



Heartless Prince

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Enter the dark, scandalous world of America's elite and discover their sinful secrets, twisted lies, and dirty desires... I've watched her from afar, and now it's time for me to claim my prize – Tatum Marris, the girl I bought. My newest and prettiest toy. She will serve me. Cater to my every wicked whim. Sate my desire for complete control. I'll own her pleasure, and one day, she's going to beg for more. She keeps pretending she's pure and innocent, but that isn't true. I know her darkest secrets, and one way or another, I'll make her confess every last sin. I'll make her fear me. Make her submit. Deep down, she knows she belongs with me. She knows she deserves to be punished. Caged. Owned. Tatum Marris, you're now the property of Elias King.

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Prologue

Tatum

November 28th, 2018

I opened one eye as something creaked near me. Couldn't quite manage the other; it was too heavy with sleep.

The room before me was a gray haze, a jumble of blurry outlines hanging in the air around me. I didn't know if it was day or night. Nausea crashed through me, flooding me in endless waves, and I sluggishly rolled to my right, not wanting to choke if I ended up retching and vomiting. That was when I saw it.

There was a person standing a few feet away.

I managed to open my other eye from the pure shock of realizing I wasn't alone, and the room seemed to swim around me as I tried to focus on the man. All I could see was brown hair, a towering body, and cold blue-green eyes. The rest was a blur, swept away on the ferocious ebb tide of my watery, hazy vision.

I knew I must've been drugged. Otherwise I would know where I was and who this man was. There was something familiar about those eyes and that reptilian gaze, but every time I tried to grasp the memory, it slipped away like dust through my fingertips. I felt as if I were in a tormented dream state, but I could tell from the aching in my head and the roiling in my guts that this was very real.

A moan escaped my lips. “Where... where am I?” I tried to say. It came out in a croaky, barely-recognizable slur. This wasn’t my voice. This wasn’t my room. This wasn’t my life.

The man spoke. “Sit up. It’ll wear off soon. You know these things are necessary. I think they may have given you too high of a dose last night, though, if you’re this bad.” His voice was cold, dangerous. I couldn’t remember who he was, but I knew I should be afraid of him. I could feel it in my bones.

I tried to do what he said, lethargically pulling myself up to a seated position. I was on a small bed with white sheets. I swung my legs over one edge and rubbed my eyes before looking around again.

I could see properly now. I was in a small room with smooth white walls, except for the wall to my left which was made of dark gray stone. The floor was solid gray concrete. A toilet with no lid sat in one corner with a large grate next to it. I still had no idea where I was at all.

Letting out another soft groan, I swallowed hard. Then, with great difficulty, I lifted my head to sweep my eyes around again. The room had no windows, but there was a glass pane on the door which gave me a view of more gray and white outside. Under the door, a flag of light fell in from the corridor. The door itself had some sort of keypad and electronic lock which required the swipe of a keycard.

Had I lost my mind? Was I in prison, or some sort of drab mental health facility designed to scare me straight? What had I done to wind up here?

I repeated my earlier question. “Where am I?”

The man glared down at me. “Tatum, you’ve been here for weeks. You know where you are. Think.”

I rubbed my eyes again, straining to remember what had happened to me. All I had were shards of senseless wreckage in my brain. I was trying my best to piece them together and lift my memories out of the cruel darkness, but it seemed impossible.

A name suddenly popped into my head, clear as day. “King,” I whispered. “That’s... that’s you.”

“Good girl. You’re starting to remember.”

Another lick of fear crept up my spine. “Why am I here?”

“Because you asked for it.”

I shook my head. “No.”

A vicious smile. “Oh, yes.”

A picture was starting to form in my head now. Then it was solid, complete, clear. A nighttime ceremony in the deep woods, a coffin, flaming torches, robed men with horned masks and golden rings. A woman in white, tied to a stone altar.

I gulped. Every piece of the memory brought with it gruesome forecasts of the consequences of my actions and dark visions of my future. I was still trying to force away the blackest thought of all; the mere suggestion of it sent panic skittering up my spine. But there it was, cold and stark and fully-formed in my memories.

“I made this happen,” I whispered, reaching around to feel the brand on my lower back.

The man cracked another nasty smile. “So it’s all coming back to you. Thank god it’s wearing off. We need you ready for tonight, don’t we?”

“Tonight?” I choked out the word, so normal and yet so ominous in these circumstances.

“The Bonding is tonight. Surely you remember thatpart.”

I shook my head. “I don’t.”

“It means it’s finally time for you to lose your virginity.”

I felt stripped of oxygen all of a sudden, as if the man’s words had burned it all away, left the room hollow and dry. More memories flooded back as I thought about how all of this began, piecing things together like a jigsaw puzzle. What an ugly, twisted picture it made.

“I can’t believe I did this,” I repeated miserably. What the hell was I thinking?

“You did it because you belong here.” Another nasty smile. “Don’t you?”

I nodded bleakly. He was right. I brought this upon myself.

My fault.

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Tatum

Three months earlier

The blazing fall leaves swirled around my feet, a heavy wind firing them into the air seconds later. The morning light gave them a gorgeous orange glow, and I smiled and let out a long, satisfied breath as I stepped into Bamford College.

Home.

Bamford was one of ten residential colleges here at Roden University. Set up like something out of the pages of Harry Potter, all students were assigned to a 'house' known as a college when they were granted acceptance. Every student was convinced that their college was the best and this promoted some rivalry between them, but it was all in good fun, never taken too seriously.

Like many other buildings on the prestigious Ivy League campus, Bamford was a great hulking place that swept upwards with awe-inspiring architecture. A grand Collegiate Gothic design made of light gray stone with intricate carvings, it was covered with creeping ivy and ornate gargoyles which watched stonily over the outside world.

As was the case with every other residential college, Bamford had its own spacious private courtyard outside with an enormous marble fountain, stunning gardens and thick green hedges. On the inside, it had enormous private suites for every student, an

expansive dining hall, a late night buttry, gym with heated indoor pool, movie theater, library and activity areas. Every little luxury you could possibly imagine.

As a friend of mine once commented, eighty grand a year in tuition had to pay for something, and that was why Roden's housing was so extravagant. I was fortunate enough to be on a full-ride scholarship, though, never paying a dime for any of it, so being surrounded by all this lavishness still made my head spin on occasion even after all this time. I'd never experienced anything like it in my life, and when I first arrived on campus three months ago, the giddiness hadn't subsided for weeks.

"Hey! We're over here!" Mellie Davenport waved at me from the middle of the dining hall.

I smiled and hurried over to my friends, weaving my way through the tables and chairs. The hall was enormous with towering vaulted ceilings, decorated leaded windows and carved pointed arches over the doors. It was only seven in the morning, but the place was already bustling with activity.

That was one of the things I loved about Roden. No matter how early it was, nearly everyone here was eager to get started on their days so they could learn as much as possible. I knew I wasn't some sort of genius by any stretch of the imagination, but I'd always loved studying and learning, so it was nice to be surrounded by so many like-minded people. The intense class schedules and heavy focus on academics over sports was very likely the reason Roden topped every other college in the country on the academic rankings most years. Even the other Ivies and super-competitive places like MIT struggled to keep up.

"I got you some scrambled eggs and a giant latte," Mellie said when I reached the table and sat down, whipping off my jacket and wiping the sweat from my forehead with a napkin.

“Ooh, thanks!” I smiled and took a grateful gulp of coffee. Then I groaned with satisfaction. “God, I needed that.”

“You know, you could just get up an hour later and come here first thing like the rest of us,” Mellie said with a snicker. She was the Dean’s daughter. We met when I came to New Marwick for a tour after getting early acceptance to Roden last year. Seeing as we lived on the same floor of Bamford, we’d become fast friends once we started classes.

We’d both started in the summer, preferring to forego our summer breaks and dive into things head-on. That was possible because rather than the usual fall and spring semesters that other colleges offered, Roden had three study periods—a summer, fall, and spring trimester schedule. Because of that, we’d already completed a few courses even though it was only the beginning of fall.

“I’d still need coffee to function this early anyway, whether I go jogging or not,” I said with a grin, digging into my eggs.

“True.”

“How was your run, anyway?” another friend inquired—Willa. I’d met her a couple of years ago through my best friend Katie (who was now on a gap year trip in France). I always got along with her well enough, but now that we were at the same college together, we’d become closer by sheer proximity. Like Mellie, she came from a filthy rich family, but the two of them were sweet as pie, unlike a lot of other students here who couldn’t get their heads out of their over-privileged asses.

“Good. It’s so beautiful out there. I love fall mornings,” I said dreamily.

“Wish I had your dedication. I’m way too fucking tired to exercise most of the time,” chimed in another friend, Greer, who’d only just managed to lift her head off the

table. Her eyes were red-rimmed and bleary with heavy bags under them.

“Sleep badly again?” I said, my brows knitting with concern.

She shook her head. “I barely even slept. I was up all night writing my article.”

“Did you finish it?” Willa asked. Her hands were wrapped around a large mug of green tea.

Greer nodded. “Yeah. Thank god.” She groaned. “Why do I always do this to myself?” she added miserably. Then she shook her head and laughed self-deprecatingly.

The rest of us joined in with mischievous giggles. Greer was a creative writing major, and she and I worked together at one of Roden’s student-run newspapers—the Roden Daily News. While Greer was talented at writing and creative as hell, she also had a habit of flaking out and leaving her newspaper assignments to the last minute, preferring to spend her time reading about fantasy worlds and wild conspiracy theories. Out of our little group, she was the most flighty and irresponsible. A true artistic type.

More perked-up now, Greer started telling us about her article. I listened intently for the first few minutes but began to tune out when a familiar man stepped into my line of vision, several yards away but in line with Greer’s left shoulder.

Oh, hell no.

What was he doing here?

Even with the bright light bursting through the windows, Elias King still managed to fill my morning with gloom. He was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt with a jacket

slung over one arm, but nothing about him was casual. He held himself with an intensely regal air, knowing full well what everyone thought of him and the power he held over them. That is, if he chose to acknowledge their existence at all. Arrogant son of a bitch.

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His solid muscles, perfectly-chiseled features and cold blue-green gaze held the rapt attention of every female student or staff member within twenty feet of him. I couldn't blame them. I didn't like the guy, but I had to grudgingly admit he was one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen.

A shadow slid down the curve of his cheekbone when he spotted me watching him from my table. His upper lip curled almost imperceptibly, and he turned to meet my eyes with a stony stare. Ah, there we go. The good old 'King glare', aimed directly at me. No surprise. I'd seen it many times over the last year.

Elias and I first met—or had an encounter, I should say—at a party Willa threw last December, when I was still in my senior year of high school. He spent a good portion of the evening staring at me with unbridled malice in his reptilian gaze, despite the fact I'd never done anything to him or even met him before that night. Later, when we actually spoke, he made it quite clear that he considered a girl like me to be far below him and wholly undeserving of sharing space with him.

Since then, I'd seen him on a few more occasions, as we were now at the same college—me as a freshman, and him doing some sort of grad school business course, from what I'd heard through the grapevine. Every single time we ran into each other, he either pretended he didn't see me or stared at me with cold fury etched into his features, as if I personally offended him by daring to exist within a hundred yards of his privileged ass.

The thing that bothered me the most about him was the effect he always wound up having on me. As much as I hated having someone stare at me as if I'd done something terrible like blow up their car or murder their pet, the wildness and anger

in his eyes appealed to something dark and twisted inside me. Something I usually tried to hide. His intense stares made my knees turn weak as cold licks of fear slithered down my spine.

It seemed counterintuitive, but I liked that feeling of fear. It stirred strange cravings deep within, made me want to let him grab me and hurt me and command me. Made me want to give up all control and let him guide every word I spoke, every movement I made.

The need to submit, the need to let another person own me in order to complete me, filled me with an uncontrollable thirst and longing, as much as I tried to hide it from the world. As if all the guilt over my past actions could be assuaged if someone else owned me, because it would all become their responsibility. I would just be their toy, their pet, their living doll.

Seeing the cruel, malevolent way Elias looked at me ignited all those feelings, making them impossible to ignore.

I tried to push them aside anyway and glowered right back at him. I might like and crave those feelings, but at the same time, I didn't want to. I didn't want to feel like I could escape all accountability by letting someone else take control of my life, and I didn't want anyone to own every inch of me. It was just a dark fantasy.

“What's wrong?” Greer asked, registering my look of exasperation.

“Sorry, it's not you,” I said, nodding toward Elias. “It's him. Why is he even here?”

Technically, Elias wasn't allowed to be in here. This dining hall was for Bamford residents only, and as far as I knew, he didn't even live on campus. Then again, everyone always bowed to the Kings. If he wanted to be in here, I couldn't imagine anyone stopping him.

The others all looked in the direction my gaze was fixed on. “Ah, your nemesis,” Mellie said with a tinge of amusement in her voice.

“Who are we talking about?” Greer asked.

“Black t-shirt, tall, looking at Tatum as if she just slashed his tires,” Mellie said.

Elias had just realized we were all looking at him, and he abruptly turned away to talk to three senior guys at a table. I couldn’t help but notice all of them had the same ring as him, thick gold bands on their right middle fingers. It was hard to see from here, but I’d seen the intricate design on Elias’s ring on other occasions when I bumped into him. It was an eight-pointed star.

“Oh, him. Who is he again?” Greer’s brows knitted together in a puzzled expression.

“He’s Elias freakin’ King,” Willa said. “Is that not enough for you to know exactly who he is?”

“Uh. Not really.”

She sighed. “I keep forgetting you aren’t from around here. You have heard of the King family, right?”

“Yes, but it’s seven in the morning and I’m half asleep, so I’m gonna need a refresher.”

Willa began to explain everything to her. In the meantime, I sipped at my coffee and watched Elias out of the corner of my eye, wishing he’d leave. As much as everyone else respected him and his family, I couldn’t respect someone who treated me like trash just because I wasn’t as rich as them.

And god, was his family rich...

The Kings were practically a national institution here. After amassing enormous wealth in the oil and petroleum industries a couple of hundred years ago, they now possessed the largest private fortune in the world, making even the Rockefellers look like peasants. Richer than God, richer than sin.

The fortune was split between all the descendants and branches of the family, and despite nearly everyone being aware of their existence, the majority of them shied away from the media, opting to keep their lives as private as possible.

Of course, this enigmatic behavior only added to their popularity due to the intrigue swirling around them, so they were a household name to most people. Our very own American royalty.

I turned my attention back to Willa, who was still talking about them.

“Honestly, they’re worth so much that they make me feel super poor,” she said. For reference, her family—the Van der Veers—were worth about seven billion dollars. Their main house alone was worth about forty million, not to mention all the other real estate they owned for different seasons and vacations.

Greer looked at me and rolled her eyes heavenward with a good-natured smile. I grinned back. Like me, she was here on a scholarship after being born and raised in a family that always struggled to pay the bills. She knew what it was like to rub shoulders with the elite and come out feeling like she’d stepped into a particularly savage episode of *Dynasty*, and she liked to tease Willa and Mellie whenever they accidentally said something oblivious, just to balance things out a little.

“Yes, I know how bad that sounds,” Willa added, playfully nudging Greer. “I’m just saying, that’s how filthy rich they are.”

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“Don’t worry, I get it,” Greer said.

“Cool.” Willa clasped her hands together on the table in a pyramid shape. “Anyway, Tobias King is pretty much the patriarch right now. He’s the one who controls the most wealth out of every branch of the family. So he’s basically like the king of America. I guess that would make Elias a prince. He sure acts like one.”

I snorted. “Please. We live in a democracy, not a monarchy.”

“Maybe that’s just what they want us to think,” Greer said with her brows raised.

“Oh, you and your conspiracy theories,” I said with a teasing grin. “Look, Elias King is just a stuck-up asshole with too much money. He can glare at me all he wants, but he can’t exactly hurt me or throw me in a castle dungeon like an actual prince could back in the day.”

Willa worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “I don’t know. I agree with you about the Kings being arrogant asses, especially Elias—believe me, I’d know, because he’s friends with my brothers—but on the other hand, they’re still powerful as hell. I told you about Brad Wellings, right?”

“No.”

“He was friends with one of my older brothers. He got on the wrong side of a King a few years ago. One of Elias’s cousins, I think. Slept with his girlfriend. Next day, he was fired from his Wall Street job for no reason, and he couldn’t find a single lawyer on the entire East Coast who would represent him for unfair dismissal. Couldn’t find

another job, either, even though he was really smart and qualified. He'd been blackballed. Last I heard, he had to move to Montana to work on a ranch." She said the state's name as if it were a dirty word.

"Hey!" Greer said indignantly.

"Oh. Shit." Willa's cheeks turned pink. "Sorry, I keep forgetting you're from there."

Greer reached behind her and messed up her perfectly-styled blonde locks. "Now we're even." She snickered.

Willa smiled at her, then turned back to face me. "Anyway, if Elias doesn't like you, that's not a good sign. He could ruin all sorts of stuff for you with nothing more than a phone call."

I sighed. "I hope not, because I have no idea why he doesn't like me, so I can't exactly do anything about it."

"Are you sure you'd never met him before my party last year?" she asked, forehead wrinkling curiously.

"Hundred percent sure. It's like he just took one look at me and decided to hate me."

"Maybe he has a thing for you," Mellie said, leaning forward on her elbows. "It could be a love-hate thing. Like, he hates how much he loves you, and it drives him crazy."

"I seriously doubt that. Besides, that whole 'boys are only mean to girls they like' thing is so junior school."

"True. But I still think he might have a crush. I can't think why else he'd stare at you all the time. He must think you're super-hot. Which you are, by the way."

My cheeks turned warm, and I knew I was blushing hard. “Thanks.”

“When was the last time you went on a date, anyway?”

I shrugged. “A few weeks ago. That blond guy from my media class. I haven’t seen him again, though.”

I’d actually been on several dates since I started at Roden. A ton of funny, interesting guys went here, and unlike high school, where I’d basically been invisible, they actually seemed to take notice of me. I couldn’t help but be a little concerned about my love life luck, though, or lack thereof.

The dates always seemed to go really well, but the budding relationships would fizzle out right afterward with the guys never calling or texting me again. One of them even quite literally ran from me when he saw me walking toward him outside a lecture hall the other day, and I wasn’t even going to speak to him. I was just headed that way for a class. He actually looked afraid, as if I might bite his head off for ghosting me.

No wonder I was still a damn virgin at the age of nineteen. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to have sex, it was more like the universe was conspiring against me in order to prevent me from ever having it.

Or maybe I was just a terrible date.

“So it didn’t go well?” Mellie asked.

I gave her a rueful smile. “It was fine. Really good, in fact. But he stopped returning my texts afterwards.”

Greer frowned. “What the hell? Isn’t this the fifth time this has happened with a guy?”

“Sixth,” I said miserably. “Be honest, you guys. Am I boring? Or unintentionally mean?”

“No,” my friends all said in unison.

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I shrugged. “I just don’t know why else these guys are all ditching me. It always seems to go well, so it’s almost like someone is paying them to ghost me. But maybe I’m missing something. Maybe I really suck.”

“No, you’re great. They’re all just assholes,” Willa said.

“Maybe they get pissed that you don’t sleep with them?” Greer added.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “But I want to! I just figure I should wait until at least a third or fourth date so I know we’re really connecting. Is this really what the world is like now? You get ditched if you don’t immediately jump into bed with them?”

“Um. Yeah, pretty much.” Greer pressed her lips together in a thin line.

“No, don’t tell her that!” Mellie tossed a balled-up napkin at her. “There are some nice guys out there. You’ll find one eventually,” she added soothingly, turning her attention back to me.

“I hope so. Anyway, what’s on everyone’s schedule today?” I asked, trying to change the subject to something less gloomy.

“Back-to-back accounting and economics lectures,” Mellie said.

“Same,” Willa chimed in. “That’ll be fun....”

“I have to hand my article in and do some research for an assignment. What about you, Tatum?” Greer asked.

I glanced at the clock at the far end of the dining hall. “I have a media class in an hour. Before that, I’m gonna go back to my room and have a serious Google session. I really need to come up with an idea for a paper for Professor Halliwell’s class.”

“Is that your sociology class?” Greer asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. The paper’s due at the end of the trimester and it’s worth sixty percent of my entire grade for the class. It’s a really cool subject, but there’s so much stuff to pick from. I can’t decide.”

“Maybe we can help?” Mellie said. “I hear Halliwell is super tough.”

“Yup. Someone told me she’s never given anyone an A. Ever.”

“Jeez. Okay, so what’s the assignment subject?”

“Urban legends.”

“Ooh!” Greer said, clasping her hands together in front of her. “That sounds like fun.”

“It is. We have to pick one legend and look at where it originated, how it’s transmitted, why it persists, what its purpose within our society is, what that says about our culture, and so on. It’s really interesting, and if we write about something local, we get extra credit. I was thinking about the killer in the back seat legend, because someone told me that started here. But I don’t know. I think a few people are already doing that, and I want to stand out.”

Willa rolled her eyes. “Please don’t do the back seat one. That’s so played out. Besides, I’m pretty sure it originated in Indiana. I saw a movie about it.”

“Oh, really? Crap.” I slumped back in my seat.

“I have an idea, though,” she went on. “What about the Roden Strangler? That’s definitely a Connecticut thing.”

My eyes widened. “Yes! Oh my god, I can’t believe I didn’t think of that.”

“The Roden Strangler?” Greer looked confused.

“You haven’t heard about that?”

“Nope. Born and bred out-of-state, remember?”

“Oh, right, duh. It’s an old urban legend here. I think it originated around the sixties or seventies. Basically, it claims that the rate of young missing women is higher in New Marwick than anywhere else in the state. Especially around the Roden campus. I don’t think it’s actually true. We probably have the same amount of missing girls as anywhere else. But anyway, I guess someone decided to started a rumor that there was a crazy guy going around strangling all these women who disappeared, and it’s persisted ever since then.”

“Yeah, so now people around here will sometimes say stuff like, ‘careful, don’t walk home alone at night or the Roden Strangler will get you’,” Mellie said.

“Right. Did anyone actually ever get strangled?” Greer asked, her forehead wrinkled quizzically.

“No.” Mellie frowned. “At least I don’t think so. There’s no proof suggesting it happened, because out of all the young women who’ve gone missing around this area, none of them have ever been found.”

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“Except that one in the eighties they wound up finding in a forest,” Willa chimed in. “But she wasn’t strangled. It was a drug overdose.”

“So no one knows what happened to the rest of them?” Greer said, her eyes widening.

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“That’s so creepy. How many missing women are we talking about?”

I frowned, racking my brains. “About four in the sixties, another three in the seventies, also three in the eighties. Not sure about more recent decades.”

“Two in the nineties and another three since then,” Willa said. She was peering down at her cell phone. “I just looked it up. Camille Gorham went missing in 1992, Laura Cecchettini in 1999, Ali Ryan in 2005, Tamika Beck in 2011 and Kylie Burns in 2015. Three of them were Roden students.”

Greer shuddered. “Jeez. That’s actually a lot of missing women for such a small city,” she said. “I mean, the population’s only a hundred thousand, right? That’s tiny compared to places like New York.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t mean there’s a serial killer on campus. With most of them, there was some sort of background that could explain it. Like Kylie Burns. Apparently she had a major coke problem, and her friends were worried she was getting involved in some really shady stuff to pay for the habit. Also, Tamika Beck had pretty serious mental health issues. I know it’s horrible, but those sorts of things are way more likely to have contributed to them vanishing than some creepy old strangler legend.”

“Yeah.” Mellie nodded. “That reminds me. Have you ever heard the other legend about why all these young women go missing? I think it’s way more interesting than the Strangler theory.”

Willa frowned, then nodded emphatically. “Yes! Crown and Dagger!”

I tilted my head to the side. I’d heard that name before, but I couldn’t remember where. “Who or what is that?”

Greer clapped her hands together. “Okay, now that I can answer. A guy at the paper told me about them a few weeks ago. He said he doesn’t know if they actually exist, but they’re supposedly a secret society which recruits right here on campus. Men only. Very clandestine. Lots of shady rumors about them.”

I frowned. I’d heard about a few secret societies here at Roden. They tapped upperclassmen in fall and had weird initiation rituals. Other than that, they were mostly just networking groups for people in similar fields. For example, Book and Quill was known to be a society for writers, and another one called Skull and Key was known to recruit law students.

I’d never heard anyone at Roden talk about Crown and Dagger and who they recruited, though.

“There’s always been a ton of weird stories about them,” Willa said, picking up where Greer left off. “Most of it is just urban legend. I think that would actually make a really good topic for your paper.”

“You’re right. I’m totally locking it in,” I said excitedly. “Is there any proof they actually exist?”

Willa and Mellie exchanged glances. Then Willa leaned forward and spoke in a

hushed tone. “Don’t tell anyone I told you this, but my older brothers and my dad are in it. They were recruited when they were here, and apparently it’s a lifetime membership thing.”

“Me too,” Mellie said, turning slightly pink. “My dad, I mean. He’s a member. My brother isn’t.”

“Why can’t you tell anyone?”

“We’re not supposed to talk about it. It’s all pretty silly, really, but still, my family might get pissed at me,” Willa said. “I can tell you a few things about them, though. They all wear a ring on their right hand with a Star of Ishtar engraved on it. Membership is also very exclusive. Unless you come from a very rich or very old family, you won’t get tapped. Oh, and like Greer said, it’s for men only.”

I briefly glanced over at Elias and his friends. They all wore rings with a star engraved on them. Could they be in Crown and Dagger? Or were they part of some other secret club which also required ornate membership rings?

I looked back at Willa. “What were you saying about the society and the missing girls?”

She waved a hand. “Oh, that’s one of the legends. According to those who believe it, Crown and Dagger kidnapped all those girls. The story came about after they found that dead girl in the forest in the eighties—the one I mentioned earlier. Even though she overdosed on drugs, which was ruled as self-inflicted, she had a crown brand on her lower back. Authorities said it was just a sorority hazing incident that left the mark and closed the case, but people talk, and everyone knows it wasn’t a sorority. Some of them blamed Crown and Dagger.”

“Creepy.”

Greer nodded. “Yup. Also, Crown and Dagger’s motto is apparently *Deliciae Dolor*, which makes it even creepier. It’s Latin for ‘the delights of pain’.”

Willa rolled her eyes. “That’s just a rumor. My brothers both said it’s bullshit.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. They said Crown and Dagger is the same as every other exclusive secret society. Just a bunch of rich guys getting drunk and partying hard.”

Greer frowned. “I dunno. I’ve heard they’re hiding a lot of really shady shit.”

Willa sighed and rubbed her temples. We all knew her well enough by now to know that this meant she was about to deliver a long, critical monologue.

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I leaned forward in my seat, waiting with bated breath.

“Trust me on this,” she began. “Almost everyone likes to believe there’s all these deep, exciting secrets about the real order of the world out there. Something only a chosen few can know, hidden in exclusive clubs, arcane riddles or ancient paintings. It makes the world seem way more interesting than it would if everyone knew the truth: that there’s nothing. No secrets. No esoteric elites who run the whole world and control every aspect of every government.”

“But how do you know that?” Greer asked, raising a skeptical brow.

“Because I just do,” Willa insisted. “All those secret societies... all they really do is have wild parties, get a few bones thrown to them by politicians for making campaign donations, and ensure their power mostly stays within their ranks via family and company mergers. That’s no secret, though. Everyone knows the rich work to keep themselves rich, and everyone knows they donate to political campaigns to make a few things go their way here and there. But they aren’t hiding anything like messages written by God, or some Renaissance sculpture that gives them directions to the fountain of youth, or a code that fills them in on the meaning of life.” She paused to take a breath. “So I guess that’s the real secret: that there is no secret. Yeah, the world is unequal, and yeah, it sucks. There are lots of ‘haves’ and way more ‘have-nots’. That’s just a boring, open fact.”

“Then why are all the rich dudes in these societies so secretive about them?” Greer asked, pouting slightly. She loved conspiracy theories, and she clearly didn’t like hearing that something like this might all be bullshit.

Willa shrugged. “It benefits them to be shrouded in mystery. I guess it helps them maintain their positions.”

I wrinkled my nose. “How?”

“Well, if everyone else thinks they have all these big, dark secrets that they’ll never personally know, and that they’ll always be on the outside, they’re less likely to try and get a look in. Most people will think there’s no point because they can never join the club or know the secrets. So they don’t bother trying, and all these rich old white dudes stay put.”

“Um....” My lips turned upward in a half-smile. “You think so? Because honestly, the secrecy makes me want to look into them even more, not the other way around.”

“Hey, there’s always a few rebels who think the same way.” She winked. “How do you think revolutions start?”

Mellie groaned. “Revolutions? If that’s where this conversation is going, I need more coffee.” She got up and headed off to refill her cup at the espresso machine standing on a bench a few feet away.

Greer licked her lips. “I heard something else about Crown and Dagger,” she said slowly. “Willa, you can correct me if I’m wrong, but apparently the college initiates have parties in their clubhouse under some giant tomb in the campus cemetery.”

“That’s actually true,” Willa said with a nod. “I heard my oldest brother talking about it once. They always have a huge party on the Friday after Tap Night for the neophytes to start their trials and see what it’s all about.”

“Tatum, you should try and sneak in for your assignment,” Greer said, her brown eyes lit with excitement. “You could do a full-on exposé on it!”

“Sneak in where?” Mellie asked. She’d just returned with a new cup of coffee.

I told her. As I spoke, she frowned and anxiously tugged her black sleeves down from where they were riding up past her wrists. She only ever wore long-sleeved things, even in the summer. She once told me it was because a girl in her exclusive prep school said her arms were ‘fat’ even though they were as slim as toothpicks, and she could never bring herself to bare them in public ever again.

For a long time before that, I’d had this idea in my head that all wealthy people lived perfect existences totally free from worry. I was wrong. No matter how privileged someone’s background was, they could still be horribly insecure. Mellie was living proof.

When I was done explaining Greer’s exposé idea, she looked down and chewed on her bottom lip. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” she finally said.

My brows pulled together. “Why not? Like Willa said, all these guys do is party hard. It’s not like they’d kill me if I sneaked in and they happened to find me.”

Mellie rubbed her eyes and gave a twitchy shrug. “I guess,” she said softly. There was a worried crease between her brows. “Shit, I just remembered, I have to go and talk to someone about a group assignment. I’ll see you guys later.”

She left hurriedly, leaving her full, steaming mug of coffee on the table.

“So... will you go to the party?” Greer asked, turning her attention back to me.

“Depends. How would I even get in? Surely they lock the place.”

“The main tomb entrance is always locked. But on the night of the party, they leave a little back entrance unlocked between nine and midnight. It’s so the new recruits can

get in after solving a set of riddles which end at the tomb before the party begins,” Willa said in hushed tones. “It’s the only night of the year the tomb is left unlocked like that.”

“So anyone could get in through that back entrance?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Most people avoid the tomb for various reasons. But yeah, technically, anyone could get in that night. They wouldn’t make it into the main underground area where the celebrations are held, though. Not unless they’re careful.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Still seems careless of them to leave it unlocked for even five seconds if they’re so hell-bent on secrecy.”

Willa waved a hand. “Well, firstly, hardly anyone actually knows that it’s left open for a few hours one night a year. I mean, most people don’t wander through the cemetery on a Friday night, so they would never discover it. The only reason I even know is because my brothers have big mouths. And secondly, the Roden tomb is mostly for initiates and first and second-level members. There’s nothing all that important kept in there, so I guess they don’t care that much. From what I’ve heard, the third level is the most serious one. You’d never be able to infiltrate that stuff, wherever it is. I wouldn’t know. Because of my brothers’ aforementioned big mouths, they didn’t make it to the third level.”

I snickered. “I see. So when’s Tap Night?”

Greer spoke up again. “Not next Tuesday, but the one after. So the party will be the Friday after that. I’d totally try and sneak in with you, but my parents are flying over to visit that week.”

“And I can’t go because if my brothers are there and see me, they’ll totally trash me to my parents,” Willa said with a sigh.

I chewed on my bottom lip. Professor Halliwell expected a hell of lot from her students, but if I was able to write an amazing exposé on Crown and Dagger and illuminate some of the urban legends surrounding them, I might very well get an A in her class. I would be the first one ever.

“Hell yes,” I finally said with a wicked grin. “I’m definitely sneaking into that party.”

2

Tatum

It was the Friday after Tap Night, a strange night: wild and gusty, squalls of wind roaring across campus, no moon as it slipped behind a cloud to hide.

I was going to spend most of the night hiding too.

I hurried out of Bamford and headed right, down a wide stone path. The Roden cemetery was on the westernmost part of the campus, about a fifteen minute walk from my suite.

I knew sneaking into the Crown and Dagger tomb and getting into the underground lair to witness their party without being seen wouldn't be easy. It might even be impossible. Still, I'd done all I could to ensure I had a chance.

Willa told me that after the initiation ceremonies on Tap Night, all recruits were given dark brown hooded robes to wear at future events. We'd gone to the Drama Department and borrowed the closest thing we could find, and now I was wearing it.

I figured I would get to the cemetery early, hide near the tomb, and wait for a group of recruits to find their way to the back entrance. Then I would quietly slip behind their group with my head down, pretending to be one of them as they entered the tomb. After that, I would have to think on my feet, because I had no idea what the tomb was like on the inside.

Posters stuck onto stone and brick walls fluttered in the wind as I headed past a campus library. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a girl's face staring at me from one of the posters. Priyanka Rahman.

Two weeks ago, right after the conversation I'd had with my friends about all of Roden's missing girls, Priyanka—Pri to her friends—had gone missing as well. It was a horrible coincidence. Her neighbor from her residential college had reported her missing, and posters had gone up all over campus over the next few days, begging for information.

A week later, Dean Davenport released a statement saying that Pri was actually fine. Apparently she'd become stressed from her workload at Roden and dropped out so she could fly back to her home country of New Zealand for some much-needed relaxation. Still, the incident had given the campus quite a scare, and not many people were hanging around outside at night anymore, opting for the cozy safety of their suites instead. It didn't help that no one had bothered taking down any of the posters yet, either.

I finally reached the path that led down to the cemetery. It was narrow and dimly-lit with only a handful of cast iron lampposts, curling away downhill and lined with deep black hedges. From my vantage point up here, I could see more lights shining on various places in the cemetery, a strangely-welcoming yellow glow that fell on the winding paths within.

There was a large wrought iron gate and stone wall guarding the cemetery. I didn't want to go directly through the gate just yet, though, in case I ran into anyone. Instead I went slightly to the left and crept along the wall, keeping one hand on the branches and ivy that crept over it. Then I waited, my eyes scanning for movement and ears pricked for sound.

The moon chose that exact moment to come out from behind the clouds. The lawn in

the cemetery looked almost white in the light, and the dark outline of gravestones rose up eerily in the night. I didn't see any people, though.

As quietly as possible, I crept back to the gate and opened it with a creak. I stole across the lawn on my tiptoes until I reached a gravestone tall enough to hide behind and close enough to the Crown and Dagger tomb to see what was going on. The cemetery should seem spooky to me, but I was too excited about my little mission to worry about the ancient bones beneath my feet.

I peered out from my hiding spot to get a good look at the hulking gray sepulcher. It was the quintessential Roden tomb: imposing, windowless and full of secrets. Much larger than I thought it would be, too. I knew I was at the back of it, because I'd seen the front with its stone columns and carved Latin words when I crept past a moment ago.

I checked my phone. It was just after nine. Willa told me the recruits usually solved the riddle and found their way to the back entrance of the tomb anywhere between nine and twelve, so I could be in for a long night.

I curled up and waited. The evening went on and on. A handful of times, there was a noise, and I immediately perked up, but it was just some sort of animal scrabbling through the graveyard.

A few minutes before ten-thirty, there was a snapping of twigs somewhere, too far away to pinpoint. Silence again, then a crunch of footsteps over dead leaves, only yards away from the tomb.

It was time.

I pulled my hood down over my face and crouched in my spot, ready to jump up and silently join the recruits. They arrived a moment later. I counted twelve of them. That

was a good number, easy to blend into.

“What’s gonna happen here?” I heard one of them say. “I thought the other night was the initiation.”

“It was. Pretty sure tonight’s just a party to celebrate our acceptance. At least that’s what my uncle told me. He’s a member,” said another guy in a low voice.

“Better be fucking good to make up for it being in a freezing tomb,” another one grumbled.

“I heard it’s wild as fuck, man.”

I saw them heading to the tomb’s back entrance, a large door carved into the stone. Quiet as a mouse, I tiptoed over to the back of the group and followed them, keeping my head as far down as possible with my hood pulled forward so that no one would see my face and realize I wasn’t male. The robe hid my curvy shape perfectly, so hopefully I’d just look like a short guy if anyone happened to notice me.

Fortunately, no one even turned to look at me. They were too excited about what lay ahead of them. I could practically feel them buzzing and vibrating with anticipation.

The recruit at the front of the group pushed the heavy, creaking door open so that it stayed ajar. Everyone else stepped inside, one after the other. I crept in with them, still unnoticed, and I immediately cast my eyes around, planning my next move.

Two burning torches lit the expansive tomb, held by two tall men in dark navy blue robes. The floor was cold gray concrete and a stack of coffins stood to one side. Creepy, but not unexpected.

Several padlocked doors stood nearby, ostensibly leading to other wings. Willa was

right about this main room—aside from the coffins, there was nothing in it.

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I quietly ducked behind the stacked coffins as the excited, blathering recruits made their way over to the men with the flaming torches. I now realized the men were guarding a darkened entrance to... I wasn't sure what. I could only assume it was the way down into the underground lair I'd heard so much about.

"Silence, neophytes!" one of the torch-holders said, his deep voice echoing throughout the tomb. "You are treading on sacred ground."

The brown-robed recruits went silent immediately.

"You wish to gain entrance to our Inner Temple," said the other blue-robed man. "Speak our watchword or leave this place forever."

"Deliciae dolor!" said every recruit in chorus.

I raised an eyebrow. Greer was right about that motto of theirs; it wasn't just a rumor. Willa's brothers either lied to her or didn't care enough about the society to remember the words.

One of the men lowered his torch. "Follow me, neophytes."

He turned and briskly headed through the dark entrance. The recruits followed him in single file.

I waited in my dark hiding spot, my heart racing. I had no idea what to do now. There was still one man with a torch guarding the entrance, so it wasn't like I could sneak through. Damn. Willa was right the other week. It would be impossible for anyone to

make it farther into this mausoleum than where I was right now.

My shoulders slumped, and I let out a defeated breath. I didn't even know how I could get out of here without that guard seeing me. I'd just have to make a break for it to the back entrance and hope he didn't catch me as I raced through the graveyard.

A shrill sound assaulted my ears a few seconds later. At first I panicked and almost jumped up, but then I realized it was only a cell phone. Not mine; I set it to the softest vibration setting earlier so that only I would know if it went off.

The guard with the flaming torch slipped a hand into a deep pocket and pulled his cell out. "Hey, man," he said. "Yeah, they just arrived. We followed the stupid script, don't worry. They're on their way down to the lair with Hasser now. Should've seen their faces. They pretend like they're so calm and casual but they take this shit so seriously. Fucking hilarious. Anyway, I'm just gonna go for a piss."

My forehead wrinkled. So much for Crown and Dagger being grim and serious. From the way the guy was talking on the phone, it seemed more like the society was just a silly frat they only pretended to take seriously to scare the new recruits.

"What? No." The man's tone was getting argumentative now. "My fucking bladder feels like it's about to explode! Seriously, man, my dick will probably fall right off if I don't go now."

I suppressed a snicker. Nice imagery there.

"It's not like anyone else is coming. I'll go outside and it'll take three minutes max. I'll see if anyone tries to get into the tomb, anyway." There was a pause, then, "Yeah, fine, whatever."

He hung up. I saw him dialing another number. "Hey, man, I seriously can't wait

until I'm second-level and don't have to do this boring-ass bullshit anymore. Think you can come up here for a few minutes and keep me company? I need to take a leak but fucking Benson said I can't take a break until someone else is here to keep watch." He paused, presumably listening to his fellow Crown and Dagger brother on the other end of the line. "Ten minutes? Urgh. Fine. See you then."

