



# Veil

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**Category:** Romance, Action, Suspense

**Description:** The moment I laid eyes on Makayla Hawkins, I felt it in my gut. A spark of desire, igniting a burning need inside me that I hadn't felt in years.

I wanted her.

She had the face of an angel, and a body made for sin.

She was a temptress. A forbidden fruit.

And I wanted a taste.

Such a shame she belonged to another man.

One who didn't deserve her.

But after a simple phone call, she was mine for the taking.

From the moment she stepped inside my club, I knew one night would never be enough.

I was consumed.

She was addicted.

I was her fantasy.

She was my obsession.

**Total Pages (Source):** 66

## PROLOGUE

Giving myself one last glance in the mirror, I opened the bedroom door of the master suite and strolled into the living room. Victor was perched on the edge of the sofa, head down, as he tapped away on his phone. I swear the man never stopped working, but running one of the largest hotel chains wasn't exactly a nine-to-five job. His bags were packed and lying beside his feet. He was going on another business trip. He'd been taking a lot of them lately.

Victor lifted his head, his expression blank, but I caught the flash of surprise in his beautiful blue eyes. He was an attractive man at thirty-seven, and fifteen years my senior. I never considered dating an older man, but he changed that with one flash of his charming smile.

We met in November of last year, when he was a guest speaker in my Business Strategy class. His family owned the Martin Hotel chains located all around the world. After class, I found him standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall and looking completely out of place in a sea of college kids. He asked me out for coffee. Coffee turned into dinner. Dinner turned into spending Christmas with my parents, followed by a surprise ski trip to Breckenridge. Our relationship moved fast. I was in love, and somewhere along the way, I lost pieces of myself.

Nervous butterflies danced around in my stomach as his gaze swept over the tiny scraps of red lace clinging to my nearly naked body. Victor loved me in red.

Tossing his phone on the coffee table, he leaned back against the cushions and patted his thigh. "Come here, kitten."

I straddled his lap, circling my arms around his neck.

He settled one hand on my hip, and with the other, he traced the scalloped edges of my bra. “What are you doing?” he asked with a hint of amusement in his tone.

Victor knew what I was doing, and he was goading me. Recently, our battle of wills had become less of a game and more of a power struggle to regain the control he’d slowly stolen from me over the last few months. “Why don’t you ever ask me to come with you on your trips anymore?” I asked, trying my best not to sound accusatory, but nothing got past Victor.

A slap echoed through the room as I registered the sting on my asscheek. Victor didn’t like to be questioned.

Smoothing a hand over my tingling skin, he spoke in an even tone. “Your graduation is on Thursday, and I’m not sure if I’ll make it back in time.”

That wasn’t my question, but before I could argue, he cupped the back of my head and guided my mouth to his. My fingers teased the silky strands of hair on the back of his head as the kiss deepened.

I felt him harden beneath me, and I rocked my hips to relieve the ache between my thighs. I loved Victor, but lately it seemed like my love wasn’t enough.

Rising up on my knees, I pulled the ties holding the tiny panties in place and tossed them to the side as Victor lowered his pants just enough to free himself. He wrapped his hand around his cock, stroking it before swiping his thumb over the precum at the tip.

My core clenched in anticipation. “Is this what you want, kitten?” I answered with a moan as he pushed his thumb into my mouth, the saltiness coating my tongue.

Keeping his gaze locked on me, Victor pulled his thumb from my mouth and dragged the wet digit across my cheek, pressing hard against my skin.

“Such a greedy little slut, aren’t you, Makayla?” he taunted.

It was like he’d just dumped a bucket of cold water over my head. My body stilled, and my moan turned into a strangled gasp. It wasn’t the first time he’d called me a “greedy slut” or “little whore.”

“Victor, please don’t talk to me like that,” I chided softly.

I was always down for kinky sex. Some light hair pulling, a smack on the ass, and even a little dirty talk. But I had my limits. I hated those words for good reason, and he knew it. He was being cruel.

Leaning forward, he sucked a nipple through the lace of my bra. “What about what I like?”

“I thought you liked this—” I gestured to my mostly naked body. “—but lately, all you’ve done is make me feel like I’m not enough. You’ve changed.”

His jaw clenched as irritation passed over his face. The slight flare of his nostrils meant that I was pushing him too far, but our relationship was falling apart at the seams, and I was desperately clinging to the tiny, frayed edges.

“Where is that man who stood outside my classroom and asked me out for coffee?” I pressed. “Where is the man who whisked me off to Breckenridge and made love to me by the fire?” The words poured from my mouth, and damn the consequences. I wouldn’t take them back.

“That man was in denial. Depriving himself of a need that you can’t satisfy.”

Jerking my head back, I narrowed my eyes. “Whatneed?” I snapped. “I’m the one trying here.”

“I know exactly what you’re doing, and I don’t have time for your whiny bullshit.” He bucked his hips. “Get up.”

The knot in my gut was a clear warning to stop pushing. To let him leave. Deep down, I could feel things were about to spiral out of control. Something I desperately wanted back. Something I knew he would never return. but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t fight for it.

“Show me what you need,” I challenged.

His blue eyes turned nearly black, glazed over with something much darker than desire. Something carnal. His cock swelled between my legs as he reached up and fisted his hand in my hair, and I cried out. A mask of indifference fell over his face as his grip on my hip tightened, his fingers digging into the flesh. There would be a bruise later.

“Get on your knees,” he growled.

## Page 2

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The malice in his voice had me scrambling from his lap, but when a sharp pain ripped through my skull, I realized Victor still had a firm hold on my hair.

Tears pooled in my eyes as I dropped to my knees. “Victor,” I whimpered.

“Tell me to stop, Makayla.”

Our battle of wills had escalated to a new level. It was too late to back down. Victor would still win, but the strong, confident girl I’d shoved aside—in exchange for Victor’s affection—lifted her chin in a silent challenge. Bring it on, Victor.

When he tugged my face forward, I instinctively moved my hands to grasp his thighs. With his free hand, he grabbed his dick and angled it at my mouth. More precum leaked from the tip as he brushed it over my lips.

“Open for me,” he demanded huskily.

I parted my lips, flattening my tongue, and in one swift move, he shoved his cock to the back of my throat. My fingers clenched the fabric of his pants as I gagged around him, struggling to breathe.

“Suck it hard,” he grunted, driving my mouth over his cock. “That’s it, my littlewhore.” He enunciated the word, wielding it like a weapon, slicing at old wounds.

Tears spilled down my cheeks, and my heart cracked piece-by-piece until there was nothing left. But then a small voice in my head reminded me that right now, I was the

one in control. I flicked my gaze up to him, determined to end this. Closing my eyes, I hollowed my cheeks. I wouldn't be the only one on my knees when this was over.

His breaths became ragged and his thighs tensed under my knuckles. He was close.

My jaw was throbbing as saltiness coated my tongue.

"Fuck." Victor threw his head back, a loud roar ripping from his chest as hot semen spilled down my throat.

He pulled me back, his cock slipping from my mouth, both of us gasping for breath as I wiped saliva from my chin.

He leaned in until we were face-to-face. "You said you wanted the man you fell in love with," he said condescendingly, before smashing his lips against mine. "This is that man."

He released my hair, and I fell back on my ass. I scrambled over to the adjacent sofa and curled up at the end, wrapping my arms around my legs to cover my partially naked body, shaking my head in disgust as I swiped the tears from my cheeks.

He pushed up from the sofa and righted his clothes as if he didn't just treat me like a sex toy. "You think some skimpy lingerie is going to distract me?" He shook his head in annoyance. "If you're going to play games, Makayla, you should never underestimate your opponent."

I held my breath, staring at him with hurt and anger, waiting for an apology or even a look of remorse, but instead he picked up his bags and walked out.

He was right. I had underestimated him.

Victor doesn't lose.

He always wins.

ONE

X

“Makayla Hawkins.”

I commit the name to memory the moment she crosses the stage to collect her diploma. Her big blue eyes and captivating smile appear on the overhead screens flanking all three sides of the stage.

After the diplomas are handed out and the graduates are seated, I slip outside the auditorium to where other family members are already waiting to greet the new grads. Finding shade under an oak tree, I pull out my phone and scroll through my emails. Several minutes pass before commotion draws my attention to the doors as graduates spill out of the building.

I spot her immediately.

With her cap clutched to her chest, she arches her neck and searches the crowd. A gust of wind blows past, catching her long blonde hair and twisting it around her face. She reaches up and tucks the wayward strands behind her ears.

How is it that a simple action can be so alluring?

She's heavenly. A goddess among mortals.

An angel.

## Page 3

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She brushes past me, the scent of her innocence—sweet, like candy—wafts in the air, awakening a desire I haven't felt in years. My dick twitches as I imagine her beneath me, writhing and panting, breathlessly begging me to fulfill her darkest fantasy.

I want to play with her.

My eyes follow the goddess as she makes her way over to an older couple and a dark-haired man in a tailored suit. His back is to me, but there's something oddly familiar about him. I narrow my eyes behind my sunglasses as I try to place him.

A surge of jealousy fills my veins when the mystery man takes Makayla by the hand, calling her kitten as he presses a kiss to her wrist. When he turns to the older woman beside him, giving me a view of his profile, I grin.

Today is my lucky day.

I drop my gaze to the phone still clutched in my hand and shoot off a quick text. Then I scroll through my contacts until I find the number I need. Turning away, I weave through the crowd before pressing the Call button and bringing the phone to my ear.

After the third ring, the slimy motherfucker answers. "Victor Martin."

"Makayla is lovely," I purr in lieu of a greeting.

Silence hangs in the air, and I turn around to see Victor scanning the crowd until he spots me. I flash him a wolfish grin and give a little finger wave.

He straightens his spine, lips pinched, and growls into the receiver, “She’s mine.”

“Tsk tsk, Victor. So greedy,” I taunt. “Does she know about your little tryst with the lady of the mansion?”

“Is that a threat?” he snaps.

“Now, Victor. Threatening clients is bad for business.”

“What do you want?”

“I want Makayla,” I reply, as if it’s that simple.

He scoffs. “You can’t be serious.”

I say nothing. Instead, I turn my back on him and head for my car.

Victor hums as if he’s considering my request before he speaks. “You’re being awfully presumptuous. What if she doesn’t want you?”

I chuckle softly. “I can be quite charming when I want something,” I say.

A harsh exhale echoes through the line. “All right,” he relents. “But Desiree is mine.”

I rub a hand over the scruff covering my jaw. “What if she doesn’t want you?” I toss his words back at him.

“You and I both know she does,” he retorts.

For now. Her body might want him, but her heart belongs to someone else.

“Fair enough,” I agree. “But listen closely, Victor.... I have rules. Desiree broke them by getting involved with you. If you want to continue playing with her, you’ll have to surrender your membership. If your relationship ends, you walk away and never show your face in my club again. Do we have a deal?”

“Fine. I’ll be in touch.”

Well, that went much better than I expected.

TWO

MAKAYLA

Stepping out of the auditorium, I scan the crowded courtyard for my parents.

“Makayla,” my father calls, waving a hand in the air and grabbing my attention.

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Smiling, I wave back and start toward them, then falter when I notice the man beside my mother. Victor.

I suck in a breath, unable to hide the shock on my face. I wasn't expecting to see him today. If I'm being honest, I'd hoped I wouldn't see him ever again. Not after the way he treated me.

But there he stands with his hands shoved in his pockets, looking like the loving boyfriend he'd been when we first started dating. It's a lie. Everything about Victor Martin is a lie.

I've been on an emotional rollercoaster over the last few days, and right now I just feel... indifferent. My stomach is in knots, because him being here is just another manipulative tactic to control me right under my parents' noses. I'm not the type to make a scene in a crowded place. I prefer to fight my battles in private, but I'm done battling with Victor. He knows he's caught me off guard, and that my mother is—understandably—overprotective, so I'd never say or do anything to cause her more worry.

Keeping my smile locked in place, I put one foot in front of the other until I'm standing in front of Victor. "Well, this is a surprise," I say sweetly. I leave out the words "nice" or "pleasant" because it's neither. "I thought you weren't going to be back in time."

"I took an earlier flight and came straight here," he explains, taking my hand. "You didn't really think I'd miss your graduation, did you, kitten?" He kisses the inside of my wrist, laying it on thick for my parents.

I seriously hate him.

My mother swoons, pressing a hand to her chest. My father rolls his eyes at my mother's theatrics.

"Congratulations, baby girl." He opens his arms, and I step into his embrace.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Victor, I hope you'll be joining us for lunch," my mother says.

"Of course, Mrs. Hawkins, but lunch is on me." He flashes her his charming smile, the one I stupidly fell for, and I want to slap it off his face.

"Oh"—she waves him off—"that's not necessary."

Victor pulls his buzzing phone from his pocket and frowns down at the screen. "Excuse me. I need to take this real quick." He turns on his heel. "Victor Martin," he barks into the phone as he walks off.

"Makayla," a female voice calls, and I look over to see Heather, my former classmate, approaching.

"Congratulations," I say as we embrace each other.

"You too." She holds out her hand to my mother and introduces herself. "Heather Reed."

I introduce my parents, and before my mother begins interrogating Heather, I suggest they head to the restaurant. "Victor and I will meet you there."

Mom holds out my wristlet, and I take it as she kisses my cheek. “See you soon.”

I watch them walk off, then turn my attention to Heather and glance briefly over her shoulder. “Is your family here?”

“Yeah. Somewhere.” She cranes her neck as if searching for someone, and I instinctively do the same.

I spot Victor standing under a tree with his phone pressed to his ear, other hand shoved in his pocket, and annoyance etched on his face. As if he senses me watching, his eyes meet mine, and his lips thin into a straight line. His gaze flicks between Heather and me before he ends his call and stalks back in our direction.

“... so if I could get your number.” Heather’s voice pulls my attention back to her. She’s holding up her phone and looking at me expectantly.

Crap. I didn’t hear anything she just said.

I rattle off my number, and she types it into her phone. “Perfect. I just texted you with my number. Maybe we can meet up for a celebratory drink sometime.”

If my parents weren’t already on their way to the restaurant, I’d suggest we get that drink now. “I’d like that.”

“Great. I’ll text you soon.” She steps around me and hurries off, disappearing into the crowd.

I take the last few steps toward Victor, closing the gap between us.

“Who was that?” he asks, slipping his phone into his pocket.

Ignoring his question, I ask, “Why are you here?”

## Page 5

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“Stop asking stupid questions, Makayla,” he snaps in a low voice, then looks around. “Where are your parents?”

Asshole. “They’re meeting us at the restaurant,” I reply woodenly.

He nods once. “Let’s go.”

Victor curls an arm around my lower back, clamping a hand on my hip. I try to pull away, but he tightens his hold. His fingers dig into the tender bruise on my hip from the incident four days ago, making me flinch.

“Ow,” I hiss.

“Sorry,” he mumbles.

I ignore his half-assed apology as he steers us through the parking lot and then opens the passenger door of his Mercedes. I quickly remove the polyester robe, revealing the red dress he bought for me before he left town. I was tempted to run out and buy myself something else out of spite. Victor’s smug expression makes me wish that I had.

I press my lips together, biting back a snide remark, and drop into the passenger seat, tossing my hat and robe into the back before pulling on my seat belt. Victor closes the door, then rounds the front of the car, pinning me with an indecipherable look through the windshield that puts me on edge. He seems agitated, and I wonder if it’s from that phone call or if he knows what I did. Anxiety tightens my chest as he climbs into the driver’s seat and starts the engine without looking at me.

As he merges into the line of cars waiting to exit the parking lot, I shift in my seat. “How was your business trip?” I ask sardonically.

He briefly glances over at me before returning his attention to the line of traffic ahead of us. “Productive.” He seems eerily calm for the amount of angst vibrating off him.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I look out the passenger window. “Yeah, I bet it was.”

I did a lot of thinking over the last few days. I might be a little naïve at times, but I’m not dumb. I know Victor is cheating on me. I don’t have solid proof, but if his behavior is anything to go on, I’d say it started two and a half months ago, right before he asked me to move in with him.

Victor regularly went out of town on business, but that particular time, he was only supposed to be gone for two days. Normally, I wouldn’t bother him while he was working, but after a week of no contact, I was worried. I called and texted, but he didn’t respond. So, I called his office, and his assistant informed me that he was in a meeting. I’d been ghosted once before, so I recognized the signs, but I never expected that kind of disrespect from Victor. I was furious, and when he finally did call, I sent him to voicemail. If I wasn’t worth his time, then he wasn’t worth mine.

A few days and many unanswered phone calls later, Victor showed up at my apartment with flowers and an apology, then asked me to dinner. It felt like a small victory.

During our date, he told me all about the hotel expansion he’d been working on. He was sweet and attentive. He was the man I fell for. Later, as he drove me back to my apartment, he asked me to move in with him.

With graduation approaching, the timing could not have been more perfect.

Looking back, I realize the victory had been all Victor's.

You could say I'm a hopeless romantic. I love with my whole heart and I feel things deeply. I've told myself with every new relationship that it'll be different. That I'll take it slow, skim the shallow waters before taking the plunge. Only I end up diving right into the deep end and the weight of my feelings keeps me from breaking the surface.

My young heart has been broken dozens of times over the years, not just from breakups, but from jilted friendships too. In high school, I was targeted and bullied by girls I thought were my friends. Most of it online, because people are a lot braver behind the screen. I'd never felt so helpless or hopeless. I cried a lot. Then one day, as my mom and I were leaving the principal's office, she turned to me and said, "Makayla, you can't control what others say about you, but you can control how you allow it to affect you."

Control.

Such a complex word. Something a hormonal teenager didn't possess. However, I held on to that little piece of advice, and though it was hard, I pushed through those shitty high school years and even made a few new friends along the way.

Strangely enough, it had also become the crux of my relationship with Victor. When you're in love with a narcissist, you don't realize how much control you've given them until it's too late.

I mistook his manipulation for romantic gestures. Coupled with the fact that he's handsome, older and more experienced, I relished in the attention and affection. Especially in bed. I wasn't a virgin, but I'd never been with a man who knew his way around a woman's body the way Victor had. I felt worthy.

I was so enamored, I couldn't see past the hearts in my eyes. His moves were careful and cunning. I allowed him to dictate everything from what I ate, to the clothes I wore, to the way I behaved in his presence. He always ordered for me when we went out, and only allowed me one glass of wine at dinner. I hated wine. He picked out my clothes and accessories, and while he would always tell me I looked beautiful, he still found a way to make me feel inadequate. His backhanded compliments were another form of manipulation over simple things such as the color of my lipstick, the flavor of my gum, or even my taste in music.

After I moved in, I felt like I was living with a totally different man. He was hardly ever home, either working late or out of town. I missed him, but I understood his job was important. When he was home, he was cold and distant. His touch was rougher, his words hurtful and degrading. He wasn't the same man I fell in love with.

I should've known better than to play games with a man like Victor.

I'd made the first move, attempting to salvage our relationship. To balance the scale between us. Victor countered with cruelty, breaking my heart before he walked out, leaving me feeling confused and worthless.

But I finally saw him for what he truly is.

The veil of denial had been lifted.

I realized the man I fell in love with never really existed.

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THREE

MAKAYLA

Lunch went surprisingly well, considering the tension crackling between us, but my parents seemed oblivious. Victor talked business with my father, while my mother drilled me with questions about my goals for the future. She wasn't thrilled with the idea of me living with Victor, and I decided I'd wait a couple of days to let them know of my change in plans.

Then I hugged them goodbye and insisted they call when they made it home. They only lived an hour and a half away, but I still worried about them on the road.

After lunch, Victor drives us back to our penthouse—his penthouse—at the Martin Portside, which is one of the many hotels owned by his family. Even with all the amenities, I wasn't thrilled by the idea of living in a hotel. He promised we could look for another place after graduation, but that's no longer an option. After he walked out on me, I packed up my stuff and moved to another hotel ten minutes down the road.

I'm almost certain he knows. There's no way a man like Victor would allow me out of his sight without keeping tabs on me. Not because he cares. This is all about control. Which brings me back to the reason he showed up at graduation. To lure me back to his penthouse so he could punish me?

Victor pulls his Mercedes into the valet entrance. I collect my things from the back seat as he climbs out and comes around to my side.

Passing the valet his keys, he takes my hand and leads me into the lobby, bypassing the front desk and heading over to a bank of elevators. My heart slams in my chest as the thumping of my pulse fills my ears. Dread sits like a lead weight in the pit of my stomach. What will he do when he sees my stuff is gone?

The elevator pings and the doors slide open. Victor gestures for me to go first, then steps inside and pushes the PH button.

The ride is silent as Victor and I stare at each other from opposite sides. His demeanor is now cool as he leans against the wall with his hands braced on the railing.

He's very attractive, tall, and fit. His chiseled jaw is lined with day-old scruff, and his blue eyes stand out against his black hair.

My mom used to say, "It's not what's on the outside. It's what's on the inside that counts." Well, whatever is inside Victor is dark and unnerving.

"What are you thinking?" he asks.

I take a deep breath and blow it out. "Honestly, I kind of hate you." I probably shouldn't provoke him.

He nods once, then lifts his gaze to the rising numbers above the door. "I gave you what you asked for."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes as the elevator slows to a stop, and the doors glide open. Victor gestures for me to go first, so I step out into the foyer, then nervously follow him through the wood-grained double doors and down the short hall that opens up to a living, dining, and kitchen area. He removes his jacket and drapes it over an accent chair before making his way to the bar. I drop my stuff onto the same

chair and head over to the wall of windows overlooking parts of the city and the bay that stretches on for miles.

I cross my arms over my chest to hide my trembling hands. Maybe he won't notice, since he's not here much.

Wishful thinking. Victor notices everything.

The pop of a cork makes me flinch, and I look over my shoulder to Victor standing at the bar, pouring two glasses of champagne.

He motions me over to the living area and passes me a glass as we take a seat on opposite ends of the sofa. Victor sits facing me, pulling his knee up on the cushion between us and draping his arm across the back.

"A toast." He raises his glass. "To new beginnings."

He brings the champagne glass to his lips, eyeing me over the rim as he takes a mouthful. I frown. "Drink your champagne, Makayla."

I narrow my eyes and take a tentative sip. "I know you've been cheating on me."

"You don't know anything," he says dismissively before tossing back the rest of his drink.

Taking the flute from my hand, unconcerned with whether I've finished or not, he sets both glasses on the coffee table.

Wrapping my arms around my middle, I ask, "Did you ever love me?"

I don't know why I bother to ask. It won't change anything, but for some reason I

need to hear it.

Victor's eyes move over my face. The spark of desire they once held for me is long gone. It's not like I haven't been hurt by words before, but still.... I mentally brace myself for the blow. "No," he says simply.

It's like a punch to the solar plexus.

Inhaling sharply, I nod and avert my gaze. "I didn't think so."

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“You surprised me,” he says, and I glance over to see him looking at me, but his eyes are unfocused. It’s as if he’s looking through me, lost in a memory. “I had just ended my previous—for lack of a better word—relationship.”

I frown as my brows dip in confusion. What the hell does that mean?

“Then there you were.” A sinister smile tugs at his lips, and my heart drops to my stomach. “Your innocence was like spilled blood in shark-infested waters. I thought there could not have been anyone more perfect for me.”

Despite the warm afternoon sunlight pouring through the wall of windows, darkness lingers between us. A chill brushes over the base of my spine as I try to convince myself that the man I fell in love with wouldn’t hurt me. But the truth is he hurt me that day before he walked out. Now I wonder if that was just a preview of the man sitting less than two feet from me now?

I thought about what I would say to Victor if I had the chance to confront him, but now, I’m torn. Part of me wants to bolt for the door, but another part of me is determined to have her say.

I square my shoulders. “I think you used my inexperience to manipulate me into submission,” I state. Victor quirks a brow. “Someone has been doing her research.”

He’s right. I’ve seen the movies and read the books. I did my research and gathered enough information to know we would never be compatible. While I thought his dominance in bed was hot, I have my limits. Controlling, cheating, and cruelty are all a hard no for me.

“Just because I’ve allowed you to control most of our relationship doesn’t make me a submissive,” I assert.

No, it just makes you a fool.

“Allowed?” He tilts his head as if it’s the most idiotic thing he’s ever heard. “Whether you like it or not, Makayla, you’re very much a submissive.” I shake my head, wanting to argue, but he presses on. “What else did your little Google search tell you about me?”

That you’re a narcissistic sociopath. According to Google, of course. I lift a careless shoulder, though my heart is trying to beat itself out of my chest. “You’re a Dominant.”

“But you already knew that,” his tone is accusatory. “Were you hoping for Christian Gray?” He quirks a brow.

Victor isn’t the type to make jokes, so his quip surprises a laugh out of me. “I’m not, nor will I ever be, interested in a Dom/sub relationship.”

“Me either. My desires—my needs—are far beyond the scope of that. There are too many rules. I prefer something more... aggressive.”

A strangled gasp expels from my throat as I jerk to my feet and move to the other side of the room, putting some space between us. “Are you saying...?” I blink, unable to form the words.

“I’m not a rapist,” he states, but it doesn’t ease the trepidation spreading through my chest. “There are plenty of women out there who are more than willing to satisfy my needs.”

For once, I decide to keep my mouth shut. I don't want to know what he's been doing with other women.

The less you know, the better, Makayla.

At this point, I feel sick and extremely uncomfortable in my own skin. Maybe I've been looking at this all wrong. His behavior toward me the last couple months wasn't about control or the need to dominate me—degrade me. Maybe it isn't even about my willingness to submit. Victor is a predator—admittedly—and there are women out there willing to be preyed upon.

Is this just a kink? Or is it something deeper, more sinister?

An image of Victor's cruel face as he savagely shoved his cock down my throat flashes through my mind and I shudder. He's not Fifty Shades, he's American Psycho.

