



# A Method to His Madness

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, New Adult

**Description:** Ashley is stuck. In order to save her family's farm, she married Waylon two weeks ago, a terrible man she doesn't love and won't allow to touch her.

Enter Caleb. On the surface, he's a strict and stoic marriage counselor, but his methods are somewhat...unconventional. In order to save her marriage to Waylon, Caleb proposes that Ashley spend three days—and nights—with him, so the therapist can study what makes her happy. Emotionally. Physically. At the end of their time together, Caleb will pass on his findings to Waylon, so he can be a better husband. Simple, right?

Wrong.

Caleb has absolutely no intention of returning Ashley to her husband—and he has three days to figure out how to save her family's farm from ruin and keep the woman he loves forever. But is there a method to his madness or is he just...mad?

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## CHAPTER 1

Caleb

The woman staring at the jars of pickles stops me in my tracks.

Around me, the squeaks and muffled mutterings of the supermarket flatline and a loud ringing in my ears begins. I can no longer feel the red plastic basket in my hand.

It is an indisputable fact that she is beautiful, even with her blonde hair pulled back in a severe braid. Her shirt collar is tight, buttoned up and nearly reaching her delicate chin. She wears thick rimmed glasses. Loose pants. Everything about her attire is designed to draw the least amount of attention, yet I'm arrested in time, my steps faltering as if the air has grown sticky around me.

And she continues to stare at the pickles.

It occurs to me after a moment that she is not really seeing them. She's dazed.

Numb.

There is an entire world turning behind her eyes. The pickles are just bystanders. Though, after approximately thirty seconds, she visibly shakes herself, selects one of the jars and returns it, something on the top shelf catching her eye, instead.

When she reaches for the item and her outstretched fingers don't even come close, I begin to move in her direction, intending to help, though I would be a bald-faced liar

if I didn't acknowledge my body thrumming, my heart beating double time in my chest, some unknown part of me demanding to get closer to her.

I'm still ten yards away when she steps on the bottom shelf to boost herself, one elegant hand wrapping around a jar of tapenade—the sole of her sneakers yelping as she slips. The woman clutches the glass to her chest with one arm, her other one reaching uselessly for purchase, as there is nothing to grab but breakable items. It's clear she's going to stumble and possibly fall. But he doesn't, because her back lands against my chest, instead, my left hand a steadying presence at her waist.

It's the only steady part of me as soon as I've touched her.

As soon as her scent invades my head.

Once, in an orange grove in California, I plucked an orange off a tree, peeled it and bit into it whole. That's what she smells like. Sun heated, natural. Juicy.

I look down at the soft sweep of her neck and wonder what I'd need to do to sink my teeth into her. Unfortunately, I don't get the chance to ponder the answer for long, because she turns pissed off green eyes on me and raises the glass jar, obviously prepared to break the vessel of tapenade over my fucking head.

“Get your hands off me or I'll crack your skull open,” she says haltingly.

Fearfully.

“Easy,” I say quietly, making sure she's steady, then backing up a pace, despite wanting more contact. More. My pulse is erratic, regardless of my calming tone, thanks to her hushed honey voice. The supple glow of her cheeks. The mixture of violence and trepidation in her incredible eyes. I'm...captured.

Who the hell is this woman?

“There’s nothing easy about me,” she says, flipping the glass jar over in her hand.

“Would you like a demonstration?”

Yes.

I would, in fact, love her to show me anything about herself, because she presents such an enigma, and I’m not used to being confused. I’m a therapist who can diagnose people at forty paces. Disruptive behavior disorders. Depression. Disassociation. Anxiety.

This woman is not straightforward. She contains multitudes.

A moment ago, she appeared lost in a pickle-induced fog.

Now she would very much enjoy killing me in aisle five.

And one thing is for certain. She does not appreciate being touched by a stranger. Frankly, I’ve never met a woman who does. This is something I can confidently address.

“You were falling,” I point out. “I didn’t mean to startle you. It was a reflex.”

“Sort of like me clocking you with this heavy object?”

My lips twitch. “Sort of like that, yes.”

“Well.” She gives me a once-over that can only be coined downright disrespectful. “Aren’t you going to complain that I should be thanking you?” Slowly, she sets the tapenade back on the wrong shelf behind her, though she’s careful to keep one green

eye trained on me, as if I might attack her in the middle of the supermarket. “Aren’t you going to try and make me feel crazy for threatening you over a harmless little touch?”

## Page 2

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“No. I’m not.”

“It’s not harmless to me,” she says, somewhat choppily.

“I can see that.” That is an understatement. She’s...haunted. There’s trauma here and I’ve haplessly unearthed it with one touch. “I’m sorry.”

Slowly, her brow knits together, this gorgeous woman who is trying to disguise her beauty to no avail, her gaze attempting to collect information about me. “You actually seem sorry.”

“And that’s hard for you to believe?”

“Yes.”

If I had my clipboard in front of me, I would have filled three full pages of notes by now and there would be no end in sight. “Why?”

She starts to respond, but checks herself, pressing her lush lips in a line as a woman trundles past with a baby tucked into the front of her shopping cart. “This isn’t really grocery store conversation.”

“No, it’s not.” I’m careful to keep an appropriate distance from her when I say the next part, because it could easily be interpreted as a come on. I tell myself it isn’t one, though my body’s reaction to her calls me a liar. “We could have it in my office, instead.”

Before I can stop myself, remind myself that I'm a strict professional for a reason, the moving image is there. Me fucking this fiercely beautiful woman face down over my desk, her hair loose and wrapped around my fist, her ass cheeks plumping, plumping, plumping against my stomach, her fingernails digging lines into wood, both of us moaning.

"Oh, could we?" she laughs, sarcastically, reaching for the jar once again.

"I'm a therapist."

That gives her brief pause. Brief being the operative word. "Your profession doesn't preclude you from being a creep." Almost reluctantly, she drags her gaze along the breadth of my shoulders. "You don't look like a therapist."

It's an even steeper struggle not to step closer to her after that. She's noticed my body. Analyzed and considered it. "What does a therapist look like?"

"Pale. Bored. Like they sit in an office all day."

I wrestle back a surge of amusement. "And what do I look like...?"

"Ashley," she murmurs, seeming surprised at herself for revealing her name. A name I already know I will never forget. "I don't know, um..." She seems to hate...and enjoy looking at me. In equal measure. Interesting. "A secret service agent, maybe."

Clever girl. "In my past life, I was something similar."

Ashley looks so deeply inside of me, I feel an alarming shift. A rock formation loosening, preparing to cause a landslide. "How many lives have you led?"

"Too many," I mutter, breaking my rule. Allowing information about myself to enter

the conversation. Technically, we're not in the middle of a session, but she's disarmed me enough to forget where my barriers lie. Ten feet high. Impenetrable. The patient is the focus, not me. Never me. There is too much to dissect there.

I left my job as a homicide detective and became a therapist out of an urgent need to understand what makes a person hurt others. Emotionally and physically. How someone capable of violence hides in plain sight, the way my partner on the force did. My affable, goofy partner who didn't come to work on day, because he'd been arrested for killing his wife. The human brain became a fascinating and scary place to me that dark day, perhaps because behavioral science is easier to understand than grief. Rage.

A man appears to the right of Ashley...

...and grabs her wrist. Hard. Yanking her sideways, in his direction.

The way he pulls her sleeve renders the collar of her shirt askew...and I see it.

A bruise.

My vision is suddenly coated in such a thick, syrupy red, the man is almost obscured by the rageful color, but I see him out of necessity, because I'm about to choke him out with my bare hands. Trucker hat, unkempt beard. A starchy, short sleeved button-down shirt. A violent man like my partner, but far more obvious about the monster inside of him. I'm reaching for his throat when he says, "Thanks for finding my wife for me." He gives Ashley a look of veiled anger. "Sooner or later, you're going to learn to stay where I put you."

## CHAPTER 2

Ashley

Acid rises in my throat,helpless ire rattling my bones.

More than anything, I'm humiliated.

## Page 3

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To be identified as this man's wife in front of...him.

Who is the other man? I've never seen him in town before. I would have remembered. Standing at least six feet three inches tall, his body robust in a way that whispers lethal, he's a presence. Dark hair fashioned in a slick back, his eyes a piercing navy blue, face clean shaven, he stands eerily still, but his gaze ripples as he looks at the man I'm unfortunate enough to call my husband.

"I go where I want," I say through my teeth.

Waylon, my husband of two weeks, laughs. But the sound contains a promise of punishment. I feel nothing. This whole marriage is a punishment, so what's a little more?

"Apparently where you want to go is off flirting with another man," Waylon says, making me cringe. It wasn't flirting. This conversation with the stranger...it seemed like more than that, though I must be mistaken. Having a meaningful conversation with a man is about as likely as hooking a whale while fishing for trout. "Maybe you could try flirting with the man who put a ring on your finger. Even if you refuse to wear the goddamn thing."

"I'd rather blind myself with a screwdriver," I say, numb. So numb of anything but useless anger. I'm a prisoner. I've been stripped of my will. Might as well be in shackles.

I can hear Waylon's teeth grind. "That can be arranged."

It's very subtle, the stiffening of the other man's muscles, the slow tightening of his fist around the metal basket handle. The winding of his jaw. But I'm highly aware of the increase in his tension, because weirdly, my body constricts with corresponding winds of muscle, of flesh, like...I'm physically attuned to him in some way. It's odd, to say the least. I've never felt physically connected to anyone, especially the man I married to cover my family's debts. I'm so repulsed by his touch, I've found ways to avoid consummating the marriage, claiming I'm sick or I have my period. Outright hiding.

Last night, I pretended I'd seen a huntsman spider in the bedroom and thankfully, his fear of arachnids overrode his suspicion that I'm full of shit.

But I'm running out of time.

Sooner or later, this slimeball I married is going to force intimacy on me. That's why he married me, isn't it? Sex. That's all men believe I'm useful for, simply because I was born with a pleasing face. I arouse them, which is considered my fault, so they're entitled to take what they want. Too many times in my life, I've been spoken to in disgusting ways, groped and objectified. That's why I started dressing like this. To deter the advances, even of my husband. Moments ago, when the stranger braced my hip in his hand so I wouldn't fall, I assumed he was using an opportunity to cop a feel.

Now...I'm not sure.

Something about his lethal stillness is reassuring. Which makes no sense.

"Go sit in the car," Waylon says, squeezing my arm. "Before you piss me off."

"Seems like you're already there," the stranger says, a muscle leaping in his cheek. "You're laying hands on your wife in the middle of the supermarket." His expression

doesn't change, but the rippling of his gaze becomes infused with glacial intention. "While we're on the subject, I suggest you stop or you're going to have a problem to deal with."

Waylon thrusts his chin out. "What's that?"

"My motherfucking temper."

My husband laughs, but he's clearly intimidated by the much taller stranger, his stance shifting, his next words emerging with a stutter. "Hey, man. L-look. I know she's pretty, but it's all for show. God gave her that face and body as a cruel joke." He hefts the waistband of his jeans higher. "This wife of mine is as frigid as a snowstorm in January."

Heat suffuses my cheeks, but I lift my chin and refuse to break eye contact with the stranger. Yup, that's right. I've got no use for men. This newcomer is no different, despite what my exhausted instincts are insisting on telling me. That he's...other. Different.

"How long have you two been married?" asks the stranger.

"Too long," I bite off.

"Two weeks," Waylon snarls.

I try to rip my arm out of his grip, but he holds on.

The stranger takes one step forward. "Let. Go."

My husband releases me, as if he's been socked in the jaw. "Hey," he says, getting jumpy. Definitely annoyed at himself for following the other man's order. "Back off,

bro. This is none of your business.”

The stranger stares at Waylon long and hard. Then he says something I’m not expecting at all. “Why? Don’t you want my help?”

Waylon goes slack jawed. “Huh?”

Huh?

“I’m a therapist.” He sets down his basket, which only appears to contain a tin of coffee and shortbread cookies. From the inner pocket of his suit jacket, he produces a business card and a pen. He writes something on the back, his eyes finding mine and lingering, as if trying to pass on a message. “My services include couples counseling.”

While I absorb that, Waylon scoffs. Predictably.

## Page 4

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“I ain’t going to see no shrink.”

The stranger nods, only a hint of disgust bleeding into his features, but I can tell there’s a lot more hiding under the surface. And it makes me feel...not so alone. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t feel like a solitary mass of useless rage crying into a void, so even the briefest flash of unity is powerful. Enough to make my breath catch. “Then by all means. Continue along in your unhappy marriage with a wife you couldn’t possibly begin to understand,” says the man. “I’m sure no one will be surprised when you fail.” Those blue eyes look into Waylon’s soul and find the weakest point to inject venom. “It wouldn’t be the first time, would it? That you’ve failed to live up to standards.”

Waylon pales considerably. “Who the fuck are you?”

I’m wondering the same thing. The whole world has slowed and crystalized around the stranger and it’s like catching a glimpse of a higher power, his blue eyes and strictly controlled voice in charge of the earth’s next revolution. My belly and my knees reach for each other, the latter beginning to tremble.

What is going on here?

The stranger takes another step closer, blocking Waylon’s view of his hand, which is deftly sliding his business card into my pocket. Without touching me, I notice. Keeping the boundary I set. Oh. “Come see me when you build enough courage,” he says to Waylon. “Or should I say if you build enough courage.” Another step toward Waylon and he’s looming over my husband. “If you cause her pain again, I will know. And I will strike from the darkness when you least expect it. You won’t

survive the first blow.”

I’ve never seen my husband shaken. Not in the two weeks we’ve been living under the same roof. Or the two years he haunted my family leading up to the wedding day, vowing to take me as collateral for their missed payments. Ultimately succeeding.

The stranger gives me a meaningful look as he strides away, turning the corner and disappearing at the end of the aisle. I wait until Waylon storms off out of the supermarket, cursing a blue streak, before unearthing the business card from my pocket.

Caleb Draper. Licensed therapist.

Unconventional methods.

On the back, he has written a two-word message. For my eyes alone.

Trust me.

## CHAPTER 3

Caleb

It takes her forty-eight hours to call.

Honestly, I expected longer from my stubborn supermarket angel.

I don’t mind admitting that I paced a lot during those two days, primarily because the fact that she’s married—and to an abusive buffoon, no less—is a crime against humanity. Could I have tracked her down and stolen her away from him in the wee hours of the night? Yeah. I have those capabilities.

But I'm a smarter man than that.

Kidnapping or force will not work with this woman.

She needs to come to me. What happens between us needs to be her decision.

I look at my watch.

