



Love in the Dark

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Description: He was everything I should avoid... A silent lion in the dark; watching, studying, devouring me without a single touch. His voice sent shivers up my spine, stopping my heart inside my chest as if he controlled the oxygen it needed to beat. I danced for him, because he demanded it. I lied for him, because he wanted it, even though I knew a single lie could get me killed. He told me I was too pretty for this world, that there were things he could do for me. His eyes, the way they wander over my body, it makes me feel things I never felt before. Feelings that have no place here. Feelings that don't exist in my world. I couldn't ignore what I felt, and decided to risk my life to ask him for help. But I was a fool wishing on fallen stars. When the smoke clears, I'm able to see him for what he truly is... And it's not the hero I wanted him to be. How could I ever find love in the dark? *This is a standalone dark romance, and may contain material that might make some uncomfortable.

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Prologue

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who lived peacefully at home with her mother and siblings. Her father had gone to war, sending letters whenever he could.

Every day this little girl would run to the mailbox and check it for his notes. Most of the time it was empty, but every now and again she would get lucky, finding a letter tucked inside. The envelope would be dirty, the bright white a smokey shade of gray and brown as if he had rubbed it in the dirt before he sent it.

Her father would fill her small mind with loving words. He would talk about how much he missed his family, and how it was rough where he was, but that he was alright and would come home as soon as he could.

He would talk about memories of their trips to the beach and how he couldn't wait to be home with his family. He would tell his daughter that she needed to be good, that she needed to stay strong, and one day soon, he would show up on the doorstep, and give her the biggest hug she'd ever had.

That little girl waited, she waited and watched the driveway. She waited, stalking the window like a lonely puppy, just anticipating that moment a car would pull up and her father would get out.

Only he never came.

His letters arrived less often, their messages scattered and confusing. The strong man she remembered had started to fear for his family, afraid that something was going to

happen to them, warning them to be careful and not to trust anyone.

The girl couldn't understand why he was so afraid, the war was so far away, there was no way it would ever reach them. Her mother had promised her that they were safe right where they were, and that no one would ever come to harm them.

She had told her that the war was between others, that it didn't involve the innocent.

'We are the innocent, my little flower, no one wants to hurt us.'

Then something changed. Her mother refused to talk about her father anymore and told her daughter that she wasn't allowed to read anymore letters.

It was a horrible new rule the girl couldn't understand. Her father was everything to her, it didn't make sense why her mother would take the only connection the girl had to him. Those letters made her feel close to him, like their lives weren't so far apart if she could see his words, knowing that his hands had touched the same paper she was holding.

Losing that, tore her apart inside.

One day, the young girl came home from school to find her mother standing in the kitchen with three suitcases. Her skin was white as a ghost, her eyes red and swollen as if she had been crying.

“Mom, what's wrong? What's going on?” she asked, dropping her backpack on the floor.

Sniffling, her mother softened her eyes in the same way she had when the family dog died and she had to break the news. “We need to leave, my flower, it's time for us to go,” she said, her voice almost a whisper.

The young girl peered up at her mother, tears of her own starting to bubble over her large, green eyes. She felt so confused and afraid about what was happening. Her mother looked so sad and lost the girl could feel that something wasn't right.

“What about Dad?”

“Your father will find us, but we can't stay here, it's not safe.” Her mother was clutching the girl's little brother to her hip, and her younger sister was standing at her mother's side, digging her thin nails into her leg. “I can't explain it to you right now, you just have to trust me.”

“But where will we go?”

“Away from here.” Holding out her arm, she waved the little girl in. “Dad wants us to be safe, it's not safe here anymore.” Rubbing her back, she leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “He loves you and he will find us. There's not a doubt in my mind about that.”

“I want my dad,” the girl cried, burying her face into her mother's dress. “I don't want to go, I just want my dad.”

“I know my little flower, and he'll be with us again, I just don't know when.” Patting her back, her mother pulled her away. “You need to be strong for your brother and sister—and for me. Can you be strong for me?” Sniffling, the girl wiped her fingers across her eyes and nodded. “Good, that's good, it's time to go. I want you to grab the blue suitcase and carry it to the car.”

Holding in her tears, the girl took the handle in her hand and tugged the heavy suitcase towards the door. “Are we going to see Nana and Papa?”

“No, I'm sorry, we can't, we need to go far far away.” Walking behind her, her mother

pushed her along, trying to pull the other two bags with her as she bobbed a child against her ribs. “And we won't be able to call them either, we have to hide.”

“Hide? Why do we need to hide?” The girl stopped short, turning to look up at her mom. “I don't understand what's going on. Why do we need to do this? Why can't we just stay here and wait for Dad to come?”

Her mother forced a slight smile, but it was so weak, so brittle, she thought her mother's lips were going to crumble. “I'll explain it all to you one day when you're older, but right now, I just need you to do as I say.”

Nodding, the girl pushed the screen door open, pulling the bag behind her. Walking down the steps, the suitcase bounced off each one with a loud pop. But her mother didn't scold her for not lifting it up, she just kept pushing her along, telling her to hurry.

“Put it in the back with you and climb inside.” Walking to the other side of the car, she opened the door and pulled the baby off her hip, setting him in the car seat.

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The little girl leaned the bag against the edge of the door and started to lift it from the bottom to push it up. It was so heavy, as if her mother had packed it full with every ceramic dish from the cupboard.

“What did you put in this thing?” she asked, grunting as she gave it another hard shove.

Tires squealed up the street, so the girl stopped, letting the bag drop back to the ground. Peering at her mother, she watched the blood drain from her face as she threw her hand above her eyes to block the sun, and searched for the direction of the sound.

“What was that?” the girl asked, taking a few steps towards the back of the car.

“Get in the car, get in the car now!” her mother screamed as she scrambled to pick up the small girl at her feet and stuff her into the car. “Get in the car right now!”

“Mom, what's going on?”

“Go! Go now!” her mother yelled, flailing her arms wildly and trying to pull the keys out from inside her purse.

But the young girl was paralyzed as she watched two cars come flying up the road, slamming on the brakes as they reached the edge of the driveway.

Five men emerged from the cars, all of them carrying guns. The men stalked up the pavement, each one dressed in black clothing and heavy black boots, their eyes

shaded by dark sunglasses.

“No! I won't let you! You can't do this!” her mother screamed at the men, running towards the group and throwing her arms out to block them from coming any closer. “Run! Run, little flower!”

But the girl couldn't run. She wanted to, she knew she should, but she couldn't. All she could do in her state of confusion was stand there, watching in shock as a man threw her mom to the ground, placing his gun to her temple as she begged him to let her family go.

It didn't look like he was listening to her, or even cared one bit about what she was asking. The other guys veered off in different directions, splitting apart like the arms of a branch. Each one moved with precision like it wasn't a sporadic event, but a well formulated plan.

Her eyes tried to follow each one individually, but it was impossible. With her head twisted over her shoulder, she watched a man enter her home with his gun held out, aiming it at invisible danger.

The space around her grew dark, as if the sun had suddenly disappeared behind a thick cloud. Turning around, she quickly realized it was the shadow of a guy coming towards her. A tall man with a light brown beard walked stealthily up the driveway, tucking his gun into his waist.

“Run! Run!” her mother demanded, but the girl stood frozen, unable to move her legs.

It was like time had stopped for that little girl. She could hear the sound of her mother's voice, but couldn't hear her words. She could see the man getting closer, but couldn't make out any of the fine details on his face.

“RUN!” Her mother's voice finally found its way inside, flipping a tiny switch in her brain. Turning on her small heels, she tried to take off. But it was too late. The man grabbed her around the waist, tossing her over his shoulder and turning back towards the cars.

“Let her go! Don't do this! Please, you don't need to do this! Just let her go!” Her mother pleaded to the man with a gun to her head, her nails digging into the lower part of his pants.

“Don't need to do this—maybe you should have told your husband that from the start,” he said, pulling back the hammer. “It's too late for begging.”

“Take me, take me instead. Just let my kids go and I'll go with you.”

The young girl's body bobbed and bounced against the man's shoulder as he approached the car. “Mom! Mom!” the girl screamed, reaching her arms out in the direction of the only safety she knew.

“Please, I'm begging you, don't take my children.”

“Are you fucking deaf? Was I just talking to myself?” Cocking his head, his lip turned into a snarl. “What's done is done. It's nothing personal, business is business. Don't act like you didn't know this was coming. . .” Chuckling, the man smirked. “Your husband knew what would happen if he didn't hold up his end, obviously he didn't give a shit—”

“He's not here, I don't know where he is,” her mother said, cutting him off.

“We'll see about that, but it still doesn't change shit. The message needs to be given, he needs to know who's in charge.”

Her mother's head dropped into her hands as she sobbed uncontrollably.

Slipping the girl off his shoulder, the man pushed her inside one of cars and shut the door. She sat alone for what seemed like eternity. The car was hot inside, the air thick and salty, smelling of metal and thick, sour cologne.

The girl's ears were ringing from the change of air, silencing the world around her. Her disconnect with reality and immature mind was trying to grasp what was going on, but there was no way for her to fully understand it.

The man who grabbed her climbed into the front passenger seat as another one of the men slid into the driver's side. The engine roared to life, vibrating her ribs, but the girl couldn't take her eyes off the window.

Her eyes met her mother's. "I love you." Her mother's lips moved in soundless words as she closed her eyes and lowered her gaze to the ground.

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The girl could see two other men grabbing her brother and sister from the car and walking off to the other vehicle with them. The man who had gone into the house, came out shaking his head.

That small signal, the subtle 'no' he said without words, it was the nail that sealed the coffin.

The man in the front seat pulled a yellow rag from his pocket and wiped the sweat off his forehead before tucking it away. "You're going to want to look away, little girl, I don't think you'll want to see this." His voice was scratchy and thick, reminding her of her grandfather who used to smoke those unfiltered cigarettes.

The car jerked forward as it pulled away from her home, forcing the girl to turn back to the window. Resting her palm against the glass, she heard a loud pop as the distance grew between the car and her house. She watched as her mother's body fell to the ground, laying motionless.

She was too young to really dissect exactly what had happened, but deep in her heart she knew she would never see her mother again. Tears filled her eyes as the car turned and her home was no longer visible.

And as she wept alone, without the comfort of a hug and someone telling her everything would be alright, as she slowly began to see that her entire life had just changed, that little girl still held on to hope.

Hope that her father would come to save her.

Hope that he would find her and punish the men for hurting her mother.

Hope. . . A hope that would soon fade when none of that happened.

A hope that would be replaced by hate.

I wish that was just a scary story, a tall-tail about men who come and steal you away from your mother's arms if you don't follow the rules or disobey your parents. . .

But it's not just a story. It's my reality.

I was nine when they took me away, nine when I saw my family last, nine when I watched my mother die.

I was nine when my life changed forever.

My name is Berlin, and my life is no longer my own.

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Chapter One

Berlin

Fifteen years old

“Sit.”

Folding my hands together, I sat on the hard wooden chair against the back wall. I didn't say a word, because I wasn't allowed to unless he permitted it.

It was one of the new rules Virgo had so kindly decided I needed. I couldn't lie, it was hard as hell to not ask questions, to not answer back with a snotty comment or attitude, but I was trying.

Every day it felt like I was drifting further and further away. I wasn't myself. But how could I be? This wasn't my life.

My life stopped at nine years old. All of this was just a scary nightmare I couldn't escape.

“I have some men coming today.” Standing above me, he played with the ends of my hair. His touch a false tenderness, one I had learned to see right through. “I don't want you asking questions, I don't want you looking at them, I don't want you to do anything unless I tell you to. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Patting the top of my head, he walked towards the long table in the center of the room. “Now these men, my sweet child, are not nice men.” He was speaking into the air, his head facing away from me as he looked over the table.

So they're just like you?

The snippy question burned behind my eyes, searing my retinas like a neon sign. But I held onto the silence, choosing not to let it out.

That was my solace, my way of twisting his rules into a game of my own. He might have told me not to speak, but in my mind, I was refusing him an answer. It made me feel like I had more power, as if I was controlling this dreadful situation.

The sad reality I was living in was actually better if I felt like my silence was a choice and not forced.

There was a dark box sitting near Virgo's chair that he kept shifting and adjusting. He'd move it to one side, then push it back over to where it was before. I watched him from the corner of my eye, spinning and twisting that box as if it made a difference.

Kicking my legs back and forth nervously, I could feel my stomach as it twisted into corded rope. I had never been in one of his meetings before. For the entire six years I had been with him, he never once let me sit upstairs for longer than a few minutes, keeping me hidden away in the depths of the basement.

But there was something different about him that day, something about that whole situation that didn't feel right.

My legs swept over the floor, making soft thumps against the wall. Tucking my hands under my thighs, I watched my feet as they moved back and forth like a pendulum. I could feel him watching me, but I didn't look up, keeping my eyes down.

“What's wrong?”

Shrugging a shoulder, I spoke to the floor. “Nothing.”

“Something's wrong, you're shaking like a damn leaf. Tell me what it is.”

Letting out a weighted breath, I mustered up the strength to be honest and ask the question that was in my head. “Why am I here for this? You never let me stay up here, you always keep me downstairs. Why now?”

“Well,” he said, stepping over to me and dropping to his haunches. “You're almost sixteen, it's time for you to see what your life is going to be, what I'm going to need you for. I haven't been teaching you obedience for nothing, Berlin, there's a reason. You're going to be my masterpiece, my perfect creation.”

His masterpiece?

My eyes scanned his face, trying to figure out why he was being so open with me and what the hell that meant. Most of my questions went unanswered, and if I tried to pry too deep, the only answer I would get was a back hand across the face.

Not today. Today he was willing to actually hear me, to indulge me with a privileged answer. He answered me as if I deserved such clarity for what was about to happen. And I was sadly grateful for his kindness, even if this open dialogue between us

wouldn't last.

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“What does that mean?” Scrunching my brows, I stopped moving my body, planting my feet into the floor. “I know what you are, I know what you do. I'm not fucking stupid.”

“Watch the mouth,” he snapped, holding up a finger to my face. “It makes a woman look cheap if she swears. And my women aren't cheap.” Crooking his jaw, he glared at me. “Things are going to change, Berlin, not yet, but soon. And men like the ones that are coming, they're going to be around. You need to be around them, you need to understand how to behave with them. That's why you're up here. Watch Val, you'll see.”

The doorbell rang, causing Virgo to tip his head and look back over his shoulder. Lifting a finger to his lips as he twisted back in my direction, he gave me a soft smile. “Remember, no talking, not unless I tell you it's okay. And absolutely no looking at them. That's the most important thing right now, do not fuck it up.”

“I got it, I won't do anything.” My tone was short, layered with teenage annoyance.

Virgo shot me a look, one that said, 'Don't test me, I'm not going to tell you again.'

Sometimes, I just couldn't help it. In the past when I was younger, I had more wiggle room. But his reigns had lost slack, Virgo wasn't letting me step out of line as much.

He had expectations for me, rules that he was holding over my head that just didn't seem to fit. I wasn't allowed to talk anymore unless permitted. I could only sit if he told me I could, I could only eat when he was finished.

Questions of why he was putting those rules on me had been brewing in my head for some time, but I had a feeling I might just get some unspoken answers today.

Jerking my eyes back to the floor, he whispered. "Good girl." Standing up, he adjusted the jacket on his suit and took his seat at the table.

From the corner of my eyes, I watched his face fall flat and his back go rigid as he laid his palms down. There was a change in Virgo, it was subtle, but I could see it. He was molting what was left of his human shell for something else.

The look in his eyes was almost unrecognizable. I thought I had seen the worst in him, but right then, I knew I had barely grazed the surface.

The silence around us was deafening, causing the hair on my neck to bristle. I waited quietly, anxiously aware that this meeting was something I could never really have prepared for.

I did my best to not look, but I couldn't stop the curiosity. Under hooded lids, I peered up, carefully keeping my head in the same position.

Val, a woman who I had only started to see recently, guided three men into the room. That happened often, women would come and go, some would stay for months, while others wouldn't be there for very long.

I knew what had happened to one girl, but that wasn't something I liked thinking about. Regardless, these girls were his in every sense of the word. The girls waited on him hand and foot, never uttering a word. They looked like mute robots, moving around on autopilot.

Virgo stood up, holding out his arms to greet his guests. "Gentlemen, welcome."

The woman curled her feet beneath her as she took a spot on the floor beside Virgo. She didn't need directions, she knew what he expected. Keeping her eyes on her hands, she nervously fiddled with her fingers.

She looks so scared.

“Virgo, finally we meet.” A tall, slender man said, with shoulder length blond hair, pulled back into a low ponytail. Holding out his hand, Virgo took it and gave it a firm shake. The man took a step back, pointing to the guy at his side. “This is Fior.” Pausing, he moved his hand to the other man. “And this is Machi.”

“Yes, Hans told me you'd be bringing them. Please, sit,” Virgo said, his eyes watching the men cautiously. Opening the small box, he pulled out a cigar. “Ethan?” he asked, twisting the box in the man's direction. “They're the best money can buy.” Running the cigar under his nose, he inhaled a deep breath.

“We've been told money can buy a lot of things.” Ethan plucked a cigar from the box, flashing his brows at Virgo. “May I?”

Waving his hand, Virgo nodded. “Of course.”

Ethan moved the box down the table and the other two men took out a cigar for themselves. Lighting the tip, Virgo passed the flame so the men could light theirs.

“So,” he said, taking a heavy pull on the end. “I hear your boss is looking for. . .” His hand circled the air as he looked for the right word to use. “New merchandise.”

“That's right. Sylvan wants to try and take his business to the next level. From what I hear, you're the man to speak to.”

“Hans told you a little about what I deal in, did he?”

“He did.”

Glancing around the table, my eyes connected with the man on the end. Darting my eyes back into my lap, I didn't dare move. I didn't even blink because of the fear I felt when our eyes met.

It wasn't just that I had disobeyed Virgo's orders to not look at anyone, it was something else, a feeling that zipped from head to toe in that single second of eye contact.

There was something in his gaze, a depth I couldn't ignore, a power I couldn't place. He wasn't heading the conversation, he wasn't involved in planning any of the details of that meeting; and yet, it felt like he controlled all of it.

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He had jet black hair and olive colored skin, with eyes as dark as night. Splaying an open palm on the table, he tapped a single finger softly as he relaxed back in his chair.

I could still feel his eyes on me, boring a hole into the top of my head. It felt like he was studying me, trying to figure out who I was and what purpose I had.

Virgo and Ethan were chatting away, their voices muffled, each word blurring together in my ears as I felt my body warm and the air grow dense from the nerves coming to life inside me.

That man made me more nervous than Virgo.

Machi cleared his throat, leaning forward and pointing at me. “How old are you little girl?”

I didn't answer, keeping my lips tightly sealed.

Virgo stopped speaking, his mouth hanging partially open as his jaw clicked. Glancing at me over his shoulder, he turned back to Machi. “She'll be sixteen in four months.”

My anniversary. . .He gifted me a new birthday, it was the day I came into his hands. It didn't matter that I had an actual birthday and had turned sixteen two months ago; in his eyes, I wasn't born until the very moment I became his.

“I wasn't asking you, I was asking her,” Machi said sternly, puffing up his chest as he

spoke. “How old are you girl?” he asked again, his voice firm, making my stomach clench with fear.

But I still didn't answer.

Virgo let out a grunt as he twisted in his chair. “Answer him.”

With my eyes on my hands, my voice was low and delicate. “Fif—fifteen.” I lied, giving him the age Virgo considered me.

“There,” Virgo jumped in, his tone annoyed but polite. “Can we continue with our business now?”

Peeking up at Machi, I watched him stroke his jaw, glaring down the table. “Why is she here?”

“Because I want her to be.” Virgo veered his stare as his lips thinned. “You got a problem with that?” Any kindness in his voice had disappeared.

Machi's jaw rocked back and forth, his teeth grinding down hard. “We don't deal in children.”

“And this one isn't for sale, so there shouldn't be a problem, should there?”

Sale?

The word hung in my head for what seemed like an eternity as my mind tried to package it in a way that made sense.

What's for sale?

Women. . . Are women for sale?

“Is she yours? Daughter? Niece?”

“Neither.”

“And her parents?”

Shrugging a shoulder, Virgo shook his head. “It's none of your fucking business.” Furrowing his brows, Virgo glanced between Machi and Ethan. “Are you a cop? Did you bring a fucking cop to my home, Ethan?”

“No,” he said eagerly, his mouth drawing taut. “Machi, you're prying where you shouldn't be.”

“I'm just curious. Is there something wrong with being curious?” A thin smirk rested on his lips as he seemed to take pleasure in making Virgo uncomfortable. “She just looks so sad, too sad for a teenager.”

“Did you ever think the sadness you see is really just a well disciplined child? My roll had to change drastically when she got here, neither one of us expected this.”

My skin buzzed with hate as he sat there and acted like I was some child abandoned by horrible circumstances. I wanted to jump to my feet and scream that he had destroyed me, I wanted to beg these men to save me from my captor.

But he said they're not nice men. . . They're here to talk about buying women, Berlin!

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That should tell you enough.

“Is that so?” Tilting his head, his eyes threw grenades across the table at Virgo. “You're full of shit. How can we trust you if you lie to us?”

“What goes on in my life is none of your fucking business.” Cocking his head, Virgo snarled. “Ethan, what the fuck is this shit? I'll end this whole thing right now if you can't keep your dog on his leash.”

“Dog?” Machi growled, his body stiffening, muscles flexing into stone.

Ethan held up his hands, bouncing them in the air to settle the testosterone that was clearly starting to take over. “Gentlemen, gentlemen, this is not what we're here for.” Dancing his eyes between them, he stopped on Virgo. “What Machi is trying to say is that we need to be cautious. Some of our clients are high-end, they're already taking a huge risk making this type of purchase. We don't need anything else to draw attention on us or them.” Tapping the long ash off the end of his cigar, he smiled big. “We're putting our faith in you, and we want to make sure the product is worth our efforts. Sylvan won't settle for anything less, we need top of the line.”

“But not children, no fucking children.”

Virgo and Machi were staring at each other, their pupils as small as pinpricks as if they were having a silent battle. Machi balled his fists, his knuckles turning bright white as he bared his teeth.

“Look, you came to me for a reason,” Virgo finally said, his voice low and firm. “I

won't deal with any bullshit, and I certainly won't deal with some asshole that I don't know, coming into my home and questioning me.”

“Of course, Machi is sorry.” Ethan cocked his head and looked at Machi. “Apologize to the man, you're disrespecting him in his own home.”

“Fuck that, I won't apologize for shit.” Leaning back, he folded his arms across his chest. “You brought me because Sylvan respects my judgment. I don't think we need this shit. Foreign women, who might carry some shit we're not aware of—is that what Sylvan really wants? At least we know what our girls have before we do anything. This is a risk, Ethan, a huge risk. It's like finding out your puppy is sick after you already bought it from the pet store.”

Ethan's face tensed as he spoke through clenched teeth. “This is not the time nor the place, Machi. This is what Sylvan wants, so this is what we're doing.”

“Did you forget about the Russian girl ? How do we know she didn't come from this prick?”

Virgo slammed his fist down, pushing out his voice across the table. “I don't deal in Russian whores.” Taking in a deep breath, he ran flat palms down the front of his suit. “Look, I can get you what you want, and it won't be shit. My girls are top of the line.” Slipping his hand down Val's head, a devious smile spread across his face. “Sylvan knows this, which is why he sent you to me.” Bouncing a hand in the air, he rested back in his seat. “Gentlemen, I'm willing to do this deal, I'm willing to take a risk on this, because I think it can work for all of us. But I won't tolerate any bullshit.”

“Understood,” Ethan said, glancing back at Machi. “Do you think you can shut your fucking mouth, Machi?”

“As long as I don't see anyone under the age of eighteen, we won't have an issue. We're all aware of the danger in that, right?” Arching a brow, Machi peered at Virgo, bringing his chest right against the edge of the table.

“Do I look like a fool?” Virgo asked.

“Well, there is a fifteen year old girl sitting right behind you. So, you tell me.”

“She's none of your fucking concern. I won't tell you that again.”

Machi flicked his eyes to me, but this time I didn't look away. His face had softened, as if he was hoping I could read his mind. He looked like he wanted to say more to me, but he didn't, simply nodding his head as his eyes floated back to Virgo.

“Can we get down to business now?” Ethan asked as he smoked his cigar.

The two talked numbers, going back and forth until they both seemed satisfied with the end results. I sat in shock, fully aware that the man I had been living with wasn't just hiring prostitutes for himself or holding women against their will. . .

He was selling them like livestock.

“I'll be in touch soon.” Virgo said with a smile as he stood up and shook Ethan's hand. “Let me walk you out.” Looking back at me, he nodded his head. “Come, my sweet child.”

Standing up, I followed a little behind the men. Virgo and Ethan were talking and laughing as we made our way to the front door. My eyes were itching to see that door as temptation to run out it the second it was opened rushed through my brain.

My blood began to pump hard, my heart beat faster and faster as that temptation

twisted into a viable opportunity.

He'll kill you if you try that. You'll never make it, one of them will grab you.

Talking myself out of it, I realized how stupid of an idea it was. There were four grown men between me and that door, there was no way in hell I'd make it through.

Watching my feet as I walked, I felt the weight of someone beside me. Looking up, Machi had trickled back, his pace matching mine.

Keeping his head forward, he softly whispered. "If you need my help, just say the word."

The way he said it made me almost believe him. He seemed sincere, real, like the thought of a child being in this home made him concerned.

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Parting my lips to speak, I couldn't find my voice. I knew what Virgo was capable of, I knew how he handled a troubled situation. And I promised myself that I wouldn't let anyone else die because of me.

Holding onto the single word I knew would start a war, I held my breath and kept my eyes on my feet.

Machi could be telling the truth, or it could be a test. There was no way for me to really know.

But if he was being honest, there was no way in hell I would let him risk his life for me.

I wasn't worth that kind of trouble.

Virgo made that clear with every person he killed around me.

The men all shook hands again, Ethan was smiling, telling Virgo he was happy they would be working together. Fior hadn't said a word, simply nodding along like a damn puppet.

Machi stepped to Virgo, resting his hand on his shoulder and squeezing. Standing much taller, he lowered his face as his nostrils flared. "And just so we're clear, if I find out you touched that girl before she's eighteen—" His fingertips tightened, causing Virgo to wince. "I'll come back and fucking kill you. Understand?"

Virgo glanced between Ethan and Fior, but neither one stepped in.

Machi's voice dropped, his tone laced with dark threats. “Understood?”

“Of course.”

Slapping him on the shoulder, Machi glanced in my direction, his eyes soft and sincere.

And just like that he was gone.

I didn't say a word. I didn't yell for him to take me.

I stood like a statue, letting him go.

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Chapter Two

Berlin

Seven years later

Ifelt the cold metalof the pole as it slid between my shoulder blades. The men around me hooted and hollered, begging for one last dance. Smiling, I took a small bow, gathering up my earnings, and exiting off the stage through the deep red curtains.

The second I was out of the spot light, my smile was gone and my shoulders drooped forward. Heavy heels weighed down my feet as I walked to the small dressing room in the back.

There were other girls inside getting ready for their turn on the stage, other girls just like me. Girls who would most likely be there forever, or maybe—just maybe, they would be sent someplace else. An unknown place that had different walls, different people, different rules.

I guess that depended on who came looking. Not that it really mattered, none of us would actually be freed from any of this.

Money could do all kinds of things, it could buy you anything you ever wanted in a place like this.

It could even buy me if the price was right.

But us girls, we weren't allowed to talk to each other, that was against the rules.

There weren't a lot of rules, but all of them held me hostage. I was refused the pleasure of conversation, I was denied the luxury of human contact and compassion. There was no going outside, no phone calls, no emails, just solitude.

As a child, I spent most of my time alone, hidden from the world until the time was right. Groomed—that was the word Virgo used.

He was the man who had torn my family apart, and ultimately, he was the man who controlled my life.

But that wasn't the worst part. The part that mad me angry, the one thing that really made me hate life itself. . . My body was no longer mine and it hadn't been since I turned eighteen.

I guess that was a positive in this world. No one touched me before the law said I was a woman, but it didn't make any of this easier. A part of me wondered if that small detail was because of the man from years ago who had offered me help.

Was that my silver lining? A stranger who demanded women and not children?

Had his presence been the one thing that preserved me until I hit that perfect number?

Fuck the silver lining, my world was coated in tar.

From time to time, Machi would pop into my head. My mind would drift to that day, the one and only time someone had offered me their hand. And I did nothing, I said nothing, I let that moment slip through my fingers.

Sometimes I would wonder what my life would be like if I had said those four little letters;help.

It doesn't matter, because you didn't.

Slinking into the chair, I slid the shoes off my feet, pressing my throbbing heels into the carpet.

There weren't many luxuries in my life. So I took any chance I could to get some sort of comfort from the things around me. I would smell the floral soap in the shower, trying to remember what it felt like to be free, to roam without walls keeping me hostage.

I would listen to the men in the club talking, trying to grab little bits of normalcy out of their conversations; dinners at restaurants, vacations in the mountains, traveling with the windows down and the wind blowing in their hair with the bright blue sky overhead.

It had been so long since I had any of that, and it was getting harder and harder to remember it anymore. I wasn't sure if my memories were even real at this point.

Would the wind feel as good on my face as I thought I remembered it? Would the rain be cold on my skin and the sun warm on my cheeks?

At this point it didn't matter. I wasn't getting out of this place, not now, not ever—not unless an offer came along that was too good to refuse.

“Berlin, give it over.” Keeping my eyes on the floor, I handed Vinchezo the small cluster of bills I had grabbed off the stage. Counting the money, he balked in his thick Italian accent. “This is it? You're suppose to be the star, Berlin, but I think you might be losing your edge.” Tucking the cash into his pocket, he nodded his head towards

the private room. “You're lucky, that room just saved your ass. Go on, get,” he barked, snapping his head.

Folding his arms over his chest, he leaned against the wall as he waited for me to put my heels back on and adjust my makeup.

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“You're taking too long, Berlin, you're losing us money.”

“I hear you, don't worry, I'm going.” Giving him a soft nod, I ran my fingers through my hair and walked to the private room. I could still feel Vinchezo as his eyes stayed on my back, always watching and anticipating me trying to bolt.

That was something he didn't have to worry about anymore, I had given up on that a long time ago.

The last time I tried to escape, I ended up in the ditch for a week, with a broken rib and two black eyes. Each attempt to get out over the years was fruitless. I never made it any further than the front gate. And just like Virgo's threats, each punishment was worse than the last.

I had finally been broken.

Letting out a deep breath, I gripped the handle and opened the door. The black lights were glowing bright, the brass pole on the small stage was sparkling and twinkling like a precious piece of gold. The music crackled through the speakers, filling the room with a melodic beat.

I could see the shape of a man on the couch, his body pressed back, legs spread a few inches apart.

Standing in the doorway, I took a second to collect myself and get into the head space I needed to perform. When I danced, I felt nothing. When the men touched me, I felt nothing. And when they decided they wanted more, I still felt nothing.

I didn't have a voice in this world. As far as anyone was concerned, I was just a doll; a possession, a play toy, an object of desire and pleasure that could be used however the client saw fit. That's all any of us would ever be.

We're all just dolls.

I hate it.

My innocence was lost and there was nothing I could do to get it back. I was forever tainted. Even if I was able to escape, no one would ever want me. Not with my past.

“Come,” the man said sternly, flipping his shadowed fingers in the dimly lit room. His accent was one I didn't hear very often, it sounded more Western than European.

Stepping in softly, I closed the door behind me, knowing that once it was shut, I was his until time was up—or at least until his money ran out.

“Of course, I'm sorry to make you wait.” Forcing the confidence and complying tone in my voice, I strolled into the room like a woman on fire.

This was all a game. I was trained to pull money out of the customers, taught to manipulate them into giving me more.

But that came with a heavy price. I wasn't allowed to say no to their darkest desires.

Saying no left me with bruises, it left me hurting on the outside just as painfully as I hurt on the inside. I was already shattered, my heart a beating pile of broken glass inside my chest. It wasn't worth it anymore to ache on the surface.

Stepping onto the stage, I curled my fingers around the cold metal pole, swinging around it in a wide circle.

Thin tendrils of white smoke spilled from the man's nostrils as he smoked a cigarette. The end lit bright red with each inhale, dimming slightly as he let out a breath of toxic fumes.

