



Sins of Autumn

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Category: Romance, Adult, Dark, Horror

Description: I fell madly in love with a nightmare.

I thought I knew him. Wilder Carson—the man who chased me through high school, who promised me forever and the world. That was before I saw the texts and the photos that unraveled everything I believed.

When my friends and I escaped to a remote cabin for some much-needed TLC, I thought I was leaving the chaos behind.

I was wrong.

The knocks on the door and the masked figures lurking in the shadows are not random. They're calculated. And somehow, they're connected to him.

Now, I'm not just questioning if I ever knew the man I loved.

I'm questioning if I'll make it out alive because his dark promises weren't just words.

They were warnings.

Author's Note

This book is part of the Nightmares of Nevermore series, a collection of standalone dark horror romance stories. While each book is interconnected through shared themes of obsession, betrayal, and survival, they can be read in any order.

These stories contain mature themes and content that may be disturbing to some readers. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

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CHAPTER ONE

It was the kind of half-conscious awareness where dreams and reality were blurred. The room was completely dark aside from the distant city lights reflecting off the floor-to-ceiling windows. I lay there for a minute, my body feeling heavy, languid from sleep, and the delicious soreness that had helped put me to bed.

My skin prickled with awareness, and I turned my head, my gaze clashing with Wilder's. He was propped up on one elbow, his hazel eyes fixed on me, unblinking and burning with an intensity that made my breath hitch.

"How long have you been awake?" I asked, my voice still thick with sleep.

"Long enough." His fingers brushed against my cheek.

The touch was light, like he was afraid I might vanish if he pressed too hard. "You're beautiful when you sleep."

"Is that what you've been doing? Watching me sleep?"

"I love watching you."

I laughed softly. "You sound like a stalker."

"I am." His lips curled into a faint smile. "But you're the only woman worth watching."

His words made my stomach twist in the maddening way only he could, warmth blooming under my skin at his attention. There was something unshakable about the way he looked at me, like I was the center of his world, the axis his entire existence spun around. It was suffocating, overwhelming... and impossible to resist. I glanced across the room and saw it was only a little after 1 AM.

With a sigh, I closed my eyes and dragged the comforter higher, aware of how bare I was beneath.

After a minute or two, I laughed. "You're still staring," I rasped, though the complaint lacked any real bite.

"I can't help it." His voice dipped lower, his fingers trailing down my arm, igniting a path of heat as they went.

I opened my eyes and smiled at him. One would think that I'd be used to this by now, but he still easily made my heart race with just a look. He leaned down, his soft lips brushing against mine. The kiss started soft, almost tender, but it didn't stay that way long.

His hand moved to cradle the back of my neck, holding me in place with a fervor that left me breathless. Every stroke of his tongue was a reminder that I was his. He pulled back just enough to whisper against my lips, his breath warm and heavy. "I need you."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Again? We just—"

He cut me off with a wolfish grin, the kind that always sent my pulse skittering. "Don't act like you don't want me just as badly."

Before I could argue that while that was true, he'd already fucked me twice, his lips

were on mine again.

His hands slid down my body, the bedding tangling around us as he shoved it away. The cool air hit my skin, quickly replaced by his warmth.

His mouth trailed down my neck, lingering on the sensitive spot just below my ear before moving lower. He kissed a slow path down my collarbone, his lips and tongue working in tandem to drive me insane. When he reached the curve of my stomach, my body was already trembling beneath him.

“Wilder,” I whispered, but whatever protest I might’ve had dissolved the moment his mouth found its way between my thighs.

His tongue was slow at first, deliberate, teasing, as he licked me from top to bottom.

The sound I made was more of a gasp than a moan, my back arching off the bed as his lips sealed around my clit. He was relentless, his tongue moving in rapid, precise strokes.

His beautiful eyes met mine, a predatory smile playing on his lips. He knew exactly what he was doing. The control he had over my body was exhilarating. He moved his head back and forth, covering my entire pussy with his magical mouth.

My hands flew to his hair, tangling in the dark strands as he worked me over like he had all the time in the world. He gripped my thighs, holding me firmly in place as he dragged me closer and closer to the edge.

“Wilder,” I moaned his name.

His face was etched with concentration, but there was a hint of wickedness in his gaze that sent shivers down my spine. “Let go, baby.”

With a loud cry, my body tensed and then relaxed as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me.

He continued his assault, drawing out the orgasm for as long as he could, pulling me apart piece by piece until I was left panting and dazed. When he finally kissed his way back up my body, I felt the weight of him settle over me again. His lips met mine in a deep, possessive kiss that had me tasting myself. A deep moan slipped from my throat as he slid inside me, slow and deliberate, like he was staking his claim all over again. He was so long and thick, filling me completely. I never got enough of this.

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He fucked me slowly, bringing our bodies closer together with each stroke. "I never get enough of you." He thrust deeper and my hands flew to his sides, grasping him tightly.

I couldn't respond. I could barely think, lost in the way he filled me, the way his hands cradled my face.

He groaned, his forehead pressing against mine.

His words were a soft mantra, spoken with raw, unguarded emotion. "I love you. Fuck, I love you so much."

A warmth bloomed in my chest, wrapping around the intensity of the moment. His eyes locked with mine, and the world outside us ceased to exist.

"Tell me you love me, Mint," he murmured, his tone soft.

A shiver ran through me as I moaned his name, my body arching to meet his. Words escaped me, caught between the pleasure and the unrelenting pull of him.

His movements quickened, each thrust sending me spiraling further into the space we shared, a place that felt infinite and safe all at once.

"Say it."

"I love you," I managed, barely.

“Again,” he urged his hands tangling in my hair, grounding me as he moved faster, deeper.

“I love you,” I choked out, every nerve attuned to him, responding to the way he claimed me. His name spilled from my lips in a series of soft cries, my mind a haze of pleasure and connection.

The moment built between us, a crescendo of raw emotion and physicality. The sound of our bodies moving together filled the room, punctuated by my gasps and his low groans. I clung to him, my nails digging into his back as I spiraled closer to the edge.

His movements became harsher, each thrust a silent declaration of how deeply he needed me.

“Wilder,” I gasped, my voice breaking as the pleasure crested, a tidal wave that left me trembling beneath him as I came, my pussy clenching around his dick. He followed moments later, his release a warm pulse that sent aftershocks through my body.

He kissed me again, tender, and almost reverent like he was worshiping the very air I breathed.

He found my hands and laced our fingers together without breaking away.

We’d been doing this for years, yet every time felt just as intense and consuming—whether it was rough, gentle, or somewhere in between. Wilder had a way of making it feel like the first time, everytime. I wasn’t sure if it was normal to sleep together as often as we did, but it worked for us. He was definitely a giver before he took for himself.

We stayed like that for a few minutes longer before he withdrew slowly. I immediately felt the loss.

I beamed at him and stretched. “Thanks for that.”

He laughed. “I feel like I just got a slap on the ass and told good game.”

“Same thing, really,” I joked, slowly sitting up.

“What are you doing?”

I ran my hands through my hair, forcing back a yawn. “Bathroom.”

“Let me have you for five more minutes.”

He didn’t give me much of a choice, already pulling me into his arms.

The phone buzzed on his side of the bed, the soft vibration breaking the silence in the room. I dozed back off at some point and vaguely remembered Wilder slipping out to grab a glass of water.

The same buzz came two more times and that was enough to fully get my attention. It was damn near 3 AM. That wasn’t the time for casual conversation, so who the hell was blowing him up?

I rolled over and grabbed the phone just as the preview for his group chat that he usually muted when we were together. It was only a few words, but that was enough to make my stomach drop. I told myself not to look. These were Wilder’s private messages—his life outside of us. Instinct, or maybe just raw curiosity, got the better of me. I quickly entered his pin, unlocking his cell and going right to the thread.

Thorne:

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Got her in my sights. This will be fun.

Attached to that lovely text was an image, a bombshell of a woman in thin lingerie that left nothing to the imagination.

I hesitated, my pulse picking up speed as I listened for any sign that indicated Wilder was about to walk back into the room. I tried reasoning with myself that he was in a group chat with his friends, men I had come to think of as my brothers like he did. They were all gorgeous in their own way and single.

Talking about women was completely normal, but the tone of the messages was fucking gross and violating. I doubted these women had consented to be talked about like meat at an auction.

I continued to scroll, now invested.

Lucian:

Make it longer this time. Don't want to lose the bonus.

Hunter:

Got another bid that'll make this even more entertaining.

An image accompanied this one too, and she was just as gorgeous as the others.

"Who the fuck is KJ?" Their initials popped up a few times in the thread. They never

actually responded directly, they just gave a thumbs up and hearted a few of the messages. Wilder's entire group of friends were in the chat and that was the only name I didn't know.

I clicked out of it, my hands trembling. The way they spoke was not coming across as men simply chasing ass or sharing inside jokes. Scrolling through his other text messages, I found... nothing. I bit my lip, the pang of suspicion growing stronger as I tapped into his recently deleted tab hoping if there was anything at all, it would be spam.

One quick scan proved that was not the case.

Right away, I could feel in my gut these weren't meant for my eyes to see. I hesitated, fingers hovering over the first message. I knew I was about to cross a line, that I was on the edge of something that could ruin everything, including me. But ignorance wasn't fucking bliss if my boyfriend was passing around community dick. I braced myself and opened the very first thread.

The texts were brief but suggestive, each one laced with an intimacy that sent a wave of nausea through me.

I scrolled until I saw a single photo that sent our entire relationship up in flames.

Amber fucking Hughes.

Her full lips were curled into a smug smile, posed in a way that showed every inch of her naked body. Perfectly manicured nails were on her chest, touching the delicate golden chain of the necklace she always wore.

She was beautiful and she knew it. Anger surged through me, hot and thick the longer I stared at her.

Thisbitch.

Of all people why did it have to be her? The spoiled, vindictive princess of Jared Hughes—a man I was semi-convinced was a sociopath. Amber had inherited his arrogance and then some, making my and my sister's life hell from high school through college.

Beneath the picture was a text.

Amber:

Still up for our little rendezvous?

Wilder's response made my head spin.

Wilder:

Depends on if you're ready to behave. Don't waste my time. I like obedience, not games.

My hands shook as I backed out of Amber's messages. An insidious voice urged me to keep going, while every other fiber of my being was screaming to stop.

I'd already inserted the knife, why not keep twisting the blade?

The next thread had a name I didn't recognize—Isla Martinez. I opened it and was met with another picture. She was stunning, with dark, flowing hair and eyes that challenged anyone who looked at her. She wore a slinky dress that hugged her curves, and her gaze was sultry, legs spread invitingly. Her text was no less suggestive than Amber's.

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Isla:

Waiting for you. Can't wait to beg. You know how much I love when you make me wait.

I could practically hear the longing in her message, the familiarity, the way she spoke like she knew he'd come back to her, that she had a right to expect it. Then came his response, each word twisting the knife a little deeper just like I knew it would.

Wilder:

Patience, princess. I'll get there when I'm ready. Don't wear yourself out thinking about it. I like it better when you're desperate.

The easy confidence was something I was familiar with but had never seen directed at anyone but me.

Isla:

Don't make me wait too long. You know what happened last time.

Wilder:

Don't get too needy. Last time was your lesson, remember? Maybe I need to remind you.

A fresh wave of nausea hit as I read his words, imagining the kind of history they

must have had.

With a shaky breath, I forced myself to click out of their messages, the words already haunting me with a pain I couldn't wish away. One more thread remained in the deleted folder, and as much as I didn't want to know, I couldn't stop myself from opening it.

Natalia Cruz.

Another woman I'd never heard of. I wasn't sure if that made this better or worse when she was just as beautiful. A stunning blonde with striking green eyes, her beauty almost unreal. Her picture was a close-up shot of her flawless face, her lips parted slightly.

Natalia:

Can't stop thinking about last time. Ready to make it even better?

I stared, numb, as I scrolled down to find his reply.

Wilder:

If you can handle it. Don't disappoint me.

His phone was filled with conversations with women who were flawless, and stunning, like they'd stepped out of some forbidden dream.

"Motherfucker," I breathed.

Just moments ago, we'd been fine. I'd been lying there, blissful, warm in his arms, trying to get the feeling back in my legs because he'd fucked me so hard.

And now...

Now, it was a miracle I still remembered to breathe. I set his phone back down carefully, as if handling it any other way would shatter whatever was left of my sanity. I slid out of bed, moving as quietly as possible, and started fumbling with my clothes.

My hands were trembling, my heart pounding so loud I was sure it would echo off the walls. I yanked my shirt over my head without bothering to search for my bra, my movements frantic.

I had to get the fuck out there. I couldn't be near him. It was taking all I had to seriously hold myself in check. The door creaked open, and I froze. Wilder stood in the doorway, towering over me at his full 6'3" height, his broad, muscular frame filling the space. He was shirtless, dark sweatpants slung low on his hips, revealing his delicious V and his toned torso, a glass of water in his hand.

He looked at my flushed face and the hurried, frantic way I was pulling on my clothes, his brows knitting in confusion.

"What's wrong?" His voice was calm yet laced with a hint of concern, like he couldn't possibly fathom why I was acting this way.

I swallowed, forcing myself to look away from his piercing gaze, which always seemed to see more than I wanted him to. My eyes fell to the tattoo inked into the side of his chest, standing out against his fair skin, a raven perched atop a stopwatch with a skull shadowed beneath it.

I had seen it countless times, and traced the lines of it as I laid with him. Now it seemed darker, more ominous, like a reminder of secrets he kept buried.

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I had no idea where my ability to speak went, why mouth chose then of all times not to work. Normally I never shut the fuck up. When I didn't answer, he shut the door and took a step closer, observing me carefully.

“What happened, Mint?”

I finally lifted my gaze to his again. Whatever he saw on my face, had him looking from me to his cellphone. Asshole was always too damn quick-witted. I watched the moment it clicked—the realization settled over him like a shadow. He took a slow breath, his expression shifting to something unreadable. He did that well too, wore a mask of cool composure that never cracked.

“You looked at my phone,” he stated, his voice still calm. Too fucking lax for what I'd just seen.

Anger and hurt clawed their way up. “You're not going to deny it? The pictures, the messages?”

He continued to study me, his silence louder than any words. He ran a hand through his dark hair. It was always cut in a clean, undercut style, usually swept back or slightly tousled. There was just enough length to allow him to rake his fingers through it, which was exactly what I'd been doing when his face was between my thighs.

He placed the water on his nightstand. “It's not what you think.”

“Oh? Please do tell me what I think about the deleted text between you and that bitch-

whore Amber Hughes.” Her name tasted like sour venom, each syllable twisting something painful in my chest.

“It was before you,” he admitted, his tone clipped.

Well, if that wasn’t the cherry on top of this shit sundae.

I almost gave him half a point for not lying, but then took it back because it fully dawned on me what he’d just revealed. My voice came out hoarse. “You... you fucked Amber before we got together?”

He didn’t flinch, didn’t look away. His gaze stayed steady on mine. “Three times,” he replied, his tone cold and indifferent.

Don’t cry.

Don’t cry.

I clung to my anger, holding onto it like a lifeline, refusing to let the tears spill. I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction. “And you didn’t think that was something you should have mentioned?”

“It was before you,” he repeated as if that made it better.

Somehow, that felt worse.

Everything about Amber, the snide comments, the looks she gave me any time we crossed paths, all of it suddenly made sense.

She’d always had this look, like she was keeping a secret, something she knew would destroy me. I thought back on their thread and the date they’d been sent.

“And while with me!” My fists clenched at my sides, nails digging into my palms to keep from shaking. “I saw the texts, Wilder. Those were recent.”

“Mint.” He took another step towards me.

“This looks bad. I know, baby, but it isn’t what you’re thinking. I would never cheat on you. I’m a little insulted you’d go there.”

I silently started counting to ten.

I didn’t make it to five.

“Are you trying to gaslight me? You’re a little insulted? I saw the text messages. I saw them with my goddamn eyes!”

“And I can promise you that what you saw and what the truth is, isn’t remotely the same. It’s...complicated,” he explained in such a calm manner I wanted to scream.

I let out a hollow, bitter laugh. “Oh, it’s complicated? What’s next, this isn’t what it looks like? Did you memorize the Dumbass Cheater’s Handbook for all the classic excuses?”

“I can’t say anything right now that will make this better other than that those texts were nothing more than work.”

I felt my mind spin, and then my voice rose, loud enough that the entire penthouse could hear. Not that it mattered. He and his dipshit friends owned the whole top floor.

“Work?” I echoed, anger and disbelief mixing into something dark. “How the fuck does your job have anything to do with screwing other women, Wilder? Huh? Is it some kind of status thing? You get a promotion or extra stocks for every girl you

line up?”

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He continued to stare at me, his expression eerily blank.

“Don’t just stand there. Help me make this make sense because all I see is you with a backup harem.” I ran a hand over my face. “I’m such a fucking idiot.”

“Stop,” he warned lowly.

Did this motherfucker just tell me to stop?

“You know what?” I pointed toward the glass doors leading to his balcony. “We should have this conversation outside. You can explain how ‘work’ makes you a total piece of shit while you enjoy the view. You might get so carried away; that you’ll slip.”

He grinned, the kind of dark, twisted smile that didn’t belong in a conversation like this. His eyes raked over me, and he tilted his head, that grin widening. “You’re gorgeous when you’re murderous.” His voice was close to a purr.

“What the...what the fuck is wrong with you?” I was completely thrown, every warning bell in my head going off at once. I needed to get the hell away from him before I ended up as a highlight on Snapped or a true crime podcast.

“You know what. It doesn’t matter. The before, during, after—it all blurs together. I’m done, Wilder.”

I snatched my phone and key fob from the dresser, my mind racing. My things were scattered everywhere in this penthouse. Clothes in his drawers, my birth control in the

bathroom, my favorite shampoo in the shower. I couldn't stay to gather them, not when I felt like I was about to either fall apart or make headlines as a murder statistic. I turned to make a break for the door, but he was suddenly right there, looming over me, backing me against the wall, and caging me in.

"Done?" he questioned lowly. "I told you on our first date this was forever. Till we're sharing a grave and whatever life comes next."

Yeah. That was a blazing red flag I ignored like a colorblind fool.

"Pretty sure you having a dirty dick makes that null and void, you fucking psycho," I damn near hissed.

He laughed. "Psycho? I think you almost meant it this time."

I glared, tallying up yet another red flag I ignored. If I sat and took stock of all of them, I could plant a whole damn forest.

His grin widened. "I love that you see me for who I really am. That's what makes you so perfect for me, Mint."

I stared at him, my chest heaving, at a complete loss for words. How the hell could anyone say something like that and sound so damn sure of it? Oh, right. Wilder Carson.

"Was perfect you," I couldn't help but correct.

"You think I'd give you up for anything or anyone? Have you forgotten how obsessed I am with you?" He leaned back slightly, and his expression became contemplative. "I thought I did a good job showing it. I'll have to do better."

His audacity broke something loose in me.

I shoved him, my hands hitting his chest with everything I had, my anger surging to the surface. He stepped back, not because I'd managed to move him, but because he let me. The maddening grin never left his lips, his body a wall of control, radiating calm.

"You're insane," I spat, my hands trembling from the effort not to swing on him.

"And you love it." He watched me like a predator indulging his prey. I damn near speed-walked toward the door. I flung it open with more force than necessary, the sound echoing. Just as I stepped into the hall, his voice followed.

"You're everything to me, Mint. We're not done. We can never be done. You start where I end, remember?"

I swallowed but didn't look back. As I passed through the sleek, modern living space, I muttered a curse under my breath, a specific one directed at Wilder's asshole friends.

They were all there, sprawled out on the plush sectional at nearly two in the morning, texting each other, their faces lit by the glow of their screens. Lucian, Thorne, Hunter, Atlas. Romeo's crazy ass was God knows where. They were all in that thread and not a single one of them looked up, didn't say a word.

They sat there, fingers tapping away in their little group chat. The whole scene was all around weird and unsettling, like some twisted cult gathering. I fought the urge to flip them off on my way out. I was done with this place, and as much as it was already killing me, I was done with the man I loved more than anything.

CHAPTER TWO

I kept my head down and powered through. I held it together as I stepped into the elevator, entering the pin that got it moving and then practically assaulting the ground button with shaking hands. The ride down was agonizingly slow, the silence thick and suffocating.

When the doors finally slid open, I flipped off the camera that gave them a view of the lift and called Wilder a piece of shit again. Then I walked into the parking garage, passing their ridiculous line of luxury cars, my footsteps echoing in the dimly lit space. My breath felt tight in my chest, but I kept going, determined to get to my car without falling apart.

Not yet.

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It wasn't until I slid into the driver's seat of my sporty sedan that Wilder always teased me about that I finally let out the first choked sob I'd been holding back, gripping the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turned white.

Holy fuck, this hurt.

The pain ripped through me, sharper than anything I had ever felt.

I'd sworn I would never be that girl, the one who aggressively claimed their man would never cheat, only to end up looking like a complete fool. Yet there I was, sitting behind the wheel of my car, feeling every bit the idiot, humiliated, and blindsided.

I blinked through the tears that welled up, my vision blurring. Even if he wasn't physically cheating—which I found hard to believe--there were still those fucking pictures, the messages. The betrayal clung to me like a second skin. I wasn't just mad at Wilder; I was mad at myself. Mad that I had let it get this far. Mad that I'd ignored every red flag.

There was still a pitiful, delusional voice inside my head, whispering that I had this all wrong. That there was some reasonable explanation for everything. I shut that stupid bitch down real quick.

I knew better than to let that voice take over. It was delusional. I'd seen what it did to my mom, how it had driven her to ignore the truth and live in denial until it was too late. She spent her last days clinging to some fantasy that everything would be okay, even as my dad's lies chipped away at her until there was nothing left.

It drove her into an early grave, leaving me with a father who drank too damn much because he regretted his shitty choices far too late to fix anything. He wasn't a mean or angry drunk; he was a sobbing pathetic one. His death led to me being taken in by a new family entirely.

I wasn't going to be her.

I couldn't be her.

And the worst part? Wilder knew all about that. He knew what it had done to me, the scars I carried from watching my mom unravel. So how could he do the same damn thing?

The ache in my chest burrowed deeper, sharper, cutting through the anger. He was supposed to be different. He was supposed to understand. That hurt even more than the lies.

I pulled out of the parking deck, gripping the steering wheel like it was the only thing keeping me tethered to reality. The streets were empty at this hour, the quiet hum of the city night wrapping around me as I drove. The streetlights blurred by, one after another, but I barely noticed them. My mind was still racing, tangled in everything that had happened.

My phone had only gone off once during the thirty-minute drive, and I didn't need to check it to know who it was from. I ignored it the entire way, too afraid to see whatever excuse or bullshit justification he might have produced. It wouldn't change anything. I knew that, but there was a part of me still clinging to some semblance of hope and terrified of what he said, or worse, what he hadn't.

I turned down my street, the familiar sight doing little to calm the storm brewing inside me. I pulled into the driveway, parking behind Cherish's Enclave, the SUV a

reminder that I wasn't alone in all of this. Daniella was still out, her closing shift at the bar likely just now ending. She'd be home soon enough, exhausted and smelling of beer and smoke, completely unaware of the mess I was in.

I turned off the engine, the car going silent, but the deafening quiet inside me only grew louder. The tears I'd been fighting for the entire drive started to blur my vision again, but I blinked them away, unwilling to fall apart just yet. I knew once I started, I wouldn't stop. I stared at my phone, knowing there was an unread message waiting for me.

I didn't want to read it.

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking I cared what he had to say. As I sat there, staring at the dark house, I knew I had to. If I didn't, it would eat away at me all night.

With a shaky breath, I unlocked my phone and opened his message. It was simple. Just two words.

Wild:Come home.

I stared at the screen, my heart lurching painfully in my chest. He wasn't talking about his penthouse. We always told each other that home for us was wherever the other was. For a split second, I almost typed out a response:You're not my home anymore.The words were on the tip of my fingers, bitter and filled with the kind of pain that makes you lash out. I stopped myself. That was what he wanted—some sort of reaction. Anything to make me fall back into the orbit of his control. Instead, I did something better.

Nothing.

Silence could be just as powerful as any reply.

Let him sit there, waiting for a response that wasn't coming. I didn't stop there. I took it further.

With trembling hands, I went through my phone, systematically blocking him on everything—calls, texts, social media. Every app that connected me to him felt like a live wire I had to sever, no matter how much it burned. Each block, each deliberate click, felt like carving pieces of my heart out, leaving raw, aching spaces where he was supposed to be. I paused with every step, hesitating, the weight of each decision pressing down like a physical blow.

After gathering all the composure I could muster, I finally exited the car, the cool fall air wrapping around me, sharp and biting. It was quiet, the kind of eerie stillness that made every small sound stand out. The crunch of leaves under my boots felt too loud as I crept toward the house, hoping that Moose wouldn't hear me and start barking. The last thing I needed was him barreling down the stairs and waking up the whole neighborhood.

I barely made it halfway up the walkway when the front door swung open. The outside light clicked on, spilling warmth onto the front lawn. I froze, mid-step, blinking against the sudden brightness. Cherish stood in the doorway in nothing but a fluffy crop top and matching pajama shorts, her silk bonnet perched on her head, not exactly dressed for the chill in the air.

Her eyes locked on me, instantly reading the situation. We didn't need words for her to know. She was the only person outside Wilder who could read me like an open book. My best friend turned sister from the day our parents adopted me at the age of thirteen.

She tilted her head slightly, eyes narrowing in that way only a sister could manage,

full of both concern and readiness for a fight. “Do I need to go grab my tennis shoes and Vaseline?” she asked in a calm, steady voice, “Or do you need me to hold you while you cry and rage?”

I let out a shaky laugh, though it felt more like a sob, and the tightness in my chest loosened just a fraction. I didn’t know what I needed yet, but just seeing her standing there made the weight of everything feel a little lighter. “Option one sounds perfect if I didn’t want to make us felons. I think I’m going to go cry in the shower,” I tried to joke, forcing a weak smile.

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Without a word, my sister moved aside, letting me in, and Moose was right behind her, his stubby tail wagging as he came to greet me. I stopped for a second, reaching down to wrap my arms around his neck. He always seemed to know when I needed him.