He hung up, grumbling to himself. Then he looked over to the tomb's back entrance and muttered, "Oh, fuck it. Two minutes won't kill the pricks," and strode outside.

My heart leapt. This was my chance. The entryway was unguarded, and I knew no one else was coming up to cover for this guy for at least ten minutes. It was almost as if the stars had aligned to make my life as easy as possible tonight.

I crept out from my hiding spot on my tiptoes and ducked into the dark entrance. Shouts and drumbeats echoed up from deep below. My hands shook with fear and anticipation as I walked forward, feeling my way down a winding path. Everything turned black as the torchlight from the main room faded away. The air became cooler, thicker, filled with the scent of earth. I was in an underground tunnel.

I moved as fast as I could in the darkness, praying I didn't run into the guy who would be heading up here soon to relieve the other guard. If I did, I'd be screwed.

Luckily, I didn't encounter anyone. I made it all the way down to the end of the dank, twisting tunnel, and I squinted as light hit my eyes again. I drew in a sharp breath and shrank into the shadows as I saw what lay at the end.

It was a magnificent underground grotto, decorated with imposing stone columns and intricate sculptures carved into the walls and ceiling. Flaming torches and candles lit the sprawling place, and old cracked gravestones were scattered around the edges. I could see dark little doorways leading to other rooms in the grotto, and I could hear wild shrieks, masculine groans, and feminine giggles spilling out from them.

Deep, rhythmic drumbeats echoed throughout the main chamber. It was filled with dark blue-robed Crown and Dagger members, along with several others in red robes. They had their hoods pulled up, and they were all wearing golden masks which covered every inch of their faces. The masks were elaborate with gleaming jewels and elegant bird's beaks that suggested arched brows and predatory mouths.

The new recruits stood barefaced and stoic on one side, not far from where I was crouched at the end of the tunnel.

In the center of the room, standing by a stone altar ringed by fire, was a man in a black robe. His hood was down and unlike the other established members, his mask only covered his eyes. He also wore a twisted golden crown. In one hand, he held a dagger.

I muffled a gasp. Even with the top of his face covered, I could tell it was Tobias King—Elias's father. I recognized him easily, because I'd once seen him speaking to my parents about a potential contract for my father's surveying business. He also had the exact same nose and powerful square jawline as Elias.

I guess it made sense that he was the head of Crown and Dagger, given how wealthy he was. The society only tapped members from super-rich or powerful families, and the Kings were the richest and most powerful of all.

There was a sudden booming sound as someone hit a large gong. The giggles and shrieks from elsewhere in the grotto abruptly ceased, along with the drumbeats, and a moment later, a few more robed men appeared from the doorways and headed over to the others.

"Welcome, neophytes!" Tobias called out, drawing everyone's eyes to him. I took the opportunity to quickly creep out of the tunnel and slip through the darkness along the edge of the room, ducking behind one of the tall gravestones. "Come forward!"

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The recruits shuffled closer to the ring of fire around Tobias. He smiled and spoke up again. "I see you survived the initiation ceremony on Tuesday. Congratulations. I'm sure you've heard the legends, and now, you are part of the legend yourselves."

He paused to look at all the recruits in turn, then went on, his voice crisp and clear.

"Election to our brotherhood is a golden ticket into a life beyond your wildest dreams, even with all your privileged backgrounds. Success becomes your birthright as soon as you are reborn into your new lives as members of our society. Anything you want is within your reach, and anything your enemy wants can be taken away from them at your whim. The brotherhood will see to your every need. You will never want for anything, and in return, your loyalty will supersede everything else in your lives."

The masked men on the other side of the altar stamped their feet and cheered at this.

"Neophyte DuPont, step forward and kneel!" Tobias commanded, holding up the dagger.

One of the recruits shuffled farther forward and knelt, bowing his head. Tobias gently tapped him on the top of the head with the dagger, and then a red-robed man stepped forward with a golden goblet and held it out. The recruit took the goblet and gulped down its contents.

The process continued with the other recruits, one by one.

I almost laughed as I watched the surreal events unfold before me. It all seemed so...

silly. Tacky. Like something from a cheesy thriller movie.

Then I remembered what Willa told me. First-level Crown and Dagger stuff was basically a joke, from what she'd said. The second level was harder to reach and far more secretive (she barely knew anything about it), and the third level was so clandestine that she knew absolutely nothing about it. Even her brothers, who'd apparently made it to the second level, had zero idea of what the third level entailed. They hadn't made it that far and never would.

Despite that, I already had at least a vague idea of the different levels from what I'd seen tonight. Brand new recruits wore brown robes during initiation, and first-level members wore navy blue (as evidenced by the guard outside the door complaining about wanting to reach the second level so he didn't get scut-work anymore). From that, I could assume that the red-robed men were in the second level of the brotherhood, and black was reserved for the highest level.

Tobias King was the only one wearing black here, so this was definitely a lower-level event, designed to appeal to the new recruits and younger members. Not counting Tobias, who obviously had to be here to oversee the event, the third-level members weren't here and probably had far better things to do with their time.

A shiver ran through me as I imagined what those things might be.

"Now," Tobias called out in a booming voice when the last recruit had finished whatever was in his goblet. "Enjoy the fruits of your success!"

The gong sounded again, and the drumbeats immediately started back up along with loud music. Whoops and cheers echoed throughout the grotto.

I settled further down into my hiding spot and pulled out my cell phone to surreptitiously film what was happening. Now that the silly dagger ritual was out of

the way, the party seemed to be beginning.

Beautiful women were slinking out from the dark little doorways on the edges of the main chamber, holding trays of drinks along with fat lines of white powder. Some were dressed in gauzy white Grecian-style dresses, others were topless with black thongs and golden spray-paint on every bare inch of their skin, and others were simply stark naked save for black collars around their necks.

“Holy shit,” I heard one of the recruits mutter. His voice was slurring slightly; whatever was in the goblets must’ve been potent.

Within the next twenty minutes, a scene I could only describe as a wild orgy began to take place. Women were on their hands and knees with masked men filling them rough and hard, grunting and groaning. Others were on their knees with their hands bound behind them, sucking cocks and moaning in pleasure as someone else stroked their pussies. The new recruits all shared expressions which suggested their dreams had come true as they joined in.

It was rough, raw, Bacchanal.

I was frozen with a mixture of fear and excitement as I took it all in, my pulse pounding hard and fast. I pictured myself as one of those women, being used and abused, taken in every hole for the pleasure of rich men. It made me scared, the thrilling kind of scared that got me all hot and bothered. My chest rose and fell, heat slipping down my neck, and my nipples tightened as the fiery desire moved across my stomach and pooled between my legs.

I let out an involuntary squeak of surprise as I saw a red-robed man slap a woman’s tanned, oiled ass before he spread her cheeks wide and shoved himself inside. Right in her ass, no warning given. She let out a guttural moan, her head falling forward as the man roughly violated her tightest hole. Then she began to moan and gasp with

bliss, succumbing to the heady mixture of pain and pleasure.

I clapped a hand over my mouth. Luckily the party was so loud that no one seemed to have heard my squeak. Thank god. I looked around anyway, just to make sure.

Along one wall of the grotto, a few red-robed men stood watching the wild sex, sipping at goblets instead of joining in. I couldn't see their faces, seeing as the masks covered everything, but I got the impression they were bored. They'd probably participated in this sort of activity many times, and now, what once seemed wild and dangerous had turned old and stale.

One of them suddenly turned his head slightly to the left. There was something familiar about the way he held himself.

I bit my lip and ducked down lower, hoping he hadn't spotted me in the darkness behind the gravestone. Peeking out a moment later, I saw that he was watching the orgy again. False alarm. I was safe.

Still, I needed to think about getting out of here before it was too late. As long as I stayed in the shadows, I could slip out amongst all this primal writhing and moaning easily enough. Or so I hoped.

Sticking as closely to the cold stone wall as I possibly could, I found my way back to the tunnel and slid into the blackness beyond. Then I dashed back up the winding path, dizzy and buzzing from everything I'd just witnessed.

When I realized I was nearing the doorway which led back into the above-ground section of the tomb, I halted and got down on my hands and knees before slowly inching my way forward. The guard would probably still be out here, so I would have to figure out where he was, then dash around him to the back door and fly through the cemetery as fast as possible to evade him.

He wasn't right at the entrance, thank god. Neither was anyone else. I guess the guy who promised to replace him never bothered to show up. It really was my lucky night.

I poked my head out slowly, then breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the guard passed out against a wall, snoring loudly with his now-extinguished torch across his lap. Obviously, guard duty in the tomb was just as boring and shitty as he claimed earlier. No wonder his friend didn't bother coming to help.

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I sneaked past him on my tiptoes, then slipped out the back entrance and whipped away across the graveyard, refusing to look back. When I reached the gate, my pulse finally eased back to normal, and I smiled and quietly cheered at myself for surviving the strange encounter.

I did it. I actually sneaked into a Crown and Dagger party and got away with it.

Granted, it was just a first-level event, but still, the things I saw proved that it wasn't just any old secret society. These guys did some seriously depraved stuff down in that lair. Drugs, debauchery, voyeurism.

I couldn't wait to get started on my paper.

With a spring in my step, I headed back up the hilly path toward the main part of the campus, humming an upbeat pop tune as I went. My phone vibrated gently in my robes a moment later. I pulled it out, assuming it was Greer or Willa asking me how it went.

The message was from an unknown number. I stopped in my tracks and fell silent as I read it.

I saw you.

3

Tatum

Early morning light filtered in through my bedroom window. I yawned and snuggled into my pillows, trying to get some rest, but sleep never came.

With a sigh, I checked the clock to see that it was half past seven. Despite my efforts, I hadn't slept a wink since I returned home just before midnight.

I kept thinking about that text I got, kept freaking out over it. At the same time, the idea of replying to it freaked me out even more. I knew it was probably just Greer or Willa playing a prank and texting me from someone else's phone, seeing as they knew exactly what I'd been up to last night, but a tiny part of me wondered if it was actually a guy from the party.

What if someone had actually seen me? Was I in trouble? Or did one of the Crown and Dagger guys simply have a weird sense of humor and think it would be funny to text me? That raised even more questions: who was it, and how did he know me and my phone number?

My eyes drifted over to my cell. It sat on my bedside table, seemingly staring at me accusingly. I picked it up.

Trying to put the weird text out of my mind, I dialed my mother's number, hoping for a chat. She always got up early on Saturdays, so I knew she'd be around. The phone rang endlessly, though, and after a few minutes I gave up, dejected.

My parents had barely spoken to me since I arrived at Roden a few months back. It was so strange. I knew they were busy with work (seeing as Dad's formerly-struggling surveying business had started to pick up several months ago) but surely they still had time to return my phone calls. They hardly ever did, though. They hadn't been to visit me on campus either, even though it was only a half-hour drive from their house.

Their newhouse.

Ever since the business started taking off, they'd been splashing out and buying themselves all the things they'd never been able to afford before now. Their decrepit rental bungalow had been replaced by a bigger house in a nicer neighborhood, and they'd treated themselves to a new car as well. On top of the thriving business, they also had more disposable income purely because they no longer had to care for me anymore. I was happy for them, but still, it would be nice to hear from them more than once a month.

I thought about calling one of my friends as a distraction, but I decided against it. Everyone liked to sleep in a little later on weekends, so expecting a conversation at half past seven was pushing it a bit.

Oh, screw it. I finally swallowed my fears and tackled the elephant in the room.

Who is this? I sent to the unknown number from last night.

My phone pinged with a reply almost right away. I could be your worst nightmare or your most pleasurable dream. I'll let you decide.

My shoulders slumped with relief. Considering the totally over-the-top reply, it was obviously just a stupid prank. All this time, I'd been freaking myself out over nothing.

I tapped out a sarcastic response. Very funny. Is that supposed to scare me?

Another reply came through immediately. You'd like it if it did, wouldn't you? You like being scared. Turns you on, doesn't it?

I stiffened. Perhaps this wasn't a prank after all. Or if it was, the person had quite a sick sense of humor. Hands shaking slightly, I sent another text. I don't know what you're talking about.

Him: Yes you do. I know you, Tatum Marris. I know everything about you.

Me: So you're a stalker. Should I call the police?

Him: Not a stalker. Just an interested party.

Me: Interested? I leaned back on my bed, curling up against the thick, ruffled pillows. Suddenly, I wasn't so worried. More curious than anything else. Who was this guy, and what exactly did he want?

Him: Yes. You're interested in me, too.

Me: I don't even know who you are....

His reply took a little longer this time. But you were there last night. You watched us. You loved us. Admit it.

I swallowed hard. So he had seen me at the party after all.

Me: It made me curious. That's all I'll admit.

Him: Well, in the words of Bachman, you ain't seen nothing yet. But you'll find out.

My curiosity was fully piqued now. I kept the exchange going, even though I was quite certain that the person at the other end was just a bored guy looking to assert his dominance by trying to creep me out.

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What will I find out?I asked.

Him: What we really do. Last night was nothing. Just a few party tricks to get the new recruits interested. It's nothing like our real world.

A smile played on my lips.Is that why it was so easy for me to get in? Your security is seriously lacking.

Him: You really think you're the first person to sneak into a Tap Week party at the Tomb? We practically let people do it, just to get their little thrills and make them think they know what we're really about. Everyone knew you were there, not just me. You weren't as careful as you think. How was it sitting behind that gravestone, anyway? Comfortable?

My smile faded. I felt completely naked. Exposed. The whole time I'd been hiding in that grotto, the members knew. Every single one of them. I wasn't that special for sneaking in after all... they let me do it.

No wonder so many rumors flourished about the society. They came from other people who'd sneaked in before me, years and years ago. The men at Crown and Dagger encouraged it, found it amusing to shock us and let the wild stories spread. The debauched parties, the drugs, the orgies... that was a side of their society that they wanted people to talk about. To distract from something else, perhaps.

That made me very suspicious about what they could be hiding behind all that.

I bet I'm the first person to film it,I finally shot back. In all my online searches about

you guys, I've never seen a single video of the Tap Week party. But I have one now.

Him: Sure about that, sweetheart?

With a frown, I exited the text messages and went into my phone gallery. The video was gone. Undeterred, I checked the cloud storage app, because I knew my phone occasionally bugged out and deleted stuff by itself.

When the app loaded, I started to worry again. The video wasn't there. The only way for it to be gone from the cloud was if someone accessed my account and manually deleted it. I certainly hadn't done it.

I texted the guy back, my hands shaking with a mixture of fury and fear. You hacked my stuff?

Him: You came into our world, and now we've come into yours. Why does that surprise you? It's what you wanted, isn't it?

Me: I might've wanted a look in, but I didn't ask for my phone to be hacked!

Him: You've been asking for that and much more for a long, long time. You're heading down a dangerous path, little girl.

As pissed as I was that someone hacked my phone and cloud storage app, I had to admit I was starting to get excited. Very excited. The danger, the darkness... it was all so terribly appealing to me. I felt wide awake despite the total lack of sleep, and sugary little thrills were trickling down my spine.

Maybe I like danger, I shot back boldly.

Him: Oh, I know you do. I bet you can't wait to be tied up and on your knees for me,

can you?

I smiled and leaned back, a smile playing on my lips. Flames were licking up between my legs, filling me with pleasurable warmth. I shouldn't be turned on by a total stranger texting me things like this, but I couldn't help the way my body responded.

Somehow I knew that the angrier I managed to make this guy, the darker and sexier his messages would get. I decided to try my hand at it.

Me: So this is how you Crown and Dagger guys get your kicks? Stalking girls and threatening to tie them up?

Him: Not a threat. A promise. And you're the only one.

Me: Oh yeah? What makes me so special?

Him: You're a bad girl. A dirty girl.

I liked being called that. It made my nipples stiffen beneath my shirt. Biting back a grin, I replied. How do you know?

Him: Like I said, I know everything about you, Tatum. I know what you've done, and you need to be punished for it.

Me: Tell me how...

Him: I don't need to tell you. You're going to find out, and it's going to hurt. But you deserve every ounce of pain. I know what you are at your core. You're an evil little slut, and you need to be punished. You need to be destroyed.

The messages were getting a little too dark for my liking now. I needed to be destroyed? What was that about? It wasn't hot. It was just plain creepy.

Me: Um, I think you're taking it a little far now, dude...

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Him: What, you thought this was some sort of joke? I'm not laughing, little whore. I know exactly what you fucking did, and I'm gonna make you pay. 3/17/17. You remember, don't you?

I turned my phone off and threw it to the end of the bed, my entire body shaking as chills raced through me. That date at the end of the message... oh, god. Whoever was texting me, he knew about what I did in March last year. The thing I refused to let myself think about anymore. The thing everyone else swore wasn't my fault.

The guy on the phone obviously didn't agree, and he wasn't just some bored frat guy getting his kicks by sexting random girls either. He hated me. He wanted to hurt me. Worst of all, he knew everything about me. He could even get into my most private possessions whenever he wanted. He'd already shown me that by hacking my phone.

So what else could he do?

What else would he do?

I jumped up and walked over to my window, peeking out the dove-gray curtains as if I actually expected to see a person in a black trench coat with a pair of binoculars peering up at me. Of course, there was no one there except an early-morning jogger powering through the courtyard and a gardener sweeping up red and yellow leaves.

My eyes fell on an unfamiliar black SUV parked in the lot on the right of the courtyard. I squinted, trying to get a better look. The parking spot was for Bamford students only, and I'd never seen anyone here with that sort of car before.

I figured it could be new, seeing as Roden students were frequently gifted brand new cars and other such things by their wealthy parents, but as soon as I made it obvious I was looking by pulling the curtains further back, the SUV started up and squealed out of the parking lot.

Trembling, I went and sat down on the bed. Just a coincidence, I told myself. A student owns that car, and they were racing out to grab some coffee and bagels.

Deep down, I knew that wasn't true. Whoever was in that SUV was watching me, and they wanted me to know.

But who the hell was it?

4

Elias

I tossed my phone aside with a frown and zipped up my pants despite the aching in my groin. Tatum had stopped replying to me, and I was too fucking frustrated to come. Having her right there at my fingertips telling me how she liked danger had worked for a few minutes, but it wasn't enough.

It was never enough.

I was sick of playing games. Sick of waiting. I wanted to have her right here in front of me. Wanted to press my hands into her soft skin, gripping her so tight she cried out. Wanted to bite those plump pink lips, make her scream into my mouth. Wanted to fuck her tight little pussy so hard she wouldn't be able to walk for a week.

I wanted to own her.

Right fucking now.

I knew there was a protocol in our society, and I'd been patiently sticking to it for a long time, as crazy as it drove me. Now I was officially done with it. I wasn't supposed to contact Tatum at all before the time was right, but I couldn't help myself anymore. Not when she was so close last night, shivering only yards away from me behind that stone as she watched the proceedings.

I had to admit, it bothered me that she'd been there. I already knew she wanted to be

involved with us, but when she sneaked into the Tomb party like that, it showed me that she wasn't scared of us.

I wanted her to be scared of us. I wanted her to be terrified when I finally took her. I wanted real tears, real anguish. Real pain. Not this fake bullshit where she pretended to be frightened but secretly wanted it the whole time.

No, I wanted her on her knees, stark fear in her eyes, begging and pleading.

I took a cold shower to ease the aching in my loins, then headed downstairs to my father's study. One of them, anyway. He had identical ones in every house we owned and used, even the vacation homes. He spent most of his time in Fairfield or out at the Lodge in the northwest of Connecticut, but for the last few weeks he'd been here with me at our New Marwick property, keeping an eye on me to make sure I didn't do anything unwise. He knew how impatient I was getting after being kept from my prize for so long.

He was standing by a roaring fire, lazy white curls of smoke drifting up from a Cuban cigar held in one hand. When I entered, he turned to look at me. "What is it?"

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you think? I want to know about Tatum. When is she arriving?"

He pressed his lips into a thin line as I spoke. "How many times have we discussed this?" he asked.

"Not enough, obviously, because I still don't have a straight answer."

"It's still being set up. As I told you last time we discussed this matter, it needs to look normal. The transfer of the money, that is. It can't be done in one lump sum, or else we risk drawing the wrong kind of attention from certain people. The last thing

we need is the US Attorney's office breathing down our neck over financial irregularities, and you know they're always watching us and waiting for us to slip up. So we're carefully laundering it through her father's business, and when the last dollar is in, she'll be ours."

I folded my arms. "I know all that, but I still want a date. I've waited a year and a half for this, and my patience is seriously wearing thin."

He held a palm up. "Fine. Three weeks. She's being watched at all times, just to make sure she doesn't get any funny ideas or try to leave."

"Good. That wasn't so fucking hard, was it?" I said.

A bored expression appeared on his face. "Don't you have some study to do now?"

That was his way of dismissing me. It wasn't like I actually had to study to get through grad school. I did it when I needed to, because I wanted to know all the necessary shit, but there was no way I needed to put my head down and work my ass off like other people did.

Being born into a family like mine ensured my success and set it in solid stone without me having to lift a finger if I didn't feel like it. Entering a brotherhood like Crown and Dagger made it even easier. We were the nation's dirty little secret, running and controlling things across the nation that most people couldn't even dream of. There was nothing that didn't come to us if we decided we wanted it.

We owned most of the buildings at Roden, as well as more than half the land within several miles of it. The local police were in our pocket, along with the mayor. People who knew of our existence feared us, only speaking about us in hushed tones (aside from the odd vocal conspiracy nut who no one gave a fuck about listening to anyway), and they also desperately wished to be us.

We had everything, after all.

Even the lowest-level members were given enormous monetary gifts, flashy sports cars, dream jobs upon graduation, and access to multiple luxury mansions on private properties and islands if the need ever arose. They had all the connections they'd ever need, and they would never be down on their luck. The society would always see to that.

It only got better from there. The second level, where I was now, brought untold pleasures that the average man could only ever fantasize about. It taught me what I liked, helped me uncover all the things some deep, dark part of me had always craved. I didn't want innocent girls who liked tender kisses and gentle lovemaking on their backs in romantic candlelight. I wanted it dirtier, darker, sicker. I wanted to hurt them. I wanted them begging, crying, screaming. I wanted to give them exactly what they deserved.

The society showed me there wasn't anything wrong with me. I was just a man with needs, like all the other men who made it that far. They all got what they wanted, too. Any woman they desired could be theirs, because every woman had a price.

Tatum's was lower than expected. I guess she and her pathetic little family were desperate enough that they'd sign her life away for even the most paltry of sums. Or perhaps—and I hoped this was the case—she felt such crushing guilt over her past that she knew she wasn't worth the full million we would've been willing to offer if she'd bothered trying to negotiate. She was worth nothing, and I couldn't wait to show her that. I couldn't wait to ruin her.

I hated knowing she'd actually signed up for this, though. I didn't want her consent for any of the things I planned on doing to her. But I suppose in the end, it was easy enough to pretend I didn't have it. That was the closest I'd ever get.

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Besides, I'd still be taking all her firsts for myself. I'd ensured that anyone who ever dared to display interest in her never went near her again, so even her first kiss would be mine. The first cock she took in her mouth would be mine. Her virginity would be mine. The first orgasm that ever tore through her would be because of me. All of those things, taken and done to her by me and me alone. The thought made a giddy rush speed through my veins like a drug with her name on it.

I couldn't wait to see her expression when she realized what she'd truly gotten herself into; when she realized how utterly I owned her.

She knew she would be sold to Crown and Dagger one day, but she didn't know her new master would be me. When she first saw me in her new home in a few weeks and realized who I was and what she'd done, those gorgeous baby blues would come alive with pure panic, flaring hot and bright before they went dark with terror. She would try to leave, but by then it would be too late. Too late to avoid what she'd done, too late to avoid the punishment I had in store for her.

She deserved it.

Why, you may ask?

I despised Tatum Marris with every inch of my soul, and hate was nature's most potent source of energy. It was vast, endless. It drove me to dark places, drove my need to claim her as my unwilling prize when the time was right, just so she'd feel the same pain she brought upon everyone else.

A lot of people liked to think that someone like me could never really want for

anything because of my family's obscene amount of money and power. That was true for the most part, but the one thing even the richest people could never buy was time. You could have all the gold and jewels and prime real estate in the world, but it wouldn't buy an extra minute with your loved ones once they were gone.

One of mine was gone, and it was all because of Tatum. No amount of cash would bring them back, but I was still going to make her pay anyway.

See, I didn't just want to own her.

I wanted to destroy her.

5

Tatum

At ten o'clock, I was still shaking. For the last few hours, I'd tried to focus on reading lecture notes and assignment details, but my mind kept drifting back to the disturbing messages.

Finally, I abandoned all pretenses of study and headed out into the hall. I wanted to find Mellie and talk to her about everything that was going on, see if she had any advice for me.

Her suite was just a few doors down, but it felt like I hadn't seen or spoken to her in ages. That was weird, considering how she was my best friend here at Roden.

Come to think of it, she'd been acting quite oddly for the last two weeks. She was suddenly busy all the time, and conversations at breakfast and dinner were stilted and vague. It almost seemed as if she was avoiding me, though I couldn't think why. I'd asked Greer and Willa about it, but they'd never been as close with Mellie as me, so they hadn't noticed anything unusual about her behavior. They figured she was probably just stressed about assignments.

As I padded toward her door, I heard shouting coming from her suite. Not wanting to intrude, I hesitated in the hall, wondering what was going on and if she was okay.

"Shut the hell up!" I heard Mellie say. "I honestly don't know why you bothered coming here. Just fuck off with your pack of goons. Where are they, anyway?"

Shouldn't they be following you around like puppies?"

"Are you serious?" said a deep masculine voice in response. There was a brief pause before he went on, voice edged with fury. "For fuck's sake, you really have no idea what you're doing. At all."

"I'm not as dumb as I look, Henry," Mellie replied, her voice shrill and furious now. "I'm so fucking sick of you treating me like this just because I don't have a dick! Men aren't actually superior, you know. Are you ever going to get that?"

"You think that's what this is about?" The man scoffed. "I guess you're gonna get a nasty shock soon, you stupid little bitch! Just wait."

There was a tinkling sound as something shattered. "I said get out!" Mellie yelled.

The man didn't say anything else, and the door opened a few seconds later before slamming behind him as he strode out into the hall. I shrank back against the wall, and his brown eyes narrowed as he saw me. "You," he said, eyes blazing.

I raised my brows. "Um... do I know you?"

He came closer and jabbed a finger toward my chest. "Stay the fuck away from my sister."

My eyes widened incredulously. "Huh?"

He looked around us for a second, presumably making sure there was no one else to witness his threatening gestures. "Just do as I fucking say. Stay away," he hissed.

Before I could respond, he strode away. When he reached the stairway, I finally gathered up the courage to call out after him. "Whatever, asshole!"

He didn't turn around.

I headed over to Mellie's door and knocked. She opened it in a huff. "I told you to fuck off! I don't... oh, it's you."

"Yeah. Me. I think I just met your older brother. Everything okay?"

She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes wide. "You saw Henry? Did he say anything to you?"

"Yeah. 'Stay the fuck away from my sister'. Any idea what that's about? I've never even met him before."

She waved her hand and stepped aside to let me in. "Oh, who knows with him? He's an idiot. Probably thinks you're a bad influence on me or something," she said as she set about cleaning up the broken glass.

Her offhand comment sliced right to my core. Because I came from a poorer family—when I was younger, at least—I'd often heard the 'bad influence' line from my richer school friends. Their parents would side-eye me or outright ban them from hanging out with me, as if I'd pass on 'common' behavior to them purely because I wasn't rich and didn't have the right pedigree. It made me feel lower than low, even though I knew they were just elitist assholes.

Mellie knew all that. I'd confided a lot of my insecurities and past traumas in her over the last few months.

She saw my face, and she shook her head and held out her hands, palms facing me. "Shit! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that he's always been weirdly protective. He thinks everyone is a bad influence on me. It's so annoying. It's like he thinks because he's a man, he automatically knows better."

My face softened. “Oh. Right.”

“Also...” She averted her eyes. “I just remembered. He was friends with Ben Wellington. Around the same time as when you....”

She trailed off, and my stomach lurched. This was the second time last year’s incident had been brought up today. Guilt tightened my chest. I felt like I was falling, spiraling, down, down, down....

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Don't think about it. It didn't happen.

"I'm sorry, Tatum," Mellie said softly, seeing the look on my face. "I shouldn't have brought it up. And I'm sorry my brother was a prick to you. If it's any consolation, I doubt he'll be visiting me much more after the fight we just had."

"It's fine," I said, swallowing my feelings. "Are you okay?"

She nodded as she swept a small pile of broken glass into a corner. "Yeah. He's just a dick sometimes. Don't worry, he didn't attack me or anything. I overreacted and threw the glass at him. I know that's bad, but he was being such an ass."

"I get it. Are we okay?"

Her eyebrows puckered. "What do you mean?"

"You've been kinda weird for the last couple of weeks. We've barely even spoken, and I'm kinda getting the sense that you're avoiding me."

Mellie rubbed her forehead and sighed, her shoulders sagging. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry," she murmured. "Let's sit down."

I followed her over to the cream-colored sectional and sat next to her.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "You're right. I didn't even realize I was doing it, but now that you've mentioned it..."

She trailed off again, and I looked at her, my eyebrows raised. “What’s going on?”

“I was just worried, and you’re my best friend, so I knew I wouldn’t be able to avoid telling you the truth if you kept asking. And I knew you would, so I backed off and hoped you’d forget about it after a while. But then you didn’t, and you and the others were still talking about it all the time, so I avoided you even more.”

She was babbling now, and I was beyond confused. “Ask about what? I don’t get it.”

“Your paper! The exposé thing you’re doing on Crown and Dagger.”

“Still confused.”

She hesitated, inspecting a flawlessly-manicured nail. It never ceased to amaze me how perfect she looked at all times, even when she seemed anxious and troubled.

We were the same height and weight with the same color hair and eyes, but she always managed to look like a far more expensive version of me. Straight glossy hair with zero flyaways, glowing skin, polished nails, eyelashes so long and curly they couldn’t possibly be real.

“I know a bit more than I originally let on,” she finally said. “Way more than Greer and Willa. See, my dad is really high up in the society, and even though he’s not meant to tell outsiders anything, he’s let a decent amount slip to me in private over the years. So I know a lot. I know which parts of the urban legends are true or false, I know about the stuff they do, and I know where they do it. I even know where they do their initiation ceremonies. If I figured out enough of the logistics, I could actually sneak someone into a ceremony at some point.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Well, it’s just a college paper. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t wa—”

She cut me off, holding up one finger. “Wait. Sorry. It’s a long story.”

I leaned back. “Okay.”

“You wanted to go digging into the society, which I get, because it’s interesting. But as soon as you started wanting to sneak into their events, I got worried.”

My brows shot up. “What, worried they’d do something to me? Like... they’re actually dangerous?”

She shook her head. “No. Of course not. Although, those guys can be pretty weird when it comes to their stuff, so you’d want to be careful just in case,” she said slowly. “I know you managed to get into the Tap Week party, but that’s nothing; just an event to show off to all the newbies.” She paused for a quick breath. “Anyway, as I was saying, they might be a bit pissed if you sneaked into anything more serious, but they wouldn’t hurt you. That’s not what worries me.”

“So what is it?”

She sighed. “Like I said before, my dad is in the society. Every male member of my family for generations has been in it, because one of the founding members was a Davenport. So they take it really seriously.”

“How seriously?”

“Take Henry, for example. He was in it, and he decided he didn’t want to be anymore. The parties and other stuff were just boring to him. Anyway, no matter what level you are, you’re obligated to help your society brothers in any way, using whatever connections you have. He didn’t want to do it. I guess he didn’t like most of the other guys or something along those lines.”

“So what happened to him?”

“Well, obviously, it was fine for him to leave. They don’t kill you or anything, like all those dumb urban legends say. But it caused a massive rift in my family, because Crown and Dagger has been such a big part of it for so long. So Henry and my dad got in a huge fight over it, and since then, Henry’s basically been cut off from the entire family.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I’m the only one he even speaks to, and as you just overheard, that doesn’t always turn out so well.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks.”

“Yup. Anyway, I was worried you’d start to ask questions about Crown and Dagger that I actually knew the answer to, and I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from telling you. Like I said, you’re my best friend. I can’t lie to you. But on the other hand, if I told you all this stuff I knew and helped you infiltrate the society to get information for your paper, my dad might find out. He would be pissed, and I don’t want to get cut out like Henry. You know I’m a total daddy’s girl. I can’t stand the thought of that happening to me.”

Her eyes were wide and worried. I reached out to pat her arm. “So that’s why you’ve been avoiding me? You thought I’d accidentally get you in trouble with your family?”

“Yeah.” She nodded miserably, then let out a deep sigh. “God, I’ve been a real bitch. I didn’t even realize how much I was avoiding you until you confronted me.”

“No, I get it. I’m sorry for putting you in such a weird position. But seriously, if you ever told me anything at all, it’d never come back on you. I promise,” I said, putting one hand on my heart. “I’d never let anyone find out you said anything.”

“Not even Greer or Willa?” she said, concern flashing in her eyes. “I mean, Greer has

a pretty big mouth, and Willa's dad is friends with my dad. So it could've gotten back to—"

I smiled and cut her off before she started babbling again. "No, I wouldn't tell them. Cross my heart and hope to die."

She took a deep breath, then gave me a sheepish smile. "I guess I kinda overreacted, right?"

I returned her smile. "Just a bit."

"I mean, even if Dad found out I told you stuff, he'd be mad as hell but he probably wouldn't cut me out like he did with Henry. They always had a lot of other issues before they hit that breaking point."

"Well, there you go. You have nothing to worry about. Like you said, you're a daddy's girl. He wouldn't kick you out of the family." I patted her arm. "So... we're all good? I didn't do anything to offend you?"

"Of course you didn't! And look, if you can absolutely promise that you'll never let it come back on me...." Mellie paused mid-sentence, then leaned closer, as if her father was right in the room with us and might overhear. "I could probably help you sneak into their next second-level initiation ceremony."

"Really?" My heart leapt.

She looked uncertain again. "Well, it wouldn't be easy. But I think I could swing it," she said slowly. "We just have to be really, really careful."

I squealed. "Oh my god. That'd be so amazing! Thank you!"

“Don’t thank me yet. I still need to think of a way to get you in,” she said, her brows knitted. “I mean, I know where it is and all, but security is watertight. We can’t just walk in.”

“Why is security so much tighter at the ceremony than it is at the Tomb?”

She waved her hand. “Like I said before, the Tap Week party is really just a way to show off to the newbies. Only the younger members go, aside from the society president, and from what Dad has told me, they basically expect outsiders to try and sneak in. Nothing happens there except wild sex and a ton of drinking and partying, so they don’t really care. Letting the occasional outsider sneak in and see it all—with the masks and robes and whatever—kinda adds to their mystique. Or so they think. Personally I think it’s totally lame.”

“So why do they feel the need to hide what happens at their other events? Is there something worth hiding?” I asked in a low voice.

She laughed. “Not really. I think most of their higher-level initiation ceremonies and parties are just a bunch of old dudes getting wasted in the woods. But they do some really weird shit out there, as per tradition. Strange rituals and so on. So I guess they don’t want outsiders getting in and seeing them, because the older members have reputations to protect. They don’t want photos of them getting drunk in the woods, banging hookers, snorting coke and chanting with flaming torches to get out to the media. Not when they have family names and high profile careers to worry about.”

“Oh. Right. Well, speaking of certain members....” I quickly filled her in on what had been happening with the weird texts I’d been getting this morning.

“Ugh, what an asshole!” she said when I finished, eyes narrowed.

“Is it anything to be worried about?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Some of the younger Crown and Dagger guys get kinda drunk on power when they first get elected to the society. They like to throw their weight around because the whole world basically just got handed to them on a silver platter and they want to ‘prove’ what they’re now capable of as a result. I guess one of them must’ve decided to try and scare you after seeing you at the party last night. And it worked. He got you. But seriously, don’t stress about it. I really don’t think they’d hurt you.”

I chewed my bottom lip. “You sure?”

“As sure as I can be. I mean, obviously I don’t know everything about the society. Only what I’ve picked up from Dad.”

“Oh.”

Mellie’s forehead creased with concern. “Like I said, I can’t be entirely sure, so if you’re worried, we won’t try and sneak you into the ceremony. I don’t want you to be all freaked out over it. A college paper isn’t worth that.”

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I took a deep breath and thought about Halliwell's class. If I sneaked into a Crown and Dagger initiation ceremony and witnessed what went on, separating fact from legend for my paper, I would get an A for sure. I'd be the first person to ever manage that in her class, and a professor like her was a good one to be noticed by. She had a lot of connections, so if she liked and respected a student, she could easily help them with future internships and jobs.

"I still want to do it," I said.

Mellie nodded and leaned back, her brows knitted in deep thought. "I'll have to try and come up with a way to get you in. There must be something I can do," she muttered.

"Well, while you think about it, can I ask some stuff about the society? I promise I won't write it down anywhere. It'll all stay right up here," I said, tapping the side of my head with a finger.

"Sure."

I outlined what I'd figured out during the party last night, regarding the different levels and the colors they wore. "Is that right?" I asked.

Mellie nodded. "Yes. Brand new recruits wear brown robes during initiation week, and after that they're considered first-level and wear dark blue robes. Second is red, third is black."

"How long does someone stay at the first level?"

Mellie shrugged. “Anywhere between a year and their entire lifetime.”

I crinkled my forehead. “Why?”

“You don’t actually need to progress to the second level, or the third. At the first level, you get financial gifts, houses, and all the connections you could possibly need to succeed. In return, you offer your own connections to current and future members for the rest of your life. If you’re happy with that and don’t really meet the criteria to go up a level, then you can remain quite happily at the first level forever. Several past US Presidents and Vice Presidents have been first-level Crown and Dagger guys.”

“Really?” My eyes widened.

“Yup.”

“Wow. So what’s the difference between the first and second levels?”

Her lips tightened. “I’m not entirely sure, but I know the society watches certain members they think might be fit for the second level. If and when they’re considered ready—as in trustworthy with a certain personality type—they’re selected for initiation into the second level. It happens in a ceremony in fall, a few weeks after Tap Week. That’s the one I’m going to try to sneak you into.”

“So you don’t know what they actually do at second level?”

“No. From what I’ve managed to glean from Dad, they’re privy to certain secrets. No idea what, though.” She shrugged. “Oh, and they get to use this huge vacation house on some private island that the first-levels aren’t allowed at.”

“And the third level?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know anything about it at all. My father would never tell me, so I’m pretty sure those secrets go to the grave with the members who reach it. They can’t let anything slip about it to anyone, not even their wife or kids. Ever. I get the impression that’s the level where they might actually kill you if you revealed their secrets.”

That certainly sounded ominous. “Do you know any details about the ceremony you’re going to try and get me into?”

“A bit. Dad is responsible for organizing it, so he’s told me a few things here and there, and he even showed me a few short video clips once. He burned them afterwards, of course,” she said with a wily smile. “Anyway, I know it’s different to the first initiation ceremony that brand new recruits go through on Tap Night. That one happens here at Roden and involves a bunch of trials, like solving riddles, diving into the moat around Reid Library to find a hidden object, and proving their worth in other ways. But the initiation into the second level is different. It happens way out in the woods on private property, and it’s very... weird.”

I arched a brow. “How so?”

She scooted closer to me, as if she were still worried someone might hear us. “It’s just strange, ritualistic kind of stuff. There’s fire, chanting, music, weird kinds of shows put on for them. Almost like a carnival. They hire actors to play all the people and creatures in their shows, and—” She stopped midsentence and jumped up. “Oh my god. That’s it.”

“Hm?”

“They have to hire actors and actresses for the shows, and half of them have background people, like women standing around in Grecian gowns with wreaths and masks. We could try and get you in as one of them!”