Starting my dance, I wrapped my leg around the pole, curving my spine and dropping my head back to look at him upside down.

He didn't look or act like most of the other customers I've had in the past. I was used to greedy hands, slurred words, breath that stunk of strong booze, and men with no self control. The guys that came in wanted immediate gratification.

This man was none of those things. He was too still, too stoic, too calm.

He didn't grunt or groan, he didn't smile or lean in closer to get a better look at my body. He stayed relaxed back, his shoulders and body comfortably reclined against the seat. The only motion I could see in the dark was his hand raising to his lips to suckle the end of his cigarette.

Snapping my head up, my hair floated around my face, falling back into place. "You know in here you can have anything you want, anything you desire." Holding the pole, I stuck out my ass, dropping my head to my feet. Slow and precise, I rolled up, seductively looking over my shoulder at him. "What do you desire?"

Expelling a huge plume of smoke, he tapped the ash head off into the small tray. "I desire nothing," he said, his tone as still as his body.

"Everyone desires something, I'm sure you're no different." Spinning on the sharp tips of my heels, I dropped down quickly, butterflying my legs open and grinding back up the pole. "I'm here for you, I'm here to give you anything you want."

"You're here because I'm paying you to be and nothing more."

My lips pulled up into a big smile as I flirted my tongue over my bottom lip. It was so easy now to act the part, to switch on the role I had been trained to play. It scared me the first time I recognized it, the very first moment I didn't have to force my lips up and they went naturally, a muscle memory from verbal and physical abuse.

“I'm here for you, don't deny me, Baby.”

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The man let out a gruff chuckle, putting out his cigarette and checking his watch. “I have you for half an hour, let's not waste it with you talking. Just dance.”

“That's all you want? You don't want anything else from me?” Stepping to the edge of the stage, I ran my hands up over my breasts and squeezed them hard. “Because I'm good for more than just dancing.”

He sat quietly, his already dark eyes turning jet black. “Dance.”

The way he said it sent a shiver up my spine. There was power in his voice, and a part of me was afraid to not follow his orders.

But that small flicker of fear was nothing compared to what my owner would do to me if I didn't bring him more money.

“Baby, don't be shy, I won't bite.” Sitting on my knees, I curled my fingers over the edge of the stage and arched my back so my ass went up high. “Unless you want me to. In here you can have anything you want, there's no rules, no one to tell you no.”

“Did you not hear me?” he asked. I watched him through the smokey haze that was filling room as he gently slid his thumb back and forth over his fingertips.

Moving my legs off the edge of the private stage, I walked towards him, adding a little extra kick to my hips. “I heard you just fine,” I said, running my finger up his arm as I moved to his side.

Tracing his shoulder, I let my fingers play with the soft hair at the base of his neck as

I leaned over to rest my lips against his ear. “But men don't come here just to see me dance.” Blowing cool air across his lobe, I saw his muscles clench. “Tell me what you came for.”

With strong fingers, he gripped my wrist, pulling me back in front of him. The black lights made his teeth glow bright and his eyes turn into the darkest shade of night I had ever seen.

Shifting in his seat, I could see he was hard, the tip of his cock perfectly outlined beneath his pants. Forcing my lips to curl, I bit my bottom lip and smiled.

“You're enjoying this, it's easy to see.” Reaching forward, I went in to grab his cock.

With fierce resistance, he snatched my hand before I could touch him. “I said dance,” he barked through clenched teeth. “So fucking dance.”

I wasn't sure why he unsettled me so much. His tone hit a nerve, it was so ominous and deep, my heart stopped inside my chest. My lungs hitched at his demand, and for a second, I couldn't breathe.

Taking in a deep breath, I gathered myself, forcing my body to do what it was being ordered to do. I wasn't going to go against what he wanted, he made his choice.

“As you wish.” Rocking my body, I gyrated my hips, moving my hands all over my chest and stomach.

“Not here, on the stage.” Flipping a finger, he pointed behind me. “I came for a show and that's what you're going to give me.”

I did as I was told. I danced.

Glancing at his watch, the man stood up, adjusting his blazer as his back snapped square. "Time's up," he said, flipping some bills onto the edge of the stage.

Running a hand across his jaw, his eyes captured mine for a brief moment. I was frozen in place as his eyes washed over my body. The way he looked at me made my skin flush and the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

And then he was gone. The room suddenly felt colder, darker, emptier. And so did I.

I couldn't explain it in words, but I felt different.

Staring at the door, I bent down and picked up the money. Counting it out, he had left me over five hundred dollars. Far more than a single dance should ever cost.

Standing on the stage, I fumbled with my lip, not sure how to process exactly what had happened.

There was no talking.

There was no touching.

There was no sex.

It was just a pole dance in the darkness between two strangers.

Chapter Three

Berlin

“What did he say to you?”

“Nothing.” My voice was soft, but Virgo could hear me just fine.

“What did you say to him?”

“Nothing, I didn't tell him anything.”

“So you're telling me this man just gave you five hundred dollars and requested nothing else in return? You did nothing for him at all?” His eyes turned into tight slits, head angling in towards his shoulder. “Why would he do that?”

“I don't know why.”

“You're telling me he said nothing to you at all? He didn't ask you any questions?”

“No, he didn't. He just told me to dance.”

Virgo sat back in his mahogany brown leather chair and pressed the tips of his fingers together. His hair was slicked back, glistening with a thick sheen of gel. Sucking in his cheeks, his eyes flickered with distrust.

“Did he tell you his name?”

“No.”

“Have you seen this man before? Here or any where else?”

Holding my eyes steady on his, I shook my head. “No.”

Letting out an audible breath, he pointed his finger in my direction. “You're lying to me.”

Looking him straight in the eye, I forced myself to stand taller. “I'm not lying, that's exactly what happened.”

“Berlin, there have been very few times where you've impressed me. And each time I think to myself—good girl, you finally understand. I start to feel a sliver of trust, like you know your place here.” His eyes slowly traced my face as his mouth curled into a heavy frown. “And then you go and fuck it all up again.” Glancing over my shoulder, he nodded his head to the security guard standing near the door. “Take her away.”

“Wait, no, Virgo, please,” I pleaded, holding out my hands and taking a step to the side. “I'm telling you the truth, everything I told you was exactly what happened. He told me to dance, so I danced. He didn't ask for anything else, I don't know why he left me so much money.”

The guard attempted to grab my arms, but I yanked them out of reach. Taking long strides away from him, I flailed my arms so he couldn't get a good hold on me.

“I'm not lying, that's what happened.” Doing my best to stay out of his grasp, I kept moving.

I knew what was happening. And I did nothing to deserve it.

For once I was being honest and Virgo didn't believe me. It made me think of the story about the boy who cried wolf. I had been that boy once, and it was coming back to bite me in the ass now.

“You must have done something—said something—told him something to get him to give you so much money. No man just drops that kind of cash for a dance. Especially on you, you're not that special.” Virgo shot up from his seat, slamming his palms onto the top of his desk. “Now tell me the truth, sweet girl, about what he asked you and what you told him—or shut up and deal with the consequences.”

Holding my eyes firmly on his, I tipped my chin in protest to his threat. “Fuck you, I am telling you the truth. I didn't tell him a goddamn thing.”

His mouth turned razor thin as his pointy chin crooked to the side. Folding his hands into fists, his knuckles blazed white, pupils turning to pinpricks as his nostrils flared wide.

Hit me. Go on, hit me!

I wanted to tell him to do it. I wanted to call him a pathetic excuse for a man, a man who was so weak he had no other way to make himself feel good except by hurting women.

But I didn't. Those words wouldn't do shit. He wouldn't hear me. He didn't have the ability to feel compassion or step outside himself to listen to the truth.

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As if he could read my mind, he pulled back his hand, striking me with an open palm across the cheek. The force of his slap caused my head to whip to the side. And still, I stood strong.

Twisting my head slowly back in his direction, I brushed the hair from my face as my back straightened. I didn't care that my skin was on fire, I didn't care that my eyes sizzled with unwanted tears.

You'll never own me completely.

Squinting his eyes, he tipped his head as if he was waiting for an apology, one that I would never give. It didn't matter what I said at that point, Virgo had made up his mind, and in his eyes, I was a lying bag of shit.

The only thing he ever cared about was creating fear. He wanted all of us girls to feel it, to endure it, to know he held our fate in his hands. It gave him a high greater than drugs, greater than having all the money in the world.

That power was dangerous, it was far too much for one man to have.

Except, I was his one failure and that drove him fucking crazy. He wanted to call me his masterpiece, he once said I would be his perfect creation, but he was wrong.

I didn't fear him, not anymore. When I was little, yes he scared me, I couldn't lie about that. But as I got older, the more I saw through his parchment like shell.

In the midst of all his torture, in some sick twisted way, I felt like he saw me as an

extension of himself, like a daughter, only without the love and attentiveness a father should give. He would never give up, not on me. Because if he did, he'd have to admit his failure to himself.

And Virgo had too much of an ego to ever do that.

My resolve to listen was merely for myself, it was to save what was left of the girl I was, no matter how small that piece might be. I refused to let him destroy me completely, despite how broken I felt.

I was the lone sheep he had molded since childhood. None of the other girls had been with him as long as I had been.

Which was why I thought he hadn't let anyone buy me. If a man came to him about wanting one of his girls, he already knew the price he would need for each one. It was mapped out in his mind, who was worth what, and how much it would take to give them away. But I was still there, not once had he ever talked about my price.

That only came up once, not a number, not an actual amount, it was just a question about my existence in his home. His response was enough for me to understand my value, according to Virgo, I wasn't for sale.

Grinding his teeth, my silence was enough for him to know that our conversation wouldn't go any further. "So be it." Snapping his head, Virgo barked, "Take her, get her the fuck out of my sight."

The man jerked his body forward, wrapping his thick arms around my waist. I tried to fight him, furiously flailing my arms at anything I could hit. His face, his chest, his neck and back, all of it was exposed. But I might as well have been hitting a wall, it did nothing.

Tossing me over his shoulder, the security guard stormed off towards the door. Wrapping his arm firmly around my hip, he pinned me in place so I couldn't move.

Lifting my head to look at Virgo, he was relaxing back into his chair with a smug grin on his face. "One of these days you'll learn, I just hope it's sooner than later. You might think I'm the asshole, Berlin, but you keep doing this shit, I might have to sell you to a man who is far worse than me just to teach you a lesson."

The door closed on my face as the guard walked out, leaving me with those last words from Virgo.

'Sell you to a man who is far worse. . .'

The thought made me sick. Virgo was the devil, could there really be a man worse than him out there somewhere?

Dropping my body onto the cold concrete, the man took a step back and started to close the door. Jumping to my feet, I ran at the door with my arms out, trying to stop him from closing me inside.

"No! No! I wasn't lying!" The door clicked shut, blackness consuming me. Pounding my fists on the smooth metal, my muscles shook with anger. "I don't deserve this!"

He didn't answer, most of Virgo's muscle never did. They were spineless, brainless creatures who only functioned with orders.

I had done nothing to deserve the ditch. I had done nothing to deserve this life.

Not a fucking thing.

Virgo was gifted me when I was a child, a small present left over from a nightmare.

Smuggling me over seas when I was eighteen years old to this wretched place after his empire collapsed in the states, he removed any chance for someone to find me.

I still didn't know exactly what my father had done to make Virgo rip my family down the center. I still didn't know if my father and siblings were out there somewhere in the world or if they were all dead. I tried to ask him once when I was too naive to see him for what he really was.

He didn't answer, giving me a back hand instead. I never asked again.

For the first few years, things were alright. They weren't good, but they weren't horrible considering where I was now. He kept me hidden away, but he treated me fairly, as fairly as someone could without being kind. But the closer I got to coming of age, the firmer his reigns coiled around my body.

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And after that meeting, I knew exactly what he wanted with me. I had promised myself that night when I laid in bed after the men left that I wouldn't let him turn me into one of those women.

I tried, I tried so hard to fight him anyway I could. No matter how much he beat me, I pushed back. No matter how many times he threatened to starve me, I refused to eat. No matter how many times he threatened me with death, I begged him do it, I begged him to save me from all of this by ending it once and for all.

He never did. He kept me, he broke me down, he took who I was and crushed it between his fingers as if I was nothing more than a vile bug. But he never sold me. Maybe it was because he failed his conquest to mold me into his vision of perfection.

Regardless, I was here.

Broken, alone, sad, and angry; hating life because I didn't have one worth living.

Dropping back against the wall, I slid down onto my ass, wrapping my knees and pulling them into my chest. Stuffing my head between my legs, I let out a defeated breath.

Fuck my life.

Chapter Four

Berlin

The lock popped and the door swung outward, giving way to a bright burst of light.

“Get up.”

Lifting my head, I blinked rapidly, trying to focus on the figure. Virgo was standing with his hand out, his brows furrowed into the bridge of his nose.

Pushing myself up off the ground, I took his hand and let him help me up. “What day is it?” I asked, rubbing my eyes, trying to adjust to the sudden onslaught of light.

“It's Wednesday.” His voice was deep and harsh, not caring at all that I had spent three days in that room. “And you need to get back to work.”

My entire body ached, my muscles tight and tender from being cramped in the small room. Pins and needles started to ripple up my legs, sending electric snaps across the skin.

“Can I shower first?” Keeping my head on my feet, the light hurt my eyes, giving me an instant headache. “And maybe something to eat?”

Grumbling, Virgo yanked me along, making me walk faster than my tired legs could

carry me. “We're not a fucking hotel, Berlin, you should know that by now. Then again, there's a lot you should know, and yet you still like to fuck with me.” His nostrils flared as he looked down at me. “You have one hour in your room to do whatever the hell you need to. Don't make me come looking for you, you won't like what happens if I have to come get you.” Giving me a firm push, Virgo stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching me go up to my room.

I didn't argue. The last thing I wanted was to be tossed back into that room, with just water to hold me over. I got lucky this time, my only punishment was the solitude. I wasn't sure why he hadn't sent someone to hurt me.

Maybe he had given up on physical pain because I didn't react to it like the other girls. I didn't scream, I didn't beg them to stop. I shut down and escaped into my mind, refusing to let him gain any satisfaction from my suffering.

Or maybe he just knew that being completely alone was far worse to me than any pain he could try and drum up. It was awful not being able to talk to anyone else there, but at least knowing people were around me felt less lonely than none at all.

Making my way into my room, I flopped my body onto the thin mattress, curling up into the smallest ball I could. I wanted to cry, I could feel the water as it crept up over the thin edge of my lids, but I didn't, instead forcing it back down into the depths of my soul where everything else lived.

I didn't cry anymore. There was no point in shedding a tear over shit I couldn't control. That part of me, the human part that had feelings and emotions didn't exist anymore. I had locked everything up, hoping that one day I'd be able to unleash them all and live normally.

The only emotion I could feel at all was hate.

Hate for Virgo.

Hate for this godforsaken place.

Hate for anyone who stepped foot in the club.

I wanted to kill them all.

What did that make me? Was I a monster too?

I didn't feel like a monster. But what do you call someone who can only imagine tearing the balls from a client and stuffing them down their throat?

What name do you give to someone who dreams about slicing the throat of a man and basking in his tears as he slowly bleeds to death at their feet?

You're a fucking monster. But you weren't born this way, you were created.

Laying down for a few minutes, I reluctantly dragged my ass out of the bed and took a quick shower. Washing my body, I scrubbed my head and nails, watching the dirt swirl in the water at my feet and disappear down the drain.

I wish I was normal. I wish my life hadn't turned out this way.

Wishes. . . Wishes were God's way of making you feel even less significant. My mother had called us the innocent, and I believed her. If that was true, then how could he turn his back on the innocent and not listen?

There was a time where I used to pray. I would kneel down every night and send him my heartfelt wishes. Wishes of being found, wishes of being free, wishes of not being in pain anymore.

And all he gave me was silence. I was done praying to someone that never answered.

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Throwing on an old pair of leggings and a grungy t-shirt, I made a quick sandwich and ate it as fast as I could.

My room wasn't much, about the size of a really small dorm. I had a bathroom and a raggedy old couch, a small hotel sized fridge and a closet full of clothes I didn't pick out. There were bars on my windows, and locks on the outside of my door. Everything was brought to me; food, clothes, hygiene stuff; the bare essentials to keep me alive.

I was as much a prisoner as any other criminal, except my crime was just being alive.

Slipping my feet into a pair of sandals, I made my way back downstairs. A few of the girls were already gathered at the bottom, waiting for Virgo to come tell us we could head into the club.

My eyes connected with a couple of the girls I saw regularly, so I smiled faintly, giving them a little hello. They didn't smile back.

Because they know better!

Just like you should!

I was past thinking about what would happen if I broke the rules. What could he do to me that I didn't beg him for already? I wasn't afraid to die, I welcomed it with open arms. My only weakness was not being able to do it myself, otherwise I'd have been gone a long time ago.

“Everyone's here,” Virgo said, strolling through the group of girls with his arms knitted behind his back. As he stepped past me, he whispered under his breath. “Even you.”

He was dressed in a fitted black suit, with shiny jet black shoes to match. The only pop of color in his entire outfit was a small yellow handkerchief he had tucked into his back pocket.

The color yellow signified who he was. Boss of the Berchello family, Virgo used the sun tinted hue as a way of stature, a way to separate him and his men from the rest of the world.

The club was just a front for all the illegal shit he had his fingers in. Illegal gambling, stolen goods, racketeering. And then there was his favorite, what he was well known for; selling sex.

On the outside it was just a typical strip club. Men flocked to the club to get a taste of his girls. And if those men had money, well, there wasn't anything they couldn't buy.

But, cross him the wrong way—and no one will ever find you.

Virgo's feet led him beyond the front of the group of ten. Keeping his back to us, he spoke up towards the ceiling. “I expect you all to put on a show like your lives depend on it.” Cocking his head over his shoulder, his eyes connected with mine. “Because for some of you, it does.”

A shiver scaled my spine as his lids lowered and pupils expanded, glowing in a hellish fire of brimstone. His tone was slick as snake's skin, layered in a subtle threat that we could all see. But, his threat was only meant for me.

Leading us all down the hall, he unlocked the door that connected to the club and

opened it wide. “Doors open in thirty minutes.” As I walked by, Virgo threw his hand out and snatched my wrist. “No bullshit tonight, Berlin, I’m warning you.”

Fuck you.

Peering at him from the corner of my eyes, I nodded. Loosening his fingers from my wrist, I started forward again, my pace quick and steady.

Sitting down at the small table and mirror, I painted my lids in deep blue eye-shadow and a thick coating of jet black mascara. The tiny, form fitting outfit I pulled off the rack had pops of blue and gold, matching my makeup perfectly.

This was the only thing I actually enjoyed about being there. Putting on that makeup made me feel like a different person, like I was just a normal girl, getting ready for a date or a party. In the club I could be whoever I wanted to be.

I could smile, I could make up fake stories about who I was. I could act as though I chose to be there and this was the life I desired.

It wasn't anything like that, but a girl could play pretend. That's what all this shit was anyway, just a big game of pretend.

Pulling my hair over my shoulder, I started braiding the long thick locks. Staring at myself in the mirror as I folded one long section over the other, memories began to play in my head; ones I tried desperately to hold onto and other times I wanted nothing more than to forget them all.

'No, not like that, you're knotting your hair. Like this.' My mother stood behind me, taking my hair and pulling it into three equal parts. 'Over, under, over, under. You want to pull in from the outside and lift over from the middle. Try again.'

My hands copied her movements, but at a much slower and sloppier pace. 'Like this?' I asked, my small fingers creating pulls in the strands as they wrapped over each other.

'Just like that.' She smiled as she placed her hands on my shoulders and dipped her chin down onto the crook of my neck. 'You're so beautiful, my flower.'

I could see her face in the mirror, a ghostly apparition that hovered behind me. My lips curled into a slight smile as tears threatened to bubble over the surface.

Shaking my head, I tied the end with a thin black elastic and blinked rapidly to dry my eyes before the water could take over, and there would be nothing I could do to stop it.

I hated my memories. Because they brought more pain than the life I was living.

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Memories should be good. But my memories brought tears to my eyes. Tears that had no place there, tears that weren't meant for this world. I was supposed to grow up and become someone else, not this.

All my dreams of being a princess and having Prince Charming ride in on his white horse had faded away. I had turned into Cinderella with an evil step father and no magical fairy to make things better.

The music started to pound through the speakers, making my muscles shake in surprise. Taking in a deep breath, I slipped my feet into my heels and got ready to do what I had been trained to do.

Make money, take money, and not think about how I was getting it.

Adjusting my skirt, I took my place behind the curtain, waiting for my turn.

The lights dimmed, the music slowly fading away as the DJ changed the record. Thick bass created a wave of prickles across my skin as my song came on, signaling I was up.

Taking in a deep breath, I closed my eyes, gently shaking my hands at my sides and forcing myself to forget all about who I was and what I was about to do.

You're not this person, it's just an act. You're better than this, you know you are.

Tickling my fingers across the velvet curtain, I spread both sheets wide, batting my lashes as all the men began to hoot. The tip of my toe pressed out, leading my long

leg into view. I felt the curtain as it slipped across my skin, sealing my entrance to the stage.

Letting the music consume me, I rocked my body, moving to the beat and working my way over to the pole. The room was filled with men, all of them peering up at me, drool almost pouring out of their mouths.

I ignored them, same as always, imagining that I was on Broadway, taking part in a musical. The men were an audience of hundreds, the song my shining moment for the world to embrace me.

Looking out past the dogs at the base of the stage, I kept my eyes on the background, doing my best to stay focused on my daydream. Bills were flying past my feet, sliding across the glossy wood floor. The yelling was getting louder and louder, drowning out the voices inside my head.

Closing my eyes, my hand gripped the pole, holding on tight as I swung around. Curling my leg, I dropped my head back, letting my braid sweep across the floor.

Opening my eyes, everything changed. My heart jumped into my throat, sweat began to bead up on the back of my neck, my palms became clammy, causing me to slip on the pole.

Snapping my back straight, I whipped my head over my shoulder and glared at the last seat at the end of the stage.

He's back. He's here again.

The man that had gotten me into trouble was sitting right at the front of the stage, his hands folded against his chest as his eyes bore a hole right through me.

I could feel his glare, the way it shifted around my body as I stood like a statue, completely thrown off by his presence.

The corner of his lip lifted into a slight smirk as I paused my dance, his smile a knowing sign he was well aware that he was the reason for my sudden falter.

The other men around me began to bark to keep going, but I couldn't. Flaring my nostrils, I pursed my lips, taking in long deep pulls of stuffy club air.

Why is he here? Why did he have to come back?

The man rolled a single finger, his gesture telling me to finish what I started. But I didn't want to, I wanted off that stage. I wasn't going to dance for him.

Turning quickly on my heels, I left the bills that had accumulated and stormed off the stage. Throwing the curtains aside, I stumbled down the steps, almost tripping and falling on my face.

Grabbing a wood beam, I caught myself, trying to slow down the panicked sensation that was flowing through my veins. I was struggling to breathe, the air too dense to seep into my lungs, as a soft wheeze filled the space between my ears.

Throwing a hand to my chest, I took in slow breaths through my nose and blew out through my mouth. I felt the eyes of the other girls around me, they were all staring at me, curiosity and a hint of fear on their faces.

They were worried about what happened, they were concerned about me, they were also terrified about what Virgo would do to me for leaving the job early.

And yet no one came to my side to see if I was alright.

“What's this? You're not done, get back out there, Berlin!” Vinchezo demanded, his feet pounding over in my direction. “You don't stop, no one stops in the middle of a show.”

“I know, I know, and I'm sorry,” I said, holding up my hand. “I just. . .” Pausing, I tried to come up with a good excuse for what I had done. “I just got my period, Vin. Virgo wouldn't want me bleeding out on the stage, would he? You know how he feels about that shit.”

I'm not going back into the ditch for that man.

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Vinchezo ran a hand through his hair as his lids shot open. His expression changed from anger to discomfort. I don't think there's a guy in this world that doesn't feel awkward when a girl brings up her monthly visitor.

Even Virgo was uncomfortable. I was eleven when I got my period, and it was the only time I had seen him clam up and not know what to say or do. So he sent one of his girls down with everything I would need and they showed me what to do.

Grunting, his fingers scratched at the stubble on his jaw. "Alright, go take care of that and get right back out there."

Nodding, I braided my fingers together and scurried into the bathroom backstage. My hope was that by the time I came back out, another girl would be up there and I could have a little time to relax.

Who the fuck does that guy think he is?

Standing in the bathroom, I gripped the dirty, stained porcelain sink, and let my head hang loosely on my shoulders. I wanted that man gone, I wanted him to never step foot in the club again.

And yet, there was nothing I could do to stop him.

I had no power there. I had no authority to send him away. My feelings meant nothing.

Letting out a weighted breath, I turned on the sink and splashed some cool water on

my cheeks. Drying my face with a few paper towels, I stiffened my back, drawing out all the strength I had to forget that guy was even out there.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I opened the door, walking back into the dressing room.

“All set? You take care of everything you needed to?” Vinchezo asked, glaring at me under hooded lids.

“All set,” I said, holding out my arms. Recognizing the song on the speakers, I knew he had sent another girl up on stage and relief washed over me. “Am I good for a bit?”

Shaking his head, he glanced at the private room. “No, you got a customer.”

“Already?” I asked, arching a brow.

Vin cocked his head back, a stark frown falling over his lips. “Enough questions, just go.”

Dragging my feet, I walked over to the door, readying myself for whatever waited inside. It was always a mystery. I never knew what type of jackass to expect.

Some of the guys were shy, quiet, a little on edge. While others were ready to jump you the second you opened the door. They were sitting there like a dog, skittish with their tongues hanging out, their muscles anxiously trembling to pounce the second the door was closed.

The knob felt cold against my palm, sending a shiver up my arm as I turned it. The room was always dark, sometimes too dark.

What if it's him?

Pushing the thought away, I stepped inside. Blinking wildly, the figure of a man was outlined against the back wall, his silhouette an ominous statement in the room.

Putting on my fake smile, I started forward slowly, waiting for my eyes to settle. “Hi there, my name's Ash, I bet you're—” Drawing in a thick swig of air, my voice caught in the back of my throat. “You.” The word shot out, harsh and jagged.

I fucking knew it!

“Don't sound so happy to see me.” The man leaned forward, the white of his eyes popping under the black light as he smirked with a devilish grin.

It was him. The man I wanted to run away from, the man I never wanted to see again; the man who had gotten my ass tossed into the ditch for three days.

“What are you doing here?”

“Isn't it obvious?” he asked, his smile spreading wider.

Wrapping my arms around my ribs, I veered my stare. “I'm not doing this again, you need to go.” Jerking my head towards the back door, I snarled. “Go, get out of here.”

“Well, that's no way to treat a paying customer.” Relaxing back, he pushed his big palms into the tops of his knees. “Because I do believe I'm paying you.”

“I don't want your fucking money, I want you gone.” Throwing my arm out, I shot a finger towards the door. “So get the fuck out.”

I knew I was breaking the rules, I knew what would happen if Virgo found out I had

turned down a customer, but I didn't care.

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“You said your name's Ash?” he asked, tilting his head. His dark hair swept across the top of his brows, covering his right eye. “Is that your real name?”

“First off, it's none of your business and you were just leaving anyway.” Crossing one leg over the other, I squared my shoulders and tipped my chin higher. “The door's right there, don't let it hit you in the ass on the way out.”

Chuckling, the man smiled, brushing the hair away from his face. “You're different tonight, you seem angry and pissed off. . .” Pausing, he let his eyes ride up and down my body. “What happened to making my desires come true?”

Scoffing, I rolled my eyes. “You can shove your desires up your ass.”

“What did I do to make you so angry? I paid you well last time—very well,if I remember right. And you didn't have to do a damn thing. I think you should be thanking me for not making you shame yourself anymore than you already do working at a place like this.”

“Thanking you—thanking you?” My jaw hung wide open as I glared at the man. “You got me in trouble!” Holding onto the rest of my yell, I lowered my voice so Vin didn't hear me. “You left me way more than you should have for what I did, and that pissed off my boss.”

“I've never heard of someone getting angry for willingly being paid too much. Your boss must be an asshole.”

“My boss isn't the issue here—you are.” Pointing in his direction, I clenched my jaw.

Thinning his lips, the man furrowed his brows. “Then why does he care what you made, so long as you made it? Seems to me like he might be an issue.”

Dragging my fingers over the top of my head, I dropped them to my hips. “Look, I don't want any more trouble. Can you just go before this gets out of hand and you end up fucking me again?”

“I haven't fucked you yet, if I did, you wouldn't be asking me to leave.” His smile returned, causing a flutter in my gut.

The feeling was foreign. My stomach never clenched because of a man, it never tumbled or knotted up. But this man, this man had magic in his voice and spells in his eyes.

His jaw was sharp, his chest thick and muscular. Almond shaped eyes were framed by long lashes, longer lashes than I had ever seen on a man before. His hands were bear sized, arms as dense and wide as tree stumps.

I could feel myself falling, my body growing heavy, causing me to teeter on my heels as my muscles tingled with sensations that had no place there to begin with.

Taking in a deep breath, I kept my eyes sternly on his. “Why are you doing this?” I asked, shaking my head in confusion. “Are you always an asshole? Last time it looked like you wanted out the second I walked in, but today I can't get you to leave.”

“Maybe I just wasn't in the mood for games last time. Today I am.”

“God, you remind me of someone I met once.” Folding my arms across my chest, I rolled my eyes.

“Oh yeah,” Arching a brow, he eyed me. “Was he an asshole too?”

“Actually, no.” Plucking at my bottom lip, I flirted my eyes up to his. “Maybe a little,” I said half smirking. “But it's not that, it's the confidence. You have too much of it in a place that's not yours to show it.”

“Confidence—is that what you think you see?” Our eyes bounced over each other as his lips curled to one side. “It's not confidence you're seeing, it's power.” Taking out his wallet, he threw some bills at my feet as he stood up. “Tell your boss you did whatever that would normally get me. I'm paying you enough to lie to him, so make it believable.”

You don't know my boss. . .

As he walked to the door, I called out,” Hey, wait—”

The man stopped short, his hand curled around the door knob, his eyes peeking at me over his shoulder. He didn't say a word, he just waited for me to speak.

“You got a name?” I asked.

“That depends on who you ask, but you can call me Salt.”

“Salt? Seriously?”

Yanking the door open, he stepped back into the club, not giving me anymore answers.

Salt? What the hell kind of name is that?

Chapter Five

Berlin

I did something horrible.

I did something that could get me killed.

I kept some of the money Salt had given me.

My reason wasn't about being selfish, it wasn't because I wanted to hoard it for myself, I knew better than to screw with Virgo's money for my own benefit. I had seen it happen over the years on occasion, a girl here or there who thought they could outsmart him. It never worked. Those girls never came back, they would vanish as if they never existed.

Except I knew, I knew exactly what happened to them.

There were very few secrets between Virgo and myself, mostly because I had been around long enough to witness it all. And if I didn't see it, I heard about it one way or another.

When I was little, about ten or so, Virgo had this woman. I thought she was his wife, I was naive back then, and too immature to see the whole picture.

In reality, she was never more than property to him.

This woman would bring me things. She'd bring me food, she'd bring me extra blankets and medicine if I was ill.

I remember her brushing my hair one night, her hands tender and soft. Her name was Samantha, but Virgo called her Tabby Cat. She would whisper in my ear stories about her childhood, her voice so delicate I had to listen really hard to even hear her.

We would talk about going to the beach and riding the waves, she would talk about going to Disney World and how one day we would travel to the Grand Canyon.

And I would sit there as she brushed my hair, my mind swirling with images of all the wonderful things we were going to do together.

Samantha had the bluest eyes I had ever seen, and her hair was the color of gold. I remember thinking that she was too beautiful to look so sad. Her face over time had started to sink in, showing the bones of her cheeks. A dull gloss coated her eyes, making her appear so tired.

But when she was with me, I couldn't help but feel safe, like a normal little girl, sitting with her older sister. One night, I was laying on the small cot Virgo had set up for me in the basement and I could hear him yelling at her.

I had heard him upset and angry before, but that night, it was different. Everything about his voice was different. His tone was deeper, colder, and every word he used was meant to hurt her. He was calling her all kinds of names, telling her she was worthless and her life meant nothing.

Samantha begged him to forgive her, she begged him to give her another chance.

