch her get undressed from the corner of my eye. Her almost inaudible grunts telling me she is struggling to do it on her own. Knowing that she won't ask for it, I get up and help her. I try not to look at her body, I don't want to see her beaten like this. It makes me physically sick, especially thinking about the possibility of her being pregnant. If she is... I will hunt that fucker down and end him. Hell, I might do it anyway.

Once she is in her hospital gown, I sit back down on the chair, waiting another eternity for the doc to show up. The entire time, we barely look at each other, both avoiding eye contact as much as we can, each for different reasons.

When the door finally opens, and the doctor walks in, my heart is slamming against my ribcage furiously.

“Hey there,” she greets us both. The nurse who was here earlier, entering the room behind her. “I’m Doctor Bayley. Amy filled me in. So, you fell down the stairs, huh?”

“Yes.” Penny nods, but the doctor frowns at her. Giving her a look as if to say, I don’t believe a word you’re saying. She taps her pen on the clipboard she is holding, waiting for a moment to give Penny a chance to talk.

When Penny doesn’t say anything, she finally lets it go. “Okay... your pregnancy test came back negative, so we will do some x-rays next to make sure you didn’t break anything when you *fell*.”

I might have been annoyed by her snarky remark if it wasn’t for the fact she said the test was negative. A wave of relief washes over me. My heart rate slows down almost immediately, leaving an unfamiliar and unexpected dull ache in my chest. It’s almost like there is a tiny, disappointed part of me.

Confused and irritated, I shove that feeling down in the darkest corner of my mind and concentrate on what else the doctor is saying.

“I’m going to examine you. For that, I need you to take this off. Are you okay with him being in the room?” The doctor asks, and I almost roll my eyes at her. Penny nods, but the doctor keeps pushing. “I can make him leave if that makes you more comfortable.”

“No,” Penny speaks up this time. “I want him to stay.” Her words slam into me and settle deep in my chest. Not because I’m surprised by her saying them, but because of the way she says them. There is an undeniable desperation in them. Like she doesn’t just want me to stay, she needs me to stay.

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly feels tight.

“Okay, he can stay,” the nurse says, and she and the doctor help Penny out of the hospital gown.

“So, tell me what hurts the most right now?”

“My side... my ribs, I guess,” Penny says, pointing to her right side.

“I’m going to feel around here. Let me know if it gets too painful, okay?”

Penny’s soft whimpers fill the otherwise silent room, and when I can’t take it any longer, I finally look over there. She is sitting up on the bed, the nurse holding her up while the doc examines her. There are bruises all over her face, arm, and shoulder, but the worst one covers her ribs.

Another rush of anger surges through me, and I decide then that I will hunt Thomas down. He needs to learn a lesson.

“Amy is going to take you over to radiology, and when I get those x-rays, we’ll go from there.” The doctor writes something down on her clipboard before handing it to the nurse and leaving the room.

Amy unhooks the IV from the pole and attaches it to the bed when there is another knock on the door. A few seconds later, it opens, and a gray-haired man appears.

“Sorry to interrupt. I’m Charles with the financial department,” he introduces himself and walks into the room. “Miss Jenkins?”

“Yeah,” Penny croaks, before clearing her throat, “that’s me.”

“I’m about to take her to radiology. Can’t this wait, Charles?” Amy interrupts, and I don’t miss the tone of annoyance in her words.

“This will only take a minute. Hospital policy,” he explains. “Miss Jenkins, when you filled out the take in form, you stated you have no health insurance. How would you like to pay for your visit and treatment today?”

“I... I don’t know,” Penny answers, flustered and embarrassed.

“We offer payment plans. You could put some money down today and pay the rest in installments. If you can’t pay anything, we could only treat anything that’s life-threatening—”

“We’ll pay for it today,” I cut his rambling off.

Fishing out my wallet, I find my credit card I rarely use and hand it to him. Most of our business is done with cash, but I have a nice cushion sitting in a

bank account.

He takes the card without question and slides it through an attachment of the laptop he is carrying. “The visit and basic checkup are \$250. Any other testing and treatment, like x-rays, will be charged separately.”

“That’s fine,” I tell him. He hands me back my card and makes me sign on a small digital pad.

He leaves just as Amy rolls out Penny, but not before both of them glance over at me.

“Thank you,” Penny says quietly, and the nurse gives me an actual smile. A far cry from the death stares I have been getting so far.

The door shuts behind them, leaving me to my thoughts.



PENNY HAS BEEN BACK from the x-rays for almost an hour, and we are still waiting on the test results. At least they’ve given her some pain meds through her IV now. She seems a little out of it but also calm, her breathing steady, and when she reaches to get some water, she doesn’t flinch or grimace in pain.

“Thank you, again,” Penny whispers, breaking the seemingly endless silence between us. “I’ll pay you back. However you want... if that’s still okay. I mean, if you still want this.”

She says *this*, but I’m sure what she really meant was *me*.

Do I still want her?

The truth is, I don’t really know...

Before I can come up with an answer, the doctor finally walks into the room, folder and clipboard in hand.

“Sorry for the wait, guys. We are slammed today,” she excuses. “I just had time to look over your x-rays.” She walks up to stand next to Penny’s bed.

“Is everything okay?” Penny asks.

“Well... there is some stuff we need to talk about and go over. The good news is, there is only a hairline fracture on one of your ribs, *this time*.” She pauses for a moment to get out one of the x-rays. “But I found ribs that were broken at one point and healed now.”

Penny stays quiet, not wanting to tell the doctor anything. Instead, she just listens to the list of all her injuries. Luckily, most seem minor compared to what could have been if I hadn't intervened. Still, she has so many bruises she is going to be in a lot of pain for a while.

“I'm going to let you go home, but you need to take it easy. Your rib will heal on its own, but you need to rest... and be safe,” she says, emphasizing the last word.

“I am safe,” Penny whispers, looking down at her hands.

PENNY

*F*or a long time, I just lie on the couch, looking into the darkness and trying to forget the pain in my body.

Now that we are back at the house, and I have nothing but the silence to keep me company, I'm faced with everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours.

He came for me.

Ryder came for me. He got me out of there and took me home, even after realizing that it was Tommy. I have the urge to go to his room and talk to him, explain why I stayed with Tommy and why I lied all those years ago. I want to thank him and apologize for everything I did to him... but I don't. Partly because I don't think it would matter to him, and partly because I'm simply scared. What of exactly, I don't know. I'm just scared.

Closing my eyes, I try to go to sleep, but the pain keeps me from finding any rest at all. Now that the medicine from the IV has worn off, the pain riddles through every fiber of my body. I don't think there is a part of me that is not sore right now.

To make matters worse, my throat is dry like a desert, my stomach aches for food, and my bladder screams for release. I need to get up, even if every inch I move hurts. If I don't eat and drink, my recovery will take even longer.

Gripping the back of the couch, I use my arm to pull myself up in an effort to keep my torso straight and not use my abs. I grind my teeth together and

groan in pain as I hoist myself up into a sitting position. After taking a short breather, I push myself to stand up all the way. With my head spinning and my knees weak, I walk into the kitchen, switch on the light, and grab a glass from the cabinet.

Turning on the faucet, I fill the glass with water and drink almost the entire glass. I turn to set the glass on the counter, my movement a little too sudden, and a sharp pain shoots through my side. My fingers tremble, and the slick glass slides out of my hand, shattering onto the floor into a million pieces. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Automatically, I bend down to pick up the mess I just made, only to be stopped by my own body as pain shoots through me. A sob rips from my throat, and I have to hold on to the counter just to hold myself up.

The bedroom door swings open, and Ryder's large body fills the frame. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"I... just wanted... to get... some water," I explain in between sobs.

"Don't fucking move," he growls and walks over to where I'm standing. Careful not to step on any glass shards, he comes as close as he can get and holds his hand out to me. "Come on," he orders roughly, and I take his hand.

Unlike his harsh voice, his touch is gentle as he takes my hand and helps me step over the glass. He assists me back to the couch, motioning for me to lie back down.

"I need to use the bathroom," I whisper. Ryder sighs, but to my surprise yet again, he doesn't give me a snarky remark. Instead, he guides me to the bathroom, going slow, so I can take smaller steps. When I'm in front of the toilet, he even helps me pull down my yoga pants. If it was anybody else, I would probably be embarrassed, but since Ryder's seen me naked and up-close many times, I don't even blush.

"Use the bathroom. I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't try to get up by yourself," he orders and leaves the room.

I do my business and stay seated on the toilet, waiting for him to come back. After a short while, he does just that, holding a glass of water in his hand.

“Take this,” he says, showing me his free hand. A large white pill is in the center of his palm, and I grab it without question. I put it on my tongue and take a sip of the water he hands me. I don’t understand why he is being so nice and caring, but I’m not about to complain.

He helps me up and gets me dressed before taking my arm and walking me to his bedroom. I’m confused, but don’t complain when he heads for his bed. Slowly, and with Ryder’s support, I lower myself onto the soft mattress.

“Thank you,” I say quietly when I’m situated comfortably. He doesn’t say anything back, only grunts and walks off. Even though I can’t see him from where I am, I listen to him move into the kitchen and open the fridge, gather some stuff, and prepare some food. I briefly think about asking him if I could have something to eat but decide against pushing my luck. He has done more for me today than I ever expected from him, more than I deserve. I won’t ask him for anything else, even if I am starving.

A few minutes later, Ryder reappears in front of me, setting a plate and a water bottle on the nightstand.

“Eat, drink, and then go to sleep,” he growls before spinning around and leaving again.

The bedroom door shuts behind him, and I instantly miss his presence in the room. The space feels colder, emptier without him in here. I’ve been suppressing the idea of seeking Ryder’s company, the idea of enjoying his touch, and letting him protect me. After today, those thoughts and feelings are harder to ignore.

He came for me, helped me, protected me, took me to the hospital, and even cared for me here. Now, I only need to figure out his motives. Does he really care, or is he just doing this because I owe him, and he wants me to work off the money?

My mind is reeling with unanswered questions as I take tiny bites of the sandwich he made me. Each morsel lands heavy in my empty stomach. About halfway through, I notice a strange feeling creeping up on me. My mind goes a bit fuzzy, and my limbs grow heavier, less mobile. The pain in my body seems to lighten, the throbbing in my head dulls, and the sharp sting in my ribcage lessens.

I figured the pill he gave me was some kind of pain or sleeping medicine, but I didn't expect it to work this well. Whatever he gave me has the pain almost gone within a few minutes. Pushing the rest of the sandwich aside, I slump back onto the cushions and close my eyes, my mind drifting off almost immediately. All physical and mental pain vanishes for the moment as the drug courses through my body and gives me welcome relief.

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RYDER

*P*enny sleeps through me going on a run, taking a shower, and eating breakfast. I let her, knowing she needs the rest.

Being the good Samaritan, I even scramble her an egg while I'm at it. Putting it on a plate, I set it on the nightstand along with another Percocet and a glass of apple juice.

I tell myself that the only reason I'm doing this for her is because I don't want her to break more shit. I try not to think about the reality. How I feel about taking care of her like this. I don't understand why I do, I just know that it feels kind of good. I like her needing me, depending on me.

I like this way too much, but I hate that it's with her. Why couldn't it be someone else who makes me feel this way? Anyone else...

A pained groan drags me out of my thoughts.

She blinks her eyes open and looks up at me, confused and disoriented. Glancing around, she realizes where she is, but the confusion never leaves her features.

"I'm going to help you sit up, so you can eat."

She nods slightly, and I slide my arm under her body and lift her up, scooting her to the headboard. I hand her the medicine and juice, watching her take it without hesitation.

When I hand her the eggs, she eats right away. I walk around the bed and carefully sit down next to her, not wanting to leave her.

“Where did you sleep?” she asks between the tiny bites she’s taking.

“On the couch,” I admit, watching her eyes go wide in shock. “I didn’t want to move and hurt you by accident.”

“Why are you being so good to me?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. I don’t know why I feel this need to protect her, take care of her, and keep her with me. All I know is that I do.

“Why did you borrow the money from the club?”

“I didn’t. I mean, I did, but I didn’t know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tommy wouldn’t let me leave the house, but sometimes he would bring people over. His friends. They all knew, of course, but no one ever offered to help me until one night. His friend, Ryan, told me he could help me leave. I thought Tommy had told him to say that, like it was a test or something, but I was willing to risk it. So, I agreed.”

I stay silent as she continues, “A few days later, when Tommy was at work, Ryan came and got me. He kicked in the door and made me go with him. I didn’t know where we were going. If I was safe or had simply traded my jailer. He parked the car in some back alley, and we met a guy, one of your guys. Ryan told him I wanted to borrow five grand.”

You’ve got to be shitting me.

“Before I knew what was going on, the guys gave him a stack of money,” she continues. “Ryan took it and shoved it in his pocket. He told me that this was his payment for getting me out. Then he got into his car and left.”

Immediately, I imagine all the ways I’m going to hurt him. The need to avenge, to somehow make things right for Penny, overcomes me.

I’ve got a name, know who he hangs around with. It will be easy to track him down. I will make him pay, and I will enjoy doing it.



AS I PREDICTED, it wasn't hard to find him.

I waited until Penny passed out again before I called Maddox and had him help me track this Ryan guy down. As soon as he sent me an address, I left, leaving Mojo to protect Penny.

It's dark when I pull up to his house, the light coming from the windows telling me he is home. I cut the engine and get out of my truck.

When I walk around the house and look in through the window, I can't believe my luck. Thomas is there as well. Half lying on the couch, an X-Box controller in his hand. Ryan is sitting next to him.

Great, I've got myself a two for one special.

Sneaking around the back of the house, I draw my gun. The back door looks easy enough to kick in, but before I do that, I grab the door handle and try to see if it's unlocked. I turn the knob and push the door open.

Idiots.

With a smile on my face, I stroll into his house undetected, closing the door quietly behind me. I follow the voices coming from the living room until I stand in the door with my gun raised.

The two dumbasses are so into their game that they don't even see me standing a few feet away.

"Sorry to interrupt your party." I grin.

Both Thomas and Ryan jump up from the couch, shock and fear written all over their faces. Ryan reaches for something behind him, but I'm faster. I pull the trigger, and the bullet hits him in the shoulder.

He groans and falls back onto the couch, clutching the spot I just shot him.

Before Thomas can make a move, I lower my gun and pull the trigger again, hitting him in his right knee.

"Motherfucker!" he yells and crumbles to the ground.

When I see Ryan reaching for something again, I step further into the room, pointing my gun at him. He freezes, and I walk around the coffee table to where he is sitting. Reaching behind him with my gun pointed at his head, I pull out a Glock from his waistband and step back, stuffing the gun in my jacket.

“What do you want?” Ryan groans, blood soaking the complete front of his shirt now.

“I want my five grand,” I lie. I couldn’t care less about the money right now. “You don’t happen to have that kind of cash lying around here, do you?”

“I didn’t borrow it. Penny did.”

The moment the words leave his mouth, I’m on him. My fists fly, hitting him square in the jaw. His head snaps back so hard, I think I might have broken his neck.

“Don’t you say her fucking name! Actually, don’t say anything at all.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Thomas groans from the floor.

“You didn’t know your friend here was the one who took Penny from your house? Don’t worry, he won’t make it out of here alive... and neither will you.”



I DIDN’T COME HERE PLANNING to kill either of them, but it happened anyway. I killed them, and I’m not sorry about it one bit. I enjoyed it, relished in the way the life drained from their eyes, especially with Thomas. The moment he took his last breath, a weight lifted from me. I didn’t know how much I held onto that hate for him until then.

I text the clean-up crew on my way out. They’ll take care of this. Now I only need to explain this shit to Maddox. Problem is, I don’t know how to. How do I explain why I killed him without lying to my best friend?

Technically, Ryan was the one who owed the club money, but dead men can’t pay. I should have beat him up and told him to get our money instead of

putting a bullet in his brain. And I really have no excuse for killing Thomas, other than I wanted to. Not that the club is concerned.

As if he can hear me thinking about him, my phone vibrates, and Maddox's name flashes across the screen. I hit the green button.

"Yeah—"

"What the fuck is going on with you?" Maddox's angry voice comes through the receiver.

"Look, those fuckers deserved it."

"That doesn't answer my question," Maddox snaps.

"I know. I don't have all the answers myself. Can you just trust me on this? I needed to kill them for my own sanity. It's a long story, and I promise I'll explain it all, but not tonight, okay?"

"You know I trust you, but you have been acting strange lately. Not like yourself."

I don't feel like myself either.

"It's done now. Killing them is the end of it. Now we only have to figure out which one of our brothers is stealing from us, and everything can go back to normal."

"If you say so..." The line goes dead, and I throw my phone back onto the passenger seat.

Fuck. This is getting out of hand.

I pull into my driveway a few minutes later. Killing the engine, I sit in my truck for a few minutes before getting out.

Quietly, I walk through the house and into the bedroom. Penny is still in bed, looking like she hasn't moved at all.

As I take in her sleeping form, something feels different. I feel different. Less burdened, less angry toward her. Now that Thomas is dead, in a way that gave me closure. I blamed her for so long when, in reality, it was his fault. Now he paid for it. The debt is settled.

The only question is, where does that leave us? What's going to happen between Penny and me? Can I go on letting her think she owes me, just to keep her here?

Stripping out of my clothes, I climb into the bed beside her. She stirs, and her eyes fly open, looking around, alarmed. She pushes herself off the bed, but then she sees me, and her panic retreats. Her head falls back onto the pillow.

I lie down, turning onto my side, so I can see her. Even in the dim light, I can make out the bruises covering her face, reminding me I did the right thing tonight.

"Tommy is dead," I say before I can stop myself.

I hear her sharp intake of breath, and for a split second, I'm worried. Worried that she is going to mourn him, that she is going to cry for him, but when I study her face, there is nothing but relief.

She doesn't ask how it happened. Maybe she doesn't care, or maybe deep down, she knows the answer. Either way, she closes her eyes a few minutes later, her features turning peaceful, almost angelic. Her breathing evens out, letting me know she went back to sleep.

Even though I'm satisfied with the outcome tonight, I can't seem to sleep. I stay up watching her for a long time, wondering what the fuck I am going to do with her. She doesn't owe me, maybe she never really did, but I don't think I can let her go regardless.

PENNY

The next few days, Ryder leaves me alone, not asking anything of me while I'm recovering. The times he is at home, he barely says a word and hardly ever looks at me. I don't know if it's because he is mad or because he finds me so repulsive this way. Every time I look in the mirror, I assume it's the latter. The swelling has mostly gone away now, but the purple and black bruises have now turned to an ugly yellow-brown color.

Then there is what Ryder told me that night in his bed. *Tommy is dead*. I didn't need to ask him if it was true. I knew as soon as he told me it was. I felt it—an enormous weight lifted off my shoulders.

I want to ask him how it happened, but I'm too scared of the answer. I'm positive Ryder had something to do with it. He probably sent one of his guys to do it. I can't bring myself to feel sorry for Tommy after everything he did to me. He deserved it.

Maybe that makes me a terrible person. Being glad that someone is dead seems like a horrible thing to do. I can't help it though, instead of remorse, I only feel... free.

Even with Ryder acting weird like this, I'm more than thankful for him letting me stay here. After I left Tommy and went to the women's shelter, I could never get a good night's sleep and could never relax or feel safe. Even surrounded by other people, I was always scared of him finding and killing me. I'm not scared here, not with Ryder and Mojo in the house. Ryder might

not be prince charming, but at least he won't hurt me or let anyone else hurt me, and that's more than I'm used to.

I take Advil during the day, but every night Ryder gives me one of those magic pills that makes everything go away and lets me sleep peacefully.

My ribs feel a lot better, too, letting me move around much more easily. So, I decide to get up and cook while Ryder is out for the day.

Just when I'm done frying the pork chops and baking the potatoes, the back door opens, and Ryder walks in. He looks at me, standing in the kitchen, while Mojo greets him at the door.

"Feeling better, I see," he murmurs, taking a seat at the table. "You finally able to keep paying off your debt?"

I swallow hard before answering, "Yes..." A tiny bit of fear swirls around my stomach, but it's quickly overwritten by excitement. I guess he does still want me.

Putting his food on a plate, I grab a beer from the fridge and bring him both. Setting it in front of him, I watch as he takes a sip of the beer before returning to the kitchen and preparing my plate.

When I sit down with my food in front of me, Ryder continues, "That's good because I have a job for you. I need you to come to the club with me tonight."

At his words, I suck in a sharp breath. The fork in my hand slips from my fingers and lands against the plate with a *clang*. "But-but you said..."

"Not to fuck someone else," he clarifies. "I need that big brain of yours to do some quick math for me, and I need you to do it quietly, with no one else noticing. Can you do that?"

