



Pushed Through The Dark

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Description: She caught my eye from a distance... I'm no Prince Charming. I'm a darkness, a force, a man who doesn't take orders. I don't fear anyone. And love, well that only makes you weak. There's no room for weakness in my world. But when I spot her on the stage at the auction, alone, scared, dressed in tattered silk with bare feet, I know I have to have her. The dark desires that burn in my gut forced me to do the unthinkable. No price was too high to get what I want. She's mine now, I own her. Bought and paid for, there's nothing she can do. I don't care how much she begs, I'll never let her go.

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Prologue

Aubrey

I once thought that the world had a plan for all of us, that a divine entity, one greater than any single person could wrap their mind around, stood above us and made things happen.

But that isn't possible, it isn't how this thing we call life actually works.

Because I'm here, right here, in this place that knows only how to take and never give. In a world that never shares, only holding for themselves. In a hell that has sprouted from the earth around me, and taken claim where it isn't welcome.

My father once said that the world is a flower, constantly blooming, shedding its petals to make room for new ones. He used to tell me that we're all given one petal, one petal to call our own, to do what we want with.

'This petal is your only shot, Aubrey, that's it. You don't get another one, so make your petal shine.' His words sat in my heart, making each beat painful.

Nothing is shining for me now, and it won't shine ever again. All I'll ever be is a single tear on the petal I once called life.

I'm slowly crumbling, falling away piece by piece like brittle porcelain. Fading, that's what I'm doing. My heart is crying and my brain's a heaping pile of fucked up.

And as I fall, as I get torn to bits and thrown aside like I mean nothing, I wait for the savior who isn't coming.

A dream isn't always just a dream, it's a nightmare, it's a soul with mass and weight and shape.

We all dream. . . Even when we don't want to.

And there's nothing you can do to stop it.

So what do you do when that dream is your reality?

* * * *

"Where are we going?" I asked, folding down the visor and running my fingers around the thin edge of my lips, wiping away any lipstick that was out of place.

"It's a surprise."

The way he said it. . . Fuck I should have known right then and there that something wasn't right. But I didn't hear it, the soft waiver in his voice, the richness that should have screamed for me to pay more attention. The glint in his eyes. Sinister. Cold.

I ignored it all. Every sign. Every instinct. It was a meek silhouette in the darkness.

Instead, my stomach tumbled with excitement, and my heart fluttered like the quick wings of a hummingbird.

I was blinded, infatuated by a man, and unable to see the motives he held in his pocket.

"A surprise?" Keeping my eyes on the mirror, I fluffed and fixed my hair, making sure it was perfect. "This is new, you're not one for surprises."

"What?" Giving me a sly eye, he smirked. "I'm not allowed to surprise you with something special?"

Flipping the visor back up, I ran my hands down over my lap, straightening the creases in my skirt. I hated wrinkles, they drove me crazy.

"I've known you for years, and you're a man who likes consistency. You only get your coffee from one cafe, and you freak if it doesn't have two sugars, and non-dairy creamer. I know you get up every Thursday to buy the paper from the corner store, and you have to have the very bottom copy because you think less people touched it. Even your lunches revolve around what day of the week it is."

"What's your point?"

"My point, Napal, is that you're a man who doesn't change, and thrives on routine."

"You're right, but here's the thing—you've known me as your boss for years, not as a boyfriend. Boyfriend Napal is different, he gives surprises and is unpredictable. I'm sorry, Aubrey, but you don't know me as well as you think you do."

"I've spent the last two years as your secretary, practically throwing myself at you almost every day. I think I know you better than you're giving me credit for." Shifting in my seat, I smirked. "I've watched you from a distance, and it wasn't until a few days ago that you finally showed any interest. What changed, what made you finally see me as more than just a filing cabinet for your paperwork? What made you see me?"

It took so long to get this man to notice me, and I know I should be over the moon

about it, I just couldn't help but think, 'Why now?' 'What had changed?

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Shrugging his shoulder, his hand tightened around the wheel as he pulled down a dark road. "I guess I just opened my eyes."

"Well, it took you long enough." Giggling, I looked out the window. "Where are we anyway? Is there a secret restaurant up here or something?"

The sprawling darkness was filled with shadows of mountains and thick trees. There was no sign of life. We hadn't even passed another car for miles.

"It's something like that."

I felt giddy, excited that the man I had a major crush on for what seemed like eternity had finally noticed me. The short skirts, the low cut tops, the clear as day cleavage, and fluttering lashes hadn't been for anything.

So what if it took two years to get to this point. Napal was a businessman, he had a lot of shit going on, and I respected him as my boss.

Even though I fantasized about him laying me over his desk every morning, and how I imagined him coming up and pulling me into his arms, kissing me with a fierce passion.

I would purposely bend over at the filing cabinet, knowing he could see my panties and wishing he would just come and take me, make me his, run his fingers through my hair, and tear my head back.

Except, he never did, I wasn't even sure he had even looked up. Until now.

Through the thick trees, there was a flicker of light coming from a building in the distance. The road curved and twisted like a snake, the nearest town a flicker of light down in the valley below.

It was desolate, a no-man's land. And still, I wasn't worried, I was excited, on the verge of giddy laughter thinking that he had planned some fancy romantic date for us.

Turning up a long driveway, the dirt path opened up to a huge clearing. The building at the end was giant, with tall pillars and marble steps. As he parked the car, I stayed seated, just mesmerized by the grand design.

I had lived in Italy my whole life, and never had I seen something so beautiful, tucked away where it was invisible to others. The stars twinkled in the sky behind the rooftop, the moon is casting shadows off the trees, making them explode over the dirt driveway. It was breathtaking.

I felt the cool night air as it seeped inside the car when Napal opened my door. Holding out his hand, I took it, and let him help me out.

"Wow, what is this place? It's gorgeous." My heels sunk into the soft ground as my eyes scanned the dimly lit windows. I heard the soft thump of music from inside and could see the curtains as they swayed back and forth.

"Let's just say it's an exclusive club for the elite." Placing my hand into the crook of his arm, he led me towards the door. "And we're the special guests for the evening."

"Ooh, fancy."

The door opened as we reached it, and a man welcomed us in. "Napal, so glad you made it." Shaking hands, the man turned to me with a smile on his face. "This must be Aubrey." Lifting my hand to his lips, he kissed the back of my palm. "You really

are as beautiful as Napal said."

"Thank you, and you are?" I asked, slipping my hand free.

Something felt off with that man. I couldn't place it, it was just a feeling. His eyes were dark, almost black, his smile was thin and looked forced. Even his voice rolled down my body, bristling my skin and making my hair stand on end.

Another sign I ignored. Pushing it away as if it served no purpose.

"Virgo," he said with a slick grin. "Come, let's have a drink." Virgo held out his arm, guiding us inside to a set of double doors.

Swallowing hard, I shied back, pressing myself closer to Napal. Virgo made me extremely uncomfortable. My skin chilled when he touched me, sending an icy shiver up my spine.

But whoever this man was, it really didn't matter. I was on a date with Napal, the man I had daydreamed about, the man I had imagined taking me in ways that would give any porno a run for their money.

Virgo pushed open the double doors, causing the music to triple in volume. There was a stage in the center of the room, lined with chairs, and square tables scattered around the outskirts.

The floor felt sticky as I walked, holding the sharp spike of my heel for a second before releasing my foot. Strobe lights flicked on and off above the stage, bouncing between blue and white.

"Napal," I said, squeezing his bicep tighter to get his attention. "What are we doing here? What is this place?"

"You'll see, no need to worry, trust me, it'll be worth it." He smiled down on me, but I didn't feel happiness in his eyes, or in the curve he was creating with his mouth. I felt emptiness, I felt lies.

Giving him a weak smile back, I thinned my lips and nodded with uncertainty about what we were doing. In my head, I kept hoping I'd see a single candle on one of the tables, the top covered in roses, and a waiter standing by with a bottle of wine.

But the further we moved through the room, the less and less I had faith in my wish. We followed Virgo through another door that led into a hallway. Neither one of them was saying a word, no light chatter or talk as if they were truly friends. The silence was maddening, causing my nerves to spark and my stomach to knot.

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Breaking the silence, I finally asked, "So, Virgo, what exactly is this place?"

"It's called the Canary, and it's my pride and joy, my baby, if you will." Chuckling, he braided his fingers behind his back as his feet clicked like music across the floor. There was an eerie skip to his step, and something sinister about his voice. "We're going just up here, it's nice and private, off-limits to most of my customers, except for the ones that I know personally."

Looking up the hall, I saw a man standing guard outside a door, his back was stiff and rigid. As we approached him, he opened the door and let us in. Napal and I followed Virgo inside, and the man closed the door behind us.

I heard a lock click, causing my lungs to inhale a sharp breath. Suddenly the urge to scream tripped inside my head and my muscles were tense and trembling, ready to engage and explode if I had to run.

Did he just lock us in?

"So, who wants a drink?" Virgo stepped to a small bar against the wall on my right, pulling three glasses out from underneath and grabbing a bottle of dark red liquid. "Please, take a seat." Turning his back to us, I could hear the liquor as he poured it into the glasses.

Napal led me to the table, pulling out a chair and pressing me into the seat with his hands. There was a darkness that came over the room, it weighed down my shoulders, making me want to slump forward and slink under the table.

I don't like this.

Virgo passed Napal a glass, then he handed one to me. The way he was staring at me made my nerves go wild. There was a look in his eyes, a blackness, an emptiness, like a shark zeroing in on its prey.

I took a sip instantly of the alcohol, trying to ease the nervous twitch I felt in my chest. The alcohol goes down easily, so I take a second, and then follow it with a third sip before cupping the glass in my hands.

The glass was cold and the liquor was warm, but it was only the coldness I felt. The iciness spread up my fingers, through my wrists, and continued up my arms. Tingles worked their way through my chest, and I could feel the sensation as it crawled over each rib and around my back.

I was frozen, unable to move or speak or breathe.

What's happening to me?

What's going on?

Virgo smiled, tipping his glass in my direction. "Feeling good?" he asked, his lips thinning as he glanced at Napal and then back at me. "Is it in your legs yet? Your feet? Your brain?"

He walked smoothly to my side, lifting a lock of my hair and pressing it to his nose. I tried so hard to lift my arm and swat him away, but I couldn't move. Trying to open my mouth, I wanted to scream, but nothing came out.

I couldn't speak, I couldn't flinch, I couldn't do a damn thing.

Napal was peering down at me, and I thought I saw a flicker of apology in his gaze. But he did nothing. He didn't say a word, he didn't stop this stranger from touching me in ways he had no right to. He just stood there like a statue, a coward, a fucking brainless monster.

I tried to scream again at the top of my lungs, I was trying so damn hard to push my voice out on shards of glass, slicing this creep where he stood. But I'm silent as a mouse, a voiceless puppet he could manipulate how he wanted to. It was like every muscle and tendon in my body was asleep, but my brain was wide awake.

Virgo's fingers stroked through my hair, brushing down softly. He moved the very tip of his fingers down the center of my back and across my shoulder blades. "You weren't lying, Napal, she's very pretty."

"Bene?" Napal asked, cocking a brow. "Siamo pari?"

'Well? Are we even?'

What the hell does he mean are we even? What the fuck is happening?

Virgo pat my head as I sat like a life-sized doll in a chair, his hands moving firmly, but with the tenderness you'd expect from a father to his daughter.

My stomach twisted as he looked me over, his eyes glossing with excitement. "Yeah, I think we're pretty close."

From the corner of my eye, I see Napal let out a heavy breath and his muscles relax. The weight leaves his body as Virgo seems happy with his gift. Napal smiled effortlessly, and it was then I realized he wasn't looking at me with apologetic eyes, he was looking at me with relief in his gaze.

Hope that I'd be good enough for this man.

Hope that I'd be a present Virgo would accept.

Hope that whatever had happened between these men would be forgiven now.

Virgo's smile thickened as he winked at me. "But pretty close isn't even, Napal."

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Napal barely caught the look in Virgo's eyes, but as a flicker of understanding registered on his face, there was nothing he could do. It was too late.

Everything around me happened in slow motion.

Without warning, there was a man suddenly standing behind Napal. The shiny barrel of a gun was against the back of Napal's head, and before he could even turn to look, the gun went off. The blast was loud, causing my ears to ring.

A flash exploded behind his ear, a surge of red bursts in my direction. Napal's body dropped, his head hitting the edge of the table against his temple as he went down hard, landing on the floor with a loud thud.

I could feel the warmth of his blood as it dripped down my face and arms. But I was trapped inside myself, unable to wipe the blood off. Fear crawled through my gut, clenching my heart, and gripping it tightly.

Holy shit! Holy shit! What the hell is going on?!?Voiceless screams destroyed my brain, staining my mind.

"Nowwe're even." Virgo's voice was light and playful as he let out a deep, evil chuckle. Lowering his face closer to mine, an evil smile seared his lips. His eyes moved around my face, brows softening. "Awe, look at you, he got you all dirty. What a dick." Tugging a yellow handkerchief from his back pocket, he licked the corner and wiped my face. "There, that's better." Jamming his hand under my arm, he tore me from my seat as if I weighed nothing and threw me over his shoulder. "Let's go get you settled in, there's a lot for you to learn my pet. A lot for you to learn."

And just like that my life was no longer my own.

Everything I thought I knew, everything I thought I was is all stripped away as if it wasn't mine to begin with.

Living was about to become a privilege, not a right.

Chapter One

Aubrey

Four Months Later

Darkness.

Pain.

Sadness.

That was all I knew now. And I hated it. Death was a friendlier thought than the life that had been forced in my face and stuffed down my throat.

Death was a dream worth having, and a vision worth walking towards. Happiness was a fading memory that seemed so far in the past it ceased to exist all together. It was a long tale my brain would try to focus on, but the images were nothing but smoke.

I knew I was dreaming right then as my hands reached out, attempting to grab hold of that happy image; the one of my father as he smiled down at me, holding out his hand for me to take. But I knew it wasn't real. There's that feeling in my dream, you know what I'm talking about. That feeling where you fully understand that you're inside

your own head and nothing around you is real.

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My father was right there, his smile a taunting game my brain liked to play on me. And yet I still reached for him, I still stretched my arm out hoping this time it would be real. But my fingers went right through his hand like he was a ghost.

The tips of my fingers slipped through his palm as he suddenly began to vanish like dust getting blown in the wind.

His face dissipated like pouring sand as he dissolved in front of me. I tried to grab pieces of him, frantically my hands scooped the air, and I was screaming for him to come back.

Out of nowhere, the darkness in my head was disturbed, causing my eyes to pop open as the air around me was suddenly musty and stale, and I couldn't seem to find the light.

From a dead sleep, I woke up to someone pulling a thick bag over my head. Hands were in my hair, ripping my head up off the pillow as a sack was quickly slipped over my face and tied tightly around my neck.

What the hell is going on?! What's happening?!

The air was stripped from my lungs as I tried to take in a deep breath, but the string became snugger with that inhale, strangling my throat and refusing to let the oxygen in.

"No," I attempted to scream at the top of my lungs, only my voice is quiet and raspy, with a hint of sound. Throwing my hands wildly, I struck blindly at nothing and

everything all at once. "No! Stop!" The scream was soft, but it was there, delicate and weak, finding just enough volume to be heard.

A man let out a chuckle as his fingers dug into the back of the sack and held my head still. "Fighting will only make this worse, we both know that." He yanked my head so I'm looking up, but I couldn't see his face. "But, I can't lie, I do love it when you fight." Letting out a hot breath across the top of the sack, he kissed my forehead.

I knew who it was instantly, I knew which of Virgo's goons had been sent to steal me away in the dead of night. His laugh was unforgettable, his voice one of the many scars on my brain.

Blue; a bad man, a man almost as bad as Virgo—almost. Blue didn't care what orders he was given, not once did I ever see regret in his eyes.

That's how you knew if someone was good or bad, just look into their eyes. There were only a couple of guys here that I knew didn't want to do some of the things they were told to, but their own fear drove them to listen.

And I allowed myself to understand that fear they felt. I watched Virgo take the life of another man without flinching, fear was a very real thing in his presence.

Then there were the men who enjoyed what they did. The ones who had no remorse, the ones who smirked as they handed down a punishment, and took a piece of you that wasn't theirs to have.

Blue had taken from me, he took from others, and he enjoyed every second of it.

Swinging over my head, I curved my fingers with the hopes that I'd at least scratch the fucker on his face. My nails are longer than they should be, dirt-caked up underneath. I knew I couldn't do the damage I wanted to, I couldn't even see a

fucking thing, but maybe I'd get lucky and scratch him deep enough to cause an infection.

An infection that turns into an illness, and an illness that eventually kills him in his sleep. It's happened before, people have died from simple infections that weren't cleaned right. Maybe, just maybe, it'd be my face he remembered as he slowly died from sepsis.

"Rah!" I called out, raking my fingers in the air.

Blue's hands swiftly wrapped my waist, lifting me and throwing me over his shoulder, dodging my feeble attempt altogether. Slamming my fists against his back, I used every piece of strength I had.

That's another thing Virgo took from you here; your strength. He fed you just enough food and gave you just enough water to keep you alive, but not enough to give you strength. My muscles were thin and brittle, my hair was dry and frizzy, my skin was pale and dull. I had even started to notice how my cheeks were going concave and my ribs were starting to show.

Virgo stripped you of any power, because you weren't allowed to have it, not here, not in this hell—his hell.

"Enough." The man's voice came out low and firm as he dug his fingers into my hips. "Hit me again and I'll fucking kill you."

"You're not allowed to make that decision." Gritting my teeth, I snarled, "I know that much."

"Unless I have permission." Blue laughed, his laugh almost giddy and playful. "Do you think I have permission, Aubrey?" He started moving forward, causing my body

to shift and bobble on his shoulder.

"What's going on, Blue? Where are you taking me?" Twisting my head, I tried lifting it and looking down where a thin stream of light was creeping up from under my hood. I couldn't see shit.

He stayed silent, stomping down the hall towards the stairs. My heart was racing and all I could imagine was this man dropping me into the solitude of the ditch. I hated the ditch. It was a horrible, wretched place. You were alone in the dark, alone with your thoughts, alone with your pain, alone until Virgo thought you had served your time.

This isn't right. I've never been brought to the ditch like this.

It wasn't making sense to me, I had never been blindfolded and torn from my bed during the dead of night to get thrown into the ditch for no reason.

This was something different. Something I wasn't ready for, something I would never be ready for, and I wasn't going to have a choice in any of it.

Virgo took my voice, my power, my free will, he took it all the second my body became a gift for a debt.

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Most nights I would cry myself to sleep. I was sad Napal had used me to repay his debt, sad that he had lost his life and I had to watch, sad that I would never be the same person again.

The Aubrey I remembered was gone, replaced by a woman I didn't recognize, and a girl who would never find her way home. When I looked in the mirror, my eyes were different. There was no more life, no spark, there was nothing but hatred in my empty stare.

Virgo took it all from me, he skinned me like a freshly killed deer, slowly hanging me out to dry. I was helpless, a victim still being abused, a victim still trapped in the hands of a villain.

I dangled in shock, trying to decipher what Blue had been sent to do, what Virgo had decided he wanted from me, what the next tear in my life here would consist of.

Am I just being moved?

Am I going to be punished for yelling when they came for Berlin?

Is he going to kill me?

The thought of dying didn't scare me. You have nothing to fear when you have nothing to lose. The idea of death actually lightened my heart, giving me a sense of relief, an ending to this horrible nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Shut up."

"I said where are you taking me!?" My voice boomed as I felt myself lose control. My arms slapped and scratched at his body, at every piece of open flesh I could find. He couldn't hide from me like this, I knew where his body and face were, so I aimed for his eyes.

If I couldn't see, neither could he.

"Let me go! Fuck you, let me go!"

Swap

Swap

Over and over I tried to scar and maim the asshole carrying me. I wanted to give him scars he could see like the ones I felt every second of every day. The scars I couldn't erase, the ones that made it hurt to open my eyes in the morning, and close them at night. The scars that left me with nightmares.

It was useless, he moved like he was carrying a simple bag of flour. I never connected with his face, no matter how much I wriggled and swung my arms, Blue dodged me easily.

"You're going to tire yourself out doing that. I'd be careful, you'll have nothing left for later."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You'll find out soon enough." He walked us down the stairs and through the dance room.

Even without my eyes, I knew where we were. The air reeked of stale sex and old cum, and I could hear the bottom of his feet as they peeled off the sticky ground.

Shoving open the double doors in the back, Blue kept going down the hall. The scent of sex slowly slipped away, replaced by brick and the musty odor of the basement. It was hard not to think he was taking me to the ditch, and this sack over my face was just a new, sick way for Virgo to mind fuck me.

Then Blue took a sharp left, his feet clicking over the tiles, turning down another hall, and another set of steps. We were in an area I hadn't seen before, causing my anxiety to push my stomach into my throat.

Muffled voices echoed from someplace not far away. There were so many voices, so much deep laughter and chatter. I could sense the darkness in those muffled tones as the voices moved between raging layers and deep tragedy like Beethoven's Pathétique Sonata.

Men growled low, they snarled, they rumbled with more laughter and the high pitch sound of women moaning.

With one quick motion, Blue tore me off his shoulder and dropped me to the floor. "Here, put this on."

Throwing something at me, I was hit with a silky weight, the material cool and soft. "What is this?" I asked, lifting it and feeling it with my fingers.

"Just put it on."

"For wh—"

Cutting me off, Blue's fingers were on the hood instantly, yanking my head back

hard. "Either you put it on yourself, or I'll fucking do it for you. Understand?"

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Swallowing hard, I nodded lightly. "Can you just fix it so it's in the right direction?" Blue growled annoyed as I felt him flip it over and spread the bottom out over my legs. "Is this a dress?" Gently touching the end in my lap, I ran my hands up looking for some type of strap.

"Yes, it's a dress, now put it on."

Frowning to myself, I didn't say a word. There was no point, anything I said he'd either ignore or hurt me for saying. So I stayed quiet, running my hands over the dress, feeling for the zipper, and tracing the lacy front, following a thick slit up one side.

"Fuck, Aubrey, I don't have all fucking day. Virgo is waiting, fucking move already."

Holding the dress up, I tipped my head in the direction of his voice. "Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around."

"This isn't a fucking movie set, and you're not a damn movie star. Just get dressed."

"Turn around," I demanded. "I'll put it on, but not with you looking."

"Either you put the fucking dress on right now, or I'll fucking do it for you," he said, the sound of his feet scuffing closer. "You have one minute, put the damn dress on. Last chance."

"Fine," I said. Pushing up onto my feet, I spun away from him and slipped out of my clothes. Doing my best, I pulled the dress over my head. Shimmying my hips, I tugged it down, feeling the fabric as it swooshed at the bottom and tickled the top of my feet.

I could feel him watching me. His breathing was heavy, the sound of him licking his lips was thunder in the room. It was disgusting.

"Alright," I said, holding the back shut as I tried to find the zipper or string, or whatever the hell was there to close it up.

"The belle of the ball," Blue said, his voice cutting through me as I felt him hovering over me. His breath heated the top of the sack again, the weight of his shadow enough to push my shoulders down.

I hadn't heard him step closer, and that scared me. He had been so quiet, so light. Rough fingers spun me around, throwing me off balance.

"We can't let you go out there like this, you'll look like a whore." His mouth pressed against the outside of the coarse hood, his whisper was dark and sinister. "We don't sell whores, we sell women."

What? Sell me?

I stood silent as he zipped up the back of the dress, fluffed my cleavage so it billowed out of the top, and adjusted the bottom so it was straight. Blue stroked his hands up and down the outside of my arms, his touch a maddening knife that was cutting my flesh.

"There, that's better." Taking me by the wrist, he led me away, barefoot, and confused.

My mind was trying to wrap itself around what was happening. I wanted to understand, I desperately wanted to understand, but something was stopping me.

Maybe I was trying to protect myself, maybe I had already been through so much that I just couldn't handle this too. Whatever it was, time slowed down and the world around me became foreign.

The floor was so cold under my feet to the point the tips of my toes were going numb. The voices and laughing I had heard before began to grow louder and more clear.

Men were talking about cars, they were talking about money and business deals. I could hear all the voices, the different depths of the men's tones, the way the different pitches mixed.

And I feared every last one of them.

Running my hands gently across the top of my shoulder, I barely touched one of the long, thin scars. The scars on my body were a constant reminder of what it meant to be owned by one of these men.

"Alright, alright, settle down, settle down," a man's voice rained down on me, causing my body to jerk in surprise. "We've got another special one for you, and this one is special."

"You got that right." Blue chuckled as he spoke, and the men between us let out a laugh to match his.

I still couldn't see anything, everything was dark, the bag over my head was stuffy and hot, and sweat was beading up across my forehead. Through a thin opening at the bottom, I could just see the top of my feet and random shadows.

Thump

My foot slammed into something hard, making me stop short. Through the sack, I could see the shape of a step as Blue yanked my wrist to keep me moving. Slowly, I climbed the steps, counting four until the ground flattened again. Tugging me in, Blue pressed me against his ribs, his arm holding me firmly in place.

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I could smell his cologne, the scent turned my stomach, making me want to throw up. It was the first thing I smelled after waking up in my room that first night, and it has stayed with me ever since. The temptation to run zipped through my brain, making my heart speed up and my toes tingle with the muscle memory of movement.

I knew I couldn't. Even if I wanted to, there was nowhere for me to go. The room sounded like it was filled with people, I wouldn't make it two feet before someone else grabbed me and handed me back to Blue.

Don't do anything stupid, Aubrey.

Today isn't the day you die.

I could hear the small voice inside me, the one that was trying to keep me alive. Running would equal death, simple as that. Today didn't have to be that day.

The man's voice crackled in my ear, causing my head to shift towards the ceiling. It sounded like his voice was coming from a speaker, but it was hard to tell where he was in the room.

"Gentlemen, why don't you get your wallets ready and take a look at Starla."

The name Virgo gave me came out of the man's mouth as Blue tore the sack off my head. The light was blinding, causing me to blink hard and lift my hand to block my eyes.

As the room came into focus, all I could see were faces. So many faces that I couldn't

even count them all.

And they were all staring at me like I was a piece of art, an object strung up for them to admire, for them to stake a claim on.

Twisting my head, I stood in shock, unable to really grasp the gravity of the situation.

What is this? What the hell is going on?

Blue used his rough fingers to push the hair over my shoulder and out of my face. Lowering his mouth to my ear, he spoke softly. "Get ready pet, every man in this room wants to fuck you until they either get bored, or their dick falls off." His chuckle was deep and full, making my stomach curl in on itself.

No! No!

Like a scared puppy, my eyes darted around the room, hanging on individual faces for a single breath, then moving to the next. Tears were building behind my eyes and my lip had started to tremble as I watched men lick their lips eagerly, and their eyes expand in excitement.

Dropping my head into my chest, I shut my eyes. I couldn't look anymore. I didn't want to look anymore. Every face made me sick, every smile made me wince.

