

BLOOD



ONE SHOT AT PROTECTION.
ONE SHOT AT VENGEANCE.

ASPEN CAMPBELL

Blood

Aspen Campbell

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Cover design by JS Designs jsdesignscoverart.com

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Author's Note

Blood is a dark captive romance for *adults*. It contains kidnapping, spanking, sexual assault and nonconsensual as well as consensual sexual scenes, and murder/death.

If this isn't your cup of tea, feel free to jump ship now.

If this is what you're looking for, read on and enjoy!

Welcome to the dark side, loves.

XOXO

Aspen

Everleigh

AT THIS RATE, MY hands will be too sweaty to hold my Colt 45. I wipe them on my black leggings for the fourth time.

I pat my side. The gun is still tucked in the waistband of my leggings, hidden under a loose shirt. It's heavier than I thought it would be. The guy who handed it to me is waiting across the street, and I didn't get a chance to ask him if it's only this heavy when it's loaded.

I look down, checking to make sure I can still see the bump of the knife strapped to my ankle. It's not hidden well, but no one seems to be checking out my legs. Both of the weapons are fastened securely, not going anywhere, but since this is my first time doing this, I don't want to lose anything.

I can't fuck this up. This is my one chance. Do this, and I buy myself safety. Security.

A man in a faded Pink Floyd t-shirt walks toward the door of the apartment building. I slip out of where I've been waiting. The early afternoon light doesn't offer any shadows of protection, so I walk casually—I hope—to the door, following just a little behind him. Far enough that it's not weird,

although not being weird has never been my strong suit. The goal is to be just close enough that he'll feel bad if he doesn't hold the door, but not so close that he really takes notice. Just enough to gain entry to the building.

Sure enough, the gamble pays off. The man pauses in the doorway, holding the door open while I walk toward him. I smile my thanks, sneaking a quick view at his face.

It's not the guy I'm looking for. That probably wouldn't be the most convenient, anyway. The lobby probably has cameras, and what would I do with a dead body in the common area here anyway?

The guy I'm looking for should be in his apartment, anyway. That's why I'm here now, in the middle of the day. I always pictured crimes going down in the darkness of night, but my knowledge comes from old episodes of SVU and CSI rather than real life.

I cross the lobby to the elevators. There's no security or doorman to stop me. The man who held the door, unwittingly aiding and abetting this felony, has stopped at his mailbox and is now ignoring me while he leafs through junk mail and catalogs.

He probably thinks I belong here, that I live in one of these crappy apartments. I look like I could belong here. This building isn't exactly in the slums, but it's not the Upper East Side, either. Anyone walking in here is likely to be lower middle class, barely scraping by, shit on by life. Desperate. My apartment building is even worse than this one.

My sneakers are quiet on the faded, cracked laminate flooring. I step into the elevator and press 8, hoping I'm quick enough that the Pink Floyd guy doesn't join me. Out of habit, I press the Door Close button a few times. Usually, I press it because I don't want to talk to people. I've always been sort of socially awkward and confined spaces make it worse. If someone

starts a conversation, I always say something to make it weird, and then we're stuck there until the door opens. Like the time I was on the subway, and a woman asked how my day was going, and I told her that I'd learned that cutting someone's femoral artery was a quick way to kill someone. She just gave me a look of horror and took a few steps away from me. Apparently, not everyone is into true crime podcasts.

Right now—well, I still don't want to talk to anyone, but there's a bit more at stake than just the chance I'd say something weird. And this isn't a story on a podcast—it's real life, even though I can't believe it's *my* life.

On the fourth floor, the elevator slows and comes to a stop with a *ding*. The doors slide open. A woman peers in, reading glasses perched on her grey hair. "Is this one going down?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Nope! Going up!" I say brightly, stabbing at the Door Close button.

The doors slide closed as she gives me a strange look.

Fuck, my heart is racing now, and I haven't even done anything other than gain illegal entry to a building. I take a deep breath to try to calm myself.

On the eighth floor, the doors slide open with another *ding*. The sound echoes in the silence. I steel my nerves and tiptoe out into the hallway, checking the gun again to make sure it's still there. My fingers find my mother's necklace, the silver locket heavy against my chest. I run my fingers over the engravings. Over the last year I've found myself touching it, almost unconsciously, whenever I'm stressed, which has been almost all the time.

I take another breath. I can do this.

I have to do this.

Everleigh

MY BROTHER IS THE reason for all of this. He's ten years older than me and always seemed godlike while I was growing up, and I wanted to be just like him. Even when Asher started getting into trouble at school, he was always there to stand up for me. Now that my parents are gone, he's the only family I have left.

They're catching up to me. It's just a game, I think—boys chasing girls on the playground, that sort of thing, although you'd think now that I'm in fourth grade they'd have grown out of it. These two sixth graders, Ryan and Jack, have been teasing me for a few weeks. I like the attention sometimes, but their expressions when we got off the bus? Terrifying.

But it's all just a game... I hope.

My driveway is in view. They're only a few yards behind me now.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?” Asher appears from behind the car in the driveway, fuming. At almost eighteen, he's more than a head taller than the boys and has the obvious strength advantage.

Ryan and Jack hesitate in their steps, slowing down when I nearly plow right into Asher. I catch my breath, staring at the two boys who told me they were going to show me theirs and then make me show them mine. They stagger to a stop in the street.

My brother takes a step toward them, a wrench in his hand, his eyes trained on those following me. “Stay the fuck away from Everleigh. She’s not yours. She’ll never be yours.”

The boys scatter, running awkwardly in two different directions. I let out a gasp, safe now, my heart still pounding .

“Are you okay?” Asher narrows his eyes at me. “Did those fuckers touch you?” His grip tightens on the wrench.

I nod, then shake my head. “I’m okay. They didn’t do anything.”

He keeps his intense gaze focused on me. “You stay away from boys like that, Everleigh. I’m not fucking kidding.” He holds an arm out. “Come here.”

I settle into the security of his strong embrace, closing my eyes.

My heart twists as I think back. It was so easy back then, with parents who loved me and a brother who was always there, shielding me from anyone who dared to tease or bully me. My parents seemed relieved when Asher moved out as soon as he turned eighteen, a month before his high school graduation, but I never understood why.

But what hurt the most was the way he stopped coming around. It was almost like I lost him before I lost my parents.

My parents are fighting again. Their voices carry through the dark house, barely lit in the evening. It’s way past my bedtime, but I’m awake and hanging on every word, even though my eight-year-old mind doesn’t understand what they’re saying.

My mom’s words reach me again, “I found more in his room. This is too

much, Dan.”

“I know, but he’s in high school. Teenagers get into trouble. They look at things they shouldn’t.”

“Not like this. Not with a little sister in the house. We need to do something.”

“Like what, Wendy? Kick him out?” my father shouts back. “He’s seventeen. He’d have nowhere to go. And he’s our kid. You don’t give up on your kids.”

“I know, I know. But if Everleigh—”

A door opens and slams, and the conversation stops.

I didn’t even know Asher had joined the Kings of Blood, one of the vicious gangs that run the underworld of the city, until about a year ago when our parents were killed in a car crash.

The brake lines were cut. The police report confirmed it wasn’t an accident, but the ensuing investigation went away quietly. I did my own digging after the fact and found out that the city’s gangs were definitely involved. I was floored to find out Asher must have been involved, too. Even as a college student, I was able to gather plenty of information. From asking around, following people, and Google stalking, I found out about Asher’s involvement in the Kings.

I hired a private investigator with my meager savings. The PI, Hank Weimer, was the one who discovered that Asher is high-ranking. So high-ranking, in fact, that he may be one of the few people who know how high that hierarchy even goes.

The reach of the Kings of Blood is the stuff of legend. They have police officers on their payroll, elected officials. If the Kings want you dead, you already are, and the authorities will look the other way.

My target is just another in a long line of murders they’ve ordered. When I got the assignment, I didn’t even think to question why they wanted him

dead. It doesn't matter. The Kings ordered the hit, so it's happening.

I never pictured myself joining a gang. I was a good girl growing up, always earning badges with the Girl Scouts, and then later, making the all-state track team while getting straight A's. I was on track to get my degree in early childhood education at NYU. I was just starting my junior year when my parents died. I had it all planned out.

Then the car crash, and I couldn't pay the tuition. I dropped out of school, moved to a cheaper apartment, and started picking up gigs in an attempt to make ends meet. Then the thing with the guy from the Sinners—a rival gang—happened, and I begged the Kings to let me join for my own protection. They take care of their own, ensuring all members have the skills and weapons to defend themselves. Not to mention the lengths at which they'd go to protect you. Just the way Asher used to protect me, when we were kids. And if I was accepted into the Kings, maybe he'd let me back into his life. I needed my big brother back.

I've made it halfway down the hallway, one door from where I need to be. I wipe my hands on my leggings again, then take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Apartment 8F. The home of Bobby Martinez. Soon to be the former home of Mr. Martinez, if I don't fuck this up.

Even if I do mess this up, he'll be dead anyway. It's just a question of whether I'll be joining him in Hell. The Kings don't tolerate screwups. More than that, though, I just can't let Asher down like that.

The tarnished apartment number is staring me in the face. I take another deep breath.

I use the sleeve of my shirt to cover my hand as I try the door knob. No one on the police force is coming after a member of the Kings, but until I'm

initiated, it's still better to cover my tracks.

The knob turns easily and—thank fuck—quietly. Not the smartest man, leaving his door unlocked. Anyone could walk in.

I push the door open a crack, listening.

Silence.

It's three in the afternoon. Most of the building's occupants are away at work, or school, or whatever it is that people who have their lives together do all day.

Bobby does not appear to have his life together. Neither do I, for that matter. It turns out that this is a convenient time for both of us.

I open the door just enough to see into the living room. There's no visible movement in the apartment. I step inside and survey the room.

The living room is scattered with beer bottles and food wrappers. I wrinkle my nose. The galley kitchen is partially visible from where I'm standing just inside the door, and it doesn't look much better. My apartment isn't anything to brag about, but I can't stand food outside the kitchen, and garbage is another level entirely.

A rustling sound meets my ears, and my head snaps towards it. It sounds like he's in the bedroom.

I slip the gun out of its holster, creeping through the living room and down a short hallway. The bathroom is empty, the door open. The toilet is running, and I resist the urge to jiggle the handle. The bedroom door is open just a crack. The rustling sounds more like footsteps now that I'm closer.

I put my back to the wall next to the bedroom door, trying to peek around the edge like I'm on some TV crime show. TV and movies are the only point of reference I have for how a murderer should act, so I'm going with that.

My hand that holds the pistol is shaking, so I use my other hand to steady the

weapon. It doesn't help, but at close range, I shouldn't need to be all that accurate.

I can do this. I have to.

I use the toe of my sneaker to push the door open, then spin into the open doorway, the gun pointed in front of me.

There's a man on the bed. It's Bobby Martinez, but he's covered in blood. A wound on his chest is still wet with the crimson fluid. His eyes are open, lifeless.

Fuck.

Wolf

THE GIRL HAS OBVIOUSLY never seen a dead body. She's still holding the gun, trained on Bobby, but her mouth has dropped open, her pale blue eyes wide. I suppose that's a normal reaction for most. I'm not used to extra people showing up when I'm handling business. I'm a professional. It's why they pay me good money to kill. I get in, get the job done, and get out. I don't usually take on assignments that involve more than one target for that reason.

Everything has just gotten more complicated. This was supposed to be simple.

I step out from behind the closet door. I wasn't even trying to hide. I hid in the closet when I heard the footsteps coming down the hall, a minute or so after the front door opened and never closed again. It wouldn't have been the police, not this soon after an unwitnessed murder, but I hadn't done anything with the body.

The girl has been so focused on Bobby Martinez's corpse that she hasn't looked anywhere besides the bed, but a few seconds later she catches my

movement in her peripheral vision. She lets out a scream, swinging her gun around to point at me. She tries to pull the trigger, but the safety is on.

It's kind of adorable, really. At least I know she has the balls to try and kill someone, even if she's failing miserably. This is why we leave things to the professionals.

She mumbles a curse as she fiddles with the gun, trying to take the safety off. She's quick—surprisingly quick—but it's not fast enough. The safety is still on when I deftly remove the gun from her hand. I tuck it in my pants and twist her arms behind her back, holding them tight.

She struggles, but she's no match for me. I'm 6'4", solid muscle. She looks to be almost a foot shorter and tiny, other than her tits. I take a moment to admire them from my vantage point over her head. Those would be nice to—"Fuck! Let me go!" She lets out a stream of curses when I turn her around toward the door.

She's got a mouth on her, this one, but she's keeping her voice low.

I put my lips next to her ear. "Shut up, princess. Let's go."

I don't have time for games. Not ever, but certainly not now. This is a colossal mess. I'm supposed to be the professional here. But this girl is messing with everything.

Now I'm stuck in my own goddamn head. The deep blue of her eyes triggered something in me, made my mind go somewhere else entirely, and now the job I was supposed to do is shot to hell.

At my low growl, she sucks in a breath. "Please let me go. I didn't see anything, I swear." Her body shakes beneath my grip.

I laugh, even though none of this is amusing in the least. "I don't believe you, princess. Now, let's move. Keep your goddamn mouth shut, unless you want me to shut it for you."

I leave Bobby's still-warm body on the bed. There's nothing that could tie me to his murder. I don't know if she left anything behind that would implicate her, but I don't have time to do a cleanup job. I propel her through the apartment. Despite the trash and other shit lying around, there's not much furniture, and it makes it easier to maneuver. I peer through the open door, then haul her into the hallway. I steer her down the corridor quickly.

I need to get her out of the building before someone sees us; that would open up a whole new can of bullshit that I can't deal with right now. The fact that I'm hauling this girl out of the apartment is bad enough. The door creaks as I open it to the stairwell. Her cursing echoes off the walls in the empty space until we spill out the emergency exit to the alley.

The security in this building is fucking appalling. Even the emergency exit doesn't have an alarm. It's just a door, and you can also use it to walk right into the building, away from the prying eyes of the security cameras in the lobby. I'd wager they don't even work.

I pop open the trunk of the sedan that's waiting for me. There's a roll of duct tape in there, along with some other crap. I use the tape to secure her hands in front of her, binding her wrists. Her constant cursing slowed as we left the building, replaced now by frantic breathing. I'm choosing to focus on the fact that she's quiet. There's no time to deal with an impending panic attack.

I toss the roll of tape back in the trunk and shove it to the side, along with the rope, towels, and tarp. I hadn't exactly planned on an abduction today, but there's still plenty of room for a tiny thing like her.

I pull out the tool kit and the crowbar, then place them on the ground. I wouldn't put it past her to use anything at her disposal to try and escape. She's young and obviously inexperienced, but there's an air of desperation about her, her rapid breathing giving her away.

Her eyes are darting back and forth, watching what I'm doing, and she seems to have figured out that she's going in the trunk. She starts to open her mouth, pausing her hyperventilating for a second.

She's about to scream, and she's going to regret it.

I slap a hand over her open mouth when she finishes her breath in, before she can make a sound. I pinch her nose with my thumb and forefinger, too, for good measure. The sooner she understands exactly what she's dealing with, the better. She's in over her head. I also need her unconscious right now and, having not planned on kidnapping, I don't have anything to knock her out other than a lack of oxygen.

“Bad girl. No screaming.”

Her eyes are going wide as she tries to pull in a breath, her shaking body starting to flail wildly. I've cut off her oxygen; I understand her panic.

The drive to breathe is one of our most basic instincts—as it turns out, you don't even need a full brain to breathe. Just a brainstem. Our bodies are hard-wired to protect our breathing, so choking or drowning is a vicious way to go. It's not like I'm going to kill her, though. Not now.

Eventually, her body goes slack, and I remove my hand. I bundle her limp body into the trunk before I check to make sure she's still breathing. She takes shallow breaths, and she has a nice, strong pulse.

I check her for other weapons; the little sneak has a switchblade attached to her ankle, which I remove, and I take her iPhone, too. I remove the sim card and toss the phone on the ground.

I slam the trunk shut, locking my little captive inside. My sister's face flashes into my head again. I shake my head to rid myself of the vision. Memories of my sister are visions of my own failings, and I don't need a reminder of that right now.

I pick up the tools and the crowbar, setting them in the front seat with me. I turn my phone off, too, before slipping it in the glove compartment along with the sim card I took from her phone.

Muttering under my breath, I ease the car out into traffic.

Today has gone spectacularly wrong. I still haven't figured out exactly how wrong.

We need to get out of the city and lay low for a while. There are going to be people looking for both of us, no doubt. I need us away for long enough that I can figure out who she's tangled up with and how she got herself into this mess.

Everleigh

I'M IN A CRAMPED, dark space. My wrists are tightly bound together. I twist them back and forth, trying to get free, but the duct tape holding them together isn't coming apart easily. I don't remember how I got in here, but know I'm in the trunk of this guy's car. The man who took me hostage after I saw him at Bobby's apartment. The guy who killed Bobby, obviously. Why else would he be there?

My breathing picks up as panic takes hold. The edges of my vision start to go black. My hands tingle. I'm trapped. I can't get away. My breaths come in short pants, not enough to fill my lungs.

Fuck. Not now. I can't let my mind go back there. I don't have time for a panic attack.

My body lurches as the car hits a bump, knocking me out of my spiral.

I'm so fucked. For so many reasons. Maybe it's a blessing that I've been abducted, or whatever is happening here. I failed to do the job the Kings sent me for. They'll be angry. I'll lose my chance. I bring my hands up to my

neck. Even in my current situation, the reminder of my mother's necklace still clasped around my neck is comforting, filling me with relief.

But that soon turns to rage. This asshole thinks he can just kidnap me? Doesn't he know who my brother is? I didn't even fucking see this guy do anything. If he had just stayed behind the curtain, I could have popped an extra bullet into Bobby and called it good. No one would have to know which bullet killed him.

This guy is so dead when the Kings get to him. But then, I might be as good as dead, too.

They made it clear that *I* was supposed to kill Bobby Martinez. The fact that he's dead is helpful to them—I assume, since they usually don't kill for sport—but I wasn't the one to finish the job. It wasn't just about getting rid of Bobby. It was my way of proving my loyalty, buying my way into the Kings. And I failed.

Do this job, and we'll initiate you into the Kings. We'll protect you. We take care of our own.

This was also supposed to be my way of proving myself to Asher, to get him to let me back in his life. Now that Dad is gone, Asher is the closest thing I have to a father figure, and I need him to be proud of me.

Maybe if I'd been quicker and shot the asshole who's now my captor, I could have claimed responsibility for both. Dammit.

I squirm in the enclosed space, trying to free myself somehow. The tape seems to be getting looser. Maybe it's just my imagination.

I should be in class right now, finishing up my degree in Early Childhood Education. I had two years left. That was it. I should be so far from this world of gangs and murder.

I let myself wallow in self-pity for a moment. A year ago, I never would have

tried to join the Kings of Blood. I wouldn't have broken into someone's apartment intending to kill them. But then again, I also wouldn't have imagined myself struggling to make ends meet, living in a crappy studio apartment I can barely pay for.

I wouldn't have imagined myself figuring out how to sell a house that was upside-down on its mortgage, or how to bury two people and pay for their funeral expenses. Everything changed last year.

“Are you Everleigh Mason? Daughter of Daniel and Wendy Mason?”

The police officers at the door have a somber expression on their faces, and my heart drops to my feet. Everything happens as if in slow motion. I know what they're going to say before the words leave their lips, but hearing it out loud makes my stomach drop.

“Your parents were killed in a car accident this evening. I'm so sorry. Do you have someone you can call?”

I don't really, not anymore, but I call Asher. He's all I have left.

