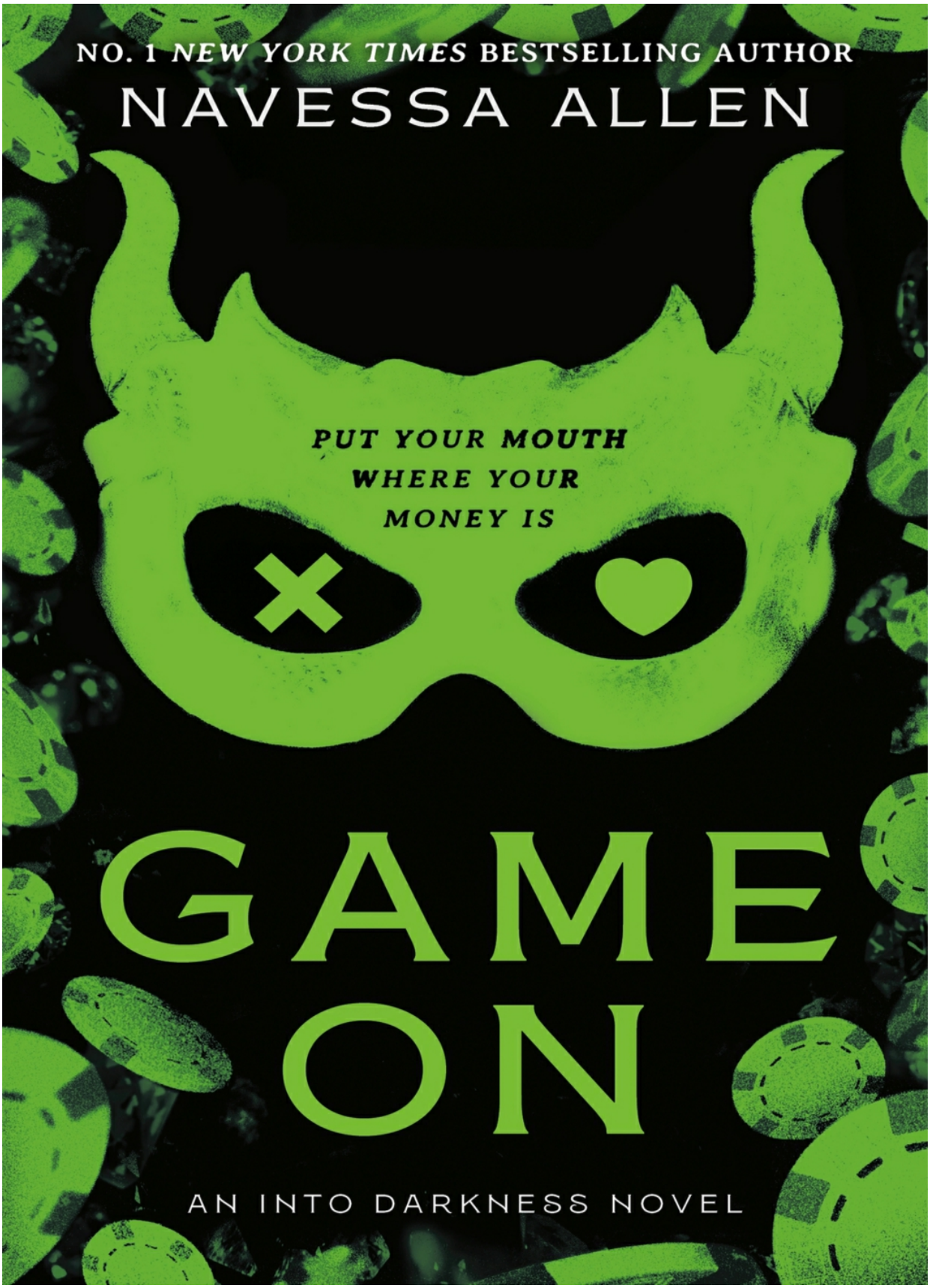

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GAME ON

By Navessa Allen

INTO DARKNESS

Lights Out Caught Up Game On

Snowed In

The Kings of Kearny The Lunatics

Scandal

AN INTO DARKNESS NOVEL

GAME O N

NAVESSA A LLEN



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C ONTENTS

Game On

By Navessa Allen

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AUTHOR’S N OTE

The female lead, Stella, has chronic gastritis, and the depiction of it is deeply personal to me as I share her diagnosis. Her experience with the disease reflects mine, including symptoms and triggers. Please bear in mind while reading that not everyone’s chronic illness presents or progresses in the same way, and that I am only portraying my own.

TRIGGER WARNINGS *GAME ON* IS A DARK ROM-COM WITH HEAVY THEMES. R EADER DISCRETION IS ADVISED AS THIS BOOK CONTAINS: G AMBLING

Alcohol and drug use Needles (tattoo) Play club

Mention of the Mafia and their crimes Mention of serial killers Food insecurity Food restriction Blackmail

Bullying, coercion, and threats Chronic illness and pain Violence Description of a car accident (remembered) Amputation and discussion of surgery Hospital setting Child abuse and neglect (remembered) Head trauma

Cheating (remembered) Murder (discussed) Kidnapping Hit-and-run car accident Explicit sex (including multi-partner and anal) Cum play

Brat play

Orgasm denial and edging Death of a parent

For everyone attracted to men against their will.

1

Tyler

ONE MILLION DOLLARS. THAT'S WHAT I could make tonight if the party keeps up like this.

I still couldn't believe I'd pulled it off. Weeks of planning, tens of thousands in costs, and untold laws broken—all to host a private, high- stakes gambling night onboard an abandoned freight ship that sat decaying in the old port. It was the absolute last place anyone would think to look for an ultra-exclusive party for the city's elite, which is why it was perfect.

A raucous cheer erupted from the crowd. Everyone wore masks to protect their anonymity, including the staff, but, as the master of ceremonies, I knew who they were. I turned to see a blond woman in a scarlet ball gown jump in celebration. She must have hit it big, which was good for both her *and* me.

As the bookie hosting this little soiree, my take-home was ten percent of all winnings. And while, yes, a million dollars might *seem* like a lot of cash, after all the bribes and payouts, I'd be lucky to net a third of it, most of which would get reinvested into my next game night.

But it was worth it. The real money was in interest, anyway. If any of our players ran out of funds, we, the house, helpfully supplied them with the means to keep playing. For a fee, of course. It was small enough to be appealing, a fisherman's hook to ensnare the unsuspecting. Only after people took the bait did they realize how much that fee stacked up if they didn't pay us back on time.

My gaze swept over the rest of the room, a cavernous chamber that was formerly a cargo bay. Now, over two dozen tables filled the space, some draped in white linens holding platters of gourmet dishes, others surrounded by gamblers in designer dresses and suits. A bar was set up along the far

wall, and waitstaff made their way to and from it, delivering top-shelf cocktails to the crowd. Soft light filtered down from chandeliers, glinting off jewels and champagne flutes in a way that lent a dreamlike quality to the scene.

I sighed, thinking of the war of one-upmanship I was fighting with myself.

Tonight was a triumph, a party to end all parties. But next time, I'd have to come up with something even better, even more unexpected and exciting. My parties *had* to remain the most elusive and sought-after entertainment in this city. The wealthy, I'd learned, were a lot like spoiled children, easily distracted by the latest shiny object, and it took a lot to keep them clamoring for a spot at my tables.

And to think, all this started in my college dorm room. I'd been a broke- as-shit double major in finance and business, looking to make some tuition money on the side so I wouldn't have to drop out. I'd always been good with numbers and pattern recognition, so cards were easy for me. My brain inherently *knew* which ones were left in a deck without having to consciously count them.

At first, my poker nights were small, just me and whoever I convinced to play. Most didn't stick around after repeatedly losing to me, and I thought I'd been cooked because of it, my money-making scheme over before it even began. But then rumors started circulating that I was unbeatable, and soon every wannabe poker pro and math genius was clamoring to get in on the games, making me enough cash to stave off financial panic.

A class about entrepreneurship planted the seed that there might be more stable money *behind* the table, running the games like a business. I opened it up to all levels of gamblers, from experienced players to rookies trying their luck for the first time. Then two things happened at once: People at school found out that my best friend, Josh, was the son of a notorious serial killer, and the faculty caught wind of my games. So we moved to the city to start over. I transferred schools, but Josh dropped out to become a professional hacker because he was a better programmer than any of his professors, and there was nothing left for them to teach him.

I left the games behind, finished out my senior year, and went into corporate finance after graduation. But it only took me a year to realize I hated it. Hated dressing up in a suit to go work with a bunch of shitheads who treated *The Wolf of Wall Street* like an instruction manual. Hated my entry-level salary that barely covered cost of living, because I *knew* there were better (and easier) ways to make money. Also, it was boring as shit. Unchallenging. And my boss was a fucking idiot, landing his role via nepotism, not merit—another reminder of why I'd always hated the rich. Quitting let me get back to my old ways. I started another poker night, building it back up from scratch. This time around, I let myself think bigger.

I wasn't just in it to make money. I had an objective: revenge. A target to pursue. Every game advanced my agenda, but tonight, in particular, was a massive move forward in bringing me one step closer to *him* .

Another cheer sounded from a nearby blackjack game. This time it was an art dealer who'd won. To his left, a hedge fund manager looked on with envy. To his right, a crime boss gave him a congratulatory slap on the back. I pulled my gaze away and adjusted my mask. It was black, accented with green jewels and molded to look like a devil, complete with glaring eye holes and twisted horns. Maybe it was overkill, but seeing as how I'd been described as the devil incarnate more than once in my life, I figured the symbolism would serve as a good reminder to my clients that it wasn't smart to fuck with me.

I settled the mask back in place and headed toward a trio of poker tables near the ship's boiler. Seated at the center one, with his back to me, was a twenty-year-old man-child who had no business being here.

Blake McCormick.

He was an heir to one of the largest fortunes in the city. I'd seated him with the best poker players in attendance, and if all was going to plan, he was being overserved by the bartenders. I'd also instructed his dealer to inform Blake that if he overextended and ran out of money, the house would happily lend him more.

The dealer and I locked eyes, and the man sent me a subtle nod of confirmation.

I grinned. The kid was already running up a debt, and the night was still young. Who knew how much he might owe me by the time it was over? Half a million? More? Whatever the amount, it was a debt I fully planned to exploit.

Because Blake had an older sister who would do absolutely anything to protect him, and she was going to be my way in. My means to an end. *She* was going to lead me straight to *him.* My father. The man I moved to this city to find. The man I moved to this city to ruin.

See you soon, Stella, I thought, smiling to myself as another round of cheers rose from the crowd.

2

Stella

THE SHOP WAS QUIET THIS early in the day, without the buzz of tattoo guns or the idle conversation of my coworkers.

Too quiet.

It left room for thoughts to bubble up. Thoughts like, would my utilities increase again this month? Why was the word “Ohio” now an insult? And would that mole on my thigh eventually turn into skin cancer and kill me?

I plugged my phone into the sound system and put on my favorite playlist to drown out my inner monologue. Soft, eerie music floated from the overhead speakers. The notes were filled with longing, regret, and fading memories of happier times. One of the other artists I worked with, Elayne, said it sounded like the funeral dirge of a Victorian spinster. She’d looked confused when I’d thanked her.

The song matched the shop's décor: dark, Gothic. Framed antique ephemera hung on the walls. Vintage taxidermy rubbed elbows with reproduction Roman busts and leafy houseplants on bookshelves. In the common areas, thick rugs softened the cement floors, with cushy leather armchairs and sofas crowded atop them. It was maximalist, a feast for the eyes. New customers regularly told me they didn't know where to look first. Returning customers loved discovering new curiosities while they waited for their appointment. It had turned into a sort of game, with me switching out pieces to see who would be the first to notice a new addition.

I carried my morning coffee and my tablet over to the seating area and curled up in my usual corner spot. Sometimes, I still couldn't believe this place was mine. That I'd created my dream tattoo parlor out of what had once been a lifeless concrete cube. It had taken a lot of hard work, countless hours of planning and drafting and arguing with contractors when they tried to nickel-and-dime me. There were moments when I'd felt like it would never get done, that I would fail at this like I had failed at everything else—too flighty to stick it out, too weak to follow through. But somehow, I'd persevered through that hellish, stressful year, and the reward of sitting here, staring at what I'd accomplished, made it all worth it.

I took a sip of coffee before setting it aside to pick up my tablet. The shop wouldn't open for several hours, and I usually spent this time creating. All my tattoos were hand-drawn and unique. I was a neo-traditionalist, melding vintage and modern styles. My specialty was pronounced line work and vibrant colors with a dash of whimsical illustration, art nouveau meets Studio Ghibli. The style wasn't for everyone, but those who loved it, *loved it* .

I'd been working at my craft for years. I was good at what I did, and it showed in my busy schedule. Today, I had three tattoos and two consultations scheduled, and while that might not sound like a lot to a layperson, it *was*. One of the tattoos was small and wouldn't take much time, but the other two were much more complex. I was looking at eight hours of tattooing, and I could already feel my back twinging with anticipatory stiffness. I'd need several painkillers and a heating pad tonight —but again, worth it.

Arattle at the front door had me lifting my head.

This part of the city was up-and-coming. Meaning, there were as many nice parts as there were bad ones, and the threat of break-ins was real. The curtains were shut, so I couldn't see who was out there, but I wasn't worried. Instead of glass, the windows were made of a clear, shatterproof polycarbonate. Every inch of the shop (both inside and out) was covered with cameras, and I'd installed Grade 1 commercial locks on all the doors. It was *really* hard to break in here.

Trusting my security measures, I went back to drawing.

The door swung open.

Fuck!

I leapt up, grabbing a nearby urn to use as a makeshift club, when my mother walked inside. She was sixty-five but looked much younger, thanks to a mix of genetics and the money to afford the best skin care and cosmetic treatments on the market. Tall and trim, she was dressed in a hunter green, mid-length embroidered dress that probably cost as much as a used sedan. Her jet-black hair hung loose down her back. She wore red-soled stilettos. In one hand, she carried a custom Hermès handbag and the keys I now regretted giving her. In the other, she held . . . a lamp?

"What are you doing, Mom?"

She yelped and spun toward me, clutching her chest. "What am *I* doing? What are *you* doing, standing there in the dark like a pervert?"

My mother was originally from England but had lived in the States for long enough that her accent had morphed into a strange blend of posh British and snooty American—some vowels elongated, others clipped. Because of it, "pervert" ended up sounding more like *pearvert,* and despite my annoyance, I almost grinned. My younger brother, Blake, and I were going to have so much fun calling each other *pearverts* when I told him about this.

“I thought someone was trying to break in,” I said.

“And you were going to do what? Scare them to death?” Mom’s expression morphed into concern. “Darling, are you not moisturizing? You look positively ghoulish in this light.”

The threat of grinning vanished. I hefted the urn. “My plans are leaning more toward blunt-force trauma. What are you doing here?”

She indicated the lamp. “I saw this at an antique store downtown and thought of the perfect place for it.”

“You couldn’t have waited until we were open to drop by unannounced?” That earned me an exaggerated eye roll. “Oh, please, Stella. Unlike you, the rest of us don’t have time to lounge about in dirty sweatpants all morning. I have a breakfast meeting and then a full day of work followed by a charity dinner for impoverished children. And if I didn’t pop by like this, I’d never see you.”

She turned and strode toward the front desk like she owned the place. I took a moment to glance down at myself. Ugh, I must have dribbled coffee on my sweats at some point. And no, I hadn’t moisturized yet. Leave it to Mom to point out all my morning failures within two minutes of clapping eyes on me.

I sighed and followed her. My mother had grown up in a cruel and unforgiving household where praise was anathema and warmth nonexistent. Despite all her years in therapy, she was still deeply uncomfortable with displays of affection and donned snobbery like armor. Especially when she was feeling vulnerable or neglected—which clearly she was, judging by that last comment. Instead of saying it outright, she came at it sideways, picking at me because she couldn’t bring herself to admit how much she cared and that she worried over me constantly, just like any other parent. Instead, the signs that she loved me were more subtle, seen in the way she sneakily tried to pay my rent and randomly dropped into the shop with some excuse for needing to be here. Today, it was the lamp; two weeks ago,

it was because she was “in the area.”

So yeah, Mom was a complete snob with tons of childhood baggage she was still working through, and we had a complex relationship. But I loved her, and she was the first person I would turn to if I ever ended up in real trouble. Again.

She set the lamp on the front desk, her back to me as she fiddled with its placement.

I used her momentary distraction against her, wrapping my arms around her narrow waist and giving her a quick hug. “I missed you, too.”

She started to stiffen, and I pulled away before she got too uncomfortable. “Yes, well, no need to get overly emotional about it,” she said, but I knew she was mollified. She placed the lamp next to the computer monitor and stepped back. “Don’t let anyone put their grubby hands all over this. It’s Tiffany.”

I nearly choked. “Are you trying to get me robbed?”

She waved a hand, bejeweled rings flashing in the dim light. “I doubt any of the hooligans you work with could tell it’s real. Oh, speaking of which . . . ” She pulled a business card from her bag. “Give this to Elayne. It’s for a tenant rights attorney your father and I met the other night. I told him about her terrible landlord. He thinks there’s something to it and agreed to take her on pro bono.”

I accepted the card. It was thick, tactile, and understated. My eyes widened as I read the firm name—it was one of the most prestigious in the city.

I shook my head. Mom might be eccentric, aloof, and pretentious as hell, but beneath that lay a heart of gold. That charity she’d mentioned? I had no doubt she sat on its board, had organized tonight’s dinner herself, wrangled all her wealthy friends into attending, and would essentially hold everyone hostage until they reached whatever outrageous fundraising goal she’d set

for the night. And then she would doggedly follow the money after it was donated, ensuring it reached those most in need first.

Mom reached out like she might be about to pull me into another hug, and I stilled, not wanting to spook her. She hesitated, met my eyes, and shot me a close-lipped smile as she patted me on the shoulder instead. “You’re still coming by for Tippi’s birthday?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Tippi was our family dog, an ancient bichon frise who was half-blind, fully deaf, and an even bigger snob than the woman before me.

Mom looked me over one more time, wincing. “You’re not . . . wearing that the rest of the day, are you?”

I pointed toward the door. “Out.”

She opened her mouth, but I raised the urn and gave it a threatening shake. Wisely, she made her way toward the front, but she took her damn time, making sure I knew that this was her choice. At the door, she paused, her face pinched. “I saw Maddie this weekend, at her aunt’s annual summer soiree.”

I went stiff, the name like a slap.

Mom’s expression darkened. “She asked after you.” “Why?” I asked, unease creeping up my spine. Mom shrugged. “Audacity?”

“Is she finally ready to take responsibility for what she did?”

Mom’s answering laugh was humorless, all the answer I needed.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I said. “Until she finally tells the truth, she and I have nothing to say to each other.”

“I told you because if she’s bold enough to say something to me, she might be bold enough to seek you out herself. And I’m not saying you should

forgive her—”

“There’s no forgiving what she did,” I spat.

“But murdering her would probably give you wrinkles, and if you’re not even following a proper skin care routine, then you’re more susceptible to them than—”

“Okay, it was nice seeing you. Goodbye!” I said, practically shoving her out of the shop.

She paused, turning back with an expression close to regret on her face, like maybe she was about to come back inside and try to have a real conversation for once. I was just about to reopen the door when she seemed to think better of it, giving me a terse nod of goodbye before striding toward the waiting Mercedes at the curb.

■ ■ ■

Many hours later, I was saying goodbye to my last tattoo appointment of the day. She was a blond woman in her early twenties who thought she was the coolest person in the city. Which, I mean, she probably was. She had over two million followers across her social media accounts and about as many YouTube subscribers, earning a respectable living as a cozy gamer.

Her right forearm was now covered by a large, stylized crow perched on a flower-wreathed skull. We’d been working on it for months because she had a low pain tolerance, first laying down the line art, then adding in the shading, and finally, tonight, the last of the color. The bright jewel tones popped even through the Saniderm bandage covering the tattoo.

My gaze lifted to hers. “Ashley, I swear to God, if you don’t follow the care instructions I gave you . . .”

She rolled her heavily lined eyes, looking harassed. “Yes, Mom.”

I stiffened. I wasn’t *that* much older than her. “That is some of my best

work. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Or what, you’ll ground me?”

I shook my head. “I’ll get on your next livestream and tell all your followers that you use cheat codes.”

“Client privilege!” she said, whipping her head around to see if any-one overheard.

“That only exists for lawyers and therapists.” Her face turned red in betrayal. “I trusted you.” I grinned. “That was your first mistake.”

She flipped me off and stomped out the front door.

“Pleasure working with you!” I called after her.

A draft of balmy night air kissed my skin as the door slowly swung shut behind her. Today had been another scorcher, the sun unrelenting, the humidity high enough to frizz even my bone-straight hair. Summer was my least favorite time of year. The moisture-laden atmosphere turned everything sticky and smelly. All the concrete made it worse, absorbing the heat throughout the day and storing it up like a battery, expelling it at night, so it never cooled down. I couldn’t wait for autumn to arrive. I had *juuust* enough basic bitch in me that September would find me standing in line for my first pumpkin spice latte of the season like everyone else.

The door closed, cutting off the heat of the night, and I returned to the front desk to exit out of Ashley’s transaction. It was 9 p.m., and the tattoo parlor was buzzing. Literally, because of all the needles, but that sound was nearly drowned out by voices raised in conversation.

The shop was mid-sized with a simple layout. The reception area and front desk flanked the door. A hallway led deeper inside, with six individual tattoo rooms branching off of it. None of them had doors, and the cement floors made the acoustics echoey, so voices carried. The music tonight was

upbeat and punchy because Elayne had tuned us in to an alt-pop station.

I grinned, feeling content, borderline happy. After nearly losing everything, I had made something. Something that belonged to me and me alone. With no help from anyone else, despite how much my parents tried to intervene in my life. I wasn't ungrateful they wanted to help. The problem was that they'd already done so much for me (too much, really) that I was determined to do this *one thing* by myself.

Was I terrified of fucking it up? Absolutely. Money was still tight because the business was new, and my inheritance was needed elsewhere, so I scrimped and saved where I could, making sure every dollar earned went to good use. I was a one-woman handyman, cleaning crew, IT specialist, and, on one disgustingly memorable occasion, plumber.

And it was starting to pay off. We had regular, returning clientele. Good online reviews. A growing social media presence thanks to my carefully curated pictures and videos. I still lost sleep some nights, worried that it would all go up in flames, but my fear wasn't constant anymore, and on weeks like this, when we were in danger of being overbooked, it made me think that I might actually pull this off. That I might actually succeed at something for once in my life. And that was all I really wanted. Not just to prove that I could do it, but because this was what I *loved.*

My gaze strayed to the Tiffany lamp next to the register. Mom was right. It looked perfect there. Okay, fine, so maybe letting them help *just a little* wouldn't kill me, but I drew the line at paying my rent.

A heavy footfall pulled me from my thoughts, and I turned to see Derrick, one of my tattoo artists, strolling out of the hallway. He was a rough-looking, silver-haired man in his mid-fifties. Tall, beefy, white, with a mutton chop beard and more tattoos than anyone else I knew. In his past life, he'd belonged to an outlaw motorcycle club down in Texas, but he'd had a falling out with its megalomaniac leader and hightailed it out of there before he wound up dead. I wasn't even sure Derrick was his real name, but I didn't give a shit because his specialty was realism, and he was fucking *good* .

My gaze shifted to the client following him, a towering young Black man whose face was turned toward his forearm, admiring his new ink. As he got closer, I saw why. It looked like something had clawed him, three long gashes peeling back to reveal a glimpse of a panther beyond. It was almost spooky how good it was, like his skin had been ripped open.

In moments like this, I wondered how the hell I'd landed Derrick. He was a world-class artist, regularly drew in famous clients, and could have worked anywhere, but for whatever reason, he'd shown up one day and applied. Hell, he was the half the reason I didn't have weekly panic attacks anymore—that's how much money he brought in. It made me wonder if one of my parents had gotten to him somehow. This wouldn't be the first time they'd done something sneaky like that, helped me from the shadows even though I'd told them I needed to do this on my own. Whenever I hinted at it to Derrick, he expertly changed the subject or played dumb, and my suspicions only grew.

"That looks amazing," I said.

Derrick let out an ambiguous huff, but his client sent me a blinding smile. "Thanks," he said.

I tried to pretend I wasn't starstruck. "Will it have time to heal before training camp?"

He nodded. "Yeah, we don't start until late September."

"Good luck with the season," I said.

His grin widened. "Thank you."

I headed toward my booth before I did something stupid, like hit on an NBA All-Star.

3

Tyler

“ASEX CLUB,” I SAID. “We own a sex club.”

I turned to look at Nico “Junior” Trocci, my business partner in this venture. Dark hair, olive skin, Napoleon complex. The neck tattoos would be a problem if he ever tried to get a normal job, but since he’d been born into Mafia royalty, he probably didn’t have to worry about that.

He and I had a somewhat complicated acquaintanceship. I used to fuck his cousin, Aly, who happened to be engaged to my best friend, Josh, who I was beginning to suspect was *also* Junior’s best friend.

The traitor.

Junior and I didn’t get along. I wasn’t sure if it was a territorial thing, or if we just rubbed each other the wrong way, so the fact that we were now in business together was the last thing I could have anticipated. Unfortunately, there’d been no way to avoid it.

He’d shown up at the ship party last week looking to buy someone’s debt off me, and we’d essentially blackmailed each other into a corner. He’d threatened to tell Josh about my gambling operation. I’d threatened to tell Junior’s dad (who was almost as bad as Josh’s) about his interest in this building. We’d ended up going halfsies on it, and now I was more convinced than ever that it was going to blow up in both our faces.

Junior scowled. “It’s actually called a play club.”

I eyed him. He really was a handsome sonofabitch. His dad’s dark features with his mom’s green eyes. Too bad he was also the straightest man on the planet and this tension between us couldn’t be . . . eased. People were much easier to deal with after they’d been fucked senseless.

“Is it even profitable?” I asked.

“It is,” said a soft, feminine voice.

Junior and I turned to see his girlfriend, Lauren, stride into the room. She was short, stunning, and absolutely out of Junior's league, with long dark hair, large brown eyes, and sun-kissed skin. I was still confused how such a moody bastard had pulled her.

"Can you prove that, or am I just supposed to take your word for it?" I

said.

Junior elbowed me. Hard. "Watch how you speak to her."

I locked eyes with Lauren. "Why? Are you as hypersensitive as your boyfriend?"

Her answering smile was megawatt. "I have a habit of tasing people who piss me off. He's trying to save you from yourself."

I snorted, because bullshit.

Junior caught sight of my disbelief and lifted the bottom of his shirt to reveal an ugly, half-healed burn.

My eyes snapped back to Lauren, and her grin gained a sharp edge. Okay, so maybe these two psychos deserved each other after all.

"A fucking se—play club," I corrected, taking in the room. The club wouldn't open for another several hours, but even in the middle of the day, it was dark and intimate, with black damask wallpaper, comfortable furniture, a gleaming bar along the far wall, and a set of stairs along the right wall that led up to the . . . sex rooms? Scene rooms?

Jesus Christ, what the fuck had I gotten myself into?

I rubbed a hand over my face. "How am I supposed to explain this to my seventy-year-old accountant?"

"Tell him you're exploring your brat kink," Lauren answered.

I frowned at her.

She scoffed. “Oh, please. I have never, in my life, met a man who so obviously needs someone to order him to kneel at their feet and shut the hell up until they’re ready to hear him speak again.”

I grinned. “You offering to break me in?”

Junior made a sound close to a growl, confirming his hypersensitivity. Lauren just laughed. “Brat taming isn’t on my kink menu, but don’t worry, we have people who can teach you to behave.”

“Pass,” I said. “Misbehaving is so much more fun.”

Junior, his patience waning, waved a hand toward the staircase. “Can we get this fucking tour over with so I can move on with my day?”

I motioned him forward, for once on the same page because I also had places to be. “After you.”

The urge to add *pipsqueak* to the end of the sentence was strong, but if Junior and I had any hope of surviving this partnership, I probably needed to rein in the urge to constantly mock him.

What can I say? The man was easy prey, and while I might not have the

brat kink Lauren thought I did, I *had* always enjoyed getting under people’s skin. Because they were much more likely to slip up when their emotions were elevated, say something they wouldn’t have otherwise, reveal more than they intended to. And those little slip-ups were easy to exploit.

Junior and Lauren showed me around the rest of the club, which I learned was named Velvet. The first floor consisted of communal spaces, and the bar setup was unique because city zoning meant they couldn’t serve alcohol on the premises. Luckily, BYOB was fine, so they hired bartenders to pour and mix whatever the patrons brought in. Past the main room, there were several

smaller spaces: dens filled with cozy seating and soft lighting, hidden nooks and alcoves, and even a small library that smelled like leather and old books. It wasn't much different than any other swanky club in the city.

Or so I thought, until I was shown the play rooms on the second floor. Their layouts were all similar: square, with seating on one side that faced a slightly raised stage. The first one we entered—the voyeur room—held just a bed and a chair onstage, and the way Junior and Lauren shared a long, meaningful look when they thought I wasn't paying attention (spoiler alert: I am *always* paying attention) made me think the space held some significance for them.

I displayed no outward reaction, but the thought that Junior Vanilla Trocci liked to watch other people fuck rocked my world a little. Then again, his cousin Aly and my best friend were heavily into mask play (knowledge I wished I could scrub from my brain), so maybe the kinks ran strong in their family.

Next, we passed through a slew of other spaces, Lauren helpfully explaining what happened in each, before we moved up to the third floor and the private rooms that were obviously designed for fucking.

Lauren turned to face me in the middle of the largest one, which contained a massive, velvet-draped four-poster bed on one side and a wall of mirrors on the other. "We're planning to rent these spaces out during the day to boudoir photographers and camworkers."

"Every day of the week?" I said. "Not just the four the club is open?" "Every day," Lauren said. She'd done almost all the talking so far, Junior nodding along and staring at her with open adoration. Being with them was almost as bad as being with Josh and Aly. Everyone around me was disgustingly in love, and it was starting to make me nauseous.

"How much are you going to charge per hour?" I asked.

Lauren answered, and my mind went to work on the math, tallying up the number of private rooms and how many hours they could logistically rent

them each week.

“That will do a lot to help cover the cost of renovations,” I said. During the tour, Lauren had explained their plans to turn Velvet into the safest, most profitable play club in the country. I was fully on board with that, because money flowing into my accounts from a legal business would always be welcomed. My revenge had an expiration date, and after that, I planned to be done with gambling for good, which meant I’d need to replace that income with legitimate sources like this one.

I turned to face Junior. “You need any help looking over the books?” He shook his head. “I’m good.”

Lauren slipped her arm through his and stared up at him with hearts in her eyes. “He’s a secret math whiz.”

That didn’t really surprise me. Junior was a cautious man. He wouldn’t be so hell-bent on buying this building if it weren’t going to be profitable, regardless of how in love he was with one of the club’s owners.

“I still want to see them,” I said. “Just to double-check. If I’m going to be a silent partner in this little venture, I want to make sure we’re squared away first.”

“I’ll send you the numbers later,” Junior said.

I glanced at my watch. I had a lot on my calendar for the rest of the night and wanted to hit the gym before I went to my last, and most important, appointment. “We done here?”

“We’re done,” Junior said. “Good. Don’t fuck this up.” With that, I saw myself out.

4

Stella

IT WAS FRIDAY NIGHT, AND my last client was late. His appointment was at 11:15 p.m. but it was now 11:25 and there was no sign of him. Technically we were open until midnight, but this wasn't my night to take walk-ins, so if I didn't have a client, I didn't have to be here. I could be upstairs, lying flat on my couch with a heating pad, until it was time to close up.

As predicted, my back was stiff, muscles already tightening, shoulders achy from holding my arms out for so long. I'd downed a couple of acetaminophen to take the edge off, but the pain was making me cranky, and I'd be even more pissed if my client didn't show.

I was about to give up when a large blond man swept inside. From my perch in the seating area, I had a perfect view of him. He was dressed like a total slut: gray sweatpants and a white tee that looked two sizes too small. A gym bag hung from his shoulder, and his hair was damp like he'd just stepped out of the shower.

I felt like a *pearvert* watching him from the shadows, but for the life of me, I couldn't pull my gaze away. His profile was striking. Sharp jaw, aquiline nose, defined cheekbones, full lower lip. I wanted to study him, draw him, trace his lines and learn how they fit together to create such a stunning specimen of a man.

My gaze dropped to his beefy arms. Smooth, virgin skin as far as the eye could see. Good. I liked working with blank canvases. It was much easier than trying to cram my designs in between other artists' work.

He stopped when he didn't see anyone at the front desk, and I probably should have said something, but I was still too busy drinking him in. He looked like the poster boy for Farmers of America, the definition of corn- fed good looks. Tall enough that he could have been three tractors in a trench coat. Broad enough that I worried the growth hormones we injected into our beef were starting to mess with our genetics.

An annoyed look crossed his face as he caught sight of me, and all thoughts of farm boys fled my mind. His expression was pure ice king, down to the

haughty quirk of his brow. It made me want to draw him even

more. Seat him upon a frozen throne and put a crown of icicles atop his head. Maybe add a pair of antlers and replace the lower half of his legs with those of a deer. I'd turn him into a villain straight out of Narnia and flank his throne with polar bears dressed in battle armor.

"You Stella?" he asked in a gruff tone that shredded my fantasy.

"That depends," I said, leaning back into my chair.

His brows drew together. "On what?"

"On whether or not you plan to apologize for being ten minutes late to your appointment."

"I hit traffic," he said, turning fully toward me. Damn, he was big. "And you couldn't have called?"

He attempted to freeze me in place with his stare. "I don't believe in distracted driving."

"What a convenient excuse."

His jaw ticked. "Are we doing this, or am I leaving you a one-star review on Yelp?"

My annoyance deepened into anger as I rose from my seat. "We're doing this. But not because of your Karenesque threat, so don't look so smug." His lips twitched, and I had to force my gaze away from them. Not that looking at his eyes was any better. They weren't just blue; they were a rich, deep cobalt that seemed to sparkle when they caught the light.

Why were the hottest people always the most insufferable?

I started toward him. "We're doing this because I spent another hour on your design this morning, and you *will* pay me for my work."

His gaze raked over me as I approached, and something swept over his face, there one second and gone the next. Something cold and calculating and *pleased*. It was probably the same look a female mantis wore right before ripping the head off her partner.

I stopped a few feet away from him, cautious of his freakishly long arms and glistening mandibles. Okay, so maybe the latter was imagined, but I hadn't seen his teeth yet, so I figured it was best to err on the side of caution.

Up close, he was even more striking, twice as wide as me and well over six feet. As a tall girl, the first thing that flashed through my mind was *This is the height difference I deserve*. The second was a chastisement for letting my thoughts even go there. So he was hot *and* tall. So what? He was also a prick. And *blond*. My standards were low, but they weren't in hell.

"So you *are* Stella," he said, a taunting edge to his tone that made me feel like he was making fun of me somehow.

"Yup. And what was your name again?" I knew damn well what it was, but being this level of petty felt like the correct response to his douchery.
"Theo," he said with a wink. "You're gonna want to remember that."

I feigned a gag. Normally, I was *never* this rude to new clients, but there was something about this guy that instantly set me on edge.

He grinned. "Or you can call me Mr. Strickland, if you prefer."

"I'm not calling you Mr. anything," I shot back. "You're not my dom." That startled a chuckle out of him, his eyes shining as he looked me over again, slower this time.

Was he . . . *enjoying* this?

I turned on my heel. "We're back here."

Not checking to see if he followed, I led him toward my booth at the end of

the hall. We passed Derrick, working on his last client of the night. Everyone else had already cleaned up and gone home. My jealousy burned. I needed to stop overbooking myself like this. Exhaustion and stiffness made me crankier than usual, and yeah, Theo might deserve my animosity, but what if tomorrow I snapped at someone who didn't?

Resolving to try to be civil, I indicated the client chair in the center of my booth. "Have a seat."

Theo ambled toward it, dropping his gym bag with a thud before turning to take in the room. The walls were painted a deep green. Gold-framed portraits and landscapes hung in a gallery on the right. Arose-colored velvet settee sat opposite, draped in pillows and blankets. There were bookshelves and potted plants and a giant brass deer head draped with faux moss. It was a veritable feast for the senses.

Theo looked overwhelmed. "I think I'm getting a headache."

"Then close your eyes and lie down," I told him.

His gaze slid to mine. "Only if you promise to be gentle."

I sent him a flat look and turned my back on him. Stupid, sarcastic, meat-headed motherfucker. I should have known he'd be a problem client. We'd only interacted via email up until now, but we'd done so much back and forth on the specifics of his design that I almost hadn't agreed to move forward with this consultation.

Picky clients I could deal with, and I did so on a regular basis. Tattoos *were* forever, and I understood why someone would want to ensure the

artwork was exactly to their specifications. But Theo's emails had been next-level, nitpicking every tiny detail of my rough sketches. And then he'd demanded I print out a full-color temporary tattoo so he could see how it would look in place. Which brought us to tonight.

I snagged the design from my desk and turned back to him. "You need to

push your sleeve up.”

He shook his head and flexed, muscles popping. “It won’t go. I’m too swole.”

I was about to gag for real when his hands went behind his head and he pulled the tee off in one fluid motion.

The sight of him standing there, shirtless, punched through me. I didn’t know where to look. Some weightlifters turned veiny when they got too lean, but Theo had enough fat on him that his muscles were covered by smooth, golden skin. He must have waxed because there wasn’t a single hair on his chest. Beneath the glow of the overhead lights, he looked unreal. Obscene. Like an angel getting ready to fuck.

My head spun. Moisture pooled between my thighs.

It felt like I was going through puberty again.

He tossed his shirt aside and sat down, giving me a much-needed moment to compose myself. What was happening right now? I *hated* men. Unfortunately, I was also attracted to them against my will.

He’s a dick, I repeated to myself as I pulled on a pair of gloves and gathered my supplies. That mantra morphed into *He* has *a dick* when I turned back around and saw him leaning back, his gray sweats settled into place, perfectly framing what looked like a girthy cock.

I wrenched my gaze away before I got caught. Thankfully, he was still distracted by the décor, his eyes flitting from one art piece to the next. I pushed my stool over to his left side and rolled the tray cart into place next to me.

Get your shit together, Stella, I told myself. *You’re a fucking professional* .

I worked on shirtless clients all the time. Hell, I worked on pantless clients just as often. It shouldn’t be any different just because Theo was one of the

most physically attractive people I'd ever seen.

I took my seat and pulled close to him. He smelled like expensive soap. The kind made in small batches on goat farms in Vermont. His bare chest rose and fell with every breath, abs contracting as he shifted slightly toward me. Not a dot of ink marred his beautiful skin, and my mouth went dry

thinking I might be the first artist to leave my mark on him.

"What happens if you get too close to magnets?" he asked.

I lifted my gaze to find his eyes roving over my face, taking in my piercings from my eyebrow to my Austin bar to my Monroe.

"Gee, I haven't heard that one before," I grumbled, but honestly? I was grateful for the comment. It made it easier to focus on what mattered most about him: his ugly personality.

He rubbed a hand over his mouth like he was trying to hide a smile.

"Do you have low self-esteem?" I blurted. "Is that why you feel like you have to seek out negative attention?"

He swayed toward me. "Maybe I was a neglected child, so any attention feels like good attention."

"Might I suggest therapy instead?"

He snorted. "Why? It doesn't seem to have improved your personality." Goddamn it, I was not about to be out-insulted by a gym bro. "The pre-therapy me would have already punched you."

His expression turned smug. "You would have tried."

I was about to fire something back when I remembered all the progress I had *actually* made in therapy. This behavior was regressive. The old me. The one who always had to get the last word. The one who acted like a big bad bitch

anytime she was around someone larger because she hated feeling small and vulnerable.

I shifted my attention to the cart, tugging it closer. “Let your arm hang loose at your side.”

Theo eyed me, looking wary.

“I need it straight so I can position the tattoo,” I told him.

Reluctantly, he dropped it, and because of the way I was sitting, it fell straight between my thighs, close enough that I felt air brush my skin from the movement. Heat unfurled in my core. If he turned his hand just right, he’d be able to wrap those long fingers around my ankle. Stroke them up my calf. Work them beneath the hemline of my shorts.

I guillotined those thoughts and snapped the transfer paper up from the cart, leaning back enough to eyeball his bicep as I tried to gauge where the tattoo would best sit on his arm.

“Relax your muscles,” I said.

“They are relaxed.”

“C’mon, dude. I don’t want to be here all night.”

He shook out his arm, brushing my thighs with the movement, and I fought the urge to clamp my legs around him like a Venus flytrap. What the fuck was *wrong* with me tonight? Oh, right. My workaholic ass hadn’t gotten laid in six months, and it was quickly turning into a problem (see, me almost propositioning one of the most famous men in the city earlier).

“I’m relaxed,” Theo said, his annoyance nearly a match for mine.

I poked his beefy shoulder and realized he was telling the truth. He hadn’t been flexing. He was just that defined. “Oh.”

He waggled his brows. “Impressed?”

“Only by your ego.”

A small, *evil* smile spread over his face. “The way your jaw fell when I took off my shirt makes me think otherwise.”

Shit. He’d noticed.

I lifted my eyes to his, and our gazes caught, *held* .

Something passed between us, something I didn’t want to name. He seemed to feel it, too, his pupils widening, lips parting. Slowly, he tipped toward me. I sat frozen in place, fighting my body’s urge to meet him halfway. His gaze dropped to my mouth, and arousal unfurled within me like a poisoned flower, infecting my limbs and turning every part of me hypersensitive.

Oh, no. Had we been *flirting* this whole time? Was that what this was? That antagonistic, I-don’t-like-you-but-it-doesn’t-mean-I-won’t-fuck-you kind of foreplay?

Back away, I begged myself.

No, betch, we need this, my slutty alter ego responded. Against my will, my eyelids began to flutter shut. Theo leaned in.

Derrick cleared his throat from my doorway.

Theo and I jerked apart like we’d gotten caught doing something far more compromising.

One of Derrick’s bushy eyebrows rose as he looked between us. “I’m almost done for the night. Want me to stick around?”

I glanced back at Theo. He might have been a douche, but he didn’t set off my creep alarm. “Are you going to be a problem?”

He winked. “I’m always a problem.”

I poked his shoulder again, harder this time.

He lifted his other hand in a three-fingered salute and turned toward

Derrick. “I’ll behave. Scout’s honor.”

Derrick scowled. “You better. If I find out you touched a hair on her head, I’ll cut your dick off and shove it up your ass so you can find out what it feels like to go fuck yourself.”

Theo swiveled my way, looking like he was having the time of his life. “This shop has excellent customer service. I think I’ll bump my review up to two stars.”

It was the exact wrong thing to say in front of Derrick. I couldn’t believe I’d almost let this idiot kiss me.

The ex-biker took a step into the booth.

I held up a hand. “I’ll be fine.”

Derrick eyed me for a second before shaking his head and stomping out, grumbling something under his breath about horny teenagers.

My cheeks heated with delayed-onset embarrassment. He wasn’t wrong. I’d definitely been acting like one. Almost making out with a client? That wasn’t like me. At least not *current* me.

I blamed Mom. Her mentioning Maddie brought up too much ugliness. Made me remember who I used to be, how much easier it was when I lived my life like there were no consequences to my actions, and I did whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted.

Well, I wasn’t that person anymore. Didn’t want to *be* that person. From here on out, I would go back to being the consummate professional. I wouldn’t

sink to Theo’s level no matter how much he baited me, and I *definitely* wasn’t going to kiss the bastard.

He turned my way when Derrick disappeared, the look on his face telling me he was about to push my resolve to the breaking point.

5

Tyler

“NICE GUY,” I REMARKED AS Stella’s hulking coworker disappeared down the hall.

“He’s one of the best tattoo artists in the country,” she said in that low, sultry voice of hers. Fuck me, I hadn’t been ready for it when she’d first opened her mouth. Was still fighting my body’s reaction. Every time she spoke, it sounded like she was one breath away from telling me to get my dick out.

“And that somehow excuses his rudeness?” I asked, just to hear it again. “He was looking out for me,” she said. “Surely even *you* can appreciate

that.”

I frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Oh. *Ohhh.* I was twice her size, and she was about to be alone with me. Yeah, I probably should have pieced that together, but for all my awful past, present, and let’s face it, future behavior, I would never, *ever* take advantage of someone sexually.

“You have nothing to worry about,” I said. “I’m not a predator.”

She cocked a pierced eyebrow at me. “That’s exactly what a predator *would* say.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning. Damn, she was prickly. And oh so easy to bait. I hadn't been lying earlier when I said I'd take any attention I could get, and if she kept snapping at me, I was going to get all riled up in the pantal region. Which would be pretty fucking obvious since these sweats left nothing to the imagination.

I leaned closer and dropped my voice. "You're safe with me, Stella."

Her eyes flashed when I said her name, like she'd noticed the way my tone caressed it, tasting it on my tongue. It made me want to say it again, lower, rougher, to see how she'd react. No, I wouldn't force her, but I didn't think I'd have to. I hadn't imagined what almost happened between us before her coworker so rudely interrupted. I'd been about to kiss her. And she'd been about to *let me.*

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Looked like she was trying to rein herself in.

Come on, I wanted to say. *Fight with me.*

I'd come here with a plan to tell Stella that I held her brother's fate in my hands, and then lay out my demands for how she could set Blake free. But then she'd opened those pouty lips and antagonized me, and I figured after all the hard work I'd put in, I deserved to have a little fun playing with my prey first.

She seemed to think better of whatever she was about to say (disappointing) and dropped her gaze to my arm. "I need you to sit back again and relax."

I did as she asked but kept my face turned her way. Her head tipped down as she fitted the temporary tattoo against my skin, giving me a chance to finally study her in peace. Long lashes kissed her upper cheeks when she blinked. The metal of her piercings flashed in the light. Her midnight hair was pulled back in a loose braid, leaving her dramatic makeup on full display: cat eyeliner, red carpet–level contour, matte blue lips so dark they were almost black. Paired with her cropped band tee, barely-there ripped shorts, fishnets, combat boots, and innumerable tattoos, she looked like the poster child for

depressed millennials.

I was an equal opportunity kind of guy. Meaning, I was attracted to just about everyone, but I'd never fucked an emo chick before. Hell, I was struggling to remember if I'd ever fucked *anyone* as hot as Stella. Up close, she didn't look real. And yes, I knew some of that was down to how well she'd applied her makeup, but I could tell from her features and bone structure that she'd be just as stunning without it.

I'd known she was beautiful based off pictures, but they hadn't prepared me for seeing her in person. Didn't capture how impossibly long her legs were. How expressive her face was. The way her eyes flashed with annoyance. The way one eyebrow crept up in perfect disdain. We might have just met, but I'd spent enough time studying people at card tables that I was quickly learning her tells. She was enjoying our sparring, no matter how much she tried to pretend otherwise, and it made me want to keep poking at her, let my not-so-inner douchebag run rampant until she was so pissed off that she finally snapped and—

And what? I wondered. Punched me in the face like she'd threatened? Dragged her nails down my bare chest deep enough to draw blood? What

was it about this woman that made me want to goad her into violence? *Brat,* a voice that sounded a lot like Lauren's ghosted through my mind.

Nah. No way. That wasn't what this was. I wanted Stella at her worst because it would make it easier to remember who she was: my enemy. Nothing but a pawn on the chessboard, someone I planned to play with until I was ready to make my next move. And then I would discard her, broken and ruined, while I set my sights on winning the game.

I'd been prepared to manipulate her. Threaten her if I had to. What I wasn't expecting was this instant spark of *something* between us. What I felt was too complicated to be defined, and what she felt . . . judging from the look on her face, she seemed torn between wanting to choke me and fuck me.

Both please! my subconscious chimed in.

I did my best to muzzle it as her gaze slid away from my arm and down over the rest of my body, like she couldn't help herself. The urge to touch her was so strong that I balled my hand into a fist between her ankles because I didn't trust my fingers not to wander. I could *feel* the heat coming off her, longed to trace it to its source, wondered if I would find her wet and wanting.

Fuck. This was a complication I didn't need. I hadn't dated a woman in over six months, had stuck strictly to men, so I figured there was no reason to worry, because I wasn't in a girl phase. Of course, Stella would be the woman to remind me that I liked pussy just as much as dick.

It made me resent her even more. She was everything I hated: the product of wealth, born with a silver spoon in her mouth. She'd never wanted for anything in her life. Had no idea what it felt like to go without, to constantly worry about where her next meal was coming from, or if there would even be one. Hell, this tattoo parlor was likely bought and paid for by her parents, all to support her little hobby. She probably wasn't even any good, the place kept afloat by the other artists who worked alongside her.

She made a low, contemplative noise and pulled the transfer paper away to make a few small cuts.

My gaze dropped to the final design for the first time. I had to admit the tattoo was good—a stylized skeleton, hooded, holding five playing cards in its bony hand, bright with color and contrast. Seeing the rough sketch was one thing, but seeing it in full, glorious finality was something else entirely. "You did that yourself?" I said, unbelieving. No way this pampered rich

girl had actual talent.

Her jawline flexed like she was grinding her teeth. "Yes."

"No one helped you?"

Her eyes flashed as they lifted to mine. "No. Now if you're done asking

questions, I'd really like to get this placed and send you on your merry way to go piss someone else—" She cut herself off, forcing a smile that looked painful. "I mean, let you get on with the rest of your night."

I grinned, unable to help myself. "But I'm having so much fun here with you."

She ignored the goading comment, lifting the paper back to my arm, and I realized the cuts would allow it to contour better around my muscles.

"I think it should sit here," she said, leaning back to inspect her placement. "Fine," I said. I had no plans to get an actual tattoo, so it didn't matter where she put it. This was all just a ruse so I could get close enough to get a good read on her, learn which buttons I would need to push to get her to do what I wanted. Lucky for me, the woman seemed to be made of buttons. "I'm gonna go through all the steps, like if I was about to tattoo you," she said. "That way, we should get the best fit."

I bet it'll fit real good, came an unbidden thought, my gaze dropping straight between her spread legs. Those goddamn shorts had ridden up, lean muscles on display beneath the fishnets. My online stalking had revealed a lot of things about Stella, including that she'd been a ballerina when she was younger. She still had the body for it, almost rail-thin. Her movements were graceful, too, hands all but floating through the air as she turned to grab a clean pair of nitrile gloves from her cart.

The motion pressed her thigh against my arm.

Aslight pressure came from my crotch.

Now? my dick asked.

Absolutely not, I told it. Stella was so close that there was no way she'd miss the trouser trout forming if I lost control of myself. Goddamn sweatpants. I should have taken the time to pull my jeans back on post- workout, but I'd been in such a rush to get here that I'd dressed at Mach speed.

She turned back my way, wetting my upper arm with a soapy solution and then wiping it dry. My gaze dropped to the seemingly random tattoos dotting her pale skin. I spotted an anchor, a dancing skeleton, the lunar cycle, and a snake wrapped around her forearm. It shouldn't have worked,

but the way they were placed, paired with the spacing between them, made it look more eclectic than arbitrary, like she'd planned them out with care. She swapped the soap for a razor and started dry-shaving my arm.

I lifted my gaze to her face, watching her brows draw together with concentration, the way her eyes followed the motion of the razor. She had beautiful eyes. Light brown with honey tones running through them.

A strand of hair had come loose from her braid, and it brushed against my arm as she leaned close. I clenched my jaw and tried to think of absolutely anything else but the feel of her warm breath on my skin. Once she was done, she spun away to set down the razor and pick up a bottle of hand sanitizer, giving me a brief respite in which to beg my nether regions to behave. And then she was back, leaning in as she wiped my arm down for a second time. She smelled good. Like incense. The kind they burned in hippie stores to cover the reek of the devil's lettuce from the break area out back.

One more half turn brought Stella's leg back in contact with my arm, and something in me finally snapped. I unclenched my fist and brushed my fingers over the inside of her ankle.

She froze.

So did I.

What the fuck was I doing?

And why couldn't I seem to stop myself?

Slowly, she pivoted away, her expression unreadable, and it clicked. She was too calm, too collected, too flawless. Like that almost-kiss hadn't happened. Like it was that forgettable. Like *I* was that forgettable. Meanwhile, here I

was begging the chub in my pants not to go full flagpole. It made me want to drag her down to my level. Undo her. Ruin her. Grab her by the shirt and haul her forward so I could smear that perfect lipstick all over her face with my mouth.

Something ugly was crawling up the back of my throat, demanding to be let out. This was a sickness I'd been fighting my whole life, the need to prove that I was good enough, that I was worthy. And what better way to do that than by fucking a spoiled brat in the shop her parents paid for? She was always going to hate me for what I had done to her brother, and for what I planned to do to her and everyone else she'd ever cared about, so what did it matter if I added one more sin to my list of crimes?

If I was going to be the villain in her story, I might as well earn the title,

right?

Plus, it wasn't like Stella was some innocent nobody. She was a villain herself in someone else's story, and that was a large part of why I'd chosen her. It was easier to hate her knowing what she'd done, knowing that the protection of her wealth and privilege had kept her from paying for her crimes.

"See you tomorrow!" her grizzled coworker called before the chiming door announced his departure.

Alone at last.

This time I wrapped my whole hand around Stella's ankle.

"What are you doing?" she said, echoing my earlier thought.

"What we both want me to," I answered, dragging my fingers up the inside of her calf.

She shuddered, eyes closing, lips falling open, just like they had before we'd been interrupted. "I don't even like you."

“Who said this has anything to do with us liking each other?” My fingers reached her knee and curled around the back of it. Gripped.

She started to say something, but I cut her off before she could talk us out of this.

“Get up here.”

I grabbed her arm, and with a tug, I had her moving, but her leg swinging over mine? That was all her. A clear indicator that I wasn’t the only one who’d lost their goddamn mind. The transfer paper fluttered to the floor, forgotten, as she landed in my lap. I dropped my hands to her hips and ground up just enough for her to feel what she’d done to me, gripping her hard enough to know I resented her for it.

Her palms slapped against my bare chest as she was forced to brace herself upright. But no one was forcing her to dig her nails in so hard. And no one was forcing me to like it as much as I did.

“You’d be prettier without the piercings,” I said, some small part of me trying to save myself from this stupidity by being an asshole.

“And you’d be prettier with your mouth stapled shut,” she shot back. I rolled my hips into her. “So you only want me for my body?”

“No, your winning personality.” Her tone was deeply sarcastic.

“Shut up.”

“*You* shut up.”

We moved forward at the same time, shutting each other up. With our

mouths.

Stella’s lips popped open immediately, and I knew from the first glide of my

tongue against hers that this was a mistake. Because it wasn't awkward. Or hesitant. Our teeth didn't click together. We didn't have to go slow at first as we learned each other's kissing style. No, we went into it hard, rough. Like we'd been doing this for years.

Her tongue felt like heaven, pausing, swirling, deepening the kiss as her hands gripped my face and she tilted my head back to give herself better access. And her hips. Fuck, she knew how to move, that slow drag of her pussy up and down the length of my cock making me want to shred the layers between us and drive up into her wet, welcoming heat.

"Don't let this go to your head," she said as we shifted angles. "I make out with all my clients."

"Dirty little slut." With my voice gone low from lust, the words came out even rougher than I'd intended.

Stella must have liked the sound of them, because her lips crashed back into mine on a moan. Our tongues met again, mouths pausing open as we twirled them against each other in an absolutely filthy kiss. My hands swept up from her hips, briefly framing her narrow waist before stroking upward to her ribcage and pausing there. I brushed my thumbs along the underside of her breasts, felt her arch into me with a silent plea for more.

The sound of a chime echoed through the shop. We froze, eyes opening, staring at each other as heavy footfalls headed in our direction.

Stella dove sideways off me. Or maybe I threw her. Either way, the squawking noise she made as she went flying had those footfalls picking up speed.

"Your mouth," she hissed, scrambling back onto her stool. She was one to talk. Blue was smeared from her nose to her chin like she'd cannibalized a Smurf.

At least I'd achieved my goal of ruining her perfect face.

I clapped a hand over my lips and yanked my knees up to shield my now raging erection from view.

Stella put her back to the door just as her crotchety coworker strode into view. He paused on the threshold, eyeing us with obvious suspicion. “Everything okay in here?”

“We’re fine,” Stella said, facing the wall.

His gaze narrowed. “Forgot my keys.”

“Oh, okay,” Stella responded, her voice a whole octave higher than normal. Real smooth. “Did you find them?”

“Yeah.” The big guy looked between us again. “How much longer you going to be?”

“Maybe ten minutes?” Stella said.

He jerked a nod. “I think I’ll wait after all. Spend that time setting everything up for tomorrow.”

He shot me a warning look and stomped away.

Stella released a shaky breath and grabbed a paper towel to wipe at her mouth. Afterward, she tossed it my way. “Here, clean your face off.”

I flicked it onto the floor. “Ew.”

She rolled her eyes. “Your tongue was just cleaning the back of my teeth.” “Doesn’t mean I want to use your dirty rags.” I reached past her and snagged the roll of paper towels myself.

Somewhere nearby, a loud noise sounded, like her coworker had slammed a drawer.

Stella glanced toward the hallway. “I don’t think he likes you very much.”

“Yeah, well, the feeling’s mutual,” I grumbled, wiping my lips clean, but maybe I should have been thanking him instead. Seducing Stella would have been fun in the moment, but it also would have complicated things further down the road.

I didn’t need to fuck her to play my part as the villain; what I had planned was more than enough to make her hate me forever. And plus, that kiss had quickly gotten out of hand, had been a little *too* good. Even now, I felt the ghost of her lips over mine, working, coaxing, and it made me want to reach out and haul her back up here, to hell with her grouchy employee.

I chucked the used paper towel onto her work tray and then handed her the roll. Our eyes met as she took it, held for a moment before her gaze dropped to my lips.

“That won’t be happening again,” she said, sounding like she was trying to convince herself.

“Then maybe you should stop staring at my mouth like you’re about five seconds away from re-attacking me.”

She yanked the paper towels out of my hand. “I didn’t attack you.”

“Yes, you did,” I said, gesturing toward the doorway. “I’m half-tempted to invite your buddy back in here to make sure you keep your hands to yourself.”

“You are *so* egotistical,” she said, spinning away to set the roll down and scoop her design from the floor.

“I like to think I have the appropriate level of self-confidence.”

“Sir, you are a blond man. Calm down.”

I frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She scooted back toward me, repositioning the transfer paper. “I can’t

explain why that’s a burn. It’ll ruin it.”

I eyed her while she refocused on her work, wanting to say more, wanting to keep taunting her because I didn’t like how quickly she was getting herself back under control.

More loud sounds came from nearby, another reminder that we weren’t alone.

A wave of irritation washed over me, and this time, I did nothing to stem the tide, letting it distract me from Stella’s nearness and remind me of how I should have been feeling this whole time.

Her coworker’s return had fucked up my plan to reveal myself. I’d booked this appointment so late because Stella had a (bad) habit of closing the shop herself, and I’d wanted us to be alone when I explained my true intentions. I couldn’t do that now with Lurch loitering nearby. Not that I couldn’t take the old bastard in a fight—I still met Josh at the dojo once a week so we could kick the shit out of each other. No, it was because I didn’t want witnesses, especially not a dude who looked like he might have ties to the seedier side of this city.

So I’d just have to sit here and suffer through Stella’s nearness in silence. Getting her alone again was going to be a pain in the ass. She never seemed to leave this place except to run across the street for coffee, and unlike my best friend, I didn’t have the time to sit around watching people like a creep. I had places to be, another event to prepare for.

Goddamn it, I was going to have to book a second late-night appointment, wasn’t I? Hopefully she had something open in the coming days, because the sooner I laid out my cards, the better. Stella and her brother were incredibly close, and my blackmail banked on that. Blake and I had only interacted briefly, but between my “research” and being a good reader of people, I’d determined a few crucial things about him: he was young for his age (having obviously grown up sheltered), gullible, naïve, and in a vulnerable state because of a recent breakup. It made him the perfect victim, and he’d fallen easily into my trap.

Now he was in trouble. Trouble too big for his frat boys to get him out of. This was blood-is-thicker-than-water trouble. The type you'd only bring to someone who'd feel obligated to help you. Someone who'd been protecting you your whole life, so you wouldn't repeat their mistakes. Which meant there was a very high risk that Blake might go running to Stella for a bailout before I could break the news to her myself.

Would that be the worst thing? I wondered, eyeing her as she taped the transfer paper into place. If Blake got to her first, she'd have all the pieces she needed to figure out my identity. He hadn't seen my face at the party, but he knew my hair was blond, and that I was tall, muscular, and went by Mr. Strickland. Plus, if he told her, I wouldn't have to deal with the fallout. The yelling. The potential tears and pleading for mercy I didn't have. God knew I dealt with that shit enough with my regular clients.

Was I worried about Blake going to his parents instead? Or worse, the cops? Absolutely not. Because I'd done my homework. Thanks to Stella's checkered past, I was convinced that Blake wouldn't want to cause their parents any more grief or embarrassment. And going to the cops risked a public scandal, something the McCormicks would do anything to avoid.

At my core, I was a gambler, and it was time to roll the dice.

One way or another, by the end of the week, Stella was going to find out who she was really dealing with. And then I could set my plan in motion.

6

Stella

"HONEY, I'M HOME," I SAID, shutting my front door.

From deep inside the apartment came a loud, squawky, "*Fuuuck you.* "

I shook my head and started unlacing my boots. "Why are you cranky, Amos? I spent an hour with you at lunch, and *you* were the one who threw

me out at the end."

"*Treat?*" the parrot cawed back at me. "*'Stash, 'stash, 'stash, Snack Bitch .*" I grimaced. African grey parrots were like toddlers. You had to be careful what you said in front of them because you never knew what they'd fixate on. I'd jokingly referred to myself as his "Snack Bitch" *one time* three years ago, and now it was the only thing he called me. And yes, I knew it was intentional because usually he laughed afterward. Also? His species was known for being as smart as a three- to five-year-old child, and most of Amos's other phrases changed on a weekly basis. Yet this one had stuck. Because he knew it was an insult and no one could convince me otherwise. My apartment was right above the tattoo parlor, and parrot hearing was on par with human hearing, so I'd had the contractors soundproof the floors during the build, wanting to keep it as quiet as I could for Amos.

I kicked off my shoes by the door and went to find him, passing through the small entryway into the open-concept living room. Amos's cage took up almost the entire far side, surrounded by plants meant to mimic his natural habitat. In summer, the cage sat close to the floor-to-ceiling picture window, which looked out onto the back deck—again, filled with so many tropical plants that it resembled a small jungle. I'd also put bird feeders and plenty of pollinator-friendly flowers outside so Amos had something to watch all day.

We called it Bird TV.

Right now, there wasn't much to look at. It was past midnight, and beyond the window, the sky sat low over the city, heavy with clouds and the threat of rain.

I snagged the bag of pistachios (aka, 'stash, aka, Amos's *favorite* food) off a side table and approached his cage. The only light on in the apartment was

a small lamp in the kitchen set to a timer matched to the sunset. The bulb was soft and warm, and dim enough that it wouldn't keep Amos from falling asleep. I'd tried to do the whole cage-cover thing with him, but he wouldn't have it, constantly complaining and gnawing at it through the bars until I finally gave up and let him have his way—a regular occurrence in this

household.

Thankfully, the lamp provided just enough light for me to see where I was going, and I threaded through the plants to the cage. Amos was already climbing the bars toward the door to meet me, doing his signature mix of whistling and chirping to show he was happy.

“Only one. You had one at lunch earlier.”

“*Three, three, ’stash. Shit please*,” he said.

Amos swore so much because I swore so much, but he didn’t quite have the knack of when exactly he was supposed to curse, so he ended up throwing the words in randomly whenever he wanted to emphasize something.

“One,” I told him, opening his cage.

He strutted out onto the knobbly wooden perch and then flapped onto my shoulder, cuddling right up to the side of my face like the manipulative little asshole he was. His feathers were soft against my cheek, and while his talons pricked at my skin, I could tell he was trying to be as careful as possible. Something most people didn’t know was that African greys have an oddly clean scent, like fresh linen that’s been dried with fabric softener. I took a deep breath of it and leaned my face in to cuddle him back.

He let out a happy whistle (clearly sensing his win), and popped his head forward enough to look me in the eye. “*Peekaboo!* ”

“You’re too cute and you know it,” I grumbled.

“*’Stash? ’Stash?* ”

“Yes, fine,” I said, holding up a nut for him.

He took it with one claw, and had it open and down his gullet in less than a second. “*’Stash?* ”

I held up a second, and he demolished it as fast as the first.

“Okay, but that’s it,” I told him. “You’ll get the shits if you have too many.”

“*Shits, shits. ’Stash?* ”

“No, sir. Now come on, I have to go shower and you need to go to bed.” “*I love you*,” he said in an adorable little sing-song voice.

“I love you, too,” I told him. “Which is why you can’t have more.”

He mimicked a sad sound effect that he’d picked up from a movie, but allowed me to transfer him back to his perch, and then walked into the cage himself.

“Go to sleep, bud,” I said.

“*Go to sleep, bud,*” he shot back at me.

I shook my head, shut the cage door, and headed toward the bathroom.

I’d inherited Amos from my paternal grandmother after she passed. He’d spent the first thirty years of his life in a much smaller cage with almost zero environmental stimulation and no one for company but another crotchety old bird (my grandmother), and I wanted him to live out the rest of his days as happy as he could possibly be in captivity.

At first, I’d tried to introduce other birds because the experts said that was best for a parrot’s social and mental well-being, but Amos hated absolutely every creature besides me, so instead, I focused on improving his environment, diet, and physical enrichment. Which meant no more than three pistachios a day, no matter how much he begged.

The sound of his complaints followed me out of the room. This apartment had the same footprint as the shop below it, and my bedroom and en suite branched off the living area. I headed straight to the shower, cranking up the heat in hopes that it would ease some of the ache in my back. As steam

started to fill the room, I paused to glance at myself in the mirror, my expression guilty.

Today, I'd sunk to a new low. I'd *kissed* a client. What was worse, I'd chosen an obnoxious gym bro to swap saliva with. No, wait. That wasn't the worst part. The worst part was how much I'd *enjoyed* it.

I grabbed the edge of the sink and bowed my head, trying to calm my racing pulse, desperate to ignore the little throb of unfulfilled longing emanating from my core. My underwear was still slightly damp, slick since Theo dragged me over his cock and *definitely not before that moment.* Thank fuck Derrick had interrupted us again before things got out of hand. God, what had I been thinking, letting a virtual stranger manhandle me like that?

