



Praise Me: Soldier

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, New Adult

Description: July is on her first date—ever. Leave it to her to sit down at the wrong table. With the wrong man. As soon as she realizes her error, she should get up and leave, right? Thing is, she can't seem to move once she locks eyes with Theo, a soldier fighting demons that chased him from a POW camp overseas, all the way back to Chicago. The only person who seems to quiet those hostile memories in his mind...is her. But what she does to his body? It's the opposite of quiet.

And there's no switching tables now.

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CHAPTER ONE

Theo

My skin is feverish.

Sweat is forming a pattern on the front of my gray T-shirt.

I can't seem to uncurl my fists long enough to pick up the coffee mug and bring the rim to my mouth for a sip. No one else in this café is having difficulty performing basic tasks, like consuming their beverage. In fact, they're multitasking while they drink. Having witty conversations, reading, typing on laptops.

All the clicking and laughter and scratching of pens, chair legs, skin...it culminates in a marching battalion of sounds to assault my ears. Ears that haven't heard anything but silence...or screaming...in so long, they can't cope. I can't cope.

I can't do this.

I thought I was ready for the outside world, but I'm not.

I don't even have a cell phone yet because all the icons and apps were so confusing, but trivial at the same time. Unfamiliar like everything else.

My hands are jerky, sweat rolling down my spine while I fumble with my wallet, taking out a ten-dollar bill and wedging it in between the salt and pepper shakers. Is ten enough? Has the cost of coffee gone up since I've been imprisoned? Why didn't I

think to look at the menu more closely?

A man two tables away raises his voice to ask the waitress for the check and my skin shrivels like hot plastic. He's a civilian. A civilian. But all I hear is a person in distress. Another soldier being tortured on the other side of the wall. Distant explosions. Gunfire. Soon-to-be dead men screaming for their mothers. All absorbed into the blackness of my cell. My sweltering, airless hole carved into rock somewhere so far removed from this fancy coffee shop, it shouldn't even be allowed in the same universe.

Taking a deep inhale, I close my eyes and recite the directions back to my new apartment, reminding myself not to glance right or left on the way home, to keep my attention locked on the path in front of me, lest I see something that triggers my severe PTSD and causes a scene. Sort of like in the airport upon landing back in Chicago, when I thought the rumble of the baggage claim belt starting, a horn blaring three times in succession, meant there was incoming fire.

Those people didn't need to be hustled to safety. They were safe, normal Americans, like the people surrounding me right now. Sometimes my brain forgets, though. It forgets everything but the fear and memories and horror of the last four years.

I push my chair back to leave, but I never get the chance to stand up.

A girl sits down across from me and...

The grating noises in the coffee shop fade into a low, thumping rhythm. I don't realize right away that it's my heart I'm hearing. I haven't heard it do anything but pound with painful adrenaline in so long, I barely recognize the sound.

She's short.

Young.

In round, tortoiseshell glasses. Beautiful brown eyes look back at me from the other side of that glass, bewildered and inquisitive all at once. Her dark hair is twisted up on the top of her head in a bun, but I can see light, golden strands woven throughout the messy masterpiece. She parts her lips to say something, and thankfully, she doesn't, because I wouldn't have heard it, anyway. Goddamn, that fucking mouth. Supple. Full. Kissed with a light gloss that catches the golden light above the table. The bow of her upper lip is unnaturally high, and it allows me to see the tiny gap between her front teeth.

I'm staring.

I can't stop staring and my prolonged attention is making her blush.

She drops her head forward on a shy, breathy laugh.

"You're..." She peers up at me through her eyelashes. "You're Kevin?"

Kevin. Kevin. Who the fuck is Kevin?

"I don't usually let my co-workers set me up on dates. I don't usually go on dates at all, to be honest." Slowly, she starts to unwind a light, tan and white striped scarf from around her delicate throat, which is circled by a thin necklace. A gold charm in the shape of a bow sits right on that little notch above her collarbone and my mouth begins to salivate. What is happening to me? "I just...um..."

Dear God, her voice is so...innocently husky.

My cock gives a heavy thrum. For the first time in years.

I feel the pulsation in my throat and nearly choke on the unexpectedness of it.

Beneath the table, I dig my thumbs into my knees. Breathe.

“Well, I’m trying to be more of a yes person,” she continues. “I always say no to happy hour. When I have vacation days at work, I never use them for anything but...”

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“But what?” I ask, desperate for her to keep speaking.

My voice visibly startles her. It’s no wonder. I sound like I just crawled out of a grave. In a lot of ways, that’s exactly what I’m trying to do. Starting with being in this coffee shop.

“I take short road trips to visit estate sales. That’s what I do with my vacation days.” She tugs on the sleeve of her sweater, but I don’t look down. I can’t look at her breasts. Not with my dick beginning to get stiff for the first time since I was imprisoned and tortured. All over the mere sound of her voice. “Do you think that’s morbid? I just love to see what someone collected while they were alive.”

Silence falls.

I realize it’s my turn to speak.

This is a conversation. Not a one-sided shouting diatribe in a language I don’t speak.

Say something or she’s going to get uncomfortable.

“No.” I clear the cobwebs from my throat. “I don’t think it’s morbid to visit estate sales. I think...any kind of curiosity about other people is a good thing. It probably means you’re not a self-absorbed piece of shit.”

She sucks in a breath.

The people at the table to my right go silent.

But then, the girl across from me breaks into a giggle that she quickly catches with her hand. “You’re very blunt, aren’t you?”

“Sorry about that. It’s been a long time since...” I gesture to our surroundings. “I’ve been in the service for a long time. Too long, obviously.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Dierdre didn’t mention you were in the service. Which branch?”

Fuck. I forgot she’s here to meet Kevin, the bastard.

Oh well. I’m not going to pretend to be someone I’m not.

“Army. Special forces.”

“I see.” This girl is smart and she’s beginning to realize something is up, but she’s not letting the suspicion show on her face. Not so much that regular person would notice. But I’m not a regular person. I’ve been trained in wartime interrogation. Not to mention, I had to rely on infinitesimal facial tells to survive captivity.

Any minute now, she’s going to ask me if I’m really her date. Or if she’s sitting at the wrong table. I’m not going to lie to her. Actually, I’m not even going to make her ask. For one, she seems too smart to believe a lie. And two, I want to get this Kevin bullshit out of the way. I like having this person across from me. I’m no longer sweating or stuck in fight or flight mode. Something about her is...restorative. So absorbing that I can’t manage to think of anything but her, especially my constant, impending sense of doom.

“I’m not Kevin.”

Her only reaction is to breathe faster. A single swallow.

She glances down the row of tables and I follow her line of sight, both of us noticing the clean-cut man in a suit, checking his watch.

“If you’re not Kevin, why did you let me sit here so long?”

“I didn’t want you to leave.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’?” I scoff.

She blinks, obviously still confused.

I lean forward, the forward shift causing my dick to chafe against my zipper, the bulk of me beginning to swell in a way I haven’t felt in so long. It’s her. It’s everything about her. What is that smell she’s wearing? Smells like sugar cookies. “Because you’re a fucking knockout. Or haven’t you looked in the mirror lately.”

“I’m...” She starts in surprise, her knee bumping the underside of the table, rattling the silverware. “I’m not a-a knockout.”

“Yes, you are, baby.”

“Baby,” she mouths without sound, her spine straightening with some indignance. “I suppose you’re going to tell me you’ve been in the service so long, you forgot it isn’t polite to call a woman baby when you just met her.”

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“I’m not going to tell you that.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I didn’t care much for being polite, even before I was in the service.”

She glares at me from behind those nerdy glasses and my balls start to pulse.

Jesus Christ, I’m hard. I didn’t think it would ever be possible again. Thought my post-traumatic stress had robbed my ability to feel arousal. I’ve been back on US soil for two months. During that time, some of my old friends have sent me pictures of single women, asking if I wanted to try dating. They’d even offered casual sex with some grateful—and apparently patriotic—friends of their wives. One friend even dragged me to a singles mixer, but I felt sick and impatient just being there. Porn has done nothing to encourage my body back to its usual state.

This girl, though.

She’s given me my first erection in four years.

I want to be happy about it, but...I’m suddenly very aware of my constricted balls. The weight of them between my legs, denim pressing in on everything.

“Stay where you are,” I rasp. “Pick me over Kevin.”

Twin pink spots appear on her cheeks. “I don’t even know your name and you’re telling me where I can and can’t go?”

“My name is Theo. Yours?”

She hesitates. “Maybe I shouldn’t say.”

My full concentration goes into staying still, instead of ripping the table out from between us and throwing it across the room. “I think you want me to know it.”

“July,” she whispers.

There goes my heart, booming again. I like when she whispers. I like feeling like we’re in bed, sharing secrets. I like...her. A lot. “Your name is July?”

“Yes.”

“Were you born in July?”

“No. August first. But I was due on July twenty-seventh and by then, my mother had already fallen in love with the name, so...”

Another first in four years? The urge to laugh. Holy shit.

I want this girl in my lap. Want to smuggle her out of here like stolen diamonds.

She’s bringing my body back to life.

More than my body. I’m not locked in numbness like I was this morning.

Like I’ve been for months since coming home.

“I don’t know if you’re m-my speed,” she whispers, but her gaze betrays her words, slipping down to the rough curve of my bicep, my throat, eventually taking a

prolonged peek at my mouth. Is she attracted to me? “Going on this date alone was a big step for me, you know?” she finishes.

“I understand.” I look around, noticing the crowd has thinned out slightly. “It’s a big step for me just being in this coffee shop.”

That catches her attention, her expression turning inquisitive. “What do you mean?”

Despite urging from my friends, I haven’t spoken about my experience as a POW. It’s hard enough to have the horror inside of me, but harder still to watch that horror dawn on the faces of other people really brings home the gravity of what I survived. I find myself wanting to tell this girl, though. It almost feels inevitable. She’s supposed to know everything about me.

“I was held in an enemy camp for four years. A prisoner of war.” Across the table, her lips part on an intake of breath. “I saw nothing but the walls of my cell and the faces of my captors for so long, this coffee shop feels like a figment of my imagination. It doesn’t seem like real life. Nothing does.”

“Four years?” she whispers

I hum a confirmation. “I wish I could go back into the darkness and tell myself if just survived the torture a little longer, I’d eventually find myself sitting across from an angel in glasses. Might have given me something to hang on for when I’d forgotten how to hope.” Damn. My gut is beginning to churn, my skin going clammy, just talking about my time in the camp. It’s getting hard to draw a breath. “Never mind, I don’t want to go back into the darkness. I want to stay right here—”

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My words cut off abruptly when she reaches across the table and lays a hand on my forearm, her fingertips finding one of my many scars, tracing it lightly. “I’m sorry, Theo,” she murmurs, wetting her lips. “I’m sorry you had to live like that for so long. You must have been incredibly strong to get through that.”

Maybe.

But I’m not strong right now.

My attention is locked on her hand where it connects with my skin. It has been over four years since anyone has touched me without the intention to do harm. Warmth spreads from the place where our skin connects, rolling downward toward my belly, heating my skin like I’m sitting too close to a fireplace. And I can’t help looking at her tits now, small and high and proud in her modest, white V-neck sweater, those mouthwatering handfuls seeming to grow plumper with every breath.

July’s eyes find mine through the forest of her eyelashes, shy and overwhelmed and I know I should draw my arm away, because my neglected body is poised to ruin this. I’m going to take this encounter too far and she’ll run away, refuse to ever see me again. I don’t want that. I need to see her again. As soon as possible.

I need to be in her plans. I need to make her plans.

But I don’t draw away. I soak in her delicate touch like she’s the sunset and this is my last day on earth. Shouldn’t I warn her, though?

“July,” I manage, my tone rocky.

“Yes?”

“I haven’t been touched by a woman in a long time,” I say, in desperate need of adjusting myself, the stiff flesh of my cock crammed up behind my fly, seeking space to grow. To be relieved. “I...think you have to stop.”

“Really? I’m only touching your arm.”

“Please,” I pant.

She starts to remove her hand, but her fingertips linger and she’s curious. Too curious for her own good, apparently. “What if I don’t?”

“I’m going to embarrass myself. Please, I...” I lean forward across the table, devouring the nearness of her mouth, the shape of her nose, eyes, chin. “My body has been through so much pain, it forgot what pleasure feels like. But it started to remember as soon as you sat down in that chair.”

“You haven’t...been with a woman in four years? Not even since you came back?”

“Couldn’t even get hard until I saw you, baby. And like I said, we have to stop talking about this or I’m going to...” A wave of lust snares my loins and my hips jerk, a moan trapped in my throat. Jesus, my cock is straining against my zipper, my spend dribbling out everywhere, ready to pop. “I’m going to bust if you don’t stop touching me, July. Hell, if you keep looking at me like that, it’s going to happen.”

“How am I looking at you?” she breathes.

“You’re curious.” Despite the agony in my jeans, I scrutinize her face for clues as to how she’s reacting. How she’s feeling. “You’re curious because it would be the first time you’ve watched a man get off, huh?”

“Yes,” she says, her voice low, thready. “I-I didn’t know I could have this effect on someone.”

“You’re having it on me.” I pound a fist on the table, making the sugar container bounce. “Going to bring me off with nothing but that pretty face, aren’t you, baby?”

That’s when she moans.

It’s only the smallest, briefest sound but it’s like a cannon boom in my head.

It’s the final straw.

My cock swells and lengthens that final degree—and in such swift fashion, I have to snatch up a cloth napkin in my fist and press it to my mouth, my willpower demanding my body cool off, to stop whatever is happening due to her scent, her coy but rapt body language, the fucking way she’s looking at me.STOP. But—

I ejaculate in my jeans.

My balls spasm, cock rippling with the flood of semen. Four years’ worth of pressure leaves me in a blistering liquid rush, filling my briefs, soaking into the cotton, while I grit curses into the napkin, straining my vocal cords in an attempt to stay quiet. My stomach screams in agony over what it’s been holding in and the sudden, dramatic loss of tension, my thighs shake in the seat. I see heaven and hell on the backs on my eyelids, and in between it all, there’s her. July. Looking up at me in that excitedly nervous way.

And it’s a good thing her image is seared into my mind, along with her name, because when I open my eyes, she’s gone. I’m staring back at an empty seat, the outline of her perfect face still lingering in the vacant air.

My obsession with finding her begins here...my mission sharp and clear.

Urgent.

Only, this mission won't end with me getting locked down.

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No. It's July's turn.

CHAPTERTWO

July

I'm so flustered, I forget how revolving doors work.

Walking too fast, I run smack into the glass, hanging my head in shame and slowing to a shuffle. Did I even grab my purse running out the café?

Yes. Yes, it's on my shoulder.

With sweaty hands, I fumble through the process of taking out my badge and swiping through security, blurting a hello to the guards who are watching me with speculation. Probably because I never leave my desk for lunch and the one time I do, I come back looking like I got swept up in a tornado.

In a lot of ways, I did.

His name was Theo.

When I get into the elevator and punch the button for the twenty-third floor, I don't process any of the conversations taking place around me. I'm careful to keep a distance between me and the person beside me, just in case I'm as hot to the touch as I feel. Wouldn't want to burn anyone alive.

What just happened?

Like...what?

For starters, I sat down at the wrong table, which is humiliating enough, because...that man, Theo, was nothing short of a ten in the looks department. Way out of my league. Tall, intense. An abundance of sinewy strength. Weathered.

Straight up hot. Life experience hot. Capability porn hot.

Who was I kidding sitting down across from him in my sensible sweater and oxfords? Now that I'm the last one on the elevator, I groan up at the ceiling. When I drop my chin again, I catch my reflection in the steel doors. Flushed. Glassy eyed.

He came.

He climaxed at the table.

The memory of it returns in perfect clarity, just throat muscles straining, his chest rifling up and down, her eyes zeroed in on my mouth. I'm going to bust if you don't stop touching me, July. Hell, if you keep looking at me like that, it's going to happen.

I move aside my scarf, staring at the reflection of my spiked nipples through the front of my sweater and...suddenly, I'm noticing the curve of my hips, the shape of my calves. The wild toss of my hair.

Am I attractive enough to make a man spontaneously ejaculate?

Did that really happen?

My body thrums as if it did. There's a drumbeat pulse between my thighs and a

telltale wetness making my panties cling uncomfortably. When I blink, I'm assailed by the vision of Theo on the other side of the elevator, charging at me. Shoving me backward against the wall, jerking my skirt up and filling me.

Baby's a virgin, he mutters thickly in my ear. Lucky me.

The elevator doors open and I've never felt more exposed walking into the sweeping floor comprised of cubicles, offices, a lounge area. Donner Advertising has been my work home for two years, since I graduated from Tulane. It doesn't feel like home right now, though. I'm in a waking dream in which I've arrived here naked.

"You have clothes on," I murmur to myself, throwing my purse down on my cubicle desk. But I don't sit down. I'm too restless. I'm...

Oh man, I'm so turned on.

I barely even know what this feeling means, I've been turned on so few times in my life. Men always make me feel like an alien. Like a placeholder until they can find someone sexier and more confident. Theo...he made me feel like the ultimate catch. My thighs quiver like jelly as I stand and stare at my workspace, my tummy in a perpetual summersault, remembering how he jerked and grunted into the cloth napkin, his ripped body in the throes of an orgasm.

Without thinking, I turn on my heel and beeline for the restroom. What I'm planning to do is shameful and scandalous, not to mention unethical, but I can't concentrate. I think...yes, I think I need to touch myself or I'm going to melt. My clit throbs excitedly now that the questionable decision has been made, my underwear clinging tighter, as if my sex is swelling with anticipation. Have I ever been this aroused before?

Before I can reach the bathroom—and much to my horror—my boss, Elsa Vikander,

blocks my path. “Miss Newsom. You’re back from lunch.”

In dramatic eye makeup and a leather dress, this woman has modeled her entire personality on Maleficent. Normally, she makes me shake in my oxfords, but I’m still coming down off the strangest lunch date of the century, so all I can do is stare at her and try not to look like I was on my way to masturbate in the company bathroom. “Good afternoon, Ms. Vikander. What can I do for you?”

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“Funny enough, your lunch outing made me think...”

“It did? How?” I say, wide-eyed.