"Yes," I answer confidently. That's one thing I actually can do.

"You are going to sit in on a meeting. I want you to run all the numbers that are being said through your head and make sure they add up. If they don't, you gonna ask me for a drink."

"Okay." I don't ask any more questions, mostly because I know he won't answer anyway.

We finish dinner in silence, and when I get up to clean the dishes, Ryder stops me.

“We need to go now, and we’re taking the bike, so grab that helmet and let’s go,” he points toward a black helmet sitting on the entrance table next to the door. He wants me to ride on his bike with him?

Ten minutes later, I’m out the back, and I get my answer. Ryder swings his leg over the mean and dangerous-looking motorcycle. “Get on.”

I pull the helmet he made me get over my head and fasten the little buckle at my chin before I swing my leg over the bike. Unsteady on one leg, I have to hold on to his shoulders while I position myself behind him. Unsure what to do, I leave a few inches of space between us while sitting straight and trying to find something to hold on to that isn’t Ryder.

“Slide closer and wrap your arms around me unless you want to fall off,” he finally says, a hint of amusement lacing his voice.

I follow his orders, scooting my butt until my crotch is flush against Ryder’s backside. At first, I only sling my arms loosely around him, but once he starts the bike, making it rumble and vibrate loudly under me, I grip onto him like an iron shackle. I can’t hear him because the thing is so loud, but I can feel his stomach under my touch, and I know he is laughing at me.

I spend the rest of the ride in equal amounts of fear and excitement. I’ve never ridden on a motorcycle before, and this is quite the experience. When we pull up to the same club Ryder took me from two weeks ago, all the excitement vanishes, and I’m left with deep-rooted fear.

“You remember what you are supposed to do?” Ryder asks when I slide off the bike behind him.

I pull off the helmet and answer, “Yes, run all the numbers in my head and make sure they’re correct. If they’re not, I’ll ask you if I can have a drink.”

“Good job. Let’s go,” Ryder says and starts getting off the bike.

Before thinking about it, I reach over and grab his arm, holding onto his bicep tightly as I can feel it flexing underneath my touch. His body stiffens at the way I hold on to him, but I need to know. I need to make sure he’ll

protect me tonight.

“No one in there is going to hurt me, right? You’ll stay with me the whole time.” At my words, he relaxes, his body softening.

“Yes, no one is going to hurt you as long as you do what I say,” he assures me. We head toward the door, but right before we get to it, Ryder stops briefly. “One more thing. If anyone should ask you, act like I’m the one who did this to your face.”

“Why?” Why would he take responsibility for that?

“Just fucking do it.” He rolls his eyes at me.

As we enter, flashbacks of the first time I was brought to this place rush through my head. I was scared then, thinking I was going to die. I am still scared today, but not like I was before. Deep down, I know Ryder will protect me, he always has, even when I didn’t deserve it.

Even though a lot has changed since I was here last, the bar is just as I remembered. The smell is the same, the people are the same, hell, most of them are wearing the same clothes, it seems. All eyes are on me as I follow Ryder closely through the club like a lost puppy.

Every time we pass one of the few women here, they give me nasty looks and glare daggers at me. I’m not sure why, though. Is it because I’m here with Ryder or just because they know I don’t belong here? All the other girls here are dressed sexy and provocative, wearing high heel stilettos and dramatic makeup. In my leggings and pink long sleeve shirt, I couldn’t be any more out of place.

Even worse than the women’s death stares are the men’s eyes roaming my body like I’m some kind of sideshow. I feel like I’m on display, and maybe I am.

Ryder stops so suddenly that I run into him, my face smashing into his muscular back. My still bruised cheek throbs on impact, my hand instantly coming up to cradle the sore spot.

“Watch where you walk, bitch,” Ryder barks at me. The harshness and iciness of his voice has my spine stiffening in fear. He never talks to me like

that. He never calls me names other than little owl. This is not the Ryder I know, and I don't think I like this one... I don't like him at all.

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RYDER

I glance back at Penny, finding her staring at me like I just slapped her. I've done some messed up things to her, but I've never talked to her like this, and doing so now leaves a bitter taste on my tongue.

"Finally," Huck calls and walks up to us, grabbing his crotch with his free hand while his other is holding a bottle of beer. "I thought you would never bring her back and share with us."

"I'm not," I tell him, holding out my hand to stop him from coming any closer. "She is still mine, and I like to fuck her without a raincoat on my dick. So, no one fucks her until I'm done. I don't want to be catching any of your diseases."

Huck throws back his head and laughs. "You're a fucking asshole, you know that?"

Oh, I fucking know.

"Fine, I'll wait," he says, licking his lips while seeking one last glance at her.

You'll be waiting for nothing. I won't let anyone touch her.

"Ryder," Maddox calls and waves me over to his table where he and three more of our brothers are already sitting. Bradley, the youngest of my brothers, and also one of the smartest. He does all of our surveillance and tech stuff. Then there is Trick, our trusted mechanic, and Bear, our gray-

haired brother, who looks more like a lumberjack than a biker.

Without looking back, I walk over to them and take a free chair. I know Penny is following me. Not just because I told her to, and I know she'll listen. I can sense her presence, feel her warmth, smell her sweetness lingering in the air.

Penny sits down next to me, looking as nervous as ever, and she doesn't even know the worst part yet. Maybe this was a bad idea, maybe I should have warned her. Well, shit, it's too late now.

"You brought your pet, I see," Maddox says, looking Penny up and down. "What happened to her face?"

I shrug. "The pet didn't listen, so I had to teach her a lesson. That's how you train pets, right? Hit them with a rolled-up newspaper?"

"That must have been a heavy-ass newspaper." Trick chuckles and the rest of the table erupts into laughter while I sit there, forcing a smile on my lips. I don't want anyone to know how fucking pissed I am right now.

"You rub her nose in piss too?" Bradley jokes, and more laughter ripples through the crowd, only poking the bear. Me being the bear.

Maddox looks over to me, his eyebrow slightly raised. *Fuck*. He knows me too well. I have never been able to hide anything from him. Today, that fact annoys the fuck out of me. I glance over at Penny and see her shifting nervously. Then she stops, her body going still, remaining stoically in her chair.

I follow her gaze and unsurprisingly find Tucker walking toward our table. His eyes instantly zeroing in on the petite woman beside me. A sinister grin tucks on his lips, and for the first time, I actually hope Maddox is right, and Tucker is fucking us over. That's the only way I could get away with destroying him.

"I didn't know we could bring sex slaves to meetings now," Tucker says, his attention remaining on Penny.

"Just run the damn numbers, so we can get drunk," I growl, earning me another glare from Maddox.

“Fine.” Tucker slams a stack of papers on the table and retrieves a calculator from his cut’s inside pocket. “The run we made on Monday morning brought in 3400, the one that night 8300, take 80% out, divide by 14 brothers, put the rest back in the bank...” he rambles down the numbers for each day while punching them into the calculator and making check marks on the paper.

After he has gone through the entire week, he says, “total, \$91, 250, 20% back in the bank leaves 73k even. Divided by 14 means each brother gets \$5,214.”

Tucker is still talking when I feel Penny’s soft fingers brush tentatively over my arm. Her touch, so soft it tickles, leaves goosebumps in her wake. I tilt my head toward her, letting her know I’m listening, but I don’t look over. My eyes remain on Tucker.

“May I get something to drink... please,” she says, barely loud enough for people to hear. Her words confirming what I was suspecting. Fucking Tucker, skimming off the top. Thinking he is so smart.

All I want to do is call him out, grab him by the throat, and use his face as a punching bag for the next twenty minutes, but I know I can’t. I need to play this smart, and I definitely need to talk to Maddox before doing anything.

“Bradley, get her a drink,” I order my brother, who looks at me like I’ve just asked him to solve an unsolvable riddle.

“I’m not a server, especially not for some bitch,” he snorts.

Barely holding on to my restraint, I grit out, “Get off your fucking ass and get her a drink before I stomp your teeth out.”

“Jesus, fuck, Ryder,” Bradley yells, but thank fuck, he gets up and walks toward the bar.

“Touchy, touchy.” Tucker grins.

Bradley returns a moment later, slamming a glass with some fruity looking liquid in front of Penny and a bottle in front of me. “I brought you a beer too. Maybe that will lighten up your fucking mood.”

Doubt it. But I still take the beer and down half of it. I really need to calm the fuck down before I do something really stupid. Something that I can't take back.

Everyone at the table breaks out in conversation. Bradley talks about the chick he banged behind his gym yesterday, and Trick swears he fucked the same chick last week. Maddox talks to Tucker about upgrades he wants to do to his bike, and Bear chimes in about those upgrades only adding unwanted weight.

Maddox occasionally glances my way with a look that says, we're going to talk about this later, and Penny is sitting next to me stiff as a board, nursing her half-empty drink.

"Soooo," Bradley says loudly, grabbing the attention of the whole table. "Remember how I told you guys about this new drug coming in? The one that's tasteless and dissolves in liquid." He smirks, looking straight at me. I freeze. He fucking wouldn't. I almost throw the bottle of beer across the room.

"Calm down, fucker." He laughs. "I didn't put it in your drink." His gaze swings over to Penny. "I put it in hers."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I growl, standing up so quickly the chair I was sitting on crashes to the floor behind me.

Bradley rolls his eyes... he rolls his fucking eyes. I'm livid. My mind goes blank, and the next thing I know, I'm across the table with my hands around Bradley's throat.

"Ryder!" Maddox yells, grabbing my arm and pulling me back. I feel more hands on me, trying to pull me away, but my fingers are wrapped so tightly around my brother's throat they can't get me to move.

Bradley's face turns a reddish-blueish color, and his eyes are bulging out when Maddox's voice finally gets to me, "Ryder, cut it the fuck out. Just get that chick out of here."

At the reminder of Penny being here, the fog around my mind slowly lifts, and I release Bradley with a shove. He slumps back into his chair, and I take a step back, taking in the scene in front of me.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

All eyes are on me, glaring at me like I've lost my fucking mind, probably because I have. I look down to my right and find Penny still in her chair, her big blue eyes glazed over, the spiked drink still in her hand. I take it from her and slam the glass on the table.

Then, I grab her arm and pull her up to her feet. I don't know if the drug is already working or if her legs are buckling because I scare her. Either way, she needs my help to walk. I half carry her through the bar, her shorter legs unable to keep up with my long strides.

I head for the front door before remembering that I took the bike to get here. There is no fucking way she'll be able to hold on. I really don't want to stay here, but right now it's my best option. Dragging her through the back of the bar, I take her to my room, the same room I took her to that first night.

Once inside, I lock the door behind us and guide her to the bed. As soon as I let go of her, she flops down like a rag doll. *Fuck.*

For a moment, I just stand there, looming over her. Her body looks exhausted, and I don't think she can move much, but her eyes are still open, and they're fixed on mine. Even through the haze of drugs in her system, her gaze holds an ocean of emotion, and I feel like I'm drowning in their depths. I don't understand half of them. One, however, stands out... fear. I scare her. She is scared of me, and she has every right to be. Still, there is a part of me that wants to wipe that fear away.

The irony is not lost on me. All this time, I wanted to break her. I wanted her to hate me and fear me. Now that she does, all I want to do is keep her safe.

I undress her limp body. Her breath hitches when I get to her underwear, and her hand comes up as if she is trying to push me away. She is so weak; she wouldn't be able to fend off a bug right now.

Unclipping the bra, I pull it off her body, and a whimper passes her lips. When I look back up to meet her gaze, I find her on the brink of tears. I leave her panties on and take off my boots. At the last minute, I decide to keep my own clothes on, knowing I won't be able to keep my dick to myself if I don't. I crawl onto the bed, pulling the thin blanket over us, and lie down next to

her.

Her body trembles when I wrap my arms around her and pull her to my chest. She is stiff at first, but when I do nothing besides hold her, she relaxes a little.

With the door and two walls between us, the bar's loud music is nothing more than faint background noise. But there are other rooms around us, rooms my brothers use to bang club whores. Sounds from somewhere down the hall keep getting louder. When someone slams the door a few rooms down, Penny shakes and sobs uncontrollably. *Fucking Christ.*

This will not work. Pulling my phone out, I text Maddox telling him I need a ride to my house. Ten minutes later, someone knocks on my door, freaking Penny out even more.

"Calm down, I'm going to take you home now," I try to calm her and get up at the same time. She shakes her head and grabs a fist full of my shirt, looking at me like she is in full-on panic mode now.

"Please," she whimpers, tears rolling down her face.

"Nothing is going to happen to you. You're safe, I'm taking you back to my house." She keeps staring at me like she has no idea what I just said. I have to peel her fingers off before I can get to the door.

I find Maddox and Billy, one of our prospects, on the other side. They both look into the room, their eyes lingering on Penny's curled up body on the bed.

"I can't get her to calm down. What the fuck did he give her," I growl. Sitting down on the bed, I pull my boots back on and wrap Penny up in the blanket tightly.

"I don't fucking know, some kind of new crossbreed. He said Rohypnol is part of it, so she won't remember shit tomorrow. If that makes you feel better."

It does, actually, but I'm not about to offer that piece of information.

"Just get us home," I say, sliding my arms under Penny's blanket-covered body and lift her up.

“Billy will take you, he is the least drunk,” Maddox tells me.

“Great, lead the way, Billy boy.”



HOLDING her close to my chest, I walk through the quiet house. In the living room, we pass Mojo, who only briefly opens his eyes to glance at us, uninterested.

Penny was in and out of it the whole drive home, but right now, she’s looking at me fairly lucid. Maybe it’s the familiar environment and simply the absence of loud noises that has her finally relaxing.

Depositing her on the bed, I unwrap her from the thin blanket.

Dipping my fingers in the waistband of her flimsy panties, I pull them down her legs, freeing her from the last piece of clothing. Having her sprawled out on my bed and completely nude is a beautiful sight. One that has my balls screaming for me to shoot a load inside her tight pussy. But having her look up at me with pleading eyes dampens my mood.

Never taking my eyes off of her, I slip out of my boots and start taking off my clothes. When I’m completely naked, I slide into the bed and cover us both with my comforter.

Draping my arm across her torso, I carefully pull Penny closer. She shudders once but then relaxes into my hold, her naked body melting into mine.

“Ryder,” she croaks my name.

Pulling away just enough to see her face, I try to read her expression. Part of her is still scared, of what, I don’t know. There is a slight panic in her eyes, and her bottom lip is trembling.

Looking at her plump lips reminds me of what she can do with those. Desire stirs inside of me, and my cock hardens in no time.

“Ryder?” she says again, but it sounds more like a question.

“What is it, baby?” *Baby? Where the fuck did that come from?*

Hopefully, she really will forget about this in the morning. Penny stares at me in confusion, her eyebrows drawn together, forming little creases on her forehead. She looks like she forgot what she was going to ask me.

Yeah, she probably won't remember any of this tomorrow. So, I guess it would be a good time to do this... something I've wanted to do since that first night I took her.

Sliding my hands up and down her back, I end up with one resting between her shoulder blades and one right on her perfectly shaped ass. I pull her even closer until there is no space between us. So close that I can feel her heartbeat through my chest, and her breath fans against my skin.

I press my lips against hers. It feels right and wrong at the same time. I haven't kissed anyone since I was a teenager. I never felt the urge to, even then, but I want to kiss her now.

At first, she remains stoic in my hold. Only when I move my lips against hers does she part her lips slightly. I take the invitation and swipe my tongue across her pouty bottom lip, beckoning them apart more.

She tastes divine, so sweet with a hint of mint. I never thought a simple kiss could be so satisfying, so all-consuming and arousing. My dick is so hard it's throbbing painfully. Like a steel rod between my legs, it's lying between us.

Penny wiggles in my hold, her slender arms moving awkwardly. It takes me a moment to realize that she is trying to wrap them around my neck. I can't help but smile against her lips while helping her to move her arms around.

When she finally manages, she holds me closer, deepening the kiss. She moans, and the sound vibrates through my entire body before making its way to my cock.

I've never wanted someone as much as I want her right now. I want her like a junkie wants his next hit. I crave her, need her. I didn't plan on having sex with her, I just wanted to hold her and calm her down, but right now, there won't be anything stopping me from having her.

Rolling us over, so she lies on her back while I'm on top of her. I keep most of my weight on my elbows but not enough to leave any space between us. Our lips are still moving against each other when I nudge her thighs apart

with my knees, and she spreads her legs even wider, inviting me in as I line myself up with her.

Pushing inside her tight channel as slow as I can manage, I enjoy every single second. I savor every sensation and hold on to every tiny way her body responds to mine. She moans, and her hip lifts slightly, meeting my thrusts.

I've had sex so many times, I lost count a long time ago. Even with Penny, I can't recall how many times it's been. But I know that it has never... never felt like this. I've never felt so close to anybody, not physically or mentally. I don't know where my body ends, and hers begins. It's like we are in a bubble of some sort, a space where only we exist, where we come together and somehow become one.

Maybe this is what people mean when they say, *make love*. Even though I don't feel like this is love. I can't explain what this is, but it feels special, precious somehow, and I want to hold on to it for as long as I can. Because I know damn well tonight is all I'm going to get.

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PENNY

Before I even open my eyes and wake up all the way, I know something is wrong. I feel weird... off. My mouth is dry, and there is a bitter taste lingering on my tongue, almost metallic.

There is a pounding behind my eyes, deep inside my skull, that I've never felt before. This alone is odd because I've had my fair share of head traumas. I should be used to any kind of headache by now.

Prying my eyes open slowly, I take in my surroundings. I'm in Ryder's bed... naked. His blanket is draped over me. I clutch it closer to my chest and slowly sit up.

I'm alone in the room, which scares me a bit. But the thing that's really freaking me out is that I can't remember how I got here. Searching my memory, I ransack my brain for any information on last night. Thinking so hard only makes my head hurt more, and I come up empty anyway. It's like someone has taken an ice cream scoop and scooped out a piece of my brain, a morsel that held all of my memories from last night.

The last thing I recall is... getting on a bike with Ryder. He drove us to the bar, that's where things get fuzzy. I think we went in inside...

After that, only snippets of memories flash through my head.

"Are you serious?" A muffled male voice meets my ears. Even through the closed door, I can hear the anger in it. Then I hear Ryder say something, but he keeps his voice low, so I can't make out what he is saying.

Quietly, I get up from the bed and take small steps toward the door. Immediately, I notice something sticky on my inner thigh. I reach down between my legs, realizing I'm slightly sore, and there is definitely cum stuck to my skin. We had sex last night. He came inside me, again.

Damnit. Why can't I remember anything?

I grab the first item of clothing I can find. It's one of Ryder's sweaters. I slip it over my naked body and tiptoe to the door, lightly pressing my ear against it.

"How can you trust her? And how could she have done all that math in her head?" The unknown man asks. *Math...* that rings a bell. Ryder asked me to run numbers.

"I just do, and she is good at math. She had no reason to lie."

"No reason to lie? You've been keeping her locked up as your sex slave, ready to hand her down to the guys when you're done with her."

No. He wouldn't do that. He won't...

"Not to mention the shit that happened to her last night..."

I stumble back, my head spins, and my stomach flips. *What happened to me last night?*

My hand comes up to my mouth when I feel the vomit suddenly rising. I barely make it to the bathroom before emptying the entire contents of my stomach into the toilet. I keep heaving, my body convulsing, long after there is nothing left inside.

I don't hear him come in. He just appears out of nowhere, kneeling next to me, his hand on my lower back.

When my body has finally decided that was enough. Ryder hands me a small towel to wipe my face.

"What happened to me?" My voice is so hoarse, I hardly sound like myself.

"You'll be fine," is all he says, not answering my question at all. "I need you to come with me and talk to Maddox. He is in the living room."

I shake my head, but Ryder is already pulling me up to stand. Wrapping his arm around me, he walks me into the living room.

Maddox, who I now realize I know, is sitting on the recliner. His icy glare finds me, and my heart races in my chest.

Ryder drags me to the couch, where he sits down, pulling me with him. Instead of letting me sit next to him like I expect, he pulls me down on his lap. Keeping one arm tightly around my torso, almost like he thinks I'm going to make a run for it.

Glancing down at the floor, I find Mojo looking up at me, his head tilted to the side like he doesn't understand why I'm scared.

"Penny, is it?" Maddox breaks the silence.

"Yes," I answer, my voice sounding just as meek as I feel right now.

"What do you remember from last night?"

"Not much. Really nothing." Squeezing my legs together, I remember that I'm naked under the sweatshirt. Luckily, Ryder's clothes are five sizes too big on me. Even sitting down, his shirt covers half of my thighs.