Ashley and her husband, Waylon, are set to arrive at my office in three minutes. When I hear the muffled croon of Willie Nelson blasting in the parking lot, followed by the crank of a parking brake, my pulse begins to beat low and slow. A sniper waiting in the hills for the perfect moment to pull the trigger. And I will be pulling it this afternoon.

For Ashley's sake.

For my own sanity.

I refuse to leave this woman in a situation making her so miserable. Not to mention, his behavior will only escalate—and I don't allow villains to win anymore.

I take matters into my own hands.

In this instance, I will be taking her into my own hands, too. Come hell or high water.

There's a loud knock on the door of my office, but I don't move right away from my cross-armed lean against the lip of my desk. I listen.

"I'm only staying for fifteen minutes," Waylon snaps. "I'm meeting the boys for the fishing trip in an hour and I ain't even packed my equipment yet."

Fishing trip. Perfect.

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There's a sigh from Ashley and my stomach tightens in response, the anticipation of seeing her again—finally—prickling my palms, my scalp.

“Is there any chance the boat will sink?” she asks, hopefully.

Alone in my dark office, I smile. Then I let it drop.

Put my game face on and push off my desk, crossing to the door and opening it, my attention zeroing in on her face. Her pupils expand as our eyes meet, her chest dipping almost unnoticeably. I notice. I can't imagine a world where I don't notice every little thing about her. For instance, her hands meet and clasp below her navel when I murmur her name in greeting, as if she's unconsciously trying to block her pussy from view.

Is it already having a response to me?

Maybe that's why she looks so annoyed.

God, she's beautiful. Glasses in place, hair in a tight braid. An oversized pea coat.

You can't hide perfection from me, angel. I see you.

Her husband, on the other hand, has his thumbs tucked under his armpits, chin thrust out, like a belligerent clown. Impatient to go pack his tackle box, instead of focused on fixing his marriage to this goddess who is a million miles out of his league.

“I'll enjoy taking her from you, Waylon,” I say.

His eyes bug out. “What?”

“Her coat,” I say smoothly, stepping back to let them cross the threshold. “I’ll enjoy taking her coat.”

He hesitates, trying to puzzle through my statement, before roughly nudging Ashley inside. And just like that, I’m picturing his blood staining my walls.

Easy, Caleb.

Play the long game.

Keeping a censorious eye on Waylon, I hold out my hand for Ashley’s coat, but she shakes her head, bundling the wool tighter to her body. “I’ll keep it on.”

“Very well.” I just barely manage to avoid slamming the door behind them. “Have a seat.”

Waylon stomps deeper into the office and drops onto the couch that faces my leather wingback chair, sniffing. “Just what the hell are we planning to do here, exactly? I don’t have a lot of time.”

His back is to me and Ashley, so instead of wasting my time answering the buffoon, I meet her guarded green eyes and mouth the words, “Are you okay?”

With a heavy swallow, she inclines her head. Outwardly calm.

But the vein at the bottom of her delicate neck is pounding wildly.

I want to pull her close and reassure her that everything is going to be fine now, but she doesn’t like being touched. Yet. She doesn’t trust me. Yet.

But she trusted me enough to come here. To read the message on the back of my card and take the leap. I refuse to let her down.

A moment later, I'm sitting across from Waylon and Ashley, clipboard resting on my knee. Pen wedged between by index and middle fingers. "First off, I would like to get some preliminary information. Waylon, how old are you?"

His knee starts to jiggle. "Thirty-one."

"And Ashley..."

"Twenty."

I desperately want to judge the age gap, but I can't, considering I'm thirty-three, myself and fully intend to make this woman mine. "Right. Let's start at the beginning," I say, after making a note. "How did you two meet?"

Silence.

Waylon crosses his arms stiffly.

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Ashley looks down at her lap.

“Everything you say inside this room remains between us. I encourage you both to tell the truth, so we can produce authentic results.”

Ashley clears her throat. “He was...he is my family’s landlord. Two years ago, his father bought the ten acres on which my family’s dairy farm operates and put the land in Waylon’s name. He’s been coming around to collect the payments since then.”

“I’m a businessman.”

“Your dad is a businessman,” Ashley corrects him. “You’re a bill collector who took advantage of your position.”

Waylon turns an angry red. “I did your family a favor. Forgave all that debt—”

“In exchange for a human being!”

“I don’t see the point in this,” Waylon shouts with a mottled complexion. “We got one problem in this marriage and it’s that she won’t fulfill her marital obligations.” He gives Ashley a disgusted once-over. “I got myself a centerfold who acts like an old shrew.”

“I didn’t ask to be in this marriage,” Ashley says, eyes closed. “I was forced.”

“Well, you’re here now. Why not make the best of it?” Waylon drops his hands, and I watch them carefully, prepared to intervene if they go anywhere fucking near her.

“You could do a lot worse than me, you spoiled brat.”

And I’ve heard enough.

The events that led them here have come together like a fucked-up puzzle. Protectiveness over this woman has been a flood in my stomach since meeting her and it has hardened now to iron. This man preyed on her vulnerability, did he? Forced her to marry him, which she obviously did only out of desperation. To save her family farm.

He couldn’t win her heart on his own merit, so he bought her with daddy’s money.

Expects her to thank him.

And he has the nerve to call her a spoiled brat?

I stand up, carefully setting down my clipboard on the seat I just vacated.

There is only one way to deal with this type of man. He is a follower. A simpleton. He only understands one thing with his animal brain.

Hierarchy.

Recognizing the alpha.

It’s why I take three measured steps toward the couch and backhand him across the fucking mouth. “A man speaks to a woman with respect,” I say in a low, authoritarian voice, looking down at him from above, while he gapes at me, in total shock. Good. That’s right, chump. I’m in charge. Now you’re the victim. “Especially his wife. Next time I’m required to warn you, it’ll be with a closed fist. Is that perfectly clear, Waylon?”

“Did you just fucking hit me?” he spits.

“Are you going to cry?” I ask him, eyebrow raised. “Would you like a tissue?”

Face fuchsia, he sputters through a few curse words, looking to his wife, whose wide eyes are trained on me, lips parted. Moist. Knees pressed together.

Tightly.

We’re only beginning, Ashley.

“What kind of shrink is this guy?” Waylon whines, holding his cheek.

“My business card warned you that my methods are unconventional.”

“That’s true. It did,” Ashley whispers. “If I’d known that meant bitch slapping, I would have made an appointment sooner.”

“You shut the—” Waylon starts, coiling. Preparing to strike out at Ashley.

Not me. The man his own size who just slapped him.

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Which explains everything about him. About men of his low caliber.

“Don’t even think about it,” I bite off, pleased when Waylon freezes.

Recognizing the alpha in the room.

“You came here to better understand your wife, so that this marriage might function in a way that makes you both happy. Correct?”

“There’s no making her happy!”

There’s my opening. Thank you, Waylon.

“Oh, I’m sure there is.” I return to my chair, pick up the clipboard and sit down, slowly, noting that Ashley’s fingers are curled into the hem of her coat, knuckles white, green eyes watching me with reluctant awe. “But I’m not sure you’re the kind of man who enjoys putting in the work, Waylon. You’re more of a shortcut guy, aren’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he complains, gingerly testing his eye for pain and wincing as a result.

“It means, you sound like someone who lets other men do the work for you, then step in and benefit, such as your father buying land for you to profit from. Another example might be...” I nod at the gaudy ring on his finger. “You played football in high school.”

“Hell yeah, I did.”

“State champs?”

“Damn right.”

“How much time did you actually spend on the field, though?”

I haven’t even raised a hand and he looks like he’s been slapped again.

Ashley undoes the first two buttons on her coat and it takes every ounce of willpower in my body to stay seated. Stay calm. When all I want to do is carry her upstairs and whisper in her ear until the coat is on my floor and she’s opening her legs for me.

Patience.

“How long is your fishing trip, Waylon?” I ask.

He frowns. “Three days. Why?”

I write the word idiot on my clipboard. “Go on your trip. While you’re gone, I’m going to counsel your wife. I’m going to learn what makes her happy, so you don’t have to put in the work.” It’s a struggle to keep my voice even, because I’m imagining the time I’ll be spending alone with Ashley. Learning her. Earning her. Because this man is too stupid to do so himself. “By the time you come back, I should be able to share those results with you.” I move my focus to Ashley. “That is, if she chooses to be counseled by me. Every decision from here on out will be made by her and her alone.”

Her lips part on an uneven breath.

Her fingers are no longer curled in the hem of her coat and the too-big garment rides up and over her smooth, feminine knee. A knee that I can already feel fitting into my palm.

Waylon splits a concerned look between me and Ashley—and he should be concerned. Very concerned. Because if I have my way, I'll be fucking his wife like an animal by the time our three days together are up. What's more, she'll be screeching for it.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Waylon says.

"What do you propose, instead, Waylon?" I ask, drawing a hangman's noose onto my clipboard. Six spaces underneath. Just enough to fit the letters W-A-Y-L-O-N. "Continuing on the way things are? If you choose that path, the three of us know what's going to happen. Don't we?"

"He's going to make me consummate this marriage, with or without my say so," Ashley says, her voice vibrating with a combination of fear and indignation. "He's going to keep...hurting me. It'll only get worse."

"And I'm not going to allow that to happen, am I, Waylon?" I say, looking him dead in the eye. Making sure he sees my willingness to slaughter him with a smile on my face. "I'll have to kill you first, won't I?"

After a long, drawn-out pause, I laugh, as if I'm joking. I'm not.

Waylon, moron that he is, laughs, too, his relief clear. "What kind of...counseling are you planning to do with her?"

"That's between me and Ashley." I lean forward, my hands clasped loosely in front of me. "But let me be very clear, how we proceed is up to her. If she wants to use this

opportunity to learn more about her own wants and needs, so that I can get a clear picture of what she requires in a marriage, I'm going to accommodate her."

Waylon shakes his head, visibly confused. "I don't...I don't understand."

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“Then allow me to be very clear.” I stand up, so that he’s forced to look up at me again, this beta who flew too close to the sun. “If Ashley wants to spend three days talking, that’s what we’ll do. If she wants to be taken on a date by a real man, that’s what we’ll do. But listen very carefully, if Ashley asks me to fuck her, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.” I enunciate every word. “I’m going to fuck your wife, Waylon.”

### CHAPTER 4

Ashley

Every time I think I can’t be surprised any more than I already have, I’m proven wrong. Not only did he slap my husband across the face, but he has also utterly cowed the man. Waylon is doing his best to melt into the couch, his toxic bullshit diminished in the face of real strength. Real power. I’m...dreaming? I must be dreaming. This man, this self-proclaimed unconventional therapist—Caleb Draper has shocked me at every turn since walking into his office.

He’s a pillar of quiet might.

A puma on the verge of striking.

He’s terrifying.

And I can’t look away. I’m hypnotized by the deep resonance of his voice. The words coming out of his hard yet undeniably sensual mouth.

I'm going to fuck your wife, Waylon.

I should cross the room and slap him across his chiseled face for making such a presumption. I should storm from the dim, tasteful office comprised of muted forest colors, steal Waylon's truck and keep driving. Get far, far away from here and the conflicting emotions in my chest, the confusing waves of heat pulsing through my lower body. I don't want this. I don't want any man. I made that decision a long time ago.

But Caleb is giving me the green light to make more choices.

More decisions. Real ones. Concerning my own body. A body I've never truly explored because I resent it for all the attention it's brought down on my head.

If Caleb is to be believed, he's empowering me.

And I'm caught off guard. I'm struggling with how to react.

Righteous anger or...gratitude.

"What the hell did you just say?" Waylon finally shouts, spittle flying from his mouth, his face still red from that well-earned backhand.

Caleb's expression is made of stone as he steps even closer to Waylon, so he's looming above the smaller man. Smaller in every way. "You heard me."

It's unreal, watching my abuser shrink down to nothing. It's like dragging in oxygen after swimming against the current all the way from the ocean floor.

It's magical. It's freedom.

It's so freeing, in fact, that if I could, I would leave Waylon this very afternoon. I would file for an annulment and pursue my own life. A life of creativity and abundant thought. Writing stories. Letting my mind expand and run wild. But he still has my family by the throat. He could refuse to renew their lease on the land. He could strip them of their livelihood in a heartbeat. And he would. He's vindictive. He's unconscionable. How else to describe a man who could force me into marriage when he's known me since I was in elementary school?

"Ashley," Waylon says, twisting toward me on the couch, face purpling with impotence and rage. "You can't really be considering this!"

I can't.

I can't.

Right?

Except I haven't been able to think of anything but Caleb for two straight days. How he spoke to me with such understanding and respect. How he stood up for me. And those two compelling words written on the back of his business card.

Trust me.

"I decide how I'm to be...counselled?" I ask Caleb, sending Waylon into a sputter.

"That's right." Caleb ignores my husband and focuses on me, his blue eyes like a beckoning stretch of ocean. Deep and reliably turbulent, but also...eternal. Strong. Present. Renewing. "I'm going to help you learn about yourself. You'll learn what you need. That way, you'll know what to ask for. In a marriage."

A marriage.

Notmy marriage.

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Interesting.

If I wasn't such a wordsmith, I might have missed the slip.

What does it mean?

In any event, I'm not going to...sleep with Caleb. God no.

Not only would that be out of character, but being intimate with someone as a form of therapy is...extreme? Isn't it?

Just for a moment, however, I allow myself to picture an act that I've heard described by men around the farm, when they don't think I'm listening. I imagine myself reaching up from the couch to unfasten his belt, rubbing my palm against the swell in his pants while my husband watches helplessly from three feet away, his head falling shamefully into his hands while Caleb pushes his shaft between my waiting lips, groaning.

Stroking my hair lovingly while he pumps firmly. Inch by inch vanishing into my mouth. Holds himself deep while I whimper, blinking up at him.

A swallow catches in my throat when a foreign wetness gathers unexpectedly between my thighs. I almost look down to inspect, but I don't want to draw attention to the issue. What...is that?

"Would you like Waylon to leave now, Ashley?" Caleb asks, eyes flickering.

I should take some time to consider my answer. Or the fact that Waylon is going to retaliate against me when he comes back from the fishing trip. But he's going to be a putrid, violent monster, either way, isn't he? I might as well gasp this final breath of freedom being offered. "Yes. I would."

Waylon snorts, but he's got a fine layer of sweat on his forehead. If we were at home, he would be in my face, shouting, shaking me. Threatening me. But right now, I don't feel an ounce of fear, though, and it's because Caleb is there. At the ready. "You think you're going to get her into bed, man?" Waylon snorts again. "Ain't no chance of that. She's as frigid as they come. You'll see."