“Because I went to your desk to ask you a question and you weren’t there.” She laughs, as if this is the funniest thing she’s ever experienced. “It made me realize how many times you’ve worked through your lunch break. Sad, really. But productive.”

What a hoot. “Thanks. Uh. Yes, well...”

“And it got me thinking, that kind of dedication should be rewarded with opportunity.” She leaves that statement hanging in the air, for dramatic suspense, I guess. “I’m going to let you present a campaign to Yerbi on Friday.”

“You’re...what?”

I’m not horny anymore.

I’m frozen. A deer in headlights.

“You heard me,” chuckles Elsa, taking a long sip of her flavored seltzer. “I want to get some new blood into the boardroom. See if we can tackle our slump with youth and synergy.”

“We’re in a slump?”

“Eh, it’s minor.” She glances back over both shoulders. “Yerbi didn’t like what I

came up with for their fall baby food flavor campaign and you know what? It probably did suck. I hate babies.” She shrugs. “Anyway, they requested someone new on their project, and I thought, why not July Newsom?”

“Because July Newsom has a fear of public speaking.”

“There’s only one way to get over that.”

“Klonopin?”

“No, silly. Speaking publicly. A lot. Starting Friday.” She pats my cheek. “Better to have you fail than me, I always say.”

Elsa sails off in a condescending cloud of Opium by YSL before I have the chance to tell her I can’t do the presentation. That I will have a panic attack if positioned in front of enough people. I’m a background person. I’m quiet. I like doing the grunt work and letting someone else take the glory. That’s what I’ve been doing up until now. Setting up ideas for Elsa to knock down. Isn’t everyone in the office comfortable with that, too? I’m treated like the cute but dorky assistant who doesn’t know how the world works.

I might not be happy in that role, but I’m comfortable in it.

I return to my desk in a daze.

A double daze.

When I get there, my co-worker, Dierdre, is sitting in my chair, looking exasperated. “There you are!” she exclaims, pushing out of the chair. “Why didn’t you show up for your date with Kevin?”

Oh my gosh, I've been so wrapped up in my indecent thoughts, I forgot that I'd eventually have to explain my absence at the coffee date. "It's kind of a funny story."

She curls her upper lip at me. "Kevin doesn't think it's funny. He waited for half an hour."

I wince. "To be fair, I was actually there. At the café."

"You were?" Her mouth hangs open a moment. "You didn't think he was cute?"

Do I tell her the truth? I have to give some explanation or she'll think I'm just a flake. An abbreviated version, however, because...I'm still processing what actually happened. And maybe I want to keep it to myself. "I sat down at the wrong table. With the wrong guy."

No, he was the right one, whispers my brain.

Despite the fact that he came in his pants. At the table.

What is wrong with me?

Dierdre is still slack jawed. "Only you, July. I swear, you're too green for your own good. Why didn't you get up when you realized it was the wrong dude?"

"He was...it was..." I swallow hard. "I can't really explain it. We started talking and I found out he recently returned from overseas. I guess you had to be there," I finish lamely.

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“Are you going to go on another date with him?”

“No,” I scoff, my heart sinking at the thought of never seeing the intense former POW again. “No. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“He’d have to track me down. I didn’t even give him my number.”

I had to run out of the café before I had a public orgasm, too.

Who would believe me?

Eyes narrowed, Dierdre slowly takes out her phone. “I’ll explain to Kevin what happened and see if I can set up another date.”

“No.” I stay her hand, before I know what I’m doing. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Do you think you can do better?” she laughs a little to herself. “Or do you just like this soldier?”

Painfully aware that I’m blushing to the roots of my hair, I skirt past Dierdre to get to my desk. “Sorry, I have to work,” I mutter.

And a soldier to try and get out of my head. He stirred up something inside of me. Something needy and sexual. Against my better judgment, he left me wanting to know more about him, the source of his pain. But that doesn’t change the fact that

climaxing in public is a giant red flag. I'm a safe girl. I pay attention to warnings.

Right?

Yes.

I need to pay attention to this one.

CHAPTER THREE

Theo

It wasn't hard to find July Newsom.

I simply asked Kevin for the full name of the girl who he was supposed to meet for a date. At first, he didn't want to give me the information, but we came to terms. Quickly. He walked away with minimal damage and honestly, he probably would have given up July's name and workplace without the right cross to his jaw, but I didn't want to let the opportunity pass to give him a warning.

Stay the fuck away from July. Or you're a dead man.

Now, I'm across the street from her office building, waiting for her to leave for the day. She's in advertising, working for Donner Advertising. Attended the University of Chicago. Studied abroad one semester in Florence. Not a party girl. Her social media feeds are mainly comprised of pictures of her parents, book recommendations and affirmations. She likes going to the symphony and goes alone, most of the time. There's one video of her being brought to tears by a crescendo and I can't stop watching it. Can't stop listening to her little gulping sob, the shudder of contentment that follows.

She is breathtaking.

It has been hours since I saw her and I'm going through withdrawals, like an addict being denied a hit. I'm in the shadows, arms crossed. Waiting and—

There she is.

Right there.

Fumbling with her umbrella on her way down the sidewalk, her heavy purse slipping down to her elbow while she tries to get it engaged. She finally does, holding the basic black umbrella overhead and sailing toward Union Station. I walk faster, catching up to her when she dips inside, once again tangling with her umbrella to get it back down, her nose wrinkled in irritation. Her white sweater is wet, I can see the outline of her bra straps as I trail her through the overcrowded station, rush hour commuters zigzagging paths in between us and this would unnerve me most of the time. All this action. All this chaos.

But I'm too determined to keep pace with July to pay any heed to my nerves.

I'll be much worse off than a panic attack if I lose her.

She stops on a platform, just as the train rolls in and—using a different entrance, I slip onto the same train as her. It's an express train, meaning it won't be making a stop for a while and that's good. I need her to hear me, before she's given the option to run.

Again.

The train begins to move, the motion rocking everyone gently on their feet. It's so packed, I have to weave through bored-looking straphangers in July's direction—and

I know the exact moment she becomes aware of me. She touches the back of her neck, as if I've pressed an invisible kiss there, looks up from her phone, head turning in every direction, a little trench between her brows. When she spots me coming toward her through the sea of commuters, her brown eyes widen.

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But she doesn't run.

She stays silent in the hum and sizzle of the train, letting me come closer, the blush building on her cheeks, neck. Goddamn, what a beautiful sight. The way she pushes up her glasses with her index finger makes me feel protective. So much so that tendons pull taut in my chest, my arms, the urge to growl making my throat feel strained. I've been a lost wanderer since coming home, but I'm filled with purpose now. And that purpose is July.

I don't say anything when I reach her corner of the train.

I simply box her in and let her get used to it.

She stares at my chin, her breath coming fast, and I close my eyes momentarily, enjoying the way her exhales coast down my throat. My dick is already throbbing so ominously, it's very possible I'm going to come in my pants again, but I strangle back the need and try to appear as normal as possible. For someone who has stalked a woman to this location and backed her into a corner, that is.

"You're not here by coincidence, are you?" she whispers.

"No."

Her throat works with a swallow, and I want to press my tongue against her jugular, so I can feel her alarm. Soothe it. "I should be screaming for help," says July.

"What's stopping you?"

She appears to weigh the question. “I don’t know.”

Damn. That honesty is so appealing. Every thought in her head is right there on her gorgeous face. No subterfuge or psychological games. I’m no longer capable of the latter and it relieves me to no end that she isn’t, either. “Maybe you sense I won’t hurt you.”

“Maybe,” she murmurs, tilting her head back to look me in the eye.

Being at the perfect angle to kiss her and close enough to do so has my stomach in a fucking knot, my pulse flying. But God, I don’t have a hope in hell of holding back my seed if I taste that pouty mouth. I’ll blow everywhere.

“I had to go home and change my pants because of you, July,” I lean in to say against her temple, figuring we should address the elephant in the room. “Did you enjoy what you did to me?”

She surprises me by staying quiet, her tits rising and falling gently against the strength of my stomach. Not issuing an outright denial or an admonishment for being inappropriate in public at her expense. “I...found it shocking,” she says, finally. “Men don’t usually notice me and suddenly, I’m causing you to...”

“Bust. Hard.”

A shiver snakes through her entire body, her eyelids drooping to half-mast.

“Jesus,” I rasp, my cock filling with lead. “You liked it, didn’t you?”

She presses her lips together.

“Tell me,” I demand, crowding her tighter into the corner, raking my open mouth

along her cheek, temple. “Did it get you hot?”

“Please,” she breathes. “I have no experience with this kind of thing.”

“Men or sex?”

“Both.”

July Newsom is a virgin. On some level, I already knew. And I’m not going to pretend that doesn’t wrench the possessiveness inside of my tighter. “July.”

“What?”

“When you left the café...” I grip her hip in my right hand, tracing the shape of her with my thumb, strumming it up and down, side to side. “Did you have a wet pussy?”

She inhales sharply. Hesitates, then looks up at me, the answer there in her fathomless brown eyes. Fuck. Shewaswet. She doesn’t even have to say it out loud.

“Did you do anything to ease yourself?” I ask, massaging that hip roughly now.

“No,” she says too quickly, wetting her lips. “Well...”

“Well?”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 7:59 am

“I was...maybe going to,” she says, so quietly I can barely hear her over the hum and rattle of the train. “But my boss decided to drop the bombshell that I would be presenting a campaign to a real-life client on Friday. After that, I was too shocked to feel anything else.”

“Why?”

“I don’t present. I’m a researcher. I’m just a background person.”

“That’s what you think,” I mutter, inhaling against the crown of her head. Sugar cookies. No wonder I want to take a fucking bite out of her. “You seem like the kind of person who does everything to the best of her ability. I can’t see you doing anything but killing the presentation.”

“I can,” she laughs quietly—and that sound travels through me like a sensual stroke. “I can see myself stuttering and panicking and bombing. I’m about as comfortable with public speaking as I am with...men.”

I release her hip in favor of grasping her chin, tilting it up firmly. Perhaps a little rougher than I should, but her eyes glaze over and damn, I think she likes being maneuvered. Put in her place. “That’s the last time you refer to men in the plural sense. You sayman from now on. Singular. Meaning me. Say it correctly now.”

It takes her a moment to nod, but she does, whispering, “I’m about as comfortable public speaking as I am with you.”

Satisfaction rumbles through me. “You’re getting more and more comfortable with

me, though, are you?”

“Possibly to my own detriment.”

My lips twitch at her dry humor. “Why do you say that?”

“I have no idea what you want from me. Or what you want to do to me.”

The train slows to a stop and more people push into the already overflowing train, forcing me to press her tight, tight, tight into that corner, releasing a silent groan of thanksgiving when her stomach cushions my engorged cock, her palms rising in surprise to flatten against my pecs, her tummy hollowing and lifting against my bulge.

“You’re the only woman who can get me hard or make me come,” I say, my voice thicker than molasses. “I think you know exactly what I want to do to you.”

Her head seems to fall back against her will, her toes lifting so my cock drags up and over her belly button. “The way you speak is so blunt,” she says, a little breathless. “You decide you want something—me, in this case—and you take it. I can’t decide if you’re driven or just entitled.”

“I don’t feel entitled to you, July. I just need to keep feeling like this.”

“Turned on?”

“Like I’m a human being,” I say through my teeth, lifting her between my body and the wall so I can rub my face in the curve of her neck, getting her sugar scent all over me, in my nose, in my head. “When you look at me, I’m no longer some ghost floating around, watching the normal people go about living their lives. It’s like...as soon as you sat down across from me, I materialized. You’re anchoring me back

down into the real world, July, and I don't...if I'm being too forward or too aggressive, it's only because I can't be polite about finally breathing again. You force me to breathe, if for no other reason than to go on looking at you." I suck hard on the side of her neck and groan over the way her thighs tense in response. "I need you, baby. I need you."

CHAPTERFOUR

July

The train has always been a necessary evil.

It's loud and crowded and perpetually running late.

I'm never going to look at it the same way again.

Theo has me pinned in the corner on my tiptoes and lord help me, if there was room, I think I might wrap my legs around his waist. Right here on the train.

This, coming from a woman who can barely get the courage to speak to a man.

Before Theo, at least.

As he takes another long, groaning drag of my neck, his hands dragging around to my backside and kneading it like pizza dough, I realize I'm feeling sexy for the first time in my whole entire life. Even sort of...daring. Theo's frankness when speaking about me and my body and his blatant hunger for it...it's having an effect.

You're the only woman who can get me hard or make me come. I think you know exactly what I want to do to you.

Judging by his prolific erection and the way he moans low and animalistic in his throat every time the train rocks him against my belly, I'd say he wants to come home with me. And take me to bed. Post haste.

Am I ready for that?

I didn't even know this man before lunchtime.

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Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:21 am

He wasn't even my scheduled date!

His mouth fastens beneath my ear and a rush of sticky heat presents itself between my thighs. Wetness round two of the day, all thanks to this man, who I barely know. But he's a man I feel...something for.

Attraction, yes. Obviously. Serious, potent attraction. There's something else, though, and it has manifested in my chest. Compassion for what he's been through. Gratitude over his honesty. A growing fondness for his no-nonsense personality. Is it possible to be anything but blunt when one has been imprisoned for four years?

I'd do well to adopt more of his drive. Want something? Go get it.

If he presented an idea in front of a boardroom, best believe everyone would listen to this man who speaks with such conviction and experience. They'd be in awe.

Maybe he could show me his ways.

At first, that thought appears as more of a non-serious flight of fancy.

But it sticks.

I've only been in this man's company twice and I'm already more confident in my appeal, my ability to be seen. What if he could give me the boost I need to walk into the boardroom on Friday and wow the clients...and Elsa, too?

"What are you thinking about?" Theo breathes in my ear. "I can practically hear the

wheels turning. Also, your mouth is moving and no sound is coming out.”

“What? No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. Are you mapping out plans in that beautiful head?” He rolls our foreheads together, his breath heavy on my mouth. “And how do I make sure they involve me?”

I don’t know.

That’s the answer that comes to mind. Three words I say a lot, even when I know exactly what I want, because I’m afraid to be pushy or seem too ambitious or a million different characteristics that people deem negative when applied to women. But Theo, he’s looking at me and waiting, because he truly wants to know what I’m thinking.

What I want.

“Um...”

Those eyes bore into mine. “What, baby?”

I take a deep breath. “I’ve never felt as capable and confident and...hot as I do than when you’re looking at me.”

I’ve caught him off guard, but he’s...pleased. Very pleased, his jaw flexing once, twice. “Good.” He kisses my hairline. “Thank you for telling me that.”

Heat is sweeping me. This languid feeling that could only come from being nearly elevated off the ground with a six-foot-three Army special forces soldier memorizing my every breath. “I’m not going to have sex with you the day we meet, though,” I whisper, so the people around us don’t hear me. “I’m not the type to rush into

things.”

“Not going to lie, I’m obsessed with being able to fuck you, July. I need it. Likeyesterday.” His open mouth slides up and down my jawline. “But I don’t need to be inside you to come.”

“I noticed.”

He laughs, husky and warm into my neck and I laugh, too.

It’s the greatest intimacy I’ve ever shared with another human.

Foreplay and humor at the same time. It’s an instant hit with my entire body. Mind.

Heart.

“If I make you feel capable and confident and hot now, July,” he rasps, twisting a fist in the hem of my skirt. “Just wait until I start worshipping your pussy on my knees.”

“Yes,” I whisper, without thinking.

“Yes, what?” he says, pouncing on my consent. “Yes, you’ll let me lick it?”

This is getting overwhelming.

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Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:21 am

I'm growing drenched.

On the train. With this man I just met and this is so far out of my comfort zone, it isn't even funny. I need to get a hold of the situation. I need it to make sense until I can categorize what I'm feeling for Theo. "I...think so, y—"

He cups a hand over my mouth. "On second thought, don't answer that. I'm getting close to making a mess again." He bares his teeth against my ear. "Jesus Christ, woman, the effect you have on me should be illegal."

"Public indecency?" I half gasp, half laugh. "Pretty sure it is illegal."

"Lock me up." He half-grins. "As long as you're locked in with me."

Scary. So scary the way my heart elevates into my mouth. Set parameters. Make it make sense. Come back down to earth. Like, what if I'm being love bombed and I'm too experienced to recognize it? What if I'm being completely naïve and the growing bond and deepening physical connection I feel for this man is a bad thing?

"Um..."

"Hmm."

"What I was going to say is...I have this presentation on Friday and maybe, I don't know, maybe you could help me? You're so good at getting your point across and this-this confidence you have in me is a little contagious. And I sort of need that?"

He takes hold of both sides of my face and looks me in the eye. “I’ll do whatever you need me to do, July.”

“Just be you...around me,” I say, meaning it. “And in exchange, I’ll...”

His eyebrows knit together. “You’ll what?”

I lower my voice and speak directly against his ear. “Well. You can only get...relief. With me. Right?” My face is on fire, but I keep going, knowing he won’t judge my idea. And honestly, I want this so badly, my desire gives me the final push I need to speak up. I enjoy being the only woman Theo’s body responds to. I enjoy being his wonder drug. I’ve never been that important to anyone. I like how his praise makes me feel. Powerful. Unique. Alive. “I’ll help you get that relief. When you need it.” I pull back to find his eyes have gone molten. “Anytime you need it.”

He’s suddenly breathing like he’s run a thousand city blocks. “Starting tonight?”

I take the leap. “Starting tonight.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Theo

I don’t know what I did right in this life to deserve a shot with July, but I’m too worked up to think about the whys and wherefores too hard. We’re standing in front of her apartment door, her fingers trembling slightly as she turns her keys in the lock. My hands are on her hips, tracing her curves with my palms, because I can’t stop touching her.

It’s nothing short of compulsion.

And I'm going to be honest with myself, I shouldn't be following this nervous virgin into her home. She isn't ready to fuck me. But my need to fuck her is out of control. I've flown straight past the point of desperate. When I told her I can get off without being inside of her, I meant it. Hell, I've proven that. There's a war drum beating inside of me, though, the tempo increasing steadily, calling me to engage my enemy.

That enemy is hunger.

Hunger that has been suppressed way too long.

Until her.

