



Vicious King

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Crime And Mafia, Dark

Description: The Dark Dynasty trilogy continues – step into the dark, scandalous world of America’s elite and discover their sinful secrets, twisted lies, and dirty desires...

I’m his captive. His toy. Sold into his possession to pay for my wicked deeds.

I tell myself I hate him, but every time he steps into my cage, my body betrays me. I fear him and want him at the same time.

I don’t even recognize myself anymore, and I can’t tell what’s real.

Can’t tell where the lies end and the truth begins. All I know for sure is that I’m trapped with him.

I don’t want to show weakness. I don’t want to surrender to the darkness. I want to make it out of his clutches and expose him to the world. But something is becoming clearer to me with every day that passes...

He’ll never be done with me.

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Elias

“You fucking lied to me.”

I looked my father square in the face. He seemed a lot older, weaker, but he still met my cool gaze with sharp eyes.

“Lied to you? About what?” He sat up straighter, grimacing as he tried his best not to move his neck. “That’s a nice way to greet me after I almost died, by the way.”

I ignored his sarcasm. “I guess the doctor didn’t tell you the entire situation yet. I tried to donate blood to you, and there were complications. That’s part of the reason you almost died after Tatum stabbed you.”

Comprehension dawned in his pale blue-green eyes, and he waited for me to go on, guilt slowly etching itself into his sharp features.

“Somehow, my A-negative mother....” I picked up the chart on his bedside table and squinted at it. “And my O-negative father,” I continued. “Managed to produce a B-positive child. Care to explain that mysterious anomaly, Dad?”

He shook his head and cursed softly under his breath. “Shit... I knew this would come out one day,” he muttered. He rubbed his lined forehead. “I know I should’ve told you, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“Told me what?” I asked sharply. “That I’m not really your son?”

“For Christ’s sake, Elias, you are my son. Let me explain.”

I held my hands up, palms facing him. “Okay. Go ahead.”

“I’ve discussed your mother with you in the past. She had quite a few health issues. Thyroid problems, mostly.”

I nodded.

“After we got married, we started trying for a baby. I was a man with everything except an heir to share it all with. I wanted that. We both wanted that. A child to share our lives and fortune with. A child who could carry on everything I’ve built over the years. But your mother’s health issues proved very... difficult.”

“So you adopted me and never bothered to tell me?” I narrowed my eyes.

“No. Please be patient. It’s a long story.” He sighed and looked past me, then closed his eyes for a moment. “We tried everything, all the best doctors, but your mother couldn’t fall pregnant. Something to do with her eggs. She wasn’t producing any viable ones. So we finally made the decision to go in another direction. After a careful search, we found an egg donor. A sample taken from me was used to fertilize one of the eggs using in-vitro technology. Then that egg was successfully implanted in your mother’s womb. You grew inside her, and she gave birth to you. She might not have been your biological mother, and yes, I suppose you inherited your blood type from the donor, but Sylvie carried you all those months and she died birthing you. I was right there when she died, and I saw the way she looked at you before her eyes closed. She was your mother, Elias.”

I sat down, a cold feeling creeping over my chest. “Oh.”

He rubbed his face. “I wanted to tell you, believe me. But I just thought....” He shook his head and trailed off.

“Thought what?”

“You already knew from day one that your mother wasn’t around and that she died when you were born. I thought that was already traumatic enough as it was without adding on the story of your true biological parentage.”

“Why?”

“I thought you might develop some horrible theory that you didn’t belong in this world, because it was so hard to bring you into existence—with the donor and the IVF and all—and then your mother died giving birth on top of that.”

I set my lips in a tight, grim line. That made sense, I suppose, but only in a shallow way. “I might’ve thought that when I was a child, but surely by the time I was an adult, it would’ve been safe to tell me.”

“I know, I know. I thought about telling you many times over the years. But it kept getting away from me. Every time I tried to do it, I thought it was too late because I’d already waited so long. I didn’t know how you’d react, and I kept picturing the worst. I didn’t want to lose you. You’re my only son. The only one who can truly continue my legacy.”

“You could’ve remarried and had more children, if you were so worried about that,” I pointed out. “Sorry to be so cold and blunt, but you know what I mean.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Remember the car accident I was in when you were a toddler?”

“Not really, but I remember hearing about it a few times. Down in New York, right?”

“Yes. Well, anyway, it did quite a lot of... shall we say, structural damage to certain areas. While I can still perform the necessary activities required to create a child, if you catch my drift, I’ve been sterile ever since the accident.”

I rubbed my jaw and exhaled. “Shit. I never knew that.”

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“Not exactly something I’m overjoyed to admit to my son, let alone anyone else,” he muttered. “There’s nothing less emasculating to me than knowing I can’t father children anymore.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said.

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth about your conception. I always had a feeling it would come back to haunt me one day, but as I said, I just couldn’t find the right time or the right words to tell you.”

“I understand.”

“Forgive me, son?”

I shrugged. “Sure. And for what it’s worth, I really am glad you pulled through. You looked terrible back there.”

“I probably still do,” he said with a wry smile. “Fortunately, I’m on just enough painkillers to not care.”

I returned his smile and stood up. “I should probably let you get some rest. You must be exhausted.”

He nodded and yawned. “Come and see me again in the morning.” He glanced at the clock. “The real morning, that is.”

“Will do.” I went to leave the room but turned back a second later as curiosity

gnawed at my guts. “Can I ask you a couple of things before I go? It won’t take long.”

“Of course.”

“What should I do with Tatum? I never thought she would go this crazy. Obviously it’s more than acting at this point. She really can’t stand being with me. I mean, she hates me so much that she stabbed you just to get at me.”

“Yes.” His eyes narrowed and he let out an angry puff of air. “Well, after what the little bitch did, I know exactly what I’d want to do, but in the end, I suppose she’s yours. Punish her as you see fit.”

“You don’t think we should terminate the contract and send her home? Or send her straight to a fucking psych ward?”

His upper lip curled slightly upward. “No. You’ve only had her a few months, and she’s still in training. She’ll settle down. Like I’ve always said, she knew exactly what she signed up for when she gave herself to the society. And we all know what a good little actress she is. She isn’t crazy. She’s just faking it all for attention. Trust me.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Right.”

“What was the other thing?”

I hesitated for a few seconds before responding. This subject could be sensitive. “The egg donor,” I finally said. “Do you have any records on her, or contact details?”

Now that I knew the truth, I was curious about my background on my biological mother’s side. Of course, I knew she wasn’t my mother like Sylvie was, because she

didn't carry me or give birth to me, but the immediate urge to know where my genes came from had stoked a burning thirst for answers.

“What? Why?” Something zapped across my father's gaze for a second, making his pale face bright and alive for an instant. It was fleeting, but I didn't miss it. He was angry at me for asking.

“Just curious. There's this whole new side of me I never knew about till now. Wouldn't mind finding out more.”

“No.” Something glinted in his eyes again, hard and dense as steel. “She wasn't your mother, so there's no need for you to go digging around. I don't have any information on her anyway.”

I frowned. It wasn't exactly an unreasonable request on my behalf. I was conceived twenty-four years ago, back when medical testing for heritable illnesses and conditions wasn't at the standard it was nowadays. Back then, the egg donor might've seemed like a good choice, but for all I knew, certain health issues ran in her family that I might want to know about. Heritable forms of cancer, heart disease, chromosomal abnormalities, mental illnesses... all manner of things I might want to know about for my own sake and my future children's sake, if I ever decided to have any.

I deserved to be informed, as much as it might upset my father.

I outlined this to him, expecting him to understand.

Instead, there was that flash of steel again. “Leave it alone, Elias. Sylvie was your mother, and she sacrificed her life for you. Don't taint her memory by searching for another woman to replace her!”

I narrowed my eyes. Again, my request wasn't unreasonable. I wasn't looking to replace my mother's memory with another woman. I just wanted simple information.

Dad was overreacting, trying to guilt-trip me into dropping the subject, but I didn't want to. His reticence made me suspicious all over again (along with the fact he claimed not to have any information on the egg donor, when he simply had to) and I wanted to shake him until he told me everything he knew about her.

Of course, I couldn't do that. Not now. He was weak, frail. It would have to wait.

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow," I said curtly.

I swept out of the room and strode down the hall. It was late, but I was wide awake now, filled with pumping adrenaline and fury.

I was going to take out some of that anger as soon as I could, and I was going to do it to the person who deserved it most of all.

Tatum.

2

Tatum

Elias returned to the island sooner than I thought.

I'd wondered if he'd stay on the mainland with his father while he was recovering in the hospital, but now I realized that was simply wishful thinking.

I was in trouble, deep trouble, and I wanted to delay my punishment—or death—as long as possible. But it was only the morning after my escape attempt, and here he was, a scowl on his face and dark malice flashing in his eyes as he stared down at me in my bloodstained bed.

Terror surged in my mind, and my blood felt like ice in my veins. These could be my last few moments on Earth, but my tongue was tied, so I couldn't even fall to my knees on the floor and beg for mercy.

“Get up,” Elias said, venom practically dripping from his tongue. His nose wrinkled as he caught sight of my filthy, scratched-up feet and the dried blood caking my hair. “You're fucking disgusting.”

I finally choked out a couple of words as he dragged me to my feet. “Please, Elias...”

He cut me off. “Haven't you already murdered enough of my family members?” he asked, eyes blazing.

I cowered, my legs trembling like mad. “I’m so sorry,” I mumbled. “Really, I’m sorry.”

He narrowed his eyes and slammed me up against the wall. “I think I’ve heard that bullshit word from you enough already, you lying little slut.” He sneered. “Let me guess... you’re going to claim this incident was an accident as well? You tripped and accidentally stabbed my father in the fucking neck as you fell?”

I shook my head helplessly. “No. It wasn’t an accident. But I do regret it. I swear. Please believe me.”

“No shit. Of course it wasn’t an accident. You planned this. A bedspring, huh? Hidden in the vent? Smart, I’ll give you that. But now you know that even if you got away with that little scheme, you’d never really get away with it.”

“I know,” I said in a ragged whisper. “We’re on an island. I get it, Elias. You’ve trapped me. I was trapped all along...”

A vicious smile curled up the corner of his lips. “How long did you think you’d be able to trick me?”

“What?”

His nostrils flared. “You pretended to want me. Pretended like you might have actually accepted your place here. But the whole time, you were scheming and plotting.”

“So were you,” I said. I immediately regretted it. As much as I hated the thought of him laughing behind my back over his plan to trick me into thinking he wasn’t aware that I was here against my will, pointing out his hypocrisy at a time like this wouldn’t help my case in the slightest.

He leaned closer, his hot, angry breath right on my face. “How fucking long?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured. “For a while, I really believed I wanted you. I swear I did. I wasn’t plotting anything then. But it went away when I started to think straight again.”

Did it, though?

Hot shame built in my core as I considered this intrusive new question. As much as I despised Elias after discovering his true nature yesterday morning, some traitorous part of me actually felt guilty for hurting him. Disappointing him. He obviously wanted me to want him, wanted me to fall for him, despite his loathing for me, and I’d made him believe he was getting his way before turning around and stabbing him in the back.

Well, I stabbed his father in the neck, to be specific, but the point still stood. I led him to believe one thing, and then I betrayed him. He was the one person in here who could decide my fate, and as a result of my actions, I’d well and truly ruined whatever twisted fragment of a relationship we had before now.

How could I do that?

The thought filled me with teeming shame and regret. Just a week ago on that altar in the woods, I told him I wanted him, needed him, and then I nearly killed one of the people closest to him. I was an awful, terrible, evil girl. A toy that deserved to be broken.

Stop it, stop it, stop it, I chanted in my mind, trying to stop myself from careening down this mad path again. But I couldn’t stem the heavy flow of guilt. The stark realization that I still had some sort of feelings for Elias, still felt some sort of strange connection with him, made a cold sensation slither through my guts like a serpent.

I suddenly realized I could've jumped yesterday. I could've plunged right into the ocean off that rugged cliff and made an attempt to swim away. Yeah, I would've most likely been smashed on the rocks below or carried away in a cold current, struggling to stay afloat and shivering violently as I sank, legs and arms finally giving way with frozen exhaustion. But at least I would've tried. At least there would've been a chance at survival, as infinitesimally small as it was sure to be.

Earlier, I'd told myself that it was an obvious choice to remain on dry land. The likelihood that I would've died in the escape attempt was enormous, especially as I didn't even know which direction to swim in to reach the mainland.

But now, a sneaky voice in the back of my head was whispering to me, telling me that it wasn't the only reason I gave up and let the mansion guards bring me back here. Perhaps part of me didn't want to leave, alive or dead... that same part of me that wanted Elias last week, against my better judgment. Perhaps that same tiny, fractious part of me kept me here, desperate to see Elias again.

The realization made me shudder, but I couldn't stop the feelings from coming, no more than I could stem the flow of gut-wrenching guilt. The voice in the back of my head grew louder, turning from a whisper to a screech like iron nails scraping against rock.

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“Please forgive me,” I said, tears spilling from my eyes. “Please, Elias.”

“Now why would I do that?” he said. He grabbed my right arm and yanked me toward the door.

I screamed and tried to dig my heels in as he pulled me down the hall, but as usual, he was much stronger than me. “Don’t kill me! Please!” I cried.

Elias stopped. “Is that what you think I’m going to do?” he asked, looking down at me with a narrowed, heavy-lidded gaze.

I nodded tearfully. “Yes.”

“I’m not going to kill you. I don’t want to,” he said crisply. Then he started dragging me down the hall again.

The message there seemed quite clear. He wasn’t going to kill me, but if he ever wanted to, he could. He would.

He took me upstairs to the communal bathroom I usually showered in with the other girls each morning. Right now, it was completely empty. I was already naked, so it only took a few seconds for Elias to turn one of the showers on and shove me into the cubicle.

Just a few hours ago I would’ve welcomed a shower. But not this one. The water was freezing, making my nipples ache painfully, and Elias was roughly holding a few strands of my hair, forcing my head back so that the full blast of the shower hit me

right in the face before streaming over the rest of my hair. I felt like I was going to drown, right here in the cubicle.

Elias finally let go, and I coughed and spluttered as I cowered away from him. The blood that had dried in my hair yesterday was now circling the drain.

He pointed to a few bottles along the side of the shower. “Wash yourself properly,” he ordered.

I did as he said with trembling hands, quickly lathering my hair with shampoo just in case any bloody remnants were left in the strands. Then I rubbed myself down with a sweet-scented shower gel.

When I was fresh and clean, Elias turned the shower off. He had a towel in his hand now, but he didn’t offer it to me. I stood before him, teeth chattering, waiting for him to speak.

After two full minutes of this painfully confusing experience, I realized what was happening. He wanted me to ask him for the towel. Or beg.

“Please, may I have the towel?” I mumbled.

“Ask me properly,” he said stiffly.

I faltered for a moment. My thoughts and feelings were still at war with each other: one major part of me broken-down and beaten, telling me it was pointless to fight back now that I knew there was no escape, and the other tiny little part of me still trying to cling to my old identity with all its hatred of the man before me.

I knew he didn’t deserve my submission, and he knew he wasn’t my true ‘master’. He knew I didn’t sell myself to this place. He knew all along, and he mocked me the

entire time; made me believe he could be a lifeline for me.

In a way, he was still a lifeline, but not in the way he led me to believe all those weeks ago. He was the only one who could decide my fate, but he wouldn't be lenient with me or help me get out of here because he cared for me in any way, like I originally hoped for when he told me he didn't know I was here against my will. No, that was all a lie, and he would choose whether to be lenient with me entirely at his own whim, probably based on nothing more than how much I pleased him.

In the end, that meant I had to submit. Go along with whatever he said, just to keep myself alive.

"Please, Master, may I have the towel?" I said softly, my shoulders slumping with defeat.

He handed it to me. "When you're dry, I want you to blow-dry your hair and put on some makeup. You look like you're half-dead."

I am half-dead, I thought drearily. This wasn't a proper life, after all. I was nothing but a slave with no chance of escape. A ghost going through the daily motions until I was finally allowed to move on to the afterlife.

Maybe I should've just jumped off that awful gray cliff yesterday.

But it was too late for that now.

I did as Elias said and dried my hair before applying some foundation, blush, eyeliner and shadow. Mellie had taught me a few tricks when she'd done my makeup in the past, so I knew a way to make my eyes seem less puffy and more awake using white eyeliner along the waterline and brown eyeshadow on the bottom eyelid. I momentarily hoped that it would make me look a bit more wide-eyed and innocent to

Elias so that he might go easier on me, but I quickly realized that was just more wishful thinking.

He hated me, and he would always treat me accordingly.

When I was done, he led me out of the bathroom and up to the second floor. I was still naked, but I'd stopped caring about anyone seeing me like this a long time ago. Being in this place stripped me of those mortified feelings and replaced them with another type of shame and humiliation.

"When we get to the Lodge, you'll have a collar," Elias said as he strode down the hallway ahead of me. He turned his head over his shoulder a second later, a smirk playing on his lips. "I'll be able to lead you around on a leash or a chain. Something to look forward to."

I lowered my eyes to the parquet floor. The way I was treated here was bad enough, but when I got to the Lodge, I would be considered as nothing more than an animal. Collared, leashed, chained. No longer a person.

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As we stepped down the hall, I heard moans and grunts coming from behind the doors, interspersed with the occasional scream, clank of a chain or crack of a whip. I swallowed hard and tried to ignore the horrible sounds. There was nothing I could do about it. All the other girls here were in the same situation as me: trapped on a distant island with no means of escape and forced to submit.

A few minutes later, I was led into a room with light gray wallpaper patterned with black damask. There was a bed on one side, covered in a dark brocade duvet with matching pillows and cushions tucked neatly under the bedhead. On the other side of the room there was a long French-style sofa with pale blue tufted fabric and golden lining. A coffee table sat in front of it.