“How? You said security is crazy tight. I can’t just show up and say ‘Hey, I’m an actress, can I come in?’” I said with a teasing smile.

She shook her head impatiently. “Of course not. But my dad organizes it, remember? He’s responsible for keeping track of the people they hire, organizing the payroll and making sure they all sign ironclad non-disclosure agreements. I’ve seen him looking at all the information on spreadsheets before, when he thought I wasn’t looking over his shoulder. So if I could somehow get in his office and get on his computer when he’s not there, I could probably find one of the spreadsheets where the upcoming ceremony staff members are listed with their contact details and so on. I could add you to the list of actresses and say in your notes that you’ve already done an interview and signed the NDA.”

My skin prickled with excitement. “What would happen after that?”

She chewed her bottom lip. “I’m not a hundred percent sure, but I think you’d be contacted with some sort of password and instructions a few days before the ceremony, and they’d also send you the outfit they want you to wear. Oh, and I’m pretty sure they’d pick you up on the night. That way they never have to tell you the address.”

I cocked my head to the side. “That all sounds great, but it also sounds way too easy. What’s the catch?”

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“It’s not easy, trust me. It’ll be really hard for me to get into Dad’s office and figure out his laptop password. I might not even be able to do it at all.”

“Oh, right.” I nodded slowly. “Well, if you can, that would be amazing. Seriously.”

“I’ll do my best. I think the ceremony is in three weeks, so I’ve got a while to try.”

“Cool.” I nibbled the inside of my cheek and frowned as something occurred to me. “Is it really the best idea to put my real name in your dad’s spreadsheet, though? If he’s going through and double-checking it, won’t he get suspicious that your best friend happens to be an actress he supposedly hired and forgot all about?”

“Oh, jeez. Good point. I’ll put a fake name and address. I know of a few houses in town that are empty at the moment,” she replied. “Ooh, and I can wait there with you on the night and make sure it all goes to plan.”

“If it doesn’t, and they catch me and want to know how I found out their secrets, I’ll tell them I received anonymous tips from a member, okay? That way they’ll never suspect it was you who told me anything, and your family will have no reason to be pissed at you.”

She smiled. “Great idea. Thanks.”

I grinned back at her. “If this actually works, it’s gonna be so awesome.”

Mellie winked. “Let’s just hope it does, then. And hey, if the journalism thing doesn’t work out for you, you could try being an undercover cop. We both could.”

I laughed. One of my favorite movies was actually about an undercover detective. Several of my favorite books, too. The idea of slipping into a world I didn't belong in filled me with heady anticipation and rushing adrenaline.

I guess it was a way of finding excitement in the undercover aspect of my own drab existence. After all, I was currently sitting in a world I didn't truly belong in. This elite private college, these richer-than-God people, this high-class culture. I wasn't raised like most of them; wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth.

I was painfully aware of the fact that I didn't dress 'properly', I didn't always know which spoon to use at fancy dinner tables, and I didn't understand a lot of the inside jokes and references so many of them spouted. I didn't fit in. But with my Roden scholarship, I was allowed inside. I was allowed a seat at the table.

I might never truly be one of them, but at least I had an opportunity to see what it was all about. My very own undercover mission. At least that's what it felt like most of the time.

Now, I had a chance to venture even deeper into the everyday existence of America's elite. I was so excited that thrilling shivers were already racing up and down my spine, making goosebumps rise on my skin.

Watch out, Crown and Dagger. I'm coming for you.

6

Elias

“Pull!”

A black clay target shot out of the elevated trap thrower several yards to my left. My father narrowed his eyes and aimed his shotgun before pulling the trigger. The target exploded in midair, a thousand dark shards raining to the earth.

“Still got it,” he said smugly, looking over at me. “Your turn.”

We were out at Barnaby Grove, an exclusive sporting association for wealthy gun-lovers like my father. Everyone knew the rich had clubs for things like golfing and yachting, but not many people were aware of the existence of places like this. Barnaby was set on 2000 acres with facilities for plain old target shooting, sporting clays, and a trap field. There was also a fortified gun vault in the main building which held over 500 guns, many of which were worth over six figures.

The club boasted several billionaires and business titans as members, and it only accepted fifty members at a time. Of course, my father and I were shoo-ins. The King name would open any door in this country.

We had shooting ranges set up at several of our own private properties, naturally, but my father enjoyed the exclusive Barnaby membership anyway. It was yet another way he could slyly brag to business associates and lord it over them, given that ninety-nine percent of them would never be offered a membership here no matter

how hard they tried.

I lifted my shotgun and waited for the target to fly out. Pressing my finger down on the trigger a second later, I swore softly as the bullet veered off to the side, missing the clay plate entirely.

“You’re rusty,” Dad said.

I shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“Hold it a little lower. Also, be sure to keep the fifth of October free,” he said, changing the subject at random as he so often did. “The second-level initiation ceremony is that night. All Crown and Dagger members who can make it are expected to be there.”

I scoffed. “You really think I’d miss it?”

He grinned broadly. “Oh, of course. You wouldn’t dream of it, considering what we have planned for you. How could I forget?”

“Maybe your memory is failing in your old age.”

“At least I can still hit a target,” he said with a superior, thin-lipped smile. “You’re twenty-three. What’s your excuse?”

“Like you said, I’m rusty. But speaking of my age, I’ll be twenty-four in less than six months. Am I going to make it to third?”

Instead of happening once a year like the first and second-level initiation ceremonies, the third-level ceremonies were conducted individually once a member reached a certain point of trust in the organization. I knew very little about the third level, other

than that the minimum age for acceptance was twenty-four. Before that, members wouldn't even be considered.

My father gave me an incredulous look. "Just because I'm the society president doesn't mean I can tell you anything about that. No favoritism allowed."

"I'm sure you could give me a hint," I said, my upper lip curling slightly. "I happen to know very well that favoritism does exist within the council ranks, because Henry Davenport is still alive."

"That's none of your concern." He narrowed his eyes coldly. "You might not even progress to the third level, Elias. Just being my son brings no guarantee, and sometimes I doubt you have what it takes."

I stiffened. "Why?"

He was silent for a moment, staring out at the gray sky as a dark flock of birds flew past. "You often remind me of your mother."

"How so?" I asked, my frown deepening.

I never met my mother. Sylvie King died giving birth to me, so I never knew her or grieved over her. She bled to death, my father told me. Sometimes it happened, even in the best hospitals in the world, and there was nothing any doctor could do to stop the hemorrhaging, no matter how qualified he or she was.

Some nights as a child, I would dream of my own birth: little me, red-faced and howling, entering the world in a sea of blood. My mother, fading away to a pale, motionless husk, giving her life so that I might live and grow and thrive. Or maybe it was more that I took her life rather than had it given to me.

By the time I was old enough to realize what it meant to be raised without a mother, I wasn't grief-stricken, because I had no memories of the woman. I was curious, however, especially as my father very rarely spoke of her. When I was about ten or eleven, I used to spend hours hunting through our main house, looking for any small pieces of information I could get on her—old photos, clothes, bits of paper with her handwriting on it. Just to see what she was like beyond the posed, somber photos that hung around the place.

One summer, I came across the motherlode, no pun intended. There was a small room on the fourth floor of the house which I'd never gone in before (it was shockingly easy to live in a mansion that size and never enter half the rooms) and I discovered what was essentially a shrine dedicated to her in my father's no-nonsense, all-business manner. The room was filled with filing cabinets and carefully-organized boxes with her old things, any paperwork she'd ever required or filled out, college, employment and financial records from before she met my father, medical records, and even her birth certificate.

Even though I'd never met her, I felt like I almost did when I came out of that room after an entire day spent in its depths. I knew her history, I knew the sort of grades she got in college, and I knew how well she performed at the fashion house she worked at before her wedding. I even knew her damn blood type and contact lens prescription details.

"She was stubborn. Brash. Argumentative. Overly-curious," Dad said before shooting another clay target out of the sky. Then he wiped his brow and continued. "She asked a lot of questions about a lot of things, and she never quite knew when to give up a fight. Same as you. The council might not be able to put their full trust in a person with that personality."

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I side-eyed him. “You’ve never described her like that before.”

“Hm?”

“Sylvie. You’ve always said she was meek and mild-mannered. Now you’re suddenly saying she was stubborn and brash.”

He waved a hand. “People can change. She was all of those things over the years.”

“I see.”

“As I was saying, just because you’re a legacy doesn’t mean you’ll automatically make it to the third level. You know it isn’t like other societies where legacies have the upper hand. It’s all down to you as an individual. Whether you are a correct fit or deemed trustworthy is entirely dependent on the behavior you demonstrate during your time in the second level, the answers you give to questions asked of you during the interviews, and the manner in which you conduct yourself in the trials. Only ten percent make it to third.”

“Right.”

“We’ll see how you go with Tatum before we consider you,” he said. “Now, it’s your turn.” He gestured toward the guy working the trap thrower. “Pull!”

The clay target seemed to fly out in slow motion as my mind drifted to Tatum yet again. Just two more weeks until she was mine.

I pictured her on her knees, forcibly submitting to me and sobbing, makeup running down her face in harsh black streaks. She would be exhausted, eyes filled with terror. I would grant her no mercy, breaking her into pieces day after day. I didn't give a shit if she was scared, didn't give a shit about what she wanted. Her hopes and dreams didn't matter to me one iota.

Eventually she would learn her place with me and willingly submit, desperate to please her owner. I couldn't get the thought of that out of my head. It was stuck in me at all times, a potent cocktail of lust and hate pounding through my veins. Even though I'd barely spoken to her or touched her, I could already feel her soft skin, breathe in her scent, taste her lips, all in my imagination.

Of course, the real thing would be better, and now it was right around the corner.

I narrowed my eyes, aimed my shotgun, and pulled the trigger.

This time I didn't miss.

7

Tatum

“Nearly done....”Mellie licked her lips as she arranged a golden wreath on my head. “There we go.”

I looked in the mirror and smiled, pleased at what I saw reflected back at me. The flowing white Grecian gown fit perfectly, plunging at the neckline to show off my cleavage, and the gold-braided belt cinched my waist, giving my figure a lovely hourglass shape.

Mellie had also done my hair and makeup. My lips were a deep shade of pink, and my eyes looked dark and inviting with the smoky black and bronze eyeshadows she’d blended over and around my upper and lower lids. My straight brown locks had been curled and teased into thick, luscious waves that hung over my shoulders and down my back.

“It looks perfect,” I murmured. “You’re amazing at this.”

“Thanks,” she said with a beaming smile. “Honestly, though, the most amazing thing is that my plan actually worked.”

Somehow, Mellie had figured out a way onto her father’s private computer, and she’d succeeded in adding me to the list of actors who would perform in tonight’s Crown and Dagger second-level initiation ceremony and celebration. I couldn’t believe it when she first told me. She looked like she couldn’t even believe it herself, and we’d

both shrieked and danced in giddy excitement for two straight minutes, scarcely able to believe that I was actually in.

The Grecian-gowned girls had one of the simplest tasks—basically all they did was stand around at certain times during the ceremony and hold up golden goblets. Barely even acting; they were more like human props. That was good for me, though. It meant I didn't really have to do much in order to get away with being there, and I would have a front-row seat to most of the action.

I had been contacted a few days ago with tonight's password, and an outfit had been sent to the address Mellie put in the spreadsheet. It was a townhouse in central New Marwick which belonged to a friend of hers, and it was currently empty while he was overseas, which made it the perfect place for us to use in our guileful plan.

Mellie glanced at the clock. "They'll be here in a few minutes, right? Are you freaking out?"

I nodded. "Hell yeah." My heart was racing a mile a minute, and my throat felt thick with nerves. I knew I could do this, though. I'd been through far more harrowing things in my life.

"Remember, they won't hurt you, even if they catch you out," she said. "They won't be happy, but it's not the end of the world."

I smiled. "I know." The doorbell rang downstairs, and my pulse doubled. "I guess I better answer it. No one else is supposed to be with me."

"Good luck!"

I slowly walked down the stairs, the door pulling me toward it like a magnet, as if my subconscious knew that on the other side my life could lift right off the ground and

change forever.

A tall man in a dark suit stood on the steps, waiting for me. “State your name and the password,” he said.

I gulped. “Carina Adams,” I said, giving him the fake name Mellie made up. “The password is potentia.”

He nodded and stepped aside, one hand falling to the left in a guiding gesture. “This way.”

There was a black car with dark-tinted windows idling by the sidewalk. The man opened the back door for me, and I haltingly got inside and put my seatbelt on. There was another girl in a white gown sitting on the other side of the back seat. She didn’t look at me. Didn’t even turn her head the slightest bit.

“Hi, I’m Carina,” I whispered. “Are you excited about the job?”

That made her turn her head. She stared at me with wide eyes, then frowned deeply and looked away again.

The man in the suit was in the front passenger seat now, and he looked back at me with suspiciously-narrowed eyes. Then he leaned over to the driver and muttered what sounded like directions out of town.

As he did that, the girl leaned over to me for a second. “No names, remember?” she hissed. “Didn’t you read the contract?”

My stomach flipped. No, of course I hadn’t read the contract. I wasn’t really hired for this, so I never even saw one. I should’ve known there were strict rules surrounding the event, though, so I’d probably already messed up by offering my albeit-fake name

to her when I got in the car. Shit.

My heart fluttered in my chest like the wings of a trapped bird, and I glanced at the front again, hoping the man hadn't noticed I didn't belong as a result of my misstep. If he did, he didn't say anything.

He reached into the glove compartment and pulled out two black satin blindfolds. "Put these on," he commanded me and the other girl. "Actors aren't permitted to know the address of the event."

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. I was safe.

I put my blindfold on and waited. I heard the car start up, and then we pulled away from the curb and drove for what felt like two or three hours. Jesus, where were we going? Another state?

Long car-rides usually put me to sleep, but I was so nervous and excited about tonight that I couldn't relax for even a second. My hands kept twitching, and I couldn't keep my legs still.

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Finally, the man in the front instructed us to remove our blindfolds. Then he stepped out of the car and opened the doors for us.

The night sky had no stars, so it was almost pitch black out here. From the glow of the car's headlights, I could see we were standing on the edge of a forest. The smell of decomposing leaves and loamy earth filled my nostrils, and the darkness of the woods ahead made me feel claustrophobic even though it seemed to stretch for miles.

The man in the suit turned on a flashlight and nodded for us to follow him onto a narrow path. It was hilly and uneven with knotted roots crossing over it, and it branched at regular intervals. Man-made, but old.

I followed the path, shivering with each step. About a hundred yards in, I spotted a warm, flickering glow in a valley below. Voices drifted up to us, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

My nervousness and trepidation increased the closer we got. What if Mellie was wrong? What if these people were actually dangerous and they caught me sneaking in under false pretenses? The thought of what could happen made a chill swirl through me, and my hands turned cold and clammy. All this over a damn paper, just because I was determined to get an A. It was a stupid idea. I should pretend I felt sick and ask to leave right now, before I got in too deep.

And yet, I couldn't. My feet kept following the suited man's path through the woods, as if that strange magnetic pull I felt earlier was still drawing me along, dragging me ever-closer to the mysteries of Crown and Dagger. As much as I knew it was probably a bad idea, I couldn't back out. I wanted to see what they did out here,

wanted to see if it was just as silly as Mellie thought, or if there was something more to it that she was unaware of. Something darker, something more sinister.

The path turned downhill, and we drew closer to the valley. A huge portion was delineated with tall burning torches that filled the area with a warm orange glow. In the middle of that area was a semi-circular Roman-style theatre made from ashlar stones with stacked seating around the auditorium and a large raised rectangular slab in the center of that. Along the straight edge of the semi-circle was a wide stage, and behind that was an imposing building with carved stone columns and a pavilion on the other side.

To the left of the outdoor theatre, way off in the distance, I could see an enormous metal statue of a bull. In the shadowy ground in front of it, lit with the flickering flames of only two small torches, were nine deep rectangular holes. They each looked large enough to fit a coffin in.

Creepy.

We were led over to the pavilion and into the building, and a rhythmic drumming started up not long after we stepped into it.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, gazing at the wondrous sights inside. Mellie was right: the event really was like a carnival. Everything moved so quickly with such chaotic visuals, wildly-flashing lights and a cacophony of sounds that I could barely take it all in as we walked through the various rooms.

Upper-level society members in masks and robes milled around, drinking, talking and laughing. Actors who’d already started their shows were getting right into their roles. Some of them were funny, others were downright creepy.

In one room, five hooded figures dangled a man dressed in rags and chains over a

pool of dark red fluid while guests watched him beg for his life. In another, a man dressed as the Devil jumped around, letting out deep-throated shrieks and calling out unfamiliar Latin words. The next room had no fire or candles, but was lit with the glow of hundreds of fireflies instead—or at least something that appeared that way—and actors dressed as heavily-bandaged mummies were trudging around and moaning.

Yet another room had men dressed in elaborate golden Aztec-style outfits with shimmering feathers and jewels along with golden beaked masks. They were dragging laughing first-level Crown and Dagger members into stone seats and tying them up before forcing them to drink from skulls. I hoped they were fake...

From everything I was seeing, I assumed this interior carnival was something the first-level members had to go through before being allowed outside to complete the second-level initiation ritual in the theatre. It seemed like they had to experience each one of the rooms, with the final one being the skull-drinking gold room.

The suited man led me and the other girl into a quieter back area of the building.

“About fucking time,” grumbled a short curly-haired woman when she saw us. She hurried over to us and quickly inspected our dresses and makeup. “You’re the last to arrive.”

“Traffic was shit on the way out of the city,” said the man, lighting up a cigarette.

“And yet the others all managed to get here on time,” the woman replied with a sarcastic air. “Anyway, we have to begin soon,” she went on, yanking on my arm and forcing me to follow her. “You girls know the drill, right? When you’re told to go, you head out in single file and line up facing the auditorium, right at the back of the stage. You hold these out in front of you, right hands only.” She picked up two golden goblets and pressed one into my hand. The other went to the girl I arrived

with.

A gong sounded from somewhere in the building, and the curly-haired woman's eyes widened. "Okay, time to go. Come on," she said, ushering us over to a group of other women in the same flowing white gowns as us.

We walked single file to a curtained area, and then we stepped out onto the concrete stage which overlooked the stone outdoor theatre. The chill of the night sky hit me immediately, but I ignored the shivers and stood with my head held high, holding out the goblet.

My arm began to ache after a few minutes, but I stayed where I was, surreptitiously casting my eyes around. The theatre seats were filling up with society members now. Their dark masks were either beaked or horned, and I could see rings glinting in the firelight on their right hands.

I was too far away to see properly from here, but I knew those rings had eight-pointed stars carved on them. The Star of Ishtar. I'd done some research on what that star meant when I first heard about it. Apparently in ancient Babylonian customs, the goddess Ishtar was associated with the planet of Venus, and she represented lust, fertility and war.

A horn blew, long and loud, three times.

The crowd settled into silence. A tall black-robed man stepped out onto the stage in front of us. He was wearing a golden mask with a cruel, predatory beak, but I knew who it was. Tobias King, the head of the society.

He said a few words in Latin, and then he lifted a hand and clicked his fingers. Heavy drumbeats began to echo around the theatre as several sturdy men in white Grecian robes carried nine coffins out into the auditorium.

“It is time for these men to die and be reborn into the second order,” Tobias called out. “They have passed our tests, and they have been deemed worthy.”

He recited a list of names, and nine men in dark blue first-level robes stepped down out of the audience and haltingly trod toward the open coffins. My heart skipped a beat, even though I knew it was all symbolic. The death and rebirth Tobias referred to was all metaphorical. Still, the idea of getting into a coffin and lying down made my stomach turn.

Tobias recited some sort of speech on the glories of the brotherhood as the nine men lay down in their coffins. Then the drums stopped and the lids were shut. The men in white robes picked them up, two to each coffin, and carried them out of the theatre and over to the giant bull statue in the distance.

I squinted so I wouldn't miss anything, and I saw the coffins being lowered into the holes in the ground I saw earlier.

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“Now we wait for the rebirth of our brothers,” Tobias called out in a booming voice. He walked off the stage, and some sort of play starring the Grim Reaper began a few minutes later. Parts of it seemed Shakespearean, but I didn’t recognize it overall.

The white-gowned girls and I were all still standing at the very back of the stage, holding the goblets as the play went on before us. My arm felt like it was about to fall off, but I gritted my teeth and held steady.

My eyes kept wandering to the right as I waited for the play to finish, over to the bull statue and the buried men. The show had been going on for half an hour now. How long until they ran out of air down in those coffins?

The men in the audience seemed to be getting progressively drunker and louder, and when the play ended, they all cheered and bellowed as if it were Hamilton rather than the weird, convoluted show it was.

I cast my eyes to the right again, and I was surprised to see nine shadowy figures heading toward the theatre. It seemed the men had escaped the coffins and climbed out of the pits. I guess that was another test for them.

When every last one of them had reached the stone steps around the outer rim of the theatre, several of the red-robed members in the crowd rushed over to them and greeted them with firm handshakes and cheers. They were given their own red robes to wear, and then they were led into the center of the auditorium.

A bevy of women marched out to meet them, and each man knelt and held out his left wrist. Over the next half hour—the longest, most boring half hour of my life—the

women tattooed something on the men's wrists, presumably some sort of Crown and Dagger symbol.

Finally, they were done, and Tobias stepped out onto the stage. "Welcome to the second level, brothers! And now for everyone's favorite portion of the evening—virgo sacrificium."

My blood ran cold. I knew what that meant. Virgin sacrifice.

A young woman in a white dress not too dissimilar to mine was quickly dragged out to the stone slab in the middle of the auditorium. She was kicking and screaming, begging to be freed. Mascara had run down her face in teary rivulets, staining her cheeks black.

"Please! Someone help me!" she cried as three burly men bound her wrists above her head and held her down on the altar.

My heart raced. She seemed genuinely terrified. What if this wasn't just part of the show? What if they were really going to kill this crying girl?

My anxiety inched up further as Tobias stepped down from the stage and pulled an enormous dagger out of his black robes. It glinted in the orange glow of the fiery torches, and my nerves hummed with fear as he held it poised over the girl's chest.

"No!" she screamed. "Please!"

A chant rose from the crowd, getting louder with each moment as Tobias slowly stepped around the slab, still holding the dagger right above the girl.

Then he plunged it down, right into her chest.

I almost screamed, but then I saw a grin spread across the young woman's face, and she sat up on the altar and waved to the crowd. I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. It was a trick knife; she was fine. This was just part of the strange carnival of events.

The girl began to shimmy her hips and tease the men in the crowd by slowly taking off her dress, exposing her bare, heaving breasts below. I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. No matter how rich or classy men pretended to be, they still went wild for strippers.

Naked servers with golden skin and trays of drinks streamed out from somewhere behind us, slinking into the theatre toward the crowds of robed men. They were swinging their hips seductively and smiling as the men's greedy eyes lingered on their firm asses.

I nearly rolled my eyes again as I saw the brand-new second-level members being led away by yet more naked women. It looked like Willa and Mellie were both right. These events really were just a bunch of elitist guys getting wasted, doing silly old rituals for no reason and screwing high-class escorts. Just a glorified excuse to party.

Still, the strange, otherworldly goings-on would make an interesting topic for my paper.

A gong sounded about fifteen minutes later. Everyone went quiet and turned to face the stage, and the music and drum beats abruptly ceased as well. The sudden silence was eerie, and I swallowed hard. They all seemed to be looking at me.

The other Grecian-gowned actresses at the back of the stage with me slowly walked away from me, and I turned and watched them leave in confusion. "Wait, where are you going? Are we supposed to leave now?" I whispered urgently to the girl I'd arrived with as she stepped past me.

She kept walking, ignoring me.

I started walking too. Maybe I'd missed the instruction to leave, and I was supposed to follow them all. But as I walked, two red-robed men stepped in front of me, barring my way.

Shit. Someone must've figured out that I wasn't really an actress; that I'd sneaked in here under false pretenses. "Wait," I said frantically. "I can explain."

The horn from earlier sounded again, and I heard a rising roar from my right. I turned to face the auditorium again, and my blood froze in my veins. Dozens of masked society members were charging toward the stage. Toward me.

I turned away from the two men barring my way and ran in the other direction, hoping I could get off the stage and escape the theatre on the other side. I had no idea how to get back through the forest, but I could figure it out later.

As I dashed down the stone steps leading off the stage, several of the men caught up, and I yelped as I felt an agonizing pinch in my neck, like I'd been stabbed with a red-hot knitting needle.

"Please, I..." I never got to finish the sentence. Whatever they'd just injected me with was already speeding through my veins and hitting me hard. My body felt boneless and my mind was spiraling into darkness, falling faster and faster with each second that passed.

I dropped like a stone, crumpling to the ground in a puddle of weak, whimpering terror.

The last thing I saw was a man in a sinister bronze mask looking down at me, and then the cold, calming darkness took over. I let it wash me away, far away, and then it

finally pulled me under.

8

Tatum

I wokeup in a small bed with white sheets, dressed in an unfamiliar sweatshirt and pants. I didn't know where I was. Or who I was. I couldn't even remember my name, let alone anything else. All I knew was that I felt sick. Bone-chillingly, gut-wrenchingly, feverishly sick.

Nausea made my insides churn, and I sat up, holding one hand over my mouth. The left side of my neck ached, and I moved my other hand up to delicately touch the skin there. "Ow!"

I pulled my hand away as if I'd been zapped. Even touching my fingertips to the area made it feel like I was gouging a hole in my neck. There had to be a serious bruise there.

I blinked, and a brief vision swam before me: a man with a large hypodermic needle. That was all. I still had no idea what happened to me or where I was.

I looked around, trying to make sense of everything. I was in a tiny box-like room with a gray stone wall running along one side. The rest of the walls were smooth white, and the floor was concrete. The bed was low and narrow, with an air vent high on the wall nearby. A toilet with no lid sat in one corner with a large grate next to it. The room had no windows, only a door to my right, but there was a glass pane on the door with a view of whatever lay beyond.

Letting out a groan, I forced myself up and padded across the room to look through the pane on the door. There was nothing but a hallway with white walls and bright lights. I guess it was nighttime. Other than that, still no clues as to where I was.

The nausea returned in full force, intensifying and robbing me of my strength. I stumbled to the corner of the room, my stomach aching and tightening more with each passing second. I kept swallowing and my throat kept clenching, trying to stop the horrible feeling in my chest, but it all came up a moment later as I crouched over the toilet, spilling out of me as I gasped and retched.

I heard a sound a couple of minutes later as I lay panting on the floor, waiting for the feeling in my guts to subside. I sluggishly rolled my head over to look, only to notice something I missed earlier. There was a slot on the bottom of the door, and someone had just slid a tray inside with a glass of water and a miniature plastic cup filled with green liquid.

I crawled over and gulped down the water, then sniffed the green fluid. Minty. It had to be mouthwash. After gargling with it, I spat it down the large grate near the toilet and crawled back over to the bed, exhausted. I closed my eyes and let sleep claim me.

I woke again an indeterminate amount of time later. A woman in a white outfit was standing over me, her hand pressed against my forehead. Cool, calming. A wave of relief flooded me. I must be in a hospital, and this was a doctor or nurse.

“What happened to me?” I asked in a croaky whisper. “I can’t remember anything.”

She didn’t say anything. Instead, she pulled me up so that I was in a seated position, then stepped over to a metal cart she must’ve brought in while I was still asleep. It was packed with medical equipment and objects: a blood pressure monitor, specimen cups, needles, cotton balls, medical tape, pill bottles.

“What hospital is this?” I asked.

“You aren’t in a hospital,” the woman finally said.

“What? Then where am I?” I asked, panic rising in my chest.

She ignored my question and wrapped part of the blood pressure monitor around my arm. After waiting for it to do its thing, she recorded the results on a clipboard.

“Hello?” I said incredulously. “Where the hell am I? What happened to me?”

“Your memory will return soon,” she said tartly. That was all she had to offer.

She conducted various other physical exams on me, touching and rubbing certain spots on my body to feel for any abnormalities or injuries, checking my reflexes, and taking my temperature. She kept muttering things like, ‘good,’ or ‘that’s fine’ and recording the results on the same clipboard. Then she shined a miniature flashlight in my eyes to check my pupils.

I gasped. The light flashing in my eyes had brought something back; a shimmering memory. Men in the woods, burning torches everywhere....

Oh, shit.

It was all flooding back now. I knew who I was. I knew what I’d done.

I was so stupid. So naïve. I actually thought my friends and I were right, and that all the silly conspiracy theories surrounding Crown and Dagger were exactly that—silly conspiracy theories. I thought the society was just a relatively-harmless group of wealthy men who liked to party and honor weird old traditions. I thought they wouldn’t hurt me.

But here I was, clearly in captivity, sore and sickly. They obviously saw me at their ceremony and realized I didn't belong, and this was my punishment for violating their inner sanctum.

All this for a stupid grade in a stupid class.

I should've known better. I should've stopped the second I started getting those horrible threatening texts that morning.

"Wait," I said frantically, scrambling to get off the bed. "This is a mistake. I shouldn't be here. I didn't mean anything by it. It was just... I just wanted to write a dumb paper. But I won't tell anyone, I promise!"

The nurse wrenched me back into a seated position, then told me to stay still as she slipped on some gloves and held up a small needle.

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I screamed and tried to fight her off, and she sighed and put the needle down. “These are just routine medical tests. If you keep fighting me, I’ll be forced to give you an orange juice. Is that what you want?”

I stopped shrieking and simply gaped at her. Was she crazy? I’d love an OJ right now.

“I’d actually like a drink, so go ahead,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

She gave me a thin-lipped smile. “You won’t like the orange juice here. It’s what they give the more spirited girls at night to make them sleep instead of screaming the place down all night and bothering the guards. The active ingredient in it is similar to what they injected you with last night. It wipes you out and when you wake up, you have no memories for a while and feel like you got hit by a freight train. Is that what you want?”

I bit my bottom lip and shook my head. “No,” I whispered miserably.

“Good girl. Now stay still.”

She wrapped a tourniquet around my upper arm, then stuck me with the needle. My blood filled the syringe a moment later, and she pulled the needle out and removed the sample, quickly capping it with one hand while applying pressure to the puncture mark on my arm with the other. Then she put a cotton ball and medical tape over it.

I sat back and watched, numb and exhausted. The nurse carefully labeled my blood sample, and then she held out one of the specimen cups. “I need you to urinate in

this,” she said sharply.

A raw red flush of humiliation crept up my neck as I trudged over to the toilet and squatted over it, aiming for the specimen jar as much as possible. I filled it, then wiped and flushed. There was nowhere for me to wash my hands.

I swallowed hard and gave the sample to the nurse. “Can you please tell me what’s going to happen to me?” I asked softly. Hopefully I could appeal to her, woman to woman, and she’d give up some information.

No such luck.

“Please,” I said, my voice reaching a higher pitch again. “I have friends and family. They’ll wonder where I am. I can’t just stay here.”

“That’s all been taken care of,” she said. She held up another needle. “I’ll need you to stay still again.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean it’s been taken care of?”

“I said stay still.”

“No!” I backed away from her. “What the hell is in that needle?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not poison, if that’s what you’re worried about. It’s just a basic Depo contraceptive shot. Now come here, or I’ll get someone to give you some juice. I think we already established you don’t want that.”

My blood felt like ice in my veins. A contraceptive shot? That was very illuminating. I knew exactly what was going to happen to me now.

Tears burst forth like water from a dam, spilling down my face in warm salty rivulets. The muscles in my chin trembled and I looked toward the horrible nurse, as if blatantly showing my terror and distress might actually soften her attitude.

She simply stared at me, her gray eyes cold and dead inside, like a shark. She didn't move. I had a feeling she had been through this exact process many times, and she was waiting for me to cry it out and give up.

My eyes kept dripping with tears, drenching my shirt, and soon I was on the ground sobbing as the walls that once held me up and made me strong began to collapse. I was innocent. I didn't deserve this. All I did was sneak into an event and see some weird stuff. Nothing criminal happened there, just some entertainment, some drinking, and probably some wild sex, so why did it even matter if I witnessed it? I couldn't get any of them in trouble for it. Surely they would realize that soon and let me go. It was all a mistake.

Despite that belief, I couldn't stop sobbing, no matter how hard I tried. Try as I might to convince myself otherwise, I knew I was anything but innocent. The guilt that had nestled deep within me for the last year and a half, coiled like a snake, was bubbling up in my throat, and a little voice in the back of my head was whispering, 'maybe you deserve this.' I pressed my hand against my mouth, trembling and shaking as the raw emotion spilled forth.

The pain started to come in waves, subsiding for long enough to let me take short recovering breaths before hurling me back into grief again. Finally, there were no more tears, no more gasps, no more begging. I was too tired.

"Are we done with the tantrum?" the nurse said in an acid tone.

I nodded and stayed curled up on the floor, barely lifting my head for the gesture. She crouched down and jabbed the needle in my upper left arm. "There. That wasn't so

hard, was it?”

“Please....” I said in a last-ditch attempt to get help, my voice nothing more than a ragged whisper.

“I’ll get these to the lab for testing. You need to try to get some more rest,” she replied calmly. She didn’t acknowledge my plea for help.

She wheeled the cart to the door and slid some sort of keycard into a slot. A light flashed green as something beeped, and the door swung open. I knew I could try to rush the door and slip out with her and the cart, but I was too exhausted, and besides, I could see a man in black clothes and boots out in the hall. She’d mentioned guards earlier, so he must be one of them.

I wouldn’t make it two steps out that door.

With a defeated sigh, I got back on the bed and closed my eyes, praying that this was all some sort of horrible nightmare. Perhaps I would wake up in my bed tomorrow, and I would go down for breakfast with my friends and laugh about the crazy dream I had. It would be nothing more than a dark memory from the depths of my imagination.

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But sleep never came. Even though my muscles ached and my eyelids felt heavy, I couldn't make it happen. I lay stretched out on the white sheets for what felt like hours, though it could've been mere minutes. I had no way to tell.

A scraping noise came from my right again, and my eyes shot to the door. The slot was opening again. I could see hands pushing a tray inside. Food and water.

"Hey!" I sprang off the bed and got down on my hands and knees, trying to call through the slot to whoever was on the other side. "Please, you have to help me! I'm not supposed to be here!"

Whoever they were, they completely ignored me. The slot closed, and through the thick glass pane on the door, I saw them rise to their feet and stride away. My shoulders slumping in defeat, I leaned down to pick up the tray and carried it over to the bed.

There was a tall glass of water, some sort of reddish-brown tablet, and a bowl of oatmeal. I gulped down the water, wolfed down the oats, and ignored the tablet. Who the hell knew what was in it?

Then again, the water and oatmeal could be laced with god-knows-what as well. Shit. I didn't think that through.

The door suddenly swung open again, and I turned my head and lifted my eyes to see a middle-aged man in a dark gray suit enter the room. He closed the door behind him and smiled at me.

My stomach clenched. It was Tobias King.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, motioning toward the plate. “But it’s just food. The tablet is just a multivitamin. You’ll only be drugged if you misbehave.”

I leapt to my feet. “What the hell is going on?” I said. “You can’t keep me here like some sort of prisoner. All I did was sneak into a dumb ceremony. That’s not illegal! It was just for a paper, but I don’t have to write it. Just let me go and I promise I’ll never say a word!”

He laughed mirthlessly, a sinister sound that made me want to throw up. “Firstly, the ceremony was on private land, so technically, sneaking into it was illegal. As for your paper... that’s not why you’re here, Tatum.”

Confusion surged through my mind. “I don’t understand.”

He patted the bed. “Sit down.”

“No.”

He shrugged. “Very well. This could take a while, though.”

“I’ll stand,” I said, not wanting to do anything this horrible man commanded me to do.

“Fine.” He took a seat on the end of my bed, a nasty smile playing on his lips again. “Tatum, we’ve been following you for a long time. We always knew about the silly little paper you wanted to write, and we also knew perfectly well that you intended to infiltrate our brotherhood as part of your research. We allowed it to happen. Why do you think it was so easy for you to make it in? Did you honestly think it was that simple? You didn’t suspect anything at all?”

I swallowed thickly. He was right. It did seem far too easy, especially for such a secretive organization.

“We have eyes and ears everywhere, so we knew all about the little plan you concocted with your friend. Every last detail. We just thought it would be amusing to play with you and let you think you had the upper hand. A lot of the men in the society love games, and stupid little girls like you are especially fun.” He paused and let out another chuckle. “They very much enjoyed last night. Those who were aware, that is.”

“What do you mean?” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Well, obviously the actors and other staff had no idea what was really going on. Half the brotherhood didn’t even know what was happening. They thought your demise was all part of the show, and that you were a willing participant. But of the ones who were high-level enough to be made aware of the plan... well, they loved it. One of the men said he hadn’t seen such an incredible spectacle in years. The fear, the wild look in your eyes as it dawned on you that you were caught out. Amazing. So much better than the acting.”

I sucked in a deep breath. What he was saying made sense in a macabre way. Most of the actors and society members at the ceremony saw the fake virgin sacrifice, and they also saw that the girl was fine afterwards. So when they saw men rushing at me and someone jabbing me with a needle as I screamed and cried and tried to escape, they would’ve thought it was more of the same. More entertainment.

I finally sat down, my knees turning weak. “So you just let it all happen and tricked me for fun? That’s why I’m here?”

“Yes and no. It was amusing, but you’re here because you belong here.”

“I don’t. This is a mistake.”

“I think you’ll find you do belong here, and there is no mistake. We bought you, and we own you.”

My mouth fell open. I stared at him in shock for a full twenty seconds before responding. “What did you say?”

“I said we own you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I thought you were supposed to be smart,” he said with a contemptuous look. “You were sold to us. Now you are our property. Understand that?”

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My lips pulled back, baring my teeth. “You can’t be serious. You can’t own me. And believe me, my friends and parents are going to realize I’m missing soon. They’ll call the police, and—”

Tobias slapped me across the face, hard. I yelped, spittle flying out the side of my mouth as fiery pain raged across my sensitive skin. A metallic flavor filled my mouth, and I realized he’d split my lip open.

“Your friends have already been informed of your decision to drop out of Roden and spend some time backpacking around Europe with no phone or internet. They are upset, of course, especially seeing as you left without saying goodbye, but they’ll get over it. Eventually, they’ll forget all about you.”

I took several deep breaths, my face twisted into a grimace. “You really think my parents are going to believe that? They know how hard I worked to get into Roden. They know I’d never drop out. And even if they did somehow believe that, if I don’t return from this fake backpacking trip at some point, they’ll definitely know something is up.”

A cold smile spread across Tobias’s face. “Your parents, huh? Who do you think sold you to us, little girl?”

All the white noise in my mind immediately shut off as the full weight of his words hit me, smashing into my life broadside and shattering everything I thought I knew.

“No,” I whispered, my body trembling like a leaf.

He was lying.

He had to be lying.

Tobias pulled out a folded sheaf of paperwork from his jacket pocket. “I have the contract right here. You can look at it.”

“My mom and dad wouldn’t do that to me....”

He handed me the papers. “See for yourself.”

Hands trembling, I took the alleged contract and scanned the pages. Shock immediately spiked through my belly, twisting and twirling like a tornado. Tobias was telling the truth. Both my parents’ signatures were on it.

The contract detailed the terms of my bondage to Crown and Dagger, and I could see what my parents had been given in return: their debts paid in full along with three hundred thousand dollars spread out over the months to look like legally-obtained business income.

There was also a stipulation that they would be allowed to live rent-free permanently in one of the King family’s many, many properties in Connecticut. That was their new house... the one I thought they worked so hard for. The one I was so proud to see them living in after spending so many years in a cramped little shoebox of a house in a poor borough of my hometown. All a lie.

As the stark reality hit me, I dropped the documents like they were on fire. My life had been traded by my parents for a few hundred thousand dollars and a free house. That was all I was worth to them in the end. It said it right there in those papers.

“I don’t... I can’t....” I couldn’t form a full sentence. I was too horrified.

