



Choke

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

Description: Some moments change the trajectory of your life.

Some make an impact that molds your character.

Others are bombs that uproot your life.

I am familiar with all of these, but I was not prepared for them.

They kidnapped me.

Then they saved me.

They were a distant memory.

Until they weren't.

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PROLOGUE

Mona

“Move your ass. You won’t like what they do to bitches who don’t do as they’re told.”

My body jolts as the tip of the man’s gun digs into me. His voice is harsh, his stance intimidating. I want to pretend I’m not scared, but I’m petrified.

I glance around the room and see four other women. They all look to be in their late teens to mid-twenties. They appear visibly shaken, and their eyes are vacant. The stench of fear is so thick and pungent that I wonder if I’ll gag from it. I always assumed that fear is odorless, but I was wrong. It carries the rancid aroma of sweat and unwashed hair of the women in the room. It’s apparent they’ve been here for much longer than me.

I stiffen as a deep rumble assaults my ears.

“Do as you’re told. Don’t speak unless spoken to. Play dead if you have to. Just survive.”

I turn my head slightly to look at the man pressing the barrel of a gun to my back. His blue eyes lock with mine, and a chill oozes down my spine. What will happen if I ignore his advice?

“Line up!” another man yells, causing the four other women to form a straight line, their arms stiff at their sides.

The cell door flies open, and a robust man with pudgy cheeks and a receding hairline enters with four armed guards.

He claps his chubby hands and smiles, showing one gold tooth. “Ah, my new girls. Welcome to the fold, my children. I’m delighted you’ve found your way to God.”

Bile rises in my stomach, and my hands shake. God—a word that every power-hungry degenerate has twisted since the dawn of humankind. A tired playbook repeated ad nauseam.

I scan the four women, who all have their gazes dutifully downcast as if greeting the supreme ruler.

Wonder how small this fucker’s dick is?

The old man waddles through the cell and stops abruptly in front of me. “Oh, aren’t you lovely?” He claps his hands again and giggles like an excited child. “We’ve never had an exotic one like you before.”

What the fuck? Does he think he’s talking to a safari animal?

“That olive skin, those pretty green eyes, and all that long, black hair. Yes, child. God has favored you, hasn’t he?”

Part of me wants to laugh. God doesn’t favor me. He despises me. God took my father from me and made me watch.

The man gently pinches the ends of my hair, the tips of his fingers rubbing the dark strands. “Such a pretty girl. Unfortunately, we can’t keep you.”

“What do you mean?” the guy pointing a gun at me asks.

His accent is Scottish. He's tall, at least a foot taller than my five-foot-eight frame. His eyes are an ethereal blue, almost alien-like. Creepy but hauntingly beautiful. A five-o'clock shadow dusts his chiseled jaw and high cheekbones. In another life, he could've been a model.

"She's not to be touched by anyone." The chubby man rubs my cheek with the back of his hand. "God's favorite child must remain pure."

Must remain pure? I've got news for you, buddy. I lost my virginity at sixteen in the back of a pickup truck. It lasted all of three minutes.

The creep turns to the Scottish guy. "You're responsible for her, Callum. I'm entrusting her care to you."

"Yes, Mr. Meyer," Callum says before shoving me with the barrel of his gun. "Move."

1

PART ONE

2

ATLAS

Is humanity based on nature or nurture? That's a question I've asked myself my entire life as I struggle to extricate myself from my father's name while acknowledging that I harbor similar tendencies as him. Finding myself repulsed by my father and the DNA running through my veins is a strange concept.

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The door flies open, and Callum barges in with a pretty woman who looks to be in her early twenties. Despite her ragged, filthy clothing, her beauty is undeniable—especially her large, emerald eyes framed by long, black lashes.

“She’s staying with us. I’m her bodyguard for the time being. Marcus is worried the other guys might get rough with her.”

“Mona,” the girl says firmly as she tugs her arm from Callum’s grip. “My name is Mona.”

Callum steps toward her, his large hands framing her delicate face. His nostrils flare, and his eyes blaze with fire. “I don’t care what your name is. Learn to keep your mouth shut. If you do anything to fuck up my life, it’s not the other guards you’ll need to fear. I’ll fuck you up so bad that the pain will be ingrained in your nervous system.”

The girl, Mona, glares at Callum. She doesn’t flinch; she doesn’t balk or cry. She holds his glare with a determined expression, a silent challenge laced in her pretty green eyes.

What kind of internal strength does it take to stand up to someone who could crush her so easily?

“I was seven when I witnessed the execution of my father. Six months later, I watched as my sister received seventy-four lashes because perverted men couldn’t handle their twisted urges and sexualized a thirteen-year-old girl. I was nine when I trekked across a desert, worried my mother would die of starvation because every

morsel of food she had she gave to her three children. My first ten years were more brutal than most adults experience in a lifetime.” Mona steps closer to Callum, her breasts flush with his chest. “Cowards like you don’t scare me.”

Callum’s hand shoots out, and he laces his fingers in Mona’s long tresses, bending her body backward. He leans over her, his face barely an inch from hers. “You know what I do for a living, little girl? I destroy people. So, if you don’t get in line, I’ll break you.”

Mona’s full lips twist into a smile that’s unnerving for such a stunning woman. “You can’t break someone who’s already shattered.”

Callum releases her hair and steps back, and Mona crashes to the floor. He looks as if he’s received a lethal blow. His face is ashen, his confidence visibly shaken. I’ve never seen Callum off-kilter. He’s always collected, calculated, and lethal. Never would I have imagined he’d come undone because of the words of a beautiful stranger.

For a moment, I think Callum will walk away, leaving the girl huddled in the corner.

But that thought is foolish.

Callum’s back is rigid, his hands clenched into fists. The man I love is no longer visible through the dense fog of his anger. He’s my father’s henchman, a man I once believed capable of ending my life.

This is the Callum I forgot existed.

This Callum is a stranger.

CALLUM

Is redemption possible for monsters like me? I harbor hope that my dark soul will one day find salvation. That a time will come when goodness grasps me from my continued descent into hell.

A girl who doesn't know when to shut her mouth has just shattered that delusion.

Each step I take toward her is heavy. Not because of an ill-informed notion that what I'm about to do is wrong. My moral compass became skewed years ago when my impressionable mind was far from fully developed. What makes me hesitate is the defiant spark in her eyes. Tears well and spill down her cheeks, a silent torrent of emotion, but her eyes unwaveringly hold mine in a silent challenge.

"Your body can't cash the check your mouth wants to make," I spit as I lean over her, shadowing her with my massive frame.

"You ever wonder why your handler wants me kept safe? Why a man who barter and trades women like cattle cares that I'm safe? Or is your job as a mindless enforcer not to question the atrocious acts he commits?"

I take a moment to allow her words to permeate the anger and frustration consuming me. She's correct. This behavior isn't standard practice for Meyer. He's violent and ruthless and rarely gives anyone grace or displays kindness, not even to his own son. That he wants this girl kept away from the other guards is peculiar and contradicts the brutality he inflicts on other, less willing women.

Mona has been assigned to that group. The undesirables. Ironically, their captivity and brutalization stems from their inaccessible allure. Unlike the other female members of Meyer's organization, who want to be engulfed by Meyer's religious rhetoric and madness, these girls are prisoners. Taken against their will and bent and

broken until they eventually submit.

My body lurches as a firm hand grips my shoulder.

“Leave her alone, Callum. That’s enough for one night.”

I gaze at Atlas, anger sparking every nerve ending in my body. He raises his arms, aware of the rage that consumes me. Atlas isn’t stupid. He understands that I love him, but he also has a firm grasp of the reality of our lives. I can only keep him safe if I indulge in the madness perpetrated by his father. I know what I’m doing is corrupt, vile, and evil. Atlas knows it, too, but we also know we have to play with the devil to survive hell.

“Leave it for tonight,” Atlas whispers, the words a dying prayer on his lips.

“You’ll pay her pound of flesh?” I ask, hating myself for asking when I see the weariness in Atlas’s eyes. His defeat isn’t due to the acts he knows I’ll expose him to. The sorrow in his eyes is because he’s trapped in the hellscape crafted by his father and because he loves me—his father’s head demon.

Atlas peers at Mona and nods. “Yes.”

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I turn to Mona and smirk. “Looks like today is your lucky day.”

“You’ve got a fucked-up understanding of the word lucky,” she spits.

At that moment, all I see is anger, and all I feel is torment. This girl has somehow burrowed into the disfigured scars hidden beneath my flesh, and her claws are digging deep. I want to hurt her, to make her wear the suffering on her skin that she’s inflicting on my memory.

She skitters back as I lean into her, closing the distance between us. I hate that the terror in her eyes excites me. I despise the notion that, at some point in my life, violence and fear became an aphrodisiac.

I turn away, searching Atlas’s eyes, needing him to reel me in from the darkest edges of my fragmented mind.

“Help me,” I whisper, a hollow plea from a man on the brink of madness.

4

ATLAS

Callum handcuffs the girl to the radiator.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure she can’t leave or cause trouble.”

“What if I have to go to the bathroom?” Mona asks.

Callum walks into the kitchen and returns with a pot. “Use this.”

Mona glances at the stainless-steel pot he places on the floor before looking at Callum in utter disgust. “And how do you expect me to take off my pants?”

I cringe as I witness Callum’s sinister smile. He unsheathes the blade from his belt as he moves toward her, gliding it between her legs. With a flick of his wrist, he pops the button of her dark blue denim pants and yanks them down to her ankles with her underwear.

I expect Mona to freak out over Callum’s aggressive act, but she doesn’t even flinch.

“So, I’m supposed to waddle to your makeshift piss pot, and then what? Stand there while I pee on the pants and underwear you’ve shackled me to?”

I burst out laughing, which isn’t the best reaction, considering the wrath bubbling beneath Callum’s surface.

He doesn’t say a word as he slashes the crotch of her pants and underwear. “There. Now, the worst thing you’ll do is piss on the floor like the little bitch you are.”

“Better a bitch than a pathetic dog.”

In a flash, Callum has the knife at her throat, pressing the blade to her jugular. “What did you call me?”

“Tell me, Callum, do you always follow your master’s orders like an obedient little puppy?”

I gaze at Mona in fascination. The girl is on the verge of being slashed to death, yet she's still fighting. What is it like to possess a flame that strong inside you?

Mona tips her head back and smiles. "Go ahead. Having my throat slit will be far better than whatever your owner has in mind for me. Unlike you, I'd rather die than be manipulated and used by a monster."

The knife falls from Callum's hand, and he grabs Mona by the throat, throwing her against the wall. "You have a smart mouth, little girl. Better be careful, or I'll do something about it. Something you won't like."

Mona croaks a laugh that seems to alarm Callum enough to abandon his hold on her throat. "Why are you laughing? Do you have any idea what I could do to you?"

She shrugs, rubbing her throat as if hoping to wipe away the finger marks Callum has left there. "Our lives are etched into the universe. The threads of our destinies are unchangeable and inevitable. So, if death is knocking, I'm ready."

"You're insane!" Callum shouts. "You have any idea what men like me and Meyer could do to you?"

"I'm used to men's cruelty, violence, and lies to subjugate women. I understand that had my mother not left a home she loved because of evil men, someone could have killed me long ago. She bought me time, and if that time is up, so be it. One thing I do know is that my mother would never want me to cower in fear, groveling for my life at the feet of corrupted men."

With each word she speaks, I become more captivated by her. But with that newfound fascination comes a tsunami of jealousy and rage. I'm envious of her unwavering strength and determination. I'm jealous of her bravery because I've been a coward my entire life.

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“Shut up. If he doesn’t kill you, I will.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Disgust is a bullet I fire at myself, but I can’t stop my tirade.

“You think you’re special? You’re not. You’re insignificant. Those women you saw? Just the tip of the iceberg.” I step closer, my face right up to hers, my breath hot on her skin. “The only thing keeping you from that kind of brutality is us. So how about you stop being so ungrateful and shut your fuckin’ mouth?”

“What do you want from me?” she demands. “Am I supposed to get down on my knees and beg to suck your cock because you’ve exchanged my disgusting, filthy cell for one made of logs? Should I be happy that I get to piss in a pot in privacy instead of having others peer at me? Shall I thank God that He has put my life at risk with His benevolence for humanity? Tell me what you want from me because I promise you’re unlikely to get it.” She tilts her head toward the discarded knife on the floor. “If that’s what you’re looking for, you may as well grab that knife and spill my blood.”

Her words are fists connecting with every vulnerable part of me. Blow after blow meant to maim and eliminate.

“Here.” Mona moves closer and brushes her lips against mine.

Her taste is a summer breeze tangled with a frigid snowstorm. Her hot tongue pokes out, demanding entry into my mouth. My lips part for her, and her tongue slips inside. A surge of adrenaline consumes me, knocking me down and pulling me under like

powerful waves in a turbulent ocean. I don't worry about my partner watching while I kiss a virtual stranger. All I can think about are her soft lips against mine. Is it possible to siphon someone's strength through a kiss?

When she pulls away, I'm heady, breathless, and terrified.

I turn to Callum, who stands in silence, an uncomfortable interloper forced to watch.

Then Mona says, "You can join in, too, you know."

5

MONA

My life was a fucking mess from the moment I was born. I learned the harsh realities of life and the tough choices necessary for survival at a young age.

Those hard roads and hills, which require a strenuous climb, are far more difficult for women. Not because we aren't capable but because we're forced into additional roadblocks on the obstacle course known as life.

I'm not naïve enough to believe that offering these men the only commodity available to me will save me from something far worse, but I hope it will at least buy me time to figure out an escape plan. Then again, considering how I ended up here, my escape plan might need some serious rethinking.

Being snatched off the street by a man in a black car two weeks ago was terrifying. Although I was blindfolded and in a padded room, I was looked after. I had a comfortable bed and hot food, and my captor seemed kind and didn't wish me ill will.

But I wasn't about to wait around to see if Mr. Lady Napper's good nature suddenly

became twisted, and he did all kinds of ungodly things to my body and psyche. So, when the opportunity arose, I ran. Guess something more important came up, which made him forget to secure the room.

My escape worked beautifully... until it didn't.

Only me, Mona Baran, could escape one captor and be caught by another.

I found myself on the road and waved down the first car I saw. Lo and behold, instead of taking me to the police station, the driver took me to a private plane, flew me to God knows where, and delivered me right into the hands of evil.

“Are you done?”

I turn my gaze to Callum. I hope he's seething after witnessing his man kiss me. I hope his blood is boiling with rage. A part of me hopes he'll put a bullet in my head to save me from what is undoubtedly a fate far worse than anything he could do to me.

Callum laughs, making me feel like a child placated by an annoyed parent. “Is that all you've got, little girl?”

His voice drips with condescension and wry humor. I have the urge to punch him hard enough to wipe the amusement from his eyes and the arrogant smile from his mouth.

But I play the game instead.

I drop to my knees, my face level with Atlas's crotch, and glare at the big Scotsman.

Callum steps toward me, his eyes never leaving my face. He stands behind Atlas,

slides his hand to the front of his black slacks, releases the button, and lowers the zipper.

“Listen, darling,” Callum whispers, pulling down Atlas’s boxers to expose his long, thick shaft. “I have a fondness for games, especially those as risky as chicken.”

Callum grips Atlas’s dick and points it directly at my closed mouth. “Open up, or I’ll assume you’re all talk and no action.”

A sane person wouldn’t willingly suck her captor’s cock. A sane person would regret poking the bear. But I’m not sane.

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I part my lips, lean in, and engulf Atlas's cock. The moan escaping his mouth is the only knowledge I need—if I can't fight, run, or scream, maybe fucking them will get me out of this.

6

CALLUM

Are we raping her? Is this sexual assault? Are we sex offenders? Have we used coercion, or is she a willing participant? Am I the worst vermin to exist? Those are the questions swirling in my mind as I witness Mona gagging on Atlas's cock like a top-tier porn star.

She didn't say no. If she'd said no, I would've stopped. But was she in a position to say no?

I shove aside the jumble of narratives my mind hurls at me, blocking out all thoughts that could halt the situation before me. This girl needs a lesson, and it seems she's determined to learn it.

Walking behind her, I undo the cuffs and shove her head down on Atlas's dick. "I'm a demon, but I'm not the devil. Tap my leg if you want it to stop."

She doesn't move. She doesn't run. She simply bobs her head and swallows Atlas whole.

"Looks like that pretty mouth is good for something other than being smart."

I lift her hips, bending her over until her pretty pink cunt and asshole are exposed to me. Unbuckling my belt, I tie it around her neck and buckle it tight. It's been a minute since I fucked a girl. I never had the urge, but at this moment, all I can think about is burying my cock in her slick heat.

Her body lunges forward as I penetrate her with one full thrust. To my utter shock, she pushes against me, fucking me back.

“Look at you, Mona. Not such a good girl, after all, huh?”

She mumbles as Atlas's dick lodges down her throat. Part of me wants to ignore her rambling, but a larger part wants to know what she said.

Leaning forward, I grip her hair and pull her off Atlas. “Did you want to say something, slut?”

I regret the word as soon as it flies from my mouth. Degradation is something Atlas and I enjoy. It's a little fucked up, but it's a huge component of our relationship because of the trauma we've suffered. Alas, we crave it. But I should've stopped to consider that others don't appreciate being demeaned in the same way we do.

“Say it again,” Mona whimpers.