Elias locked the door behind me, then strode over to the coffee table and picked something up. I had no idea what it was, but it looked a little bit like a plastic hair clip or clothespin. I noticed there was another identical one sitting on the table. Next to that, there was some sort of device that looked like an old iPod.

“Come here,” Elias commanded, raising a hand to motion me over.

I did as he said, quickly and quietly.

“Know what this is?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, Master,” I murmured.

“It’s an electrically-stimulated nipple clamp. It’ll feel good for you, but only if you tell the truth. Unfortunately, we all know what a terrible problem you have with that.”

My stomach dropped. When Elias played with my nipples in the past, it felt good, but he'd never done anything too severe. The thought of having something clamping down on them made me want to shrivel up. I could almost feel some sort of pre-emptive aching in my breasts.

Elias picked up the other clip and held them both out to me. "What do you say, Doll?"

I quickly figured out what he wanted to hear. I closed my eyes for a second, then looked up at him. "Please put them on me, Master."

"Of course."

I wondered how many people would count this as consensual. Sure, I asked him to do it, but it was clearly under duress. Then again, I knew there were a lot of people in this world who would still blame me and say I asked for it, and therefore I deserved it.

Honestly, I probably did deserve it, considering the fact I nearly murdered a guy less than twenty-four hours ago. The same old chant abruptly started up in my head again.

Guilty, guilty, guilty.

Shame, shame, shame.

I whimpered when Elias attached the clamps to my nipples, squeezing my eyes shut as an intense pinching sensation assaulted my nerve endings. It quickly died down to a dull pressure and within a minute or so, it actually felt nice.

Really nice.

I let out a low moan of bliss. “Mm...” I assumed I was brought here for punishment, but this wasn’t so bad at all. Maybe it would even feel—“Ow!” I suddenly shrieked and fell to the carpeted floor, immediately forgetting my previous thought process. Elias had just clicked something on the electrical controller device on the coffee table.

“That’s the highest setting. Tingles, doesn’t it?” he said, watching me with interest.

I let out a sob. It was more than a damn tingle. It felt like someone had attached a live wire to the nerves beneath my breasts. My body convulsed as the violent currents pulsed through me in sharp shocks. “Please, Master,” I begged. “Stop.”

He clicked something else and the pain immediately vanished, replaced by the pleasurable pressure of the uncharged clamps.

“Get down on your hands and knees,” Elias said. “We’re going to play a little game.”

“Yes, Master,” I murmured. I assumed the position, and Elias strode across the room to grab something. When he returned, I saw that he had a book, and he placed it on the flat of my back.

“The objective of this game is to keep the book balanced. Think you can manage that, Doll?”

I nodded. As long as I stayed on my hands and knees and didn’t move or shake, the book would stay on my back.

“Good girl. Now, I want you to answer some questions for me,” he said, taking a seat on the sofa.

“Yes, Master.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Doll,” I murmured. I knew that was exactly what he wanted to hear. As long as I kept parroting all the right answers, I would be safe.

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As usual, though, Elias was always one step ahead.

“Favorite color?” he asked.

“Blue.”

“Flower?”

“Carnation.”

“Food?”

“Lobster roll.”

“Your name?”

“Tatum Mar... ah!” I shrieked as the nipple clamps turned live again, and the book flew off my back as I jerked on the floor.

Elias tricked me. He knew I was just telling him what he wanted to hear, so he asked me a bunch of rapid-fire questions in the hopes of distracting me from the real question when he finally asked it. I wasn’t expecting it, and I inadvertently gave him my real answer when he asked my name.

I guess I wasn’t completely broken after all. At least not yet.

The clamps switched back to normal, and I collapsed on the Persian carpet, sobbing

and gulping in deep breaths of air as the pain subsided.

Elias got off the sofa and stooped to my level, one finger forcing my chin up to look at him. “I had a feeling you were simply playing along,” he said softly, dangerously. “When I said I wanted to play a game, that’s not really what I meant.”

“I’m sorry, Master,” I whimpered. “I’m trying.”

“Try harder.” He picked the book back up. Instead of placing it on me, however, he strode across the room and put it back where he found it. Then he rummaged around in a bedside drawer and returned with a bottle of lubricant and a black phallic-shaped object.

It didn’t look like the vibrator Willa once bought for Greer as a gag gift when she said she couldn’t think of something to take to her older sister’s bridal shower. It was thicker, meaner-looking, and the base of it flared out widely.

“This is going inside you,” Elias said crisply.

My insides clenched involuntarily. I didn’t want to be aroused by the thought of him putting something in my pussy, but as usual, my body grew hot and wet within seconds, craving him against my will. It was that feeling of helplessness as he took charge that made it happen; the forced surrender, the lack of control. I never knew what would happen next, and a strange, delicious fear always seemed to accompany that, making desire unfurl deep in my core.

He went behind me and ran a hand down my back before sliding down to my pussy. Two fingers parted my lips, and he chuckled as he found me already soaked. “I know where you want me to put this,” he began. “But today isn’t about what you want. Today is about making you see what you’ve done.”

I stiffened as I remembered the bottle of lube in his hand. Oh no. The black toy wasn't going in my pussy at all.

"No, please," I said hurriedly. "Not there."

He chuckled. "Are you really saying no to me?"

"I..." I trailed off. That was a bad idea. "No, Master. I didn't mean that."

"Good, because I want to take every part of you, Doll. Turn you into the perfect toy for me. So if I want to put something in your asshole, you're going to say yes, and you're going to love it."

"Yes, Master," I whispered, my cheeks flushing with red-hot shame. "Please... put it in my ass."

I heard him open the bottle and squeeze the liquid over his hand. He began to massage it between my cheeks, one fingertip dipping in and out of me as he prepared me for the violation. I bit back a whimper at the humiliating sensation as his finger went even deeper, right inside my ass.

Then he pulled it out and pressed the tip of the toy against me. "Push back on it," he ordered. "Keep yourself relaxed or it'll hurt more."

I swallowed and closed my eyes as I did what he said. Or tried to, at least. It was one thing to tell me to relax while a dildo slid into my virgin ass, but actually doing it was another thing entirely.

I bit down on my bottom lip again as the toy broke past my entrance and slid inside, maybe an inch or so, and then I finally let out a cry as the pressure grew too intense. I was unbearably full.

“You feel that, Doll?” Elias murmured. “You feel it going inside your tight little asshole?”

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“Yes,” I whimpered. “Please, Master, it hurts....”

“We can’t stop now. Keep going. Show me what a good girl you can be,” he replied. One hand squeezed at my ass cheeks, massaging and groping as the toy pressed even farther inside me.

I took a deep breath and finally relaxed my body enough to bear down on the toy, and suddenly it slid all the way in, only stopping when the flared base wouldn’t allow it any farther. I shivered, feeling oh-so filthy and embarrassed as it filled me up so completely. As much as I assumed I would hate it, my body seemed to want it desperately. I felt a familiar mix of pleasure and pain spiraling deep within my core, and I knew my pussy was practically dripping by now.

“You fucking love it, don’t you?” Elias muttered, leaning forward so that his mouth wasn’t far from my left ear.

I nodded. “Yes, Master. It hurts, but it feels... I don’t know how to describe it....”

“Do it.”

“I feel so dirty,” I whispered. “So full. But that makes it feel good at the same time.”

He chuckled. “You see how it can be good for you when you behave and listen to your owner?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Now try to keep it inside you.”

He picked up the nipple clamp controller again and returned to questioning me in short, sharp barks. “What’s your name?”

“Doll.”

“Who am I?”

“My Master,” I whispered.

“Louder.”

“You’re my Master,” I said in a clearer voice. I gritted my teeth immediately afterwards, trying my best to keep the toy inside my ass. An enormous pressure was building deep within and I felt an urge to push it out, but I wasn’t allowed.

“Why did you stab my father?”

I drew in a deep breath. “Because... because I’m bad.”

“Why did you kill Ben?”

I shook my head slightly. “I didn’t. It was an accident. I—” A scream tore from my throat as he shocked me with the nipple clamps again. The toy began to slide out of my ass as my body let go and collapsed to the floor again, and Elias sighed and turned the clamps to the normal setting again.

“You just don’t learn,” he muttered, pressing the toy back inside me all the way. Then he delivered a hard slap to my ass, making me yelp as pain raced across my skin like fire. “Who killed Ben?”

“I did, Master,” I said with a sob.

“Why?”

“I... I don’t....” Obviously I was taking too long to answer, because the electrical shocks started again. I squeezed my eyes shut and screamed, clenching all my muscles to try and keep the toy inside me despite the pulsing pain.

A wave of exhaustion suddenly crashed over me. I wasn’t sure how much I could take. I needed to give in entirely, needed to submit my mind and body to Elias once and for all. It was the only way I would survive, and besides, he was my Master. He was all I had left in the world...

He turned the controller off again and patted my ass. “You’re getting better at this, but it’s still not good enough. Try again. Why did you kill Ben?”

“I was angry at him,” I said in a flat whisper. “He didn’t want me.”

“Good girl. We’re finally getting somewhere again,” he said in a deceptively soothing tone. “Have you ever thought about killing me?”

I thought back to the day before. Not only had I thought about killing Elias when his father told me the truth about him, I’d said out loud that I wanted to do it. “Yes, Master. I’m sorry.”

“I know you’re telling the truth, but you need to be punished for these thoughts,” he said, shocking my breasts again. “Do you understand?”

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“Yes, Master. Please punish me.” Tears rolled down my face as the throbbing pain shook me, but I didn’t make any sound, and I held the toy inside me with gritted teeth. Elias was right. I deserved punishment for my terrible behavior. Awful, terrible, evil girl.

“Did you ever feel anything for me?” he asked a moment later.

“Yes. I... ow!” I screamed as he shocked me yet again. That one was unexpected.

“Please, Master, I wasn’t lying!”

“Yes, you were. I know it. Tell the truth.”

Another wave of tiredness overcame me. I wanted to collapse, but I couldn’t. I had to tell him what he wanted to hear first.

“I lied,” I whispered, trying to keep my eyes from closing. “I told you I wanted you because I hoped you would help me get out of here.”

“That’s what I thought. But things are different now, aren’t they, Doll?”

I nodded brokenly. “Yes. I know the truth now, Master.”

“Tell me.” He moved back around to my front, fixing me with a questioning gaze.

I let out a long, juddering sigh. “I’ll never leave this place, not unless you want me to. I’m yours.”

He smiled wickedly. “Yes, you are. For how long?”

My mind returned to the previous day. I pictured the jagged cliff and the endless expanse of deep, dark ocean beyond. I thought of the hopelessness, the helplessness, the futility in dreaming of a world outside of Elias.

And just like that, the last rebellious, unbroken piece of me shattered all the way.

“Well?” he demanded. “How long will you belong to me?”

My whole body felt like it was sinking into the floor as I finally replied. “Forever....”

This time, I knew it was true.

3

Tatum

Five weeks later

“Arch your back more, Doll.”

Without a sound, I did as my Master commanded, curving my back and pushing my ass farther up and out. My wrists had been tied together with soft silk earlier, but he'd changed his mind halfway through, and now they were spread wide but still immobilized in a wooden restraining device which resembled a medieval stock.

My feet were restrained on the floor with chains and my back was stinging from the lashings of a whip he used on me earlier. I was marked and shackled, with no possible hope for escape. Same as every other day.

It hadn't taken long for me to make peace with my new reality. I was truly my Master's toy now, simply a set of warm holes in which he could unload himself. I didn't mind. I deserved it. This was my place in the world now. My penance for all the awful things I'd done.

Behind me, Elias was fucking my pussy. His pussy. I belonged to him, and he could do whatever he wanted with me. All I wanted was to please him.

I wasn't sure if it felt good. My mind was elsewhere, trying to focus on the bad things I'd done in my life so that I wouldn't start to feel any orgasmic pleasure. I didn't

deserve it. I didn't deserve to feel that incredible heady buzz that Elias gave me that night on the altar when his perfect cock slid inside me, filling me with warmth and wonder. The only pleasure I allowed myself to feel nowadays was when he punished me with the whips or paddles in the Finishing School playroom.

"I want you to come on my cock," he suddenly said in a husky murmur. "Now, Doll."

I shifted my mind away from my crimes and tried to focus on the fullness of my pussy as his thick cock slammed in and out of me. My clit was swollen and throbbing, but I couldn't reach down and rub it. Not when I was restrained like this.

Elias slapped my ass, hard. "I said now!" he growled. "Come."

"I... I can't. Sorry, Master," I whispered raggedly.

"Why the fuck not?" He said this as he thrust all the way inside me, filling me to the brim.

"I don't deserve pleasure. All I deserve is punishment."

He slowed his movements and slapped my ass again, making me quiver. "Why?"

"Because I'm a bad girl. I'm a liar."

He grunted. "Tell me more."

"I lied when I arrived here. I said I didn't sell myself here, but that wasn't true. I signed the contract. I wanted to be here," I said, closing my eyes.

I knew it was true now. Just because I had no memory of it didn't mean it never happened. It had to have happened, because my Master wasn't a liar. I was.

I must've felt so guilty and ashamed over the awful things I did that I decided to force myself into this subservient existence so that I could receive the punishment I so direly needed.

If I concentrated hard enough, I could actually see myself signing away my life on a cream-colored piece of paper, and soon, the image blurred with my solid memories until it started to gain a life of its own.

Yes, I remembered now. I signed that contract in early 2017. Of course I did.

"Why did you want to be here?" Elias asked.

"Because I'm a murderer. I realized I needed punishment. I needed to let you get your revenge on me."

"But you weren't aware you'd be given to me when you signed your rights over to Crown and Dagger," Elias said crisply.

I shook my head. "I... I must've guessed, Master. I wanted to be given to you. I wanted you to punish me for what I did."

"And what was that?" he said in a low voice.

"I killed Ben Wellington. Your cousin and friend. I pushed him right off a cliff on the 17th of March, 2017."

I didn't fully remember that either, but I knew I would eventually. The real memories would make their way back one way or another, piece by jagged black piece, and finally I would be able to lift a full picture out of the darkness of my mind and hold it up to the white light of truth.

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I knew now that the version of events I'd previously believed was nothing more than fiction. Something my mind created as a coping mechanism to deal with the crushing guilt I felt after I murdered Ben.

I once read a book where a girl did something similar and her brain developed false memories to help her cope with what she'd done; allowed her to escape responsibility by blocking out the truth. But I wasn't like that girl. Not anymore. I didn't want to escape responsibility. I didn't want to keep remembering that fake version of events where I was innocent and it was all a terrible accident.

It was no accident.

Ben rejected me because I wasn't good enough. I wasn't from his world. I was just a lower-class loser who could never even dream of getting a guy so far out of my league. Sure, he wanted my body, that was good enough for him, but when I realized he would never want me in any real way, I snapped. I pushed him off me and ran away, my head pounding with white-hot rage, and when he came after me to try and calm me down, I pushed him right off the cliff.

Then I ripped my own skirt and messed up my hair and makeup to make my story more convincing. As for the drugs... I must've taken them earlier at the party. I wanted to have a good time, and tons of people took pills and snorted things at parties.

A dark, distant part of my mind whispered to me, reminding me of the secret witness on the beach, some man or woman who backed up my false version of events, telling the police that I didn't push Ben. He slipped and fell, and I was nowhere near him at

the time, this person claimed.

I used to see this secret witness as a beacon in the night, something to give me hope whenever the crushing guilt set in. Something to remind me of my innocence. But now I saw the witness for what they really were.

A liar.

A dirty, bad, malicious liar. Just like me.

I was not innocent. No way. Whoever the witness was, they probably hated Ben and wanted him dead. They probably saw me push him but they didn't want me to wind up behind bars for doing what they wanted to do themselves. So they lied to the police and defended me, getting me off all the charges.

Yes, that had to be it. No wonder they wanted their name suppressed by the courts.

Elias leaned down, brushing his lips against the shell of my right ear. "I want you to put that out of your mind right now. I want to feel you come on my cock. Do it now, Doll."

"Please... I can't," I said, tears springing to my eyes. "I'm bad, Master. I don't deserve it."

"Do it now, or I won't see you for two whole weeks. I won't be able to punish you with the whip or the clamps then, like you want so badly. Is that what you want to happen?"

"No!" I frantically shook my head.

Elias sped up again, pounding into me harder and harder. My legs shook from the

sheer power of his movements. “Come right now, or that’s exactly what will happen,” he said, his voice deep and throaty. He sounded so serious, so angry.

I couldn’t disappoint him again...

“I’m sorry, Master,” I said, concentrating harder. I might not deserve to come, but if he commanded it, I had to make it happen.

I let go of my guilt and allowed myself to really feel his cock inside me, allowed myself those few seconds of wanton need. Finally, warm pleasure began to unfurl deep in my core, and it exploded out of me several seconds later, a gasp tearing from my lips as I jolted and clenched. It was the hardest thing I ever did.

“Good girl,” Elias muttered, slamming into me even faster. He came inside me with a juddering groan, and then he slapped my ass and set about unshackling my wrists and feet.

“You can spend the next seven days in here,” he said, gesturing at the room around us as I shakily got to my feet. We were in the same place he’d taken me all those weeks ago when he bathed me and gave me my favorite food—the gorgeous open-plan suite with the huge four-poster bed and the claw-footed tub.

“Thank you, Master,” I said, glowing warmth spreading through me. He was so kind. So generous. “I don’t deserve this.”

“Well, there’s books and other things to keep you entertained. I won’t be here for several days, and I don’t want you losing your mind from boredom down in the cell.”

My eyes widened. “Master, why?” I cried. “You said if I came, you wouldn’t stop seeing me.”

“I’m not stopping,” he said curtly. “Not for two weeks. Just a week. You might’ve followed my commands eventually, but you said no to me at first. You displeased me, Doll.”

I didn’t bother falling to my knees and trying to argue. He was right. I defied him, and now I was being punished in the worst way, left alone without him to touch me or bring me the pain I wanted so badly now.

“Yes, Master,” I whispered. “I understand.”