With all the shock flooding my system, I felt like my heart might stop and I would collapse right into a coma and never wake up. That might actually be preferable to what was happening right now.

I knew my parents had had a tough time in the last decade or so, but I never thought they would be so willing to give me up in return for some money and a free house. Yet they did exactly that. Why the hell didn't I see it coming?

My mind drifted back to my childhood. Many times, I'd overheard them arguing about money, arguing about me. Saying they could barely afford to feed me. Sometimes my mom would blame my dad and tell him he should've worked harder to get his business going properly. Sometimes he would blame her for not being able to find another job after being laid off from her teaching position. Sometimes I even heard one of them say they shouldn't have had me.

At the time, I put it down to stress. I knew how badly money—or lack thereof—could affect people's minds. I figured they didn't really mean it, and I spent my teens working as many after-school and weekend jobs as I could in order to contribute and lessen their stress.

I guess it wasn't enough. Not enough to buy their unconditional love, anyway. They sold me down the river the first chance they got. Literally.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and looked up at Tobias. There was a nasty gleam in his eyes as he watched me. He was enjoying this.

“Is that why you met with my parents in December last year? I saw you with them at Roden,” I said.

The memory had just returned in a flash. When I was invited to do a campus tour after receiving my acceptance, my parents had come with me, and they'd told me

they had a business meeting with a potential client in the area. Later that day, I'd seen them talking to Tobias near a marble fountain, looking quite grim and uneasy. At the time, I got a strange vibe from the incident, but I ignored the feeling, figuring it was just an innocent work-related meeting.

I guess I should've trusted my gut and realized then and there that something was very wrong.

Tobias chuckled. "No. That was just a quick meeting to discuss some of the payment terms. You first appeared on my radar as far back as March last year, and in the ensuing weeks, I realized you would make the perfect toy for my son, for various reasons. I contacted your parents then."

My previously shocked frame of mind turned feral and furious as a forest fire, rage blinding me, burning out of control.

"This isn't legal!" I said, jumping to my feet again. I stamped one foot on the contract. "You cannot own me, no matter what this ridiculous thing says. I know my rights, and I did not give my permission for any of this!"

"Like I said, the contracts were signed a year and a half ago. You're nineteen now, so that means you were only seventeen when they were signed. Legally-speaking, you were still a child. Your parents could sign for you, and they did."

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I spat at his feet. “I’m not stupid. It doesn’t matter how young or old someone is. You can’t buy or sell another human being.”

That earned me another hard slap.

“You’re going to have to learn the rules, Tatum,” Tobias said icily. “You are property now. You will do and say as we tell you, or you will face punishment. I won’t go easy on you just because you’re my son’s new toy.”

His son’s toy...

He’d said the same thing earlier. My mind had simply skated over it in my shock and horror.

“Elias?” I said, my upper lip curling. I should’ve known that arrogant prick had something to do with this. Like father, like son.

Tobias nodded. “He will be your new master. You will do his bidding at all times.”

“I won’t.”

Another slap. This time, I was braced and ready for it. “You can try to fight all you want, but we will break you, you stupid little cunt. You’ll accept your new place.”

I winced at the insult and shook my head. “No,” I whispered. “No one will ever own me.”

“You’ll change your mind,” he said coldly, rising to his feet.

“I won’t. I’m going to get out of here, and when the police hear what you’ve done, you’ll be screwed. Doesn’t matter how rich you are. You can’t buy people.”

“So you’ve claimed. And yet, I can buy people. I have before, and I will again. Even if by some chance you managed to escape from here—it’s impossible, by the way—there isn’t a single person in the world who would help you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“No, I’m not.” His lips curled into a thin, savage smile. “The best thing about being as wealthy as I am is the realization that everything and everyone is for sale. If you ever got away and tried to tell anyone what happened to you, I would squash you like the little insect you are.”

I drew back, shaking with rage and indignation. I hated that he was probably right. Hated that men like him could get away with things like this, all because they had more money than everyone else. It was sick.

Tobias reached out and roughly forced my chin up to meet his gaze. His eyes were cold and dark, his features arranged in a sneer. “The only reason I haven’t already crushed you for your insolence is because my son is so looking forward to crushing you himself.”

Every hair rose on my arms and the back of my neck. In all my life, I had never truly felt the presence of evil. It seemed like something that only existed in books and movies or shocking FBI case files that would never be close enough to my life to affect me in any real way. But I felt it now, dark tendrils curling their way up my legs, heading for my throat and choking me with their black, rancid presence.

I didn't respond. I shrank back, hugging my arms around my body, shivering all over.

Tobias suddenly turned his head, and I followed his gaze to the door. Someone had just appeared at the pane and was looking in at us. I would recognize that tousled brown hair and arrogant, devilishly-striking face anywhere. Elias.

"Ah. Speak of the devil," Tobias said. "He must've heard that you're finally awake. I don't think you're quite ready for his company, though."

He strode over to the door and swiped a keycard through it.

I followed him, and he shoved me back and stepped out, shutting the door with a slam. I pounded my hands on it, screaming at the men through the pane.

Elias looked right at me and smiled, clearly amused by my distress. I wanted to claw his painfully-handsome face off, wanted to shred him to pieces with my nails. But I couldn't touch him. Couldn't even get close to him until they deemed me 'ready', whatever that meant.

Tobias whispered something in his ear, and the two men turned and walked away.

I closed my shaking hands into fists, willing myself to breathe properly. I needed to keep my mind as calm and focused as I possibly could in such a harrowing situation, for my own sake.

There had to be some way out of this place. This situation. Had to be.

I could never put up with this. I could never give in. I had to stop these Crown and Dagger assholes from trying to turn me into nothing but a subservient slave, and I had to escape this place. I didn't know how, and I didn't know when. All I knew was that I would make it happen.

One way or another, I would be freed.

9

Tatum

The days drifted by endlessly. Or maybe it was weeks. I had no way of knowing, and I'd lost track of time what felt like an eternity ago. There were no clocks or calendars in the room I was trapped in, no pens or sharp implements to scratch marks on the walls in an attempt to keep track.

The only certainty in this place was that I would always be confused, always scared, my mind a constant tangle of chaotic, muddy disorder. The air in here felt dense, suffocating, and I could barely sleep, even when I wanted to.

The lights were almost always on. Glaring, bright, a steady reminder that I was still in this hellhole. The only comfort was that every so often they would suddenly turn off for a few hours, plunging me into pitch-black darkness.

I used to be scared of the dark when I was a kid, and in more recent years I still felt the need to cover every inch of myself in bed at night, always afraid to have an arm or leg dangling into the night air beside my bed. Now, contrary to all that, the darkness was my only solace. It was like a place out of time, a place to rest without addressing reality. A sanctuary.

When I couldn't see anything around me, I could easily pretend I was somewhere else, try to forget where I really was until the lights went back on, cruelly dragging me back to the real world where I was still a prisoner. The real world, where I couldn't rest. Couldn't do anything at all other than sit in the bright light and think

about my old life and where it all went wrong.

I missed my friends. I missed our late-night trips down to the Buttery for fries and hot lobster rolls. I missed my classes. I even missed the grueling hours of study and exam prep. Would I ever experience any of that again?

No, a sinister, insidious little voice told me. You heard Tobias. You belong here now.

I kept rewinding my actions over the last few months, trying to delve deep into my memories and figure out the exact moment I messed up and caused all this trouble for myself. I previously thought it was my decision to write a paper on Crown and Dagger that got me caught in this dark-woven net, but Tobias had made it very clear the other day that the society was already aware of me a long time before then, and they always intended to take me at some point.

But why? What did I do to make them choose me? Was there something in particular about me that screamed ‘kidnap me’? Was there something about my face, my body, my eyes?

I knew it didn’t actually do me any good to blame myself for the actions of these sadistic men. Kidnapping girls was a fucked up thing to do, and the logical side of my mind—what was left of it, anyway—told me I wasn’t really responsible for what happened to me. And yet, I couldn’t stop the crushing sense of culpability from hitting me over and over again. There must be something I did, some tiny little thing that made them pick me.

I even wondered in a foggy haze if I’d actually done something to make them think I was for sale. I knew how stupid that sounded, but after days and days of endless boredom and fear, my rationality was starting to slip. Things were suddenly fitting into place in my brain with little clicks; things that never fitted before. Yes, maybe I did do something to make these men think I wanted to be sold. Maybe I told my

parents to do it. Maybe I thought it would help with their situation, and I owed it to them for taking care of me all my life, even though they could barely afford it. Maybe I somehow forgot it all but was still ultimately responsible.

I pinched my left arm. “No. I didn’t do this,” I whispered to myself, trying to stop the irrational thoughts from plaguing me. I turned on myself again only seconds later. “Or maybe I did....”

The words left me hollow, like my chest was caving in on itself.

I still had no idea what the men of Crown and Dagger actually wanted to do with me now that I was their captive. The contraceptive shot I was given by the nurse and the way Tobias told me I was going to be the perfect toy for Elias made me think I would be raped, turned into some sort of sex slave. The word ‘toy’ made that abundantly clear. I might be a virgin, but I wasn’t that innocent. I’d read dark, sexy books before. I’d watched porn movies. I knew the sorts of things some men liked to do to women. The sorts of things some women liked men to do to them.

But they hadn’t touched me. At least not yet.

The closest thing I had to human contact was the slot opening every so often on the door with seemingly-disembodied hands shoving food and water through for me seconds later. Aside from that, there was nothing. No one visited me, spoke to me, or touched me in any way. No one gave me anything to do. I just sat here in the same clothes every day, bathed in my own sweat, getting dirtier with each hour that passed.

Without my usual routine, and without any word on what was going to happen to me in the future, there was nothing to keep me stable; nothing for me to cling to just to maintain my sanity. My thoughts had turned wild, winding and rambling through unmapped space, tethered to nothing. Anything could happen. Everything. I could be dead tomorrow, or I could be alive yet wishing I was dead.

It was like living in a wild snowstorm. I couldn't see what was ahead of me, couldn't hear anything but the howling roar of abject terror in the back of my mind. I had no idea where I was or where I would be going anytime soon, and the fear kept coming and coming and coming from every direction, making my body ache.

If they would just tell me what they had in store for me, that would calm me down a little bit, even if what they had in store for me was death, because at least I'd finally know. At least I could mentally prepare for it. But instead, I was cruelly left in the dark, never told anything at all. Never able to prepare for whatever came next. Things would inevitably be sprung on me out of the blue.

If anything ever happened at all, that is. Right now, it seemed as if I'd been left here to rot. As if I was being punished, trapped in solitary confinement like a criminal.

The thoughts of the constant isolation and abandonment made my mind drift to my friend Greer. A few days ago, a vague suspicion had taken root in my mind when I remembered an article she sent me when I first decided to write about secret societies for my class paper. Greer had always been into conspiracy theories, and even though she thought Crown and Dagger was essentially a glorified frat, she'd once read some things about other secret societies that she thought I might find interesting.

At the time, I thought it was a load of crap, but now I wondered if there was some merit to it after all.

The article she sent me was about a now-defunct CIA program called MK-Ultra which operated between 1953 and 1973. Their mission was to develop mind control drugs and techniques. They experimented with hallucinogenic drugs, hypnosis, sensory deprivation, sexual abuse and other forms of torture. Many unwilling civilian and military subjects were used in testing, and the program was eventually shut down after all the controversy.

One of the alleged experiments was for the development of ‘beta slaves’—sex slaves who were programmed using mind control techniques and trained to ignore any inhibitions in order to serve a master (or many masters) in sexual ways. The ‘programming’ involved mental and physical torture, making them swap pain for pleasure deep in their minds. This torture they endured during training was supposed to destroy something called ‘the sacred feminine’ in order to turn them into nothing more than a piece of meat to be used and abused by the master at any given time.

According to the article Greer sent me, certain secret societies and criminal organizations had supposedly used these ‘beta slave’ training techniques to create willing sex slaves to serve them.

Perhaps that was what Crown and Dagger did to women. Perhaps that was exactly what was happening to me right now. I could be in the very first stage of the programming process, where the men in charge would attempt to mentally break a woman via imprisonment and isolation.

The sick thing was, if that were the case, then it was actually working on me, as much as I hated to admit it. I’d been so neglected and deprived in these last couple of weeks that I actually wanted someone in this godforsaken hellhole to come in and touch me, just so I could feel the warmth and connection of a hand that wasn’t mine. Even if the hand in question was delivering a cold-water slap to my face. I just wanted to feel something, anything.

I was losing my mind.

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Sometimes I felt lucid, in control. Other times I felt like I were in a dream state, and none of this was real. I would drift off in my mind and start to think that at any minute, my friends would jump out with party hats and streamers, and I would find out it was all a huge, elaborate prank.

I suddenly sat bolt upright on my bed.

Shit. My friends!

I couldn't believe this hadn't occurred to me before now. In all the days or weeks I'd been kept here, I hadn't thought about anyone's welfare other than my own. It was horribly selfish. Considering the reach and influence Crown and Dagger had, my friends could all be in serious danger.

The society had watched me and followed me for a long time, as Tobias had informed me, and that meant they knew who my friends were. Not only that, they knew about the paper I wanted to write, and Greer, Willa and Mellie had all helped me with ideas for it.

Greer and Willa had helped me figure out how to sneak into the Tap Week party, and Mellie had helped me sneak into the second-level ceremony. Greer and Willa were probably fine—I hoped—seeing as Crown and Dagger apparently let people sneak in to the lower-level parties all the time. But Mellie... she could be in serious trouble.

When she'd managed to get into her father's office and found his laptop mysteriously unlocked, she'd seen it as an incredible stroke of luck. At the time, we couldn't believe it, but now I realized that we should've been far more suspicious of that so-

called luck. No one got that lucky. Mellie's dad had probably been told by the rest of the society to leave his computer unlocked when his daughter was around, knowing full well about our plan to sneak me onto the actress spreadsheet.

We'd both been played like fiddles.

"Shit, shit, shit," I murmured, praying Mellie was unscathed. Perhaps they would be more lenient with her, given her father's place in the society.

Or maybe she was right here in a cell too, being tortured horribly...

Guilty tears sprang to my eyes, and a grim chant started in my mind. My fault, my fault, my fault.

A face appeared in the thick pane of the door a moment later. It was Elias. He simply stood there watching me fight back the tears, a hungry look in his striking green-blue eyes. He didn't come here often, but when he did, he would look at me for a while as if I were an animal in a zoo and then stride away without a word.

I jumped up, anger temporarily replacing my fear and sadness. "Stop staring at me, you sick fuck!" I screamed through the door.

I wasn't sure if he could actually hear me, given how thick the door and glass pane were, but it made me feel better to yell at him anyway. I might be craving human company, but not his. He and his father were the sickest bastards known to mankind, as far as I was concerned. I didn't want anything to do with them.

The other day, I'd shocked the hell out of Elias when he came to look at me. I'd just been given a tray of mashed potatoes and salad to eat, and instead of eating the mash, I'd picked some up between my fingers and smeared it all over the glass pane so that it was too clouded for him to see me properly. I hadn't been able to stop laughing

after that, giggling away for the first time in far too long, and I'd subsequently learned what the orange juice in this place was like.

The nurse from my first day here was right. When the guards came in and gave it to me for my insolent behavior, it knocked me out almost immediately, and when I woke the next day, I was dizzy and disoriented, my memories all gone until it finally wore off. It was the strangest feeling, remembering all these things I'd already forgotten and remembered once before.

My door was clean when I woke, of course, and Elias came back to stare at me like the fucking smug creep he was.

I flipped a middle finger at him and went back to lie on my bed, inching over to the very edge of it and facing away, just so I could be as far away from his lecherous gaze as possible. As I snuggled into a curled up position, my hand fell into an indented spot on the mattress.

Strange.

I sat up to look at it, keeping it covered with the thin blanket so Elias wouldn't know what I was doing. There was a reason the spot sank inward slightly. One of the coiled mattress springs beneath it had come loose. I could see part of it sticking out of a tiny hole in the fabric on the side of the bed.

My heart skipped a beat. All the promises I'd made myself about attaining freedom came flooding back to me in a giddy rush. This spring could be useful for when I finally found a way to escape. If I managed to pull it out and uncoil the wire, it could make a decent improvised weapon.

I rolled back over and stared at the door until Elias left. Then I quickly set to work on the mattress. I ripped the hole in the fabric so that it was a little bigger—but not so

big it would attract a lot of attention if a guard or nurse ever came in here—and then I deftly worked the spring out. It took a while and was a lot harder than I thought, but finally, I wrenched it free. A triumphant grin quirked up my lips as I uncoiled it.

Now I just had to find somewhere to hide it.

I went over to the door and looked through the glass pane, just to make sure no one was coming down the hall in either direction. Then I stood up on the bed and reached into the air vent on the wall, carefully placing the wire around one of the slats so that it wasn't easy to see but would be easy to pull out if I wanted it in an emergency.

I couldn't sit down after that. Thoughts of escape and freedom were heavy on my mind again, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I was excited. Inspired. What else had I missed in all my days of gloom-and-doom moping? What other things could this room be hiding from me?

I began to search everywhere, painstakingly tapping on the walls and every part of the floor for anything that sounded different to the rest. Under the bed, behind the toilet... everywhere.

One of the stones in the gray wall on my left sounded strangely hollow when I tapped it. I tapped it again, harder, and to my shock and amazement, it swung outward to reveal an old lever.

“Holy shit,” I whispered, hoping to god I wasn't hallucinating.

I tentatively reached forward and pulled the lever down. There was a heavy grinding sound for several seconds, and then a third of the stone ‘wall’ swung open to reveal a hidden doorway.

Oh my god. It was a secret passage.

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I pinched myself, hard. Surely this was a dream.

When I didn't wake up, I stepped through the doorway into the darkness beyond. My eyes quickly adjusted. I was in an old tunnel. It was cold and damp, and the floor was littered with dead leaves, bits of paper and dirt. For a second, I caught a whiff of salt air, slicing through the dank scent of mold and grime. Wherever this place was, it might be near the coastline.

I kept walking, my feet crunching over the leaves and paper. I seemed to be heading upward at quite a steep angle, which made me wonder if my cell was actually underground. Every so often, a chilling gust of wind would blow through from somewhere, scattering more leaves and debris, twirling them in the dank air. No signs of life in here. No signs of anyone else even knowing about this place.

That was a good sign for me. I quickened my steps, spurred on by the promise of freedom. Then I reached the end of the tunnel, and my heart sank. It was a dead end, just a wall packed with stone and brick.

The wind had to be coming from somewhere, though. Frantically, I turned and dashed down the tunnel in the opposite direction. When I reached the end, I saw it wasn't bricked off like the other side, but it may as well be. There was a door with a barred window where the breeze was slipping through, but it was heavy and locked. I couldn't even try to use the bedspring to pick the lock, because it was an electronic lock which required a keycard, just like the one in my room.

I sank to the ground, sobbing into my knees as I drew them up around my chest and rocked back and forth. The society knew all about the tunnel. Of course they did.

They probably left the trick wall in my room just to mock me and let me think I had a chance of escape only to rip it away when I realized I was still locked in after all.

I was wrong all those days ago when I thought there would be some way for me to get out of this place. So very wrong and naïve.

There was no way out. No escape.

This was my life now.

10

Tatum

Someone finally came for me about three days after I discovered the secret tunnel leading out of my room. That horrible tunnel which held nothing but salt air and false promises.

It was the same nasty nurse from the first day. She took my temperature, then told me to stand up and follow her.

“Where are we going?” I asked weakly.

She turned her nose up at me. I didn’t blame her. I probably smelled terrible. I hadn’t washed or changed clothes in weeks. “To bathe you,” she said. “Thank god,” she added under her breath.

She led me into the brightly-lit hallway and pulled me along to the end. It terminated in a set of stairs and an elevator. She put a keycard in a slot near the elevator, and it pinged a second later. The chrome doors slid open.

“Get in,” she said, motioning one hand toward them.

We rode the elevator up one floor according to the control panel inside. From the panel, I could see there were four floors altogether.

We stepped out into another hallway. This one was much airier and nicer than the

other. It had high ceilings with intricate plaster moldings, oil paintings on the walls, polished parquet flooring and soft natural light. There was a slight scent of salty air in here too. It was pleasant and soothing, and it reminded me of my old summer job back in high school, working at a kiosk down at the beach.

I found myself wondering again if my cell was underground. So far, there'd been quite a lot of evidence pointing to that—the constant warmth despite a lack of heating devices, the harsh, unnatural lighting, and the winding secret tunnel which led steeply upward only to terminate in a ground-level door and window.

As I stepped down the new hall, I craned my neck to look out a window. I couldn't make out much other than wide swathes of deep green pine trees. Wherever we were, we must be near a forest as well as the coast.

The nurse stopped outside a door and swiped her keycard in it again. She pushed it open and beckoned me in.

I let out a gasp at the sight inside. In the center of this new room was an enormous Roman-style bath, unlike anything I'd seen in person before. I was struck dumb by the imposing sandstone columns all around the square pool, each one linked by an embellished archway. The ceiling was inlaid with gold and the bathwater was made azure-blue by patterned tiles and underwater lights.

It was a shame a beautiful building like this housed such ugly secrets.

“Strip and get in,” the nurse said.

I was about to do what she said when the door opened. Instinctively, I turned my head, and I gulped as I saw Elias step into the room.

“I said strip and get in,” the nurse repeated.

I glowered at her. I didn't particularly like the idea of being naked in front of her, but there was absolutely no way I wanted to be naked in front of Elias.

"I'll take it from here," he said. The nurse bowed her head and left the room. He turned his cold gaze to me. "You heard her, Tatum. Strip and get in."

The expression on his face told me he wasn't messing around, and the way he said my name made it sound like a threat. Do as I say or else.

Haltingly, I pulled off the filthy sweatshirt and pants I'd woken up in on my first day here. I hadn't been given any underwear, so as soon as the clothes were crumpled around my feet, I was completely bare before him, dirty and humiliated. So far below him I may as well be a peasant from the Dark Ages.

This is the fucking Dark Ages, a sarcastic voice in the back of my mind whispered. All these men thinking they can buy and sell women like property. Archaic pricks.

Elias's eyes roamed over the curves of my body. I shivered under his cold gaze. He was hard. I could see the thick outline of his cock straining against his black pants. I hoped I never had to see it bare, never had to feel it inside me. As astoundingly handsome as he was, he was pure evil, just like his father.

He took three steps toward me, slow and measured, his eyes never leaving my dirty body. Every inch of me was on display for him, and his lips curled into a devious smirk as my nipples hardened. It was only because I was cold. Not because of him.

Never because of him.

"Get in the water," he said, tilting his head forward to indicate the enormous bath behind me.

I did as he said, feeling his watchful gaze on my back the entire time. The water was warm as I stepped down into it, but I kept shivering anyway. I heard slow footsteps behind me, and when I turned, I saw Elias standing right at the edge.

“Wash yourself,” he commanded. One hand flicked upward, motioning toward some bottles and a cloth on the edge toward my left.

I moved through the water and grabbed the first bottle I saw, a violet-scented shower gel. Tipping some onto the cloth, I scrubbed myself with it until my skin felt raw. Then I washed my hair with the shampoo and conditioner which sat next to the gel.

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“Good girl. Already doing as you’re told,” Elias said a moment later, watching me with amusement as I lathered up my long brown hair. “I guess all those days in solitary broke you down just enough, huh?”

I swept my hand through the water, splashing his shoes and pants. “I’m only doing this because I haven’t been allowed to bathe until now, and I need to. Not because you told me to do it!”

His eyes went steely and dark, like slate in the rain. “You better watch your attitude if you want to stay in one piece. Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to.”

“Bite me,” I muttered.

“I heard that. Next time you speak, I will fucking bite you, right on your pretty little clit. Maybe then you’ll learn your place.”

What did he think he was, a fucking vampire? Asshole.

I glared at him for a few more seconds. Then I fell silent and continued washing myself, basking in the warm water and sweet-smelling soaps. A few weeks ago, a bath or shower seemed like nothing to me; just an everyday ritual that everyone had to go through. Now it was a special treat to be savored, an indulgent luxury.

Elias finally looked at his watch. “Time to get out,” he said. He strode over to the other side of the room and returned with a fluffy white towel and matching bathrobe.

Against my better judgment, I let him dry me. Let his warm hands coast all over me

with the towel, just so I could feel that human touch I'd been craving so badly. I'd promised myself I would never crave it from him, but by now I'd turned so loopy and desperate that I didn't mind so much. If I closed my eyes, I could pretend I was somewhere else and the man rubbing me down was a beloved boyfriend, not a ruthless psychopath.

My eyes snapped open a moment later as Elias let out a chuckle. "I see the bath isn't the only thing that got you wet," he said, eyes focused downward.

I swallowed hard. I hadn't even noticed until now, because I was too caught up in my own deep thoughts, but he was right. I was wet. Soaking wet and turned on beyond belief.

It wasn't because of him, of course. It had to be because I'd been picturing another man standing here touching me, caressing me, stroking me. But then I realized with a harsh shock that the man I'd pictured as my boyfriend in my mind's eye was Elias all along.

I was broken. Something inside me was sick, wrong, bad.

I didn't have enough time to worry about it, though. Two bulky men entered the bathroom a moment later and hauled me away. Terrified, I looked back over my shoulder at Elias, wishing and praying against all reason that he would stop them from taking me. He didn't. He simply stood there and watched, cruel amusement radiating from his handsome face.

The men took me into another room somewhere down the hall. High ceiling, molding along the edges, wide varnished floorboards and understated furniture in muted colors. Expensive. Through the paned windows, I could see the forest I caught a glimpse of earlier, stretching out for miles.

I was led over to a vanity table and forced to sit in front of it on a little stool covered in a rose-pink cushion with thin gold stripes. “Stay,” one of the men commanded, like I was a pet dog.

A woman entered the room a moment later. She blow-dried my hair, styled it, and applied some makeup to my tired, haggard features. When she was done, I looked like a totally different person. I looked beautiful.

Despite that, I still hated what I saw in the mirror. I didn’t want to look beautiful for these people.

The men stepped forward again, ripped my robe off, and put me in heavy chains. I didn’t bother struggling against them. They were far too strong for me, and I had no idea what they might do. They could slap me, kick me, beat the living shit out of me. Kill me.

When my hands were limp and useless behind my back, they put a black leather collar around my neck. One of them slapped me on the ass, making me yelp. “She’s ready to go,” he said to the other.

Raw, angry red crept over my cheeks at the violation. At least if Elias had slapped me on the ass, it would make sense. I knew him, sort of, and I’d been told I belonged to him. His toy. Even though he’d barely shown any sign of wanting to play with me yet, I was still his, and I doubted he would tolerate these men touching me like that.

Wait. What the hell?

Stark shock hit me a second later as I fully processed the idea. I couldn’t believe the thoughts swimming around my mind. I didn’t belong to Elias! I wasn’t his toy. He didn’t own me, and he didn’t have any more right to my body than these horrible men next to me.

God, my mind was melting. I was genuinely losing it.

The men led me back through the hallway. It was late now, and everything was lit by a soft yellow glow from sconces and chandeliers.

When we reached a wide set of doors, they pushed me outside into the night air and began to lead me up a path. It was freezing out here. No surprise there, given that it had to be late October by now, if not even later. I bit back tears as stones, twigs and fallen pine needles dug into my bare feet.

I looked around as much as I could in the darkness, trying to figure out where we were. On my left, all I could see was a thick canopy of trees. It was the same forest I noticed earlier. The branches spiked high in the sky, and it was so dark I couldn't see more than a few feet into the woods. There were small sounds of rustling bushes and the howl of the wind coming from within, making me shiver even more.

I could see a wide swathe of inky water to my right, glittering in the moonlight. Foamy crests of crashing waves were the only sound from that direction, and there was no sign of a beach. Only tall cliffs stretching in an inhospitable expanse into the creeping darkness.

I was right earlier. We were somewhere by the coast. That didn't really narrow things down for me much, though. We could be anywhere. I assumed we were still on the east coast, but it could be the west for all I knew. Hell, we might not even be in the States anymore. We could be in Italy, South Africa, anywhere in the world with a coastline.

The men led me deep into the woods, following a narrow path down a soft incline. Up ahead, the path was lit by tall burning torches along the edges, and in the distance, I could hear the rhythmic pounding of drums.

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Glowing orange light shone through the branches, shadowy arms stretching across my vision until the trees tapered off and we reached a clearing. I stared ahead in wonder and fear at the astonishing place kept secret by the dense forest. Within the wide clearing was an ancient-looking amphitheater.

Built with granite and black marble with perfect arches between each column, it rose imposingly into the night sky, lit by myriad burning torches around its perimeter. Tiers of wide stone seats rose up around the open space, filled with men in dark robes with the hoods pulled up. Within the circular arena was a large throne on a platform. On the back of the throne there was an ornately-carved double-headed eagle topped by a crown. A stone rendering of a dagger cut through the middle of the carved crown, sinking into it.

The general atmosphere reminded me of the second-level ceremony I sneaked into, but it was definitely a different place. It was darker, windier, and I only counted about fifty or so men; much less than the ceremony.

Cloaked in black, Tobias sat on the throne, looking as arrogant and contemptuous as ever. The asshole genuinely thought of himself as some sort of king, just because of his surname.

The men who had been tasked with bringing me here pulled me over to a group of women huddled on the edge of the amphitheater. They were naked and wearing collars and chains, just like me, and every one of them looked drained and terrified. A petite girl with black hair, light brown skin and wide green eyes looked uncannily familiar to me, and with a shock I realized it was Pri Rahman—the girl who went missing from Roden several weeks ago. The same girl who was supposedly safe and

back home in New Zealand.

Of course. The statement saying she was fine had been issued by the Roden Dean, a high-up member of Crown and Dagger. Mellie's father. He was probably right here tonight.

I guess I wasn't so special after all. This society probably 'bought' or kidnapped young women from all over the place, and only a few cases ever made it to the public eye. Take me, for example. No one thought I was missing. They all thought I was backpacking in Europe, and when they didn't hear from me ever again, they'd probably just think I was a shitty friend who couldn't be bothered staying in contact.

The drums pounded louder, and we were led to the platform in front of the throne. Someone pushed on my shoulders, forcing me to kneel, and I saw that all the other women were kneeling as well.

A gong sounded from somewhere to the right. I heard Tobias rise to his feet behind us. "Welcome, brothers!" he said in a booming voice. "As you were made aware of last night, the last girl in our new collection has finally arrived!"

Collection. We weren't even human to these men. Just objects to be acquired, like stamps or pretty gems.

A cheer went up, and Tobias continued.

"These fine young specimens have all had their contracts signed, and they are now official property of Crown and Dagger. As soon as they are healed from tonight, they will begin their training here at the Finishing School."

Healed? That sounded incredibly ominous. And what was this about training?

My stomach lurched. Fear crackled like electricity in the air around the platform. The other women were just as uninformed and terrified as me.

A man in a bronze beaked mask stepped over to the platform and leaned down in front of me, the first in line. “Drink,” he said. His voice sounded strange and distorted through the mask.

I glanced down at what he was holding out to me. A human skull, fashioned into a drinking bowl. Please be fake, I silently begged, but something told me it was all too real. I felt queasy.

“Drink,” the man repeated, proffering the skull bowl again.

I haltingly moved my head forward and let him tip the edge of the skull to my lips. It was filled with a dark red liquid. I prayed it wasn’t blood. It smelled sweet, and as the first drops hit my tongue, I realized gratefully that it was pomegranate juice.

Small mercies, I guess.

When I’d taken a few mouthfuls, he moved on to the girl next to me, then the next, until we’d all had our fill. Almost right away, I began to feel dizzy, disoriented. It was like I was in a dream. The sound of the men chanting suddenly filled my ears, and yet it felt like they were miles away, their voices drifting over the wind. The world was spinning and I just wanted to sit down, even though I was already kneeling on the ground.

The glowing light from the fiery torches planted in the ground seemed to shimmer and swirl before shooting into the air like fireworks. Whatever that juice was spiked with, it was hitting me hard, making me see things that weren’t there. It actually felt nice, this sensation of floating around, all warm and fuzzy and free.

Free.

I would never be free again...

Somehow, the terrible thought no longer seemed so bad, because I was floating away, too high to care about anything down in the real world.

“Deliciae dolor, deliciae dolor....” The chant rose, louder still, echoing through the amphitheater. What did those words mean again? Greer told me once, but I was too dazed to remember.

Colors and images and voices were whirling in front of me, twisting and twirling together until they cleaved into one stark image. Someone had dragged a brazier into the arena, and something was sitting in the flames. Some sort of tool.

I blinked hard, trying to stop my mind from drifting as I tried to figure out what it was. It was so difficult to think straight right now. I was practically hallucinating.

Reality finally struck me when a man carefully picked the tool out of the flames. It was a branding iron. The end glowed orange-red, and my belly tightened at the sight of it. I wanted to get up and run, scream, vanish into the forest, but my limbs were like jelly. I couldn’t move an inch.

Someone held my arms as a pair of unseen hands forced me to lean forward and down, exposing my back to the sky. I closed my eyes and moaned as the man with the iron moved behind me. “Please....” I muttered. It somehow came out sounding like gibberish.

A second later, a searing heat was in my skin, yanking the breath from my lungs. The drugs must’ve helped, though, because it was nowhere near as bad as I’d imagined it to be. It hurt, but it was tolerable. Then it was over, and the man stepped back over to

the brazier to reheat the iron for the next girl.

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I felt someone pressing an adhesive surgical dressing over my lower back a moment later. My eyes wandered over to the next girl. She'd just been marked, and I could see the little symbol on the small of her back: a crown with a dagger through it.

Official property of Crown and Dagger. I heard Tobias's earlier words echoing in my head. At the same time, the men watching us continued to chant the words 'deliciae dolor'.

The delights of pain. That's what Greer told me it meant...

An indeterminate amount of time later, I felt a pair of strong arms dragging me to my feet. "Can you walk?" said a familiar voice.

I suddenly giggled. The drugs were hitting me really hard now. "It's you. We both go to Roden."

Elias sighed impatiently. "Yes. Answer the question."

"I think I can walk," I murmured, blinking rapidly. Everything seemed to be swimming in front of me. I blinked again. His sinfully-handsome face finally came into view. "I feel drunk. Or high. I can't tell."

"I know. You'll thank us for that when you wake up tomorrow."

I stared at him lazily, my head lolling to the side. "What do you mean?"

He supported me steadfastly in one arm and held the other out, letting the sleeve of

his dark red robe fall away. The same mark that had just been burned onto my back had been burned onto his right wrist. It looked like an old wound, a pale pink area of slightly raised flesh.

“They do this during Tap Week when we’re first recruited, and we aren’t offered any drugs to alleviate the pain. Not that I’d want any drugs anyway,” he said with a superior smirk, as if refusing painkillers made him some sort of alpha god. “It’s one of the final tests before we officially make it into the first level, to prove that we’re dedicated. We’re given a Rolex to cover it, so people don’t notice the scar.”

“Huh. So it’s not all sex and partying at the first level. That’s what I thought when I first saw it,” I said, my voice coming out breathy and unfamiliar. Was I even here? Was this just a dream?

“Oh, that’s right. You sneaked into the Tomb party. I almost forgot about that,” Elias said in a nasty voice. He began to drag me along beside him, up the path leading through the forest.

I nodded dreamily. “You saw me there....”

“I did.”

“Well, I saw you at another weird sex party,” I said, my mind wandering back to last December. “I didn’t know what it was back then, but I guess I get it now.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Elias said. “You get what?”

Before I could answer, I stumbled on a tree root and yelped. He let out a short, angry breath, then picked me up as easily as if I were a baby.

While I was high on whatever drug they put in the pomegranate juice, I could pretend

he was my boyfriend, just like I did earlier. Pretend we were at a dance where I got too drunk on the punch, and now he was chivalrously carrying me home.

We weren't far from the main building now. The Finishing School, as I'd learned it was called. It was an enormous three-story Georgian mansion, sitting on top of a hill. That meant I was right about my cell being underground, seeing as I'd seen four levels in the elevator earlier.

Every light was on inside the mansion, making it glow like a warm, friendly beacon in the darkness. I knew better, though. The place was black and sinister as a snake pit.

"What were you talking about before? Something about a sex party?" Elias asked, his voice stiff. We were rapidly approaching the mansion, his feet flying over the rough terrain in long strides. He was obviously familiar with the area.

I blinked a few times. "Oh. That..." I hadn't thought about this in a while, although it'd made me very curious at the time.

I went to a party at Willa's Greenwich mansion almost a year ago, and after taking a wrong turn somewhere upstairs, I'd walked in on a very strange sight: a room lit by fire and filled with a group of men in robes and masks.

There was a topless woman on her knees with her hands bound behind her back, blowing one of the guys. Two other fully nude women were on the bed, tied up and blindfolded as two men fucked them hard and fast. The rest of the guys in the room simply stood around watching. One of them was Elias. He was masked but I still recognized him anyway, because I'd seen him downstairs earlier, staring at me.

As well as all the orgiastic stuff happening in the room, strange symbols were daubed everywhere in red paint, and some sort of ritual music was playing. At the time, the whole thing freaked me out, but now I realized it was probably just more of Crown

and Dagger's traditional ritualistic abuse of women. As much as the girls seemed into it, they could've been drugged.

I told Elias about it, and he chuckled. "I remember that," he said. "I saw you walk in, remember? It's not what you think, though."

"What was it, then?" I asked.

"Just something the younger members do sometimes."

"Why?"

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“Girls see our rings and hear all the dumb rumors about the society, so they know the kind of power and influence we have. That turns them on. They want to get fucked by us. But not just by us. They want the whole experience. So we give it to them. The music, the stupid made-up symbols, the candles. It’s everything they think we do, and in return for us giving them that, we get laid. Good deal for everyone. But it has nothing to do with the real society.”

“What about that girl who came in and screamed about someone taking her sister? Kylie Burns. You told her you knew where she was.”

He snorted. “I only said that to shut her up. She was obviously drunk or crazy. I’ve never heard of her sister.”

“Oh.” I was surprised at how talkative he was being after all the unbridled maliciousness from earlier times. “Why are you suddenly being nice to me?”

“I’m not being nice. I just don’t mind talking to you when you’re like this, because you’re so high you can’t be anything but honest, and honesty is pretty fucking rare for you, isn’t it?”

The full force of his loathing hit me again like a brick, and I sagged in his arms. “I don’t know what I did to make you hate me so much,” I mumbled.

He scoffed. “Really? You’ve never done anything that might make someone dislike you? Nothing springs to mind at all?”

We were in the mansion now. He was carrying me down a softly-lit hallway, toward

the elevator.

“I’ve done bad things before,” I murmured. “Really bad things. But that doesn’t mean I deserve... this. Whatever this even is.” The last word came out more like ‘ish’ due to my slurring.

His eyes narrowed. “Oh yeah? What bad things have you done, doll?” he said icily. As if he already knew....

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I muttered. Guilt roiled in my guts.

“Of course you don’t. But I will make you talk about it one day, Tatum.” He pressed the elevator button for the lowest level, then put me back down on the floor.

It was cold beneath my feet, but I barely noticed, too distracted by a hot rush of anger toward Elias. Who the hell did he think he was, saying that he would make me do stuff? I was so sick of his attitude, so sick of this horrible place.

“You can’t make me do anything,” I said in an acid tone as the elevator sank downward. “I know what you’re trying to do here. You want me to be like an MK-Ultra sex slave, with all your mind control and drugs. But I won’t fall for it. I won’t!”

He chuckled again. “MK-Ultra? Wow. You’re really into your conspiracy theories, aren’t you?”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing. Trying to program mindless sex slaves.”

Elias suddenly pushed me up against the wall, his hands above my shoulders. His breath was hot against the shell of my ear, sending unwanted tingles down my spine. “Mindless? That’s what you think I want?” Another cruel laugh. “You stupid little slut. You couldn’t be more wrong if you tried. I want you completely lucid and aware

of everything I do to you. I want you to know exactly what's happening when I force you to your knees and choke you with my cock. I want you to know exactly what I'm doing when I fuck you and punish you. Mindless is the last thing I want you to be."