Now, I stand just inside the door, watching her flit around, picking up discarded coffee mugs, tidying her already pristine apartment. It's all blues and silvers and plush rugs, big, comfortable-looking pillows and stacks of books on antique shelves. It's a magical place that suits the magical girl who made my blood start flowing again. It's sweet. It's a sanctuary. And all I want to do is drag her to the ground and hike up her skirt.

Control.

Find some control.

I could so easily ruin this.

Don't ruin this.

"So, um..." She stands in front of the couch, wringing her hands. "Do you want to sit down?"

I wrestle back the dishonorable impulse to throw her over my shoulder, stride to the

bedroom probably located at the end of the short hallway and take what I need so badly. Take what she hasn't offered me yet. That's not the man you used to be. Don't prove right the people who treated you like an animal by becoming one. Somehow, I manage to hold off the urge and go closer, joining her in front of the couch. I sit down slowly, concentrating on keeping my hands to myself. Concentrating on not slaking myself.

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Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:21 am

“Are you okay?” she asks, sitting down beside me, our thighs an inch apart. “You seem really tense.”

I want to be honest with July at all times, the way she’s been so honest with me, so I search for the words to describe how I’m feeling. Without scaring her. “I’ve been living without necessities for so long...starved and beaten. Reduced to needs, like food, water, warmth. Survival. Then suddenly I have a soft, beautiful girl in front of me in her pretty apartment and I’m trying to stop thinking in terms of immediate needs and enjoy the journey, the moment, you...it’s just hard. To be normal.”

“Maybe it’ll get easier as we spend more time together.” Her cheeks darken with color, her mouth opening and closing. “I mean, if you want to spend more time—”

“I stalked you to the train and all but demanded you take me home, July. I don’t know how to make it any clearer that I want all your time to myself.”

She nods, squeezes her eyes shut. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous. I guess because I’ve never had a man in my apartment.”

“Interesting first choice.” Her laugh slides around in my belly, kicking my pulse into a heavier rhythm. I can do this. I can make her not regret me. Maybe. “July...”

She turns to face me, one of her knees coming to rest on the couch, the shadow between her thighs becoming a painful distraction. If that skirt was one inch higher, I’d finally know what kind of panties she wears. God, I want to know so badly. The color, the material, the cut. “Yes?” she prompts me.

I clear my throat hard, holding on to what I want to say. “I want you to know I’m not just...some crazy man walking around Chicago who fixated on you. At least, that’s not all I am,” I say wryly, dragging a hand down my face. This is going great, idiot. “I’m an investor in a private security company. Some of my Army buddies started the business while I was in recovery and it’s rolling now. They want me to oversee Chicago operations while they branch out in Philadelphia next.”

“Theo, that’s great.”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you seem excited?”

I hesitate. “I need to pass a psych eval before they’ll hand over the reins. It’s not unusual. They all took it themselves. But, uh...”

“You’re not sure you’ll pass it just yet,” she finishes, softly.

My chest is starting to ache, the sounds of gunfire, screaming, the smell of smoke and rotting flesh. All of it invades me at once. “Yeah. I can’t see how I will. Which means I’m going to need a lot of therapy fist.”

Slowly, she lets her knee touch my thigh and I’m almost caught off guard by the amount of support that single touch gives me. Not necessarily comfort, because I still want to rip her clothes off, but her knee against my thigh makes me feel...steadier.

“Have you talked to anyone at all?”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “I know it helps a lot of guys, but I can’t listen to someone sitting in a leather armchair in an air-conditioned office tell me how I’m feeling and why. I just can’t take it seriously. They weren’t there.”

“I understand. Your experience was unthinkable. Someone trying to relate to it in such a controlled environment is probably hard to bear.”

“Exactly.” Relief swamps me. She gets it. I want to keep going, because her intuitive manner makes me want to unload my baggage. I don’t want her to feel bad for me or feel bad for any reason, though, so I change the subject. “You read all those books?”

July glances over at the shelves, wincing slightly. “Half of them, probably. I get a little overzealous at the bookstore. But I justify the expense by reminding myself that I skip the happy hours and girl trips my co-workers invite me on.”

“Why do you skip them?”

“I always feel out of place.” A line forms between her brows while she thinks. “I’m not being myself in those big groups. I’m trying too hard to be interesting and fun and appeal to everyone at once. It’s exhausting. It doesn’t come naturally.”

“What would you rather do? Instead of spending time in large groups of friends?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “Before today, I would have said I like being in my own company. Working. Browsing and reading and dreaming. Keeping my...peace. But...”

“What?”

Her shyness undoes knots in my chest I didn’t know were tying me up. “I like having you in my company. I’m being myself with you.” She studies me for a handful of seconds, no idea my fucking heart is beating out of my chest over what she just said.

“Do you feel normal in big groups of friends?”

“My friends are soldiers. None of us feel normal. I think...that’s what bonds us. The

abnormal is our normal.” I laugh without humor. “If my friends were here, they’d be telling me I have no business getting within ten feet of you, baby.”

“Why?”

I inhale and exhale, gripping onto my self-control for dear life. “July, you’re a blushing virgin in a tight skirt, sitting next to man who hasn’t fucked in four years. It’s a miracle I’m not pounding you into these fluffy little cushions right now.” My chest shudders up and down. “I have no idea where I’m getting the goddamn willpower.”

* * *

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Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:21 am

July

His hoarse confession sends a downward fluttering in my belly that intensifies between my legs. I've never been so objectified in my life and that's supposed to damn well offend me, but I'm enveloped in heat, instead. I'm excited, my nipples budding under my sweater, my flesh sensitizing, lungs beginning to labor. As a special forces soldier, this man is surely dangerous when he chooses to be. Theo could hold me down and take what he needs so visibly, and yet, I feel as if I've harnessed all the power.

I like having it.

Which must be why I turn fully on the couch and kneel beside him, observing the way he tenses, his hands curling into shaking fists on his muscular thighs. He seems to be fighting the need to look at me, but he loses that battle, his pupils dilating as they zero in on my mouth.

"I told you I would help you get relief, Theo," I say, sliding my right hand into his windblown hair, prompting his eyes to roll back in his head. "Why don't you ask for it?"

"July, please..."

"Ask."

"Just because you can bat your eyelashes and make me bust, doesn't mean I don't want to bust inside of you." His hips tilt, as if to drive his point home, and for the first

time, I let myself look at the big ridge in his jeans. “Now that we’re alone...I’m afraid if you give me an inch, I’ll take a mile.”

“You won’t do anything against my will.”

A harsh laugh escapes him. “I’m glad you’re that confident in me.”

“I am.” Wanting to prove my confidence in Theo, I follow instinct, peeling the sweater off over my head, leaving me in a pink lace bra and my skirt. “I know you’ll find a way that makes us both happy.”

“Oh God,” he groans, looking at my breasts, his lower body twisting on the couch, that bulge so prominent now, it’s a wonder it fits in his jeans. “God, it fucking hurts.”

“How do we make it stop hurting?”

His eyes are black now, his breath coming in quick pants. “You can lie down like a good girl and let me stretch that little fuck hole.”

I gasp. Out of shock over his crudeness. Out of shock that it makes me feel languid.

But I’m pushing him too hard, too far. It just feels so exhilarating to be desired like this after a lifetime of being in the background. I thought that’s what I wanted. To blend in. But...with Theo looking at me like I belong in a museum, I’m not so sure anymore. “Not yet, Theo,” I murmur. “Think of another wa—”

“No.” He surges taller on the couch, gripping the front clasp of my bra with both hands and ripping it in half, the cups falling away from my breasts as he wrestles the straps down my arms with a snarl. “Lay down, you little tease. I’m stealing that cherry. It’s mine.”

“Theo. Stop!”

His frantic movements pause, and I watch as he visibly struggles to regain his self-control, nostrils flared as they devour the sight of my straining nipples. The tops of my thighs that have been exposed in the struggle. “Oh Jesus, you need to call the police, baby. I’m not a good man right now.”

“I don’t need to call the police,” I assure him, and myself. Honestly, I’m the one that needs the most reassuring, because not only is he losing his grip on self-control...I like it. I like driving him crazy with my body, my hands, my voice. Who knew I had this inside of me?

Bringing my forehead to Theo’s, I reach down and unzip his jeans, wildly outside of my wheelhouse, but too turned on to second guess myself. “We’re going to take care of this together.” I fist his erection in my left hand, stroking it top to bottom. “Just like we planned.”

He makes a sound I’ve never heard come from a man.

It’s a low, guttural scrub of his vocal cords.

His right hand flies to the arm of the couch, holding on for purchase, his chest heaving up and down. “Oh, fuck yeah. Play with it, baby. Fast. Fast. Take the edge off before I do something bad, like pin you down for my load.”

He’s huge in my grip. Smooth and veiny and turgid. His balls are bigger than expected, too, swelled up and partially hidden beneath his garden of dark pubic hair. I slide my hold up, down, up, watching his flesh move with me, the size of him increasing with every pump, wetness appearing at the thick tip, his hips lifting with my hand, his whole body shuddering and shaking, sweat glistening on his forehead.

“Harder,” he grits through his teeth, analyzing me with molten eyes. “Look at you. Kneeling with your innocent tits out, stroking a cock for the first time. Blushing over your first hand job.” His stomach hollows violently and he groans, long and loud, his flesh beginning to pulse with more intensity in my hand. “That blush is going to get you into a lot of trouble with me, little girl.”

“What kind of trouble?” I whisper, my sex tightening and releasing over the words “little girl”. Little girl. Why do I respond so feverishly to that name?

“The barefoot and pregnant kind, July.”

“Oh,” I breathe, with difficulty. I’m hot, dizzy.

“I’m almost there.” He heaves the warning, but I don’t really need it. Instinct tells me he couldn’t possibly last much longer with this much pressure built up in his sex. He’s practically made of stone now. I can barely get my hand around him. “Keep jerking it, but kneel on the floor. Right in front of me. Let me nut on that curious little face.”

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Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:21 am

My legs move without my consent and I'm on the floor before Theo in a flash, crowded in close between the V of his thighs, my hand still racing up and down to pleasure him, my grip tight, so tight, and so much of his pre-come has dripped down that each stroke is a wetfrop, the muscles of his thighs bunched to the extreme.

“Call me Daddy when you're on your knees,” he rasps, beating his chest with a fist.

“Daddy,” I whisper, sticking out my tongue dutifully.

In a way that simply comes naturally.

A rattling shout is ripped from inside and his spurts paint me in thick stripes, landing across my tongue, forehead, cheeks, the consistency like rubber cement, but the taste salty and earthy and perfect. I know this because I draw it back into my mouth and savor the taste of him with a moan, my sex clenching unexpectedly, a ticklish tide invading lower and lower, the concentration of need so incredibly frustrating and beautiful, I can't withstand it...and I'm...I'm having an orgasm.

Oh my God.

My body knows it before my mind.

My first climax.

I have it while looking up at Theo, his shaft giving off ropes of pent-up lust, his hips thrusting up and grinding at the air, like he can't stand the pleasure. And when he realizes I'm also in the throes of pleasure, he gets this awestruck and possessive look

in his eye that I instantly know will carry on as a core memory.

“Daddy,” I whimper, looking down at the floor where my panties drip with excess moisture and leave a small puddle. “Daddy?”

He bellows a curse up at the ceiling, a final spurt decorating my collarbone. A moment of rasping breath passes, his forearm coming up to swipe the sweat on his forehead and then I’m being scooped off the floor and thrown onto the couch with Theo looming above me, my skirt shoved up to my waist, panties being ripped down to my ankles and thrown across the room

“Theo...” I gasp, still coming down from an incredible height.

“You tasted my come, now I get to taste yours.” He presses my knees open and goes down on his stomach, grinding his face against my sex, abrading the sensitive flesh with his five o’clock shadow, the rough gusts of his breath making me hotter, hotter. “Goddamn, I can’t even see the hole. Where the fuck is it?” He maneuvers me side to side. “Oh my God, there she is.” He spits on me, there, his face a mask of possessiveness. “That’s my fucking property now. That’s Daddy’s fuck hole. Say it.”

“That’s Daddy’s fuck hole,” I sob, that wonderful strain building once again in my tummy, the need almost worse than before, because I know the glory that lies on the other side and I want it, I want it, I want it. “Make it stop!” I cry out.

Theo’s tongue snakes into the top of my slit and I have a flash of embarrassment, because surely I’m soaked and fragrant, but his groan of pure starvation upon tasting me robs me of self-doubt and now there’s nothing but light. Light at the end of the tunnel that gets closer the faster his tongue moves. “Right there, right there!”

Whose voice is that? Mine? I don’t know. How did the strands of his hair get wrapped around my fingers? I’m moaning and writhing, and I don’t know myself

anymore and I love that. I'm free. I'm overcome by heightening pain that transforms into wet, shuddering, convulsive joy that tears a scream of his name from my throat.

I'm swallowed by the light.

I see his worshipful face above me.

And I slip into the deepest sleep of my life.

CHAPTERSIX

Theo

I need to force myself to leave July's apartment.

That's my last rational thought before hell finds me.

Everything is so soft. She's so soft. So perfect and trusting in her sleep, her hand curled against my chest, as if we've slept like this a thousand times before. But my heart begins to pound wildly around three thirty in the morning and that's when I get confused.

Am I asleep or awake?

My mouth begins to taste like dust, my eyes become crusted with grit.

Every time I let my guard down, I hear the spray of machine gun fire.

That must mean I'm awake, right? I feel the heat of the sun. It can't be a dream.

Why is July in the prison with me? How did she get here?

I shield her in my embrace, protectively, scanning the room to find out which direction the threat is coming from. The shrapnel buried in my back begins to heat, cool, heat and...I need to get her down on the floor. We're too exposed here on the bed.

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Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:21 am

Looking down at my torso, I realize I'm covered in sweat, my chest puffing up and down. I'm going to get my sweat all over July. The gunfire has stopped for now and she looks so sweet, so serene.

Oh Jesus, what if she's already dead?

Was she hit by a stray bullet and I didn't even realize it?

Wheezing, I snatch up her wrist and feel for a pulse, a deluge of relief coursing through me when I feel the beat. She's alive. She's alive. But for how long—

“Theo,” she murmurs, lacing her fingers with mine and yawning without opening her eyes. “Is it time to get up?”

No. It's time to get down on the floor.

My vocal cords ache from restraining the shout.

But something new happens. As soon as I hear her husky voice, the prison wavers around us and I'm now in her bedroom. In Chicago. Baby blue sheets are pulled up around my waist, the glow of a streetlight percolating through the slats of her blinds. It's silent, except for the whoosh of traffic and my shallow breathing.

“No, baby. It's still nighttime,” I say, kissing her temple, feeling...broken. Like a broken toy that has been put back on the shelf and sold to an unsuspecting customer who has no idea of the defects. I have to get out of here. Next time I fall asleep, I could wake up fully entrenched in the memories and do something to hurt her, like

tackling her down to save her life from nothing. There's nothing here. No threats. Why can't my brain believe it?

Having to get up and leave her when she is pure paradise...it's hell.

My chest is yawning open as I look down at July, while pulling on my shirt. I reach down and trace the smooth line of her bare outer thigh, all the way to her hip, swallowing a wrench when she shivers from the cold. Because I'm no longer holding her?

I make a miserable sound in the quiet bedroom, pacing for long moments.

This is where I want to be, but I haven't stopped to ask myself if I'm good for her.

In the unforgiving darkness of the night, I examine how I got here. Through the lens of a sane human being. I stalked and followed her. Just hours ago, I had to physically restrain myself from taking her virginity on the couch, even though she wasn't ready. Now, I'm ebbing and flowing in and out of a PTSD nightmare. If she hadn't snapped me out of it, I might have barricaded us in the bathroom and terrified the shit out of her.

I continue pacing, punching myself in the head once, twice.

I'm so fucked up.

There's no way in hell I can leave July alone, but shouldn't I save her from the worst of me? The nighttime me who can't sleep without being attacked by demons? If I physically hurt this fragile girl, I'd never forgive myself. And God, I don't want her to see me in the throes of some mental war.

Go.

You don't belong here.

Go.

I reach for her softness one more time, but don't allow my fingertips the satisfaction of touching her, curling my fist into a ball until it's shaking. Taking a heavy gulp of her scent, I leave the bedroom, the air conditioning drying the sweat on my skin. I scrawl out a note and leave it on the small kitchen table, barely aware of what I'm writing, I'm so focused on removing myself from her peace, before I shatter it.

* * *

July

Theo is gone when I wake up.

Before I even sit up in bed, I'm hit by a sense of betrayal.

It's probably an extreme reaction on my part. He had every right to leave, right? This is probably standard protocol and I'm just not aware of the ins and outs. Man goes home with woman. They have a mutually satisfying experience and then it's over. No need for breakfast or cuddling or coming up with a plan to spend time together again. Maybe he doesn't want that. Maybe he wasn't satisfied.

I feel hollow as I settle my feet on the bedroom floor and cross to the closet, unhooking my robe from the knob and putting it on. Padding out to the kitchen, I catch his aftershave and metal scent lingering in the air, heat pushing in behind my eyes.

There's a note on the table.

It simply says I'm sorry.

Sorry about what? The fact that this thing between us isn't going to work out?

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My legs turn to soup, and I drop into one of my kitchen chairs, looking back at the couch over my shoulder. Seeing us there. Me on my back with my legs open, him licking and snarling me to an orgasm. Only the second one I'd ever experienced. He'd given me my first one minutes before, without even touching me. Just by being so beautifully raw.

Did I...overestimate the importance of us?

Was this a normal encounter between consenting adults and we've already reached the conclusion?

The note drifts down from my numb fingers to the floor and I stand, wobbling a moment and swiping at my damp eyes, before sailing to the bathroom and shutting myself inside. Taking the hottest shower I can stand and trying to do the impossible.

Not think about him.

Not think about his breath on my neck, how possessively he touched my hips.

Lock me up. As long as you're locked in with me.

Words he said to me on the train.

Was I naïve to believe any of this was real?

I've never felt more vulnerable and lonelier as I do when getting dressed for work. I'm distracted, so I don't pay close attention to what I'm wearing, only becoming

aware of the flaws of my decisions when I reach the office.

“Wow,” says Dierdre when I pass by her desk on the way to mine. “Leave it to July to save her best outfit for the day after her blind date.”