He looked down at me, eyes darkening. Somehow, he was still angry with me, even though I’d given him everything he wanted and agreed with everything he said.

He opened his mouth like he was about to say something, but then he clamped it firmly shut and strode over to the door. I stayed where I was, my heart beating painfully in my chest as I watched him unlock the door and step outside.

He looked back at me for a brief moment. “I’ll see you later, Doll,” he said.

Then he was gone, and my world went cold and dark again.

4

Elias

“This’ll only take a minute.” Dr. Paulson gave me a tight smile as he jabbed a needle into a vein on my left arm. “Strange weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

I usually detested small talk, but he was right. Winter had come late this year—it was already the eleventh of January—but it had finally arrived in a freezing flurry.

I looked out the window. The snow had begun falling overnight, sprinkling the towering cypress trees outside my family’s New Marwick house and draping the ground in blankets of white. The sky was filled with angry gray clouds, carried by gusting winds. Dreary, dark, depressing.

“Almost done.” The doctor pulled the needle out of my arm and capped the sample as I held a cotton ball over the little puncture mark. Then he stuck the cotton in place with a strip of medical tape. “Let me just label this,” he went on, more to himself than me.

“How long will this take?” I asked. “For results, I mean.”

Dr. Paulson finished marking the sample tube and looked up at me. “Longer than you might assume. All those CSI-type shows have ruined everyone’s perceptions. They submit a sample and expect to get their entire genome mapped in five seconds, when really, it can take weeks of work, especially with the backlog at most labs. So you’ll be waiting a while.”

“That’s fine. I’ve got time.” I pressed my lips into a thin line and looked out the window again.

My father had recovered well from his injury and was generally in good spirits again, but he was still cagey whenever I tried to bring up the egg donor issue. It was clear he wanted nothing more than for me to drop the subject entirely, but that only made me more curious. I’d thought about it frequently over the last few weeks, trying to figure out what I could do to get more information, and finally, a friend of mine had given me an idea.

Apparently there were quite a few ancestry websites where you could submit a DNA sample, and your sample would be tested for a number of things, like what sort of diseases you might be prone to, where your ancestors were from, and even information on how much Neanderthal DNA you might have in your genome. The best part was that the sites would connect you with other users who shared close genetic makeups to you. My friend had told me a story of how some girl he knew wound up finding several aunts, uncles and cousins on there when she previously had no idea they even existed.

I didn’t want my DNA on one of those sites—who the hell knew what the company owners might do with the information one day?—but the general scope of the idea appealed to me. If I could get a sample of my DNA tested and compared to all those that were available online (under the table, of course), not only would I discover a lot about my ancestry on my biological mother’s side, I might even find out who she was, if she or any of her relatives used the genealogy sites.

Dr. Paulson was happy to assist with my plan of getting tested without anyone else’s knowledge. He felt as if he owed me after the incident where my father was given the wrong blood. At the time, I held up my end of the deal and took full responsibility for what happened, telling everyone that I forced him to give my father that blood. As a result, he still had a medical license and a job at the Finishing School, even though

things had gone so drastically wrong.

I didn't see it as a big deal that I held up my end of the bargain—I said I'd do it, and I didn't often like to go back on my word—but the doctor was supremely grateful, and so he'd jumped on the chance to help me out.

"It might take even longer than regular testing, actually," he said.

I cocked an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"Well, you want this done off the record, right? All very hush-hush, no connection to your family?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Why do you think I didn't offer you or your science buddies any bribes to get it done fast?" I said. I was only half joking.

He snorted. "Indeed. Anyway, I have quite a few friends who work in private labs, but their workload is enormous. Not only that, if they're doing it under the table, they'll have to work on it after-hours, which doesn't leave them a hell of a lot of time to get it done."

"Right. Well, like I said, I've got time. I've gone all these weeks without knowing who this damn egg donor was, so I'm sure I can handle a few more."

Dr. Paulson's sparse gray brows pinched together. "You sure it's a good idea to do this behind your father's back?"

"I have to. Like I told you the other day, he won't tell me anything." I paused and shot him a warning look. "Don't you dare tell him what we're up to."

He smiled. "If it was anyone else, I'd refuse to go behind Tobias King's back. But for

you, Elias, I'll do it."

"I appreciate that."

He zipped up his black bag and stood up straight. "I'll head out now. I have a few things to do in the city while I've got the day off. I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything from the labs, all right?"

"Sure. Thanks again."

He turned away, then hesitated for a second and turned back to face me. "Forgive me if I'm overstepping in bringing this up, but I hope things have been sorted with Ms. Marris after the stabbing. I haven't had the chance to see her, although I understand Nurse Fernandez updated her Depo shot a few days ago?"

"Yes, that's right. And don't worry, an incident like the other week won't happen again. All the other girls' quarters have been swept for any sort of hidden weapons, and nothing was found. Just a one-off."

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "I don't mean that. It's just that the girl seems very mentally disturbed. She almost killed your father, Elias. It's deeply concerning."

"She'll be fine."

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He hesitated for a few seconds too long. “Right. If you say so. Anyhow, see you later.”

After he was gone, I strode into my bathroom, stripped off and got in the shower, setting the water to a frigid temperature in the hopes it would dampen my desires. The mere mention of Tatum had made my dick hard as steel, but I couldn’t be fucked jerking off. I’d already done that five times since I got back to New Marwick, all to the thought of her, and I was tired of it.

I shouldn’t even have to jerk off. Over the last few weeks, I’d had the pleasure of Tatum’s company on the island almost every single day, so I’d been able to fuck her, not my hand. That was what she was there for. To serve me. But now, even though the winter break wasn’t over yet—grad school stuff didn’t start up at Roden for another couple of weeks—I’d returned early, growing frustrated with Tatum’s recent behavior and attitude.

Something inside her seemed to have broken not long after she found out she was on an island. That was exactly what I wanted to happen, but the results hadn’t exactly been what I anticipated. I thought it would make her even angrier at what I’d done to her, thought it would make her fight and claw at me like mad, screaming and more desperate than ever to get away from me. That would be hot as fuck, and when I made her submit to me again and again, it would taste that much sweeter.

But it wasn’t like that at all.

Instead of fighting, Tatum was quiet and passive, her face almost always blank. Brittle, glazed, stupefied. Colorless. She barely said a word, barely even cowered

when I went to see her. Never cried. Everything I said or commanded, she instantly agreed with and submitted to. She never defied me or questioned me, at least not purposefully.

It wasn't the screaming and begging I wanted. It wasn't even the hysterical sobbing she came out with last time I thought she was falling to pieces. It was just... acceptance. Silent, dead-behind-the-eyes acceptance. The last time I saw her, she seemed more vacant and lifeless than ever. She had the appearance of something discarded, just a crumple of gray cloth tossed away in the garbage.

I hated it. I used to think her complete and utter submission to my will was exactly what I wanted, especially after the things she'd done to my family, but I actually missed the wild spark she used to have. I missed the way she used to frantically argue with me and curse at me, the way she'd try to fight her way out. That spark had vanished along with the rest of the personality, just like the light in her eyes.

She was basically a robot.

The worst part was what it had done to the sex. She didn't seem to enjoy it, which I initially didn't think I'd care about, but I did. More than anything. I didn't want some limp woman lying there taking my dick in silence, her mind elsewhere. I wanted her present and in the moment, wanted her to crave my body, crave my cock inside her, even if she hated me for making her want it.

Tatum had gone the opposite way. She loved feeling me inside her, I knew that, but she'd seemingly morphed into some sort of guilt-ridden automaton, saying that all she deserved was pain and punishment, and that she 'wasn't allowed' any pleasure after the things she'd done.

Well, supposedly done. That was another issue with her.

So many of the things she'd said in recent weeks didn't make sense. At first, I was elated when she finally 'admitted' all her lies to me, because I'd wanted that all along, but then I realized half her stories didn't add up.

For instance, the other week she'd told me that she sold herself to Crown and Dagger because she wanted to let me have my revenge on her for pushing Ben off a cliff. Except... she didn't even know I was related to Ben until I told her weeks after her arrival, and when she allegedly signed the contract, she had no idea who she would be given to. So it was impossible that her reason for selling herself to the society was that in particular.

So what was the real reason behind her desire to sell herself here? Something must've made her sign that contract, but she didn't seem to want to tell me what it was.

I could put it all down to exhaustion and confusion, I suppose, but the issue kept plaguing my mind, arousing sneaking suspicions deep within. I couldn't quite put my finger on any of it, but I knew there was something I was missing. Something major. There was something deeply broken and messed up inside Tatum, and I had no idea how the fuck to deal with it anymore.

The whole thing stopped me from even wanting to touch her. Fucking her now was like fucking a zombie, so what was the point?

If I wanted to get off, I could just screw another woman back here in the city, but I couldn't even look at anyone else without thinking of her. Every woman I passed on the street, every porn star on the videos on my phone, every girl I dreamed of at night, was Tatum in my head.

Sometimes I worried it meant she was weakening me. The girl had killed my best friend and very nearly killed my father, and yet I still wanted her around. Craved only her. I told myself it was because I wanted to punish her for her heinous actions, but if

that were true, then why the fuck did I care so much about whether or not she wanted me to fuck her? Or whether she enjoyed it or not?

If I truly despised her, I wouldn't give a shit. I would feel nothing toward her but cold fury. I wouldn't care if I squashed her like a bug, crushed all the defiance out of her. Wouldn't care if she was nothing but a mindless, broken toy.

And yet, I did.

It didn't mean I cared for her, though. All it really meant was that my desires had changed, and the things I cared about getting from her had evolved. I suppose that didn't exactly make me weak. It just made me a typical human, always seeking out new ways in which to obtain that heady endorphin rush my brain craved.

I just needed to remind myself that I owned her for as long as I wanted. That meant she had to do as I said. If I told her I wanted her to try to fight me, she would damn well do it, whether she liked it or not. No more of this blank, passive bullshit. No more letting her get away with it.

My train of thought was derailed by the sound of my cell phone vibrating across the tiles. I turned the shower off, grabbed a towel, and answered the call. It was Brett, the security guard from the island. "Yeah?"

His voice was distant and warbled. It sounded like a tap was gushing with water somewhere nearby. "Sorry to call you like this, but you're needed on the island. Your father's request. He said he tried calling you, but you didn't answer."

I sighed. Dad had actually tried calling four times in the last half hour or so, but I'd been avoiding the calls out of annoyance, given his reluctance to discuss the egg donor issue with me. "Not today. I have way too much shit to do here. But I'll be there in a couple of days."

“It’s an emergency, Elias. We need your help.”

“Emergency?”

“Yeah. Oh, shit, I gotta go,” he said hurriedly.

“Is Tatum okay?”

He didn’t respond for a second, and I heard him shout something at someone in the background before returning his attention to me. “Sorry, really gotta go deal with this. Just get here as soon as you can,” he shouted over another loud gushing sound. “Call your father back if you want the whole story!”

“No need,” I said, my pulse racing. “I’m on my way.”

5

Tatum

The wind howled outside, and a light drizzle of rain pattered against the gym windowpane. The clouds that had gathered since dawn blocked out the winter sun, dark and unyielding, casting shadows throughout the room.

I was running on one of the treadmills next to Pri. She hadn't said a word to me, hadn't even looked at me. Her eyes were hollow and her skin was marked with bruises. This entire week, I hadn't heard her speak to anyone at all during our gym and shower sessions.

That was fine. I felt the same as her. No need to talk, no need to pretend everything would be okay. Nothing would ever be okay again, but that in itself was okay, because we all deserved to be here.

She must've done something terrible to whomever her master was. Just like me.

The winds grew louder outside. Even through the thick glass of the window, I could hear the creaking of trees as the relentless gales battered and tore at their branches.

When one of the guards opened the window for a second, stupidly thinking it might be good to let some fresh air into the musty room, the winds sounded as loud and powerful as a jet engine. He quickly pulled the pane shut with a muttered curse. "Any news about this storm?" I heard him ask another guard a moment later.

The other one nervously scrubbed a hand across his chin as he spoke. “Apparently it’s gonna be huge. I’m worried about the underground areas, to be honest. Conditions like this, they could flood.”

“How?”

“You know the tunnels underneath the place?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“They were built a long time ago. Aren’t exactly sealed off perfectly. They could flood if there’s too much water flowing into them in a short period of time. If that happens, the water could flood through the vents or cracks in the walls of the cells. And who knows what kinda structural damage that could wind up doing to the whole mansion? The base could start to crumble from all the water damage, and the top floors could start to cave in.”

“Oh, yeah. Shit.”

“Obviously that’s a worst-case scenario, but it doesn’t look good outside right now. So I’m gonna look at the weather reports and call King in a sec.”

The first guard sniffed. “I doubt he wants to come back here anytime soon. Not since he got....” He trailed off and motioned with one of his hands. I pretended not to notice out of the corner of my eye, but he was looking at me and miming the action of stabbing someone.

“Well, if this place needs evacuation, he’ll probably want to oversee it.”

A grunt. “Yeah. Guess so.”

The second guard stepped away with his phone, presumably looking at the most recent weather updates before making the aforementioned call to Tobias.

I glanced at the window again. The whole mansion seemed to be creaking and groaning now, sticks and leaves slamming against the glass as if some tempestuous spirit wanted to destroy the whole place. The trees outside were swaying with a violence I'd never seen before. It scared me. What if a huge branch ripped right off one of them, crashed through the window, and impaled someone?

I'd never been on an island during a thunderstorm, so I had no idea if island storms were usually this bad or if this was just a particularly wild one.

I tried to push the worries out of my mind and returned my attention to the treadmill. One of the other girls gave in to her fears and approached the guard who'd tried to open the window earlier, her face etched with worry as she asked if everything would be okay.

"It's nothing. I bet it'll blow over in a few minutes. Get back to your exercises," he said dismissively.

No sooner than he spoke, the sky outside erupted with forks of angry white lightning and buckets of cascading rain, hammering loudly on the roof and windows as if it were demanding entrance. On cue, the power inside went out, and the treadmills and other powered exercise devices switched off along with the lights.

"Shit." The guard stepped over to his friend, trying to peer over his shoulder at the phone screen. "What's it say?"

The other guard looked troubled. "It's practically a hurricane," he said in a low voice, thick with concern. "Give it a few hours, the waves might be high enough to knock the fucking windows out of the third floor. Whole damn place is gonna flood."

“Motherfucker...” The first guard let out a low whistle. “So we do need to evacuate.”

“Definitely. I’m calling King now. Lucky I still even have cell service.” He dialed a number, then waited with his lips pursed in a grim line.

I heard bits and pieces as he hurriedly explained the situation to Tobias. “Yes, sir. It’s meant to make landfall in about four hours. Maybe even sooner depending on wind conditions. I’m going to make all the staff aware, and I...” A brief pause. “I just... okay. Yes, I understand that. I know the girls aren’t ready for placement at the Lodge yet, but we must evacuate. I hate to be blunt, but either they go to the Lodge, untrained as they are, or they drown here.”

I closed my eyes. Drown. I felt like I was drowning here most of the time, slipping under wave after wave of numb exhaustion. Maybe if the storm carried me away in a few hours, it wouldn’t be so bad.

It would just be... over.

The guard went on a moment later. "I see. Can you arrange for him to fly out here and oversee the evacuation? I know it's a rough situation, but the island is owned by your family, so I thought you might want—" He stopped and paused, listening to Tobias again. "All right. Thank you, sir. Yes, I understand. We'll start packing everything we can and rounding up all the girls and staff while we wait for the helicopters. There's also several society members here at the moment. We'll get the first rescue helicopters to evacuate them as soon as they land."

Of course. The lives of Crown and Dagger members were far more important than any of us lowly slaves.

When the guard was finished with his call, he pulled a flashlight off his belt and switched it on, waving it in the air to attract everyone's attention. "Listen up, girls! Today's storm is a bad one, so the island needs to be evacuated. Mr. King is having several choppers sent over from the mainland, and he's getting his son to fly in to help coordinate the effort. There's sixty-two people here on the island altogether, so it's going to take a while, but we need to try and stay as calm as possible. Got it?"

Completely counter to his words, several of the girls in the gym started screaming and crying.

"Jesus Christ," another guard muttered.

The one with the flashlight raised his hands. "Girls, calm down and wait here! You're perfectly safe. In about an hour, you'll start heading down to the front entryway in an

orderly manner. You'll wait there until your helicopters start landing." He waved a hand at the other guards. "Cullen, you go and alert all the kitchen and cleaning staff. Oh, and Nurse Fernandez too. I'll get Hilson and Adams to keep an eye on the situation below-ground, and I'll ask Smith to alert the members currently staying here. They'll be the first to leave. I'll work on rounding up all our guys on the other floors."

"Right. Let's head out."

One guard remained in the gym in front of the door to make sure we didn't try to go anywhere before the helicopters were ready for us. Some of the girls were quiet like me as they waited, while others sobbed their hearts out in fear.

About thirty minutes later, I heard a faint whirring sound above the wind. I glanced outside to see three slate gray helicopters circling above, preparing to land. They weren't for us. They were for the society members. We had to wait for another convoy to arrive.

Finally, another forty or so minutes later, a radio bleeped in the guard's pocket, and he waved his hand at us. "Okay. Let's go!"

The girls began to move toward the door in one heaving mass, blubbering and whimpering. "God, what if we get hit by a tsunami before we make it off?" I heard one blonde girl sob.

I wouldn't mind, if I was being honest. There'd be a moment of terror, which was no different to most moments here on the island, and then there'd be nothing but coldness and pressure as the great wall of water slammed into us, sweeping us all away to oblivion. Nonexistence....

I shouldn't exist.

I'm nothing. Nothing but a contemptible, unworthy girl. My life is pitiful, unjustifiable, valueless.

The dark thoughts swam through my head as I trudged down the main hall of the first floor with the other girls. I didn't want to escape the island with them. I didn't even want to exist anymore. I was too drained, too weary. Why should I bother existing when all I did was hurt people? Why should I bother going through all the daily motions when my owner didn't even see a point to visiting me?