“Do you want to talk tonight? Or tomorrow?” my sister asked softly.

“Tomorrow,” I replied in the same tone, looking up at her. She wanted answers, I could see it in her eyes. A play-by-play, every detail laid out for her to dissect.

She knew how crazily in love with Wilder I was. She’d encouraged me to give him a chance and the rest was history. That’s exactly why I had to block him now, because if I didn’t, at the first sign of “later,” I’d be right back in his arms. I could still feel him all over me, his touch lingering like a brand I couldn’t escape. It wasn’t just on my skin, it was everywhere. It burned, cruel and unrelenting, a reminder of everything I’d lost in the span of a single night.

Cherish gave me a small, knowing smile, the kind that spoke louder than words, her way of saying she was there, and that I didn’t have to shoulder this alone. I rose and headed for the stairs. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

In my room, I tossed my phone and keys onto the bedspread, pointedly ignoring the urge to check for messages. I knew there wouldn’t be any, not after what I’d done. I grabbed what I needed and headed for the bathroom, each step heavier than the last.

The second the hot water hit my skin; all the tears I’d been holding back broke free.

CHAPTER THREE

The front door slammed, reverberating through the entire penthouse.

“Fuck.”

My chest tightened; frustration flared beneath the surface. I hadn’t expected her to leave like that. I was surprised she didn’t go off like a damn bomb. It would have been better if she had. I looked around the room, briefly lingering on my bed where I’d had her pinned beneath me, whispering my name like a chant what felt like only moments ago. I fucking loved that sound. It paled in comparison to how much I needed her.

She’d seen too much.

Misunderstood even more.

She actually thought I’d been fucking other women as if I could touch someone else when every inch of me was hers. Not to mention I fucked her so often that even if I could stomach another’s proximity, I had nothing left to give.

I craved Autumn in a way that bordered on madness—three times a day, minimum, and it still wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. I could drown in her and still want more. Her scent, her taste, the way she looked at me. When she smiled. The sound of her laugh. I was addicted, bound to her in ways I couldn’t even put into words.

I knew what kind of image those texts painted, but this was so far beyond infidelity. If she had any idea what was really happening, she would’ve run screaming and never looked back. Then she would have realized I was right behind her.

How many times had I played through this scenario in my head, preparing for the moment she might find out too much? I had rehearsed every excuse, every line, but when it actually happened—when I saw the hurt in her eyes—not a single one of those words came out. All I could focus on was the pain etched on her beautiful face and chose not to lie to her.

I picked up my phone and unlocked the screen. The group chat was still there, the messages glaring back at me like a mirror to everything I'd screwed up tonight. I always let Autumn have free reign with my phone, never thinking twice about it. She could scroll through playlists, change my background, and send herself photos she liked. 98% of them were of her, the rest were of us. I let her in because I never thought she'd stumble onto the one thing she was never supposed to see.

I should have double-checked everything before she came over. If I had, the phantom program that ran on our phones like a ghost in the system would have scrubbed every trace of those texts well beyond a simple deletion. It made it so they never fucking existed. It was a seamless, flawless system.

Until tonight.

This wasn't just a mistake; it was a catastrophic fuck-up.

To Autumn, it was proof of betrayal, a confirmation of her worst fears.

I failed somewhere along the way because no fucking way she should have believed I would do that to her. Like an asshole, I told her it was nothing but work. That hadn't been a lie but there was some major context missing from that revelation.

I'd planned to tell her everything. Eventually. The second she knew the truth; she'd have to be mine in every way. She would be locked in my world, unable to turn back and unable to leave. Timing was crucial, and tonight wasn't it. I was not telling her

shit until there were fail-safes in place that ensured she'd never be able to escape me once everything was laid out for her.

The mentors who oversaw our unit had always drilled into us: "The shadows keep us safe. You don't pull someone into the dark unless you know they'll never leave."

My phone buzzed and a new text popped up.

Thorne:

Well, that escalated fast. How long do you think she'll stay mad?

I could practically see his smirk through the text. Normally, I'd have laughed, and thrown something sarcastic back, but my mind was elsewhere. I knew they got it. They always did. Lucian, Thorne, Hunter, Romeo, and Atlas—were my brothers, not by blood but by choice—and my closest friends.

They knew what it was like to crave control, to thrive on the chaos that came with our line of work, and how twisted our personal relationships would be because of it. They just hadn't found the right girl yet. We all knew it would happen eventually, and when it did, they'd fall just as hard, just as fast, just as completely. The exception was Lucian.

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He understood on a different level. There was one girl he'd never gotten over.

He'd burn the world down for her without hesitation. She was on our agenda for winter. I was looking forward to it. Autumn would need a friend.

I backtracked to the messages I'd sent, my jaw tightening as I scrolled through them. The texts stared back at me like a condemnation. I didn't want this shit touching my girl, not in this manner. All the women she'd seen, from the group chat to these deleted chats, weren't anything but quarry.

My words were nothing but a lure to get what was needed from each of them. I paused on the thread with Amber. She alone was enough to destroy what I had built. I'd never told Autumn about my prior arrangement with that serpentine cunt for various reasons.

Amber had been a convenience, something easy before Autumn had ever entered my orbit. She was eager, predictable, and obedient at first. It wasn't bad sex; it was just empty. Mechanical.

I took what I wanted, and she was more than willing to give it. She liked the power she thought it gave her. It started at one of those insufferable parties her dad threw, the kind where everyone was drowning in champagne and pretending not to notice the underhanded deals happening in the darkened corners.

I happily attended with my parents. They raised me with a golden spoon and then handed off the tools that I used to succeed on my own. It was only right I came with them to galas, charity events, or wherever else.

Amber caught my eye because she wouldn't stop staring. She had nothing I wanted beyond the obvious, and she knew that, too. We weren't friends. We didn't talk about anything that mattered. It was purely physical, which she quickly began to hate. Amber had a mouth on her, and not the kind that made her useful.

I remember the first time she mentioned Autumn's name.

She'd been throwing around spiteful comments about some sophomore she'd had a run-in with. It didn't mean anything to me then. I was two years ahead of her in school. I barely registered it, brushing her off with some noncommittal grunt. It wasn't until two months later that I finally saw the face that went with the name. Some childish asshole, that I'd since taken care of, had purposely body-checked one of her friends and knocked the girl to the ground.

Autumn helped the girl up and then went after the guy, slamming him into the lockers before anyone knew what was happening. It took two people to pull her off him. Her anger burned hot, but it wasn't just rage—there was a fierce protectiveness in her that grabbed my attention right then and there. It didn't hurt that she was fucking beautiful, either.

Absolutely drop-dead gorgeous.

Her long, dark hair had a way of catching the light, making it impossible not to notice her.

It cascaded straight down her back, framing her face perfectly.

And her eyes.

Those deep, brown eyes always seemed to say more than she ever did. Her skin had a natural glow, like she'd soaked up the last rays of the summer sun and kept it with

her. She had a naturally toned body that reflected her active lifestyle, but with enough curves to drive me crazy.

It didn't take long for me to learn every guy in the whole damn school had noticed her. I'd somehow missed that fucking memo. Even Hunter was aware of who she was. The relief I felt when I discovered she paid no attention to any of them was the first sign I had been hooked. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I knew I had to have her.

It was easy to see why Amber had a problem with her, and it was nothing but cliché jealousy.

Autumn was everything Amber wasn't, with a sharp wit and a smile that could stop me in my tracks.

She owned me.

I wasn't ashamed to admit that.

I'd scream it from the rooftops, put that shit on a billboard.

I crossed to the window, staring out at the city below. Lights flickered in the distance, the streets calm and quiet, but the restlessness inside me refused to settle. I wouldn't be getting any sleep that night. Sleeping without her wasn't natural. It never had been. The first night she'd stayed over, tangled in my sheets, I'd known that was how it was supposed to be.

Without her, the bed was too big, the silence too loud, and everything felt wrong. There was no reason for us to be apart, and yet there I was, staring out at the city like a man exiled from his own life and it was my own damn fault.

I unlocked my phone again and sent a basic text, knowing full well it wasn't going to be enough. Not even close. Two words—Come home. That barely scratched the surface of what I needed to say, but doing nothing was worse.

I glanced at the empty doorway, still hanging slightly ajar, a reminder of her departure. She had thrown it open so hard that I was fairly sure the doorknob had left a dent in the drywall. The thought almost made me smile, if not for the situation.

A soft rasp on the doorframe broke the silence as Lucian shuffled in, his steps silent despite his size. He was dressed similarly to me, in a black tank top and sweats, his usual casual look that only highlighted the sharp edges of his frame. His dark eyes scanned the room, looking for the aftermath of the argument. He seemed just as surprised as I was that there wasn't one.

"We're going to make this right," he said quietly as he stepped further into the room.

His tone wasn't a question, it was a statement of fact. I glanced at him, meeting his dark-eyed stare. "I know we will."

His expression didn't shift, but there was a flicker of understanding that didn't require words. It was the kind of silent exchange we'd perfected over the years.

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Lucian wasn't just someone to watch out for, he was someone you couldn't afford to look away from. Tall and solidly built, with a sharp angular jaw and jet-black hair that always gave him an effortlessly commanding air, he didn't have to assert his authority. He simply was. He was ice-cold and calculating, the embodiment of control. Beneath that icy surface was an absolute loyalty.

His unwavering dedication to our inner circle wasn't something anyone else would dare to question. He didn't say much, but when he did, every word mattered. I knew we weren't just going to make it right.

We were going to make it how things should have been and needed to be.

"How do you want to play this?"

I turned back toward the window, my gaze fixed on the city lights below as they blurred into an indistinct haze, offering no clarity. "I'm not sure yet."

Lucian didn't press, didn't push for answers. He just stood there, his presence steady, grounding me in a way I didn't acknowledge aloud. My chest tightened as my thoughts drifted back to Autumn, to the way she'd looked at me before she left. The pain in her eyes had gutted me.

I had to do this just right.

She was mine, and nothing, not even her own doubts was going to change that. She fit into my life so seamlessly, it felt like she'd always been meant to be there. My family adored her, and my friends did too. What she didn't realize yet was the lengths

I'd go to, to keep her by my side.

It was time she understood.

Long past time

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CHAPTER FOUR

My suitcase was open on the bed, meticulously organized with perfectly folded clothes I was still undecided on. The dryer buzzed downstairs, signaling the last load, and I made a mental note to grab it when I was finished. My fleece robe clung to my still-damp skin, the soft fabric a small comfort as I paced back to the closet, trying to figure out what else to pack.

It shouldn't have been so hard to pick out a few outfits for a single weekend, but Daniella wasn't all that descriptive about what we'd be doing. She was a nature girl, so if she wanted to go hiking and I only had leggings and slipper boots, that would be a problem. Whatever she had in mind, I desperately needed this little getaway.

The past two weeks had been a relentless battle to avoid any possible run-ins with Wilder or his friends in our small-ass city.

Despite not crossing their paths once, he was still everywhere, in every corner of my head and deep inside my chest. What surprised me most was that he hadn't shown up at my house. In fact, he'd made zero effort to reach out. He had to know he was blocked, and there hadn't been a single peep unless you counted flowers. Each arrangement was different and accompanied by a note that the florist had probably debated reporting to the authorities or at least a shrink.

My sister and Ella were starting to see just how obsessive Wilder was. They'd always joked about it, teasing me over his intensity, but it was another thing entirely to witness it play out the way it was. While I didn't want to give his actions any space in my mind, I couldn't stop myself from reading between the lines of every note and each chosen bloom. It was as if he was speaking directly to me through them.

I didn't miss their looks of concern when the flowers arrived, especially from my sister.

They didn't say much, but I knew what they were thinking. After I got a little too overprotective, snapping at them for making it into a bigger deal than it was, I think they silently agreed to keep their opinions to themselves.

I didn't mind the notes.

If I weren't so fucking angry and hurt, I might've been a puddle on the floor reading them. That was the worst part—knowing that, despite everything, Wilder still had a hold on me. The cards were simple but devastating, the kind of obsessive, unhinged shit that left no doubt about what he thought.

"Every night without you feels like dying. Come home."

"You can block me, but you can't run from me. You're mine. Always."

"I would burn this city down to have you in my arms again. Say the word, Mint, and watch me do it."

One of them had been nothing more than a single sentence. "Tell me who to kill to fix this, and I'll do it with a smile if it makes you happy."

Each time, I told myself to throw them out without reading, but I couldn't because as

much as they terrified me, they also made my heart twist in a sick, needy way I hated. The flowers were beautiful, of course. Wilder didn't do anything half-assed. Roses, lilies, orchids—blooms I couldn't even name, their meanings layered and deliberate. Once, he sent me a bouquet of asphodel and yarrow, which my sister had googled.

"Asphodel means eternal regret and yarrow is for healing wounds," she'd explained, her voice hesitant. "That's... a lot."

Yeah. A lot.

That was Wilder, though.

Even in his silence, he was still finding ways to invade my life, leaving me reeling in the aftermath of him.

For fourteen days.

Fourteen fucking days.

It didn't sound like much, just hours and seconds when you broke it down, but when it felt like part of you was missing, when the pain twisted itself into something physical, clawing at your chest, fourteen days was endless. Each second dragged, and each minute felt like a lifetime. Nights were the worst. The silence and the absence of his warmth were a constant reminder of everything I'd lost.

Part of me was relieved, thankful for the space to breathe and sort through the mess he'd made of me. Mostly, I was crushed. I hated the tiny voice in the back of my mind whispering that maybe I didn't matter to him as much as he always claimed. It was relentless, eating away at the fragile pieces of my heart I was desperately trying to hold together. Every day had been a battle, a rollercoaster of hysterics, rage, and a sickening emptiness I couldn't shake.

The anger kept me afloat, burning bright enough to drown out the hurt, but it was fleeting. Always so damn fleeting. I wasn't sure what I would get out of this spontaneous vacation, but a change of scenery couldn't hurt. Right?

The faint beep of the security system announced the front door opening, pulling me from my spiral. I didn't think twice about it. Cherish had run out to grab ice for the coolers; she didn't want to deal with it in the morning before we headed out. I backed out of the closet with a pair of sweatpants in hand, wondering what to match them with.

“Taking a trip without me?”

I yelped, my heart slamming against my ribs. Whipping around, my pulse thundered in my ears as my gaze landed on him.

“Wilder?”

He was leaning casually against the wall beside my now-closed bedroom door.

His eyes fixed on me with the unrelenting intensity that always stripped me bare. He looked infuriatingly perfect as if the last two weeks hadn't gutted him the way they had me. He was so damn gorgeous this could have been an image in a men's magazine. The smirk tugging at his lips was one I knew too well.

For a moment, I couldn't move, couldn't speak. The storm of questions that had haunted me every day since that night surged forward, demanding answers. I wasn't sure I wanted them anymore. I certainly didn't need them. Whatever answers he had would not be beneficial to me moving on. I was pretty certain they would just split me open all over again.

“You like the flowers?”

What a stupid, rhetorical question. I had been going out of my way to make them all live for as long as they could. He knew I liked flowers. There were four massive vases in my room. More were downstairs.

“What are you doing here?” I asked in place of answering.

“I needed to see you up close.”

That implied he'd seen me from a distance. I scoffed, crossing my arms like it would

protect me from the weight of his presence. “So, you show up in my bedroom?”

“I just need you to listen,” he said, cutting me off, his voice soft but commanding. “Can you do that for me?”

“How the hell did you even get inside the house?”

He smiled, and my stupid heart flipped. “Cherish left the door unlocked. Convenient, isn’t it?”

“More like reckless,” I shot back, my arms tightening. “You need to leave.”

“I’ll go,” he assured, way too smoothly, his tone almost playful. “After we finish talking.”

That word felt like a cruel joke, given the way he looked at me, like I was still his.

“You don’t get to decide when we talk, Wilder,” I snapped, desperate to drown out the war raging inside me. “And you sure as hell don’t get to just show up here like this just because you can.”

“But I did show up, Mint,” he replied, his tone softening, “You’re going to listen to me whether you want to or not. We can always do this the hard way. I know that’s your favorite.”

My face flushed. I tried to hold his gaze, but my mind betrayed me, spiraling. It felt much longer than two long, miserable weeks since I’d felt him inside me. We’d always been insatiable, unable to get enough of each other, stealing moments whenever and wherever we could. Sometimes it wouldn’t even be sex, he’d just hold me close and everything else melted away.

The memories twisted something sharp and ugly in my chest. It disgusted me how much I missed him.

My body ached for someone who clearly wasn't mine, not wholly. My heart was one thing. It had belonged to him and only him for years. He was my first everything beyond a few meaningless kisses. I thought I was safe in his hands. My eyes began to burn, and I silently cursed.

"I can't stand that look on your face."

Why did that sound so sincere? He pushed off the wall, closing the distance between us in a few quick strides. My breath caught as I really took him in—slacks and a button that hugged his fit frame. I shifted, instinctively stepping to the side, keeping my eyes locked on him. I wasn't afraid of Wilder, I never had been, but I knew he thrived on control. I had always happily given it to him. Now he could go fuck himself.

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“You need to leave,” I repeated, my voice firmer this time, though it still wavered under the weight of his stare. I was starting to sound like a broken record, but I didn’t care.

“I’m not going anywhere. Not until we talk. You owe me that much.”

I couldn’t do this. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t want to. I’d blocked him for a reason. God, I wanted him close as much as I wanted to put his beautiful face through a wall. Is this what they meant by there was a thin line between love and hate? Did it apply when you were trying to force yourself to stand on one side of it?

“I owe you?” My voice cracked. “I’ve given more than enough, and it wasn’t—.”

He was suddenly right in front of me, his arms pulling me in before I could stop him. His warmth, his scent, it hit me all at once, like a battering ram on the resolve I was clinging to.

“Get off me.” I pushed against his chest, but it was useless. He didn’t budge like he had before.

“Calm down.” He spun me around, pressing my back against his front.

He carried me to the bed like I weighed nothing and sat down, pulling me with him until I was perched on his lap, my robe rising up. My pulse raced, my breath shallow as his hands gripped my hips, keeping me in place.

“Wilder,” I ground out, my voice shaking with frustration and nerves.

“Mint,” he countered playfully. “We’re going to talk.” He moved some of my hair aside and brushed his lips over my shoulder blade. “I’ve missed you. Missed us.”

“And all the bitches in your phone seem to have been missing you too.”

I felt his lips curve into a smile. “Right. That’s what I wanted to talk about.”

I stiffened instantly, my body going rigid. “I don’t want to talk about them,” I snapped, fighting against his hold. “Let go of me!”

He ignored my struggles and held onto me with ease. “Do you honestly think I would cheat on you? Riskus? Risk you?”

His hand pressed firmly over my mouth, silencing my next tirade of protests. My chest heaved in a way that made my pulse hammer in my ears.

“I never would have touched Hughes if I’d known I would one day have you. The thing with her can’t even come close to what you are to me. She is nothing. You’re everything.”

At the mention of Amber, a fresh surge of fury bubbled up inside me. I jerked my arm, trying to free myself, aiming to elbow him, but his grip only tightened, pinning me more firmly against him.

“None of that,” he chided. His lips brushed against my neck this time. “I know you’re angry. I know you’re hurting. That is the last thing I ever wanted. We’re going to have to work through this together until you’re better because, above all else, you’re mine.”

My anger flared again, but so did the traitorous ache inside me, the one I hated for being there at all.

The way he claimed me without hesitation left me feeling maddeningly conflicted.

“You don’t get to fix this by sweet-talking me,” I seethed against his hand, my voice muffled but no less defiant.

“Of course not.” His lips grazed the curve of my neck again. “I’m going to show you exactly how committed to you I am.” He pressed a kiss just below my ear. “But first,” he continued, his hold on my mouth loosening just enough to let me speak clearly, “tell me how much you miss me.”

“Go to hell.”

He laughed as if I’d said exactly what he wanted to hear. “Only if you come with me,” he countered, his grip tightening on my hip.

“I haven’t missed a damn thing.”

“Lying to me will you get fucked until you forget what you just lied about,” he teased. In one swift, fluid motion, he shifted his weight, pushing me flat onto my back.

His body covered mine instantly, a wall of heat and power pinning me down. “Why don’t we start with the fact that you’ve been crying yourself to sleep?” His tone shifted to something dangerously intimate. “You’re barely eating. And those fingers you’ve gotten so acquainted with?” His lips hovered just above mine, his breath warm against my skin. “A pitiful imitation of what I give you. No matter how hard you ride them, they’ll never be me.”

How did he know any of that?

“That’s not--.”

He cut me off by sealing his mouth over mine. The kiss was hot, and demanding, a collision of dominance and unrestrained need. His tongue slipped past my lips, claiming me in a way that left no room for argument.

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Without thinking, I bit down hard, the metallic tang of blood spreading across my tongue.

He pulled back sharply, a sharp intake of breath escaping him. He groaned, a deep sound that turned into a laugh. Then he smiled, licking the corner of his lip. “Fuck, I love you.” He gripped my throat and kissed me again, stealing the air from my lungs.

A moan escaped as he pressed against me. I cursed myself for not wearing anything under my robe. Then again, I never would have expected this to happen when I put it on. His hand slid between my legs, fingers expertly finding their mark as I whimpered and gasped against his mouth. Panic and desire waged war within me.

“Wilder, no.” My voice came out breathless, a mixture of protest and pleading. “Shh,” he murmured against my skin. “Just let me take care of you, Mint.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “Wilder,” I tried again, weaker this time as his grip on my throat tightened just enough to silence me.

His fingers worked in and out of my pussy, his thumb circling my clit. It had been way too long since quitting him cold turkey.

I curled my hands around his solid shoulders, gripping the fabric of his shirt as if holding onto him could anchor me. I bit down on my lower lip to hold back my moans.

“Don’t.” His eyes locked onto mine as his fingers continued their devastating rhythm. “I want to hear you.”

I shook my head, refusing.

He leaned in, brushing his lips against my ear. “I love when you fight it, but you know I’m not stopping until you cum.”

A whimper escaped before I could stop it, the sound spurring him on. My legs trembled as he rocked his fingers in and out of me, increasing the pressure on my clit. I couldn't hold back any longer as he brought me closer and closer to the edge.

“Wilder,” I gasped, his name a plea on my tongue as the pressure finally snapped, sending a wave of heat crashing through me.

My nails dug into his shoulders as I rode out the wave pleasure.

I pulsed around his fingers, my breaths coming in short, gasping pants. He held me steadily, his other hand still firm on my throat, guiding me through the sensation.

“That’s my girl.” He pulled back. His eyes roamed over every inch of my face, lingering on my lips, flushed cheeks, and trembling form. “You’re so beautiful, Mint,” he murmured.

His words felt like both a balm and a wound, stirring up emotions within me that I didn't know how to handle. I watched in a daze as he brought his fingers to his mouth, sucking them clean of my release. “I needed something to hold me over,” he explained, his voice low but unapologetic. “Not fucking you right now, is the hardest thing I've ever had to do.”

My mind scrambled for a response, but before I could find one, his lips were on mine again. The kiss was rough and gentle all at once, leaving no room for escape.

“I promise I’m going to fix this.” He drew back and his breath mingled with mine.

His gaze roamed over my face one last time before he straightened.

“Enjoy your trip, baby.” He strode out the door, leaving me there confused, vulnerable, and too furious with myself to process anything else.

CHAPTER FIVE

The crisp evening air hit me as I stepped outside. I still felt her on my lips, the small taste was an aphrodisiac lingering on my tongue. My hands flexed at my sides, craving the warmth of her body again. I shoved them into my pockets as though they could anchor me, but it was futile. Every step away from her felt like a betrayal, every breath without her an excruciating punishment.

Everything inside me screamed to go back. To throw that damn suitcase out the window and pin her to the bed until she admitted she couldn't live without me. She had to know that her resistance was meaningless. I'd felt her melt under my touch, her helpless whimpers as I played with what was mine.

Her body never lied, and neither did her eyes. It was only with words she could try and deny the undeniable.

I wanted to destroy the distance between us, remind her over and over that no one else would ever know her the way I did.

I fucking missed her.

My hands fisted in my pockets as I forced myself to keep walking. Timing and control. I silently repeated the words in my mind like a mantra, forcing myself to stick to the plan. I slid into my car and took a moment to steady my breathing. I leaned back, gripped the wheel, and closed my eyes. I could still hear her voice, trembling and raw as she explained what happened the night she left me to her sister

and best friend.

I had the footage from the bugs and cameras I'd planted in her house months ago. She didn't want to move in with me yet, so I'd done the only thing that made sense. If I couldn't be there physically, I had to make sure I was still present in every way that counted.

She'd sat on the couch, her knees tucked up to her chest, her gorgeous face puffy from crying.

Cherish and Daniella flanked her, mirrors of concern.

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“I just don’t understand how he could do it,” Autumn ranted, the pain bleeding through in a way that made my chest ache. “How he could look me in the eye after... after everything and not even try?”

She had no fucking clue how hard it had been to stand there, to hold myself back and let her leave when all I wanted to do was pull her into my arms and never let go.

“I don’t understand either,” Cherish added, her voice sharp. “God, Autumn, fuck that man.”

“I should’ve known,” she replied, her voice almost breaking. “But there were no signs.”

There weren’t any signs because Autumn was a queen, and I treated her like nothing less.

Daniella reached out, placing a hand on Autumn’s knee. “You’re better off without him. You know that, right?”

Better off without me? My chest had burned when I heard that.

“I know,” she whispered, but the look in her eyes betrayed her. She didn’t believe that. Not for a single second.

It had been two weeks since the night she left. Fourteen debilitating days since she’d blocked me, cutting me off from her in a way no one had dared before. At first, I was fucking infuriated, and then that quickly morphed into an anguish I had never known.

I got why she was upset.

If tables were turned, I'd have a fucking hit list with the names of every man I found in her inbox. But just like she didn't have to worry I knew I didn't either. From the moment I saw my girl, it was her world, and I was just lucky to be included in it.

After seeing her in the hallway and finding out all I could about who she was, it took me nearly six months to convince her to let me take her out. She was convinced I was a typical varsity jock who only thought with his dick and nothing else. She didn't say that directly, but I knew that was the case by the way she brushed me off like I wasn't worth her time.