"If you think that's true, you're even dumber than you look, Waylon," Caleb responds without missing a beat. "And it's time for you to go."

"If you think I'm going to leave my wife here to...to be—"

"Get the fuck out, Waylon. Before I throw you out."

Oh lord. My heart is slamming sideways in my throat. That moisture that had started to trickle between my legs is more prominent now, soaking my panties. I've never felt the urge to touch myself. I thought that was for other women. Women who like sex. Like men. But if I was alone right now, I think I might slide my fingers among my wet flesh now and explore. My nipples tingle and plump inside my bra. What is happening to me?

Finally, Waylon lunges to his feet with a snarl, though Caleb doesn't so much as flinch. He merely watches my husband storm out of the office with a wry smirk, running a slow hand down the length of his tie as the door is slammed shut.

I'm not going to bed with you.

Those are going to be the first words out of my mouth in the wake of Waylon's departure. Just to set the tone. But he speaks first and surprises me once again.

"Name something you want, Ashley. It can be anything."

"A typewriter," I breathe. "And some paper."

He doesn't roll his eyes. Or complain that I didn't answer that I want sex.

Caleb only nods, examining my answer, as if he appreciates this clue about who I am.

"That can be arranged."

## CHAPTER 5

Caleb

As luck would have it, I took over this office from a lawyer who started practicing law in the sixties. It doesn't take me long to locate an old typewriter in the storage shed out back. While still outside, I blow the dust off the machine, entering the office through the rear door and setting the typewriter up in front of a window on the far side of the room, stacking a sheaf of paper alongside. Then I gesture for Ashley to sit in front of it.

"I hope you won't mind if I get some work done while you write," I say, raising an eyebrow, trying not to inhale too deeply of the orange grove scent she's introduced into my office, like a ray of sunshine. I don't have many tasks to complete. My clients are few and far between at this early stage in my practice and I blew through my to-do list over the last two sleepless nights. But I want her to relax, I want her to feel safe being alone with me, and that means time to adjust. To exist in the same space without any expectations or pressure. "I'll just be at my desk."

Her gaze is wary, but it strays to my mouth, cutting away quickly. “That’s fine.”

“Good.” I notice the slight flush on her neck and wish I had the freedom to suck that flavor into my mouth. “Would you like me to take your coat now?”

“No,” she says quickly.

I nod. “Very well.”

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“Actually.” She swallows, fingering the buttons. “I’m a little hot. But...I didn’t plan to take it off for the session. I’m not dressed like I usually dress. Especially around...”

“Men?”

She exhales sharply. “Yes.”

When she doesn’t seem inclined to elaborate—or remove the coat—I search for a way to calm her obvious nerves. “Ashley, you could be wearing nothing under that coat and unless you ask for my hands on you, I’ll be keeping them to myself.”

An instant later, it becomes painfully obvious that I have placed a lot more confidence in my willpower than I should have. Because Ashley finishes unbuttoning the pea coat and shrugs off the wool outerwear to reveal a body that could launch World War III. She’s watching my reaction closely, holding her breath, so I try to remain stoic—and I’ve never faced such a challenge.

For one, she’s wearing these shorts made of sweatpants material and they’re rolled at the waist, leaving them damningly short. So tight against her pussy, it’s like they’ve been twisted in a fist. She’s nipped at the waist and flared at the hip. Lithe, luscious thighs. A white tank top does nothing to conceal the plump mounds of her tits. High, pouty things that have my cock vibrating like the sidewalk when a train passes beneath.

Perhaps, just for a moment, I understand Waylon a little better. A man could be driven insane by proximity to this woman. A man would be driven to fuck her by any

means necessary. I'm hard in my briefs just imagining the incredible shape of her beneath me, my dick buried between her two sweet thighs, angled for optimal pleasure.

All of these inexcusable thoughts and observations pass in a matter of seconds, however, and I'm tamping down my instinct to have her, take her...and drawing out the chair, instead. Indicating with a dip of my chin that she should sit. My restraint is worthwhile when her shoulders relax and she exhales in relief, taking her spot in front of the typewriter.

With her seated, I go to my desk and sit, adjusting my erection out of view, though there is no comfort to be had for the next couple of hours. I go through patient files and make unnecessary notations while the pace of her typing picks up slightly. Every time she leans forward to read what she's written, the gap between her shorts and tank top widens at the small of her back. That smooth expanse of skin thickens my pulse, the very beginning swell of her ass forcing me to reposition my stiff dick over and over, but nothing helps. There's no antidote for this lust.

Or this fascination.

It grows by the minute.

What is she writing? What is she thinking?

Has anyone ever encouraged her to write? Is this her first chance?

What made her decide to bring Waylon to therapy? Was it desperation...or is it too much to hope that she felt the same electric connection flowing between us in the supermarket?

I hold back my questions for now, but my curiosity multiplies. No end in sight.

After a couple of hours, she drops her hands away from the typewriter.

“I...think I’m done. For now.”

Calmly, I set down my pen, despite the fact that her voice just constricted every muscle in my abdomen. “You sound disappointed.”

She flicks me a surprised look, as if she wasn’t expecting such an astute observation. “Well, I...”

Remaining quiet, I lean back in my chair.

“I guess I always thought...I just needed an opportunity. Like this. And the perfect masterpiece would come pouring out. But it’s not like that at all. I’m indecisive over every word and instead of focusing on the story, I’m regretting all the ways I didn’t make it better.”

“I don’t know a lot about writing, but I gather indecision is a side effect for anyone creating art from scratch.”

“It’s far from art,” she says with a light laugh, the sound making my feel out of breath. “I’m still eager to dive back in tomorrow, though.” She looks over at me, still somewhat guarded, but not as nervous as before. “Thank you. For finding the typewriter.”

“You’re welcome.”

She glances out the window, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. “What now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do we do now?”

Anything, angel. Name it. “Why don’t you sit on the couch and we’ll talk through what you want to do next?”

She only displays the barest indecision, before pushing back the chair and crossing to the modern leather sofa, sitting in the same spot as before.

I resume my position across from her in my wingback, clipboard resting on my knee.

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“It’s getting close to dinner time. Would you like me to bring you home for the night and we can resume our session tomorrow? Or would you like to have dinner with me?”

A delicious flush darkens her cheeks.

She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

“What is it, Ashley?” Did she notice her thighs flexed when I said her name? “As I mentioned earlier, nothing you say to me will leave my confidence. Nothing you say will be considered shameful or wrong. Not even your darkest confessions.”

“I don’t know if I have any dark confessions, it’s just...it’s so strange to be given...options. What I would like to do. Where I want to have dinner. I went from living with my set-in-their-ways parents to Waylon. That kind of thing is usually up to someone else.”

“Now it’s up to you.”

Her chest rises and shudders down. “That’s how it should be.”

I want to hold her. “Yes, that’s how it should be, angel.”

That endearment slides right out without any forethought and it’s too late to take it back. Can’t play it off, either, because the way I said it matches how I feel when I look at her. Tender, protective. Hungry.

“I’m sorry,” I say, at a loss. “I hope that didn’t make you uncomfortable.”

She hasn’t blinked since I said it. “I’m not an angel.”

“What’s your definition of an angel?”

A beat passes. “An infallible being. With wings.”

“Maybe for me, an angel is someone faced with a lot of difficulty but manages to hold on to their sense of self. And their dreams.”

Silence passes slowly.

“I don’t think I should have dinner with you,” she whispers.

There’s a hard lurch in my chest. “All right. Because I’ve upset you?”

A small hesitation. “No.”

I wait, holding my breath.

She smooths her palm along the cushion of the couch and I can almost hear my words repeating in her head. Nothing you say to me will leave my confidence. “I guess I don’t really understand my...how I feel when I’m around you.”

It costs me a giant effort to remain seated.

I can normally predict what my clients are going to say. None of my preconceived notions apply to Ashley, do they? Professionally or personally. She’s one of a kind.

“Would you like to explain what you mean?”

“You confuse me.”

“How?”

“You give me freedom. But for some reason...” She wets her lips. “I don’t want to take freedom...from you. I finally have the chance to run free and taste some independence and yet, I want to stay around you. My body—”

Oh Jesus.

“What about your body?” I rasp.

“I’m not used to feeling anything but tension around men.”

“But around me you feel...”

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She crosses her thighs in response, swallowing, pupils dilated.

“Are you aroused, Ashley?” I ask, on the verge of coming in my pants.

“I don’t think I know w-what it feels like to be aroused.”

My God, I’m burning alive.

If her honesty wasn’t undoing me, the telling side-to-side shift of her hips would. “I can ask you a series of questions to determine if you’re aroused. Or I can join you on the couch and make a determination. Physically.” My pulse is skittering, voice unnaturally thick. “But the latter would require me to touch you. Is that what you want?”

She thinks about it. “Maybe...not yet.”

Sexual frustration strangles me with its bare hands, but I don’t allow myself to show it. “Very well. I’ll make my determination from here.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

Thank God for my clipboard, because it’s hiding the rigid column of my cock. The wet spot I’m sure is spreading at the top of my zipper. “Does your skin feel sensitive, Ashley?”

“Yes.”

I make a note. “Are your breasts heavy?”

She sucks in a breath and nods.

“What about your little nipples?” My voice is a bare scrape of sound. “Are they hard and puckered?”

“Yes,” she complains, nearly killing me by rubbing the heel of her hand against the stiff peaks, gasping at the friction. “They hurt.”

A bead of sweat rolls down my spine. “Last question.” I dig the tip of my pen into my thigh to the point of pain. “Are you wet between your legs?”

She closes her eyes, a blush painting her cheeks. “For hours.”

It’s everything I can do not to drop the clipboard and unzip my pants. Beat myself blind and come on the carpet at her feet. “It is my professional opinion that you’re aroused, Ashley,” I manage, winded.

Her lips form a moist oval, fingers clawing the edge of the leather couch cushion. “What should I do about it? Is there a way to make the ache go away?”

“Yes,” I grit out. I’ve never been so keyed up in my life. Desperate for her and her alone. But I won’t violate her wishes. Or her will. I’m going to be the one man who doesn’t do that to her, even if it kills me—and it very well might. “You’ve never had an orgasm?”

“N-no?”

Jesus. It’s no wonder she’s so horny. Twenty years old and never had relief. She’s been stifling her natural impulses. Or they’ve been stifling themselves, because she’s

never felt safe enough to explore them. Never seen her sexuality as anything but a negative. An obstacle. Now that she's been given some space to think and feel, her libido is probably busting out of its cage.

“Take off your panties, angel. I'll guide you through it.”

## CHAPTER 6

Ashley

What is happening to me?

I'm overcome by such a mixture of emotions. Gratitude and desperation.

Hope.

Need.

What do I need, though?

When I look at Caleb, when he speaks to me in that deep therapist voice, my blood seems to cook itself, every hair follicle on my body standing at attention. There are muscles and tendons south of my belly button I've never encountered and suddenly they are tighter than piano wire, stretching and making me crazy. I can't think straight with this urgency plaguing my body. An urgency I don't understand.

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I want to focus on the session with Caleb. It represents progress—and I never expected to see emotional, tangible progress again in my life. I want to talk to him and untangle the web of trauma inside me, lay it at his feet, but until this heat ceases to inhabit my bones, I can barely remember my own name, let alone articulate the pain inside of me.

“Take off your panties, angel.” Across from me in his throne, the sudden and unexpected savior of my universe yanks on his collar, sweat beginning to glimmer at his hairline. “I’ll guide you through it.”

The fact that he isn’t advancing on me with bad intentions only amplifies the feeling of safety, and safety is breeding inhibition. He’s really going to stay over there. All because I said I wasn’t ready to be touched. He meant what he said.

He’s not a liar.

He’s authentic. And lord, he is the first man I’ve ever found gorgeous. The more I look at him, the more qualities I find to be fascinated with. His laugh lines. The thickness of his neck. His watchful eyes. The leashed intensity of it all.

Am I really going to take off my underwear in front of him?

For once, my body is urging me to do something other than hide. When will I ever get the chance to feel this way again?

With a deep breath, I hook my thumbs in the side waistband of my shorts and peel them down, along with my boy short underwear, over my hips and down my thighs,

dropping the garments to the floor and toeing them to the side. His gaze blazes over my sex, darkening, and he makes a sound, his nostrils flaring, a closed fist pressing to his mouth. Positive reactions to what I've just revealed to him. Lustful, even, yes. But he's in control of himself. He's respecting me enough to keep his distance.

That's what makes all the difference to me.

The warm leather feels strange against my bare bottom when I sit back down, but it's not unpleasant. It's...exciting. It's exciting and reassuring to watch him wrestle with the bonds of self-control and win. Even if he barely claims victory.

"Okay, Ashley," Caleb says, hoarse. "Start by petting your thighs with a light touch. Just the tips of your fingers, knee to hip. Inner and outer thighs. Close your eyes while you do it and acknowledge the sensation this creates throughout your body. Describe it to me."

I do as he tells me, my breath catching when I trail my fingertips up the sensitive flesh of my inner thighs, stopping before I reach my apex. "It makes me shiver."

"In a nice way?"

"Yes."

"Good." He fights to keep his breath steady. "Now. Lightly stroke the seam of your pussy. Just enough to part the flesh. Let it know you're coming to play, then go back to touching your thighs."

I've cleaned myself between my legs every shower I've taken in my life, but it has never tingled in the wake of my touch. I've never squirmed and gasped in response to a simple slip of finger through softness or felt a pooling of liquid follow behind, my toes stretching, knees trembling, breath stuttering in and out.

“I know you want to keep touching yourself there, but we’re going to bring you closer to the edge first.”

“The edge of what?”

“I’m going to show you, angel.” He loosens his tie with jerky movements and I can tell he’s trying not to openly stare at my sex, but he’s failing. “Dear God...” he mutters.

“What?” I ask, teasing my hips with circular strokes of my fingertips.

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“You can say it. I want you to say it.”

His chest lifts up and down heavily. “That’s a cunt fit for a fucking king,” he says in a voice rubbed raw. “And if I was a king, I’d sell my kingdom for one pump in that little thing.”

A gasp spears upward in my chest, an unknown part of me coiling tight, so tight, between my thighs. I twist to avoid the increasing ache, but I can’t. It’s in me, a part of me, it’s everywhere. Alive. And now I’m thinking about Caleb, this restrained man in his sophisticated suit, moaning himself hoarse while he moves on top of me, his sturdy hips rearing back and punching forward, buttocks sweaty, flexing.

I’ve never found any of this imagery appealing, but I do...when it comes to him.

My body absorbs the moving images in my imagination like a sponge soaks up water, my palms closing over my breasts and twisting. “Oh, my goodness,” I sob, because the golden wave that starts at my nipples and flows down into my lower body is sinful. Like melted butter gripping my most private places and stiffening, yanking

slowly.