Confused, I look down at my white mini skirt, a black silk blouse tucked into the waistband. Technically, I’m not dressed inappropriately for the workplace, but it’s right there on the borderline. My pointed flats are saving me from going full office vixen and getting a phone call from human resources. “Oh, um...” I push up my glasses. “I slept too late and got dressed in the dark this morning. That’ll teach me to rush.”

She purses her lips at me. “That’s not like you. Being out of your routine and all.”

“No?” I turn on a heel, shrugging on my way to the other side of the office. “Maybe I’m turning over a new, irresponsible leaf.”

Dierdre snorts in my wake. “So it would appear, after sitting down at the wrong table yesterday. And continuing the date, regardless!”

I keep walking, the hollow feeling settling back into my middle. I resolve to focus on work for the next eight hours, because hello, I have a huge presentation on Friday and it’s happening whether or not my heart feels broken. So yes, I dive in, outlining concepts and doing market research while the office buzzes around me, skipping lunch, like I usually do. It’s not until four o’clock rolls around that I realize I’ve been staring at my screen for seven straight hours. At least I have a lot of work done to show for it.

Not that any amount of work is going to help me with my public speaking.

Theo was going to do that.

“Earth to July,” Dierdre says, waving a hand in front of my face. “Are you with me? I asked if you want to kick off early for happy hour? Vikander is buying.”

“Vikander? As in, our boss? She is letting us leave early to go drinking?”

“I think she’s having a shit week,” Dierdre whispers. “Maybe she wants to drown her sorrows. Or she’s taking us all down with her. At least we’ll be drunk!”

I eye the door to my boss’s office skeptically. “I think I’ll stay here.”

“Come on,” Dierdre whines, shaking my chair. “For once, you’re not dressed like a Sunday school teacher. Take advantage of the dirty librarian look.”

“Dirty librarian,” I snort. Except she’s kind of right. How did I leave my apartment with this much leg showing? “All the more reason to go home,” I mutter, tugging down the hem. That being said, I’m not sure I want to go home. That stupid note is still on my floor. Theo’s scent is everywhere, as are the memories of our single night together. I’m going to go home and dwell, aren’t I?

“What’s wrong?” asks Dierdre, frowning.

“Nothing.”

“Something is definitely up with you—” She breaks off on a gasp. “I mean, you’re always a little awkward, but you’ve been acting extra weird since your accidental date yesterday.”

“Have I?” I ask breezily, but I don’t quite pull off the casual act because my throat hurts simply from talking about Theo. It’s pathetic how quickly I got attached. Maybe I should just talk to Dierdre about the whole situation. She has more experience with men than I do. She could have some valuable insight. I don’t have a lot of friends to

call about this kind of thing. “He...found me after all. We connected on the train.”

My co-worker does a double take. “What do you mean, he found you?”

“He just...did. I think he asked Kevin for my information.”

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“And Kevin just gave it to him?” She stares at me stunned for a few seconds, then takes her phone out, tapping the screen a handful of times, before holding it up to her ear. “Kevin? It’s Dierdre. Did you...”

I can’t make out what Kevin is saying on the other end of the line, but he’s talking a blue streak. When Dierdre’s eyes start to widen, there’s a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“What?” I mouth at her.

She shakes her head slowly. “Kevin, I’m so sorry. I...why didn’t you call me? Have you told the police?”

My eyes shoot wide. Police?

“You’re too afraid of this guy to call the police? That’s what you’re telling me?” She rakes a hand through her hair. “Kevin, he put you in the hospital!”

All at once, everything clicks into place. I know she’s talking about Theo. Theo got my information from Kevin. And apparently caused him bodily harm to get it.

The boom of my pulse drowns out the rest of the conversation. I’m in a daze. Dierdre is talking to me, but all I can think about is my own shortsighted behavior. I let this violent man into my home. He admitted to struggling with the need to take me on the couch, before I’d given him the green light. And yet, I slept beside him so soundly. Better than I’ve slept in years. Even now, I miss him.

Is there something wrong with me?

“Come on,” Dierdre says, shouldering my purse and steering me toward the elevator.

“We’re going to get a drink. This is some happy hour shit right here.”

“Is Kevin...okay?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“A broken eye socket and two missing teeth later, yeah, he’s fine,” Dierdre says dryly. “He’s adamant about not involving the police, but dude, this commando guy has all your information, July. And he’s obviously dangerous. We need to call someone.”

I know she’s right, so why am I shaking my head?

Dierdre starts. “No?What am I missing?”

He won’t hurt me. He just hasn’t adjusted to civilian life yet.

I can’t even say it out loud, because I’ll sound like such a cliché. How can I explain having this crucial certainty about a man I’ve only known for one day?

Then again, I thought I was special to him and he left.

I could be completely wrong about his character, too.

“Let me think about it,” I manage, wetting my dry lips. “I know it’s concerning.”

“Good,” Dierdre huffs, hooking her arm through mine and leading me into the building’s lobby. It’s not as full as usual, since we’re leaving an hour early from work, so I can actually hear our footsteps echoing off the marble walls. “Vikander and the rest of the crew are already at happy hour. Just a block from here.”

“Don’t tell them anything about this, okay?”

“Ah, come on. For once, you’re interesting!”

“Come up with something else,” I say, wanting more than ever to go home and lick my wounds. My heart isn’t into happy hour, and fifteen minutes later, I can only stand there holding a sweating vodka and tonic, sipping steadily and without really thinking, conversation whipping at a breakneck pace around me, leaving me totally disconnected, as always. It’s worse than usual this time, though, because I’ve so recently vocalized to Theo this feeling of being on the outside looking in. Pretending to enjoy myself for no reason, except to briefly belong. But the more I try to belong to other people, the less I belong to myself.

I didn’t feel that way with him.

Suddenly, there’s a niggle of electricity on back of my neck.

Before I even turn around, I know he’s there.

Theo.

Standing right outside the bar, looking in at me through the glass, his face a mask of intensity, the evening wind whipping his hair in ninety directions.

God help me, my first reaction is decimating relief. If he’s here, he cares about me. He didn’t leave my apartment last night with no intention of ever seeing me again. Right?

Following closely on the heels of relief is irritation. Not the minor kind of annoyance I feel about a work setback or the fries not being delivered with my takeout order. This is a hot, stormy kind that I’ve never experienced before. I’m mad...and there’s

also a mean, little twist beneath my navel. A chaotic fluttering in the vicinity of my collarbone. It causes me to turn my back on him abruptly and sip my drink, my pulse flying into a rapid march. Because I anticipate a response from him. I don't know what it's going to be, which is new for me. Life is usually so predictable. Not like this.

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Not mysterious.

Not erratic, the way it has been for the last forty-eight hours.

I don't know if I like it or if I'm scared or excited.

I only know that when I feel heat on my back and all my co-workers turn to stare at me, I know Theo is standing behind me. My hand trembles around my drink, my tummy muscles tensing.

“Is that him?” Dierdre says out of the corner of her mouth. “Because, whoa. Fine. I get the impulse to make poor decisions, but still—”

“July,” Theo says, right beside my ear, his hand settling on my waist with a definite grip of possession. Every single one of my male co-corkers takes a giant step back, making me wonder about the expression on Theo's face. “I waited outside your office, but you never came out. If I hadn't seen you through the window—”

“I decided to do happy hour,” I interrupt abruptly.

A prolonged pause. “I see that. In a tight little skirt, no less.” His thumbs delve beneath the waistband, slipping side to side, before digging in slightly, my sex contracting in response, my knees turning inward to combat the spreading ache. “Can I talk to you privately?”

Gathering my courage, I turn to face him, sucking in a breath when I see the level ten violence he's directing at the men behind me. “If you wanted to talk, you could have

stayed this morning and had ample opportunity.”

That brings his gaze swinging sharply in my direction, eyes narrowing. “You’re...upset with me.”

I’m not a rock-the-boat type of lady. I’m a people pleaser. My first inclination is to minimize my feelings and be accommodating. I don’t want to be the girl who gets bent out of shape after one night, demanding to know our relationship status. Because I’ve been told all my life that to do so is crazy and unattractive and hysterical. But I don’t want to be a pushover, either. That’s bad too, right? Why is being a woman such a pain in the ass? “I don’t know,” I whisper, refusing to look at him.

“You are,” Theo says, scrutinizing me so closely, I can feel his breath on my eyelids. “You’re mad at me for leaving.” He takes hold of my upper arms now, pulling me in close. “Come with me so I can explain.”

“Classic abuser,” Dierdre says to my right, gesturing with her wine glass. “Isolating you. Cla-ssic.”

Theo flicks a dark look in her direction, and I watch his reaction to Dierdre’s willowy blonde good looks with interest, but he’s only interested in focusing back on me as soon as possible. “Who is this person?”

“I’m Dierdre. I’m the one who set her up with Kevin.” She drags out the last two words, then lowers her volume. “You remember Kevin, right? Or have you put multiple men in the hospital since yesterday? I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Dierdre,” I sigh, my face burning hot.

“I remember Kevin,” Theo says, stiff lipped. “But not because I put him in the hospital. More because he was going on a date with a woman who doesn’t belong to

him.”

“Who does she belong to?” I whisper, lifting my chin.

His forehead falls to mine, pressing there, his breath coming hard and fast against my mouth. “Me.” A beat of charged silence allows that statement to sink in—and it does. It sinks in so deep, I’m suddenly a human ocean with unplumbed depths. But not for long. He’s discovering parts of me that I didn’t know existed. “Come talk to me somewhere. Alone,” he says, voice husky, his gaze rife with meaning. Hunger. “July, I need you.”

Ignoring Dierdre’s growing concern, I discard my drink and take Theo’s hand, letting him steal me from the bar, heart thundering in my ears.

I’m not quite ready to let him off the hook for disappearing...

But there’s no sense in pretending I don’t need him, too.

CHAPTERSEVEN

Theo

My chest is crushed like an aluminum can.

It’s a wonder I’m upright and walking, July’s perfect hand inside of mine, one foot landing in front of the other as I get her as far away from the bar as fucking possible. She’s too innocent, my girl. Hasn’t a clue the way those men, her slimy coworkers, were looking at her, wondering about their chances of getting her in bed. I could see it in their eyes before they noticed my approach, how hard they struggled not to stare at her bare legs. How they watched the level of her drink, wanting to be the guy who bought her the next one. Praying she’d use a poor judgment call on one of them.

The only reason I didn't send July's coworkers to join Kevin in the ER is...

I hurt her feelings. Fixing my mistake is sucking up all my focus.

If you wanted to talk, you could have stayed this morning and had ample opportunity.

Oh God. All day, she's been upset. Hours.

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If I was alone with this realization, I'd bash my head off the closest wall, just to redirect the pain. Who could damage this sweet girl's feelings? Am I a monster?

Am I a classic abuser like her annoying co-worker said?

"Where are we going, Theo?"

"Park," I manage, voice ragged.

I didn't even know the answer until she asked, but the second I hear her husky tone, the need to be alone with her becomes even more urgent. I can taste my own lust. My own obsession. It's alive, moving in the air around me. Inside of me. And there isn't a chance in hell I'm going to bring her on a train or call us an Uber without imploding from the wait to soothe her anger at me. To touch what's mine.

I guide her into a park that is surrounded by old, wrought-iron fencing, laden with tall, shivering trees. It's semi-empty, a few stragglers watching the final dregs of the sunset that are visible within the city limits. There's an ancient-looking stone storage shed on the far side of the park, and I lead July there now, circling us around back, taking us out of view.

When I look down at her gorgeous face in the twilight, I don't even know where to begin communicating what's going on inside of me. I'm a roadmap of crossed wires, my emotions heightened like never before.

"I left last night because I was hallucinating," I say, caging her in with my arms against the stone wall of the shed. "I was in your apartment, but I was mentally

trapped very far away from there, July. And I didn't want to bring you to hell with me."

Her face softens a degree. "You were having a nightmare?"

"Much worse. There's no way to tell if it's real or not." I close my eyes and hang my head, pushing my face into the curve of her neck. "You were the only thing I knew was real, baby, and it felt like you were in danger. I had to take the danger with me. I don't even know if that makes sense."

Her hands lift, fingers sliding into my hair and my entire being sags, stress rushing from my body like a dam has broken. "You should have woken me up. We could have gotten through it together."

"Right. I want to keep you, not drive you away."

"Leaving me uncertain will drive me away faster."

I rear back and punch the stone wall, careful not to come close to her beautiful head, and all the while my mouth rubs up and down, side to side, in the crook of her neck, into her hair. "Stop talking about driving you away. Just stop."

Her breath catches when my teeth latch onto her ear. "Why are you back now? To get your relief for the day?" Her voice is defiant. "Do you need to use me to come again?"

"I'm not using you, July," I say through my teeth—and I mean what I'm saying more than anything—but my cock is punching up against my zipper like hot steel, the veins that run the length of my hefty stalk pounding like a drum. The sudden ability to get hard again after going so long without...oh Jesus, the result is me shaking with rampant lust. Just like last night in her apartment, I want to hold her down and fuck

her in the most brutal ways possible. Yet somehow, I also want to baby and pamper and spoil her. I don't know myself or my urges around this woman, and that scares me, because she's important. "I am not using you, I just need to..." A blistering hot shiver runs the length of my erection, gripping my balls. "I-I just can't concentrate, until..."

Knowing eyes flicker to mine. "Until you come."

"Yes," I gasp, my abs yanking tight as laces, semen wetting my tip. "Ohfuck."

She's starting to breathe faster. Does it turn her on to see me in sexual pain over her mere existence? "Last time, you weren't even touching me. It just happened from..."

"Looking at you across the table. I know." I turn my head, nestling our panting mouths together. "Is it asking for too much to kiss you while I ejaculate this time, baby?"

The smallest whimper tumbles from her lips and I surge forward, snarling against her mouth, my hands taking a gratifying ownership of July, skimming up the backs of her thighs to the supple ass beneath, my grip luxuriating in a possessive knead. Goddamn this tight little butt. It's mine. "There's nowhere I wanted to be last night than with you. Every second of this day, that's what I wanted. But here's the thing, there's nowhere those co-workers of yours would rather be, either. In your bed, pumping away like dogs, under this piece of nothing skirt." Through the barrier of her panties, I press my middle finger to her asshole. Tight. Enough to make her whole body jerk between me and the wall, that whimper less inhibited this time. "Don't wear it again unless I'm on top of you and we're using it to soak up all the come you tease out of me."

Her breath has begun to shallow. "Not that I'm obligated to explain, b-but I was distracted when I got d-dressed this morning and—"

“Uh-huh.” I add a second finger on top of that pucker, massaging them in a possessive circle. “And the result is everyone spends the day distracted, hoping for a peek at your cunt.” Slowly, I slide my hand down the back of her underwear, and we’re skin to skin now, her softness threatening to turn me feral. I continue until I encounter the soft swell of her pussy, rubbing four fingers gently within her flesh and my God, she’s like a dew-slicked rosebud. “A man sees you in a skirt this short, he thinks of it twisted around your waist while you bounce on his cock and moan like a fucking porn star. And if that happens, I’ll have to make it so they can’t think anymore, July. Ever again. Do we understand each other?”

The continued defiance in her expression is only making me want to be more aggressive. Hold back. Calm down. I can’t fuck her in this park, because I am not going to be quiet when I’m finally hitting that pussy. I’m going to be an animal. Someone will hear her screaming and call the police. Right now, what I need to accomplish is an understanding that July is my temptation and my temptation alone. And I need to bust so I can think straight. “You won’t wear the skirt, period.” Lord, I’m sweating. “Unless...”

Pink colors her cheeks. “Unless it’s soaking up your come.”

“Yes.” I drag my mouth over to hers, rocking our lips together with a shuddering breath. “That’s what I need it to do right now, July, baby. I couldn’t get hard all day, then I saw you through the window...and now? Fuck. It woke up so angry.” I strum the seam of her sex, painfully aware that she’s getting wetter and wetter. Wanting to take care of her needs but imprisoned by my immediate need to nut. For her. On her. I’m being choked by four years of no satisfaction, finally given the ultimate outlet for the pain. My sweet July. “Answer me,” I rasp. “Can I kiss you while we’re calming me down?”

It takes her a moment to respond, because she’s visibly trying to hold on to her irritation, despite her arousal, but eventually she nods, if unevenly. “Okay.”

Being given the green light to kiss her is like being granted a feast and having no idea where to dig in. Is she even remotely aware of her succulence? Her mouth is a juicy piece of fruit, moist and breathy, her breath tinged with mint and fruity alcohol. My cock wouldn't even fit between those lips, but God help me, I think of her trying. Whining and struggling, trying to fit it down her throat, and I threaten to unload in my pants once again.

It's already happening, my balls beginning to milk themselves with rough spasms.

This woman is my kryptonite.

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And damn, she'sso wet.I wonder if I could pin her to the ground, unzip my jeans and get balls deep in her cunt before exploding.

No. Not a chance. Not in this state of heightened sensitivity.

Her mouth is my promised land right now and she's granting me access.

Be grateful.

Oh, I am. My God, I'm so grateful. She's going to let me kiss her.

I stroke my fingers away from her soaked pussy, dragging the wetness up the split of her bottom, and I press my shaking palms flat to the wall on either side of her head. Searching her eyes for a moment, all I see is innocence and heated curiosity. Tipping my head to the right, I lay my mouth over July's, sipping at the seam, absorbing her shaky, little exhale, before drawing her lips into a long, moaning kiss, dragging our combined wetness left, then right, pushing her mouth open to introduce her to my tongue, turned on beyond words by the contradiction she offers me. An eager mouth and a body that will no longer hold her upright, she enjoys my kiss so much.

Good.

Because I'm sinking deeper into this obsession with every slip of her exploring tongue. Every ripple that passes through her virgin body. Every gasping draw of tongue and the way we luxuriate in that suctioning pull afterward, her fingernails digging into the meat of my shoulders.Fuck.

“I’m going to finish,” I choke out in between frantic meetings of our lips, the consuming mash of mouths, her lower body flattened against the building by my hips. “How do you do this to me? How do you pop me like a fucking balloon?”

“I don’t know,” she gasps, yanking on my collar, pressing higher on her toes, accepting my starved kisses with desperate mewls.

“You dressed like a slut today for Daddy. Admit it.”