Her casual dismissal of me was like waving a flag in front of a fucking bull. I made a point to be everywhere she was, to know her routine better than she did. I wasn't above stalking to get the girl I dreamed about. In the end, that worked. I wore her down, little by little until she finally agreed to go out with me.

After our first date, it took another two months before she let me have her body. Every sound she made, every time she arched, it was almost enough to bring me to my knees. By the time we finished, I was so far gone I knew I'd never come back. If I'd died right then, I would've gone out a happy man.

She didn't just give me her innocence that night; she gave me something I never realized I wanted until it was mine, her trust. I'd be damned if I ever let her go. I couldn't lose the very thing that made my heart beat. Autumn was it. My future. My everything.

I expelled a sharp breath.

I'd been patient for long enough. I had given her space, as pointless as it was, because I knew what was coming next. Pulling out my phone, I called the one person who was

helping everything come together. The line rang twice before Lucian's voice came through.

"How did it go?" he asked, no urgency, no concern, just a quiet confidence.

"Exactly as expected," I could still feel her defiance, the way she'd glared at me, her stubborn refusal to let me back in. "Are you all ready for our field trip?"

Lucian chuckled, the sound dark and laced with amusement. "We can't wait."

CHAPTER SIX

The suitcases were neatly packed in the hatch of my sister's SUV, along with groceries, board games, and plenty of liquor. I checked that I had grabbed the tin of dog food for Moose. My big boy had already claimed his spot in the backseat, his stubby tail wagging with excitement.

"Liza and Naija are following us, right?" I asked, adjusting the string of my hoodie.

"Yeah," Daniella replied, lounging against the side of the car. Her pale green eyes were hidden behind a pair of cat-eye sunglasses, and her jet-black hair was pulled into a sleek ponytail, framing her sharp, striking features. She had a way of standing out, her effortless confidence making her the center of attention wherever she went. It was also why she had stuck with bartending for so long. Her tips were abundant even on slow nights.

Cherish emerged from the house, carrying a box of snacks in one hand and the last of our small coolers in the other.

Her long, wavy black hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, her eyes hidden behind a pair of shades too. "Alright, this is the last of everything." She placed the

snacks and cooler in the back of her SUV. “How long till the other two get here?”

As if on cue, the familiar rumble of Liza’s ruby-red Jeep cut through the air, and I turned to see it pulling into the driveway behind us. The windows were rolled down, and Liza was behind the wheel with Naija in the passenger seat. What I didn’t expect was the sight of three guys in the back seat. I knew all of them in one way or another.

I frowned, my stomach sinking as I caught sight of Jason Montgomery, his light brown hair styled in that casual, cocky way he’d perfected in high school.

Beside him was Gabe—broad, quiet, with dark curls that caught the sunlight.

And lastly, there was Ryan Alvarez, the former rival college football player with a sharp jawline and a wide, friendly smile on his face.

My sister looked from us to them then called out loudly, “I thought this was a girls-only trip.”

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Liza grinned as she leaned over to reply through the passenger window, clearly unfazed. “It’ll still be just as fun!”

Jason edged forward, resting his arms on the back of Naija’s seat. “I promise we’ll show you all agoodtime.”

Cherish rolled her eyes. “Hard pass.”

I stifled a laugh, though it wasn’t hard to imagine what my sister was thinking. Cherish was unapologetically a maneater, and Jason’s smirking confidence was probably lighting her internaldo not engagealarms.

My amusement didn’t last long.

As I watched them banter, my thoughts drifted to Wilder. I couldn’t help it. The thought of how he’d react to me going away for the weekend with three guys in tow twisted something in my chest. He’d lose his goddamn mind.

It wasn’t jealousy. Wilder didn’t get jealous. No, it was something deeper and darker than that. He was possessive to a fault and territorial. As much as it frustrated me at times, it also turned me on more than I cared to admit. There had been more than one occasion when that raw, unfiltered intensity had bled into the way he fucked me, leaving me craving more.

Now that same possessiveness felt like a chain around my neck, heavy and suffocating. It shouldn’t have mattered anymore. We were over. I’d reminded myself of that a thousand times since I blocked him. Cumming all over his hand the other

day aside.

Unfortunately, that didn't stop my heart from aching anyway. Seeing him yesterday had done me more harm than good. I lay awake half the night thinking of his mouth on mine and simply being in his arms.

Liza honked the horn lightly, pulling me out of my thoughts. "You good, Autumn?" she called out, flashing a grin.

I forced a smile and gave her a thumbs-up before turning away and going to climb into my sister's Enclave. Moose barked softly in the back, his tail wagging as Cherish slid into the driver's seat with an exaggerated sigh.

"This better not turn into a disaster," she muttered as she started the engine.

Naija leaned out of the Jeep's window with a wave. "You're welcome in advance for all the fun we're about to bring!"

Daniella snorted, grinning as she climbed into the backseat. "Oh, I can't wait to see how this plays out."

As the car rolled out of the driveway, I tried to focus on the excitement of the trip, the promise of a weekend away from everything.

The open road stretched ahead, and with it came the faint hope that maybe, just maybe, I could finally breathe again.

"How far is the town we're heading to?" I asked as I glanced back at Daniella, who was scrolling on her phone.

"Snowcreek," Cherish answered, her tone tinged with amusement. "Try to remember

where we're going, Autumn."

"It's about five hours away, give or take now that we're on the road," Daniella replied.

"That's plenty of time for you to tell us what's been on your mind."

The small smile I tried to fake fell flat. I knew she wouldn't let it go, and Cherish's sideways glance told me she wouldn't either. They were a united front when it came to prying things out of me lately.

"Have you told Mom and Dad about Wilder yet?" Cherish took the lead instead, her tone soft.

I shook my head, focusing on the trees blurring past the window. "Not yet."

"Thanksgiving is in a few weeks," she said softly, her fingers tapping the steering wheel in a steady rhythm. "They're going to notice when he doesn't show. You know how they are. They love him like a damn son."

The mention of the holidays hit like a gut punch. I hadn't allowed myself to think that far ahead. I was taking things day by day and that was hard enough.

You never realized how much someone was part of your life until you were forced to face each day without them. Wilder had been such a constant, his presence so natural I'd taken it for granted. The thought of facing those moments without him felt unbearable but Cherish was right. Our parents loved him like a son. That's who they were, open-hearted and protective.

After my mom died and my OG dad fell apart, they went above and beyond to adopt me, stepping in as if it had always been meant to be. I never once thought of them as

anything less than my mother and father. Cherish had always been a sister to me, long before then. She'd stood by me through every heartbreak, every joy, every stupid decision. I knew without a doubt that our parents would want his head if they knew the extent of what he'd done.

Maybe it made me stupid, but I didn't want them to hate Wilder.

He wasn't a bad person. He wasn't even a bad boyfriend. Wilder treated me like gold. He simply wasn't loyal. I still had trouble wrapping my head around that because everyone always described him as the opposite, me included.

I rubbed my forehead, imagining the looks I would get from the rest of our family. Most of them were just as loving and protective as our parents but there were at least four that had never learned how to read a room. Wilder was gorgeous, wealthy, and successful. I had an aunt and uncle who would think that made his actions excusable, and two petty ass cousins that wanted him for themselves.

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Their questions and commentary would either have me brawling at the dinner table or hiding in the kitchen and drinking my sorrows with a bottle of Honey Jack.

“I don’t have it in me to deal with any of that. Not yet.”

Cherish reached over, her hand covering mine. “You don’t have to figure it all out right now. But you’re not doing this alone, you hear me?”

I nodded, squeezing back, grateful for her beyond words. Daniella leaned forward from the backseat, her voice cutting through the moment. “So... on the topic of Wilder, have you heard anything else from him since yesterday?”

I shook my head quickly. “No. He’s still blocked.”

Oddly enough, he hadn’t said anything to me about changing that. I’d told them he had come over to talk. What I didn’t mention was that he held me on his lap like I still belonged to him, made me cum all over his hand, and kissed me in a way that shattered whatever was left of my already broken heart. Then he walked out, leaving me more confused and pissed than ever.

They were just as lost trying to decipher what the hell his intentions had been. Well, besides screwing with my head—we all agreed on that one.

Daniella was quiet for a second. “If need be, I’ll handle him.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “The last thing we need is you going to war with Wilder.”

She smirked, leaning back. “Just saying. You know I’ve got your back.”

“And I appreciate that,” I replied, meaning it.

Cherish snorted. “Let’s be real, okay? You’d have to take on his gang of rich assholes too.”

Daniella’s brows shot up and she leaned forward with a sly grin. “Take them on how? I have multiple holes, babe.”

I laughed as my sister’s face screwed up. “You’re disgusting.”

“Well, I’ll say this much, Wilder’s friends might be complete assholes, but damn, they’re fine as hell.”

Cherish shook her head. “Of course, you’d think that.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re not,” I admitted with a grin.

I may have wanted to blow them all to hell, Wilder included, preferably inside their fancy-ass penthouse, but that didn’t take away from the infuriating reality: their entire friend group was unfairly attractive.

Thorne could have been the depiction of an angel, with his white, blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, tall and athletically built. Lucian, on the other hand, was every bit the tall, dark, and broody type. Romeo had the elegance of an actual refined aristocrat—if you ignored the ink snaking across his skin and the blunt, razor-edged insanity that lurked just beneath his polished exterior.

Hunter looked like he'd stepped straight out of a Greek myth, all pretty-faced charm with green eyes that gleamed with mischief and curly brown hair that gave him a deceptively boyish look. Atlas, meanwhile, had the kind of classic, old-world style that could land him a leading role in *Peaky Blinders*.

It was almost as if they'd been handpicked by some cosmic joke to be the most aesthetically pleasing group of assholes imaginable. I couldn't help but wonder if that correlated to them all being disgusting pigs. Beauty and bullshit seemed to go hand in hand with them.

"And don't even get me started on Romeo. That man is crazy in all the best ways. Like, someone you don't make eye contact with unless you want to end up in a trunk. You just know he's packing," Daniella continued.

I wrinkled my nose. "Can you stop?"

"What?" she said, throwing her hands up innocently.

"He's insane, sure, but that only makes it hotter. I mean, come on, you've seen him."

"Yeah, we've met him too," Cherish muttered, making a face. "And I think we prefer to stay alive."

"Ella, you'd have to survive being in the same room with him for more than five minutes first."

"Oh, I'd survive," she said confidently. "I'd probably walk funny for a week, but I'd survive."

We both shot her a look, but she just grinned wider, clearly pleased with herself. Thankfully, the conversation shifted after that, and it had nothing to do with Wilder

or his friends. Their voices blended into a comforting hum as I leaned my head against the window, staring at the endless stretch of road ahead.

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Why the hell was heartbreak this hard? I shouldn't have had to force myself to be in this moment with them. It felt wrong, like I was trying to play a part I wasn't ready for.

I loved these two all the more for the simple fact they weren't pressuring me to be okay; they were just doing what they could to keep me distracted. I had a few hours yet to pull myself together and convince myself that I could survive this weekend and fucking enjoy it like I longed to do.

I was going to get drunk with my girls, eat all the food that was bad for me, sleep late, and pretend I wasn't missing a vital piece of myself, like the absence of him hadn't carved out something essential inside me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The drive had been quiet for a while, the steady hum of the engine and the occasional burst of chatter from Daniella and my sister filling the car. I was zoning out with little cat naps when her phone buzzed in the cupholder.

Cherish tapped the button on the steering wheel, answering it on speaker. "What's up?"

"Need to stop for gas," Liza's voice crackled through the car. "I'm running low. Let's pull off at the next exit."

Cherish glanced at me, raising a brow as if to ask if we were good with that. I nodded, and she responded, "Got it. We passed a sign about fifteen minutes ago.

There's a station two miles up. Meet us there."

"I'll just follow you, speed demon," Liza teased before ending the call.

"I should have mentioned this way earlier, but what do we think of Liza bringing stray dicks on our trip?" Cherish asked.

After processing her stray dick comment, I shrugged, pretending to be unbothered. "I mean, if we're stuck with them, we're stuck with them."

"You wanna call dibs?" Daniella asked curiously.

I turned and stared at her, deadpan. "I have zero interest in men."

"Same here," Cherish added, her tone dry as she kept her eyes on the road. "Plus, none of them look like they manscape."

"Same," Cherish added dryly, keeping her eyes on the road. "Plus, none of them look like they manscape."

Daniella gasped in mock horror. "Manscape?"

"Yeah. It's like going to a fancy restaurant, getting your food, and then finding a hair in it. I'm not willingly putting myself through that," my sister explained.

I bit my lip to stifle a laugh, my mind wandering right to Wilder.

He always kept himself together down there. Not barren or anything, but it wasn't a jungle I had to battle when his dick was down my throat.

Daniella sighed dramatically, pulling me from my thoughts. "I'm just saying, a little

road trip romance never hurt anyone.”

“Yeah, except for the fact that this is supposed to be a girls’ trip. You know, bonding, relaxation—not scoping out guys or riding them.”

“I’ve said my piece,” my sister stated.

“I bet at least one of them is surprisingly well-kept. Like, diamond-in-the-rough vibes.”

Cherish laughed and hit her signal for our exit. The gas station came into view as soon as she took the next right off the ramp. It was a small, run-down place with only a couple of pumps and a convenience store that looked like it hadn’t been updated since the early 90s.

“Cue horror movie intro,” Daniella mumbled.

“Don’t jinx us,” I chastised playfully, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

I actually kinda agreed, though. The bright sun didn’t do much to ease the creeping unease that settled over me as we pulled into the lot. The place felt unnaturally quiet. It was no surprise there weren’t card readers, and you had to pay inside.

Everyone climbed out, stretching and shaking off the hours of driving. Liza rounded the Jeep, her long blonde curls catching the sunlight as she called out, “We’re grabbing snacks. Anyone need anything?”

“I’ll take a brisk tea if they have it,” I replied, clipping Moose’s lead onto his thick collar. He hopped out of the car eagerly, sniffing at the air with his stubby tail wagging. “I’m taking him around back.”

“I’ll get your tea,” Cherish said as she lifted her shades, scanning the lot briefly before heading toward the store with Daniella and Liza.

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Naija went to join them, pausing long enough to throw a pointed look at Gabe, who was leaning lazily against Liza's car. "Don't start anything with anyone."

His thin lips curved into a grin. "What could I possibly start, Naj?"

She said something under her breath, giving him some side-eye before heading inside with the others. I shook my head, tugging Moose's leash and heading for the side of the building. Tiny grains of asphalt crunched underfoot, and for a moment, I let myself focus on the sound, trying to shake the strange vibe that clung to the place.

"Autumn?" a voice called out, making me jump. I turned quickly to find Ryan walking toward me, his hoodie pulled up, hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you not to sneak up on people?"

He grinned, and a dimple appeared on his left cheek. "Didn't mean to scare you."

His dark brown eyes shifted toward the edge of the building, scanning the area. "Not the best place to hang out alone, though."

"I'm not alone. I've got Moose, and he's a better judge of people than I am."

He chuckled, glancing at my rottie, who was sniffing a stretch of grass near the edge of the building. "He seems solid, but I'd feel better sticking around. You never know with places like this."

I blinked, caught off guard by the quiet sincerity in his voice. "That's... sweet of you,

but I'm fine."

"Still," he said, leaning casually against the side of the building, his broad shoulders relaxed but his eyes watchful. "Doesn't hurt to be careful."

I sighed, shaking my head but appreciating the gesture. Ryan had always been friendly anytime our paths crossed, and while Wilder might have been the most beautiful man that I'd ever laid eyes on, Ryan wasn't hard to look at. I didn't want his interest though.

Moose suddenly froze, his body stiffening as a low growl rumbled in his throat. I followed his gaze and saw a girl stepping out from the opposite side of the building. I realized she was older than I initially thought as I studied her face. She was just small, and pale, with loose dark hair that framed her face and dark blue eyes.

She didn't say anything, just stood there, staring, like she was sizing us up. Her head tilted slightly, her lips curling into a slow, unsettling smile. "You're really pretty," she breathed, her voice soft but clear.

"Thanks..." I replied cautiously, tightening my grip on Moose's leash as his fur bristled. She stepped closer, and his growls turned sharper, his hackles rising.

"Hey." Ryan stepped slightly in front of me. "Something you need?"

The girl didn't answer. She just stared for a moment longer before turning abruptly and walking off into the field behind the gas station, disappearing into the tall grass. I didn't see anything back there that would cause someone to go that way.

"Hey," I called after her, glancing over when Ryan put a hand on my arm and shook his head.

“Let her go.”

I frowned, looking for some sign of the woman, but she was completely concealed.

“What if she’s not...well?”

“Do you know her?”

I slid him an exasperated look. “How would I know some random girl hiding on the side of a gas station?”

“Good point.”

We both looked toward the field again, but the girl had vanished. Where the hell was she going? I didn’t see any indication of a building or road.

Ryan shook his head. “Come on. Let’s get back to the others.”

I tugged on Moose’s leash, and we circled around to the front of the building. Everyone was standing by the cars, bags of snacks and drinks in hand. Daniella glanced between Ryan and me as if she already had a million questions.

“What took youtwoso long?” she asked, her tone teasing.

Ryan thankfully ignored the bait. “Did you guys see a skinny, wraith-looking girl? Dark hair, pale, kinda off?”

Jason, who had been leaning against Liza’s car and sipping from a soda, nodded his head. “Yeah, she was inside when we first got here. Didn’t think much of her, though.”

“She was creepy as hell,” Naija added, adjusting her long locs as she pulled a water

bottle from one of the bags.

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Ryan exhaled, glancing back toward the building.

“She came around the side while we were back there. Told Autumn she was ‘really pretty’ and then just... walked off into the field.”

Liza’s lips curled into a skeptical frown. “That’s weird as fuck.”

“You’re telling me,” I muttered, opening the car door and guiding Moose back inside. He hopped up onto the seat, his tail still low as he cast wary glances around the lot.

Daniella grinned. “Guess we’re off to a great start on our little getaway, huh? I love the suspense.”

“Not funny,” Cherish stated flatly. “People like that give me bad vibes.”

Ryan crossed his arms, glancing toward the gas station. “I don’t like it either. Let’s get out of here.”

As we all piled back into the cars, my gaze flicked toward the gas station windows. Two employees stood near the counter, staring at us.

Their expressions were blank, their movements unnervingly still.

“You seeing that?” I murmured to Cherish as she climbed into the driver’s seat.

She glanced toward the windows. “Yeah, I see it. We’re getting our asses far away from here.”

I settled into my seat, trying to shake the unease that had built ever since we pulled into this place. Cherish started the engine, and as the car rolled forward, I glanced back at the gas station one last time.

The final stretch of the drive was quieter. Trees lined the path on both sides, their tall, shadowy forms closing in as we ventured deeper into the countryside.

It was peaceful, and for the first time since we'd started this trip, I felt like I could let my guard down if only a little.

When we pulled up to the rental, my eyes widened. The place was stunning, almost surreal. Nestled on what seemed like its own little slice of paradise, surrounded by vibrant greenery, colorful flowerbeds, and rows of trees that made the entire area feel isolated from the rest of the world. I slipped out of the car and the soft crunch of gravel under my feet barely registered as I stared at the house, my gaze sweeping over the light stone walls.

“This is amazing.”

“You did good, Ella,” Cherish praised with a nod of approval as she took off her sunglasses, her grey eyes scanning the property.

Daniella grinned. “Do you think I'd settle for anything less?” she questioned, crossing her arms and looking at the house like it was her personal achievement.

Liza walked over to join us. “Alright, but are we sure this isn't someone else's fancy rental? Because this is giving serious ‘we're not supposed to be here’ vibes.”

Daniella pulled out her phone, scrolling confidently. “It's ours. Booked and paid for, down to the cleaning fee. You're welcome.”

Cherish let out a soft laugh. “Alright, let’s unload.”

Moose hopped out of the car beside me, his stubby tail wagging as he sniffed the air. I clipped his leash on and gave him a quick pat. “Come on, big guy,” I murmured, leading him up the short path to the house.

The interior was just as breathtaking as the outside. Hardwood floors gleamed under the warm glow of recessed lighting, and large windows allowed sunlight to flood the space. The living room was cozy yet elegant, with a plush sectional, a massive fireplace, and shelves lined with books and trinkets.

The kitchen was modern, with sleek countertops and a large farmhouse sink that looked straight out of a home renovation show. A small welcome card was propped up on the counter near a wicker basket filled with local treats.

Welcome to your home away from home! It read in elegant script. We hope you enjoy your stay and find everything you need for a relaxing getaway.

“Okay, this is ridiculous,” Naija said as she walked in, her long locs pulled back into a loose bun. “This place is way too nice for a bunch of us to just crash for the weekend.”

“That’s the whole point,” Daniella said, setting her bag down. “Luxury, relaxation, and snacks.” She plucked a granola bar from the welcome basket to emphasize her point.

I shook my head at her and stepped back into the long hall that seemed to run horizontally to all the lower rooms.

Moose padded beside me, his massive frame practically taking up the whole hallway as he sniffed the air. His ears twitched, his keen eyes darting toward the staircase as if

on high alert. With my bag in hand, I started up them, and Cherish followed close behind.

We went from room to room, skipping right past the master since it was going to Daniella. She had paid for this whole rental on her own despite our objections so it was only right.

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“We’re taking this one,” my sister announced the second we stepped into a room with two full-sized beds. The walls were painted a calming shade of beige, and the bedding was different shades of brown. The air carried a faint chill that didn’t match the warmth of the decor. A large window overlooked the backyard, where tall trees shed their golden leaves in the breeze.

The earthy scent of damp bark and crisp leaves drifted in through a slightly cracked window.

Moose sniffed the air and let out a low, approving rumble.

“Fine by me,” I murmured, setting my bag on the bed closest to where the breeze was coming from.

Cherish moved to the dresser, her brows knitting together as she picked up an oddly shaped cross. “What religion is this?” she asked, tilting it in the light.

I stepped closer, my curiosity piqued. My fingers brushed the cool, tarnished surface. The intricate design felt almost sharp, like it had been crafted more for ritual than decoration. When Cherish flipped it over, my unease deepened. The back was covered in strange, looping symbols that looked like something out of a horror movie, and at the base, the letters "N.N." were engraved with precision.

“Um... not a good one?” I joked, forcing a small laugh that fell flat in the quiet room. I took it from her and set it back down, my fingertips tingling as if I’d touched something I shouldn’t have.

Cherish snorted softly, but there was an edge to her voice. “Yeah, let’s hope we’re not summoning anything in our sleep.”

I started to turn away when something caught my attention across the room. Mounted on the far wall above a small desk was a mask, its black surface glossy and smooth, the hollow eyes staring blankly into the room. It looked like it belonged in some forgotten cult. A chill ran down my spine, settling in my stomach like a lead weight.

“Well, that’s not fucking creepy at all,” I muttered, nodding toward it.

Cherish followed my gaze and let out an exasperated groan. “Oh, hell no.” She moved past me, climbing onto the desk chair with purpose.

“We’re not sleeping with this thing watching us. Nope.” With a yank, she pulled the mask off the wall.

I watched amusedly as my sister marched toward the closet, snatching the cross on her way. She shoved both inside with a dramatic flourish, slamming the door shut. “There. Problem solved.”

“Maybe you should have thrown them out the window.”

“If not for damage fees, I would. You think there’s crosses in the other rooms like this?” she asked.

“If there are, and I would be surprised if there wasn’t since this isn’t the maser, let’s just hope it’s the only weird shit we find.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I’d take that over a human sacrifice book that requires virgins and newborns.”

“Uh...right,” I drawled with a laugh.

We left the room and headed back downstairs to join the others.

I found myself in the kitchen with Cherish, my first drink already in hand, and trying not to let my mind wander to the place it was straining to go. She leaned against the counter beside me, sipping her own margarita.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I lied, glancing at the welcome card again so I didn’t have to meet her eye.

She reached out, squeezing my hand lightly. “We’re going to have a good weekend, K? No dicks, no drama, just drinks and...happy dances.”

“Happy dances?” I parroted, catching on to what she was trying to do. “You really butchered that. And I’m not sure Liza’s stowaways would fully agree with the itinerary.”

“Oh, just finish that so I can get you another. If you’re drunk, they can’t matter.”

I smiled and raised my drink in agreement.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The last rays of sunlight were bleeding into twilight. Music played softly from the living room television, mingling with the sounds of cooking, laughter, and the occasional clink of glasses. The aroma of Naija’s infamous mac and cheese drifted through the air as it bubbled in the oven.

I was on salad duty, diligently slicing cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes into a bowl.

My fleece hoodie had long been abandoned, leaving me in an oversized sweater and leggings, my sleeves pushed up to my elbows as I worked.

“Don’t forget the dressing,” Daniella teased as she walked by, snagging a cucumber slice from the cutting board. “And no cheap bottled crap. We have options.”

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“Do I look like the type to cut corners?” I shot back with mock offense, tossing the sliced vegetables into the bowl.

I finished tossing the greens and moved to the bread. Daniella handed me a baguette and some garlic butter with a flourish.

“Don’t burn it.”

I gave her an exasperated look, slicing the bread carefully. “I won’t burn it, but if you don’t stop acting like I can’t outcook you in my sleep, I may burn you.”

Her jaw dropped. “Rude.”

“She does have a point,” Naija cut in. “You burn pop tarts.”

“That was one time!”

I waved her off and refocused. As I worked, the familiar rhythm of being in the kitchen with my friends felt comforting. Cherish wandered in from the living room, her eyes lighting up as she surveyed the scene.

“Looks like things are under control here.”

“For now,” Naija replied, stirring a pot of gravy with a wooden spoon. Her long locs were pulled into a loose bun, and she’d dressed up for this as if it were a formal dinner.

She looked every bit the queen she always carried herself as. “Okay, before I get too sidetracked, I’m about to lay down some rules.”

Cherish laughed. “Oh, this should be good.”

Naija set the spoon down with an exaggerated flourish, turning to face all of us. “Listen up, ladies—and gentlemen,” she added, casting a pointed glance toward the living room where Jason, Ryan, and Gabe were lounging. “Rules for the weekend: One, no talk of exes.”