I'm no longer interested in Victor's dark desires. The sooner I can get out of here and away from him, the better.

There's just one burning question I need him to answer. "Why did you stay with me, knowing I couldn't..."? I gesture wildly, not wanting to finish that thought.

"Because I like variety," he replies, rising from the sofa. "I wanted you from the moment I saw you, and when I walked into the classroom, there you were, front and center. So young and innocent. Naïve. The perfect little plaything. Bright-eyed and eager to please. The perfect submissive. It was as if you'd been handed to me on a silver platter."

What the fuck? I scoff in disgust. "How poetic." He shrugs as if he hasn't just rocked me to my core. "I won't lie and say I didn't feel the urge to bend you just a little." He gives me a wry grin.

“Is this where I’m supposed to thank you for not dragging me into your dark world of depravity?”

He moves so fast that I don’t have a chance to flinch. One hand fists in my hair, the other around my throat, his nose pressed against mine. I wrap my fingers around his wrist, my nails digging into his flesh as I try to pry his hand from my throat. “Do you have any idea how lucky you are?” he grits out, his voice low and menacing. “Do you want to know how many times I’ve wanted to tie you down, put my hands around your throat, and fuck you while your body jerked beneath me, fighting for breath?” He inhales sharply through his nose. “I want nothing more than to watch my cock pounding into your needy little pussy as you stare up at me with those wide blue eyes.”

A tear slips from the corner of my eye and rolls down the side of my face.

He catches it with his tongue. “Mmm. Your fear makes me so hard. What I wouldn’t give to get drunk on your tears as they spill from your pleading eyes, silently begging me for just one. More. Breath.” He punctuates those last three words with a short, sharp inhale, mocking me. “And just as the darkness creeps to the edges of your vision, I would come so hard and sink my teeth into your flawless skin.”

My chest heaves with each sharp inhale of breath through my nose, my body trembling as every vicious word sears into my brain. I don’t have to wonder if he’s done those things to someone else.

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“Do you want to know how close I’ve come to punishing you because of your little games and smart mouth? You want to know why you’re still breathing?”

His questions are rhetorical, so there’s no point in answering. Even if I could.

“Because I have control,” he shouts, and I squeeze my eyes shut. “Say thank you, Makayla.” His hand falls from my throat.

“Thank you,” I choke out.

Still gripping my hair, he holds my head steady before smashing his lips to mine. Unable to turn away, I sob against his mouth.

Breaking the kiss, he presses his forehead to mine. “I don’t want to let you go, but I don’t have a choice.”

I don’t know what that means, but I don’t care. I just want him to get away from me. Releasing my hair, he cups my face. “I deposited some money into your account this morning. Consider it a graduation gift.”

His Jekyll and Hyde behavior is making my head spin. I press my lips together, my chest shaking with silent sobs.

Victor brushes his lips over mine, gently this time, and whispers, “I’ll send a car to drive you to your hotel.”

I stiffen, my eyes popping open. His lips curl into a knowing smirk. “Never

underestimate your opponent, Makayla.”

He always wins.

Holding my breath, I stay rooted in place as Victor brushes past me, his footsteps carrying him away.

“See you around, kitten.”

A moment later, I hear the door click shut.

I don’t know how much time passes before I dare look over my shoulder and see I’m alone. I sink to the floor, and fall apart.

FOUR

X

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see Victor’s name flashing on the screen. It’s only been a few hours since we made our deal.

Swiping my thumb across the screen, I bring the phone to my ear. “Don’t tell me you’ve had a change of heart?”

“She’s all yours,” he says, bitterly.

I practically choke in disbelief. “You could’ve given her the day to celebrate. Even I’m not that much of an asshole.”

“Who cares? You got what you wanted.”

Not yet, but soon. “And you’re getting what you want,” I retort. “Where is she?”

“She’s staying at the Heritage Bay Hotel,” he says with a hint of amusement.

This fucking guy.

“You dumped her at a hotel?”

“No.” He pauses. “She was living with me at the penthouse. She moved out while I was away.”

Smart girl. “I’ll take it from here.” I start to pull the phone away when I hear him call my name. “What?” I bark.

There’s a beat of silence before he says, “She’s not like Desiree.”

I huff out a laugh. “If I wanted a woman like Desiree, I’d have kept Desiree.”

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Done with this conversation, I hang up and decide it's time to make a plan.

It's true that no good deed goes unpunished, but as far as I'm concerned, neither does being an asshole.

Karma is a bitch.

But sometimes, she's a beautiful goddess, with a pert nose, full lips, and a smile that gives me hope for something I didn't think I'd ever want again.

Don't worry, angel. You're in good hands now.

FIVE

MAKAYLA

After a long, hot shower, I slip on a robe and move to stand in front of the mirror. Using a hand towel, I wipe away the condensation and check my neck for bruising. Thankfully, there isn't any.

The twisted expression on Victor's face as he spewed those menacing words flashes through my mind, causing my entire body to shudder.

God, I hate him.

I was in shock after his sudden assault. My mind had shut down, but my survival instincts kicked in, telling me to get out of there in case he changed his mind and

came back.

I moved on autopilot, going through the motions. When the Uber pulled up to my hotel, I couldn't even remember ordering one, much less leaving the penthouse. It was like I was standing on the sidelines, watching myself do all these things. I'd even forgotten Victor said he was sending a car for me. Not that I would've taken it.

It wasn't until I was safely locked inside my hotel room that his words truly sank in. I spent the last twenty minutes in the shower going over every moment I shared with Victor, and I just couldn't wrap my head around it.

How could I be so stupid?

I walk into the bedroom and shake my head as I look over the five pieces of luggage lined up against the wall. Hard to believe everything I own fits into five suitcases.

The only place with last-minute availability was at the Heritage Bay Hotel less than ten minutes down the road. The one-bedroom suite costs almost as much as my car payment per night. I cringed when I'd handed the lady my credit card, knowing I'd have to get a job real soon.

I have money in my savings, which I plan to use for an apartment. That's what it was always meant to be used for, even before Victor asked me to move in with him. I looked at a few places online and even reached out to a couple of realtors, but everything is so expensive. Even if I find a decent paying job, I'll still need a roommate if I want to stay in this area.

Maybe I should just go home.

It suddenly hits me just how alone I am. The only friends I had were my old roommates. Neither of them liked Victor, which put a strain on our friendship.

Apparently, I was the only fool who didn't recognize the wolf in sheep's clothing. I already feel like an idiot for the amount of time I wasted on that relationship.

But the inevitable "I told you so" speech would be worth it if I had a place to live.

Falling back on the bed, I blow out a breath and consider moving back in with my parents. They should be home by now. I reach for my phone on the nightstand. Sure enough, there's a text from my mom letting me know they made it home and are getting ready to go over to the Parsons' for poker night. A half smile pulls at my lips. I text back telling her to have fun and I'll call them tomorrow. What will I tell them? That Victor is crazy? They'll insist I come home. I don't want to worry them. Below my mother's text is the distinct green dot of an unread message from a number I don't recognize, but just under the number, it says: It's Heather Reed. This is my number. Let's get together for drinks sometime.

I'd been so distracted by Victor's presence at the graduation ceremony, I'd forgotten about Heather. I don't know her well, but maybe I can change that.

Though our interactions were school related, we'd always gotten along.

Rolling from the bed, I walk over to the window overlooking Pelican Cove. The place is known for its nightlife, upscale restaurants, and shopping. It's late afternoon, the sun is out, and the sky is clear. The weather is perfect. It's too early for dinner, but it's never too early for drinks.

I save Heather's number in my contacts, then tap the Call icon. She picks up on the second ring.

"Hello."

"Heather, it's Makayla."

“Hey, girl. How’s it going?”

“Well....” I let out a disbelieving laugh, because what the hell happened to my life over the past week? “My boyfriend and I broke up, and I could really use a drink.” And a friend.

## Page 10

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She gasps. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, um... It’s a long story.” I sigh. “I was wondering if you were free, maybe we could meet for that celebratory drink.”

“Sure. I’d love to.”

“Great.” We agree to meet at the hotel bar, and the relief I feel is almost instant.

What a shitty day. Though I’m a little lost and hurt, I’m looking forward to a fresh start. But first, I’m going to salvage what’s left of what is supposed to be one of the most important days of my life.

Fuck Victor.

\* \* \*

“Good riddance, Victor, you fucking dick,” Heather cheers, bringing the glass to her lips.

I throw my head back and laugh.

Heather is sassy, and so much fun. Not to mention an exotic beauty with dark, wavy hair that hangs just past her shoulders, golden-brown skin, light eyes, and pouty lips. I wish she and I had hung out more in college. I could’ve used a friend like her.

While waiting for Heather to arrive, I checked my bank account, and my eyes nearly

fell from their sockets. Victor called it a graduation gift, but I'd be an idiot to think his gifts didn't come without strings. My immediate thought was to send it back. Then I decided I wouldn't be too hasty in returning his money. At least not until I find a place to live and a job. Then I would return every single penny. But tonight, drinks are on me—or Victor.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

I wouldn't even know where to start. How do you tell someone you hardly know that your ex-boyfriend attacked you, threatened your life, and deposited ten thousand dollars into your bank account? It sounds just as insane as the man himself. “He was a controlling asshole,” I admit, leaving it at that.

“Gross.” She shakes her head, then lifts her glass again and taps it against mine. “To starting over.”

“To taking back control,” I toast before taking a big gulp of my dirty martini. The alcohol spreads through my limbs, making me feel relaxed.

“What about you?” I prompt. “Do you have a man?”

Heather pulls her glass from her lips and shakes her head. “Relationships are hard for me.”

“Oh?”

She sets her drink down on the table and leans back in her seat. “When I was sixteen, my parents were killed in a car accident. The day they died, something inside me died too. My brother and I both went to counseling, and while he worked through his grief spending long hours at the office, I worked through mine with our next-door neighbor, Tommy.”

I frown, feeling like the world's biggest asshole. Here I am whining over a man when she's lost so much more. "I'm so sorry."

She lifts a shoulder. "Don't be. Tommy was hella hot and just what I needed at the time. I've had a few boyfriends, but truthfully, my relationships have all been superficial. I'm not a commitment-phobe or anything. I just haven't felt like I wanted... more. You know what I mean?" I nod, and she lifts a shoulder. "I don't know. Maybe I'm broken."

I shake my head. "You're not broken," I assure her. "You were carrying some heavy emotional baggage, and you needed an outlet. A distraction from the pain. Some people use sex and others use drugs. You seem to be doing well. You're a college graduate." I grin.

"True." She purses her lips.

"I'm quite the opposite. A hopeless romantic. I swore every boyfriend I've ever had wastheone." I giggle, running a finger over the rim of my glass. "I always wanted more, even though they weren't that serious." I pause. "Last year, I was dating this guy, Spencer, from my business ethics class. He was a senior graduating in the summer. We dated for months. I really liked him, and I figured we were on the same page. He even invited me to his graduation and dinner with his family afterward. I never heard from him after that."

Her eyes flare. "He ghosted you?"

"Yep."

"You know what you need?" Her expression turns conspiratorial. "A sexorcism."

I bark out a laugh. "Like a night of hot sex with a stranger to rid me of my Victor

demons?”

“Exactly.”

“Do people even do that anymore?”

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“One-night stands?” she asks. “Hell yes. One way to get over a man is to get under another one. Rebound sex would be good for you.”

I look around the room. It’s pretty crowded for a hotel bar. I wonder if this is the norm, or if there’s a convention. There are dozens of men dressed in suits. It’s happy hour, and I’d say the male-to-female ratio is around sixty-forty. Several guys at the bar are minding their own business, drinking and watching the baseball game playing on the television above. Clearly they’re only here to unwind after a long day. Some are gathered at their own tables, engrossed in conversations and laughing. And then there are the prowlers, the ones watching and waiting for an opening to pounce.

“If I was sure I wouldn’t be kidnapped, killed, or walk away with some unnamed STD”—or end up with a man like Victor—“I’d totally have a one-night stand.”

“Even then, how do you know if he’ll be any good? He could be a fumbling idiot who fucks you like a jackhammer against the wall for his own selfish pleasure.”

I twist my lips to the side. “Sounds like you speak from experience.”

“Maybe.” She leans forward, a conspiratorial twinkle in her eyes. “If there was a place that could guarantee all those things and more, would you go?”

Curiosity piqued, I raise my brows. “Does such a place exist?”

Nodding slowly, she scans my face, carefully considering her next words. “It’s very private. The only way in is if you’re invited by a member.”

Propping an elbow on the table, I rest my chin in my open palm. “Are you a member?”

“I might be.” She presses her lips together, amusement twinkling in her eyes.

Lowering my voice, I ask, “Is it one of those sex clubs?” The corners of her mouth curl up in amusement, and my eyes go wide. “Like BDSM?”

“No.” She snorts. “The BDSM clubs you read about in romance books are nothing like real-life BDSM clubs.”

Heather goes on about this private club, the differences between BDSM and fantasy. I don’t bother to tell her about my Google searches. I admire her for her ability to speak so casually about such a taboo subject. The entirety of it all is fascinating. The idea of a safe place where you can experience your deepest fantasies seems almost too good to be true.

“No whips and chains or anything, right?” I’m only half kidding.

“Only if you’re into that,” she winks, then bursts into laughter. “I’m kidding. It’s not that hardcore. Besides, you can’t just walk into a room and have sex. You have to be invited.”

The idea of being in charge of my own sex life seems almost insane after seven months of being with Victor. Taking back control would be liberating. A fresh start.

No, a restart.

“So what if I just wanted someone to rub my feet?” I joke.

“Then get a pedicure.” She flicks her wrist, waving the suggestion away. “Be more

creative, Makayla.”

“Hmm.” I take a moment to think about it. “I’ve always fantasized about hooking up with a stranger. No names. Just the two of us in a dark room except for the slivers of moonlight peeking through the blinds, allowing him just enough light to play with my body.” To make me feel desired.

“Wow.” Heather fans her face. “That’s hot.”

“I know, right?” I laugh. “Take me to this club.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” she says with a laugh, shaking her head. “We’ll talk about it later,” she adds as a waiter approaches the table with a round of drinks we didn’t order.

“Where did these come from?” I ask.

“They’re from a secret admirer.”

I wonder if Victor would have the audacity to show up here. The answer is abso-fucking-lutely.

I crane my neck to scan the bar, searching for a familiar face. “Which one?”

“He left.” He sets the drinks on the table. “They’re safe, I promise. I made them myself.”

“Thank you,” Heather says.

“Would you mind bringing us the check?” I ask.

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I feel much safer locked inside my hotel suite.

“The gentleman paid your tab too.” He winks. “Great tipper.”

That’s unnerving. “What did he look like?”

The waiter beams. “Tall, dark, and handsome, honey.”

SIX

MAKAYLA

“This is nice.” Heather waves a hand, gesturing to my hotel suite before dropping down onto the sofa cushion beside mine. “How long do you plan on staying here?”

Leaning back against the sofa, I prop my feet on the coffee table and sigh. “I don’t have anywhere to go,” I admit. “My parents live an hour and a half away in a fifty-five-and-up community. I thought about moving back home for a little while or at least until I find a job. But I don’t want to bring my drama to their doorstep. They had enough of that when I was in high school, and honestly, I don’t want them to think I can’t take care of myself. Tomorrow, I’m going to act like the adult they raised me to be and look for a job. The apartments around here are too expensive. I might have to go back to the ones I lived in near the university.” I didn’t tell her how much money Victor gave me, just that he’d given me some for graduation. Plus, I plan to return it as soon as I have my life figured out. The sooner I find a job, the sooner I can pay him back and rid his existence from my life.

“Cannon gave me an apartment building for graduation.” She purses her lips, a knowing expression on her face. “You need a place to live, and I need tenants, so....”

My mouth drops open. “That’s one hell of a gift. Wait. Who’s Cannon?”

“My brother,” she says. “When he graduated college, our dad gave him his first investment property, and Cannon wanted to do the same for me. I still have to go over the numbers with him, but I’ll give you a discount on the rent for being my first tenant.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t want to take advantage. And besides, you can’t run a profitable business if you’re giving discounts to your friends.” I give her a look that says she should know better. We did both just graduate today with our business degrees, after all.

“We can work out the details later.” She waves me off. “In the meantime, you can come stay with me. I have plenty of room, and this place isn’t cheap.” Before I can argue, she adds, “Now, let’s order room service.”

\* \* \*

Heather and I settle in with our food, drinks, and a Sex and the City marathon playing on the television.

During a commercial break, I shift on the sofa to face her. “So, when are you taking me to this club? What’s it called?”

Heather gives a slight shake of her head as she swallows a bite of her burger. “Veil. We can go tomorrow night. I just have to let Desiree know.”

“Is she the owner?”

“No, but she’s in charge. Technically, no one gets through the doors without a background check, proof of birth control, drug screening, STD testing, pregnancy testing, and a fuck ton of money.” She waves a hand dismissively. “But you don’t need to worry about any of that yet.” She considers me for a second. “Except maybe the STD and pregnancy tests.”

And suddenly I’ve lost my appetite. I toss the container on the coffee table and pull my knees to my chest. “I’m gonna need to get tested anyway. I’m on birth control, but Victor and I didn’t always use condoms.”

“I didn’t want to ask, but was he cheating on you?”

“I’m pretty sure he was.”

“There are plenty of women out there who are more than willing to satisfy my needs.” How long will those words taunt me?

Carrie’s narrative draws my attention to the TV. “I love this show.”

“Me too.” She looks over at me. “Which character do you think you’re most like?”

“Charlotte.” Hands down.

“Really?” She sounds surprised.

I nod, thinking about the fantasy club. I’ve always been the good girl, and the idea of doing something naughty, but also being in control of my own pleasure, is tempting.

“But for one night, I’d like to be Samantha.”

“Why Samantha?”

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“Because she’s not afraid to take what she wants.”

Heather’s lips stretch into a wide grin. “Samantha it is.” She reaches over, grabs my hand, and says, “Don’t worry, Makayla. I’ve got you.”

And though my head is swimming with a gallon of alcohol, I know she means it.

SEVEN

X

I roll to a stop beside the call box and punch in the four-digit code. A moment later, the gate swings open and I continue up the driveway.

I’d always wanted to open my own club at some point, even while working for my father’s company. I traveled all over the country, attending one grand opening after another, and while I found each one more impressive than the next, they all had the same common denominators: music, flashing lights, and alcohol. I decided nightclubs were too much work, that the shine would eventually fade, and the patrons would move on to the next “it” club. I needed something more appealing.

A strict BDSM club was out because I knew nothing about the lifestyle. I enjoy kinky sex as much as the next guy, and though I have a dominant personality, I’m not a Dominant. My need for control is geared more toward the business aspect of my life.

So, ten years ago, I opened a private club where people with money and power come to play out their sexual fantasies, kinks, and fetishes.

A fantasy club.

Veil.

I park in one of the empty bays of the six-car garage and enter the mansion. Dim light spills into the hallway from the open door of Desiree's office.

Her gaze lifts from her laptop as I walk inside and over to the bar. "What are you doing here?"

I snort, reaching for a glass to pour myself a drink. "Well, hello to you too. Last I checked, I still own this place."

"Smartass. That's not what I meant."

Desiree and I met twelve years ago at a grand opening of a new club downtown. We hit it off instantly. She was hot, sexy, and uninhibited. We talked, laughed, drank, danced, and fucked around in the dark corners. Then we went back to her place and fucked six ways to Sunday.

She was very adventurous in the bedroom throughout our seven-year relationship. She loved to role-play and was open to anything and everything that could get her off.

She was my inspiration for Veil.

Drink in hand, I move over to the sofa and take a seat, kicking my feet up on the coffee table.

Turning her chair to the side, she props her arms on the rests and crosses one long, toned leg over the other. "Heather called," she says. "She's coming to the club tomorrow evening and bringing a friend."

“Call her back and tell her I said no.”

“I’ve already told her yes.”

Leaning my head back, I pinch the bridge of my nose. “We have rules for a reason. Only members are allowed to bring guests. Heather is not a member.”

“I’m making an exception.” She smirks. “Last I checked, I’m the one in charge.”

Desiree has always had a soft spot for her one and only female friend, Heather, but her retort pisses me off. “You’re abusing your power,” I warn lightly.

Desiree’s head jerks back as if I’d slapped her, hurt flashing in her dark eyes.

Three years after I opened Veil, my father died tragically and unexpectedly. Unfortunately, I couldn’t keep up with running two businesses while taking care of my family. Desiree was my rock. She took over Veil while I worked endlessly on building my father’s empire. That left little time for a relationship, and Desiree needed attention. She lived in a fantasy world. While I was struggling with my new reality, our romantic relationship shifted into a partnership.

I confess, I found myself back in Desiree’s bed from time to time, but that fizzled out years ago. Despite that, she’s still my best friend, partner, and one of the few people I trust. She’s made a few decisions over the years that I wasn’t happy about, but then she broke my number one rule: never get romantically involved with a member or a potential member. For nearly seven years, she’s held the reins. And while she likes to play, she did so with her partner. Until he broke her heart.

When Victor showed up looking for a partner to feed his sexual appetite, Desiree dove in headfirst. While she wasn’t aware of my history with Victor, it didn’t change anything. She still broke the rules.

Bringing the glass to my lips, I eye her over the rim. “Have you heard from Victor?”

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“Not since this morning. Why?” she asks, skeptically.

“I saw him today,” I tell her. “We had an interesting conversation.”

“What?” she asks, surprised. “What did you say to him?”

“Were you aware he was involved with someone?”

Her eyes flare in surprise. “I... No. Nothing came up on his report.”

Probably because he was hiding her in his penthouse.

“If I’d known...” She huffs, averting her gaze. “I know we don’t have control over what our members do in their personal lives outside the club—”

“Which is one of the reasons why I put that rule in place,” I cut in. “Are you in love with him?”

“Absolutely not.” She scoffs as if my question is offensive.

I didn’t think so, but I had to ask. “Okay.”

“Okay?” she echoes, narrowing her eyes skeptically.

“Yes. I gave him an ultimatum. You or Makayla—”

“Makayla?” She blinks.

I nod. “Her name is Makayla Hawkins.”

“So, what did he say?”

“He chose you.” I pause. “He gave up his woman, his membership, and agreed to stay out of my club for good, in exchange for you.”

She raises her brows, seemingly impressed.

“I still hate his fucking guts, and I sure as hell don’t trust him, but if he’s what you want, I’ll back off and let you have your fun. What goes on between you two is personal and stays within the walls of your private space. Our relationship has nothing to do with Victor. You’re a professional, and I trust you to keep the two separate.”

She gives me an exasperated look. “Of course. What about Makayla?”

I guess it’s a good thing I make the rules. “Let me worry about Makayla.”

EIGHT

MAKAYLA

I pull up to a set of tall iron gates and punch the four-digit code Heather gave me into the keypad. A moment later, a sultry voice comes through the speaker. “Good afternoon. This is Desiree.”

Heather leans over me to speak into the intercom. “Good afternoon, Desiree. It’s Heather. I’m here with Makayla Hawkins.”

“Lovely,” she chirps.

The call cuts off with a buzz and the gate swings open. I ease through the opening and up the tree-lined driveway.

This morning, Heather informed me that we had a big day ahead of us. First on the list was to pack up my shit—her words. While checking out of my hotel, the desk clerk told me that my bill had been settled. When I asked who paid it, she said she couldn't tell me. I knew it had to be Victor. Just another reminder that he was in control, even when we weren't together.

After the bellhop loaded my suitcases into the back of my car, I drove us to her newly renovated two-story Mediterranean-style apartment building.

Once my bags were unloaded, I called my parents on FaceTime to let them know Victor and I had broken up, but assured them I was fine. They were a little apprehensive at first, which was expected, but after I gave them a rundown of my plans, a quick video tour of the apartment, and a wave from Heather, they seemed content. Heather has already halfway moved into her place and offered to rent me any of the three available. I chose the upstairs apartment directly across from hers. It's an open floor plan with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Plenty of space, if I still want a roommate, but I really want my own space, and so does Heather.

We spent the early part of the day putting her things away and the rest of the afternoon furniture shopping for my apartment. We even managed to grab a few outfits at this boutique in The Village, which is in the heart of Magnolia Park.

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“We don’t even have to stay for the happy hour.” Heather’s voice pierces through my thoughts.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said it’s just a simple meeting with Desiree and then we can grab a drink in the bar. But if you feel uncomfortable at any time, we can leave.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

My eyes widen as a large white French chateau-inspired mansion comes into view. A fountain fills the center of a circular driveway surrounded by lush landscaping and trees.

“This is Veil?” I ask in awe.

“It is,” Heather confirms as I park in the driveway.

I slide out from behind the wheel of my Jetta and brush my hands over the skimpy dress I allowed Heather to pick out for me. It’s a bodysuit with a halter top that barely covers the front of my breasts, while the bottom half is covered by a fringe skirt. I won’t deny that it makes me feel sexy, but it leaves nothing to the imagination.

Heather leads the way up the four short steps to the glass-and-iron door and rings the doorbell.

Tilting my head, I take in the massive structure. “Do people sleep here?”

“I imagine some do. Think of it as a fantastical bed-and-breakfast.” She snickers.

“I wasn’t expecting this, Heather.” I gesture around us. “Exactly how much is a membership?”

“Makayla, just—”

The door swings open, revealing a tall, gorgeous woman standing in the doorway. She’s wearing a cream-colored sleeveless blouse tucked into a pair of black fitted dress pants. Her black hair is parted down the middle and cut into a blunt bob. Her pouty lips, painted a bright red, stretch across her pretty face in a friendly smile.

“You must be Makayla. I’m Desiree.” She holds out a hand, and her long, slender fingers curl around mine. “Welcome to Veil.”

\* \* \*

The house is pristine in all black-and-white decor and reeks of wealth. A large crystal chandelier hangs in the grand foyer between two sweeping staircases leading to the second floor. It’s like something out of a magazine.