'No one gets second chances.' His words cut through the floor, reaching me downstairs, snagging my heart and crushing it in my chest. A loud thud echoed off the floorboards, causing me to jump in surprise.

Then there was nothing.

The house had thin walls, walls that didn't hide shit. I found out from eaves dropping that Samantha had been hoarding money. Money that was meant for Virgo. Money that she was going to use to try and help me get away.

He killed her because of me.

For years after that I refused to talk to any of his other girls. I didn't let myself get close to them, I denied them any attention or responses if they tried to interact with me.

I wasn't going to let Virgo kill anyone else because of me, and that meant this man too, even if he was a pain in the ass.

There was no doubt in my mind that if Virgo knew that the same man had come back and given me so much money for nothing a second time, he'd slit his throat without pause, thinking that I was being paid for information that wasn't mine to give or his to have.

Salt obviously didn't understand who I worked for. If he had any clue about who owned the Canary, he would have known better than to screw with him.

Fucking tourists.

Tucking the money into the most discrete spot I could, I hid it in my panties, doing my best to fold it up small enough so it wasn't visible. Walking out the door, I started

towards my table.

“Berlin, are you forgetting something?” Vin asked, holding out his hand.

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“No, I'm not forgetting something, I just didn't see you there.” Taking a few hundred out of my top, I stuffed it into his hand.

“What did you do for him?” he asked, counting out the bills.

“The usual.” Wrapping my arms around my waist, I crossed my legs.

His eyes flicked up, mouth hanging open. “Don't fuck with me, Berlin, I really don't want to have to take you to Virgo again.”

Hanging my head, I lifted my fingers to my mouth and fumbled with my lips. “A dance and a blow-job—the usual.” Shrugging my shoulder, I let my eyes dance between his.

Arching a brow, he stood quiet for a long second. My heart started racing inside my chest, nervous that he could see right through my lie.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I lied. If he knows—

“Why are you still standing here? You can go.” His voice was hard, but there was no threat in his tone.

He believes me.

A wave of relief washed over me, allowing my body to relax. Sitting at my table, I looked around to see if anyone was watching me.

Vin was getting money from Aubrey, a girl who had come into Virgo's hands recently. I felt bad for her. Her room was right next to mine and I could hear her crying herself to sleep every night.

From what I knew, he had received her as payment for a past due loan from a man named Napal. It was either pay or die. Napal chose death for her instead of for himself. It was the cowards way out, because there was no way she would survive this place.

I could see it on her face, in the way her body slumped, and how the deep rings under her eyes showed just how damaged she was from all this.

This world divided the weak from the strong. You either grew skin as thick as bark or you crumbled like the delicate shell of an egg.

Aubrey was cracked all over.

Slipping the cash out from between my legs, I quickly stuffed it into the pocket that held the padding on the sports bra I had on when I came in. Taking another look around, no one seemed to notice me at all.

It's all clear.

The rest of the night went as it typically did. I did a few more dances on stage, I trolled the floor, doing lap dances and snuggling up to guys, chatting away until their wallets were empty.

Salt had left, but I found myself periodically searching out the room for him, checking the dark corners to see if he was still there.

He wasn't, and each time I felt a little more empty, a little more deflated that he was

really gone.

What the fuck am I doing?

As the night came to an end, and the men slowly trickled out, I was left wondering what the hell was happening to me. I couldn't get Salt out of my head, I couldn't stop my thoughts from drifting to the man who had eyes that were cold as ice but warmed me inside like a hot fire in the same breath. A man who had muscles that looked like they could drown you in fear and keep you safe at the same time.

Just stop, Berlin. He's just another asshole with money to burn.

One of the guards closed the door to my room after I stepped inside. Listening for the lock, I stood silent until I heard the click and the loud thump of his feet carrying him away.

The silence in the room was deafening. I hated it. There was no television, no radio, no phone or computer. All I had were my thoughts, and those were slowly killing me inside.

This is your life. You just have to accept it.

Taking a long hot shower, I scrubbed the feel of gross hands off my body until my skin was red and raw. The soap never felt like enough, I needed more. I needed to see the top layer of my skin disappear, ensuring that any and all remnants of the men from the club were gone.

Climbing onto the paper-thin mattress, I snuggled under the scratchy wool blanket and covered myself up to my shoulders.

Salt popped into my head, his black eyes mesmerizing me even in my thoughts. They

looked like shaded pools, so deep they could be bottomless, tempting me to jump inside.

I'm not going to think about him.

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There's no point.

Burying my head under the pillow, I curled it around my ears, trying to stop my mind from running wild.

The muffled sound of crying crept through the wall, growing louder and softer, then loud again.

Picking up my head, Aubrey was crying uncontrollably in her room. The same as she had been every night. Climbing out of bed, I tip-toed over to the wall beside my couch, pressing my ear to the wall.

Her sobbing was a mixture of labored breathing and moans of sadness. Through the painful moans I could make out the single word she kept repeating—'why?'

I've asked that same question. . . And never got an answer.

Laying my hand on the wall, I lifted my index finger, ready to tap the wall and reach out to her, just so she knew she wasn't alone. I wanted to do what Samantha had done for me and give her a friend in this hell.

You know what happened to Samantha because of you. Do you want the same thing to happen to Aubrey?

The sharp edge of my nail hovered over the torn wallpaper, ready to tap. But I stopped myself. Aubrey had grown quiet, her audible tears now a few heavy breaths as I assumed she had cried herself to sleep.

Stepping away, I climbed back into bed, laying flat on my back with my eyes on the ceiling. I remembered being like Aubrey. That feeling of despair and sadness that was so overwhelming there was no where for it to go but out.

Then one day you change. You stop feeling sad. You stop feeling lost and blaming the world for this shitty hand you've been dealt. You learn to deal with it. You learn to work with it and not against it.

It didn't fix a fucking thing, but it made living a little more tolerable. I hated thinking that I had accepted this life. I felt like I had let myself down after all the countless promises I made to never give up.

You haven't given up, Berlin, you've just smartened up. This isn't how your story ends.

Deep down I knew I was just waiting.

Waiting for that perfect moment to tip my world on its axis and give Virgo the middle finger.

Closing my eyes, I drifted off to sleep. A sleep where my nightmares consisted of the life I should have and not the one I was living in.

Who else could say that their nightmares were actually dreams about good stories and happier times?

Only people who had nothing to live for.

People like me.

Chapter Six

Berlin

I watched Aubrey wiping her eyes as she sat at her table. Sniffling, her hand was shaking as she tried to apply her eyeliner. Stopping for a moment, she let out a breath and looked up at the ceiling.

Her cheeks were streaked in fresh and old tears. The water would drop off her lashes, tracing dried up streams as they plopped onto her lap. I wasn't sure if she noticed the small circle stains being left on her thigh from the mixture of mascara and water.

She's going to need to change.

Virgo would frown on such an appearance if he saw her like that. He expected perfection. I didn't even want to think about what he'd do to her if he walked in on her right then.

Leaning back over, she tried to put on her makeup again, but she just couldn't do it. The tip of the liner kept creeping up towards her eyeball, threatening to stab her in the pupil. Dropping it onto the table, she drove her fingers against her temples and hung her head.

“Here, let me help,” I said as I stepped to her side.

Her eyes shot open as she whipped her head in my direction, staring at me like I was insane. “What are you doing? We're not supposed to talk, you're going to get us in trouble.” Aubrey's eyes darted around the room, searching for Vin.

“He's not in here right now, he went out front to take care of something.” Grabbing the eyeliner, I held it between my fingers. “Don't worry, we're alright, I won't get you into trouble, I promise.”

“Alright—we are not alright if you haven't noticed.” Her voice was cold and empty as she turned to look at herself in the mirror. “Nothing will ever be alright.”

She looked so defeated, and all I wanted to do was make her feel better. I didn't want her to end up like the other girls that just vanished into thin air. I didn't want her to think that this was all that was left for her.

Because there was always the chance that one day things could change. The right person could walk in that door and free her. It wasn't out of the realm of possibilities that a man might see her and want to bring her home.

Maybe that man would be a good man, a man who would love her, shower her with gifts and affection. Maybe that same man would set us all free.

You're lying to yourself, Berlin, you know you are.

“Things will get better, you're still adjusting, that's all. It takes time, it doesn't happen over night.” Grabbing her chin, I twisted her face to mine. Holding the liner, I arched her head up and started to gently drag the charcoal across the edge of her lid. “It doesn't have to all be bad, you just have to find your place. You have to look inside yourself and find the strength you need to keep going, because if you don't, this place is going to kill you. You can't let that happen, you can't let him win.”

Sighing loudly, she looked right in my eyes. “And what if I can't? What if I'm not strong enough?”

“You have to be, you don't have a choice.” Running a black line across her other eye, I placed the pen back down on her table. “But if you get your shit together, things will get better. I promise.”

“Better. . .” Blinking her sad doe eyes, she sucked in a shallow breath, like she was trying to hold back more tears. “How the hell can you think any of this will get better?”

“Because I know it will, you just have to trust me.”

Thinning her lips, she shifted in her seat. “How can you know that?”

“I've been here long enough to know how it works.” Walking back to my table, I dropped into the seat just in time to see Vin coming in through the door.

Aubrey twisted in her chair, finishing up the rest of her makeup without an issue. Neither one of us looked at each other again and our little conversation went unnoticed by Vin.

But I could see a change in her, it was subtle, but it was there. Her back was straighter, her face was flat and not scrunched up like she was about to bust into tears.

She finally knows she's not alone.

None of us were really alone, we had each other, even if Virgo wanted to keep us apart. Sometimes I felt like I was only the only one who could see that.

“Berlin, you got a customer.” Vin stood at my side, his strong cologne swirling

around my face and making me sick.

“Another one? Why can't one of the other girls go?”

“Because this is yours. Do your fucking job, Berlin.”

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Vin was the only guy around who actually said more than a few words to us at a time. It was part of his job, it wasn't like he did it by choice. But he was a little different than the rest of Virgo's men. He didn't look at us like we were trash. He was an ass at times, but he gave you room to grumble and complain a little bit.

I wasn't sure if he was here because he wanted to be or if Virgo was forcing him to be. Temptation to ask him over the years was there, but I never actually questioned him about it. It didn't really matter what his answer would be. We all had a role, and running the back room of the club was his.

“Alright, I'm going, give me a second.” Standing up, I tugged my skirt down. “You know, I'm not the only one in here who can do the private room.”

“Yeah, but you're the only one in here who goes by Ash. When you're requested, you're requested, I can't send in someone else.”

“How about you don't send any of us?”

“Berlin. . .” Pausing, Vin hung his head, lowering his lids to cover half his eyes.

“I know, I know, I'm going, no need to run to Virgo.”

“Then stop flapping your mouth and go.”

Turning around, I walked to the private room. For a brief moment, I wondered if Salt would be behind the door. I could feel my heart start to bounce in my chest and my hands get sweaty with nerves.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been waiting for him to return. He had come in twice in the past week, the chances were in my favor I'd see him again.

Slipping inside, I did my ritual of blinking quickly, trying to adjust to the darkness. The shadow against the wall moved as the man stood up and started to walk towards me.

Is it him?

“Are we feeling better today?” His voice skipped through my chest, twisting my heart.

“You're back again,” I said, doing my best to keep my voice steady. The tension I felt melted away as soon as I knew it was Salt.

The room felt lighter, the air cleaner and fresh as if his presence made the difference. He was like the shining star in a black world. For the first time in my life, I was happy to be in that room.

“Did I get you into trouble?” Salt asked as he approached me in the dark. “Or are we on good terms today?”

When he stopped a foot away, I realized just how big he was. He was towering over me, at least six feet tall. His shoulders spanned the length of my arms if I stretched them out, his chest was puffed up and firm behind the fitted button-up shirt.

I half expected the buttons to pop off and shoot me in the face as he curled his arms around his ribs, resting his chin on the edge of his fist.

Shaking my head, I focused on his face as the shadowed room turned into actual objects. “No, I did what you told me to.”

“Good girl,” he said, his voice a whisper as he smirked. “I’m glad you listened.”

I felt my lips curl up into a soft smile, the movement so out of place and forgotten I wasn’t sure it was real. All of my smiles had been fake for as long as I could remember, but not then, not with him.

Why am I happy he’s pleased with me?

Shaking the smile off my face, I focused on what I was actually doing and not how happy it made me to please him. “Are you here for another dance?” I asked.

Lifting his hand to my face, he brushed his thumb across my jaw. “You’re too pretty for this, you know that?”

My body went up in flames, instantly trembling from his touch. I felt my cheeks blush, my skin so hot I was certain he could see the bright fire on my face.

No Berlin! Stop this now!

Taking a step backwards, I dropped my eyes to the floor. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t tell me I’m pretty.”

“You don’t like a compliment?” he asked, his eyes piercing the top of my head as I refused to look up.

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I could feel him watching me, I could feel the intensity in his gaze as he tried to read what was going through my mind. He could never understand me, no matter how much he tried.

“I don't like it, it's not real, not in a place like this.” Braiding my fingers together, I started picking at the beds of my nails nervously. “Look, I don't know what your plan is here, but whatever it is, you should reconsider.”

“Reconsider?” Taking a firm step in, Salt pinched my chin with his thumb and forefinger, forcing me to look up at him. “Reconsider what?”

Searching his face, I wanted him to see the concern I felt for him. He was playing with fire. Virgo didn't like being messed with, he didn't like men who thought they were above him.

And this man, he thought he was above everybody. I could see it in his clothes, in the way he held himself, in his fierce, unforgiving stare.

“I don't think you understand what you're doing. Every time you come in here like this—”

Cutting me off, his jaw crooked. “Like what? What am I coming in here like?”

“Like you own the place, like you have rights to do whatever the hell you want.”

“You're the one who said no one will tell me no. Did the rules change suddenly overnight?”

Veering my stare, I spoke clear and firm. “Games in this place will get you killed. Do you understand that? Can't you see what I'm trying to telling you?”

“I'm not afraid—” His voice turned dark, his tone deep and stern. “I create the games, my flower, no one else.”

Sucking in a quick gasp, my brain went wild. He had called me his flower, no one but my mother had ever called me that. I hadn't heard that word in years. When he said it, it hit me, making my heart stop in my chest and my mother's voice skip through my head.

My flower. . . I'm not a flower anymore.

There was no color left in me. I was wilted, dying slowly without sun and air.

Pulling my face out of his grasp, I walked past him, putting some distance between us. “You have no idea who you're screwing with, you have no fucking clue.”

“I know what this is, I know all about this place, don't think I don't.” Salt's lips twisted into a wicked smile. “I think you under estimate who I am. I can do things for you.”

He can do things for me? What the hell was that supposed to mean?

“What do you want from me?” I asked, holding out my arms. “If you know all about this place, then why the hell do you keep coming back? Why do you pay me for doing nothing and taunt me like a child holding a magnifying glass on an ant. You're not like the other guys that come here—”

Cutting me off, his voice went sour. “You're right, I'm not like the other guys.” Salt started walking forward and instinctively I backed up. “I'm nothing like the fucking

creeps that come in here.”

Each step brought him closer, his power an electric charge I could feel in the air. It was like standing outside during a thunderstorm, when the air was filled with so much static it prickled the tiny hairs on your arms.

I could feel every nerve, every small pore and thin hair as my skin buzzed and tingled from head to toe.

Stepping backwards, I wanted to keep the space between us, but he just kept coming. The cement wall crept up on me, pressing into my back, leaving me no place else to go.

Caging me in with his hands by my head, he pressed flat palms into the concrete blocks, sealing me in place. He was so close, his chest inches from mine, his face hovering at a distance that pulled on my body.

The hair on the back of my neck bristled as he let out a slow hot breath. Licking his lips, his eyes settled on my face.

“Let me tell you what type of man I am.” His toes touched mine as he stared down at me, his arms thickening as his muscles surged with testosterone. “I’m every other man’s worst nightmare. I’m the darkness that seeps into your dreams and steals your breath, I’m the man your father warned you about and the one your mother told you to stay away from. I’m the last face you see if you fuck me over and first face you see when you open your eyes after you die. I’m not like any other man, because there is no one else on earth like me.”

Swallowing the lump that had formed in the back of my throat, I spoke softly. “What do you want?” My voice was weak and brittle, despite my effort to stay strong.

“I want you to hear me, I want you to know that I can give you things. I want you to understand that I am the power, the muscle, and the voice, that will be heard.”

Scrunching my brows, confusion smeared my expression. “I don't understand.”

Looming over me, his cologne stole my senses. His scent was powerful, an erotic mix of mint and sage. My brain suckled the euphoric flavors, devouring every last drop until I couldn't think straight.

The strength in his voice tugged on my body, causing me to sway on my heels. I was trapped, but he wasn't holding me, I couldn't move, but he wasn't touching me. Every breath brought him closer, causing my back to arch forward. And every exhale took him away, leaving me hollow and cold.

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It felt like we were in this dance, one that was controlled by just his presence, his tenacity, his vigor.

“You will.” Holding out his hand for me to take, I stayed still.

I wasn't sure what to think. I didn't know if I should fear him or trust him. Every bone in my body felt like jelly as my brain swirled trying to figure him out.

My muscles moved before my mind told them to, placing my hand into his. Curling his fingers around mine, he pulled me away from the wall, lowering his mouth to my ear.

“Now dance,” he said, his breath flowing over the shell of my ear, making goosebumps jump across my skin. Leading me along, he guided me towards the stage and jerked his head. “Dance for me, my flower.”

And just like that, as if ownership had transferred with just a few words.

My body did as it was told.

His voice the puppeteer to my strings.

I became his.

Chapter Seven

Berlin

I knew what to do. The idea had taken hold of me and I couldn't get it out of my head.

Salt had said there were things he could do for me. There was no way for me to tell if that was a good or a bad thing. I suppose there could have been malice laced in his words, that his offer was built purely on self gratification and not the way I wanted it to sound.

Maybe I was being gullible, because I desperately wanted to believe that what he said was meant for good, that it was meant to help. That he was what I had been waiting for.

But how do you trust someone you don't know?

Fixing myself a sandwich, I sat down on the couch and started eating. Taking small bites, I forced the stale bread and processed cheese sandwich down with a glass of water.

I'm so fucking sick of sandwiches.

Peeling off the hard crust, it pinged on the plate as I dropped it on top. Setting the plate on the cushion beside me, I laid back, resting my head against my arms.

Aubrey had been crying on and off since we were brought back to our rooms. Which was a little better than the previous days.

Sitting up straight, I stared at the wall where the sounds were coming from. I wasn't sure why, but the need to comfort this poor girl was weighing heavily on me.

Because all you ever wanted was a real friend, that's why.

Climbing to my feet, I carefully stepped to the wall, as if the sound of my walking would spook her. Placing my ear to the thin sheet rock, I tapped the wall quietly with my nail and listened.

Aubrey hiccuped a subtle gasp, obviously startled by the sound. I could hear her shifting around in her room and feel her body against the wall as she pressed herself into the material.

She didn't speak, I wasn't even sure if she was breathing, but I knew her head was pushed as tightly against the wall as mine was.

Tap tap, bouncing my finger, I waited.

The seconds ticked by, the only sound I could hear was the blood pumping between my ears.

Tap tap, repeating the noise, I stood as still as I could, hoping she would tap back.

She didn't.

It's better this way, you can't get her killed.

Letting out a slow breath, I wandered over to my bed and laid down. Laying my hand

over my stomach, I ran my plan through my head. Salt was giving me an offer in not so many words. There were meanings hidden between the lines, words I might be manifesting to life by pure desperation; but I didn't care.

I had to grasp at something in order to keep this feeling inside me alive. A small flicker of hope had started to burn in my gut. It had been years since I felt that, since I could visualize a way out of this fucking place.

Tink tink. . .

Popping upright in bed, I sat still, unsure if my mind was playing tricks on me. There were all kinds of noises that could be heard throughout this place.

Pipes clanked and spit as water ran through them, the floor boards creaked and twisted from the guards that casually walked the halls, making sure we were all safely secured. Rain would splash against the roof, the gentle splatter another reminder that there was still an entire world I'd never see outside those walls.

Tink tink.

There it was again. Throwing my feet over the side of the bed, the sound was coming from the wall that separated Aubrey and myself.

It's her, she's signaling back.

Darting across the room on the tips of my toes, I quickly gave three taps back. Aubrey mimicked my beat, giving me three more.

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“Aubrey,” I said, pushing my voice out in a low whisper.

Tink.

“You can talk softly, I should be able to hear you.”

“What about the guards?” she asked, her voice so quiet I had to strain to hear her.

Her voice sounded like it was coming from the seam of the wall and the floor, so I slid down to my haunches, keeping one shoulder and ear against the wall.

“We have a little bit before they come back around, they do sweeps every thirty minutes or so. How are you feeling?”

It was a dumb question. I knew how she felt. She felt like shit, she felt like her life was over, she felt all the same things everyone else did about being there.

“Are you sure it's safe to do this?”

“Sure enough,” I responded with a giggle, doing my best to make light of a horrible situation. “It feels good to talk to someone else that isn't one of Virgo's goons, I can tell you that.”

“It really does.”

Relaxing my head against the wall, I sat on my ass, curling my legs underneath me.

“Where are you from?”

I was trying to make small talk. It seemed like the proper thing to do when you were talking to someone you knew nothing about.

“Florence,” she said, her accent fairly light for someone born in Italy. “You?”

“Boston.”

“Where's that?”

“The U.S.”

“That's a world away from here.” She sounded much more relaxed, almost at ease. We sat silent for a moment, and I don't think either of us really knew how to have a normal conversation anymore.

What do you say?

What do you ask?

It wasn't like we had lives to talk about outside that place. Memories equaled more pain, and I wanted to avoid the pain.

“Can I ask you something?” she finally questioned.

“Sure.” Picking at my fingers, I kept my hands in my lap.

I had one ear on her and one on the hall. We had to be careful. If we got caught, I didn't even want to think about what Virgo would do to her.

I wasn't really worried about myself. I had been with him long enough to build up a thick skin to his punishments. The scars I bore were my armor. He couldn't hurt me

anymore than he already had. Death was the only other thing he had, and I knew he would never give me that because it was something I had begged him for.

'You'll always suffer, that's why you were brought to me.' His words were burned into my head, a constant reminder of how he truly saw me.

“Do you think your family is looking for you?”

My heart clenched at her question, turning the muscle to stone. Taking in a labored breath, my eyes closed tightly. The memory of that day flooded my mind, making my body numb.

The answer was simple. No, no one was out there looking for me.

But every once in awhile, I wondered if my siblings questioned where I was. And then I would remember how young they were when we were separated. Odds are, they didn't even realize I existed anymore.

There memories of me had probably faded, becoming more of a dream than a reality that was once viable. My sister was three and my brother was barely a year old, there minds were cleansed of their older sister by now, filled with new memories of whatever life they were living in.

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They're fine and happy. You have to believe that.

“No one is looking for me, no one has ever been looking for me. I'm not one of the lucky ones with a chance out of this hell.”

“Oh,” Aubrey said softly. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be, it's not your fault.” The floor creaked outside my door, causing my back to stiffen. “Shh,” I huffed out quickly.

“Why? What do you hear?”

Boom!

The noise caused my muscles to jerk in surprise.

“Who the fuck are you talking to?” A man's voice came out forcefully.

But he wasn't standing in my room, he was in Aubrey's.

Shit. . .

Snapping up onto my knees, I threw my ear to the wall, pushing it as hard as I could against it. Splaying an open palm on the sheet rock, I wanted desperately to climb through the wall and save her.

It was my idea to talk, not hers. I was the one who had reached out, I was the one

who had decided to break a rule.

This is all my fault.

“N—no one, just myself.”

His feet pounded over the floor, and I heard Aubrey let out a cry that made my stomach jump into my throat.

Her screams could probably be heard through the entire building. It sounded like she was being dragged away and her heels were scraping against the floor, doing their best to keep her inside.

“Let me go! No! No! I didn't do anything!”

Jumping to my feet, I ran to my door and started pounding on it. “It was me! I talked to her! Leave her alone! Take me Asshole!”

A loud bang hit my door, making me jump backwards. “Shut up, Berlin!”

“Leave her alone! It was me! Take me!”

Aubrey was crying loudly, her sobs fading as the man yanked her further and further away, bringing her to receive her punishment.

I stood like a statue in my room, guilt gnawing away at my insides like a rabid dog that killed a squirrel.

This is all my fault. I did this to her.

I didn't have much time to think about what had happened. Within seconds my door

was thrown open and a man named Juno stepped in, grabbing me by the hair.

“You want to see what happens when something's your fault?” Yanking me out of my room, I followed on stumbling feet, doing my best to stay upright. “Let me show you.”

Juno dragged me like a rag doll downstairs, walking me through the hall that led to the basement. I could feel my stomach as it knotted, unsure what the hell was going to happen.

It doesn't matter, you can handle it.

Her screams began to fill the air as we reached the door for the ditch. But Juno didn't open the door, he just held me there, his fingers pressed around the back of my neck, keeping me in place. I listened to her cries for help, I listened to the sound of her being hit, I listened as my choice created scars on her body.

And there was nothing I could do.

Juno loosened his grip, allowing my body to fall. Dropping onto my knees in the center of the hall, I pressed my fingertips to my temples. I wanted to take her pain away, I wanted to cry for what she was going through.

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Yet, I couldn't. My tear ducts were dry as a desert, unable to do a fucking thing anymore.

Raking my nails through my hair, I looked up at the ceiling and prayed.

'If you do exist, you can forget everything I've ever asked of you, if you just let her live. Don't let him kill her too because of me. She doesn't deserve to suffer because of my stupidity.'

It was like I was poison, everything I touched seemed to die around me.

I watched my mother die, my father was probably long gone, my sister and brother were basically figments of my imagination at that point. Even if they were out there somewhere, they were unreachable, they might as well be dead. Samantha had lost her life because she wanted to help me.

Now Aubrey—I wasn't sure she was strong enough to survive.

This only cemented the idea in my head that I had to get out, I needed to get away.

And there was one last option that floated into my fingertips.

It was time to do something big.

Chapter Eight

Salt

Sitting in the darkness, I waited not so patiently for my flower.

That's what she was, she was my flower.

I fucking hated the idea of another man with his hands all over her, his eyes greedily devouring her, trying to take her in ways that weren't meant for anyone else but me.

The second she walked in that door the first night, I knew instantly that I wanted her all for myself. No one else deserved her, not one man on this earth had earned the right to touch her the way I wanted to.

Clenching my jaw at the thought of someone else being skin deep inside her, I buried my fingers into my palms, ready to kill every last one of these motherfuckers inside the building.

She thought I should be afraid of them, but she had it all wrong.

Because I was the one who owned fear. It was mine to give and mine to take, just like the sweet flower I so kindly decided was mine without her permission.

The music was a thorn in my ear, twisting its thin talons into my brain and giving me

a headache. I fucking hated this place. I never even wanted to step foot inside, but shit needed to get taken care of.

An empire had suddenly fallen into my hands. A business that I was born into, a world that was harsh, unforgiving, and perfect for me.

I never really questioned where the darkness in my soul came from, all I knew was that it was there, and it felt fucking good when I could unleash it.

The door split open and I watched silently as my flower entered. Her eyes were huge, trying desperately to seek me out in the room. Smirking to myself, I watched her cautiously close the door, unsure of who she was going to find.

Tonight I wanted more from her. And she was going to give it to me.

But I wouldn't take it by force, no I wouldn't have to.

She was going to give it to me willingly without a second thought.

The thin spikes on her heels made her calves pop as she walked, elongating her legs. My tongue traced my bottom lip as I pictured myself licking her from ankle to thigh, tasting her skin, devouring every inch of her body as she melted in my hands.

“You're back.” Her voice was light, filled with a sliver of happiness. “I wasn't sure I'd see you again.”

I liked the way she sounded right then. Her happiness was real, unlike the forced bravado she tried to use on me the first night. My pulse picked up, causing my cock to jerk at the sweet innocence in her tone.

“Mystery and wonder are funny things, they can make you feel so much, especially

when you're not ready for it.” Smirking, I let my eyes lick her from head to toe. “I also enjoy watching your body come alive and your muscles tense when you realize it's me.”

“Alive—” Cutting herself off, she dipped her head into her chest. “I'm not sure that's what you're seeing. I don't know what it feels like to be alive anymore.”

You will, I promise you that.

The wordless promise sat on my brain like molasses, slowly dripping into every crevasse. I wanted to make her feel so much more than just that; I wanted her body to tremble as I touched it, I wanted her breath to hitch as my lips teased the surface of her skin. I wanted her to know what it felt like to be with a real man.

Her feet clicked over the hard floor as she made her way towards the stage. Climbing up, she ran her fingers through her hair, flipping it off her back. “I'm assuming you just want me to dance, am I right?”

I was infatuated by that girl. The woman with hair the color of copper and eyes so green, they glowed like a black cat's in a dark alley. I couldn't get her out of my fucking head.

But I wasn't there for that, I should have done what I came for right after the plane landed and been long gone, but this woman had dug her nails into my brain, refusing to let me go.

Sitting quietly, I didn't give her an answer.

Wrapping her hand around the pole, she spun in a circle, curling her body around the metal like a snake on a tree limb. Peering at me over her shoulder, she gave me her award winning fake smile.

“Don't,” I said, drawing my lips back into a thin frown.

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“Don't what?” she asked, grinding against the pole, and biting her bottom lip.

“Don't smile unless you mean it.” Glaring at her through the darkness like a hawk at its prey, I watched her expression fall flat. “There's nothing worse than a forced smile.”

Gripping the pole with her hand, she eyed me guardedly. “You know, you're a really confusing man.” Twirling a finger in my direction, her lips pursed. “And I bet you enjoy it too, don't you? Pretending to not want anything, acting like the world is in the palm of your hand.”

“That's because it is.” Adjusting the cuff on my sleeve, I tugged it down. “I'm not confusing. I've been pretty clear with you about what I want.” Stroking my jaw, I slouched into the seat. “I might like games, but I haven't played any with you. . .” Pausing, I let the air dangle between us until I could see her body tense, waiting for me to continue. “Yet.”

“Is that what you think?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. “I think you've done nothing but play games with me.”

“Please, humor me with why.”

“Well,” she said, spreading her legs wide open as she rocked with the beat. “The first night you seemed guarded, the second night you refused to listen to me when I told you to leave, the third you warned me about how dangerous you are, and tonight you just seem settled, as if you own the seat you're sitting in.” Popping her ass, she rode the pole back up. “I'd call that playing games.”

This woman takes notes. She pays attention.

But she's wrong.

“Was I clear about what I wanted every time I was here?”

“Yes.” Nodding her head, her fingers clenched the pole as she twirled.

“Then how I act doesn't matter. If I want to sit and watch, I will. If I want to get up and walk around, I fucking will. If I decide I want you to do a fucking headstand and sing for me. . .” My lip twitched, head angling into my shoulder. “You will.”

“What the hell is the point you're trying to make? That you're in charge? Because I'm pretty sure I made that clear the first day.”

“The point is, you'll know what I want from you, but what I do or how I act is irrelevant. It's that simple.”

“Is it really that simple?” she asked, snapping out her hip as she stood still, her body stiff and rigid.

Pushing my hands into the arm of the chair, I stood myself up and walked to the edge of the stage. Using the very tips of my fingers, I tickled her ankle, gently running my fingers up and down her calf.

“Tell me your name,” I said, tracing the muscle in her calf, circling her ankle and riding the muscle back up.

“I told you already, it's Ash.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Your real name.” My hand kept sweeping up and

down her leg, feeling her silky smooth skin.

Her eyes steadied in the sockets as the question drew out an uncomfortable shudder. Taking a step back, she pulled her leg away. "I can't do that."

"Yes you can."

Curling her arms over her chest, I watched her trying to protect herself. "I can't do that, it's against the rules."

"I make the rules in here, no one else. You told me that, you said the word *no* doesn't exist in here. So, give me what I want, tell me your name."

"Why don't you tell me yours first?"

"Fine," I said, holding out my arms as if I was an open book. Biting my bottom lip, I arched my brows, letting my eyes scan her face. "Bentley, there, now it's your turn."

"I thought you said it was Salt?"

Smirking, I leaned over the stage and took her hand, pulling her back into reach. "It is, that's what other people call me. But I want your real name, so I'm willing to trade, mine for yours."

"Well, I can't, I'm sorry."

"You can and you will." Veering my stare, I tilted my head. "You said before I can have anything I want in here, that's what I want, I want your real name."