She bites her bottom lip, lowering her eyelashes. “I’m so sorry, Daddy.”

My broken groan echoes through the park before I stifle it with determination.

We fall into these rolls like we were born for them and nothing has ever felt more right. More inevitable. I’m the man in her life. I fill all the roles and fulfill all the needs. No questions. No negotiations. “Do you want me to spend the day with sopping wet briefs, little girl?”

“No,” she whispers, shyly.

Finding it hard to catch a good breath now, I drop my hands and shakily lower my zipper, prying my thick, turgid cock through the opening, beads of sweat popping up on my forehead over seeing it more engorged than ever before. Pained and swollen, veins beating root to tip. “Turn around, yank up that slutty skirt and pull your ass cheeks apart. You’re going to sit in my sperm on the way home and think about what you did.”

Hiccupping with surprise, with excitement, July turns to face the wall and we both pull her skirt up to her waist, her panties shoved down to her knees with one flick of my wrist. And then, my God in heaven, she follows orders by grabbing a butt cheek in each hand and drawing them wide, andson of a bitch, I’m DONE, my wad hits that

little pink bullseye like we've been playing naughty target practice for years, load after load of milky white spend spurting into that tight crevice and slipping down, down, down, some of it dripping onto the ground, some of it sliding right around to her cunt and painting it shiny.

I don't even have to jack off. I'm hands free, the tip of my cock tucked up against that pucker, aiming and firing while my hands roam up the graceful dips of her sides and around to her tits, slapping and squeezing them, tugging on her hard little nipples, spending and spending all over her back entrance, my gut damn near on fire from the abundance of vibrating relief she gives me, this perfect woman.

"Christ. Christ. Look how much you make me spill, baby. Actually putting my cock inside of you might be the death of me." I drag my open mouth up the side of her neck into her hair, baring my teeth against her skull. "But God, I need to so bad. I need to build a tolerance for you so I can dominate my little girl like the devil intended. Spread you open, use you rough, then clean you up afterwards. Rock you in my arms. Don't you want that?"

"Yes," she sobs, the valley of her backside overflowing with my offering now and still she tilts her hips for more, as if she's fertile ground and I'm a storm after a drought. I latch onto her smooth neck with my teeth and deliver the final dregs of my need, panting and moaning as I slip my fingers around to her pussy, finding it coated in my spend, making me want to pound my chest like an ape.

I trace my fingers through the slipperiness and gather it to her clit, pressing and rubbing gently, gently, until her hips start to rock back into my lap, her hands relinquishing their job of keeping her bottom pried apart, her palms flattening on the wall while I stimulate her...and fuck, she is stimulated, her breathy gasps of my name making me feel like I'm soaring ten miles above my body.

"I'm going to finger some of my come into you, baby. Not far enough to pop your

cherry. Just enough to stop me murdering every man we pass on the way home.”

“W-why will that stop you m-murdering them?”

“Your panties and pussy full of my sperm will put me in a good mood, that’s why.” I can’t control the jealousy and rampant possessiveness that lances me like a blade. I’m biting into her neck enough to draw blood and I can’t stop myself. This tight cunt is mine. These thighs, her face, her laugh, her fucking insides are mine. And she knows it’s true, because the more I finger into her snug hole, the harder she breathes, the more her privates begin to quicken and grip my digit. “Good girl, July. Good. Leave all that pretty pleasure on Daddy’s fingers. You earned an orgasm in that tiny skirt, didn’t you? You earn it just by waking up and breathing. By keeping this pussy so sweet while I was away.” I massage her swelling nub faster with my middle fingertip, smiling darkly into her neck when she starts to dance on her toes, whimpering brokenly. “It’s not going to be that way much longer. The next time your beautiful young cunt is full of come, it’ll be because my bastard cock put it there.”

She cries out, her body sagging between me and the wall, requiring me to hold her up, which is my greatest honor, my mouth chanting words into her ear, praising words, while my right fingers continue to milk her through the climax, sneaking in occasionally to experience the clench I want so badly to feel around my dick, careful to keep my touch shallow. When finally July goes boneless, I hold her up in the crook of my left arm. Pulling up her panties with my other hand and adjusting her skirt to cover her delectable ass.

“I’m coming over again,” I say into her neck. “I want to spend every goddamn minute I can with you.”

“Then don’t leave this time,” she whispers, looking back at me over her shoulder.

I open my mouth to make the promise.

But as much as I long to say the words, they refuse to come out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

July

This morning, I never expected to have Theo back in my apartment. Here he is, though, taking up every inch of space in my living room—and my head.

My nerves endings are like little live wires flapping around, ready to start a fire the second he touches me. I'm aware of things about myself that I usually take for granted. Like, how fast I'm breathing. How quickly my heart picks up tempo when he comes within reaching distance of me. My panties are molded to me, soaked in his pleasure. I just rode in a cab in this state of post-orgasm breathlessness, while Theo never took his eyes off me once, his intensity blanketing everything in my new world. Turning everything a deep purple. Keeping me balanced on the balls of my feet.

Dierdre...hell, anyone would tell me this is bad. This hot, prickling awareness of Theo. This state of not knowing what will happen next, my body and heart on high alert.

But he's standing two feet away from me and I'm already craving more of his presence. I'm magnetized by his unpredictability and darkness. I've never had either. I've never been someone's obsession. I've never had someone be my obsession. And from so many angles, I'm sure this entire situation appears to be risky, but there's a whisper in the back of my mind telling me he's worth the risk and a hell of a lot more.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

He slips his phone out of his pocket, casually turning it over in his hand, his attention

burning a path up my thighs. “I’ll take care of food. You go change.”

I shouldn’t like being told what to do, right?

I’m going to let it slide because he suggested exactly what I want.

Maybe that’s why I enjoy being commanded by him. His wishes echo mine.

“Okay.” I move on slightly shaky legs to my bedroom, toeing off my flats and stripping out of my clothes. I pile my hair on top of my head in a knot and take a quick shower in my ensuite bathroom, applying deodorant and dabs of perfume while the steam settles around me. Then, back in my bedroom, I pick out a simple pair of black underwear, then return to the drawer to swap them for a frilly silk emerald pair. I choose a white, worn-in nightshirt that makes me comfortable, but still shows a lot of leg and molds to my breasts like a second skin.

I’m tempted to wait in the bedroom for my nipples to soften, but as long as Theo is in my apartment, staring at me with the obvious desire to sleep together, I don’t think they ever will—and I doubt he’ll complain. With a deep breath, I emerge from the hallway and find him sitting on the couch, hands clasped loosely between his legs, his eyes on me as I enter the room. As if he was just staring at the end of the hallway this whole time, waiting for me to return. Not looking at his phone or the television. Just...waiting.

“What did you order?”

“Thai,” he said, his deep voice rippling across the room.

“Perfect. That’s exactly what I wanted.”

He nods slowly, tongue tucking into the corner of his mouth. “Someone named

Dierdre is texting you nonstop.” He points to my phone where it sits on the coffee table. “You might want to answer her before she calls the cops.”

“Mmm.” Wincing, I take a few steps forward and pick up the device, tapping out a quick proof of life message to Dierdre. “You met her in the bar. Don’t you remember?”

“Baby, my mind has been wiped clean of anything but you in that fucking skirt.”

“Oh,” I breathe, my tummy flipping dramatically. “I hope you’re not offended. She just thinks she has the right to say whatever she wants. And often does.”

He gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head. “What did you tell her?”

I hold up my phone to read back the exact message. “Everything is fine, I promise.” I chew my lip, before reciting the next part. “I’ll give you a full rundown tomorrow.”

Theo’s eyebrow ticks up. “And will you? Give her a full rundown?”

“An abbreviated version,” I mutter, my face beginning to grow hot.

“Uh-huh.” He smirks, then—and lord, he’s so handsome with that flash of humor on his face, my toes curl on the hardwood floor. “Come here, July.”

“To you?”

“I don’t want you anywhere else.”

Is it safe to be this flushed? To have my pulse pounding for this long? I guess I’m going to find out, because I cross the living room to where he sits on the couch, allowing him to pull me down sideways into his lap. I’ve never sat in anyone’s lap

before. Not since childhood, at least, but I'm only awkward for a moment before my frame molds naturally to his larger one, my legs draped over his formidable thighs, my shoulder tucked against his chest. Before I'm even settled, he's unfurling my hair from the bun on top of my head, stroking the long strands with his big fingers, and I simply go softer than butter on a skillet.

"Do you have family in Chicago?" he asks.

"My aunt lives here. She works in real estate and helped me get a good deal on this apartment." I'm trying not to moan over the gentle pull of my scalp and how good it feels. To be touched. To be soothed. "My parents are in Arizona, though."

"No brothers or sisters?"

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“You can’t tell by the only child energy I give off?”

He puffs a laugh. “Now that you mention it...”

I smile with my eyes closed. “What about you? Where’s your family?”

“Maine.” He’s silent for a handful of seconds. “I’ve got two sisters. They’re married with kids. My parents are divorced, but they still live in the same town. I went to see them after I came home, but...I don’t know, they couldn’t act normal around me. I could tell they wanted to ask me a million questions about being held prisoner.” He shrugged. “Thing is, I might have told my father, if he’d asked. He served in the Army, too, but I guess there’s a limit to what he can stand when it comes to his own son, because he never got the bravery. It got hard to be in a room with so many unspoken words.” He makes a grinding sound in his chest. “I told them I’d be back for Christmas. Hopefully it’ll be easier next time.”

“Maybe they needed time to recover from four years of uncertainty. If anything, it means they love you. They can’t stand having those blanks filled in. Yet.” On impulse, I lean in and kiss his scratchy jaw, watching in fascination as his breath temporarily shallows in response, his head turning, eyes scrutinizing my mouth. “In the meantime, if you want to tell me what happened over there, Theo, I’m here.”

He looks at me without speaking for so long, I start to squirm.

“What?”

“I was thinking, hell no, I don’t want anything but sunshine and rainbows in your

head.” He frowns, visibly troubled. “But that’s not really possible, if you’re with me, is it?”

“Maybe I don’t want sunshine and rainbows,” I whisper, laying kisses on his jawline, listening to the increasingly heavy slam of his heart. “After all, I chose to live in Chicago and work in advertising.”

His brief laugh seems to surprise him. “That is true.” He slides his fingers into the back of my hair and cradles my skull, fisting my hair just enough to be comforting and hold my attention. “You chose to live in Chicago and be a badass with a presentation on Friday. How is that going?”

I bite my lip. “Umm.”

He lifts his eyebrows.

“It’s going fine, I guess. I have a pitch forming, but every time I try to practice the presentation, my nerves cause me to forget all the words.”

“Is that so?” His grip tightens in my hair, tipping my head back to expose my throat, his open mouth skimming very lightly over the delicate skin. “Maybe we need to put you in wartime conditions, so you’re not caught off guard in battle.”

“Excuse me?” I giggle.

“You don’t think I forgot my end of the deal, do you?” His lips roam over mine and I moan without any forethought, because it’s my most honest reaction. And he’s been steadily thickening beneath my bottom since I sat down. Knowing he wants me is the most potent aphrodisiac of all. “I’m supposed to be passing on my no-bullshit attitude to you, preparing you for this presentation.”

“And you don’t think you’ve been doing that?”

“Have I?”

“I could have easily been arrested for public indecency about an hour ago! That’s something I couldn’t have imagined a few days ago.”

“I’m the one who pulled your panties down.”

I purse my lips and notch my chin higher. “Maybe I’ll pull them down next time.”

“For me.” Before I can predict his actions, Theo is standing up with me in his arms and wrestling me down onto the couch, coming down heavy between my parted thighs, my wrists captured soundly above my head. “You’ll only pull them down for me, July.”

“That was implied,” I hiccup.

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

He’s shaking, his breath coming in short pants. “Jesus Christ, I’m so fucking possessive of you. It comes up and bites me out of nowhere.”

“I don’t hate it.”

“Yeah?” He snaps his teeth a hair away from my lips. “It makes me want to forget you’re a virgin and do very rough things with this body.”

“I don’t hate that, either.”

“You don’t know how hard I can fuck.”

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“Oops.” I look him square in the eye while sliding my knees up and down his ribcage. “I guess you have to show me.”

Theo breathes hard for several beats, his sex like a lead pipe between my legs. “Now, do your presentation.”

I blink. “What?”

He dips his mouth to my neck, sucking a mark onto my skin in a raw, purposeful way that panties grow damp. “Do it now, baby. Let’s hear the pitch.”

“Are you serious?”

“Keep your hands above that pretty little head,” he rasps, his touch tracking down my sides to my hips, inserting them beneath the couch and my bottom, kneading, lifting me toward him for a slow, thorough hump, before my cheeks are released and he’s drawing the nightshirt up to my neck, groaning without shame over the sight of my breasts, my nipples at such stiff attention. “Give me the pitch. Doing it while you’re distracted is going to make it easier when the time comes for the real thing.”

“Uh...uhhhh.”

He sucks my right nipple into his mouth, rolling the bud around on his tongue with a drawn-out grunt. “The pitch, July.”

“Oh. Um...” My back arches as if I have built in hydraulics, the pull of his mouth is so savoring, the relentless suction a revelation. “Every parent believes their child is

unique. Cut from a different cloth. A leader. Every parent wants a Yerbi baby...and...and...” He’s kissing down my stomach now to my panties, breathing hard against my mound, as if he’s praying to an altar, his eyes glittering with lust as he watches me from below. “W-well there’s a lot more to it and I’m still playing with the slogan, but...oh God, oh God...”

“That’s a weird slogan.”

How am I giggling at a time like this? “Yerbi. Feeding the leaders of tomorrow. O-or...We follow the right recipe now, so they can lead...tomorrow. I’m still working on it!”

“Sounds fucking great to me, baby. I think you’re a natural.” He removes my panties in one swift blur of movement, shaking his head with visible awe at what he reveals, his big hand dropping to adjust the ridge in his pants. “All that hard work deserves a reward—”

The door buzzer rings.

He curses. “I’m inclined to ignore that.”

“But it’s noodles.”

His lips jump, head dropping forward. “Fine, we eat first,” he growls, giving my bare sex a look of blistering regret as he climbs off the couch. “But I’m going to be thinking about dessert the whole time.”

CHAPTERNINE

Theo

I find out something new about July that night.

Big meals make her sleepy.

We sit on the floor in front of her coffee table and share noodles and potstickers while she goes over the finer points of her Yerbi pitch. I'm absorbing every word she's saying, but I'm also highly aware of how fucking good this feels. Having dinner with July while she sits inches away from me, smelling like a shower. Can she tell my heart is lodged in my throat the entire time?

I will die before I hurt this girl.

On purpose.

Look at her. She's so delicate. Shy at times, though her sense of humor is shining through more and more and, damn, she's funny on top of being intelligent and sensitive and sexy as hell? I'm going out of my mind here. I'm fucking crazy for her. But she's as new to men as I am to civilian life, isn't she? And here I come, a bull in a china shop with my nightmares and PTSD and specific physical needs (her).

Is my mounting obsession good for this girl?

It can't be.

Once again, I'm barely holding it together, restraining myself from taking her buck naked on the living room floor. Without mercy. Windows open while she screams my name, her ass cheeks slippery with sweat and her own wetness, my hand clenched around her throat. Are these raw, graphic urges a product of the violence I experienced overseas? I don't know, but my heart protests the treatment my cock wants to inflict on her. And with every minute that ticks by, my lust pulls ahead in the race.

She's nodding off in my lap now, a fork of noodles still held loosely in her hand. Finally, that hand drops and her head falls back against my shoulder. July in a nightshirt with a scrubbed face, totally limp in my embrace is a wonder I never expected to be given. She must trust me to let her guard down so thoroughly and I don't take that for granted. Hell no, I thank God I was in the right place at the right time to meet this phenom.

I should tuck her into bed and keep her safe while she sleeps, like a good man.

Nighttime is here, though.

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I know what's coming.

I'm all worked up with the hunger to fuck and I'm going to be trapped in a nightmare, as soon as I close my eyes. Some nights, I don't have them, but I've started to sense when they're coming, like garden snakes slithering up the back of my neck. The combination of physical need and mental desperation isn't going to be healthy around July.

I should leave.

But I'll hurt her feelings all over again. She thinks if I stay, she'll help me, but she can't. My mental scars are exactly that. Scars. They're permanent. Can't be swept away or smoothed out, no matter how incredible she is.

July makes a sleepy sound in my lap and my entire body starts to beat ominously, every fiber of my being longing to lay her down, climb on top of her and press down on her until we're one. Until I don't know where she ends and I begin, her goodness soaking into my skin, easing my constant agitation and uncertainty. I want to lock us together and throw away the goddamn key.

I want to get her pregnant.

OH FUCK. YES. THAT'S WHAT I NEED.

My head tips back, breath shuddering out in the direction of the ceiling. I turn her gently as possible in my lap so she's facing sideways, starting to shake when her ass twists in a half revolution on my erection, scalding come dribbling into my briefs. Oh

shit. She never put her panties back on from earlier. Unzipping my pants would be so easy. Just work myself right in for a nice, hot blast. No protection.

“You’re a fucking animal,” I mouth to the quiet room, wrestling back my sickness.

I want to be good for her. How do I do that when all my sexual frustration is channeled straight into her? I can’t even jerk off to ease the sting of arousal. My cock wants July’s presence, touch or nothing. Her pussy or nothing.

I’m not sure how much longer I can wait.

Vowing to be the man she deserves, I stand up with her in my arms and carry her toward the bedroom, gently laying her on one side of the mattress. Covering her with a blanket, I stare down at her beautiful, curled up form for several minutes, before I carefully join her on the mattress. On the other side, where I hopefully don’t reach for her in the throes of a nightmare, my hands suddenly turned into weapons.

But despite my prayers, that’s exactly what happens.

I close my eyes briefly and open them to a red haze. An early morning firefight. I’ve been here before, and it ends with tortured screams of grown men. It ends with the realization that there’s no way out. No way home. The only way to make it to the next day is kill more people. Survive. Keep my bones and blood inside my body. Dust singes the insides of my throat, my eyes burning from the heat, the grit that never leaves the air.

A barrage of gunfire erupts, and I reach for a weapon, but there’s nothing.

Why am I wearing jeans?

“What are the fucking orders?” I shout, hoarse. “Which direction—”

“Theo?”