“I’ll wait for you in the bar,” Heather says as she veers off to the left and disappears behind a set of shiny black doors.

“Come with me, Makayla,” Desiree instructs as she leads me to a formal living room. The large painting on the wall is the first thing I notice. It’s a black-and-white portrait of a woman with short black hair, a red blindfold covering her eyes, and full lips, slightly parted and painted in the same shade of red. I wonder if the painting is of Desiree. It sure looks like her.

“Have a seat.” She gestures to the white sofa.

Rounding the rectangular glass coffee table, I perch on the edge of the soft leather cushion, resting my clasped hands in my lap.

Desiree lowers herself into one of the adjacent black accent chairs. She swipes a leather folio from the coffee table and flips it open before passing it to me.

“Before we get started, I’ll need you to sign an NDA. By signing it, you agree not to disclose anything about Veil, including me.”

“Of course.” Sliding the pen from the elastic holder, I quickly read over the one-page document then fill in the blanks before scribbling my signature at the bottom and placing the folio on the table between us.

She leans back, crossing a long leg over the other, drawing my attention to the red sole of her \$800 Iriza pumps. I only know this because I happen to own the exact same pair. They were a gift from Victor. The man is certifiable, but he has good taste.

A prickle of awareness brushes the back of my neck, and though it’s just the two of us in the room, I feel as though I’m being watched. I take a quick scan around the space, wondering if there are any hidden cameras. I’d expect nothing less in a place like this.

Dragging my gaze up, I find Desiree studying me. Her dark eyes, framed with thick lashes, twinkle with interest.

I flash her a friendly smile. “Sorry. I’m a little nervous.”

She takes in the room as if she’s seeing it through my eyes. “I imagine this must feel a little intimidating for you.”

I’m not sure if that was a dig or not, so I let it go. For now.

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Desiree returns her attention to me. “How about we skip the formalities?” She stands from the chair and grabs the leather folio from the coffee table. “Let me show you around first. Then we’ll have a drink in the bar and talk a bit.”

“Sounds good.” Rising from the sofa, I follow her from the room and up the stairs. “Do you live here?”

“I do,” she replies with a nod.

“You must get lonely in this big house by yourself.”

Her lips tip up into a knowing smile. “I’m never lonely.”

Keeping with the decor of the house, the upstairs hallway is white and lined with shiny black doors on each side. Desiree opens the first door on the right and gestures for me to go in.

Stepping inside, I gasp. “It’s beautiful,” I whisper, turning in a circle and taking in the massive bedroom. I’ve never really cared for black bedroom furniture—it always seemed too gothic for my tastes—but in this room, it looks elegant. The walls are black, and the tall windows are flanked by long damask-print silk drapes that puddle atop the shiny black hardwood floor. A large chandelier hangs over a king-sized bed covered in crisp white bedding. The bed is situated between two shiny black nightstands topped with crystal lamps. The black silk tufted headboard is high, and a matching bench sits at the foot.

I move to stand in front of the oversized floor-length mirror fixed to the wall directly

across from the bed. It's framed by carved wood, painted in a shiny black.

A chill runs down my spine, and again I get the feeling someone is watching me.

Maybe someone is.

Turning away from the mirror, I scan the corners of the room, looking for cameras, but I don't see any.

My gaze moves to Desiree to see her staring at me with a look I can't quite figure out. "How many rooms do you have?" I ask, cutting through the awkwardness.

"Thirty," she answers.

My eyes widen. "Wow. Do they all look like this one?"

The corners of her mouth curl up in amusement. "Let me show you something." She tips her head to the side before she turns and walks out of the room.

At the end of the hall is a set of double doors. Desiree tucks the leather folio under her arm before gripping both doorknobs. She looks over her shoulder and says, "This room is for... larger parties." She winks, then shoves both doors wide open.

If she was going for shock value, she definitely succeeded. This room is equally as beautiful as the last, but the attention grabber is what sits in the middle—the biggest bed I've ever seen. It's round and covered in a red satin sheet.

I look over at Desiree with raised brows. "By parties, you mean orgies, right?" I joke to cover up my nerves, and she laughs.

She shows me a few more rooms which are set up for scenes, like a doctor's office,

corporate boardroom, and even a classroom. I've never been into voyeurism, but I'd be interested in watching a scene played out in one of these rooms.

"Let's go get that drink. We have a lot to discuss."

As we make our way back down the hall, my gaze snags on a small keyhole embedded in the decorative molding covering the wall, but there's no visible door. Scanning the wall, I realize there's one between every door, and I wonder if, in fact, there is a secret door. Maybe it's a storage closet filled with kinky stuff. I'm no prude, but I'm also not an idiot. This place is way out of my depth of experience.

As we descend the stairs, Desiree goes over the rules, the hours of the club, and the application process. It's a lot of information to retain. "I'm making an exception for you tonight as a favor to Heather. After tonight, you'll have to go through the application process before you can be invited back."

"I understand. Thank you."

"For liability reasons, there is a two-drink maximum, and no drinks are allowed outside the club. We don't want our members getting drunk."

As we reach the bottom of the stairs, I notice a woman with a blonde pixie cut wearing a strapless leather dress standing at a podium near the door.

"There will always be a guide to greet you at the door. Members with a reservation will obtain a key to their room."

I nod as I take everything in.

We move across the foyer and enter the club. A large circular bar sits in the middle of the fairly empty room. Four bartenders are moving around behind the counter setting

up for the night. Heather is perched on a barstool, a martini glass in hand. She's too busy talking to the handsome older man beside her to notice me. Hovering over the center of the bar is a platform with a black metal cage. Inside, a naked woman, a red blindfold covering her eyes, moves seductively to the beat playing softly in the background.

“That's Ruby. Which means—” She looks down at her watch, then back to me. “—we have about thirty minutes before it gets busy. Have a seat in the booth in the back corner. I'll get us drinks.” She points to me. “Martini?”

“Yes, dirty,” I request, before heading to the back booth.

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Desiree returns a few minutes later and slides into the space across from me, setting the leather folio off to the side as a woman with beautiful red hair dressed in a red leather corset top and miniskirt approaches with our drinks.

“Thanks, Scarlet,” Desiree says with a nod as she picks up her glass.

“You’re welcome, babe. Let me know if you need anything else,” she says before turning and heading back to the bar.

I reach for my drink and take a large sip while Desiree checks her phone.

Folding her arms on the edge of the table, she leans in and asks, “What brings you to Veil, Makayla?”

“Heather says I need a sexorcism,.” I deadpan.

“A what?” Desiree asks through a soft laugh.

“Sorry.” I wave off the joke. “I’m just overwhelmed.” I smile nervously, placing my drink on the table before leaning back in the booth and crossing my legs. “I’m curious.”

She tilts her head and waits for me to continue.

“I just recently got out of a relationship,” I confess. “I didn’t have a lot of experience when we met, and I... uh... he had certain needs that I couldn’t—wouldn’t give him.” I avert my gaze to the naked woman in the cage to keep the word vomit to a

minimum. I'm still shaken by the fallout with Victor yesterday. I can't even begin to explain to a total stranger that my ex was either kinky or crazy. "So we parted ways."

"I'm sorry."

I tear my eyes from the naked woman to meet Desiree's. "It was for the best." I lift a shoulder. "You can't force something that isn't meant to be."

She tilts her head. "What changed?"

"Depends on who you ask." I snort. "I'm certain he was cheating on me."

A look passes over her face, but it's gone just as fast. I imagine she's probably heard much worse, or maybe she's experienced heartbreak a time or two. "Sexual needs and desires can change often. It has nothing to do with lack of experience, but when needs change, it's important to communicate with your partner. I'm sorry if your ex made you feel inadequate, Makayla, but it's not your fault. It sounds like maybe he was lacking experience as well."

My lips pull to the side in response. It wasn't experience he was lacking. It was a conscience.

"Do you have any questions?" she asks.

"So many." I laugh as the bar begins to fill with people. "How does it work?"

She looks over her shoulder, following my line of sight. "Some of our members bring their own partners. Others request the company of our fantasy guides."

This whole place is surreal. I feel like I'm in another world.

Desiree slides from the booth, and I follow, tucking my clutch under my arm and grabbing my drink before we make our way toward the bar. “How does one become a member?” I ask.

She stops and turns to face me. “Fantasy guides don’t need a membership.”

My brows pinch in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Veil is basically a gentlemen’s club, but we don’t use that term because we have several female members, too. We provide a safe place for members who hold powerful positions in their real lives looking for an escape for a night or two to let off some steam in privacy. Our fantasy guides are here to provide just that. You’re literally a walking fantasy all wrapped up in a sexy package.” She gestures to my dress. “I can promise you our members will take notice.”

I feel my cheeks flush, and Desiree laughs. “After everything, now you’re embarrassed.”

I let out a soft laugh. “What happens then?” I ask. “If a member wants to... you know.” I shrug. “... spend time with me.”

“Then they make arrangements to do so through me.”

My heart drops into my stomach. Wait—

Desiree narrows her eyes. “We’re not prostitutes, Makayla. The only fantasy guides who get paid are the ones who actually work here.” She gestures to the bartenders, then up to the naked woman in the cage. “The rest are here because they were invited. Just as you are.”

“Sorry.” I blanch. “The make arrangements part kind of threw me.”

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She places a hand on my arm and leans closer. “Our members are extremely respectful of each other. You are completely safe here. Reserve judgment and keep an open mind. You’d be surprised by what you discover about yourself and your body with the right partner.” She gives my arm a gentle squeeze before dropping her hand. “Have fun.” She winks before she turns and walks out of the club.

NINE

X

Through the monitor, I watch my angel slide onto the barstool beside Heather. As much as I don’t want Heather in my club, I’m happy she brought her new friend. My top-notch security cameras allow me to see clearly as the two of them lean toward each other before Makayla tosses her head back with a laugh. Seeing her so carefree makes my dick painfully hard.

Or it could be that scrap of a dress that shows off her flawless skin.

“What are you grinning at?”

I slide my gaze to my friend, Gio, seated in the chair opposite my desk. His brother, Enzo, occupies the other.

“None of your business.” I smirk, and he flips me off.

The sound of Desiree’s heels clicking rapidly against the marble floor mimics the sound of gunfire. Her steps are hurried, which means she’s got a lot to say about

Makayla, and a moment later, she saunters into the room.

“Uh-oh,” Gio murmurs under his breath.

“How’d it go?” I ask, keeping my eyes trained on the monitor.

A black leather folio lands on the center of the desk with a loud thwack.

I flinch, lifting my head. “What the fuck is your problem?”

She turns to my friends and points toward the door. “Out.”

Enzo exhales a soft laugh as he rises from the chair. “You know, Des,” he says in a playful tone, “if you were anyone else, that attitude would earn you a beating, and not the pleasurable kind.”

Desiree pins him with a hard stare. “Don’t threaten me on my turf, Enzo Cantore.”

Enzo barks out a laugh. “So feisty.” Shaking his head, he leans in and presses a kiss to Desiree’s cheek, eyeing his older brother.

Gio glares at Enzo as he pushes to his feet and leans in to kiss Desiree on the cheek. “I miss you, amore mio.”

She jerks her head back from Gio with pure hatred on her face. “You’ll get over it,” she replies bitterly, and I fight back the urge to laugh.

Gio shoots me a pleading look, and I shrug. I’m not getting in the middle of their bullshit.

“We’ll wait for you in the club,” Enzo says, heading for the door.

“Grab a booth in the back corner,” I call, before directing my attention to Desiree who’s glaring at me from the opposite side of the desk with her hands on her hips.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

A grin tugs at my lips as I lean back in my chair.

“She’s a child.”

“She’s twenty-two,” I argue. “Why are you acting like a jealous girlfriend?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she says with a soft laugh, dropping down in the chair across from my desk. “Her innocence surprised me, that’s all.”

“It’s refreshing.”

She rolls her eyes. “What are you going to do with her? She’s here because”—she curls her fingers, making air quotes—“she’s ‘curious.’”

“I’m going to play with her,” I say simply. “Twelve years ago, you were a curious twentysomething,” I remind her. “That’s why Veil exists.”

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“Whatever.” She bristles. “Have fun with your pillow princess.”

“Why are you being so judgmental?”

She averts her gaze to the large window overlooking the back of the house. “She’s not what I imagined for Victor.” She turns her face to me. “I wasn’t expecting her to be so alluring. Even I’m attracted to her.” She purses her lips, and I smirk. “She and I couldn’t be more opposite. She’s light, and I’m dark.”

Leaning forward, I rest my arms on the desk. “In the twelve years I’ve known you, you’ve never compared yourself to another woman. Why now?”

“I just find it hard to believe Victor gave her up for me.”

“If it’s just sex, why does it matter?” I press.

She jerks a shoulder. “I guess it doesn’t.”

“As I said, I gave Victor a choice. He chose dark.”

\* \* \*

“What’s it gonna take to get Desiree back in my bed?” Gio asks.

“You can start by not being a dick,” I advise, scowling at my friend. “Is that all she is to you? A fuck?”

He averts his gaze to the dance floor, jaw clenched. “No.”

That’s what I thought. “She’s seeing someone.”

Gio’s attention snaps back to me, nostrils flared, eyes hard. “Who the fuck is it?” he shouts, slamming his glass down on the table.

I shake my head. “You know I can’t tell you that,” I lie.

Technically, I could because Victor’s no longer a member, but it’s not him I’m protecting. It’s Desiree. No matter how much she pisses me off.

“I’ll find out.” He flashes a wolfish grin to mask the rage. “Then I’ll kill him.”

I hate Victor with a passion, but not enough to want him dead. Maybe just a few punches to the face and a swift kick to the dick.

“Leave the killing to me,” Enzo interjects. “We can’t have our family lawyer behind bars.”

I laugh, but knowing these two, they’re only half joking. “You can’t kill him,” I tell him. “He’s family.”

Gio’s gaze slides to his brother. Enzo holds up his hands. “Don’t look at me. I’m an asshole, but I’m not stupid.”

Gio doesn’t look convinced, but he lets it go, turning his attention back to me. “It can’t be Sandro or Frankie, because she’s not their type. Is it one of my cousins? Give me a hint.”

I smirk. “It’s not Enzo.”

“Stronzo.” He laughs, calling me an asshole in Italian. “So, what you’re saying is he’s part of The Family. Not my family.”

I nod once. “Yes.”

People assume the mafia only exists in cities like New York, Chicago, or Vegas. However, organized crime in Florida goes back to the 1920s. The syndicate has evolved over the years and is now referred to as The Family. The organization is made up of legitimate businessmen in high-ranking positions who operate beneath a superior under certain rules in exchange for connections and power. While the Cantore men are at the top of the food chain, they, too, have to answer to a higher power and follow the rules. One of those rules is: you cannot kill another member of The Family without just cause. Only the head of The Family gets to decide if another member deserves to be taken out.

Gio lets out a harsh breath and leans back in the booth. “Fuck.”

The Cantore brothers are longtime friends and business partners of mine. Their family owns a majority of the land just east of Heritage Bay, including the port. They also have dozens of businesses—all legit—including a gentlemen’s club. The women we—Desiree and I—hire to work at Veil come through a dummy corporation owned by the Cantores. Everyone is thoroughly screened by Gio or Enzo personally.

“Damn.” Enzo whistles through his teeth. “Never seen her before.”

Turning my head, I follow his line of sight to see my angel on the dance floor, standing almost a head taller than most of the women around her. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a fancy bun, exposing her long neck and slender shoulders. Her extremely revealing, but sexy, black dress shimmers under the flashing lights. Her skirt moves with every sway of her hips, showing off her long legs and tight ass, attracting the attention of several men.

“New fantasy guide?” Enzo asks.

“No. She’s mine,” I growl before tossing back the rest of my drink, then sliding out of the booth. “Come on, Enzo. I need a wingman.”

TEN

MAKAYLA

Heather and I are on the dance floor, expensive vodka flowing through our veins as “Bad Guy” pumps through the speakers. Heather is in front of me, arms raised over her head, eyes closed. A very attractive man with dark hair appears behind her and curls his arms around her waist.

A hard chest presses against my back, and a pair of hands settle on my hips. I start to turn my head to the side to peek over my shoulder, but his lips press to the shell of my ear. “Don’t turn around,” he purrs, sending a shiver down my spine. “Just dance with me.”

My body relaxes in his embrace, and I rest my head against his shoulder. His rich, masculine scent: mahogany, oak, and something forbidden wraps itself around me like a warm blanket. It’s comforting.

He moves his hands from my hips to my lower abdomen and dips his head, brushing his lips over the pulse of my neck. “What’s your name, angel?”

Angel? I don’t hate it.

It's better than slut or whore or... gag, kitten.

"No names," I breathe, and I feel him smile against my skin.

"Do you want to play?"

I stiffen in his arms, my eyes immediately searching for Heather, but she's not there. Panic seizes my chest momentarily before Desiree's parting words roll through my mind. "You're safe here."

"You can say no."

"No." I shake my head, and his hold on me loosens. "I mean, yes. I want to play."

He removes a hand, then he's pressing something against my palm. "At the top of the stairs, turn right, and it's the first door on the right." That's the room Desiree had shown me earlier. "Meet me there in ten minutes."

Then he's gone.

\* \* \*

A mixture of nerves and excitement swirls in my lower belly as I shove the key into the lock, turn the knob, and ease the door open.

The room is dark except for the stream of moonlight peeking through the part in the drapes.

"Hello?" I call from the doorway.

"I'm here, angel," the mystery man whispers.

I guess he's keeping the nickname.

I turn my head in the direction of his voice and find him sitting in a chair in the corner. That sliver of light brushes over one shoe while the rest of him is hidden in the darkness.

I take a tentative step inside, my hand still gripping the knob.

“Don't be scared. You're safe with me.”

I know I am, but it doesn't make me any less nervous. After he left me on the dance floor, I found Heather at the bar. I showed her the key and told her what room I'd be in. She reassured me that I was safe and reminded me why she'd brought me here. My fantasy. Then we agreed to meet back at the bar later.

“Lock the door and place the key on the table.”

I take a deep breath to calm my nerves and do as he asks. The sound of the key hitting the table cuts through the awkward silence.

“Come closer.”

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I move until I'm standing beside the bed.

“Do you trust me?”

A laugh bubbles from my chest. “No.”

A soft chuckle floats from where he sits and goes straight to my core. As much as I want to see his face, I crave the fantasy more.

“Fair enough,” he rasps. “Yet you trusted me enough to come here, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.” The way those words roll off his tongue has me pressing my thighs together.

“Turn around and face the bed.”

The click of his shoes against the hardwood draws him close enough to feel the heat of his body against my back.

His finger trails down my spine leaving goose bumps in its wake.

“What’s your fantasy?” he whispers.

Oh God.

“You. This,” I breathe. “Just us. No names. No strings.”

“I can give you that.” He puts his mouth close to my ear. “But you have to give me something in return.”

My mouth goes dry. “What do you want?”

“Your trust.”

My heart races as the words you’re safer roll through my mind. Even if I don’t completely trust him, I trust Heather. And oddly enough, I trust Desiree.

“Okay.”

“Good girl.” He presses a kiss to my neck. “Don’t move. I’m going to blindfold you.”

“Wh-why? It’s already dark in here. I can’t see anything as it is.”

“It’s for my benefit and your pleasure.”

“What do you mean?” I snap my mouth shut, hoping he doesn’t change his mind or kick me out for asking so many questions.

“Have you never worn a blindfold?”

“No.”

“Taking away your sense of sight will heighten your other senses. It makes the experience more... intense.”

The silky material is cold against my heated skin and wide, covering my forehead

down to the bridge of my nose.

Behind me, there's a rustling of fabric. "You don't need a safe word. If you don't like something, just tell me to stop. Understood?"

I nod.

"I need your words."

"I understand."

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His fingers slide under the thick straps of my dress pushing them over my shoulders and down my arms.

“Take this off,” he instructs. “But leave the heels on.”

Slipping my arms free from the straps, I hook my thumbs into the waistband and shove my dress down my legs until it puddles at my feet. I wobble slightly in my heels, but his hand gently cups my elbow as he helps me step out of the dress.

Wrapping his arms around me, he cups my bare breasts in both hands, brushing his thumbs over my nipples. My hands find his thighs, needing something to hold onto.

“Tell me, angel.” His hand moves from my right breast and dips between my thighs, his fingers stroking lightly over my slit. “Are you a naughty girl?”

I respond with a moan, pushing against his impressive erection as he continues to tease me with a single finger, circling my clit then down to my entrance. Then repeating the motion with two fingers until my clit is throbbing and my core is pulsing with need.

When he pushes his fingers inside, I cry out in relief, clenching tightly, desperate for the friction. He hums in approval, the rumble in his chest vibrating against my back. “You’re so wet,” he murmurs. “And tight. Fuck. I can’t wait to feel you wrapped around my cock.”

His other hand grips my hair, turning my head at an awkward angle, and then his mouth covers mine. His lips are soft but firm. Commanding. My knees buckle as he

fucks my mouth, every dip of his tongue moving in sync with the stroke of his fingers. It's the best kiss of my life.

He picks up the pace, pumping harder and faster, our kiss turning desperate. He curls his fingers, hitting the spot that has my eyes rolling back. I tear my lips from his, crying out as I come hard.

He releases my hair and his arm curls around my waist to keep me upright. My body is still trembling in post-orgasmic bliss when he flattens a hand between my shoulders and gives a gentle push.

"Bend over and put your hands flat on the mattress." Reaching out, my hands brush over the soft sheets and I do as he asks. My heels put me at the perfect height so I don't have to strain to keep my feet planted on the floor.

His thigh slips between mine, wedging my legs apart before his hands slide over my ass and down the backs of my thighs. "Such a lovely view," he purrs. "The way your pussy glistens in the moonlight."

I've never felt more exposed in my life, yet I don't feel embarrassed or ashamed. His hands slide back up my thighs to grip the cheeks of my ass. A moment later, his warm breath brushes over my hot, oversensitive flesh, followed by his tongue dipping inside me.

My sharp moan echoes through the quiet room. My back arches and my fingers curl into the soft sheets as I push against his perfectly skilled mouth, rocking my hips while he devours my pussy like a starving man.

"I could eat this pussy all night."

Then his mouth is gone. The clank of a belt fills my ears, followed by the distinct

crinkle of a condom wrapper.

With one hand gripping my ass, he presses his tip at my opening. My mouth falls open as he fills me with his thick cock in one long thrust.

“So good,” he rasps.

I moan. So good.

“Are you ready to be fucked, angel?”

I clench around him, pulling a soft hiss from his lips.

“Greedy girl.” He pulls out slowly then pushes back in, rolling his hips. Stretching me in a painfully pleasurable way. One hand slides up my back over my spine then down to my tailbone. My skin tingles as he plays with my body. His hands move to my hips, and I brace myself as he pulls back then slams into me hard.

I cry out as my body jerks forward, my arms collapsing under me.

With each thrust, he drives into me with deep, deliberate strokes, the tip of his cock hitting that sweet spot that has me seeing stars.

The slapping of his hips meeting my ass cheeks, mixed with our collective moans, fills the room.

My body trembles on the verge of another orgasm, each thrust pushing me higher. “You’re almost there,” he pants. “I can feel it.” His hand dips between my legs, pinching my pulsing clit between his fingers, and my mouth falls open with a silent scream as I fall over the edge. The orgasm crashes over me, spreading through my limbs with an intensity of an electrical current. A low buzz fills my ears and a light

sheen of sweat coats my skin.

His cock jerks inside me and he stills, dropping his head to the middle of my back, groaning against my skin. My legs are on fire as I work to catch my breath. After a moment, his lips press to my shoulder before he pulls out and the cold air hits my exposed parts.

I hear the rustling of clothing behind me. “You can use the bathroom to clean up,” he says, his voice farther away. “Thank you for a memorable night, angel.”

\* \* \*

My body is still humminglike a live wire when Heather parks my car at the curb. Butterflies tickle my lower belly as I pull a strand of hair under my nose and inhale the woodsy scent the mystery man left behind. The whole way home, all I could think about was him: his hands, his fingers, his mouth, his lips, his tongue, his teeth, the softness of his hair, the smoothness of his skin, the ripples of his muscles, and the feeling of his perfect cock sliding into me.

## Page 23

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Sex never felt like that with Victor. Probably because he was too focused on trying not to strangle me.

Psycho.

I follow her on shaky legs through the courtyard, into the elevator, down the hall, and into her apartment.

Heather kicks off her heels, then walks into the kitchen while I head for the sofa.

“You okay?” she asks.

I lift my head and see the concern etched on her face as she passes me a bottled water.

“I’m still processing.” I blink a few times as I sort through my thoughts and feelings. “It’s never felt like this before.”

Heather snorts, curling up on the opposite end of the sofa, facing me. “It’s the endorphins.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I mean, yeah, but I’ve never felt like this after sex. Not even after my first time with Victor.” I turn to face her. “I’ve never felt so... desired? No.” I wave a hand. “Cherished. The way he touched me... I felt like I belonged to him, but not in a controlling way.”

His touch was nothing like Victor’s.

“It’s fantasy,” she reminds me.

“I know, but—” I bite down on my lip. It’s a hell of a lot better than reality.

ELEVEN

MAKAYLA

The distinct sound of a key sliding into the deadbolt has my eyes darting to the top corner of my computer. How is it five thirty already?

The front door opens and Heather walks in dressed in her business attire, carrying a long thin black box. “Honey, I’m home,” she calls out, closing the door behind her.

Placing the box on the table, she kicks off her shoes and heads straight to the kitchen.

“I need wine,” she calls out. “Want some?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Please.” I never thought I’d like wine, but Heather introduced me to one that’s sparkling and sweet. It’s cheap and delicious and tastes a lot like champagne. I close my laptop and set it on the coffee table. “What’s in the box?”