I hadn't been thinking, and that was the problem. Even after I'd resolved to be the better person, I kept letting Theo antagonize me into reacting to his childish needling. And then all it had taken was one brush of his fingers for me to launch myself at him.

My face heated with embarrassment. Ugh, he was right. I *had* attacked him. And the bitter truth was that I'd spent the rest of the appointment fighting the urge to kiss him again. In my defense, it was a *good* kiss. Hot, bruising, our disdain for each other spicing it with enough heat that I'd felt like my clothes were about to catch fire.

I really needed to take a day off and go find some other, nicer person to hook up with. For the safety of all my future clients, because, clearly, I could no longer be trusted.

The shower spray was nearly scalding when I stepped beneath it, but I couldn't tell if it was because it was just that hot or because my skin was still so hypersensitive. I had my answer when I brushed my soaped-up loofah over my breasts and my nipples tightened painfully. Giving in, I closed my eyes and dropped my hand between my legs, the first roll of my fingers over my clit shooting stars across the inside of my lids. I came less than a minute later, definitely *not* imagining Theo's thick fingers inside me instead.

Afterward, I toweled off and did my skin care routine in record time, resolving to never think of Theo again. Or at least not until I *had* to when he came in for his next appointment, scheduled for a week from now.

I dressed in sweats and a ratty old band tee and quietly padded back into the kitchen.

"*'Stash?*" Amos sleepily called from his cage.

"No, bud. Go to sleep."

He grumbled under his breath, half words, half grouchy noises, while I looked for a bedtime snack for myself. I'd eaten dinner a few hours ago, but I always went to sleep with at least *something* in my stomach to help settle it. Usually a few pieces of bread or some crackers.

I was just opening a cabinet when my phone chimed with the notification that someone was out front on the street level. Normally, I'd ignore it—my standard assumption was that anyone pushing the shop's buzzer at this hour was either drunk or had some nefarious motive—but I worried it was Derrick, having accidentally left something else behind.

I pulled up my security app and saw a dark, hooded shape standing outside. Yup, definitely ignoring it.

They pushed the buzzer again. And again.

I tapped the microphone button. "Get fucked."

The figure pulled their hood back and turned toward the camera. Surprise

shot through me. It was my brother. What the hell was Blake doing here this late? And why hadn't he texted or called first?

Frowning, I went downstairs to let him in.

The second Blake was through the door, I locked it behind him and reset the

exterior alarm. If I took after Mom, he took after Dad: tall, sandy- haired, freckle-faced, with shoulders too wide for his gangly body. He looked like shit. Like he'd aged a decade in the week since I'd last seen him. Dark circles stood out beneath bloodshot brown eyes. His cheeks were hollow, skin paler than normal, and the reek of stale alcohol wafting off him was strong enough to turn my stomach.

What the hell happened to my baby brother?

I ushered him over to the seating area. "Are you okay?"

He didn't answer, stumbling past me to collapse onto a chair and bury his head in his hands. Unease crept up my spine. This *wasn't* Blake. He'd gotten Dad's personality, too—lighthearted, jovial, a permanent smile etched on his face.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

When he still didn't answer me, I reached out to feel his forehead, wondering if he was sick, but his skin felt cool, clammy.

I sat across from him. "Say something. You're starting to freak me out." "I fucked up," he croaked.

"Fucked up, how? We talking you accidentally ruined a pair of Mom's heels, or you broke one of Dad's golf clubs?"

I figured it had to be something like that because Blake *never* got into trouble. That had been my role, and I'd taken it very seriously right up until I'd gotten into the sort of trouble you couldn't come back from. Blake had been young enough during my experience that it had scarred him for life, turned him risk-averse. He became the good kid, the smart kid. Where I'd been a constant headache, he was a straight-A student. Our parents trusted him to leave the house without worrying they'd get a phone call from the police by the end of the night.

Blake finally lifted his head, expression bleak, and said the absolute last

thing I could have predicted. “I gambled away my inheritance.”

“Ha ha,” I said, relief sweeping through me. Blake might have been arrow-straight, but he was also a prankster, constantly pulling my leg or setting up ridiculous scenarios that would end in my own embarrassment. This was obviously another grift, him showing up here looking devastated so he

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could laugh at me for falling for his dumb act.

“I’m not kidding,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Fine. If he wanted to take it too far, we’d take it too far. “Okay then, while we’re making confessions, I should tell you, I’ve recently been introduced to the world of dendrophilia, and it has really broadened my horizons.”

He blinked. “Dendrophilia? What is that?”

I grinned. “Tree humping.”

Instead of finally cracking a grin and giving up the bit, he shot out of his seat, fingers fisting his hair as he started to pace. “I’m serious, Stel. Last week, I got this mysterious invitation to some kind of party. I didn’t know what it was, so I wasn’t going to accept it, but Henry and Grant caught sight of it and insisted we all go.”

I frowned. Henry and Grant were two of his frat buddies, and some of the most annoying rich kids I had ever met, which was saying something because I’d grown up surrounded by nepo babies. I had no idea why my brother tolerated them. Blake had tried to tell me they weren’t that bad when you got them on their own, that most of their assholery was just for show, but I wasn’t convinced.

Blake paced back toward me. “It was an illegal gambling party or something. We all had to dress up and wear masks. I don’t know how it happened, but I lost track of Henry and Grant while I was talking to the guy hosting the event, and then he led me over to the poker tables. We’d pregamed before going, and the waitstaff kept serving me drinks I didn’t ask for. By the time I started playing, I was already drunk.” He paused to shoot me a guilty look, like it was inconceivable that an underage kid might be drinking illegally.

“Then what?” I asked, my mind spinning. Was he actually serious right now?

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s all a blur. I got *really* drunk. Most of it I only remember in pieces. Running out of cash. The dealer telling me the house could front me money for the next bet. And then the next one. I kept accepting because I was so out of it that I don’t think I really understood that it was *real* money I was losing, and . . .” His sharp inhale sounded pained. “I lost Grandpa’s watch.”

He pulled up his sleeve to reveal his empty wrist, and my stomach dropped. That watch had been his most cherished possession; he would *never* joke about losing it. As a little kid, he’d been obsessed with the

vintage Patek Philippe timepiece, and Grandpa had regularly taken it off so Blake could watch the back gears move as the seconds ticked by. It was the beginning of Blake’s mechanical obsession, his need to know how things worked. When Grandpa passed, he’d left Blake the watch, and I’d never seen my brother without it.

Shit. He was telling the truth.

I sat forward in my seat. “Do you remember who you lost it to? Maybe we can get it back.”

Blake shook his head, looking like he was about to cry. “No. Everyone was wearing masks, and my memories are so hazy that I don’t think I’d remember anyway.”

“How . . .” *Oh, god*. “How much did you lose?”

He stopped pacing and closed his eyes. “Three million.”

I stopped breathing. Three million dollars. His entire inheritance. Gone in one night.

Our parents might be swimming in money, but they’d made it clear to us that they only planned to leave us a comparatively small amount, the rest going to charity when they passed.

Blake didn’t even have access to his yet, which would make paying off his debt impossible.

“You were drunk,” I said, latching onto a small but hopeful thought. “And you’re underage. There’s no way they can hold you to your losses.”

Blake’s exhale was shaky. “I doubt these people care about either of those things. The entire party was illegal. And the guy who runs it,” his eyes met mine, looking scared, “everyone says he’s ruthless. That if you don’t pay him on time, he’ll destroy you.”

Fear wormed its way up my spine. “We need to tell Mom and Dad.” They’d know what to do. They had the kind of money to fix this situation. Blake gave a violent jerk of his head. “No. Please, Stel. They can’t find out. I’ve never done anything bad before, and I can’t handle them being as disappointed in me as you are.”

I pushed to my feet and hauled him into a hug. “I’m not disappointed in you. I’m shocked. And I think our parents would feel the same. Really, you should be more concerned about Mom going on the warpath *for* you.” Someone had hurt her perfect angel baby. She would be furious when she

found out.

Blake pulled free and went back to pacing. “No, you . . . you don’t understand. Mr. Strickland has no morals. He’ll do something to Mom and Dad. Or threaten to leak my losses to the press. I don’t want to put them through another scandal like yours. It almost broke them last time.”

I went rigid.

Blake’s face fell as he caught sight of me. “Shit, Stella, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“What was that name you just said?” I asked, my ears ringing.

“Mr. Strickland?”

My head spun. *No.* No fucking way. “What did he look like?”

Blake shrugged. “I don’t know, he had a mask on.”

I lunged forward, grabbing his shoulders. “But you must have seen something. Hair color, eyes, height, anything?” My fingers dug into his arms. I was squeezing him too hard but couldn’t help myself, my mind stuck on something from earlier. *“Theo. You’re going to want to remember that.*” The smug look on Theo’s face when he’d said it. The way he’d followed it up with, *“Or you can call me Mr. Strickland if you prefer.”* How he’d seemed like he was secretly laughing at me the whole time he’d been here.

“He was tall, I think,” Blake said. “With blond hair? Maybe blue eyes?”

I tore myself away from him and flew out the door. It couldn’t have been more than half an hour since I’d closed the shop. Theo could still be nearby. This block had several bars that were open until 2 a.m. Maybe he’d popped into one of them. Or, considering his vanity, was standing under a streetlight admiring himself in the reflection of a window.

I froze half a dozen feet away, trying to remember which direction Theo had walked in. Left? Right? Passersby turned to look at me, no doubt wondering what the hobgoblin with the messy bun and pimple patches was doing out here.

Shit, shit, shit, think, goddamn it, I told myself, trying to ignore the onlookers. That motherfucker had come into *my* shop, after doing what he’d done to *my* brother, and acted like a smug asshole. He’d goaded me. Flirted with me. *Kissed me* .

Blake materialized at my side. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to remember which direction Theo went when he left.”

“Who the hell is Theo?” Blake asked, clearly confused.

“Mr. Strickland.”

Blake made a choking noise. “He was *here*? Oh, fuck, Stella, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “Did you see a blond man on your way in?”
“No.” He glanced up and down the street, fear taking over his expression. My blood was singing for immediate vengeance but I forced myself to be rational. Theo was probably long gone. If, by some miracle, he was still close by, there was likely no way I could find him, and even if I did, what then? It wasn’t like I could beat him to death in the middle of a bar. The man was huge, and something about the way he’d said I could *try* to hit him told me he knew how to fight, that all those pretty muscles weren’t just for show.

What I needed first was more information.

Reluctantly, I led Blake back into the tattoo shop, relocking the door behind us. Once inside, I made him a cup of strong coffee from the break room in the back—because, god, he reeked of booze—and forced him to drink it while I recounted tonight’s events (minus the kiss I wished I could banish from my memory).

“I can’t believe he was here,” Blake said when I was done, glancing around like he was waiting for the boogeyman to jump out.

I was quiet in response, my mind in overdrive. Blake said the party was last week, but Theo and I had been emailing for over two. It reeked of a setup.

“Come take a look at this,” I said, heading toward the front desk. With a few shakes of the mouse, I woke the computer and navigated to my security footage. Today’s video feed filled the screen. I snapped forward in time to 11:25 p.m., and right on cue, Theo strolled inside, somehow looking both douchier and hotter than I remembered.

I hit pause and turned the monitor toward my brother. “Is this him?”

I had to ask the question. Because even though all signs pointed to Theo being *the* Mr. Strickland, there was still a sliver of a chance that this was some horrible coincidence and I was planning to violently end the life of a completely innocent, albeit obnoxious, man.

Blake leaned close to the screen. “Can you zoom in on his face?” I did, but it pixelated the image.

“Shit, I don’t know,” Blake said, straightening. “I was so drunk. I’m sorry.”

I gripped his shoulder. “Stop apologizing. This isn’t your fault.”

He pulled away. “Yes, it is.”

I shook my head. “It can’t be.”

He made a low sound of annoyance. “Don’t do that. Don’t make it out like I’m some little kid who got taken advantage of.”

But you are, I almost blurted.

“I’m twenty years old,” he said. “I chose to go to that party. I chose to get that drunk.”

“You said they kept giving you drinks you didn’t ask f—”

“Yeah, but I didn’t have to drink them,” he interrupted, dark eyes blazing with frustration. “Just like I didn’t have to keep playing when I realized I was in over my head. At any point during the night, I could have folded and gotten out of there.”

“Then why didn’t you?” The second the words were out, I wished I could take them back. It made it sound like I was mad at him. I wasn’t; I just wanted to understand how my brother had gone his whole life without screwing up only to gamble away his entire inheritance in one night.

“Alex broke up with me.”

My heart sank. Alex and Blake had been together since their junior year of high school. Our parents were good friends. I was pretty sure our moms had been secretly planning their nuptials for years. They were the perfect couple. Meant to be. And now Blake was telling me Alex had ended it?

He must have been heartbroken. No wonder he'd gotten blackout drunk. "What happened?" I asked, reaching out to comfort him.

Blake shirked my touch. "He cheated on me."

My mouth dropped open.

"For the past six months."

Anger bubbled up from the pit of my stomach, not just at Alex for hurting my brother, but at Mr. Strickland for taking such obvious advantage of his heartbreak. Blake was kind, compassionate, and empathetic. He saw the best in everyone, was always ready to give people second chances, and didn't have a mean bone in his body. He'd planned to use his inheritance for good, following in Mom and Dad's footsteps, with the brightest possible future ahead of him.

And Theo Strickland had stolen it all from him.

I was going to fucking *kill* that man.

7

Tyler

MY BURNER PHONE CHIMED WITH an incoming email as I pulled into my apartment complex. It could have been anyone—Josh with whatever random thought had popped into his head, or a contractor thanking me for a speedy payment—but my mind immediately went to Stella. Which was ridiculous. I'd *just* left her shop; there was no reason for her to be emailing me.

Unless it was to beg me to come back and finish what we'd started. . . .

I parked in my usual spot and grabbed my gym bag out of the front seat. Before getting out of the car, I checked my surroundings. So far, I'd managed to keep my real life and my secret life separate, but Junior Trocci finding the location of my last party had turned me skittish, and I'd spent the past week looking over my shoulder, wondering who might find me next. I had a lot of enemies in this city.

I didn't see anyone, but I still unzipped my bag so I'd have easy access to the gun hidden inside.

Another email hit my phone as I got out of the car. Another as I climbed the stairs. Another as locked the door behind me. Who the fuck was this impatient? It must be one of my shadier contacts. My closest associates would have texted or called.

I set my bag on the kitchen island and pulled out my phone.

A whoosh of air shot through my lips. It *was* Stella. Excitement and anticipation rolled through my veins as I opened the message, and my dick gave a twinge like it was half a second away from hardening.

The first email read: *You motherfucker.*

I frowned. Had my payment bounced or something? Was that why she was mad? That shouldn't have happened. I'd used the credit card of one of my clients, who had all but begged me to take it from him. I mean, at the time, I'd been threatening to send my collection goons to his big fancy office if he didn't pay his debts. To stave them off, he said I could rack up as much as I wanted on his platinum card. If he'd turned around and canceled it, I swear to God . . .

Did you take advantage of my UNDERAGE brother? the next email read. Well, this was escalating faster than I'd expected.

If you did, you better get your affairs in order.

Because I am going to END YOU.

I set the phone on my kitchen counter and strode into the living room, stopping at the floor-to-ceiling windows to stare out at the city lights beyond. How to play this? Josh had taught me enough that I knew this email address couldn't be tracked back to me. I'd also parked several blocks away from Stella's shop so none of her exterior cameras (or anyone else's on the street) would have seen my license plate. And I'd used my alias, *Theodore Strickland,* in all our communications.

I decided to see Stella's threats as a good thing. Asign that Blake had gone to her after all, and her parents probably weren't involved. If so, I needed to keep it that way. Keep her on the hook long enough to dangle the *real* bait, which, at first glance, would look like an easy enough way to save her younger brother.

A small, sadistic smile lifted the corners of my lips as I went back to the phone.

Death threats? I typed. *That drops my review back to one star.*

I hit send.

Her response was almost immediate.

Are you making jokes right now?

I chuckled, picturing her furious face. The way her jaw was probably clenched so hard she might crack a molar.

Oh, I'm deadly serious, I told her, and then fired off a follow-up email: *Get it?*

Your death will be slow, she wrote. *And painful.*

I stifled a laugh. Who knew mentally torturing someone could be so much fun? Maybe I was better suited for the darker side of my profession than I realized. Next thing I knew, I'd be breaking kneecaps with the best of them. *What's your brother's name?* I asked, hoping to drag this out a little longer. *I'm not playing whatever game you think this is*, Stella wrote. *Just tell me whether or not he owes you money.*

How about I tell you over dinner? I asked.

DID YOU JUST ASK ME OUT THATS IT IM CALLING THE COPS I took her lack of punctuation to mean she was well and truly furious. This was the most fun I'd had in ages.

No, you're not, I typed.

Awhole minute passed before she answered me.

Two.

Fuck, was she really calling the cops? The whole reason I'd picked her was because I thought she'd be the last person to get them involved. She and our city's PD had a long, fraught history, and from the way they'd handled her most recent charges, I figured she'd want to avoid involving them at all costs.

My phone finally pinged, and relief swept through me when I read the email.

Who the fuck are you? she asked.

Meet me for dinner on Sunday, and I'll tell you .

I have plans Sunday.

With who? I almost asked. Like it mattered. Like I actually fucking cared about the thought of her out with someone else.

I didn’t.

Cancel them, I said. She needed to understand how this worked between us, who held the power. *And be at Angolini’s over on the east side by 8 p.m. Don’t make me threaten you.*

With that, I set my phone down and went about making myself a light meal before bed. I’d eaten dinner earlier, but between working out and the adrenaline rush of seeing Stella face-to-face, I’d burned through enough calories that I was hungry again. I didn’t like being hungry. Couldn’t stand it, actually. It made me anxious, brought up memories I refused to think about. As a kid, food had been scarce, and that insecurity was hard to shake even as an adult. Now, I carried an emergency protein bar wherever I went, just in case, and had two boxes of my favorite snacks in the back seat of my car.

My phone buzzed with notifications as I set about making myself a sandwich. I ignored them. I might have believed the email was untraceable, but I wasn’t willing to answer any of Stella’s questions in writing. Everything between us from here on out had to be verbal. Her family was old money. They had the kind of generational wealth that came with real power and connections, which made them much more dangerous than the lower echelon of nouveau riche clients I’d dealt with so far. I had to tread carefully with her, because if she felt like her brother was really stuck, she might go to her parents after all.

And that would ruin everything.

■ ■ ■

Sunday night found me sitting in a booth in Angeloni’s, an Italian restaurant in an older part of the city. I hadn’t been here before but had heard good things from Josh. Good, meaning he said it was small, hard to find, and relatively private—the perfect location to unveil a blackmail plan. I’d have witnesses, which would likely keep Stella from following through on her threat of killing me, but not enough that it would be a huge scene if she had a public freak-out or started screaming about me being a criminal. The

location would also make it hard for the cops to get to in a hurry, but, in the unlikely event that they were a) called and b) arrived quickly, I'd gotten here an hour early to scope out the area. If shit went sideways, my plan was to escape out the rear kitchen door and flee into the warren of narrow streets and alleyways beyond.

I'd paid the hostess extra to seat me in one of the secluded little alcoves in the corner, and I'd taken up position with my back to the wall, my eyes trained on the front door as I waited for my "date" to arrive.

The restaurant might have been small, but it felt more cozy than cramped. Booths ringed the exterior walls, while tables draped in white cloths dotted the interior. The lighting was soft and subtle, coming from vintage wall sconces, candles, and a single chandelier. Waitstaff wove throughout the dining room dressed in crisp black uniforms, and music filtered from hidden speakers, the dulcet tones of a mandolin accompanied by a guitar. It was nice, romantic even, under different circumstances.

Surreptitiously, I reached into my jacket pocket and drew out a small, black, rectangular device. It was an ultrasonic jammer that emitted a high-frequency sound above the range of human hearing. I flicked it on and peeled off the sticker backing, attaching it to the underside of the table. If Stella tried to record our conversation, the jammer would prevent her mic from picking anything up.

The door pushed inward, and suddenly there she was, backlit by the exterior streetlights. She paused on the threshold, one hand holding the door open like she wasn't quite sure if she was really going through with this. Her eyes scanned the crowd. I smirked, waiting for them to land on me. I knew my expression was arrogant, but I couldn't help it. I felt like a spider watching a fly zoom straight toward my web.

If this little meeting went how I hoped, I'd be one step closer to the revenge I'd been chasing for years. Stella's parents owned one of the most lucrative, privately held real estate companies in the country, and their business partner was my father: Richard Lawson. By getting close to Stella, I'd have a chance to connect with everyone around him, and then I could start

turning them against him one by one.

Stella's gaze found me across the room. I lifted my glass of wine in greeting. She snarled and stomped forward.

The hostess tried to say something, but one look at Stella made her think better of it, and she slunk back behind her desk. Not that I could blame her. Stella looked mad enough to spit nails, and oh, goody, she was heading straight toward me with that attitude.

This dinner was going to be fun.

Even pissed off, she was stunning. She'd done something different with her makeup than the first time I'd seen her. It was more subtle, less emo and more corporate goth. Her hair was curled into dark waves. The black dress she wore fell to just above her knees, cinched tight at the waist by some strappy leather contraption that looked like it could double as a bondage prop. Her knee-high, heeled boots added several inches to her already towering height, and I was sure she was trying to be intimidating, but she was so beautiful that it was backfiring.

Asmoking hot woman with her entire focus trained on me? Yes, please. She paused a foot away from the table, glaring.

I grinned at her. "Nice outfit. You cosplaying as one of Dracula's rejected brides?"

She shot me a withering look. "I came dressed for your funeral."

"And how are you planning to do away with me?"

She tilted her head to the side. "I'm currently torn between driving masonry nails into your eyeballs or dousing you in kerosene and throwing matches at you until you catch."

I winked at her. "So what you're saying is you've spent a lot of time thinking about me."

She opened her mouth to respond, but our waiter suddenly appeared at her side. “Good evening,” he said, his warm smile oblivious to the tension. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Just water,” Stella said. “I’m not staying.”

The waiter’s eyebrows twitched upward before he schooled his features. “I’ll be right back with that.”

Reluctantly, Stella slid into the booth across from me.

Our eyes met over the table.

Well, this was a mistake. Because Stella lit by candlelight? Breathtaking. *She’s your enemy*, I reminded myself. *She’s everything you hate about the rich* .

I leaned back and used the excuse of sipping my wine to give myself a few seconds to regroup. Stella’s eyes remained trained on me the whole time, her shoulders held in a tense line like she was waiting for me to lunge across the table.

Time to get this ugly conversation over with.

“Your brother owes me three million dollars,” I said.

She inhaled sharply, expression furious. “So that whole tattoo consultation, that was what? Asetup to taunt me? Threaten me?”

“No, actually. I planned to tell you then, but your coworker ruined my fun.”

“Fun,” she deadpanned, her eyes dropping to my lips, the kiss an unspoken four-letter word hanging between us.

Oh, so she wanted to pretend like it hadn’t happened? Over my dead body. That ugly need to prove myself was crawling up the back of my throat

again, and if I had to constantly relive the kiss in my head, then so would she.

I ran my gaze over her, slower this time, and sunk a little smolder into my voice. “I think you had plenty of *fun*, too.”

Red swept over her cheeks, visible even through her makeup. “Temporary insanity.”

I laughed, low and humorless. “Tell yourself whatever you want, but nothing will erase the sound of you moaning into my mouth after I called you a dirty little—”

The waiter reappeared with her water, his carefully blank expression telling me that he was definitely aware of the tension now. He set the glass down and pulled out a small notepad. “Would you like to hear the specials?”

“No,” Stella said.

“Yes,” I countered.

He looked between us, hesitating.

I waved him on. “Please, proceed.”

He started rattling off dishes, each sounding more delicious than the last. I kept my eyes on him while he spoke, but in my periphery, I could see Stella glaring at me like a thundercloud. My, my, my, the shoe was on the other foot now, and it felt good to be the one who was calm and collected while she was barely holding it together.

“I’ll have the chicken scallopine,” I said when the waiter was finished.

He turned toward Stella, looking like he was bracing himself. “Anything for you?”

“No,” she bit out.

“We’ll take some bread for the table,” I said. “Just in case she gets peckish.”

The waiter nodded.

“I won’t,” she said, but he was already turning away. She let out a frustrated huff and refixed her gaze on me. “Men are so easy to hate sometimes.”

“Oh?” I said, leaning back in my seat.

“I told you two that I wanted nothing, and you both ignored me.” I grinned. “Maybe we just know better.”

The fingers of her left hand curled around her butter knife.

Now was probably the time to stop trolling her. For my plan to work, she needed to play along, and it would be easier to get her to agree if I stopped giving her reasons to hate me. But goddamn, was it a thrill to rile her up. She was so *easy,* so responsive. It made me wonder if she’d be that way in the bedroom, too.

“So,” I said. “About the three million Blake owes me.”

“He doesn’t owe you anything,” she shot back.

I arched a brow. “Yes, he does.” She shook her head. “No.” “Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes. And Stella? I’m an only child and a Taurus. I can do this all night.” Her expression darkened. “He’s twenty years old.”

“So?”

“He’s too young to gamble.”

“Legally.” I leaned forward, dropping my voice like I was sharing a secret. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but the games I run aren’t exactly . . .

aboveboard.”

Her expression turned feisty, mouth puckering in a way that drew my gaze. Her lips were painted a glossy cherry red that would look incredible wrapped around my cock. Goddamn it, I really needed to stop thinking about all the ways I could fuck her.

“That doesn’t change the fact that he’s too young to know better,” she said. “Especially because you got him drunk.”

My grin slipped. “First off, he’s twenty, not twelve, and attending one of the most prestigious colleges in the country while maintaining an impressive GPA, so stop pretending like he’s some innocent little lamb I took advantage of. Second, I didn’t force him to do anything. It’s house policy to keep the alcohol flowing because it’s good for business. No one held a gun to his head and made him drink it.”

She blinked. “How do you know so much about him? About us?”

Ah, so she’d picked up on the fact that I’d done my research. “I make it my business to learn as much about my clients as possible. Because we’re not aboveboard, some people think that means they don’t have to pay their debts. That they can threaten to go to the cops and report my operation to get me to back off. Let’s just say, having some ammunition against them has been to my benefit.”

A frisson of something slipped into her expression—worry, or maybe fear—there one second and gone the next. When she spoke, her voice was steady, belying what she felt. “Blake can’t pay it. He doesn’t have that kind of money.”

Which I already knew.

I leaned back in my seat, draping one arm across the top of the booth as I

studied her. Fuck, she was gorgeous. Not just because of the flawless skin and pouty lips. There was something about her features that made you want to stare at her, like your brain was stuck trying to figure out *why*, exactly, she was so stunning.

I comforted myself with the knowledge that I wasn't the only one distracted by her beauty. People had noticed her entrance and were still sneaking surreptitious glances from nearby tables. A passing busboy almost tripped over his own feet when he caught sight of her.

Maybe that's why I felt the need to be even more of a dick to Stella than usual: it was self-protection. A way to keep distance between us when all I wanted to do was close it.

Why were the most beautiful people always the worst human beings? "But Blake *will* have that money, eventually," I said.

Her expression shut down even more. "In, like, five years, at the soonest. Can you wait that long to be repaid?"

"No."

"Then why don't you do the right thing and forgive his debt?"

I set my wineglass down before I shattered it, looking out into the restaurant while I tried to get ahold of myself. My temper had bubbled up like a flash boil, and the urge to lash out was so strong, I almost couldn't resist it. The fucking *nerve* of this woman. Asking *me* to do the "right thing" so her brother wouldn't have to take responsibility for his own actions.

Here was my proof that she was exactly who I thought she was. That she'd learned nothing from her own monumental fuckups. That no matter what façade she presented to the outside world, beneath it she was nothing but a spoiled rich girl who'd gotten away with her horrible, uber-privileged, life-shattering behavior because Mommy and Daddy were always there to step in and save her. And now she was trying to do the same thing for her brother, ensuring the cycle would continue.

Abso-fucking-lutely not.

“The right thing,” I repeated, dragging my eyes back to her.

She nodded. “Forgive his debt.”

I gave her another moment to realize what she was asking, what a double standard it was, but her expression remained stubbornly determined, and I finally lost my temper.

“No,” I snarled.

“This could ruin his life,” she said.

“Maybe it *should* ruin his life. Maybe then he’d finally learn what the rest of us already know: that there are consequences for our actions.”

She pulled a face. “What are you talking about? My brother knows all about consequences. He watched—” She cut herself off, taking a deep breath as she seemed to think better of what she’d been about to say. “My brother has never stepped a toe out of line before this. He’s never so much as gotten a B minus.”

I scoffed. “You expect me to believe that? That he really *was* an innocent little lamb right up until he threw away three million dollars? Be so fucking for real, Stella.”

“Hey,” she said, leaning over the table to glare at me. “I *am* being real.

He’s a good kid. And naïve because he’s been so sheltered. His long-term boyfriend recently broke his heart. Blake was an emotional wreck, and his stupid frat boy friends dragged him to *your* party to blow off steam, where *you* took advantage of his vulnerable emotional state. So yeah, in this instance, I think the right thing, the decent thing, would be to forgive his debt.”

I shook my head, unmoved by her sob story because I'd heard a million of them before. Everyone always had an excuse for their behavior. A reason they shouldn't have to pay, why *they* were the exception to the rule. If my mother had taught me anything, it was that people saw kindness as weakness. So, no, I never forgave anyone's debt. Because I knew that if I did, I'd be inundated with endless requests. Worse, word would get around I'd gone soft, and someone would seize the opportunity to try to steal my business.

The waiter arrived with the bread and began to place it in front of Stella. She snapped at him. Literally bit the air like a feral cat.

He dropped the basket and fled without a word.

"Was that called for?" I drawled.

"Yes," she said, unapologetic.

We went back to eyeing each other across the table. I needed her to trust me, at least a little, for my plan to work, which meant it was time to stop toying with her and get down to business.

I leaned forward and dropped my voice. "I'm not decent. So, no, I'm not going to forgive Blake's debt."

Her brown eyes darkened with hostility. "Then I'll just go to the cops and tell them what you did."

"No, you won't," I said, calling her bluff. "The cops like you as little as you do them. There's no way you'd blow up your baby brother's life like that, and your family can't afford another scandal."

The color drained from her face.

I winked at her. "Like I said, I've done my research. But I'm not entirely heartless"—a blatant lie—"so I'll tell you what. I'm willing to transfer Blake's debt to you instead."

She fell back in her seat, eyes wide, skin even paler than a moment ago. “You *what* ?”

“I’ll let you take on Blake’s debt,” I repeated, because Stella looked like she might be in shock.

She stared at me, her expression shifting as her thoughts whirred. I could practically see the internal war she fought, the need to protect her brother battling it out with self-preservation.

“I can’t pay either,” she said.

“Already blew through your inheritance?”

“It’s tied up elsewhere.”

Which I’d guessed from the way she led her life, no longer spending huge amounts of cash on frivolities, but I had to play dumb; I’d already revealed enough of what I knew for one night. “Then find a way to free it up.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. But . . .” Her gaze slid away from me, toward the door, a tell that she was feeling trapped and her subconscious was looking for a way to escape. With a heavy sigh, she forced her eyes back to mine. “I’ll do it. I’ll take on his debt.”

Just like I knew she would.

A wave of something close to disappointment rolled through me. It had been so easy to lead her into this trap. I was almost sad it hadn’t taken longer. Next time I blackmailed someone, I should drag it out more, savor the kill.

“How do you plan to pay it off?” I asked.

“In installments?” she said.

“I have a better idea. Date me instead.”

8

Stella

“DATE YOU ?”

Date him?!

Had Theo lost his fucking mind?

I looked him over. He was dressed better than the first time we’d met: light khaki pants; a white linen shirt that I could tell was expensive from the weight of the fabric; a navy blue dinner jacket that matched his boat shoes. His hair was combed back and styled in a way that would have made me want to run my fingers through it if he were anyone else. Unbidden, that ridiculously catchy song from a few summers ago popped into my head: *“Trust fund. Six five. Blue eyes.”*

Theo looked like he belonged in this fancy restaurant, like he was used to nice things. Like our parents went to the same country club. It made me wonder who the hell he really was. Definitely a madman, but you wouldn’t know it from the way he studied me from across the table, those stupid, pretty eyes steady and calm.

He tipped his head in the barest of nods. “Date me.”

I just stared at him, because what the fuck? There was no way he was serious. Date the man, no, the *criminal* who’d done nothing but piss me off since his first email hit my inbox. The criminal who’d come into my shop to taunt me after he’d cost my brother his entire inheritance. The criminal I now owed three million dollars to. The criminal I’d—nope. Not going there. Not thinking about the way I’d dry-humped him while his tongue did delicious, lascivious things in my mouth. This was bad enough as it was without adding humiliation to the mix.

“Why?” I blurted, so confused that for a second, I forgot to be scared. Theo shrugged. “Because I need new clients. Specifically, wealthy ones, and a great way to get them is to rub elbows with people from your socioeconomic class.”

Judging by his tone, there was an insult buried there, and I didn’t like it. “My socioeconomic class is the one of barely-above-water small business owners.”

He shook his head, a subtle smile playing about his lips. “The one you were born into, Stella.”

I shivered, hating the sound of my name on his lips. “The only people I see from that class are my parents, and there’s no way I’m introducing you to them.”

Despite his lingering grin, something malicious sparked in his eyes. “I’m not good enough to meet Mommy and Daddy?”

“No, you fucking asshole.”

I could tell the second the words were out of my mouth that it had been the wrong thing to say. Theo’s smile disappeared, replaced by something cold and malevolent. Something that finally made me realize the gravity of my situation. Until now, I’d been thinking of him as an obnoxious gym bro, because that’s how he’d presented himself. But this new darkness made me realize he’d acted that way on purpose, to lull me into complacency so I wouldn’t see the dagger hidden behind his back.

What had Blake said to me the other night? That Mr. Strickland always collected his debts. That he’d go to any extremes to do so. That he was ruthless. Morally bankrupt. Soulless.

Instead of insulting him, I should be ingratiating myself to him, getting on his good side so he wouldn’t feel the need to further prove what a bastard he really was. Apologizing for my last comment would be a good start, but no matter how hard I tried to force the words, they wouldn’t come. My

stubbornness had reared its ugly head, going to war with my logic, and we were stuck in suspended silence.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “you’re not in a position to tell me ‘no.’ So, yes, you will introduce me to your parents and all their fancy friends. We’ll go to their parties together, their charity fundraisers. And while we’re there, I’ll discreetly gather new clients.”

Why? I wanted to demand. Why my brother, why me, why my parents and their “fancy friends”? This all felt like some sort of setup, like Theo had laid a trap for me that I’d blundered straight into. If it were one, I’d be an idiot to let on that I was suspicious of a greater scheme. Plus, it was doubtful he’d answer my questions anyway, so I kept them to myself, fighting a mix of rage and fear, feeling like a caged rat with nowhere to go. Because he was right. I couldn’t say no to him. Not without discovering the depths of his ruthlessness. And I wasn’t willing to risk my brother’s future just to slake my curiosity.

“How will dating you clear my debt?” I asked, glad my voice sounded steadier than I felt.

“By making me more money,” he said. “Your peers have deep pockets and generational ennui. My illegal games are just the thing to bring a little excitement back into their monotonous lives. Their debts will clear yours.”
“And I’m free once they spend three million dollars?”

He nodded, a small smile playing about his lips that I didn’t trust for a second. Why was this motherfucker always grinning?

“How long do you think that will that take?” I asked, nightmares of being forced to pretend I actually *liked* this man for months on end running through my mind.

“That depends on what kind of players you recruit.”

“Me?” I said, incredulous. “I’m supposed to do the recruiting, too? You just said that you’d be the one collecting clients.”

“Yes. But I don’t know these people. I’ll need you to point out who the best candidates are. Who might be more accepting of a little illicit fun without leaking my secrets.”

I rested my elbows on the table and rubbed my temples. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me. I haven’t been around any of these people in years, and I hate most of them.”

“First off, I don’t care,” he said with such obvious disdain that I felt like an idiot for thinking that could change his mind. “Secondly, not liking them should make your job easier.”

I lifted my head to meet his gaze. The candle flickered between us, light dancing across his features, sweeping along his jawline and cheekbones, softening his skin and lending it a golden hue that gave his face a dreamy, surreal quality. My fingers itched for a sketch pad, and it made me hate him even more. His beauty was a trap. A lie. Nothing but a paper-thin façade hiding the monster beneath.

My eyes rose back to his, and I found him watching me, waiting, like he had all the time in the world for me to come to terms with my situation.

It could be worse, I told myself.

God, it could have been so much worse. He could have forced me to sell the tattoo parlor, take out astronomical loans I could never hope to repay, threaten to go after my parents or ruin my brother’s life. Compared to all that, pretending to date him should seem like a cakewalk. But I didn’t know if I could stomach it, if I could believably pretend to enjoy Theo’s company

when all I’d be thinking about was how many other people were trapped beneath his thumb, how many more souls I’d be forced to deliver to his doorstep.

Unbidden, an image of Blake popped into my mind. Of him sitting in my tattoo parlor the other night, head in his hands, terrified that he’d ruined his

life.

I took a deep breath. For him, I could do this. I'd already destroyed my life once, so what did it matter if I did it again? I knew that I was strong enough to endure this, believed that I could find a way to climb out of this hole and eventually return to a somewhat normal existence, because I'd done it before under much worse conditions.

Blake might not be fully innocent of any blame for this situation, but to me, the only thing he was guilty of was having the world's worst luck. The *one time* he (understandably) got blackout drunk and acted out of character, he had the misfortune of blundering straight into someone more than ready to take advantage of him. It didn't seem fair, but then life wasn't known for its fairness.

I was now in a position to keep Blake from facing the same devastation I had, to keep my family from enduring another scandal, and after everything I'd put them all through, it felt like the least I could do.

Blake was going to be furious when he found out I'd traded places with him. And probably try to do something stupid like switch back. But that was a problem for future Stella. Current Stella already had enough on her plate. I met Theo's unforgiving gaze. The gym bro was long gone, and in his place sat someone far more formidable, far more dangerous.

Oh, fuck. This was happening.

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry, and nodded. "Okay. I'll do it."

His lips curled into an antagonistic grin. "I knew you were smarter than you looked."

I fought to keep from scowling at him. "Don't you think this is going to be bad enough without you insulting me every few seconds?"

"But insulting you is so much fun."

I was about to clap back when the waiter reappeared with Theo's entrée. He wisely kept his focus on Theo, asking if he wanted any fresh asiago grated over the dish. Theo acquiesced.

"And can you bring us a spare plate?" Theo asked. "This looks so good, my girlfriend might decide she'd like to try some."

The waiter hesitated. Glanced my way. I kept my gaze fixed on Theo. His *girlfriend*? I was already supposed to play my part?

"Sure, honey," I said, my voice dripping poison.

The waiter scampered away.

Theo chuckled. "Feral little thing, aren't you?"

I didn't respond. Didn't trust myself to not bite him if I opened my mouth. He'd returned to being smarmy, but I wasn't about to be lulled back into complacency. I'd glimpsed something far more treacherous lurking beneath the surface: the *real* Theo.

He lifted his silverware, his fork in his right hand as he speared a piece of chicken.

"Not like that," I blurted.

He paused to glance up at me.

"If you want to step into my parents' world, you'll need to act the part." I gestured at him. "This old-money aesthetic is a good start, but there are little things that will give you away, hint that you're not one of them. They'll never accept anyone they suspect is a fraud."

"Elaborate," he said.

I dragged the bread plate closer and picked up my own utensils, fork in my left hand, knife in my right. "Like this," I said, demonstrating the European

way of holding your silverware. I cut through a piece of bread, positioning my fork just so as I lifted it toward my lips. Instead of popping it in my mouth, I set it back down.

“You should eat that,” Theo said.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You look like you should be,” he muttered, switching his fork to his left hand and cutting into his chicken.

I blinked, simmering in silent outrage. I’d heard snide remarks like that my whole life. *Eat a burger,* was a frequent comment on my Instagram posts. I’d stopped trying to explain myself to people. It wasn’t any of their business why I was underweight, why trying to put on pounds was nearly impossible, how any weight I *was* able to gain never stuck because my kind of chronic illness wasn’t visible to the naked eye.

God, I *wished* I were hungry, but all I felt was nauseated because my stomach was currently an acid-filled nightmare. This spike of stress had triggered my gastritis, and for the past few days, I’d been doing everything in my power to avoid a full-blown flare-up.

My stomach burned, but I’d already taken my emergency meds, and now there was nothing left for me to do but take small sips of water to dilute the acid until I could get out of here and, hopefully, find some way to calm down.

Not that I was going to tell Theo any of this; I wasn’t about to hand him more ammunition to use against me.

“I ate before I came,” I told him, pushing away the plate of bread. “Sure,” he said, sounding like he didn’t believe me.

The word felt like a slap to the face. Him constantly taunting me was bad enough. I had no idea how I was going to pretend to be his girlfriend if I had to endure this level of casual cruelty on top of it.

“What else?” Theo said.

“What else, what?” I asked.

“What else do I need to know to blend in?”

“Lose the jacket. It’s trying too hard.”

He shoved another forkful of food into his mouth before shrugging out of the garment. I could immediately tell it was the right move. His linen shirt was nice, the heavier drape of it highlighting his muscles without making him look too big. If he could just keep his fucking mouth shut, he might fit in perfectly. There was something about his features that lent him a kind of aristocratic beauty. The lush shape of his mouth. His aquiline nose. Paired with his blond hair, he’d look right at home on horseback in the English countryside.

“I can’t believe I’m taking fashion advice from Bondage Barbie,” he muttered, setting the jacket aside.

“Just because I favor black clothing doesn’t mean I don’t understand fashion. You want to ignore me and risk immediately getting spotted as an interloper, go right ahead, farm boy.”

His eyes narrowed. “Farm boy?”

“Oh, please,” I said. “You think I can’t hear traces of your Yooper accent when you say certain things? Especially when you’re being a prick. It brings out your lingering rhoticity in any word ending with an r.”
“Rhoticity,” he repeated. “Sounds like one of your fancy prep school words.”

“It is.” No sense in denying it. I’d had a superior education. At least, when I’d actually gone to school. “It means your ‘r’ sounds are pronounced. Like car,” I said, putting extra emphasis on the end of the word.

“Noted. Anything else you want to point out?”

“Not especially, no.” From his sharp tone, it was clear I’d pushed my luck by being so blunt.

Theo released a prolonged sigh and schooled his features. “No, really. Continue. I need to know everything I can.”

I eyed him, feeling like this might be another trap. The restaurant had dimmed the overhead lights even further, and between the deeper shadows and warm candlelight, he looked like something out of a Renaissance painting. My focus dropped to his lips. I hated that I knew how they felt against mine. Hated that my mind kept circling back to our kiss. Not because I wanted to do it again. Fuck, no. It was because I was furious with myself for letting it happen.

He licked his lips, and I glanced up to find him staring at me, the smug, heated look on his face telling me he knew *exactly* where my thoughts had gone.

“Don’t ever bring up money,” I said to break the tension. “And never ask anyone what they do for work. Most of my parents’ friends and the people who float through their circle still view ‘work’ as what the peasants do for them while they sit fat and happy in their castles.”

He sent me one last lingering look before shifting his attention back to his food. “Keep going.”

I spent the next hour telling him everything I knew about the unwritten rules of the world I’d grown up in, wondering if I was making a huge mistake, praying the information wouldn’t somehow lead to the damnation of more innocent people.

Theo absorbed it all like a sponge, and from the way his eyes sharpened, watching me with intent, I had no doubt he’d filed away every single word I’d said. Which only drove home how fucked I really was. Because my hatred didn’t blind me to the fact that Theo was intelligent, determined, and

a fast learner. Hell, he was already handling his silverware like he'd eaten this way for years, and his voice had lost all hints of a country accent, morphing into something smoother and deeper. It left me even more convinced that he had ulterior motives. That I was about to lead a wolf into a pasture full of . . . well, not sheep, but maybe slower, dumber wolves.
"We need to start small," he said at the end of my crash-course finishing school. "A family dinner or a more intimate gathering, where I can meet your parents without too many eyes on us. That way, we're already familiar

with each other going into larger parties, and it will make our relationship seem more legit to everyone else if they already know me."

I opened my mouth to tell him no, because the thought of bringing him straight into my parents' small inner circle felt like too much, too soon, not to mention that it would be a monumental betrayal of their trust. But one sharp look from Theo had me choking back the word, remembering his earlier declaration that I was in no position to deny him. Maybe I could play into whatever sliver of empathy he might have instead.

"I'm scared to do that," I admitted. "I don't know you, and so far, all you've done is antagonize, threaten, and blackmail me. What assurance do I have that you won't do something to hurt my family?"

"None."

I waited for more, but he just sat there, watching me. Okay then, empathy was not in the room with us. No need to panic. No need to freak out over the fact that I now owed this soulless motherfucker three million dollars and was completely at his mercy—of which, he obviously had none. Absolutely *no* need to start spiraling and—

Theo sighed, clocking my mounting anxiety. "Why would I harm them? There's no benefit to me."

I gaped at him. "Is that supposed to be reassuring?"

He lifted his glass and drained the last of his wine. "Take it however you

like. But I'll have to meet them eventually, and if this plan is going to work, it makes the most sense to do it my way."

I hated that he was right. That it was *smart* to do it his way. Part of me wanted to argue, if only to buy myself time to find an alternative, but it was pointless.

"Fine," I said. "But you should know that you can only push me so far. My family isn't without defenses. If it ever feels like a massive scandal is preferable to this arrangement, I'll tell my parents everything, consequences be damned."

His teeth flashed in the candlelight. "Is that a threat?"

I shook my head. "Just a statement of fact."

"And you don't think I have ways of retaliating?" he drawled, draping his arm over the back of the booth again. He both sounded and looked relaxed, but I could tell I was pushing him farther than I probably should. Too bad. It had to be done. He needed to understand that I wasn't some helpless little plaything.

"I'm sure you're more than capable of retaliating," I said. "But if you want to do it 'your way,' we need ground rules."

"Fine. Rule number one: no fucking."

Heat swept over my cheeks, my earlier promise to keep my anger in check completely forgotten. The *nerve* of this man. I opened my mouth to tell him the only person he'd be fucking was himself, but he held up a hand to forestall me.

"Don't," he said. "I can't stand to hear a woman beg, and you should know that no matter how hard you do, I won't change my mind. We need to keep some professional boundaries between us."

I choked on my tongue. I was going to *murder* him .

“Number two,” he said. “You have to be nice to me in front of other people.”

“And how do you expect me to do that when every word out of your mouth is a provocation?”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way.” His gaze bored into mine. “Especially given the alternative.”

My flush deepened. Great, so we were already back to threats.

“No telling people who I really am,” he said. “No warning people away from me. And don’t even hint that I might be anything other than your adoring boyfriend.”

“Adoring,” I bit out.

He nodded as he looked me over, his expression shifting into something raw, possessive, like he already knew every curve and valley hidden beneath my dress and couldn’t wait to get me out of it. Leaning forward, he lifted a hand to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers trailing over my jaw, pausing to angle my chin up so he could stare deeply into my eyes. Someone nearby let out a dreamy little sigh, clearly watching this display. Theo dropped his voice into something sinful. “Unlike you, I have no doubt that I can play my part.”

I jerked out of his grip, hating the way my nipples had pebbled and heat had pooled in my core, my body falling for his lies even as my mind rebelled.

“Anything else?” I asked.

He rattled off several more rules, all of them placing restrictions on my behavior. Finally, he relented. “I think that’s it for now. We can figure the rest out as we go.”

“Wonderful. Can’t wait.” My tone was laced with sarcasm.

“After the first party, we’ll attend a slightly larger one,” Theo said. “Your choice. And that’s where you’ll start pointing people out.”

My eyebrows crept upward. “You trust me to pick?”

“I trust you to remember it’s in your best interest to choose wisely.” This time, his smile was more a baring of teeth. “You have far more at stake than I do. If you really think threatening to go to your parents is enough to keep me from doing my worst, it only shows that you’re just as naïve and sheltered as your brother.” His voice dropped into a bass growl. “You don’t want to get on my bad side, Stella. You don’t want to make me hurt you.” He opened his wallet, tossed three hundred-dollar bills on the table, and left. I stared after him, struck silent by his last, deeply fucked-up declaration. His face had been void of all emotion, like the choice of getting hurt or not was entirely up to me, and it didn’t matter to him one way or another.

With shaking hands, I pulled my phone from my purse and hit stop on my voice recording app. Thank god I at least had this if I did end up going to the police. I watched it save to my files, and then got up and left the restaurant, popping in an earbud as I waited for my Uber to arrive, because there was no way in hell I was walking all the way back to the subway in these heels.

The recording sounded fine at first (I’d hit start right before walking into the restaurant), but only a few seconds in, something went wrong. Weird, distorted noises started playing, and then soon, all I heard was a continuous low, vibrating tone that shook my eardrum. I pulled the earbud out, wondering if that was the problem, but when I played the recording over my phone’s speaker (much to the annoyance of people passing on the sidewalk) the same thing happened.

Panicking, I skipped forward in the file, but the entire thing seemed corrupted.

No. *No.* I had been relying on having this evidence to prove that I was being blackmailed. Without it, I had nothing but my word, which didn’t mean shit

in this city.

I turned to stare back at the restaurant. Had Theo . . . *done something* to cause this?

Unease crept up my spine.

Who the hell was he?

And what the fuck had I gotten myself into?

9

Tyler

I KNEW STELLA HAD COME from money. I knew she'd grown up in the nicest neighborhood in the vicinity, went to the best academies money could pay for, and spent her school holidays jet-setting all over the world. I'd even seen the latest net worth reports for the company my father and her parents co-owned. But seeing numbers on paper was one thing; it was something else entirely to witness that wealth with my own eyes.

Stella's parents lived just outside the city, in the same zip code as high-ranking politicians, famous musicians, and billionaires. The roads were wide and well-maintained, lined with large, century-old oaks. Women in overpriced leggings walked tiny dogs on the manicured sidewalks. Gardeners pruned hedges and tended flower beds. The houses sat proud and imposing on expansive lots with luxury vehicles in their driveways.

Stella's parents lived at the very end of the neighborhood, on a five-acre lot that was heavily wooded. My research revealed that the woods were actually a planned forest, something called an arboretum. It was a kind of garden for rare trees that had been shipped in from all over the world by the original owner back in the 1800s, and now the property was home to some of the largest specimens in the country.

My car passed through the front gates, tires rolling over the brick-lined

driveway. The trees closed in on either side of me, trunks as wide as my S-Class, the canopy so high above it created an artificial twilight. Around a slight curve, the forest opened, and dead ahead sat a manor house that looked like it had been plucked out of the English countryside and dropped into a clearing, gardens and all. The stone façade was sand-colored, accented by white window casements. No fewer than six chimney stacks rose from the slate roof, and my head spun at the thought of how much it must cost to heat this bastard in the winter.

More than a dozen cars were lined up out front, ranging from a limited-edition Maserati with a quarter-million-dollar price tag to an older model Range Rover, which looked like it had recently gone off-roading. Not for the first time, I was glad I'd spent some of my hard-earned money on my

vehicle, because the fancy European emblem on the hood would help me blend in with these assholes.

I parked at the end of the row and cut the engine. Adrenaline flooded through my veins. This was it, all the years I'd spent planning were about to pay off. Inside this house lay the key to my revenge. The McCormicks' inner circle was my father's inner circle, and the closer I tied myself to them all, the more ammunition I could gather. I might act like a douchebag most of the time, but that didn't mean I couldn't be charming, and between that charm, my good looks, and how well I could read people, secrets didn't stay buried for long. I had a talent for drawing them out, or, at the very least, being able to detect their existence, which was all I needed before digging for more dirt.

This part of the plan was simple enough: ingratiate myself with as many of these fuckers as possible. The hard part would come later, beginning with the next party we attended. I'd told Stella I was after more clients and money, that I was going to target people from her parents' socioeconomic class, but that was a lie.

My true focus was on the people who surrounded them. Their staff, their accountants, and all the other hired help who might have secrets to share. The more disgruntled, the better. The shadier, the better. Because those

kinds of people were exploitable, either through bribery or blackmail, and they were how I planned to bring my father down. Not with some over-the-top plan of vengeance. No, his death would be by a thousand paper cuts, bleeding out slowly, excruciatingly, forced to watch as his empire crumbled around him one brick at a time.

I'm here, I texted Stella.

We're out back, she responded.

Good for you. Now come greet me like a proper fucking girlfriend .

A typing bubble popped up. Disappeared. Popped up again only to vanish once more. I assumed she was fighting the urge to tell me to go fuck myself.

Maybe I'd been rude, but I didn't see the point in trying to play nice, especially given the circumstances. There was no way in hell I was walking into the party on my own. Knowing my luck, I'd get lost. Or stumble into one of Stella's parents and be forced to introduce myself without her.

I could do it, but I'd rather have Stella by my side. Her presence alone would lend me an air of belonging that would make it easier for others to

accept me. Without her, I'd draw more focus, maybe enough for people to smell fresh blood and come circling like sharks. And yes, I'd spent plenty of time around wealthy assholes, but there was a vast difference between millionaires and the deep-pocketed generational wealth rubbing elbows at this party.

From everything I knew about the ultra-rich, they were some of the most predatory, cold-blooded people on the planet. Less than one percent of the population held the wealth needed to change the world, better the lives of the rest of us, and what did they do with it instead? Use it to fund space tourism for their friends, build a five-hundred-foot clock inside a mountain only they got to see, or research immortality, while all around them, humans continued to die of preventable diseases.

God only knew what else they got up to that the public didn't know about. Most of the rumors I discounted as conspiracy theory bullshit, but there were other facts that were harder to deny. Like how we'd had our very own monster hiding in this city for years: Bradley Bluhm. He'd been a predator his whole life, with his billionaire family continuously covering for him or bailing him out. Just like Stella's parents had for her. Unlike Stella, Brad grew up to be a serial killer, and there were still federal agents digging up bodies in his backyard just a few streets away. And where was Brad, to answer for his crimes? Most likely in Europe, according to the latest news reports, spirited away by his parents.

I stared up at the towering stone house through my window, wondering what the fuck I was so nervous about. I might have been a nobody, but I still held the moral high ground over these motherfuckers.

You're nervous because he *might be here,* a small voice reminded me. Right. There was that. The likelihood that I might run into my father at any of the events I attended with Stella was high, and that was the root cause of my hesitancy. Because as much as I was prepared to face him, had promised myself that I would keep my cool when we eventually met, I still worried my anger might boil over and ruin years of planning in one explosive instant.

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that he probably wasn't even in town. The last I'd heard, he was somewhere in Italy. Which meant there was no reason for me to be preoccupied with him.

I threw the door open and got out of the car. The surrounding forest dampened the noise of the nearby streets, so the house stood within its own

quiet little bubble. Crickets chirped in the grass. Birds trilled overhead. A swell of laughter rose from somewhere close, just out of sight around the corner of the house. It was nice, borderline bucolic.

The front door opened, and I could tell from the look on Stella's face that the peace was about to be shattered. She caught sight of me and marched

forward, fists clenched at her sides.

Oh, yeah. I'd definitely pissed her off.

I leaned back against the car, sliding my hands into the pockets of my linen shorts while I tried not to grin. I'd never really gotten off on antagonizing people—that was more Josh's forte—but I was starting to wonder if maybe I'd spent so much time around my best friend that some of his personality had rubbed off on me. I had no other way of explaining the small thrill that shot through me, knowing I'd managed to get under Stella's skin again.

Brat.

I curbstomped that thought as she neared. Instead of the monochromatic look I'd come to expect from her, she wore a white babydoll dress with black polka dots, white knee socks, and black Mary Janes. The hemline of the dress swished upward with every stride of those ridiculously long legs, and I couldn't keep my gaze from dropping, hoping it'd swish just high enough that I might get a glimpse of what she had on underneath it.

Only when Stella got closer did I realize the "dots" on her dress were miniature skulls. Because of course they were.

Unlike me, she wasn't wearing shades, so I had an unobscured view of the fury in her eyes when she stopped a foot away to glare up at me. Because of said glare, the smile she forced onto her face looked deranged. "Hi. So glad you could make it." Her tone said otherwise. "The party is out back, so if you'll please follow me."

With that, she turned and started to walk away. I snagged her wrist and spun her back around. She crashed into my chest with an "*Oof* ."

"Stay still," I said.

She tried to push free. "There's no one here to perform for."

"Someone's watching from the house," I growled through my smile. I could

see them just on the edge of my periphery, standing framed within a window on the third floor as they stared down at us.

Stella went stiffer than a board. “What do they look like?”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and widened my legs, pulling her

between them. In an infuriating turn of events, she fit perfectly.

Keeping my face slightly turned toward her, I shot a quick glance upward. “There must be a light on behind them, because all I can see is a shadowy outline.”

Her mouth turned down. “Fucking creep.”

“Me, or our mysterious voyeur?”

“Yes,” she said, taking the bait just like I knew she would.

I squeezed her waist in warning. “Behave. We’re in public, and the rule is, you’re nice to me in public.”

Her eyes blazed with annoyance, but she stayed quiet. Good girl.

I chanced another look toward the window but couldn’t distinguish more. “Whoever it is, we have to assume that if they’re nosy enough to spy, they’re nosy enough to gossip. Which means you can’t just stand there like a brick, or they’re going to think you’re not into this.”

“I’m *not* into this,” she muttered, inching closer. “Nobody’s into this. Not even God is into this.”

I shook my head and slid my hands to her waist, squeezing a little harder this time. Her humor wouldn’t soften me to her.

Stella grimaced, blew out a breath, and then reluctantly put her hands on my chest.

“You look like you’re holding me at bay,” I said. “Come on. It won’t kill you to wrap your arms around me.”

Looking like it might *actually* kill her, Stella slid her hands around my neck.

“We’re going to have to work on your acting abilities,” I said. “No one’s going to believe you’re obsessed with me if you keep this up.”

“You’re forgetting that these people actually know me. They expect me to be a bitch. Me suddenly fawning all over some random man would immediately raise their suspicions.”

I tightened my thighs on either side of her, trying to ignore how good she felt there. “You sure you’re not just saying that because you’re worried if you pretend to be obsessed with me, you’ll realize you actually are?”

“I’m not obsessed with you,” she said, her tone almost lifeless it was so flat, but I could tell from the way her sides heaved that she was struggling to keep a lid on her temper.

“Whatever you say, Sunshine.”

She spluttered. “Do *not* call me that.”

I smirked as a dark thrill of triumph shot through me. I felt like a wolf spotting an injured deer. “I’ll call you whatever I want.”

She opened her mouth, but another warning squeeze had her clenching it shut. Maybe she *could* be taught.

I caught a shift of movement from the window and tugged her the last inch forward, until we were fully pressed together. From there it was easy to lean down and bury my face in her neck. Damn it, she smelled incredible. Like that nostalgic blend of banana-scented sunscreen and sunshine that always reminded me of summer. Suddenly, the pet name felt like it fit.

Her skin was soft beneath my lips, and warm from the heat of the day. The dress had a sweetheart neckline, leaving her shoulders and clavicles on display, and I was tempted to drag my mouth over every exposed inch of her.

You hate this woman, I reminded myself.

Yes. I did. She and her kind were a plague upon this planet. My reaction was nothing but a physiological response to being close to another human being. I would have felt the same way with literally anyone else.

“How long do we need to keep this up?” she asked.

“As long as it takes for you to lose the attitude,” I shot back, rubbing my nose along the column of her neck.

She sighed. “We’re going to die here.”

I was glad she couldn’t see my answering smile. She might take it to mean that my threats were empty and I’d go easy on her. That I wouldn’t set her entire life on fire if she spoiled my plans.

Another stolen glance at the window revealed that our voyeur was gone, but feeling Stella’s impatience to get out of my arms made me want to keep her there for a little while longer.

“Tell me who’s at the party, Sunshine,” I murmured into her skin. “New rule,” she countered. “No pet names.”

“Too late for that.”

“Then that means I get to choose yours.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I said, nipping at her delicate skin in an idle threat.

A shudder wracked her body. “So, you just get to make all the rules, and I

have to go along with them?" Her voice was low, breathy, and it made me think I might not be the only one affected by our proximity.

"Mmhmm," I murmured, tracing the shell of her ear with my lips.

She blew out a shaky exhale. "Did you ever stop to think that it might

have been a *nice* nickname?"

I pulled back enough to look at her. "Was it?"

Her expression turned cagey, eyes flitting away from mine. "I guess you'll never find out."

I took that as a no.

"Who's at the party?" I asked again.

"I already sent you the guest list."

We'd emailed some since our first "date." Unwritten norms she'd forgotten to mention over dinner. More rules for her to follow. A general game plan for today.

"I know," I said. "I read it. What I'm asking is if there's anyone here who wasn't on the list."

"A few kids. My mother's friend Susan. My parents' business partner. And uh . . ." she grimaced. "Blake is here, too. I told him about the swap, and I wouldn't exactly say he's happy about it. I also didn't expect him to be here because he's so pissed at me. I've tried to get him alone a couple of times to warn him that you're coming, and that he *better* behave, but he's also avoiding me."

The midday sun suddenly felt five times hotter than a second ago. My father was *here*, in this house?

I lifted my gaze toward the front door, half expecting him to be standing there, waiting for me, but that was ridiculous. The man didn't know who I was. And even if he did, he still wouldn't care enough to come greet me. He'd made it crystal fucking clear all those years ago that he wanted nothing to do with me and my mother.

Anger unfurled its poisonous claws inside me, and a dark anticipation swept in on its wake. After all this time, all this waiting, the day had finally arrived to meet the bastard, to stare him straight in the eye as I smiled and shook his hand. To finally force him to look at me, acknowledge my existence, even if it was only as a stranger.

Belatedly, the rest of what Stella said sank in. *Blake*. Goddamn it. This was a complication we didn't need.

"Is there a place we can speak to your brother alone?" I asked. If he caused a scene and ruined my plans, I'd make him regret it for the rest of his life. I was so close. I couldn't fail now.

"Ow, you're hurting me," Stella said, pulling away as I loosened my hold. "There's a study just inside, to the right of the front door."

"Go get Blake and bring him there. I don't care if you have to drag him. You have five minutes."

I finally released her, and between my tone and the look on my face, Stella must have realized how close to the edge I was, because she turned and hurried inside. Instead of five minutes, I gave her ten, pretending to fuck around on my phone in case anyone else glanced out the window. I needed the extra time to calm down, and I was hoping Stella used it to explain the situation to Blake so all I'd have to do was walk in and threaten him into behaving.

Taking a deep breath, I shoved my phone into my pocket and headed toward the house. Thankfully, no one was lingering near the front.

The entryway looked like something out of a magazine: black-and-white

tiled floor, wainscoting, crown molding, expensive furniture and artwork, a dark-stained staircase climbing upward. To my immediate left was a sitting room. To my right, with the door closed, was the study Stella mentioned.

I turned the handle and stepped inside, shutting the door behind me. “Look out!” Stella shouted.

In the split second it took my eyes to adjust to the dimmer light, I almost missed the fist flying at my face.

I reacted instinctually, blocking the punch with my forearm and following the movement, grabbing Blake’s wrist and using his momentum against him as I shoved him away.

“Blake, stop!” Stella hissed.

He tried to turn back to me, but I got there first, grabbing him by the nape of his neck and slamming him into the wall, pinning him. I snatched his flailing wrist out of the air and yanked it up and around behind his back, hard enough that he cried out.

“Stop fighting me,” I snarled.

He thrashed in my hold. “Fuck you! The deal’s off. It’s my debt. I’ll pay it. Leave my sister alone.”

“*Blake*,” Stella said, rushing up to us, her expression pleading. “It’s already done.”

“Then *undo* it,” he demanded, trying to shove me off.

I pressed him harder into the wall, his cheek grinding against the wood, arm twisting so high it was in danger of slipping out of its socket. “No. And keep your fucking voice down.”

His breathing turned into ragged, pained pants.

“You going to behave if I let you go?” “No!” he yelled, trying to stomp on my feet. I sighed. “Stella.”

She must have heard the unspoken threat in my tone, because her voice turned placating. “Blake, I know you’re mad, but it’s done. Theo agreed to transfer your debt to me, and this is how I’m going to pay it off. If anything, he’s letting us both off easy. It could be so much worse. He has the power to *make it worse* if you keep pissing him off.”

Good to know she understood the situation so well. Maybe it would be easier to keep her in line than I’d expected.

She stepped closer, gaze steady on her brother. “You need to accept that this is happening, because freaking out or acting like an asshole will only draw attention, and then what do you plan on telling Mom and Dad?”

Blake went still in my grip, showing he hadn’t really thought this through. It made me think even less of him, had me doubting Stella’s claim that he was a smart kid. Maybe her parents weren’t the only ones who had sheltered and coddled him. Maybe she had, too, and that’s why she still looked at him through rose-colored glasses instead of seeing him for who he truly was: a dumb college kid, as impulsive and hormonal as everyone else his age.

“You done?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he muttered.

He was lying. No way had he’d been cowed into submission so easily.

I released him, stepping back so I had room to swing when he proved he couldn’t be trusted.

He whirled on me immediately, fist flying. Sometimes, I hated always being right. “Blake!” Stella seethed.

I ducked his sloppy punch and hammered a fist into his side, right beneath

his floating ribs, where his kidney sat.

He let out a strangled cry and crumpled to the floor.

Stella tried to rush forward to help him, but I snagged her around the waist and drew her back while Blake writhed in pain.

“He’s fine,” I said as she fought me. “I didn’t hit him hard enough to do permanent damage, but pissing blood for a week should be a good reminder to behave. Right, Blake?”

“Fuck you,” he wheezed from the floor.

I pushed Stella toward the door. “Get out. Let me talk to him alone.”

She stumbled to a stop, shaking her head. “No. You’re going to hurt him again.”

I met her eyes with a hard stare. “Not unless he makes me.” My gaze swiveled back to Blake. “Your brother and I just need to get on the same page, is all.”

She didn’t move. “I’ll only leave if you promise not to hurt him.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Two strides and I was in her face. “Promises mean nothing in my world. They’re just another way to manipulate naïve idiots.”

She backed up, eyes wide, expression torn between fury and fear. “Are you an idiot, Stella?”

Her cheeks pinked, and she shook her head, anger winning the fight as her eyes narrowed to slits. “No, I’m not. If you hurt him again, all bets are off.” I flashed her a smile. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

And then I shoved her out the door and locked it behind her.