Tearing her hand free from mine, her brows dipped into the bridge of her nose. "I told you I can't." Her voice was low as she spoke through clenched teeth. "I can do

anything else for you, but I can't give you my real name.”

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You're going to give me what I want.

Climbing onto the stage, Ash started to back up more, her eyes huge and surprised. Stalking forward, I trapped her against the wall. Cupping her chin, I lifted her face, forcing her eyes onto mine.

“Are you really telling me no?” She didn't answer, she just stared up at me, her skin washing white with concern. “Because bad things happen when people tell me no.”

A shiver ran over her body, the tremble so fierce I felt it zip through the pads of my fingers. Swallowing hard, Ash crooked her jaw, glaring at me with razor sharp eyes.

“Is that a threat?” she asked, her words cold and abrasive.

She's not afraid me.

What have you been through, my flower?

“It's a promise.” Leaning in, I kissed her forehead as my thumb drew small circles over her chin. “And I always keep my promises.”

Parting her lips to speak, I pushed a single finger against her mouth, silencing her from saying a word.

“I want you to think really hard about what you're going to say. Think very carefully about it, because this is the only chance you'll have.”

Her eyes searched my face, but not once did she show any true fear. She was trying to read me, trying to weigh the truthfulness in what I was saying.

Would I really hurt her?

Would I punish her for not listening?

I knew the answers to her questions, but I wasn't going to let her know how far I was willing to go to get what I wanted.

The soft light under the stage caught her skin perfectly, highlighting thin scars on her shoulders. Running the tips of my fingers across one of the lines, I traced the old wound.

Her eyes fell to her shoulder, watching my finger as it moved over more marks, gently admiring the battles she fought.

“Are there more?” I asked.

Sucking in a gulp of air, she pushed my hand away, covering her scars with an open palm. Biting on her cheeks, she glanced over my shoulder, darting her eyes around in the darkness.

“Who did this to you?” I tried to ask delicately, knowing from her eyes that those scars were a source of pain she didn't want to remember. “Was it your boss?”

The girl froze up, her voice no longer audible as she closed her lips and bit the inside of her cheeks harder. Her face had sunken in, her skin glistening in nervous sweat as she tried to weed out the answers she was willing to give and those she couldn't—or wouldn't.

Dancing my fingers across her collarbone, I slid my hand around her throat, coddling it in my palm. My thumb found the thick vein in her neck, her pulse picking up as I applied a little pressure.

“I'm not sure you're understanding how this works.” Angling my head, I lowered my face so our cheeks were touching as I whispered into her ear. “I ask and you answer.” Inhaling a shallow breath, I felt the blood as it was forced through her vein. “Do you need me to explain the rules again?” Squaring my shoulders, I looked down on her, hoping she would give me something.

Licking her lips, her eyes stayed firmly planted on mine. “Berlin.”

“Berlin?” Catching me off guard, I expected her to beg me to let her go, to plead with me not to hurt her.

I wasn't planning on hurting her anymore than was necessary, but I wanted her to feel how serious I was, I wanted her to understand that I'm not a gentleman. I'm a soldier built from titanium, ready and willing to kill for what he wanted.

And I wanted her. I wanted everything from her.

Every detail, every memory, every pain she had ever felt; I wanted all of it.

“That's my name, my real name is Berlin.”

Loosening my grip on her neck, I pulled my hand away. “A pretty name for a pretty girl.” Looking at my watch, I took some money from my pocket and dropped it at her feet. “Time's up. Tell your boss whatever you need to, I've got a meeting to get to.”

Turning around, I jumped off the stage, leaving her with her jaw hanging open and a look of confusion. I went with one purpose that night and that was to get her real

name.

I got what I wanted.

Heading towards the door, I started to pull it open. “Wait,” she called out, swiftly darting to my side. “Let me actually earn this money tonight. I've already lied for you, but I'd feel a little better if I didn't have to lie again.” Her thin fingers ran across the top of my belt as her lids hooded.

“No, you don't need to. I got what I wanted, you gave me your name. I don't need anything else from you.”

“You might not need it from me, but I need it from you. Lying is just as bad, if not worse, than me having money I can't explain.” Lowering her body slowly, she was on her knees and unbuckling my belt.

My brain was screaming to stop her. That paying for sex was one thing I wouldn't do. If she was going to do anything, I wanted her to do it because she wanted to, not because she felt like she had to.

I felt my button as it popped free and heard the metal ping of the zipper as she pulled it down. But I didn't stop her, I let her keep going. It was like the animal inside me had taken over; the one that was raw, greedy, and willing to let her pleasure me.

Don't! Don't let her do this! She really doesn't want to, she just feels she needs to.

Grabbing her wrist, I stopped her from going any further. “This isn't what you want.”

“Who says I don't want this?” she asked, gently biting her lower lip.

Fuck that look. She was like an angel, glowing with a pure sexual prowess I just wanted to destroy. Batting her lashes, she slipped her small hand into my pants and pulled out my hard cock.

I was rock solid, throbbing and pulsing as she wrapped her palm around my shaft and gave me a small smirk. “You want this, I can see that. So let me give it to you, let me give you something because I want to.”

Her hand moved, stroking down my length. With a tight grip, she slipped back up, circling the pad of her thumb across the tip. My muscles shook as hit the tender bundle of nerves, causing goosebumps to explode across my skin.

Cupping her hand, I held her still. “Are you sure you want to do this? Because you don't have to.”

Berlin ran her tongue across the sharp edges of her teeth as her eyes turned sultry, the green in her pupils growing darker. Thrusting her hand back down hard and fast, she pumped my cock, working it like it was a machine.

The fast she went, the thicker my cock grew. I could feel my balls as they drew up, causing my stomach to clench tight. “Fuck, that feels good.” The words spilled from my mouth as my eyes closed.

A warmth circled my erection, causing me to open my eyes and look down. Her plump lips were wrapped around my cock, her eyes open wide as she watched me. Flattening her tongue against the underside of my dick, she sucked me as if she was dying of thirst.

Bobbing her head in and out, she took my length deeper and deeper, until the hair at my base tickled her lips. I could feel the orgasm building, spreading up my chest and around my back.

Grunting, I drove my hand into hair, guiding her head faster, and slamming my cock against the back of her throat.

Berlin made a soft gagging sound, which turned me on even more. My brain was on mute as my body took charge, letting her one little sound send me over the edge.

“I'm going to cum,” I said, clutching her hair tighter. “Fuck, that feels so good.”

Her lips reached my base one last time before I lost complete control, blowing a load of hot cum down her throat. Every nerve in my body tensed up instantly as the orgasm zipped up and down my muscles.

With a loud slurp, Berlin stood up, wiping her lips. “Now I feel better about taking your money.”

“Well you shouldn't, I didn't come here to pay you for this.” Tucking myself back in my pants, I fixed my shirt and buckled my belt. “If I wanted to buy you for sex, we would have done that night one. As far as I'm concerned, that money was for your name.”

I was pissed at myself for falling into the siren's trap. Berlin's sexy lips and award winning curves had somehow found a way to control me. I didn't like it. I didn't like losing control.

“If this isn't what you were working up to, then why the hell do you keep coming back?”

Adjusting my blazer, I took in a deep breath. “I have a meeting to get to, so if you don't mind, I need to go.”

Taking a step towards the door, Berlin's small hand wrapped around my wrist. “You

said before that there were things you could do for me. . .” Pausing, she fumbled with her small skirt, giving me little peeks of her panties underneath. “Did you mean that?”

“I don't say things I don't mean, little flower.”

Berlin reached for my hand, pulling it up and slipping something into my palm. Closing my fingers around the small object, she peered at me for a second. She wanted to say more, I could see it in her eyes, but she didn't. Taking a firm step backwards, she dropped her eyes to the floor.

Opening my hand, I looked at what she had given me. A small white note, folded up into the tiniest square was sitting in my hand.

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“What's—”

“Open it later, not right now, not here.” Our eyes connected, hers suddenly so vulnerable it made my chest tighten.

Tucking the note into my pocket, I opened the door and walked out into the club. Berlin was watching me as I walked away, twisting her toe uncomfortably into the floor.

“Bentley, I'm so glad you made it.” Virgo was waiting outside the door, his hand stretched out for me to shake.

Giving him a firm handshake, I didn't smile. “Virgo, how are you?”

“Good, I'm really good. I see you've indulged yourself with our finest dancer.” Winking, his smile thinned into a sick grin.

Glancing over my shoulder, Berlin stood in shock, her face white as a ghost.

She didn't expect I'd be meeting her boss.

But she would have found out sooner or later, it wasn't a secret that would last for long.

Because monsters don't stay under the bed forever.

Chapter Nine

Berlin

I watched in horror as Virgo and Salt shook hands. Virgo was talking, I couldn't hear what he was saying, but he was obviously so self absorbed in the sound of his own voice he didn't notice the shock on my face.

The door closed slowly as Salt took one last glance at me over his shoulder, his lips taut except for the small crinkle of a smirk pulling up on one side.

What did I just do?

Clutching my chest, I stumbled backwards until I hit the edge of the stage. The room was spinning around me, my lungs were aching to catch a sliver of air. Every breath felt like I was inhaling hot ash.

I'm dead, I'm fucking dead.

Sitting down, I threw my hands to my head as I realized that Salt was working with Virgo. How and why were unknown, but it didn't really matter what the answers were. My life was over.

The note I had placed in his palm was enough for Virgo to kill me twice over. Every nerve in my body was firing off as sweat dripped down my temples and my skin felt

cold and clammy.

I was trying to think of ways to fix it, to take back that note and pretend like it never happened. But there was nothing I could do. I gave it to Salt, he had it in his possession, and there was no getting it back.

Vin knocked on the door as he opened it and stuck his head inside. “Hey, you coming out anytime today?” Snapping my head up to look at him, I gave him a silent nod. Peering at me, he took a small step in, a hint of concern on his face. “What's wrong? Did something happen I should know about?”

Frowning, I shook my head. “No, nothing's wrong, I'm fine.” Stiffening my back, I sucked in a deep breath of air, pretending that I hadn't just fucked up royally. Grabbing the money off the stage, I stalked forward, slapping it against his chest. “Here,” I said, not stopping as I walked right past him.

“What did you do for him?” Vin questioned me as he counted the money, enhancing his voice so it reached me at my table.

“Ask him yourself, he's with Virgo right now.” Dropping into my seat, I looked over at the table Aubrey had been using.

I hadn't seen her since that night. No one had mentioned her name, no one else seemed to even notice her absence except for me. Her table was neat and tidy, all her makeup was stacked and organized the same as she had left it.

Picking at the beds of my nails, the gravity of what was coming my way settled in my chest like a pile of rocks.

I'm so screwed. What the hell was I thinking?

It was a strange feeling I had inside. I thought for a really long time that dying would be a blessing, that I was ready for it, and if it happened, Virgo would be doing me a favor. But that wasn't what I felt right then.

The idea of actually dying, of knowing that it was right there, only an arm's reach away, it brought more fear than comfort. My heart wouldn't stop racing, my body wouldn't stop trembling with cold shivers, the air tasted sour as if I was breathing through the pulp of a lemon.

Knowing death could come tonight, tomorrow, days later if Virgo really wanted to make me sweat; it only made me want to live that much more.

People often say that you can't appreciate what you have until it's gone; but it wasn't this life that I would miss, it was the future I could possibly have. I appreciated the idea that someday I might be freed. I thrived on the idea that I could potentially beat Virgo at his own game.

But I was still just as naive as I had been when I was little girl. I once believed that Virgo knew what was best for me, because he told me to believe him. I once believed that there had to be some good in everyone, because that's what my mother had taught me. I even believed we were the innocent.

I was wrong, just like I had been wrong believing the adults around me.

No one could be trusted, not even me. If I couldn't tell the difference between good and evil, how the hell would I ever function outside of this place?

Virgo had done more than just destroy my past, he destroyed the trust I had in myself.

Lifting my face to look at myself in the mirror, I watched my eyes glisten with lost tears and fallen wishes.

I've been a damn fool.

Resting my hands in my lap, I stared at my reflection, cursing myself for being so fucking stupid. I could never beat Virgo. I could never win this war.

I had lost the battle before I even had the chance to find a weapon. And as a single tear escaped, I watched it trickle down my cheek. I didn't wipe it away, I didn't hurry to suck it back in and lock it up.

That single teardrop was the last bit of myself I had left. And now she was gone, free to roam, free to be whoever she wanted to be, because there was no point in holding onto her anymore.

Closing my eyes, I hung my head, knowing that inside I was truly empty.

The little girl was gone, the woman I could have been was now a single puddled tear, soaking into my skirt. And that feeling of emptiness was enough to turn me numb.

I'll always just be this. . .

The girl with no place in the outside world.

Chapter Ten

Salt

Strumming the sharp corner of the note in my pocket, I leaned back in the chair as Virgo adjusted himself behind his desk and cleared his throat.

Pulling a small wooden box out from inside his desk, he opened the lid and pushed it across the smooth surface. “Cigar?” he asked, taking one for himself and running it under his nose. “They're the best money can buy.”

Crooking my jaw, I nodded and pulled one free from the small humidor. “Thank you.”

Virgo snipped the tip off both cigars with a bold smile on his face. “Your father used to love these.”

“I'm sure he did, my mother hated when he smoked.”

Laughing, Virgo grinned as he sparked a lighter and lit his cigar, passing the flame to me. “That's usually how it goes.” Sucking in a thick stream of smoke, he let it swirl around inside his mouth, rolling the cloud like he was a God. “Your father was a good man, he always followed through, but he was horrible at taking control. That woman held his balls far too tightly.”

“Is that what you think?”

His eyes grew wide as he realized the slew of shit he just sent my way. Holding up his hand, the white smoke spilled out of his mouth. “No offense to your mother of course. I just know how much she got on his ass about certain things. She never did agree with his choices.”

Setting the cigar between my lips, I stared at Virgo with my lids half shut, studying his reaction. He was one of my father's first clients, they had been working side by side for years. They had their system, one that worked for both of them.

So I was certain the fact that I showed up unannounced like that wasn't something he cared for. It probably pissed him off, maybe even made him a bit nervous, and rightfully so.

I was a force to take seriously. When my father lacked the ability to jump in anymore, I had no fear. When my father needed someone to teeter on that thin line of moral value, I was the one who volunteered. Because I wasn't afraid to get my hands dirty. I actually enjoyed playing in the mud.

I called Virgo that morning, told him we needed to speak, and hung up before he could say one fucking word. There wasn't going to be a debate, I had new terms, and this was how it was going to work from now on. Period.

“I'm not here to discuss my family, Virgo.”

“I'm aware that this isn't a vacation.” Relaxing into his seat, he was quiet for a long second. “So what are you here for?”

“My father—”

“My condolences to you and your family,” he said, cutting me off. “Did you receive the flowers I sent?”

“We did.” My voice was low, uninterested in his ploy to show concern for my family after my father's death. “You understand why I'm here then, don't you? You must have some idea about why I'd come all this way to speak with you in person and not just call you instead.”

The end of his cigar lit bright as he drew in a long pull. “I'm sorry, I don't. Your father and I had a deal, I assumed after his death that deal would remain the same. So, honestly, I have no idea why you showed up here like this.”

“You're right, the deal you had was with my father, and unfortunately for you, I'm not him.” Rolling the end of my cigar in the ashtray, I watched the red embers as they flaked off. “My father and I have done a lot for you over the years, but now it's time for a change.”

Virgo's jaw rocked back and forth, and I could hear his teeth as they ground down on each other. “Change?” he asked, but I didn't answer, simply letting my eyes connect with his. “What type of change?”

Pulling a thin stack of folded up papers from the inside pocket of my blazer, I slid them across the desk. “I'll leave these here with you, take a day or so to read them over.” Tapping out the hot end of my cigar, I stood up. “I'll be in touch.”

“Bentley, your father and I go way back.” Standing up from his perch, he pushed his hands into the top of his desk. I could hear the desperation and worry in his voice. “I hope these papers of yours don't start something you can't finish.”

“Like you said, my father had an issue with control, Virgo. Lucky for you, I don't.” Turning my back to him, I headed for the door. “We'll talk soon.”

“If I don't like what I read, we're going to have a problem. I'm not someone who enjoys problems, Bentley.”

Holding the door in my hand, I gave him a smug grin. “And I'm not someone who handles threats well, Virgo. You know I'm really good at what I do, and I know there's not a chance in hell you'd do this shit yourself, or send one of the assholes you have roaming this fucking club. That's why you called my father in the first place. So, I guess we'll have to come to an agreement, won't we?”

Not giving him a chance to answer, I slammed the door shut as I walked out.

The man standing guard outside the door, jumped in surprise, shooting me a disgruntled look.

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“Don't worry, I didn't kill him—” Stopping to adjust my jacket, I flipped up the collar. “Yet.”

* * * *

Salt,

I know, even as I write this letter, that my life means nothing to you. You don't know me and you have no reason to believe a word I tell you. But putting pen to paper like this could very well get me killed.

And I'm willing to risk that, because I have to believe in something.

So here I am, spilling my guts to a stranger, trapped in this place like a caged rat, willing to put my life in your hands.

When I met you, there was something about you that was different. I don't know if that's a good thing or not, because I don't know a damn thing about who you really are.

But you gave me something I haven't had in years, you gave me hope.

It's been so long since I've felt that, and this was the only thing I could do with that feeling.

You're probably wondering what the point of this is, but it's simple. I need your help.

This place isn't what you might think it is. It's all smoke and mirrors.

I didn't come here by choice, I'm not a poor girl who needed to make a quick buck. I didn't agree to sell my body and I never would. But it isn't up to me, because I'm not free, I'm owned.

You told me there were things you could do for me, and if that's true, then I need your help now more than ever.

Please set us free.

If you are the man I hope and feel you are, then you'll know what to do.

Either way, no matter what you're thinking or what you decide, I still say thank you. Thank you for giving me something back that I had lost a long time ago.

It means more than you could ever imagine.

—Drowning Girl

Folding up her note, I set it on my chest and stared up at the ceiling in my hotel room. Her words hit a nerve, they filled me with an endless hate for Virgo. I never really liked the guy, I always thought of him as a piece of shit, but what he did was never my business before. My family was paid for a service and we provided it. The ink was set, no questions were ever asked.

Now I had the voice and power to do all kinds of things.

You'll start a war. . .

And I'll end one too.

My brain was playing a game of tug of war, going back and forth between what was right and what was wrong. I felt strange, this foreign feeling of concern had started to work its way through my body.

It doesn't matter, it's not your place.

This wasn't my home, I had no business getting involved in such matters. What he did on his own grounds wasn't my concern. So long as it didn't trickle down onto me and my business, I shouldn't give a fuck.

But this shit, it didn't sit right, it made me uncomfortable, and it always had. When my father ran things, he was the one who decided who we worked with, what jobs we would take, and who would execute them.

Now it was all on me. I didn't have to look the other way, because I was the one who held all the power.

Laying my arm over my head, I picked up Berlin's letter and read it again, then I read it a third a time. The woman was desperate, and she had no clue she was reaching out to a man that in all forms was just as bad as her owner.

You're not like him, you don't sell women. . .

But we're both evil, we take lives, we don't give them.

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Closing my eyes, my hands trembled no matter how much I tried to steady them. My mind kept wandering to how deep in this whole thing I was willing to go. I had only come to set new terms, and now I was staring down the barrel of my own gun.

I knew what Virgo had for protection, because we were the ones who supplied it. Every gun and bullet he owned came from my father. Any time he needed to make someone who screwed him over disappear, my family would step in.

It wasn't a pretty business, but it was profitable. The people I worked with went from high power government officials to low life scum. As long as they had the means to fund it, I had the power to make it happen.

But this fucking woman had seeped into my head, making it hard to concentrate, forcing me stick around a lot longer than I wanted to.

When she said I was playing games, I didn't want to admit she was right. Because once I laid eyes on her, my whole purpose for that fucking trip suddenly changed.

My body was holding me there, making me go back over and over to see her. All I could think about was touching her, caressing her, making her scream.

But that was before I knew just how unhappy she was. What Virgo did wasn't a mystery to me, but maybe I had always been too ignorant to realize that none of it was consensual.

You knew, you just chose to ignore it.

I turned my head, never looking any deeper than the surface. I saw the girls, I saw a stage, I saw women with a fake smile and flirty tongues. But I never stopped to actually see the truth. That was what my father had taught me to do, don't stick my nose where it doesn't belong.

And then I met her. I watched her dance on that stage the first night while I sat in the shadows. I knew her place, and still I let her pull me in with her endless curves and sexy, pouty lips. Her body moved in ways that made my blood surge through the veins and my cock thicken.

I want to fucking kill him.

The idea of just making it easy and killing Virgo weighed heavily on my mind. But that could come with a price.

What I did went well beyond a service for hire. I was supposed to be in the shadows, an unknown name that would come in and take care of a problem. There shouldn't be any links to the person that hired me and no trail that would lead back in my direction.

But it was impossible for me to know what notes Virgo had, who he had told about me, and how much his men knew, or what they would do if I just took out their boss.

I had to play nice, at least for now. I wouldn't risk my life for his.

That doesn't mean she's not worth the fight. . .

Berlin's desperate attempt to seek my help made my chest hurt like someone was squeezing the muscle hidden behind my ribs. Each beat was a struggle, painful and wretched like my heart was turning to stone.

Forget it, forget her. She's not worth the trouble.

Going to war was out of the question.

It wasn't worth it for just one girl.

Chapter Eleven

Berlin

Ididn't sleep at all, I couldn't.

Every noise made me jump, every creek made my body tense, anticipating the door to fly open at any moment, and for one of his men to drag me away.

I couldn't stop looking over my shoulder, watching and waiting for the hammer to drop.

But nothing came.

Staring in the mirror, my eyes were puffy and swollen with dark purple rings underneath. My face was droopy, the color of my skin dull and gray from pure exhaustion. Splashing my face with cold water, I wiped it clean and walked back out into the dressing room.

Vinchenzo was standing at my table, his arms crossed over his chest. "You look like shit, Berlin."

"Thanks, that was the look I was going for." Glancing up at him under hooded lids, my lips folded. "Are you going to stand in my way all night or do want me to get ready?"

Taking a wide step to the side, he lifted the back of his hand up and touched my forehead. Swatting him away, I glared at him with jagged angry brows.

“Just checking to see if you have a fever,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“I'm not sick, I'm tired.”

“What's wrong?” he asked with a slight smirk on his face, as if this was some type of joke. “Not sleeping well? Do you want to take a sick day?”

Crooking my jaw, I tilted my head. “Are you fucking serious? Sleeping well. . .” Letting out a condescending laugh, I rolled my eyes. “You're right, knowing this is my life should make me sleep like a baby.”

Vin pressed the back of his knuckles into my table as he loomed over me. “Don't be a smart ass, Berlin.” His voice was cold, the playful tone erased. His words were rough and annoyed as he thinned his lips. “You know what will happen. And I know neither one of us wants that.”

“Like I care anymore.” Laying my face flat on the table, I pinched my eyes closed. “Go on, go tell him, let him do whatever the hell he wants to with me. I really don't give a shit at this point.”

I heard the soft scrape of the chair behind Vin, causing me to sit up quickly. Leaning back, I looked around his thick torso to see Aubrey slipping into her seat. She was moving slowly, lowering down as if her entire body was broken.

Vin glanced between us, letting his eyes settle back on mine. Moving his face to my ear, he whispered. “She's lucky she's alive, you and I both know that. Don't get her in trouble again. You're on thin ice, the last thing you want is to fall through.” The phone on his hip rang, so he tugged it free, and looked at the screen. “You're on in

twenty minutes, Berlin, I suggest you get ready.”

Walking off, I heard him answer the call, talking quietly as he moved through the room checking on the rest of the girls.

Waiting for him to be out of ear shot, I looked back at Aubrey. She had bruises that looked like finger prints across her biceps and large red scratches on the side of her neck. There were tears in her flesh going down her back, most of them scabbed over and deep red.

“You alright?” I asked, my voice low enough so that only she could hear me.

Shifting her eyes to look at me from the corner, there was so much pain on her face. Her eyes were apathetic and bloodshot, filled with all the terror that she went through while she was away.

I had the scars to remind me of my own defiance, and the memories to create nightmares no one would ever wish on their worst enemy.

Touching my shoulder, I ran my fingertips over the same path that Salt had stroked. My skin tingled as I remembered how gentle his touch had been when he felt the raised area.

Peering at Aubrey, I gave her a smile. “I’m glad you’re back.” My voice was delicate and grateful that Virgo hadn’t killed her because of my foolishness. I wasn’t sure how I would handle another death at my hands.

Her eyes held nothing; no silent smile, no hate filled curse words, she was just an empty shell. My heart broke inside, knowing that it was all my fault she had to go through that shit.

You ruined her. You broke her. You destroyed her.

My smile faded into a line as thin as paper. Mouthing the words, 'I'm sorry,' I let my gaze fall to my lap.

I never meant to cause her that pain. But I did. It was all my fault and I suffered no punishment for it.

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Virgo obviously knew that I was involved. And yet no one came to deliver my punishment, not for this, and not for the note either.

Maybe Salt just threw it away. . .

Or maybe it's just a waiting game until it's my turn to feel the wrath.

Salt and Virgo knew each other. They had shaken hands, which meant that Salt had some sort of loyalty to him, where he owed me nothing. He couldn't be a good man. He couldn't be the man I hoped he was. There was no more kindness in his bones than there was in a hollow cave.

Putting on my makeup, I didn't look at Aubrey again. I let go of the idea of making a friend, I let go of the idea of having someone on my side, I let go of her.

Because there was no point in trying to create a normalcy that would never exist.

I could help her about as much as I could help myself. We were both going to die in that fucking place one way or another. Either by the hands of Virgo, or by a man he sold us to. We were never getting out of this world, at least not on our own two feet.

Finishing my dance on stage, I started towards my table. The music was loud, the bass buzzing across my skin, giving me a chill. Rubbing my hands up and down my arms, I watched my feet as I walked.

“Hello, sweet girl.” Virgo's voice radiated around me, making my head snap up. “How has your night been going?”

I did my best to not look him directly in the eyes, simply dancing around his pupils in the sockets. “Same as usual,” I said, keeping my tone steady.

His smile made my stomach turn as he pulled out my seat and waved for me to sit down. Doing as he requested, I sat in the chair, allowing him to push me in.

I felt his hands as they squeezed my shoulders, massaging the muscles. Digging his fingertips deep into my skin, he worked his hands down my back. “You're so tense, Berlin, you need to relax.”

Forcing a slight smile, I watched him in the mirror, not reacting to the vile feelings flooding my veins.

I hated his hands on my body, I hated the scent of his cologne and the roughness of his skin against mine. I hated having to look at his face and listen to his voice. I hated everything about him.

“We need to talk,” he said as his fingers stretched down over my collarbone, gently gripping the base of my neck.

I could feel the threat in his touch. He moved with the weight of a feather, fluttering the pads of his fingers across my skin, manipulating his face into an evil grin as his fingers moved closer to the center of my throat.

Holding my breath, I nodded for him to continue, unsure if this would be the moment I had waited for.

Was he going to tell me he knew about the note I wrote asking for help?

Was he going to whisper my death sentence into my ear, excited to see the expression on my face?

I sat silent, his touch hot as fire on my skin, singeing me like the burning end of a cigarette. I couldn't take a breath. There was a shimmer in his eyes, it was small, but enough for me to know there was something on his mind and it wasn't good.

“Berlin, you and I have a history. You know me better than anyone else, and that thought is unsettling.” His mouth crinkled tight as he pursed his lips. “No one should know me better than me, especially not some cunt.”

Flaring my nostrils, I still stayed silent.

His smile returned. Baring his teeth, Virgo ran his tongue across the sharp edges as his lips reached up towards his eyes.

“Did I just offend you?” Dropping his head down, he rested his chin on my shoulder, pressing his cheek to mine. “Do you not like it that I called you a cunt?” He watched me carefully in the mirror, walking his fingers down my ribs and tracing the outside of my breast. “You never scream anymore, you never cry anymore, but I say one word and you look like you want to fucking kill me. I would think that a silly little name like that would be the least of your worries, Berlin.”

Jerking my body, I swallowed the onslaught of words I wanted to throw in his face, trading them for a much lighter question. “What do you want to talk about?”

“The man who was here the other day, do you know who he is?”

Fuck, here it comes.

“No,” I said sternly.

“He was the same man who paid you before for doing nothing, wasn't he?”

Don't lie, there's no point. He might be testing you.

“He was.”

I heard him suck in a sharp gulp of air. “But he never told you his name?”

“No.” I lied.

He obviously knows! Why are you lying?

Dragging a single finger up my arm, Virgo traced my shoulder, following the lean muscle in my neck. “You know, you're not a good liar, you never were. I know you just as well as you know me, Berlin. That's what happens when two people spend so much time together.” His finger kept moving, drawing up bile from my stomach as he reached my chin. Pinching the sides of my cheeks with his fingers hard, he twisted my face to his. “You're lying to me. I can see it all over that cunt face of yours.”

My lids dropped down as my eyes turned to pinpricks. “If you know me so well, then you'd know I'm telling you the truth.”

What the hell am I doing? Am I just begging him to kill me now?

I couldn't stop the lies. But in the same breath, I wasn't willing to bow to that man and let him know he was right.

Walking his fingers across my face like a spider, my skin tickled with a sensation that I wanted to swat away. Reaching my hair, he dug in hard, jerking my head back.

I could feel the hair being torn from my scalp as he tightened his grasp. His eyes

blackened, the dark abyss spread like liquid, filling in any color that was there. Gritting his teeth, he growled, tugging my head back further, harder, to the point I thought my neck might snap.

My eyes were open wide, filling with water as the tension on my head began to burn. I couldn't move, I was trapped beneath his devilish face as he glared at me with death in his eyes.

“I should fucking kill you right here,” he said through his teeth, spraying my face with small droplets of spit. “Don't fucking lie to me, I know he said something to you.”

Shaking my head in disagreement lazily, my eyes caught a glimpse of Aubrey. Her face was frozen with fear. But that fear she had, it only made me want to be stronger. I wanted to show her that you could stand up for yourself, and sometimes you had to, regardless of the punishment.

We weren't livestock, we weren't put on this earth for him to profit. I was a woman, not his fucking merchandise.

“Then kill me.” Keeping my eyes firmly on his, I barked, “I told you he didn't say shit to me, so if you choose not to believe me, then fucking kill me already.” My breathing increased, chest rising and falling heavily as I curled my fingers around the bottom of my chair and braced myself. “Come on! What are you waiting for?”

Virgo studied me, watching my eyes, watching for any sign that I was lying through my teeth. Swallowing hard, I took in slow breaths, waiting for him to do whatever the hell he was planning.

Throwing my head away, he snapped his back straight and ran his hands over his hair. “Good girl,” he said, fixing his suit and looking around. “If he comes in again, I

want to know. You do nothing for him, not a fucking thing. Do you understand?"

He doesn't know. He believes me.

"Yes."

Virgo searched for Vin, waving his hand for him to follow him. The two men went off to a solitary corner, where I watched Virgo give him orders, his hands moving around nervously as he spoke. I had never seen Virgo look so unnerved before. Not once had he ever told me to deny services to anyone, especially when the money was so good.

Bentley wasn't just a man, he was a power, one that made my handler anxious and uncomfortable. It made me question just how dangerous he really was. He warned me, he told me that he was the one to be feared.

But I didn't have a reason to believe it until right then.

I couldn't help but wonder what had happened between them. I watched them shake hands, I watched Virgo smile and pat him on the back as they walked off together like they were friends.

But today the friendly mask had been yanked free, tossed into the trash and forgotten as quickly as it appeared.

Who exactly is that man?

And what the hell was I thinking asking him for help?

Chapter Twelve

Berlin

Sitting in my room, the silence from Aubrey was killing me inside. I thought I'd hear her crying, I expected her to be sobbing harder than when she had been dragged in there.

I heard nothing.

Stepping to the wall, I pushed my ear against it. I knew I shouldn't, I knew I should have just gone to bed and forgotten all about the girl next door, but I couldn't. Not until I apologized for what I had done.

Softly tapping the wall, I listened carefully, not expecting anything back from her. I could hear some rustling and the squeak of her mattress. Through the bottom of my feet, I felt the floor vibrate as Aubrey crossed her room.

She didn't speak, she didn't tap, but I knew she was there listening. I could sense her, I could feel the weight of her body on the wall.