"Of course, you don't," Maddox growls, annoyance lacing his voice. "This is useless." He waves me off as if he is really saying I am useless.

"Go back to bed. Catch up on sleep," Ryder says dismissively as he pushes me off his lap.

I stand on shaky legs but manage to walk back into his bedroom without falling. Closing the door behind me, I lean against it for support.

"I'm taking her back to the club," Maddox growls. "We're putting her in a room with Tucker and ending this shit once and for all."

His words knock the air from my lungs. He might as well have sucker-punched me. They're going to take me back to the club... put me in a room with Tucker.

No. I can't let that happen. I need to get out of here.

Frantically, I look around the room until I find a pair of leggings to wear. Luckily, my shoes are in here as well. I slip them on and walk to the window. Unlocking it quietly, I push it open as quickly as I can.

Lifting my leg, I half climb out, fear swirling deep in my gut—for two reasons. I'm scared that Ryder is going to catch me, and I'm terrified that he won't. Because the truth is, after everything that has happened to me in the last five years, this is the only place I've felt safe.

I stare at the door for a few more seconds, but it never opens. I finish climbing out of the window, my feet landing on the soft grass below, and I take off running.

Without looking back or thinking about where to go, I just keep running.

I run until my legs give out, until I can't do anything else besides sit down on the sidewalk, my back leaning against a building. My legs are sore, my lungs burn, and my ribs ache.

Closing my eyes, I concentrate on breathing evenly. Wrapping my arms around myself, I bury my face into the crook of my arm. The material of the sweater is soft, and it smells of Ryder. A deep ache forms in my chest, thinking of him... I miss him. I miss the comfort he gave me.

“Are you doing okay, sweetie?”

I lift my head to see where the voice comes from and find an older lady standing a few feet away. She is carrying two grocery bags that look way too heavy for her to carry.

“I'm fine,” I lie, “but you look like you could use some help.” I push myself up to stand. “Can I help you carry those?”

“That would be very nice of you.” She hands me one bag. “I don't live far from here, just another block down.”

I follow the sweet old lady to her building, glad that she doesn't ask me any more questions.

“This is me,” she says when we get to an apartment entrance. “Set the bag down on the steps for me, please. I got it from here.”

I do as she asks, leaving the bags on the top step. I turn around, ready to walk away, when she reaches her hand out to me.

“Here, take this for your trouble.” I look down at the twenty-dollar bill in her hand.

“It’s fine, really. I’m happy to help.”

“So am I, child. Please, take it. Maybe for a bus ticket out of here.”

“Thank you,” I take the bill from her hand and stuff it in the sweater pocket. “Really, thank you.”

“The bus station is that way.” She points the way we came from a moment ago. “Good luck.” She smiles at me sweetly, and her kindness almost brings me to tears.

I watch her grab her bags and disappear into the building before I turn around and start walking.

After a few blocks, I find myself at the bus station. Walking up to the booth, I wonder if I really have the guts to take the bus, I know I should.



THE BUS RIDE isn’t long. Only twenty minutes outside of town, and I’m here, stepping off the bus and onto the street I grew up on.

As I walk to the house I used to call my home, fear swirls around my stomach. I haven’t talked to my parents in so long. They probably don’t even want to see me.

I should go back to the women’s shelter, but that would be the first place Ryder would look for me. Here is probably the second, which means I can’t stay long. Just long enough to tell them the truth and tell them how sorry I am.

Walking up to the house feels like I’ve stepped back in time... a better time. Everything looks the same, my dad keeps the grass cut, and my mom keeps the flowers blooming. There is a wind chime hanging from the front porch,

the gentle sound calming my nerves slightly.

Standing in front of the door, it takes me a few minutes to gather my courage to knock. When I finally raise my hand and let my knuckles rap over the heavy wood, my heart is slamming furiously against my ribcage.

Fighting the urge to run, I force myself to stand still and wait.

A moment later, I hear footsteps approaching, and the door swings open. All I can do is stand there, frozen in time as I hold my breath.

My mom stares at me, her eyes impossibly wide as if she can't believe I'm really here.

"Oh, Penny," she finally says, taking a step toward me. She wraps her arms around me and pulls me into her in a way that only a mother could. "We were so worried about you. We thought..."

"I'm so sorry," I murmur into her hair, and she hugs me even tighter.

"Don't be sorry, honey. I'm just so glad to see you." She pulls away, tears glistening in her eyes now. She cradles my face between both of her hands, rubbing my cheeks with her thumbs. "We missed you so much, Penny."

"I missed you too." More than I can explain.

"Now, come on in and tell me what happened." She pulls me into the house and shuts the door behind me. Leading me into the kitchen, she pulls out a chair for me. "Sit down, I'll make you some hot chocolate."

I take a seat and watch her getting out a cup.

"Ryder didn't start the fight," I blurt out.

My mom stops dead in her tracks. She turns and looks at me, confused. "But you said he did."

"I know. It was a lie. Ryder was protecting me from Tommy that day. He was just trying to help, and I lied to get rid of him. It was all my fault."

"Penny..." My mom sits the cup back down and crosses the room. Sitting down next to me, she takes my hand into hers. "Why would you do that?"

“Because I was stupid, jealous, and desperate for someone to like me. When you started fostering Ryder, I felt like he was taking you away from me. It was dumb and immature. But at the time, I just wanted him gone. And then the fight happened, and Ryder got in trouble. Everyone blamed him, and then the next day, the police came to the school asking questions, and I lied.”

I’ve never been so ashamed in my life. I can’t even look at my mother while I confess this. I hurt someone, really hurt him, changed his life because of my selfishness.

“I don’t know what to say, Penny.”

“There is nothing to say. I did that, and I deserved everything that happened to me after.”

“Don’t say that. We all make mistakes. What I don’t understand is why you stayed with Tommy. Why did you let him treat you like that? Why didn’t you just tell us the truth?”

“Right after I talked to the police, I felt so guilty. I was going to tell them, tell you, but then Tommy caught me on my way home. He started talking to me, being very nice and charming. He told me that he always liked me and that I did the right thing, and we could now be together. He started walking me to school every morning, picking me up every afternoon, bringing me presents. I believed it all, fell for his lies. I thought he actually loved me.”

“Tommy is an expert manipulator. He had us fooled too. It took us a while to figure out he was trying to get you away from us, and when we figured it out, it was already too late. He had you wrapped up in his web, and we didn’t think we’d ever get you back. Then he came looking for you here, about two months ago. We were so worried.”

“That’s when I got away. I wanted to come here, but I was scared that he would find me and that you wouldn’t want me back.”

My mom squeezes my hand gently in response. “We always want you here. This is your home, no matter how old you are. Your dad will be home from work soon, and then we can get you situated in your old room.”

“Mom, I can’t stay long. I should probably go soon.”

“Penny, if you think I’m going to let you walk out of that door after not seeing you for so long, you are very, very wrong.”

“But—”

“No, buts.” she holds up her finger, “You are staying, and that’s the end of it.”

“Okay,” I finally agree. It’s not like I have anywhere else to go.

Now, I can only hope that Ryder is not going to come looking for me. Hopefully, I won’t be worth the trouble.

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RYDER

She's been gone for two weeks now. The house feels empty, like something vital is missing. It's quiet, too quiet. Mojo knows it too. He's been moping around, missing her, same as me.

I shouldn't be surprised by her taking off. I gave her no reason to stay, no reason to trust me. I treated her like shit, kicked her when she was already down. I know all of this, but none of that makes her leaving easier. Quite the opposite. It makes it harder.

As soon as I realized she was gone, I sent one of the bartender girls for the club to the women's shelter, looking for her. I knew that they wouldn't let me within ten feet of the front door. She wasn't there, so I went to the only other place I could think of.

I snuck up to the house, sneaking around and looking into the window like a creep. She was there, sitting at the dinner table with her family, a family we once shared.

I was about to knock the door down, pull her out, demand that she come back to me, but then something happened.

She smiled...

She fucking smiled, and in that exact moment, I felt the icy exterior of my heart crack, shatter into a million pieces. Each piece cutting into the inside of my chest, causing a pain I've never felt before.

It was a small, seemingly insignificant gesture. She smiled at something her mother said, her eyes lit up, and her shoulders shook slightly as her smile turned into a giggle. She was happy, content.

In all those weeks, she stayed at my house, not once—not one time—had I seen her smile. Not once had I seen her eyes light up or heard the sound of her laughter. All I saw was her pain, and her tears and felt her trembling in fear.

I hated her for what she'd done to me, hated her for so long. Now, I realize I've done way worse, and I only have myself to hate.

My phone rings, dragging me out of my thoughts. I answer without checking the screen, knowing exactly who it is.

“Where the hell are you?” Maddox's voice booms through the speaker of my truck.

“Just driving around. What's up?”

“We might have a lead on Tucker. I'll know more tomorrow, so be ready.”

The line goes dead, in typical Maddox fashion.

The reminder of Tucker only darkens my already dark mood. The fucker stole from us. Penny was right. Unfortunately, he caught wind of us looking for him before we could get him. Now he is nowhere to be found.

At least none of the brothers sided with him after we showed them the proof. Him taking off like that only made him look guiltier.

Shaking the thought of the prick Tucker out of my head, I concentrate on the here and now.

I park a few houses down, always a different spot, then walk the rest of the way. It's two o'clock in the morning, everyone in this quiet suburban neighborhood is asleep—everyone except Penny.

She is sitting on the back porch, looking up at the sky. She is holding a cup in her hands. The way she takes careful sips tells me it's something hot.

The lawn chair she is sitting on makes low sounds of distress as she moves, pulling her legs up. She is wearing my sweater, the one she wore when she

left. It's so big on her, she looks like a child wearing an adult size.

I stay in the shadows behind a tree. She doesn't know I'm here, she never does. I come to see her almost every day, it's become a routine, an obsession of sorts.

The need to see her compels me to do it, but that's all I ever do. I simply drive here to see her, make sure she is okay, then I leave, go back home to my empty house, wishing it wasn't so empty.

Taking one last look, I soak her in. Every feature, every strand of her hair, I memorize it all. I wait until she finishes whatever is in her cup. Then, I watch her get up and walk back inside. Only when I know she is safely back in the house, do I turn around to leave.

I take two steps before coming to an abrupt halt.

"Forgot where the doorbell is?" James asks, his always kind eyes giving me a questionable glance. Suddenly, I'm not a coldhearted criminal anymore. I'm a teenager again, standing in front of the only father figure I ever had.

"I just came to check up on her," I explain, shoving my hands in my pockets.

"I figured," he nods, "Penny told us everything. About her lying and that you let her stay with you for a bit."

Guilt and shame mingle deep inside me. I'm sure she didn't tell him what I asked of her in return. What I took from her as payment. I hope he never finds out either, because the truth is, I don't want him to be disappointed in me. He was always good to me, treated me well, took me into his home when no one else would.

"I'm sorry she lied, and I'm sorry we didn't believe you." His apology is genuine, which only makes me feel worse about my actions.

"I was never mad at you, and I don't hate Penny anymore for what she did."

"That's good. It's a lot of hate to hold on to. Hate like that can eat you up inside."

Don't I fucking know it?

“Shit happens.” I shrug.

“Why don’t you come inside, have a beer with me?”

I’m tempted to say yes. To be part of their lives again. Be part of Penny’s life in a healthy way. A tiny flash of a happy future enters my mind, a world where everything is okay, where Penny and I have a normal relationship, without all the hate and resentment between us. But then I remember who I am, what kind of person I’ve become, and what I did to Penny.

“It’s late. Maybe another time?”

“Maybe another time,” he echoes my words. “You’re always welcome here, Ryder.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

And I will keep it in mind, but I won’t act on it because I know it wouldn’t work out. It wouldn’t be right to step foot in that house again. It wouldn’t be fair to Penny.

The best thing I can do for her now is walk away. Let her build the life she deserves. The life she lost five years ago, the same day I lost mine.

PENNY

Moving the last few boxes of pasta from the small pallet onto the shelf, I take one last look to make sure everything is straight.

“You know your shift ended ten minutes ago?” Mary calls from the front of the store.

“Just finishing up,” I tell her.

I’ve been working here in her tiny grocery store for a few weeks now. I couldn’t stand letting my parents pay for everything. The least I can do is help out. It’s not much, but at least I don’t feel useless, and I like it here. Mary is a sweetheart, and she was running this place all on her own before I came along.

“Will you be a doll and take the trash out on your way?”

“Sure thing.” I grab the large trash bag from behind the counter and head toward the back exit. “Bye, Mary. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, kid!” she calls after me. “Thanks again.”

The heavy door falls shut behind me, and I step into the small back alley behind the shop. I wrinkle my nose at the stench of garbage and urine that always greets me back here. Dragging the trash bag behind me, I use my free hand to open the dumpster’s sliding door.

“Need some help?” a male voice startles me.

I drop the trash bag and spin around, coming face to face with a man I don't know. He is wearing dirty clothes, and his hair looks uncombed, making me think he might be homeless.

"Sorry, sweets. Didn't mean to scare you." He gives me a smile that has the small hairs on the back of my neck standing up. Panic rises inside of me; like a vine, it wraps around me, not wanting to let go. "Just thought you could use a hand."

"No, thanks, I'm fine," I say, trying to keep my voice even. Glancing around the small alleyway, I look for the quickest exit. The only way I can go is behind me, which means I have to get around the dumpster first.

"Don't be like that, sweets. I'm just trying to help." He takes a few steps toward me, his eyes roaming my body, and I know I have to make a run for it now.

Just as I'm about to take off into a sprint, the man suddenly retreats. His face goes pale, and the mischief in his eyes turns into fear. He takes a few more steps back, holding up his hands, palms first.

Only then do I realize he isn't looking at me anymore. He is staring at something behind me.

Twisting my head, I look over my shoulder.

Ryder.

I'm vaguely aware of the man making a run for it, hearing his feet pound against the concrete to get away.

Then the alley goes silent, leaving Ryder and me in it alone. I don't know how he got here or why he came, neither do I care at this moment.

I'm feeling so many different things at seeing him that I can't make out if it's good or bad. All I know is that my feet are cemented to the ground, and I can't move a muscle.

The glare he was giving the unknown guy lowers, and his eyes find mine. His gaze softens, but I can still see the anger and turmoil within the icy blue depths.

“You shouldn’t work here,” is the first thing out of his mouth. His words take me by surprise, I expected him to yell at me. Demand why I left, maybe ask for his money back. Definitely not that I shouldn’t work here.

When I say nothing back, he grabs my hand and pulls me down the alley and onto the road. With my hand secured in his, we walk down the sidewalk. To everyone else, it probably looks like we’re a couple taking a stroll.

At the next corner, he leads me down a different alley where I spot his truck.

He opens the passenger side and lifts me in, climbing in behind me. He shuts the door, and I slide toward the middle of the cab, making space for him, but he grabs my hips and pulls me back onto his lap.

Before I can comprehend what is happening, I’m cradled to his chest, his muscular arms wrapped around my body, holding me to him tightly.

I bury my face in his shirt, sucking in air mingled with his unique scent, I missed so much. Yes, I missed it, I missed him. I missed the way he smelled, the way he tastes, and the way he makes me feel. I missed it all.

I thought those feelings might go away, but they have only been getting stronger. Every night, I wish he was holding me, wish for his touch. I was just too scared to admit it, even to myself.

We stay like this for a long time, clinging to each other without saying a word. There is no need for anything to be said. We both know what happened. Somewhere along the broken road we traveled, we turned to each other for comfort. We started depending on one another. Forgave each other. We turned the darkness between us into light.

Now the question is. Will that be enough?

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, reminding me I’m supposed to be home right now.

Ryder releases his hold on me, but only enough for me to sit up and retrieve my phone. He keeps his arms around me, his large hands sprawled out on my back and thigh.

Unlocking my phone, I find a message from my mom. “My parents are asking if I’m okay and if I’ll make it home for dinner.”

“I’ll drive you home.”

Before I can object, he is moving us around. After making me sit on the seat, he climbs over to the driver’s side and gets behind the wheel.

The engine roars to life, and he pulls out of the alley and onto the road.

“I’m sorry I left.” I feel the need to say it, even though I know I did the right thing. “I was scared, and I overheard Maddox saying he was going to take me back to the club and put me in a room with Tucker.”

Ryder curses under his breath. “I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say honestly.

“I know.”

“Have you been watching me?” I had a feeling he was, something in the back of my mind telling me he was close, but I chalked it up to dreaming for the most part.

“Yes,” he admits shamelessly and without further explanation.

“Why didn’t you talk to me?”

Just as I ask, we pull up in front of my parents’ house.

“You should go inside,” Ryder tells me, avoiding my question.

“Come with me,” I offer, but it sounds more like a plea. “I told them the truth, and they know I stayed with you.”

“Do they know what I made you do while you stayed with me?”

“It was my choice to stay with you. I had sex with you willingly, and we both know I enjoyed it too. But that’s not something they need to know.”

Ryder glances toward the front door, his fingers gripping onto the steering wheel tightly, before he turns his gaze back onto the road ahead. I can tell he is thinking about it. He wants to come in, but something is holding him back.

The past.

It's the same thing holding me back too. Our past can't be erased, no matter how we feel about each other now.

“Go inside, Penny.” He tells me, calling me by my name. It sounds foreign coming from his mouth, and I wonder why he chose this moment to say it.

Maybe because this is goodbye?

The thought of never seeing him again leaves a dark, empty space in the center of my chest.

“Go,” he repeats, still looking ahead as if he can't bring himself to look at me.

Climbing across the seat, I lean over and place a kiss on Ryder's cheek.

He doesn't move or say anything. Simply looks ahead, his eyes trained on some imaginary spot on the road.

“Bye,” I murmur and climb out of the truck. As soon as I close the door and step onto the sidewalk, he drives off.

I watch his truck disappear when he takes a turn. The road turns blurry, making me realize I'm crying. Wiping the tears away with the back of my hand, I keep staring at the road, hoping he might change his mind. Wishing he would turn around and pick me back up.

But he never does.

He left, and I've never felt so alone.

RYDER

*A*bsentmindedly, I bring my hand to my face. I let my fingertips run over the spot where her lips touched my skin. It's like she left an imprint, just like her scent is lingering inside the truck, and her presence never seems to leave my house.

I have to force myself to drive home, fighting the urge to turn around and make her come back with me. Driving on autopilot, I'm lost in my thoughts. I did the right thing by leaving her, I tell myself. She doesn't belong with me...

All my internal rambling ends when I turn onto my road. Blue flashing lights from two police cars and an ambulance light up the street. All parked in front of my house.

What the fuck?

When I get closer, I spot Maddox's bike on the front lawn, him standing next to it.

I park in the street, cut the engine, and hop out of the truck.

"Why the fuck are you not answering your goddamn phone!" he yells at me, loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Someone called the cops hearing shots inside your house. When the cops got here, the door was kicked in, and the windows smashed." I look past him, only now realizing the damage.

Then my fucking heart stops.

Mojo.

Pushing past Maddox, I run inside the house. A cop tries to stop me at the hallway, but I shove him down until I get to the living room.

There are two medics and a cop all hovering over my dog, who is sprawled out on his side, whimpering in pain.

“Is this your house?” one of the cops asks.

“Yes.” I kneel next to Mojo’s head, gently stroking his ear.

“Someone broke in and shot your dog,” the same guy tells me.

One of the EMTs is putting pressure on Mojo’s wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

“Where is your girlfriend?” the cop asks. “She might be in danger.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Do you know who this note could be about?” He points at the wall.

I look up and read the large black letters spray-painted on the wall.

Your bitch is next!

Fuck.

“Don’t let my dog die!” I yell at the EMTs as I jump up.

Maddox is standing in the doorway, reading the writing on the wall.

“Maddox, stay with Mojo, and get him to a vet. I’ve got to go.” I’m normally not the one giving orders, and the deep frown on his face tells me he doesn’t like this one bit. Still, I trust he is going to do this for me, whether he thinks I’m making a mistake or not.

The cop yells something after me while a second tries to stop me from leaving. I shove him to the ground, leaving him lying in the grass, and get into my truck.

With squealing tires, I take off, leaving my house behind in the review mirror and going back to the place I just came from. It's a twenty-minute drive that only takes me ten minutes this time around.

Fucking Tucker, it has to be him. He is the only asshole brave enough to fuck with me.

When I get back to the Jenkins' house, I half park in the street, half in the front yard. The truck has barely come to a stop, and I'm out of the car. Running toward the front door, I bang my fists on it hard enough to make the wood crack.

The door flies open, and James stands on the other side, looking at me perplexed. "Ryder?"

"Where is she?" Without an invitation, I push inside the house, frantically looking around.

"Ryder, calm down. What's wrong?"