10

Stella

I PACED OUTSIDE THE STUDY, ears strained for any sound of pain, but all I could hear were low male voices, too quiet for me to pick out the words. Having Theo here was a mistake. Possibly the second biggest one I'd ever made. Which was saying something, since the first had been so bad it had altered the entire trajectory of several people's lives for the worse, including mine.

Finally, the study door cracked open, and Theo stepped out. Behind him, I caught sight of Blake, sitting in an armchair, clutching his side. His face was grim but resigned, like the fight had gone out of him.

"Blake," I said.

He caught sight of me and nodded. "I'm okay."

Theo pulled the door shut before I could ask if he was sure.

"I want to talk to my brother," I said.

Theo slipped his arm around my waist. "He needs some time alone with his thoughts."

"What did you say to him?" I demanded.

"That's between me and your brother," he answered, his voice laced with warning as he turned us toward the hall.

A squeeze at my waist punctuated the words, and I fought back a wave of nausea that had as much to do with his proximity as it did my gastritis. I wanted to wrench myself away from Theo and scrub my skin raw from his touch, but unfortunately that wasn't an option. Someone could come around the corner at any second, and shoving him away didn't exactly give "loved up" vibes.

God, he'd moved so *fast* when Blake tried to hit him. Too fast. I'd thought I was aware of the danger I was in, but that split second had driven home how precarious my safety was. Sure, I knew how to throw a punch, knew the basics of self-defense, but it was obvious Theo hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said I would *try* to hit him, and if the past five minutes had taught me anything, it was that I'd never be able to keep him off me if he decided to do me harm.

My mind drifted back to that night in the tattoo parlor, him leaning close and telling me I was safe. Lie. I was far from safe, and suddenly so scared of being alone with him that I was desperate to rejoin the crowd of odious people outside. Since Theo seemed hell-bent on pulling off this little deception, I was hoping it meant he wasn't a danger to me while we were around others. That there was safety in numbers.

New life goal: never be alone with him again.

Our footfalls echoed over the marble floor as we walked. The silence between us was stilted and awkward, but I wasn't about to break it. I was too preoccupied with my swirling thoughts and my anger that he'd laid hands on my brother. I was also furious with myself. I'd done nothing to intervene. I'd just stood there, watching the altercation unfold. I tried to excuse my inaction as shock—the violence had come out of nowhere and caught me off guard—but the ugly truth was that I'd never faced a real threat before, and my instinct had been to curl up and hide to avoid becoming Theo's next target.

Guess I wasn't as tough as I thought.

This newfound knowledge made me want to cry, made me feel small and vulnerable in a way I hadn't experienced in years, but I fought back the sting of tears because I *refused* to show any more weakness around this man. From now on, I'd play my part in public, but in private? He'd get nothing from me.

As we neared the mouth of the hall, Theo tightened his hold on my waist,

leaning down just enough to whisper, “You’ve stiffened up again.”

“Gee, I wonder why?”

A tug on my waist, and I was spinning toward the wall just like Blake had a few moments ago. The difference was I ended up with my back to it, one of Theo’s hands on my hip, the other braced above my head as he loomed over me. I immediately flashed back to the driveway and the way he’d pulled me close against the side of his car. The feel of his lips sliding up my neck. The way my body had reacted to his touch. I’d never felt so betrayed by it before.

And I swear to God, if you react now, it will be outright war between us, I threatened. Thankfully, it seemed like my brain and vagina were finally back on the same page, and that page contained a single sentence: We *hate* Theo Strickland.

He and I stood in the shadows thrown by a marble column, and the light

and darkness playing across his eyes made his irises look like a storm-ravaged sea. Again, I froze, feeling like a hare staring up at a circling hawk. Blake wasn’t small. He was nearly the same height as Theo and had played sports all his life, and yet Theo had manhandled him like a bear batting around a butterfly. Theo made violence look effortless, hadn’t even been breathing hard by the time it was over. I shuddered to think what he was capable of if he ever *really* put his energy into harming someone.

He must have seen my thoughts playing across my face because he let out a low, frustrated sound and leaned closer. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Maybe he meant for the words to be reassuring, but all I heard was another warning. “I don’t want you to hurt me either.”

He dropped his hand to my chin and tilted my head up. “Then don’t make me, Stella.”

God, that was a fucked-up sentence. One I couldn’t even begin to form a

coherent response to because my survival instincts were finally kicking in, and his words made me want to run yelling to Mom and Dad, tell them everything that had happened and deal with the fallout of another scandal because it seemed better than being around this man for one more second. His grip tightened, sensing my inner rebellion. “This doesn’t have to be hard. We smile, we flirt, we mingle with other people, and you work your way out of your debt. The better you do, the faster you’ll get rid of me.”

Get rid of him. Now there was a thought that held real merit. Maybe I could go back to my original plan of ending this sonofabitch. That would solve all my problems, and judging by his sparkling personality, I doubted anyone would care if he suddenly went missing. Or slipped into a coma after a traumatic head wound. Better yet, died in a fiery explosion.

He smirked. “Contemplating my death again?”

I tried to control my expression. “No.”

“Don’t bother lying. You get shark eyes whenever you picture yourself killing me.” He winked. “Or fucking me.”

“I do *not* picture myself fuck—”

“Oh, there you are,” came my mother’s voice. “I thought you’d gotten lost.”

I froze, panic racing through my veins. It was too late to back out now. Too late to beg Theo to let me pay him off some other way. Mom had found us, which meant we were doing this, *really* doing this, about to pretend we didn’t hate each other in front of a crowd full of people who’d known me

all my life. How was I going to convincingly fake attraction to a man whose touch made me want to vomit? I could practically *see* the impending disaster heading straight for me like a runaway train, but I was tied to the tracks. There was no escaping.

Theo straightened, turning toward my mom. “It was my fault,” he said, his voice more cultured than I’d ever heard it. The smile he sent her was full of

charm, and his eyes shone like they held real warmth. “I wanted a moment alone with Stella before I was forced to share her with everyone else.” His gaze slid back to mine, the warmth in his eyes ratcheting up several degrees, like he couldn’t *wait* to get me alone again.

Don’t puke, don’t puke, don’t puke.

I stepped out from behind the marble column and forced myself to meet my mother’s inquisitive gaze head-on. “Mom, this is Theo, my,” oh-god-I-couldn’t-believe-I-was-saying-it, “boyfriend. Theo, this is my mother, Georgianna, but everyone calls her—”

“Georgie,” she said, shooting me a warning look.

“What’s that face for? I was going to say that.”

“Excuse me for not trusting you, but you did once introduce me as Bitchy McBitchface.”

“I was sixteen, and you *had* been acting like a—”

“Theo!” Mom said, interrupting me again as she extended a hand toward him. “So nice to make your acquaintance. I can’t remember the last time Stella brought a sweetheart home to meet the family.”

The last bit was said with a healthy dose of side-eye toward me. Because I had *never* introduced anyone to my family. I’d liked all my past partners too much to subject them to their scrutiny. Not that Mom was actually a bitch or anything. Well, at least, not an intentional one. She was just overprotective, had high standards, and even after all my troublemaking, no one was good enough for her daughter.

Theo gently took Mom’s hand. “I’m glad I made the cut.” They shook, and Theo made a show of glancing around. “You have a beautiful home. Was that a Morisot I saw hanging back there?”

My jaw nearly dropped.

Mom looked pleased. “It was.”

“It’s a shame she’s not more well-known,” Theo said. “She’s always been one of my favorites.”

Mom slipped her arm through his and led him back down the hallway.

“Did Stella tell you the story of how we acquired it?”

Theo shook his head. “I’d love to hear it from you.”

“Well, twenty years ago, we spent a dusty summer in the south of France,” she began.

I tuned out the rest because I could recount it from memory. Berthe Marie Pauline Morisot was a French impressionist painter who wasn’t as celebrated as her male compatriots, despite her incredible talent. Married to the brother of the famed Édouard Manet, she struggled her whole career to be taken seriously as an artist, with most male critics patronizingly praising the “feminine charm” in her work. Both Mom and I *loved* her, and this painting, one of Morisot’s lesser-known works, was the crown jewel in my parents’ art collection. The fact that Theo recognized a Morisot painting that had never been recreated in print was unbelievable.

Literally.

The bastard must have done more spying on my family than I’d realized, and now I was worried at just *how* much he knew about us. About me.

I joined them by the painting.

“No,” Theo said, sounding appropriately shocked. “It was just sitting in the back of the gallery?”

“On the *floor*, if you can imagine, leaning against the wall in a neglected corner of the room,” Mom told him.

“And they had no idea what they had?”

Mom shook her head. “We practically stole it from them. In our defense, we didn’t believe it was real at first. The bottom edge was so thick with dust that only the first few letters of her signature were visible, and even after we had it professionally restored, we thought surely it was a fake. Imagine our shock when one of her biographers told us it was the real deal. She’d found a reference to it in one of Morisot’s diaries, and all the other analyses confirmed her belief.”

“Incredible,” Theo said.

“And it’s hung here ever since,” I said, butting my way into their conversation. This little interaction made my hackles rise. I wanted Theo as far away from my mother as possible. I didn’t like how easily he’d ingratiated himself, or the smoothness of the upper-crust American accent he was using. His transition was almost as frightening as his outburst of violence, and it had me back to wondering who the hell this man was and what he was really after.

Taking a page out of Mom’s playbook, I slid my arm through his and tugged at him. “We should join the party.”

“Tippi will be so glad to see you,” Mom said. “I’ll be out in a moment. I just need to grab something from upstairs for Babs.”

We parted ways, my mind spinning as I led Theo away.

“How do you plan on convincing anyone we’re dating if you only let me have five seconds with them?” he whispered.

“Trust me, I was doing you a favor. My mother is incredibly observant. The more time we spend around her, the more likely she’ll realize we hate each other.”

“Hate?” Theo said, and I could hear the grin in his voice without having to

look up at him and confirm it. “Such a strong word.”

“Well, let me go after one of your family members, blackmail you, attack that same family member, and then force my way into your life. Then tell me how you feel.”

He shrugged. “Go ahead and try. I don’t have any family.”

“That explains a lot,” I muttered.

Unfortunately, he heard me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

He slowed his steps. “Say it, Stella.”

Fine. He really wanted to know? I’d tell him. “I was just thinking that it’s probably easy to be such a heartless bastard when you don’t care about anyone but yourself.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he said, sounding like he wasn’t even insulted. “I have friends, like anyone else.”

“Yeah, friends who are probably as fucked up as you are.”

For some reason, that made him chuckle. “Oh, Sunshine. You have no idea.”

Second life goal: never meet his friends.

Our conversation died as we reached the party. The rear rooms of the house had oversize windows to take advantage of the view over the rolling rear lawn and trees. Through them I saw a crowd of people gathered around a series of tables, umbrellas overhead to block the midday sun, fans blowing a gentle breeze to keep it cool. The patio was large, spilling downward in a series of terraces that eventually ended at the pool. I could tell from the shrieks and splashes echoing through the open bifold doors that the young

guests were taking advantage of the water.

“Ah, welcome back,” Richard said, coming up beside us.

Theo’s grip on my waist tightened painfully before easing into a looser hold. Another warning? If so, I didn’t need it. I was finally well and truly afraid of what would happen if I got on his bad side, and I feared that even going to the cops wouldn’t keep him from getting his revenge on me.

“I had to go collect my boyfriend,” I said, the b-word rolling a little more easily off my tongue. “Richard, this is Theo. Theo, my parents’ business partner, Richard Lawson.”

Richard stepped forward with his hand extended toward Theo. They were almost the same height, and both blond, though Richard’s hair was mostly silver now. His skin was also a few shades darker, tanned from his recent trip to Italy, making his light blue eyes pop in the midday sun. Between his well-preserved good looks and wealth, he was one of the most eligible bachelors in the city, but he hadn’t dated anyone in years, at least not that I knew of. We all assumed he was still recovering from the lingering heartbreak that had almost destroyed him a few decades ago.

“Nice to meet you, Theo,” he said.

Theo released his hold on me to shake the older man’s hand, his smile easy, gaze lasered in. “You, too, Richard.”

The men released each other, and Theo re-draped his arm around my waist like it belonged there. Richard had been part of my life since the day I was born. He was my godfather, and more like an uncle to me than any of my actual uncles. Aside from my family, he knew me better than anyone else at this party, and I needed to keep Theo moving before Richard picked up on my discomfort.

“Have you seen Tippi?” I asked. “I want to make sure Theo meets her before the food is served.”

Richard tipped his head toward the yard. “Last I saw, she and your dad were down on the lawn.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Theo said as I dragged him away.

“You, too,” Richard replied.

We greeted others as we wended our way toward the lawn, quick hellos and brief introductions mostly. Theo seemed to charm everyone immediately, and it only made me grumpier. All I could think about was the altercation in the study. Lurking behind his easy smiles and friendly banter, I saw something else: him pivoting, lightning-fast, driving the hand currently wrapped around my waist into my brother’s side. No hesitation.

No mercy.

Despite the summer heat, I shivered.

Finally we stepped onto the grass, and Theo pulled me closer. No one was near enough to overhear us, but he still dropped his voice. “Smile, Stella. It’s a beautiful day, we’re at a lavish party to celebrate some old broad’s birthday, and your brother still has all his fingers and toes.”

“For now,” I countered. “But I’m sure the next time I make you mad, you’ll threaten to cut off a few of them.”

“Not a bad idea,” he mused.

I snarled.

He chuckled, the sound low and antagonistic. “You know, for someone of your advanced years, you’re really easy to rile up.”

I stopped walking, wondering if I should be pissed or insulted. With Theo, I could never quite decide between the two. “I’m thirty-five.”

He stopped a step after me, turned, grinned. “You’re practically a cradle

robber.”

“Oh, please,” I said, looking him over. “I can’t be *that* much older than you.”

“Ten years, actually.”

What the fuck were they feeding these midwestern farm boys?

“So,” he continued, and I didn’t like the look in his eyes, “that means when you were my age, I was—”

I clamped a hand over his mouth to shut him up.

And then reality came crashing back in, and I realized *who* I’d shut up and immediately pulled my hand away. I was just about to force myself to apologize, no matter how unappealing the thought, when someone approached out of my periphery.

I turned to see my father, practically grinning ear to ear as he looked between the two of us. Unlike Mom, there was no deeper emotion hiding behind his smile, no guile in his gaze. He was just genuinely happy that I’d finally brought someone home to meet him. It was then that I realized how this interaction between Theo and I might look: like we were having some sort of cute little couple-y exchange, and it was all in good fun. Especially because of how wide Theo was smiling as he turned toward Dad.

“Mr. McCormick,” he said, offering to shake.

Dad shuddered, brown eyes creasing at the corners as he scrunched his befreckled nose. “Mr. McCormick was my father,” he said, gripping Theo’s

hand. “Please, call me Phil.”

“Phil,” Theo said as they released each other. “Thank you so much for having me.” He turned to take in the scene. “This is quite a party.”

Dad’s smile softened. “It’s probably going to be Tippi’s last year with us, and we wanted to make sure the old girl was celebrated in style.”

“Don’t say that,” I chided him, dropping into a crouch as Tippi tottered over to us. Her rheumy eyes were fixed on me, and she picked up the pace a little, her tail starting to wag like she still had some life left in her yet. “She’s going to live forever, aren’t you, girl?” I said, cupping her face and dropping a kiss on her forehead.

I heard a choking noise from overhead, and then Theo’s disbelieving voice. “Tippi is a *dog* ?”

11

Tyler

ALL THIS FOR A FUCKING dog, I thought, taking a sip of my cocktail as I stared out at the encroaching twilight. Flickering café lights were starting to wink on, the lines strung between the two wings of the house. Out in the forest, more lights blinked to life, wrapped around trunks and up into the boughs of the trees, making it look like an enchanted woodland.

A shriek rent the air. I dropped my gaze to the lawn, where kids chased each other carrying lit sparklers. Their parents watched them from nearby lounge chairs arranged around a massive firepit. There was a rumor going around that there’d be s’mores later, and the prime seats were filling up fast as the flames started to grow.

To my left, a quartet of bored-looking teens occupied a picnic table, their faces plastered to their phones. On my right, a group of men stood gathered around the grill, talking and laughing as a chef finished cooking the last of the organic, free-range, locally raised, single-source hamburgers and hotdogs on gluten-free buns.

I stood alone. I’d had just about enough of these motherfuckers as I could take, focusing on my dislike of them because it was easier than thinking about my father. All they talked about was their summer vacation plans or

which interior designer they should hire to redo their beach house, as if the world weren't burning around us. Everything was shallow and vapid with these people, and while Stella had been correct about no one outright talking about money, they all seemed to love *hinting* about just how much of it they had.

Aglance behind me showed Stella still sitting at a table by herself beneath an umbrella. She had a glass of water in front of her and nothing else, and it made me want to growl. I'd spent half the party trying to get her to eat, but all she'd put down was a few pieces of plain bread, and it was bugging the fuck out of me. She had to be starving, and knowing that brought up bad memories, made me feel phantom pangs of hunger. The deep, gnawing kind that felt like your stomach was trying to eat itself.

"So," someone said, and I turned to see Richard ambling over to me.

Fuck .

My fingers trembled with a mixture of adrenaline and rage, and I dropped my drink to my side so he wouldn't notice.

"Having fun?" he asked.

"I am," I lied. "The McCormicks host a good party."

He grinned. "You might not believe this, but back in our college days, they used to throw ragers."

"Phil? No. Can't picture it. Georgie, however . . . " I joked, proud of myself for how I was handling this. Meeting my father was the ultimate test of my acting abilities, and if I could just get through tonight without slipping up, I had no doubt I could pull off the rest of my plans without a hitch.

His answering chuckle had me glancing over. Usually, I had to look down at people, but we stood shoulder to shoulder. Yes, I had his height, and his coloring, and his build, and his nose. But I had just enough of my mother's traits that I didn't look like a carbon copy of him, and for that, I was

immensely grateful. Not just because I didn't *want* to look like him, but because it would keep anyone else from getting suspicious if they knew about his secret love child.

A thought struck me then. Was I even the only one? Or were there dozens of us scattered across the world? It wouldn't surprise me. Once a cheater, always a cheater, and he had so expertly discarded my mom when he found out she was pregnant that I doubted it had been his first rodeo.

"How'd you and Stella meet?" he asked.

I fought the urge to grind my teeth. The fact that he was more interested in me as a stranger than he'd been about his own child was like a punch to the face.

"At her tattoo shop," I said. We'd agreed to stick to the truth on that front, because the fewer lies we told, the better.

Richard looked me over, clearly searching for ink.

"I went in for a consultation," I elaborated. "I'm not sure if I'm ready to go through with it."

Richard nodded sagely. "It's always better to take your time with things that have some level of permanence."

I nearly laughed. "*Like knocking up your mistresses?*" I wanted to ask. What a fucking hypocritical cunt. "Stella said you just got back from Italy?" "I did. One of my old college friends recently moved to a vineyard in

Tuscany and won't stop raving about it, and I wanted to see if that kind of retirement was for me."

"And?" I asked.

He tipped his head a little. "Still undecided. On the one hand, there's a simplicity to that kind of life that part of me craves. On the other, I feel like

I still have so much work to do here."

"Did you go by yourself, or with family?" I asked, trying to sound less interested than I was.

"Alone like the tragic bachelor I am," he said, shooting me a self-deprecating grin.

I didn't pity him for a second. No way was I falling for this sad-sack act; I was sure he preferred being alone because it meant he could plow his way through the countryside in relative peace. Men like him never fucking changed.

I glanced behind me to check on Stella, but she was gone.

"Looking for your lady love?" Richard asked.

"Yes," I said, finished with both this conversation and this fucking party. I'd done what I'd come here to do: ingratiate myself with the inner circle. Richard tipped his head sideways. "She just went inside a minute ago." His expression turned contemplative as he met my gaze. "Honestly, I'm surprised she stuck it out as long as she did. Normally, she's at these things five, maybe ten minutes before she disappears." He smiled, patting me on the arm, and it was a struggle not to jerk away. "You must be a good influence on her. Not that she isn't a good person," he rushed to add. "Just made some mistakes in her youth. But she's doing everything she can to make that right, and not enough people give her credit for that." The last part was said with a disapproving glare toward a gaggle of older women who hadn't so much as looked in Stella's direction the entire afternoon.

I nearly scoffed. How could Stella possibly make "right" what she'd done? In my opinion, there was no coming back from that kind of fuck-up, and Richard's opinion only reinforced my belief that he was one of the shittiest people here.

I tipped my drink toward him. "I'm glad to hear you feel that way." Another lie. "And it was nice talking to you."

“You, too, Theo,” he said, eyeing me a little closer than he had a moment ago.

I said my goodbyes and headed into the house to look for Stella, but she

wasn’t in the two back rooms being used for the party. My instinct was to ask the catering staff if they had seen her, because I knew they paid more attention than anyone realized, so I headed toward the kitchen. There, I found a harried-looking woman in a chef’s hat placing candles on a birthday cake.

She stiffened when I entered her line of sight, clutching her chest. “God, I thought you were Mrs. McCormick again.”

Which told me a few important things, all of which I could exploit. “Sorry for the jumpscare,” I said with a wink.

She looked me over, taking in my expensive clothes and realizing I wasn’t part of the help. A blush stole over her face. “Not that Georgianna showing up in her own kitchen would be a bad thing, I just—”

I held up my hands. “Don’t worry. You don’t need to explain yourself.” I glanced over my shoulder. “If it helps, I think she’s still outside terrifying one of the caterers.”

The woman gave me a watery smile. “Do you . . . need something?”

Ah. Because why else would one of these rich assholes be in the butler’s kitchen?

I dropped my voice into a conspiratorial tone. “I’m hiding. All anyone wants to talk to me about is golf, and I don’t play.”

Her eyes widened. “An egregious sin.”

I chuckled, motioning toward the three-tiered, heavily decorated dessert.

“Did you create this?”

She nodded, starting to soften up, a hint of pride in her expression. “I did.” “It’s stunning.” I sent her a questioning look. “Is it people food or dog

food?”

“People food,” she answered. “Poor Tippi’s stomach isn’t what it used to be.”

I nodded like I already knew this. “Have you worked for the McCormicks for long?”

She laughed. “Sometimes it feels like forever.”

“Any tips for a newcomer?” I asked. “I’m Stella’s boyfriend.”

“Oh, really?” she said, eyeing me like she couldn’t picture the two of us together.

“We’re the opposites-attract kind of couple.”

She grinned. “That’s me and my Hamid.”

I spent the next ten minutes pleasantly engaged with Mrs. Tori Ahmadi,

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being my most charming self, asking seemingly innocuous questions about Stella's parents under the guise of using the information to make a good impression, when the truth was, I had ulterior motives with much darker intentions.

"Has Stella passed by here lately?" I said during a natural pause in the conversation.

Tori nodded toward the front of the house. "I think she's out front. Probably letting the air out of Cordelia's tires."

I frowned. "Who?"

"Short, toadlike woman. Deeply unpleasant."

"Ah," I said. I knew exactly who Tori meant. Earlier, a woman matching that description had shaken her head at Stella's tattoos and muttered *Such a shame* in the loudest stage whisper I had ever heard. "I should probably go help her then. Many hands make quick work and all that."

Tori wished me luck, I thanked her for the insider tips, and left the kitchen, passing Blake in the hall.

No one else was around. This was the first time we'd been alone-ish since our "bonding time" in the study. I braced myself for another ugly scene, but I must have driven my point home earlier because he took one look at me and dropped his gaze, striding by in complete silence. Despite the fact that he seemed cowed now, I didn't trust him not to try and be brave again at a later date, and I made a mental note to keep an eye out for him.

I pushed open the front door and emerged onto the steps. Night was closer here, more apparent in the thickening shadows of the woodland. The only sources of light came from the house itself and the lamp posts, set at intervals along the driveway, illuminating the way back to civilization. The sounds of the party were distant enough that those of a summer twilight reasserted their dominance. I heard crickets. The last calls of a pair of mourning doves.

One day, this could all be yours, I told myself. Or maybe something a bit nicer. Smaller. Less ostentatious and more secluded, with a better view. Here, all you had to stare at were tree trunks and the sky.

I lifted my gaze heavenward, searching for the first light of the stars. Now that I'd successfully infiltrated my way into Richard's life, I didn't have long—a few months, maybe a year—before my goal would be complete, and I'd be free to move on. Free to finally start living for myself instead of being driven by this constant, lashing need to avenge my mother.

This was the life she *should* have led. Spoiled, pampered, happy, and safe. Instead of . . . *no*. I'd told myself I wouldn't think about that tonight. Wouldn't let myself dwell on her final, awful, lonely years.

A soft, feminine swear had me dropping my focus back to earth. The hood of a car was popped toward the end of the line, close to where I'd parked. I caught a flash of white around it, heard another low curse.

Stella.

I took the stairs down and headed her way. I'd thought Tori was joking about her letting the air out of some snooty bitch's tires, but maybe she was right. Hoping to sneak up on her, I moved parallel to the parked cars. More swears colored the night, and my curiosity deepened. What the hell was she doing? I crouched low and rounded a Beamer, creeping up from behind to see her elbow-deep in the engine block, her phone propped on the carburetor while a YouTube video told her where she could find the spark plugs.

I straightened to my full height. Jesus Christ, she was *actually* disabling someone's car.

And why did that suddenly make me respect her just the tiniest bit? Her vindictive behavior proved she had a backbone, but it also meant I'd have to be more careful around her from here on out—not nice, though; I'd never sink to those depths. Just . . . cautious.

I crossed my arms over my chest, watching as Stella fiddled with wires. From the volume of her phone and her continued swearing, two things were clear: she had no idea what she was doing, and no idea that someone else was out here with her. I glanced around, frowning at her piss-poor planning. Yes, it was dusk, and the party was still in full swing, but it was light enough that anyone coming out to their vehicle would have caught her in the act.

Amateur.

I took another step forward, close enough to reach out and touch her if I wanted, and said in a singsong voice, “Whatcha doin’?”

Stella shrieked, jumping straight up and banging the top of her head on the underside of the hood. An unholy *gong* rang out, and Stella sank to her knees on the gravel, half slumped over the bumper.

I stepped forward and grabbed the hood before it slammed down on top of her. “If this leads to some sort of brain swelling and you die, please know that your debt will revert back to your brother, and I won’t go nearly as easy

on him as I have you.”

She let out a feeble groan, hand rising shakily to her head, and it took me a second to realize she was flipping me off.

I snorted and propped the hood back up. There weren’t any obvious signs of tampering, and from how frustrated Stella had sounded, I was guessing that meant she hadn’t managed to do any actual damage.

“You weren’t even near the cylinder head,” I told her.

“What?” she mumbled.

“Where the spark plugs are. Here, look.” I hauled her upright and showed her. “But that’s easy to fix. If you really want to fuck with someone, loosen

the connector on their mass airflow sensor."

She pushed away from me, a bit wobbly, but able to stand on her own. Probably not concussed then. Shame. "What's that do?" she asked. "I'm not trying to hurt Cordelia, just inconvenience her."

"Rough idling. Stalling." I shrugged. "It might not even start."

A soft *snick* hit my ears. I glanced around the side of the car to see the front door opening. Fuck, we were about to get caught. Quickly, I closed the hood, grabbed Stella, and sat her on top of it, shoving my way between her thighs.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, trying to push me off.

"Incoming."

She glanced toward the house, and without having to be told, wrapped her arms around my shoulders. Just in time. The couple waved goodbye to someone and then turned our way.

I yanked Stella forward at the last second and sealed my mouth over hers. We were near the far end of the cars, the house lights barely reaching us. To the other couple, we probably appeared as shadowy outlines. Which meant we didn't really have to sell this kiss.

Stella must not have realized that, because her lips parted beneath mine. I stayed frozen in place for half a second, torn between letting her embarrass herself and fighting my own morbid curiosity to see if our first kiss had been nothing but a fluke. On the one hand, humiliating her held real appeal, but on the other—

Her tongue traced the seam of my mouth. I parted my lips and kissed her back, and, fuck, it was just as good as the first time. No hesitancy, no softness. If anything, this one was even better. Because it was angry.

Stella kissed me like she was trying to punish me, mouth bruising, hands

fisting in my shirt. She pulled away just enough to bite my lower lip, hard, and between the stab of pain and the taste of copper on my tongue, I knew she'd broken skin. My dick went rock hard, and I shifted my hips backward before she noticed and thought I was actually into this. I wasn't. What had she said earlier? Not even God was?

Lights flashed over us, and we froze. A catcall rent the air, and then the headlights pivoted away as the people in the car rolled down the driveway. Stella and I tore our mouths apart, both of us breathing hard, her dark lipstick smeared to hell again.

I grinned, knowing it wasn't friendly. "It looks like Dracula blew a load on your face."

"Yeah, well, it looks like you've been out here sucking tailpipes." She shoved me back a step and slid off the hood. "God, I hate you."

"Right back at you, Elvira."

Without another word, she turned and stomped toward the house, and I took that as my sign to get the fuck out of there while I still had some of my sanity intact.

12

Stella

IT WAS FIVE O'CLOCK ON Thursday afternoon. Normally, I'd still be at work, but I had somewhere else to be, and thought it would be a good idea to walk. A storm had blown through the city earlier, and I'd been hoping that meant it would cool off some. Nope. Instead, it was still hot, but with the added bonus of being so humid it felt like you could chew the air.

Several days had passed since the party at my parents', and Theo and I had barely spoken since. Just enough for me to tell him when to pick me up tomorrow and what to expect from our next evening together.

Over the past five days, I'd been desperately trying to balance my current stress load: meditating every morning, doing yoga every night before bed, limiting caffeine to one mid-afternoon matcha, eating the blandest diet humanly possible, and completely avoiding the news and social media. Every time I started to feel even the tiniest bit anxious, I began my breathing exercises, even if I was mid–tattoo session, which had confused more than a few clients. But this, I'd found, was the only way to face a full-blown flare, which I was *definitely* in, thanks to that absolute shit-fuck, Theo, and the fact that I was three million dollars in debt to him.

My stomach hadn't been this bad in over a year, burning anytime I ate too much or too little. I woke up every morning with a sore throat because I was forced to sleep upright, my mouth dropping open despite the sling I wore around my head that was supposed to prevent it.

I was constantly nauseated. Constantly in pain. I'd started limiting my appointments and taking hour-long baths after work because floating in a pool of hot water while watching ASMR videos on my tablet was the only time besides sleeping when I had any relief from this hell.

My stomach twinged, and I cut off my self-pitying thoughts, starting up another breathing exercise to slow my racing pulse while a gust of wind sent raindrops splattering down from the buildings that towered overhead.

I pulled up the hood of my rain jacket, dodging puddles, bikes, and the swaying umbrellas of other pedestrians. Strands of hair clung to my neck. A bead of sweat rolled down my back. I was starting to feel like a bog witch,

but one of the best things for gastritis was gentle movement, especially walking, so I was willing to ride out the yuck until I got to the hospital. What the hell was I going to do about this whole Theo situation? He was such an asshole that I was desperate to find a new way out of my debt. Maybe I could blackmail him back, find out his hidden weaknesses and use them against him.

Unfortunately, I didn't exactly know how to do that. It wasn't like I'd

stalked anyone before, and god knew I didn't have the time to take up a new hobby. I had the shop to run, appointments to keep. I couldn't afford to take much more time off. Literally. I hadn't been lying to Theo when I said my inheritance was tied up. I was fully dependent on the shop's income to pay my bills, so I'd just have to find some other way to find out more about him. A private detective, maybe? How expensive were those? Probably out of my budget.

I could abandon the blackmail plan entirely and set aside my hatred to worm my way into Theo's good graces. Or I could get him drunk. Drug him, tie him up, and torture him. Fuck him senseless so he'd be so blissed out from coming that he'd drop his guard and answer my questions.

I set that last thought on fire and shoved it off a cliff for good measure. Rule number one meant sex with Theo was *never* going to happen. Even without it, I wouldn't be tempted. Not even if he was the last man on earth. Not even if it would save my life. I'd rather die without the confirmation that he gave a mediocre wienering, at best.

Men that good-looking were always subpar in bed, because they'd never had to work for it. He was probably as vanilla as they came, missionary only, and cried when he climaxed. I'd tried to tell myself that the kiss in the tattoo shop had been a singular irregularity. A glitch in the matrix. Either that or I'd been so touch-starved that anything would have seemed amazing in the moment.

But then our second kiss at the party was just as good as the first. Which was why I'd been steadfastly ignoring the fact that it had happened, and would now go back to doing exactly that again.

A car drove past, close to the curb, hitting a puddle and sending a wave of water cascading toward me. I barely managed to leap out of the way, blaming the near-miss on Theo. If I hadn't been so distracted by his dumb, stupid existence, I wouldn't have almost gotten drenched.

Focusing on the sidewalk, I trudged onward, but try as I might, my

thoughts kept circling back to him, as they had all week. How far would he go to get what he wanted? Who else did I know that might end up hurt by him? And was I really going to just play along with his sadistic little game without putting up a fight? If the way I froze in my father's study was anything to go by, the sad truth was that I just might, and I hated the thought. But what could I even do? My brother's future was on the line, along with my family's (somewhat tarnished) name.

I still had no answers when I arrived at my destination half an hour later, passing beneath the hospital's welcome sign and heading for the nearest elevator bank. Johnson Memorial was the largest medical facility in the city, and I'd been here so many times over the past seven years that I knew the layout like the back of my hand. I took the elevator up to the third floor, signed in at the nurses' station for visiting hours, and strode down the hall. "Knock, knock," I said, sticking my head into a small room. "I hope you aren't hooking up with a hot nurse."

The woman in the bed closed her book and sent me a flat look. "Ha, ha, ha."

Runa Lund was in her early forties, with the pale skin and white-blond hair that indicated her Norwegian heritage. My gaze roamed over her, instantly looking for signs of how she was feeling. Dark circles sat beneath her ice-blue eyes, and her skin was washed out, cheeks hollow, mouth pinched with what looked like pain. She'd gotten out of surgery two days ago, but I knew well enough not to visit within thirty-six hours because she was especially susceptible to medications and was always too loopy to do much more than mumble and giggle.

This time, she was in for TMR (targeted muscle reinnervation) surgery to ease the phantom pain she felt in her legs. Both had been amputated above the knee, but her right one gave her more trouble than her left, and she'd decided to have that one (hopefully) fixed first.

"Don't give me that look," I said as I sank into the chair next to her bed. "It's not like I haven't caught you getting freaky with hospital staff before." She slapped my shoulder with her book. "How many times do I have to tell

you he was fixing the EKG electrode on my chest?"

"Sure he was," I said, sliding my chair out of her reach. "You know, I bet I could find another person to *check your electrode* again, if you're feeling frisky. These private rooms come with all sorts of perks."

I dodged sideways to avoid the book flying toward my head.

"That's literary abuse," I said, scooping it off the floor and tossing it back on the bed.

"I am two seconds away from pushing the emergency button," Runa threatened.

I held my hands up. "Fine, I'll behave."

She eyed me, distrustful, as she settled back against her pillows, and I forced my gaze to remain fixed on her face instead of the wires attached to her. Seeing her like this always brought me back to the first time we met, seven years ago. I was the passenger in Madison Clyde's car when Maddie jumped the curb and struck Runa.

Maddie fled the scene on foot, leaving me behind to deal with the fallout. While I called 911 and tried to save Runa's life, Maddie called her parents, who called their family lawyer, who immediately started the process of pinning everything on me. I'd stolen the car from the party we'd been at, they claimed, and Maddie had never even been at the scene.

The only other witness to the accident was Runa, who'd been walking home from a late-night work shift, and she, understandably, couldn't recall anything but the car rushing toward her and then excruciating pain. Paramedics arrived after Maddie fled, testifying that I'd been the only one there. My parents' lawyers had fought tooth-and-nail in court to clear my name, but all they'd managed to do was cast doubt on who'd been driving. Maddie had refused to be interviewed by the cops or testify, so the judge had no choice but to dismiss the case due to lack of evidence, leaving no one liable to pay Runa's mounting medical bills.

Against my parents' and lawyer's advice, I'd decided to step in and take responsibility, admitting guilt in a civil suit that ended with a ten-million-dollar settlement covered by my family's private insurance policy. I was deemed responsible for paying any medical bills Runa accrued related to the accident. So now here we sat, back in the hospital, and I prayed her TMR surgery had worked. Not because I was worried about having to cover the cost of another treatment—I would happily do so—but because I just wanted Runa to be free from pain.

I hadn't been driving that night, but I felt as guilty as if I had been. Because it easily could have been me. I'd had close calls before. Drank too much and thought I was okay to operate a vehicle when I wasn't. And I'd done nothing to prevent Maddie from driving, even though I'd known better. Complacency would be a nice way of looking at our behavior, but

that wasn't it; it was privilege, pure and simple. Nothing bad had ever happened to us. Despite all the stupid shit we'd done before the accident, there'd never been any real consequences. A night in the drunk tank, maybe some community service if we were unlucky. Our lawyers or parents got us out of everything else.

Shame burned through me every time I thought of my younger self. I'd been reckless, careless, so hell-bent on chasing the next high—whether it came from alcohol or drugs or adrenaline—that I never paused to consider my actions. I'd been a bored, spoiled, entitled bitch, an absolutely insufferable human being, and memories of my past behavior would haunt me for the rest of my life.

Everything changed that night seven years ago.

Fuck, Runa had almost bled out and died right there on the sidewalk because I'd been so drunk that I kept fumbling the tourniquet the 911 operator instructed me to tie.

"Stop," Runa said.

I blinked and came back to myself.

Runa’s gaze was censoring. “You’re doing it again.”

“I’m not,” I lied.

“You literally just started crying.”

“No, I—” The words died on my tongue as I lifted a hand to find a tear streaming down my cheek. Whoops. I sent Runa a tentative smile. “Sorry.” “I’m *fine*, Stel. The doctor said everything went as well as could be expected.”

“I know,” I told her. “I just . . . worry.”

Her expression softened. “I know you do.”

Our gazes locked, and there was so much I wanted to say to her. Apologize, again, for my role that night. Ask her how she *really* was, beneath the brave face she always put on. I wanted to reassure her that even if this surgery didn’t completely fix her pain, I would pay for another one, and another. As many as she needed or was willing to endure.

She must have seen the words bubbling up in me because she quickly changed the subject. “How’s Blake?”

I grimaced.

Her eyebrows rose. “Oh? The golden boy not so golden anymore?” “He gambled away his inheritance.”

Runa’s jaw dropped. “No.”

“Yes, but I managed to get his debt transferred to me, so now I owe a bookie three million dollars.”

“You’re joking, obviously.”

I shook my head.

She leaned forward. “Tell me *everything* .”

I opened my mouth, and the whole sordid story poured out. Runa and I had been through so much together that we’d developed this weird kind of relationship where we weren’t, like, besties, but still told each other absolutely everything. More than you would tell a friend. I’m talking the worst of the worst, things you wouldn’t even say to your therapist—the kind of shit you usually took to your grave.

I blamed all the late nights sitting awake in hospitals. In the early days, we didn’t know if Runa would make it, and I’d been almost like a priest to her, a way for her to admit to her sins, tell me all her last confessions and life’s regrets. I hadn’t liked how one-sided it felt, so I started reciprocating, and now, all these years later, every time we were in a hospital room together, we dredged up forgotten memories or horrors and visited them upon each other. It was trauma bonding at its finest, but afterward, we both felt lighter, closer. Less lonely.

So I held nothing back, telling Runa everything, and out of all the details for her to pick up on, including all the awful threats and the fight in my father’s study, of course she chose to zero in on the first kiss.

“In your booth?” she said, looking scandalized.

I nodded. “I crawled right on top of him in the client chair.”

She sniffed and glanced at the ink on her arm. “I didn’t get that kind of treatment when you tattooed me.”

“You’re not even attracted to women.”

“Still,” she said. “I would have liked the opportunity to turn you down.” I flicked her shoulder. Carefully, because, god, there were so many wires. “You want to kiss him again, don’t you?” she prodded.

“Absolutely not. Twice was two times too many.”

“Stella. It’s *me* .”

I heaved a sigh. “I don’t know. Maybe I do, or maybe I just want to kiss *someone*. I’ve been alone for . . .”

“Your entire adult life?” she helpfully supplied.

“Yeah, that,” I groused. “Play-acting like we were all coupley messed with my head. Not like I’ve started to feel anything for him, but it’s made me

realize how alone I’ve been, and I think . . . I want that. Someone to do things with.”

“Aww,” Runa said. “The tin woman longs for a heart.”

I flipped her off.

She sobered. “You should introduce Maddie to Theo. Tell him to get *her* shit-faced next and drain her entire inheritance.”

“I’d have to see her to do that, and I don’t think I could pull it off without trying to kill her. She told Mom to say hi to me.”

Runa reared back. “No she fucking didn’t.”

“Yuuup.”

“Bring me to the next party. Beating her to death with one of my prosthetic legs would be such poetic justice.”

I choked. Runa’s sense of humor had always tilted toward the darker side of the spectrum, and she was forever saying things that I would probably go to hell for laughing at.

“Seriously, though,” she said. “Are you really going to do this? Help Theo go after your family’s friends?”

“I don’t think I have a choice,” I told her. “I keep trying to think of some way to hold out, but I’m scared of what he might do if I sabotage him.”

Her expression turned contemplative. “What if . . . you really do tell him to go after Maddie? Or if not her, people *like* her. The worst of the worst in your parents’ circle. The ones who have gotten away with horrible shit. People like the Bluhms and Montgomerys and Hatchers. Didn’t Vincent Prout and his son just get away with swindling hundreds of millions of dollars from their investors?”

I frowned, contemplating her words, thinking back to something Theo had said over dinner about how my not liking these people should make my job easier. Maybe there was something to that statement. So far, I’d been floundering, desperately trying to come up with a way to get myself out of this situation, but what if there were another way? What if Runa was onto something?

Previously, all my crimes had been committed while under the influence, and most of them had been accidental. This would be the first time I’d be making an intentional choice, while fully sober, to cause someone else real harm.

God, could I do that? I’d spent so many years in therapy trying to work through all my hatred and resentment toward the people I’d grown up

around, and I had *just* reached the point where I was starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. By doing this, immersing myself back into that world with the intention of helping ruin those people, would I be undoing all of my progress? Reverting to the worst version of myself?

My focus returned to Runa, to the tubes attached to her, the steady sound of the heartbeat monitor at her side. Maddie had done this to her. And then she’d gone on to live a happy, unencumbered life . . . if her lavish Instagram feed was anything to go by.

Anger burned in my belly. Runa was far from the only person in this city who'd been wronged by the wealthy and left to fend for herself. There were people walking around who had done horrible, unspeakable things, and they'd gotten away with it for so long that I doubted their crimes would ever catch up to them. Those people? If anyone deserved Theo, they did. Runa caught sight of my expression and smiled, some color returning to her cheeks. "Take your phone out, and we'll make Theo a hit list."

"Careful. He *is* a bookie. Putting hits out on people might not be entirely out of the realm of possibility."

The smile spreading over her face was pure evil. "In that case, put Maddie's name at the top of it."

13

Tyler

YOU'RE STILL GOOD TO PICK me up at six? Stella's text read.

Yes, I wrote back.

The party starts then, but it's better to be a little late to these things. Trust me.

Ha. Unlikely.

"Are you ready?" Dean asked.

I looked up from my phone. "Yeah."

Dean and his fellow urban explorer, Aubrey, stood shoulder-to-shoulder across from me at the bottom of a narrow shaft fifteen feet below a Thai restaurant. To our right was the crumbling ladder we'd descended. To our left, the dark maw of a tunnel.

“Is there another entrance?” I asked. Multiple avenues for escape were a must in my line of work. This singular point of entry was too tight and too obvious to funnel everyone through. I’d need to split the crowd to keep them from drawing attention.

Dean, nodded, his red hair flashing in the dim light. “Yeah, there’s at least one more over on Eleventh. The entrance is more discreet, but it’s a trickier route down.”

I made a contemplative noise, eyeing the tunnel branching away from us. It could work. I could send the younger, fitter clients to that one, and everyone else here. I’d also need overhead lighting along both routes, which meant paying my shady electrician to tap into a nearby line, but that discussion was over the explorers’ pay grades. Their only purpose was location scouting, and I paid them well enough to keep from getting nosy about what, exactly, they were scouting for.

“Then let’s go,” I said.

Together, the three of us turned our headlamps on and moved deeper into the tunnel. Dean took point, followed by Aubrey. I brought up the rear, studying our surroundings as we traversed the gloomy depths of the undercity. The floor beneath our feet was paved with hundred-year-old concrete, cracked and buckled in places, and I made a mental note to get

someone to spray-paint the tricky areas in a neon, glow-in-the-dark color so no one tripped.

At least it smelled better than the freight ship had initially, but that wasn’t saying much. There was a rank, fetid note to the air that spoke of decay, like it probably wasn’t safe to breathe for that long. Around us, the walls crowded close, and the ceiling hung low overhead: a claustrophobic’s worst nightmare. The entire tunnel was damp and moldy, green algae blooming along the seams, like it was seeping in from the bedrock. Yes, it was in rough shape now, but I could already see the potential.

Up ahead, Aubrey glanced back as if to reassure herself that I was still

there, and Dean, who had explored half this goddamn city with me, was quieter than usual. I was pretty unflappable, but even I could admit that there was something unsettling about this place, disquieting. Maybe that was because of the slight breeze, punctuated by an intermittent gusty sigh that made it sound like the tunnel was *breathing* .

Or maybe I was biased because I knew about its dark history. How Al Capone and his fellow gangsters had run their bootlegging enterprises through here during the Prohibition years. And that wasn't all. Guns, girls, drugs—these tunnels had served as the primary means of transportation for a lot of unseemly shit, and more than a few people had fought and died in them. The proof could be seen in the bullet holes we passed, some with the contorted remains of lead still stuck in the walls.

Finally, the tunnel opened up, and we stepped into a cavernous, stone- lined room filled with towering brick columns. Originally, it had been the nineteenth-century basement of a bank, reinforced to hold the astronomical weight of the building above it, but in the 1920s, it was transformed into a warehouse for illicit liquor, right up until the Feds caught wind of it and conducted one of the largest raids of the entire Prohibition. Even now, there were signs of its shady past scattered throughout the room: wooden racks rotting along a far wall; the shattered remains of barrels splintered across the floor; old copper pipes that were probably part of a makeshift distillery; still more bullet holes riddling the walls.

It didn't look like much, but I had enough imagination to be sure it could be transformed into something spectacular. Candles in the alcoves, soft pendant lighting. In my head, I envisioned something a little like the Italian restaurant where Stella and I shared our first "date." The bar would sit to the right, poker tables to the left, blackjack, craps, roulette, and baccarat

filling the space in between. I could really lean into the Gatsby vibes here and hire a jazz band to perform, giving my clients an excuse to dress up for the occasion.

It was fucking perfect.

Not wanting to give myself away, I waved Aubrey and Dean onward. “Let’s see the other entrance.”

■ ■ ■

Two hours and one of the longest showers of my life later (the underground of this city was disgusting), I was dressed in a suit Stella had recommended. It was a deep navy, lightweight, and expertly fitted since I’d managed to get it tailored in record time. Beneath the jacket, I wore a crisp button-down, sans tie. My belt and shoes were a warm brown that Stella had also picked out, and seeing myself in the mirror, I had to give it to her: I looked good. Not just dressed, but styled. Which meant she hadn’t been lying—she knew about fashion, but for some odd reason chose to clothe herself in Bela Lugosi’s castoffs.

I half turned away to inspect myself from another angle. Suit jackets tended to look comical on me because of my size, but Stella managed to find one that seemed to be designed with weightlifters in mind. It accentuated the breadth of my chest, but because there weren’t any shoulder pads, it didn’t make me look overly bulky, and the cut made my waist appear trim by comparison. I’d never admit it to her, but later tonight, I was going online and ordering it in every other color they carried.

I snagged my burner phone, wallet, and keys, and left the apartment. The humidity slapped me in the face the second I stepped outside. It made me glad the suit was so lightweight; anything heavier and I might have broken out in a sweat. Cicadas called from the trees around my apartment complex, and the air was heavy and dense, like another storm was rolling in.

I got into my car and headed toward Stella’s shop, spending the drive contemplating logistics for the new location. I’d need to contract a lot of people for the event, more than I had for the last one on the freight ship, and that gave me pause. The more people involved in what I was doing, the higher the risk of someone talking, and even though I only ever told employees what they needed to know to do their job, I was still paranoid about someone saying something to the wrong person. I’d need to get Tim, my lawyer, to draft a stronger NDA. I’d also need to make a point of

implying there would be more than just *legal* consequences if it were broken.

Luckily, those I worked with had experience keeping their mouths shut. My carpenter was a convicted felon who'd gone straight, my plumber used to break kneecaps for the Bratva, and even the catering company I hired was corrupt, so I had a feeling it would all work out just fine.

Traffic was lighter than I anticipated, and I got to Stella's earlier than planned. I parked half a block away, in the first open spot I could find, and hoofed it back to her shop. The second I stepped into the tattoo parlor, stimulus overload hit. God, there was so much stuff in here. Like a morbid granny with a hoarding problem had donated her most macabre garbage to Stella. Seriously, why was there a mummified hand floating in a jar of . . . *something* sitting right there on the check-in counter?

I glanced around and saw more creepy shit. They were practically asking to be haunted. And don't even get me started on all the weird crap cluttering the shelves or hanging on the walls. The "décor" was so busy that it made me want to pull on a pair of gloves and start clearing it out, and I was far from a clean freak. Josh could never come here. He used to throw my socks away if I left them on the floor of my own bedroom; he'd break out in head-to-toe hives if he saw this place.

Two women stood behind the counter. One was short, pale, curvy, and had flame-pink hair. The other was almost Stella's height, with light brown skin, corkscrew curls, and so many piercings it looked like she'd taken a shrapnel bomb to the face. Their clothes could have been pulled from Stella's closet: dark, edgy, antisocial.

Great, more goths. Hopefully they came with better attitudes than their boss.

The short one let out a low whistle as I approached. "Are you in the wrong place?"

I put on my most charming smile. “No. Just picking up my girlfriend.” They glanced at each other.

“Who’s your girlfriend?” the taller one asked, taking her time looking me over.

“Stella,” I said.

Twin looks of shock swept over their faces.

The short one choked. *“Stella?”*

Guess she hadn’t told them.

I leaned my elbow on the counter. “It’s still new.” Motioning them closer, I dropped my voice. “Between you and me, Stella’s a bit insecure about it. She hasn’t dated in a while and is feeling rusty. And,” I glanced around like I was about to share a juicy secret I didn’t want anyone to overhear, “she said something about not feeling like she was good enough for me?”

The women’s faces softened.

“I’m not sure where it’s coming from,” I continued. “She’s so beautiful, and talented, and while she seems so confident on the outside, inside, she’s filled with crippling self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy.” I glanced around again. “Do me a favor?”

The women nodded.

“Be . . . nicer to her for a little while, will you? She might act all tough, but it’s to hide how vulnerable she really is, and I think she could use the reassurance that she’s worthy.”

The taller one glanced down at her coworker. “I never knew.”

The pink-haired woman shook her head. “We should have. It’s always the grouchiest people who secretly have the softest hearts.”

I fought back a grin. Stella was going to hate this.

14

Stella

I'M DOWNSTAIRS, THEO TEXTED .

Panicking that he might be pissing off my employees, I scooped my purse from the coffee table and rushed toward the front door. My heels were waiting for me beside it, and while I tugged them on, I shot a glance back into the living room toward Amos, whom I'd just put back in his cage. "Don't answer the door while I'm gone."

"*Come on in!*" he cawed.

If Mom didn't get me robbed, he would.

"I'll be back soon," I told him.

"*Treat, Snack Bitch? "*

"Later, I promise."

Slipping out the door, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and headed downstairs. The sound of feminine laughter hit my ears. Hopefully Elayne and Shaunté had been giving Theo hell and were now cackling over the destruction of his fragile man-ego.

I passed the last tattoo booth and stepped into the lobby, stopping short at the sight of the three of them clustered close, conspiratorial looks on their faces as they laughed *together.* Theo leaned against the front desk, speaking in a low voice, and I suddenly wished I'd made him buy an uglier suit. Because he looked incredible. Like he'd just stepped out of an advertisement for expensive cologne. He must have gotten it tailored because it hit him in all the right places, and the navy blue color brought out

his eyes in a way I hadn’t anticipated.

Something low in my abdomen clenched at the sight of him, and if not for the audience, I would have turned into the old man from *Family Guy* and punched myself in the crotch, but instead of yelling, “Wake up, damn it!” I’d be screaming, “I warned you what would happen if you started acting slutty again!”

Theo caught sight of me and straightened, his expression sobering as his gaze raked over my body from head to toe. “You look amazing,” he said, sounding like he genuinely meant it, but there was a lingering gleam of

malice in his eyes I didn’t trust.

The women turned toward me, their expressions almost . . . sympathetic? “Oh, wow, Stel,” Shaunté said.

“Damn,” Elayne added. “Look at the smoke show.”

I fought back a frown. What the hell was this? Where were the sarcastic jabs from Elayne I’d come to expect? The insult sandwich Shaunté was known for?

“Thank you?” I frowned, stepping forward to join them.

They shared a look, expressions shifting into what might have been pity. “Don’t worry about the shop while you’re gone,” Shaunté said. “We’ll hold down the fort.”

“Yeah,” Elayne said. “You do too much. You deserve to have a night off with your boyfriend. We can close.”

Okay. What the fuck was going on here? Why were they suddenly being so nice?

My gaze shifted to Theo, who was smiling like the Cheshire Cat, and I knew, *I knew*, he’d said something to them. Probably something either

embarrassing or fabricated. I'd look like a lunatic if I started interrogating them, and since that might play right into his hand, I decided the only way forward was to pretend like I hadn't noticed anything.

"There's no need for you to close," I said. "I should be back by then."
"Unless I convince her to stay at my place," Theo tacked on, his voice low and full of innuendo.

My stomach swooped. While I wasn't fully committed to giving him the list of names Runa and I had drafted—I wanted assurances the targets would only be hurt *financially*—one thing I was sure about was that the less I fought Theo, the easier my time with him would be. Which meant I needed to start acting like he really *was* my boyfriend. At least in front of other people.

I sauntered over and plastered myself to his side, one hand around his back, the other braced on his hip as I stared up at him in false devotion. His arm wrapped around me automatically, and the way his eyes darkened as they stared into mine was *not* fit for the public.

"In that case," I told the girls, "you're closing."

Theo and I held each other's gazes while the pair laughed and made lewd jokes. I kept my mind carefully blank as I met his impossible stare, ignoring the heat rolling off his big body, the feel of muscle and bone beneath my

palms. He gave good smolder, but I wasn't fooled. I could see a calculating gleam that said he didn't trust my act.

Before he could read into it, I turned back to the girls. "Don't turn the music up too loud. Amos needs his beauty sleep."

"We won't," Shaunté assured me.

"Ladies," Theo said, his hand completely enveloping mine. "Have a good night."

“You, too,” they chorused, glancing between the two of us like proud aunties sending a niece off to prom.

Theo’s grip tightened as he led me out the door. The second we were out of sight of the shop windows, he practically threw my hand back at me. “Who’s Amos?”

“My African grey parrot.”

“That explains the smell.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to shut the fuck up, but miraculously, I managed to keep my response measured. “Amos doesn’t smell bad. He smells like laundry.”

He fell quiet as we climbed into his car. It was surprisingly nice. Clean. Even smelled good. I buckled myself in and waited for him to start the engine, but he just sat there, staring at me.

“What are you doing, Stella?”

“Waiting for you to drive, so I can give you directions.”

He gestured toward me. “No, I mean this Stepford wife routine.”

I forced myself to smile. “I’m behaving, like you told me to. Showing you what a good little blackmailee I can be.”

“You’re up to something.”

“I’m not,” I spoke through my teeth. Christ, this man was exhausting.

“If you do anything to risk this, I’ll tack another quarter million on, and then you’ll *never* get rid of me.” His expression turned ominous. “We might even have to get *engaged* .”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “I promise I won’t be a problem.”

Somehow, it was the wrong thing to say. In a flash, Theo was in my space, his hand on my chin, his grip just shy of painful as he stared into my eyes. “Don’t think for a fucking second I’m falling for this act. What are you planning?”

“*Literally nothing* .”

“I swear to God, Stella,” he seethed, clearly not believing me, “if you fuck

with my business, I will burn your entire life down around you. I’m talking scorched-earth, salt the ground, there will be nothing left when I am done level of retribution.”

“Casual.”

“Fuck!” he yelled, releasing me. “This isn’t funny!”

“Yeah, I *get that,*” I told him, leaning as far away in my seat as I could. “But it’s either crack a joke or start crying, and my mascara isn’t waterproof. I was just trying to make it easier between us, but you’re such a monumental asshole that it’s obviously impossible!”

The car’s engine roared to life, and then we were tearing out of the parking space into the night. I grabbed the door handle as we raced past shops and pedestrians. One wrong move, and . . . oh, god.

“Slow down,” I said, fighting back a wave of panicked nausea. Scenes from the night of the accident flashed through my mind.

Theo ignored me, the streets whizzing past as he broke the speed limit and closed in on the sound barrier. Up ahead, a light turned yellow, but instead of braking, he put the gas pedal to the floor, and we passed through the intersection right as it turned red. I curled in on myself, bracing for an impact that, thankfully, never came.

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes, and my voice came out broken. “Please.”

He glanced over at me and swore, but he eased his foot off the gas, and the car slowed to a survivable speed.

Silence descended upon us. I had no idea what to say to him because so far, nothing seemed right. No matter how I acted, it blew up in my face. Or more like, *he* did. I don't think I'd ever met anyone so full of anger, and it made me wonder what made him like this. Was it learned? Or had he been born spitting venom?

"Where am I going?" he finally said.

"Get on the highway and head north," I answered. Of course he wasn't going to apologize for threatening and then scaring me. God, I hated him. He glanced my way. "You seem like you've made a regrettably full recovery after slamming your skull into the hood of that car last week. I'm guessing your head is fine?"

I shrugged. "I've never had any complaints."

"Goddamn it, Stella," he snapped.

"What?" I yelled back, my temper frayed. "Arguing with you hasn't

worked, and neither has being nice. If you're going to be an asshole all the time, I might as well crack jokes to entertain myself."

He didn't reply, just worked the manual transmission through the gears as we made our way east toward the nearest on-ramp. The quiet lengthened until it grew awkward. At least for me. I wanted to say something to break the silence, call a truce between us, but I didn't know how.

A glance over revealed him studying the road ahead, jaw clenched like he was still on edge. Waves of light and darkness played across his features as we passed under streetlights, a fitting analogy for his volatility. There had to be some way to get on his good side. If he even had one.

I heard a crinkling sound from the back as he took a turn and glanced toward it. There were several boxes of food stacked on the floor behind us. I saw crackers, protein bars, and mixed nuts.

“I think you forgot to unload some of your groceries,” I said, sitting forward again.

“No, I didn’t.” He shot me an ugly look. “Not all of us grew up with the same easy access to food like you did, and that can leave a mark on a person. I always have something on hand, just in case.”

His words made me want to sink through the floor and let the traffic claim me.

Theo had food insecurity. My brain didn’t know what to do with that information.

Was he an asshole? Big time. But that didn’t keep me from feeling bad for him. No child should have to grow up like that. This country had so much fucking wealth that the absolute *least* we could do was make sure no one went hungry.

I stared out the window, thinking back to the night in the restaurant. The way Theo had been such a jerk about me refusing food. And at my parents’ party, when he kept trying to slip hamburgers and potato salad and pasta onto my plate. I thought it was just a dig at how skinny I was, but what if that wasn’t it? What if me not eating made him nervous, brought up past trauma, and his response was to bully me into eating?

It made me want to learn more about him. To find out what made him tick, so I could avoid stepping on any other hidden land mines.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be. I don’t want your pity.”

I opened my mouth to tell him it wasn’t pity, but changed my mind. He

wouldn’t believe me anyway, and he’d probably just see my regret as something else to exploit, knowing him.

The rest of the drive north passed in stilted silence, punctuated only by my directions. Theo kept the car to a somewhat reasonable speed, but I still flinched anytime he switched lanes too quickly or tailgated. After the night of the accident, I’d mostly avoided motor vehicles, and despite unpacking why in therapy, being in them still freaked me out. Especially when someone I didn’t trust was behind the wheel.

“Tell me more about tonight’s party,” Theo said when we were a few miles away. All I’d really told him over text was that there would be plenty of people for him to schmooze with.

“It’s at Cordelia Fentwick’s summer house,” I said.

“I thought you hated her.”

“I do.”

“What’s the party for?” he asked.

“It’s the annual death day celebration for Cordelia’s late husband.” “That can’t be a real thing.”

“I assure you, it is. He passed twenty years ago, and every year on the anniversary of his death, she throws this huge, lavish dinner party, with the proceeds going to lung cancer research.”

“Is that what he died from?”

“No. He had a stroke on a golf course.”

The steering wheel creaked from how hard Theo was squeezing it. “Stella.”

“I’m being serious! That’s really how he died. And no, I don’t know why

the money goes toward something else. Probably because she hated him." He shook his head. "Imagine being that petty."

"Well, at least that pettiness results in a lot of money being put toward research for a really deadly form of cancer. And . . ."

He glanced my way. "And what?"

I sighed. Time to dance with the devil. "And since Cordelia is such a petty asshole, that means a lot of other ones will be in attendance, so you should have plenty of people to prey on."

"Your parents are going."

"Yes," I said, my tone sharp because I didn't like the implication. "Because they genuinely want to contribute money to the research." "Cordelia was at *their* party."

"Because she's my father's aunt and they invited her to be polite."

His profile contorted with a grimace. "You're related to that old cow?" "Unfortunately, yes."

He cut his gaze to me again. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. The two of you have an uncanny resemblance to each other."

I glared. "She's five-foot-nothing with flaming red hair and looks like the reanimated corpse of a frog."

"Like I said, uncanny."

I couldn't remember the last time I'd wanted to punch someone so much. There was absolutely no hope of getting along with him.

"Walk me through the festivities," he said as we turned off the main road and started climbing into the foothills.

“There will be drinks and hors d’oeuvres right when we get there. Don’t overdo it on those, because Aunt Cordy’s dinners are usually five courses. Afterward, there will be more socializing and dancing, followed by the fundraiser.”

“And who do you expect to be there?”

I sighed, racking my brain. “I haven’t been to one of these in years, but the attendees rarely change in our circles, so I’m guessing the big names will be the MacArthurs, the Warners, the Crowns, the Rosenfields, and the Bluhms. Maybe the—”

“The Bluhms?” Theo interrupted. “As in, Bradley?”

“Obviously not, since he’s busy fleeing across Europe. And probably not his parents either. I think they’re pretty much housebound. But his aunt and uncle and cousins are still being sociable, and from what Mom said, they’re telling everyone who will listen that Brad always creeped them out, even as a kid.”

Theo scoffed. “Please tell me you’re not dumb enough to believe that.”

I placed my hands in my lap, clutching them together to keep from reaching out and squeezing Theo’s throat. “No, I’m not. Especially because I have it on good authority that they helped cover some of Brad’s crimes when he was younger.”

“You’d know all about that kind of behavior, wouldn’t you?” he said.

I craned my head sideways, staring at him. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

He sent me a scathing look. “Please. I did my research. I know all about the horrible shit you got away with because your parents threw money at

the problem.”

“Look, I’m the first to admit that I was a reckless idiot when I was younger, but DUIs and pranks that got out of hand are *not* the same as driving your car into someone’s bedroom because they turned you down for a date.”

“But running someone over is.”

I sucked in a breath. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No? You didn’t run a woman down and then skip away from it scot- free?”

“Shut up,” I said, and in my mind, I saw Maddie sprinting into the darkness, heard Runa screaming.

“Not so high and mighty now, are you?” Theo said, an ugly, goading note in his tone.

“I said, shut up.” My ears were starting to ring.

“Talk all the shit you want, but the truth is, you’re just as bad as the rest of those assholes.”

“No, I’m not,” I said, my voice shaking.

“Tell that to the woman you—”

“I wasn’t the one driving the fucking car!” I screamed.

15

Tyler

STELLA LEAPT FROM THE VEHICLE before I’d even pulled to a stop.

I climbed out, tossing my keys to a waiting valet, and jogged to catch up with her.

“Stella.”

She ignored me and kept on walking toward her great-aunt's absolutely monstrous brick manor house. Thank god there wasn't anyone out here to witness this scene but the valets. From the number of cars lining the driveway, we must have been some of the last guests to arrive.

"Stella," I said again, louder. She picked up speed, almost running. Fucking hell, this was not the way we should be walking in, but I had no one to blame but myself. Talking about my childhood always left me so *angry*, and Stella was such an easy target. Not just because of her proximity to Richard, but because she had become something akin to the embodiment of everything wrong with the wealthy. So I'd lashed out and gone too far. And while I wouldn't say I was sorry for what I'd done, I wasn't entirely immune to regret.

Why couldn't I remember that in order to pull this off, Stella had to be willing to work *with* me? Hell, if she were telling the truth, that's what she'd been trying to do tonight. And I'd gone and fucked it up because I couldn't keep a lid on my goddamn temper.

I put on a final burst of speed and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her off her feet and hauling her toward a screen of evergreen shrubs.

"Let me *go*!" she yelled, thrashing.

One of the valets stepped forward.

I pointed a finger at him in warning. "A hundred bucks to each of you who minds their fucking business."

He stepped back, miming zipping his lips shut. The others followed suit.

I shook my head and stalked into the shadows, disgusted that that had worked so easily. They didn't know me. There was nothing to say I wasn't about to assault the woman in my arms. And yet all it had taken was money to corrupt them.

We rounded the side of the house, where I dropped Stella to her feet, pinning her to the wall by her shoulders before she could escape. “What do you mean, you weren’t driving? You were the only one at the scene.”

Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. She shook her head. “I’m not doing this with you. I don’t owe you shit.”

“I’ll become an even bigger bastard if you don’t tell me.”

“Do it,” she spat. “What do I care?” Her lower lip trembled, and she bit it like she was trying to keep me from noticing.

My heart kicked against my ribcage. I hated this. Hated seeing her vulnerability. I’d much rather she were still screaming at me. I dropped my voice. “No. Tell me what you mean. From all the documents I read, it was clear you were driving.”

“How?” she asked, voice cracking. “My fingerprints were nowhere on the driver’s side of the car.”

“You wiped them off.”

“Then why were Maddie’s still there?”

I blinked. “That wasn’t in the court transcripts.”