“Good girl, Ashley. Tease yourself.” His breathing is shallow. Harsh. “You’re too young to have babies. Those pretty little nipples are purely for pleasure right now. They’re for playing with, plain and simple.”

“Is...is that what you would do with them?” I ask, shocking myself, but not enough to stop what I’m doing. Slipping my tank top down, so I can touch my nipples bare. Skin to skin. I’m chewing my lip in despair over needing to know his answer. Some part of me is certain his voice, his words, his presence are the answer to my sensual pain.

“You want to know what I’d do with your tits, angel?” I hear the creak of his chair as he leans forward. “I’d eat you out until you’re nice and drowsy. Then I’d sit you on my lap and suck on your nipples while my middle finger jiggles your virgin asshole.”

I’m whipped by need so dense, it’s a jungle and I can’t see two feet in front of me.

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My fingers fly down to my sex out of pure necessity, moans cracking in my throat as I slide eager digits through my drenched flesh, desperately searching for the source of my incredible misery.

“That’s it, Ashley. Find your clit, It’s the sensitive spot at the very top of your slit. Higher, higher...even high—there.” My whimper is high pitched and urgent. “There you go. Rub it quickly. When you feel a gathering of nerves and you sense a storm is about to break, circle your fingers faster. Press deeper and grind, if you need to. You deserve this.”

For some reason you deserve this makes me forget my surroundings. Forget what I’m doing and focus on the why. Release release release. I deserve it.

“I feel it,” I manage, my tone choppy, pleasure zeroing in beneath my touch, like I’ve found a secret target that has been waiting for my arrow. “I-I feel it.”

“Take it, angel. Be fucking selfish.”

I moan as the storm doesn’t simply break, it explodes, my intimate flesh drawing in so tight that my moan becomes a scream, tears leaking from my eyes and coursing down my temples, a ripple of appeased hunger eating me alive, wracking my entire body with pleasure so immense, I can’t see the edges of it.

I fly out the other side of it...renewed. A different person.

A force.

And there's a waiting pair of arms that signal safety, acceptance. Not ownership, but a place to go and own myself. I throw myself into them, close my eyes and go limp, secure in my belief in another human being for the first time in my life.

The next time I wake up, I'm in my own bed, looking up at the shifting patterns on the ceiling, my body relaxed and satisfied.

There's no sign of Caleb, apart from a business card on my nightstand.

Your next appointment: 10 am. Tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 7

Caleb

Ashley is mine.

I knew it as soon as I saw her in the pickle aisle, but the logical part of my brain attempted to hit the brakes. Reason tried to stop me, warn me that people don't fall in love in a matter of moments. Well, that's what the fuck I did, so explain that. Puzzle it out. I saw her and my life's plan altered itself, a new path laying itself out in front of me.

That new path includes disentangling Ashley from her husband.

The one thing keeping me remotely sane is that she only belongs to that son of a bitch on paper. Not physically. Not emotionally. Those are parts of Ashley that will be mine. Soon. She must take her identity and soul and needs back first, before she can give them to another person. I'm trying like hell not to rush the process of healing, but dear God, I don't know how long I can restrain myself.

From kissing that mouth.

From holding her legs open and licking her hot little cunt.

From taking the decision to be with me out of her hands and simply binding her to my headboard, demanding she love me back.

Jesus Christ, I'm capable of that, aren't I? I had no idea these tendencies were inside me. She's unearthed them. Or created them out of thin air. The good, logical man I'm supposed to be is horrified by my thunderous obsession with Ashley, because this infatuated man wants to bend her to his will, while my conscience orders me to help restore her will. That conflict wages itself in my middle now, making my pulse hammer.

One thing that requires no debate is this, however: I'll bury Waylon alive before I allow her to return to him. The two weeks she spent living in his home exist like needles underneath my skin. They turn my stomach. I should have found her sooner. I should have known my angel was out here in need of help. I resent the universe for not giving me a sign and guiding me to her sooner.

I'm here now, however, sitting in the driver's side of my Bronco, watching her family through the front window of their farmhouse. It's easy to see the mood is heavy, as one might imagine it would be after selling Ashley to a violent lecher. An older woman sits at the dinner table and stares straight ahead, not eating the food right in front of her. An older man rubs her shoulders, though he seems to know his comfort is useless.

I came here wanting to hate them for putting Ashley in a perilous situation, but they appear to be victims, too.

Not for long.

Taking my phone from the cupholder, I dial a detective friend back in Chicago.

“Luther, hey.” I close my eyes and see Ashley, peaceful and trusting in my arms, as I lay her down in bed. The warmth of her still lingers against my chest, my heart pounding pathetically from missing her. “I’m officially calling in that favor. I need you to run a background check on Waylon Collins, Lunson, Illinois.”

There’s a noticeable change in Ashley when I open the door of my office the following morning. Color dances in her cheeks. Her blonde hair is still fashioned in a braid, but it’s looser, a couple of strands having been teased free by the wind to frame her beautiful face. She wears the pea coat again. It’s not buttoned, however, giving me a glimpse at the pale pink dress underneath, the little pearl buttons that run down the center of her body. Between her tits. Resting against her pussy.

It takes all my self-control not to manhandle her inside and flatten her against the inside of my office door. To run my hands up beneath her dress and feel her curves, her smooth skin, my mouth finally, finally, experiencing her taste.

Patience.

You will have patience.

I told her in very clear terms yesterday that I want her. And she's still came here of her own free will. I should be seeing this as progress from several different angles. I am. I do. It's simply getting more and more difficult to ignore my severe hunger for this woman.

This married woman I plan to steal out from under her husband's nose.

"Good morning, Ashley," I say, striving to keep my tone even.

"Good morning, Caleb."

I ease back and allow her to enter my office. She comes slowly, glancing up at me shyly from beneath her eyelashes as she passes. "Would you like me to take your coat?"

"Sure." With her back to me, she shrugs the garment into my waiting hands, pinkness creeping up the side of her neck when I linger close to her a second too long. "Um." I hear her swallow. "What are we going to do today?"

I hang her coat on the hook by the door, adjusting my stiff cock before turning to face her again. "How we proceed is up to you, Ashley, but I think we should dig a little deeper today."

Green eyes fly to mine. “D-deeper?”

She thinks I mean physically—it’s easy to see that—though I’m actually referring to her psyche. Still, the man who is starved for her can’t help but press a little before making the clarification. Just to get a clue of how long she plans to keep me waiting. “Yes.” I pace closer to her, listening to her breath hitch. “I want to put you on the couch and go extra deep.” I drop my gaze to her knees and stroke it up the front of her body. “Really find the source of what’s making you ache.”

“Ache,” she whispers, shifting in her sandals. “I...I thought you were going to let me decide if you touch me.”

If? We’re still at “if.”

God help me.

I feign confusion. “That decision is yours. I’m talking about digging into your trauma, angel. What did you think I meant?”

“Nothing,” she blurts, spinning out of my reach and skirting around to the couch where she sits abruptly. “Trauma sounds amazing.”

Despite the heavy pain below my belt, my lips twitch.

I drag a hand down my face, which I apparently forgot to shave, and take my spot at the chair across from Ashley, settling my clipboard onto my lap. I want to tell her she looks like fucking paradise in that dress, but focusing on her looks is a trigger for her, so I hold my tongue. Instead, I say, “Talk to me about your parents.”

She opens her mouth, but hesitates, crossing her legs.

I show no outward reaction to the flash of lily-white panties, but my balls tighten roughly between my legs.

“Well, we’re on good terms now. But they...it’s hard to be around them sometimes, I guess.” Her lips twist. “Not that I’ve gotten much of a chance recently. Waylon doesn’t like me to visit.”

Of course not. He’s isolating her.

Temper burns up my windpipe. “Why is it hard to be around your parents?”

Ashley considers her folded hands. “They obviously feel very guilty about what they were forced to do. They cry and apologize...and I don’t know how to comfort them.” She drops her voice to a whisper. “Sometimes I’m not sure I want to comfort them.”

“Interesting. Why do you think that is?”

Her fingers flinch ever so slightly. Several seconds of silence passes. I wait.

“I don’t think they ever really believed me. When I told them...how bad it was.”

“How bad what was?”

“The harassment from men. And later, from Waylon.” She shrugs a shoulder. “I could have ignored the harassment if it were just cat calls and inappropriate comments, even though no one should be subject to those, either.” She seems to be breathing faster. “But there was an incident. In high school. After that, I just wanted to...hide.”

The word incident almost has me snapping the clipboard in half.

“What incident?”

She wets her lips. “During my sophomore year, I was pulled into the boys’ locker room. They...thought it was funny. To flash me. It was my first time seeing anything like that...and there was so many guys. A wall of them. I couldn’t get out. They just kept shoving me around, pushing me into their friends. And then they decided I should return the favor. I should flash them, too. Only I wouldn’t, of course, so they...started tearing at my clothes.”

My hands are fucking shaking. “I’m sorry, Ashley.”

A small nod. “When I tried to explain it to my parents and the school administrators, they all just kind of brushed it off. Boys will be boys, they said. Meanwhile, I was...some part of me was dying inside. The shame was so thick.”

“The shame is theirs,” I seethe.

“Oh, I know that. Logically. But that doesn’t seem to help the fear of it happening again. Being powerless again. After that day, I didn’t want a single inch of my skin showing after that. It doesn’t stop the comments or the...the entitlement, though. And then came Waylon. My parents thought he was harmless, in terms of the attention he paid me. Once they realized the truth, it was too late.” She looks at me for a prolonged beat. “It’s always like that. No one takes a woman’s fear seriously until she’s dead. Or married to someone who hurts them.”

Grief pours into me like wet concrete.

She has no idea how those words, that truth, affects me. But they affect her so much more. She wasn't the bystander of the trauma, she experienced it firsthand. All I can do is sit here in my helpless rage, wishing to go back in time and protect her.

"They should have listened to you. They should have punished those boys for their deplorable actions. And most importantly, taken steps to make you feel safe again, by any means necessary. Especially when you were brave enough to come forward."

She swallows and looks toward the window. "Thanks."

I realize the tip of my pen has put a hole in the paper attached to my clipboard and toss it aside on the desk behind me. "How do you feel about going back to that locker room with me? Stare the memory in the face and let it know it has no power of you anymore."

"I..." She sits forward, appearing almost startled by the idea. "I mean, it's the weekend. The school is locked."

"If it takes away some of your pain, I'll rip the walls down with my bare hands."

She studies me long and hard. Then, "Let's go."

## CHAPTER 8

Ashley

The front door to the school is locked, as predicted.

Caleb calmly takes my hand and leads me around back to what I believe is the cafeteria door. He gently ushers me off to the side, before stepping back and kicking the door in with the ferocity of a beast.

My blood flashes hot, as if it has been set on fire. That peek at what lies beneath his firm yet collected therapist exterior is only the tip of the iceberg. Somehow, I know. He might be steady and have tremendous willpower, but there's a lot more left undiscovered.

For now.

For now?

I shake myself as I enter the school through the broken door, Caleb offering me his hand once again. And I take it, though I really shouldn't. Should I? This man told my husband in no uncertain terms that he'll take me to bed, if and when I indicate that's what I want. But maybe I'm a little brainwashed or old-fashioned, because I couldn't help but lay in my bed last night and feel surprised at my actions on the couch yesterday.

Me, a married woman, took my underwear off in front of another man and touched myself, so thoroughly that I had my first orgasm. While he watched. Sweating.

He tucked me into bed last night.

Now, I'm holding his hand.

I'm...an adulteress. Aren't I?

Whether Waylon is a good or bad husband, that fact remains.

I'm developing feelings for my therapist. For Caleb. Serious ones.

He's caring, compassionate, genuine. Protective. Encouraging.

Though underneath his handsome exterior, he's lustful. Rough.

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And if I was a king, I'd sell my kingdom for one pump in that little thing.

Caleb looks back at me when I shiver. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Which way is the boys' locker room?"

I gulp, memories assailing me. Flesh. White towels whipping. Hands everywhere. My own screaming. "That way," I murmur, nodding at the dark hallway to our right.

"Are you ready?"

Two days ago, I would have said no, but with Caleb holding my hand, I'm steady.  
"Yes."

We journey down the squeaky corridor, arriving at the entrance to the boys' locker room. The door looks so small compared to the looming object in my memory. That observation gives me hope that the rest of the place won't be so scary, either, but when Caleb pushes inside, leading the way, I follow him and...

The memories come rushing back.

There, in the corner, is where I was pushed, my skirt shoved up, my thighs groped in sweaty hands, the smell of sweat and grass choking off my air.

"How do you feel, angel?"

“It’s only harmless now because it’s empty,” I whisper.

He makes a sound of understanding. “Ashley?” He steps in front of me. “You can come in here and leave at will. No one is going to keep you here. You’re safe.”

I tilt my head back to meet his eyes. “I know.”

Something over my shoulder catches his attention, causing a corner of his mouth to tick up. He leaves me standing alone for the briefest of seconds—and a moment later, I feel something hard and wooden slip into my hand.

I look down to find I’m holding a bat.

“What am I going to do with this?”

He crosses his arms, observing me closely. “What do you want to do with it?”

“Bust up some lockers.”

“Don’t let me stop you.”

I huff a laugh, that sense of freedom that was instilled yesterday increasing in size. Ballooning. “Are you serious?”

“You’re asking the man who just busted down the door?”

A laugh tumbles out of me. I’m laughing in the locker room that houses my darkest memories. I can’t believe it. Tears rush to my eyes and along with them, a surge of confidence finds me. Outrage. Strength. Might. I look around and allow myself to see the faces of those tormentors, some of whom I still cross paths with in town.

I whirl around without a second thought and bash the closest locker with the bat, leaving a dent the size of my forearm. I smash the metal one more time for good measure, leaving twin trenches behind, a lot like the scars that were left on my soul that day. Adrenaline snaps in my veins. Exhilaration races through me, no direction, just an implosion. I'm finally being given the chance to fight back. My anger is being validated.

Dropping the bat, I turn slowly to face the man who is pushing me higher and higher aloft like a fierce wind beneath my wings. Helping me heal. Restoring the colors of the world around me.

And I go toward him without hesitation, knowing that a physical relationship with him might be morally wrong, but in this moment, it's not even a choice.

When he senses my intentions, his chest heaves once, twice, fire roaring to life in those deep blue eyes. He catches my hips in his big hands, squeezing, before sliding them around to my ass and dragging me up the front of his body into his arms, his mouth falling open on a groan when I sling my thighs about his hips, my sex encountering and cradling a very large, very hard ridge. Snuggling it tight, on instinct, a purr waking up in my throat.