With my voice soft and low, I whispered. "I just want you to know I'm sorry. I never meant for you to get hurt." Laying my cheek flat against the wall, I shut my eyes. "I hope you get out of here one day, and I promise, if I ever get out, I'll come back for you."

“No,” she said, her voice stern, taking me by surprise. “You won't come back, you'll run, you'll save yourself. I don't want you getting killed because you tried to save me.”

“Shh,” I hushed to her. She was talking too loudly and I was afraid that someone would hear her.

If she got caught talking again, there was no doubt in my mind that Virgo would kill her. He tolerated very little. I was certain the only reason I was still alive was because of how long he had me.

Virgo looked down on me, he treated me like shit, but he always gave me another chance. It was as if he refused to accept that he failed with me, still hoping he could manipulate me into that mindless puppet he always dreamed I'd be.

But other girls, girls who had trouble falling in line, they weren't given room for any extra chances. They got a single do over, that it was it. This was her fresh start, she didn't have any left.

“I don't care, this isn't your fault. It's his fault, he chose to do this to me, not you.”

Taking in a deep breath, I hung my head. “Aubrey—”

“No, Berlin, promise me if you ever get out, you'll just run.”

“I'm not—”

“Promise me,” she said, her tone strong and rigid.

Sucking in a gasp of air, I bit my bottom lip, unable to give her such a promise. I could never promise her that I wouldn't risk everything to save her and everyone else

there. It wasn't right, it wasn't what I felt.

I knew deep down that if I had the opportunity, I would take it. I'd die just so all the other girls could go free. There was no one waiting for me outside of this horrible place, I had no family to run back to.

But most of those girls did. They had mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, people who were probably worried to death and searching day and night for them.

I would gladly trade my life for theirs.

The sharp creak of the floor outside my door caught my attention, making my spine jerk straight. Tipping my head towards the hall, I listened carefully as I watched the door for movement.

Holding my breath, my eyes steadied on the handle as the metallic ping of the lock rang through the air and the door busted open in one wild whoosh.

Taking a jump backwards, the void of the doorway was filled by one of Virgo's men, his shoulders almost touching each side of the frame.

He went by the name Blue, and he was one of the assholes who never blinked at an order. Virgo let him punish me once, and I swear, he smiled the entire time.

“What the hell do you want? Why are you here?” I asked, keeping my eyes on the man as I backed up further into my room.

“You're coming with me.” His voice was harsh and deep as he started forward, walking straight towards me.

“I'm not going anywhere, not until you tell me why.”

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Letting out a husky laugh, he growled. "I don't need to tell you shit."

With long hard steps, Blue swept across the floor in a flash, curling his arms around my waist. My instinct to fight kicked in, causing me to swing, lashing out as hard as I could.

"No! Let me go!" Scratching with my nails, I caught the side of his cheek, feeling his skin rip open as my fingers raked down.

But he didn't flinch, he didn't yell, he didn't teeter on his heels. Blue laughed, releasing me for a mere second to wipe the blood off his face, only to reinsert his fist into my hair.

Tearing my head back, he cocked his fist, letting it rest in the air long enough for me to know what was coming next. Clutching my hair tighter, he let his arm go, driving it right into my face.

I felt his knuckles as they connected with my eye, each one seemingly designed to strike me on their own. The sound that came out of his mouth as he hit me made me cower, worried that there were more on the way.

Covering my face with my hands, I tucked my head under my arm, hoping that I'd be able to block any more punches.

But he didn't hit me again, he traded the violence for an eerie silence, relaxing his arm at his side.

“Why are you doing this? What's going on?” Peeking my eyes out cautiously, I braced myself.

Blue laughed, his smile cold and pleased all in the same breath. He enjoyed watching me fear his strength, he was proud of himself for how he made me feel. Staying silent, he turned in one giant swoop, snapping my neck and yanking me along.

Trying to stay on my feet, I wrapped both my hands around his thick wrist and dug my heels into the floor. “No! I'm not going with you!”

Blue was too strong, jerking my head with a single yank, causing me to fall onto my knees. Keeping his head on the door, he moved like he was rolling a suitcase behind him and not a living person.

“Stop! Let me go!” My screams went unheard as my knees buckled beneath me, forcing my body to flop straight as a board. “No! I won't go! Let go of me!” Kicking my legs, I tried to pull his fingers out of my hair, using my nails to pinch and claw at his wrist.

What is he doing? Where the hell is he taking me?

Aubrey was pounding on the wall, her voice shrill as she screamed at the top of her lungs for him to let me go. He ignored her completely, un-phased by her sounds echoing through the hall.

The thud of her fists on the wall soon began to fade as Blue pulled me further and further away from my room.

Reaching the stairs, he stopped and looked down at me over his shoulder. “Are you ready to walk on your own, or are you going to make me drag you down the stairs too?”

“Fuck you,” I said, my breathing heavy and fast paced as my eyes turned to slits.

“Fine, have it your way.” Blue started down the steps, my body dangling behind him.

I felt every step as my body bounced off it. My hips hit the hard edge, the small of back scraped the wood, forcing splinters into my skin.

Except, I didn't scream in pain, I stayed strong. Refusing to give him the satisfaction, forgoing the fucking sick pleasure he would get out of knowing he was hurting me.

You won't break me! I won't let you!

The screams remained in my head, replaced by action. I fought. I fought him just as I had fought every other man that had ever come for me.

Grunting and groaning, I did everything I could, not giving up on getting free. My fingers scratched and sliced at his wrist, my legs flailed, bucking with all the force I could. I had no idea what was going on, I had no clue why he had come to get me.

Yes you do.

He didn't have to tell me. Virgo knew what I had done, and it was time for me to pay for it. He was a man who loved games, and him forcing the anxiety to flow through my veins as I waited for my punishment was his playtime with me.

Reaching the bottom, Blue curled his free hand into my hair, and pulled me to my feet. “Time to walk, Berlin.” Slinking his fingers down my neck, he gripped me around my throat and pushed me forward.

We walked through the house, down a long hall that lead to the basement. I hated going down that hall, I hated the feeling that came over me when I got close to that

door. It made my mind go back to that first night in the states when I was brought to Virgo's home.

Blindfolded with my hands tied, my poor nine year old self was petrified. I heard Virgo's voice first, a deep grunt that ricocheted through my skull like an ax splitting wood.

'What's this?' he asked as I felt him stalk around me like a shark circling its prey.

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'This is the eldest child,' a man said.

'Why do you have her?'

'You wanted answers, April wasn't talking.'

'And?'

'And we did what you asked us to do.'

'So she's. . .'

'Yes, do I need to spell it out for you?' I heard a weighted breath, feeling the man beside me shift on his feet. 'But just so we're clear, I'm never doing that again. It's not what we do.'

'Don't worry, you'll be paid accordingly, you'll forget all about it when you're eating caviar and drinking gold. But, what about her father?' Virgo asked, softly lifting a lock of my hair and spinning it around his fingers.

'We still don't know where he is, but we'll find him.'

'You need to find the shit stain, Trent. That's all I want.' His voice was sharp, angry and upset. I felt him slide his hand underneath the crease of my arm, the tips of his fingers ice cold, sending a rush of chills down my spine. 'I'll take her, she might be useful.'

'Are you sure? Because I can take—'

'I told you, I'll take her.'

Leading me down a long flight of stairs, I could see a sliver of the steps through a small crack in the bottom of my blindfold. Reaching the bottom, Virgo tore the cloth off, forcing the light to blind me.

Blinking hard, I tried to focus on where I was. There was a light bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling, dangling back and forth on a thin wire. It smelled musty, like wet clothes that had been left in the washer for days.

Virgo took a step back, his smile thick and coy as he tilted his head and examined me. His fingers ran through my hair, gripping my chin and tipping it up to look at my face. His eyes studied every detail, but he didn't say a word.

'Do you know where your father is, little girl?' I had no words, shaking my head no to answer him. 'Are you sure about that?' he asked, arching a brow.

It felt like I couldn't find my voice. There was no air in my lungs to make a sound, no saliva on my tongue to wet my lips. So I shook my head no again.

'No? Well, let's make this a little easier for you. I know I'm a stranger, so how about I tell you my name, this way I'm not a stranger anymore.' His lips lifted higher as he crossed his arms over his chest. 'I'm Virgo.'

'Where am I?' I finally asked, my voice weak and frail as I spoke. I could feel the tears as they welled up, bubbling over the surface. Blinking once, the large drops fell down my cheeks one after the other. 'Where are my brother and sister?'

'Don't cry, sweet child, your tears will get you nothing here.' Running a thumb

beneath my eye, he dipped down so we were face to face. 'I don't know anything about your brother and sister, but what I do know is that you're home now, sweet girl.'

The way he said it made me cry harder. The pit in my stomach exploded into dry heaves as I gagged between breaths. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think, I couldn't run away.

I was trapped in a place that was unfamiliar with a man who scared me to death. A man who would make me the center of his fucked up existence, training me for a future that felt more like being strangled than being alive.

And that feeling, it stayed with me. Every time I was near the basement, or he threw me in the ditch, that feeling would come back. It made me sick, it made me hate him over and over again.

Blue stopped short, knocking on one of the doors. There was movement inside, I could hear rustling and the sound of someone walking around. My heart was beating in my throat and my chest was swelling like a hot air balloon.

The door opened slowly, exposing a sweaty and flushed Virgo. Buttoning up his shirt, he glanced between Blue and myself. "Is it time?" he asked, running his fingers through his hair to fix it.

"You said he would be here at eleven, it's ten of."

"Mm," Virgo grunted, checking his watch. "Well, perfect timing then. I'm done here anyway." Looking over his shoulder, he spoke to someone else. "Now you're ready." His eyes moved back to me, his smile bold and sinister. "Give the new girl a nice smile, Berlin, she's just been inducted as one of our own."

Virgo turned sideways, allowing me to see inside. There was a young girl curled up

in a ball on the bed, her tears fresh and streaming down her cheeks like roaring rapids. Her gaze was wide and full of sadness as our eyes connected.

Another one. Another poor girl who will have to suffer until she is bought or worse.

This was his ritual, it was how he showed his power and authority, letting you know he was in charge. Virgo always had the first turn with a new girl. He got her before anyone else, and he liked to joke at times about the men in club getting his sloppy seconds.

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It made me sick, it filled me with so much disgust, and my experience was no different than hers. Except I fought. I fought and I didn't stop fighting until everything went black.

And I was thankful for that.

But the memory of what happened before everything shut down, burned me from the inside out. I felt so disgusting after, so violated and ruined.

Shadowed fingers traced my shoulder, causing me to look at my arm. Flashes of that night began to pop into my head, taking me back in time, to that single moment where a monster stole my innocence.

* * * *

'You know what day it is, my sweet child?' Virgo asked, gently closing the basement door. 'It's your birthday, the day I took you in, the day I decided you belonged to me.'

'It's not my birthday, my birthday—'

Cutting me off, Virgo laughed out loud. 'When will you learn, Berlin? Your life before doesn't exist, not anymore. You were nine when you came into my hands, a small frightened girl, so lost and alone. Today you're eighteen, you're. . .' Pausing, his smile glistened with excitement as if he had been waiting for this day for years. 'A woman,' he finally said as his feet hit the basement floor.

Climbing off my cot, I kept my eyes on him as I walked backwards. 'What's your

point?' I asked, trying to search around in the dimly lit room for anything I could use as protection.

He had gloated about this day for the last two years, talking about it like it was Genesis, a day of reckoning, as if a whole new world was about to open up. I guess I could thank that man, Machi, for allowing me to keep my virginity for this long.

His threat was heard, it was enforced, it was the only time I had seen Virgo show a hint of fear.

'How many times have I warned you about that attitude?' Virgo took gingerly steps in my direction, slowly unbuttoning his shirt with each stride. 'Today things change, today you start your new beginning.'

'Stop right there!' I yelled, knowing exactly what he meant. 'Stay away from me!'

'Or what?' he asked, his smile thickening as moved like a snake across the floor. He stepped with power, making it clear that what I wanted didn't matter. 'You've known this day was coming, stop acting like a fucking bitch.'

Moving against the back wall, I felt around with my hands, praying that something would jump out for me to grab. 'I'm warning you, don't come any closer!'

His chuckle sent shivers down my spine as his eyes twinkled in the shadows. 'The more you fight, the more it's going to hurt.'

'I don't care, I won't let you fucking touch me. You'll never fucking touch me. I've done what you asked. I've been quiet, I've followed the rules, but this! I won't let you!'

Stopping a few feet away, he gripped his belt and unbuckled it, pulling it out of the

loops with ease. 'You're being very disrespectful right now, I don't like it.' Folding the belt over his hand, he clutched it firmly. 'Come here.'

'No!'

'I won't tell you again.'

'Fuck you!'

'I warned you about that, you sound like a cheap whore. And cheap whores get punished for talking with filthy mouths.' Throwing his arm out, he whipped me across the top of my thighs with the leather belt.

I felt the material first, then the stabbing burn that radiated over my skin. The welt began to swell instantly, but he just kept coming.

Strike after strike, Virgo slapped my bare legs. Each lashing the skin turned red and raw, and I could feel warm blood trickling down my calves.

Moving against the wall, I tried to cover my body the best I could. My eyes kept scanning, looking for anything I could use as weapon. With my back to the old brick wall, I turned around, squishing my chest into the rock as he continued to hit me.

Pressing my palms into the wall, I felt a brick as it moved loosely in place. I didn't have to think about it, my brain knew what to do instantly. Working the small stone free, I gripped it in my palm.

'Stop! Just stop!' I screamed, jerking my body around quickly and chucking the brick blindly in his direction.

'Fuck!' Virgo yelled, dropping his belt to the ground and grabbing his face.

I stood stunned, unsure if he was screwing with me to make me drop my guard, or if I had actually hit him.

Pulling his hand away, blood was spilling from a wound under his eye. 'You little fucking bitch.' Grinding his teeth, he glared at me.

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'Kill me! Go on, just kill me already! I can't live like this!'

Growling, Virgo charged forward, curling both his hands around my throat before I could even react. 'Kill you?' Whispering through his teeth, his eyes turned to ice. 'Killing you would be too easy, I'm going to make your life living hell.'

The air thinned, the room swayed, growing fuzzy and purple as he kept squeezing. Raking my fingers over his wrists, I tried to pull him off, but it didn't work.

The look in his eyes was terrifying. There was nothing there. No emotion, no care, no love. All I saw was control.

The room slowly began to fade, and for a moment I was actually happy. I thought I was leaving for good, I thought I was going to see my mother again.

I thought I was going to be free. . .

I was none of those things.

Opening my eyes, I was laying in my bed, with the old blanket pulled up to my chin. My body hurt all over, my throat was sore and scratchy, but I wasn't dead.

Sitting up, I felt different. It was a feeling I couldn't explain, but one that a girl just knows deep inside her being.

Removing the blankets from my lap, a small pool of blood was on the sheet between my legs. Leaning my head over the side of the bed, I threw up all over the floor.

He had done the unthinkable. He had taken me without permission. He had taken me while I was unconscious and couldn't fight.

He was a fucking monster.

And that was when I knew I had been captured by pure evil.

* * * *

Virgo chuckled, drawing me back into reality as he looked between the frightened girl and myself. “This is Blue, he's going to show you to your room. Don't forget what I told you, listening keeps you safe, fighting gets you hurt.” Winking at the girl, Virgo let Blue pass by. Holding out his arm for me to take, he said, “You've seen better days. I take it you weren't too happy to see Blue at your door.” His laugh sent chills up my spine as he glanced over my new bruises and open cuts. Wriggling his arm, he let out an annoyed sigh. “Come on, I don't have all day.”

“What's going on?” I asked, nervously fiddling with my hands, reluctant to place my arm in his. “Why do you need me right now?”

“It's business, Berlin, that's all I'm going to tell you. Come,” he said, jerking his head and moving his arm. “Take my arm before I get angry.”

Slipping my arm into his, I let him lead me back the way I had come. Looking over my shoulder, I spotted the basement door, and was relieved to be walking away from it.

What the hell is happening here?

Virgo caught me, following my gaze. “Did you think you were in trouble?” he asked as the corner of his lip twitched up with a smirk.

“What was I suppose to think?”

“Did you do something I need to know about?” I didn't answer, allowing my eyes to float to his. “I know about the stunt you pulled with Aubrey, and I was going to punish you too, but then I thought it would be more fun to give her a few extra instead.”

Clenching my jaw, I veered my stare. “It should have been me, not her.”

“You're right, it should have been. But she wouldn't put any blame on you, so I guess you can thank her for that.”

She's stronger than I thought.

“What business do you have with me?” Watching the floor as we walked, I stepped over small cracks in the concrete, wishing I was thin enough to slip through and disappear.

Is he selling me? Is that what this is all about?

Virgo didn't answer as he took a corner and stopped. Nodding at the guard outside the door, he asked, “Is he here yet?”

“Not yet.”

He? Who is he talking about?

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“Perfect.” Smiling down at me, he lifted his hand to my arm and patted it. “You're going to love this, Berlin.”

The guard opened the door, stepping out of the way to let us in. Entering the room, I looked around. It was a new place to me, one of the few rooms I hadn't had the luxury of seeing before.

There was a long wooden table in the center, with several chairs placed around the outside. A thick oriental rug was beneath the table, and the walls had pictures of old Italian relics.

What the hell is this room for?

There was a recreation of the Volto Santo and the Shroud of Turlin. A painting of the Villa of Mysteries was hanging on the wall behind the table. My eyes were scanning each image, taken by the beauty and ironic nature of them being in Virgo's hands.

So much beauty for such a dark place.

“Beautiful isn't it?” he asked, walking up to an image of a woman on a horse and admiring her. Nodding in agreement, I stepped to one of a woman standing on the crest of a wave. “That's Venus,” he said, walking up beside me, his eyes mesmerized. “This painting is suppose to show her actual birth from the sea.”

“Why do you have this?” I asked, unsure how something so breathtaking fit into his world.

All I saw was darkness, a black hole that kept swirling and swirling, growing stronger every minute. I didn't see beauty, I didn't see color or shapes.

“Because I give life, Berlin, just like the sea gave her life. I take a seed and grow a flower, I formed everything in this place, just me. Without me, you'd have nothing.”

He said it as if I should be grateful for him, like he had given me something to cherish. He wasn't God, he was the Devil. He destroyed life, he tore it to pieces and put it back together like a shattered vase, and he expected that vase to still hold water.

I held nothing, I was too broken to be filled. All of us were, and yet he thought of himself as a creator.

Without you I'd actually be living.

My mouth opened to speak, but a knock on the door stopped me. Virgo turned to look at the door as it opened. The guard stuck his head inside, and said, “He's here.”

“Good, send him in.” Virgo swirled his hand in the air as he gripped my arm and guided me over to the table. “This is going to be fun. I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” I asked as he pulled out a chair and pushed me down.

Smiling, his eyes twinkled with an evil glow, but he didn't answer, simply pulling out a chair for himself at the head of the table and sitting down. Steepling his fingers, he watched me carefully as his smile widened.

Leaning forward, I asked him again. “What surprise, Virgo?”

Left in silence, my heart started to pound as he let his eyes shift off of me and onto the door. He refused to answer me, leaving my mind to tumble and whirl with

questions.

Why am I here?

What does he want from me?

What is the surprise?

There was no way for me to know. Not if he didn't tell me.

All I could was wonder. . .

Until the door opened.

Chapter Thirteen

Salt

Two men led me down the dimly lit hallway. They each had a gun, which they didn't show me, but I knew the cold metal was there, tucked discretely into the back of their pants. It was their protection. Protection against me.

These useless fucks have no idea.

Stopping at a door, the guard outside opened it, giving me a head nod to go in. I was highly aware of the situation I was walking into. I wasn't a fucking idiot, oblivious to the intimidation Virgo was trying to use against me.

The dark hall.

The ominous lighting.

The bulky assholes he had leading me to the powerhouse in this fucking place.

All of it was his way of letting me know he was in control.

Sadly for him, it wasn't going to work. I could kill every single one of these fuckers before any of them knew what hit them. I knew that and so did Virgo. But of course he needed his men to think they held some cheap value.

What a fucking joke.

Stepping inside, the first thing I noticed was Berlin. Her hair was knotted up and frizzy, her arms were red and bruised. Dark rings traced the thin skin under her lids, highlighting a stare that was angry, full of sadness and pain. As our eyes connected, I watched her skin turn white and her face fall flat.

Why the hell is she here?

Studying her expression, it was easy for me to see that we were both left in the dark. She looked shocked, confused, her mind tumbling with questions about what was going on.

“Bentley,” Virgo said, holding out his arms to welcome me in. “So glad you made it.”

“Virgo,” I said, puffing out my chest and standing taller.

I had called him earlier in the day, telling him it was time to meet. I let him create the details of when and where, not really concerned that he wanted it in his war room.

But I had no clue that I'd be walking into a meeting with her too.

“Please, have a seat with us.” His smile was thin, spreading like a crack across glass as he spoke. “We've been waiting for you.”

Taking a seat across from Virgo, I folded my hands on the table. I didn't say a word, I just stared down the table at him, never breaking away. The air in the room felt charged, filled with testosterone and power.

We both wanted the power, we both wanted to be the alpha, but we also both knew who that belonged to. And it wasn't him.

But I would let him play his games, appeasing him for the moment. It was the least I could do since I was in his home.

“I went over the papers you gave me,” Virgo finally said, his words cutting through the tension in the air. “And I’ll be honest, I don’t care for the changes.”

“Really? I thought they were pretty fair, all things considering.” Leaning back, I let my eyes fall on Berlin. “But honestly, I thought this business was between us. What’s she doing here?”

“Oh her,” he said, waving a hand carelessly. “Berlin knows this business, maybe even better than both of us together. This girl,” he said, pointing at her. “This girl is right in the thick of it. I saw the sparkle in your eye the other day after you had your time with her, I didn’t think you’d mind me bringing her along.” His lips folded into a heavy grimace as his face contorted like a mad scientist.

Crooking my jaw, I laid my hands down flat. I could feel Berlin’s eyes as she watched me, taking notes on everything I did. Flicking my gaze to hers, she dropped her eyes to the table.

The more I looked at her, the more injuries I could see. Fresh wounds peppered her neck, perfectly circular in shape and the size of fingertips, her left eye was swollen, puffing around the edges. I didn’t like it, it made me angry.

What has he done to you, my little flower?

“What happened to her?” Floating my eyes back to Virgo, he was chewing on his cheeks with that fucking smile I wanted to strip off his face.

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“Bentley, come on, don't pretend like you don't know how it works here. You've been around long enough to know exactly what I do. And I think you enjoy it as much as I do.”

“Enjoy it?” Narrowing my eyes, my brows dipped in. “Not once have I ever agreed with what you do.”

“And yet, you've never done anything to stop me.”

“It wasn't my business, but if you want to make it my—”

Cutting me off, he slyly said, “I know she sucked you off, she told me all about it.” Berlin flinched as he said it, closing her eyes tight. “But,” he said, standing from his seat and walking up behind her. “What she refused to tell me was what you two talked about. Berlin has a problem with following directions and lying to me. She's wearing the colors of a disobedient liar.”

I'm going to fucking kill you. . .

“So you beat her for it?” Veering my stare, my nostrils flared wide.

“Oh, I didn't beat her.” Flicking his eyes to look down on her head, the edge of his lip curled. “The bitch got mouthy with one of my guys, she got what she deserved. But lying causes the same colors.” Using his hand to lift her chin, he forced her to look up at him. Trolling his eyes around her face, he had this look of satisfaction, as if he was proud of the damage on her body. “But forget that, tell me what you two discussed when you were alone. You paid her a lot of money for nothing, something else must

have happened in that room besides a blow-job.”

Baring my teeth, I felt my muscles as they tensed, ready to throw the table and charge him. “It's none of your fucking business what was said between us. I paid her well, isn't that all you should give a fuck about?”

“It's not the money, although it was good, it's what was said behind those doors. What did you tell her, what did she tell you?” Resting his hands on her shoulders, he gently massaged her. “Because I'll be honest, she's pretty, but her skills aren't worth that kind of money. And I know, trust me.”

Gritting my teeth, I did my best to stay in my chair and not jump across the table and slit his throat. I wanted to and it was hard as hell to not just act on it.

Balling my fists, I peered up at him with a snarl on my face. Staying quiet, I refused to give him an answer. Whatever happened was between us. And that blow-job was all her, I didn't ask for it. Even though deep down I would have fucked her if she wanted it.

But she didn't want it and I wasn't that type of guy. If I was going to fuck her, it would be because she was begging me to give it to her. I didn't want to sleep with a lifeless doll.

“If you're not going to discuss our business, then you're wasting my time.”

As I started to stand, Virgo barked, “Sit back down.” His teeth were clenched, his face turning red as the power he wanted to exert was obviously failing.

“Excuse me?” I asked, cocking my head and glaring at him. Snapping my back square, my jaw clicked hard. “I know you didn't just talk to me like that. I'm not one of your fucking goons, I'll walk right out that door and you'll never see me again. But,

not before I fucking reach down your throat and pull your balls out of your filthy fucking mouth.”

Virgo's demeanor changed instantly, his face twisting as his mouth pursed tight. There was a long silence, a silence I wasn't going to fill until he stepped off his perch.

“Alright, let's talk business.”

“Those papers,” I said, my voice coarse and firm. “You can fucking forget them now, I changed my mind, I want something else.” Sitting back down, I folded my hands on the table.

“Something else?” he asked flatly, digging his thin fingers into Berlin's shoulders. “Do I look like a man who negotiates?”

“There won't be any negotiations, you don't get to make choices on this anymore.” Stroking my jaw, I let my eyes fall on Berlin. “You need me, and in order for that to happen, I know what I want.”

“And what's that?” he asked, the tone in voice highly aware of what I was going to say as he followed my gaze to the beauty beneath his hands.

“You know.”

Thinning his lips, his brows bent angrily. “No.”

“No?” Smiling, I pushed my chest against the table. “She's one of many, Virgo, you don't need her. Let me take her off your hands.” I watched Berlin's back stiffen as she realized what I meant.

“She's not for sale, Salt.”

“Salt? Wow, I don't think I've ever heard you call me that.”

“I'm not playing fucking games with you, she's not for sale, period.”

“Everything here is for sale, aren't those your words?”

“Not this one, she's not ready.”

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“They all have a price, Virgo—even her.” Narrowing my stare, I let my smile grow. “Tell me your price, you know I can pay it.”

“Not this one, she's trouble, you wouldn't like her at all.” Letting his fingers slip over her shoulders, he wrapped them around her neck as if he was cuddling her. “But I have more, you can choose one of them.”

“I don't want anyone else, I want her.” Letting out a shallow breath, I slowly licked my lips. “Let me see for myself how much trouble she is.”

“Okay, you're right, I need you. But I have so many girls who would fit you better than her. Let me show—”

“No,” I snapped. “You want me, my price is her.”

I watched him think about my offer, trying to decide what to do. Pouting his lips, thick lines drew up on his forehead. “You can have her for tonight, here, in one of the rooms. And we keep our price the same. You wanted a change, I'm willing to work with you.”

“Double what it was and I take her to my hotel, then we have a deal.” My gaze moved to Berlin, watching her muscles start to shake and her eyes glisten as if she wanted to cry.

I could tell she had never been used as a bartering toy before. Which surprised me, Virgo always tried to use his girls as a portion of the payment.

When I first started in the business, my father and Virgo met once to discuss a job he needed done. Virgo offered him two of his women, trying to sell them to my father like he was a used car salesman.

My father declined of course. We weren't in that business, we worked for money and nothing more. So my abrasive suggestion seemed to shock and please him all at once.

Sick fuck.

“I might actually enjoy doing business with you more than I thought.” Reaching across the table, Virgo held out his hand. “She needs to be returned by noon tomorrow, understand?”

“Of course.” Nodding, I stood up and shook his hand. Letting my eyes fall on Berlin, she was glaring at me, her eyes razor sharp, pupils as small as the sharp end of a needle. It looked like she wanted to rip my throat out.

I couldn't blame her, we were discussing her as if she was an object, an item you could just purchase at the store. And in that very instant, I rented her for the night.

“You're at the Santa Rosa, am I right?”

“Does it matter where I'm staying?”

“It does if I need to come find and retrieve my Lucciole.”

His firefly.

“Virgo, if you don't trust me, then we have nothing to discuss. I'll walk out that door and you'll never see me again.”

Stroking his hands down Berlin's hair, Virgo tipped his head into his shoulder as his eyes circled my face. "You know I can't afford to lose you."

"Then don't fuck with me. You can either trust my word, or you can fuck off. It's that simple."

Kissing the top of her head, Virgo kept his eyes on me as his lips pushed gently into her hair. "My sweet girl, I hope you enjoy yourself tonight." His hands worked over her throat, twisting her neck and lifting her chin. "Because this is a one time deal, you'll never leave this place again."

Berlin's lip was trembling as he whispered the words against her cheek, a visible shiver was making her muscles shake uncontrollably. The terror in her eyes was palpable, I felt like I could reach out and snatch it from her.

Softly, he tickled the pads of his fingers down her face. "Take her," he said, stepping away and adjusting the collar on his shirt.

Letting my eyes connect with Berlin's, I smiled down at her. "Gladly." Stepping around the table, she stayed in her seat, her hands gripping the thin arms as if she was holding on for her life.

Virgo moved towards the door that led out into the hall. "Nino will show you out when you're ready." Standing still for a moment, he looked back at me over his shoulder. "And just a warning, she's feisty, it's what I love most about her. Don't make me regret this, Bentley."

Throwing the door open, he left me alone with her. She had this look on her face, as if her entire world had just imploded around her and everything she knew was gone.

Standing at her side, I looked down at her at the same moment she looked up at me.

Her eyes were huge, the green in her pupils now engulfed by emptiness.

“Do I scare you my flower?” I asked, gently lifting a lock of her hair and twirling it around my finger. “Because I should.”

Chapter Fourteen

Salt

“Nothing to say?” I asked, glancing at Berlin in the passenger seat. “You're awful quiet now that you're out of that place? What happened to the sexy little vixen, ready to grant my every wish?”

Keeping her head out the window, she didn't give me an answer. She hadn't said a thing to me since we left the Canary compound. I couldn't blame her, I saw her face when she realized that her owner and I knew each other.

Shock. Regret. A hint of fear.

She wore those colors like a fucking halo.

Turning back to the road, I watched the trees in the distance as their tops swayed back and forth in the breeze. I thought I'd see her exhale a sigh of relief the second her toes touched cement and she was able to smell the fresh air.

But Berlin only seemed to look more worried, her body folding as if the gravity outside was too heavy for her slender frame. She looked like a house cat that had finally escaped, but once there, didn't know what to do.

Every so often I felt her looking at me, but the second I tried to catch her, her eyes

were gone. Her hands were tucked securely between her thighs, her shoulders rolled forward, and there was no life left inside.

You'll thank me for this, I know you will.

The lights from the street lamps kept flashing over her skin, lighting up bruises like a beacon at sea. My eyes were drawn to the red welts and streaks of broken skin. And yet she sat there as if they didn't bother her. She didn't show a sliver of discomfort, she didn't wilt like a dying flower every time she moved.

She's used to the pain.

It was a sad thought, to know that she could be beaten and brutalized, but never show an ounce of it. If she didn't hurt on the outside, it was hard to imagine what she was feeling on the inside.

“How does it feel to be out of there?” I asked, gripping the wheel tighter and relaxing into my seat.

No answer.

What the hell did you expect?

Removing her doesn't heal what damage has already been done.

Tapping my thumb against the wheel, I peered at her from the corner of my eye. “Virgo seems to have a thing for you. How long have you been with the prick?” Silence. “He didn't want to let you go very easily, you must really be something special.”

“Fuck you.”

There she is.

“Ah, so you're not a mute outside that shell you call home.”

“It's not home, it's hell.”

“Then why don't you seem happy to be out?”

“Am I supposed to thank you for this?” Whipping her head over her shoulder, her eyes glistened with lost tears. “Fuck you!” Digging her nails into the seat, Berlin's forehead folded with thick lines as her lids shot open. “Just fucking take me back! I don't want to go anywhere with you!”

“Did I say something wrong?”

Frowning, she sealed her lips tight as she glared at me. Whatever was going through her head right then, whatever it was that she wanted to yell and scream, she didn't. But I could see it in her eyes; the hate for me, the hate for Virgo, the pure rage she felt for being passed around like a fucking joint.