“Say what?”

“Call me a slut.”

I tug her until her back is flush to my chest and whisper in her ear, “Why, Kitten? So you can show me your cute little claws and pretend you can go head-to-head with a tiger?”

“No,” Mona pants. “I...”

“Spit it out, Kitten.”

She drops her gaze and shuts her eyes. “I—I don’t know why I like it.”

I recognize her defeated expression all too well. Running from your true nature and living in denial is a hell of a fight.

“Look at me.” I grip her chin, forcing her gaze to mine. “There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Her chest rises and falls with a heavy sigh, and I instantly feel like a bigger piece of shit than I already am.

“Those words should disgust me. Words like slut, whore, and cunt”—she swallows—“are used for women and young girls.” Her voice shakes as tears stream down her face. “Virgins. Girls imprisoned and brutalized.”

I don’t know what possesses me to utter my next words. I have no clue why this girl’s confession has cracked a piece of my stone-cold heart. “We can’t control what our trauma does to us. Words that hurt in times of pain can also bring peace. It’s fucked up. I don’t understand it. But I don’t think we should harbor shame for taking back power with words that were used to harm us.” I push her hair from her face and hold her stare. “Maybe we should stop.”

“No,” Mona says. “I need to escape. Please. Even if it’s only for a moment. Let me forget.”

I nod before shoving her head down on Atlas’s cock again. “Open up, slut.”

Atlas looks at me, his eyes pleading, asking if all this is okay. I nod to reassure him, but I'm not sure it is.

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“Are you okay with this?” Atlas asks the question I’m unable to form but need to know.

“Yes,” Mona whispers. “I don’t think I should be, and I can’t explain it, but I am.”

Atlas caresses her face. “Then open up, slut.”

Certain moments in life create a turning point. One step can alter the entire course of your life. Prior to my conversation with Mona, my course of action was clear. I was sure of what I needed to do.

But something in her confession has shifted my entire perspective.

If this were a game of chess, it would be checkmate because I can’t sacrifice her to save myself.

7

ATLAS

The entire situation is fucked-up. Completely and utterly insane. So preposterous that no one would ever believe the tale. Here I am with my cock deep inside the mouth of the girl my father has kidnapped, and she isn’t objecting. It isn’t Stockholm, either. Mona knows what we are. She isn’t in a trance or deluded.

She’s a woman in a fucked-up situation who wants control. A moment where she believes the sword of faith is hers to wield.

“That’s it, whore. Fuck our cocks. You’re doing such a good job.”

Mona moans at Callum’s degradation as if it’s the sustenance she needs to survive and thrive. How far can we take this?

I pull her off my cock. “I need you to tap my leg if what I’m about to do is too much while your mouth is full.”

She nods.

“That’s not good enough, baby. I’m gonna need you to say the word.”

“Yes,” Mona says as saliva trails down her chin.

“Thatta a girl. Open up nice and wide so I can fuck your worthless face and come down your pretty little throat.”

Mona takes my dick all the way, gagging as I hit the back of her throat.

“Fuck, sweetheart. This mouth was made for choking on dick.”

“It’s not just her mouth that’s made for taking dick, “Callum groans as he bounces Mona between the two of us. “You’re so tight, baby girl. So fuckin’ wet, warm, and fuckin’ tight.” Callum locks eyes with me and smiles. “I’m going to fill you with cum, Mona. I’m going to chain you to the wall and take you down just to shoot my load inside you. That’s what you’re going to be, little girl. Our personal cum dump. Nothing but holes for us to fill.”

Callum’s filthy mouth is pushing me to the edge. The fouler he becomes, the more I want to match his energy.

I gaze down at Mona, wrapping my fingers around her delicate neck, and squeeze. “You look pretty like this, slut. Stuffed full, your face red. You’d look so pretty unconscious, wouldn’t you?”

Mona’s eyes shoot up, and her hands move. For a moment, I think she’ll tap out, but she grabs my ass and pulls me toward her.

“Fuck. Goddamn.” I grip her head with one hand while the other squeezes her throat. “I can feel my cock choking you, baby. You’re doing such a good job. That’s it, baby. Swallow me whole.”

I stiffen as Mona works my cock with her hot mouth. Between the thrill of watching her face turn red, her gasps for breath, and her warm tongue gliding around my cock, I’m on the brink. I pump aggressively into her mouth, hitting the back of her throat. Her gagging noises heighten every sensation as I come.

I lower my head and gaze into her green eyes as I kiss her, tasting myself on her tongue. “You did well, baby girl. I’m soproud of you. Do you think you can take another load in that pretty pink cunt?”

“Yes,” she purrs.

I kiss the tip of her nose. “That’s my good girl.”

“Fuck,” Callum groans as he grips Mona’s hips and thrusts deep. “You’re so fuckin’ tight.”

His hand moves to her hair, yanking her head back so he can close his hand around her throat. “How does it feel, slut? How does it feel to know you’re a pathetic whore? To know that you gave up this cunt to two men you don’t know.”

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“Good,” she squeaks, the word barely audible.

Callum spits on her face and smiles. “Glad you’re enjoying yourself, slut, because I plan on making you my free-use cum bucket.” With a groan, he stiffens as he comes, abandoning his hold on her neck to wrap his arm around her middle. “What am I going to do with you?”

Guilt racks my body as she whispers, “Let me go.”

8

CALLUM

I drop the phone as Atlas walks into the room. “Who were you talking to?”

“No one.”

“Cut the crap, Callum. You look like you saw a damn ghost. That tells me whoever you were talking to is someone you want to keep from me.”

I hate lying to Atlas. Every truth I omit to tell him is a heavy punch lodging in my body, but I don’t want him to hate me. Atlas doesn’t need a reason to see a bigger monster than I already am. But I’ll no longer be a piece of trash who mindlessly hurts others. I’ll be a soldier breaking rank to do the right thing.

“The less you know, the better.”

“Fuck off. I’m not a child, Callum.”

“I’m getting her out of here, and...” I don’t know how to say the next part. How can I tell the man I love that I’m busy hatching a plan to kill his father?

“And what, Callum?”

“They’re going to kill Meyer. It’s the only way all three of us can be free. Turns out that Mona is connected. Really connected. Her sister works for Alaric Cinder.”

Atlas sits on the bed, stunned into silence. I am not sure if he cares about his father dying. That man should have lost the privilege to breathe years ago. The only concern I have is the void Mona will leave in our lives. In such a short time, she’s changed our decrepit world into something better. “What will happen to Mona?”

“She’ll go home. She isn’t like us. She has a family. A big one full of people who love her.”

“You think you’ll be able to let her go?”

Will I be able to let her go?

“No, but we have to give her a shot. A chance for something decent. We owe her that.”

PART TWO

TWO YEARS LATER

CALLUM

If I were to pick one word to describe me, it would be dysfunctional. At least I'm self-aware. Most people with proclivities similar to mine would proclaim themselves as misunderstood. Which is laughable when one contemplates the moronic notion of that word. What does it even mean to be misunderstood? It allows gray to bleed into situations that should be black. Fictional stories would likely depict me as morally ambiguous and complex. But in reality, I'm simply a bad guy.

Good people don't have a garage and a large plot of land they keep handy for killing.

Placing my phone on the dock, I hit play, filling the space with C & C Music Factory's iconic nineties bop Gonna Make You Sweat.

"I love this song. It's severely underrated," I yell over the music. "The beat allows me to work more creatively. Do you like music,"—I glare at the driver's license on the table—"Seamus?"

I hum along to the song as I sharpen the Miyabi knife before holding it to the overhead light. "There's nothing like Japanese and German steel. No one makes knives or cars like those two countries, and there's a reason for that." I swiftly bring down the eight-inch blade on Seamus' pinky finger, disconnecting it from his hand.

Sweat beads on Seamus' brow as his muffled screams drown out my music.

"Manners, Seamus," I mumble as I examine his stout finger. "That's how you got into this situation, by not having good manners." I wave the finger, oozing blood, in Seamus's face. "You think the loss of a finger taught you a lesson?"

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Seamus nods frantically as tears stream down his face.

“Hmm, I’m not sure if I believe you,” I say, bringing the freshly severed finger to my nose, the coppery tang of his blood assaulting my nostrils. Shrill screams echo off the concrete walls of the garage as I tear the duct tape from Seamus’s mouth. “I think you can give it more conviction. Go on, Seamus, convince me you’ve learned your lesson. Give me an Oscar-caliber performance.”

“You’re a-ah-a fuck-in’ psy-cho,” Seamus stutters in pain.

The knife slips from my hand, hitting the edge of my boot before it clangs against the concrete slab floor. “Goddammit, Seamus, you almost made me damage my new boots.”

“How is that my fault?” Seamus demands, his voice shaking as tears glide down his chubby cheeks.

Our eyes lock as a smile plays on my lips. “Seamus, do you now see the correlation? If you hadn’t been so rude, you wouldn’t be in this predicament, and I wouldn’t have pulled out my knives.”

With a thin, sharp, paring knife in hand, I approach the whimpering idiot, offering my most charming smile and pointing the tip of the blade toward him. “So you see, dear Seamus, this whole situation is completely of your doing.”

“Okay, man,” Seamus stammers, sweat beading on his forehead, his breath ragged. “I’m sorry. Whatever happened, it was my fault.”

I step closer, filling my lungs with the putrid air before exhaling deeply. “That,” I say as I raise the paring knife and stab him in the cheek, “is not how you apologize.”

Seamus screams, “God, please!”

“God doesn’t answer prayers for the holy. Why would you assume he’d ever hear your call? You’re missing brain cells, aren’t you, lad?”

“Why are you doing this? I don’t even know who you are. What do you want? Money?”

“Money has never motivated me. I despise it.” The blade scrapes against my bottom lip as I contemplate my answer. “Actually, no. That’s hypocritical since I have money. Money was the be-all and end-all for me at one point. I was on the brink of destitution, and money was a beaconing light.”

My hands glide over the various knives on my table, all of which I've purchased during my travels. Some people collect mugs. I collect sharp, pointy weapons. There was a time when I worried about where my next meal was coming from. Now, I could fly to Morocco for couscous if the fancy took me. “That’s when money matters, you know. When you’re desperate. Life and death is when it matters. I see rich guys with their pathetic goals of wanting to live on Mars. Those guys are vacant. They need money because they have nothing else. Who fucking needs three hundred billion dollars? It’s gross when you think about it. Kids are being bombed, starved, and beaten across the globe, and those bastards are out there playing power games instead of using their resources to help.”

I stab Seamus again. “On second thought, it wasn’t money. The money was a bonus. I wanted revenge on the man who raped my mother.”

Seamus releases a symphony of grotesque screams as I abandon the blade in his

cheek and walk back to my table. Taking out my phone, I open the app and watch as a pretty girl with long dark hair huddles on a leather sofa, her piercing green eyes glued to the pages of a book. She's reading *East of Eden* today. All the books she consumes are about the disparity between the rich and the poor. I suppose it would make sense for her to be preoccupied with such thoughts, given that she witnessed the brutality of it every day at her job.

"She's beautiful, don't you think?" I shove the screen in Seamus's face.

"She's hot," Seamus says.

I push the blade further into his flesh. "I asked you if she was beautiful, Seamus."

Seamus screams before panting illegible words. "I. Said. She's. Hot."

"I don't like you calling her that."

"Fine, ugly!" he bellows.

"Stick out your tongue," I demand.

"What? No."

Frustration takes over. I place the blade of the chef's knife between my teeth, plug his nose with one hand, and grip the tip of his tongue with the other, yanking it out of his mouth. I release his nostrils, allowing him to breathe. "When I was younger, I spoke back to someone out of turn and had an entire bar of Ivory soap shoved into my mouth. They forced me to let the soap disintegrate completely before I could spit it out. It was an atrocious incident. I was nine, but I'll tell you, I never dared to talk back again. If you'd had the same experience, would you have learned some manners?"

Seamus thrashes his head as he squirms in a futile effort to get away from me. A strangled gasp escapes his throat as he utters unintelligible words. “I dot now hat you re alking out?”

“Earlier today, you ran into a young woman, and instead of saying sorry, you berated her by demanding she watch where she was going. That wouldn’t have been so offensive to me, but then you added one tiny word, and that insult forced me to do this.” I slam the blade down on Seamus’s tongue and slice it off, allowing it to fall into the palm of my hand. “Who’s the bitch now, Seamus?”

Seamus’s screams resemble those of a wild animal rather than a human male.

“You behaved like an animal, and I’ve now ensured that you sound like one.”

Seamus’s body goes limp, tumbling onto the cold cement.

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“Oh, Seamus, dear boy. It looks like your body is desperately trying to compensate for the blood loss.” I glance down at him, flapping like a fish about to vacate this mortal coil. “I fear you might be going into shock very soon.” Bending, I smile as I meet his terrified eyes. “I’m torn here. “Should I let nature take its course, or should I put you out of your misery?”

A painful whimper pours from Seamus.

“I don’t understand. Guess I’ll decide for you.” I press the blade of the knife into his throat and slice through his jugular, watching with fascination until the light abandons Seamus’s eyes.

10

ATLAS

Sex after violence, or violence after sex. That seems to be the motivation for Callum for the last two years. His personal therapy to rid himself of the pain.

I stand in the shadows while he performs the ritual to banish his demons. A ritual that doesn’t cleanse but increases his terror. A ritual that I never muster the desire to end. It unleashes desires that frighten and excite me. I both loath and admire this side of myself. The knowledge that I’m a monster, my father’s son, disgusts me. Yet the power I feel from knowing I am capable of loving even in the darkest of spaces allows me to have some sort of notion that I’m capable of empathy.

Callum laughs as he stabs the dead man’s body. A sick joy fills his expression as

blood splatters his face. He looks like a madman—possessed, tormented, and deranged. Wild gray eyes burn bright behind the mask of blood, now dried to rust with streaks of crimson.

“We’re going to leave her alone, Callum. That’s what you said, wasn’t it? Leave her alone so she can live her life, and we can finally be free.”

Callum’s lips curl up, his predatory teeth glimmering in the moonlight cast through the small window. “He deserved it.”

“Did he?” I step toward him. “He was an asshole without manners.” I glance at the pool of blood, the severed tongue, and the brutally maimed body.

Callum ignores my question as he stabs into the deceased man’s body, expanding his wounds to a gaping hole. “No one is rude to her and gets to live.”

I watch in fascination as Callum unzips his pants and unleashes his hard cock. He’s always aroused from violence. Sex is rarely tender anymore. It’s a destructive force that navigates how we physically love.

Callum shoves his cock into the stab wound.

“Oh, fuck,” he moans. “That’s so fuckin’ wet.”

I wish I could say his actions disgust me, but they don’t. I am my father’s son, after all. That sick, twisted DNA runs through my veins. Instead of stopping the depravity and helping Callum cure the disease that’s infested his being, I fuel the illness. Standing before him, I watch with disgusting lust, taking in his thick cock penetrating the dead man’s flesh, lubricating himself with blood.

Callum’s head snaps back from the slap inflicted by my palm. “Open up.”

“I love how you try to be the sane one. The good one. But you’re a little freak just like me, Atlas.”

I smile down at Callum, captivated by his jet-black hair and pretty gray eyes. He’s a work of art. Such beauty. Such artistry. A masterpiece for the ages. God, the Devil, or whoever dreamed the idea of Callum, understood the true aesthetic of perfection.

I twist my hands in his shaggy hair, yank his head back, and spit on his blood-stained face. “Be a good boy, Callum, and do as you’re told. We wouldn’t want me to force you now, would we?”

Callum laughs as he raises his right hand, holding the crimson blade toward me. “I think it’ll be fun to fuck a bloody hole in your body, Atlas. Remember the first time you let me do this? These guys do the job, but there’s nothing better than watching my cum drip from your bloody stab wound.”

I answer him in silence because I’m incapable of forming words. The two sides to Callum. One deranged and one bursting with compassion. I never know which one I’ll get. I’ve consoled myself with the realization that it doesn’t matter because I love both parts of him. The good and the bad. The angel and the demon. Is this my warped devotion to God? Like the blind allegiance of my father’s disciples? Because I’d bow down and accept Callum’s wrath if it meant I could bask in his splendor.

“Is that what you want, Callum? To fuck my wounds? Do you want to breed physical harm on my flesh to match the wounds on my spirit?”

Callum smiles as he lifts my shirt and trails the tip of the blade along the name scarred on my flesh. “I don’t know, pretty boy. Why don’t you cut the crap and tell me what you really want?”

“Fuck,” I groan as I slam my dick into Callum’s warm mouth. “You sound so much

better when your mouth is full of my cock. I think I prefer you like this, Callum. Unable to speak.”

My head falls back, and I focus on the cement ceiling with its glaring fluorescent lights. This room is a construct to harbor our madness.

I thought I was finally free when Mona’s sister killed my father. Callum and I could start something new without the weight of our past weighing us down, but we couldn’t do that because of her. She burrowed into the deepest parts of us. Parts we weren’t sure still existed. Spaces that were consumed with vacant memories of kindness suddenly became blaring beacons.

Confusion washes over me as I hold Callum down, forcing him to choke on my cock. My hands aren’t gentle. They aren’t kind. I relish dominating him. Yet even with this exaltation flowing through my body, my heart hammers wildly as I witness Callum gasping for breath.