"Where is she?" I repeat as I storm into the kitchen.

Laura, Penny's mom, is sitting at the kitchen table looking at me like she's seen a ghost. Right next to her is Penny, concern written all over her face.

"What's wrong?" Penny asks. Her voice has my panic simmering down at last.

She is here. She is fine. No one hurt her.

Relief washes over me, and I sag against the closest wall. Catching my breath, I close my eyes and let my head fall back against the wall.

"Is that blood on your hand?" James asks, and my eyes fly open.

Laura and Penny have gotten up from their seats. Now all three of them are standing in front of me, inspecting me with concerned eyes.

I look down at my hands and find smears of blood.

"Someone shot my dog," I explain.

"Mojo?" Penny gasps. "Is he okay?"

“I don’t know. Maddox stayed with him. I came here,” I say, still looking at my hands.

“Who would shoot your dog?” Laura asks. The sound of her voice has me looking up at her. Taking her in for the first time. She hasn’t changed one bit.

She reaches for me, placing her hand on my arm and squeezing it lightly. Her touch comforts me like it always has.

“Come on, let’s get you cleaned up,” Laura coaxes, tugging me toward the kitchen sink. She uses a washrag to clean up my hands like I’m a child and not a man three times her size.

Penny moves with us, staying close to me but not close enough to touch.

When Laura is done cleaning me up, we all move into the living room. I take a seat on the couch, and Penny sits down next to me, while Laura and James take the love seat.

“It’s good to see you, Ryder,” Laura starts. “And I’m sorry it’s been so long...”

“It’s good seeing you too, and you don’t have to apologize. It’s in the past.”

“Thank you for taking Penny in when she needed a place to stay,” James says. I grind my teeth together, stopping myself from giving a response.

“I can’t stay long, and I’m taking Penny with me. I don’t think she is safe here right now.”

“What do you mean not safe?” Laura asks, worry lacing her voice.

“The guy who shot my dog, he threatened to hurt her too. I’m taking her somewhere safe. Until...” *He is dead.* “Until the cops find him.”

“You don’t think she’ll be safe here?” James asks, sounding just as concerned as his wife.

“I think it would be better if I go with Ryder,” Penny chimes in.

Laura and James exchange looks before returning their attention back to me.

“We’ll trust you. Just stay safe. Both of you.”



AFTER A LONG TWENTY minutes of goodbyes and promises that we will be back soon, we are finally out of the house.

Just as we climb in the truck, Maddox sends me a text.

“Mojo is doing good,” I tell Penny. “He has to stay at the vet for a few days, though.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I watch her buckle up before backing out onto the road. “Tucker broke into my house, destroyed it while he was there. We can’t go back there.”

“Oh... where are we going?” she asks, and I already know she will not like the answer.

“I’m taking you to the club. It’s the safest place.” It’s true. There is nowhere safer. Not only does it have a security system and cameras, but it is also where you can find most of the brothers. Some actually live there, but most of us just have a room to crash... or fuck.

“I know you don’t enjoy going there, but it’s safe, and that’s all we need right now.”

PENNY

We don't walk into the front of the club this time. We park around the back, close to a large metal door with a keypad attached to it.

Before we get out of the truck, Ryder turns to me. "Listen, no one in there is going to touch you... but you have to do exactly what I say. To everyone else, you are nothing more than someone who owes the club money. Do you understand?"

I nod my head furiously.

"That's the way it's going to have to be. Especially with this Tucker shit going on. I need all my men trusting me, and they are not going to do that if they think I'm distracted."

"I understand."

I climb out of the truck and follow Ryder. He punches a bunch of numbers into the keypad, and the door clicks open. Taking my hand, he pulls me inside and shuts the door behind us.

We move through the long hallways, and I suddenly feel like I'm a calf being led to slaughter.

Stopping in front of a door, recognition sets in. I've been here before. This is where Ryder took me the first time.

"You finally ready to share?" some guy yells down the hall.

“Fuck off,” Ryder yells back and grabs me by the arm. He pulls me into the room roughly and slams the door shut before letting me go.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I look around the room. I hate being in here, and I hate how Ryder acts when we are here.

Then something catches my eye. There are clothes lying next to the bed... my clothes. I don't remember taking them off in here.

“How did these get here?” I ask, pointing to the pile on the floor.

“Last time I brought you here, someone slipped something in your drink. I tried to get you to sleep it off in here, but you wouldn't, so I took you home.”

“I walked out of here naked?” I ask in complete horror.

“You didn't walk out of here at all.” He chuckles. “I wrapped you up in the blanket and carried you out. No one saw you naked, little owl.”

I glance at the bed to find the blanket missing, confirming his story. It doesn't make me feel much better, though. I still don't like any of this.

“Speaking of naked... I'd like you to get naked right now,” Ryder tells me, his voice low and husky.

I turn around to find him standing closer than I thought, so close I have to tilt my head up to look at his face. The mood in the room shifts. I go from being nervous and scared to feeling excited and content.

Grabbing the hem of my shirt, he drags it up and over my head slowly, then throws it to the floor, adding to the pile. My bra is next. He cups both of my breasts once they are free, massaging them and toying with my nipples, drawing tiny moans from me.

By the time he gets to my jeans, he is not so patient anymore. He yanks the zip down and pulls the jeans down my legs, taking my panties with them. I step out of my shoes and stand in front of him completely naked, while he hasn't taken off anything yet.

Reaching for his shirt, I grab hold of the soft fabric and pull it up. He lifts his arms, helping me get it off. I drop it on the floor next to mine, reaching for his pants, but he swats my hand away and picks me up instead.

With a gasp, I wrap my arms around his neck on instinct, and my legs around his waist. A moment later, my back is pressed against the door.

Ryder holds me up with one arm and his body while he undoes his pants. Then he slowly lowers me, guiding me onto him. He fills me with one deep thrust, burying himself inside me. I cling to him, my nails digging into his shoulders as he rocks against me.

Our faces are only inches apart, and I wonder if he would kiss me. He tips his head and presses his forehead against mine. Our noses brush against each other. We are both panting. His minty breath only makes me want to kiss him more... taste him. But I'm scared. Scared that he doesn't want to. Scared that this is still nothing more than me paying him back.

He drives into me over and over again, pushing me against the door harder and harder. With every thrust, he rubs against my clit, bringing me closer to fall off the edge.

When I feel my orgasm looming, the urge to kiss him overcomes me. His eyes are closed, his face contorting in pleasure.

On a whim, I lean in and place my lips on his. He pulls back, and his eyes fly open, but he doesn't stop fucking me against the door. Surprise flashes over his face, and I'm about to say sorry, but then his lips are back on mine.

Our kiss is urgent, primal, and possessive. He kisses me like he has been waiting for this for a hundred years. Like a starving man eating a meal. What is even more surprising is there is something familiar about this kiss. Almost as if this isn't our first time. A sense of déjà vu overcomes me.

The kiss only intensifies my arousal. The orgasm slams into me, overtaking my complete body. Ryder keeps fucking me through it, only elongating it. I'm still coming when he finds his release, grunting and grinding himself into me so deep I can feel him at the end of my channel.

He buries his face in the crook of my neck until he catches his breath. He is still holding up all my weight, and I'm thankful because my limbs feel boneless right now. I don't think I could stand up if I tried.

He carries me to the attached bathroom, which I didn't even know was there until now. He puts me on my feet but keeps one arm around me, holding me

up. Closing my eyes, I lean against him, my cheek pressing against his warm chest.

I hear the water in the shower being turned on and feel tiny escaping droplets on my heated skin. We wait until the water is hot before he guides me under the spray. After a few minutes, I feel my strength resurface, and I'm able to stand up on my own.

Reaching for the shampoo, I'm about to wash my hair, but Ryder takes it from me. Pouring a healthy amount into his palm, he washes my hair for me.

"I like taking care of you," he admits, shocking the hell out of me.

"I like you taking care of me," I whisper after a moment. It's true, I like this, maybe even need it. I have dreamed about being an independent woman, free from any man, but now I find myself giving in to this, accepting it in a way.

I know I'm playing a dangerous game, letting myself rely on someone again, needing someone to care for me. I'm giving Ryder a lot of power, and I'm trusting him not to abuse it.

As he rinses out my hair, I stare at his muscular, tattoo-covered chest, wanting to run my fingers over it. Watching his muscles flex each time he moves only intensifies that urge, but I stop myself. I'm still unsure what this is between us, how this works, and what I'm allowed to do. Whatever we have, I feel like it's fragile, and I need to treat it with care.

After he is done with my hair, he grabs a washcloth and covers it in soap. He runs it over my entire body, washing every part of me, paying special attention between my thighs.

Once I'm clean, he rinses out the washcloth before reapplying soap. Instead of washing himself, he holds his hand out to me. I look at the washcloth for a second before it clicks in my head.

I take it from him, excitement swirling deep in my core, as I run the soapy cloth over his skin. Beginning with his chest, the place I've been yearning to touch. Making sure not to cover my hand with the fabric completely, I let my fingertips run over his skin.

Taking my time, I wash his entire body just as he washed mine. I enjoy every second. Enjoy how he lets me explore every inch of him. After everything we've done, nothing has felt more intimate than this.

All too soon, the shower is over. We step out, and Ryder retrieves two larger towels from the linen closet. He wraps me up in one and dries himself off with the other. While I dry my hair, he grabs some sheets from the same closet he got the towels from and spreads them out on the bed.

"I'll get a new blanket tomorrow. Are you hungry?"

"No, I ate before you showed up." *Kicked down the door and barreled in like a tank.*

I hang the wet towels over the shower stall to dry and walk into the bedroom. Ryder takes in my naked form.

"Get under the sheets before I fuck you again," he orders, and I know he isn't joking.

The sheets are cold, and the mattress is not as comfortable as the one at Ryder's house, but at least he'll sleep next to me.

He slides in beside me, turning off the light on the nightstand. There are no windows, which means the room falls into complete darkness. The soft sound of music carries through the walls, but it's subdued enough to where it shouldn't bother me to go to sleep.

Ryder is not touching me, but he is close enough for his body heat to seep into me. Curling up on my side, I wrap the thin sheet around my body, trying to get comfortable. The thin fabric doesn't offer much to keep me warm, and the air in this room is chilly.

I wonder if he would be okay if I scoot closer to Ryder and steal a little of his body heat. I took a risk kissing him, and it turned out well, but I don't want to push my luck. I don't think Ryder is the cuddling kind of guy.

Maybe I just wait until he is asleep before I scoot closer.

"Are you cold?" he asks suddenly.

“A little,” I admit, only then realizing my voice is shaking because I am shaking.

The bed creaks, and the sheet is pulled down a bit as he moves. A shiver runs through my body as the cold air kisses my skin, but it’s quickly forgotten when I feel his hands on me.

Large, strong, warm hands pulling me into his chest, engulfing me in warmth. I cuddle into him, kicking myself for not speaking up sooner.

Closing my eyes, I relax, turning to putty in his embrace. It doesn’t take me long before I drift off, and for the first time in a long time, I’m excited to wake up in the morning.

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RYDER

I wake up the same way I fell asleep, with my arms wrapped around Penny. Her face is pressed against my chest, and with each breath she takes, a puff of air fans out over my skin.

This should feel odd. Cuddling has never been my thing. Kissing has never been my thing either. Yet, it feels right when I do it with Penny, a girl I hated for so long. How is that possible? Nothing about this makes sense.

Reaching over, I flip on the bedside lamp so I can look at her. Maybe seeing her will remind me who is wrapped up in my arms. I take in her face. Her lips are slightly parted, her eyes are closed, and her lashes rest like tiny wings right below. Looking at her doesn't change anything. I still want her. Still want to hold her, want to protect and take care of her.

Stirring next to me, she slowly wakes up, her whole body goes stiff. Blinking, she looks around, and a moment of panic flashes over her face. When she realizes where she is, her body relaxes, and she melts back into my touch.

“How long do we have to stay here?” she asks, her voice still sleepy.

“However long it takes to find Tucker and have my place fixed up.” I'm sure she doesn't like being here, but this will have to do.

“About yesterday...” she starts but then pauses for a long time. “Are we... I mean, am I still paying off my debt?”

My heart speeds up at her question. I know what she is asking. Was sex last night about money, or was it more? She wants to know where we stand, but I'm not ready to say it out loud. I can't, maybe never.

"Nothing has changed." I give her a washed down answer.

I feel her pulling away immediately, physically and mentally. I almost want to take it back... almost. But the truth is, nothing *has* changed, because it was never about the money for me. I always just wanted her. The only thing that did change is the reason I want her close.

Of course, she doesn't know that. She thinks I just want to use her body to get my money's worth.

"Why did you come for me? Why didn't you just let Tucker get to me?"

"How are you going to pay me back if you're dead?"

She flinches at my words, then turns her body away from me as if I shoved her away. I might as well, but this is the way it has to be. I can't let her get too close. It's going to make it harder for both of us when it's time for her to leave.

I'm not stupid. She is leaning on me now, letting me take care of her because she needs me, but as soon as Tucker is out of the picture and she is safe again, she is going back home. Back to her own life. There is no room for me in it.

"Don't make this out to be any more than it is." Getting up from the bed, I pick up my clothes and pull them on. "You owe me. I take payment in the form of fucking. That's it. Just because I'm nice to you in between doesn't mean there is anything between us."

When I glance over at her, she is sitting up, her head lowered as she looks at her hands lying in her lap. The sheet is wrapped around her torso, hiding her perky little breasts from me.

"Understood." She nods, not looking up. Her long brown hair covering her face like a curtain, and I'm guessing that's by design.

"Get dressed. We have to go see Maddox."

She scurries off the bed, and I avert my gaze. If I look at her naked body right now, we won't leave this room any time soon.

When we leave, I grab hold of her upper arm and walk her down the hall. As we enter the bar area, I tighten my grip on her, pulling her along rougher than necessary. She whimpers but doesn't complain.

It's early, and there are only a few people in the bar for a morning beer, but I don't want anyone to know what Penny is to me. I walk her straight through the bar to the staircase leading up to Maddox's office.

I don't let go of Penny until we're in front of his door. She rubs her arm where I held onto her, and the unwanted pang of guilt hits me.

Knocking on the door, I wait for Maddox to call us in.

"Come in..."

Pushing the door open, I step in and take a seat opposite him at his desk. Penny walks in after me timidly. She closes the door, and I motion for her to sit down next to me.

Keeping her head down, like she is avoiding eye contact with Maddox, she takes the seat.

"We still can't find him," he growls. "But since she is here, I have a job for her."

Maddox opens a drawer behind his desk and gets out a stack of papers, putting them on the table in front of Penny.

"I need you to go through these and check all the numbers from the last few years."

"Okay," she says so quietly, it's almost inaudible. She clears her throat and when she talks again, it's loud and clear. "But I want something in return."

Fuck.

I grind my teeth together in anger. She is going to ask for her debt to be forgiven, I fucking know it. Without debt, I have no real reason to keep her here.

Maddox leans back in his office chair. “Is that so? I don’t think you are in a position to make demands, but out of curiosity, what is it you want?”

“I want a laptop and internet access,” she explains.

“I’ll get you a fucking laptop,” I growl. “Now, run the damn numbers.” I don’t know who is more surprised by my outburst, Maddox, Penny, or myself.

Her shaking hand reaches for the papers, and she looks through them.

“I’ll need some time for these,” she whispers.

“You can take them to Ryder’s room, but they are not leaving the compound—”

Maddox hasn’t finished speaking when I’m on my feet. Gathering the papers, I shove them under my arm and grab Penny to pull her from her seat.

“Anything else?” I growl.

“Come back later, I need to talk to you in private,” he says dismissively.

“Fine.” I nod and drag Penny out of the office and through the bar the same way we came.

Slamming the door shut, I lock us back in my room and throw the stack of papers on the bed.

“What the fuck was that?” I yell at her, making her go pale. Guilt is written all over her face, but not even that is calming me down right now.

“I-I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I just need to fill out some applications—”

“I don’t give a fuck,” I don’t let her finish. “You don’t demand things from Maddox. You don’t demand things from anyone here.”

Fuck. She has no idea what she just did.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats, but her words don’t matter. The damage has been done.

“Start on the papers,” I order and turn away from her.

Leaving the room, I walk back upstairs to talk to Maddox. Before I enter his office, I take a calming breath, as if that would help.

Not knocking this time, I simply walk into his office and take the seat across from him.

“She needs to go. She is nothing but trouble, and she doesn’t know her place.”

“I’m handling it.”

“Fuck you are. You’re not handling shit. She has you wrapped around her little finger, and the guys are taking notice. You need to stop thinking with your dick and start using your brain. You are bound to this club, not to some pussy. Deal with her, or I’ll do it.”

His threat hangs in the air. I want to tell him to fuck off, but the truth is he is right. Whether or not I want to admit it, she has been getting under my skin. Worse than that, she makes me look weak. This has to stop.

I need to end this... and I need to do it before Maddox does.

PENNY

Ryder is giving me whiplash with his mood swings and multiple personalities. One minute, he is swooping in to save me, and the next, he is keeping me locked in a room.

In one breath, he tells me, *I like taking care of you*. The next, he tells me, *you owe me, I take payment in the form of fucking. That's it*.

Which one is it? Am I really that desperate I'm imagining there is something else between us?

There are these moments when I'm positive there is more. The way he kissed me back and held me to keep me warm. The way he washed me in the shower and then let me wash him in return.

It's been three days, and I feel like I'm going crazy. Being locked in a windowless room doesn't help. At least I have something to do now.

The first two days I spent going over the bookkeeping Maddox had given me. Tucker had been skimming money since he started running the numbers, but in the past, it was not a lot. Only recently, he has been getting greedy, taking more and more cash that didn't belong to him.

Yesterday, Ryder made good on his words and brought me a laptop. I've been on it non-stop, using this time to fill out college and grant applications.

Ryder gets me breakfast each morning but leaves me here throughout the day. I wait for him to come back. Each day, I wait with anticipation for the door to

open and for him to walk in. Today is no different.

Checking the time in the corner of the computer screen, I realize he's been gone for a long time. It's Saturday night, and the music from the bar is louder than usual. I try not to think about Ryder being there, drinking with his friends, and the naked women.

Jealousy wraps around my chest, making it feel tight and hard to breathe. I don't want to imagine Ryder with another woman, but I'm not stupid. I have no claim on him.

When I hear the rattling of the key and the lock turn, I close my laptop and set it next to me on the bed. Expecting Ryder, I watch the door swing open, and a large body fills the frame. I suck in a sharp breath when I realize it's not Ryder stepping in the room.

"Hello, Penny," Maddox's voice is clipped as he closes the door behind him.

I instinctively scoot back on the bed until my back is pressed firmly against the headboard. Maddox steps closer, a mischievous grin tucking on his lips.

"W-where is Ryder?" I ask, failing miserably to keep my voice even. His grin widens. He knows I'm scared of him, and he enjoys that thought. Men like him feed on it.

"Getting drunk. Having fun." He sits down on the edge of the bed, and I pull my legs to my chest as much as I can.

"Why are you here?" I ask, knowing damn well that I won't like the answer.

"Just wanted to ask you some questions. Ever since you walked into my bar, Ryder has been different. Distracted. You're a weakness, and I can't have that."

"I'm sorry," I say on autopilot. I'm not sure what I'm apologizing for exactly, but he clearly thinks this is my fault.

"You are the girl who got him sent to jail, aren't you?"

I swallow hard, an enormous lump forming in my throat. "Y-yes."

"I don't know what game you are playing, but it's going to stop now."

“I’m not... I mean I don’t—”

“Shut up,” he growls, the raw anger in his voice making me flinch. “Let’s go. You’re coming with me.”

“Where are we going?”

Grabbing my arm, he gets to his feet and pulls me up with him. “You’re going to pay off your debt tonight, so you can be gone by the morning.”

“Please...” I beg, digging my heels into the floor as he drags me out of the room. “Please, don’t!” I say a little louder, but my pleading falls on deaf ears.

“You’re going to walk into that bar and give everyone a little show. Then you’re going to suck off whoever wants your lips wrapped around their dick, and when you’re done with that, you are going to walk out the front door and never come back. Are we clear?”

No, no, no! I shake my head profusely. Ryder said no one would touch me. He promised. My head tells me to believe him, to trust what he said, but my body isn’t convinced.

By the time we enter the bar, I’m in full on panic mode. My heart is racing, and I feel like I can’t breathe. I scan the room for Ryder, hoping, praying he is here, but all I see are unknown faces.

Maddox drags me through the bar area by my arm, and I’m reminded of the very first time I was here. The same fear I felt then is coursing through my veins now.