The elevator door opened, and he dragged me out, pulling me down the artificially-lit hallway toward my cell. I didn't struggle. As much as I hated the tiny room, I craved it, because it was the closest thing I had to a home now, as messed up as that sounded.

Elias swiped a keycard in the door, then shoved me into the room. "Goodnight, little whore."

"I hate you," was all I had to offer in response.

"Good. I want you to hate me as much as I hate you." He smiled at me, but there was no mirth or kindness in that smile. It was reptilian, evil. Strangely sexy.

I hated how hot he was, hated myself for noticing and physically responding. It's just the drugs, I told myself. They were dulling all sense of reason and rationality as they coursed through my veins. Any tingling, heated response I had to this man was induced by that. It wasn't real.

Was it?

He turned away. I reached out and tentatively touched his shoulder before springing back in case he turned and slapped me like his father seemed so fond of doing. "Wait," I said in a ragged whisper, forcing my twisted attraction to him aside. "Just tell me... what's going to happen to me?"

"I already told you," he said, his upper lip curling in disdain. "You're going to be punished for the things you've done."

I shrank back. “By who? Just you?”

“Yes. You’re mine now. I own you.”

I swallowed and shook my head. “No. You’ll never own me. No one will.”

His eyes glittered with malice. “We’ll see about that,” he said, his voice soft and deadly. “You’ll be begging to obey me soon.”

“No. You can never truly own something that hates you,” I said softly.

He smiled again, as if I’d just told a hilarious joke. “Like I said,” he began, words laced with cold finality. “We’ll see about that....”

11

Tatum

Another week passed. My brand was healing nicely. I was kept in my cell for the most part, with a few changes. I was allowed out for an hour every day to exercise in a gym on the mansion's first floor. After that I was allowed to take a shower, brush my teeth, change the gauze padding on my brand, get into fresh clothing and, if so desired, put on some makeup.

I did not desire that. I ignored all the powders and perfumes and potions. If I was going to be kept here with Elias as my new 'master', whatever the hell that even meant to these people, I didn't want to look pretty for him. I wanted to look as plain and unappealing as possible. Perhaps then he'd leave me alone and stop making threats about jamming his cock down my throat till I choked.

So far, touch wood, there had only been threats. I was beginning to wonder if this was part of the mental torture he had in mind to break me down, as if I would become so starved of human touch and affection that I might beg him to strip me naked and fuck me. After all, he had made a comment the other night about me begging for him. Soon. So obviously, he thought I would actually do that.

He was in for a nasty surprise. I would never do that. Never.

My feet were currently pounding away at the treadmill in the gym. Sweat dripped over my forehead. I ignored the dampness and took in a deep breath, relishing the stimulation and exercise. It wasn't about making my body look fit and sexy for Elias,

of course, which was supposedly the official purpose of these gym trips. I used to go jogging every day, so being allowed to do this brought back some normalcy to my life. As much as that were possible in this scenario, anyway.

The other girls at the Finishing School were allowed to train in the gym at the same time as me, but we were never allowed to speak to each other. Hulking guards in black were positioned around the room to make sure we followed this rule. However, they weren't always able to hear the whispers and hushed murmurs between girls on adjacent exercise machines. Because of this, I was occasionally able to catch a few pieces of information about the other girls.

There were twenty of us, and it seemed most of us had been taken at various stages from various places. Most of us weren't considered missing, according to things we'd been told upon arrival. Crown and Dagger had made sure of that.

One girl had been here for six weeks already (the society had spread a rumor around her hometown that she was involved with a drug dealer, so no one was all that surprised when she vanished) and the last girl to arrive just a week and a half ago was a tanned blonde all the way from Kansas. Because she was still so new, she spent most of her time crying hysterically.

I didn't cry anymore. There was no point.

Using my peripheral vision, I saw a petite girl with black hair get on the treadmill next to me and start it up. It was Pri, the other Roden girl. She'd been across the gym doing some free weight exercises until now, and her caramel-brown skin glowed with a sweaty golden tinge in the morning light streaming through the window.

"Hi," I murmured. "Pri, right?"

"Yeah," she whispered back, beginning her jog at a steady pace. "I think I know

you.”

“I’m Tatum. We were at the same college.”

“I must’ve seen you somewhere there,” she whispered. “Did you live in Bamford?”

“Yup.”

“That’s it, then. My best friend was in the same residence as you. I must’ve seen you around there.”

I nodded and wiped my brow, keeping my eyes ahead. If the guards saw us looking at each other, they might get suspicious, and I’d seen a girl get a black eye the other day for daring to say ‘good morning’ to another girl when she walked in.

“So how did you end up here?” Pri asked.

“I’m still not sure. They say my parents sold me here, but I don’t know if they’re telling the truth,” I muttered.

“Me too. Apparently I’m back in New Zealand, if anyone from Roden asks. And if anyone from New Zealand wonders where I am, my parents will tell them I’m still in the States.” She sighed dejectedly.

“I’m backpacking around Europe,” I said with a wry smile.

“Lucky you.” She let out a short, angry breath. “Do you sometimes pretend that you really are?”

I nodded briefly. “Yeah. I have to imagine all sorts of stuff to pass the time here.”

“Same.” There was a brief pause. Then she lowered her voice even further. “Do you know what they’re going to do with us?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t entirely sure, but I’d made a few educated guesses. This place was obviously a training ground for sex slaves, but I had no idea where we would be sent afterwards or when the official training would even begin.

I said as much to Pri in a low, halting whisper. Her sorrowful eyes dropped to the black conveyor belt under her feet. “That’s what I figured,” she said softly.

“Who have they assigned you to?” I asked.

Her brows knitted. “What do you mean?”

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“They told me Elias King is my ‘master’. Apparently I’ve been sold to him specifically.”

Her face was still etched with confusion. “They didn’t tell me anything like that. I guess that means I could be given to anyone once they finish training us. Whatever that even means.”

I wondered why I’d already been assigned to a man when she hadn’t. In fact, I hadn’t heard any of the other girls talk about being given to anyone in particular either. Why was I different?

We settled into a grim silence. When my damp hair lay like a second skin over my cheeks and I felt like I’d been caught in a sudden storm, I turned the treadmill off and stepped away from it, whispering a brief ‘see you’ to Pri.

I told one of the guards I was done, and he nodded and led me into the communal bathroom. Before stepping into one of the showers, I looked at myself in the mirror, gawking at my sweaty form. The young woman who faced me wasn’t familiar. As much as I’d tried to keep my head straight and my resolve intact, I looked like a stranger with the bruised look of a victim. My skin was pale, my eyes had dark circles under them and a defeated expression within them, and my shoulders seemed permanently slouched in acceptance of my fate.

No. I couldn’t accept this. I couldn’t let them continue to break me down mentally, forcing me to believe I belonged here. I didn’t. No one did.

I turned my back on the strange woman in the mirror and stepped into the shower.

* * *

Elias came to my cell later that day. He had a black bag in one hand and a long tool in the other. I recognized it immediately. A cattle prod.

I gulped and sat up on the bed. “What are you doing here?”

He stalked over to me, then held the cattle prod out to my abdomen and flicked a button. A painful zap shocked me, and my body jolted so far backward that I nearly fell off the bed.

“From now on, you don’t speak unless spoken to. Got it?” Elias said, a cruel smirk playing on his face. “And when you do, you address me as Master. There will be other rules, but we’ll go through them later.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He zapped me again, and I yelped. He brandished the prod threateningly in the air. “You want more?” he asked. Amusement and malice glittered in his eyes. He enjoyed hurting me. “Or should I take you out, string you up and whip you instead?”

I swallowed hard and shook my head, biting back any words of protest. It wasn’t the worst pain in the world. Being whipped would be far worse. I knew when to pick my battles, and this wasn’t the time. I would only get myself badly hurt.

“So,” he went on, putting down the prod and opening the bag. I half expected him to pull out some sort of medieval torture device, but instead he pulled a notebook and pen out and threw them on the bed. “This is for you. I know you were a journalism major. You love writing.”

“You’re letting me write something?” I asked, my heart leaping. That would be an

incredible luxury. I'd be able to pass the long, mind-numbing hours in this cell by jotting down all sorts of things—my thoughts, feelings, even fictional worlds I created in my imagination just to amuse myself.

Elias picked up the prod and held it toward me again. I skittered backward. "What did I just tell you?" he said, eyes narrowed coldly.

"Um. I mean, are you letting me write something... Master?" I said, venom practically dripping off my tongue as I said the final word. There was no way I would ever accept him as my master, but if it meant I wouldn't get shocked with the cattle prod or whipped half to death, I would say it just to protect myself.

"Sort of," Elias replied, amusement flickering in his eyes again. "Last night, I called you 'doll', and afterwards, I realized how much I enjoyed that. So I've decided. That's your new name. Doll. Because you are nothing but a fuck-doll. A toy for me to play with. And now, I want you to write lines to that effect."

I gaped at him. My new name? Did he seriously think he could strip me of my identity as well as my dignity?

"I can tell by your face that you aren't pleased with your new name, Doll," Elias said. "But you need to realize: things have changed for you, permanently. It's what you signed up for. If you refuse to accept this and continually displease me, I can do any number of things to punish that behavior. I can hurt you, I can take away your food, and I can prevent you from sleeping. I can even sell you to a far worse master. You don't want that, do you?"

I shook my head, tears springing to my eyes. I'd promised myself I wouldn't cry, and just this morning I'd been musing on the utter pointlessness of showing emotion in this place. But at the mention of being sold to someone even worse, I couldn't help it.

Elias pointed to the notebook and pen. “I want this written five hundred times. My name is Doll. I belong to Elias King. Got it?”

“Five hundred times?” I said, my eyes widening. I knew I’d forgotten to call him ‘Master’, but I was too shocked to notice at first. It was bad enough that he wanted me to write lines like a misbehaving schoolgirl from the 1950’s, but five hundred times? My hand would fall off. “Master,” I finally added in a reluctant mutter.

“Yes. After you’ve done that, you might be more willing to accept your new place in life. Begin.”

Asshole.

My hands shook as I picked up the notebook and pen. This would take hours. If I took an estimated thirty seconds to write the two short sentences, that was still only a hundred and twenty per hour. Writing five hundred of them would take well over four hours, and that wasn’t including any breaks I had to take to rest my hand.

“I’m not completely sadistic,” Elias said. “If you finish without any issues, you will be rewarded.”

“How?” I asked, glancing up.

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He let it slide that I'd once again forgotten to call him Master. Or maybe I would be punished for it later. That seemed far more likely.

"You'll see. I'll be back in a few hours."

He left the room. I let out a sigh of relief. At least I wouldn't have him breathing down my neck as I faced the arduous task ahead of me.

I kept myself as detached as possible as I wrote down the horrible sentences. My name is Doll. I belong to Elias King.

After the first hour, my hand began to cramp, but I kept going, intent on finishing before the words imprinted themselves on my mind. The more they did, and the more degraded and humiliated I felt, the more likely it was that I would begin to believe the words were true.

I'd seen movies about Stockholm syndrome before, and I knew it affected people even if they tried their hardest to stop it from happening. It was a survival technique, a coping mechanism. If it happened to me, there wasn't much I could do to stop it. I just had to hope writing these lines wasn't the first step in that direction for me.

With every line saying 'My name is Doll' I thought to myself 'My name is Tatum Marris', and with every line saying 'I belong to Elias King' I thought 'I belong only to myself'. It helped me remember that the mind-numbing mental torture was just that—mental. It wasn't real. It wasn't tangible. It was all in my head, which Elias couldn't actually see. He could only presume the damage it was doing to my emotional state. So as long as I chose to believe I was still my own person, he could

never take that away from me. I could let him think he had, let him think he'd won, but deep in my mind, I would never be his.

He returned somewhere around dinnertime with another bag and a tray of food. This time it wasn't the bland slop or plain old salad they usually gave me. It was a divine-smelling bowl of duck and mushroom risotto with truffle oil. I'd always loved risotto, and I wondered if Elias knew that or if this meal was just a coincidence.

"As promised, your reward. A real dinner," he said, placing the tray on the end of my bed. "Are you going to thank me, Doll?"

"Thank you, Master," I murmured. Go fuck yourself, Master.

He picked up my notebook and began to leaf through it. As he did so, I dug into the risotto, wolfing mouthfuls down as fast as possible, like it would vanish from under me if I paused for even a second.

"What's this?" Elias frowned and threw the notebook at me. The tray was yanked away from me a second later.

I stared at the food longingly. I hadn't even been halfway through it. Then my eyes fell to the notebook page Elias had directed my attention to.

My heart sank. At some stage, my brain must've gotten mixed up between my assigned lines and conflicting thoughts. I'd written 'My name is Tatum Marris. I belong only to myself' several times.

I looked up at Elias, my eyes wide and my hands shaking. "I didn't mean to," I said frantically, terrified that he would tie me up and whip me like he promised earlier. "Please, Master."

I hoped the use of his preferred title would placate him, but he glared and leaned down, strong fingertips digging into my shoulders as his face hovered only inches from mine. “I guess we’ll have to try it another way, Doll. I had a feeling this might happen.”

He reached into the new bag and pulled out something that looked like skimpy women’s underwear. “Strip, then put these on,” he commanded.

I stood up and did as he said, shame creeping over my cheeks in a hot blush as I removed my clothes and stepped into the black panties. I didn’t want him to see me like this, but I desperately wanted to avoid punishment.

His eyes glimmered with arousal as they roamed over my body, settling on my breasts. My nipples were hard. “Good girl. It really is a shame something so beautiful can be so ugly beneath the surface,” he murmured. Then he pulled something else out of the bag and clicked a button on it.

A breathy moan ripped through me as the underwear began to vibrate. Within seconds, I was too aroused to function, my clit throbbing and my core pulsing.

Elias turned it off. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Against my better judgment, I nodded.

He smirked. “Read the words you’ve written there,” he said, pointing to a line on the notebook. The cattle prod from earlier was back in his hand, along with the remote controller for the panties.

“My name is Tatum Marris. I belong only to myself—ow!” I screamed and fell against the bed as he zapped me with the prod. He must’ve turned the voltage up, because that one hurt far more than the others. I felt it in every inch of my body,

every muscle aching and cramping.

“Now read this line.”

“My name is Doll. I belong to Elias King... oh....” I let out another breathy groan as he switched the vibrating panties back on, wishing I wasn’t so physically pliable. I didn’t want him to know how much it turned me on, how amazing it felt, but it was impossible to keep inside.

“See how good it feels to say those words?” Elias said. “Want me to keep it switched on?”

I nodded. As much as I hated him seeing this, it was the first thing that had felt good for me since my arrival here. I wanted to cling to it as much as I could, feel every bit of pleasure I could eke out of it. “Yes, Master.”

“I’ll leave it on if you keep repeating those words.” His perfect lips curled up in a sinful smile.

“My name is Doll,” I began, my legs shaking and juddering. I collapsed onto my knees and moaned. “I belong to Elias King.”

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I kept repeating that, and as promised, Elias kept the vibrations going. He moved closer and hooked a finger around the edge of my panties before sliding them down just an inch or two, enough to let his thumb creep in and touch my swollen clit. My arousal was painfully obvious, quickly soaking him, and he hummed appreciatively as he rubbed my clit in slow circles. “You’re such a good girl when you’re like this,” he muttered. “So wet. So beautiful.”

He’d always acted as if he despised me, but his voice was betraying him, showing how aroused he was. Dark and low and gravelly.

All of a sudden, he bent down and kissed me. My body went rigid against him, and a bolt of electricity burst through my veins. As he hunted for a way into my mouth, I took a deep breath through my nose and found myself swathed in his scent. Rich, spicy, clean, oh-so masculine.

His tongue bathed my lips in heat as he leaned in, deepening the kiss, and finally I opened my mouth all the way, letting his tongue slide inside to conquer mine. With his hand down my panties and his other arm holding me flush against him, I had no way of escaping his embrace. For a moment, I didn’t even want to. A wave of primitive emotion swept through me, arousal that scared me more than any of his earlier threats of physical pain.

He drew back, lusty gaze focused right on my face as his thumb kept circling my clit. The wave of arousal became a dark, churning storm deep inside, threatening to overwhelm me.

“I think I’m going to....” I hesitated, needing to suck in a deep breath. I’d never had

an orgasm before, but I felt myself being pulled toward the edge of something, and I knew I was close.

“Come?” Elias said, his deep voice laced with amusement.

I nodded anxiously.

“Who is making it happen?”

“You.”

“Who am I?”

“My... my Master,” I gasped. I don’t mean it, I don’t mean it, I kept reminding myself, but the words were becoming a distant haze in the back of my mind as the impending climax threatened to engulf me.

“It isn’t fair if you get all the pleasure,” he muttered against my ear, pulling his hands away from me. The panties stopped vibrating.

I let out a moan of protest, and Elias chuckled. “Patience,” he said. He unzipped his pants and pulled out his hard cock. I swallowed hard as I saw it for the first time. “I’m going to fuck your mouth, and you aren’t going to come until I do.”

Shaking desperately, I got down on my knees and looked up at his hard length. Elias kept the panty controller in one hand and used the other to grip my head, fingers roughly tangling in my hair to create a makeshift ponytail as he pulled me forward and pressed the tip of his cock against my lips.

My eyes grew wet with tears again, but I didn’t stop him. He tasted slightly salty, and I let him go in deeper, sliding the whole crown of his cock inside my mouth.

“That’s it,” he growled. “Keep taking it. Lick it and suck on it.”

He slid in farther, and I moaned and began to suck on him, my tongue flicking over the slit before licking the veiny underside. His hips thrust deeper into my mouth, and as much as I hated him, I had to admit I liked hearing his deep grunts and groans of pleasure.

He hit the back of my throat, and my vision blurred as tears spilled out. I felt like I was choking, but Elias didn’t seem to care. He kept thrusting, yanking on my hair harder, filling my mouth and throat with his throbbing length. I forced myself to look up at him, not wanting to miss the expression on his face when I finally made him come.

He was looking down at me, eyes dark and warlike, as if this were somehow difficult or painful for him to do. “That’s it, little slut,” he growled. “You’re a fucking natural. I knew you would be.”

He switched the controller back on. I moaned against his cock as my clit began to throb again. The cell was filled with the sounds of my wet mouth on his thick cock and the humming vibrations of the panties along with my plaintive moans and his husky groans. I began to breathe even deeper as I felt myself approaching the cliff’s-edge of my climax again. Elias noticed and began to move his hips faster, his grip tightening on my hair. Then he slowed and let out a deep groan, erupting in my mouth, hot and salty and slightly bitter.

I swallowed every last drop. At the same time, I felt an immense pressure deep within my core, and then it exploded out of me in hot waves of incredible pleasure mixed with trembling fear. Elias pulled his cock out of my mouth, and I cried out, the waves still crashing through me. The desperate sounds tearing from my mouth seemed to amuse him. He smirked down at me as I collapsed to the cold floor, my legs twitching.

The pleasure began to fade, replaced with stinging regret almost immediately. For all my talk of staying strong and refusing to give up, I'd broken down and given Elias everything he wanted within just a few hours. I was weak. Pathetic.

The magnetic attraction between us didn't help matters, either. Even though I didn't want to admit it existed, it was always there. Powerful, seductive. Toxic.

I hated him, and I hated myself for responding to him and sinking so low. I felt dirty, used, ashamed. I should've accepted the cattle prod or the whipping... it would've stung, but at least I would have maintained my dignity by refusing to 'admit' that Elias owned me.

"I'll never forgive you," I whispered, more to myself than him.

Elias heard me. "I probably shouldn't be forgiven. I've always known that. But you... neither should you. In that respect, we're exactly the same, Doll," he muttered.

I wondered what he'd done that made him think he didn't deserve forgiveness. Was it just my kidnapping? Or was there more?

Why did I even care?

I broke down in sobs, each one ripping out of me in painful contractions as my chest shook. Elias didn't leave. He simply stood and watched me with a derisive stare in his eyes. "What's wrong?" he finally asked. "Tell me, Doll."

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I looked up at him again. “I just don’t know why you’re doing this. How I ended up here. Or what’s going to happen next. I’m scared,” I whispered, my bottom lip trembling. I sniffed and drew in a deep, shaky breath.

Elias crouched down next to me. “You knew what you were getting into when you signed up for this. You knew you would be sent here for training, and then you would be sent to the Lodge. Why are you pretending otherwise?”

I stared at him blankly. I didn’t know anything of the sort. What was the Lodge? Would I be given to other men there?

The thought was like a red-hot knife twisting in my guts. As much as I hated myself for thinking it, I didn’t want to be owned or punished by anyone other than Elias. Better the devil you know. So far, he hadn’t hurt me too badly, but god knows what another man might do to me...

“I don’t understand,” I said, shaking my head. “I didn’t sign up for anything.”

He laughed. “Yes you did. You know what I’m talking about. Granted, you didn’t know I would be your new master, but you still knew what you were getting into in general when you sold yourself to the society.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No! I didn’t! I’m telling you, I never signed up for any of this!”

He ignored the fact I wasn’t calling him Master. “What do you mean?” he asked sharply.

“I mean I didn’t do it. My parents sold me here! At least that’s what I was told.”

His eyes widened ever so slightly. The movement was barely perceptible, but I saw it.

“Your parents?”

“Yes. Your father told me about it. He even showed me the contracts they signed. I don’t belong here,” I said in a broken whisper, tears sliding down my cheeks again. “I would never sell myself. Never.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you lying? Is this some sort of game?”

I shook my head and widened my eyes. “No, I swear!” I felt as if I were choking on all my emotions. “Please, this isn’t some sort of act. I mean it. I have no idea what’s going on here, and I didn’t ask for any of it.”

Elias stared down at me, his expression hard and dark. Finally, he picked up the bag he’d brought in earlier. “I have to go,” he said.

He put the controller and the cattle prod in the bag, but he left the notebook and pen behind, along with the risotto. A small mercy.

He headed for the door without another word, and then he was gone.

12

Elias

After the briefflight back home, I drove down to my father's main business headquarters in Fairfield and breezed past the frantic blonde assistant stationed outside his office. I stalked in without knocking, my brows knitted in a mixture of anger and puzzlement.

The room was set up to look like an old-fashioned study: antique desk with small framed photos, paintings adorning the walls, stacked bookshelves and soft carpet along with a roaring hearth on one side. Only the executive chair and computer made it clear it was an office.

My father was sitting at his desk, sipping at a two-thousand dollar bottle of scotch and staring at something on his computer monitor.

"We need to talk," I said, by way of announcing myself.

"Remind me to fire Brenda later," he muttered, glancing up from his screen. "What is it?"

I crossed my arms. "I was at the Finishing School with Tatum earlier."

He blinked. "And?"

"She started crying hysterically and saying she didn't sign anything, and that she has

no idea what's going on. She said her parents sold her to the society and that you showed her the contracts to prove it. Is there any truth to that?" I asked.

Before Tatum's arrival, I'd been pissed at the idea of having some sort of begrudging consent from the girl. But now, knowing that there was a possibility that I genuinely didn't have her consent, I felt differently about the situation. Something about it felt all sorts of wrong, deep in my marrow. Even to someone like me.

The traumatized look on her face, the haunted expression in her eyes, the raw note of pain in her voice... I thought I would love it. I knew I would. And yet, when it was right there in front of me, I wound up hating it.

I wanted her to fight, I wanted her to detest me, I wanted her to struggle and feel pain. But I didn't want some broken girl in front of me, weeping and falling apart at all times. Not to mention how much fucking trouble the society would be in if we were somehow found to be holding an unwilling subject.

The deal was meant to be: virgin girls sold themselves to our society as subservient sex slaves for varying lengths of time, depending on their personal preference and how much money they wanted. During that time, they would become our property. They couldn't leave, couldn't argue. Their rights would no longer exist, and they would be branded with our mark and endure strict lessons at the Finishing School, which was essentially a training facility for all kinds of sexual proclivities. The wilder the better.

Afterwards, while they were in our service at the Lodge—a high-class luxury playground owned by Crown and Dagger and designed to offer any carnal delights a man could dream of—their families would receive the payment for them. Because we didn't want any watchdog organizations finding out about what we did (as it was technically illegal) the money had to be paid out very carefully, often funneled through family businesses over months to appear as income from that, or laundered in

other ways.

Some girls signed two year contracts to earn just enough to pay for college, and others did five year stints, desperate to pay off their family's entire mortgage or other such debts.

It worked out well for everyone. In return for giving their virginity to us and providing every possible sexual service that the second and third-level men of Crown and Dagger might crave, varying from light vanilla to dark as sin, they received more money than they could've possibly dreamed about in the past. It was a symbiotic relationship.

When their contracts finished they were finally free to go, after signing heavy non-disclosure agreements (their families also had to sign these, for obvious reasons).

Tatum's contract was unorthodox in that there was actually no time limit on it. She would belong to Crown and Dagger until whichever master she was assigned to finally grew tired of her. It could be a year, it could be ten years. Or longer.

She'd been rewarded heavily for such a sacrifice, though. She and her family had a free house to live in for the rest of their lives, all their debts paid, and several hundred thousand dollars given to them upfront as spending money. It could've been a million, or possibly even more, but apparently Tatum hadn't bothered negotiating when she went through the process with my father.

If she even did that.

After this evening's incident, I couldn't be sure, and that was troubling, to say the least. Prostitution was already illegal, so if we were ever caught by the feds, we'd be in a lot of shit already... but if they found a girl with us who claimed to be an unwilling, abused hostage, we'd be fucked beyond repair. We might be the richest

people in this country, but that didn't mean we could kidnap a girl, keep her and hurt her without any consent. No, she needed to understand and sign that damn contract, whether we liked it or not.

Dad smiled at my pissed expression. For him, that was rare. "Oh, Elias. I didn't think you'd fall for that so easily."

My forehead creased with confusion. "Huh?"

He didn't answer me right away. Instead, he stood and headed over to a filing cabinet on the other side of the office, humming as he went. He rifled through a drawer, then returned to his desk with a thin folder. "The original contracts are stored in my office at the Lodge, but I keep copies of them here," he said, handing the folder to me. "Go on. Read it."

I frowned and opened the folder, leafing through the paperwork. It was a contract, signed by Tatum in multiple places.

"Look at page three," Dad said. "About halfway down the page."

I did as he said, my brows immediately shooting up.

"See?" Dad went on. "I put that clause in. As part of the deal—and for an extra fifty grand for her family—she has to pretend to have no idea what's going on at first and try to fight her new master on the issue whenever she can. I knew you weren't too happy at the thought of having her consent, given that she gave herself to our group, so I thought it would be a nice touch." He chuckled. "You're just like me. You like it when they fight. Or am I wrong about that?"

He wasn't wrong. I nodded slowly. "I see. I should've realized."

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“You actually believed her, didn’t you?” he said, still chuckling.

I stiffened. “Well, she seemed genuine.”

“She was acting. Women are vastly superior to men when it comes to thespian talents. Especially Tatum. We’ve seen her in action before, haven’t we? Lying little bitch.”

“I suppose so.” I finally took a seat, facing him. Something was still bothering me. “She was crying and breaking down all over the place, but she wasn’t fighting me. Not like this clause says.”

“I’ll have to have a word with her about that, then. She knows the deal and she has to stick to it. Fight, not curl up and cry a bucket-load of crocodile tears.” He paused. “I’d say some of those tears might be real, though. When I approached her and made the deal with her, she had no idea she would be given to you specifically, and she probably isn’t too happy with how things have turned out. Many of the girls are like that at first. They don’t like their new masters, so they act out. That’s why they’re sent to the Finishing School first. It’s there to give them an idea of what their new life will be like.”

“I suppose.”

He sighed. “A lot of them think they’ll be treated like princesses, and they feel very let-down when they arrive and experience something far crueler and more isolating than what they imagined. But the treatment at the School is necessary to get them into the slave mindset.”

I grunted. “Right.”

“Why do you think there are so many guards there? We need to account for all the girls who change their minds and try to run away when it’s already too late,” he said with an annoyed sniff. “If Tatum is upset at how she is being treated or who she’s been given to, then that’s her problem. Her fault for making assumptions. She was well-informed about what she was getting into, and she should know not to expect any special treatment.”

I stared down at Tatum’s signature on the back of the contract again. It was right there, delicate little letters in spidery handwriting.

“She looked genuinely scared when we took her at the ceremony,” I muttered. Some fractious part of me was still unconvinced.

My father let out an exasperated sigh. “Again, she was acting. We set up that whole show purely for your benefit, Elias. I knew you wouldn’t be happy if she arrived on her own, totally willing. No, we had to make it dramatic, make it seem like she was terrified and had no idea what was happening. And it worked, didn’t it?”

I nodded slowly. My cock had never been so hard than when I saw Tatum running off the stage that night, fear marring those pretty features as she tried to escape the men charging at her. “Yeah. I liked it.”

“Good. By the time her training is complete, she’ll be prepared for the Lodge and her behavior should improve dramatically.” Dad pursed his lips for a second. “But I’ll go and talk to her about her recent conduct anyway.”

I waved a hand. “No, don’t do that. I’ll talk to her. She’s mine now, and she needs to know I won’t tolerate any more hysterical lies. She can fight me all she wants, be as insubordinate as she wants... that’s fine. As you said, I somewhat like that. But I

don't like lies."

"Fair enough." My father nodded. "I suppose she's spewed enough bullshit in the past, hasn't she?"

"No shit."

My face felt hot with humiliation. I couldn't believe I let fucking Tatum Marris trick me. Despite what she'd done in the past, I still fell hook, line and sinker for her black lies. All because of those pretty blue eyes staring up at me, weakening me, suddenly making me feel things I'd never felt before. Compassion. Tenderness. Pity.

My hands curled into fists by my side.

I wouldn't let it happen again.

13

Tatum

My eyes snapped open. There was something in my cell making a soft scuffing sound on the floor. The sound had woken me.

I wasn't sure what time it was. After Elias left last night, I cried myself to sleep, and I woke earlier this morning to find myself still alone. When the time came to head to the gym and shower, I barely put in any effort, still mentally caught up on yesterday's conversation with my supposed master. Then I went back to my cell and laid on the bed, still waiting and wondering while I drifted off for a nap.

Would he believe me? Would he return to help me? Was it possible he was actually unaware of the fact that I was here against my will? He seemed surprised when I told him, but he hadn't returned or said a word to me since then.

Until now. Someone was in the cell with me. Please be him, I prayed. Please get me out of here.

"Elias?" I said, rubbing my eyes as I waited for the heavy tiredness in my limbs to fade. There was no response.

I sat up and looked around. With a start, I realized there was another girl in here with me, sitting against the far wall with her eyes closed and her head lolling forward. Her hair was dark and straight, and she was clad in a short black dress. One foot was twitching, making that scuffing sound on the concrete.

My mouth fell open and one hand flew to my chest as I realized who it was.

I practically flew off the bed to crouch next to her. “Mellie!” I said, my eyes wide and tearful as I shook her awake. “Oh my god, they got you too... I’m so sorry!”

She opened her eyes and yawned. “Oh, you’re finally awake. I couldn’t get you up earlier, so I was just waiting. Must’ve drifted off myself.”

Her voice sounded preternaturally calm. She was obviously in shock.

“This is my fault,” I said hurriedly, my voice shaking as I tried to fight back tears of remorse. “I got you into this.”

She stood up and stretched her slim limbs like a lazy cat. “Not really,” she said breezily. “I’m fine. I was just napping.”

As she stretched her arms over her head, my eyes fell on a small tattoo on her wrist. My body immediately went rigid. I’d never seen it on her before; never seen her in anything but a long-sleeved top or jacket. “What’s that?” I asked, although I didn’t need to. I recognized it: a crown with a dagger through it. The same symbol was branded on my back.

She smiled thinly. “You know what it is.”

I shook my head with wild confusion. “I don’t understand... you’re one of them?”

“Ding, ding, ding!” she replied. “Finally figured it out. Well, I guess you had it spoon-fed to you, really, but whatever.”

“No....” I slowly sank to the floor in shock, pulling my knees up tightly to my chest. “How can you be one of them? And why?” I said, my voice thick with emotion.

She sighed as if I were nothing more than a petulant toddler. “I had a feeling you’d react badly.”

“What did you expect?” I said, raising my chin indignantly. I looked into her eyes, but my friend wasn’t there anymore. I didn’t recognize this girl in front of me. Didn’t recognize that malevolent glimmer in her eyes or the twisted slant to her pursed lips.

All these days, I’d worried about her, thinking I might’ve gotten her into trouble with Crown and Dagger for helping me sneak into one of their ceremonies. I thought her father and the rest of them had set her up by making it easy for her to access his computer on my behalf... but the whole time, she’d been working with them to set me up. Only me.

And I thought Tobias King was an asshole...

Mellie was far worse. At least Tobias never pretended to be my friend.

“God, you should see your face. It’s so funny,” she said, sitting cross-legged before me.

I swallowed hard, choking back the tears. “How is this possible? How can you work for the society?”

She smiled at me. “Let’s just say you aren’t the only one who likes sneaking into places you don’t belong.”

I shook my head. “What do you mean?”

“When I was a kid, I used to love spying on people. One time I sneaked into this old dumbwaiter in our vacation house and sat curled up in the dark the whole day, just so I could spy on my dad when he and his friends went into the room to talk. I ended up

overhearing a lot of stuff. Top-secret Crown and Dagger stuff. He's one of the very highest council members, after all. Only Tobias King is above him. Anyway, I kept it all to myself for years, but when I was about seventeen, I went and told my dad what I heard that day. I told him I knew everything."

"What happened then?" I asked warily. I loathed Mellie with a cold fury now that I knew what she was like deep down, but I was still curious to hear her story. I needed to in order to make sense of it all.

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She looked over my shoulder, as if she were looking into the past. “He just stared at me, totally shocked and horrified. I could see it in his eyes; he was wondering if he’d have to have me killed now that I’d discovered it all, even some of the secrets of the third level. I was his baby, his little daddy’s girl, and now he might have to arrange for me to take a bullet in the head or ‘accidentally’ overdose on coke. But I told him he didn’t have to do that. I wouldn’t say a word to anyone. I would keep it to myself just like I’d done for the last several years if he promised to let me in on it. If all of them did. I wanted to be one of them, you see. It took a hell of a lot of convincing, and a lot of good old-fashioned nepotism, I suppose, given how high-up Daddy is in the society, but they saw reason after a while.”

“You wanted to join them even after you heard about all the sick things they do to women?” I said incredulously.

She smiled smugly. “You wouldn’t understand my reasons, Tatum. Or are you Doll now?” she said with a malicious gleam in her eyes, her eyes falling on the notebook Elias left in here the night before.

God, she was such a bitch.

She went on. “Anyway, I told them I could be useful to them. I could talk with the girls here, woman to woman, and help them accept their new places. I could make them see reason in ways that men just can’t manage. Stuff like that. They were uncertain, but they saw another way in which I might be useful, and so they gave me an opportunity to prove my worth to them.”

“What was it?” I asked, although I already had an inkling as to what it was.

“They wanted me to befriend a girl during her Roden campus tour and maintain the friendship with her until they were ready to take her. That way, there would always be someone close to her, watching her every move and making sure she didn’t randomly decide to leave the country for any reason, which would make it harder to track her. She was very important to them, because the society president wanted her for his son.”

“You’re talking about me,” I said softly.

She smiled again. “Yes. It had to be someone you’d never suspect. They figured I would be perfect for the job because I’m a girl and I’m also the same age as you.” She waved a hand. “It all went to plan, and the society was very happy with how I performed.”

There was a deep pit in my stomach. “Performed,” I repeated in a low murmur. “It was all a joke to you. An act.”

“Not exactly.” She cocked her head to the side. “To be honest, I actually enjoyed being friends with you. You’re smart and nice, albeit incredibly naïve. And you were also my golden ticket into the society. I’ll always love you for that.”

“Great,” I said miserably. “That makes me feel so much better.”

Mellie sat down next to me. “Don’t you want to hear the rest? It’s pretty entertaining, if I say so myself. I’m kinda proud of it.”

I waved a hand. “Whatever.”

“I planted the Crown and Dagger sociology paper thing in your head on purpose,” she said, her lips turning up in a triumphant grin. “When I heard you bring up your urban legend assignment that morning, I saw an opportunity to let the society play with you.

So I mentioned them in our conversation, and then I let you, Greer, and Willa get all excited about it. It worked perfectly. I could see how much you wanted to write about them.”

“So even that was a setup....”

She nodded proudly. “Uh-huh. When Greer suggested sneaking into the Tap Week party, I quickly called my dad and made sure it would be easy for you to get in. That way you’d start to feel invincible, like you could actually get in and out of Crown and Dagger events unscathed, all for your stupid exposé. Then when they finally got you, you’d be terrified and shocked out of your mind. Great entertainment value. My dad and the rest of the society loved my idea, so they went with it. That’s why they took you specifically at that ceremony, when really, they could’ve taken you any time around then.”

I shook my head slowly. “But you were so against it! You avoided me for ages, and when I confronted you, you said it was because you were concerned.”

She laughed. “Of course I said that. It would’ve been too obvious I was in on the whole thing if I didn’t,” she said. “Instead I acted like I was so worried and against the plan, because I knew it would only make you more curious and also make me seem more trustworthy. You fell for it.”

I could almost see the evilness emanating from her, spreading through the room like a cloud of black dust, blotting out all the light.

“You’re so fucked up,” I said, my eyes narrowing. “How could you do something like that to another person?”

“Like I said, I wanted to prove my loyalty and worth to the society. I wanted to be one of them.”

“Tell me why,” I said impatiently. “Tell me how you could possibly think it was okay, woman to woman, to help these men kidnap and torture young women.”

She rolled her eyes. “I already told you before, you wouldn’t get it.”

I glared at her. “Try me.”

“Fine. Look, it’s just the way of the world. As much as people don’t like to admit it, some people are just better than others. Richer, smarter, more attractive. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, some people are obviously born to serve. Look at you, for instance. Your family has always struggled, and you’ve grown up to struggle as well, just like them. Class reproduction at its finest. It’s literally in your blood to be a loser. But at Crown and Dagger, there’s an opportunity for girls like you to cease the constant struggle and follow your true subservient natures. So by helping the society, I’m also helping the girls find their true purpose in the world. That’s what I want to do. That’s my purpose.”

I stared at her, my forehead lined with incredulity. She sounded deranged. “You’re serious? You really think you’re naturally better than me just because you’re rich? That someone like me should be nothing but a slave?”

I thought back to all the times she’d comforted me over my insecurities about coming from nothing and feeling like I didn’t belong. She was always so kind, so caring, so sympathetic. She told me people like her were no better than me and that they were just lucky to be born into wealth, so it was simply astonishing to see her displaying her true colors and saying the opposite now.

She sneered. “There’s a reason my family has everything and yours doesn’t, Tatum. You’re below us. Simple as that. Sorry if I ever led you to believe otherwise. I had to make you like me somehow, right?”

I didn't bother arguing with her. There was no point trying to reason with someone so obviously unstable and irrational. Someone so utterly sociopathic.

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As my mind whirled back through our entire history, something suddenly occurred to me. “Not everyone in your family agrees with your worldview, do they?” I said, glancing up at her. “Your brother Henry. He isn’t like you, is he?”

Mellie rolled her eyes. “No. He left Crown and Dagger after he made it to the third level about a year ago. They thought he could be trusted, but they got it wrong. Happens sometimes, I guess. They’re only human. Anyway, the only way out of the third level is death, but he’s a Davenport, and like I said, my father is one of the highest council members. He didn’t want his son dead, so he reached an agreement with the others to let Henry be exiled instead. Nepotism all the way. It exists everywhere.” She laughed.

“What do you mean, exiled?”

“Cut off from everything. Always followed and monitored to make sure he never tells anyone about what the society really does. If he ever so much as tries to breathe a word to anyone in any way, he’ll be killed immediately. That was the best compromise they could reach.”