“Yeah, thanks to her lawyers.”

I loosened my hold on her shoulders. Was she . . . telling the truth? Had Stella really not been driving? Goddamn it, I was going to ream out my private detective. I paid him too much for him to miss shit like this. He was supposed to dig until all the bodies were unearthed, and then keep on digging until he found the ones no one else knew about. He’d never failed me before, but if Stella was being truthful, clearly he’d fucked up.

She must have sensed my distraction, because she managed to duck out of my grip before I realized she was moving. This time when I rushed after

her, there was an older couple ambling up the driveway, so I couldn’t drag her back into the shadows.

Stella nodded toward them. “Mr. and Mrs. Ashley. Nice to see you again.”
“Miss McCormick,” the man replied.

The woman said nothing, and I shot her a censorious look before catching up with Stella, careful not to touch her this time because she looked about ready to scream.

“Don’t do anything to ruin this,” I warned, my voice low as we approached the front door.

“I won’t,” she snapped.

And then we were inside, accepting glasses of champagne from a server

posted up in the entryway. My gaze rose to the grand, spiraling staircase, which climbed several stories up to a stained-glass skylight high overhead. The hanging art looked like it belonged under bulletproof glass, and I didn’t even want to know the cost of the ancient statue currently operating as a coat rack.

Had she truly not been driving the car? I wondered, my mind stuck in a loop.

“Stella?”

We turned, and there were her parents marching toward us with twin looks of surprise.

“I didn’t know you would be here,” her mother said.

“You invited me,” Stella said, her tone sharp.

Georgie raised her brows. “And you’re what? Here to make me regret it?”
Stella sighed. “Sorry. Long day.”

I grinned, forcing levity into my voice. “It’s my fault we’re late. Couldn’t find my cufflinks.” I lifted my wrists in demonstration.

Her father shook his head. “You should have called. I would have let you borrow a pair of mine.”

“Next time,” I said.

Georgie stepped closer to Stella and dropped her voice. “How was Runa when you visited?”

I had to work to keep myself from reacting. Runa was the name of the woman Stella—or Maddie?—hit with the car.

Beside me, Stella stiffened, very carefully keeping her eyes trained on her mother as she responded. “She was good.”

“Do we know if the surgery was successful?” Phil asked.

“It’s still too early to tell,” Stella said. “Can we please talk about something else?”

Georgie frowned. “Darling, I wish you would let us cover some of the cost.”

“Mom,” Stella bit out. “Not here.”

My head spun. What the fuck were they talking about? Was Stella somehow responsible for Runa’s medical expenses? That couldn’t be right. She’d been found not guilty on all charges.

I fought to keep the confusion off my face as I stared down at her. Was this why her inheritance was “tied up”?

Movement caught the corner of my eye. People were casting glances

toward our group, or more specifically, toward my fake girlfriend. She was easy to spot, standing out like a sore thumb because she was the only one with tattoos and piercings, the only one with such dramatic makeup—full contour, false lashes, matte purple lipstick.Her dress was another focal point: black, diaphanous, with a deep V in the front that was much more suited to a red carpet than this stuffy gathering.

Stella had to notice the extra attention, but from the way she twirled her untouched champagne glass, she appeared completely unaffected. Still, I took a step closer to her and put a hand on her lower back in a silent act of support.

Yeah, I made fun of her style choices, but there weren't any teeth in my remarks. I did it for the sick thrill of knowing I'd gotten under her skin. But these motherfuckers were vindictive in their criticism. Even though I hated Stella, it pissed me off to see her as the target of their censure.

"Oh, thank god," a masculine voice said. Richard. My mood plummeted straight to hell.

He stopped next to Stella's dad. "Phil, this is the last one of these I'm coming to. Dennis is already drunk and won't shut up about the time he came in under par on the Ocean Course in 2015."

Phil grinned good-naturedly. "To be fair, if I pulled that off, I'd probably never shut up about it either."

Georgie cast the pair a confused look.

"It's the hardest golf course in the country," Phil explained.

She rolled her eyes. "Dennis cheats at backgammon and gets winded walking up stairs, so excuse me if I have a hard time believing he didn't shank his way through all eighteen holes."

Richard chortled. Phil shook his head, looking both amused by and deeply in love with his wife. Beside me, Stella stood stock-still with almost no

expression, as if she hadn’t even heard them.

I followed her gaze toward a familiar-looking petite woman with a button nose and big blue eyes. Her blond hair was curled into loose waves, and paired with her dewy makeup and baby-pink gown, she looked like she was trying to appear younger than she was.

Maddie.

Fuck.

“What is *she* doing here?” Stella croaked.

“Who?” Phil said, craning his head around. His gaze landed on the

woman, and for the first time since I’d met him, his calm, affable demeanor disintegrated, replaced by something raw and angry.

I returned my focus to Maddie and her cute little innocent blond act. It was devious, really, knowing what I already did about her. Even if Stella were lying, and Maddie hadn’t been the one to hit Runa, her list of sins was extensive.

Stella swore and lurched away from our group, beelining toward a side hall. Heads rotated to follow her departure, and that was enough to draw the notice of the very woman she was attempting to avoid.

Maddie caught sight of her through the crowd, a determined expression taking over her face as she excused herself from the people she stood with and headed after Stella. Because of Stella’s angle, she wouldn’t even see Maddie coming.

“Oh, no,” Georgie said, noticing the same thing.

Phil turned to intervene, but I stopped him. “I’ve got it,” I said, following Stella, my strides elongating to catch up to her without appearing like I was rushing. I didn’t want to draw any more attention to their collision course.

Unfortunately, Maddie had no such compunction, rushing straight at Stella. Shit. More people were noticing. Conversations were starting to falter, and heads were twisting toward the pair. These people obviously knew about the women's history and could sense an impending scene. The hungry looks on their faces turned my stomach, reminded me of a flock of vultures getting ready to descend on a fresh corpse.

I abandoned my attempt to act casual and caught up to Stella with a final burst of speed.

"Go," I said, my hand on her back to propel her forward.

We cleared the edge of the crowd and reached the mouth of a hallway. "Stella!" Maddie called from behind us.

"Don't," I said, but Stella ignored me.

She stopped short, her face a thundercloud as she turned. "What?"

Maddie stood right behind us, eyes glistening, chin trembling. She took another step forward, and my hackles rose. This emotional display was fake. I could see it in her even breathing, the lack of color in her cheeks, the way her arms hung so loose at her sides, how she looked to the crowd like this was a spectator sport.

"Stella," I said, my voice low, trying to warn her that this was a trap. "I just want to talk," Maddie said.

I expected Stella to explode, scream at Maddie like she'd screamed at me in the car, but her voice came out deathly calm. "About what, Maddie? How you're ready to go to the police and confess everything?"

Maddie's face shifted into the picture of innocence. "Stella, please."

"If not that," Stella went on, "then you must be here to offer to pay me back for Runa's medical bills."

“Why would I pay you back?” Maddie pleaded. “I didn’t do anything.” Stella snarled and tried to move forward, but I snagged her around the

waist.

Maddie let out a scared little bleat and took a half step back as angry whispers rose from the crowd. Shit. If Stella took the bait and punched this woman, I doubted we’d be invited to more parties, and then my plans would be ruined.

I dropped my lips to the side of Stella’s head, just above her ear, and lowered my voice so only she could hear it. “She’s baiting you. Be smart.” Stella jerked her head up, finally noticing our crowd of onlookers.

Maddie wiped away a tear. “I just thought that after everything you did to me and my family, we could finally talk.”

Stella was a heartbeat away from violence. I sensed it in the way her body practically vibrated with the need to lunge at the other woman. Surreptitiously, I tightened my hold on her.

“Look,” Maddie said in a stage whisper. “I know a lot of what happened was because of your addiction, but I thought that now you’re sober, you might be ready to apologize.”

“You fu—”

I yanked on Stella’s waist, using my body to shield her from the onlookers. My hands quickly rose to her face, forcing her to look up at me. “Go,” I said, my voice a whispered command. “I’ll find you when I’m done with her.”

Stella’s eyes were furious as they searched mine, but she must have heard something in my tone that swayed her, because she dipped a nod and pulled out of my grip. Turning on her heel, she strode down the hall without a backward glance.

Time to fix this problem.

I forced my expression into concern as I faced Maddie. “Are you okay?” She shook her head, blubbering. “No. Did you hear what she almost called

me?”

Raise your voice a little louder, sweetheart, I snarled inwardly. *I don’t think the people in the back heard you.*

“I did. Let’s go over here and take a minute to collect ourselves,” I said, leading her away from the crowd, toward the entryway. “Here.” I handed her the handkerchief from my suit pocket.

“Thank you,” Maddie said, making a show of dabbing her cheeks.

Rage crawled up from the pit of my stomach, but I managed to train my face into a look of concerned empathy. People were still surveilling us, their eyes sharp, hungry for a scandal.

I stopped us just shy of the front door, my back to the crowd. A glance over my shoulder confirmed that no one was close enough to overhear me before I spoke again. “If you ever do anything to upset my girlfriend again, I’ll make sure everyone finds out what a vile little bitch you really are.” Maddie yanked her head up, eyes narrowed, fake tears forgotten. “ *Excuse me?* ”

“You heard me.” I smiled at her, letting the silence drag out, holding her gaze until she broke eye contact.

She opened her mouth, clearly about to make a scene.

“*La Mer,*” I said.

Her teeth clicked shut.

I chuckled. “That was the name of the boat, wasn’t it? I’ll give it to your parents; they did a good job covering your tracks with your previous

crimes. But let’s just say they weren’t as thorough with that incident in Turks and Caicos.”

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

“Oh, no,” I said, my voice deceptively soft. “I’m not Stella or any of the other idiots you’re used to dealing with. You’re not going to bait me with this innocent act. I know all about what you did that night.” I leaned closer. “So you’re going to walk out of this door and go take a couple months off from being sociable.”

“My parents—”

“Emily,” I said, raising my voice loud enough to carry.

She shut up, peeking past me to see if anyone had heard.

I lowered my voice again. “That was her name, right? The girl who kissed your boyfriend. The one who ‘slipped and fell,’” I said, lifting my hands to put the last words into air quotes. “Buying off a coroner is risky business, because if they’ll falsify a report for money, they’ll do a lot of other things

for cash, too. Like answer questions.”

Maddie’s face paled. “Who are you?”

“You can call me Mr. Strickland,” I said. “Now leave.”

Anger swept over her face. She’d been a spoiled brat her entire life, coddled, enabled—and she wasn’t used to being told what to do.

“And just so we’re clear, I don’t give a fuck who you are,” I said. “I don’t care that you’re wealthy. I don’t care that you’re a woman. If you say anything to anyone about this, I’ll make what you did to Emily look like child’s play. And I’ll *laugh* while doing it.”

I grinned, mimicking a look I’d once seen Josh’s father wear, showing too

many teeth, my eyes empty and out of focus, like I was staring through her to the gristle and bone beneath. Like I couldn't wait to hear how loud I could make her scream.

Maddie turned and fled out the door.

■ ■ ■

I found Stella pacing in a study (these rich-people houses were lousy with them), her hands clenching and unclenching, her eyes red like she was fighting back furious tears. She didn't notice me at first, her gaze fixed on the carpet, and it gave me a moment to study her. Watch her long legs kicking at the skirt of her dress with every step. The way loose tendrils of hair brushed over the pale skin of her exposed back.

She hadn't hurt Runa; Maddie had. Between what Stella said outside, that interaction with her parents, and then the scene with Maddie, I was convinced of that now. And while Stella was far from innocent, I could admit that she probably hadn't done enough to deserve my treatment of her thus far.

Fuck, how was I going to fix this?

I closed the door and leaned against it.

Stella's head snapped up. She caught sight of me, grabbed a paperweight off a nearby desk, and chucked it at my head.

I barely managed to catch it out of the air.

Her face contorted in rage, hands curling into claws as she bore down on me. "You bastard! I've been avoiding that bitch for seven years because I *knew* she would pull some shit like that, and you dragged me right to her."

I held my ground, ready to block the hit I knew was coming. "Technically, you chose this party."

“Oh, fuck you, Theo,” she spat, my fake name sounding foreign on her lips. “You forced me back into this world!”

She lunged, but it was easy to grab her wrist out of the air, snag her other hand before it could connect with my face, block the knee she aimed at my groin. Not wanting to hurt her, I turned and pinned her to the door, trapping her hands overhead and using my body to flatten her against the wood. Her chest heaved into mine. I stared down at eyes gone black with fury. They dropped to my shoulder, and I knew, *I knew* she was going to try and bite me, yet I did nothing to stop her.

A heartbeat later, she attacked, her teeth sinking into my suit jacket, clamping down hard enough to hurt. I didn’t pull back. I didn’t yell at her. As fucked-up as it sounded, it felt right to let her hurt me after everything I’d done to her. It was almost . . . a release. Almost felt good, like she was finally giving me what I’d been asking for.

Brat .

I shook my head, wincing as Stella bit down harder. No. That wasn’t what this was. I’d been a fighter my whole life, didn’t have a submissive bone in my body. This was just relief that she was so enraged. This kind of anger I was used to, had been harboring inside me for as long as I could remember. I knew how to speak its language, how to use it against her.

“I believe you,” I told her.

Stella released me, the back of her head thumping into the door as she closed her eyes, all the fight drained from her. “Yeah, well, no one else ever will.” A shudder wracked her body. Another. Wetness leaked from beneath her lids, and she bit her lower lip to stop its trembling.

I was probably the last human—besides Maddie—who she’d want to comfort her in this moment, but since I was the only person around, it was either me or no one. Hell, she’d probably prefer no one, but I was feeling just guilty enough for the way I’d been treating her that I felt obligated to do something.

I only needed one hand to keep her wrists pinned, so I let go with the other, wrapping it around the back of her head and drawing her forward until her forehead rested against my chest—a dangerous decision, given her propensity for being bitey.

“You won’t have to see her at another event,” I said. “I got rid of her.”
“How?” Stella murmured into me.

“Let’s just say you’re not the only person I have dirt on.”

She was quiet for a long moment, taking deep, even breaths like she was trying to calm down. “Even after everything she did, even after all the years I’ve spent hating her, I didn’t expect this. What I did to *her* family? God, she’s evil.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“I don’t want to go back out there. All those fucking people.” She took another steadying breath. “I saw their faces. Maddie will always be the innocent little girl to them, and I’m the big bad bitch who tried to ruin her life. I *hate* her. *Hate* them.”

I tilted her head up. “Then help me take them down.”

“Why should I?” she asked, her eyes searching mine. “Who’s to say you won’t turn around and stab me in the back when I’m done? Or keep piling on more debt any time I piss you off, so I’m stuck beneath your thumb forever?”

I heaved a sigh. Time to do what it took to make this right. “Fine. It’ll stay at three million flat, like we agreed, even if you constantly piss me off.”
“Again, why should I believe you? You already told me I’d be an idiot for trusting your false promises.”

“I *know*. But that was because I thought you were just like them.”

“I *am* just like them,” she said. “You’ve made that pretty goddamn clear.”
“Then why are you paying Runa’s bills?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I can find out with a few phone calls, but I’d rather hear it from you now and save myself the time and money.”

“Like you’ll believe me,” she said, her tone laced with acid.

I eyed her for a moment. “There’s no record. So, what’d you do, Sunshine? Settle it in a private civil suit?”

She clenched her jaw and looked away, confirming my suspicions.

“You did, didn’t you? You admitted guilt.” I frowned. “Why? You’d already been cleared in the criminal case.”

She tried to yank her wrists from my grip, but I kept them pinned to the door.

“Why?” I repeated.

“Because Runa couldn’t pay,” she said, voice low, eyes looking everywhere but at me.

“And you could.”

It wasn’t a question, but she nodded.

“Do you really hate these people as much as you claim?” I asked, wanting to see her answer from up close, where she couldn’t hide.

“Most of them, yes. With every fiber of my being. Why do you think I spent so much of my life numbing myself with drugs and alcohol and acting so stupid and reckless? I was lashing out. Being a self-obsessed, rebellious child because it was either that or cut myself off completely from this

world.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I worried it meant I’d lose my family, too.”

I stared into her eyes, looking for lies, but I saw none. Only fear, anger, regret.

“Why do *you* hate them so much?” she asked.

I forced a smile, rubbing my thumb over her lower lip, marveling at the way the color stayed perfectly in place. Had she learned her lesson from our first two encounters and switched to something that wouldn’t smear if we kissed again? Did that mean she *wanted* me to kiss her again?

I shook my head, clearing those thoughts. “Let’s just say I pay attention to what goes on in this city, and I don’t appreciate that there are rules for me but not for thee. There’s no way Bradley Bluhm is the only monster hiding in these circles, and if our justice system won’t deal with them, then someone else should.”

“And that someone is you?”

“I don’t see anyone else stepping up to the plate.”

Her gaze swept over my face, sharp, observant. I kept my expression carefully neutral, because it was clear we were approaching a critical moment, one in which Stella finally made up her mind about what she wanted: Help me take these people down, or stay on my bad side.

“Come on,” I crooned. “You know you want to ruin them.”

“I do,” she admitted. “But only financially. I don’t want to be complicit in people being harmed in any other way.”

“I’ll only hurt them if they make me,” I said, repeating the line I’d already

said to her.

She rolled her eyes, the soft overhead light catching the golden flecks in her irises. People who claimed brown eyes were boring had never seen them close enough to realize their true beauty.

“What are you doing?” she said, her voice low and raspy.

I stopped, my lips an inch from hers. What the fuck *was* I doing?

Losing my goddamn mind, apparently.

I forced a grin. “Trying to seduce you into going along with my plans. Is it working?”

She tore free from my grip. “Oh my god, you are so obnoxious! I don’t even know why I told you any of that.”

By the time I spun around, she was halfway across the room. “It’s because you care deeply about my personal opinion of you.”

She grabbed a small globe off a bookshelf and threw it at me.

I managed to block it before it connected with my crotch. “Fuck! Truce, okay? We want the same thing. You out of debt, and these assholes in it. We just need to find a way to work together without killing each other. Should be easy enough.”

“Easy enough?” she parroted. “That’s what I tried to do earlier, and how did you react?” She puffed her chest, arms flexed out wide. Her voice dropped an entire octave in mockery of me. “I’m talking scorched earth, Stella. Nuke you from the orbit, curse your entire bloodline, replace all the flooring in your apartment with Legos.”

Goddamn it, she was *not* funny. “Can you blame me for not trusting you?”
“Yes!”

We eyed each other, clearly at an impasse. I'd done most of the damage tonight, and I had the most to lose if she failed to uphold her end of the deal, so it was on me to fix this. To get over my shit and do what I'd set out to do: work with her, even though I couldn't stand her.

"Fine," I said. "I'll try to be less of an asshole."

She paced to the windows and threw open the curtains, staring into the darkness.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Looking for the flying pigs." "Stella," I ground out.

She turned, smirking, and I realized it was the first time she'd come close to smiling in my presence. The sight was . . . fine. It was fine. That's all. "Oh, no," she said, tone mocking. "What's wrong? You don't like it when someone is mean to you? Does it hurt your feelings? Make you angry?" "No. It makes me hard," I snapped.

That shut her up.

"Are you in or not?" I asked. "This will go a lot faster if we're on the same team."

Which means you'll be rid of me sooner, I didn't have to add.

She eyed me across the room. "I'm in. But you're going to have to follow my lead tonight," she said. "None of the stodgy old assholes here will take an invitation, at least not without immediately outing you and calling the cops. They're too stuck up."

I released an aggravated sigh. "Then what the fuck are we doing here? You said there would be plenty of targets."

"Their children and grandchildren are who we're after," Stella said. "They're the ones who are bored and depressed and looking for the kind of thrill you can provide. But first we have to get through dinner. Then we can

follow the younger crowd to the afterparty, somewhere else in the house or on the grounds. That's where the *real* fun will begin."

16

Stella

THE REST OF COCKTAIL HOUR passed in a blur. We spent the entire time with my parents—no one else wanted to come anywhere near me. Eventually, Cordy, looking like a frogess in her swamp-green gown, invited everyone into the dining room, where there was no escaping the judgy stares cast my way. The upside was that I was so distracted by my lingering rage that they hardly affected me.

Theo better be right, and I better never see Maddie again. Because there was no way I'd be able to stop myself from attacking her. From ripping into her, tearing off entire chunks of her American Doll disguise to expose the ugly creature lurking beneath.

My fingers still trembled with unspent anger, and I shoved them beneath the dinner table to keep anyone from noticing. The nerve of that bitch, to stand there, looking me in the eye and lying through her teeth. It'd felt like an out-of-body experience, and even now, part of me still couldn't believe it had happened. Who behaved that way? Who was that fucking manipulative and soulless?

A larger part of me recognized the behavior because I'd witnessed it from Maddie when we were younger—in smaller, less horrifying situations, when she tried to sway things in her favor. They'd been red-flag moments, but I'd brushed them off because her parents owned a media company, and she'd had PR training from a young age. She was just doing what she'd been taught, I'd told myself.

God, I'd been so stupid.

The chatter in the room seemed to fade as my thoughts backtracked to that awful night seven years ago. I would never forget what it felt like to kneel

on the sidewalk next to Runa, watching Maddie flee into the darkness, her phone pressed to her ear as she sobbed, “Mommy,” like she was a child instead of a grown-ass adult, leaving me alone to deal with her crimes. Theo’s hand landed on my thigh, large enough to completely envelop it. He squeezed, once, and then his scent filled my nose as he leaned in, something bright and clean, completely at odds with his personality.

“Fix your face,” he murmured, lips brushing my temple. “You look like you’re trying to set people on fire with your mind.”

Now that was a superpower I would kill for.

He pulled away, and I took a sip of water to dilute the mounting acid in my stomach. Now that my adrenaline was starting to fade, I could tell I was going to pay for tonight’s events. I’d have to break out the big guns when I got home and numb myself with the only heavy-duty pain med that, so far, hadn’t worsened my symptoms.

Theo laughed at something my dad said, and I glanced sideways. From looking at him, you’d never know he didn’t belong. That he hadn’t grown up in this world. As I’d feared earlier, he was a near-perfect mimic of manners and behaviors. Hell, even his facial expressions fit. That borderline lazy, self-satisfied grin. The quirk of his brow as he lobbed a comment at my mom. My gaze fell to his hands, and I noticed how perfectly he held his fork and knife.

Agreeing to help him entrap some of these people was probably going to blow up in my face—with Theo, I was more convinced than ever that nothing was quite what it seemed—but right now, I couldn’t drum up any worry or regret.

Instead, a sense of righteousness had settled over me. It was a relief to stop fighting him, to stop flailing and grasping at straws as I tried to find some way out of this. Choosing to actively take part felt so much better, and that had less to do with the path of least resistance and more to do with the fact that I might finally get to act on the anger I’d harbored all my life. To have an outlet for it instead of turning it inward like I’d done my entire

childhood. To reclaim my agency, stepping out of the role of victim and into that of the aggressor.

Sure, I was probably undoing half a decade of growth achieved through hard work and therapy, but you know what? None of that self-improvement felt half as rewarding as the promise of revenge. And maybe that was wrong, maybe it made me a terrible person, but I didn't really care.

I was on some vigilante shit now, and it felt *good* .

I'd have to thank Runa later for helping me put together the list I could now act upon. I was even a little grateful to Maddie, because she'd just made it clear that she would never, *ever* change. That she'd never be a better person. The more she got away with, the worse she'd become, and I knew for damn sure that she was far from the worst monster in this crowd.

Runa was right. So was Theo. If the law wouldn't make them pay for what they'd done, someone else should.

"Lobster puff?" a voice said.

I turned to see a server leaning in with a tray full of appetizers.

"Oh, no thank you," I said. "Actually, could you have the chef make me a peanut butter and banana sandwich? On plain white bread?"

She nodded. "Absolutely."

"Thank you." My stomach was starting to grumble, which was bad. An empty stomach meant an acid-filled stomach, and I needed to put something in it. Soon.

"Tell me you're going to eat more than that," Theo said, his tone almost pleading, and for some reason it felt like the words *After what I told you in the car* hung heavy between us.

"She can't," my mother answered him. "She's in a flare."

“Mom,” I hissed, leaning forward to shoot a warning look at her. At least no one else had heard her. Between the servers offering food and the innumerable conversations surrounding us, her voice hadn’t carried more than a few feet.

She waved me off, her focus on Theo. “She refuses to tell anyone when they hit, but I know the signs. Get your phone out, and I’ll tell you what to watch for so you can recognize them.”

I glanced past her, silently begging Dad for help.

“Georgie,” he said, a note of rebuke in his tone.

“No,” Mom told him. “Theo needs to know these things so he can take care of her *when she refuses to take care of herself.* ”

The last part was said with a scathing look in my direction, and I leaned back in my seat, knowing this was an argument I wouldn’t win.

Theo gave me a curious glance as he pulled out his phone, and I assumed he was looking me over for signs of sickness.

That was the thing about a lot of chronic illnesses; they were invisible to the naked eye. Most of the time, I presented as a relatively healthy, albeit skinny woman, even when I was in a flare, because over the years, I’d learned to mask my pain, which wasn’t uncommon among the chronically ill. I couldn’t speak for everyone, but for me, I just didn’t see a reason to show outward signs of discomfort. What was the point? It wasn’t like there was anything anybody could do to ease my suffering, and talking about it was the last thing I wanted. Dwelling on it too much could spiral into

fixation, which could raise my stress and result in prolonged symptoms.

So, despite my mother’s prodding, I had no plans to announce when I was in a flare. And I *did* take care of myself. Most of the time. But it wasn’t like the entire world stopped for me when my illness acted up. I *had* to keep

working, had gotten damn good at managing my symptoms through it, was even better at avoiding anything that triggered it.

The only reason I was in a flare now was because of Theo.

I glanced over to see him taking notes while Mom talked, and the sight made me start my breathing exercises to keep from freaking out. She thought she was helping me, but she was doing the opposite. Most people would probably learn about my gastritis and shut up about food, but Theo? Despite our tentative truce, I worried he wouldn't be able to resist his assholic tendencies and torment me over all the things I couldn't eat or drink instead.

My gaze strayed toward my untouched champagne. I hadn't had a drink in years because alcohol was one of my biggest triggers, and I had never hated that fact more than right now. I wished I could down it and take the edge off my anxiety. Even with my meds, I was struggling. Seeing all these people's judgy faces, being back in this world, it brought up a lot of ugly memories. Not just that night with Runa, but all the stupid things I'd done at parties exactly like this one. All the reasons why I'd felt the need to numb myself in the first place.

Beside me, Theo tucked his phone back into his jacket pocket and sent me an unreadable look. Our eyes caught, and I had a flashback to the study and the low, masculine grunt he'd let out when I'd bit him. It sounded like he'd *liked it.*

"How are the lobster puffs?" I asked, dropping my eyes to his plate. He'd taken three of them and had already eaten one.

"Delicious," he said, forking another into his mouth. "Would you like something other than water?" His voice was just loud enough for Mom to hear, and from her small smile, she must have thought he was already looking out for me.

"I'm fine, thanks," I said, lifting my glass and taking another sip.

The rest of dinner crawled by, every course dragged out because Cordelia insisted on explaining the intricacies of each dish, the rarity of the ingredients, how long they took to prep, their remote source. As much as I hated the woman, she knew how to throw a party, and the smells wafting off

some of the plates were so delicious that I started salivating, even after finishing the first half of my sandwich. I hesitated to eat the second part, waiting to see how it would settle. Gastritis made your stomach swell so much that you had to be careful. Consume too much, and you were in for a world full of hurt, or destined to throw up, and I didn't relish the idea of having to race out of here with my hand over my mouth.

From the way Theo kept glancing my way, I knew he was getting antsy about me finishing my food, and it was in that moment I realized something: We were each other's perfect tormentors. Theo had what appeared to be a compulsive need to see me eat. Meanwhile, I literally couldn't, and him fixating on it was starting to stress me out. If I'd been a religious person, or had any belief in fate, I'd say that we'd been paired together as punishment for our past sins.

Finally, dessert was served, and I was forced to sit in tortured silence while the people around me dug into delicate-looking soufflés, highly intricate patisserie, and an absolutely decadent flourless torte.

"Not even a single bite?" Theo asked, leaning in.

I shook my head, a sudden, unexpected swell of self-pity overwhelming me. Would I ever be able to live a normal life again? Or was I doomed to an existence of having to go without? It felt so fucking unfair that everyone else could drink and eat to their heart's content without ever having to worry about how much it might hurt, while I was forced to subsist on the blandest diet imaginable and was *still* in pain.

Theo must have seen something of my true feelings on my face, because he straightened up instead of making whatever shitty comment he'd prepared.

After dinner, we retired to the ballroom, where Cordelia gave a big speech

about supporting a great cause. Unlike most fundraisers, Cordy didn't plan an auction or any other fanfare. She simply asked guests to get out their checkbooks and donate.

"She didn't even mention her husband," Theo said, his voice low. "I told you she hated him."

The tables here were smaller, round, and didn't have assigned seating, so people sat wherever they wanted. We were still with Mom and Dad, but now Richard had joined us, along with the Herdwicks.

"You two planning on dancing?" Richard asked.

We glanced his way. Shit. I didn't know if Theo *could* dance. A big,

cumbersome guy like him?

"I'm still working up the courage to ask her," he said.

Richard tipped his glass in our direction. "You should do it while you can. None of us are promised a tomorrow."

Mom swiveled toward me, expression wry. "With that bleak declaration, how could you say no?"

Richard chuckled with good humor. He was used to my mom's bullshit. Theo's eyes met mine in challenge, and then the bastard offered me his hand. Goddamn it, I did *not* want to dance with him. Three minutes plastered together while a room full of people watched in not-so-silent judgment? Pass.

"There's hardly anyone on the dance floor," I said, looking for an escape route.

"That's only because they're waiting for a good-looking young couple to lure them out there," Mom said, giving my shoulder a light shove.

I sent her a look that promised retribution.

She grinned, seemingly having the time of her life torturing one of her children.

Theo used my distraction to slip his hand into mine and pull me up. Oh, god. This was happening.

“Smile, Sunshine,” he said, leading me from the table.

I gave him my brightest smile, talking through my teeth. “Call me that again, and I will stomp on all your toes.”

His own smile ratcheted up a notch. “Do it, and I’ll return the favor.” Inwardly, I winced, imagining all that weight coming down on my feet.

He led me to the middle of the dance floor and eased me toward him. I focused my eyes on his to distract myself from the fact that we were now the center of attention.

The music started. Annoyingly, Theo pulled me into an effortless waltz, practically gliding over the floor, and suddenly my attention went into not fucking up the steps. It had been a long time since I’d done this, and I was out of practice.

“Was dancing together really necessary?” I asked, my smile still fixed in place.

“Yes,” Theo answered, half-turning us when we neared the band, who were playing some slower classical number I couldn’t identify. “I’m still trying to worm my way into everyone’s good graces. Stop being so

dramatic about it.” He eyed me. “Or are you worried that being this close to me might overwhelm you with lust and you’ll try to grope me in public?” “You have the most punchable face I have ever seen,” I said, my tone saccharine.

His eyes sparked. “I am begging you to try it. I would love an excuse to put you in a headlock.”

My expression remained warm, but my tone was frigid. “So much for not being an asshole anymore.”

“What can I say?” He grinned. “You bring it out of me.”

I grinned back. “Have you been overdoing it on whey protein? Because your breath smells like milk farts.”

“Better than the scent of battery acid you keep exhaling.”

That shut me up, because it might be the truth.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“For what?”

In answer, he spun me away from him so fast I almost went whirling across the dance floor like a runaway top. Only his death grip on my hand stopped me. With a yank, I was spinning toward him again, stopping when my back slammed into his chest. His free hand clamped down on my shoulder, keeping me there while we swayed to the music for a few beats. “Again,” he said, all the warning I was given before he spun me out once more.

This time, I flowed into the movement, actually allowing him to lead me, even though I’d rather chew glass. With a gentler tug, he pulled me forward. I pressed a palm to his shoulder, my other finding his like they were magnets. His free hand went to my waist, so big I felt his fingers span halfway across my back. Instead of fighting him, I sank into his grip, my long years of dance finally overcoming my discomfort. My limbs became loose, steps sure, and soon we were floating across the floor.

“Where’d you learn to dance like this?” I asked, because as much as I hated to admit it, he was a good lead.

“Why? Poor kids shouldn’t know how?”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Stop putting words in my mouth.” My face was starting to hurt from holding this smile through my mounting annoyance. “What happened to our truce?”

“Fine.” The word came out clipped, and I knew he was struggling as much as I was, despite his outward appearance of calm. “What *did* you mean by

that comment, then?”

“I just assumed an obvious jock like you was too busy bench-pressing farm animals to take up ballroom dancing.”

“One of my exes was a dance instructor,” he said. “Sometimes, he’d ask me to help with demonstrations. And yes, I *am* a jock, which means it’s easy for me to pick up anything that involves moving my body, including this.”

The song was coming to a close, and Theo spun me again, slower this time, allowing me to fully extend, my free arm rising, hand loose like my ballet instructors had taught, toe pointed, neck elongated. A soft tug had me twirling back toward him, and he passed me from one arm to the next before dropping into a half squat and dipping me over his knee.

We paused there, chests heaving, both of us breathing harder than we should have been. Our eyes met, clashed, and I begged myself not to think about the feeling of him pinning me to the study door. Yes, I hated this man, but I was starting to realize that hatred didn’t keep me from wanting to fuck him. Violently. Forcing him to admit that he was attracted to me, too, and I wasn’t the only one stuck in this hellscape of unwanted need.

What I felt toward him was less about desire and more about dominance, about winning whatever this sick game was. I’d even stop myself from coming, just to prove that I could get him off, but he was too inadequate to give me the same pleasure.

He bumped his nose against mine. “You have shark eyes again. Are you

thinking of killing or kiss—”

Aloud whistle cut through the air, and then cheering.

I tore my gaze from Theo’s to see the other dancers ringing the edge of the floor, a few of them clapping for us. Oh, Jesus. How long had we been the only ones dancing? How long had we been the center of attention?

And why the fuck hadn’t I noticed?

“Smile, Sunshine,” Theo said, hauling me upright.

Some asshole tapped a knife against their glass, and then the sound of tinkling spread throughout the room. No. Absolutely not. I was not going to kiss this man in front of a crowd full of—*oh, fuck*—Theo was spinning me again, dipping me over his arm, my back arching as his free hand cradled my cheek. His face filled my vision, closing in, and then his lips were on mine, warm and firm, there one second and gone the next as he lifted me back to standing.

“Take a bow,” he said beneath his breath.

I sank into a ballet curtsy as he bent forward at the waist. The clapping intensified.

And then I hurried off the dance floor, not bothering to check if Theo followed. I had to get away, just needed one goddamn minute to myself to recover from whatever the hell *that* had been.

17

Tyler

I WAVED TO THE CROWD and stalked after Stella, who was beelining for a side door. My lips tingled from the kiss, hands flexing with the need to have her in my grasp again. I knew she felt it, too, this inexplicable, infuriating attraction, because her eyes kept falling to my lips while we

were dancing, and her pupils had been huge, even as she insulted me.

I pushed through the door and stopped short. Stella was standing with a group of about ten other people, *young* people, or at least younger than most of the crowd in the ballroom, in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties.

“Nice moves,” an attractive man with dark, curly hair and full lips called out, his green eyes drinking me in.

“My parents forced us,” Stella explained. “Everyone, this is Theo. My boyfriend.” She was getting better at saying that word without tripping over it.

I smiled and joined them. “Please tell me there’s something stronger than wine and champagne in this house.”

Ablond woman with large blue eyes and a pouty mouth motioned us down the hall. “This way. Cordelia keeps all the good stuff locked up when she has company. She doesn’t want anyone getting wasted and puking on one of her priceless rugs.”

“*Again*,” a brunette woman added, shooting a taunting glance at Stella. “I’m sorry,” Stella said. “Who was it that set the lawn on fire at that same

party?”

The brunette cackled. “Oh my god, I forgot about that.”

“Probably because you were blackout drunk,” a sandy-haired man told her. Stella and I let the group precede us down the hall, and I tugged her elbow to slow her down enough that a gap opened between us and them.

“Who are my targets?” I asked, voice low.

“Everyone but AJ,” she said, pointing to the man who’d first greeted me. “The rest deserve you.”

“Now who’s being an ass—*Ow!*” She’d pinched my side.

The blond heard us and started to turn. I grabbed Stella around the waist,

but she was already leaning toward me, and by the time the blond laid eyes on us, we were plastered together, my lips at Stella’s temple while she giggled softly like we hadn’t just been on the verge of fisticuffs.

The woman pivoted back around, and Stella immediately tried to put some space between us, but I held on. “Someone else might look.”

She made a disgruntled sound but stayed where she was, and we fell farther behind.

“We need to add more items to the list of rules,” she said, her words barely above a whisper.

I dropped my voice, too. “Like what?” It was easy to guess where this conversation was headed.

“No more kissing.”

I chuckled. So predictable. “Scared you’ll get used to it and be sad when our time comes to an end?”

“Please. You kiss like a dead fish.”

“Is that why you just moaned into my mouth?”

“I did *not*—” She took a deep breath. “I didn’t do that.”

I let out a quiet, high-pitched imitation of a porn moan, and Stella scrambled to clap her hands over my lips.

“Would you shut *up*?” she hissed.

I licked her palm.

She pulled her hand back with a horrified expression.

“Look at the bright side,” I said. “At least your moan wasn’t as embarrassing as the way you ground down on me that first time, like you hadn’t been dicked in a while.” She went suspiciously quiet, and I tugged her to a stop, gleeful. “Is that it? You’re going through a dry spell and are worried that if I kiss you too good, you’ll come in public?”

Her eyes sparked with a mixture of fury and panic as she glanced down the hall, obviously worried someone might have overheard, but the group was disappearing through another side door. Only when the last of them were gone did she spin back to me. “Is this how you get your clients to pay up? You torture them with your presence until they finally snap and agree to give you whatever you want just to get away from you?”

“Aww, don’t be embarrassed,” I taunted. “Tell you what. I’ll do us both a favor and take the edge off for you. I’m sure most of your shitty attitude stems from the fact that it’s been so long since the last time you came.” “Oh, please. You probably fuck like you’re scooting a chair closer to a

table.”

“And you probably fuck like a bored fitness model bouncing on a stability ball.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a noise, but I could tell from the way her eyes crinkled that she was fighting back a laugh.

The sight made something snap inside me.

I hauled her up by the armpits. Thankfully, the skirt of her dress was loose enough that she was able to wrap her legs around my waist, making it real easy to pin her to the wall. My dick, which had been rock-hard for longer than I cared to admit, ended up right where we both wanted it, pressed tight to her pussy. This close, there was nowhere for her to hide, no way to keep me from seeing her pupils dilate or feel the way her thighs shook around

me.

“Oh,” she said, a smug smile spreading over her face. “So it’s like *that* .” She rolled her hips over the length of my cock, and it was all I could do to hold still. “You’re not offering to get me off so I’ll be nicer to you. You’re offering because you’re desperate for me, aren’t you?”

“The only thing I’m desperate for is to shut you up, and I gotta say, the idea of using my dick to gag you? Real appealing right now.”

“You’re disgusting.” The words were spoken with what sounded like barely restrained lust.

“Hate me all you want, but don’t fucking lie to me, Stella.” I shoved a hand between us, and as I suspected, the whisper-thin fabric of her dress was slightly damp from where it had been shoved against the V of her legs. Unfortunately for her, I more than knew my way around a woman’s body, and with the barest flick of my fingers, I had her squirming, her body betraying her. “*You’re* the one who’s desperate for *me* .”

“Uh . . . hello?”

We froze, heads whirling to see the blond hanging out of the open doorway thirty feet down the hall.

“You two coming in here?” She grinned. “Or coming out there?”

Stella shoved me off her so forcefully I almost stumbled. “Sorry!” she called. “Anytime we have two seconds together, he ends up begging for it.” The blond cackled and disappeared from sight. Probably to go repeat what Stella just said. Goddamn it.

I let Stella go, needing a moment to gather myself. What the actual fuck had I been thinking, pinning her to the wall like that? If we hadn’t been

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interrupted, I might have slipped my hand beneath her dress and followed through on my threat to get her off just to prove she wasn't as immune to me as she pretended to be.

Why? I asked myself. Why did it fucking matter what she did or how she felt? It wasn't like I actually cared about her opinion.

Was this borne from my need to prove myself? Or was this something else? My inability to accept that I was the only one who noticed this completely unwelcome attraction? The only one who was as amused as I was infuriated? Painful as it was to admit, fighting with Stella was the most locked-in I'd felt in months. Normally, my thoughts were scattered, my mind racing in a million directions at once as I tried to stay on top of all the things I needed to do to ensure my next party was even more entertaining and extravagant than the last. But with Stella, I was hyperfocused, needing all my brainpower just to keep up with her whip-fast responses. I never knew what she'd say next or how she'd react, and getting the upper hand with her had turned into an addiction. Every time I succeeded in annoying her was like taking another hit.

Brat .

Would you shut the fuck up? I told that nagging little voice. I wasn't a fucking brat.

I *wasn't* .

Stella was just forbidden fruit. A dangerous distraction. This arrangement was only temporary, and within a month or two, I'd disappear from her life, leaving ruin in my wake. And Stella's family would be among the casualties caught in the crossfire aimed at my true target. That couldn't be helped, and besides, Stella's parents were far from innocent. They kept terrible company, so who knew what other skeletons were hidden in their closet? More likely than not, they deserved what I had planned.

■ ■ ■

Half an hour later, I was reclining in the billiards lounge, which was fancy, rich-person speak for a game room. It was long and wide, with vaulted ceilings and dueling fireplaces at each end, now dormant in the summer heat. A pool table sat beneath a gilded chandelier on the far side of the room. Spread throughout the rest of the space were various games, including cribbage, chess, mah-jongg, and backgammon. I even spotted a blackjack table and a roulette wheel.

Over in the corner, two people smoked hash by an open window. Three others snorted lines off the antique coffee table beside me. I felt like an extra on the set of a *Cruel Intentions* remake. In the past thirty minutes, all I'd heard anyone do was gossip and complain about their first-world problems. The one topic that seemed taboo was Stella and Maddie's encounter, and I found it fascinating how obviously everyone was avoiding it. Was this another manners thing? They wouldn't bring it up to Stella's face, but once she left, it would become the center of discussion?
"Strickland," a lazy voice drawled.

I shifted in my chair, finding AJ, the handsome one Stella said was off-limits, regarding me from a nearby loveseat. Out of all the insolent, entitled, boring assholes in the room, he seemed the most tolerable. The rest were just as bad as their parents.

"I don't think I know anyone with that last name," AJ said.

"And?" I raised a brow. "Trying to determine if I meet the right pedigree requirements to be in this room?"

AJ glanced sideways at Stella, who was seated next to him. "Touchy." She rolled her eyes. "Like that wasn't what you were doing."

He flicked her thigh. "I was *not*. I just wanted to know if he had any siblings, since he's obviously spoken for. Unless," he bit his lip, gaze sliding back to me, "you're as into sharing this one as you were with Caleb."

My eyes snapped to Stella. Her and AJ? And *someone else*? Fuck, that

wasn’t an image I needed in my head. Especially not when my malfunctioning brain made *me* the someone in that scenario.

Julia, the blond, lifted her head from the coffee table and dabbed at the white beneath her nose. “Oh, Caleb. He was so pretty. What happened to him?”

“I think he lives in Dubai now,” Stella said, looking everywhere else in the room but at me. Why? Because she thought I might be judging her? Or because she was picturing the same thing I was? AJ sandwiched between us, the focal point for all our unspent hatred and lust?

“Okay, wait, though,” someone else (Federico, maybe?) said. “Where *are* you from? Not here.”

I shifted my gaze to him. “No?”

The redhead at his side shook her head. “No. You look like you were born in some dusty old manor in the Bavarian alps.”

I glanced around the room. “Any other guesses?”

Afew people answered, throwing out responses like California or England or Sweden, all of which seemed to be tied to my light features. I smiled, feeling smug that I’d done such a good job mimicking their upper-crust accents that there was no more *rhoticity* for them to notice.

Across from me, Stella looked nervous. This is why I should have sat next to her when I had the chance. To place a warning hand on her thigh whenever she started getting squirrelly or showing her discomfort. She really was a terrible actress.

I leaned out of my seat and snagged a card deck off the nearest table. “I’m from here. Just not *here*, here. My lineage hails from farther north.” I left it there. Let them think I was some Canadian oil baron’s offspring.

With a flick of my fingers, I shuffled the deck, and then the cards leapt to

life in my hands. They fanned out in a full circle, back in, my fingers moving in a blur as I split them, again and again, moving sections outward and inward, rotating individual cards.

Someone let out a low whistle.

I lifted the deck in one hand and let half of it waterfall into the other. A brief pause as I halved the cards before flicking the ones in my right over and around to land perfectly face down on top of those in my left.

“Oh god, please tell me you aren’t into magic,” a woman said.

I chuckled. “No. I just like cards.” I spun the deck again and lifted my head. “Anyone up for a friendly game of poker?”

AJ shrugged. “Sure.” He shot a look at Stella. “You in?”

Her answering smile was somewhat forced. “I think I’ll watch this round.” His face fell, and he dropped his voice. “Oh, right. Sorry.”

Stella winced. “It’s okay.”

Did AJ know? That she didn’t have any money to gamble away?

Not wanting to draw attention to their awkward exchange, I stood and paced toward a table stacked with a mountain of poker chips. Several people followed, including AJ, Federico, and Julia, the bored expressions leaving their faces now that money was on the line. Or maybe what drew them in was the competition, the chance to defeat and embarrass their peers. “The game is hold ’em,” I said, shuffling. “Everyone know how to play?” Nods all around.

“Good. What’s the limit?” I asked.

AJ shot me a wry look. “No limit.”

I shrugged and set the cards down. “Have it your way. The starting bet is

fifty.” I went on to establish the blinds, side pots, and other rules. “Everyone agree?”

They did, and the chips were divided.

Feddy (as his friends called him) frowned when I didn’t take any. “You’re not playing?”

“Wouldn’t be fair.”

Tommy, the broad, sandy-haired man across from me, made a disgruntled noise. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I tipped my head toward Stella, who was observing from the couch. “I’m still trying to make a good impression. Embarrassing her old friends would be counterintuitive.”

Those within hearing distance gave me the reactions I’d been hoping for, mostly annoyance and disbelief. Because who the fuck was I to say no to these people?

Tommy tapped the table. “We can handle it.”

I tried to demur again, but they played right into my hand, all but daring me to take their money.

“Stella?” I said. “Would you come deal for us?”

She eyed me for half a second, wariness in her gaze, before standing. Yes, she’d agreed to help me, but it was obvious she was still adjusting to her role. “Fine.”

An hour later, Tommy was close to the breaking point. He’d decided to go all-in with me for the second time and was now down to a pitiful stack of chips.

“You’re cheating,” he declared, chucking his losing hand at Stella.

Anger tore through me at the accusation, but I did my best to tamp it down. The rules of the game were holy to me. I would never commit the sacrilege of cheating.

“Tommy,” AJ said, a hint of displeasure in his tone.

Tommy pushed back in his chair. “Tell me you don’t agree,” he said, glancing around the table.

No one took the bait, but no one stepped up to defend me, either.

“You’re just bad at poker,” I told him.

“Fuck you,” he shot back. Ooh, testy.

“You tap the back of your cards,” I said. “When you have a decent hand. Just once or twice with your right index finger while you’re holding them.

When you have a bad hand, you nod and grin, trying to throw everyone off. And when you have a great hand, you sit almost perfectly still to not give anything away.”

“How is that not cheating?” he said, voice rising.

Julia made a face. “Because all he’s doing is paying attention?”

“Bullshit,” Tommy spat, and now I was really starting to get mad.

“Calm down,” AJ said, rolling his head to look at Tommy in laconic annoyance.

The larger man gestured at me. “Who the fuck even *is* this guy?”

Stella slapped a hand against the table. “My boyfriend, you coked-out jockstrap.”

Julia and I choked back surprised laughter, which only seemed to enrage him.

“Fuck you!”

“Not even with someone else’s vagina,” Stella shot back.

Beside her, Julia cackled.

Tommy tried to toss the table, but it was clear someone with foresight had affixed it to the floor, so he ended up looking like a toddler throwing a tantrum. The movement was still enough to send drinks and poker chips flying, and loud, angry voices filled the room as everyone scrambled to avoid getting soaked.

Tommy pointed at Stella. “I wasn’t offering, you fucking cunt.”

I went completely still, wondering if knocking him out would expose me as an interloper.

AJ’s voice cut through the room like a knife. “You’re starting to bore me now, *Thomas*. Why don’t you do everyone a favor and leave?”

I stepped in front of Stella, expecting the jockstrap to protest or throw a punch, but AJ’s words had a mollifying effect on him. Face red with frustrated anger, Tommy stormed out of the room without another word.

My gaze returned to AJ. This wasn’t his house. He shouldn’t have any authority here, and yet he did. Why? Because his family was the richest? Was that all it took to establish hierarchy amongst these bougie fucks? I hadn’t been able to find much dirt on him, so either his parents had buried his bodies deeper than most, or there weren’t any to find. Now that I knew Stella had a soft spot for him, I was even more curious about which it was.

I pulled her close, framing her face with my hands. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I’m fine. Tommy’s been a prick as long as I’ve known him,

so this isn’t anything new.”

I kissed her forehead, knowing she’d probably hate it. “I think this is our cue to leave.”

“What about the game?” Feddy asked. “We owe you.”

I released Stella. “Let’s just agree to call it even.”

He studied me for a second before nodding.

We said our goodbyes, and on the way out, Feddy caught up to us. “You’re him, aren’t you?” he said, his voice low.

Stella, horrible actress that she was, jerked her gaze up to me. I kept my features controlled. I’d known there was a risk of being recognized—word got around in this city, no matter how much you threatened people to keep their mouths shut.

“Who?” I asked.

Feddy took a surreptitious step closer, and I had to credit his discretion. “The man who throws the underground parties. My cousin Grant went to the last one.” His eyes slid to Stella. “With Blake.”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” I protested, making a mental note to send a few goons to teach Grant a lesson about the dangers of running his mouth.

Feddy’s eyes were bright with undeterred excitement. “When’s the next one?”

“The next what?”

“Come on,” he said. “I can hang.”

I made a show of looking him over. “Can you?”

He nodded emphatically. “Yes.”

“Good to know.” I placed my hand on Stella’s lower back and nudged her in the direction of the door. “Enjoy the rest of your night.”

Without a backward glance, we left.

“What are you playing at?” Stella asked outside. “You didn’t hand out a single invitation, and I just watched you turn down Feddy. Don’t fall for his buddy-buddy bullshit. He’s *not* a good person. He hazed a kid so bad in prep school, they took their own life.”

Oh, I was well aware. “That’s not how it works. I don’t send out invitations until an hour before the party. And I just met these people; I’ll need a few more interactions before making up my mind. As much as I’d love to ruin them all, discretion is key.”

“Feddy can keep his mouth shut,” she interjected.

I shook my head. “No, he can’t. I guarantee he’s upstairs right now telling Julia all about my illicit work.”

She grimaced. “He wouldn’t do that. They can’t stand each other.” “They’re fucking,” I told her.

“No.” “Yes.” “*No* .”

Great, we were back to this again. “Stella, I have pictures to prove it.” She gagged. “They’re second cousins.”

“And that surprises you? Rich people have been inbreeding since the dawn of time.”

She looked too nauseated to respond, which was good, because we had almost reached the valet stand. Conscious of my earlier promise, I pulled

out my wallet and tipped each of them a hundred dollars when we reached it.

“The S-Class,” I said, reminding them which car we’d arrived in.

While a kid in his late teens went dashing off into the darkness, I wrapped my arm around Stella’s shoulders and drew her away. “I turned Feddy down because I knew he’d tell Julia.”

“Who *can* actually keep a secret?”

I nodded. “And also hates being told no. By the time we see them again, they’ll be both be desperate for an invitation, and I’ll be in a better position to threaten them into silence.”

Stella made a contemplative noise that made me feel like she was finally catching on. “I don’t think you’ll have to go that far. Having exclusive access might be enough to keep them quiet.”

“Maybe, but I’m not taking any chances. There’s already more than enough risk involved.”

The car pulled around, and we thanked the valet. I opened Stella’s door before heading toward the driver’s side. One night down. Countless more to go.

“When’s the next party?” I asked when we were a few miles down the road.

“That depends,” Stella said. “The summer season is in full swing, so there’s a lot to choose from. Would you prefer a banquet, a ball, a soiree, or a reception?”

“Whatever works best for your schedule,” I said, distracted. There weren’t

any streetlights this far out of the city and the road was windy as fuck. “Soiree it is then. Clear your plans for Wednesday.”

18

Stella

MORE THAN TWO WEEKS HAD passed since Cordelia's death day celebration, and I was rushing to get ready for my Saturday plans with Theo. He was swinging by at six, and I didn't want to hear whatever bitchy remark he would make if I kept him waiting.

So far, we'd gone to three more events together: a soiree, an afternoon cocktail party, and a reception (where Feddy and Julia cornered him demanding an invitation). At each one, Theo acquired new targets, choosing his victims from the list of names I'd supplied. We'd fallen into a routine, he and I, smiling and pretending to flirt, but under our breath, it was nonstop bickering and insults, which, every so often, turned disturbingly sexual.

"Truce," one of us would say right before things went too far, and it had become our own little version of waving the white flag of surrender. I'd been forced to say it three nights ago as he was dropping me off after the reception. He'd made some gross innuendo, I'd told him he made me drier than the Sahara, he'd fired back, "That explains all the goddamn sand in my car," and then I'd done the worst thing yet: I'd laughed. Hard.

It wasn't even *that funny*, but between working long hours, spending so much time around people I hated, and not sleeping because my ongoing flare was keeping me up until 3 a.m. every morning, I'd turned slap-happy. Theo had frowned, looking slightly concerned, and I'd blurted, "Truce!" and fled into the shop.

"*Treat? Treat, treat?*" Amos called from the living room, snapping me back to reality.

"You've already had three today," I told him.

Athud, followed by the saddest little "*Oh, no,*" I'd ever heard.

I walked into the living room to see him perched on the back of a kitchen stool, staring down at his favorite chewed-up piece of balsa wood.

“*Help.* ”

I picked up his stick and handed it back to him, something I did about twenty times a day when he was out of his cage.

He chirruped and leaned into my hand. “*Pretty bird!* ”

I gave him exactly two and a half head pets—all he’d allow. “Yes, you’re very pretty.”

“*I love youuuu,*” he cooed in a singsong voice.

“Love you, too, Amos.”

“*Amos, Amos, Snack Bitch. Treat?* ”

“Maybe later,” I told him.

He flew to his favorite perch in the middle of his jungle, keeping up a steady stream of inane chatter that had become a sort of white noise for me, and I let him have his fun until Theo texted that he was waiting outside. I put Amos back in his enclosure, grabbed my purse, and blew him a kiss as I locked the door.

“Sunshine,” Theo drawled as I slipped into the passenger seat.

I chose to ignore the nickname because I could tell reacting to it gave him some sort of sick pleasure.

“That suit looks familiar,” I said instead. Tonight’s was black, but I recognized the fabric and cut. “What’d you do, buy the one I recommended in every color?”

His jaw flexed in annoyance.

“Aw, you did, didn’t you?” I teased as he pulled away from the curb.

“I would have chosen differently if I’d known we’d be so matchy- matchy.”

My eyes roved over him. He wore a black shirt beneath the suit jacket, fully embracing the monochrome look, and annoyingly, it worked for him, making the bold lines of his face that much more apparent.

I was in a black sheath dress that I’d borrowed from my mother’s closest. It wasn’t my usual style, but it would do. Silk, whisper-thin, backless. Thank god I had such a small bust and could pull it off with nothing but a thong and a pair of pasties underneath.

“At least they’re the same shade,” I said.

He dropped his voice. “Black like your soul.”

“You’re not funny.”

“Tell that to the witch’s cackle you let out the last time you were in my car.” He sent me a disturbed look. “I’ve been hearing it in my nightmares.” “It was a pity laugh.”

“Oh? Like that pity orgasm you begged me to give you?”

“I did not. You were the one begging for it, *pearvert* .”

“*What* ?”

Goddamn it. Blake hadn’t been speaking to me—he was still mad I’d taken on his debt—and I hadn’t gotten a chance to tell him about my favorite new Mom word, so of course I’d gone and blurted it to someone else.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Is that how Georgie pronounces it?”

I snapped my head toward Theo, wondering how he'd guessed.

He shrugged. "You're a decent mimic of her."

My god, was that a compliment? I tried to put my hand on his forehead, but he deflected me so hard that I ended up punching my fist toward the ceiling like a middle-aged man at a sports game.

It collided with a *crunch!*

"Ow," I groaned, cradling it to my chest. At least it wasn't the hand I tattooed with.

"What the fuck were you doing?"

"Trying to check for a fever, you idiot. I figured you must be delirious if you were being nice to me."

"Please. That was neutral at best."

"God, you're such a bitch."

Needless to say, the rest of the ride did *not* go well, and by the time we finally pulled up outside of one of the oldest, most stately buildings in the city, we were practically snarling at each other.

Theo got out first, tossing his keys to a valet and preceding me up the towering front steps. He must not have noticed I'd lagged behind, because he paused near the top and shot me an annoyed look. "Are you coming?"
"No, I'm just breathing hard."

Anearby couple gasped.

The valet behind me wheezed with laughter.

Theo closed his eyes and pinched his nose, and I decided to take my sweet

time reaching him because he seemed more on edge than usual.

Abutler held the door for us, and we swept inside.

Theo frowned down at me. “Why are you so short tonight?”

“I got a blister from those heels on Wednesday, so I’m wearing flats. And I’m five-eleven. That’s the opposite of short.”

He glanced around, looking over the top of my head like I wasn’t there. “I’m sorry, who’s speaking? I can’t see you.”

“How have you not been dismembered by someone yet?” “Uh?” a guy said. “Welcome?”

Oh. We’d reached the greeter.

Theo gave him our names, and together, we joined the party.

19

Tyler

TONIGHT’S SOCIETY FUNCTION WAS MUCH like the last one, and the one before that, and the one before that. Stella had warned me they all followed the same basic sequence of events—dinner, dancing, donations—but I hadn’t anticipated how quickly they’d start to blur together. Fancy clothes, glittering décor, mind-numbingly boring conversation. When it wasn’t infuriating. During cocktail hour, I’d overheard two men discussing their doomsday plans in hushed voices. One said he’d bought shock collars to control his guards. The other planned to abscond to his private bunker, ringed in land mines to keep interlopers away.

It solidified my belief that billionaires were food, not friends.

At least Richard wasn’t at this party.

I saw a lot of other semi-familiar faces, though.

“Don’t people get sick of seeing the same assholes over and over?” I whispered to Stella during dinner.

“No. They’re too busy trying to one-up each other.”

I lifted my gaze to the room around us, still coming to terms with the fact that this was a house and not a museum. Specifically, AJ’s family home, where he’d grown up. His parents were the ones hosting tonight’s event, though I’d only glimpsed them briefly through the crowd.

I refocused on my plate. Part of me had hoped this ultra-exclusive world would act as inspiration for my own parties, but everyone was too stuck in the past to inspire anything other than a yawn. I could have thrown this event in my sleep. Sterling silverware, white bone china, floral centerpieces. Sure, it was done to an impeccable degree, but at the end of the day it was all so . . . blah. No wonder Stella had sought a way to dissociate.

That thought brought me up short. Was I actually empathizing with her? No. Absolutely not.

Beside me, she picked up the second half of her sandwich and took a tentative bite. It wasn’t just bananas and peanut butter tonight. She had a side of unsweetened applesauce to go with it. Averitable buffet.

I opened my mouth to ask if that meant she was feeling better, but didn’t want to seem like I actually cared. Because I didn’t.

Instead, I tucked back into my own delicious food. That was one thing I had to give the rich. Their chefs were better than mine. *Hmm.* Maybe I could find a Michelin-starred restaurateur with a shady past and rope them into working my upcoming party. There was still time. The tunnels had needed more work than I first thought, and it set my target date back by several days. Not that I was strict about when I hosted my events. Sometimes, it was every four weeks, sometimes much longer; it all depended on the

location. The unpredictability of it was part of what made people so desperate to attend.

After dinner, we remained in the glittering ballroom, trapped by a ninety-minute-long auction. Up for grabs were a stunning array of luxury items and vacations, the odd old-world painting thrown in for good measure. I raised my hand a few times, winning a five-thousand-dollar pair of diamond cufflinks, losing on the rest. It was all for show, to prove that I had money to toss around.

The hosts thanked the crowd at the end, and the stage was cleared to make way for a twelve-piece band. Two tables over from us, AJ sat in my line of sight, even more handsome than I remembered. He caught my eye and subtly tipped his head toward a side door.

I nodded and leaned toward Stella. “We’re being summoned away.” “Good. I’m so bored I could fall asleep.”

I dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder. To annoy her.

She jerked, clipping me on the mouth.

I licked her.

“Ew!”

Every head at the table swiveled our way.

“Sorry, thought I saw a bug,” she said.

I straightened, lips twitching. Her expression promised retribution.

Around us, the younger attendees in the crowd started filtering out of side doors one by one, so as not to draw attention to their departure. Stella and I remained where we were, waiting for our chance.

Phil was seated on my other side, and he turned toward me during a lull in

the conversation. “Are you two planning to get the dancing started again?” “Not unless we’re forced at gunpoint,” Stella answered.

Phil patted his coat pockets. “I know I have that Ruger here somewhere.”

Georgie, on his other side, put a restraining hand on his arm. “Darling, let them go smoke their marijuana with their friends in peace,” she said, but with her accent, she pronounced it mary-jo-*ahna* .

I snuck a glance at Stella, whose expression was carefully blank. “I haven’t smoked pot since I was in high school.”

Her father nodded sagely. “The kids these days eat it instead.”

Georgie rolled her eyes. “Like we weren’t the ones who invented baking it into brownies?”

“They hit gummies,” Phil told her, looking to Stella for confirmation. “Yes, we hit them,” she said, and though there was almost no inflection in her tone, I could tell she was fighting back a laugh because of the way her eyes shone.

A few minutes later, our time had come to follow the others, and we rose from our seats.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Stella said. “I think we’ll go see if AJ has any pot for us to hit.”

Georgie smirked, recognizing the troll for what it was. As I passed her chair, she snagged my arm. “You’ll be careful?” Her eyes slid to Stella’s retreating form. “Precious cargo and all that.”

“No pot hits for me,” I told her.

She pinched my arm good-naturedly and let me go, and I grinned as I walked away. Inside, I felt nothing. This rare display of maternal warmth wasn’t enough to change my mind about her.

■ ■ ■

By the early hours of the morning, the party was starting to wind down, both upstairs and here in the basement pool area. I swept my gaze over the room. It looked like something out of ancient Rome. Rough-cut stone pillars, Venetian plastered ceiling, soft lighting made to mimic candles and torches. Sitting in the center of the cavernous space was the pool itself, with a small swim-up bar. A lazy river wound around it, filled with people floating on tubes—most of them naked because no one had brought a suit. The water was aquamarine, reflecting the tiles, and I had to admit, I was a little tempted. To throw Stella in.

I glanced right, where she and AJ sat on a stone-cut alcove bench. He was sunk low, looking indolent, his full lips quirked up in amusement at whatever Stella was saying. They'd been there for half an hour, and I was

about ready to go break up their little reunion. Especially since Stella looked so unbothered by the fact that there was a half-naked woman currently hanging off my arm.

"Excuse me," I said, extracting myself from the woman's grip. She made a low, petulant sound and tried to reach for me again. I sidestepped her. "Don't be desperate."

Someone nearby gasped. Another snickered.

The woman, one of the countless bottle-blond heiresses in the room, threw me a dark look and stalked away. Good riddance.

I beelined toward Stella, who glanced up in question, like she'd missed that whole exchange. Like she'd forgotten about me entirely.

Asmall flare of antagonism shot through me. Because, hell no.

I took her untouched drink from her hand and set it on the nearby table before scooping her up. She squawked in surprise, but before she could

wriggle free, I plopped down where she'd been sitting, settling her on my lap in a way that forced her to wrap her arms around my neck for balance. There, much better.

AJ arched a brow, looking amused. "Planning to use her as a human shield?"

Oh, so *he'd* seen what happened. "Yes. Did everyone drop ecstasy before we got down here? I've been propositioned by, like, six different people so far."

AJ and Stella exchanged a glance, and he laughed. "No."

I sent him a blank look.

"You're fresh meat. And you're hot. They don't need to be high to want to fuck you."

"Oh, god, don't," Stella said. "His ego doesn't need any more inflating."
"Be nice," I said, punctuating the words with a slap to her ass. "He might start thinking you don't like me."

"Ha!" AJ said, throwing his head back. "No threat of that. Pretending to ignore you? Only looking your way when you're distracted and won't notice? The woman is obsessed."

Stella went so stiff that she almost fell off my lap. "I am *not* ."

I would never let her live this down.

"Aw, come on, Sunshine," I said, tipping back enough to peer at her. "It's okay to admit your feelings in front of an old friend. Go on. Tell him how much you love me."

"Sunshine," AJ said, laughing even harder.

Stella's arms tightened around my neck, and then her lips were at my ear. "I

am going to put glass in your food."

I pulled back, smirking. "Confirmed. She loves me."

She started to respond, and from the look on her face, I knew it wouldn't be anything nice, so I yanked her into her a kiss—quick, hard, over before the shock could even register on her face.

AJ's eyes fell to my mouth as I pulled back. "Here," he said, shifting forward. His hand rose to cup my chin, his thumb pressing into my lower lip and dragging it sideways. "Her lipstick smeared." He stroked it the other way, his green eyes molten in the flickering light.

Stella held herself perfectly still in my arms. I didn't even think she was breathing.

"Is it always just the two of you?" AJ asked, his focus shifting from me to Stella.

"Why?" I said, a rough edge to my voice. "Are you offering to join in?" Slowly, his eyes rose back to mine. "What if I am?"

20

Stella

"WE ARE NOT SERIOUSLY DOING this," I hissed.

Theo and I stood in the middle of AJ's childhood bedroom while he freshened up in the en suite. Any second now, he would walk back in here, expecting a fun little hookup with me and *my boyfriend*, and I was starting to panic.

Theo raised his brows. "Are you going to be the one to tell him you changed your mind?"

"No." I poked him in the chest. "You are. You're the one who started this."

“And you went along with it.”

“Because I didn’t think it would go this far!” I whisper-yelled.