He doesn't answer.

The bumps are getting softer and less frequent. The car must be slowing. I don't have a frame of reference for how long I've been trapped here, and I don't know how long I was unconscious. We could be hours from the city by now.

If we slow down, maybe I can escape. What are you supposed to do when trapped in someone's trunk? I saw a social media post about it once. You're supposed to kick something out. The light? The side of the car? The seat in front of you?

While I'm debating the merits of kicking various things, the car lurches to a stop.

Something scrapes above me, then another thing pops. I squint as sunlight

floods my tiny prison and my eyes adjust. I look up at the absolutely massive man standing above me.

I think I was safer before he opened the trunk.

I didn't get a good look at him earlier, but I have a good view now. My eyes grow wide as my gaze moves from his face and down to the rest of his body. His head is shaved, but his thick, dark beard makes up for the lack of hair on his scalp. The combination is attractive as fuck, and I hate myself for thinking this about the man who just kidnapped me. His tan skin is covered in tattoos. They snake across his thick neck and disappear beneath his black t-shirt. More emerge from his sleeves, winding down his enormous biceps.

I look for anything that might give me a clue about his affiliation. A diamond overlaid by a cross for the Sinners. A serpent wrapped around a knife for the Vipers. A skull with a bloody crown for the Kings of Blood. I want to know who I'm dealing with, but none of the tattoos I see place him in any of the main gangs that would be involved in the Kings' business.

"Get out." His voice is deep, dangerous, almost a growl.

"I'm fucking tied up. I can't get out." *Fuck.* My sass comes out more when I'm scared. I can already tell that this guy isn't someone I want to piss off.

The corner of his mouth quirks up slightly. It's gone so quickly I might have imagined it, and his eyes narrow.

He reaches down and grabs me. He roughly lifts me under my arms and tosses me over his shoulder. My head hangs down his back, my ass in the air. He closes the trunk with a thud before he turns and walks, hauling me with him. His arms hold my legs against his broad chest.

I twist on his shoulder, trying to get away, or at least gain my bearings. My legs are trapped, but I'm able to move my head just enough to see our surroundings. We're outside, the sun streaming down. There are pine trees

everywhere, and their smell mixes with the moss and decaying leaves of a forest. We're a world away from the city.

He walks up steps—I count three of them—and opens a door, carrying me inside. Once we're through the door, he turns and closes it before setting me on my feet. My first reaction, of course, is to go for the door, but my hands are still bound, so it's hard to grasp the knob. I do the best I can, but I can't get it to turn.

He lets out a chuckle. "Even if you escaped, there's nowhere to go. There are miles of forest surrounding us. You'd get lost and starve to death before you found a town."

I don't know if he's telling the truth or not. "Why did you—why am I—" I'm not even sure what question I'd like to ask.

He doesn't answer, although to be fair, I didn't really ask anything. He moves away from the door and closes a curtain in front of a tiny window. In the small space of the cabin, he seems even larger than he did before.

It's then I remember the knife strapped to my ankle. Crap, why didn't I think of that while I was in the trunk? I bend my knees and reach for it.

"Looking for this?" He holds it up. My knife. Dammit. It looks tiny in his massive hand. "If you promise to be a good girl, I'll undo your hands."

Fine. I'll play his game while I figure out how to get out of here. "Yes. I'll be good."

He grips my upper arm so hard it borders on painful and uses my own goddamn knife to slice through the duct tape. He rips the rest of it off. "Don't do anything dumb, princess. You won't like the consequences."

I rub my wrists together, trying to alleviate the ache as I watch him. All I need is one chance. I'm slightly subdued by his threat of consequences, but if I can get away, whatever he's threatening won't matter.

He looks down as he slips my knife into his pocket, and that's the opening I'm waiting for. It's only a few steps to the door, and I'm there in a flash, my adrenaline spiking. I'm shaking when I put my hand on the doorknob.

But before I can pull open the door, he's behind me, his hand resting on the door. He holds it closed and cages me in. His entire body presses up behind mine, huge and hard. His breath is hot against my ear.

A shiver runs down my spine.

"I thought you were going to be a good girl for me."

Everleigh

THE MAN'S HARD BODY presses me up against the door. All of the emotions that I've gone through today have managed to get twisted and completely jacked up. That's the only explanation for the surge of arousal that shoots through me.

"Naughty girls get punished, princess. I'm a man of my word. I warned you, and now I have to follow through."

His fingers dig into the fleshy underside of my arm, yanking me away from the door. His strong arms drag me across the room before he stops next to the side of the couch.

"Bend over the sofa, princess." He lets me go to fold his arms over his chest. I stare back defiantly. There's no way I'm doing that. I know I'm playing with fire by refusing, but I don't want to be punished. I'm not sure what he's planning, but I *am* sure that I won't like it.

When he calls me princess, it doesn't sound like a term of endearment. He's mocking me. But I'm not some sheltered, submissive little girl. We were both

there to kill someone, weren't we? How is he any different from me, and how does he think he gets to be the one in control here?

Amusement lights in his eyes at my disobedience. "Let me rephrase that. Naughty girls get punished, and you've been a very naughty girl. First, you fucked up my job. Second, you've disobeyed me several times, and you're being a general pain in the ass. I'm happy to add to your punishment if you don't start listening. Trust me when I say you won't enjoy any of this."

I swallow hard. My confidence is cracking, but I can't just give in. I can't. I fucked up his job? He fucked up mine.

I shake my head, and the sass comes out before I can censor myself. "Let me guess. This is going to hurt you more than it will hurt me?"

A muscle in his jaw twitches. "Not at all, sweetheart. I'm going to enjoy this."

He pulls me around the couch, then sits and takes away any semblance of control I have as he drags me across his lap as though I weigh nothing. He's so much bigger than me that there's nothing I can do to stop it. Even though he's manhandling me, just like he did when he dragged me out of Bobby's apartment, he's not hurting me. At least, not yet.

I land on his lap. His thighs are like tree trunks, hard beneath my belly. He's so big that I'm dangling, my feet and head both off the floor. I grasp at the fabric of his pants for stability. This close to his body, I can smell him—sweat and cedar, both intoxicating.

His fingers hook into the elastic of my leggings. I freeze, but he drags them down over my ass before I can protest. He pulls them slowly, every inch rubbing across my flesh, lowering them until they're just above my knees. My exposed skin prickles with goosebumps.

I should have figured it out when he told me to bend over the couch, but I

didn't. Now, though, it's crystal clear. I disobeyed him, and I'm going to be spanked like a child. I've never been spanked in my life, not even as a kid. I was a good girl, and I assume my parents didn't believe in spanking, because they certainly never used it as a punishment with me.

His hand strokes my bottom cheeks over my underwear, and I thank God that I didn't try to wear something sexy today. The humiliation of being over his lap, compounded by him pulling my leggings down, is more than enough. I would die of embarrassment if he had a view of a lacy thong right now.

I'm not sure the pink, flowery bikini-cut panties are any less embarrassing, but at least they cover most of my bottom.

He runs his fingers along the elastic edge where my ass meets my thighs.

I whimper as my heart pounds in my chest. "Please don't. Please let me go. I'll be good."

His hand leaves my body, then comes down sharply on my ass.

I let out my breath in a shriek. I kick my legs, struggling to get away, and he brings his leg over mine, trapping me in place. He rains down slaps on my bottom and *fuck*, it hurts. Way more than I thought it would.

Tears prick my vision. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. I grit my teeth, biting back the pain.

He stops, shifting beneath me. I catch my breath and wait for him to let me go, but the strong arm holding me in place doesn't budge.

His gravelly voice drifts down to me. "I'm going to give you a taste, princess. Then you get to make a choice."

A taste of what?

I don't have to wonder long. He runs something over my punished ass. It's thin, warm. Maybe leather?

"This is my belt. This is what naughty girls get."

Oh, fuck.

I could barely take his hand spanking me. But even as I start to panic, my body has a mind of its own and my hips lift, ready for him.

The belt lifts away from my skin. I'm nowhere near ready when it lands a blow with a crack. My ass is on fire. It feels like a thousand bees stinging all at once.

I let out a scream. This is way beyond what his hand delivered. I'm writhing on his lap. Tears are falling freely now. That was just a taste?

He rubs the belt over my underwear, then along the skin of my thighs. It feels like the spot he struck is forming a welt already. "If you lean over the couch like a good girl, you get ten. If I have to hold you in place, it's twenty, and we'll take your panties down for that. Think carefully, princess."

Tears are running down the tip of my nose and falling to the floor. I don't answer right away, and he gives my bruised ass a squeeze.

"Are you going to hold still for me, baby?"

I whimper but nod. I don't know if I can hold still. I'll try, though. Anything to make this torture end. I can't fathom how much worse—and more humiliating—it would be with a completely bare ass.

He tips me up to stand, then pulls me to the arm of the couch and presses my shoulders down. My body is shaking.

"I'll count them for you this time."

I can barely hear him as he brings the belt down over and over. He doesn't pause, and the pain grows as he hits the same spots again and again. It's agonizing and humiliating all at the same time. It's all I can do to stay still, at least at first.

By the time it's done, I'm sobbing and limp.

"Good girl." He drops the belt and runs his hand over my punished ass.

I want to hate him. I do. But when he calls me a good girl, something in me blooms. All those years of seeking approval from my parents, my brother. Years of trying to be good, to make people in my life proud... The praise shoots right to my core, where it runs right into something else that's brand-new to me.

My pussy loves the pain, and it's dripping with arousal.

Wolf

S HE LOOKS DEFEATED. SHE hasn't moved from her position over the arm of the couch, and she's still sniffing, although the tears have stopped. I didn't take it easy on her; I need her to listen, to understand that I'm in control here. I need her to behave, for her own protection.

I'm not even certain what our game plan is here. I've gotten completely away from the way I'd planned for this job to go, bringing her up here. To be fair, this job went off the rails the minute I saw her. I wish I could say it was just her body that made me change course, that I wanted her. I do, but that wasn't it. There was something in those vulnerable eyes of hers when she saw Bobby's corpse. Something that made me think of my sister, the fact that I couldn't protect her, and the need to protect this girl.

If she knew the truth, I'd never get her to trust me. These methods might not gain her trust, but they'll gain her obedience, which is close enough for now.

I'm impressed that she held still for the belting. I'm not usually one to resort to corporal punishment outside of a consensual relationship, but I didn't have any better ideas that would gain her obedience without actually harming her.

Based on her reaction when I started her punishment, I'd guess that she's never been spanked in her life.

There's a little spark of pride, too, that swells in me that I was her first. In this, anyway.

While I watch, she shifts, her thighs pressing together, putting pressure on her clit. I smirk to myself. She may not even realize it just yet, but her body likes the pain.

A spanking is supposed to hurt, especially a punishment spanking, and God knows a belting can hurt like a bitch. But your ass has nerve endings everywhere. The flip side of pain is pleasure. The two meld together for a lot of people, one enhancing the other. Lots of people enjoy playing with the pain.

I love the challenge of getting a woman off with just a spanking or flogging. But this wasn't one of those times. This was punishment, pure and simple, meant to hurt and not much else.

I'm not so sure there was nothing else there, though. I can only see a tiny bit of the wetness on her underwear, but it's there. A little patch of her arousal seeping through the cotton panties that are still on display. She squeezes her thighs together again. I'm not sure she even knows she's doing it. I hide my grin. She's turned on.

I slide my belt back into place and buckle it before I move away. She's still lying over the couch through all of this, breathing heavily. Her sobs have faded into hiccups. They're adorable.

I resist the strong urge to pick her up and cuddle her on my lap, because she's not mine to comfort. This wasn't for fun. Her punishment was meant to prove a point. To keep her in line, for her own safety. She can't get out of this cabin on her own, but I can't spend all my time keeping her in line.

I leave her where she is and round the couch to sit. She's still leaning over the arm of the couch and, in this position, her head is practically in my lap when I sit down.

When she realizes how close her face is to my crotch, she gasps and bolts upright, stumbling away. Her face is as red as her ass must be, underneath those cute panties, and her leggings are still around her thighs, limiting her movements. I try not to laugh.

"What the—?" She's trying to be angry, but her face gives her away. She's embarrassed. Humiliated, even.

I offer her a lazy smile. "Feeling better, princess?"

She meets my eyes briefly, then swiftly averts her gaze. "Of course not, you dick."

"Language," I admonish her as I tilt my head.

I'd hate to have to bring her in line with another punishment so soon, but she needs to get it through her head that I'm the one in charge. I don't care how embarrassed she is by her body's reaction to the spanking. I also don't really give a fuck about her cursing. I just care that she's learning to listen and to obey me.

If I'm being honest, though, I like that she's aroused by my punishment.

"I don't fucking care what language you want me to use, asshole. I can't believe you *spanked* me. You let me go right now. When the Kings find out what you've done..." Her face grows even redder, if that's possible, and she slaps a hand over her mouth, like she's physically trying to hold in a secret.

I smirk. "The Kings, huh?" She's broken one of the cardinal rules, giving away who she works for. She should know better. The more I learn about her, the clearer it becomes that this little girl is innocent and that she's in way, way over her head.

I watch her face as the anger drains away, replaced by something else. Fear, hopefully, if she's smart.

I stand up, now towering over her. She must be a foot shorter than me. Maybe more. I usually don't use my height to intimidate women, but right now, I'll use any advantage I can get.

I use my fingers to raise her chin, so she meets my eyes. "Let's get something straight; I didn't plan to bring you here. But that doesn't change anything. You're here now. I am in control, and you will listen to me. I have no problem punishing a little brat who's out of control. Pull it together and behave."

She sucks in a breath through her nose. When she speaks, her voice is calmer, at least a little, or she's very good at pretending. She hasn't moved on. "Anyway. When my people find out, you're fucked."

I chuckle. God, I love a brat. Or rather, I love the challenge of taming a brat like this one. She has no idea what's waiting for her at home, does she? "Again, language. But while we're on the topic, who exactly is fucked in this situation? I know you think I'm screwed, but what about you?"

She looks down. I can practically feel the anger emanating from her, but she doesn't speak.

Then, there it is. A slight slump of her shoulders as she realizes the truth of my statement. Stumbling upon a crime scene and being taken hostage? The Kings would be a laughingstock if that became their reputation. Her vulnerability pulls at my heartstrings. Even with her tearstained cheeks, she's beautiful.

She needs to realize that the Kings don't tolerate screw-ups. They'll do anything they need to clean up this mess.

Everleigh

I 'D BEEN WILLING TO kill Bobby Martinez if I had to. But now I know what it feels like to really want to murder someone.

This asshole is so sure of himself. He's not wrong about the Kings, which is what pisses me off the most. But his arrogance grates at me, reinforcing just how far out of my depth I am right now.

Who does he think he is? I know I can seem passive, innocent even, and younger than I am. And maybe he's better at this whole thing—murder, kidnapping, all of it. It's new to me, but that doesn't mean I know nothing. He's treating me like a child.

I get it, to some degree. I keep most of my thoughts to myself. And when those thoughts come out, if I'm stressed, the things I say are either strange or sassy. It used to bother me a lot as a kid. It's one of the biggest things that I got made fun of for in high school. Ninth graders are ruthless. The fact that my big brother had moved out of the house by then and wasn't around to protect me from their jeers didn't help, either.

I've grown into my face—and my body—now, and I've learned that if I keep my mouth shut, I can pass as pretty. But my experience with men so far in life has made me want to avoid their attention as much as possible.

I don't think it's working with this guy. So far, he seems like he's not attracted to me, at least. I'll keep my fingers crossed that it stays that way. He's hot as fuck, and I'm attracted to him, I'll admit that much. The way he took control of my body and spanked me was humiliating, but it unlocked something inside me. Maybe it's Stockholm Syndrome. Or maybe it's just the fact that he's a big, strong guy who could really hurt me but is choosing not to.

Either way, I've been in situations before where men I've been attracted to have proven that I have poor judgment. Even attractive men can treat you badly. In fact, it's the hot ones that can be the most casually cruel.

He sits his gorgeous ass back down on the couch, looking as casual as if he were here to watch a baseball game on TV. It's frustrating as hell that he's so nonchalant about this. My future, my *life*, is on the line here. And he's playing games.

I lean down and yank my leggings up over my punished ass. I hiss as the fabric rubs over the new welts. I hate that he spanked me, and I hate myself for letting him. More than either of those, though, I hate that my body responded to it.

I look around. There are a few windows, but all of them are small and too high off the ground for me to reach easily. The rest of the cabin is sparsely decorated, with just the single couch, a side table, and a bookshelf in the living room we're in. There's a doorway that seems to lead to a kitchen, then another door that's closed.

I decide to bide my time. I need him distracted, and then I can try to run.

It's then I realize I'm just standing here awkwardly and that his eyes have been following me. A shiver goes through me when I meet his dark eyes. There's a hunger in them. He stands up, and I involuntarily take a step back. I'm trying so hard not to show fear, and every time he moves, I fail. His lips turn up on one side.

"I'm going to see what I can find for food, princess. You can stay here and relax." He walks toward the kitchen and pauses with his hand on the door frame, turning back to me. "Don't do anything dumb."

I sit on the couch once he disappears into the next room. What do I do now? I push down on my thigh to stop my leg from bouncing up and down. *Think, Everleigh.* There has to be a way out. I need to get away from him, to get back to the city. Where the fuck are we, anyway?

The Kings will be pissed that I fucked up this job, but maybe Asher will step in. He could fix things, if he wanted to. He was always around when I was little, until he moved out at the end of high school. He was my protector, the one who stood up to the bullies and mean girls in elementary school.

He'll still protect me—I know he will, once he lets me back into his life. And I'll find another way to prove myself to him and to the Kings.

I glance toward the kitchen. I can't see the guy, so he can't see me. This might be my only chance. It's probably stupid to try and make a move so soon after being punished, but I have to take whatever shot I can, since I might not get another one. I take a deep breath, rising from the couch as quietly as I can.

My ass stings, and I grit my teeth as I tiptoe toward the door. My sneakers are quiet on the hardwood floor, and I let out a relieved breath.

When I reach the door, I look back toward the kitchen, biting my lip. I still can't see him. This is my chance. I grab at the handle, pulling hard, but it

doesn't turn. The door doesn't budge. Fuck.

I keep grabbing, tugging at it. This is the only way out. The door opened to let us in. It opens somehow. I look along the edge of the frame for a key or some hidden lever. Nothing.

I continue to pull at the door that may as well be a lead wall. As I work fruitlessly, something pushes into my back. I stiffen. He's right behind me, crowding my space. I'm trapped between his hard body and the door.

He brings his head down to mine, his deep voice gravelly in my ear. "You still trying to run, little bunny? Your punishment wasn't enough?"

My stomach twists. I try to ignore him, or at least pretend I can ignore the massive man standing right up against me. I keep working at the door, finding no success. There's something more than the deadbolt keeping it closed.

He chuckles at my fruitless attempts. "If you want to run, maybe I'll let you. Hunting a baby rabbit is always fun for a big, bad wolf. I don't think we're going to let you run today, though."

He grabs my wrist and tugs, spinning me around to face him.

I instantly back against the door when I realize his chest is right up against mine. I shove against the solid wall of muscle, getting nowhere. My breathing is shallow and coming in pants.

He laughs, and the vibrations rumble through his chest. "Come on, princess. Time for dinner."

I hadn't realized it had gotten that late. We must have been driving for longer than I realized. How far are we from the city? It doesn't matter, I guess. It's not like we can be that far from civilization. If I can get out of this cabin, I should be able to get a decent way on foot, and I can hitchhike the rest of the way. The dangers of hitchhiking pale in comparison to being locked up here.

This man could kill me easily. But that's not what scares me.
It's that despite everything, my body wants him.