“So he lives his life in constant fear.”

She shrugged. “I guess. But that’s his fault. I’ve tried reasoning with him, telling him to come back into the fold, but he won’t listen.”

My mind drifted back to that strange morning outside Mellie’s suite. I thought her brother was just a horrible person, and I thought he was telling me to stay away from his sister because he hated me for some unknown reason. Now I saw the truth. He

was trying to warn me away from her, because he knew what the society had planned for me, and he knew Mellie was in on it.

Because he was constantly being followed and he knew anything and everything could be bugged, he couldn't tell me the whole story, or else he would've been killed for finally opening his mouth and revealing the truth to someone. He couldn't even say my name in case it aroused suspicion in those listening in on his conversations. All he could do was tell me to stay away from Mellie and hope I somehow got the underlying message. Those tailing him would've simply assumed he was yelling at someone to stay away from his sister for some other reason. Just being a protective brother.

"They're only using you, Mellie," I said softly. "As soon as you don't have anything to give them anymore, the society will get rid of you. They'll never let a woman into their ranks."

She showed me her tattooed wrist. "Wrong. They know something valuable when they see it, and I've proved my loyalty again and again. I let them mark me, I let them take over my life, I let them control everything. I belong to them way more than my brother ever could, even though he's a man. They've already let me suggest ideas to them, like I told you, and one day they're bound to let me have some power too. They might even start kidnapping a few men here and there, so I can have my own sex slaves." She giggled at that.

"Wow, way to score one for feminism," I said sarcastically.

"Oh, shut up. It's not like I'm the only woman helping them, anyway. The nurse who saw you on your first day here is female, and she has no problem doing the job in return for a fat paycheck. Money trumps loyalty to your gender any day."

My shoulders slumped. She had a point. Just as Tobias once said to me, almost

everyone on the planet had a price. Loyalty could be bought.

“Anyway, you need to come with me,” Mellie said, rising to her feet again.

“Why?”

“Well, I didn’t just come here to chat. I need to take you upstairs and get you ready for the ball tonight.”

My brows furrowed. “The ball?”

“When the new girls’ brands are finally healed, they throw a big fancy party here at the Finishing School. Second and third-level members are allowed to attend and bid on the girls in a sort of silent auction.”

I gulped. “For what?”

“To score the chance to take their virginity before training begins. Whoever wins the bidding on a particular girl will also become her master and be given the opportunity to determine exactly how she should be trained. When she gets to the Lodge, she’ll be shared amongst other men, but she’ll always be that particular member’s slave in the end. She’ll always serve him above any other man.”

I felt like I would vomit at the slightest provocation. “I’ve already been given a master, and I’m pretty sure my training has begun,” I said gloomily, thinking back to yesterday with the cattle prod and the notebook. “So why do I have to go?”

“I know you’ve been given to Elias,” she began with an injured sniff, as if that somehow personally offended her. “But you still need to attend the ball. The other members need to get to know you and see that you exist for when you’re sent to the Lodge. Besides, we can’t just have you wasting away in here forever,” she went on,

waving one hand around the cell. “You’ll lose your mind.”

“I think I already have,” I muttered.

“Get over it and come with me. Don’t make me slap you,” she said in a warning tone.

With a miserable sigh, I followed her out of my cell and into the elevator. A few minutes later, she led me into an unfamiliar room on the first floor and motioned toward a rack laden with beautiful evening gowns. “I’m not a complete monster,” she said with a smile. “I’ll let you pick a dress.”

I walked down the line of gowns, trailing one finger along the soft, luxurious fabrics. After a few moments of indecision, I pulled out a long dark purple column dress. The silky material sparkled under the chandelier light, and the bodice fell from points at each shoulder before diving into a plunging neckline. The skirt spread out in a flurry of delicate pleats that fell to the floor in breathtaking lines.

“I guess I’ll wear this one,” I mumbled. Purple had always looked nice on me.

Mellie nodded sagely. “That one will look great on you. I was actually hoping you’d pick it.”

She spent the next couple of hours fussing over my hair and makeup, transforming me from a pale, lethargic-looking waif to a living doll with bright red lipstick, thick eyeliner, blush, and lashings of mascara. My hair was in a stylish up-do with a few loose tendrils hanging down to frame my face, and diamond jewelry sparkled on my ears and neck. The final touch was a tall pair of stiletto heels.

“Perfect,” Mellie finally said, looking me up and down. She checked her watch. “Just in time, too. The ball is starting soon...”

* * *

Mellie led me up the stairs and into a spacious ballroom on the second floor. It was already filled with other girls in gorgeous gowns and men in tuxedos and masks, and the air carried the heady scent of perfume, cigar smoke and liquor.

I drew in a deep breath, fear stabbing at my guts as I stared around, taking in the elaborate beauty of the room. It had high ceilings and a polished hardwood floor with multiple chandeliers hanging from plaster ceiling roses, and heavy-framed oil paintings hung on the wood-paneled walls. On one side there was a small stage with a string quartet playing classical music, and the far side was lined with tall French doors which led onto a wide balcony outside. From where I was standing, I could see that the balcony overlooked the dark ocean beyond the mansion. Moonlight made the gentle waves sparkle and shimmer like a million jewels had been dumped into the water, and I marveled at the view.

If it wasn't such a horrible event, I'd actually be thrilled to be invited to such a luxurious ball. Instead, I had visions of throwing myself off the balcony and hoping I tumbled into the water below so I could swim far, far away from this terrible place.

Mellie left me on my own so she could go and find her father, and I went and hung by a wall with a few other girls, hoping I could blend into the background. No such luck. Several masked men came up and spoke to me, offering me drinks and chuckling at my obvious anxiety as if this were a regular gala and I was just a nervous girl waiting for her Prince Charming to sweep her onto the dancefloor.

I tried my best to be civil and held myself back from clawing the men's eyes out like

I so wanted to—I didn't want to be murdered, if I could help it—and the night went on, minute after heart-pounding minute. At nine o'clock, when waiters in black suits went around the room offering a fresh round of canapés, I saw a chance to slip out onto the balcony and get away from all these horrible Crown and Dagger assholes.

I quietly stepped outside and headed over to the far side of the balcony so that prying eyes wouldn't see me through the French doors. Then I took in a deep breath, drawing the refreshing ocean air into my lungs.

"Lovely out here, isn't it?"

I turned to see who had spoken. My heart sank as I took in a tall white-haired man in a Venetian mask. I'd seen him across the ballroom earlier, groping the terrified blonde from Kansas.

He stepped closer to me. "It's nearly winter, so you'd think it would be freezing and windy, but we've been blessed with perfect weather tonight." He slid an arm around my waist, and I gulped. He wasn't here to discuss the weather. "I saw you sneak out here. You were hoping I'd follow, weren't you?"

I swallowed hard. "I just wanted some fresh air."

He laughed. "I've been watching you all night. I know you noticed me too."

Yeah, noticed you being a disgusting sleaze, I wanted to say. I bit back the words and stayed silent instead.

"I've decided to bid on you and the little blonde farm girl," he went on, eyes glittering behind the awful mask. Hungry, lecherous, terrible eyes. "If I win you both, I can compare the two of you and see who responds better. See whose cunt and asshole is tighter. I'm guessing hers, because she's more petite than you, but you

never know....” He moved his hand down lower, fingers digging painfully into my left ass cheek. “I know we’re supposed to wait for the Bonding ceremony to take your virginity, but I’ve never liked rules. I should bend you over this balustrade and fuck your tight ass right now, make you bleed all over my cock. If it’s not pussy, it doesn’t really count as losing your virginity, does it?”

My breaths came fast and shallow, and my hands shook with terror. “Please,” I murmured in a ragged voice. “Don’t.”

He didn’t listen. He pushed my dress up off the floor, hands groping between my legs. My panties tore, and he spat on one finger and slipped it into my ass crack, massaging the digit over my puckered hole. “Spread your legs, bitch,” he muttered.

“No! Stop!” I pleaded. His free hand went to my mouth, muffling my shrieks and cries only seconds later.

I heard him unzip his pants, and he grunted in my ear. “You better not get me dirty, little whore.”

I closed my eyes, waiting for the agonizing violation. It never came.

“Get the fuck away from her!” said a furious and familiar voice.

I whipped my head around to see Elias stepping out of the shadows, his face etched with fury. “She’s been promised to me. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to aggravate my family by taking something that belongs to me, would you, Mr. Porter?” he went on.

“I was only going to fuck her ass. Hardly counts,” the older man said, loosening his grip but still holding onto me.

“Let her go right now or I’ll smash your fucking face into pieces,” Elias said, his

voice cold and dangerous.

There was a heavy silence for a moment. Then the other man let out a derisive sniff. He let me go, zipped his pants up, and strode back inside.

I fell to my knees in front of Elias, sobbing grateful tears. “Thank you,” I said between gasps and sniffles. “He was going to—”

He cut me off. “Did I say you could fucking speak, slut?”

I recoiled and stared up at him, my eyes wide. What was going on? Last night, he looked like he might actually believe me when I told him I hadn’t sold myself here, but now he was acting like we never had that conversation. Like I was still nothing but a slave to him.

“Elias, I....” I trailed off and shook my head. “What’s going on?”

He dragged me to my feet and slammed me up against the wall. “You don’t learn, do you? You can’t even follow simple fucking instructions.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Please, tell me why you’re being like this.”

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He leaned down, hot mouth only inches from my left ear. “I know you lied to me. That’s all you are. A filthy little liar.”

My brows shot up. “No, I’ve never lied to you! Everything I said the other day is true!”

“Christ, you just can’t help yourself, can you?” he said, his eyes lit with savagery. “You need to be fucking punished. I should’ve done it sooner.”

“Why?” I choked out.

He didn’t reply. He grabbed my right arm and roughly dragged me inside, across the ballroom and out into the hall beyond. I wailed as he pulled me down the hallway, begging him to let me go, but he stayed silent, his fingers bruising my arm.

A red door opened, and he pushed me into a dim room with crimson walls and no windows. There was an X-shaped frame on my left and a wooden beam suspended from the ceiling directly ahead of me. On the right was a table with ropes, chains and other objects I didn’t recognize. Above it was a thin black rack with whips hanging from it.

However he intended to punish me for my so-called lies, it was going to hurt.

“I’m going to give you exactly what you deserve tonight,” Elias hissed in my ear, fingers twisting in my hair. He dragged me kicking and screaming to the beam, and he tied me onto it with my arms high above my head, my back exposed and vulnerable.

“Please don’t hurt me!” I cried as he stepped around to look at my face. A knife had appeared in his hand, presumably from his pocket.

“Don’t try to struggle, unless you want to make it worse for yourself,” he said, eyes blazing. He moved so close I could feel his warm breath on my cheeks as he sliced my beautiful gown down the side. I sobbed as the fabric fell away, leaving me naked aside from my torn panties and jewelry. It was cold in this room, and goosebumps cropped up all over my bare skin as I shivered in place.

“I’ve waited a long time for this,” Elias continued. “I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d done this the night they brought you here.”

His eyes coasted over my semi-nude figure. My nipples turned stiff and pointed. I told myself it was just from the frigid temperature in the room, but deep down, I knew there was more to it than that. It was the same as last night’s incident in my cell. Despite all his nasty words and cruelty, I was intensely attracted to Elias.

I hated myself for it.

He walked over to the rack and selected a black tasseled whip from it. With a cruel smirk, he headed back over to me and stepped behind me, running his free hand over my back. “I’m the only one who will ever touch you,” he growled. “Either here or at the Lodge. I’m going to be the first and only man inside you, and I’m going to break you down like the nasty little whore you are until you’re begging for more punishment.”

He trailed the tassels of the whip across my skin as he spoke. My back automatically arched against the sensation, wanton and desperate. I cursed myself inwardly, still hating how much I responded to his cruelty.

Elias chuckled. His hand moved around to my front, pinching my left nipple until I

whimpered. Then his hand moved lower, fingertips stroking between my legs. I bit my lip, knowing what he would find there.

“You’re soaked,” he muttered. “I knew you would be.”

I let out a humiliated sob. He was right. Somehow, all the fear and shame was making me wet and tingly. The closeness of this sinfully-gorgeous man, the stark hatred in his voice, the fact he could do absolutely anything to me right now and make me take it all... it was all twisting into a cocktail of wicked delight, sinful pleasure brewing deep in my core.

There was something seriously wrong with me.

“You really are a little slut, aren’t you?” Elias went on, his lips hovering over my left ear. “Or maybe you’re just wet because you know this is exactly what you deserve.”

“I don’t deserve to be hurt,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “You don’t have to do this. I never lied to you. I swear, Elias.”

“You did. Just like you lied about Ben Wellington,” he said in an angry hiss. “And it’s Master to you. You don’t get to call me by my name anymore.”

I bit back a strangled moan as Ben Wellington’s name echoed in my mind. Shit. Elias knew all about my past. He knew what I did.

I closed my eyes as rolling waves of guilt and shame hit me all over again. “No...”

“Oh, yes. I know all about that, you little bitch. He wasn’t just my second cousin. He was also one of my best friends. Until you murdered him.”

“I didn’t!” I cried out, struggling against my restraints. “I’m not a murderer!”

“Yes, you fucking are!” He suddenly hit me with the whip. Sharp, red-hot pain slashed at the sensitive skin of my upper back. I shrieked, and he did it again, hitting me slightly lower this time.

“Please!” I screamed. “It was an accident. I didn’t lie!”

“I’ll get the truth out of you one way or another,” Elias said, raining down another two strokes on my back. “And I’ll make you feel what you’ve done.”

“No,” I mumbled. Tears rolled down my face and into my mouth, so many I thought I might choke.

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How had I never known Ben Wellington was distantly related to the Kings? Why didn't Elias say anything to me for so long? It wasn't like he didn't have the opportunity to do so before now.

He partially answered my second question a moment later, without me even having to ask.

"I've waited so long to tell you who I am, just so I could finally do this and draw it out. Savor it," he said in a low voice, stepping around to my front again. He lashed at one of my breasts, and I yelped. "I've dreamed about you tied up and sobbing, exactly like this, and I've fantasized about seeing the agony in your eyes as I force you to think about all the fucking pain you inflicted that night. It used to be enough. But not anymore."

"That night... it was an accident," I whispered, lowering my eyes.

"Bullshit." He pushed my chin up with his free hand, forcing me to look at him. "I've seen the evidence myself. You're guilty, and you know it," he snarled.

He slashed the whip over my other breast. I whimpered. I wanted to close my eyes and disappear into my mind in an attempt to ignore the physical pain he was causing me, but right now, my mind was a far worse place to be than this torture chamber. Thinking only made things worse, and my lips trembled as all the awful memories rushed back in, pouring through me in torrents of shame.

A year and a half ago—March 17th, 2017—I'd been invited to a party by a school friend of mine, Katie Gagne. She came from a lower middle class family like me, but

her mother worked for several wealthy people, so she'd managed to make friends with some of their kids who were around the same age as us. Katie had always been cool like that, easily able to transcend social boundaries like they didn't exist. The rich kids all liked her, so they'd often invite her to their social events and let her bring friends if she wanted.

This particular party was somewhere near East Haven at an enormous mansion on an estate that ran along the coast. While Katie and I were there, I met a guy—an older college student named Ben Wellington. He was cute, smart and funny, and he seemed to think the same about me. He told me he wanted to go for a walk with me and get to know me better.

I went outside with him. I was young and stupid, barely seventeen. I actually thought he wanted to talk to me and nothing else, like he promised, and I thought all my teenage fantasies would be fulfilled. I thought I'd get my first kiss, right there under the stars, and he'd ask me to be his girlfriend.

So stupid. So naïve.

Ben wasn't what he seemed at all. He put something in my drink, something that started to hit me as he led me along a dark path that ran through the back of the estate, high above the ocean. I didn't notice until it was far too late.

The coastline on our right was jagged, fingers of dark rock sticking out with no discernible pattern above inlets of silvery water. Thick trees and bushes lined the other side of the path.

"It's great out here, isn't it?" Ben said as we stumbled farther along the wide path. I was beginning to feel unsteady and lightheaded, but I wanted to seem cool. I wanted to be perfect girlfriend material. So I agreed. I said it was amazing where we were, with all the fresh air and pretty clifftop views.

A second later, I spied a private beach below one part of the cliff, and I stopped and told him I wanted to go down to it. I wanted to feel the sand between my toes, wanted to dip my feet in the moonlit ocean.

Ben didn't let me. He pushed me back against a thick bush on the other side of the stony path and muttered in my ear. "You know what else could be great out here?"

He grabbed at one of my breasts, and I frowned. "What are you doing?"

"C'mon," he said, chuckling and nipping at my neck. "You know what this is."

"I thought you just wanted to talk," I said in a small voice. I could feel my innocent fantasy slipping away, shattering into tiny pieces on the horizon. He hadn't even tried to kiss me. He was just going straight for my body.

He laughed again, a sharp, cruel bark. "Bullshit. I know you want my cock, and lucky for you, I don't mind slumming it." As he spoke, he managed to push me down to the ground and rip my skirt.

I struggled under his weight as he sucked at my neck and tried to get one hand down my panties. Most of my strength had been sapped by whatever he slipped in my drink, but I managed to jam one knee into his balls as he held me down. Then I slid out from under him and ran away as he grunted with pain.

He chased me down the path. I tried to hide behind one of the bushes, hoping he would lose sight of me in the darkness, but before I could slip behind the foliage, he caught up and grabbed me. I screamed and whirled around, pushing him as hard as I could.

He lost his grip on me, stumbling back over the path and tripping on several stones. He tried to regain his footing, but he didn't realize how far back he was stepping, and

only seconds later, he was teetering on the cliff's edge.

Arms flailing, he begged me to help, begged me to pull him forward before it was too late. I was in complete and utter shock over what was happening, and my reflexes were slowed by the drugs he put in my drink. So I didn't reach for him. I stood there blankly instead. Within the next ten seconds, he was gone, plunging into the darkness.

Only seconds later, I passed out right there on the stony path.

Someone had been walking on the beach below that night, and they saw Ben plummet over the cliff's edge. They called 911. Within half an hour, I was found sprawled on the path above.

I was taken to hospital, and the police came to talk to me when I was awake. They told me Ben was dead and asked me for my side of the story. Apparently his wealthy, influential parents were insisting charges be laid against me. They were saying I pushed their son on purpose, and it must've been because he rejected me. After all, he was so far above me... why would he ever want me? I was nothing but a scorned little girl, angry and hell-bent on revenge.

That was the narrative they tried to spin, but I was lucky. The police were on my side, because my skirt had clearly been ripped by someone and there were drugs in my bloodstream—something called GHB which could be taken as a party drug but also used as a date-rape drug. My story added up with the evidence they were given, even though it was blurry with several gaps in it from when the GHB started to hit me hard.

The case went to trial anyway, even though it seemed clear I was innocent. Ben's parents were devastated over his death, understandably, and they wanted someone to pay for it.

I spent several months worrying myself to death, but a judge ended up dismissing the case entirely once she reviewed the evidence. Apparently, there were wildlife cameras along the path Ben and I had been walking along, and while the footage was grainy and didn't show the fall, it showed Ben on top of me on the ground farther up the trail, which matched my story of him attempting to assault me several minutes before he fell.

The linchpin in the case was a witness who gave testimony in my favor. We were never made aware of their name (the court was evidently concerned that Ben's parents might try to pay them off to lie or stay away, and so their identity was suppressed) but we knew it was the person who'd been down on the beach when Ben fell. He or she testified that they'd seen Ben fall of his own accord with me standing several feet away, and that there was no way I could've pushed him.

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Whoever the witness was, they were credible enough to get the case dismissed. I'd never know who it was, but I owed him or her my life. The Wellingtons had been out for my blood, so if it wasn't for that witness, I might very well have lost the case and ended up in prison for murder, or manslaughter at the very least.

"I'm not guilty. Ben attacked me," I said in a ragged voice. "He was going to rape me."

"Bullshit," Elias snarled. "I've seen the footage from the wildlife cameras. The other footage they wouldn't allow during the trial." He lashed at me again, using the ends of the whip tassels.

"What footage?" I squeaked, more tears springing to my eyes.

"The footage that shows you pushing Ben right over that cliff," he said, voice dripping with scorn. "I know the real story, Doll. You went out there hoping Ben would want more than a hookup. When you realized he didn't want anything but that, you changed your mind and kicked him off you. He went after you, trying to calm you down, and you snapped and pushed him right off the edge."

"That's not true!"

"That's what the footage shows. You pushed him off the cliff. Killed him in cold blood because you couldn't handle the rejection. I'm betting you even ripped your own skirt and smeared your makeup to back up your assault story when the police arrived."

“No. Ben drugged me. They proved it at the hospital,” I said in a pleading tone.

Elias scoffed. “You took those drugs yourself. It’s not like you’d be the first teenage girl to experiment with GHB at a party. And like I said, that footage doesn’t fucking lie.”

I moaned and dropped my gaze to the floor. I’d never heard anything about any other footage, and I certainly hadn’t seen it. On top of that, I knew I didn’t push Ben off the cliff. I only pushed him off me, which caused him to stumble back several feet and trip over the edge moments later. Not my fault, my mind chanted, though some other distant part of my brain told me it was, just like it had for the last year and a half.

Of course it was my fault, at least partially...

I could’ve helped Ben. I could’ve run over and yanked him forward. But I froze instead and let him plummet to an awful death. Apparently his entire skull had been caved in by the rocks below.

I pushed the horrible image out of my head and returned my focus to Elias. He had to be lying about the existence of this footage which proved I killed Ben. But if he was, then what reason did he have to be so angry at me? If he knew I was telling the truth, he might be mad at me for not helping Ben regain his footing, but he wouldn’t blame me entirely for his death, saying over and over that I did it on purpose. And yet he did blame me entirely, as if he’d seen something that I hadn’t. Something that proved I was guilty after all.

An awful thought suddenly occurred to me.

After that harrowing night, I’d felt a horrible, crushing, soul-destroying guilt over what happened. But maybe something else happened instead. Something truly deplorable. Maybe my brain tried to protect me from the awful truth by inventing

another story to cover what really happened, and maybe the secret witness on the beach was mistaken about what they saw in the dark.

Maybe I really did push Ben over the edge....

Snap out of it! You didn't do that, I tried to tell myself, but already, I was twisting and twirling into the darkness, letting the dark new suspicions flood through me.

Elias let the tassels of the whip fall on me again and again, alternating between hard and soft, thrashing me and teasing me at the same time until I was a trembling, whimpering mess. I couldn't tell if I wanted to cry or come.

"That's it, Doll," Elias said soothingly, using his free hand to caress my neck. I moaned, leaning into his cruel kindness. "Take it all."

My brain and body seemed to have reached a point of surrender, scooping up all my guilt and shame and letting it out with each stroke of the whip. It hurt, but it felt extraordinarily good at the same time because it seemed like divine penance.

Even if I didn't directly cause Ben's death as Elias claimed, I was still partially responsible for what happened to him. I deserved to feel the effects of that. I'd put up with these horrible feelings of culpability for far too long, and it was time to let it all out, no matter what it took....

"Oh!" I moaned as bliss and burning agony spiraled within me, that same twisted cocktail of shame and guilty longing that made me love the pain and hate myself all at the same time.

"Say it," Elias suddenly said, putting the tail of the whip under my chin, forcing me to look up at him again. Then he lashed me again, across the stomach.

He didn't need to tell me what he wanted me to say. I already knew. "I... I deserve this," I choked out. "I need you to punish me."

Just saying the words made the painful sensations on my abdomen turn to arousal instead of agony. I squirmed, desperate for more. I felt as if I'd been dead for the last two years and was suddenly coming alive again, my eyes wide open, my blood rocket fuel.

"Feels good to admit it, doesn't it, Doll?" Elias said, trailing the tassels over my skin.

I nodded. "Yes," I said breathlessly. "Give me more."

"Yes what?" His eyes glinted with a mixture of malice and lust. "Say it properly, and thank me for punishing you."

"Yes, Master," I whispered. "Thank you for punishing me. Please, I want more...."

14

Elias

Tatum's head lolled forward, her body slumping against the restraints. After half an hour in the playroom, she was finally exhausted.

Dried mascara caked her cheeks from where she'd cried and begged me earlier, claiming she never lied. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost. Then I remembered what a fucking liar she was. What a liar she'd always been.

I put the whip away and headed back over to her, my eyes traveling over her stomach and then to her back as I stepped around her. She wasn't bleeding. I didn't hit her hard enough for that, only enough to raise pink welts on her pale skin.

She was still having an odd effect on me. I wanted to be far crueler to her, wanted her bleeding and screaming in agony, but something kept stopping me in the heat of the moment. Some treacherous voice in my head kept whispering that I would be better off humiliating her by making her want me instead.

I couldn't deny that I'd enjoyed making her come in her cell last night. I loved the look of horrified guilt in her eyes afterwards, when the pleasure began to fade, and I loved the way her body quivered and clenched as she curled up and cried. The thought made me hard all over again. Unfortunately, she was too drained to blow me right now, and I couldn't fuck her yet, even though she was dangling right in front of me, soaking through her panties with arousal.

My father was hell-bent on maintaining old Crown and Dagger traditions, and one of them was the Bonding ceremony. Once all the new girls had been given masters, they would lose their respective virginities to them during this ceremony. That included me and Tatum. So as much as I wanted to fuck my little doll's brains out right now, make her scream and beg for me again, I couldn't.

The ceremony was only a couple of days away, though. I could hold out that long.

Barely....

The sight of her shivering, nearly-naked body trussed up on the beam in front of me was almost enough to make me give into temptation and slide right into her slick pussy here and now. The only thing stopping me was the prospect of Crown and Dagger's third level dangling in front of me like a carrot on a stick.

Part of the process of getting elected to the third level entailed gaining the complete trust of the other higher-up members. Breaking one of their favorite traditions and taking Tatum's virginity tonight would anger them enough to never consider me. I wanted to know what the fuck the final level was all about, so I intended to obtain their consideration. That meant keeping my dick in my pants for now, as much as it pained me to do so.

Tatum suddenly let out a moan and mumbled the word 'no!' as she slumped below the beam. She was sleep-talking.

I stiffened, wondering if she was having a nightmare about the man who attacked her on the balcony earlier. That slimy fucking prick made me want to vomit. As much as I hated Tatum, I couldn't stand the thought of her being hurt and fucked up the ass by some seventy-year-old sleazebag who refused to follow the rules.

Jealousy flared inside me at the mere thought of that man trying to take what wasn't

his. In fact, the idea of anyone else's hands or dick going anywhere near my girl made angry red dots appear on the edge of my vision. Yes, I loathed Tatum, and I ultimately wanted to destroy her, but that task was for me and me alone. No one else could ever have her or touch her.

I released her wrists from the beam and picked her up, throwing her over my shoulder. She was light and easy to carry, and she stayed asleep as I carried her all the way back down to her cell in the underground section of the mansion.

She moaned, sleep-talking again as I put her down on the bed a few minutes later. "Ben..."

Hot anger flared in my chest. She wasn't dreaming about the old guy, at least not anymore. She was dreaming about what she fucking did to him—Ben Wellington, my second cousin and best friend.

Even though we weren't all that closely related (compared to a sibling or first cousin, anyway), my father was close to Ben's father, so we practically grew up together, attending the same schools and vacationing with each other on my father's private island just south of Martha's Vineyard every summer. We were thick as thieves, and even when he went off to college on the other side of the country, we still caught up as often as we could. Private jet access certainly made it easier.

When I heard that he'd suddenly died at a party—a party I'd been invited to as well but couldn't attend for some reason—it felt like my heart had detonated inside my body. Pure agony. My best friend, gone forever. Just like that.

The first discernible emotion I felt was torturous guilt, as if I could've somehow prevented it from happening if I'd gone to the party after all. Then the full story surrounding his demise came out, and the guilt dissipated until all I felt was boiling anger. The girl he'd been with that night was claiming he tried to sexually assault her,

and in the ensuing struggle, he'd tripped and fallen over the edge.

My father and I knew it was bullshit from the second the Wellingtons called to tell us.

For one, Ben wasn't a fucking rapist. He was wealthy and good-looking, and women constantly flocked to him. In our teen days, we'd have competitions to see who could score with the highest number of girls in one night, and he won just as often as I did. A guy like that didn't need to drug girls to get laid, and if someone happened to reject him, he'd take it in his stride and move on. I'd seen it happen before; sometimes he struck out. He never attacked the girls who said no. He accepted they weren't interested and moved on.

Secondly, there was footage from the wildlife cameras farther up the trail which proved what really happened. For some reason—some fucking bullshit to do with the discovery process of the trial—the footage was deemed inadmissible as evidence, and that smug little bitch Tatum continued to get away with her evil lies.

Unfortunately, there was also the issue of the secret witness who'd testified on her behalf, stating that he or she clearly saw Ben trip and fall of his own volition. That solidified Tatum's innocence in the eyes of the justice system, and she got off scot-free. Given that she was a nobody and Ben was related to one of the most powerful men in the country, that was a huge deal. Whoever this secret witness was, it had to be someone very fucking credible. Someone whose word couldn't be disputed or disbelieved under any circumstances.

Obviously, it wasn't a friend or family member of Tatum, because any one of them would have a good reason to lie on her behalf. So whoever it was, they were probably a stranger to her. I still wanted to know who the fuck it was, though, because they were just as much of a filthy liar as Tatum.

I glared down at her as she dozed on the narrow-framed bed. She was still moaning

softly in her sleep, calling out for Ben again. My hands curled into fists by my side.

I wanted to grab her and choke her until her face turned purple.

The fact that she spread such vicious lies about Ben made his death so much fucking harder to swallow. If it was truly an accident, I could've moved on. I could've grieved and eventually let go. But she made sure I couldn't do that. She smeared him, made everyone believe he was a would-be rapist, when all the while, she was the corrupt one.

When the case was dismissed despite the fact he was purposefully pushed off that cliff, my whole world turned black. My feet kept moving and the Earth kept spinning on its axis, but I felt frozen in time, trapped in dark amber until I could have some sort of vengeance. I wanted to make Tatum confess her sins, wanted to make her feel the same sort of pain she made me feel when she killed Ben.

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Somewhere along the line, my obsessive hatred for her began to twist into lust and dark desire. As much as I couldn't stand the girl, I had to admit she was a stunner. Slim yet curvy figure, pretty features, mesmerizing blue eyes, shiny chestnut hair that fell down her back in waves.

I hated her, but I fucking wanted her. She was a thorn in my side, haunting me with every step I took. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Couldn't move past her.

I could only think of one way to properly deal with my obsession, and that was to take her and force her into submission. Make her admit what she'd done. Make her beg for her life, beg for my forgiveness. At the same time, I could release all that pent-up sexual frustration I felt whenever I looked at her.

Luckily, my father had the exact same thought process long before me. He anticipated how I would end up feeling about her, so right after she was acquitted of any wrongdoing, he approached her and her parents (without revealing his relation to the Wellingtons). He'd looked into the Marris family, and he'd seen they were struggling financially. Now they also had the stress of Tatum's legal drama to add to it all. They weren't far from crumbling.

He told them that he had a way to end all their financial troubles. He also delicately insinuated that he knew the truth about what Tatum did, and that selling herself into Crown and Dagger's service might be a good way to alleviate any guilt she might feel. He made it sound like it would be penance for her, a way to wipe the slate clean.

It didn't take long to convince her. Her parents desperately needed the money, and she desperately needed to ease her conscience. This was an opportunity to pay her

parents back for all the trouble she'd caused, and also a way to punish herself for what she'd done.

What she didn't know when she signed the contract was that she'd be given directly to me, Ben's best friend, and that I would be her worst nightmare.

She stirred in her sleep, then rubbed her eyes and sat up. "When did I get here?" she asked in a low voice.

"A few minutes ago. You fell asleep," I said icily. My eyes fell on the ugly pink welts criss-crossing her bare skin. "Get up."

She did as I said, standing on shaky legs.

"Kneel and bow your head."

She bit her lip, then knelt down before me, leaning her head forward and down so that her back was exposed.

"Stay."

I stepped out of her cell and headed back upstairs. I didn't tell her where I was going; didn't even tell her if I was coming back. For all she knew, she would have to remain on the floor all night.

I went into the medical wing of the Finishing School and rummaged through a drawer, searching for some medicated cream. When I found it, I returned to Tatum's cell to find her exactly where I left her.

"Good girl," I muttered. I leaned down and began to rub the cool cream over the welts on her back. Even though I didn't make her bleed, I still wanted to make sure

she was okay.

It wasn't because I cared about her. I just wanted to take care of my property, ensure she didn't get some sort of infection which might deform her appearance. I didn't want a broken toy.

I commanded her to get up so I could rub the cream on her tits and stomach. She did as I said immediately, her head still bowed slightly. "Thank you," she murmured. "It feels much better now."

My lips tightened. I couldn't tell if she was actually forgetting to call me Master when she addressed me, or if it was some purposeful mini-rebellion. Some way of letting me know she still didn't believe she belonged to me, no matter what I did to her. No matter how much I tried to break her.

I thought about punishing her for it, but there was no point. She'd had enough tonight, so it wouldn't achieve anything. Besides, it was probably an innocent mistake. She'd called me Master earlier, while I was punishing her with the whip.

"Did you mean what you said, Doll?" I asked sharply.

She looked up at me through puffy, red-rimmed eyes. "When?"

"In the playroom, when you said you deserve to be punished."

She chewed her bottom lip for a second before replying. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I've done bad things," she murmured. "It makes me feel good to be punished for them."

“I want to hear you say the exact words. I want you to tell me you murdered Ben and lied about the whole thing.”

She shook her head. “I... I can’t. I know it’s my fault he died, but I swear, I didn’t mean to make it happen. I didn’t push him. Please, you have to believe me, M-Master...”

I stiffened, my eyes narrowing. Just when I thought I’d made some progress with her, we were back at square one. She was still lying right to my fucking face.

How dare she?

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I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself and get my head centered. I knew from the start that this wouldn't be a quick and easy process. It would take more than a whipping to make Tatum tell the truth.

A tear slipped down one of her cheeks as she stared up at me. I frowned, my thoughts veering off in another direction.

Maybe she genuinely believed she was innocent. Maybe she'd been traumatized by the horror of what she did and blocked it out, unable to process or cope with the guilt. But somewhere, locked away deep inside her mind, there must be the knowledge that she was fully responsible. Why else would she give in to me so easily? Why else would she beg for more punishment?

"Okay. We're done for tonight," I said stiffly. "Go to bed, Doll. I'll see you again soon."

"Tomorrow?" she asked, eyes widening. If I wasn't mistaken, she was hopeful. She actually wanted to see me again.

Something flared brightly in my mind. An idea. A good one, too.

I smiled patiently. "Yes, Doll. Tomorrow."

She nodded and crawled into bed. I brought the blanket over her, keeping the fake smile plastered on my face as I tucked her in.

The other day, she told me that I could never truly own someone who hated me, and

now I realized she was right about that. I couldn't. I also realized I could never completely and utterly destroy something I didn't fully own. Not properly.

As long as I was cruel and malicious toward Tatum, she would continue to hate me, even if she outwardly gave in and obeyed me. Even if she physically desired me. She would continue to hold out on the inside, never letting go in her mind, never truly submitting to my ownership.

But if I changed tactics and stopped her from hating me, I could make her let go. Make her submit. Mind, body and soul. If I managed that, I could conquer her and truly own her. Then I could finally enact my revenge and destroy her with cold and deadly precision, making her regret every second of her existence.

There was only one way to achieve that. Only one way to make her stop hating me. I had to throw all my plans out the window and head in the opposite direction.

I had to make her fall in love with me.

15

Tatum

I wokeup in a cold sweat of shame and regret. Oh, god. It was happening again...

I tried to stay strong last night, tried to resist Elias and all his dark lures, but he'd broken me down once again. He made me beg for the whip, made me beg for punishment, made me admit that I needed it. That wasn't the worst part, though.

The worst part was that I loved it.

I wanted more. I craved it, thirsted for it, needed it.

I'd often fantasized about this sort of scenario in the past, wondered what it would be like to have someone dominate me and control me, but I never thought I'd actually enjoy it in real life. Especially against my will. Yet here I was, plunging headfirst into the darkness whenever Elias so much as issued the smallest command.

I'd officially lost my mind.

"Good morning, Doll," said a soft voice from my right.

I rolled over, my eyes wide with surprise. Speak of the devil... Elias was right here in my cell.

"Are you here to take me to the gym?" I asked. Usually a guard arrived each morning

to escort me upstairs for exercise and a shower, but no one had come to get me yet.

“No gym today. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Only Elias King could make the word ‘surprise’ sound ominous. My heart began to race and tremors shook my hands. “A surprise?” I said in a low, terrified murmur.

He smiled. “Relax. This isn’t some sort of punishment. I....” He paused for a second, emotion flashing in his usually-cold eyes. “I think I may have been a little rough with you last night. You might belong to me, but that doesn’t mean I should abuse you beyond your limits. I should care for my belongings. I’m going to make it up to you today.”

I gaped at him, pure shock reverberating through my system. Surely this was some sort of cruel game. He didn’t really want to make anything up to me. No way. He loved the idea of hurting and abusing me. He thought I killed his best friend, after all.

Besides, last night didn’t go beyond any limits for me... did it?

Or maybe it did.

Maybe this place had driven me so crazy that I couldn’t tell anymore. Maybe I didn’t really love or crave the pain of that whip, or the black leather tendrils trailing over my skin, teasing and tormenting me. Maybe I was simply succumbing to some sort of Stockholm syndrome where my brain tried to convince itself that it loved the treatment as a coping mechanism.

Elias frowned at my shocked expression. “Get up. I promise this isn’t some sort of joke. I want us to have a good day today, so please don’t make it difficult.”

“Um. Okay.” I stood up and tentatively stepped over to him. Then I realized I’d once

again forgotten to call him Master. I reflexively cowered away, thinking he might suddenly lash out at me. “Sorry, Master. I keep... I keep forgetting.”

He simply smiled again and placed a firm hand on my left shoulder. “Calm down, Doll. It’s okay. I understand this is still very new and raw for you. I’ve been far too hard on you, and I regret that. It’ll take time for you to remember the rules, so I’m going to be more lenient from now on. Got it?”

I stared at him again, my eyes wide. This had to be a dream. Why else would he suddenly change his mind about the way he wanted to treat me? It didn’t make any sense... unless he genuinely felt bad for the way he’d acted toward me so far.

Perhaps underneath those cold eyes and arrogant features, Elias King actually had a soul.

“Why?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. “Why now?”

He rubbed his chin. “I’m not too proud to admit when I’m wrong, and I think my behavior last night was definitely that. I stayed awake all night thinking about it. I took it too far, and I hurt you.”

I felt a sudden, inexplicable urge to comfort him and tell him it was fine, tell him I wasn’t hurt badly. I even liked it. But then the rational part of my brain whispered ‘Stockholm syndrome,’ at me, and I kept my mouth shut.

I had no idea what was right. No idea what to think. No idea what to feel.

I was going crazier and crazier with each minute that passed in this place.

I let Elias lead me out of my cell naked. I didn’t care if anyone else saw me like this anymore. I was past the point of feeling shame over my body. Besides, the daily

exercise and bland food over the weeks had been good for me. As awful as it sounded, my figure had never looked better. I noticed it yesterday when Mellie was helping me change into the gorgeous purple gown.

Elias took me to the first floor and led me into an enormous room with large curtained windows. A third of the room had been sectioned off into a large open-plan bathroom with white and black marble-tiled flooring and a large claw-footed bathtub.

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The main section of the room had polished parquet flooring, most of which was covered by a gigantic patterned Persian rug, and a large portion of the space was taken up by a huge four-poster canopy bed. To the left of it was a hanging mirror beside a marble-topped marquetry chest. On the right was an antique French love seat. The walls were pale mint green with molded paneling, and a large crystal chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling.

It was old-fashioned but beautiful all the same.

Steam was rising from the bathtub along with a heavenly scent. Elias pointed to it. “I drew you a bath. Get in,” he commanded.

