



Twisted Attraction

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Description: Being a criminal defense attorney isn't for the weak. I spent years in and out of law school and lost countless hours of sleep fighting for my dream to become an ADA, and now, aside from the bar exam, I was just handed a case that could finally help make that dream a reality.

If only there weren't other problems getting in the way.

I was thirty-three, freshly divorced after a ten year marriage and eight long months of separation, and in my most loneliest times, had secretly found comfort in a sex club called The Flirty Sanctum, and in the arms of two wildly delicious masked men who call themselves Spike and Phoenix. My ex-husband was stalking me, a young girl was assaulted at the sanctum, and my love life was clashing with my job in a way I'd never anticipated possible.

I wished that was the worst of it.

When all of it comes collapsing down on my shoulders and wedges me in an impossible position, I'm left with a choice that could potentially cost me everything, even my life.

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one

Charlotte

I shouldn't be here tonight. I should be at home, tucked all warm and comfy beneath my blankets, resting. But after another hard day at the law firm, on top of finally finalizing my divorce with my cheating scumbag ex-husband, I desperately needed the escape. The fucking release. The Flirty Sanctum had been screaming my name since my lunch break.

A soft moan escaped my mouth at the warm tongue stroking against my clit, hitting it in all the right ways to have my back arching and my fingers digging deep into the blankets.

"Fuck," Phoenix's dark voice rasped beside me as he stroked his cock, his pre-cum leaking from the tip.

I licked my lips, eager for him to slide the head along my mouth so I could taste him.

"Open your mouth, baby."

I did as he commanded and opened wide, my heart fluttering. I let him fuck my throat while his buddy Spike lapped at my swollen clit. I mewled around Phoenix's cock as Spike inserted two fingers inside of me, stroking me.

"Yes," I cried around Phoenix's cock, sucking and licking despite my lack of breath. I looked up, seeing nothing but Phoenix's green eyes through the rabbit mask he

wore. I sucked him harder, faster, as Spike brought me closer to the edge. I groaned as he came hard in my mouth and then swallowed it down, opening my mouth to show him I'd drank it all just how he liked.

"Fuck, baby," he hissed, still stroking himself even after he'd slipped out my mouth. "How do I taste?"

"Salty," I moaned as Spike worked his fingers even faster inside me.

My eyes rolled back when his mouth latched onto my clit, sucking gently as he flicked his tongue.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"But sweet," I cried out, shattering as my orgasm sprayed out of me. My body shook even harder while I watched Spike open his mouth to catch and drink my release.

OH MY FUCKING GOD.

"Are you done?" Spike asked as he got up off his knees and towered over me.

I shook my head, panting hard as I stared up at the lion mask hiding the top half of his face. He licked his gorgeous lips and then aligned his thick eight-inch, pierced cock to my pussy. A loud, uncontrolled moan escaped me when he impaled me all the way down to the hilt, his piercings rubbing furiously against my soaked walls.

"Hold her down," Spike growled low under his breath.

Phoenix moved fast and grabbed my wrists, pinning them above my head as Spike began fucking me slow and deep, groaning in ecstasy. Loud, guttural moans that weren't my own filled the room around us, and I couldn't help but turn my head to

the side, watching as the other masked strangers fucked their selected partners just as fast and brutally hard on the sectionals across from us.

“Eyes here, Princess,” Phoenix demanded. He kept one hand locked around my wrists while the other tenderly snaked down my sternum and grabbed my tit, his fingers tugging tortuously against my nipple. Spike hit something deep inside of me that had my eyes rolling back and a wild moan shaking up and out my mouth. It wasn’t long at all before another waterfall poured out of my pussy, soaking Spike and the bed again.

A satisfied sigh escaped me when my head fell back against the soft bed. Phoenix gave me a knowing smile and then gently eased himself up and on his feet, Spike following his example.

Now, I was done.

I was sweating. I needed water. Electrolytes.

Yeah, it was time to go home and call it a fucking night.

Like sweet gentlemen, Spike and Phoenix gathered my dress and lacy lingerie and passed it over to me.

“Wait,” Phoenix whispered before I could move and start getting dressed. “We need to clean you up first.”

“Oh, that’s okay. You really don’t have to—”

“Eve,” he spoke again, using the fake alias I’d given myself when I first started coming here about three months ago. “Please. It’s the least we can do.”

I bit my lip with uncertainty, watching as Spike dressed quickly and departed, and

then averted my gaze from the rest of the masked couples occupying different sections of the room, each of them being sucked, licked, or fucked in different positions.

The moans...

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God, listening to them and all the heavy breathing and masculine grunts sent another dangerous trail of fire down to my core and had me eyeing Phoenix through my mask with my teeth biting down harder against my bottom lip.

Fuck me.

If Spike didn't get back soon...

He thankfully returned before I could finish the thought, and my cheeks couldn't help but burn hot as Spike took the damp cloth and gently brushed it across, around, and under my core and ass, cleaning me. He smiled at me when I embarrassingly looked away and rushed to jump to my feet, eager to dress as fast as fucking possible.

"When will we see you again?" Spike asked, pushing his mask higher up his nose so he could see me better despite my cat mask covering the top half of my face.

"Oh," I stammered, a little caught off guard by the request. I shook it off and shimmied back into my black dress feet first, pulling it up. "Zip this for me?" I asked Phoenix.

"When will we see you again?" he asked more sternly this time, clearing his throat.

"I work a lot, so I don't really know."

Phoenix finished zipping me up. I thanked him and began putting my heels back on. "You should let us take you out sometime," he said to me. "So we can all get to know each other a little better outside of this place. What do you say?"

I swallowed to hide the discomfort cording through my body and offered him the most polite head shake I could.

“Sorry, but I don’t think so.”

I left it at that and quickly fled the room, desperate to get to the exit. This was the sole reason why I’d put off coming to this place when I first heard a colleague talking about it at work. What I truly admired about the sanctum was the anonymity. Nobody knew my real identity or that I was one of the best goddamn criminal defense attorneys Seaview Pines had to offer. It was the same for the other swingers, single folk, couples—whoever the fuck the majority of these people are. The best part was the masks. Everyone was required to either provide their own or purchase one from the front desk. I’d been with Spike and Phoenix often since my first time here, but this was the literal first time one of them actually had the balls to ask to see me personally outside of The Flirty Sanctum. I literally just got through a nasty ass divorce, and with the exception of work, dating was the farthest fucking thing from my mind. I wasn’t ready to mingle like that and connect with a new partner. Honestly, I just wanted to fuck my stress away and leave it at that. Besides... I doubted Phoenix and Spike were their real names anyway. Aside from this club and their amazing cocks, these guys were strangers to me. That’s how I liked it.

And I needed it to stay that way.

I finally made it out of the building and even though the coast was clear, I kept my mask on until I was safe and secure inside my car. After removing it, exhaustion crashed like a bolder against my chest when I leaned back in the seat. I took in a hard breath and instead of sitting there and reflecting on how fucked my life has been, I started the car and then carefully backed out, forcing myself to think about nothing but just getting home, taking a shower, and going to bed.

When I was halfway there, a set of blue lights flashed imposingly bright through the

rearview mirror. I cursed deeply under my breath and then stared down at the speedometer. The speed limit was 55 and I was currently doing 50. Obviously, I wasn't speeding, so I wonder why...

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

Never-fucking-mind.

Banging my head against the seat and angrily gritting my teeth, I pulled off the side of the street and parked, not bothering to grab my license or registration. My window was already halfway rolled down by the time he could step out of his car. He made it to me and just to be an asshole, decided to blast the beam from his flashlight directly in my face.

"License and Registration please."

"Seriously?" I sneered at my ex-husband. "Fuck off, Karl. I'm not in the mood for your shit tonight. I'm tired, and I want to go home."

He smirked and then leaned forward, shining the flashlight around the backseat and down to the floorboards like he was expecting to find a stowaway.

"Where are you coming from this late?"

I scoffed at him. "Work. Where else?"

"Have you been drinking tonight?"

I glared at him. "Are you fucking kidding me, Karl?"

"I need you to step out of the car."

My hand made fast work of snatching my phone out of my purse. I made sure the doors were still locked and then I rolled up my window, ignoring Karl as he began shouting at me and banging against the glass with his fist.

I worked fast, dialing my lawyer. How ironic. A lawyer needs a lawyer. I squeezed my eyes closed and after the third ring, Peter answered.

“Charlotte,” his groggy voice greeted me. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” I said quickly, my eyes widening in horror as Karl pounded both fists against my window like he was determined to break it.

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Not knowing what else to do, I put the call on speakerphone and then rammed the gearshift into drive. I drove my ass off and cleared at least six or seven streets before I was confident I was safe.

He wouldn't come after me. I was an attorney and well, Karl would've made Detective months ago if he hadn't crashed his car with his nineteen-year-old mistress sitting in the passenger seat. She died at the scene. Once the details came out, I was devastated, and of course, filed for divorce. We'd been separated for over six months, and he was gravely pissed because the judge ruled in my favor and let me keep the house. Compared to Karl's income, I was the only one who could actually afford the mortgage payments.

"Karl pulled me over just a minute ago. I wasn't speeding, I don't have any headlights or taillights out, and I sure as fuck didn't run a red light or refuse to yield or stop when I was supposed to."

"Are you just now leaving work?" he asked, sounding more alert.

I banged my head against the headrest again. "I had a lot of paperwork to catch up on. I'm a little over halfway home now. I... Uh... I kinda fled the scene."

"YOU WHAT?"

"He was pounding on my fucking window like he was trying to shatter it. I didn't know what else to do. It's not like I carry."

"Restraining order," Peter angrily prompted. "I'm not even joking."

“And what good will that do?” I chided, smacking a palm down against the steering wheel in frustration. “He won’t honor it. The asshole never even honored our marriage!”

“Just calm down, Charlotte. Everything will be fine. Let me make some phone calls and I’ll come see you at the office tomorrow. Sound good?”

“Yeah, Peter, that’s fine.”

“And you’re sure he won’t follow you home?”

I snorted. “He doesn’t have the balls. I changed all the locks and had a brand new security system installed weeks ago. You can’t crack open a window without the alarms going off.”

“Cameras?”

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me do it. “Yep. Already done.”

“Good. That’s good.” He paused a moment, sighing. “Just try to get some rest, Charlotte. If anything happens, call me back. I mean it. I’ll come straight there.”

“Thanks, Peter. I’ll see you later.” I hung up the phone, shaking my head as I pulled into my driveway and shut off the car.

No sooner than I walked inside, the alarms began wailing. I had fifteen seconds to punch in the code or else over half of the SPD would be lining up outside my driveway.

Relief blanketed over me, easing away the tension in my neck and shoulders as the alarms ceased, filling the house with perfect, peaceful silence. Sighing to myself, I

ascended the staircase and walked inside my bedroom. In seconds my clothes were gone, and I was stepping inside the shower, desperate to wash the sweat and smell of hot sex off of my body. When I was done, I wrapped myself like a burrito in my towel and then took my sweet time finding something comfortable to sleep in.

Beside the bed was my nightstand, and resting on it was a frame with mine and Karl's wedding photo inside. I sighed again as I grabbed it and sat down on the bed, unsure why I was still holding onto it. I was a good wife. Faithful. I'd never done Karl wrong throughout our ten years of matrimony, and I just didn't understand what went wrong or why I wasn't good enough. We didn't have any kids. We both worked nonstop, so we never really had time to actually be around each other enough to try—which was fine by me if I was being fully honest. I wanted kids, yes, but I loved my job, and having kids meant I'd have to put my career on hold, and I just wasn't ready to do that yet. I worked hard to get where I am today and after everything that's happened, I guess it just wasn't meant to be.

Fuck it.

I slammed the frame face down against the nightstand and shook my head. I pulled my blankets down, lay back in bed, and closed my eyes. Tomorrow. Things will be better tomorrow. I repeated it over and over in my bed until my body relaxed and I fell into a deep slumber.

two

Phoenix

"Detective," one of the younger officers shouted just as soon as I stepped through the elevator doors with a coffee cup in both hands.

I inwardly groaned and stood straighter, giving her a fake smile as she approached.

“Yes, Officer Peach?”

She froze in her tracks and offered me a nasty scowl. “That’s not my fucking name, Phoenix.”

I grinned at her. I knew it wasn’t, but I chose to call her Peach because her long blonde waves and bright blue eyes reminded me of Princess Peach from the Super Mario Brothers. The woman absolutely hated the nickname, but I had to admit it sure tickled the fuck out of me, especially when her face scrunched up into an explosive pit of unattractive wrinkles.

“Forgive me, Officer Brown. What can I do for you?”

“You got a case,” she murmured, handing over the details which were scribbled down on a yellow sticky note. “Captain told me to find you.”

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I glanced over the notes she'd taken and sighed. "Thanks, Peach. Tell the boss-man Spike and I are on it."

Officer Brown rolled her eyes and called me an asshole under her breath before she spun on her heel and dashed back to her desk.

I attached the yellow sticky paper to my coffee cup and then passed by the other officer's desks, including my own, until I entered the break room. Spike was there by the coffee machine, sniffing unimpressively at the batch he just poured inside his mug. He had on his best black suit and, like always, his black running shoes. He looked fucking ridiculous, but there had been countless times over the years where we had to chase after suspects on foot, and Spike outright refused to ruin another pair of his fancy shoes while on the job.

"Don't even bother," I told him before the cup ever made it to his mouth. "I got you covered."

"You're a fucking lifesaver," he grumbled as he turned to me, taking the cup from my outstretched hand. "The coffee here tastes like dirt and spoiled ass."

I plucked the sticky note off my cup and handed it over to him.

"What's this?" he asked.

"A case. Captain wants us on it, pronto."

"Fuck." Spike ground his teeth the longer he glared at the details, his sharp jaw set. "I

hate these cases.”

“I know,” I answered, feeling just as dismayed as he looked.

“One of the biker gangs?” he wondered, glancing up at me with a thick brow raised.

I shrugged. “We won’t know until we get there. Are you ready?”

“Let me take a leak first. I’ll meet you at the car.”

Minutes passed before Spike came out the precinct and slid inside the passenger seat, closing the door behind him. I sipped my coffee as I drove and bobbed my head to my Five Finger Death Punch CD, laughing softly as Spike began singing along and tapping his fingers against the dash, feeling the music.

We made it to the hospital, and when we walked in, flashed our badges at the hospital staff and gave them the 411 about why we were there. We were told to wait in the emergency room lobby for the doctor on duty. He came out minutes later and greeted us both with firm handshakes.

“Her name is Delilah Fields,” the older man with a bald head and thick glasses said to us. “She was brought in a few hours ago thanks to an anonymous caller claiming they’d found her unconscious in an alley. She was assaulted and severely beaten.”

“Rape kit?” Spike asked.

“Already done. It’ll take some time, but we should hopefully have the DNA results within a few hours. I put a rush on it. Hopefully we can give this poor girl some answers. She’s scared shitless.”

“Is she awake?” I asked.

The doctor nodded. “She is. We had to sedate her when they first brought her in. She’s a little groggy but she’s alert and verbal.”

“May we speak with her?”

“Of course. Follow me.”

We followed the doctor down a few halls and watched as he paused outside of a door, knocking twice before entering. Spike walked in before me and cursed under his breath. I stepped inside, my guts twisting when I laid eyes on the young girl with two massive purple shiners under her bloodshot eyes, and fingertip bruises peppered everywhere along her neck and collarbone.

“Delilah,” the doctor spoke sweetly, trying to calm her as she tried to sit up in bed, her eyes wide in utter terror. “This is Detective Rhodes and his partner, Detective Hutch. They’re here to ask you some questions and help in any way they can.”

“Hi there, Delilah,” I spoke to her first. “Is it okay if we talk to you?”

“I-I guess.”

Spike grabbed two chairs and planted them a few inches away from the hospital bed. The doc took his leave and together my partner and I sat down with our pads out and ready.

“Can you tell us what happened to you?” Spike asked.

“I-I didn’t want to go.” Tears rolled down her bruised face. “My boyfriend made me go!”

“It’s okay, Delilah,” I assured her. “You’re safe here. Nobody is going to hurt you.

Tell us what happened. Where did your boyfriend take you?”

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“It-it was some club. I don’t remember the name, but it was like a sex club or something. We-we had to wear masks.”

I sucked in a sharp, silent breath and shared a look with Spike whose brows were raised high, his face swelling red.

The Flirty Sanctum.

I cleared my throat and jotted the details down as she continued explaining.

“My boyfriend ran off and left me alone. I-I was uncomfortable, and I just wanted to leave. I tried to, and then this guy wearing a bull mask attacked me. He shoved me into the bathroom and then he—” She broke, sobbing harder.

“About what time did this happen?”

“I-I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t. After it happened, the guy just left me there. I had a panic attack and I guess I must have passed out in the alley before I could ever call the cops. Next thing I know, I’m waking up here.”

“Is there anything specific you remember about the guy? Hair color, height, build, skin color, anything at all?” asked Spike.

“I-I think he was white. Dark hair... Black, maybe?” She squeezed her eyes closed and shook her head, more tears slipping out of her eyes. “I-I’m sorry. I’m just not sure. It-it all happened so fast.”

“That’s okay, Delilah. We’re going to investigate and do everything we can to find the guy that did this to you. But first, we need to speak with your boyfriend. Can you tell us his name?” I asked gently.

“Justin. Justin Wheatley.”

“And do you know where we can find Justin?” I asked her.

She sighed as she thought about it, and I could see the longer it took her to form a response that she was either too scared to tell us, or she frankly didn’t know.

“He could be at home,” she muttered after a moment. “Or at work. He won’t answer my phone calls. For all I know, he probably left with some random woman at that club.”

She sniffled and wiped hastily under her swollen, battered eyes, hissing from the pain.

“I just don’t understand how he could leave me like that. Why didn’t he come look for me?”

“Those are very good questions, Delilah, and I promise we’ll do everything in our power to get the answers. Where does Justin work?”

“He’s a manager at the mini market in town.” She paused, chewing her lip. Slowly, her brows raised. “Now that I think about it, he’s supposed to be off today. That’s why we’d gone out last night...”

Spike cleared his throat then and nudged my shoulder, slightly cocking his head toward the door.

“Excuse us for a moment. Are you thirsty? Can we bring you anything?”

She politely refused and then stared toward the window, blinking through more tears.

I followed Spike out, our movements ceasing when we made it halfway down the hall.

“What are you thinking?” I asked him.

“I think we just got handed one of the most complicated cases we’ve ever had. And I know there’s a lot more she’s not telling us. You and I both know you have to be twenty-one to get into the sanctum, which means—”

“They had fakes.”

It was either that, or this Justin Wheatley was old enough to get in and had somehow found a loophole to get Delilah in as well. There was a shit storm of questions we still had to ask her, but if we pushed Delilah too hard, she could shut down on us, which would only make both of our jobs harder. We had to handle this carefully.

“What do you want to do? Do you want to continue questioning her?”

“I think it’s best we do a little digging. Speak to the boyfriend first and then go to the club. Felix should have security footage.”

“There’s no guarantee he’ll give us access.”

“He will if I beat the shit out of him.” Spike sighed at my disapproval and rolled his eyes. “Fine. We’ll get a warrant if we have to.”

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Felix may have been a dick, but I hoped he'd be more lenient once he found out an underage guest was sexually assaulted in his establishment. I couldn't argue that it wasn't worth a shot, but knowing Felix like we did, he wasn't going to cooperate without a warrant.

"What are you doing?" Spike asked when I pulled out my cell phone.

"I'm calling Harley. It's better we give her a heads up just in case."

"Fine," he approved with a nod. "I'll give Delilah my card and let her know we'll be checking in with her again soon. Find the doctor and ask him if he ran a tox screen on her. He didn't mention it, but we still need to find out if she was drugged."

three

Charlotte

"You look hot today," Blaire said from the doorway, making my gaze jerk away from the paperwork spread along my desk. She stepped inside my office and took it upon herself to sit down in the chair in front of me, crossing her legs with a huge smile on her face. "Special occasion?"

I gave her a blank look and then stared down at my wardrobe. I'd chosen a white button-down and a black pencil skirt with matching heels. My jacket was draped across the back of my chair. My hair was up, wrapped tightly in a neat bun, and of course, I'd done my makeup.

“I always look like this.”

“No,” she said with a deep chuckle. “You don’t. At least not like this, anyway.”

I scoffed and offered her a tight glare. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She gave me a watery smile in return. “All I’m saying is that you look good, Charlotte. Damn good. I know you’ve been through hell with the divorce. Now that it’s finally over and done with, you just look... I don’t know... Better. Happier.”

“Oh.” I leaned back in my seat, feeling bad for getting snappy with her. “Things have been hard, yes, but you’re right, I suppose I am somewhat happier.”

“Hey, Char,” Perry, our colleague whose office was right next to mine, said as he stuck his head in the door. “Boss wants to see you.”

I swallowed.

Oh, shit.

“Tell her I’ll be right there.”

A worried look flashed in Blaire’s brown eyes as we both rose to our feet. She nervously ran her hands down her grey skirt to smooth out the wrinkles there. “Is everything okay?”

“I think so,” I answered, albeit I hadn’t the slightest fucking clue why the head honcho wanted to speak with me. This had really taken me by surprise. “Go on and go before you get in trouble. I’ll fill you in when we’re done.”

“Good luck.” Blaire turned away, pausing to stare back at me when she made it to the

door. “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you Peter called.”

Shit.

I forgot he was coming to see me today.

“What did he say?”

“He said he had a few things to take care of but that he’d be here around 4-ish to see you.”

I nodded to that, and she gave me a look. Instantly I could sense her next words without needing to hear them.

“He’s my lawyer, Blaire. We’re not seeing each other.”

Blaire pursed her lips and lifted her chin at me like she wasn’t buying it, but instead of speaking her mind, she just turned away and left, leaving me standing there with knots in my stomach.

I drew in a deep breath and walked out the room, my hands sweating as I stalked toward Harley’s office. I knocked twice on the door and as her soft voice instructed me to enter, I complied and closed the door behind me. She stretched her hand to the chair in front of me as an invitation to sit.

This was unnerving. I hated how my muscles locked up and how I instantly felt like a baby doe coming eye to eye with a tiger in her presence. Harley Ford just had that effect on people. I may have been one of the best defense attorneys in Seaview Pines, but this woman practically ate, shit, and breathed her job. She was the best of the best, had won more cases than I could ever dream of winning, and most importantly, Harley did not fuck around. It was truly an honor to work under her wing and I’d

learned a lot from her over the years. She rarely called me or any of the other attorneys to her office unless it was dire, so I couldn't help but wonder what she wanted. Hopefully it didn't have anything to do with Karl.

“So,” she started, shuffling through a few papers on her desk before she looked up and gave me a smile. “How have you been, Charlotte?”

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“I’m doing okay,” I replied, trying awfully hard not to appear as nervous as I felt. “Can’t really complain.”

“I understand you’re working the Hamilton case?”

I nodded. It wasn’t anything big or special, just a simple DUI case I’d taken out of Blaire’s hands since she was hassling three other cases at once.

“I am.”

“I’m afraid it will have to be transferred back to Blaire, or perhaps Perry, if he’s willing. A big case has just fallen in my lap, and I’d like for you, Charlotte, to work it.”

“Oh, of course.” I straightened in my chair, allowing the tension to die from my shoulders. “What are we looking at?”

“A young girl, eighteen, was sexually assaulted last night. Her name is Delilah Fields and she’s currently being treated at the hospital. Are you familiar with Rhodes and Hutch?”

“Uh,” I started, shaking my head after a moment. “Their names sound familiar, but I don’t think I’ve met them in person.”

“Rhodes and Hutch are the lead detectives working the case.”

Harley reached across her desk and grabbed a pen, writing two sets of numbers down

on a small pad. She ripped off the page and offered it to me.

“These are their numbers. I just got off the phone with Rhodes and they’re currently leaving the hospital as we speak. They’re trying to track down the girl’s boyfriend. I’d like you to meet with them, gather what intel you can, and then report back to me as soon as possible.”

“You... You’re sending me to do field work, ma’am?”

I wasn’t trying to sound ungrateful for the opportunity. This was just completely unexpected. I always met the detectives I had to work with at the precinct, not out in the open during an ongoing investigation.

“In a sense, yes,” Harley nodded, her features surprisingly calm. “I’ll be honest with you, Charlotte. I don’t have the full report in my hands yet, which is why I’d like you to temporarily overlook the investigation. It may seem like an odd request, and I know it’s not exactly considered protocol, but I want you to be prepared so that we both have a better understanding of what you’re dealing with. From what the detective told me, this case is far more barbarous than what you’ve been assigned in the past. I hope that’s not going to be a problem?”

“I can handle it,” I promised, fighting like hell not to jump up and unleash the excitement breakdancing through my veins. I’d handled big cases before, maybe not as horrific as this one, but still, this was a huge opportunity that could significantly impact my career and maybe even earn me the promotion I’d been fighting so hard for. There was an open ADA position that hadn’t been filled yet and I wanted it, desperately. If I did well enough and the case managed to go to trial, and I win...

There was no way in hell I was turning this down.

Harley grinned at me. “I was hoping you’d say that. You’re a great attorney,

Charlotte, and well, aside from myself, you're the only person I trust to take the lead on this. I should have everything you'll need by no later than this afternoon. Take what notes you can, and then we'll compare them with the file once you're back."

"Yes, Harley, of course." I rose to my feet when she did and firmly shook her hand. "I won't let you down."

I took my leave and when I made it back to my office, I shut the door fast, letting my enthusiasm ooze out in the form of a jubilant squeal.

four

Spike

"How long before she's here?" I asked Phoenix, my partner in crime and for well, everything. He'd just gotten off the phone with Charlotte Greene, the attorney who had been ordered by the District Attorney to shadow us for a few hours. It was total bullshit if you ask me. Phoenix told Harley she'd have everything she'd need once we were done with the boyfriend and the club, so why the hell was she sending her little pet out here to hound us? This could've waited until later once we had more to go on. With any luck, Ms. Charlotte Greene would get the information she needed and then head back where she came from.

"The DA's office is about fifteen minutes away, so she'll be here soon."

I gaped out the passenger window as Phoenix took another swig from his coffee, grinding my teeth at the house across the street. We ran a trace on Justin Wheatley's cell phone since the fucker wasn't at home when we dropped by after leaving the hospital. The search led us here. There were two cars parked in the driveway: a black sedan and a fancy lime green Sunfire. According to Delilah's intel, Justin drove a bright green Sunfire. We were at the right place.

“Don’t even think about it,” my partner demanded, locking the doors just when my hand wrapped around the door handle. “We need to wait for Charlotte.”

“Why can’t she just meet us at the damn precinct? We’re taking this guy in, right?”

“He isn’t under arrest, Spike. He might be a shitty guy, but we have nothing to hold him on.”

I ground my teeth even harder, pissed because I knew he was right. This guy better have a damn good excuse why he left Delilah behind and why he never bothered to check on her, or else this mother fucker was about to have an awfully brutal meet-and-greet with my fists. Assaulting civilians was shamed upon amongst the SPD, but I’d come across a lot of disgraceful people in my career who deserved to have their spines severed in half. The department had already been sued a few times thanks to me losing my shit in the past. One more strike, and I’d be suspended or worse, terminated.

It fucking sucked, but I had to be on my best behavior. It wouldn’t be easy, but I had to try.

I loved my job. I worked hard to get here, and I couldn’t let my temper throw it all away.

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Minutes passed and then, finally, a white Nissan Altima pulled up and parked ahead of us across the street. Phoenix tapped my shoulder and pointed at the SPD police car coming it hot behind us.

“Did you call for backup?”

“No, I didn’t.”

We both watched in confusion as the cruiser pulled directly behind the Altima and parked. The officer got out of the car at the same time a woman fled her vehicle and began storming toward him, shouting obscenities. Phoenix rushed out of the car first, then me, as the officer snatched the woman up by the arm and vehemently slammed her against the side of her car. He spun her around and then proceeded to slap her hard across the face.

My service pistol was in my hands then and immediately I approached them with Phoenix flanking me, his gun raised. The woman shouted for the officer to let her go at the same time I commanded he back the fuck away from her before my finger decided to get trigger happy.

The officer released her and then backed away with his hands raised high. Nothing but malice carved an ugly and dangerous path along his face the longer he glared at the woman.

“Are you Charlotte? Charlotte Greene?” Phoenix spoke first, following the woman’s path as she raced over to us, hiding behind me and panting hard.

“Ye-yes,” her voice shook as she gripped the back of my suit jacket and pulled me closer, her body trembling. “I’m Charlotte.”

My jaw flexed the harder she shook and desperately tried to use me as a barricade.

“And who the fuck are you?” I growled, my grip tightening around my weapon as I sized the officer up. He was too far away, so I couldn’t read the name on his badge.

“He’s my ex-husband. He followed me here.”

“What’s his name?” I asked when I glanced at her over my shoulder.

“Karl. Karl Greene.”

“Officer Greene,” Phoenix shouted, taking a single step closer as Karl began to back away. “Care to explain what the fuck is going on here?”

“No need,” a loud voice boomed behind us.

My partner and I, plus Charlotte turned to find a man fleeing a black Charger and daggering Officer Greene in utter disgust. Right away I recognized him and lowered my gun, as did Phoenix. It was the chief, our captain’s boss.

“Chief—” Officer Greene stammered.

“Not another word,” he spitefully hissed through bared teeth, his face casually softening and lips spreading in a sweet smile when his gaze landed on Charlotte.

“Charlotte, my dear, how are you?”

“I could be better, Chief.”

“Peter paid me a visit and told me everything.” Little by little the smile on Charlotte’s face receded, her eyes blown fretfully wide. “After today, you won’t have to worry about Karl bothering you again.” To Karl, he said, “My office. Now. I’ll follow you back to the precinct myself.”

“God damnit, Peter,” Charlotte murmured to herself before putting on a fake, strained smile and meeting Chief’s gaze. “Thanks, Chief. I appreciate it.”

Officer Greene scoffed before he got in his car and drove away. Chief followed behind, and it was then that Phoenix approached Charlotte and tenderly grasped her face, checking her over.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” she huffed as she yanked out of his grip, rubbing the cheek baring her ex-husband’s handprint. “I’m fine.”

“My apologies,” he said sincerely, raising his hands as he backed away. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked as I strapped my gun back to my hip.

“I’m a little shaken up, but I’m fine. I just wasn’t expecting him to follow me here.”

I wanted to ask what the fuck his problem was. It wasn’t my business though, so I decided to just keep my mouth shut.

“Are you okay to proceed?”

“Yeah.” She straightened her posture and smoothed her hands down her white shirt and black skirt. “I’m good. So, what are we looking at?”

“For starters,” said Phoenix. “I’m Detective Rhodes, and this is Detective Hutch.”

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I offered Charlotte a tiny wave when she stared up at me, her lips parted. Now that I got a better look at her, this woman was truly breathtaking. She had dark brown hair that was wrapped in a bun, and had a set of eyes that reminded me of the ocean. Freckles dotted her nose and cheeks and her face itself had to have been carved from angels. Her cheeks flushed when I gave her a subtle onceover and trapped my teeth beneath my lip.

“It’s nice to meet you both.” She cleared her throat and then looked away from me with her head held high. “As you know, I’m Charlotte Greene. Harley Ford sent me. Again, what are we looking at?” She pulled out a pad and a pen and stared between us, waiting.

“Delilah Fields. She’s eighteen and was assaulted last night at a sex club called The Flirty Sanctum.”

Charlotte’s hand froze on the pad, her skin paling as she looked up, glancing between us.

“The Flirty Sanctum?” she repeated, her perfect brows raised high.

“You know the place?” Phoenix asked, raising his own thick brows as he cocked his head, curiously observing her.

“I know OF the place. And I know you have to be twenty-one to get in the door. How the hell was Delilah able to get in?”

“Her boyfriend is Justin Wheatley,” I answered, watching as she veered back to her

pad and jotted the details down. “We checked him out. He’s twenty-two, so he’s old enough to get in. We’re assuming Delilah has a fake ID. We won’t know for sure until we talk to Justin. According to the trace on his cell phone, he’s in there.” I pointed to the house in front of us. “Once we talk to him, our next stop is the club.”

“And what about Delilah? Was there a rape kit done? Was she drugged? Is she able to identify who attacked her? Did you ask her about the fake ID?”

Phoenix shook his head. “She wasn’t drugged. Tox report came back clean and we’re still waiting for the DNA on the rape kit. All we know is that it’s possibly a white male with dark hair. He was wearing a bull mask at the time Delilah was attacked, so she never got a good look at his face. As far as the fake ID goes, we didn’t ask. She’s terrified, and well, we didn’t want to push her too hard, too fast. We suspect there’s more she’s not telling us, so we want to interview the boyfriend first and then check out the club before we take another swing at her.”

An intense shiver rushed over Charlotte’s body. Instead of speaking, she simply bobbed her head. “And what about the boyfriend? Where was he when she was attacked?”

“According to Delilah, he disappeared and left her. Claims she tried to leave and was shoved into the bathroom by the assailant.”

Charlotte gasped, looking appalled. “What a piece of shit.”

She paused before taking a massively deep breath and closing her eyes, releasing it.

“I’m sorry, that was rather rude of me.”

She cleared her throat and finished writing her notes, putting her pad away.

“If we’re ready...” Phoenix lifted his arm and gestured toward the property. “Please follow us, Ms. Greene.”

“My name is Charlotte,” she corrected him. “Call me Ms. Greene again and I’ll sever your tongue.”

Phoenix choked on his next words, blinking wide-eyed as he watched her move past him with her plump ass purposely swaying side to side. Was she trying to seduce us? Clearly, it was working for me and perhaps a little too well with Phoenix. Where I was a Dom in the bedroom, Phoenix was a Sub. He loved beautiful, feisty women and relinquishing all his control to them. As for me, I liked being in control. I liked bringing women down to their gorgeous knees and tracing my cock around their plump lips and leaving behind my mark in the form of a hand necklace while I fucked them senseless. A woman’s body was a temple I loved to explore and ravish whenever I could, and Charlotte Greene, albeit she was a stranger to me, had curves in all the right places. Even now as I watched her, I couldn’t help but imagine how she’d look kneeling before me with those pretty lips wrapped around my cock.

I slapped Phoenix on his shoulder and then ambled after Charlotte, tracing every delicious curve of her body again, my dick growing painfully hard, and fast. God damnit. This was not the time or place for this shit, and I knew it, so I mentally went over the case notes and eventually got my head back in the game.

I took the lead and knocked on the door, thankful Charlotte had listened to Phoenix when he cautioned her to stand behind us and off to the side, out of harms way. Just in case Justin tried to run, we didn’t need her getting caught in the crossfire.

Nobody answered at first, so I knocked again, a little harder this time. Movement shuffled inside the house and after a moment, footsteps approached the door. A woman with wild blonde hair wearing a sleep robe and last night’s horribly smudged makeup opened it.

“Yes?” she said through an ugly yawn. “How can I help you?”

“I’m Detective Hutch and this is Detective Rhodes.” I flashed my badge at her, as did Phoenix. “We’re looking for Justin Wheatley.”

“For Justin?” The woman blinked twice and then scoped over our badges again, looking confused. “What’s this about?”

“Ma’am, are you familiar with a club called The Flirty Sanctum?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” she said with a nod, stepping out then and closing the front door behind her. “Justin came home with me from there last night. Is something wrong?”

“I’m afraid so, ma’am,” Phoenix replied. “We have to ask you a few questions. Justin, too. Would you mind waking him?”

“I will if you tell me what happened...”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Charlotte spoke then, stepping out and revealing herself. “Charlotte Greene. I’m here on behalf of the DA. There was an incident last night at The Flirty Sanctum and Justin’s eighteen-year-old girlfriend, Delilah Fields, was attacked. You both can either cooperate here or we can take this down to the precinct. The choice is yours.”

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“Kristen,” the woman replied, her bottom lip trembling with fear as she glanced at Charlotte again and then me and my partner. “My name is Kristen Gallows. I’m twenty-four. Justin and I have been seeing each other for about five months now. We met at the sanctum. I-I knew about Delilah, but he told me they were over. Are you saying she was there last night, with him?”

“That’s exactly what we’re saying,” I nodded.

“But I... I don’t understand...” Kristen looked terrified, like she frankly had no clue what the fuck was going on. “Is she okay?”

“Yes, thankfully. Aside from her attacker, Justin was likely the last one to speak with Delilah last night. We need to talk to him.”

She opened the door then and screamed his name at the top of her lungs, shouting that the police was here to talk to him. He groggily shouted he was coming and would be down in a minute. Kristen waited outside with us.

“Charlotte,” I said, turning and glancing at her again over my shoulder. “Talk more with Kristen here while my partner and I deal with Justin.”

She offered me a tight smile and nodded. “Of course, Detective Hutch.”

five

Charlotte

“I had no idea they were still together,” Kristen told me first thing when I guided her away from the detectives and toward the street. “He told me he left her about a month before we got together. I swear I didn’t know she’d been harmed or that she was even there last night. She’s not even old enough to get in.”

“It’s okay, Kristen.” I instructed her to breathe in and out and did the motions with her, trying to calm her.

God, this woman really seemed to be shaken up by this whole thing.

“I believe you. I don’t think you had anything to do with what happened. However, you were there last night. Are you sure you didn’t see Delilah?”

Kristen immediately shook her head. “I swear on my life I didn’t know she was there. The truth is, I’ve never actually met Delilah, so even if I had seen her last night, I honestly wouldn’t have recognized her. You see, the club is very strict on anonymity. All members are required to wear a mask.”

“What time did you arrive at the club last night?”

“Uh...” Kristen paused for a long moment, worrying her bottom lip. “Sometime after 11pm, maybe? I got off work at 10. I left, came home, showered, got ready, and then I texted Justin telling him I was on the way. I’m not exactly sure what time it was, but it couldn’t have been no later than 11:30.”

I fetched my pad and pen out of my pocket and wrote down the notes. “And what time did Justin arrive?”

“About five, maybe ten minutes after I got there. It wasn’t long at all.”

“And you don’t remember seeing anything out of the ordinary? Anyone that may

have looked suspicious or like they didn't belong?"

Kristen slightly lifted her shoulders and frowned. "No. Nothing. Everyone had masks on. The only thing I can think of that could help is to maybe have the detectives check out the sign-in sheet at the club. All members are required to sign themselves in and show their membership cards to the guy at the door upon arrival."

I cracked a smile at her. I had to give it to the girl—Kristen was smart. She practically read my mind.

"Felix McMann," she rushed in before I could speak. "He's the one you should talk to. He's the owner."

"Thank you for your time, Kristen." I reached inside the chest pocket of my shirt and handed her my card. "If you remember anything, anything at all, please don't hesitate to call me."

Detectives Rhodes and Hutch were still interviewing Justin, so instead of interfering, I just stayed put while Kristen reentered her home and pulled out my phone, checking my call logs.