“Ashley. Ohfuck.”

“Erase the memories completely with me,” I whimper against his mouth, the shock of being touched and enjoying it, loving it, blotting out yet another black mark from the past. “When I think of this place, I only want to remember this.” I rub my mouth against his jaw. “How this is where you gave me my first real kiss. The first kiss I've ever wanted.”

## CHAPTER 9

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Caleb

First kiss.

First...kiss?

The firm warmth of her pussy against my thickening cock is an extravagance.

My balls swell and tighten, drawing high, become a sturdy pedestal for my erection.

Oh lord, I can't help but bounce her a few times, feeling her weight lift and land, cradling my length a little more securely each time through her thin panties. The irony of saints being celibate is that only a saint could deserve this feeling. This coursing current of relief that I'm finally going to be cock-deep in my obsession.

But she is only asking for a kiss.

A first real kiss.

Of course, we both know she kissed her lackluster husband on her wedding day. Had no choice but to do so. But I understand what she's doing. She's erasing her bad memories with good ones. Overpowering the terror of what took place in this room. Outshining her real first kiss with a better one. Bet your ass I'm going to deliver.

She won't even remember her wedding day when I'm done.

She'll forget she's married at all.

I slide my fingers into her braided hair, turning us in a slow circle while I look her in the eye, absorbing every nuance of her angelic face. Her slow blink. The gentle flush deepening on her cheeks. Green eyes flaring with excitement and curiosity. I maintain eye contact with her until she closes the distance of our mouths slightly, then I meet her halfway, melding our lips together and rubbing right, left. Slowly. Letting her relax into the contact, before I tilt my head a few degrees and sip at her mouth.

She makes a sound halfway between a moan and a gasp, her thighs clinging tighter. An innocent reaction that makes me desperate to maul her sweet mouth until she's so horny and confused, she lets me take her virginity against a locker. But no, that is not how this is going to happen. She's going to be with me every step of the way, because no way in hell am I going to let her look back on our courtship with resentment. Or the feeling of being coerced. Seduced.

"Do you want a deeper kiss, Ashley?"

Gratification spreads in my chest when she nods, no hesitation. "Yes."

"Come here, angel," I say in a low voice, opening my mouth a bit more, letting her feel my breath, absorbing the sweetness of hers. Our foreheads meet, the side of her nose pressing to mine, my lips delivering light suction and twisting, pulling her forward into me, so I can dive in deeper, slowly introducing her to my tongue with brief brushes that turn longer, hungrier, her little cunt getting swollen and damp where it presses down on my fly. "Do you want more of my tongue?"

"Yes," she breathes, her thighs flexing around my hips. "Please."

"Don't say please, just let me keep kissing this sexy mouth."

"I never want you to stop," she whispers, then shakes herself, looking a touch self-conscious. "I-I mean...of course you're going to stop eventually. I just—"

“Angel,” I say in a hushed tone against her mouth. “I’ll stand here kissing you for all of eternity if you ask me to. You don’t have to feel uncertain about anything you say to me, all right? I want to know every thought in your head, whether it’s well thought out or impulsive. Every. Little. Thought. Okay?”

Her eyes close and she nods.

I exhale, the sound rocky, due to the mounting pressure below my waist. “Can I hold you against one of the lockers, Ashley? You’re making me feel so fucking good and I need to get closer.”

“I...I guess that would be okay.”

I hesitate. “You guess?”

She searches my eyes. “I know that would be okay.”

“Good girl,” I say, heart pounding with pride. So much confidence in me. Don’t abuse it. Keeping our mouths locked, I take a few steps forward until her back meets the row of metal lockers and I angle my hips, groaning brokenly when my cock is able to grind and hold against that supple mound, her sweet gasp briefly interrupting our kiss, and I’m so lost in sexual need, I don’t take care to guard my words. The heat of my body simply translates to a sentiment and I can’t do anything to stop it from rasping up my throat. “There’s a little angel making Daddy very hard right now, isn’t there?”

I play those words back, shocked at myself for referring to myself in such a way, even if something is growling to life inside of me just hearing that moniker out loud. Common sense is telling me to jog back the statement, because it will be too much for her, too confusing, but I can only watch in fascination as bewildered hunger dawns on her features, my balls getting harder and sweatier between her thighs,

possessiveness streaking down the length of my spine.

“Daddy?” she whispers, her fingers playing with the ends of my hair. “Is that...what I should call you?”

Fuck yes, I want to bellow into her neck.

Calm. Stay calm.

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“Why don’t we use it for a while and see how it feels?”

“Okay.” She inhales quickly when my cock surges against the swatch of her panties and I pin her rhythmically to the locker, while the metal creak, creak, creaks. “Can you keep kissing me now...Daddy?”

Dear God. I don’t recognize what’s happening inside of me. It’s like being anointed ruler of the universe. I’m already a large man, but I become a giant in that moment, my mouth capturing her little mewls, taking, her tongue no longer hesitant to meet and stroke mine, our bodies melting into one with slow yet rough squeezes of my hips up, up, up between her thighs, her head falling back now, tempting me to lick the length of her beautiful, young neck while she catches her breath, her fingers starting to tear at my hair, the collar of my shirt, our mouths mating in a frenzy that hints at how we’ll fuck someday very soon. Like long-lost lovers that have been separated too long.

“I’m g-getting that feeling again...”

“The one you had yesterday on the couch?”

“Mmmm.”

“What did I tell you, angel? Be selfish. This time, take what you need from me.”

Her eyes are glassy when they meet mine, her arousal making her even more beautiful. Rosy and vulnerable and ripe. “Are you going to take what you need from me, too?” she hiccups, her hips starting to writhe, rock, her thighs trembling.

“Watching you have an orgasm while I dry hump you is going to kill me, little girl. I’m going to make a fucking mess.” I slide my palms down her thighs and up beneath her dress, moaning over my first clutch of her unparalleled ass. Lord almighty, it’s so smooth and round. Taut. A temptation God himself couldn’t turn down. “We’ll make a mess together.”

“I’m having a...a-an orgasm, D-D-Daddy.”

I shove my mouth up against her ear, licking it crudely. “Hear that, Waylon? Your wife calls me Daddy when she busts.”

We hit our peaks simultaneously, her ass flexing in my hands, warm goodness soaking the zipper of my pants. Through her panties and my briefs, that liquid heat spreads between us, dampening everything, my balls twisted up like twin screws trying to drill into my stomach from below—fuck me fuck me fuck me—lust like I’ve never known boiling over and burning us both, our bodies straining, her moans echoing through the empty locker room, her legs shaking around me with pleasure this time, not fear, our mouths frantic, kissing in between satisfied exclamations.

I’m careful not to crush her when the bliss runs its course, leaving me wasted, swaying drunkenly on my feet. I keep her tight to my chest, nonetheless, unwilling to let her go, to break contact. Mine.

“I don’t think I’ll have nightmares about this place ever again,” she whispers into my throat, sending my heart back into a sprint.

“Only good dreams from now on, angel,” I say, kissing her thoroughly, letting her feel what she’s doing to me. Branding me. Owning me. Making me fall in love with her. But I’m not going to take it for granted that she feels the same way. What if through liberating her from her husband, she flies away from me, too?

Panic settles in—and with only two days left until her husband returns, I need to work fast. To make sure she's free to choose me.

“How about I take you on that date tonight?” I say, kissing her forehead.

When her eyes sparkle up at me and she nods, so trusting, one thing is clear.

I'm not falling in love with her. I'm already there.

## CHAPTER 10

Ashley

I feel awake for the first time in years.

I'm sitting across from Caleb at an outdoor café, an hour's drive from our town. We must be careful to not be spotted, because I'm being unfaithful, but we don't say that out loud. I don't feel like I'm being untrue to anything. In fact, I think I'm finally being faithful to myself. Because I want to be here. I chose to be here. With him.

With this man who I'm already coming dangerously close to loving.

How could I avoid the feeling when he gives me options? At every turn. Even when he is clearly in sexual pain, he asks me if I want to be kissed. If he can press his body against mine. I'm breathing right now like I've miraculously grown a third lung. So much space to exist that I don't know what to do with it all, but I also don't feel any immediate pressure to decide. It's exhilarating.

Caleb appears so staid now, compared to how frantic he was in the locker room, his thick hips shoving up between mine, his mouth plying me with pleasure I didn't know was possible. I can still feel his big hands gripping my butt and I loved them

there. I love his hands on me. Considering I abhorred human touch a couple of days ago, this revelation is astounding. All I can think about as I observe his polished, controlled exterior across the table is...what will his fingers feel like inside me? What will it be like to be touched there?

To say nothing of...sex. Intercourse.

My breath skips and I press my white napkin more firmly to my lap beneath the table. His eyes tick upward from the menu he's perusing to scrutinize me.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me, Ashley?"

It should be unnerving to have a man be so attuned to my every movement, but it's not. Not with Caleb. Which makes me wonder how he became this person. Someone who can liberate me with such skill, designed exactly for my experiences and insecurities. Where did he come from? Was he ever a young man or has he always been this distinguished and magnetic and...mysterious?

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“I was thinking...I don’t know anything about you,” I say.

The waiter arrives then, but Caleb keeps his gaze trained on me while we place our order and the man leaves again. “I’d rather our sessions focus on you.”

“Is that really how you think of our time together?” I swallow the trepidation, but it sticks. “Sessions?”

“No.” A vein ticks in his temple. “That’s what I’m calling them for your benefit.”

Confusion prods me. “Why?”

His head tilts, ever so slightly. “You’re not ready to hear the answer to that, angel. As much as I’d love to tell you.”

“I am ready to hear it.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but he stops himself. Checks himself. Recognizes that I have a will, am expressing it and he should respect that. My God, this is what it’s like to be seen and understood. “The way I feel about you is rather intense, Ashley.”

My pulse scatters. “So...it’s not like this with all your clients?”

An incredulous laugh puffs from his mouth, followed by a longer and louder one. “No. My methods might be unconventional. Immersion or adventure therapy, for instance.” His amusement fades rapidly, something intense snapping in his blue gaze. “But I can confidently say it has never occurred to me, before now, to steal another

man's wife out from under his nose."

My lungs labor for air. "Is that what you're doing? Stealing me?"

"I'll answer that when I'm positive you want to be stolen."

I start to respond with I am. I am positive. But I can't. I'm not free to make that decision yet. I've been caught up in this whirlwind of Caleb and his sensual methods of bringing me back to life, but...nothing has changed. Not really. Waylon still owns the farm on which my parents' livelihood depends. The deed is done. I sealed myself to that monster and even if I could find a way to get my parents off the hook, I don't think my husband would willingly let me go. Not without an ugly battle.

Caleb nods once, as if he's read every frantic thought in my head. "Patience, angel."

"Okay," I breathe, feeling shaky. At least, until he presses his instep to mine beneath the table, grounding me. The way I feel about you is rather intense, Ashley. "Can I ask you more about yourself?"

His Adam's apple lifts above his collar and disappears again, his gaze drawn down to the table. "I'll do my best to answer. There are parts of my past I'd rather leave behind."

"I'll start easy. How old are you?"

"Thirty-three."

Am I surprised he's thirteen years my senior? Yes. But only because I hadn't considered his age until now. Perhaps because he's so timeless. Still...wow. I'm not only engaging in an intimate relationship with someone other than my husband, he's a lot older than me. Unlike my age gap with Waylon, the one with Caleb only makes

me feel more secure. More...sure of him. As though his experience only puts me in the surest hands, instead of primed to be taken advantage of.

He's studying my face. "Does our age difference bother you?"

"No. I, um..."

"What?"

My face is hot. "I like it."

"Do you?" his voice is like gravel. "For the same reason you like calling me Daddy?"

I don't realize the tiny muscles of my sex are sore from orgasming until they slowly yank tight now, like zip ties, wetness dripping gently into my panties. This man is my Daddy. "Yes."

An unholy light pools in his eyes. "Ask your next question, before I make another mess, angel."

I press my palms to my knees to stop them shaking. "You're new to Lunson, but you're not from town originally. Where were you before?"

He exhales in a measured way. "Chicago."

"Did you go to school there?"

After a brief hesitation, he says, "I went through the academy."

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“The academy. Were you a...cop?”

A line hops in his cheek. “Once upon a time, yes.” He pauses. “I was going to save the universe, but it didn’t want to be saved.” He forces a smile, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Suffice it to say, I’m no longer suited for that line of work.”

I process everything he’s just revealed. Big city law enforcement. Of course. Since the beginning, my gut told he wasn’t an average, everyday therapist. His actions since we met have only bolstered that theory. My mind drifts back to Caleb looming over Waylon, as if interrogating him for murder. How safe I felt walking into the restaurant with his hand on my back, his eyes scanning the faces of customers, clocking the exits.

“What are you thinking about, Ashley?”

A slow wave of goosebumps travels down my arms. Over his attentiveness. The rasping way he says my name. “I...was, um.” I release the odd, pent-up giddiness building in my chest. “I was thinking that marrying Waylon made me feel like an adult for the wrong reasons. But knowing I’m on a date with someone who has already lived enough to be a former cop from Chicago...I guess I feel grown up tonight in a good way.”

Underneath the table, his warm hand slides onto my knee, massaging it firmly. “Why do you think that is?”

Tingles carry upward, targeting my sex, making it achy. Swollen. “You’ll use your age to our advantage, instead of against me.”

Lust flares in his face. “I’ll never use anything against you.”

“I know,” I whisper, wishing we were sitting on the same side of the table. I want to crawl into his lap and feel him everywhere. But I’m distracted by our unfinished conversation. “You left the force and moved all the way to Lunson. Something bad must have happened.”

After a full five seconds, he gives a barely perceptible nod.

I place my hand over his, where it sits high on my knee. “Will you tell me?”

“I’m worried it’ll trigger you, angel.”

“If I’m triggered, you’ll soothe me.”

After an intense moment, he nods. “Yes, I will.” Five seconds tick by. “My partner killed his wife,” he reveals in a tone that hints at a deeper agony. “I didn’t see it coming. He never displayed any of the classic hallmarks of a violent offender. Of the two of us, he was the easy-going one. Or so I thought. I thought their marriage was happy.” He rakes a hand down his face. “But knowing what I know now...there were signs. Signs I’ve committed myself to recognizing now, as a therapist.”

Pain is lancing me in the throat. “I’m so sorry that happened, Caleb.”

“Now I spend my life figuring out how men think. I have no delusions that I’ll be able to change people who are inclined to mistreat others, but...” He shakes his head. “The other option is to let the guilt over what happened consume me.”