I faltered. My back and chest were still lined with angry red welts from last night, and I knew getting into a hot tub of water would make them sting like hell. “Eli... I mean, Master, I’m not sure I can,” I said, motioning to one of the welts. “It’ll hurt.”

“It won’t. I promise. Do you trust me?” he said, extending one hand to me.

I swallowed hard. Did I really have a choice?

I took his hand and let him guide me into the tub, sinking slowly into the bubbling water. Amazingly, he was right. The bath was filled with some sort of salts which immediately relaxed my muscles and had a strange cooling effect on my whip-marks, even though the water was hot.

Elias sat on the edge of the tub and watched me relax in the bath.

“Mmm...” I couldn’t help letting out a satisfied moan.

His lips turned up in a ghost of a smile. “See? It’s a special sort of bath salt from France. When I was a kid, my nannies would put it in my baths if I ever scraped my knee or anything like that.”

“How many nannies did you have?” I asked tentatively, curious as to what it was like to grow up uber-wealthy. The closest thing I ever had to a nanny was the little TV my mother would set me in front of when she wanted some time to herself.

“Four.”

“Your parents must’ve appreciated the extra help,” I said, trying to sound as pleasant and agreeable as possible. I had no idea what might set him off and make him angry at me all over again.

His lips tightened. “My mother died when I was a baby, and my father was working most of the time. So yeah, I guess it was appreciated. By me at least.”

I saw a flash of vulnerability in his eyes, and for a moment, I felt terrible for him, despite everything he’d done to me. “I’m so sorry,” I murmured. “I had no idea about your mother.”

For a brief second, my brain screamed ‘Stockholm!’ at me again. I knew one of the signs of the condition was when a captive began to feel sympathy for his or her captor, and I was definitely feeling that toward Elias right now.

I pushed the suspicion aside. No, it wasn’t a mental condition. I really did feel bad for him. He might be an asshole, and I might hate him for what he’d done, but I could still separate my feelings from the sadness of his motherless upbringing. No matter who he was, it was tragic that she had died so young, leaving him to be raised by a

bevy of nannies instead.

He abruptly stood up. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t even remember her,” he said, stepping over to the end of the tub where I was leaning my head.

He reached down into the water and slowly stroked his hands over my shoulders and back, and the feeling of his palms on my skin was the most delicious, gratifying sensation I’d ever felt. Even better than when he rubbed the cream on me last night. His hands were strong and talented, and he knew just how much pressure to apply to make my treacherous body respond.

“Do you really believe I killed Ben?” I suddenly blurted out. I didn’t actually mean to let the question slip out, but it’d been burning a hole in my tongue, so I guess it had to come out one way or another. I was glad Elias was above and behind me so I couldn’t see his face when I asked. I felt him stiffen, though.

He reflected the question back at me in a low voice. “Do you really believe you didn’t?”

“Yes,” I murmured. “I know I was at fault in some way, but I didn’t push him.”

There was a long pause, dense and volatile, heavy with tension. I squirmed in the tub, regretting ever opening my big mouth. “Let’s not talk about this now,” Elias finally muttered in a brittle tone. “I want us to have a good day.”

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief as my pulse slowed. I had to admit I was surprised at his reaction. I thought he would revert back to his usual self, angry and seething, filled with fiery rage toward me. I thought he would drag me back into that red room and tie me up and beat me. Instead, he was still being nice and lenient, just like he promised earlier.

My mind drifted back to the article Greer sent me about beta slave programming. Apparently one of the mind control techniques the MK-Ultra psychologists developed was some form of irrelevant leniency. It entailed letting the slave have certain privileges at totally random times for no apparent reason. This confused them, which led to them becoming even more compliant and subservient.

Was that what Elias was doing to me today?

If so, it was damn well working. I was confused as hell, and I felt as if I were balancing on a razor's edge. One more slip and the leniency might vanish, replaced with the cold steel of anger. I had to try and be good to avoid that.

Elias got up a moment later, dried his hands, and crossed over to the marble-topped chest on the other side of the room. There was a silver cloche tray sitting on it. He picked it up and carried it over. A delicious buttery scent wafted under my nose as he pulled the dome lid off the tray.

"Is that....?" I looked up at him, letting my question linger in the air.

He nodded. "Hot lobster roll from the Buttery at your residential college at Roden. They're your favorite, aren't they?"

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“Yes,” I said softly. Simply seeing and smelling the roll brought back all kinds of memories from my time at Roden. My friends and I used to go down to the late-night Buttery and get stacks of rolls after all-day study sessions, giggling as we discussed which professors we wanted to slap, which exams we were totally sure we’d failed, and which boys from our classes we thought were cute.

That all seemed so far away now, like it was from a different life I lived hundreds of years ago.

“I had it flown up here for you,” Elias said. “Thought it might make you feel a little less antagonistic toward me.”

I sat up straighter in the tub and took a bite of the roll as he held it out to me. It was just as delicious as I remembered, and I moaned with bliss as I chewed.

If we were here under different circumstances, this could be legitimately romantic: a gorgeous room, a hot bubble bath, a massage, and my favorite guilty pleasure food flown in all the way from Roden. Elias could actually make the perfect boyfriend... if he hadn’t kidnapped me and held me hostage in this beautiful mansion of hideous horrors.

A lightbulb suddenly switched on in my mind. He’d inadvertently given me a clue about where the mansion was. If he managed to get a hot lobster roll flown in from the Roden campus in New Marwick without it getting too cold and soggy, then that meant the Finishing School couldn’t be far away. North, most likely, as he’d said ‘flown up’. For all I knew, we could be as close as Bridgeport.

My heart sank a second later as I remembered Elias was a billionaire. Duh. He had access to multiple private planes, which made the process of flying to and from places a lot faster and easier. A short one-hour flight north of New Marwick could put the Finishing School somewhere in Maine. Maybe even as far as Canada. So again, all I really knew was that we were on the coast somewhere.

I slumped back in the bath and sighed dejectedly.

Would I ever know where I was again?

“Don’t you want any more?” Elias asked, frowning as he held the roll out again.

I shook my head. “Sorry. I’m not hungry.”

“All right. I’ll leave it over there for you to finish later,” he said. Something flashed in his eyes before he walked away. Disappointment? Anger? Concern? I couldn’t tell.

I closed my eyes and sank under the water, one hand reaching up to rub my face. When I emerged, I took a deep breath and kept rubbing at my face, removing all remnants of last night’s makeup which had spilled down my cheeks and encrusted in black chunks when I cried.

Elias stepped over to me with a towel a moment later. Just in time; the water was starting to turn lukewarm. I stood up and let him wrap the towel around me, luxuriating in the soft fabric, and then I stepped out onto the tiles.

Elias kept rubbing me down with the towel, and when I was dry, he tossed it aside and led me toward the large hanging mirror in the bedroom. It was framed with ornamental gold. I stared at my bare-faced reflection, wondering what Elias must think of me when I looked like this. Despite the things he’d done to me, he was still the sexiest man I’d ever laid eyes on, and compared to him, I felt utterly plain and

boring.

He seemed to read my mind, because he stood behind me and slid his hands around to my hips and waist, stroking and caressing my body as his eyes focused on my face in the mirror. “Even without makeup, you still look like that,” he muttered. Then he stepped away.

My lips twitched slightly. I suppose that was his idea of a compliment.

He returned a moment later, holding a bag. “For you,” he said.

I tentatively opened the bag to find a beautiful black lingerie set. The bra had pearl details and tiny little ribbons woven through parts of it, and the panties had a split at the front with lacy ruffles to disguise it. Classic with a raunchy twist.

“You want me to wear this now?” I asked nervously.

“Obviously.” Elias smirked.

I slipped into the panties and hooked the bra behind my back. Then I turned to look in the mirror again. Makeup or no makeup, the set made me look amazing. It was incredible what a good bra could do. “Thank you,” I said breathlessly. “It’s gorgeous.”

“I could say the same about you.”

I turned to look at him with a timid smile. “Thank you.”

His eyes darkened as he looked down at me. I felt so short, so tiny and powerless compared to him. “I really wish you weren’t so fucking beautiful. Makes things very hard for me,” he said, voice low and husky.

“That’s exactly how I feel about you,” I said softly. It was true. I wished he wasn’t so goddamned handsome, because it would make it so much easier to keep hating him.

At that, Elias leaned down and took my mouth in a bruising kiss. Urgent, hot, needful. Savage.

His hands cupped my head, tilting my face upward to meet his embrace. I moaned and kissed him right back, my tongue battling his, teeth nipping at his bottom lip as I dug my nails into his broad shoulders, clinging to him.

A distant voice in the back of my mind told me it was a bad idea, kissing the enemy like this. I should feel sickened by it, should push Elias away, but in the heat of the moment, I didn’t care enough to stop. It felt too fucking good.

I could regret it all later, when the moment was over and my sanity had returned.

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Elias groaned and moved one hand down to grip my left hip, and when he brought me closer to him in one rough movement, I felt his stiff cock straining against the confines of his pants. He suddenly pulled back from my mouth, and just when I was about to protest, his hot lips found my neck, peppering my throat with soft kisses and hard nips, making me moan.

I felt myself moving backwards. Seconds later, Elias pushed me onto the bed. I gasped as he settled his weight over me, pinning me down before delivering another brutal kiss to my lips, one which made all the breath fly out of my lungs.

A hand slid down over my stomach, then drifted over the top of my panties, his touch as light as a feather. I squirmed beneath him as my core began to ache like mad.

Elias reached into the slit at the front of the panties and pressed down on my clit with his thumb. “You’re being such a good girl,” he said against my neck, his hot breath tickling my ear. “So compliant. That’s what you want to do, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I gasped, bucking my hips. I would agree to anything if it meant he’d keep touching me like that. Besides, the knowledge that I was pleasing him sent electrifying thrills through me, even though I knew I should feel deeply ashamed for that. I shouldn’t want to make him happy, shouldn’t want any of this, but that only made me want it more. It was wrong, taboo, and oh-so fucking hot.

“Do you want to know what I feel like inside you?” Elias said in a throaty murmur, flicking my clit again.

A breathy moan ripped through me. Against my better judgment, I nodded. “Yes.”

“I can’t wait to make you beg me to fuck you,” he said, his voice a low hiss through his teeth.

I mewled beneath him, crying out for release. “I will. I’ll beg. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Not yet,” he said, thumb swirling over my clit. “We have to wait for the Bonding ceremony.”

My breaths turned harsh and ragged. It was so cruel, making me want him like this only to rip it all away. “Why?”

“That’s the rules, Doll.”

“When is it?”

“Tomorrow. Believe me, I’m going just as fucking crazy as you,” he said, rolling his hips and grinding himself against my pussy. His pants were still on, but the mere touch of his hardness against my clit made me feel like I would split open at any moment from the pressure building inside me.

I wasn’t just captive to Elias anymore. I was captive to this fiery, insatiable need for him, and I didn’t want to be freed from it. I wanted him inside me, wanted him to fuck me until the world went dark.

He began to kiss his way down my body, leaving trails of sinful wetness behind. When his mouth reached the top of my panties, I spread my legs on instinct, and he chuckled, nipping at my inner thigh. “You want it bad, don’t you?”

I looked down at him and nodded. “Please....”

He moved closer to my aching core, one hand parting the lacy ruffles on the panties so that the split was exposed. My pussy was only inches from his lips now, and I swallowed thickly, unable to stop the wild cravings from flooding me.

“Beg, and I might give you a sneak preview,” Elias murmured, a wicked glint in his eyes.

“Please,” I whimpered. “Show me what it’s like. Make me come.”

“Properly.”

I let out an exasperated cry. “Please, Master. Please make me come!”

I couldn’t see straight anymore, could barely even think straight.

Elias smirked and brought his mouth over my pussy, his tongue parting my folds and swirling over my clit. He lapped and nipped at me, making me shiver and moan, and I closed my eyes and let myself drift away on the waves of pleasure until I began to spasm wildly beneath his touch. I knew I was soaking his face with my arousal, but I wasn’t ashamed. He obviously liked the way I tasted, or he wouldn’t be down there devouring me like that.

When my climax finally ripped through me, I let out a strangled cry, my legs twitching like crazy. Elias held me down, his tongue moving lower, darting at my entrance and lapping up all my juices.

He moved back up the bed and nestled beside me, strong arms wrapping around my quivering body. “Did you like that, Doll?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Tell me why.”

“It... it felt so much better with you touching me this time,” I said, thinking back to the other night in my cell when he made me have my first orgasm in the vibrating panties. It was amazing, but it was still nothing compared to how this felt, with his hands and tongue all over me.

“Just think how much better it will be with my cock in you,” he replied, burrowing his mouth into my neck.

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I gasped and nodded. “Why do we have to wait again?”

“Crown and Dagger rules. You can only lose your virginity at the Bonding.”

“But how would they even know?” I asked softly. “It’s just us in here.”

He smirked. “As happy as I am that you want me to fuck you so badly, I really can’t. There are cameras hidden all over the place, so the society council will know if I take your virginity before the ceremony.”

“Oh.” I shivered, suddenly feeling far too exposed. I scooted back and pulled the duvet over myself.

“Don’t be ashamed,” Elias said, sitting up on one elbow. “Your body is perfect.”

“Thank you,” I murmured. “It’s just weird knowing people might’ve seen us doing... that.”

He laughed. “You’re going to have to get used to it, Doll. The Bonding happens in front of everyone.”

“Oh.” I bit my bottom lip. “What exactly goes on during the ceremony? I mean, apart from the obvious.”

“I’ve never been to one before, so I know about as much as you.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really? You’ve never been?”

“Never had any reason to go before now. So I guess we’ll experience it all together, won’t we?”

I nodded and settled back into his arms. I was still curious as to why he’d had such a sudden change of heart toward me—seemingly, anyway—so I decided to milk it for as long as I could. I might actually be able to get some answers out of him while he was in this pleasant mood.

“Could you tell me more about this place?” I asked shyly.

Elias frowned. “You already know what it is.”

“Not really.”

He chuckled softly and sat up properly. “Oh, that’s right. I keep forgetting. You’re supposed to act like you’re clueless.”

My brows furrowed. “I really am clueless.”

He smiled patiently, as if he were humoring a child. “Fine. I’ll play for a few minutes,” he said, waving a hand. “Ask me whatever you want. Within reason.”

“Okay. What exactly is this place we’re in right now? I know it’s called the Finishing School and it has something to do with training, but that’s all I really know.”

“This is where all the new girls get sent once they’ve signed their contracts. They need to undergo certain processes to prepare them for their time at the Lodge. The manner in which they are trained depends on who their master is, but the end result is usually about the same.”

“What’s the Lodge?”

A half-smile curled his lips up again. “I suppose I’d describe it as a playground for the elite. A twisted pleasure palace. Anything a man wants, he can have it there. Most of the girls are trained to provide whatever they ask for, no matter how depraved.”

My brows knitted. “Sounds like an illegal brothel to me,” I murmured.

“Well, if you want to be crass, then sure, that’s what it is.”

“But you’re good-looking, smart, and rich,” I said, tilting my head to the side. “You can probably have any woman you want. So why would you need to use something like the Lodge?”

“Because the only woman I want right now is you, under very specific circumstances that you’d never agree to if you weren’t being paid,” he said, eyes flashing. “As for the other members, the reason they visit the place is because they can get anything they want there. Things regular women won’t do, even if they’ve been dating or married for years.”

“Oh.”

“Of course, that’s not everyone. Some members who visit only like plain old vanilla stuff, and they just aren’t getting any from their wife anymore. Others want a bit of light BDSM action, like handcuffs and spanking. But the vast majority prefer something... else. No rules, no limits.”

“I guess you’re firmly in that category,” I said quietly.

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I thought he might chuckle at that, but instead he pressed his lips into a tight line. “Yes. But I really am sorry, Tatum,” he said. My eyes widened. It was the first time he’d used my real name in what felt like forever. “I pushed you too far last night, too soon.”

I swallowed hard. I wasn’t sure how to respond.

I changed the subject instead, trying to capitalize on his guilt. “You said I was being paid to be here with you,” I said warily. “But I’m not. I told you the other day, it’s my parents who are being paid.”

He sat up and rubbed his chin. “Well, yeah. Most of the girls who wind up here have the money distributed amongst their family members while they serve their contracts. It’s not like they can spend it while they’re here.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I meant,” I said, my voice sounding sharper than I intended. “I didn’t agree to any of this, and I know the other girls didn’t either.”

He sighed. “Christ... this again? I know what your contract says, but this act is getting very old, very fast. Just stop.”

“Why won’t you listen to me?” I said. “This isn’t an act. I’m not a prostitute. I’m here against my will and my parents are benefiting from it. Just like the other girls. They were either kidnapped or their parents sold them here!”

“For fuck’s sake...”

“Please, Elias, if you actually care about me at all, just listen! None of us want to be here. I’m not lying.”

“Yes, you are.” His eyes narrowed. “The girls are all here willingly. Competition to work at the Lodge is actually very fierce, because they can be offered up to a million dollars for their contracts, depending on the length and other factors.”

I shook my head. How could he say these things with a straight face? “What about Priyanka? That other girl from Roden. She was a straight-A law student, and she probably would’ve made a ton of money once she graduated. More than a million over the years. She wouldn’t sell herself here, and I know for a fact that she didn’t. She told me so herself!” I said.

Annoyance again, sparking hotter this time. “I thought we were doing so well today,” Elias said with an irritated sigh. “But we can’t have you spouting these lies, Doll. I need you to calm down or the guards will have to come in here and give you something to make you calm down. I’m sure you know what will happen then.”

The message was clear. No matter how sweet or nice he was to me, he was still my owner. I was still his possession to do whatever he pleased with. If I didn’t react the way he wanted, I could easily be drugged and forced back into my cell, just to shut me up or make me behave. I could be silenced for as long as it took for me to accept my new position under him.

I glowered at him, then got off the bed. I didn’t want to be near him anymore.

Elias stood and stalked over to me. “Don’t be like this. I’d really hate to spoil our good day. Wouldn’t you?”

I glared up at him indignantly. “It’s already spoiled.”

He looked at me like I was nothing but a toddler having a tantrum over a broken toy. “I’m going to give you one more chance to calm down, Doll. You’re a good actress, and it’s going to make it very fun to train you as my whore. I like all the fight you have in you. But now is not the fucking time.”

His words were like a cold-water slap to my face. That was all I was to him in the end. A whore. Something subhuman, an object to be trained and molded into the perfect pleasure doll.

“You’re sick,” I muttered. “If you just opened your eyes for five minutes, you’d see the truth. I don’t belong here, and neither do any of the other girls. This place and the Lodge aren’t high-class brothels. They’re sex trafficking hives, and the men in your society who set them up belong in prison.”

Elias narrowed his eyes and pushed me up against the wall. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were doing this on purpose to make me punish you. Is that what you want me to do?” he said, a dangerous edge to his voice.

“No. I just want you to let me go home!”

I inwardly cringed as I said it. I wasn’t saying ‘I want to go home’ like a normal person. No, I was saying that I wanted Elias to let me go home, as if a large chunk of my mind had already given itself over to him and his claims to my ownership. As if part of me genuinely thought I couldn’t do anything without his express permission.

He leaned even closer. “Your contract states that you will remain with me as long as I want to keep you. You know that. And right now, I don’t want to let you go.”

Hot anger swept through me. “No! I fucking don’t know anything of the sort, because I never signed any fucking contract!” I shouted, pushing him away from me with one hand.

I wasn't sure what came over me, but before I could stop myself, my other hand was swiping through the air, delivering a hard slap to his right cheek.

I immediately skittered away from the wall, cowering in fear near the bed. Oh, shit.

I slapped Elias.

I actually reached out and slapped a man who could beat me senseless if he so desired.

He touched a hand to his reddening cheek and turned toward the bed, eyes steel-hard as he regarded me. "You shouldn't have done that," he said. His voice was soft yet icy-cold and dangerous.

I fell to my knees. "Please, I'm sorry!" I said, desperate to avoid whatever terrible punishment he had in store for me now. Hot tears were already spilling from my eyes. "I didn't mean it. It was an accident!"

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Elias roughly dragged me to my feet and pushed me back up against the wall, his eyes blazing. “You’ve always had a very fucking twisted concept of what an accident is, haven’t you?” he hissed through his teeth. “You raise your hand and very purposefully slap me, and you call it an accident. You push a man off a cliff out of anger, and apparently that’s an accident too.”

“Please,” I whimpered. “I didn’t mean it like that, I just meant...” I trailed off, sobs replacing my words as he dragged me toward the door.

“You’re going back to your cell and you’re staying there. You will not leave for any reason until the Bonding tomorrow night, and after that you’ll be there for another three days. No exercise, no shower, nothing,” he said. “I was actually going to keep you here with me for the rest of the day and night, but you’ve just proved that you can’t handle it yet.”

I shrieked as he pulled me along. Now that I’d seen the nice room and been in it with him, I couldn’t bear the thought of returning to my cell. Especially if I would be left alone for days on end again. I’d had more than enough of that. One more day might just push me over the edge into pure insanity.

“No, please, I’ll be good! I’m sorry!” I cried as Elias pulled me roughly down the hall, toward the elevator.

He ignored my pleas. When we reached my underground cell, I refused to go in, planting my feet as firmly as I could on the concrete floor outside. “No! I can’t be alone again!” I said. “Not anymore. I can’t do it. Please, Master...”

My voice was broken, heavy with emotion. Elias simply stared at me with cold eyes, unlocked my door, and pulled me inside with him. No matter how hard I struggled, his strength would always outmatch mine.

I fell to my knees again, begging and pleading, clutching at his legs. “Don’t leave me here. Whip me again, do whatever you want to me. Just not this again!”

He still didn’t respond, and I felt my face turning hot with desperation. “Please, please, please,” I sobbed, lowering my head. “Elias, you’re all I have....”

It was bleak but it was true, as much as I hated to admit it. The guards never spoke to me, and I wasn’t technically allowed to talk to any of the other girls here, so conversation with them in the gym was always whispered and sporadic. If I was kept in my cell for the next two days straight, even those short instances would vanish.

Elias was the only one I could have real conversations with, as long as I was good, and he was the only one I could spend time with. My only proper human contact. He really was all I had in this place.

Now I’d gone and messed it up. He didn’t want me, didn’t even want to be around me.

Bad girl. Bad girl. Bad girl!The awful chant started in my head, growing in pitch. Guilt and shame swirled deep within, making my guts churn.

Elias looked down at me, his eyes flat and emotionless. “I really tried with you,” he said softly. “How many times did I say I wanted today to be good for both of us?”

“You said it a lot,” I said, wiping my cheeks and nose as tears leaked down my face.

“And what did you do?”

“I messed it up. Please, Master, I’ll make it good again. Just punish me like you did last night and take me back to the room with you. Don’t leave me alone.”

He smiled, a cruel smirk. “I’m not going to whip you. For one, you aren’t entirely healed from last night. You’re covered in welts, and I don’t need my toy to get infected and broken,” he said crisply. “And two, I’m not going to give in and give you what you want. I know perfectly well that you can’t stand the thought of being left alone in here again, not after all the little tastes of freedom and luxury you’ve been given. This is the worst punishment you can imagine right now. So it’s what you’re getting.”

I wailed and begged, but he ignored me and stepped out of my cell.

I cried hysterically as I waited, hoping this was just a test, but he didn’t return. Still sobbing, I crawled over to the corner and pulled my body into a tight ball, rocking back and forth.

At some point, I must’ve crawled up to my bed and fallen into a fitful sleep. I didn’t remember doing it, but when I opened my eyes again, I was under the blanket, and my cheeks were finally dry.

Something caught my eye, and I sat up and looked. There was a tray sitting by the slot in my door. A familiar silver cloche tray...

I got out of bed and padded over to it, lifting the lid. Beneath it was the remaining part of my lobster roll from earlier, along with another brand new one. Warm, buttery, delightful.

There was a note on the tray as well. My eyes scanned the scrawled words. I’m not a monster.

Fresh tears sprang to my eyes, and I crumpled back to the floor and sobbed, this time out of relief. I was right this morning.

Despite it all, Elias still had a soul.

16

Tatum

I opened one eye as something creaked near me. There was a man in my room. All I could see was brown hair and cold blue-green eyes. The rest was a blur.

A moan escaped my lips. “Where... where am I?” I asked.

“Sit up. It’ll wear off soon. You know these things are necessary,” the man said. “I think they may have given you too high of a dose last night, though, if you’re this bad.” His voice was cold, dangerous, sent a lick of fear up my spine. I couldn’t remember who he was, but I knew to be afraid of him.

I tried to do what he said, lethargically pulling myself up to a seated position. I was on a small bed with white sheets and a gray blanket. I swung my legs over one edge and rubbed my eyes before looking around again.

I repeated my earlier question. “Where am I?”

The man glared down at me. “Tatum, you’ve been here for weeks. You know where you are. Think.”

A name suddenly popped into my head, clear as day. “King,” I whispered. “That’s... that’s you.”

He was Tobias King. Richest man in the country. But why was he here? I strained my

mind, trying my best to figure it out.

“Good girl. You’re starting to remember.”

My voice trembling, I spoke up again. “Why am I here?”

“Because you asked for it.”

I shook my head. “No...”

A vicious smile. “Oh, yes.”

My memory was slowly beginning to return now. I recalled a ceremony in the woods, flaming torches, robed men with horned masks and golden rings. A woman in white, tied to a stone altar...

I moaned, and the memories kept seeping in. A mansion in the darkness. A skull filled with red liquid. A hot metal iron pressed against my skin. Mellie, laughing cruelly at me. A ballroom. A tasseled whip. A bath.

Elias.

“I made this happen,” I whispered, reaching around to feel the brand on my lower back. It still wasn’t entirely healed, but the scab was almost ready to fall off, and it wasn’t infected.

Tobias cracked another nasty smile. “So it’s all coming back to you. Thank god it’s wearing off. We need you ready for tonight, don’t we?”

“Tonight?”

“The Bonding is tonight. Surely you remember that part.”

I shook my head. “I don’t.”

“It means it’s finally time for you to lose your virginity.”

Suddenly the rest of it came flooding back. Of course. I’d been given some of the orange juice last night because the guards were sick of me crying for Elias after he left me the lobster rolls. No wonder I felt so dizzy and blurry for so long. The drugs in the juice made me sleepy and woozy, and they made it hard to remember anything when I woke up, at least for the first few minutes.

I wished I never remembered any of this at all. I wished the drugs would strip it away permanently, leave my mind untainted and innocent.

“I can’t believe I did this,” I repeated miserably.

“You did it because you belong here.” Another nasty smile. “Don’t you?”

I nodded grimly. I hated to admit it, but he was right. This was where I belonged now, and it was all my fault.

I thought about how different my life would’ve been if I wound up making other choices. Better choices. What if I’d been smart and accepted from the very start that I didn’t belong anywhere near the world of the elite and subsequently never attended that party with Katie nearly two years ago? I wouldn’t have met Ben Wellington, I wouldn’t have contributed to his death, and I wouldn’t have ended up on the Kings’ radars. I wouldn’t be here now, owned and subjugated by one of them.

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Every choice I'd made, every action I carried out... it was all leading me down a twisted path, carrying me toward Elias. All this time.

"Where is he?" I croaked. "Elias."

"Missing him, are you? How sweet," Tobias said in an acid tone.

I shivered. Yes, I missed him. Missed his voice, his touch. I'd been left here all alone in this room for what felt like an eternity, even though I knew it was only since last night. A well-deserved punishment. I was bad yesterday, and I hit Elias. I needed to be good now, or I would get more punishment. More confinement.

"He's back at Roden," Tobias went on crisply. "Had some sort of grad school exam. But don't worry, he'll be here tonight."

"Okay," I murmured. One last remnant of rationality, a tiny scrap right at the back of my mind, told me I shouldn't miss Elias. Shouldn't crave him. Shouldn't be desperate to see him.

Oh, but I was....

I wanted him to touch me like he did the other day. I wanted him to bring me all those heated pleasures, make me feel better and forget where I was for just a few minutes. When he touched me, it was the only time I felt good in this place. The only time I had any real will to keep going.

I needed more, even if it was bad for me. Even if it destroyed me.

Tobias snapped his fingers at me. “You need to go upstairs and start getting ready.”

“I’m allowed out again?” I asked. I couldn’t quite believe it. Not when I’d been trapped in here for what felt like such a long time.

He glared at me. “You really are stupid, aren’t you? Did you think the ceremony would be in here? Of course it’s not, and of course you’re allowed out. For now, anyway. So hurry up.”

I stood and trailed after him, up to the first floor. He took me into the room with the enormous Roman bath and left me in there, shutting the door behind him with a click.

I wasn’t alone. There were other girls in the water already, washing themselves and splashing around, and three guards slowly patrolled around the room, making sure no one spoke.

I stepped down into the warm azure water. I was already naked; I’d taken off the lingerie Elias gifted me not long after he dragged me back to my cell last night. I didn’t deserve to wear it. Not until he was happy with me again.

When we were all sparkling clean, the guards ordered us out of the water one by one, tossing fluffy white towels at us. “Come with us,” one of them said.

We quickly dried ourselves before wrapping the towels around our bodies and stepping out of the room in single file, silently following the guards down another hall. After that, we were all split up again. I saw Pri being directed into a room at the start of this new hall, and another girl was pushed into the room across from it. I kept heading down the hall until one of the guards told me to stop.

The door opened, and a familiar face peered out. Mellie.

“Hey!” she said, as if we were actually friends. As if she didn’t fake everything and sell me out like the treacherous little witch she was. “I’m going to help you get ready. Are you excited?”

I shrugged. Truthfully, I was excited to see what the Bonding would entail, because it meant I would get to see Elias again, but I didn’t want to tell her that.

“You’re finally going to lose your virginity,” Mellie went on, ignoring my obvious reticence toward her. “You’re lucky. I wish I could lose mine again. I threw it away at some stupid party in high school. But you... you get to lose it to someone special. Someone who wanted you so badly they were willing to do anything to have you.”

I nodded mutely. I was lucky, in a twisted sense. I would get to be with Elias tonight, while so many of the other girls here would be paired with old men with sagging bodies, receding hairlines, and cruel eyes. Like the horrible man from the ball. The thought made me shudder.

“Why is Elias so young compared to most of the other men I’ve seen here so far?” I blurted out, suddenly unable to hold the question in.

Mellie smiled. “Ah, she speaks.”

“I was just curious,” I said softly, averting my eyes.

“Well, it’s a good question. And lucky for you, I know more than most about Crown and Dagger.”

“Yeah, I know. Unfortunately,” I muttered.

She ignored my dig. “Elias is only a second-level member of the society. Technically, any society member from the second or third levels can come here, bid on a virgin,

and take care of her training before she goes to the Lodge, but it's usually more of an older man's game. The second-level guys are usually still pretty young, so while they don't mind banging a gorgeous hooker at the Lodge once in a while, they don't always have half a million dollars to throw away on one girl. Or they do, thanks to their trust funds, but they don't want to. Better off saving for their future and spending their time establishing their careers and whatnot. Elias is already a multi-billionaire, though, thanks to his family. Paying for you and your innocence is nothing to someone like him."

"So the other men here are mostly third-level?"

"Uh-huh," she said breezily. "The youngest a guy can be to obtain consideration for that level is twenty-four. Most of them don't make it till they're far older than that, though."

“Right,” I muttered.

I wanted to know what the differences between the second and third levels were, but I knew Mellie would never tell me. She wasn’t even supposed to know. The only reason the society hadn’t killed her for discovering their secrets was because she was able to convince them she had a necessary service to provide.

She was always a smart girl.

She sat me down at a dark mahogany vanity and set about waxing my legs, underarms and pussy. I endured the pain silently as she ripped the strips away, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of knowing she hurt me.

When my skin was smooth and hairless, she rubbed some sweet-smelling lotion on me to soothe any redness and irritation. Then she put some makeup on me—dark brown eyeshadow, thick lashings of mascara, pink lipstick. For the finishing touches, she swiped some golden highlighter over my cheeks.

“Time for the hair,” she muttered, mostly to herself. She brushed my hair until it was tangle-free and shiny, and then she styled it into loose waves that hung around my face. As much as I couldn’t stand Mellie, I had to admit she was talented at this stuff.

“Nearly done,” she said, inspecting her handiwork in the mirror. “We just need to get you dressed now.”

She crossed over to a wardrobe on the other side of the room and returned with a gauzy white robe. I stood and let her slide it over my head. The light fabric billowed

out around me when I moved, and it was thin enough so that my nipples and pussy were visible under the light.

She topped the outfit off with a ring of white flowers on my head. I looked like some sort of virgin sacrifice victim from an ancient cult.

“Perfect,” Mellie said. “You’re due out there at seven-thirty, so we have some time to kill. Do you want to watch a movie with me?”

I gaped at her. “A movie?”

She frowned impatiently. “Yes, a movie. You haven’t forgotten what they are, have you?” she said. She motioned toward a laptop sitting on the bed. “We aren’t allowed out of this room until it’s your turn, so we may as well do something.”

“I don’t know if I’m allowed,” I said softly.

“Jesus, they’ve really done a number on you,” she muttered. “You’re allowed to tonight, okay?”

I went and sat down on the bed. Mellie joined me, opened the laptop and put a Netflix movie on. I watched in a dreamy silence. This was all so surreal. I was just sitting here watching a rom-com with my old best friend as if nothing ever happened. As if I wasn’t going to lose my virginity in some strange ceremony in two hours.

I’d never really been one of those girls who made a big deal about virginity. I didn’t want there to be some big special evening after my high school prom with candles and red rose petals everywhere. Honestly, I just wanted to get it over with and see what it was like. Granted, I never wound up having the opportunity, but still, that was my general attitude toward it. Maybe not the best attitude, and definitely not the one society expected of girls my age, but hell, I’d never really fitted in properly anyway.

If I ended up going on a date and sleeping with a guy I barely knew, and he wound up already having a girlfriend or having some sort of sexually transmitted infection, then yes, that would show poor judgment on my behalf and end up being a bad decision compared with all the girls who waited for a special guy and a special night. But at least it would be my bad decision.

Here at the Finishing School, the decision was out of my hands. I would lose my virginity tonight whether I liked it or not. And suddenly, just like that, I no longer had the attitude of ‘getting it over with’. I wanted it to be special. I wanted it to be my decision. I wanted it to be with someone I cared about...

I bit my bottom lip, thinking of Elias. It occurred to me that I did care about him in a twisted way, and in different circumstances, it would be beyond special. Back in the real world, losing my virginity to a guy like him would be memorable and incredible. Here? It could be the same if I made the most of it. He was sinfully sexy and made me melt like no one and nothing else, and just the other day, I’d practically begged him to fuck me.

Tonight probably wouldn’t be any different. As soon as his lips were on mine, all those lustful feelings would stir within me again, and I’d be putty in his hands. I’d beg him to make me feel good, beg him to make me feel better. After all, he was the only one who could...

“Tatum.” Mellie nudged me. “Time to go.”

With shaky legs, I stood up and followed her over to the mirror for a quick once-over, and then she led me out of the room. She left me at the end of the hall with two guards. They blindfolded me and guided me out of the mansion.

It was cold outside, but I felt fine. Excitement was bubbling through my veins, warming me, and I almost felt like I wasn’t really here. As if this were all a dream

where I was looking down at myself from above, watching myself walk down that dark path to the amphitheater in the woods. I couldn't see, but I knew that was where we were going. I could hear the low rumble of the ocean on my right, and on the left there was the sound of wind blowing through branches. In the distance, I could hear the steady rhythm of drums.

The sound grew louder and then suddenly stopped. There was nothing but silence. Darkness. The guards took my blindfold off, but it was still pitch-black. There was no moon to cast a glow over the world tonight, barely any stars visible through the thick canopy of branches. The excitement in my stomach boiled down to a hum of nervous energy.

"Go forward," one of the guards said in a low mutter. "Keep going until they tell you to stop."

I took a deep breath, then started forward, stumbling slightly. Without the men to guide me in the darkness, my feet felt alien and awkward, and I wasn't sure if I was even going the right way.

A sudden chill made me shiver. I wished the drums would start up again, just so I would know I was going the right way, but aside from the moaning wind, there was nothing but an intimidating silence from up ahead. I felt simultaneously alone and watched.

A voice suddenly echoed out of the darkness ahead. "Stop."

Directly ahead of me, a torch was lit. In the flickering light, I could see I was standing in the amphitheater. The flame dipped to the right and flared again. Around in a circle it went, until I was surrounded by a ring of burning torches twenty feet across.

Beyond the circle, I could make out a group of people sitting on the amphitheater

steps. There was a hood over each one, hanging low over masculine cheekbones and jawlines. One of them stepped forward, and a creeping fear took hold at the base of my spine.

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The man pulled back the hood of his robe, letting it fall away to the ground. On his head was a bronze mask that covered his nose and cheekbones and cast the rest of his face in shadow. He was shirtless, and his tanned skin glowed in the firelight.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew that body anywhere. It was definitely Elias.

A low murmur started in the audience, and then the drums began to pulse and throb in the air around us. Alongside them, a musical number with a strange, haunting chant started up from the front of the amphitheater. It wasn't in English or any other language I vaguely recognized, so I had no idea what the words meant, but it was hypnotic all the same.

My pulse quickened in a mixture of fear and anticipation as Elias picked me up and carried me in his arms. We were only a few feet away from an enormous altar, and he gently set me down on it a moment later.

The altar was draped in heavy dark velvet, with two bronze rods at the end closest to my head. Two robed men approached with what appeared to be white silk scarves. I lay still as they tied my arms above my head, securing the fabric on the rods.

I couldn't move now, even if I wanted to.

Elias stood above me, watching me through his mask. He saw that I was trembling, and he reached down and stroked one arm. I could feel his warmth seeping into my skin, spreading through my system like hot oil as the sounds in the amphitheater grew louder, the chanting reverberating around the stone structure. The whole world seemed to be aquiver, blurring at the edges, and I felt myself falling deeper under the

music's hypnotizing spell.

Elias took his mask off and placed it on the side of the altar. He leaned over me, hands going to my shoulders and then my chest, gently caressing the bare parts of my skin before ripping my gauzy robe wide open.

His touch was slow, sensual, and I let out a satisfied sigh as his hands moved lower, coasting over my stomach and down to my pussy. I felt like I was drifting away on a hot cloud of arousal, dancing up in the heavens.

I couldn't quite believe it, but I already couldn't wait for more. Couldn't wait to fuck Elias... no, to be fucked by him.

He was impossible not to crave when he was this close, and my legs twitched at the mere thought of him breaking me in. I wanted him to strip me of my innocence, wanted his cock to fill me up, wanted him to stretch me and slam into me until I was bruised all over.

This wasn't just Stockholm syndrome. I was sure of it. This was real. There was something between the two of us, even when we hated each other, some force which drew us together like magnets. The dark feeling of animosity and fear stirred a deep lust within me, turning me into an inferno of need, and I knew Elias felt the same. He might hate me because of the things he thought I'd done, along with the things I had done, but he wanted me just as much as I wanted him right now.

He leaned down over me and brushed his lips against mine. It was a tentative kiss, like he was waiting for something from me. "You want this, Doll?" he finally asked. His voice was barely audible through the music and the pounding drums, and I was surprised that he'd asked such a question. I didn't realize I had a choice in the matter.

Maybe I misheard, and it wasn't actually a question. Maybe it was simply a

statement, telling me he knew I wanted this to happen. Either way, I nodded. I was too delirious with need to do anything else. Dizzy, panting, hot, my muscles taut with tension.

The music and drumbeats were so loud and fast now that the sounds ran together, making my head spin wildly as vibrations rumbled deep in my chest. Elias kissed me again, and I arched my hips up and parted my lips.

“Say it,” he muttered in my right ear a moment later, drawing slightly back.

“Please, Master,” I murmured.

“Please what?”

He knew exactly what. He just wanted to hear me say the words, wanted to hear the ultimate surrender spill from my lips.