I didn't blame him for not wanting me anymore. Not at all. Why would he want a lowly piece of trash like me?

I was the only one to blame.

I waited in silence in the expansive entryway. The girl next to me impatiently tapped her feet on the black and white tiles. I barely even registered the sound, or the guard's voice near my ear a moment later when he announced that our rescue helicopters were landing. I was too busy concentrating on the sound of the wind outside, the smell of the salty air, the thought of the jagged cliffs surrounding the island....

A few weeks ago, those cliffs were terrifying to behold, but now, they were like a magnet, drawing my mind and my will. I wanted nothing more than to find my way to them; give myself what I truly deserved in the end.

"We can fit five girls in the helicopter that just landed, and five more in the one that's about to land," I heard a male voice saying. It sounded distant, warbled, like he was speaking through the walls of an aquarium. "Please, stay calm! There are more coming."

The girls didn't listen. Even though only ten of us could go, everyone clamoring in the entryway surged toward the door as two guards held it open. "He said ten! Jesus!"

one of them shouted, grabbing at girls' sleeves and collars to try and stop the rush.

I used the flurry of desperation and confusion to slip outside in front of a much taller girl. The guards could only see her, and they grabbed at her and told her to stay back inside. I quickly ducked around to the right side of the mansion instead of running toward the helipad which stood only a few hundred feet from the front of the place.

Not far ahead of me, the ocean heaved and swelled in the gusting winds and pouring rain. I stood with my head raised to the clouds for a moment, watching the droplets cascade from the sky until they reached the sea, quickly becoming part of the briny depths and moving with the surging waves. It was almost mesmerizing in all its chaos.

Gulls squawked overhead, tossed around in the air like paper planes, flashes of white against stormy gray. Beneath them, the waves began to rise like great mountains, turbulent and unforgiving as they smashed against the rocks below the cliffs.

The cliffs....

I stepped forward, heaving my legs against the gale. It felt like I was walking through molasses, and the pressure from the wind hit my face so hard I had to squint my eyes, but I didn't slow down. Each step drew me closer to my fate, closer to peace.

The air grew thick with briny mist as I moved toward the cliff's edge, and the wind pummeled me harder. There was no mercy in this storm, only wrath and tempest.

No mercy. I didn't deserve it, did I?

I closed my eyes, preparing to step right off the cliff so I could be sucked into a vortex of cold black emptiness. The thought was peaceful, calming. So calming...

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All of a sudden, something cut through the fog in my mind. A voice. Don't do it. Then something else, stark and bright against the backdrop of misery. Images of home. Images of my old college. My friends.

The voice in the back of my head grew louder, calling to me, begging me to see reason. You aren't worthless. These men just made you feel that way. Don't you remember? You're strong. You're worth something.

"No," I murmured to myself, delirious and confused. "I'm a bad person. A murderer...."

Don't jump, Tatum. Don't do it. Just stop. The voice almost seemed to be coming from somewhere behind me now, not just in my head.

"I have to do it," I mumbled.

No. You didn't do those things. This isn't you.

The voice in my head grew louder, chanting until it was all I could hear. Finally, my eyes flew open, and for the first time in weeks, I truly saw myself and where I was.

I gasped, staggering back from the edge, unable to believe how close I actually came to jumping.

Holy shit. What the hell was happening to me? How far had I slipped into the abyss of despair that I genuinely believed I deserved to die for even a few seconds?

I shook my head and fell to my knees in the pouring rain, rubbing my eyes as all my mental faculties regained their proper function. I couldn't let this happen again. Couldn't let myself descend back into this state for even a second. I had to force myself to see the truth.

These last few weeks held nothing but hazy lies and rambling delusions, slipping in one after another like wraiths in a fog, sinister and insidious. In the end, only one thing mattered: none of it was true. I didn't deserve any of this.

I didn't sign any contracts or invent any false memories to cope with some sort of crushing guilt. I didn't push Ben Wellington off a cliff, and when I stabbed Tobias King, that slimy old prick well and truly deserved it. He was a bad person. Not me.

I gulped down several breaths of icy air, grateful for that one tiny bit of hope in my mind that refused to be snuffed out. I thought it was gone, thought it was dead like the rest of me, but in my grimmest time of need, that little voice came roaring back to life, yanking me back from the call of the void.

I wasn't going to die. Not today.

I wiped my face and turned around. I was going to go back to the front of the mansion and get on one of those helicopters, and then I would go to the Lodge and bide my time, even if it was hell on earth. I would play along with their twisted demands, but I wouldn't stop fighting back in devious little ways, wouldn't stop trying to escape in any way I could. Fuck Crown and Dagger, and fuck all the twisted pricks who ran it. They could all rot.

A sudden barrage of sleet began to fall from the storm clouds overhead, making the ground slick with ice, and one leg gave out from under me as I slipped and fell.

"Shit!" I tried to scramble to my feet as another heavy gust of wind hit me in the face,

but I slipped backwards, heading perilously close to the edge of the cliff again. I screamed and tried to dig my nails into the rocks to no avail.

Then I slid right over the edge.

6

Elias

Thunder cracked through the sky, and frigid air blasted me in the face as I jumped out of the helicopter on the Finishing School's helipad. I was well over an hour late, because my family's usual pilot wasn't available due to an injury, meaning I had to wait until a substitute could be found. The high wind speeds had also made it difficult to get over to the island.

One of the guards dashed toward me as I strode over to the main entrance of the mansion. "We thought you weren't coming," he shouted over the roaring winds, shielding his face from the rain.

"Had some issues getting a pilot, but I'm here now. The helicopter's a twin-engine so it can fit ten passengers and do several flights without refueling, if we need that," I replied. "How's it going so far?"

"There were twelve society members here, but they left on the first two choppers, along with the art. Then—"

I cut him off. "Hold up. Did you say art?"

"There's been a lot of priceless artwork added to the collection here over the years. Your father wanted to ensure all the valuables were taken out first, along with the members, so we—"

I cut him off again. “Fuck the art! Who gives a shit about that when there are fucking people here?”

“I’m sorry, Elias, I was just following your father’s orders. He said he wanted you to do all this stuff, but you didn’t get here in time.”

I let out a sharp, angry snort. I should’ve known today’s ‘emergency’ involved some bullshit like this. My father didn’t want me to help oversee the island evacuation to make sure everyone got off safely. He wanted me to make sure any priceless family treasures were airlifted to safety before anything else. I guess to him, people could always be replaced, but an original Modigliani couldn’t.

“How many others have been evacuated?” I asked, taking a deep, steady breath.

“Ten of the girls so far. All the kitchen and cleaning staff are still here along with the nurse and the rest of the guards. Several more choppers are due to land any minute now to get everyone.”

“Right.” I waved my hand back at my helicopter. “Like I said, that can fit ten passengers. We’ll get the rest of the girls onboard now.”

“Got it. They’re waiting inside.”

I strode into the mansion with him, and my eyes narrowed as I counted nine remaining girls in the entryway.

“I thought you said you only evacuated ten girls, not eleven,” I said, turning to the guard.

“That’s right.” His brows furrowed.

“Care to explain this, then?” I said, waving my hand at the gaggle of fearful girls.

His face paled as he counted. “I... I don’t know what’s going on. Hold on.” He dashed over to another guard, who was holding a clipboard. Then he returned to me, flipping up a piece of paper. “We’ve been keeping track of everyone who left so far. There were definitely only ten girls on that rescue chopper.”

I scanned the list, and my guts began to churn. When I didn’t see Tatum in the entryway, I assumed she was on that helicopter, but her name wasn’t on the list.

“Where the fuck is Tatum Marris?” I shouted, addressing everyone in the large foyer.

There were some shrugs and murmurs, but no one seemed to know. Fuck.

“Come on, has anyone seen her?” I said, a note of desperation in my voice.

“She was here a second ago,” a petite dark-haired girl murmured. “I... I thought I saw her go outside to get on the first helicopter, but I guess I was wrong.”

I turned back to the guard. “Good fucking job, man,” I said, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

“I’m sorry, sir, I have no idea what—”

I held up a hand. “Get these nine girls on my helicopter, and the nurse as well. That’s ten.”

“What about Tatum?”

“I’m going to find her. We’ll get on one of the next ones.”

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I pulled my hood up and dashed back outside. No point searching inside. I had a pretty good idea that Tatum was out here, given what the dark-haired girl said, and conditions were far more dangerous outside than inside. I couldn't risk wasting valuable time looking through the mansion first.

Shielding my eyes from the rain with one hand, I frantically looked around, trying to figure out what direction she might've gone in. I didn't have to look too far. I caught a glimpse of white fabric out of the corner of my eye almost immediately, and I turned to see Tatum stepping toward the cliff's edge a hundred feet ahead.

"Fuck!" I started running as fast as I could in the gale-force winds. They were strong enough to pick up a small animal and fling it right into the briny waves, but I steeled myself and kept going. Every sense was maxed out, every muscle working beyond normal capacity.

"Tatum! What the fuck are you doing?" I shouted, but my voice was lost on the wind. She didn't turn around, didn't seem to hear anything at all.

My lungs burned as I sped up, flinging myself into the furiously-pouring rain, and I realized what Tatum's intentions were with a sickening jolt. Perhaps I was wrong, but it looked like she was going to jump off the cliff. Like she thought she deserved it after what she did to Ben, pushing him off another cliff all those months ago.

The impact of the realization made me feel like someone had sucker-punched me right in the gut. "No!" I shouted. "Tatum, don't do it!"

She still didn't seem to hear me, but I kept calling out anyway, hoping at least one

word would make it to her.

The tension was unbearable as time stretched on, each millisecond seeming to last a thousand years as I tried to catch up. There was a fist around my heart, squeezing it tight. I couldn't hate Tatum anymore. Couldn't let anything happen to her. Couldn't lose her. For all my claims of not caring about the girl, the thought of her potential death made my world shatter to pieces around me.

Obviously, somewhere deep inside, I fucking cared.

Tatum stopped right by the edge, falling to her knees. Then she stood and turned around, seemingly changing her mind at the last second. Thank fucking Christ.

All of a sudden, she stumbled and fell. My momentary relief vanished, stomach jerking with pure terror. The ground was slippery with ice, and Tatum was sliding backwards, right toward the edge. She let out a piercing scream, and I surged forward and fell to my hands and knees, flinging my right arm out as she slipped over the cliff.

I managed to grab her left sleeve, and she screamed hysterically as I tried my best to pull her up. The fabric quickly began to tear, and I steeled my jaw and moved down onto my belly, reaching my other arm out as far as I could to grab Tatum's wildly-flailing right arm. "I've got you. I've fucking got you, okay?" I shouted.

Her face was pale and streaked with raindrops, eyes saucer-wide with shock and fright. "I'm going to fall!" she screamed. "I can't hold on!"

"You fucking can, and you will!" I shouted back at her, trying my best to pull her up. In all her struggling terror, she was like a dead weight. I needed her to calm the fuck down, but as long as her wet fingers were slipping within my grasp, that wasn't going to happen.

A terrified cry bubbled up from her throat. “I can’t! I’m slipping!” she screamed.

I was holding on so tight my knuckles were bone-white, but I kept my face arranged into a neutral expression, refusing to let it betray the abject fear I felt. That would only worsen matters. “Tatum, listen to me!” I shouted. “There’s a narrow rock ledge just below you. I can see it. I need you to do your best to hold onto me, but if you lose your grip and fall, you’ll land on the ledge. But only if you stop squirming and struggling, okay? If you aren’t completely still, you’ll miss it.”

She took in a deep, shaky breath and stopped twisting in fear, going rigid instead. That was all I needed. Using all my strength, I began to pull her soaked, shivering body up from the cliff’s edge. When I finally had her all the way up, I dragged her to safety and collapsed onto my knees, my arms tightly wrapped around her. “I’m not losing you like that,” I muttered, voice thick with emotion. “You’re not leaving my sight ever again. No fucking way.”

Tatum was trembling and sobbing like mad, her tears mixing with the heavy rain as she nestled against my chest. She tried to speak, but all that came out was a hysterical blubber.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” I repeated over and over, pulling her even tighter. I felt like I’d just been through a fucking war. “I’ve got you.”

“I...” she finally choked out. It was the only word she managed before sinking into another bout of gut-wrenching sobs, each one jackknifing her like a punch.

I filled my aching lungs with a deep breath of fresh air before dragging myself to my feet. “Come on. Need to get you inside,” I said as I moved up. I picked Tatum up and carefully threw her over my shoulder, keeping her safe and tight in my grip. I never wanted to let go.

As I trudged back toward the mansion, the image of her dangling off that cliff almost knocked the wind out of me as it flashed repeatedly in my mind's eye. She was so close to falling, so close to being smashed on the jagged rocks and swept away by the roiling ocean, sucked down into a place she'd never return from. There was no ledge below her; nothing to stop her from plunging a hundred feet if she slipped out of my hold. Just a lie I told to calm her down.

Thank fucking god it worked...

A sudden mental image of her falling through the air and breaking on a craggy pile of rocks made me want to retch violently. I swallowed down the bile I tasted and forced the thoughts aside. It was fine. She was fine. Nothing like this would ever happen again.

I went into the mansion through a side entrance, opened the first guest bedroom door I found, and gently set Tatum down on the floor. She was soaked to the bone, shivering and ghostly-white.

I quickly stripped her of her freezing, sodden clothing and wrapped her in a thick blanket before rummaging through a cupboard to find a towel and dry clothing. My heart was still hammering at what felt like a million miles an hour, and I didn't see that changing anytime soon.

"Here," I said softly, returning to Tatum's side a moment later.

She gratefully accepted the towel and dropped the blanket so she could dry herself off. "Thank you, Mast—"

I put a finger to her lips. "No. Don't call me that now. Use my name." It didn't feel right to let her call me her master anymore. I wanted the old Tatum back, not the blank-faced wreck I'd turned her into these last few weeks.

“Thank you, Elias,” she whispered slowly, looking down at the floor. A pink flush was creeping up her neck. She sniffed back her tears and wiped her face, looking back up at me a second later. “You... you saved my life,” she added, teeth still chattering. “Why?”

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Her question hit me like a brick. Why indeed? I'd spent so long trying to convince myself I despised this girl, but when it came down to it, I couldn't see myself without her. If she actually went over that edge today, she would've taken a sizable chunk of my soul with her, leaving a hole inside me that could never be filled by anyone or anything else.

This whole time, I hadn't truly wanted to destroy her, as much as I told myself otherwise. If anything, I was letting her destroy me.

I stepped closer and reached one hand out to her face, slowly tucking a thick wet strand of hair behind her ear. "I know I'm supposed to hate you," I muttered huskily. "You killed Ben, and almost my father too. But... I can't. I just fucking can't. Guess it took almost losing you to make me realize that."

Her eyes widened, and I couldn't hold back any longer. Just fucking couldn't.

I leaned down and crushed my mouth against hers, commanding her lips in a searing kiss. A potent jolt of energy shot straight into my bloodstream, and I pushed her back and pressed her up against the wall, unable to drag myself away from her.

This wasn't the time or place for such actions, but I didn't care. I had to have Tatum now, had to let these feelings and all this adrenaline pour out of me somehow. Everything about her was intoxicating, addictive, eliciting something deep inside me that I could neither control nor fight. She was like a damn siren, luring me to her side and keeping me under her spell with her seductive call.

I reached one hand down and around to her firm, round ass, the other still tangled in

her hair, yanking her head back so I could pepper her neck with hot kisses. She gasped and arched her back against the wall, pressing her hard nipples into my chest. “Elias...”

I bit down on her left earlobe, making her yelp as I unzipped my pants. “I need you,” I murmured, my cock throbbing with the need for release. “I fucking need you, Tatum.”

She let out a deep, satisfied sigh, obviously liking the sound of her name on my lips. If that’s what she wanted, I’d say it every fucking day. Every hour.

I moved my lower hand around from her ass, pushing her legs apart and sliding up to massage her clit. She moaned loudly, and within seconds she was wet and throbbing and so fucking ready for me. “Oh, god, please...” She tilted her head to look at me, soulful blue eyes shimmering like deep pools of need.

I wrapped both arms around her and lifted her right off the ground, forcing her to wrap her legs around me, and then I nudged my cock against her pussy, sliding through her slick folds and watching her face as I filled her. Her lips parted in a soundless gasp as I thrust deeper into her slippery core, and when I dug my nails into her ass and bounced her faster on my cock, she began to moan and whimper.

“That’s it, baby,” I grunted. “Scream for me. Come for me.” My thoughts quickly turned to words, and I couldn’t stop them flowing out. “Oh, shit, you’re so fucking tight...”

At that, her pussy clenched down on me like a vise, milking me even harder. I groaned, thrusting my hips like a madman as she climaxed. She screamed, her voice reaching a spine-tingling pitch, and for the first time in weeks, I saw the old Tatum. She was finally back here with me, coming apart on my cock, wild and free and uninhibited. “Don’t ever fucking leave me again,” I commanded her.

“I won’t,” she whimpered breathlessly. “Just keep doing this to me.”

I didn’t know if she truly meant it or if it was just something she said in the heat of the moment, but I could figure that out later. Now wasn’t the time for conversation. We needed to satisfy the heady urges flooding our bodies, filling us with desperate heat and energy. The rolling waves in the storm outside had fucking nothing on us right now.

I kept hammering into Tatum’s mind-numbingly tight pussy, letting her hot juices drown my cock, and then I closed my eyes and let out a grunt, a flash flood of release spilling out of me and into her. “Oh, fuck...”

I stayed inside her for a moment afterwards, still holding her up against the wall. My arms were aching from all the effort I exerted earlier during the cliff rescue. It had only just started to hit me now that the adrenaline had worn off. I didn’t mind. I’d tear my fucking right arm off if it meant stopping Tatum from plunging over that edge.

“That was...” Tatum opened her mouth, then clamped it shut after two words.

I nodded. “Yeah. It was.”