“Don’t know. It’s for you.”

Hmm. Standing from the sofa, I walk over to the table and lift the lid. Inside is a long-stemmed blue rose.

Heather walks out of the kitchen carrying two glasses and passes one to me. “That’s interesting. Who’s it from?”

I lift a shoulder. “No clue. There’s no card.”

Her brows pinch. “Weird.” Setting her glass down, she digs her phone out of her purse and begins typing. “They mean something. Oh. The blue rose represents mystery, or unattainable. Hmm. I think someone has a secret admirer,” she teases.

I bristle. “Or a stalker.”

I take the box to the kitchen and put the rose in water. Then head back to the living room.

Heather is curled up on the sofa sipping her wine. I grab mine from the table and take a seat at the opposite end. “So how was your first day at work?”

“Not bad, just long,” she replies. “So how’s the job hunt going?”

“I sent out five résumés today. I have a Zoom interview on Wednesday and another on Friday. Oh, and I also got a call from the furniture delivery people. They’ll be here Saturday.”

“Sounds like you had a productive day.” She grins.

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I lift a shoulder. Job hunting is harder than I thought. “How do you like working with your brother?” I ask, stretching out my legs and propping my feet on the edge of the coffee table.

“Honestly, it’s a lot, but he’s a good teacher.”

“I hope I’ll get to meet him one of these days.”

“Actually....” She brings the glass to her lips and takes a sip. “I mentioned to him that you were looking for a job.”

My eyes bug out. “Seriously?”

She gives a careless shrug. “It wouldn’t hurt to send in your résumé.”

Dropping my feet to the floor, I lean forward to set my glass on the table, then shift on the sofa to face her. “Heather, you’ve already done so much for me. I feel like a mooch.”

She frowns. “How?”

“I don’t know. Maybe mooch isn’t the right word.” I avert my gaze. “I don’t want to be one of those high maintenance friends that eventually you get sick of.”

She tosses a throw pillow at me. “Stop it, Makayla. You’ve never asked me for anything.”

I hug the pillow to my chest. “True, but somehow I feel like you’re always saving me. If you hadn’t come up to me that day after graduation, I’d probably be living in Sarasota with my parents, driving a beverage cart around the golf course.”

“It’s called being a good friend.”

I smile sadly. “Something I’ve never had before,” I remind her.

Last night, over Chinese takeout, I filled her in on my high school hardships. It’s not easy talking about the things I endured from my so-called friends.

Heather’s expression hardens. “I want the names of every bitch who did you dirty in high school.”

“Are you gonna go beat up my bullies?” I ask with a laugh.

“Maybe,” she lilts.

My phone vibrates on the coffee table with an unfamiliar number. Normally, I would let it go to voicemail, but since I just sent out a bunch of résumés, I tap the Answer icon and bring the phone to my ear.

“This is Makayla.”

“Makayla,” a familiar feminine voice purrs, and my stomach flips. “This is Desiree.”

“Hello, Desiree.” My eyes cut to Heather, and I mouth, “Oh my God.”

“I was calling to check on you,” she says. “Did you enjoy yourself the other night?”

“Um....” I clear my throat. “Yes, I did.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She pauses. “I have a member who seems quite taken with you. You didn’t give him a name. He called you ‘Angel,’ and it took me a minute to figure it out.” She laughs.

“Oh.” I snort. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You didn’t break any rules. It’s part of the fantasy, right?”

I suck in a breath. He told her my fantasy?

“Anyway,” she continues, “he wants you for one month. Before you answer, he has one condition. You must wear a blindfold. Do you accept?”

I count to three in my head so I don’t sound too eager, then reply with a simple “Yes.”

“Wonderful. I have your email address, so I’ll send over the paperwork to start the application process and the contract. Once everything is complete, I’ll have your access card delivered. Any questions?”

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“What do I call him?”

“He’s requested that you call him ‘X.’”

“X,” I repeat. Mysterious. I like it. “Thank you, Desiree.”

“My pleasure. Talk soon.”

The call disconnects, and I toss my phone on the table before picking up my wineglass. I take a hefty sip, then tell Heather, “My mystery man has invited me to Veil.”

“Sounds like you weren’t the only one left reeling.” She smirks behind her wineglass. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Makayla.”

What I always do.

I’m diving into the deep end.

TWELVE

MAKAYLA

“Knock, knock,” Heather calls as she walks through the front door, carrying a large gift basket wrapped in cellophane.

“What is that?”

“Housewarming gift.” She grins as she sets it on the breakfast bar.

“You didn’t have to do that.” I gesture wildly. “This apartment is more than enough.”

I spent the early part of the day getting settled into my new place. I’ve never lived alone, and I’m excited about having my own space.

“We’ve been over this.” She waves me off. “You needed a place to live, and I needed a tenant. We both needed a friend. It couldn’t have worked out more perfectly for either of us.”

“Speaking of tenants....” I grin. “Who’s the hottie who just moved in downstairs?”

She blushes. “His name is Jesse Carver. He’s a firefighter and a part-time tattoo artist at Inkubus over in The Village.”

“And did Jesse get one of these fabulous housewarming gifts?” I tease, fighting back a smile.

“Shut up and open your gift.”

Grabbing the scissors from the drawer, I cut the top of the cellophane and rip it away. Inside the basket is a bottle of champagne with two flutes, all six seasons of Sex and the City on DVD, and a card.

“I wasn’t sure if you could use those, because who watches DVDs anymore?”

“I do,” I admit with a snicker as I peel open the envelope and slip out the card.

In a world full of Charlottes, be a Samantha. ~ Heather

“Aww, Heather.” I wrap her in a hug. “You’ve been such a good friend to me. Thank you for everything.”

She purses her lips and says, “You know I love you, girl.” She plucks the bottle of champagne from the basket. “We need to get this nice and chilled so we can celebrate later,” she adds as she sets the bottle in the refrigerator.

“Oh? What are we celebrating?”

Reaching behind her, she pulls out a FedEx envelope. “I bumped into the delivery guy outside.”

Taking the envelope from her, I tear it open and pull out a shiny black envelope not much bigger than the one holding the card in the basket. Lifting the flap, I find a black plastic card with “Veil” written in red in the center and a small note with next Friday’s date.

Shortly after I spoke with Desiree, I got an email. The application process consisted of a background check, plus a drug, STD, and pregnancy test. There was also a contract that included a checklist of sexual acts I was comfortable with. A hot flush spread over my chest, neck, and cheeks as I read through the list, and by the time I finished, my whole body was on fire.

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“Wow, that was fast.” I slap the card to my chest and grin. “What does this mean?”

“It means you have a date with your mystery man next Friday.”

I squeal in excitement and do a little happy dance. “You’re coming with me, right?”

Her lips pull to the side. “Actually, I have a date.”

I gasp, smiling. “With who?”

“The hot neighbor.” She winks. “Now, call Desiree. Her number is on the back of the card.”

“Let me do that now.” I scan the counter, looking for my phone. “And then you’re gonna tell me about this date.”

\* \* \*

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Caldwell,” I say with a smile plastered on my face.

“It was a pleasure, Makayla. We’ll be in touch.”

The screen goes blank, and I close my laptop on my last interview of the week. I rub the tension from my neck and pick up my phone to check the time. It’s only 10:00 a.m., which gives me a full day to clean my apartment and run some errands.

Tonight, I have a reservation at Veil with my mystery man. It’s been two long,

agonizing weeks since that first night. A shiver of excitement runs through me just thinking about his touch.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and a call from an unknown local number flashes on the screen.

“This is Makayla,” I say in lieu of a hello.

“Good afternoon, Makayla. My name is Jane, and I’m calling from Davis Corporation. We received your résumé and would like to proceed with an interview. Are you available to come in on Monday?”

I grin. “Yes, ma’am. What time?”

“Will 9:00 a.m. work for you?”

I nod even though she can’t see me. “That’s perfect.”

“Great.”

She rattles off the address, and we wrap up the call. I have no doubt Heather pulled some strings to get me this interview, and after the shitty ones I’ve had over the last two weeks, I realize getting a job right out of college is all about who you know.

I call to check in with my parents, then spend the next two hours cleaning my apartment, before driving over to The Village for my mani-pedi appointment. Afterward, I grab a smoothie before heading home.

I park in my usual spot at the curb, gather my things from the passenger seat, and climb out. As I make my way through the courtyard, I cross paths with the new tenant, Jesse.

I extend my hand. “Hi, I’m Makayla.”

Keeping his eyes on mine, he takes my offered hand and rewards me with a heart-stopping smile. “Jesse. Nice to meet you.”

There’s no denying the man is fine. He doesn’t look much older than me. Strands of blond hair peek out from under a baseball cap that says “MPFD.” His eyes are light blue, and both arms are decorated with colorful tattoos. He seems nice, and I appreciate that he doesn’t make a show of checking me out, especially when he has a date with my best friend.

“You too. Are you on your way out?”

He shoves his hands in the front pockets of his shorts. “I am.”

I smile and edge toward the door. “Well, I won’t keep you. Just wanted to introduce myself. If you ever need anything”—I point to my apartment—“I’m right up there.”

“I appreciate that. Same goes for you.” He gestures to the unit directly below Heather’s. “See you around.”

THIRTEEN

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

MAKAYLA

“I can’t believe you’re ditching me for the hot neighbor,” I call from inside the closet.

“It’s the tattoos,” Heather deadpans, and I smile to myself.

“Why can’t you just invite him to come with us?”

“It’s our first date, Makayla,” she replies. “I don’t want to scare him off before I get to sample that di—”

Her words are cut off by a buzz from the main door downstairs.

Brows pinched, I move to the doorway of the closet as she rolls from my bed and stands. “I’ll get it.” She points to my simple red slip dress. “I like that one,” she adds as she hurries from the room.

A few minutes later, she returns carrying a shiny black box wrapped with a red satin ribbon. “Special delivery,” she singsongs as she sets the box on the bed.

“What is it?”

Heather shrugs, stepping back and tucking her hands into the back pockets of her shorts. “I have no idea. Whoever delivered it left it outside the main door.”

I frown, staring at the box. “That’s weird.” I flick my gaze to her. “Do you think it’s safe to open?”

She raises her brows. “Do you want me to do it?”

“No.” I wave her off and move to the bed. “You haven’t known me long enough to risk your life for me,” I joke.

Heather snorts. “Open the damn box, Makayla.”

Carefully, I remove the satin ribbon over the box and toss it on the bed before lifting the lid. A shiny black envelope—exactly like the one containing the Veil card—sits on top of red tissue paper. Picking up the envelope, I tear it open and pull out a card.

\* \* \*

Wear this for me tonight. ~ X

“Who’s it from?” she asks.

“X.” I pass her the card, then pull back the tissue paper to find three articles of clothing.

“Ah. Your mystery man.”

“With very expensive taste.” I grin, holding up the black bandeau bra and matching thong.

“Damn.” She uses the card to fan her face dramatically.

I laugh at her theatrics as I lift a see-through black lace bodice dress. I turn to her with my brows raised, and she grins, nodding her approval.

“That is hot.” She nudges me toward the closet. “Go change.”

“Wait.” I pause at the door and turn back around to face her. “Is this normal?” I gesture to the dress.

She drops down on the edge of the bed and leans back on her hands. “I don’t know about normal, but I’m sure it’s not the first time.”

I twist my lips to the side. “Hmm.”

“Hurry up.” She waves a hand toward my closet. “You don’t want to keep him waiting.”

\* \* \*

I pullup to the gate at exactly 8:45 p.m. and roll down my window. Grabbing my clutch from the passenger seat, I fish the card out before leaning through the open window. I swipe the card beside the keypad, and a moment later, there’s a buzz, and the gates slowly swing open.

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I roll up my window and ease through the gate. I'd been so lost in my own thoughts over "X" that I hadn't bothered to notice how different everything looks at night. It's so dark that I can hardly make out the trees. The only illumination is the landscape lighting lining the driveway.

My stomach knots with nervous anticipation.

Light fills the car as the mansion comes into view. "I can't believe I'm actually doing this," I whisper to no one.

I pull into the circular driveway, and a valet moves to open my door.

Climbing out, I tuck my clutch under my arm and brush my shaky hands down the front of my dress. I suck in a deep breath, push my shoulders back, and walk into Veil.

Just inside the door, a woman stands behind a black podium. Her long black hair is pulled back into a high ponytail. Her full lips are painted a deep shade of red.

She greets me with a polite "Good evening."

"Good evening," I reply as I approach. "Makayla Hawkins."

Her gaze drops to the iPad in front of her, and I can't help but stare at her halter top made of pearls. The multiple strands swoop across her naked chest. It's probably the sexiest top I've ever seen. It's paired with a high-waisted, leather pencil skirt and sky-high stilettos that wrap around her calves.

“Ah. You’re here for X.” Bending at the waist, she retrieves a black tag holding a key and passes it to me with a knowing look. “X would like you to be in the room and ready by 9:30 p.m. You’ll find everything you need in your room. Until then”—she gestures toward the bar—“have a drink. You look tense.” She gives me a playful wink.

I let out a soft laugh and thank her before heading inside the club.

A woman with short dark hair, slicked back from her face, and full lips painted a deep red greets me with a smile as I slide onto an empty barstool. “Hey, gorgeous. What can I get you to drink?” she asks, placing a black cocktail napkin in front of me. “Veil” is printed in red across the middle.

“A vodka martini, dirty, please.”

With a nod, she spins around and pulls an expensive-looking bottle from the shelf. My gaze lifts to the large metal cage on the platform. I recognize the woman from last time, Ruby, inside as she grinds to a remake of “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” A red leather body harness is fastened around her waist with a pair of angel wings fixed to the back.

“Here you go,” the bartender says as she sets the martini glass on top of the cocktail napkin. I reach into my clutch for some cash, but she stops me by adding, “Drinks and tips are covered.”

“Oh.” I set my clutch on the bar. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure.” She nods once more before she moves down the bar to another waiting member. Turning on the barstool, I sip my martini and watch the couples on the dance floor.

“Good evening, Makayla,” Desiree’s sultry voice greets me before she appears at my side. She sweeps her gaze over my outfit as she slides onto the empty stool beside me. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you.” I start to tell her it was a gift from X, but we never discussed the rules on gifts, so I keep it to myself. I don’t want to get the man in trouble.

“How are you feeling about tonight?” she asks as the bartender places a champagne flute in front of her.

“I’m a little nervous,” I admit before taking a big sip of my drink.

“I promise you’re in safe and very capable hands.” Her smile is warm and reassuring. “X will take excellent care of you.”

No doubt he will. A shiver of excitement runs through me.

“Since this is technically your first time, I’ll escort you to your room and answer any questions before X arrives.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Are you ready?”

I down the rest of my drink, setting the glass on the bar before sliding off the stool and righting my dress. “I’m ready.”

My cheeks warm, and it’s not from the alcohol.

Desiree leads the way upstairs and pauses outside the same room I’d been in with X the last time. I look over at her, and she gestures to my clutch. “Do you have your

key?”

“Oh.” Reaching into my clutch, I fish out the key and shove into the lock. I twist the handle and walk inside. Desiree follows, closing the door behind her.

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“You can put your purse there.” She points to a console table against the wall, flanked by two black leather club chairs. I have to blink twice when I see a slim vase in the middle of the table, a single blue rose tucked inside. “And you can hang your dress here.” She gestures to the hanger on the back of the door. “Unless you’d prefer to keep it on.”

I move over to the table to set my clutch down along with the key before turning to take in the room.

“Makayla, if you’re not—”

I turn to face her. “I’m fine. I promise. It’s just different from last time,” I admit.

“Because it wasn’t planned,” she states.

“Exactly.” I release a shaky breath. “I was caught up in the moment. I didn’t have much time to think about it.”

Desiree nods once. “I understand. Do you need a minute?” She gestures to my dress.

“Oh, um... no.” My brows pinch. “Are you staying while I undress?”

“Unless you don’t need me to help you with the blindfold. But you should know there’s no such thing as modesty within these walls.” She laughs softly, putting me at ease.

Fuck it.

Kicking off my heels, I slip out of my dress, passing it to Desiree before removing my bra, tossing it on the table beside my clutch.

I walk over to the large bed and perch on the edge of the mattress as she reaches into the top drawer of the nightstand and pulls out a red silk sash.

“It’s new.” She smirks and gestures for me to turn my head.

Once the blindfold is secure, Desiree helps me lie back on the bed. “Are you comfortable?” she asks.

“I am,” I assure her. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.” I can hear the smile in her voice. “I meant what I said earlier. He’ll take good care of you.” The sound of her heels clicking against the wood floor tells me she’s heading toward the door. “Have a good evening, Makayla.”

## FOURTEEN

### X

The door at my back opens, and Desiree steps inside the private room where I stand behind the large two-way mirror facing the bed. The space—which is no bigger than a walk-in closet—was designed for those who like to watch.

“For a second there, I thought she was going to back out,” she whispers.

“You know,” I start, keeping my eyes trained on Makayla, “I could’ve sworn I left a blindfold for her on the table.”

Desiree moves forward to stand at my side, arms crossed over her chest. “I wanted to

see what all the fuss was about.”

I look over at her, brows raised. “And?”

She shrugs. “She’s got nice tits.”

Shaking my head, I return my attention to the young woman stretched out on the bed, wearing nothing but the blindfold and a scrap of material that barely covers her pussy.

Her body is long and lean, her tanned skin firm and smooth. Her tits are round and perky, proportionate to her slender frame.

“I’m a little infatuated.”

Desiree bristles. “You’re obsessed.”

I hum thoughtfully. That I am.

She exhales an exasperated sigh. “Have a good night, X.”

FIFTEEN

MAKAYLA

The silky material is secured tightly around my eyes, but I feel the shift in the air the moment he enters the room. I listen to the light tapping of his shoes against the wood floor echoing as his footsteps bring him closer. I breathe in his woodsy scent as goose bumps prick my skin, feeling his eyes on me.

“Good evening, Makayla.”

His voice is just above a whisper, soft but deep, and smooth like honey. My core tightens with anticipation, and I already want him inside me.

Jesus, Makayla, calm down. It’s been thirty seconds.

“Um... hi.” I exhale a shaky breath. “Sorry. I’m nervous.”

A few seconds of silence stretch between us before he murmurs, “Me too.”

Once again, I hear the sound of his footsteps as he moves to the other side of the room. I hear the rustling of fabric, followed by the clink of metal touching metal, and I try to imagine what he looks like as he strips off his clothes and hangs them up.

A moment later, I feel him standing over me. “I’ve been looking forward to this since you signed the contract,” he confesses. “Have you been a good girl for me?”

Inhaling a deep, cleansing breath, I force myself to relax and tell him, “Yes.”

I squeeze my thighs together to curb the ache, and my breath catches in my throat when I feel the gentlest touch of a fingertip trail across my collarbone and down my chest.

“I love seeing your beautiful body in the light,” he whispers huskily.

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I say what I would to any compliment. “Thank you.”

“Remember, if I do anything that makes you uncomfortable, just tell me to stop.”

“Don’t stop.”

I hear him chuckle under his breath, and that makes me smile.

My heart pounds harder when the bed dips and I feel the heat from his body as he hovers over me. A moment later, his soft lips press against the pulse in my neck. He kisses his way down my chest before sucking a nipple into his warm mouth, and a breathy moan slips past my lips. Instinctively my hands fly to his hair, sliding through the silky strands, my nails scraping over his scalp as his tongue flutters over the sensitive peak while pinching the other between his fingers.

My body writhes beneath him as he moves to the other breast, licking and sucking before dragging his lips down my stomach, pausing to kiss me over the top of my panties.

“May I remove these?” he asks softly, his breath fanning over my skin.

“Yes, please.”

I feel him sit back and settle between my parted thighs before hooking his fingers into the sides of my panties. He slowly guides them down my legs, and I bend my knees as they pass over my feet.

He shifts once again, sliding his hands under my thighs, cupping my ass and tilting my pelvis. His warm breath brushes over my pussy before I feel the first swipe of his tongue.

My hips buck, and I cry out, reaching back with both hands to grip the pillow when he sucks my clit into his mouth.

Pulling one hand from under my ass, he pushes a finger inside me, curling it at just the right angle, and my inner walls clamp down on him greedily. He pushes a second finger inside me and pumps them in and out at a faster pace. My hips buck as I fuck his fingers while he continues to lick and suck my clit. The pressure builds and my orgasm hits me hard and fast. My loud cry bounces off the walls, as I clutch the pillow tightly. “Good girl,” he whispers, placing a kiss on the inside of my thigh. “So beautiful.”

“My turn,” I pant.

“Not yet.”

He moves up my body, slowly, brushing his lips over my heated skin. His tongue dips into my navel, then trails up to the space between my breasts. His warm mouth covers my right nipple while he pinches the left between his fingers. He moves again, the mattress dipping on either side of my shoulders, and I imagine him hovering over me as he gathers my hands, pinning them above my head.

I feel the spongy tip of his cock brush over my lips. “Open.”

I lick my lips before parting them. His cock dips into my mouth with a shallow thrust, the soft velvety skin sliding over my tongue. A moan vibrates in my throat as I close my lips around him, tasting the saltiness of his arousal. A groan of pleasure rumbles from above me as he sinks deeper, hitting the back of my throat. He pulls back slightly, then slowly fucks my mouth.

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“Enough,” he grunts before pulling out.

Once again the bed shifts, and a moment later, I hear the sliding of a drawer next to the bed, followed by the distinct sound of a condom wrapper, and then he's back between my legs. I feel the tip of his cock teasing my entrance. I grip his shoulders as my body tenses, and I hold my breath when he surges forward, sliding into me and filling me in the most painfully delicious way.

My back arches, sinking my head deeper into the soft pillow, as a long, pleased-filled moan pours from my lips.

Lips pressed against my throat, he whispers, “You feel even better than I remember.”

The warmth of his breath brushes over my nipple before his lips close around it and he swirls his tongue over the tight bud.

“Kiss me,” I pant.

Then his lips are on mine as he rocks into me with deep, steady strokes. He slides his hand down my thigh, bringing my leg around his hip as he picks up his pace and drives into me harder, sinking deeper, stroking that magical spot.

God, he feels perfect.

My heart is pounding, and my body trembles as the pressure builds. Rolling his hips, X grinds against my clit, and a shudder rolls through him, sending us both over the edge. I tear my mouth from his and scream as a pulse of white-hot pleasure races

down my spine and through my limbs, making my toes curl.

Panting and sweaty, we lie there for a moment before X presses his mouth to mine in a chaste kiss.

How is it possible to feel so connected to a man I've never seen?

\* \* \*

It's after midnight when I park my car at the curb.

Grabbing my clutch from the passenger seat, I pull out my phone and call Heather.

"Hey," she murmurs.

"Hey. Did I wake you?"

"No. I'm just watching TV."

"I'm here. Will you stay on the phone with me until I get inside?"

"I'll meet you at the door instead."

"Thanks." Ending the call, I slip my phone back into my clutch, then quickly scan my surroundings before climbing out of my car. Magnolia Park is a safe area, but I'm always creeped out when I have to stand on a dimly lit sidewalk to unlock the gate.

Heather is holding the door open as I hurry across the courtyard.

It is well lit, but there are still dark areas behind the trees. Although, someone would have to climb the gate or scale the wall to get inside.

“How was your night?” she asks once I’m inside.

“It was....” I shake my head because I have no words.

I follow her into the elevator and sag against the opposite panel.

“That good, huh?” She flashes me a knowing grin.

I let out a deep sigh, a dopey smile on my face.

The doors slide open, and I follow her out into the hall. “How was your date with the hot neighbor?”

“I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow over coffee,” she says as she heads to her apartment.

“Sounds good,” I agree as I turn toward mine.

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Stepping inside, I let out a sigh as I lean against the door. I could easily become addicted to this feeling.

And X.

SIXTEEN

MAKAYLA

“So,” Heather prompts, “how was last night?”

I hold back a smile as we cross the road, then look down at my smart watch. “Five minutes. I’m impressed,” I tease.

She showed up at my door bright and early this morning dressed in workout clothes, her hair twisted into a messy bun. I laughed at her tank top with the phrase “People... not a fan” printed on the front before she told me to get dressed. Then she suggested we walk the couple blocks to The Village and grab a coffee.

“Hey, I’m not asking for details. If you don’t want to talk about it—”

“No, I do. I just don’t even know where to start.”

“Start at the beginning.”

So I do. I tell her everything from the interesting pearl top the guide had been wearing up to when Desiree escorted me to the room. “That was awkward.”

Heather waves me off. “She probably just wanted to make you comfortable for your first time.”

“Yeah.” I sigh.

I can’t help but wonder if Victor is or was ever a member. Who knows? Maybe Veil is too tame for what he needs. I shudder at the thought.

Up ahead, a woman pushing a jogging stroller is coming toward us.

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

“Do you think Victor has ever been there?”

Heather makes a humming sound as if she wouldn’t be surprised if he was.

“Oh my God.” I look over at her with wide eyes. “What if he’s a member?” I snort, stepping to the side to allow the woman to pass. She lifts her hand, giving a quick wave, and I return the gesture with a smile. “What if I run into him?”

She looks over at me with a look that says duh. “You pretend he doesn’t exist.”

I lift a shoulder as we approach the coffee shop. “As far as I’m concerned, he doesn’t.”

\* \* \*

“Makayla,” the barista calls as she sets my order on the counter.

“Thank you.”

“Makayla?” a male voice says behind me.

I jerk my gaze over my shoulder to find Spencer, the guy I dated last year, standing in line.

Grabbing the two lattes, I turn away from the counter and face him. “Spencer,” I greet, trying my best to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “You’re alive,” I add with a hint of sarcasm.

I don’t have any lingering feelings for him. In fact, when he stopped calling, I was worried more than I was hurt.

He gives me a tight smile, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Sorry I never called.”

I just stare at him, waiting for an excuse to follow, but I don’t get one.