A worry wiggles its way beneath my skin. “You’re not...interested in saving me out of guilt, are you? That’s not what attracted you to me, right?”

The intensity he emits from the other side of the table makes it impossible to breathe. “Your marriage is what brought you into my life, but it’s not what’s keeping you here. In my thirty-three fucking years, I’ve never felt anything close to what I feel for you.”

“Pity?” I challenge, swallowing.

“Admiration. Protectiveness. Wonder. Fascination. Need. My God, the fucking need,” he breaks off, visibly trying to gather himself and the waiter picks that moment to appear, setting down our food, while another refreshes our glasses of wine. “That’s what I feel when I look at you. Not guilt or pity. The fact that you’re...”

“What?” I whisper, shaken.

“Mine. Permanently. Or I burn it all down,” he says succinctly, leaning forward across the table. “Is that what you want to hear? That I’m fighting to appear civilized and patient, so I don’t scare you off, Ashley? No one has ever challenged those qualities in me. Ever. But God help me, I want the last thing your husband sees before he dies to be me fucking your brains out. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Yes,” I whisper, shivering so severely and with such a rush of heat, my teeth chatter a bit. “Believe me, I never expected to want to belong to any man, but you gave me the power of choice. And there’s no other choice but you.”

Hope is alive on his face, but he struggles to keep it from spreading. “As your therapist, I’m honor bound to point out...” His voice is a scrape. “There are other choices.”

“Such as?”

“Total freedom. From me. From any man.” He closes his eyes, his grip tightening on

my knee. “I am trying not to let this possessiveness beat me, but I worry I will lose the battle. I’ll become everything I am fighting to keep you away from.”

My heart is hammering. “Maybe possessiveness is okay, as long as...”

Blue eyes impale me. “As long as what?”

“As long as it’s balanced with respect. Trust. Kindness.”

“I will give you those things,” he vows, his thumb swiping across my thigh, just beneath the hem of my dress. “Don’t forget about pleasure, angel.”

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“I’d never forget that, Daddy,” I breathe. “Not when you give it to me so well.”

His jaw locks, his fist twisting in the material of my dress. “We haven’t even gotten started, little girl. Tonight, that changes. Eat.”

### CHAPTER 11

Caleb

My blood is set to high as I take Ashley’s delicate hand in mine, walking her into the air-conditioned hotel lobby, the sound of piano music and low conversations surrounding us, along with the scent of expensive pine. I could have driven the hour back to Lunson and made love to Ashley for the first time in my bed—and maybe I should have. The foreign setting of a hotel only amplifies the illicitness of our relationship.

Or the perception of illicitness, anyway.

From the outside looking in, I’m an older man bringing another man’s much younger wife to a hotel, so I can fuck her without getting caught.

From the inside, however, our relationship is far different.

I’m a man who has climbed over the fence of obsession and come down on the other side, an endless field in front of me. And she’s given me permission to run free in that field, allowing my infatuation with her to deepen. No end in sight.

She has confessed that she wants to be mine.

Our feelings for each other are authentic. Unexpected. Concentrated.

In short, there is no way in hell I could have made it home, and fucking her in a five-star hotel room is better than pulling over to slake this lust in the parking lot of a rest stop.

I need her with an immediacy that defies description.

As I lead her to the front desk and she's openly ogled by every single man in the lobby, my teeth set themselves on edge, a jealous beast awakened inside of me. She scoots closer to my side when we arrive at reception and I ask the clerk for a room for the night, setting my credit card down on the marble counter. Then I put my arm around Ashley's shoulders, tucking her against me securely into my side. Kissing her forehead while I cow every man in the room with a death stare.

She's mine.

She chose me of her own free will.

Fuck off.

The clerk and I exchange a few words, before she runs my credit card and hands me a room key, not a hint of speculation on her face...

Though I can't say the same for the couple that joins us in the elevator.

Thinking we're going to be alone, I haul Ashley up against me, indulging myself with her mouth, because it has been far too long since we kissed. She presses up on her toes, purring as I maul her to appease the jealous lion still pacing inside of me, my

hands slipping beneath her dress to cradle and knead her sweet ass through her panties—and I'm in the process of tugging down the waistband, so I can feel the supple flesh of her cheeks against my palms, but the elevator doors halt in their process of closing, a couple in their forties stepping on, the woman rearing back when she spies us in our compromising position. She and her partner enter the elevator, exchanging a not-so-subtle glance.

I begin the painful process of separating myself from the now-public intimacy with Ashley—at least, momentarily—but she surprises me by snuggling closer, rubbing her belly against the ninety-degree angle of my dick. All while looking me in the eye.

Whimpering.

My lord, does she...like this public display of affection?

Even Ashley doesn't seem to understand the impulse, her movements verging on shy, yet there she goes, teasing me again with a wicked rock of her hips, my cock turning to forged steel in response.

I test my theory that she wants to be seen by palming her ass beneath her pink dress, massaging the tight hills, one at a time, studying the slow roll of heat in her eyes while I kiss her, tangling and untangling our tongues. Openly. Audibly.

“Have some decency,” the woman snaps. “You're old enough to be her father.”

Ashley's pupils expand the final millimeter, her ass pushing into my hands.

“Careful,” I rasp. “That only makes her wetter.”

The elevator dings and the couple fling themselves off in a huff, my composure popping like a balloon, legs lunging to pin her between me and the elevator walls, my

mouth on a furious mission to take. Ashley gives me everything she knows how to give, her body promising to learn the rest, her legs clamping around my hips in a chokehold.

We arrive at our floor and I growl, ripping her off the wall and charging into the communal area, our room number repeating on a loop in my head. Find it. Find it.

There.

Turned on to a degree that should be impossible, I tilt my head to let her kiss my neck while I unearth the key, slapping it over the sensor. The door opens behind her and we're in, fucking through our clothes on the way to the bed. Alarm bells begin to sound, because oh yeah, all that stands between me and bone-rattling satisfaction is a couple rough pumps in that tight virgin pussy, but no.

No. Her first time needs to be about her, not me.

"Fuck," I grind out, laying her down on the bed. Coming down on top of her, the weight of me popping her mouth open on a gasp, pleasure flooding her beautiful features. "Oh m-my God," she stammers. "You feel so good."

I bare my teeth against her mouth. "It feels good being pinned down by a man you know will get you off if you only ask."

"Yes," she says, dazed. "I'm asking."

Unbuttoning the front of her dress with my left hand, I kiss her plumped cleavage and up the side of her graceful neck. "It feels good to open your legs for a man who will fuck your mouth in front of strangers, just because it turns you on."

A flush pinkens her cheeks. "Did it...turn you on, too?"

"Everything with you turns me on, angel." I peel open her dress, marveling at the smooth dip of her bare stomach, her braless tits, so innocently aroused and ripe to be

sucked, then lower, the gentle mound hidden inside of her panties. “Everything.”

I skim my palm across her perked-up nipples, my touch continuing down the center of her superb body while she shivers below me, my hand finally reaching her pussy, cupping it for the very first time. Kneading it gently while her green eyes turn the color of smoked moss, the pace of her breath picking up.

“Does that feel nice, angel?”

“Yes.”

I suction my mouth to the spot below her ear, running my knuckle up and down her slit, dampness reaching me through the cotton. “It’s going to feel even better when I lick it.” Gently, I press my knuckle to her clit, kissing the gasp clean off her delicious mouth. “Do you trust me to take special care of you?”

Eyes glazed over, she nods. “I trust you. I only trust you.”

My chest fills with gratitude, fighting my sexual anticipation for space. “Good girl,” I manage roughly, engaging her in a provocative kiss while I’m dragging the sodden panties down her thighs. Off completely. Her tongue is quickly learning how to stoke my fire, growing more confident and, goddamn, do I benefit from that confidence. She kisses with abandon and tenderness, yes, but the way she opens her mouth so wide, her tongue so curious, also communicates her adventurous side.

“She’s going to fuck like a little fireball, isn’t she?” I mutter against her lips.

“I-I don’t know,” she whispers, still blushing like a schoolgirl. “Am I?”

“That’s what my tongue is for,” I say, kissing my way down between her tits, her quivering stomach, pressing my face to the patch of blonde curls and inhaling that

citrusy heaven for everything I'm worth. "To make sure you're licked up and soaking for me. If you're not screaming for deeper cock, I better be pulling it out and going back to work."

I can't stand another second without her taste, so I catch her knees in my hands, open them wide and lap my tongue up the split of her cunt, my balls throbbing when she lets out a shaky exclamation that isn't part of any language I've heard, her pussy opening for me like the pearly gates, slowly, a blooming of flesh and a rush of warmth on my tongue as I explore her deeply, overwhelmed by her sweetness, her mewls of my name.

I forget myself.

I forget everything I've ever known, apart from the flesh between her thighs.

I use my thumb to rub her clit into the open and babble my lips against it, her fingers ripping and tearing at my hair. I'm burning up with fever, inside and out, which makes me realize I'm still in a dress shirt, tie, slacks and shoes, while my angel is buck naked, but there's no time to undress now. Not when she's started to press herself into my licks, her lips lifting, offering me the only pussy I'll ever want or need.

"Should I?" she whimpers. "Should I...can I?"

"Can you what, angel?"

"H-have an orgasm like this?"

"You can have ten like this." Using the flat of my tongue to paint snug circles atop her clit, I bring my fingers up between her legs, tracing her entrance with the pad of my thumb. "God knows I shouldn't finger this little thing. We don't want blood on

my hands, do we, Ashley? We want it all over my cock.”

Her hips shift, restless, as if wrestling with her oncoming orgasm.

Desperate to experience that squeeze of muscles, I press my thumb into her entrance, my mind reeling at the firmness of her inner walls, the electrical current that races up my arm when she comes. The way those little tendons constrict around my digit, release, constrict. Releasing more and more wetness. Lord God Almighty.

“I can’t stand another second,” I snarl, my self-control sapped as I growl my way up her body and pounce, yanking her knees up around my hips and arrowing my cock down, between her folds, pressing with gritted teeth while my thick tip spreads her untried hole, swooping down to cover her mouth with mine and pumping clean to the hilt, the dramatic draw and clench of her pussy making me shout into her hair, my lower body shuddering like the ground during an earthquake.

“Oh Christ! Or Lord!”

“Daddy—”

That’s all I need to hear and I’m jackhammering, helplessly. Filling her with quick, savage drives, while my panicked conscience swears at me, demanding I calm myself down, despite the young flex of her cunt, the way she looks up at me in wonder, her mouth swollen from kissing, pleasure written right there on her features—and if I had any doubt of her enjoyment, her juice already dripping down my balls would clear things up. But I wrangle my urgency, nonetheless, needing to give her more care. More romance.

Every man who crosses her path dreams of banging her silly like this.

I need to be better than that. The best and only man she ever wants.

With an extreme effort, I slow my pace, slanting my mouth over hers for a thorough kiss that builds a purr in her throat, her thighs softening and opening even wider around me, unconsciously rewarding me for my restraint. My necktie has come loose from its clip and it briefly blocks my view of her tits, but I’m not having that, so I toss the silk over my shoulder, well aware I’m sweating through my clothes, but unable to stop or slow down.

“Cunt’s so sweet Daddy got carried away,” I grunt, rocking into her, my balls slapping loudly off the curve of her ass. “Taking my cock like you were trained for it.”

“Maybe I was built for you,” she murmurs, locking those little tendons up around me, so I can barely move, my bellow rattling the windowpanes. “Or maybe I don’t mind it

hurting a little when you're getting so much pleasure out of me."

"The pleasure should be yours," I groan raggedly, the pressure blinding in my lower back, stomach and testicles. So much pressure I'm going to explode. As if it's not enough that I'm looking down into her flawlessly beautiful face while her tits bounce around, her hole is the size of a fucking dime and yet she moans every time I bottom out.

Motherfucker.

"The pleasure is mine," she breathes, reaching down between our bodies to rub her clit with two careful fingers, her back arching at the contact, then bouncing up with the bed from the slap of my thrust. "You taught me how to have it. Like this, Daddy?"

"Yes." My dick releases a spurt of frothy white and I look down, watching with hungry eyes as I fuck it back into her. Hard, hard, hard. "Yes."

"Can I play with myself while you fuck me?"

"Oh God, yes. Yes. Don't stop. Even if watching you play means I won't last much longer." I pant heavily. "Look at me while you play."

"It feels way better when you're filling me so tight," she moans, head falling back, her fingers moving faster, faster. "I'm coming again!"

"Good. Daddy's busting, too, baby. Take my sperm." I twist my hips to get in deep as possible, shoving my face into neck and yelling through the most satisfying climax of my fucking life, my balls zapping with currents of sensual electricity, her pussy massaging me while it spasms, her sobs of my name and pleased jolts of her body egging on my own sexual flight, my dick jerking and erupting into her snug warmth, the headboard rattling against the wall because both of us are shaking so goddamn

hard, riddled with relief over finally slaking the lust, but more than that.

So much more.

We're clinging to each other in the relief of finding this. Us.

Two bonded people who are vowing with our bodies to never be apart.

No matter what the world is about to throw at us.

## CHAPTER 12

Ashley

I sleepin his arms that night.

I don't think I've shared a bed with someone since childhood and my best friend slept over. This is different. Very different.

After we make love, he finally takes off his clothes while I sit watching him from the pillows, wrapped in a soft sheet. He undresses the way he does everything else—with the utmost care. Tie. Belt. Watch. He removes them, sets them down, side-by-side. Eyes zeroed in on me, he draws his white dress shirt from his waistband and releases the buttons, one by one, until he can strip off the garment.

My pulse clamors at the sight of his ruthlessly tight muscles, the power of his half-naked body. His past is evident here, in tattoos and faint scars. I want to run my hands and mouth over every inch of that body and make it mine. Erase the past with my tongue and touch until he only thinks of me.

Apparently, I'm obsessed with him, the same way he's obsessed with me.

My tummy hollows and I whimper softly when his fingers move to the fly of his slacks. I can still feel him moving on top of me. Can still feel the determined entry of his long, thick shaft into my body, the way he ground himself deep, cursing, grunting, rasping his disbelief over how well I was able to fit him. This man is a marvel of control, but I turned him into an animal. I'm addicted to that transformation already.

His pants are pushed down to the floor and he steps out, wearing nothing but a black pair of boxer briefs while he hangs his clothes on the back of a chair, his muscles moving and shifting in delicious patterns. I'm verging on screaming for him to join me in the bed when he finally does. He lies on his side, handsome head propped on a fist, the position putting his bicep on mouthwatering display.