"Damnit," I whispered, sighing with regret. It was 11:15 when I'd called Peter and cried to him about my run-in with Karl last night. Assuming Kristen's timeline was correct, then Delilah was assaulted after I'd left the club. There was nothing I could've done to help her or prevent it from happening.

Putting my phone away, I glared across the lawn at Justin Wheatley, whose face was flushed, with a river of bullshit tears pouring down his face. He wasn't ugly. I'd give the little shit that much. He had a nice body and honestly looked like he could pull off a career being a male underwear model. His pain seemed real and even from my standpoint, it appeared genuine, but it was beyond my control—I couldn't help but

fucking judge him even though he wasn't Delilah's rapist.

He was an asshole.

Delilah deserved so much better and so did Kristen.

The detectives shook Justin's hand, and from across the lawn I could hear Justin telling them he'd be at the precinct soon. I remained in my spot until both detectives were standing in front of me with annoyed sighs slipping past their lips.

"Justin is coming to the precinct to submit a DNA sample," Detective Hutch spoke first. "He admitted he's been cheating and lying to both Delilah and Kristen."

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“However,” Rhodes pitched in, “he claims Delilah never knew about Kristen or about The Flirty Sanctum. According to Justin, Delilah was never supposed to be there.”

My brows lifted in frank surprise.

Huh... That’s interesting.

“Do you believe him?”

“Unfortunately, we do,” Rhodes nodded. “We don’t think Justin’s our guy, but we can’t fully rule him out until we get the DNA results.”

“Kristen told me there’s a sign-in sheet and that all members are supposed to show their membership cards at the door upon entry.”

Both Rhodes and Hutch nodded. “Justin told us the same thing,” said Detective Hutch. “Apparently, the owner is known to be quite the asshole. I have a gut feeling he won’t let us anywhere near that list or the security footage without a warrant.”

I raised my brows then. “If that’s what it takes, then so be it. I can have one ready and signed by a judge within an hour.”

“Let’s just wait and see what happens first. If we need the warrant, we’ll call, so keep your phone close.”

I suppose that was Hutch’s way of telling me he didn’t want me hovering around them more than I had to.

That was perfectly fine with me because thanks to my overbearingly impatient lawyer going behind my back and reporting Karl to the chief, I had other matters to tend to, and fast.

My intuition must have been spot-on because my phone started ringing. I sighed as my boss demanded me to get back to the office as soon as fucking possible. She did not sound happy.

“Go handle business.” Detective Rhodes offered me a weak, sympathetic smile. “We’ll update you once we know more.”

I nodded and turned away, my heart sinking as I ambled toward my car.

Jesus fucking Christ, Peter. What the hell have you done?

six

Phoenix

Good fucking grief. Felix McMann was the most inconsiderate, egoistical fucking prick I’d ever met in my life.

“I can’t fucking stand him,” Spike groused, shivering out his irritation as we burst out the sanctum doors a few hours later and headed back to my car.

“I hope he chokes on the first dick he sucks tonight.”

“Easy, Spike. We got what we needed, so just calm down and let it go. We have a lot of work to do.”

As expected, Felix outright refused to cooperate without a warrant, so we ended up

having to reach out to Harley's office since neither she or Charlotte would answer their cell phones. It had taken a little over an hour to get to us, but it was well worth the wait. We had the list and copies of the security footage.

And man, did we have our work cut out for us.

"Let me see that," Spike demanded just before we reached the car, pointing at the folder I was holding. I passed it over and then pulled out my keys, getting in as Spike quickly rounded the vehicle and claimed his seat.

We were back on the road in under a minute. I watched from the corner of my eye as Spike flipped through the pages and then blew out a stressful sigh before he leaned back in his seat and squeezed his eyes closed.

"Fuck, that's a lot of names."

He rubbed viciously at his green eyes and scoured his hands down his face, releasing the long breath caged in his chest.

"Captain won't be happy about this. He may give you a slap on the wrist, but I'll be lucky if he doesn't take my badge for not coming clean about this sooner."

He wasn't wrong, and it was easy to understand why Spike was so perturbed over it. Not only were Spike and I faithful members of The Flirty Sanctum, but we were also there last night when Delilah was attacked. Our names were on that list and even though we'd never harmed a hair on that poor girl's head, our attendance automatically made us suspects in this investigation. We both should've gone back to the precinct and marched our asses in the captain's office after our interview with Delilah.

"He won't take your badge," I tried to reassure him. "Worst case scenario is he takes

us off the case and gives us a two week suspension.”

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“You know we’ll have to submit DNA samples if Justin’s isn’t a match.”

I nodded, having considered that ahead of time. “I’m aware, but you know we have nothing to worry about. We didn’t do anything wrong, Spike.”

“I know that, and you know that, but that doesn’t mean the captain will believe us.”

Which was precisely why we had to come clean now before we fucked around and dug ourselves any deeper into this investigation.

“Well, we’ll find out soon enough.” I pulled in at the precinct and parked at the front of the building. “Let me do all the talking, yeah?”

Spike rolled his eyes but didn’t refute. He knew just as well as I did that our captain was quite an intimidating son of a bitch. He’d served just over twenty years in the military and had an endless number of connections that could bring any officer’s career to an end with just a simple phone call. Captain Burgess was well respected not only throughout Seaview Pines but by his fellow officers, too. Spike was skating on thin ice thanks to him letting his temper get the best of him, so for his sake, it was better for me to take the lead. With any luck, the captain would show some leniency and still let us work the case. It was a shot in the dark and a massive conflict of interest, but it was a shot worth taking.

We entered the building and stepped inside the elevator, tapping the button for our floor. When we stepped out, Officer Peach—I mean, Brown—came storming toward us with an annoyed look on her pretty face.

“Captain wants to see you in his office.”

Spike and I shared a look then. It couldn't have been about the case because we hadn't given him the details yet, so if my gut feeling was right, then this likely had to do with the incident with Charlotte.

“Thanks, Peach.” I grinned at her, chuckling as she scoffed and then proceeded to flip me off before walking away.

“One of these days, that woman is going to shoot you in the face.”

“It's just a bit of harmless fun,” I replied, grinning bigger as we approached the captain's office. “I mean, come on, you can't tell me she doesn't look like Princess Peach.”

“Maybe a little,” Spike agreed, bobbing his head as he glanced behind us to stare at her. “Yeah, I can see it. Still though, give it a rest. Last thing we need is her filing a complaint on you for pestering her, even if it is just harmless fun.”

By the time I could knock on the door, the captain had already opened it and was politely waving us inside. Spike and I took our seats and did nothing but glance through all of the military awards and certificates displayed on the desk and hung up in frames all over the walls. Captain Burgess reclaimed his spot behind the desk and then sighed heavily as he scrutinized us with his brows raised.

“I just got off the phone with Chief. He tells me you two were there when Officer Karl Greene attacked his ex-wife, Charlotte Greene. I understand Harley has her working the rape case with you?”

“That is correct, Sir,” I agreed, a little surprised I'd proven myself right. But with that surprise were also some levels of concern. Was everything okay? Is Charlotte okay?

“We saw everything,” Spike said coolly.

He and I watched as Captain Burgess scooted closer to his desk with a stiff expression on his face. “Tell me in your own words what happened.”

“We were in my car waiting for Charlotte to meet us. When she arrived, a police cruiser pulled up behind her and parked. Charlotte got out and Officer Greene did the same. He grabbed her and then proceeded to slam her against the side of her vehicle.”

“He slapped her too,” my partner did not hesitate to add. “Hard. Left a nice handprint on her face. Rhodes and I approached the scene with our guns drawn. He released Charlotte and then it wasn’t even five minutes later when Chief showed up to intervene.”

“Are you two willing to go on record and file a report?”

Spike and I shared another look. “What’s going on?” he asked first.

“Yeah, Boss, is everything okay with Charlotte?”

“Yes, she’s fine. Charlotte wants to pursue getting a restraining order against her ex-husband. Since you two are eyewitnesses to her attack, your statements would be quite beneficial to her.”

“I’m fine with filing a report.” When I saw Officer Greene put his hands on Charlotte, it’d taken everything in me not to shoot the fucker in his kneecaps. I hated abusers and worst of all, so did Spike. It was the sole reason why his career was hanging on its last thread. Charlotte may have been a stranger to me, but she was also somewhat of a colleague now that she’d been assigned to Delilah’s case. I made a vow when I became a cop to always protect the innocent. I’d do whatever I could to help keep her safe from Karl Greene, even if it meant I had to sit in court and testify

what I saw to a judge.

“Hutch?” Captain wondered, surveying him closely.

“Yeah, Cap, I’ll file a report. Whatever I can do to help.”

“Excellent.” He sat back in his chair with a pleased smile splitting his lips. “Now that that’s out of the way, tell me where you’re at in the rape case. What have you gathered so far?”

“We’ve made a little progress, but I’m afraid we have a bit of a problem, Sir.”

Captain Burgess straightened his spine with his head slightly cocked to the side, his penetrative eyes shooting chills through me. There wasn’t an easy way to tell him, so I just came out with it, starting with the interview with Delilah, ensuring not to leave a speckle of detail out.

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“We understand it’s a huge conflict of interest and we’re sincerely sorry we didn’t come to you sooner. Spike and I were there last night when Delilah was attacked but I swear to you, Captain, we had nothing to do with it. We’re fully prepared to submit a DNA test to prove it.”

“How you spend your free time outside of the job isn’t any of my business,” he said sternly, his bushy brows pinched. “And yes, you’re right, this should’ve been brought to my attention first thing.”

He leaned further back in his chair then, steepling his fingers as he calculated us through tight, vexed eyes.

Silence filled the room while he mentally debated how to proceed.

My heart began to pound the longer he remained mute.

Spike shifted uncomfortably next to me and from the corner of my eye, I could see he was getting extremely anxious.

“Is that the list?” Captain asked, nudging his head toward the folder resting in Spike’s lap.

“It is,” was Spike’s nervous reply.

“Let me see it.”

Spike handed it over and together we tautly watched as he opened it up and grabbed

the two pages, scanning them thoroughly. It was the sign-in sheets containing the names of all the men who attended the sanctum last night, mine and Spike's included.

"Damn." Captain Burgess dropped the pages and massaged his temples with the tips of his fingers. "That's a lot of suspects."

He tilted back in his chair again and scrubbed his hands down his face, sighing.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do. Protocol states I have to remove you two from the case. However, I'm going to put my ass on the line here and allow you to continue with the investigation."

Spike and I blew out a breath, our shoulders sagging with relief.

"Go down to the lab and submit your DNA. If you're positive Justin's not the guy, then we need to rule you two out immediately. I'll phone Chief and fill him in."

"Thank you, Sir." I rose to my feet, as did Spike.

"Take this with you." He placed the pages back in the folder and handed it off to me. "You said you have the security footage from the club too?"

"We do," I nodded.

"We need to talk to Delilah again, Cap," said Spike. "There's evidence on those tapes proving she wasn't being honest about what happened last night."

"Handle it tomorrow. Let the girl rest tonight. For now, get your asses down to the lab and then get to work marking names off that list. I expect a full update by tomorrow afternoon."

Spike and I offered each other buoyant smiles before turning on our heels and starting for the door.

seven

Charlotte

I got home from work later that night and dropped the file Harley had given me down on the kitchen table, sighing as I approached my liquor cabinet to fetch a wine glass and my big bottle of Blackberry Moscato.

What a fucking day.

My nerves were completely shot, and nothing would please me more than to go upstairs, take a scolding hot shower, and sleep away the day's hectic events, but I couldn't. I still had a lot of work to do. I was going to the hospital first thing tomorrow morning to speak with Delilah and I wanted to be primed and ready.

I finished pouring my glass of wine and then sat down at the table. I took a sip and then opened the file, frowning at the photos. Each and every injury Delilah suffered from the attack was documented at the hospital. Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen purple. A brutal canvas of bruises was splayed across her neck, chest, and collarbone, and there was some minor bruising along her ribs and stomach. She also had two cracked ribs and a slight concussion.

"That poor, poor girl," I whispered, internally sighing as I gulped the glass down and poured another.

After moving the photos aside with my free hand, I got started reading over Delilah's statement, then the toxicology report, and then the rape kit results.

She wasn't drugged, there wasn't a drop of alcohol in her system, and semen was found in her vagina only. The DNA from the rape kit came back to an unknown male who wasn't listed in CODIS, meaning the assailant didn't have a criminal record and...

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Wait, what the hell?

That was the last page in the file.

Where the hell was the rest of it?

I grabbed my phone to call one of the detectives, blinking with surprise when it began ringing. Either it was pure coincidence or Detective Rhodes had somehow read my mind.

“Detective,” I greeted him after taking another swallow of my heavenly Moscato. “I was just about to call you. I’m afraid I’m missing some documents.”

“I know. That’s why I called. The lab is a little backed up, but we should have Justin’s results in the morning.”

“What about the list?”

“We’ll make sure you have it when we see you tomorrow. Hutch and I are going to the hospital to interview Delilah again. Speaking of, we found something on the security tapes you need to see.”

“Send it to my email address. I’ll review it tonight and then we can touch bases on everything in the morning.”

I didn’t give him time to answer before I hung up and texted him my email address. My work laptop was in my office but luckily, I had a spare I kept here at home in

case of emergencies.

I went upstairs to retrieve it and then placed it down on the table and waited for it to boot up.

“Alright.” I plopped back down in my seat, guzzling the rest of my drink down. I set the glass aside and then accessed my emails, tapping twice on the video. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

The camera was angled at the front desk where Felix McMann, the owner, stood behind it, wearing an ugly duck mask that ceased just below his nose, exposing his lips, mouth, and jawline. My mouth dropped when our victim, Delilah Fields, walked in unaided wearing a black pencil dress with matching heels. She approached Felix with a bright smile and placed her little pocket-purse down on the counter.

The audio was weak, so I couldn’t really hear what they were saying even with the volume cranked as high as it could go. That was fine though. One thing I just so happen to be particularly skilled at was reading lips.

I studied Delilah’s mouth and was able to make out a few words just before three hard knocks pounding against my door shattered my concentration and had me stumbling to my feet with my hand grasping my chest.

Karl.

“Charlotte?” came Peter’s loud but emotionally soft voice.

I remained calm for nearly two seconds before heat furiously licked up my back and ignited like a freshly lit matchstick, forcing my hands to curl into tight, trembling fists.

Without breathing a word, I marched over to the door and punched in the code to disarm the security system. I unlocked the door and opened it to find him standing there in his best black suit offering me a nervous, forced smile.

“Now you want to talk?” I crossed my arms firmly against my chest and gave him a look that expressed how extraordinarily pissed I was with him.

He knew it too because his smile fell, and then all he could do was gape sadly at me and sigh in defeat.

“May I come in, please?”

I rolled my eyes, then stepped aside, permitting him to enter. I shut the door and reactivated the alarm. Peter followed me into the kitchen and didn’t speak until after I’d finished off the last gulp left in my wine glass.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte.”

I said nothing. I just topped off my glass and unimpressively observed him grip both of his gloved hands around the back of the chair closest to him with my head cocked to the side. Nothing but desperation and sorrow stared back at me through his hazel eyes.

Sorry, Peter, but you should be smart enough to know a simple ‘I’m sorry’ wouldn’t cut it this time.

“You almost cost me everything, Peter,” I told him in a cold, snipped tone. “Harley just handed me a case that could exponentially impact my career in ways I’ve always dreamed of. She came this close, Peter” —I raised my hand and brought my index finger down to my thumb, leaving the tiniest amount of space between them— “this fucking close to taking it away.” I dropped my arm back to my side and fixed him

with a malicious glare. “All because you just had to go and run your fucking mouth to the goddamn Chief.”

“I did it for you, Charlotte. Karl’s been stalking you, threatening you since before the divorce was ever finalized. I truly feel like you’re in danger and need—”

“And I’ve told you countless times that I don’t need you fighting my battles for me. It’s not your problem to fix, Peter. It’s mine. I had to file a report and then sit in Harley’s office for over an hour discussing my personal life and whether or not I was mentally and emotionally stable enough to do my job efficiently. Thanks for that.”

“Nobody forced you to file a report,” he argued, his lips tilting up in a smirk. “You did that because you knew it was the right thing to do.”

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I scoffed at him, so furious I wanted to come across the table and deck him across his thick ass jaw.

“That is completely beside the point here, Peter, and you know it. Instead of allowing me—a thirty-three-year-old woman, to think and act for myself, you went behind my back and selected to take those decisions away from me. You had no fucking right, Peter. You may be my lawyer, but let me make one thing perfectly clear to you. You do not control me or any of the decisions that I may or may not opt to pursue. Am I making myself clear?”

“You’re my friend, Charlotte.” He released the chair and tried to move closer to me.

I raised my palm and shook my head, refusing his advance.

“I care about you and I’m worried—”

“I asked you a question, Peter. All I want from you now is a simple yes or no response.”

It was evident by the way he gripped his hair and feverishly ran his hands down his face that he was getting frustrated with me, but I frankly didn’t care. Peter’s intentions may have been pure, but his actions were inexcusable and had almost cost me the opportunity of a lifetime. He crossed a line he had no goddamn right to cross, and I wasn’t going to just sit back and pretend it never happened.

“Yes, Charlotte. I hear you loud and clear.”

“Good. Now if that’s all, you can go now. I have work to do.”

Peter scuffled his fingers through his dark hair and sighed. “Chief called and told me Karl is in lockup. They’re holding him overnight and he needs to know if you’re still pressing charges.”

I breathed in deeply and closed my eyes.

Great. Just fucking great.

“I’ll sleep on it,” was all I could tell him. “You’ll have my answer in the morning.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it, rethinking whatever he was about to say. “Okay, Charlotte, that’s fine. Call or text me with your answer and then we’ll go from there.”

He spun on his heel, and I showed him out the door, locking and securing the house for what was hopefully the last time tonight.

eight

Charlotte

It was all I could do to get out of bed this morning. Between watching the security tape at least a thousand times, going over my notes, and taking new ones, I’d completely lost track of time. I’d barely gotten three hours of sleep and to make matters worse, I was running late. The detectives were waiting for me at the hospital. There were two texts from Peter I hadn’t gotten around to reading yet and a missed call from Chief. I still hadn’t figured out how I wanted to handle things with Karl.

When I was finally ready and in the car, I let it idle for a few minutes so I could grab

my phone and pull up the texts.

Peter: Good morning.

Peter: Chief needs your answer soon or else Karl goes free.

I sighed and leaned back in my seat, forcing myself not to cry and ruin my makeup. Why did it have to come to this? He was the one who cheated and was responsible for his mistress's death. Hell, I never would've learned about the affair if Karl hadn't sped through a red light and T-Boned another car. I understood his animosity, but none of this shit was my fault, and I was fed up with him treating me like this and accusing me of ruining his life. Peter was right, Karl was escalating. Not once in our ten years together has Karl ever hit me and ever since he did, I couldn't help but think about what would've happened if Rhodes and Hutch hadn't been there to stop him. I had to decide, and I had to do it now.

I took a deep breath and typed my response.

After taking a detour long enough to grab a large coffee from Starbucks, I finally made it to the hospital and found Detective Rhodes and Hutch sitting in the lobby, flipping through healthcare magazines.

"Hey," I said, rushing over to them. "Sorry I'm late."

They both dropped the magazines on the table by their chairs and rose to their feet. Detective Rhodes offered me a gentle smile while Detective Hutch silently excused himself and walked over to the desk to speak with a nurse.

"Rough night?"

"You could say that, yeah. So, what's the verdict?"

“Justin’s clear. He’s not our guy. Did you review the footage I sent you?”

“About a zillion times,” I shamelessly admitted. “I don’t mean to pry or step on any toes here, but would it be okay if I could maybe take the lead on this?”

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Rhodes gave me a look that made his forehead pucker with wrinkles. “You want to speak to her alone?”

I shook my head and said, “Not alone, no. Given what’s happened to her, I can’t help but feel like maybe she’d feel more comfortable talking to me as opposed to dealing with two intimidating cops who just so happen to be men.”

He considered that for a moment or two, saying nothing at first.

“It’s worth a shot,” he eventually concurred, but it was the way he was looking at his partner that told me Hutch likely wouldn’t approve of it.

“He doesn’t want me here, does he?” I wasn’t sure why I asked—it just kind of slipped out. Maybe it was the way Hutch seemed so eager to get rid of me yesterday, or maybe it was because he’d stormed off without having the decency to speak to me.

Better yet, why do I even care? I wasn’t there for him, not even for Detective Rhodes. I was there for myself and most importantly, for Delilah. Whether Hutch wanted me there or not frankly didn’t matter. Either way, I still had to do my job.

“What?” Detective Rhodes blinked at me like I’d sprouted a third eyeball. “What gave you that idea?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I mean, after what happened with Karl—”

“Listen to me.” Rhodes stepped forward and reached up to grasp my shoulders, squeezing them gently. “You’re fine. If he seems a little flustered, well, that’s

because he is. He and I pulled an all-nighter reviewing hours of security footage, on top of trying to pilfer through the suspect list at the same time. He's exhausted—we both are, and to be honest, this is the last place we both want to be today. But we have jobs to do, and so, here we are. I promise you haven't done anything wrong, Charlotte, so don't worry about it, okay?"

"Okay." I nodded, accepting his answer. "Thank you."

"You two ready?" Hutch gruffly called out from where he stood beside the check-in desk.

One of the nurses left their post and scanned her ID card, opening the doors for us.

"We're ready," I answered, straightening my posture.

"Ladies first."

Detective Rhodes smiled fondly at me and then gestured toward the open path. I ignored the heat flooding through my cheeks and then followed behind the nurse. She led me to Delilah's room and as I glanced behind me, I found Detective Rhodes conversing with Hutch. I didn't bother waiting for them.

"Hi there," I said to the young brunette who was sitting up in the hospital bed, picking listlessly at her breakfast.

Delilah's bruised gaze lifted and locked with mine. She offered me a wobbly smile but didn't speak.

"My name is Charlotte Greene. I work for the DA's office."

"So, you're technically my lawyer?" she asked, looking a bit confused.

“Sort of, yes. I’m helping Detectives Rhodes and Hutch with the investigation.”

Delilah swallowed, and then her battered eyes grew wide as they shifted over my shoulders. I didn’t have to look to know the detectives were behind me. I felt it the moment they entered the room.

“We need to talk, Delilah. Is it okay if I sit down?”

She nervously nodded. “Sure.”

I grabbed the closest chair and implanted it a few inches away from her bed. The detectives hadn’t moved but I could still sense them behind me.

“So,” I started. “I’d first like to express how sorry I am for what happened. I can’t imagine what you must be going through or how you’re feeling.”

“It’s hard,” she replied. “But I’m alive. I guess that’s all that matters.”

“You’re right,” I didn’t hesitate to agree. “You survived. Not many women are fortunate enough to survive something so heinous.”

Tears filled Delilah’s eyes. “What can I do for you, Ms...?” She paused, having forgotten my name.

“Please, call me Charlotte. The reason why we’re here is because, well... We know you weren’t being honest about what happened.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?” her voice shook.

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“Listen, Delilah,” I said as calm and as comforting as I could. “We have the security tapes from that night. We know you didn’t go to the club with Justin. You were alone. You spoke to the owner and there’s evidence of you purchasing a membership and a mask from the shop.”

Her jaw began to tremble, and then she broke, sobbing with tears pouring down her cheeks.

“Delilah.” I scooted closer to her and grabbed her hand, trying to calm her by rubbing my thumb in smooth circles along her skin. “You’re not in any trouble here, okay? We just need to know what really happened and why you lied.”

“I didn’t lie about the rape,” she swore. “Justin... I discovered he was cheating on me. I went through his phone and found messages between him and this girl... Kristen. A friend of mine knows how to make fake ID’s and so, I got one. I knew Justin was meeting her at The Flirty Sanctum, and—”

“You went there to catch him in the act,” Detective Hutch said from behind me.

“I was going to confront him,” she fiercely admonished, her red eyes flashing. “But I never got the chance. I couldn’t find him. Everyone there... They all had masks on, and according to the rules, you can’t officially enter the sanctum without one.”

“What happened?” I asked. “There’s no use in lying, so you might as well come clean.”

“I bought this ugly beaver mask and as soon as I was through the door, I went

hunting. When I couldn't find Justin, I decided to head back to the front desk because I remembered I had to sign in after I purchased my membership. I never thought about checking the list when I first got there, so I decided to go back to see if his name was on it."

"But you never made it that far, did you?" asked Detective Rhodes.

Delilah sadly shook her head. "No, I didn't."

"Did you talk to anyone? Anyone at all? Even if it was just a few words?" I asked.

"The bartender greeted me and asked if I wanted something to drink, but other than that, no."

"You said your attacker had a bull mask on," said Detective Hutch.

"Yes!" Her eyes frantically lit up. "It was a bull. It had to be. If not a bull, then it was something extremely close to it. I was so scared... I tried to scream, but then the guy put his hand over my mouth and told me to shut up or else he'd kill me. He-he had a knife..."

"He pulled a knife on you?" Detective Hutch repeated, his tone raised and heated.

"Delilah," Rhodes cut in gently. "Why didn't you tell us this the first time?"

"Because I was terrified," she answered, her wet eyes wide and pleading for us to understand. "I've never been in this type of situation before."

"It's fine," I said before either of the detectives could say anything else. "We know now, and that's all that matters. Now, your attacker... Did he say anything else to you? Anything at all?"

“He...” She paused, her jaw trembling as she swallowed. “He told me I was stupid and that I knew better. That I belonged to him and that he had to teach me a lesson.”

I sat back in my seat then and blinked in frank surprise, my brows to my hairline. “And why would he say something like that?”

“How the hell would I know?” She met my gaze, then Hutch, then Rhodes. “I have no idea who did this to me if that’s what you’re implying. I swear I’m telling the truth.”

“And you never saw his face?” Hutch asked. “Not even a glimpse?”

Delilah shook her head. “No, never. It covered his whole face, and he never took it off, but...”

“But what?” I wondered. “What is it?”

“My mask broke while he was beating me. He tore it off and when he saw my face, he...stopped. His whole body went stiff, and it was like he was just... frozen. I can’t be sure, but a part of me feels like maybe he thought I was someone else.”

I took a moment to absorb the information, nodding at the probability. It wasn’t as crazy as it sounded, and I could tell just from the look in her eyes that she was terrified we wouldn’t believe her.

“And then what happened?” asked Detective Rhodes.

“He bolted after that. Ran right out the bathroom and just left me there on the floor.”

“What about your mask?” I asked. “Do you know where it is?”

Sadly, Delilah shook her head. “Sorry, no, I don’t. I don’t remember seeing it in the bathroom before I ran out, so it’s possible the guy could’ve taken it with him.”

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Damnit. I sure as fuck hoped that wasn't the case here. Given Delilah's condition, there was no way in Hell the assailant inflicted an assault that heinous without busting up his hands and knuckles. I guarantee there was DNA on that mask, possibly fingerprints—

“Wait...Was he wearing gloves?”

Delilah thought back and then blinked, her lips parting. “Actually, yeah. He was.”

I frowned then, sighing. Shit. No fingerprints then.

“Do you remember what he was wearing?”

“Not specifically, no,” she replied, frowning miserably. “I remember the gloves because even now I can still feel the leather pressing against my mouth.” She swallowed and then reached a hand up and began tenderly rubbing her bruised throat. “And around my neck. As far as the rest of it goes, I really don't know. I want to say he was wearing regular clothes. I'm sorry I can't be of more help but that's literally everything I remember.”

“I think we've got everything we need for now.”

I rose to my feet, digging into my pocket to hand her my card.

“Rhodes? Hutch?”

“Yeah, we're good,” said Hutch. “We'll be in contact, Delilah. Be safe out there,

kid.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“You guys hungry?” Detective Rhodes asked when we stepped out of the hospital room and began our trek back to the lobby. “We have a lot of ground to cover, so I thought we could discuss things over brunch. My treat.”

I wasn’t about to reject free food, so I agreed to the proposal and told them I’d meet them at the restaurant.

Detective Hutch downed his cup of coffee not even thirty seconds after the waitress had placed it on the table, looking frustrated because now he had no choice but to wait for her to come back with the coffee pot.

“Rhodes said you two pulled an all-nighter,” I said as I sipped my water, frowning at him. I was sitting across from him in the corner of the L-shaped booth with my case file and menu in front of me on the table. Detective Rhodes had excused himself to the bathroom and should be back any minute. “That bad, huh?”

“It is when you have fifty suspects stacked on your plate.”

I coughed mid sip, damn near choking on my water. “I’m sorry, did you just say fifty?”

“We eliminated about half of them last night,” he told me, looking away to cover his mouth as he began releasing one of the largest yawns I’d ever seen in my life.

“What?” I asked, my brows crinkled. Obviously, I’d misheard him. “How? You mean to tell me you gathered over twenty DNA swabs overnight? There’s no way in hell the lab—”

“No,” he said thickly. “We didn’t gather any DNA because we didn’t need to. Everything we need is all over the security feed.”

I slightly cocked my head at him, my brows furrowing. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, Detective.”

He tiredly rubbed his eyes and scuffled his fingers through his black hair, sighing as he gaped around the restaurant for both our waitress and his partner. Thankfully, Detective Rhodes had turned the corner and was headed our way. He approached the table, raising his brows at Hutch, and then turned, offering me a charming smile as he slid into the booth.

“Are we ready to order?” a young blonde asked as she quickly trotted over with the coffee pot in her hand. She offered Hutch a flirty smile and then refilled his mug.

“Would you mind doing me a favor?” he politely asked her, his hand dipping down to his pants pocket. He pulled out twenty dollars and swiftly guided it to her empty hand, enclosing the currency around her fingertips. “I need two large to-go cups filled to the rim with coffee. This little mug here isn’t cutting it.”

“Oh.” The pretty waitresses’ face flushed. “Yes, Sir, of course.” She cleared her throat then and gazed between me and Rhodes. “Would you like some more time?”

“I’m ready,” said Rhodes. “I’ll take the stacked omelette with ham, bacon, sausage, extra cheese, and a side of hashbrowns.”

“You know what,” I said, pursing my lips as I considered what I wanted. “That sounds fantastic. I’ll have the same, please.”

“Same for me as well,” Hutch replied.

“Of course. I’ll get that in and be right back out with your coffee.”

The waitress spun on her heel and when she was gone, I wasted no time turning to Detective Rhodes. “You care to explain to me how you two were able to eliminate twenty suspects without obtaining DNA samples?”

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“It’s simple, really.” I watched wordlessly as he gathered up our menus and slid them toward the edge of the table for the waitress to retrieve on her way back. “I’ll forward you the rest of the footage if you need me to, but basically, we followed the timestamps and compared it with the sign-in sheet.”

“The club opens at 9pm and doesn’t close until 2am,” Hutch added, whispering, thank you to the waitress as she zoomed up and dropped off his to-go cups, sneaking him a folded piece of receipt paper with what was obviously her name and phone number jotted down on it. A strange heat sizzled across my cheeks when he cracked a smile at her advance. I hadn’t realized I was scowling until Detective Rhodes nudged my shoulder and asked if I was okay.

I cleared my throat and took another sip of water, shaking off whatever the hell that just was. “I’m fine.”

“Anyway,” Hutch continued, groaning as he took a large swallow from his large coffee. “It’s like Rhodes said, we followed the timestamps. Delilah walked in the door around 10:50pm. The tapes show her running out the front door around 11:10pm.”

“That’s twenty minutes,” I easily assessed. “That means Delilah was attacked just minutes after her arrival.”

“Correct,” his partner agreed. “Which also implies the assailant was already in the sanctum.”

“The list contains the names of every male in the building at the time of her attack,”

Hutch continued. “Majority of the serving staff are female, except for the males who were bartending. None of the bartenders left their post, so that automatically marks them off the suspect list. The others we eliminated walked in minutes after Delilah fled the club.”

“Shit.”

I sat back in my corner, mildly displeased.

This was bad news.

I mean, it was good they were able to shorten the list some, but it still left us with a big whopping pile of nothing.

“Okay, so what about the others? Any leads there?”

“We’re still working on it,” said Detective Rhodes. “So far, we haven’t found anyone wearing a bull mask or anything related to that particular animal. We still have more footage to review, so don’t worry, we’ll find him. It’s just going to take a little more time.”

“Why don’t you let me help with that?” I offered, staring serenely between the two of them. “Honestly, I don’t mind. You still have to interview those other suspects, right?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hutch told me. “We have it—”

“Actually,” Rhodes interrupted him with a raise of his hand, which had Hutch scoffing at him in utter annoyance before he took another giant swallow from his plastic coffee cup.

What the fuck was his problem?

“That would be a huge help. Thank you, Charlotte.”

Our food arrived and we discussed the dirty details while we ate. Even though Hutch seemed to have his foot up his ass over me assisting with the tapes, overall, I was pleased with the arrangement.

I then brought up Delilah’s interview, most specifically Delilah’s mask and the comment she made about the perp. It was a long shot, but we really needed to find that mask.

“Chances are Delilah is right and the guy took it, but it’s possible he could’ve tossed it, right?”

“It’s possible, yes,” Rhodes agreed. “We can check the dumpsters—”

“It’s too late for that,” Hutch pitched in as he wiped his mouth with a napkin, tossing it on top of his empty plate. “Trash pickup was yesterday. If the perp did toss it, it’s gone now.”

Damnit. That’s right. I completely forgot about that.

“Well, there’s still a chance it’s out there,” I said, trying to remain confident despite my sagging shoulders. “If we can find the perp, hopefully we’ll find the mask. If not, then that’s okay. All we need is the DNA match. I won’t lie though, I’m a bit concerned with what Delilah told us. What if this guy really was targeting someone else?”

“Let us worry about that while you focus on the security tapes,” Detective Rhodes said just before he stopped the waitress and handed over his debit card, turning back

to face me when she was gone. “I’ll lend you our notes. They should be easy to follow. And oh, I have your copy of the list in my car. If you find anything, either call or send us a text.”

He slid out the booth. Hutch followed, and after throwing my purse strap over my shoulder and grabbing the file, I was on my feet and ambling toward the exit, ready to get to work.

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Spike

I awoke later that evening feeling refreshed and eager to get the night started. After breakfast, Phoenix and I went back to the precinct to update Captain Burgess on our findings. Miraculously—and I blame it strictly on luck—after we informed him of our grand plan tonight, Cap let Phoenix and I take the rest of the day off to get some rest since Charlotte was helping analyze the security tapes. Currently, it was 8:30pm and there wasn’t so much as a text or miscall from Charlotte or Phoenix. I hadn’t long gotten out of the shower and had just finished putting my running shoes on.

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Sighing to myself, I grabbed my lion mask off the top of my dresser and tucked it securely under my arm before walking out my bedroom door and fetching my keys off the center table in my living room.

I couldn't stop thinking about her while I was in the shower. Eve. The mystery woman Phoenix and I had taken a strong liking to over the last few months. Although I'd never seen the real her behind the cat mask, Eve was truly stunning—and goddamn, that woman knew how to suck cock. I wasn't sure if she'd show up tonight but just in case she did, I wanted my mask with me. I wasn't sure how to do it without fucking up the investigation, but somehow, someway, I had to warn her. If what Delilah said was true and this bastard really did mistake her for someone else, then he just might be reckless enough to strike again.

After locking up my apartment, I marched down the steps and entered the parking lot. I hopped inside my truck, tossed my mask in the passenger seat, and was on the road in under a minute.

With still no word from Charlotte, I could only assume she hadn't found anything useful, which to be frank, wasn't a good sign. Phoenix and I spent all fucking night bouncing from tape after tape until our eyes were painfully strained and bloodshot, and there was nothing—no signs of that bull mask fucker anywhere. Just because we couldn't find anything didn't mean Charlotte would, but it also didn't mean she wouldn't either. There was still a chance, though, and it was a prospect I was trying to hold onto despite not being able to shake this gut feeling that maybe this guy, whoever the fuck he is, was so much smarter than we'd originally anticipated.

Twenty minutes later I was pulling into The Flirty Sanctum's lot and had parked in

the open spot next to Phoenix, who was leaning against the trunk of his car, waiting for me.

“Nice,” he said, nodding approvingly at my royal blue button-down and black slacks. “You look good, man.”

“We’re basically wearing the same thing,” I grumbled, ready to hurry up and get in the building before the crowd began rolling in. The only difference was Phoenix’s shirt was white and mine was blue.

“I see you brought your mask.” He eyed it profoundly, his dark brows raised. “Let me guess... Eve?”

I nodded, not bothering to deny it.

“Great minds think alike then.” Phoenix walked over to his car door and opened it, fetching his rabbit mask from the driver seat. “I brought mine too. Do you think she’ll show up tonight?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible. Do you have the list?”

Phoenix nodded. “Yeah. It’s right here.” He reached inside his back pocket and pulled it out, showing it to me.

“Come on, then. We got less than ten minutes before this place starts filling up.”

The front door was locked, but after knocking three times and having to wait a bit, Felix finally opened the door and let us in.

“The office is set up and ready for you guys,” he said, looking at Phoenix before his eyes fell on me, delivering a wink that made my guts clench with revulsion. The

pervy fuck said nothing more and then pranced through the door leading to the bar.

“How do you want to do this?” Phoenix took my mask and rounded the front desk, depositing it with his mask on the top shelf under it. “Do you want to conduct the interviews or stay up here and help Felix?”

I scoffed at him. He knew better than to ask such a stupid question.

“I’d rather get gang banged by a pack of werewolves than work with Felix.”

Phoenix threw his head back, chortling so hard he snorted. “It’s not his fault you’re so damn handsome.” He grinned bigger and waggled his brows at me. “I bet he dreams about choking on that massive co—”

“Finish that sentence and I’ll shoot you in the dick, Phoenix. I’m not even joking.”

He wiped the tears out of his eyes, then nodded, taming his grin. “Fine, I’ll handle Felix.”

Speaking of the prick, he just appeared in the doorway behind Phoenix with his keys in hand, telling us it was time to unlock the doors.

Without another word, I blew out a deep breath and headed to my post.

Two and a half hours later and we had nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero, zip, fucking nothing. It was unnerving. I’d interviewed ten guys, and not only did they not have bull masks, but I could unfortunately account for five of their alibis, due to recognizing their masks and remembering they were in the Red Room with me and Phoenix at the time of Delilah’s attack.

Strangely, the other five was a polyamorous group who conveniently claimed they

were all together, and had sworn up and down that they had no desire for a woman's pussy, and wouldn't so much as touch one with a ten-foot pole.

They were, um...

Very convincing, to say the least.

Aside from that whole insanely weird encounter, there was one thing all ten of them tactlessly had in common. Nobody claimed to have seen anything or recalled seeing Bull Mask that night. It'd been a while since Phoenix gifted me with more suspects to interrogate, so I decided to get up off my ass and deliver the full update.