Icy dread grips me: unspoken desire, a terrifying weight threatening to shatter my fragile composure. Callum allows me to have something I desperately want but am too frightened to voice. The unraveling of his mind reveals my reflection, exposing a terrifying image of my true self. I can’t escape my situation even if I want to because I love the madness and desire the insanity. There is comfort in my gilded cage, shrouded by the darkest shadows.

“I said nothing when you bought the building she lived in so you could install those security cameras in her apartment. I said nothing when you left at the crack of dawn and came home late at night so you could watch her at work. But I’m saying something now. Your obsession with her will blow up our lives.” The words hang heavy in the air, each syllable a hammer blow shattering the fragile remnants of our happiness.

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I pull Callum's hair, removing his mouth from my dick.

"It's my life," Callum croaks.

I shiver at the empty, methodical tone of his voice. A chilling stillness, consumed by anger and controlled rage, radiates within me. "Our lives, baby boy. It's our fucking lives. You think I have a life without you? You think I could breathe without you?"

Callum pushes the tip of the blade to the first scarred and raised letter on my skin. It's a reminder that while lies may slip from my lips, the truth is visible and permanent on my flesh. "You want her, too. I see the way you watch the videos. Pretend all you want, Atlas, but I'll always know you're a liar."

I wrap my hand around Callum's mouth, desperate to shut him up. I don't want to face what he's revealing. The truth he's shoving down my throat is a bitter pill to swallow, like every other reality about my life. "Maybe it's my fault," I spit. "Perhaps I should've kept you on a leash so you knew your place."

In a flash, I'm bent over the stainless-steel table Callum keeps in the garage. My pants pool around my feet, and Callum chuckles in my ear. "It's so cute that you think you're in control. It's only because I allow you to be, pretty boy. You think you can keep me on a leash? No, baby, you're my toy. A toy I sometimes allow to get the better of me because I enjoy getting railed by your big, beautiful cock."

Pain registers me as two wet fingers slowly invade my asshole. "What are you doing, Callum?"

“I’m going to fuck you like the little dog you are, so you know which of us is the master and which is the pathetic, worthless bitch.”

Callum spreads my ass cheeks and spits directly on my asshole. “Ah, this tight little hole, Atlas. It’s beggin’ for my cock to spread it nice and wide. You want me to make it hurt, don’t you, my pretty boy? You want me to stretch you until you cry for me, don’t you?” More spit on my asshole before Callum penetrates me with two fingers again, working them in and out slowly at first before increasing his pace. “This is going to hurt, baby boy. You shouldn’t have pissed me off when there’s no lube around. Looks like all you’ll get is a little blood and spit.”

My body is hurled around again so my cock is level with the dead man’s knife wound, the one Callum fucked earlier. “Better stuff your dick in that, pretty boy. It’ll hurt less when I fuck your useless asshole.”

My fingers tremble as my mind rages with want, disgust, and need.

“Put it in, pretty boy. Show me what a depraved little slut you are for me.”

Gripping my cock, I line it up with the bloody hole in the dead body. This should disgust me, but it doesn’t. There’s a perverse delight in the act. My eyes shut as my hips thrust forward, and I lodge my cock into the limp, lifeless body.

My body lunges forward as Callum slowly impales my ass. His rhythm is slow at first. His lips grace me with words of encouragement.

“Good boy. You’re doing such a good job taking me into this pretty fuck hole. I’m so proud of you.”

Stinging pain registers as he impales me, but it soon transforms into pleasure. This is how it always happens. My shame morphs into desperation and want.

“When you close your eyes, do you imagine you’re in her cunt? That it’s her, sleeping as you rail her?”

My eyes shoot open at Callum’s words. I turn my head to stare up at him.

“What is it, pretty boy? You thought I didn’t know that you creep into her room and shove your tongue deep into her pussy while she’s asleep?”

“No,” I croak.

My head is yanked back, and Callum’s spit falls from his lips, hitting me between the eyes. “I know everything you do, you pathetic slut. Everything. I know you cum in your hand while you watch her over the monitors in the middle of the night. I even know about your collection of her used underwear. I might be a sick fuck, but you’re the pathetic little pervert.”

Each degrading word Callum throws at me fuels my body with lust and longing. Increasing my thrusts into a sonata of humiliation and depravity until I unleash into a morbid laceration.

“See, Atlas?” Callum groans as he thrusts into me. “You’re a sick fuck, just like me. You’re obsessed, just like me. You’re insane, just like me.”

My body is pushed forward, my softening cock continually impaling the abrasion full of blood and my cum as Callum continues to fuck me, using my body like its meat, meaningless and made only to please him.

“That’s it, my pretty little cum dump. Take it all,” Callum moans as he holds my hips still and fills me.

When he finishes, he pulls me to him, kissing my forehead and caressing me like I’m

the most valuable thing on the planet. “Such a good boy for me.”

I pull back, locking eyes with Callum. “I sent her food. She always forgets to eat.”

He laughs. “Did you sneak in groceries again? Was it a rouse to steal another pair of panties?”

“No. Persian food, this time.”

“I should turn her ass red for eating a delivery she didn’t order.”

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I sigh, thinking about how Mona takes risks she shouldn't, not just with eating the food I have delivered to her, but with her job. This situation we're in can't sustain us forever.

"We can't keep doing this, Callum," I whisper as I cuddle into his arms.

"I know."

We let the knowledge of our depravity linger between us as I think about how I walked in on Callum a week before, hacking a man to death. This obsession in him bringing out his most callous and maniacal instincts. I want to pretend that I can shake off the shackles Mona Baran imprisoned me with, but the truth is, I can't. From the moment she came into our lives, I dove head first into the delusion that she craves us like we do her. But reality tells me otherwise. I close my eyes, bombarded with my sickness and depravity, a disease that spreads like poison.

The first time I snuck into Mona's apartment was when I discovered she took sleeping pills. Apparently, the time she spent with us had seeped into her psyche and caused her to have terrifying nightmares. That was the moment I knew she'd never want us. Who would want the men responsible for their night terrors in their life? Yet, knowing that didn't deter me from wanting her, so I decided I would have her any way I could, even if it were through the dysfunctional act of watching her sleep.

At first, my visits were somewhat pure. I snuck into her apartment and sat by her bed while I watched her sleep. But like any drug, the need to take more to maintain the high crept in. That was when I discovered her panties. First, clean ones that I wrapped around my dick as I came while picturing her mouth on me. Then, when that didn't

have the same high, I lifted her used panties to my nose and inhaled, pretending my head was between her legs.

But those moments ceased to be enough, and I was soon stealing her panties and bringing them home. I was always careful, taking one every three to four weeks so she wouldn't notice.

Tonight, I took it further. I'm ashamed of what I did, but I don't regret it. If all I can have are those fleeting moments, I'll be content. They'll have to sustain me because I know that a life with her will end me.

I touched her tonight. She looked so peaceful as I lifted the blanket and placed my nose on her pussy, licking her with the tip of my tongue. That fleeting, forbidden taste was like salvation, and I craved more.

To avoid waking her, I gently slid my fingers along her slit and into her pussy before bringing them to my nose and inhaling.

"Fuckin' hell, you're so sweet."

When I placed my fingers into my mouth, my eyes rolled back, and I felt light-headed. I was hooked—a junkie.

From that moment, I knew I could never quit Mona Baran.

11

CALLUM

The beauty in the world is so captivating that it chokes you. Beguiling luminescence is all-consuming, and you crave to be near it, no matter the cost. If we're lucky, we

witness this beauty once during our lifetime. I've been fortunate to have experienced this wonder twice. With the man who helped me discover my soul and with the girl I failed to save. Perhaps my inability to help her when she was most vulnerable is what set me on the path to making her the center of my universe. A part of me can't help but think that my desire for her is rooted in the failure I see within myself.

My compulsion with her began out of nowhere, and it's become a beacon of light, transfixing me.

My obsession isn't healthy, and though I try to delude myself that it's benign, I know at its core it's a flickering light of deviance. Yet even with my understanding of the disease she's sparked within me, I can't help myself. I require her presence, even as a casual observer, to feel a modicum of sanity.

She's a creature of habit, my beautiful girl. Every Saturday, she goes to her foreign language class. She's learning Farsi, a language she should know since it was her mother tongue, but she succumbed to the desire for assimilation and lost her ability to speak it fluently. Over the last year, she's devoted herself to learning what she abandoned.

This brings me to her second task on Saturdays. After class, she visits a coffee shop, one of those pretentious establishments where all the hipster kids hang out. Those places with a million coffee flavors that draw the line at cow's milk.

She spreads her books on an IKEA table as she sips an iced coffee. She likes her coffee sweet, half almond milk with so much sugar that I fear she'll put herself into a diabetic coma.

"Can I help you?" the barista asks, drawing my attention from my sweet Mona.

"Tea, orange pekoe, black."

“Name?”

I panic at her question and blurt the first generic all-American name I can think of.

“Bob.”

The Barista arches her eyebrow and tilts her head. “Don’t get many British guys called Bob. Don’t you stick to Robert?”

Aren’t people in the hospitality sector supposed to be sickly sweet? This girl has a chip on her shoulder. “I’m not a Brit.”

“Oh. Where are you from?”

What the fuck is with the hundred and one questions?

“Scotland.”

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“Oh!” she squeals as she claps her hand like an excited child. “I’ve always wanted to go to Scotland.”

I tip the rim of my Yankees ball cap toward her. “It rains a lot.”

I step away from the counter before the girl can ask me any more monotonous questions. Her shrill voice is a nuisance and distracts me from my pretty girl.

Three steps. That’s all it would take to sit at the table across from her. My Mona.

Some views are so striking that you feel like the wind has been knocked from your lungs. But nothing has the same magnitude as Mona brushing strands of her dark hair from her cheeks, her face scrunched in concentration. She is a vision. A transcendent work of art with the ability to inspire humanity into something better.

“Mona,” a chipper voice calls.

Mona's radiant smile appears as she waves to her friend, Ari. Will she smile at me with the same warmth and radiance one day? “Hey, Ari.”

Ari thumbs the books on the table and smiles. “You’re the only person I know who would spend a perfectly sunny Saturday afternoon couped up in a dimly lit coffee shop.”

Mona shrugs. “I’m having a few issues with the grammar and thought some practice couldn’t hurt. My brother-in-law learned Persian in his teens and is now fluent. He always tells me to practice more. If we went back to Iran, he could probably get by in

small remote villages, while I'd have to get by around with the English speakers in Theran."

Ari pulls out a chair and sits. "You planning on visiting Iran soon?"

A pang hits my chest at Mona's somber expression. Her green eyes turn wistful as she stares out the window. "As much as I want to, I don't think that will be happening." She laughs bitterly. "It's funny, you know. When I was younger, I had no desire to form any attachment to the country with all its pain, religious persecution, death, and brutality. I wanted to put it aside. I was ashamed of Iran and everything about it. But as I get older, I realize Iran's more than the perception displayed in western media. Iran is so much more than the hostage crisis and the bullshit religious theocracy. Being Iranian is more than a thirty-second sound clip from a middle-aged man who couldn't even point to the country on a map. But being Iranian is hard, both in Iran and in the diaspora. Being Iranian is beauty wrapped in brutality. Being Iranian means culture, art, science, and injustice. Being Iranian means being proud, resilient, and scared."

Ari dabbed a napkin under her eyes. "Wow, Mona, that's kinda beautiful. Sad, but beautiful."

"It's too bad it took me so long to see the beauty of it all. I was just glad I didn't have to grow up there. I saw so many heartbreaking things in Iran. That trauma took over, you know? I wanted to forget it was real. I told people I was Italian or Greek when they questioned my ethnicity, but now, I'd do anything to connect with that land and its people again."

Mona casts her eyes down and concentrates on a line in her book. "It would have meant so much to my mom to see this. She said it was okay when I rejected my culture, but I know it hurt her. My mom had so much love for Iran. If it weren't for my siblings and me, she probably wouldn't have left. I wish I were more grateful for

her sacrifices.”

“I’m sure she understood,” Ari says softly. “And I know she’s smiling down on you.”

Mona laughs. “My mother is dead, Ari. Her body is well on its way to decay.”

“Girl, don’t say that. The Lord doesn’t like it. Besides, even if you don’t believe in the all-mighty, everyone needs a little hope. It’s sad to assume that once we die, that’s the end.”

“Humans.” Mona laughs bitterly. “The only species on the planet who think they’re important enough to get a do-over.”

Ari sighs as if frustrated. “Is that why you decided to learn Farsi? In remembrance of your momma?”

“No,” Mona says, shaking her head. “That’s only a part of it.”

12

MONA

“What changed?” Ari asks, genuinely curious.

I like Ari. She’s a steadfast friend and truly listens without judgment. I never thought I’d be friends with someone religious. My family ran away from overtly religious people.

But Ari has shown me that not all religious people are overbearing zealots desperate to force everyone to adhere to their beliefs. Ari’s belief in God is personal, something she holds dear. The way she talks about God and faith is beautiful. She’s never forced

me to accept her beliefs or judged me for being different. If Jesus were real, he'd be proud of Ari.

We met in the first year of college. We both studied criminology, but over time, our academic interests shifted. Ari went on to law school while I leaned toward social work and outreach. But one thing that never fluctuated was our friendship.

I consider her question, unsure how to answer it. Being Iranian in the West is a complex balancing act. It's hard to explain the various emotions that plague Iranians because Western media's bias and limited portrayal fail to capture the full complexity of Iranian experiences and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

People use us to propagate information depending on the demographic they want to sensationalize. We're victims of persecution by a religion they hate, or we're extremists they despise. Iranians are ambiguous, especially those of us who aren't religious. An Iranian without an accent can truly be anything they want within the Western world. Speak English with the accent of the locals, and you become a chameleon. We claim Portuguese, Italian, Greek, and Spanish descent—an array of relatively safe people with an olive complexion.

Laughter bubbles out of me as I remember a trip to Greece a few years ago. I looked across the Mediterranean Sea and contemplated how artificial borders and differences in faith labeled one group human and the other not to so many in the West. I felt a sense of shame for all the years I denied my identity and avoided having friends at my house so they wouldn't hear my mother's accent. All those times I refused to take her delicious homemade Persian food for lunch for fear of the taunts. Now my mother is gone, I'd do anything to go back and show everyone how lucky I was to have that woman as a parent. A woman who sacrificed for me. A parent who loved my siblings and me unconditionally.

"I grew up. I spent years turning my back on a culture and the people who formed me

because I wanted to belong with people who would never accept me.”

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Ari places her hand on her heart and exclaims in shock, “You’ve always been accepted.”

I laugh nervously. “I don’t mean to sound so dramatic. Many non-Iranian people have been welcome and loving additions to my life. I mean, look at my large, unconventional extended family.”

“I know. Girl, you have five smokin’ hot brothers-in-law. How did both your siblings end up in polyamorous relationships with the most attractive people? Even Cyrus is an exquisite man despite his scars.”

My lips turn up at Ari’s comment. It’s so rare to see religious people being okay with my siblings’ lifestyles. Ari talks about it like it’s a beautiful thing. And it is. The amount of love I have in my life because of these unions is a true blessing.

“What I mean is, you can’t deny who you are forever,” I clarify. “Eventually, it all catches up with you. I don’t think we can truly know who we are if we oppose the things that form us. Iran molded me. Iranians nurtured me. What I do now is because of the brand that country left on my soul.”

“How so?” Ari asks.

“My oldest memory is of a young boy, no older than four or five, with pleading eyes and dirt-smudged cheeks, begging for money on the bustling streets of Tehran. At the time, I was unaware of the country’s destitution, nor did I care. I was a six-year-old girl, not yet familiar with the true brutality my country hid. Little did I know that those careless years would soon end abruptly.”

“Yek toman, dari?” the boy asked.

He only wanted a dollar, but my Baba gave me that money to buy myself a sweet. To a six-year-old girl who was in the habit of being treated like a princess and had everything she wanted, giving up my sweets to this boy seemed like the worst travesty to have befallen me.

My gaze moved from the money in my palm to the boy’s outstretched hand to his thin frame.

His body was the most haunting. Thin arms and legs covered by skin. His clothes were tattered, and he smelled like he hadn’t bathed in a while.

I’d heard my parents whisper about the beggar children and how they were beaten if they didn’t meet their quota. I blinked back the tears that threatened, unsure if they were for the boy or the pending loss of returning home without the sugar I craved.

“Mona!” my mother shouted as she barreled toward me. She appeared angry. She was frowning, and her hands trembled. My mother was seldom angry unless she was frightened.

At that moment, I had to decide what to do before my mother reached us. I hurriedly placed the money in the boy’s hand and ran toward her.

My parents didn’t ask me questions that day or even that night when they tucked me in. But as I closed my eyes in the safety of my bed, under a warm blanket with a full stomach, the image of the boy’s face lingered in my mind.

I didn’t understand how I could be so comfortable while he suffered. That was the day I realized the brutality of the world and its callous, unjust nature.

“Damn, Mona. That’s intense.”

“Yeah. I’ve never forgotten that little boy’s eyes, and I don’t think I ever will. There’s something haunting about eyes consumed by hunger. They have a way of pulling you under until you suffocate in the depths of their sadness. Don’t get me wrong, there were times when I was a selfish little shit. I took everything for granted and thought life was so unfair because I had to wear Azadeh’s hand-me-downs instead of getting the trendiest outfits. When I think back on it now, I can’t help but feel shame about it.”