Everleigh

HE CLEARS THE EMPTY bowls and washes the dishes, setting them on a towel next to the sink. It's strangely reminiscent of the way my father used to do the dishes every night, after my mother cooked. It was a deal they'd worked out shortly after getting married, and it just always worked for them. I don't remember any of my friends' dads doing dishes when we were little. It dawns on me just how special my parents' relationship was. How much I lost when they died.

I don't speak at all while we eat, and neither does the man who's with me. I've been lost in my own thoughts, trying to think of a way out. I look up at one point during dinner and realize he's watching me. I can't quite read the expression on his face, but the intensity of his stare has me quickly dropping my eyes back to the bowl of chili.

I let out an involuntary yawn. My belly is full, and the adrenaline that's been coursing through my veins all day has started to wear off. Sleep would be a good thing right now.

An even better thing would be if this asshole would fall asleep while I stayed awake, if I can manage it. I could find a way out, or at the very least steal his weapons. But what would I do with them? If I managed to get the guts to kill him, the door is still completely sealed.

I'm also not at all confident in my ability to stay awake if I lie down for even a minute.

He yawns too, probably in response to mine. He turns off the sink and wipes his hands dry. "You must be sleepy. Let's get you ready for bed."

I don't protest as he leads me back through the living room and opens the other door, the one that was closed before. It opens into a bedroom. The minimalist theme of the living room extends to this room. There's a queen-size bed in the center and a dresser along one wall. Otherwise, the room is bare. Even the bed follows the Spartan aesthetic of the room, with only two pillows and a few thin blankets on top.

Maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to get some sleep before I try to get out of here. Another yawn blooms in my chest, and I try my best to stifle it.

He nudges me toward the bed. "Feel free to sleep in whatever you want."

I usually sleep in my underwear, but he doesn't need to know that. I wait, silent, for him to leave, to head to wherever his bedroom is. At the very least, maybe I can use this time alone to figure out a plan.

I've always considered myself an introvert. I can't think out loud; I can't even process when other people are talking, or sometimes even when other people are around. It kills my inner monologue. So being with this man nonstop, no matter how frustratingly hot he is, is making it difficult to reason. He pulls his shirt up and over his head. There's no thinking right now as I try not to drool. He may be an asshole who's holding me captive, but he has the

body of a god.

His abs are chiseled, with defined muscles everywhere. There's a little bit of scattered hair across his pecs. The tattoos I saw on his arms and neck continue down onto his shoulders and chest in intricate patterns, but no legible words or signs of an affiliation are present.

Wait a minute. "What are you doing?"

He cracks a smile at me. "Getting ready for bed."

Oh, hell no. "I'm not sleeping with you!"

He steps out of his boots, then unbuckles that goddamn belt and slides his pants down and steps out of them. "One bed. Plus, I don't trust you to keep yourself out of trouble while I sleep. So, you're stuck with me."

I huff out a sigh, trying to seem nonchalant, but my stomach flips as I realize I'll be sleeping next to this man. Guess I won't be sleeping in my underwear, then. And any chance of getting a clear head to think things through has completely flown out the window. If I can't make my brain focus when he's in the same room, there's no chance of it happening when we're in the same bed.

I kick my shoes off and crawl into the bed fully clothed, squeezing myself as far to one side as possible. I need as much space from him as I can get without falling onto the floor. I pull the covers to my side, trying my best to wrap myself in them like a shield.

The mattress dips under his weight when he climbs on. I curl into a ball on my side, keeping my back to him.

The covers jerk out from under me as he pulls some of them to his side. A large arm circles my waist. He pulls me backwards and into his solid chest. For a split second, it's nice. Safe, secure.

Then I remember who's holding me, and the comfort of his strong arm feels

more like a cage.

I squirm against his hold. “Let me fucking go! I got in the goddamn bed. Let me sleep over there.”

He doesn’t answer, but as I wriggle, trying to get free, I feel something start to press into my back.

Something hard. And large, from the feel of it.

I gasp. “I am not having sex with you!”

His laugh rumbles through me. “You think that’s what I want, princess? You must think pretty highly of yourself.” His breath is hot against my ear. “Don’t worry, baby. I won’t fuck you tonight. But one of these days, you’ll beg me to take your sweet little pussy.”

My pussy clenches in response to his words, letting out a gush of wetness. Traitorous bitch. She wants him, alright. Every last inch of him that’s pressed into my back.

I squeeze my eyes closed. I’ve never been able to sleep in a bed with another person. It doesn’t matter if it’s a sleepover with a friend, or staying the night after a hookup. I just can’t. I sigh and shift again, but all that does is make it even more obvious that his body is there. If I can’t sleep, I guess I can at least try to think about how I’m going to get myself out of here.

But I can’t think logically right now. Not with the massive man holding me, his rock-hard cock poking into my back, and the fact that I’ve never been so turned on in my life.

Wolf

I WAKE WHEN THE bed shifts just the slightest bit beside me. I crack my eye open. It's barely even light out yet, the first soft glow of sunrise just starting to appear from the nearby window.

She's wriggling under my arm, trying to be sneaky as she works to get away from my grasp. She's determined, I'll give her that. My cock is hard, and it's not just morning wood. The little bunny wriggling her body against mine is doing its part to raise the flag to full staff.

I let my arm stay relaxed as she loosens herself from my iron grip. I can feel the catch of her breath, the excitement when she thinks she might get away with it. She moves again, almost free, and I pounce.

I roll over and pin her beneath me. She's on her back, her arms by her shoulders, my hands grasping her wrists. She gapes up at me, frustration and anger searing in her gaze.

I meet her eyes, staring into those pale blue eyes until she finally blinks and looks away. She blows out a breath of frustration.

"What are you doing, princess?" I lean close.

She presses her lips in a thin line. No answer.

I raise a brow. “Didn’t we talk about you trying to run?”

She looks pissed. I’m sure I would be, too, were the situation reversed. And she doesn’t even know the whole truth just yet. When she learns all the facts, I’ll be dealing with a little ball of red-hot anger.

She finally speaks, sounding every bit as pissy as she looks, and squirms under me. “I’m just trying to get some space, you overgrown ape!”

I chuckle. Her sass is back. I’m not usually one for brats, but on this one is kind of adorable. “Too bad. There’s no space here. You’re stuck with me.”

“Arrggghh!” A cry of frustration rips from her throat. She struggles beneath me.

It doesn’t change anything about her position. She’s trapped, and I’m bigger and stronger than her. I’m also more determined to keep her here than she is to leave. All she’s doing is making my cock grow hard. There’s something about having a woman underneath you, fighting to get free, especially one that makes you want to be both the controlling dominant and the sweet protector. She’s a little spitfire, and even though I can tell she’s scared, she’s holding her own here.

I try to ignore the growing length between my legs. I can’t wait for the chance to bury myself in her little pussy. But she’s going to be the one to set that in motion. I’m an asshole, but even I have boundaries.

She fights for a few minutes, then stops, panting hard. She catches her breath to glare up at me. “What’s your name, anyway?”

I smirk, raising my eyebrow. “Why?”

“Just want to know if I should keep calling you *asshole*, or if there’s something else you prefer.”

Ah, my little brat. Her sass is going to get her in trouble one of these days.

Probably today, if I were a betting man.

“My name is Wolf.”

She stares at me like I’m crazy. “No, it’s not.”

“Sure is, little one. It’s a nickname, but it’s what I go by. Have for years.”

“Fine then. Wolf.” She bites her lip. “I’m Everleigh.”

“Nice to meet you officially, Everleigh.” I feel like I should offer a handshake. But then again, we’ve slept next to one another, I’ve spanked her ass, and I currently have her pinned to the bed. We might be beyond a handshake at this point.

She shifts again, reminding me that my 250 pounds are pressing her into the mattress.

“I’m going to let you up, Everleigh. Make smart choices.”

I hear her snort, but nonetheless I lift off of her and move to the side. As predicted, she bolts off the mattress and into the living room.

I roll out of bed, pulling on my pants and boots before following her into the other room. She has no chance of getting out, so I take my time. I stroll to the living room and find her messing with the front door again. I can’t help my eyeroll.

She’s not going to be able to open it. Maybe she should have looked for a weapon instead. She wouldn’t have had any luck with that either, though.

I plant my hand on the door above her head. “So, you *do* want to run.”

She keeps fiddling. “Of course, asshole.”

“It’s Wolf, baby, not asshole. I thought we just covered this. How are you going to run without shoes?”

She pauses and looks at her feet, then utters a curse under her breath.

“I’ll make you a deal. If you want to run like a scared little rabbit, I’ll give you one chance. I’ll even let you put on your shoes and get a head start.”

She looks at me warily. I've given her no reason to trust me, but I'm telling the truth. I'll give her the chance she needs. She needs to know she tried to run, that she didn't just sit down and take this like a passive victim. There's something in it for me, though.

"I'll open the door, and you can run. Then the big, bad wolf is going to chase you. This is your chance to escape, but if I catch you, you're mine." I lean in close, so my lips brush her cheek. "And I *will* catch you."

She narrows her eyes at me. She's waiting for the catch.

I smirk. "All of you will be mine, baby. In any way I want to use it."

There's a sharp intake of breath as she understands my meaning. Is she excited about the thought of the chase? Or about me using her body?

She squeezes her thighs together, giving me my answer. She won't admit it, but her pussy, at least, wants me to catch her.

I stand up, allowing her a bit more space. "Go get your shoes if you want them, Everleigh."

She looks like she wants to say more, but she slides by me and heads back to the bedroom to collect her shoes.

While she's gone, I use the key from my pocket to unlock the deadbolt, then key in the code in the hidden panel on the wall. Gears shift in the door as the mechanism unlocks. I pull the door open. It really is a beautiful day. Not too chilly, even in the early morning hours. It's quiet, the forest not completely awake yet.

I sniff the air. Morning mist hangs on the passing breeze, carrying the green scent of leaves and grass. It's a beautiful day for a hunt.

Everleigh reappears wearing her sneakers as my gaze hungrily cuts to her.

Now that the door is open, she looks uncertain, hesitant.

"You sure, princess? This is your one chance to run. But I'm warning you,

your odds of getting away aren't great. And when I catch you?" I grab her chin, forcing it up so her eyes meet mine. I want her to know what she's signing up for. "I'm taking that sweet little pussy."

She swallows. Her eyes flicker between looking at me and at the forest beyond the door. I can read the emotions written across her face. She wants to stay. She needs to run, to prove to herself that she didn't give up. Despite her hatred, she wants me.

I want her, too. But I'm leaving it up to her. If she doesn't run, then I won't force her.

I step to the side, leaving the doorway wide open. "If you're ready... then run, little bunny."

Everleigh

I LOOK PAST HIM into the woods. There's some fog lifting, making the trees appear mysterious and foreboding. The forest is so thick, I can't see more than a few feet beyond where the trees start.

With what Wolf's promised, the dread I'm feeling might be accurate.

I hesitate. I'm going to run. I am. But...what if he's telling the truth? That we're miles and miles from help, and all I'll do is get lost?

He's also promised that if I run, and he catches me, he'll fuck me, and it isn't going to be gentle. And while there's some fucked-up attraction going on here, by running, I'm agreeing to his terms. I let my gaze wander down his body. He's massive.

God, I want him to fuck me. What does that say about me?

I take a breath. The cold morning air is sharp with frost and the scent of pine and fear, or maybe that's anticipation. I saw this man kill, or at least saw the aftermath of his murder scene. I don't think he'd hesitate to do the same to me. Why didn't he just kill me right there, though?

I don't know what this man is planning for me, nor what he's capable of. I don't know what the Kings will do when I return, either.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. I'm not going to let myself go down that spiral. There might be no good options, but at least there are choices for now. And I can't just give up. I can't stay here like a sweet little captive for this man. I have to fight, to try to get away, no matter what the consequences are.

And if I fail, I'll at least get the chance to feel him inside me. That's enough of a consolation prize for me.

I step slowly through the doorway, past the hulking man who's planning to hunt me down like a deer.

"Run fast," he says, his voice husky.

I walk down the three steps, then take off.

I throw a glance over my shoulder as I near the edge of the woods. He's standing, unmoving, watching me. I focus on the path ahead and pick up my pace.

I was an all-state track champion in high school. I can run like this for hours. Okay, maybe not hours.

And maybe the high school track was smoother terrain than the twisted mass of roots that catch my feet with every step, forcing me to alter my gait into short, choppy steps. The dry leaves that coat the forest floor hide them, too, so I can't concentrate on anything other than where I'm stepping.

I've barely run for five minutes when I slow, panting hard. I can't be this out of shape. It's the terrain, or maybe it's that my heart's been beating out of my chest since the minute I saw him in Bobby's apartment. He gave me a head start, so I should have some cushion.

I soon find an area where several trees stand together and hide behind them. I

strain my ears for any sound of movement. At first, there's just the rustle of leaves in the soft breeze.

Then the crunch of leaves underfoot.

It sounds distant, but it's there. I listen again, trying to see which direction it came from, but it's silent now.

He's out here, though.

I push off the trees and keep running, slower this time. If I fall or twist an ankle, I have no chance. And they say slow and steady wins the race, like the tortoise and the hare, but in this scenario, I'm the rabbit. And there's no turtle, just a predator on my heels.

The crunch of leaves underfoot is giving away my position. I can only hope I'm faster than him. I must be. Right?

Another few minutes of running and I'm breathing hard again. I slow to a walk, trying to make my steps silent. I listen. There are no sounds other than the chirping of birds and the humming of the forest.

It's early, so I have time to find shelter before night comes. Water, too.

I freeze when I hear the crackle of leaves, holding my breath. Is it him?

A chipmunk darts across my path.

I laugh in relief. I'm so in my head that a fucking chipmunk scared me.

"Something funny, little rabbit?" The deep, familiar voice comes from behind me. Shit.

I let out a scream, then start running again, faster. Adrenaline courses through my veins.

I only make it about ten yards before he grabs the back of my shirt, stopping me in my tracks and forcing me to the ground. The layer of dead leaves doesn't offer much padding, and the dirt below is cold. Twigs scrape against my arms.

“Got you,” he growls.

Wolf places one knee on either side of my hips, holding me in place while I struggle. My hands pushing at his legs do absolutely nothing to move his bulk. His hand dips into his pocket and comes back with a switchblade. He opens it with a flick of his wrist, then holds it up so I can see.

The cold metal gives off a dangerous glint in the sunlight filtering through the dense trees. I hold my breath as fear trickles down my spine.

“Are you going to be a good girl for me?”

“Yes,” I whisper, too afraid to move. My heart is hammering so hard I hear the blood rushing through my head.

Now that he’s looming over me, the idea that he’s going to fuck me isn’t exactly as exciting as it was when it was just a vague possibility. It’s terrifying. He’s huge. I know he won’t be gentle.

I swallow hard. “I’ll behave. I promise. You can take me back to the cabin. I’ll be good.”

“Too late for that, little rabbit. You chose to run, knowing exactly what would happen.” He lifts the blade and brings it down through my shirt, slicing the fabric in two so it falls away from my body, revealing my bra.

He cuts through that, too.

My breasts are on full display to him, and my fucking nipples are hard as pebbles. I could make any number of excuses for this. It’s the cold air. It’s the fear.

But even I know that there’s arousal thrumming beneath all of it.

Somehow, my fucked-up mind wants this. I want him to take me, to own me. No matter how hard I fight. I’ve known this since the minute I chose to step out of the cabin.

Who am I fucking kidding? I’ve wanted him since the first time I really saw

him, when he opened the trunk.

Wolf closes the blade and slips it back in his pocket. His hands roughly knead my breasts, and his thumbs flick over my nipples. They harden even more under his fingers, and he gives them a firm pinch. He moves down toward my feet as he grabs the waistband of my leggings and pulls, taking my underwear with them. He leaves them around my ankles while he stands and shrugs his pants off.

I now have a full view of the thing that was prodding my back last night. And I was right—it's not small.

I've had sex before, with boys back in high school. I've also been with a couple of the gang members, doing anything I could to earn my way into their good graces to get a shot at joining the Kings.

Wolf is nothing like any of them.

His cock is long and incredibly thick. It's a dark pink, covered in veins. It's pierced, too, with barbells running parallel to one another along its length. There's a drop of white liquid at the tip.

Fuck, that thing is going to destroy me.

He stands above me, stroking the long length with one hand. He smears the pre-cum over the head, then down the length.

I scramble backward, away from him, but make it only a few feet before his foot lands on my leggings. They're still bunched around my ankles, and they stop my retreat.

He leans down and rips the pants off of one foot, right over my sneakers. He keeps the leggings, still attached to my other foot, in his hand like a leash. He looks up, to the apex of my thighs that's already slick with arousal, and his eyes grow even darker.

"I like that you're ready for me, baby." He shoves my legs apart. "Hold on.

You're going to take every last inch of me. It's going to hurt, baby. I'm not small. But you want this. And you're going to take it like a good girl."

He notches himself at my entrance, and it's already too much. I whimper as he presses the head inside me. Just that stretches me painfully.

His sultry voice continues to taunt me, "You knew what was going to happen when I caught you. You wanted it. That's why you ran, isn't it?"

It's exactly why I ran. I needed to prove to myself that I wasn't just some scared little girl, that I could fight. But more than that, deep down, I wanted him to take me. I need him to force me, so it's not me that's giving in.

He presses in another inch. My pussy stretches around the invasion. I let out a whimper. I shove at his shoulders to hold him back, and he grasps both my wrists in one hand, holding them on the ground above my head as he pushes deeper, stretching me wider. I feel the first barbell at my entrance before it pops inside me. The breath that I've been holding comes out in a shrill cry of pain.

My scream awakens something in him, and he thrusts the rest of the way inside me, burying his monster completely in one ruthless plunge.

I finally run out of air and pull in a ragged breath. He starts to move, setting a furious rhythm.

I thought I'd had sex. I thought I'd even had rough sex.

But nothing compares to this brutal claiming. It hurts. And it feels so, so good.

He keeps going, driving in and out. My face is wet with tears. I hear a guttural sound, animal-like, and realize it's coming from me.

My body is reacting to his dominance. My pussy is getting wetter, coating him with my arousal. Through the pain, there's another feeling taking over.

The orgasm rips through me without warning. This time, when I scream, it's

from pleasure. My body spasms, my pussy gripping his cock. He lets out a grunt, slowing his thrusts just enough to lift my legs to his shoulders.

At this angle, he's even deeper inside me. He picks up his pace again, holding my hips and slamming me down onto his dick. Another climax is growing before I can recover from the first one. I've never had multiple orgasms. But I've also never been fucked with a cock like this, or by a man like Wolf. I don't know if this is a result of his pierced cock, the way he's fucking me like an animal, or his dominance. Maybe it's all three.

My pussy clenches around his cock again as he thrusts in, hard and deep. I cry out as I come in an explosion of sensation, waves crashing over me again and again until I can't get a breath in. Wolf pulls out, almost all the way, then slams deep inside me. He holds himself there, letting out a noise that sounds like a roar while he empties himself into me.

He pulls out slowly, letting me feel each barbell as his cock slides out of my ruined cunt.

It's only when he's out of me completely, pulling his pants back on while I lie on the ground, shattered, that I realize...

He didn't use protection.

Wolf

EVERLEIGH IS LYING ON the ground, looking completely destroyed with her clothing torn. Her hair is wild, with sticks and leaves tangled in the light brown strands. The sunlight hits her hair, and I can see a slight reddish hue. God, she's gorgeous. I keep my eyes on her while I buckle my belt. Her cunt was tight as fuck. It was all I could do to keep going as long as I did.