"That's bullshit." He blew out a flustered breath and angrily shook his head. "Somebody had to have saw something."

"Maybe, maybe not." I hated having to say it, let alone think it. "You know how wild and crammed this place gets. Between the bar, lounge, and the Red Room, it's quite possible everyone was far too busy getting buzzed and being balls deep in joy to notice anything suspicious."

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Phoenix sighed, knowing I was right.

“What about Charlotte?” I asked. “Have you heard from her? She hasn’t reached out to me.”

“Can’t say I blame her. I wouldn’t want to talk to you either if I were her.”

“What?” I blinked incredulously at him, my brows furrowing. “What are you talking about?”

“Seriously?” He glared at me like I was an idiot. “Bro, you were a total dick this morning. First, you got pissed over her interviewing Delilah. Then as soon as she offered to help with the tapes, you shot her down, and then got pissy with me when I told her she could help. Am I ringing any bells here?”

“I wasn’t being—”

“You were being a fucking asshole,” he jeered, pinning me with a look that told me he was far from kidding. “Look, man, I get it. I know you don’t like that she’s been tagging along, and to be frank, I wasn’t so fond of it either at first.”

“Your point, Phoenix?” I asked, cocking a brow at him.

“The point, Spike, is that we still have to work with her. You were being an ass and like it or not, you need to apologize.”

Okay, fine. Perhaps I was a little...harsh with Charlotte—yes, I’d admit it. But it was

only because it felt like she was trying to completely take over the investigation. That, and because I particularly didn't like how she questioned our methods. Charlotte was not a detective. She was a defense attorney and nothing more. Phoenix and I had a strict, systematic way of handling our cases and it wasn't custom for the DAs to play tag-along at every interview. I decided not to push the issue over the tapes because considering everything we still had to do, the extra help was necessary. So, I just let it go and bit my tongue.

"But to answer your question, yes, Charlotte called me a little over an hour ago."

"And?" I prompted, my jaw tight. "Did she find our guy?"

"No. We're still at a dead end."

Fuck.

"Captain called too. Karl Greene is being arraigned tomorrow morning. It turns out the restraining order got upgraded to assault charges."

"Are we expected to be there?"

"It's not mandatory, so, no, we don't have to be there. Cap wanted to give us a heads up just in case—holy fuck, Spike, look."

I followed his frozen gaze, my lips parting and eyes widening as I took in Eve approaching the door from the parking lot. She was wearing a sexy black and red corset, a pair of tiny black shorts that hugged around her upper thighs, and long black boots that halted at the start of her knees. Her dark hair cascaded wildly down her back and shoulders and the whiskers on her mask shimmered the closer she loomed. I wasted no time snatching my mask out from under the desk and vanishing through the door behind me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Phoenix hissed, sticking his head through the threshold to find me tugging at the buttons on my shirt.

I smirked at him. “You know exactly what I’m doing.”

“How come you get to talk to her?”

“Because you know what will happen if you leave me alone with Felix.”

He didn’t look happy, but he didn’t fight me on it because he knew I was right.

“Don’t fuck this up, man. I’ll handle the interviews until you’re back.”

I smirked when he disappeared from the doorway, and in less than a minute, I was stripped down, wearing nothing but my boxers and lion mask.

Carefully, I hauled up my clothes and raced back to the office long enough to place them on top of the computer desk with my service weapon and phone. When that was done, I dashed through the short hall and was able to run past the front desk and get the other door open before Felix could dare start whistling at me.

The sanctum itself consisted of three main spacious areas: the bar, the lounge, and the Red Room. The bar wrapped around the left side of the room and ended at the start of a small hallway which harbored two doors that led to the bathrooms and an emergency exit at the end. At the center and extending to the right was the lounge, which was basically nothing but sectionals, booths, high and low-top tables—hell, you name it, it was there for members to sit around and chitchat, amongst other things. And straight ahead, past the lounge, was a door leading to my favorite place of all, the Red Room.

I searched through the crowd, spotting Eve sitting exactly where Phoenix and I saw

her for the very first time three months ago, at the bar. She was a shy little thing then, well, that was before Phoenix and I had gotten ahold of her, but now, she'd developed a routine here. Before, she wouldn't so much as let anyone—man or woman—touch or engage her, which was precisely what had drawn Phoenix and I to her in the first place.

But now, she'd come in, sit down at the bar, take a few shots to loosen herself up, and then she was off to the Red Room. Rumor has it that on the nights she did come in, she'd ask for me and Phoenix specifically. If we weren't here, she'd return to the bar, chuck back a few more drinks, then leave. We'd left our mark on that woman and she sure as fuck left hers on us. Nobody touched Eve except for me or Phoenix.

Fucking nobody.

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Per usual, the bartender placed three double shots of whiskey down in front of her, and I couldn't help but crack a smile when she took the first shot like a champ and slammed the glass down on the counter. My smile fell as I watched her tenderly slide a hand up under her mask to wipe under her eyes. She was crying...

Wait...

Why was she crying?

I couldn't help myself. Within seconds I was standing by her side and cradling what I could of her exposed cheeks in my hands.

"Talk to me, baby," I whispered in my husky voice, her tear-soaked eyes widening as they swept over my mask. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Sp-Spike," her tender voice shook. "You're here."

"Did you have a bad day?"

She wordlessly nodded.

"Want me to make it better?"

Again, she nodded.

"Good," I smiled. "Finish your drinks and then we can go have some fun."

She took her time slamming the last two shots back and instead of paying her tab, I told the bartender I'd take care of it on my way back. With Eve's warm hand in mine, I led her to the Red Room. I opened the door and escorted her in.

There was a reason why the Red Room was called the Red Room. Literally everything was red. The lights, walls, furniture, tables, toys, whips, chains, everything down to the sheets on the Alaskan bed in the heart of the room was red. Aside from all the hot, wild sex that goes on in here, it was the sole reason why I loved this room so much. Red was my favorite color.

"After you, Eve," I whispered in her ear, loving how her body shuddered as my hot breath raked across her sensitive neck.

The bed was currently taken by the same five guys I'd interviewed not even an hour ago and, other than the swing, the doggy chairs, spin wheel, and sectionals were occupied. Eve made her way over to the swing and one by one, removed her boots. After placing them and her black handbag nicely and neatly against the wall, my hand was around her pretty little throat and the other was inside her shorts, cupping her pussy.

Fuck.

She was wetter than a fucking slip-n-slide.

"Fucking hell you're soaked," I growled in her ear, straining not to rip the material off her body.

I needed her bare, so after crashing my lips roughly against hers, I dropped to my knees and snatched the fabric straight down to her ankles. My mouth salivated like a malnourished mut when I saw she wasn't wearing any underwear.

“Get in the swing.”

She did as I commanded and followed my every move, eagerly waiting with her teeth trapped between her bottom lip while I strapped her in and secured both of her legs through the thigh straps, lifting them up to give me better access. Her fingers curled around the arm handles, gripping them tightly, and her breath came out in sharp pants when I dropped back on my knees and brought my face closer to the prettiest fucking pussy I’d ever seen in my life. As much as I wanted to savor this moment, torment, and edge her beautiful body until she was crying for me to let her cum, I had to remind myself Phoenix was up front and waiting impatiently for my return. Time was of the essence here and I was still on the job, so I had to fuck Eve into better spirits, warn her about this bull mask fucker, and then head back to work whether I liked it or not.

I teased her first by popping kisses along her inner thigh, earning a pleasurable hiss and thrust from her hips the closer I made it to her core. Instead of regarding her desperate demand, I moved on to her other thigh, planting kiss after kiss that had goosepimples sprouting along her flesh and her pussy juices weeping a gorgeous puddle all over her tight little asshole. After sucking and licking her arousal clean from her ass, my tongue slurped up her pussy in one strong, languid lick. I slipped two fingers inside of her and didn’t stop feasting on her clit until I’d stroked her sweet spot in just the right way to have her orgasm flooding out of her like a fucking waterfall.

“Oh my God,” she cried, panting hard as she gripped the arm handles tighter, her body shaking. Her next words perished when I sprung to my full height and wrapped my hand around her sexy throat, the advance taking her by surprise.

My cock pressed painfully against my boxers, so I set him free, stroking him with my lips parted.

And then I silenced Eve's mewls with a deep kiss as I breached her in one swift, hard thrust that had her eyes rolling into the back of her head.

"Fuck, you feel good," I praised in a feral whisper, tightening my grip on her throat as I picked up the pace, jostling her in the swing while I fucked her fast and deep. I pressed the forehead of my mask against hers and trapped her moans with my mouth, wondering if she could taste herself on my lips.

"God, how I've missed you."

"Sp-Spike," Eve's breath shuddered, and I knew from the way her pussy was choking my cock that she was about to explode.

"That's it, baby," I groaned, squeezing her neck even harder, my balls slapping against her asshole the rougher I plowed into her juicy, swollen cunt. "Be my good little girl and cum all over Daddy's cock."

The sexiest wail tumbled up and out of her throat, and within seconds I was soaked chest to cock in her release, grinning as her weak hands slipped from the handles and the dead weight of her arms slapped against my back. I held her, my grin unwavering even when our eyes locked. Eve chuckled softly under her breath and then asked for my assistance getting out of the swing.

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“We made one hell of a mess.” I slipped out of her, cursing softly at the sight of my cum dripping down her pussy and onto the floor. “Sit tight for me, Evie. I’ll be right back.”

Phoenix was probably furious with me and since he hadn’t come looking for me yet, I could only assume he was in the middle of an interview. We had a good turnout so far, but the night was far from over. I had to get back, so I grabbed what I needed from the bathroom and then dashed back to the Red Room to help clean Eve up.

“Thanks,” she said, embarrassment staining her exposed cheeks as she looked away from me when I was done cleaning her up and grabbed her shorts and boots.

I always wondered why she did that, why she’d get so nervous and shy after our encounters. Phoenix and I were the only men in this place she’d let touch her, so what the hell was there to be so wary about? Eve should know by now that we didn’t mean her any harm. Hell, all we really wanted was a chance to get to know her, the real her, outside of the sanctum.

“I-uh, I didn’t see Phoenix when I walked in. Is he here?” she asked, zipping up one boot and then moving on to the other.

“Not tonight,” I told her, frowning at her jutted bottom lip.

She was disappointed.

But why? Was she not happy to be with me tonight?

“He had to work late and wasn’t able to make it.”

“That’s a shame,” she muttered, sighing as she reached down and grabbed her black handbag. She opened it up and fumbled through it, pulling out two folded index cards with my name written on one and Phoenix’s on the other. “I was hoping to give these to you together.”

“What is it?” I asked, my heart jumping to my throat when I took them from her.

“It’s, um...” She paused, her cheeks pinkening under her mask. “It’s my phone number. Maybe when we’re all free, we can meet up and go see a movie or something.”

Her phone number?

I blinked between her and the folded cards in disbelief.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t happy because I was. This was just completely unexpected.

“Thank you, Eve. I’ll make sure he gets it. And oh, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

I looked around to make sure nobody was listening, but just to be safe I grabbed Eve’s hand and pulled her close to me, my mouth by her ear.

“A young girl was assaulted here two nights ago. The police are here questioning all the men who were here that night.”

She pulled away to look at me, her eyes wide and shrouded with fear.

“Phoenix and I are fine,” I promised her. “But from what the police are saying, it’s possible this guy may strike again. I think you should consider staying away from this

place for a little while, at least until they've caught the guy."

"Is this your way of asking me to leave?" she asked, her head cocked and lips pursed like she was confused.

"Oh, sweetheart." I grasped her chin, trying not to get myself worked back up as I thumbed her bottom lip. "I'd fuck you here all night and have you waking up crippled in my bed tomorrow morning if I could. But in regards to your safety, yes, I'm afraid I am asking you to leave. I don't want you to get hurt, Eve, and neither does Phoenix. Is that going to be a problem?"

"I guess it's a good thing I gave you my number then."

I smiled at her. "It is. I'll get with Phoenix and we'll set up a date. Now, would you like me to escort you out to your car?"

Eve chuckled and shook her head. "Thank you, Spike, but no. I can manage from here." She started for the door, pausing to stare back at me just as I'd finished putting my boxers on and had the dual copies of her phone number clasped securely around my fingertips. "I-uh... I'm looking forward to seeing you again outside of this place. But there's something I need to tell you first."

"Whatever it is can wait. We have a lot to talk about, so why not save everything for our date?"

"If you insist," she agreed, smiling at me. "Goodnight, Spike."

She walked out the door then, and after standing there grinning like some teenage nerd who just landed their first date with the hottest girl in school, I got myself together and blew out the deep breath I'd been holding hostage in my chest. I glanced down to my open palm, catching a glimpse of the number written on the card with my

name on it. Slowly my smile fell, and my heart dropped like a brick in my stomach once the revelation hit me.

Fuck.

Houston, we have a serious fucking problem.

ten

Charlotte

Peter was going to kill me.

I blew out a deep breath and hit SEND on the text.

“Hey, Charlotte,” Blaire said, knocking twice on my office door before she entered.
“Are you done with the—”

I was startled, having jumped in my chair at her intrusion, which sent my phone flying out of my hands and plummeting down hard in front of my desk.

I grimaced and squeezed my eyes closed when Blaire harshly surveyed the scene with her brows raised concerningly high.

“Are you okay?”

“I can’t do it,” I said, my chest heaving so hard I was on the verge of a panic attack.
“I just can’t do it.”

I winced again, my body bristling tighter when my phone began ringing on the carpet. I didn’t have to look to know it was Peter.

“Charlotte.” Blaire took a calm step toward me.

“I just can’t do it.”

I rushed forward and slapped the phone out of her hand when she kneeled down to pick it up.

“Just listen to me.”

“Charlotte.” She pinned me with a thin, impatient glare. “Stop talking and just breathe.”

“Right.” I sat back on the edge of my desk and impulsively rocked myself back and forth, my breath shuddering. “Just breathe. Right. Yeah, I can totally do that.”

“You have to make a choice, Charlotte.” Blaire kneeled in front of me and grabbed my arms, ceasing my rocking. “I get that it’s your ex-husband, but you have to think about yourself here.”

“I’m not a monster,” I whispered, shaking my head as I looked at her. “I can’t do this to him.”

“Nobody said you’re a monster. But unless you put a stop to this shit now, then it’s only going to get worse. Do what’s best for you, Charlotte. Just know that it may not work out in your favor if you wait too late.”

“You’re right.” I understood what she was saying. I just hated how shitty it made me feel. “You’re absolutely right.”

I got myself together, and after taking a few minutes to give back the paperwork Blaire needed some friendly advice on, the alarm on my phone signaled it was time to leave for Karl’s arraignment. My body shook, and it was all I could do not to burst into tears on the way to the courthouse. I parked next to Peter and got out to meet his

harrowing glare and perfectly locked jaw.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” he spat, his hazel eyes flashing in a way that sent chills slithering down my spine.

Despite the hostility, he looked good in his black suit and white tie. His dark hair was combed and styled in a fancy fauxhawk, and he must have been suffering through another eczema flare because he was wearing his favorite black gloves again today.

“Hey, Peter.”

“You’re dropping the assault charges?” he raged, scoffing as he grabbed ahold of my shoulders and shook me like a fucking maraca. “Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

“I’m sorry, Peter. I’d also like to address Karl before the court and judge.”

Peter stepped away and sucked in a sharp breath, glaring at me like I’d lost all of my sense of intellect. “Even if you drop the assault charges, you said it yourself that he won’t honor the restraining order.”

“He will,” I assured him. “Once he hears what I have to say, he won’t bother me anymore.”

And if he does, then I guess everyone was right and I’d be just another unfortunate soul who foolishly fucked around and found out the hard way.

“Charlotte.” Peter blew out a deep breath before he came closer and grasped my shoulders, squeezing them gently. “Please don’t do this.”

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I could see he was trying. That he was genuinely trying to understand me and why I was being so goddamn stubborn.

But the sad truth of it was that he'd never understand, not even if I'd taken the time to sit down and write it out for him on paper.

Peter was more than just my lawyer. We'd gotten through law school together and aside from our professional relationship, we were friends, and I knew he would never intentionally do anything to hurt me. I understood he was angry with me but as my friend, I needed him to trust and have a little more faith in me. As my lawyer though, he still had a job to do, and I needed him to listen to me and do it.

"I've made my choice, Peter."

He snorted and turned away, murmuring that I was making a horrible mistake.

"Then let me make it. Is that going to be a problem, or do I need to find someone else to represent me?"

Peter cocked his head back, looking genuinely appalled by my audacity. "You wouldn't."

"If you can't emotionally separate yourself from the situation, then yes, I will."

"Fine." Peter blew out an enraged breath and shook his head at me. "Cue the emotional detachment."

He turned back to his car long enough to retrieve his black briefcase, and then we were off, marching up each ankle-aching step until we made it through the doors and were in the correct courtroom.

Karl and his attorney Ben were already here standing and waiting, and an incredulous sigh slipped past Peter's lips as he approached the podium and deposited his briefcase on top of it.

"All rise," the bailiff shouted before I could ever plant my ass in a seat. "The court is now in session. The Honorable Judge Carter presiding."

Judge Carter, an older woman with thinning white and brown hair and glasses hanging at the tip of her nose, entered the courtroom and claimed her rightful spot on the bench. She offered Peter and Ben a warm smile and then dove right on in asking about Karl's charges. I told myself I wouldn't look at him, but temptation got the best of me, and I ended up sparing a glance in Karl's direction. I was glad I did, because from how torn and guilt-ridden he looked as he stared up at the judge, I knew in my heart that I was making the right choice.

I was married to this man for ten years. What Peter and everyone else failed to understand was that I was a walking audiobook when it came to Karl Greene and the things that would make him piss the bed at night—figuratively speaking, of course. Sure, we had arguments like all married couples did, but as I expressed numerous times, things had never gotten violent between us. I know it doesn't condone what Karl did, but after tossing and turning all night thinking about it, I had a better understanding of why things escalated this far. Overall, Karl wasn't a bad guy. I had memories with this man, beautiful memories I'd forever cherish despite all the pain and heartache he put me through recently. If I'd thought for one second that he'd ever lay a hand on me or purposely intended to cause me physical harm, I'd have never agreed to marry him.

This was his last chance, though.

Just because I wasn't letting his ass rot in jail didn't mean Karl was getting off Scot-Free. I was still filing for a restraining order.

"Charlotte, are you with us?"

I was so distracted by my thoughts that I hadn't realized Judge Carter was speaking to me directly until I took in the shock staring back at me on Karl's face.

"Yes, ma'am," I agreed, clearing my throat as I met her pinched gaze. "That is correct. I would like to drop the assault charges against my ex-husband."

"But yet you still want to pursue the restraining order?" she questioned with a slight head tilt.

I nodded. "That is correct, Your Honor."

"Would you be offended if I asked why?"

I gave her the best smile I could muster. "Not at all, Your Honor. In fact, I'd be happy to explain it to you and my ex-husband, if I may?"

Surprisingly, Judge Carter agreed. "You are free to speak as you wish, Ms. Greene."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

I swallowed hard as I stared between Peter, Judge Carter, Ben, and Karl. What made it worse was when I'd turned around to steady my breathing, I found Chief, Detective Rhodes, and Hutch, posted beside the doors.

Great. What the fuck were they doing here?

“Ms. Greene?”

“It’s like this, Your Honor.” I spun on my heel and kept my face hard enough to cut through marble. “Karl Greene and I were married just over ten years. Not once in those ten years has he ever raised a hand to me, and I believe the only reason he gave in to those emotions is because not only is he still grieving the death of his mistress, but after over six months of separation, we just recently finalized our divorce. Karl wanted to reconcile but as he very well knows, I don’t condone cheating. I think his grief has driven him down a dark path and given that he’s just been temporarily suspended from duty, I no longer feel the need to press charges. I truly feel like he’s suffered enough.”

I broke eye contact with the judge and focused on Karl, struggling to level my breathing. It was hard fighting back the tears.

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“I loved you. I’ll never understand what I did or why you didn’t just talk to me instead of running off and secretly burying your cock inside of a fucking teenager—”

I sucked in a painful breath and shook my head, apologizing to Judge Carter when she grabbed her gavel and slammed it down three consecutive times.

“When it comes to the terms of the restraining order,” Peter piped up, clearing his throat. “We ask that Karl Greene not be allowed within a hundred-foot radius of Charlotte Greene in any indoor and outdoor setting. We ask for all contact in any verbal or nonverbal form to be denied.”

“And if I may, Your Honor,” I stubbornly and unprofessionally interrupted. “I ask to please approach my ex-husband.”

“Now Ms. Greene...”

“Please, Your Honor.”

She hesitated for a moment, sighing as she frowned. “Fine. Permission granted. But if you attack him, I cannot help you, Ms. Greene. You will be detained.”

“Charlotte,” Peter called out in warning, but I waved him off, keeping my eyes locked on Karl.

“We promised each other forever, but I guess somewhere along the way you must have gotten lost.”

“Charlotte—”

“Just shut up and listen to me, Karl. That restraining order goes into effect just as soon as I walk out of this courtroom.”

His bottom lip wobbled, but he remained mute, letting me speak.

“It’s not my fault your mistress died, and it’s not fair that you’ve been taking all of your frustrations out on me because of it. You’re a good man, and the last thing I want to do is throw your ass in jail, but if you ever come near me or so much as dare raise a hand to me again, I will. I may be dropping the assault charges but please listen to me when I say with the last bit of intolerable patience I have left, that you have got to stop this shit, Karl. I’m tired of suffering over your mistakes and from this point forward, I’m not going to allow you to do this shit to me anymore. I’m sorry it’s come down to this, but you left me with no other choice.” I paused to take a breath and nodded toward Judge Carter, signaling I was finished. “Thank you, Your Honor, for letting me speak.”

“Very well then.” The judge blew out a relieved breath and then gave Ben another subtle smile. “Given what I just witnessed, I can only assume your client is pleading guilty on the stalking charges?”

“He is, Your Honor,” Ben replied.

She nodded and then leveled her stern sights on Karl. “After walking out of this courtroom, you are no longer allowed to be within a hundred-foot radius of Charlotte Greene in any public setting. Verbal and nonverbal contact is forbidden and to ensure you abide by these orders, all phone calls will be monitored until further notice. Should you decide to disregard these orders and get caught, you will be in direct violation of the restraining order and a warrant will be issued for your immediate arrest. Do you understand, Mr. Greene?”

“Yes,” Karl nodded, his voice shaking. “Thank you, Your Honor.”

“Great. I’ll get the paperwork going and have it distributed to your lawyers soon.”

“Excuse me, Judge Carter,” Chief said from the doorway, stepping forward with his hand raised. “Permission to approach the bench?”

Karl looked like he was about to shit a brick, but instead of offering him any speckle of comfort, I just smiled sweetly at Chief as he passed by me and then made my way over to where Detectives Rhodes and Hutch were casually leaning against the wall. Embarrassment burned fatally hot against my cheeks as I realized they had heard my whole fucked-up pity spiel.

“What are you two doing here? Did you catch a break in the case?”

“Afraid not,” Detective Rhodes replied. “I hate to be so blunt, but things aren’t looking too hot.”

“But to answer your first question,” said Detective Hutch, who had his large arms folded tightly to his chest as he glared at Karl like he was a roach he wanted to stomp with his black sneaker. “Captain Burgess told us about Karl’s arraignment. He thought it was a good idea for us to be here for emotional support.”

“You didn’t have to do that. Really, it’s okay. I just hate that I had to do this shit to begin with. What’s up with Chief though? Why is he here?”

Rhodes let out a dark chuckle, and my eyes couldn’t help but widen in horror as I watched Karl kick his seat and furiously pound his clenched fists atop the desk. He tried to make a play for Chief, but thankfully reconsidered when Ben grabbed ahold of his shoulders. Judge Carter ordered Karl’s immediate removal and just like that he and Ben were accompanied out of the room by the bailiff.

Fuck, fuck, TRIPLE FUCK.

“What the fuck is going on now?” I groaned.

“Chief requested Karl wear an ankle monitor,” was Detective Hutch’s fast retort, his lips curled in a satisfied smirk. “And judging by Karl’s reaction, I’d say The Honorable Judge Carter agreed.”

“But I don’t understand,” I said, gaping between them in utter confusion. “Karl’s been suspended. They took his badge, gun, and the cruiser.”

“Yes,” Rhodes did not hesitate to agree, “they did. However, Chief isn’t fucking around and is taking Karl’s abuse of power very seriously, perhaps personally if I’m being frank—but you didn’t hear that from me.”

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“He’s not under house arrest,” Hutch explained. “Karl can come and go as he pleases but the initial purpose is to keep track of his location while he’s on suspension. He can go anywhere he wants and do whatever he wants as long as he doesn’t come within a hundred feet of whatever path your shiny high-heeled feet are walking on.”

“But what if Karl refuses?” I asked, ignoring his remark about my feet.

“It’s in his best interest that he doesn’t. I don’t think Chief will let him back on the force otherwise.”

Which meant Karl would be out of a job for good.

Fuck.

Now I had to go work some magic to ensure that exact thing doesn’t happen.

eleven

Phoenix

“Explain to me why we’re here again,” I said when we parked in the sanctum’s parking lot, releasing the yawn I’d been suppressing when I got out of the car.

I was dogshit tired. I’d hardly gotten a wink of sleep, and the coffee I drank—aside from it being scolding fucking hot and searing the skin off the roof of my mouth—didn’t do shit to help wake me up. If anything, it only heightened my exhaustion and left me with an unbearably sore mouth.

Fuck I needed a real day off.

“Research,” Spike reminded me, rounding the vehicle and matching step with me as I approached the building. “I think I may know how Bull Mask was able to evade the cameras.”

I stifled back a groan, not really in the mood to deal with anything else pertaining to those damn cameras. In the last forty-eight hours, those tapes and this damn club had done nothing but suck every ounce of energy dry from my poor body.

But fuck it.

We were already here, so I suppose I may as well nibble on the bait.

“What are you thinking?”

Felix came storming out of the door then, holding an empty beer bottle box in each hand, sighing with a look on his face that was more ridiculous than his royal blue shirt covered with festive dancing pineapples, gray sweatpants, and rainbow crocs.

“Well...” Felix gaped unimpressively at me but had no problem whatsoever winking and provocatively clicking his tongue at Spike. “I doubt you two dropped back by for an early morning peg session, so what do you need from me now, Detectives?”

“We’re not planning to be here any longer than we have to be,” I spoke up before Spike could dare fire back with an insult or worse, strangle Felix to death with his fancy pineapple shirt. “We just need a few minutes and then we’ll be out of your hair.”

Felix rolled his eyes but didn’t refute. He dropped one of the boxes and flicked a hand toward the entrance. “The door is unlocked. I’ll meet you at the bar.”

Spike literally launched himself at the door, bolting through it and leaving me standing there scowling when it slammed in my face before I had time to catch it.

Asshole.

When I walked in, the door behind the front desk was closed, but the one leading inside the bar and lounge ahead of me was cracked open. I walked in to find Spike pacing in a circle, mumbling to himself.

“Our perp somehow managed to ghost his way through the club without being detected by a single security camera.”

“You talking to me, or to yourself?” I asked just to be sure.

“It’s impossible though,” he carried on, shaking his head. “There’s no goddamn way in hell me, you, and Charlotte failed to find his ass. There’s just no fucking way.”

Oh, so he was talking to me. “Again, what are you thinking?”

“We’re missing something here. We have to be. Give me a minute and let me look around first. I need to be sure.”

I was way too fucking exhausted to argue, so I let him do his thing and made my way over to the bar, plopping down on a barstool in the middle. The TVs weren’t on, and I could hardly convince myself to summon the strength to play hide and seek with the remote, so I just got back up and wordlessly trekked around the lounge so I wouldn’t make the mistake of falling asleep.

I’d never paid it any attention before but without all the extra bodies covering just about every inch of the place, it amazed me how big The Flirty Sanctum actually was. It wouldn’t be a true sex club without the Red Room, but still, even without it, the

space from the bar and lounge combined was immaculate all on its own. Hell, if you knocked down a few walls and had the money to make the plumbing and electrical adjustments, this place would make one hell of a three, maybe four-bedroom apartment. Shit, it was probably big enough to split into two two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartments, but that was only if you were damn good at your job and could manage to divide the space evenly with two separate entrance and exits.

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“What the fuck are you doing?”

Felix barged through the door with both hands pressed firmly against his hips, his eyebrows furrowed.

“I know you are not conducting a search inside of my club without a warrant.”

“Calm your tits, you rainbow shitting pineapple,” Spike sneered near the end of the bar. “I’m just trying to find the security cameras. And speaking of which.” He pointed a finger up to the ceiling, at the camera facing the hall, bathrooms, and the back door/emergency exit. “You never gave us the footage for this camera.”

“That’s because there’s none to give. That camera and the one just outside the Red Room broke like three, maybe four days ago.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Spike roared at the same time I politely asked Felix why he failed to mention this to us ahead of time.

Felix had the decency to smirk at me. “You didn’t ask. You told me to give you all the footage I had available, and so that’s what I did. Obviously, I can’t provide you with what I don’t have.”

Spike drew in a powerful breath and blew it out, scrubbing his hands down his face. I knew he was agitated but I couldn’t translate if it was really with Felix or with himself. Felix may have been a ridiculing smartass and massive thorn in our asses at times, but he did have a point. Neither one of us had bothered to ask about any malfunctioning cameras once we had the warrant in our hands. And to make matters

worse, we were so consumed trying to find this guy that we made a rookie mistake and hadn't recognized we were missing evidence.

"What's this really about, Detectives? I thought everything went well last night."

"It did," Spike answered as he ambled across the lounge. "The problem is that whoever the fuck this bull mask guy is, was smart enough to elude detection."

He kept walking and passed by the entrance to the Red Room, pausing to glare up at the nonfunctional camera attached to the ceiling. He studied the trajectory all for a small moment and then turned, locking eyes with me.

"And I think I just figured out how he did it."

For the third and hopefully last time, I asked, "What are you thinking?"

"Felix," he said first, sliding his sight over to him. "The back door, do you keep it locked when business is open?"

"I do not. The dumpsters are out there and it's easier letting the staff come and go as they need as opposed to constantly having to run off and unlock the door every ten minutes."

"God, I fucking hate you," Spike whispered in a low grumble, sighing as he squeezed his eyes closed. When he opened them, he looked at me and said, "The reason why our perp isn't on any of those tapes is because he came in through the back door. The camera near the end of the bar is angled directly toward the bathrooms and the other is just outside the door to the Red Room. Had they been working, we'd have him on camera, but since they weren't, that leads me to presume the guy knew those cameras were down."

Which implies this attack could've been premeditated after all.

"There aren't any cameras inside the Red Room and unfortunately, the others don't give any direct shots of the entrance or of anyone coming and going, which really fucking sucks because we still can't account what time our perp arrived. Anyway, I believe he was in the Red Room. Delilah walks in looking for Justin, he sees her, waits for her to leave, then makes his move. He corners her, knife drawn, and then he takes her to the bathroom and assaults her."

"Here's what I don't understand." I started moving and didn't stop until my eyes zeroed on the emergency exit at the end of the hall. "Why run for the front door when there's a perfectly functional door right there?"

"That may be my doing," answered Felix. "While I do tend to keep the door unlocked most of the night, I do lock it up from ten to midnight due to them being our busiest hours. I don't know when that poor girl was attacked but if it was within that timeframe, then that's probably why."

Spike and I shared a look then.

"Are you sure you have no idea who this guy could be?" I asked, shifting my attention back to Felix. "You don't remember selling a bull mask or something similar to that animal recently?"

"God, no. I remember every mask I've ever sold in this place so trust me, I'd know if I'd sold anything resembling a bull. However, you two should keep in mind that not every mask worn in this place has been purchased from my shop. Members are free to buy elsewhere, and it doesn't even have to be anything animal related. It's preferred, but it's not required. As long as you're a member and you walk in with the top half of your face covered, you're good to come in. All masks have to be worn at all times or you're gone. It's that simple."

Shit.

“Alright then, Felix.” Spike let out a sigh and tiredly rubbed his eyes. “Thanks for the help. Per usual, we’ll call or drop by if we need anything else.”

He started for the door first, and it was quiet for a long time even after we’d entered the car and hit the road. Not that it did me much good the first time, but I wanted another coffee.

“You want one?” I asked when I pulled up at the drive thru.

“Yeah, I’ll take one.”

I recited our orders and after another whopping round of silence, we had our drinks and were heading back to the precinct.

“You good?” I asked Spike in the passenger seat.

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“Yeah, man, I’m fine. Sorry I’m being so quiet. I’m just thinking.”

“Well, good. Keep doing it for the both of us. I’m so goddamn tired I’m surprised I haven’t dropped dead and wrecked the car yet.”

That summoned a slight chuckle out of him.

“I think the attack was premeditated.”

He drew in another deep breath and released it. “I do too.”

“So what about what Delilah said about her attacker? Do you believe he’d mistaken her for someone else?”

I glanced over to find him lost in thought, his forehead puckered. “That’s where it gets a little tricky for me, bud. It’s possible he did, but aside from Delilah’s word, we have absolutely nothing evidence wise to back it up. Any of it. And with no visual evidence or precise timestamp of when the bastard arrived, it only makes it all the more difficult to prove he was there, not unless we can find a match to the DNA.”

Fuck. He wasn’t wrong there.

“Are you saying you don’t believe—”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all. What I’m saying is that the situation with the cameras isn’t a coincidence. It can’t be. This guy knew what he was doing, which means he had to have been in there countless times in order to become so adequately

familiar with how Felix runs the place—not to mention knowing where each and every security camera is located. Neither of us really know if Delilah was his real target or not, but one thing we can both agree on is that this guy snuck inside the sanctum that night with intentions of hurting somebody. The main questions now are: Was Delilah chosen by random draw? Or is she really telling the truth this time around and this asshole really did brutalize the wrong woman?”

“I think she’s telling the truth. The things she claims he said to her... Those aren’t words you just come up and say to some random stranger, not unless you’re confident you know who they are. I saw the look on her face, Spike. I don’t think she knows the guy, and I highly doubt she just erratically produced all of that shit off the top of her head.” I shook my head. “No, she’s telling the truth. She has to be. And hey, man, there’s something Felix said that’s really been bugging me.”

“What’s that?”

I took a sip of coffee, having decided it had cooled down enough not to inflict third-degree burns to my mouth, and winced, though I couldn’t help but groan in pleasure at its heavenly taste. It wasn’t melt the skin off the roof of my mouth hot, but it was warm enough for me to still feel the furious sting leftover from the wound the earlier morning’s batch inflicted.

“He said he locks the back door from 10pm ‘til midnight. We didn’t leave until after midnight that night, and if I remember correctly, I don’t recall seeing anyone, male or female, leaving for quite some time after Delilah ran out the front door when we were reviewing those tapes. Obviously, our rapist didn’t depart through the front door, so that means he was still inside the sanctum with us long after Delilah left.”

“God fucking damn it.” Spike twisted in his seat to face me, and I turned my head, blinking in utter surprise when I realized he’d never linked the connection between the timeframes. “You’re right. But...” He froze, and then his eyes went distant like he

was taking a moment to do a mental surf through his memories. “Phoenix, we were all over that fucking place before we left. I think I’d remember seeing some random weirdo prancing around half-naked in a fucking bull mask.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, nodding and focusing back on the road so we wouldn’t wreck. We’d be arriving at the precinct soon. “I don’t remember seeing anyone wearing anything like that either, which is strange given that most of the rush clears out just about a quarter before midnight. Unless... I mean, it’s a long shot, but just hear me out, okay?”

“Okay,” Spike said, tilting his head at me. “I’m listening.”

“What if he had two masks with him? Maybe Bull Mask really is on those tapes somewhere and the reason why we can’t find him is because he was wearing a different mask. I mean, I doubt he hid in the bathroom or was camped out in the Red Room getting sucked off while rubbing peanut butter all over his nipples like that one guy did a few weeks ago, so he had to have gone somewhere else to lay low until midnight, right?”

“Fucking hell.” Spike leaned back in his seat and rubbed his fingertips so hard and deep into his eyeballs, I was worried he’d puncture them and send nasty eyeball jelly splattering all over me. “I love you but I fucking hate you, man. That’s smart thinking and I can’t believe I hadn’t considered any of that first.”

“Hence why you have a partner,” I reminded him by flashing him a toothy grin. “You can’t save the world by yourself, man.”

twelve

Charlotte

“I’m so happy you let me in and let me hang out for a while,” Blaire said later that night, giggling on my couch as she brought what had to be her twentieth glass of wine in the last three hours up to her mouth and sucked it down.

“You’re welcome,” I said sweetly, giving her a smile that didn’t quite reach my slowly tightening eyes.

Jesus, fuck.

Blaire was so trashed; she was seconds away from shattering the wine glass just by simply trying to put it on my center table.

“I’m happy to have you. Would you—uh, like some water, Blaire?”

Finally, she got the glass on the table, and then offered me a shy, embarrassed frown as she tilted back and sank sideways onto the corner cushion.

“I’m sorry. It’s just been so long since we’ve got to hang out outside of work, and you know, with Karl’s arraignment, I figured you could use a little emotional support.”

“You’re not bothering me, Blaire. I was only asking because you still have to drive home tonight and you just said it yourself, you are hitting the booze pretty hard.”

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“Good thing we don’t have kids then,” she said in a slow, drunken chuckle. “This couch is so comfortable I could just crash right here. But yes, to answer your question, I’d love some water.”

“I’ll go grab us a pitcher.”

I wasn’t trying to sound like or be a bitch. I truly meant well, and typically I was fabulous company to be around, but sometimes words had this nasty habit of coming out and sounding so much harsher than they did when I first envisioned them in my head. I held nothing personal against Blaire. She was my coworker, my friend, and I really enjoyed getting together to have a few drinks when I could. Today was actually the perfect day for it. My emotions had more or less spiraled this morning after Karl’s arraignment, and after finally gaining the courage to speak privately with Harley, she ordered me to take a few personal days off and promised she’d call if there were any major breaks in Delilah’s case. I refused it at first because I just wanted the day, not two or even three, but it wasn’t like I could tell the woman I was fighting so hard to be her assistant wingman to shove those personal days up her ass, so, I reluctantly took the time off. Since this morning, I’d gone home and taken a shower, napped for a while, and then texted Peter asking him to come over later tonight after he got off work. Blaire showed up not long after that with about ten different boxes of Chinese food and two cases of wine. All we’d been doing for the last three to four hours was binge drink wine, eat, and watch bullshit love stories on Lifetime.

I didn’t mind it though. Blaire was right. It had been a while—months, in fact, since we’d gotten any girl time to gossip or focus on anything else other than work. That was also part of the reason I asked Peter to come over. He and I still had a lot we had to sort through with Karl.