“You were a kid. That’s normal. Teenagers are little shits. Hormones, you know?”

“I’d like to blame it on that, but I was ungrateful. An extreme brat. I didn’t even realize how good I had it until my mother died. Looking back now, I’d give anything to have been a little kinder. It couldn’t have been easy for my mom. A new country, a single mom, three kids. While she struggled to keep us healthy and fed, I was upset about not having new shoes.”

We fall quiet for a moment before Ari asks, “How is it going at the shelter?”

I welcome the shift in conversation. Discussing my feelings about Iran is both freeing and depressing.

“I love it. It’s great to make a difference in people’s lives. Switching from policy to outreach is the best decision I’ve made. I feel like I’m making tangible changes now and positively affecting lives. Those who come into the shelter seem to trust me, and I never want them to regret that decision. The people I work with say I’ll eventually become hardened to it, but I don’t see that happening. If I can help one person, it’s all worth it.”

Ari smiles. “That’s great, Mona.” She shifts in her seat, leaning toward me to

whisper, “Why does that guy in the glasses keep looking over here?”

Ari’s words are heavy punches to my gut because sometimes I feel like someone is watching me. My therapist thinks it’s PTSD, but it’s more than that. When I attempt to discuss my trauma with anyone, even my sister, an icy dread seeps into my bones, leaving me speechless. I think people are staring at me, seeing a paranoid, irrational woman. Yet even when I try to shake it all off as a residual effect of being held captive, I can’t ignore the twist in my gut. It’s hard to explain. It’s like the soft brush of a palm against my flesh or a warm breath teasing the back of my neck. It’s a lingering scent in the air: clean, sharp, and familiar. A warm wind carrying a memory.

It’s not constant. I don’t go through my day in a state of paranoia. It’s fleeting moments when I swear someone is watching me.

At times I even pondered if it was paranoia, but then the deliveries started coming.

Random grocery orders or food delivery. Initially, I was hesitant to eat anything, but the reputation of the delivery company put my mind at ease.

I should have been fearful, but the first order, containing Iranian items like saffron, cardamom tea, rose water, basmati rice, and herbs, made me feel warm and nurtured. Whoever sent it knew I was Persian.

Each package since has felt like a ghost of my mother wrapping me in comfort, feeding parts of me I didn’t know were starving.

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What truly unsettled me, though, wasn't the memories of her. It was the echo of them—two men whose names I haven't dared speak aloud in two years. Two men I once believed could see every fractured part of me... and maybe still do.

Two men I miss more than I care to admit.

“Why is he wearing sunglasses inside a coffee shop?” Ari's question pulls me from my thoughts.

I shrug. “I'm sure he has his reasons. Maybe he just had eye surgery.” I wiggle my eyebrows. “Maybe he's checking you out?”

Ari snort-laughs. “That's instant serial killer behavior. Oh, my god, what if he wants to kidnap you? Or me? I love the whole Stockholm Syndrome trope in books, but I don't want to live that fantasy. With my luck, Mr. Hotstuff over there would take me to a seventy-year-old Hugh Hefner type who would chain me up in his basement and force me to do disgusting things to his shriveled penis.”

Laughter bursts out of me. “The issue isn't the kidnapping, but that the penis could be of the geriatric variety?”

Ari slaps her palm to her face and lets out an audible gasp. “I'm so sorry. I'm such a lousy friend.”

My lips tip up in a reassuring smile. It's interesting how people react to what I went through two years ago. Apparently, being kidnapped by a money-hungry cult leader is a taboo subject for those who've never experienced it. “It's not a big deal. It was

years ago. We can be normal about it all.”

Ari sips her iced coffee while she studies me. Silence is something that’s always bothered me. I hate it. There has never been a moment of comfortable silence in my life. I sit with my discomfort, fighting the sudden urge to crack open her head to figure out what she’s thinking. I wish people would ask what they want to know instead of being so damn weird.

“You never talk about it, so I assumed something bad happened, you know?” Ari finally says. “In my experience, avoidance is usually due to trauma.”

Ari isn’t wrong. I have trauma. A shit load of trauma. The healthy thing would be to tell my therapist and work it out, but I’m Persian, and we don’t like people to know our secrets. Oh, the way of Persian people? Bottle it up, swallow it, put it under the rug, cover it with a blanket—anything other than revealing the chips and cracks in your armor.

I always thought it was stupid to feel that way. But the thought processes are lodged in my DNA. My mother tried so hard to break us of it. Growing up, nothing was too shameful or taboo to discuss. My mother’s only rule was to not lie to her. She promised we wouldn’t get in trouble as long as we told the truth. That woman even accepted my sister having three boyfriends.

Even with a mother like mine, I wanted to pretend it was all okay, and if it weren’t, I’d fabricate a story to convince myself it was.

This moment feels perfect to shed the heavy burden of those few weeks when I was kidnapped. But a nagging doubt creeps into my mind, whispering that my struggles were insignificant compared to the other women.

Those women were abused in violent ways I don’t think I would ever recover from.

Those memories keep me silent about my suffering, which was nothing in the grand scheme of things. So what if I fucked two hot guys to keep myself safe? Two hot guys who were kind to me for the most part. Two hot guys who saved me.

I glance at the man in the glasses briefly before lifting my gaze to the clock on the wall above his head. “Oh, crap. I’ve got to get going. I have a shift at the shelter.”

“So, I guess you won’t be coming out with us tonight?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“You never come out.”

I laugh. “It’s just not my scene.”

“Dinner with people your age isn’t your scene?”

I close my eyes momentarily. “I just need to focus on work for now.”

It’s hard to explain to Ari that I’m not the same person I was two years ago. Back then, I was out until all hours of the night, usually drunk. I was soaking in life as if I had nothing to lose. Two years ago, I didn’t know what I know now. I was still living in denial. I was oblivious to the world’s harshness despite being my mother’s daughter and having a sister who risked her life for years to save the very women I witnessed being brutalized and did nothing to help.

Ari nods and gives me a quick hug before I head out the door.

I didn’t help those women back then, but I’m determined to help anyone I can now.

MONA

“Do you have Persian food every night?” my sister asks as she scoops rice into Lev’s plate.

I’ve always found that amusing about my sister. She’s married to three capable men who worship the ground she walks on, but she still insists on taking care of them like children.

I watch as she carefully places the kabob, grilled tomato, and raw onion away from the rice. She treats them like babies. Their food can’t even touch. “You gonna chew up that rice and kabob for him, too, or can he manage that all on his own like a big boy?”

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Zeke, one of my sister's husbands, chuckles behind me. "Take it easy, Mona. The three of us have some issues."

I smile at Zeke. Out of the three men my sister shackled up with, he's my favorite. "It's weird seeing how Little Miss Can-Do-Everything-On-My-Own pampers three grown men."

Azadeh glares at me. "I pamper them because I love them, and they take care of me." My sister gazes at Zeke and gives him a radiant smile—the kind of smile only truly fortunate people can bestow on another. Then she looks at me, her forehead creasing with a frown. "I'm not like Mamon, doing it for ungrateful brats."

My heart sinks at the mention of my mother, and tears well up in my eyes. I'm the brat Azadeh is talking about. I know I am. When my mother was alive, I was so ashamed of who I was that I treated her like garbage. Of the three of us, I was the troubled child. The one my mother worried about. If she'd died from a heart attack instead of cancer, I'd be convinced that I caused her death.

"Anyway, how about you answer my question?" Azadeh demands.

I stare at my sister, knowing that once she hears the truth, she'll lose her ever-loving mind.

Azadeh places her hands on her hips and doesn't budge. "Well?"

"Someone delivers it. It's not always kabob, but it's always Persian."

Azadeh makes herself a plate and sits down, the clatter of her cutlery making me think her questioning has come to a halt. The brief respite shatters as she asks her next question. “What restaurant did you order from?”

“Not sure,” I mumble as I stuff my mouth, limiting my capacity for speech.

“She’s avoiding you,” Cyrus says.

I turn to him, taking in the burn marks on his face and the smug little boy smirk forming on his lips. “You’re annoying, you know that?”

Cyrus shrugs. “Game recognizes game.”

Four sets of eyes glare at me, and I can’t help feeling I’m about to be interrogated. “Someone sends it, okay?”

“Who?” Zeke and Azadeh demand in unison.

My eyes drop to my plate as I fork a piece of kabob into my mouth. If I keep eating, maybe they’ll drop their questions.

Lev clears his throat. “You can’t eat continuously for the rest of your life. Eventually, you’ll have to come clean.”

Unlike my other two brothers-in-law, Lev usually leaves me alone. The weight of his guilt concerning what he allowed to happen to me two years ago is a heavy burden for him to carry.

Lev’s stupidity led to me spending a month with people who could have caged, beaten, raped and tortured me. The only reason that never happened is I was lucky to meet two men and catch their eye. The irony is that Lev doesn’t even know what

happened to me. I lied to my sister and the guys. If Azadeh knew the extent of what happened, she'd turn away from Lev, and he'd already suffered so much.

My gaze travels between three pairs of glaring eyes. The band of misfits my mother and sister took in. My mother nurtured all three men, and my sister fell madly in love with them. They have so much baggage to work through, and I won't add more weight to their already heavy burdens. They punish themselves enough. My sister wasted so much time delaying her happiness with these three men, and I don't want to give her another reason to blow up her happily ever after.

But I know they won't stop pestering me until they get an answer. So, I give the vaguest response I can think of. "Someone whose name you don't need to know, okay?"

"Yeah, that's how delivery usually works," Cyrus states.

Zeke glares at me, the blaze of his blue eye a stark contrast to the black leather patch covering his other eye. "You've already said that, Mona."

"I don't know," I sigh, frustrated that I'm the world's worst liar. "A package is always waiting for me when I get home. It's usually groceries."

The clang of utensils hitting glass plates startles me, as do the eyes glaring at me in disapproval and shock. The only person who doesn't seem to be fazed by my confession is Cyrus, who continues to shove his face with kabob and rice. He stops abruptly when Zeke elbows him.

"Whoa, Bro. What the fuck was that for?" Cyrus demands.

Zeke glares at him. "How can you keep eating after what she just confessed?"

Cyrus shrugs. “This shit’s good, and I’m hungry. It’s not like what she said is gonna kill us.”

“How do you know?” Azadeh demands.

“Hello? Mona said this has been going on for a while. If whoever is dropping it off wants to kill her, they would’ve done it ages ago.”

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My sister ignores Cyrus and turns to me. “Doesn’t mean it won’t happen. Maybe it’s some twisted fuck who gets his sick kicks by making you think you’re safe, and then bam.”

“Well,” I say as I regret having them over for dinner, “it’s been a year, and since I haven’t died, I’m gonna assume it’s a good Samaritan.”

“Or a stalker completely obsessed with you,” Cyrus mumbles between mouthfuls.

Azadeh smacks him on the back of the head. Cyrus just beams at my sister as if she’s hung the moon. “If you want to get frisky, Hellcat, say the word, and I’ll get you home in a jiffy.”

Azadeh shakes her head but cracks a smile. “You say that like it’s not a big deal.”

Cyrus shrugs as he looks at Lev. “Sometimes, stalkers aren’t that bad.”

“Yeah.” I point to Lev. “If stalkers were that bad, you wouldn’t have married yours.”

Zeke clears his throat. “Um, she’s married to me, and I did not do any kind of unhinged nonsense.”

Cyrus rolls his eyes and leans back in his chair. “Zeke takes out eyes before he kills people. Lev put a tracker on Azadeh for ten years. Oh, and he was a perv who recorded her while she slept. I burn people for shits and giggles. Azadeh has a thing for knives. All I’m saying is that it’s obvious the person sending Mona food isn’t trying to hurt her. Maybe they’re shy or fucked up and can’t ask her for a simple

dinner date.”

The plates jump as I stand and slam my palms on the table. “Listen, I’m a big girl. A big fuckin’ girl. I’ve been through shit, and I know I have to be careful. For fuck’s sake, I’ve been around danger my whole life. Now, the four of you are going to eat and tell me about your week, and that’s that.”

Azadeh sighs as she picks up her fork. “I just worry about you.”

“You’re my sister, Az, not my mother. If I need your help, I’ll ask. I love you, but you don’t get to impose bullshit on me that you’ve ignored your entire adult life.”

“Fine, but if whoever is sending you this food hurts you, I won’t be held responsible for stabbing them to death.”

I smile at my sister. “Deal.”

14

CALLUM

I’ve only ever been good at one thing, and that’s killing. I could’ve been an artist or a doctor with a better upbringing, but fate had other plans. I was born to a charming woman addicted to poison. At least my mother tried her best to protect me. I wasn’t harmed to supply her addiction or wound up on drugs—something unheard of with heroin addiction. No, the issue of growing up where I did, surrounded by certain types of people, schooled me in crime and survival rather than mathematics and science.

From the age of seven, I did what I needed to do. I stole a loaf of bread to fill my belly. I slipped a diamond ring off the finger of a tourist in Edinburgh when I was

twelve. As I filled out, I took on odd jobs shaking down rich geeks who owed money to loan sharks. Despite those crimes, I never imagined killing anyone. Not until I was sixteen and walked in on a man raping my mother. Bashing his brains in with a frying pan felt good. Too good.

The pent-up energy festering in my blood was released in a storm of rage and retribution. I should've served jail time for what I did to that man, but my mother grabbed the pan and told me to burn my clothes and leave the house. Once she knew I was in the clear, she called the cops and spent three years in jail. The good news? She got clean while locked up. The bad news? I discovered I had a taste for killing.

Three years of surviving on the streets alone forced me into situations that no one should have to endure. One thing led to another, and I found myself face-to-face with Marcus Meyer. He took a scared punk-ass kid and turned him into a meticulous cold killer. I committed a string of murders in his name.

I'd like to say that meeting Marcus was the lowest point in my life, but it brought me my first taste of happiness with Atlas.

"Where are you going?" Atlas asks, walking toward me with a beer bottle in his hand. His eyes narrow as he takes a sip.

Atlas isn't a fan of my extracurricular activities. He seems to think that leaving his father's perverse lifestyle means we should put the past in the rearview. He's tried to convince me to leave it be, to move on, but I can't. He loves me and craves her, so he bends easily, but a part of me hates that I've turned his already dark existence to pitch black.

Atlas has always struggled with the darkness that resides within him. Constantly running from it, contriving an image that allows him to delude himself and those he comes in contact with into believing he's upstanding. Didn't hurt that he landed a

trust fund from his rich mother. Money his father couldn't squander. That wealth allowed him to set us up.

"Where are you going, Callum?" Atlas asks again.

"For a walk," I lie.

Atlas squints, removing his light gray suit jacket and throwing it on the sofa. "It's a lovely night for it. Let me get out of this monkey suit, and I'll come with you."

Two years ago, we started a security company. It's rather amusing when I think about it: two criminals setting up the cops and government institutions with all their surveillance needs. It's also come in handy with my other seedy activities pertaining to a certain girl who's been consuming my thoughts.

"No, that's okay. I'm sure you're tired." I tap on the earphones. "Thought I'd listen to some music and decompress."

Atlas stalks me like a predator cornering his prey, his lips tilting up in a smirk. "Decompress by staring into a certain woman's window?"

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This is where I bend so that Atlas doesn't break. Our little game soothes his resentment and allows me to feel like I'm taking care of him.

I back up until I hit the wall, allowing Atlas to see that I'm trapped. Shrugging, I flash him my most sincere smile. It won't work on him because he knows what I truly am, but he enjoys these games where he has the upper hand. "I don't know what you're talking about. She's probably still at work."

Atlas's body covers mine as he reaches for his tie and tugs it off his neck. He doesn't say a word as he wraps the silk around my throat. I cough, and my hand automatically moves to the restrictive silk.

Atlas shoves two fingers between the silk and my flesh. "Not too tight, but tight enough to make sure you know your place."

My lips twitch at his brazen words—words I've said to him in the past. I never thought I'd bend for someone like this, allow them to control me, but here we are.

It didn't start like this. Atlas and I found each other amid violence and resentment. Two broken people, abandoned and alone, needing a place to feel safe and angry.

"Will you ever say no to him?" Atlas asked as he plopped down beside me on the concrete steps, puffing away on his cigarette.

Fuckin' entitled jerk.

While sneering at his father's underlings, the kingdom's prince refused to soil his

delicate hands. I knew what I was—asoldier for Marcus Meyer. I knew I was serving the devil, but I resented his son sitting at our table when he knew nothing of the life we led.

I glanced at the green pasture before me, relishing the serenity of the Meyer country estate. “It’s a job. Gotta eat.”

“Plenty of jobs out there that don’t require getting your hands bloody.”

“None that pay as well.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

I laughed. “The only people who say that are those who have it.”

That seemed to shut Atlas up. He didn’t have a quick answer to deny a fundamental truth. I appreciated that he wasn’t trying to deny our stations in life to feel better. So many times, people wanted to believe they were better. They cozied up to the lesser mortals to improve their reflection when they gazed into the mirror. Atlas wasn’t trying to pull that shit on me. Good thing for him he didn’t because it would be the quickest way to get his pretty boy face bashed in.

We sat in silence—it unnerved me how comfortable it was. I couldn’t do this with others. I would need to fill the void of silence with mindless chatter.

“I hate my life,” Atlas whispered, but those four words were so loud that they shattered the silence. “All the money, top-tier education, and villas in the Riviera are worthless when all you can think about is burning it all down.”