“So do it,” he said, his expression lit with challenge. “Back down. Throw in the towel and admit defeat.”

I took a step back, suspicion worming through me. Was that what he wanted? Away out of this without having to be the one to do it? Or was this just another game? An attempt to see how far he could push me before I broke?

My spine went rigid with stubborn refusal. Suddenly, all of our bickering, all of our microaggressions and fights felt like they’d led up to this moment. I’d caved too many times, and even after our truce, he still made all the rules, all the decisions, controlled almost every aspect of our interactions. Sure, I pushed back where I could, but Theo always got what he wanted in the end.

Well, not this fucking time. Here, we had an audience, making it impossible for him to coerce or intimidate me. So yes, I *would* go along with it, for as long as I had to, because no way in hell was I backing down first.

I heard the sound of a doorknob turning and launched myself into Theo’s arms. He automatically wrapped them around my waist, his eyes wide as I grabbed his face and hauled his lips down, mashing our mouths together for the barest of moments before pulling away and pretending to be breathless. “Getting started without me?” AJ said.

I sent Theo an evil grin before twisting in his arms. “Can you blame us?” AJ shook his head. “No.”

I leaned against Theo’s chest and—holy shit. His dick. Fully aroused. Pressing into my lower back. How long had he been hard?

“Come here,” Theo said, his tone gaining a husky edge as he extended a hand toward AJ. “I want to see your mouth on hers.”

Cool, cool, cool. This was fine. I could totally make out with AJ in front of Theo.

AJ strode toward us, his steps sure, just as handsome as I remembered: my height, trim but muscular, with an expressive face and beautifully curly hair. His skin was tanned to a light bronze, evidence of the recent vacation he'd been telling me about by the pool before Theo interrupted us.

AJ and I had been on-again-off-again throughout our teen years and into young adulthood, not because we'd had a tumultuous relationship, but because we'd always gotten along so well that whenever neither of us was seeing anyone (and sometimes even if we were) we'd wind up together at the end of a party, talking all night, before it turned into something else.

He was one of the few decent people in this world, which was wild considering his family had more wealth than some nations. Catching up after all this time had been . . . nice. Even when he'd gently chided me for cutting him off, like I had everyone else, after the car accident. I'd apologized, and he'd graciously accepted like the gentleman he was, asking how I'd been, admiring all my new tattoos and wanting to see more examples of my work. In that moment, I realized how much I'd missed him. He stepped into me without hesitation, wrapping his arms around my waist and skirting his hands into the open back of my dress. The smile he sent Theo over my shoulder was lopsided and full of promise as he leaned in to kiss my neck, trapping Theo's arms between us. It was easier to relax into his embrace than I anticipated, but then, I'd slept with AJ more times than I could count. Though it had been a while, my body still recognized the softness of his lips, the feel of his fingers stroking my skin.

Warmth pooled in my belly at the expectation of pleasure. AJ was unselfish in bed, insisting on making me come at least twice before he allowed himself to, and I wanted that right now. Because Theo was correct about one thing: It *had* been too long since I'd done this with someone, especially someone I liked and respected. Maybe after Theo threw in the towel, I could lock him out of the room, and AJ and I could finish what we

were starting.

One of Theo's arms slipped free, and I thought surely this was the moment he would put his foot down, but instead, he swept my hair aside, out of AJ's way. Hoping to call his bluff, I shifted my hips backward, right into his straining erection.

Come on, I thought, brushing my ass back and forth over his cock. *It's me. The woman you hate. You don't really want to do this, do you?*

In answer, he grabbed my waist and ground into me, reminding *me* who *he* was. The man I hated, who was now leaning down and—*kissing the other side of my neck* .

"Mmm," I purred, even as I fought back a wave of panic. "That feels so good."

The horrifying truth was that it actually did.

"Do you know about the spot right behind her ear?" Theo mumbled into my skin, his lips moving upward.

"I do," AJ said.

Wait a second. How did *Theo* know about it?

My thoughts flashed back to that moment he and I stood together against his car outside my parents' house. The way my body had betrayed me by shuddering when his lips brushed over the area.

Goddamn it, the man really was savant-level good at reading people. One of his big hands started to slide upward toward my breasts.

Was I actually going to let this man grope me?

Yas, betch! my slutty alter ego answered.

Or so I tried to tell myself. But the ugly truth was . . . I didn't have one. That stupid voice was me, not some weird, fragmented personality. It was the part of me I didn't want to admit was still there. The part of me that liked dangerous things. Craved the thrill of them. Was desperate to turn my brain off, stop overthinking for once, and just *feel* .

I'd been fighting it since the night Theo came sauntering into my life, worried that if I set that part of myself free, I might risk turning back into the person I used to be, but . . . what if I was wrong? What if it was okay to be a *little* reckless every now and then? I had to be so strict about every piece of food I ate, all the liquids I drank. I was religious about taking my meds, constantly monitored my stress and anxiety because I was so afraid that if they got out of control, they would trigger a flare.

And I was tired of it.

So *goddamn* exhausted.

For once, I wanted to pretend nothing had changed. That nothing bad had ever happened and nothing ever would. That I was still young, still healthy. That this was just like any other party, and AJ and I had been lucky enough to find a willing third to join us.

And maybe that was selfish, and wrong, but it didn't change the fact that I was desperate for someone to take this pain away and make me feel good for a little while.

So, yeah, I was doing this, and not just to win some stupid mind game with Theo, but because I wanted to, plain and simple. I wanted to strip off my dress. Touch someone, let them touch me, *see me*, see how much this fucking illness had stripped from my body and tell me they still wanted me anyway.

I closed my eyes, fighting back a wave of tears, and reached between the men to pull my dress up. I only managed to heft it halfway before it caught on Theo's hands. In a move that surprised me, he gathered the hem and pulled it the rest of the way off, stepping back so I could lift my arms

overhead.

AJ's gaze drank me in hungrily, no sign of hesitation or worry over how skinny I'd gotten, only lust, open and honest for me to see. I framed his face with my hands, smiling in silent thanks, and started to pull him in.

"Oh, wait," he said, taking something from his jacket pocket. With a brandish, he produced a makeup remover towelette. "For your lipstick," he said. Then he grinned, glancing behind me at Theo. "Unless you don't care?"

Theo let out a low rumble of amusement, close enough that I felt his breath rush down my back. "The last time we didn't take it off, it looked like a depressed clown painted our faces."

AJ chuckled, focusing back on me. "Here," he said, tilting my face toward the light. His eyes dropped to my mouth, and he started wiping my lips with gentle strokes. "Do you want him to remove those or do it yourself?" he said, tipping his head toward the pasties covering my nipples.

"I'll do it," Theo said.

I nearly clapped my hands over my boobs in self-defense. Because there was no way he'd be gentle about it. Knowing him, he'd probably rip them off like Band-Aids.

"I can," I assured him, starting to blindly reach for them while AJ finished

wiping my mouth.

Theo batted my hands aside, and then his fingers found the edge of the right pastie. I braced myself, and he paused there, drawing out my terror like the sadist he was. But then blond hair appeared in my periphery, and I felt him drop a kiss to my shoulder, his other hand spanning my ribs, warm and large, before snaking across my stomach and pulling me into him. I hated to admit it, but we fit each other perfectly, his big thighs framing mine, body forming a cage around me, like he could use his size to protect me from the

world. Too bad he was the one I needed saving from.

“Relax,” he said, kissing his way toward my neck. “I’ll be gentle.”

AJ tossed the makeup remover over his shoulder. “Unless you don’t want him to be.”

“Don’t give him ideas,” I said, curling my fingers into AJ’s jacket and hauling him forward.

Our mouths met, lips parting immediately to welcome each other in. I was so distracted by the kiss that I barely felt the tug on my breast as Theo peeled the pastie off. I *did* feel him strum his fingers over my nipple ring right after, and, *fuck*, it felt good. A pull came from my other breast, and then my chest was fully bared, Theo’s huge hands cupping and kneading me, his fingers bumping over both nipples in tandem.

Need punched into me, and I clenched my thighs together to keep from squirming. The rush of endorphins and happy hormones coursing through my body was starting to take the edge off my pain, and I wanted *more* .

With a gasp, I broke the kiss. “You have too many clothes on.”

I turned us, pressing AJ back into Theo, sure this was the moment my blackmailer would balk, but when I lifted my gaze to his, it was to see the look of challenge gone, replaced by something else entirely. Something hot, hungry, his blue eyes dark, with a carnal gleam in them that told me he had no intention of stopping either.

To have him looking at me like that . . .

My face heated. Lust curled in my core.

And then I remembered how good Theo was at reading people, and I dropped my gaze back to AJ before he could see too much. I pushed AJ’s jacket wide. Theo snagged the lapels, tugging it down his arms, and AJ shrugged out of it. Theo tossed the garment onto the same chair he’d draped

my dress over. Then his lips were on AJ's neck, his hands at his shirt, unbuttoning it. I dropped my fingers to AJ's belt, sliding it free. His slacks

framed his straining cock, and I paused to stroke a palm down it.

"God, Stel," he breathed, reaching out to draw me in for another kiss, this one deeper, slower, Theo's hands moving between us as he continued unbuttoning AJ's shirt.

I made the mistake of opening my eyes as we shifted angles, and blue filled my vision. Theo was staring at me from an inch away. His eyes narrowed, annoyed, and he flicked them to the right in a clear command of *This is my side, go back to where you came from.*

I glared but switched angles again, and we kept AJ between us like a barrier, barely touching each other as we finished stripping our companion out of his clothes.

Saliva pooled in my mouth as I stared down at AJ's cock, not too big, not too small, the head full and proud, the shaft bare and soft, not a vein in sight. I'd once told him that someone should photograph it, and while he'd laughed, I'd only been half joking. Surely some anatomy textbook needed an example of what a perfectly formed dick looked like?

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had one in my mouth, and not even Theo's presence was enough to stop me from dropping to my knees right there on the carpet and laving my tongue over the head of it.

"Fuck," AJ groaned, relaxing backward into Theo, one hand framing my face, the other reaching behind him, searching for what I already knew was a much larger and more cumbersome piece of equipment.

All the luck to him. I was happy where I was, twirling my tongue around the entire circumference of his head as I relearned the feel of him. He was just as soft as I remembered, just as responsive, his dick twitching in my grasp as I lifted my hand to his shaft and wrapped my fingers around it.

I was just starting to close my eyes and really let myself enjoy what I was doing when motion had me popping them back open. Theo's hand, stroking down AJ's stomach to slide past my fingers and cup his balls. And then his other freakishly large hand wrapped around the back of my head, threading his fingers into my hair and tugging me backward hard enough that I saw stars.

Warmth pooled between my legs. My pulse stuttered.

With a yank, Theo had me moving forward again, and, oh, no, I shouldn't like this as much as I did—him controlling me like a bobble head. But from the way my pussy clenched, there was no denying the truth.

I pulled my hand from AJ's shaft and braced it on his thigh, opening my

mouth wider, relaxing my throat so he could glide in and out of it with every thrust. A quick glance showed AJ working the arm he'd slipped behind his back, biceps flexing. Was AJ fondling Theo through his suit pants? Or had he managed to free that massive cock while I'd been busy worshipping his?

I wanted to know, had a morbid curiosity to see Theo's dick. So I'd be able to identify every part of him when the eventual day came that he pushed someone too far and they chopped him up into little pieces. *Yup, that's his schlong, all right*, I'd tell the coroner.

"Enough," AJ said, sliding out of my mouth and stumbling toward the bed, leaving me kneeling there on the floor, Theo's massive, *girthy* cock barely a foot away from my face. My lips parted even more, out of surprise, I tried to tell myself, but really, I was just trying to figure out if it would even *fit.*
"It would," Theo rumbled.

I should have snapped out of it, gotten to my feet, but I just sat there, frozen, *staring at it*, my scalp starting to burn from how tightly he held me. Suddenly, he let go, and it was only when I swayed forward that I realized he'd actually been holding me back.

Get it together, I told myself, rising on shaking legs as Theo turned away. He shrugged out of his jacket, shoulders straining the fabric of the shirt

underneath.

“Goddamn, Stel,” AJ said from the bed. He sat reclined against the pillows, idly stroking himself as he watched my “boyfriend” disrobe. “Where do you find such beautiful men?”

“This one followed me home like a stray.”

Theo turned, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal the smooth, flawless chest I remembered from our first meeting. He sent me a cocky look and then glanced toward AJ. “Don’t let her fool you. She climbed into my lap within ten minutes of us meeting.”

“Can you blame her?” AJ said. “I mean, have you seen yourself?”

Theo’s expression was insolent as his eyes came back to mine. He would be insufferable now.

“I think you’re the only person I’ve ever met who’s almost as pretty as she is,” AJ added, and now it was my turn to be smug.

“*Almost,*” I mouthed at Theo.

Instead of firing some silent insult back at me, he drank me in from head to toe as the last of his buttons slid free. I braced myself for some horrible

comment. For him to say he preferred partners with some meat on their bones—a common refrain from my past partners—but his eyes heated as they rose back to mine.

“No one’s as pretty as Stella.”

I nearly fell over dead.

His shirt fluttered to the floor, his pants and boxers following soon after, and then he was standing there, fully naked, and I didn't know where to look. *Anywhere else,* would have been ideal, but I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away. He was a work of art. Raw masculinity. Brutal power. The Renaissance masters would have wept to see him. I could fill notepads with sketches of his nude form, whole pages taken up by the swell of his pecs, the hollow at the base of his throat, the deep V of his hip flexors.

He wrapped his fingers around the base of his cock and squeezed, and I jerked my head up to find his eyes boring into mine.

Look away, I begged myself, but I was like a deer trapped in headlights. Did Theo really want this? Had I been right all those weeks ago, and some part of him enjoyed our constant bickering and barbed insults?

Oh, no. *Did I?*

Mentally, I shook myself. The answer was no, definitely not. Half the time I lashed out, I felt like a kitten facing down a Doberman, trying to appear bigger and tougher than I was. The other times, my goal was to keep Theo from getting the upper hand. And okay, fine, maybe like one percent of the time, I was trying to make him laugh, but that had more to do with my own sick need to be funny than it did anything else.

Theo looked me over, slowly, his hand working his cock, eyes dark with some hidden emotion I couldn't interpret. It made me wonder if I was reading too much into things. Was he secretly laughing at me, and this was all just for show? He could be such a convincing actor that it was impossible to tell how he really felt.

I faced the bed and the much simpler sight of AJ sprawled atop the covers. He reached out and lowered the dimmer on a switch, and the room was dropped into warm shadows, not too dark to see, just bright enough to be intimate and inviting.

I approached the right side of the bed, Theo, the left, and we paused for one last staring match.

Leave, I told him with my eyes.

You leave, he shot back.

In answer, I climbed onto the bed beside AJ.

The other side of the mattress bowed beneath Theo's weight as he copied me.

This is your last chance, I thought at him, shifting lower and sliding into AJ's waiting arms.

If you're staying, I'm staying, he seemed to say, moving into place on AJ's other side and dropping a kiss to his shoulder, eyes smoldering at me out of the shadows.

There was no turning back.

This was going to happen.

I was about to have a threesome with a man I absolutely *hated.*

21

Tyler

STELLA STILL HAD HER THONG on, and it was bugging the shit out of me. Because quid pro quo. AJ and I were naked, so she should be, too.

It was only fair.

She turned toward the man between us, mirroring me, kissing his other shoulder as her eyes blazed with challenge. There was no fucking way I was backing down, and I could tell from the stubborn look on Stella's face that she wouldn't either.

I grabbed AJ's chin, leaning him my way. His gaze immediately dropped to my mouth, tongue peeking out to wet his full lower lip. Fuck, he was hot. I'd thought so since I'd first clapped eyes on him. Tousled curls, sun-darkened skin, bright green eyes.

He closed the distance between us, wrapping a hand around the back of my head and pulling me in. Our lips met. I parted mine, and he followed my lead, and then my tongue was in his mouth, working against his. I rose onto an elbow and deepened the kiss, opening my eyes to throw Stella a taunting look, but I found her staring at me and AJ with the first unguarded expression I'd ever seen on her face.

Need. Lust. Anticipation.

My dick stiffened against AJ's thigh. Stella *wanted* this. And now that I knew it, there was no way I'd let her pretend otherwise. No more using AJ like a shield, no more silently daring each other to back down. If we were going to do it, we were going to fucking do it. Full send.

I broke the kiss, reached over AJ, and hauled her between us. She let out a surprised squeak that had him chuckling, and then an even louder gasp when I grabbed the whisper-thin strap of her silk thong and tore it off her. My eyes dropped to the neatly trimmed patch of hair between her legs. On each side was a tiny black heart. Who the fuck had gotten close enough to tattoo her there? And why did I suddenly feel like killing them for it? Lifting my eyes to AJ's, I pressed Stella's thong against my nose, taking a deep breath full of her scent. Sweet. Musky. Just as fucking luscious as I'd feared. Wetness pressed against my lips. Unable to stop myself, I parted

them and licked the crotch of the fabric, the flavor of her exploding over my tongue.

"Fuck," AJ breathed, pupils blown wide as he watched me.

"She's wet for us," I told him.

"Is that true, Stel?" He spooned her while facing me, stroking a hand down

her stomach. My eyes latched onto the movement, watching with bated breath as he dipped his fingers between her legs. Stella let out a whimper, clenching her thighs around him. “Soaked,” he confirmed.

The smile spreading over my face felt triumphant as I fixated on her small, pert breasts and the nipple rings catching the light. I reached out and gently tugged one, and Stella squirmed onto AJ’s hand.

“How many fingers do you have inside her?” I asked.

“Just one,” he said. “She’s so tight.”

“She can take another,” I told him.

His expression turned wolfish, and I knew exactly when he slipped a second finger into her pussy because they both moaned. Stella’s cheeks turned pink, bottom lip pinched between her teeth as she stared over my shoulder.

Uh-uh. She wasn’t about to get away with that.

I gripped her chin. “Look at me.”

Her eyelids fluttered, another fractured moan slipping through her lips before she met my gaze. Beneath the lust, I saw something else. Something dark, angry. Like she hated that she wanted me. Like she wanted to punish me for it.

Okay. Maybe I did have a little brat in me after all, because the thought of Stella taking out all that pent-up aggression on my body had the head of my cock weeping.

AJ’s arm moved, his hand pumping between her legs, the veins on his forearm starting to pop. “Your girlfriend feels so good,” he told me, and a possessive thrill shot through me to hear the words. “So wet. So warm. Do you want another taste?”

Slick sounds hit my ears as he started to work her faster. The musky smell

of sex filled the air.

“Yes,” I practically growled.

He pulled his hand free with a suctioning noise that had no business being so hot, and lifted it toward me in offering. I parted my lips, saliva pooling in my mouth at the thought of cleaning her off his fingers, but Stella grabbed

his wrist out of the air.

“Bad boys don’t get rewards,” she said, and then sucked his fingers down to the bottom knuckle, her eyes locked on mine.

Fuuuck. The sight made my balls tighten. Made me want to do something else to piss her off just to see what she’d do next.

AJ groaned, dropping his forehead to her shoulder as she hollowed her cheeks and cleaned every last drop of herself off him. And then she opened her lips with a pop and slid his fingers out, excruciatingly slow, maintaining eye contact as her tongue swirled between his fingers. The sight had all the blood rushing from my head straight to my cock, so fast it made me dizzy. AJ’s eyes turned liquid in the dim light. The look he sent me was both apologetic and imploring. “I want to fuck your girlfriend.”

“I want you to fuck my girlfriend.” The words were out before I could stop them.

Stella raked her nails over my chest. “While my boyfriend shoves his fat cock down my throat.”

My heart skittered to a stop. She didn’t really mean that, did she?

Nah, she couldn’t. This was just her playing her last card, taking things to the point of no return and forcing me to back down. Only, I didn’t want to. And the longer I searched Stella’s eyes, the more convinced I became that she didn’t want to, either.

Everything else between us was fucked up, complicated as hell, but this lust? This was the one simple truth between us, and it could no longer be denied.

She lifted her palm, holding it in front of my mouth. “Spit on it.”

I complied instantly, dick twitching from both the command in her tone and the action itself. She slid her hand behind her, using my spit as lube on AJ’s cock. He met my eyes over her shoulder, his teeth dimpling his bottom lip, and I leaned forward and captured his mouth in another kiss, pinning Stella between us.

He reached forward and wrapped his fingers around my dick for the second time, grip strong and sure as he immediately started working me, not needing any lube because of how much cum I was already leaking.

I nudged Stella’s legs apart and slid my knee to the apex of her thighs, giving her friction where she needed it. Wet warmth immediately coated my skin, telling me just how turned on she was, just how badly she wanted this. My hands rose to her tits, so small but so fucking perfectly formed, and I

rolled my fingers around her nipples, barely bumping the rings, teasing her because I couldn’t help myself.

AJ broke our kiss, and Stella tilted her head to welcome him next, their mouths melding together right in front of me as she worked him, and he worked me, his hand choking my cock, relaxing, stroking, squeezing again. I ground my leg higher, moving it in a steady motion that Stella met with shuddering thrusts of her own. I tugged both nipple rings at once, and then she was gasping, breaking the kiss, head falling against the pillows as she ground onto me. Her cheeks flushed, and her lips popped open. I grabbed her chin and shoved my thumb into her mouth to give her something to suck on. Her tongue wrapped around my finger while AJ pumped my cock, and oh, fuck—

“I’m close,” I warned.

So was Stella, if her muffled moans were anything to go by.

“Her first,” AJ said.

His grip on me loosened, and I could tell from the way he shunted his hips backward that he’d pulled out of her hand. I kept my knee right where Stella needed it, kept teasing her nipples while AJ nuzzled the sensitive spot behind her ear with his nose. He said something I didn’t catch, low and encouraging, before parting his lips and stroking his tongue up her neck, just once, before fastening his mouth over her and sucking.

Stella moaned around my finger, breathing hard through her nose, eyes squeezed shut as she moved against me. A shudder wracked her body, her thighs clamped tight, and then she was coming, her hips losing their rhythm, her pussy soaking my leg.

I brought her down gently afterward, easing my thumb from her mouth. The second she could speak, her eyes flashed open, and she glanced behind her. “Put a condom on. I want to be speared between you.”

Jesus Christ.

AJ groaned, rolling away from her toward a nightstand.

Stella’s eyes roamed over me, slowly, like she was memorizing every inch of my skin. Still a little out of breath from coming, she rose to all fours, mouth tantalizingly close, ass presented to AJ like a present. Her hair brushed my chest as she shifted closer, and then I felt her lips ghost my ear before she whispered, “Gag me like you threatened.”

My cock spasmed, another bead of precum leaking from the tip. Tonight was teaching me things about myself I’d been unaware of before. The fact

that I didn’t hate being ordered around in the bedroom. The fact that I might not be as vanilla as I’d always believed. This was my first threesome, and if it was anything to go by, it would *not* be my last. The hunger rising inside me couldn’t be satiated from this one encounter alone. No, I wanted *more* .

AJ sprawled out on the bed while Stella rode his face and I sucked him off. Or him between us, AJ fucking into Stella while I fucked into him. Oh, god. Stella between him and I, pinned on both our cocks, stuffed so full she couldn't move.

I rose to my knees, looming over her as AJ rolled a condom on. Reaching out, I tapped her upper lip, right beside her Monroe piercing. My dick was wide enough that she'd really have to stretch around me, and the backing of it might cut her gums. "This needs to come out, or I'll end up hurting you." Her eyes were liquid pools of night as she stared up at me. "What if I want you to?"

Fuck, she shouldn't say things like that to me. Didn't know how much I'd *longed* to hurt her. That urge had dulled recently, but I wasn't a good enough man to turn her down if she was offering.

Behind her, AJ rose to his knees on the bed, his flawless cock, now covered by a condom, jutting from a dark thatch of hair, his body golden in the lambent light. Saliva pooled in my mouth at the sight. He'd called Stella and me beautiful, but I'd watched him turn heads at every party we'd attended together, and I knew from the looks on people's faces that it was less about how much he was worth and more about that pretty face of his was.

He stroked a hand up Stella's back, and she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, practically purring. Then his fingers were wrapping in her long hair, and he was dragging her head back, tilting her mouth at the perfect angle to take my cock.

Our eyes met above her.

"At the same time?" he said.

I nodded, unable to speak, desperate to follow through on my previous threat and stuff her so full of me she couldn't speak.

Her mouth popped open. I grabbed my shaft and used the head of my dick

to paint her lips with precum. In a flash, her tongue darted out, tasting me, and she closed her eyes and hummed with pleasure. Behind her, AJ angled his own cock lower, hips barely pressing forward, his eyes staring straight between the two of them. Fuck, what I would give for a mirror on the

ceiling to see what he did.

“Goddamn, you’re tight, Stella,” he said, brows drawing together in concentration.

She couldn’t answer him, because I’d shifted my hips forward just enough to feed the head of my dick into her mouth, and she was too busy circling her tongue around it.

“Here,” AJ said, indicating her hair.

I took it from him, twirling my hand once to wrap it around my wrist and pull her head back even farther, elongating that pretty neck, straightening her esophagus to make it easier for me to slide into it.

AJ gripped both of her hips, working his way deeper, and the sight nearly undid me. His abs contracted, forearms flexed, jaw clenched like he was barely holding back the urge to pound into her pussy. The thought that even after coming as hard as she had, Stella was still tight enough that she needed to be coaxed made my pulse pound. Because now all I could think about was how it might feel fucking into her before she was ready to take me. Not that I hadn’t *already* imagined it.

I dropped my gaze back to her mouth. I wasn’t the gentleman that AJ was, and Stella had made it damn clear what she wanted from me, so I was going to give it to her.

Fisting her hair, I held her steady, dropping my other hand to my shaft and lowering it before thrusting forward, shoving my cock to the back of her throat. She choked, and I eased off, but not much.

“Suck,” I told her.

She did what I said, hollowing her cheeks, wet heat tightening around me, a pulling motion easing my next thrust forward. Another peek up at AJ showed him watching me with a hungry look on his face. We met each other's eyes and then thrust our hips forward at the same time.

Stella made a sound torn between a moan and a cough, but she wasn't giving me any indicator that she needed a break, so I didn't give her one. Instead I thrust again, harder, deeper, forcing the head of my dick into her throat. It was such a tight squeeze that I risked actually choking her, so I slid back out. Her nostrils flared as she sucked in a breath. It was all the reprieve I'd give her. My next thrust was deeper, and she choked again, tears starting to leak from her eyes. The sight was mesmerizing.

"God, I missed this pussy," AJ said, matching my rhythm, pushing into her with smooth, slow strokes.

Stella made a keening noise that vibrated through my dick, and then she was balancing on one arm, her other hand shoved between her legs as she played with her clit. Her back arched, angling her hips to take AJ deeper. He picked up speed, and so did I, working her harder, fucking into her throat like AJ was fucking into her cunt.

Her face reddened, eyes squeezed shut, mascara leaking down her cheeks as she alternated between moaning and choking and gagging. I watched my cock piston in and out of her swelling lips, knowing her throat would hurt after this, loving the fact that I was finally getting my chance to ruin her like I'd wanted to since that very first night in the tattoo parlor.

I dropped my free hand to my balls, tugging and rolling them, my gaze shifting between what I was doing to Stella, and what AJ was.

"I'm gonna come," he said. "Stella, baby, you're going to make me come so fucking hard."

He frowned, face flushing, chest heaving, eyes laser focused on where he pounded into her. I heard his balls slapping against her skin, the sucking

sounds of my dick thrusting in and out of her mouth, the even wetter sounds coming from her pussy, and oh, god, I was going to come, too.

Pressure built at the base of my spine. My dick stiffened, growing even larger inside her. I let go of my balls and grabbed the back of her head, thrusting deep, stars exploding across my vision as I came. Stella gagged and swallowed, the feel of her throat contracting around me prolonging my release. Cum leaked from the seal of her lips, and tears streaked down her cheeks, even as a low moan hit my ears. She looked completely wrecked as I eased out of her, collapsing backward, shaking from how hard I'd come. "Fuck me harder," she begged, her voice ragged and raw.

Her eyes flashed open, red from what I'd done to her, and then she clamped her hand onto my thigh to brace herself up, nails biting deep as she thrust backward onto AJ's cock. From this angle, I could see everything. Her tits swaying, her other hand working furiously between her legs, AJ's thighs bunching as he slammed into her.

"Yes, oh, god, yes," she panted, her eyes clenching shut, lips lifting into a blissed-out smile, a fresh wave of pink darkening her delicate skin.

"Stella! Fuck!" AJ yelled.

They came, together, and I'd never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

Stella collapsed forward onto me afterward, her chest heaving, skin

clammy with sweat. I brushed her tangled hair from her face and wrapped my arms around her, whispering words of affirmation in her ear, telling her how well she'd taken me, how beautiful she'd looked gagging on my cock. AJ dropped the condom in the trash bin next to the bed and cozied up on her other side. She reached back to draw him closer. His arms slid over her waist and then mine, clasping behind my back, pulling us all together.

I lifted my eyes to the ceiling, my head spinning.

What the fuck had we just done?

And why was I so desperate to do it again?

22

Tyler

MY PHONE CHIMED WITH A notification.

“Just tell me who it is, and I’ll stop bugging you,” Josh said from beside me on the couch. It was a Sunday, and he’d guilted me into coming over to his place to play video games because he “never saw me” now that we didn’t live together anymore. Which I’d pointed out was his fault, since he was the one who’d gone and gotten engaged.

To Aly. Awoman I used to fuck.

Not awkward at all.

I glanced sideways to see him looking at my phone instead of the TV. His skin was tanned to a deep olive from the summer sun, and he’d grown his dark hair out just enough that you could see the slight curl in it. It was warm today, and he was wearing a pair of loose shorts and a muscle tank that left his tattoos on display. Unlike Stella’s random assortment, his blended seamlessly together, Gothic monstrosities crawling up his arms like demons escaping hell. As much as his personality skewed toward goofball, he could really be a morose motherfucker when he put his mind to it.

“Behind you,” I warned.

Too late. Blood splatters filled his side of the split screen as an enemy soldier lit him up. He yelled and ducked sideways, both onscreen and beside me, bumping his shoulder into mine and almost knocking the controller out of my hands.

Maud, their kitten, who’d been asleep on the back of the couch, leapt up and raced toward a nearby cat tree for safety, where her older, grouchier

brother, Fred, sat watching me with half-slitted eyes. That little asshole and I had never gotten along.

Josh threw his controller onto the coffee table. “Welp. I’m dead.” He glanced toward my phone again.

Then lunged.

I shot forward to intercept him, but he swiped it off the table and ran away like the goddamn man-child he was.

I raced after him because I’d done too much fucking work covering my

tracks for him to find out that I’d essentially been lying to him for two years. If he saw some shady message on my phone, he would never let it go, and since he was a world-class hacker, there would be no way to stop him once he started digging. I knew how obsessive he could be; it would only take a day or two for him to uncover my entire illegal operation, and then our friendship would really be on the line.

“Give it back!” I yelled.

Josh skirted an armchair and raced toward the rear of the house, and fuck, he was fast. Had he been doing more cardio lately?

I ran after him, onto their screened-in catio. He vaulted over Aly, who’d been sprawled on a lounge chair, reading. She was nearly as tall as Stella, but muscular, with pale olive skin, long brown hair, and an Italian nose. “Defend my honor!” Josh said, hiding behind her.

“He stole my phone,” I explained when she shot me a confused look.

She swiveled to Josh, who was doing nothing to hide the fact that he was trying to break into the device. “Babe. Boundaries.” She snatched it out of his hand and tossed it back to me, and my shoulders slumped in relief. Jesus Christ, that was close.

“Who’s Stella?” Josh asked in a singsong tone.

Shit.

Aly’s head turned my way, eyes wide, as nosy as her fiancé.

“No one,” I bit out.

“Ooh,” they chorused in the same obnoxious tone.

I glanced down to see that Stella had texted, telling me what time to pick her up for tonight’s party. Two weeks had passed since our night with AJ. We’d gone to four more events since, our war of words escalating, our flirtations gaining a dangerous edge, the tension building to a breaking point because the knowledge, the *memories* of what we’d done were driving us both crazy.

I knew I wasn’t the only one who felt it. I saw the way she stared at me when she thought I wasn’t looking, felt the way she trembled whenever one of us backed each other against a wall—something that happened with increasing frequency.

Part of the problem was that we hadn’t spoken about that night, hadn’t even acknowledged it. I’d tried to bring it up once (in a shitty way, if I was being honest with myself) and Stella had said *Don’t* with so much rancor that for once, I’d backed down.

What a mistake that threesome had been, not just because it had made things even more awkward and tense, but because every time I closed my goddamn eyes, I saw AJ pounding into Stella from behind, his hands on her hips, his focus fixed on where I fucked into her pretty little mouth.

That night had altered my brain chemistry, imprinted upon my skin like an invisible tattoo. How the hell did you come back from that? How could you act normal around someone after having the most incredible sex of your life with them?

“Tyler’s got a girlfriend,” Josh sang.

“She is *not* my girlfriend,” I said, striding into the house.

I went straight to the fridge, pulling it open to look for a beer. Cold air rushed over me, and I closed my eyes and begged my dick to behave. It was hard again, had been practically nonstop since the night of the threesome, and jerking off only provided temporary relief. I needed something more to slake this thirst. Stella, bent over a bed as I fucked into her, AJ watching us from a nearby chair. Or better yet, my face shoved between her thighs while my tongue worked her cunt and my fingers plied those pretty little nipples. *Stop*, I begged myself, resting my head against the closed freezer. Thoughts like that weren’t helping me right now.

You hate her, I told myself, but the words felt hollow. What reason did I have left to hate her? She was draining her inheritance to pay for a crime she didn’t even commit. She was actively helping me hunt down people who deserved to be punished. And it wasn’t like I could claim she was some elitist snob. Reserved, standoffish, downright rude at times? Sure, but then I’d probably earned that type of treatment.

So what did that leave? Me hating her just for the circumstances of her birth? Because she’d grown up with everything while I had nothing? That didn’t feel right. Not anymore.

“Fine. *She* hates *you*,” I said, because that much was still certain. Ongoing blackmail was pretty hard to forgive, and it wasn’t like I’d done myself any favors with my “winning” personality. Fuck, most of the time I was around Stella, I turned into the worst version of myself, punishing her for my father’s sins because I couldn’t take it out on him.

Yet.

Well, that would all change tomorrow night. If everything went to plan, it was the last party we would ever have to attend together.

“Hey,” Josh said from behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder to see him leaning against the doorjamb, looking contrite.

“Sorry for taking your phone.”

“And what else?” Aly called from the catio.

Josh winced. “And for trying to hack into it.” He snuck a look behind him and then hurried forward, dropping his voice like he didn’t want his fiancée to overhear what he was about to say next. “I just worry about you. I feel like as soon as I moved out, you got distant. Are you sure you’re really okay with me and Aly?”

I sighed. “Dude. Aly and I were never serious. Don’t worry; I’m not holding some torch for her.”

He eyed me like he wasn’t quite convinced.

“You really think I didn’t recognize your tattoos?” I asked.

Josh stiffened, knowing exactly what I was talking about without me needing to say more. Seven months ago, Aly had sent me a screenshot of a thirst trap, the man shirtless, covered in fake blood and wearing a mask, and asked me if I’d consider wearing one for her the next time we hooked up. Which was wild since she’d been ghosting me for two months (I only later found out that she hadn’t meant to, just that her job as an ER nurse had consumed her life).

That screenshot was from Josh’s “super-secret” MaskTok account that he didn’t think I knew about. Since the two of them reminded me of each other —both chronically online, unserious, a little antisocial and fucking morbid —I’d decided to show Josh the text, hoping he’d reach out to her. Instead, he’d stalked her, because he couldn’t help himself, but it turned out she was into it, and now they were insufferably in love.

I patted Josh’s shoulder. “Bro, I set you two up.”

“I knew it!” Aly said, popping her head around the doorjamb from where she’d clearly been eavesdropping. “That night in your apartment when you thanked me for taking him off your hands. You looked so goddamn smug __”

“That’s just his face,” Josh said.

I punched his shoulder.

Aly joined us in the kitchen. “And I *knew* you must have recognized his tattoos.” She wheeled on Josh. “I *told* you.”

He grinned, looking sheepish. “Can you blame me for hoping he hadn’t? The optics of my account aren’t great.”

“What do you mean?” I said. “The son of a notorious serial killer dresses up like something out of a slasher movie and dry-humps the air to the dulcet tones of Sleep Token? I don’t see anything troubling about that at all.” My tone was bone-dry.

Josh opened his mouth.

Aly got there first. “He’s trying to distract you away from Stella.” Goddamn it.

“Seriously, dude,” Josh said. “Who is she?”

“No one.”

“She’s got to be *someone* for you to be deflecting this hard.”

I shrugged. “Fine. She’s someone.”

“Do you . . . *like her,* like her?” he pressed.

I grimaced. “What are you, in middle school?”

“Well, excuse me,” Josh said. “You just seem awfully touchy about her, and I’m trying to be respectful of your delicate sensibilities.”

“You are the most annoying person I know. Why are we even friends?”

He tried to put me in a headlock. I sidestepped him. He attempted to grab me, but I blocked him, and now it was my turn to go racing through the house, leaping over Fred when he jumped out from behind the couch, all four paws extended, a murderous gleam in his beady little eyes—proof that he was as psychotic as his parents.

I snagged my keys off the coffee table as I passed. “Thanks for lunch!” “Get back here, you coward!” Josh roared.

I ran out the front door toward my car, laughing when I got in, feeling lighter than I had in weeks. Shit, I really should start hanging out with him more. Even if his cat *was* trying to kill me.

■ ■ ■

Every summer, Stella’s parents and Richard threw an annual soiree for their employees. This year it was being held in a museum downtown. They’d rented the whole place out for the night and paid some of the docents to work overtime, providing tours for the company’s employees.

I was running behind schedule thanks to a shit show of a day, and had asked Stella to meet me there. Everything always went wrong in the week leading up to game night, which was part of why I never sent out invites until an hour before showtime.

I’d spent most of this morning trying to problem-solve with my

electrician, who was worried about how much power we planned to pull, and then the afternoon dealing with the plumber, who was having a hard time rerouting a water pipe. On top of that, my usual security team wasn’t available, so I’d had to call Junior and ask who he recommended. He gave

me the name of a merc unit, and told me to tell them he'd sent me.

All this made me later than I'd planned, and by the time I arrived at the museum, the party was in full swing.

Here, I texted Stella as I climbed out of my car.

I'm waiting by the entrance, she texted back.

I figured she meant just inside it, but I found her pacing outside instead. She looked incredible. Tonight was more formal than all the other events we'd attended, the dress code calling for ball gowns and tuxedos. Her back was to me as she walked, bare like the night we'd—

Don't think about it or you'll end up greeting her dick-first, I warned myself.

The skirt of the gown flowed out behind her, layers of black chiffon overlaying a lighter gray beneath, almost like she was a ghost emerging from fog, which sounded like it should be more spooky than hot, but Stella managed to pull it off.

She turned and paced in the other direction, and I drank in the sight of her. The front of the dress rose right to her neck, the chiffon so thin that it looked transparent, but since I couldn't see her nipples (sadly), I assumed it was some sort of optical illusion—backed by fabric the color of her skin or something.

When I got closer, I noticed she'd switched out her usual silver piercings for matte black hardware to match the dress. Her makeup was more subtle tonight than usual, foundation thin enough that I glimpsed a smattering of freckles over her nose, lips coated in a simple gloss that made them look wet and ready.

"What's wrong?" I asked, because it was clear from the look on her face and the way she clutched her stomach that something was off.

Her head snapped up, like she'd been so lost in her own little world that she hadn't noticed me until I was standing right in front of her. "Maddie's here."

"What?" I bit out.

A look of betrayal swept over her face. "You told me I wouldn't have to see her again."

"And I meant it." I turned and strode toward the door, furious. That stupid little bitch.

Stella grabbed my arm and tried to tug me away. "Theo, come on. I want to leave."

I dragged her forward a few feet. "No. I warned her what would happen if she showed up at another event."

Stella tugged harder. "Calm down. You're starting to freak me out." "I am calm."

"No, you're the one with shark eyes now," she said. "And you wearing your I'm-about-to-to-ruin-someone's-life smile."

I stopped and spun toward her, my voice cajoling as I cupped my hands around her face. "Come on, let me ruin her for you."

Her eyes dropped to my lips and stayed there for a moment while she considered it.

"Say yes, Stella," I crooned, stepping into her, tilting her face toward mine. "You know you want it."

Was I even talking about Maddie anymore? Or was I was talking about the unfinished business between us, willing Stella to finally make up her mind about whether or not she was going to let me fuck her?

Her eyelids fluttered, lips parted, and she swayed toward me the slightest bit.

Ahorn blared from the street.

Stella pulled out of my grip, the lust clearing from her eyes. “We should go. Not just because of Maddie, but because there aren’t many people inside who you’d consider high rollers. Most are just regular folks. Accountants, marketing analysts, Realtors.”

Shit, this wasn’t good. I *had* to be in there, because some of those regular folks were on my guest list and just didn’t know it yet. Linda from HR. Joe from Finance. Phil’s executive assistant, Jessica. Which meant I needed to convince Stella to stay.

“Don’t try to make this about me,” I said. “We both know it’s about you letting Maddie run you out of here.”

Stella shook her head. “I can’t see her again. I don’t trust myself around her.”

“Then trust me. You won’t have to say a thing. Just give me a few minutes to get her out of here. That’s all it will take.” I bent down to look directly into her eyes. “And then in a few days, she’ll get an invitation she can’t

refuse.”

“The next game night is that soon?” Stella said.

I nodded. “Just think, if it goes well, you might never have to see me again.”

Her brows pinched the slightest bit, enough to tell me she didn’t know how to feel about that. Which shouldn’t have made a swell of hope rise inside me. After I executed my plans, Stella wouldn’t be torn; she’d go back to wanting to kill me.

I bumped my forehead against hers. “No one deserves me as their own personal demon more than Maddie does. I’m even willing to split her debt with you so you can recoup some of the money you’ve spent helping Runa.”

“What do you mean? Shouldn’t it all go toward *my* debt?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m sure it’ll only take one party to clear it, which means I can be generous with whatever Maddie racks up.”

Stella pulled back, her eyes searching mine. “Why would you do that?”
“Because it wasn’t your responsibility to pay. It was *hers*,” I snarled.

Her eyes widened, and I straightened to my full height and wiped a hand over my face, trying to fight back my fury. I *had* to get in there, and Stella needed to be at my side, because what reason did I have to be here without her?

“As much as I’d love to unleash you upon Maddie, it’s a bad idea,” Stella said. “If she landed in debt, she might run straight to her parents to make it go away, just like she did after the accident. And they’re even worse than she is. They didn’t just pay their lawyers to defend her, they paid them to destroy me. They’re the type of people who would burn the entire city down to find you, and they’d make sure everyone who ever worked with you, ever even met you, would suffer, too.”

I clenched my jaw so hard it hurt, antagonism and stubbornness vying for dominance inside me. Nothing Stella said made me any less determined to go after Maddie; if anything, it only raised the stakes. Because Maddie was who I thought Stella was. Maddie was everything that was wrong with the wealthy, and it was time she finally paid for her crimes. It was time they all did.

“Her parents won’t come after me,” I said.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Runa isn’t Maddie’s only victim, and if they fight me, I’ll

threaten to leak what I know. So, yes, they *will* pay me. And then I’ll leak it anyway, because fuck them.”

Stella’s teeth clicked shut, and I knew I had her.

“What’s Maddie wearing tonight?” I asked, taking a backward step toward the doors.

“Wait, we should talk about this more.”

I pivoted on a heel and strode inside. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing left to talk about.

Stella hurried to catch up with me. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” I said. “But if you could put together a list of her greatest fears, that’d be helpful. I’m not above filling her purse with spiders.”

“That’s horrifying.” Apause. “Make it bees. She’s allergic to them.”

I chuckled and wrapped my arm around Stella’s waist. Goddamn it, she really did use humor as a crutch. At first, it annoyed me, but now I feared I might miss it when this was all over.

“Take a right,” she said. “I saw her heading into the Jurassic period.”

I snagged two glasses of champagne from a passing server, handing one to Stella because she liked having something to do with her hands at these events. It cut down on her urge to flip people off. “Why was she even invited?”

“She wasn’t,” Stella said. “She came as someone else’s guest.”

“It’s another setup.”

“Absolutely.”

“Who’s her date, some smarmy heir?”

“No, actually. He’s the CFO of the company. I think he’s the first person from his family to graduate college. And I’ve only met him twice, but he seemed like a decent person.”

“He must have a hidden Mr. Hyde side if he’s dating her.”

“Probably chews really loud,” Stella said. “Wears moisturizing gloves to bed.” “Collects antique dolls.”

“Is secretly a *pearvert* .”

Stella laughed, a bright, infectious sound I hadn’t heard before that had me turning my head. She noticed my regard and lifted her eyes, and we slowed to a stop right there in the middle of the crowd.

Shit. I didn’t hate her at all. But I also wasn’t ready to examine how I

actually felt, so instead, I nodded behind her. “Hey, look. You match.”

She glanced over her shoulder at the nearest dinosaur. It was about six feet tall, with mottled gray-black skin and raised, bony bumps along its forehead and nose in almost the exact same places as her piercings.

Her eyes narrowed to slits as she swiveled back to me. “You’re such a dick.”

“Wait, I want to take a picture.” I pulled out my phone. “Say, ‘Twinning!’” “I hate you,” she said, striding away, and even though the comment was flippant, the words stung.

I rushed to catch up with her, sliding an arm around her waist because I couldn’t help myself, and because it might be one of my last chances. “You

know what they say about love and hate being two sides of the same coin.” “I know whoever actually believes that is an idiot.”

I dropped my voice. “Big words from the woman who screamed my name when she came.”

She made a horrified sound.

My grin felt maniacal. “Didn’t realize you’d done that, did you?” “Because I *didn’t*,” she insisted. “I said, ‘Oh, god.’”

“I thought God was the nickname you picked for me.”

“You are *so* conceited.”

“Am I?” I sent her a knowing look. “Or is it time you finally admit my self-confidence is warranted?”

She broke eye contact, her gaze sweeping the room like she was searching for a lifeline. “Oh, look! My parents. And Richard is with them.”

It felt like she’d dumped a bucket of ice water over my head. Fuck, I didn’t want to see that asshole yet.

She tugged my arm, practically dragging me across the room. We rounded a small group chatting near a stegosaurus, and there he was, standing right between Georgie and Phil, a drink in his hand and a wide smile on his face, like he didn’t have a care in the world. The sight made me want to roar like one of these fucking dinosaurs, made me want to grab the glass out of his hand and smash it over his head.

I thought it’d get easier, seeing him, but it had only gotten harder to hide my hatred.

Phil caught sight of us. “Theo,” he said, his smile warm and welcoming. “So glad you were able to make it.”

I greeted the trio, Richard stepping forward last, his hand extended.

“Nice to see you again, Theo,” he said, grinning like he meant it.

I forced myself to smile back, to slide my hand into his and not succumb to the urge to break all his fucking fingers.

Nice to see you, too, Dad. You won’t be smiling for much longer.

23

Stella

“MR. LAWSON,” THEO SAID, RELEASING Richard’s hand. “How are you?” “Good,” Richard said, shooting a sideways glance at my dad. “This one’s been filling my inbox with work, and I’m half-tempted to give my two weeks’ notice and flee to a Tuscan vineyard of my own.”

Mom grimaced. “And turn into one of those insufferable people who does nothing but talk about grapes?”

Richard rubbed a hand over the back of his head like he’d been caught. “So what if I did?”

Mom’s look was chiding. “You’d be out of your mind with boredom within a month and beg us to come back, but by then we’d have hired someone far more qualified than you to fill the position, and it would all become unbearably awkward.”

Richard looked to Theo. “Thirty years, I’ve been putting up with this kind of workplace harassment.”

Theo chuckled, and to anyone who didn’t know him, it probably sounded fine, but my ears caught a forced note. Was he still thinking about Maddie? Had he spotted her through the crowd? I searched for her, adrenaline-laced blood pumping through my veins as my fight-or-flight kicked in. Where *was* she? In my head, I saw her lurking behind every group of people,

waiting to pounce the second my guard was down.

“Oh, Jerry!” Richard said, raising his glass to someone across the room. He sent us an apologetic smile as he stepped away. “I know we’re not supposed to talk about work at these things, but I want to thank him for getting a report to me ahead of schedule.”

My parents left us a few minutes later to make the rounds, and I noticed Theo’s gaze still tracking Richard.

“Does he always attend these parties alone?” he asked.

“Yeah, he’s been single as long as I’ve known him. I mean, he’s dated, but I can’t remember him ever being in a long-term relationship.”

Theo snorted. “Typical.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He eyed me. “Just another wealthy playboy.”

“Richard isn’t like that.”

His answering laugh was condescending.

“He *isn’t*,” I insisted. “There was some big drama when I was younger, and he and his wife had a very long, very ugly divorce. I think he met someone else during it? But then she just up and vanished, and he’s been alone ever since.” There was more to the tale, including Richard’s desperate search for the woman who’d vanished, and a child he’d been trying to find for over two decades, but I wasn’t about to spill his secrets.

“Quite a story,” Theo said, sounding like he wasn’t buying it, which made me feel defensive. Richard was a good man, and I didn’t appreciate the insinuation that he wasn’t.

“You know, just because he’s rich doesn’t mean he’s a liar.”

Theo opened his mouth, a cruel look on his face, but then he seemed to think better of it and slugged back the rest of his champagne. “I need something stiffer than this to get through tonight. Where’s the bar?”

“I think it’s in the Cretaceous period.”

He gave me a blank look.

“This way.”

I kept my eyes peeled for Maddie as we walked, my shoulders inching upward, muscles clenched with tension. Where the fuck was she? From the way Theo tracked the crowd, I could tell he was wondering the same thing, and by the time we reached the bar, we were both silent and tense.

After ordering (a water for me, an old-fashioned for Theo), we meandered our way into the Hall of Human History, trying to act casual when we both knew what we were really doing: hunting down Maddie.

“Oh, look,” I said as we approached a particularly ugly caveman. “Now we found *your* twin.”

Theo had no reaction whatsoever. No choked laugh, no eyeroll. Just silence. Like he hadn’t even heard me. It was oddly deflating, and yes, I did have the sudden realization that I’d been *hoping* for a response. That I wasn’t just being mean to him for my own satisfaction, or because he deserved it (which he did), but for some other (probably tragically sad) reason I should probably speak to my therapist about.

Another thing to ask her? If I had Stockholm syndrome. I couldn’t think of any other reason why the thought of not seeing Theo anymore made my stomach drop.

On second thought, screw my therapist. This was above her pay grade. What I really needed was Runa. She’d be able to unpack this with me. Maybe I could stop by her place tomorrow, use my problems as an excuse

to see how she was doing now that she was out of the hospital. I could call first, see if she needed me to pick up groceries or anything on the way over because despite how ADA-compliant her apartment was, there were still areas that were a pain in the—

“Stella?” a tentative, feminine voice said.

I wrenched around, horrified that Maddie had managed to sneak up on us. She stood a few feet away, her blond hair perfectly coiffed, makeup equally flawless. In her white ball gown, she looked like the picture of innocence, which was probably her intention.

“Maddie,” Theo drawled.

“No.” I put my hand on his arm to forestall whatever he was about to say. Because I had things I needed to get off my chest first. “What do you want, Maddie?”

“To talk. Please.” Her eyes glistened, and I wondered how anyone could possibly fall for her crocodile tears.

“Fine, we can talk,” I said, forcing my tone to remain calm, refusing to give her whatever she was after.

She’d always been a drama queen, loved causing scenes, loved the eyes of a crowd on her. Maddie thrived off the attention, especially if she found some way to make herself look like the victim, and I’d always wondered why. Did she crave the attention of others because her parents had been so absent throughout her childhood? Was it narcissism? A personality disorder? I’d tried asking my therapist, but she said she’d need to speak to Maddie in order to properly diagnose her.

Maddie’s bottom lip quivered. “I tried to talk to you at the last party, but you were so *mean* .”

I didn’t answer, refused to show any outward reaction, and it was probably the hardest thing I’d ever done. This woman had framed me for a crime I

didn’t commit, had almost gotten away with it, and yet here she was, for the second time, publicly acting like *she* was the victim.

“I think . . .” Her lower lip trembled, and she steeled herself like she was gathering courage. “I think you owe me an apology.”

Theo’s hand pressed against my lower back in a silent show of support, and it buoyed me, knowing he was ready to fuck up Maddie’s life if I

faltered. For the first time since we’d met, his presence gave me courage. He’d practically dragged me in here when all I’d wanted to do was flee, but I was grateful for that now, because it made me realize two things: Maddie wasn’t invincible, and I needed closure with her, as ugly as it might get. And while it was nice to have this big, ruthless bastard by my side, I didn’t need him to fight my battles for me. I was going to do this myself.

“Why should I apologize?” I asked. “I wasn’t the one driving the car. I wasn’t the one who fled the scene sobbing on the phone to my parents. I stayed there and did the right thing, and you’ve been punishing me for it ever since.”

“Why do you keep lying?” she cried.

“Why do *you*?” I waved toward the people around us, watching this scene unfold. It was a mixed group, some were company employees, others my parents’ friends and acquaintances. I spotted Mrs. Heidi Ashley and pointed to her. “When we were eight, you broke her Bronze Age amphora because she said you couldn’t have it.”

“That was an accident,” Maddie argued.

I pointed to Angela Renner next. “When we were twelve, you were desperate to get a pony for your birthday, but Angela got one first, and you were so mad that you knocked her cake over while we were all singing ‘Happy Birthday.’”

“That was another accident,” she cried.

“You tried to drag the pony away, screaming that it was supposed to be yours.”

“I didn’t.”

Angela harrumphed. “You absolutely did, and there are fifty other witnesses to confirm it.”

I shot her a grateful look before refocusing on Maddie. “One day, all your horrible behavior is going to catch up with you. People will start reflecting on all your ‘accidents’ and wonder if your innocent act is just that. They’ll start to see who you are. Who you’ve always been. A selfish, spoiled, entitled bitch.”

Her answering laugh was ugly, the real her peeking out. “Like you’re any better.”

“I am,” I said, fully believing the words. “Maybe I wasn’t always, but I’m trying to make up for my past, while you’re acting like a thirty-five-year-old child lashing out because Mommy and Daddy don’t love you enough.” I

shook my head, doing my best to mimic Theo’s most obnoxious grin because I knew firsthand how infuriating it was to have it directed your way. “I actually pity you, Maddie. Your life must be so sad if you have to resort to rage-baiting for attention.”

A*crack* split the air, and suddenly I was looking at the wall.

My cheek was hot and painful. My ears rang.

She’d slapped me.

I rolled my neck, shrugging it off, my tongue coated with the taste of copper because her rings had split the inside of my lip.

Theo made a low, angry sound in the back of his throat and tried to move

forward, but I grabbed him.

“That’s assault,” I told Maddie.

She retreated a step, eyes wide as she searched the crowd for support. “She pushed me into it. You heard what she said.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Angela Renner spoke up. “But I did see you hit Stella unprovoked, and I’ll be happy to tell the police that when they arrive.”

“So will I,” Mrs. Ashley added.

I leaned forward and smiled, knowing it must look deranged because of the blood coating my teeth, “Run, Maddie. It’s the only thing you’re good at.”

She fled.

Someone started clapping, but others shushed them. Once she was out of sight, the crowd’s focus shifted to me, and my panic rose. I needed to get out of here.

Theo noticed and dragged me in the opposite direction, through a door labeled “Employees Only” and into an empty hallway.

“Fuck, that was incredible,” he said, drinking me in like it was his first time seeing me.

I spun away from him and paced down the hall, my arms wrapped around my burning stomach, my entire body trembling with unspent rage. I didn’t *feel* incredible. Instead, I felt like I could scream. Like I might puke. I was so fucking angry at Maddie for showing up at this party and so fucking angry at Theo for practically forcing me back in here, but also so fucking proud of myself for how I’d handled that. For not letting my feelings get the better of me in the moment. For finding a way to goad Maddie into slipping up and revealing the real her.

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There were too many emotions in my body right now, and since I wasn't giving them any other outlet, they manifested as tears. I did my best to fight them, but a sob slipped through my lips.

Theo snagged my elbow and yanked me into a hug, his arms banding around me, his warmth seeping into my skin. I immediately relaxed into his hold, burying my face in his jacket and breathing in the smell of him.

"Are you okay?"

"Why do you even care?" I muttered into his shirt. "You hate me. Remember?"

He sighed, holding me tighter. "I don't hate you. I hated who I thought you were."

I had no idea what to say to that, so I kept quiet, fighting back the continued threat of tears because I didn't do this. I didn't lose it in public. I held everything together until I was back in the safety of my own apartment, where I could cry in the shower until the water ran cold.

"How'd you get here?" Theo asked. "I can have one of the valets bring your car around so I can drive you home."

I shook my head. "I don't have a car. I don't even have a license. I haven't driven since that night."

He was quiet for a second, and when he spoke, his voice was softer. "Then I'll take you home in mine. There's a bathroom behind you if want to check your makeup first."

I pulled free from his arms without a backward glance.

For a moment there, I'd forgotten myself, forgotten that he was the last person I should look to for comfort. I wouldn't even be in this position if it weren't for him. He wasn't a safe harbor in the storm; he was the lightning about to strike. And no, he might not hate me anymore, but I still didn't

think that would stop him from setting fire to my entire life if I didn't uphold my side of our bargain.

I checked to make sure I was alone in the bathroom and then locked the door behind me before approaching the mirror. Thankfully, I'd gone light on tonight's makeup, and it wasn't smeared that badly. I grabbed a couple paper towels from the dispenser and tried to blot away a few smudges of mascara, but my hands shook so much that I nearly jabbed myself in the eye.

I set the paper towel down and turned to inspect my face. My cheek was already red and swelling. Maddie had hit me pretty good. Leaning in, I

carefully pulled my lip up to see that yup, the inside was cut, and I knew that until it healed, it would serve as a reminder of that awful interaction. God, I should have walked away. The second I caught sight of Maddie, I should have turned and left the building, with or without Theo. I'd been wrong. Standing my ground hadn't made me feel any better. It hadn't brought me closure. In fact, I felt worse, because at the end of all my maladaptive daydreams about confronting Maddie, she did the right thing. She turned herself into the police, promised to confess, and attempted to make everything right.

Now I felt like a fool. Because some small part of me had obviously been holding out false hope that would all come true. Had thought there was at least a minuscule chance she might be capable of change, because *I* had changed.

But I should have known better. Sure, I'd been a stupid, self-centered asshole for most of my life, but I'd never done anything malicious; only reckless. Maddie was different, and people like her didn't suddenly wake up one morning and decide to right all their wrongs. She'd gotten away with something terrible, and she was going to hide inside her crystal palace where she was safe, probably dying old and happy, surrounded by her loving family because there was no justice in this world.

Theo was right to be so full of hate and vitriol. To wish ill upon everyone in

my parents' socioeconomic class. To assume that people were guilty until proven innocent. So far, I'd given him the worst of the names. Those I thought were on par with Maddie. But there were others I'd withheld. People who might not be inherently evil, but had still done bad things. Well, I would spare them no more. I'd hand each and every one over to Theo and let him be their judge, jury, and executioner.

Because fuck them.

Five minutes later, I emerged from the bathroom a changed woman, makeup flawless, spine rigid.

Theo was waiting where I left him, looking like a Bond villain in his tuxedo. His gaze landed on me. "Are you ready?"

"No. I want to stay. I have more names to add to your list."

24

Tyler

THE REST OF THE NIGHT wasn't as bad as the beginning, but it wasn't good, either.

For starters, we were seated at the head table with our parents and the rest of the company's higher-ups. Oh, and Blake. He'd turned up right before dinner and was acting borderline hostile toward his sister. I'd attempted to catch his eye to silently tell him to stop being such an insufferable shit, but he'd avoided my gaze throughout the entire four-course meal.

Stella and I were both in terrible moods, her for obvious reasons, me because I was still thinking about Maddie being a manipulative little bitch, was also deeply confused about my feelings for Stella, *and* because I was fighting pre-event jitters because my next party loomed, and the pressure to get everything right was astronomical.

Oh, and I'd been around Richard for far too fucking long.

I wanted to snarl whenever he opened his mouth. Force him to drop this charming act and reveal his true self—just like how Stella had forced Maddie.

The longer dinner dragged on, the more my thoughts spiraled. Feelings I'd kept shoved down were rising to the surface, refusing to be ignored. I couldn't stop thinking about my mother, a young, naïve country girl who'd come to the city with big dreams, only for Richard to crush them.

My father laughed at something Phil said, and I tightened my grip on my dinner knife. He should have done the right thing and taken care of us. I didn't mean mansions and yachts, but basic goddamn necessities, like constant access to power and running water. Instead, we were left with intermittent utilities dependent on Mom paying the bills on time. The absolute bare minimum in child support would have been life-changing for us. But no. He hadn't even done that.

I drained my drink, signaling to our server for another.

My eyes tracked the young woman as she headed for the bar. Was this how my parents had met? Mom said she'd been waiting tables when a handsome man fifteen years her senior swept her off her feet and promised her a

dream. Instead, it turned into a nightmare.

Mom hadn't been shy about telling me what she'd gone through. She'd repeatedly told me I should stay away from anyone with wealth because they couldn't be trusted. That money was the ultimate corrupting force in this world, turning even good people bad. That was the point where our opinions diverged. Money wasn't the problem; these people were.

The server returned with my drink, but I barely sipped it, too distracted by my dark thoughts until Stella rose from her seat, and I snapped back to myself. Dinner was over.

We stayed and mingled afterward, just long enough to make the rounds, and

for Stella to introduce me to more people she thought might fit my criteria. At one point, I made some excuse and wandered away. There were *other* people I needed to introduce myself to before the party was over. After my errand, I found Stella, and we exchanged a silent look and decided it was time to go.

Outside, we stood shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalk, waiting for my car. Thunder rumbled in the distance, another storm blowing in off the water.

“Are you okay to drive?” Stella asked.

“I only had one drink and a few sips of the second.”

She was quiet, eyeing me.

“I’m six-five and weigh two hundred and fifty pounds. Plus, I ate a lot. I’m fine.”

She didn’t seem convinced, and I started to get annoyed.

“I’m not some rich idiot who doesn’t know their own limits.”

She flinched, and belatedly I remembered that while she might not have been driving the car that hit Runa, she had her own DUI under her belt from a few years prior to that.

“I don’t know what *you* have to be so pissy about,” she sniped. “You aren’t the one who had to face down the person who ruined your life.” Anger swelled in my stomach. Yes, I fucking had. But it wasn’t like I could tell her that, so I locked my jaw and fixed my gaze on the street, silently urging the valet to hurry the fuck up.

We were only in the car a few minutes before the skies opened up and rain started pelting the windshield.

“Can you slow down?” Stella asked.

“I’m barely going over the speed limit.”

“Yeah, but it’s raining.”

I ground my teeth and eased off the gas.

“There’s a party at Feddy’s tomorrow,” she said. “AJ invited me.”

“Talk to him a lot now, after your reunion?” I sounded like a jealous boyfriend. Fuck, I even *felt* like one.

“A little. And I think we should go. Everyone there will either be from my parents’ circle or trying to break into it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why not? It’s a room full of bored rich people. They’re literally your dream clients.”

“I don’t need it. The guest list is pretty much set and it’s too late to vet new ones. Plus, it’s better to keep it small and exclusive.”

“But fewer people mean less money.”

“Not if one of them gets shit-faced and blows through three million in one night like Blake did.” It was a dumb thing to say, and I knew it, but I was in too shitty a mood to try and fix it.

Stella blew out a breath. “You’re *such* an asshole.”

“I’ve never claimed to be anything else.”

“Then hopefully the night is a great success, and we’ll never have to see each other again.”

I gripped the steering wheel. “Desperate to get away from me, Sunshine?”
“Can you blame me?” she said, her voice rising. “Since you barged into my

life, I've taken on millions in debt, experienced my worst flare in years, lost money because I'm missing so much work, and then, tonight, to cap it all off, I had another ugly fight with a woman I hate, because you dragged me in there!"

"I didn't drag you anywhere," I snapped. "You chose to follow me. I was perfectly fine to handle her on my own."

"No, you weren't. Threatening Maddie clearly didn't work the first time, and it wouldn't have worked a second. Whenever life gets hard, she runs straight to her parents."

"You don't know that that's what would have happened."

"Yes, I do. Before the night of the accident, she was my best friend. She *always* goes running to them."

I shot a look in her direction. She'd been best friends with that monster? "Don't," she said. "Don't you fucking dare judge me. You are a fucking *bookie*, Theo. You ruin people's lives for a goddamn living. Where the hell

do you get off looking down your nose at anyone else?"

"Been holding that in a while, huh?" I said, my voice low and ugly.

"Yes. And something else, too." She leaned toward me. "You might not be able to see it, but you are *just* like the people you claim to hate."

"Shut up."

"You take and take, with no remorse and no empathy for those you prey upon. And I know for a fact that not all the people you go after are corrupt, because you went after my brother."

"Stop it, Stella."

"At the end of the day, you're as bad as they are, maybe even worse,

because you do it for profit."

"I said *shut up* !"

Headlights flashed across the windshield. A horn blared. I shot my arm to the right, holding Stella back as I slammed on the brakes and cut the wheel to avoid a car that had blown through a stoplight. Stella screamed as I swung back the other way to keep from hitting a driver who'd careened into our lane while dodging the first vehicle. More horns blared, and I let Stella go because I needed both hands on the wheel to get us out of the chaos.

A few seconds later, we slid to a stop on the side of the street, our gasping breaths loud in the sudden silence. I glanced back toward the tangled intersection. It was a goddamn miracle we'd gotten out of it unscathed. "Are you okay?" I asked Stella.

In answer, she popped her seat belt and threw open the door, stumbling into the night.

Fuck. She must be having flashbacks of the crash, and while I was probably the last person she wanted near her, I couldn't let her run off alone into the night.

I eased the car forward, parking in an empty space, and got out. "Stella!" She ignored me, arms clasped around herself as the rain started to soak her

dress.

I shrugged off my jacket and caught up to her, draping it over her shoulders.

"Get away from me," she said, hurrying up the sidewalk.

"No. I can't have you getting serial murdered, or I'll never recoup my loses." I'd meant it as a joke, but after our shouting match, it felt wrong as soon as the words were out.

"Is that all I am to you?" she said, her voice low and shaky. "All anyone is

to you? Pawns on a chessboard?”