I finished filling the water pitcher and like a thoughtful host, brought it with two empty glasses balanced in my other hand inside the living room. Blaire's eyes were glued to some random Cinderella retelling that had just started playing on the TV. I poured her water and gave it to her and then plopped back down beside her.

"How are things coming with the Hamilton case?"

Okay, okay, fine. You caught me. Conversing about cases and clients to others was not only completely inappropriate but strictly forbidden given the attorney-client privilege. But let's just be real here, it happens quite often than many are led to believe, especially amongst other lawyers who just so happen to be close friends.

"Don't even get me started," she scoffed. "You've handled all the actual work aspect of it, but now what I'm basically doing is sitting around in a cold conference room, listening to my very guilty client rant and rage over how the accident wasn't his fault, and over how I need to get off my ass and do something to help him. Like dude, you were the one who put that bottle to your lips and chose to drive. There's no way in fucking hell I can guarantee you a reprimand when your BAC is three times the legal drinking limit."

I tried not to chuckle but honestly couldn't help it. I knew exactly how she felt. Mr. Hamilton was an absolute nightmare to deal with and was the sole reason I'd originally taken that case off Blaire's hands. My fuse was quite a bit bigger than hers when it came to the more challenging, or in Mr. Hamilton's case, temperamental, rich clients of Seaview Pines. I felt bad I had to throw all of that madness back on her shoulders, but it was too late now and there was nothing I could do about it.

"What about you?" she asked, sipping her water. "How's it going with your case?"

"Honestly," I started with a deep sigh, "I really don't know. We've been making some progress, but the problem is we really don't have shit aside from DNA, and no,

there wasn't a match in CODIS. Whoever committed this crime doesn't appear to have a record, but he's definitely done his homework and seems to know what he's doing."

It was ridiculous. I'd spent hours on the computer, ingested health concerning amounts of coffee, and painfully expelled what had to be gallons upon gallons of caffeinated piss in my toilet just to come up fucking emptier than a pauper's purse. I hoped the detectives were having better luck because as much as it internally butchered me to say it, I had a horrible feeling this case was falling downhill faster than a knife fight in a phone booth.

"That's rough," Blaire said with a pout. "I'm sorry. And hey, no offense, but I really don't want to talk about work. I want to talk about you and how you're doing now that Karl's arraignment is over."

I sighed. I may as well. I mean, it wasn't like I'd been trying to avoid the conversation since she got here.

"I guess I'm doing okay." I shrugged, because I knew there wasn't shit else I could do except to take each day as it comes. It was no different than what I'd been doing for the last soon to be eight months now. "It hurts. Things should've never turned out this way."

"What happens now that he has to wear an ankle monitor?"

I curled into the nearest cushion, making myself comfortable. "Well, as long as he doesn't attempt to remove it or violates the restraining order by coming within a hundred feet or less of wherever I am, then nothing will happen. If he does, then, I guess I'll have to do what I probably should've done this morning and throw his ass in jail."

“Those restraining orders are a bullshit asset to our legal system and do absolutely no fucking good. You know just as well as I do that Karl can still stalk you right outside your house, or anywhere really, just so long as he doesn’t ‘fuck up’ by getting too close. You know guns are a thing, right, Charlotte? You don’t have to be standing a hundred feet away in order to shoot and kill somebody.”

“I’m aware.” I turned away and allowed the tears building under my lids to slip out and fall freely. “Thanks, Blaire.”

“I’m not trying to upset you, Char. I guess what I’m saying is that maybe it would help if I understood the real reason why you changed your mind after everything he’s done. I know you don’t like talking about it, but could you at least try for me? Please?”

“Everyone looks at Karl now and sees a monster, but what everyone also refuses to understand is that I was married to him for over ten years. That’s a long time, Blaire. Karl has always been a good man to me since the first day I met him, and the only reason any of this happened is because he cheated on me with a fucking nineteen-year-old, whom I never would’ve known a goddamn thing about if it weren’t for him running a red light and hitting another car.”

I paused, needing a minute to breathe so I wouldn’t completely combust into tears.

“Well, as you know, she died on impact. And then Karl lost his promotion and got booted back down to street traffic duty with the rookies. I filed for divorce. I quit speaking to not only him but to my parents as well. During the divorce they were trying to do or say any little thing they could to make me take every dime of money Karl had to his name and leave him slap broke with nothing but the clothes he had on his back. There’s more, but those are just some out of the many reasons why I dropped the charges.”

I looked at Blaire and found her gaping back at me like she still didn't fully understand.

"I told you, I'm not a monster. Aside from Karl hitting me that one time and of course, the cheating, he's never physically hurt me. I know I should want him to hurt and that I should want to ruin him like everyone has been telling me to, but it's just not that simple when it comes to someone you've loved and spent a good chunk of your life with. The reason Karl has been so hostile lately is because he wants to talk to me, I guess to reconcile just like he did all the other times he's claimed he wanted to talk, and I've been telling him to fuck off and leave me alone. I'm hurting, yes, but the sad truth is, he's lost a lot more than I have recently, and I'm not about to purposely ruin his life all because he cheated and broke my heart. I want to give him a chance to move on and let me go the right way, not only out of respect for him but because of the simple fact that I really don't want to put his ass in jail if I don't have to. If he doesn't listen, then well, I guess I'll do what I have to do. I just don't want it to result to that. I really don't."

Blaire sprung forward and wrapped me in a tight embrace. "When you put it that way, it makes a lot more sense now. I'm sorry, Charlotte, I-I really am. You're a good person."

"I try to be." I chuckled, reaching up to knuckle the tears under my eyes away before I pulled back, giving her the best smile I could muster.

"Forgive me for asking, but it's been how long since you two split?"

"Coming up on eight months now."

"Have you... You know..." She waggled her brows at me. "Gotten any during the separation?"

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“Oh.” Heat scorched against my cheeks like someone had just snatched my head and tugged it over a freshly lit grill. “I love you, Blaire, you know that, but I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

She sat up straighter and had the audacity to scoff at me. “Bitch, you’re thirty-three and I’m thirty-five. We’re grown, this is juicy shit, and you know my husband is deployed in Iraq and won’t be home for another six to eight months. All I have to keep me company is my book boyfriends and sex toys. If you’re fucking someone, just say you’re fucking someone... And then give me all the dirty details.”

“Blaire.”

“It’s just sex, Charlotte. Everyone has it, does it, experiences it, whatever. Come on. Loosen the hell up a little and just talk to me.”

“Fine.” I shook my head, knowing she wouldn’t let it go until I gave her something. “No. I haven’t slept with anyone.”

“Bullshit,” she coughed with her curled fist under her mouth, straining not to grin at me in her drunken state.

“You’re drunk, Blaire.”

“I am drunk, that is true, and you’re a liar. You’re fucking someone and I want to know who it is.”

“Only thing touching this pussy are these three girls here.” I raised my hand up and

wiggled my middle, ring finger, and thumb around.

“Bull. Shit.” She grinned at me, still not buying it despite how good I was doing at almost having her convinced. “Tell me his name. Just tell me his name and I swear I’ll leave you alone.”

“Who said it’s one guy?”

“Bitch.” She put her water down and grabbed ahold of my shoulders, shaking me with her eyes blown wide with sheer excitement. “Tell me everything.”

“You’re so fucking gullible.”

I wiped another round of tears out of my eyes and shook my head at her, cackling so hard I snorted.

“What the fuck ever. If you don’t want to tell me, then fine. Just because everyone is entitled to their privacy doesn’t mean others won’t find it interesting or maybe a little on the sexy side.”

Blaire fell silent for a moment, then looked up and locked eyes with me like I was some random rodent she’d just caught pissing all over her brand-new tire.

“It’s Peter. You’ve been secretly screwing Peter all this time, haven’t you?”

“You’re not serious.” I scoffed, blinking at her in total disbelief. “Have you lost your mind?”

She snorted and shook her head at me like I was an idiot. “He likes you, Charlotte, and I see how you two are around each other when he comes by the office. I just don’t understand why you won’t—”

“Because Peter and I are friends and will always and only be friends.”

I wasn't sure what ever it was she may or may not have seen that had given her the impression I was interested in Peter, or him with me, but she was far off because in my eyes, Peter was nothing more than a massively overprotective brother who severely pissed me off on occasion.

“Okay, fine,” Blaire whined. “So, you mean to tell me you aren't interested in anybody? I mean, I know shit's been rough, but eight months is a long time to self-soothe an aching appetite only a dick can cure. Trust me, I'd know.”

I sighed, and instead of answering right away, I leaned over to the center table and filled my empty glass with water, sipping it for a minute. I wished I could tell her about Spike and Phoenix and all about this new wild and exciting ride I'd been experiencing, but I'd learned the hard way months ago about spilling any specifics to her about my personal life.

As much as I loved Blaire, she had quite a ridiculous and annoyingly nasty habit of spreading anyone and everyone's personal business around the firm. When I'd finally convinced myself to file for divorce, aside from Peter, Blaire was the only person I'd told at the time. Come the next day, everyone knew my marriage had fallen to shit. If I told her about Spike, Phoenix, The Flirty Sanctum, and that I'd done the most stupid shit ever by giving them my phone number last night, then my career, my reputation, and everything I'd ever worked so fucking hard for would be over.

I'd be ruined.

“I don't know what you want me to say, Blaire. Eventually, I'll get back out there but for now, I just want to focus on my career. You know Harley still hasn't hired anyone to fill that ADA position yet.”

She widened her eyes at me. “I know. You’re gunning for it, right?”

I nodded despite my frown. “Trying to, yeah. I hope we manage to catch a huge break in this case. If we do, and this shit makes it to trial...”

I closed my eyes and blew out a sharp breath.

“I want this, Blaire. I want this more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life. It’s my dream. Unfortunately, I don’t think I’ll get it. More than likely she’ll offer it to you or Perry.”

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Blaire laughed like I'd just told the most comedic joke she'd ever heard. "I don't want that shit. I barely get enough sleep as it is. Besides, once Carter comes home from deployment, more than likely we'll be moving again. But Perry?"

She raised her brows like it was her way of asking if I was being serious.

"No, honey, Perry won't land that promotion over you. He may be a good lawyer and is a tad bit better at handling heavier workloads than the rest of us, but you've been at the company longer, have far more experience, and there's still the exam you have to consider. Plus, it wasn't Perry Harley trusted to work the rape case. It was you, and I think she did it for a reason."

"You mean like a test?" My heart jumped to my throat at the prospect.

"It's possible, yeah," she nodded. "Think about it. There's a reason Harley keeps putting off hiring someone to fill that spot. It's been open for months now, so she's either in no rush whatsoever to bring in fresh meat, or she already has her sights set on someone. I mean, don't take this to heart because we both know I could be wrong, but it's very possible that person is you, Charlotte. You may not have any control over what happens during cases but what matters the most is how you do your job and how you present yourself amongst the court. You're amazing, Charlotte. You're damn good at your job and Harley knows it. She'd be a fucking idiot not to offer you that position."

"Thanks, Blaire. That really means a lot." I scooted in and hugged her, holding on for barely a minute when my doorbell rang, and three heavy knocks pounded against my front door.

Shit.

“That’s Peter,” I told Blaire as I got up and made way for the door, punching in the code on the alarm. “I texted him earlier and told him to come over so we could talk about Karl.”

“Do you need me to go?” she asked.

“You need to drink about twenty more glasses of water before I consider letting you go anywhere.”

“Okay, Mom,” she hooted. “Whatever you say.”

I hid my smile and then opened the door.

That same smile fell as I took in the disappointment thronged along Peter’s face when he saw Blaire on the couch.

I guess he must not have read the other text I sent him telling him she was here.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he answered, his gaze softening when his pupils met mine. “Just tired. It’s been a long day. Do you want to do this another time?”

I shook my head and opened the door wider. “Not at all. Come on in.”

“Do me a favor, will you?” he asked, hissing slightly as he walked inside and handed over his leather briefcase. “Open that up and grab my—”

“Oh my God, Peter,” I squealed, my eyes widening in horror as I took in the damage

just under his glove and on his wrist.

I met his gaze again, my lips parted.

“My lotion,” he softly demanded. “I need it. It’s bad.”

“Another flare?”

I took the briefcase and rushed inside the kitchen, pushing some of the Chinese food boxes on the island aside and depositing the case on top. I opened it up and immediately found the medicated lotion, grabbing it as Peter hissed more as he struggled taking off his black gloves.

“Here, let me help.”

I put the lotion down, then gasped when I pulled the first glove off and found every crevasse of his hand red, swollen, cracked, and on the verge of bleeding. His other hand was worse, so as fast as fucking possible, I squirted the lotion on both his palms and got to work massaging the medicine in on all the uglier spots first.

“More like constant flares,” he said, sighing in relief the more I massaged the lotion into his hands. “You seriously have no idea how painful this shit can be at times.”

“I’m sorry. Is this helping any?”

“The lotion takes time to work, but yeah, you’re helping me in more ways than I have enough thanks to express.”

Sometimes I had no idea how he got through the days. Peter had the worst case of eczema I’d ever seen. Not only did his skin severely itch, but sometimes it was completely incapable of retaining moisture and would dry out, crack, bleed, you

name it. Occasionally his flares would affect his face and nose, but it was always his hands that got the shit end of the stick.

“The point of the lotion is to use it consistently,” I kind of snapped at him. “Which I assume you haven’t been doing given how bad your hands are.”

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“Let me remind you that our healthcare system is shit and that money doesn’t grow on trees. That lotion costs a pretty penny even with my insurance, which is damn good, by the way.”

“But are you doing it consistently? Are you using it when you really need it the most?”

He looked away from me.

“God damnit, Peter!”

“It’s not like I can just keep caking the shit on my skin, Char. I’ve been portioning to make it last as long as I can. Unless you’re willing to rob countless pharmacies or can miraculously produce the money to keep me stocked long-term, then there’s nothing I can do. I wish the doctor would just prescribe me a year supply instead of forcing me to do this month-by-month bullshit.”

A faint sound met the air, almost like a snore. Peter and I both whipped around to the living room to find Blaire passed out on the couch, her head on the arm rest and her mouth open wide.

Well, shit. That was fast.

“Damnit, Blaire,” I muttered.

“Problem?”

“No, not really, I guess. I just wasn’t planning on having her stay overnight.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait and do this another time? I mean, you pretty much know what to expect and what’ll happen if he violates the restraining order. There’s nothing really more I can tell you that you don’t already know.”

“I’d like to go over it one last time, just so I know exactly what my options are, and what to do just in case Karl decides to do something stupid again. I’m not saying he will. I have a feeling he’ll listen this time around, especially now that he has to walk around with a computerized tracker locked around his ankle. I’d rather be safe than sorry, that’s all.”

“Okay,” Peter nodded, offering me a kind smile. “We can do that.” Without touching the bags, he shifted his head forward and kind of eyed around what he could see of the contents, licking his lips. “I’m so sorry to ask, but is there any way I could maybe have some of whatever that is? I skipped lunch today and I’m starving.”

I chuckled and walked over to the cabinet, grabbing a plate for him. “I’ll make you something while the lotion dries. Blaire didn’t exactly know what I liked Chinese wise, so she kind of went a little crazy. Hell, if you want, you can take some of it home with you. There’s no way I’ll be able to eat all of it, and I doubt Blaire will either.”

“Yeah, I’ll take some home with me.”

“Good.” It took me a few minutes but once I was done, I moved his briefcase off the island and sat his food down in front of him. “Dinner is served, my friend.”

thirteen

Spike

“There’s no fucking way.”

Phoenix gaped between me and the index cards, his lips parting wider and wider the longer he stared at them. Work had been rough these last few days, but thankfully we both landed the day off and decided to spend most of it sleeping and the rest of it watching football and getting plastered at my place.

“Why are you just now telling me about this?”

“Because I wasn’t going to at first,” was my blunt response.

His brows lifted in frank surprise at the guilt staring at him through my dark eyes.

“You’re not the only one involved with her, so, I changed my mind. It wasn’t fair hiding it from you, and I’m sorry I did.”

I took a swig from my beer and swallowed it down, sighing.

“I panicked. The moment I realized Eve was Charlotte... I really didn’t know what to do, how to react, anything. Fuck, I’m still having a hard time getting around the shock of it all.”

“God damnit,” Phoenix whispered. He’d just double checked the number in his phone and found it was a perfect match.

Eve was Charlotte. Charlotte was Eve.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK!

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“Does she know who we are?” he asked after a moment.

“I don’t think so,” I answered despite the shrug I’d given him. “But then again, it’s hard to say. Before she left, she told me she was excited to meet up with us outside of the sanctum, but that she had to tell me something.” I paused, looking up and locking eyes with him. “I never found out because I told her we’d talk about everything on our date. I wonder if that was it—if she was going to tell me Eve wasn’t her real name.”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything, Spike. The truth is, well, the truth.”

“How do you want to play this?” I asked, feeling just as worried as he looked. “She comes back to work tomorrow. I know we haven’t been working with her long, but the timing with all of this just seems...I don’t know...not very coincidental.”

“What do you mean? Are you changing your mind and saying you suspect she does know who we are?”

I bit my lip, stammering at getting the right words out. “It could be possible, but fuck, I don’t know, man, I’m buzzing here. We’ve asked about hooking up outside of the sanctum before, and she gave us the cold shoulder. Then she starts working with us, and then all of a sudden, she comes to the club and changes her mind? I don’t know, it just feels weird.”

“Look at what she has stacked on her shoulders. I know you heard everything she said in court. When Eve—” he froze, wincing, “I mean, Charlotte, first started coming to the club, she made it clear to us she wasn’t looking for a relationship. And

the only reason we've been so butt-hurt since she shot us down is because we didn't understand why. Well, now we do. We were trying to pursue something she clearly wasn't ready for. Maybe now with Karl on suspension and his every waking moment temporarily being tracked, she's trying to relax and actually live a little."

I finished off my beer then, considering everything as I have for the last two fucking days while I watched Phoenix toss the cards down on the center table and then get up to fetch us more beer from the fridge. Since I was a child, I always had this horrid habit of insinuating the worst out of literally every fucking great thing to ever come into my life. I didn't want to do this with Eve, but that was before I knew Eve wasn't really Eve and was in fact Charlotte fucking Greene.

"We need to come clean," I said when Phoenix returned and handed over my ice-cold beer.

"What?" he said with a soft scoff, gawking at me with a huge knot sticking out between his pinched brows. "You can't be serious."

"It's not like we can just keep this shit to ourselves, Phoenix, not whenever she's still working this case with us. On the job she knows us as Rhodes and Hutch, but at the club she only knows us by our first names."

His eyes went wide once he realized what I was saying without having to fully explain.

"I completely forgot about that."

"This case is growing cold, Phoenix, and fast. We're right back to square one and the only thing all three of us internally and externally have in common with this case is The Flirty Sanctum."

“I know that,” he answered, and I could tell from the way his face slowly fell as he leaned against the cushion that he didn’t want to do this. “But don’t you think it would be better if maybe we waited—”

“I know what you’re going to say, bud, and I get it, I’m worried too. I don’t want to lose whatever this thing is we have with her either. But it doesn’t change the fact that we have an eighteen-year-old rape victim whose rapist is still out there roaming the streets and could strike again at any moment.”

He swallowed hard, sighing as his eyes drifted back over to the index cards on the center table.

He knew I was right.

As much as I, too, wanted to keep all of this hush and pray everything would work for our benefit, it was realistically impossible. We couldn’t be selfish about this and play games with Charlotte’s head and heart like a bunch of punk-ass teenagers. We were in our fucking thirties for crying out loud. It had to be done and whatever happens, happens, and I said as much to Phoenix.

The worry on his face only worsened because he knew me better than the back of his own hand and knew I’d already devised a plan. He took a few chugs from his fresh beer but said nothing aside from giving me a miserable nod.

fourteen

Charlotte

My little three-day vay-cay was finally over, and as pumped as I was to go back to work today, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little bummed out. I’d taken Peter’s advice and shut off my phone and had come to learn something crucial about myself

recently.

All I did was work.

My off days were never really considered as my off days because I still worked from home even after spending twelve hours at the firm, or wherever else the day's required tasks had directed me to meet with clients. I spent more time outside of my home than getting to relax and actually enjoy being at home, which I found to be quite depressing the more the reality of it settled in. I had a lot of vacation time over the years built up that I hadn't actually used yet, so I suppose that was something I'd have to look into soon.

And speaking of my phone, the damn thing hadn't stopped dinging since I powered it on first thing this morning. I was currently in my bathroom finishing up with my makeup and still, the fucking thing kept vibrating against the counter with God knows how many texts, personal and work emails, and possibly some voicemails too.

Someone was calling me now, so after glancing down at the screen and seeing it was Harley, I quickly answered the line and put her on speakerphone so I could finish applying the final touches to my hair. I was wearing it down today and almost had it ironed to perfection.

"Good morning, Harley," was my chipper greeting.

"Ah, Charlotte," she replied. "Are you coming into the office today?"

"I sure am. I'm finishing up now and will be walking out the door soon."

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“Glad to hear it. Would you mind doing me a favor and grabbing me a coffee on your way in? I’m afraid the coffee pot in our break room is broken.”

I couldn’t help but chortle. “Is that why you called? To see if I was coming in so I could bring you some coffee?”

“Would it be unprofessional of me if I said yes?” she asked coyly.

I grinned bigger at my reflection in the mirror and shook my head. “It’s not a problem, Harley. I’ll be happy to stop and grab you one. How many sugars and creamers?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll just use what we have here.”

“Sounds good then. I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

I hung up the phone and gave myself a final onceover in the mirror, nodding approvingly before grabbing the device and heading downstairs to grab my purse. A notification from my camera app had me freezing at the bottom step. I opened the app and sighed hard with relief when I saw a delivery guy placing a package at my front door. He knocked twice, rang the doorbell, then turned away and departed for his truck.

After punching in the security code, I opened the door and grasped the large box, staring down at it in confusion. My full name and address were printed in sloppy handwriting, but the sender’s information was blank, which was weird because I couldn’t recall whether I’d made any online purchases as of late.

Huh. I wonder what this could be.

I didn't have time to open it, so I shut the door and then wandered inside the kitchen and set the package down on the island, beside my purse. After snagging my keys and double checking to make sure I had everything I needed, I rearmed the system and was off to the coffee shop.

"Did you send me a package?" I asked Blaire first thing when I saw her.

She looked up at me from her computer and blinked at me standing in her doorway. "Huh?"

"A package came in with my name on it, but no information on who sent it."

"Oh." She frowned at me. "Sorry girl, but it wasn't me. Did you ask Peter?"

"Yeah. I called him on my way here and he swears he didn't send me anything."

"I don't know then. Are you sure you didn't order something and just forgot? I do that shit all the time."

"I don't think so," I said, shaking my head and shrugging. "Hell, who knows. It's possible."

If push came to shove, I'd break and call my mom on my lunch break. She and my dad were the only people I could think of considering I didn't have any siblings, and my grandparents passed away years ago, so I knew they couldn't have sent it.

"Alright, Blaire. Thanks. I have to go meet with Harley, so I'll catch you later. If things don't get too crazy today, then do you want to go out to lunch together?"

She smiled at me, nodding. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

I bid her farewell and then made the short trek down the hall and toward Harley’s office. After balancing her coffee in hand with mine, I knocked on the door. Harley immediately opened it and wasted no time accepting her beverage and thanking me at least a thousand times.

“Here,” she said, rounding her desk and placing her coffee down so she could grab her purse. “How much was it?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I told her, refusing the money when she tried to hand me a five-dollar-bill from her wallet. “Really, it’s fine. You don’t have to pay me back.”

“Nonsense.” She shook the money at me, urging me to take it. Just to make her happy I did, but it wasn’t going to stop me from slipping it back on her desk when she wasn’t paying attention.

“Do you have any updates for me on Delilah’s case?” I asked, eagerly glancing over at the file resting beside her computer.

“Yeah, about that.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked when I heard the shift in her tone.

“Tell me something, Charlotte. Are you having any issues with Rhodes and Hutch?”

I blinked at her, a little taken aback by the question. “No, ma’am. At least none that I’m aware of. Why?”

“It’s just that Detective Hutch phoned me last night requesting a new CDA for Delilah’s—”

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“He did fucking WHAT?” I bellowed, slapping my hands over my mouth as Harley’s head jerked back, her eyes narrowed.

“Oh my God.”

I squeezed my eyes closed and breathed in deep, letting it out.

“I’m so sorry, Harley. Forgive me. That just kind of...slipped out.”

I sat down in the chair in front of her desk and watched as Harley plopped down in her seat, her features softening at my apology.

“I don’t understand. Did he say why?”

“Not exactly,” she said, giving me a look that expressed she was just as befuddled by this whole thing. “He just expressed some concerns over whether you were capable of keeping your personal issues separate from the job given everything you’re currently going through with Karl.”

Rage bubbled up in my blood. I kept my face blank, albeit it was much, much harder keeping my breathing under control.

“I told him you and I have already had this discussion, and I guaranteed him he had nothing to worry about.”

I nodded, remaining mute despite the heaving in my chest.

“It’s evident you’re upset by this.” Harley sat back in her chair and offered me a frown. “Personally, Charlotte, I don’t think he meant any harm. I think he’s just worried you’re gonna burn out from the stress. You are going through a lot and well, it’s no secret that both sides of your life have been clashing lately, so it’s completely understandable for him to be troubled.”

“You’re taking me off the case, aren’t you?” I asked, struggling to fight back the tears dotting over my eyes.

“Did I say I was taking you off the case? I was just informing you what was relayed to me so there wouldn’t be any surprises when you see them again.”

“Thank you for telling me.” I forced the fakest fucking smile I could muster in that moment. “I appreciate it.”

Harley nodded and then turned her attention to the file, grabbing it. I took that opportunity to swiftly slip the five-dollar bill behind one of the picture frames closest to me on her desk.

We sat there for a bit discussing the case and when we were done, I grabbed the file, my coffee, and was out the door again.

Now it was time to go pick this fucking bone with Detective Hutch.

fifteen

Phoenix

I gaped between both sets of flowers with my lips pinched, torn between which one I should select. The set on my left was an exquisite bouquet of freshly harvested red roses, and the bundle on my right was a bouquet containing an assortment of roses,

daisies, lilies, and tulips.

“Hi there. Anything I can help you with?”

My gaze lifted and landed on a young girl in her early twenties with dirty-blond hair and blue eyes. She was wearing dark blue jeans, a white button-down, and she was pregnant—about a good six to seven months. I offered her a kind smile and gestured between the two bouquets.

“I’m looking for something...not creepy,” I said with a tense chuckle. “It’s been a while since I’ve done something like this and let’s just say I’m a little nervous.”

“First date?”

“Something like that. I’m looking for something that shows I’m interested, but I also don’t want it to scream I’m trying too hard.”

The woman laughed softly. “That should be easy enough. Do you know what she likes?”

“I don’t,” I shamefully answered, frowning. “It’s hard to explain, but this is sort of like a blind date. We’ve spoken before, but never for more than a few minutes. This is technically the first time we’re meeting face to face.”

“And you never thought to ask her about her favorite flowers?”

I shamefully nodded.

“Well, you can’t go wrong with our variety bundle,” she said, nudging her head to the assortment on my right. “Not only is it our best seller, but it’s the perfect option for those who find themselves in situations much like the one you’re in. Now, there are

some women who can be particularly picky about their flowers, but me personally, I prefer variety. There's a unique art to arranging them, but if done correctly, you'd be amazed at how much beauty and magic one simple little flower arrangement can bring to someone's life."

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Beauty and magic were the precise things I was looking for.

“Sounds great. I’ll take it.”

The blonde beamed at me, her eyes glittering. “Awesome. I can get that going for you right away. What size bundle would you like? We have small, medium, large, and XL, which is the largest we offer.”

“Medium is fine. Do you happen to sell flower vases?”

“We do.” The woman nodded and then pointed all the way to the opposite side of the flower shop. “We have different selections from glass, plastic, ceramic, and we even do special engravings should you decide to go with one of our metallic vases.”

“That sounds great.”

“I’ll be at one of the larger tables in the back of the store,” she said, pointing in said direction. “It’ll take me a few minutes to get your arrangement ready. If you find a vase you like, then you can bring it over to me and I’ll set everything up for you. If not, then I can box everything up separately.”

“Sounds good. I’ll think about it and let you know.”

I left her to begin her work and continued to browse through several tables harboring different flowers bearing names I couldn’t dare pronounce if I’d tried, until, as promised, a large aisle stocked full of all sorts of vases blessed my vision. I had no fucking clue what I was doing and if my parents were still alive, I could’ve called one

of them up and asked for some advice. Given that it had been two miserably long years since their passing, and four lonely years since I felt serious about someone, the Lord knew how much I really needed it, and them. I'd only just discovered the mystery woman I'd been longing for was the CDA I was currently working with. Aside from that, and of course, this ridiculous fucking situation she was in with her ex-husband, I frankly didn't know shit about Charlotte Greene or anything pertaining to her likes, dislikes, hobbies, her favorite color—hell, none of it. Spike said the plan was to invite her out to lunch so we could speak with her privately, so I wanted to do something sweet, like buy her some flowers in hopes it would help make things less awkward once we broke the news to her. I was so damn nervous, but I could do this. I knew I could. Picking out flowers was one thing, but seriously, how hard could it be picking out a vase?

It was less than a minute later when my eyes landed on a stunning, crystalized vase which had what appeared to be a leaf and vine pattern professionally molted top to bottom inside the glass. It was a little on the smaller side, but after taking another look, I suppose the mouth was big enough to hold a mediumish size bouquet. There was only one way to find out, so I eagerly grabbed the glass and looked it over with a pleased smile before starting my trek to the back of the store.

I was about halfway there and could literally see the woman I'd spoken to busy assembling my order, when my phone started buzzing in my pocket, halting me in my tracks. After safely tucking the vase away under my left arm, I fished out the phone and glanced down to see it was Spike calling.

“Hey. You at the precinct?”

“I am. And you're never going to believe this shit. We have another case.”

My body stiffened where I stood. Swallowing hard, I asked, “Like a rape case?”

“Amber Strickland. Dark hair, blue eyes, and twenty-eight years old. She was found by her husband in their living room about thirty minutes ago. She’s been beaten and her clothes are torn.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear long enough to check the time. It was still early, just a little after 8am.

“Is it connected to Delilah’s case?”

“Chief seems to think so. He called Cap with the info and had him update me first thing when I walked in. Where are you at?”

“I’m about ten, maybe fifteen minutes away.”

“Do me a favor and put the pedal to the metal. I’m low on gas, so I need you to swing by the precinct and pick me up. CSIs got there ten minutes ago and Cap wants us there ASAP.”

Shit.

I had no idea how much longer it was going to take here in the flower shop. The EMTs would have Amber on the stretcher and over halfway to the hospital by the time I left here and made it to the precinct.

“I’ll be there as fast as I can, Spike. Sit tight.”

I hated rushing people, but this was an emergency and unfortunately, I didn’t have much of a choice.

“Hey hon,” I said, greeting the nice lady who was helping me. “Work called and I’m afraid I have to leave.”

“Oh, no problem. Believe it or not, I just finished up. Is that the vase you want?” she asked, nudging her head to the glass trapped under my armpit.

“It is,” I replied, handing it over. “Is it big enough to fit?”

She nodded. “All I have to do is cut the stems a little shorter but yes, it’ll fit just fine.”

There was a register on the counter beside her. After placing the bouquet down long enough to open the register, she handed over my bill and then disappeared through a door behind the table.

She appeared moments later with the arrangement placed neatly and beautifully inside the water-filled vase and a huge smile on her face.

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I pulled up at the precinct and hit SEND on the text, letting Spike know I was here and waiting. I hoped he would come out soon because I had an idea I wanted to run by him.

The plan was to take Charlotte out to lunch and make the big reveal then, but instead of waiting for lunchtime to make our move, I wanted to go by the DAs office, personally deliver Charlotte's flowers, and then ask her out to lunch in person. It seemed more intimate and gentlemen-like to approach her that way as opposed to sending a foolish, inconsiderate text message.

Time ticked by and the longer I waited, I began to get irritable. If he was in there taking a shit, usually, he'd have the decency to message me with a heads up. There were no missed calls or texts on my phone though, so the longer I was forced to sit and wait, the more impatient I'd become.

What the fuck was taking so long?

I exhausted another five minutes we really couldn't afford to waste before I got out of the car and slammed the door shut. Charlotte's flowers were in the passenger seat and no sooner than I'd shut the door, the vase tipped over in the seat.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I moved fast and opened the door, saving them from harm and luckily able to dodge wetting the seat. I blew out a breath and set them down on the floorboard just to curse angrily when I shut the door and watched them tip over again.

God damnit.

I rounded over to the passenger side, saying fuck it then and deciding to bring the vase with me. I didn't want the flowers or the vase to get ruined, so if it meant I had to tote it around with me until it was in Charlotte's hands, then so be it.

I made it inside the precinct and entered through the elevators, halting again when all of my colleagues, including Detective Peach, turned, and suddenly stiffened—their feet rooted in position and their eyes solely locked on me.

Spike wasn't at his desk and as I wordlessly gazed around, I didn't see him anywhere.

What the hell was going on?

"Interrogation Room 1," a deep voice said from behind me.

I turned, locking eyes with Captain Burgess.

"You might want to hurry. It isn't pretty."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Charlotte Greene came storming in not even a minute before you did. I'm not exactly sure what your partner did, but what I do know is that she looks angry enough to wrestle a thirteen-foot crocodile with her bare hands."

I sighed deeply and closed my eyes.

Fuck.

This was the last fucking thing I wanted to deal with right now.

At this rate, the EMTs would be at the hospital long before Spike and I could step a foot outside of the building.

“Alright, Cap. I’ll handle it.”

I wandered over to my desk and gently placed the vase down, ensuring it was secure and nothing would knock it over before I turned and made the short trek over to the door leading to the interrogation hall. I approached the door to Room 1 and opened it to find myself staring at Charlotte and Spike nose to nose through the window.

Quickly, I rushed over to the speaker box and activated it so I could listen in.

“You had no fucking right, Hutch,” Charlotte growled, her chest heaving as she glared up and deep into his dark eyes. “Next time, grow a set of nuts and confront me face-to-face like a real man.”

She took a step away from him with her hands pressed to her hips and her head slightly cocked to the side, her eyes flashing.

All I could do was stand there wide-eyed and confused.

What the hell was going on?

What did Spike do?

Doing nothing but standing there behind the glass wouldn’t give me any answers, so I shut off the speaker box and entered the interrogation room, earning a startled gasp from Charlotte and an annoyed curse from Spike.

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“What the hell is going on here?”

“I’ll tell you what’s going on.” Charlotte raised her hand and pointed a hostile finger at my partner’s chest. “This motherfucker called my boss demanding for a new CDA. Apparently, Detective Hutch seems to think I have an issue keeping my personal problems emotionally contained outside of work.”

“He did what?” I asked, staring between the both of them in utter disbelief. It must have been time to clean out my ears because I was certain I had to have misunderstood her.

But as my gaze flicked back over to Spike, visually processing how he refused to look at me and how he neglected to defend himself, I became angry, and fucking fast too.

Why the fuck would he do something like that?

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No,” he growled, his jaw ticking. “There isn’t. But she has something to tell us. Isn’t that right, Eve?”

Charlotte blinked wide-eyed at him with her lips parted, her breath trembling. “Wh-what did you just call me?”

My heart dropped.

I opened my mouth, but as hard as I tried, no words came out.

What the fuck was Spike thinking? This was not part of the fucking plan!

“Eve,” Spike carried on with a malevolent grin on his face. “That’s what you told us your name was when we met at The Flirty Sanctum.”

“Spike,” I growled without thinking, seconds away from striking him across his thick fucking jaw as I turned to him with my fists clenched and ready.

“Sp-Spike?” Charlotte repeated, her skin paling as she took another step back, her eyes sweeping over him again, and then me. “Ph-Phoenix?”

“Hi, Eve,” I muttered, frowning with remorse as I watched her hands shoot up and clasp around her mouth, tears filling her eyes.

“My name is Spike Hutcheson and his is Phoenix Rhodes. At the club you know us as Spike and Phoenix, but here you know us as Hutch and Rhodes. We didn’t know who you really were until you gave me your phone number the other night. I am the lion, Phoenix is the rabbit, and you, Charlotte Greene, are our precious feline.”

“No.” She moved closer to the door, shaking her head. “That’s impossible.”

“I’m sorry, Charlotte.” I wanted to go to her, but I knew she’d shove me away or run if I tried. “But he’s telling the truth. You weren’t supposed to find out this way. The plan was to invite you to lunch and then tell you.”

I cut my eyes at Spike, who did nothing but roll his eyes in spite of his constant refusal to look me in the eye.

I’d deal with his ass soon enough.

“We have a case,” I told her before she could say anything. “Possibly another rape victim. Chief thinks it’s related to Delilah’s case.”

“Good.” Charlotte straightened her posture and then turned for the door, grasping the knob. “Text me the details and I’ll meet you there.”

She took a step out before she froze and whirled back to face us, her forehead scrunched with wrinkles as she glared ruthlessly at Spike. “I’ll make sure to keep my personal problems emotionally separate from the case.”

Charlotte took her leave and viciously slammed the door behind her. I turned to Spike and without thinking twice about it, grasped him by the collar on his shirt and vehemently slammed him against the wall.

I typically wasn’t one to resort to violence so quickly, but I was good and pissed the fuck off and Spike deserved to have his shit rocked sideways after that stunt he just pulled.

“What the fuck were you thinking, huh, Spike?” Spit flew out my mouth and landed on his chin and cheek. “We had a plan!”

“Plans change,” he sneered, shoving me off of him and adjusting his collar back in place, smirking at me as my chest began to heave. “It felt like the right call and so, I did what I had to do.”

“You went to her fucking boss!”

“How the fuck was I supposed to know Harley would tell her?” he asked, raising his hands in defense. “The woman denied my request and shot me down. There was no reason to tell—”

“That’s her fucking boss, Spike. Of course she was going to tell Charlotte!” I scrubbed my hands down my face and took a moment to get the jackhammering in my chest back under control. “Charlotte’s right, Spike. You had no fucking right to do that shit. However, what’s done is done and well, I doubt there’s anything I can do to fix this shit. Not only did you decide to fuck me over, but you probably just cost us our relationship with her too. Thanks for that. I truly hope it was fucking worth it.”

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It fell silent then, and as I looked at him, finding his gaze planted to the floor and his lips dropped down in a miserable frown, I sighed and shook my head. There was nothing more I could say and hell, I was so upset I didn't even want to look at him. We still had a case to work though, so I told him I'd meet him at the car and left him alone to temporarily reflect on the consequences of his actions.

sixteen

Charlotte

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I vomited inside the toilet, coughing a few times until I was able to gulp down a few greedy breaths and rest my head against the top of the toilet lid.