It’s the softest, sweetest voice and it doesn’t belong here. Oh God, no. It’s July. I brought her into battle with me. No, no, no. I need to put her somewhere she won’t be vulnerable to a flying bullet or an explosive. There’s nowhere like that out here, though, and I can’t see her. Can’t find her in the haze of smoke.

“July!”

“I’m here. You’re in my bedroom, Theo.” Her touch ghosts over my chest, her fingertips caressing the sides of my face. “It’s okay.”

“It’s a trick.”

“No—”

I pounce on top of her July, covering her with my body, a hand clapped over her mouth. “Keep your voice down while I figure out where to put you. There’s a safe house, but I can’t see it. I don’t know which direction we came from...”

Her arms wrap around me. Tight. Is she scared?

She must be terrified. This place makes mincemeat out of grown men.

“Theo,” she says, turning her head to escape the muffle of my hand. “You’re having a nightmare.”

“Please, please, baby, be quiet.”

“We’re not in danger, I promise.”

“It’s a trick,” I say again, my voice pleading now for her understanding. Doesn’t she know one false move could get her killed? “You’re never safe here.”

“Theo—”

“What would I do if something happened to you?” I snap into her neck, because, Jesus Christ, her smooth skin is like a siren calling to me in the middle of a dust storm. She’s the only pure thing for a million miles. The light at the end of a hellish tunnel. I suck on the soft skin of her neck and drag that suction up to her ear, becoming more and more aware of her tits mashed to my chest, the way she molds to my hard muscles, like she was made just for me. I’m in the cradle of her thighs, and fuck, this is no time for a long, heavy ache to form between my legs, but the heaven of her is so tempting when all a man knows is hell. She’s salvation.

“We can’t...we can’t fuck here,” I rasp, licking the shell of her ear, burying my face in her fragrant hair and groaning at the light, innocent smell. “Out in the open. We can’t...”

“Kiss me, Theo. It’s okay.”

“I...” My heart is slamming up against my eardrums. Or is that gunfire? I don’t know. I don’t fucking know, but the horrific soundtrack of war fades slightly when I feel her breath on my mouth. And I just sort of sink myself into the mouth she’s offering, plumes of light streaking across my vision at the warmth and delicacy of her lips. How her thighs seem to settle wider as I fall further into the whimpering slants of her mouth. “Did you come all the way here for a fuck, baby?” I mutter, gripping her jaw in my hand and turning her head, lapping at her pulse, that sleek column that holds so much life. “You must need it so bad.”

“I do,” she whispers, her fingers tunneling through my hair. “I need you.”

A rain of bullets whizzes past my ear and I tense up, my hand dropping to her throat and gripping it hard. “Stay quiet.”

I don't realize my eyes are closed until I open them to assure myself she's nodding. And her eyes are gorgeous, but they're full of trepidation. Obviously. We're in enemy territory. She's not safe. But...God. I shift my hips around, and it's enough movement to feel the heat of her cunt through my jeans. Enough to know she's not wearing any underwear.

“Did you come here to get pregnant?” I'm just so confused as to why she would risk her life to come visit me in the middle of hell. It makes no sense. Unless... “Are you ovulating? Is that why you took this risk, July?”

She's trying to answer, but she can't because my hand is locked around her throat.

She's pulling at my fingers, her eyes widening in alarm.

Denial spears me on an intake of breath, and I loosen my grip slightly.

“Th-Theo—” she gasps.

“We're going to have to make it fast,” I mutter, lowering a hand to unzip my jeans, huffing and puffing while I fish my aching dick out of the denim, not daring to stroke it, lest I spill a drop anywhere but her pussy. “You came here so fertile for Daddy, didn't you?”

I press the head of my shaft to her gash, rubbing it up and over her clitoris, my muscles flexing with gratification when she sobs my name. “Daddy.”

A shudder passes through my balls, and they turn to lead, full of painful, molten lust. I know damn well I could come without a single thrust. I could simply let her name

pass through my head and my admiration of her would splatter between her spread legs. But she's here to breed. She made this risky trip to get on her back for me, so I could mate her and that's now my only reason for breathing. Impregnating her is the mission.

"I can't play too much or I'll explode."

"I know," she whispers, opening her mouth for my tongue, taking it with the eager mewls of a virgin. "I love..."

"You love what?" I say, tonguing her mouth crudely, the head of my cock nestling into her sopping wet entrance, trying to widen it for that first sacred pump.

Her eyes are half mast, but they're showing enough of her iris to see the dark sparkle of excitement. "I love those explosions."

I can't describe the sound I make. It's a keen of arousal so steep, I might die of the impact when I come down. Temporarily, I let go of my cock, the weight of it sagging my hips, my fingers finding the slot among her slick flesh and knuckling my middle finger deep, jiggling her roughly, because I don't have much longer. The enemy is closing in and she needs my sperm. "You come here with this tight cunt and ask for a quickie? I need hours, little girl. You're barely taking my finger."

There's a commanding voice in the back of my head, warning me that I'm going to hurt her, that I'm being too rough with a virgin, but there's also a hail of gunfire and shouts to take cover. There are plumes of dust and helos passing overhead. We're in some kind of structure, but that doesn't mean we're safe. Nowhere is safe. And nowhere is safe enough for this sweet thing beneath me with her legs spread.

She's not even safe with me.

I choke on that realization, even as I'm pressing a second finger deep, deep, deep, twisting my two digits in a one-eighty, again and again, while her pussy clenches around my knuckles, her breath catching like the sensation is new...and she likes it.

“You need your first fuck from your Daddy. Say it.”

“I need my first fuck from my Daddy,” she gasps.

I should take it as another, more serious warning when the words fuck and Daddy from her sweet mouth nearly send me into a frenzy. I rip her nightshirt straight down the middle and spit on her tits. One, two. I spit a third time on her panting mouth, fist my dick and enter her with a grated expletive while she licks my spit up and screams, my mind seeming to expand to an uncomfortable degree, light and color spinning clockwise around me, before narrowing down to her. There's nothing but her and the perfectly painful squeeze of her pussy, her nails drawing blood on my back and the sound of my snarls as I begin moving in a merciless rut.

The war surrounding me threatens to intrude, but I burrow into the palace in my mind where only she exists and I try to stop it, I try with all my might to keep my pain from rushing toward July, taking out its misery on her, but the pleasure she's giving me absorbs too much of my focus. The hot stroke of her cunt, her throat, caught mid-swallow in my hand, the velvet softness of her skin against my coarse body, which grinds her down, groaning into her ear, my lower body scooping and slamming into that tiny place I could barely fit my fingers. My balls must be in too much shock to lose the battle with lust, at least not right away and it buys me time to experience the woman beneath me. Her heels digging into the bed, her hips wiggling, wiggling, as if she's trying to find a comfortable way to receive my girth, the sounds of slapping wetness coming faster, faster, my grunts growing more and more urgent.

I grab the headboard for purchase and hear her hoarse intake of breath.

Was I cutting off her air?

No. No, I wouldn't do that.

Who could do anything to harm someone so perfect?

"Theo," she whimpers, her eyes glazed over. "I'm scared."

My heart almost leaps out of my chest. "I won't let anything happen to you, baby," I vow, leaning down to latch our mouths together, my hips never slowing, only picking up the pace, the frame of her bed beginning to bash off the wall. "I'll protect you forever."

"Theo!" she screams against my mouth.

"I know. It's a crime to be so fertile and have nothing to grow." My drives turn brutal, concentrated, preparing for what my body is about to do, a crack forming in the headboard beneath my hand. Or maybe the earth is shaking from the battle outside. "But I've got our baby right here, July. I've got that fat come you love so much."

Our sweat is making it almost too easy to slip up and down her naked body, slicking my path to every pound. At some point I take her wrists in mine and shove them beneath her butt, elevating her hips and angling me to deliver the hot spend that threatens to release at any second. I'm scared. Those words shout at me from an unseen source in the room and I look into her eyes for reassurance, finding them anxious and dazed, her hips working her pussy furiously in my lap, helping my length slam in and out. And she bites me. Bites me enough to leave blood on her lip, her cunt twisting violently around my shaft, her desperate moan filling my head.

“I...I...” she starts, her wetness sluicing around the trunk of my dick, thighs vibrating in a blur. “Oh God, it’s happening!”

“Christ, baby, I’m coming with you,” I manage, before my sperm breaks free and floods July’s breach. I shove deep as possible with a roar, my body convulsing on top of her smaller one, her thighs twitching around me while I break. That’s exactly what I do. I break. I give myself over to the tender mercy of her body and let it heal me, let it pleasure me, my cock jerking inside of her narrow passage over and over and over, making my eyes tear from the pleasure-pain. “Wasn’t that worth coming into battle for, little girl? Came for a load and you left with enough for six, didn’t you?” I drag my cock in and out to stroke out the final drops of seed. “No one comes as hard as I do for you. No one, sweet July.”

Slowly, I come back to myself, my body sated and my heart thundering with love for the woman beneath me. I love her, I love her—

And that love recoils in horror when it sees the bruises around her neck.

The blood on her chin.

Red handprints on her jaw, her throat, her upper arms.

Her hands are still pinned beneath her hips. I’ve been holding her prisoner.

Lifting my gaze, I see the crack in the headboard and it all comes back to me. Her telling me she was scared. How brutally I just fucked her. A virgin. How I took solace from the battle in her body, unfairly. And there was no battle.

We’re in her bedroom. She trusted me to sleep beside her and I...

I choked her. Didn’t prepare her enough. Possibly got her pregnant without any kind

of rational discussion first. No wonder she was scared. Why didn't I stop when she said she was scared? Am I a monster?

Quickly, I release her wrists, climbing off her ravaged body and burying my head in my hands, starting to pace beside the bed. "Oh Jesus, July, what have I done?"

CHAPTER TEN

July

Oh my goodness.

I can't move. My bones are made of warm butter. There are stinging marks all over my body, my throat feels raw and I'm not sure if I'll ever catch my breath again. I completely overestimated my ability to handle Theo during one of his nightmares. I thought it would be so easy to snap him out of it. Soothe him. But I was wrong. He was in the midst of battle the whole time we made love and now, I feel like I've made it through battle, too.

And I'm exhilarated.

Sex is not this choreographed act I was expecting. It's messy. It's mental and physical. In my case, it's...destruction. When Theo gave me orgasms with his tongue and fingers, it was like a knot loosening. A slow, wonderful melt into relief. With Theo inside of me, however, using my body so roughly and with such a lack of control, the orgasm hit me like a mean right cross. It choked me and robbed me of reason, cinched up my tummy so tight, I thought I would rupture from the inside out...until the pleasure arrived like a reward for making it through the briar patch.

I'm wrecked in the best way.

Sated, stupefied and...proud of myself. I'm stronger than I thought. I'm adventurous. I'm the embodiment of his needs. Need so strong, he can't breathe when he's fucking me. He has to bite and groan and squeeze me because the pleasure is so intense. With me. I'm good in bed, I think. Who knew? And it's only my first time.

It takes me a moment to mentally wave away the haze and realize Theo is pacing back and forth beside the bed, visibly distraught. His reaction parts the bliss induced fog all around me and I struggle up onto one elbow.

"Theo. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" He stops, raking an unsteady hand through his hair. "Baby, you're..." His chest rises and falls. "You're all covered in marks. Jesus, your throat...I could have killed you."

"No." I sit up and swing my legs around, scooting to the edge of the bed, reaching out for him, but he shakes his head and steps out of my reach. "No, you were rough, but you weren't violent."

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“Rough is bad enough. You were a virgin, July.” For the first time, he notices the traces of blood on my inner thighs. “Oh God. Does it hurt?”

“No,” I lie. At first. Then I decide to tell him the truth, because honesty feels right with this person so vulnerable around me. And because I sense that the truth will assuage his guilt. I don’t want him to feel guilty about something I found so extraordinary. Something that taught me a lot about myself. “Fine, it hurts a little, but...I, um...”

“What?”

I cast my gaze down to the ground. “I liked when it hurt.”

His brows pull together, his chin lifting and I can tell he doesn’t believe me. “You said you were scared.”

“I was scared of how good it felt. How...b-b-big the feeling was.” He doesn’t respond to that, continuing to scrutinize me, as if searching for the truth. “Didn’t it feel good for you?” I whisper.

He starts, as if I’ve asked a question from left field. “Didn’t it—” He cuts himself off, dropping into a kneel in front of me, wrapping both arms around my waist and pressing his face into my thighs. “July, it’s no wonder I only get hard for you. One look at you across a table launched an obsession. Kissing your mouth, touching your soft skin, is like being admitted early to heaven. But now that I’ve fucked you?” His eyes glitter with heat as he eases my thighs apart, perusing my swollen sex. “It’s so tight, you’d have been a hot fuck if you just laid there and took it, but Christ, you

worked that pussy like you were marking your territory. I couldn't fuck you hard enough. Goddamn." A shudder wracks his huge body. "Did it feel good? Did you really ask me that? I'd do forty more years in that enemy camp to get five minutes on top of you with your legs spread. It wasn't good. It was worth dying for. You are...God, July. You are a work of art, and I abused that. Abused you." He buries his face in my lap again, drawing me in close, so close I have a hard time catching my breath. "Maybe prison is exactly where I belong."

"Stop. You're not listening," I whisper, threading my fingers through his hair. "I mean, I was worried in the beginning because you wouldn't snap out of the dream and my heart hurt for you. But I knew we were safe, so I let myself...experience you." I wet my lips. "I wouldn't have thought it about myself, but the harder you...you know, took me, the faster that ticklish feeling in my belly spread. I don't think you realize what a turn on it was to watch you enjoy me...so openly. It took away all my self-consciousness."

He lifts his head, pressing his forehead to mine and staring into my eyes in wonder. "I don't deserve you, July. You're barely going to be able to walk in the morning."

Heat rushes into my cheeks, a flip-flop taking place beneath my navel. "Really?" I breathe, surprised by the excitement in my own voice. "Am I this girl now? A girl who craves rough sex from her boyfriend?" I slap a hand over my mouth. "I mean, the guy she's kind of seeing? I—"

I cut myself off because he slowly lifts his head, pins me with a look that could cut through a thick fog, his chest puffing up and down. "Boyfriend." Before I can prepare, he's moving, lunging to his feet and lifting me around the waist in one swift motion, throwing me down in the center of the bed and coming down on top of me—hard. I only catch a brief flash of his body before it's flattening mine, but it's long enough to realize his sex has become stiff again. Now it's wedged between our bellies, long and pulsing. His forehead drops to mine, his warm breath moistening my

mouth. “You’ve done it now, baby.”

“What do you mean?”

His teeth pull back in a wince, as if he’s in pain. “Call me your boyfriend again.”

“Is that what you are? Because if this is moving too fast—”

“July.”

“Okay! You’re my boyfriend.”

Theo lurches on top of me, moaning, his shaft jerking against my navel and—to my astonishment—hot spend pools on my stomach. He continues to pant and moan, his hips wrenching in tight circles, his spend dripping down my ribcage on both sides. Once the worst of the spasms pass, he snares my mouth in a deep, cherishing kiss, and he can’t seem to stop, plying me with his tongue over and over until I’m delirious.

Then finally, “I’m going to find a way to be the man you deserve, July,” he says against my lips, his gaze boring down into mine. “I’m going to be the last boyfriend you ever have.”

“And the first,” I murmur, trailing my fingertips down his sweaty back, hesitating at the swell of his buttocks, then tracing the curve of them, as well. “My first everything.”

His jaw goes slack, his lower body jerking, and more moisture drips down my sides. “Are you trying to kill me?” he huffs, his muscular frame vibrating on top of me like a car engine. “Better yet, maybe you’re exhausting me so I’m too tired to have any more nightmares.” He nuzzles my mouth, sipping at my bottom lip. “It’s hard to

believe nightmares even exist in the same world as you, July.”

He doesn't give me a chance to respond, before he climbs off the bed, prowling to the bathroom in all his nude glory and fetching a towel, coming back to clean me off, his brow drawn in concentration. Then I'm tucked into bed like a princess, wrapped in two strong arms, drowsiness hitting me in a potent wave, dragging me under.

* * *

Theo

Oh Jesus.

The bruises look a million times worse in the morning light.

She's covered in them. Finger and handprints all over her pristine body.

Her throat is red from the pressure of my grip, bite marks decorating her shoulders and neck. I can't stop the miserable sounds leaving my mouth as she gets dressed, buttoning up a blouse that covers her neck and throat.

“I'm fine, Theo.”

I can't stop shaking my head.

Finally, I must turn away from her, unable to stand the sight of her discolored skin. Almost immediately, she comes up behind me, wrapping her arms around the breadth of my chest. I bring one of her hands to my mouth, kissing the knuckles. Those, at least, bear no marks. “I must be a monster, because I've done unforgiveable things to you and I know you should walk away from me.” My voice drops to a guttural promise. “But I wouldn't let you.”

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“I don’t want to walk away.”

“Thank God,” I say on an unsteady exhale. “I’m going to make sure you don’t regret that decision. Starting today.”

Her fingertips stroke up and down my chest. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to take the mandatory therapy sessions. I’m calling my buddy to make the appointment as soon as I get the chance. I’m not going to be careless with you, July. I’m going to fix what’s broken, before I...breakyou.”

She’s silent for several moments. “I’m proud of you. For taking that step.” She holds me tight and there is no better feeling in this world than being squeezed in this woman’s arms. Being told she’s proud of me. “You’re so brave.”

“A brave man isn’t that rough with a woman.”

“I told you I liked it,” she whispers.

My body reacts like it’s been electrified, my cock stretching long and nasty in my briefs. “I’d quit talking like that, unless you want to be late for work.” I turn around, the beauty of her face knocking the breath out of me. She affects me so severely, my hand is shaking as I tilt her chin higher with my index finger. “I don’t think ‘my boyfriend needed an extra hour to raw dog me’ is an excuse your boss would accept.”

“Theo.” She blushes to the roots of her hair. “I don’t even know what that means.”

I brush her hair back, lowering my mouth so I can whisper in her ear. “It means to fuck you without a condom. And be real goddamn dirty about it.”

“Oh.”