I grimaced. Yes, that was eerily close to how I’d first thought of Stella. As a game piece, there to be used and discarded once I was ready to move on to the next one. Because that’s how I *had* to look at people to survive. Otherwise, I might actually start listening to their sob stories—or worse, caring. And I knew the folly of that.

Take the guy Junior had stolen our play club from. He’d tried to sell me one tale of woe after another, when the truth was, he was nothing but an asshole with an addictive personality. He’d had money his whole life and didn’t understand it was a finite resource, so when he started losing at my tables, he just upped the rent on all his tenants to cover the cost.

Stella took my prolonged silence as confirmation of her accusation. “You’re such a bastard.”

I shrugged. “You’re not saying anything I haven’t heard a hundred times before.”

“Why, though? Why are you like this?”

“Remember what I told you? I’ll take any reaction I can get.”

“Stop it! Stop *lying*. No one is this awful unless someone really hurt them. Who hurt you, Theo?”

“Not me,” I snapped, tonight’s dark thoughts rising to the surface. “My mother.” I grabbed Stella and spun her to face me. “You want to know why I’m like this? Because of her. She was the nicest person on the planet, and all anyone ever did was use her. Her parents for free labor, my father because he wanted a young, hot side piece, and everyone else who entered her life. She gave and gave, and they took and took, just like you said, and I decided that I would never let anyone push me around. I’d never let anyone treat me the way they treated her.”

“Do you fucking hear yourself?” she said, the words fracturing as she shivered. “You hated the way your mother was treated so you became just like the people who mistreated her.”

“I’m not like them,” I sneered.

“Yes, you are.”

“The people I’m mean to deserve it.”

“You’re mean to *everyone*, Theo!”

Her words echoed off the brick around us, rebounding, burrowing beneath my skin like insects.

I wasn’t mean to *everyone*. I was nice to Josh. Well, nice-ish.

“Name one time I’ve been mean at the events we’ve attended,” I said. “Easy, you’ve been mean to me 24/7, because blackmail.”

“Fine. Someone else then.”

“My brother.”

“That was self-defense.”

“Maddie, who I can admit deserved it, and everyone you plan to prey upon. You don’t get credit for being nice the rest of the time, because it’s been nothing but an act to worm your way into their good graces.” She pulled out of my grip. “I’m done having this conversation with you. You’re a fucking jerk, and you know it, and I don’t know why I’m even trying to prove my point. It’s like talking to a wall.”

She started to walk away, but her foot caught on the waterlogged hem of her dress, and she flailed forward. I grabbed her before she hit the pavement, scooping her up, bridal style. I could have carried her back to the car, but I didn’t think I’d be able to convince her to get into it after such a close call,

plus her shop was only a few blocks away. It'd be no problem to carry her the whole way because, Christ, she was light. Almost painfully so. I'd made the mistake of looking up her disease, and I'd learned that people with it could lose as much as twenty pounds in a month if they were flaring. Stella didn't have that much to spare, so, for the first and last time, I decided to make an exception for someone. For her.

"We're done," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm certain all it will take is one party to clear your debt."

A shiver wracked her body. I hugged her closer to my chest, and even though my shirt was just as drenched as her dress, at least the body beneath it was warm. All my muscle made me run hot, like a furnace burned inside me. I never thought it'd be good for anything other than keeping me warm in winter, but if I was able to heat Stella back up, then I guess it was my new superpower.

"But . . . you can't know that for sure," she said.

I hefted her higher. "Careful, it sounds like you want me to stick around." "I just want to make sure that when I'm free from you, it's for good." "Don't worry, Sunshine. It's for good. I'll find a way to drain them." And even if I weren't able to fully recoup the three million, I wouldn't tell her. The money wasn't what I'd really been after anyway. Revenge was, and since it was now within my reach, there was no reason to drag this out any

longer, despite the fact that I wasn't quite ready to say goodbye to Stella. I'd grown used to her over the past several weeks. And I'd never admit it out loud, but lately, I'd found myself actually looking forward to picking her up, wondering what sort of outfit she'd be wearing, what kind of mood she'd be in. If she'd be prickly or feisty or playful. I didn't know what it said about me that I preferred feisty Stella over every other incarnation.

It says that you're a brat after all, and you want her to put you in your

proper place, at her feet, where you belong, my subconscious helpfully supplied.

I tried to muzzle it. On top of researching gastritis, I'd made the mistake of googling "brat kink," and now my head was full of all sorts of thoughts and images I didn't need there. They'd been cropping up more and more lately, and maybe that's really why I'd been such a dick tonight. Maybe it had nothing to do with being trapped with Richard and everything to do with wanting Stella's negative attention to distract me away from my own fucked-up thoughts.

"I'm sorry about your mom," she said.

I nearly stumbled. After everything I'd put this woman through, *she* was apologizing to *me*? Goddamn it, how had I been so wrong about her? And why was I now worried I might be wrong about other people, too?

I shook my head. No. I couldn't start second-guessing myself. Not now that I was so close.

"Don't be sorry," I told Stella. "I'm fine."

Thankfully, she let it go. "You can put me down now."

"In bare feet?"

"I have shoes on—oh."

They'd fallen off half a block ago, and it made me think she must be half frozen if she didn't feel it happen.

"The mind really goes when you get older, doesn't it?" I said, returning to the familiar safety of insults.

"I am *not* old," she grumbled.

"Said the woman born in the 1900s."

She was quiet for almost a full minute. “That might be the meanest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“Hey,” I started.

She looked up at me. “Yeah?”

I slowed enough to meet her eyes. “Don’t think this means I’m suddenly

going to become a nicer person, but I’m sorry about what happened with Maddie.”

She dropped her gaze. “Yeah, you already said.”

“I mean seven years ago. I’m sorry you went through all that. Your best friend leaving you like that, and then trying to blame you for what she did . . .” I shook my head. “That’s beyond fucked-up. And I’m sorry about what happened in the car. I should have been paying better attention to the road. That must have been . . . hard.”

“Not as hard as this apology is,” she said. “No wonder you’re such an asshole all the time. You are *not* good at this.”

I pretended to drop her.

She shrieked and clutched at me, and I hauled her back up.

“Also,” she added, “while I don’t regret anything I said, I can admit that screaming at you while you were driving probably wasn’t the smartest move.”

I was quiet for a bit, thinking over what she’d said to me right before the near-miss. “I don’t go after people who can’t pay.” God, why did I even feel the need to explain myself? “Or innocent people. I do my research. We usually cut people off when they hit what we believe is their debt ceiling.” “Then how do you explain what happened with Blake?”

Shit. I'd walked right into this.

"That was a one-time thing," I said. Technically, it wasn't a lie.

"You still hurt people. You still ruin their lives. And maybe most of them deserve it, but it doesn't make you any better than they are."

I sighed. "I try to avoid hurting people. At least physically. Usually, I get big scary guys to threaten to do it, and that's enough to put the fear of God into them. I've found threats of public exposure or asset seizure to be much more effective than violence, so that's what we focus on. And we're not unreasonable. We offer income-based payment plans."

She made a sound of disbelief.

"Think about it, Sunshine. I wouldn't be able to keep drawing in wealthy clients if I were as heartless and brutal as everyone says. People would be too scared to come back."

"So, what? You've secretly been some good guy this whole time? Come on, Theo."

"No, obviously not. I've done terrible things, and I have no plan to stop."
"Why?" The word felt weighted.

"Why not? It's good money. It's challenging, every month presenting different obstacles, new ways to be creative. But more than anything else, I like it. It's *fun*. And it's what I'm good at."

We reached her shop, the windows dark because it was so late.

"Okay, you can put me down now," she said.

I ignored her.

Stella

THEO, MUCH TO MY HORROR, carried me all the way upstairs to my apartment. “Where’s the bathroom?” he asked, still holding me.

“*Fuuuck you,*” Amos answered.

Theo jerked around, clearly looking for another person.

“It’s just Amos,” I told him. “And it’s over there,” I added, pointing. “*Treat, Snack Bitch?*” Amos called.

“In a minute.”

“*Treat, treat, treat?* ”

Theo turned toward the bathroom. “Sunshine has just been dethroned.”

“If you call me Snack Bitch, I swear to God, Theo . . .” I’d had about all I could take tonight.

We passed through the living room, and he paused just long enough to get a good look at Amos in his cage. “Why would anyone ever want to keep a bird as a pet?”

“He was my grandmother’s.” I dropped my voice, not wanting Amos to overhear the next part even though I knew he probably wouldn’t understand it. “And no one else in the family wanted him.”

Theo grunted and shouldered open the bedroom door, passing into the en suite and setting me down beside the shower while he turned it on.

“I’m fine now,” I told him. “You can leave.”

He shot me a look like I was stupid. “Please. It’s not anything I haven’t seen before, and if your mother has taught me anything besides how to

mispronounce even the most basic words, it's that you suck at taking care of yourself. Where do you keep your trash bags?"

"Beneath the kitchen sink," I grumbled.

He left the room, and I crossed my arms over my chest, starting to shiver again, suddenly freezing without his body heat. I needed to get out of this ruined dress, but I had a feeling Theo meant for me to put it straight in the trash, so I stripped off just the bodice because the wet fabric clinging to my breasts felt like the coldest part of me.

Aminute later, I heard a rustling sound before he slipped back in.

"Here," he said, dropping to a crouch with the bag open. "Step out of the dress."

The sight of him, practically kneeling at my feet, hit me like a bulldozer. This obnoxious, proud *asshole* was actually trying to help someone other than himself for once, and I couldn't decide if I was touched or turned on. *Definitely Stockholm syndrome,* I thought. I'd been forced to endure the presence of my blackmailer for so long that the lines were starting to blur between us. Physically? They'd been fucked since our first disastrous run-in. But after what he'd just revealed about his mother, I felt myself softening toward him emotionally, too. I wanted to know more. Crack open his brain and sift through the matter until I understood what made him tick, all the traumas that had led to him being such a mean, closed-off person.

He glanced up at me. "I'm trying to help you. Quit looking at me like you're back to planning my death."

"Have you heard my mom say 'murderer'?"

"No."

"She pronounces it *mer*-dare-er." I told him, pushing down the waist of the dress.

“Here.” He guided my hand to his shoulder.

I braced myself on it and stepped out of the dress. He kept his eyes downcast, gathering the fabric into the trash bag. My bra and underwear soon followed. Setting the bag aside, he went to pull the shower curtain open, and my hand slipped free from him as he stood.

“Get in,” he ordered.

“Only if you say please.”

Annoyance swept over his face. “Stella, your fucking lips are blue. This isn’t the time for jokes.”

I glanced in the mirror. I’d been steadfastly ignoring my reflection, and yikes, for good reason. I looked like a corpse. Black-rimmed eyes, parchment-paper skin, bones sticking out, and yup, blue lips.

“Please get into the shower,” Theo said, low and ardent and, oh god, I liked the sound of him saying *please* like that.

He gave me a gentle shove forward, and I managed to stumble in, hissing when the hot water met my frigid skin.

He jerked his head inside. “What happened?”

“Nothing. Water’s hot.”

He pulled back, leaving the curtain open a crack, and started yanking off

his clothes, muttering darkly under his breath about stupid, stubborn women insisting on contracting hypothermia.

“I couldn’t get back in that car,” I said.

He shut up.

I probably should have turned my head away and given him some privacy, but the sight of Theo stripping made the threat of hypothermia worth it. He pulled his shirt off, bending to shove it into the garbage bag, and I had my first real glimpse of his wide back, his skin puckered with goose bumps, muscles flexing. My gaze snagged on three small imperfections: circular scars that were about the size of . . . cigarettes.

Jesus Christ, what had this man been through?

He kicked off his ruined shoes next, and then undid his slacks. With a shove, they fell to the floor along with his boxers, and he faced me, fully naked.

“Move,” he said.

I stepped forward, letting him climb in behind me. He wrapped his arms around my chest and he pulled me backward, all the way down to the shower floor, positioning me right in front of him so I had his warmth at my back and the hot water hitting my front.

Afull-body shudder wracked through me, and he held me tighter. He growled. “If you end up with pneumonia . . .”

“You know you can’t actually get sick from being cold and wet, right? That’s just a myth.”

“Maybe so, but it can weaken your immune system, making you more susceptible to illnesses, and you’re already sick.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but he cut me off.

“Stop arguing with me. You need all the energy you can spare to heat your body back up.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “You don’t need to do this. Despite what my mom told you, I can take care of myself.”

He snorted.

“I *can*,” I argued. “And you hate me, so why the hell are you sitting here trying to—”

He clapped his hand over my face, covering both my mouth *and* nose. “Shhh. Go to sleep.”

I tried slapping at him, but he grabbed my hands out of the air with his free one and pinned my wrists to my stomach.

“I already told you I don’t hate you,” he said. “Stop fishing for compliments. It’s pathetic.”

I bit his palm. His hand stayed where it was, and I felt his dick twitch behind me, confirming that he liked it. Oh, no. Had I been right this whole time? Did Theo have some sort of pain or degradation kink, and I’d been unwittingly feeding into it?

The long history of our arguments unspooled through my mind. In the tattoo shop. At the Italian restaurant. At my parents’ place. Hell, every time we’d been around each other for the past month. All our toxic texts and emails and death glares.

Had Theo been turned on every time? The thought made me want to clench my thighs together. Because all I could picture was his cock fully erect, tucked into his waistband to hide it from sight while we insulted each other.

I bit his hand harder.

He hissed in a breath and finally let me go, and I could feel his dick swelling at my lower back. What in the entire fuck was I supposed to do with this new information? Or did I even need to do anything with it? “What you said earlier,” I began.

He released his hold on my wrists to push my hair aside and started kneading my shoulders. “What, specifically? We’ve said a lot of things to

each other tonight.”

I closed my eyes. His fingers felt like heaven, stroking over my skin in circles, just the right amount of pressure. Between that, the water, and the heat of his body, I was finally starting to defrost, finally starting to unwind from how tightly coiled I’d been all night. Maddie. Theo and I fighting worse than usual. The almost–car accident. They’d sent my adrenaline sky-high, which masked my gastritis symptoms, but I knew the crash was coming, and honestly? Theo telling me we were done couldn’t have come at a better time, because I didn’t think I could keep this up for much longer without serious, lasting consequences to my health.

His thumbs stroked up my spine, one on either side, and then started rubbing slow circles over the top of my back. I let out a low noise and dropped my chin to my chest, only to catch sight of his thick thighs framing mine. Tentatively, I reached out and put my hands on them, forcing my fingers to keep still instead of tracing the long lines of his muscles. Part of my art courses had included anatomy, and even years later, I was still

fascinated by the way the human body was put together.

“Stella,” Theo said.

“Mmm?”

“What were you about to say?”

“Lower.”

He dropped his voice. “What were you about to—”

I elbowed him.

His hands slid down my spine.

“I was talking about when you said we were done,” I clarified. “What did you mean, exactly? And don’t start another fight. I’m too tired.”

“I meant exactly that. No more parties or public events together. I want my money back, but not if it means you suffer this much for it. Like I said, I try to avoid physical torture.”

“But mental torture is okay?”

“Yes, and I think I’ve put up with more than enough of it from you. I need a break.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” I said, my tone flat. “What if you don’t recoup your losses?”
“I will.”

“But what if you don’t?”

He sighed, kneading his way back up my spine. “Stella, just drop it. One way or another, I’ll get what I’m after, but you don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

I waited for the elation his sentence should have caused, but I must have been through too much shit tonight to feel joy, because all I felt was numb. Not even relieved.

“Do you promise?” I said.

“Yes.”

I turned in his arms.

“What are you—”

I kissed him. Maybe just to be reckless, maybe just to feel something, or maybe because I’d been fighting the urge to kiss him again for so long that I couldn’t fight it any longer.

Theo froze for half a second, but then he groaned, deep and guttural, and yanked me the rest of the way onto his lap. His lips opened, our tongues

brushed, and—yes. This was what I wanted. This was what I *needed* .

His hands fell to my ass, fingers digging in. I lifted mine to his face and tilted his head back to get a better angle. He was an annoyingly good kisser,

knew when to push deeper, when to draw back. When to nip at my lower lip in a way that spiked my lust. Unable to help myself, I rolled my hips, dragging my pussy over the entire length of his cock and pausing at the top to feel the swell of his head prod my entrance before forcing myself back down.

He pulled me into him, dick straining between us, and I swirled my hips as much as he allowed, the friction of his skin against my clit enough to make me lightheaded. He shuddered, his mouth moving faster, forcing me to keep up. I might have been the one who started this, I might have just escalated it, but I was under no illusion that he didn't have the power to rip control from my hands. And yet he let me have my fun, allowed me to tease and torment us both by rolling my hips again and again, my nipple rings dragging over his chest every time I moved.

With a gasp, I leaned back to stare down at him, my hips working in a circle, his cock straining beneath me. Goddamn it, why did he have to be so beautiful? The water had slicked his hair back, leaving nothing to distract from the sharp angles of his cheekbones, that pouty mouth. His eyes held another challenge, another dare, like he didn't think I could do this. That I would change my mind or chicken out, leaving the question of how good it could be between us unanswered.

But if he was being serious, and this was the last night I'd ever see him, I saw no reason to hold back. No reason to pretend I hadn't wanted him since the first time he'd walked into my shop. Was it messed up? Borderline pathetic to lust after my blackmailer? Maybe, but right now, I didn't give a shit. I was choosing problematic over safe, letting myself be reckless and stupid one more time before I had to go back to living the most boring, cautious life imaginable.

I bent forward and bit his lower lip. "I want you, Theo."

The devil was in his grin as he stared up at me. “I’ve been waiting *weeks* for you say that.”

“Then why didn’t you say it first?”

His smile widened. “Because I couldn’t be the first one to break.” I tried to climb off him.

He called my bluff, yanking me back into place and holding me there, his eyes dropping to my tits, tongue slipping out to wet his lower lip. “I couldn’t let you know how bad I wanted it.” He squeezed my hips and ground upward. “That every time I said something to piss you off, it was

because I was thinking about fucking you and needed you to put me in my place.”

A blush crept across my cheeks. “You must have been thinking about it constantly.”

He dragged his gaze up to mine, his eyes almost black they were so dark. “Yes. That night in the restaurant, I imagined dropping to my knees and licking your pussy right there at the table. And then outside that first party, when I got you up on that car. I was desperate to pull your panties aside and get you off where anyone might catch us.”

I braced my hands on his chest, meeting his renewed thrusts, feeling my slickness start to coat his shaft with every dirty word that fell from his mouth. I wanted him inside me, so bad, but knew I couldn’t take him yet. “At Cordelia’s,” he continued, “when AJ said you’d shared people between you? That became my new obsession.” He shook his head and leaned forward, fastening his mouth on my breast, tongue swirling my nipple in a languorous stroke before he flicked the ring pierced through it.

I cried out, grinding down, desperate for friction.

With a groan, he shifted back, using his grip to help me. “I couldn’t believe

it when it actually happened. Kept thinking you were going to panic and run out of the room."

"I couldn't let you win," I said, breathless. I wanted his mouth back on me.

His gaze turned scorching. "Don't lie. You wanted it, too."

"Yes." The word was a breathy confession.

"How did it feel?" he asked. "To have us both inside you."

"So good." The words were close to a sob, I'd held them in so long.

"But once wasn't enough, was it?" he said. "And now you can't stop thinking about the three of us together again, can you?"

I shook my head.

"I can't stop thinking about it either," he said. "You in the middle again, he and I so deep inside your ass and cunt we can feel each other moving."

Oh, god.

I scrambled backward, landing on the floor of the tub between his legs. We stared at each other, chests heaving, the silence so loud it was deafening.

He rose to his feet, water sluicing off his big, beautiful body, and extended a hand to me.

"Get up here. I want you warm and clean before I fuck you."

26

Tyler

STELLA AND I TOOK FOREVER in the shower, stroking, kissing, and teasing each other into a frenzy in between washing. We took even more

time drying off before she donned a bathrobe—short, silk, and of course, black— and wrapped her hair in a towel while I tied one around my waist. Afterward, I led her into the bedroom.

My body was demanding release, and I could tell from how breathless Stella was that she needed it, too. There was a mirror mounted to her wall, in sight of the corner of the bed, and that became my target.

“Where are your condoms and lube?” I asked.

“Bedside table.”

She tugged on my hand. “I’m STD-free.”

“So am I.”

“And I’m on birth control,” she said, biting her lower lip.

“Stella, are you telling me I get to fuck you raw?”

She nodded. “If you want.”

I groaned. “Yes, I want.” I snagged the lube and led her over to the side of the mattress. “Come here,” I said, sitting on the edge, my feet braced on the floor. I hauled her onto my lap, facing away from me, holding her steady while she tucked her legs under, resting on her knees. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you fall.”

She glanced back at me over her shoulder, one perfect eyebrow arching. “You saying that makes me feel like you’re about to push me over.”

“This is the one place you can trust me,” I told her, lifting her hips just enough to unwrap my towel and shove my dick beneath her, her ass cheeks framing the base, my shaft pressed against every slippery inch of flesh. God, she was soaked.

Ashiver ran through her.

“Are you still cold?” I didn’t know how she could be. She felt like a furnace, the combination of the hot water and what we’d been doing beneath it spiking her temperature.

She shook her head. “No. That feels good.”

“Look,” I said, nodding toward the mirror.

She spun, watching me untie her robe. It spilled open, revealing her seated on my cock.

“You’re fucking *stunning*, Stella.”

She grinned, knowing it was true, and swirled her hips. I groaned, pulling her neckline down to kiss the back of her shoulder. She was so warm, so welcoming, and judging from the slickness coating me, just as turned on as I was, telling me I wasn’t in this alone. She felt it, too, this thing between us, this spark of desire that was one gust away from igniting into an inferno. What would it feel like to slide into her now? It wouldn’t take much, just a lift of her hips and a hard thrust. But despite the wet warmth of her, she was far from ready for that, and if this was my only night with her, I was going to make it good.

With that thought in mind, I tugged the towel off her hair and leaned in to kiss the spot behind her ear. She tilted her head sideways, watching me while I bit and teased her skin, rolling her hips like she was testing this position out.

“Theo,” she said in that low, raspy tone I liked best.

“Shh,” I said, soothing her. “I know what you need.”

I slicked my hands up the bathrobe and cupped her breasts through it, palming them. Our height difference gave me the perfect angle to see over her shoulder, allowing me to watch what I did, follow my fingers as they fondled and teased, see her give another experimental roll of her hips. It

was a feast for the senses, and it made me greedy for more.

I parted the robe, slipping it off her, and pulled it from between us, leaving her bare to my sight. Her nipple rings flashed in the dim light, begging for attention. I stroked my fingers over them in tandem. Stella rewarded me with a soft moan, clenching her spread thighs. I flexed my legs, pressing my cock against her, offering her more friction. She squirmed against me and moaned again, starting to sound impatient.

“The lube,” I said, unwilling to release her for even a second.

She fumbled for it, and I was glad to see I wasn’t the only one feeling rushed and desperate. With a flick, she had it open. “It’s warming.”

“Coat me in it.”

She squeezed out a large dollop, and I had to hold her hips steady as she rose up, doing what I said.

The second she was done, I settled her back down, my dick still braced

beneath her because it would be better for both of us if she got off first before I fucked my way into her.

She gasped, rolling her hips over my length, and tilted forward a little, bracing her hands on my knees to steady herself before she started to move. I gripped her hips and helped her, my cock starting to heat from the lube and her warmth. The next time she rose up, I hauled her down even harder, obsessed with the way her ass clapped against me.

She shuddered, fingernails digging into my knees. A small, desperate sound climbed up the back of her throat. In the mirror, she looked half- undone, as wrung out as I was from how long we’d spent teasing each other in the shower. I wanted nothing more than to shove her over the edge and welcome her into oblivion with me, so I went back to teasing her nipples, simultaneously rolling my hips upward.

She cried out.

“Say it, Sunshine,” I rumbled. “Say you wish I was inside you.”

“I wish you were inside me.” In the mirror, her eyes met mine in a familiar challenge. “I want that big, beautiful dick to split me in half.”

I froze, even as she kept moving. “You should come first. It’ll be easier.” “I don’t want it easy.” She rose to her knees. “I want you to fuck me so hard, I’m sore for days.”

“Stella, I am begging you. I’m not a good enough person to say no to what you’re asking.”

She angled her hips backward, and I saw my dick rise up between us. Watched her take a hand off my knee and use it to guide my shaft to her entrance. “I don’t want a good person. I want the man I hate to prove to me what a big, evil bastard he really is. This is your only chance to fuck me, Theo.” Her dark eyes bored into mine. “Make it count.”

“It’ll hurt,” I growled.

“Good. Fuck me ragged, Theo.”

“Is that an order?” I asked, echoing words I had read in an online brat forum.

Without hesitation, Stella answered. “Yes.”

Something snapped inside my mind, all the pent-up fury, bottled frustration, and denied attraction finally allowed an outlet.

Fine. If that was really what she wanted, I would give her my worst.

I wrapped an arm around her waist, slapped my hand over her mouth to muffle the noise she was about to make, and *yanked* her onto my cock.

She screamed, eyes flashing wide above my hand.

I held her while her sides heaved and her nostrils flared, the sound of her fractured breaths filling my ears. She was so tight that I knew she must be in pain, knew that must have fucking hurt, but god, the sight of her, trapped against me, my cock spearing into her. It did it for me. Made it impossible to hold still any longer.

“Blink twice if you need a second.”

She glared at me, unblinking, and then bit my palm so hard, she’d probably broken skin. It felt incredible. I dropped both hands to her hips and started bouncing her on my cock in short, brutal thrusts because she was so fucking tight, that’s all the movement her pussy would allow. She gasped, fingernails digging into my knees, hips angling back to meet me. Words started pouring from her lips. “Fuck. Yes. Ow. No, don’t stop. It’s good. Theo, it’s perfect. Just like that.”

I didn’t know what was hotter: what we were doing, or the fact that we were both watching it like our own personal porno. Her thighs bunched, belly flexed, tits bounced, lips dropped open, and my thoughts flashed back to the night I’d filled that filthy mouth so tight she’d choked.

Inexplicably, her pussy tightened even more, and she started shoving into me harder. Was she—?

“Fuck! Yes, Theo, harder.”

Holy shit, she was already coming.

I used my grip on her hips to lift her up a little and pound into her, giving Stella everything I had, holding nothing back.

“Perfect,” she sobbed. “Oh, it’s so good. Just like that. Good. Boy.”

The pleasure that tore through me at the praise was unlike anything I’d ever felt in my life, and I went from being close-ish to full-on coming in the

blink of an eye. I yanked her all the way down, strangling her hips as I unloaded deep inside.

Holy fuck.

What *was* that?

Stella went boneless, starting to drop forward, and I caught her before she could fall. I laid her on the bed, dragging her throw blanket over us so she wouldn't get cold again.

This couldn't really be it. The only time I got to fuck her. Because now that I'd done it once, I never wanted to stop.

But I had to. Because I still had a job to do, and once I did it, she'd go

from hating me to wanting to kill me.

Unless . . .

I found a way to spare her parents and only target Richard. It might be possible, but it would force a restructuring of my plans and lead to several more weeks of delays after I'd already spent years waiting for this opportunity. Could I really do that? Let them off the hook after what their best friend and business partner had done?

In my mind, I saw Georgie and Phil, her with her sharp gaze and quick wit, him with his affability and easy smiles. The obvious love they had for their children. The countless times I'd watched them run Stella's detractors off when she wasn't paying attention, quietly protecting her like a pair of lions guarding a cub.

At the end of the day, I had no actual proof they'd had any involvement in what happened to my mother, only assumptions. Maybe it wouldn't be the worst idea in the world to play it safe and spare them on the off chance they were innocent. I'd been wrong about their daughter. Who's to say I wasn't mistaken about them, too?

I shoved the thought aside for later. Right here, right now, all that mattered was enjoying what might be the last few moments I would ever have with Stella. The rest could wait.

She stretched beside me like a cat, toes pointed, hands rising overhead. “Mmm, I needed that.”

“Clearly,” I drawled. “You’re fifty percent more tolerable like this.” Her eyes opened, glaring.

“Whoops, spoke too soon.”

She started to roll away, but I stopped her, dragging her back toward me on her stomach.

“Don’t move,” I said, moving to kneel between her legs, spreading them wider.

“What are you doing?” she asked, peering at me over her shoulder.

I slid my hand down her back, dipped my fingers between her ass cheeks to tease her pert little asshole, and then slowly sunk my fingers into her soaked cunt, reveling in the knowledge that half this cum was mine.

She hissed.

“Sore?”

“Yes, but I wanted to be. Theo, that was . . .”

“I know,” I said, swirling my fingers inside her, wishing we had more

time. “I have to go soon. Unfortunately, I keep hitting snags in my plans, and I need to sort some things out.” I pulled my fingers from her and lifted them to her back, starting to draw over it. “Don’t shower.” I dropped a kiss to her shoulder. “If this is the only night we have together, I want to know

you fell asleep with my words on your skin.” I pressed another kiss to the top of her spine. “That part of me is still here with you after I’m gone.”

I dipped my fingers into her, stroking, soothing away some of her pain, wanting to make her feel good one last time, before pulling them out and drawing the next letter, repeating the motion until I’d made Stella come again and wrote a whole secret message on her back.

27

Stella

IT WAS ALMOST 3 A.M. by the time we finally re-emerged from my bedroom, me in my robe, Theo in his slacks and the largest T-shirt I owned.

We hadn’t turned on any lights in the living room, so it was especially creepy when Amos made a low clicking noise and called, “*Hellooo*,” out of the darkness in a high-pitched voice.

Theo stopped dead in his tracks, and I nearly ran into him.

“Where is he?” he asked.

“Far side of the room, in his cage.”

More clicking. “*Ah, ha ha ha haaa* .”

It was Amos’s usual cackle, but right now, even I could admit it sounded slightly terrifying.

Theo’s shoulders inched toward his ears. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” To prove my point, I slid past him and turned on the soft light in the kitchen.

It brightened the apartment just enough to make out the cage and plants, but Theo still hadn’t moved from my bedroom doorway. Not a fan of birds,

then.

“*Oh, Theo!*” Amos cried in near-perfect mimicry of me.

Jesus. Had I really sounded like that?

Theo turned to me wearing an insufferable expression.

“He repeats what he hears,” I said, stating the obvious as I retreated to the kitchen. “Do you want water or anything before you go?” I shot him a smirk. “Since I did just drain you dry.”

His gaze slid down me, like he was wondering if we had time for round two. Oh, god, I hoped not. My vagina couldn’t handle it. Not after what he’d just done to me. What I’d practically begged him to do to me.

“Just water,” he finally said.

I snagged a bottle from the fridge and turned back around, freezing. Theo stood by my couch, half bent over my coffee table. “What is *this* ?”

The way his tone had shifted into pure glee was a clear indicator that he’d spotted something to torment me with, and I did a quick scan of the objects

cluttering the table, worried I’d left something embarrassing out like a vibrator or my retainer or—oh, shit.

My sketch pad.

I tried to lunge at him, but he hip-checked me onto the couch, and while I was busy bouncing off it, he snatched up the sketch pad. It tumbled open in his hands, a loose paper sliding free. I cringed as a charcoal drawing of his bicep floated to the ground.

His smile widened as he flipped to the first page, and he shot me the most unctuous, self-satisfied look I had ever seen. “I knew you were obsessed with me.”

I launched myself off the couch and tried to grab it from him, but he held it out of reach, and I was *not* about to jump for it like a kid on a playground. It was too late anyway. The damage was done and now his ego would be so big, there'd be no speaking to him. Good thing this was our last night together.

A small frisson of disappointment wormed through me at the thought, and I tried to push it down.

Theo flipped another page, smile dropping, a line appearing between his brows. "These are really good."

"Yes, and? You've seen my work. Why are you surprised?"

He shot me a look. "I wasn't fully convinced you did it yourself." "Get out," I said, pointing toward the door.

He ignored me, flipping another page. "Wow, you're, like, *really* obsessed with me."

I couldn't believe I'd just had the best sex of my life with this asshole. Atearing sound filled the apartment as he ripped a page free.

"Hey!" I said, reaching for it.

"I'm taking this one with me." He flipped it around, and I saw his face in profile. It was probably the simplest sketch I'd made of him, his chin resting on his hand, looking bored.

"Why that one?" I asked, confused as to why he'd choose it over the much more elaborate pen-and-ink of him sitting on a throne, an ice crown on his head, flanked by faceless sycophants.

"It's the first one you drew, so it must have been the moment you realized you were in love."

“I am going to close my eyes, and by the time I open them, you better be gone.”

“Aww, don’t be mad.”

A hand slid around my waist. I cracked my eyes open, and yup, he was back to wearing his most obnoxious grin. The one that made me want to punch him.

“Goodbye, Stella,” he said, closing the distance between us. He gave me one last drugging kiss, and for some stupid reason, I let him.

Afterward, he stepped back and shot me a wink. “Text me when you realize you can’t live without me.”

“Goodbye forever,” I said.

With a laugh, he turned and left the apartment. I waited a minute, and then followed after him to make sure he was really gone before I set the security alarm. Once that was done, I headed back upstairs, where I fought my curiosity for a solid ten minutes before realizing it was a losing battle. With a sigh, I went downstairs again.

Elayne frequently did glow-in-the-dark tattoos, and she had a big black light in her booth that she turned on during the application process. I took it into the shop’s bathroom and plugged it in, slipping my bathrobe to my waist and putting my back to the mirror. Theo’s fingers had moved so slowly that I hadn’t been able to make out the letters as he’d written them. The way he’d paused to drop kisses along the back of my shoulders and then down my ribs made me think he’d been in his feels, like maybe he wanted a little more time together to explore this inexplicable, totally fucked up, *thing* between us.

And what he’d said . . .

“If this is the only night we have together, I want to know you fell asleep with my words on your skin. That part of me is still here with you after I’m

gone.”

He’d definitely written something sentimental or possessive. Something he probably hadn’t wanted me to see, but how else was I supposed to get a glimpse into what was really going on in that thick skull of his?

I turned the black light on and the lights off. My back glowed in the mirror, and it took me a second to decipher the words because they were not only backward, but slightly smeared.

F . . . U . . . C . . . K . . .

Y . . . O . . . U.

Fuck you.

He’d written “fuck you” on my back in cum.

I was definitely going to see him again. Just once. To kill him.

I stomped back upstairs and grabbed my phone out of my soggy purse. Thankfully, it still worked.

FUCK ME? I texted him.

Wow, he responded. *I was sure you’d wait at least a day before begging for it again, but I guess you’re more obsessed with me than I realized.*

I dropped the phone before I gave in to the urge to hurl it across the room. He’d done this on purpose, and I’d played right into his hand. Anything I texted back would only add more fuel to the fire, give him the upper hand, and even more opportunities to taunt me.

Not this fucking time. I absolutely refused to take the bait.

I left my phone lying on the floor and turned to go scrub my back raw in the shower. It was only when I laid down to go to sleep that I smiled, and then

started laughing. Uncontrollably. Because this might be the best practical joke anyone had ever played on me, and I didn't think anything would ever top it.

■ ■ ■

Monday was the one day a week we were closed because it was the slowest for appointments. I spent the morning running errands and trying to ignore the delicious ache between my legs, but moments from Saturday night kept popping into my mind. Theo letting me take charge in the bathroom. The excruciating pleasure of him yanking me onto his cock after I'd essentially ordered him to hurt me. His big hands palming my breasts. The sight of us fucking, reflected in the mirror.

Yes, the sex had been amazing, but I'd enjoyed the power play just as much, and was equally shocked and thrilled by how eager Theo had been to do what I said. He'd spent so long bossing me around that it felt nice to finally get my turn. There was something exhilarating about having a massive man who could easily manhandle me be so willing to play submissive. It was the first time I'd ever felt that way, *wanted* to dominate someone, and I'd been with a fair amount of partners. It made me wonder if

it was a me thing, a Theo thing, or an *us* thing.

I shook my head. It was probably a Theo thing. There was no way in hell I was his only sexual partner that wanted him to sit down and shut up.

An image of Theo bound and gagged shot through my mind, and I had to cross my legs on the bus.

I was headed to Runa's, a bag of groceries by my feet. She'd been home for a few days, and I'd offered to swing by with some essentials. We both knew it was just an excuse for me to visit post-surgery.

She lived in an ADA-accessible building on the east side. It was a one-bedroom unit on the third floor, with a renovated kitchen and a decent seasonal view of the small park out back. This time of year, her windows

were filled with green, making it looked like she lived in a treetop canopy because the oaks outside had gotten so tall. She buzzed me in with her remote when I arrived, and I used my key to open the door so she wouldn't have to get up.

"Hey," I said, heading straight toward the fridge. "They were out of that brand of gluten-free pasta you like, so I found you a chickpea-based one instead."

She made a retching noise from somewhere in the living room. "That shit falls apart in the water."

"I asked the clerk, and he said this brand doesn't do that."

"We'll see," she said, sounding highly suspicious.

I put away the rest of her groceries and found her in the living room. My hands were behind my back, carrying a present I knew she was going to lose her mind over.

She lay sprawled out on the couch, her wheelchair sitting nearby because it would be a while before she was healed enough to use her prosthetics again. On the TV was her favorite Dutch show, some period piece about a hotel near the ocean, the volume louder than normal because her washing machine was running.

I stopped by her side, and she hit pause and looked up at me.

"What have you done now?"

"I bought you something."

She rolled her eyes and pushed herself upright, and I was glad that she looked better than she had in the hospital. Less exhausted, less wracked with pain. "It better not be another jumbo box of condoms, Stella."

"It's not," I said. From the look on her face, I knew she didn't believe me,

so I pulled my hands around with a flourish. “Ta-da!”

Her eyes flashed wide. “Shut up, no you didn’t.”

I nodded and popped the lid of the cake box, showing her that I had, in fact, gone to her favorite bakery all the way across town just to order her favorite (and also out of season) upside-down almond fig honeycomb cake that I’d had to pay double for.

“Bring me my biggest fork,” she said, waving to the kitchen.

I laughed and set the cake on her lap before following her order, grabbing a fork for myself, too.

“Uh-uh,” she said, pulling the box close and hunching over it like a dragon guarding her treasure.

“Hey, I was the one who bought it,” I whined. “I don’t get a bite?” “Not until you tell me why you bought me an apology cake.”

“It isn’t an apology cake.”

She stabbed her fork into the dessert and took the largest bite imaginable, all while maintaining direct eye contact. “I’ll eat this whole goddamn thing in front of you,” she said, her mouth so full that crumbs fell out.

“Why can’t it be an I-hope-you-feel-better-cake?”

She swallowed. “Because you have been blowing up my phone every hour on the hour since I got out of the goddamn hospital, and you know damn well that my recovery is going better than expected. The truth, bitch.” She pointed her fork at me. “Out with it.”

I threw myself into the armchair next to her. “I saw Maddie again.”

Runa nearly choked. “What the fuck? Where?” Her eyes narrowed. “If you

killed her without me, I am going to be so mad."

I shook my head. "I didn't kill her, but it was close. She was at my parents' company party."

"I told you she'd be back. I told you whatever Theo said to her wouldn't be enough." I'd been keeping Runa up-to-date on everything that had happened. Mostly.

"I should have listened to you."

Runa winced. "How bad was it?"

I told her the whole story, starting with Theo coercing me into the party, and then that ugly interaction. I skipped over the near-crash afterward, not wanting to trigger her, but told her about my fight with Theo and ruining my favorite dress in the rain.

She hefted the cake box toward me. "Fine. I guess you could use a bite."

I forked one out and popped it into my mouth, and maybe this was my favorite cake, too, because, goddamn, the flavor combination was so subtle but *so* good.

"I'm sorry," Runa said. "That it played out that way."

"Why, because she's still alive?"

"Yeah, but also because it sounds crazy-making." She shook her head. "For her to just stand there, demanding an apology after everything she's done? My god."

"I don't know how I kept my shit together. I've never felt like that in my life. Like I could actually murder someone with my bare hands. Well, aside from Theo."

"Too bad she isn't single, or you could set the two of them up. It sounds like

they deserve each other.”

I took another large forkful of cake, careful not to meet her eyes.

She sighed. “You fucked him, didn’t you?”

I shoved the cake in my mouth and then pointed to it like, *Oops, sorry, bad timing. Can’t answer you.*

She leaned forward and backhanded my shoulder. I really should have known better than to sit so close to her.

I chewed my food and swallowed. “It was a one-time thing.”

She brandished her fork like it was a sword. “Li-ar.”

“Fine. Akind of one-time thing. Two weeks ago, we slept with AJ.” Runa let out a whoop. “You filthy little slut. How was it?”

I covered my face, peeking at her through my fingers. “Which time?”
“Both, duh?”

“It was . . .” I dropped my hands, shivering.

She let out a low whistle. “That good, huh?”

“Yes, but it’s not going to happen again. Theo thinks he’s got enough people to clear my debt.”

“But what if he’s wrong?”

“Thank you! That’s what I said.” I quickly caught her up on the rest of the night, including Theo’s prank, because, again, there were no secrets between us.

She laughed so hard afterward, I worried she might choke. “You have to see him again. You cannot let that man get away with something so diabolical.”

“Why would I see him when I’ve just gotten free?”

She sent me a *Don’t be stupid* look. “Because you want to.”

The sound of running water cut off, and then I heard the shower door close and heavy footsteps padding in her bedroom. My mouth fell open. It hadn’t been the washing machine. There was someone else here. First thing in the morning.

I stared at her in accusation. “Is there a *man* in your bedroom, Ms. Lund?” She dropped her gaze to the cake. “I don’t know what you’re talking

about.”

“You fucking ho-bag. This whole time, I’ve been spilling my guts, and you were what? Just *not* going to tell me your recovery is going so well because you’re being dicked back to health?”

Her eyes snapped to the closed bedroom door. “Will you keep your voice down?”

I rose from my seat. “It’s that hot nurse who ‘attached your electrodes,’” I said, using air quotes. “Isn’t it?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“One way to find out.” I backed up a step.

“Don’t you dare!” she whispered-shrieked.

I rushed toward the bedroom, reaching for the doorknob, threatening to open it.

“Fine! It’s him, okay?”

I paused for half a second, drawing out her panic, before shaking my head

and returning to the couch. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Her cheeks pinked.

“Ohhh,” I said. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“Yes, and I didn’t want to jinx it by talking about him.” Her expression turned apologetic. “I’m sorry.”

“I get it,” I told her. Lord, did I get it. All she and I did was trauma-dump and talk shit about the entire world. If she’d tried to casually bring it up, I probably would have found some way to tease her or turn it into a joke. “I’m happy for you.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

More noise came from the bedroom, and I glanced toward it, starting to feel like an interloper. “I think I’m gonna head out.”

Runa grabbed my arm as I started to stand. “What about Theo? Are you going to see him again?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. He literally *blackmailed* me.”

Runa shrugged. “So?”

“And treated me like shit.”

She rolled her eyes, grinning. “I’m not asking if you’re going to marry him. I’m asking if you’re going to bounce on it again.”

“You are a horrible influence.”

She sobered. “Don’t you feel like your work is half done? I mean, sure, your debt might get paid off, but there are still more people out there in need of some vigilante justice.”

“Girl, my tummy is too upset to run around this city living out my Catwoman fantasies.”

Runa laughed. “Fair enough.”

“Plus, Theo has enough names. And he already has his foot in the door. Once people from that world realize there’s an ultra-exclusive party they didn’t get a ticket to, they’ll be desperate to find a way in. All I’d have to do is tell him which ones to target.”

“Which gives you a perfect excuse to talk to him again,” she said with a triumphant smile.

28

Stella

MY PHONE CHIMED WITH A notification, which meant it had to be either Blake or one of my parents, since I’d set it to do not disturb.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, leaning back from my client, a short, full-figured Latine woman with pink streaks in her hair and a pin-up girl aesthetic. “I have to check that.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” she said. “I was about to ask for a break.”

“Shading is always the worst part.”

She threw an arm over her eyes. “And I can endure two hours straight of it before I need to tap out, but can I tell the hot morgue assistant who works in my hospital that I have a crush on him? No.”

“You’re a catch, Vern,” I said, pulling off my gloves. “He’d be an idiot to turn you down.”

“*I* know that. But what if *he* doesn’t?”

“Then he’s clearly not good enough for you,” I told her, rolling my chair toward my desk.

I scooped my phone up, unlocked the screen, and froze. It was a text from my brother that read *Put on a nice cocktail dress. I’m taking you out.*

Um . . . at 10 p.m. on a Tuesday? I’m working? I responded. *And you haven’t really spoken to me in over a month? Hi, hello?*

I’ve been busy, he texted back. *But not as busy as your boyfriend. Trust me, you’re gonna want to come to* this *party.*

“Family emergency?” Vern asked, sounding hopeful.

I glanced her way. “Kinda.” What the fuck was Blake talking about? Vern’s expression shifted to open relief. “We can be done if you need to

be.”

“Do *you* need to be?”

She winced. “Yeah. I don’t think I have much more left in the tank tonight.”

I eyed her thigh and the portrait of her abuela that was slowly coming to life. “Okay, but do you think you can last through me finishing this section?”

She glanced down at where I’d paused. “How much longer?”

“Five minutes, I promise.”

She laid back, looking resigned. “I can do it.”

I rolled over, pulling on a fresh set of gloves. “What a brave woman. Next up, asking out a man who knows his way around a dead body.”

She waggled her brows. “Hopefully he knows his way around live ones,

too.”

I laughed and got back to work.

Vern was, luckily, my last appointment of the evening, and once I was finished checking her out, I tried to call Blake.

He sent me to voicemail and texted me a location instead. *Meet me in thirty.*

Not until you tell me what this is about.

I can’t explain it over the phone. Just please. I’m asking you to trust me. Normally, I wouldn’t have hesitated, but between the whole gambling-away-his-entire-inheritance thing and how moody and aloof he’d acted since (no matter how much *I* apologized), I wasn’t sure I knew my brother as well as I’d once believed. And him not telling me where we were going felt like a giant red flag.

Was it even him?

Where did we hide Cordy’s pug statue?

In the suit of armor by the front entrance of her townhouse. Why? Just checking.

It’s ME. Blake. The little brother you’ll thank by the end of tonight because I’m fixing the problem I created.

Unease twisted my stomach. Uh . . . what the fuck was he talking about? *There’s nothing left to “fix,”* I texted back. *I’m free.*

No. You’re not. None of us are. And I’m about to prove it to you. Half an hour, Stella. Be there.

I tried texting him back several times, but he’d gone radio silent.

Shit. What the hell was he up to? I had *just* gotten clear of Theo’s

blackmail, had finally gotten onto his good—scratch that—less bad side. If Blake did something to mess with him, I worried we'd wind up right back where we started. Or worse.

I rushed to Derrick's booth. He was closing tonight because I'd decided to actually start taking care of myself by limiting my hours to a more manageable work schedule.

"Heyyy," I said, hanging off his doorframe. Thankfully, he was in between clients.

"Yes?" he drawled, raising one bushy white eyebrow.

"I have to head out for a bit, but I can be available if anything pops up." "It won't," he said, and from his tone, I had a feeling that even if something did, he'd handle it himself.

I raced upstairs.

"*Treaaat?*" Amos called.

"You've had enough today," I told him, rushing straight to my closet.

He let out a sad little whistle, tugging at my heartstrings, but I needed to start putting my foot down. I'd been guilt-feeding him extra treats for weeks because of my absences, and that was worse than giving him none at all. I wanted him to live to out the full promise of his long lifespan, and overfeeding him was counterproductive.

I threw open my closet door. Black as far as the eye could see.

"*Like your soul,*" Theo had joked, but my monochromatic wardrobe was more practical. Black went with everything. Ink stains were hard to see on it. It cut down on decision fatigue when it came to outfit selection. Plus, it just plain looked *good* on me.

Hiding near the back was a short, corseted tulle cocktail dress that made me

feel like the Black Swan whenever I wore it. I pulled it out and quickly changed into it before running to my bathroom. The location pin Blake sent me was twenty minutes away without traffic, which meant I needed to get my ass in gear if I was going to meet him on time.

A glimpse in my bathroom mirror revealed that my makeup had held up pretty well throughout the day. All I needed to do was blot my face, reapply my blush and lip stain, and then add another layer of setting powder and finishing spray.

There. Good enough.

I ordered an Uber, locked the apartment behind me, and headed outside. One apprehensive car ride later, I was back in the balmy night air, standing on a corner near a jewelry store and a hair salon. This was a busier part of the city, filled with hotels and bars, and there were people everywhere. I scanned the sidewalks for my brother but didn't see him.

I'm here, I texted.

Where? I don't see you.

I searched for him again, then peeked my head around the corner of the

building, and there he was, walking toward me in a tuxedo, looking dapper. He'd done something to his sandy brown hair, slicking it back, and the sullen look I'd seen on his face lately was gone, replaced with determination.

"Are you ready?" he said.

"Hi, yes, hello. It's nice to see you, too. I'm glad we're speaking again. Do you finally understand why I did what I did?"

"No, you self-sacrificing idiot. Now come on." He wove his arm through mine and led me down the street.

“You couldn’t pay it,” I said, my eyes clocking a few other well-dressed people heading in the same direction.

“You could?” Blake asked.

“We came to an agreement.”

He shook his head. “And you trusted him to stick to it? That he didn’t have ulterior motives?”

“Don’t give me that look,” I said. “I’m not *actually* an idiot. I have never, nor will ever, trust that man. And yes, I was worried about ulterior motives, but I was more focused on getting us clear of him.”

“That’s where you went wrong. While you spent the last month flirting with him, I was paying closer attention.”

“I was *not* flirting.” At least, not the whole time.

Blake shot me a look full of censure. “Yes, you were.”

Anger swept through me. I hadn’t thought less of him for losing three million dollars, and yet here he was judging me for what I’d done to get that money back.

“What are we even doing here?” I asked, my voice flat. I wanted to get this over with, then go back to my apartment and calm down. I also planned to take some more time away from Blake. Because it was clear that my relationship with my brother was on rockier ground than I’d thought, and I wasn’t in the right headspace to try to fix it.

“I told you,” he said. “We’re going to a party. Avery *exclusive* party.” Exactly as I’d feared. “How’d you even get another invite?”

“I stole Henry’s.”

“And you think Theo’s just going to let us waltz in together?”

Blake snorted. “Theo won’t have any idea we’re there until it’s too late. These parties make our society functions look like cute little get-togethers.” “What do you mean, *too late*?” I said, reaching out to pat his chest. “You

don’t have a bomb on you or something, do you?”

He slapped my hand away. “No, and you’ll see soon enough.” “If you do something stupid, he’ll find a way to get back at us.” “Not if he’s in jail,” Blake said, his tone dark.

My pulse skyrocketed, thoughts circling to those big scary men Theo had mentioned, who wouldn’t be in jail, but still free to hurt people. And yeah, Theo tried to avoid that, but I was willing to bet he’d make an exception for those responsible for putting him behind bars.

I grabbed my brother’s arm, trying to slow us down. “What did you *do*?” I had to find some way to stop whatever was about to happen.

He pulled free from me and kept walking. “You’re about to find out. We’re here.”

I wrenched my gaze away from him, our surroundings coming back into focus. Here? Here, where? This street looked like any other congested part of the city. Traffic, pedestrians, storefronts, construction barriers.

My eyes homed in on the one thing that was different: two large men wearing city uniforms and safety vests, guarding the entrance to the work site. Late at night.

A woman in a trench coat stopped in front of them. The three had a brief exchange, and then she passed between the pair into the darkness beyond. Blake pulled away from me, and I hurried to catch up with him, my heartbeat pounding so hard I felt like I might choke on it. I didn’t want any part of what was about to happen, but it was clear Blake was determined, and I had no idea how to stop him without resorting to hitting him over the head and dragging his unconscious body out of here.

Maybe I could find some way to change his mind once we were inside? Threaten to go to Mom and Dad? Remind him that Theo was a scary, evil mastermind with untold minions ready to do his dark bidding?

“Password,” said the beefy guy standing on the right, his head on a swivel as his gaze swept the rest of the street.

“Rhoticity,” Blake replied.

I blinked. No fucking way.

The guy on the left motioned us past.

Blake and I entered the narrow mouth of an alleyway. Overhead, someone had strung café lights, their warm glow providing just enough light to see by. The pavement beneath our feet had been cleared of trash and swept clean, and there was even a light lemony scent in the air, like someone had

taken the time to mop.

“Here, put this on,” Blake told me, handing me a plain masquerade mask.
“What, why?” I said.

“Just do it.” He tied his in place. “No one shows their faces.”

I grumbled about ruined makeup, but begrudgingly put it on as we approached another big guard, this one in a suit, standing at the far end of the passage. My gaze scanned the walls around us. I didn’t see any doors or windows, and it made me worry we were walking straight into some sort of trap.

I tugged Blake’s sleeve, my voice low with warning. “I don’t like this.”

He shushed me and kept walking, and as we got closer to the guard, I realized the dark spot on the ground next to him was an open manhole.

Oh, Jesus.

The guard motioned us forward. Blake stepped up to him, and the man started waving a foot-long wand over him, slowly, from top to bottom. “No phones or recording devices?”

“No,” Blake said.

“Um . . . I have a phone in my clutch,” I confessed.

“Take it out and turn it off,” the guard barked, and I quickly complied.

He motioned toward a basket and told me I could pick it up on my way out. Then he gave me the same head-to-toe wand treatment while Blake approached the tunnel.

“Follow the lights when you reach the bottom,” the guard said.

And, no. Nope. Nuh-uh. There was absolutely no fucking way I was willingly climbing down a dark-ass hole in the ground in these heels and this dress. We were clearly being lured to our deaths. Blake was an idiot for not seeing it. He was blinded by hatred, still reeling from his breakup. He was—*turning and climbing straight into the hole*.

Goddamn it.

He didn’t even look at me as he passed out of sight, too focused on whatever vengeance fantasy was playing out in his head.

The guard motioned me forward, impatient for me to follow my brother. New voices entered the alley, low and excited. Fuck, I couldn’t just stand here.

With a deep breath and an ominous rumble of my stomach, I trudged after Blake, carefully placing the toe of my heel on the top ladder rung. My limbs shook as I edged down, and my regret was both instant and absolute.

Because while the manhole opening was wide, the tunnel was much narrower. Brick lined the circular walls, which, like, was that okay? Shouldn't they have been made of something stronger, like cement? Something that wouldn't degrade so quickly and potentially lead to bowing or a cave-in or—oh, god, I was going to give myself a panic attack.

"Hey, you gonna move?" someone called from above.

I realized I was frozen in place, my ragged breaths loud in the closed space. "Yeah, sorry," I yelled up to them, forcing myself back into motion. A small eternity later, my feet hit the tunnel floor. It, at least, was made of cement, and dry, thank god. These heels wouldn't hold up against mud or raw sewage (gag).

Overhead, more café lights were strung on a line leading away from the manhole, and I spotted Blake's back disappearing around a bend farther down the tunnel. I had just enough dignity to keep from shrieking *Wait!* as I scurried after him, trying not to think of what else might be scurrying down here. The walls were wider than the hole I'd just climbed down, but still too close for comfort, and I was acutely aware that if something happened to the lights, we'd be dropped into complete darkness.

"Please listen to reason," I begged when I caught up to Blake. "Theo has people who work for him. Who's to stop them from coming after us if he's in jail?"

Blake snorted, an arrogant look on his face. "They wouldn't dare."

"Okay, rich boy," I said, grabbing his arm, my sudden spike of anger lending me the strength needed to yank him to a stop. "First of all, *yes*, *they would*. Secondly, how fucking dare you act so casual about putting your family's safety at risk?"

"Mom and Dad don't go anywhere without people all around them, their house has better security than most banks, and their driver is ex–French Foreign Legion."

“What about me, dipshit?”

“Please,” he spat. “You think I don’t know you’ve been working with Theo? That you’ve been *sleeping* with him? Everyone at AJ’s saw the three of you leave the party plastered together. Why would he hurt the person helping him take down our family?”

My face burned with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. God, this must have looked so bad from Blake’s perspective. I should have *known* people would gossip, but I’d been so focused on one-upping Theo that the

thought hadn’t even entered my head.

“I wasn’t helping him hurt our family,” I said. “I was fixing the mess you created.”

“No! You were making it worse!” he yelled, his voice echoing over the tunnel.

“Sorry, excuse us,” someone said, and my face burned even hotter as I stepped back to let a trio of people pass.

Blake shot me a disgusted look and followed in their wake, and I was so stunned and confused that I just let him go. This behavior wasn’t like him. I knew Blake. He didn’t have a malicious bone in his body. He’d never treated me like this before, even when I was at my worst.

Yeah, but was *it your worst?* a small voice wondered.

The thought made me deeply uncomfortable. Because more than once over the last few weeks, I’d wondered if I was regressing into my past self, undoing all my hard work. Had I been so consumed by my hatred of the world I’d grown up in that I’d let it blind me to what was really going on?

I thought by joining forces with Theo and helping him take down the worst people I knew, he’d spare the innocent, but what if I was wrong? What if Blake was right, and my nagging suspicions about Theo’s ulterior motives

were warranted? My brother sure seemed to think so, and if he was so convinced that coming to this party would prove that, then maybe I needed to stop underestimating him.

I started walking again, pursuing the other partygoers through a labyrinth of tunnels toward an ever-increasing wall of noise. Laughter, cheering, the frenetic sounds of a jazz band.

I rounded a final corner and stopped dead in my tracks. Because *wow*. The wide-open room in front of me looked like a movie set. Glittering chandeliers hung from overhead, a tower of champagne glasses rose from a white-clothed table. Women in flapper dresses danced with men in three-piece suits. People stood clustered around tables stacked with food or games, laughing, drinking, looking like they were having the time of their lives. Movement drew my gaze to the left, and I saw a bank of white curtains hanging from the ceiling, made to look like they were strung over windows, or doors that might lead to a terrace.

Theo did all this?

No wonder people were so desperate to attend his parties.

Someone tapped my shoulder. “Excuse me.”

I turned to let them pass, and froze. The man was tall and thin, with white-blond hair and a scar on his chin from a bad fall when he was a kid. “Keith?”

He smiled and tipped his mask up. “Stella? I thought I might see you here.”

My stomach dropped, because never in a million years did I think I’d see *him* here.

29

Stella

KEITH SHATTUCK HAD WORKED FOR my parents for nearly fifteen years, which was why I'd recognized him, even with the mask. He came from a staunchly middle-class family, had graduated from a state school, and joined the company with an entry-level accounting job before slowly climbing the ranks. And sure, his salary was decent, but he didn't have the kind of money that granted access to parties like this.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"Your boyfriend invited me." He gestured back toward the crowd. "A bunch of us are here."

My stomach sank. *What the fuck?*

"Who else?" I demanded.

"I saw Jessica a few minutes ago."

"My dad's executive assistant?"

Keith nodded. "And Mike, Brian, Adam, Laura, Charlotte, Wayne, Joe, and a few other people, but I'm sure there are more of us."

It felt like the floor dropped out from beneath me.

"I haven't run into Theo yet," he said. "Will you thank him for us if you see him first? This is so exciting."

"Please tell me you haven't spent any money," I said, the blood draining from my face.

"No. I've always wanted to try blackjack, though, so I think I'll head over there first."

He made to step away, but I grabbed him. "Keith, listen to me. You have to get out of here. This isn't what you think. Theo's not really my boyfriend." He pulled out of my grip, looking like he was torn between laughing and

frowning. “What do you mean?”

Other people had noticed me lunge and were turning toward us, so I tugged him over to a corner. “This isn’t just some fun, themed party. This is an illegal gambling ring.”

He chuckled, looking uncomfortable. “Gambling ring? That’s going a bit far, isn’t it? I know you’ve always had a darker sense of humor, but—”

“Keith, I am begging you to leave. There’s way more going on right now than I can ex—”

“Steve!” he yelled as a fresh batch of guests arrived. “Hey, you made it!” And then he just . . . walked away.

I stared after him. Okay, Keith, you know what? Fine. Fuck you. It wasn’t like I’d been trying to save your ass or anything. I stalked away from him, as angry as I was afraid, and wove back into the crowd, a tingling sensation creeping up my spine.

Something was going on here. From everything I’d learned, Theo only ever went after a certain type of clientele: the wealthy, the criminal elite, social climbers, hedge fund managers, real estate investors, etc. Part of what made his parties so exciting was the chance to rub elbows with people outside your normal social circles, and the masks added an additional thrill because you had no idea who you were speaking to—the heir apparent to a foreign conglomerate or a mobster.

These events were supposed to be exclusive. Inviting random, regular people went against everything they promised.

My mind worked on overdrive as I discreetly searched the crowd for my brother. I had no doubt that if Theo caught either of us, he’d be furious. From the beginning, I’d wondered why Theo had invited one seemingly random, underage college kid to something like this if it weren’t for a specific reason. Yes, Blake came from money, and he could have been targeted just for that, but he didn’t fit the guest list. He wasn’t an

extravagant spender. He wasn't a social butterfly or known in party circles; he was a bookish engineering student.

My assumption had been that Blake was a mark. That Theo had chosen him because he was vulnerable, with the plan to blackmail his way into high society and expand his clientele list to the uber-wealthy, making these parties even more exclusive.

That made sense. Explained why Theo had been so quick to offer that I take on Blake's debt. And the whole fake-dating-to-lure-in-the-wealthy scheme had popped out of his mouth just as fast.

But now I wondered if I'd been a mark, too, and my parents were the real endgame. Because I couldn't think of why so many of their employees were at this party—innocent and unsuspecting, and, judging by Keith's nonchalance, thinking it was just a fun little game night—unless something bigger was in the making.

What if Theo did to them what he'd done to my brother? Plied them with drinks, sat them at tables with more knowledgeable players, and then offered to front them as much money as they needed, allowing them to spiral deeper and deeper into his debt?

For what reason? I thought, feeling desperate. Why would he target people who could never pay him back?

Unless . . . he wasn't after their money, but something else. Information? Dirt on the company? Secret files? To what, blackmail my parents, hoping for a big payout? Attempt a hostile takeover of the company? I shook my head, my thoughts whirling, more options presenting themselves, each darker than the last. Yes, Theo *hated* the rich, but this was targeted, and it made me wonder what on earth my parents could have done to become the focus of his hatred.

My parents were good people. I believed that with my whole heart. Were they perfect? No. But they'd never tried to hide their failures, always used them as teaching moments for Blake and me growing up. As far as I knew,

there weren’t any skeletons in their closet.

Two people parted in front of me, and I finally caught sight of my brother again.

I beelined toward him, slipping my arm through his and, as casually as I could, dragging him sideways, almost bumping right into Feddy and Julia, who were too busy pawing at each other to notice us—gross. Once we were clear of the crowd, I pulled Blake to a stop by the far wall, beside another hollowed-out doorway. “What the fuck are so many of Mom and Dad’s employees doing here?”

“Oh, you finally caught on, did you?”

“Blake, answer me!”

“I don’t know, okay? It’s the one puzzle piece I haven’t put together yet.”
“How did you even know they would be here?”

“Because, I told you, I’ve been paying attention. Ever since that first party. While you were god knows where, Theo was busy buttering up Tori.”

“Our parents’ chef?”

“Yes. I heard them talking in the kitchen and listened by the door, and he put on that charming act of his and asked her a bunch of questions about Mom and Dad. He did it again at every event after. Any time your back was turned, he’d slip off and go talk to the staff, or someone close to our parents. Didn’t you see him at the company party?”

My thoughts cast back to that night, memories dominated by the fights with Maddie and Theo, and then what happened afterward. I focused, and a fractured image of Theo yukking it up with a group of people after dinner finally materialized.

Now here all those people were.

Betrayal and anger raced through my veins. Theo had been playing me this whole time, and I was an idiot for not seeing it. For being so consumed with my own predicament and sickness and worries that I'd been too distracted to see the forest for the trees.

Blake took my elbow and towed me past the doorway, down another narrow tunnel and into a dead-end side shoot. "I talked to Jessica at the museum, and she told me Theo mentioned something to her about how he threw his own parties. I knew that had to mean he was going to send her an invitation, so I went right to the police station afterward and told them everything I knew. I wasn't about to sit back and give him the chance to execute whatever fucked-up scheme this is."

I braced a shoulder against the wall, swaying. Oh, god. This was bad. This was so, so bad. "Blake, he's going to kill you."

"He won't get the chance. The police are on their way right now."

An icy wash of fear sluiced down my spine. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Because I thought you'd be happy!" he yelled, his voice bouncing off the stone. "I thought you'd want to see the look on Theo's face when he was arrested, but I didn't realize you'd caught feelings for the man *actively blackmailing you* ."

I winced, not bothering to defend myself because the accusation was warranted. I *had* caught feelings for Theo. Because I thought we'd been working together toward a righteous end goal. But now I knew that I'd never been anything to him but another game piece to move across the board toward his ultimate goal.

"The cops will probably raid this party with a SWAT team," I told Blake, because this wasn't my first rodeo with illegal events. "Everyone inside will be arrested. Including all of our parents' employees."

"Yeah, but they'll be released once the cops realize they're innocent."

So smart, yet so fucking naïve. “The cops are not the good guys, Blake, and the sooner you realize that, the better. We need to find some way to quietly get everyone out of here.”

Adark shape stepped into the mouth of the alcove.

Blake and I spun around.

Theo.

Fuck.

He pointed at my brother. “Take him.”

Two burly men appeared, heading straight for Blake.

Oh, hell fuck no. I had mace in my clutch because I never went anywhere without a bottle, and I quickly fumbled it out and lifted it to eye level.

Theo sighed. “Don’t hurt my girlfriend. She’s the idiot with the pepper spray, if you can’t tell.”

I pulled the trigger without warning, because fuck all three of them.

I hit Goon 1 straight in the eyeballs, and turned it on Goon 2 as he lunged, spraying him in the mouth. Both men went down screaming, and a cloud of fiery fumes filled the air. Theo threw his arm over his face and backed away.

“Hold your breath,” I cough-screamed, grabbing Blake and shoving him ahead of me. He broke left at the opening of the alcove, and I tried to follow him, but Theo grabbed me before I could slip by. I turned the mace on him, and he hit me on the wrist hard enough that my entire hand went numb, the sprayer falling to the ground.

Blake froze.

“Run, or I’ll never fucking forgive you!” I said, thrashing in Theo’s arms. I didn’t know what he would do to me, but I was sure it wouldn’t be nearly as bad as what he’d do to Blake if he caught him.

One of the guards came barreling out of the alcove, wiping at his red face, looking like a rampaging bull in search of a target. The second man was right on his heels, coughing and spitting as he tried to clear his mouth. “Run!” I screeched.