Spike was Hutch.

Rhodes was Phoenix.

Spike Hutcheson. Phoenix Rhodes.

They were...

Them.

"Oh god," I groaned, dropping my head down and puking again. My stomach felt empty now, but just to be sure, I sat on the floor for another minute and did nothing but cry, silently asking how I could've possibly gotten myself into this situation.

I wasn't sure how long I'd sat there, but there was a familiar buzzing against my thigh that had me reaching inside my slacks pocket for my phone. I read the text twice, and then restlessly sighed, resisting the urge to puke again.

With the exception of prepping for trial and being present for suspect interrogations, shadowing a crime scene wasn't exactly part of the job description and well, after that huge fucking bomb that just got dropped on me, I frankly didn't want to do this shit anymore. I couldn't. I literally just discovered that the two amazing cocks I'd been secretly riding for the last three months were attached to the bodies of the same detectives I was working Delilah's rape case with, and I was just what, supposed to get up off my ass and face them? Pretend like it hadn't been roughly four or five nights since I was strapped to a fucking swing with Spike pounding my aching pussy raw?

Shit.

No wonder I never heard from them since that night. Maybe Detective Hutch had a good reason for wanting to request a new CDA after all.

Tears burned my eyes at the reminder, forcing me to lean back against the stall and wipe under my lids, furious because I couldn't decide who I was more angry with—Detective Hutch, or myself. None of this would've happened if I'd never gone to the sanctum to begin with, but the only reason I did was because I was sad, lonely, and desperately needed a distraction from my hectic fucking life. I never intended to take such a liking or to grow the slightest thread of attachment toward Spike and Phoenix, but they were charming, mysterious—even more so then thanks to their masks—and after finally breaking down and letting my freak flag fly for the first time in over ten years, I let them have their way with me. I had no idea why it made me feel so satisfyingly sick to admit it, but ever since then, there wasn't a set of lips, cocks, or hands I wanted ravaging any part of my body unless it was theirs.

Still though, this was never supposed to happen. That part of my life was never supposed to clash in the real world—at least not like this, it wasn't. I wanted to meet them, yes, and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been silently moping over why I hadn't heard from either of them since I gave Spike my number. I guess I understood it much better now, but still, what in the actual fuck?

What were the fucking odds?

And why attack my career?

I mean, for fucks sake, all he had to do was just talk to me!

I wanted some damn answers. Hutch knew the truth about me for days now, and had Phoenix not come inside the interrogation room right when I was about to rip Spike's head off his sexy as fuck shoulders, I could've gotten them. I get that I may not have been completely honest about my knowledge and personal involvement with The Flirty Sanctum, but that did not give him grounds to fuck with my job because of it. Regardless of Spike's intentions, this felt personal, and since Harley had my back and opted not to honor his request for a new CDA, I still had to work with them on these cases.

Which was fine. I could totally do that. Keeping my personal shit emotionally and separately contained from the job was never an issue I had before, and I refused to allow a Mr. Man Cop with an eight-inch pierced cock—no matter how awfully beautiful it is—to question my capabilities or dare tarnish a single cell of my confidence like that and get away with it.

Two can play that game, so I got up off the floor, flushed the toilet, and walked out the stall with my head raised high.

It'd taken me a minute to fully rid the mascara smudges from under and around my

eyelids. When I was calm and the redness on my cheeks had dampened enough to look more like a natural blush touch-up, I got out of my car and made the long trek across the hospital parking lot. I entered the building and then ambled across the lobby, smiling at the nurse sitting behind the front desk.

“Hi there,” I greeted her, taking a minute to reach inside my bag and flash her my DA badge. “I’m Charlotte Greene. I was told Amber Strickland was brought in not too long ago by EMTs.”

“You’re the attorney working with Hutch and Rhodes, right?”

“I am. They’re at the crime scene, so I thought I’d help out by coming here and interviewing Amber. Is her doctor around?”

“Of course, Ms. Greene.” She stood tall and moved quickly, opening the doors for me. “I think he’s with her now, so you may have to wait outside the room for a moment.”

She walked for a bit and when we made it to the correct room, I sat down on the bench just outside the door while the nurse entered to let the doctor know I was there. It was no less than five minutes later when the doctor stepped out and offered me a bright smile.

“Charlotte,” he said, reaching out to hug me as I rose to my feet, ogling wide-eyed at him with my lips parted. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Dr. Giles,” I stammered, my hands shaking as my arms lifted in an attempt to return the hug he’d given me. “Yes, it’s good to see you.”

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I swallowed when I pulled away from him, feeling a little uneasy. Dr. Giles was the man who'd taken care of Karl when he wrecked his car.

"You're here for Amber?" he asked.

"I'm working her case with Rhodes and Hutch. Chief seems to think Amber's case is connected to our other one. Is she alert?"

"She is for now, but I have to warn you she's in a lot of pain. I just gave her a mild sedative, so I'm not sure how much you'll get out of her right now. It's likely she'll fall asleep at any moment."

I sighed, but nodded because I understood. I was still going to try though.

"What do her injuries look like?" I looked around, then lowered my voice as I ducked my head closer to his. "Was she raped?"

Sadly, Dr. Giles nodded. "Violently. She has several severe tears inside her vagina and bruising that'll take a solid two months to heal."

"DNA?" I wondered.

"Rape kit should be on its way to the lab now."

"What about her injuries?"

"Fortunately, there are no broken bones, but there isn't an area of her body this guy

didn't assure to leave uninjured by the time he was done with her."

Chills shot down my spine at his words.

"She'd been drinking too. I ran a tox screen on her, but it's going to be a little while before the results are back. I won't know for sure until then, but given how strongly she stinks of alcohol, I'd say there's a substantial possibility she may have no memory of her attack. If she does, then I doubt it'll be more than snippets."

Damnit.

That was not what I'd hoped to hear.

"Alright, Doc. Do you still have my info?"

"I should, but it wouldn't hurt to get another card from you just in case."

I reached inside my bag and handed one over to him. "Do me a favor and fax the DNA and toxicology results to my office as soon as you get them. Do you mind if I step inside and maybe see what I can get out of Amber?"

Dr. Giles stepped to the side and waved me along. "No, not at all. Go ahead and do what you need to do. I'm sorry to ask you to please not wake her if she's asleep, but if she is, then I'm afraid you'll have to come back later. I'm sure you can understand."

"Yes, Dr. Giles, of course."

I thanked him and then knocked twice on the door, stepping inside the cold room just to sigh my disappointment when I found Amber Strickland lying down in bed with her battered eyes closed and her split mouth open wide, sound asleep like Dr. Giles

had predicted.

There was nothing more I could do now, so I fetched another card from my purse and placed it on the little table beside the hospital bed, scowling as I spun on my heel because I knew I had no other choice but to report Amber's condition back to the detectives.

seventeen

Spike

I swallowed uncomfortably as I sat next to Daniel Strickland, Amber's husband, struggling to calm him as he sat hunched over on the bottom step of the staircase with his elbows draped across his knees and his face trapped in his hands, sobbing. He was beyond plastered and given that he was doused in the unbearably potent stench of Jameson whiskey, I was surprised he didn't have alcohol poisoning.

Then again, it was possible he did.

It probably wasn't a bad idea to have him transported to the hospital for fluids and a medical evaluation.

"I-I can't be-believe th-this ha-happened," he cried, sucking back in the snot trying to leak out of his nose as he lifted up and wiped the wrist of his sleeve under said spot, blowing out a breath. "I-I don't even know how this could've happened. I... I don't remember us coming home last night, me getting in bed, nothing."

"I'm sorry this happened, Daniel. You have my condolences. I know this is hard, but I really need you to tell me everything you told the CSIs and EMTs."

Phoenix and I had gotten here just moments ago and the EMTs were gone with

Amber long before we left the precinct. Phoenix was gravely pissed and hadn't so much as breathed a word to me the drive here, except for the one remark he made about going to help process the scene while I fell back and interviewed the husband. He was currently in the living room with one of the CSIs who stayed behind to talk to us.

“My wife and I are swingers.”

My fingers tensed, squeezing tighter around my pen. I had a feeling I already knew where this was going.

“Swingers?”

Daniel nodded. “We’re members of this club called The Flirty Sanctum. We haven’t been there in a while thanks to our work schedules, but we got lucky and managed to get the night off together.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it, rethinking my next approach. He admitted he and his wife were members, but if they hadn’t been there for a while, then they likely weren’t aware there had been a recent assault. I also didn’t remember seeing Daniel Strickland on the list of suspects for Delilah’s case either.

“What is the last thing you do remember, Daniel?”

He blew out a furious breath and swiped under his swollen, bloodshot eyes. “I remember being at the bar. Amber and I were drinking. There’s a couple we’re used to seeing but they canceled on us at the last minute.”

“Did anyone approach you?”

“Yeah,” he said after a moment. “It was a guy. He came up to me and asked if I’d mind if he bought Amber and I a drink. I was going to say no at first, but Amber seemed flattered by the offer, so I let him buy us a round.”

“Okay, Daniel,” I nodded, feeling a burst of excitement dance through my veins. “I need you to really think here. Do you remember the mask he was wearing?”

“I don’t,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “I didn’t really pay much attention to the guy after that. I went to the bathroom and when I got back, Amber was still talking to him. I drank my double shot of whiskey and then everything after that is just...blank. Like I said, I don’t remember leaving the club, coming home, nothing.”

Shit.

If Daniel was telling the truth—which so far, he hadn’t given me any reason to believe otherwise—then I suspect I knew what happened to him.

“Tell me what happened when you woke up this morning.”

More tears rained down Daniel’s face. He sucked in another breath, his bottom lip trembling.

“I woke up with a gnarly headache. It was all I could do to get out of bed but when I did, I went to our master bathroom and popped two Tylenol from the medicine cabinet. After that, I came downstairs and found Amber on the couch, covered in blood and her clothes torn clean off her body. I ran to her, tried to wake her, then checked her pulse. She was still alive, but she just wouldn’t wake up for me.” He paused again, sniffing. “I didn’t know what else to do, so I called the police.”

“I’m sorry, Daniel, but I think it might be best for you to come down to the hospital and get checked out. Get some bloodwork done.”

“But why?” he asked, though I could tell by the horrified expression on his face that he already knew.

“There’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to say it. I think you may have been drugged. If you’re willing to come down to the hospital, we can run a toxicology test to know for sure. I’m pretty sure Amber’s doctor has already administered one for her. We should have those results no later than this afternoon.”

Daniel staggered to his feet, grabbing ahold of the railing for support. “Whatever I can do to help Amber.”

I sighed in defeat. He was definitely still intoxicated, and there was no way in fucking hell I could permit him to drive to the hospital. I genuinely felt bad for the guy, so I offered to give him a ride. If I was right and Daniel really was drugged, then I had to race him to the hospital before any and all traces were completely depleted from his bloodstream.

But fuck, I rode in with Phoenix.

“Sit tight for a second, Daniel. We’ll get you to the hospital soon.”

He sank back down on the bottom step, looking lost and like he was light years away from mentally ascending into another universe. This was bad, so as I stepped off the bottom step and crossed over the crime scene tape displayed across the entrance to the living room, I approached Phoenix while he was still in deep conversation with the CSI.

“Daniel needs a ride to the hospital. I think he’s been drugged. I told him we’d take him.”

“That’s fine,” Phoenix said, keeping his attention locked on the blonde CSI standing beside us.

I took another look at her, then froze, my mouth dropping once I recognized her.

No fucking way...

Was that Kendall?

“I’m waiting on another unit to come in for the couch and rug,” she said to Phoenix.
“Blood samples, fingerprints, and all that good shit should be on its way to the lab as we speak.”

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“Thanks, Kendall.” Phoenix reached inside his pocket and slipped a hundred-dollar bill in her palm.

My brows furrowed at the exchange.

What the hell was that about?

“Will you ask around for me?” he asked her.

Kendall sighed, but nodded and deposited the money in her back pocket. “I can’t guarantee anything. I don’t really talk to my brother anymore. You know he hasn’t exactly been supportive of my career choices.”

“But your niece is still fucking around with Killian and Levi, right?”

“That’s none of your business, Phoenix, but yes, I guess you can say Kendra still sees them on occasion.”

“Can you talk to her? See if she’ll ask them?”

“You know this shit can cost me my job if word gets out to the wrong people.”

“It’s me, Kendall.” He reached up, and in a stupid as fuck move, cupped the side of her face. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do.” Her fingertips grazed his wrist before she pulled away and stepped back, shaking her head. “I can’t do this, Phoenix. It’s not fair, so please don’t make

me.”

“Fine, Kendall. That’s fine. Just check into that for me and let me know as soon as you can.”

She ran off then, leaving him to stand there gaping at her with tears shimmering in his eyes.

“Phoenix.” I stopped him, grabbing his shoulder as he made to turn and walk away. “Are you still—”

“I stopped seeing her years ago. I heard she was back in town and had gotten a job at the lab recently, but this is technically the first time I’ve seen her since the breakup.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Kendall Wilson used to be Phoenix’s everything once upon a time. They’d dated throughout high school, but when college rolled around, she’d called it quits in their senior year and left Phoenix devastated. Since then, throughout the years, Kendall would randomly pop up, drunk off her ass, pussy soaked, and would spend the night in Phoenix’s bed, just to crush his world the next morning when he’d wake up and find her gone without leaving so much as a goodbye note. I’d spent many nights nursing my dear friend back to health thanks to him damn near drinking himself to death over that woman in the past.

“Phoenix.”

“I don’t want to be with her anymore, okay, I don’t. I gave up on her a long time ago. The only reason I slipped her that money is because we need to know if the MC’s may have any involvement with these cases. Crow would know, but since he and Kendall aren’t on speaking terms, then we’ll have to go with the next best thing.”

“And if Kendall doesn’t deliver?” I asked.

“Then it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve made a mistake with her, now, would it?”

It was extremely risky confiding in Kendall, but Phoenix was smart and knew just as well as I did that with us being cops, we couldn’t inch a toe inside Crow’s turf or make it within twenty feet of his daughter without having an army of fucking weapons aimed at our heads.

“Why not just go by his place and talk to Crow yourself? You used to be friends, right?”

Phoenix sighed and said, “It’s complicated. Crow and I had a bad falling out after Kendall and I ended things the last time. I see him around once in a while riding with his crew, but he and I haven’t spoken a word to each other in over four years.”

“Was there any evidence found indicating a MC member was involved?”

Phoenix shook his head. “Not exactly. We’ve got blood, hair, fingerprints, and a few fiber samples I think may be from either the couch or carpet. We won’t know more until we get the results back.”

“Then why did you ask Kendall to hound Crow’s daughter?” I had to ask.

“Because Crow’s club isn’t the only MC in Seaview Pines, and it also isn’t a secret that a lot of them stay coming and going from the precinct. I know we ruled them out with Delilah’s case, but here, we’re at an actual crime scene and have a little bit more to work with this time around. Plus, you know some of the crews are good for this kind of shit. I understand Chief thinks our cases are connected, and he may be right, but I want to exhaust any and every possible lead we can think of first before we draw up any sort of conclusion.”

I opened my mouth, starting to tell him I agreed, when suddenly, a loud thud

resonated behind me.

My eyes widened, and as I whipped around, cursing to myself, I ran for it, right on over to Daniel Strickland who'd just tipped over forehead first onto the floor.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

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“We have to get him to the hospital,” I hollered at Phoenix over my shoulder, cursing again as I struggled to help Daniel sit up as he groaned, his eyes pressed shut. “Help me with his—”

I bristled, gritting my teeth as I slightly turned to the side, finding Charlotte Greene stepping through the threshold and staring incredulously between me, Daniel, and Phoenix, who was helping haul up Daniel’s legs.

Charlotte dashed out of the way as we lifted Daniel up, eased him out the door, and toward the car.

“What the hell? What happened to him?”

“We think he’s been—”

“I wasn’t talking to you.” Malice flashed through her eyes as she narrowed them at me. “I was talking to Detective Rhodes.”

I internally snorted. So much for that promise to keep her personal problems emotionally muted outside of work.

“Spike things he’s been drugged,” my partner responded, grunting as he swapped positions with me, holding up Daniel’s upper half long enough for me to get the back door open.

It took us a minute, but eventually we were able to get Daniel’s heavy ass draped across the back seat.

Maybe not comfortably, but still, we got his ass in there.

“We’re taking him to the hospital to get checked out. Amber should already be there.”

“Dr. Giles won’t let us talk to her right now. I already tried.”

“You what?” I growled, cocking my head at her. “Since when did that little DA badge clipped to your slacks get upgraded to a detective’s badge? Last I checked, you aren’t one.”

“What the fuck is your problem, Spike?” she hissed right back at me. “No, I may not be a detective, but as the CDA working alongside you on these cases, I have every right to speak and interview the victims as you do.”

“Spike.” Phoenix looked torn as he stared between us. “Charlotte. Please, guys, we don’t have time for this—”

“But you know what,” Charlotte sternly bellowed, approaching me nose to nose, eye-to-eye. “Fuck it. Have it your goddamn way. I QUIT. Figure all of this shit out for yourselves.”

“What?” Phoenix muttered, his face falling in utter devastation at the same time my heart sank to my stomach when she threw up her hands and stormed away for her car.

“Charlotte,” I shouted, swallowing painfully hard when she refused to stop and proceeded to get into her car, slamming the door behind her.

Phoenix tried running after her, but it was already too late. The wheels on her Altima spun, and just like that, she was over halfway down the road, leaving me standing there feeling so fucking guilty as Phoenix glared at me across the road with tears

snaking down his cheeks.

eighteen

Phoenix

Ifucking lost it.

One minute I was standing in the middle of the road watching Charlotte drive away, and then the next thing I knew, I was standing over Spike with my chest heaving as he lay in the grass, groaning, tribute from the triple decker I'd just impulsively graced him with.

"Fuck, Phoenix," he whined, rolling to his side and groaning louder as he clutched his mouth.

"Fuck you," I spat, so fucking furious it was all I could do not to stomp his ass to dust. "You can walk to the hospital."

"Phoenix," he screamed. "Don't you fucking dare leave me—"

I got in the car, fired up the engine, and as promised, left his ass on the side of the street to fend for his-fucking-self. I may have temporarily set my personal feelings aside after the previous incident thanks to this new case, but now, fair was fucking fair. Spike had already fucked me over once today and I refused to let him do this shit to me again. One way or another I was going to fix this shit with Charlotte.

I just had to.

But first, I really needed to get Daniel to the hospital.

“You alive back there?”

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When he didn't respond, I began to panic, so I stomped the pedal as hard as I could and activated my hazard lights since I was in my personal vehicle and didn't have access to a siren. Thankfully, traffic wasn't too bad, and I was safely able to dodge and weave most of the way there without any major holdups.

The sign to the hospital blessed my vision and as fast as fucking possible, I parked out front and screamed for help getting Daniel inside the building. It'd taken a few minutes—more than what we could afford to lose—but we got Daniel in a wheelchair and inside an empty room. Right away the nurses got to work gathering what blood they could from Daniel as I began explaining the situation.

“His wife is Amber, the woman they brought in not too long ago?” the brunette asked.

I nodded. “Yes, why? Did something happen with Amber?”

“No, no, she's fine,” the nurse promised, offering me an assertive smile as her colleague gathered the last of the blood they needed from Daniel's vein. “She woke up about five minutes ago. She's in a lot of pain and she's been asking for him.” She nudged her head to Daniel, who was pale, and desperately needed to be hooked up on fluids.

“Where's her doctor?” I asked.

“He should be in the room with her now.”

“I'll go talk to her. Get him set up on an IV and get those blood samples off to the

lab. I need those results ran ASAP.” I started for the door, pausing to stare back at the nurses. “Get some food in him and then bring him to Amber’s room when he’s stable enough to walk.”

I got Amber’s room number, and after making a quick detour to the bathroom long enough to drain the snake, I knocked on the door, then walked in to find Amber sitting up in bed, crying as she painfully tried to breathe in and out while the doctor planted his stethoscope along different areas of her chest and back.

“Excuse me,” I announced, clearing my throat, and flashing my badge. “I’m Detective Rhodes, SPD.”

“You’re just in time, Detective,” the doctor said as he stepped away from Amber and faced me, reaching out and shaking my hand. “I’m Dr. Giles. Charlotte Greene was here not too long ago hoping to interview Amber, but she’d fallen asleep and so, I told Charlotte she’d have to come back later.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “I just spoke to Charlotte. I brought Amber’s husband with me, and he’s in another room getting checked out.” I paused, then leaned in closer to the doctor so Amber wouldn’t overhear. “My partner and I think he may have been drugged. I had the nurses take blood from him and I need those samples ran yesterday.”

“Da-Daniel?” Amber’s raspy voice cracked across the room. “He-he’s here?”

“He is,” I replied, offering her a comforting smile. “He’s in bad shape right now, but we’re going to get some food and fluids in him, and then I promise he’ll be here with you soon.”

“Th-thank you, Detective. Thank you so much.”

“Can I talk to her?” I asked Dr. Giles.

“You can, but I’ll tell you just like I told Charlotte—I’m not sure how much you’ll get out of her. Tox results aren’t back yet, but trust me, once you get close enough, you’ll know what I mean. I’m surprised you can’t already smell it from here.”

“That bad?”

“Yeah. I imagine the results will have quite the story to tell us.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“She’s horribly injured, but yes, she’ll live. Charlotte requested I have all the paperwork sent to her once they’re in. Do you want me to include the husband’s results in those reports?”

I nodded. “Yes. Whatever she needs, you give it to her. If anyone has a problem with it, send them to me.”

He nodded, then stepped aside, exiting the room.

I approached Amber with somewhat of a wobbly smile on my face.

“Hi, Amber. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

I walked out of the hospital a couple hours later, freezing mid-step and angrily grinding my teeth when I found Spike sitting on a bench ahead of me, his eyes locked on mine. His left eye was swollen and had already begun sprouting a bruise, same with along his jawline.

“I’m sorry.”

I marched right past him and onward for the parking lot, digging inside my pocket for my keys.

“Phoenix,” he called out, getting up and following behind me.

I whipped around, my chest heaving, tempted to shoot him in his fucking face.

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“We just got the tox report back on Amber,” I cut him off when he made to speak again.

I didn’t care to listen to his bullshit right now.

And besides, it wasn’t me he should be apologizing and groveling to.

It was Charlotte.

“She was drugged with Rohypnol. Daniel’s results aren’t back yet, but it’s obvious he was too.”

“What did Amber tell you?”

Even though I was still gravely pissed with him, I nudged my head for him to come the hell on and began the trek to the parking lot.

“She said they were at the bar, drinking, and then some guy came up to her and offered to buy them a drink. She also believes he has dark hair and either blue or green eyes.”

“Does she remember what they talked about?” he asked, cursing low under his breath when I shook my head.

“She doesn’t, which is to be expected given the circumstances. That’s okay though, because hey, guess where we’re heading next?”

I offered him a wicked grin and narrowed my eyes at him when we made it to the car.

“And for being a fucking asshole and forcing Charlotte to quit, you get to deal with Felix this time.”

nineteen

Charlotte

“You quit?” Blaire asked, her eyes growing wider and wider in disbelief. “Why?”

I sighed, refraining from speaking because our waitress had walked up and asked if we were ready to order.

“I didn’t completely quit,” I said after handing over my menu. “I said the words, but I haven’t grown the balls to tell Harley yet.”

I explained the situation to Blaire, watching as she nodded along the further I dished out the details, all except for a few main components I still didn’t trust her enough to reveal.

“But this is your dream,” she said when I was finished. “Just the other day you were spouting this huge spiel over how badly you want to be the new ADA, and now you’re going to throw it all away over some asshole cop whose dick is probably the size of this thumb?”

I choked on my water, earning another unbelievable glare from Blaire.

“You can’t quit, Charlotte. You’ve already invested way too many hours into Delilah’s case to give it up. And with this new one, it’s possible this could be the same guy. I don’t have to stress to you what this could mean for—”

“I know, Blaire, I know.” I breathed in deeply, knowing she didn’t understand, and wishing I could just say fuck it and tell her, but it was impossible. “I haven’t fully decided what I’m going to do. I doubt I’ll really quit, but then again, I don’t know. I’ll probably just sleep on it and see how I feel tomorrow morning.”

“Or you could just put your big girl panties on and go ask that cranky piss-ant what his problem is.”

Little did Blaire know, I already knew what the problem was, just like I knew nothing would get resolved unless the three of us could sit down and talk it out like adults. I didn’t want to give up these cases, and Blaire was right, doing so was basically saying fuck my career and everything I’d accomplished. Plus, there was a good chance the man who’d attacked Delilah could be responsible for Amber’s assault.

“Like I said, I’ll sleep on it.”

My phone pinged with a notification, so I glanced away from Blaire long enough to check my phone, finding an email from Dr. Giles.

My lips parted.

Oh, shit.

It was Amber and Daniel Strickland’s toxicology results.

Both were dosed with extremely high levels of Rohypnol.

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“What is it?” Blaire asked as she took in my wide-eyed, baffled expression. “What’s wrong?”

“Amber and her husband were drugged.”

I zoomed in on the results and then faced the display toward Blaire.

“Rohypnol.”

She lifted her chin and met my gaze.

“That’s a date rape drug.”

I placed my phone down on the table again, shaking my head in disbelief.

“This doesn’t make any sense though. Delilah wasn’t drugged.”

“So maybe it’s not the same guy then?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to say when I don’t even know what Amber told the detectives. I’m sure they’ve interviewed her by now. So far, the only thing these two cases have in common is The Flirty Sanctum.”

I backed out of the document and double checked the email just in case I’d missed something by mistake, scoffing angrily when a message from Detective Rhodes popped up on the screen. He was apologizing for his partner’s behavior and was begging me to reconsider. He wanted to meet with me after work to discuss Amber’s

case.

“Aww,” Blaire gushed. “At least one of them doesn’t seem to be an asshole.”

I rolled my eyes and didn’t bother to respond, opting to drop my phone on the table and rub frustratingly at my eyes, not caring if I ruined my makeup.

I needed a minute to think.

Phoenix was undoubtedly the sweeter one out of the duo, and I hadn’t forgotten the look on his face or what he’d said at the precinct. It was evident he wasn’t involved with the stunt Spike pulled with Harley, and so, I suppose it would be ludicrous of me to punish him when he hadn’t truly done anything to deserve it. It was a lot to consider, but in my heart I knew avoiding it was useless. I had to hear him out and clear the air now that my identity had been compromised. A lot was on the line here.

So, I picked up the phone and replied back, praying I wouldn’t come to regret it later.

All Blaire could do was flash me a proud grin when I turned and faced her.

“You’re doing the right thing, Char.”

I nodded, wanting to believe it as much as she did. “Yeah, I hope so.”

Blaire and I went back to the office after lunch, and instead of relaying my outburst at the precinct to Harley, I kept my mouth shut, thrilled she hadn’t mentioned her knowledge of it when I’d walked in to give her my report on Amber Strickland’s case.

What I didn’t expect to see, however, was the case file resting on her desk containing all the information I just spoke about, plus the crime scene photos. That seemed

awfully fast given it had only been a little over five hours since Amber had been admitted into the hospital.

“Detective Rhodes stopped in and dropped this off.” I blinked wordlessly as she picked it up and handed it over to me. “Daniel and Amber’s statements are in there too. From what I’ve gathered, I suspect Chief is right about the connection. Rhodes tells me you’ll be meeting with him later, so I’d like you to go home and start thoroughly picking that file apart. DNA isn’t back yet, but Rhodes is hoping to have it no later than this evening. I called and demanded the lab put a rush on it. I want those results ASAP.”

“You’re thinking it’s the same guy,” I muttered.

Harley nodded; her jaw irately set. “I do, and I don’t have to tell you what that would mean.”

I swallowed hard, my heart sinking at the implication.

If she and Chief were right and the DNA matched both rape kits, then we possibly had a serial rapist on our hands, the first Seaview Pines had encountered since Gunther Knox lived and walked along these streets over ten years ago.

“I understand, Harley. I’ll get to work on it right away.”

I made it home and armed my security system, then slung my purse over on the couch before toting the file inside the kitchen with me, halting when I spotted the package resting right where I left it when I’d walked out the door this morning. On the island.

Damnit.

I said I’d call my parents on my lunch break, and it had completely slipped my mind.

The three of us hadn't exactly been verbal thanks to our altercation over my divorce, and I wasn't exactly sure if I was ready to speak to them again after all of that bullshit went down. But they were the only ones I could think of, and I couldn't lie and say I wasn't slightly curious, so I put the file on the kitchen table and then pulled out my phone, sighing as I thumbed out the text.

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Did you or Dad send me something? I got a package in the mail with no return address.

I held my breath, waiting.

And then there it was.

Mom: Why on Earth would we send you anything?

It was a low blow, one my heart felt down to each string holding it together.

But no matter how much it hurt I had to force myself to suck in a breath and brush the pain aside. I couldn't let it get to me. I had my answer and there was nothing more I wanted or needed from them.

Saying to hell with it, I approached the package resting on the island and tore it open, blinking down at a white box with the logo from the local flower shop printed on it. There was a small envelope with my first name written in the same sloppy handwriting taped to the box. Somebody sent me flowers.

But who?

My curiosity got the best of me, so I removed the envelope first and opened it, my brows furrowing.

It should've been you.

I gaped dumfounded at the note, not fully sure what the hell that was about, and placed it down to focus on the box, lifting it open to find a stunning bouquet of red and white roses resting inside.

I took a step back then and peeked another glance at the card, barely having time to read over it again before my phone dinged with an alert from my security system. My heart leapt into my throat when I opened the app and found a truck idling at the end of my driveway.

It was Karl's pickup truck.

“Oh, fuck no,” I whispered, scoffing as I gave the evidence a hasty once over before hurling the card and flower box straight into the trash.

It should've been you.

As in he should've chosen me instead of his secret teenage fling.

That motherfucker.

He had a lot of goddamn nerve.

Maybe it was my anger that had my feet striding toward the front door to glare out the peephole, and maybe I was certifiably insane for opening the door and trudging down the driveway with numbing anticipation, but I'd had enough of this shit.

Blaire was right. Restraining orders really were a bullshit asset to our judicial system.

I should've known better than to think that a fucking ankle monitor would be enough to keep Karl away from me.

“You have ten seconds to get the fuck up and out of my driveway before I call the cops, Karl,” I shouted, smirking when he got out of the truck and nervously pressed his back against the metal door, his hands raised and eyes pleading. “Matter of fact, I’m sure they’ll be on their way to arrest your ass any minute now.”

“Please don’t,” he called out, raising his hands up and high like he was trying to prove he wasn’t a threat.

I stopped moving then and gushed out a furious breath. My driveway was rather long and although Karl was still well within his safety zone, that didn’t necessarily mean I was safe. What made it worse was that the closest neighbor was half a mile down the road. I couldn’t push it.

I wouldn’t.

“A buddy of mine is keeping watch over the tracker for me at the precinct. If you turn me in, I’m done for.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I sneered.

Does he not understand that this gave me even more ammunition to lock his ass up?

“Please, just listen to me,” he begged, his voice cracking as he dropped his hands back to his sides. “All I need is five minutes.”

I shook my head, not believing I was actually considering this, but what other choice did I have? I had no idea what Karl’s true intentions were, and the fact he was risking prison time by being here was a thought I had to admit, did leave me a bit flummoxed. Karl had to have been either extremely stupid or as much as I hated to dare think it... Desperate.

But why?

What was so goddamn important?

“You have two minutes and not a minute more.” I pulled out my phone and held it up, waving it around. “I already have Peter’s number up and waiting.”

Karl nodded and then carefully reached his hand toward his jacket pocket, fishing out what I suspected was a court subpoena—or at least that’s what it looked like. It was hard to tell from where I was standing, so I had to squint.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Ben brought this to me a few days before we’d ever finalized the divorce. Kate’s parents have been trying to overthrow the department’s decision against me for months now. They’ve hired a private investigator and are trying to have charges brought up against me for vehicular manslaughter, amongst other things.”

I let out a scoff, shaking my head as I processed the information.

So that’s why he was here.

All because of his dead mistress.

Kate.

“I already know what you’re going to say,” he started before I could ever get a word

out. “And you’re right, I have no goddamn business coming here asking you for anything after everything I’ve done. I know I hurt you, Charlotte, and I’m sorry. I can’t take any of it back, but what I need you to understand is that none of this shit—the stalking, the violence—none of it had to happen if you’d have just talked to me and listened. Nobody fucking else will and you’re literally the only person I can trust.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Kate and I were being followed, Charlotte. I don’t know for how long, but somebody knew we were seeing each other. I was receiving threats because of it.”

His words had me inhaling a sharp, trembling breath.

Just what kind of game was he trying to play here?

“I don’t have any evidence. I got rid of everything months ago because I thought it was all a bluff at first. But it wasn’t. As time went on, Kate started receiving them too.”

Karl paused, gulping loudly as he licked his lips.

“She wanted us to run away together, and had I not still been so madly in love with you at the time, I probably would have. But what everyone doesn’t know is that I ended things with her, Charlotte. I’d chosen you. I broke up with her the night of the accident.”

“Your point, Karl?” I asked through gritted teeth, really not in the mood to play this bullshit mind game with him anymore.

“My point is that I think what happened wasn’t an accident. When I picked up Kate

that night, my truck was fine. I took her out to dinner and then broke the news as I was taking her home. She was a wreck. I tried to calm her down, but then the next thing I knew, my brakes weren't working. We flew straight through the intersection, and then, BAM, it was too late—there was literally nothing I could do. The next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital and finding out Kate was dead.”

“Are you done now? Your two minutes ended thirty seconds ago.”

The last bit of hope inside of him died as his shoulders slumped, his features falling in what obviously had to be a torturous act of defeat. “You don't believe me.”

“Sorry,” I said with a careless head shake. “I don't.”

“Just think about it for a second—”

“I don't have to do anything, Karl. You said what you needed to say, and now you need to leave. Any concerns you have about your case need to be taken up with Ben.”

“You don't understand,” he screamed when I made to turn away, halting me in my tracks and forcing me to tap the CALL button, praying Peter would answer. “Ben won't listen to me! Nobody fucking will!”

I was glad I listened to my instincts, because no sooner than I took off running for the house, Karl came charging after me, demanding I stop and listen to him. Once I made it inside the house and had my alarm set, I cautiously peeked out the window to find him heading back to his car, furiously kicking the gravel as he went.

twenty

Phoenix

I finished gathering my wallet, keys, and then rose to my feet, anxious to get down to the lab as soon as possible. Harley Ford must've struck the fear of God into the forensic squad because it was a little after 7pm and I'd just received the call I'd been waiting for. With any luck, we'd have some answers and would hopefully be one step closer to putting this son of a bitch behind bars.

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“Where are you going?” Spike, who was watching me from his desk, asked as I gently grasped Charlotte’s flower vase and tucked it firmly around my arm and securely at my side.

He paused the footage he’d been watching on his computer and sat up straighter in his seat, scrutinizing me with his brows pinched painfully tight.

“Lab called. I’m going to get the DNA results, and then I’m going to see Charlotte.”

“I’m coming with you then.”

“No,” I sternly bellowed when he got up and began gathering his belongings, scoffing when he offered me a quizzical look. “The last thing I need is you fucking shit up more than you already have, so just stay here and find what you can on our perp.”

“I said I was sorry, Phoenix. I swear I can fix this if you’ll just let me explain.”

“We had a plan,” I spitefully reminded him. “One that would’ve worked perfectly if you hadn’t gone rogue and fucked it all up.”

“And what about Kendall?” the bastard just had to ask, quirking an amused brow at me. “Are you sure you’re truly ready to commit to Charlotte now that she’s back in the picture?”

“Kendall isn’t in the picture, Spike. She works at the lab and that’s it.” I clutched the vase harder to my side, struggling not to let his words rile me up. “Just stay here or go home. I don’t really care. Either way, don’t fuck this up for me. I’ll call you once

shit's sorted."

I left him to it and stormed away, praying he'd listen and stay put.

Because if he didn't—then so help me fucking God—I just might have to shoot him.

I was the only shot we had at reconciling everything Spike had possibly destroyed with Charlotte, and like fucking hell if I was about to let one of the best things to ever happen to me in a very long time, crumble all because of that cranky asshole.

I made it to the lab a few minutes later and walked inside to find most of the crew had departed for the evening, all except for Kendall Wilson, my old flame from my teenage years.

But that was a story for another day.

She'd just thrown her long blonde hair up in a ponytail and was fetching some paperwork from out the printer when I knocked twice on the door.

"Oh, hey," she said, smiling when she spun on her heel and faced me. "You're just in time. I just finished printing some extra copies of the DNA results for you and Hutch."

"What's the verdict?"

Kendall pursed her lips, saying nothing as she stepped forward and handed the pages over to me.

"Holy shit."

I surveyed Delilah and Amber's results, thoroughly scanning them over again, and

again, my lips parting and eyes blown saucer wide.

“And you’re sure this is accurate?”

Kendall scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Yes, Phoenix, it’s accurate. I know how to do my job.”

I blew out a breath then and pulled out my phone and delivered the news to Spike.

“There’s more if you’d like to hear it.”

“Yeah.” I put my phone away and then gave Kendall my undivided attention, careful not to drop Charlotte’s vase. “Lay it on me.”

Kendall led me over to one of her computers and began typing away on the keyboard. In just moments she had CODIS pulled up, the software most—if not all police departments used to test the DNA of convicted criminals against ongoing cases.

“Unfortunately,” she continued, running another search just to sigh when the words, ‘No Match,’ popped up on the screen. “CODIS can’t find a match to your perp’s DNA, so it’s clear whoever you’re looking for doesn’t have a record.”

“What about blood and fingerprints?”

“That’s where it gets complicated. The blood samples we collected are a precise match to Daniel and Amber Strickland’s blood-types only, and it’s the same for prints, too. Hair samples will take more time to sort through.”

I nodded as I took it all in. It wasn’t much of shit to be honest, but it was the best we had to work with for now. Hopefully, Spike would have better luck with the security footage I made him confiscate from Felix. We had to catch this fucker before he

decided to get cocky and hurt someone else.

“Alright, Kendall, thanks.”

“Oh,” she kind of shouted when I made to leave, stopping me. “I called Kendra. She said to give her a few days and she’ll call me with a date and time for you to meet.”

I cracked a tiny smile and bobbed my head to show my appreciation. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

I parked in Charlotte’s driveway about thirty minutes later, feeling my smile flatten and my brows crumple with confusion when I spotted Chief’s car, and a random one I didn’t recognize, parked on either side of Charlotte’s vehicle.

Fearing the worst, I immediately got out and damn near busted Charlotte’s vase along the way, but thankfully I was able to catch it despite some of the water spilling out and landing on the driveway.

My heart sped like a freight train the faster I hurried toward the door.