“What’s so horrible about your life, Atlas? Did Daddy not buy you the car you wanted?”

“My father is a monster, Callum. A vicious, selfish piece of human trash. He’s a weak man. A small man. A man who knows he can’t wield power of any value, so he cheats, lies, manipulates, abuses, and kills to feel. My life, the life you covet and see as some sort of fairytale, is nothing but a simmering nightmare, ready to pull me under and suffocate me.”

I chuckle. “I slit the throats of people who trash talk Marcus Meyer.”

Atlas’s warm hand enveloped my cold one, and he pressed a wooden handle into my palm, pulling my arm toward his throat. “That’s why I told you.”

A vast emptiness spread through my chest at the broken plea in his voice. Each word he uttered was a piercing shard of glass cutting into my already mangled heart. Sadness saturated Atlas’s eyes, a bone-deep pain encapsulating his soul in a fiery inferno destined for destruction.

“Atlas,” I said, my voice low and steady, “I might be a murderer, but I’m not killing you.”

“You’d be providing me with mercy.” Atlas pulled out his phone and pressed a few buttons before showing me the screen. “It’s fifty million. My mother left it to me. It’s all yours. You could leave here. Start a life. A good life free from all this insanity. It’s all yours if you do this one thing.”

I let his words linger between us, allowing their poison to fester and suffocate me as they permeate my ears. Fifty million was a lot of money. But a small voice in my mind was shouting at me, repeating the same two words on a loop. Save him. At that moment, I understood my purpose in life. My reason for being there was to save Atlas Meyer.

“What are you thinking about, Callum?”

Atlas's voice pulls me back from the past. I stare into his eyes and feel the sense of peace that always overcomes me when I'm with him. Then the guilt hits. The guilt that I can't give him what he wants. What he craves. Stability.

"How I've betrayed all the things I promised to give you."

Atlas smiles, and I swear all the air abandons my lungs at his sheer beauty. Atlas puts up with a lot from me. More than any other man would. When we met, I thought he'd be my world, the only thing I'd ever need. For years, Atlas was my only reason for breathing. The day I refused to kill him was the day he saved me. He gave me back a shred of humanity when all I knew was brutality.

Atlas leans forward and brushes his lips to the tip of my nose. "Why are you still hiding from me? I'll never turn my back on you, Cal."

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Atlas yanks at the tie around my neck, and I tumble to my knees. “I like you like this, Callum. A fuckin’ bitch who knows his rightful place. How many more years do I need to do this? How much longer do I have to wait for you to realize I’ll do anything for you?”

His words are sharp with their precision. To an outsider, his words might seem cruel, but the reality is that we give each other what we need. Through our relationship, we have found solace—a balm to heal the brutality of the marks inflicted upon us. The complicated and confusing parts that no one has seen. The fragmented parts of ourselves that no one knew about until we found each other. Through these games, we remain level—as level as two disturbed people with fragmented minds can be.

Right now, Atlas needs control. He needs to know he’s not slipping. That I still need him. Love him. Want him. I could tell him with words, but when you’ve lived your life being told you’re worthless like he has, words do little to provide comfort and reassurance.

So I do the only thing I can. I let him use my body to soothe his mind.

I submit.

“You’re going to blow up our lives, Callum. You’re going to destroy what we’ve built if you don’t get yourself under control.”

I look up at Atlas, my eyes conveying an unspoken message, a silent submission to his desires.

He presses my face against the smooth mahogany floor with his foot. The scent of polished wood assaults my nostrils. “You want her to recognize you? You want her to discover who you are so she’ll end your self-imposed misery.”

Searing pain laced with pleasure shoots through my neck as Atlas increases the pressure, making it hard for me to breathe. Something about breath play has always attracted me, but it’s usually my hands wrapped around Atlas’s throat, helping him to heal. This is the first time he’s done this to me. His rage is palpable, a tornado spinning out of control.

“Get your ass up, slut.”

I can predict what’s coming next. It’s the anger, pain, and rejection. The blanket of sadness and the loss of the lie shrouded in hope.

Lifting my hips, I unfasten my pants and pull down the zipper, offering Atlas what he desperately craves. I jerk from the sting of his hand.

“You’re out of fucking line, Callum. You know what happens when you’re out of line, don’t you?”

It’s not me out of line. It’s him. Atlas is spinning. He needs something to ground him, so I offer him my body as an anchor. A safe harbor.

What comes next is Atlas’s rage. Rage that burns so hot I don’t think I’ll ever be able to extinguish the flames. I do the only thing I can. I allow him to abuse my body to soothe the pain inflicted by his father. Pain I eventually added to. Pain I’m now desperate to heal.

Atlas doesn’t speak. Instead of words, he uses the lash. I grit my teeth and brace myself for the brisk impact of the leather biting into my bare flesh. I take the lashing

without a sound. It's the least I can do.

"I hate what you've turned me into, Callum. I hate what loving you has forced me to become. I hate that I can't want you without consequences."

My heart burns and yearns for this man, but even with the love we have for each other, we're not enough. Atlas is better at suppressing his desire for her. Unlike me, he has control. I'm the one who keeps forcing him to confront the emotions he's running from. And I think that makes him despise me a little.

I close my eyes, transported back to the moment I divulged an earth-shattering truth to the man I loved. The moment I told him he was no longer enough.

My hands shook as I put my gun on the kitchen table. "They've brought in more girls."

I couldn't do it anymore. Nine years of working for Marcus Meyer had finally taken its toll. After everything, I'd finally seen enough.

It disgusted me. I'd done this for so long. Shame coursed through me for not realizing how wrong I was to serve that man mindlessly for so many years. Maybe I'd never realized how bad it was because most of the women Marcus brought into his fucked-up organization were willing. So many gazed at him with starry eyes as if he were the answer to all their prayers.

But this time, with those girls, it felt wrong. These girls didn't want to be there, and I didn't want to hold them in place.

The way their eyes held mine with silent questions would haunt me for the rest of my days. Their gaze was weary and heavy, a look of utter exhaustion.

I slouched in a leather chair and held my head in my hands. A wave of sadness washed over me, and I wished I could cry. I didn't know why I couldn't. Why couldn't I shed a fucking tear? One more thing that life, time, and circumstance had stolen from me.

“Some days, I think it'd be better if I used that gun to blow my fucking brains out.”

Atlas said nothing at first. He allowed the heavy weight of my words to linger in the silence between us like suffocating smoke.

Thinking about killing myself wasn't a new concept. It was something that had been stirring in my mind since a very young age. The unbearable grief of life holding me down and never allowing me any air. Perhaps that was what drew me to Atlas that day when I saw the same pain and suffering in his blue irises that I held in my heart. Neither of us knew what joy was until we found each other. Both of us wanted to let go but held steadfast for the other.

We started as friends, and one thing led to another and within the horror of our lives. We found a speck of happiness in each other—a happiness that could be easily extinguished at any moment by those around us. Happiness that I would kill to maintain, even if it were fleeting.

A nervous cough escaped Atlas's lips before he whispered, “Why are we still here, Callum?”

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His question irritated me, grated on me. Atlas knew why. Even though these women wanted to be here, they were surrounded by men who harmed them. I kept them in line. I was the monster holding the evil men at bay. “You know why. If I’m not here, most of them wouldn’t survive.”

“If you keep doing this, you won’t survive.”

“I don’t matter,” I whispered.

Atlas pulled back a chair at the modest kitchen table and lit a cigarette. The stench of the smoke was both nauseating and comforting. “You matter to me.”

15

ATLAS

The complex dance of love and hate is a vibrant paradox—the similarities stemming from primal, instinctual responses. Emotionally healthy individuals can regulate A and separate the two emotions, but since my mental health is murky at best, I lack this ability.

A shrink would evaluate my parents and tell me that this stems from my father establishing an environment where I believed anger and violence correlated with love. There would be truth in that. My father beat me, professing his love for me with each blow. Violence cloaked in twisted declarations of love.

The contrast of my white knuckles gripping the worn leather belt and the redness of

Callum's ass are stark reminders of the brutal beatings inflicted by my father. Perhaps this was where my interest in impact play began. My body ignites with a rush of adrenaline at the intense physical sensations. The sharp stings and the satisfying thuds fuel my desire.

Each strike I give Callum makes me harder for him, and I feel a sense of relief. Unlike the situation where my father would harm me, Callum knows that he's safe. He has a safe word. He knows I'll stop if he demands it. Despite our dysfunction, we've consistently succeeded at one thing over the years—we've fostered safety for each other.

Besides, Callum could slit my throat before I blink if he thinks he isn't safe with me. He has psychotic tendencies—a side effect of his brutal life. These usually come into play with violence and blood. In moments like these, Callum doesn't need to be in charge. He wants to let go. He doesn't want to think or control anything. These are the moments when I'm the master.

I loathe my feelings for him and the raven-haired beauty who has held us in her grasp for years. She's pulled us in with a force that's kept us at a standstill. My hatred for this situation burns with an intense flame, leaving me disgusted and revolted. She's turned me into my father—an obsessed man who crosses lines and causes harm to obtain his heart's desires.

My soul is gripped with the need to take my pound of flesh, to alienate what has caused my insides to bleed so viciously. All I wanted was a simple life away from the madness of my father and the world he raised me in. Instead, I'm in love with two of his victims.

I continue to belt Callum's ass, desperate to cast out the demonic shadows of my past that still follow me. I've allowed myself to fall so irrevocably in love that the idea of being without it sucks the oxygen from my lungs.

The belt drops from my hand as I stare at the welts on Callum's ass. I derive pleasure from those markings on his flesh. They arouse us both.

Callum isn't a submissive, and I'm not a dominant. We construct our relationship to provide for our needs at any given time. Right now, I need control, and he desperately wants to be owned. Lately, Callum has needed my dominance to control the spiraling emotions that could risk the life we've built.

Anger rises in catastrophic waves as I pull his hair, yanking his head back. I lean down and whisper in his ear, "I want to see the videos. Get up."

The fabric of Callum's shirt is rough against my hand as I pull him off the floor and march him to the office. "Turn it on."

His fingers shake as he boots up the computer. The first image is her empty apartment.

"Don't be stupid, Callum. Show me what you watch."

Callum presses various keys, and Mona pops up on the screen. She's naked in the shower with soap suds cascading down her body.

"Show me what you do when you watch," I demand.

Callum fists his thick cock, gliding slowly up and down his length. He's nervous. His shyness is endearing when it comes to Mona, a clear sign that he's trying not to objectify her. The notion is idiotic since he spends time alone watching her naked body and everything she does when she's alone.

"You fuck yourself dry?" I demand. "I call bullshit on that."

Callum's eyes widen in shock as I spit on his dick and his hand. "There you go. Thought you could use some lube."

My eyes flicker from Callum to the bright light of the computer screen. God, she's beautiful. A full figure, shoulder-length dark hair. I brush my fingers over the screen, longing to touch her soft skin.

Before Mona, we had a plan. We knew what we wanted—a life away from all the madness my father forced us into. Then she came into our world and pulled us away from that future. Ironically, Mona gave us the freedom we craved by putting us in a cage where we worship her.

At first, I hated her for it. I loathed the girl who softened Callum's edges and made him see beauty in ways that were foreign to me. I didn't know why she was so special, why she was the one to capture his heart when hundreds of others were disposable to him.

I wanted to hurt Callum. I wanted to puncture and bruise his flesh in the same way as he tortured my battered heart. I needed to see him suffer for forcing me to watch as he became consumed with Mona.

But all that changed once I saw her strength and kindness amid the horror of my father's world. As I watched her take care of the other women in her group.

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“What’s your favorite song,” Mona asked one girl. She always held the women after my father and his men had roughed them up.

The girl, Lesley, sniffled and whispered, “My Girl.”

Mona nodded and began to sing. Her voice was shaky, but her embrace was firm as she brushed the damp hair away from Lesley’s face. It was deeply moving. Despite her fear, Mona had a deep compassion. She focused on helping another when she didn’t need to. At that moment, I understood how she’d stolen Callum’s heart. Because she’d also stolen mine.

I tug Callum’s hair until his head falls back. “You wish you were fuckin’ her, don’t you, Callum?”

I fist my dick and violently slap his face with it before shoving it deep into his open mouth. “Keep your eyes on the screen, baby boy. I wouldn’t want to punish you again. Eyes on her hands as she moves them over her naked body. Choke on my dick and imagine her cunt wrapping around your cock as she rides you.”

Callum gags on my dick as he desperately gasps for breath.

“That’s it, baby boy. Take it all the way back. I love the way you choke for me.”

I thirst for the salty tears that fall from his eyes. Bending, I lick the saltiness from his cheeks. “You look so pretty when you cry for me.”

Callum’s hands move to my ass, and he pulls me further into his mouth. He’s

showing me that he likes it. My boy is trying to regain control.

I laugh, remembering how it used to be me choking while he called me names.

“Where have you been?” I asked as soon as Callum opened the front door.

I hadn’t seen him for days. He snuck out at the break of dawn and stumbled in late at night. I knew he was staying later than he needed to at the compound for her. He had an irrational fear that something would happen to her if he so much as blinked. He was the same with me in the beginning.

But it was different in my situation.

With me, he feared I would kill myself. With Mona, the fear was that my father would have her murdered.

He didn’t utter a word. The quiet thud of his jacket against the wall hook was the only sound.

His silence was maddening.

I stepped toward him, grabbing his throat and slamming him against the wall. “Where have you been?”

My instant rage-filled action had no reaction. Callum stared at me, his eyes vacant, as if the man I loved had become a shell, robotic and lacking in passion. My chest tightened, and my world narrowed as I witnessed the dull lifelessness in his eyes. At that moment, I would have done anything, uttered any word, no matter how depraved, for the faintest glimmer of joy to ignite within him.

I didn’t wait for him to respond. I crushed my lips to his in desperation. Relief

flooded through me as he parted his lips, and his tongue tangled with mine in a dance consumed with anger. His body reacted to mine, his cock surging against me.

“Is this what you want?” Callum hissed through gritted teeth.

Before I could respond, he gripped my throat, restricting my ability to speak. “We can do this all night, Atlas. Hashing out violence until we feel something other than pain. I enjoy this game.” The metallic taste of blood invaded my mouth as Callum’s teeth sliced my bottom lip. “Why don’t you be a good boy and get on your knees for me? That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

My body responded to his demands even as my brain raged at me to punch him in the face.

With one hand firmly on my throat, Callum used the other to unfasten his pants and release his cock. My mouth watered, and my lips parted. Callum thrust inside my mouth, pushing in all the way until he hit the back of my throat. I gagged, and saliva formed in abundance.

“You don’t get to question me, Atlas. You don’t get to ask me where I’ve been or who I’ve been with. I get enough of that from your deranged, demented, dehumanizing father. You don’t want to be like him, do you, Atlas? You don’t want to be a weak, insecure little man who demands others kneel to him out of fear, do you?”

Callum’s words were a bullseye, hitting their mark.

“How do you think he’d feel knowing that this is how you like to pray, baby boy? Do you think he’d be interested to know how you beg for God while my cock is deep in your ass? How would the great Marcus Meyer react if he knew his son loved my dick more than he loved his Daddy’s little bullshit cult?”

My body instinctively reacted, and I moved my head up and down Callum's cock. I loved when he used depraved words that my father preached against in his sermons. I always found it wildly amusing how Marcus Meyer pretended to be a god-fearing man. A prophet ordained by God. He pushed the narrative on the naive women and corrupt members of his church. In reality, Marcus was a drifter, a crook, a maniac who had no issues harming people to fill his pockets and obtain more power.

Callum pulled out of my mouth. "You look so pretty, baby. You're my pretty boy, aren't you?"

I nodded, basking in the praise. I wanted to be his good boy. I wanted to be his filthy slut. I wanted to be anything Callum needed.

He placed his hand under my chin and collected the saliva trailing from my mouth before wiping it on my face. "You know how beautiful you look with spit and cum on your pretty face?"

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My head snapped back as Callum slapped me. “Spit on my cock, bitch. Make it nice and wet.”

I spat on Callum’s dick and stared up at him. He sneered at me before shoving his dick into my mouth again, hitting the back of my throat. I relaxed so I could take him deep.

“Good boy.”

I gripped his pants and yanked them down to grip his ass. Pulling apart his cheeks I rubbed the tip of my index finger over his asshole and pushed in slowly, careful not to go too far.

“Look at you, Atlas. Such an obedient little whore. Your daddy thinks you’re his good little choir boy, but little does he know that you only kneel before one god. I should take a video and send it to him. Show him how you like to pray. That’s it, Atlas. Suck my cock until you receive your fuckin’ holy communion. Daddy would be so proud of how desperate you are for a shot of my cum down your worthless throat.”

My cock surged as Callum spoke about my father’s disapproval, my entire being fueled with insatiable lust. The blasphemous words cleansed me, wiping away the brutality of my father’s sermons and his dysfunctional, twisted views about God and faith.

Yet, even knowing that my father was the monster of this story, I couldn’t help but feel dirty. Disgusting. A demonic being wrapped in sin. My father had sown the seeds

of dysfunction, but I had allowed Callum to water it until my sickness climbed into a twisted vine of poison oak.