I know it hurt. It had to. I've never met a woman who could take me without pain, even before I got my cock pierced. But the strength of her climax—and the fact that she had more than one—tells me she didn't hate all of it, even though she's now curled into a ball, shaking.

Maybe I should feel bad. I don't, though. She knew what she was getting. She wanted it. And I like causing pain, especially for someone who needs it. I like the look of fear in their eyes. And the fear mixed with arousal in Everleigh's eyes will be a memory I jerk off to, years from now.

Now that we've both come down from the high of our orgasms, she looks different, or maybe I'm seeing her differently. There's something softer,

vulnerable to her. It awakens those protective instincts I've buried so deeply. I want to take care of my girl, fix what I've broken.

I nudge her with my foot. "Let's go, baby."

She doesn't move from her curled-up position, but she shakes her head slightly. At least I know she's awake and lucid.

I could leave her out here to fend for herself, I suppose, but she's safer in the cabin with me. There are wild animals in the woods that could tear her to pieces. And if she made it back to the city, there are dangers waiting for her there, too.

I reach down and lift her from the ground, my arms under her knees and behind her back. I curl her into my chest to carry her back to the cabin.

She made it a decent way, at least a mile. She's in good shape.

Unfortunately for her, so am I.

She's a slip of a thing and practically weightless. I spent most of my time in prison lifting weights. I came out of the joint with fifty extra pounds of muscle compared to when I went in, and I've been meticulous about maintaining it for the last few years.

When I was released, the parole board asked if I planned to return to running drugs. True to my word, I've stopped, cold turkey.

Now I stick to murder. I have no soul to risk, and it pays well. Although apparently, I've branched out to kidnapping. I've never pretended to be a good guy.

Everleigh lets out a small whimper. Unlike her twisting and fighting when I hauled her into the cabin, she's relaxed against me. Her leggings are still around one ankle, the scraps of her shirt and bra hanging off her arms.

There's no one within fifty miles to see us. Even if someone happened by, Everleigh seems too far gone to care.

By the time we reach the cabin, the sun is bright in the sky, the afternoon upon us. I bring her inside, re-engaging the locks, and settle her on the bed. Her eyelids flicker, but she's drifting on the edge of sleep.

Fuck, she's beautiful. Her long chestnut hair is fanned out on the pillow, and even with the remnants of the forest still tangled in the strands, it looks soft and lush. Her lips are parted slightly. They're a deep rose and seem kissable as all hell.

And Christ, those tits.

I turn my back on her and stalk to the bathroom. I turn on the tap, filling the bathtub with warm water. I stare at myself in the mirror as I wait. What's this girl doing to me?

The guy in the woods—the monster who stalked a girl through the forest, then took her roughly—I know him. He's who I've been for as long as I can remember. But this guy, the one who carried the girl back home like a fragile flower, who's running her a bath? He's a stranger.

Once the tub is filled with steaming water, I stalk back into the bedroom. She's asleep already, curled up on the bed. I pull a twig out of her hair. There's dirt on her arms and legs, dried semen between her thighs.

She doesn't move when I pull the rest of her clothing off, but she stirs when I lift her from the bed.

"Shh, baby. I've got you." I carry her to the bathroom, then gently lower her into the warm water, holding her up so she doesn't slip under. She's still half-asleep as I run a washcloth over her skin, tenderly removing the dirt.

When I bring the washcloth between her legs, she lets out a gasp, but then her knees fall apart, granting me entry. I realize I'm hard again. Jesus. This woman is affecting me more than anyone I've ever met.

I adjust myself in my pants with a soapy hand before I finish washing

Everleigh. I leave the washcloth on the side of the tub and bring my hand under the water, finding her pussy. Even under the water, there's the slick wetness of arousal. I run my fingers between her folds, and she lets out a soft moan, then a gasp when I push one finger up into her channel. It feels swollen, and I'm sure she'll be sore for a few days.

"Wolf," she whimpers, so softly I'm not sure I hear her at first.

I slide my finger out of her and place my palm on her mound, cupping her sex with my hand. "I've got you."

I lift her up and wrap her in a towel. Once she's dry, I carry her back to the bedroom and place her on the bed. Her head hits the pillow, and she whispers my name again, so soft I wonder if I'm imagining things.

I shove down the urge to kiss her forehead. To pull the covers up over my sleepy little rabbit. Men like me can't get attached. The lifestyle I lead aside, I'm not a protector, and that's what she needs. I've tried to fill that role before for someone else. It's why I know I can't be that person for Everleigh.

Asher

“**W**HAT THE FUCK DO you mean, she’s missing?” The words come out in a roar. I don’t give a shit what the Brothers think of me right now.

The leadership—the Brothers—of the Kings of Blood are gathered in what we call the War Room. It’s not the fancy place the name calls to mind. It’s just the basement of an old casino that the group owns, but it’s good enough for what we need.

There are several large tables set in a circle with one gap to allow access to the inner ring. It’s the setup other people use to facilitate discussion, business meetings and the like. For the Brothers, it grants us a front row seat to witness whatever we’ve commanded: rape, torture, you name it. In some cases, it affords a front row seat to an execution.

Jimmy wrings his hands. He’s a scrawny little bastard with buck teeth, and right now he’s wriggling like the worm he is in the center of the tables. I never should have trusted someone like him to take care of this. He’s an underling, still trying to prove his loyalty to the Kings. He wants to be a bad-

ass, to say he's a member of a gang as powerful as the Kings, but he doesn't want to put in the work. Worse, he doesn't have enough at stake, especially for this job, or at least that's how he saw it. All he had to do was make sure the job was done. I'm sure he thought he had nothing to lose by playing fast and loose with this one, since he didn't know the whole story.

No one ever knows the whole story behind Kings' business, other than the people in this room. Sometimes, even the Brothers don't know the entire truth. And everyone has something to lose.

"It—it seemed like it was under control. So I, uh...figured things were set, once she went into the building." Jimmy avoids my gaze, staring at the table before him.

This time, my words are deathly quiet. "Let me make sure I understand, Jimmy."

He nods, a small smile of hope on his lips. I want to slap it off his face.

"You were asked by the Brothers to follow Everleigh. To ensure that the job was done and done right. Did you even go into the building?" I lean forward, my fist curled on the table.

He gulps and shakes his head.

"And now my sister is missing."

He nods his head. "But I, um—"

I hold my hand up. "You fucked up, Jimmy. The Kings of Blood don't tolerate fuckups." I glance toward Dante. His dark expression and large frame underscore the authority he has as the Boss, and he's the only one who can veto an execution at the last minute like this.

He gives an almost imperceptible nod, granting me permission to continue.

"Your blood will be spilled, Jimmy," I utter the line that all Kings hear just before they die.

Then, I lean back in my chair. Jimmy's eyes dart around in a panic, and I watch as they slit his throat.

It seems like the final word on the subject, and it is—for Jimmy. But not for me. There's too much at stake here.

Where the fuck *is* she?

Everleigh

EVERYTHING HURTS. I SUPPOSE I should be grateful that Wolf brought me back to the cabin and cleaned me up. He could have left me for dead out there in the woods once he had his way with me. What does he want now?

I'm sore between my legs, more than I've ever been. Even more than I was after I was raped by one of the Sinners, a rival of the Kings. I think they thought they could get to Asher through me, but their plan backfired. I wasn't wet for that at all, and it hurt like a bitch, but at least that guy was small.

The joke was on them, though. Asher hasn't been my protector since he left home. I'm not sure that he thinks about me at all these days. But the rape was the incident that spurred me to ask for entry into the Kings, for protection from the other gangs in addition to the hope of Asher letting me back into his life. It never occurred to me that I could be hurt worse on this side of things.

Now that I think back on that time, I know this was different. I didn't have a choice once Wolf caught me, and it hurt like fuck. But he warned me. I knew

exactly what was coming if he caught me, and I ran anyway. And I wanted it. It's half of the reason I ran. Maybe more than half, if I'm being honest.

I wanted him to catch me. I wanted him to take me.

I didn't know about his piercings. But would I have made a different choice if I'd known all the details of the cock that was going to shred my insides?

My pussy clenches, and a wave of pain goes through me. Fuck. I curl my legs up until I'm in the fetal position.

At this point, I think he's just toying with me. I know these types of men. Apart from my father and brother, they're the only men I've ever known.

The men in my life view women as playthings. They have no qualms about playing with them any way they want and then throwing away their toys when they get bored. The tenderness Wolf showed me in the bath was all part of his game, wasn't it?

The tears prick my eyes. How did this become my life? I'm about to let myself wallow in my self-pity when a scuffling sound makes me bolt up, and Wolf enters the bedroom.

He sits on the side of the bed. The mattress dips, causing me to roll slightly toward him.

"How are you feeling?" He strokes my hair back from my face.

I don't want to play his games right now. I don't want the mindfuck of him being sweet. I gather all the vitriol I have left, spitting the words out. "Just fucking peachy. Some asshole chased me through the woods and fucked me."

His eyebrow quirks. "Really?" he asks, deadpan.

"Yes, really. Go away."

His hand grips my jaw, squeezing my cheeks as he turns me to face him.

"You chose to run. You knew the consequences. And you ran anyway." His eyes narrow. "Tell me you didn't like it."

He's not wrong, but I can't let him know that. I need to hold on to some control here.

I try to turn my head, but he holds my jaw firmly in place.

"Let me go. You're hurting me."

His eyes burn into me. "Maybe I like hurting you."

I pull away from him, harder, and he relents. I rub my face, glaring at him.

"I'm not fucking scared of you, Wolf."

He narrows his eyes at me. "You should be scared. I'm not a nice guy."

I don't answer.

Wolf lets out a sigh. "Everleigh, there are things you don't know."

I lose it. "Like what? Like the reason you killed Bobby Martinez? Like the reason you took me? Or like what you're going to do with me when you get bored? I know men like you, Wolf. You're not as special as you think you are. Just go ahead and fucking kill me now. I'm over it."

I'm met with silence. Minutes go by, and he doesn't speak.

Eventually, I peek at him over my shoulder. He's still there, his arms crossed over his large chest.

"Are you done with your tantrum?"

I huff out a breath. "Maybe."

He cocks his head to one side as he looks at me. "Good. And the answer to your rudely phrased question is yes. All of those are things you don't know."

"So tell me."

He shakes his head. "Show me you can behave. That I can trust you. Then maybe, *maybe*, I'll fill you in."

He needs to trust me?

Wolf stands from the bed and crosses the room to the bedroom door, pausing before turning back to look at me. "Come get some dinner. There are clothes

on the dresser. You need some food in you after all that running you did. You slept right through lunch. And Everleigh?” He waits until I meet his eyes. “You’ve never known any man that’s like me, baby.”

He’s heating some frozen meals in the kitchen. He sets one in front of me, with a plastic fork. I pick it up, then turn my gaze at Wolf to glower at him.

“Afraid I’m going to stab you if you give me a real one?”

He smirks, sitting down with his food.

I sit too, wincing when my ass hits the seat. I can tell he sees it, his eyes narrowing.

“You okay there?” He takes a bite of pasta, chewing slowly while he appraises me.

“What do you care?” I still hurt, and it’s his fault.

“Careful, now. You want answers, you need to behave. And that includes watching that mouth.”

I scowl, forking a bite of macaroni and cheese into my mouth. It tastes amazing, so I’m either starving, or he has some gourmet chef prep these meals.

I’m going with starving.

He’s chewing his own bite of noodles as he watches me. “You know,” he says conversationally, “I can make it feel good, too.”

I almost choke on my next bite.

His eyes are still fixed on me. They darken as he speaks. “It hurts when it’s forced, doesn’t it? Maybe you’d rather have it sweet and slow. I can make it feel good for you. Make you come, over and over.” He reaches for his drink

and casually takes a sip. “Or maybe you want it hard. Maybe you’d like me to hold you down and make you take every inch, over and over again.”

My mouth hangs open. Who the fuck can talk like this over a meal? I look down at my plate, but it’s now lost its appeal. I squeeze my thighs together under the table, needing to put some pressure on my throbbing clit.

When I look back up at Wolf, he’s staring at me with a hungry expression.

My pussy clenches.

He winks. “Behave, little rabbit.”

Asher

I FROWN AS MY call goes straight to voicemail. *Answer your goddamn phone, Everleigh.*

It's been three days now. And there's still no information. Everleigh went into that building and just fucking vanished.

It's making it hard to enjoy this blowjob. I put the phone down next to me on my couch and try to concentrate.

The brunette kneeling at my feet is doing an admirable job, but everything else that's going on makes me need to hurt someone. She's not the one I want to hurt, but she's the only one in my apartment with me, so she'll have to do. It won't be the first time. I've had plenty of practice at using a surrogate when the person I want to hurt—or fuck—isn't available.

I grab her ponytail and rise to my feet, wrapping her long hair around my hand to get a better grip. She winces when I pull her hair, but she adjusts herself on her knees to my height, then takes me deeper in her mouth. It's not enough. It'll never be enough.

I use her ponytail as a handle to slam her face onto my cock, shoving it deep into her throat. When she has a frantic look in her eyes, the whites going red, I pull back, just enough for her to breathe, then repeat the cycle.

I want to let her choke on my dick for real. That'd be the ultimate power trip, wouldn't it? Letting a bitch suffocate on your cock because it was just too fucking big to leave her room to breathe.

Like a good slut, she takes me deeper. I groan as her throat grips me.

The tears streaming down her cheeks are what really bring me joy, the thing that lets me come even though she's not the one I want. I watch them as I grunt my release, holding her in place so she has no choice but to swallow every drop of my seed as she struggles for air.

When I finally release her, she gasps.

She slumps to the ground but looks up at me. "Thank you, sir," she manages.

I wave a hand, dismissing her. I don't have the time, or interest, to engage more with her. I got what I needed, and she can get out now. There's only one girl I really want, and it's not this slut.

I turn away as I adjust my pants and buckle my belt. I pick up my phone, dialing the same number again. It goes straight to voicemail.

The phone is obviously off. I don't know why I keep trying. I've tried to ping the location, too, without success. Who just turns their phone off?

Someone who wants to disappear, I suppose. But why would she be trying to vanish? She doesn't have the resources to pull off a stunt like that, anyway. There's something else going on.

The girl scurries out the door just as I hurl my phone at the wall. It hits with a crack that should be fucking satisfying, but nothing is doing it for me today.

Dante walks through the door, his eyes lingering on the ass of the slut that just left. He watches her retreating form for a minute before he turns them to

me. “Any updates?”

I shake my head, curling my hands into fists. “Nothing. Fucking nothing.”

He rubs his chin as he saunters across the room to the floor-to-ceiling windows. He stands there for a moment, looking out over the city skyline. Dante has the same view I have from his penthouse, both of us enjoying the power trip of looking down on the world. Right now the sun is high in the sky and the harsh light is streaming in, but closing the curtains would change this apartment with a Godlike view to a cave, and I’m above that.

“This was your job, Asher. You promised this would go as planned. You have a lot riding on this, and you’re in a tenuous position right now. From where I’m standing, this has turned into one big goddamn mess.” He shifts to glance back at me. “The Kings don’t tolerate messes. Clean it the fuck up. All of it.”

I give a nod. I refuse to justify anything to him. He doesn’t know the whole story, anyway. He doesn’t need to. I can handle this.

Dante gestures toward the door. The brunette has disappeared down the hallway. “That one of yours?”

I shrug. “She gives good head. I’m done with her, though. You know I don’t like to reuse my things.”

He chuckles. “Same here. I don’t usually take sloppy seconds, but maybe I’ll fuck her later.”

I shrug. I don’t give a fuck what he does with the slut. I don’t even know the girl’s name.

Dante strides toward the door, all business again. “At the risk of sounding like your fucking mother, clean up your goddamn mess before you play with anymore new toys.”

My jaw tightens at the mention of my mother. I was never the perfect kid,

and my parents and I always had a strained relationship. I didn't really understand the reasons until recently. Now that I know why, it makes perfect sense. It also means that I don't give a fuck about what they thought of me. At any rate, the last thing I want to discuss is my mother, but I know better than to get into it with Dante.

He slams the door behind him, leaving me alone in my big fucking apartment with my big fucking mess.

Everleigh

WOLF IS WATCHING ME. My eyes are on the book in my hands, some old novel that was on his bookshelf, but I'm barely concentrating. I can feel his stare. His gaze is so intense that it's almost like he's touching me.

God, I want him to touch me again, and how fucked up is that? This man killed someone, kidnapped me, and has made me his hostage. The way he took me in the woods was brutal and unforgiving. I should want nothing to do with him.

I'm usually good at putting up walls. I can keep myself at an arm's length when it comes to almost everyone, especially men. It's better that way. Safer. But with Wolf, my body has other ideas. It's been deliciously sore for the last couple of days, and he hasn't touched me while I've recovered from the ruthless manner he fucked me. But now that the soreness has faded, I'm aching in a whole different way.

I can't let myself get attached to him, even if it's just physical attraction. I can't open up to him or leave myself vulnerable. He's a ruthless killer. I

know this.

But I also know he wants me just as much as I want him. I can try use that to my advantage.

I let out another sigh, all breathy like some goddamn Disney princess, and reposition myself on the couch. I pull my arms in, pushing my boobs together to maximize cleavage. I watch him out of the corner of my eye. His eyes narrow.

It's a dangerous game I'm playing. I know that. But there's a power in being able to push a man. Being able to get him to the point where he wants you so badly that he can't help himself. Up until now, he's had all the control. I need some of that power. I want the upper hand, just for a while.

I lower the book to look at Wolf. His eyes are dark, heavy-lidded with lust. I bite my lower lip as I make eye contact with him and hold it.

"What are you doing, princess?" His voice is dark, gruff.

I smile in what I hope is a sultry way. "Nothing. Why?"

He lets out an evil-sounding laugh. "Oh, I doubt that. Just be careful, little rabbit. You're playing with fire, and it's easy to get burned."

"Maybe I like it hot."

I want to get burned by Wolf. I want him to lose himself with me. I want to have that control.

He leans toward me, and I part my lips in anticipation.

Then, there's a scuffling sound. We both freeze.

I hear it again, coming from near the door.

"What the fuck was that?" I whisper.

"Language." His voice is low as he listens intently.

The sound comes again, closer this time. It sounds like scratching now, like tiny claws on a—

“Fuck!” I screech as something small bolts across the floor in front of us, scrambling to pull my feet onto the couch. “Is that a mouse?”

“Goddammit. How did that get in here?” Wolf rises from the couch.

“What is it?”

“It’s a chipmunk. Probably looking for food.” He moves toward the tiny rodent. The chipmunk is huddled against a wall, but it takes one look at the giant coming toward it and sprints away, scabbling across the room to hide in a corner.

Wolf follows, stalking his tiny prey.

He looks so serious. I let out a giggle, and Wolf glares at me.

“This isn’t funny.”

This makes me laugh even harder. It’s fucking hilarious, this massive man chasing a tiny woodland creature around his living room, and it’s making me forget the fucked-up situation we’re in here. Forget me getting control. This chipmunk is the one with the upper hand now.

The chipmunk makes a break for it, darting across the room and under a bookshelf. Wolf turns so fast he almost falls over as the chipmunk runs right across his path.

“Dammit! Get over here, you little fucker.” Wolf follows the chipmunk, then drops to the ground and peers under the bookshelf at the little stowaway. He sticks his hand underneath, trying to grab our tiny home invader.

“Um, Wolf, you might not want to—”

“Aaahhh!” He yanks back his hand. “The fucker bit me! Get back here, you little asshole. I’m going to skin you alive. Then I’m getting a shotgun and coming for your entire little rodent family. Breaking in here will be the last thing you do.”