Blue's fingers slid over the back of my neck, tangling into the roots of my hair and snapping my head up. Holding my head straight, I couldn't look at anything but the pack of wolves ready to tear me to pieces.

"Can I get ten? Ten, I see ten, can I get twenty? I see twenty, can I get thirty?"

The announcer rattled off numbers into a microphone as his voice crashed out of the

speakers behind my head, and his finger pointed around the room.

Every number he said stabbed my skull and lit my skin on fire. The numbers were prices, money the bidding men were willing to pay for me.

I was stunned, standing in shock. Men in suits, men of different ages, men with paddles and numbers, and girls sitting at their feet. There were men petting women like animals as they laid their heads in their laps. And men getting head as they watched another woman ride her master.

It was like nothing I had ever seen before. I had heard about it though, about the auction, about the way men dropped thousands just to have one of Virgo's girls to call their own.

I just never expected to see it with my own eyes—or become one of those girls.

Blue spoke into my ear again, his voice low, and his breath rancid. "You're fetching a pretty penny, little girl, Virgo will be pleased."

The announcer kept calling numbers as pops of color exploded around the room. My eyes flicked in different directions, trying to follow the paddles, but they were popping up all over, the red and yellow bursts were exploding like tiny fireflies in the darkness.

"SOLD!" his yell cut through the air and slammed into my chest.

Sold. . . I'm sold. . .

Looking up, Blue sneered as our eyes connected. "What a pretty word for Virgo—sold." His smile spread easily, moving across his face like a snake on water. It was calculated, it was smooth, it was wicked and cruel. That smile was pure evil.

And I reacted.

"I'm not for sale!" With a closed fist I punched him in the mouth. I felt his teeth behind his lips and the warmth of blood as it instantly spilled onto my skin. "Fuck you! Fuck you and your asshole boss!"

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The words came out of my mouth, and I couldn't stop it. Something had taken over inside me. It was raw. It was primal. It was hidden someplace deep in my gut.

Blue glared at me, wiping the blood off his lip with his thumb. Licking his finger clean, he smirked, his teeth bright red and lip split down the middle. "Tsk, ts, ts, you just made a big mistake, Sweetheart."

Using the back of his palm, he smacked me hard, forcing my head to snap in the other direction. My feet twisted around each other, and I lost my balance, dropping to my hands and knees on the stage.

In my head, I was wishing that someone would come to my rescue. That maybe there was a good man in the audience who wouldn't sit by and let this asshole lay his hands on me.

But wishes and prayers can't penetrate these walls.

"How dare you?" Lowering his face to mine, he spits on my cheek. "How dare you lay your hands on me?" His words were quiet, coming out through clenched teeth. Slamming his hands into my hair, he started to drag me off the stage. "How dare you embarrass me, and embarrass Virgo like this!"

I tried to kick and scream, I tried to scratch his hand with my nails and force him to let me go. But it was like he didn't feel me at all. I was a mosquito on the flesh of a rhino.

No matter how much I scratched or clawed, no matter how deep it felt like I was

going, Blue didn't release one ounce of his grip. It only made him hold me tighter.

My heels scraped the steps as my body bounced off each one. It felt like my scalp was on fire as he dragged me like a heavy bag to the back of the stage.

"Let me go! Fucking let me go!" Kicking my legs wildly, I bucked my body up and down. "You can't do this!"

"Shut the fuck up," Blue growled. Releasing his hand from my hair, he quickly moved it to my throat. "Shut the fuck up or I'll kill you right here." The cool metal of a knife was pressed against my neck, the sharp edge slicing the first few layers of skin instantly.

Pursing my lips, I took long slow breaths in through my nose. Every inhale forced the knife to tear a little deeper into my skin, not enough to cause too much damage, but enough to remind me it was real steel.

Swallowing hard, I licked my lips. "Then why haven't you yet? That's the second time you threatened to kill me, so fucking kill me."

"Don't test me, whore."

"You can't kill me." Veering my stare, I arched a brow. I wanted to challenge him. I could feel it as it swelled in my chest, making the words come out of my mouth like a fuse ready to be lit. All I had to do was light it.

Blue grunted, his lips curling up into a snarl. Releasing a sound from the back of his throat, he threw his arm out across my shoulder, slicing the strap on my dress.

Reaching up, I grabbed the strap and held the top so it didn't fall forward, exposing my chest. Peering up at him, I did my best to not show any fear. I didn't want him to

think he was getting to me, I didn't want him to have that power.

He already had it for far too long, enough was enough.

A warm sensation started to flow over my fingers, running down the back of my palm. Glancing at my shoulder, I realized that he had actually cut me. There was a gash running from my collarbone to the curved edge of my shoulder. Blood was seeping from the wound, and a throbbing sensation was starting to pulse deep in the tissue.

"Your throat is next if you say one more fucking word, understand?" Holding the knife eye level, he aimed the pointy end at my face. "One more fucking word."

The blood was pooling in the little dips of my knuckles as I tried to apply pressure and close the cut. It moved down my wrist as the small pools grew and the bump of my knuckle couldn't hold it back anymore.

"Fuck you." Tipping my head, I gave him full access to my throat. "I don't give a shit anymore. Go on, do it, just get it over with. Fucking kill me."

Let him kill me, let him end this fucking misery.

"Are you done?" a deep, thick voice asked, coming in from behind us. "You've fucked with her long enough, but she's certainly not yours to kill." His tone dropped lower, his words firm and commanding.

I could feel him all over me, as if his shadow was climbing around my body, weighing me down. The man moved to my side, his steps flowing like water over rocks. He was quiet and smooth, each one seemed methodical and planned out.

From the corner of my eyes, I could see his shiny black shoes, the laces tied uptight,

not a smudge of dirt or scuff in the leather. Moving my gaze up, his pants were just as black as his shoes, his button-up, his blazer, his tie, all of it dark as a starless night.

"Who the fuck are you?" Blue asked, standing up straight. He puffed his chest out, hanging his arms at his sides, muscles tensed and ready to fight.

"That's the wrong question to ask me." Braiding his fingers behind his back, he took a step in towards Blue. "You should know who I am. I made a very large purchase tonight." The man glanced down at me, and his eyes tearing the air right out of my lungs. It felt like he reached inside my chest and squeezed them until they were empty. "And you're currently vandalizing my property."

His property?

He's the man who bought me. . .

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Blue stroked his jaw, spinning the blade in his hand. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"Do I look like a man who lies?" Furrowing his brows, he held his arms out, wriggling his fingers softly. "I don't like when people doubt me, and I don't like when people tell me I'm lying."

"Blue," Virgo's voice crashed through my brain. I wanted to look up at him, but instead, my body shut down, the reflexes he poisoned my mind with kicked in, causing my eyes to drop to the floor. "You're not being rude to one of our guests, are you?" His fingertips softly started to touch my hair, brushing through it gently. "He bought her fair and square. Paid a pretty penny for this little vixen too."

"No, Virgo, I was just getting his new toy ready for him." Tucking the knife away, Blue held out his hands as if to show he wasn't a threat, and he was standing down.

"Koa," Virgo said smiling. I could hear it in his voice, his lips lifting, and pulling back. His hand moved down my head and slipped under my arm. Lifting me to my feet, he held me tightly in his grip. "This one might not be right for you. She's still young, hasn't had as much training as some of the other girls here. We can arrange someone else if you'd like, someone more experienced, more willing."

Taking the chance to peek, I flicked my eyes up. Koa chuckled as he crossed his arms over his chest. His muscles rolled like boulders under the surface, stretching the material of his shirt. The buttons on his shirt pulled taut, threatening to shoot off like tiny bottle caps.

"Virgo, I know what I want." His gaze shifted to mine, so I looked away immediately. "And I gladly paid for it. Period."

A shiver ran down my spine as they talked about me as if I wasn't there like I was a car and this was a dealership. But this wasn't just a transfer of property, this was the sale of a human, the sale of a woman, the sale of me.

I knew this was one of the things that Virgo did, he sold women. But being that woman had an out of body feel to it. None of it felt real, I was watching it from outside myself, and for the first time, I saw what he had done to me.

The way my shoulders rolled submissively, the way I kept my head down and my hands in front of my waist. Nothing about the girl I was staring at was recognizable as me as Aubrey Moretti. A twenty-three-year-old woman, who came from a hard-working family, with an older sister, and a pet parrot named Squish.

That girl was gone, vanished, erased from the earth as if she never existed to begin with. What was left?

Just a shell of the woman I once was. No identity, no past, and definitely no future. Not anymore.

"Can I have what's mine now?" he asked, thinning his lips and tilting his head.

It took Virgo a moment to release me. His fingers unwound from my arm one at a time as he let out a heavy breath. I felt the air as it swept across my cheek, and his eyes as he glared at me.

Giving me a little shove forward, he waved his hand. "Here, she's yours." The man took my arm, tugging me close to his side. Virgo kept his eyes on me, the small red flame flickering in the background. "You know what I don't understand, Koa?"

"What's that?" His fingers tightened around my forearm as his voice came out cold.

"You've been here a dozen times. You sit in my bar, you drink my alcohol, you watch my girls. But you've never bought anyone, and yet today you do. Tell me, Koa, Why? Why today? Why her?"

"Isn't it obvious, Virgo? You finally had something I wanted." Koa started to pull on my arm as he walked towards the door.

Fear swept down my body, causing heaviness in my chest, making it hard to breathe. I didn't know this man, I knew nothing about him other than the fact that he knew Virgo, that he spent time in this place willingly.

I don't want to go with him.

Digging my heels into the floor, I pulled back. "No, I can't go! I won't go!"

For all I knew this guy was just as bad, or worse than the man who stole me violently. This feeling of being thrown into the unknown flooded my system, causing my heart to slam wildly and my body to get hot.

At least I knew what to expect here, I knew what Virgo wanted from me, I knew what my job was. I didn't like it, and I fought against it the best I could. But this man was foreign to me. And the fact that Virgo didn't challenge him, the way the man wasn't intimidated at all by Virgo, it just made me fear him even more.

Koa stopped and looked down at me, his mouth forming a slight smirk to one side. "We can do this the easy way, which is my way, or the hard way, which is your way. You decide."

Baring my teeth, I dropped back on my feet, trying to use my weight to break free.

All I could think about was running. I didn't think about what he was actually saying, I didn't think about how strong he actually was, or how tightly he had me in his grip.

"Fuck you!" screaming at the top of my lungs, I pierced his hand with my nails, trying to break his skin. "I'm not going with you!"

"Told you she's feisty," Virgo said with a chuckle. Snapping his fingers, he flicked his head over his shoulder. "Come, Blue, she's his problem now."

"No! No!" My voice crackled as it strained. I didn't know why, but the thought of Virgo leaving me with someone else scared the fuck out of me.

Why is he doing this?

"Don't go!" I called out to Virgo, begging him with my eyes to not do this. "Don't leave me with him! Virgo, please!"

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It should have felt strange to be calling to a man who had done nothing but hurt me. I had dreams about running away, about breaking out, about killing him so I could be free again. Four months of my life was nothing compared to some of the girls here, but any amount of time was still too much. Yet, I still called for him, I called to him for help.

Virgo shot me a look over his shoulder, his smile big and toothy. "Normally, I love hearing a woman beg for me. . ." Pausing, he stopped in the doorway as Blue held it open and adjusted his jacket before speaking again. "But you don't belong to me anymore."

He took pleasure knowing that I would choose the safety of what he gave me, no matter how terrible it was, no matter how ruthless he might be, to the danger of the unknown. He reveled in the fact that I would call his name in a time of need, instead of running into the arms of a stranger.

Koa's fingers squeezed down harder around my wrist as Virgo and Blue turned their backs on me, and walked out the door. Slowly, I twisted my head and looked up at him. His eyes sparkled with delight as he quickly swept me off my feet, and threw me over his shoulder.

"No! No!" Punching his back, I hit and slapped and kicked my legs.

He didn't care. Koa wrapped his arm firmly around my waist, and the other around my lower back.

"Your way it is."

Chapter Two

Aubrey

"Let me ask you something. . ."

Koa's voice softened as he massaged my neck for a brief moment. His fingers dug deep into the muscle, almost soothing. My eyes fluttered as if they wanted to close, my body relaxing to the foreign tenderness.

He isn't a kind man. He's a devil in disguise.

The tips of his fingers pinched my skin, jarring my nerves. Jerking away, he chuckled to himself. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he looked down at it. "How long have you been behind these walls?" he asked, tapping the screen of his phone.

We were standing in the front entrance, a place I hadn't seen since day one, an escape that had been kept well out of my reach. I could feel the adrenaline as it started to fill my veins like coffee percolating under the surface.

My legs wanted to run, my heart was speeding up, my lungs were starting to take in air rapidly. Every piece of my being was ready to go. This was what I had always hoped for; a chance to break away.

Take it, Aubrey! Take it!

The window by the front door teased me with earthy images; trees, the sky, the moon as it twinkled like a spotlight. Biting my lower lip, all I could think about was charging the door and running for the woods.

Shrugging my shoulder, I kept my eyes down. Virgo's rules flashed in my head like a

beacon, stealing my tongue as if he had cut it out. I'm actually surprised Virgo hadn't done that to all the girls anyway.

He couldn't. He enjoyed hearing you beg for mercy too much to deny him that privilege.

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"That's not an answer." His fingertips slipped down over my shoulders as he dug his thumbs into my shoulder blades. I felt his breath first as he exhaled across the side of my face. To my surprise, it wasn't rancid or vile. It was sweet like icing, causing the hair on my neck to stand up like a feather was tickling my skin.

It was a reaction I didn't want and never expected. I found myself leaning into him, my breathing slowing down to deep, long inhales. My lids fluttered, threatening to close again and enjoy this split second of euphoria.

Pressing his chest against my back, Koa rested his head in the crook of my neck as he held me close. My lips twitched, the muscle memory of a smile, a real smile was tingling at the edges.

Then he spoke again, and I was dropped right back into reality. The tingles instantly disappeared as my lids shot open, and my lips turned down into a heavy frown.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, his voice low and far too pleasant. "I know that you want to run. I know that your brain is trying to figure out what needs to happen; which way to go, where you'll hide, how far you could make it before I catch you. . . Am I right?" His lips brushed the outside of my ear, sending a cold shiver down my spine.

Glancing at the side of his face, I shook my head no.

I lied. I lied knowing what bad men do to girls who don't tell the truth.

I lied knowing Koa was one of those men, and I was one of those girls.

I lied because I didn't know what this man was capable of if he knew the truth. . .

How do grapple with that? How do you decide the right answer to give when you know pain will be the only response?

"You have a voice, use it." His finger swept across the underside of my jaw, softly tracing the curve of my cheek. "I already heard you scream, now I want to hear you speak."

Keeping my mouth shut, I let my eyes connect with his. But I wouldn't speak, not to a man who just bought me like meat from the butcher.

I might not have the power to keep him from hurting me. I might not have the power to stop him from claiming whatever piece of me he wanted to. But I had the power to keep him wondering what was going through my head, I had the power to not give him what he couldn't control.

He would never control my thoughts or my voice. Those were mine. Mine alone to have and to hold. He might own my body, but he'll never own what's inside.

"Fine, stay mute, we can make a game of it." Without warning, Koa wrapped a yellow handkerchief around my eyes, tying it snugly behind my head. "I love games," he said, whispering into my ear.

My heart jumped into my throat as all the light was stripped away, leaving me in pitch-black darkness. A sharp exhale purged my lips, snapping my back straight. Every nerve in my body ignited, sending a wave of heat from head to toe.

Sliding his hand down the center of my back, he grabbed my wrists and held them in one hand. Pulling down on my arms, my shoulders perked higher, my elbows locked up, and every muscle stretched to its limits. I was trapped like a mouse in the claws of

a cat.

Winching as a lightning bolt of pain shot down my arm from the cut Blue gave me, I bit my lip, refusing to let out the scream that bubbled in my throat.

Koa chuckled, a low, thick chuckle as he gave my wrists another hard tug. "I have a feeling this is going to be fun," he said as his large hand engulfed both my wrists like they were tiny twigs.

Nightmares are made of so many different things, but when your nightmare is actually your reality, there's no way to explain what that feels like.

You want to wake up and you can't. You want to grow wings and fly away, but all you have are arms and legs, and nothing to carry you up and away. You have no control.

You're left to the mercy of your nightmare, and its ability to be kind is like a bear being tender to a salmon.

"Walk," he demanded, giving me a little shove forward. "We have a plane to catch."

Cocking my head, I twisted it in the direction of his voice. My lips crinkled, wondering where he was taking me, and what his plan was. Even behind the blindfold, my eyes were open wide, filled with confusion.

I felt the air on my face as Koa gave me another little push and the doors opened to a wall-less world. There were no fences around me, no chains or locks were holding me in. But there was a wall of man still holding me hostage.

"There's a step," he said, gently cupping my elbow.

Slowly, I felt the stone slab with my foot. The icy cold stone sent goosebumps up my calves. Inhaling the fresh air, I felt myself drawing in more and more like I was dehydrated and the air was water.

My lungs filled, drinking it up. I could feel the oxygen as it slipped into my veins like a fucking drug, making me lighter and tingly. I wanted more, I needed more.

Koa walked me down a few more steps, then guided me into the grass out front of the Canary. "Does that feel good?" he asked.

You have no idea. The thought sweeps through my head, but my voice remains silent.

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I wiggled my toes in the dirt, letting the blades tickle between each one. The grass was damp, coated in dewdrops, but it felt incredible. The simplicity of grass under your feet was something most wouldn't really take the time to think about, but I finally appreciated those little moments.

The ones that were so normal, so free for anyone to do, that you don't ever think you'd miss them if they were gone. But you can't miss something until it's stripped from you, and you're left bare and naked with nothing to your name.

"I don't need you to tell me it does," he said as his fingers teased the blindfold. I felt him pluck the bow, tightening the knot. "Now run."

Did I hear him right? Did he really just tell me to run?

Tilting my head, I still wouldn't speak. This could all be some type of test, you just never knew with Virgo. I couldn't trust this man. I couldn't trust anyone in this place.

He's not serious, he's testing me.

Planting my feet in the dirt, I dug my toes in. This man was lying, he had to be. There was probably a man on the top of the building, ready to take me out with one well-placed shot. No one just walked away from this place. Not ever.

Picking up a thick lock of my hair, he twirled it around his finger until it was a tight cyclone against my scalp. Slowly, he let the curl unwind, and bounce off my shoulder.

"You're mine now, I bought you. You have to do as I say, and I said—run,"he demanded, lowering his face to mine, and growling the word into my ear.

Wriggling my toes, my knees bent and my arms lowered to my side ready to go, but still, I didn't move.

"Run!" he yelled into my ear, scaring my body into flight mode.

I ran.

I ran through the wet grass, sliding on mud and slick patches. I ran not knowing which direction the trees were, and what the hell this game was he was playing.

Lions love to chase their dinner.

A robust laugh exploded from his mouth as my feet pounded the ground and my heart pounded inside my chest.

"Run little minx, run!" His laugh echoed through the forest, making it sound like the trees were laughing with him.

Tearing the blindfold off, I threw it to the ground. Glancing back over my shoulder, Koa was standing there with his arms folded across his chest, and a huge grin on his face.

My heels sank deeper into the ground, legs slamming fiercely as I used every ounce of strength I had to move as fast as I could. The oxygen I had so badly craved and wanted more of was now burning like fire in my chest.

The woods were getting closer and closer, but his laugh still bellowed full and loud. I kept looking back over my shoulder, expecting him to be running after me. But Koa

hadn't moved. He was still holding the outside of his arms, his smile full and playful.

What the hell is this? What is he doing?

Hitting the treeline, I knew I couldn't stop, I needed to keep going. I had to get deeper, and further away to give myself any chance to hide. Taking one last look over my shoulder, Koa's eyes were squinting as he tried to see me between the trees.

Whoosh

Out of nowhere, I'm ripped off my feet. Someone was holding me from behind, lifting me high off the ground. I was dangling in the air, stunned and confused, with thick arms wrapped around my body.

No! It can't be! He's still back there, he couldn't have made it to me.

"Where do you think you're going?" a man's voice I didn't recognize asked as he started laughing. "Got her!" he called out loudly as he adjusted his arms tighter around my body.

My heart dropped into my stomach and tears started to bubble over my eyes.

I never had a chance to begin with. Koa wasn't giving me one.

I'm just his fucking toy.

Chapter Three

Aubrey

My ankles and feet were bound, and I was sitting on the floor of a limousine. Koa was sitting on one side of the limo, and the other man was sitting across from him. I was in between two monsters, tied up like a gunned down trophy.

"So, you finally bought one." The man took a long swig of his drink, cupping it in one hand, and setting the base in his palm. "Was she expensive? I heard his whores are pricey but worth it. They can go for hours without going dry." The man starts to chuckle, bouncing his brows, but Koa flashed him a look. Lifting his hands as if to show he meant nothing by it, he smirked. "But seriously, you got to let me know if it's worth it. Maybe you can get me one for my birthday."

"If you're so fucking curious, buy one yourself. You have the money."

"Koa, come on, I'm just curious, that's all. It's not a crime to wonder."

"Curiosity is what gets you in trouble most of the time, Knox."

"Didn't Mom always say my curiosity is what makes me special?" Sipping his drink, the ice clanked around as he smiled from behind the glass.

These two are brothers?

Koa tilted his head as he adjusted his sleeves, rolling them up to his elbows. "Yeah,

well, you've been walking on a thin wire for some time now, little brother, maybe being special isn't a good thing."

"Dick," Knox said, chuckling under his breath. "So, what happens now? Where we headed?"

"We're not heading anywhere. You're going home to work on the Flint metrics we talked about. Mr. Bolanger is expecting perfection, and that's what we're going to give him. So don't fuck it up."

"And what about you?"

"What I'm doing is none of your fucking business. Just focus on Flint, that's all you need to do right now."

"Whatever." Sinking into the seat, Knox, turned to look out the window.

Koa's eyes dropped to me, giving me a silent smile. "I'm sorry you have to hear us bickering like this. My brother forgets his manners sometimes, especially when he's all hopped up on fuck knows what."

"I didn't take shit, asshole."

"See," Koa said with a soft laugh. "He's normally not this big of a cock, he's usually a little cock, but I guess I'm the asshole."

"Yeah, you are the fucking asshole." Filling his glass with more alcohol, he downed it quickly. "Don't listen to him, he doesn't know what the fuck he's talking about." Using his knuckles, he struck the glass behind his head to get the attention of the driver. The window rolled down, and Knox spoke to the driver, keeping his eyes on his brother. "Pull over."

"Are you sure, Sir, the nearest town is still ten miles away?"

"I said pull over."

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"What? Are you all pissed off now? Did I offend you?"

"Pull this fucking car over."

"No, don't, he's not getting out—you're not getting out," Koa said, leaning forward and holding up his hand. "We're in the middle of fucking nowhere, in a country you don't know—you're not getting out here."

"Fuck you I'm not. Pull over and let me out now." Knox's voice was harsh and deep. The vein in the side of his neck started to pulse and throb as he rocked his jaw side to side.

It was easy to see these two had years of pent up jealousy and anger over shit from the past, and it didn't seem like either one was the type to back down. They both wanted control, they both wanted to be crowned king of the mountain, but only one could hold the key to the top.

From where I was sitting, Koa was that king.

"You're drunk, Knox, if you get out you'll end up lost or dead. You'll probably end up walking your dumb ass off a fucking cliff, or into the barrel of a gun because you can't keep your mouth shut."

As they argued back and forth, I took advantage of the distraction and tried to free my hands. They were so preoccupied with each other, that neither one was really paying any attention to me.

The rope around my wrists was tight, but I could feel the frayed ends. The thin fibers were pulling free as I tugged on them, and each one I removed caused the rope to loosen.

A plan was formulating in my head, and it was actually starting to seem like it might work. If I could get my hands loose and my feet free, I'd be able to hop out and take off before either one of them knew what happened. I could hide in the woods, easily tuck myself into a bush in the darkness and they'd never find me.

It was foolproof, it was plausible, it might be my only chance. The last opportunity I might have for a long time to get my freedom back.

The tires cracked and popped over the rocks as the limo slowed to a stop. Knox and Koa were still going at it, completely unaware that I was carefully slipping my feet out of the rope.

Knox started to climb to his feet and reach for the handle, but Koa put himself between that door and his brother.

"You're not going anywhere, just sit down and let's get to the airport. This isn't the place for you to be pulling this shit."

"Don't fucking tell me what to do. You're not my boss, we're partners, remember?" Knox attempted to shove him out of the way, but Koa didn't budge. "Fucking move, douchebag." Giving him another push, Koa held his arms up to block him.

"I'm not moving, and you're not getting out. Stop being a fucking pussy and sit your ass back down." Shoving his brother back, Koa's chest puffed up and his eyes turned to slits.

One shove turned into two, and then before I can blink again, they're wrestling, fueled

by testosterone and dickishness.

This is it! Go! Go!

Arms were moving, feet were digging into the limo floor, both men were tangled around each other, grunting and growling. What started as two brothers annoyed with each other, quickly escalated into two men battling.

And in the mix of it all, I slipped out of their way, grabbed the handle, and threw the door open. Jumping to my feet, I hit the ground hard, not even feeling the rocky terrain of the road on my bare feet.

Holding my arms up in front of my face, I darted into the woods beside the car and just ran.

"Go! Go!" Koa's voice barked from someplace behind me. "She went this way!"

Heavy feet vibrated the ground as both men quickly took off after me. I was hoping they wouldn't notice right away, I was praying that neither man would realize I was gone until I had more of a head start.

But their fight ended the second I opened the door. I had underestimated how preoccupied they were.

Glancing over my shoulder, I took a sharp left and hid behind a tree. Pressing my back against the stump, I tried to catch my breath. I couldn't see a damn thing. Rubbing my eyes, I strained to make out anything in the pitch-black cover of the forest at night.

Branches were cracking around me, leaves rustling beside me, but there was no way for me to tell what was causing it. Both men had gone silent, and I had this nervous

feeling come over me that I wasn't the first person they had ever hunted.

Peeking my head out from behind the tree, my eyes had adjusted slightly. I could make out shapes under the dimly lit sky, but I wasn't seeing any movement.

Twisting around, I turned to check the other side.

"Going somewhere, little minx?" Koa's thick hand was instantly around my throat, squeezing firmly. "You're so fucking lucky I found you, and not my brother. He would just kill you, I'm a little more lenient."

His fingers moved up my neck, curling around my face, and squeezing my cheeks. Flaring my nostrils, I took in long slow breaths. "You call this lucky?" I asked, balling my fists at my side.

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"She does have a voice," Koa said with a smile. "It's prettier than I thought. With the blood-curdling screams I heard from you earlier, I wasn't sure you had any voice left."

"Fuck you." Staring into his eyes, I refused to look away. I knew the rules that Virgo had trained me to follow, I knew what was expected of a girl like me, but he wasn't getting any of that.