I was sure that many facets of my upbringing foreshadowed my fall to my knees, swallowing Callum's cock with such vigor. There was relief in being in a relationship that was so freeing. With Callum, I could think what I wanted and speak instead of swallowing my words. With Callum, I'd found a peace I'd never known. So it was no shock to me that I'd do anything to maintain my solace.

"That's it, princess. Take that dick. All the way." Callum gripped my hair, and my head snapped back as I gazed up at him. "That's it, baby. Eyes on me while I fuck your useless mouth. I want you looking into the eyes of your god when he gives you his favor. Next time you decide to speak out of turn, I want you to remember how I fucked your mouth into submission and put you in your place, proving that the wrath of God is all-consuming."

The memories of the past take hold of me. The demons I thought I'd buried rear like the four horsemen riding in a blazing inferno. "Who's getting mouth is getting fucked into submission now, motherfucker?"

Callum and I have always been harsh when we fuck. Our sex life lacks the tenderness and gentleness that marks the rest of our relationship. Fucking for us has always been hard, fast, and completely unhinged. We have words and cues for when it goes too far or if we want it to stop, but trauma has prevented us from using them. Fucked up, I know. We've built our entire relationship on dysfunction, just like our obsession with her.

My hips thrust into his mouth as I roll up his cotton t-shirt, exposing his nipple rings. I grab the hoops and tug, forcing Callum to arch his back.

I pull out of him and watch as spit falls from his mouth, trailing down his chin and

hitting the hardwood floor. He looks the way I feel: pathetic. “This is all you’ll ever get from her. She’ll think we’re a twisted sickness that perverted her privacy.”

Callum opens his mouth to speak, but I fill it with my cock and stare at the raven-haired beauty in the shower. I long for her to be here with us, to touch her, to have her hands on my flesh.

Callum and I need her so we can finally be at peace.

16

CALLUM

My hand moves up and down my cock as Atlas thrusts forcefully into my mouth. I’m lightheaded from being upside down, but I don’t care. All I can focus on is the desire to taste him on my tongue. To know that even when he’s fueled with anger, I can make him come undone.

Atlas seems to be under the impression that Mona has replaced him, but she hasn’t. She fills spaces in my soul that he can’t. And it’s not like this is one-sided; he wants her, too. But he’s too scared to admit it. I’m not blind. I see the way he stares at the screen as he fucks my mouth. I bet he’s wishing my mouth was her pussy.

It’s agonizing to doubt your worthiness with your soulmate. Could we forget Mona and live relatively happily? Yes. I would never risk losing Atlas. He’s my constant in a world of turbulence. The problem isn’t happiness; it’s fulfillment. My soul desires them both to be complete.

“Do you think she could ever love you?” Atlas grits between clenched teeth as his hands abuse my swollen nipples.

To the casual observer, his behavior would seem abusive. His actions may be born of anger, but his violent touch holds a healing component. He needs to take, and I need to give. This is our balance. Some people discuss their problems or seek therapy. Atlas and I like to fuck it out. We have parameters and can make it stop. We aren't abusive; we're just a little fucked up.

Atlas pulls out of me, his cerulean eyes glaring down at me. "Answer my question. Do you think she could ever love you?"

His question is a noose tightening around my neck, slowly draining the air from my lungs. "I think no one can love me."

Atlas abandons my nipples and steps back. His face is ashen. "You think I don't love you?"

I can't discern his expression. Shock? Fear? Disgust?

I stand and slowly walk toward him, careful not to spook him with any sudden moves. Atlas, for all his bravado, still hides the broken boy inside him—the boy who only desired goodness and light but was thrust into the darkest evil.

He flinches, and a visible shudder runs through him as I cup his face. I hate the way he recoils from my touch. I never want Atlas to see my touch as anything but healing. Even with the violence of our sex, I need him to know it's part of the construct of my love for him.

I ignore his struggle to free himself. Holding his head steady, I bring my forehead to his, peering into his crystal blue eyes.

With a rough shove, Atlas sends me stumbling. "The thought of you believing I don't love you is unbearable. My fuckin' heart started beating when I met you. You're the

fuckin' center of my soul. My life ignited when I met you, which is why I'm baffled about being drawn to her." He shakes his head. "No, that's not even the part I care about. She doesn't think about us, Callum. She doesn't want us. We're desperate for her, and she's trying to forget we exist. We aren't the ones who saved her. We couldn't even give her that. We had to get help. We were cowards, and to make up for it, we made ourselves demons for her. Shit, you killed a guy last week for what? Not saying sorry when he bumped into her?"

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I feel like an asshole. Top of the line, piece of shit coming through.

I clear my throat. “He called her a bitch.”

It’s funny that even after all these years of being with Atlas, I still can’t handle him being upset. Since the day he cracked open my heart, all I’ve wanted is to help him thrive. He’s the first person I loved besides my mother. Atlas's pain makes me panic, and I’ll do whatever is necessary to end it.

“What are you doing?” Atlas asks

I snap my pants and smooth my t-shirt. “She’s getting off work, and I don’t like the idea of her walking home late at night.” I lean in and kiss Atlas on the forehead. “Do you want to come with me?”

Atlas shakes his head. “Not tonight.”

I place a finger beneath his chin and tip his head back so his eyes meet mine. “I love you.”

He nods. “I love you, too.”

17

CALLUM

Some people work because they need to eat. Others because they long for riches and

fame. Then there are people like her, those who take a vocation not because it will lead to fame and riches but to help others.

Staring at the raven beauty, it's not hard to see the black circles under her eyes or the redness within them. I often watch as she leaves the building with her shoulders slumped and defeat consuming her entire frame. Yet some nights, she wears a radiant smile on her majestic face as she walks. Her steps carry a quiet triumph like someone stepping into the sunlight after years in the shadows.

Why did she choose this line of work? How can she throw herself into the constant misery of broken people thrust into devastating lives? People with bleak futures, constantly digging for a semblance of joy. Every day, I see her embrace those society has discarded with pure love.

Her touch and her words contain no malice or judgment. She gives these people hope in a world of despair and never asks for anything in return other than their acceptance of her help to enrich their lives.

How different would my life be if I'd been assigned a social worker like her instead of the tired, miserable men and women who were placed in my path? Individuals worn down and disillusioned by the system, losing all faith in its potential for improvement or reform.

I see how gentle Mona is with those society has discarded as vermin. How she shows them beauty when all they've known is disgust. She judges no one. She doesn't condemn or scold. She simply smiles and tells them they're worthy. She gives them the same gift she gave me. The knowledge that I'm better than I was driven to believe.

She is the definition of poetry in motion. A cascading flow of beauty that dances in the darkness. Something beautiful in a world riddled with violence, misery, and

destitution.

She is the paragon of virtue, and I am the demonic sinner who longs to corrupt her. The darkness casting a shadow over her light. Even when she's forced to bear witness to the most barbaric acts, she never once steps into the darkness. She stands tall even in the most impoverished of situations, fueled by the embers of hope burning in her heart.

I stand in the shadows, intoxicated by her, as I watch her lock up the community center. I devour the high of her melodious voice as she hums to herself. Her captivating beauty holds me frozen as if under a spell. She possesses a beauty that haunts both my dreams and nightmares

Mona has a calming influence—an ability to tame the most violent of thunderstorms into refreshing summer rain.

It still bewilders me how she provided me with unimaginable peace while I held a gun to her temple and uttered disgusting words laced with malevolence. She didn't even blink at my threats. I wasn't sure if it was because she didn't believe me or because she would rather die than bend to any man's will. Her silent defiance captivated me from the moment I laid eyes on her.

Atlas is wrong about one thing. It's not that Mona can't love; it's me.

"I'm not kidding, little girl. I have no problem decorating these mundane walls with your blood and brains," Marcus sneered in his thick German accent. His bloated fingers played with the loose strands of her raven hair. "Pretty Mona, it would be such a shame if I had to get rid of you before you fulfilled your full potential."

"I won't break for you or anyone else. You can starve me, beat me, rape me, but I will never break."

Marcus chuckled. “Oh, silly girl. You think you’re the first brave woman I’ve seen? You think you’re the first girl who’s strolled into my path believing you’re strong and defiant?” Marcus leaned over, his lips barely brushing the beauty’s mouth. “Sweet child, the strong ones are my favorite to decimate. You present the greatest challenge.”

My hand twitched with the urge to move the barrel of the gun from Mona’s head to his, but I remained still. I wasn’t stupid. I knew he had guns trained on me in case I stepped out of line.

Marcus gripped the hem of Mona’s blue t-shirt and ripped it, exposing her black satin bra. “Look at you. Aren’t you delectable, Mona?”

Mona held Marcus’s gaze, and her pretty lips tilted into a smile. “Aren’t you pathetic, Marcus?”

In a swift move, Marcus seized her dark hair, causing her to grimace. “You’re different, Mona. I’ve been kind to you. Much kinder than I am to the others. But if you step out of line, I’ll break you just like I broke them.”

Two kinds of women existed in our community—those who came willingly looking for salvation and those brought here by force.

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I never enjoyed it when Marcus inflicted humiliation and terror on the prisoners. I preferred it when the women and girls wanted to join him. It was so much easier. All I had to do was wax lyrical about how the commune was paradise on a desolate and destructive earth. Those women believed that Marcus was their salvation, the second coming of a proverbial Jesus to save their souls from the brutality of the world.

Once they understood the truth, they didn't care because they'd become fixated on the notion of sacrificing their choice, their freedom, and their lives to worship at the feet of a man who didn't care about them.

Those who presented the challenge were women like the one who stood before me. Women like Mona.

I stood there weak and pathetic as Marcus forced her to her knees and kicked her in the face.

Mona wiped away the blood trickling down her face and glared at Marcus. "You can try to break me. But you won't succeed."

"You pathetic bitch," Marcus hissed. "You think the worst I can do is beat you? There are far worse punishments for women like you. I can pass you around my men. Let each of them take a turn. Use your body until you can't walk straight. So I'd be careful if I were you, you dumb cunt."

Marcus turned to me when Mona laughed at Marcus's words. "Make her bleed."

Guilt is a complex emotion because its outcome is never entirely predictable. Some

people turn guilt into violence, while for others it becomes a penance.

My guilt sparked a curiosity that evolved into an obsession. A burning need to ensure she was okay. So I became a shadow.

Her shadow.

Most nights, I watch Mona close up the center and walk the few blocks of urban decayed sidewalks to her modest apartment. An apartment in a part of town that makes my eye twitch. She doesn't have to live in that hellhole. One of her sister's husbands is ungodly wealthy. He could set her up in a penthouse, but Mona wants to stay near the people she helps. Admirable or stupid? I'm not sure which, but it doesn't matter because we own the building. Mona is safe. She'll always be safe with Atlas and me.

I stand on the other side of the street and watch a neighborhood punk pull a knife on Mona.

"Don't be a stupid bitch. Give me your purse. You don't want to die today, do you, lady?"

Someone will die tonight, but it won't be my angel.

I cross the street, watching the scene unfold. My instinct is to rush the motherfucker and slit his throat, but a part of me enjoys watching Mona handle challenging situations. Is that some sort of kink from watching her take a beating without flinching? I understand how fucked up that is. Getting hard as fuck by a woman being beaten, but it's not her abuse that consumes me. It's that she can take a punch. The fight rivets me.

"I'm not giving you anything," Mona says calmly. "I will help you, though."

My shoulders shake as I silently chuckle. This asshole is threatening to slice her up, and she's offering him a helping hand. This is why she needs me. She may think she's tough, but she's too sweet for her own good. This cocksucker will take advantage of her, and I simply can't have that.

"Listen, bitch, it's not like you can't afford it."

"You think I can afford it? I live in this neighborhood and work for a nonprofit. My bank account has forty-three dollars and twenty-one cents in it." Mona pulls out her wallet and shoves it at him. "Is twenty bucks and some loose change worth going to jail for?"

The punk sneers as he steps closer and holds the knife to Mona's throat. "There won't be any jail time if you can't talk, bitch."

Nah, motherfucker, it'll be you who can't talk when I slash your throat and drain the blood from your worthless body.

"You can stab me, but having my death on your conscience won't be worth the couple of dollars you'll get out of it."

The asshole sneers and presses the tip of the blade into Mona's throat. "Shut your mouth, bitch, before I slit your throat for shits and giggles. You're so fuckin' annoying. I'm sure I'd be doing the world a favor. You think I've never come across do-gooders like you? Holier than thou chicks who think they can fix the world with a few pleasant words and a meal?"

Mona moves, allowing the blade to pierce the delicate flesh of her throat. "Do it. If you think you'll feel better, go ahead." She laughs. "I bet you've never even seen a dead body, have you? You think I'm weak, but you don't know the first thing about me. You don't know where I've come from, what I've endured, and what I'll

sacrifice. Go ahead, big man. Show me what a bitch I am.”

Do it? Fuck, Mona.

The punk sneers and pushes the blade against her throat. “Oops. Looks like the blade slipped a little. I’d hate for it to puncture your jugular. Why don’t you be a good girl and give me your purse?”

I don’t even think. No hesitation, no concern, no plan. I bolt forward, grab the fucker’s shoulder, and twist. That’s when I see the blood.

Mine?

His?

His arms flail, but I dodge his fist as he tries to punch me. I shove him to the ground and fall on him. I pummel him, my fists connecting with his face repeatedly until blood gushes and splatters streaks of crimson onto my face. “She. Is. Mine. And. I. Don’t. Like. My. Things. Touched.”

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I'm unaware of the carnage my hands are creating. I don't care. I'm no longer a man. I'm inhuman. A creature longing for vengeance and blood. I hear screams from behind me, but they're faint and barely noticeable, much like the soft hum of the wind. Even if the shouts were thunderous, I would ignore them. It's easy for me to shut out my surroundings when my brain takes on a mission. I see nothing but my target and the completion of the task bestowed upon me. A good little soldier. I know what my mission is and deliver results. The one time I couldn't complete my task is the same reason I'm willing to murder a man in cold blood.

"Please," a sweet voice pleads. "Please stop. You'll kill him."

"He deserves it," I spit as my hand connects with the punk one more time, and his head lolls to the side.

Then I turn around, and my heart stops.

18

MONA

It's dark. I'm freezing. Why am I freezing? My head hurts. My stomach throbs and stings a little—it's not unbearable, just uncomfortable.

My fingers brush my abdomen, brushing a bandage covering what feels like a shallow wound. I shift in the bed, but before I can move, two hands grab onto my biceps.

“Take it easy.”

The man is tall, and a black balaclava shrouds his face. I can't help but think how ironic it is to find ski masks both alluring and terrifying. The air of mystery adds sexual tension, but the men who haunt my nightmares also wore those masks. Men who abducted, beat, and harassed women. The same mask worn by the men who killed my father and beat my sister.

I stare into a pair of familiar steel-gray eyes.

“I know you,” I whisper.

“Yeah,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. “I saved you from being robbed last night.”

“No. I know you from somewhere else. Your eyes are so familiar, but I can't place them.”

He chuckles dismissively. “You hit your head harder than I thought. Why don't you get some rest?”

Get some rest? I'm in a strange space with a man my body recognizes on a visceral level peering at me. Sure, he seems familiar, but that means nothing. I could've bumped into him at the mall. I dismiss the thought immediately. The sensations bombarding me are far from vague.

“I think I should go home.” I try to stand, but dizziness forces me back onto the bed.

The man grabs my shoulder, his fingers warm against my bare skin. “You can't go anywhere right now. Lie back in bed.”

“Listen, buddy, I don’t know who the fuck you are, but you if you don’t let me go, you’ll be dealing with my family—and trust me, they put the fun in dysfunctional.”

His laugh is warm and sinister. “Kitten, no one you know is more fucked up than me. But I promise you’re safe with me. I won’t do anything to harm you as long as you’re a good girl and do as you’re told.”

“So no harm will come to me as long as I let you rape me? You’ll violate me in exchange for not slitting my throat? What kind of fucking statement is that?”

He waves his hands up and down his body—his extremely chiseled, muscular body. “Do I look like a man who needs to force a woman to have sex with him? If I wanted to fuck, darling, I’d go to the nearest bar and flash some girl my smile and my baby blues.”

“Your baby grays.”

“What?”

“You can’t flash baby blues ‘cause your eyes aren’t blue. They’re gray.”

His smile deepens before he bends toward me and whispers seductively, “You noticed my eyes, didn’t you, baby?”

“You know, you could’ve just asked me on a date if you wanted to flirt with me? There was no reason to kidnap me.”

Maybe my sister’s right. I’m so used to lovable psychos that I think any madman who kidnaps me is a broken boy I can fix.

“This isn’t a kidnapping, pretty girl. Trust me.”

I turn my head and glance around the room, trying not to blush at the endearment from my very attractive captor. It's not normal to think your captor is good-looking, but I've learned not to panic in situations like this. "I know what a kidnapping looks like. This isn't my first rodeo. But you seem much more agreeable compared to the last guy who took me. Oh, wait. The first guy who took me wasn't that bad. It was his boss who was certifiable." I gaze up at the ceiling before turning to meet his gaze. "Is your unhinged boss going to join us now?"

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Those steel orbs shrouded by black lashes tug at a locked box in my mind. A memory teases the outer edge of my mind before vanishing like a wisp of smoke. I know this man. Intimately. My body recognizes him on a fundamental level, even while my mind rebels against the truth.

He doesn't respond, and the silence thickens until I feel like I'll suffocate.

Finally, he clears his throat. "I no longer take orders from unscrupulous men."