We get to the back of the bar, and that’s when I finally see him. Ryder is sitting at one of the tables, his hand wrapped around a beer bottle in front of him. He looks up, and his eyes find mine immediately.

“Ryder has finally agreed to share,” Maddox announces. “This is going to be her last night here, so make it count, boys.”

Appreciative cheers erupt around us while Ryder sits still like a stone statue.

For a split second, I think he is going to jump up and rip me away from his friend. I think he’ll save me, protect me like he promised, but he doesn’t move. His face giving nothing away. His glassy eyes void of emotions.

Hopelessness washes over me, threatening to pull me into the darkest waters to drown.

Maddox shoves me into the crowd, and hands I don't know grope me. I try to get away, fight them off, but that only makes them grab me harder.

"There she is! I've been waiting for you, sweets," someone slurs. I squeeze my eyes shut when he presses his face into the crook of my neck, licking my skin there.

I recoil, bile rising in my throat, making the man only laugh louder. Someone else comes up behind me and grinds himself against my ass. Another hand grabs my breast, kneading it painfully. A sob rips from my throat, and tears spring from my eyes.

"Cry for us," someone whispers in my ear. "Makes my cock hard."

A hand shoves into my pants, cruel fingers running over my panties, digging painfully into my sensitive flesh. I want to keep fighting, want to be strong and brave, but I know there is no use. That will only make it worse.

So, I do the only thing I can. I stop fighting, stop thinking, stop being present in this room. I let my mind go blank, letting darkness surround me. The voices get further away, their touch less painful. I'm about to be gone, in the place I visit during my darkest hours.

Just before I close myself off completely, something happens around me. The fingers between my legs disappear, the hands groping my breasts vanish, and I'm moved around the room forcefully.

I'm slammed against a brick wall, hard enough to knock the air out of me. Before I have the chance to regain my bearings, a large hand wraps around my throat, holding me in place.

My hands come up, pressing against the chest of my attacker, but he moves as much as the wall behind me would.

My eyes fly open, but I can't see anything besides the dark fabric covering the shoulder right in front of me. I suck in a breath, taking in a familiar male scent. *Ryder.*

“Calm the fuck down,” he growls. His lips so close, I can feel his breath against the shell of my ear.

As soon as I hear his voice, my fingers curl into his shirt, pulling him closer instead of shoving him away.

His grip around my neck is firm, but not enough to make it hard to breathe. Instead of me panicking more, it calms me.

His body is pressed up against mine, and only then do I realize what he is doing. With the wall behind me, there is only him. He surrounds me, and no one can touch me—no one but him.

To everyone else, it might look like he is scaring me, choking me, crowding my space. But Ryder knows how to use his body to soothe my fears, and that’s exactly what he is doing.

I relax into his hold, trusting him with my body, believing that he is going to protect me from everything bad.

I don’t fight him when he pulls me away, and I don’t fight him when he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder.

Wherever he is taking me, whatever he is going to do, I know I’ll be safe.

RYDER

*W*ithout looking at Maddox or anyone else, I push through the crowd with Penny hanging over my shoulder.

The guys are hollering after me to come back, to share her with them like I'm supposed to, but I keep walking to the front of the bar.

Tank, our bouncer, gives me a questionable look when I pass him, but doesn't make a move to stop me. *Thank fuck*. He is nicknamed Tank for a reason, after all.

I hurry around the side of the building where my truck is parked and deposit Penny in the passenger's seat. I'm halfway around the truck when I see Maddox approach. *Fuck*.

"What the fuck are you thinking?" he snaps at me. "Have you lost your goddamn mind?"

"I'm leaving," is all I say, grabbing the handle of the door. Before I can pull it open, Maddox shoves me away from the truck.

"Do you even realize what you just did?"

"I know exactly what I did. It's you that doesn't realize the mistake you made," I spit back at him, shoving against his shoulders. "I told you! I told you, I'd fucking handle it, but you had to step in. You had to make sure you got your way."

I've known Maddox for five years, and I can count on one hand the time I could see any kind of emotion written on his face. Right now, there is no doubt about what he is feeling. Utter shock. He is absolutely shocked by my words.

"When did I ever not stand by my word? When did I ever not deliver? In five years, not once, not one single time, did I give you a reason not to trust me, and still, you had to go against me on this."

"I do what's best for the club," he says, a little more composed now. "That's all I care about."

"Maybe that's your problem. I care about the club too, but that doesn't mean I can't care about something else along with it."

"Are you saying you are putting her before the club?" Maddox points to the cab of my truck.

"I'm saying I protect what's mine. That goes for both the club and her."

"You are blind. She is nothing but some broad who fucked you over once. She is going to fuck you over again, and this time I'll let you rot in jail." Maddox turns away from me.

"Fuck you." I open the door and climb into the truck. Turning on the engine, I watch as my best friend walks back into the bar without me, and I can't help but wonder if I just made the biggest mistake of my life.



WE DRIVE IN COMPLETE SILENCE, which is a good thing because I don't trust myself to say anything right now.

I pull up to a motel on the other side of town and put the truck in park. When I get out, Penny follows me into the run-down lobby.

She stands close behind me as I pay for a room.

Grabbing the key card from the counter, I turn and walk down the side road until we get to our room. I don't have to look back to make sure Penny is

following me. I can feel her, even though we're not touching. Even though I can't hear her footsteps, I know she is there.

Stepping into the shitty motel room, I flip on the light and sit on the bed, letting my head fall into my hands, running my fingernails over my scalp. I feel like pulling my fucking hair out.

I fucked up. I really fucked up today, but what choice did I have? It was this, or watch the guys fuck Penny in front of me. The thought alone renews my anger. My muscles vibrate, my arms shake, and all I want to do is punch something. Let go of this anger.

The door closes, and I hear the deadbolt being put in place. Other than my ragged breath and my heart beating viciously against my ribcage, the room is silent.

I feel Penny move in front of me, her small hands cautiously touching my forearms.

“Tell me what I can do? What can I do to make you feel better?”

Her question catches me off guard. What can she do? *Nothing*. She takes me by surprise yet again when she gets on her knees between my legs.

“Ryder, please, tell me what I can do? I'll do anything.” Her voice is laced with emotion, and I know how much she means what she is saying.

“Unless you want me to let my anger out on you, you need to step back right fucking now.”

“Do it then... do whatever you want to. Hurt me. Let it out. Do whatever you want with me.”

I let my hands fall from my face so I can look at her. She is on her knees, but her head is held up high, her eyes determined, her shoulders stiff, and her back straight. If she is scared, she is not showing it.

“*Do whatever you want with me?*” I echo her words. “You don't know what you're saying. You don't want me to take you up on that offer,” I warn, but her resolve doesn't falter.

“I do. I can take it, and I trust you not to go too far.”

Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around her slender throat like I did earlier. She doesn't flinch, doesn't move, or even blink.

“Are you sure, little owl? Are you sure you can handle that side of me?”

“Yes.” She nods slightly, her eyes never leaving mine. I can feel her pulse racing beneath my touch, but I'm not sure if that's to do with fear or excitement.

In one swift move, I move us around so she is lying on the bed, and I hover above her. Never taking my hand away from her throat, I use my free one to undress her. Her chest rises and plunges, but she doesn't fight me. Her arms lie motionless beside her body as I rip her clothes off until she is completely naked beneath me.

Like an offering, she's lying on the bed. Giving me her complete submission, she surrenders her body to me in every way. She is giving me all the power, which is exactly what I need right now. Regaining a sense of control.

I can feel the anger draining from my body, leaving the intense urge to fuck her senseless in its wake. Fuck her any way I want to.

Leaning down, I take her taut nipple between my lips, running my tongue over her soft skin before sucking it harshly. She stifles a moan, and her back arches slightly, pushing her tits further into my face.

Raking my teeth along her tender flesh, I bite down gently, just enough to cause a little bit of pain. Penny whimpers but doesn't move or push me away.

Trailing my free hand down her stomach, I shove between her legs, teasing her folds apart with my fingers. She is already wet, making my two fingers slide into her cunt with ease while I continue teasing her breasts, biting, sucking, and licking anywhere I please.

Releasing her tit, I lift my body so I can see her face while I finger fuck her. I expect to see at least a trace of fear by now, but all I find is her cheeks flushed, her lips slightly parted, and her eyes unfocused.

I tighten my grip around her throat and add a third finger into her tight channel. Her eyes flicker to mine before she closes them. Her hands grabbing the sheets next to her, like she needs to hold on to something.

“Regretting your offer yet?”

She shakes her head but keeps her eyes shut. “Do your worst.”

I don’t know why she is pushing me right now. Neither do I understand why I want to push back. Why I want to test her limits. I just do.

“Turn around,” I order, pulling my fingers from her pussy and releasing her neck. “I want you on your hands and knees.”

She obeys immediately, turning around, she scrambles on all fours.

“Spread your legs more. Ass in the air.” Again, she follows my instructions without question. Her legs are spread wide, her ass is juttied out, giving me a full view.

I strip out of my own clothes in record time. My dick is so hard it’s painful. I get on the bed behind her, grabbing her ass cheeks, I spread them apart even further.

Leaning down, I drag my tongue all the way from her clit up to her puckered asshole. She tenses but doesn’t say anything.

I keep teasing her there, dipping my tongue into her tight ring of muscle until I can feel her relax again.

Straightening up, I take my cock into my hand and guide it to her cunt. Running my engorged mushroom head through her slit, I gather all the moisture before lining up with her entrance.

With a groan, I bury myself deep inside her, filling her pussy in one fluid thrust.

Fuck... She feels so good. My head swims. I could get lost in this feeling, get lost in her.

I pull out, just to plunge back into her, over and over again. Each thrust making her body bounce forward.

Sprawling my hand out between her shoulder blades, I push her down, flatten her upper body against the mattress while keeping a tight grip on her hip with my other hand. With the newfound leverage, I fuck her the way I always

wanted to, hard and fast.

I don't know how long I fuck her like this. Minutes? Hours? I have no clue. I lose all sense of time while rutting her into the mattress.

Only when I feel my orgasm building at the base of my spine, do I slow down and loosen my grip on her.

This feels too good for it to be over so soon. I want to make this last all night if I can.

"You still with me, little owl?" I ask breathlessly while running my hand up and down her spine. She shivers but pushes her ass back into me.

"Yes," she murmurs with her cheek against the mattress.

"You said I can do whatever I want," I point out while running my finger down the crack of her ass.

"Yes." She gasps when my thumb circles her backside.

Grinning, I continue massaging her puckered hole all while lazily fucking her. When I know she is relaxed enough, I pull out, so I can gather her wetness from her cunt and spread it around her ass.

She whimpers when I push my thumb into the tight ring of muscle, but once I pump it in and out a few times, she moans into the sheets. I knew she would like this.

Pulling out my thumb, I replace it with the head of my cock.

"Stay relaxed, don't tense up," I warn before I slowly push inside her. "Fuck... you're so tight." So tight, I don't think I can do this without hurting her. Not like this anyway.

Wrapping my arm around her middle, I pull her up and against my chest. My other arm snakes around her as well, my hand going between her thighs, finding her swollen clit.

"Come for me." I breathe into the shell of her ear while rubbing her clit relentlessly. "That's it, let me in."

Her head falls back against my shoulder, and I use this new position to trail open mouth kisses over her neck and shoulder.

She relaxes in my hold, and my cock slides in an inch, making her moan. Her slender fingers wrap around my wrist, not to push me away but to hold me close to her.

I dip three fingers into her cunt, rubbing my palm against her clit while sliding my cock all the way inside her ass. She shudders, and a soft whimper falls from her lips. Her sharp nails dig into my skin, and I hiss at the pain.

“Fuck...” My balls slap against her skin as I fuck her ass. Simultaneously, I thrust my fingers inside her other opening.

“Ryder,” she whines, her nails digging deeper into my skin.

“Is this what you had in mind?” My voice is so low and raspy; I can barely recognize it as my own. “Is this how you wanted me to take you? To fuck you like you’re my toy?”

My crude words finally set her off. Her whole body convulses as a strangled scream rips from her throat. Her back arches, and her ass grips me so tightly that it sets off my own orgasm.

I clutch onto her, clinging to her slender body as I come deep inside of her ass. The room spins, and I see stars. Wave after wave of release washes over me until my head is cloudy and my body so weak, I can’t hold myself up any longer.

Collapsing onto the bed, I trap her body beneath mine until I can catch my breath.

When I finally regain a sense of control over my body, I push up to make sure Penny is all right. She is still breathing heavy, a thin sheen of sweat covering her body. I swipe the damp hair from the back of her neck and place a soft kiss there.

I want to ask if she is okay, but looking at her face, I know the answer. Her expression is relaxed, peaceful, and sated. Her lips are even tucked up in a tiny smile. Her eyes are already closed, and despite being in this shitty motel bed, she looks like she is going to have the best night of sleep.

Pulling out of her gently, I wince at the coldness and loss of contact.

Going into the bathroom, I grab a washcloth and run some warm water over it. When I walk back to the bed, I find she hasn't moved an inch, and her eyes are closed. She looks thoroughly worn out.

She doesn't flinch when I clean between her legs, and she doesn't stir when I move her body up, so her head is on one of the flimsy white pillows.

Before I lie down, I double-check the lock and window. Grabbing my gun from my jacket, I make sure a bullet is in the chamber and place it on the nightstand. This location and this room are completely unsafe, but it will have to do for tonight. Tomorrow, I'll think of something better.

Climbing into the bed next to Penny, I cover us with the scratchy motel blanket and pull her limp body into my chest.

Today was all kinds of fucked up, but at least I have this... *her* safe and sound in my arms. Even if it won't last much longer.

PENNY

*M*y eyes blink open, and I take in the unfamiliar room. It only takes a moment before last night's events come rushing back to me.

Ryder is lying next to me, the thin blanket draped over his lower half, while his broad chest is on full display. I have the urge to scoot closer, to cuddle into his side, to run my hand over his bare chest and pepper kisses all over his skin.

Admiring his physique, I recollect what we did last night... how he fucked me rougher than I thought I could ever handle. I didn't lie; I trusted him completely, letting go of my fears. I would have let him do whatever he wanted because I know he won't go too far. He won't hurt me, won't push me over the edge.

I gave myself to him, and in return, he gave me the most mind-blowing orgasm. *Jesus*, I literally passed out after.

"I can hear you thinking," he murmurs without opening his eyes.

"What did you hear?" I question curiously.

"You're thinking about how good I look right now." He grins, and I almost swat his arm.

This is new. This playful side of him. The comfort I feel around him.

“You’re not too far off, actually.” At my answer, his eyes pop open, his eyebrows raising with it, giving me a questionable look.

“Continue,” he prompts in a teasing tone.

“I was thinking about touching you. Maybe kissing you,” I whisper the last part, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

“I don’t know if that would be wise. Touching would lead to fucking, and I’m sure you’re a little sore this morning.”

Swallowing hard, I press my thighs together. The movement confirms that I am, in fact, sore. It’s not a terrible pain, more like a dull ache. It’s something I am willing to deal with again just to feel the way I did last night.

“Um, yeah. I am sore, but not in a bad way. Not like my ribs after someone punched me in the stomach. More of a muscle sore after a workout. You can feel it, but it’s not quite painful, more like an uncomfortable reminder of what you did last night.”

“That’s what I thought.” Ryder throws the blanket off his naked body and stands up to stretch his back. I watch his muscles flex and feel my core warming despite my thoughts just moments ago. Why does he have to have this effect on me?

“What’s going to happen now?” I ask, trying to distract myself. Clinging to the blanket, I pull it up, covering my hardened nipples.

“I don’t know. We can’t stay here, though.” He runs his hands through his hair. “Let’s go get some breakfast. I need some brain fuel before I can think.”

“Do I have time for a quick shower?”

“Sure.” He nods and watches me get up.

Even after all this time, it’s weird having Ryder looking at me the way he does when I’m naked. He takes in my exposed form like I’m a piece of art, like I’m an expensive meal at a five-star restaurant. One he wants to devour.

I walk past him and into the bathroom. Ryder follows me quietly, standing behind me as I turn on the water.

Holding my hand under the spray, I wait until it gets hot, then step under it. With a smirk on his face, Ryder gets in behind me.

Just like last time, he washes me from head to toe. In return, I do the same for him.

We rinse off and dry ourselves with the thin motel towels.

I hate getting dressed in my clothes from yesterday, but I don't have much of a choice.

After we're both fully clothed, we leave the motel room, and Ryder drives us to a small diner on the outskirts of town.

The diner is pretty packed, which is probably due to it being Sunday morning. Like everywhere we go together, Ryder gets dirty looks. Hushed voices surround us as we sit down in a booth furthest away from the entrance. Ryder either doesn't see it anymore, or he simply doesn't care.

The waitress comes to take our order shortly after we sit down. She is about my age, but her bright red hair, pierced nose, and attitude in her walk tell me we couldn't be more different.

"Hi, my name is Abby, and I'll be your server," she rattles off her introduction with nothing but boredom. "What can I get you?" she asks while chewing a piece of gum. A pencil and small notepad in her hand.

"Two breakfast platters, sweet tea, and coffee for both of us," Ryder orders.

"You got it, big boy," she says with a wink and grabs the menus from the table. "I like a man who orders for his woman."

I expect Ryder to correct her, but he just nods without even looking up at her. He is scanning the restaurant instead, probably looking for threats. Maybe he just didn't hear her.

I watch Abby walk off in her too tight, too short dress. Apparently, she is not one of the people intimidated by Ryder. Actually, I get the opposite vibe. I think she is attracted to him.

My hunch is confirmed when she comes back with our drinks. She sets the coffees and teas down, then wipes an imaginary dirty spot off the table. It

happens to be across the table on Ryder's side, so she has to reach over and lean into him, giving him a full view of her very voluptuous cleavage.

My mind immediately goes to the women at the club, half-naked, and throwing themselves at the men. I always wonder where they find those kinds of women. I guess at diners like this one.

She leaves, and I catch a smirk plastered all over Ryder's face.

"Are you jealous, little owl?"

"No," I half-lie. Okay, maybe I am jealous. She is confident, fearless, and obviously Ryder's type. "I might be a little," I admit.

"Jealously looks kind of good on you. I'll try to make you jealous more often in the future." He leans back in his seat and keeps looking around the restaurant.

I don't read too much into his statement, but I can't help trying to analyze it. Does he mean he wants to keep me around *in the future*?

Abby, our server, brings our food out not much later. Again, she shamelessly flirts with Ryder, batting her eyelashes and leaning over every chance she gets. Even knowing that he does it on purpose now, anger rises inside of me. I don't want him to flirt with her, or anyone, joking or not.

"Stop pouting," Ryder says halfway through the meal. "You're looking at me like I'm about to go fuck her in the bathroom."

"For all I know you would." I shrug.

"I wouldn't. I haven't had sex with anyone since the day you walked into the bar."

I stare at him, studying his face while he keeps eating. He is not lying, at least I don't think. I was sure he must have had sex after I left. I've been actually suppressing that thought.

"Why not?"

"I didn't want to." Ryder shoves another piece of bacon in his mouth, then reaches across the table and grabs another one from my plate. "Plus, I was

too busy stalking you.”

Next time Abby comes back to clear our plates, Ryder completely ignores her. He doesn't even answer when she asks if we are ready for the check.

“Yes, we're ready,” I tell her.

“Will that be together or separate?”

“Together,” Ryder growls, making Abby jump a bit.

She scurries off, and Ryder gets up. Pulling two twenty-dollar bills from his pocket, he throws them on the table and starts walking out. I get out of the booth and follow him like the lost puppy I am.

“Now that you've eaten, do you know where to go next?”

“Today is Sunday,” he says, like I should know what that means. “Day of rest,” he explains.

We pull out of the parking lot and head back on the highway. I don't know where we are going, but we are heading away from town.

Still exhausted from last night, I get comfortable and doze off a little.

A while later, I am jolted awake when the truck comes to a stop. Disoriented, I look around. We're at another hotel, but this one is the exact opposite of the one we stayed in last night. It's nice, really nice.

“What are we doing here?”

“Relaxing,” Ryder explains, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. “Wait here, I'll get us a room.” He gets out of the truck, then pauses. “Actually, just come with me now.”

“Okay.” I climb out of the cab, glad he is not leaving me alone. Even if it's just for a few minutes, I'd rather be with him.

Together we walk into the fancy lobby, looking completely underdressed and out of place. The receptionist is in a suit, for Christ's sake. I'm certain he is going to tell us to leave because we can't afford to stay here, or at the very least, that there are no vacancies.

To my utter shock, he greets us with a bright smile, not glancing twice at our appearance.

“Welcome to the Grand Levine. Do you have a reservation with us?”