Blake finally fled, the guards stumbling after him. They didn’t stand a chance. Blake had run Division 1 track at his boarding school. I just prayed he could get past whoever was guarding the other end of the tunnel.

Theo shoved me away from him, and I spun, hands up, ready to defend myself. I’d never seen him look so furious. Gone was the man who’d carried me three blocks through the rain. Gone was the man who’d massaged my neck. Trailed kisses down my spine. This was the Theo I’d dealt with in the restaurant. The one who’d threatened to burn my entire life to the ground.

He stepped forward. “If your fucking brother ruins tonight for me . . .”

I retreated, my back brushing the wall. Panic hit my bloodstream, and I glanced past him, thinking about trying to break free, but he was too big. There was no room. I was trapped with no way out, and no opportunity to subtly warn all the innocent people he’d lured down here.

Which left me with one option.

“Cops!” I yelled, my voice loud enough to echo over the stone. “Run! The cops are com—”

Theo lunged, slapping his palm over my mouth to shut me up. My head bounced off the wall, knocking me loopy for a second, and by the time the world stopped spinning, I realized more people were yelling, and there were whistles cutting through the air. Oh, shit, the cops really *were* here. Suddenly, a wall of humanity stampeded into the adjoining tunnel, everyone

trying to flee at once.

“Fuck!” Theo roared, hauling me into the chaos ahead of him, one arm around my chest, the other keeping people from careening into me.

We were like rats in a narrow tube, nowhere to go, everyone yelling and flailing and bouncing off each other. I heard a thud, felt Theo jolt forward like someone had slammed into his back. Awoman screamed up ahead, and I caught sight of her falling. I tried to grab her when we got close, but Theo beat me to it, yanking her up by the back of her dress and shoving her in front of us to get her moving again.

Suddenly, he broke right, down an even narrower, tunnel with no one in it. “Help!” I yelled, sure he was about to murder me.

He shook me like a rag doll, so hard my teeth clicked together. “Shut up. This is another way out.”

In that moment, I didn’t give a fuck if I got arrested, not if it meant that he got handcuffed alongside me. I opened my mouth to scream again, but Theo pulled a gun from inside his jacket and aimed it right at me.

“Turn and walk,” he said.

I did as I was told, my entire body starting to shake with a mixture of anger and fear. He had a fucking *gun* aimed at me. A minute later, we rounded a slight bend, and the tunnel darkened dramatically. I could barely see a few inches in front of my face.

“Put your right hand on the wall,” he said. “There’s a grate up ahead. Find it.”

I reached out, and my palm landed on something slimy. Oh, god, ew. I

fought back a gag and kept walking, wondering what was happening behind us. People were really screaming now, and the closed walls of the tunnel made the sound of their running feet echo in a way that made me feel like

we were about to be trampled. Whistles cut through the air, along with shouted orders of “Stop!”, “Get back here!”, and “Put your hands up!”

It was fucking anarchy. And it broke my goddamn heart because I knew there were innocent people caught up in it. All my fault. This was all my fault for helping Theo.

My fingers snagged on something, and I paused. The grate? Theo plowed right into my back, and I stumbled forward, tripping over the uneven ground to land on my hands and knees. I hissed, knowing from the burning sensation that I’d scraped the shit out of my skin.

“Get up. It’s here,” Theo said.

The screech of grinding metal rent the air.

Tears stung my eyes as I climbed to my feet. Fuck, that hurt.

Theo shoved me into the new passageway. I tripped again over a step and went down sideways this time, taking the fall on my hip and shoulder, the ground wet and mucky beneath me.

Ew, ew, ew, but also *ow, ow, ow* .

“What are you doing?” he said, hauling me up by the waist. “We need to hurry.”

“Then stop pushing me!”

Another screech of metal ripped through the air as he closed the grate, and then light flared from his direction, illuminating our surroundings. I recoiled from the sight that greeted me. It looked like something out of a horror movie: wet, dark walls, with a waterline two feet up from a past flood; garbage strewn about the floor; pipes running along the ceiling, dripping god knows what onto us; the orange glow of eyeballs close to the ground that told me we weren’t alone in this tunnel.

Without a word, Theo shoved me forward, and I had no choice but to precede him straight toward the serial killer who was obviously waiting to dismember us. In my mind, I devised a plan to push Theo at them first, straight onto their outstretched knife so I could make my escape and go find my brother.

“Why were *they* here?” I asked.

“The cops?” he said, intentionally being obtuse. “Ask your brother. Actually, you know what? Let *me* ask him.”

“My parents’ employees. Why the fuck were they invited?”

He didn’t answer me, and the urge to claw his eyeballs out was almost too strong to resist. The only thing stopping me was the gun.

“*Theo*,” I said.

“Would you shut up and let me concentrate? I’ve only been this way once, and I don’t want to get lost and end up having to eat your corpse to survive.”

“Why did your mind go straight to cannibalizing me?”

“Because I’m mad enough to!”

“You’re mad? *You’re mad, Theo?*” I whirled on him. “You fucking lied to me!”

“Which time?” The grin on his face sent me into outer space. I had never been so angry in my fucking life.

“I’m glad you’re not denying it,” I spat. “If you’d gaslit me on top of everything else, I—”

“You what, Stella?” he demanded. “What the fuck could you possibly do to me? Theo Strickland isn’t even my *name* .”

I stumbled backward, horrified, realizing that nothing between us had ever been real, and I was now trapped in an underground tunnel with someone who had more reason to want me dead than alive.

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30

Tyler

STELLA REARED BACK AS IF I'd slapped her. I felt almost nothing at the betrayed look on her face, because my rage was all-consuming. I had *just* decided to spare her and her family from the fallout around Richard, and she and her brother showed up and ruined everything, proving that no good deed goes unpunished. It was something I never should have forgotten. "Who the hell *are* you?" she asked.

"Trust me, you're not ready to find out. Your pretty little head would explode. Now move," I said, waving her onward with the gun.

Thank fuck it was empty, because I might have been tempted to use it. I felt crazed, desperate. It was all fucking ruined. Everything I'd worked so hard to accomplish, gone, because one spoiled nepo baby had a lucky hunch. I should have been meaner, taken the time to corner Blake at every opportunity and terrorize the stupid little shit. I'd thought about it, but I'd held off because I worried Stella might get angry enough to go back to working against me. My mistake. I should have fucking known I'd pay the price for making an exception to my rule.

As mad as I was at the McCormick children, I was even angrier with myself.

Behind us, the panicked echoes started to recede. The SWAT team was probably close to rounding up everyone in the main room, and would start checking the side tunnels next. Which meant we needed to move faster. Thank fuck I'd asked the urban explorers to find more ways out. They'd discovered two. One branching off the other entrance, and this one, which twisted and turned for half a mile beneath the city before meandering back to the surface. I'd written the directions into my phone, and the next one read: *turn right beneath the orange u-groove wheel*. My eyes traced the pipes on the ceiling, looking for it.

Jesus Christ, tonight had been close. Paying off the cops had worked to my

advantage, because one of them called to warn me I had incoming. I'd been heading toward this tunnel to escape when I caught sight of the McCormick siblings and decided to eavesdrop on their argument.

"What happened to not going after innocent people?" Stella asked from up ahead, her voice small but furious.

My answering laugh was ugly. "For all you claim to be one of the poors now, you've done a shitty job integrating. Pull your fucking head out of your ass, Stella. Everyone is capable of doing horrible, evil shit and getting away with it, because humanity, at its core, is self-serving and egotistical. We're at the top of the food chain because we're the smartest *and* the most vicious. The only difference between the crimes committed by the poor and those by the wealthy is that the latter has more money and resources to hide them."

"You expect me to believe that Keith from Accounting is an undercover serial killer?"

"No. But he *is* guilty of elder abuse. Did you know his siblings are planning to sue him for illegally changing their mother's will when she was dying of Alzheimer's, making him the sole beneficiary and cutting them out?"

"But I thought she didn't have much money," Stella said.

I almost threw the gun at the back of her head. "It doesn't matter that it's not a million fucking dollars. Thirty thousand is more than enough to make a greedy asshole like Keith commit a felony. And while we're talking about it, did you know your dad's executive assistant has been having an affair with Adam from Finance for the past six months? Oh, and guess what? She just took out a secret second life insurance policy on her husband. Gee, wouldn't it just be awful if he dies in some freak accident or is killed in a home invasion gone wrong?"

"So, what? Everyone working for my parents is bad?"

I nearly roared. "No. Fuck, are you even listening? Nothing is black-and-

white. I'm sure they have plenty of normal people on their payroll, but those aren't the ones I care about."

"That's what you were after, then. Their dirty secrets. Why? To blackmail them into doing what?" Her voice rose, loud and harsh. "What have my parents *ever* done to make you target them like this?"

I didn't answer her. Because I was too angry to trust myself right now, too angry not to blurt out everything like some cartoon super-villain. I'd always thought their monologuing was laziness on the part of the writers, but now I felt like I understood their character motivations a little better. They just wanted someone, anyone, even their worst enemy, to know how much they

were about to lose. How much effort and planning was going up in flames and how unfair it was that some lucky amateur sleuth was the one to take them down.

An orange wheel came into sight up ahead.

"Turn right," I told Stella.

She did, and immediately fell again. I reached down to help her up, some stupid, sappy part of myself unable to take the sight of her sprawled in the muck, before I checked the urge.

No. I was done. I'd already put in my time pretending to be a gentle-man. Hell, I'd even tried to be a better person for her, and now there was probably a warrant out there with my fake name all over it.

I'd learned my lesson about going against what I knew to be true. It was time to go back to being who I really was.

Stella slowly crawled to her feet, and from the sniffle she attempted to hide, I could tell she was crying.

I hardened my heart against her tears. "There's a ladder at the end of this tunnel. We're going to take it down another level."

“Where the bigger rats probably live,” she muttered. “Maybe you’ll get lucky, and they’ll eat you.” “Before or after you kill me?”

I said nothing. Let her be scared. It was the least she fucking deserved.

We continued on in silence for several minutes, and as my anger cooled from a boil to a simmer, I tried to tell myself that not *everything* was lost. While this plan might be ruined, there were still other options. I’d known there was potential for someone to talk to the wrong person, or find a do-gooder cop that couldn’t be bought. Or for one of my competitors to infiltrate my games. So I’d dedicated a fair amount of time to developing alternatives. Plan A had been all about going at things sideways to keep people from guessing my intentions, convincing them that they’d just organically fallen into my debt, and wow, how nice of me to not immediately break their kneecaps but instead allow them to pay me in installments or information.

Plan B cut the bullshit. No machinations, no deception. I sent my goons after everyone I had dirt on and told them to give me what I wanted or I would make their lives a living hell. Similar to what I’d done with Stella, but removing me from the equation. The people I targeted wouldn’t know who, exactly, was on the other end of the blackmail, just that I existed and

was capable of following through on my threats.

Plan C . . . well, let’s just say it was messier. Involved me getting my hands dirty. And it was the last resort for a reason.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” Stella said.

“Who?” I said.

“Richard Lawson’s son. This whole time, I thought you were targeting my parents because you went after Blake and then me, but it’s him you’re really gunning for, isn’t it?”

I stared at her back in the harsh light of my phone. How the *fuck* had she pieced it together? “What makes you think that?”

“What you went through with your mom. How much you hate rich people. Your mom being a ‘young, hot side piece’ to a wealthy older man. That my head would explode if I knew who you were. Also, the two of you look alike. I noticed it the first time I saw you together, but thought it was just coincidence. And you’re the same age his son should be.”

Fucking hell. This was my fault again, for saying too much. For giving her context clues.

I shook my head. “You’ve told me he’s a good guy, and yet here you are dropping knowledge about an abandoned child. What a stand-up man.”

Her steps slowed. “Richard wouldn’t just abandon you.”

“Abandon *a* child,” I said, unwilling to confirm her suspicions. “And I changed my mind. You really are as dumb as you look.”

“And you’re as mean as you look!” She stopped, turning on me. “Richard is a good man. One of the best I know.”

“Most of the people you know are irredeemable scum.”

“Not him. He would be thrilled to find out his child was in the same city as him.” She grimaced. “Well, maybe not thrilled about that child being *you*, because, you know, you’re *horrible*. But that you were alive and healthy? He’d be over the moon.”

“Why the fuck would you think that, Stella?”

“Because I remember you.”

I took a staggered step backward. “What?”

She shook her head. “Hearing about you. During Richard’s divorce. I

remember my parents saying something about how he'd met someone new and it was going well and he was happy."

"Bullshit."

"No, I *do*!" she insisted. "And then I remember him being sad for months,

and asking what happened, and no one would tell me anything. I overheard my parents whispering one night about a baby, and Richard being desperate to find it."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Now you're just lying."

"I'm not lying!" she yelled, her face turning red. "Why would I lie?"
"Because that's all people like you do!"

"People like *me*?" she roared. "You fucking lie about *everything* !"

"I'm not lying now!" I yelled back. "Richard is a fucking piece of shit."
"Based on what? Your preconceived notions of him? Your false belief that he abandoned you and your mother? I've known the man since I was born. He is my godfather. He's been at every major milestone of my life, and he was one of the only people who didn't abandon me after what happened with Maddie. And because I've spent so much time around him, I know I'm not wrong. I'm a decent judge of people's character. Case in point, I knew immediately you were a douchebag."

"And yet you kissed me."

"Which I plan to speak to my therapist about at length in order to unravel the deep-seated self-hatred that must have led to that decision," she said. "The point is, I *know* Richard. And he's not capable of hiding some big, dark, ugly secret. He's honest and genuine."

I shook my head. "Why would I trust the word of someone who was best friends with Maddie Clyde? You know she killed a girl, right? In the Caribbean? Hit her over the head with an oar and knocked her into the

water, where she drowned."

The blood drained from Stella's face.

"So, no, I might not know Richard as well as you do, but I trust my judgement of his character far more than I trust yours. And I can prove I'm right."

"How?"

"By taking you to someone who was there when it all happened."I hefted the gun again, pointing it past her. "Keep walking."

31

Stella

THE MOTION OF THE CAR shook me awake. I must have fallen asleep somehow, my exhaustion finally getting the upper hand over fear. I couldn't have slept long, because it was still dark outside.

My eyes immediately went to the dashboard clock. 5:30 a.m. I'd been out for less than an hour, and from the looks of it, we were still on the highway. We practically had the road to ourselves, the city so far behind that we'd passed through two more on our journey north, though they were smaller. The sun was starting to rise, turning the distant horizon a dusky pink. Maybe I'd get a chance to flag down a passing motorist. Yes, it was risky, but I couldn't come up with a better alternative. We were driving too fast for me to barrel-roll out of the passenger door. And it wasn't like I had a phone to call for help—mine was probably lost or stolen at this point. No one even knew where I was, so if Theo—or whatever the fuck his name was—did end up murdering me and dumping my body, it might really be weeks before it was found, if ever.

I didn't know where we were going, how much longer we'd be driving, or what would happen when we arrived at our destination. What was worse, I had no idea if Blake had made it out alive, because the man beside me

refused to answer my questions.

He'd fucking *kidnapped* me. I should have been terrified, but more than anything, I was *pissed.*

I sighed and pretended to shift in my seat, turning my head away from "Theo," my eyes slitted just enough to see. The glove box didn't have a lock on it, and the car's registration might be in there. With his real-ass name on it. I'd have one chance at this, so I had to make it work, had to fight back my fear of what might happen and do what I had to.

I took a deep breath through my nose, steeling myself, and then another. "Watch out!" I yelled, jerking upright and pointing left.

He slammed on the brakes and yanked the wheel right to avoid the nonexistent obstacle. My instinct was to freeze, to curl up, to brace myself for the scream that would follow, but I pushed myself through it and shot

forward in my seat. The car swerved, and my fingers missed the glove box latch, but I got it on the second try, yanking it open and grabbing as much as I could.

He reacted faster than I expected, straightening us out and ripping the papers away. But it was too late. I'd already seen it. I knew who he was. "Tyler Neumann," I said, my voice shaking with adrenaline.

He made an angry noise and threw the papers back into the glove box, having to lean into my space to slam it shut again.

I inspected him with fresh eyes. The name Tyler fit him well, seeing as it was one of the douchier ones in existence. The only thing worse would be a J name.

He sat back and said nothing, but I could tell from the way his jaw jumped that he was furious. Good, I'd finally scored one against him, and since he hadn't hit me or threatened me with the gun again, maybe he wasn't as homicidal as I feared back in the tunnels, when his rage had been visceral.

I looked him over, wondering where the gun even was. We were still in our party clothes, and he was coated in yuck from our trek through the city's underground, his white tuxedo shirt smeared and torn, a pant leg ripped from snagging it on a pipe. He'd used a cleaning wipe on his hands before touching the steering wheel, but did he give me one for my soon-to- be-infected-wounds? No. Proving how much he didn't care about me and never had.

God, I'd been so stupid. I hadn't ever fully trusted him, but I'd let him in enough to help him. *To fuck him*. Which I would never forgive myself for. Runa was going to start charging me by the hour after I unloaded all this on her.

If I got the chance to see her again.

Shit, Runa. If I died, who would pay her medical bills?

My thoughts went back to Aunt Cordy's fundraiser and the way Dad had pleaded to cover some of the cost for Runa's TMR surgery. Was that just because he wanted to help his struggling daughter? Or out of the pure goodness of his heart? Would he step up and do the right thing even without me there?

I wanted to say yes, but after all these ugly revelations with Theo—no, *Tyler*—I was questioning my own judgement. I knew Maddie was bad, but murder? And Keith committing elder abuse? I never would have seen that coming. Jessica, however . . . I mean, she'd always rubbed me the wrong

way, but I'd assumed it was because of her type A personality mixed with being an insufferable kiss-ass.

At least Tyler had allowed me a brief phone call to Derrick (on speaker because he didn't trust me not to talk in code or something) to make sure Amos was taken care of. So, he wasn't an animal killer, at the very least, but all other bets were off. And sure, he'd *said* he was taking me to someone who could prove Richard was a shitty person, but did I trust him?

Never again.

My stomach growled. Loud enough to be heard over the road noise. I'd already eaten the emergency crackers in my clutch, but they were running thin, and the acid was starting to build. Just when I'd started to make some progress and get a little relief, my life went to shit again and my stomach right along with it.

"There are snacks in the back," Tyler said.

"I can't eat them."

"The ones on the right are gastritis-friendly."

I stared at his profile. He had food I could eat. *Why?* "Been planning my kidnapping for long?"

He made a dismissive sound. "Now who has a big ego?"

"Then explain the facts, man formerly known as Theo."

He shot me an annoyed look and kept his mouth shut, just like he had this entire four-hour ride. I had never wanted to kick someone in the face more, but the cramped quarters meant there wasn't enough room.

Carefully, I turned in my seat, cautious of any sudden movement from him because there was nothing to say this wasn't some sort of trap, and glanced in the back. At first, I didn't see what he was talking about, because his gym bag was covering it and it was still mostly dark, but a passing streetlight revealed a row of boxes peeking out from behind the bag.

I slid it away and stared. Plain, unsweetened, squeezable applesauce. Rice crackers. Raw almonds. Single-serving packages of dried bananas. Unseasoned potato chips fried in light olive oil.

"How long have these been here?" I asked.

Silence.

“Tyler!” I finally snapped, at wits’ end.

He must have heard the murder in my voice because he actually answered me. “Since Cordy’s dinner.”

That was weeks and weeks ago.

And I hadn’t noticed because he’d conveniently hidden them behind his gym bag.

“Why’d you buy them?” I said in a small voice.

He sighed, the next words spoken low, like he didn’t want to say them. “I read that you have to eat at regular intervals, and saw how restricted the diet was, so I bought them in case we got stuck in traffic or something and you didn’t have anything else on you.”

I finally turned back around in my seat.

He glanced over as we passed beneath another light, eyes steely. “Don’t read into it. This is more about me than it is about you.”

“Isn’t it always?” I sniped, but regardless of why he bought them, I was grateful, because I needed to put something in my stomach.

I turned again and snagged some applesauce and crackers. Sounds of crinkling filled the car as I opened them. They weren’t my usual brands—these were organic—but the ingredient lists looked fine.

“What was your plan?” I asked, popping a cracker into my mouth.

Tyler’s forearm flexed as he squeezed the steering wheel, the only sign he’d heard me speak.

“With the employees,” I pressed, unwilling to let the conversation drop no

matter how hard he tried to ignore me. “You were going to blackmail them, right? Force them to give you information?”

Silence.

I bounced a cracker off the side of his face.

He flinched sideways like I’d punched him, and shot me a look of warning. “Don’t do that again.”

“Then answer a question!”

“Why, so your brother will have more to give to the cops?”

“Does that mean he’s still alive and free to do that?”

His expression turned cagey.

My fingers curled as the urge to strangle him became unbearable. “Just fucking tell me.”

More silence.

“Pull over,” I said.

“Why? Are you carsick?”

“No. I want to slap you but recognize it’s not safe to do so while you’re driving.”

He shocked me by actually slowing down. And then pulling to the side of

the road.

He hit his hazards and faced me. “Do it.”

I stared at him, hating that the rising sun had turned his skin golden, making

him look angelic when I knew he'd been sent straight from hell to torture me. My hand shook with the urge to actually follow through. To pull back my arm and not just slap him, but punch him in the face, over and over again. This man had looked me in the eye while lying to me more times than I could count. He'd flirted with me, danced with me, forced me to parade him through my parents' house, all while planning to burn the life they'd worked so hard for to the ground. I couldn't even bring myself to think about all the other things we'd done together, or I might actually get sick.

"Do it, Stella," he repeated, looking like he meant it, like he *wanted it.*

I shook my head. "No. I'm done giving you what you want. Get back on the road."

He checked his mirrors and pulled back on, and we were quiet for a while, him focused on driving, me working through my snacks.

"I need you to tell me what happened to make you like this," I said. "Every single step along the way that made you hate your father so much you were willing to fuck over so many other people in order to get to him. And I'm not just talking about my family. I'm talking about all the other people who owe you money. Everyone you planned to use."

"I'm not his—"

"Stop *lying*!" I screamed. "For once in your fucking life, just tell the truth."

He was quiet for so long that I didn't think he would do it, but then he ran a hand over his face, looking exhausted, and let out the longest sigh I had ever heard. "Maryanne Margaret Neumann," he said. "That was my mother's name, but everyone called her Meg. She was nineteen when they met. Richard was thirty-five."

I frowned because *I* was thirty-five, and nineteen-year-olds looked and acted like children to me.

“There are bigger age gaps out there, but she was young for her age,” Tyler said, and I felt my stomach drop. “And she was naïve, easy prey for someone looking to take advantage of her. She was also new to the city, had scraped and saved just to get there, barely escaping the poverty she’d been born into. Her parents ran a dairy farm that had been in her father’s family

for over a century. By the time she came around, it was underwater, and she and her seven siblings were doing most of the manual labor themselves. It . . . wasn’t a good childhood. Her parents were strict, deeply religious, and fucking *mean*. The worst combination.”

“At fifteen, they forced her to drop out of high school and toil in the fields during the day. At night, she worked at a twenty-four-hour diner serving handsy truck drivers and saving every single cent she could hide from her parents. It took her four years, but finally, she had enough for a bus ride to the city and the cheapest studio apartment she could find.”

I shifted in my seat, thinking how I’d been born with a silver spoon in my mouth and had the audacity to be mad about it growing up. No wonder Tyler hated me. Hell, *I* hated past me, still, even after the hours I’d spent in therapy trying to unpack my resentment.

“When I was little,” he continued, “and we didn’t have much food in the house, I remember Mom telling me at least we weren’t mixing ketchup and hot water to make tomato soup like she had when she was a kid.”

“Tyler, I’m—”

“*Don’t* say it,” he snapped. “I don’t want your pity.”

I shut my mouth.

He took another deep breath. “She was a waitress in the city, saving up to take community college courses, when they met. Mom was pretty spare on the details. All I know is that Richard came into the restaurant one day and swept her off her feet. She said he’d been charming, wealthy. That they’d had a whirlwind romance and she’d fallen quickly. Not that I could blame

her. She'd never had anything nice in her life, and suddenly here was this man, buying her expensive clothes and taking her on impromptu trips."

"It wasn't until several months into the relationship that she learned he was married, but by then, she was deeply in love. But it was okay. He swore he was going to leave his wife for her. He just needed time to get his affairs in order first. So my mom stayed with him, waiting, hoping. Believing. And then she found out she was pregnant with me. She told Richard right away, sure the news would be the final push he needed to file for divorce, but instead, he stopped taking her phone calls. Pretended not to know who she was when she publicly confronted him. Claimed she was nothing but a random woman trying to cause a scandal. And everyone in his life believed him, which must have included your parents since they *were* his best friends."

The man from Tyler's version of events was so different than the one I'd known all my life that it sounded like two different people. Literally. I was tempted to ask if Tyler was sure he'd found the *right* Richard, but one thing I'd learned about Tyler was that he was meticulous, so I had no doubt that he'd done the work to confirm it. Plus, the city might be a big place, but I highly doubted there were *two* Richard Lawsons who owned real estate firms with a twenty-five-year-old long-lost son.

"That is very different than what I remember," I said, carefully.

"You were a kid, and you overheard whispers. This is my fucking origin story, Stella. I think I know what I'm talking about."

I fell quiet again, because he was right.

"After the ordeal, Mom moved back home. Broke, pregnant, and heartbroken. She was so desperate that she went to her parents for help, even though they'd done nothing but abuse and neglect her all her life."

I braced myself, sensing what came next.

"They turned her away because she'd had premarital sex," he said. "So we

stayed with my aunt Jenny in her shitty apartment over a laundromat. We moved around a lot after that. There are huge gaps in the welfare system, and we slipped through them. The nearest food bank was half an hour away, but Mom worked two jobs and didn't own a car, which meant she hardly ever made it there, and when she did, it was so picked clean that there wasn't much left for us. I was never starving. But I was always hungry."

I swallowed down the rising lump in my throat, hating how easily my mind conjured an image of him, much younger, too thin, scared and hungry. "Mom must have been hungrier, because she always gave me the larger portions, but she never complained. Sometimes, there were men to help out, but they didn't last long, and they were even worse to her than her parents. I wasn't able to keep them off her when I was younger, but I tried."

My mind went back to the first time I saw the circular scars on his back and wondered what they were, thinking they were exactly the circumference of a cigarette. I couldn't imagine how awful someone would have to be to do that to a child, and god only knew what they'd done to Meg. It was horrible, what she and Tyler had been through. More than anyone should have to endure.

"She ran herself down to nothing," Tyler said, shaking his head. "It was like she was disappearing right in front of my eyes. The fall I turned sixteen is when I really remember looking at her and starting to worry. Well, more

than usual, at least. She was only thirty-five, but her hair had gone completely gray, and yeah, I know genetics and blah, blah, but none of her siblings had gray hair, so no one can convince me it wasn't caused by stress. She was just so frail, always exhausted, never able to catch up on sleep. At that point, I was old enough to get a job and help out, but even after she went down to working normal hours, she kept getting worse. We didn't have insurance, but I forced her to go to the doctor anyway. Two months later, she was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer."

I had to turn my head away and bite my lip. Somehow, the story just kept getting worse.

“No one visited her in the hospital,” he said. “I think the nurses felt bad for us, because they broke the rules and snuck a cot into her room so I could sleep over. One of her oncologists caught me once, early in the morning, but he must not have said anything because the cot stayed put.”

I braced myself, because I knew Meg was no longer with us, but I’d demanded Tyler tell me every single step that led to him becoming who he was, and now I had to face the full reality of that.

“The nurses did their best to prepare me for the end. It was kind of them, but there’s no way to prepare a child to watch their parent die.” His voice grew quieter. “Even before the diagnosis, mom was so frail that everyone said it would be over quickly.” He shook his head. “It wasn’t. Or maybe it was, but it didn’t feel that way to me, because she was dying and there was nothing I could do to save her. All I could do was sit there and say goodbye to her in stages. The day she lost the ability to speak, I remember staring down at her hand while I cried. Her skin was so transparent that I could count every single vein.”

A tear slipped down my cheek. Yes, I hated this man, but it didn’t mean my heart wasn’t breaking for him.

“It was in her lungs, at the end,” he said, staring out at the highway with unseeing eyes. “I still hear the sound of her gasping in my nightmares. I think she was trying to stay as long as she could for me. I can’t explain how else she hung on for as long as she did. The day she slipped into a coma, I finally found the courage to tell her to let go. I told her it was okay to stop fighting. I lied and said I’d be all right, that I couldn’t watch her suffer anymore because it was killing me, too.”

I reached out and threaded my fingers through Tyler’s free hand, dragging it into my lap, squeezing it so he knew that at least he wasn’t reliving this

alone.

“She must have believed me, because she passed that night. Afterward, I sat with her body for over an hour before the nurses were able to lead me from

the room, and I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

"Why?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

He shook his head. "Because we didn't have any money. I tried to go to my grandparents, but they refused to claim Mom's body or help with her funeral costs even though they'd sold the farm and actually had money by then. She wanted to be buried," Tyler said, his voice barely above a whisper. "But in the end, she was handed over to the state and cremated because no one would help me."

He cleared his throat, sniffed, and the sound of him trying to hold it together was enough to make me lose the fight against my own tears. I turned my head away so he wouldn't see, because what right did I have to cry?

Listening to Tyler's story was enough to make *me* want to burn the entire world to the ground. No wonder he was so angry, so mean, so unwilling to let people in. Why would he when all anyone had ever done was hurt him? "It wasn't until senior year of college, after I hosted my first big poker party, that I had enough money to do right by her," he said. "I found a nice plot of land in a cemetery overlooking a lake and bought it for her. It took another party for me to afford the kind of coffin she deserved. Another one before I could buy her headstone. She has everything she wanted now, and I even pay a groundskeeper to buy new flowers every week and place them by her headstone."

"I'm so fucking sorry," I said.

Tyler turned toward me, but instead of grief, I saw a deep, cavernous well of rage in his eyes. He yanked his hand out of mine. "I don't want your apology, Stella. I just want *him* to hurt as badly as she did."

32

Tyler

I HADN'T BEEN BACK TO this piece of shit town in years. Not since

Josh's mom and stepdad moved away. There was nothing for me here but bad memories and the evidence that nothing had changed. The houses were still run down. The yards were overgrown with weeds. The concrete roads were pitted and pockmarked, and the dirt ones were so bad you'd need a lifted truck to navigate them.

Mom was buried a whole county over in a much nicer area, away from her fucked-up family. I didn't even tell them where she was—those assholes didn't deserve access to her. So, no, there hadn't been a reason for me to come back here. Not until now.

One of the few changes of note was that there were more trees than I remembered. This part of the country was flat, and growing up, there had been a lot of open fields, though they'd mostly laid fallow because the local farming industry had been in full collapse by then. Now the forests were creeping back in, reclaiming what had been stolen from them. I wondered if that meant the wildlife was rebounding, too, bears and wolves stalking through the trees.

Stella was quiet beside me, her face turned away as she stared out the window at the passing landscape. Seeing her openly weep for me had been oddly gratifying. Like maybe I wasn't wrong for thinking I had an especially shitty childhood.

She must have felt my eyes on her because she glanced my way. "Where are we going?"

"To see my aunt Jenny. She was the only one Mom had any contact with and can confirm everything I told you."

Ten minutes later, a familiar, abandoned farmhouse appeared ahead on the right, looking even more decrepit than I remembered, the roof caving in, the front porch half rotted away. I hit my blinker and turned onto a dirt road just past it, slowing the car to avoid all the ruts and potholes. My shoulders stiffened up, and I put both hands on the wheel, white-knuckling it even though we were only going ten miles an hour.

Stella noticed. “You sure you want to do this?”

“Yes. Aunt Jenny will confirm everything I told you, and then you’ll know I’m not lying.”

“I don’t think you’re lying,” she said. “Not about this. I believe you really think Richard treated your mom that way.”

“But you still don’t believe he did.”

“Does it matter if I do?”

“It does,” I said before I could stop myself.

Did I have any right to ask her to believe me? No. But I was asking anyway because I *needed* someone else to hear the whole story. To understand that I had my reasons for doing what I’d done, behaving the way I had.

My mother died a horrible death that might have been prevented if she’d had access to early cancer screenings or better healthcare. Coverage she *would* have had if Richard had done the right thing. For him to claim he’d been looking for us, all so he could save face if the scandal eventually broke, was un-fucking-forgivable. I couldn’t let him get away with it.

All too soon, we were pulling into the dusty driveway of a run-down, brown-shingled ranch. Pink flamingos dotted the lawn. A flower basket hung beside the front door. We parked next to Jenny’s ancient, rusted-out minivan, and I turned off the car. Two tired-looking old hound dogs roused themselves from the front porch. One gave a low *woof* as they headed our way, but neither seemed aggressive.

Still, I wasn’t taking any chances.

“Let me go first,” I said, pushing my door open. Both dogs wiggle-butted right up to me, tails blurring, noses leaving wet marks on my pants. “They’re fine,” I told Stella, and she climbed out next.

They went around and greeted her, and then retreated toward the house like their jobs were done and they could go back to napping.

“The fuck are you doing here?” a raspy voice called.

I turned to see Jenny standing by the railing, wearing a blue-and-white tie-dyed dress, her long brown hair piled on top of her head, a blunt dangling from her fingers. She’d lost weight since the last time I’d seen her, the dress hanging loose on her frame.

“I came to talk to you,” I said.

She took a long hit off the blunt, eyeing me over the top of it. Yup, this was going about how I expected.

“This is my girlfriend, Stella,” I said, putting a hand on her lower back to get her moving. Why I felt the need to still play-act like we were together, I had no idea. Maybe it was habit at this point, a way to explain her presence. Jenny exhaled a cloud of smoke and looked Stella over from head to toe. “I thought you left here because you wanted to get away from the trash?” Stella reached the porch steps first, extending her hand toward my aunt. “It’s been a long fucking night. At least give me a hit if you’re going to be an immediate bitch to me.”

Jenny barked a laugh, caught off-guard, and passed the blunt over. “Maybe you’re not so bad.”

“I’ve even been told I’m tolerable once or twice,” Stella said, taking an even longer drag then Jenny had.

My aunt chuckled.

I pulled the blunt from Stella’s fingers when she tried to take a second hit. “Calm down, lightweight.” I wasn’t one, so I took two drags and passed it back to my aunt.

“What do you want?” she said.

I blew out a lungful of smoke. “To talk about Mom.”

She scowled. “You finally going to tell me where you hid her?”

“I didn’t *hide her,* I gave her the burial she deserved, without help from any of you.”

Jenny pointed the blunt at me. “Don’t start that bullshit. I was in *jail* , Tyler. What the fuck did you expect me to do from there? Barter my commissary money for a headstone?”

I clenched my jaw shut on a retort. I was not getting dragged into this fight again.

“I just want to say goodbye to my sister,” Jenny said.

“Fine. I’ll tell you where she is. After you answer my questions and promise not to tell anyone else in the family. She’s finally at peace, and I don’t want them bothering her.”

“Like I talk to any of those fuckers.” She studied me for a second. “What do you want to know?”

“What happened to Mom in the city?”

Her gaze slid away from mine. “Why are you asking me that now, after all these years?”

“Because I found Richard.”

Her eyes, the same pale blue my mother’s had been, landed back on me.

“What do you mean, you found him? You promised Meg you wouldn’t go looking.” She inspected my clothes—dirty, but expensive—before her gaze slid to my six-figure car. “Don’t tell me you *live* there.”

“I live there.”

“Goddamn it, Tyler. He didn’t lie and tell you he tried to find you two, did he?”

Atingle ran up my spine. Why—*the fuck*—had my aunt jumped straight to that conclusion? “Why would you think he said that?”

She waved her hand through the air. “Because that man was always lying about everything.”

I studied her. Lack of eye contact, increased breathing, immediate defensiveness, looking up and to the right, fidgeting with the blunt. She was trying to hide something from me.

Stella shifted at my side, and I could tell from the look on her face that she thought so, too.

“He told a pretty convincing story,” I said, remaining vague on the details to see how Jenny would react.

She suddenly became very interested in her fingernails. “’Course that asshole did.”

Lying. She was *lying* .

“Aunt Jenny,” I said, my voice laced with barely restrained anger. “I am going to need you to tell me what happened. What *really* happened.”

Her head snapped up, eyes boring into mine. “Don’t you take that attitude with me. I am your elder.”

I stepped toward her. “You’re nothing but a mean old drunk who’s spent your whole life blaming other people for the problems *you* caused. You mooched off us when we had nothing to give and took advantage of Mom’s kindness for years. The fucking *least* you owe me is the goddamn truth!”
“Tyler,” Stella said, putting a hand on my arm.

“No!” Jenny shouted. “Let him show you who he is, honey. Who he’s always been. A self-obsessed brat who thinks he’s too good for the rest of us.” She got right in my face, breath reeking of pot and stale liquor. “You wanna know what happened? Your mama saw what those people were like. She saw how greedy and awful money made them. How rotten and spoiled and *mean* their kids were, and she didn’t want you to grow up in that world. She thought it would be better for you if you grew up here, with nothing, so you learned the value of money and hard work. *That’s* why she left

Richard.”

She poked me in the chest. “Well, I’m glad she’s not around to find out she failed. That it wasn’t money that made them like that, it was blood, and even after all her hard work, you turned out just as bad as those rich assholes.” She shoved me, and I stumbled back a step. “Get off my property. I got somewhere to be.”

She turned and stormed back into the house, and I just stood there, unmoving, my ears ringing. I tried to tell myself she was lying, but the truth was there for anyone who knew how to read the signs.

“We should go,” Stella said, taking the steps down to the dirt lawn.

I didn’t follow her because I didn’t think I could move. My hands were shaking, and I felt hot, dizzy. Like I was about to puke.

“Tyler, come on,” Stella said, heading toward the car.

My gaze went past her to the trees, my vision tunneling around me. There was nothing in my head but a low roar and a need to get away. From what, I had no idea. Maybe myself. Maybe the knowledge that my entire life had been a lie and I had wasted years of it pursuing a Machiavellian plot of familial vengeance. Maybe if I started walking, I’d feel better. Maybe if I *kept* walking, heading as deep into these woods as I could, I might find some forest hermit with untold knowledge who could tell me how to unfuck my life.

Aunt Jenny came storming back outside. Without so much as looking at me, she took the stairs down and climbed into the minivan. The engine wheezed to life, and then roared as she dropped the gas pedal to the floor and tore out of there so fast the rear tires skidded. Time seemed to slow as the van suddenly jerked several feet to the left.

Stella was standing in its path, her eyes widening as she realized she was about to get hit. I screamed—her name, or a warning, I wasn't sure—but there was nothing she could do to avoid being clipped by the tail end, and then suddenly she was flying backward, her head cracking against the ground.

Fuck!

I leapt from the porch as Jenny took off down the road, still swerving. Stella lay in the dirt, the dogs closing in on her. I shooed them away and slid to my knees by her side. Her eyes were closed, head lolling in a boneless way that shot terror straight through my heart.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Was she dead?

"Stella."

No response.

I grabbed her shoulder and was about to shake her, but thought better of it. What if something critical was broken and the slightest movement finished her off? I slid my fingers to her neck, feeling for a pulse and panicking when I didn't immediately find it.

What had I done? What had I fucking done?

Stella was afraid of cars, and I'd forced her into one and dragged her up here to what, get killed by another? And god, after everything else I'd

already put this woman through. This prickly, impossible, snarky, beautiful woman, who I once thought I hated but now—

Her pulse jumped against my fingers.

Relief swept through me, but that didn't mean she was okay, just alive. She'd just been hit by a car, and while it hadn't looked *that* bad, she was thinner and frailer than most. Her back might be broken. She might have brain swelling. How the fuck did I check for that?

I had no idea, but luckily, I knew someone who did.

I yanked my phone out of my pocket. One bar.

Please let me be able to make a call. I swear, I'll never be mean to this woman again, I promised any deity who might have been listening.

I called Josh and put it on speaker. A few seconds passed before it finally started to ring, and I swear my heart stopped while I waited.

"Yello," Josh said.

"Can you hear me?"

"Kinda. You're breaking up a little. Are you on the shitter? You know your bathroom gets the worst reception in the apartment."

"Is Aly with you, or is she on shift?"

"She's here. Why?"

"Can I talk to her?"

"Seriously?" he griped. "I barely hear from you in weeks—*weeks, Tyler*—and the first time you actually call me first, it's to speak to my fiancée?"

"I have an injured woman here!" I yelled. "Quit fucking around and give

Aly the phone!”

“Oh, shit. One second.” I heard the sound of running feet. “Babe! Tyler needs your help, and before you say something sarcastic like I did, it’s serious.”

A scuffling noise came over the line, and then Aly’s voice. “Tyler? What happened?”

“She got clipped by a car and hit her head,” I said, hating the panic in my voice. “Now she’s unconscious. What do I do?”

“Call 911,” she said.

I hung up, called them, gave them our location and then called Aly back. “They’re on their way, now what do I do?”

“Call them back so they can talk you through it.”

“That’s what I called you for! They’re just an operator. You’re a fucking ER nurse.”

“Jesus. Okay, is she breathing?”

“She has a pulse.”

“Yeah, but *is she breathing* ?”

“I don’t know!” I yelled, staring down at Stella’s slack-jawed face.

Aly went into full nurse mode. “Put a hand on her ribs and your cheek near her mouth. Wait to see if her lungs expand or she exhales on you.”

I did what she said, shaking with adrenaline, and just like with Stella’s pulse, it took me far too long to feel anything.

“She’s breathing,” I said, about to pass out from relief.

“That’s good,” Aly assured me. “Keep one hand on her ribs to make sure she doesn’t stop. What position is she in?”

“She’s on the ground. On her back. I didn’t move her.”

“Good. Don’t. Make sure her head stays slightly tilted back while she’s unconscious to keep her airway open. If she starts to gag at all, roll her sideways so she doesn’t choke.”

“Puking after a head injury is bad, right?”

“It’s not great,” Aly said, and I was grateful for her honesty. “Is it light where you are?”

“Yes, we’re outside.”

“Crack one of her eyelids open.”

Aly walked me through the steps of checking Stella’s pupils for responsiveness, and sounded relieved when I told her both of them contracted immediately and equally.

“Have you tried to wake her up at all?”

“No, I called you immediately.”

“Okay, next we’re going to try the shout-tap-shout method,” Aly said.

It involved shouting a person’s name, gently tapping them, and then

shouting their name again. I was just gearing up to scream *Stella!* straight into her face because how dare she scare me this badly, when she started to wake up on her own, letting out a groan.

“I think she’s coming to,” I said. “She’s rolling onto her side. That means she didn’t break her neck, right?”

“I mean, you’d need X-rays to be sure—”

“*Aly* .”

“She probably didn’t break her neck. But she still needs to go to the hospital to get checked out.”

Stella made another low sound and blinked her eyes open.

I carefully brushed her hair back from her face. “Hey, Sunshine.” Aly sucked in a surprised breath.

“Was that a pet name?” Josh whispered.

The sound of a slap came over the line, and then shushing.

Great, I was on speakerphone, too.

“Tyler?” Stella rasped.

“Ask her questions,” Aly said. “Simple ones.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“*Not* Sunshine,” Stella answered.

I grinned, taking her immediate snark as a good sign. “What month is it?”
“August.”

“Who am I?”

“A bastard.”

Josh choked back a laugh.

“I’m hanging up now,” I told Aly.

“Wait!” she said, before giving me a list of instructions on how to handle Stella and what to watch out for in case her condition deteriorated while we waited for the ambulance.

I asked her to text it to me, thanked her, and hung up.

“Who was that?” Stella asked.

“My best friend and his fiancée,” I told her. “She’s an ER nurse. What hurts?”

“My whole body,” she groaned, her breathing picking up.

“What specifically, Stella? Come on, try to focus.”

“My head. My hip?” she added, sounding less sure. “My forearms from putting them out to try and block the van. Oh, god, I got hit by a car. I got hit by a *car*.” She burst into tears. “Am I okay?”

I couldn’t let her just lie there anymore, and since she didn’t say her neck or back, I pulled her onto my lap. “You’re okay.” No thanks to me. “You’re not even bleeding, and she didn’t hit you that hard, just enough to knock the wind out of you. You hit your head when you fell, but you were only out for a minute or two.”

She sobbed even harder, and I didn’t know if it was because she was in that much pain or just traumatized.

“I hate you,” she said, trying to push away.

I held her easily, refusing to let her go, because for a second there, I’d thought I’d lost her forever. “I know.”

“This is your fault!”

“It is.”

She beat her fists against my chest, still crying, and I was glad, because it meant that she couldn't have been hurt that badly if she was trying to fight me, right?

"I'm sorry," I told her, pulling her close enough to drop a kiss on top of her head.

She punched me one more time and went still, her sides heaving, voice broken. "Why should I believe you?"

It wasn't lost on me that she'd been forced to ask me that question multiple times. "Because I'm done lying to you, Stella. I thought you were dead. I thought I had gotten you killed, and it . . . shifted my perspective on things."

She was silent for the longest moment of my life. "Finally realized that it's actually *you* who's in love with *me,* huh?"

"I wouldn't go that far," I said.

I'd spent my whole life so full of hate that I didn't know if there was any room in my heart for love. But what I did know was that over the last several weeks, Stella had wormed her way into it against my will. I'd told myself I kidnapped her because I wanted someone else to bear witness to everything I'd been through, everything I had lost, and maybe that was true, but deep down, I hadn't wanted her to get caught or arrested. I'd wanted a chance to explain myself. Had *hated* the look of loathing and disgust on her face when she realized what I'd done, like we'd suddenly been reset back to day one.

So I'd done what I did best. Acted in my own self-interest without a thought for what anyone else wanted or needed. I'd forced, coerced, and

bullied because I'd spent so long treating people that way that I'd forgotten there was any other way to behave.

In the distance, the first wail of sirens cut through the air.

I stared down at the woman in my arms, with no idea how to move forward from here, only knowing I wanted to move forward with her. And from this point on, I'd do whatever it took to make that happen.

33

Stella

"HOW MUCH LONGER UNTIL WE get to the hotel?" I asked.

"We're almost there," Tyler said.

I rested my head against the window as he drove, watching the sun dip toward the horizon. We'd just gotten out of the hospital, having spent most of the day there thanks to a combination of long wait times and the barrage of tests the doctors put me through, just to be sure.

Nothing was broken, and my concussion was minor. Mostly, I was just bruised and scraped to hell, and while the hospital staff had cleaned my lacerations, the rest of me was still filthy from the tunnels, and I badly needed a shower. I was starting to smell. And I was fucking exhausted. Not only had I been up for almost two days, but they'd been two of the most harrowing days of my entire life.

"Is Blake okay?" I asked. The least Tyler owed me was some goddamn answers.

"I don't know, but he did manage to get past my goons."

"You're not going after him, are you?"

"No. Next time I see him, it'll be to apologize, thank him for stopping me, and give him this." He pulled open the center console, and there sat my grandfather's Patek Philippe watch.

I snatched it up. “I’ll give it to him. You can’t be trusted.”

“That’s fair,” Tyler said, and I glanced over to see him looking resigned.

Afew minutes later, we pulled into a dusty parking lot. Of course the hotel was a tiny roadside place, but that’s what I got for telling him to book the closest thing he could find. At least it was clean inside, and looked like it’d had a somewhat recent renovation—no shag carpeting or roaches in sight. The only problem was that there was only one bed.

I shook my head. No, actually, it wasn’t. Tyler could sleep on the fucking floor. There, problem solved.

I paced to the bathroom and turned on the shower, dropping the clothes we’d grabbed at a local Walmart on the counter. Steam filled the room as I stripped out of my ruined dress. I turned, saw a zombie in the mirror, and

gave myself a jumpscare.

Oh, Jesus, it was me. I looked like shit. Pale, gaunt, covered in scratches and bruises, bags under my bloodshot eyes.

Aknock sounded from the door, and I was grateful I’d locked it.

“Do you need help with anything?” Tyler asked.

I opened my mouth to tell him to go fuck himself, but thought better of it. Let him have a taste of his own silent treatment instead.

The shower was calling my name, and I threw back the curtain and stepped into it, sighing when the heat hit me. The only thing better than taking your bra off at the end of a long day was a hot shower when you were dirty and exhausted. I closed my eyes and sank to the floor, letting the water run over me. Everything hurt, not just physically, but also emotionally. The last time I’d been this drained was the day after Runa’s accident.

I closed my eyes, resting my head against the tile. The only saving grace

was that I was so tired my brain was starting to turn fuzzy, thoughts slipping away because it required too much effort to hold on to them.

For the next twenty minutes, I was on autopilot, groggily climbing to my feet and washing my hair and body with the cheap hotel products. Drying off. Getting into clean clothes and wrapping the towel around my hair. Plodding back out into the room. Grumbling something unintelligible when Tyler asked if I was okay.

I was in the middle of towel-drying my hair when he reemerged after his shower, his own towel slung low around his waist, hair slicked back, water droplets coursing down over his heavy muscles.

He saw me looking, dropped his gaze, and fell to his knees. I blinked a couple of times to make sure I was really seeing what I thought I was. I'd pulled the blackout curtains shut, and only a single, soft lamp illuminated the room, its light dancing over Tyler's crouched form.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Whatever you want," he answered.

I sighed. "Look, it has been a very long, very traumatic day for both of us, and I am begging you to stop with the games. If you're not ready to talk about what happened, that's fine. I understand that you probably need time to process or have your existential crisis in peace. Just, please, can we not do whatever this is?"

He stayed where he was. Same position, head down, hands resting on his

knees.

"Tyler," I said, careful to keep the rage out of my voice because this man just found out that his dead mother had told him a massive lie that effectively set him down a dark path that could have ended *very* badly if my little brother hadn't called the cops and potentially saved all our asses from whatever nuclear-level catastrophe Tyler might have unleashed.

“This isn’t a game,” he said. “I’ve done nothing but bully and threaten you. I won’t apologize again, because I don’t think you should forgive me. But I want to offer myself up for punishment instead.”

“Punishment.”

It wasn’t a question, but he nodded. “Whatever you think I deserve, I’ll accept.”

This fucking asshole. Hadn’t he messed with me enough?

I put my hands on my hips and turned fully toward him. “So if I told you I wanted you to kiss the floor, you’d—oh my god, no! Don’t actually kiss that, ew, are you serious?”

He froze with his mouth an inch away from the carpet, leaning forward like a knight paying homage—which, I mean, yes, thank you, finally the kind of recognition I deserved.

“Where is this coming from?” I asked.

He stayed right where he was while he answered, muscles starting to pop from the strain of holding himself in place. “All this time, I’ve been pushing you, intentionally pissing you off because I *did* want any reaction I could get. Good, or bad. But mostly, I think I wanted bad. I wanted you to be mean to me because it made it easier to lie to myself, made it easier to convince myself that I hated you when the truth is, I think I’ve been obsessed with you since the moment we met.”

I didn’t say anything to that, was too mesmerized by the fact that he was *still* holding himself in place, right where I’d told him to stop. Maybe I should have relented and ordered him up, but I wanted to test this, see how serious he was, see how long he could last. Also? I *did* want him to suffer.

I started counting seconds in my head.

Ten.

Thirty.

One minute.

His shoulders trembled.

Two minutes.

Veins were starting to pop on his biceps.

Oh, Tyler was *dead* serious.

“You can sit up,” I said.

He pushed back to kneeling, head down, hands on his thighs.

“What is this? What are you doing?”

“I think I’m a brat.”

“Tyler, everyone thinks you’re a brat.”

“No, like brat kink.”

Oh. *Ohhh*. “So you really *did* like it when I was mean to you.”

“I did.” He glanced up at me from beneath his brows, his gaze hot, searing. “And I think you did, too.”

My breath whooshed out of me, because, fuck. Was he right? I mean, I *had* felt a little thrill zing through me whenever I got the better of him. I *had* been turned on against my will almost every time we were together, but I thought it was just because of the annoying spark of chemistry between us. And my thoughts about Tyler *had* strayed toward him needing to be put in his place a time or two. But there was no way to know for certain whether I

was really into this until I put it to the test.

“Who said you could look at me?” I asked, my voice cracking like a whip. Tyler snapped his gaze back down, and in that moment, I learned something very critical about myself: I liked when he did what I said. Like, *liked it*, liked it. And I didn’t know if that was because, so far, I’d been the one forced to do whatever he wanted, or if I just plain enjoyed having this big, loud, *bossy* douchebag of a man finally shut the fuck up and kneel there in silence.

My eyes dropped, and it was clear from the way Tyler’s towel was starting to tent up that *he* enjoyed it, too.

“I’m so mad at you,” I told him.

“You have every right to be,” he said. “I’ve been the world’s biggest bastard.”

“How does it feel to find out it was all for nothing?” I asked, because I also wanted to be a little bit mean to him, now that I knew he could take it. I wanted him to pay for all the things he’d done and all the other things he almost had.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m numb. I think I might be in shock.”

“And you think brat play is somehow going to help?”

“All I know is that I don’t want to be in my own head right now. I don’t

want to think. I don’t want to make decisions. I just want you to tell me what to do.”

“And you’ll do whatever I say?” I asked, feeling a little shocked myself. Tyler, just quietly doing whatever I told him to? No way. This had to be some cruel, elaborate prank. One final *fuck you* before he disappeared out of my life forever and never faced the consequences of his actions or tried to make amends for what he’d done.

He nodded.

“So if I said crawl over here and kiss my feet, you’d—”

Oh, dear god, the man was crawling right across the grubby hotel carpet, shoulder muscles rolling, back flexing, head down like he’d been a very bad man and was ready to beg for forgiveness. I was absolutely going to draw this next, because I never wanted to forget the sight of so much languid power brought low in supplication, even if it *was* a prank.

He stopped when he reached me, the towel barely hanging on, and brushed his lips over the top of my foot. I’d been ready to turn down the A/C a few minutes ago because I was cold. My body was plenty warm now, humming with energy and awareness, my nerves firing on overdrive.

“I’ll do whatever you tell me to. The worse, the better. I’ve been bad, and I deserve to be punished in a fitting manner,” he said, sounding like he couldn’t wait for me to order him to do something degrading.

I had what was probably a general understanding of brat kink, thanks to a chatty client who bartended at a play club downtown, but I was by no means well versed enough to jump right into the deep end. From what I understood, it was very much a dom/sub relationship in which the sub enjoyed testing their limits and the dom’s patience, and the dom saw their impertinence as more playful than rude. I knew that discipline was part of it, that a dom was meant to punish their bratty sub to teach them better behavior, but . . . what if I didn’t want Tyler well-behaved? The idea of him suddenly turning nice and compliant didn’t sit right with me, felt like too much of a monumental personality shift.

Did I want him to be his most assholic self? No. But I also didn’t want him to stop pissing me off either, because in those moments when I’d forgotten that he was my blackmailer and we’d just been two people, bickering while simultaneously trying to make the other laugh or break or even scream . . . I’d forgotten that we weren’t really dating. That we were only supposed to be pretending to like each other. Maybe that was fucked up, but I’d never

been overly romantic. I didn’t want flowers and chocolate; I wanted a challenge.

I reached down and threaded my fingers through Tyler’s damp hair, bending his head back to force him to look up at me. His eyes were their deepest blue, pupils wide, expression open and guileless and patient, like he could have stayed like that all night if I told him to.

I’d never seen him so settled, so at peace, and it made me start to believe this might be real.

“I don’t want to hit you,” I said. “You don’t have to.” “Degradation, however . . .”

He tried to nod in my hold, but I tightened my fingers so he couldn’t move. “Yes, please.”

“And orgasm denial. You definitely don’t deserve to come.”

“I don’t.”

Fuck, the way he agreed so easily.

“Afterward, we’re talking,” I said.

He wrapped a hand around the back of my calf, rising up just enough for me to see that he was fully aroused. “I’ll do whatever you tell me to.”

Oh, god. Nope. I did not have the willpower to do the right thing and say no. I’d come close to dying today, and right now, I was desperate to feel alive. And, look, how convenient: a gorgeous, willing man on his knees before me.

Was I still fucking furious with Tyler? Absolutely, but the problem was, anger had always been part of the equation when it came to my attraction to him, and that didn’t seem to be changing anytime soon.

I slid my calf out of his grasp and dropped onto the mattress, spreading my legs open right in front of his face. “Lick my pussy, Tyler.”

Without hesitation, he ripped off my sweats and underwear and then shoved me backward on the mattress before crawling onto the bed with me. He ducked between my legs, pushing my thighs up and over his wide shoulders, tipping me back in the process and *burying* his face between my legs. Okay, then, no tame little sub for me. The second his tongue touched the evidence of my arousal, he groaned.

“Tell me you love how wet I am for you,” I said.

“I love how wet you are for me, Stella.” He swirled his tongue around my clit. “How hot.” It dipped into my entrance. “How tight.” A long, seductive

stroke back up to my clit, before he paused to toy with it. “I’ve wanted another taste of this pussy since I licked your underwear. It’s all I could think about.” He sank his tongue deep, nose nuzzling my clit.

“Stop,” I said.

He froze, lifted his eyes to mine, and the sight of him, staring up at me like that, his sides heaving from how turned on he was, hands shaking with the need to move, completely undid me. I wanted to grind down onto his face. Wanted to leave him wet and glistening and tell him he wasn’t allowed to clean himself off. Wanted *him* to go to sleep with *my* cum on him.

His eyes darkened, all the warning I had before he flicked his tongue inside me, proving just what a fucking brat he was.

“Sit back,” I said, both pissed, *and* pleased, which was an odd combination, but I was done suppressing my responses to this man. I presented Tyler with my foot. “Lick this instead.”

Again, *no* hesitation. He wrapped those big hands around me, one holding up my heel, the other cradling my calf. Still maintaining eye contact, he

licked a long, slow line all the way up the underside of my foot.

I propped myself up on an elbow, my other hand sliding between my spread legs. “Clean it.”

Tyler swirled his tongue around my big toe and then sucked it into his mouth, and from the way his eyes closed in bliss, it might as well have been his favorite food. I’d never had anyone do this to me before—no one had ever wanted to—and I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it. Especially when he shifted his grip and started massaging my foot simultaneously. There was just something so sinfully hot about it. Maybe it was because it felt slightly taboo. Or maybe it was that my feet had carried my weight for my entire life, and now someone was finally showing them some appreciation for it.

He shifted a little, and the towel finally gave up the fight, falling off him to pool onto the mattress. His dick filled my sight, so big, so hard. Fuck, he *really* liked this.

“Look at me,” I said.

His eyes fluttered open.

I plunged my fingers into myself.

Tyler’s gaze latched onto the movement, and I could tell from the way his grip tightened on my ankle that he wished it was his fingers filling me up. “If you do a good job, I’ll give you another taste,” I said.

He cleaned every single one of my toes while I used my fingers to tease myself, to tease us both. When he was done, he started to lean in. I planted my foot on his chest to stop him. He frowned, an echo of the Tyler I knew so well visible in his stormy expression.

I swirled my fingers deep inside me, eyes rolling at the pleasure, at the feel of my inner walls clenching around myself, and then pulled them out. “Open.”

The thunderclouds cleared, replaced by a pleased expression that told me Tyler liked my little deception. I held my fingers up in offering. He strained forward, having to work for it because my foot was still on his chest, and I was *not* going to make this any easier for him. The hottest part was that I knew he could overwhelm me if he wanted to, and yet he chose to play along instead.

He grabbed my wrist. Held it steady. Lifted his eyes to mine. And then he slid my fingers deep inside his mouth, tongue swirling around them, lapping me up, a pleased sound rumbling through his chest at the taste of me. I squeezed my thighs together, knowing how he must feel because I'd been craving another taste of him, too.

He slid off my fingers with a *pop!*

"Get on your knees and put your hands on the headboard," I told him.

He didn't ask why, didn't argue, just nodded in submission and crawled past me. I turned my head, watching him, mesmerized by the sight of his complicity. And then he was in position, thighs bunched, back flexed, big arms braced, facing the headboard. His skin looked gilded in the soft light, and maybe I *did* want to hurt him, at least a little, because if I had a flogger, I would have gladly used it to redden his ass.

My eyes rose to the three red marks on his back. I wanted to kiss them, tell him I was sorry they were there, that no one should have done that to him, but he didn't want to be in his head right now, and if I was being honest, neither did I, so that softer treatment would have to wait for another time, another mood. Right now, we needed something different, something harder on both of us, but *especially* him.

"Move back a little," I said.

He complied, giving me more than enough room to slide between him and the headboard.

I turned, putting my back to him, and pulled my shirt off. “Are you okay with us not using a condom again?”

“God, yes,” he growled. “I want—”

I turned and pressed a finger to his lips. “No one cares what you want.” His dick twitched against my back, even as his eyes flared. Oh, he *loved it* . Turning around, I did what *I* wanted, leaning forward, bracing one hand against the pillows, reaching between my thighs with the other to grip his girthy cock. I wasn’t even close to being able to take all of him, at least not easily, and the thought of the stinging pain that came from fucking a large dick without the proper prep only spun my desire higher. I remembered it well from our first time together and wanted to feel it again. *Needed* to. Because I had no idea how long this tentative peace would last and I planned to make every second of it count, give myself something good to remember if it all went to shit again because Tyler decided to go back to being The Worst.

“Don’t move a muscle,” I told him. And then I dragged the head of his dick through my folds, his skin hot against my slickness. I paused with it at my entrance, pushed back just a little to test myself. Oh, god, this wasn’t going to be easy for either of us. Him, because I planned to drag it out. Me, because my entire body was exhausted and hurt, and now I was asking even more of it.

My core pulsed at the thought of how good it had felt last time, warmth flooding my veins, nipples tightening. I swirled my hips, coating him in my arousal, and tried again, taking more this time. Another swirl. Another push, and I sank onto his head.

Tyler groaned above me, the sound guttural.

I smiled and pulled off him, repeating the motions, and sank back down. Oh, fuck, it was heaven. Exactly what I needed. The perfect blend of discomfort and pleasure. I wanted to prolong the feeling, so I stayed where I was, just existing, just breathing, while my body stretched around him. His chest heaved against my back, and I knew he must be *dying*, the urge to

thrust so strong it was nearly overwhelming.

I shifted forward, back again, taking just a *little* bit more before my body clenched up, fighting the invasion, trying to tell me it was too much when I knew damn well it wasn't nearly enough. The sound of our breaths filled the room. My thighs trembled with exhaustion and need.

I released his dick and leaned forward on both hands, widening my legs, angling my hips as I slid almost all the way off him before shoving backward, trying to force it. A sting of pain, and then a flood of pleasure.

Yes, this was what I wanted. For my brain to fade out and my body to take charge.

"Don't come," I said.

A tremor ran through Tyler, and his breath gusted out in a rush, but he knew better than to respond now. Knew I didn't want to hear his voice. He was a glorified sex toy, and I was going to use him to get myself off before I even thought about releasing him from the order.

I shifted forward, thrust back, fucking myself onto him, and started a steady rhythm, angling my pelvis forward to widen myself as much as possible and moaning when it didn't work, when I realized nothing was going to make this any easier and I was going to have to fight for every inch. Big dicks I had come by before, but none had been this wide, and it was a whole new experience.

The headboard creaked above me. I glanced up to see Tyler white-knuckling it, muscles straining, veins popping as he fought to stay still. The sight *soaked* me, a heady wave of lust punching into my core before tearing through the rest of my body, igniting my veins, turning every part of me hypersensitive. I rocked back harder, took him deeper. Deeper. Oh, fuck. He must have been close to bottoming out.

I leaned down, looked between us, and tightened up at the sight of how much further I still had to go, how much cock I would have to coax my

body to accept. This angle was different than last time, harder to manage. He was already hitting part of me I'd never felt before; any more, and he'd be rearranging my guts.

Maybe it'll fix them, I thought, and almost laughed at the idea of my chronic illness being cured by a magical penis, like this was some sort of slutty fairytale.

I took a deep breath, begged my inner muscles to relax, and fucked him even deeper into me. "God, you're doing so well, Tyler. You're staying *so still* while I take you."

He let out a tortured sound, and I knew he must be suffering.

I smiled.

Good.

34

Tyler

THIS WAS HELL. ONE OF the lower circles, where they sent the very worst offenders.

Beneath me, pinned on my cock, was a gorgeous, moaning woman, and I *couldn't* touch her. Couldn't move. Couldn't come. I was only allowed to look. Watch her dark hair spill over her shoulder, trace her tattoos across her back, stare between us at the sight of my throbbing dick disappearing into her in torturous increments as she worked her hot, tight pussy over me.

Her hips were *right there.* All I'd have to do was reach out, grab them, and hold her steady while I pounded the rest of the way into her.

"What a good job you're doing," she said, and I almost whimpered.

Yup. Yes. I was definitely a brat because the only thing keeping me steady

was her praise and the thought of how happy she'd be if I managed to do what she said. But, god, it was hard. I'd never been so turned on in my life. Never felt this *right* in the bedroom, had always felt like there was a missing element, and now I understood why.

Stella moaned, sliding a hand between her legs, and I *knew* she was playing with her clit. I wanted to shove her fingers away and replace them with my own. Flip her around and watch every wave of pleasure wash over her face. Do literally anything but just kneel here and take it.

I strangled the headboard instead, battling the rising need to move, to thrust, just a little, just to relieve some of this unbearable pressure. Stella was fucking *drenched*, the part of my dick not yet inside her shiny with her arousal, prepped and ready for the moment I was fully sheathed. My head spun at the promise of being balls-deep again, how good it would feel to have her pussy squeezing every inch of me.

My focus rose to her ass, and I thought about how much tighter that would be. How much slower we'd have to go, how much harder she'd have to work to take me there, and oh, god, I needed to stop thinking about that because it was only making things worse.

"How does my pussy feel, Tyler?" Stella asked, shunting her hips backward, sliding further down me.

"Sofuckinggood." The words came out in a rush. "You're so tight, Sunshine."

She froze, voice dropping low with warning. "You know how I feel about that nickname."

Yes, I did. Which is why I'd used it: to see what she would do, learn how she would punish me.

She pulled off my dick, and I was so hard that it slapped against my stomach. Oh, god, no. I'd fucked up. "Wait, I'm sorry."

“It’s too late,” she said, turning and leaning against the pillows as she faced me. I could tell from her reddened cheeks and sparking eyes that she was pissed I’d just ruined that moment for us.

“You’ll have to watch instead,” she told me, legs parting, knees rising as she braced her feet against the mattress. Her hands skimmed upward, cupping and kneading her breasts, gently rolling her nipple rings. “You’ll have to kneel there with the knowledge that if you’d just behaved, I would have come all over your cock.”