A small sound escapes my lips, but before it can become a roar, my throat locks up, and the past my brain has compartmentalized unleashes in a tidal wave of memories.

I've been here before. I used my body to persuade two men to protect me. Under duress, I would admit that the sex was spectacular. But sex doesn't make bad men good. And I suddenly know who this man is.

Callum.

An agonizing scream pierced my ears. The woman was in pain; her wails twisted with horrific edges of unbearable agony.

"This is for the greater good, Serena. You want to be enshrined in his divine light, don't you?"

The shrill, pain-laced scream was one of the most tortuous sounds I'd ever heard, and I'd heard many calls of suffering and dread. I was born into it.

“He’ll do that to you.” a deep voice murmured.

I turned to stare into the slate eyes. A shiver ran through my body.

He tucked my hair behind my ear and whispered, “Tell him what he wants to hear so I don’t have to hurt you. Claim him as the Messiah.”

Callum’s voice was hushed, almost pleading, a broken element in every word he uttered. I hated that a part of me wanted to do what he asked because this was the man who’d had no issues holding a gun to my head. If he’d been ordered to pull the trigger, he would’ve worn my brain matter on his shirt like a badge of honor.

“I can’t,” I whispered.

“It’s only words. Just fuckin’ do it. Say them.”

A lump formed in my throat, choking back my words and leaving me hollow and speechless. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t utter the words. I hated being so weak, so unsure of who I was, that I faltered when it really mattered.

I shut my eyes and contemplated that death might not be so bad. At least then, nothing would matter. I would no longer need to conform to belong, something I’d strived for from the moment my family moved to America.

The loudspeakers blared to life just as I thought I was experiencing my final fleeting moments before my demise.

“We have a traitor in our midst. We have captured the person who has harmed our community, and they will be punished. Now, we must pray.”

Bile rose in my stomach as a chorus of chants echoed above me.

“Eternal rest grant unto them, oh, Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.”

A large hand clamped around my mouth as a tortuous scream bounced off the walls, followed by a loud snap.

“I’m gonna need you to say calm,” Callum whispered. “Nod, so I know you understand.”

I nodded, though I didn’t comprehend his words. All I knew was that I was lying on the cold cement floor, listening to God’s words before a human life was extinguished. It was a torture Marcus hadn’t used on me. It was the one abuse that would’ve made me crumble and abandon my will to fight.

The steel-eyed man removed his hand from my mouth as silent tears cascaded down my cheeks, blurring my vision.

He tilted his head, examining me in earnest. “Why are you crying?”

I remained silent, unsure if I could speak past the intrusive knot in my throat. I swallowed, gasping for breath until the words fell from my lips. “Why did he pray before he killed her?”

He shrugged. “They do that for heretics who disturb the system. She went against the norm, and they cannot tolerate dissenters. Anything to stop a domino effect.”

I tried to collect myself, but I couldn’t stop crying. Memories I’d desperately tried to forget over the last fifteen years crashed over me, forcing me to admit truths I’d tried to bury. “That’s how they killed him.”

Two brawny arms wrapped around me, pulling me against a warm body. A large hand rubbed my back as I continued to cry. The man who'd held a gun to my temple not too long ago was silent, simply offering the comfort of his embrace as I remembered watching the first man I ever loved executed.

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“I don’t believe in it, you know.”

I looked up as he spoke. His voice was hoarse, but his words flew with the precision of the bullet of an expert marksman.

“All the bullshit about God. I heard this madness from the moment I was born.” He chuckled softly. “I still can’t figure out why so many people believe in it. I don’t know what they get from it. It’s always seemed fucked up to believe in something that induces fear. It’s all I’ve ever seen. I know exactly what kind of vengeful notion God is.”

I buried my face in the cotton of his button-down shirt. “I stopped believing the day they told me that God wanted my father dead.”

Warm hands framed my face, pulling me away from his chest. I gazed into the steel-gray eyes, and for a moment, I wanted to believe that we were someplace else. That I was someone else.

“What do you mean, God wanted your father dead?”

“I wasn’t born in America. I came here just before I turned ten. I was born in Iran. My father was politically active. He was a good man who was tired of seeing his friends and neighbors persecuted for everything they did. I remember him telling my mother that it felt like even breathing was haram. That’s what it means. When you’re doing something that goes against God. Impermissible, whatever the fuck that means. It’s a joke, you know, calling things haram, especially when the ayatollah does it. They sanction prostitution to make it halal. Permissible. Then they marry the

prostitute to the clergy or whoever comes along and give money to the ayatollahs. They marry her for a short period, whatever timeframe the man wants: a week, a day, an hour, or minutes. She's forced into whatever sexually deviant act the man deems fit, and she can't object. It's fucked up when you think about it. That's the thing with the ayatollah and the clergy, isn't it? Those men are supposed to be holier than thou, but they're devoted to a god none of them believe in. They walk around claiming to be good Muslims, but they're not. Not a single fucking one of them."

"That still doesn't tell me what happened to your father."

Could I tell him what happened to my dad? I wasn't sure I could talk about it. I could speak of the ayatollah and the regime and everything it did to innocent people, but could I talk about how I watched my father's neck snap?

Somehow, the words came despite my doubts. "The Islamic call of prayer. A holy sound. It was the last thing I heard before they snapped my father's neck and showed me his lifeless body. So you see, I'm not a fan of prayer or holy chimes as a harbinger of death to slay innocent people. I thought we escaped the barbaric holds of religious manipulation and subjugation, but I guess I was wrong."

Emerging from the memories, I lift my gaze to the man before me. "You said you'd never see me again, Callum."

"Correction, pretty girl. I said you'd never see me again."

19

ATLAS

"What the fuck, Callum? What's she doing here?"

“She’s hurt. I needed to take her somewhere.”

“How about a fuckin’ hospital? Fuck, maybe call the cops and have her rushed off in an ambulance.”

“How the fuck would I explain what I was doing there, Atlas? ‘Sorry, officer, but he was bothering my stalking victim, and I can’t handle men being mean to her. I’ve got a problem. That girl is mine, and anyone who fucks with my shit gets it.’” Callum shrugs as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. “Besides, I would’ve hated the little shit to pick me out of a lineup. Didn’t have time to take care of the problem properly.”

I step toward Callum. “You don’t need to worry about being picked out in a lineup.”

Callum doesn’t step back. Instead, he steps toward me. “How can you guarantee that, pretty boy?” He crosses his arms, and his smug smile makes me want to punch his arrogant face.

I chuckle. “Your location setting.”

Callum frowns and digs in his back pocket, pulling out his iPhone. A scowl replaces his smile as he pushes a few buttons. “Motherfucker. I turned this off.”

Now it’s my turn to smile smugly. “And I turned it on. You should thank me for cleaning up your mess. Well, it’s not completely cleaned up, but it’s contained for now. I thought you’d like the honor of ridding yourself of the problem.”

“What are you going to do to him?” a soft voice asks hesitantly.

Callum and I turn to look at Mona. She’s been unconscious, so this is the first time she’s aware of my presence in the room.

“Mona.”

That’s all I can say. Her name. As if that one word is a silent prayer that can save my soul. Four letters that mean more to me than my life.

“Hi, Atlas.”

She appears so calm, but her trembling shoulders and downcast gaze speak of a deep-seated fear that shocks me. It’s not like Callum and I were cruel to her. We gave Alaric Cinder all the information he needed to help her sister and brothers-in-law break her out. I sacrificed my father to save her life, and I’d do it again.

An icy dread seeps through me as I see Mona’s wide, terrified eyes, despite my rational mind knowing she has nothing to fear. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but it’s certainly not this.

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I step toward her slowly, not wanting to spook her more than she already is. “It’s good to see you.”

“Can I go home now?”

“No,” Callum interjects. “You can’t.”

“What are you gonna do, Callum?” Mona asks. “Are you going to keep me prisoner all over again, or can we make the same deal? Do I get three wishes for every sexual act I submit to? Three holes, three wishes. Fuck my mouth, and I get to call my sister. Fuck my pussy, and I get to walk around this penthouse apartment unsupervised. Allow you in my asshole, and what? You’ll take me out for a walk like a good little puppy?” Mona’s eyes narrow as she looks around the hallway, and she smiles when her eyes notice something.

Callum and I stand silent as she walks into a second room, the door ajar. “I knew you two freaks would have one of these.”

My heart stops as she walks inside. I want to chase after her, tell her to get out of there and mind her own business.

A minute later, Mona walks out with a choke collar and a leash. “You want me to wear this while you take me for a walk? Be a good little pet, or you’ll give me a lesson I’ll never forget?”

Fuck, I forgot how much sass she has. Usually, when we view Mona through the lens of a camera, she’s so sweet. While she exudes heart and compassion at work, she’s

nothing more than a brat with us, provoking my desire to assert my dominance.

Before I can say anything, Callum bursts into laughter. “Missed us, did you, Kitten?”

“Like a hole in the head,” Mona spits.

Callum stalks toward her, a smile plastered on his face. I expect Mona to retreat, but she doesn’t. She holds her ground as she lifts the collar and leash.

“I’m so fuckin’ scared, Callum.”

Callum’s hand shoots out, and he slams Mona against the wall by her throat. “You know what I am and what I’m capable of.”

Mona smiles right before she knees Callum between the legs.

He falls to the floor, groaning and cupping his crotch. “What the fuck, Mona?”

“I didn’t give you permission to touch me.” Mona steps closer to Callum, and in the blink of an eye, she fastens the collar and leash around his neck. “Last time you saw me, I was different. I’ve been training with my sister. You remember my sister, don’t you, Callum? The girl who could kill the man that you were too scared to.”

She steps back and yanks the leash. “Is this how it felt when you were Meyer’s little puppy?”

Callum’s head snaps up, his amusement replaced by irritation. “Be careful, Kitten. You’re playing with fire.”

Mona bends down, getting in Callum’s face. “Then burn me, baby.”

CALLUM

She wants me to burn her? Okay. I'll ignite a raging fire that will leave her blistered. Mona is expecting my anger and dominance, but that's not what I'm going to give her. If she wants to be in charge, that's what she'll be.

She tugs at the metal leash and pulls me forward. "What's the matter, Callum? Thought you were going to burn me."

"The most dangerous fire is the one you aren't expecting, Kitten."

Mona's eyes widen. Good, I caught her off guard.

Her shock wears off quickly as she smirks and yanks the leash again. "I might be your kitten, Callum, but you seem to enjoy being my little pup."

"Baby, if it means I get to see you naked, I'll be anything you want."

"You want to see me naked, Callum? Is that what all this is about?"

I smile. "I always want to see you naked, Kitten."

"What will you do to get what you want?"

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I could lie, get off the floor, and put her in her place, but seeing Mona in charge is intoxicating. Watching her stand over me with the chain in her hand has my dick throbbing in my pants. “Anything. I’ll fuckin’ do anything.”

Mona turns to look at Atlas. “What about you?”

We wait in silence for what feels like an eternity. Atlas gazes from Mona to me. He swallows. I’m not sure why he’s hesitating. This is what we’ve wanted for two years, each of us consumed with her, needing her, desperate for her.

I’m about to get off the ground and choke him out for not jumping on the opportunity when he speaks.

“What do you want us to do?”

Mona smiles and returns to the toy room. Minutes tick by as we wait for her to return.

When she does, she steps toward Atlas and snaps a collar and leash on him. “If the two of you want me, you need to know how it feels to be chained up like a dog. On your knees, Atlas.”

Atlas falls to his knees at the command.

“Good boy,” Mona coos, dropping the leashes and walking into my bedroom. “Now, crawl to me.”

Both Atlas and I follow her orders like dogs.

Mona smiles as she removes her shirt, exposing her black lace bra. “Look at my good little boys.” She glides her hands up her body, gently grazing the fresh knife wound on her abdomen. I should have killed the motherfucker.

Mona snaps her fingers. “Eyes up here, Callum.”

I gaze into her pretty green eyes. “What do I get for being a good boy?”

Mona saunters over, picks up the leashes, and yanks us forward. The leash constricts my throat, limiting my air supply. “Choke collars. Of course, you’d have those, Callum. If I remember correctly, seeing someone suffocate is one of your favorite things.”

“Go ahead, Callum, it’s fine.”

Mona kept telling me it was okay, but a part of me hated my actions. Yearning to suffocate someone was a sickness, but I still did it. I thrust into her as my hands circled her neck.

“Tap my arm the minute you need me to let go,” I ordered.

“Got it,” Mona croaked.

“What’s wrong with me, baby girl? What’s wrong with me for wanting to turn your pretty skin blue? I love the way your legs thrash and your fingernails scrape my hands.” I thrust into her warm cunt. “Even your perfect pussy feels tighter.”

Atlas gripped my waist as he adjusted his cock in my asshole. His fingers bruised my flesh as he hammered my ass.

“Choke me,” I begged through clenched teeth. “I want to feel like I’m going to pass

out as I cum deep inside this pretty whore's pussy."

Atlas kissed the side of my face as his hand slipped up my body, and he gripped the end of the chain. "Remember when I put this on you? Tell me when you're close."

Atlas gave me the necklace four years ago. The day he claimed me as his and discovered I had a thing for choking.

Atlas and I thrust in rhythm. I fucked Mona while Atlas fucked me.

"Now. Pull it now."

My throat was restricted, and breathing became impossible. But I didn't care because the struggle to breathe unleashed one of the best orgasms I'd ever experienced.

21

MONA

Humans are shaped by their experiences and the lasting effects of memories. Sometimes, these memories are full of joy. Other times, they're riddled with fear and sorrow. Mine seem to be muddled with regret. I've made choices that have caused me pain. I believed I was making the correct decision, only to discover how misinformed I was years later. Each regret became an aching reminder etched on my soul.

For the last two years, I've questioned my longing for those two men. Why I craved their touch and no other. I was convinced that Stockholm Syndrome wasn't a condition a healthy mind would develop, so I began regularly seeing a therapist. No matter what I did, though, I couldn't escape the weeks when those two men were the center of my existence.

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I never thought I'd see them again. The bitter taste and sweet scent of those memories faded, becoming a distant memory locked away, hoping to be forgotten. I never expected the ghosts from my past to reemerge, igniting a firestorm of emotions I believed dead and buried.

Yet even knowing that these men held me captive, I can't deny that they risked their lives to set me free. Perhaps that's why I've chosen to ignore their sins.

I wrap the metal chain around my hand to ensure I have a firm grip and yank as hard as I can, causing Atlas and Callum to lunge forward. A perverse joy courses through me as I witness their red faces. Power surges in my fingertips, knowing I have them on their knees. For me.

"Please," Callum gasps, shocking me.

"Does my little puppy want something?" I taunt.

"Cut the crap, Mona. You know exactly what I want."

My laughter fills the space between us as I approach Callum and line my pussy up with his face. He leans in and inhales, his nose nuzzling me.

"You're not being a good boy, Callum. I think I need to see you beg like the pathetic puppy you are."

"What do you want from me, Mona?"

Chuckling, I let the chain fall and stroll back to bed, swaying my hips, aware of two pairs of eyes on my rear. Slowly, I remove every single garment of clothing and discard them on the floor. Lying on the bed, I part my legs, displaying my wet pussy to their ravenous stares.

I prop myself on my elbows and lock eyes with Callum. “I’m gonna need you to bark like the dog you are.”

His eyes narrow. “What?”

“You heard me, Callum. Be a good boy and bark for me.”

“I’m not barking,” Callum hisses.

“That’s unfortunate.” I sigh, gliding my hand toward my pussy and rubbing my finger over my clit.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Kitten,” Callum growls.

“All you need to do is bark for me, Callum. Good dogs get treats. You want to be a good boy and earn your treat, don’t you?”

Ignoring Callum, I turn toward Atlas, seeing the lust in his eyes. “Atlas, why don’t you come here?”

Atlas gets up. “No, on your knees. Crawl for me, pretty boy. Show Callum that you’re a good boy who listens to his owner.”

Atlas places one hand in front of him before sliding his knees behind him. Slowly, he crawls to me until he’s in front of my open legs.

“Good boy,” I pant as I plunge two fingers into my pussy, fucking myself. “Open your mouth, Atlas. Tongue out.”

Atlas parts his lips, and his tongue hangs out.

“See, Callum? Atlas is a good little pup.” I remove my fingers from my pussy and place them on Atlas’s tongue.”

“Mm,” Atlas mumbles as his lips close around my fingers.

“You see, Callum? You’re missing out,” I whisper as I slide my fingers in and out of Atlas’s mouth. “That’s it, Atlas. Suck them clean. You’re doing such a good job.”

Callum laughs. “Kitten, I hope you’re having fun because when it’s my turn to have you under my boot, I’m going to make you regret this.”

My body runs hot as Callum glares at me, ensuring I understand that his threat is simply a promise. What he doesn’t realize is that for the past two years, I’ve craved him and everything he could do to me. So his promise is one I fully intend to make him keep.

“I’m looking forward to it, Callum.”

“Then cut the crap, Mona.”

“I will once you bark.”

“It’s not happening,” Callum spits.

I smile. “Atlas, be a good boy and take out your cock.”

Atlas rises from the floor and unbuckles his pants. He lowers the zipper and pushes the black denim down to his ankles. Stepping out of the pants, he stands before me, naked from the waist down. My mouth waters as I take in his hard cock, pointing at me like an arrow with one aim.