Sucking in the air from the back of my throat, I spit in his face. Baring my teeth, I wanted him to see it in my eyes that I wasn't his little minx, I wasn't going to just shy away. I was going to do the one thing I hadn't really done. I was going to fight for myself, truly, and fully fight for myself.

Wiping the saliva off his face with the back of his hand, he smirked. "Uh uh. . ." Pausing, he tisked me, shaking his head. "That's no way to treat the man who saved you." Tilting his head, he dug his fingers deeper into my cheeks. "I expected more from you, little minx, I really did." Slipping his fingers around my head, he gripped my roots and yanked on my scalp. "Come, we can't be late."

Using force, Koa pushed me in front of him as he walked me back to the limo. Even under the cover of darkness, I could see the anger in his eyes, the small red flames that flickered on, giving his pupils a burst of color.

He didn't like that I tried to run away, and he definitely didn't like that I wasn't being a good little slave like Virgo advertised his girls to be.

"Let me go!" I growled, digging my heels into the dirt.

I tried to lock my legs so he couldn't move me, and defend myself. Swinging my arms, I struck his chest, his forearms, his biceps. I slapped and smacked him as hard as I could.

It was useless. I wasn't strong enough. My muscles were too weak to compete with him. It felt like I was hitting a brick wall.

Koa let out a laugh as he pushed me along. His laugh turned my stomach, infuriating me even more. Swiping my hand at his face, all I wanted to do was tear his smile clear off.

My nails hit his skin, causing him to stop in his tracks as they raked through the layers. Inside I felt this sliver of victory as if I had won a small battle. I had stopped him, I had hurt him.

Grunting, Koa reached up and grabbed his face, glaring down at me. Rocking his jaw back and forth, he dabbed the bloody scratches with his fingers. There was a long silence, where he didn't say a word, he just stared at me.

With his fingers still tightly wrapped in my hair, he brought his lips to my ear and whispered. "A little advice, don't do that again or I will fucking kill you myself." With a light shove, he pushed me in the direction of the car.

The way he said it sent a shiver down my spine, causing the hair on my arms to bristle. He was serious, his threat easily felt in the tone of his voice. I had been afraid of Virgo and Blue, afraid of the life I had been living, but the mystery of this man, and the richness of his voice, scared me even more.

He was capable of evil.

As we stepped out of the trees, Knox was leaning against the door of the car with his

arms folded across his chest. "Little bitch is fast, huh? Didn't expect that." Arching a brow, his lids lowered. "What the hell happened to your face?"

"A fucking stick happened, that's what," Koa snapped, fixing his sleeves and adjusting his collar. "Just get the fuck in, we need to go."

He didn't tell him it was me. Why didn't he tell him I did that?

Knox opened the door and climbed in, Koa shoved me inside and climbed in behind me.

Giving his brother a look, Knox strummed his knuckles against the window. "Let's go."

The limo rolled back out onto the road, and neither brother said another word to each other. Curling my legs up into my chest, I snuggled my body into the corner where the seat and the door met the floor.

Keeping my eyes down, I could feel Koa looking at me. His eyes burned a hole in the top of my head, his gaze intense and unavoidable in our sour cocoon. There was nowhere for me to go, nowhere for me to hide, I was on display.

Leaning forward and resting his arms on his knees, Knox rubbed his hands back and forth. "Where you taking her? To the East Side estate?"

"Don't worry about it." Running his thumb across his bottom lip, he kept his eyes locked on mine.

"Dickhead, I'm asking because when—"

"I said don't fucking worry about it." His eyes popped open as his lip curled angrily.

"You need to learn to keep your mouth shut and stop asking questions. This doesn't involve you, so fuck off."

"Fine," Knox said under his breath.

The car started to slow down, and both men turned their attention to the windows at their sides. Following their lead, I looked up. I could see the bright lights of a runway and hear the loud engines of jets.

We're at the airport. . . I can get some help here.

The idea flooded my brain and it all made sense. There would be people everywhere; guards, pilots, workers, passengers, so many people that I could find help.

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There was no way people wouldn't notice me, I was going to stand out like a sore thumb. I was wearing a torn and dirt-covered silk dress. Any flesh you could see on me was covered in bruises or dirt, and I had a large open gash on my shoulder, that was still bleeding. My hair was knotted, my cheekbones were sharp, and my body was far too thin for my frame.

"Excited?" Koa asked, scooting himself across the seat to look out the window with me. "Ever see big lights like that before?"

"I wasn't raised in a fucking cave," I snapped.

I felt his fingers as they tried to run through my hair, but were stopped by the knots. Gently, he started to untwine the locks and smooth them out against my back. "I didn't say you were. I was asking because I know nothing about you. For all I know you were born in a basement and handed off like the pick of the litter."

Snarling, I rolled my eyes. "Fuck you, I'm not an animal."

"Be careful, little minx, no need for claws." Turning his eyes back to the window, he pressed his lips to my ear. "Save them for the real bad guys."

As he spoke, I watched the airport terminal come and go. I saw the people moving inside, I saw the luggage trolleys as they were shuffled around in and out of the building. But we were driving away from the terminal, away from safety.

Away from people.

"No," I said, my voice barely audible. "No, no. . ."

"Did you think we were going in there?" Pointing back at the terminal, Koa chuckled. "No, little minx, we're not going in there. Do I look stupid to you? Did you really think I was going to just waltz in there with you on my arm? I know better than that."

Hanging my head, I felt the tears as they bubbled over my eyes. Closing my eyes, I covered my face, falling back onto my ass and tucking my head into my legs.

Of course, he wasn't going to parade me through an airport. He's smarter than that. He has the means to hide me, to smuggle me anywhere he wants.

The limo stopped and I felt the cold air as Knox climbed out first. Koa grabbed my wrist and dragged me out behind him. The limo driver took a couple of suitcases out of the trunk and handed them to a steward.

Koa led me up a small set of stairs and onto a private jet. "See, we have our own means to get around. I bet Virgo never took you out like this."

"You think this makes you better than him? Do you think I'm going to look at you and thank you for saving me? You're no different than that asshole, no fucking different."

Shoving me into a seat, he hovered over me for a moment before speaking. "Virgo and I are nothing alike, you'll learn that soon enough. Whoever you thought he was, I'm a hundred times worse. Whatever you thought he was, I'm a hundred times darker." His fingertips swept across my forehead, circling my face. "My poor little minx, you have so much to learn."

Pressing two fingers to his lips, he moved the pads of his fingers to my mouth and set his kiss on my lips. Wiping my mouth, I snarled. "Don't fucking touch me."

Koa smirked, tilting his head slightly. "That's the beauty when you own something, it's yours to do what you want." Winking, he took his seat in the chair across from me.

I felt sick inside like all my guts were being shredded.

Who was this man? Where the hell had he come from?

And why the hell did he want me?

Chapter Four

Aubrey

The plane bounced lightly as the turbulence made our flight less than comfortable. The men slept, sleeping like they had nothing to fear like they hadn't just purchased a woman and were smuggling her to another prison.

Another place with bars and chains and no exit no matter how much I might want to leave. I've been taken again against my will, pulled from one world, and deposited into another.

Why does this world hate me so much?

I knew exactly what was coming. I knew what was next. This was only a transfer of hands, from one master to another. Whoever Koa was, whoever he claimed to be, was merely a mask. I knew men like him, I've met them, danced for them, and been an object for far too long to not know what he was going to take from me.

They all take, that's all men like him know how to do.

Glancing around, I was trapped. There was no place for me to go. I took the opportunity to rummage around on the plane, but I didn't find anything I could use to protect myself or hurt these men.

Fuck.

Dropping into the seat, I curled my legs up and just looked out the window. It had been night for hours, nothing but blackness as far as the eye could see. My eyes were getting heavy as I watched my reflection in the small oval window. And then there was nothing.

No dreams. No thoughts. No wishes.

I stopped wishing a long time ago. Wishes were useless. They brought me nothing but more sadness, and they made me hate my parents forever letting me believe there was any truth to them.

"Wake up." His voice rains down on me, jarring me awake as he shakes my shoulder.

"Ah," I say, grabbing the cut on my arm.

"Let's go, we're here." Knox looks at me with a deadpan expression, turning and heading for the open door.

Glancing out the window, the sun is just coming up over the horizon, casting bright red and yellow arms out into the sky. Squinting, I can see seagulls as they circle overhead and white clouds as they float by slowly.

"Let's go," Knox says again, waiting at the door for me. "We ain't got all day."

Standing, my legs feel weak and shaky as I grab the back of the chairs and walk to the exit door. There's a small set of steps leading down to the cement pad, and Koa is waiting at the bottom.

"You got some sleep, that's good."

Frowning, I didn't answer him. The brightness of the sun hit my face, causing me to

cover my eyes and squint. I hadn't seen the sun like this in months, it was so bright it burned my eyes. Moving slowly down the steps, my bare feet touched the cold pavement and a chill ran through my body.

Shivering, I wrapped my arms around myself and walked to Koa's side. Looking up at him, he nodded his head for me to get in the back of the blacked-out SUV.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, letting my eyes flick between his. I'm tempted to pull them away, to dart them to the ground.

Fucking Virgo. . .I hated how much he stained who I was. This wasn't me, and yet I couldn't wash him off my skin or get his voice out of my head.

My eyes wavered, shooting around his face. The protective instinct to do what I've been taught is too strong to ignore. My gaze shifted, attempting to lower, but my head is stopped.

Koa gripped my chin with his thumb and forefinger, forcing my eyes back to his. "We're going home, little minx." He held my gaze for a split second, before dropping his hand and jerking his head again for me to get in the vehicle.

My body moved without warning, following his directions like an obedient dog. I hated it. I hated feeling my body react even when my mind said no.

He climbed in behind me, but Knox doesn't follow. Moving my eyes to the window, Knox is getting into another SUV by himself.

Koa noticed where I was looking. Shifting in the seat, he closed the door. "He's not coming with us." He pulled back his sleeve and looked at the watch on his wrist. "Have you ever been to America?"

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America. . . He brought me to America.

I was a sea away from home now. There was no chance of me ever escaping.

Shaking my head no, the car started to move, and I turned my attention back to the window.

"No—I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Virgo didn't travel much after. . ." His voice faded as he dug his hands into his knees and cleared his throat.

"After what?" I asked.

"Nothing, forget it. We'll be home in about twenty minutes." He pulled out his phone and started flipping his finger across the screen.

"After what?" I asked again, suddenly curious about the man who tore me from my life and bound me to a world I never asked for.

"I said forget it," Koa snapped, darting his eyes up to mine. His voice was firm. I wasn't going to get an answer, I knew that instantly.

Sitting in silence, I watched the trees pass by as we drove to his place. He kept calling it home like this was my home too, but that would never be true. My home was in Italy, not here in this foreign land.

The vehicle pulled off the road, stopping at a large iron gate. The metal was thick, like prison bars, but with a deceiving swirling and swooping design in the center. The

gate pulled back slowly and we headed up a long, winding driveway. We were surrounded by trees, thick, dense trees, and I couldn't see any other houses.

The trees suddenly opened up to a sprawling mansion. There was a fountain in the center of the driveway that circled up to the front. Tall pillars ran across the front of the house, and giant glass windows were spaced equally between the pillars.

Beautiful gardens of pink and white flowers lined under the windows and two gargoyles protected the entrance. The double doors looked like they came from a castle in Ireland, they were deep mahogany with thick, black iron hinges.

It's like nothing I had ever seen before.

The SUV pulled around the backside of the driveway and came to a stop. Koa looked up from his phone and smiled.

"Welcome home, little minx." The driver opened his door, and he climbed out, then he waved his hand for me to follow. "Come, I've got a lot to show you."

I sat still, in awe over his home, and afraid to enter it. I didn't want to leave the safety of the vehicle and put myself in his hands. My eyes moved to the driver who was still holding the door open, but he wasn't paying any attention to me at all. It was as if I didn't exist.

Glancing around side to side, I twisted to see what was behind us. Koa chuckled, a low, evil chuckle as he stroked his jaw.

"I know what you're thinking and it'll never work. There are cameras everywhere. If you run, I'll find you. I'll find you before you even know where you are. Don't waste what little energy you have left on wishful thinking."

"You don't know shit," I growled, "You don't know me."

"I know what I see, and I know what I saw when you tried to run before. You'd never survive one night out there without help. Don't be stupid, minx, it's a death sentence."

Gritting my teeth, I dug my nails into the seat and yelled, "What about you?! Are you going to just let him do this to me? Help me! Help me!"

The driver didn't move, he didn't flinch, he didn't even make a sound. His eyes stared straight ahead as if I was invisible.

"He's not going to help you, so scream all you want. His loyalty lies with me."

"Fuck you!" I screamed, leaning over and spitting at Koa. "Fuck you!"

His lips folded down, and I watched his hands clench at his sides. Lunging forward, he threw his hand out and grabbed my wrist before I even had time to register what he was doing.

Yanking me out of the car, he held me tight. "Enough," he barked, baring his teeth. "Have I hurt you at all?" he asked his jaw crooking to one side. "Have I done anything to disrespect you?"

Peering up at him, I didn't answer. But my mind twirled with insults.

Asshole!

Bastard!

You bought me! How is that not disrespectful?

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"No, I haven't," he answered his own question with such confidence it made my stomach turn. "I'm not going to pretend like I'm not a bad man, but I'm not the man you think I am. But, disrespect me again, and I'll make you wish I left you at the Canary." Walking forward, he dragged me along with him.

His tone sent a rush of prickles down my skin, freezing my feet and causing my entire body to still like a stagnant lake. Fear consumed me, and I couldn't breathe. He's not Virgo, he's scarier than Virgo.

With Virgo, I knew what he wanted. With Virgo, there was no question as to how he felt, or what he would do if I went against the grain. But this man, this man was built from different darkness. There was something else in his tone. Something real. Something true. Something that Virgo didn't have and never owned. . .Real power.

Virgo did terrible things, but in the end, the girls made him his money. Death was his last resort. He broke you down to the point you stopped fighting back.

Koa didn't need me, he wanted me. Like a child wanted a toy. Children break toys all the time on purpose, and then they throw them away. I was just his toy.

I'm nothing to this man.

The driver got back in the car, completely unphased by what just happened. It was unsettling. How could he just stand there? How could he just let this man force me out when he heard my pleas for help?

Because he owes you nothing. . . No one owes you shit.

Koa opened the front door by typing a code into the keypad, his hand still firmly wrapped around my arm. As it shuts behind us I heard the deadbolt lock. The metallic ping hit my ears and caused my stomach to tumble.

Another prison. Another set of walls to hold me in.

He punched numbers into another keypad inside the entryway, and that was when he finally released me. Every muscle in my body was tense. I could still feel the burn of his fingers on my skin and it made me want to throw up.

"These locks aren't to keep you in, they're to keep others out."

"Liar," I said, my blood pumping as I clenched my hands at my sides. Locks are to keep people in. Locks have kept me in for months.

His thick fingers wrapped my cheeks, squeezing them together, and forcing my face up. "Don't call me a liar. Never call me a liar. Understand?" I nodded softly, and he threw my face away. "I know you had rules under Virgo, but here, here it's different. I'm not Virgo."

"You're just like Virgo." My voice came out sharp as razors, and I prayed the words would slice him into pieces.

But he just laughed. Koa shook his head from side to side and held a finger up in the air. "You have a lot to learn, little minx."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I took a step back. "I won't be what you want me to be. I refuse."

He smirked at me, playful and almost giddy. Taking a big step forward, he brushed me out of the way. "My rules are easy," he said as he moved down the hall.

I refused to follow him, so I stood still, cementing my feet into the cold marble tiles.

You don't own me!

"Don't piss me off," he said louder as he disappeared through a doorway to his right. He was projecting his voice so I could hear him. "Don't make me regret buying you. . ." He poked his head out of the doorway and asked, "Tomatoes?"

"What?" I asked, arching a brow.

"Do you like tomatoes?"

I stared at him confused, and he stared back, both of us sitting in silence. Finally, I nodded yes lightly, and he disappeared again into the room.

I could hear doors opening and closing, and clanking like glass against glass.

"Rules are important, we all have them," he yelled, his voice slightly muffled. "But I'm not Virgo, that man is a disease." He appeared around the corner holding two plates and stopped in the center of the hall. "Compare me to him again, and I'll have to punish you. Do you want to be punished, little minx?"

Shaking my head no, I cupped my hands in front of my waist and looked at the floor.

"Good, good answer. Then you can be rewarded." He held up two plates and smirked. "How about some food?"

I could smell the sandwich from where I was standing. The tomatoes and lettuce, the meat and the cheese, it was drawing me in. My mouth started to water as I found myself taking steps towards him.

No! This is a trick!

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Stopping short, he eyed me curiously. "Don't be afraid, I'm not going to poison you. I paid good money for you, too much to just destroy you right away. What fun would that be?" He jerked his head and used the plate to guide me in his direction. "Come on now, it's been a long night. We could both use this."

My feet quietly walked over the tile floor, barely making a sound as he took a seat at a giant table. Placing the other plate at his side, he tapped the tabletop.

"Sit, eat, don't be rude, minx."

Pulling the chair out, I sat down, keeping my hands in my lap. Koa picked up his sandwich and took a big bite. From the corner of my eyes, I watched him. The way his lips glistened with tomato juice, the way he ran his tongue around the edges, licking all the crumbs from the bread away.

My stomach grumbled. I was starving.

He chewed slowly, his eyes just watching me, studying me, coring my soul.

"Eat," he said again, gesturing to the food.

Lifting the sandwich, I pressed it to my lips and took a small bite. The flavors exploded on my tongue, but I didn't let him know how much I was enjoying the food.

"You eat like a bird." He chuckled to himself, pushing out of the chair and walking to a bar against the far wall. "Drink?" he asked, taking down two short glasses.

'Drink.' Virgo's words right before everything changed.

The thought made me wince, causing my entire body to shudder and my lungs to seize.

He poured a dark burgundy liquid into two glasses, then walked with such power back to the table. Setting the glass down in front of me, he relaxed back into his chair and held his cup chest high.

"I take it you haven't eaten a good meal in a really long time?"

"You call this a good meal? It's a sandwich."

Koa smirked and arched a brow. "Is it though?" He took a sip from his glass and held it against his chest. "Royal Bloomer bread, made with gold and champagne, Spanish Iberian ham, with Brandywine tomatoes. And to top it off, Gruyere aged Swiss. Plus, I added my own honey mustard glaze for a little sweetness." His tone was full of pride as if any of that shit meant something. It meant nothing to me.

Taking another bite, my tongue exploded with all the flavors. It was incredible. Eyeing him, I swallowed my bite. "You a chef or something?" I asked. Reaching for the glass, I hold it and look inside.

"Or something I'd say, and don't worry, I didn't drug your drink. I told you, I'm not like Virgo. People do things for me willingly, not by force. That's the difference between real power and the false cloak Virgo wore." He winked and took another sip from his glass. "Unless I have to, of course, nothing is off the table completely. So, enjoy this, tomorrow we begin."

"Begin? Begin what?"

With a cold smirk on his face, his eyes twinkled with delight. "Your new life."

Chapter Five

Aubrey

"Here," he said, pushing open a door on the second floor. "This is your room."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I peeked my head inside.

"Go on." He held his arm out and swept me into the room with an open hand without actually touching me.

Taking a resistant step inside, I kept my eyes down. "This isn't my room, this is your room, in your house. Nothing here is mine."

"It's yours if I'm giving it to you."

"What if I don't want it?" Hugging myself tighter, my lips curled down into a heavy frown. "I didn't ask for this."

"No one asks for a gift, minx, it's given by choice." His eyes dropped to my shoulder, spotting the fresh wound. "Can I look at it?"

"I'm fine."

"It looks pretty deep," he took a step closer, holding out his hands. "I won't touch you, just let me look at it." Koa took another small step, keeping his hands out so I could see them. "I have a first aid kit in the bathroom, I'm just going to grab it."

He moved past me and ducked into a dark room. A light flicked on, and I could hear him rummaging around. Coming back out, he had a small white box in his hands. Setting it on the dresser, he pulled back the top and took out a small package.

"Can I just. . ." he said with a pause, slowly walking towards me. "You don't want it getting infected."

"Please, save me this little sympathy act you got going on. I know what you are, and you don't fucking care."

"Alright," he said, throwing the small pack of bandages at me. "Then you do it. But if that shit gets infected, it's on you." He took a wide step to the door and held the handle in his hand. "I'm going to go get some rest, I suggest you do the same."

Koa closed the door hard behind him, and I stood still waiting for a lock to click. But the only sound I heard was his feet storming away. They thudded down the hall until they were nothing more than a faint click, disappearing altogether.

Where did he go? What type of game is he playing?

Did he forget to lock me in?

Placing my ear against the door, I listened intently, my gut telling me tonight doesn't just end like this. There had to be more. There was always more.

Time ticked by slowly, but the only noises I heard was the house creaking and spitting, and coming alive. There was no Koa, no sign of him outside the door.

Is this a test? Is he waiting in the shadows for me to try and escape?

Gripping the handle, I held it tightly for a moment. The cold brass felt like hot coals

against my palm. I was frozen. Frozen in fear of the past and the present.

Turning this handle could mean all kinds of horrible things. There was always a punishment for not following the rules.

Screw it! Try the door! My brain screamed to be heard. I couldn't just do nothing. I had to try.

The knob twisted easily and the door opened smoothly. There was a small crack at the hinges, creating an echo down the long hall. Taking in a deep breath, I inched it open a little bit at a time.

My ears perked, listening carefully for Koa. Silence. Poking my head out, I looked left to right and saw nothing but a vacant hall. It was surreal. I was alone. Completely and utterly alone.

You're not really alone. Not in a world like this.

I couldn't forget that, it would be stupid of me to think he wasn't setting me up. But the need to try was tugging on me.

Taking a small step out the doorway, I walked on the tips of my toes back in the direction Koa had brought me.

The house felt old, maybe built in the eighteen hundreds. There were old fashioned details in the crown molding across the ceiling, and the light fixtures hanging on the walls were brass.

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The wood floor looked like it was coated in a layer of glass, mirroring my footsteps. The walls were two-tone, white on the bottom and a deep navy blue on top, with textured paint. Beautiful artwork hung between the closed doors.

Stopping, I studied one. A naked woman throwing herself out of the water, surrounded by lily pads. It wasn't erotic in nature, it was gorgeous, so gorgeous I find myself admiring it. Her head was arched back, her hair was dripping, her arms were out, and open wide as if she was giving herself to someone.

There was another image of a pair of hands holding one giant pink flower, the rest of the image was black and white, and there was a set of eyes deep in the background. This man's taste in artwork seemed to be just as high-end as his taste in food.

Making my way down the stairs, there are more images of half-completed planes, frameworks of jets, and helicopters. Some are old fashioned, others more modern, but all are equally intriguing.

I was being as quiet as a mouse, soundless, and invisible. I still couldn't help but think this was a trick to see what I'd do if I was left alone.

Why would this man purchase me, and then just leave me to roam free?

Isn't he afraid of me running?

"These locks aren't to keep you in, they're to keep others out. . ."

His words play in my head, reminding me that Virgo and Koa aren't the only bad

guys in the world. But, who could a man like Koa be afraid of if he isn't afraid of Virgo?

I need to get the hell out of here!

This man had to think I was like all the other girls. That I wouldn't even attempt to take my freedom back. He was too trusting of Virgo's word, and his promises of an obedient pet to play with. I was not that girl, not anymore.

No matter how broken I was, I decided to fight for myself. I was worth that much.

In the darkness of his house, I found my way to the front door, my feet itching to run, and my lungs eager to breathe their first breath of truly free air.

My fingers touched the handle, and there was almost a grin on my face as I got ready to turn it. I wasn't thinking about my bare feet or the fact I was wearing almost nothing.

"There are cameras everywhere. You won't make it out of these woods before I find you."

His words seared my insides, drenching my muscles with hesitation. My eyes moved to the small blinking keypad by the door, and I knew instantly there was no escape from this place. The door wouldn't open for me, and even if it did, it would only set off an alarm.

I didn't want to die, I wanted to live. For me to live, I needed to use my head. I couldn't just react, that's not how I'd get out. Waiting may be painful, but waiting was smart. Berlin taught me that, she taught me the power of persistence and patience.

My fingers fell off the handle, and I dropped my head as I turned, walking back to the

room. Closing the door behind me, I exhaled another deep breath as I willingly shut myself in for the first time.

Tears bubbled over my eyes, but I quickly forced them away. I wouldn't cry for this place. I wouldn't cry for this life.

I'd only cry when I got myself back, when freedom was mine and no one was controlling me anymore.

Then and only then would these eyes shed a single tear.

Chapter Six

Aubrey

The sun hit my eyes, creating a bright splash of color that forced me awake. Blinking my eyes open, I forgot for a moment where I was.

The pillow beneath my head was foreign, the warm blankets and squishy mattress almost shock me altogether. The night's events rushed through my head, and I jolt up in bed. My nails dug into the blanket, and I clutched it so hard I could feel the tips of my nails start to tear through the fabric.

Glancing around frantically, I anticipated seeing someone in my room. It was like I could feel the eyes on me as if I was being watched. But no one is there.

Letting out a sigh of relief, I twisted in the bed and let my heels sink into the plush maroon carpet on the floor. My toes scrunched in and out, enjoying the softness as it tickled between my toes.

The small things life. . .

Standing up, I walked lightly to the window and pulled the curtains back. They were thick and heavy, the same maroon color as the rug, with a pattern of gold and white flowers. I was looking out at a dense expanse of thick trees. It was incredible and terrifying all at once. For all the vast beauty of the forest, I still only saw bars.

The bars aren't hard metal anymore, instead, my cage is wide with the illusion of

freedom, except it would still kill me just the same.

My arms fell to my sides and I turned to check out the rest of the room. There was a long wooden dresser, with amazing detail etched into the wood, and a matching nightstand at the side of the bed.

No mirror. Probably a good thing, I'd rather not see myself.

From the corner of my eyes, I noticed a small bench at the end of the bed with a pile of clothes on it. Stepping to the bench, there was a small note on top of the clothes.

You look like you could use something new.

Shower and come down when you're ready.

—K

He set out a pair of yoga pants and a long gray t-shirt. Looking over my shoulder, there was a soft light inside the bathroom. Cautiously, I moved to the door, unsure if the eyes I had been feeling had hidden inside. Peering into the room, it was empty.

My eyes shifted to the bench, then to the shower, and back to the clothes.

Another trick. . . Is that what this is?

Virgo liked to taunt us, he played his games, and he loved every second of it. He'd try to lift you, taunting you with freedom, with new clothes, with money and expensive jewelry. All of it was a ruse. And when he saw the light in your eyes get snuffed out, he'd smile with delight.

Why would this man be any different?

Crossing my arms around my chest, I plucked at my bottom lip. I'd love a shower. Sleeping felt great, and the opportunity to clean up would feel just as incredible.

It isn't this simple, is it?