She didn’t look at me as she said it, but I felt the weight of her words anyway. From the way she yelled loud enough for everyone to hear, I gathered I wasn’t the only one in the crosshairs. “Two, no phones at the dinner table. This weekend is about togetherness. I don’t wanna see anyone with their face in a screen. They’ll go in the box.”

“What box?” Gabe asked from the living room.

“The one I’ll be putting them in, smartass.”

Jason appeared in the kitchen doorway, twisted tea in hand. “And what happens if we break the rules?”

“Try me and you’ll find out,” she replied sweetly, flashing him a smile. “And three, absolutely, positively, everyone must have a good time. No exceptions. We’re here to relax and make memories, not mope around.”

Daniella slipped through the throng of bodies around the island and raised her glass in a mock toast. “Amen to that.”

“Fair enough,” Cherish said, shrugging. “But you know I don’t do rules.”

Naija rolled her eyes but didn't push the point. "Just get your ass into the dining room when this is ready."

Once the bread was in the oven, I busied myself wiping down the counter and cleaning up as I went, anything to keep my hands busy.

As soon as it was done, Naija went into dictator mode.

"Alright, team effort, let's get this table set. Liza, Daniella—plates and cutlery. Autumn, bring out the salad and bread. Cherish, drinks. Jason and Ryan, you're on chairs. Let's move, people."

We all laughed, moving to do what she instructed. Liza headed toward the cabinets, her long blonde curls swaying as she reached up to grab the stack of plates. Her pale blue eyes scanned the table as she began setting them down.

"Do we need the fancy forks, or are we sticking to average tonight?" I asked with a playful grin, holding up the mismatched set of cutlery.

"Mismatched works," Naija said cheerfully, waving me off. "This isn't the damn Ritz."

Daniella grabbed the cutlery from me. "I got this. You focus on your given task."

"Bossy much?" I teased, sticking my tongue out.

I carried the salad bowl and breadbasket out of the kitchen, placing them in the center of the table. The bread was golden brown, still warm and fragrant from the garlic butter I'd slathered on earlier. Moose padded after me, his nose sniffing the air eagerly.

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“Don’t even think about it,” I warned him. He let out a small huff, but he stayed put.

Naija emerged from the kitchen carrying the bubbling dish of her infamous mac and cheese, golden and crusted with breadcrumbs. Behind her, Cherish followed with a pitcher of sweet tea in one hand and a bottle of 1800 in the other.

We were gonna pay the price for mixing all these liquors.

“What else?” she asked, glancing around the table. She’d changed into a loose sweater and joggers, her long black hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail.

“Gravy!” Naija said, spinning on her heel and disappearing back into the kitchen.

As the dishes came together, the table looked like something out of a cozy autumn magazine spread. The roasted chicken was the centerpiece, golden and crispy, surrounded by roasted vegetables—carrots, Brussels sprouts, and sweet potatoes glistening with olive oil and herbs. There was the mac and cheese, the garlic bread, and the salad I’d thrown together with spinach, arugula, cherry tomatoes, and cucumbers, all lightly dressed. A bowl of creamy mashed potatoes sat at one end, next to the gravy boat Naija returned with, and a plate of steamed green beans at the other.

“Damn, this looks good,” Jason said as he set down the last of the chairs to make room for everyone. “You guys went all out. It’s like a pre-thanksgiving.”

“That’s what happens when you put Naija in charge of the kitchen,” Daniella chirped.

She pointed at Naija. “You’re a culinary goddess, babe.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Naija retorted with a grin, setting the gravy down next to the potatoes. She vanished then reappeared with the box she’d been talking about, which was really just an old shoe carton. “Alright, people, phones up.”

One by one, we dropped them into. Liza and Daniella went first, followed by Jason and Ryan, then Cherish. I hesitated for a moment, my thumb brushing over my screen, before finally letting go and adding it to the pile.

Naija raised her glass once everyone was seated. “Here’s to good food, good company, and forgetting about all the bullshit for the weekend.”

“Hear, hear,” Daniella chimed, clinking her glass against Naija’s before turning to the rest of us. “Now, let’s eat before it gets cold.”

Conversation flowed, and the atmosphere around the dining table grew warm and easy.

Moose had settled at my feet, occasionally glancing up with big, hopeful eyes.

He was waiting for someone to drop a crumb. I may have snuck him one or two.

“So,” Jason began, leaning back in his chair, his drink in hand. “What do you do for work now, Autumn? You always seemed like someone who’d end up doing something cool.”

I smiled faintly. “I do content strategy and brand consulting for a few companies. It’s flexible, so I can work from wherever, and it pays really well. Not exactly glamorous, but I like it.”

His brows lifted. “That actually sounds amazing. Flexible, good pay. What’s not to like?”

Daniella leaned in, smirking as she poured herself yet another drink. The girl was throwing them back. “Autumn’s probably making more than all of us combined.”

I rolled my eyes, though I couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s not like that. I just got lucky landing a couple of decent contracts.”

“Well, good for you,” Naija said, her locs swaying as she nodded. I could tell she meant it. “Working online sounds like a dream. I can barely handle my nine-to-five as it is.”

“Same,” Liza added, glancing up from her chicken. “I’d kill for something like that. What’s the secret?”

“Networking,” I replied with a shrug. “And maybe a little bit of timing. A lot of it is just knowing how to pitch yourself, honestly.”

“That makes sense,” Ryan said, his tone thoughtful. “I mean, you always were sharp. Guess that hasn’t changed.”

Daniella grinned. “Someone’s enamored.”

He chuckled. “Just calling it like I see it.”

Naija leaned forward. “So, is it weird working from home all the time? Like, don’t you get bored or lonely?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted, “but I stay busy enough that it’s not too bad. And, honestly, the flexibility makes up for it. I can work in my pajamas if I want to, so that’s a win.”

“Okay, that’s a serious perk,” Liza agreed with a grin. “I’d trade my commute for that any day.”

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Cherish, who had been listening quietly, finally chimed in. “Well, even when she’s not technically working, she’s working.”

“True,” Daniella chimed in, shooting me a playful look. “You need to chill more, Autumn.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “I think this is me working on it.”

The conversation bounced from work woes to memories of high school and college, to half-hearted debates about who had the best taste in music. At one point, Ryan’s smile widened, and for a moment, I felt his gaze linger just a little too long.

Daniella rescued me and shifted the focus back to him, her grin mischievous. “Alright, Ryan, what about you? What’s life been like since your golden boy quarterback days?”

He laughed, running a hand through his hair. “Still coaching, mostly. I’ve got a gig lined up for the fall, but for now, it’s a lot of training camps and filling in where I can.”

“Must be nice,” Naija said, tilting her head. “I can’t imagine working with a bunch of high school boys, though. I’d lose my mind.”

“You get used to it,” he replied easily. “Though, yeah, some of them test your patience. It’s worth it when you see them grow and start taking it seriously.”

“Spoken like a true mentor,” Liza teased. “Bet you’re a favorite, huh?”

Ryan smirked. “I try.”

After the plates were cleared and everyone started to relax, Daniella leaned back in her chair, swirling her half-empty glass.

“Alright, we’ve got options for after this amazing meal. More alcohol, obviously, and a game. Something fun.”

“Like what?” Cherish asked, arching a brow as she took a sip of her drink.

“Let’s see... Uno? That always gets heated. Or Pictionary—though Naija would absolutely crush us with her drawing skills. Or,” she paused dramatically, “we go for Bones.”

“Bones?” Gabe tilted his head, his brow furrowing.

“Dominoes,” Liza clarified with a soft laugh. “She just likes stirring the pot.”

“It’s a classic!” Daniella defended. “And there’s nothing like slamming down a winning piece in someone’s face.”

“Except maybe Scrabble,” Naija added. “Though that one gets personal. The arguments over what counts as a word? Brutal.”

“Too much thinking,” Cherish objected. “We’re supposed to be relaxing, not debating the dictionary.”

“I think Uno then,” Jason suggested. “It’s fast, easy, and guaranteed to ruin friendships.”

Daniella pointed her finger at him like she’d just won the lottery. “Yes! That’s

exactly the vibe I'm going for."

"Calm down, bitch," Liza laughed.

"I'm good with Uno," I said, shrugging. "But don't blame me when I hit someone with a stack of Draw Fours."

"Oh, we're blaming you already," Ryan countered, flashing me a grin. "I'm in."

Naija nodded. "Same. Uno it is, but if someone skips me, it's on sight."

"Uno and liquor?" Cherish shook her head, with a laugh. "This is going to end in disaster."

"And that's exactly the point," Daniella replied, smug as ever.

As the laughter died down and everyone started shuffling around the table, I pushed back my chair, stretching lazily.

"Before I get too drunk to remember, I need to take Moose out," I announced. "He comes first."

Liza grinned at me and cooed, "Such a good mommy."

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“I do try my best.” I moved from the room and hunted down his leash, him trotting after me. His tail wagged furiously as I clipped it onto his collar. “Alright, big guy let’s go,” I murmured, heading toward the rear glass doors of the enclosed porch.

The outside lights were already on, casting a soft glow over the yard. The air was crisp, biting at my exposed skin as I stepped outside, closing the door behind us. I rubbed my arms through my sweater, grateful I’d kept it on. Moose trotted out ahead, sniffing around the manicured grass like he owned the place.

The yard was beautifully landscaped, with flowers and shrubs lining the edges, but beyond that was nothing but dense woods. The house stood in isolation, surrounded by the dark embrace of the woods, perfect for the quiet weekend. Now that night had fallen, the seclusion went from serene to unsettling.

The chilled air sobered me slightly as I kept pace with Moose. His rounded ears perked up near a cluster of bushes, his posture suddenly alert. I followed his gaze toward the tree line, my stomach knotting. The stillness around us seemed unnatural, the kind of silence that pressed in on you, amplifying every tiny sound. I heard a faint snap, twigs breaking underfoot. The noise was distant, but it was enough to send a chill racing down my spine.

Moose stiffened, his muscular frame going rigid as his stub of a tail lowered. His body vibrated with tension, and I felt my own heartbeat spike in response.

“Don’t even think about it,” I whispered tightening my grip on his collar. He was well-trained, but he was still a dog. If something caught his attention, he could drag my ass straight into the woods without a second thought. The last thing I needed was

to stumble after him, drunk and half-blind, into the dark.

I scanned the tree line again.

Shadows danced with the faint sway of branches in the breeze, but nothing moved. Nothing that I could see, yet the prickling sensation along my neck refused to go away. Moose let out a low growl, the sound barely audible. I tugged gently at his leash,

“Come on. Let’s go back inside.”

He didn’t budge. His body stayed taut, his gaze fixed on the same dark patch of forest as if he could see something I couldn’t. My eyes darted back to the tree line, desperate to find what had set him off. A rustle came, softer this time. I tightened my grip on Moose’s leash.

“Moose,” I whispered, my voice barely steady. “Let’s go. Now.”

This time, he obeyed, though his steps were reluctant, his attention still trained on the trees. I couldn’t shake the feeling that someone or something was watching us. My hands trembled slightly as I led him back toward the house, the porch light casting a pale glow ahead of us.

I locked the door firmly behind us, shaking off the unease that clung to me. “We’re fine,” I told myself and him, giving him a quick scratch behind the ears after I unclipped the leash. He padded off seemingly unbothered now. I stood there for a few minutes longer, chewing on my bottom lip as my eyes scanned the darkness outside through the windows. I felt stupid when I finally turned away and went to wash my hands.

“Are you good?” Cherish’s voice startled me as I reached the sink.

I hesitated, debating if I should say something or not. “Yeah. I just... I don’t know. It felt like someone was watching me out there.”

“Do you want me to send the guys out to check?”

“No,” I said quickly, shaking my head. “No, I didn’t see anything—just trees. Probably nothing. I had Moose out there with me.”

The voices of my friends and the music playing carried through the house, and I let the sound pull me out of my head. I dried my hands and Cherish passed me off a fresh drink.

“I made this while you were out there, figured you’d be ready for the next one.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking a sip.

The burn of the alcohol was a comfort as I followed her back into the dining room, where Daniella was already shuffling the Uno cards with a wicked grin plastered on her face.

We were well into the game, the sound of drunken laughter and slurred insults bouncing off the walls.

I wasn’t sure whether my vision was blurred from the alcohol or from the tears that kept coming as I laughed at Cherish’s attempt to cheat her way to victory.

It took my alcohol-muddled brain a few seconds to register the loud knock that echoed through the house, cutting through the music and conversation. We all exchanged uncertain looks.

“What the hell?” Liza slurred. “Did we order food?”

“No, Miss Piggy,” my sister teased, poking her side and earning a playful swat.

“I’ll see who it is,” Gabe said, pushing back his chair.

“Hold up,” I called, patting my lap to call Moose over. He trotted to my side, his tail wagging lazily as I grabbed his collar to keep him from running toward the door.

Another knock came louder this time, and Naija crept up behind Gabe as he headed for the foyer.

The dining room was tucked away, so none of us could see the door, only hear the knocks as they reverberated through the space. I heard the lock turn and then Gabe’s voice.

“Uh, hey. Can I help you?”

“Is Kristy home?” someone responded, her tone emotionless.

“Kristy? I think you’ve got the wrong house, sweetie,” Naija answered.

Silence followed.

Then, without another word, Gabe shut the door and locked it. They both returned to the dining room, Gabe shaking his head as Naija looked back over her shoulder.

“That was weird as shit,” she said, sliding back into her seat.

“Who was it?” Ryan asked, setting his drink down.

“Some woman,” Naija replied, then frowned as if considering something.

“What did she look like?” I asked, my stomach twisting with unease.

Something about the voice had stuck in my mind, a faint familiarity I couldn’t quite place.

Gabe shrugged, looking as unbothered as ever. “...A woman?”

I rolled my eyes. “Wow, thanks for the vivid description.”

Cherish snorted, shaking her head. “You’re an idiot, Gabe.”

“I don’t know what she looked like!” he defended himself. “She was just... a woman.”

“Helpful,” Daniella said dryly, shuffling the cards in her hands.

I tried to focus on the game again, but my mind kept circling back to the voice.

It had sounded so familiar. The unease lingered, gnawing at the edges of my thoughts. I didn’t realize my hands were gripping the table until I caught Ryan’s tipsy gaze across from me.

His expression mirrored my own unease, his dark eyes narrowing slightly as though he was trying to piece something together.

He leaned forward slightly, and before he even opened his mouth, I knew what he was going to say.

“There’s no way it’s her,” he stated. “That place was like... hours back.”

“Who?” Daniella asked, her curiosity piqued as she glanced between us.

Ryan hesitated, and when I didn’t respond fast enough, he filled in the gap. “That girl from the gas station. The one who was creeping around the back.”

“But it did look like her,” Naija replied slowly.

Liza shook her head, her blonde hair bouncing as she dismissed the idea outright. “Can’t be the same girl. No way. Why would she be all the out here?”

“Right,” I said, more to reassure myself than anyone else.

“Let’s just finish the game,” Jason chimed in, clearly wanting to keep things light.

He grabbed the deck of cards and began shuffling, but even with alcohol, my nerves were already shot.

CHAPTER NINE

Another twenty minutes passed, and just as I was beginning to let my guard down, the knock came again. This time, it was sharper. Louder. I jumped, my heart racing as I stood up. Before I could even think of going to open the door, Cherish’s hand shot out, gripping my arm.

“I don’t think so.”

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For a second, I wanted to argue, but then the alcohol coursing through my veins hit me. My head swam, and I realized just how far gone I was. “Fine,” I think I muttered, sinking back into my chair at Cherish's warning look.

Jason and Gabe were already making their way to the foyer. We fell silent, straining to hear what was happening over the music. Gabe repeated the same question he had before and the voice came again, the same flat, unnervingly calm tone.

“Is Kristy home?”

Jason's response was immediate. “Didn't you just knock and get told she's not fucking here?”

“Jason,” Daniella hissed as she jumped up and made to go get him, her cheeks flushed from the alcohol. She wasn't exactly in a state to lecture anyone, though.

The door slammed shut, and a moment later, the guys returned to the dining room. Jason looked annoyed, his arm wrapped around her, and Gabe just shrugged like it was no big deal.

“I need to pee. Be right back. Keep playing.”

Cherish gave me a cautious look but nodded, and I stood up again, swaying slightly. I made it upstairs without falling on my ass or busting open my face so that was a win. I never drank like this. I was a casual sipper. Then again, when I went out I was with Wilder and a completely different friend group aside from my sister and Ella tagging along.

He always watched over me and knew my tells to cut off my supply. He always...watched over me. I think I was going to miss that. I rubbed my chest where it began to burn. I really missed him. I hated his ass for doing this to me, but I couldn't take years of feelings and just pretend they didn't exist.

I went into the room Cherish and I had claimed, Moose's nails clicked against the floor as he followed me.

My head was swimming, and everything felt a little too loud, a little too bright. Once inside, I dug through my suitcase, drunkenly pulling out some clothes I wasn't sure even matched and my toiletries. Somewhere in my mind, I knew not to fall asleep with a liquor mouth.

Clutching my things, I crossed the hall to one of the bathrooms. Moose stayed close, his tail wagging softly as he followed me. His presence was grounding, a small comfort against the whirlwind in my head.

"Be right back," I told him, nudging him gently with my foot before closing and locking the door behind me.

I set my things on the counter and then went to use the toilet. When I was done, I leaned against the sink, my palms pressing into the cold porcelain. The fluorescent light buzzed faintly above me as I stared into the mirror. My reflection stared back, familiar, yet somehow distant.

I studied myself critically, taking in every detail. I knew I was pretty. Not in a vain way, but in the way you just know something about yourself. Socially above average, or at least that's what I'd always been told by Daniella and Thorne when he broke down whathistype was, wanting me to play matchmaker.

My body didn't fit the mold of skinny and delicate like Cherish's. She was effortless

elegance, all long limbs, and understated grace. My body ping-ponged between a size 5 and a size 6 depending on the season.

I had curves, a chest that made bra shopping an event, and an ass that stayed toned thanks to years of softball and regular gym sessions. I wasn't glamorous like the girls I'd seen on Wilder's phone. Those girls had polished perfection down to an art—flawless makeup, hair that didn't know what a bad day looked like, and wardrobes that screamed effortless luxury.

I could be like that, though. I liked getting dolled up, putting on a killer dress, and turning heads. But I also liked sweatpants and hoodies, messy buns, and skipping makeup just because I could. That duality was mine, and I owned it. Most of the time.

I wasn't sure where the fuck I was going with this train of thought. That I was too pretty to be betrayed? I sneered at myself. Beyoncé got cheated on, so clearly, looks did fuck all to keep a man. Not that I wanted to hook one that way, anyway. Still, the thought that maybe that was why stung, lingering like a bitter aftertaste.

It was my inebriated brain drudging up insecurities out of freaking nowhere. Wilder never made me feel less. He called me beautiful when my hormonal acne showed up during my brutal periods. He said it when my long, usually straight hair betrayed me, sticking out in wild directions like I'd fought an electrical outlet and lost.

He whispered it when I was sick and miserable, bundled in blankets on the couch with tissues everywhere. It wasn't just words with him; it was the way he looked at me like nothing else in the world mattered. So, it wasn't my physical appearance. It damn sure wasn't my personality. I refused to go there. Was that cocky? Maybe.

It couldn't be the sex. He couldn't have faked that, could he? No one was that good of an actor. Every moan, every groan, every time he whispered filthy shit in my ear, like my pussy was the only thing keeping him alive—it had to be real. Right?

Right?

Jesus Christ.

What was wrong with men?

I splashed some water on my face, the chill biting against my skin and doing nothing to cool the rising frustration. My mind felt like it was running circles around itself, looking for a logical explanation in a sea of chaos.

There wasn't one.

I wasn't even supposed to be thinking of him or men in general. It was against the rules. Plus, right then I hated them all. Every single one of them. Except for my second-chance dad and a few uncles. Women needed an island, a safe haven where the opposite sex was banned for all eternity. We could live in peace, free from the endless headaches they caused by being fucking idiots. If we got horny? Easy. We could cuddle dildos, vibrators, or each other.

Problem solved.

I sighed, leaning closer to the mirror and brushing a stray hair out of my face.

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Moose whined softly outside the door, his nails clicking against the wood as he shifted his weight.

“Almost done,” I called.

I moved away from myself and turned the shower on to full blast. The bathroom quickly filled with steam, fogging the mirror as I stripped off my clothes, having to use the wall for support. The cool air brushed against my skin. I stepped into the tub, immediately dancing away from the liner as it clung to my leg.

“So damn gross,” I laughed at myself, so I didn’t cry, swatting it back into place, and sighing as the hot water cascaded over me. The heat sank into my skin, soothing and sobering me just the tiniest bit. The faint sounds of laughter and music drifted up from downstairs, muffled through the walls.

For a moment, I let myself focus on it, grounding myself in the normalcy of my friends and their ridiculous antics.

Moose barked sharply from outside the door, pulling me from my thoughts. I froze, my hand hovering midair as I reached for shampoo.

“Moose?” I called out as if he could answer me.

There was nothing. Just silence. After a moment, I shook my head and laughed at myself. “You’re losing it,” I whispered, rubbing my temples before continuing with my shower. If it was anything serious, Moose wouldn’t just bark once and stop.

By the time I was done, the bathroom was a sauna.

I remembered then that I hadn't thought of making sure any towels were in the room before getting into the shower. I hunted through the linen closet and managed to find a stack. "Thank God." I pulled two out and wrapped one around my body.

I twisted the other around my wet hair, finally feeling somewhat human again. As I wiped the fog off the mirror and prepared to brush my teeth, my gaze caught on a thin gold necklace. It was draped carelessly over the soap dispenser. The light reflected off the delicate piece, drawing my attention. Frowning, I reached out and carefully picked it up.

The chain was dainty and elegant, with a small diamond-encrusted "A" pendant dangling from it. My brows furrowed as I turned it over in my fingers. It wasn't mine. I didn't own anything like this, and I couldn't recall seeing it on anyone I was staying with. It wasn't uncommon for random things to get left behind in rentals. This could have easily been overlooked. I hadn't noticed it until then. My sluggish brain conjured up an image I didn't want the longer I stared at it.

Amber Hughes.

She wore a pendant like this. The thought sent a bitter taste into my mouth.

I dropped the necklace back onto the counter as though it burned me, cursing under my breath as the image of her perfect tits flitted through my mind.

Why the hell would I even let my mind go there?

"Goddammit, Wilder," I swore, the words echoing faintly in the small bathroom as I angrily swiped at my cheeks. My fingers tightened on the towel wrapped around me, a flood of anger and sadness threatening to pull me under. I hated how easily the

memories could unravel me. Even here, miles away, in a house full of my closest friends, his presence still clung to me like a shadow. When did this phase end?

I took a deep breath. “Get it together,” I told myself, grabbing my toiletries and the pile of clothes I’d brought. “It’s just a necklace.”

I stepped out into the hallway and Moose greeted me with a wag of his stubby tail, but even he seemed to sense my unease.

I didn’t go back downstairs. Instead, I went straight to the room I was sharing with Cherish. I pitched my clothes aside and flopped down onto the bed. I broke my own rule, patting the space beside me when I looked over at Moose. “Come on, big guy.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. With a huff, he hauled his massive body onto the bed and settled in beside me, his warmth pressing against my side. I wrapped an arm around him, letting his steady breathing calm the mess of thoughts swirling in my head. I wasn’t sure how much time passed. Minutes? An hour? Before the door creaked open.

Light footsteps padded across the floor, and then the bed dipped as Cherish climbed in beside me, squeezing into the already tight space Moose and I had claimed.

I laughed softly, rolling to the side to give her some room. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you sad girl cuddles,” she declared, her voice slurred with drunkenness.

“You’re super drunk. And I’m not sad.”

“Shhh,” she shushed me loudly, the scent of liquor heavy on her breath. “You are. It’s okay. I’m here. I’ll still kick his ass when I see him.”

That made me laugh, despite myself. “Cherish, you couldn’t kick a soccer ball in your state, let alone someone’s ass.”

She huffed indignantly, resting her head on my shoulder like we were kids again. “Doesn’t matter. I’d figure it out. Nobody makes my baby sister sad and gets away with it.”

Her words warmed me, even as I shook my head. “I’m not sad,” I insisted, though my voice lacked conviction.

“Liar,” she murmured, hugging me tighter. “You’re my sister. I know you.”

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We talked a little after that—well, as much as one semi-drunk and one fully drunk girl could manage. Our words were slurred and scattered, the conversation weaving between nonsense and fleeting moments of seriousness.

At some point, her breathing evened out, and I knew she'd fallen asleep. I was on the verge of drifting off myself when I heard the door open again. Moose let out a soft huff but didn't move.

I cracked my eyes open just enough to see Ryan standing in the doorway. His expression softened as he took in the scene—the two of us squished onto the bed, Cherish half-sprawled across me, Moose taking up the rest of the space.

Without a word, he grabbed the comforter from Cherish's bed and draped it over us, tucking it in gently before retreating. I let my eyes close again, a faint smile on my lips.

I woke to the sensation of being shoved halfway off the bed and sunlight streaming through the windows, blinding and relentless. My head throbbed as I squinted against the light, groaning. Cherish had sprawled out in her sleep, taking up most of the bed, her arm flung carelessly over where I'd been lying.

“Cherish,” I griped, carefully maneuvering myself off the edge without falling. My headache pounded with each small movement. I looked down at myself and saw I was in sweatpants and a WOW sweatshirt—sans bra and underwear. I didn't remember putting clothes on, but I had to be pretty damn out of it to skip those.

I looked around and saw Moose was no longer on the bed. I frowned, scanning the

room. He wasn't sprawled out on the floor or curled up by the door. He wasn't anywhere. Carefully, I grabbed the blanket Cherish had kicked off and pulled it back over her.

She shifted but didn't wake, mumbling something incoherent into the pillow.

"Moose?" I called softly, stepping into the hallway. The house was eerily quiet. I glanced toward the windows in the dining area. Judging by the light, it had to be midmorning, maybe later. Everyone else must've still been asleep. As I walked past the dining room, I stopped short.

Jason was asleep on top of the table. His hair was a mess, one sock was missing and Sharpie doodles were covering his face. Someone, or maybe himself, had draped the rug from the living room over him like a makeshift blanket.