“No, I would like a room for tonight. Well, actually today and tonight. I know it’s early, so if you need to charge me for two nights, that will be fine,” Ryder explains.

“Regular check-in is at two o’clock, but you can get a room with early check-in. That would only be \$100 extra, no need to pay for a full night.”

“Sounds good.”

“I have a lovely suite, facing the atrium available for \$429 a night, not including breakfast.” He probably thinks we’re going to leave now, but Ryder simply pulls out his credit card and driver’s license and hands it to him. If the receptionist is surprised, he hides it well.

He hands us our room key a moment later, and we head to the elevators. As we walk through the hotel, I’m in awe of how beautiful the place is: high ceilings, shiny marble floors, and light paisley wallpaper covering the walls.

The room is just as fancy as I imagined it to be. Larger than any bedroom I’ve ever been in, it looks like something out of a home décor magazine. There is a king-sized bed in the center, covered by at least eight neatly stacked pillows. On the wall in front of it is a huge flatscreen television.

Ryder takes his shoes off and flops down onto the bed with the remote in hand. “Come on, get comfy.” He pats the spot next to him.

I grab one of the complimentary bottles of water next to the expensive-looking coffee machine and join Ryder on the bed.

He turns on the TV and starts flipping through the channels, leaving it at an action movie.

This is so weird.

Lying in bed with Ryder and watching a movie is so... normal. And that’s not something we often do. I almost ask him if he likes this, if he wants to have this between us all the time, but then I remember how it went last time I

ask him a question like that. So, I decide to bite my tongue and enjoy the moment.

Enjoy this while it lasts.

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RYDER

I got up before sunrise, leaving Penny asleep in the hotel room. I used the hotel gym before heading to the closest Walmart and buying us some new clothes.

I'd left her a note so she wouldn't freak out when she woke up. It's after eight by the time I get back, but she is still sleeping like a baby when I enter the room.

Curled up in the center of the immense bed, surrounded by fluffy pillows and crisp white sheets, she looks small and innocent.

She doesn't wake up when I dump out all the stuff I bought. I get dressed and lay her stuff out on the bed. Only when I brew a coffee with the in-room coffeemaker does she stir.

Sitting up, she rubs her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Hi." She yawns, taking my newly dressed form in. "Did you leave?"

"Yeah, got you some clothes too. Put this on," I point to the bathing suit. The hotel has a pool. I wanna go for a swim before we pick up Mojo from the vet."

She blinks rapidly, then looks down at the stuff I bought her. "Thank you. Is Mojo going to be okay? I mean, where are we taking him?"

If that isn't the big question. I thought about it all night and all morning. A hundred different scenarios running through my mind, but none of them

make sense. None of them feel right... *except for one.*

“I have some money saved up. I think we should go away for a bit.”

“Away?”

“Yeah, like leave town. Actually, leave the state. Lie low for a bit, until Tucker comes out of hiding.” *Or longer*, I add in my head. “It’s off-season right now, so cabins in the mountains are cheap and rent by weeks or month. Mojo is gonna love it too. Once he is all healed up, we can go on hikes every day.”

“Wow, you really thought this through.” She studies me for a moment. “What if I don’t want to go?” I can’t hide my smirk at her question.

“Oh, little owl. What did I tell you? Don’t mistake my kindness. Don’t think we’re equals. What I say goes, and if I want your ass in a cabin up in the mountains, then your ass will be there. Now, get out of bed and put the fucking bathing suit on.”

Frowning, she gets up and starts dressing. With my arms crossed in front of my chest, I lean against the wall, and I watch her. She slips into the bathing suit, which fits great. The dress I got her to wear over it, not so much. It’s baggy, and the straps fall off her shoulders, but it’ll do for today.

I lead her through the hotel. She clutches one of the large towels in front of her chest as she takes in every inch of this place with wonder, like a kid in a toy store for the first time in their life.

When we get to the pool, I’m glad to find it empty. After I take my shirt and shoes off, I stand on the edge of the pool. I jump in headfirst, diving under the water, and swim to the other side of the pool before I resurface.

Penny is still dressed, folding her towel neatly over a chair.

“Take the dress off and get in here,” I order.

She murmurs something I can’t hear over the water pumping into the filter, but I’m sure it’s something like *fine*, or *I know*. She makes quick work of her dress and flip flops before getting into the pool. She doesn’t jump in; instead, she walks into the shallow side of the pool slowly.

I'm right in the center of the pool when I lift my hand and motion for her to come closer.

"You know it won't always be like this," she tells me as she approaches.

"Like what?"

"Me taking orders, letting you push me around. At some point, I'll have enough, and I'll get away for good. I've done it before."

Anger surges through me like a tornado. Not because she is threatening me to leave, but she is comparing me with Thomas. With two large strides, I cross the distance between us. The water slows my movement down, but not enough for her to get away from me.

I wrap my hand around her throat. She gasps, her eyes go wide, and her hands wrap around my wrist. I walk her backward until her back is pushed up against the side of the pool.

"Do not compare me to him. I am nothing like him. I would never hurt you like that."

I can feel her throat work under my touch as she swallows. "I know that, but you hurt me in other ways."

"Shut up, you like what I do to you. Even when I'm rough with you, you come, so don't fucking lie." I'd never push her too far. I always make sure she enjoys it too.

"No." She shakes her head. "That's not what I mean. You don't hurt me when we have sex. It's just... I don't know what this is between us. You don't talk to me. Every time I think we're getting close, you push me away."

"What do you expect? How do you want me to act? Like fucking prince charming?" I squeeze my hand around her throat before I release her completely. "This is who I am." I jab my finger into my chest. "And that's not going to change."

"I'm not asking you to change. I'm asking you to let me in."

"That's not going to happen either. I could never trust you again."

Her face contours into pain, like the words physically hurt her. Part of me wants to wrap her into my arms and tell her I don't mean it. Instead, I hold on to that last bit of pain. I have to because if I don't, I won't survive letting her go when this is over.



WE'RE on our way to pick up Mojo. I have Penny in the truck, and together we're about to go on an extended vacation.

I should be in a great mood. But I am definitely not.

I let what Penny said earlier replay in my mind. She wants me to let her in and not push her away. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know how. This will never work. Not in the long run anyway. She'll come to realize that soon enough.

"I think you just passed it," Penny's voice drags me out of my daydream. "There was a vet on the right."

"Shit, yeah." I make a U-turn and pull into the vet's parking lot a few minutes later.

Penny gets out with me, and together we walk into the vet's clinic Mojo has been at for the last few days. I pay the lady at the front, and she has someone else go get my dog from the kennel in the back.

When the guy walks my 150lb Rottweiler into the lobby, I smile. Mojo looks like shit, groggy as hell, and there is a good-sized shaved spot on his side. The scar still looks angry and red, but when he sees me, he perks up a little.

"Hey, bud." I get down on one knee and run my hands through his fur, giving him a good behind the ear rub. He nuzzles his face into my chest, just as I see Penny kneeling down next to us.

Her small hand reaches out and pets him between the shoulder blades. He waddles closer to her and goes to lick her face with his slobbery tongue.

"We took the stitches out and left the cone off. He hasn't messed with the incision so far, but if he does, he'll have to wear the cone again."

“Got it.” I nod as I stand back up, and the guy hands me Mojo’s leash.

As soon as we walk out through the front door, I see him.

Maddox is sitting on his bike, parked right next to my truck. *Fuck!*

“Get in the back seat with Mojo,” I tell Penny.

When I glance over at her, I see her face has gone pale, and her shoulders are slouched, almost like she is trying to make herself smaller... invisible.

“It’s going to be okay, just do as I say,” I tell her. She moves closer to me and slows her walk, so she is positioned a little behind me as we approach my friend.

Opening the back door, Penny scurries inside, then I lift Mojo onto the backseat as well.

“How the hell did you know when I was coming?” I ask after I shut the door. I’m not really mad at him, but I am annoyed that he is here. I shut down my phone for a reason.

“Called them this morning, asking when I was supposed to pick up Mojo.”

“Of course, you did. Look, I know this is not how it’s done, but I’m leaving town for a few weeks—”

“I know where Tucker is,” Maddox interject.

“Where?”

“If I tell you, what are you going to do with him?”

“You know what I’ll do. He deserves to die.” I lower my voice a little at the last part. Don’t need someone passing by overhearing me.

“He does.” Maddox nods. “And then what? Are you still going to *leave town for a few weeks?*”

“If Tucker is taken care of, there won’t be a reason for me to leave.”

“What about her?” He points at the cab of the truck.

“I’ll send her back home.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” I repeat.

Maddox studies me for a few moments before continuing, “Come stay at my house. Mojo and your girl will be safe there. We’ll take care of Tucker. Just you and me, like old times.”

“I don’t know.” I look down at the ground. “Penny doesn’t like you.”

“Most people don’t like me.” Maddox chuckles.

“That’s fair.”

“Come on. You have my word. She’ll be safe at my place.”

“Fine. We’ll stay with you.” I nod. Penny might not trust him, but I do. He gave me his word, and he’s never broken it before; he better not now.

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PENNY

Even before Ryder climbs back into the truck, I know our plans are about to change. I can't hear what they are saying, but I can read enough of their body language to know that Maddox is asking Ryder something. Ryder disagrees at first, but then his shoulders slump down in defeat as he nods slightly.

Mojo's heavy head is lying on my lap. I run my fingers through his soft fur, letting it calm my nerves a little.

Ryder opens the door and gets into the driver's seat while Maddox's bike roars to life beside us. Even after Ryder closes his door, the motorcycle is so loud, I can feel the vibration come off it. Or maybe that's just me shaking in fear.

"He found Tucker, and we're going to stay with Maddox tonight. You'll be safe there."

"That's what you said when you took me to the club too."

"And? Did someone hurt you at the club?"

"Well, no, but..." *Your friends almost raped me.*

"But nothing. I kept you safe like I said I would." He turns on the truck and pulls out of the parking lot.

"Okay," I agree. It's not like he is going to change his mind anyway.

We drive for much longer than I expected. I figured Maddox would live close to the club, like Ryder, but he actually lives about an hour away.

“He doesn’t come here much. He stays at the club most days,” Ryder answers one of my unspoken questions as we are driving down a long and winding driveway.

I haven’t seen another house in about five minutes, which means he has no neighbors. I’m sure him being secluded is by design.

As we get closer to the house, the attached garage opens, and Maddox pulls his bike inside. Ryder parks his truck in front of the garage and kills the engine.

My mind is whirling as I look up at the two-story house that looks like a large family lives here. I wonder if he lives here on his own? From what little I know about Maddox, he is a loner. I doubt he has a girlfriend or anyone else living with him.

I’m so lost in thought I flinch when the back door opens.

Ryder lifts Mojo out of the truck, and I slide out of the seat behind him. When I get out, Maddox is standing next to the truck, his arms crossed in front of his broad chest.

“Relax, I gave Ryder my word to leave you alone,” he tells me, his tone letting me know he is anything but happy about it.

I simply nod and follow Ryder inside the house, through the garage. Mojo is still walking sluggishly, and I’m sure he is going to pass out as soon as he gets a chance to lie down somewhere.

The inside of the house is surprisingly cozy. We enter the kitchen first. White, weathered cabinets wrap around the corner, and a large kitchen isle, with pots and pans hanging from the ceiling above it, sits in the center of the room. Ruffled sunflower curtains hang over the window above a deep double sink, giving it a country house flair.

Pictures cover the wall of the staircase—a family with three young children, and I wonder if this is actually Maddox’s house.

The living room is just as nice as the rest of the house. A large sofa is sitting in front of a brick fireplace, a TV hanging above the mantle.

“Just put Mojo on the couch,” Maddox says, reminding me he is right behind me.

“Sit down and stay with him,” Ryder tells me when he gets Mojo settles.

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I walk around the couch and sit down, cuddling up to Mojo carefully.

The guys disappear into another room, but I know they are not far because I can hear their muffled voices. Awkwardly, I sit on the couch and wait for them to be done with their private conversation.

When they return, they look just as pissed off as they were before. I'd hoped maybe talking it out would resolve whatever they are fighting about. Apparently not.

“We're going to leave you here for a bit,” Ryder announces. “We're going to take care of Tucker... after, I'll take you back to your place, and you'll forget the last few weeks ever happened.”

His words shouldn't hurt me this way, but they do. They cut so deep I feel like my heart is bleeding. Not only is he sending me away, but he also wants me to forget. I should be glad, I should be relieved that he is giving me an out, a way to start my life the right way, but my stupid heart is not letting me.

Tears prick my eyes, but I force them away. I'll have plenty of time to cry later in private.

“That should knock him out for a while,” Ryder says as he gives Mojo a pill wrapped in cheese. “You can go upstairs to the guest room.”

“I'd rather stay here with Mojo,” I tell him, my voice shaky from unshed tears and a million emotions swirling around in my core.

“Suit yourself,” Maddox joins our conversation. “There is food in the fridge.”

I assume he means to tell me I can eat something without saying the actual words.

“We’ll be back in a few hours,” Ryder gives me a look that says, don’t do anything stupid.

“Okay.” I nod and watch them disappear through the front door. I cry as soon as the lock clicks in place. Ryder walking out the door without looking back is too much of a representation of what he is doing to me.

Silently, I let the tears fall freely and take comfort in the warmth Mojo’s large body gives me.

Mojo falls into a deep sleep not long after they leave. I keep petting him long after he is out, just enjoying the way his fur feels between my fingers.

When I can’t sit still any longer, I get up and walk around the room for a bit. I feel weird being here, especially on my own. That doesn’t stop me from snooping around just a little.

I inspect the picture hanging up on the wall. Close up, I realize the children are two boys and one girl. They seem all close in age, maybe each a year apart. Both parents look happy and in love.

The first few pictures are taken when the children must have been in elementary school. As I get further down the hall, the kids get older until they are some at high school graduation. That’s when I recognize him for the first time.

He looks like a different person without the tattoos, beard, and constant angry frown on his face, but I’m certain this is Maddox. I can’t help but wonder how he changed so much. What happened to him? What happened to his family?

With those questions still nagging me, my stomach growls, matching the sound of Mojo’s soft snoring coming from the couch. I walk into the kitchen, deciding to hunt down something to eat.

Even though Maddox said there was food, when I open the fridge, I find it almost empty. Like a typical guy, Maddox has more beer and condiments than actual food. I do discover some cheese and sandwich meat hiding behind the six-pack.

I rummage through the cabinets for bread but give up my search quickly. Getting out a plate, I put some cheese and ham on it. The smell of the meat fills my nostrils, and a wave of nausea overcomes me.

My hunger suddenly turns into my stomach churning, and I dry heave. *What the hell?*

Running over to the sink, I grab the counter on each side and let my head hang. Closing my eyes, I take some deep breaths through my nose until the queasiness subsides.

More tears spill from my eyes and over my face. I don't have to be a genius to know what this is. Our constant sex without a condom caught up to us. I don't get my period regularly, so I couldn't go by that alone, but being nauseated on top of that is a clear sign.

"You better get the morning-after pill then. Because I'm not taking care of some brat," Ryder's words run through my mind. Me being pregnant will change nothing. He is still going to send me away...still going to leave me.

How am I going to take care of a baby? I can hardly take care of myself.

The moment the thought of abortion enters my mind, I push it out. I could never go through with it. No matter how hard it will be, I could never do it... *never.*

Ripping a piece of paper towel off, I dry my eyes and grab my plate. That's when I hear something breaking. A glass, or a vase, maybe. I run into the living room, sure Mojo must have stirred and knocked something down, but when I get to the couch, Mojo is still out. I don't think he has moved at all, and there is nothing broken in the room either.

Am I imagining things?

Holding my breath, I stay still and completely quiet, listening for any sound. There is nothing but silence for a long moment. Then I hear something move... right behind me.

I don't have time to turn. Someone slams into my back. Two arms coming around my body, caging me in.

“Hello, little pet.” Tucker chuckles into the shell of my ear. “It’s finally just the two of us. We’re going to have so much fun together.”

No! I’m screaming in my head. I can’t let this happen.

My heart sinks, and my blood runs cold in my veins as Tucker turns me in his arms, so I come face to face with him. His eyes are crazed, more of those of a wild animal than a man.

His lip curls up into a malicious smirk, as if he is thinking about all the violent things he is going to do to me.

I shove against his chest in a feeble attempt to get away, but he just chuckles and throws me over his shoulder like I’m a sack of potatoes and carries me away. I know I shouldn’t fight, I know it will only make it worse, but I have to try to get away. I have to because it might not only be me I have to protect. If I am really pregnant, I owe it to that life growing inside of me to fight for us.

I bang my fists against his back and move my knees to free myself, but he only holds me tighter.

“Keep fighting, that gets my dick even harder.” He slaps my ass and laughs.

When we’re outside, I hear him opening a car. He throws me into a trunk. Literally throws me. My back landing harshly against the bottom of the trunk, knocking the wind out of me. Before I can regain my bearings, he shuts the trunk, trapping me inside and plunging me into darkness.

I bang, kick, and scream the entire drive, hoping that someone might hear me. I don’t know how long we’re driving, but it feels like an eternity. With every bump, my body is bouncing over the unforgiving trunk floor.

When the car finally comes to a stop, my throat is sore from screaming, and my hands hurt from beating against the metal.

Tucker opens the trunk, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut, the sudden light blinding me. I swing my fists blindly, kicking my legs out while yelling for help at the top of my lungs.

His fist comes out of nowhere, hitting me on the side of my face. My head snaps back, and my vision goes black for a moment.

“Shut up. You’re hurting my fucking ears,” Tucker growls.

He lifts me and throws me back over his shoulder. I lose consciousness for a moment, and when I come to again, we are inside. Disoriented, I look around. We’re in some kind of abandoned building, a storefront judging by the empty shelving on each wall.

We walk into some kind of backroom, where tucker puts me down on a mattress. As soon as he has me on my back, he puts his knee on my chest, digging it into my diaphragm.

“Don’t move.” He grabs something from beside us, which I quickly realize are cable ties. “Give me your hands,” he orders. I do it because I’m already gasping for air. If he puts any more weight on my chest, I won’t be able to breathe at all.

He ties my hands together first, then my ankles, leaving me completely at his mercy. That fact becomes more apparent when he pulls a knife from his boot.

“We’re going to have so much fun.” He smiles maliciously. His eyes are dark, his pupils so dilated they drown out the surrounding green. The hateful look on his face has only one word coming to mind.

Evil.

RYDER

The entire house smells of mold, dust, and something dead. Some rats must have starved to death in this place.

With my gun securely nestled in my palm, I make my way through the house with Maddox by my side. It's completely quiet, a little too quiet, and it was suspiciously easy to get in here.

I glance over at Maddox, and without saying a word, I know he is having the same thoughts, which only intensifies the bad feeling in my gut. Something is off, and I don't like it.

"I don't think he is here," Maddox says when we clear the second floor, anger lacing his voice.

"Who told you he was?"

"Buck. He said he was sure too," Maddox growls. My anger multiplies. Buck and Tucker are pretty close. "I didn't think he would betray us."

"I know." I nod, and I really do. I believe Maddox, and I didn't think Buck would have betrayed us either. Not knowing what that would mean. Buck just signed his death certificate.

"The question is, why did he send us here?"

"Let's get out of here before this place blows up," I half-joke. Why else would he lead us here? Just to show that he can fuck with us? I wouldn't put either past him.

Not wasting any time, we move out quickly and get back to the car.

“Fuck,” Maddox punches the steering wheel. “Fucking prick.”

“Let’s go back to your place and figure something out from there.” I try to calm him down while there is a storm raging inside of me as well. “We’ll get him.”

Just as Maddox cranks the car, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I get it out and look at the screen.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me?” I growl. “It’s him.”

I answer the video call, my thumb swiping over the screen so hard it might crack. The video comes on, and I freeze. My heart stops, and terror settles deep in my bones.

“Hello, old friend,” Tucker greets, looking amused with himself. He has the camera angled from above him. He is sitting on the floor, and behind him is Penny. She is lying on her side, her hands and feet tied together, leaving her even more helpless than she already is. The side of her face is swollen, and her eyes are red from crying.

“You’re a dead man,” I grit through my teeth, just as Penny raises her gaze to the phone. The moment our eyes meet through the screen, my chest aches. There is a distinct pain that only she could ever make me feel. It’s a mixture of longing, sadness, and lost hope.

Knowing that I never told her the truth is eating me up inside. I should have told her I forgave her. She doesn’t have to carry that guilt any longer. I should have told her she was safe here instead of toying with her. I should have done a lot of things, but it’s all too little, too late now.