Tapping my fingers against my mouth, I decided to just go for it, but not before making some changes to the room so I felt safer. Using the bench seat, I jammed it under the handle so no one could just open the door and come in.

Picking up the clothes, I walked towards the bathroom when something caught my eye. The small first aid kit was still open on the dresser. Standing still for a moment, I touched my shoulder, and the pain caused me to wince.

He's right, I don't want it to get infected. Grabbing the kit, I took it with me in the bathroom.

Locking the door behind me, I noticed there was no mirror in there either, and I'm starting to wonder if there's a reason for it. I haven't seen one mirror in this house, not one.

Steam filled the bathroom after I started the water, and I climb into the shower. The water cascaded down my body, and it felt so damn good. Closing my eyes, I dropped my head under the water and let it steal me away for a minute.

Because right then, right in that very moment, I actually felt normal. I felt like I was home in my apartment, and everything was just a bad nightmare.

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Opening my eyes, the teal blue tiles and glass trim, and the dirty water circling my feet, reminded me that every memory I had was very very real. All of it.

Scrubbing myself, I washed my hair and stripped my skin clean. Wrapping myself in a towel, I used the small first aid kit and dressed my wound. Drying off and getting dressed, I paced the small room, wondering if I was still alone.

It's fine, I blocked the door. No one got inside.

My hand was on the handle as I was about to exit, but I paused again. There was something about this whole thing that was off. I couldn't figure it out, but it was unsettling.

I was waiting for all of it to implode. For the moment where playtime ended, and the reality of my new world finally showed its ugly face. Koa was wearing a mask, and I was just anticipating the moment he peeled it off.

Letting out a slow breath, I slowly pulled door the open and peeked into the room. The bench was still snugly tucked in place, the silence of the room all most too much for me to tolerate.

I don't like this.

Every nerve was in this constant mode of anticipation. Sharp, on edge, a hot spark ready to be lit. All my muscles were tense, tight, ready to fight if I had to.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I debated what to do. He told me to come down when I

was ready, but I couldn't bring myself to leave the little bit of safety I felt there. Those walls created a haven for me.

Swinging my legs back and forth, I squeezed the edge of the mattress as my mind ran with a million thoughts.

I can't stay here all day.

Gathering some courage, I pulled the bench away from the door and opened it up. The faint sound of music floated up from downstairs, and the scent of food wafted into the room.

Quietly, I stepped barefoot into the hall, and tiptoed down the stairs, following the sound of the music. I could make out the strum of violins, the deep base of a cello, and a symphony of other instruments. I was being as silent as possible, doing my best to keep my presence unknown.

Standing outside the kitchen door, I was hidden by the wall as the music blared from speakers in the room, and the sounds of cooking sizzled and popped between low notes. Pressing my hand against the wall, I just listened, not moving an inch.

"You don't have to hide, come in and sit."

He knows I'm here. How does he know?

Taking a step around the corner, Koa looked over at me briefly, and then back to the pan on the stove. "The clothes seem to fit alright, that's good. Much better than that ratty, dirty dress he put you in."

He was holding a wooden spoon, stirring something that smelled incredible. My stomach grumbled loudly, so I covered my belly with my hands.

"Go on, you can sit wherever you want." He nodded behind to himself, keeping his eyes on the pan.

With tender slow steps, I climbed into one of the stools and rested my hands in my lap. The kitchen had just as much dazzle as the rest of the house.

There were black onyx counter-tops with speckles of gold that curved around the room and create the island in the center. White cabinets and a white marble floor brightened the rest of the space. Shiny copper pans dangled from a rack above the island, with stainless steel appliances.

"I need you to eat, and then we have to go."

"Go?" I asked, squeezing my hands between my thighs. "Go where?"

"A meeting."

"You don't need me—"

"Uh," he said, turning around with two plates and pushing one to me. "I'm not leaving you here alone, that's not fucking happening. You'll come, you'll sit quietly, and then we'll leave. Understood?" Koa's eyes flicked to mine, stern, bold, and making me nervous.

Keeping my hands between my legs, I diverted my eyes to the plate. "I'm a big girl you know. You don't need me there."

"I said you're going. Period. Now eat your fucking food." He shoveled a fork full into his mouth, never once taking his eyes off of me.

The hair on my arms stood up, bristling with how intense his stare was. I could feel

his eyes, literally feel them on me like a finger tracing my skin.

Lifting my fork, I poked around the food. There were vegetables, and what looked like chicken. Taking a small bite, I'm blown away by his cooking again.

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"Good isn't it? It's my grandmother's recipe. I like to make it once in a while when I have company, and today, I have company. You." Pointing his fork at me, he took another giant bite with a smug grin on his face.

I'm tempted to smack the grin off his face. I wasn't this company, I wasn't his damn property, and I didn't fucking like it.

Nodding, I tried to eat slowly. I was fucking starving, but I didn't want him to know. I didn't want him to see any weakness in me. Those are mine, not his. Not his to ever use against me.

He might think he owns me, but he was going to get a rude awakening when I disappeared one day.

I'm saving myself, only I can do that.

He chatted casually as we ate, talking about the kitchen and the vegetables he liked to use in his dishes. He mentioned a small farmer's market that he liked to go to weekly in town, and how everything was so fresh. Koa was talking to me like we were friends.

It was strange for me sitting there, having this man talk to me as if he saw me as an equal. His voice was so smooth and calm, I almost forgot for a moment that I wasn't here by choice.

"You're really not a chef? You're not a personal cook for the elite assholes of the world?" I asked, poking around the little bit of food left on my plate.

"No, fucking way, cooking is just a little side hobby of mine." Grabbing my plate, he rinsed them both in the sink and set them in the dishwasher. Koa cleaned up the pans and wiped down the counters.

"You don't have anyone here to do that for you?" I asked.

"Like a maid?" he asked. I nodded, running open palms up and down my thighs. "No, no maids here. I hate the idea of someone cleaning up after me. And I don't need people I hardly know wandering around my home. You think I'm one of those guys who can't take care of himself?"

"No." My eyes drifted to the big window behind me as I turned on the stool. "Virgo had people, I just assumed you would too."

"Virgo is a lazy motherfucker. I'm not." He slammed the door shut on the dishwasher, and checked the time on his watch. "We need to go."

"I don't have any shoes," I answered, hoping he'd just let me stay there.

"Exactly, it's harder to run barefoot, and I'm not in the mood to chase you today." Grabbing a set of keys off the counter, he turned and started to walk away. "Let's go, I don't like being late."

Again, my body defied me, following his orders as if there were strings attached to my limbs. Following him down another long hall, my heart started to race in my chest. My mind flashed with still frames of the hall in Virgo's home that led to the pit.

I fucking hated the pit. It was a place you were punished in, left in the dark, alone, and with nothing but your thoughts.

Fear raced up my throat, causing me to swallow hard. Koa probably had a pit too, or

maybe a cage. Fuck, maybe he was just going to tie me to a damn pole like a dog.

My entire body shivered, forcing me to stop moving.

Koa opened the door at the end and stepped inside. He noticed my absence immediately, his voice echoing as he yelled for me. "Come, little minx."

Timidly, I moved towards the door, but my muscles were refusing to work. Reaching out, I gripped the door-frame and tried to force myself forward, but it didn't work.

"I said come," he demanded, his voice razor-sharp as it startled me into motion.

Jolting forward, I crossed the threshold and realized it was just a garage. There was a jet black Escalade, with blacked-out windows. Tools hung on the walls, and there was the frame of a motorcycle against the back wall.

Koa was standing by the back door of the vehicle, holding it open.

A sigh of relief forced my lungs to work again. It wasn't a dungeon he was taking me to, just a normal garage.

"In." Nodding his head towards the car, his mouth pulled tautly. "Don't make me ask you again, I don't like having to repeat myself."

Stepping down, the concrete floor was cold as ice under my feet, so cold it almost felt like glass. Climbing into the back, he held the door for a moment and just stared at me.

"Look, I know you have your reasons for not trusting me and thinking the worse, but the more you comply, the easier it will be on both of us."

"I'm not a dog, you can't just bark orders and expect me to jump."

"And yet, here you are." His lips curled into a smile, baring his perfect white teeth. Running the tip of his tongue across the edge of his teeth, he slammed the door shut.

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The car jostled around as he climbed in the front and started the engine. "So," he said, "Tell me, minx, what did you do in your former life?"

Like I'm going to tell you.

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Why wouldn't it matter?" he asked.

"Because I'm not that person anymore."

Koa started to back the vehicle out of the garage as the door lifted behind us, letting in a rush of light.

"You might not feel the same, but it doesn't mean who you were is totally gone."

You have no idea what I've been through. The thought is loud in my head, but I stayed quiet. He could never understand what it felt like to be me. He was on the opposing end of torture.

Koa reached forward, putting on music, more of the same classical music I heard in the kitchen.

Crossing my arms over each other, I looked out the window and tried to make mental notes of the things I saw. We drove through a small town, where I see a bakery, a grocery store, and a coffee shop. Places I could try to get to if I ever broke free.

We merged onto a highway, and all of a sudden everything looked the same. Cars are passing by, cars with people. So many people.

Get their attention! The voice screamed in my head.

Glancing at Koa, he was facing forward, his eyes set on the road. His head was swaying to the music, fingers tapping the steering wheel.

Nibbling on my lip, I waited anxiously for the perfect moment. There was some traffic coming up ahead, so he started to slow down, coming to a rolling stop.

Now!

"Hey! Help me!" I screamed as I slammed my hands on the window over and over. "Over here! Help me!" Turning my open hands into fists, I pounded one after the other against the glass.

Koa started to chuckle, looking back at me through the mirror. "It's useless, they can't hear you."

Growling, I grabbed the handle and yanked on it. Tugging and pulling, I tore at the door, and punched the window, until sweat was pouring down my temples, and my knuckles were swollen and raw. My chest was rising and falling rapidly. I could hardly breathe.

"Are you done?" he asked as he hit the gas and we started to move again.

Throwing my body back against the seat, I veered my stare. "I hate you." I was seething. Anger and rage were all I could see. "I fucking hate you."

"I know you do, little minx." He smiled as he talked, his eyes almost delighted by my

failed escape. "So, how about this, how about you put that hate in the right place. Leave it with the man who did this to you."

"You did this to me!"

"That's where you're wrong. Virgo did this to you, I just made a purchase."

Through clenched teeth, I snapped, "Are you fucking happy with yourself? Are you happy you bought a woman? Are you proud of the man you are?"

"I am actually."

"You're a fucking monster."

"That's where you're wrong. I'm not. You'll see who I am soon, and when you do, you won't see a monster."

Lurching forward, I was ready to jump in the front seat, and tear his fucking head off. But I never got the chance. A glass barricade lifted between us, blocking me, and stranding me in the backseat.

Sitting alone didn't change how I felt. The anger was boiling, and I was unleashing it all at once. Using my feet, I kicked the glass window as hard as I could. Throwing my shoulder against it, I cried out in rage.

I spent far too long just letting shit happen. I was done. It was time to fight. To truly fight until I couldn't fight anymore.

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I'm going to fucking kill him!

Kicking and screaming, I slammed around in the backseat trying to break the window. I didn't care if I broke a bone, I just wanted out. Sweat trickled down my temples, and the shirt was sticking to my skin as I used all the energy I had.

"I hate you!" Dropping back exhausted, I closed my eyes and took in deep breaths.

Koa shook my leg, waking me up. "We're here. You feel better? Get that out of your system?"

Giving him a dirty look, I didn't answer. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up and yawned.

"I'll take that as a yes. Here's what I need you to do, when we go inside, just stay close, don't talk to anyone, and don't look at anyone. If someone tries to talk to you, ignore them. I'll handle everything, understand?"

Grunting, I rolled my eyes. "Sounds familiar, but you're not like him, right? You're not a monster?"

"Don't, not here." He gripped my chin and forced my eyes back on his. "This isn't a place for games, minx. I need you to trust me, and do as you're told."

"Trust," I said, laughing lightly. "Why would I ever trust you?"

"Because one fuck up here, and neither of us will walk out alive. Understand?" His eyes ignited like liquid fire, burning me from the inside out. "Let's go."

Koa wrapped his hand around my wrist and pulled me out of the car. With strong steps, he walked us towards a brick building. There was no sign outside, or any defining features to let me know what it was exactly we were walking in to.

I could smell salt in the air, and taste it as I breathed in. The sound of ocean waves smashing against rocks was close by. A seagull squawked overhead, drawing my attention up. The sound of the waves grew closer as we approached the building.

Looking to my right, the water was crashing against the rock wall that lines the edge of the parking lot. And for the first time, I saw a real escape. No fence, no barricade, just open ocean.

I know how to swim. . .

A plan was forming in my head, one that was so tangible, I could feel it. I could already taste the saltwater on my lips, and feel the cold ocean on my skin. But my timing needed to be perfect if it was going to work.

Jiggling my wrist lightly, his fingers clenched harder, letting me know he was highly aware of my arm in his hand. I deflated a little, but not enough to ignore the itch for escape.

Patience, Aubrey. Patience.

"Don't even think about it," he barked, reading my mind. Flicking my eyes to his face, he was shaking his head.

"You don't know what I'm thinking."

"I know exactly what you're thinking."

Pursing my lips, I jerked my arm as hard as I could. To my surprise, my thin wrist slipped between his thumb and forefinger easily, breaking the chain he created. Taking off, my feet pounded against the ground, my skin getting cut up from cracked seashells and sharp rocks.

Throwing my arms up, I was about to dive into the ocean. The breeze washed across my face, and my feet lifted off the rock wall, ready to plunge in headfirst.

This is it, I'm free!

Suddenly, a burning pain hit my scalp as his thick fingers tangled in my hair and yanked me back. Wrapping his arm around my waist, he threw me over his shoulder.

"Nice try, but you can't escape that easily." My body folded over his shoulder, and he wrapped a strong arm around my hips.

"I hate you," I said.

"I know you do, but you won't hate me forever." Setting me down on my feet, he gripped my shoulders, forcing me to look up at him. "No more games, they stop here. I'm warning you now, no more."

I could feel the seriousness in his voice, and see it in his eyes. Nodding, I give in. I'll get my chance, it just wasn't yet.

"Good, you're finally using your head."

Standing outside the thick metal door, Koa knocked. The door creaked open slowly, but no one emerged. A faint light trickled out, and the scent of an old basement hit me instantly.

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"Yeah?" A voice asked, his tone low and scratchy.

"I'm here for Alek."

The door opened outward, and Koa yanked me inside behind him. The man who opened the door took a long step back and pointed down the hall. "You know where to go?" he asked.

"Yeah, I got it," Koa answered.

The man looked old, with gray hair and a hunched back, even though he was standing straight. His sick, beady little eyes looked me up and down, and a crooked grin adorned his pockmarked face as he watched us leave.

Koa's fingers tightened even more, as if he sensed the man's eyes too, and wanted to make sure his grip was unbreakable. Pulling me behind him, the man watched us until we disappeared into the darkness.

There were noises all around us; groans, moans, yells, and screams. The sounds of whips cracked in the dusty hall, coming from behind closed doors. I knew exactly what that place was. Fear bubbled up in my chest, causing me to take short, quick breaths.

How dare he bring me back to a place like this!

Leaning forward, I whispered in Koa's ear with tight lips. "I know exactly where you've taken me you fucking prick. You're a fucking liar, you are just like him."

"Sh," he hushed me, squeezing my wrist with the weight of a vice grip. "Don't. Not here." Giving my wrist a hard flick, he took long steps forward, forcing my bare feet into a light run to keep up. His voice was low and harsh as he growled, "I need you to do what you've been trained to do, exactly as you were taught."

"Fuck you," I seethed through grit teeth.

Whipping his head over his shoulder, his eyes turned black as his brows dropped hard. "If you want to leave here on two feet, I suggest you do exactly what I'm telling you to do. If you know where you are, then you know the seriousness of what I'm telling you. Don't fuck this up."

Thinning my lips, I snarled. "Just remember, I know exactly who and what you are. You can't fool me."

"Enough," he snapped. Stopping at a door to our left, he raised his knuckles and knocked. The door opened, revealing half of a man's face.

"What the fuck do you want?" he barked.

"I'm here to see Alek, he's expecting me."

"And who the fuck are you?"

Koa cocked a brow. Through gritted teeth, he said, "I'm Koa, do you need me to fucking spell it for you too?"

The door closed, and we waited outside. My eyes scanned around us, studying the hall. The floor was gritty under my feet, causing me to keep lifting my feet and wiping them off on my calves. The hall reeked of cigar smoke and mold. There was water dripping through the bricks and off the pipes lining the ceiling.

I didn't like the place, it drummed up too many emotions. Too many memories of the life I couldn't seem to escape.

Koa cleared his throat, readjusting his hand around my wrist, and letting out a heavy breath. "Remember, do what you've been taught."

"I heard you the first time, asshole."

He gave me a cocky look but didn't respond because the door opened. The man warily moved out of the way to let us through. The dimly lit room had a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling in the center. There was instant tension in the air, scaling my spine, and reminding me of the danger all around us.

Do what he says and this will be over soon.

My eyes dropped to the floor as the training I went through kicked in. From the corner of my eyes, I spotted a girl chained to the wall, and another getting fucked as she dangled from the ceiling.

My stomach turned as memories of the Canary come flooding in. It was sick, twisted, and these men were another limb of the same system.

I don't want to be here.

"I wasn't sure you'd show." A figure emerged from a dark corner, taking a few long steps in our direction.

That must be Alek.

"I'm a man of my word," Koa said, placing his loose hand on his chest. "You requested me, I won't turn away a potential client."

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Client? What the hell does Koa do?

Shit. . . He's not going to sell me, is he?

The thought of being transferred to someone else turned my stomach upside down. A lump formed in the back of my throat and my palms became sweaty.

He can't. He won't.

I was trying to convince myself, but I knew nothing about Koa. I had no clue what he was thinking or why the hell we were even there. I could be the meal on the table.

"Mm," Alek grunted. Looking up under hooded lids, I watched him suck on his cigarette. The red ember at the end sparked bright as he inhaled. "They say you're the best."

"I am."

"And your brother? Where's he?"

"He should be here any minute." Glancing at the door, Koa stiffened his back, making him taller. "We can get started without—" There was a knock at the door, causing him to stop talking and look back over his shoulder.

The same man who let us in cracked it open and stepped out of the way.

Knox walked through, his eyes squinting slightly as they adjusted to the light.

"Ah, here he is now," Koa said, forcing an awkward smile. "Alek, this is Knox."

Holding out his arms, Knox grinned. "Let's get this party started." His eyes danced around the room, enjoying the scenery far too much. I could see the gleeful pleasure on his face as he looked between the different girls.

But the girl chained in the center grabbed his attention the most. His eyes lit up, the small flames dancing in his pupils as he bit down on his bottom lip and grunted like a sick animal.

"Nice place you got here, Alek. How come I haven't been here sooner?" Knox asked.

"Because it's invite only. We don't take strays." Alek said to Knox under his breath stalked around Koa in a circle, spotting me. "Who's this? Did you bring me a present?"

"She's mine," Koa said quickly, no hesitation in his voice.

Oh thank god, I'm not here as merchandise.

"She's his new toy," Knox added, giving Alek a wink. "Virgo didn't even want to let her go."

My skin went cold as Knox talked about me. It felt like I never left the Canary coming to a place like this. My life had spun in a full circle, dropping me right off where I started.

"One of Virgo's. An expensive toy you got there." Alek bit his knuckles as his eyes ran up and down my body.

Hearing a stranger say Virgo's name made me realize just how big this world was. It

made me realize that I might never be able to escape the man who branded me as his pet. If I could fly across the world and still hear his name from a stranger, I'd never be able to truly getaway.

Pressing myself closer to Koa, his broad shoulders and thick arms gave me a small sense of safety. I didn't like the sound of Alek's voice or the way it felt as he eyed me.

"I only like the best." Koa released my wrist and wrapped his arm around me. It was strong, firm, and for the first time in ages, I felt untouchable.

I knew that was a falsehood. No one was truly safe in this world. But his arm helped to create enough of a mirage for me to cling to.

"You've got good taste." I didn't need to see Alek know his eyes were still moving all over my body. It was like I had a sixth sense. "She's a little overdressed, isn't she? I'd expect less clothing."

"What I put her in is my business, not yours."

Knox chuckled, running one hand down his sleeve, and plucking a small piece of lint off the cuff. "Have you bought your doll new clothes?"

"Knox," Koa snapped, whipping his head over his shoulder to glare at his brother. "Enough."

Knox rolled his eyes and held up his hands as if to signal he was done.

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Alek reached out and took a handful of my hair, letting it run between his fingers. He moaned, and that fucking moan made me cringe. I stepped as close as I could to Koa, closing any space between us.

Alek was making me nervous. The last time I was in a situation like that, Virgo shot Napal. It was like de ja vous.

"She's pretty." Flicking my eyes up for a second, I caught him as he licked his teeth and smirked.

"She's not the reason I'm here," Koa said, keeping his eyes firmly on Alek.

Alek's lips folded down into a hard frown. He didn't like his power being challenged. None of these men do. But the ones on top, they hated it the most.

Alek moved to a small table against the wall and held out his hand for Koa and his brother to take the other seats. "Please."

The men sat down, and my body goes into an obedient mode, kneeling beside Koa on the floor. Keeping my eyes down, I folded my hands in my lap and held my breath.

I fucking hated it. I hated being there like that, like a fucking dog at his side. My insides burned and the blood in my veins percolated like hot coffee under the skin.

Alek peered off into the room, flipping his fingers towards the door, telling the other men around us to take their girls and leave.

It was just us, no one else. My heart began racing in my chest as silence weighed down the room like a heavy blanket.

Koa set his hands on the table and stiffened his back. "So, I was told you're looking for something special?"

Sitting back in his chair, Alek snuffed out his cigarette in a small glass ashtray. "I am, I need a plane, one that I can use for business. But it has to be secure, I can't risk having eyes on me, understand?"

"Then you came to the right guy." He held his hands out proudly and smiled. "We can give you everything you want. I'm sure you're aware of our work."

"I don't doubt it, but sometimes a man's legacy precedes him." Alek's voice lowered, and I glanced up to see him looking down at me. "Let me ask you this, how much?"

"Well, it depends on what you need. The—"

"No, not for the plane. I don't give a fuck about the plane. It's not for me anyway, it's for my boss. We can work out those details in a minute. I want to know how much for her?" He licked his lips, shifting in his chair closer to see me better.

"She's not for sale."

Pulling a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, he offered one to Koa, but he declined. Knox accepted, pulling one free. Alek lit a lighter, and Knox puffed on the cigarette until the end burned bright.

Alek took one for himself, resting the filter on his lip. It sticks there as he lit the end, tucking the lighter back into the breast pocket on his jacket. Taking a deep inhale, he exhaled slowly, allowing long tendrils of smoke to curl up around his face.

"I'm sure we can come to an agreement."

"I told you, she's not for sale."

Knox relaxed back, giving the two men time for a side deal. His eyes moved between them, dull and unaffected by the prospect of human trafficking right in front of him.

Alek's eyes flicked to me, then back up to Koa. "One night then, rent her to me for one night. I'll make it worth your while."

My heart stopped in my chest as the words came out of his mouth.

Looking up at Koa, my eyes pleaded with him to not even think about it. Koa didn't even look at me, his eyes were steady on Alek, jaw crooked to one side.

Is he actually thinking about it? No! He can't!

"No price is too much, I've always wanted to try one of Virgo's girls. But you know, my boss would flip if I cut out the middle man without his permission." He smiled thick, and tapped his cigarette on the ashtray, knocking off the head.

"This isn't what we came here for," Koa snapped, his voice bordering on anger. "We're here to discuss plans for a jet, not for sharing my girl."

Alek's lips thinned as his mouth twisted in anger. "Are you disrespecting me in my own home, Koa? It's rude to deny me of something I want."

"You might have men that work for you, but I'm not one of them. I don't take orders."

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"Do you know who my boss is? Do you know what I could do to you if I made one call?"

"I don't give a fuck, Alek. Your boss means shit to me."

Grinding his teeth, Alek's nostrils flared wide. "Last chance, Koa, let me have your whore, or you're going to regret it."

"Alright," Knox cut in, sitting up straight in his chair. "We don't need to get heated. Koa, the man just wants a turn, give him a turn. That's what she does, she fucks."

"Stay out of it, Knox." Koa's eyes stayed on Alek, his lids lowering angrily.

I can't do this. I'm done being treated like I'm not even here. It's my body, it's not a fucking bike you can take for a ride around the block.

Every muscle in my body was shaking and convulsing with pent up rage. I had been holding it in, I was doing my best to behave, but I couldn't do this, not anymore. I won't be treated like property.

"He said no!" I yelled, unable to contain myself or the pitch of my voice. Jumping to my feet, I clenched my fists at my sides as my cheeks puffed up with hot air. "I'm not a fucking whore! I'm a woman you stupid fucking piece of shit!"

Alek launched out of his chair, his teeth bared like a rabid animal, lids wide open, exposing all the white. In one quick swoop, his hand was around my neck, and he shoved me back against the wall.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he asked as red lines spidered across his eyes like bloody rivers.

I felt him press something to my temple, the icy cold metal pierced my skin like a knife. My eyes were starting to swell from lack of air as his fingers tightened around my throat. His lips rested at the edge of my ear as he whispered

"You just made a big mistake, whore, you're in my house now."

I heard him cock the hammer as he pushed the gun even deeper into my head. Closing my eyes, I felt the ache in my lungs as they struggled for air, but at that moment, I made peace with myself.

"Fucking do it, asshole. Put me out of my misery."

A deep, dark silence filled my head. I could hear the blood being thrust through my body to keep me alive, but I was ready for the end. I made peace with my life a long time ago.

Bang!

The shot rang out, and his hand slipped off my throat. Air immediately filled my lungs, and I inhaled as much as I could instinctively as I fell to my knees.

What the hell just happened?

Coughing, I rubbed my neck as I opened my eyes. Alek was on the ground, his eyes opened wide as blood puddled up next to his head.

Looking up at Koa, he stuffed his gun back into his waist and pulled me to my feet. "We got to go," he said sharply as he took my hand, and darted for the door. He

stayed still for a second, resting his ear against the wood.

"Fuck, Koa! What the hell were you thinking?" Knox jogged to his side. "Why the hell did you shoot him?"

"Because he put his hands on the wrong person."

"Her? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Shut up, Knox! We need to get the hell out of here." He listened carefully before slowly opening the door. Koa poked his head out, looking left to right. "We're good, come on."

Panic set in as Koa pulled me into the hall. We reached the front door, and Koa slowed into a confident stride, giving the doorman a subtle nod.

"All set. I'm sure I'll see you soon." His voice was so smooth as if nothing happened at all.

Koa and Knox walked without hesitation or fear. Neither one gave a hint that anything had gone wrong.

The man didn't get up from his seat, he just let us go straight out the door. I was confused and surprised. He barely even looked up, his face buried in a dirty porno magazine.