I walk her backward until she’s up against the wall, trapped between it and my body, my face grinding into the slope of her neck, licking the sugar cookie scent of her and swallowing it, hoping to keep the taste of her with me all day long. “Quit looking at me like that or I’m going to come, July.”

“Sorry.”

I bash the wall with the heels of my hands. “I don’t have a change of clothes.”

“I know.”

“God, I want to fuck you silly right now,” I growl.

She whimpers. “Me too. I just...the presentation a-and—”

With a guttural roar, I pull her off the wall and out of the bedroom. I’ve already done enough damage. I’m not going to cause my girlfriend to lose her job, too. Or be the reason she loses valuable working hours when she has a big opportunity coming up. Even if I do want to spend the day giving her leg-shaking orgasms. “I’m going to walk you right to the door of your building,” I say, once she’s checked her purse and slipped her feet into her office shoes, meeting me at the front door. I tell myself to resist the possessive urges wracking my being, but I can’t and...I don’t think she wants me to deny those feelings she inspires. So I reach under her skirt—a sensible one this time—and take firm hold of her sexy little pussy. “Any man comes within ten feet of this at work today, you’re going to call me. I’ll come handle the disrespect.”

Her eyes struggle to stay open. “I-I can just tell them I have a—”

“Don’t say it out loud. Just think it,” I growl, my balls pressing together on high alert. Boyfriend. That word, where July is concerned, is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. It has a direct line to my dick and every base instinct I possess, because it means she’s mine. I’m obsessed with being her boyfriend. I’m obsessed, period. “I want you back on the sidewalk outside your building at five o’clock.” I squeeze her mind-blowing cunt until she cries out, her panties turning sodden against my palm, her teeth sinking into her plump bottom lip. “I might just bring this home and lick it all fucking night. How about that?”

“Y-yes,” she stammers, her nipples peaking against the front of her blouse. “But I want you inside me, too.”

“Is that right?”

She nods, her mouth open and gasping. “I want my boyfriend to fuck me.”

Game over.

I actually black out for a few seconds and when I regain consciousness, July is up against the door and I’m wrenching her skirt up to her waist. “I told you not to say that word,” I snarl, working her panties down over those full ass cheeks, then giving up the battle to get them onto the floor, simply ripping them off in my hand. “Now I need to come in your pussy, July. Now I need to fuck your pretty little brains out. Are you happy?”

“Yes,” she moans as I throw her high against the door, rattling the hinges, my hips notching in tight between her thighs, her thighs, her smooth fucking thighs that are so perfectly molded for my body, hugging my hips with tenacity while I fumble with my zipper, our mouths locked and panting, sweat beginning to pour down my back.

“Fuck me, Theo,” she whispers, her eyes glazed with lust. “Fuck me so hard that when I walk in late, they know exactly what I was doing. And exactly who I was with.”

I bellow into a kiss, almost losing my seed prematurely.

She’s some kind of miracle, my July. A sweet, innocent girl who discovered last night that she likes rough, rude sex. I have a moment of fleeting regret over the fact that I’m the bastard who stole her wide-eyed purity and replaced it with hunger for pleasure, but it passes very quickly as I sink into her too-tight cunt and listen to her wail my name, her thighs flexing violently around my hips. “Tight and horny, aren’t you.” I surge forward, pinning her as securely as possible to the wall and hit her with some upthrusts. “You just want to make Daddy crazy, don’t you?”

“I...” she hiccups, taking me like such a good girl, her tits jiggling around in her white blouse. “I think I do want to make you crazy. Is that bad?”

Watching her discover her sexual preferences while I’m ten inches deep is a gift I never expected to receive. “It’s a good kind of bad, baby,” I manage raggedly, drilling her against the door with inexcusable force, our tongues meeting to lap at one another, her eyes lighting up over the filth, over the depravity with which I’m plowing to the hilt, her pussy making wetter and wetter sounds, the door bumping loudly in its frame. “Listen to how much that creamy little thing enjoys my cock.”

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“I love it,” she whimpers.

“Yeah?” I bare my teeth against the shell of her ear. “Stay still while I grind in it.” I pump all the way in and rub my balls with relish against the smooth underside of her, tightening those sacks to the point of agony. Sweet, sweet agony. Her thighs convulse wildly in response, her back attempting to arch off the wall, but I don’t allow it, using my body to keep her flat, rasping a breath into her neck. “I said, stay still.”

“I can’t,” she screams. “I can’t!”

“Does that make you need to come?” I ask, hitting her with mean little fucks now, only exiting her a small amount, before shoving back in, rougher each time, and I know by the way she’s suddenly clawing at me, I’m hitting her G-spot.

“Theo. Theo.Theo!”

“What, little girl?” I slap her ass from below, the sharp sound echoing around the room. “Tell Daddy the problem. Is that cock just too fucking nice?”

“Yes!” July starts to cry, which swamps me with alarm, until I realize it’s...a good cry. It’s the breaking point of pleasure on display. I know that because her legs turn into a vise around my hips and my dick drips with telltale juice, her core flexing around me so hot and insanely snug, I can only do my best to hold on, not to blow too soon.

“Baby wants to walk into the office smelling like that jealous boyfriend dick?” I grind harder, pressing a snarl into her fragrant hair. “Believe me, I’m more than happy to

make that happen. You want sticky thighs are a sore cunt from nine to five? Let's go."

Intuition tells me she's on the brink of an orgasm and I'm proven right a second later when her tear-covered face goes almost peaceful as she passes over the jagged hill of lust into relief, her body trembling so beautifully, my own eyes become coated in a sheen just watching her cross over to bliss. Bliss I gave her with my body. And I take my own, erupting while memorizing her expression of satisfaction and knowing I'm responsible, my cock filling her with the substance that built inside me overnight while I held her and leaking all over the ground in gratifying splats, pressure leaving my loins in tidal waves, again and again until my legs are on the verge of buckling.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay," I chant against her forehead, holding her steady while she recovers. "I've got you."

Those words ring true. Truer than anything ever has in my life.

But there's an urgency growing inside of me now, telling me to earn her.

Do what I need to do to keep her safe. From everything. Even me.

And that's exactly what I plan to do.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

July

I'm half an hour late to work.

I've never even been one minute late.

My reflection looks back at me from the elevator doors, a woman with a distinctly mysterious look in her eye, some light bruising on her jaw from her boyfriend's demanding grip, a skirt that hugs curves that I never stopped to appreciate before. My hair is up in a top knot, slightly mussed, my mouth noticeably swollen.

I smile back at myself, laughing under my breath.

Who would have thought it?

I'm a sex kitten.

A sexenthusiast, to be honest. Perhaps I've only made love twice in my whole life, but those two times seemed...advanced. Newbie or not, I'm competing at the professional level and oh my goodness, I'm not just competing, I'm winning. I can still feel the hugeness of him inside me, his soldier's body mashing me into the door, his hips slamming up into me so frantically, I swore he would die without me to satisfy him. And lord, that's a heady feeling. One that I covet...in a somewhat dark and twisted way.

I don't know how I'm going to focus on work today.

I might just bring this home and lick it all fucking night. How about that?

My knees snap together and I moan...

And I'm still moaning when the elevator doors open.

Vikander and Dierdre stare back at me.

"Oh!" I clear my throat, willing the pinkness to flee my complexion. "Sorry, I was meditating. Terrible commute. That's why I'm late." Stop rambling. Can't. "And now

I'm meditating to calm the stress. Have you tried meditating? Does wonders."

They blink at me in unison.

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My boss uses her forearm to keep the elevator door from closing. “My God. Look at you. Did he hold you hostage in some...somewhere last night?”

“You’re a mess,” Dierdre says, pursing her lips while she peruses me, top to bottom.

“You’re thirty-one minutes late and you have the presentation of your life on Friday,” Vikander says. “This man is not good for you.”

“Really?” I say, without any forethought, my lips curling into a dazed smile. These two women who always make me feel so silly and small are not going to best me today. “I feel...great.”

Dierdre reaches into the elevator and yanks me forward by the wrist. “This man assaulted one of my friends, then he has the nerve to walk into a work function and just drag you out of there like a caveman? It’s only going to get worse, July.”

“We’re not just your co-workers and boss,” adds my boss, clicking along in her heels to keep up with us. “You need us to guide you! You’re so gullible!”

I stop in the middle of the hallway, ordering myself to be patient with them. From the outside looking in, Theo must look like a walking red flag. I’m operating on a gut feeling about him and I can’t expect Dierdre and my boss to understand that, can I? Even if their refusal to treat me like a smart adult is beginning to rankle. “I would be concerned, too, but you’re going to have to trust me. Theo is going through a lot, he’s been through something unimaginable...and he’s rough around the edges, but he makes me happy.”

“Theo,” Dierdre spits. “Sorry, but you sound like a woman blinded by good sex.”

“That’s a fair point,” I sigh. “The sex is really, really, really good.”

“How good?” my boss asks, throatily, before waving off the question. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. The point is, we’re saving you from yourself.”

I frown, not liking the direction of the conversation. “How exactly are you doing that?”

They exchange a glance that verges on guilty. “I’m keeping you here working late tonight,” says Vikander, briskly. “You need to focus on the Yerbi presentation, July. Not a man. Maybe refocusing your energy on work will remind you what’s important. Your health, your career, your safety. You can’t put those in jeopardy.”

“I can’t stay late tonight,” I protest, remembering my promise to Theo. Not to mention that fact that I don’t want to work late. I’m just beginning to enjoy my personal life for the first time. Now it’s being stifled?

“You will if you don’t want me to pass off the presentation to someone else,” my boss says with only a slight air of regret. “I need to see a clean draft in the morning, complete with illustrations. And a clean backup plan, too.”

My heart sinks into my stomach. “But my deadline was Friday morning. Tomorrow is only Wednesday.”

“I want to be prepared.”

Heat prickles my eyelids. I’m starting to wonder if I was asked to take on this project simply because my boss and Dierdre didn’t feel like doing it themselves. “This feels illegal,” I mutter under my breath.

Dierdre sniffs. "Assault is illegal. Ask your boyfriend."

Eat a dick, Dierdre.

I don't say those words out loud, but honestly, just that fact that I'm thinking them is a small victory. Right? And I desperately need a victory right now, because I'm being manipulated and railroaded by two people who think they know what's best for me. I want to walk out. I want to stand up for myself and tell them to shove their weird intervention up their butts, but I don't quite have the courage. Despite the confidence I walked into the office with this morning, I'm still exactly the same girl.

Aren't I?

Wishing desperately that I was back in Theo's arms...or better yet, basking in the warmth of his contagious admiration, I swallow hard, my shoulders hunching on my way to my desk.

* * *

Theo

After leaving July's, I go buy a cell phone. My first one since returning from active duty. I need to be able to get in contact with July. No more leaving our meetings to chance or wondering if something happened to her if she's running late. There are features, too, that I'd forgotten about until now. Such as tracking. I want to know where the fuck she is at all times. I want her to know where I am, too.

I want pictures of her stored in my phone.

Text messages from her that I can read back, whenever I want.

The fact that I have none of these things is suddenly a very pressing problem.

Looking down at the shiny new device in my hand, I vow to fill it with pictures of my girlfriend tonight. I'm going to take pictures of her being cute, like when she cleans her glasses with the hem of her shirt and has to squint for those eight seconds, because she can't see. Or when she comes out of the shower in a nightshirt. Or when she presses her nose into my jaw and nuzzles it around. I want a goddamn picture of that.

I want to put my entire cock in her, pin her down with it and snap a photo of her face.

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I want her to take selfies with my phone while I'm giving her head.

I want around a million pictures of those sweet, motherfucking tits.

I'm going to use up half the memory on this thing within a week.

Noticing my familiar surroundings, I realize my feet have led me to the sidewalk outside of July's work building. My stomach muscles pull taut, my heart climbing up into my mouth. Go in there and get her. That's my impulse. Take her home and spend the day worshipping her body, the only body that tempts me or gives me relief.

My woman's body.

But I can't follow through on the urge, because she's working. Her work is important to her, and I want her to succeed. Not to mention, I made a vow to myself to be better, to do the work to rejoin civilian life in a healthy way, so July will be proud to call me her boyfriend.

Instead of storming the building and kidnapping July, the way I want to, I untuck a business card from my wallet and make my first official call on my new phone.

Mark, my Army buddy, answers after three rings. "Hello?"

"Mark, it's Theo."

An amused puff of air. "You finally got a phone."

“Calling you is easier than looking at your ugly face.”

A laugh bursts down the line, followed by several beats of silence. “Why are you calling?”

I inhale deeply and let it out, glancing up at July’s building. “I’m ready to see the therapist. As soon as possible, actually.”

“Wow. I thought you’d be in denial over needing help for a lot longer.”

“Surprise.”

“What changed your mind?”

An image of July sitting down across from me in the café blinds me to everything else on the sidewalk. I see nothing but her, pushing those glasses up her nose and reaching out to touch my arm, her touch turning me back into a human. “I met a woman.” Christ, my throat is suddenly tied in a knot. “I met the woman.”

“That’ll do it!” Mark laughs. “So you need to see the therapist and get cleared for security work in order to buy this woman a diamond ring. Am I on the right track?”

“Yeah,” I rasp. “Might need an advance.”

“She’s that special, is she?”

I almost turn around and charge the building. Who the hell are these walls and elevators and security guards to keep me from my other half? “She’s a walking miracle.”

Mark makes a warm sound, and I hear the tapping of keys in the background. “As

luck would have it, one of our guys had to cancel his therapy appointment today. There's an opening. How fast can you get to the west side?"

"I'm on my way."

It's funny how one chance encounter brings me back to the land of the living. I complete my first therapy session that afternoon and it's nothing like I expected. The therapist is a former soldier himself and even so, didn't try to relate to my experience or wrap it up in a neat little bow with some psychological terminology. He listened. Asked minimal questions. Validated the horror I experienced with reactions that neither jarred me or pissed me off.

Unbelievably, I'm looking forward to going back.

Hours later, it's 5:09 and I'm standing outside of July's office building.

She isn't there.

I've been standing here since a quarter to five. She never comes out.

I check the bar I found her in yesterday. She's not there, either.

I'm beginning to panic when I see her co-worker walk out the building, along with another woman I don't recognize.

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“I feel a teeny bit bad forcing July to work late,” says the one I haven’t met. “She already works her ass off.”

“It’s for her own good,” drones the other one. “The more time she spends at the office, the less time she spends with that monster. She’ll thank us when she comes to her senses.”

Monster.

They’re talking about me.

My bones threaten to melt down into the pavement. Did they see her bruises? The bite marks? July was walking a little differently this morning, thanks to the rough ways I took her last night and this morning. Did they notice?

A lot like the morning I fled July’s apartment, my brain tells me to do the same now.

Leave this woman alone, so I can’t hurt her.

I can’t do it, though. I might as well walk into oncoming traffic, because leaving her would be worse than death. And I promised her I wouldn’t disappear again. I don’t break promises to my girl. There’s also a part of me, maybe the tiniest spark of progress from therapy that denies what they’re saying. I’m not a monster.

I’ve just been through something monstrous.

I’m going to get through to the other side. For the man I used to be.

For July.

As the women walk by, I turn my back and duck my head, so they won't clock me. When they pass by, I unclip a security card from one of their pockets and slip inside the building, the need to see July and reassure myself that we're on solid ground multiplying by the second.

CHAPTERTWELVE

July

I stare over at the window with tears in my eyes, resolutely focusing on my work. I have at least one more hour, then I'll go home. Theo will find me.

There's no question of that in my mind.

I'm more upset because I feel walked all over. Put in a corner.

Managed.

Not listened to.

Worse, I let it happen.

Taking a deep breath, I release it and attempt to focus. I'm the only one left in the office, everyone else having fled to happy hour at five o'clock on the dot, including the two women who imprisoned me here. I open my reference sheet to make sure my back-up plan idea meets all the necessary criteria and—

Footsteps.

My fingers freeze on the keyboard.

Those aren't the footsteps of a co-worker, they're too...slow. Creaking. Not the crisp and purposeful gait of someone who spends eight hours a day in this office. I lift my gaze to the monitor of my computer and see a shadowed figure in the reflection, weaving in and out of the cubicles behind me. I'm in trouble. No one is on this entire floor, except me.

And this person. Whoever they are.

I pick up my stapler, intending to use it as a weapon, stand up and turn around.

My hand drops like a five-hundred-pound boulder when I see Theo coming into view, his beautiful face splitting into a wry grin.

"Theo," I breathe, pressing a hand to my chest. One might assume my heart would slow down once I realize I'm not about to be accosted, but no. It speeds up. My throat tightens, warmth crowding behind my eyes. Seeing his rugged soldier's frame in this professional environment brings home exactly how different he is from everything in my life. How new.

How beloved and perfect and gorgeous.

Without a second thought, I drop the stapler and run to him, jumping into his arms and wrapping my legs around his waist, listening to and loving his gruff whisper of my name. "I missed you so much," I say, meaning every word. In fact, it's an under exaggeration. I've been yearning for him since I left his side this morning. "How did you get into the building?"

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“I stole your co-worker's security card.”

“Of course you did,” I giggle into his neck. Why am I crying? How am I laughing and tearing up at the same time? “I’m sorry I wasn’t outside at five pm. They—”

“I know. I heard them talking.”

I pull back, chewing on my lip. “And you came to rescue me?”

“Which way to the dragon I need to slay?” His smile slowly fades. “Why are there tears in your eyes, baby? Did I scare you that much?”

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head. “I’m just relieved you’re here. I’ve felt really alone today. Alone used to feel normal, but I know what it’s like to be with you now.”

Tenderness blasts across his face and he kisses me hard. “You’ll never be lonely again. Not even at work. There’s something called FaceTime I learned about today.”

“You need a phone to use FaceTime.”

He tucks his tongue into his cheek, looking a little smug. “Good. I got one.”

“You did?”

“Uh-huh. Planning on filling it with pictures of my girlfriend tonight.” He kisses the underside of my chin, his right hand rasping down the center of my bottom, tugging me closer so I can feel the stiffness between his legs. “As soon as she’s done

working.”

“It might be another hour,” I say, with obvious regret, even as I flex my thighs and rub myself on that thick tower he keeps all for me.

“I’ve waited my whole life for you, July. I can wait another hour.”