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“Spencer,” the barista says.

Spencer reaches around me, grabbing two cups off the counter. He nods, raising one in what I guess is a mock salute. “Good to see you.”

My brows pinch in annoyance. “Uh, yeah... you too.”

Stepping around him, I make my way over to the table in the corner where Heather is waiting.

I set our coffees on the table and take a seat across from her.

“Who was the hottie?” she asks, bringing the cup to her lips.

“Spencer.”

She raises her brows. “The guy who ghosted you?”

“Yeah.” I make a sour face as I reach for my cup. “That was super awkward.”

“What did he say?”

“Sorry I never called,” I mock, rolling my eyes, and she laughs.

“How was your date last night?” I ask, propping an elbow on the table and tucking my fist under my chin.

Heather smiles, eyes bright. “It was perfect. We went to that little Italian restaurant, Antonio’s. There was a quartet set up in front of the fountain, so we sat outside on the patio and watched the show.”

“That sounds nice.” I pick up my coffee and take a sip.

“It was really nice. Jesse is....”

“Nice?” I grin.

“Yes.” She snickers. “You were right.”

“About?”

“I’m not broken.” She turns her head to stare out the large window overlooking the sidewalk, but I don’t miss the somber expression on her face. “Or maybe I am. I shouldn’t like him this much after one date.”

“Don’t do that,” I chide softly.

She turns her face to me, brows pinched. “What?”

Crossing my forearms on the edge of the table, I lean forward. “Don’t downplay your feelings. You’re afraid.”

“Terrified,” she admits, sinking back in her chair. “I feel too much already. I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Heather.” I reach across the table and cover her hand with mine. “You can’t push him away because you’re afraid of getting hurt. I know it’s hard to let people in, but you have me now, and if anyone hurts you, I’ll kick their ass.” I grin, prompting her

to laugh. “Is he worth the trouble?” I ask.

“Ugh.” She drops her head back. “Yes.”

“Good,” I chirp.

Pushing back from the table, I get to my feet and grab my coffee. “Let’s head back. I have some adulting to do before my interview tomorrow.”

On the way back, Heather gives me a mock interview, drilling me with ridiculous questions that I’m certain will not be asked. By the time we walk through the gate, we’re both laughing.

A black box is leaning against the outside door. “What’s that?” she asks as she picks up her pace. “Is that another flower delivery?”

Just like the one before, the box is long and slim. Inside is a blue rose.

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“Okay, this is getting creepy,” she says, opening the door.

I shake my head as I follow her inside. “I’m pretty sure it’s from X,” I tell her. “There was a rose in the room last night.”

“I was right. You do have a secret admirer,” she teases.

I snort a laugh. “He could still be a stalker.”

SEVENTEEN

X

Leaning in the doorway of Desiree’s office, I watch as she stares vacantly out the window.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Without looking at me, she says, “I ended things with Victor.”

Thank fuck. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I cross the room until I’m standing beside her. “Did something happen?”

She heaves a sigh and turns away from the window. I suck in a sharp breath when I notice the small cut on her bottom lip. “He plays a little too rough,” she admits, taking a seat on the sofa. “I don’t trust him.”

My jaw clenches. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Do I need to call and remind him of our agreement?”

“I already did.” She waves me off. “He’s in London for a few weeks so he won’t be a bother.” Releasing another sigh, she averts her gaze back to the window. It’s clear there’s something else on her mind.

“What is it?”

Her teary gaze returns to me. “Was there—” She clears her throat. “Did you ever think about marriage when we were together?”

My brows shoot up to my hairline. What the hell? “Are you asking me if I ever wanted to marry you?”

She shrugs. “We were together for seven years.”

I sit down on the coffee table in front of her, propping my forearms on the tops of my thighs, and lean in. “Where is this coming from, Des? Is it your biological clock?” I joke.

She exhales a puff of air through her nose. “I’m serious. You’re the only man who treated me right, and I’m just wondering where it all fell apart.”

“When relationships fall apart, it’s rare that the parties remain friends, much less business partners. Our relationship didn’t fall apart. It grew stronger. When my father died, my life changed. My priorities changed. My feelings changed.”

When someone close to us dies, it forces us to reevaluate our lives. Desiree was the woman I loved for seven years of my life. She was a good partner and my biggest cheerleader. But she lives in a fantasy world. One that I created, and she continues to rule. She was in no way ready to give up the fantasy life for a domesticated one. In hindsight, I believe Veil was always meant to be hers.

“You’re my best friend and not having you in my life was never an option. I’ve always respected you. I never stopped loving you. I trust you more than anyone. The rule I put in place about not getting involved with a member was for your benefit. You deserve more than to be someone’s weekend getaway fling. You deserve a life outside of this place. You deserve to be loved and worshiped.”

Desiree sniffs as she wipes the tears from her cheeks. “I thought Gio was the man to give me all those things. How could I be so stupid?”

“You’re not. Gio is a good man, and he cares about you. I’m not excusing his behavior because I will never agree with cheating, but in his world, it’s just the way things are. It’s how he was raised.”

“He’s been calling me nonstop, but I don’t know what to say. I’ll never be okay with him sleeping with other women.”

“Maybe you should answer and hear him out. But unless he’s willing to change his ways and commit to you, then I suggest you move on.”

“Yeah.” She nods in agreement. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” Pushing to my feet, I lean over and kiss her cheek before heading toward the door.

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“For the record,” she calls, “I never stopped loving you either. You are and will always be my best friend.”

\* \* \*

She’s a vision lying naked on her back in the middle of the bed, arms at her sides, knees bent. A black silk blindfold covers her eyes, and her long blonde hair is fanned out around her face.

Slipping inside the room, I stop at the end of the bed and take her in. My angel. I’m completely obsessed with this woman.

“X?” she whispers with a hint of uncertainty.

“I’m here, angel.”

Stripping out of my clothes, I toss them on the bench at the end of the bed before moving around to the side to climb in, stretching out beside her.

“Have you been a good girl this week?” I ask as I lower my mouth to her breast, swirling my tongue over her nipple.

“Yes,” she moans.

My hand dips between her legs, running a finger over her slick center, stroking her clit before dipping into her warmth.

A groan of approval rumbles in my chest. “You’re always so wet for me,” I murmur as I move my mouth to her other breast. Pulling my fingers and mouth from her body, I shift on the bed, putting my back against the headboard. “Come here.”

She rolls to her stomach, then pushes up on her hands and knees. Reaching for her hand, I guide her until she’s straddling my hips.

“I need you, angel,” I say.

Goose bumps pebble over her skin as I run my hands up her bare thighs, over her hips, and up her smooth back. Pulling her body flush to mine, her breasts pressing against my chest, I tilt my head and seal my lips over hers. Her mouth parts, and I dip my tongue inside, sliding along hers. Her mouth always tastes like the one vodka martini she drinks at the bar before heading up to our room.

Makayla rocks her hips, rubbing her slick pussy over my dick, and my eyes roll back. Our kiss turns frantic, desperate, and her hips move faster. Her hard nipples graze my chest, and she whimpers into my mouth as that familiar tingle of electricity builds.

“I don’t want to come like this,” I whisper against her lips. “I need to be inside you. Lift.”

Placing a hand on my shoulder, she raises her hips, and I position my cock at her entrance. I inhale a sharp breath, jaw clenched as I watch my bare cock disappear inside her pussy. She’s clean. I’m clean. There’s a contract, so no discussion is needed. Her other hand moves to my shoulder as she finds her rhythm.

Arching her back, she braces her hands on my thighs, rolling her hips, and hell if she’s not the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

This feels too fucking good. I won’t last.

My hands go to her hips to still her movements. Leaning over, I press an open-mouthed kiss between her breasts, before sucking one of those pretty pink nipples into my mouth.

“Oh God,” she moans.

“Call me X,” I tease.

Her soft laugh makes the muscles in her pussy flutter around me and I groan. As much as I want this to last, the sensation is too much.

Moving my arms around her back, I pull her body flush against mine once more, anchoring her to me. With our foreheads pressed together, mouths parted, I tilt my hips, hitting her deep.

“Ah,” she cries, her nails digging into my back. Her body shudders as she pulses around me. “That’s it, angel. Come on my cock.”

Her mouth falls open as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over us, dragging us both under. Covering her mouth, I kiss her hard, swallowing her moans as I come inside her.

Chest heaving, she falls to the side as we both try to catch our breaths.

After a few beats, she asks, “What’s wrong, X?”

“Hmm?”

“Something’s wrong.”

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Victor is what's wrong. That motherfucker deserves a beat down. What the hell was Desiree thinking?

"What makes you think that?" I reply, keeping my voice low and steady.

She rolls to the side and rests her hand on my stomach. "I heard it in your voice. You said you need me."

I blow out a breath and decide to give her a little pillow talk. Except I'll let her do the talking.. "Rough day."

She drops her head to my chest. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." I curl an arm around her back and press my nose into her hair, inhaling her sweet scent. "Tell me something about you, angel."

"What do you want to know?" Her fingers brush lightly over the hairs on my chest.

"Everything."

I feel her smile against my skin. "That's a lot of information, X. How about I start with the basic stuff?"

A laugh rumbles in my chest. "Okay. What's your favorite color?"

"Purple," she says without hesitation. "Yours?"

“Black. When is your birthday??”

“Black isn’t a color,” she chastises playfully. “Shouldn’t you know my birthday from my background check?”

“Your personal information is confidential.”

“Oh. My birthday is March 18. How old are you?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“Mmm. I like older men.”

I scowl down at her even though she can’t see me, thankful for the opening she just gave me. “Have you dated a lot of older men?”

“No,” she clips. “Just one.”

My jaw clenches. “Tell me about him.”

Her body stiffens for a moment, then relaxes. “I’ve never told anyone this. Not even my best friend.” She sighs, her warm breath brushing over my skin, and my dick stirs. “We met when he came to my class as a guest speaker. He was good-looking and charming. He was perfect. Tooperfect. He was a walking red flag, but I couldn’t see past the hearts in my eyes. He was controlling, manipulative, and most likely a sociopath.”

I force myself to stay calm and keep my breathing even and my voice steady. “Did he hurt you?”

“Yeah, kind of,” she admits.

She tells me how they broke up a few days before graduation and that while he was out of town, she packed her things and moved into a hotel. Which confirms what Victor already told me.

Then she tells me how he showed up unexpectedly at her graduation and played nice in front of her parents. My blood is boiling when she tells me what he did and said before leaving her in his penthouse.

Guilt spreads through my chest knowing I was the one who provoked him and he took it out on her.

He was angry I was taking away one of his favorite toys, so he tried to break it.

I'm going to kick his ass.

"How did you get away from him?"

"Oddly enough, he just... left. He said something about not having a choice but to let me go. Thank God for that." She heaves a breath. "So tell me, X, are you a coffee drinker?"

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We spend the next hour talking about everything and nothing, and I imagine doing this with her everyday. Makayla naked in my bed, curled up beside me, telling me all about her day until she falls asleep.

Two more weeks.

Then she's mine.

EIGHTEEN

MAKAYLA

"What are the chances?" a familiar male voice says.

I look over my shoulder to see Spencer standing behind me. He's wearing a button-down dress shirt, dress pants, and a smirk.

He's still cute.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Here you go, Makayla!" the barista says as she sets my latte on the counter.

"Thank you." I smile, grabbing my cup and turning my attention back to Spencer.

"I work in this building," he replies.

“Me too. Contracts on the fifteenth floor. You?”

An hour after my interview with Davis Corporation, I received a call from Human Resources with an offer, including a generous signing bonus. I started last Monday, after a routine background check and drug screen.

“I work for the other Davis. Architect, eighth floor.”

I raise my brows. “I didn’t realize there were two different companies.” Heather only mentioned having one brother. “Are they related?”

“Cousins.”

“Oh.”

His eyes flick over my face as he considers his next words. “Hey, I’m sorry if I acted like a dick last time. I told myself if I ever got the chance to apologize for the way I ended things—”

“You mean when you ghosted me,” I interject, arching a brow.

Shoving his hands in his pocket, he gives me a tight smile. “You caught me off guard, so I just blurted out a half-assed apology. It was awkward.”

“Yeah, it was,” I admit as I take a sip of my coffee.

“So, do you live in Magnolia Park?”

“I do. You?”

“I do.” He nods. “I’m living in my sister’s guest house at the moment. Rent is cheap,

and it's bigger than most of the apartments in Magnolia Park. Maybe we can meet at the coffee place in The Village sometime and catch up," he suggests. "My treat."

"Sure. I'd like that." I smile.

He pulls out his cell, and I rattle off my number. I dart my gaze over his shoulder to see Heather walking into the lobby and heading for the elevators. "Gotta go. We'll catch up soon."

"Hey, girl," I say, falling in step beside Heather.

"Hey," she chirps. "Was that Spencer?"

"Yep." I snicker and blow into the small hole of my coffee lid. "He's an architect on the eighth floor. I didn't know there were two different Davises in this building."

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She nods. “Yeah. Ryan is our cousin. He and Cannon own this building together. Ryan remodeled my apartment building. He’s also the one responsible for the gazillion-dollar mansions you see tucked behind those big, tall gates, and those lofts downtown near the port.”

“I love those.”

“Me too.” She presses the call button for the elevator, then glances over her shoulder. “So what did Spencer have to say?”

I turn to face her. “Not much, really. He apologized for being a dick and wants to catch up over coffee.”

“Like a coffee date?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” I take another sip of my coffee. “I missed you this weekend. Did you have fun on your getaway with Jesse?”

Her cheeks flush, and she grins. “I did.”

“Oh my God, Heather, you’re blushing.” I laugh.

“Shut up. I am not.” The elevator slides open. “Did you have a good weekend?” she asks.

“Of course I did.” I wiggle my brows as we step inside. “I went shopping in The Village yesterday and got myself some new heels.” I lift my foot.

“Oh, you think you're fancy now?” she jokes, pressing the numbers for our floors.

The sound of heels clicking against the marble floors in hurried steps drags my attention to a blur of hot pink and flailing limbs. “Incoming,” I warn under my breath as I reach out to hold the door.

Tara, the office gossip queen, dashes inside while gasping for air. “Phew. Thanks for holding it,” she says. “This thing takes forever to make its way back down.”

Just as the doors start to slide closed, a hand slips between them, causing the doors to jerk back open. I gasp as the most delicious man I’ve ever laid eyes on steps inside. His presence is overwhelming in this small space.

“Good morning,” he mumbles, and I almost swallow my tongue when our eyes lock.

Fucking hell. He’s beautiful.

His brown hair is short on the sides and longer on top. His eyes are the color of dark chocolate, and a dark scruff lines his jaw. His suit is expensive and looks like it was made just for him. Probably was.

The intensity of his stare is powerful and magnetic, sucking the air from my lungs. I shift on my feet, and his eyes drop to my bare legs, then slowly trail back up to my face.

“Makayla.” Heather’s voice pierces through my thoughts.

I blink slowly before tearing my gaze from his. “Hmm?”

She jerks her head to the side. “This is my brother, Cannon.”

I slide my gaze back to him, then to his outstretched hand.

“Hi.” I smile, taking his hand, and wince. His touch sends an electric current shooting up my arm. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“You too, Makayla.”

My stomach dips at the sound of my name rolling off his tongue.

Tara nudges my foot with the pointy tip of her heel, and I cut my eyes in her direction to see her smirking.

The elevator slows to a stop, and the doors glide open. “See you at lunch,” Heather tells me as Tara and I step out.

Unable to form any words, I just hold up my hand and wave.

“Damn, girl,” Tara hoots. “I would give my left titty to have him look at me like that.”

I laugh off her comment and ask, “Is the other Mr. Davis as attractive as he is?”

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“Who, Ryan?” She looks over at me with wide eyes. “God, yes.” She fans herself, and I laugh harder. “That family hit the gene pool lottery.”

“Makayla,” Jane calls, pointing to a thin black box on the edge of her desk.

Slapping a hand to my chest, I suck in a breath.

Jane gives me a sheepish grin. “I peeked. I couldn’t help myself.”

I snicker as I set my coffee cup on her desk, then lift the lid to find another blue rose. I’m surprised to see a card tucked inside this time. I rip open the envelope and slide out the card. My heart rate slows, and my shoulders sag in relief.

I can’t wait to have you under me again.

“I know that look,” Jane teases.

I can’t help but smile. “What look?”

“Love.” She winks.

The smile slips from my face. “I’m not in love.” Am I?

“Okay.” Jane nods as if to say sure you’re not.

How can I be in love with X? I’ve never even seen his face. Do I know him? The basic stuff, sure. I know he’s thirty-seven, never been married, no kids, and has his

own business. His favorite food is steak—preferably cooked on the grill—but his favorite thing to eat is me. His words. He takes his coffee with just a splash of cream, no sugar, and his favorite color is black.

Is it normal to want to know the person you're having sex with in a fantasy club? Especially when that person requires you to wear a blindfold? Probably not.

Aside from knowing how I like to be fucked and the sounds I make when I come, X is the only person I told about what Victor did to me.

Curling an arm around the box, I pick up my coffee with the other and say, "I'm not in love. It's complicated."

I turn on my heel and head for my office as Jane's laughter rings out behind me.

\* \* \*

"Do you think I'm in love with X?"

Heather stops midchew and frowns. "Do you think you're in love with X?"

Shrugging, I set my sandwich down and brush off my hands. "I don't know. He sent me a blue rose today."

It hadn't occurred to me until I sat down at my desk this morning that X sends me a blue rose every Monday. It's like a memento of some sort to get me through the week until I see—well, feel him again. I trust X more than I ever trusted Victor, and I haven't even seen his face.

"You know what I think?" Heather asks.

I reach for my drink and take a sip. “Hmm?”

“I think you should stop spending your weekends fucking a stranger and start dating like a normal twenty-two-year-old.”

My brows snap together. “Wow. Tell me how you really feel.”

She holds up her hands. “Hey, you asked.” She pauses to take a sip of her drink. “I think you’re in love with your fantasy. You’re getting everything you want without the risk of getting hurt.”

I hate that she’s right, but I’m not ready to give it all up just yet. “It’s your fault for introducing me to that place,” I reply, defensively.

“It was only supposed to be one night to forget that asshole Victor.” She bugs her eyes out at me. “I didn’t expect you to get swept off your feet by some mystery man who won’t even let you see his face. Your fantasy has become your reality. The more time you spend with X, the harder it’s going to be to separate the two. Sooner or later, you’re going to want more than one night a weekend. You deserve more than that.”

Leaning back in my chair, I sigh. “It’s hard not to when we have such great chemistry. Clearly, he likes me or he wouldn’t be sending me flowers. Right?”

Heather scoffs. “He’s a member of Veil, Makayla. You’re not the first woman he’s fucked, and you won’t be the last.”

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Well, if that's not reality slapping me in the face. "You're being a bit harsh, but you're right. I'm blurring the lines."

Her face softens. "Your contract is almost up, right?"

I nod. "Two weeks. I was—"

"Hoping he'd extend it," she finishes.

I roll my eyes. "God, I'm so stupid."

"No, you're not," she says, softly.

I avert my gaze. "Maybe I should take Spencer up on his offer for coffee."

"That's a start."

"Your brother is hot," I add, biting the inside of my lip to keep from laughing.

She narrows her eyes. "He's your boss."

"He's my boss's boss," I argue.

She arches a perfect brow. "Are you saying you want to fuck my brother?"

"Heather!" I toss my balled-up napkin at her head.

Leaning back in her chair, she crosses her arms over her chest. “He asked about you.”

My eyes go wide. “What did he say?”

“He asked if you were single.” She smirks. “I told him you were very much single and that he was just your type, single, rich—” Her eyes move over my face. “—older.”

“You didn’t,” I squeak.

Her shoulders bounce with silent laughter, and she shakes her head. “I’m kidding.”

“I’m not a gold digger.”

“I know.” She smiles while picking up her sandwich. “He did ask about you, though. I told him he should ask you out.”

“I don’t know.” I bite down on the inside of my lip and avert my gaze.

Heather is the first real friend I’ve had in years. What if I go out with her brother and he turns out to be another jerk? I don’t want to ruin our friendship. Not to mention, he’s my boss and I don’t want to lose my job. Plus, now that I’m making good money and can afford to live on my own, I sent a certified check for ten thousand dollars to Victor’s office last week.

Everything is finally working out.

“You guys don’t have the same last name. Different dads?”

“We’re not blood related. His dad married my mom. After they died, Cannon raised me and put me through college.”

“Now I totally want to fuck him.” I smirk, and she snorts.

“He’s a great guy.”

He’s her brother. Of course she’s going to say that. “Then why is he still single?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Not everyone settles down in their twenties.”

“Hmm.” She’s got a point. “What if he turns out to be another Victor?”

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She pins me with a look that says don't be ridiculous. "Then I'll kick his ass myself." She shoves the last bite of her sandwich in her mouth.

"Wow. Someone worked up one hell of an appetite this weekend." I grin, and she flips me off.

NINETEEN

MAKAYLA

The scent of mahogany and spice still lingers on my skin as I step inside my apartment. I toss my clutch and keys onto the table before locking up and heading down the hall to my bedroom. Inside my walk-in closet, I kick off my heels and strip out of my dress, tossing it into the basket meant for dry cleaning, then make my way into the bathroom, ready for a long hot bath.

Every inch of my body is deliciously sore as I sink into the lavender-scented water. Leaning my head back, I inhale a deep, calming breath. As I come down from the euphoric high I've been riding, reality settles in the pit of my stomach, and suddenly I'm exhausted.

Before I fall asleep in the tub, I climb out and dry off. After slipping into a thin tank and a pair of sleep shorts, I turn off the lights and fall into bed, only to realize I forgot to close the blinds.

Rolling from the bed, I move to the window when something across the street catches my eye. A shadowy figure stands under a streetlight, looking into my apartment. My

breath catches in my throat, and I quickly step away from the window. Heart pounding, I hurry back to the living room to grab my phone, ready to call Heather.

How long have they been out there?

A shiver of fear rolls down my spine at the thought of someone lurking in those dark spaces untouched by the soft glow of the streetlights.

Phone clutched in my shaky hands, I move back to the window and peek through the blinds, but the figure is gone.

\* \* \*

Heather stands at my door holding two coffees. “You didn’t call me when you got home last night,” she chides as she brushes past me.

Closing the door, I follow her into the living room. “Your light was off and I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I’d rather you wake me with a phone call than a scream,” she teases, and I wince. Her smile falls. “What?”

“I have to tell you something, and I don’t want to freak you out.”

“Tell me,” she cuts in, worry etched on her face.

“Last night, I went to close the blinds in my bedroom, I saw someone standing outside looking up at my bedroom.”

“What?” she practically shrieks.

“I couldn’t see their face, but they were definitely looking up at my window. I was going to call you, but I left my phone in the living room. I went to grab it and when I got back to the window they were gone so I figured maybe it was just some guy walking home and he just happened to look up at the same time.”

“Or a perve.” She’s freaking out. “Show me where you saw them.”

I lead her into my bedroom and over to the window. “Right there.” I point to the streetlight.

“I’ll call my brother,” she says, turning away from the window and heading back to the living room. “We have cameras around the property. So, maybe he can figure out what that creep was doing.” She spins around, pointing a finger at me. “This is why you have to call me when you come home late.”

I raise my hands in defense. “I promise I will.”

TWENTY

CANNON

It's been over a week since Makayla and I were formally introduced. She’s been working for my company for almost a month, and meeting for the first time in the elevator wasn’t exactly what I’d planned. But after seeing her flirting with that kid at the coffee bar and giving him her number, jealousy had me practically sprinting to catch the elevator.

Standing in the doorway of the break room, I watch Makayla leaning against the countertop, staring off at nothing while heating her coffee in the microwave. Her blonde hair is pulled back and twisted into a bun at the base of her long, slender neck. The neck I kissed, sucked, and licked just a few days ago.

My gaze drops to her pert, round ass in the fitted dress. Makayla is on the taller side, probably five-eight, and even taller in those expensive-looking red-soled heels. I wonder if that fucker Victor bought them for her.

Taking a few steps inside the break room, I clear my throat, reminding myself to use my regular voice and not the soft whisper I normally do when I'm with her. "Good morning, Makayla," I say just as she's turning away from the counter, hot mug in hand.

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She startles, and coffee spills over the top of her cup and onto the floor between us, hitting our shoes.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.” She turns to set her half-empty coffee mug on the counter and grabs a handful of napkins, then squats to wipe the floor. “Oh, I got it on your shoes.”

“Makayla,” I say a little more firmly.

Her head snaps up, her blue eyes wide, and my cock instantly hardens. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve imagined her on her knees, staring up at me, her eyes glazed over with lust as she’s taking me down her throat. A growl rumbles in my chest as my cock strains against my slacks, begging to slide between those big, beautiful lips.

“They’re just shoes.” I offer my hand and help her from the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she says again.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I startled you.” I shove my hands in my pockets. “If you don’t have anything pressing, we could grab a cup of coffee downstairs.”

“Um, sure. Let me just tell Jane.”

I head over to the elevator to wait for her. She rounds the corner, and my heart nearly beats out of my chest. The elevator opens, and we step inside, standing on opposite sides. I press the button for the lobby and shove my hands in the pockets of my slacks

to keep from touching her. Makayla leans against the railing, one leg stretched out, the other bouncing furiously.

“Do you do that a lot?”

She raises her brows. “What?”

I nod to her bouncing knee.

“Sorry,” she says with a tight smile. “It’s a nervous habit.”

“Do I make you nervous?” I smirk.

“A little,” she says softly.

“Why?”

Her brows pinch in confusion. “Um, because you’re the boss?”

I tilt my head. “Is that all?”

She narrows her eyes. “I’m going to kill your sister.”

I bark out a laugh. “Heather didn’t say anything. I’m just messing with you, Makayla.”