Did he not hear the shot? Are gunshots a normal sound in this place?

The air hit my face as the door opened, and we stepped outside. Relief set in the second we left the building. The ocean air pulled me in, and for a split second the thought of trying to jump in again hit me. I just wanted to escape all of this shit. I was

spent. I couldn't take one more second of it.

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And as I readied myself to pull free for a second time, Koa's thumb swirls over the nub on my wrist. It's tender, soft, soothing. My eyes move to him, and he's scanning around us, making sure no one is coming.

There was protection in his touch as if he cared about me. It startled me, causing my heart to have a different beat.

I decided not to jump. I let Koa steal me away again. Maybe I was in shock. Or maybe the subtle motion of his thumb on my skin was enough to show me he's not all bad. Maybe, just maybe, there was some good in him too.

He refused to let Alek take me. He refused to let Alek hurt me.

He killed for me.

But he bought you himself. . . There's evil inside him, you just witnessed it.

There was a war inside my head between good and evil. A battle that wasn't going to be won by a single gesture. Yet, that move opened a door, a door for me to catch a glimpse of the man inside the beast.

Maybe I'm wrong about him.

Knox climbed into his car, and Koa guided me into his, then climbed in the front. There were no quick tires as we drove out of the lot. He wasn't hitting the gas hard, trying to get away.

He wasn't afraid.

And neither am I.

He stole one thing from me and replaced it with another.

He stole my fear and gave me safety.

Chapter Seven

Aubrey

"Are you hungry?" he asked as we headed inside the house.

"No, not after that," I said, my fingers coming up to touch the tender bruises on my neck. I could feel where Alek's fingertips had been, the indentations still deep crevices on my throat.

"That's shouldn't have happened, but he gave me no choice."

Standing in the kitchen, I kept my eyes firmly on him. "You could have let him kill me."

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Koa's expression softened as he stepped to the fridge. "No, I couldn't." He opened the fridge and started pulling out ingredients as if this conversation was about the weather. He wasn't phased at all about putting a bullet in that guy's head. "He doesn't get to play God with you." Koa pointed at me with a carrot, then set it on the counter.

Crossing my arms, I fiddled with my lower lip. I was nervous, unsure if he had any conscience at all because he didn't sound rattled.

"Doesn't it bother you at all that you just killed a man?"

"Should it? Because from where I was standing, you needed me to step in. Or do you think he was one of the good guys?"

"I don't know, but good or bad, you still took his life."

"Would you rather I just let him kill you?"

"That's not what I mean. I just don't see how can be so cavalier about it."

"It seemed like a pretty simple answer to the problem. Either he killed you, or I killed him. You aren't his, he didn't have the right to even touch you, let alone threaten your life." He shrugged his shoulder, taking his gun out from his waist and setting it on the counter.

"You're right—you own me." Tilting my head, I glared at him.

"I don't mean it like that, I just mean that he had no right to take you from me, just

because you told him to fuck off."

"You're still not giving me an answer." Wrapping my arms tighter around my ribs, I angled my head more. "Does it bother you that you killed him?"

"He was a bad man, he's lucky to have lived this long anyway."

"I'm not saying he didn't deserve it—"

Koa pulled out a wooden cutting board and a large chopping knife. "Then stop acting like I did something wrong, and thank me for saving your fucking life."

Veering my stare, I took a step towards him. "You think that makes you better than him? That you're different? Like you're some fucking saint? Can't you see you're the same person? You bought me! You took me! You stole my life too! My life isn't even mine anymore!"

"I saved you," he said, his voice sharp as the knife he was holding. "You just don't realize it yet."

Huffing under my breath, I dropped my arms to my sides and started to walk away. He was delusional, living in some world where he was the king and decided everyone's fate. I was nothing more than property.

There was no point in even trying to see if there was a shred of humanity left inside him. His answer was enough.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked as he chopped up vegetables.

"My room," I said, looking back at him over my shoulder. "Unless you want to put a bullet in my head too?"

Shaking his head no, he pointed at the stool with the knife. "Sit."

"I don't want to sit."

"I'm not asking, I'm telling. Sit."

Turning around slowly, I walked to the counter and climbed onto one of the stools. He continued with cutting vegetables, his hand moving quickly with the knife. He wasn't phased by anything. Not buying a person, and not killing a man.

"You cook?" he asked as he lifted the cutting board, and dumped the vegetables inside a big pot.

My head moved side to side lightly. "No."

"Come here." He pushed the cutting board into the sink and took out another one.

"I'd rather—"

Cutting me off, he laid down the knife and rested both hands on the counter. "You might as well learn something new while you're here." His eyes shot up to mine and he lifted one brow. "You were with Virgo for how long?"

"I don't really know, weeks, months. . ." Pausing, I moved my fingertips across the smooth countertop. "Too long."

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"Then let me give you something he didn't, let me teach you something real."

Biting on my lip, I was hesitant to give any trust to that man. He smiled softly and tipped his head for me to his side.

"Fine," I answered, dropping down from the stool, and standing next to him. He slid the cutting board over and held the knife out to me. "You sure you trust me with this?" I asked. "What if I try to use it against you."

"You won't, you don't have it in you."

My lips pulled taut as I held the knife up in my hand. "You don't know me well enough to know that for sure."

"I can see it in your eyes," he said as he stepped to the fridge. Dropping a thick chunk of meat onto the board, he held out his arms. "But if you do try, you better make sure you're on point, you'll only get one chance."

I held the knife out, aiming the sharp tip in his direction. "I could do it, I could kill you right here."

"Go on, do it then." Koa turned to face me head-on, puffing up his chest, and taking a step in towards the knife.

My hand started shaking as I actually debated jamming it in the center of his chest. I was trembling so much the knife was rattling side to side as I inhaled a deep breath, trying to steady my muscles.

Koa grinned, dropping his shoulders as he said, "You're not a killer, little minx, and I won't let you start now. Once you cross that line, you can't ever go back." He reached out slowly and gripped my wrist. "Here, let me show you."

Standing quietly, his eyes darted between mine as he gave me a little smile. Twisting my body gently, Koa guided the knife to the meat and stepped up close behind me.

"Here, you want to cut against the grain." The sharp knife slipped through the meat like it was butter, and the slab fell over with a wet smack. "Can you see it? The way the fibers are running parallel down the meat."

He used my hand again as if it was his own, and sliced another chunk. Adjusting on his feet, he pressed in even closer. I could feel him as he took a breath, the way his chest reached out and grazed my back with each inhale.

I was waiting for the next one, anticipating with bitter need his chest pressing against my back again. It was terrifying and alluring all at once. I liked the way he felt there. I felt safe and protected, but I also felt fear, a fear that he'd use me however he wanted until he felt full and threw me away.

Leaning over my shoulder, he rested his head by my ear. "You try," he said, his voice the softest I'd heard since I'd been there. The warmth of his breath rolled down my neck, bristling my skin, and making my muscles quiver.

His cologne swirled up around my face, and his fingers glided down the back of my hand as he pulled away. But he didn't step back, he stayed close, wrapping me in his arms as he rested flat hands on the counter.

I wanted to smell him more, to enjoy the notes of sandalwood and juniper as he hovered over me, manipulating my body in ways I'd never felt before. My heart was pounding, my stomach was fluttering with a million butterflies.

What the hell is going on with me?

He set my hand on the edge of the pan and helped me pour the meat into the pot. Placing one seasoning at a time in my palm, we sprinkled them into the food together until he thought there was enough.

The flame on the stove heated the beef stock inside, and we stirred everything together. It was the most sensual thing I'd ever done with someone that wasn't sexual. The scent of the food filled the room around us, and once it was boiling, we lowered the heat and covered it to let it simmer.

Every touch was gentle, precise, and drawing up feelings inside me I thought were dead. The butterflies turned into a hoard of locusts, and the air around us was thick as molasses, making it hard for me to breathe.

I never knew cooking food could be so arousing. My thighs were rubbing back and forth, and there was a warm, slick puddle building between my legs. The feelings inside me were foreign, I didn't want them to be real, but they were here, fresh and alive.

"Alright," he said, reaching under the counter and pulling out a bag of flour. "Now let's make some bread."

He left me to gather a few other items, and instantly I was cold. The heat from his body was gone, causing me to shiver like I was standing in the snow.

Come back. The request sat silently in my head.

Setting down a bowl, he handed me things to add together; sugar, water, yeast, and then he dumped it into a large bowl with the flour we measured out. Using his hands, he mixed the dough until it lifted off the inside walls of the bowl.

"Alright, sprinkle some flour on the counter."

Doing as he asked, he came back behind me, and I embraced his warmth. I felt my body lean back as he leaned in. I felt my heart start to pound as he brought his face over my shoulder, and our cheeks were almost touching.

"Here, we need to work it like this." His hands found mine, and we kneaded the ball of dough together.

I had no idea what was wrong with me. I was supposed to hate this man, but every second we stood there like that, close and snuggled together, I felt my body changing.

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My heart was hammering in my chest, but for all the wrong reasons. It used to beat for freedom. It used to pound for a chance at a brand new life.

And now it was pounding for him. For his warm embrace. For his rock hard muscles. For his fearlessness to keep me safe; even if it was just for his own pleasure. He saved me.

Turning to face him, I asked, "Why me?"

"What?" His fingers slid between mine as we pressed the dough and rolled it out.

"Why me? Why'd you choose me, and not someone else? There were a lot of girls to choose from."

Koa's lips closed as he kept his eyes on the ball of dough. "Because you didn't belong there." He turned his face to mine and we were nose to nose. There was hardly any space between our faces, our lips so close he could kiss me if he wanted to.

"There's no way for you to know that. You saw me from a distance."

"It was in your eyes, little minx. You can tell a lot about someone from just their eyes."

Squinting slightly, I peered deep into his gaze. "I don't see anything in your eyes."

"That's because you're not really looking. You see what you want to see, or you see what you think you know. But you'll learn, not everything is as it seems, sometimes

you have look deeper."

His mouth parted, my lips opened. His tongue tempted the opening, lightly licking his bottom lip. I nibbled on my bottom lip, anticipating what I wanted to come next.

Kiss me. . .

I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to hold me. I wanted him to help me feel human again. To feel like a woman again. To feel alive again, like my life wasn't truly over, it was just beginning.

Our eyes were frozen on each other, his gaze penetrating me to the core. And as quickly as it happened, it was gone.

Koa pulled away, taking a step to the side and wiping his hands on a dishtowel. "Alright, I think that's good. We need to let it rest, and then we can roll it out and bake it."

He swiftly took a few steps back, diverting his attention from me to cleaning up the dishes.

"I can do that," I said. "Let me help."

"No, I got it. Why don't you go upstairs and I'll call you when dinner is ready."

Bowing my head, I backed out the door and head upstairs to my room.

What the hell was that? What is happening to me?

I was afraid of what was brewing inside me. Of the demons that were taking over and allowing me to feel anything for the evil that purchased me like a painting in an art

show. He was a wolf in sheep's clothing, taunting me with happiness before stealing it all away.

I knew better than that. I couldn't drop my guard for a guy like Koa.

He called me his minx. . .

I called him my nightmare.

Chapter Eight

Koa

What the fuck am I doing?

The thought drifted around in my head as I watched her in the garden from my window. She had been here for about a week, and I'd been fighting every instinct in my body to devour her whole. I wanted to take her, I wanted to take her so fucking bad it hurt.

It was like an animal was living inside me, one that only wanted to take. Every time I was near her, all I could think about was tearing her clothes off and fucking her. I knew I couldn't, but it was getting harder and harder to tame the wild inside me.

My little minx, with all her natural beauty. She killed me and didn't even know it. With curly black hair, and big, bright green eyes, she made my cock jerk. The way she played with her lips when she was nervous. The way her eyes wanted to hit the floor when I looked right at her, but she fought it. I could see the strength building inside her.

It fucking pissed me off that Virgo did this to her. That he tried to break her into a million pieces, for the pleasure of someone else. That was what he did, that was what they all did. They mind fucked their girls until there was nothing left but a malleable form to play with.

Except for my minx, she wasn't totally broken. She was a wildfire inside, her flame a

roaring inferno that he could never touch.

My eyes followed her as she moved through the garden. Tipping her head up, she soaked in the sun. The light freckles that ran across the bridge of her nose lit up, and I wanted to lick each one, then run my tongue up and down her entire body. Tasting her, drinking her in, enjoying all she had to offer.

She flaunted through the garden, touching every petal she passed. She didn't notice me spying on her from the window. She was completely consumed by her surroundings.

Her innocence is daunting.

Cupping a handful of daisies, she brought the bundle to her nose and smelled them. The corner of her lip peeled up into a small smile. It was faint, almost missable, but it was the first smile I'd seen on her, and she was wearing it beautifully.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, so I pulled it out, to see it was my brother. "Yeah?" I asked, my eyes steady on my muse.

"Where the fuck you been? I've been trying to call you for days."

"I've been busy."

"Right, busy fucking your new toy?" Knox laughed, his chuckle crackling through the speaker.

"You're a fucking asshole, you know that?" Sighing loudly, I said, "Go fuck yourself, Knox."

"Well, what else am I supposed to think? I haven't heard shit from you. Any news on

Alek? Are we good?" he asked.

Pouring myself a glass of scotch, I sipped it as I looked out the window, enjoying the view. "Are you scared?"

"No, I'm not the one that shot him, asshole."

I was half paying attention to him. I didn't really care what he thought about any of it. Alek deserved what he got. I have no regrets.

I was more consumed by her.

She glanced around for a second, scanning the dense forest around her. I was curious if she'd go for it. Would she run?

Her eyes danced around, but as quickly as the thought seemed to appear, it was gone, and she was smelling the flowers again.

Good girl.

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I didn't lie when I told her the trees have eyes. I'd know where she was before she'd ever find her way out.

"You fucked up a good deal, man." Knox's voice scratched through my ear, making me cringe.

"Yeah, well, sometimes shit just doesn't work out."

"That's not what this was. You fucked it all up for us." His voice teetered on the edge of yelling. I could hear him clenching his teeth as he talked.

Yeah, and I'd do it again.

"I've got to let you go." I wasn't going to defend myself to him. I made a choice, and I stand by it.

We've both done things to get where we are. He's not a fucking angel. This business, what we turned it into, it took both of us to cross that line to have the respect we do from this world.

My brother and I took over the family business after our father passed away when we were barely adults. Three generations of builders, our grandfather built planes, our father built planes, and now we built planes. This was our legacy.

"I'm coming over."

"No."

"Why not? Because you'll be too busy fucking the whore you purchased?"

"Don't fucking call her that, Knox." My teeth ground down as I spoke.

"Are you kidding me? You bought her from a whore house, dude, what else should I call her?"

"Fuck you, I got to go," I snapped, hanging up the phone.

Hearing him call her a whore made me angry. It twisted my insides and caused my muscles to twitch. I was ready to punch something. Clenching the phone in my hand, I threw it against the couch.

Glancing back out the window, she was still wandering. Her skin glowed in the sun, her cheeks slightly turning pink.

Refilling my glass, I poured a second one for her and headed outside. I wanted her name, but she still wouldn't give it to me. I was determined to get it though. I wanted every last piece of her.

She didn't trust me, not that I expected her to. She'd been through a lot, far more than I'd probably ever understand.

I had been to the Canary a few times over the years. Virgo was a big client of ours, having hired us to build him three planes.

He was always courteous, welcoming my brother and me into his world without question. And it wasn't until the night I saw her that I finally decided to truly step into his world. I couldn't leave without her.

Strolling into the garden, I came up behind her as she was peering at a cluster of pink

flowers. "Begonias," I said softly over her shoulder.

"Ah!" she yelled, quickly turning around and slugging me in the face. "Oh, shit! I didn't mean to hit you," she said instantly, throwing her hands up to cover her mouth.

I should have known better than to sneak up on her like that.

My jaw throbbed, so I held the glass of liquor to my face and smirked. "Nice shot." Chuckling, I passed her the other glass and rocked my jaw side to side. "You have a good punch for someone with such thin arms." Winking, I gave her a playful grin.

"You scared me, I didn't hear you behind me at all. Are you okay?" she asked, her eyes full of concern. "Did I hurt you?"

It was nice to hear the worry in her voice. It meant I was doing what I set out to do, to show her that not all of us are rooted in evil.

"Yeah, I'm alright, don't worry about it." Rubbing my chin, I said, "I was just telling you those are Begonias."

"These?" she asked, reaching out and touching one.

"Yeah, they're my favorite. Do you know what the other name for them is?" She shook her head no as she coddled the drink in her hands. "Pink Minx."

"Minx, huh?"

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"Yeah," I said with a smile.

She looked at me from the corner of her eyes and arched a brow. "Gee sounds familiar."

"Well, you won't give me your name, so I had to give you one of my own." Shrugging my shoulder, I took a sip of the alcohol. "You could just give me yours, I'd prefer to call you by your real name."

"I'm sure you would." She twisted the glass in her hand, spinning it around and around. "But, you haven't earned it yet."

"Fine." Taking a step in, I pinched her chin between my fingers. Lifting her face high, I smiled. "Minx it is then."

Her eyes flashed, pupils growing wide as she ran her tongue across her bottom lip. Her skin was soft as velvet as I stroked the curve of her jaw.

Parting her lips, she exhaled a slow breath. Her chest snapped out, and she swallowed hard at the same time. Tilting her head, she looked up at me under hooded lids. Blinking slowly, her lashes fanned her lids like small wings. The sun hit her face perfectly right then, causing her eyes to sparkle like sea glass.

Fuck, I want to kiss her.

I leaned in, slowly lowering my face to hers, ready to feel her lips on mine. We were so close, her lips were right there, and I thought for a brief moment that I was going

to get what I craved.

Spinning away quickly, she took a long step back. "So. . ." she paused, running her hand through her hair nervously. "This garden is amazing."

She's not ready, but she will be.

Smirking, I twisted away from her as I said, "The key to beautiful flowers is pruning. You need to cut off the dead leaves and branches, giving them room to breathe." Looking back at her, I plucked a Begonia free. "You know, you're a lot like these flowers."

"How's that?" she asked.

Spinning the stem of the flower between my fingers, I dipped my head and stared down at her. "I cut the dead off of you, now you can grow."

She goes quiet, tapping her finger against the glass as it hovered near her lips. Fuck, I just wanted to kiss those lips so badly. I could take her so easily, she'd never be able to fight me off. I could do it. I could end the need I felt inside.

No, I'm not a thief.

I won't steal from her, she had to give it to me willingly. That was the only way this would work. No force. No demands. She had to want it too.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, looking into the drink before taking a long sip. "You must want something. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that men like you always have an ulterior motive."

"You know exactly what I want. I want your name."

"Why? It doesn't matter what my name is, does it? I'm going to have to be whoever you want me to be, right? Isn't that how this works?"

Tilting my head, my lips folded down. "Haven't you learned yet that I'm not like those other men? I'm different, not all of us are the same."

"You're not different, no matter how much you try to convince yourself you are. You still bought me, you dragged me here, you killed that guy. You did that, just you." She jabbed a finger in my direction and took a small step in. "So, please, tell me what makes you different."

Grinding my teeth, I tried to keep myself calm. I hated being compared to the scumbags she was thinking of. I wasn't them. I'd never been them. We were very different people.

"I'm nothing like them." My voice hinges on the last word, and my hand clenched tightly around the glass. "Never," I growled, closing the distance between us, and looming over her. "Never compare me to those pieces of shit again. Understand?"

"Yeah, I understand. You can't handle the truth, can you? Is that why you don't have any mirrors in your home? Because you can't stand to look at yourself?"

The glass shattered in my palm as I squeezed, exploding into a million pieces. Something warm started to trickle down between my knuckles, and drip off my fingertips.

Her eyes were huge as saucers, and I hated myself instantly. I had just given her another reason to hate me all over again.

She dropped her glass to the ground, and took a few quick steps back, reaching behind herself as if she might find something there to save her.

This girl wasn't letting herself see the truth. She refused to see what I had to offer her.

True Freedom.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

The more she told me I was just like the men I hated, the men I found disgusting, the men who didn't deserve to breathe one more fucking breath on this earth, the more I hated what I'd become.

I willingly stepped into this world. The money was amazing, it drove straight into their hands. I was selfish.

"I'm nothing like them." Dabbing my hand in the air, blood dripped off my fingers, staining the ground with red raindrops.

Her eyes moved to my hand, her fear washing away as she saw the blood.

"You're hurt, let me see it," she said, attempting to reach out and take my hand.

Pulling away, I clenched a bloody fist and tipped my chin higher. "I don't want your fucking help, if you hate me, then hate me. I don't need you walking around pretending to be nice because you think it'll get you out of here." Pulling a handkerchief out of my pocket, I wrapped it around my hand and tied it.

I was angry. My blood was boiling, my chest was aching, and my muscles were tensing up. All because I dipped my hand once in the pot. But it didn't mean I was anything like the assholes who drank from it.

Can't she see I fucking saved her?

"That's not—" she started to say.

"I don't need a damn explanation, just fucking be real. If you want to scream at me, scream at me. But, don't antagonize me, don't say stupid shit to get under my skin, because if you'd actually open your eyes, if you'd actually listen to a fucking word I say to you, maybe you'd see someone else. Because right now, you're never getting out. All you can see is hate. You live in a gray world, minx, and that's too bad."

She blinked slowly with big doe eyes, her expression soft at first, almost as if she couldn't understand exactly what I was saying. Then it changed. Her lips turned down, her brows furrowed.

"You have no right! No right to tell me what I'm living in when my entire life has been stolen from me!" Her hands flew through the air as she came alive with emotion. "If you want to show me you're different, then do the one thing no one else has, and let me go!"

She was pleading with me, begging me to give her back her life.

"I'm sorry, I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. You're the only one who can do it." My little minx dropped to her knees, her eyes glassy as she peered up at me. "Look at me. Is this what you want? Do you want me to be the obedient little servant? Because I will. All you need to do is just promise to let me go when you're done."

That's not why you're here.

My poor minx. Lost and broken, on her knees begging for something she can't get from me. I wasn't the one who locked her up, but I couldn't free her. She had to do that herself. She was the only one who could craft that escape.

Because right now, she was exactly what Virgo wanted her to be. It made me sad for

her. To know she was in such pain, living with such hurt, and not able to see the gift I was giving her.

But I couldn't just release her out into the world. That wasn't how this was going to work.

"Get up," I said, flipping my hand for her stand.

"Please," she begged, falling forward and pressing her body against my calves. "I'll be whatever you want me to be, I don't care. Just promise to let me go when you're done. That's all I want."

Taking her hands off my legs, I pulled her to her feet. "Get up. You don't belong at my feet, you belong at my side."

A single tear dripped down over her cheek as her eyes shifted between mine. Softly, I ran my fingers around her face, smoothing my thumb across her bottom lip.

Smacking my hand away, she snarled, "Don't fucking touch me." Grimacing, her nostrils flared. "I fucking hate you." Through clenched teeth, her words tumbled out. "I fucking hate you."

"You don't hate me," I said, taking a step in. "I've only been nice to you."

"You call this nice!" Throwing her arms in the air, she shook her head wildly. "You're fucking insane. You're refusing to let me leave! How is that nice?"

I loved the spunk in her, it was beautiful, raw, and real. It was the fucking sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

"Calm down," I said, patting open hands in the air. "I'm just trying to help you."

"Fuck you," she barked, her eyes turning to pinpricks as her pupils darkened. She took a brazen step forward, her chest puffing up. "You are a fucking weak weak man."

The corner of my mouth pulled up into a slight smile. "Is that right? You think I'm weak?"

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"I know you're weak." Her finger flew up, poking me in the chest. "You want to be like those men, but you don't have it in you. So guess what? I'm fucking leaving." She spun on her heels, glancing left to right as if she was deciding which way to run.

She lifted her leg like she was about to sprint, but I snagged her around the waist and twisted her back to face me. My little minx was furious, her eyes igniting with rage as she began hitting me over and over. She wasn't aiming for anywhere in particular, she was just flailing.

"Stop it, just stop." Pulling her in closer, I hugged her tight. "You know I'm not like them, you can feel it. I know you can feel it."

"You don't know fucking shit about me!" She wriggled her body back and forth, but she couldn't break free.

Because I wasn't letting her go.

"I know plenty. If you truly believed I was so terrible, you'd be cowering in a corner, not challenging me."

"Virgo told you I was feisty, he wasn't lying."

"That doesn't mean shit. You could have run at any point, but you haven't. You stayed. You stayed because you know I'll keep you safe. You stayed because you know I can protect you." Her eyes met mine, her lips going slack as if she was finally hearing me. "Deep down, you know I won't hurt you."

"You're a liar."

"I'm not."

Her chin lifted higher, and for a moment I anticipated her spitting in my face. She didn't. She closed her mouth tight and thinned her lids. "You're a fucking liar!" With a closed fist, she punched me in the cheek.

One fist after another began to pummel my face. Releasing one hand off her waist, I grabbed both her arms and lifted them above her head. She was breathing heavily as her eyes stayed firmly on mine.

Our faces were so close, our noses almost touching, lips hovering over each other. I could feel the heat of her breath as she exhaled. Her eyes flicked between mine as she licked her lips.

Her cheeks were rosy from all the adrenaline, and there was a thin sheen of sweat across her forehead. Neither one of us was talking, we were just staring at each other.

Curling my arm tighter around her waist, I kept her arms suspended in the air over her head. "Are you done?" I asked, my voice a whisper, my lips moving even closer to hers.

Nibbling on her bottom lip, I watched her eyes change. The hardness disappeared, the shadow of hate slowly peeling away.

She can see it now. She can see the truth.

I won't hurt her. That was never my intention.

Every inhale forced her tits against my chest. Her nipples hard as diamond, making

my cock hard.

"If I wanted to hurt you, I would have by now. But I don't, and I know you know that. You can feel it. Tell me you can feel it."

Her eyes shifted around my face, across my forehead, down the bridge of my nose, and over my lips. They hovered there for a moment, twinkling with lost emotions.

She licked her lips again, this time slower and more defined. Everything changed at that moment. Her body leaned into mine, her lids lowered seductively, her breathing turned shallow.

Trust yourself, minx. Trust what you feel, not what you think.

Tugging her bottom lip in, she chewed on the inside of her cheek. "I don't—" she started to say, but I quickly cut her off with a kiss.

I didn't care. I had to kiss her. At least once, one kiss was all I wanted.

With bruising passion, I crushed my lips against hers. Her body stiffened in shock momentarily, then relaxed as I released her arms, and scooped her face in my hands.

I wasn't sure how long the kiss would last. Any second she could break away, and slap me. So, I kissed her as long as she'd let me.

Her lips started to open, permitting me to kiss her deeper and harder. My tongue accepts her invitation, sweeping through her mouth, twirling and wrapping around her tongue. She tasted just like I imagined; sweet, delicate, with the sharpness of scotch.

Minx closed the gap between us, embracing the kiss. This wasn't a kiss between

enemies, it was a kiss between two people in need.