"What the hell did I miss last night?" I murmured as I moved on, continuing my search for my dog.

I wandered through the living room, then the kitchen, growing more uneasy with every empty corner I passed. My steps slowed when I felt a faint breeze, cool and insistent.

Following it, I paused, my stomach dropping as I stared at the enclosed porch. The door to the outside was wide open, swaying slightly in the breeze.

"No, no, no," I whispered, the panic rising in my chest as I did the math. Moose wasn't in the house. The door was open.

He'd gone outside.

"Moose!" I called, my voice a little louder now as I stepped onto the porch and

peered into the yard. Nothing but trees and an empty lawn greeted me. “Moose?”

Silence.

Shit.

I turned and jogged back inside, my heart pounding. There was no way I was about to take off into the woods without my phone, but the problem was I didn’t have it. Naija had taken the box of phones after we’d all tossed ours in, and now I had no idea where it was.

“Where the hell did she leave it?”

I darted from room to room, my panic growing with every passing second. I had no way of knowing how long the door had been open or how far Moose could’ve gone.

“Autumn?” Ryan’s groggy voice called out from somewhere behind me. I turned to find him standing in the foyer, his hair messy and his expression still half-asleep.

“Do you know where Naija left the phones?” I asked quickly, barely pausing.

He rubbed his eyes, shaking his head. “No. What’s wrong?”

“My dog’s gone,” I divulged, the panic evident in my voice. “If anyone asks where I am, tell them—”

“I’ll go with you,” he interrupted.

“You don’t need to—”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere surrounded by trees, Autumn,” he needlessly

reminded me, cutting me off again. “Let me put something on first.”

It was only then that I noticed he was standing there in nothing but boxer shorts and a t-shirt, his long frame looking both casual and utterly unbothered. Any other time it might’ve been funny, but I was too wound up to care.

“Fine, but hurry,” I stressed, pacing back and forth as he turned to head back to his room.

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A few agonizing minutes later, Ryan emerged, now dressed in jeans and a hoodie, tugging his boots on as he walked. Gabe trailed after him, looking like death warmed over, his hair sticking up in odd directions and his eyes bloodshot, but his expression was sweetly determined.

“He told me Moose got out,” he explained, his voice low and slightly raspy. “I’ll help. Not sure what asshole left the door wide open. I wrote a note for the others in case we’re gone long.” He held up a notepad.

“That’s smart. Thank you. Thank you both.”

We stepped outside, the morning air sharp and cool against my skin. Gabe gestured toward an already-made clearing that seemed to lead into the woods. I hadn’t noticed it at all the night before. “Let’s try this path first. If he wandered off, he might’ve followed it.”

I nodded, and the three of us headed for the trail, calling out for Moose as we went. My voice cracked as I yelled his name. I had to fight the overwhelming urge to cry, swallowing to keep it at bay.

“We’ll find him,” Gabe reassured me, his tone confident despite his hungover state.

Ryan chimed in, even calmer but just as resolute. “I don’t think he’ll have gone far. He’s pretty well trained and basically glued to your side, right?”

“Yeah.” My voice wavered. I wanted to believe them, I really did, but something about the open door and the silence of the woods wasn’t making me feel very

positive.

We continued walking, calling for Moose every few feet. Every rustle of leaves or distant sound had me spinning around, hoping it was him.

“Wait.” I stopped abruptly when something caught my eye. Ryan and Gabe turned to look at me. I took a step closer to a low-hanging branch off the path, where Moose’s leather collar was tied with a red string.

CHAPTER TEN

My heart raced, and my vision tunneled on the collar swaying gently from the branch. A person clearly had to have done this. I stepped toward the tree, my breathing sharp and shallow.

Gabe caught my arm, his grip firm yet gentle. “Autumn, wait,” he said quietly.

“Move,” I snapped, glaring at him. My entire body was thrumming with rage and adrenaline.

“Let me grab it,” Ryan volunteered. He stepped around us and grabbed for the collar. As his fingers closed around it and he undid the string, I noticed the way his shoulders stiffened, a subtle but unmistakable tension rolling through him.

“What is it?”

When he didn’t answer right away, I struggled against Gabe, breaking free from his grip with a sharp yank.

“Autumn,--,” Gabe started, but I was already moving.

Ryan turned reluctantly, his face taut and unreadable as he held the collar up for me to see. Inside, written in thick, black marker, was a note. “Can I come in now?”

“What the fuck?” Gabe rasped, taking the collar from Ryan and examining it, his expression darkening with every second.

Ryan’s jaw was clenched tight, his eyes scanning the surrounding woods, every muscle in his body coiled like a spring. “We need to get back to the house. Now.”

I shook my head as I looked between them. If someone did something to my dog, I would be going to jail. I’d smile in my goddamn mugshot. I’d plead guilty as fuck because I would get it all back in blood. Every single ounce. That must have reflected on my face. Ryan stepped closer to me, cautiously.

“Hey, we’ll figure it out, but right now, we have to move.

My eyes darted back to the empty woods, the stillness now feeling more ominous than peaceful. Swallowing hard, I forced myself to nod, my hand trembling as I reached for Moose’s collar.

“No,” Ryan objected gently, pulling it back. “I’ll hold onto this for now. Let’s go.”

Gabe placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder, gently steering me toward the clearing as Ryan led the way. My legs felt like lead, my mind racing with a thousand questions that had no answers. Who lured him out of the house? What were they doing to him?

We made our way back through the woods, the crunch of leaves and twigs the only sound cutting through the eerie silence. To our left, something moved. The sound of snapping branches broke through the stillness, sharp and deliberate. That wasn’t the damn wind.

Gabe's eyes widened, his voice dropping to a hushed whisper. "What the fuck was that?"

My breath caught, my pulse hammering in my ears. I turned my head just enough to meet Ryan's gaze. His posture was rigid, ready.

"Fuck this," I hissed, my voice trembling with both anger and fear, I grabbed them both by their sleeves. "Go."

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Without another word, we quickened our pace, practically running along the narrow path. Every rustle of leaves and every creak of the woods seemed amplified like the entire forest was watching us. My heart was in my throat by the time the house came into view.

We stumbled inside, and I slammed the door shut, locking it with shaking hands. My chest heaved as I moved from the patio to the kitchen, trying to catch my breath.

“Autumn?” Daniella’s groggy voice drifted from the foyer as she came around the corner. Her hair was a wild mess and there were hickeys all down one side of her neck.

“What the hell are you guys—”

“Someone has my dog,” I cut her off, the words sharp and clipped.

Her eyes widened as the haze of sleep left her in an instant. “What?”

When I didn’t stop to explain, Ryan handed her his collar.

What was I supposed to do? Arm me and go traipsing through the woods? That seemed like afuck yes, but I wasn’t that stupid. A loud knock echoed through the house, the sound like a gunshot against the quiet. I turned toward the door, my body moving before I could think.

“Autumn!” Ryan’s voice called sharply as he lunged forward, catching me before I could reach it. His arms wrapped tightly around me, holding me back as I struggled

against him. “I know you’re pissed, but you can’t just open that door, sweetheart. We have no idea what the fuck is going on.”

I stilled for a moment, glaring at him over my shoulder. “I’m not opening it,” I snapped. “I just want to see who it is.”

He hesitated, his grip loosening slightly, and I moved forward, stepping up to the peephole. My fingers curled into fists at my sides as I pressed my eye to the tiny glass. On the other side, staring directly was the girl from the gas station.

My blood ran cold.

Her face was pressed so close, it was like she could see me, her lips curved into a slow, unsettling smile. Her eyes seemed to bore into mine as if the door wasn’t even there. I froze, unable to move or breathe, my mind screaming at me to step back, but my body refused to listen. This creepy bitch had walked into a field. How the fuck did she get here? How did she know this was where we were going?

“Autumn?” Gabe’s voice was low. “Who’s out there?”

I didn’t answer, my gaze locked with hers through the peephole. Her lips moved, slowly, forming words I couldn’t hear but understood perfectly.

“Is Kristy home?”

I stepped back, bumping into Ryan’s chest. His hands steadied me as he looked toward the door, his jaw tightening. I swallowed hard, forcing myself to speak. “It’s her,” I whispered. “The girl from the gas station.”

Daniella, who had moved closer, paused mid-step. “How is that possible? That place was at least two hours away.”

Ryan glanced at Gabe, who was standing by the living room entrance, his face grim. “We’re not opening that door,” he stated firmly, his hand tightening on my arm.

Another knock came, louder this time, followed by a long, dragging scrape against the stone. I backed away, my eyes locked on the door as if it might burst open any second.

Gabe stepped in front of me, his broad shoulders blocking my view. “Get everyone in here.”

That was directed at Ryan.

“How many doors does this place have?” I asked, my voice tight.

“I don’t—I don’t know,” Daniella stammered, glancing toward the living room as if the answer might materialize there.

Ryan was already moving, heading toward the bedrooms to wake everyone else. Another knock echoed through the house, louder and more deliberate, and Daniella snapped, her nerves clearly fraying. “Go the fuck away!”

Her shout was met with silence.

One by one, the others began to shuffle toward the foyer, hungover and half-asleep. Naija was the first to speak, her locs swaying as she rubbed her eyes and glared at Gabe. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Where’s the phone box?” Gabe asked urgency in his tone. “We need our phones.”

Naija scowled, visibly trying to think past her pounding head. “It was in the kitchen, by the paper towels.”

I bolted, Daniella hot on my heels. My eyes scanned the counter as I rounded the corner, but there was nothing. “It’s not here,” I called out. My hands fumbled over the counters and pulled open cabinets as if I might have missed it, but it was nowhere to be found.

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“It’s gone,” Daniella announced, her voice rising as she turned with disbelief.

“It’s not there?” Ryan questioned.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s not.”

Another knock came.

Ryan muttered a curse under his breath, running a hand through his hair. “Stay here,” he instructed. “Don’t move. I’m going back to the foyer.”

“What is happening?” Daniella gripped the edge of the counter to steady herself.

I crept forward and peeked around the wall to watch him.

After a second, Daniella was right behind me. Ryan moved toward the front door cautiously and pressed his face to the peephole.

“There’s no one out there anymore,” he said finally, though the tension in his tone betrayed his unease.

“What you mean is that there’s no one at the door right now. Someone is most definitely out there,” Naija corrected. She’d fully woken up at this point.

Cherish joined us, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “What’s going on?”

I didn’t even try to explain. “We can’t find the phone box,” I divulged instead,

frustration thick in my voice.

“Alright,” Jason began, his voice gruff, “we need to figure out what’s happening.”

Liza nodded, crossing her arms tightly over her chest.

“If someone’s messing with us, we need to stay inside and keep the doors and windows locked.”

I pressed my hands flat against my thighs, squeezing my eyes shut to think. The panic wasn’t helping. I needed to calm down. Around me, the group buzzed with scattered questions, fragmented ideas, and mounting tension. Cherish stepped up beside me, her hand finding mine and squeezing it firmly. “I’m right here with you,” she said softly.

I nodded, forcing myself to breathe deeply. “Okay,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt. “Let’s figure this out.”

Ryan rubbed his jaw. “First things first—our phones. Naj, you said you left the box in the kitchen, right?”

“Yeah, I did. Right by the paper towels. It was there last night. I know I was drunk off my ass, but that happened before then.”

“Well, it’s not there now,” Gabe pointed out. “And unless someone here moved it, there can only be one other explanation.”

The implication hung in the air, unspoken but crystal clear. Liza frowned. “If it’s not inside the house then that means someone came to get it. And then they just left?” Her words dripped with skepticism, but there was a nervous edge beneath them.

“Someone is clearly fucking with us,” I stated the obvious. “My dog didn’t just open a door and walk away. And how did that girl from the gas station know to find us here? We’re hours away from that place.”

My sister shook her head. “It doesn’t make sense. This house is in the middle of nowhere.”

“Are we sure someone was inside the house, why didn’t we hear them? Why didn’t they... do anything?” Naija questioned.

“Because they didn’t need to,” Gabe replied.

“They wanted to mess with us. It’s psychological. Freak us the fuck out.”

“They’re doing a damn good job of it,” Daniella snapped, rubbing her temples.

“We should search the entire house. Every room, every closet, every corner. If the phones are gone, we need to know how they got in. And if they’re still here...”

Jason, now leaning against the banister, scoffed. “So we just wander around this big-ass house like it’s a Scooby-Doo episode?”

Liza shot him a glare. “Got a better idea?”

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“Alright,” I said, taking a steadying breath. “We need to search the entire house. If the phones are still here, we’ll find them. If not, at least we’ll know for sure someone came inside.”

Cherish nodded, moving closer to me. “We’ll stick together. I’m not letting you wander off alone.”

“Same here,” Ryan added. “Gabe and I can take the first floor.”

“Daniella, Liza, and I will check the basement,” Naija said, her tone clipped. “Let’s grab anything that can double as a weapon while we’re at it. Just in case.”

“We’ll start upstairs,” I said, glancing at Cherish. As we headed toward the stairs, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched.

“They’re gone,” Ryan announced, his voice grim as we all returned to the foyer. “All of them. The landline too.”

“Fantastic,” Liza muttered, crossing her arms. “So what do we do now? Wait for whoever this is to knock again?”

“No,” Daniella objected. “We grab our shit and leave. We’re sitting ducks here without any way to call for help.”

“That’s not an option.” My voice was firmer than I expected it to be. “My dog is still out there with some psycho. I’m not leaving without him.”

“Autumn.” Naija turned to me, her tone gentle but unyielding. “You’ll be no good to him dead.”

Cherish groaned, raking a hand through her hair. “We’re jumping straight to someone trying to murder us now? That’s where we’re at?”

“What else would you call someone taking all our phones so we can’t call for help?”

Cherish’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Okay. We’re leaving now.” She turned to me next. “I know you don’t want to leave without Moose, but if we’re going to find him, we need to get somewhere safe first. We’re not going to be able to do this from here, Autumn.”

Every instinct screamed to stay, to tear through the woods until I found him, but I knew she was right.

I’d be no good to him like this and I refused to believe he’d been harmed. I couldn’t let myself go there. “Let’s get the fuck out of here then.”

Jason stood taller. “Everyone grab your stuff and meet back here. We should walk out together.”

Our group dispersed, adrenaline pushing away any lingering hangovers. Cherish stuck by my side as we headed for our room, her hand gripping my arm.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I barely got my zipper unstuck when Liza’s sharp voice rang out from the living room. I abandoned my suitcase and rushed to find her standing by the couch, her face paler than usual, her purse dumped open in front of her.

“My keys are gone.”

“Shit,” Cherish rasped. She crouched down, ripping open her own bag open and shaking its contents onto the floor. Makeup, receipts, and random knickknacks scattered across the rug. Her hands sifted through the mess, her movements growing more frantic. “Fuck! My fobs gone too!”

Gabe ran a hand down his face, his expression grim. “How could someone come in here and do this bullshit right under our noses?”

Daniella let out a harsh laugh, though there was nothing funny about it.

“We were drunk off our asses, and then we all passed out cold. If someone wanted to pull this shit, it wouldn’t have been hard.”

"How... how did someone get in, to begin with though?" I asked. "I've only seen the two doors, and I know they were locked."

“The person who owns this house?” Liza suggested hesitantly. “They would have a key.”

Cherish’s brow furrowed. “So the homeowner is fucking with us?”

Daniella scoffed. “I’m almost positive this place belongs to an older couple, based on the bio.”

Gabe ran his hands over his face. “I think the who is the least of our problems right now. If we can’t drive out of here, and we can’t call anyone, then what the hell do we do?”

“There’s got to be a way to get to town. We stick together, and we figure it out,”

Ryan stressed.

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“And then what?” Naija snapped, panic slipping into her tone. “Walk ten miles through the damn woods? In the middle of nowhere?”

A thud reverberated against the front door, cutting off our conversation. Without hesitation, Jason took off to the door.

"Jason, no!" Liza called after him, but it was too late.

He flung it open and relief washed through the room when the porch revealed nothing—no intruder, no looming figure, just the empty, quiet expanse of the property.

“What the fuck is this?” He bent over and lifted something up. When he turned around there was a square brown box in his hands. “Mint?”

My stomach dropped. It felt like the world had tilted sideways.

"Isn't that... you?" He looked at me, his eyes narrowing, oblivious to the immediate turmoil that one word had caused in me.

"Yes," I replied quietly.

Gabe strode forward, yanking him further inside and slamming the door shut with a curse. "Are you insane? Don't just open the damn door like that."

Jason ignored him, shaking the box gently. Something rattled inside, the sound both light and solid. His gaze shifted to me. “Well, this is for you.”

Feeling eyes on me, I shifted and looked at Daniella. “I...I didn’t tell him about this trip.”

“I know,” she replied softly.

Taking the box from Jason’s hands, I swallowed and carried it into the kitchen. I placed it on the island and stared down at it. How did he know where I was? Was he the one doing all of this? That didn’t make much sense to me if he wanted us to get back together. This would have the opposite effect.

Everyone crowded around me, the room deathly silent except for the faint hum of the refrigerator.

“Autumn,” Cherish prompted softly.

Naija tilted her head, her curiosity evident as she eyed the box. "So... why did you and Wilder break up, exactly?"

“Long story.” I could feel their eyes on me, and a plethora of unspoken questions. I knew Daniella had already told them we weren’t together anymore, but she hadn’t shared the details. For that, I was grateful.

I grabbed a knife from the cutlery drawer and sliced through the packaging tape. The lid popped open, revealing layers of tissue paper, neatly folded and pristine white. An elegant card sat on top. If I had any doubts about this being Wilder, they were gone.

“Fixing our forever.”

The card slipped from my hands, fluttering onto the counter like the punchline to a macabre joke. I dug through the excessive layers of tissue paper. The rustling was deafening. My fingers brushed against something gritty and I paused.

I carefully peeled back another layer of tissue paper. Seeing what I had just touched, I recoiled with a curse, knocking the box onto its side. Amber's head hit the island with a grotesque thud and the room erupted into chaos.

Jason ran to the sink and threw up. Cherish grabbed me, her nails digging into my arm as I stumbled back, my legs barely holding me upright. Her face was almost unrecognizable except for one side. One side was flattened, covered in dried blood. A single glassy eye stared lifelessly, the other lost missing entirely.

Gabe's expression was a mix of horror and disbelief, his eyes glued to the head on the counter. Naija let out a choked sob, backing away until her shoulder hit the wall. "Who the fuck... who would even...?" she trailed off, her hands trembling as she covered her mouth. Daniella had her hand pressed over her stomach as if she were going to be sick.

My heart raced, my mind spiraling as I stared at her disfigured face.

My sister shook her head. "No. No, he's not this unhinged."

Ryan stepped closer to the kitchen island. "Who?"

I couldn't bring myself to say his name. Of course, Naija sharp as ever, was already piecing it together.

"Is this... is this about Wilder?"

Gabe's brows shot up, his expression shifting from confusion to alarm. "Holy shit."

Jason turned the tap on and rinsed his mouth, not quite keeping up but getting the gist. When he turned back around, he glanced between all of us, his brow furrowed. "Wilder Carson? Your boyfriend?"

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Cherish corrected him immediately. “Ex-boyfriend.”

Liza shook her head. “Wait, he’s the one doing all of this?”

“It’s clearly not just him. I’ve never seen that freak from the gas station a day in my life,” Daniella replied.

“When did you two break up?” Ryan asked.

I stared down at my hands, trying to summon some kind of strength to explain. My heart pounded as memories of Wilder’s intensity, his obsessive nature, and the look in his eyes the last time I saw him rushed back all at once.

“Two weeks ago,” Cherish answered for me.

“Two weeks?” Ryan repeated, incredulously.

I finally looked up. “It can’t be him. He... he’s not this...”

“Unhinged?” Daniella finished, using my sister’s adjective, but with bitter sarcasm.

“No,” I snapped. “He might be obsessive, possessive, sure, but this... this is different.”

“Do you guys think someone is still inside? Watching?” Liza whispered just loud enough for us to hear.

“We just searched this place top to bottom for our phones. There’s no one here,” Cherish replied.

“That was before we got that.” Daniella gestured to Amber’s head. “Who’s to say they didn’t sneak back in? Or that they don’t already have a way in we haven’t found?”

I instinctively glanced at the windows. Most were still uncovered, the curtains pushed to the side, leaving us exposed. “We should close all the curtains, and double-check the windows are all locked. If we can’t go out there, then we sure as hell can’t let them or whoever get back in here.”

Ryan glanced at me. “I’ll start with the back windows. You coming?”

I nodded mutely and followed behind him, pulling my sister along.

The others spread out and followed our lead. Every movement felt too loud, too slow, like we were racing against an invisible clock.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Daniella and Jason, their tense whispers barely audible over the pounding of my heartbeat. As we moved from room to room. A sudden memory surfaced, nearly making me stumble. The necklace. The delicate gold chain with the diamondA.

“Fuck,” I whispered, realization crashing down on me like a wave.

Ryan and my sister both looked at me.

“What is it?”

I looked at Cherish. “I think he’s been here. The whole time.”

She understood straight away, but Ryan didn't.

"What are you talking about? Who?"

"The necklace," I stammered. "I found a necklace in the upstairs bathroom last night. It wasn't mine. It's the same one Amber always wore."

His jaw clenched, tension radiating off him. "Are you sure?"

"She can't exactly message the bitch and ask if it's missing, so I think it's safe to assume she's sure," Daniella interjected.

My sister tugged at her hair, exhaling heavily. "Are you saying Wilder's been in the house with us this entire time?"

"I'm saying someone put Amber's necklace here last night. Was it Wilder? I don't know."

Ryan cursed under his breath. "Okay. We need to tell the others, now."

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“No,” Daniella whispered harshly, grabbing his arm. “We need to stay calm and figure out what the hell to do next.”

Ryan studied her for a moment, his lips pressing into a grim line. “Fine,” he said, his voice tight.

We continued what we were doing and I had to stop and take a minute to pull myself together.

Ryan approached from the side and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “It will be okay,” he reassured me, pressing a quick kiss to my temple.

Caught off guard, I gave him a tight smile and stepped away just as music began to play from downstairs. We shared a look between us.

“What the fuck is this?” Jason’s voice rang out.

We made our way downstairs and into the living room. I could see Jason standing near the TV, his arms crossed and his expression rife with unease.

“What’s going on?”

He pointed at the TV. “Look at this shit.”

I looked, trying to see what he wanted me to do. There was a music app pulled up. My eyes flicked down to the bottom of the playlist. The Bluetooth device connected was labeled as Gabes.

He and the others trickled into the room.

“What happened now?”

“Your phone’s connected to the TV,” Ryan replied.

Gabe stepped closer. “But I don’t have my phone. I left it in the box.”

Naija stood in the doorway, damn near chewing her lip off. “Do you know how close someone has to be to connect Bluetooth like that?”

Gabe rushed forward and reached behind the flatscreen, yanking at the cord until it came free from the wall. The abrupt silence that followed was louder than any sound.

Jason was the first to speak. “Carson. He’s still close with those other guys?”

I nodded. “Practically brothers. They live together.”

Gabe frowned. “So they could be helping him?”

Naija glanced around, her eyes darting toward the covered windows. “Would they really go this far, though?”

Daniella let out a humorless laugh. “They’re all crazy in one way or another. They just hide it behind wealth, charm, and a perfect smile.”

I crossed my arms, trying to ignore the knot in my stomach. “That’s...accurate.”

Cherish looked at me, her brow furrowed. “But they all loved you, didn’t—”

Liza interrupted her. “Then this is happening because of you?”

“No, it’s not her fault.” Daniella spun toward her. “Why the hell would you say that?”

Liza raised her chin. “I can’t be the only one thinking it. There’s a severed head in the kitchen. Ahead—of a girl you hated.”

“You hated her too. And how the fuck is that my fault? I don’t recall decapitating anyone recently.”

She kept going as if I hadn’t spoken. “Add that weird ass note to the mix, and it’s not hard to figure out. You’re here with three guys, and if the rumors about Wilder are true, everyone knows he’s obsessed with you. You could’ve warned us that he was an actual psych—”

Cherish moved before I could intervene, shoving her backward. “Do not blame my sister for the actions of a man who can’t handle rejection.”

Liza stared at her; eyes wide. “I wasn’t blaming her—”

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“Yes, you were,” Daniella interrupted.

I should’ve felt relieved and defended, but guilt was already setting in and effectively shutting me up. A severed head and the creepy-ass gas station girl, I refused to take the blame for, but if my ex really did have something to do with this, then it was my fault.

“Liz, you’re entitled to whatever you want to think. You can be as pissed at me as you want, but we can’t fight amongst ourselves right now.”

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “I’m sorry. I just--.”

Music began to play again. The same song that had just been playing on TV.

“Where is that coming from?” my sister asked quietly.

“If that’s his phone...” Jason trailed off, turning so that he was in front of us.

“Someone is in the house,” Liza whispered, her voice shaking.

“No. We just went from room to room. Twice,” Daniella reminded her.

She shook her head, blonde curls bouncing. “I can’t...I’m not staying in this goddamn house a second longer. I’ll take my chances in the woods.”

“That’s the dumbest thing you could possibly do right now,” Gabe retorted.

She backstepped, damn near shoving Jason across the room to get around him.

“Liza, stop! Don’t be a fucking idiot,” Naija yelled.

I ran after her, grabbing her from behind in a desperate attempt to stop her. “You can’t go out there!”

“Getoffme!” She shrieked, twisting in my hold. Her elbow came dangerously close to connecting with my face, and I instinctively let her go before she could land the hit.

The heavy door swung wide, and for a split second, everything seemed to still. Liza didn’t have a chance to react before the person on the other side grabbed her by the throat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Thorne carried the blonde into the house like she was nothing more than a rag doll. She kicked and clawed at him, but he didn’t even flinch, making her resistance laughable.

Lucian and I followed close behind him, stepping into the chaos with unhurried strides. The screams inside were already echoing through the house. We’d expected this to happen much later. She just moved our timeline up and I wasn’t complaining.

Romeo and Atlas had broken away to go in through the sunroom, setting themselves up to cut off any retreat. Hunter had been inside since the night before. For as many times as they went through this house, I couldn’t believe they hadn’t found him. He wasn’t exactly subtle about it either, he’d moved around just enough to stay in plain sight while staying under their radar. Jason, the fucking fool, clearly didn’t know what situational awareness meant.