“Am I? I feel like I’ve got a lot of leverage here, and I’m not just talking about your little sex slave here. See, there are some guys in the club who are sticking by my side. They are tired of your bullshit, Ryder, putting some slut before your brothers.”

“You’re lying,” Maddox growls.

“How do you think I got Buck to send you to that house? Are you really that stupid that you can’t see when your men are turning against you?”

“What do you want, Tucker?” I ask him.

“I want you to leave the club. I’m taking your spot. The guys are okay with Maddox being president, but they want you gone.”

“You know there is only one way out of the club,” Maddox answers.

“I guess death for you it is.” Tucker shrugs. “Look, we can do it the easy way or the hard way. Maddox can kill you now where you stand. Quick and easy. I’ll even untie your pet and let her go. Then everything goes back to normal... well, almost. I’ll be VP.”

“Fuck you,” Maddox roars, trying to snatch the phone from me.

“Let her go first. Untie her. I want to see her walk away, then I’ll do it.”

“You think I’m stupid? No deal. Do it now, or I’ll take my frustration out on her.”

Maddox lunges for me, and this time he is able to grab the phone from my hand. “No!” I yell, but he’s already disconnected the call. My mind goes blank, and I throw punches. “You fucking asshole!”

“Calm down!” Maddox yells back at me, his fist connecting with my ribs. “Listen to me.”

I don’t. I keep hitting him as hard as I can, not caring what the fuck he has to say.

“I know where he is!”

My fist freezes in midair. “What?”

“I know where he is,” Maddox repeats. “I recognize the fucking wallpaper.”

The fucking wallpaper?

I look at him dumbfounded. “Why didn’t you lead with that? Where the fuck are they?”

“Tucker’s old man used to have a convenience store on the corner of Main and Bristol Street. It went bankrupt years ago. I used to joke it was probably the ugly ass wallpaper.”

“Shit, that’s an hour away from here... but only ten minutes from the club. Call the guys, Maddox.” I stare my friend down, urging him to pick up the fucking phone.

“Ryder...” There is a tone in his voice I haven’t heard in so many years, I can’t recall the last time it was. Uncertainty. Maddox, the president of the MC, who is always so sure of himself, hesitates. “What if Tucker was telling the truth? If there are guys against you, this will only make it worse.”

“He is fucking lying, and you know it. Maybe Buck is in on it, but that’s it. No one else would go against us.”

Maddox contemplates my words for another moment before unlocking his phone. “If I do this. If I involve the club to rescue your girl, then I need you to promise me something.”

“Promise you what?” I’m almost scared to ask.

“That this will be over after. You send her away, and that’s the very last time I see and hear about her.”

“Deal,” I say without thinking. We don’t have time for a fucking discussion. I’d agree to anything right now, no matter how much I don’t want to do it.

Maddox calls the club as we are speeding down the road. He puts the phone on speaker and explains what’s happened.

“Maddox, I swear Tucker was lying.” Trick’s voice comes through the car’s speaker. “None of us would go against you or Ryder. That fucker is trying to play you. We got your back all the way.”

I look over at Maddox, who is nodding and giving me the look that says, you’re lucky.

“Yeah, Prez,” Bear comes onto the line. “We didn’t know, and none of us would have been okay with this shit. Tucker is a dead man.”

“Buck is here now; what do you want us to do with him?” Tucker asks.

“Put his ass in the cell, and I need at least five guys to this location,” he tells him the address and gives him all the detail they need. “Get Tucker, but don’t kill him yet. We’ll do that slowly later... and don’t hurt the girl. Just keep her there until we get there. We’re on our way now.”

“Done and done,” Trick’s deep voice agrees through the speaker before the line goes dead.

Sighing in relief, I say, “I told you—”

“Shut up and tell me you understand what I’m asking you to do?” Maddox interrupts.

“Cut her loose. I got it.” I huff, annoyance lacing my voice. “It was my fucking plan all along.”

“Sure it was,” Maddox quips.

It was my plan; I just never knew if I could go through with it.

Now, I don’t have a choice.

PENNY

Dizziness overcomes me, but I force myself to stay awake. My vision is blurry from all the tears, but I still keep my eyes wide open.

Tucker is kneeling next to me; using the knife in his hand, he slowly brings it to my throat and dips it under my shirt. Then cuts the fabric down the center. The cold blade grazes along my skin, and I'm scared if I look down, I'll find blood.

My entire body is shaking, my teeth rattling together in fear. I always thought there would come a time when I'd get used to this kind of fear, the pain, and the suffering, but I never did. The agony never lessens, the terror only growing with each experience.

Maybe it's because every time I feel like this, I'm scared for my life. I fear that he is going to take it too far and kill me. Maybe today I'll die.

"Are you cold, pet? Don't worry. I'll warm you up here in a minute." He gives me a salacious grin.

He stops between my breasts and slides the knife under my bra. In one slice, he cuts it, and my bra opens, leaving my chest exposed.

"Nice tits," Tucker says in approval. "A little small, but they'll do. Plus, I'm more concerned about your pussy being tight." He roughly cups one of my breasts and pinches the nipple.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I muffle a scream and pull on my restraints. I try to roll away from him, my body jerking away like his hand is a branding iron. It might as well be. Every time he touches my skin, I feel like I will forever be tainted by him, like a curse, I won't be able to shake.

"I'm going to enjoy fucking you. I hope you'll scream for me every second."

He picks the knife back up and continues to cut down my shirt. When the blade runs over my stomach, I panic even more. It must be my manic state that has me opening my mouth because I know better than to talk back. That's only going to anger him further, make the punishment more severe.

"Why are you doing this? Can't you find a woman who will willingly sleep with you?"

"Of course I can, but where is the fun in that? I like when they fight me. You're gonna fight me too, aren't you? Or you going to take my cock willingly? Tell me, did you fight Ryder?"

At the mention of Ryder's name, my heart squeezes in my chest as if an invisible hand clasps onto the beating organ behind my ribcage.

"Tell me!" he yells, spit flying and landing on my skin as the blade digs into the tender flesh above my belly button.

"No," I whimper.

"No? Why? You liked him fucking you?" He pulls the blade away and looks at the blood coating it now. My blood, I realize.

"Yes," I blurt out, not wanting to lie.

"You did," he laughs, "of course, you did. You're nothing but a whore, after all. That's what Ryder likes, you know? Whores, like you. Surprisingly, they like him too. Everyone loves Ryder, the fucking golden boy who can't do wrong." Tucker talks with such venom in his voice, the hatred for Ryder can't be missed.

"Why do you hate Ryder so much?" I ask, trying to keep him talking.

"Why? Because he has everything, and I have nothing. Everyone loves him. Everyone wants him. Even his fucking dog is loyal. You know what my dog

did? Pissed on my boots.” Tucker laughs humorlessly. “It’s always Ryder, all about Ryder. What about me, huh?”

“I-I don’t know.” I shake my head, not knowing what I could say to calm him down.

“I’ll just have to take everything that’s his, starting with you. You should have just sucked my dick and taken the money when you had the chance. Now you’re going to get every hole in your body fucked, and you’re going to do it all for free.”

“Please, don’t,” I beg, but that just seems to egg him on further. I see his dark worn jeans bulging in the front, letting me know how aroused he is.

“Begging turns me on just as much.” He reaches for his zipper, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

Just when I lose all hope to get out of here, I hear a loud bang coming from the front of the building. My eyes fly open just in time to see Tucker get up and spin around. He reaches behind him to grab the gun tucked in his waistband, but before he can lift it in the air, five men storm into the room. Three of them are pointing their own guns at him.

“Drop it,” one guy orders. I recognize two of them from the bar. They are Ryder’s friends. Did he send them?

“Listen, Trick, this is all a misunderstanding,” Tucker tries to play it off. “She came to me. She got tired of Ryder and wants me to fuck her.”

Trick looks past him and down to where I’m lying on the mattress. All I can do is shake my head profusely, hoping he believes me.

“She doesn’t look like she is enjoying it much.” Trick tilts his head and raises an eyebrow.

“She likes to be tied up, you know how some whores are. They like it rough.”

“I don’t know what’s more disturbing; how easily you lie to our faces or what kind of sick fuck you are that you get off on shit like this,” someone else says.

“Look, guys...” Tucker takes a step toward his friends but is quickly cut off.

“Drop your fucking gun, or I’ll shoot your dick right off,” Trick warns, pointing his gun at Tucker’s crotch, who immediately lets his gun fall to the ground. It lands with a thud only feet away from me.

Trick and the guy next to him move closer while the other three block the exit. Tucker makes a feeble attempt to run, but he is swiftly stopped and shoved to the ground. I watch as he is hogtied with the rest of the cable ties on the ground.

Only when he is completely immobilized does Trick come and kneel next to me. That’s when I realize that my shirt and bra are open, and everyone can see my breasts. He pulls a knife from his boot, and my heart stops. He is going to kill me, after all.

Trick must see my thoughts written all over my face because he gives me a lopsided grin. “Calm down, just cutting your restraints,” he assures me. “Tucker won’t hurt you anymore, and the boss said not to harm you. Maddox and Ryder are on their way. So, just sit tight.”

He cuts through the cable ties around my wrist and ankles. As soon as my limbs are free, I sit up and pull my knees to my chest.

Looking up, I find five pairs of eyes watching me curiously. After a moment, they all look away and start talking between themselves. I should probably listen in to make sure they are really not going to hurt me, but I’m too consumed with what Trick just told me...

Ryder is coming.

RYDER

*M*addox drives about thirty over the speed limit the entire way, but I still feel like it's not enough. Trick sends a text when we're about halfway there.

Trick: Got Tucker. The girl is fine.

His words don't ease my worry. *Fine* could mean a lot of things. It doesn't mean she is unharmed. It just means she is alive.

Me: Stay put. We'll be there in twenty.

We ride the rest of the way in silence. It isn't until we are parked in front of the rundown convenience store that Maddox opens his mouth again.

"Remember what you've promised. I need you to go through with it. End this."

"I will." I nod. I know what I have to do, not only for the club's sake.

We walk through the kicked in front door, and I can already hear the voices of our brothers coming from the back room. I force myself not to run back there, pacing my steps instead.

I enter the room, and my eyes fall onto Penny. She is sitting on a mattress in the center of the space. Her legs are drawn up to her chest, and her arms are wrapped tightly around her knees. She looks so small and helpless right now.

Trick, Bradley, and three more guys are standing around her while Tucker is hogtied on the floor a few feet away.

“Let’s take this piece of shit back to the club,” Maddox orders. “We’ll have a nice room available for you in the basement.”

The guys chuckle, knowing exactly which room that is, one we reserve for special occasions when someone is going to die very slowly and very painfully.

“Ryder, you go take care of her. We’ll wait for you to start,” Maddox glances over at me and hands me his keys. I take them, and I give him a nod.

Walking over to Penny, I lean down and pull her up by her arms. “Come on.” When I pull her arms from her body, I realize her shirt and bra are cut away, and she is flashing her tits to the entire room. Fuck! I have to swallow a possessive growl.

To my relief, her dainty arms come up, and she crosses them over her chest. Once she is covered, I snake my arm around her back and lead her to the front door. Her body is stiff, and her knees seem weak, so I hold on to her as we walk outside.

I put her in Maddox’s car and take in her disheveled clothes. She is still wearing her pants, but I can’t be sure that she was when the guys got there. I should ask her how far it went, but I’m too scared of the answer. If she tells me he fucked her, I will lose it.

I know that makes me a pussy, but I just can’t handle this right now without losing it. I’d rather torture it out of Tucker later. That way, I can let him feel my hate right away.

“Take that off,” I order, pointing at her shredded clothes. She doesn’t make a move until I pull my hoody off and hand it to her. She quickly strips out of her tattered shirt and slips into my sweatshirt.

“Where are we going?” she asks when I start the car.

“I’m taking you home, and this time, you’re going to stay there.”

“Home,” she says the single word almost like a question as if she is unsure where home really is for her.

“I’m taking you to your parents’ house, and you will remain there. This...” I point between her and myself. “Whatever it is between us ends today.”

“But—”

“No buts,” I interrupt before she can get more than one word out. “It’s over. I don’t want to see or hear from you ever again. I want you out of my life for good. You’ve caused me enough trouble.”

I glance over at her. She still looks like she wants to say something, and that’s when I dig the knife a little deeper. “Just sit there and keep your mouth shut until we get to your house; your voice is getting on my nerves. I should have just sent you to the basement with Tucker and the guys.”

She flinches away from the words like they physically hurt her. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her turn away from me to look out of the window. I grip onto the steering wheel tightly, feeling the need to hold on to something... something to ground me and keep me from reaching for her.

She doesn’t say another word for the rest of the drive, and I keep having to tell myself that this is the best way. She’ll be safe now. She’ll have a normal life. She’ll be okay.

The real question is, will I?

PENNY

It's been three days, and I'm still curled up in my bed, crying my eyes out. He came for me, he saved me, but then he left me here. I should be glad it ended this way. Logically, this is the best-case scenario. I'm finally free from Tommy, and I don't have to worry about Tucker or anyone else coming after me.

My parents want me to stay with them. They are even taking out a loan to help me pay for college. I should be happy, but my heart hurts.

A gentle knock on my door has me sitting up in my bed.

"Penny, can I come in?" my mom's soft voice asks through the door.

No. "Sure," I croak, shocked by how raw my voice sounds. Using the sleeve of my sweater, I wipe the tears from my cheek, as if that would hide the fact that I've been crying all day.

The door creaks open, and my mom steps in, balancing a tray of food with one hand. "I brought you some lunch, sweetie."

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry." I flop back down on the bed, throwing my arm over my face. I hate the way she is looking at me. "Please, don't feel sorry for me. I'm fine."

"You're not fine, Penny, but you will be." I hear her set the tray down on my nightstand. "Just try to eat something. A few bites, at least."

“Okay,” I murmur into the crook of my elbow, knowing that’s a lie. I can’t get a single bite down. Even thinking about food has my stomach churning.

I listen to my mother leave the room, closing the door quietly behind her. I still haven’t gotten a pregnancy test, but I know. I can feel it. I’m pregnant. I’m growing a child inside my womb, Ryder’s child. A man I love but can never have.

This is just another reason I should be happy. Ryder made it very clear he didn’t want a child. Even if I got a chance to talk to him, how would I tell him? He would hate me even more. Like he said, all I do is destroy his life.

A sob rips from my throat, one of many seemingly endless ones. There is nothing but dread, fear, and sadness left. I cry almost every day. My parents have begged me to talk to someone and even made me an appointment with a psychologist. I didn’t go.

I’m crying for so many reasons I’ve lost count. I’m crying for everything I’ve lost. I’m crying for the past and for all the uncertainties of the future.

Most of all, I cry for the child growing inside of me, knowing that I could never be the mother it deserves.

One Month Later

I DON’T KNOW who came up with the saying time heals all wounds. Whoever it was, they were wrong. It’s been a month now, and I still feel no better. Maybe even worse.

Two weeks ago, five grand magically appeared in my bank account. The transfer read tuition, which made my parents certain it had been from some grand I filled out, but I know better. Ryder sent it, probably because he felt sorry or guilty. Either reason made me feel like shit, like he paid me off.

Using my fork, I shovel the food on my plate around to make it look like I’m eating. I only take tiny bites of mash potato in between. I’ve been getting

better with eating, but I can only do small amounts at a time.

I don't know how much of this issue with food comes from my pregnancy and how much stems from my depression.

I've done a little research online about the first trimester. I know I should go to the doctor, but every time I think about it, I freeze. Going to the doctor would make this all real. I don't think I'm ready for that yet.

The ringing of the doorbell startles me to the point of me dropping my fork. My father's hand comes out of nowhere, covering my own gently.

"Just the doorbell, I'll get it."

"I wonder who that could be? It's almost seven," my mom points out as if seven o'clock is in the middle of the night.

"I think you might be at the wrong house, son," my father's deep voice carries through the house.

"This is the address I'm supposed to drop him off at. It's for Penny," someone says.

At the mention of my name, I perk up. Curiously, I get up from my chair and walk toward the voices. The front door is wide open when I turn the corner. I see the guy my father is talking to first.

I've never seen him before. He is young, about my age, with shaggy looking blond hair. He smiles at me when he sees me approach, but I can't muster up even a fake smile. Until my eyes lower to the floor.

"Mojo!" I call out and drop to my knees. He immediately breaks free from the guy holding his leash and runs toward me.

I wrap my arms around the Rottweiler I've missed so much. He licks my face and whines in excitement, his large body shaking in my hold. I dig my fingers into his thick fur like I've always done, and for the first time in over a month, I feel a jolt of happiness.

Burying my face in the crook of Mojo's neck, I hold on to him like I'm holding on to that spark of joy. He smells the same, feels the same, and his presence alone makes me content.

“So, I guess you are at the right house.” My dad chuckles.

“The guy who sent me told me he can’t take care of the dog anymore and that you would take him. I have a bunch of dog stuff in the car too. I’ll get it unless you can’t keep him either.”

“Yes!” I blurt out. We’ll keep him.” I look up and find my father staring at me with his eyebrows raised.

“We will?”

“Yes, please. He is a good dog, I promise.” I give him a hopeful look.

“Okay, then. We’ll keep him.”

The corners of my mouth turn up. I go back to cuddling Mojo, curling up on the floor with him in the middle of the hallway.

I don’t even care how weird I look right now. All I care about is having another part of Ryder here with me.

Two Months Later

RUBBING the growing bump on my stomach, I watch two expectant mothers chat across from me in the waiting room. They are talking about nursery colors and classical music to soothe newborns. They look so happy, so excited about having a baby soon. I haven’t felt either.

I have told no one about this pregnancy. I’ve been hiding my bump, and this is the first time I’m actually seeing a doctor, and watching those two chat is another reason I have been avoiding this.

Not only is being here making it real, but it’s also a stark reminder of everything that’s wrong with me. I shouldn’t be sad about having a child.

“Penny Jenkins,” a sing-song voice calls my name. I look up and find a nurse sticking her head into the waiting room. When our eyes meet, she smiles

widely. “Hey, Penny. Come on in, we don’t bite around here.”

Returning a tiny smile, I get up and follow her into an examination room. She takes my vitals and checks my weight before handing me a gown to put on.

“Leave it open in the front. The doctor will be right with you,” she tells me before leaving me alone in the room.

I take off my clothes and put on the gown as instructed. A few minutes later, a soft knock fills the small room, and a petite woman enters. She looks so young, I think she must be another nurse, but then she introduces herself.

“Hey, Penny, I’m Dr. Walden. It’s so nice to meet you,” she says so cheerfully it almost sounds fake, but the way she looks at me and takes my hand in between both of hers tells me she is not fake at all.

There is a kindness and warmth in her eyes that you rarely see. I instantly know that she genuinely loves her job. She loves helping people and bringing new life into this world.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you too.”

She takes a seat on the backless rolling stool and moves it right in front of me. “So, I looked over your charts. Your vitals are good, and it says here that you think you’re four months along, but you haven’t seen a doctor yet.”

“Um, yes, I haven’t seen anyone yet,” I admit shamefully. Looking down, I wring my hands in my lap.

“Oh, sweetie, that’s okay.” She reaches out and pats my leg. “The important part is that you are here now, and we’re going to take good care of you,” she tells me without an ounce of judgment in her voice.

I feel like a tremendous weight has been lifted off my shoulder, a weight I didn’t even realize was there. I figured the doctor would be mad, telling me how reckless I am not to take proper care of myself. I didn’t expect her to be so sweet and understanding.

She asks me a few more questions, and I answer each one honestly before she makes me lie back to examine me. When she is done with that, she finally rolls over the ultrasound machine. She squirts some cold gel on my belly and

spreads it out before bringing a wand looking thing to my skin.

The moment she touches my stomach, the ultrasound machine comes to life. The screen lights up with an array of green lines moving across, numbers are popping up along the bottom, and then I hear it.

The loud and even drumming of a steady heartbeat. My baby's heartbeat. The fast-moving rhythmic sound evokes feelings inside of me I wasn't sure were possible. A warmth spreads through my chest, slowly overshadowing the dread I've been holding on to.

I've avoided coming here because I didn't want it to be real, but now that it is, I feel more at ease than I have in a while.

I could listen to my baby's heartbeat forever, it's like my own personal lullaby. A calmness washes over me, and I close my eyes. I imagine holding my baby in my arms. I imagine its head pressed against my chest, listening to my heartbeat.

A single tear escapes the corner of my eye and rolls down my cheek. It's a happy tear because this is the moment I realize something. This is the moment I realize that I already love this baby. I love it more than I love anything in the world. More than myself, and no matter what, that love will be eternal.

RYDER

I look into the bottom of the glass, mad that it's empty again.
Where is the fucking bartender?