We didn’t need to say it out loud. We both knew what the other meant; that what just happened was fucking incredible. Magical.

We used to hate each other so much, but neither of us could deny the magnetic pull that’d always drawn us together. Somewhere along the line, all because of that dark lure, our mutual hatred had twisted and spiraled into explosive passion and need, animosity falling somewhere along the wayside.

At least for now.

“You should get those clothes on,” I said softly. “We need to get the hell out of here.”

She did as I said, quickly wiping herself down before pulling on the dry sweatshirt, pants and socks I’d fished out of the cupboard for her. They were all several sizes too big, but at least she was warm and dry now.

I led her out into the hallway, marching toward the entryway. The guard who’d greeted me earlier was standing there, his face stark white. “Oh, thank fuck,” he said when he caught sight of us. “You found her. When you didn’t come back, I thought...” He shook his head. “There’s another chopper landing now. Last one. Everyone else is gone except us and one other guy outside.”

“Let’s go.”

I picked up Tatum and carried her outside, shielding as much of her body from the icy rain as I could. When she was safely inside the helicopter, I strapped myself in next to her and looked out the window, watching as the winds stirred the waves beyond the cliffs to even greater heights.

“Just in time,” the pilot remarked. “Storm’s about to hit for real. Give it an hour and this whole place will be flooded.”

The helicopter rose off the platform, struggling against the battering winds. I held Tatum’s hand tightly as we soared above the island. When I looked out again I saw a cypress tree ripped from its roots by the wind, crashing right into the far end of the mansion. Around the cliffs, the waves were growing taller, foam spraying right up to the second-floor windows as they smashed against the rocks.

Tatum let out a soft sigh and leaned her head against my shoulder, her eyes closing. I let her nestle into me, one hand gently stroking her hair as I stared down at her.

I wasn't sure exactly when it started to happen—a slow, unwitting transformation must've begun deep inside me long before today—but this girl had seriously changed something in me. I'd been numb for so long that I'd forgotten what it was like to truly feel alive. Forgotten what it was like to feel something other than blind hatred and burning wrath. But not anymore. Not with her around.

It occurred to me that I didn't recognize this person I was becoming. Maybe that was a good thing, maybe it was bad. I had no idea right now.

All I knew was that with Tatum here in my arms right now, I almost believed I wasn't a monster.

7

Tatum

I kept my eyes closed as I nestled into Elias's shoulders, letting his warmth seep into me. I wasn't asleep, but I needed some time to silently process everything that'd happened. It still didn't seem real. I'd come so close to death today, only to be ripped from its jaws by one of the men I thought I hated most.

Elias saved me, and in doing so he showed me a whole new side of him.

I'd felt it in the way his hands closed in a death-grip around mine when I was dangling off that cliff, as if his life would be over along with mine if I fell. I'd felt it in the way he looked at me with such fear in his expression, in the way his heart didn't stop hammering hard and fast enough to feel it through his shirt until we stepped inside the relative safety of the mansion. I'd felt it in the way he set my core aflame with a few simple words, in the way his lips devoured mine as if he'd starve without one more taste.

I had a sneaking suspicion that was the real Elias. Not the angry, arrogant asshole who seemed to take after his father in every way. Not the man who claimed to hate me with every inch of his being. No, the real Elias was hidden behind a mask, and I'd seen it slip today.

It took me almost dying to force him to reveal a few glimpses of that side of him, and I didn't know how I could make him do it again without putting myself in another dangerous situation. All I knew was that I wanted to see more.

I wanted to know all his secrets, wanted to know what it would take to get him entirely on my side. I wanted him to stop hurting me, and I wanted him to care about me. I wanted him to take me in his arms and tell me he'd protect me from the nightmare my life had become.

Even though his family and secret society was the nightmare.

That aside, there was a chance now. Something in Elias had shifted, and if I remained compliant and grateful, he might eventually let his mask slip all the way. If that happened, I might have a real chance at escaping the clutches of Crown and Dagger.

That meant from now on, I had to be as good as gold around Elias, had to acquiesce to all his demands to speed up the process of getting him on my side. If doing that meant experiencing more instances of today's mind-blowing sex, I wouldn't even mind....

I shifted on my seat in the helicopter. Elias stroked my hair, his skillful hands making goosebumps rise on my scalp. "It's a twenty minute flight," he murmured a moment later. "And then a half-hour drive to the Lodge. As soon as we're there, you can eat and rest."

I opened my eyes. "Thank you," I whispered, staring up at his handsome face. As much as I wanted to continue simmering with hatred for him, I couldn't. Not after today. Not after he saved my life and showed me that caring side of him, rare as it may be.

I let myself doze off properly for a while, and when I woke, the helicopter was approaching the mainland. My heart leapt as I recognized some of the buildings on the ground below. We were landing in New Marwick. I could see the tall old clock tower at Roden gleaming in the late afternoon sun, and beyond that, the old town square with all its shops and cafés.

I was so close to my old life, to my old friends... and yet still so far.

The helicopter finally swooped down lower, landing at a private airfield just out of town. After that, I was bundled into a black car with tinted windows. Elias stayed with me, keeping a watchful eye on me the whole time.

The winter sun was only an hour or so off setting, and the trees on the edge of the road glowed with an orange-red gleam as the car whizzed past them. The tall buildings and busy roads of New Marwick had been left in the distance, and it looked like we were heading somewhere northwest, into a more rural area where the houses grew increasingly farther apart and set back off the road.

Around thirty minutes later, the car slowed and veered to the left, approaching a wide set of black-iron gates with intricate scrollwork. There was a towering iron arch over the gate with 'Scarborough Estate' picked out in gold on a crest. Stone pillars flanked the gate on both sides, giving way to a tall privacy wall covered in thick green moss and ivy, flecked with crisp white snowflakes.

There was a small stone gatehouse on the right. Two men stepped out and waved for the car to stop as we pulled up. They were dressed in black clothing similar to the outfits worn by the guards at the Finishing School.

The driver put his window down and spoke to the men. One of them glanced into the back, his eyes widening as he saw Elias. "Go ahead," he said, stepping off the road and waving his hand forward. The other guard stepped back into the gatehouse and pressed something, making the gates swing open a second later.

Nervous twinges bit at my belly as the car pulled through and headed down the long driveway. It was lined with cypress trees and tall cast iron lampposts, and at the end it swung in a semicircle around a gentle slope of snow-flecked grass that seemed to go on forever. At the top of that slope was the Lodge.

I realized now—foolishly late—that the name was one of those silly ironic nicknames people like to come up with, like calling a seven foot man ‘Shorty’. It was by far the biggest and most extravagant mansion I’d ever seen.

I drew in a deep breath as we drew closer, my eyes widening at the sheer splendor of the place. It was five stories of breathtaking Jacobethan architecture faced in beige limestone with mullioned windows, gables, and soaring turrets and spires. At the front of the magnificent mansion was a sunken courtyard with a fountain surrounded by marble tiles. Beyond that were beautiful gardens, somehow intact and alive with greenery and colorful flowers despite the bitter winter weather.

Once upon a time, it may have been someone’s ancestral home, with horses and carriages and dainty ladies in long dresses fluttering fans at their faces. It was so dazzling and beautiful that it was hard to believe such a wicked, immoral organization had use of it now.

How times change...

In the distance, I could make out more fountains and gardens. There were also smaller (but no less grand) buildings with private courtyards of their own, and even what appeared to be an enormous hedge maze. Beyond all that was more snow-flecked lawn, stretching for miles before ending in a wall of thick forest, dark and foreboding.

The car came to a stop in a large parking lot just off the driveway. It was filled with expensive cars—Mercedes, Aston Martins, Jaguars, McLarens, Ferraris, even a Rolls Royce.

Elias helped me out of the car and led me toward the classic stone-column portico which demarcated the entrance to the Lodge from the rest of the place. Wide steps led upward to the enormous golden-arched double front doors. It wouldn’t surprise me in

the least if I heard that they were inlaid with real gold.

We stepped into a foyer and then through another arched doorway. I almost lost my breath at the spectacular vision before me. The interior was like something straight out of a Disney princess film. Right in front of me, a grand double staircase swept up to the second level. The floors were polished marble. Extravagantly ornamental carvings lined the moldings and ceiling panels, glittering chandeliers provided soft, shimmering light, and statues and paintings adorned the walls.

To our left was another arched double doorway leading into a room the size of a gymnasium. It was darker in there, lit only with tall crimson candles and a roaring fireplace on one side. What I saw left me flabbergasted.

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It was like a scene from a Roman orgy. Rich, carnal, debauched.

Scores of beautiful women in various states of undress were spread around the enormous room, along with at least fifty men in suits. The women had black collars around their necks. Several of them were wearing gold filigree domino masks as well. Some of them were on their hands and knees or bent over furniture with men fucking them from behind, eyes scrunched with either pleasure or pain. Others were upright, being fucked in standing positions as they clutched at the walls or curtains. Still more were slinking around the room, letting men grope them or finger them with their free hands as they sipped at drinks and smoked cigars, and others were on their knees, servicing those same men with their mouths.

The room itself was filled with tufted black leather sofas, French-style chaise lounges as big as beds, individual armchairs that almost resembled thrones, Persian rugs in deep crimson with golden threadwork, and walnut accent tables littered with empty glasses. Heavy dark velvet curtains were drawn across the high windows, making the room dim and shadowy around the flickering candlelight, and multiple bars were set up on the edges, serving drinks in golden chalices and crystal flutes.

Braided black whips, wooden paddles, ropes and mean-looking sex toys were on display on one of the walls, lying in stark contrast against the classically-patterned wallpaper behind them. A couple of wide swings were also suspended from the ceiling with golden chains, along with black harnesses hanging nearby. On top of that, there were crosses, cages, stocks, benches, and leather spanking horses, all of which were in use.

In the center of the room there was a shimmering indoor pool with steam rising off it,

designed to look like a natural lagoon. In the middle of the pool was a bronze statue of a naked woman rising out of the water, which was twinkling with submerged golden lights. A couple of naked women were frolicking in the pool, putting on a show for two men with dark, lecherous eyes.

Grunts and moans echoed in the room along with shrieks and giggles. The women seemed to love what they were doing, which immediately struck me as odd. I used to get turned on by witnessing this kind of stuff, picturing myself being taken and used for the pleasure of rich, powerful men, but now I couldn't imagine anything worse than servicing these slimy pricks.

The thought of doing it with Elias, however... that was a different story.

I looked at a woman strapped to a cross, moaning with pleasure as a man lashed at her with a tasseled whip. I imagined it was me there instead, letting Elias bring me that potent mix of pleasure and pain. My nipples tightened under my shirt as arousal flooded my body, pooling between my thighs.

“Tatum. This way.”

I looked to my right to see Elias beckoning me toward the staircase. I started walking again, letting the sounds from the room on the left drift away as I trailed upstairs after him. On the second-floor landing, two men in suits were talking. When they turned to look at us, my stomach flipped with terror.

One of the men was Tobias.

He excused himself from his acquaintance and strode toward us. My mind was immediately filled with black, incredulous horror, and my knees went weak, threatening to give out.

I tried to stay calm by telling myself that I'd already be dead if Tobias wanted me gone for what I did to him. All I had to do was pretend to be apologetic in order to avoid incurring his wrath.

"You're finally here," he said crisply to his son, ignoring my presence entirely. "Everyone else arrived well over half an hour ago."

"We had some issues getting off the island," Elias said curtly. "But don't worry, all your art is safe."

"Good." Tobias finally turned his gaze to me. "Tatum. You look like you've seen a ghost."

I swallowed hard. "Mr. King, I'm so sorry about what I did to you," I murmured. "I... I don't know what came over me."

His eyes glittered with barely-concealed malice, but he smiled anyway. "Don't worry about it. It's all in the past, and it barely left a scar. Nothing a good plastic surgeon can't take care of, anyway."

He was right. I couldn't see anything on his neck at all, save for a tiny red dot that could just be a broken capillary at first glance. No one would ever guess he'd been stabbed a month and a half ago, or that he nearly died. It was almost as if it never even happened.

But it did.

There was no way Tobias had forgiven me, no matter what he claimed. His smile and easygoing words were nothing but lies, and the malevolent expression in his eyes told the dismal truth. If I wanted to survive in this place, I needed to stay as far away from this man as possible.

“Show Tatum to her new room,” he said, returning his attention to Elias. “You know where it is.”

With that, he swept away. Immediately, I felt as if I could breathe again, my legs no longer threatening to give out from under me. I followed Elias down a long hall on the right. He stopped and swung open a large wooden door a few minutes later, letting me inside for a tour of my new quarters. The sight before me was enough to make me forget all about Tobias.

The enormous room beyond the door was a wonderland, containing almost everything I could ever imagine wanting or needing in a bedroom. It was spacious and airy with light dove gray walls, polished hardwood floors and a chandelier dangling from the center of the ceiling. A queen-sized bed with a white and gold duvet and matching pillows stood on one side, flanked by bedside tables made from dark wood. Tiffany lamps sat on the tables. To the left of one of them, tucked in a corner near the window, there was an antique toile fabric armchair; the kind that looked like you could sink into it with a book and never want to get up.

On the other side of the room, there was a tufted sofa in front of a low coffee table. A few feet behind the table was a widescreen TV sitting in a cabinet filled with movies, and to the right of that was a bookshelf stacked with books, magazines, and beautiful ornaments. It was so big that it took up almost half a wall.

Two large windows on the far side of the room let the pink-orange light of the setting sun spill in from outside, casting a warm glow over the furniture. The windows were barred, a jarring reminder of where I was, but thick brocade curtains covered most of that.

Elias smiled gently as he led me around, directing me to another section I hadn’t noticed when I first stepped inside. He seemed amused by my stunned reaction. To him, a room like this was probably ordinary, but I’d never seen anything like it. It

was beyond words to a girl like me, especially considering I'd spent the majority of the last three or four months trapped in an underground cell with only the sparsest of furnishings.

I padded after him into the attached bathroom. It was just as beautiful as the rest of the place. The tiles were marble and in the center was a large rectangular bath which looked like it had been carved out of a single slab of stone. To the right was a double shower with a rack of fluffy white towels beside it. There was also a bathroom cupboard and mirror with toiletries, various lotions and moisturizers sitting on it.

In one upper corner, I saw a tiny black object with a blinking red light. A surveillance camera. The bedroom had one too, above the bed. They were probably there to ensure I didn't attempt anything like hanging myself with a sheet or drowning myself in the bathtub.

Elias beckoned to me a moment later. Apparently there was more.

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There was a doorway on the far side of the bathroom, and through it was a large walk-in closet, big enough to be its own room. It was filled to the brim with gorgeous clothes and shoes. At one end was a huge mirror, and beside it sat a vanity with multiple drawers, all filled with makeup, hair products and perfumes.

Right at the back, tucked away in a little hidden nook, was a writing desk and comfortable study chair. The desk had a lamp and multiple leather journals and pens scattered over one side. The only thing missing was a computer, although it was clear I would never be allowed one of those while I was here. Too risky—I could get onto the internet and let the world know what was happening here.

“I figured you’d like this room because of that.” Elias nodded toward the writing nook.

“Thank you,” I said. “This whole place is beautiful.”

“I’m not sure if the clothes will fit you, because I didn’t exactly have much time to organize them, but they can be replaced.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

He smiled. “Why don’t you take a shower and find yourself something comfortable to wear to bed while I sort out some food?” he said. “You’ll probably want to have a rest after you eat.”

I nodded, a yawn suddenly creeping up my throat. I hadn’t noticed till he brought it up, but I was absolutely exhausted after the day we’d had.

After taking a long, hot shower, I headed into the closet and rifled through the drawers in search of some pajamas. I found a beautiful pink and cream silk cami and shorts set. I slipped into it, almost groaning with pleasure at the feel of the luxurious fabric sliding over my skin. They weren't typical winter pajamas, but they were too gorgeous to pass up. Besides, the heating in the palatial mansion was so good I could barely even tell it was winter outside.

It was hard to believe that just a couple of hours ago, I was freezing and soaked on the edge of a cliff, desperate to hurl myself off it. It seemed like it all happened to a different girl in another lifetime.

Elias was sitting on the bed when I returned to the main part of my suite. Next to him was a tray of hot food and two steaming cups of mulled wine. The heavenly scent of cinnamon and orange from the mulled wine filled my nostrils, and I sighed with contentment and flopped down on the bed, taking a mug in one hand.

"Want to watch something while we eat?" Elias asked as I took a sip.

I swallowed, then smiled shyly. "Sure."

He set up a movie on the massive TV, and I reclined against the bedhead with all its cushions, nibbling at the food and taking sips of the delicious hot wine. Elias came back and did the same, sitting in silence as the movie played out before us. My eyelids began to feel heavy after a while, and he slid an arm around me, letting me slide farther down the bed so I could nestle into his chest.

It was easy to pretend for a while that we were a real couple, sitting in a hotel suite as we enjoyed delicious meals and did regular couple stuff like snuggling up together on a bed while a funny movie played in the background. But then my eyes drifted over to the windows and the thick silver bars dragged me back to reality.

This was no hotel, and Elias wasn't my boyfriend. This gorgeous, opulent room wasn't really mine, and it never would be.

It was a beautiful cage... but it was still a cage.

* * *

"Rise and shine, Doll."

I opened my eyes to see Mellie standing over my bed, a smug smile on her beautiful face. I groaned and sat up. "What are you doing here? Where's Elias?"

I didn't remember going to sleep last night. I wasn't even sure if Elias spent the night, or if he slipped out after waiting for me to drift off.

Mellie shrugged. "I think he had to go do something with his dad. I don't know what. Anyway, I'm here to go over the ground rules with you."

I gaped at her. "What, you work here now?"

She beamed and nodded. "I told you, I've proved my worth to the society, and now they're rewarding me by letting me take part. It's my job to liaise with all the new girls here and help them get settled, especially as none of you were actually ready to be integrated just yet." She paused to let out a long, heavy sigh. "God, it really is a crying shame that Albemarle Island flooded, isn't it? The School won't be fixed for months. It's such a nice place, though. So far away from the real world. I can't wait till it's all restored."