This is what breaks the dam and now I’m laughing so hard I’m crying. The

chipmunk is dashing around in a panic. Wolf is stomping around, waving his wounded finger in the air and threatening the chipmunk.

Finally, he herds it toward the door. He opens it with a keypad to the side of the door before ushering it outside. Huh. So that's the secret.

I'm still laughing when he drops back on the couch with a heavy sigh.

"It's not fucking funny, Everleigh." He gives me an aggrieved grimace, but the whole chipmunk debacle has shown me another side of Wolf. It's softer. Protective, in a way.

"It is too! You, chasing that little thing around, and—" A thought occurs to me, and my laughter dies. Oh no.

Wolf tilts his head. "What is it?"

This could be bad. "What if—what if it laid eggs in here?" I whisper. There could be a whole chipmunk infestation.

Wolf stares at me, then bursts into laughter of his own. "It didn't. I promise." He can barely get the words out.

I get the distinct sense that he's now laughing at me and not at the chipmunk. I scowl. "What's so funny about that? It could happen."

It takes him another minute to stop laughing. He wipes his eyes. "Fuck, I haven't laughed that hard in a long time, baby."

I still don't get why it's so goddamn funny.

"Chipmunks are mammals, princess. Like dogs. Do you think dogs lay eggs, too?" He dissolves into uproarious laughter again.

Oh.

Wolf

THAT LITTLE FUCKER GOT my finger good. It's still sore, hours later. I glare at the tiny red bite mark.

Everleigh stands next to me at the mirror. "Can I, um..."

I look at her in surprise. Her hands are held out, reaching for mine. She doesn't wait for an answer as she gently takes my hand and places it under the running water, then washes the bite gently with soap. Once it's rinsed, she turns off the bathroom sink and pats my hand dry with a towel.

It's been so long since anyone offered me anything like caring that I don't know how to respond. I'm still trying to figure out what to say as she leaves the bathroom.

I stand there in silence for another minute before pulling myself together and walking into the bedroom. Everleigh has slipped beneath the covers already, having pulled them up so they're just covering her breasts, and it's obvious she's not wearing a shirt. She's lying on her back, watching me.

I tug my shirt over my head and shed my pants. Her eyes follow every move. I grin as I watch her tongue dart out to lick her lips.

“Wolf. Come here.” The words are just above a whisper.

I can see the game she’s playing, angling for some semblance of control in this situation. She’s smart, and I know just how easily I could lose myself in that sweet cunt of hers. She won’t get the control tonight, though. If she wants it, she’s going to have to beg.

“What do you need, Everleigh?” I cross my arms over my chest.

She bites her lip. God, she’s fucking adorable. I want to feed my cock into that sweet mouth, but it’s going to be on my terms, not hers.

“Just thought you might want to come join me.”

I snort. “You’ve really got no choice there.” I drop my boxers, too. My cock is already hard. I can tell from her small gasp when she sees it that she’s in over her head, that she’s already forgotten just how large I am. “Scared, little rabbit?”

Her eyes are wide, but she shakes her head. “No.”

I ease under the covers and slide toward her, running my hand down her side. She’s completely naked.

So much for the scared girl from that first night, the one who came to bed fully dressed.

She shivers and pulls back slightly. Her small hand traces my chest, then down my abs. She hesitates for just a second, then touches my cock. Her fingers are soft, hesitant, and now I know exactly what she’s up to. The scared little girl is still there, hiding behind a brave façade. This is all about control for her.

I chuckle, running the back of my hand over her nipples. They’re hard as rocks. “You want that cock again? It wasn’t enough for you when I took you in the woods?”

“I just thought—maybe I’d offer you something you want. Maybe you could

give me something I want, then.”

Oh, this little fox. I love this game. And I’m *really* going to love this game when I win.

I don’t give her any warning before I shift us both, bringing her underneath me. She’s caught off-guard, so she doesn’t fight, but even if she did, she stands no chance against me. I kneel with my knees on either side of her hips, pinning her in place, and I grip her wrists in one hand as I bring them above her head.

She lets out a squeak. Her hands grasp for something to hold, then ball into fists when they can’t find purchase.

“Listen up, little girl. When there’s something I want, I take it.” I dip my head, swirling a tongue around her nipple, then biting down. Her hips lift off the bed toward me. She lets out a groan. I pull my mouth off her nipple and look her in the eye. “If there’s something you want, you can beg me for it.”

She struggles at the wrists I’m holding in place. “Maybe I can make you feel good.” She licks her lips, but it’s hard to be seductive when you’re pinned to the bed.

I grip her chin with one hand, pulling down on her bottom lip to open her mouth, then forcing my thumb inside. “Suck.”

She does, and for a moment I let myself imagine that the swirl of her tongue is around something else. I remove the finger from her mouth with a pop and hold her chin in place.

“This is how we do things around here. My way.”

I let go of her hands and reach over the bed to grab the belt from my pants. I wrap it around her wrists, tightening it, and then loop one end through the slats of the headboard. I tug on it to make sure it’s secure.

Her eyes are wide as she pulls at the restraint. “What are you—what are you

doing?”

“Taking what I want.” I slide down, separating her legs and positioning myself between them. I hold her open, one hand on each thigh, and bring my mouth to her pussy. I run my tongue along her labia. She’s wet with arousal, and she tastes amazing.

Everleigh lets out a groan as my tongue circles her clit. I draw it into my mouth, sucking hard on the bundle of nerves. Her hips start to buck. I release her clit and circle my tongue around her entrance, then push it inside.

“Oh my God! Oh my God, Wolf. That—” She breaks off with a moan as I curl my tongue inside her.

I pull back. “What do you want, princess?” I run my tongue lightly along her pussy lips.

“Oh God. I want—I want you to fuck me.” Her hips arch.

“Thought you were sore.” I slide a finger inside her channel as I pull her clit back into my mouth. She clenches around my finger. A hiss of pain fades into a moan as I press up against her G-spot lightly. I don’t want her to come. Not yet. She’s going to stay right on the edge where I put her and she’ll learn who’s in charge.

She gasps. “Fuck! Oh my God, I’m going to—”

I pull away from her. I can see her sweet pussy clenching around nothing.

“No! God! Wolf, please, I need to come. Please. Please.”

I chuckle darkly. “I told you that you were going to beg. Ask nicely for what you want. Use your words.”

She writhes beneath me. Her body is tight, a sheen of sweat starting to form.

“Wolf. Fuck me. Please. I need it.”

I rub my cock along her slit. I need her to beg me. “How do you want it, baby?”

“Hard. Please, fuck me hard. Please.” Her voice has gone up an octave. There’s a tear in the corner of her eye. It makes its way onto her cheek as she squeezes them shut. She seems to get off on humiliation as much as she does with pain.

I notch my hard length at her entrance, ready. She wants control? This is her one chance. “You sure, Everleigh? You sure you want this? You might still be sore. This is going to hurt.”

She nods, frantic. “Please. Fuck me. Hard. Make it hurt. Please, I need—”

I drive inside her, sheathing myself in her in one vicious thrust. I pull back and plunge in again, even deeper. Her cunt clenches, gripping me in a vise, and she moans her release as I let her topple over the edge.

I hold myself still inside her as she recovers, then start to move again, slower this time. I want her to feel every inch, every ridge of my piercings. She lets out a whimper. Her pussy is tender from the way I fucked her in the woods, and now that she’s coming down from her climax, she’s feeling every bit of pain. I cover her breast with one hand, squeezing before I catch her nipple in a hard pinch.

I press my lips next to her ear. “Isn’t this what you wanted? You wanted to fuck me, didn’t you? Wanted to bring me to my knees?” I increase my speed, my force. Fuck, she’s tight. She’s going to feel this for days. “Don’t forget who’s in charge here, little rabbit. You’re mine.”

I flip her onto her stomach, then pull her hips back until she’s on her elbows and knees. She mewls as I pump into her, this angle letting me hit her G-spot with every hard stroke.

I feel it before she does, her cunt getting slicker as her body accepts this invasion and starts to let it feel good again. Her whimpers turn to moans, and her pussy tightens around me.

“That’s it, princess. Come for me, baby.” I reach around to pinch her clit as I bury myself deep inside her.

She comes, crying out my name in an explosive climax, her entire body tightening around me. The sound of my name from her lips pushes me over the edge, and I join her in the best fucking orgasm of my life as I empty into her.

Wolf

SHE'S GORGEOUS WHEN SHE'S asleep. Her eyes are closed, and her lips are slightly parted. I think this might be my favorite version of Everleigh.

Sure, I like the little spitfire who tried to fight me, the tough-as-nails girl who was ready to kill Bobby Martinez. But this Everleigh is innocent. She rolls over, away from me, and snuggles under the covers.

She's too innocent, too pure, for a monster like me. I need to find a way to keep her protected without letting myself get attached. I don't deserve someone like her, and she deserves much better than I could ever offer. I've reformed some areas of my life, the ones that sent me to prison. But I associate with bad people. I make a living—a damn good one, it turns out—killing people. I'm not the kind of man who has relationships or settles down. She stretches next to me, then rubs the sleep out of her eyes, her head on the pillow. She's relaxed, vulnerable. I love her like this, even though I know I shouldn't let myself indulge in these feelings.

“Good morning.” I nuzzle my face in her hair. It smells like pine and summer. I didn’t even realize summer had a smell, but now I can’t forget it. Fuck, just the scent of her is making me hard.

She rolls toward me. Her chestnut-brown hair is messy around her face. “Good morning.” A sleepy smile stretches across her face, her cheeks flushed and her lips pink, even with no makeup. She has the sheets pulled up under her armpits.

I prop my head up with my elbow on the bed and my hand under my chin. I have a better view of her this way. “How are you feeling?”

She blushes, looking down at the bed. “Sore.”

I chuckle. I’m sure she’s thinking back on exactly what we did to make her that way, and sore is probably putting it mildly. I’ll have to make sure I didn’t cause any real damage to her beautiful pussy. She was tight, and I’ve never been even close to gentle with her.

“I’d imagine you are, princess. What exactly were you trying to get from me last night? Was that it? Just the sex?”

She bites her lip. “Not exactly. I mean, kind of. I just...”

I sit up against the pillows and look at her, waiting silently. It’s time that she knows the truth, or at least what I know of the truth. There’s always more to every story, and I’m sure this is no exception. I need her to ask me, though. I need to know she’s ready to hear what I have to say, to believe the facts.

Experience has taught me that when you tell people things they aren’t ready for, they have a tendency to push away the truth, to cling to their own reality. They vilify the bearer of the information. If Everleigh isn’t willing to hear the truth, I can’t risk her pushing me away. I need her to continue to trust me.

She blows out a breath. “I guess I was thinking that if I gave you something you want, then you’d tell me what you know. You said I don’t know

everything.”

I thoughtfully rub my hand over my beard. “That’s true. I’m sure there’s a lot I don’t know, too, but I can tell you what I do know. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

She sits up then, staring at me intently. Her eyes are bright. She looks as ready as I imagine she’ll ever be. “Tell me the truth.”

I shake my head and let out a deep sigh. This just might destroy her. It will shatter everything she thinks she knows when I introduce her to a reality that’s so different from the one she thinks is true. I keep my gaze fixed on her, watching for signs that she’s open to hearing everything I have to say.

“Trust me, Everleigh. Believe me when I tell you that you should just stay under the radar. Move somewhere and start new, with a new name. I can help you.”

Everleigh rolls her eyes. I know I sound overdramatic, recommending that she disappear. I get it. She doesn’t know me well enough yet to realize that I don’t exaggerate. I don’t overdramatize. I stick to cold, hard facts.

She sighs again. “So, what? I just abandon my life? I have an apartment. A job, sort of. Family. I can’t just leave it all behind.”

I choose my words carefully. I’m offering her an out, before I bring her world crashing down. “Those are things to consider. But I’m telling you that the safest choice here is to vanish. Start over—away from your old life.”

Her eyes narrow. I know I need to give her more. I just hope she trusts me enough that she believes what I’m about to tell her.

I take a deep breath. I’m stalling now, and she knows it.

“Everleigh... the job you were sent to do...”

“I was supposed to kill Bobby Martinez. You fucked that up,” she says, her voice accusing.

I shake my head, averting my gaze down to the bed.

“We have a job for you. It should be an easy hit, but it’ll pay well.”

I don’t really need the money, but it’s a lot for a simple hit. The job should be quick. Get into a man’s apartment. Kill him.

Wait for a girl. Kill her and leave both bodies. Make it look like a break-in gone wrong.

“This one is a high priority for the Kings. It has to go precisely according to plan.”

“You got it. I’ll call you when it’s done.”

I force my mind back to the present. I still can’t meet Everleigh’s eyes. “You were never supposed to kill Bobby. I was hired to kill him before you got there.” I pause and swallow. It’s not long enough for her to ask questions, but long enough, just barely, to bring myself to utter the next words. The ones that will change everything. “I was also hired to kill you.”

Everleigh

I 'M NUMB AS MY mind starts to process this new information. Who wants me dead so badly that they would have ordered a hit? Who would have set it up so Wolf would take care of both Bobby and me at the same time?

Even through the lack of feeling, there's a sense of... something. Safety, maybe. Wolf may have been sent to kill me, but his blunt honesty is more than I've received from most people in my life.

"My job... my job was a cover?" I whisper.

Bobby was collateral damage, or maybe someone the Kings wanted to get rid of, but he wasn't the main target.

I was.

Wolf has the good grace to look ashamed. He can barely meet my eyes. "You were never meant to be the one to kill Bobby. You were meant to go to that apartment and be eliminated in what would look like a drug deal gone wrong."

I was set up. But who... "Who do you work for? Who ordered it?"

My mind is going a million miles a minute. I don't know who to trust. This man who was just inside me was hired to kill me. It would seem reasonable that I wouldn't trust him, but he had the chance to kill me—more than once—and didn't. He might be the only one I can trust.

I may not agree with his tactics, but I'm alive because of him.

There's someone out there who ordered the hit, and I can't think of anyone who hates me that much. Who would benefit from me being dead?

Wolf finally sits all the way up, away from the pillows. "I don't work for anyone, Everleigh. I'm independent. A hired gun. I work for anyone who pays."

I'm in bed with a killer for hire. I don't know why this idea scares me more than the fact that I've seen him kill once, but it does, and I scoot away from him another inch. He stiffens but doesn't interrupt my interrogation. "Who hired you for this job?"

Whoever it is, the Kings are going to rain down fury on them when they find out. Asher has told me before that they don't deal with defectors, nor anyone whose loyalty is called into question. They just eliminate the threat. If someone out there hired Wolf to kill me, an almost-member of the Kings, they would see that as a threat to the gang.

Anger flares inside me. I don't know what I did to threaten someone to the point where they ordered a hit on me. At this point, I don't care. I want them dead, whoever they are.

Wolf looks me right in the eye, and my world comes crashing down when he speaks. "The Kings of Blood are the ones who ordered the hit."

Fuck. No. I'm not even sure I understand what's happening here. If this is true, then everything I knew is a lie. The Kings of Blood accepted me. They said I was in. That the job was just a formality. A way to prove my loyalty. Does Asher know? If they wanted me killed, is he at risk too? I need to find a way to warn him.

I look at Wolf. He's silent, his face serious as he watches me process things. "Who ordered it? Who hired you?" My voice wavers, catching on *hired*.

He shrugs. "I don't know, princess. Things like this aren't a matter of placing an order, where you can see who the buyer is. They filter it through so many layers that it can't be traced. An order for a hit like this would have come from high up in the organization, though."

I know Asher is high up in the Kings, but I don't know how high. New recruits aren't allowed to know things like that. We don't know who's in charge, nor how high the pyramid goes. We just know that everyone we've ever seen has someone above them in the chain of command.

This has to have come from higher than Asher. Otherwise, he would have heard about it and stopped it. Despite the distance between us over these past years, he's still my big brother. I have to believe that he would have protected me.

He's high up in the Kings, but no one knows everything. They must have kept this from him, and if they did, there's a reason. He could be the next target.

My stomach twists. Asher could be in danger.

"I have to leave. I need to warn Asher," I blurt out. I throw the covers off and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I don't even care that I'm naked right now.

Wolf holds his hand up, making me pause. "That's not a good idea,

Everleigh.”

I throw my hands up in exasperation. “Why not? My brother is part of the Kings, too. If they ordered a hit on me, he could be next.”

“Everleigh. Why do you think I brought you here?” He speaks slowly, as if trying to get me to understand. Waiting for the gears to start turning in my head.

I hadn’t really thought about his motivations at all, to be honest. “To keep me captive and fuck me, I assume. How long were you planning on keeping me?”

“That’s just it. I didn’t have a plan. I saw you and I couldn’t go through with it. I couldn’t kill you. That’s never happened to me before; there was just something about you. You remind me of—” He breaks off, shaking his head slightly before continuing. “But I knew that if I let you walk out of there, you were just going to die by someone else’s hand. If the Kings want you dead, they won’t stop just because I didn’t finish the job. If you go back there, it will be like walking right into the lion’s den.”

There’s a flash of pain in his features. Something about me? Or is there more to this for him? He was going to say I reminded him of someone, wasn’t he? Who? I study his face, taking in the war raging in his eyes. He was supposed to kill me. Instead, he took their money and didn’t finish the job. He might be in danger, too.

I whisper, “How much did they pay you?”

“Everleigh. It isn’t about the money.” He refuses to look at me.

It’s a lot, then. How badly did they want me dead? “Tell me. How much?”

“One million.” He finally raises his steely gaze to meet mine. “Half now, half once the job was done. And they’re going to want that back, just as much as they want you dead.”

Fuck. So Wolf took half a million dollars of the Kings' money and failed to do his job. I failed to do mine and also failed to get killed. At this point, we're both at the top of the list of people the Kings of Blood would like to get rid of.

Wolf's muscles twitch as he clenches his jaw. He should be terrifying when he's angry like this. I suppose he would be, if his anger were directed at me. The Kings may want him dead, but whoever they send for Wolf should be prepared for a fight.

Asher is still there, firmly entwined in Kings' business. If I'm in danger, he is too. The only reason I can think that someone in the Kings would have ordered a hit on me is to get to him.

"My brother. He's high up in their ranks. He could be in danger. We have to go back. I know where he lives, so I can help."

"We can't, Everleigh. It's not safe. The Kings will be looking for you."

"I don't care! This is my brother. Other than my parents, he's the only one who's ever looked out for me. And now that they're gone, he's all I have."

My voice cracks on the last words, and I swipe at the tears that are threatening to fall.

Wolf's jaw clenches again. "Dammit, Everleigh! I brought you here because the first time I saw you, there was something I needed to keep safe. I don't fucking *do* things like this. But now I'm the one looking out for you, and you need to fucking listen to me when I tell you things to protect you."

Wolf

SHE PLEADS WITH ME and dammit, this girl is making me soft. It only takes a few minutes before I'm reluctantly agreeing to return to the city.

It's a risky proposition. As soon as the Kings of Blood know where we are, both of us will be in danger. Me, because I failed to do my job and kill Everleigh after taking their money. Her, because, for some reason, the Kings want her dead, and they don't change their minds.

Nothing she's told me so far explains why they'd want her out of the picture. From what I can see, she's a sweet girl, if a bit sheltered. Her only connection to the gang is her brother. I can understand her concern; if they came after her, they might come for her brother next. But even that doesn't add up. Wouldn't they take him out first? Everleigh seems like an easier loose end to tie up than her brother.

The unanswered questions make me uneasy. I still think we're safer far away from the city. It's why I brought us here in the first place.

I don't have family, not anymore, and I don't have friends. When you live a life like mine, those are just a liability. If it were up to me, we'd disappear altogether.