My flower, you need this, no matter how much you want to hate it.

Looking straight ahead, I kept my tone hard. “Be mad at me all you want, but I'm not the one who put those bruises on you, or the one who controls your every move.”

“What the fuck do you call this then?” Grunting, Berlin curled into herself, hugging her knees. “If I asked you to pull over right now and let me out, would you?”

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“No,” I said, not even having to think about my answer.

“So you do hold the control, stop pretending like you don't.”

“You want to get out?” I asked, slowing the car down and pulling over into the thin breakdown lane. “Go, get out.”

Snapping her eyes in my direction, her jaw crooked. “Right here? But we're in the middle of nowhere, in the fucking mountains.”

“But you want to get out, so go.” Leaning across her, I popped open her door. “There, get the fuck out.”

“Virgo will kill you if you set me free.”

“I'm not afraid of that man, no matter how much you might be.” Giving her a light push against her shoulder, I said, “So go, get the fuck out. You want out, I'm letting you out.”

Looking around in the blackness, Berlin's muscles loosened as she closed the door. “Just drive, I'd fucking freeze to death out there.”

“I'm glad to see your common sense is still in tact.”

Hitting the gas, I pulled back onto the road and drove towards my hotel. I didn't say anything else, there was no need to. I could see her submitting to the idea that she was going wherever the hell I was taking her. Even if she hated the thought.

She looked so small, so frail, as if she would break apart with a big gust of wind. I could see the small bones on her wrists and the thin veins spidering across the back of her palms. Her skin was the color of white hot ash, as if she hadn't seen the sun in years.

Because she hasn't. She hasn't had that luxury.

But within that cracked exterior, I could see the woman who lived inside. She was strong, bold, a fighter inside and out. She wouldn't be alive if she wasn't.

There were certain things that even the worst person couldn't take from someone they were trying to tear apart. And for her, it was everything that Virgo could never reach.

I thought maybe that was why he held onto her so tightly, because she fought like no one else ever had. She refused to give him all of herself, holding on to those pieces that he couldn't touch, or beat, or carve away.

“We're here,” I said, parking the car and turning off the engine. “Let's go.” Climbing out, I shut the door and stood at the front of the car, waiting for her to come to my side.

Berlin watched me for a second through the windshield, then folded her arms across her chest and turned her head away, looking out into the dark parking lot.

Are you fucking kidding me?

Letting out an annoyed breath, I stalked to her door and tore it open. “Get out.”

Twisting her face in the opposite direction, she hugged herself tighter. Her silence returned as if that would save her from me. It wouldn't.

“Fine,” I said, leaning in across her body to unbuckle her myself. “I’ll fucking carry your ass out then.”

Her hands feverishly tried to keep the buckle clicked securely in place, as she pulled her knees into her chest, trying to push me away with her legs.

“Stop acting like a fucking child and get out of the damn car.” Grabbing her knees, I forced them down, holding them in place. Using my free hand, I drove it into the crook of her hip and the seat and tore the buckle from its holster.

I wasn't going to deal with this nonsense, bullshit, stupid fucking hissy-fit she was throwing. Some men might just give up, some might strike her until she's unconscious and can't fight for herself. I was not that man.

But that didn't mean I wasn't going to take what wanted.

She was mine for the night, no matter how much she hated the idea.

Flailing her arms, Berlin was grunting and growling as she slapped aimlessly at my body. I could feel her hitting me, a smack to the side of the head, a whack to the shoulder, a slap to my chest. But I didn't stop.

Wrapping my arms around her body, I ripped her from the car, throwing her over my shoulder and slamming the door shut with my foot.

Her beating was relentless. She punched with her small fists, kicking her legs and bucking her body. But still she stayed silent.

She didn't scream for help. She didn't call out for someone to dial the police. It was like she had been so brainwashed into thinking that no one would ever come to her rescue, that the words didn't exist in her head.

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With heavy feet, I carried her around the building and went in the back entrance. Her attempts to hurt me did nothing, she could hit me all she wanted, and in the back of my head, I was hoping she would eventually just burn herself out.

Was I an asshole? Yes.

Was I a killer? Yes.

But was I a fucking monster? I guess that would depend on who you asked.

Taking a moment to look around, the hall was clear, so I carried her over to the door that led to the stairs. The elevator was an easier option, but that's what everyone used to get around. And I wasn't about to risk being seen like that. The last thing I wanted to deal with were the police at my door.

Climbing up four flights of stairs, I stuck my head out the door before heading into the empty hall. Berlin wriggled like a caterpillar, her body bending and rolling, rocking and flopping.

“Knock it off, you're not helping yourself here, you're just making it more difficult than it has to be. I'll fucking tie your ass up if I have to.”

“Grrr,” she groaned, my little threat seeming to feed her fire instead of extinguish it.

Tightening my grip around her waist, I found my room. Digging the card out of my pocket, I bobbed her on my shoulder as I tried to get it to scan.

The small light blinked red, so I swiped again.

Red.

Red.

Red.

Swipe after swipe I was met with a red burst.

“This fucking card,” I growled, swiping it back and forth until I was almost ready to kick the fucking door open. Taking in a deep breath, I slowed my hand down, letting the card rest for a moment before pulling it away.

Green.

“Thank you,” I huffed out, throwing the door open.

I heard the door click shut behind us as I walked inside. Twisting, I locked the handle and flipped the top latch to make sure we weren't interrupted by any cleaning ladies or unwanted guests.

Walking to the bed, I dropped her on the mattress, hovering over her like a lion studying their next meal.

“Honey, we're home.” Smirking, I let my arms dangle by my sides.

Pursing her lips, she looked like she was about to burst at the seams. I could almost see the cuss words floating across her pupils as she glared up at me.

“Go on, call me an asshole, call me a fucking bastard, I know you want to.” Holding

out my arms, I took a small step back. “Call me whatever the hell you want to if it will make you feel better.”

“There's nothing in this world that will make me feel better.”

“You're here, isn't that a little bit better than being there?”

“Better?” Shooting up on the bed, she let her legs hang over the side. “You buy me like this, you use me to get what you want from him, and I'm suppose to feel better?”

“No. I lost out because of this, I traded a lot of fucking money to get you here for the night.”

“Oh, excuse me,” she said, standing up and waving her hands in the air. “I'm so sorry that I lost you money, because I really give a fuck about you and your feelings and any money you're out now.” Her tone was dry, cynical, laced in a condescending heat I wasn't about to take.

“I suggest you watch how you talk to me.” Crooking my jaw, I let my eyes settle on hers. “Because I won't tolerate this bullshit.”

“What are you my fucking father now?” Rolling her eyes, she pushed her leg out as she folded her arms over her chest. “Are you going to punish me? Put me in time out? Or maybe you can just add to the bruises I already have?”

“I'm not going to hit you.”

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“Are you sure? Because the look on your face says you want to.” Taking a small step in, she turned her face so her cheek was fully exposed. “How about right here? Right where everyone can see it, so they know how big and bad of a man you are.”

“I’m not going to hit you, Berlin.”

Scoffing, she veered her stare. “So you’re just going to fuck me then? That’s it, give me some good old fashioned dick and call it a night?” Chuckling lightly, she shook her head. “You’re just like every other jackass that walks into that club. It’s all about pussy and control.” Sitting back down on the bed, she parted her thighs as she ran a single finger up the middle of her chest. “Is this what you want? You want to fuck me? You want to fuck me like the whore I am?”

Running a hand through my hair, I kept my eyes on hers. “I never said you were a whore. I would never call you that.”

“Why not? It’s true isn’t it? I get paid to have sex, men pay to get what they want from me. You’re losing money to have me here, so you must want something in return. Tell me what it is?”

“I already told you before, I don’t want shit from you.”

Bouncing her eyes back and forth between mine, her lips folded into a heavy frown. “You’re just like Virgo, it’s all about the power with both of you.”

I felt my veins burn as the words came out of her mouth. I couldn’t stop the rage that came over me. I was nothing like Virgo, we were two different species.

Lunging forward, I wrapped my hand around her throat and yanked her off the bed. Holding her tightly in my grip, I pushed her backwards until she hit the wall.

My face was inches from hers as I bared my teeth. “I’m nothing like that man. I’m nothing like the fucking men you’re used to dealing with. I don’t ever want to hear you say that shit again. Do you understand? Do you fucking hear me?” My chest had started to rise and fall, filling with rapid bursts of air.

Berlin was staring at me in shock, her voice nothing but audible gasps. She was struggling for air, she was trying to put words into some sort of order in her head so she could get them out, she was trying desperately to understand all of this.

Shaking her head yes, she pinched her lips closed, causing her cheeks to collapse into her mouth.

“Tell me you fucking understand. I want to hear you say it.”

“I understand.” Whimpering out the words, Berlin kept her eyes frozen on mine. “I understand.”

“I’m fucking serious, Berlin, don’t ever compare me to that fucking prick or anyone else.”

“Okay, I won’t.” Flicking her gaze around my face, she asked, “But if you’re not like him or anyone else, then why are you doing this?”

Loosening my grip, I let my hand drop free. I could see the shape of my fingertips in her skin, the small red impressions an ominous addition to her body. Pulling out the small note she had given me from my pocket, I threw it at her face.

“Why don’t you tell me.”

Chapter Fifteen

Berlin

The folded paper bounced off my forearm as I blocked my face, falling to the ground with a gentle thud. Staring at my written cry for help, my lungs were aching as my heart began to jump around my chest like a caged bird.

A cold sweat beaded up across the back of my neck, trickling down between my shoulder blades like searing hot fire. It was so cold it actually hurt.

“Did you read it?” I asked, knowing that he obviously had. But my brain was trying to catch up with everything that was happening.

Is this some kind of fucking trick?

Virgo had never let me leave with anyone before, he would have killed any motherfucker who even dared to ask. But, he gifted me to this man tonight. . .

Why?

Salt nodded, taking a long step back and pacing in a small circle. “Yeah, I fucking read it.”

“And?”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Scratching at the stubble on his chin, he rested a hand on his hip as he stopped moving and glared at me. “What the fuck, why did you have to ask me? Of all the men that have come in and out of there, why me?”

He breathed the words, as if he meant to keep them for himself, but wanted me to hear them anyway. There was tension in his voice, his tone almost begging me to take the note and pretend like I never wrote it.

My eyes searched his desperately, trying to see if there were any hidden agendas or messages. I couldn't read him for shit. I didn't know if he was pissed, upset, anxious. His face was flat except for this look in his eyes that made my skin bristle.

There has to be more to this. Something isn't right.

Glancing at the door, I nervously waited in anticipation for it to fly open, and one of Virgo's men to come crashing through.

“Don't worry,” he said, noticing my anxiety rising and where my eyes had gone. “No one is coming for you.”

“Why should I believe you?” Cautiously, I stepped so I was facing the door straight on, bending down to pick up the note and clutching it in my palm. “How do I know this isn't some type of sick game? Virgo likes games, you must know that.”

“It's not a game, Berlin. He doesn't even know you gave me that note. I didn't tell him.”

Crinkling my brows, I refused to let down my guard. Just because he said it, didn't mean it was true. “But he let you take me here. Why would he do that if he wasn't fucking with me?”

“Because he needs me, because without me he'd have to rely on those sorry excuses he calls security.” Pressing in closer, Salt reached his hand out and softly touched my arm. “Without me, all of the power he has would vanish.”

“I don't understand, what the hell does that mean?”

“Let me ask you a question. Why do people fear him?” he asked, softly rubbing my skin with his thumb.

“Because he'll kill you if you cross him, it's not a fucking secret.”

“And who do you think does his dirty work?”

Tilting my head, I was trying to put the pieces of his puzzle together. Virgo was in charge, he had money, he had people who worked for him on all different levels. But I couldn't figure out how Salt fit into that equation.

I had met or heard the names of most of Virgo's muscle at one point or another, but not once had he ever mentioned a man named Salt or Bentley.

Then it hit me like a fucking kick to the stomach. Instantly, my gut was in knots as the bile rose to the back of my throat, threatening to cover him and the expensive Persian carpet we were standing on.

“You. . . You do that for him?”

“You didn't think he'd send one of his dumb-ass guys or risk getting picked by doing it himself, did you?” His lips twisted into a playful smile as he chuckled. “How do you think he got away with everything he's ever done? He doesn't get close to the problem, he just hires me to remove it.”

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What the fuck is happening here?

Staring at him confused, it took a moment for me to fully understand what he was telling me. Slow and painfully the information trickled over my brain, burrowing into the muscle like a parasite.

“Holy shit,” I said, pulling my arm away from his as I stumbled backwards, allowing the edge of the bed to catch me. “You're a fucking killer—you're a murderer. I'm in the hands of a damn monster.” Hanging my head, I pressed my palms into my eyes.

There are worse men than Virgo—and I was standing face to face with one.

“The people I deal with are not good, Berlin. Trust me, if anyone deserves to have shit cut short, it's the fucking guys Virgo does business with. If that makes me a monster, so be it.”

Feverishly my hands ran back and forth over my head as the depth of who he truly was washed over me.

He's a killer.

He ends lives. . .

As the words replayed over and over in my head, it felt like everything suddenly fell into place, and I knew the true nature of why I was there. Virgo allowed Salt to take me because he had a job to do.

“Oh my God,” I said, my voice strained and erratic. “I know why I'm here now. You're going to fucking kill me, aren't you?” Jumping to my feet, I moved further away from him. “That's why he let you take me. You're supposed to kill me, Virgo wants me dead.”

My stomach coiled up with knots as thick and heavy as chain. Grabbing my stomach, I bent forward, doing my best to keep my stomach from decorating the floor. “Fuck, I don't feel good. I'm going to be sick.”

“What—no,” he said, his lids lowering as he shook his head. “I'm not going to kill you, Berlin. That's not why you're here.”

“Don't lie to me, do not fucking lie to me!” Raising my voice, I was almost screaming. “It all makes sense now, all of it.” Dragging my nails through my hair, I was inhaling short gasps of air as my body shivered and my limbs went numb. “I thought I was ready for this, I even thought I wanted it at one point. . .” Pausing, my eyes shot open as I stared at Salt. “But I don't, that's why I wrote you that note, I'm not ready, I'm not—”

Cutting me off, Salt darted to my side, curling strong hands around my arms. “Berlin!” he snapped, giving me a little shake. “I'm not going to kill you, I swear. Look at me, look at me my flower.” Lifting his hands to my face, he cupped my cheeks, holding my head in place.

And then it happened.

Tears.

They came, they flowed, they fell freely as if a dam had been demolished and there was nothing holding them back.

“I don't want to die, Salt.”

“And you're not going to,” he said, holding his eyes steady on mine. “That's not why I took you, that's not why I brought you here.”

Sniffling, my eyes were blurry, causing his face to morph and cloud over. “Then why am I here?”

“I told you I could give you things. But, I'm not a monster and I can't grant wishes. You wrote me a note, a note I can't fulfill. I can give you something else, something you didn't ask for, but I want to give you. If you're not ready, I'll understand. ”

“I don't know what you mean. What are you giving me?”

Thinning his lips, his eyes dulled. Wiping the water off my cheeks, Salt softly licked his lips. My heart jumped inside my chest as he peered deep into my soul, looking past the scars, seeing through the shell I had built around myself.

“Look at you,” he said, running his fingers around my swollen eye. Smiling lightly, his eyes took note of all the other damage to my body. With the pads of his fingers, he softly touched the torn skin on the side of my arm.

Sucking in a gulp of air, I pulled myself together. “I'm fine, it's nothing.” Wiping more tears off my face, I forced a smirk. “It could have been worse.”

“You shouldn't think that way. What was done to you is wrong, you don't deserve to be hurt like this.”

“Yeah, well, that's how this shit goes.” Rubbing the side of my neck with my hand, I moved it down my back and cringed.

“What is it?” he asked, manipulating my body and turning me around. “Is it your back?” Lifting my shirt, I could feel him examining me. “Stay right here, give me one second.”

“What? What do you see?”

He didn't answer, walking away and going into the bathroom. I could hear him sifting through a drawer, moving items around. Reaching around I tried to feel my back and see if I could tell what was wrong.

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My entire body fucking hurt since Blue dragged me down the steps, so picking one injury out from another was almost impossible. Hitting a rough patch, my skin buzzed, causing me to huff under my breath.

Fuck, I felt that.

Salt came out of the bathroom, carrying a small pouch, his gaze serious and set on my back. "Turn into the light for me." Following his directions, I twisted around. "Lean forward."

"What are you doing? What's wrong?"

"Just stay still." I felt his hands as they pulled on my skin, stretching it tight. "Let me know if it hurts too much."

Nodding, I watched him the best I could from over my shoulder. His face was still, working diligently on something I couldn't see. I could feel light tugs on my back and something sharp sticking me.

"Can you tell me what you're doing?"

Glancing up at me, Salt grinned. "I'm playing doctor. This might sting a bit." Winking, he splashed my skin with liquid.

Sucking in air through my teeth, I pinched my eyes closed.

"You alright?" he asked.

“I’m fine.” Opening my eyes, I clutched the wood shelf under the window, forcing the pain to flow from my fingers into the wood. “Are you almost done?”

“Yeah, almost.” Laying out a white towel, he pushed my shoulders forward more.

We were both quiet as he plucked at my flesh, placing splintered pieces of wood on the towel. Salt was tender, his touch methodical and precise as he mended my wounds.

It felt like an out of body experience. I had a man tending to me, caring for me, asking me if I was alright when he knew I was in pain.

Peeking at him, his eyes were set in place as he bandaged up my back and stood up. “There, everything is clean and shouldn't get infected now.”

“Why?”

“Why won't it get infected?” he asked, angling his head into his shoulder.

“No, why did you do that?”

“That's not the question you should be asking. You should be asking me why I would want one night with you.”

Biting my bottom lip, I flicked my eyes between his. “Why would you want me?”

Bringing his lips in closer, they hovered dangerously over mine. “Your eyes, your lips, your porcelain skin. . .” Exhaling, the tip of his nose brushed mine. “Because you have yet to bloom, my flower.”

I could feel his breath as the heat washed across my face, making the hair on my arms

stand straight. Placing one thumb on my bottom lip, he drew it back and forth, touching me in a way that no man ever had.

He was gentle, he was kind, he was loving.

Love. A word that I had long forgotten and thought would never return. I knew I loved my family, but that was the only love I ever had the pleasure of feeling. And even that love was short lived.

I never had a boyfriend. I hadn't experienced true love.

The love a man and woman share together, a kiss that wasn't built off dirty money and fear of beatings. What it felt like to be held and not demanded, to be stroked and not moved around like a plastic toy.

I wasn't sure what to do with the feelings that were running rampant through my body. My clit had started to throb and pulse, my stomach was swirling with butterflies that created a wave of shivers as his body shifted closer.

His face was no more than an inch from mine. I could smell his cologne, the sweetness of caramel mixed with cedar. Taking in a slow, deep breath, I let the aroma fill my lungs. It took me some place else, to a kinder place, a place that wasn't so dark anymore.

I could feel my body coming alive. The warmth in my belly spread up my chest and down my legs. My fingertips were tingling right down to the very edge. A rush of fire burned across my cheeks, making my face feel so hot.

“What are you doing?” I asked as Salt pressed in even more, our mouths so close to touching I wasn't sure what to do.

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“Shh,” he hushed me silent as he shifted his face to rest his cheek against mine. “This isn't for me, it's for you.” Moving his hands down my face, he pushed his fingers into the hair at the base of my head, softly massaging my scalp. “All you ever feel is pain, you deserve something good for once.”

My eyes closed instantly, head rolling side to side as my body tingled. Moaning lightly, my head fell back naturally as his fingers became more intense, more needy, tugging at my roots.

But it wasn't harsh, it wasn't rough. It was the most erotic touch I had ever experienced. Goosebumps tore their way down over my skin, my nerves exploded, flooding my body with heat that zipped from head to toe.

Pushing the hair away from my face and off my shoulder, Salt kissed my neck, fluttering kiss after kiss up my throat, never missing one inch of exposed skin.

There were no words between us as his hands kept exploring, caressing, finding these little nooks I didn't know existed. I never could have imagined that a touch could be euphoric, an aphrodisiac to my brain.

But his touch was.

The tips of his fingers worked their way down my ribs, finding the edge of my shirt and pulling it over my head. His lips grew more intense, kissing across my collarbone and my shoulders.

Lowering his hands to the trim of my pants, he pulled them down over my hips,

gently lifting one leg at a time to help me out of them. And I let him. I didn't fight him off, I didn't tell him no.

I wanted it. I wanted more of it; more touch, more kisses, more of him.

Because this wasn't about money, it wasn't about pleasing Virgo or doing what I had to in order to stay above water.

Right then, it felt we were just two people. Two people that crossed paths, two people that were about to find pleasure in a world that was void of it. I shouldn't have wanted this man, I shouldn't have wanted to be touched by this man or any man at all.

And yet, I didn't want to stop him.

I had one night, just one night to not be Ash, to not be that girl bought by sex driven greed. I had one night to be free.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, he looked down on me and smiled, slowly pulling them away. Taking a step back, I watched his eyes as they explored my body, devouring me with just a look.

Curling one hand over my belly, I looked down at the floor, suddenly embarrassed. I wasn't sure why I felt that way. It came out of nowhere, another feeling I wasn't used to having.

It was the way he looked at me. His eyes still and feverish, moving up and down, but always coming back to my eyes.

Biting his bottom lip, he pulled my arms away from body, and braided our fingers together. "Don't hide, you don't need to. You're beautiful, too beautiful for this world. You're like a lost angel that took a wrong turn."

My cheeks blushed as his eyes moved around my breasts, trailing down my stomach and over my mound. My muscles were shaking, my lungs were struggling to keep steady.

What is this? What's happening to me?

Holding my hand, he led me to the bed, manipulating my body delicately, as if I would crumble in his hands if he was too rough.

Laying me down on my back, Salt climbed up on the bed, kneeling above me. My eyes never left his, just watching him come alive the more he touched me.

The pads of his fingers tickled across my belly, making me tremble. I was visibly shaking, vibrating the bed beneath me. Doing my best to stay still, I clutched the soft quilt, digging my nails into the fibers.

Smirking, he ran his hands up my side, sweeping over my ribs and circling my breast. He was barely touching me, his hands light as a feather.

“This is my gift to you—just for you.” Whispering the words, he placed kisses randomly on my skin; my stomach, my side, the back of my palm, the top of my thigh. Each one leaving a buzzing sensation that remained long after his mouth was gone. “But if it's too much, if you're not ready, don't be afraid to stop me.”

His mouth moved lower and lower, teasingly close to my most sensitive area. I could feel the warmth between my thighs as my arousal slicked my skin. Cupping my mound with his hand, Salt laid down beside me, pressing his chest into my side.

Snuggling up to him, I started to touch his shoulder and face, giving myself to him in a way I had never given myself to anyone. I was willing, I was turned on, I was eagerly ready for more.

The room was growing hot and stuffy, the smell of sex was filling the air. But this scent was sweet, it was enticing, it was everything you could ever want from your real first time.

I wasn't a virgin, but this would be the first time I willingly accepted a man. I had a voice in the room, one that would be heard, one that would be received and acknowledged.

And that meant everything to me.

Squeezing my pussy in his hand, he kissed the tender skin behind my ear, running his tongue down my neck and across my shoulder. The tip of his finger slid between my folds, spreading my arousal.

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“Are you alright?” he asked, his tone almost concerned as my thighs squeezed around his hand. “Do you want me to stop?”

My lashes tickled the bottom of my brows as I looked at him. “Mm,” I cooed, placing my hand over his and guiding him deeper. Every vein in my body was alive, pulsing, beating, playing a tune as he strummed the chords.

“That's right, my little flower, sing for me.” Pressing his finger into my pussy, he moved slow and precise.

His thumb circled my clit, rubbing it as he dipped his finger in and out. My muscles were shaking violently, quivering uncontrollably as he moved faster and faster.

Turning my face to his, I looked up, our eyes connecting as he slid a second finger inside, stretching my walls. His hard cock pushed against my hip as he rocked his waist, rubbing himself against me.

I need him, I need him more than I've ever needed anything.

Reaching my hand down, I started to slip it inside his pants, but he stopped me. Pulling my hand away, he lifted it over my head, pinning it in place. “This is just for you.” Kissing my forehead, he thrust his fingers in deeper. “This isn't for me. I want you to feel how good some things can be. I'm not a greedy man, Berlin, let me show you.”

Is this really happening? I was tempted to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. All of this was too good to be true.

The rough pad of his thumb rubbed my needy button, drawing out louder and more intense moans. I was at his mercy, completely and utterly under his control. My body had become his, his to work, his to play—his and his alone.

The orgasm took shape, tingling in my lower belly before stealing me away. I felt it, I embraced it, I let it consume me.

Snapping my eyes shut, pinks and reds, blues and purples all burst behind my lids like fireworks. I used to live in the darkness, but now I could see the colors. The shade of gray I had been living in quickly dissipated as more and more explosions of bright colors lit up inside my mind.

I could see that hope again as if I could actually reach out and touch it; feel it in my hands, curl it in my palms, bundle it up and take it with me where I went.

Opening my eyes, Salt was looking down on me with a little smirk. Kissing my cheek, he pulled his fingers from my body.

I had never seen something so beautiful in my life before, but his eyes, they held a universe of their own. One that had been selfless. One that whisked me away and gave me pleasure, not pain.

Peering up into the depths of his big, brown eyes, they flickered with pops of amber and gold, drawing me in and holding me hostage.

I was his. Salt had granted me a single night of freedom. And I was thankful for that.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring, I didn't know if this moment would live on forever in my head, or get drowned out by an uncertain future.

But right then I didn't care.

I had this, something he had wanted to give me.

And I would hold onto it for as long as I could. Even if it fucking killed me in the end.

Because I knew, I knew I could never go back to that place.

This is your chance, Berlin.

Make him see that.

Chapter Sixteen

Salt

I watched her as she laid her hand across her chest, her breathing erratic and unhinged as stars twinkled in her eyes.

She was beautiful. In every way. From the color of her hair to the tips of her toes, Berlin was like a bright light, slowly being drowned to silence her beauty. Every scar, every bruise, every cut, each one had a story.

A story I wished she didn't have, memories I wished she never had to relive inside her head.

You really are too beautiful.

Resting my head in my hand, I looked down on her. "Tell me about yourself. How long have you been with him?"

"You don't really want to hear my life story." Her eyes fluttered up to mine, flicking back and forth as the question seemed to press on her chest. Inhaling a sharp breath, she held on to it for a moment before giving me a vague answer. "Too long."

"No, really, I want to know. Exactly how long?"

I wasn't sure why, but I needed a real answer. I wanted the truth. I wanted to know all her secrets, all her pain, everything she had to endure that brought her to this point. And then I wanted to strip them from her, leaving her bare and weightless, new from the inside out.

You'll never fix her.

Rolling onto her side, she tucked her hands under her head and pulled her knees up, snuggling into the blanket. “What does it matter? Any time with that man is too long.”

“Why haven't you run?”

Glancing down at the light colored scars on her shoulder, she ran her hand across them. A feigned smile spread across her face as she softly touched the curve of her shoulder.

I had my answer.

“Those aren't scars, they're your strength.”

Blinking, her lashes fanned across her eyes like canopies as her lips parted like she wanted to scrutinize my comment. Her tongue came out, slowly licking her bottom lip. “I wish I could see it that way, all I see are reminders of a stolen life.”

Reaching my hand out, I stroked her arm, tracing the lines. “Every scar is a moment you found your own will to keep going. You could have given up, but you didn't. That says more to me about who you are than any words you could use.”

A slight smile teased the corner of her lip as she looked down at the healed wounds. Her voice was lost, replaced by a tender touch as she rested her hand on mine and

squeezed. Her smile broadened, and that smile, fuck that smile could drop any man to his knees.

“That's the smile I've been waiting for.”

Dipping her chin into her chest, she moved her gaze around my face. “You said not to do it unless I meant it.”

Brushing my thumb across the soft curve of her jaw, the world around us became less and less vicious. We were both built and molded to only know chaos. Anything outside the boundaries of carnage would be out of reach.

We shouldn't know happiness, because it would destroy our version of normal.

We shouldn't know pleasure, because it would extinguish our need to feel misery.

It was a level of self destruction that we both hated and craved without truly realizing it. Because it was all we ever knew.

“You don't have an accent.”

“That's because I'm not from here.”

“You're from the U.S.” Brushing my hand down the outside of her arm, I tickled the tips of my fingers against her soft skin. Berlin nodded as her thoughts clouded her mind. “How did you end up here?”

“How?” she asked, letting out a light laugh. “It was a giant ball of fucked up that got me here.”

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Arching a brow, I wanted more. “Where you traveling? Did he steal you off the street?” Every question held meaning. And every answer she gifted gave me more reason to keep her.

You can't keep her. You're giving her more than anyone else ever will right now.

It's all you can do for her, you know that.

“I was nine when he took me and eighteen when he brought me here.”

“Nine?” The number shot out on hard air as the shock must have been written all over my face. Flinching at the pitch in my voice, she seemed to shrink in size, folding up into herself.

There was so much pain in her eyes, far too much for one person. It seeped from her pores, spilling across the blanket. I could feel it in my chest, the power curling around my heart and crushing it like a ball of clay in your palm.

“You were just a child.”

“That was a long time ago, Salt. I'm not that little girl anymore. I refuse to be weak, he doesn't own me, even he knows that. That's why he holds onto me so tightly.”

“So did he take you here after all that shit went down back home? When Sylvan's place got raided?”

“Were you involved in that too?” she asked.

“No, I keep to my own, but I heard about it. Virgo only calls me when he needs something. That's how it's always been and that's how I want to keep it. The less I know, the better, and the less he knows about my end, the better. It keeps our arrangement clean. There's no trail to follow back to either one of us.”

“So, you kill people, but you don't see yourself as a monster? I can't understand that.” Raising an eyebrow, the light off the end table lamp caught her skin perfectly, giving her a sun kissed glow. “Even I think of myself as a monster from some of the thoughts I have, the things I would do if given the chance.”

Thinning my lips, I didn't give her an answer. I spent most of my life trying to look at my profession as a job and not a sin. I rationalized it as removing the filth from the earth. I didn't kill good people, I killed the wicked.

What's so wrong about that? I make the world a better place. . .

Fucking liar.

Even my own inner voice wasn't enough to keep this charade going anymore. My father had always been that voice of reason, he would twist reality and package it up so it looked good to me.

Since he'd passed, that package was becoming less and less appealing.

Clearing my throat, I climbed off the bed and grabbed a bottle of water from the small fridge. Taking a long sip, I wiggled the bottle side to side. “Want some?”

Shaking her head yes, I walked over and handed it to her, sitting back down beside her. The weight of my body made the mattress squeak as I adjusted myself to get comfortable. The silence between us was heavy, her question deserved an answer, but I wasn't going to give one.

How do I give her an answer, when I'm having doubts myself?

Lifting the water to her lips, I watched her neck elongate as she tipped her head back, the lean muscles moving in a way that made my cock twitch as the water trickled down her throat.

“How did he do it?”

“Do what?” Twisting the cap in place, she set the bottle on the table at her side.

“How did he get you here? I mean, it's not like he could just buy you a ticket and fly you here. How did he do it?”

Glancing off, she let her eyes examine a picture on the wall of some beach off the coast. “He was pissed after all that shit happened, calling Sylvan a stupid fuck, who didn't know how to run shit. He said he wasn't going to be prosecuted here for something that was almost legal in his country. Virgo decided he could do it better, that he knew a way to keep selling women that wouldn't get him thrown in jail. So, he stuffed me into a trunk, put me on some container ship, and the rest is history.”

“Nothing he does is legal, you know that right?”

“Nothing you do is legal either.” Her eyes turned to slits as she snapped her head back in my direction. “Neither of you are fucking saints, you're both going to hell.”

“You think I don't know that?” My face was flat and emotionless as my chest constricted, trying not to get angry with her for comparing Virgo and myself again. She didn't need another man going off on her. Forcing that anger down into my gut, I tried to keep talking about her. “What about family? Do you have any back home?”

Berlin pushed herself up higher in the bed, letting out a long breath. “I really don't

want to talk about this anymore. Can we change the subject?" Pulling the blanket up to cover her chest, she looked down the bed, staring at her feet as they wiggled back and forth. "Why don't you tell me how you ended up in this profession."

"I was born into it, there's not much more to it than that."

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“But why do you do it? Why do you think it's alright to be this way? Why do you help such horrible people?”