My chest tightened, and I was suddenly furious with myself. Especially because I could feel her warmth quickly cooling on my dick, and it made me desperate to get back inside her. Well, the only way that was going to happen was by *actually* behaving for once in my life.

Stella snaked a hand between her legs, spreading her folds, giving me a perfect view of her glistening cunt.

This was going to be the hardest thing I had ever done.

Her finger slid inside, and she sighed, relaxing backward, taking her time teasing herself, and the only thing that made me feel slightly better was the way she drank in the sight of me, her gaze moving from my chest to my abs to my straining dick. She added a second finger, her other hand moving between one breast and the next, and then she closed her eyes and really started to work herself, breaths panting, thighs shaking, fingers plunging deep, palm rubbing over her clit, hot, wet sounds hitting my ears, and oh, god, I had never wanted to fuck someone so bad in my life.

“Please,” I begged.

“Shut up,” she snapped, eyes flashing wide, hands stilling.

I nodded, and we held gazes for what felt like a small eternity before her eyelids fluttered down and she went back to working herself, her hips starting to gently thrust, her legs closing, thighs squeezing together to give herself more friction. Pink bloomed across her cheeks, and her breaths came

out in short, shallow gasps. She was close.

My cock strained between us, begging to be touched, desperate to get back inside her. I was so turned on I was dizzy, my balls starting to tighten. Fucking hell, I might come without any contact.

Shit, she'd told me not to.

I clenched my jaw and willed my body to relax, but it was impossible because Stella was moving faster, her flush spreading to her chest, fingers pinching her nipples while her other hand worked furiously between her legs.

"Tyler!" she cried, back arching, legs shaking, tits bouncing.

Oh, fuck, I was going to come.

Please don't, I begged myself, holding onto the headboard for dear life, completely undone by the sight beneath me.

Stella continued to work herself all the way through it, moans low and keening and so fucking hot because she had the *perfect* bedroom voice. Afterward, she went still, a small smile playing over her lips as her eyes opened and she gazed up at me.

"Are you sorry for what you did?"

"*So fucking sorry, Stella.* "

"Do you think you can behave now?"

"Yes. I promise. I'll do anything, just . . . please let me back inside you." She eyed me for a few seconds, like she was contemplating it, like she was really thinking about leaving me here like this. God knew it was the *least* I deserved after everything I'd done to her, but Stella must have wanted it as badly as I did, because she pushed back to her knees and gripped my chin,

staring into my eyes from an inch away.

“Don’t move. Don’t speak, and don’t you dare come until I tell you to.” I nodded to show I understood.

She turned back around, gripped my dick, and slid down onto it. My teeth nearly shredded the inside of my cheek as I fought to stay quiet. Her pussy was incredible, and the sight of my cock slicking back into it had me digging my nails into the headboard to keep still. She planted her hands just below mine, using her arms to push herself backward. It was easier this time, because she’d already come. But *also* because she’d already come, she wasn’t in as much of a rush as before, so she took her goddamn time working me, pausing every now and then to give her hips a delicious twist that made my head spin and my dick twitch inside her.

A small eternity passed until I was fully seated, and I don’t know how I survived it, spending every goddamn second fighting my body’s urge to thrust forward. Stella stilled the moment her hips met mine and she realized she’d successfully taken *all* of me, her sides heaving as she breathed.

She arched her spine, rolled her hips, and dropped her head forward. “Fuck, you feel so good. Do I feel good, too?”

I opened my mouth to tell her she felt life-changing and realized at the last second it was a trap.

She glanced over her shoulder and shot me a coy smile. “Good boy.” Ohfuckjesuschristiwasntgoingtomakeit.

My lower stomach clenched, thighs trembled, hands death-gripping the headboard. This was *actually* torture.

I was torn between wanting to die and wanting to live in this moment forever, because I’d never been so focused in my life, not a single thought or feeling in my entire body except for my overwhelming need to come. I’d asked Stella to turn my brain off, and she delivered, and I was going to fucking *worship her* for it if she ever let me.

She rolled her hips again, shifted forward, and then slammed back onto me. I nearly blacked out. She did it again, and I started praying for the first time in my life, begging anyone who would listen to grant me the willpower needed to survive this.

The next several minutes were like an out-of-body experience. Stella fucked herself onto me like I was nothing but a prop, and it was the hottest thing I had ever seen in my life. My entire body started to shake. Sweat slicked my skin. My balls were so tight they were painful, and I'd been kneeling so long, my feet were starting to go numb.

"I'm going to come," Stella moaned, slamming herself backward. "I am going to come on this dick so hard, Tyler."

I knew she was telling the truth because her pussy was practically *strangling* my cock. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. I felt a desperate sob building in the back of my throat. I needed to come or I might actually pass out. Or die. Fuck, was that possible? I sure as shit *felt* like I was dying. *Please let me come,* I started begging her, over and over again in my mind. "Oh, god," she moaned, thrusting harder, faster. "Oh, fuck. Tyler, yes!" She threw her head back, spine bowing, hips working furiously, pussy tightening like a vise as she came.

Stars exploded across my vision.

I was going to die. Aheart attack, at twenty-five.

Stella rammed all the way home one last time, pausing there, swirling her hips as her muscles pulsed around my dick.

"You can come," she said, and the feeling that roared through me was so base, so primal, so *unevolved* that it couldn't be described with modern words.

I wrenched out of her, spun her onto her back, and slammed home, burying myself balls deep and immediately coming so hard that the sound tearing

free from my throat didn’t even sound human. I sounded like a wild beast. Fuck, I *felt* like one, pumping into her over and over again, coming harder and longer than I ever had before.

She clung to me through it, her arms wrapped around my shoulders, legs around my hips, gasping and moaning and whispering words of praise. Afterward, I collapsed onto her, exhausted and shaking as I buried my head in her neck and just breathed her in. She scratched her nails down my back, and I shivered, wrapping my arms around her and rolling us sideways so I didn’t crush her, still buried deep, my dick twitching with aftershocks of the orgasm.

“You know the most annoying part of all of this?” she said, like she was picking up the thread of a conversation we’d been having.

I nuzzled my nose against that spot behind her ear. “No, what?”

“If you’d been less of a dick, we could have been doing *this* the entire time instead.”

My shoulders shook. Leave it to Stella to make me laugh right after making me come so hard I saw God.

■ ■ ■

Somehow, we found the strength to get back in the shower together. The urge to immediately fall into a deep, dreamless sleep after what we’d just done was strong, but we were both covered in sweat and each other’s cum, and the thought of waking up gross and sticky was enough to convince us. “You did so good,” Stella said, lifting the washcloth to my back while I stood beneath the water.

I grinned. “You wouldn’t be saying that if you knew how many times I almost blew inside you before you told me I could.”

She slapped my ass, hard enough that it would probably leave a mark, and there went my dick again, starting to stir back to life. I hung my head,

staring down at it like, *Really? What are you planning to do? There is nothing left in the tank, bro.*

Stella had milked me dry. Like, my head was light, legs were weak, I was so dehydrated I felt hungover.

She poked my ass next, one fingernail digging right into the meat of a cheek before she suddenly pulled back. Her hand flattened over it. Squeezed.

“Flex,” she said, and I did as I was asked. “Yup. I want to bite it.” “An ass man, huh?”

“Confirmed.” She gave me another squeeze. “Fuck, Tyler. I want to bite it and then tattoo my teeth marks onto you.”

My dick jerked at the thought. “Yes.”

Her forehead hit my back, and her voice came out breathy. “Are you sure?”

“God yes. I’ll be hard the whole time you do it.”

She made a pained sound. “Don’t turn me on. I can’t come again. Three times can’t be good with a head wound, and I’m pretty sure a fourth might kill me.”

Oh, so she *had* come again when I had.

“Also,” she said, palming both my ass cheeks and spreading them slightly. “I feel like we need to lay down more ground rules. First question: What are your thoughts on pegging?”

I chuckled and turned around, and the sight of her staring up at me with that wicked grin, even while visibly exhausted and *injured* punched into my heart. I hauled her into my arms, careful with her like I should have been this entire time. “Shit, Stella.”

“Is that a no to pegging, or a yes?” she muttered into my wet chest. “This reaction is confusing.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes?”

“No, I mean, did I just hurt you? Fuck, why am I always so goddamn *selfish* ?”

She yanked backward. “Hey, stop.”

The look on her face brooked no argument, so I held my tongue.

“I’m *fine*,” she said. “Yes, banged up, absolutely dead on my feet, but you and I *both* needed that, Tyler, and I was in control the entire time. If I didn’t think I could handle it, I would have stopped us.”

I eyed her, unsure.

She grabbed my face and pulled me down to her level. “Did you hear me, yes or no?”

“Yes.”

She didn’t let me go, but her grip softened. “Are *you* okay?”

I shook my head. “No. I thought you’d died, and it made me realize that I’ve spent my entire life focused on the wrong thing, believing that if I finally got revenge for what happened to me and my mom, it would fix me.” I put a hand on my chest. “Fix whatever is broken inside here.”

Her expression fell. “You’re not broken.”

It was my turn to pull out of her hold. “I am. And I know that words aren’t enough to make up for everything, but I am so fucking sorry, Stella. I want you to know, out of all the horrible shit I’ve done and had planned to do,

treating you the way I did was the worst. My rock bottom."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah. You've been different since I regained consciousness. Borderline tolerable."

I shook my head. "Why are you here with me?"

"Um, you kidnapped me, pyscho? Did you hit your head, too?" She grinned. "Or did I sex you stupid?"

"You absolutely did, but I mean, why haven't you called the cops and told them where we are?"

"Because I don't think you should go to jail. I think you should go to therapy."

"My best friend has been saying that for years," I admitted.

"You should listen to him. You have a lot of anger, and before you get mad, I'm not saying it's not justified, but, like, holy shit, what you learned today is beyond fucked up, and I think it will take a professional to help you unpack it all."

I dragged a hand over my face. "You probably have a point." In my head, I relived that whole ugly scene with my aunt. "What if Jenny was lying?" "You're the expert on body language. Do you think she was?"

I sighed. "No."

"Richard might still have been an asshole. My dad has always said to listen to both sides of a story because the truth is usually somewhere in the middle. What if Richard was scared and *did* push your mother away when

she told him she was pregnant? And then once she was gone, he came to his senses and tried to track her down, but by then it was too late, and the trust was broken?"

"We'll never know," I said. "Because my mother is dead, so I can never ask her why she lied to me."

Stella wrapped her arms around my waist. "I'm so sorry. She must have thought she was doing the right thing."

"And yet, what was it you and Jenny both said? That I turned out even worse than the people she was trying to protect me from?"

Stella squeezed me tighter. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You weren't wrong. I've been a bastard since the day the county coroner handed me Mom's ashes."

She didn't bother arguing with me. We both knew I was right.

"I'm still sorry," she said.

"You really shouldn't be, Stella," I told her. "Because you were right. I *was* planning to use those employees to bring Richard down. Among other people I spoke to whenever your back was turned. I was going to blackmail them just like I did you, have them dig up all the dirt they could find, or plant it if there was none. And then I was going to *really* lean on them, force them to help me dismantle the company one brick at a time."

"How did you know they'd even go along with it?" Stella asked.

"Because of what I told you in the tunnels. Their secrets are dark enough that I was betting they'd do anything to keep them hidden. That if it was between jail and following my orders, they'd choose me every time. Especially because I didn't plan to ask too much of any one person."

"Death by a thousand paper cuts," Stella said in perfect understanding.

“Yes. At first, your parents were included in that plan, but after all our time spent together, and with them, I changed my mind. And I’m not telling you this to soften you toward me; they still would have gotten caught in the crossfire, probably lost a ton of money. But Richard was going to bear the brunt of the blame, and I wasn’t going to stop until he lost everything. Not just financially. I wanted him as alone, destitute, and helpless as my mother had been.”

Stella was quiet for a long time, but I took heart in the fact that she was still hugging me.

“You’re not going to do any of that now,” she said.

“No, I swear. And I know I’ve already said it, but I am so fucking sorry,” I

told her, dropping a kiss on top of her head.

“I think what matters more than anything is how you move forward,” she said. “My debt is obviously forgiven.”

“Well, hang on now.”

She pinched my side. “And any other innocent people you targeted are cleared, too.”

“Oh, I wasn’t lying when I told you most of my clients either deserve to have me as a problem or can pay what they owe. But, yeah, I’m done. The cops will be looking for my alter ego, so I need to lie low for a little while, which will hopefully give me time to sort out my shit and make amends for all the wrong I’ve done.”

“But what about the wrong everyone else has done?” she said. “I would still *love* for Maddie and Feddy and all the other assholes I know to finally pay for their crimes.”

I shrugged. “Easy. I get my hacker best friend to anonymously leak everything I’ve learned about them to the press. This city is already furious

with the wealthy for hiding Bradley Bluhm for so long. They're hungry for more blood, and because of that, it'll be impossible for people to sweep things under the rug or pay their way out of it this time."

"Devious. Let me know what I can do to help."

"You still want to help?"

"Of course I do. But doing it your way feels a little too easy for me. We should find a way to make them suffer more."

I pulled back to look down at her. "Who *are* you?"

She laughed, a small, evil little sound. "Stella, if you're behaving. Ma'am, if you're not."

My dick twitched between us, giving away how much I liked that idea. "But I'm an asshole. Probably will be even after therapy. I'm moody, and I fucking hate most people."

"So? Most people suck, and I don't know if you've noticed this about me, but I'm not exactly the most pleasant person to be around."

"Oh, come on, Sunshine," I teased. "Now who's underestimating themselves?"

"Tyler, I swear to God."

"Sorry. I meant Snack Bitch."

She growled, teeth parting like she was getting ready to bite me.

"I meant ma'am!" I amended.

"Oh, no." Her eyes widened as she looked up at me. "That's going to backfire."

I grinned. “Like it when I call you ma’am, huh?”

She nodded. “Almost as much as the sound of you begging for it.” I sobered. “So . . . that’s it? You’re just going to . . . forgive me?”

Her mouth dropped open on a big, loud laugh that echoed through the bathroom. “Absolutely not. You are going to have to fucking *grovel*. And prove to me that you’re going to make some changes. I’m not asking you to turn into a completely different person, but you can be *so mean* when you’re in a bad mood, and I refuse to put up with that ever again.”

“You won’t have to,” I told her. “I promise. I’ll find someone to speak to. Maybe use my best friend’s therapist. God knows that woman can keep secrets.”

“And I’m not, like, saying we’re together or anything,” she continued. “I just . . . want to see if there’s anything here.”

“There is,” I said. “At least for me. I’ve been gone for you since that first kiss and was just trying to fight it.”

“I knew it,” she said, shaking her head. “You got hard every time we fought, didn’t you?”

I leaned down and nipped her shoulder. “Every fucking time.”

We got out of the shower when the water started to cool, slipping into bed naked because we were low on clothes.

“See you in an hour,” I said, setting an alarm. “You aren’t really going to wake me up, are you?” “You have a concussion.”

“A *minor* one. My head doesn’t even hurt that much anymore, and the hospital said we didn’t have to do this.”

“I’m not taking any chances,” I told her, turning her back to me and pulling her close beneath the covers.

“No,” she said, voice stern. “Bad, Tyler.”

I chuckled. “You being my dom doesn’t apply to your health and welfare.” She grumbled but snuggled in, not bothering to fight me because she probably knew it was smart to be cautious.

I reached back to turn off the light, and with the blackout curtains blocking the setting sun, it felt like Stella and I were in our own little world.

“Why did you actually want to come here if you were so sure you were right?” she asked.

“You really are so much smarter than you look.”

She elbowed me.

I sighed. “Because a small part of me was second-guessing myself after meeting Richard. He . . . wasn’t what I was expecting. I’ve hated him for so long that I’d built him up to be this monster in my head. And then to meet him and have him act like a normal guy? I think it drove me off the deep end. Every time we were around him, I paid attention, and I didn’t see any tells that he was lying about the things he said or putting on a front or hiding the fact that he was a secret sociopath.”

I rested my head behind Stella’s on her pillow, dropping my voice. “It’s why I was such a dick to you whenever he was in attendance. Partly why I manipulated you into going back inside the night of the company party. I had to see him one last time, had to look him in the face and silently laugh at him while I made introductions to the employees I planned to blackmail. After that night, I was even more determined to take Richard down because I *couldn’t* be wrong about him. I’d spent too long planning for it, too long working toward it, and I was so close to finally achieving my goal that I *had* to see it through to the end. I was desperate because the small chance I might be wrong was too terrifying to face.”

I pulled Stella closer, insanely grateful that she was alive and mostly okay.

Even if this was the only time I ever got to hold her, it would be enough, just to know she was living and breathing in the same world that I was.
“I’m sorry for everything that’s happened,” I said. “Especially last night and today. I was crazed, and I didn’t snap out of it until Jenny hit you and I thought I might have gotten you killed. No wonder you hate me.”

“I hated you so hard,” she said, and my attention snagged on the past tense of that statement.

“Don’t you still?”

“Maybe a little. But I like you a little, too.”

“I don’t deserve another chance.”

“Neither did I,” she said. “Seven years ago. And yet my parents gave me one. Blake did. *Runa*. That accident was my life-changing moment, my chance to become someone different, someone better, someone new. Maybe this is that moment for you. You had a horrible childhood full of betrayal and loss and people turning their backs on you. Maybe you just need someone to be there when you need it most. Someone to give you a chance. It’s up to you what you do with it.”

I dropped a kiss of thanks on the top of her head, because I didn’t want to make her any promises until she could trust me to keep them. Instead, I promised myself that I wouldn’t squander this opportunity. That I would do what it took to become a man worthy of Stella, but more importantly, worthy of me. I’d spent my whole life living for other people, focused on how they’d wronged or crossed me.

It was time to start living for myself.

35

Tyler

WE SLEPT THROUGH THE NIGHT and late into the next morning,

waking up at hour intervals no matter how grumpy Stella was about it.

Sleeping naked proved to be convenient by the time we decided to get up for good, me rolling her onto her back and plying her sleepy body with my fingers and tongue until she was turned on enough to take me. I'd rocked into her slow but deep, committing the sound of her little gasps to memory, loving the way her pussy clenched down on my cock whenever I pulled back, like she was desperate to keep me inside her. All my time studying people for tells came in handy as I learned what she liked, what she loved. The way her thighs shook around me when I hit a certain spot, the way her breath caught when I brushed my thumb over a nipple.

I made her come twice before I let myself, and afterward I carefully settled my weight down onto her while she held me close.

Eventually, we found the willpower to get out of bed and cleaned up. I'd only booked the room for one night, and Stella probably couldn't afford to be gone from work for more than a day or two. She hadn't said anything, but I knew she must have lost money from how much she had to cut back on hours because of me. Just another reason to be pissed off at myself. There was no way to go back and change how I'd behaved, so I'd have to find some way to make it up to her, maybe intercept Runa's medical bills or take a page out of Junior's book and secretly pay off her mortgage.

"Do you mind if we stop by the cemetery?" I asked as we packed up. "It's on the way back, and it's been a while since I visited."

"Of course I don't mind," Stella said. "And I'd like to come with you, to see her, if that's okay. But I understand if you want time alone, too."

I shook my head. "No. I want you there."

Together, we checked out and got back on the road, driving forty minutes south before taking the exit for the sleepy little lakeside village that Mom had always loved. The church was small and humble, but the white paint was fresh, and it had a nice view of the water. I led Stella to the top of the hill where Mom was buried, glad to see that the flowers by her headstone

were still fresh and making a mental note to text Mr. Ansel a thank-you. “Mom, this is Stella,” I said. I knew she wasn’t still around, knew she might not even be able to hear me from wherever she might be, but it always felt right to talk to her. “She has very kindly *not* murdered me despite the fact that I gave her several good reasons to.”

“It was touch and go there for a while,” Stella said, speaking straight to the headstone like she didn’t think it was weird at all.

We stayed there for an hour, Stella eventually wandering away to give me some alone time, and when I was done saying my goodbyes, I knew what I needed to do next. My mother wasn’t around to tell me what happened all those years ago, but my father still was.

I threaded my fingers through Stella’s as we walked back to the car, grateful that I didn’t need an excuse this time, recognizing that I’d spent the last month constantly looking for reasons to touch her.

“Is it okay if we make one more stop before I drop you off?” I asked, holding her door open for her.

“Sure,” she said, sinking into the passenger seat. “Where are we going?”
“To see Richard,” I said. “I can go alone, but . . . I’d rather have you

there.”

Her expression softened. “I’ll go with you.”

■ ■ ■

Night was falling by the time we made it back from our road trip. I expected Richard to live in some sky-top palace, or on a grand estate like Stella’s parents, but she directed me to a neighborhood right in the heart of the city. It was still a *nice* neighborhood, the streets lined with private brownstones, the landscaping immaculate, but it wasn’t even close to the most expensive in the area, and that surprised me.

“He lives *here*?” I asked.

Stella snorted. “Now who’s the snob?”

“No, I just mean, he could live anywhere. Why here?”

She shrugged. “You’ll have to ask him that yourself, but he’s always been pretty private.”

Easier to get away with being a fucking asshole when there aren’t any eyes on you, a dark thought bubbled up.

Shit. I was obviously still harboring a lot of anger toward this man. Was I really ready to face him? Maybe it was too soon, and I should give myself

more time first.

Stella touched my shoulder, her voice soft, obviously sensing my hesitation. “We don’t have to do this.”

I shook my head. “No, I want to. The sooner I can start piecing together the truth, the better.” Speaking to Richard was the right move, the starting point I needed to regroup and decide where I went from rock-fucking- bottom.

I dragged in a deep breath as we exited the car, and together, we took the stairs up to Richard’s front door. He met us there, Stella having texted him that we were on our way.

“Hey, you two,” Richard said, pulling the door open. He was dressed in dark slacks and a white button-down.

A knee-jerk wave of anger rose within me at the sight of him, but I quashed it. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with us.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he said, shutting the door and following us into the wood-paneled foyer. “And I have to say, I’m curious what you want to

speak to me about. Stella was vague on the details."

Stella looked from him to me, and I could see the silent offer of help written on her face. I gave her a subtle head shake, telling her I had it, and she stepped close, wrapping an arm around my waist in a show of support.

I refocused on Richard, finally admitting to myself how much we looked alike, letting myself see all the things I'd been ignoring. The way his eyes crinkled when he smiled. His jawline. His hairline.

I cleared my throat. "My mother was Meg Neumann."

Richard paled and took a step back. "I thought I was going crazy." His eyes raked over me. "I thought I'd spent so much time trying to find her that I was starting to see pieces of her everywhere I went, even her features in strangers' faces. The first time we met, I took one look at your eyes and almost asked if you knew her, because they're exactly the same as Meg's." Yikes. That wouldn't have gone well.

"You weren't imagining things," I told him.

He eyed me the same way I'd eyed him a moment ago, as if comparing all our similarities. "Are you . . . mine? My son?" he asked, and the hopeful note in his voice, paired with his sincere expression, was like a knife to the gut.

"I am, but I can take a DNAtest if you'd like."

He shook his head. "I don't need it. I mean, we should do it for record

purposes, but, god, you look just like us. Just like a child of ours would. And . . . Meg? Is she here, too?"

The knife twisted deeper. "No, she's . . ." I took a deep breath. "She passed nine years ago from ovarian cancer. I'm sorry."

His eyes glassed over, a broken note entering his voice. "No, *I'm* sorry. This

is all my fault. Please. Give me a chance to explain."

I nodded. "That's what I came here for."

Stella held my hand while he led us to the living room. My head spun. It wasn't like I'd been expecting a huge blowup with the man—he was so even-tempered and laid-back the other times we'd interacted—but his easy acceptance still jarred me. Maybe because this was so different from all the confrontations I'd imagined. The way I'd planned to laugh in his face when I told him I was the cause of his downfall, the way I'd hoped he'd plead, beg for my mercy, just for me to tell him I didn't have any.

He lifted a hand, gesturing Stella and me toward a couch, and I noticed the fine tremble in his fingers, the color on his cheeks, the moisture gathered in his eyes. The news of my mother's passing had torn this man apart, and he was barely keeping it together.

Fuck.

How had I been so wrong about everything?

Stella and I sat. Richard dropped into an armchair opposite us, took a deep breath, and told us what had happened. Between his lack of tells and the brutal way he didn't spare himself, I believed him, believed this was the *real* story. He described meeting Mom, admitted that he knew he was in trouble from the first time she smiled at him. He even recognized the age gap, saying that while she was naïve in some ways because of how she'd been raised, she was also such an old soul because of what she'd been through with her family.

His marriage was already over by that point; he and his wife just hadn't filed the paperwork because they both knew how messy it would be. Mom had been a breath of fresh air for him. Open, honest, guileless, so different from most people he knew. He promised himself after meeting her that he wouldn't go back to her café, because she deserved better than a thirty-five-year-old married man who couldn't make her any promises.

He lasted a week before he returned, and even though he told himself that it would really be the last time, every lunch break from then on found him at Meg’s table.

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“I should have immediately told her I was married,” he said. “I’m not proud that I didn’t, and I’m not making any excuses for myself. At the time, I doubted anything would develop between us. I was convinced she was sweet to me because that’s how Meg was with everyone. She was the kindest person I’d ever met.”

I squeezed Stella’s hand, and she shifted closer to me on the couch. Richard went on to describe their whirlwind romance. From his side, it sounded more like she was the one who swept him off his feet, his goofy smile making it clear that he’d been gone for her. Still, he thought maybe it was just a fling, that Meg would meet someone younger, more handsome, more available, and break up with him. It didn’t happen, and the day he realized he was falling for her, he told her about his wife. By then, they’d finally filed, but he knew it would be months if not years before they were able to fully untangle all their assets. Mom forgave him—too easily, he said —and told him she was willing to wait.

So they carried on their relationship. By that point, his soon-to-be ex-wife was seeing someone, too, and Richard, thinking it would be okay, brought Mom to a few smaller gatherings, meant for close friends. Friends he’d cut off after the way they’d treated her. Only the McCormicks had welcomed Mom with open arms.

My face heated, thinking how quick I’d been to damn them alongside Richard, assuming the absolute worst.

Richard said he’d been shocked when Mom got pregnant, because they’d been so careful, and he didn’t react well. He told her he needed a few days to sit with the news, a choice he deeply regretted.

“It took me a day,” he said, “to pull my head out of my ass and realize I’d be the luckiest man on the planet to have a child with that incredible woman.” He waved a hand, gesturing toward the room. “I put down a deposit on this place on day two, because Meg loved this neighborhood so much. I spent day three trying to pick out the perfect engagement ring because I knew I wanted to marry her as soon as I was legally able to.”

His grin was rueful. “I called her on day four, but her phone had been disconnected and her apartment was empty. That was the moment I realized how badly I’d messed up. How badly I’d *been* messing up. But it was too late. She’d waited for me for so long, I just assumed she’d wait a few more days, and that was my mistake. I’ll never forgive myself for taking her kindness for granted.”

I almost begged him to stop talking, not sure how much more I could endure. So much of his story aligned with my mother’s, but where they diverged was what broke me. Mom had lied to me my entire life. This man wasn’t responsible for her downfall. *She was*. She was the reason I grew up the way I did, why we endured such hardships. How could she have possibly thought *that* was the better choice? It made me wonder if she’d ever questioned her decision, was ever tempted to return to the city to find Richard.

Why the fuck didn’t you? I wanted to scream at her. If she had, she might have lived. If she had, I might have grown into a different person. A better person. Aman deserving of someone as incredible as Stella.

Instead I was a shell, empty now that my misguided vengeance plan had disintegrated.

Richard blinked and seemed to come back to himself. “I tried to find you both. For years. And while I knew about Meg’s childhood, it wasn’t until after she left that I realized she’d never even told me the name of the town she was raised in. Another selfish mistake on my part. I should have asked. I should have begged for every single piece of information she was willing to give me.”

His words mirrored my own feelings of regret toward Stella, and I untangled our hands so I could wrap my arm around her shoulders, just to remind myself that she was still here, and, unlike Richard, I’d been granted a second chance.

“What . . .” his voice broke, and he coughed to clear it. “What happened? After she left?”

Funny, after all the years I'd spent wanting to ruin this man, now that I had my chance, I couldn't do it. With everything he'd confessed, I realized the truth *would* ruin him, learning that Mom had turned him into a villain with the hope it would keep us apart. It was the only cruel thing she had ever done, and it must have gutted her.

Why, Mom? I wondered again and again, knowing I would never get an answer.

Instead, for the first time in memory, I chose kindness. "You weren't why she left. Or at least, not the whole reason. Mostly, she wanted me to have a normal childhood, because she thought growing up with wealth might negatively impact my development. She returned home and continued to waitress until she got sick, raising me as best she could."

Richard rubbed a hand over his face. "Did she ever get married? Have more children?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't think she ever really got over you."

He swore and stood, his hands on his hips as he took a few steps away, trying to compose himself. "I'm sorry," he said after a minute. "You should know, I never got over her, either. It's why I don't really date. Why I stayed in this brownstone all these years. I kept hoping that maybe one day I would find you both and make everything right, or at least get the chance to meet you and apologize to your mother."

"She would have taken you back," I said, knowing it was the truth. Guessing it was the reason she'd forced herself to stay away.

Richard returned to his seat. "How are you? How was your childhood? What was your favorite subject in school? I want to know everything." He shook his head. "Sorry. I'm not trying to overwhelm you. It's just that I've been looking for you for so long, and this is all very surreal. Let's start with an easy question. How long have you known I'm your father?"

"Since the beginning," I told him. "But I didn't think you wanted to meet

me.”

“Well, I think I’ve cleared that up, at least.”

I nodded, my heart in my throat. Yes, he’d certainly done that.

He glanced from me to Stella. “Wait. How do you two know each other?” I opened my mouth to fabricate some answer, but Stella beat me to it.

“He came into my tattoo parlor one night and convinced me to bring him to a few parties. And no, at the time, I didn’t know he was your son. I just found out last night.”

Richard frowned. “So you two *aren’t* together?”

Stella and I spoke at the same time. “It’s complicated.”

He lifted his hands. “Understood. Sorry for prying. I’m just trying to wrap my head around all of this.”

“I’m sorry for the deception,” I said, realizing I meant it. “How long have you lived in the city?” Richard asked. “Four years,” I told him.

We spent the next two hours together, answering each other’s questions. I didn’t outright lie, but I did skirt the truth about my childhood and how hard Mom’s life had been after she left him. Unfortunately, Richard wasn’t an idiot, and though he didn’t come right out and say it, I could tell he knew there was more to the story than I was letting on.

I struggled to process the conversation. It was too unexpected, too unreal. All my life, I’d hated this man, and here he was, leaned forward in his seat, laser-focused on me, actively listening, wanting to know everything he could and seeming like he was more than ready to accept whatever role in my life I was willing to offer. It made me feel like an even bigger bastard. Because I didn’t deserve his acceptance or faith.

Up until yesterday, I’d been hell-bent on destroying him.

“Can I visit Meg sometime?” he asked. “I’d like to pay my respects and say goodbye.”

“Yes, absolutely,” I told him, because it was clear that Stella wasn’t the only person I needed to make amends with.

“Would you . . . like to come?” He grimaced. “Sorry, if this is awkward.”
“It’s not. And I can take you to her. Help you break the ice.”

He smiled, lines creasing the corners of his eyes. “Thanks, it’s been a while since we’ve spoken.” His smile slipped, and he dropped his head into his hands. “Oh, god. Meg.”

His shoulders shook with a silent sob, and Stella shot me a heartbroken look and crossed over to him, sinking down on the arm of the chair as she hugged him.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, her eyes welling up.

I stayed where I was, not wanting to intrude on his grief. Yes, I was his son, but I had no right after what I’d almost done to him.

Nothing was settled before we left—everything was still too new, too raw. But Richard and I did make plans to meet at Mom’s gravesite in the coming week, and I was sure we’d talk more then.

Afterward, I drove Stella back to her shop.

“Can I stay?” I asked. “With you, I mean. Just for the night. I, uh, don’t really want to be alone right now.”

“Yes,” she said.

I sighed in relief. “I’ll go park the car.”

“Okay.” She opened her door to get out but paused, turning back to me. “I’m

proud of you for how you handled that. For how kind you were to Richard."

"Thank you. It felt like the right thing to do."

She leaned over, gave me a brief kiss, and slipped into the night.

36

Stella

"I CAN'T BELIEVE WE DIDN'T figure it out," Mom said.

She and I stood on my parents' back porch in a shaded corner. It was late September, and while we were officially in fall, the heat of summer was still clinging on, one final burst of warmth before the cooler temperatures moved in.

Today's gathering was the first social event I'd attended in well over a month, because I'd needed that time to focus on healing my flare. At least it was small, just my family, and Richard and Tyler, who stood chatting together by the grill. Mom and I had been watching them, and without the distraction of other people around, their similarities were much more obvious.

"They have the same laugh," Mom said. "It's almost uncanny."

"Even if you had noticed, you would have found a way to excuse or ignore their how alike they are," I told her.

She made a dismissive sound. "Never. I'm far smarter than you are." I tried to flick her arm, but she swerved me.

"See?" she said.

"Don't make me regret taking today off to come here. *You* invited *us*. You're supposed to be nice to guests."

She started to respond, but the sound of the French doors opening had us turning. Blake stepped out, carrying a platter. Dad was right on his heels with another, and he paused long enough for Tippi to come tottering onto the patio after him.

“It’s too hot out here for her, darling,” Mom said.

“She wouldn’t stop whining at the door,” Dad answered, looking sheepish. “Well, then we need to get her chilled dog bed and fan,” Mom said before heading inside.

Tyler heard and sent me a look over his shoulder. “*Spoiled,*” he mouthed. I grinned.

“A little help . . .” Blake said, struggling to set his tray down on the already crowded table.

I took a step toward him, but Tyler got there first, sliding aside a bowl of potato salad to make room.

“Thank you,” Blake said, the words clipped.

“You’re welcome,” Tyler told him before returning to his station at the grill.

It was a terse exchange, but it was better than nothing. Not that I could really blame either of them. Tyler *had* used Blake like a pawn in his quest for vengeance, and even though Tyler had apologized and explained himself, we knew that forgiveness would take time, if it was ever granted. And Blake *had* gotten half of Tyler’s clients arrested, which, you know, wasn’t great since most of them were involved in the criminal underworld and might try to get revenge.

Tyler had laid low after the initial fallout. I thought it was a good thing, because it also gave him a chance to book a therapist, spend more time with his best friend, and start to unpack twenty-five years’ worth of trauma. Mom reemerged from the house and settled Tippi near us in the shade on her pre-chilled bed, making sure the fan wasn’t blowing too hard before she rejoined

me. “So,” she said, “how are things going . . . with those two?” She indicated to Tyler and Richard, who were now flipping burgers. “Richard has been sparse on the details and we’ve been trying to respect his privacy.” “By asking me instead?”

Her look said *Yes, obviously* .

I sighed. “It’s . . . I don’t know, like any new relationship? I think they’re both just trying to come to terms with being in each other’s lives and what that looks like.”

She tipped her head down, peering at me over the bridge of her sunglasses. “And how are *you two* doing? Still not official?”

“Still none of your business.”

She tutted and lifted her head, and our conversation drifted toward easier topics. Tyler and I hadn’t had the “What are we?” conversation yet. For now, we were happy to keep learning, exploring, *playing* .

But, I mean, I *had* tattooed my teeth marks on his ass, which felt pretty permanent.

My gaze dropped to the spot, now covered by clothing, and I wondered how he was feeling. He was in the itchy stage of the healing process, and this morning, I’d had to order him to stop bothering it. The way he’d responded by saying, “Yes, ma’am,” in his growliest baritone was the

reason we were late to this party.

We were sitting down to eat when his phone chimed with a news alert. My heartbeat picked up as he slid it out of his pocket. He showed no reaction whatsoever, but his eyes were triumphant when he passed it to me. I read the headline: *FBI Opens Investigation into Tourist Drowning.* It was from the *TCI Sun,* a small, local paper in the Turks and Caicos, but I knew it was just the beginning, knew the story would soon reach our city and spread like wildfire, and this time, not even Mommy and Daddy would be able to save

Maddie.

I schooled my face as I passed the phone back to him, and once it was in his pocket, he put his hand on my knee beneath the table and squeezed. We'd done it. We'd gotten the bitch.

And we didn't plan to stop with her.

Maddie was only the beginning. Piece by piece, we would feed information to authorities and newspapers, and soon everyone in this city would know that Bradley Bluhm was far from the only monster hiding amongst its citizens.

"So," Richard said. "Any fun plans later?"

Tyler and I didn't look at each other. I couldn't speak for him, but I was too busy trying not to blush to do anything but stare at my plate.

"We're meeting AJ for dinner," Tyler said.

Mom perked up, looking from him to me. "Oh, I'm so glad you two reconnected. He was always such a good boy."

Tyler's hand tightened on my leg, and I knew he must be fighting for his life.

Yes, AJ was a *very* good boy.

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Tyler

"WAIT," THE LOVE OF MY life gasped from above me.

AJ and I shared a heated look over her shoulder, and he grinned, his eyes locked on mine as he brushed her hair aside and started trailing kisses over the top of her back. "Tell me when you're ready for me to move again."

We were in his penthouse apartment, sprawled over his bed together, me on my back, Stella already seated on my cock, AJ working his way into her ass. We'd taken our time prepping her, but this was our first attempt at double penetration, and as excited as we all were to try it, we knew there might be a learning curve.

Stella dropped her forehead to my shoulder, panting.

I cradled her neck and kissed her forehead. "You're doing amazing, Sunshine. Take all the time you need."

"This would be so much easier if I didn't already have your giant cock inside me," she said.

"Complaining about it will definitely make it smaller," I told her. "Good choice."

She wheezed out a breath.

AJ groaned. "Don't make me laugh right now. It's taking everything in me to hold still."

"My bad," I said, but we all knew I wasn't really sorry. "Does this help?"

I slid my hands up Stella's ribs, running my thumbs between us to brush over her nipples. She clenched around my cock, and from the grunt AJ let out and the way his eyes flashed wide, she must have clenched even harder around the head of his dick.

He met my impish grin with a glare. "I know I said I wasn't into brat play, but I swear to God, if you don't behave, I might make an exception."

The thought of both of them punishing me for my misbehavior made my cock twitch inside Stella.

"Don't be mean to him, or he'll come," she said.

AJ bit back a laugh, and judging by Stella's hiss, the movement sunk him deeper.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That was my fault," she told him. "And actually, Tyler, do that again."
"Yes, ma'am," I said, my voice dropped low as I rolled my fingers over her nipples, a little harder than last time.

Another clench, and then a slight loosening.

"Now," she said.

AJ shifted forward, his eyes rolling back as he pinched his bottom lip between his teeth. Stella shuddered, a low moan clawing up her throat. We gave her another few moments to adjust, and then repeated the sequence of events until AJ was buried inside her, and now it was his turn to ask for a break.

I just laid there, trying to keep still even though I was desperate to move. Was it easy? No, but Stella had trained me so well in orgasm denial that it was a cakewalk compared to some of what she'd put me through.

"I can feel him," I whispered to her, knowing he would hear, knowing he must feel me, too. "Pressing against me inside you."

Stella's mouth popped open on a gasp. She was no longer panting, but her breaths were still ragged.

"You take us so good, baby," AJ said. His pupils had almost entirely edged out the green in his eyes, and from the way he mouthed, *Fuck,* at me, I could tell he was loving this as much as I was.

"Are you ready to move?" I asked Stella.

We'd previously agreed that she would be the one calling the shots, that she would do most of the work because it was her body we were pushing to the

limit, and since this was still new, we didn't want to accidentally hurt her.

"Mmm," she murmured, rising from my chest, her hands braced on either side of me, tits swaying tantalizingly close to my mouth.

In the past month, she'd gained some weight, and she looked *good*. Not that she hadn't before—I would worship her body whatever size it was. She looked so good because she felt good, her illness starting to get back under control, her work/life balance finally restored.

Tentatively, she shifted up, pulling off both of us a little before slowly sinking back down. All three of us moaned.

She did it again, and then paused, hanging her head.

"How are you feeling?" AJ asked.

I brushed Stella's hair away from her face so I could see her better. "Talk

to us."

She lifted back up, grinning. "I feel like a fucking goddess."

"Yeah, you do," AJ said, and it was my turn to laugh. "This *ass*, baby."

I dropped my gaze to see the tips of his fingers on her hips, and I knew he had to have two hands full of her cheeks, spreading them so he could see what he did to her.

She moved again, with more confidence, and there was absolutely no way I was going to last, because every shift of her hips had AJ and I sliding together inside her, and between her squeezing cunt and his hard length, I was close to stimulation overload. And I was just *lying here*. I had no idea how many sensations Stella must be experiencing. If I added another, would she implode?

I reached up and cupped her breasts, giving her a chance to tell me no.

Instead, she nodded down at me, so I brushed my thumbs over her nipples. Her pussy tightened. AJ grunted, and since part of our legs were pressed together, I felt a tremor run through him.

He leaned sideways just enough to meet my eyes, and I could tell from the wild look in them that he wasn't going to last long, either.

Her first, I mouthed, tipping my head toward Stella. It had become our modus operandi, making her come as many times as possible before either of us got off. So far, tonight's orgasm count was at two, both achieved during our foreplay, but I had no doubt we could get her to three or four.

AJ nodded, a determined look on his face as he disappeared behind her, sliding one hand from her hip to tease her clit. I watched his fingers move, matching mine to them, rolling or tugging her nipples every time he rubbed over that hypersensitive spot.

"Oh my god," Stella said, picking up the pace, fucking herself onto both of us, her hot little cunt pulsing around me as she worked her way up and down my shaft. "You both feel incredible. So big. So *hard*. I didn't know if I would like this, but I *love it.* Please say we can do it again."

"Yes," AJ and I immediately agreed.

"You can move," Stella said. "But not much. I think we still need to be careful."

"I'm good like this," I said. "I've been well-trained."

Stella's eyes sparked. "Debatable."

"I'm not," AJ said, shunting his hips forward to meet Stella's downward thrust.

"That's perfect," Stella told him, her eyes fluttering. "Just like that. Tyler, I need your mouth on me."

I rose up immediately, kissing her first because I needed her mouth, too. Our tongues slid together as she continued to move, and I drank down her breathy moans. She was getting close. I'd memorized every single one of her tells, and she was showing them all, the way her hips picked up speed, how her breathing hitched. I pulled back enough to see a blush stealing over her cheeks and knew it wouldn't take much more to get her where she needed to be.

I stroked both nipples one last time before parting my lips around one and swirling my tongue over it. Between us, I could feel AJ still working her clit. Stella slammed down, spearing herself on our cocks in short, shallow thrusts. Inside her, I felt AJ moving against me, and thank fuck I was practiced at keeping myself in check because this was more than enough to get me off.

"So good," Stella said, the words close to a sob. "God, it's so good, I'm going to come."

"So am I," AJ said.

Stella started to shake, her skin heating, her nipple tightening in my mouth. Her pussy squeezed me in waves as her pleasure peaked, and then she was coming, moaning, calling out both of our names, absolutely drenching my dick with her release. AJ's dick stiffened against mine and his thrusts turned choppy, his pleasure chasing hers.

"Stella, oh, fuck," he said.

I released her nipple and laid back to see him holding her hips steady as he thrust home one last time and kept himself there, both of them shaking, panting, so fucking hot, I almost came from the sight alone.

Stella collapsed onto my chest, utterly spent, and AJ and I shared a smirking glance over her back, proud of a job well done. When their breaths evened out, AJ carefully removed himself from her and went to discard the condom in the bathroom.

"You didn't come," Stella breathed.

“Because I know your greedy little pussy is still ready for more, and I wanted to be able to give it what it needs.”

“Fuck,” she bit out, her cheeks pinking as she broke eye contact.

“How do you want it, Sunshine?”

Her gaze slid back to mine. “As hard as you can give it to me.”

AJ opened the bathroom door just in time to watch me flip her onto her stomach, facing him. I yanked her hips up, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and rammed into her, bottoming out on the first thrust.

She screamed, and AJ half fell against the doorjamb, his eyes wide. I stared him down while I fucked into Stella with the brutal, unforgiving thrusts I knew would quickly push her over the edge. He raised a shaky hand to his mouth, covering it, his dick stirring back to life as he watched us.

“Tyler, *fuck*!” Stella yelled, her hands scrambling against the covers, hips crashing backward into mine. “Yes, like that. Harder. I *need it.* ”

I shoved my palm into her lower back, forcing her to arch her spine, deepening the angle so she took more of me with every thrust. My hips pounded into hers, balls slapped her clit, fingers twisted into her hair. Most of the time, she called the shots in the bedroom because that’s what we both preferred, but every now and then, she wanted to be fucked, to be used, to feel a bit degraded herself, and the high of having AJ watch us while it happened was enough to have her cunt clenching down on me in record time.

She moaned. Cried out. Swore at me. Begged.

I held steady through all of it, pinning her to the bed, fucking into her with unrelenting thrusts.

“Tyler,” she sobbed. “Harder.”

Fuuuck.

I picked up the pace, sweat rolling down my back. AJ was fully aroused now. Both hands death-gripping the doorframe like it was the only thing holding him back from joining us again. Any other time, I would have asked him to, but Stella was close to her limit, shaking so bad that this needed to be her last orgasm for the night.

“Come with me,” she pleaded. “Tyler, *come.* ”

The order undid me, and I leaned my weight into her, fucking her all the way down to the mattress, hitting all of her favorite spots as I unloaded deep inside her. She squirmed beneath me, barely able to move because of the pressure, and screamed her release into the comforter.

AJ started clapping. “Bravo. That was the hottest thing I’ve ever fucking seen. You two would make a killing on Me4U.”

I laughed, but Stella was still so out of it I didn’t even think she heard him. It took both of us to get her boneless body into the shower. We propped her

up between us and soaped her down while she giggled and sighed, so blissed out from sex hormones that she’d gone loopy.

“I like her like this,” AJ said, grinning.

“Me, too,” I said. “She’s much more agreeable.”

She managed to raise a shaky arm and flip me the bird.

I laughed and kissed her.

Afterward, we got dressed and headed downstairs, where the remains of our meal sat cooling on AJ’s dining room table. Somehow, we’d actually managed to eat. Progress, since the first time we came over for “dinner,” we ended up fucking on the floor.

“We’ll help clear these,” Stella said, reaching for a plate.

AJ waved her away. “Oh, I think you’ve both done enough for the night.” “Are you sure?” I asked.

He nodded and glanced between us. “When can I see you again?” “When do you get back from your trip?” Stella asked.

“Three weeks,” he said. He was going to Singapore with his mother to look at an investment property.

“Call us when you land, and we can make plans.”

“I will,” he promised.

We took a while leaving, loitering by the door, exchanging casual touches because even after everything we’d done tonight, we wanted more. It always ended this way between us, which was why Stella and I had recently discussed asking AJ if he was open to making this a more regular situation, instead of only occasionally joining us, but we were holding off because we didn’t know if he was ready for that kind of commitment.

“How you feeling?” I asked Stella on the drive back to her place. “Exhausted. Wrung out. Sore. But so good.” She turned to me, eyes reflecting the passing glow of neon shop lights. “How are you?” “Dehydrated.”

She laughed. “Next time we should put *him* between us.”

“Like that first night.”

“Until you yanked me over to you.”

“I wasn’t about to let you use him like a shield and keep denying how obsessed you were with me.”

“I was *not* obsessed with you.” “You’re so cute when you lie.” “Tyler.”

“Stella,” I said, mimicking her voice.

She slapped my arm, and while we were still settling into things, still figuring everything out, I hoped this part of our dynamic never changed. Because I liked bickering with her, and I was hoping she still liked it, too, even though she’d probably never admit it aloud.

A few minutes later, I parked in my newly minted spot right outside the shop, and we headed in.

Shaunté was at the register.

“How’s everything been?” Stella asked.

“Derrick punched a client, Elayne fucked up someone’s tattoo, and we may have had a small fire,” she said, deadpan.

Stella rolled her eyes and headed past the booths toward the stairs. “I’ll come back down for closing.”

“No,” I said. “She’ll be asleep. I’ll close up.”

“I’m fine,” Stella argued.

“Yeah, *now* you are. But you slept like shit last night, and too many sleepless nights in a row might fuck up your stomach, so I got it.”

She waited until we shut the stairwell door behind us before responding. “You have got to be the bossiest sub in existence.”

“No, I’m the *brattiest* .”

“As soon as my vagina stops hurting, I’m going to teach you a lesson.” I snorted. “Like you’ll actually wait that long.”

She shut up, knowing she'd been caught, and together, we took the stairs up.

I grinned as I unlocked the door.

"You don't have to say it every night," she told me.

"Why not? It's so much fun."

She sighed and waved me forward. "Fine, then."

I swung the door open. "Honey, we're home!"

"*Fuuuck you*," Amos squawked.

Epilogue

Stella

"DON'T BE NERVOUS," TYLER SAID .

I made a noncommittal sound.

It was twilight, mid-autumn, his hand firm on mine as he led me toward the back of a turn-of-the-century, Craftsman-style bungalow. Laughter floated from around the corner, where his friends were having one of their "family dinners." This was my first time meeting them, so, yes, I was nervous.

Especially because of what Tyler had told me about them. His best friend was the son a notorious serial killer. His business partner was a reformed mobster. And the rest of the group was no less intimidating, ranging from social justice warriors to a woman who saved lives every day. I wanted to make a good impression, but also, I just had no *idea* what the vibes would be with such an eclectic group, and that's what made me anxious.

"One second," I said, slowing to lift the hem of my dress out of the way. I wore yet another gown—this one a newly acquired piece, with a deep V neckline that flared wide to sit just off my shoulders, the sleeves

embroidered lace, the skirt wide and tulle, with a silk underlay. After dinner, we were due at my parents' house for a cocktail party celebrating their acquisition of a second Morisot painting, which they planned to unveil later this evening.

Tyler wore a new suit in hunter green, exceptionally tailored, his shoulders impossibly broad in the jacket. The white button-down beneath it made his skin look golden in contrast, and I couldn't stop staring at his throat, remembering earlier, my hand wrapped around it while I rode his dick, and he begged me to squeeze harder.

I had no idea how I was supposed to get through tonight with that image tormenting me. My panties were already soaked, and I was desperate to get him inside me again.

His eyes scorched over me, and I could tell his thoughts were mirroring mine. "You know, that dress is almost wide enough for me to hide under the skirt."

I leaned into him. "Maybe if you're a good boy tonight, we can test that out."

He made a low sound in his throat, close to a purr, and started dipping toward me before a fresh swell of laughter reminded us where we were.

I shook myself and straightened up, and Tyler recaptured my hand, bringing it to his mouth to kiss the back of it. He paused, hovering, a mischievous spark lighting his eyes.

"Don't you dare," I warned him.

His lips parted, and he nipped my skin hard enough to hurt.

"You'll pay for that later," I told him, even as my chest flooded with affection. I knew what he was doing: acting bratty to distract me from my nerves. It was sweet—something I'd once thought Tyler incapable of.

His signature smug grin spread over his face as he lowered our joined hands. Without another word, he tugged me around the corner of the house. “Oh, wow,” I whispered.

The backyard looked like something out of a magazine. White-clothed tables sat on a small patio, with a gorgeous center spread of flowers and candles running down the middle of them. Overhead, café lights twinkled, strung through a series of tall garden stakes. Potted plants surrounded the scene, white hydrangeas and mums interspersed with hurricane lanterns. It was cozy, intimate, and only possible thanks to this late-season heat wave. The sound of crickets and conversation filled the yard as Tyler towed me closer. My jaw nearly dropped as I took in the people seated around the tables. I don’t think I’d ever seen a more stunning group of human beings assembled in one place. They didn’t notice us at first—too busy talking over each other—but once they did, all eyes turned our way.

“Walter!” someone yelled as a dog came pelting out from beneath a table. It was a monstrous shepherd mix, tail wagging, tongue lolling, obviously not a threat. Tyler stepped in front of me anyway.

“Don’t even think about jumping on her,” he ground out, sounding more like the old him than he had in weeks.

I put a steadying hand on his back, and felt him immediately relax.

“He’s like a reckless puppy,” Tyler explained, leaning forward to pet the wiggling, whining derp. “And he doesn’t know his own strength. I didn’t want him to take you out.”

I smiled and stepped around him, soothing my fingers down his spine before I joined him petting the dog, who seemed like he was in canine

heaven with *two* people doting on him. It only took me a second to realize the greatest threat came from his tail, whipping so fast it actually stung when it struck my shins. He wound between us like a cat, whimpering and yipping, leaning hard into our legs.

“Sorry about that,” a stunning, petite brunette said, grabbing Walter’s harness to stop him. “Oh, Jesus, look at the dog hair.”

I glanced down to see Tyler and I both covered.

“I have a lint roller,” another gorgeous brunette said, almost as tall as I was, but with a muscle mommy build.

“Lauren and Aly?” I asked.

They looked impressed.

“Yes,” Aly said, extending a hand. “It’s so nice to finally meet you, Stella.” Her smile was warm and welcoming, her expression filled with open curiosity.

“You, too,” I said, shaking her hand, relieved there wasn’t any awkwardness like I’d feared. Meeting your partner’s ex was always weird, but Tyler had assured me there were no hurt feelings between them, and it had only ever been casual to begin with. “Thank you for what you did, helping Tyler that day.”

Aly’s expression softened. “You’re welcome. How’s your head?” Tyler choked. “*Don’t* ask her that.”

Aly cocked a brow at me in question.

“Inside joke,” I told her.

“You’ll have to explain that to us at some point,” Lauren said, stepping right up to hug me like we were old friends. “But first you have to tell me about this dress. I *love* it.”

“Same!” a lavender-haired woman exclaimed as she joined us. “Where’d you get it?”

I grinned. “One of my clients made it. Vern. She’s a lab tech by day,

seamstress by night."

Aly's eyes flashed wide. "Vern *Martinez* ?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"She's one of my best friends," Aly said. "We work together."

I blinked. "Woah. Small world. Wait, so you must know Greg, too." Aly grimaced. "He's my cousin."

My head spun, and I mentally downgraded the world's size from small to microscopic.

"He's not nearly good enough for Vern, so I refuse to set the two of them up," Aly added.

"Ah," I said, not knowing how to tell her that even without her help, the two of them would probably end up involved if Vern got her way.

The lavender-haired woman looked between us. "Which one of you is giving me her number so I can buy a dress?"

The woman's name was Taylor, I learned, and afterward, I met everyone else: Josh, Junior, Ryan, Ben, and Jackson. Once the introductions were over, we sat, talk resuming, the conversation easy and light, the group quick to laugh and tease each other, the couples openly flirting—a far cry from the intensity I'd feared coming into this.

"So! Tyler!" Josh said at one point, his gaze shifting between us. "How did you and Stella meet?"

"Well, that's kind of a long story," Tyler said, his eyes sliding to me.

We'd known coming into this that people would be curious. He hadn't spent much time with them over the past six months, so absorbed in his Macbethian plot that everything else fell to the wayside. He'd been trying to

fix that lately, taking a more active role in Velvet, the play club he co- owned with Junior, and spending time with Josh, but he still hadn't come clean about what he'd been up to. Partly because he hadn't been emotionally ready to handle the fallout—he was still recovering from everything that had happened over the summer, and since Junior and Lauren were tied up in his lies, he worried it might negatively affect the whole friend group.

I found his hand beneath the table and threaded my fingers through his, squeezing so he knew he wasn't alone, silently telling him that no matter how he chose to play this, I'd support him.

He faced Josh. "The TL;DR version is I went into her tattoo parlor for a consultation."

Josh frowned, looking like his feelings might be hurt. The man was more heavily inked than anyone else at the table, and I recognized the artist he used from the designs alone—one of my competitors on the other side of the city who was famous for his dark, Gothic work. "I thought you never wanted to get a tattoo?"

Tyler shrugged. "I changed my mind."

"What'd you get?" Josh asked.

I took a sip of water to avoid meeting his searching look, a blush

threatening to pink my cheeks. Not that I should be worried. Tyler was so private that there was no way he would—

"Stella's teeth marks on my ass," he said.

I choked, barely managing to keep from spraying Ryan and Ben across from us. Beside me, Lauren howled with laughter. The rest of the table had mixed reactions. Josh was clearly shocked. Aly smirked. Junior was draining the rest of his beer like he wished he were somewhere far, far away. Taylor and Jackson looked like they were bursting with questions, while Ben and Ryan were still focused on me as I hacked, worried I might lose the battle and soak

them.

Tyler rubbed my back, but his expression was anything but apologetic. One thing that hadn't changed? His love for catching me off-guard like this. Fine. Two could play at that game.

"Clearly, your training has failed," I rasped.

"I guess you'll just have to punish me harder," he shot back, and I lost the fight against blushing.

Lauren rounded on Junior. "I *told you* he was a brat."

"I'm not into all that shit," Josh said, mimicking Tyler's voice.

Tyler dropped a kiss on my shoulder. "Things . . . changed."

"I understand," Josh said, looking at Aly with hearts in his eyes. "You finally met the right person to unlock your kinks."

Junior gagged while Lauren wheezed for breath beside him. Across from her, Taylor finally broke, joining in the laughter, and soon all of us were chuckling.

A few minutes later, we'd returned to safer topics when Walter barked. Ryan moved quickly, able to grab him before he went racing off again.

I turned to see someone amble out of the darkness, wearing a casual black suit, his hair ruffled, looking tired after a long day of travel, but no less handsome because of it.

"I thought you couldn't make it," Tyler said, rising from his seat.

AJ smiled. "I caught an earlier flight."

I stood as well, watching the men embrace and press their lips together in a chaste greeting. They rejoined the table, AJ kissing me next before plopping

down on the bench seat and wrapping his arm around my waist to pull me close. Tyler sat on his other side, drinking him in after the past few weeks apart.

Josh cleared his throat, and it was then I noticed how quiet the table was.

Everyone stared at us, a mixture of expectant and impatient expressions on their faces.

“This is AJ,” Tyler said, simply, and let his friends come to their own conclusions.

No one so much as batted an eye, greeting AJ, offering to heat up a plate, pour him a drink. I watched on, falling quiet as the tension in my shoulders finally eased. I’d spent so much time around judgy assholes that it was second nature to look for double meanings, backhanded compliments. There was none of that here. Instead it was just . . . easy. Nice.

I *liked* these people. And not just one or two of them, but all of them. I was beyond curious about Junior’s time in the mob, wanted to know more about Lauren’s advocacy work, ask Josh how he’d gotten into hacking. Their easy camaraderie was like a siren song, proof that healthy friend groups existed and that family didn’t only mean the one you were born into, but the one you chose as well.

By the time we left hours later, and only after promising that yes, Tyler, AJ, and I would definitely be at the next dinner, I felt like my cup was full. New numbers had been added to my phone. Jackson was coming in next week for a consultation on a tattoo he wanted to get. Aly had demanded I join their next impromptu cocktail night, where she, Taylor, Lauren, and Ryan got together to blow off steam and talk shit about the world. Lauren had invited Tyler and me to Velvet to meet more people in the brat play community, which we happily accepted because we’d exhausted our online research.

They’d accepted AJ and me so easily, with open arms, so obviously happy for Tyler that it made my heart ache.

“It almost feels too good to be true,” Tyler told me on the drive to my parents’ house, AJ following just behind us. “Like I shouldn’t get to have this, be so happy, after everything I’ve done.”

My answering smile was sad. “I understand. I’ve had a lot of those same feelings myself. My therapist says it’s irrational guilt.”

Tyler nodded. “Mine, too, but I can’t shake the feeling.”

“Punishing yourself forever won’t change your past behavior,” I said. “Just keep reminding yourself of that. For as long as it takes to alter the narrative in your brain. You did what you did because the information you were given was inaccurate, which is no fault of your own. And yeah, you acted like a giant bag of dicks for a few years, but you have the rest of your

life to prove you’re *not* that person.”

He shook his head, jaw tensing, a stubborn expression coming over his face.

I flicked him. “Hey. Don’t be mean to my boyfriend. That’s *my* job.” This earned me an eyeroll and a muttered, “Yes, ma’am.”

“I love you,” I told him, for the very first time, knowing it would snap him out of his spiral, but also because I’d been holding the words in for a while. Were things between us always this wonderful? No. Tyler still had a lot of anger he was working through. Sometimes, he fell into black moods that were hard to pull him out of. He could be rude, fickle, and quick to temper. But he was also becoming quick to apologize and make amends, putting in the hard work to make things better, to make himself better, and I loved that about him just as much as I loved his sly humor and barbed flirtations.

He turned his head toward me and then back to the road. “Fuck, Stella. I love you so much.”

I worried the inside of my cheek, wondering if what I was about to say might change everything. “I think I love AJ a little, too. I think I always have.”

Tyler nodded, looking like he'd seen this coming. "AJ is easy to love." "Do you?" I asked. "Love him, I mean."

Tyler sighed. "I'm not sure. Up until recently, I didn't really think I was capable of romantic love. That my heart was too hard. But I know I love you. And I know AJ is important to me, too. I miss him when he's gone. I crave our time with him. He . . . steadies me in a way you don't." He shot me an apologetic look. "No offense."

I smiled, thinking it sounded a lot like love, but if Tyler needed more time to realize it, then I'd keep my opinion to myself. "I get it," I said instead. "And I feel the same. Do you want to ask him tonight? If he wants to join our relationship?"

"Do you think he'd go for it?" Tyler asked. "That he'll say yes?"

"He will," I assured him.

Several hours later, AJ proved me right.

A CKNOWLEDGMENTS

I need to start by thanking all the people who watched my very first TikTok about *Lights Out* back in 2023 and left encouraging comments. I'd been close to giving up on my dream of being a full-time author, and you screaming at me to write that book gave me the kick up the ass I so desperately needed. It's wild to think of how far we've come since then.

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Lastly, eternally, to my husband and cats. I don’t think it’s over-reacting to say that I would be lost without you.

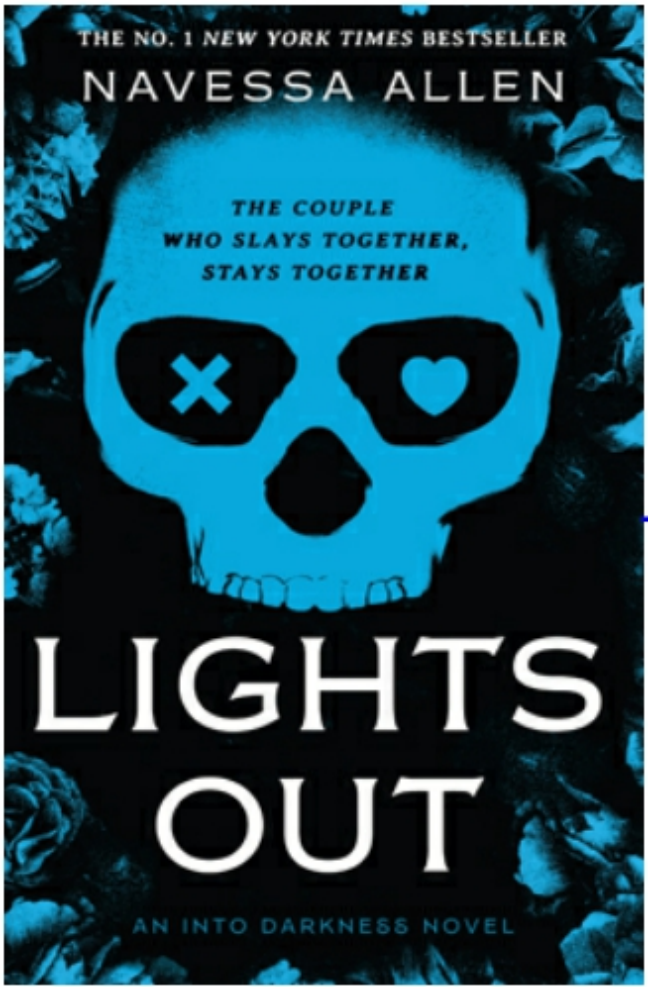
ABOUT THE A UTHOR

No. 1 *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Navessa Allen lives on the shores of Chesapeake Bay with her husband and their spoiled cats. She posts her books in serial format to her website via Patreon. To catch up on her latest work in progress, read exclusive bonus scenes, and

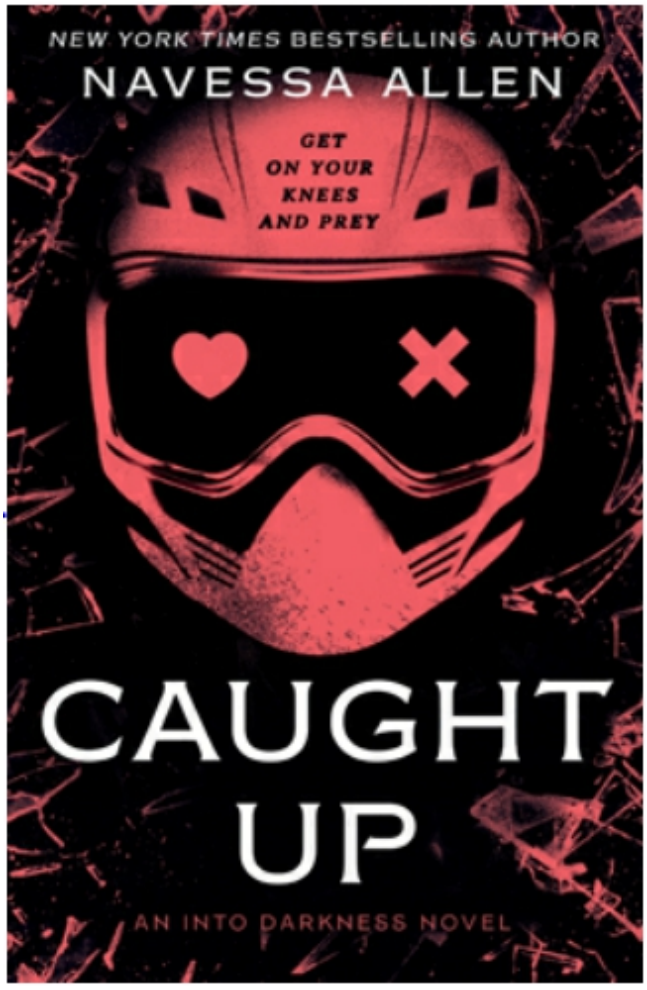
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• Support school libraries

• Give books as gifts

There’s a lot more information about how to encourage children to read on our website: **www.RaisingReaders.co.uk**

Thank you for reading.

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1 OECD, ‘21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World’, 2021, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/21st-century-readers_a83d84cb-en.html

2 National Literacy Trust, ‘Book Ownership in 2024’, November 2024,

https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/book-ownership-in-2024

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