This is all new to me, not having everything be completely dictated by my whims. I'm a man who takes what he wants. Money. Lives. Women. I use what I need and don't form attachments. Getting attached only leads to pain when those connections are inevitably severed, especially when it's your own fault. Yet here I am, giving Everleigh exactly what she's asking for. She begged me to fuck her. I wanted her to want me last night, and when she spoke those words, I almost came before I was inside her sweet cunt.

And now we're here again. Everleigh's asking for something, and I'm about to roll over like a goddamn golden retriever to give her what she wants.

She's in a pair of baggy shorts and a t-shirt when we walk out of the cabin to my car. The clothes she was wearing when I met her were destroyed after our time in the woods, and this is all I had to offer. It's better than nothing, I suppose. She pulls at the front passenger door.

I shake my head. "Nope. In the back."

"But Wolf—"

"Back seat." I cut off her whining with a swat to her bottom. "Don't make me take you back inside for a reminder of how to behave. You're lucky you're not riding in the trunk."

She pouts but obeys. I pull a seat belt across her lap before climbing in the front seat and starting the car.

Everleigh is silent through most of the drive. So am I, and since I never listen to music when I drive, the car is dead silent, with only unanswered questions hanging in the air. When I stop at a small convenience store on the side of the highway, she finally looks at me, a question in her eyes.

I shake my head. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

I don’t need the questioning eyes of the workers when I bring in a girl who’s wearing ill-fitting clothes and looks like she’s been on the run. Plus, security camera footage can be hacked easily. We’re walking right back into the Kings’ den, but we don’t need to give them a heads up that we’re coming.

She gives a slight nod and sinks down a bit in the seat.

I lock the car and walk into the shop.

It’s one of those hole-in-the-wall places where no one would really shop if it weren’t the only thing for miles. I pick up a few bottled waters that have dust on top and some packaged snacks. The expiration dates listed on all of them have passed. I think when you’re dealing with all these preservatives, those dates are more of a suggestion. I also pick up a burner phone for Everleigh, since I left her phone behind when I took her from the apartment building.

The TV is on behind the counter, playing the news, some fluff story about a dog who knows how to do tricks or something. The camera pans back to the anchor as I hand over cash for my purchases.

“More news today on the apartment shooting case. The police have now identified the victim as Bobby Martinez, an undercover police officer who had been working on a case involving the city’s gang wars. An investigation into his murder is ongoing. There is expected to be a press conference later today on the case, but at this time they have released the following security camera footage. Anyone with information on this individual is asked to contact the NYPD at the phone number on your screen.”

The screen changes from a view of the anchor to a grainy video of the apartment building lobby. I watch as a man walks through, followed by a smaller person in a dark top and leggings, her chestnut-colored hair in a

ponytail. *Fuck*. You can't see her face well in the video, but there's no doubt in my mind that it's Everleigh.

Bobby was apparently an undercover cop. That answers the question of why the Kings wanted him dead. The fact that they set up Everleigh to take the fall for it is a whole other level, though. This thing goes deeper than I thought.

I grab my things from the counter, waving off the clerk who's trying to hand me my change. He can keep the tip. I'm back at the car in less than a minute, my long legs covering the distance in no time.

I slide into the driver's seat and slam the door as I start the ignition. I turn back to look at Everleigh. She deserves to know about this new development.

Only, the backseat is empty. She's gone.

Fuck. My little rabbit is on the run again.

Everleigh

I PROBABLY SHOULDN'T HAVE run. When Wolf catches up with me —and I know he will—he's not going to be happy. But I have to do this on my own. Somehow, I've grown attached to him over the past several days, and I can't put him in this kind of danger.

My pussy tingles at the memory of the punishment he gave me when we first arrived at the cabin, spanking me over his lap like a small child. It hurt, but there was something intimate about it, too. The way he held me in place, firmly but gently. The way it felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest once he was done. The pain was cleansing in a way I hadn't realized I needed.

A part of me hopes that he does come after me, catch me, and take me over his lap again. Only someone who cares would go to the trouble of punishing me for running.

Something hitches in my chest. Wolf cares about me, doesn't he? Somehow, something has grown between us during our time at the cabin. Maybe he

didn't plan to bring me there, but it seems like it was meant to be in some way.

Something like grief stabs my heart. I miss Wolf already.

I suck in a deep breath. I need to get moving before he catches up with me. I stick out my thumb for a passing car. It slows, and an older man peers out the window of the old Crown Victoria. There's rust on the wheel wells.

"Need a ride, sweetheart?" he asks.

I nod without offering any other information. I must look ridiculous, in this oversized t-shirt and shorts that Wolf gave me. It's clear that they belong to someone much bigger than I am. At least I have my own sneakers, even if I don't have socks. With any luck, I'll be back to my apartment soon and in my own clothes.

"Are you heading to the city?" I ask hopefully.

"Sure am, sweetheart. Hop in."

He unlocks the car. I pull open the passenger door and climb inside. It smells like pipe tobacco and something else. Menthol, maybe? He pulls back onto the road without any further questions.

I stare out the window, watching the passing trees. It's been less than a week since I left the city—since Wolf took me, to be precise—but everything seems different now. Everything I thought I knew has been turned upside down.

Since my parents died, my life has seemed to move forward on autopilot. Go to a crappy gig, then another one. Drive for a ride share. Deliver food for people who are doing much better in their lives than I am. Scrape by, barely making enough to cover both my rent and food. It's been the same thing, week after week, month after month. All of my energy was focused on two things: surviving and finding a way back into Asher's life.

Now, though, everything has shifted. Nothing seems clear. The group that I thought would offer me protection, the way they've protected Asher for years, has stabbed me in the back, at least if Wolf is correct, and I don't think he'd lie to me. I don't know who to trust anymore.

You can trust Wolf, a small voice in the back of my head insists.

Not anymore. Not since I ran from him again. He's gone. He has no reason to help me. All I've been is a colossal pain in his ass.

I'm sure he's already driving the other direction, happy to be free of me. He hadn't planned for any of this. He can take his half a million dollars and start over, away from this whole mess.

The man in the driver's seat clears his throat. "It's probably none of my business, sweetheart, but...are you in trouble?"

I pull my eyes away from the forest that borders the road. "No, just... got stuck out here. A friend was supposed to give me a ride, and we had a falling out."

That's true enough, and to my relief, the man doesn't push. He gives a short nod. "Mind I we listen to the radio?"

"That's fine."

He turns a dial, and voices fill the car. So, he's the kind of guy who listens to NPR talk radio on road trips. This fact reassures me somewhat. What I've seen so far makes me think he's someone's grandfather. The type who smokes a pipe, pulls quarters from behind your ear, and sends you a five-dollar bill on your birthday with instructions to not spend it all in one place.

The rest of the car ride is filled with the commentary from the radio. The voices from *All Things Considered* drone on about plastics and their impact on the environment. It's interesting, as it turns out, and gives me something to think about other than my current predicament.

The man driving doesn't ask my name, and I don't ask his.

As we near the city, he asks for a destination. I give him a set of cross streets that will get me close enough that I can walk the rest of the way. I've never been to Asher's apartment, but I know his address. My digging turned up plenty of information, and the rest of it I got from the private investigator I'll be paying off until I'm thirty.

When I get out of the car, he leans over and speaks through the passenger window, like he did when he picked me up. "Be safe, okay?"

It's reassuring to know that there are still good people in the world. Maybe not many, but they're out there.

I give him a wave in response. He pulls into traffic, then I can't see the car as it gets lost in the commotion of New York City drivers. I give it a few minutes anyway, just to make sure he's out of sight, then start walking toward the address I have memorized.

Asher

I PACE AROUND MY apartment. The massive loft is owned by the Kings of Blood. If I don't clean up this mess, I'll be back to living on the streets.

I quicken my steps on the dark flooring. The story is all over the news now. You can't see Everleigh's face in the video they released, but anyone who knows her will be able to tell. I need to find her before the cops do.

I cross to the kitchen and pull out a crystal tumbler, filling it halfway with scotch, then taking a large swig. The burn as it goes down my throat is exactly what I need to focus on right now. I top it off before returning the bottle of Glenlivet to the liquor cabinet.

Everything was under control up until a year ago. I was rising through the ranks of the Kings to where I am now, third in command, with my finger on the pulse of everything. The money was secondary to the power.

To have both and to know that I'm so close to losing them...

I realize I'm gripping the glass so tight it's about to shatter. I breathe in through my nose, forcing my fist to loosen on the tumbler. I take another sip

as I step over to the main window. The massive glass pane—floor to ceiling—and its view was the selling point of this penthouse. I love being able to look out over the city. It gives a sense of power, of being so far above everything. People. The law. I rest my forearm against the glass, leaning into it as I take another swig of the alcohol.

There's a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" I call. I don't bother to move from my spot.

"It's me," a timid voice says in return.

Everleigh?

So, she is alive. And here, apparently. How the fuck does she even know where I live?

I stride across the huge open-concept living room and swing the door open. She's standing there in baggy clothes, a t-shirt and shorts that look like they were borrowed from a man. The thought that she's been with some guy makes my blood boil. Her face is free of makeup, making her look younger than her twenty-two years.

She pushes past me into the apartment before I can say a word.

I close the door and turn to face her. She's pacing back and forth, the mirror image of what I was doing just minutes ago. We really are more similar than people would think.

"Asher, you're in danger. Someone set me up. It's not safe. I tried to do the job, but someone was there, and the Kings were behind it. I don't know more. We have to go somewhere, stay safe, away from all of this." She pauses and takes in the vast penthouse for the first time. "This is your place?" The confusion in her voice is underscored with jealousy. I know exactly how she's been living the past year, and it's not in the lap of luxury.

She's not looking at me; she's looking around my apartment. It's lavishly

decorated, with high-end furnishings. The open-concept layout makes it appear bigger than it is. She seems mesmerized by the whole thing. So much so that she doesn't see my expression.

So she's shocked when I start laughing.

"Asher, what's going on?" She finally turns to look at me, her brow furrowed.

"I'm not in danger, Everleigh."

She tilts her head, her face still scrunched up in confusion.

"You are."

Everleigh is tied to the bed. I shoved her panties in her mouth after I took off her shorts and stuck a piece of duct tape over it, for lack of a better gag. She's spitting mad, but she's not going anywhere.

I walk around her slowly, taking my time. She pulls at the ropes holding her arms and legs in place. She fought me while I tied her up, but she had no chance. I'm bigger and stronger.

She's mine to toy with now.

"Mmmm!" Her cries are muffled behind the tape.

I pause in front of her. "What's wrong, baby sister?"

She makes another frustrated noise.

"I can't understand you." I laugh and watch her face grow even more red with anger. If looks could kill, I'd be a dead man.

But looks don't kill. Guns do. Or knives. And I'm not the one who will die here tonight.

I pull a switchblade out of my pocket and slice through the shirt she's wearing. Whoever the man was who let her borrow this outfit, I hope I get to

meet him. I'd like to slice him up, just like his clothes.

I let the blade rest between her breasts. Fuck, she has nice tits. Shame I couldn't enjoy them before now. I stare for another minute, then toss the knife on the floor. I bring both hands to her breasts, squeezing. They feel even better than they look.

I finally drag my eyes away from those glorious tits and back to her face. "If I take the tape off, will you behave?"

She nods. I grasp the edge of the tape, then pull harder than I need to. It comes off, ripping a cry from her throat with it as she spits her underwear out of her mouth.

"Fuck, Asher! What's going on? What are you doing?"

I'm now regretting taking the tape off—just a little. I don't want to talk, but I do want to hear her cry. I narrow my eyes at the small figure on the bed.

"You're supposed to be dead."

Her eyes flash fire. She has spunk. It was always one of the many things I liked about her. "Well, I'm not."

I shake my head with pity. "It's a shame. The guy we hired sounded reliable. I suppose even the best of us can make mistakes."

"You hired him?" Her expression goes from incredulous, to hurt, to angry.

"I mean, the Kings paid for it, but yeah. I made the decision, convinced them you needed to die." No reason not to own up now. She'll be dead soon enough. I can play while I clean up my mess.

"Why?" she whispers.

I don't answer. I tighten the ropes that bind her ankles, pulling her legs farther apart. Then I climb onto the bed, kneeling between her parted legs.

"Asher. Don't." She pulls at her bindings, desperation filling her features.

I ignore the horror in her voice. Instead, I pull her labia apart to reveal her

sweet cunt. It's swollen, pink. Someone's been inside her recently. The edges of my vision burn red. I bring my hand down on her mound with a sharp slap.

"Who fucked you?"

She cries out, but she shakes her head. "It's none of your business, you sicko."

I twist my lips in a cruel smile. It is my business, because she's my toy now. I shove two fingers roughly into her pussy, forcing a cry from her lips. I twist them inside her, then pull them out and shove three fingers back in.

Tears form in her eyes. One slips down her cheek. "Asher. No. I'm your sister."

I pull my hand out of her cunt and shove my fingers in her mouth. My fingers are deep enough that she gags. Maybe I'll fuck her mouth first. It doesn't really matter. I'm going to ruin all of her before I kill her.

I wonder what it would be like to fuck her corpse. The thought makes me hard.

I free my erection from my jeans, tossing the gun on the side table, out of her reach. I pull my fingers out of her mouth and use her saliva to coat my cock.

"Asher. No," she whispers again.

"Shut up, whore. You're not my fucking sister."

Everleigh

ASHER KNEELS OVER ME, his hand on his cock. I've never seen him like this. The sweet, protective boy who watched out for me, who chased away neighborhood bullies, is gone. The man in his place is one I don't recognize. This man is psychotic, unhinged.

He's going to kill me. I can see it in his eyes. They're dark and desperate, and that scares me more than anything that's happened since the minute I stepped into Bobby Martinez's apartment.

He strokes his cock, staring at my breasts. "You have no idea what it's like. Imagine wanting your little sister for years, feeling like you're fucked up beyond belief for feeling like that. Getting kicked out of your home at eighteen because your parents found the porn you used to take the edge off that obsession. Going through life with no other woman comparing to the fantasy of that little girl back at home.

"And then getting a call when you're thirty. Thirty fucking years old. From someone who claims to be your fucking mother. And she has proof. Proof

that the people who raised you have been lying to you for thirty. Fucking. Years!” His voice raises to a scream. I’ve never seen him like this.

“Asher. I—”

He keeps going, the words flying out of his mouth with venom. “They fucking lied to me. To both of us. You’re their child. I was some abandoned orphan they picked up and just decided to keep the truth from, even when it ruined my life. They never told you either, did they?”

I shake my head slowly. Our parents adopted him? I never knew. They must have kept it from us from a reason, but they loved us. Didn’t they? I’ve never had a reason to question them. But then again, I’ve never had a reason to question who Asher is, either.

“All those years I felt dirty, ashamed for wanting to fuck my baby sister. And it turns out, you’re not related to me at all. And now that the assholes who kept everything from me, lied to me, and kicked me out of my home are gone, you’re going to be mine. I’m going to fuck every hole you have. I’m going to destroy you, their perfect child. And then you can join them in hell.”

My eyes widen in horror. Our parents’ car crash. “Asher, what did you do?” I whisper.

He merely smirks.

Cold settles over me with realization. It was him. The brake lines. The car accident. He was the one behind it. I’ve been digging for information on Asher, but I’ve never stopped trying to solve our parents’ murder. Even the private investigator who uncovered so much information wasn’t able to find the answer. A side effect of the Kings controlling the narrative, I suppose. Did Asher know I would figure it out eventually and expose everything? Or did he want me dead because I was their biological child?

For years, I’ve believed that he was one of the few good ones. One of the few

men in my life that I could trust to protect me. It looks like I was wrong. The big brother I wanted so badly to count on is the one that's betrayed me beyond anything that anyone else has done. Darkness settles around me.

"I fucked that up, too. You were supposed to be in the car with them. I fuck everything up." An expression flits across his face. Pain, maybe. Regret. But it's gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced by a determined, almost gleeful look. "It doesn't matter. You're going to die now. After I have the fun that I've waited years for. I wanted that hot little cunt from the time I was old enough to look at the porn that your mother used to go snooping in my room to find. None of the girls in the magazines ever measured up to what I really wanted."

He leans over me, cock in hand. I close my eyes, gritting my teeth, trying to pretend I'm anywhere else. I can't believe this is how I'm going to die. Being raped by the boy I've looked up to for years, idolizing him, while he was looking at kiddie porn and wishing it was me.

He slaps my face, and my eyes fly open. "Watch me, bitch. Watch me while I take what should have been mine for years."

If I have to see him, he can see the hatred in my eyes. "Fuck you, Asher. I'll never be yours."

He hit my face again, this time backhanding me so hard that my head snaps to the side. The sound of his hand hitting my face echoes through the apartment like a gunshot. Then he whips his head around to look behind him, and I realize it was something else.

"Get the fuck away from her."

I pull in a deep breath. I'd know that growl anywhere. Relief floods me. How did Wolf find me? I hold the breath in. Maybe if I make no noise, Asher will forget I'm underneath him.

“Who the fuck are you?” Asher sneers. He makes no move to get off me. His knees push into my hips, his weight settling on my thighs.

I pull at my hands again. The ropes don’t give at all. The only thing I can try to move are my hips, but I’ll just push my groin into his cock, and that’s not going to help. I try to push myself further into the mattress; I want to get away from his touch.

“Get. The fuck. Away from her.” Wolf takes a menacing step closer.

Asher reaches for the gun on the side table, the one he pulled out of his pants when he took them down. He’s still reaching when I hear the sound again, but this time, it’s real. The gunshot reverberates through the loft. It’s louder than the last noise. The first sound must have been the door slamming open.

This is different. It’s deafening. The shot knocks Asher to the side. He falls on top of me, screaming. There’s blood pouring from a wound in his shoulder.

Wolf strides to the bed and lifts Asher away from me, dragging him by his hair. Asher’s agonized cries do nothing to stop Wolf. He tosses my brother to the ground. Then he puts one foot on Asher’s chest while he undoes the ropes that bind me.

“I told you to get the fuck away from her, asshole. Next time, you should listen.”

Asher is whining on the ground, clutching his shoulder.

I wipe my face as soon as Wolf unties me. I don’t care that I’m practically naked. I stand up from the bed. Asher’s gun is still on the bedside table, the one he couldn’t reach in time. I pick it up and train it on Asher.

“Fuck you, Asher. This is for our parents. For me.” I point the gun at his dick, which has shriveled since Wolf arrived.

“Safety, baby,” Wolf prompts.

I check the safety, making sure it's off, then aim again. And fire. Straight into his balls.

The scream he lets out this time is unholy, like a dying animal. Wolf steps away from Asher, confident now that he's not going anywhere with two bullet holes in him. He gives me a nod.

"Your blood will be spilled," I whisper. It's not audible over Asher's screaming, but I don't care. I aim at his head and pull the trigger twice.

Wolf

EVERLEIGH DOESN'T MOVE THE gun, so I gently remove it from her shaking hand, then tuck it into my waistband and gather her into my arms.

“I shot him,” she whispers into my chest.

“I know, baby. He deserved it.” I run my hands down her back. I pause, not sure if this is the right time, but I need to know. “Everleigh...what did he do to you? Did he hurt you?”

She shakes her head but doesn't lift her face. Her words are muffled by my body. I pull her back a step, then pick her up, cradling her close to my chest. I settle on a sofa, holding her in my lap.

Asher's bleeding body is still next to the bed, his groin mangled from Everleigh's vicious shot. I'll have someone clean it up in a bit. My priority is Everleigh right now.

I stroke her hair back from her face. “Everleigh. What did he do?”

She snuffles and shakes her head. “He didn't...you know...what he was going to when you walked in. He just slapped me and um...put his fingers in me.”