I needed her, and she needed me, even if she wouldn't admit it.

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Tipping her head back further, she accepted me, she gave herself to me. Her hands came up and gently grasped my wrists as she exhaled a light moan into our kiss.

Slipping my hands down her face and over her neck, I kept moving lower, grazing her sides. She shivered lightly as my fingertips raked her ribs, reaching around to grip her ass. Lifting her off the ground, she didn't resist. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and her arms curled around my neck.

I loved the way she felt coiled around me, her body snugly pressed against mine. It felt right, she fit like she was meant to be around me that way. A lost puzzle piece that finally found it's space.

Her tits rubbed my chest, and her breathing was growing in intensity as our kiss became delirious and manic. That was what I wanted, that was what I'd been waiting for.

For her to permit me to heal her.

Suddenly, she broke away, pushing her hands against my shoulders. "Koa, I don't know if this is right," she said, her eyes frantically searching mine. "My head is fucked up, I'm not sure I'm thinking clearly."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"That's the fucked up thing, I want to keep going. I need to feel something good to help me wash away the bad."

"This is your choice, minx, not mine."

She nodded softly before making her decision known. Throwing herself forward, she kissed me on her own. I was letting her take charge, giving her the choice. It was something she'd been denied, and I was giving it back to her.

"You want me to make you feel good?" I asked.

She eagerly said, "Yes, please, if you're really not like the men that hurt me, then make me feel good."

"And you want this? You're sure?"

"Don't make me beg, just give me what I want." Her voice came out smooth and firm. She wasn't questioning herself, so I wouldn't either. I gave her the chance to say no, but she decided what would happen next.

I won't deny her what she wants.

Spinning us around, I unwrapped her from my body and cradled her in my arms as I walked us to the house. She nuzzled her face against my chest, and the very tips of her fingers teased the hair on the back of my head.

If she needed pleasure, I'd give her pleasure.

If she needed a release, I'd give her that release.

I'd give her anything she wanted for as long as she'd let me keep her.

Chapter Nine

Aubrey

His arms were strong, carrying me as if I weighed nothing. He held me firmly against his chest, and I allowed myself to rest against him.

Running my fingers down the side of his face, I couldn't deny the pull I felt.

There was a bristle of stubble on his cheek that scratched against the pads of my fingers. That small bit of shadow opened a door inside me. My stomach clenched and my sex began to come alive, pulsing with new life.

The feeling flowing through my body, zipping from head to my toe, came to a stop as it coalesced as a heat seeded deep in my core. Every inch of my body was drowning, sinking faster and faster into Koa.

He moved through the house with long sweeping strides, taking me to an area I hadn't been before. Carrying me up a spiral staircase, he came to a stop at a set of french doors. There was a design intricately carved in the wood. Both halves of the image came together in the center, and created the picture of a woman with four arms, standing in the middle of a giant flower.

It was incredible. I attempted to reach out and run my finger through one of the thick paths that made up her dress, but, Koa threw the door open, casting a rush of air through the room that ruffled the curtains on the giant window.

Giving the door a hard kick, it slammed shut behind us, sealing me inside with a man I knew I shouldn't want. I shouldn't have these feelings rolling through my body. My heart shouldn't be beating with excitement. My pussy shouldn't be throbbing with desire.

Everything I felt was wrong, and yet, I was embracing it. I surrendered myself to the moment because it was too strong to ignore anymore. The subtle touches, the way his eyes looked soft. The way his cologne filled me and made me feel warm, the sensual cooking lessons; all of it was built without torture and pain.

I didn't know if he was grooming me for something else, but right then, I didn't care.

Looking around the room, everything looked touched by age. There was an old Victorian style dresser against the wall, with matching nightstands on both sides of the bed. A king-sized bed was in the center of the room with tall metal posts, sitting on top of a plush navy colored rug. There was a fireplace in the wall across from the bed, and light fixtures that looked like they used to be made for candles.

Koa didn't miss a step, heading straight for the bed, and laying me down like I was made of glass. Placing me down softly, he gently slipped his hands free from under my back. Koa's eyes stayed steady on mine as he pulled away, standing over me like a powerful god.

My body sunk into the thick, silky comforter as Koa stood at the edge of the bed and looked down at me. His lips were taut, and his eyes, his eyes were full of need. He wanted this, he needed this, maybe more than I did.

Seeing the want in his gaze turned me on. I didn't feel like an object right then. I felt like a woman.

My legs rubbed back and forth as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt one button at a time.

He was going painfully slow, so slow I was tempted to jump up, and rip it the rest of the way myself.

Every nerve in my body was firing off with excitement, my heart pumping fast. I was screaming on the inside for this. I needed this more than I ever could have realized.

I needed to feel pleasure and not the pain that was fermenting inside me. I needed to feel wanted, and not discarded like trash. I just needed to feel alive.

I should be afraid of him, but the voice inside my head was telling me if he had wanted to hurt me, he would have by now. He hasn't. And for that I'm grateful.

He dropped his shirt to the floor, exposing corded abs on a hard torso, and thick arms covered in sleeves of ink. His eyes licked my body as his hands dropped to his pants, and he removes them as painstakingly slow as his shirt.

"You're sure you still want this?" he asked, pulling his button free and unzipping his pants. "Because I can't guarantee I'll be able to stop myself once I'm inside you."

Rolling my hips, my brain was trying to find any rational thought to stop what I was about to do, but it came up empty.

"Don't stop, I don't want you to stop."

He growled, pulling his pants down his legs and stepping out of them. His cock was hard, tenting his briefs. My eyes froze, staring at the engorged muscle.

"Like what you see?" Koa asked, his tongue tempting the edge of his lips as he bit the tip.

Running my hands up and down my thighs, I couldn't hide the desire that took over.

My pussy was wet, aching for him to erase every memory and replace it with new ones.

"Please," I said, moving my hands back up over my ribs, and squeezing my tits. "Help me forget, help me heal."

Koa's eyes darkened as he crawled up the bed, splitting my legs wide open. His hands rested by my face as his cock pressed against my mound from behind his boxers. Brushing the loose hair out of my face, he whispered. "Last chance to tell me to get the hell off, and go fuck myself."

My eyes searched his, trying to find any reason to end it now. He claimed if I looked hard enough, I'd find the answers, I'd see him. I couldn't see anything. No lies. No truths. All I saw was an escape.

I want to see him so bad. Maybe I'm just too damaged to see anything at all.

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"Make me forget," I answered, my words full, real, lifting off my lips on desire. "And then make me remember."

"Remember what?" he asked, his fingers gliding down the side of my face as his eyes danced between mine.

"What it feels like to be alive."

Koa's lids dropped, and his lips pulled back into a knowing smile. "Little minx, I can give you more than just that. I can give you everything you've ever wanted."

He trailed his fingers down my neck slowly, making me swallow hard. His fingers kept moving, slipping down my chest, over my ribs, and across my quivering belly. Cupping my mound, he lowered his mouth to my ear.

"Just don't forget that I can also take it all away." His breath warmed the shell of my ear as he nipped it with his teeth, sending another rush of tingles through my muscles.

Sucking in a quick gasp of air, he chuckled against my cheek.

"Don't be afraid, that's not a threat. Embrace what I have to offer you." He pressed his lips to my face, fluttering kisses down my throat, and coaxing a moan out from me.

The sound startled me for a second. I didn't expect it. How could a man like that make me feel this way? How could someone with so much darkness following them, ever make my body come alive?

My pussy was wet, and the knots in my stomach twisted tighter. His palm pressed down, massaging my clit as he watched me closely.

"You're soaked," he said, rubbing his hand against me a little harder. "You like this. I don't think your body forgot a thing at all."

My body began to move towards him, back arching, hips rocking, and I'm not controlling it. It was like there were strings on my body, strings he was pulling methodically.

Koa's lips crossed my jaw, kissing their way from one side to the next. He feathered more kisses up my cheek, and back down until the only spot left he hadn't touched was my mouth.

Licking my lips, I waited. I waited for him to take me, to free me from this burden I'd been carrying and couldn't shed.

Exhaling a hard breath, his face cast a shadow over mine, hovering so close our lips were almost touching.

My eyes closed naturally. I couldn't take it. I was afraid.

It wasn't fear of him. It was fear of finding this joy again and having to let it go. What if it didn't last? What if after giving myself to him, he decided to sell me to someone else? I wasn't sure I'd be able to handle it.

Running his thumb across the apple of my cheek, he whispered. "Open your eyes, minx, I want to see you."

Slowly, my eyes peeled open, and I was struck with bursts of colors in his eyes I hadn't seen before. Ambers, yellows, golds, so many exploding at one time.

Koa smiled as his fingers curled into the hem of my pants. I was trembling as he worked them off my body. My thighs were shaking so much, he placed his hand on the inside of my leg to hold me still and glanced up at me.

"Let me give you what you want." Kissing the inside of my thigh, Koa worked his way up, closer and closer to my pussy.

My legs attempted to close around his head, but he butterflied them open with his strong hands and pinned them to the bed. Growling, he softly ran his tongue up my center and circled my clit.

"Mm," I groaned as my back snapped off the bed and my head tipped back.

He flicked his tongue over my swollen bud, drawing more and more moans out of my body. The sensation spread across my stomach as he lapped my pussy lick after lick.

His tongue speared inside my pussy, and he fucked me with his mouth. A wave of fire crackled through my muscles as goosebumps cascaded down my arms, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Screaming, I threw my hands into his hair, tearing at his roots as the orgasm seared me from the inside out. It came out of nowhere, taking me completely by surprise.

"You like that?" he asked, suckling my clit gently as his brows raised high. "I can make you feel good, little minx."

His words vibrated against my tender and swollen skin as I floated down slowly from the high he purged my veins with. It was like he injected me with something. His essence, his command, his darkness. . .

Koa rose from his knees, crawling up the bed towards me like a hungry lion. He was

starving. The gleam in his eyes told me he had a taste, but it wasn't enough. With fierce prowess, his muscles bulged and twisted as they carried him to me.

His face glistened in my arousal, but he didn't seem to notice or care. He crushed his lips against mine, and I could taste myself on his tongue. It was sweet, tangy, but it didn't make me want to shy away. I wanted more.

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Greedily, I sucked his tongue into my mouth and ran my fingers through his hair. Koa groaned into our kiss as he settled above me. His thick fingers tangled in my hair as our kiss turned messy and rabid.

We were breathing heavy, our chests rising and falling rapidly as if we were sucking the life out of each other. I'd never felt this unhinged or this lost in a moment. He had given me an option to stop at the beginning, but right then, I couldn't even stop myself if I wanted to.

Moving one hand to my tit, he squeezed, pinching my nipple and rolling it between his fingers. Koa pushed my shirt up, exposing my chest as our tongues swirled in this crazed dance.

Wriggling his hips, he slipped his boxers off. His hard erection glided easily between my wet lips as he shifted his hips against mine.

Our eyes connected as he broke our kiss. My breathing was already heavy and uneven as his eyes caused my body to stiffen. Koa rocked his hips, causing his shaft to rub my clit. I was still tender from the orgasm, my body a rumble of tender nerves.

The weight of his knuckles scraped lightly down my face, barely touching my cheek as he said, "Do you see me yet, little minx?"

Drawing his hips back, the tip of his cock found my entrance. Sucking in a gulp of air, I held my breath as the anticipation painted my skin in more goosebumps.

"I see you," I said, my voice crackling. Licking my lips, I arched my back as the

weight of his cock against my opening was making me delirious.

I wanted it, and needed it, and hated it all in the same breath.

Koa shook his head. "No you don't, but you will."

"How do you know what I see?" I asked, "You're not in my head."

"It's in your eyes, minx. You still have so much fear of me, it's written all over you. Your eyes let me in, but your body is screaming," he said, pushing just the tip of his cock inside my body.

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Your skin is warm," he said, pressing deeper into my body. "Your heart is racing." His cock spread my walls wide. "And your lungs, they're struggling to keep up. If that's not fear, then I don't know what is."

He was in control. Moving slow, painfully fucking slow, as he sunk inside my wet center.

"I'm not afraid of you," I said again, my words a whisper, but I was trying to be heard. "I'm not." I forced my voice out, pushing out confidence in my tone.

"I know that. You fear what I am, you fear what I can give you, and you fear what you feel inside for me."

Thrusting his hips, he drove the rest of his cock inside my body. My body tensed for a second, causing me to whimper softly and close my eyes on reflex.

Koa stilled with his massive dick inside my body. I could feel him breathing as he

lowered his lips to my ear, and ran the tip of his tongue around the edge. My body shivered as he pushed the hair away from my face.

"Look at me, minx."

My eyes opened, my heart jumped, and my lungs froze. He peered down on me, his pupils turning to pinpricks as he pulled his cock back and drove in with force.

"Don't close your eyes anymore," he commanded as he pistons his hips at a steady pace. "You can't see the world if you're eyes are closed the entire time."

My pussy grew wetter and wetter as he fucked me. I can't take my eyes off of his. With every thrust, the tension I felt slipped away. My muscles loosened, and the air filled my lungs.

It tasted different, sweeter, warmer, cleaner. And I couldn't help but wonder if this man was my escape. He was my gift.

Running my fingers down his back, my legs curled up around his hips, as my body made the choice for me. I didn't need to fear this pleasure.

Moaning, my back arched as he slammed against my clit. Digging my nails into the firm muscle of his back, I held on tight. Koa growled, his pace quickening as if he could sense my acceptance.

My stomach swirled with pleasure as his cock grew even harder, and still, our eyes were locked on each other. The orgasm exploded through every vein, every nerve, every pore, curling its long arms deep into my bones.

Koa crushed his lips against mine as his cock pulsed, pushing hot cum into my body. The kiss felt different. It felt more personal, more passionate as if he was trying to

steal a piece of me to keep just for himself.

Breaking away, Koa let his eyes settle on mine. The tips of his fingers gently ran down the side of my face as he steadied his breathing.

"Can you see me now?"

Chapter Ten

Koa

Opening my eyes, I rolled over, expecting to see her beside me.

She was gone.

Sitting up in bed, I felt her pillow, and it was cold. Running my hands down my face, I dropped them into my lap. I was still half asleep, trying to catch my bearings. Groaning slightly, I planted my feet on the floor and stood up with a slight wobble.

Where did she go?

Walking to her room, the door was shut, so I knocked lightly. "Minx?" Silence. Opening the door, I poked my head in and found it empty.

Raking a hand through my hair, I made my way downstairs. The sound of violins rolled down the hall, and I could smell the faint scent of something in the air.

Eggs and bacon.

Reaching the kitchen, she was standing at the stove with her eyes closed as she swayed her head slowly to the music, using the spatula in her hand as if she was conducting an orchestra.

Leaning against the door frame, I crossed my arms and just watched her. I enjoyed

seeing her that way, relaxed as if she was home in her own house. Her body moved, rolling like a goddess, her hips rocked, and her ass jiggled.

Opening her eyes, she folded the eggs in the pan, unaware that she had an audience.

Clapping loudly, I stepped into the room. "Beautiful," I said.

She jumped, startled by me. "You have to stop doing that." Holding her hand to her chest, she shook her head. "I hate being snuck up on."

Holding up my hand, I tilted my head and apologized. "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that again. I'm just happy I was far enough away you didn't sock me this time. I see you found my stereo," I said, taking a seat at the island.

She nodded as she poked at the eggs in the pan. "Yeah, I did. I hope it's alright that—"

Holding up my hand, I smiled. "It's fine. You don't need to apologize for anything. Besides, music is food for the soul." Closing my eyes, I swayed my hand in the air to the beat. "Beautiful, isn't it? So much power. Il ritorno—"

She cut me off, keeping her head down on the pan. "Di Ulisse in Patrie." She said it perfectly, her tongue rolling the R with her sexy little accent.

"You know what this is?"

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She nodded slightly and said, "Claudio Monteverdi, he wrote it for the Venetian opera not long before he died."

"Impressive. Not many people would even have the slightest idea."

Arching a brow, she looked back at me over her shoulder and gave me a half smile. "If there's one thing I know, it's opera."

"My brother hates this stuff. He'd rather put a bullet in his own head than sit through one act. But, my grandmother, she's the one who introduced me to opera. She used to love it. She'd put it on and cook in the kitchen, completely lost in the music." Listening to the voices, I could hear the desperation in the woman's tone. "I've always enjoyed it. You can feel the music. The sadness, the pain, the desperation. It's too bad I don't understand what they're saying." Chuckling, I shrugged a shoulder.

"This is the story of a husband and wife's commitment to each other. He comes home from war and finds out that three men are harassing his wife. In the end, he's able to get rid of them and take back his kingdom."

Eyeing her curiously, I squinted as I asked, "You're Italian, aren't you?"

She looked back at me over her shoulder with sharpness in her glare. "I never said that."

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"I didn't say that." Her voice was firm.

"I don't need you to say it out loud for me to know it's true." A smirk crept up on my face as she rolled her eyes.

Got ya.

Flicking her eyes back to the pan, she said, "Good detective work."

"It's something, I mean, you won't give me anything on your own." Standing up, I moved to her side, pressing my chest against her back. "So, tell me something else. What did you use to do when you lived in Italy?"

"You mean besides getting sold like livestock?" She pushed the spatula through the eggs, scrambling them. "I lived a normal life, totally normal. I was just a regular girl."

She was looking in the pan, but she wasn't with me anymore. She was someplace else in her mind. Maybe an old memory had just popped in. Or maybe she was remembering what it felt like before her world was turned upside down.

Wrapping my hands over her shoulders, I massaged her gently. "Come back to me, minx." My words caused her to shake and look up at me. She was back, grounded, her feet firmly on the kitchen floor and not in her head.

"I said it before, it doesn't matter. I'll never be able to be that girl ever again."

"That's not true."

She held the pan in her hand, pouring eggs onto the two plates she laid out. Adding a couple of strips of bacon, she shrugged as if she had no other option than to accept it. "It is true. It's a fact." She looked back at me over her shoulder, her eyes glistening with tears she was refusing to let free. "After everything, I've been through, after everything I've seen, how could I ever get back to the person I was?"

"You can start by telling me your name."

Slamming the pan down on the stove, she grabbed both plates. Shoving one towards me, she brushed past me and sat at the island. Shoveling a giant fork full into her mouth, she kept her eyes down.

Silence.

She wouldn't accept the fact she didn't have to abandon who she still was inside. No one can erase you. Whoever she was is in there, but this was something she'd have to see on her own.

Walking to the other side, I took a seat. I wasn't going to keep pressing her, she'd give me her name when she was ready. I just had to be patient.

"I have a meeting today."

"Great, should I expect it to be like the last one?" Her head joggled on her shoulders side to side, brows reaching up to her hairline.

"No, not a chance in hell, because I'm having it here. I won't be in that situation again. You can stay in your room, or walk around the garden, it's up to you." Taking a bite of the breakfast she made me, I pointed at the plate. "This is really good."

"It's just eggs."

"Doesn't mean they're not good." Scooping in another big bite into my mouth, I smiled.

"You're such an asshole," she said with a slight grin.

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"I know." Finishing the food, I placed my plate in the sink. "Leave the dishes. You cooked, I'll clean up later." Checking the time on my watch, I tapped the glass surface. "But I need to get ready, the meeting is in an hour. I'll come to find you when it's done. Alright?"

"So, you're hiding me like Cinderella? You want me to stay out of sight?"

"That's not what I said, but you know the people I work with. I'm assuming you'd rather not be a part of it. I'm sure you've had enough."

"You're just realizing that now?" Huffing under her breath, she scraped her fork against her plate as her eyes were down. "Why do you work with people like that?"

"Because those people pay the bills. I don't get involved in their lives, it's none of my business."

Standing up, her back snapped straight as she strolled past me, purposely brushing her shoulder against mine. "The second you bought me, you got involved. You're one of them now, I hope you realize this." She walked away, taking one last look at me over her shoulder. "I'll be in my room."

She's wrong about that. I'm not one of them.

I didn't buy her for the same reasons men go to those auctions. I couldn't save all the girls, but saving one. . . Saving her was the one thing I could do.

The doorbell rang, forcing me back into work mode. Adjusting the cuffs on my

sleeve, I pulled the door open.

"Gerry, you made it."

"Yeah, with no thanks to the dumb ass driver!" he yelled out to the silver car in my driveway. "The guy can't even follow simple fucking instructions." He stepped into my house before I even invited him inside. "I mean shit if you can't follow basic directions from a fucking computer, what good are you to me?" He laughed to himself as he pulled off his jacket and looked around. "Nice place, are we set to begin?"

"We are, Knox is already inside, so let's go." Holding out my arm, I directed him down the hall.

"Man," he said, folding his jacket over his arm as he looked around. "Looks like the plane business treats you well."

"I can't complain." Fanning out my arm, I said, "Right in here."

Knox was sitting back in one of the recliner chairs, sipping scotch on the rocks.

"Gerry, you remember Knox."

"Yes, Knox, good to see you again."

My brother nodded, slouching deeper into his seat as he took another full swig from his glass. He was still pissed about Alek. It was easy for me to see, my brother wasn't very good at hiding his feelings.

"I don't remember you being so quiet," Gerry said as he took the seat across from my brother.

"Yeah, well, not every day is the same," Knox answered as he stood briskly and walked to the bar. "Drink?" he asked Gerry.

"Sure."

"I'll take one too," I said, grabbing my folder with the plans I drew up for our prospective client.

"I bet you will." His voice was low, but I caught what he meant.

The second he got there, he started grilling me about the girl. He wanted to see her, borderline demanding me to serve her up on a silver platter, but I refused.

She wasn't some sideshow freak I was going to put on display for him or anyone else. That wasn't why I bought her.

Knox passed Gerry a drink, slamming the other one down on the table in front of me. "Here."

"Thanks," I said. Knox just grunted, dropping back into his chair with a full glass of his own. "So," Turning my attention back to Gerry, I asked, "You're looking for a small, two-seater, is that right?"

Opening the folder, I flipped through the loose pages.

"Yeah, something small, but I need room underneath." Gerry hissed as he took a sip, letting out a loud rush of air. "Woo, that's strong."

"Aged for the burn," I said. "What's the plane for?"

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"Do you ask all your clients what they need?"

"Well," I said, tapping a pen against my hand as I relaxed back. "Look, I'm not here to judge you. Your business is your business. But, I do need some details. You know the people we've worked with, I know the people you work with, so I think you can trust you're in good company. But, yes, I need to know for weight requirements, ventilation purposes, it all depends on what you're traveling with."

"How do I know I can really trust you?"

Braiding my fingers together, I leaned forward and rested my hands between my thighs. "Because you wouldn't be here if you didn't, and I wouldn't have you if I didn't trust you. It goes both ways."

Knox sucked down the rest of his drink and glanced between us. "If you'll excuse me, I need to use the John."

Sitting with Gerry, we went over a few different ideas I had for him. He's only transporting cocaine. It was an easy job. We were done in less than twenty minutes, and I was shaking his hand firmly, landing us another big job.

It was right then that I realized my brother wasn't with us. He hadn't been with us for quite a while.

Where the fuck is Knox?

Chapter Eleven

Aubrey

Running a finger across the records on the shelf, I pulled one out. There were so many opera records, dozens and dozens of them all lined up perfectly. Placing it on the record player, I set the needle down, and it crackled to life.

Koa's study upstairs was incredible. The giant window overlooked the garden, catching the sun just right. There was a wall of books, and directly across from it was a wall of records, with a single chair sitting next to the window.

Marian Anderson.

Running my finger around the edge of the record sleeve, her beautiful voice came through the speaker. Laying my head back, I closed my eyes and let this woman's voice infiltrate my soul.

That was the only thing I had in common with this man. My grandmother was an opera singer. She performed all over the world, and this. . . This made me feel like I was close to my family.

With my eyes closed tight, I let the music take me. It brought me home. It let me feel everything I'd lost. I can feel them.

Swaying a finger in the air, the needle suddenly slipped, causing the record to scratch and go silent. Sitting up, I turned around to see Koa's brother pinching the needle with his fingers and an evil smirk on his face.

"So, this is where my brother's hiding you," he said as he pushes the needle deep into the vinyl, causing it to scratch so high it hurt my ears.

Covering my ears, I jumped up from the chair, whipping around to face him. "What

do you want?" I asked with a slight tremble in my voice.

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Yanking the record off the player, he flipped it between his fingers as his smile thickened. "I bet you've said that a lot in your line of work." He chuckled to himself, but I wasn't laughing.

"Fuck you," I snapped. "I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for any of this."

"Ooh, a little attitude on you." Licking his lips, he bit down hard. "I like it."

Veering my stare, my arms were by my sides, hands clenched into tight fists. I didn't like this at all. Knox made me uncomfortable.

He walked close to the shelf, running his finger across the line of records. Pulling one out, he looked down at the cover and smiled to himself. "My fucking brother loves this garbage. I never understood why. It's shit if you ask me."

"No one asked you." My voice was cold and harsh. "And your brother has good taste, something you'd never understand."

Darting his eyes up to mine, his pupils turned to pinpricks. "Watch it, girl." Snapping the record in half, he dropped it to the floor. Taking out another one, he angled his head on his shoulder and snapped that one too.

Thinning my lips, I took a long step back, putting more space between us. "Did you just come here to break your brother's stuff?"

"Why? Is that so bad?" Sliding the pad of his finger down the row, he reached the end. His lips peeled back as he pushed his hand in and swept his arm hard, knocking

the entire row to the floor.

As his eyes met mine, I watched as his pupils dilated and turned ink black. It terrified me. An icy shiver ran up and down my spine. He looked so cruel as if he had come to torture me.

"Where's your brother?" I asked, moving behind the chair as he took a step in my direction.

"He's busy entertaining. So, I thought I'd come get some of my own entertainment. I mean, you are a whore. Right? You're only purpose is to please."

"I'm not a whore." I could feel the hate bubble heavy in my veins as my lungs contracted and the air thinned. "I never was."

"That's not what I was told." His lids hooded, and he peered at me with angry lust in his gaze.

Looking around quickly, I searched for something, anything, I could use to protect myself if I had to. There was nothing.

Knox walked smoothly through the room. No fear. No alarm or worry. "I'm here for a taste of the good stuff. That's what Virgo's girls are. Right? The best of the best?"

"I don't know. That asshole said a lot of things. It doesn't mean they were true."

Shrugging a shoulder, he let his head fall into his chest. "The only way for me to know is if I take you myself. Koa won't mind. We're brothers, brothers share."

Shaking my head, I took another step back. "No." My voice was firm, strong, and lacked any sign of fear.

I was going to stand tall. I was done being that girl. He wasn't going to lay a hand on me. I wouldn't stand for it.

"What did you just say?" he asked through grit teeth.

"I said no." Tipping my chin higher, I tried to show him I wasn't afraid of him.

Knox made a long, quick jump forward. His hand was around my throat before I could even react. With rigid fingers, he squeezed hard, cutting the air off almost instantly.

I could barely suck in a breath. Gasping, I clawed at his hand as my eyes began to water and swell.