And then I looked up, spotting Chief walking out with a displeased expression engraved through every fine wrinkle on his face.

“Chief,” I nervously greeted him. “What’s going on?”

“Ah, Phoenix.” Although he seemed legitimately surprised to see me, it didn’t stop him from offering me a polite smile and stepping forward to shake my hand. “What brings you here this evening?”

“Our new case. I told Charlotte I’d be stopping by. Forgive me for asking, but why are you here? Is everything okay with Charlotte?”

Chief bellowed out a gruff sigh and shook his head. “It appears her ex-husband gave her quite a scare earlier today.”

“What? He was here?”

“Afraid so,” he confirmed, which had me swallowing as a result of my own anger. “Karl pulled a fast one and sent one of his colleagues to keep guard over his location.”

“So, what happens now? He violated the restraining order.”

“Charlotte doesn’t want us to arrest him. According to her, Karl was well over a hundred feet away during their encounter. So—technically speaking—he didn’t violate the restraining order.”

I took a step back then and shot him an incredulous sneer.

He couldn’t have been serious.

But all Chief could do was throw up his hands and heave out a regretful sigh, stunning me further.

“I don’t agree with it either, but it’s out of my hands. There’s nothing I can physically do at the moment.”

“But what about Karl?”

“I’ll be keeping watch over his tracker and phone records throughout the remainder

of his suspension. Captain Burgess has agreed to help out, too. Unless Karl gains any more stupid ideas, that's the best we can do at this point."

"And Charlotte?" I wondered.

Chief sighed and tiredly scrubbed his hands down his face. "I offered to post two units outside for her protection, but of course, Charlotte refused. Peter is in there trying to talk some sense in her now. It might not be a bad idea to get in there and offer the man some support."

"I understand, Boss. I'll see what I can do."

Chief patted me twice on the shoulder and as he turned, taking his leave, I approached the front door and knocked twice, just to veer back a few steps when the door vehemently swung open, and Peter came storming out with Charlotte hot on his heels.

Clearly, neither of them noticed I was there.

Or maybe they did and had chosen not to acknowledge me.

"What's it going to take for you to fucking listen to me?"

Peter was enraged, glaring ruthlessly at Charlotte, who was daggering him in the doorway with her arms folded tightly to her chest.

"Does someone have to die or get hurt in order for you to see how dangerous he is?"

“Peter—”

“No, Charlotte,” Peter growled, his chest heaving the harder he balled his gloved fists at his sides. “I’m tired of hearing it. You’re always defending him, and I have literally grown sick and fucking tired of constantly being made to put up with this shit.”

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“What I mean,” Peter said thickly, releasing a slight scoff when he finally noticed me standing off to the side, minding my own business while I was still holding on to this damn flower vase.

Well, this was awkward.

“What I mean...is that as your friend, I love you, and I am genuinely concerned for you, Charlotte. But as your lawyer, I’m sorry. I just can’t do this anymore. I’m done.”

“So that’s it? You’re quitting on me?”

“What other choice do I have?” he challenged with a furious cock of his head. “For years—fucking years—I have been by your side offering you advice, guidance, and support. I helped push you through law school and was always there whenever you needed a shoulder to cry on, especially when it first came out Karl was cheating on you.”

“I know that, Peter—”

“I told you not to drop the charges, Charlotte.” His voice shook with his body. “I warned you this would happen, and like fucking always, you outright refused to listen to me. If learning the hard way is what it takes for you to finally open your eyes, then so be it. Either way, I’m done.”

He spun on his heels, leaving Charlotte to stand there blinking wide-eyed and utterly baffled.

“Peter,” she hollered, trying to call him back.

But it didn’t do any good.

Peter hopped right on in his car and drove away without a second thought.

“Damnit,” she whispered, bellowing out a hasty breath before she turned and offered me an unfriendly smirk. “Did you enjoy the show?”

“I wasn’t trying to intrude,” I said calmly, hoping not to agitate her further as I grasped the vase and extended my arms, nudging my head for her to take it. “These are for you. I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I just kind of winged it.”

Charlotte gaped between me and the flowers, appearing unsure of herself and perhaps a little uncomfortable when she reached out and accepted them.

“They’re lovely, Phoenix. It’s...um. It is okay if I call you Phoenix, right?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I don’t see why not. After all, that is my name.”

“Right.”

Charlotte stood there for another minute, mute, and just as I began questioning

whether or not I'd made a mistake with the flowers, Charlotte gave me a warm smile and then jerked her head for me to follow her in.

She had a beautiful home. Hardwood floors paved the living and dining room, and wedged in the middle of the layout was a gorgeous black-oak staircase ascending to the upper level of the residence. The kitchen was huge—practically every Homemaker's dream kitchen—and ahead was a glass of wine resting on the island with a personal laptop and an open case file next to it.

Huh.

Charlotte must've been working on Amber's case before the cavalry arrived.

"I'm sorry about that," Charlotte said, twisting around to face me when she was finished setting the alarm. "Peter can be a little...hormonal, at times."

"It's none of my business," I told her, honestly meaning it despite how much I wanted to tell her that she should've taken Chief up on his offer.

It wasn't my place, and I was here to fix shit, not ruin it more.

"But is it fine that I ask if you're okay?"

Charlotte gripped the vase tightly in her hands and led me toward the kitchen, where she placed the vase up on the windowsill.

I took that moment to pull a barstool closer to the island and sat down, glancing briefly at Amber Strickland's crime scene photos stacked atop the open file.

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Charlotte kept her back to me and continued studying the flowers. When she turned, she'd given me a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"It's been a long day and I'd rather not talk about it. How about we get down to business, yeah?"

She didn't give me time to respond before she'd moved to stand beside me, gathering up the crime scene photos and setting them aside.

"What's the news on the DNA?" she asked, blinking expectantly at me. "Did you get the results?"

"I did." I lifted up in my seat and slipped a hand inside my back pocket, pulling out the copies Kendall made at the lab. "And I'm sorry to tell you there wasn't any DNA present in Amber's rape kit."

Charlotte let out a gasp, her blue eyes bugging wider the longer she read through the unresourceful verdict. "You're shitting me. We got nothing?"

Her pretty face fell impossibly lower when I shook my head.

"Blood came back to Daniel and Amber. Same with the fingerprint samples. We still have the hair follicles, but it'll take a few days for the lab techs to get everything sorted and tested for additional DNA."

Charlotte was stressed now, biting fretfully on her bottom lip as she plundered through some pages in the file, grabbing Amber and Daniel's statements.

“They’re both saying someone approached them at the bar and offered to buy them a drink.”

“That’s right,” I agreed, nodding along the further Charlotte’s fingers trailed down the papers, her face pinched in concentration. “Spike and I went back to the sanctum and obtained the security footage. Which reminds me...”

I paused, lifting up again to grab the USB drive I’d nearly forgotten about, and deposited it on the island.

“That’s it right there. I wasn’t sure if you were really going to quit or not, so I held off forwarding them to your email address.”

Charlotte let out a sigh then, saying nothing as she moved away from me and closer to the sink. Her palms fastened tightly around the counter, and then she tipped her head up to the ceiling, shoulders coiled, expelling what obviously had to be one painfully long breath.

“I suppose we need to talk about this. I mean, me being Eve is part of the reason you’re here, right?”

“It is,” I muttered, swallowing as the nerves immediately took flight in my stomach when she whipped around, her arms folded and pressed tightly to her chest. “But you’re also Charlotte Greene, our new CDA. That is also why I’m here. To fix the damage my partner caused.”

“I know I should’ve come clean about my involvement with the sanctum. But to be completely honest with you, Phoenix, that part of my life was supposed to be nothing but me living out a fantasy. Just some harmless fun and nothing more. None of this—you really being Phoenix and Spike being Spike—none of this was supposed to happen. That’s why I gave a fake name. I purposely kept that part of my life a secret

so that it wouldn't clash with my real life."

"Why give us your number then?" I had to ask, cocking a curious brow at her. "If you never intended for this to turn into something more, then what changed your mind?"

Charlotte sighed, frowning as her shoulders slumped. "I don't really know."

"Bullshit." I rose to my feet, starting to get angry. "Why did you give us your number if you didn't want to be with us?"

Charlotte's jaw trembled, and I internally sucked in a breath, feeling like shit because the last thing I wanted was to upset her or make her cry.

"I-I'm lonely, Phoenix. I gave over ten years of my life to a man I'd planned to grow old and one day start a family with, and instead of honoring me and our marriage, he chose to run off and bury his cock inside of a fucking nineteen-year-old. Some of the best memories I've had recently have been at the sanctum, and, well... It's been a very long time since I've genuinely felt wanted. Needed. I thought maybe it was worth the risk, and so, I caved and decided to give you my number. I just never in a million fucking years thought doing so would've landed me here."

"And now?" I asked, gaining the courage to step closer to her. "Now that you know the truth, have your feelings changed?"

I moved closer, noting her lower back squeezing harder against the counter and her breath shuddering as she swallowed, her pupils dilating.

She was nervous. Maybe even a bit aroused.

Good.

Because little did she know, I was just as terrified even with my cock pressing painfully hard against my zipper.

“Because mine haven’t,” I whispered, closing the distance and pausing directly in front of her, my lips a few breaths from hers. “I want you, Charlotte. I don’t care that you lied about your name, that you’re our CDA... Hell, I don’t really give a fuck about none of it. All I’ve ever cared about has been you from the start.”

“But-but Spike—”

“—is an asshole,” I fiercely cut in as I grasped her cheek and pulled her closer to me, brushing my lips across the shell of her ear. “I can’t speak or fully atone for his actions. That’s something the two of you will have to sort out amongst yourselves. But this, you and me, what I feel for you isn’t just sexual, Charlotte. You’re a mystery I’ve been dying to solve since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

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“I’m scared,” she mumbled barely above a whisper, her throat bobbing. “I don’t want to lose my job. And Phoenix... there’s so much about me you don’t know or understand. I have so much baggage and—”

I silenced her words with a deep kiss, earning a throaty moan that had me pressing her body harder against the counter and shamelessly grinding my erection against her pelvis.

“I don’t care,” I mumbled against her mouth, nipping her bottom lip and making her hand fly up and cover said spot in frank surprise. “I’ve made my decision and there’s nothing you can say or do that’ll change my mind.”

“You don’t want this,” she pressed, shaking her head. “You don’t want me.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, being bold by grabbing her hand and forcing her to feel how fucking hard I was. “Because I have nine inches of heaven ready to prove you otherwise.”

“But-but we work together,” she stuttered, and I knew her restraint was cracking from the way she’d nervously licked her lips and from how hard she was squeezing her thighs together.

She wanted this just as badly as I did. If not, then she would’ve shoved me away, and her hand sure as fuck still wouldn’t be grasping my cock through my slacks right now.

“So what?” I questioned, making her breath shake harder as I began popping gentle

kisses behind her ear and down her neck. “Nobody has to know. If you want to keep it a secret, then that’s fine. The three of us can be each other’s dirty little secret.”

My words had her squirming against me, panting hard.

“I’m serious, Charlotte. Nobody has to know. And if you’re scared about getting hurt again, don’t be. If there’s one thing Spike and I are good at, it’s keeping a woman satisfied inside and outside of the bedroom.”

“That’s two things,” she breathlessly murmured. “And I’m not just some random woman.”

I chuckled softly. “You’re right. You’re not just some random woman. You’re our woman. My woman. At work we’ll remain professional, but behind closed doors, you’re mine. I will lick you until you’re weeping. I’ll have Spike tie your sexy little body to a chair, and then stand back and watch as he does nasty, filthy things to you. And for fun, you can even tie me up and have your way with me. I love it when a woman takes control and forces me to be their good little boy.”

Her breath hitched, and for a moment I thought I broke her because all she could do was ogle up at me with her plump lips parted, frozen in an O.

“I know it’s complicated,” I whispered, pecking the corner of her open mouth softly, cracking a tiny smile when she slightly kissed me back and then caught herself, trying to play it off. “But there’s no avoiding what’s already happened between us.”

“I’m scared, Phoenix.” She blew out a trembling breath and then reached up to knuckle under her eyes. “I-I like you. I do. But I don’t know if I can do this again. I was lucky to make it out of my divorce in one piece. But this—me, you, and Spike? It’s crazy.”

“I know you’re scared, Charlotte. You have every right to be given everything you’re going through. And yes, it’s crazy. I know it is. But I wouldn’t be standing here right now confessing my feelings if I didn’t think this was worth it. That you are worth it.”

I stepped away from her and grasped her hands, bringing them to my mouth and kissing them gently.

“Don’t quit. Stay, work these cases, and help us put this son of a bitch behind bars. The three of us can figure out the rest later. Let us show you just how good we can be to you. Just give us a chance. Please, Charlotte.”

She opened and closed her beautiful mouth, grappling for a response.

Then she sighed, heavily, and before I had time to react, she was in my face with her mouth molded against mine and a hand wrapped around my cock, pushing me toward the living room.

twenty-one

Spike

“Alright,” I said, dropping the folder I was holding when Phoenix walked past me and plopped down behind his desk. “That’s it. What the hell is going on with you?”

“What do you mean?” He placed his coffee cup down and began sorting through the small stack of pages in front of him, neglecting to look at me.

I scowled.

For the last three days he’d been prancing around the precinct with this huge shit-eating grin on his face, and the fact he’d up-and-suddenly adopted a more snazzier

wardrobe hadn't exactly gone unnoticed either. Plus, when I saw him yesterday, his hair was longer.

Today, he had a fresh haircut.

He even styled it with gel, which was not common Phoenix behavior.

"This," I stressed, emphasizing by throwing my hands up and gesturing to the fucking stranger sitting in front of me. "What the hell is this—"

"Good morning," a chipper voice cut me off, which had me cocking my head hard to the left, choking on a breath when my eyes landed on Charlotte Greene.

Holy shit.

Her dark hair was down, curled to perfection with each tendril weightlessly drifting down her shoulders. Her makeup was flawlessly applied, and dangling from her ears was a set of diamond earrings. She had on a sleeveless, black button-down, and the top three buttons were open as if to purposely expose her cleavage. She was also wearing a dangerously short skirt and a pair of heels with strings that twisted up each milky leg and tied in place just below her knees.

She had no goddamn business looking that fucking ravishing in public.

Phoenix's head lifted from his desk, and the answer for his strange behavior had literally bitch-slapped me sideways when his whole face lit up like Christmas morning.

My suspicion was proven correct when he got up from his desk and cautiously peered around before he leaned in and pressed a tender kiss to Charlotte's mouth.

Holy shit.

That son of a bitch actually did it.

He won her over.

But...when?

And why the fuck didn't he tell me?

“Still nothing?” she asked, pulling away from Phoenix and casually acting like she was staring at a picture frame when another officer had walked by.

“Not yet,” he told her. “The last of the results should be ready soon. I’ll call the lab and find out how much longer it’ll be.”

“Just text me when you know. I have to get to the office.”

Charlotte offered him a loving smile. But when she turned to face me, her smile had flattened faster than a blown tire.

“Good morning, Hutch.”

She walked away then, making my anger grow catastrophically higher when three of my colleagues froze mid step and shamelessly tipped their bodies over to peek up her skirt and at her ass, sharing looks that had me ready and eager to permanently conceal each and every one of their bodies inside some random level of this precinct. Things still may not have been formally settled between us yet, but it didn’t matter. Charlotte Greene belonged to me. I could see now that a discussion needed to be had over her work wardrobe.

“Charlotte,” I croaked, failing to clear the lump in my throat as she paused just before she’d reached the elevators. “We need to—”

“Hey there, Spike,” Kendall Wilson said gleefully as she appeared out of literally fucking nowhere, blocking my view from Charlotte. “Are you and Phoenix free?”

I sighed, cursing low under my breath when I glanced over her shoulder and saw Charlotte was gone.

“Maybe,” I replied, tipping my nose to her. “Who’s asking?”

“My niece called. She said she’ll meet up, but you have to leave now. Should I send Phoenix the location?”

Shit.

“Yeah,” I nodded, straightening my posture as I glanced back at Phoenix. “I’ll let him know.”

Kendall blindsiding me like this was unexpected, but her niece being willing to talk to us was a blessing that couldn’t have come at a better time. I’d made some progress with the security tapes, but before we could start pointing the finger at anybody, we had to be sure we were looking at the right suspects.

“Phoenix,” I yelled, stalking toward him as he got up and finished inserting a paperclip on the stack of pages he was holding.

“Yeah?”

“Check your phone. Kendall just told me her niece is waiting for us.”

“You’re a cunt,” I told Phoenix as he drove us to our destination, angrily shaking my head as I stared out the window. “You told me you were going to fix things.”

“And I did,” he replied smugly, smirking at me through the corner of my eye. “I fixed my relationship with her. Not yours.”

I scowled in my seat, pissed because I knew he was right, and that it wasn’t anyone’s fault but my own. I had plenty of time, days in fact, to fix what I’d broken. Instead, I’d chosen to focus on our cases and had cast Charlotte aside. There was no real excuse for my actions and there was nobody to blame but myself.

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“Do you think she’ll talk to me?”

“Maybe,” he said, shrugging and failing to hide his grin. “Have you rehearsed your apology yet? Because I doubt jumping in and wooing her with your dick will work this time. You really hurt her whether you know it or not.”

“What? Did she say something?”

“We may have discussed it a little,” he coyly muttered, his eyes on the road.

I straightened my spine and squared my shoulders then, screening him over with a scolding smirk. “Phoenix. What did she say?”

But all the asshole did was shake his head at me.

“It’s not my place, Spike. Whatever issues the two of you have need to be settled amongst yourselves. But if you want some brotherly advice, you need to make the first move.”

And I would have earlier if it wasn’t for Kendall fucking Wilson stopping me.

“The sooner you do it though, the better,” he carried on. “Depending on what happens with these cases, and then this shit with Karl—”

“Karl?” I repeated, my brows furrowing.

“Yeah. I meant to tell you about it, and it must have slipped my mind. I’m sorry.”

“What happened?”

“Karl paid Charlotte a visit about four days ago. Had one of his buddies keep watch over his location at the precinct so he could sneak to her house and talk to her.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I growled.

“I’m not exactly sure what went down. Charlotte didn’t want to talk about it, and I didn’t push her, but Chief and her lawyer, Peter, were at her house when I showed up. Long story short, Charlotte still refuses to press charges and refused to have units posted outside her house when Chief offered. And also, Peter quit because of it. She wants to reconcile things with him, but I don’t see it happening. Peter was brutally pissed that night, and I can’t say I blame him.”

“What the hell is Karl’s problem?” I asked, unable to contain the rage bubbling in my gut. “Why won’t he leave Charlotte alone?”

“I wish I knew.” Phoenix lifted his shoulders again as he prepared to take the next exit toward Downtown Seaview Pines. “It’s obvious there’s a reason behind it, but unless Charlotte wants us to get involved, we have to stay out of it. There’s nothing either of us can do anyway, not unless the fucker is bold enough to approach her out in the open when there are witnesses around.”

Or I could just pay that motherfucker a not so friendly visit and put this bullshit to bed once and for all.

But I didn’t bother saying that out loud because, hell, what good would it have done?

Phoenix was right. Charlotte’s squabble with her ex-husband wasn’t any of our business.

However, what Phoenix failed to grasp was that it would be all the more difficult to initiate and secure a healthy relationship with Charlotte when we had Karl lurking through the shadows like a covetous creep, eagerly waiting to rain on our parade.

No.

The more I thought about it, the more that shit just didn't settle with me.

One way or another, Karl had to be dealt with.

“What if he randomly decided to go on a hike one day, and then, eureka, he magically trips and plummets off a cliff?”

“Spike.” Phoenix took his eyes off the road and pinned me with a malicious glare. “We’re not pushing his ass off a cliff.”

“It was just a suggestion,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes. “It’s not like anyone would miss him. I know I wouldn’t.”

Phoenix drew in a deep breath, his grip loosening around the wheel as he released it. “Look, I know what you’re thinking, but it is not our place, nor is it our business to get involved, not unless Charlotte says so. We’re here now, so we’ll just have to pick this up later. But please, Spike, I’m begging you. Just stay out of it and let Karl’s karma run its course.”

Phoenix was smart enough to know that, staying out of it, just simply wasn’t in my nature, especially when it came to shit preventing me from having what was rightfully mine.

But, just to make him happy, I told him I wouldn’t intervene.

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That did not mean, however, that I couldn't find some legal, but nonlethal way of striking the fear of God inside the son of a bitch.

Yeah.

I liked this idea a thousand times better.

And I knew just where to start.

With the new resolve in mind, I tucked it away for now and got out of the car, squinting unimpressively up at Daggers, the biker bar owned and operated by Crow Wilson and some of his close friends.

"You sure this is the right place?" I asked, glancing over the top of the car at Phoenix.

"Daggers Bar and Grill," he repeated with a confident nod. "It's been a long time since I've been here, but yeah, this is where Kendall said to—oh... Shit!"

Phoenix froze, and bit by bit, every ounce of color began draining from his face.

"What?" I asked, following his petrified gaze until it zeroed on a Harley Davidson parked just outside of the bar's entrance. "What is it?"

"That's Crow's bike," he muttered, growing paler by the second. "Fuck. I... I didn't think he'd—"

"What the hell did you expect?" I asked, scoffing at him like he was an imbecile.

“This is Crow’s daughter we’re talking about. You didn’t really think she’d keep Dear Old Dad in the dark, did you?”

He obviously did, because his only form of response was to curse heavily under his breath and scrub his hands down his face.

“Kendra is over eighteen and doesn’t need a guardian present to speak with us. So, yes. I was hoping she’d have been more open-minded to speaking with us alone. I see now I was wrong.”

He drew in another breath and then blew it out, cursing again.

“Fuck, now I’m nervous. How do I look?”

“Like a spoiled-rich dumbass who wipes their ass with lavender scented toilet paper,” was my incredulous reply. “Get a fucking grip on yourself, man. This isn’t a fucking beauty contest. We have jobs to do.”

I never did ask Phoenix about what happened between him and Crow all those years ago, but it was evident with the way Phoenix was acting that it must’ve been a real ball-buster. Whatever did happen though, I just hoped the aftermath of this reunion didn’t result in one of us leaving in an ambulance or worse, a body bag.

Phoenix looked too scared to move, so I took the lead and approached the entrance first, sighing as I was made to hold the door open while Phoenix took his sweet time moving his fucking ass.

“You’re acting like a pussy,” I whispered when he finally made it to the door. “Keep it up and I’ll make sure Charlotte hears all about it when I see her later.”

I ignored the threat in his dark gaze and trailed past him, ready to get down to

business.

Behind the bar and wearing a biker's jacket with Rolling Rebels stitched on the back was a young girl with dirty-blond hair and bright blue eyes.

She looked up and offered Phoenix and I a sweet smile when she heard our footsteps heading her way.

"Hey, Phoenix," she greeted him first, raising her perfect brows and clicking her tongue. "Long time no see."

"Kendra," he acknowledged her with a nod. "You sure have grown up."

"It's only been, what, four, maybe five years now?" She shrugged and chuckled softly. "Not much has changed. Anyway, I hear you wanted to talk to me."

"Not another word, Kendra," came a dark voice that had Phoenix bristling beside me and sucking in a sharp breath.

Behind the bar was a door, and out stepped a taller man in his mid-forties, who was wearing a matching biker jacket, a t-shirt, dark jeans, and boots. He had black hair and dark brown eyes, but it was the marking above and under his right eye that stood out to me the most. It was a scar, and a gnarly one, too. One I could only assume he'd received as a failed result and permanent reminder of a rival MC trying to kill him.

"Be nice," Kendra said as she turned and fixed him with a stern smirk. "They didn't do anything wrong. They're just here to talk."

"Tell me something, Phoenix," Crow said, releasing a dark chuckle as he moved closer to his daughter and slightly pressed his body weight against the side of the bar, scrutinizing him intently. "I'll admit using my sister to avoid contact with me was

quite a ballsy move on your behalf. But seriously, Phoenix, my daughter? Did you really expect to come within a fucking inch of her without me finding out?”

“She’s not in any trouble, Crow,” Phoenix reassured him, but Crow just shook his head like he wasn’t having it. “We just need to ask her—”

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“No,” he said, pounding a clenched fist down against the bar top.

Kendra shrieked and jumped back with a hand to her chest. “Daddy!”

“You’ve obviously lost your goddamn mind and have forgotten who you’re dealing with. Your puny little pig badges don’t mean a damn thing to me. You’re under my roof now, and I’m the one who calls the fucking shots. Now, whatever you have to say to her can be said to me, and me alone. If that’s a problem, then you can turn around and get the fuck out of my bar. I’ll give you ten seconds to decide and then an additional thirty to explain why the fuck you’re here before I throw you out myself. Your time starts now.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

And I thought I had anger issues.

“That’s fine, Crow. We’ll talk to you if that’s what it comes down to.”

“Good,” he said, flashing us a cruel smile as he grabbed a clean glass off the counter and poured himself a drink. “Kendra, go to the office and stay there until I come get you. I won’t be long.”

Kendra glanced sadly between us, whispering how sorry she was before she dropped her head and disappeared through the doorway.

“Out with it then,” Crow demanded. “This better not be about my sister because I told you what would happen the last time—”

“This isn’t about Kendall,” Phoenix retorted in a snipped tone, his jaw set. “This is about two rape cases we’re working.”

“Rapes?” Crow repeated, jerking his head back and gaping outrageously between us. “You’re wasting your time. Kendra doesn’t know anything about any rapes and neither do I.”

“Nobody said she was involved,” I calmly pointed out, cautiously watching his movements as I gently scooted out a barstool and sat down on it. “We’re just looking for some information because one of the girls was spiked with a date rape drug.”

“Rohypnol,” muttered Phoenix.

“And you’re thinking a club member is involved due to some of our...history of dabbling in certain drugs and other illegal narcotics.”

“That is also correct,” I didn’t hesitate to agree.

“I’ll be the first to tell you it wasn’t one of my guys. While the majority of them are stupid and reckless, they all have wives and terror goblins hanging off their legs every day when they go home. There’s only two men in my crew who aren’t married and that’s Levi and Killian. I wish I could throw the blame on those shit stains, but it’s impossible whenever they share the same bed with my daughter every night.”

“If not one of your guys, then who?” asked Phoenix. “Is there anyone you can think of who would be good for brutally raping and physically assaulting two innocent women?”

“It could be any of them, really.” Crow finished off the booze in his glass, pouring another. He then reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights and a lighter, sparking one up and puffing away. “Then again, it’s possible it

could be none of them.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked, curling my nose when the grouchy fuck blew the smoke dead in my face.

“I may be able to provide some information, but whatever I say has to stay off the record indefinitely. If I get arrested, trust me when I tell you that you’ll get arrested next, and then we’ll all be sitting in a room face-to-face with Chief. I’ll walk away Scot-Free and you two will lose everything. I swear that on my life.”

“Fine, Crow,” Phoenix hissed, growling slightly as he rubbed a flustered hand down his face. “Just tell us so we can get the fuck out of here already.”

“It’s like this.” Crow picked up the bottle of whatever amber liquor he’d been drinking and fetched another glass, pouring a fresh drink and sliding it over to me.

I blinked, surprised, and then looked at Phoenix, who angled his head at me as a warning not to drink it.

“I’ve been trying to go legit for while now. Keep my side of the Pines as drug and crime free as possible, but there have been some issues getting in the way.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Phoenix. “Like what?”

“Someone has been smuggling in some pretty lethal drugs and distributing it out on the streets. Coincidentally, Rohypnol just so happens to be one of them. Rumor has it that it’s another rival club, but the problem is, nobody’s talking. Whoever’s in charge of the operation has gone through masterful lengths to conceal their identity.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“About four months now,” he answered, turning to me. “That’s when I’d first received word that all of the homeless kids we helped were back on the streets, selling again. It’s not just Rohypnol though. Other drugs like weed, heroin, and crack are involved too. But from what my sources are telling me, Rohypnol has been the highest in demand as of late. And if I’m right, then that means there’s another huge shipment coming in, and soon.”

“What does that have to do with our cases?” Phoenix wondered. “I’m afraid I’m not catching whatever point it is you’re trying to make here, Crow.”

“I’m telling you this so that you two can start thinking a little more outside of the box here. You said one of the girls was drugged with Rohypnol. So, if it wasn’t a club member, then that means whoever spiked her had to have purchased it from a street dealer, because it’s not like you can just walk inside of a pharmacy with your hand stuck out asking for the shit.”

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I shifted my attention to Phoenix, my brows raised. “He kind of has a point there.”

“And that’s where you’re going to run into a fuck-ton of problems. There are hundreds of dealers involved with the other clubs, and don’t even get me started on the length of their client lists. It’ll be like trying to find a needle in a haystack. It’s a long shot, but I’d suggest reaching out to someone from Narcotics, someone who’s a little more familiar with the bullshit going down on this side of the Pines. I doubt they’ll tell you much but given that one of your cases is Rohypnol related, it’s possible they may be able to help steer you in the right direction.”

Crow let out a tired sigh and lifted his glass, finishing his drink and dropping it down on the bar.

“Now if that’s all, there’s the door. I have shit to do and my business isn’t going to run itself.”

He was off without another word, and as Phoenix spun on his heel, beelining for the exit, I grabbed the free drink I was offered and guzzled it down, cringing at the unkindly burn spreading down my throat.

“Phoenix,” I called out, sprinting after him. “You want to tell me what the fuck that whole thing was about? What the hell happened between you two?”

Phoenix shook his head, refusing to speak until we made it to the car. “I don’t want to talk about it. It was a long time ago and I just want to put the shit behind me and forget about it.”

“At least tell me why the hell he hates you so much,” I pressed.

“That scar... The one on his face, across his eye. You noticed it, yeah?”

I nodded. “Yeah, what about it?”

Phoenix ground his teeth as he heaved in one long, trembling breath and tenderly expelled it, his eyes locked on mine.

“I’m the one that gave it to him.”

twenty-two

Charlotte

Hours passed and I still hadn’t heard from Phoenix about the lab results. There were no new messages and absolutely nothing had been delivered to my email, which wasn’t unusual, but I did find it to be quite annoying. I know these things take time and that it was unprofessional to call and rush the lab techs at the risk of cross contaminating the evidence, but I was quite an eager beaver today and my brain just wouldn’t settle the hell down unless I had some damn answers.

So, I picked up my cell phone and reluctantly called the lab.

“Crime lab. This is Kendall Wilson speaking.”

“Hi, Kendall. It’s Charlotte Greene, the CDA working with Hutch and Rhodes.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. What can I do for you, Charlotte?”

“I was hoping to maybe get an ETA on the hair follicles. I’m sorry to be a pain but

Rhodes told me they would be ready today.”

“We’re not quite there yet,” Kendall answered, which had me scowling as I leaned back in my seat, struggling not to get further agitated. “Some of the results are back but not all of them are ready.”

“Okay, so lay on me what you do have.”

“So far, it’s basically the same. Most of the follicles we collected belong to Amber and Daniel Strickland.”

I sighed.

Damnit.

This was not good news.

“However,” Kendall continued, “we did find some follicles on Amber that don’t belong to her or Daniel.”

My heart jolted. “Really?”

But it would be just my fucking luck for her to tell me it was animal hair.

“Yes, and after further investigation, I discovered they’re from two different males.”

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I nearly tumbled out of the chair when my body reactively dove forward, stumbling to my feet. “Two?”

“That is correct,” Kendall confirmed. “Two. It’d taken me a while to sort through everything, and unfortunately, I was only able to find a strand with the root still intact on just one of them. The other strands are rather short, but I’m going to try and see if I can at least gather some mitochondrial DNA from the shafts.”

“And how long will that take?” I asked.

“It’ll be a while, Charlotte. 72 hours at most. I know that’s not what you want to hear and that you have Harley and Chief breathing down all of your necks right now, and I’m sorry. I want to catch this guy as much as you do, but this form of testing is something that unfortunately cannot be rushed. I hope you can understand.”

“That’s fine, Kendall.” I wasn’t happy, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it, so I just took the little bit of info she was able to provide as a win and just simply bobbed my head. “Would you mind doing me a favor and forwarding the results you do have to my email address?”

“Uh, yeah, no problem. I can totally do that.”

I gave her my info and then ended the call, sighing as I sat down at my computer and pulled up my emails, waiting.

Once I had what I needed, I printed off the pages and then began going over everything from scratch, starting with Delilah’s case.

I stared up at the two mobile white boards Blaire and Perry were nice enough to let me borrow from their offices and wiped the sweat beading down my brows away, checking for what had to be the thousandth time that I hadn't made a mistake and forgotten to jot down any significant information. Everything appeared to be precise, so after convincing myself it was okay to unhand the files and focus more on the boards, I dropped them on my desk and then perched down on the end of it with my arms crossed firmly against my chest.

None of this made a lick of fucking sense.

Delilah wasn't drugged. And other than the DNA we'd gathered from her rape kit, there was no additional evidence that had been found or reported indicating there was another assailant.

Then again, just because no evidence had been found didn't necessarily imply a second man wasn't involved.

But it did, however, make it insanely fucking difficult proving there was.

If only those cameras hadn't been broken. That footage would've given us all the answers we needed.

"Hey, Charlotte," Harley said, knocking twice before she stuck her head in the door. "I'm about to head home."

I twisted around to stare at the clock on my desk, blinking in surprise. It was getting late. I should've left over an hour ago, but I was way too invested in my work to even think about going home.

"You're still at it?"

Harley stepped in, whistling as her eyes briefly scanned over each board harboring the crime scene photos and paragraphs of notes and theories scattered everywhere in dry-erase marker.

“Yeah.” I sighed tiredly and swiped away the last of the sweat marinating my face. I must’ve looked like a circus clown, but my condition must not have been too bad because Harley made no mention of any smudges smeared along my face. “To be honest, I feel like I’m starting to lose my mind.”

“Cases like these can do that sometimes. Do you need me to take over for a few days so you can get some rest?”

I shook my head and said, “I’m fine. Really, I am. It’s just the additional hair follicles the lab found on Amber that’s been bugging the hell out of me. One of them has to belong to our perp, but the second one... That just completely screws up our theory and any hopes of it—”

“Not necessarily, Charlotte.”

I lifted my chin and met her gaze, my brows crinkling. “What do you mean?”

“The extra follicle does raise some suspicion, but it doesn’t imply there are two different aggressors. Amber and her husband are swingers, Charlotte. It’s possible Amber had another engagement prior that day with a special friend, or perhaps a more special kind of friend her husband has no knowledge of. The possibilities are endless, but there’s no way to know for sure until DNA is back, and, well, Amber will also need to be questioned again too.”

I considered that, having realized Harley made a damn good point.

“Have you told Hutch and Rhodes about it?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I left messages, but neither has responded. Their phones are off.”

“I wouldn’t sweat it too much. They probably got called into a meeting and had to shut down their devices. Chief gets rather pissy when over half the department would rather be on their phone than pay attention to their briefings.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. Yeah. That sounded like Chief.

But it had also been hours since I last reached out to them. I doubted he had them tied up for that damn long.

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“You’ve worked hard today, Charlotte. Wrap it up, go home, and get some sleep. You can fret more over the hair follicles tomorrow. Are you fine locking up, or would you rather I wait for you?”

“I’ll lock up. I still have to pack my bag and make a trip to the break room for a coffee. I don’t know who was generous enough to put a Keurig machine in there, but—”

Harley casually cleared her throat then, grinning at me.

My mouth dropped. “Harley, I fucking love you.”

She giggled and shook her head. “I love you too, Charlotte. Now, go home. I’m serious. I have access to the office feed. I’ll check it in exactly one hour, and if I see you’re still here, you’re fired for an entire week. A whole week. Do you understand me?”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Yes, Harley. I understand.”

She took her leave then, and after a moment there I’d paused to listen, almost swearing I’d heard her speaking to someone. I marched over to the door to check it out, but when I stuck my head out, glancing left to right down the halls, there was nobody there. As far as I knew, Harley and I were the last ones in the building.

Deciding I was exhausted and that it was my brain playing tricks on me, I left my office and headed down to the break room, which was literally the first room at the head of the building, just off the right-hand side. It had taken me about five minutes

to get my coffee ready thanks to using multiple Keurig cups to fill the biggest to-go cup we had, but once I had it in hand, I was stalking back to my office and groaning in absolute heaven at the taste, just for all of it to come spewing out of my mouth when I walked in my office and found Spike butt-naked, hard as a fucking rock, with his lion mask on, grinning wickedly at me.

His clothes were tossed in an ugly pile just under the white boards.

“On your knees,” he commanded in a seductively gruff voice.

I swallowed hard, trying not to choke, and glared at him with my lips pursed.

“What the fuck are you doing, Spike?”

I fought like hell not to purposely glance at his amazing cock or the fact that his piercings looked like they were ready to rip through his gloriously sensitive flesh.

He spit in his hand and then gripped his amazing girth, stroking it, making my lips part and eyes widen with what I was failing to convince myself was deceptive fascination.

My knees grew weak, and reactively my tongue was slithering along my bottom lip at the sight of pre-cum leaking out his swollen head.

Snap the fuck out of it, Charlotte!

I shook my head fast, luckily managing to catch my coffee before it slipped from my grasp, and rushed to put it on my desk, releasing a shriek when a large hand had suddenly gripped my throat from behind.

My body shuddered in sickening pleasure when Spike’s fingertips fastened around

my skin and slightly obstructed my airway, his cock pressing against my ass.

“You’ve been a bad girl, Eve,” he whispered, and I fumbled on the tiniest breath I could draw in, unsure why he’d called me Eve when he knew that wasn’t my real name. “Showing up at the precinct looking like this, you’re just asking for any man to shove his head between your scrumptious legs. That’s not okay, Eve. In fact, I almost buried three of my coworkers today because they wouldn’t stop staring at what’s mine.”

“That-that’s not my fault,” I choked out, hating the moan as it tumbled out my mouth when he ground his cock even rougher against my ass.

“You’re right,” he replied in a spine-quivering growl, one that sent a pulse of fire straight to my aching cunt. “It’s not.”

His hand tightened around my throat and in a breathless, forceful push, I was bent over the desk with his free hand snaking up my skirt and under my panties. Spike cursed low under his breath as he felt the arousal drenched along his fingertips.

I knew what was coming and that there was nothing I could do to stop it, so I waited, bracing myself for his cock.

But then my back arched, and the most guttural sound evaded my throat when his scorching hot tongue snaked up my pussy from behind and his mouth began feasting greedily on my asshole.

“Oh my God,” I cried, panting harder as new sensations rushed through me, driving me to the fastest orgasm I ever had in my fucking life.

Spike gathered my juices with his cock and eagerly rubbed it up and down my pussy, pausing when he reached my entrance. It was all the warning I got before he impaled

me in a brutal thrust that had my eyes rolling in the back of my head and my hands desperately gripping the sides of my desk for support.