Hunter had been right beside him at one point. Every floor was accounted for; we'd been meticulous.

Naija ran up the stairs with Gabe right behind her.

"What are you doing?" Autumn yelled after them. They were gone without a reply and she was left with Cherish and Daniella, moving down the hallway that connected all the lower rooms. Daniella turned towards the kitchen, more than likely thinking they could make it out of the rear exit, but Rome and Atlas had got inside by this point.

"Fuck." She backtracked and shoved Cherish and my girl further down the hall.

"Lower level," Cherish yelled.

She must have meant the basement. That was smart in a limited, narrow-minded way. That would keep them away from us for a while, sure, but it was also a death trap. No exits. No chance of escape. She was about to box my girl in for us.

Lucian caught sight of them too, his laughter softening into a hum of interest. "Desperation always makes for good entertainment."

"Mint," I called, my voice clear even through the distortion of the mask.

She and her sister both turned to look at me. Autumn's eyes swept over me, her fear and fury rolling off her in waves. She was trying so hard to stay strong, but I could see the cracks beneath the surface. Fuck, she was so beautiful like this. It made my bloodsing.

"If you come to me now, this will go a lot easier."

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Cherish held her arm up like a barricade. “She’s not going anywhere with you, Carson so why don’t you go fuck yourself?”

My grin grew beneath the mask. Atlas moved into the hall; Amber’s head cradled under his arm. Apparently, he wasn’t done playing with it. “We’ve already come all this way. Why would he leave to do that now?”

Autumn’s chest heaved, and for a second, I thought she might cry. Instead, she lifted her chin and looked right at me. “Go to hell, Wilder. You twisted fuck.”

God, I loved her.

Romeo circled around Atlas and reached them quicker than they could blink.

Autumn dragged her sister back and reached for Daniella at the same time he did. He took hold of her hair and wrenched her away from them. Her panicked rage echoed through the foyer as she fought against him.

Cherish gave up a little too quickly for someone meant to be that girl’s best friend, now damn near shoving my girl through the basement door as she tried to get to Daniella. They vanished, the door slamming shut behind them.

Thorne tossed Liza like the trash she was. Her head smacked against the hardwood, and she whimpered.

She scrambled to her feet, and he grabbed her again, this time not letting go, lifting her back off the floor.

“Leave her alone!” Daniella let out a guttural scream. Romeo shut her up by covering her mouth with his gloved hand. Jason moved forward like he was finally going to do something about us, a fire poker in his hand.

He looked fucking stupid with marker all over his damn face and only wearing one sock.

Lucian slowly looked at him and tilted his head, a sure sign he was amused. “I think, you think you’ve got guts,” he said taunted.

Jason hesitated, his grip faltering as he looked between Lucian and the rest of us.

Smart boy.

Or maybe just scared shitless.

Either way, I ignored him. He wasn’t my concern. KJ, ever the picture of twisted delight, skipped into the house behind us, her dark hair swinging as she kicked the door shut.

She had been playing her part perfectly, staying one step ahead of them the entire time. She lived for this as much as we did, the chaos, the fear, the game. It wasn’t just fun for her; it was art.

The sound of people running, followed by a door slamming shut carried from upstairs, but we didn’t need to concern ourselves with that. Hunter was up there, waiting for just this moment, his patience finally paying off.

Jason took a few steps back, his eyes darting toward the front door as if escape was still an option. It obviously wasn’t. Ryan stood his ground, chest rising and falling as he tried to keep his cool. I could see the tension in his jaw and the way his hands

clenched into fists.

He wasn't stupid.

He knew exactly who I was under the mask, and he knew why I was looking at him. Fortunately for him, knowing our identities didn't matter since he wouldn't be leaving this house alive.

It was a shame that we couldn't stream this. The girls that got fucked once or twice and then killed fetched good money, but the ones we terrorized like this were prime entertainment. The rental aspect went even higher, something about hunting unsuspecting families got people excited. I wasn't putting my girl on our broadcast for obvious reasons. She wasn't for anyone's entertainment but mine.

KJ tilted her head slightly, her stance casual. Her mask, with its exaggerated doll-like features, made her unsettling presence even more striking as she stood watching the scene unfold. Lucian didn't bother with the gun strapped under his suit jacket. He was a man of theatrical brutality.

He moved swiftly, wrenching the poker from Jason's trembling hands. Jason froze for half a second, and that hesitation was all Lucian needed. With deliberate force, he slammed the pointed end of the poker into Jason's stomach.

The air left him in a sharp wheeze as he doubled over, blood blossoming under his t-shirt. Before he could recover, Lucian brought the poker down again. The sound of the impact was beautiful, and after a few more hits Jason crumpled to the floor, unconscious, blood running from his temple. Head wounds always got messy.

Ryan backed himself into a corner, chest heaving as he tried to calculate his next move. What a shitty bunch of friends this was. Just more reasons why Mint didn't need them. He hadn't even attempted to help the guy.

I stood before him, my mask hiding the satisfaction curling my lips. I stepped closer, not needing words to let him know who had the upper hand. He chose then to lunge, enraged idiocy driving him. I grabbed him mid-motion, slamming him hard into the wall. The impact made the framed picture behind him shatter and crash to the ground, shards scattering like splinters of my rage.

He swung at me and missed. Swung again and I deflected, letting him get a hit in so he had a flicker of hope, then I grabbed him by his throat, pinning him in place. His face contorted with pain and panic as I leaned in, my voice low. “The biggest mistake of your life was touching what’s mine.”

I brought my knee up into his ribs, the sound of the hit satisfying as he let out a choked gasp. He doubled over, his breath a ragged wheeze. I grabbed him again and slammed him back into the wall, making sure the back of his head felt every ounce of force as the plaster buckled and crumbled. When I finally let go, he fell to the floor, gasping and clutching at his ribs.

He wheezed his voice barely a rasp. “Let the girls go.”

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Atlas, leaning casually against the doorway and playing with what was left of Amber's hair, gave an amused chuckle. "Look at that, a real hero—"

His words were cut off by wood splintering and a piercing scream from upstairs. A moment later, a body crashed over the banister, slamming into the ground with a sickening thud. Liza wasn't far away, sprawled on the ground since Thorne had rendered her unconscious.

She wasn't dead yet, but Gabe was. His neck was twisted at an unnatural angle, head facing completely backward. The silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the ragged gasp that tore from Daniella's throat behind Romeo's hand. He held her close, mockingly soothing her with gentle shushing sounds while laughing like the brilliant maniac he was, balancing on the balls of his feet.

Ryan was frozen, his eyes wide and locked on the mangled body of his closest friend. His chest heaved as he stared, shock rendering him immobile.

"Aw, don't look so upset," Thorne sneered. "That could've been you if you'd been as stupid as he was."

I started to walk away, but a thought stabbed through me like a blade. He had wrapped his arm around her and then kissed her temple. The image was burned in my mind, raw and unforgiving.

It could have been a lingering handshake and my reaction would've been the same. I knew the way he looked at her wasn't wholly platonic. Autumn never saw what I did, because she only ever saw me. I had been ready to come in the moment I watched it

happen on the cameras, but Lucian and Hunter helped me see reason.

I turned back, crouching down beside him. His chest was heaving, his face contorted with pain as he tried to push himself off the floor. I grabbed his hand and twisted sharply.

I ignored his pained cries and kept twisting until I saw visible bones breaking, popping, and shifting beneath the skin.

“You know what that was for, don’t you?”

“Y-you’re fucking sick,” he groaned.

I laughed and took hold of his wrist. “I’m not sick,” I replied smoothly, twisting his wrist in the same manner. “I’m devoted. There’s a difference.”

He tried and failed to get away, his entire body trembling. I tossed the broken limb away and rose, watching as he flailed pathetically pushing against the floor with his good arm. I brought my dress shoe down between his shoulder blades. Hard.

His chest hit the hardwood with a nice little thunk, the impact driving the air from his lungs as he flattened under my weight.

“You guys are having all the fun,” Thorne sighed, his voice tinged with a pout.

“You’ll get your turn,” Lucian promised.

I turned my attention to the rest of the room. Jason and Liza were out cold, and Daniella was still in Romeo’s grip, her terror palpable. Her wide eyes darted between us, looking for some escape, some mercy where there was none to be found.

“Kristy,” Lucian called to get her attention, his tone calm but commanding. “Help get these three tied up in the dining room.”

KJ didn’t hesitate. She skipped into the living room, her gloved hands reaching down to grab Jason by the hair. Despite his limp weight, she dragged him effortlessly, humming a tune to herself.

Romeo shook Daniella. “Do I tie her up too?”

“Didn’t she say she wanted to fuck you? Maybe let her live out the fantasy.”

He canted his head, pretending to think it over. “What do you think?” he asked her, his voice mockingly sweet as he leaned in closer.

“Should I play with you? We all saw how you rode that tiny dick last night. It was very...theatrical. On top of the dining table was a bit much, though.”

She glared at him, refusing to let her fear fully show. “Fuck you.”

Romeo laughed. “Oh, I like it when they’re like this. The false bravado really makes a difference.”

“Let’s go get the sisters,” I said, my voice low, almost bored. There was no rush. Not when everything was already in motion and we knew exactly how this was going to play out.

“Help Kristy,” Lucian directed at Atlas as a scream of "No!" rang out upstairs, followed by the unmistakable crash of glass shattering. None of us paused or cared to investigate.

My girl was trapped below me. Scared. Pissed off. Vulnerable.

That's exactly how I needed her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The basement door slammed shut behind us, the sound ringing in my ears like a death knell. My chest heaved, panic clawing at my insides as I tried to make sense of what the fuck was happening.

Daniella's scream pierced the air. It wasn't just a cry for help, it was raw, visceral, and filled with a terror that made my blood run cold. Cherish locked the basement door, her hands shaking as she twisted the pathetic lock in place. "They've got her," she whispered, her voice trembling. "They've got fucking everyone."

From the sound of things, we weren't far behind. I didn't say that aloud, knowing it would do us no good. My sister ushered me down the stairs. I took in the room, noting that there wasn't anything that would help us.

"What do we do?" My voice came out much stronger than I felt at the moment.

Cherish didn't answer right away. She scanned the dimly lit room, her sharp eyes darting from the pool table in the center, the sofa against the wall, to the small windows barred with iron grates near the ceiling. We were trapped, and we both knew it.

"First, we make a weapon," she said, moving to the sofa. She grabbed a decorative, ripping the case free with quick, desperate movements. "If they come down here, we're not going without a fight."

She turned and began loading pool balls into the pillowcase, her hands working fast despite the fear etched into her features. The clinking of the balls against one another was almost deafening in the suffocating quiet of the basement.

The sound of footsteps above us sent fresh waves of panic through me. The thuds were erratic, moving from one end of the house to the other. Occasionally, something crashed—a chair? A table? I couldn't tell.

My stomach churned as I pictured what they could be going through.

"I'm so sorry," I rasped.

My sister looked at me with a glare. "Why are you apologizing?"

"Because this is Wilder." I started to pace. "And Liza was right."

"You're not blaming yourself for what this sick, twisted asshole and his friends are doing to us, Autumn."

I didn't argue the point, but this was on me and there wasn't anything she could say to change that. "The masks they're wearing match the one you shoved in the closet."

She began to reply, hesitating, her gaze darting to the ceiling as another scream echoed down to us. "So this is some kind of planned revenge? If he's doing this for you, why not just—" She stopped herself, her expression darkening. "This is fucked."

I didn't know what conclusion she'd just come to, and I wasn't going to ask.

I wasn't sure what Wilder wanted, not really. Obviously, me. But then what?

Cherish moved to a light switch at the bottom of the stairs and looked over her shoulder. "I'm going to turn this off."

I swallowed and gave a terse nod, packing all my needless commentary into a box. There was no way in hell we were walking out of this basement with the upper hand,

and I had a sinking feeling that whatever the fuck was going on upstairs, this was only the beginning.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

One of them had locked the basement door after realizing Daniella wasn't going to join them. It was a desperate move and a critical oversight. Most basement doors are locked from the opposite side. We'd made sure this one was backward, just for the hell of it.

I pulled the small key from my pocket, turning it over in my gloved hand. The homeowner's key. We'd taken it the night we killed him. We had known about this trip since the moment Daniella booked it. They never stood a chance. Sliding the key into the lock, the tumblers click into place. With a faint creak, the door opened, revealing the dark stairwell leading down.

The lights were off. That was smart but also pointless. Our masks were designed to give us perfect vision in the dark. We'd look just as foolish as our quarry did if we were running through darkness half-blind.

I stepped forward first, my shoes heavy on the stairs, the sound deliberate. I wanted them to know we were coming. Let them stew in the terror for just a little longer. As I reached the bottom, I paused, my gaze sweeping the space. The room was wide, housing a pool table, sofa, and a dart area. Just a few feet ahead, was Cherish.

She gripped a pillowcase stuffed with pool balls, the fabric stretched and strained under the weight. I couldn't help but be impressed. I shouldn't have been. Cherish always scrapped dirty when she had to.

For someone who'd grown up cushy, she had a surprising knack for survival when the stakes were high. As soon as I stepped off the last stair, she swung. Hard and fast.

The pillowcase sliced through the air, aiming right at my head. I dodged, barely avoiding what would've been a nasty hit. Lucian and Thorne laughed behind me. Of course, they thought this shit was funny.

Cherish twisted, her movements sharp and fluid, and swung again. This time the pillowcase arced for my ribs. I caught it mid-swing, the force jolting up my arm, but I didn't let go.

"No!" she snarled, trying to yank it free, but my grip held firm.

Lucian stepped forward, chuckling as he plucked the makeshift weapon from my hands. He examined it, spinning it lazily. "Creative."

She blindly came swinging at him. Thorne intercepted her, his arms locking around her torso. Cherish bucked against his hold, spitting curses as he began dragging her toward the stairs.

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“Let go of her!” Autumn lunged toward the sound of her sister’s voice, instinct and adrenaline driving her, but I was ready. I grabbed her arms and spun her around before she could reach where they stood.

“You should’ve been more worried about yourself, now look where you’ve wound up.”

I pulled her flush against me, my arms wrapping around her waist like a steel band. Her hands clawed at my arms, her strength wasn’t surprising, but it wasn’t enough. She wouldn’t be going anywhere. Not ever again.

“Let her go!”

I couldn’t help but grin.

“You really think you’re in a position to give orders, Mint?” The nickname rolled off my tongue like a brand, claiming her all over again. She stilled for a fraction of a second, just long enough for me to feel the way her body tensed against mine.

“You wanted to run away from me,” I murmured, leaning in closer. “Look where it’s gotten you.”

She thrashed again, her nails raking against my arms through the fabric of my suit, but I held firm. The struggle only made me want her more. Lucian tossed the pillowcase onto the pool table like it was nothing more than a forgotten toy.

He gestured toward the stairs. “We’ll be... entertaining our new friends until you’re

ready.”

He turned on his heel, following Thorne as he hauled Cherish the rest of the way up the stairs. Her struggles echoed through the space, her voice carrying until the basement door slammed shut, sealing us in darkness. I didn’t need light to know her thoughts were racing. She would be trying to figure out how to gain some semblance of control.

Too bad for her I’d already taken it.

I walked her forward. When we reached the pool table, I forced her down, bending her over the edge. My hand wrapped tightly around the back of her neck, pressing her cheek against the felt. I leaned in closer, my voice a low murmur against her skin. “Didn’t I tell you I’d make this right?”

Her fists clenched, against the felt of the pool table.

The tremor that ran through her wasn’t fear alone, it was anger, frustration, and desire that I knew she didn’t want to admit.

That was fine. I could wait. I always had the patience for her.

I trained my fingers down her spine, savoring every inch of her defiance. When I reached the waistband of her pants, I tugged them down in one fluid motion, the fabric peeling away to reveal her flawless, smooth skin and perfect ass. Her body tensed even more, a low hiss escaping her lips as I pinned her harder by the back of her neck.

“Wilder, stop. Please. You don’t need to do this.”

“Don’t pretend you aren’t into it.”

Her breath came in uneven gasps, and she turned her head slightly, her voice trembling. “You’re insane. Actually fucking insane.”

I reached around and slipped my hand between her legs.

“That doesn’t change the fact that I’m yours. Just like you’re mine.” Her breath hitched as I eased a finger into her pussy, pushing past her resistance. Her body was taut with tension, her fists curling tighter against the table.

I held her firmly, keeping her exactly where I wanted her. “I never cheated on you, Mint.” My fingers moved slowly, stroking, coaxing, drawing out every reaction from her. “I never touched any of those women.”

She choked out a breath, her voice trembling as she struggled to form words, fighting the pleasure. “You killed Amber.”

“And it was a gratifying experience,” I replied without hesitation, my voice dripping with satisfaction. “Did you like seeing her like that? Did it make you feel better knowing she’d never be able to hurt you again? I should have done that a long time ago. I made it nice and slow for you. She felt as her neck detached.”

She froze beneath me, her body going still even as her breathing quickened. “You’re sick.”

“Then that makes you, my cure.”

My fingers slid deeper, her slickness coating the leather of my gloves, further proof of the war between her mind and her body.

I reveled in the way she reacted, the way she fought herself. She could never truly hate me or anything I did to her. I’d had years molding her to fit me, knowing one

day the time would come for her to know the truth about my line of work.

Her breathy voice broke through my thoughts. “What are you going to do to us?”

I withdrew, savoring the way her body trembled at the loss. “How many of you do you think is left?”

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She turned her head, trying to look at me, her voice shaking. “What?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I undid the buckle of my slacks.

“No,” she ground out, trying to loosen the hold I had on her neck.

I lifted her higher, placing more of her upper body on the pool table to make things a bit easier. I grabbed my dick and lined the head up. I was so fucking hard it hurt.

“Gabe’s dead,” I revealed as I thrust inside her. Her body clenched around me, her breath catching in her throat as a strained cry escaped her lips. “Naija should be next.”

She said something unintelligible and a sob broke free. I thrust harder, watching her fingers claw at the table. Fuck, I missed her. I refused to go a single night without fucking her ever again, for as long as I lived.

“You’re a monster.”

That I understood.

“But you like that, don’t you? Must be why you’re drenching my dick.” I leaned forward, pressing my chest against her back and grabbing her hip. Her body arched, her breathing ragged as I pushed her closer to the edge. I wasn’t gentle; I wasn’t kind. I gave her everything—my anger, possession, and devotion, all of it poured into every brutal thrust.

“Tell me you don’t want this, Mint” I taunted. “Tell me you hate me.”

Her silence was deafening, and the way she gripped the edge of the table told me everything I needed to know. I knew her better than she knew herself. She could fight it all she wanted, but there was no denying it. I owned her. Every perfect, beautiful inch inside and out.

She made the most delightful sounds as she got closer to cumming, her heavy breaths and quiet, desperate sobs cutting through the dark basement. They spurred me on, each gasp and whimper encouragement I couldn’t ignore.

She felt like a dream come true, home—everything I’d been needing since the second she walked out of the penthouse. I hadn’t gone this long without her, ever.

The loss of her had hollowed me out, and now that I had her again, I couldn’t get deep enough inside her. Sometimes I wanted to split her apart just so I could crawl inside.

There was a sharp intake of breath when I moved just right, stroking her G-spot.

I drove into her harder, the force enough to make the pool table creak beneath us. I couldn’t stop, didn’t want to. The way her body moved against mine, so responsive, so perfect, made my head swim. I’d been starving for this.

“You feel it too,” I implored, my voice rough and strained. “Don’t you, baby?”

She shook her head, a desperate, futile denial. “Wilder... please—”

“Please what? Please don’t stop? Please remind you who you belong to?” I punctuated each question with a deep-seated thrust, dragging a broken whimper from her lips. “Say it, Mint. Tell me the truth.”

“I hate you,” she choked out.

“Remember what I told you about lying, Mint?” I laughed through a groan. “You can’t hate me. I made it that way.”

She let out another muffled sob, her pussy beginning to clench, betraying every word she tried to say. She was unraveling, her fight slipping away.

I savored every second of it.

“You’re perfect,” I murmured, more to myself than to her. “Everything I’ve ever wanted, everything I’ll ever need.”

I moved faster, rougher, determined to push her over the edge, to take everything she had. When she finally came, she muffled the scream of pleasure against the pool table, I followed, the intensity of it ripping through me like a storm. I kept pumping in and out until every drop of cum was inside her.

For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of our ragged breathing, the weight of what had just happened settling over us. I pulled back slightly.

Unable to withhold anymore, I lifted my mask just enough to free my mouth, then leaned down and captured her lips. I swallowed her protests, my hand tightening to keep her where I wanted her. Her body was still trembling.

I slipped a hand between us again, finding her clit with ease.

She gasped into my mouth, and I pulled away, pressing my lips to her slick skin, sucking and biting just hard enough to leave a mark. My mark.

“Come on,” I coaxed, my voice low and rough as my fingers worked. “Let go for me,

Mint. I know you want to.”

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She shuddered, trying again to push me away. I moved closer, my lips brushing her ear as I whispered the words that I knew would break her. Promises, confessions, and dark truths, all spilling from my mouth like a poison she couldn't resist. Her body tensed and then she came again with a broken cry.

“Good girl,” I praised.

I wished I had longer to draw this out, to worship her fully from head to toe, but there were limits to my patience, and I didn't want us to miss all the fun upstairs.

“I'll make it up to you tomorrow,” I promised.

“Fuck you, Wilder.”

I hushed her with another kiss.

Reluctantly, I pulled out, fixing myself as I cast a lingering look at her flushed, tear-streaked face. “You're beautiful like this.” I worked to tug her pants back into place. She squirmed weakly, but I didn't let up, pleased by the thought of her carrying the evidence of me inside her after all this time apart.

Once she was dressed, I adjusted my mask, pulling it back into place, my focus never left her. She flinched as I gripped her throat, my fingers a leash to lead. We reached the stairs, and I paused.

“Now it's time to go upstairs and clear up some misconceptions,” I explained, my tone soft but unrelenting. “Be good, and you'll see Moose sooner rather than later.”

There was a noticeable change in her demeanor at the mention of her—our—dog, a spark of life reigniting in her gaze. If that was all it took I'd buy her a million of them. I smiled and led her up the steps.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I had to have entered some kind of alternate reality. That was the only explanation for all of this. The wetness between my legs and the masked man at my back, his grip firm and unyielding, were trying to convince me otherwise.

Every step I took felt heavier, like the air around me was thickening, pulling me down into a nightmare I couldn't escape. My thoughts were a mess, torn between rage and humiliation. I wanted to scream, cry, tear my skin open to escape his suffocating weight, but I couldn't do a damn thing. Not when my sister was caught in the same nightmare that I was. My mind raced, grasping at any hope for how this could possibly end.

I felt a small trickle of his cum run down my inner thigh and clenched my jaw. He'd come inside me. The thought flitted through my mind, sharp and unwelcome.

I hadn't taken birth control since I left the penthouse, and I—

"I swapped those out with fakes months ago." His soft voice cut through the chaos in my head like a scalpel.

I nearly stumbled, my breath catching. "What?" The word came out in a whisper, barely audible over the pounding of my heart.

"Be careful." He steadied me.

"Why would you do that?" My voice teetered between disbelief and fury.

“I was going to tell you.”

“When?”

“When you got pregnant,” he said simply, as though it were the most logical answer in the world.

My knees threatened to give out beneath me. I couldn’t do this. Not now. My mind spun in circles, trying to piece together how the man I had loved could be capable of any of this. I wanted to be shocked, appalled, and disgusted but sadly I wasn’t.

Some dark corner of my mind whispered that I had known, all along, what he was capable of. I just hadn’t wanted to see it. I’d painted over the jagged edges of his personality with rose-colored strokes, convincing myself that his intensity was love and his possessiveness was devotion. Now I was caught in the web I had ignored for so long.

I didn’t know where carrying his baby ranked on the ever-growing list of horrors, but it couldn’t be my focus right then. I tried to prepare myself for what I might walk into, but nothing could have readied me for the sight of waiting at the top of the steps. The first thing I saw was Gabe. His head was entirely wrong, twisted at an angle no head should ever be.

I would have fallen over myself if Wilder wasn’t holding onto me. The house was cloaked in near-total darkness, save for the dining room, where a single light illuminated the space like a spotlight.

A classic song played faintly, the melody twisted and haunting. At the entrance to the dining room, my breath hitched again, this time from the sheer devastation in front of me. Everyone was tied up, their faces and bodies battered and broken.

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes as my gaze darted frantically over each of them. Ryan and Cherish were gagged, their arms bound behind their chairs. Ryan's jaw was swollen, and a deep cut marred one side of his face.

Cherish's eyes were wide with fury and terror as she struggled against her restraints upon seeing me. Liza looked dazed, barely upright, her head lolling as if she'd been drugged. Jason was slumped over completely unconscious, a dark bruise spreading across his bloodied temple.

Daniella was in nothing but a bra and underwear, her face pale, and streaked with tears.

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One of the masked men held her close, a gloved hand gripping her arm hard enough to bruise.

And Naija...

Naija's face was a swollen mess, one side red and grotesque from a vicious beating. Half her locs looked like they'd been ripped from her scalp, blood streaking what was left. She sat with her head down, her shoulders shaking.

The tears threatened to spill, but I blinked them back, gritting my teeth as I forced myself not to break. Six masked gazes swung my way as we entered the room, their presence suffocating. I knew who each of them was except for one. The masked girl in the corner didn't move like the others. Her stance was more casual, almost playful, but it was her hair that drew my attention. Long, dark, and unmistakable. The girl from the gas station.

"Autumn," Lucian's voice broke through the tense air, smooth and sincere.

His mask tilted slightly as if he were studying me. "It's good of you to join us. We've all been looking forward to this."

I refused to speak. Wilder guided me toward an empty chair, his hands steady as he maneuvered me into it. I tried to resist, pulling against him weakly, but he only leaned down, his breath ghosting over my ear.

"Don't make me force you."

The chair creaked as he pressed me into it, pulling my arms behind my back.

“Kristy,” Lucian said gently.