"Who the fuck do you think you are? Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?" He pushed me backward, lifting me briefly off my feet to slam me against the wall.

"Pl—ple—" I tried to plead with him to let me go, but he wasn't listening.

Growling, his hand clasped tighter. "Shut the fuck up. I didn't come here to listen to you talk. You can beg me all you want, but it means shit to me. I want one thing and one thing only. And guess what?" he asked, lowering his face to my ear as he whispered. "You're going to give it to me. Because that's what you do, you're a fucking whore. And whores do what they're told."

Gasping for air, I dug my fingers into his hand, trying to pry them free. He eased up slightly, giving me a chance to inhale through a thin opening in my throat.

Gathering enough of a breath, I flared my nostrils as I seethed with such hatred. "Fuck you."

Knox smiled and ran his tongue across his teeth. "That's exactly right, whore."

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In one quick swoop, he threw me to the floor, and stood over me, opening and closing his fists at his side.

Rubbing my neck, I coughed loudly as my lungs eagerly sucked in as much air as they could. Looking up, Knox started to undo his belt. Driving my hands into the floor, I pushed myself back, trying to get to my feet.

This couldn't happen. Not again. I won't let it. I've been there before, taken against my will, forced to do things I never wanted to do. I'd rather die.

Scrambling backward, his mouth curls up as he looked down at me like I was a mouse, and he was a cat who just cornered his next meal. There was nothing in his eyes but complete blackness, and as his sick smile emerged bolder and brighter, my heart stopped in my chest.

I can see Knox. . . I can see who truly lives inside him.

The vile creature before me wasn't a man at all. He was destruction. He was fire brimming with the desire to tear me to pieces.

The sound of metal teeth hit the air as he pulled his zipper down. Knox's shadow covered my entire body as my shoulders hit a shelf, causing a few trinkets to fall to the floor. Ceramic pieces shattered around me, but he didn't even blink. Not a shred of concern for the broken debris around me.

Lurching forward, he snagged my ankle, pulling me back towards the middle of the room. "You're not going anywhere." He dropped to his knees and started to pull open

his pants.

"Stop! No!"

"Scream all you want, it won't make a difference."

"What about Koa?" I asked. I was trying to make him think. Hoping he would realize that what he was doing was wrong.

"Fuck my brother."

"He wouldn't allow this, would he? That's why you're here alone because you know he wouldn't let you do this."

"Shut up!" he yells, slapping me hard across the face. "My brother thinks he's the one in charge. He thinks he has the last say on everything. But this, this is for me. I'm going to fuck you till you bleed." He grabbed my pants, ripping them down the middle, leaving me completely exposed.

"Don't do this." I needed him to see me as a person, not an object. "Please, once you do this, you can't take it back. It'll change you."

"I told you to shut the fuck up!" Hitting me again, my face snapped to the side.

The taste of metal hit me instantly as I licked my lips. "I belong to your brother, not to you."

"Right now, you're mine," he growled as he grabbed my legs at my knees, forcing them open with a hard push.

I could feel myself retreating to that place, to the darkness inside me, just like I used

to at the Canary. It was all I had left to protect myself from the barbaric waste of human life hovering over me.

He laid on my chest, and his breath crept across my cheek. The hair on my neck stood up, and my body began to tremble. There was nothing I could do. Every muscle memory was taking over, driving me deeper and deeper into my mind.

Closing my eyes tight, I felt him pressing against me as he shifted his hips. Holding my breath, my body tensed, waiting for him to force himself inside.

A single tear escaped, causing Knox to laugh. "Don't cry, whore, it won't save you."

Sucking in a gulp of air, I bit my lip, trying not to make a sound. I didn't want to give him anything. Nothing. Not a sound, not a tear, not a fucking thing.

He deserved nothing.

Suddenly, his weight was off me. There was nothing there anymore. My chest was free to breathe, my body was able to move.

"Get the fuck off her!"

Opening my eyes, Koa had Knox by the collar as he threw him across the room.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" He grabbed him by the throat, pulling him in close to his face. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he snarled as spit flew from his mouth onto his brother's face.

"Get the fuck off me, man!" Knox tried to push him away, but he couldn't.

Koa held his arms, and pushed him back towards the door, with rage in his eyes. "I

want you out. Get the fuck out of my house."

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Throwing up his arms, Knox's voice was low. "What's wrong? You don't want to share your whore? She is just a whore, Koa. I mean fuck, you're so selfish you wasted a fucking bullet for her."

Koa pulled his arm back, letting it go in his face. Knox's head snapped back as he let out a grunt, reaching up to cup his nose.

Throwing his hand up, he grabbed Knox by the throat. Squeezing hard, Knox's eyes bulged from his head. "You don't get to fucking touch her. No one gets to fucking touch her. Understand me?"

Knox shook his head eagerly, raking Koa's hands around his throat, trying to breathe.

I won't lie. I liked seeing him like that. I enjoyed watching him feel what I felt when his hand was clasped around my neck. I liked seeing the fear in his eyes, the same terror I felt when I couldn't breathe.

"Good," Koa said through clenched teeth as he leaned in closer. "I don't give a shit if we're brothers, next time, I'll fucking kill you." Casting him backward out the door, Knox fell to his ass. "Now get the fuck out. I can't even fucking look at you."

Koa stood firm, his muscles thick and bulging as he put himself between his brother and me. His eyes were on Knox, watching him as he stepped backward out the door, wiping the bloody trail pouring out of his nose.

The two men stared at each other. Knox's lips curled up, nostrils flaring wide. "You're going to regret this. I hope you know that." He pointed a finger at Koa's face. "You're

fucking done." Shaking his head, he stormed off.

Koa waited in the doorway for a few minutes. His entire body was still clenched and stiff.

Turning to face me, he walked to my side and reached down, scooping me up in his arms easily. "Are you alright?"

"I'm okay."

"He didn't. . ." His voice trailed off as he searched my eyes.

"No, I'm okay."

"That fucking asshole. I had no idea, minx, I swear."

My eyes steadied on his, and I finally see him.

He wasn't like his brother. He wasn't like Virgo or any of the men that had been given passage to me without consent.

He wasn't there to hurt me or sell me or make me suffer. He was Koa. He was my savior. He was a long lost wish I thought went unheard.

"Aubrey."

"What?" he asked, arching a brow.

"My name is Aubrey."

Chapter Twelve

Koa

Aubrey. . .

She actually said it out loud, she gave me her name. I was still surprised. It was the last thing I expected her to say. I thought she'd scream for Knox to die, or condemn him to hell. But she didn't, instead, she gave me her name.

Helping her into the bathtub, she lowered herself slowly as she held the edges of the clawfoot tub. She looked so sore, like an injured bird. She's been trying to fly, but her wings were too thin, too small, and she just keeps plummeting into the dirt instead.

It's not her fault. None of this has been her fault.

Dropping to my haunches, I dipped the sponge in the water as I watched her pull her knees to her chest, hugging them close, and laying her head down.

Squeezing the sponge so water spilled down her back, I gently ran it over the deep purple bruises my brother left on her shoulders. Her body was marked, covered with visual battery, old and new.

I could see small fingertip shaped bruises necklacing the skin of her throat, and the raw skin around her fingertips from clawing the floor. Her cheek was swollen from where he slapped her, and the skin under her left eye was puffy.

Her back was riddled in faded scars. Some were thin, some were thick, all of them going in different directions.

It enraged me to visibly see what she had been through. It wasn't just a pain she had to carry inside, it was something she had to see every day. A visible reminder she'd never be able to get rid of.

"Ah," she hissed as her back jerked in pain.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's alright." Sitting up straight, she bent left and right, trying to stretch the soreness away. "I guess I've gotten weaker since being here. Normally, I wouldn't feel so sore after something like that."

"You shouldn't compare one beating with another. This should have never happened to you, it's wrong."

"It's not your fault," she said.

"I can't control what Virgo did you too, but I invited my brother here. I brought him to you. It's my fault. If I had just done this meeting by myself—"

Cutting me off, she looked directly into my eyes. "You aren't responsible for his choices. He chose to do this, there's nothing you could have done. If it didn't happen now, it would have eventually." She lengthened her legs, relaxing back, and allowing the bubbles to cover her body. Closing her eyes, her hands floated on the top of the water, swashing side to side. "If there's one thing I've learned from everything I've been through, it's that you can't control what other people do."

"I should have fucking killed him." The words came out under my breath as I stared

blankly into the water. "I could have fucking killed him."

"Don't say that," she snapped quickly. "He's still your family, he's blood. That always has to mean something."

"How can you say that after what he did?"

She looked into the bathwater, moving her hands slowly to create small waves. "There are only two people in this world I wish death on; Virgo and his right-hand man Blue. Your brother might be empty on the inside, but he's impressionable. He got sucked into the idea those men paint. That we're just here for pleasure or whatever sick desire someone might have."

"After everything, after all, you've been through, how can you not wish death on him?"

"I believe that people have the ability to change, and sometimes, what you originally thought about someone, turns out to be wrong." Her eyes drifted up to mine, settling easily on my face. "I understand now, I do. Your brother isn't like you, he's cold and emotionless, but it doesn't change the fact he's your brother and he respects you."

"Respects me," I said with a single chuckle. "He doesn't respect shit, he fears me."

"Even fear is ingrained with respect. It's built differently, but it's there."

"No, fear isn't respect." Disagreeing, I grabbed a bottle of shampoo and nod my head for her to sit up. "Fear is just that; it's terror, it's a pit in your stomach, it's a lump in your throat. Respect is different. My brother doesn't respect shit."

"If he's so horrible, why do business with him at all?"

Sitting quietly for a moment, I didn't have an answer to give. "I don't really know."

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My brother hated the business. He always had. He was only there for the money, and nothing more. He didn't care about carrying on what our father and grandfather taught us.

He's not here for the business. You know that.

As our clientele took a darker turn, that was when his interest seemed to peak more. He wanted to be more involved in the meetings, but not in anything else. It was like he found something he liked in these men, something he wanted, someone he wanted to become.

Maybe the dark side slipped inside him, and now it won't let go.

I couldn't say the appeal of the men we were around didn't have an effect on me too. The power they seemed to have, the way people groveled at their feet and were willing to do anything for them, it was intoxicating. It was something I couldn't help but admire too.

But it was also dangerous. Too much power and you'd lose control. You'd become Virgo, or Alek, or a number of other men I'd met along the way. That kind of power will change you. And my brother, he lacked the self-control needed to keep it in check.

It hurt to say it, but I wouldn't think twice if it came down to it; I will kill whatever threats came my way, and trust me, there have been plenty.

I'd be the executioner, but I wouldn't be the villain.

These men, men like my brother, they only see one kind of power, and that power was driven by death and destruction. I wasn't that man.

Lathering Aubrey's hair, I massaged her scalp with my fingertips, causing her to moan.

"Mm," she groaned as she rolled her head against my hands. "That feels good."

"I'm glad, you've been through enough, you don't deserve to hurt anymore." Rinsing my hands in the water, I asked, "Can you tip back to rinse? Or do you need my help?"

"No, I got it." Turning, she centered herself and held the tub as she arched her back, dipping all her hair into the water.

The bubbles dripped down her chest, exposing her tits. Her nipples were hard, her skin glistening as the bubbles continued to trickle down her ribs, merging with the water.

My cock jerked in my pants. She looked so fucking sexy all wet and soapy, it was making it hard for me to concentrate.

Aubrey sunk all the way under the water, disappearing beneath surface. A rush of bubbles burst on the top of the water as she blew out air through her nose. She pushed herself back up out of the water, and ran her hands down her hair, pulling them down to the ends.

Dancing her fingers across the water, she tilted her head and looked up at me. "I feel better, thank you."

"Don't thank me." Shaking my head, my eyes fell to her perfect tits as droplets of water fell off her nipples.

She caught me looking, and slowly slid her hand up her belly to grab her tit. Rolling the firm bead between two fingers, she gently plucked it.

Darting my eyes back to hers she smiled. "You like looking at me. I feel your eyes all the time. Constantly watching, observing, lusting."

"You're a beautiful woman, I can't help it."

Her hand glide over her smooth and slippery skin to her other tit, squeezing it hard. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why am I beautiful?"

"Besides your body, and your perfect lips, and smile, and the freckles that run across your cheeks?" She smirked and giggled. "Well, you're strong, you're smart, you're not afraid to speak what you're thinking."

Her hand moved down her belly, disappearing into the water. "Keep talking," she said as she started to touch her pussy. "I like what I'm hearing."

Grinning, I adjusted my cock in my pants as it pushed against my zipper. "You pay attention to everything, every detail, every action, every word. You don't miss a thing."

"Mm," she moaned as she started to rock her hips. "You're a convincing man," she said, opening her eyes and biting her bottom lip. "Keep going."

"You're going to have to give me more then. I know nothing about you, except what I've been able to see."

"More. . ." She paused, nibbling on the inside of her cheek. "I'm not here to give, I'm here to take."

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"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, quirking a brow, and thinning my lips.

"It means exactly as it sounds. I've been forced to give for far too long, it's my turn now."

The corner of my lip pulled back as I shook my head. "And what exactly do you think you're going to take?"

Aubrey lashed out, grabbing my shirt and yanking me in. Kissing me hard, she curled her finger into my shirt and held on tight. Her tongue slipped easily into my mouth, licking and tasting as she swirled it around.

I couldn't stop myself. My tongue licked back, coiling around hers. She tasted so fucking good. My hand glided over her chest and grabbed her tit, causing her to moan into my mouth.

"Mm," she groaned, tugging on my shirt harder. Aubrey started to pull me closer, and I was happily letting her.

No! Stop!The voice inside my head screeched loudly.She doesn't know what she's doing!

"Whoa, wait, hold on," I said, breaking our kiss and pulling myself away.

"What? What's wrong?" she asked, her fingers still digging into the meat of my shirt.

"This, this is wrong. You don't want this, you can't, not after what happened."

Shaking my head, I gripped her wrist and started to pull her hand free. "You're going to regret this, you don't know what you're doing. I'm sure your feelings are all skewed and your head isn't thinking straight. . ." I was rambling, talking myself down more than anything else.

If we went any further, I couldn't guarantee that I'd be able to control myself. She had been through so much, and after what my brother did to her, the last thing I wanted was for her to feel confused and regret a choice she made without thinking it through.

"Koa," she said, but I ignored her, still rattling off reasons this is wrong.

"You might regret it, and I don't want to hurt you. You should think about this more, see if it's—"

"Koa!" she yelled loudly, grabbing my attention. "I don't need you telling me what I want. I can think for myself. I've had enough of people telling me what I'm going to do and not do, I'm done with all that."

Twisting in the tub, she lifted up onto her knees and grabbed me with her other hand. Her body was dripping, bubbles were flowing over her skin like a beacon for my eyes. I followed the trail, watching them as they glided down her soft skin, over her belly, and through the trail of hair on her pussy.

"Are you—"

"Shut up, Koa," she ordered as she yanked my shirt hard, and pulled me into the tub with her.

The water soaked through my shirt and my pants as I tumbled inside. Aubrey's fingers swiftly started to unbutton my shirt as she straddled my lap. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I ran my tongue across her bottom lip, and gently bit down.

She was breathing heavily as her patience broke in half and she tore the rest of my shirt open, busting the buttons. The water sloshed around us as her hands slipped up my chest and over my shoulders.

She was exploring my tattoos, feeling the muscles, and rolling her hips as she crushed her lips against mine with so much force I fell back against the side of the tub.

Nipping at my lips, she pushed my shoulders down and sat up straight. Fuck, she was so god damn sexy it killed me. Her skin was tinted pink from the heat of the water, and her nipples were hard as diamond.

Reaching up, I touched her face and softly traced a single finger down the curve of her jaw, following her neck, and slipping between her tits. I danced around her nipples, circling one, and then moving to the other.

Aubrey arched her back, her body exploding in goosebumps as I came so close to her nipples, but never touching them. My finger kept moving, over her navel and around her hips, then back up, following her spine.

Driving my hands into her hair, I coiled her locks around my fist and tugged her head back. "Is this what you want? You want me to fuck you?" I asked, jerking my hips so I hit her pussy.

"Yes, fuck me, I need you to fuck me." Her hips rocked, grinding down against my bulge.

"But I thought you were going to take from me? Isn't that what you said? You were done giving?"

Aubrey growled with a smirk on her face. Her hands dove under the water, and she quickly undid my pants, pulling my cock out. "Fine, I'll fuck you."

Gripping the edge of the tub, I lifted myself up so she could tug my pants down my legs. Dropping the wet clothes onto the floor, she palmed my erection and stroked me up and down.

"I have no problem taking what I want." Her eyes glinted like gunmetal, and her lids lowered as she squeezed my tip.

Her hand was like magic. Holding tightly, she worked my length as her free hand slipped down her stomach to her pussy.

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Through the water, I watched her as she inserts two fingers and starts to grind her hips against her palm. Her eyes closed as she tipped her head back, her hands working in unison. She entered herself over and over, making my cock so hard it hurt.

Grabbing her hand around my dick, I held her still, and demanded, "Fuck me."

Her eyes drifted between mine, so full of need it made my chest tight. She crawled up my lap and positioned my cock at her entrance. She placed her hands on my shoulders, slowly lowering herself down.

"Fuck." I uttered the words through a heavy breath.

She was so warm and tight as her pussy stretched to fit my girth. I was so fucking tempted to just take control, to flip her over and fuck her as hard as I could to end this ache. But I won't, she could have this, I'd let her go at her own pace, giving her exactly what she wanted.

Her control. Her choice. Her voice.

And hopefully, her life back.

A tremble scaled her body. I felt it through my fingertips as she rode me. Her tits bounced in my face, so I flicked my tongue over her hard nipples, and suck her tits into my mouth one at a time.

Aubrey let out a coo as she wrapped her arms around my neck and rocked her hips faster. Running my tongue across her chest, I nibbled on her hard bead, drawing out

another moan.

The water splashed around us, spilling over the edge and soaking the floor. She was fucking me harder, faster, her body moving exactly the way it wanted to. There was no fear in her eyes, no terror, all I saw was escape and pleasure.

Driving my hand into her hair, I pulled her lips onto mine. She moaned into my mouth, and it was the most perfect sound. It was music I wanted to drink, and devour, and make mine over and over again.

Growling, I jerked my hips, driving my cock deep into her heat as she dropped her ass down. Aubrey's coo turned into a full, throaty moan as goosebumps jumped across her skin. I felt her entire body shake as her pussy clenched around my length.

Pistoning my hips, I let go. My cock exploded, filling her body with cum. I was shaking with her, the orgasm so intense I couldn't control my muscles.

Breathing heavy, she rested her face against my chest, and I curled my arms around her back. Neither one of us said a word as our breathing turned into a rhythmic dance, and we just sat in silence.

Running my fingertips up and down her back, I nuzzled my face against her hair, enjoying everything about the moment.

"Koa," she said, tilting her head up to look at me.

"Yeah?"

"Can we stay like this for a little bit?"

"Of course," I answered, wrapping my arms back around her. "We can stay like this

as long as you want."

She smiled lightly, adjusting herself in my arms. Her hands were open, resting on my chest, and then she does something. She does something so small and so simple, most wouldn't even notice it.

But I did.

Aubrey moved her hand up higher, slipping her fingers behind my neck, and pressing herself deeper into my arms. Her fingers gently played with the ends of my hair, and that was when it happens.

Her entire body went loose, relaxing against me.

Her body molded to mine.

I could feel her as she let go of some of the weight she had been carrying. Everything about her in that single moment changed with one simple move, with her hand in my hair.

I'm going to fix you my little minx.

I promise.

Chapter Thirteen

Aubrey

His fingers swept across my chest, rousing me awake. Twisting over my shoulder, he was still asleep, holding me tightly in his arms. Koa squeezed me as if he was subconsciously checking to see if I was still here.

I'm here.

It made me smile. I rubbed his arm, feeling the muscle of his forearm and the bulge of his bicep. My fingers moved down to his hands, and I studied the roughness. Thick callouses dotted his palms, and there were cracks around the tips of his fingers.

Despite the rough exterior, his hands touched me like I was antique glass, like a brittle petal on one of the flowers in his garden outside.

I was broken when he bought me, drowning in the world that captured me without permission. And now I couldn't help but feel that he was helping me rebuild. He let me scream and yell, he even let me hit him. He took it all as if he knew I needed to let it out to find myself again.

I was vanquishing the demons, casting them out so I could be free. I finally felt it, that sense of freedom. The air smelled different, the food had more flavor, the colors around me were bolder and brighter.

Braiding my fingers with his, I pulled his arm down further and pressed myself

deeper into his embrace. The warmth of his body passed through my shirt, heating my skin.

His morning wood pushed against me, causing my nipples to bead as they brushed against the fabric, sending chills down my arms and legs. Wearing only one of his t-shirts, it would be easy for him to slip right inside me. I was wet, the slick juice coating my thighs as I rubbed them together.

I never thought I'd experience any of this again. My heart beating for something good. A smile, a laugh, a breath of air that I wasn't struggling to grab. My blood rushing because I was excited and not fearing for my life.

Koa was giving me all of that.

Berlin was right.

The one friend I had at the Canary told me this could happen. She said there were lucky girls, bought by men who had no interest in hurting. I didn't believe her. I didn't think it was possible.

Rolling over, his arm slipped down my side and landed on the small of my back. Koa pulled me into his chest, nuzzling his face into my hair. I liked this right now.

His arms gave me safety, comfort, protection. In his arms, no one could get to me.

Pressing my lips against his, I kissed him softly. He didn't kiss back, his eyes still shut tight in a deep sleep. Running my fingers around his face, I traced each eyebrow, and down the bridge of his nose. The pad of my thumb slid across his lips, causing his eyes to flicker behind his lids.

My fingers kept moving, down his throat, over his chest, touching each and every

ripple of his abs. I followed the fuzzy strip of hair right below his navel and ran my fingers across the seam of his boxers.

His cock jerked against me, growing harder as I dipped my hand under his boxers and gripped his shaft. His eyes fluttered rapidly as I stroked his cock up and down. Kissing his lips again, I heard him groan quietly.

Smiling to myself, I moved my hand faster as I ran my tongue across his lips. Koa's eyes started to open, his lips finally pressing back, his tongue coming out to meet mine.

He dug his fingers into my back as he moaned into our kiss. Pushing his dick into my hand as I stroked, his kisses became more savage and brutal. It was brutality at its finest.

Rough, delirious, hungry kisses. The world could stay outside, and I'd be happy just staying right where I was for eternity.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

My clit was throbbing. I was so fucking wet, all I wanted was him inside me. I hadn't wanted anyone in such a long time. Even before my life went to shit, I never felt like that. Napal didn't strum like my body like this man, he didn't even come close.

The tips of his fingers walked from the hem of my shirt up over my back, slowly gliding back down and cupping my mound. His hands were an experienced musician, touching me just right.

Koa palmed my pussy, and pushed against my clit. "Mm," I moaned, breaking our kiss as my head arched back and my eyes closed.

The feeling flowing through me was euphoric, causing my body to swell with need. All the pain was getting washed away, flushed from my body.

Growling, he nipped at the tender skin of my throat, causing a shiver to explode down my spine. His lips moved down, taking small bites along the way. He wasn't hurting me, it was just enough to cause goosebumps.

Pulling his cock out of his boxers, I wrapped my leg over his hip. Koa moved his hand off my pussy, sweeping it up under my shirt, and grabbed my tit. He squeezed hard, pinching my nipple between two fingers and twisting.

"I need you," I said as I whispered against his ear.

Guiding his cock to my pussy, I slipped it inside, easing him in as my juice coated his length. Koa grunted, his eyes rolling back in his head as I took his entire cock. He pushed his hips closer, driving the last inch of his cock inside.

His hand grabbed my ass, and he pushed me down as he thrust up. We were laying sideways, pressed so close together I could feel his heart beating in his chest.

Thump-thump, thump-thump. It was so intense, so loud, so fierce, it was forcing my heart to beat with him. My pulse kicked as he kept thrusting himself inside.

The tips of his fingers took hold of my flesh as he rolled onto his back, flipping me with him so I was on top. He didn't stop moving. He fucked me, slamming up as he held my hips, pushing me down.

He was so deep I could feel him in my lower belly, fucking me as if the moment was keeping him alive. I was his food, his air, his energy. His hands were hot against my body, and sweat was breaking across his hairline as I rode him faster and faster.

There was no ignoring the way his dick grew stiff, or the way the tip swelled as his grunts became ragged and uneven. His eyes were on my body, watching my tits bounce, then moving down to watch himself disappear inside my pussy.

Biting my bottom lip, my head fell back as tingles began to work their way through my body. They started in my stomach, deep in the muscles, then spread out in all directions. It was a sensation I didn't ever want to end.

Like tiny fireworks, they exploded outward, making me cry out with pleasure. "Mm, Koa," I moaned as he swept me from one world to the next. I wasn't in hell anymore, I found my heaven.

Snapping my eyes shut, I pierced his chest with my nails as he jerked his hips up high, lifting me with him.

"Aubrey," he said as he lets out a breath, his body stilling as his cock unleashed deep in my heat. His hard muscle throbbed and pulsed, filling me so much it began to spill

out and slip down the outside of his hips. "Fucking, holy hell." His hands raked down his face as he blinked up at me. "I didn't expect that."

"Sometimes the best things happen when you least expect it." Smiling, I flopped onto his chest and kissed his cheek. "My eyes are wide open, Koa. You pushed me through the dark, and now I see the light."

He softly brushed his fingers down the side of my face and kissed my forehead. "No, I didn't do anything, you did that on your own. I could only open the door for you, but you had to step through yourself, I couldn't do that for you."

Dropping off him, I curled up under his arm. "Thank you," I said, swirling my finger up and down his chest.

"Don't thank me. I told you, this was all you." Clearing his throat, he ran his fingers up and down the outside of my arm. "So, how about some breakfast?"

Smirking, I tugged my bottom lip into my mouth and peered up at him. "Didn't we just have breakfast?"

Koa chuckled as he stretched his legs out, and pulled me against his chest. "Then it's time for second breakfast." Pinching my chin, he tilted my head up and kissed me. "I want to show you something."

Pulling his arm free, he shifted his legs to the floor and stood up. My eyes traced all the dips and curves of his back, and the bulges in his arms as he reached high above his head to stretch.

Instinctively, I nibbled on the inside of my cheek. Holy fuck, he was sexy, big, built like God created him from a piece of marble. My pussy pulsed and my clit ached as if he hadn't just been inside me.

Looking back at me over his shoulder, he nodded his head for me to follow.

Climbing out of bed, Koa reached back and took my hand. His thick fingers wrapped mine, pulling me to his side.

"You don't belong behind me. You belong beside me." He looked down at me, his eyes stern. "Remember that. You always walk with, never beneath. I know what you've been taught, and that ends now. It's time to shed the skin that asshole put you in."

"Okay," I said, agreeing. "I'll remember that."