Sitting beside her, I laid my hands in my lap, unsure how to answer. Nothing I did was really for the men that hired me. I didn't care about their gains or losses. I was the last of a dying breed.

My father used to say, “If we don't do this, then who will? It's who we are, you were born for this. The world needs people like us, because no one else is going to do it.”

There was that red ribbon, perfectly tied for me to see my job as normal and accepted.

I wasn't sure where all the anger I felt inside came from. But it was there, and I saw this job as a way to vent it. The men I killed weren't normal people. They deserved what they got.

I thought of myself as a vigilante for the damned, a small light inside the darkness. At least if I was the one on the other end, I could rest my head at night knowing the right person had been hit and no one else got injured, or lost their life in the crossfire.

That made everything alright in my eyes. I was the angel that delivered to the evil.

“I'm good at what I do, Berlin, let's just leave it at that.” Running a hand across the back of my neck, I frowned. “Nine. . .” Pausing, I eyed her, trying to imagine what it was like for her at such a young age. “And you're still alive.”

I couldn't even begin to fathom what her life had been like. The things she had

probably seen were enough to ruin even the strongest soul. But she was still here, breathing the same as I was.

Knitting her brows, she tilted her head. “Why are you so surprised?”

Shrugging a shoulder, I laid my head back against the headboard. “It's just hard to imagine is all. I've known Virgo for years, and I've never seen him keep someone that long.”

“Yeah, well, lucky me I guess.” Berlin let her head drop down as she began to fiddle with her nails. “So, what now?” she asked, allowing her eyes to soften as she glanced back in my direction. “What happens to me?”

It's not what I want, but I don't have a choice.

“Right now I think we both could use some rest, and tomorrow—” Cutting myself off, I couldn't bear to say the words out loud.

I knew what she wanted, but I couldn't give it to her.

Holding her eyes with mine, she nodded with sad acceptance. “Tomorrow I go back.”

“I'm sorry, but I have to, there's nothing else I can do.”

Her chest lifted and fell as if she wanted to cry but refused to. “So this was what you could do for me? Give me a fucking orgasm and push me back into the hands of evil.”

“It's how it has to be, Berlin, I don't have any other choice. Even if I wanted to save you, the world I live in wouldn't allow it.”

“Why not? You see what I live in, it couldn't be any worse with you.”

She couldn't understand. Berlin was living in the danger, it wasn't chasing her. But if I stole her, she'd become my weakness. I wasn't willing to risk that. I'd be forever worried that she'd die because of me.

How could I live with myself if I was the reason she got killed?

“It won't work. You'd never be safe with me.”

Berlin held her breath as her eyes filled to the brim with tears. “Then why take me at all? Why not just leave me there?” Her voice quivered as she tried to stay strong.

“I just thought a night away would be good for you.”

“How the hell could you know what's good for me? You don't even know what's good for yourself.” Pulling the blanket up over her shoulder, she rolled onto her side. “Good night, Bentley.”

The way she said it stabbed me in the heart. I wished it could be as easy as just whisking her away and never looking back. But it wasn't.

We were in Italy. How did she expect me to get her home? We couldn't run in this country, we couldn't hide, there was nowhere for us to go that he wouldn't have eyes watching. He probably had someone outside keeping tabs on us right then.

Virgo had her since she was a child. If he hadn't sold her off at this point, he never planned to. He would probably go to hell and back to keep her. I was never afraid of that man, but I was well aware of just how unpredictable he was.

Virgo couldn't kill me, but there was no doubt in my mind that he could, and would,

kill her. That's how men like him worked. If he couldn't have her, no one could.

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Berlin had reached out to me for help, but this was all I could give her. One night of freedom for the lifetime she had already served. I wanted to do more, but when I really thought about it, my hands were tied.

It was a harsh reality we both had to face.

We would spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders. Virgo would find someone else just like me at some point, and we'd forever sleep with one eye open. It wasn't fair to either of us.

Fair? What's really fair for her?

Turning off the lamp next to the bed, I laid down and stared up at the ceiling. My eyes slowly began to droop as my mind ran wild with ways to fix all of this.

We could disappear. . . But go where?

I could get her a new identity. . . That would take too long.

I could kill him. . .

A flutter tickled against my cheek and I felt a weight on my chest. I wasn't sure how long I had been sleeping for, but when I opened my eyes, the room was still dark. My brain was trying to figure out where I was and what was going on as the sleepy haze still coated my thoughts.

There was something hovering over me, so I reached out to feel what it was.

A small hand wrapped mine, pulling it in as delicate lips kissed my knuckles. “Berlin?” I asked, unsure if I was dreaming.

“Sh,” she said, hushing me with another kiss to my palm. Moving my hand to her cheek, she snuggled up against it. “If this is it, if this all the time I have here, then I need more.”

“More? More what?” Blinking my eyes, I tried to adjust to the low light creeping in through the cracks in the blinds from the lights outside. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not going back without having all of you.” Rolling her face in my hand, she dragged her lips against my fingers. “I can’t. It’s not fair.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Pulling my hand away, I tried to push myself up.

Berlin shoved her hands into my shoulders, forcing me back down. I was surprised by her strength. There was power and determination in her arms. The frail person I thought I had seen before was gone.

Rolling her hips, I felt something wet slip against my lower stomach. “You feel that?” she asked, continuing to rock her body. “Can you feel what you do to me?”

“Berlin, stop, this isn’t what you want.” Gripping her hips, I held her still. “You can’t use sex to change anything. That shit doesn’t work with me.”

“Is that what you think this is?” I could feel her smiling in the dark as her hands ran up and down my stomach, tracing my abs and chest. “Because it’s not. I know I’m going back tomorrow, so make this night really worth while for me. Give me something to remember when I’m alone in my room, or when I need something good to think about because my mind wants to wander to darker things.”

“This isn't what you want. It won't fix you, it won't change anything.” Digging my fingers into her hips, I could feel her pussy pressing against my skin. She was smooth and soft, warm and wet, causing my dick to harden.

“Don't tell me what I want, I get told enough about what I should think or do. I'm telling you what I want, so fucking listen.” Cupping my hands with hers, she rolled her hips, rubbing her pussy harder against my skin. Reaching a hand back, she touched my cock. “I know this is turning you on. Why resist it, Salt?”

Her fingers slipped into my pants, curling around my shaft. My cock jerked and twitched, pulsing as she began to stroke me slowly. Arching her back, she kept grinding down harder, stroking my length a little faster.

Grunting, every thought in my brain was turning to mush as she worked my cock. I couldn't focus on the voice inside my head, I couldn't stop my body from igniting as she touched me.

The room morphed from black into a foggy shade of gray, her silhouette perfection against the backdrop. I wanted to stop her because of what she had been through, I wanted to stop her because I didn't think she could want something that had been so vile in her world.

Listen to her. The small voice chirped, reminding me that she had been the one to decide this. There were no promises of freedom, there were no open ended sentences that could lead her on. This was her choice.

Pulling her hand free, she rolled her shoulders forward, driving her face into the crook of my neck. I could feel her perfect teardrop shaped breasts as they squished against my chest, I could feel her tongue as she licked and kissed my neck, unraveling a hunger I never imagined she would have.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, brushing the hair away from her face and forcing her eyes to mine. “I don't want you to regret it later.”

“Don't make me beg,” she said, her eyes catching the soft light and sparkling like the sea underneath a full moon. “Please, don't make me beg you. Just let me control one thing for once in my life.”

That was it, all the doubt in my mind vanished as I drove my hands into her hair and kissed her. Her full pouty lips had been the source of my weakness. I wanted to kiss her the first moment I laid eyes on her.

Our lips blended together, mouths opening, tongues swirling as the need grew out of control. She asked for it, she wanted it, but she had no idea how badly I wanted to give her it.

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Tugging my pants down my hips, I kicked them off. Our mouths never broke apart. I refused to let her lips leave mine. She tasted too good, like the perfect cup of sweet and savory, filling a thirst that went deep into my core.

My cock slid between her ass cheeks, rubbing against her tight hole. Sitting up, Berlin pressed her hands into my shoulders to hold herself up as my mouth found her nipples. Suckling the perked beads, I bit and nibbled, drawing out moan after moan from my beautiful flower.

Reaching over to the nightstand, I awkwardly grabbed my wallet and pulled out a condom. Berlin sat up, gripping her tits and squeezing as her body rolled, slicking my skin in her arousal.

Even if I wanted to stop right then and there, I wasn't sure I could. I had turned from man into beast, a feral animal that had lost all sanity as the world slowly collapsed into one selfish moment.

She was mine.

Tearing the wrapper open, I sheathed my cock. The sun must have started to come up because an orange glow was filling room, turning her skin from ivory into a blooming sunflower.

Our eyes were on each other, our breathing was ragged and labored. Lifting her hips, she positioned herself above my cock and slowly lowered herself down.

“Mm, fuck, Bentley,” she cooed, closing her eyes and biting on her lip as she stilled,

allowing her walls to stretch as I filled her.

She was so warm, her pussy already drenched, muscles tense as she gently began to ride my dick. Raising up, I placed my hands on her hips and drove her back down. Her pussy clenched around my shaft, milking me as her pace quickened.

Faster and faster her body rocked, her tits bouncing as I thrusting up, hitting her so deep she screamed.

Scraping her nails down my chest, Berlin's eyes rolled back in her head as she fell forward. Her fingers pierced my skin, holding on like the talons of a small bird.

Goosebumps broke across her skin as she bit my shoulder, her body going stiff. I felt her pussy throbbing, each pulse sending waves of pleasure through her muscles.

“Fuck,” I groaned, pressing my palms into her shoulder blades, holding her against me so she couldn't move.

I wanted her right there. I wanted to feel her pulse as it kicked, I wanted to feel her skin as it flushed, heating us both. Wrapping my arms tighter, I held her firmly against my chest.

I won't let him hurt you. . .

Not anymore.

Pistoning my hips, I gave one final thrust, spewing my life blood into the thin skin between us. Our bodies gave out, going limp and motionless as we both tried to catch our breath.

Twisting her face, she snuggled up against my cheek. “Thank you,” she said,

whispering the words into my ear.

“For what?”

“For being my first.”

“Your first?”

“My first by choice. Thank you for letting me have a voice here.” Kissing my cheek, Berlin rolled off my chest, flopping down beside me and almost instantly falling asleep.

As I held her in my arms, the realization set in that I had given her more than she had ever had. She was heard. And I knew. . .

I knew I couldn't let her continue to live the way she had been.

I knew that she deserved better than the life she was given.

I knew that her life depended on me.

Chapter Seventeen

Berlin

Ididn't sleep alone. For the first time in my life, I had someone else beside me.

The heat off his body was warm as he curled himself around me unknowingly while he slept. His arm draped over my shoulder, face snuggled up into my hair, leg thrown over my calf.

A small smile sat on my lips as I watched bright streams of light stretch between the cracks in the blinds. I was afraid to move, afraid to wake him up and have all of this end.

The night before I was angry, too caught up in how I ended up in his hands, unable to see the genuine gift he had given me.

I was out of the Canary. Not forever, but long enough to enjoy the pleasures of this strange world.

Taking in a deep breath, even the air smelled different. It was fresh and light, filled with subtle notes of perfume and laundry detergent. The bedding was clean and soft, the walls were crisp and clean, decorated with ocean scenery.

Memories of going to the beach with my family when I was a little girl rushed into

my head. I could remember the salty air and the way the sand stuck to your skin, making it feel rough.

A single tear trickled down my cheek as my father's face sat in my mind, his smile bold and gleaming as we built sand castles and splashed in the cold water.

Moving my eyes to the table beside the bed, the thick glossy lacquer was like a mirror. Running my fingers across the surface, I gently touched the thin edge of the lamp, feeling the coarse material.

The need to explore and touch and smell everything in the room had started to come over me. This was the only chance I had to regenerate memories of normalcy. Things that most took for granted.

A soft bed, a fluffy pillow, the way the fabric felt against my skin. I was trying to make mental notes so I'd be able to revisit this memory in the future.

Salt stirred, rolling onto his back,. Glancing over my shoulder, his eyes were still closed, and his breathing was heavy as he snored lightly.

Giggling, I laid my head back down, allowing myself to have that moment. One where there was no pressure on me to perform, or feet stalking by my door like I was a dangerous criminal who might escape.

Pulling the blanket up higher, the feather filled pillow cradled my skull like a delicate egg. I wanted this to last forever. I wanted to live this life. I wanted nothing more than to wake up every day to the sun as my alarm clock.

Salt grunted, mumbling something to himself as he rolled further to the other side of the king sized bed. Twisting my body, I turned so I was facing him, and watched him while his dreams seemed to take him places.

Every few seconds his face would contort and his lips would move as he spoke unrecognizable sentences to an unseen person. Lifting his arm up over his head, his muscles rippled, drawing my eyes to his bare chest.

Thick black lines decorated his ribs, swirling and looping as they followed the defined muscles down his side, disappearing into the seam of his boxers. Reaching out, I let the tips of my fingers hover over the tattoo.

I wanted to trace it, follow the lines and see exactly where they went. The pads of my fingers inched closer, my hand shaking slightly as I tried to be as gentle as possible so I didn't wake him up.

He looked like a sleeping God, one that was dropped from above by mistake. Salt didn't belong mixed up in this shit. For all the bad things he'd probably done in his life, there was something about him that screamed savior.

From the corner of my eye a red flash blinked, catching my attention. Lifting up on my arm, I spotted a phone on the table on Salt's side. The small light kept bursting like a tiny firework, but the phone wasn't making a sound.

A phone. I could call for help. . .

For the first time ever, I had a way out. I could save the girls at the Canary, I could save myself, I could put Virgo behind bars.

Checking to make sure he was still fast asleep, I slowly and delicately slipped out of the bed. With tender feet, I walked on the tips of my toes around the giant bed. I was stunned as I kept the phone in my sight, unsure if it was really true.

I hadn't been that close to a phone in years, at least not one that I could possibly use. Virgo and Vin had their cell phones, but that was it. And there wasn't a chance in hell

I'd ever be able to get my hands on either of those.

Stopping a few feet away from the end table, my hands tingled at my sides, eager to snatch it up and make a call.

Who will I call?

The police?

The operator?

The lobby downstairs?

It wasn't like I had family to call. . .

My eyes fluttered to Salt as my thighs hit the edge of the table. He was still snoring, his mouth partially open. With shaky fingers I reached for the phone, pulling the receiver off. Lifting it to my ear, the sound of the dial tone was like a symphony in my head.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I let my brain remember the noise, allowing it to open old memories from my childhood. Calling my grandparents to wish them happy holidays, calling my friends from school to make plans.

My mind flooded with snapshots of my mother laughing as she talked to my grandmother and cooked dinner, the phone pinned between her shoulder and ear. Her smile as she danced around the kitchen, pulling food from the fridge and pans from the cupboard as she chatted away without a care in the world.

Tears filled my eyes as I opened them back up and muscle memory worked the keys as I made my call.

Each button made its signature beep as I pressed them down with a trembling finger. Holding my breath, I pushed the phone firmly against my ear, praying that my memory was right and the number would work.

'Mi dispiace, il numero che stai cercando di raggiungere. . .'An Italian automatic message came through, telling me that number was out of service.

Fumbling with my lip, I listened to the operator repeat the phrase, not wanting it to be true. Pushing the phone harder against my ear, I felt like if I just waited it out, if I didn't give up, that if I listened a little bit longer, maybe it would miraculously connect.

Without warning, the phone was yanked from my hand. Salt growled, tearing the phone from the wall and throwing it across the room. Crashing against the wall, it shattered into pieces.

My heart sank in my chest as I looked up at Salt, his eyes cold and angry. Stalking forward, he grabbed me by the arms and shoved me against the wall.

The edges of his fingers dug into my arms, his hands firmly holding me in place. Glaring at me, his nostrils flared wide as his jaw clenched.

“What the fuck did you just do? Who the hell did you just call?” His eyes darted between mine, furious and irate.

“No one,” I said, my voice stern and full of truth.

“Bullshit.” Taking in deep breaths of air, he spoke through gritted teeth. “Who the fuck did you call? Was it the cops?”

Shaking my head, I thinned my lips. “No, I. . .” Pausing, I closed my eyes slightly, feeling stupid for having even tried the number to begin with. “I called home.”

His hands tightened, jaw crooking. “Home? You expect me to believe that?”

Forcing my voice to steady, I could feel the tears sitting right there, ready to spill. But I didn't want to cry, I didn't want to allow those tears to consume me. "You can believe whatever the hell you want to." Yanking my arms hard, I was able to pull them free. Standing taller, I stepped into his chest. "But don't worry, the number doesn't work anymore anyway, because she's dead."

Salt's face went slack as his eyes softened. "What?"

"My mother, my father, my family, they're all gone." Leaning back, I let my body rest against the wall. "They're gone. I just—" Stopping myself from saying what I was about to, I waved my hand dismissively. "It doesn't matter, forget it."

"Finish what you were going to say. You just what?"

Looking up at him under hooded lids, I shrugged my shoulder. "I just wanted to hear her voice." Dropping my eyes to the floor, I twisted my toe into the carpet. "It was stupid, I know, but I just wanted to hear her."

Running his hand through his hair, he took a step back, putting some space between us. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have reacted like that, I didn't know." Sitting on the bed, he kept his head down. "How—"

Cutting him off, I snapped, "I don't want to talk about it."

Bobbing his head up and down, he sucked in a gulp of air. "Alright, I get it." Lifting his head, his eyes showed understanding. Even if he wanted to ask more, he wasn't going to.

We both sat in a long silence. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to tell him about my past, about how Virgo had taken my family from me, but it was just too hard to talk about.

“You want some breakfast?” he asked, breaking the numbing quiet between us.

Nodding, I wrapped my arms around my stomach. “Yeah, that sounds good actually. I'm a little hungry.”

Salt got up and went to the fridge, pulling out a small white bag. “I got these from a little bakery in town, they're the best I've ever had.” Handing me a muffin, he took one for himself.

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Real food. Real delicious food.

I wanted to savor every last crumb of that muffin. Bringing it to my nose, I smelled the blueberries, tasting them as the aroma entered my lungs. My mouth was watering as I brought it to my lips, and I had to hold myself back from just stuffing it all in at once.

Peeling a strip off the top, I popped it into my mouth. “Mm,” I moaned, unable to contain myself. “This is amazing.”

“Told you it was good,” he said with his mouth full.

“I don't think you understand, I don't get stuff like this usually. This is so good, it's almost as good as an orgasm.”

“Almost.” Winking, he took another bite of his breakfast and smirked. “But not really.”

Laughing, I swallowed my food, choking it down. “Yeah, you're right, not really.” Watching him eat, I asked, “Can I ask you something?”

Shrugging his shoulder, he took another bite. “Sure.”

“Why do people call you Salt?”

“It's nothing special really, just a nickname. My last name is Saltiana. But my father used to say that when I was little, I was really good at making my mother feel bad

when she tried to punish me. He would say I poured salt on her wound and made her give in.”

“Makes sense.” Sitting at the small table, I picked at my muffin. “You look too young to be this bad-ass assassin. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

“I was raised to be this. It’s a family business, it runs in my veins.” Taking a sip of water, he swallowed hard. “Sometimes, we don’t get to decide who we become.”

“So we’re not that different.”

“I guess not.” Giving me a sad smile, he looked down at the floor. “Can I ask you something?” Nodding at him, I ate some more of my breakfast. “What’s your last name?”

“Parson, Berlin Parson.” Salt stopped, his eyes growing wide. “What? What is it?” I asked, crinkling my brows.

The look I had seen vanished as he shook his head and glanced down at his food. “Nothing, it’s nothing. I thought the name sounded familiar for a second, but I was wrong.” Giving me an uneasy smirk, he checked the clock. Salt’s smile slowly faded into a frown. “It’s almost time for me to bring you back.”

“I know,” I said, finishing my breakfast and throwing the small paper wrapper into the trash. “I’m trying not to think about it.”

Stepping to my side, he curled a finger under my chin and tipped my head up. “I’m sorry I can’t do more.”

“Why can’t you? You could buy me from him. I’ll pay off whatever the debt is for me, I’ll do anything you want, just don’t take me back there.”

“Berlin, it's not that simple.”

“Why not? It could work, we could make it work. I'm a quick learner, I can help you somehow—” Shaking my head, I pursed my lips. “I don't know how, but I can. We could leave all this behind.”

“No, we can't. We'd never be able to fully leave this. You and I both know that.”

He's right. You know he is.

I didn't want to admit it, but Salt wasn't wrong. If we ran, we'd never stop running. I'd be living in the same prison, only it would be built off fear of being found. We'd have to hide, we'd never be able to stay in the same place long.

That wasn't how I wanted to live, I didn't want to spend my freedom constantly afraid that someone was waiting to get me, ready to kill him and drag me back.

Virgo would never stop searching for me.

My eyes met his as his thumb stroked my bottom lip. “I wish we met in another life, not this one.”

Lowering his face to mine, he kissed me softly. “Me too.”

Chapter Eighteen

Salt

Walking to the car, Berlin was a few steps in front of me. She looked so sad when I closed the door to the hotel room. But there was nothing more I could for her.

At least I gave her one night, one night that was just for her and no one else.

Stopping, I plucked a white lily from the garden walkway. Spinning the stem between my fingertips, I watched the petals spiral. It was such a simple thing, but beautiful, just like her; soft, delicate, but so easily damaged.

Looking up, Berlin was still walking towards the car, so I jogged to her side. “Here,” I said, holding out the flower.

“What's this?” she asked, taking it warily as if it was poison.

“It's a flower.” My voice drew out long and playful, trying to make her smile. But there was nothing for her to smile about. A flower to most woman would give them butterflies and make them blush. For her it signified an ending.

“I can see that, but why are you giving it to me?”

“Because it's beautiful, just like you. I want you to keep it, so you can have

something to remind you of me.”

Lifting the flower to her nose, she smelled it. “Thank you,” she said as a light smile teased her lips. It wasn't the same smile I had seen the night before and that cut me deep.

Berlin looked up at me, her eyes glazing over as if she was going to cry. I hated that she was about to cry because of me. The tears she was holding, the ones she was trying to keep in, they weren't from the pain of going back.

They were because of me. They were because I wasn't the person she wanted me to be.

Pulling her in, I hugged her tight, pressing her face into my chest. I felt her lungs as they started to inhale heavy breaths and her muscles as they shook.

All the pent up frustration and sadness came out as she sobbed in my arms. I wasn't going to let her go, not yet. She needed this.

“Don't cry, my flower. Life isn't always kind, sometimes you only have a handful of memories you can look back on that make you happy. This is one of them.”

Her body melted into mine, and she felt perfect there, like she was made to fit in my arms. Clearing my throat, I pushed her away, not allowing her to see the pain I felt about having to bring her back.

“Come on, it's time to go.”

The drive back was long and silent. There was nothing for either of us to say. She wanted something I couldn't give her, and I wanted something I could never have.

What was there for us to talk about?

Sitting in the car outside the Canary, I could see the tension in Berlin as her eyes fell on the building. Her hands were clasped around the flower, her back was stiff, and her face was slack, full of torment.

“You don't have to do this,” she said as water bubbled over the surface of her eyes. “We can just leave, we can go somewhere else. We can become different people, no one would find us.” She tried so hard to sound confident, but I could tell she knew it wouldn't be that easy.

Reaching over, I took her hand, braiding our fingers together. “Berlin, you know I can't do that. It won't work, there's no place for this in my life.”

“For what?” she asked, letting her eyes fall over my face. “For me? You can't find room in your world to help? You only have room to hurt?”

“No, that's not what I mean.”

“Then what? What the hell do you mean? Why can't you just help someone for once in your life?” Her voice pleaded with me to save her, to steal her away and not look back.

But I couldn't.

“There's no place for all the other shit that comes with helping; for the feelings, for the emotions, for. . .” Pausing, even the thought of using the word made my throat close up.

She didn't want to go back, no more than I wanted to bring her back. But I was right when I said the world I lived in wouldn't allow me to have her.

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It went far beyond just the danger she would be in on a daily basis. The life I lived made it almost impossible to get to close to anyone. There was always this underlying fear that it would create a rift.

I watched what it did to my parents, the way it changed how my mother looked at my father. The deeper in he got, the further she pulled away. Until it got to the point she hated everything about him. I watched him try over and over again to please her, to try and make her see him as the man she had fallen in love with.

But this job changes you, no matter how strong you are.

My father was a family man, he loved my mother, he loved me. . . But he also loved the power that came with his line of work. Men would cower in your presence, they would go out of their way to kiss your ass. And the men we killed, well, if you were good, they never saw you coming. But for the ones we were given instructions to make suffer, the look in their eyes was satisfying.

I'd be a lying piece of shit if I said I didn't get high off that power too.

I am a fucking monster.

My mother stopped looking at father with love in her eyes. I couldn't bare the thought of Berlin ever looking at me the way she looked at him. There was this empty glare my mother had, one that made falling in love unbearable.

“For love?” Her eyes darted between mine, trying to understand.

Shaking my head, I looked up at the building. “Yeah.”

“You can't say it, can you?” Sitting up, she tried to force our eyes back together. “You can't even say the word.”

“It's a weakness, Berlin. It's not what people tell you, it's not full of smiles and laughs. There's hatred and pain, there are tears and heartache. And when it's gone, there's nothing but hurt that flows through every fucking vein. I don't want to feel that, and you don't either.”

Letting my eyes float back onto hers, her lips parted as she took in a slow breath. “If love was meant to be full of happiness. . . If it was meant to be easy—” Her voice fell soft, barely audible as she spoke. “We'd have no reason to fear it.” Pulling her hand free from mine, she opened the door and started to climb out of the car. “The only right thing in this fucking world is love. It's the one thing no one can control.”

Snagging her wrist, I yanked her back inside. I couldn't let her just walk away. Not like this, not pissed off and already forgetting what I had given her.

What I'm going to give her. Shit has to change, I have to change.

Wrapping my arm around her back, I pulled her as close as I could, pressing our bodies against the center console. My mouth hovered over hers, unwilling to let her go. Berlin peered up at me, her expression softening as we locked eyes.

“I can't give promises, but,” I said, running my fingers through her hair and holding her tighter, “this isn't the end of your story.”

“I've been living in the end for a long time, Salt. I'm ready for my story to finally begin.”

Driving my lips onto hers, I kissed her. I kissed her as if we were the only two people in the world. I kissed her as if I needed her to survive. I kissed her because I wasn't sure I'd ever have the chance to kiss her again.

I didn't want her to love me.

And I didn't want to love her.

Because I couldn't promise her that I wouldn't break her heart.

I was about to go to war for her, and there was no guarantee I'd come out alive.

Chapter Nineteen

Berlin

My feet felt heavy as cement as I dragged myself across the lot and up towards the front door. The entire time I kept hoping that he would just grab my hand and yank me back to the car.

I don't want to go back.

My eyes fluttered to the surrounding treeline that hid our little evil oasis. Tucked far out of view from the prying eyes Virgo knew wouldn't approve of his ways, the Canary thrived by word of mouth and sour men who had far too much money to spend.

“Don't even think about it,” Salt said, his eyes wolfish and aware of what was running through my head as he walked behind me. “If you really don't want to die, then don't do something stupid.”

“Stupid is you kissing me like you mean it, and then actually making me come back here.”

“No, stupid is you not trusting me.”

Cocking my head over my shoulder, I eyed him boldly. “You haven't given me a

reason to trust you.”

Coiling his fingers around my arm, he turned me on my feet, causing me to sway. With firm fingers, he held me steady, his voice low as if he was afraid someone might hear him.

“I've been nothing but straight forward with you. Not once have I led you to believe anything that wasn't the truth. If that isn't a reason for you to trust me, then maybe I should just walk away. I won't stay here and watch you get yourself killed because you're too fucking blind to see it.”

My eyes wandered around his face, with one heavy brow slanted in disagreement. “You brought me back.” My words were bitter as my voice came out raspy. “I'll never forgive you for this. You had your chance to do something good, instead you let him control you.”

“Me? I had my chance?” His face spiked in annoyance as he frowned. “I opened the car door and told you to get out, you could have run away at any point last night, but you stayed. You could have called the fucking cops, but instead you called your fucking—”

Smack!

“Fuck you.” Balling my fists at my side, I stood up on my toes so I was closer to his face. “You act like you're some fucking hero for giving me one night away, but you're not. You're just another asshole. One night doesn't fix shit, one night doesn't make you a fucking saint.” Storming off, my feet pounded across the walkway.

He was no different than any other man I had ever met.

Bentley Saltiana was only out for himself.

Why am I surprised?

I knew I was coming back.

But I was wishing for something else.

I wanted to believe so badly that this man had been sent to me as my savior. That finally my prayers had been heard and it was my time for something better.

I was wrong.

Because he did do exactly like he said. And for me, it just wasn't good enough. He was a lamb in sheep's clothing, pretending to be confident and powerful.

A confident man would have saved me. A powerful man wouldn't have let Virgo win. A real man would have known exactly what to do, and it wasn't returning me to this fucking place.

A new scar had started form, one that wasn't visible.

It was a gash across my heart where I had stupidly penned his name.

Chapter Twenty

Salt

Grabbing the back of her neck, I held her firmly in my hands. “I told him I would bring you back, and that's what I'm doing.”

Berlin's lashes swept up as she blinked, her eyes studying me with piercing scrutiny. “You really are a cold-blooded asshole.”

“No, I'm a man of my word.” Marching her forward, her legs were sluggish. “I just need you to open your ears and listen.”

“Oh, I hear you just fine. And I think you're a fucking coward.”

“A coward, huh?” Chuckling, I squeezed her neck tighter. “And why's that?”

“Because this isn't who you are. I know it's not, you're not this person.”

“I already told you who I am, so what the hell makes you think that I'm anything different?”

Swallowing hard, Berlin started to answer. “You're eyes—”

“Welcome back,” Virgo called out as he opened the door, causing Berlin to stop

talking instantly. Stepping out onto the large marble platform at the top of the stairs, his eyes watched us suspiciously as he slanted a heavy brow. “How was my sweet girl last night?”

“I don't believe our agreement included details, Virgo.”

Leveling his eyes with mine, he crooked his lips. “Well I hope she was worth it for you. Come, sweet girl.” Waving his hand, he wanted her at his side.

“She's fine where she is,” I said, wrapping my arm around her neck and holding her close. “I'd like to see she gets in safely.”

“Safely?” he asked as if he had no clue what I was referring to.

Lowering my eyes, I glowered, running my hand up and down the outside of her arm. “Don't play games with me, you know exactly what I mean.”

Clicking his tongue, Virgo perused his eyes between us. “Fine, she's due to go on soon anyway.” Shifting on his feet, he threw his shoulders forward and walked inside. Pointing his finger towards the club doors, he spoke to her as if she was a dog. “Go, Berlin.”

Berlin reacted, not even thinking twice about how he was talking down to her. Dropping her eyes to the floor, she went to walk, but I held her in place.

The least he could do was talk to her as if she was human. It wasn't too much to ask. She had already done more than enough to earn that from him.

Snapping her head in my direction, her big green eyes anchored on mine. I knew what she was thinking, I knew she wanted me to just grab her and run.

But if I was going to do anything to help her, we had to do it my way.

“Why don't you try that again, and this time ask her nicely.” Clenching my jaw, I refused to let her go until he addressed her with some compassion, and talked to her as if she was on the same level as us.

“Nicely?” His back stiffened as his lips rolled into a deep grimace. “Nicely?” Taking a firm step into me, his arms went pin straight. “You see this?” he asked, grabbing her face and twisting it hard. “This is mine, she belongs to me. I'll talk to her however the fuck I want to.”

Holding my ground, I lifted my chin higher. “Not while I'm here. While I'm here, she's a woman, and you'll show her some damn respect. I think she's earned that much after what you've put her through.”

“Okay, I see now.” Virgo let out a cackle that was high pitched. “What I put her through. . .” Pressing an open palm to his chest, he smiled coyly. “Every fucking bruise, every cut, scrape, and fucking scar she has could have been prevented. All she had to do was follow orders, that was it. She asked for all of it, she defied me by not listening like a good fucking whore should.”

Balling my fists, my voice shot out deep and husky. “What did you just call her?”

“Bentley, please. This little fucking hard on you have for her needs to stop.”

“She's not going anywhere until you do what I'm telling to you to do.”