The girl practically skipped over. Her gloved hands were quick and efficient as she wound what felt like coarse twine tightly around my wrists. I flinched at the rough texture biting into my skin, but I didn’t dare make a sound.

“Good girl,” Wilder murmured close to my ear.

The tears I’d been holding back spilled over, burning hot trails down my cheeks.

This couldn’t be real.

It couldn’t be happening, but every brutal, unrelenting detail told me otherwise. I didn’t want to cry in front of them. The last thing I wanted to do was give these psychopaths the satisfaction of seeing me break, but it was like everything was catching up to me all at once—the fear, the rage, the utter helplessness.

“Hey, hey,” Atlas’s voice broke through the suffocating tension. “You don’t have anything to be afraid of, Tums.”

Tums. The nickname Wilder’s friends had always called me. Hearing it now, in this setting, from a man wearing a mask and gloves, felt like a slap in the face. My eyes shifted toward him, and it was only then I realized he was holding Amber’s head.

One of his gloved thumbs was casually pressed into the empty socket where her eye used to be. Thorne chimed in, his voice smooth and just as sickeningly reassuring.

“This is nothing but an intervention, pretty girl. Relationship counseling in a sense.”

Relationship counseling? The words rattled around in my head. My mouth opened, a sharp retort on the tip of my tongue, but before I could get it out, something soft and damp was shoved between my lips. I jerked back, my muffled protest barely audible. It was a cloth, a gag.

His gloved hand stroked my hair soothingly, the gesture eerily gentle. I wanted to scream, to kick, to lash out, but I couldn't do a damn thing. My heart pounded as his thumb trailed down the side of my face, his mask close enough that I could feel the faint heat of his breath. Then he straightened, stepping back to join the others.

His movements were unhurried, as if he knew he had all the time in the world to make his point. Each of their masks carried its own horror, and together, they formed a wall of terror that was impossible to ignore.

Wilder stood slightly apart, his towering presence commanding attention even without words. His mask, molded into a devilish visage with curved horns and an expression of restrained cruelty, glinted in the dim light, its black sheen absorbing the shadows around him. It was eerily formal, paired with his tailored attire that only added to the uncanny effect.

The girl's mask was equally disturbing in its simplicity, a childlike porcelain doll's face, grotesquely exaggerated with hollow eyes and painted lips that twisted into a mockery of innocence. The silence stretched, thick and suffocating, as their collective stares pinned me to the chair.

I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing for a moment of clarity. The soft hum of the music in the background only amplified the heavy tension in the room. My wrists throbbed where the twine cut into my skin. The cloth in my mouth was suffocating, forcing every shaky breath to echo in my ears.

Lucian stepped forward first, his movements calm and measured, like he was

addressing an audience instead of a woman bound and gagged in a chair. His mask tilted slightly as if he was studying me. "You know us, Autumn. Maybe not as well as you thought, but you do know us."

My stomach twisted as he stepped closer. I wanted to look away, but his voice had a magnetic pull that kept me rooted.

"You're probably sitting there convincing yourself Wilder isn't the man you thought he was," Lucian continued, his voice deceptively soft. "Let me make this simple for you. He is. Wilder would never betray you. Never. Everything between you was and is real, including us."

Someone laughed. Hunter. That had to be Hunter. "He only lures them into a sense of safety and want, but that's all part of our job. He never follows through with more."

I recognized the next voice just as easily. They were no longer distorting them. Atlas stepped forward to say his piece, Amber's head dangling from his gloved hand by her bloodied strands of hair. Most of it seemed to be gone. I couldn't fathom what was done to her for the end result to be this.

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“It’s one of us who does the rest,” he added casually. “Wilder keeps his hands clean—well, most of the time.” He chuckled darkly, jiggling Amber’s head.

“Some girls have a mask fetish, you know. They don’t even realize who they’re really talking to.”

“Except this nasty cunt,” Romeo drawled, gesturing to Amber’s head. “She knew. And she was dealt with accordingly.”

“She was an entire trash receptacle,” Thorne added bluntly.

I worked against the twine cutting into my wrists, every instinct in me screaming to get away.

“I’m genuinely sorry we didn’t get rid of her sooner,” Lucian continued. “We always look out for each other. As part of our family, that includes you too.”

When I didn’t react, Wilder took over.

“We don’t just have money because of trust funds or good investments. Our real line of work is... specialized.”

I glared at him, biting down hard on the cloth in my mouth to keep from making a sound.

“I don’t want you to think we’re monsters that just randomly kill people,” he stressed. “Weworkfor a very specific clientele. The kind that likes to watch.”

My stomach churned violently, bile rising in my throat. I shook my head, trying to convince myself I'd misheard him.

"The girls are only a portion of our work. Believe it or not, people love watching others be terrorized."

He gestured to the mask he wore.

"These? They're usually streaming. Our clients get their kicks watching people lose their minds. Fear, chaos, death—it's a profitable business."

"We skipped the streaming for your benefit this evening, though. What happens between us is personal," Lucian reassured me. We care about you."

His tone was disturbingly sincere. "We won't let anything hurt you. That's the whole point of this."

He said it like they were doing me a favor, and this was all some deranged act of love.

"All this," Thorne gestured around the room, to the scene of chaos and terror they had orchestrated, "it's for you. To protect what's his and in retrospect, ours."

I sat there, my mind racing in frantic loops. Every piece of this nightmare felt impossibly heavy, each revelation landing like a fresh blow.

My fingers twitched against the twin biting into my wrists. I fought to remain calm. I couldn't look at Cherish for too long. I knew her eyes would be full of fire and terror, and they'd catch that. I feared they'd notice and weaponize it. They were too calm, composed, and controlled, the way predators always were when they knew they were at the top of the food chain.

Their sense of brotherhood was as twisted and deranged as they were. They acted like they were trying to include me as if I somehow belonged to them and they truly had my best interests in mind. I chanced a glance across the room and nearly growled like a damn animal. Ryan kept glancing at me, his eyes darting from the men to me and back again.

I wanted to scream at him to quit being so damn obvious, for fucks sake. He was trying to read me. It was only making things worse.

Atlas' masked face shifted my way the slightest bit, the motion of someone who noticed far too much.

My pulse spiked, and I dropped my gaze to the floor, feigning interest in the wood beneath my feet.

"Interesting," he rasped.

Wilder finally stepped forward, his towering frame blocking out the rest of the room as he crouched in front of me. His gloved hand tilted my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze—or at least the cold, unfeeling gaze of his mask. The polished black surface reflected nothing back at me, as blank and unreadable as the man behind it.

He tugged the gag free, his voice almost gentle as he asked, "Any questions?"

I opened my mouth, but no words came. I snapped it shut again, swallowing back every plea, every sob, and every bitter burst of rage. They wouldn't care.

These monsters weren't moved by emotion. If I wanted to survive and get my sister out of this, I had to play it smart. Everything else, the others, even my sanity could wait.

“You have my dog?” It was the first thought that pierced through the mess in my head.

Someone laughed.

“I have our dog. He’s coming home with us.” He paused, letting his words sink in before asking, “You want to go home, don’t you?”

I swallowed hard, my mind spinning. Was this a trick question? There was no way to tell, not with his mask concealing his every expression. He chuckled softly, able to read me without issue. “It’s a yes or no, Mint.”

I nodded once, forcing the words out. “I want to go home.”

As soon as I said it, I swear I felt him grin behind that mask.

His gloved fingers brushed my jaw tenderly.

“Good,” he murmured. “Let’s wrap this up then.”

Wilder straightened, his towering form casting an even darker shadow as he stepped back. He turned his head slightly, his tone shifting to one of calm “KJ.”

KJ. The name from their group chat? Why had I not tied that together until right then? She stepped forward, her mask eerily doll-like, her movements unnervingly graceful as if she were enjoying every second of this. She made her way to Liza, who was still tied to a chair, her face streaked with tears.

“No!” I yelled, my voice breaking as I saw what she was about to do. “No—don’t.”

KJ grabbed a fistful of Liza's hair, yanking her head back with a vicious jerk. The chair rocked with the force of it.

Liza's broken plea ended in a choked gurgle, KJ's blade slashing a clean line across her throat.

Blood sprayed in rivulets, streaking across the mahogany table. Liza's body jerked once, twice, before going limp and her head lolled forward. Muffled screams came from the others, their cries stifled by their gags. My mind screamed at me to do something, anything, unable to even process what I'd just witnessed.

Wilder's voice broke through to me low and steady. "Lesson one, Mint, no one disrespects you and gets away with it. Not even your friends."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I watched her closely, studying every flicker of emotion that crossed her face. The defiance was still there, simmering beneath the surface, tempered now by fear and temporary grief.

Across the room, Thorne circled Naija like a predator. He gripped her face and forced her to look at him. She squirmed in the chair, but his hold didn't waver. Jason stirred, groaning as he began to wake. He was saying something, not realizing we couldn't understand.

Lucian tugged his gag down. "Start again."

His voice was weak, cracked with fear, but he managed to croak, "Why? Why are you doing this to us?"

KJ giggled. "Because it's fun."

There was no other explanation needed.

This was about control, about power, and about the simple fact that they'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He wasn't supposed to be on this trip.

Naija whimpered, and I turned my attention back to her. Thorne's grip tightened, his fingers digging into her broken jaw until she whimpered. "You're not going to beg?" he asked, his voice dripping with mock curiosity. "No desperate pleas for your life? No promises to do whatever we want?"

She spit at him. It was a weak attempt, but her intent was clear. Thorne laughed as he wiped the small blob from his mask. "Good answer. That makes this all the easier." He pulled his knife free and plunged it into the center of her chest.

Her gasp was sharp, her body locking up as he twisted the blade, shoving it deeper until something cracked, her body convulsing and then going still. A small sob came from Cherish. Jason groaned again; his eyes now clearer, wide with horror as he took in Naija's lifeless body.

"Fuck, you-you didn't have to do that to her." he stammered, his voice rising in pitch. He struggled against his restraint, his movements frantic but useless. He had to know it would be his turn soon. "Please... please, man. You don't have to do this."

"I want to do this," I replied fluidly.

His head rolled back, and he laughed dryly. "Youfuckingpussy. At least make it a fair fight."

What a change-up. "Fairness only benefits you. And in case that blow to the head

scrambled your brain, it was a fair fight. You lost to a fire poker.”

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“Let’s even things out a bit more,” Lucian suggested. He fisted Jason’s hair, yanking it back much like KJ had done to Liza. His knife flashed, the motion quick and clean, as he slit his throat. More blood sprayed, joining the small puddle accumulating on the table, soaking the front of his shirt as his body slumped forward.

Daniella wailed incoherently in the corner and Romeo murmured something to her about Jason’s dick not being that big to weep over. I kept my eyes on Autumn, her gagged sobs muffled but audible. Her eyes locked onto Jason’s body, then flicked to me, filled with rage and despair. I didn’t need to say anything; I just held her gaze.

I raised my hand and made a come-hither motion. Romeo stepped forward, dragging Daniella by the arm. She fought him, twisting and kicking, but he was stronger. He forced her down onto the bloody table, pinning her there with one hand as she thrashed beneath him.

Autumn’s scream was muffled. She struggled against her restraints, her panic palpable. My gloved hand cupped her face, forcing her to look at me as her muffled cries filled the room. “It’s almost over.”

Romeo adjusted his grip on Daniella, his knife gleaming as he leaned over her.

Autumn’s skin was flushed with rage, all of her gagged screams raw. I couldn’t have her break yet. Not until she understood. I’d piece her together later, make her exactly the same knowing she was a permanent fixture in our lives.

Hunter moved forward, grabbing one of Daniella’s arms. Atlas sighed dramatically, like this was all an inconvenience to him, and tossed Amber’s head aside. He grabbed

Daniella's other arm, pulling her forward until her midsection bent over the table, her body splayed helplessly. Her muffled cries barely made it past Romeo's laugh.

He clapped his gloved hands together, rubbing them like he was about to start a game. "Now, Daniella, let me explain something. I can't go all the way with this. No offense, but you're just not my type and you fucked another man less than twenty-four hours ago. I've also taken a vow of celibacy."

Thorne barked out a laugh. "A vow of celibacy? Give me a break."

Lucian tilted his head, his cold amusement slipping through his mask. "You, of all people, took a vow of celibacy?"

Romeo shrugged. "What? Like you haven't? I did it for my future Juliet. And don't throw me off track." He leaned closer to Daniella, his voice dropping to a darker pitch. "I can still make your dreams come true. Don't worry. When I'm done, you'll have trouble moving your legs, just like you wanted."

She went still, probably wondering how he knew about that. It was thanks to the device on Cherish's car. The same one on hers and Mint's. I had the foresight to make sure each of them was covered in case Mint was with them.

Romeo reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a sleek switchblade, its edge gleaming in the dim light. He flicked it open with an exaggerated motion.

Autumn thrashed, nearly tipping her chair, her muffled screams now filled with pure, unfiltered rage. She still didn't get it yet. This was a necessary path to be paved for our future.

I reached out and stroked her face, unable to stop myself from touching her any chance I could. "We're almost done," I promised, my voice low enough that only she

could hear. “You’ll see soon that this is for the best. I give you my word.”

Her wide, tear-filled eyes met mine. She didn’t believe me—how could she? We hadn’t gotten to the main event yet and we couldn’t sit down and have our heart-to-heart until we got back home.

Romeo dragged the blade lightly over Daniella’s exposed arm, letting the cold steel make her flinch. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

He sliced through Daniella’s bra. With another quick motion, her underwear followed, leaving her completely vulnerable and naked.

She fought every step of the way, her body twisting in vain against Hunter and Atlas’s unrelenting grips. Her cries turned frantic, but they weren’t going to help her. She was powerless, and everyone in the room knew it.

Atlas ran a gloved hand through her hair, his tone almost thoughtful. “It’s softer than Hughes’s,” he mused.

Hunter chuckled. “Amber’s was extensions.”

“Ah,” Atlas said, nodding as if that explained everything. “No wonder half of it came out so easily.”

Romeo didn’t even glance at them. He was focused, toying with the blade as if weighing its next purpose. With an almost playful toss, he let it spin in the air before catching it effortlessly. Then, without a word, he slid the blade straight into her pussy, almost gently at first, using it in place of himself.

Daniella screamed in agony, her body jerking violently, but it only earned a firmer grip from Hunter and Atlas.

Romeo placed a hand on her lower back to keep her still as he thrust the blade in and out, watching her reaction with a predatory calm, like an artist admiring his latest creation.

Cherish had a front-row seat to whatever damage the blade was doing. She gagged loudly, her face puffy and slick with tears. Lucian patted the top of her head in a rare show of comfort. Ryan joined in with the pointless outrage and grief. Tears streamed down his face too, a pitiful sight. He thrashed against his bindings, and I knew his broken bones had to be slighting.

“Shut him up,” Lucian said, his voice as cool and unaffected as ever.

Thorne stepped forward, delivering a swift punch to Ryan’s head. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and his cries turned into a strangled gasp.

He sagged in his chair, coughing and wheezing. Romeo looked over his shoulder, his masked face aimed in Ryan’s direction. “You should be thanking us,” he said casually, turning back to Daniella as though this were just another day. “We’re doing her a favor. She wouldn’t have lasted a second in our world.”

He increased his thrusting, blood spurting from between Daniella’s legs, her body still aside from the involuntary spasms. I watched Autumn closely. Her breathing was erratic, her chest rising and falling in quick bursts. She was barely holding it together. I was eager to get her ass out of that place and to our home.

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Romeo, now satisfied with his work, withdrew the blade and used her hair to clean it off, cutting some of the dark strands. “Welp,” he said, his voice almost chipper. “That was cathartic. What’s next?”

Autumn’s rage-filled scream responded. I stepped closer to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Patience.”

Hunter and Atlas let go of Daniella, and she shoved herself up. Her chest and stomach were covered in the blood of her friends, and a steady trickle came from between her thighs. She forcibly turned her upper half toward Romeo. “You sick, twisted fuck!” She seethed with every ounce of venom she could muster. “You’re nothing but a little bitch hiding behind a mask!”

Thorne laughed. “Why do they act like this? It never fails, there’s literally always one.”

Romeo sighed, dramatic as ever. “That wasn’t nice,” he said, his tone light, almost scolding. “Is that how you say thank you to the last fuck of your life?”

I didn’t miss the way his grip on the knife tightened. He reached out and grabbed her chin roughly, forcing her to look up at him. “Let me help you with that filthy mouth before you go.” He dragged the edge of the blade across her mouth, splitting open the corners on either side of her lips.

Blood dripped down her chin, painting her face in crimson streaks. When he was done, he roughly shoved her off the table. She hit the floor like a newborn calf.

“What a selfish whore,” he muttered, wiping the blade on his glove before tucking it back into his jacket.

Cherish was trembling so hard I thought she might pass out. Her tear-streaked face was twisted in horror. She was a fighter, sure, but right now, she was a rabbit caught in a trap.

“We should get the bodies into the living room,” Hunter suggested.

I nodded once in agreement.

We always laid the dead side by side. It left more of an impact when they were discovered. Dragging the bodies was a silent, methodical process, each of us moving with precision. We ignored Daniella as she crawled across the floor, leaving streaks of blood in her wake.

KJ tracked her movements, her head tilting in that unnerving way of hers, mimicking Daniella’s motions. It was almost playful, the way she crept after her on all fours, never letting her get more than a few feet away.

We were all used to her antics. She’d been a kept pet of sorts for some CEO from the time she was eight. After he was disposed of, she was discovered in a cage. Our parents saw potential and placed her in our care. She’d been the equivalent of our baby sister ever since.

Once the bodies were arranged side by side in the living room, we returned to the dining room. The air was thick with the stench of fear and blood. I crouched in front of Autumn, her wide, tear-glossed eyes locking onto mine. My gloved hand brushed her cheek as I murmured,

“It’s time.” I was elated she didn’t flinch when I reached out and gently pulled her

from the chair, steadying her on her feet. She was doing pretty damn well for not having any prior experience.

Lucian was already behind Cherish, his hands firm but not rough as he hauled her up, ignoring her weak struggles. That left Thorne to grab Ryan by his good arm, dragging him upright with little effort.

We led them through the house in silence. When we stepped outside into the crisp night air, the backyard stretched out before us, a blanket of darkness framed by the woods beyond. The chill bit at the exposed skin of my neck, but I hardly noticed.

Lucian stepped forward, his voice smooth and calm as he addressed them. “Out there,” he gestured toward the woods, “there’s a farm. If one of you makes it inside and gets help, we’ll let you go.”

I watched Autumn’s face as she processed his words, her eyes narrowing with distrust. She didn’t buy it, and I didn’t expect her to. Her mind was working, searching for the trap, the twist in our words.

Lucian looked at her and tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable behind his mask. “I give you our word,” he said simply. “We’ll even give Moose back.”

Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t attempt to respond. She was too smart to believe him outright, but the mention of Moose had her focus shifting. I was almost jealous. I stepped closer, my fingers threading gently through her hair. Her shoulders stiffened at the touch. “Here’s the catch. You keep your wrists bound and the gag in.”

Her gaze burned into mine, her anger simmering beneath the surface.

“I’ll give you a five-minute head start,” I continued. “Then we’ll come after you.”

Her breath hitched as I leaned closer, my mask inches from her face. “Now run.”

Lucian gave Cherish a nudge, his gloved hand motioning toward the woods.

Thorne shoved Ryan forward, the movement harsh and unrelenting.

Autumn hesitated for a fraction of a second, her eyes flicking to her sister, then to me. And then, with a quick glance toward the darkness ahead, she ran.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I couldn't feel my fingers anymore, the twine cutting into my skin. My breath rasped against the gag in my mouth, hot and suffocating, making my lungs burn with every stride. The darkness was impenetrable, the moonlight barely enough to cast shadows on the uneven ground.

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I couldn't see shit. My legs ached, stumbling over roots and rocks, but the adrenaline kept me moving. Cherish was just ahead, her silhouette a blur in the dim light. Her bound arms swayed awkwardly as she fought to keep her balance, the gag in her mouth muffling her breathy cries.

Ryan was just behind me, his heavy footsteps crunching through the underbrush, a constant reminder that we were still alive, still moving.

The cold bit into my skin through the thin layers of my clothing, but I refused to acknowledge it. I had to focus.

The fear coursing through me numbed everything else, sharpening my senses to the sound of our footfalls and the rustling of branches around us. I fought back tears, swallowing hard to keep them from spilling over and blurring my vision further. If I couldn't see, I couldn't run, and if I couldn't run...

No. Don't think like that.

The woods felt endless, the trees like looming sentinels watching our every move. I glanced at Cherish again, my chest tightening at the sight of her stumbling. She caught herself before falling, her bound hands twitching as though they were desperate to reach out for something to steady herself.

Ryan's muffled grunt of effort from behind me pulled my attention back.

He was keeping up, but I could hear the strain in his breath, the exhaustion creeping into his steps. His limbs weren't right. Shifted at odd angles and tied behind his back.

That had to fucking hurt.

The gag pressed against my tongue, the rough material chafing the corners of my mouth. I wanted to scream, to yell, to curse Wilder's name into the night, but the sound was locked inside me, trapped like everything else. My mind raced, desperate for a plan, an escape, but nothing made sense. Nothing about this made any fucking sense. They did shit like this simply because they could? It was sickening.

A branch snapped somewhere off to the right. My heart leaped into my throat as I whipped my head toward the sound, my breath catching. My pace faltered for just a second, my foot catching on a root. I stumbled, barely managing to catch myself before I went down. Cherish turned her head slightly, her muffled voice reaching me in panicked tones.

I managed to get my legs back under me and kept moving, but the sound stuck with me, echoing in my head.

Were they already coming?

I ran forward, nearly colliding with Cherish's back. I couldn't tell if it was the adrenaline or sheer terror fueling me now, but I clung to it like a lifeline.

The forest was alive with the sound of our frantic footsteps and snapping branches, each noise a reminder that we were prey. My heart pounded in my chest, every beat a desperate plea to keep going, keep moving, keep surviving. Cherish tripped, her shoulder slamming into mine and sending me off the faint path we'd been following.

I stumbled sideways and barely caught myself. I caught a glimpse of KJ skipping behind us and immediately regretted looking back.

"Run!" I tried to shout through the gag, but the sound was muffled and useless.

I shoved my sister forward with my shoulder, hoping she'd take the hint. If we both couldn't make it, one of us needed to. She hesitated for only a second before darting ahead, her bound hands making her movements awkward but determined.

I didn't stop to check which way she went. I couldn't, veering further off the path, the dense underbrush grabbed at me like it wanted to keep me there. Branches snagged on my clothes, tearing my sweatpants, and scratching my skin.

I pitched forward, landing hard on my stomach. The impact knocked the air from my lungs, and I coughed, dirt and leaves sticking to my face as I tried to catch my breath.

The gag in my mouth felt like a suffocating weight, and I dragged my face against the rough forest floor, forcing it free with sheer desperation. As soon as it was off, I gulped in fresh air and pushed myself up, ignoring the pain that shot through my wrists.

I could feel thin trails of blood from where the flesh had split, some of it dripping down onto my hands.

I started running again. My legs burned as I forced myself into a sprint, dodging trees and stumbling over roots. I realized too late that whoever was behind me easily could have caught me already. They had stopped when I fell, treating this like a game of cat and mouse.

They didn't seem to be struggling like I was to see two feet in front of them. A pained shout echoed through the trees from further back, and my stomach dropped. That had to have been Ryan. I zigzagged, crying out as my shoulder bounced off a tree. The ground abruptly dipped, and I pitched forward.

Before I could go sailing down into darkness and whatever else awaited me at the bottom of what I assumed was a hill, A strong arm wrapped around my middle,

yanking me off my feet and dragging me backward.

I screamed, thrashing wildly, tripping up whoever had me.

We went down together. The ground came up fast, but my fall was cushioned—by them.

No. Not them.

Wilder.

The scent of his cologne, the solid build of his body pressing against me, was unmistakable. My stomach twisted as dread and fury clashed, boiling into something dark and uncontrollable.

"I've been dreaming of this day all week," Wilder confessed, his voice low and unbothered, as if we weren't sprawled in the dirt of the forest. He wasn't winded in the slightest, his strength an inescapable cage.

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“Get the fuck off me, Wilder!” I growled, my voice breaking with rage as I lurched forward. His weight bore down on me, pinning me like prey under a predator’s claws.

Something hard pressed into my back, and my heart plummeted, dread coiling in my stomach like a living thing.

“No, not again,” I choked out, putting all I had into getting away. It felt fucking pointless without the use of my hands. The twine around my wrists dug deeper into my skin, sharp bursts of pain shooting up my arms. I didn’t care. I Escape was all I could think about.

“You can fight all you want, Mint. It’s just going to make me want you more.”

I screamed obscenities at him. The ground was cold and unyielding, just like him, and every inch of me burned with the knowledge that there was no getting out of this. His strength, his control, was absolute. He was suffocating me with the wool I’d had pulled over my eyes.

“Wilder, please!” I breathed raggedly, the words ripping from my throat. It wasn’t even a plea for mercy, it was desperation, confusion, and a fear I couldn’t suppress.

“You don’t have to beg,” he replied, his tone laced with something far too close to sensuality.

He yanked my pants down for the second time that night. He maneuvered my body easily, spreading my legs apart until I felt the burn in my thighs.

“Wilder—” I tried to protest, but anything I wanted to say was lost as he slammed inside me. The sheer force of it sent me sprawling forward. With no way to catch myself, I braced, expecting to hit the ground. He caught me at the last second, his hands gripping my waist to keep me steady, to ensure I took everything he gave.

His breathing was steady while mine came in broken gasps. The pain gave way to a mix of pleasure and humiliation. My body screamed at me to stop fighting, to surrender to the inevitability of him, but I couldn’t convince my mind to do the same.

“You feel so fucking good,” he growled. “You were made for me.”

The way I clenched around him, the heat pooling low in my stomach, and the traitorous shiver that ran through me as his gloved fingers dug into my hips, had to be a reaction from muscle memory. I couldn’t deny what he coaxed from my body even as I hated him for it.

“You’re mine, Mint,” he hissed, his voice like velvet laced with poison. “You’ve always been mine. I won’t ever let you forget that.”