So the island had a name. "Yeah, it's really nice," I said stiffly.

She glared at me, and her blue eyes no longer seemed so pretty. They were just cold

and stony. “I’ll let that one slide. But only that one.”

“So you really quit college for this?” I blurted out, unable to help myself. I still couldn’t believe a girl like her, with all the opportunities and privilege in the world, would choose this for herself.

She snorted. “It’s not like anyone from my family really needs qualifications. We can walk into almost any job we want with just a few phone calls. So what’s the point of getting a degree?” She waved a hand. “Besides, I got sick of listening to Willa and Greer moaning and bitching about you all the time. You know they can’t stand you now?”

Bile rose in my throat. “Yeah, I know,” I mumbled. I couldn’t blame them. They were my best friends and I’d seemingly cut them off without a word. Then my parents had informed them that I thought I was too good for them and therefore they weren’t allowed to have any sort of contact with me.

If I were them, I’d hate me too.

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“Anyhow,” Mellie said, finally sitting down. “We need to go over the house rules. There’s a lot, so pay attention.”

I rubbed my eyes and sat up straight. “Fine,” I muttered. It wasn’t like I had a choice.

“You’ll get a tour later today so you’ll know where everything is,” she began. “Anyway, rule one is that breakfast is served to all the girls between seven and nine each morning in the second floor dining room. It’s in the east wing. The only exceptions to this rule is if a member has invited you to share breakfast with him instead. Happens occasionally.”

“Right. Breakfast, east wing, seven and nine. Got it.” That seemed simple enough.

“Lunch is at twelve, dinner is at seven. Unless it’s a party day or night, in which case you don’t get lunch or dinner. You’ll bloat up too much, which no one wants to see. There are canapés at the parties, though, so you won’t totally starve.”

Great. “Uh-huh.”

“There are several gyms on this floor. All girls must exercise between nine and ten. You can also go for walks through the mansion and around the grounds, but you must not disturb anyone, and you must stay within the grounds. There are guards patrolling everywhere, so don’t even try to defy that rule.”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. “Got it.”

“You have your weekly beauty rituals on Tuesdays. Waxing, eyebrow threading,

manicures, teeth bleaching, and so on. You don't have to get all of those done every week, of course, but you still have to attend. Gotta maintain those polished looks. Not that you seem very polished at the moment." She sniffed, casting a disparaging eye over my frizzy hair and bare face. "There's also monthly testing for sexually transmitted infections, and your contraceptive shot must be updated every three months. Don't need any unwanted pregnancies while you're still in use."

My stomach lurched. In use. Like I was just an object or a machine.

"You must attend all parties, unless you are sick or injured."

I wrinkled my forehead. "What exactly is a party? Is it like what I saw yesterday, in that huge room on the way in?"

"Yes, exactly like that. Not always in that particular room, but if you saw yesterday's proceedings, then you already have a decent idea of what it all entails."

I nodded miserably. "Got it," I said, my voice barely above a murmur.

"Next rule: you must obey the man you've been given to. In your case, Elias. Everything he wishes is your command. And I mean everything. Even if he wants something like double anal with two massive toys, you grit your teeth and bear it. And you never, ever complain. You must always seem happy and compliant."

"Right."

"It's up to your master to choose whether or not he wants to share you at parties, but most of the members do. So if he chooses that and other men approach you for anything, you must say yes. Failure to do so will result in punishment."

"Uh-huh." The taste of bile returned to my throat at the idea of letting some twisted,

evil old man force his way inside me.

“And lastly....” Mellie leaned forward. “This is the most important rule. You must never talk about how you’re here as a captive. Ever. Even if someone asks, you smile and deny it. You say you are here consensually and that you are very happy. Or else.”

A shiver ran through me, like a bolt of electricity. “Why?”

She smiled, baring vicious white teeth at me. “Because not everyone is aware of what really goes on here.”

“What?” My heart began to pound.

“Only trusted members are let in on the truth of the Lodge,” she said smugly. “Others come here to enjoy the parties and the girls, but they have no idea where they really come from. They think you’re all just happy hookers.”

I was immediately reminded of Tobias and Elias mocking me behind my back all those weeks ago, secretly laughing as Elias pretended not to know that I was a captive. Fury bubbled up inside me all over again.

How could that man be the same one who yanked me out from the cold, creeping arms of death yesterday? How could someone so malicious be so caring at the same time?

I suppose I couldn’t entirely blame him for his nasty past behavior, though. He thought I killed Ben, and he’d subsequently held a vendetta against me for a long time. But when he saw me slip and nearly plunge to my death from a cliff, something else took charge in his mind. He said it himself yesterday: he was supposed to hate me for what I’d done, but he just couldn’t.

“Isn’t that funny?” Mellie went on. “That so many of them don’t even know?”

“Yeah. Hilarious,” I said in a voice laced with sarcasm.

She slapped me right across the face. I winced and touched a hand to my smarting cheek.

“I told you I’d only let that attitude slide once,” she said, eyes narrowed. “This isn’t Roden, Tatum. We aren’t buddies who mess around with each other between classes. This is real, and you are no longer my equal.”

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“I guess I never was in your eyes,” I said softly.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she laughed. “Good point. You always were funny.”

I wasn’t joking, but I didn’t dare say that.

“Any questions?” Mellie’s brows rose.

“A few.”

“Well, you can ask me anything now. Within reason, of course.”

I sighed and looked down at the duvet, tracing the pattern of the golden thread woven throughout it. “You said we’re allowed to walk outside. Has anyone ever managed to escape the grounds?”

Mellie’s eyes glittered. “Already thinking of trying to escape, huh?” Her lips spread in a wide grin. “Like I said earlier, don’t even bother trying. But to answer your question: yes, actually, a few have escaped in the past.”

Blazing hope flared within me. So it was possible after all. I might not even need Elias on my side. “Really?” I asked, hoping my voice didn’t betray my excitement.

She nodded. “Yup. Remember ages ago, when we were talking about that Roden Strangler urban myth? Someone mentioned that woman who was found in a forest, dead from a drug overdose. Way back in the eighties.”

“Yes.”

“My dad told me she was a captive here. But security wasn’t as good back then as it is now. She managed to get away through the forest. The guards eventually caught up to her, but after that, her master didn’t want her anymore. Neither did anyone else. Too much trouble. So they faked the drug overdose and left her body in a different forest. The one just out of New Marwick.”

I gulped. “I presume something similar happened to the others who escaped.”

“Yes. So you see how it would be a bad idea to even attempt it, right?” She arched one eyebrow. “I mean, a few have escaped, sure, but none of those few ever actually survived the escape. Not for long, anyway.”

I gritted my teeth. There was a first time for everything.

“Anyhow...” She waved her hand. “Anything else you want to know?”

“Yes, actually.” I frowned. “How many other women are here?”

“Probably around a hundred. Anywhere between five and twenty new girls are brought in each year.”

“What happens to them once they’re no longer wanted?”

“They work as maids, gardeners or kitchen staff here.”

So no longer sex slaves, just regular old slaves. What a bright future to look forward to....

“And you said all of them are captives, right? Like me,” I said.

“Yup.” Mellie cocked her head to the side, waiting for me to go on.

I worried my bottom lip between my teeth for a second. “When I saw that party yesterday, they all seemed happy. Like they were really enjoying it. How is that possible? Are they all just that...” I shook my head, searching for the right word. “Broken?”

She smiled. “Some of them are. But for the most part, no.”

“Then why would they enjoy any of it?”

“Drugs and alcohol. Sorry, I actually forgot to mention that earlier. There’s no rules about any of that. You can drink as much as you want, snort as much coke as you want, pop as many pills as you want. As long as you don’t overdose, of course. Lots of the girls here do it to cope. It makes them a lot happier and they wind up enjoying themselves at the parties. You can do it too.”

“I see,” I said stiffly. Hard pass.

“Sometimes the members even get their slaves injected with oxytocin. It’s a chemical that makes people feel all lovey-dovey. The same stuff that floods through brand new mothers to help them bond with their babies.”

“God, really?”

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She shrugged in a non-committal manner, as if it wasn't a big deal at all. "Yeah. But like I said, it's mostly drugs and alcohol that makes the girls look so happy. Oh, and the Artemis Festival, of course. That's a good inspiration for them to behave themselves."

My forehead crinkled. "The Artemis Festival?"

Mellie glanced at her watch. "Long story. I'll explain it to you another day. Sorry, gotta head out to see the next girl."

She swept out of the room. I let out a long sigh and stared up at the ceiling. According to the clock hanging on the wall near the bed, it was eight o'clock, but I didn't want to get up and find the dining room for breakfast. My thoughts were too clouded with melancholy to think about eating.

Even though I'd vowed to escape this place, I had no idea how long it would take. It could be months. Years. Until then, I'd have to put up with all the terrible things that happened here, and I wouldn't be allowed to utter a single word of complaint. Not even to Elias. I needed him to help me, and that meant being a good slave to him and telling him everything he wanted to hear. Fake compliance and happiness, like Mellie said.

There were some instances in which I didn't have to fake it, though...

A slow, warm tingle started deep in my belly, spreading throughout my body as I thought of yesterday's hot and heavy encounter with him. It felt so right to let him kiss me, touch me, pick me up and fuck me. In those heady moments, I'd never

wanted anything more, and a tiny part of me even wondered if I was falling for him. But now that I was alone again, reality was setting in.

For now, I could be with him in this luxurious place. I could let him care for me, protect me, keep me warm and coddled and safe. I could even want him and crave his touch every day and night.

But at the heart of all that, I was still a captive. A prisoner trapped in a gilded cage. Despite any feelings I had for him, I could never truly be with him.

I could never, ever fall in love with him.

8

Elias

With a flick of my hand, my golden mask sailed onto the floor with my dark red second-level robe. I was supposed to be wearing all that shit tonight, but I really couldn't be bothered. I had a ton of work to do on my thesis, and I'd rather do that right now than attend yet another first-level party at the Tomb.

Crown and Dagger held one every few months to show off to all the newer first-levels, keeping them entertained and on the hook. Guys who'd been first-level for longer (and also second-levels like me) were expected to make an appearance at a few of the Tomb parties to make everything look good, but they'd become stale and boring as fuck. It was the same shit every time: strippers with lithe bodies putting on shows, beautiful escorts offering anything a man could desire, head-pounding music, flowing booze, endless amounts of coke.

While I didn't mind drinking, I didn't want to touch random women, and I certainly didn't want to spend an evening snorting lines. I'd already been through that stage when I was younger. The shit was toxic, and I didn't feel the need to get high anymore. Especially not when I had Tatum.

She was all the high I needed. The only woman I wanted to touch. I was a man obsessed, my thoughts always fixated on the curves of her body, the lilt of her voice, the way her eyes darkened when she was afraid, and the way they lit up when she smiled.

I'd spent the last couple of weeks with her at the Lodge, helping her get settled into the place. Things between us seemed... better. She still didn't talk a hell of a lot, but she no longer seemed like a blank slate. She even smiled at me on occasion when I brought her things she liked.

On top of that, fucking her was pure heaven again. She was always there in the moment, never drifting off into some dark place in her mind like she used to.

I didn't want to leave her at the Lodge when I was forced to return to New Marwick for all my grad school shit, but her contract stated she must be kept either there or at the island throughout her service, and I didn't really have an option while I was so busy anyway. Besides, it was the safest place for her right now. There were doctors to take care of her physical and mental wellbeing if necessary, and security guards were everywhere to ensure no one would ever touch her against her will. More to the point, they could all ensure she never tried to hurt herself again.

Her room also contained surveillance cameras, so anytime I wanted to look at her, I could get on my laptop or phone and do so with a few keyboard strokes. I'd done exactly that a few minutes ago, and the security feed from her bedroom was up on my laptop screen, a welcome distraction from the boring business journal I'd been studying for my thesis earlier. Welcome to the Tatum Marris Show.

Right now, she was stretched across her couch, watching an old episode of Dexter. The show's serial killer had just jabbed a needle in someone's neck and was preparing to slice them up.

Tatum bit at her bottom lip as the action happened onscreen. I frowned, wondering if it reminded her of the incident with my father back in late November.

I still wasn't sure what made her snap and stab him. In all the weeks back at the island, when she was in her blank robotic phase, the only reason she gave me was

‘because I’m bad’. My father also seemed reluctant to discuss the subject. Every time I’d tried to ask him to elaborate, he said she just snapped out of the blue when he went down to her cell to ask her how she was doing with me.

Something about that didn’t ring true. Why the hell would he be visiting her and asking how she was? He had no reason to care beyond the fact she belonged to me. He hated her just as much as I used to. After all, he was related to Ben too.

When I pressed him, he said he assumed she stabbed him to get at me, because she hated being there with me and she wanted to draw attention to that by causing a huge scene. Made sense at first, in a shallow way. But not anymore, now that I’d actually thought about it. If she hated me so much and wanted to get at me, why not just stab me? It wasn’t like she didn’t have the opportunity. I was in her cell a lot back then, and she’d obviously had the improvised weapon stashed in there for weeks.

I knew I wasn’t going to get any straight answers from either of them, though. Tatum had closed up on the subject—she didn’t seem ready to talk about what she’d been through all those weeks ago yet—and getting straight answers from my father was like extracting teeth. And that was on a good day.

The front doorbell pealed downstairs, yanking me out of my thoughts. I ignored it, assuming the housekeeper would get it. When the bell rang again, I glanced at the time on my screen. After nine. Maricela was probably asleep.

I didn’t particularly want to go and answer the door, as I wasn’t expecting anyone, but if someone had managed to get past the front gate security, it was most likely friends or family.

I trudged downstairs as the doorbell rang again. “Yeah, yeah, I’m coming!” I called out.

I threw the door open to see Dr. Paulson standing on the steps. “Sorry to bother you so late, Elias,” he said. “Can we talk?”

For a few seconds, I couldn’t imagine what he might want to discuss with me. Then I remembered my DNA test. After all the chaos and confusion of the island flooding, I’d forgotten all about it.

“Sure, man. Come in,” I said, stepping aside.

He didn’t budge. “Could we speak outside? Away from the house.”

“Why?”

He shifted nervously from one foot to the other. “It’s quite common knowledge that your father records or films everything he can,” he said in a hushed voice. “And I’d rather this conversation stay between us.”

I snorted. “This house isn’t bugged, and you didn’t seem to have any issue discussing all that shit with me when you were taking my blood the other week. If there were any cameras or recording devices in my room, my father would’ve been on your ass immediately for going behind his back.”

“Fair point, but still... I’d feel far more comfortable discussing this elsewhere.”

I rubbed my jawline. “You’re starting to worry me. Do I have some sort of fucked up genetic disease?”

“No.”

When he didn’t say anything beyond that, I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Let me grab a coat. We’ll walk down to the park across the street.”

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We walked in silence. A wide wooden bench overlooked a duck pond in the park, and we sat down there. The fog was extra thick over the water and illuminated by the cast iron lampposts surrounding the pond. It gave it an eerie yellow glow.

I turned to the doctor. “So what is it?”

He was silent for another few seconds. “Have I ever told you how I came to be employed by your father?” he finally asked.

“Nope.” I turned my head slightly to the side and rolled my eyes. I didn’t want some trip down memory lane. I wanted him to get to the fucking point. He’d already left me in silent suspense for the last ten minutes.

“About five years ago, I was in trouble. A patient falsely accused me of something, and everyone believed him. I was close to losing my medical license. But then your father approached me. He said a doctor who worked for him had just left, and he needed someone to replace him. He also said he’d heard about my issues, and he’d make sure they’d go away if I accepted the position. Not only that, it was only four days a week on a private island for more than quadruple my old salary. Almost sounded too good to be true. I said yes, and he was right—all my problems vanished, and I was allowed to retain my license.”

“So my dad bribed someone at the Medical Board to help you. What a shock.”

He raised a gentle hand in the air. “Please, let me continue,” he said. I nodded. “Anyway,” he went on. “As part of my contract, I had to agree to never speak about my work with anyone, and I wasn’t supposed to ask any questions. Ever.”

“Sounds about right.”

“The job itself is actually very quiet and easy for me. I write prescriptions and send off samples for testing. That’s ninety-five percent of it. But I’m not completely blind or naïve. I’ve come to realize the island is—or was, before the storm—some sort of training facility for young prostitutes who want to serve Crown and Dagger.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what it is. Hence the name of the main building.”

He leaned forward. “I’m not exactly in agreement with the existence of prostitution in general, but on the other hand, I’m not stupid. As long as there are people with money, there’ll be people who want to pay for sex. All kinds of it. None of my business in the end. And like I said, the hours and money are great. So I’ve always kept up my side of the deal: never asked questions, never discussed it with anyone.”

I sighed with exasperation. “Can you get to the fucking point already?”

“This is important, Elias. So you understand where I’m coming from.”

“Okay. Fine.” I let out a sharp, impatient breath.

“I don’t have much actual contact with the young ladies. Nurse Fernandez does most of the face-to-face stuff, and it seems like the women are under some sort of strict orders not to speak with most people anyway. But despite that, over the last few years, I’ve seen and heard a few things which gave me pause.”

“Such as?”

He shook his head slowly. “Just a few things here and there. A lot of the men in the society seem to have rather dark tastes. There’s been strange injuries I’ve had to treat, allegedly resulting from accidents during coitus. Some odd behavior from the girls on

the rare occasion I see them instead of Nurse Fernandez. And more recently, the incident with Tatum Marris and your father.”

So I wasn’t the only one who still found that whole thing totally fucking bizarre. Now I was actually starting to get interested in what he had to say again. “Go on.”

“But there’s never been anything that really made my antennae tingle, so to speak. Not until your DNA results came back. That’s what we need to discuss. I found your egg donor.”

I cocked my head to the side, my pulse picking up its pace. “What’s that got to do with the Finishing School?”