Koa looked straight ahead, holding my hand tightly in his walked forward. His strides were long and powerful. His head held high. His chest puffed up, walking like he owned the world.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

Guiding me to my room, he pushed open the door, letting me go in first. I was looking around, not sure what it was he wanted to show me. Spinning on my heels, I arched a brow and glanced side to side again.

Koa smiled, leaning against the doorway. "On the floor beside the bed."

Walking around the bed, there was a wrapped box with a giant yellow bow. "What is this?"

"The only way to find out is to open it." His smile grew wider as he crossed his arms.

Picking it up, I placed it on the bed. Running the silky ribbon between my fingers, I pulled one end so it fell free. Glancing up at Koa, he was grinning like a child as he bounced his brows and tipped his head toward the box.

"Open it up."

Peeling off the paper, I dropped to my knees in surprise. "A record player?"

"You like it?"

"It's beautiful." I was scanning the record player, my eyes huge.

"Reach under the bed."

"What?"

"Check under the bed."

Lifting the blanket, there was a crate. Pulling it out, it was filled with records. Flipping through, I sit in shock.

Koa dropped to my side and pulled out one of the records. "These were some of my grandmother's. I already have a ton and thought you might like some."

"You didn't have to do this," I said, my eyes filling with tears. "Really, I can't accept this, I can't—" I started to push the crate in his direction, but he cut me off.

"You can. It's a gift, Aubrey. I want you to have them." Koa pushed them back toward me.

"Thank you," I said. My eyes lit up as I pulled out a dark green sleeve with big, gold words curving across the top and the image of a woman in black and white in the center. "Oh my god. . ." My voice trailed off as I held it up. "Are you kidding me?"

"What?" he asked.

Spinning the record, I couldn't stop myself from crying. "This. . ." I could barely get the words out as he watched me with confusion on my face.

"Iseppa Ricci," he said. "It's good. She has a beautiful voice."

"This is the first record I heard as a little girl. This woman made me fall in love with opera."

His face fell flat as my words sunk in. Of all the men in the world, of all the places I could have ended up, I was here.

Was it fate?

I never believed in fate, but how can I ignore that?

It was too coincidental for me to just brush off. Maybe fate was real. Maybe fate had somehow worked its fingers into my life and was finally able to yank me free.

And as the first real tears I had cried in a long time came flowing out, I smiled.

I smiled because the tears deserved to be shed.

I smiled because nothing could have prepared me for any of that.

I was smiling because he earned it.

Chapter Fourteen

Aubrey

Boom! Boom! Boom!

There was pounding coming from downstairs. It was loud enough to wake me up from a dead sleep, causing me to sit up straight in bed. Wide-eyed, I looked around, half-dazed with my heart beating like a drum in my chest.

What the hell is that?

My hand reached out to grab Koa's shoulder, but all I grabbed was a fistful of the blanket. Glancing over, his spot was empty, the blankets folded over as if he hadn't been there at all. My heart leaped into my throat as voices found a way to me upstairs.

Boom! Boom!

The banging got louder and the muffled yells became full-blown shouts, but I couldn't tell what they were saying. Climbing out of bed, I moved quietly across the room, checking to see if Koa was in the bathroom.

Empty.

Where the hell is he?

Walking on the tips of my toes, I moved into the hall and slowly crept down the stairs. My hand was tightly wrapping the rail, knuckles white as a cold sweat beaded up on the back of my neck. Silhouettes outside the door rocked from side to side, their shadows thick and ominous in the frosty glass that ran from floor to ceiling next to the door.

Boom!

A giant thud rang out as something slammed against the door. Falling backward, I stumbled back up the steps, unable to contain the fear that suddenly hit me.

I'd seen the people Koa did business with, I knew what each and every single one of them was capable of. And I knew they'd come and take what they thought was rightfully theirs.

Money.

Life.

Me. . .

I had no idea what enemies Koa had, but I knew if they were out for blood, I wouldn't see any mercy.

The door flew open, and wood splintered in different directions, scattering the floor like sharp leaves. A group of men in black uniforms, toting guns and bulletproof vests stormed inside, sweeping their weapons from side to side.

"Hands in the air! Hands in the air!" one of them yelled as they pointed their gun in my direction.

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My hands went up instantly, and my eyes grew large. I was standing stagnant, my entire body shaking violently. I couldn't even think straight. My brain was paused, unable to grasp the reality of what was in front of me.

"Where is he?" the man asked, his voice sharp as razors. "Where's Koa?"

Silence. I gave him nothing. My tongue was frozen in my mouth as my voice got lost in shock.

Pointing the gun at my face, the man yelled again. "Where is he?! Tell me where he is!"

"I . . . I don't know," I stuttered out as a woman officer rushed up behind me and grabbed my wrists.

Police. They're the police.

And they're here for Koa.

The man pointed to a few of the other officers, then points where he wanted them to go. "Is he upstairs?" he asked me.

I was numb. Barely able to function as the woman frisked me quickly.

"This will go a whole lot smoother if you're honest with me. I'm going to ask you again. Where is Koa?" His voice was lower, more controlled.

"I'm not sure. I haven't seen him yet this morning." The woman yanked my arms down low, clasping them together with cold steel cuffs. "What are you doing? Why are you doing this?" Panic started to set in as my hands were bound, and I still had no idea what was happening around me.

"What's your name," the woman officer asked as she guided me away from the stairs and to the door.

"Why? What's going on? Why are you looking for Koa?"

"We'll get to that, but I need to know your name first. What's your name?"

"No, I'm not saying anything until you tell me what's going on!" My eyes scanned behind her as more and more people rushed the house, all of them with their weapons drawn. "What's happening?!" My voice teetered on the edge of frantic as the police tore apart the house, looking for Koa.

Looking up at the windows as she moved me outside, I could see police moving through the rooms. Doors were being torn open or kicked down. Clothes were being thrown from the closets, and cupboards were getting upturned.

"Take her to the station. I'll talk to her there," a man said as he stepped up from behind me.

His hair was short, balding on top with white frizzies that poked out from behind his ears. In a brown trench coat, he flipped a badge at me and gave me a half-assed smile. "Go on, take her away."

The woman tried to push me inside one of the cars, but I dug my feet into the ground, doing all I could to stop myself. "No! I'm not going with you! Let me go! Koa! Koa!" I was screaming at the top of my lungs, praying for him to run to my side and save

me again.

He did it once. He'd do it again.

He won't let them steal me from him. I'm his, no one else's.

Tears flowed down my cheeks, waiting for him to charge outside, destroying everyone and everything to get to me. I wanted him to sweep me up in his arms and carry me back to the safety of his home, to the safety he'd granted me.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

The single word came through the walkie talkie in different tones.

He's not here. . . He left me.

Sadness consumed me as the realization set in that Koa left. He abandoned me. He left me for the wolves to find.

The officer put her hand on my head and pushed me down into the backseat of the cruiser. "Everything's going to be fine, don't worry." She closed the door, and I was blanketed in a silence that started on the inside.

The world goes dull. Everyone was moving around me in slow motion, but I heard absolutely nothing. Shock coated me like liquid metal. I could hardly even lift my arms.

It was surreal. Like the world had completely stopped.

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Staring out the window as the police car pulled out of Koa's driveway, I felt lost.

I wasn't even sure how long it took us to drive to the station, but we were there before I realized it. The officer was opening my door, grabbing me by the elbow and pulling me out of the car.

She guided me inside the building, taking me to a windowless room. Sitting me down, she cuffed my hands to the table in front of me.

"Is this necessary?" I asked, holding out my hands, straightening the chain tight.

"It might not be, but that's up to you." She arched a brow, keeping her gaze fixed on mine as she yanked open the door and walked out.

I was left alone. No clock. No idea how many minutes or hours had gone by. With my head on the table, I closed my eyes and sat in my own darkness.

All I could think about was Koa. Where did he go? Why wasn't he there? Why would he leave me alone? Why didn't he take me with him?

He'd never left me alone. In the month I'd been with him, not once had he left me by myself. And yet, today, he was nowhere to be found.

I wanted to cry. I could feel the tears. They were there, in the background, but I wasn't letting them out.

"Hello," a man said.

Lifting my head, it was the same man in the brown trench coat from Koa's house. Darting my eyes back to the table, I sank deeper into the chair. I didn't give him an answer. I didn't want to.

He took the seat across from me, setting down a small stack of folders and pressing a pen against his lips. "I'm Detective—"

"Thompson, yeah, I heard you before."

He smiled coyly and leans forward, twirling the pen between his fingers. "Your accent. . ." Pausing, he pressed the tip of the pen against his chin and scrunched his brows. "Where are you from?"

"Where's Koa? What's going on? Can anyone tell me anything at all?" Jerking my hands up, I clenched my fists. "What the hell are these for?" Growling through my teeth, I snarled at the man.

"How about this, I uncuff you, and then you answer some of my questions. What do you think? Does that sound fair?"

Through slit lids, I nodded once. He dug a key from his pocket, then unlocks my wrists.

Rubbing the tender skin, I said, "Thanks."

"No problem." Smiling at me, he tapped the stack of folders with his fingers. "Now, how about you give me your name."

"Aubrey."

"Good, that's a start. And where are you from, Aubrey?"

"Originally, I'm from Italy."

"See, this is good. I ask a question, you give me an answer. It's pretty simple."

"I have a question for you now." Tilting my head a hair, my lips drew back. "Why are you looking for Koa?"

His back went stiff, eyes steady on mine. "How well do you know Koa Peleke?"

Dipping my head, I couldn't give him an answer. Setting my hands on the table, I fiddled with my fingers. I wasn't sure what to do or how to respond?

I didn't want to say something that would hurt Koa or get him arrested. He saved me. He gave me my life back. I wouldn't be the one who took his away.

"Alright, let me tell you a little about what I know. Because I know a lot of things, and I think it's a really good idea that we help each other." Flipping open one of the folders, he spun a photo in my direction. "Do you recognize this man?"

Alek.

Seeing his face again caused me to inhale a quick breath. Detective Thompson angled his head, eyeing me as if he caught the shallow movement of my chest.

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Shaking my head no, I looked away. "No."

"Okay, what about this man?" he asked, slipping a photo next to Knox.

Shaking my head yes, I answered. "Knox, Koa's brother."

"Good. That's really good. Honesty is exactly what we need here." Opening a notebook, he wrote the date at the top and cleared his throat. "So, let's start with some basic information. What's your name?"

"Aubrey."

"Aubrey what?"

My eyes shot up, glaring at him. Thinning my lips, I crossed my arms over my chest. He had his questions, and I had mine. But I wasn't going to give him everything. I wouldn't take the chance that what I say could end up being used against Koa.

"Alright, then how about your age? How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"And you said you're from Italy?"

"Yes."

"When did you come to the states?"

"About a month ago or so."

"On what? A travel visa, a work visa?"

Shaking my head no subtly, I looked up at the ceiling. "Neither."

"Alright, then what about papers? Do you have documentation for why you're here?"

I shake my head no again.

"If you give me your last name, I should be able to look it up."

"No, I mean, I don't have any documentation. At least, none that I know of."

Quirking a brow, he rested the pen down. "How did you get in the country then?"

Shrugging a shoulder, I rubbed my arms up and down nervously. I couldn't tell him, even though I knew I should. I should want to shout at the top of my lungs, and scream my full name, and how I was torn from the normalcy of living.

I should tell him how I got there, how I became nothing more than an object, dressed up and sold like a living doll.

Except, I'm hit with a rush of embarrassment. It floods my body. I feel like I should have fought harder. I should have said no. I should have had more control.

But the truth was I was never the one in charge of anything, until now.

With that truth also comes risk. Koa could be blamed for me. He could be held responsible. I wouldn't put him in that position. Virgo was my captor, not Koa.

"Aubrey, I need you to be honest with me. That's the only way this is going to work."

"I. . ." Inhaling a deep breath, I let it out slow and steady. I was trying. I really was trying to do the right thing. "I. . ."

"Go on, you're not in trouble here. I promise you that. You can tell me the truth. Did Koa kidnap you?"

"No," I said sternly. "Koa didn't kidnap me."

"Then you have to tell me the truth, be honest. This is serious, Koa is in a lot of trouble right now, and for me to keep you safe, I need you to tell me what you know."

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"Trouble? Why is he in trouble?" My brows dipped hard, head tilting to my shoulder. "What is going on?"

"Look, this man right here—" Tapping two fingers on Alek's face, he said, "He's dead."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you want me to say."

"I want you to tell me where Koa is. I want you to tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything."

"You do know."

"No, I don't!" I yelled, raking my hands through my hair.

"You do." His voice was firm and harsh. "I know you do."

"If Koa wanted me to know anything, he would have taken me with him. He would have taken me just like he did the first time! But he didn't! He left me!"

He sat back in his chair, tapping his pen against his chin. "The first time. . ." he said, eyeing me curiously. "What does that mean?"

Hanging my head, I rested my face in my hands. "Nothing, it means nothing."

"It means something. Otherwise, you wouldn't have said it." Leaning over, he laid his

arms on the table and spun the pen in his fingers. "Look, this is your time to tell me everything. I know you're holding back, I can see it in your eyes."

"I'm not holding anything back."

"I've been doing this a long time, Aubrey." He pressed his chest against the edge of the table and brought his face a little closer. "Your eyes tell a different story, Aubrey. It's time to be honest. And not just with me, but with yourself too."

Lifting my eyes to his, I darted them around his face. A single tear broke free, rolling down my cheek and hitting the back of my hand. I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him everything.

But I just couldn't.

"I'm sorry, I don't have anything to tell."

Pushing away from the table, he picked up the notebook and stood up. "Fine, I don't need a statement from you anyway. Knox has given me more than enough to close this case."

Inhaling a sharp breath, I kept my eyes on him. "Then you don't need me, do you?"

"You're right. I don't. Immigration will be here shortly for you."

Flaring my nostrils, I clenched my fists, digging my nails into the soft skin of my palms. "Immigration?"

"You don't have papers, you won't give me your last name, you have nothing to help me." Arching his brows, he shrugged a shoulder. "I have no use for you. Have a nice day, Aubrey."

A flutter of fear washed through my body. I couldn't leave Koa. I didn't want to go back to the country that broke me in the first place.

I can't leave. . .

Parting my lips, I was about to speak. His hand was on the door, ear tilted in my direction. The detective's eyes were looking back at me over my shoulder. He was waiting for me. He could feel the words about to spill from my mouth.

I can get everything back.

My family. My life. The person I used to be.

All of this could be worth it if I could get my life back. But, I knew I'd never be the same person. I had changed. I was different. Maybe I could find a semblance of what I lost again, some form of peace.

Letting out a sigh, I fold my arms over my chest and look down at the table.
"Detective Thompson?"

A sliver of excitement flashed on his face. "Yeah?"

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I survived by watching, learning, listening. It was what kept me alive. Koa left me. He let them sweep in and steal me away. I wasn't sure why, and I was trying so hard not to care.

I felt it, and it hurts like a thousand hot needles poking my heart all at once.

"I'll start at the beginning. . ."

I told him everything. From the night Virgo took me, to the moment I was sold. The horror that was written all over his face almost made me stop talking. I didn't want to keep going. I couldn't take the way he was looking at me.

The sadness, the disgust, it made me feel gross all over. Pulling the thin blanket he had given me around my shoulders, I wrapped myself tighter. As if it would protect me from his eyes.

The words tumbled out of my mouth, flat, emotionless like I was telling the story of someone else. His face scrunched up, and his gaze grew wider as I detailed the forced sex and the men who paid hundreds, maybe even thousands of dollars for a night with one of us.

The scariest part about all of it was I could remember each man. I could remember the color of their eyes. I could remember the way each one's hands touched me.

Some were too timid. Maybe they were afraid because it was their first time with a whore. Maybe they were afraid of me. Or maybe they were just afraid of Virgo.

Then there were the men who took pleasure in being rough. Those that smiled with delight as they scarred my body and crippled me to the point I could barely move. The ones who grew more powerful when they thought I was growing weaker.

"But Koa was not one of those men," I said, snuggling deeper into the blanket. "He took me. He saved me. I don't know about any of the stuff you're talking about, but the man I know gave me my life back."

I lied. Explaining to the detective that I was able to escape the man who bought me and smuggled me to the states and that Koa had found me on the side of the road.

And he believed me. After spilling my guts to him for over two hours, he had no reason not to.

There was so much pity in his eyes. It made me feel weak and frail all over again. The detective ran his hands down his face, rocking his jaw back and forth.

"Wow," he said, his eyes huge. "This is not what I expected at all."

"It's not what I expected either, but we don't always get to choose the roads we walk."

"Well, you're safe now. We're going to get you connected with your family and get you home as soon as we can. Right now, I need to make a few calls. This place, the Canary, it needs to get shut down now."

Standing up, his eyes softened as he gave me a slight smile. "You really are lucky to be alive."

"Yeah, I know." I was looking at my fingers, picking at the skin around the nail beds. "Detective, what's going to happen with Koa?"

"Look," he said, holding out the notebook in my direction. "I know you think Koa did something good for you, and from what you told me he did, but I can't erase everything I know. If he's guilty of this, if he did what Knox told me he did, he needs to be held accountable. That's how justice works." Holding the door, he looked down at me sympathetically before closing the door.

I knew he was right. Koa killed Alek, and if the cops had the evidence they needed to prove it, Koa wouldn't see freedom again. I was shocked his brother was doing this to him. Knox had gone too far. He crossed a bridge and was leaving his brother on the other side.

A woman came in not long after the detective. She was wearing a dark blue dress, her hair pulled back into a tight bun, and deep red lipstick on her lips. She was pressing a small computer to her chest, and she smiled uncomfortably.

He told her my story.

It was easy to see. I saw it in her big brown eyes. That was one of the reasons I didn't want to tell my story. I didn't want people to look at me like I was broken or treat me like I was made of porcelain.

I just wanted to be normal.

She asked me a few simple questions; my name, my birthday, where I was from.

"I have a question."

"Sure," she said, typing on her computer.

"I have a few things at Koa's home. Will I be able to get them back?"

"I can't make any guarantees, but if you give me a list of what you're looking for, I can ask Detective Thompson."

Telling her the few things I wanted. She gave me another pathetic smile and reached out to shake my hand.

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"We'll be putting you on a flight tomorrow morning. You'll have a hotel for the night, and a police officer will be with you the entire time. We want to make sure you're safe, Aubrey. I wish you the best of luck, I really do. Do you want to call your family?"

My fingers fumbled around each other as I dropped my eyes to my lap. "What do I say to them?" I asked her, letting my eyes drift back up, covered in tears. "Do I tell them the truth?"

"You tell them what you're comfortable telling them, Aubrey. It's your choice now." She opened the door and stepped to the side. "Come on, I'll show you where it is."

Holding the receiver in my hand, the dial tone was loud in my ear. My stomach twisted and turned, causing a lump in the back of my throat. Pressing the numbers slowly, I pushed the phone harder against my ear.

"Hello?"

"Dad. . ."

Chapter Fifteen

Aubrey

The night dragged by. I sat in a cheap hotel room that men probably took their friendly neighborhood hookers to. The officer was outside the door, and I was told he was going to be there all night. They placed me on the second floor, with no other

way in or out of the room.

I spent the night watching American television, from cartoons to a few movies I once found appealing. They didn't do shit anymore. Life was tainted. I wasn't sure I'd ever find these mindless escapes pleasurable ever again.

My father cried through our entire conversation. I'd never heard him cry like that before. I could hear my mother sobbing in the background. They thought I was gone forever, dead, never coming home.

I had just been reborn in their eyes. Their daughter had reappeared from thin air.

And while I got to listen to their pure bliss overhearing my voice and knowing I was alive, I found myself having to force pretend happiness like I felt the same. I had no idea what they were going to think when we saw each other face to face.

The girl they knew and remembered did die. She died in that shithole club at the hands of a monster. I wondered if they'd see the scars if they'd see the muscle movements I couldn't control when someone touched me. There was a small wince, a subtle roll of my shoulders with wide eyes, and a hiccup in my voice.

Once the novelty of my homecoming wore off, would they see what I felt?

Would they see the dark cloud hovering over my head?

Not if they don't want to see it.

The only person who knew me, the person who came out of that darkness, was Koa. He was able to see behind the walls. He found me, and he brought me back. But what I lived through would always be there. It would always be a part of me now. Nothing would change it.

I kept glancing at the phone and watching the door. Waiting for Koa to call or bust through, saving me and bringing me home.

Home. . . The home he gifted me.

Except, nothing happened.

Minutes turned into hours, and before I knew it, I was walking down the hall to get on the plane. I stopped at the entrance, looking back over my shoulder one last time. He wasn't there.

He's letting me go.

Hanging my head, I adjusted the small bag on my shoulder, filled with a few things on the list I gave the woman. Other than that, I had nothing. I was alone and no closer to feeling normal.

I feigned a smile at the stewardess and at the woman who took the seat beside me. Turning to the window, I kept to myself. I wasn't in the mood for small talk.

I'd thought of this moment a million times. I pictured it in my head, had seen it clear as day. Going home had been the one goal I focused on. But right then, it felt nothing like I imagined it would. There were no excited butterflies or impatient smile that I couldn't wipe off my face. There was no intense ache in my chest that anticipation was causing, waiting for the wheels to land on the runway. There was absolutely no happiness.

I was sad. My insides ached. Every breath was painful. Every exhale felt like my lungs were being impaled by knives.

Laying my head against the window, I closed my eyes. Koa's face popped up right away. His bold eyes, his strong jaw, the way his nose would twitch when he cocked his lips to one side. His hair as it swept across his forehead and his hands as they touched my body.

I'd never see him again. What I felt for him would become nothing more than another memory. It would fade over time. All the memories would.

I'd wake up one day, and I won't think of Virgo or Koa, I won't think of Berlin and the anguish we shared. I won't think of the harsh leather that cracked my skin or the hands that created bruises.

I won't be able to recall the feelings Koa drummed up or how it tickled when the tips of his fingers traced my face. It would all fade.

The memories will never go away completely, but they wouldn't be as vivid. I'd lose the small details, and they'd become nothing more than a piece of my story, a lost smile, a lost laugh, a forgotten look. My mind would replace them with new memories that were fresh and still breathing.

Today was not that day.

I could still feel Koa's lips. I could still feel the shadowed weight of his hands on my body and his eyes on my skin.

What the hell is wrong with me?

How could I love the man who bought me?

How could I ever see him as anything more than a shepherd?

And I was just his sheep.

As the wheels hit the tarmac and the plane glided to a stop, the sun was going down behind the horizon. I sat in the seat until the very last passenger scooted past me. Grabbing my bag, I slung it over my shoulder and exited the plane.

My feet were heavy, slowly pushing me down the airbridge to the welcome I knew would be there.

Coming to the top, I spotted the giant sign first.

Welcome home, Aubrey!

My mother was already crying as I emerged from the terminal, weeping uncontrollably. My father and brother were teary-eyed, their tears more stifled and controlled. There were cameras snapping pictures for the local paper and video cameras from the news stations.

My parents and brother ran to me, embracing me in a huge hug. They hugged me for a long time, crying and babbling about how happy they were I was home.

I didn't cry once.

I couldn't. As much as I missed them, as much as I wanted to see them and let them know I was alright, I didn't want to be there. There was this unforgiving desire to be with Koa. To feel his arms, to have him holding me, and kissing me, and telling me I was home.

All the love in the world I had for my family didn't compare to the love I had for that man. I loved him. And it went so deep, so far into my soul it hurt.

* * * *

"It's been four months. What do you feel now?"

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Shrugging a shoulder, I took a sip of water. "I don't know. Nothing really."

"Nothing?" the therapist asked. "After all of that, after everything you went through, you feel nothing? You must feel something."

"Not really." Crossing my legs, I leaned back in the chair and started picking at the edge of the cushion. "I mean, what am I suppose to feel?"

"Most of my patients who have traumatic experiences like you have all kinds of feelings." She tapped her pen against the notebook, her gaze set on mine.

"How many patients like me have you had?"

"Well, no two people have the same stories. And even if they do, they see it with different eyes."

"But you have others like me? Girls that have been stolen like me?"

I know there's more. I've seen them. But how many are there really in the world?

She darted her eyes away and sucked on her bottom lip. "No, not just like you, but girls that have been through similar things. Forced things."

She has no idea then. There's no way she can compare me to any other girl.

"And what did they feel after?" I asked.

"Fear, sadness, anger, rage. . ." She paused, rolling her hand in the air as she spoke. "So, tell me, what do you feel? It's okay, you can tell me anything you want to. This is a safe space for you. No judgment."

"No judgment?"

"None," she said quickly and sternly.

"I miss him."

"Who? The man who stole you?"

Shaking my head no, I looked down at my feet. "The man who bought and saved me."

She flipped through her notes, scanning the pages. "You never gave me a name for either of those men. The man who bought you or the man who found and saved you."

Staying quiet, my eyes drifted up to hers. She didn't catch what I said. It went unnoticed completely.

I'd seen this woman for months now, coming every week. I'd give her little bits of the truth to appease her, but I had been holding back what I wanted to keep for myself. She couldn't have it all, some of my stories are just for me.

It was my parent's idea to see someone. They thought it would help me heal, that I could work out the demons and get back to living a normal life. I didn't want to do this, but if it would make them happy and feel like they'd help me, I reluctantly agreed.

For me seeing a therapist was nothing more than reliving everything again to another

stranger. I wouldn't talk to my parents about any of it. They didn't need to know the horrors their daughter went through, and maybe that was why they pushed me so hard.

"Aubrey, in order for this to work, you need to be honest with me. We've been here for months, and besides what went on in the Canary, you've barely said anything about what happened after."

"Because I don't want to."

"Why don't you want to?"

"Why do I have to? Haven't I said enough?"

"We need to work through everything from start to finish. That's how I help you work through your feelings."

"I don't have feelings, I told you that."

"We all have feelings. You just buried yours." Flipping back to a clean page, she eyed me. "So, tell me about the man who bought you."

"I can't."

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"Then tell me about the man who found you. How long were you with him before the police came? From what I know he wasn't a good man either."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because they're the same person!" I yelled, grabbing the arms of the chair and leaning forward. "And he's not a bad man! He saved me! Bad men don't save people, they ruin them!"

Her eyes grew wide. Setting the notebook down in her lap, she placed her hands on top and braided her fingers together. "Has he contacted you at all?"

"No."

"Are you lying to me?"

"No, not that it matters. But I wish he would, I wish he would find me again and take me home."

"Aubrey, I think you need to think about what you're saying. You're not thinking straight, this is why you need to let your emotions out."

"You're wrong. This has nothing to do with my emotions. I know what I want."

"And he hasn't reached out to you? Because if he has, you need to tell me. The police

are still looking for him."

"No, he hasn't. And even if he had, I wouldn't tell you." Standing up, I veered my stare at her. "I think we're done here. I'm not coming back."

"Aubrey—" she started to say.

I was gone. The door closed on its own behind me, and I never looked back.

I didn't need a therapist to save me. I already had a savior.