“You’re a good boy, aren’t you, Atlas?”

“Yes,” he moans.

“I know you are. That’s why I’m going to let you fuck me while Callum watches like a little bitch.”

22

CALLUM

Watching Mona Baran on the edge of my bed, my boyfriend standing between her splayed thighs as he fucks her, is like being trapped in the ninth circle of hell.

She wants me to bark. If I’m honest, I already feel like a dog salivating over a succulent steak just out of reach. I don’t know why I’m not giving her what she wants. Maybe this is one of those stubborn moments where one cuts off their nose to spite their face.

“Bark, Callum. Bark, and I’ll let you fuck my pussy.”

Mona’s taunts aren’t making things better. My yearning for her is ramping up so much that I fear I might explode.

“Fuck,” Atlas groans. “Goddamn, you feel so good. So fuckin’ good.”

Jesus, can he shut up? How hard would it be to fuck silently?

“That’s it, Atlas. Fuck my pussy. You’re doing such a good job. That’s it, stretch me nice and wide.”

“Fuck, I don’t think I can hold it much longer,” Atlas moans. “This perfect cunt feels so good around my dick. You’re a perfect slut, Mona. My pretty little whore. I’m going to come deep in you, baby girl. Fill you with my cum. This won’t be enough, sweetheart.”

Atlas is pissing me off. He’s getting what I want, and I can’t handle it. I plan to make him pay later.

“Yes, Atlas. Make sure I know who owns this pussy. Take me hard, Atlas. Make me your whore.”

That’s all Atlas needs. He smiles at Mona and spits on her face, smearing it into her skin before slapping her across the cheek. “Open your mouth, you filthy fuckin’ whore.”

Mona’s hips buck as she parts her lips, allowing Atlas to slide three fingers into her mouth.

“That’s it, cum dump. Fill your holes.” He slaps her face again before sliding his

hand between her legs to slap her pussy. “You like getting this pretty pink cunt slapped, don’t you?”

Mona moans and nods.

Atlas slaps her cunt repeatedly. “I’m going to make this cunt red and swollen, dirty girl.”

Mona and Atlas groan as his thrusts become more aggressive. “Fuck. That’s it. Such. A. Fuckin’. Perfect. Pussy. You’re gonna make me come, baby. I’m going to fill this pussy. I can’t wait to see my cum dripping out of your cunt. Can’t wait to see the proof of what a slut you are for me. That’s it. God. Yes.”

Atlas stills, groaning. “Fuccccckkk. Awwww. Goddamn.”

Mona’s moans and dirty talk may as well be a fuckin’ bat to my balls. “Fuck, fine.”

Mona turns away from Atlas and stares at me, a mischievous smile gracing her stunning face. “I’m waiting.”

I can’t help it. I crack a smile. The fact that she’s not only survived but also thrived in the last two years makes me happier than I thought possible. I knew Mona was strong the moment she met me head-on, refusing to cower, but to see her like this, completely sure of herself, does something to my heart.

“Woof.”

“I think you can do better than that. Imagine you’re a doggie begging for food.”

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“Awwwwhoooo! Woof, woof!”

Mona smiles. “Good boy. Atlas, pull out.”

Mona and Atlas get off the bed. Mona bends to pick up the chain and tugs, forcing me to crawl toward her to avoid falling face-first onto the floor.

“You get to ask for one thing. What would you like?”

I lie on my back on the bed. “Sit on my face.”

“What?” Mona asks in shock.

“That’s what I want, Kitten. I want my pretty little slut to sit on my face and feed me her and Atlas’s cum.”

23

ATLAS

Callum has always had a thing for suffocation. He enjoys doing it to Mona and me, but most of all, he enjoys having it done to him. He loves nothing more than suffocating.

He lies on the bed, holding up his hand as Mona moves to straddle his face. “Atlas, why don’t you go get a pair of panties and show them to Mona?”

My blood runs cold at his words. He's pissed that I got to fuck Mona first, and now he wants to put me in my place. This is what our life will be like. Three switches who aren't sure which role they want to play.

"What panties?" Mona asks.

"Little Atlas here has been going into your apartment late at night. He likes to touch you while you sleep. After he's had a little fun, he goes into your hamper and takes a souvenir. Go on, Atlas. Show her."

Walking to the dresser, I open the top drawer. I look at the array of panties piled inside and pull out a black cotton pair.

Callum laughs, his Scottish accent thicker than usual as he says, "The sicko likes to cum in them. Isn't that cute?"

Mona smirks, and I can't help wondering what she's thinking. "So that's where my panties are going? I assumed it was some pervert at the laundromat who was taking them.

Mona walks over to me, wrapping her fingers around mine briefly before taking the panties. Bending, she uses them to wipe the cum from her inner thighs before lifting them to my mouth. "Open your mouth, you perverted little slut."

My lips part, and she stuffs the cum covered panties in my mouth.

"I need you to lube up Callum's ass and fuck him like the bitch he is while he uses his worthless tongue to clean my pussy."

I nod.

“Get your legs up, puppy,” Mona orders Callum.

Callum raises his legs, and I pour the lube on my dick and around his asshole.

“Finger his ass, Atlas. Fuck his backdoor for me. Show him what a little bitch he is for us. Let him know he’s nothing more than our cum dump.”

My dick is harder than steel. I’m pretty sure it could cut through glass. I never thought I’d get so hard from seeing a woman dominate not only me but also Callum, and I have to admit that it’s the biggest high I’ve ever known.

“Go on, be a good boy for me, and fuck him nice and hard.”

I press the tip of my cock into Callum, letting him adjust before slowly pushing further. Once he relaxes, I slowly pull back before thrusting forward again.

Mona returns to Callum and hovers over his head on the bed, allowing a drop of cum to land on his face.

Callum groans. “Sit on my face, Mona.”

“Little bitches don’t tell their mistress what to do,” Mona says.

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“I let you play your game, Mona. I'll let you have your fun. But it's time for me to put you in your place. When I tell you to sit on my face, you're going to be a good little slut, and give me what I want. Now shut the fuck up and ride me until you come all over my face.”

“Oh, God,” Mona moans.

“No, Mona. I'm a servant because you're God. You're my fuckin' lord and savior,” Callum mumbles into her pussy. “Grind this sweet cunt on my face. Allow me to feel worthy of your love.”

Callum growls as he tugs Mona down, forcing her to sit directly on his face.

Seeing the way Mona comes undone for us has me on the edge. Watching the people I love in the throes of passion is the most intoxicating drug I could take. It's potent and addictive, and I'm a slave to it. These two control me, body, mind, and soul. They are my reason for waking up in the morning and my peace when I close my eyes. I want more of it. I want to be consumed by it, wrapped in rapture, and taken to paradise to hold onto this feeling for all of eternity.

My hand moves to Callum's dick, and I pump until all three of us explode in unison in a release that has me understanding the meaning of life.

But as the high wears off, the fear sets in.

What if she doesn't stay?

ATLAS

The quiet hours before dawn or the stillness after midnight are the times I cherish most. The world is asleep, and I'm alone with nature and my thoughts.

The sight of Callum and Mona's naked bodies entwined in an embrace soothes my mind and heart.

Oddly, this is the only moment in my twenty-nine years of life that I've ever felt true peace and utter calm. Right now, my mind perceives life to be perfect.

I believed Mona wouldn't want us. I thought she'd run screaming the moment she saw us again. But last night proved something entirely different. Last night, Mona saw us—the monsters, the demons from her past—and instead of rejecting us, she opened her arms. Maybe hope isn't a foolish man's game. Perhaps hope is eternal, even for sinners like me.

Leaving them was a slow, torturous pain, but I had to take out the trash. Trash in which Callum discards the problems that pop up. But he was sleeping so soundly that I didn't want to wake him. The quiet serenity on his face was a contrast to the turmoil that surrounded him his entire life. I wanted him to linger in the peace for as long as possible.

I dress and head to the garage—a closed-off space used as a butchery. The man is hanging like a cow draining of blood.

I turn on the hose and direct it at his face. "Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey."

"What the fuck?" he gargles.

His distress over hanging upside down while being blasted with water is rather humorous. Funny how differently people react when the Grim Reaper comes calling. Some scream, cry, and beg for their lives. Some, like this man, hold on to the delusion that they'll survive.

I laugh as he shakes water from his hair. "Thought it was time to have a little fun."

"Hey, man. I'm not looking for trouble."

I drop the hose and sift through his wallet. William Watson. "How long have you been robbing innocent women, Billy?"

"I-I I wouldn't h-have hurt her," he stutters.

"Ah, but you did, Billy." I pick up the knife he used to slash Mona's side and wave it in his face. "I believe you used this very blade."

"I-I'm sorry. Let me go, and I'll never do it again. I p-promise."

I weigh Billy's plea. A part of me thinks everyone deserves a second chance, but this man dared to hurt the woman I love. That's unforgivable. I lift my shirt to display the cracked heart tattoo with two names written in cursive on my abdomen. "You messed with two people who mean more to me than my life."

Billie screams as I plunge the knife into his side, the same area where he slashed Mona. "Gaaaahhhh, fuck, that hurts!"

"Oh, Billy, you're lucky I've got better places to be, or I'd make this far more painful."

I stab him repeatedly. Blood gushes from arteries, spraying my face and the floor.

“P-please!” He begs for endless minutes until he finally stops thrashing.

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I pull out my phone and dial a number.

“Hello.”

“Alaric, it’s Atlas.”

Alaric knows me through my father, but unlike Daddy dearest, he isn’t a piece of shit.

“Been a minute. How are you?”

“I need a cleanup.”

“You’ll owe me.”

I could clean this up myself, as I usually do, but I’m needed elsewhere. “I know.”

25

MONA

Have I made a mistake fucking the two men who held me captive? Is it insane to fuck them when I haven’t seen them for two years? Was it too brazen of me to act the way I did without knowing if they’d slit my throat?

I don’t know. I can’t answer those questions. All I know is that these two men have wormed their way into my very essence.

Atlas and Callum offer me peace—something I didn't think I'd ever get again.

I open my eyes to an empty bed, and my heart stops. Was it all a dream? A mirage? My panic quickly subsides when Callum walks in. He's showered and dressed, a cup of coffee in one hand and clothes draped over his other arm.

The harsh lines of his face soften as he smiles at me, but sadness lingers in his eyes.

"What is it?" I ask, jumping out of bed and grabbing the clothes he offers me. "Wait, these are my jeans. How the hell did you get my clothes?"

"From your apartment."

"How the fuck did you get into my apartment?"

Callum smiles sheepishly as he rubs the back of his neck. "We have a key."

"You have a key?"

"Umm... we own the building. We also own the surveillance company that installed the security system."

"You don't own the company. Roger Simpson does. That's who I leased from."

"We bought it from him. Offered him three times what the place is worth. How the fuck do you think you got all those upgrades? You think Simpson would've done that? That cheap ass hadn't done upkeep on that hellhole for two decades. Also, why are you living there? Your brother-in-law is God-like rich."

"I didn't want to get used to a comfortable life. I had issues about wealth and consumerism when I was younger. I enjoy living where my clients are. Once you get

accustomed to wealth, you become desensitized to poverty. Too much luxury allows a sense of superiority. Rich people get a false sense of entitlement and think they can do whatever they want. Too much money creates evil. If we saw each other as human, we would stop living like animals, and the best way to do that is to expose yourself to reality.”

“Lev isn’t an asshole. He spends a lot of that wealth helping others. He started a charity in your sister's name. I doubt you would become a megalomaniac if he set you up.”

I take a deep breath before I admit my truth. “Lev’s different. His heart has always been pure. I lusted after shiny things for years. I don’t think I’m nearly as good of a human as Levinston.”

Callum tilts his head and examines me for a moment. I’m not sure what he’s searching for, but he’s seeking something.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know Lev kills people, right?”

I laugh nervously, realizing how hypocritical I sound. But Lev doesn’t kill anyone who doesn’t deserve it. I gaze into Callum’s eyes and smile. “Every single man in my life kills people, including you.”

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“So, are you planning on keeping me?”

I move closer and pat his cheek. “I don’t know. Are you gonna be a good boy and listen?”

Callum laughs as his hand circles my throat, and he slams me down on the bed. It’s hard to breathe. A normal person would panic if a man like Callum threatened to suffocate them. But I’m not sure I’m normal.

The weight of the thickening silence is sliced by the sound of a zipper being lowered.

“If you want me to stop, tap my arm, but once I start, know this, Kitten, I’m going to own this pussy. You’re ours, mine and Atlas’s. Ours to love. Ours to protect. Ours to fuck. I’m not a good man. I never claimed to be, but fuck, Mona, I’ll be anything for you.”

My response is tactile and desperate. I brush his dark hair back and stare into his mesmerizing gray eyes. Eyes that hold the promise of everything. Of something more. The elixir for healing.

He impales me with one motion, his eyes never leaving mine as he takes my breath away, both physically and spiritually. My mind is wiped of any coherent thought other than the need to breathe and the sensations exploding from my pending orgasm.

“Eshghe mani,” Callum whispers in Persian. “You’re my love. “Ashegetham.I am in love with you.Dooset Daram. I love you.”

I'm transported into a world unknown to me before, a world full of stars, galaxies, and never-ending possibilities. I want to tell him I love him. As fucked up as it is, I love him. I want him to know that he and Atlas are the reason I am who I am today. How meeting them shaped me and compelled me to become someone I love—someone strong and compassionate. I want him to know that meeting them made me a better person.

“You and Atlas are my world. There's nothing I won't do for the two of you. I'd die to make you happy. I'd kill to keep you safe. I'm nothing without the two of you.”

“What did you say?”

My eyes leave Callum's face to see Atlas standing by the doorway. His eyes are glassy, and his hands shake.

Callum turns his head and gazes at Atlas. “I said I love you. Both of you. My life is worthless without you.”

Atlas walks toward us. He frames Callum's face before locking their lips. The kiss is passionate, unbridled, an inferno of desire unleashed after being trapped for so long.

My body ignites, and I come as I watch my men kiss. Callum grunts and follows me over the edge as my pussy milks his orgasm from him.

“When did you learn Persian,” I ask breathlessly as we catch our breath.

“I started going to classes when you did. It's important to you, so it's important to me.”

I blink back tears, unable to form words. I stare at the men I met under questionable circumstances. Men I care for beyond all reason.

“You’re going to stay, right?” Atlas asks.

I nod and whisper, “Yes.”

“Good,” Atlas says, a smile flirting on his lips. “Now open those legs so I can eat.

EPILOGUE: MONA

(Five Years Later)

“I can’t believe you married your kidnappers,” my sister says as we walk down the aisle.

I turn to her and smile. “Why? Did you think you were the only one who got to marry a kidnapper?”

My brother, Darius, laughs at my other side. “She’s got you there, Az.”

“Don’t look so smug,” Azadeh retorts. “If I remember correctly, you drugged your wife in hopes of impregnating her.”

Darius laughs as he raises his hand. “That wasn’t my idea. One of my stupid husbands came up with that idea.”

I glance at my siblings, feeling both joy and sorrow.

Joy that the three of us are living our lives on our terms the way my mother intended when she left Iran, fueled with hope and fear.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 4:33 am

Sorrow because she isn't here to see how happy and free her children are.

Two powerful hands wrap around my waist and spin me around. "What is that pretty head of yours thinking about?"

I smile at Callum, placing my head on his chest. "My mom. I wish she were here to see all this."

The loudspeaker crackles and Atlas speaks into a microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention?"

Everyone in the room stops and turns to him. I smile at the small group of misfits that I love more than anything.

My sister, Azadeh, with her husbands, Zeke, Cyrus, and Lev. Their children run around like maniacs under our feet.

My brother, Dariyus, with his family, Briar, Ezra, Malichi, and his two little ones, who are as jubilant as their cousins.

My best friend, Ari, smiling brightly beside the tall guy who gives off somewhat scary vibes.

And then my two men, Callum and Atlas, the loves of my life, beaming with all the love in the world as they gaze at me.

"Mona, our beautiful wife, the light in our darkness, the beat of our life," Atlas says.

“Stop being cheesy and get to it,” Cyrus yells, and a few people chuckle.

“As I was saying,” Atlas continues, “Mona, you mean everything to Callum and me. I hope you know that there is nothing we wouldn’t do for you, but unfortunately, some things aren’t in the realm of possibility. We know what you want most in the world on your wedding day is to have your mother here with us. Since we couldn’t do that, we made you this.”

Atlas steps off the stage and walks toward me as the lights dim and the screen lights up with my mother’s image. She’s in her hospital bed, frail and weak, not the warrior I knew her to be.

“Mona,azizam.I’m so sorry I can’t be there with you when you graduate, on your wedding day, or when you make me a grandmother. But I want you to know that my heart is with you even though my body isn’t. I’m looking down on you,joonham.Dooset daram doktaram.Love you, my darling daughter, and I’m so proud of you.”

I don’t realize I’m crying until Callum gently wipes the tears from my cheeks. “We thought that would make you happy, Kitten.”

“It does,” I whisper, “but it also makes me sad. She would’ve loved you two. She would’ve loved having all these grandkids running under her feet. I miss her so much.”

I gaze at my two men, my heart so full of love for them. They aren’t perfect. Some might call them monsters, but they’re my everything. “I love you two so damn much.”

Atlas pulls me to him, kissing the top of my head. “We love you, too, wife.”