Fuck. If the asshole wasn't already dead, with his dick shot off, I would be doing him the courtesy of removing his favorite organ. How dare he touch my girl? A bruise is rising on her cheek. I run my finger over it lightly, and she hisses at even the slight contact.

"We're going to my place. I need to make sure you're okay." My gaze roams over her wrists and ankles. My jaw tightens at the rope marks already forming.

"I'm fine, Wolf. We need to take care of..." She shrugs in the direction of Asher's body.

He can rot right here for all I care, but I pull the burner phone out of my pocket and text a number I know by heart. "I have a buddy who will take care of it. Don't worry; this is what they do."

She studies my face for a minute. "Wolf...how did you find me? I haven't even been to his apartment before today. I had no idea he lived like this. I knew his address—that's it. He pulled away from our family when he moved out. I guess I understand why now. But I wanted him back. I wanted my big brother back." Her words break on a sob. "I spent all this time trying to get back in his life, and this is..."

She cries quietly against my chest while I rock her.

When her sobs fade, she pulls her head back and meets my gaze. "How did you find me? I know I didn't tell you where he lived or where I was going."

I take a breath. "You know I'm not a good guy. I did time in prison a few years ago for running drugs. I gave that up, but now I'm a mercenary. A killer for hire. I take jobs that pay well, do them well, and leave no trace. And I have nothing else in my life. I had a sister once, but..." I tighten my jaw. This isn't about me right now. "Anyway. When you have money and no

morals, it's easy to do almost anything. I knew you'd go to Asher's apartment. I paid someone for his address."

She relaxes against me, apparently satisfied for now. I let her breathing even out. We're going to come back to the way she got here, though. But that talk is for later.

I let her sit for a minute before I shift to get her moving. "We're going to my house now, Everleigh. I'm going to take care of you. And once you're healed, we'll have a little discussion about running from me."

I feel a shiver run through her, but she just nods.

She looks even smaller than her usual tiny self as she sinks into my couch. The bruise on her face is blooming in garish shades of blue and purple. She gives me a soft smile and lifts an ice pack to cover her cheekbone.

"How are you feeling, baby?" I sit at the edge of the sofa and grasp her hand. I never want to let go of her again.

I'm pretty sure she has a fractured cheekbone, and she'll have a decent black eye in the next few days, if not the next few hours. I check the whites of her eyes again. In another lifetime, I was working toward being a paramedic. I know the signs to look for to make sure she doesn't have a concussion, internal bleeding, anything life threatening.

Everleigh whimpers when I touch her cheek. The ice is helping, but she's still in pain. I rummage in the first aid bag beside me, finding some ibuprofen. When I hand it to her, she obediently swallows it down.

She takes a sip of water from the glass I hold out to her, then hands it back. "Wolf, I can't stay here."

“I have this townhome. You need somewhere to stay, and you need someone to keep an eye on you for a few days while you heal. You also need someone to keep you safe. Just because Asher is gone doesn’t mean the Kings have given up. So, until I know it’s safe, you’ll be with me.”

She glares at me, but her vitriol fades as I brush the hair back from her forehead. She tilts her head slightly. “You told me that Wolf is a nickname. What’s your real name?”

I wince slightly. “Phillip. Phillip Wolfson. You can see why I go by the nickname.”

Everleigh’s face lights up with a teasing grin. “Phillip? Like Prince Phillip from Sleeping Beauty?”

I smile back. “That’s right, baby. Your very own Prince Charming.”

Everleigh

WOLF'S PLACE IS A townhome in Brooklyn with two bedrooms. So much has happened in the past week that I wonder how things still look reasonably in order at his house. It's been here, untouched, while my life has been crashing down around me.

I also don't understand how I can have feelings for someone in such a short time. It doesn't make any sense, especially for someone like me. I've always played my cards close to the chest. I don't let people in. I don't fall quickly, or easily, for anyone. I'm not sure I've ever really fallen at all.

But here I am, staying at a man's house less than a week after I met him for the first time. And I'm not sure at all that I haven't fallen already.

Wolf's place is exactly what I'd expect. Everything in order, minimalist but functional. There's a small kitchen, a living room with a two-person dining table pushed up against one wall. A bathroom off the living room. There's a bedroom across from the bathroom, with a full-size bed and a few boxes in the corner. It seems like a guest room that's been used mostly for storage.

Wolf's tour of the house ends at the master bedroom. The large room is at the far end of the hall and has its own ensuite bathroom. There's a huge bed that looks larger than a king-size, as well as actual furniture: a dresser, two nightstands, and a bookshelf. This must be where Wolf sleeps.

I have the irrational thought that I want to go through his dresser. And maybe his medicine cabinet. You can learn a lot about a person by how they fold their clothes and how many outfits they have, more than you'll learn just by talking with them. What do they keep in their medicine cabinet—is it just Tylenol, or is there a supply of condoms as well? I'm not sure I want to think about Wolf having sex with anyone else. The sudden stab of jealousy catches me off guard.

Wolf orders us takeout for dinner. We eat the coconut curry at the small table, then move to the couch to watch a movie, and the strangest thing is how normal it all feels. Could this be my life? Eating Thai food and watching old movies with Wolf?

My cheek is still throbbing. Wolf hands me a pain pill and a glass of water, then waits while I swallow it down. I'm a lightweight when it comes to medicine, and I probably should have shared that with Wolf before I took the whole thing. The pill knocks out the pain, and once the ache ebbs, the exhaustion of the day catches up with me. I only realize I've fallen asleep on Wolf's shoulder when he lifts me off the couch. He carries me to the guest room and tucks me into bed.

"Go to sleep, Everleigh. I'll be here when you wake up." He closes the door behind him.

I wonder why he trusts me all alone in this room, and why I find myself wanting to be next to him. My normal has gone from being unable to sleep with anyone in my bed to needing him with me.

Alone, this bed feels too big, too cold. Empty. I'm too tired to consider his reasoning, though. I drift off to sleep as Wolf closes the door.

"You're the one in danger, Everleigh. You should be dead right now. Why do you always fuck things up for me?"

He twists my arms behind me, pulling them so hard I worry that my shoulders are going to dislocate. He secures me to the bed with rope that burns against my skin, pulling it so tightly that my joints ache.

The taste of my own musk makes bile rise in my throat as he gags me with my own underwear. I have so many things I want to scream at him, but I can wait. I don't know why he's doing this. He's unhinged. For the first time in my life, I'm scared of Asher.

"Just as well, you're going to die here today, sis. Dante knows exactly what I told him. That you're a security risk. He's the guy at the top, and he signed off on your death. The fact that I'm the one who gets to kill you now is just the icing on the fucking cake."

I scream into the gag, and he slaps me again.

I gasp for breath, sitting up in bed. The room is dark. My cheek is throbbing. It's not my room, nor even the cabin that I'd gotten used to. Where am I? My heart races for a minute before I remember. I'm at Wolf's house...in his guest bed. I'm safe. My face hurts because I have a broken cheekbone. Asher's not here.

Something from my dream comes back to me. A memory of something Asher said.

Dante *knows*.

He said Dante is the guy at the top. That he sanctioned the hit on me. That means that the Kings won't stop. They're going to come after me.

The bedroom door opens. Wolf hurries into the room, clad only in his boxer

shorts.

“What’s wrong? I heard you scream.” He sits on the edge of the bed and cups his hand around my face.

I take a few breaths, needing to gather my thoughts. “I was dreaming.”

“Oh, baby, it’s okay. It’s just a dream. No one is going to hurt you.” He runs his thumb along my jaw.

I shake my head. “No. It wasn’t a dream. More like...a flashback. I remember—what Asher said in his apartment. I remember now.”

Wolf’s eyes narrow, but his gaze remains fixed on my face. “What did he say?”

“He said... Dante knows. That he fed Dante some story about how I knew too much, that I was a security risk. That Dante sanctioned the hit on me. He said Dante is the guy at the top.”

Wolf doesn’t speak for a minute. Then he nods. “We’ll take care of this. In the morning. Go back to bed, Everleigh.”

“I can’t sleep.” I bite my lip. “I don’t want to be alone.”

He nods again. Without another word, he picks me up and carries me down the hall to his bedroom.

Everleigh

WOLF'S BED IS HUGE, just like everything else about him. It's not a king-size; it's bigger. I didn't even realize they made beds bigger than that, but I suppose he's the target market. Wolf tucks me in on one side of the bed, then climbs into the other. He pulls me into him with my back to his front. It's like the first night in the cabin all over again, only this time, his body brings me comfort, not terror.

I close my eyes for a minute, trying to calm my rapid heartrate. It doesn't work. The dream is still too close, the panic too real. I shift in the bed, moving against Wolf.

"What's wrong? Do you need a pain pill, princess?" His voice is full of concern. I hated it at first when he called me that. It sounded condescending, mocking. Now, it's almost reverent.

"No," I answer. I'm aching, but I don't think an ibuprofen will help right now. I wiggle my ass against his groin.

He lets out a low groan. "Go to sleep."

I roll over to face him. "I need you," I whisper.

“You have a broken cheekbone, Everleigh. And I know he touched you. He hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you. I want you to be ready before I touch you again.”

I shake my head. I need this. I need *him*. “I’m fine, Wolf. And I need... I need him to not have been the last one to touch me.”

Wolf doesn’t say anything, but he shifts us so I’m on my back, and he’s on his hands and knees over me. I can barely make out his features in the darkness. I reach my hand up to trace the outline of his face. He tilts his cheek into me, then turns his face to plant a kiss in my palm.

“Hold onto the headboard, baby,” he whispers.

I reach up, above my head, and grasp the bars of the headboard. The cold metal feels like wrought iron, which seems to fit a man like Wolf. He moves down my body. His fingers tug the waistband of the shorts—another pair of his, borrowed, since I have no clothes here—and pull them down and off my body. He bends my knees and pushes them out to the side and back.

I let out a moan when the air touches my clit, and Wolf settles himself between my legs. His hands run along my inner thighs, pushing them even farther apart. When he reaches my labia, he separates them. I pull in a sharp breath when he brings his face close to my pussy. His breath tickles my clit, and I jolt at the sensation. He lands a kiss on my mound, then moves lower.

His tongue runs along either side of my clit. I groan, arching my hips up, needing more. His hands gently push me back down to the bed, and he holds me there.

“Patience, little bunny,” he murmurs against my sex. *Fuck*. Patience has never been a strong suit of mine.

His mouth explores while I grip tighter on the headboard. I’ve never had a man go down on me before like this, where my pleasure was their sole focus.

I thought everyone was exaggerating about how good it was. I never understood the appeal.

I do now.

Wolf circles my pussy entrance with his tongue. He pushes inside, then pulls out and licks around the entrance again. He draws a line from my pussy straight to my clit. When he pulls the bundle of nerves into his mouth and sucks, my entire body starts to shake.

“Oh God. Wolf. Oh God.” I’m gasping the words. I don’t have any thoughts right now other than the sensations that are jolting through me. His hands are still on my hips, holding me in place while he feasts on my pussy.

Wolf’s lips release my clit and go exploring again, stroking every possible surface down there, stopping just south of my pussy entrance before he moves back up to my clit. I push up toward him as much as I can with his hands holding me down.

“Are you going to be a good girl and come hard for me?” Wolf’s voice vibrates against my sex, and I groan.

“Yes. God, yes. Please, Wolf.” I arch my hips up again. He presses them down, then brings one hand between my legs.

“Hold on, baby.”

He sucks my clit back into his mouth while he slides a finger into my pussy. He curls it against the front of my channel, then pulls it out and presses two fingers back in, curling both against my G-spot. I see stars as my climax starts to build, then takes over completely.

“Oh, fuck! Wolf!” I come hard, my pussy gripping his fingers while every muscle in my body spasms.

He holds his fingers there, grazing them gently along my pussy walls while I float down from my climax. When I stop shaking, he slides them from me

and brushes his lips over my mound before settling on his side next to me.

I'm breathing hard, still recovering. *Holy shit.* I've never felt anything like that. No wonder everyone talks about oral sex like it's some amazing thing. It is. It really fucking is, at least with someone like Wolf. And it's erased my body's memory of Asher's fingers inside me, at least for now.

"Holy shit," I breathe.

Wolf

I FIND DANTE'S CONTACT in Asher's phone. We took it when we left his apartment, and it's proven useful. It took a few tries to unlock his phone, but Everleigh was the one who cracked it. 10-14. Everleigh's birthday.

I call Dante from my phone. He answers on the third ring, surprising me. Most people these days don't answer calls from unknown numbers, let alone a blocked one.

"Yeah?" There are voices in the background.

"Is this Dante?"

"Who's asking?"

This one seems smarter than Asher already. "It's Wolf. I have Everleigh Mason. I... spoke with Asher yesterday. We need to meet."

The background voices fade. I have his attention, at least to the point that he's walked away from whatever he was doing so we could have a private conversation. "What are you doing with Everleigh? Are you willing to turn her over to us?"

I need to hedge here. “Depends on the price, I suppose.”

Dante snorts. “You think she’s still worth something? We already paid you half a million. I’m not ready to be on the hook for more. Plus, she owes us. Bring her to us and we can talk. Basement of the old casino at the corner of Bedford and Park. Tomorrow at two o’clock.” With that, he disconnects the call.

The address is in a shady part of Bedford-Stuyvesant. I expected something like that. I’m not too concerned for my safety, but I’m also not sure I want to walk Everleigh into that neighborhood.

“What did he say?” Everleigh steps into the living room.

She’s still in my clothes that she wore to bed, and fuck, it does something to me. There’s something primal about dressing a woman in your clothes. It shows that she’s yours. And Everleigh *is* mine, even if she doesn’t realize it yet.

“He wants to meet tomorrow. He gave me an address, but I don’t know about this, Everleigh. Maybe we should just get out of town. Go far enough away that we’ll be off their radar.”

She shakes her head, like the stubborn brat I knew she would be.

“No. I want to look him in the eyes. I want to know how much he knew about my brother. If he knew how messed-up he was. I need... closure, I guess.”

She steps closer to me and wraps her arms around my neck, looking up at me, imploring with her eyes. “Please, Wolf.”

She has a good point, and I can’t fault her for this one.

I lower my forehead to hers. “Okay. We’ll meet them, but you follow my lead. And you do exactly as I say. I know you want closure, but if we’re in danger, that’s off the table. I say run, you run. We do this together or not at all. Do you understand?”

The next day, we stand in front of a dilapidated building at 1:55. Everleigh is dressed in her own clothes for the first time in days. We stopped by her apartment on the way here. It had been tossed, obviously the Kings looking for clues as to where she'd gone, but no one had touched her collection of leggings and t-shirts. We grabbed a few clothes, but we'll need to go back to sort out the rest later.

The door opens easily to reveal three men, each holding a gun. They nod like they're expecting us. One starts to walk down the hallway with a jerk of his head, indicating we're to follow. Toward the end of the corridor, the hall curves around a corner to a door, another two men standing guard in front of this one.

"Hand over your weapons." The first guard holds out his hand.

I clench my jaw, but I pull out my Glock and remove the clip, then hand it over, along with the switchblade in my back pocket. He frisks me, then Everleigh, before he's satisfied that we're not carrying anything else. He nods to the other guards.

One of them pulls open the door, and I step inside first. Everleigh follows me. There's no room for being a gentleman and letting a lady go first when you don't know the extent of the danger that lies on the other side. Just through the door is a staircase, and when we reach the bottom, another door opens. This one lets us into their war room.

Every gang has one of these. A place where decisions are made, where traitors are executed. Every important decision for the Kings comes through this room—and the people in it.

Everleigh inhales sharply behind me. I'd imagine she's thinking of her brother sitting in this room over the years. I'm not quite that sentimental as I size up the men sitting in the room. Dante has to be the one in the center. He has a commanding presence, and he'd be intimidating to most people. The other men look to him as we enter the room, further confirming my hunch. He's the leader, and he makes the final call.

We stand in the center of the circle of tables. This is the hot seat. Everleigh shouldn't be here with me, but they needed to see her. I look down, seeing there are dark stains on the floor. Blood.

"Everleigh. We've been looking for you," the man at the center of the table says, his voice commanding authority over the room.

Everleigh moves slightly out from behind me. Her chin is jugged out. Fuck, I hope she doesn't say something stupid. Both our lives are on the line here, and we're sitting ducks without any weapons. "Well, I'm here. No thanks to my worthless brother. Did he tell you why he wanted to kill me?"

Dante's arms cross over his wide chest. "I know plenty. And it appears you do, too. A little too much."

A gun cocks, and Everleigh lets out a terrified squeak. My fists clench as I try to remain calm, even as one of the other men holds a gun to her head.

"Please. I don't know anything. I just wanted to find my brother."

I hold Dante's gaze. "Everleigh may have found information in her search to reconnect with her brother, but she poses no threat to your organization."

Dante's eyebrows shoot up, just briefly, before he schools his features. "Do you think there's something I don't know?"

Everleigh gives a barely perceptible nod. "Lots. Like who my brother really was. He killed my parents because he found out he was adopted. He wanted to kill me because I'm their biological child, not because I knew anything

about their deaths. I didn't even know who was responsible for that until I was in his apartment and he told me."

Dante clears his throat. "And why should I believe that? Asher was my third-in-command here. And now he's dead, too, and that one's on you."

"Well, he was an ass—"

Dante and I hold our hands up at the same time, and thank fuck, she closes her mouth. The sass really does come out when she's scared.

I pull a phone from my pocket. "Asher's cell phone. Check the messages. And for what it's worth, she did kill him in self-defense. I walked in on him about to rape her."

Dante quirks one eyebrow but remains silent, so I continue.

"He had Everleigh—his sister, regardless of blood relation—tied naked to the bed. He had his dick out, at her entrance. Tell me you wouldn't take care of a man that had your woman in that position."

A muscle clenches in Dante's jaw. He holds out his hand for the cell phone. I hand it over, and he leans back in his seat, scrolling through the messages.

There's plenty on there that's just Asher rambling, and lots of messages that he wrote to Everleigh over the last week while she didn't have a phone. As he gets more desperate, he implicates himself. I'm just glad Everleigh never got those messages, although she certainly got to see a side of him that I wish she hadn't. Some of those text messages are burned into my mind.

Asher: *Where are you?*

Asher: *You better be dead, slut*

Asher: *You ruined my fucking life, the only way you can fix it is to be dead now*

Asher: *Fuck, you better be dead or never come back. If they find out they're going to kick me out of the gang*

Asher: When I find you, I'm going to fucking destroy you like you destroyed my life.

Dante's still scrolling through the phone when he speaks. "Based on the information here, Asher lied to this group, and to me, to get us to sanction an execution based on a personal vendetta rather than a threat to the organization. Further, we may not be good people, but what Asher did to his sister crossed a line. For that, his blood would be spilled." He makes a subtle motion with his hand, and the man holding the gun to Everleigh's head steps back. Dante makes eye contact with Everleigh.

To her credit, she holds his eyes, her chin never wavering.

"The hit that was taken out on you will be revoked. Your membership in the Kings of Blood has been solidified by the blood you spilled, not of Bobby Martinez, but of Asher Mason."

Everleigh swallows. "Thank you, um, sir."

Dante isn't finished, though. "However, your brother Asher racked up a sizable debt during his time with the Kings of Blood. A large part of the reason he was so high in the organization was his promise of bringing in funds that never materialized. You might have noticed his apartment and lavish lifestyle. He led us to believe that he had money, or that he would be coming into money, and we allowed him a line of credit based on the anticipated return. Now that he's dead, that debt will pass to you."

Everleigh's face drains of color.