“You’re mine,” he hissed, pounding into me so hard it had the desk sliding up and me damn near toppling off it and head-first onto the floor. “You fucking hear me, Eve? MINE!”

“Ye-yes, Spike,” I cried again, moaning the more I felt my pussy continuously weep as he fucked me faster.

Deeper.

I still couldn’t believe it. Karl and I were together for years and never, not once, had my body ever experienced something so intimately intoxicating as this.

“I’m sorry!”

“Oh, baby,” he spoke again, his hand leaving my throat and fingers forcing their way inside my mouth, hooking against the inside of my cheek.

I groaned at the discomfort, but it didn’t stop him from hammering into me like he was adamantly trying to teach me a crucial lesson.

“You should be. Why don’t you show me just how sorry you are, yeah?”

I knew what he wanted, so when he slipped out, I immediately turned and got down on my knees, opening my mouth wide for him.

He wasn’t gentle. Not at all. Spike never was.

He fucked my throat with so much anger and vengeance it was like my appearance at the precinct this morning had ultimately pissed him off and this was his way of getting payback.

And for all I knew, maybe it was.

That was fine though. Because he’d pissed me off whenever he came after my job.

So, just to be a bitch, I scraped my teeth along his shaft and then grinned big when he hissed in pain and jerked out of my mouth with a fatal, heated look flashing through his dark eyes.

“Charlotte.”

And then I sucked him back in, deep throating down his piercings until I couldn't breathe.

Spike cursed loudly, then stumbled back, holding my head in place the faster and harder he worked his hips. I held on and let him fuck my throat as deep as I could possibly handle until eventually, he exploded down my mouth.

I swallowed everything and then heaved in desperate, greedy fucking breaths when Spike trudged off with a sated sigh and gathered his clothes.

“I'm sorry,” he muttered as he dressed, shaking his head. “For trying to get you replaced. It felt like you were trying to tell us how to do our jobs, and I got pissed when you started questioning us about the suspects. Then, when I found out who you really were and that you've been lying to us, it didn't help make it any better. I just...reacted, and I'm truly sorry.”

He finished getting dressed, then approached me, grabbing my hands. He brought them up to his mouth, and in a bold move I hadn't anticipated, kissed each of my knuckles gently.

“Please forgive me. I was wrong.” He moved closer, his mouth pausing by my ear. “All you have to do is sit on top of that desk and I'll give you a second taste of just how sorry I truly am.”

“Spike.” My lips parted as I stared up at him, gasping as he forced my body back until I was sitting on the desk and his head was between my legs, sucking and licking up my pussy again.

“You... don't...” I started, but it was already too late. His tongue was deep inside my

core and his fingers were sliding in easily after, stroking along each of my favorite spots until my pussy was shamefully grinding against his hot mouth and I was collapsing, leaving his face soaked.

“Let me follow you home?” he asked when he rose to his feet, trapping his lips against mine before I could ever get a word out. “Please.”

I sighed, still fighting to catch my damn breath. “Fine, Spike. You can make sure I get home safely.”

He grinned at me through his mask, looking so elated it had my heart smiling despite how angry I still was with him.

twenty-three

Charlotte

My cheeks were tomato red when Spike escorted me out of the building. But now, as I was on the way home and glancing through my rearview mirror to find Spike riding a little too close to my ass for comfort, it was worse.

What the fuck were you thinking, Charlotte?

In your office of all fucking places?

In my defense, it wasn't technically my fault. It wasn't like I knew Spike would show up, nor was I expecting to walk inside my office to find him stripped naked, and me being bent over my desk after the fact.

It was hot, though.

God, was it so fucking hot.

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But it did not mean, however, that I'd fully forgiven him.

It was going to take a lot more than a surprise office fuck to fully get back on my good graces.

A notification dinged on my phone when I was about halfway home, so I picked it up long enough to swipe away the email, just to shake my head fast and blink twice when I saw it wasn't an email, but a text from a restricted number.

My stomach fell straight to my ass when I read over the familiar words.

It should've been you.

The text came in again.

And again.

And then again.

All with nothing but the same four words.

"God damnit, Karl," I shouted, dropping my phone in the passenger seat as I pounded my other fist against the steering wheel, my nostrils flaring.

For fuck's sake.

Why wouldn't he just fucking STOP already!?

My chest was painfully heaving by the time I whipped the front end of my car into my driveway, and when I got out, I immediately knew something wasn't right because the lights on all of my security cameras scattered along the roof of my house weren't on.

Instantly, I pulled up the security app on my phone, and then cursed heavily under my breath when I saw all of my cameras had somehow been disconnected.

"Charlotte," Spike called for me when he got out of his car. "Is something wrong?"

He came jogging up to me, then wasted no fucking time tugging me behind him when he saw the mixture of rage and fear warring it out on my face.

"What is it?" he asked, reaching for his service pistol strapped to his side. "Talk to me, baby."

"My cameras are off," I whispered. "And look." I pulled up the texts and showed them to him. "Karl showed up at my house four days ago. That same morning, there was a package delivered to me from a local flower shop with no return address. There was a card attached to it with the same four words written on it. These texts were sent to me just minutes ago."

"Stay close to me," Spike demanded as he withdrew his pistol and began moving closer to the house. "I won't let anything happen to you, Charlotte. I fucking promise."

"Wh-where's Phoenix?" I asked, matching his pace and staying close.

"He went solo tonight at the club," was his gut-wrenching response. "Don't worry, he loves you and wouldn't hurt you like that. He's only there trying to help track down our perp."

My lips parted, but no words came. Hell, it was all I could fucking do to think straight or remind myself to breathe normally.

“Are you expecting a package?” Spike asked as we came closer to the porch.

I shook my head. “No. I’m not.”

“There’s one in front of the door.”

My breath hitched.

Another one?

“Spike,” I worriedly cried, reaching out and grabbing ahold of his arm. “What if it’s a bomb?”

“I doubt it’s a bomb,” he said confidently. “Just stay here and let me open it.”

As hard as it was to listen, I did, waiting impatiently as Spike took his sweet fucking time ripping through the tape to open the box.

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He breathed in deeply, then let out a horrendous cough, dropping his gun and stumbling away with his hands enclosed over his mouth.

“Don’t look,” he yelled mid-cough, shaking his head at me as I planted a heel atop the front porch step, then another. “Don’t!”

“Spike—”

“It’s a cat,” he yelled, coughing harder and gagging, my heart sinking once his words had finally registered with my ears.

“He sent you a dead fucking cat.”

twenty-four

Spike

The police arrived at Charlotte’s house within minutes of me calling the report in. Charlotte was currently talking with Chief and Captain Burgess and was in utter shambles, barely holding it together.

“Spike!”

My brows shot up to my hairline when I spun around at the sound of my name.

“What the hell happened?”

“Charlotte’s fine,” I told Phoenix, confused as to why he was here. “I thought you were at the club?”

“I was,” he answered, worrying his bottom lip the more he stared at Charlotte talking to our bosses. “I left early after overhearing on the scanner that something happened here at Charlotte’s house.”

“Someone cut the lines on her security cameras. There was a package delivered on her porch with a dead cat inside of it.”

“What?” he asked, jerking his head back in disbelief. “Tell me you’re not serious.”

I sadly shook my head, wishing I had better news to deliver.

“Was it Karl?”

“Charlotte seems to think so. Aside from him, her coworker Blaire, and Peter, nobody else is familiar with the cameras or knows where they’re located. There’s something else too.”

I checked my surroundings and then leaned in closer to my best friend.

“Charlotte received several texts on the way here from a restricted number.”

I relayed to him what the messages said.

“But get this... Charlotte also told me she’d received another package from a local flower shop the same day Karl showed up here. There wasn’t a sender listed but there was a card taped to the box with the exact words written inside.”

“Wait...” Phoenix shook his head, completely flabbergasted. “She told you that? I

mean... Obviously, I knew about Karl, but this is the first I'm hearing about a package. She never told me about that."

I looked away from him long enough to carefully narrow my eyes over his shoulder at the random car whipping madly inside Charlotte's driveway. It was Peter. He literally jumped out, leaving his door open, and immediately ran over to Charlotte, who was still in deep conversation with Cap and Chief, tears flooding her cheeks.

"Maybe it slipped her mind. But that doesn't matter right now. She said it's Karl and that the whole 'it should've been you' thing is just another bullshit form of him trying to woo her back."

"His way of saying he should've chosen her instead of his mistress," Phoenix uneasily grumbled.

"Yeah," I nodded. "That's how it sounded to me too."

"But a dead fucking cat?" he said more angrily, gritting his teeth. "Why would Karl—"

"I have a theory about that," I whispered, not wanting to be too loud just in case Charlotte overheard. I fucking refused to upset her any more than she already was at the moment. "But before I can elaborate any further, that's the person we need to speak with first."

He followed my pointing finger's trajectory.

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“Peter?” Phoenix’s gaze volleyed between the two of us for a moment before he finally cocked his head slightly to the side and asked, “Why Peter?”

“Just trust me,” I begged, really needing him to follow my lead on this and not hound me with a thousand fucking questions.

I knew what I was doing and if my gut was spot on, then Karl had best get ready for what was coming.

We all should.

Especially Charlotte.

“Fine, man.” Phoenix rubbed tiredly at his eyes and blew out a breath. “We’ll talk to him if that’s what you want. But first, let’s go find out what the hell is going on.”

We fell in step with each other, approaching Charlotte, Captain Burgess, Chief, and Peter, who were huddled outside of the front door, listening to Charlotte as she spoke.

“I just don’t understand how Karl could do something like this.”

She frantically shook her head as she stared desperately between the three of them, her jaw trembling.

“He loves animals. We never had any pets because I’m super allergic to pet dander, but STILL!” She paused and heaved in a much-needed breath, more tears dotting over her broken, blue orbs. “This just doesn’t make any sense. He wouldn’t do

something like this. He-he couldn't have..."

Her voice cracked, and instantly my jaw tightened when Peter quickly wrapped his arms around her, holding on tight as she began sobbing into his chest, clinging to him.

Now is not the time for jealousy, Spike.

"You were right," she wept, her face one huge, blubbering mess as she peered guiltily up at Peter. "I should've listened to you, and I'm so, so fucking sorry I didn't. I'm so sorry, Peter. Please forgive me."

"What happens now?" Phoenix asked first, looking to Chief and then Captain Burgess.

"I have a team on the way to pick Karl up for questioning. We'll hold him long enough so that Burgess and I can do a little digging inside his financial records and review the data stored inside his ankle monitor. If there's anything there proving he did this, then, he's done."

"And if there isn't?" Charlotte's tender voice rasped out.

Chief sighed heavily, but he didn't lie to her. "Then we'll have no choice but to release him. I know you mean well, Charlotte. You're such a good person, and I cannot express how sorry I am for everything you're going through, but I'm sorry. I simply cannot stand back and let you continue refusing protection when it's obvious you need it."

Charlotte surprisingly didn't argue. "I understand, Chief. Whatever you have to do, just do it. I don't care how many cops you post outside of my house or for how long. Just make sure that bastard doesn't get this close to me again."

“I’m an idiot,” Charlotte mumbled thirty minutes later, wiping the tears out of her eyes as she sat on her couch, Peter right beside her. Captain and Chief were long gone and aside from Phoenix, Peter, and of course, myself; there were two units posted outside Charlotte’s house at this very moment.

“I can’t believe he’d cut my camera lines, slaughter an innocent animal, wrap it like it’s a fucking gift, and then deliver it on my doorstep. It’s just... Sick!”

Her body uncomfortably squirmed in her seat, pulling away fast when Peter tried to grab her hand.

“I’m sorry. I can’t do this right now. I-I think I’m gonna go upstairs and take a shower.”

“Would you like me to make you some coffee?” Peter asked, looking nervous as he stood and raised a red and severely peeling hand toward the kitchen.

Jesus Christ.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

“Might as well,” she answered with an indignant scoff. “There’s no way in hell I’m sleeping tonight. Not after that.”

She said nothing more and rushed upstairs, leaving Phoenix and I alone with exactly who I was eager to speak to.

“Peter,” I said, trailing behind him and casually leaning against the kitchen island when I made it there.

I watched as he fetched a pair of gloves out his back pocket and put them on. He then

grabbed a bag of espresso beans and dumped them in their slot inside the machine.

“Yeah?” he asked, but it was hard to talk thanks to him carelessly pressing a button that made the machine whir to life, grinding up the beans.

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“I want to talk to you about Karl. Just how serious is this shit?”

“Pretty serious,” he replied, rolling his eyes like he was annoyed with the topic alone.

He began preparing Charlotte’s coffee and tiredly shook his head.

“I was around when she and Karl first got together over ten years ago, back when we were in college working on getting our degrees. The guy’s fucking psycho.”

“Has he ever done anything like this before?”

“It’s complicated. Charlotte has always been extremely private about their relationship. But what I do know is there have been multiple times where she’s come to me crying her eyes out over the brutal arguments they’ve had. She was never specific about what was said, but she’s never failed to mention how hostile Karl would get, or how he’d grab the most random thing he could get his hands on and hurl it across the room out of anger.”

“Be honest with me,” I said, delivering a look that told him I was far from fucking around. “Has he ever hurt her before, like in the past?”

“Physically?” he asked, and I nodded, waiting patiently for his response.

Peter shrugged, and judging by the look on his face, I believed him, as did Phoenix, who was now standing beside me.

“Charlotte has always denied it when I’ve asked. And to be honest, I’ve never seen

any physical evidence as far as bruises and such. Aside from this one recent time, I truthfully don't know about any previous altercations. If it did happen, or has happened, she's never told me. Detective Rhodes," he said, nudging his head toward Phoenix. "He knows this already because he was here when it happened, but I quit being her lawyer because of this shit."

"She needs you, Peter," Phoenix said, frowning. "You're the closest friend she has who understands the true danger here."

"And what are you expecting me to do, Detective Rhodes?" he asked, sounding a bit tense. "I've tried everything I can think of, and nothing has worked. She wouldn't even be in this position right now if she'd have listened to me."

Well, he wasn't wrong.

"Don't quit," Phoenix answered simply. "Given what's happened, I'd say she's received one hell of a wake-up call. Don't you agree?"

Peter just scoffed and shook his head at us like we were complete idiots.

"You don't understand. The situation with Charlotte and Karl... This has put an extremely huge dent in not only our friendship, but our attorney-client relationship as well. She doesn't listen to me. Any advice I've ever given her has always gone in one ear and right out the other. I hate that I quit on her. I do. But that doesn't mean I've stopped being her friend. I'll always be there for her whenever she needs me, but when it comes to this shit with Karl, I just can't do it anymore. I've stomached all I can take."

"And yet here you are," Phoenix couldn't help but point out.

"Yes," Peter answered tightly. "Because that's what friends do. They show up and are

there for each other despite their disputes.”

Even though I didn’t really know Peter, I had to admit he’d given a reasonable, respectable explanation.

Peter abruptly straightened his spine and then whipped around to grab the coffee mug off the counter.

Phoenix and I turned, finding Charlotte standing behind us dressed in pajamas. Her hair was damp, unbrushed, and still, even after her shower, all she could do was gape between us with a river of tears pouring down her distraught face.

twenty-five

Phoenix

“You let him go?” I shrieked the following morning, irritably running my fingers through my hair and gripping it tightly as I began to pace around Captain Burgess’s office.

Chief was here too, standing beside Cap as he sat behind his desk.

“We went through everything,” said Chief. “But unfortunately, there is nothing there proving Karl made any purchases from a flower shop. There’s no evidence putting him at one either.”

“But that doesn’t mean anything,” Cap said, trying to remain confident. “We’re still investigating. Karl’s had help before, so it’s likely there are others involved. It’s just going to take a little more time to prove it.”

I couldn’t fucking believe this shit.

“What did Karl say?”

“What do you think? He’s denying everything.”

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I bellowed out a growl, so pissed that I just impulsively reacted and vehemently kicked the chair in front of me, knocking it over.

“Phoenix.” Captain Burgess rose to his feet, glaring outrageously at me. “What the hell has gotten into you?”

I closed my eyes, sucked in a hardy breath, and then released it, deciding the smartest thing I could do in that moment was pick up the chair, sit the fuck down, and apologize for my outburst.

I didn’t mean to lose my temper like that. I was just stressed the hell out with these cases, and this shit with Karl and Charlotte wasn’t making it any better.

“We understand you’re frustrated, Phoenix, but this isn’t your first rodeo. You know how these things go. Focus on interviewing Amber again and see if we can find out who those extra hair follicles belong to. I spoke to Kendall earlier and the DNA from the last of them should be back soon. Chief and I will handle Karl.”

I internally scoffed but kept my lips zipped, knowing better than to argue with the two men who could ultimately end my career with just a snap of their fingers.

It wasn’t until I made it back and plopped down at my computer that I furiously kicked the inside of my desk and slapped my stapler across the room, my chest heaving.

“Let me guess,” Spike said from behind his desk, kicking off the floor and gliding over to me in his computer chair. “They let him go.”

I met his gaze, my harrowing glare giving him the answer.

“Fucking figures,” he scoffed. “So, what do you want to do?”

“There’s nothing we can do.” I huffed as I made to go pick up my stapler, cursing again when I saw I’d broken it. “There’s no evidence putting him at the flower shop and there’s nothing proving he made any purchases from one.”

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t have help,” he stated firmly, repeating the captain’s earlier words. “Have you given any more thought to what I talked to you about last night?”

I gushed out a tired sigh and reclaimed my seat, placing my broken stapler down and rubbing my hands down my face, saying nothing at first.

“I don’t know, Spike. It’s a good theory, but it’s also a huge leap, not to mention a huge accusation that could ultimately fuck us if you turn out to be wrong.”

“Not if we keep it to ourselves, it won’t.”

I shook my head in disagreement.

“Come on, Phoenix. I understand we’d be overstepping our boundaries, but I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t truly believe it could be related to our cases.”

“And what about Charlotte?” I had to ask him. “This affects her too, you know. She could lose everything.”

“She’ll be upset, yes, but it doesn’t change the fact that we have jobs to do. If I’m wrong, then I’ll admit I’m wrong, and I’ll drop it. Nobody will ever have to know. All I’m saying is that it wouldn’t hurt to check it out and eliminate all of the

possibilities.”

“And what if you end up being right?” I asked.

He frowned at me. “This isn’t something I want to be right about, Phoenix. But if I am, then I guess the three of us will cross that bridge when we get there.” Spike got to his feet and began gathering his stuff. “Come on. Let’s go see what Amber has to say and then we can get started.”

I got up and pushed my chair in, pausing momentarily when I looked up and saw Kendall dashing out of the elevator with a manila folder in her hand. My immediate thought was that the DNA from the follicles must’ve finally come in, but a flustered growl slipped past my lips when she effortlessly whipped around a gossiping group of officers and beelined straight for Captain Burgess’s office.

Damnit.

Why the hell was this shit taking so long?

twenty-six

Charlotte

“Hi there,” a heavyset man with a receding hairline greeted me as I walked inside the local gun shop. “How can I help you today?”

“Um,” I started, swallowing nervously as I glanced around at all the weapons displayed around the walls. I took a breath and smoothed my hands down my dress pants, offering him a smile I knew for a fact didn’t reach my eyes. “I’m interested in purchasing a firearm. I’m looking for something small, easy to operate, and with minimal to no recoil if possible.”

“Do you mind if I ask what—”

“Protection,” Peter, who walked in after me, said curtly as the door shut behind him.

“It’s for her personal protection against her ex-husband.”

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The man's face flushed, and I could tell he regretted asking no sooner than he turned around to fetch some guns from under the display case.

"Thanks for meeting me," I said to Peter, turning and hugging him.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I don't think I have much of a choice anymore."

He nodded, remaining wordless as his gloved hand gripped mine and squeezed it tight. Together, we wandered over to where the salesman had a small selection of firearms set out for me to inspect.

I frankly didn't know shit about guns, but after talking things over with Peter, the salesman, and spending about thirty minutes holding different models and learning how to operate each of them, I decided on a simple 9mm that not only fit perfectly in my hand, but personally felt right for me. It probably would've been better to bring Phoenix or Spike along for something like this, but I knew they were tied up working our cases and going through the second interview with Amber. After what happened last night, I'd taken the day off, and since I knew Peter was off work today and with things still not so great between us, I thought this would be a good attempt at reconciling—or more like salvaging what was possibly left of our friendship.

"Are you hungry?" I asked when we walked out of the shop, my new gun safely put away in my purse and out of sight. "I'll buy."

"Yeah. That sounds good."

Peter and I gave the waitress our orders and when she was off, I turned to Peter and gave him a shy smile, not really sure what to say.

I felt like an idiot. Peter was right all along. He'd been warning me all this time, and I was just too fucking blind to see the truth.

"Can I tell you something?"

He nodded. "Of course."

It had been bugging me since that day Karl came to see me, and I hadn't shared this information with anyone else, not even Spike or Phoenix. I already knew what Peter was going to say, but I just couldn't stand it anymore. I had to get this shit off my chest, and Peter was the only person I trusted enough to tell.

"When Karl came to see me, he told me something, Peter. Something that's really been bothering me."

"What is it?"

"He told me that he and his mistress, Kate, were being followed and were receiving death threats."

Peter blinked at me in total surprise and leaned back in his seat, his brows raised sky high. "Really?"

"Yes," I nodded. "Karl also told me he believes the car accident wasn't really an accident. He said when he went to pick Kate up that night, his truck and brakes were working just fine. It wasn't until after they'd already left the restaurant when he noticed his brakes weren't working."

Peter let out a scoff and shook his head. “And let me guess... You believe him.”

“Of course I don’t believe him,” I scoffed right back.

“Then why is it bothering you?” he asked more gently this time. “You know he’s a liar, Char. He’d say anything at this point to get you back in his corner.”

“Because it just is, Peter,” I grumbled, coming to see that I’d made a mistake by confiding in him. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m bringing it up because I’m still having a hard time convincing myself that—”

My phone started ringing then, cutting me off before I could properly finish. Once I saw it was Phoenix, I raised a finger to Peter and then answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Charlotte,” Phoenix said in a sense of urgency. “I know you’re off today, and I’m sorry, but you need to get down to the precinct as soon as possible.”

“Why?” I asked, raising another finger at Peter when he opened his mouth to ask what was going on. “What happened?”

“We got a DNA match on one of the hair follicles.”

My lips parted, my eyes lighting up. “Really? That’s great, Phoenix!”

“No, Charlotte... You don’t understand.”

My smile fell as he breathed in deeply and blew it out, cursing low under his breath.

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“It’s Karl, Charlotte. The DNA matched with Karl.”

twenty-seven

Spike

“No fucking way,” I whispered, my eyes bugging wider as I lifted up my notes, comparing them with the data displayed on my computer screen.

I was beyond fucking furious, but I’d also be lying if I said a tiny part of me wasn’t a little sick to my stomach. I almost wished the wise idea to pursue this grand fucking theory had never popped in my head, but after finding that dead cat on Charlotte’s porch last night, I just knew it couldn’t have been a coincidence.

But fuck, man... FUCK.

Why did I have to be right?

“Where is he?” an angry voice shouted, forcing me to look up from my computer screen and swiftly rush to my feet when Charlotte came storming around the corner. Peter was right behind her, calling out for her to stop. “Where’s Phoenix?”

“He’s not here,” I said when she paused in front of me, her chest ruthlessly heaving.

Aside from her being royally pissed, she looked stunning today in her button-down and black dress-suit. I suppose that surprise office fuck must’ve knocked more sense in her than I thought. I was almost disappointed.

“He and Chief left to go pick up Karl. They should be back any minute now.”

“You care to explain to me what the hell is going on?” she commanded, her eyes narrowed.

She wasn’t going to like what I had to tell her, so to avoid her making a scene in the middle of the precinct, I had her follow me out the door leading to the interrogation rooms. Annoyingly, Peter was hot on her ass.

“Sorry,” I told him, blocking his access to the hallway. “Unless you’re working the investigation, you have to stay out here.”

“Come on, Detective Hutch,” Peter pleaded. “It’s just me.”

“He’s right, Peter,” Charlotte sadly agreed, a frown on her pretty face. “You can’t come in here. Just do me a favor and keep watch for Detective Rhodes. Come get us if they get back before we’re done.”

He didn’t look happy, but instead of arguing, he just bobbed his head and spun on his heel. I grabbed Charlotte’s hand and then guided her to the nearest door across the hall.

“What the hell is going on, Spike?” she asked worriedly as I shut the door. “Please tell me this is just some huge misunderstanding.”

“I wish I could,” I said when I turned and approached her, pressing a delicate kiss to her mouth that she quickly returned, my hand on her cheek. “I’m sorry, Charlotte, but it’s true. One of the follicles matched with Karl.”

She pulled away from me with a hand against her mouth, her skin paling like she was about to get sick.

“I-I think I need to sit down, Spike.”

There was a table in the heart of the room with two chairs pushed in on either side. I slowly walked her over to one and helped her sit down. She tucked her hair behind her ears and took in a few calming breaths before her chin lifted and her eyes met mine.

“Tell me what happened when you went to interview Amber. Don’t leave anything out.”

“There’s not much to say,” I replied, sliding into the seat next to her. “Her story is basically the same. Phoenix and I asked her about the extra hairs and if she knew who they could’ve belonged to, but she swears up and down she doesn’t know. She also swears she hasn’t been seeing anyone else outside of Daniel either.”

Charlotte made a face, growling low under her breath. “When did the results come in? Was it before or after you interviewed Amber?”

I didn’t mean to, but in that moment, I couldn’t help but stare dumbly at her, unsure how or why the hell that even mattered. “When Phoenix and I got back, we were called inside the captain’s office and were told one of the follicles matched to Karl.”

“And what about the other follicle?”

“The other one didn’t pop up any matches in CODIS, but the good news is that it does match the DNA we recovered in Delilah’s case.”

Charlotte straightened in her chair, her eyes lighting up for just a brief moment. “It does?”

I nodded. “It does.”

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But then I sighed, looking away from her as I prepared myself to break the rest of the news.

“That’s not all, Charlotte.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” she asked, swallowing hard when I reached for her hands and grasped them tight, worry painted on her face.

“I’m going to ask you a serious question, and I need you to answer it honestly.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“Are you without a doubt, 100% sure it was Karl who sent you those texts and packages?”

Charlotte nodded without a speckle of hesitation. “Yes, it’s him. I-I mean, if not him, then who else?”

“Okay.” I heaved in a breath, trying to think of the best way to explain this to her without pissing her off. “Karl knows you’re a member of The Flirty Sanctum.”

Charlotte said nothing at first—just stared at me long and hard like she hadn’t fully heard me, until finally, little by little, her face fell.

“Wh-what?”

“When I found that dead cat on your porch last night, my first thought was the

motherfucker was beyond sick. But then I'd come to understand it was a message. That the cat itself was symbolic, representing the cat mask you wear at the club."

"Oh my God." Charlotte's lips parted, tears filling her eyes. She got to her feet and began to pace with her hands on her head, shaking it vigorously. "Oh my fucking God!"

"I wasn't going to look into it at first. I held off because, well, I didn't want to go behind your back and have you furious with me. But, when Phoenix and I got back and found out Karl's DNA was a match to one of the follicles, I took it upon myself to investigate. Aside from Phoenix, nobody else knows about this but you. However, given what I've found and with Karl being a cop, I don't have a choice, Charlotte. I have to report what I found to Captain Burgess."

"And what exactly did you find, Spike?" she asked nervously.

As much as I hated seeing her this way and knowing that it would only get worse from here, I let out a sigh and got to my feet, reaching for her hand.

"Come on. I think it's better if you see it for yourself."

twenty-eight

Charlotte

"WHERE THE FUCK IS MY LAWYER!?" Karl hollered, growing aggravated the more he struggled moving his hands, courtesy of them being handcuffed to the table.

He'd been hostile ever since Phoenix and Chief escorted him in, demanding for his lawyer before they could ever get Karl inside an interrogation room. Ben still hadn't arrived yet and until he was actually here and with Karl, neither detectives could

begin the interrogation.

A tear slipped out of my eye, and I quickly swiped it away, torn and utterly broken by all of this. I just couldn't believe it, but it was hard denying the truth when it had been embarrassingly staring me right in the damn face not even ten minutes ago. It was bad enough Karl's DNA matched in Amber's case, but to make matters worse, the GPS in Karl's police cruiser put him inside a parking lot across the street from the sanctum on the night Delilah was attacked. Spike did mention that he couldn't exactly recall each time I went to the sanctum—and unfortunately, neither could I—but he'd also shown me that there had been multiple occasions dated three months back where Karl was camped out in that exact spot for long periods of time.

Spike was right.

Karl knew all along and I never had the slightest fucking clue.

“CHARLOTTE!” he screamed, and I shrieked, jumping back from the window with my hands against my mouth as he glared through the glass like he had X-ray vision. “I know you're there! Come in here and tell me what the fuck is going on!”

The door behind me opened, and I abruptly twisted around, expelling a relieved breath when Phoenix and Spike walked in with Ben, who nodded briefly at me before he departed inside the interrogation room to be with his client.

“It's about fucking time,” Karl hissed, and Spike scoffed, turning off the speaker box.

“Are you okay?” Phoenix asked me.

I shook my head, another tear helplessly sliding down my cheek. “I'm not.”

“You don't have to stay here for this. Chief called Harley.”

I groaned at the mention of Harley, my heart sinking. “She’s going to take me off these cases.”

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“You don’t know that, Charlotte,” Spike said gently. “Let’s just get through questioning Karl and then we can worry about the rest after.”

I began to open my mouth, but instead of arguing over a matter I was far more educated in, I just let them get to work, watching nervously as they entered the room and took their seats in front of Karl and Ben. I turned on the speaker and overheard Ben politely asking one of the detectives to uncuff Karl from the table.

“Tough shit,” Spike carelessly replied. “Given his track record, he stays cuffed to the table.”

“What the hell is this about?” Karl asked, seeming completely clueless as he gaped between Spike and Phoenix.

Phoenix opened the file he was holding and one by one, pulled out each gnarly photo of Delilah Fields and Amber Strickland, placing them neatly in rows atop of the table.

“What’s wrong, Karl?” Spike growled angrily when Karl cursed heavily and turned his head away, his throat bobbing. “Can’t stomach to look at your own handiwork?”

Karl’s eyes immediately locked with Spike’s, and my heart sank at the dark look flashing through them both.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Their names are Delilah Fields and Amber Strickland,” said Phoenix, who surprisingly sounded much calmer than Spike. This was the first time I’d ever seen

them in action with a suspect, so I could only assume Phoenix's role had to be the good cop and well... Spike was just an honest asshole.

"You're telling us you don't know and have never met these girls?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," was Karl's stern response.

My guts twisted the longer and harder I studied Karl's expression. How he was able to school his emotions and hold a straight face was utterly disgusting.

"Listen, Detectives," said Ben. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing with my client, but this is clearly harass—"

"We have his DNA."

Ben clamped his mouth shut, clearly stunned, and then glanced worriedly at Karl, whose skin was paling.

I took in another breath as Phoenix began explaining the situation between Delilah, Amber, and our DNA findings on Amber, just for my heart to painfully sputter behind my ribs when Karl leaned over toward Ben and began to whisper. Whatever was said, I hadn't a clue, but Ben nodded and then together they turned to give the detectives their undivided attention.

"I do know Amber," Karl muttered, the admission gutting me in half. "But the other girl, I swear I don't know who she is. I've never met her."

"We'll start with Amber then," said Phoenix. "How do you know her?"

"I met her in a grocery store about maybe two, almost three months ago. We exchanged numbers and yeah, we hooked up a few times, but it was nothing serious.

Hell, I didn't even know she was married. She wasn't wearing a ring when I met her, or the two, maybe three times she was at my apartment."

Karl cursed when he tried to move his hands and couldn't.

"Look, I have no idea who did this, but I swear to you, it wasn't me. I'm obviously being set up here."

"What makes you say that?" Phoenix asked as Spike scoffed beside him, shaking his head.

"Because I haven't seen or spoken to Amber in over a month. I have no clue how my DNA ended up on her body, but I fucking swear on my life that I haven't been anywhere near her. I can prove it too. Just check the data on my ankle monitor."

My lips parted, and it was at that moment when Spike and Phoenix exchanged weird looks that I knew they hadn't considered it or hadn't gotten around to it yet.

Then again, with the DNA results putting Karl at the scene, they probably thought they didn't have to.

But still, I knew Karl, and I swear on my goddamn life that this was not me being the worried, remorseful ex-wife here. I could plainly tell just from the look on Karl's face and how he kept worriedly gaping at Ben like he was his life vest that something wasn't right. If Karl really was being truthful and was able to prove it...

Then how in the fuck did his DNA end up on Amber's body?

"Excuse me for just a moment." Phoenix got to his feet, leaning down long enough to whisper something in Spike's ear.

Spike nodded, and all I could do was stare nervously at Phoenix as he entered the room I was in and closed the door behind him.

“We need to talk, and we have to make it fast before Spike decides to go rogue and gets physical.”

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“What is it?” I asked around the lump in my throat.

“I know this is hard and an awful lot to process, and I’m sorry. But I really need you to listen to me right now.”

“Okay,” my voice shook as I nodded. “I-I’m listening.”

“We still have a lot to do, but I have to be honest with you about this, Charlotte. It’s not looking good for either of you.”

“For me?” I questioned with a hand to my chest, forcing myself to swallow down the massive lump. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“Spike and I both agreed to do everything we possibly can to keep your name and involvement with the sanctum out of this. Spike’s theory was only supposed to be a theory, Charlotte. We never expected him to find what he did.”

Phoenix scrubbed tiredly at his face and then blew out a hoarse breath.

“Karl’s DNA may not be on Delilah, but it doesn’t excuse the fact the GPS in Karl’s patrol car proves he was in a neighboring parking lot on the night she was attacked. That automatically makes him a suspect, Charlotte, and you know it, especially given how long he was camped there that night. As far as I know, outside of me, you, and Spike, nobody else knows this information. But since Chief called Harley and filled her in on everything, knowing what we do puts all of us, especially Spike and myself, in a real fucked-up spot. We care about you, Charlotte. We... We love you,” he whispered, coming closer and cupping my face in his hands.

“We don’t want to hurt you, or worse, lose you.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I shook my head, not believing this was happening right now. As sweet as his words were, I knew I couldn’t be dumb about this. I had to really listen and consider everything he was telling me.

Captain Burgess knew the drill, as did Chief.

And now, Harley knew about the texts and the dead cat, plus the DNA match on Amber.

Fuck.

“I don’t want you two covering for me,” I whispered, sniffing as I raised my head and locked eyes on his, letting him know I was serious despite what I knew this would mean for my career. “You’re right. We are in a fucked-up spot, but we have to do our jobs, and we have to do this right despite how much or who it hurts.”

“Charlotte,” his voice cracked as he pulled me close to him, holding on tight.

“It’s okay, Phoenix,” I promised. He was so damn sweet, and the fact he was so goddamn perfect for me should be a goddamn crime. “Whatever you have to ask him, ask away. Either way, with or without the package or texts, I’m done, Phoenix. Harley won’t let me continue.”

“Right you are,” the devil’s voice boomed through the room.

Phoenix released me, and we both shared a gulp as we laid eyes on Harley with her back pressed against the outer door and a hand against her hip, her head cocked to the side.

“How,” I started, already knowing the answer as she narrowed her eyes at me. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough.”

She stepped away from the door, and then eyed me and Phoenix, her glare darkening.

“Long e-fucking-nough.”

I winced as Harley paced Captain Burgess’s office, shouting obscenities that made me shrivel down in my seat like a child getting scolded by their parents for getting caught in a serious fib.

“I’m sorry, Harley,” I said, my voice coming out pitifully weak, my shoulders slumped. “I know I should’ve told you about my connection with the sanctum, and that I was there the night Delilah was attacked. I mean, I was there, but I wasn’t inside the building when it happened. I’d already left and was headed home.”

My breath caught then, as something important, crucial—a memory, flashed in my head.

That was the same night Karl pulled me over.

He followed me from the club.

“Yes, you should have,” she’d all but screamed at me, and I looked up, finding her face twisted in a rage so intense that it had sent a dreadful chill spider-walking down my spine.

“Go home, Charlotte.”

She heaved in a deep breath and raised her shaking hands, balling them into tight fists and sighing before she turned away, her arms falling back to her sides.

“Just go home.”

My heart sank. “Harley, I—”

“I’ve issued a search warrant for Karl’s apartment, phone records, the whole nine yards. It’s with the judge now and as soon as Hutch and Rhodes are finished with Karl, he’s going in lockup, and then I’ll be assisting the detectives with the search. I haven’t fully decided what I’m going to do with you just yet, but for now, you’re suspended.”

“Suspended?” I repeated in disbelief, rising to my feet with tears shimmering in my eyes. “For how long?”

“Until I decide I’m done being pissed off with you,” was her heated, soul-crushing retort.

I knuckled under my eyes and sucked in a painful breath. I felt sick. My heart hurt so fucking much it was all I could do not to fall to my knees and scream—beg at the top of my goddamn lungs for her to reconsider, but I knew it was pointless because she outright refused to spare me another glance.

“Charlotte,” Peter’s voice floated across the room when I left the office, hiding my sobs. “Char—hey, what’s wrong?” He caught up to me while I waited for the elevator to open. “What the hell happened in there?”

I looked away, not in the mood to answer any of his questions, and just shook my head, cursing when Harley fled the captain’s office and made way for the

interrogation rooms. What I wanted—needed—was Phoenix, and yes, Spike too despite he was an impulsive asshole. I needed to be inside that room listening to what was being said. I needed to know what the fuck was really going on here so I could figure this shit out.

The elevator opened, and I wordlessly stepped inside with Peter flanking me, turning to him when the doors closed.

“She took me off the cases.”

“Fuck, Char.” Peter grasped me by the shoulder and pulled me close to him, holding on tight. “I’m sorry.”

“I worked so hard for this, Peter. So fucking hard. And now it’s gone.”

“It’s not gone,” he said, pulling away as the doors opened. He matched step with me and held open the exit door until we were both out of the precinct and making the trek back to our cars. “I know losing these cases suck and all, but you still have your job.”

I internally snorted, opting to remain calm despite my tears. After Harley’s reaction, I wouldn’t be returning to work anytime soon, at least not until these cases were closed.

And that... That was if—

“Seriously though,” Peter’s voice cut through my thoughts. “What happened in there? Since you’re not working the cases anymore, then you should be able to—”

“Why the fuck do you care?” I stopped walking and whipped around to face him, my head cocked and wet eyes narrowed. “So you can gloat? Throw in my face how stupid I am and how I should’ve listened to you? Because I think we both know that

ship has long sailed.”

“No, Charlotte,” Peter said with a sigh, “that’s not—”

“You told me you were done with this,” I reminded him, his words from the other night still fresh on my brain. “With me, Karl, all of it. So answer the damn question, Peter. Why do you want to know so damn bad?”