I shivered. I was really doing this...

“Please fuck me,” I whispered.

“Why?” he asked in a harsh murmur, grinding his hips against mine. I could feel his thick length near my slick entrance, teasing me, tormenting me. “I thought you said you would never belong to me. I thought you said you would never beg for me.”

I thought back to the day he was referring to. He was right. I told him he could never have me. Told him I’d never beg for anything from him. But I was wrong. He might not own me entirely, not in the deepest parts of my mind, but my physical body belonged wholly to him now. I wanted to serve him with it, wanted him to own every inch of it.

I should feel bad for breaking this far, for walking right into his honeyed lure, sinking lower than I ever thought I could. But I didn't. How could I feel bad when it felt this good?

"I was wrong. I need you," I said breathlessly. "I need you to fuck me. I need you to teach me. I need you to make me obey..."

"How badly?"

I let out a moan. "So badly. Please, please, please..."

"In front of everyone? All these men, watching you take my cock... that's what you want?"

"Yes!" I whimpered. Yet another thing I never thought I'd hear myself say. I'd spent so much of my life feeling guilty and ashamed, but doing this in front of so many people was actually forcing me to let go of some of that shame.

I bucked my hips, trying to pull Elias into me, and he let out a low chuckle. "Oh, no, Doll. You aren't going to control this. I am. I'll fuck you when I'm ready, and you'll come when I say so."

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A desperate mewl spilled from my lips. Elias silenced me seconds later, pressing his lips to mine in another bruising kiss.

My breath hitched in my chest as he plunged inside me all of a sudden, and when his mouth left mine, I cried out, a sound of pure pain tearing through the air. He felt huge inside my inexperienced body as he invaded and conquered my virgin pussy, but I begged him to keep going despite the aching in every nerve end. I wanted the pain, wanted to feel every little bit of it as it mixed with the wanton need in my core.

Elias thrust all the way home, pressing past a barrier inside me. “Oh!” I squealed, then gritted my teeth. Seconds later, I felt myself open up to him like the petals of a rose. An intensely pleasurable pressure built slowly in my core.

I couldn’t believe I once wanted to simply ‘get it over with’ when it came to sex. It was probably because I used to hear horror stories from my high school and college friends all the time. Awful bleeding. Premature ejaculation. Jack-hammering guys. Even boredom. But this was something else entirely, and I finally understood why so many other people raved about sex. Why they would do anything for it. Die for it.

Now that I knew, there was no going back. I wanted and needed this with Elias again and again, that thrilling, blissful, intimate place only the two of us could get to together. I wanted to give him all of me. Here, tonight. Just us. I knew we were surrounded by people, but they’d all fallen away, lost in some nebulous haze, and all I saw was him.

I moaned, and he grunted and quickened his movements, sinking into me like an anchor. He fucked me like a beast, hands roughly groping at me as he drove himself

deeper and deeper. I cried out over and over as he claimed his property, wanting him to go harder and faster, wanting him to stretch me beyond my limits.

His groin rubbed against my swollen clit as he slammed in and out of me, and I let out whimper after whimper. My body was hot and wet everywhere, my muscles tight, my pussy clenching around the cock inside me as it built me up to a violent climax. I was close already. So close.

“You won’t come until I tell you,” Elias growled. “Got it, Doll?”

“Yes,” I said, squeezing my eyes tightly shut, trying to blank out the pleasure so I could follow his command. But it didn’t work. It felt too good. I was getting closer and closer, so close it hurt. “Oh, no... please, Master. I can’t hold on. Let me come!”

“You. Will. Obey. Me,” he grunted, punctuating each word with a thrust. “Don’t you dare come until I tell you.”

I held on, every muscle clenched tightly, my whole body a ticking time bomb. Finally, Elias gave me permission to let go, his words hot and heavy in my ear. “Come on my cock, little slut. Now.”

One more hard thrust was all it took, and then it was on me, pleasure pouring through me, making me shiver with bliss. I gasped and whimpered ‘thank you, Master’ over and over again, so grateful for his cock. So grateful that he allowed me to have an orgasm.

My pussy pulsed around his cock in tight waves as I came, and he grunted as he came too, fingers roughly digging into my shoulders. I would be covered in bruises tomorrow, but I didn’t care.

“You’re mine now,” Elias muttered in my ear, his body still heavy on mine. “All

mine. Forever.”

“Yes,” I said breathlessly. I was floating away on a cloud of bliss, desperate to say or do anything for just a few more minutes with this man.

“Say it, Doll. Promise me.”

I took in a deep breath and stared up into his blazing eyes. “I promise, Master. I’m yours. All yours...”

17

Tatum

A week passed.

I didn't see Elias.

After the Bonding ceremony the other night, he'd taken me back to my cell and kissed me goodnight, telling me he would be back in a few days. Apparently he had some business to take care of back home.

Home. Something I'd never see again...

Absence is supposed to make the heart grow fonder, but in my case, things were different. Without Elias here, and without our intensely pleasurable sex enveloping my mind, my sanity was starting to return. Like a fog lifting, inch by inch, piece by hazy piece, my logic and reason were slowly coming back to me. The sensual buzz from the ceremony had worn off completely, and I was beginning to arrive at some stark realizations—realizations I probably wouldn't have had if I was still hypnotized by Elias and his body, falling apart under his touch and the delights of the pain he laid on me.

I'd promised him something the other night, promised my whole life to him, but I was already starting to see how much that promise would cost. I couldn't be his whore forever, no matter what I said or felt in the past. Simply looking around this place made that fact plain to see.

My punishment from the other week was over, and I was once more allowed out for an hour each day to exercise and bathe. I saw what was happening to the other girls when their masters were here; the same masters they'd promised their lives to during the ceremony. Some of them staggered in each morning, barely able to walk, covered head to toe in bruises and welts. They tried to exercise, but every movement was a struggle for them, and they wound up sobbing in the showers instead.

I could only imagine what might be in store for me when Elias returned to the Finishing School.

In my time here so far, he hadn't done anything too bad, but I knew it would happen eventually. No matter how good it felt to have him around, it wouldn't last, and one day, I would be just like the other girls. Bruised, battered, beaten. I saw the look in his eyes when he whipped me all those nights ago, and I knew he loved inflicting pain. Specifically upon me.

Darker brutality was coming my way, and I hated living on the razor's edge, waiting for it to happen. What I hated even more was the part of me that liked the pain, that twisted part of my mind that actually looked forward to it. It felt like I was in a wrestling match with myself, both sides struggling to win out, neither succeeding.

I knew I liked the pain because I felt as if I deserved it for the things I'd done in the past, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to like being hurt. I didn't want my body to belong to anyone.

Truthfully, I didn't even want to have feelings for Elias anymore. I was always so clouded with emotion when I was near him that I couldn't think straight, but now, in the cold hard light of my lonely days, I finally saw it for what it really was. A physical response and nothing more.

It wasn't like I was in love with him. It wasn't like we'd get married and have three

kids and a dog one day. No, I was just his little slut, his toy, his Doll, and one day, he'd get sick of playing with me and move on to a shiny new model.

The thought of what might happen to me then made me shiver with fear. He couldn't exactly send me home, could he?

It seemed obvious I would be killed once he was done with me, and I couldn't believe how far I'd managed to go down the rabbit hole before this horrible idea occurred to me. He might not do it himself (I knew he had a soul deep down below that wicked façade, no matter how broken and twisted it might be) but it had to happen somehow, and he must've known that all along.

Just because I occasionally craved darkness and fantasized about being hurt didn't mean I wanted that. Fantasies were one thing, but when they bled into reality and turned this dark and dangerous, this deadly, there was only one thing left to do: get the hell out, any way I could.

Elias took my virginity, but he wouldn't take my life. No way.

I was trying my best to go back to my old self—that scrappy, defiant girl who so ardently wanted to be freed—and forget about every last shred of feeling I had for him, so I could concentrate on an escape plan instead. But it was harder than I thought, even with all the realizations I'd come to. His face and voice kept creeping into my mind, whispering at me. You're mine. You'll never escape. You can't leave me.

I knew I just needed a push, something to convince me Elias truly didn't care for me. Something to spark that old adrenaline in me again.

And finally, it arrived.

I was in my cell chewing on a buttered bread roll I'd been sent for breakfast when Tobias came to visit me. I eyed him warily and sat as far back on the bed as possible. His visits had never gone well.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"That's not very polite. I really should flog the shit out of you for that attitude, but Elias wouldn't be pleased if I touched his little doll, would he?"

I scoffed. "One might say kidnapping a girl and holding her hostage isn't very polite either, but here we are. So what do you want?"

He chuckled and stepped closer. "I came here for two reasons. Firstly, your parents send their regards. I just met with them."

My heart began to race. "I don't believe you."

Even though it all made sense given their sudden influx of money, part of me still held out a tiny fraction of hope that my parents didn't actually sell me to Crown and Dagger. Perhaps the contract Tobias showed me was fake, and my dad's company was actually doing well on its own. Tobias was obviously a sociopath, so it wouldn't surprise me to discover that this was the case, and everything he'd told me was a lie. For all I knew, my parents were out there frantically searching for me.

He held out his phone. "Luckily for you, I like to record or film most conversations I have. It's always good to have blackmail material on people. Makes business transactions run a lot smoother."

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I have proof.” He clicked something on his phone and a video started playing, filmed from his point of view. The phone must’ve been sitting in his shirt pocket when it was recording.

The video showed my parents sitting in his office, asking how things were going with me and saying they wanted to renegotiate the contract as they felt they actually deserved more money. They’d already spent more than half the three hundred thousand they’d been given, and they wanted more.

“Turn it off,” I said softly, looking away. My guts were churning, and I felt like I’d be sick all over the place. Tobias wasn’t lying. My parents really had sold me. I guess I already knew that for the most part, but now even the miniscule shred of hope I’d held onto was shattered and I felt hollow. Dead inside.

Tobias did as I said, sliding the phone back into his pocket. “As you wish. But they also had some news from the outside world to report. Apparently you have some very pushy friends who don’t believe you’re where we said you are.”

“What?” My eyes snapped back up as hope flared brightly inside me. If my friends didn’t really believe I went to Europe, they could be searching for me, even when no one else was. Eventually, they might find me.

“If I remember correctly, the friends in question were Greer Ballinger, Willa Van der Veer, and Katie Gagne. Apparently they became suspicious when your parents refused to give them a contact number for you. Especially Katie. Seeing as she’s

taking some sort of gap year in France, she asked for your contact details so she could meet up with you while you backpacked through Europe, and when your mother tried to claim you didn't have a phone or email address, she contacted Greer and Willa."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "You didn't hurt my friends, did you?"

"Not physically. I'm sure they're very emotionally hurt, though. I had your parents try a different tack. I told them to tell the girls that you'd wanted to end the friendships with them for a while, as you felt you were drifting apart and they weren't intellectual enough for you. While you do have a contact number, you specifically asked your parents not to give it to them, and they were trying to respect that. But they felt bad, so they made up the initial 'lie' about you not having a number."

My stomach flipped. "And then?"

His eyes gleamed. "It worked. Your friends are all furious with you now. Especially Greer. Apparently she loved having you around because you come from similar backgrounds, and she thought you understood what it's like for her. But to find out that you're just as much of an elitist snob as half the other students at Roden... well, let's just say you're off her Christmas card list."

There was a pounding in my ears as his words sank in. Not only had Crown and Dagger torn me from my life and tried their best to destroy me, they'd successfully destroyed all my old friendships as well, for no reason other than the need to cover their asses when those friends began to ask questions. No one on the outside world cared about me anymore. No one was looking for me, and no one even wanted to find me.

I wanted to tear at Tobias's hair, gouge his eyes out, smash his smug face in.

"You're an asshole," I said in a low voice, thick with fury. "Get the hell out."

“I’m not done yet. I said there were two reasons I came to see you.”

I threw my hands up. “What? Go on, just say it!”

It couldn’t possibly be any worse than what he’d just shown and told me, right?

“Well, I also wanted to see how things are going between you and Elias. I do hope you’re treating him properly, given that you may be one of the most expensive birthday gifts I’ve ever bought him, but he hasn’t been around much.”

I stiffened. “Birthday gift?”

“Oh, yes. After Ben died, Elias became very dark and grim. He didn’t say it, but I could tell he was deeply affected by Ben’s passing. It was my idea to buy you for him, and I arranged the sale. I knew it would cheer him up to know he had you coming to be his slave, given your... shall we say, proximity to Ben’s demise.”

“For god’s sake, I didn’t kill Ben,” I said through gritted teeth. “It was an accident.”

Tobias smiled. “Yes, that’s the story, isn’t it?”

I stood up, narrowing my eyes. “It’s not a fucking story. I know your family hates me and blames me for his death, but you’re all wrong!”

“I don’t hate you, Tatum. On the contrary. As soon as I became aware of your existence, I was actually very pleased.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Why?”

“Like I said, I knew I could make Elias very happy if I purchased you. But that wasn’t the only reason, or even the main reason.” He sat down on the end of my bed

as he spoke. I didn't reply. I knew he wanted me to ask what the main reason was, but I didn't want to play into his hand.

"I've often wondered how much my son takes after his mother compared to how much he takes after me," he went on. "I've always tried to mold him in my image so that he can carry on my legacy one day, but sometimes I'm not sure he has what it takes. So I decided to get you for him as a sort of... test. Not just a gift. If things with you proceed according to my plan, then I'll know he's a true King."

"So what, you're grooming him to be the next family patriarch or something?" I said.

"In a manner of speaking." That nasty smile again.

"Well, I have a feeling you're actually right about him not taking after you," I said, boldly staring right back at him. "He's not like you at all."

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Tobias sneered at me. “What do you mean?”

“He was surprised when I told him I didn’t sell myself to your awful little society. He seems to think all the girls are here as willing prostitutes. That gives me the impression he won’t be too happy with you when he finds out you’ve been lying to him all along.”

I thought Tobias would look shocked, but instead he started laughing again.

“What’s so funny?” I said indignantly.

“Elias knows,” he said, leaning close to me.

My heart skipped a beat. “What?”

“He is well aware of the fact that you’re here against your will. It was his idea to make you think he didn’t know. He thought it would be amusing to play with you and make you think you had some sort of chance with him. As if he’d fall in love with you and swoop in to rescue you the second he ‘discovered’ that you were here unwillingly. He’s been laughing about it behind your back for weeks.”

A monstrous bird seemed to unfurl its wings inside my chest, and my vision blurred around the edges. Then a red film seemed to descend over it. After all the horrible shit he’d done, all the horrible shit he’d said, this was the thing that sent me careening over the edge into pure, unadulterated rage.

All those times I thought I actually wanted Elias, all those times I thought I was

feeling something for him... I was just crazed from the isolation, the naked defenselessness, the sheer hopelessness. I convinced myself it wasn't Stockholm, but I was wrong.

So wrong.

I wasn't falling for him at all. With the truth laid bare before me, all I felt was blinding hatred. He knew I didn't belong here all along, and he and his nasty, evil father had been laughing behind my back about the whole thing, as if my illegal captivity and torture were nothing more than a hilarious game.

Adrenaline rushed through my body and my hands shook with fury. I wanted to make these King bastards pay, wanted to destroy them the way they'd tried to destroy me.

"Fuck you, Tobias," I hissed through my teeth. "I'm going to get out of here, and I'm going to fucking ruin you and your son, even if it ends up killing me."

"Again, that's not very polite," Tobias said breezily, lips turned up in amusement. "Very unbecoming for a young lady. Although I suppose we can't expect much from a trashy little wh—"

"I said, fuck you!" I screamed, cutting him off. At the same time, I leapt onto the bed and grabbed the straightened bed spring I'd hidden in the wall vent all those weeks ago. "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!"

As I shrieked, I jammed the thin metal lance down into Tobias's neck.

His eyes went wide. For the first time, I'd caught him off guard.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, and the whole world seemed to have gone silent. Blood suddenly began to spurt out, coating the white sheets in thick streaks of

crimson, filling my nostrils with the scent of iron. Tobias gasped out something unintelligible, spluttering and choking, and he finally slumped to the floor.

Then his eyes closed.

18

Elias

The elevator hummed slightly as I rode it down to the underground level. A bouquet of pink carnations hung loosely in my left hand, and I looked down at them with a faint smile. I couldn't wait to see Tatum's face when I gave them to her.

My plan to make her fall for me was running smoothly. She was responding to me a lot better nowadays—aside from when she slapped me the other week, but I managed to turn that situation around to my benefit—and I could tell that the walls she'd built up around herself were falling, brick by brick.

I had a lot of shit to do back at Roden over the last week, so I'd left her here alone for several days just to give her time to miss me. Time to start craving me and my company again. After all, they say absence makes the heart grow fonder.

She was probably sitting in her cell right now, sighing and mooning over me, silently begging me to return and fuck her brains out again. When she saw the flowers in my hand, she'd probably melt all over the floor.

Most people these days disliked carnations and thought they were tacky, but I knew they were Tatum's favorite. I didn't get them because I actually liked her, of course. They simply served a purpose in my plan of making her think I genuinely cared about her interests, likes and dislikes.

Truth be told, I despised her more than ever, because the effect she had on me was

driving me mad. I kept telling myself I didn't give a fuck about her, but whenever I saw her wide blue eyes staring up at me, something deep down inside would twitch and a spark would ignite.

Like the stupid Bonding ceremony, for instance. I wasn't supposed to give a fuck what she wanted, wasn't supposed to ask for her permission or anything of the sort. I didn't need to, because I already got her permission when she signed her life and all her rights over to Crown and Dagger.

And yet, seeing her lying on the altar all wide-eyed and trembling sent a strange protective urge flooding through my veins. I had to ask her if she really wanted it; if she really wanted me. Of course, she said yes. She fucking had to. It was literally in her contract that she had to give her master anything he might want, so it was stupid and pointless of me to even ask.

I hated her for making me feel like that. Hated her for turning some treacherous little part of me soft and sympathetic. I didn't want to feel anything toward her other than the unbridled malice I felt the first time I heard her name.

The elevator door pinged and opened, and I stepped out into the hallway. Someone was shouting, and Tatum's door appeared to be wide open. Farther down the hall, three guards were pushing a gurney at breakneck speed, toward the wider service elevator at the other end. "Keep the fucking pressure on it! Don't let go!" one of them shouted at the others.

Shit. Tatum could be hurt....

I dropped the bouquet, showering the floor with pink petals.

"What the fuck is happening?" I shouted, dashing toward Tatum's cell.

A grisly scene awaited me. Blood was everywhere: spatter flying up the white walls, trails criss-crossing the concrete floor, wide smears on the door, thick puddles soaked into the sheets on the bed.

Oh, fuck.

Tatum was sitting in the corner of the room, drenched in blood as well. Two guards were standing in the room, keeping watch over her.

“Sir, you shouldn’t be here,” one of them said, turning to me.

“Why the hell not?”

“You should be with your father. They’re rushing him to the medical wing right now.”

My brows furrowed. “Wait... my father?”

He gestured to Tatum. “She managed to get a weapon somehow. Stabbed him in the side of the neck and nicked some sort of artery or major vein. He might’ve bled out before we even noticed, but luckily, she was screaming loud enough to make us want to come and check things out. We found him just in time. Jones knows some basic med stuff so he applied pressure immediately to try and stop the bleeding. Seemed to work, but obviously we’ll let the doc be the judge...” He trailed off uncertainly, scrubbing a hand across his chin.

It felt like the floor had just dropped out from under me as a knife jabbed directly into my heart. My eyes widened and I stared back over at Tatum. “You stabbed my father?”

She smiled. Fucking smiled. “You’re lucky you weren’t here, or I would’ve done it to

you too,” she said, voice laced with venom. The smile faded, and she spat in my direction. “Just wait, though. I’ll get you one day, you sack of shit.”

I stared at her in abject horror. I couldn’t fucking believe it. All this time, I thought my plan was progressing nicely, but I was wrong. So fucking wrong. Tatum wasn’t falling for me at all. Quite the opposite. She was a seething ball of hatred, hiding behind a mask of submission until this very moment.

A guttural roar echoed deep inside me, and my nostrils flared. “I’ll deal with you later,” I said through gritted teeth before turning and running out of the cell.

I headed upstairs and ran toward the medical wing as fast as I could, hoping and praying my father was okay. We didn’t always see eye to eye on things, but that didn’t mean I wanted him fucking hurt or dead.

I found the door closed and locked. “Hey!” I shouted. “Let me in!”

No answer.

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I pounded on the door for several minutes, furiously slamming my hands on it until they were red raw, and finally, the nurse let me in. “Sorry, Mr. King,” she said. “We were too busy working on your father to open the door. I didn’t even realize it was locked.”

I pushed past her to see my father lying on a bed, eyes closed and a thick surgical dressing covering his neck. I’d never seen him look so pale. So powerless. He was hooked up to a heart monitor, and the resident doctor was standing over him.

“Dr. Paulson,” I said, striding over. “What’s going on?”

He rubbed his hooked nose and sighed. “It’s not great, Elias. I managed to seal the wound and stop the hemorrhaging, but he lost a lot of blood. I suspect he’s in hypovolemic shock.”

“What’s that?”

“A condition caused by massive blood loss. The loss of fluid makes it nearly impossible for the heart to continue pumping sufficient blood around the body. It can lead to multiple organ failure.”

“Shit.”

“The guards have radioed for a MEDEVAC airlift to the nearest hospital. Obviously, we can’t treat him properly here. We aren’t properly equipped for situations like this.”

I rubbed my jaw. My pulse seemed to be racing a million miles a minute. “When will the helicopter arrive?”

He sighed again. “The weather outside isn’t great at the moment, as you know. Very strong winds. They said it could take up to thirty minutes to get here.”

“Thirty fucking minutes?” My right hand reflexively curled into a fist. “That’s not good enough. He could be fucking dead in half an hour.”

Dr. Paulson nodded miserably. “I won’t lie to you, Elias. It’s going to be a very tight situation. But I’m doing my best, and he’s holding on for now.”

I waved my hand around the crisp white-walled room. “Isn’t there anything else you can do here?”

“No. He needs a blood transfusion to increase the fluid volume inside him and get his heart pumping properly again. But we don’t have any O-neg here, or any blood bags at all, for that matter. This facility is basically a glorified birth control dispensary and STI testing lab for all the young ladies here.”

“Fuck!” I clenched my hands into tight fists again. “Wait... could you give him some of my blood?”

“Are you O-negative?”

“No. B-positive.”

He shook his head. “Sorry. O-neg is the universal donor type. Not yours.”

“But we’re the same blood type! Doesn’t that make it okay?”

The doctor frowned. “Are you sure? How do you know?”

I hurriedly told him about my childhood antics, when I used to hunt around the house for anything to do with my mother.

“I ended up finding all this stuff on her, including old medical records and blood donation cards,” I went on. “I know for a fact she was A-negative. And I know I’m B-positive. That means my father is too, doesn’t it?”

“Not necessarily. He could be AB-positive.”

“Oh. Yeah. But a B can give blood to an AB, right?” I racked my brains, trying to remember everything from my prep school bio classes.

“Well, yes. But still, I can’t just put your blood into someone when I’m not a hundred percent sure. That’s not how this works. Luckily, there’s a simple way to find out his type,” he said, briskly stepping over to a computer. “I’ll quickly look at his medical records to confirm. Yours too. If you’re indeed an appropriate donor, we can take some blood from you and give it to him.”

He tapped at the keyboard, then swore under his breath.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The damn winds outside... they must’ve knocked out the phone lines. I can’t get online, and that means I can’t access his medical records.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I snapped, slamming my fist into a nearby table. “Jesus, just give him my fucking blood!”

Dr. Paulson’s eyes widened. “Elias, I told you I have to be sure. Giving someone the

wrong blood type can be catastrophic, especially when they're already compromised. It causes a very serious immune response. If he's somehow actually an O-type and we—”

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I cut him off. “I told you, he’s not. If my mother was A-negative, then he has to be either B-positive or AB-positive, which is compatible with my type! Right? And you said yourself, he needs blood as soon as possible. So give him mine! Even if it’s not much, it’ll still buy him some more time before we can get him airlifted to a proper hospital, won’t it?”

He rubbed his chin and sighed. “Yes, it would. Shit...” He let out another sigh.

“If for some reason it all goes wrong, I’ll take the blame, okay?” I put my hands up. “I’ll tell everyone I forced you to do it; threatened to kill you or something. Your license won’t be at any risk.”

My father’s heart monitor began to beep even slower, and the doctor finally relented. “Fine. Sit down and roll up your left sleeve. I don’t have any blood bags, so we’re going to have to do an old-style person-to-person transfusion.”

“Fine by me.”

He busied himself setting the transfusion up, and I sat and watched my blood flow out of my arm a moment later, streaming directly from me into my father’s veins.

“I can only take so much,” Dr. Paulson said as he hovered over us. “It won’t be enough to fix the situation, but it should stabilize him for now. Let me know if you feel any weakness or dizziness.”

“I’m fine.” I gritted my teeth. “Take as much as you can.”

As I waited, I thought about my mother's death again; the way she bled to death to give me life. Now I was giving my blood to save my father. Kinda fucked up family tradition, really.

"That's all we can do," Dr. Paulson said a moment later. He removed everything from my arm and quickly patched up the puncture mark with a cotton ball and medical tape. Then he busied himself checking my father's vitals again.

"How is he? Did it work?" I asked sharply.

He nodded. "His pulse is steadier. Breathing slightly steadier too. He's going to make it."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Thank fucking god.

A guard knocked and entered the small medical wing a moment later. "Chopper's landing in five minutes. We should get ready to transport him out to the helipad."

The doctor nodded and barked some orders at the nurse. I excused myself and ducked out, telling them I'd meet them on the helipad in a few minutes. Then I hurried down to the underground section of the mansion and found Brett, a Finishing School security guard I'd befriended when I first found out Tatum would be given to me.

"How's your father?" he asked, eyes wide with concern.

"He's gonna be fine. Where's Tatum now?" I asked.

"Locked in her cell. We cleaned it up a bit before we left her alone."

"Okay. I need you to do something for me," I said. "We're going back to the initial plan."

He raised one thick brow. “I thought you said you wanted to go in another direction to break her down.”

“Not anymore. As soon as possible, I want you to make it happen. She needs to learn her fucking place here.”

He smiled. “Got it. We’ll do it later today.”

“Good. She needs it.”

I turned and briskly headed upstairs and out to the helipad. A large helicopter had just landed, and Dr. Paulson and some mansion guards were helping two paramedics load my father into it. I joined them, hoisting myself up inside the chopper.

The paramedics and Dr. Paulson set about hooking my father up to several tubes and machines. Then one of them gave the pilot the all-clear to take off.

“Nearest hospital is twenty minutes northwest,” one of the paramedics called to me over the loud whir of the rotor blades. “He looks bad, but he’s gonna pull through. Your transfusion helped his heart start pumping properly again. Lucky you were here.”

I nodded and stared down at my father’s pale form, my jaw set in a grim line. His lips and fingernails had a slightly blue tinge, and his chest was rising and falling far too slowly.

I still couldn’t fucking believe Tatum did this to him. She was going to regret it, though. I’d make sure of it. In fact, when I was done with her, she’d regret ever being alive.

One of the machines my father was hooked up to started beeping violently in my ear

a few minutes later, and my gaze shot up to Dr. Paulson. “What’s happening?”

His brows furrowed, and he moved closer to my father. I noticed the skin on his face looked red now, and he seemed to be having an even harder time breathing. “Shit,” the doctor said, looking at his chest. “Look.”

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The medics both swore under their breath. I glanced down at my father to see an angry rash spreading all over his chest.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked.

“Looks like an incompatibility reaction,” Dr. Paulson muttered. “He isn’t a B or AB type, Elias. He must be an O-type.”

“What?” I shook my head vehemently. “No, that’s impossible. I told you, I know my mother’s blood type and I know my own as well, so—”

He held up a hand and cut me off. “You must’ve remembered wrong. Now please be quiet and let me try to fix this before any more damage is done!” He turned his attention back to the paramedics. “He needs oxygen, more fluids, and a diuretic,” he snapped. “Let’s just hope his kidneys don’t fail before we get there.”

I sat back and watched them work, completely stupefied. How the hell was this possible? I didn’t misremember. My father’s blood couldn’t be an O-type.

I knew my own type from when we had to participate in some sort of blood drive back in high school, and all my mother’s old paperwork was burned into my mind like a brand. So I wasn’t fucking wrong. She was an A-negative and I was a B-positive. That made my father either a B-positive like me or an AB-positive like Dr. Paulson said earlier. Both of which should be compatible with me.

Unless I’d been lied to my entire life.

I went rigid as the possibilities swirled before me. My eyes narrowed as I stared over at my dad's pale face. I could think of three things that might explain this, none of which were good.

Firstly, I could be adopted, and no one ever thought to fucking tell me. That would explain why my mother and father both had different blood types to me. It would also throw up a lot of questions about my mother's death, seeing as she couldn't have died giving birth to me if I wasn't even biologically hers.

The second possibility was that my mother had cheated on my father and given birth to another man's son. That threw up a lot of questions too, if it was accurate. Did my father know I wasn't really his? And who was my biological father?

The third possibility was that Tobias King was my father, but Sylvie King wasn't my biological mother. Even more questions were attached to that. Who was my real mother? Did she really die giving birth to me? Why did my father lie about my true parentage?

I sat back, breathing deeply as I mulled over the ideas, trying to make sense of what I'd just discovered. Whatever the case was, it all came down to one thing. Somewhere along the line, my father had lied to me about something pretty fucking major.

So what the fuck else had he lied to me about?

Could he have lied about Tatum?

We landed at the nearest hospital's helipad fifteen minutes later, and I strode after the doctor and paramedics in stony silence. I sat in the waiting room with bated breath, refusing to eat or sleep, even when a nurse came to tell me it could be over ten hours until my father was awake or stable enough to see me.

I was more than happy to wait. There were enough questions swimming around my brain to keep me entertained for several days.

Finally, somewhere around three in the morning, a doctor came to get me. “He’s awake and wants to see you,” she said, one hand beckoning me to follow her.

I trudged behind her, heading down a long corridor with pale blue walls. When we reached my father’s room, he was sitting up, and despite all the tubes in him, he looked a lot better than before.

“Elias,” he said, his voice slightly croaky. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

I stepped closer to him. “Me too. I’m glad you pulled through,” I said with a tight smile. “Because we need to have a fucking conversation....”

19

Tatum

All I could do now was wait.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

I tried to count the minutes in my mind, but it wasn't easy. I figured it had to be at least five hours since the guards finished cleaning the blood off the floor and locked me in again, but it might be even more. No one had told me what was going on or what would happen to me, but now that the adrenaline had worn off and the stark fear had set in, I had a pretty decent idea of what might happen.

The thought filled me with sheer dread.

When Elias got back here, he would probably murder me with his bare hands for what I did. Or maybe he'd get one of the guards to do it while he stood there laughing at me. He already thought I killed his second cousin, after all. Now I'd literally tried to kill his father. So it made perfect sense that the next person being killed might very well be me.

My fault. I did this to myself.

I was still curled up in a ball on one side of my cell, staring at the opposite wall. Streaks of blood marred the white paint, and I kept playing the events of this morning over and over in my mind in a macabre loop.

The sheer rage that possessed me earlier was like wildfire in my veins. A feeling like that had never come over me before, not once in my life, and shame tore through me as I pictured myself jamming that uncoiled bedspring into Tobias's neck. The shock in his eyes, the way thick torrents of blood sprayed out of him like a geyser, the way he twitched and convulsed after falling to the ground... in those moments, I thought I wouldn't feel bad, but I did.

It didn't make sense that I would feel so terrible, given what an evil bastard Tobias King was, but just knowing that I was capable of committing such a heinous act against another human being made me realize there was a whole part of me in existence that I never knew about. Some dark passenger in my mind that could wake up at any moment and do awful, sickening things completely beyond my control.

Maybe Elias was right about me. Maybe I was an evil, murderous little liar....

"Don't," I forced myself to say out loud. "Don't let them drag you down again. You're not like them. They made you into this."

I had to keep reminding myself of that. Otherwise, the guilt would set too far in, blurring the lines of reality, and I might start to feel as if I deserved to be here again.

My stomach growled. I hadn't finished my breakfast earlier and it wound up soaked in blood anyway, so I could hardly eat it now, and I doubted anyone would bring me more food anytime soon. I probably wouldn't be allowed out of my cell to shower, either.

One of the guards had been kind enough to give me a wet towel when he was mopping the floor earlier, just so I could wipe the caked blood from my face, neck, chest and arms, but I was still in the same clothes and my hair was streaked with red. The coppery smell made me feel sick, like I was in the middle of an abattoir.

My cell door suddenly swung open. I skittered back and squeezed my eyes shut, terrified it was Elias. Please don't kill me, please don't kill me....

"It's just me," said a vaguely familiar voice. "They told me to bring you this."

I looked up to see one of the guards who'd come in to clean my floor earlier. It was the one who gave me the towel.

There was a fresh set of clothing in his arms, and he tossed it over to me. Sweatshirt, jeans, panties, bra.

"Thank you," I muttered. I hurriedly changed out of my old bloodstained clothes.

"They've airlifted Mr. King to the nearest hospital. He's probably gonna be okay," the guard said, staring at me with coolly assessing eyes as I got dressed.

"Right. I guess that's... good," I said softly. I would probably be much worse off if Tobias actually died.

The guard's eyes traveled to my blood-soaked hair. "They probably won't let you shower just yet, but you might be allowed out tomorrow morn—" Something bleeped in his back pocket, and he stopped midsentence and pulled out a black walkie-talkie. I could hear a frantic, static-filled voice coming over it.

"Anyone who's available, get the hell up to the second floor! One of the members is here and he's high on coke or something. Complained about the girl he's training, then started throwing shit around and trying to destroy the room. He just tore down a painting in the hall, and then he threw a sculpture at us and managed to get away. We need to catch this fucker before he destroys the whole floor."

The guard in my cell muttered. "Fucking rich cokeheads." He sighed. "Gotta go.

Someone else will bring you dinner in a few hours.”

He strode over to the door and slid a keycard into it, then stepped out and slammed it behind him. I heard his hurried footsteps pounding up the hall a second later.

My eyes fell to the floor where he'd just been standing. In his haste to pull the walkie-talkie out of his back pocket, a few other things had spilled out of it, and he hadn't noticed.

I stepped closer and crouched to look at the stuff. A few blue and white gum wrappers, a loyalty card for some sort of burger place, and something that looked like a bank card.

My heart skipped a beat as I looked closer. It wasn't a bank card at all. It was black with a gold Crown and Dagger logo at the top and the word 'Reserve' printed on it in the middle.

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It was a keycard. Obviously not the guard's main one, as he'd used that to get out of my cell a moment ago, but it could be some sort of spare.

Only one way to find out, I guess.

I stepped over to the door and slid the card in. There was a short beep and then a light on the electronic lock went green. My eyes widened. Holy shit... it actually worked.

My pulse doubled with excitement, and I reached for the handle before deciding against it. Even with all the commotion on the second floor, there would still be a lot of mansion guards around the place. I couldn't just step out into the hall, get on the elevator and walk out of here without being seen.

Luckily, I knew another way out. One which would be far less obvious.

I crossed over to the stone wall on the far side of the cell and hurriedly found the trick stone I'd discovered a few weeks ago. After opening it and pulling on the lever, I stood back and nervously stepped from side to side as I waited for the secret doorway to swing open.

Even though the Crown and Dagger architects had installed an electronic lock on the tunnel door in case anyone like me discovered the underground tunnel system, I was willing to bet there wasn't anyone manning the exterior of the door. I hadn't seen anyone standing outside it last time, anyway.

I dashed through the dark passage, exhilaration and anticipation surging through my veins. Finally, escape was within my grasp, all because of a distracted guard. It was

the exact opportunity I'd been waiting for, and it might be the only one I ever got.

I reached the door at the end of the tunnel and slid the keycard in. The lock beeped and the light went green again. I carefully opened the door.

I was immediately blasted in the face by a frigid gust of wind, but there was no one standing outside. I almost squealed with joy as I gulped down the fresh air. As long as I was careful, I could actually be free of this place in just a few hours.

All I had to do was run down to the forest on the left of the estate and make my way through it to the other side. It might take a while, but it had to end somewhere, and eventually I would hit the edge of the property and then hopefully a road. I couldn't actually walk up the road, just in case anyone at the mansion realized I was missing and sent a car after me, but I could creep along the edge of it and hide behind trees whenever I heard a car approaching.

Sooner or later, I would make it to a town, and then I would go straight to the police and tell them what happened to me.

It was freezing out here—winter was approaching fast—and sharp sticks and stones dug into my feet as I ran down the path that led into the woods and toward the amphitheater. I barely felt it, though. I was too excited at the thought of getting the hell out of this place, and that excitement seemed to numb the pain. I could almost taste the looming freedom, could almost feel the warmth of my friends' arms when I finally made it back home and explained the whole ordeal to them.

I made it to the amphitheater clearing and crept through it to the other side before continuing on my way through the dark forest. The thick canopy of tree branches blocked out most of the sky, but a few fragments of light gray remained, like scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The air was rich with the fragrance of damp soil and leaves, and I gulped down one deep breath after another, desperate to fill my lungs with anything other than the scent of my cell and dried blood.

I knew I still wasn't that far from the Finishing School, but it was already beginning to feel like a distant memory. Something that happened to someone else. My struggles wouldn't be entirely over when I finally made it to a town, because the police would have a lot of questions for me, the process of getting everyone to believe me and investigate Crown and Dagger would take a while, and it would be a long time before I felt safe again, but the thought of being in a proper house with a proper bed and home-cooked meals made me ache desperately with hope and fervor.

Just keep going.

I picked up my pace, darting through the trees and bushes as quickly as I could. Finally, a brilliant white shaft of cascading light pierced the dim forest ahead of me. I was about to reach the edge of the woods. Spurred on, I ran even faster, and I gasped with happiness as I dashed out of the forest and into the open air.

Then I slowly sank to my knees as disbelief and terror clawed at my mind again, scrabbling around in my brain like the dark skittering feet of a million cockroaches.

I was near the edge of a steep cliff, jagged gray stones zigzagging in a long, hostile stretch of coastline. Ahead of me, there was nothing but ocean. The unwelcoming expanse of cold blue-black water stretched before me as far as the eye could see.

Just like it did on the other side of the mansion.

"No! No!" I screamed, my hands curling into anguished fists.

I was on an island.

A fucking island.

Even if I found a safe way down the rocky cliffs and made it to the water, I'd never get away from this place. Not alive, anyway. The ocean would be freezing, and I

didn't know which way I would need to swim to make it to land. Even if I did, I'd drown or die of hypothermia before I made it.

I heard footsteps crunching over stones from somewhere on my left, and I turned to see the guard from earlier grinning sadistically as he slowly stepped toward me. Three other guards stood behind him, watching with undisguised amusement.

"You get it yet, little whore?" the first guard said, eyes glittering with malice as he stared down at me. "There's no escape for you. Not from here. Not from him."

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I gasped for breath, trying my best not to hyperventilate. The whole thing was a cruel setup. They gave me something to cling to, just so they could tear it away. Gave me hope, just so they could watch it fade from my eyes as I discovered the dire truth of my situation. They knew all along that I would try and go through the tunnel if I ever had the opportunity, and I played right into their hands, allowing them to demonstrate the futility of any escape attempts at my expense.

Elias had probably been keeping the dastardly little scheme tucked up his sleeve the whole time I'd been here, ready to use against me when he felt I deserved it the most. He'd very likely planned it with the guards months ago, poised to drop it on my head when he wanted me to truly suffer.

Really, I should've known better. Crown and Dagger would never hire someone stupid enough to drop a damn keycard in my cell. They were always one step ahead, always plotting ways in which to break me.

Now, they'd finally succeeded.

I crumpled to the cold ground in wretched defeat, bawling my eyes out. The guard was right.

I was never getting away from the heartless men of Crown and Dagger...

To be continued...