Wrapping my fingers tightly around the beer glass, I slam the thing onto the bar. It shatters in my hand, and pieces of glass fall onto the bar top. I look down at my hand and notice a shard is embedded in my palm. I pull it out and throw the piece of bloody glass on the floor.

It's so loud and busy in the bar that no one notices me. Maddox and the guys sit in the corner in our normal spot, but I don't sit with them unless I have to. I try not to, but I resent him for making me cut all ties with Penny. Even though I know it's for the best.

Coming to think of it, I don't do anything anymore unless I have to. Partying with the guys used to be my favorite pastime. Drinking, fucking, and working. Those three things used to be my life. Those things used to make me happy.

Now, I only have drinking left to bring me any kind of joy, and even that I hate now.

"Hey there, handsome," a female voice coos beside me.

I turn my head to look at her, realizing she is already standing so close I can smell her flowery perfume. She is looking at me with fuck me eyes and a pout on her full lips.

“What do you want?” I growl, hoping my rudeness will scare her away.

“Your friend said you could use some distraction, and I might be able to help you with that.” She bats her eyelashes at me and runs her tongue over her bottom lip.

“I’m busy,” I say, turning back to the shattered glass in front of me.

“Why don’t you let me suck your dick? Or you can fuck me however you want,” she coos into the shell of my ear. Her hand slides over my thigh, and for a second, I consider it.

I consider forgetting about Penny; consider fucking the woman next to me senseless.

Tilting my head, I look at her face. She is pretty, I think. Her features are getting blurrier by the second. I probably shouldn’t have taken those shots back to back before I drank that beer.

I drag my eyes over her body. Her tits are pushed up and barely contained by the top she is wearing. When I snap my gaze back up to hers, she gives me a triumphant grin.

“What do you say? Take me back to your room?”

And that’s when I snap out of it.

The thought of her in my bed—the bed I slept in with Penny—has reality crashing down on me. I can’t do this. I can’t sleep with anyone else.

“Go find some other dick to ride,” I sneer, angry with myself for even thinking about fucking this chick. Pushing off the barstool, I shove past her, ignoring her disappointed whine.

I head straight for the back door, wanting nothing more than to fall into my bed and sleep it off. Unfortunately, Maddox has other plans.

He steps right in my way and puts his hand on my chest.

“Where are you going? It’s not even midnight,” he slurs. “Did you not like the girl I sent over to you? She is your type, isn’t she?”

My type? Everything with a vagina used to be my type. Emphasis on *used to be*.

“I’m not in the mood. I’m going to bed,” I tell him while trying to push past him.

“Ryder, it’s been a month. You’ve got to get over this chick. The guys are calling you a pussy.”

“Let them say it to my face so we can see who the real pussy is.”

“There is my friend.” Maddox chuckles, and he finally gets out of my way. “Fine, go to bed, but tomorrow night, you party with me until the sun comes up.”

“We’ll see,” I tell him before walking back to my room. A room that has always been basically empty but never felt like it until now.

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PENNY

Four Month Later

No, no, no! This can't be happening.

"It's too early. I can't be in labor." I shake my head.

"Penny, your water just broke, and your contractions are coming closer together. The baby is coming," my mom tells me, her voice unbelievably calm.

How is she not freaking out right now?

"But it's too early." I try to make her understand. "This is my fault. I should have gone to the doctor sooner. I should have eaten better and drank more water."

"Penny, you did amazing. The baby is just ready to meet you early. It's no big deal. Everything is going to be fine," she assures me, but it doesn't calm me one bit.

Three weeks early is a big deal. The baby is not done developing. All kinds of things could happen, and it's all my fault.

Mojo nudges my leg with his giant head. I run my fingers through his fur and scratch behind his ear, but he just whines. He knows I'm stressed out, and that's stressing him out with me.

"Got the bag." My father leisurely walks down the stairs with the pre-packed bag in his hand.

Why am I the only one freaking out?

"How are you guys so calm?"

"Because we know everything is going to be fine." My mom wraps her arms around me and pulls me into a hug. I relax into her hold instantly. "Everything is going to be fine," she repeats, "and you are going to be an amazing mother."

I can only hope she is right. Please, let her be right.



LOOKING DOWN at the tiny baby in my arms, I can't wrap my mind around that she is mine.

I named her Gwendolyn, after Ryder's grandmother. I think he would like that, and I always loved the name. My mind brings me back to Ryder, and I wonder what he would think of having a child.

I've thought about contacting him so many times, but in the end, I could never bring myself to do it. It's going to be better like this, or at least that's what I keep telling myself.

Gwen coos and wiggles in my hold. Even though she decided to come early, she is perfectly healthy. Her small fingers wrap around my index finger with a firm grip.

I smile, just enjoying every moment. I could simply stare at her for hours and not only be entertained but content as well. I never knew I could feel such happiness.

A knock on the door pulls me out of my bubble of glee. I tear my eyes away from my daughter and look up at the door, expecting my parents to be back. Instead, I see someone I never expected to see again.

“Maddox?” I whisper, instinctively tucking Gwen closer to my chest.

“Calm down, mamma bear. I come in peace.” He chuckles and closes the door behind him.

“What do you want?”

“Just want to talk, that’s all.” He pulls the chair my mom sat on earlier closer to my bed and plops down on it.

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“That’s fair. Just listen then.” He leans back in the chair and stretches his arms out like he is getting comfortable. “I was the one who told Ryder to get rid of you... I mean, send you away. I thought I was doing the right thing. Hell, it still might be the right thing to cut ties, but this,” he points at Gwen, “changes everything.”

“*This* is a she, and she has a name,” I hiss at him, only making him snicker.

“Got it, she. Well, *she* changes things. Ryder would never forgive me if I kept this from him.”

“He doesn’t know yet?”

“No. I told him to cut all ties, and he did. However, I kept tabs on you, just in case you decided to talk to the cops after all. I figured Ryder was the father, but I wasn’t sure until you listed him on the birth certificate.”

Birth certificate?

“How did you...?”

“I have my ways,” Maddox explains, as he gets up from the chair. “I just wanted to tell you this before I give Ryder the green light to find you. What he does with that information is up to him. I honestly don’t know how he is going to react or what he is going to do. I guess we’ll find out soon.”

And with that, he walks out of the room. Leaving me shocked and more confused than ever.



IT'S BEEN a week since Gwen was born. The only reason I know is because I have her checkup at the Pediatrician's office this afternoon. It's hard to keep track of the days when you don't really sleep at night anymore.

My parents have offered to help me with nighttime feeding, but the truth is, I don't mind. I love taking care of her, even if my own sleep schedule suffers.

Plus, keeping myself busy makes me forget about Ryder. I waited for him to call or come by for the first few days but gave up on that quickly. He clearly doesn't want to have anything to do with us. The thought hurts, cutting me deeper than I'd like to admit. I'm upset not only for myself but for our daughter as well.

Shoving Ryder from my brain, I concentrate on the angel in my arms instead.

I'm sprawled out on the couch, my daughter cradled on my chest, when Mojo suddenly jumps up from beside me. He paces through the room, barking at something outside. What the heck? He's never acted like this before.

A moment later, the doorbell rings, which makes Mojo go even more crazy.

"What's going on, Mojo? It's probably just a delivery." I get up from the couch and head toward the front door. Holding Gwen with one arm, I open the door with the other.

I've barely got the handle turned when Mojo pushes through the door and jumps at the man in front of us.

Ryder.

"Calm down, Mojo," he tries to make him sit, but the dog is just too excited to see him.

After a moment, Ryder's eyes find mine, and a long silence stretches between us. All I can do is stand there and look at him, unsure what to say or do.

He is here... he is finally here, and he knows about Gwen.

Guilt and worry fester in my stomach. Is he going to be mad that I didn't tell him?

"Hey," he finally speaks. His gaze drops to the baby in my arms, and he sucks in an audible breath. Then his eyes snap back up, almost as if he is scared of looking at her.

"I came up with this whole speech in my head, but I think it's better if I just show you instead."

"Show me?"

"Yeah. Both of you, actually. If you have some time now, I could take you."

"Um." I chew on my bottom lip. I'm both excited and nervous. I want to go with him, but part of me worries about how safe we'll be. Then I realize that I can't go anyway. "My parents aren't here, and the car seat is in their car."

"I've got a car seat in the truck," he explains.

"You do?" I stare at him, dumbfounded.

"Yes, brand new. It's a good one with all the extra safety features and shit."

"Oh," I exhale, still astonished by Ryder being here. "I guess we could go. I just need to grab the diaper bag and put some shoes on... and get a fresh burp cloth." I mentally run through the list of stuff I need to take when I go anywhere now.

"You want me to hold her while you get everything?" His question has every thought floating around in my head scattering. "Only if you want to."

I glance down at Gwen, who blinks her eyes open and looks into the sky. The sunlight making her bright blue eyes shine even brighter. I've barely let go of her since she was born. Even my parents haven't held her much, but Ryder is her father. I can't refuse him to hold his child.

"Okay." I nod, taking a step toward him. "You just need to make sure her head is secure. She can't hold up her neck yet."

"Got it, let her head wobble around." He smirks.

I know he is only joking, but the anxiety in my gut only expands as I gently place her into his waiting arms.

He cradles her tiny body against his broad chest, her head securely placed in the crook of his arm. She seems so small in his hold, but something else too... protected. She looks like she belongs in his embrace.

Ryder gapes at Gwen in adoration, like she already has him wrapped around her little finger.

Slowly, my worries seep away as another feeling replaces them.

Love.

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RYDER

I'm fucked. I'm most definitely fucked. That's all I can think of as I take in the smallest baby I have ever seen. She is so tiny and fragile-looking. She weighs basically nothing in my arms, but I'm holding her like she is a diamond crusted brick of gold. Like she is the most precious thing in the world.

Her eyes are the palest blue, her skin has a rose hue, and her hair is nothing more than blonde fuzz that curls slightly at the end. All I can do is stare at her in awe.

She is perfect.

A little angel.

I can't believe she is mine.

One look at her, and I already know I would do anything for her. Anything to keep her safe, to make sure she is happy and has everything she could possibly want or need.

"I named her Gwendolyn," Penny's voice makes me look up, and I realize she hasn't moved yet. A moment later, the words she just said register. *Gwendolyn.*

"That was my grandma's name," I point out the obvious.

Penny gives me a small nod and smiles. "We call her Gwen."

“Gwen,” I repeat, trying out the name. “That fits her.”

“I’ll get my stuff,” Penny tells me, and I watch her from the door as she dashes through the house to grab everything she needs.

She slips on her shoes before hanging the diaper bag over her shoulder and comes to stand by me. Mojo hasn’t left me since I arrived and looks up at us with his head tilted to the side.

“You can come too,” I tell him, and he eagerly follows me.

Penny opens the back door, and under her watchful eyes, I carefully position Gwen into the already mounted car seat. I buckle her in like instructed by the manual and check her restraints three times.

When I’m done, I turn to Penny, who gawks at me like I grew a second head. She blinks a few times, almost like she is making sure this is real before she walks around the truck and climbs in.

Mojo jumps into the back and curls up next to the car seat. I get into the truck myself and start the engine.

“Why couldn’t you take care of Mojo anymore?” Penny asks as I pull into the road.

“I…” Briefly, I consider coming up with a lie, but I figure if I want this to work, I need to put all my cards on the table. “I just wanted you to have him. I knew he helped you with your anxiety, and I knew he kept you safe.”

“Really?” She sounds surprised.

“Yes, really. I can’t believe that’s the first question you ask me. Don’t you want to know where I’m taking you?”

“Where *are* you taking us?”

“You’ll see.” I smirk. “It’s only twenty minutes away.”

Penny sinks into the seat with a sigh. She looks tired. Happy and healthy, but tired. Quickly, her sweet feminine smell mixed with the powdery newborn scent fills the cab. I suck in a deep breath, enjoying the fragrance while hoping to be surrounded by it often in the future.

When I glance over at Penny to ask her if she gets a lot of sleep, I notice her dozing off. I guess that answers my question.

A few minutes later, I pull up to the house. Penny startles awake as I put the truck in park.

“Where are we?” Her question ends in a yawn.

“If I’m lucky, your new home,” I explain.

“What do you mean?” Penny’s eyes ping pong between me and the two-story family home I bought for her.

“Let me show you the inside,” I tell her nervously. Shit, I didn’t think I would be this tense, but my mind is reeling. What if she says no? What if she doesn’t want this?

Shaking those thoughts away, I get out of the truck. The car ride has put Gwen to sleep, so I unhook the car seat from its base and carry her like that.

I walk up to the front of the house and reach into my pocket to dig out the key I picked up this morning. Penny follows every step I take while looking around with wonder.

I unlock the door and push it open, ushering her inside. Mojo pushes past us and starts running through the house, sniffing every corner like he is making sure there is no danger inside.

The house is already furnished, ready to move in.

“I bought it from a family who moved overseas, so they sold it with all their shit inside. Their kids were older, though, so I had to redo the baby’s room. Do you want to see it?”

Penny’s mouth is hanging open when she nods her head. I think she is too shocked to get a single word out.

I lead her up the stairs and to the room, I hope our daughter will stay in. The walls were already pink, but I had to buy new furniture for the nursery. The white crib is pushed up against the wall, a star mobile hanging above it. A matching changing table and dresser are on the other side. But the best part of this room is the bay window surrounded by a bookshelf.

“Do you like it?” I ask hesitantly.

“It’s beautiful. I mean, who wouldn’t love it?” She looks around the room and runs her hand along the rails of the crib. “Ryder, what is all of this? Why did you buy this house?”

“I want you and Gwen to live here...with me. I bought this house for you, I mean, for us. I know I fucked up in the past. I know you don’t have a reason to trust me, but I want to make this right. I want you and Gwen in my life for good.”

“Wow.” She sighs deeply. “That’s a lot to take in.”

“I know. You don’t have to decide right now, and if you don’t want to live here with me, the house is still yours.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she admits.

When she turns back around to face me, I notice how pale she looks.

“Are you okay? You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I might.” She smiles. “I’ve barely slept the last week.” She rubs her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Come on then, you can lie down in here for a bit.” I walk her to the room next to the nursery. The master suite was one of the selling points of this house.

Penny groans when she sees the king-sized bed in the room. “I might sleep for a few days if I dare to lie down in that.”

“Better than passing out in the nursery. Come on, get in,” I order. “I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Demanding as always.” Penny rolls her eyes at me but slips out of her shoes and crawls into the bed.

Mojo trots into the room, sniffing around the car seat like he is making sure the baby is safe. When he seems satisfied, he finds a spot under the window to flop down.

I unbuckle Gwen and carefully get her out of the car seat, so I can put her in the center of the bed. Penny curls up next to her and closes her eyes. She goes to sleep almost immediately.

I take off my boots and climb into the bed slowly, so I don't wake either of them. I lie down but keep my head turned, so I can watch both of them.

For the first time since I left Penny, I feel at peace. I feel like I could have a happy life with them. We could be a family.

I just have to prove to Penny that I can do this. That I can love them the way they deserve, and that I deserve their love in return.

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EPILOGUE

Penny

One year later.

I can't believe this is really happening. A dream I've given up on dreaming years ago has finally come true. I'm enrolled in college as a full-time student. I could have started school a while ago, but I really wanted to spend all my time with Gwen. I didn't want to miss a single milestone during her first year.

I still have a little separation anxiety, but I know she is in excellent hands. She is a total Daddy's girl, after all.

"Dada!" She squeals and wiggles her way off the couch to walk over to Ryder. She only took her first steps two weeks ago, so her walk is more like a wobble.

"You ready to take Mommy to her classes?" Ryder bends down and picks up Gwen. She nods her head and throws her thin dainty arms around Ryder's thick neck.

Seeing her with him will never get old.

Ryder drives me to college, telling me about fifty times not to talk to any guys and to call him if anyone tries to hit on me. I agree and give him a kiss before climbing into the backseat to kiss Gwen.

“I’ll be here to pick you up after your last class,” Ryder calls after me just before I close the door. I wave him goodbye and watch as he pulls his truck away.

My first day is just as I always hoped it would be. My cheeks hurt from smiling, and I’m pretty sure the other people in class think I’m a weirdo for enjoying the lecture that much, but I don’t care. I’m just so happy.

It took quite some time and a lot of work, but everything has finally fallen into place.

I moved into the house Ryder bought me right away. He slept in the guest room at first, trying to give me some space, but that didn’t last long. He surprised the hell out of me in more than one way, and he keeps surprising me every day.

He is a great dad. From day one, he has been there for our daughter. Whether it was midnight feedings, diaper changes, or story reading, he’s done it all.

There are still things we don’t agree on. Ryder being in the MC is on top of that list. I know he is doing illegal things, and I hate that he is putting himself in danger. Unfortunately, he won’t budge on that. He says he can’t leave and promised to keep the MC and our life separate, which he luckily has been able to do so far.

“That’s it for today,” the professor’s voice drags me out of my own thoughts. “I’ll see you guys next week.”

I gather my things and shove everything in my backpack before making my way to the front of the building. Ryder is already waiting outside. With his hands in his pockets, he is casually leaning against one of the fancy planters.

“Where is Gwen?” I ask as soon as I’m close enough.

“Your mom wanted to babysit. So, I thought we could celebrate your first day as a full-time college student,” he tells me as we walk to the car. “But first, I need to know if anyone talked to you today? Any guys try to flirt? Just making sure I don’t have to kill someone.”

“No one talked to me.” I shake my head. Ryder has become even more possessive since Gwen was born. Sometimes he overdoes it a bit, but I secretly like the way he is. It’s like he is scared of losing me all the time, and I know that feeling very well.

After he basically pushed me away twice, it was hard for me to trust that he wouldn’t do it again.

On the drive home, I tell him every detail of the two classes I had today. It must be boring to him, but he still listens as if it’s the most interesting story he’s ever heard.

By the time we get home, I’ve told him everything I can think of, and my throat is dry from talking non-stop.

“So, how are we going to celebrate?” I question as we walk into the house through the garage.

Ryder opens the door and leads me into the kitchen without answering. He pulls me all the way into the dining room. The table is already set, a bottle of champagne and two flutes in the center.

“I didn’t cook because you know my food sucks, but I bought food from a fancy restaurant and set the table.”

“It’s perfect... but I’m not really hungry for food yet.”

“What are you hungry for? Please, say my cock,” he whispers the last bit, making me laugh.

“Yeah, maybe we can go upstairs and—” I don’t get to finish my sentence because I’m hoisted in the air. Ryder throws me over his shoulder and carries me up to the bedroom, taking two stairs at a time.

He deposits me on the bed and starts taking my clothes off in a hurry. Only when I’m completely naked does he undress himself. He drops his pants,

wearing no boxers underneath, then pulls off his shirt.

My eyes immediately go to his chest, where I find a new tattoo among the other older, faded ones. This one stands out. Not only because the ink is still dark, but also because it's the only one that has color. All his other tattoos are black and gray.

“You got a new tattoo?”

“Yeah, take a closer look.” Ryder climbs on the bed next to me, so I can look at the intricate artwork up close. As soon as I realize what it is, my throat tightens.

It's an owl—a beautiful, detailed owl, with big blue eyes and soft-looking feathers. The chest of the owl is heart-shaped and written inside the heart are mine and Gwen's names.

“You like it?”

“Yes.” I nod my head, trying to hold the tears at bay. “It doesn't really match your other tattoos, but I love it.”

“I know I don't say this a lot, and I know our life together started more like a nightmare than a fairytale, but I love you. You know that, right?”

“Ryder, I knew it before you figured it out yourself. And even though you don't say it a lot, you show me every day, and that's way more important than any words.”

“You're perfect,” he murmurs, right before he leans down and takes one of my nipples in his mouth. He sucks so hard, my body arches off the bed.

Ryder moves us around and positions himself between my legs while switching to the other breast to give it equal attention. He enters me with one hard thrust.

My head tips back into the pillow, and I hold on to Ryder's biceps as he moves inside of me. Pleasure ripples through my body. He takes me roughly, his fingers digging into my hips to hold me in place, but his lips are soft as he gently kisses along my neck.

As always, he is a contradiction in himself. Soft and hard. Gentle and rough.

Ryder is all jagged edges on the outside, rough and cold, but there is tenderness inside of him he only shows Gwen and me. A light that only shines when near us.

“I love you,” he murmurs into my skin.

“I love you too.” I love every part of him, even the ugly part. Just like he loves all of me. That’s what love is about. You can’t choose part of someone to love. You have to love everything—the good and the bad.

No one is perfect. The only thing that is, is the love between two people... and that we have plenty of.



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C. Hallman is a *USA Today* Bestselling author and one part of the international bestselling author duo Beck & Hallman.

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