He lowered his voice. “I’m not exactly sure yet. Maybe nothing. But your results pinged an FBI Missing Persons DNA database.”

“What?”

“The FBI keeps track of all missing persons cases, and whenever friends or family members hand in items that belonged to a person, like a brush, DNA can be taken and added to their profile in that database. Even with very old cold cases. So that way—”

I held up a hand. “I understand what it is. I meant like... what the fuck? Was I kidnapped as a baby or something?”

“No. It wasn’t you on the database. It was a woman named Camille Gorham. Your DNA results provided a direct familial match to her. Does that name ring any bells?”

I scrunched up my face. “Maybe. Sounds familiar but I don’t know why.”

“She was a Roden student who disappeared a long time ago.”

“That’s where I’ve heard of it, then. All those dumb Roden Strangler stories.”

“Yes, probably.”

“So the donor who helped my mom and dad disappeared? That’s pretty shitty.”

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Dr. Paulson leaned even closer to me. “It’s a little more convoluted than that. You were born in early March of 1994, yes?”

“Yup.”

“Meaning you were conceived somewhere around mid-1993.” He hesitated for a few seconds. “Camille Gorham went missing in January 1992.”

My brows shot up. “But... how the fuck is that possible?”

“That’s the million dollar question.”

“Jesus.” I leaned back against the bench, taking in a deep breath. “Wait. What if she donated the egg in say, 1991, and it was just frozen until my parents used it in ‘93? Eggs can be frozen, right?”

“There’s a very slim possibility of that being the case, yes, but egg freezing technology wasn’t exactly where it is now back in 1991. So I’d say it’s unlikely.”

“Right. So my parents were somehow able to get an egg from this girl well over a year after she went missing.”

He cleared his throat. “It seems so, yes.”

I sighed and rubbed my neck on both sides. “So what are you getting at, doc? Because it’s starting to sound like you think my family kidnapped her or something.”

“I actually wondered if perhaps this Camille girl decided to work for Crown and Dagger. Like the other young ladies who’ve done so over the years,” he said delicately. “Perhaps she was ashamed and didn’t want her family to know, so she just left without saying a word to them, and that’s why she was reported missing. Maybe she even changed her name. And then your father came into contact with her at the Finishing School and thought she’d make a good egg donor. Certain physical characteristics and so on.”

My shoulders slumped. “Oh. Yeah, that’d make sense, I guess.”

“I figured that could very well be the case, so out of loyalty to your family, I got the FBI off the scent. When they were alerted that a sample had matched with one of their missing persons profiles, I had my friend at the lab tell them that it was an error. A false positive yielded by a contaminated sample.”

“So why are you telling me all this, then?” I asked, brows furrowed. “If you think there’s a totally innocent explanation.”

He hesitated for even longer this time. “Because as I said before, there are some things I’ve seen over the years at the island that have given me pause. Now this as well? It seems...” He trailed off and shook his head slowly. “I know it’s probably nothing, and there’s very likely a rational explanation for all of it, but I can’t shake the feeling that something’s not quite right. At the same time, I can’t really do anything about it.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll be honest with you, Elias. It frightens me. Your father has a lot of reach and influence. If someone like me starts asking questions that throw his reputation into question...” He threw up his hands. “Well, not only would I lose my job, I’d probably lose the ability to work anywhere ever again. I have no doubt he’d make sure of it.”

I nodded. “But if someone like me starts looking into things, it’s a bit different.”

“Exactly. I very much doubt your father would want to cut off his only son or destroy all future opportunities for him.”

I stood up and extended a hand. “Thanks for coming to me with this. I appreciate it.”

He nodded, lips set in a grim line. “I had a feeling you might. I’m glad I was right.”

He was.

Even though it was probably nothing, like he said, I was still suspicious. The more I delved into this egg donor business and the more I thought about Tatum’s past outbursts, the more I started to think something strange was afoot at the Finishing School and the Lodge. No matter how many circles I went around in my head, trying to spin various theories that could explain away all the weird shit, I couldn’t escape the sinking feeling in my gut that told me things weren’t as they seemed. My father was obviously hiding a lot from me, and he didn’t intend for me to know any of it.

At least not yet.

I knew there was only one way to get him to be fully honest with me, and that was to ensure I made it into the third level of Crown and Dagger. The high-level members were trusted with every single secret the society had tucked away, as far as I knew, so if there was anything seriously fucked up happening at the School or Lodge, they’d be the ones to know about it.

I wouldn’t even be considered for the third level until my twenty-fourth birthday, but that was only a month away. So all I had to do was bide my time, try my best to seem like a model society member so that I’d receive consideration, and most importantly, not let my father know that I had any suspicions, vague as they were. I could easily

do that. Then I'd have every answer I needed.

Just four more weeks...

9

Tatum

My hand trailed along the dark wood-paneled walls as I slowly stepped through the halls of the Lodge. I hummed a soft tune to myself as I went.

After two weeks here, I still wasn't even a quarter of the way through exploring the sprawling mansion. It was so big that I discovered something new every day, and sometimes I suspected it was like the haunted house from Rose Red that never stopped growing, with extra wings suddenly sprouting from it in the night.

I knew that was just a fictional horror movie, but to be fair, my life had turned into quite the horror show over these last few months. Also, if any mansion in the world was bound to be haunted, it was this one. Whenever I wandered around, I could practically feel the cold, lonely ghosts of past captives. The occasional moans coming from some of the rooms certainly didn't help matters.

Today, I'd made my way up to the third floor in my exploration attempt. My bedroom door on the second floor was always unlocked, and like the other girls here, I was free to wander wherever I wanted as long as I followed the rules. Most of the girls preferred to remain in the privacy of their rooms or in the main living areas assigned to us, resigned to their fates as they curled up around roaring hearths, but I was more curious than that. I wanted to know every inch of this place, wanted to conjure up a mental map of the place whenever necessary.

As I walked past a library and farther down the hall, admiring the prints and paintings

on the walls, I thought of Elias. His piercing gaze, his strong arms, his roaming hands. His perfect cock.

Things with him were still different than before. Part of me had initially worried that he'd go back to his angry, hateful self after a while, but in the weeks I'd been here, he'd remained calm and caring whenever he was around me. He spent as much time with me as he could, he often tried to talk to me, and he brought me to countless climaxes. Once again, he was acting like we were a regular old couple.

I wasn't delusional, though. I knew any appearance of normalcy between the two of us was just a Band-Aid covering a gaping wound.

If I wanted to stay alive and escape this place one day, I had to do everything possible to ignore, to resist, to not even acknowledge the spark we shared. Of course I would continue being compliant and well-behaved, but I couldn't let things go any further than that, emotionally speaking. How could I? It wasn't like Elias and I would ever run away together, get married, and maintain an equal partnership. As nice as he'd been lately, he was still one of my captors. That was the sort of power imbalance no one ever really made it through unscathed.

And yet, whenever I saw him, there was that same jolt of attraction. That tingle of pure excitement. The air would turn hot and thick, weighing heavily on my skin like sultry summer heat, and my thoughts would become jumbled and clogged with desire.

Maybe part of me needed that thrill of the forbidden, the taboo, that sense of being with someone totally inappropriate and doing something I knew was wrong. After all, I'd always fantasized about it in the past, back when I was still a college student in a normal life. But that didn't make it right.

I saw a door standing ajar up ahead on the right. I pushed on it and stepped inside,

wondering if it was another library.

Instead, I found myself in what appeared to be a mini hospital, with white-sheeted beds, medical equipment and monitors everywhere. I recognized the nurse from the island standing by one of the beds, making notes on a clipboard.

Sitting on the edge of that bed was a pretty blonde woman who appeared to be in her early thirties. Her hair was glossy and curled, and her skin glowed. When she shifted a little, I saw a swollen belly and realized with a stark shock that she was at least six months pregnant.

There was another pregnant woman too, sitting on one of the other beds while another nurse or doctor wrapped a cuff around her arm to check her blood pressure.

Every head turned within seconds of me opening the door. No one looked happy to see me.

“Sorry, I’m a... a bit lost,” I stammered.

The nurse closer to me narrowed her eyes and stalked over to the door. “This isn’t supposed to be open,” she said sharply. “Please leave.”

I fled back down the hall and dashed down the winding staircase, wondering what the hell I’d just seen. Who were those women? Did they accidentally get pregnant by society members? What was going to happen to them when they had their babies? And what about the babies themselves?

As the questions whirled around my mind, I headed all the way to the ground floor and stepped out into one of the mansion’s back courtyards. Out here, there were arched loggias on the first floor and covered balconies on the second. They were adorned with ivy, which had been meticulously hand-woven around stone columns

and across archways. A large garden bed lay a few yards beyond, in the middle of the court.

In the weeks I'd been at the Lodge, this had become my favorite place to wander down to whenever I wanted some fresh air. But today, it wasn't helping. It was freezing outside, even colder than usual, and the howling winds made tree branches and bushes thrash in the distance as beds of blood-red phlox flowers swayed in the garden. It reminded me of that awful stormy day on the island, and I was struck with a sudden vertiginous sensation as I imagined myself nearly plunging off a cliff again.

With a shudder, I turned and headed back inside. I needed to find somewhere else to relax and take my mind off whatever the hell the society was hiding on the third floor. Somewhere quiet and comforting.

I came across it fifteen minutes later. An arched double door stood wide open on the left of the hallway I was exploring, and I saw Pri standing inside the room, her eyes wide as she admired a collection of golden trophies.

Simply seeing her there took me back to my old life and my days at Roden, before everything went so wrong. She was a direct link to the past, reminding me of who I used to be, and the thought of talking to her calmed me.

"Hey," I said with a tentative smile, stepping inside the room.

She turned to me and smiled back. "Hi," she said softly. "You're exploring too, huh?"

"Not much else to do around here, aside from TV or reading. What is this place?"

"Not sure. I only just found it."

We peered around at the expansive space. The walls were lined with cabinets, each

one filled with trophies and medals with inscribed names. There were also several mounted deer heads on the bare upper parts of the mint green walls, and a bearskin rug lay on the floor on the opposite end.

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I hoped they were all fake, but something told me they weren't.

"Hey, check this out!" Pri called to me, her head turned over her shoulder. She'd wandered down to the far end of the room.

I headed over to her. Right in front of us was an enormous cabinet filled with beautiful china dolls. Each looked different, but all of them boasted delicate features, shiny hair, painted cherry-red lips, curly black lashes and hand-stitched gowns.

"These are so pretty," Pri said breathlessly. "I used to have a collection just like it, back in New Zealand. My grandma and I used to hunt down old antique dolls at weekend markets."

"That's cool. I always used to wish I had a dollhouse," I said, recalling my childish desires. Back when I was eight or nine, I thought I'd be trapped in poverty forever, but I thought if I could just have my own miniature mansion in the form of a dollhouse, at least I'd be able to decorate that and picture myself inside it, living a life of luxury. Better than nothing.

I never got the dollhouse. My parents couldn't afford it. And now, here I was, living in one of the world's biggest and most luxurious mansions with the nickname Doll. Funny how life turned out sometimes.

"It's kinda funny that one of the members collects all these dolls," Pri said. "Don't you think? You assume they're all so dark and twisty, and then you see this."

We both snickered. It felt good to laugh, to find some amusement and beauty in this

terrible place.

“Took you guys long enough to find this room. Pretty, isn’t it? All these trophies everywhere.”

A breezy voice sounded from behind us. We turned to see Mellie sweeping into the room. I rolled my eyes and turned back to the doll cabinet. I had zero desire to speak to her today. Or ever again.

“You like the collection?” she continued, sidling up to us. “I bet you want one made of you, right?”

Pri turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“If you’re chosen as a hostess for the Artemis Festival, you get one of these dolls made in your image. It’s a huge honor. Also, it’s a way out of here.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed Pri’s arm. “Don’t listen to her,” I muttered. “She can’t be trusted. There’s no way out of here. Not unless you escape.”

Mellie sniffed and took Pri’s other arm. “I’m sure she can make up her own mind. Besides, I don’t mean that it’s a way to go home. I mean it’s a way out of the Lodge. That’s all.”

I was curious about what she meant, but I didn’t want her to know that. I stepped over to another cabinet and inspected a series of trophies. Mellie began to tell Pri all about the so-called Artemis Festival, and I kept my ears pricked, listening to every word. I knew at least some of it had to be true, because she’d already mentioned the festival to me a few weeks ago.

“It happens twice a year. A bunch of the guys from the society come here for a whole

week of wild celebrations. They drink, they smoke, they fuck, and they hunt.” She waved a hand at one of the deer heads on the wall.

Pri shuddered. “Poor animals.” She looked sadly at the trophy on the wall.

Mellie patted her shoulder. “Oh, honey. Don’t be so touchy. Deer around these parts are pests. They chew up everything and destroy the environment. So hunting them is actually a good thing. It helps the local ecosystem and also helps other species flourish, which is hard when one animal population is too large. Besides, quickly shooting them is actually far more humane than the suffering and starvation they experience when the population is left unchecked.”

I rolled my eyes and turned away. Mellie was like a mini Chernobyl, shimmering with toxicity and constantly spewing poison into the air around her. Get too close and she’d spread it to you too. I’d regrettably fallen victim to it myself all those months ago, let her fill my head with noxious lies.

She was probably far worse for the environment than a few extra deer.

“I thought hunting permits were only given out in fall,” Pri said.

Mellie snorted. “This is private land. Besides, there are other animals around this area that aren’t deer, and they prefer to roam around in the spring.” She motioned to the bearskin rug on the floor.

“So that’s when the next festival is? Spring?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay. So what were you saying about the festival being a way out of here?” Pri asked tentatively. She was right on Mellie’s hook, dangling off every word.

“Well, because it’s such a popular event with so many attendees and they’re all in good spirits, one girl gets a chance to be voted in as the festival hostess for the week. She gets a ton of privileges, a doll made in her image for the collection, and at the end of the week, she’s allowed to leave the Lodge forever.”

“Seriously?” Pri’s eyes widened.

I wanted to tell her not to fall for the trickery so she wouldn’t get her hopes up. Fortunately, Mellie did it for me.

“Well, it’s not like she really gets to be free. Whichever man wins the most hunting prizes takes her home as a grand prize. So she’s allowed to live out in the real world with him. Sort of.”

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“So... still a captive,” Pri said, her shoulders slumping.

“Trust me, most girls would think it’s better than being here,” Mellie said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Don’t have to be shared with other men, don’t have to go to any of the parties if they don’t feel up to it. Just one man, forever.”

My heart raced, and sparks of hope zapped through me. I stared at the golden medals in the glass cabinet on the other side of the wall, turning my face away from Mellie again so she wouldn’t see the excited flush rising in my cheeks.

If I could get voted in as a festival hostess, then my future escape might be easier. Escaping from one man’s house in the real world would be a hell of a lot easier than getting out of the Lodge with all its guards and security measures.

It wouldn’t be easy leaving Elias behind, not considering the feelings I’d developed for him, but I had to remind myself they were just physical. There was no future for us, and if I didn’t tamp my feelings way down, I’d never get out alive. I’d never be free.

“How do girls get voted in as the festival hostess?” I said, trying to sound breezy and nonchalant.

Mellie saw straight through me. She laughed, a mocking cackle that made my face turn hot with anger. “Oh my god, you don’t seriously think you could get picked?” she said, her pretty features contorting in a sneer.

“Why not?” Pri asked.

She scoffed. “Neither of you have a chance for the next festival. The girls that get picked are chosen because they are memorable to the men. All of them have done something to make themselves stand out. In a good way, I mean,” she said, casting a dark glance at me. “And so far, the only memorable thing you’ve done is stab someone. The president of the society, no less. Not exactly good, is it? As for you, Priyanka, you’re basically invisible. You haven’t even gone to a party yet. The members barely know you exist.”

Pri frowned. “But there’s still a chance we could be picked in future, right? For other festivals?”

“Sure. If you’re really good. But you’re competing against a hundred other women, and usually only one gets picked per festival. So don’t get your hopes up too high.” She turned her withering gaze back to me. “Especially you, Tatum. After all the shit you’ve pulled, you’ll never be picked. Not in a million years.”

I squeezed one hand into a fist by my side. Ooh, I was so tempted to hit her.

“How’s Henry doing?” I said instead, giving her a sweet smile. I knew her brother was a sore point for her. He was a traitor to the society, a stain on the edge of her narrow world.

She glared. “None of your business.”

“Still exiled, I presume. How do you know he won’t risk everything one day and turn you all in, even if it gets him killed?”

I was baiting her, trying my best to annoy her, because I was so goddamned sick of her. If I made her angry enough, she might leave me alone and pick on someone else.

Mellie snorted and folded her arms across her abdomen. “I very much doubt that.

What's he gonna do, call the New York Times and unload what sounds like a tinfoil-hat conspiracy theory that he has zero proof of? It's literally just his word against everyone else's. He'd be toast, and nothing would ever come of it. So shut the fuck up about him or you'll regret it."

When she was done talking, she flounced away. She'd had the last word, as always, but I'd succeeded in annoying enough to make her leave. I counted that as a win.

"I know she said we don't have a chance, but we should still try to get picked as hostesses, right?" Pri asked, staring at the dolls again. "I'd do anything to get out of this hellhole and go home with another man. Even if he's horrible, he can't be worse than the man they've assigned as my master."

My heart ached for her. At least Elias was trying to be sympathetic to me these days. He may still be my jailer, but at least he didn't leave me covered head to toe with bruises after sex like Pri's master did. If I didn't get picked for this upcoming festival, I hoped she did.

I patted her shoulder. "You're right. We should definitely try."

She shook her head slowly. "What are we supposed to do to make them vote for us?"

"Everything we can," I said softly.

An image of Elias flashed in my mind, and my stomach lurched once more at the thought of leaving him behind. It felt like gnawing off my own arm. Cutting out my own heart.

Shit.

Maybe I was wrong earlier. Maybe the feelings were real. Something more than a

physical response.