For long minutes, he does nothing but stare at me in the dim silence of the room, a vein ticking in his temple. Until he breaks the silence. "I was rough with you. At the beginning. And the end."

I'm sandblasted by heat, my pulse rate tripling. "I know," I respond, smiling.

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His brows draw together. “You seem happy about that.”

“Am I not supposed to be?”

“I don’t tell you what to be happy about.”

“I know,” I say, my smile even bigger. “If you’re worried you hurt me, you didn’t. I never felt anything but...”

“What?”

“Love,” I whisper.

“There’s a reason for that,” he says, his voice thick. Uneven. “God help me, I’m in love with you, Ashley. I’m sitting here trying to convince myself that you’re real.”

“I am,” I manage around the constriction of my throat. He loves me. He loves me. “I’m real and I love you back, Caleb. It’s crazy and it’s happening so fast, but it’s true.” The image of him begins to blur, thanks to the moisture crowding my vision. “I’ve never experienced anything that felt more honest. More real.”

His chest heaves once, twice. “Come here.”

I’m not ashamed to say I scramble like a little kid, tangling my naked self further in the bedding, before getting free and throwing myself up against him lengthways. Instantly, I’m soothed and made drowsy by his heat. Held in thrall by his sculpted and stubbled jaw. The size of him, the sinew of his arm as it wraps around my lower

back and yanks me in as close as possible, our legs overlapping below as if we've done it a thousand times.

"You're married, Ashley."

"I know."

"We need to get you un-married," he growls.

"I...I want to do that..."

"No," he grits out, framing my jaw in a determined hand. "We will."

"But my family..."

"We'll make sure we end things with Waylon without hurting them," he says, planting kisses along my hairline, my face. "But my patience doesn't extend to this. My angel belonging to another man will not stand. Not even if it's just on paper."

"I belong to you in all the ways that count. My heart, my body, my mind," I breathe, running soothing palms along his shoulders, down his chest, my touch stirring his sex into a standing position, the length of him beating up against my stomach. My fingers go to those inches, as if magnetized, holding that hard, throbbing flesh in a grip and looking up at him through my eyelashes while I deliver a slow stroke. "All of me is a Daddy's girl."

He lets out an abbreviated grunt, a glob of wetness rolling down my knuckles a few seconds later. "Oh lord, yes you are," he says, choppily. "A Daddy's girl who just learned how to come and wants a lot of practice now, doesn't she?"

"Is that bad?" I tease, giving him a little pout.

“Hell no, it’s not bad.” He rolls onto his back, bringing me with him and in a matter of seconds, I’m on top of Caleb—and I squeal in alarm, in happiness, like a much freer version of who I was before. I’m a girl who pouts and squeals and straddles a man, naked, preening and arching her back, so that he groans at the sight of her breasts, reaching out with eager hands to touch them. Bat them gently, delivering arousing slaps to my nipples, before kneading them in firm hands. “I didn’t wear a condom, angel.”

His thumbs tease my nipples with slow circles and the targeted, prolonged attention causes a restlessness in my hips, dampness to slither through my flesh. And my hips begin to undulate automatically, my bare, wet sex dragging up and back on the ridge of his erection, my pussy parting to cradle him, paint him root to tip with my arousal.

“My job is to protect you in every way,” he continues. “But it’s getting harder and harder to battle that side of me that needs to...”

“Claim me?” I murmur, working my lower body a bit faster. “You have.”

“More,” he growls, his eyes going from blue to obsidian. “I need more.All.”

I’m carried away on a current so swift, I don’t even attempt to reach for a branch to stop me from tearing down a river of obsession. Love. Unmitigated lust. I follow the instincts he’s awoken in me, lean forward and speak against Caleb’s panting mouth. “Maybe you need to fuck me in front of him.”

It’s almost like Caleb has been hit by shocker paddles.

Dark energy surges through him, his physique rippling and hardening, his nostrils flaring as he drags me down into a wild kiss, his hand guiding his superior length between my thighs and slamming home, my resulting squeal a mixture of pressure and excitement. He holds my face tightly in his hands, his maddened eyes boring into

mine while he hammers me from below, sweat breaking out on his face and chest.

“Don’t tempt me, Ashley. I will do it.”

There are so many snares, so much that would need to be unraveled for my marriage to be dissolved, but I play along with the fantasy, because...yes. Yes, it turns me on in the wickedest way possible, imagining Caleb and I giving each other pleasure in front of the devil who only ever gave me pain. Proving I’m not cold. Reveling in my newfound happiness and sexuality without any shame. Out from under his control and into mine.

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“Can I call you Daddy while he’s watching us?”

The trunk of his sweaty torso twists in the lamplight, his teeth gnashing. The scenario we’re both imagining appeals to Caleb, too. A lot. But he’s focused in on my face, as usual, searching my eyes, making determinations. Counseling me even while I’m riding him. “Keep going, angel. This is healing you.”

I think...he’s right.

There’s something heavy climbing my sternum, bursting free of me in waves. A sense that I was built to be a victim. I’m not one. I’m whatever I choose to be. If I want to be a sex kitten or a witch or celibate, that’s what I’ll do. I decide.

And I decide on him.

I choose to feel the impact of his thrusts, his hips slapping up beneath mine, my sex stretching to take him, my hips angled in a way that allows slippery flesh to graze my swollen clit, sending zings to my hair follicles, fingertips, to say nothing of my gripping core, already poised for another release.

Abandoning myself to the wickedness, I lean down and capture his thickness, squeezing too tight for him to move, clamping until he roars my name, but all I do is smile and lick his sculpted mouth. “I’m going unzip your pants in front of him and show him what a real man looks like.” Still holding his inches hostage, I wiggle my hips and his pupils bleed into his darkened irises, his stomach flexing to iron against mine. “Big and sturdy. Heavy. Balls like a bull.” I lap at his tongue. “The kind of man a woman swallows for.”

My world turns upside down in the wake of those words.

I'm looking down into his fierce eyes one second and the next, I'm face down, ass up with my wrists pinned at the small of my back.

Caleb enters me again with such ferocity, I scream, but the sound is muffled by the mattress, which creaks in time with his drives, his ragged moans loud in the once silent room, that thick appendage finding its home deep inside my body, the power of his invasion lifting my knees off the bed again, again, again, bliss culminating in that pleasure palace just beneath my navel, the intense quickening making me sob and rut my hips back to greet his charges, our smacking flesh loud and crude and glorious.

"Come inside me, Daddy," I half-scream, half-sob. "Please."

"You know I will, angel," he pants, his fingers biting into my wrists. His growl reaching my ears when he says, "You know damn well I'll get you pregnant and laugh while I send him the announcement." His hips pump deep and hold, hold, grind until I pop, shuddering, moaning down at the mattress while my body remains inches above the mattress, impaled and trembling through the roller coaster of release, wave after golden wave setting me free, along with his threat. Or promise. Whatever we've just engaged in.

And when I collapse face down, struggling to catch my breath, I also encounter a warm, rosy glow, head to toe. All-encompassing contentment. When his fingertips begin a slow stroke of my spine, I turn my head to look at him, finding him gloriously disheveled for the first time. Gazing at me with unabashed reverence.

I'm sure that's how I'm looking back at him. Like he gave me wings.

Through the most unconventional means possible.

“I’m starting to think there’s a method to your madness,” I whisper.

He plants a kiss beneath my ear, lingering a moment. “You are my madness, Ashley.”

## CHAPTER 13

Caleb

Ashley is inside of her house, collecting things to spend the night when I get the phone call from Chicago. I’m loath to take my eyes off her silhouette where it moves in the bedroom she’s supposed to share with that bastard, but I locate my phone in the console of my truck, answering with urgency when I see the name.

“What do you have for me?”

A few minutes later, I hang up just in time for Ashley to walk out of the house, her overnight bag in hand. I almost break my neck getting out of the truck to carry it for her, as it should be. I don’t care if she’s only walking twenty yards, I transport her bag in one hand and hold her hand in the other, opening the passenger door and making sure she’s buckled in and cozy before I close it.

This woman is one in a billion.

Her man better damn well act like it.

And after that phone call?

Her man is exactly what I’m going to be. Officially.

You have no idea what’s waiting for you at home, Waylon.

Hint: it ain't going to be your wife.

As far as I'm concerned, Ashley is already my wife. I can't even glance at her from the driver's side without my heart slamming against my jugular. She's a phenomenon. An explosion of characteristics, some of which she's still discovering herself. She's tough, brave, funny, beautiful, sweet, mean, a little kinky—

Still got a fire smoldering in my belly after the shit she said to me. Jesus.

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The flames are never going to extinguish around her, because she fans them simply by smiling. By shifting that gorgeous backside in her seat. Blinking. Breathing. Existing. Just when I think this obsession can't run any deeper, another cavern opens up inside of me and a deeper kind of crazy floods in.

"Could I write for a little while when we get to your place?" she says, looking over at me, the new sparkle in her eyes nearly stealing my concentration. "I feel...inspired. Like I could design an entirely new fictional world." Her laughter is totally unfettered. Musical and free. "Anything seems possible."

"You don't have to ask me for permission, angel," I say, stopping at a red light. "If you want to write, write."

I'm not prepared for Ashley to launch herself across the truck, wrapping her arms around my neck. "I'm so happy."

Can she feel my heart going eight hundred miles an hour? I press a hard kiss to her temple, then her mouth. "This is how it's going to stay," I promise gruffly, winding our tongues together until there's a polite tap of the horn behind us. "Just like this."

She melts back into her seat, a furrow slowly forming between her brows. "How, Caleb? He's going to be back tomorrow. I can't just...stay with you, as much as I want that. He still holds the cards when it comes to my family. The farm."

I keep my eyes on the road. "Do you trust me, Ash—"

"Yes," she says, no hesitation.

“Thank you,” I say, reaching over to massage her upper thigh. “If he wants to take you away from me, he better bring a fucking army. It’s not happening.” I ride my hand higher and grip her cunt, allowing possessiveness to spread like wildfire inside of me. “He’ll never have you.” Red mists my vision. “And he’ll never have this.”

“No.” She opens her thighs to accommodate more of my hand. “Only you.”

I mold her pussy roughly. “Because you chose to give it to me.”

“Yes,” she whimpers.

One more squeeze, then I pat her mound gently. “Good girl.”

Ashley

The next day, I stand in front of the full-length mirror, and I barely recognize myself.

My eyes are no longer haunted, surrounded by anxious white lines.

My hair is down, wavy and a little messy, because Caleb can’t stop himself from kissing me every time we pass each other in the house or in the office. He sinks those skillful fingers into my hair and robs me of reason, my feet swept clean off the ground.

I’m wearing a flowing, strapless periwinkle dress with a smock top that hugs my breasts. I’m barefoot. My expression is clear and I have a sense of fulfilment that boggles the mind, considering it only took three days to achieve it.

What could I feel in a month?

A year?

One thing I know for sure is I'll still love Caleb a year from now.

A millennium from now.

I'll still trust him.

Which is why I turn now and walk through the house slowly, toward his office where my husband has freshly arrived. Only a moment ago, his truck pulled into the lane outside the office and he climbed out, spitting carelessly into the grass and scratched his crotch as I watched from Caleb's bedroom window.

What a donkey.

Outside Caleb's office now, I pause with my hand on the doorknob to examine what I'm feeling. Not fear. Not dread. Only...triumph.

With that, I push the door open and walk into the office like I own the place, stopping beside Caleb where he leans against his desk, spine straight and proud, watching Waylon without blinking, a muscle ticking in his cheek. I brush my knuckle against the outside of Caleb's thigh, just to have a connection, because not touching him is impossible, and I look my tormentor—my family's tormentor—right in the eye.

"Hello, Waylon."

His gaze widens almost comically, taking in my transformation. He gawks at my unbound hair, the healthy color in my face, my permanently swollen mouth, my uncharacteristic attire, the skin I now refuse to hide, if only so Caleb can touch it.

"Ashley?" he sputters, his attention flying to Caleb. "I barely recognize you."

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“I do,” I say. “I finally recognize the woman looking back at me in the mirror.”

“Take a good look, Waylon.” Without taking his eyes off my husband, Caleb holds out his hand and I take it without hesitation, letting him guide me in front of him. Less than five feet away from Waylon, Caleb pulls me back into his warmth, urging me up onto my toes so my backside finds the groove of his lap, the pads of his middle fingers slowly dragging up the outsides of my arms, making me shiver hotly. “This is what a woman looks like when she’s been given her power back. When she’s been given safety and allowed to flourish on her own terms. This is what a woman looks like when she’s happy and satisfied. Fulfilled inside and out.”

Waylon gulps. “Look, I thought about this while I was gone and...” He waves a hand around. “I don’t want to know how you fixed the girl, I just want to pick her up and take her home, so I can get to the benefiting part.”

Caleb’s chest tenses against my back. “Oh, is that what you’d like to do?”

“Yup,” Waylon stands.

“Sit the fuck down,” Caleb growls.

Waylon sits like a scolded child, red blanketing his face.

It’s everything I can do not to turn and kiss Caleb, the way my body yearns for me to do every moment of the day now. Ceaselessly.

“You think only of how you’ll benefit,” Caleb says, and I can tell he’s barely holding

on to his temper. “What about her?” He gently spears his fingers into my hair and takes hold, tilting my head to the right and perching his open mouth on the curve of my neck, shooting lustful sparks every which way in my tummy. “I spent three days doing exhaustive research on this sweet angel’s needs. You don’t want to know my findings?”

“N-n-no. Like I said—”

“I heard what you said,” Caleb enunciates. “You’re going to listen anyway. This session is only getting started.”

I’m not startled when Caleb picks me up and carries me over to the other side of his desk, turns me around to face him—away from Waylon—planting me on the hard, cool wood of the furniture. Three days ago, I never would have turned my back on Waylon for fear of him striking or grabbing me before I could evade him, but with Caleb’s hard body crowding into the V of my thighs, I feel nothing but breathless excitement.

A positivity that he’s watching my back.

A giddy kind of anticipation that blooms when he slides the hem of my dress over my knees, smoothing the cotton all the way to my hips, exposing my naked sex to him. Only him, not Waylon. My husband’s point of view is my back, my spread thighs...and our therapists hands slipping out of view to clutch my bottom, jerking me to the very edge of the desk and up against his lap, causing a sob of his name to erupt from my mouth.

This situation might seem immoral and wrong to some people.

To me, it’s closure.

“She loves to be kissed, your wife.” One hand stays on my backside, the other tosses his necktie over one shoulder to get it out of the way, then cradles the back of my neck, his thumb erasing any remaining tension with sure, thorough strokes. “She’s a dreamer, hence her love of writing. She needs time to anticipate, to think about what’s going to happen. To let the moment build and come to life. She needs time to feel her body’s response. And my God...” He leans back slightly to visibly marvel at the juncture of my thighs. “She responds like such a good girl.”