I almost gasp from the sudden pressure in my chest. Welcome, happy pressure. I never expected a man to come along and remind me I’m someone worth waiting for, but he has. All I want to do is revel in the safe and cherished feeling he gives me. “Maybe I can take a dinner break.”

He half grins, nods. “I’ll take you out.”

I settle my mouth on top of his. “I’m not hungry.”

Obviously getting my message loud and clear, his chest begins to rise and fall. “I am. I’m starving.” He drags his mouth around to my ear. “For that delicious little cunt you’re hiding under your skirt.”

My breath is carried out of me on a whimper. I’ve never gotten wet so fast in my life. Except for maybe every other time I’ve been in this man’s presence. My tummy muscles pull like piano wire, my inner thighs turning the consistency of hot oil. I drop my head back and shake my hair out, one of my flats tumbling to the ground. It’s particularly satisfying to feel like a sex siren in the middle of this place, this office where I’ve only ever felt like a grunt. Someone who gets thrown a bone once in a while, but ultimately caves to the whims of her boss and co-workers.

“What are you thinking about?” Theo asks, his tongue dragging a path up the slope of my throat, teeth razing the patch of sensitive skin beneath my ear.

“I’m thinking...you make me feel powerful in a place I often feel powerless.”

For a snippet of time, he looks overcome. After a hard swallow, he says, “You do the same for me, July. I was in a world where I felt powerless. Lost.” He shakes his head. “But as long as I’ve got you, I’m a goddamn king.”

“You’ve got me,” I whisper against his mouth. “You’ve so got me.”

We kiss long and hungrily, right there in the aisle adjacent to my desk, his big hands molding my backside, giving it the occasional slap, the strike vibrating all the way to my wet sex, leading to me moaning and sinking deeper into the kiss, starved for his tongue.

“Where are you doing your presentation on Friday?” he asks, abruptly.

“Um...the conference room,” I respond, sending a confused glance over his shoulder toward the room in question. “Why?”

“Got an idea,” he says, turning on a heel and carrying me through the cubicles. The sun has begun to set, leaving the office in a hazy darkness, nothing like its usual artificial brightness, making the moment feel like a dream, especially when Theo kicks open the door to the conference room, using his foot to shut it behind us. In the near dark, he reaches beneath my skirt, taking a few moments to massage my hips, my cheeks, before pulling down my panties, sliding them slowly, slowly, to my ankles where I step out. Before I can take a breath, he yanks my skirt up to my waist with rough hands, settling me on the long table, moving a chair out of the way, so he can drop down to a kneel in front of me.

“What are you d-doing?” I pant, because I pretty much already know the answer to my question and my body tightens in preparation, my thighs already beginning to tremble.

“Scoot to the edge and let Daddy see that extra-tight pussy.”

I do what he tells me, because my body is compelled by the authority in his voice, the obsession in it, my bare buttocks dragging along the cool surface of the table and stopping at the very edge. “W-we’re really going to do this...here?”

“Fucking right we are.” He settles his palms on my knees and pushes them open, gritting a curse behind his teeth when he sees my naked flesh. Wet and waiting for him. “Because when you get nervous during your presentation on Friday, you’re going to remember me down on my knees worshipping you.” His open mouth trails down my inner thigh to my core, kissing my softness, groaning and kissing it again, deeper. “You’re going to remember you’ve got a man who knows you hung the fucking moon.” His tongue slides downward into my seam, parting me, lightly dragging the tip of his tongue through the middle, his gaze locking on mine as he presses a long finger into my pussy, working it in a circle, his knuckle rubbing side to side against my clit, shooting mind blowing sparks up to my nipples, my neck. “You’re going to remember how amazing you are, top to bottom.” He adds a second finger, pumping it in tight. “And goddamn, especially right here.”

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:22 am

Dampness steals down the cheeks of my bottom, my stomach hollowed in and squeezing in anticipation, the shake of my thighs intensifying when he sinks his tongue deeper among my flesh, licking me with rumbling enjoyment, pressing in tight so my thighs rest on his broad shoulders and bathing my clit repeatedly, my upper body resting back on my elbows, thighs spread. How many times have I been humored in this room? Ignored?

Not now, huh?

“Theo,” I sob, my hips beginning to jerk, my walls constricting. “I’m going to come.”

He growls with obvious excitement, his tongue moving faster. My skin heats another degree. Another. My heels dig into breadth of his back. My whines get louder, more desperate, as the climax starts to sink in, taking my hormones hostage and whipping them into a frenzy.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” I chant, my hands flying to his hair, hips tilting, a scream catching in my throat when his tongue starts to move at the speed of a propeller, the orgasm ripping up my middle and blasting me like sensual buckshot. My back arches off the table, torso twisting, his tongue lapping up every drop of what he did. “MyDaddy,” I bite off, shuddering through to the other side of those perfect, hot ripples.

And then he’s towering over me, eyes glittering with want as he unfastens his jeans. Button, zipper, his distended cock fisted in an iron grip, stumbling forward with a grated sound, as if he’s waited for a millennium to have me. Looking me right in the eye, he drives himself deep, his face slackening from the bliss he encounters inside

me, his hands fumbling for the table to gain purchase, sweat beading on his upper lip from one thrust.

“Didn’t even have to remind you to call me Daddy, did I?” He holds himself deep, his teeth rasping up the side of my neck. “You just knew. You know why?” Pound. Pound, pound, pound. The fading of my scream. “Because you’re a good girl who knows to open her legs nice and wide when Daddy gets that look in his eye.”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

His hands are almost violent on my bottom, bruising it in his grip, holding me still for the long, long sinks of his shaft, those breathless grinds. “This is the third time I’ve banged you without a condom, baby.” His gaze is rife with possession. “You’re going to be calling me Daddy for another reason real soon.”

“Good,” I surprise him—and myself—by saying. But I mean it. “I want a baby with you. I want everything with you.” I lean up and lick his jaw, nipping at it. “Bang me until it takes.”

He surges forward to snarl against my mouth, his sex stretching, thickening, forcing me to accommodate yet more girth. “I’ll be banging you the rest of my life.”

“Good.” I unbutton my blouse and push it open, revealing a lacy pink demicup. “Make it hurt, Daddy.”

I have no words for how hard he fucks me.

Okay, maybe a few.

It’s obscene and wonderful and filthy.

My butt squeaks relentlessly on the table while Theo thrusts into me with a force that jars my bones and makes my molars clack together. His stomach rakes over mine like warm coals, his balls smacking me the way he smacked my ass earlier. With a snap of sexual frustration. As if he's incensed over being put into a state so lusty and base. Wanting to see my lover and I from another angle, I glance toward the wall of windows that look over the sea of cubicles. Instead of seeing my own reflection, though...

I see Dierdre and Vikander on the other side of the glass.

Holding a coffee that is presumably for me.

Their jaws have dropped.

They watch Theo fuck me like a frenzied animal, my thighs open wide for his raw treatment, my mouth open on a throaty moan of his name. I should tell Theo to stop and attempt to explain that we just got carried away. But I don't, because I'm locked in a state of desire so deep, they wouldn't understand it. No one would understand it unless they could feel the hot length of Theo filling them, raking over erogenous zones and rubbing on my clit like a machine built specifically for me. My body burns him alive, turns him into a beast that can only mate to save his sanity. And after he's done brutalizing me, he's going to treat me like his sweet little princess. How can I explain the euphoria, the utter gratification of that to anyone? It's mine and mine alone.

"Going to start giving you daily spankings," he growls through his teeth. "We're going to start the morning with one. I'm taking out too much aggression on this cunt."

"I like your aggression," I gasp, my ass cheeks squeaking faster. Faster. "I want it."

I'm jerked off the table and whirled around, two eager hands yanking my hips high, positioning me for more fucking, Daddy giving me his inches a second later, my sex suctioning him deep and rippling in welcome, my hips pushing back to meet his increasingly frantic pumps.

"How is my pussy from the back, Daddy?"

"Small.FUCK." His right fist bashes down on the table, his breath shallow and shaky.

"Oh Jesus, baby, my fucking balls. Don't say another word."

I blink back at him over my shoulder, hips tilting temptingly. "Otherwise, you'll put a big load inside me?"

Am I being extra sassy because I want to show off for these women? To show them how desperate my boyfriend is for me? How good he thinks I feel? Do I want them to be jealous, instead of acting like I'm some helpless rookie all the time?

Maybe a little.

"Yes, oh God yes, oh God!" he groans, pressing my upper body down flat to the table and slapping a hand over my mouth, his steel arousal shoving into my hole like he hates me, but I know it's just the opposite, which is why I smile and separate my ankles a few more inches, reaching back on instinct to rub the pad of my middle finger against the pucker of my rear entrance.

"I'll be such a good girl if you promise to put it here next time."

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:22 am

“July, baby, JesusCHRIST!”

A flood crests and decimates everything in its path.

I press my cheek to the chilled surface of the conference table and watch their faces as Theo erupts inside me like a man possessed, ramming his lap into my buttocks, humping and bellowing for God and relief, his seed making a mess on the table, between my thighs, inside of me. Everywhere. Despite the fact that my legs are trembling with the aftershocks of my own orgasm, I manage to smile at them, and they go, bumping into one another before disappearing from sight.

I turn from temptress to angel, then, in a pattern I plan to get used to, allowing my boyfriend to pluck me off the table, cradle me in his arms while raining kisses down on my head, praising my adventurousness, my “slick hole,” and expressing gruff, passionate gratitude for letting him be so aggressive twice in one day. Apologizing for my soreness. Telling me I’m a good girl. That I’mhisgirl. That he loves every single thing about me.

I absorb his words like a flower sucking down sunshine, even preening a little when he strokes my hair and rubs gentle hands over my breasts, hips, ankles. Touching every part of me, as if to spread the praise evenly.

When he looks me in the eye, his throat working in a swallow, I already know what’s coming, because I can feel his emotions all around me.

“I’m in love with you, July,” he rasps, cupping my face and kissing me.

Tears roll down my cheeks. “I’m in love with you, too, Theo.”

We bask in each other for long moments, before we finally manage to stop touching each other long enough to get dressed. Walking out hand in hand, we leave the office, but right in front of the elevator, I hear whispers behind my back in the office.

I squeeze Theo’s hand. “I’ll be right back.”

Holding my chin up high, I walk into the break room to find Dierdre and my boss, still slack jawed and obviously talking about what they’ve just seen. If this is the moment I get fired, so be it, but I’m going to go out with my pride.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi?” sputter Dierdre. “That’s all you have to say after we caught you being...seen toby that animal on the conference room table?”

“That feeling your experiencing? It’s called envy.”

They gasp in unison.

“We came back here with coffee because we felt bad for you,” says my boss. “Instead, you were committing a firing offense.”

“First of all, you’re the one who made me stay late in the first place,” I calmly point out. “And second, good luck finding someone to come up with a half-decent presentation for Friday this late in the game. Mine is good. And it will land. You might want to consider that.” I transfer my attention to Dierdre. “If you call my boyfriend an animal one more time, you meddling troll, I will tell our boss you applied for her position next quarter.” I gasp quietly and cover my mouth. “Oops. Good night, ladies. See you in the morning.”

I walk out with a smile and an extra spring in my step, hand in hand with my boyfriend who can't take his eyes off me as we walk down the windy street together, smiling over the promise of something new and lasting.

Something neither one of us expected.

Something right and true.

The love of a lifetime.

EPILOGUE

Theo

Five Years Later

My dickstill only gets hard when I'm with July.

Some people might see it as a curse or an affliction, but me, personally?

I fuckingloveit. It gets her hot—and I'm all for anything that does that. I'm in heat the moment I see her. My security job takes me on small trips occasionally, if the businessmen we're protecting need to travel. By the time I get home after a few days without my woman, I'm so stiff I'm stumbling like a drunk through the front door, shouting for that pussy. We've damn near worn a spot on the living room rug where I've torn into her after work trips.

Today is one of those days.

I've been gone for my longest trip yet. Five grueling days.

It's the only downside to being promoted to head of security within the thriving company. I need to be present to survey event venues before high-profile guests arrive. Our clients are paying a premium and they want a supervisor running the show. That's me. When I returned to the States, before I met July, I never could have imagined I'd have a lucrative career. One that is such an easy fit for me. Maybe I would have gone into the darkness and never come out, if it wasn't for my wife.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:22 am

In the back of the cab I took from the airport, I rub my chest. Something I found out over time is that, in addition to my physical demands for July—and July only—my heart starts to hurt the longer I'm away from her and the kids. Right now, it feels ruptured.

Judging I'm about five minutes from the house we bought in the Chicago suburbs, I take out my phone and open the app that allows me to see a live camera feed to various rooms of my house. I installed the system myself, because I wasn't about to leave my family for days on end without being able to get eyes on them. Know they're safe.

As I've done frequently, I check the feed for our bedroom, sitting up straighter when I see my wife laying on the bed in nothing but pink thong panties. She's on her stomach, knees bent, feet elevated behind her, leafing through a magazine. As I watch, she picks up the magazine and rolls over onto her back, giving me a look at the tits I've been craving like oxygen for five days. Almost as much as her daily spanking.

I realize I'm beginning to breathe hard when the driver turns his head slightly, casting me a quick glance over his shoulder.

There's no calming me down, though. Not when she's almost in front of me.

I'm an obsessed husband with balls that only empty for my wife.

It's hard to be casual.

Therapy has been incredible for my PTSD and the nightmares that plagued me. They are few and far between and hopefully someday, they'll be gone completely. I no longer fall asleep worried I'll manhandle July while in the haze of a battlefield nightmare, my unconscious mind unable to temper my strength. God knows I'm rough enough with her in our everyday sex life. Here's the thing, though. She requests it rough.

Begs for it in that husky whine of hers that is probably responsible for us having a second child so soon after the first. When she whines for something, I give it. Case in point, we have two sons now. Dylan and Hunter. Dylan, the youngest, is quiet and likes to nap with his arms thrown out, like he's flying. Hunter never goes anywhere without a soccer ball. They're miracles, our boys. And God, they love their mother. She loves them fiercely, too, and hates leaving for work every morning. There have been times over the last five years where she considered leaving her position as head of design at Donner Advertising, but she still needs that creative outlet. She's damn good at what she does, too. My pride knows no bounds when it comes to July.

Neither does my lust.

Christ, I might come in my pants before I make it to the bedroom where she's currently stretched out on top of the comforter, humming to herself. As I watch, she slowly drags the thong down her hips and thighs, twirling them around her finger before flinging them across the room.

She knows I'm watching her.

That's the only explanation.

Thank God the kids are at daycare. If they weren't, I'd have to lock us in the en suite bathroom, cover her mouth and bang her on the sink, the way I've done countless times since the boys were born. My drive to get my come inside my wife is a part of

me that only balloons over time. It's a necessity. She's a necessity.

One I'm desperate for right now.

By the time the cab pulls up in front of the house, my hands are shaking so bad, I can barely run my credit card through the reader. The numbers are blurring in front of my eyes. My cock knows my wife is close and it's beginning to stiffen for the first time in five days. Rapidly. I make a guttural sound into my wrist while climbing out of the cab, ignoring a call of hello from my neighbor, retrieve my duffel from the trunk and clamber toward the big Victorian we've been fixing up, room by room. It would have been complete, except I get uncontrollably horny watching her do anything.

"July," I bark as soon as I'm inside the door.

All the shades are drawn on the windows.

Music throbs from the speakers.

I drop my bag, barely able to walk, my clothes suddenly far too tight.

"July," I choke out, wrestling with my zipper.

When she sways naked into the room, even in my state of intense arousal, I take a moment to marvel over how confident she's become. How self-assured and seductive. What a beautiful thing to bear witness to this woman thriving and know we belong to each other.

"Baby, please," I say, my words nearly sucked up by the music.

"I know, Daddy," she murmurs against my lips, her hand sliding deftly down the front of my pants to massage me in a fist, my groan echoing through the entryway

and living room. “I missed you, too.”

“Too long. It was too long without you.”

“I know how you feel.” Our mouths find one another, opening at first touch, tongues meeting in a fleeting lick. “You’re alone in the house with your little girl.” She blinks up at me with innocence that gets my blood pumping even hotter, because it means she’s in the mood to play. “I’m walking around naked, even though you’ve told me to wear clothes so many times. What are you going to do about it?”

It takes me a few beats to respond, because I’m so focused on not blowing a load in my pants, but Jesus, she knows how to mold me in that hand. “You never do what you’re told, do you?” I snag her wrist and hold it with just enough pressure that excitement sparks in her eyes. “I think it’s time you had your little princess mouth fucked. Maybe once you’ve had your throat used, you’ll remember to put on underpants before parading through the house.”

“Just underpants, Daddy? No shorts or top?” she whispers, leaning in to work her tongue into my mouth, keeping it shallow enough to make me crazy, my breath puffing in and out of my nostrils like a bull before a fight. “Maybe you like peeking.”

“Go lay on the couch,” I growl.

My pulse is slamming in my temples as I watch her tight ass strut to the living room couch and lay on her back, one leg cocked sassily. Back arched to display her prize tits.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 9:22 am

My wife is a menace and a revelation. She's probably dreaming up ways to make me hot that haven't been invented yet. Right now, though, I'm balanced on a razor's edge of pain, my dick cradled in one hand as I follow her to the couch, my knees planting near her elbows, my body pitching forward and catching myself on the arm of the furniture, jamming my long cock right between those swollen lips.

"Suck for forgiveness," I rasp, my head falling back, lost to the bliss of her heated mouth. "It's about time you learned the taste of my sperm."

A shy blink. "I've wanted to know for so long, Daddy."

"Oh Lord."

We remain locked in our forbidden game, her fingers rubbing in the valley of her slippery pussy while I plow her mouth, eventually giving her five days of frustration, my shouts of relief loud enough to strain my vocal cords. She accepts my come with her throat while her own orgasm crests, her eyes going unfocused, her throat vibrating around me and extending my pleasure, as if it were necessary.

"July," I pant, falling onto her, gathering close my life's treasure and laying kisses on every inch of her skin I can reach. "July, I missed you so much. I could barely focus."

"You have to focus," she whispers, kissing my jaw, my mouth. "So you can come back to me every single time."

I look her in the eye, giving her the weight of my love and accepting hers in return. "Nothing in this world could keep me from you."

Her eyes take on a sheen. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby.”

THE END