She visibly relaxes as the elevator slows to a stop. The doors slide open, and I gesture for her to go first.

“How do you like it here so far?” I ask as we walk side by side to the coffee bar.

She looks over and smiles. "I love it here, Mr. Davis."

"Call me Cannon."

She dips her head. "Cannon."

And once again, my cock hardens at the thought of her sprawled out under me, my name spilling from her lips as I pound into her sweet pussy.

"Cannon?" she says again, pulling me from my thoughts.

I look over at her, brows raised. "Hmm?"

She jerks her head to the barista, who's wearing a knowing look. "She asked if you wanted a muffin."

"No, thanks." I pay for our coffees, and then we slowly make our way back to the elevators.

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On the ride up to our floor, I say, “I lied.”

“About?” she hedges.

“Heather did mention something.”

Her face scrunches in the most adorable fucking way.

“She told me you saw someone creeping around the apartment.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe they were just walking home.” She shrugs. “I don’t want to make a big deal out of it.”

“I’ll check it out anyway. Magnolia Park is a safe neighborhood, but you should still be careful of your surroundings. Let me know if you see anything else.”

“Thanks.” She nods. “I will.”

I smirk. “Heather also insisted I ask you out.”

She rolls her eyes. “She gets a boyfriend and now she’s playing matchmaker,” She shakes her head in mock disappointment. “It’s like I don’t even know her.” That makes me chuckle. “You’re funny.”

She jerks a shoulder. “I have my moments,” she quips before blowing into the small hole of her coffee lid.

Jesus, those lips. I immediately avert my gaze to the numbers on the elevator panel and pull my shit together before returning my attention to her.

“So, would you be interested in a date?”

The corners of her mouth tip up. “I would,” she drawls, and I’m sensing there’s more.

“But?”

She shakes her head. “I would like to go out with you. I just don’t want things to be awkward if you decide you don’t like me.”

What’s not to like? She’s fucking perfect.

I raise my brows and smile. “We’re adults, yes?” She nods. “Then let’s agree not to make it awkward. We’ll keep it low key and simple,” I offer.

“Sounds good.”

“Are you free this weekend?”

It’s only a slight flinch, and if I hadn’t been watching for it, I wouldn’t have noticed.

“I have plans this weekend. I’m free Sunday, though, or the weekend after?”

“How about dinner Sunday night? There’s a little Italian place in The Village.”

“Antonio’s?”

I nod. “That’s the place. Have you been there?”

“No, but Heather said it was good. I’d love to go.”

“Six o’clock?”

She smiles. “It’s a date.”

So close.

TWENTY-ONE

MAKAYLA

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I'm surprised to see a single blue rose tucked under the wiper blade on the driver's side of my car. This isn't X's typical MO. Annoyed, I snatch the flower and toss it on the ground before climbing behind the wheel and heading home.

My stomach has been in knots all day. It started with the incident in the break room. The authoritative tone in Cannon's voice when I was cleaning up the coffee I'd spilled, the lust blazing in his dark eyes when I looked up at him, and the crackle of familiar energy between us when he helped me from the floor. He smelled so good, all masculine and woodsy.

In the elevator, on the way down to the coffee bar, I'd been nervous. Mostly because he was my boss, but also because I felt insanely attracted to him. Out of curiosity, I watched the barista make his coffee—black with a splash of cream. We fell into an easy conversation, and on the elevator ride back up, we joked like old friends. Then he asked me out and I was nervous all over again.

When I got back to my office and settled behind my desk, it hit me like a punch to the gut.

It wasn't an instant attraction. It was a connection. One we'd been building for the past month. The lust in his eyes was because he already knows what I look like naked. The authoritative tone in his voice—much softer in the bedroom—isn't one I'd easily forget. How could I forget the voice of the man who whispers dirty things in my ear while he's buried deep inside me? I didn't pick up on it the first time we met, but only because I was too distracted by his overwhelming presence in such a small space. And his woodsy scent is something I've committed to memory.

Cannon Davis is X. I'm sure of it.

I couldn't focus on work today, so I feigned a headache and left for the day.

My head is spinning, and my heart is racing by the time I walk into my apartment. I go straight to my bedroom and dump my purse on the bed, then head for the bathroom. While the tub is filling, I drop a lavender bath bomb into the hot water, then make my way into my closet to undress.

My phone chirps inside my purse with a text notification. Walking over to the bed, I dig it out and race into the bathroom to shut off the water. Once I settle into the bath, I open the message from Heather.

Heather: Are you ok? I stopped by your office after lunch. Jane said you left early.

Me: Just a headache. Nothing a hot bath and sleep won't cure.

Heather: I hope you feel better. I have a late meeting, but call me if you need anything.

Me: Thanks.

I was relieved that Heather had a lunch date with Jesse today, because my head and heart were a mess, and I needed to be alone to process my thoughts.

After a long soak in the tub, I go to the kitchen to make myself something to eat, except I have absolutely no appetite. I settle for strawberry yogurt.

It's still light out as I fall into bed and stare at the ceiling fan above me. A pang of hurt spreads through my chest as I recount the events in my life over the last couple of months. It feels like a giant puzzle has been dumped in my lap and I'm left with all

the weird pieces that never seem to fit anywhere. Like how did X know where I lived before I'd even agreed to sign his contract? How did he know where I worked even though I hadn't given that information to anyone? I didn't even have a job, yet. Heather never questioned it either.

Because she already knew.

My thoughts drift back to the graduation, when Heather approached me and gave me her number. Cannon was there, but where?

After the fight with Victor, it was me who'd called Heather and asked her to meet for drinks, but who paid our bill that night? Was it Cannon? Was he close by listening to our conversation?

Who paid for my hotel?

It was Heather who suggested Veil and took me there. Was she even a member, or was Cannon behind the whole thing?

Does Heather even like me, or is she pretending to be my friend for Cannon's sake?

How does Desiree fit into this? Was she the one sending the roses? Or was it Cannon?

Desiree doesn't strike me as the type to woo a woman on a man's behalf.

And what about Victor? Sure, I left him, but why do I feel like he's a part of this?

What did he mean when he said, "I don't want to let you go, but I don't have a choice."

But the real question is, why?

Seems like a lot of work on Cannon's part just to get me into bed.

Before I know it, the sun is up, and I'm even more angry, hurt, and confused than I was yesterday. I want answers, and the only person who can give them to me is Cannon, aka X.

TWENTY-TWO

### CANNON

Kneeling in the middle of the bed with her head lowered is my angel. With her ass resting on heels and her palms flat on her thighs. I wonder if her perfect submissive pose is intentional. Her blonde hair is twisted into a messy knot on the top of her head with a few tendrils hanging down and framing her face. A white leather harness is fastened just beneath her naked breasts, and peeking over the tops of her shoulders is a pair of small, leather angel wings.

The sight makes me weak in the knees. “Have you been a good girl this week?”

“Yes,” she clips, lacking her usual breathy response.

Tilting my head, I take a moment to study her closely. She seems agitated. My gaze drops to her hands, now balled into fists. “Something’s different about you tonight.”

She draws in a breath through her nose, and some of the tension leaves her body. “It’s our last night together, so I thought I’d dress up,” she explains.

Is that why she’s upset? Was she hoping I’d ask to spend more time with her?

I have to admit I’m going to miss this. I considered extending the contract, but this was never supposed to be long-term. She’s grown too attached to the fantasy, and while I’ve enjoyed worshiping every part of her body, it’s time to move on.

Placing two fingers under her chin, I tilt her head up. “Thank you, angel.” I bend down and press my lips to hers. “But that’s not what I meant.”

“What?”

“You’re shivering,” I point out. “Are you cold?”

“No.” She makes a sound in her throat. “Something happened this week.”

“Oh?” Maybe I mistook her agitation for excitement.

“My boss asked me on a date. God, X, this man... ugh. He’s just so....” She cuts herself off with a grimace, sinking her top teeth into her plump bottom lip. “Can I talk about this stuff with you?”

Why do I suddenly feel jealous?

“Makayla, it’s your fantasy. If you want to talk about boys while I paint your fingernails, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Let’s not get crazy.” She snorts, and I picture her rolling those beautiful blue eyes. “And technically it’s supposed to be your fantasy. I’m your guest.”

“My fantasy is worshiping you.”

She goes quiet for a second then says, “Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything.” She opens her mouth, but I quickly add, “Though I might not answer.”

Her full lips twist to the side. “Fine,” she says, feigning annoyance. “How did you know my name?”

My brows shoot to my hairline. I wasn’t expecting that. “It’s on the contract.”

Technically, it's not a lie. I'd been careful to avoid her as much as possible since she started working for my company. And while we're here together, I keep my voice low, just above a whisper.

"Oh." She sounds disappointed.

"Any more questions?" I ask, and she shakes her head. "Then lie back and tell me about your sexy boss."

She barks out a laugh. "I never said he was sexy, but—" She shifts on the bed with her head on the pillow. "—he is. We met on the elevator a couple weeks ago. The way he looked at me, I swear I almost melted into a puddle at his feet. Then this past Wednesday, he came into the break room on my floor. He startled me, and I spilled coffee on his shoes." She presses her lips together in amusement, and I can't help but smile. She's so fucking cute. "Anyway, long story short, he asked me for coffee, and then he asked me on a date."

She squeezes her thighs together as she continues. "I've been fantasizing about him, X."

I wrap my hand around my hard cock and squeeze to relieve the pulsing ache. "What do you fantasize about?"

"Everything," she says breathily. "His mouth. His hands. His cock. I imagine myself on top with him buried deep inside me, filling me, possessing me to the point that it hurts so good."

My jaw clenches as I crawl onto the bed and settle between her thighs. The tip of my cock brushes her entrance, and she rolls her hips instinctively. "Do you want me to be him tonight?"

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“God, yes,” she pants. “I’m wet just imagining his dark eyes glazed over with lust as he slides inside me, his soft lips pressed against my neck, and screaming my name when he comes.”

I’ve never been so hard in my life. It’s bordering on painful.

Reaching inside the drawer of the nightstand, I grab a condom, ripping it open with my teeth before sheathing myself. Then I roll us so my back is to the mattress and she’s straddling my hips. “Tonight, I’m your boss, Makayla.”

TWENTY-THREE

MAKAYLA

I gently drag my nails down his naked chest, leaving a trail of goose bumps in their wake. His skin is hot, his cock hard beneath me. Rocking my hips, I stroke him with my center. I’m tempted to slide down his body and take him in my mouth, but the throbbing ache to have him inside me is overwhelming.

Rising to my knees, I plant one hand on his chest to steady myself as I reach between us and position him at my opening. I suck in a breath through my nose as I slowly sink down, pulling a pleased moan from him.

Every time feels like our first.

With both hands on his chest, I arch my back, taking him deeper with every swivel of my hips. I feel one hand sliding up my thigh before grabbing my hip, and I gasp when

his thumb circles my clit. A thin sheen of sweat forms at the base of my neck, and the need to come tugs at my lower belly. My inner muscles tighten as a white-hot surge of energy shoots through my core and limbs.

“Kiss me, Cannon,” I cry out, riding the wave of ecstasy. Holy fuck.

“Fuck, Makayla.” His body shifts under me, and then we’re skin to skin. His mouth is on mine, his fingers digging into my ass cheeks, anchoring me in place, as he thrusts up into me, and then his long, guttural groan vibrates against my lips as he spills inside me.

With one hand, I reach for the blindfold and shove it up to my forehead. My blue eyes meet his hooded, dark brown ones. It takes a minute for the lust-filled fog to clear and reality to set in. Eyes wide, he inhales sharply through his nose and tears his lips from mine.

I came here tonight with every intention of confronting Cannon and demanding answers. What I wasn’t expecting is a surge of emotions to come flooding to the forefront. Fantasies aren’t real. They’re a collection of hopes and dreams. Fantasy is an illusion. Fantasy is a lie. A tear rolls down my cheek.

A look of remorse flashes in his eyes. “Ma—”

“Don’t,” I warn.

Dragging in a shuddered breath, I climb off him and roll off the bed. On shaky legs, I move to the bench at the end. Cannon says nothing, but I can feel his eyes on me as I snatch up my clothes, remove the stupid harness, and dress quickly. Slipping my feet into my heels, I head for the door.

“Makayla,” Cannon calls, and I pause with my hand on the knob. “It wasn’t supposed

to be like this. Let me explain.”

I look over my shoulder to see him shoving his foot through the leg of his pants. “I don’t know what kind of sick game you and Heather are into, but I don’t want to play anymore.”

\* \* \*

I feel absolutely numb as I park at the curb in front of my apartment. Moving on autopilot, I climb out of my car and make my way to the gate. I’m so caught up in my thoughts, I don’t notice the dark figure leaning against the wall.

“Hello, kitten.”

“Ahhh!” I slap a hand to my chest. “Victor, what the fuck?” I shout. “You nearly scared me half to death. What the hell are you doing here?”

He pushes away from the wall and steps into the light. His sadistic grin makes my skin crawl.

“I came here for you.”

If it were anyone else, his statement would be simple, innocent, but from Victor, it feels like a threat.

“Makayla?” I look over to see Jesse jogging toward the gate.

My phone vibrates inside my clutch, but I ignore it. “Hey, Jesse.”

He opens the gate and steps out onto the sidewalk. His gaze bounces between Victor and me. “You okay?” he asks, but his eyes are pinned on Victor.

I nod. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“All right. I’ll leave this open.” He jerks his chin at Victor before heading back inside the gate, but I imagine he’s still within earshot.

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Turning my attention back to Victor, I cross my arms over my chest. After our last encounter, I should be terrified that he's in my space, but I'm too pissed off. It's a long shot, but I ask, "Do you know Cannon Davis?" It's dark out, but I don't miss the flare of his eyes.

I tilt my head. "Seriously?"

Victor shrugs, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Cannon and I are old friends. I owed him a favor."

"What do you mean?"

"We're not friends," Cannon growls from behind me. "What are you doing here, Victor?"

"I came to tell Makayla the truth," Victor replies, keeping his focus on me. "Cannon saw you at graduation. He wanted you, and at the time, I wanted someone else."

"Wait, what?" I move so I can see them both and focus on Victor.

"He was cheating on you with Desiree," Cannon adds.

It feels like I've just had the wind knocked out of me. "So you used me. Threatened me. Then passed me on to your friend," I yell. "So you could be with Desiree?"

This is even more fucked up than I thought.

The betrayal from both men weighs heavily on my chest, and the urge to cry knots at the base of my throat. I can't breathe.

I drag in a deep, shaky breath, my furious gaze darting between these two psychos. "I want you both to get the fuck away from me!" I point to Victor. "You're a damn psycho and I wish I'd never met you." Then I point to Cannon. "I have nothing to say to you."

With that, I turn on my heels and march past a wide-eyed Jesse and Heather.

"Makayla," Heather calls, and I spin around angrily.

"I thought you were my friend," I shriek.

She blinks as a pained expression crosses her face. "I'm your best friend."

I laugh in disbelief. "You took me to a sex club so your brother could fuck me."

Heather flinches, and Jesse jerks around to look at her with a mixture of disbelief and disgust.

Shaking her head, she asserts, "It wasn't like that."

"Oh?" I huff out another laugh. "Well, maybe one day when I can stand to look at you, I'll let you explain."

"Enough, Makayla," Cannon barks.

Jesse shoulders past Heather and steps toward me. "Come on." He places a hand on my back and steers me inside.

Just before I disappear around the corner, I shoot Cannon one last hateful glare.

## TWENTY-FOUR

### CANNON

Victor and I have a rocky history. Back in college, we both had our sights on the same girl. When she chose me, he didn't seem bothered. In the two years she and I were together, Victor had slept his way through the sorority houses and then some. I figured he'd moved on, until I came home early from class and caught them fucking in my bed. It was an ugly scene. Names were called, punches were thrown, and threats were made. My girlfriend claimed Victor convinced her that I'd been cheating on her, and she'd only fucked him to get back at me. I never cheated. In fact, I was planning to propose to her after graduation. I'd even bought a ring. Clearly, she wasn't the girl I thought she was and looking back now, Victor did me a favor. I'd never tell him that though, because I still hate the motherfucker.

Makayla first caught my attention when I spotted her crossing the parking lot with her parents. When I pointed her out, Heather told me her name. And when she marched across the stage to collect her diploma, her bright eyes and beautiful smile graced the big screen overhead and took my breath away. When she walked out of the auditorium toward the one man I hated, knowing he'd just been with Desiree, I saw red.

Now that Desiree no longer wants him, he thinks he can slither his way back into Makayla's life. I don't fucking think so.

"We had a deal," I remind him.

He nods once, shoving his hands into his front pockets. "We did," he agrees, smirking as if he's privy to a secret.

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I cross my arms over my chest to keep from punching him in his smug face. “Then why are you here?”

He grins. “The deal was that I had to surrender my membership in order to continue seeing Desiree.” His grin morphs into something more threatening. “We never agreed Makayla was off-limits.”

“She’s mine,” I snarl.

Victor lifts a careless shoulder. “You sure about that?” Then he spins on his heels and stalks off into the darkness.

Motherfucker.

TWENTY-FIVE

MAKAYLA

I’m not sure what stirs me awake, but when I open my eyes, I’m acutely aware of two things: the faint woodsy scent lingering in the air and the man sitting in the corner.

I suck in a breath but don’t scream. “What are you doing, Cannon?”

“Thinking.”

“You couldn’t do that in your own bedroom? How the hell did you get in here?”

“I bought this place for Heather. I still have the keys.”

I growl in frustration. “That doesn’t give you the right to come into my apartment.”

“I know.” He pauses. “I just couldn’t leave you alone after everything that went down tonight.” He leans forward, propping his forearms on the tops of his thighs. “You have every right to be angry with me—with everyone. Heather is devastated and pissed at me for dragging her into this.”

“Do you have any idea how fucked-up this is?” I hiss. “You’re insane. All of you.”

“I’m so sorry, Makayla.” He sighs. “I’d like to explain.”

“Please do.” I shift on the bed, putting my back against the headboard. “This is your one and only chance to come clean. Start from the beginning, and don’t leave a single detail out.”

He stands from the chair and I notice he’s wearing a light blue T-shirt that clings to his solid chest, and dark jeans. I’ve never seen him in anything but a suit. He looks hot, but I keep that thought to myself.

He moves to my side of the bed, turning on the lamp before sitting on the edge of the mattress. “Victor and I have known each other for a long time. I even considered him one of my best friends, up until he slept with my girlfriend in college.”

My lip curls in disgust. “Why am I not surprised?”

“When I saw you at graduation, I knew I had to have you.”

“Had to have me?” I shriek. “You sound like Victor! So, then what? You sent your sister over to do your bidding?”

“Not exactly.” Shaking his head, he continues, “I saw you before the ceremony. When I pointed you out to Heather, she told me your name. You had my full attention the moment you crossed that stage. The camera zoomed in on your face and I was instantly drawn to you. Not just because I thought you were beautiful, but there was something else. A gentleness that tugged at my heartstrings. I can’t remember the last time I felt that way, if ever. When I saw Victor at your side, I got angry because he’d just been with Desiree.” His eyes move over my face. If he’s looking for a reaction, he won’t get one. I don’t care about Victor, at all, and I need more time to wrap my head around his involvement with Desiree. “I felt this need to protect you, but I also wanted you for myself. I was tempted to toss you over my shoulder and run.”

“How very caveman of you,” I deadpan.

He shrugs as if to say “This is who I am.”

“I texted Heather and told her to get your number because I wanted to offer you a job.”

“Did you force her to be friends with me?”

“No.” He sighs. “Heather would never befriend someone because I asked her to. Her friendship is genuine.” His eyes are soft and earnest. “Maybe if Victor hadn’t been there, things might’ve gone differently.” He shrugs. “I still would’ve sent Heather over, but I would’ve introduced myself, too. Maybe even offer you a job in person.” He rakes his fingers through his hair. “Instead, I went to the parking lot and called Victor.”

“That was you who called him?”

“Yes.” He clears his throat. “I gave him a choice. You or Desiree.”

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“He chose Desiree,” I state.

Cannon nods. “I won’t lie. He put up a fight.”

“Because Victor doesn’t like to lose,” I claim. “He’s a man-child. Control is his toy, and if you try to take it from him, he’ll strike.”

“I agree. I feel like it’s partially my fault for what he did to you, and for that I’m sorry. I know he has some aggressive tendencies but I never imagined he would hurt you.”

I shake my head. “Victor is very good at letting people see what he wants and not who he truly is. I think he would’ve hurt me either way.”

“What did he say to you? Before I got here.”

“He said he was here for me.”

Cannon’s expression turns to stone. “Stay away from him, Makayla. The fact that he showed up here is just another example of why I don’t trust him.”

“I don’t either.” I chew on the inside of my lip. “Let’s skip past Victor for now. Explain to me how you became X.”

“The original plan was to offer you a job, maybe flirt with you in the elevator, then ask you out.”

I can't help but smile, remembering he'd done that the other day.

"Heather and I had it all worked out. She was going to reach out to you that Monday after graduation about a job opportunity at Davis Corp. But then you called her because you'd had a fight with Victor. She asked me what she should do, and I told her to be a friend." He gives me a look. "That wasn't me forcing her to be your friend. Heather was worried about you, so naturally she did what friends do. Then she threw a fucking wrench into my plans by inviting you to Veil." He laughs. "I wanted to strangle her. I told her no, because one: it wasn't part of the plan, and two: because Heather is not allowed at Veil. But she went behind my back and got permission from Desiree like she always does." He rolls his eyes. "Heather didn't bring you there so I could fuck you." I grimace, remembering the look on her face.

"I feel bad for saying that," I admit.

"Don't feel bad. She knows you're upset, and truthfully, she deserves a little punishment for pulling that shit and dragging Desiree into it, too." He blows out a breath. "She didn't even do it to be spiteful. She wanted you to have fun in a place she knew you would be safe. Then you showed up in that dress and all my restraint went out the window. There was no way I was letting anyone else put their hands on you."

Warmth spreads over my cheeks. "I'm still kind of pissed off, and a little hurt, but I don't regret a single second of that night," I admit. "You made me feel things I never knew existed."

"That's how I felt the first time I laid eyes on you." He shifts on the bed to face me, bringing his knee to rest on the mattress. "Before you, I hadn't played at Veil in years."

Jealousy churns in my gut. Obviously Cannon has been with other women. I'd even

accepted the fact that X had been with others before me. Still, it doesn't make me feel any less stabby knowing other women have had a piece of this man.

Now who's the caveman?

"You're so cute when you're jealous." He chuckles, but then his expression turns somber. "I'm sorry if you were hurt. That was never my intention. I just... wanted you. Honestly, I think everything since your graduation day has worked out for both of us. You needed a place to live, and conveniently, I'd just given her this apartment building. Though the job was my idea from day one, and Heather fully supported it, you got the job on your own. I monitored the entire interview process, and if necessary, I would've forced their hands, but I didn't have to."

"Why did you have me sign a month-long contract?"

"Because you weren't ready for the things I wanted. I figured we were enjoying ourselves for a little while, and the anonymity took the pressure off both of us." He eyes me. "How did you figure it out?"

"I think my body told me. You were right about the blindfold. My senses were heightened. Your voice. Your smell. Even your coffee order. I'd committed it all to memory. Then there were certain things that didn't make sense. Like how did you have my home address? Or where I worked." A sudden bark of laughter slips past my lips.

"What's so funny?" he asks, though there's a slight grin on his face.

"I can't believe I said all that stuff, pretending to fantasize about you."

"I'm glad it was me and not Spencer from the eighth floor."

My mouth falls open in shock and amusement. “How did you—” I roll my eyes. “Heather. That little spy.”

“Heather didn’t tell me anything. I saw you talking to him that morning at the coffee bar, and I almost lost my fuckin’ mind. Then I almost lost my hand trying to stop the elevator.”

“Spencer and I dated in college, but I don’t have any lingering feelings for him. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

His lips pull to the side. “I’m not worried.”

I bite down on the inside of my lip. “I’ll be honest, I’m gonna miss all the mysteriousness.”

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“We can still play,” he offers with a wicked grin. “There are plenty of other rooms to explore at Veil if you’d like.”

“Will you still send me flowers on Mondays with those dirty little notes?”

His brows dip slightly.

“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head and smiles. “Nothing. I was just thinking about something. What were you saying about the flowers?”

“The blue roses. I’ll admit the first one made me feel a little unnerved, but then I saw the one in our room at Veil and I realized they were from you. It was sweet. I was a little thrown off when you left the one on my car the other day.” I grin as another thought occurs to me. “Were you the one who paid for the tab that night Heather and I met for drinks?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “But I did pay for the hotel.”

My eyes bulge. “I thought that was Victor.” I blow out a breath in relief. “Thank you for doing that. I’ll pay you back.”

He leans over, planting his hands on either side of my hips and brushing his lips over mine. “You can pay me back with a kiss.”

I part my lips and his tongue sweeps into my mouth. His kiss is soft and gentle, and

only lasts a few minutes before we break apart.

“So what happens now?” I ask.

“The fantasy is over, Makayla.” He rests his forehead against mine. “No Veil. No blindfold. No whispers. Just you and me. Yeah?”

My head nods against his. “Yeah.”

“Good girl.”

The blindfold may have heightened my senses, allowing me to feel pleasures I never knew existed, but all of that pales in comparison to the pleasure of staring into Cannon’s warm, affectionate eyes as he makes love to me under the soft glow of my bedside lamp.

And suddenly, I’m back in the deep end, but this time I’m not sinking.

I’m floating.

TWENTY-SIX

CANNON

I can’t shake this unsettled feeling in my gut. When Makayla told me about the flowers—blue roses—that she’d been getting every Monday, a heavy sense of dread coiled in the pit of my stomach. I know Desiree loves them because of what they represent: unattainable and mysterious. Hell, she even has a private florist on our payroll who comes out once a week to refresh the arrangements around the mansion.