I step in front of her. "Everleigh will not be joining the Kings of Blood. She is under my protection, and as such, her debt will be managed by me. I'll initiate a wire transfer back to you for the amount paid for her death. Following that, we can discuss the outstanding debt and come to an

agreement that suits the Kings of Blood, but I don't want Everleigh involved."

Everleigh is gaping at me now, shaking her head. I ignore her. Unlike Asher, I do have money. Even a few million isn't a big deal.

Dante shrugs. "Given the circumstances, I'll accept that. However,"—his eyes narrow—"if anything regarding the deaths of Bobby Martinez, your parents, or Asher is leaked, it will be traced back to you, and your blood will be spilled. I will be in contact to discuss the repayment of Asher's loans. Do not disappoint me."

I nod. "Understood."

I turn toward the door. Everleigh stands, waiting uncertainly.

"Go, baby." I nudge her toward the door.

Toward freedom, and our future.

Everleigh

MY APARTMENT IS TRASHED. Wolf and I came back here to get some more of my things, but there might not be much that's salvageable. We grabbed a few clothes yesterday. We didn't have the time, or the heart, to tackle the rest. I look around, but at a glance, I can't see anything that's still intact.

I'm not sure if the people who did this were searching for something, or just out for revenge. If their goal was to hurt me, they succeeded.

The second-hand coffee table is on its side. The framed art prints that I'd painstakingly searched out at garage sales have been ripped off the walls. My favorite Curtis Sittenfeld novel, the one I have in paperback and hardcover, is ruined, both copies torn to shreds. I can barely recognize it by the colors of the torn pieces. My jewelry box is on its side. I don't really have anything worth stealing. Even my mother's engagement ring wasn't worth taking, although it looks like they stole it anyway.

The ring wasn't anything fancy—it wasn't even a real diamond. It looks real at first glance, and either way it was gorgeous. It's just one more piece of her

that I've lost.

I still have her locket, of course. I might not have had clothes when I was at Wolf's cabin, but I had the necklace. I've barely taken it off since she gave it to me six months before the car accident, only removing it to shower. Since she died, I haven't removed it at all.

The missing engagement ring bothers me more than I thought it would. I suppose it doesn't matter anyway now. The future I'd planned is gone.

It's strange to see the life you'd mapped out in your mind disappear. I'd been so convinced of the future ahead of me that it seemed real. They say don't count your chickens before they hatch. I always bought more into the idea of manifesting your destiny, or something like that. But the only thing that's manifested for me in the past year is clarity of how far my ideal is from my current reality.

The only family I had left turned on me. I'm reminded now more than ever, looking at my trashed apartment, that I'm barely hanging on with the gigs I've pieced together. I guess it's a blessing that I didn't have a full-time job I had to show up to. I would have been fired when I missed work while I was busy being a hostage.

In the end, I'm able to gather a few trash bags worth of clothing, a partially intact photo album, and several pairs of shoes. I also took the two textbooks that weren't destroyed. I may have dropped out for now, but maybe someday they'll come in handy to finish my degree.

Wolf waits patiently without speaking while I gather the few items I can salvage. I offer a smile, trying to hide the fact that I feel like my entire life has been ripped away. I can't afford to be nostalgic.

I try for a happy tone, or at least neutral. "Well, looks like that's it! At least it'll be easy to carry, right? You ready to go?"

Wolf holds my eyes, seeing right through my false cheer. “I’m sorry, baby. We’ll replace what we can. I know there’s a lot that can’t be replaced. I wish I could fix that for you.”

It’s both reassuring and terrifying that he can read me so easily. No one else has ever truly seen me the way he does. Tears spring to my eyes. I blink them back, but then he gathers me in a hug. His strong arms wrap all the way around me. His chest is warm, and he smells amazing. Not the sweat and musk that I was used to smelling at the cabin; now the clean smell of Irish Spring mixes with the sandalwood and cedar of whatever he rubs into his beard.

I bury my face in him. He stands there, unmoving. Just holding me. I’ve never been a hugger. With family, maybe, but in general it always made me feel trapped, too close to the other person and unable to get away.

This embrace is different. It consumes me completely, and instead of feeling ensnared by it, I feel safe. It feels right, somehow, being with Wolf.

It feels like home.

The thought jars me a bit. All of this is so fast. It’s not the way I planned, not even close. There’s been no dating. No courtship. No sweet first kiss on the front porch, or even on the doorstep of my crappy apartment building. We dove right in to the most fucked-up relationship ever, and it’s perfect. It might not be the future I imagined, but it’s real.

Now, I’m terrified that I’m going to do something to ruin it.

Everleigh

MY CHEEKBONE IS FINALLY healed, or at least well on its way. Most of the bruising has gone down over the last two weeks. It doesn't hurt as much, which is good. The pain pills helped at first, but now it seems like they're just making me nauseous. Wolf says in a few days I shouldn't need them anymore at all. I'm ready to be done with the vague nausea that's seemed to get worse over the last week or so.

Everything is getting back to normal. A new normal, at least.

I've been living with Wolf for now. He doesn't like the idea of me being on my own, but maybe with time he'll come around. Once he's sure I'm safe, perhaps my nagging will buy me some independence. Then again, this is Wolf. He's not swayed easily.

He met with Dante alone a few days after we met with him together. He won't tell me what they talked about. All he'll say is that everything is okay now. That the two of them found common ground. And I believe him. I don't trust easily, and you'd think I'd have even more trust issues after everything

that's happened in the last month. But Wolf has been the one constant through all of it.

Wolf walks out of the bathroom toward the bed. He's in boxers, shirtless. I've seen him like this a dozen times now, and every time I have to stop myself from drooling. His body should be on the cover of magazines. Every muscle is sculpted to perfection and highlighted by his tattoos. He catches sight of my expression and stops a few feet from the bed.

"Like what you see, baby?" Wolf grins.

I don't respond at first. But then I pull the sheet down farther, revealing my naked breasts. I watch him, smirking as a bulge grows in his shorts. "I don't think I'm the only one who has a good view right now."

He lets out a groan, his cock fully tenting his boxers now. He sheds them and climbs into bed, sliding under the covers next to me. His body is *hot*. I arch into him, needing every part of us to touch. His hand slides between us, finding the arousal building at my core. He runs a finger through it, circling around my clit.

"Oh, bunny. You're so wet." He groans the words, bringing his hand up to my mouth. I suck his fingers, licking my juices off.

Wolf shifts us so I'm on my back. His cock slides along my slit, teasing, and then presses at my entrance. "You ready?"

I nod, and he slowly slides in. The barbells that pierce through his shaft stretch me as he enters. I wince with the momentary bite of pain, but then pleasure takes over, and I need more. He thrusts himself all the way home, then pulls back and starts to move faster. I've completely forgotten everything else that's happened in the past weeks, just like I do every time

he's inside me. He reaches down and pinches my sensitive nipple, soft at first, then hard enough to make me flinch. Wolf switches to the other nipple and repeats the action. He keeps driving hard and fast, and my body responds, shattering in an orgasm around him.

He smiles down at me while he keeps moving, slower now. He brings his hands to my face. His fingers brush the hair off my cheeks while he gently moves inside me, placing a tender kiss over my lips. It's the first time he's kissed me, and it feels more intimate than any other moment we've shared.

"Everleigh," he whispers, his voice almost hoarse.

He keeps moving slowly, but his thrusts are harder. Deliberate. I arch into it. I need more. I clench my pussy, forcing another groan out of him.

"Fuck, baby. I—" He thrusts inside again as I start to spasm.

Another climax takes over, and I spiral in bliss. I feel him swell, then his hot seed spills inside me as I come again, my pussy gripping him in overwhelming bliss.

Wolf slides back into bed after cleaning both of us up. I'm almost ready to go again, but I settle for cuddling up against him.

I turn slightly to my side to see him. He brushes my hair back from my face with a smile. His fingers trace my jawline, down my neck to my collarbone, where he touches my locket.

"You always wear this," he says, lifting it gently.

I nod, bringing my fingers to the necklace to intertwine with his. "It was my mother's. She gave it to me a few months before she died. I haven't taken it off at all since the car accident."

I told Wolf about my parents' car accident—not that it was really an accident at all, as it turned out—after we cleaned out my apartment. It feels good to tell him things, I'm learning. Like a weight has lifted off my chest. I share with him, and all of a sudden, I have help carrying the heavy things.

Wolf keeps tracing my collarbone and décolletage. "Is there a picture inside it?"

I shake my head. "No. At least, I don't think so. I've never been able to get it to open. I think it's just pretty. She would have told me if there was a picture in there, or showed me or something."

Wolf squints at the locket. "There's a clasp here, and a hinge. It looks like it does open. Can I try?"

"Sure. I don't want to take it off, though. Is that okay?" I don't really care if he tries. I just can't remove it. Maybe someday, but not now.

Wolf fiddles with the locket. His eyes squint. A little bit of his tongue sticks out the corner of his mouth with concentration in the most adorable way. He works at it for a few minutes before I let out a sigh.

"Wolf, it's not going to open. It's okay. Just—"

"Ah-ha!" He sounds triumphant. "Got it! Just press here and..." The locket opens with a soft click. There's no picture.

It's something else.

Wolf

E VERLEIGH'S EYES ARE WIDE. "What's that?"

I squint at it, then use a fingernail to pull the little piece of plastic out of the locket. "It's a memory card. People use them to store pictures. Or information."

She shakes her head. "I don't understand. Why is that in there?"

"I'm guessing it's something your parents wanted you to have. Or something they wanted to keep safe." I sit up, then look down at Everleigh, studying her face. "Do you want to open it and see?"

She bites her lip but nods. "I need to know. How do you open it?"

I slide out of bed, pulling on my boxers and holding the micro-SD card in my fingers. "My computer has a drive for cards like this. We can put it in, and it should open. Do you want me to get my laptop?"

With her nod, I hand her the SD card and leave the bedroom to grab my laptop from where I keep it in the kitchen. I use the little table in my makeshift dining room when I need to sit and do work. Mostly, I use the

computer to keep an eye on my bank accounts. I unplug it from where it's charging.

I carry the laptop back into the bedroom and settle on the bed next to her. Then I open the computer, and she hands me the SD card. It slides easily into the right slot. A folder immediately opens. There's a Word document, but nothing else. I double click to open it.

Everleigh,

If you've found this and are reading this rather than talking with Daddy and me, I imagine something has happened to us. Know that we love you very much and that no matter what else you've heard, we love your brother very much as well. You may not know this, but we adopted him as a baby and chose to keep it from him to preserve our family. He recently found out, and I know he's angry. I hope he chooses the right path.

If something has happened to Daddy and I, the following information will be important. We don't want you to have to worry about anything, and this should take care of you.

Be well, darling.

I love you.

Love, Mom

Everleigh reads over the letter again, not understanding. "What does this mean? What do I do with this?" She lifts her hands, palms up, then drops them again.

"Baby..." I hesitate, looking over the information that follows the letter from her mom. Strings of numbers with a few words, ones I can manage to piece together. "Those are bank accounts. One looks like an insurance policy. Maybe life insurance. It means they planned. They had things saved for you. They were worried that something was going to happen to them."

Tears are gathering in her eyes. One makes its way down her cheek, then is joined by more. “Asher must have confronted them. They knew he was dangerous, that he was going to do something.” A sob wrenches from her chest. “They should have talked to me! I could have done something. I could have stopped him.”

I pull her into my arms. The computer falls to the bed from my lap. Everleigh buries her face in my shoulder while I hold her tightly against my chest. “Shh, baby. You couldn’t have stopped him; Asher was dangerous. He would have killed you. He *tried* to kill you twice that we know about. You’re lucky, Everleigh. He can’t hurt you now.”

She doesn’t answer. Her shaking sobs continue for about another minute before they start to wane, then finally fade to sniffles.

When she picks her head up to look at me, her face is blotchy. Her eyes are red. Even still, she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

“It’ll be okay, bunny. We can figure all this out tomorrow.”

Without warning, she slaps her hand over her mouth and jumps out of bed. She bolts to the bathroom. The door barely closes behind her before I hear her throwing up.

Everleigh

THE WOMAN AT THE bank looks up something on a computer. It took me almost a week to go to the bank in the first place. I wasn't sure what I'd find; I've had too many surprises in the last month, and I don't think I can handle more.

The woman checks my ID, then squints again at the computer screen. "Just a minute, dear. I'll be right back."

Several minutes pass before a man in a suit taps my shoulder, and I stiffen. Wolf squeezes my hand when the man motions to me. "Miss Mason? Please come with me."

This doesn't seem good, but I have no choice. Wolf and I follow him to a glass-walled office. He motions to two chairs. I sink into one, with Wolf sitting next to me. The bank employee settles in a large chair behind the desk. "I'm Thomas Anson, one of the investment managers at this bank." He offers a hand across the desk.

I shake his offered hand warily. "I'm Everleigh Mason. I mean, you know that already, right? I, umm..."

He smiles sympathetically. “I want to welcome you as a client. I understand these accounts have passed to you from your parents, and I’m so sorry to hear of their deaths.”

“Uh...thank you.” I have to admit, I’m not sure what’s happening here.

I would think the lady at the front could just hand over whatever money is in the accounts and close them out, but maybe you have to talk with a guy like this to close accounts. Maybe it’s a few thousand? I could really use the cash. There’s no chance of me getting my security deposit back for my apartment, not with the way it was trashed. I’ll need to come up with enough for the first and last month’s rent, plus a security deposit for a new place.

He turns a computer screen toward me. It’s full of numbers that don’t make much sense. “Your parents put your name on the account, so you’ll be able to access the funds without any issues and without going through probate. In essence, this money is now yours. I’m happy to move some into a checking account if needed.”

I squint at the screen. There are a *lot* of numbers. I look for something that tells me the total.

Thomas senses my confusion and points to one line. “The total between the three accounts is five hundred thirty-two thousand, three hundred and four dollars. Just over half a million dollars.”

Wolf squeezes my hand. I feel like I might throw up again.

A knock sounds at the door. I’ve been sitting in the exam room waiting for the doctor to come back with my test results. Even after stopping the pain pills, I’ve still felt nauseated almost every day. After I threw up for a fourth

time, Wolf insisted that I go see someone and make sure Asher hadn't caused more damage when he hit me.

In addition to the bank account, my parents also had a life insurance policy. Apparently, I was the sole beneficiary, so the entire three hundred thousand dollars will come to me. My head is reeling with the amount of money that's suddenly available. With this, I'll be able to afford to rent a new apartment. A *better* apartment. I could even go back to school and finish my degree.

All of a sudden, my life is opening back up, other than whatever has been causing this nausea. Wolf keeps talking about concussions and brain bleeds, which is what scared me enough to let him bring me to the doctor. At least I convinced him to stay in the waiting room.

The doctor enters the room. "Good news, Miss Mason. I don't think you need a CT scan. I believe your head is just fine. Your electrolytes are fine, and I don't think you have an infection. I will need you to make an appointment with your regular doctor in a week or so, because the reason you're having nausea has nothing to do with your injury. It's because you're pregnant."

"Did you... um...hear me?" I stare at Wolf. I think I said it out loud, but there's no reaction. I try again. "I'm, uh, preg—"

"I heard you, baby. I'm processing." Wolf shakes his head. "I just..." He lets out a long sigh.

I bite my lip. Maybe it's the pregnancy hormones, but I thought there was something between us. Something real. I hadn't planned on this, but when the doctor told me the news, it was like another little piece of the future I'd hoped for was falling into place. Maybe I was wrong about us, about everything.

Tears prick my eyes. I try to swipe at them without being obvious. If Wolf doesn't want me—doesn't want *us*—we'll be fine on our own. We will. Maybe I won't go back to university at first, but I'll make a home and a life for this baby.

Wolf lifts his head and looks at me. His eyes are shining, and as I watch, a tear falls from one corner. I'm more confused than ever when he reaches out a hand and pulls me toward him to sit on the couch.

He draws in a breath. "I had a sister."

This seems like it should mean something to me, but I'm lost.

He keeps talking. "I never knew my dad. My mom raised my sister and I, and she passed away when I was eighteen. Breast cancer."

My heart squeezes, thinking of a young Wolf dealing with the loss of his only parent. Understanding the pain he must have gone through.

"Because I was legally an adult, they let me take custody of Jenna. My sister. She was fifteen at the time, so it wasn't a big deal. I worked, and she went to school. But my job didn't make us enough money, and I was going to lose the house, the one we grew up in, and I couldn't let that happen. A friend offered me a chance to make some quick money. It was supposed to be a one-time thing." He pauses.

I squeeze his hand, listening.

Wolf smiles bitterly. "It's never one time, though, is it? I got deeper into running drugs. I was making good money, and it wasn't affecting Jenna at all. That's what I thought until I came home one evening and found her."

I hold my breath and watch as another tear makes its way down the cheek of the man I love.

"She'd found my stash. I wasn't using, but I was dealing, and it was too much. She overdosed. I was supposed to protect her, and I failed."

“Wolf,” I whisper, putting my arms around him as he draws in a ragged breath. “You were a kid. You can’t change what happened.”

He’s silent for a few minutes until his breathing evens out. I unwrap myself from him and use my fingers to pull his chin upward, so he meets my gaze.

He finally cracks a soft smile. “You have the same blue eyes as Jenna. It’s why I couldn’t kill you that day. I’m so sorry, Everleigh. For everything.”

I shake my head and bring my lips to his to silence him. He kisses me back, soft at first, then more firmly as need takes over. When we finally pull apart, I bring my bruised lips to his cheek and brush them across his stubble before I whisper in his ear, “I love you.”

Wolf joins me at the doctor’s office a few days later. They draw vial after vial of blood until I’m sure there will be nothing left. I hold my breath when the ultrasound image comes up on the screen. There’s nothing there at first. The doctor moves the probe around, looking for something.

She stops moving the probe and points to something flickering on the screen. “See that? That’s your baby’s heartbeat.” She clicks a few things, freezing the image. She measures the smudge on the screen and smiles. “It’s measuring about five weeks, six days. That’s right in line with your last period six weeks ago. Congratulations, mom and dad.”

I study Wolf’s features, trying to understand how he feels about all of this. I laid all my cards out on the table that day, told him I loved him. After he told me about Jenna, it seemed like too much to push, but he didn’t say it back. Maybe he doesn’t.

But he tells me everything I need to know when he smiles, bigger than I’ve ever seen. “Baby, look. We’re having a chipmunk.”

I look at the screen again. The little fetus on the screen *does* look like a tiny chipmunk. I giggle. Then I keep giggling. I can't stop.

Wolf is laughing, too. He moves over, still holding my hand as he plants a kiss on my cheek. He whispers in my ear, "This one better not lay eggs."

The doctor looks slightly alarmed, but I can't stop laughing. Then tears stream down my face.

Wolf kisses me again. "I love you, Everleigh. You *and* our little chipmunk."

Epilogue

JORDIE IS FINALLY ASLEEP. Our daughter arrived perfectly, right on her due date. My pregnancy was smooth enough, and once the nausea stopped around week ten, I was able to start taking college classes toward my degree. Once she's a little older, I'm going to be able to go back full-time and finish my bachelor's degree.

The future that I thought was gone is finally back within reach. The whirlwind romance I'd always pictured is exactly what Wolf and I have. I suppose we'll need to figure out another version of the story of how we met, for when the kids start asking.

The money my parents left me went straight toward college classes. The rest was put into a trust for Jordie. It turns out Wolf has millions saved from his less-than-noble profession. He's retired now, and he bought us a house outside the city, white picket fence and all. He says we need a yard for our little chipmunk. That's what he still calls Jordie—even her name is from *jordegern*, which is Danish for chipmunk. Wolf thinks that's hilarious.

Someday, we'll take her to the cabin upstate. I think she's going to love it.

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