Huffing loudly, Virgo rolled his eyes. “Berlin, sweetie, can you please go get ready for tonight?” His voice was high-pitched like he was talking to a child, as the muscles in his face twisted like he was sucking on a lemon.

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The way he said it made me want to hit him in the face. But I didn't, I stayed strong, keeping my composure.

Berlin looked between us, her eyes steady on mine as if she was looking for approval. Giving her a nod, I released her arm, letting her walk into the club. I watched her for as long as I could, until she finally disappeared into the back room.

Virgo shifted angrily beside me, obviously annoyed that it was me she was responding to and not him. It was like I had stolen all of his power, knocking him down off his mountain that he thought he claimed.

Shooting my gaze back to Virgo, I growled. "We need to talk."

"Bentley, we're done talking. You got what you wanted, I got what I wanted. Why do we need to ruin that with more words?"

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. We have more business, and I think you might just like what I have to offer."

Wrapping his arm around his ribs, he tapped a single finger against his lip. Cocking a brow, a smug grin filled his face. "I'd be lying if I said you didn't have my attention. What are you offering?"

"Can we do this someplace else? You know I don't like drawing any attention to myself. The less I'm seen the better."

"You know, Bentley, I wouldn't tolerate this from anyone else but you."

“That's because I'm the one you call when you have an issue. Who the hell are you going to call to save you from me?”

Virgo let out a hearty laugh as if what I said was an honest joke. It wasn't. I was serious as fuck. “Follow me.”

Bringing me to the same room we had met in the night before, he strolled around the table and stood behind his chair. “Well?” he asked, laying his arms over the back of the chair and folding his hands. “What is this offer you have for me?”

“I want to buy Berlin from you.”

“Didn't I already tell you no?”

I didn't move further into the room, choosing to keep the door in my peripheral vision. “But you haven't heard my offer yet.”

“Go on,” he said, rolling his hand. “It won't change anything, but it might give me a good laugh.”

“Tell me a number, any number and it's yours. And, because I want to be fair, I'll take care of the next five issues you run into. No questions, no fee, all I ask is that after I'm done, we cut ties.”

“So you want to take the one girl I don't want to sell, and then end our contract completely?”

“It's a good deal, Virgo, you know it is. Who else would tell you to give a price and not care what it was?”

“It's fucking bullshit.”

“I'm trying to make this work in your favor so there's no problems between us. I don't want to have to kill you for her.”

His eyes lit like liquid fire, nostrils flaring wide. “You'd kill me for a piece of ass?”

“I'd kill you to save her life.”

Chuckling, Virgo's lids turned to slits. “Are you fucking Robin Hood now? Rob from the rich and give to the poor?”

“I want to do the right thing, that's it. I want to pay you for her, give you some time to find someone else to do your bidding, and then go on with my life. I don't want you to contact her, I don't want you to look for us, I want you to forget that either of us exist. It's a win win for you, you should take it.”

“Do you hear yourself? You're talking fucking crazy. What has that girl done to you?”

Grunting, my lips drew taut. “I'm taking her whether you agree or not. It's up to you how we get to that point.”

I watched as his eyes glanced behind my back. It was quick, but enough for me to sense something was about to happen. Before I could turn, someone wrapped a cord around my throat, pulling it tight.

I didn't hear or notice anyone else come into the room, but I wasn't exactly listening either. Like a fucking idiot, I let down my guard, focusing on one man.

Digging my fingers into the cord, I tried to pull it free. It was too tight, forcing me to my knees as the air became thin, barely making it into my lungs.

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“I was ready for this, Bentley. I'm not fucking stupid. But I was hoping that you'd just let her go and walk away.” Pulling his phone from his pocket, he smiled, tapping the screen and putting it back. “You're not taking her.” Taking slow steps around the table, he worked his way closer to me. “Does she know?”

I could hear myself wheezing as I focused on breathing. But there wasn't enough air for me to talk. My eyes began to bulge as the cord cut into my throat.

“Does she know?” Virgo looked at the man behind me, giving him a light nod. The cord suddenly loosened a hair, just enough for me to say a few quiet words.

“Does she know what?”

“Does she know who you are—does she know what you are?”

“She knows enough.” My voice was scratchy, holding half the baritone it normally had.

“I don't think she does.” His smile thickened to a devilish grin. “I don't think she knows enough about you. If she did, she would have run back to me.”

“I'm not playing your fucking games, Virgo.” Wriggling my fingers, I was able to get just the very tips under the rope.

“It's not a game, Bentley, it's the truth. Does she know who your father is?”

“She knows enough,” I snapped, baring my teeth. Sweat was dripping down my

forehead, stinging my eyes as I tried to figure out a way to get free.

I wasn't sure where he was going with this. She knew I killed people, she knew my father killed people, she knew enough to paint her own picture. What more was there?

You know what he's talking about.

But she's not strong enough to hear it.

She didn't need any details of how we did our job or the names of the people we killed. Berlin was smart enough to understand everything without all the morbid details. And the real truth, she couldn't handle that yet.

“I don't think she does.” His voice was smooth and confident. “But she will. Any last words you want to tell her?”

Following his eyes, I turned slightly to look at the door. In the back of my head, I knew what he was doing. He was going to fucking kill me.

You can't fucking kill me, not when I'm already dead inside.

The door opened slowly, and Vin walked in holding Berlin by the neck. Her face was beet red, her lip was split, trickling blood down her chin.

She's a fighter. That's the only reason she's still alive at all.

“Here she is boss.” Giving her a gentle nudge, he let her go. “Anything else?”

“No, you can go, Vin.”

Berlin had this look on her face. She was fucking pissed. Her mouth was tight, rolled down in the corners. Her eyes were jagged, shooting razors in Virgo's direction. She didn't even look at me, her gaze anchored on her enemy.

“Where's Aubrey?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“Who?”

“Don't play fucking stupid. Where is she?” Balling her fists at her sides, her breathing became faster as she clutched the flower in her palm. “Vin said she's gone. What the hell does that mean?”

“Oh, her,” he mocked, arching his brows high. “You two were trouble together, so I sold her.” Looking down at her hand, Virgo smiled. “What do you have there?” Stepping forward, he snatched the flower from her fingers.

“I gave her that. It's for her to keep, not for you take away from her.”

The sound of my voice forced Berlin to whip her head in my direction. Our eyes met, hers growing wide and full of tears as she absorbed the sight of me on my knees.

“What's happening? What are you doing to him?” Taking a small step forward, she clutched the side of her head, pulling her hair tight against her scalp.

“It's so sweet he gave you a flower.” Bringing the flower to his nose, Virgo inhaled a deep breath. “You're in love, Bentley. I wish your father was here to see this.”

“Leave my father out of this.”

Berlin growled, lunging at Virgo. With wild arms, she clawed and raked the air, blindly striking his body. “Let him go! I won't let you do this! You're a fucking monster!”

Letting out a loud grunt, Virgo swung a heavy backhand, smacking her across the face.

My body tensed, eager to jump up and help her. But the unknown man behind me tightened the rope, keeping me in place. It killed me that she was so vulnerable, that Virgo could hurt her and there was nothing I could do.

Stumbling backwards, Berlin clutched her jaw as her eyes turned to pinpricks. But she wasn't done. Her strength overpowered her pain, her will to fight out shined her sorrow and sadness.

Running at him again, she landed a punch to his chest and an open palm to his cheek. “I hate you! I fucking hate you!”

Crooking his jaw, Virgo drove his hands into her hair and yanked her head back. Berlin let out a cry, reaching her hands up to grab his wrists. “When this is all over, you and I need to have a little talk. I found money in your room, Berlin, that's a big no no.” Using her hair to pull her head against his face, he forced her to look at me. “Look at him, take a good fucking look.” Biting his bottom lip, an evil smile spread on his face as his eyes connected with mine. “Your boyfriend isn't who you think he is—”

Jerking my body forward, I snarled. “Don't you fucking hurt her.” The cord tightened more, making my voice drop to a whisper.

“I don't have to hurt her, you're going to. What she's going to learn is going to tear her apart. You get to break her this time, I don't have to do a fucking thing. But later, once you're gone and she's all alone, I'll come for her. And then I'll make her hurt again for stealing from me. For now, I'm going to enjoy this.”

“Don't.”

“But it's the reason we're all here, like one big happy family.” Smiling, he spun the flower against her chin, tickling it up her cheek. He looked fucking insane, like a crazed mental patient. “You and Bentley are connected, did you know that, my sweet girl?”

Berlin didn't answer, keeping her eyes on me.

“This isn't your place,” I huffed out, my words dry and hoarse.

“But doesn't she deserve the truth? You want to buy her, you want to set her free. But, I think she should know the entire story before she willingly accepts you as her hero.”

Berlin's eyes were wide and nervous. “What are you talking about? I don't understand what you're talking about.”

“Do you want to tell her?” he asked, smirking from ear to ear. “Oh wait, you're a little tied up. Maybe I should just do it.”

Holding out my hand, I tried to soften my expression, despite the fact that I could feel my face swelling from the pressure. “Berlin—”

“His father is the one who killed your mother.” Virgo spat the words out before I could say anything, his smile huge and full of satisfaction as he watched the color drain from her face.

Releasing her head, Virgo took a step back, allowing himself to bask in her reaction.

“What?” she asked, her voice nothing but air as she took a big step backwards. “He what?”

“That's right, Berlin, Bentley's father is the one who did it. Did he forget to mention that tiny detail as he fucked your brains out last night?”

That was it, I couldn't take that shit anymore. Slipping my fingers beneath the cord, I used my legs to pounce up, throwing the guy behind me off balance. With one fast twist, I had the cord around his neck, pulling it tight until his body went limp.

He wasn't dead, not yet. But it was enough to knock him out cold for a bit.

“Berlin,” I said, taking a long stride forward.

“Stay back! Don't come near me!” Tears started to stream down her cheeks as she held her chest trying to catch her breath. “You're father took my mother from me?”

“No,” I said, cutting the air with my hand and throwing my finger at Virgo. “He's the one who set the ball in motion, he was the mastermind behind that entire fucking day. My father didn't want to do it, but Virgo wouldn't let it go.”

“Why didn't you tell me? How could you not tell me?” Tears spilled effortlessly down her cheeks. She looked so lost, so afraid, so crushed. It was like all the emotions she had been holding onto suddenly floated to the surface.

“I didn't know that it was you and your family, Berlin, not at first.” Taking another step in, I tried to reach for her.

I wanted to hold her, secure her in my arms and let her cry until she couldn't cry anymore. My fingers ached to brush her hair, my tongue tingled to whisper soothing words in her ear.

Holding my arm out, I inched closer. And that's when it happened, that's when I saw the look, the same look I had seen on my mother. Hate.

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Swatting my hand away, she kept moving deeper into the room, staying out of reach. “When did you know? When did you realize it?”

Laughing, Virgo leaned against the table. He didn't seem phased that I had just gotten out of his trap, it was almost as if he expected it anyway.

“Tell her more, tell her the truth. You want to play the good guy, but we both know that's bullshit. Tell her how your father gave her sister and brother away, how he was the man who brought her to me. Tell her how your father hunted hers down like a fucking animal. How he cornered him and slit his throat, and how he loved every second watching him beg for his life . .” Pausing, he lifted his hand to his lips and grinned happily. “Tell her how you were there.”

“Oh my God,” she groaned, clawing at her throat. “I can't breathe, I can't breathe.” Her lungs lifted and fell with labored urgency as her face went pale gray. “I can't see, I can't breathe.” Tumbling backwards on shaky legs, Berlin shut her eyes, trying desperately to not pass out as she planted a palm on the wall.

I wanted to run to her, I was ready do what she wanted me to all along and whisk her away from all of this pain.

But the anger inside had reached its boiling point. I felt numb from head to toe as the adrenaline surged through my muscles, releasing the monster that lived inside me.

I honestly didn't know it was her at first. But when she said her full name it all came rushing back.

Memories of that day flooded my head. I was still new, only turning eighteen a month before. It was my second job with my father and his crew, and I was just doing what he told me to. There were no real details, just that we were looking for a single man who owed a lot of money.

My role was to check the house, to go in and see if that guy was there. If he was, my father wanted me to bring him out. I wasn't allowed to kill him, because our client wanted him alive. But the house was empty. Her father had gone into hiding, abandoning his family, not realizing the true danger he had put them in until it was too late.

It all happened so fast, and was done before I could even stop my father. I never expected him to kill the woman or take the kids. I only knew the information that he gave me.

But who I was to against my father?

I remembered when we got home that day and the look of disappointment on his face as he realized what he had done. And I remembered the blindfolded little girl that was sitting in the backseat of his car.

I never knew what happened to that little girl, or where the other two kids ended up, and I never asked. It wasn't until Berlin told me her full name that I was able to put two and two together.

What she didn't realize was how that day changed my life too. It was the day I knew I had to do things differently. I had to make sure only the right man got what was coming. I wasn't going to kill the innocent. I wasn't going to use the innocent to get back at the wicked.

It wasn't right, it was wrong.

I didn't care who came looking for a job, if they said they wanted everyone in the house dead for one person's betrayal, I said no.

That was only time I could say I honestly felt hate for my father, and was able to see the man my mother saw. The greed and power had taken over, he had lost his ability to separate his values.

She hated him, and for a little while, I hated him too.

After that day, things changed, he did things differently. It was as if he had looked in the mirror and saw the same person my mother did. I don't think he liked the image he saw peering back.

So, we had laid out plans, we weren't allowed to deviate from it. If it didn't seem like it would work, we pulled back until the timing was right.

I know he felt remorse for what he had done, and I often thought he still felt that remorse up until the day he died.

Because his last words to me were, 'I'm sorry, tell her I'm sorry.'

I never really knew what he was talking about, not until right then as I watched Berlin collapse to the floor.

Was he talking about her?

"Nice job, dip-shit, you killed her." Virgo was softly caressing the flower, pulling the petals between his fingers with a tender force so that they didn't pluck free.

Growling, I whipped my body around and lunged forward. Gripping his throat in my hand, I squeezed, cutting off his air supply. "You fucking asshole," I said, digging my

fingertips deeper into his skin. “I should fucking kill you right here.”

“Then do it.” His lips moved in soundless words as he held his gaze on mine.

“It's not for me to decide if you live or die, it's hers.” Looking at Berlin, she was starting to come to, pushing herself up off the floor. Drawing back my fist, I let it go easily.

Connecting with his face, I watched the blood as it started to trickle out of nose and over his lip. Virgo smiled, his teeth bloody and tinted red.

“You fucking pussy, you're not even strong enough to kill me. You want to leave it up to a stupid fucking whore. You are just like your father, you're weak.”

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That was it. I lost control. Any restraint I had been gently coddling, quickly dissolved.

Punch after punch landed on his face. I could feel his bones as they crunched beneath my knuckles, and his skin as it grew warm from fresh blood. Virgo's body went limp as I repeatedly hit him.

Dropping him to the ground, he flopped over into a bloody pile. He was groaning, rolling around slightly as he held his face.

Turning to Berlin, I dropped to her side. "I'm sorry, Berlin. I really had no idea, not until today. I should have told you, but I wasn't sure how you would react. You already had a reason to hate me, I didn't want to give you another one." Filling her in on some of the details, I watched her face as it transformed. It was as if I had filled in some of the blanks, pieces of that day that she was missing.

Helping her up, she looked at me, her expression sad, but holding understanding. "It's not your fault, I can't blame you for something you didn't have any control of. That's not right or fair to you."

"I really am sorry, I was still just a kid, barely a man. There was nothing I could do to help you."

"Stop," she said, holding up her hand and touching my cheek. "Stop apologizing for something that's not your fault." Her eyes fell on Virgo, lids lowering as her lip curled. "Fucking piece of shit." Walking over to him, she gave him a quick kick to the ribs.

I watched as her body began to shake and her tears came pouring down her cheeks. “I fucking hate you! I fucking hate you! You stole my family! You stole my life!”

Berlin stomped on his head, kicking him in the face and any other open area she could find.

Stepping to her side, I grabbed her arm. “Here,” I said, pulling the hidden gun from my waist.

“What am I going to do with this?” she asked as she took it in her hand.

“Whatever you see fit.” Taking a step back, I lifted my chin and straightened my back. “It's your choice to kill him and it's your choice to let him live.”

Her eyes instantly went back to Virgo. He was laying on his back, hands out to the side. “Should I kill you?” she asked him, tipping her head into her shoulder. “You made my life living hell. You deserve to die.”

“You won't kill me, you don't have it in you.” His bloody smirk widened, exposing more red teeth. “You're weak, just like your father. He ran because he couldn't face me, he couldn't face his punishment like a real man. No one steals from me, he got what he deserved.”

Pursing her lips, Berlin pointed the gun in his face as she peered down at him. “Did you ever think that maybe he saved your life because he ran? Maybe my father could have killed you, but instead he let you live. I just don't think he would have made that choice if he knew my mother would lose her life.”

“Your father didn't do me any favors. He deserved everything he got, right down to your fucking mother.”

Pulling back the hammer, Berlin pressed the gun to his temple. "I want to hear you beg. Beg me to kill you, beg me like you made me beg you."

His lips thinned as his eyes crinkled. "I'll never beg you, I won't beg someone I don't respect."

Pushing the gun harder against his skin, she screamed. "Beg me to fucking kill you!"

"Just fucking do it! Stop drawing it out! Fucking kill me!"

Berlin smiled, a genuine, satisfied smile. "I am going to kill you, but it won't be like this. You're going to spend every fucking day wishing I pulled the trigger." In one quick snap, she cracked the butt of the gun against his head, knocking him out cold.

Dropping to her haunches, she dug around in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. The screen lit up and I watched her as she dialed some numbers. "Hi, I'd like to report a place called the Canary. The owner is keeping girls hostage and selling them to men. He also murdered a woman named Tabitha. . ." Berlin listed a few more names quickly, hanging up the phone, and dropping it on his chest.

"We should probably go now," I said, taking the gun from her and tucking it back into place.

"Follow me, I know where to go." Grabbing my wrist, she tugged me along. "There's a back exit, we can go out there."

Following her through the halls, we took a few turns and exited a hidden door in the back. Berlin kept her eyes open, her senses on high alert as she lead us back to my car.

No one even noticed us.

Not Vin, not any of the other guards, we slipped out as if we hadn't even been there.

Jumping into my car, I started it up and got us out of there as quickly as I could. Berlin was smiling as she rolled down the window and let the wind blow through her hair.

This woman was amazing. She was glowing, her cheeks flushed a deep shade of pink as her smile grew.

And as we passed a cluster of cop cars, driving in the direction we had just come from, Berlin let out a sigh.

“What's wrong?”

“I left my flower there.”

Laughing, I took her hand in mine, bringing it to my lips and kissing the back of her palm. Reaching down, I pulled the crushed flower out from the small pocket in the car door. “No you didn't.”

Berlin's eyes lit up with happiness, making my heart skip a beat. Holding the wilted flower, she leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“Thank you,” she said.

“No, thank you.” Braiding out fingers together, I pulled her hand into my lap. “You made me see what's really important, and it's not what I thought it was.”

“What do you mean?”

“Love. You made me see how much it matters.” Berlin's cheeks blushed, the color spreading down her throat and over her chest.

“Are you saying—”

I didn't let her finish. “I'm saying that I love you, Berlin.”

And I did. I loved that girl.

I loved her and I would do anything to keep her safe.

Because sometimes, you find love in the dark.

Epilogue

Berlin

Six Months Later

Sitting on the couch, I flipped through the stations, landing on the news. The camera was zoomed in on Virgo's face as he sulked in his chair. He was wearing the same jet black suit I had always seen him in, with his yellow handkerchief tucked into his breast pocket.

The camera panned the room, coming back to a closeup on Virgo's eyes. Even right then, knowing he was behind a screen, miles away, I still felt this sense of uneasiness, as if he could see me through the glass.

“Alleged mob boss, Virgo Berchello, was arraigned today on charges that range from money laundering, to tax fraud, sex trafficking, and murder. Italian officials speculate he could be responsible for over two dozen disappearances between three different countries. Multiple women were removed from the dwelling, names of the victims are being kept private to protect their identities. Authorities are still looking for several names associated with the Canary. Vincenzo Manziolla, Alfred-Blue- Fiozza, Dominic Bianchi. . .” Pictures of the men came across the screen, making my heart flutter with a stilling fear. 'If you see these men, they are considered armed and dangerous. Contact your local authorities immediately.’”

They could come looking for me. . .

Virgo's face popped back onto the screen, causing the news anchor's voice to fade as I zoned out. It was unsettling to see his face again, to know that even after being imprisoned for months, he still had this halo of dark dust floating around his head. The way he glared at the judge as he read the charges, the way he held himself like he was an innocent man being wrongfully accused, it just made me sick.

The front door opened and Bentley stepped inside, carrying a plastic bag of groceries. "Hey," he said, glancing at the television, "What are they saying?"

"Who cares, so long as he spends the rest of his life in prison. I can't watch this anymore, I hate seeing his face." Hitting the power button on the remote, I tossed it onto the coffee table.

"What about your sister and brother? Were you able to find any information?"

Shrugging a shoulder, I furrowed my brows. "Nothing yet. I'm hoping that as the trial moves forward there's stuff that comes out I can use. I don't even know where to begin."

"Don't worry, you'll find them, I know you will."

Forcing a smile, I pulled my gaze off of his. "The thing I keep wondering is what happens if I do? Will they remember me? Hazel might, she was older, but Jonas was barely one. And what would I tell them?"

Tilting his head, Bentley softened his eyes. "You'd tell them the truth, because they'd be old enough to understand it."

"Yeah, I just don't know if I'd want to tell them the entire truth, or if finding them

would really do any good for them at all.”

It was hard to imagine exactly what I would say to them if I ever did find them. A part of me thought that they might just be better off where they are. From what Salt knew about that day, my siblings were adopted by a family who couldn't afford to go through all the legal loop holes, but that was it. He didn't know where they actually went, if they stayed in the states or were sent someplace else.

Maybe it's better if I never find them?

If they had no memory of that day, no memory of me or the life they used to have, what good would it do for me come in out of nowhere and shatter their world?

I would take the bubble they had been living in and literally pop it with a hot needle. They would learn the dark history of their real family, and I couldn't even begin to think about how that might impact their future.

They could be living happy lives, with opportunities, education, loving parents. . . Inserting myself could destroy all of that. But I wouldn't really know what to do until I found them.

Once I knew where they were and how they were living, then and only then would I know. Until that moment, I was still going to look. It couldn't hurt to just search.

Shaking my head, I pushed the thoughts away. “What do you got there?” I asked.

“Well, I have something that might brighten your day a little.” Smirking, he flashed his teeth as his brows bounced high.

“Oh yeah, and what's that?” I asked, pulling my feet up and tucking them under my legs.

Reaching into the bag, he rummaged around. "Let's see. . ." Pulling out a large chocolate bar, he held it high above his head as if it was made of gold. "I got you this."

Throwing it underhand across the room, I caught it. Gripping the edges, I was about to tear it open when I noticed someone already had. Pushing the sides apart, I looked inside the wrapper and saw that there were a few squares missing.

"You ate some already? Seriously?"

"What?" he asked, shrugging a shoulder. "I got hungry."

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“You couldn't buy two?”

“I thought chocolate was best for sharing.”

Giggling, I pressed the chocolate bar to my chest and pouted my lips. “The rest is mine, so don't ask for any.”

For the past six months, I spent my time readjusting to a new world. One without permanent walls, without meaningless punishments, without orders and forced interactions. A world where the sky was the ceiling and the walls were where your vision reached the horizon and you couldn't see any farther.

There were plenty of sleepless nights, nights where I'd wake up in a cold sweat, expecting to be back in that room. But when my eyes opened and Salt was beside me, all my worries and fears would melt away.

Bentley had done nothing but support me through the transition from prisoner to freedom. He was there if I needed to cry, letting me shed the weight of all the years I held inside. He was there to calm me down when I thought I had seen one of Virgo's men following us or thought I heard someone outside the door.

But he kept pushing me, forcing me to take small steps outside my comfort zone so I could enjoy what I had been missing.

I had already tasted every different type of food I could my hands on. Salt would take me to a different restaurant every week. He'd have me close my eyes and he'd feed me something blindly.

We were slowly building a life together. A life that neither of us had ever had, one that was normal, one that didn't have dark secrets. We didn't have to hide anymore. . . I loved that part the most.

He wasn't worried about the men that got away. According him, the heat was too hot for them to do anything, he said they were laying someplace, avoiding the public. It made sense, and I trusted him, so I refused to let those assholes keep me stagnant.

“So, what else do you have in that bag?” Popping a square of chocolate into my mouth, I left it on my tongue so it could melt a little before I started chewing.

Chocolate was my new addiction.

“Nothing special; a bottle of a soda, a book for you to read—”

“A book? I hope it's not a novel, I'm not that good at reading yet.”

“But you will be. You've been working really hard on it, I can already tell you're better than you give yourself credit for. Besides, we have a long flight in front of us, so it's the perfect time to practice.” Smiling, he pulled an envelope out from his jacket pocket and waved it back and forth.

“You mean—”

“Yup, I got them today. We are officially Mr. and Mrs. Jericho D'Angelo. We have everything we need; birth certificates, social security cards, passports—everything.”

“Oh my God, you really got them?” Dropping the chocolate bar, I jumped up off the couch and ran to his side. Salt was shaking the envelope above my head, just out of my reach, his eyes glinting playfully. “Can I see mine? What's my name?”

Technically, we weren't actually married, we didn't run off and tie the knot on a whim. But we did get new identities from one of Salt's connections. We could finally go home without raising any eyebrows or suspicion.

“Uh uh, first I want a kiss.” Puckering his lips, he closed his eyes and leaned in. Pecking him quickly, I snatched the envelope from his hand and darted away laughing. “Hey!” he called out, chuckling as he took off after me.

Running around the bed in our hotel room, I could see the Eiffel Tower out our big picture window from the eighteenth floor. The sun was setting in the background, the sky was this shade of orange with jagged purple and blue streaks, as if someone had hand painted the colors in the sky.

I never thought in a million years that I'd ever have the chance to see the Eiffel Tower. My eyes were fixed on the incredible image Mother Nature had created, taken back by just how beautiful it was.

There was this sense of appreciation I had for everything. Every tiny detail, every lingering aroma and flavor, every pock mark and scar, every shade of color and season. All of it was amazing, reminding me that I was still alive.

I really made it. I'm finally free.

My knees buckled as Salt tackled me from behind, his thick body pinning me to the bed as he tried to snag the documents from my hand.

“Hey!” I yelled, tucking the envelope under my stomach and out of his reach. “This isn't how you get your way, Mr. Jericho D'Angelo!”

The hard tips of his fingers dug into my ribs as he tickled me, making it hard for me to say anything because I was laughing uncontrollably.

“Come on!” Giggling, my body was rolling and bucking. “This isn't fair! You're not playing fair!”

“We never set rules for this game, so anything goes.” Quicker and with more precision, he tickled his way down my body and grabbed the most ticklish spot. His large palm wrapped my knee as his fingers pressed into the outside muscle.

I couldn't stop laughing as my body tingled and shivered, shaking like I was being electrocuted. “Stop! I'm going to pee myself! Stop!” Between crazy laughs and heavy breathing, I tried desperately to wriggle out from underneath him.

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“Oh no, you're not getting out of this that easily. I'm calling your bluff.” Flipping me onto my back, Bentley grabbed my wrists and lifted them above my head as he tore the envelope from my hand. “How dare you, Rosabella D'Angelo?”

“Rosabelle? That's my name now?”

Nodding, he asked, “Do you like it? It means beautiful rose.”

He was holding me in place, tucked against my mound as he split my legs open with his hips. I could feel his hard cock as he shifted his waist. My body reacted, nipples turning to stiff peaks as his piercing dark brown eyes held me hostage.

“I love it.”

With gentle fingers, he brushed loose strands of hair out of my face. “I like this.”

“Like what?”

“Seeing you happy.” Kissing me softly, he whispered into my mouth, feeding me the words. “I love you, and seeing you happy means everything to me.”

My lips vibrated as he spoke, my skin flushing as the heat off his mouth spread over my face. “I love you too, you make me happy. I could never thank you enough for what you've done for me.”

“I don't want you to thank me, I just want you to always love me. I want us to always be like we are now.” His lips found mine again, kissing me harder. His hands curled

around my wrists, keeping my arms high above my head.

Our tongues danced, swirling and licking. He tasted so good. I could kiss that man all day long. Pulling his mouth off of mine, he worked his lips down my neck, fluttering kisses across my collarbone and down my chest.

My beaded nipples tingled under my shirt as he circled one with his nose and then nibbled it with his teeth. Dragging his face across my chest, he plucked the other nipple beneath the fabric, forcing my back to arch off the bed.

With painstakingly slow fingertips, Salt ran them down my ribs, teasing the edge of my shirt. “Do you want me to keep going?” he asked, touching the delicate skin of my belly as he slipped his hand underneath.

Biting my lower lip, I nodded. “Yes, don't stop.” My hips rocked up, rubbing against his erection. “I never want you to stop.”

“Good,” he breathed out, sliding his hand up the center of my chest and circling my breasts one at a time. “Tell me what you want, tell me where to touch you.”

The closer he moved to my nipples, the more my body came alive. My muscles shook, my heart was pounding, my brain was slowly drowning. It was the best form of torture.

“I want you to lick my nipples.”

Pushing my shirt up, he hovered his mouth over my breast. “Is this what you want?” Flicking his tongue across my tit, he sucked my nipple into his mouth, gently rolling it between his teeth.

Moaning, I closed my eyes as he went to my other breast and repeated the motion.

Gyrating my hips, I rolled my pussy against his cock, ready for him to be inside me.

“Keep going, tell me what you want.” Running his tongue down my nipple, he placed kisses across my ribs and over my belly.

“I want you to kiss me lower, and don't stop until I tell you to.”

Growling, he pushed up on his knees as he tugged my shorts down my legs. Pressing my knees open wider, Salt's eyes devoured every inch of my pussy. His face disappeared as he dipped down and let out a cool breath across my sensitive button.

Fuck, it felt so good. It always felt so good. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined sex ever being anything but sickening. But Salt knew how to warm my body, he knew how to touch me, he knew how to read me.

Lowering his face, he licked my clit with the tip of his tongue. “Mm,” cooing, I raked my fingers through his hair, and gripped the roots.

I was completely lost in the moment. There was no one else in the world right then but us. And that was how I always wanted it to be.

Pressing his tongue flat against my folds, he sucked on my clit, lapping and drinking my arousal. Fireworks exploded behind my eyes, forcing my muscles to tremble and my back to shoot off the bed.

Resting his palm on my stomach, he pressed me back down, tearing his mouth from my pussy. “Not yet, my flower, I want to feel you cum.”

Sitting up on his knees, he unbuttoned his pants and shifted them down his hips. The way his muscles rippled as he twisted his torso, the way the thick muscles in his legs flexed as he climbed out of his pants, it was heart stopping.

Licking my eyes up and down his body, his hard cock was standing out straight, so firm the tip glistened and the veins throbbed in need. Grabbing a condom, Salt sheathed his cock and climbed above me.

Placing his hands on either side of my head, he teased my hair with his fingers as his swollen crown nudged my entrance. Holding still, Salt gently touched my face, stroking it as he looked into my eyes.

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“You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I want you to know that, I always want you to know how beautiful you are inside and out.” Kissing my shoulder, he pushed his cock in a little, giving me a second to adjust to his size.

“How did I get so lucky to have you fall into my world?” Placing a palm to his cheek, I drew circles over the stubble on his skin.

The cut angles of his jaw were sharp and rugged. His almond shaped eyes were open so wide I thought I could jump inside. His deep brown hair dangled around his face, framing it perfectly.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I shimmied my hips forcing him in deeper. Salt let out a groan as he slid all the way in, until his balls touched my ass and there was nothing left for my body to take.

Pulling his hips away slowly, he brought it right to the edge, driving back in with vigor. This wasn't slow, delicate love making. Not with him. This was passionate, loose yourself in the moment sex.

Rocking his body, he drove in hard, slamming his cock in deep. Each thrust became more intense, making my body tighten and my lungs forget how to breathe.

He was a monster transformed, a wild beast that had been tamed. Bentley had become exactly who I knew he was, he was my savior.

And as we made love, as we lost ourselves to the hunger, there was no need for words.

Because our life was meant to blend, our worlds were meant to cross, and our future was still a chapter we needed to write.

Love comes in so many forms, and mine was molded in the dark.