Makayla mentioned seeing one in our room, but I never noticed because my focus has

always been on her. She was so relieved when she thought they were from me, I didn't have the heart to tell her they weren't. The rose deliveries are a message and I know they're not from Desiree.

My guess is they're from Victor.

But what is he trying to say?

I roll my head to the side to look at my beautiful girl sleeping soundly beside me. The room is still bathed in soft light from the bedside lamp on her nightstand, allowing me to see her up close. Her hands are tucked under her cheek, and little puffs of air pass through her slightly parted lips with every exhale. There's a small cluster of freckles on her nose and her long lashes fan out over the tops of her cheeks. She really does look like an angel.

Sliding from the bed, being careful not to wake her, I move around to her side of the bed and turn off the lamp. When I go to the window to shut the blinds, I spot a lone figure ducking into the dark shadows just beyond the streetlight. It was fast, but I saw him.

I'm going to put an end to this shit once and for all.

I tiptoe back over to the other side of the room where my jeans are lying on the floor and dig my phone from the pocket. The moment I'm in the living room, I pull up my contacts and tap on Enzo's number.

He answers on the first ring. "What is it?"

"I've got a problem and I need your help."

TWENTY-SEVEN

MAKAYLA

My best friend stands at the door with devastation in her red, swollen eyes. “I’m sorry,” she says softly. Her shaky voice makes her sound small, and it makes me feel shitty for yelling at her.

My eyes well with tears. “I know,” I cry, wrapping my arms around her.

Pulling apart, we both swipe away our tears as I invite her inside and lead her over to the sofa.

“I didn’t do it to hurt you,” she explains, lowering herself onto the cushion and turning her body to face me. “I wasn’t thinking about the possible repercussions of taking you there for one night. I thought it would be fun for you.”

Nodding, I say, “I know. Cannon and I talked for hours last night. He explained everything, and I’m not mad at you anymore.”

Her shoulders drop in relief. “Thank you for hearing him out. I know the way it looked, but I promise I wasn’t pimping you out to my brother.”

I snort a laugh. “That had to be awkward for you. I guess it’s a good thing I never went into detail of all the ways I let your brother fuck me.”

Heather makes a gagging sound, extending her leg and tapping me with her foot. “Stop.”

I laugh. “Consider that your payback.”

She drags in a breath and lets it out slowly. “I did lie about a few things, and I want to come clean if you’ll let me.”

I curl my legs to the side and rest my head on the cushion. “Spill.”

“You know how I mentioned that you could only get into Veil if you’re invited by another member?”

“Yes.”

“That was true, except if a member invites you it’s because they want to have sex.”

My brows pinch in confusion.

“Remember when I told you about my neighbor, Tommy?” she asks, and I nod. “He was a member at Veil. Right after my eighteenth birthday, he asked me if I wanted to go to a private club. Of course I said yes. I was thinking of a club with a VIP room where I could drink and not get carded. When we got there, I felt a little overwhelmed, and to be honest, a little scared.”

“How old was Tommy?”

“Thirty.”

“How old were you the first time you had sex with him?”

She gives me a sheepish smile. “Seventeen.”

My mouth falls open in shock. “Heather.” I blink. “Clearly I’m not opposed to dating

an older man, but you were a kid.” A small shudder runs through me. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing bad. Not really.” She huffs out a humorless laugh. “We went to the bar and Tommy got a drink. I passed on the alcohol because I was in a strange place and I wanted to keep my head clear. We made out on the dance floor for a while, then he took me to one of the rooms upstairs. We got naked and fooled around a little bit, then he asked if I wanted to have a threesome with another woman. I was down for it, and a few minutes later, a woman came into the room.”

My eyes widen. “Oh God. Was it—”

“Desiree,” she finishes with a slow nod. “The look on her face was priceless. She flipped out on Tommy for bringing a teenager into her club. Then she called Cannon. That’s how I found out my brother owned Veil and that Desiree was a kinky bitch.” She laughs.

“Wait.” I hold up my hand. “Cannon owns Veil?”

Her smile slips. “I thought you said he explained everything.”

“The important stuff, but that makes more sense. I guess that’s why I was allowed to be there.” I shake my head.

Heather shrugs. “Cannon banned me from Veil after the whole Tommy thing. When I told him I wanted to take you he said no. So, I asked Desiree instead.”

“Wouldn’t she get in trouble for going behind his back?”

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“No.” She scoffs. “Cannon couldn’t run that place without Desiree. Besides, she’s practically family. I’ve known her since I was a kid. We were pretty close. Especially after my parents died. But after they broke up, we kind of drifted apart.”

What the fuck? It’s like a sucker punch to the gut. I blink. Then I blink again. I’m trying hard not to look shocked, but Heather sees it.

“Oh my God.” She slaps a hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry. I’m gonna shut up now.”

“It’s fine, Heather,” I lie. “I’ll add that to the list of things Cannon and I need to discuss. Moving on.” I wave a hand. “I’m sorry for screaming at you in front of Jesse. That was pretty shitty on my part, and I feel like I should probably go downstairs and apologize to him. He probably thinks we’re all crazy and I don’t want to cause any problems between you.”

Heather sags against the sofa cushion, resting her head on top. “Jesse and I broke up.”

Guilt washes over me like a bucket of cold water. I reach for her hand. “I’m so sorry. I’ll go down there right now and tell him it was all a big misunderstanding.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “It wasn’t because of you. We went out for dinner and drinks last night and ran into his ex-girlfriend.”

My brows jerk up. “Go on.”

“We weren’t there five minutes before she came up to our table. She gave me the

typical ex-girlfriend once-over and clearly wasn't threatened."

"I hate her already," I interject.

Heather snorts. "Then she asked if she could talk to him outside."

"Please tell me he didn't—"

"He did." She nods. "I don't know what pissed me off more: that he interrupted our date to talk to his ex or that his entire demeanor changed after talking to her."

"Did you confront him about it?"

"No. I didn't want to be that girl. Clearly he was agitated after talking to her. I didn't want to fight, so when I finished my drink, I told him I was ready to go home. He called for an Uber. We were two blocks away, and instead of walking back with me, he put me in a fucking Uber and said he was heading over to Inkubus." She rolls her eyes.

I raise my brows. "Wow. That's... rude. He didn't come by later to explain?"

"Nope." She sighs. "I didn't know he was back until I came downstairs to check on you."

"I don't know what to say. Give him some time. Maybe there's some painful history between them and talking to her stirred up emotions he wasn't ready to deal with."

"Guess I'll never know," she says with a sad smile. "Why was Victor here last night?"

Ugh. "For me, apparently." My lip curls in disgust. "He was just hanging out there in

the dark. Scared the shit out of me.”

Her expression turns incredulous. “He was just standing out there waiting for you?”

“Yeah.” I huff out a humorless laugh.

“You need to be careful, Makayla.”

I try not to think about how differently things might’ve gone with Victor if Cannon hadn’t shown up.

“I know, and I will.” I stand from the sofa. “I need to find something to wear for my date tonight. You wanna go shopping with me? I’ll buy you a latte.”

“You don’t have to threaten me with a good time.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

CANNON

I’d like to think I’m overestimating Victor, but I’m not willing to risk Makayla’s or Heather’s safety. My sister is aware of the situation. I filled her in earlier when she called to bitch me out for not telling Makayla about my past with Desiree. It’s not like I was hiding my past from Makayla. It’s just a lot to throw at her all at once. Not to mention that Victor is a potential threat. One thing I’ve learned about Makayla is she’s as brave as she is curious. I didn’t miss the shakiness in her voice when she told him off last night. She’s afraid of him. But that didn’t stop her from standing up for herself.

What will she do the next time he shows up?

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What if I'm not around?

While the girls are shopping in The Village, I'm meeting with a young man from High Caliber Security who came highly recommended by Enzo. He's about the same age as Makayla and Heather, so he'll blend right in.

"Don't get too friendly," I warn the good-looking son of a bitch as I pass him the key to the apartment below Makayla's.

"Chill, bro." He brushes me off with a laugh. "This isn't my first assignment. I know what I'm doing. Also, I have a girlfriend."

"Is this the same girl you cheated on in high school?" I smirk at his wide-eyed expression. "Your dad isn't the only one who knows how to get information."

He crosses his arms over his muscular chest, and if he hadn't mentioned the girlfriend, I would probably call this whole thing off. "That was high school. I was a dumbass."

I can't help but laugh because weren't we all dumbasses in high school?

"How do you want to handle the creeper?" he asks.

I pulled up the feed from the cameras installed around the building, but I didn't see anything. I figured he'd either seen the cameras or he'd just gotten lucky. When I checked the feed last night, he wasn't so lucky. I knew exactly who it was.

“I’ll deal with him. You just keep an eye on the girls.”

## TWENTY-NINE

### MAKAYLA

Stepping out of my closet, I gesture to the short pink wraparound dress I bought at a little boutique in The Village. “What do you think? Is this too dressy?”

“No. You look hot,” Heather croons with a wink. “I’m jealous of your long legs.”

“You don’t think it’s too short?” I ask, turning around to show her the back.

“Why are you stressing so hard over this date? You’ve been fucking him for over a month.” “Heather,” I chide, propping my hands on my hips.

Laughing, she rolls on her side, and I smack her on the butt.

“What? It’s true.” She rises to a sitting position, her expression solemn. “Makayla, Cannon is head-over-heels obsessed with you. This right here—” She gestures to me. “—this is what he wanted. Getting to know each other. The dates. I’ve never seen him like this over a woman. Not even Desiree.” Is that supposed to make me feel special? I know what she’s trying to placate me, and I appreciate her effort. As much as it bothers me, I decide to let the Desiree issue go for tonight. There’s too much to unpack and I’m nervous as it is. I don’t want to ruin my first date by acting like a jealous brat.

A sharp knock lands on my door pulling me from my thoughts..

“I’ll get it.” She pushes to her feet, her brows pinched in concern. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I promise.” I wave her off.

She heaves out a breath. “Okay.”

While Heather goes to greet Cannon, I slip on my heeled sandals and give my reflection one last glance before heading to the living room.

Cannon’s appreciative grin awakens the swarm of butterflies in my stomach. “You look very sexy, angel.”

“You too, boss,” I reply.

My man looks hot in a black, fitted button-down tucked into a pair of black jeans.

Heather makes a choking sound, and I laugh, grabbing my clutch. We all step out into the hall, and I lock the door.

“Have a good time on your date,” Heather singsongs as we near the elevator.

The door slides open, and Jesse steps out, jerking to a stop when he notices the three of us.

“Hey.” His attention shifts to Heather. “Can we talk?”

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She looks over at me, and I flash her a knowing smile. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Cannon leads me to a sporty black BMW parked at the curb. The interior is black-and-white, and it instantly reminds me of Veil. During the drive toward The Village, I stare out the passenger window, taking in the scenery.

He places his hand on my thigh to still my bouncing knee. “You’re nervous.”

“It’s our first date,” I admit as he pulls up to the valet.

He leans over, pressing his lips to my ear. “I’ve had my tongue in your pussy and my thumb in your ass, and you’re nervous over a dinner date?” He chuckles, and I burst out laughing.

\* \* \*

“What do you think?” Cannon asks.

“That’s the best ravioli I’ve ever had.” I smile, and his eyes drop to my mouth.

We’re seated at a table for two near a large window with a gorgeous view of a string quartet performing in front of the fountain in the center of The Village. It’s all very romantic.

“You’ve got a little sauce...” He brushes the corner of my mouth with his thumb and brings it to his lips. “Mmm.”

“As I live and breathe,” a male voice says before an attractive man steps up to our table with a very familiar blonde. Where do I know her from?

Cannon chuckles and shakes his head. “Lay it on me, Cooper.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” He presses a hand to his chest, batting his lashes innocently.

I laugh as my eyes dart between Cannon and Cooper who seem to be having a silent conversation.

“Stop teasing him, Cooper,” the pretty blonde says, smacking him on the arm before turning her attention to Cannon. “Hi, Cannon.” She extends her hand to me and introduces herself. “Hi, I’m Parker and this is my husband, Cooper.”

Cooper smiles at me like he’s holding a secret.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Makayla.”

“These two are newlyweds,” Cannon tells me.

“Oh, congratulations,” I say with a smile.

Cooper curls an arm around his wife, and says, “And we’re expecting.”

His wife jerks her head to the side. “Cooper,” she warns.

“Sorry.” He presses a kiss to her temple. “We just found out and I’m a little excited,” he tells us.

Aww. I press a hand to my chest as Cannon rises from his seat to congratulate his

friends. He pulls Cooper into a man hug, then kisses Parker on the cheek.

We say our goodbyes with a promise to come over for dinner and see their new house.

“They were nice.”

Cannon nods, and hums in agreement as he finishes off his drink. “Cooper is a good friend, and she couldn’t be more perfect for him.”

“I feel like I know her from somewhere.”

“She’s an influencer or something.” He shrugs.

“Wait.” I turn a little in my seat and lower my voice. “She’s Parker Sanders?”

“Yes.”

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I follow Parker on social media, but she hasn't posted anything since the fallout with her ex.

When the server arrives with a fresh round of drinks, Cannon asks for the check, and once he's out of earshot, I ask, "Have you always been attracted to younger women?"

He arches a neatly trimmed brow. "Are you asking if I prefer younger women?"

I respond with a shrug.

"I've dated younger and older women. I don't have a preference. It's about the woman herself. Does our age difference bother you?"

"It doesn't really feel like there's a difference." I lean toward him and push out my lips for a kiss. "I'm aware I'm a little on the immature side, but being with you feels... comfortable. Like we fit. You know?"

He leans into my ear. "Oh, I know."

The waiter returns with our check, and after Cannon pays the bill, we head to his place.

For some reason, I pictured Cannon living in a high-rise somewhere downtown near the office. I'm surprised when he turns down a side street just a few blocks from The Village. As he navigates through the quiet neighborhood, I stare out the window taking in the big, beautiful homes with perfectly manicured lawns. The car slows before turning into a driveway belonging to a white, two-story, plantation home. The

multi-paned windows are trimmed by black shutters, and of course, the front door is red.

“This is your house?” I ask.

He shuts off the engine and looks over at me with raised brows. “Were you expecting something else?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I figured you lived in a bachelor pad or something a bit more ostentatious. This is a family home.”

“This is where I grew up.” He pushes the driver door open and climbs out. “Wait there.”

Closing the door, he rounds the front of his car to my side, taking my hand as I step out.

“My parents were high school sweethearts, married right out of high school,” he says. “Four and a half years later, they bought this house. Six months later, I was born.” He slides a key into the deadbolt, unlocking the side door, and I follow him inside.

Cannon closes and locks the door and while he disengages the alarm, I move around the small sitting room. A modern-style leather armchair is tucked into the corner. Beside it, a console table

topped with a few picture frames and a silver bowl shaped like a clam shell.

I pick up one of the framed photos. It’s dated and I assume the young couple are his parents and the little boy on the woman’s hip is Cannon.

Cannon tosses his keys into a decorative bowl then studies the image over my

shoulder. His eyes soften and he smiles.

“I wondered about your mother, but I didn’t want to pry,” I admit.

“My mother lives in Boca,” he tells me. “My parents divorced right after I graduated college. They’d grown apart, so the divorce was amicable. Two years later, my father married Heather’s mother, Julie.”

“Did you get along with her?”

“I loved Julie. She made my father happy, and she was a good mother not only to Heather, but to me as well. Heather was only nine when they married and I was twenty-four, so we didn’t have a lot in common. It took a couple years for us to warm up to each other. When they died, she clung to me like her only lifeline.

I set the frame down on the table then turn to face him. “Heather doesn’t really talk about her family.”

“Because she doesn’t have much family. Her father died when she was a baby. Her grandparents don’t really make any effort to see her.” He shrugs. “I’m pretty much all she has. She gets along pretty well with my mom and there’s my cousin, Ryan, and his daughter.”

I curl my arms around his neck, and he jerks his head to the side when my wristlet nearly smacks him in the face. “Sorry.” I laugh, before placing a chaste kiss to his lips.

He gives me a light tap on the butt. “Let me show you around.”

The house has been completely remodeled. We pass through a modern kitchen with dark blue cabinets, white marble countertops, and stainless-steel appliances that

doesn't look like he's ever used it. The living room is cozy with a slate-blue sofa and cream-colored accent chair. A flat screen hangs over the fireplace centered in the middle of the wall and it's flanked by bookshelves lined with more frames.

"I love that you have pictures of your family everywhere," I say, taking a few moments to look at the framed photos.

"I have a lot of good memories."

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We continue the tour, passing a dining room, an office, and a half bath on the way upstairs where the bedrooms and additional bathrooms are. The master bedroom reminds me of our room at Veil, only less gothic. The walls and furniture are black, the bedding is black and white with a monogrammed throw pillow in the center. Black-and-white photos encased in silver frames are arranged neatly on the walls. It's classy, like something out of a Ralph Lauren ad. I can't help but wonder how much time Desiree spent in this bed. Damn it.

An awkward tension stretches between us. I know he's waiting for me to address the elephant who's managed to squeeze her beautiful ass into this small space between us. I'm not sure how I feel about it or if I really want to bring it up at all. Not until I have a moment to process exactly what it is I'm feeling. Am I mad he was with her for years? Of course not. He's thirty-seven. I'm aware he had a life before me. I wouldn't even say I'm jealous. Before Cannon, I was never really the jealous type. This is something else. I feel possessive. Maybe a little insecure? Victor cheated on me with her because she allowed him to fuck her in ways that I wouldn't. Knowing what I do about Veil, I can't really hold a grudge against her. I do wonder if Cannon did those things with her, too. My stomach knots when I imagine what they were like together and I hate that she knows him intimately. His taste. His smell. What he feels like—his mouth, his lips, his tongue, his hands, his cock. Would he get bored with me and eventually go back to her?

"It was a long time ago," he says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I guess he wants to talk about it. I turn to face him. "I'm not mad that you had a relationship with her."

“I planned to tell you. I just didn’t want to throw everything at you at once.”

“Is it strange that I’m less bothered by the fact that she was fucking Victor behind my back for months than I am about her previous relationship with you?”

“Desiree wasn’t fucking Victor behind your back,” he snaps defensively, and I can see he instantly regrets it. “Victor was fucking Desiree behind your back,” he clarifies.

Pressing my lips together, I nod, a little annoyed. “Thanks for the clarification.”

I turn for the door, but he slams it shut. Hooking an arm around my waist, he spins me around and presses me against it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to come out that way.”

“I hate the thought of you with her.” I can’t believe I said that out loud.

“I’m not with her,” he replies as he kisses my cheeks, my jaw, and my neck. “I’m with you.”

My hands go to work on his belt, then undo his pants. He tugs at the belt around my waist and my dress falls open, sliding off my arms and pooling at my feet. He slides one hand down the back of my thigh, bringing my leg up to curl around his waist. As if he can’t wait another second, he shoves my panties to the side and thrusts inside me.

His mouth covers mine, swallowing my moans as he fucks me without apology. Claiming me as his, but in return proving that he is mine.

“Cannon,” I pant into his mouth.

Turning us away from the door, he lays me down on the bed before pulling me so my ass is hanging off the edge, then slams into me hard as I claw at him, tearing at his clothes. My throat is hoarse from crying out with every thrust. He pounds into me over and over, hitting me in that perfect spot over and over until white-hot pleasure jolts up my spine and spreads through my limbs. Stars dance in the corners of my vision and I swear I black out for a second.

Cannon's grip on my hips tightens, and he groans, "Fuck, Makayla," before coming deep inside me. "So good."

He rolls to his back, both of us panting as we struggle to catch our breath. "Desiree is not a threat to you. You're the only woman I want."

\* \* \*

"Did Desiree know about me before I came to Veil? Not as Heather's friend."

"Not until I told her." He sighs, brushing his fingers lightly over my back. "The personal lives of Veil members are none of my business. As long as their background, criminal record, and money is clean."

"How did they meet?" I ask.

His fingers pause. "He came as the guest of one of our female members." So he was cheating on me with someone before Desiree? "A few days later, he came back and met with Desiree. She gave him the tour and explained the rules just as she'd done with you. She was going through some personal stuff at the time and Victor caught her in a vulnerable state. There's a two-year waiting list, but she gave him a membership anyway. I have a strict rule about getting involved with members or potential members, and she broke it with the one asshole I hate the most."

I lift my head and prop my chin on his chest. “You’re the owner. Why didn’t you just fire her and ban Victor from the club?”

His head jerks back slightly with an expression that says are you crazy?

“Desiree is the brains, heart, and soul of Veil. She is Veil. It’s her life. Sure, she’s made some questionable decisions along the way, but I would never take away the one thing that she literally lives and breathes for.”

“How did you meet her?”

“Ironically, at a club.” He laughs. “I was twenty-five. She was twenty-two. We were together for seven years. We’ve been through a lot together and she helped me turn Veil into a very profitable business. Do I love her? Yes. She’s my best friend. Am I in love with her? No.”

“Why did you break up?”

“Because I didn’t want the same things I wanted at twenty-five. Desiree was never meant to be my forever, but she’ll always be in my life.”

I slide a hand up to his chest. “I’ll never make you choose between us, as long as I know it’s me that you want.”

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“I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you.”

I smile, moving to straddle his waist. “It doesn’t sound so creepy anymore.”

He laughs. “I’ve been thinking about selling Veil to Desiree.”

I raise my brows. “Why?”

“Because my heart’s not really into it anymore.”

“Would it hurt you financially?”

“I don’t need the money from Veil.” He smirks. “Everything I need is right here in this bed.”

I tilt my head. “I think I just swooned a little, boss man.”

He jerks forward, wrapping his arms around me. I squeal when he pins me beneath him.

“Is it too soon to tell you I love you?”

My heart nearly bursts from my chest. “Probably.” I snort. “Our relationship is completely out of order, but you’re dealing with a hopeless romantic here. So, I love you, too.”

\* \* \*

“So, what exactly is this show about?” Cannon asks.

His head rests on my lap as I rake my fingers through his soft brown hair.

“Basically, it’s about the sex lives of four best friends who live in Manhattan,” I put it simply. “That’s Carrie. She writes a column called Sex and The City and a lot of the time she uses her friends’ relationships for inspiration.”

“Why do you like it so much?”

“Because it’s not just about sex. It’s also about friendship, love, and fashion.” I laugh. “I like the dynamics of their friendship. I wish I had friends like that. I like that each episode ends with a message. For example, you can have a difference of opinion and still be friends at the end of the day.”

He hums in approval. “I like that.” He pauses. “So, which one is Samantha?” His body shakes with laughter, and I groan.

“I swear your sister has the biggest mouth.”

THIRTY

CANNON

“Good morning, Mr. Davis.” The barista smiles as she moves over to the coffee station to prepare my usual order.

“Morning.” I nod.

Turning away from the counter, I check my watch before scanning the busy lobby. My gaze slides to the revolving door and a grin tugs at my lips when I see just the

person I'm looking for.

Right on time.

“Here you go,” the barista chirps.

Pulling the cash from my pocket, I peel off a ten-dollar bill and hand it over as I take my coffee. “Thank you.”

Shoving a hand in my pocket, I stroll over to the elevator bank and lean against the wall. A small group forms outside the doors, waiting for the car to reach the bottom floor.

“Morning.” I dip my head and take a sip of my coffee.

At last, the elevator pings and the doors slide open. As the group files inside, I hear the tapping of heels against the marble floors just as a female shouts, “Hold the elevator!”

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Pushing off the wall, I use my free hand to hold the door for Tara. I swear this woman is always running late.

“Thank you, Mr. Davis.” She looks at me expectantly. “You coming?”

I look over my shoulder to the coffee bar, then back to Tara, before taking a step back. “I’ll catch the next one. Thanks.”

By the time the elevator returns, Spencer approaches carrying a coffee. “Good morning, Mr. Davis.” He nods.

“Morning, Spencer.” I swing my hand, gesturing for him to go first, then stepping inside after him.

Spencer presses the button for the eighth floor, then leans with his back against the wall as the doors slide closed.

This is going better than I’d hoped.

Reaching over, I slam my hand against the Stop button before stepping into Spencer’s personal space.

His brows dip in confusion and I have to remind myself that we’re in a work setting and he’s an employee. And though he’s a stalker, this could still turn into an HR nightmare.

“You wanna tell me why you’ve been creeping outside Makayla’s apartment?” I ask,

keeping my voice even and professional.

His face pales. “Uh... who... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No?” I quirk a brow. “So that’s not you on my camera footage staring up into Makayla’s bedroom window?”

“I’m sorry.” He lifts a hand in defense. “It only happened once.”

I tilt my head, calling bullshit.

He drags in a breath. “I like her—likedher. We dated in college and things were going pretty great until that mafia guy threatened to kill me if I didn’t break up with her.”

I snap my head back in surprise. “What guy?”

“That older guy. Tall, dark hair.”

A disbelieving laugh bursts from my chest. “Victor?”

“I guess.” He shrugs. “He didn’t tell me his name. He approached me at my graduation and told me to dump her or I wouldn’t live to see another day.”

That can’t be right. Makayla said she met Victor the day he came to her class. That would mean Victor had his eyes on Makayla long before they met.

My body shakes with laughter. I can’t help it because that’s basically what I did to Victor minus the death threat. “Why do you think he’s in the mob? Did he tell you that?”

“No, but come on. Who does that? Mafia guys. That’s who.” His eyes bug out. “I almost shit my pants.”

“Victor isn’t in the mafia,” I lie. Kind of. “He’s just an asshole who stole your girlfriend.”

Spencer takes a deep breath and relaxes against the wall. “That’s fucked.”

Poor kid. “It is,” I agree. “But you need to move on. Stop creeping around her apartment. You’re scaring her and pissing me off.”

“It won’t happen again,” he assures me and strangely enough, I believe him.