His words felt like a noose tightening around my throat, pulling me deeper into the suffocating darkness that was him. Tears burned in my eyes, spilling down my cheeks as his pace grew harder, the rhythmic sound of our bodies carrying through the treetops.

I hated him.

I hated that I loved him.

I came shuddering around his dick. I could feel my cum and juices all over him and dripping down my legs.

“Good girl,” he rasped, his voice thick with satisfaction. “I fucking love you.”

He didn’t stop.

He didn’t slow.

He pounded into me, fucking me through every jagged edge of my release until I was quivering beneath him and cumming again, pleasure making my toes curl. Even in his brutality, he cushioned me, one arm holding me up so I wasn’t slamming face-first into the ground. It was infuriating, the way he could do something so violent and still make it feel like care.

“Stop, please,” I groaned, my voice breaking.

“You don’t want me to stop. You never do.”

I clenched my teeth, trying to block out the familiar sensation building inside me yet again, trying to think of anything else.

It didn’t matter. He knew my body too well. He suddenly shifted, his hands firm on my hips as he flipped me onto my back. I tried to twist away, but his weight bore down on me again, pressing me into the dirt.

His knees forced mine apart, and his gloved hands gripped my thighs, holding me in place as he pushed back inside me. His masked face loomed above me, blocking out the world, his dominance suffocating and inescapable. “You’re beautiful, like this too.”

All I could do was glare at him. My body ached, trembling beneath his relentless attention, my wrists still bound tight with twine, dug into my skin with every feeble movement.

“Don’t fight it, Mint. You can’t win. “Give me what’s mine.”

I shook my head weakly. “No,” I choked out, as the pressure built, coiling tight in my stomach, my muscles trembling with the inevitability of what he was dragging out of me.

“I feel it. You’re so close.”

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“No,” I denied, but it was futile. Pleasure hit me in uncontrollable waves.

My vision blurred, and I gasped, tears streaking down my face as I came again,

“That’s my girl,” he rasped, his voice thick with satisfaction, his thrusts punishing as he chased his own release. When he finally pulled out, I thought it was over, but then his hands gripped my shoulders, lifting me into a sitting position.

Before I could process what was happening, fingers dug into my jaw, prying my mouth open. More gloved fingers gripped my hair. “Don’t make me tell you twice.”

His voice was calm but laced with a warning I wasn’t going to test.

I opened wider and waited.

“No teeth. You’re beautiful just the way you are, but you’d look just as pretty without them.”

The twine bit into my skin again as I shifted closer to him. His hand guided me, leaving no room for defiance. He slid his slick dick into my mouth, the size of him stealing the air from my lungs as he hit the back of my throat. I could taste us on him, pre-cum, and my juices.

I gagged and he pulled out, easing himself back in. “Relax, we both know you can take this.”

I glared up at him, hoping he could see some of what I was feeling. He chuckled and

tightened his grip on my hair. “You can’t look intimidating with my dick halfway down your throat.” He pushed all the way in to emphasize his point. “You do look gorgeous as ever, though.”

He began thrusting in and out, setting a steady tempo. “That’s it,” he encouraged, his tone softer now.

He groaned and started to fuck my mouth like he had me., unrelenting, only slowing when I choked and needed a moment to catch my breath. My throat burned, my jaw ached, and my humiliation deepened with every second as saliva dripped down my chin. He didn’t let up. His control was absolute, his hand gripping the back of my head, keeping me exactly where he wanted. I had no warning before he stilled and nut shot across my tongue, coating it entirely.

“Swallow,” he commanded, his voice low and firm. When I hesitated, he pulled out and cupped my mouth. I tried to turn my head but that only caused his grip to tighten. I forced myself to swallow, the act hollowing me out in ways I didn’t think were possible. My body trembled, every muscle in me screaming for this to end.

“That’s my good girl,” he murmured, his thumb stroking my jaw as he finally released his hold on my hair.

He leaned back slightly, his gloved hand sliding under my chin to tilt my face up toward him. “You’ll remember this,” he said, his voice low and possessive. “You’ll remember who you belong to and never fucking forget it.”

I didn’t respond. My thoughts were a chaotic mess, torn between anger, humiliation, and something darker I didn’t want to name. Despite the disgust and rage twisting in my gut, there was a sickening part of me that acknowledged his words.

“So perfect,” he murmured again, branding the word into my soul. When he finally

let go and pulled back, the world seemed to tilt, leaving me dizzy and unmoored.

I slumped forward, my bound wrists awkward and useless. He caught me before I could fall, his hands steady and sure.

His touch felt like a prison, a cage I would never escape. A gloved hand stroked my hair, fingers gently picking out the leaves and dirt that clung to it.

His touch was infuriatingly gentle, as though I was something fragile, he was determined not to break. The tender care was a cruel juxtaposition to what had just happened, making me feel even smaller. He didn't force me to look at him, though his hand lingered on my cheek for a moment longer before sliding down.

"I'm gonna get you up now." His arms slid beneath me, and he moved slowly, lifting me to my feet as though I was made of glass. My legs wobbled, and he steadied me, his hands unyielding on my waist. "Let's go. The others are waiting."

He guided me forward gripping my arm. Every step felt like a march to my own damnation.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He took me back to the house with disturbing ease, like this was the most natural thing in the world and he knew the path by heart. The gag hung loosely around my neck, sticky with sweat and dirt.

I could feel the grime clinging to me—dirt and leaves stuck to my clothing and my skin. Between my legs, the soreness and feel of his cum was a relentless reminder of everything I wanted to forget and could possibly face. When my teeth began to chatter, Wilder tightened his grip on my arm and picked up our pace.

“You’ll be warm soon.”

He led me through the enclosed porch entrance, the sound of muffled laughter and music seeping through the walls. My steps faltered as we moved deeper into the house, but instead of heading for the dining room, he steered me toward the stairs.

My lips parted in shock as I took in the destruction. The hallway looked like a war zone. Walls had holes in them, furniture overturned, and shards of glass glinting in the dim light. I stepped on something soft that snagged against my foot. I glanced down, and my stomach turned violently when I saw what it was.

Naija’s locs.

Torn out at the root, clumped together in a sickening heap.

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“I’m going to throw up,” I whispered, barely getting the words out before my knees buckled.

Wilder moved fast, hauling me into the nearest bathroom and holding me over the toilet. He kept my hair out of the way as my stomach emptied itself, my sobs choking me between heaves.

When I was done, I slumped forward, unable to find the strength to do anything else.

“Easy, baby,” he murmured, pulling me back gently. He set me on the cold tile floor, his movements careful.

The music was still playing downstairs, some classic tune that didn’t match the horror that clung to every corner of this house. Laughter echoed faintly beneath it, a cruel reminder that while I was breaking apart, they were enjoying themselves.

The bathroom door clicked shut, and I looked up to find Wilder crouched in front of me. Slowly, he reached up and lifted his mask. Seeing his face, fully and clearly, made everything worse. There he was—the man I loved, the man I thought I knew, staring back at me like nothing had changed.

“How could you do this to me?” My voice broke, and fresh tears spilled over my cheeks. “How could you?”

His expression softened, but his words were anything but gentle. “I’m doing this for you. For us.”

I shook my head, disbelief and fury battling for dominance. “You killed all of my friends.”

“Those weren’t your friends, baby girl. Liza was a fake two-faced cunt, Naija was okay but weak. Daniella’s a whore, and you don’t need friends like that. Gabe and Jason were no one to you. Ryan’s not a factor.”

“And my sister?” My voice trembled, barely audible.

Wilder’s gaze didn’t falter, and that was somehow worse. His hazel eyes bore into mine, unwavering, disturbingly sincere. “You’ll always have a sister,” he said, his tone quiet but firm, as if it were a fact written in stone. “I know how much that matters to you.”

My chest tightened, my breath catching in my throat as his words sank in. What does that even mean?

My mind raced, trying to decipher his cryptic assurance, but all I found was a gaping void where logic should have been.

“As for the rest...” His supple lips curved slightly, not quite a smile but something darker. “I’m your friend, Mint. Your best fucking friend. I’m all you need.”

I stared at him, trying to reconcile the man I had fallen for with the man standing before me now. “You’re insane,” I whispered.

His head tilted, and for a moment, I thought he might actually smile. Instead, he just nodded slightly, as though agreeing with me. “I am,” he admitted, his voice soft but laced with unshakable certainty. “I’m insane about you, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep us together.”

He truly believes this. The realization sent a chill down my spine. It wasn't just some sick game to him, this was his reality, and he was dragging me into it, piece by horrifying piece.

"So what next, Wilder?" My voice was quieter now, resigned as if my own mind had already given up the fight.

"Well," he began, his tone casual. "First, we're going to get you cleaned up. After that, you're going to make a choice, and that will determine what happens from there." He paused, and that shadow of a smile flickered again. "I was thinking ice cream and corndogs later. We haven't done that in a while."

I blinked, completely at a loss for how to process the words that had just come out of his mouth. My thoughts were a chaotic swirl of anger, fear, and confusion. How could he act like this was just another day for us?

And yet, a small, traitorous part of me that still clung to the way he'd always made me feel safe and loved—wanted to pretend, just for a moment, that we could go back to that, to before. But there was no going back. Not after everything he'd done.

I swallowed hard. "And if I don't make a choice?"

He smiled this time. "Then I'll make it for you."

He straightened and moved toward the shower.

The sound of the water rushing to life filled the room as steam began to curl around us. I stared at him, trying to read the subtle movements of his body, searching for anything human, anything familiar.

"Is Daniella alive at least?" I dared to ask.

We'd fucking left her with these animals when they told us to run.

He paused, then turned to face me. "No."

"This is all my fault," I repeated the words Liza had hurled at me.

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They carried the weight of everything I'd been trying to hold back. I shook my head, my whole body trembling. The image of Daniella, naked, bloody, and broken, crawling across the floor, wouldn't leave me.

This was all my fault.

I'd brought these psychopaths right to them.

"Mint," Wilder's voice was low, almost soothing.

I shook my head again, harder this time. "This is all my fault," I repeated, my voice cracking under the weight of my guilt. "If I hadn't—if I hadn't been here—" My words caught, a sob choking the rest of the sentence out of me.

He moved before I even realized it, crouching in front of me. His gloved hands settled on my knees. "This isn't your fault, baby."

"It is," I snapped, my voice rising despite the tears choking me. "If I hadn't come on this stupid trip—"

He cut me off, his hands moving to pull mine away from my face. "Look at me," he demanded.

When I didn't, he gripped my chin and forced my eyes to meet his.

"None of this is your fault. Those people made their choices, and this is the result."

“Whatchoices?” I shot back. “They didn’t choose this, Wilder. Daniella didn’t choose to die crawling on the floor!”

“You’re looking at this wrong. You couldn’t have saved them. You couldn’t have stopped this. If we didn’t do this here, it would have happened at your house. The only difference would be the body count.”

He wrapped his around me and lifted me effortlessly from the floor. My body trembled against his chest, and I hated how his warmth felt steady, grounding, like a cruel contradiction to the chill seeping through my soul. His movements were methodical as he set me down on the edge of the tub and knelt in front of me.

He removed my shoes first, then his hands moved to my ruined pants. I flinched, but he was gentle, peeling them away before reaching for a knife I hadn’t even seen him retrieve.

With swift precision, he cut through the fabric of my sweatshirt, leaving me exposed entirely. His touch never wavered, it wasn’t rushed or cruel.

“You don’t have to do this too.”

His response was quiet but firm. “I do. I will always take care of you.”

He eased me into the tub, the hot water shocking against my skin but washing away the filth that clung to me. My body stiffened as he adjusted my position, leaning back slightly before grabbing a washcloth. He started with my hair, his fingers working shampoo through it with a care that made me want to scream. This shouldn’t have felt so normal, so intimate.

Then he moved to my body, the cloth brushing against my skin in slow, deliberate strokes. When he reached my wrists, he retrieved the knife again, carefully slicing

through the twine.

My skin was raw, the lacerations angry and red, but he didn't flinch as he gently cleaned them, his hands steady as ever. How could I fight this? My sister was alive—for now. But for how long? That was the question I couldn't stop turning over in my mind.

I knew, without having to ask, she hadn't made it to that farm. If it even existed.

"There was never really a farm, was there?"

His fingers paused for a fraction of a second before resuming their methodical care. "Of course, there is. It belongs to the man who owned this house. He, his wife, and their daughter, Melody. She's the same age as you."

A chill ran down my spine, his words settling over me like a dark fog. "Owned?"

He didn't look up, his focus remaining on my wrists as he dabbed at the tender skin. "Owned," he confirmed.

"And they're just... gone?"

"Two of three." His hand moved to tilt my chin up, forcing me to look at him. "Before you can start, that had nothing to do with you."

I wasn't going to think about that right then. "And Cherish. Where is my sister?"

"She's downstairs." His tone was maddeningly matter-of-fact.

"Unharmful. Despite what you're thinking right now, we're not all-around terrible. Lucian meant it when he said they care about you."

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I wanted to tell him he was full of shit, but I'd seen the looks they exchanged behind their masks, the way they acted as if this nightmarish chaos was somehow normal and justified. They believed what they were saying.

I shut my eyes and forced myself to breathe calmly. My mind was at war with itself—one side begging me to give in, to just stop fighting and accept the inevitable, while the other, the voice that had carried me through every struggle in my life, screamed at me to hold on.

But what was the point when there was no clear way out? Wilder dried me off with the same meticulous care he always showed. The towel moved over my skin in slow strokes, and though his mask was back in place, I could feel the weight of his gaze, the unnerving focus of a man who thought he owned me.

When he finished, he grabbed the clothes he had already picked out from me—my clothes. A sweatshirt, leggings, and even my favorite fluffy socks. He dressed me like I was a doll, his hands careful yet unrelenting, stripping away any autonomy I had left. His touch was efficient and intimate in the worst way. Every moment of it reminded me of how powerless I was.

He retrieved a small tube of cream and gauze from beneath the sink and then knelt in front of me. "This will help," he assured as he smoothed it over the raw lacerations on my wrists.

The coolness of the cream burned at first, but his movements were maddeningly gentle. Once he'd bandaged my wrists, he grabbed a comb and began working it through my damp hair.

“How did you even know to find us here?”

“I’ve had your house bugged for months,” he readily confessed. “I knew about this trip the moment Daniella booked it.”

A hollow laugh escaped me. I wasn’t even shocked. How could I be, after everything?

“The only thing I didn’t account for,” he continued, his tone darkening slightly, “was the men.” He set the comb down. “You let him put his lips on you, Mint.”

“It wasn’t, that didn’t mean anything,” I started, but he cut me off.

“Why did you let him do it?”

“I didn’t—he just—”

“You let him.” His voice was low, lethal, and unrelenting. Leather-clad fingers trailed down my cheek, almost tender.

My mind zoomed back to what started all of this in the first place. “You have no right when this all began because of the way you talk to other women.”

“How can you circle back to that when this night is to prove the exact opposite?”

He took hold of my face and made me hold his masked gaze. “I’ve never cheated on you. These women you’re so fixated on?” His tone was icy now, but there was an unmistakable edge of disdain. “They were begging for me, Mint. Begging for something they thought they were getting. My brothers fucked them all at least twice before they killed them. They had no idea who was behind the mask. That’s the thrill of it.”

I didn't think this was making it better.

"They never knew my real name," he went on, his voice softening but losing none of its intensity. "They never heard the sound of my voice, never touched my body. They didn't know how I feel." He leaned even closer, his mask mere inches from my face. "I'm all yours. No one else gets any parts of me. No one else deserves it."

His words were impossible to ignore, the conviction in his tone chilling.

There was no hesitation, no doubt—just raw, unfiltered obsession and the sick, treacherous part of me that loved him no matter how horrific he was.

"You don't understand yet," he continued, his voice dipping lower, dangerously intimate. "I wake up every morning, and my first thought is of you. I go to sleep every night wondering how I got so fucking lucky to live in your world." He gently stroked the side of my face. "I want nothing more than to spoil you, to give you every dream you've ever had."

"Stop it." I tried to pull away, but he held me tighter.

"You've always wanted to travel the country, haven't you? We'll do that. I'll take you to every state, and every city you've ever dreamed of seeing. And that farm you've always talked about? I'm going to make sure you get that. We'll build a life there. A perfect life.."

Tears burned in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I was so fucking tired of crying.

"And babies," he added. "You'll have all my babies. I know how much you want a family of your own. Now that all the cards are on the table, we can continue building our future. Nothing's holding us back anymore."

His words wrapped around me like chains.

“I’m going to marry you,” he continued, “You’re going to be my Mrs. Carson.” His hand still cradled my face, his thumb brushing against my cheek. “If you take nothing else away from this, let it be that you are it for me,” he swore.

“And if I want none of that?” I dared to ask.

“Then you’ll have to tell me what you do want with the understanding whatever it may be, I’m going to be there.” His gaze, even hidden behind a mask, felt like it was burning through me.

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“I will do every morally bankrupt, vile, terrible thing to keep you,” he promised, his voice unwavering. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t sacrifice to make sure you’re mine, to make sure you’re safe, and to make sure you never leave me again.”

Each word was a confession, a vow, and a threat all wrapped in one. I couldn’t look away, couldn’t move as my mind screamed for me to run. Run where? I just tried that and got nowhere but fucked in the dirt.

“Now we’re going to walk out of here, and you’re going to choose how this ends.” He let go of my face and took my hand, his grip firm but not forceful, and led me out of the bathroom.

My legs felt like jelly as I descended the stairs, each step a monumental effort. The house felt heavier somehow, the air thick and oppressive like it knew something I didn’t. When we reached the dining room, my stomach lurched. The space had been rearranged.

The table was on its side, shoved carelessly against the far wall. In its place sat two chairs facing one another, bound and gagged occupants in each. Cherish and Ryan. Their knees nearly touched, their faces streaked with dried tears.

The others were all there, scattered throughout the room. Atlas leaned against the wall; arms crossed. Romeo was in the corner, his mask lifted enough for him to eat. He was spearing pieces of leftover chicken with the same knife he’d used on Daniella, chewing casually as though none of this were out of the ordinary.

KJ stood near the edge of the room, her posture relaxed, though her presence radiated

an eerie sort of tension. Thorne looked between me and the scene before him, as if he were assessing every thought I might have. Lucian stood in the center of the room, turning to face me as soon as I entered.

“Looking much better, Tums,” he said smoothly, his tone kind.

It only made the situation feel more surreal. My eyes were solely on my sister. I could see her chest heaving beneath the bindings. Her muffled screams broke something inside me.

“What is this?” I managed to croak.

KJ moved suddenly, skipping forward with a theatrical flourish. “Will you be the lamb at the altar,” she asked, her tone singsong, “or the hand that wields the blade?”

“What?” The word left my mouth before I could process her question. “What does that mean?”

KJ laughed, spinning away like the deranged psycho she had proven to be. “Choices, choices!” she trilled, leaving me even more unsettled.

Wilder stepped in closer, his voice measured as he addressed me.

“You have a choice.” He gestured toward the chairs. “Ryan or your sister.”

“That’s not a choice,” I stated evenly. “Cherish is the only option.”

“Ouch,” Hunter deadpanned.

Thorne laughed. “We love a decisive woman.”

KJ moved faster than I could process, her movements a blur of sharp, practiced precision.

“Cherish!” I screamed, my voice ripping through the air, but it was already too late. The blade flashed, cold and merciless, and then there was blood—so much blood. It sprayed across the floor and onto Ryan, glistening dark and cruel under the low light, soaking into Cherish’s clothes, her lifeless body slumping forward like a marionette with its strings cut.

“No! No!” My legs buckled beneath me, but fury surged through the collapse, a tidal wave of rage and despair that demanded release.

Wilder’s grip tightened holding me back. My chest heaved, my lungs burning as I tried to make sense of what had just happened. My sister—mysister—was gone.

“Easy,” he soothed. It was wrong—so wrong. His tone, his composure, his very presence, everything about it mocked the gaping wound he’d just created in my chest.

My sister was gone. Gone? How was this real? How could he stand there and act like this wasn’t the end of everything?

“Mint,” he repeated, his voice carrying an unbearable mix of warning and tenderness. “Stop, baby. You’ll make yourself sick like this.”

I twisted harder, my nails clawing at the gloves that pinned me. With every ounce of rage and grief in my body, I threw myself into him, causing his back to hit the wall. The impact made him grunt, and for one fleeting second, I thought I’d won.

His grip faltered just enough for me to get halfway free, but then his arms were around me again, crushing me against his chest with relentless strength. “That’s enough,” he said, his voice cold now.

“Cherish didn’t see the bigger picture. She didn’t approve of your relationship. She was never going to fit in with us,” Lucian explained calmly.

“You’re fucking insane,” I snarled. “All of you are!”

“She’s not wrong,” Romeo sang around a bite of chicken. “We still love ya though.”

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The fight drained out of me as sobs wracked my body. Ryan thrashed in his chair, his muffled screams piercing through the silence of the room. His face was red, veins bulging as he fought against his bindings.

“Shut him up,” Atlas grumbled, his voice dispassionate as he passed a liquor bottle to Thorne.

Lucian’s imposing frame cut through the room as if he commanded the very air around him. He gripped Ryan’s jaw and with a sudden, fluid motion, he snapped his neck. The sound was sharp. Ryan’s body slouched, his head hanging at an unnatural angle.

Lucian shoved the chair backward, sending his lifeless form crashing to the floor. He turned to face me then. “You’re family now. That’s not something we take lightly.”

My chest heaved as the room spun around me, the blood pounding in my ears. All I smelled was death. I was the only one left. I’d brought a nightmare to our door and was the only one that survived it. How was that fair?

Wilder lifted me into his arms like I was weightless. I didn’t fight him. My body felt foreign, disconnected, as though I were trapped inside my own skin and seeing this through the eyes of someone else.

The others watched us, their masks concealing their expressions, but their loyalty to each other was clear.

They fell into step behind Wilder as we left the house, its door yawning open like a

final, silent scream. They didn't bother to close it, didn't care about what might come next when someone stumbled upon the horrors within. For them, this was the end of one chapter and the seamless beginning of another.

I stared blankly as I was carried down the long driveway, the gravel crunching under their shoes. At the end, two vehicles waited: a pickup truck and an SUV. The headlights cut through the oppressive darkness, their engines idling.

Wilder carried me to the SUV and carefully placed me in the back seat, his movements gentle. The driver's door opened, and Hunter climbed in, his expression unreadable beneath his mask.

Atlas followed, slipping into the passenger seat, Daniella's severed head balanced carefully in his lap. The rear door opened again, and something warm and furry jostled me.

"Moose," I whispered, my voice trembling. I pulled him close as he nuzzled into me. Tears spilled down my cheeks as I buried my face in his fur. Wilder slid in beside me and rested a hand on my thigh.

The SUV started moving, the pickup following right behind it.

I didn't ask where we were going.

I didn't have it in me to fight, to scream anymore, or to plead. My life as I knew it was over. My grip tightened on Moose as the night swallowed us whole.

EPILOGUE

Thin strips of moonlight spilled across the marble floors of our wing; the silver glow intermingled with the stands of Christmas lights reflecting off the polished. The compound was quiet at this hour, a vast, sprawling silence settling over the massive

property.

Moose lifted his head and watched as I moved across the room to the kitchenette. I grabbed a bottle of water and twisted the cap off, leaning back against the edge of the counter. It was a little before three in the morning and I needed to be up in a few hours.

Lucian and Thorne were heading out today, moving back in on the girl he'd been circling for the past few weeks. That left me, Hunter, and Atlas to oversee things until their return.

Romeo...was another story.

No one had seen him in two days, not since he'd stripped Melody naked and chased her through the garden maze. Fuck knows what he'd been doing with her since then. We'd all learned long ago to let him burn out his bursts of energy on his own. I made a mental note to check on him tomorrow, though.

My eyes strayed to the massive blueprint pinned to the wall across the room, diagonally from where all my masks were. The farmhouse. Her farmhouse. She didn't talk about it anymore, but I knew she was curious. Her fingers had lingered over the plans just last week, her brows furrowing as though she couldn't decide whether to love it or hate it.

I'd seen the battle in her pretty brown eyes, the longing for the dream she'd once had, and the bitterness of what it now represented. In time, she'd come to accept what it truly symbolized. I took another swig of water and then crossed the room to our bed, studying the beautiful woman curled beneath the covers.

Her hair was a silky dark wave against the pillows. Her engagement ring glinted in the faint light. It had taken every day since the end of her vacation to get here, weeks of wearing her down both physically and emotionally.

She hadn't made it easy, not that I'd expected her to. We had a few setbacks. The first was her discovering what Atlas actually did with his collection of heads. He of course apologized and decided to burn it in consideration of her feelings. That was a big step for him, Atlas didn't feel things on a normal level to begin with.

The second setback was when I made her watch the news about a gruesome discovery at a rental house and the farm nearby. It was a tragic case. A mystery that would never be solved. There were a few more, two ended with her being sedated, and another chained in our bedroom for three days. That last one had us making sure she and KJ didn't cross paths for the time being.

They were sisters now, just like I promised her. I understood it would take time for them to grow close. After the setbacks, I re-doubled my efforts. She'd softened again somewhat, the sharp edges of her resistance dulling under the weight of my persistence. I knew better than to think the fight in her was completely gone.

I'd worried when we left the vacation rental it had been snuffed out entirely. She didn't speak for days, and I was forced to get her fluids via a damn IV. I learned it was simply buried deep under her exhaustion and grief when she came at me with a butcher knife. I had since taken full advantage of all the ways she could try and kill me. Some battles I let her win. Others she had to lose.

Fucking her afterward was half the bonding experience. I knew she didn't mean it and that was proven as I slid back into our bed. She murmured something unintelligible in her sleep, and I pulled her close, her naked body fitting perfectly against mine.

She stirred but didn't wake, her head coming to rest on my chest, her breath warm against my skin. I smoothed a hand over her hair, brushing it back from her face as my lips pressed against her temple. This was all I wanted, her with me.

Sometimes I wondered if she dreamed of running away, but it didn't matter. She'd

learned twice what happened when she tried to get off the property, and the lesson had stayed with her. She knew now whether she admitted it or not, that there was no world for her without me, and no world for me without her.