“I did say those things,” he agreed, nodding as he frowned. “And I’m sorry. The shit with Karl...” He paused, taking a moment to swallow as he stared deeply into my eyes. “I shouldn’t have taken my anger out on you like that, and I’m sorry. It’s not Karl I care about, Char, it’s you. It’s always been you. I hate you’re going through this. I hate you’re hurting and yes, I’ll admit that maybe I’ve been riding your ass a little too hard about pressing charges, but that’s only because Karl has done nothing but escalate ever since you served him divorce papers, and I was worried you’d get hurt.”

He paused again, drawing in a breath.

“I’m only asking because I can see that what ever the hell’s going on has you struggling not to break down in a puddle. I may not be your lawyer anymore, but you’re still my best friend, and I care about you. As you know, I have the entire day off to do what ever I want. I will be more than happy to spend it with you to talk, go out—whatever you want to do to keep your mind off things. Hell, if you want, you can call up your friend Blaire and the three of us can go out to dinner or get drinks at a bar in town.”

I considered everything he’d said, even his offer, and despite wanting to say yes, I couldn’t stop thinking about what was happening inside that interrogation room, or worse, what may possibly happen to Spike and Phoenix once the captain and chief discovered they were willing to conceal case evidence for not only the sake of my

dignity and reputation, but my career. Unless she decided to personally confront them over the matter, there were zero doubts in my mind that Harley would keep her mouth shut. Spike and Phoenix were the only connections I had left in this case and...

FUCK.

I had to hurry and get back to the office before it was too late.

“That sounds great, Peter.” I swiped the wetness glued to my cheeks away and gave him a smile that earned me an even bigger and brighter one, his eyes dancing with relief. “I have a few things I need to take care of first. Is that okay?”

He nodded, grinning ear to ear.

twenty-nine

Charlotte

I made it within ten minutes, trying not to trip over my damn feet as I raced up the steps and inside the building, praying the white boards and files were still in my office. Perry, my colleague whose office was directly beside mine, spotted me as he was coming out of the break room and hustled toward me fast, determined to match my pace.

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“Anything I can do for you, Perry?” I asked, walking even faster just for my brows to crinkle when he’d burst in a jog in order to keep up with me.

What the hell was he doing?

“I thought you were off today,” he said, hissing through a crude curse when his coffee spilled out of his cup and found refuge on his plaid button-down.

“I am,” I replied. “I had to come in long enough to grab something from my office.”

I was nearly there, the door right in my line of sight, but I was stopped dead in my tracks when Perry had damn near knocked me over trying to get past me, spilling more coffee all over the floor rather than himself. It wasn’t until his back was pressed against my office door, his chest heaving as he panted, when I crossed my arms tightly against my chest and said, “Let me guess... Harley told you not to let me in there.”

To my utmost surprise, Perry nodded. “I’m sorry, Charlotte.”

It was another cold, hard slap to the face, but I had to give the woman her props—Harley was smart to assume I’d come here. Which also meant that the odds of everything I had pertaining to Delilah and Amber’s cases still being in my office were outstandingly slim. And, if I was right, then they had to be locked up tightly inside Harley’s office.

But then again...

If they were inside Harley's office, then why demand Perry guard mine?

"I just need to grab my blood pressure medicine. I forgot to take it home last night and I need it, Perry."

It was the best goddamn lie I could scrounge up at the moment, and Perry looked torn as he began grinding his teeth, contemplating. He had no real way of knowing if I was lying and we both knew it. Might as well use it to my advantage.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" I growled, making him gulp hard as I stepped forward and fisted his drenched apparel, forcing him to stare deep into my raging eyes. "This is a life-or-death situation and you're seriously just going to stand there? Fucking move."

I didn't fully unhand him until he stepped to the side, giving me access to unlock the door. Once I was in, I locked it, then whirled around fast, ignoring Perry's apology echoing from the other side.

The white boards were still here and—thank you, God—all of the information I'd posted and jotted along them had remained untouched. I didn't have a lot of time, so I dug for my phone and once I had the camera ready, snapped picture after picture, down to every last detail I could get. When I was done with that, I moved on the remaining pages in both Amber and Delilah's file. All I had to do now was send each one to my email address, and then print them out as soon as I got home.

Later, though.

It would have to wait until later.

I'd already spent too much time hunting for fake blood pressure medicine, and I had to get the hell out of here.

I blew out a hoarse breath when I pulled up to my destination and parked, my pulse roaring through my ears. I had to be certifiably insane, but it wasn't until I left the office and made it back to my car when I'd realized that, suspended or not, this was probably the best and last chance I had to get some solid answers. I couldn't talk to Karl, not yet at least, and since Phoenix and Spike were currently with Harley, on their way to Karl's apartment with a warrant, it could be hours before I'd hear from either of them again. I was breaking so many rules and whole-heartedly understood the risks if I got caught, but I just couldn't help it—it was a risk I had to take. There were two sides to every story and if I was going to do this, then it had to be now.

So, I got out of the car and approached the front door with my head raised high.

“Daniel Strickland?” I asked, greeting the man who opened the door with somewhat of a strained smile.

“Yes?” he replied in question, observing me through curious eyes. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“I’m Charlotte Greene. You may not remember me, but I work for the DA’s office.”

“Oh, of course,” Daniel replied, looking surprised as he shook my hand. “Please, come in.” He stepped aside, and I nodded, thanking him. “Is-uh, everything okay? I was just about to step out and grab a few things from the store.”

“Yes,” I told him, softening my features to ease the worry still flashing through his eyes. “Everything is fine. I wasn’t where I could speak with Amber while she was in the hospital, so I’m just doing a personal check-in. Is she awake?”

“She is.” He turned to the staircase, nudging his head for me to follow. “She’s in our bedroom. Doc told her to stay in bed and get plenty of rest. She hasn’t left there since we got home from the hospital.”

We made it to the top, and as he lightly pushed open the door in the middle of the hallway, he walked in and said, “Amber, baby. Charlotte Greene from the DA’s office is here to see you.”

“From the DA’s office?” she questioned, sounding startled.

“Yes. She works with Detective Rhodes and Hutch.”

I remained rooted in place, refusing to move until Daniel’s head popped out of the door and invited me in. I found Amber sitting up in bed, releasing an ugly yawn that had her wincing and clutching her ribs. Her pretty face was still bruised and there were still slight traces of inflammation around and under her eyes. Aside from that, she looked better—much, much better than when I last saw her lying unconscious in a hospital bed.

“Do you want me to stay?” Daniel asked her from the doorway.

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Thankfully, Amber shook her head. With what I had to speak with her about, Daniel sticking around would only make the situation worse, and that was the last thing I needed to happen given that I had no goddamn business being in their house right now.

“No, it’s okay. Don’t forget to grab my soup, please.”

Daniel gave her a half smile and then crossed the room, pressing a tender kiss to the side of her head. “I’ll be back soon. I love you. Call me if you want me to pick up anything else while I’m out.”

She whispered she loved him back and then together we waited, refusing to speak until we heard the front door shut and the deadbolt slide back.

“What’s this about, Ms. Greene?” she asked, keeping her head down as she fidgeted with her hands in her lap. “I already told the detectives everything I know.”

It wasn’t until I said Karl’s name when her head lifted and her blown, panicked pupils locked on mine.

Huh, so my gut feeling was right. She didn’t tell the detectives everything.

“I need to ask you some serious questions and I need you to answer them honestly. Karl’s fate rests on your answers and I do not have time for you to sit there and feed me bullshit. Do you understand?”

Amber’s eyes grew impossibly wider, but she nodded, her breath shuddering with her

body.

“Do you know who I am?”

She nodded. “Yes. You’re his ex-wife. He-he’s talked about you before. Nothing serious, but he’s mentioned you.”

“Did you meet him in a grocery store?”

“Yes,” she answered, confirming Karl was being truthful about that part. “About three—hell, maybe four months ago. I don’t really remember.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

Again, she bobbed her head.

“How many times?”

“Like, two, maybe three, I think. Why the hell does that matter? I thought you weren’t together anymore.”

“And when is the last time you’ve seen or spoken with him?”

“Oh god,” she whispered, shaking her head as she pondered it. “It’s been weeks—at least a month if not longer. Again, why does that matter? What the hell is going on?”

“I’m not here to hound you over your relationship with Karl. I’m here because somehow, a strand of Karl’s hair ended up on your body the night you were attacked. He’s been arrested and my boss, plus the detectives are at his apartment ransacking the place as we speak.”

Amber sat up straighter then, her bruised skin paling faintly. “That’s not possible,” she murmured, shaking her head at me. “I haven’t seen or spoken to him. And he couldn’t have been at the sanctum that night because I never told him about that place. I never told him about Daniel, the sanctum, none of it. Any time we’d meet, it was always at his apartment. It was just a couple harmless hookups and that’s it. I swear.”

I nodded, struggling to contain the emotions crashing through me as I processed every single thing she’d said word for word, scrutinizing her intensely.

Fuck.

She was telling the truth.

Which explained why she never mentioned any of this to the detectives when they’d asked her about the follicles. How could she possibly give up Karl’s name when they hadn’t crossed paths in over a month?

“Okay, Amber.” I didn’t bother asking for permission. I just sat down on the edge of her bed and then turned, facing her. “I’m assuming Daniel doesn’t know about this, am I right?”

Amber frowned, looking away from me with a tear snaking down her swollen cheek. “No, he doesn’t.” She sniffled, bringing the sleeve of her pajamas up to wipe under her nose. “Daniel’s a good guy. I love him so damn much, but this isn’t an unusual thing for us. He’s cheated on me plenty of times, even before we decided to start swinging. Only difference is that I’m a hell of a lot better at not getting caught than he is.”

Wow. I frankly didn’t know what to say to that.

“It doesn’t make it right,” she continued. “I know it doesn’t. But all of that bullshit aside, I’m telling you the truth, Ms. Greene.”

“And you swear Daniel doesn’t know?”

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“I’m positive he doesn’t.” Then slowly, her face fell. “Damn it. I guess it doesn’t matter now that Karl’s DNA is involved. If Karl’s been arrested, then it’s only a matter of time before the detective’s show back up wanting to talk to me.”

“Which is precisely why I’m here, Amber. I need you to listen to me and if you would, please, do me this huge favor and I will forever be indebted to you.”

Amber blinked at me like she was utterly confused. “Wh-what is it?”

“My boss took me off these cases, Amber. Legally speaking, I have no business being here talking to you right now.”

“Then why are you?” she wondered.

“Because if my suspicions are correct, then Karl is being framed, Amber. Framed for a heinous crime he did not commit, and I cannot just stand back and simply do nothing. Do you want an innocent man to go to prison?”

She frowned again and shook her head.

“Neither do I. So when my boss and the detectives show up to question you, I need you to be honest with them. Tell them everything you just told me, but you cannot—whatever you do—you cannot mention I was here to any of them, especially Harley. This is crucial, Amber. If my boss finds out I was here, Karl’s done for, and I won’t be able to help him.”

More tears snaked down her cheeks, but after taking a minute to steady her breathing

and really give it some thought, she outstretched her hand and offered me a sad smile.

“You have a deal, Ms. Greene.”

thirty

Phoenix

I stood back and watched, stricken and horrified while Spike, Captain Burgess, Harley, Chief, and the handful of CSIs went nuts, plundering through Karl's things and disrespectfully hurling anything and everything to the floor like his household items were nothing but straight garbage and didn't cost hard earned dollars to replace. I always tried to be respectful of people's belongings while conducting a search, but any time we had a full team dispatched, there was never anything I could do.

It always ended in chaos.

Karl lived in a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment, and if I was being frank, it was a rather nice spot. He had a large living room, a decent sized kitchen, and based on all the items that were now thrown along some area of the residence, Karl had pretty expensive taste. Given the inside of Charlotte's house, the house they'd once shared together, yeah...it made sense.

And he was clean too. Insanely clean. Like the guy had massive OCD or something.

Then again, it didn't really take much effort to keep a place tidied up when you lived alone. Trust me, I'd know. I'd been living alone since I graduated from the police academy over ten years ago.

Time passed on, and as we investigated room after room, Karl's bedroom being the next to the last, the only thing we'd found so far was a laptop on his nightstand. The

warrant demanded for all electronics as far as computers, tablets, and cell phones to be confiscated. Aside from the computer, nobody had announced finding any burner phones or most importantly, masks of any kind.

“Hey,” a familiar voice spoke to me, making me shake my head fast and look away from Spike, who was plundering through Karl’s dressers.

It was Kendall.

“Oh,” I greeted her with a slight eye roll. “Hey.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” I asked through gritted teeth. “I’m lucky Crow didn’t skin my ass alive.”

“Don’t you dare treat me like this is my fault. When I called Kendra, I told her to keep things quiet as a favor for me. Whatever went wrong, I don’t know. Maybe Crow has her phone bugged or something. At the end of the day, I did as you asked. Whatever happened after that is not on me.”

She reached inside her jeans pocket and then pulled out a hundred-dollar bill, handing it over.

“You don’t have to pay me for my help, Phoenix. I did it because I owed it to you after all these years.”

“You don’t owe me—”

“But I do, Phoenix. I know I hurt you, and I’m sorry. I can’t take it back, but I do hope that maybe we can move past all of this bullshit and at least be friends.”

She left it at that and then walked away, down the hall and into the spare bedroom. The other CSIs accompanied her as well as Harley, Captain Burgess, and Chief.

“What the hell was that about?” Spike asked, sweating horribly as he approached me.

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“Nothing,” I answered. “She was just apologizing for the shit with Crow.”

He nodded to that, saying nothing other than, “Look, man, I hate to admit it, but I’m starting to think maybe I was wrong about—”

“I’ve got something!”

Spike and I shared a look, then dashed down the small hallway inside the spare bedroom, which consisted of nothing but a bed, dresser, TV, and an empty closet.

Kendall and a few of her fellow lab buddies helped pull the bed frame from against the wall, and it almost sounded like something had scraped down the wall and fallen onto the floor in an angry thud. It was hard for us to see thanks to Kendall, her colleagues, plus Harley and both of our bosses blocking our path, but silence filled the room instantly when everyone fled back like a flock of frightened sheep, revealing Kendall’s gloved hands holding a burner phone in one, and a blood-stained bull mask, plus Delilah’s broken beaver mask in the other.

thirty-one

Charlotte

“Peter,” Blaire gleefully called out later that evening, chuckling as my face scrunched up, the shot I’d just taken sending a burn straight from Hell’s gates down my throat. “We need another round.”

“No the hell we don’t,” I shouted, ignoring Blaire as she began laughing harder. “I’m

done.”

We’d been at it for hours, though I was nowhere near as intoxicated as Blaire, and Peter had opted to drink beer instead of liquor. After my conversation with Amber, I wasn’t in the mood to go out tonight. I just wanted to stay home where I was comfortable.

“Here,” Peter said, ambling inside the living room with two full shots in his gloved hands.

I shook my head in refusal, but Blaire smiled sweetly at Peter and accepted them before I could throw in a verbal protest.

“Last one and then I’ll leave you alone,” she promised.

I really didn’t want the damn shot. I’d already taken eight and if I had any more, I’d be climbing into bed a lot earlier than planned. When I got home after making a quick detour to check up on Delilah, I’d printed what I needed to print, connected some dots, then hid everything neatly and safely under my mattress so Peter and Blaire wouldn’t stumble upon them. It was still radio silent on Phoenix and Spike’s end, which wasn’t a good sign. At all. I desperately wanted to call them, but I couldn’t exactly do that without Blaire and Peter eavesdropping. As much as I hated being that person, I frankly didn’t have a choice.

It was time for them to go so I could get back to work.

Blaire nudged my shoulder, and I let out a groan, making a face that expressed how much I did not want to do this. Peter chuckled deeply and sank down on the end of the couch, watching as I regretfully accepted the shot glass from Blaire, my face pinched.

“Jesus, fuck,” I coughed, gagging and strenuously shaking my head. “That’s disgusting.”

Blaire sighed in awe while Peter continued giggling under his breath.

“Well, it’s been a blast, guys, but I think I’m going to head out.”

“You’re leaving?” I asked as Blaire rose to her feet, and she nodded, offering me a frown.

Damn. Well, that was easy.

“It’s late, Char, and Carter should be calling me within the next hour. We’re going to have some intense phone sex, and then I’m taking my drunk ass to bed.”

“Are you even okay to drive?” asked Peter, who stared concerningly at her with his brows raised. “You’ve had a lot to drink, Blaire.”

“Thank you, Peter, but I already got it covered. I ordered an Uber. She should be pulling up any minute now.”

“Just be safe,” I told her, getting to my feet to return the hug she was offering me. “Text me when you’re home.”

“I will, Char. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Peter and I said in unison.

He showed her out and shut the door, turning around to face me with a small smile tilting his lips. “Are you okay?”

“No,” was my unfortunate but honest retort. “But I will be. Thank you for coming over and being here for me, Peter. I had fun, but I think I’m going to get a shower and go to bed.”

“Your cameras are still damaged, and it doesn’t look like they’re sending anyone to patrol the house now that Karl’s in lockup. Would you like me to stay with you tonight? I could sleep on the couch.”

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I shook my head. “Thanks, Peter, but no. You don’t have to do that. I called the security company and they’re sending technicians out tomorrow morning with new equipment. I’ll be fine.”

“And your gun?”

“Upstairs in my nightstand.”

He smiled, seeming pleased with that response. “Good. That’s good. Have you heard from Rhodes or Hutch?”

“No. Still nothing.”

Peter made a face, but he opted to keep his thoughts to himself. He didn’t have to though because I already knew what he was thinking—that Karl was guilty.

“It’ll be okay, Char. I know it may not seem like it, but everything will work out the way it should.”

I snorted and crossed my arms against my chest. That was easy for him to say when it wasn’t his life and career being sucked down the drain. While he may have broken me down and convinced me to spill the beans about Karl, he was still in the dark about my suspension and that I was proceeding with these investigations in secret. Hell, there was a lot Peter still didn’t know. The truth would come out eventually, but regardless of how much I trusted Peter, I couldn’t trust him with this. If he discovered what I was up to, he’d turn me in. I just knew he would.

“All I’m saying is that silence isn’t necessarily a bad thing. I know they found Karl’s DNA, but if the search was a bust, then they’re all probably scrambling around trying to figure out what the hell is going on. Hutch or Rhodes would’ve called you if they’d found something, right?”

“I would like to think so.”

“Then there you go,” he said through a gentle smile. “I’d say that’s a good sign, wouldn’t you?”

He was right.

Well, maybe...

Possibly.

“Thanks, Peter. Are you okay to drive home or would you like me to order you an Uber?”

“I’ll be fine. I only had a few beers and I’m not even buzzed.” He stepped away from the door, and I met him halfway, wrapping him in a tight embrace. “Get yourself some rest, Char. I’ll text you when I’m home.”

I thanked him again and then opened the door, staying put until I knew he was safely inside his car. When he was gone, I shut the door and armed the security system, just to blow out a huge breath of relief as I marched across the living room and into the kitchen to grab my phone, swaying a little from the alcohol. With still no word, not even so much as a damn text from Spike or Phoenix, I called Phoenix first, then Spike.

A low growl shook through my chest when I was forwarded to voicemail both times.

Saying fuck it, I went upstairs to take a shower, and when I stepped out, wrapping my bath robe around me and tying it in a knot at my waist, my body went stiff at the sound of heavy rapping against my front door. My phone was on the bathroom counter, but I soon froze mid-reach after abruptly remembering my cameras were inoperable.

Shit.

Who the hell could be at my—

My eyes widened when a voice I immediately recognized as Phoenix resonated loud enough for me to hear from my upstairs bathroom.

“Charlotte,” he called again, and I was on the move, unarming the system and opening the door within less than a minute.

My breath was stolen as Phoenix’s mouth pressed against mine, his hands firmly snaking around my robe.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered against my lips.

I opened my mouth, but my words fell short as Spike burst through the doorway and tugged me away from Phoenix, capturing my mouth with his.

“Harley has been a fucking nightmare,” he said when he parted from me.

“What happened?”

“It’s not good, Char,” Phoenix said while Spike hauled ass for the kitchen, examining the half gallon of booze Blaire brought over. “We found the bull mask, and Delilah’s mask at Karl’s apartment.”

I blinked at him, my eyes bugging fretfully wide. “What?”

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“That’s not all,” Spike said from the kitchen, as he began plundering through my cabinets hunting for a cup. “We also found a burner phone. I’ll let you take a wild guess at whose name and number was listed in it. The only name and number for that matter.”

I swallowed hard.

Mine.

It was mine.

FUCK.

“Hold that thought,” I told them, my heart hammering as I raced back upstairs and inside my bedroom to grab the pages I’d printed out. Phoenix looked confused when I came back down with the small stack in my hands.

“What’s that?” he asked, and I glanced into the kitchen, finding Spike chugging down booze, his face scrunched in horror at the taste.

“Harley suspended me,” I muttered, “but thankfully, I was able to get to my office and snap pictures of the files and all the evidence we’d gathered before it was too late. I-uh, also talked to Amber and Delilah while you were searching Karl’s apartment. Delilah told me she’s never met Karl, and Amber backed Karl’s story. She said she hasn’t seen or spoken to him in over a month.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Spike asked as he came marching back inside the

room, offering me a glare. “Do you have any idea what would’ve happened if—”

“I know, Spike, I know. Which is why I made both Amber and Delilah promise not to mention my little pop up to anyone, especially Harley. They’re both on board and know you’ll be back to question them again. And speaking of, when exactly are you planning to do that?”

“We already did.” Phoenix sat down on my couch and rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyes, expelling an exhausted breath. “That’s why it took us so long to get to you. And you’re right. Delilah says she doesn’t know him, and Amber did back everything Karl said.”

Spike planted himself beside Phoenix, pausing briefly to finish the last of the booze in his cup. He strenuously shook his head and then placed the empty plastic on my center table. “We went back to the precinct to question Karl about the masks and phone. As usual, he’s denying everything and swears it had to have been planted. Most of the evidence we had at first was nothing but circumstantial, but with the DNA match and now that we found the masks inside Karl’s apartment, proving Karl’s being framed is going to be extremely difficult.”

“If not impossible,” muttered Phoenix.

“Wait.” My heart sputtered as my gaze darted between them. “You think he’s innocent?”

“We do,” Spike answered, which frankly shocked the hell out of me. “But the problem is Harley.”

“What do you mean?”

“We tried to talk to her,” said Phoenix. “After we’d spoken with Amber. But that

woman is—”

“Fucking intolerable,” scoffed Spike.

“Harley ordered us to stand down from investigating anything else until she could review every speckle of evidence on both cases. Thanks to her eavesdropping on us, she wants to make sure everything we’ve gathered is credible.”

“We didn’t have a choice but to listen to her,” Spike said much to all of our dismay. “She threatened to rat us out to the Cap and Chief if we didn’t.”

I blew out an overly flustered breath and then gently perched against the edge of my center table, moving Spike’s cup out of the way so I could place the pages I was still holding down.

“You said you found Delilah’s mask and the bull mask at Karl’s apartment, but what about the third mask?” Phoenix had once mentioned he had a theory about our perp carrying two masks to help evade detection.

“It wasn’t there,” Phoenix answered.

“You reviewed the footage I had Phoenix bring over to you, right?”

My eyes widened, and my face flushed as I glanced over at Phoenix who smiled knowingly at me.

Oh my God...

Shit!

“No,” I admitted, unable to hide the guilt as my cheeks began burning hotter. “I kind

of got a little...distracted and completely forgot about it.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Spike’s eyes narrowed on Phoenix, who did nothing but grin bigger and flash him a teasing wink.

“When you get a chance, look at it. The guy talking to Amber isn’t wearing a bull mask. In fact, it’s not an animal mask at all. It’s hard to tell even with the footage enhanced, but Phoenix and I both agree that it looks like some type of masquerade mask.”

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“And you didn’t get a good look at his face?” I asked.

Spike leaned back in his seat and sighed. “No. The bastard was smart and sitting at an angle that only gave us a view of his mask and body, not his actual face. I remember the guy’s body type though, and from that alone, it’s not Karl. It can’t be. Karl’s at least twice the size of this other guy.”

Besides the rest of the damning evidence against Karl, this was good news. But knowing Harley like I did, it wasn’t going to be enough to exonerate him, not with his DNA and the masks at play.

Whoever’s doing this...

Whoever’s framing Karl...

Fuck.

Someone was hurting Karl to get to me. The packages, the texts, all of this bullshit was because of me.

But why?

Who the fuck would be twistedly psychotic enough to do something like this?

“I have to tell you guys something.”

I made a mistake confiding in Peter with this, but now—now I couldn’t help but think

that it had to be related. Since Karl was being truthful about his involvement with Amber, then maybe he was telling the truth about this too.

“When Karl showed up here the other day... He’d asked for my help with something.”

“With what?” Phoenix asked.

I relayed to them what was said, watching as they shared the same expression they had in the interrogation room, when they first began interviewing Karl.

“There’s no evidence to back his claims,” I said before either of them could ask. “Karl thought it was all bullshit and tossed everything.”

“But what about his mistress?” Spike wondered. “Did she keep anything?”

I shrugged. “No clue. I let Karl say what he needed to say and then I ran back inside the house and called Peter. I never looked into it because I thought he was lying to me.”

“But now you’re not so sure.”

I nodded, agreeing.

If I was right about this, then whoever tampered with Karl’s truck was likely the same person responsible for these brutal attacks.

“We’ll look into it.” Phoenix rubbed a tense hand across his sharp jaw. “But for now, can we just call it quits on all this shit? I’m stressed out and could really use a damn drink.”

“I’ll get you something,” I told him, getting up and making way for the kitchen, grabbing a glass and pouring it about halfway.

I came back into the room and passed it off to him.

“I have a better idea,” Spike said when he got to his feet, grabbing my hand and pulling me close to him. His lips softly brushed against mine as he began tugging at the knot on my robe. “Why don’t we take this off and have a little fun?”

A blush crept up my face, and before I could form a response, the knot was undone, and the robe was at my feet, leaving me completely bare. Spike’s hands cupped my ass, and he squeezed them hard as he moved back to sit on the couch, pulling me on top so I’d straddle him. My lips parted when his hands met my hips, and he bucked his, allowing me to feel his raging erection.

Phoenix finished his drink and then scooted closer to me, grabbing my chin and bringing my mouth to his as Spike began kissing a torturous pace down my neck, the sensations making me moan softly against Phoenix’s lips.

“He’s been a bad boy, Eve,” Spike whispered gruffly in my ear as Phoenix’s tongue slid in my mouth, ravishing mine. “I think he could use some punishing, don’t you?”

Phoenix broke the kiss and then locked eyes with Spike, the hunger and sheer excitement in them doing fathomless things to my pussy.

“Get my cuffs,” Spike commanded as he slightly sat up even with me in his lap. “Back pocket.”

Phoenix rose to his feet when he had them and slowly began undressing. When he was fully naked, he turned with his hands behind his back, waiting.

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“You know what to do,” Spike purred in my ear, releasing my hips so I could get up. I grabbed the cuffs and eagerly placed the cool, open metal around Phoenix’s wrists, locking him in place. I couldn’t even begin to explain the surge of pleasure I felt when he returned to his spot, his cock beautifully stiff and waiting.

“Get on your knees,” Spike softly commanded.

I did as I was told and kneeled before Phoenix, licking my lips.

“He can’t cum. You understand me, Eve? Edge him. I want to hear him begging for you to let him cum.”

I glanced up for reassurance, and he gave me a wink before he began stripping out of his clothes.

A low groan burst out of Phoenix as I sucked him in deep, his head falling back against the couch cushion. A low moan of my own vibrated up my throat when Spike grabbed a fistful of my damp hair, forcing me to choke down every inch.

I worked Phoenix fast, sucking and licking with Spike's guidance. With my other hand, I reached up and grasped Phoenix's balls, rubbing and squeezing them gently.

“Fuck, Charlotte,” Phoenix rasped, squirming and panting hard. “I’m about to—”

“Enough.”

I pulled back, cracking a smile when Phoenix groaned again and squeezed his eyes

closed, his cock dripping with pre-cum.

“Lick him clean and start again.”

I did as commanded, licking Phoenix clean before I deep throated him. And Spike, although he wasn't exactly gentle about it, grasped my hair again. It wasn't until I thought I was about to pass out when Spike pulled me back just as Phoenix began crying out that he was about to cum again.

“Are you her good boy?” Spike asked Phoenix. He approached him and then ferociously grasped his face, forcing him to stare into my eyes.

“Yes,” he whimpered. “Always.”

“Tell him he's doing a good job,” Spike instructed me.

“You're doing so good, Phoenix,” I told him, grasping his cock and stroking it slowly. “So fucking good.”

“I-I want to cum,” he pleaded. “Please, Charlotte, I-I want to cum.”

I spared another look at Spike. He nodded, and said, “Ride him.”

Spike graciously helped me to my feet, and as I straddled Phoenix, cupping his face and pressing his lips fiercely against mine, I sank down on his cock, my eyes widening at the fullness. Phoenix's eyes rolled into the back of his head once I was fully seated.

“Kiss me,” I whispered, and his lips immediately met mine, our tongues clashing against each other as I lifted up and began to ride him slowly, my hands firmly pressed against his shoulders for extra support.

I amped up my pace, my moans growing louder.

“I love you,” he moaned against my mouth. “God, I fucking love you, Charlotte.”

I desperately wanted to say it back, but I—or more like my heart—wasn’t ready to admit it just yet.

“Fuck,” he cried out as his breathing picked up. “Harder, baby. Fuck me harder.”

I worked my hips even faster, harder, feeling my release building when suddenly a presence came up behind me and grabbed ahold of my hips.

“Keep going,” Spike demanded in his gruff voice. “Don’t you dare fucking stop. I want to see his cum dripping out of your pussy when he’s done.”

His words had us both wildly moaning, and before I knew it, I was squirting, soaking Phoenix’s chest. Spike gripped my hips even harder and urged me to continue until he saw what he needed to see, Phoenix’s cum dripping out of my pussy.

Phoenix’s cock slid out of me, and I barely had time to properly recover, or much less move before Spike’s cock impaled me in a vicious thrust, taking me by surprise.

“Oh, FUCK!”

I fell against Phoenix’s chest.

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“Stay just like that,” Spike whispered through a throaty growl.

From the corner of my eye, it looked like he’d sucked his thumb into his mouth. A moment later, he had it pressing into my asshole until eventually, he breached it.

I whimpered at the pain and squeezed my eyes closed. I wasn’t an anal woman. I’d tried it a few times with Karl in the past, and maybe once or twice with Spike and Phoenix, but it was just too painful to bear.

“It’s okay, baby. Just trust me.”

“Look at me,” Phoenix whispered, and I did, a tear rolling down my cheek. “It’s okay. I promise.”

I nodded and kissed him, trying not to think about the pain as Spike began fucking my ass with his thumb while he fucked my pussy, the pleasure eventually overpowering the pain.

I fell into it deeply, a little too deeply, and wildly made out with Phoenix while Spike’s whole thumb was inside my ass. His ladder rubbed vehemently against my walls as he fucked my weeping pussy raw with each brutal thrust.

I was cumming within seconds, soaking Phoenix again and breathing hard as Spike pulled out of me, shooting his seed all over my ass and lower back.

“Fuck,” he breathed out, panting hard as Phoenix grinned and kissed me, our tongues dancing against each other. “I need something to clean you up with.”

“Kitchen,” I muttered as I lay against Phoenix’s chest, smiling in awe as he kissed the top of my head. “There’s a towel in the kitchen.”

thirty-two

Charlotte

“Jesus, Karl,” I muttered the following afternoon, my heart sinking as I rose to my feet, watching as one of the guards opened the door and escorted him in. He was dressed in hideous, bright orange prison garments, and his face—the face I’d once loved ‘til death due us part, had been clobbered to hell and back. He had two black eyes with severe swelling under the right, and his bottom lip had been split open. It was all I could do not to burst into tears the longer I gaped at him. I’d always heard jail or prison was never a good place for any cop to end up, crooked or not. And given Karl’s condition, I suppose those rumors were unfortunately true.

“No touching,” the guard callously snapped when I reached out to give Karl a remorseful hug, the reminder forcing me to ease my arms back down to my sides.

“Right. I’m sorry.”

“I’m surprised you’re here,” Karl said as he sat, gaping around at his fellow inmates chatting it up with their loved ones. “What do you want? Are you here to yell at me? Tell me I’m a piece of shit and that you hope I rot in prison for the rest of my life?”

“No, Karl. I’m here to help.” Even though the guard was nearby but wasn’t exactly keeping hawk eyes on us, I leaned closer to Karl and whispered, “I think you’re being framed.”

“Really?” he asked, appearing entertained as he slightly leaned back and cocked his head to the side. “And what gave you that idea?”

“Because I spoke to Amber, Karl. That, and because Detective Hutch reviewed the data on your ankle monitor, plus your phone records. We know you haven’t seen or spoken to Amber in over a month.”

Karl blinked at me, his busted lips parting. “You... You’re serious...”

“Yes,” I nodded. “I am. But I cannot help you unless you talk to me and are honest with me about everything, Karl, and I mean everything.”

“Okay,” he immediately agreed, a spark of hope dancing through his eyes. “Ask whatever it is you need to ask.”

“Did you have anything, and I mean anything at all to do with Delilah Field’s attack?”

Karl kept a straight, serious face as he shook his head. “No, I swear I didn’t hurt that girl, Charlotte. I’ve never even met her.”

“Then why does the GPS in your cruiser put you near The Flirty Sanctum on the night she was attacked?”

Karl looked away from me and let out a long, deep sigh. “I was there because I was following you. I’ve been doing it for quite some time now—months to be exact.”

My chest began to heave, but I closed my eyes and calmed myself, having noticed the guard now watching us.

“I know I fucked up, Char, but really, a sex club? You had to stoop that low? Just how many guys are you fucking in that place?”

I folded my arms tightly against my chest, my eyes narrowed, jaw set. “Excuse me?”

Karl just sighed and shook his head, changing the subject. “I was telling the truth when I told you I’d broken up with Kate. I-I missed you. I just wanted to talk to you and try to make things right, but you refused to have anything to do with me. And then the next thing I know, Kate’s parents are trying to put me in prison. You were the only person I trusted to help, but since you wouldn’t answer my calls and decided you were done with me, I got desperate. So, yeah, I started stalking you, trying to find the right moment to approach you so I could tell you the truth and about the death threats we’d been receiving. I-I just wanted your help, Charlotte, but I swear—I fucking swear I never went into the sanctum that night, or any of the nights I’d followed you. I just sat in my car the whole time waiting for you to come out.”

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“Okay, Karl.” I licked my lips, breathing out as I prepared myself for his next answer. “And what about the packages and texts I’ve been receiving? They found the burner phone in your apartment, along with the masks.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Charlotte,” he said, lifting his cuffed hands and dropping them back down in utter exhaustion. “I didn’t send you any packages, nor have I purchased a phone of any kind or have sent you any messages. You know all of the passwords to my accounts. Just take another look, and you’ll see I’m telling the truth. I told you Kate and I were being followed, Charlotte. I know it’s a long shot, but I think...” He paused, a tear sliding down his swollen cheek. “I think whoever killed Kate could be responsible for all of this.”

“And what has you so certain she was killed?” I asked.

“Because when my truck was in the shop, the mechanic told me it didn’t have any brake fluid in it, which is bullshit because you and I both know that I’ve always taken great care of our vehicles.”

I nodded. Karl wasn’t wrong about that.

“When I asked the guy if there was a leak, he told me no, just that the brakes weren’t working because the fluid was gone. Now, again, when I took Kate out that night, I got us there with no problems and the brakes were fine. We were at the restaurant maybe a little over an hour, two at most, and it wasn’t like we were paying attention to what was going on outside in the parking lot. That’s plenty of time for someone to sabotage my truck and escape without getting caught, Charlotte. I mean, think about it. I’m right about this. I have to be.”

“I need proof, Karl. If you and Kate really were being threatened, we need proof to back it up.”

Tears shimmered in Karl’s eyes. “I-I don’t have any. I told you I got rid of everything months ago because I thought it was all bullshit.”

“What about Kate? Did she keep any of the death threats?”

Karl shrugged, and I could tell by the look on his face that he truly didn’t know. “I’m sorry, Charlotte, but I can’t answer that. Kate told me she’d been receiving them, but she never told me if she kept them. If I had to take a wild guess, I’d say no, she probably trashed them just like I did.”

“Fuck, Karl.”

“But,” he continued, his eyes lighting up like he had an idea, “it’s possible she may have spoken to her parents about it. If she did, and they can back up my claims, then that should help me, right?”

“It’s possible, yes,” I agreed. “But it may be hard trying to convince them to help you when they’re trying to throw your ass in prison.”

“And that’s what I need you for,” Karl said, his voice pleading. “You can convince them I’m innocent, Charlotte. I know you can.”

I let out a sigh. “Karl...”

“I know this is a lot to ask for,” he muttered, his voice cracking. “And I don’t blame you if you protest. I mean, I do deserve it after what I did to you, but I don’t deserve to go to prison for crimes I didn’t commit. I’ve made my mistakes and I’m willing to own them, but I’m sorry, I absolutely refuse to admit to something I didn’t do. I need you, Charlotte. If you truly believe I’m innocent, then help me, please. You’re

literally all I have.”

A loud buzzer that rang my ears erupted through the room, signaling visiting hours were over. A group of guards came in and one by one, grabbed ahold of an inmate and began escorting them out.

“Please, Charlotte,” Karl begged as he was yanked away from me and toward the door. “At least think about it. Please!”

I didn’t know what to say to him and by the time I could form a response, it was too late. Karl was gone, doomed back to his cell with a river of tears flooding down his battered cheeks.

thirty-three

Unknown

I lit up a cigarette later that night and puffed on it twice, cracking my neck as I leaned against the trunk of my car and stared down at my phone in my free hand. My nostrils flared, and it was all I could do not to smash the phone to smithereens when I accessed the live feed and found Charlotte naked, riding Detective Rhodes on her couch while Hutch’s hands were wrapped around her gorgeous head, forcing her to eat his cock.

The sight disgusted me, making my blood boil to the point I had to force myself to look away and talk myself out of sniping both of their asses through Charlotte’s living room window. My plan in framing Karl had worked and I could not—no—I would not fuck this up and risk getting caught. I worked way too fucking hard to lose everything now.

Somehow, some-fucking way, Charlotte Greene would be mine.

And that was a fucking promise I intended to keep, no matter who I had to kill to help me succeed.

Putting my phone away, I spun around to the trunk and opened it, smirking down at the dead body currently folded like a pretzel in my trunk.

“Come now, Blaire,” I muttered, grinning bigger as I took another puff off my cigarette. “Let’s give them something else to fret about, shall we?”