I press the button for the elevator to continue its ascent to the eighth floor, then lean against the opposite wall, eyeing him.

“You’re a good-looking kid, and there are plenty of beautiful women in this building alone, but Makayla is taken.”

“Message received.” The doors slide open, and Spencer scurries off. When the doors close behind him, I shake my head.

Victor Martin is a problem.

\* \* \*

It's nearing lunchtime as I head down to the fifteenth floor. Making my way toward Makayla's office, I take notice of the curious glances thrown in my direction. There's no policy prohibiting employees from dating as long as they keep their personal shit outside the office, but it doesn't stop the gossip mill from churning. I should probably give her a heads-up.

My angel is sitting behind her desk, eyes glued to her computer. Her facial expression says she's in business mode. I may sound a little biased, but she's pretty good at her job.

As if she senses my presence, her eyes shift to the doorway, and she smiles. "Hey, handsome."

"Angel." I grin.

Pushing off the doorframe, I enter her office, closing the door behind me. As I round her desk, she turns her chair and takes my hands. I pull her into my arms and seal my mouth over hers. "Mmm," I hum, trailing kisses over her jaw. "Have you been a good girl today?"

Pulling back, she purses her lips. "What if I said no?"

My lips curl up on one side. "Then I'll have to spank that sweet ass of yours."

"Maybe I'll be bad more often," she taunts.

“Won’t hear me complaining. It’s a win-win for me either way.” I drop a kiss to her lips. “Come on. I’m taking you to lunch.”

On the way to the elevator, Makayla chats animatedly about how she's never had a hobby and wants to take a painting class at some art gallery in The Village. All the while she’s completely oblivious to the glares from her coworkers.

At the deli downstairs, she grabs us a table while I get our sandwiches.

“I want to talk to you about something,” I start.

Makayla laughs. “You’re adorable, Cannon.”

I raise my brows. “Adorable?”

“I already know what you’re going to say. You think I didn’t notice the questioning stares from those women? I’ve been dealing with it since high school. I know what women see when they look at me. Tramp, slut, whore, gold digger, dumb, ditzy... submissive.” She huffs out a humorless laugh.

“Perceptive,” I add.

She smiles but it’s sad. “Victor used to call me a slut and a whore. I hated it, and he knew why, but he still did it to be cruel. I know it’s a kink for some, and I’m not judging, but for me, it’s sort of a trigger. I was bullied in high school and it got pretty bad. It all started because Brittany’s boyfriend flirted with me. The guy was a jerk and he flirted with a lot of girls. There were rumors he was cheating too. Anyway, it was gradual. First there were the whispers and going out of their way to exclude me. They would make plans right in front of me and then say ‘You can’t come, Makayla, because I don’t want you flirting with my boyfriend’. It was catty stuff like that. They didn’t want me around because they didn’t like their boyfriends paying attention to

me. It wasn't my fault. I was always polite to them but I never flirted back. Then the guys started in on me and I'm sure you can imagine all the crude things teenage boys say." Her eyes shimmer with tears and she shakes her head as if she's trying to shove back the memories. "Then it escalated to rumors that I had sex with this guy, or that guy. Then it was two guys. I didn't even know who they were. The football players would cough 'whore' into their fists when I walked down the hall. They were so mean." I clench my fists under the table. I hate every single person who has ever hurt her. "I had a boyfriend senior year but he couldn't handle everyone calling his girlfriend a whore, so he broke up with me." She drags in a breath and blows it out slowly. "Defending myself over and over became exhausting. I finally just gave up. Women are no different. They look at me and they think 'who did she blow to get this job?'" She snickers and I can't help but laugh.

"You got the job on your own," I remind her.

"They don't know that. All they see is a young blonde with perky tits. Either I'm dumb or I'm sucking someone's dick. And they'd be right."

I don't know what comes over me, but I'm out of my chair and crouching in front of her.

Cupping her face, I tell her, "The moment I laid eyes on you, I saw a beautiful, smart, confident young woman. I saw a woman I wanted to call mine."

Her eyes well with tears. "I am yours."

Leaning forward, I press a chaste kiss to her lips. "Do you want me to call a meeting to sort out the gossip mill upstairs?"

She snorts a laugh. "That will go over almost as well as the time my mother marched into the principal's office and demanded they make everyone be nice to me."

I laugh. “She sounds like a good mother.”

A soft smile pulls at her lips. “The best.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “Eat your sandwich.”

While we finish our lunch, she tells me how her mom arranged a prom just for her and the few friends who hadn’t abandoned her. It makes me sick how cruel kids are to each other.

I wonder if Heather ever went through that. I’d like to think she would’ve told me if that were the case. She struggled for a few years after our parents died, but she stayed out of trouble for the most part. She was quiet and introverted. At least that’s what I thought, until she showed up at my club with our neighbor, Tommy. I gave that fucker one week to pack up his shit and get the fuck out of dodge or I was going to bury his ass.

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On the way back to Makayla's office, I tell her, "Saturday night, I have a charity thing. Will you come with me?"

"Hmm." She rolls her eyes toward the ceiling and taps her chin. "Do I want to put on a fancy dress and go on a date with an attractive man?" She drags her gaze back to me and beams. "Yes, please."

I laugh again, appreciating this side of her that I didn't get to experience at Veil.

She's so fucking sweet.

THIRTY-ONE

MAKAYLA

The charity dinner is downtown at the old hotel near the college. Cannon hooks an arm around my waist and leads me toward a group of men. My gaze falls on one man in particular and I suck in a breath.

"That's my cousin, Ryan," Cannon whispers close to my ear.

"He's just...." I turn to look at him. "I mean.... I can see the resemblance."

"I love how flustered you are," he says with a chuckle. "Don't worry. He gets that reaction a lot."

I bump him with my shoulder. "Who are the other men?"

“Old friends.”

“Ryan,” Cannon says as we approach. “This is Makayla. Makayla, this is my cousin, Ryan.”

Ryan holds out his hand and smiles. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Makayla.”

“Uh... you too,” I squeak.

Cannon gestures to the two other men in the group. One has dark blond hair and the other has brown hair. Judging by the similarity in their facial features, my guess is they’re related. I recognize the one with brown hair as the guy Heather danced with that first night at Veil. “These gentlemen are my good friends, Gio and Enzo Cantore.”

I knew it. I offer my hand. “Hello.”

While they both seem friendly, there’s a flicker of something in their eyes that screams danger.

“Where are your dates?” Cannon asks.

“At the bar,” Gio, the one with the dark blond hair, replies.

“You made it,” a familiar female voice says.

I look over to see Desiree approaching with a smile I didn’t think she was capable of. She’s dressed in an off-shoulder black beaded gown that hugs her perfect body. Beside her is a gorgeous dark-haired woman in a jeweled, blush-colored gown with a slit up the side.

Desiree pauses beside Gio, while the other woman moves to Enzo's side.

"You look stunning, Makayla," she says, and I can tell she means it.

"Thank you." I smile, smoothing a hand over the emerald-green gown I picked out with Heather's help.

"I'm Natalia," the other woman says with a smile and extends her hand.

"Makayla," I return, then look over at Cannon. "Where are the restrooms?"

"I'll show you," Desiree offers.

"Thanks." Cannon squeezes my hip before dropping his hand. "I'll be right back," I tell him.

Desiree curls an arm around mine and steers us toward the restrooms. I haven't seen or spoken to Desiree since that last night at Veil. The tension between us is as thick and suffocating as the humidity in August. "Makayla, I want you to know that Cannon and I are just friends. Best friends. We have a lot of history but there hasn't been anything romantic or sexual between us in a long time."

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:31 am*

I try not to picture Desiree and Cannon in any sexual scenario. “I’m not bothered by your friendship with Cannon.”

She nods once. “Good.”

I push through the door of the ladies’ room and slip into one of the empty stalls. Desiree is leaning against the counter when I step out to wash my hands. “So... Gio?” I smirk.

The smile that spreads across her pretty face is blinding, and that of a woman in love. “Gio and I are a complicated mess, but we’re working through our issues one day at a time.” Her expression turns apologetic. “The thing with Victor wasn’t serious. Gio and I had just broken up and I needed a distraction. If I had known—”

I shake my head. “Victor is in the past. He was bad for me—for anyone really.” I shrug.

“You’re right about that,” she agrees.

Grabbing the handle, I swing open the bathroom door and step out, slamming into a hard body.

Desiree gasps behind me. “Oh.” I stumble. “I’m so sorry.”

A pair of hands grips my upper arms to steady me. “You should watch where you’re going, kitten.”

I jerk my gaze up, lock eyes with Victor, and let out a strangled gasp.

“What are you doing here?” Desiree snaps.

He throws her a scathing look that sends a chill down my spine. “I’m here for the same reason you are. Charity.” His gaze shifts back to me, raking over me from head to toe, and he grins. His gaze slides briefly to Desiree, then back to me.

“We should get back,” Desiree says, hooking her arm around mine again and leading me away.

“See you around, Makayla,” Victor calls out.

“Why did that feel like a threat?” I murmur.

“Because it was,” she says. “He is one unstable man.”

## THIRTY-TWO

### CANNON

Makayla stands at the mirror blow-drying her hair, and the long blonde locks floating around her face reminds me of graduation day outside the auditorium. She was pure perfection in my eyes. Pretty and sweet, just like her perfume. And her pussy.

Tucking my arms behind my head, I watch in fascination as she twists her hair into a fancy bun and fastens it at the nape of her neck. It’s such a trivial thing but I want to watch her do it every morning. It’s been so long since I’ve been in a relationship, and the last woman I lived with was Desiree, so I don’t know the proper etiquette for asking my girlfriend to move in. If I had my way, I’d just move all her stuff over while she was at work, but I’m not going to bulldoze her to get my way.

Turning from the mirror, she walks out of the bathroom, dressed in only her bra and panties, and crosses the room to where her dress is hanging on the closet door. She's tall and willowy, and moves with the grace of a ballerina. On the outside, she appears delicate, but on the inside, she's fierce and the strongest young woman I've ever met.

She steps into her dress, pushing her arms through the sleeves, and reaches for the zipper.

"Need some help?" I ask.

She gasps as she spins around to face me with a hand pressed to her chest. "You scared me." She sashays over to my side of the bed and smiles down at me. "Did I wake you?"

"Only because you're not in this bed beside me." I gesture for her to turn around so I can zip up her dress. Then I curl an arm around her waist and pull her on top of me. "I miss you already."

"I haven't even left yet." She wiggles from my hold and stands from the bed, smoothing out her dress.

My lips pull to the side in a lazy grin. "Every minute away from my girlfriend is a minute too long."

She purses her lips, amused.

"It's true," I confess.

I'm crazy in love with this woman.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:31 am*

“I love being your girlfriend.” She smiles and I love seeing the flush of pink on her cheeks.

It’s been three months since our first date, and according to Makayla, when we became official. The time we spent together at Veil doesn’t count because I wasn’t Cannon, I was X. I laughed at that, but she had a point. I’m just relieved she forgave me, Heather, and Desiree.

We spend every second of our free time together, in and out of bed. Whether it’s dinner, the movies, or just a walk around The Village. Sometimes we double-date with Heather and Jesse. I take her out as often as she likes, because she’s never really had the dating experience.

Which reminds me....

“I can’t have lunch with you today,” I tell her. “I’m meeting with the Cantore brothers, and then we’re going to look at some property.”

Disappointment passes over her face, but she smiles anyway. “I know. You told me last night.” She heads back into the bathroom and I watch her reflection as she swipes lip gloss across those delicious lips.

I’m fully aware the ladies in the office have been stand-offish with her, but Makayla won’t let me interfere. She wants to earn their respect as their co-worker and not as the boss’s girlfriend.

One of the things I love the most about her is that even after the hell she went through

with the bullies, and then Victor, she never allowed it to touch her kindness.

She still sees the world through rose-colored glasses, and I'll never let anyone—including myself—ruin that for her.

Which is why I decided not to tell her about Spencer. I don't like that he was creeping around the apartment, but I feel a little sorry for the kid. Victor forced him to give up Makayla. Who knows how long it took him to work up the nerve to ask her out.

I also didn't tell her that Victor was likely the one sending her those roses. So I've taken the liberty of hand delivering one to her every Friday before date night. Which is tonight. Shit. I'll need to swing by Veil and steal one from Desiree.

There's been no sign of Victor since the charity dinner. According to my sources, he's been in Dubai working on a new hotel expansion. With Spencer handled and Victor out of the country, Makayla is no longer in danger. So I've called off the security stud, even though he still lives in the apartment.

Makayla walks out of the bathroom and over to the closet, slipping her feet into a pair of heels. Ones I bought for her after the other pair went missing.

It was a manipulative move, I know. But I'm going to erase every trace of Victor, even if it means I have to revamp her entire wardrobe.

"I probably won't be back before you leave the office, so I'll come straight to your apartment afterward and take you to dinner."

"Sounds like a plan." She bends down and kisses me chastely on the lips. "I love you."

"I love you, more." I smack her on the butt. "Be a good girl today."

Yeah. We're that couple.

## THIRTY-THREE

### MAKAYLA

It's lunchtime and I'm stuck eating at my desk by myself. Cannon had a meeting with the Cantore brothers, and Heather had a lunch date with Jesse. I haven't had much girl-time with my bestie—except for the occasional double-date—but she seems much happier since they worked things out.

One of the downsides of being the boss's girlfriend is that everyone treats me like I have some contagious disease. They're not rude or anything, just indifferent. It's like high school all over again.

I'm mindlessly picking at my Caesar salad when there's a sharp knock on my door. I lift my head to see Jane walking into my office, holding a shiny black box. Instead of the usual long box, this one is rectangular and wrapped with a red satin bow. "This just came for you." She sets it on my desk.

"Was there a card?"

"I didn't look." She gives a careless shrug. "It's probably from your boyfriend."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes and tell her to grow the fuck up but instead I say, "Thanks."

She nods once with a tight smile and turns to leave my office, but then I change my mind. Because fuck that.

"Jane," I call before she reaches the door.

She stops and turns to face me, brows raised. “Hmm?”

I point at her with my fork. “You’re married right?” I ask.

Her face pinches in confusion. “Yes.”

“Happily?”

“Very.”

Nodding, I take another bite of my salad, chew and then swallow. “That’s what I thought.” I grab the to-go cup and take a long sip through the straw. “Have I insulted your hair, makeup, clothing? Have I threatened your job? Did I eat your last banana pudding?”

“No,” she says, dragging out the word.

“Then please explain why you’re so butthurt over who I’m dating?” I quirk a brow.

Her mouth falls open but no words are coming out.

I nod again. “That’s what I thought.” I gesture to the door with my fork. “Please close the door on your way out.”

Jane does as I ask and surprisingly, she doesn’t slam my door.

Pushing my salad to the side, I stand and slide the box toward me, remove the bow, and lift the lid. A blue rose rests on top of red tissue paper. I remove the rose and push aside the tissue paper to find a red silk scarf, matching red silk panties, and a note.

Meet me at Veil at 6 p.m. I have a surprise for you. ~ X

Lookslike Cannon wants to play. I consider calling him and pretend to cancel our date night because I have plans with X, but I don't want to interrupt his meeting.

\* \* \*

It's well after 5 p.m. by the time I finish work, so I decide to head straight to Veil from the office.

I call for the elevator and a moment later, the doors slide open revealing Heather inside.

"You're working late," she says, eyeing the box tucked under my arm.

"I had a few things to wrap up, so I figured I'd stay late and get them done then head to Veil from here." I tap the box. "I'm meeting X tonight for a play date."

Heather grins. "I like this version of you, Makayla."

I mirror her grin. "I'm happy."

"I know." She gestures to my face. "You're fucking glowing."

"Because I have the bestest friend in the whole world and a man who loves me."

"That you do." The elevator opens and we cross the lobby to the parking garage. "Have fun tonight," Heather says with a little wave as she heads to her car.

"I always have fun playing with your brother," I call out, laughing when she flips me off.

## THIRTY-FOUR

### CANNON

My meeting ran way later than expected. I'd wanted to take Makayla to dinner, but it's already close to six, and I'm still with Gio and Enzo on the other side of town. I try calling her but keep getting her voicemail. A nagging sense of foreboding washes over me, so I call my sister.

"Hey," she answers on the second ring.

"Where's Makayla?" I snap, causing both Cantore brothers to look up from their phones with interest.

"Well, hello to you too."

"Hello, little sister," I say with fake pleasantries. "Do you know where Makayla is?"

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“She’s at Veil,” she replies in a tone that implies I’m asking a stupid question.

“Why is she at Veil?” My heart stops.

“Um.... Meeting you?”

“She’s not meeting me. What did she say?” I yell.

Heather’s voice is shaky and I can tell she’s on the verge of tears. “She caught up with me in the elevator. She had a black box tucked under arm. She said she was meeting X for a playdate.”

My chest tightens, my throat constricts, and my world stops spinning. “Fuck!” I shout, hanging up on Heather.

“What’s wrong?” Gio asks as I pull up Desiree’s contact.

Before I press send, a text comes through from an unknown number. I tap on the notification and bring up the text. There’s no message. Just a picture of a single blue rose stuck inside a slim vase and I recognize the table it’s sitting on. Sonofabitch.

“Tell the driver to head to Veil and to hurry the fuck up.” I don’t even recognize my own voice.

I can’t fucking breathe.

I go back to Desiree’s contact and press the Call icon. Bringing the phone to my ear, I

loosen my tie as her phone rings. “Pick up the fucking phone, Desiree,” I growl through clenched teeth.

My gaze bounces between Enzo and Gio, who are watching me with matching expressions of anger and concern. The call connects, and I freeze. The fraction of a second it takes for her to answer feels like years.

“Canon!” Desiree’s scream pierces through the phone and my heart shatters.

THIRTY-FIVE

MAKAYLA

I’m lying in the middle of the bed, arms down at my sides, wearing the red satin panties Canon sent me this afternoon with the red silk scarf secured tightly around my eyes.

There’s a shift in the air the moment he enters the room, but the energy I normally feel from him is missing. Maybe he had a bad day. The tapping of his dress shoes against the wood floor gets closer until it stops and I can feel him standing close by. Goose bumps prick my skin, but not in anticipation. It’s something entirely different this time.

Awareness.

Something soft brushes across my shoulder, and I recognize the familiar rich, spicy smell of the blue rose as it trails down the center of my chest, brushing over the nipple of my right breast, down my stomach, the edge of my panties, then back up to my left breast.

The bed dips under his weight as he climbs over me, his knees sinking into the

mattress on either side of my hips. He grabs my hands and pins them above my head. Panic fills my chest when I hear the rustling of fabric before something soft and silky tightens around my wrists and another tug tells me I'm being restrained. Fear suddenly takes over when I realize I missed three important details: He didn't call me angel. He didn't ask me if I was a good girl today. And his familiar woodsy scent is missing.

"Canon?" I whisper.

"You always did look good in red, kitten."

My breath catches in my throat at the sound of Victor's voice. My eyes pop open behind the scarf, and my heart stops.

"Victor." I struggle to pull my hands free, which only makes the knot around my wrists tighter. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to relax. "What are you doing?" I ask in a steady voice.

The bed shifts again as he covers my body with his. The buttons of his dress shirt press into my skin as he grinds his erection against my center.

"I'm taking back what's mine," he growls, his breath infused with alcohol, before sealing his mouth over mine.

Pressing my lips together, I turn my head. "Victor, stop. Why are you doing this?"

"Because you belong with me." He pulls my earlobe between his teeth before pressing his lips to my neck. "I watched you." He pauses. "With him."

My body stiffens, and he moves up to straddle my waist, his weight pressing down on my abdomen. His strong hand clamps around my throat, cutting off my air, and a

gurgling sound expels from my lips. Instinctively, I buck my hips, fighting for oxygen as my mind drifts back to that day in his penthouse and the horrific scene he'd etched into my brain.

“You were mine first,” he yells.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:31 am*

Stars dance behind my eyes as chaos explodes around me. The collective sound of hurried footsteps pounding against the wood floor and raised voices gets louder. My body is jerked violently as Victor's nails dig into the skin of my neck.

Suddenly, his weight is gone, and I suck in a breath. There's a roar, a grunt, and the distinct sound of flesh meeting flesh. It takes a moment to register what's happening.

The bed dips again, and I let out a scream.

"It's okay, Makayla," a female voice whispers. Desiree.

Shaky fingers brush against my wrists as they work to loosen the knot. My shoulders are on fire as my arms go lax.

Reaching for the blindfold, I shove it away from my eyes and wince at the bright light. Blinking, I allow my eyes to adjust before rolling to the side and witnessing Cannon raining punches down on Victor while Gio and Enzo stand nearby with their guns drawn.

My gasp has all heads turning to me with wide eyes. A deep growl rumbles from Cannon's chest, his nostrils flared. His gaze drops to the red satin panties, then up to my chest, and I realize I'm practically naked. Desiree moves to my side, covering me with a sheet before wrapping her arm around my shoulders.

Cannon rises from the floor and rushes over to the bed, pulling me into his arms. "Are you okay?"

Face buried in his chest, I inhale his familiar woodsy scent and nod as fear, panic, and relief wash over me all at once. Then I burst into tears.

“Angel,” he whispers, cupping the back of my head.

Victor lets out a humorless chuckle. “You can’t kill me, Cantore. It’s against the rules.”

Gio lets out a laugh that sends a chill down my spine. “I know the rules, shit stain.”

I pull back in time to see him tucking his gun behind his back before extending a hand to Victor and helping him up from the floor. Victor sways on his feet as his angry stare bounces between the men, then to Desiree, before settling on me.

Cannon's arms tighten around me, his body shaking with anger. Still holding his gun, Enzo jerks his head to the side, and Victor stumbles out of the room.

“Gio,” Desiree murmurs beside me.

As Gio makes his way over, I take in his dark blond hair and the scruff lining his jaw.

“What is it, amore mio?” he asks, his voice soft and affectionate.

The adoration in his light eyes contradicts the evil I’d heard in his laugh. Jaw clenched, he lifts his hand and gently cups her cheek. It’s only then that I notice her battered face, and I suck in a breath.

“Don’t kill him,” she pleads.

My body stills, and I look up at Cannon with wide eyes. “We should call the police and press charges,” I suggest.

Cannon flinches at the hoarseness of my voice. His eyes move to my throat, and his expression hardens. Nostrils flared, he shakes his head.

“We don’t involve the police in family matters,” Gio says.

I look to Gio, my brows pinched in confusion. “Family?”

Cannon’s arms tighten around me. A silent warning to stop asking questions.

Gio smirks. “We won’t kill him.” He dips his head. “You have my word.”

Turning my attention back to Cannon, I tell him, “Victor said he watched us together.”

Cannon gestures to the floor-length mirror. “It’s a two-way mirror. There’s a small room on the other side.” I remember the small keyholes I’d seen the day Desiree gave me a tour. “It’s for those who like to be watched,” he explains. “But you need a key to get in. I used it as a secret entrance to avoid running into you.”

“Victor probably stole the key from me and made himself a copy,” Desiree admits as tears slide down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Makayla, for everything.”

My mouth dips into a frown, and I shake my head. “None of this is your fault. We’re both victims.” I reach for her hand. “Are you okay?”

She nods. “I am. Thank you.”

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Cannon presses his lips to my temple. “Come on. I’m taking you home.”

### EPILOGUE

#### MAKAYLA

Three years later...

Ilie in the middle of our bed, arms at my sides. A silk sleep mask covers my eyes, but I don’t need to see to know he’s close. My heart pounds in my chest as I work to keep my breaths steady. Goose bumps prick my skin in anticipation of his deep, velvety greeting before he grabs my chin and presses his mouth to mine. I part my lips, and he slips his tongue into my mouth. He tastes like mint.

He pulls away to pepper kisses over my jaw and down to that sensitive spot just below my ear

as he pushes the mask away from my face. “Were you a good girl today?” He smirks.

“Yes,” I whine.

Cannon and I have been married for a year now. Six months after he proposed, we decided on a small wedding in Key West. Heather was my maid of honor, and Ryan—the other Davis—was Cannon’s best man.

After the incident with Victor, Cannon asked me to move in with him, claiming he couldn’t sleep without me beside him every night. I wanted that too, but I realized

even though our relationship was very different from what I had with Victor, the pattern was the same. My need to be loved and respected, equally and wholly, had allowed another relationship to move on fast forward. I didn't want that with Cannon. I wanted to savor every second with him. I wanted more dinner dates with a fountain view, sweet kisses, and late night reruns of my favorite TV show. And I got all of those things and more.

Three months later, I moved in.

Cannon sold Veil to Desiree, and now she and her husband, Gio, run it together.

I don't know what happened to Victor after that day, but Cannon assures me that he's alive, unfortunately—his words not mine—and running the Martin Hotel in Dubai. Victor was a horrible man, but I don't wish death on him.

"I just spoke to your dad," Cannon tells me. "They'll be here in the morning."

My parents love Cannon, especially my dad. While he never voiced his opinion on my dating an older man, nor had he ever flat-out admitted that he disliked Victor, I knew my dad only tolerated him for me. Naturally, I was worried he wouldn't like Cannon, either, but they hit it off instantly. Twice a month, we drive down to Sarasota to take them to lunch. Sometimes we go down to Boca to visit Cannon's mom. I was so nervous meeting her for the first time. In all the months I was with Victor, he never introduced me to his family. That should've been a red flag that things were off.

"And your mom?" I ask.

"Same." He trails his lips down to my swollen belly. "How's my princess doing today?"

At the sound of his voice, she kicks. "I think she's ready to meet her daddy."

Tomorrow, I'm going to be induced. I've been on bedrest for the past two weeks. I'm miserable, swollen, and ready to bring our little girl into the world.

Cannon curls up beside me, his dark brown eyes staring into my blue ones. "What are you thinking?"

My smile is warm and full of affection. "I'm thinking no fantasy could ever compare to this beautiful reality."