I’ve started to breathe harder and harder throughout Caleb’s speech, need sweeping deeper, further into my loins. Enough to make me quake openly on the desk in front of my lover, my flesh undoubtedly soaked under his watchful eye, my nerve endings on high alert. All of me on high alert.

Any part of me that might have thought this moment would be scary or feel incorrect has been silenced. If the man in front of me is the wrong thing and Waylon is right, the world itself is backwards.

The hell with some vows I was forced to recite.

Caleb leans down, momentarily taking his cautious attention off Waylon, his mouth settling over mine, his lids drifting down as if drugged while we kiss, my lips opening dutifully, gratefully, thrills racing through my blood as Caleb’s mouth fucks mine, my core squeezing and releasing in perfect rhythm with his tongue, my legs parting further, the mewls in my throat music in an otherwise silent room.

“I’ve had enough of this,” Waylon shouts.

There’s a dominant glint in Caleb’s eye when he reluctantly breaks the kiss, his hands finding my thighs, thumbs gliding up along the soft inner flesh. “She hasn’t, though, Waylon. She hasn’t had enough.” He kisses my forehead. “I haven’t fucked you yet this morning, have I, angel? Kissed you until you were restless and stopped, so you

would be nice and ready for Daddy when it was time. Now is the time.”

The couch creaks sharply behind me. “What the hell did you call yourself?”

I look back over my shoulder. “He called himself the name I gave him.” I don’t look away. My eye contact is clear and unflinching, even when I hear Caleb’s zipper come down, the jostling of his belt. I watch in satisfaction as the color drains from Waylon’s face, leaving him ashen. I allow him to watch my eyes go molten when the smooth tip of Caleb’s shaft drags through my moist sex. “Daddy,” I whisper.

Caleb tucks himself home and drives deep, snarling a curse as our hips mash together. “Fuck.” He slams a fist on the table, his hips jolting forward to pin me. Grind. “I never get used to how goddamn tight your wife is.”

“Fuck you,” Waylon seethes.

Caleb ignores the outburst, his lower body flexing, reversing and plunging deep again with a satisfied grunt. “Normally, I’d lick her little pussy first, but the sounds she makes when I give her head are for my ears alone.” He shakes his head, the pattern of his thrusts accelerating, the desk groaning underneath me. “You missed out, Waylon. You should be jealous as fuck.”

There’s a loud creak and I sense Waylon has surged to his feet. “What the hell do you mean ‘for your ears alone’? And I missed out? I’m her husband!”

“Oh, didn’t I mention?” Caleb grits through his teeth, his body on top of mine now, my back arched over the desk while he pounds me, no mercy, exactly the way I’ve discovered I like it. Hard, relentless and passionate. No space to think, just slake the desire, become one with my body and my needs. “I’m not giving her back,” Caleb finishes.

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“What?” Waylon shouts.

“Big mistake letting me anywhere near this angel.” He licks up the entire right side of my face, looking my husband in eye as his balls rap loudly off the underside of my bottom. Slap, slap, slap, slap, slap. “Only a man who’d never experienced Ashley could think it’s possible to give her up.”

Waylon is wheezing, stomping his feet. “Oh, she’s going to come home today and give me the same treatment she’s giving you right now. Mark my words. Or I’ll put her family out on the street.”

“First of all...” Caleb says thickly, beginning to pant, sweat dotting his upper lip. “You haven’t been paying attention. She’s only giving me this treatment because I treated her right first, you spineless coward. That’s how it’s fucking done.”

“Yes,” I breathe, well aware that I’m looking at him with pure hero worship.

That’s what he is. A hero. A real man.

“Does that feel good, little girl?” Caleb asks, going for broke now, his breath shallow.

“It feels so good,” I gasp. “So good.”

And I know him like the back of my hand and I know he’s getting close to climaxing. His blue eyes are glassy, his shaft barely fitting now, it’s so heavy and swollen. He’s going to come inside of me, right there is front of my husband. The darkest, most secret urges I’ve discovered over the last few days are running loose inside of me and

I'm rolling my hips forward, getting filled harder for my efforts, my whimpers getting louder, out of my control. So good. It feels so right and so good.

Look at me. Look how I've harnessed my free will.

Witness how you can't hold me back anymore.

"Second of all..." Caleb begins, trailing off, his jaw slackening, thanks to me getting close to orgasm too, my inner walls beginning to throb and tighten around him, my back arching like a wire is being bent inside my spine, thighs starting to tremble. "Hold on," he says hoarsely, "I'll explain the rest in a minute, Waylon. I just need to creampie your wife."

"Fuck you!"

"I'd say 'fuck you 'back, but I'm going to make her come, instead. In a way you'll never be able to do. How about that?" Caleb pounds forward to the hilt and we both lose our grip on the tension, electricity snapping as that now familiar painful relief ebbs and flows along with the fluids from our bodies, our sexes locked together in an unholy spasm while I cry out, my thigh muscles jumping, Caleb letting loose a string of curses in my ear, his come audibly dripping onto the desk. "Such a Daddy's girl," he says into my neck, his tone raw. As raw and perfect as I feel.

Reclaimed by myself and Caleb, by choice.

Renewed.

Understood.

But still not quite at peace.

Not yet, at least.

Caleb

I sense Ashley's tension rising again as I reluctantly pull out of her and zip up, but I cup her jaw and give her a firm kiss to remind her everything is going to be fine.

Better than fine.

"I can't believe I agreed to this," Waylon is complaining, pacing in front of the desk.

"Frankly, I can't believe you did, either," I say, covering my future wife back up with her dress. Sliding her off the desk and into my arms, holding her while she comes down from her orgasm, swaying her gently, my fingers stroking up and down her beautiful spine. "You should have cherished her like the treasure she is, Waylon. But it's too late now, isn't it?"

"Nope." He smiles with teeth, making me want to deck him right in his weasel face. "She's legally bound to me."

"That might be true. For now." I drop one hand to my upper desk drawer, retrieving the printed paperwork that was emailed to me last night. Paperwork that contains facts I spent the day verifying. "But the only reason she married you was to keep her family's land." I pause to make sure he's paying attention. "And that land was never really yours to hold over their heads, was it, ol' Waylon?"

He goes still, his left eye ticking. "I'm sorry?"

"You are. But staying on track..." I lean down and kiss Ashley's cheek, then her sweet lips, knowing she's still in need of soothing, pampering. Her well-being comes before everything. "Your father mortgaged that land with false information. He got

the loan based on a bunch of lies and the bank was very interested in hearing the details.” I flip through the pages, before picking up the whole packet and tossing it at him. “Your father is wanted for fraud in two states. That’s why he put your name on the deed. But again, seeing how the application was a bunch of lies, that land is in the process of returning to its rightful owner. Ashley’s parents. You have no hold over them or my future wife anymore.”

Waylon is shrinking. Growing smaller in front of my very eyes.

Which is saying a lot. He was a tiny man to begin with.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 5:46 am*

Ashley is looking up at me with burgeoning hope, tears pooling in those beloved green eyes and I can only pray she looks at me like this for the rest of our lives.

“We...we’ll f-fight it.”

“You’ll lose.” I stroke Ashley’s hair, gratified beyond words when she snuggles up against me, wrapping her arms around my waist, crying with happiness. “And that’s only the first set of papers you can expect, Waylon. The next ones will be divorce papers. You’re going to sign them. Fast, motherfucker.” I let him see the painful murder I’m planning, letting the malice deepen in my eyes until he starts to shake like a leaf. “Or I’ll bury you alive on her goddamn land. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” he blurts, turning in a disoriented circle, then bolting for the door. “I...I’ll sign them. Whatever you want.”

The door slams a second later, leaving us alone.

Ashley pulls back, her face streaked with tears. “Caleb. Caleb...” She swipes at the moisture, her expression a war between disbelief and joy. “You did it. You...I can’t believe...I’m free. I’m free of him. My family is going to be fine. All because of you.”

“No. I’m not taking credit when you were the brave one who sacrificed yourself to save your family. Who was brave and resolute in the face of violence.” I flatten her to my chest, kissing the crown of her head. “I’m only here to make sure you never have to do either of those things ever again.”

She looks up at me, her beautiful face finally, finally one hundred percent free of worry. “I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you, too, angel,” I say, hoarse.

A twinkle of humor lights up her features. “What was your plan if you didn’t find any fraud or wrongdoing?”

“We were going to be halfway to Europe right now.”

She giggles and it’s a dreamy sound I plan to hear often. As often as possible. “I would have run with you. As fast as I could. I still would.”

I pick her up in my arms and carry her into the house, moaning when her legs slide around my hips like second skin, the top of her dress tugging down, so I can see the ripe slopes of her breasts. “No need to run, Ashley,” I manage, pinning her to the closest wall and claiming her mouth in a kiss that leaves us both shaken. “You’re home.”

## EPILOGUE

Ashley

Five Years Later

My pealof laughter carries across the parking lot as my husband swings me up into his arms, carrying me toward the bookstore. I let my neck go loose, arms limp, not one iota of tension in my body. Secure in the knowledge that I’m in the most capable hands. The sun peaks in and out from behind the clouds, the hem of my sundress fluttering against my calves. I am the embodiment of bliss.

The feeling only increases when Caleb squeezes me tighter and says, “There’s a line out the door, angel.”

I jerk to attention in his arms. “What?”

“See for yourself,” he says, a pride heavy in his tone.

Blocking my eyes from the sunshine, I look to the far end of the parking lot where the two-story bookstore is located, my heart rippling in my chest when I see a line of women standing in the shadow of the building. If it wasn’t for the fact that each of them is holding a copy of my debut novel, I would assume they’d come to see someone else.

But...they’re here to see me.

“Oh my gosh. Is this real?””

“It is.” He hefts me higher and slightly alters the direction we’re traveling. “We’ll have to bring you in through the back entrance like a celebrity.”

“That seems unnecessary,” I murmur, but I allow Caleb to carry me around back of the building, if only because I need some time to gather my composure. This is my first time doing a book signing and I expected the turnout to be minimal.

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised. Your novel is still flying off shelves,” Caleb says, settling me on my feet in the small alley behind the shop. He doesn’t knock on the back door yet, however, probably sensing I’m not ready to go in. Instead, he wraps his arms around me, pressing his lips to my forehead, his palm rubbing circles between my shoulder blades. “I’m so proud of you, Ashley.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, tilting my head back to look at this man, this hero. The one

and only great love of my life. Father of my son...and the second child growing in my belly even now. “Who knew people would want to read a story about a lost and lonely woman falling in love with her therapist?”

His mouth brushes over mine, teasing me with light contact, before he deepens the kiss, his hand palming the back of my head, his lips a tool of magic. Everything about Caleb is magic. His practice has grown exponentially over the last five years, his client list overflowing, mostly with men seeking counseling. After the release of my book, in which the hero saves the heroine from her abusive husband and teaches her how to stand on her own, the pair ultimately falling madly in love, women started sending their husbands to therapy with Caleb in droves, hoping he'd be able to impart his secret to being a good partner. Just like the hero from the book, which I titled *Method to His Madness*.

“We need to get working on the sequel,” Caleb says, his knuckle rubbing against my nipples through the thin bodice of my dress, turning them to aching points. “Where the main characters build their dream house on the edge of the family farm and spend their evenings on the porch, watching a border collie run circles around their toddler.”

“That sounds familiar,” I say, breathing a laugh, sliding my arms up around his neck, so I can absorb his strength, the sensation of his steely shaft against my belly. “In this sequel, does the hero request a soundproof bedroom from the contractor who builds their house?”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 5:46 am*

Caleb's blue eyes flash with heat, and somehow, I know he's thinking about last night, when he had my wrists bound tightly to the headboard of our marital bed, a blindfold wrapped around my eyes, his drives relentless while my screams of Daddy echoed off the rafters. Our sex life defies explanation. It's constant and raw. We never know when the mood is going to strike and we never deny ourselves, either.

That impulsivity has led to a lot of public lovemaking.

It started for my benefit. Caleb learned early that PDA heightens my desire, as does the possibility of being seen. Caught. Now, the fact that we can't stop ourselves, no matter the setting, has a lot to do with his overwhelming obsession. With me.

Five years ago was only the beginning.

Now, he fills notebooks with information about me. Observations. He thinks I don't know about them, but one time, he left his file cabinet unlocked and a stack of notebooks—all labeled with my name—caught my eye. Maybe a normal woman would have been scared to find out their husband keeps track of her moods, opinions, hairstyles, how many orgasms she has per day. Where she goes and who she associates with. Fantasizes about her twenty-four hours a day.

But none of that scares me. I fantasize about him to the point of madness, too.

I would burn myself alive for him.

And speaking of burning, his mouth is hungry on mine now, his hands down the back

of my panties, molding my cheeks reverently.

“We should stop,” he rasps. “This afternoon is about you, angel. I’m being selfish.”

“You could never be selfish,” I croon against his mouth.

I hook a leg around his waist, and he shudders, his eyes taking on a glassy quality. “I have less and less control with you.” Two hands on my backside, he picks me up, baring his teeth against my lips. “I almost fucked you on the table in the restaurant last night.”

“I’d have let you,” I say softly, lapping at his panting mouth. “Daddy gets what he wants, when he wants it.”

“Angel,” he groans, tilting his hips. “My fucking addiction.”

“We’re early,” I whimper, peeling down the straps of my sundress, my sex clenching at his visible reaction to my bare breasts in the dappled sunlight. Pupils expanding, chest heaving, a curse forming on his lips. I lean forward to flirt our mouths together, rubbing my aroused nipples against his chest at the same time. Getting myself wet for him. “It’s only fitting to have your fresh, warm come inside of me while I’m signing a book about us.”

My husband is overcome, then. As he often is.

He rips his zipper down and shreds my panties, leaving them in tatters.

I’m soundly fucked in the alley, his animal snarls muffled with my praising kisses, my legs dangling up above the ground, high heels clattering down once his thrusts turn frantic, his mouth devouring my throat, my neck, my mouth while we get our momentary fix of each other, his teeth clamping onto my shoulder when he erupts, my hips angling and grinding on his smooth base, the contact with my clit allowing

me to follow him, shaking and shuddering, our combined moisture splattering down to the pavement.

“I love you, angel,” he grits against my temple. “Til death.”

“Til death, Caleb,” I sob, my heart in my throat. “I love you, too.”

I sign three hundred copies of our story that day with a smile on my face, Caleb watching proudly in the shadows, both of us knowing the real story will never end.

THE END