It certainly seemed like it, but it didn't make a damn lick of sense to start falling for a guy like Elias. No matter how I tried to spin it, our bond wasn't a real one. Not like normal couples in the real world. It was forged in molten hatred, forced upon me in my darkest hours. That sinister black thread would always be woven through every inch of the vast tapestry that made up our relationship.

My feelings and desire for Elias couldn't cut that thread out, regardless of how strong they became. There would always be some deep-down part of me that resented him for everything that had been done to me over the last few months. But on the other hand, he was still my lifeline in this place. I had to respect that.

So for now, as long as it suited both our ends, we could remain in this twisted affair. I would let him touch me, caress me, punish me, fuck me. I would do anything he pleased, and at night, we would hold each other beneath the sheets and pretend it was the real thing, ignoring the dark divide between us. We would simultaneously be separate and together.

But not forever.

10

Tatum

I woke the next morning to the sound of a Lodge maid setting something down on the coffee table by the sofa.

Rubbing my eyes, I sat up. “What’s that?” I asked, craning my neck.

She lifted a vase from the table. “Flowers from your Master.”

I got out of bed and padded over to her. The vase was patterned blue and white china, filled with a mixture of pale and dark pink carnations. “Thank you for bringing them,” I murmured. “They’re beautiful.”

The maid nodded and left. I leaned down to breathe in the scent of the carnations. They’d always been my favorite flower. Beautiful and sweet-smelling, yet so underappreciated by so many people.

When I got back up, I realized there was something else on the table. A letter and a Venetian mask made of superlight golden filigree metal adorned with gems.

I tore open the envelope. Inside was an embossed invitation from Elias, humbly requesting my presence at a party tonight. If I chose to attend, I must wear the mask and a formal gown. No bra or panties.

I set the invitation down on the table and picked up the golden mask. It seemed

redundant to wear it with Elias tonight. There were already masks on the two of us, invisible and ever-present. We hid our true thoughts and natures behind them as we pretended this was all normal. Pretended I actually had a choice in terms of attending this party.

Of course I didn't.

After breakfast, lunch, and a long day of exploring in the west wing of the third floor, I returned to my room to select a gown for tonight's party. Elias had had me measured and fitted a few days after my arrival, so my closet was now overflowing with beautiful designer dresses.

After several minutes of indecision, I chose a gown I could only describe as fantastic, with an intricate texture made up of hundreds of different pieces of black and gold fabric. I figured it would go well with the mask.

A striking middle-aged woman knocked at my door at six o'clock, saying she'd been sent to do my hair and makeup. I sat at the vanity as she fussed over me, and I wondered if she used to be a sex slave here, like the maid from earlier. Mellie once told me they were forced into other jobs at the Lodge once the men were tired of them.

I didn't dare ask the woman, though. We weren't supposed to talk about our captivity under any circumstances, and I didn't know her well enough to trust her. The only person I could really talk to in this place was Pri.

The makeup artist left at a quarter to eight, and I was alone again until Elias knocked on my door at nine. He was wearing a tuxedo and a black and gold Venetian mask. As usual, the mere sight of him almost knocked the breath right out of my lungs.

"You look incredible," he said, taking one of my hands and planting a kiss on it. His

hot lips sent a bolt of fire through my veins.

“Thank you,” I murmured. He didn’t let go of my hand. Sugary trickles of desire wound up my spine. “Let me just get my mask.”

He nodded and stepped into my room, waiting for me to fix the mask on my face. I’d accidentally left the TV on, playing an old episode of Grey’s Anatomy. On the screen, a woman was howling and scrunching up her face as she tried to push out a baby.

“Nice image right there,” Elias said, a twinkle of dark humor in his eyes. “Just what we need to get us in a party mood.”

“Sorry. I forgot to turn it off.” I grabbed the remote, and I was about to switch the episode off when the straining pregnant woman onscreen reminded me of something. “Wait... before we go, can I ask you something?”

I half expected him to narrow his eyes and say no, but he nodded. “Make it quick. We’re already a bit late.”

I hurriedly told him what I’d seen up on the third floor the other day, in one of the private medical wings. His brows furrowed, and he shrugged. “It wouldn’t be any of the girls who work here. They’re all on contraception. It’s written in the contracts that they have to be.”

“That’s what I thought. So who were those women?”

“No idea. Could be guests.”

I arched a brow. “Guests?”

“Honestly, you’d be surprised at the people who come here just for vacations. People you’d never expect. But it makes sense. It’s a luxury retreat, after all. Bigger and better than most hotels. Those women are probably the wives of some rich guys who like to play, so they’re enjoying their pregnancies here with their husbands instead of staying at home.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “I guess.”

I couldn’t think of anything worse than being pregnant and swollen and partying at a place which was essentially a high-class brothel. But each to their own.

Elias held out a hand. “Let’s go.”

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He took me down to the ground floor and led me through an arched double doorway which went into the party room I spotted on my first day here. It was already packed with people, and the atmosphere was electrified with energy.

The lights were dimmed, creating a heady atmosphere, rich with sinful anticipation. Musicians played ethereal instrumental songs with lilting strings and gently-throbbing drumbeats on a stage at one end of the room. Trays of pills and white powder were being passed around the room by waitresses, along with brimming cocktail glasses and golden goblets.

Pri walked right by me with her Master, flashing me a tight, nervous smile. She was wearing a collar as well as a mask. It was black with a large silver pendant, and the word ‘slave’ was inscribed on it. With a shock, I realized all the other women were wearing them too. Elias hadn’t given me one.

“Elias,” I murmured. “Why don’t you make me wear a collar like the others?”

He frowned. “I don’t want you to.”

That seemed to be all he had to say on the subject. It was a far cry from just a couple of months ago when he roughly dragged me down a hallway, promising collars and heavy chains as soon as I arrived at the Lodge. So maybe he really felt something for me and didn’t want to enslave me anymore...

Or maybe he simply didn’t like the way the collars looked, and I was reading too much into it.

My gaze drifted over the sea of masked faces as Elias led me toward a bar set up in the far corner of the room, near a chaise lounge. The women were all in towering heels and expensively-cut gowns in every color of the rainbow. They were all beautiful and toned, but I noticed Elias didn't look at a single one of them.

Several men glanced my way. Even with their masks, I could see they were sizing me up. One of them leaned over to his acquaintance and murmured something, and the other nodded, his gaze fixed on me. My stomach lurched. I knew I was meant to say yes to any men who wanted me if Elias chose to share, but the thought of servicing these horrible men made me want to retch.

"I'll be back in a minute," Elias murmured in my ear. "Stay here."

He went to the bar, and I hovered around the edge of the room, patiently waiting. The music grew louder, a thumping rhythmic beat that seemed to infuse the room with excitement. The underwater lights in the indoor pool in the center of the room pulsed over the naked bodies frolicking within, making their skin glow.

Not far from me was a writhing group of men and women on a red velvet lounge as big as a double bed. They were grinding together, hands tearing at dresses and suits, gliding over bare skin, kissing hungrily in the flickering lights. There were threesomes and even foursomes as they carried out all kinds of sex acts.

One moaning woman had three men inside her at the same time. One in her pussy, one in her ass, and one in her mouth. She didn't seem to be in any pain. Her lips were parted in bliss, and orgasmic cries tore from her throat.

Stale scotch-laced breath fanned my left ear a moment later. A cold lick of fear crept down my spine. Tobias.

"See something you like, little whore?" he asked.

Another shiver rushed over my skin. I tried to think of a response, something that wouldn't anger him, but all I could focus on was my racing pulse.

Fortunately, silence seemed to be the correct reaction.

“Good girl. Not talking back for once.” His lips curled into a smile. “I see my son finally has you under control.”

“Yes, sir,” I murmured.

“But where is your collar?”

He sounded irritated. I felt the strange, irrational need to fly to Elias's defense. “It... it didn't fit properly. He's having it altered.”

“I see. Well, I hope you ensure he enjoys himself tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

He stepped away, and I took in a deep, relieved breath. Every time that awful man came near me, it felt like all the air in the room had been sucked out.

I watched the undulating bodies around me as they pulsed and moved to the beat of the music. Gowns were strewn on the floor. Masks ripped off. Breasts on display, bouncing up and down. It was so primal, so raw and sinful. A dreamlike haze.

Elias returned a moment later. “Here,” he said, handing me a napkin stacked with little canapés. “I know they don't give you dinner on party nights.”

I gratefully accepted it and nibbled delicately at the corners of a pastry with a rich savory filling. I was still hungry after eating every canapé, but I didn't want to seem

ungrateful or demanding, especially when Tobias was in the same room, probably watching my every move.

Elias leaned down and murmured in my ear. “Ready to play?” His fingertips traced a line down my spine, hovering just above my ass. Tingles broke out across my flesh.

I nodded. “Yes.”

It wasn’t like I had a choice. If he wanted to let fifty other men inside me tonight, I couldn’t say no.

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He marched me to the other side of the room and affixed my hands to black cuffs that dangled from the ceiling. Several people started watching us with interest. I let out a moan of protest as Elias pushed my dress up.

“I thought you loved this,” Elias muttered in my ear from behind me. “That night on the altar... you came alive with an audience, didn’t you, Doll?”

He was right. Even though it felt like just the two of us out in those woods, I was still aware that we had people watching us. It was so wrong, so bad, but the thought sent wetness flooding to my core. My eyelids felt heavy, sleepy with longing.

“Is this my punishment, Master?” I asked, turning my head over my shoulder. “For trying to run away that day on the island?”

He’d told me to stop calling him that, because it didn’t feel right, but in this moment, it did. Tonight, he was still my Master and I was still his Doll.

“That was a long time ago. You think you deserve to be punished for that?” he said in a low voice, sliding a hand between my legs, stroking my pussy.

I nodded. “Yes,” I said breathlessly. I knew it was what he wanted to hear. It was just an added bonus that I liked his idea of punishment.

“Good.” Elias kept stroking between my legs, slipping one finger inside me. “Keep your eyes open. Look at everyone who wants to see you.”

I stared at the men watching us, eyes glazed with lust. I could see that some of them

were hard. Elias pulled away from me, and I struggled in the cuffs, trying to move my body back toward him. He chuckled and stepped around to my front before kneeling. I squirmed as he spread my lips open and licked between my legs, and when he fixed his mouth on my clit, I let out a cry of bliss.

He kept me in place with his hands pressed firmly on my quivering thighs as his tongue traced delicate circles over me, sucking and nibbling every so often, making me squeal. He brought me close to the edge, and then he stood up, watching my eyes widen with protest.

“Please,” I begged. My whole body tingled with pure excitement. I needed to come.

Elias moved back behind me. I felt his erection pressing up against me. “You’re mine,” he grunted behind me. “I’m not sharing you with anyone.”

“Yes, Master,” I said breathlessly. I was all his. His to torment, to pleasure, to worship.

Then he was inside me in one savage thrust, and I cried out, my arousal rising to a fever pitch. I lost control of my own mouth, streams of words flowing out involuntarily as I begged him to keep going, begged him to make me come again and again. I didn’t care about the audience watching us; I was no longer capable of feeling that kind of shame. In fact, I liked knowing they were watching us, wishing they could be us. Wishing they could join us.

We didn’t need drugs to get to this place, like so many of the other men and women here. No matter how we started off, there’d always been a magnetic attraction between Elias and me. There was no need to pretend. No need to use anything to heighten our lust and desire. Every time he touched me, my knees turned weak and I melted like candlewax into a hot puddle of pure need.

I kept my eyes open as Elias had commanded me. The party was turning darker, wilder. Almost everyone was naked now, and women were moaning and yelping as men bent them over and fucked them, using a variety of toys, whips and paddles on them. Across the room, a couple was sharing one of the wide sex swings, the woman shrieking with pleasure every time the man's cock filled her.

My desire to come was almost unbearable now. At the same time, I wanted this moment to last as long as possible. Elias felt so good inside me, so thick and hot. So intense.

"Please," I finally choked out, my voice thick with lust and emotion. "Let me come."

"You think you deserve to?" Elias asked, slamming into me again with a brutal, punishing thrust.

"Oh!" I yelped and jerked forward. "No... I don't deserve it...."

"You're right. You're a bad girl. But I'm going to let you come anyway. I like being a generous master sometimes," he muttered, hot breath skating over my left ear. "Don't I?"

"Yes," I said breathily. "You're the best. I'm so lucky to be yours."

"Come, Doll. Come on me right now."

My breaths came faster and faster until my body tensed. I almost sobbed as the pleasure ripped through me. "Yes!" I cried out as my body shook with release. "Thank you, Master!"

The convulsing muscles inside me sent Elias over the edge, and he let out a groan and slammed inside me one last time as he juddered through his orgasm.

When he let me down from the cuffs, three men approached, muttering something at him. He shook his head and they walked away, looking irritated.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I could feel his cum leaking down my leg, sticky and hot.

“They wanted me to give you to them next,” he said. “But like I said earlier: I don’t share. Not when it comes to you.”

“Thank you,” I said softly. I was so lucky compared to so many of the other girls here. Nearly all of them were getting shared around the room by their masters, some of them taking two or three cocks at the same time.

We went and sat down by the glittering indoor pool, watching the action continue to unfold around us. Now that I’d reached a climax, I was getting sleepy, and I couldn’t stop my mouth from dropping open with multiple yawns. Elias finally reached for my hand and pulled me up. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

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We wound our way back through the writhing crowd, toward the same door we initially entered through. We passed by Tobias at one of the bars. He was sipping at a glass of scotch, and his eyes narrowed slightly as he saw us, but he didn't say anything or try to stop us from leaving.

When we got back to my room, Elias took a quick shower with me, washing all the sweat and juices from our still-feverish bodies. Then he tucked me into bed.

"Are you staying with me?" I asked, my eyes wide.

As I spoke, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a black keycard with a gold Crown and Dagger emblem on it. I knew what the answer to my question would be before he even replied, because it was a keycard which unlocked all the doors to the Lodge. They were locked after eight p.m. so girls couldn't get outside and try to run away in the night, when there was far less visibility for the security guards.

"Sorry, I have to get back to New Marwick. Lots of shit to do," he said, brows furrowing. "I'll be back tomorrow afternoon. I've got a few things to do with my father first, but how about we have a proper dinner in the evening, to make up for tonight? I'll sleep here afterwards."

I nodded. "That sounds good," I said softly. Truthfully, I was disappointed he was leaving me to sleep alone again. Or maybe I was just grumpy from the lack of a proper dinner. God, I'd kill for some food right now.

Food...

Some dark part of my mind switched on brightly all of a sudden. The seeds of an idea had just taken root.

My eyes drifted across the room to the coffee table, falling on the carnations Elias had delivered to me this morning. I might not need to wait for the Artemis Festival after all, in terms of an escape opportunity.

I had a new plan.

11

Elias

I narrowed my eyes and took aim with my rifle. The gunshot cracked in the air as loud as thunder. I took the target down easily, smiling with satisfaction as countless gray shards plummeted to the snowy ground.

“You’re getting better,” my father said, watching with one hand pressed against his forehead, shielding his eyes from the bright sky. It was gray, but the sun was peeking through a cloud right above us.

I nodded and took aim at the next target as it shot out from the trap thrower. I hit it perfectly.

I knew why I was getting so much better. Since that fateful day on the island all those weeks ago, when I pulled Tatum off that cliff, the whole world seemed sharper and clearer to me. Colors brighter. Sounds louder. Music sweeter.

Every day, our relationship seemed to improve. She spoke more, kissed me more, begged me more. Her passion for me was fiery and constant. It seemed real this time, unlike the games she used to play where she pretended to want and obey me when all the while she hated being with me and constantly plotted behind my back.

She’d really settled in here, and she seemed to love being mine now. All mine. I was beyond pleased with the miraculous turnaround. I guess my father was right. She just needed some time to get used to her new life. She chose it for herself, after all.

Didn't she?

A sharp jolt shot through me at the thought. I was only ninety-nine percent sure right now. Close to absolute certainty, but not close enough.

My recent conversation with Dr. Paulson was still playing on my mind, raising all sorts of doubts about the secret society. I wanted to believe there was an innocent explanation for all the weirdness surrounding the missing woman who turned out to be my biological mother, but I couldn't shake the creeping feeling that something strange was going on.

I'd always been told that every woman at the Lodge was there willingly. That the guards were there for their protection, not to keep them trapped inside. But now I kept wondering if Camille Gorham was brought here against her will and forced to donate her eggs to my parents. Why else would she have vanished like that before I was even conceived? It didn't make any sense.

I'd looked up the case online. Camille came from a seemingly decent family, and when she went missing, all her friends and relatives were shocked and distraught. Some of them were still searching for her and hoping for new developments even though over two decades had passed since she disappeared. They all said she wasn't the type to run away or get in trouble.

Like Dr. Paulson suggested the other day, there was a chance she wanted to work for Crown and Dagger and simply didn't want anyone to know. She could've signed all the contracts and taken off without a word to anyone, then changed her name after her service was complete so that no one could ever find her again. But why would she do that? By all accounts, she loved her family.

So as horrible and outrageous as it sounded, it was beginning to seem like she may have been forced to give up her eggs as a captive with Crown and Dagger. There

weren't many other explanations as to how I was conceived using her genetic material in mid-1993 when she went missing in early 1992.

If that were the case, then there was a chance Tatum was here against her will too. Any number of the other girls as well.

I didn't even want to think about the ramifications if that were the case. It was too shocking, too appalling. All I could really do was wait until I reached the third level—if I ever did—to find out the truth. It was the only way I'd ever know for sure if something was rotten at the core of Crown and Dagger.

“Pull!”

I gritted my teeth and fired at another target, trying to dismiss the insidious thoughts. Jesus. I was starting to sound like one of those nutjob conspiracy theorists who stood on street corners in major cities, ranting and raving about a New World Order and the Illuminati.

Clearly, I was overthinking things. Spinning in pointless circles, forging connections where there were none, overreacting to everything.

I mean, Christ... of course the Lodge girls weren't secretly captives. That was ridiculous. The cover-up my father and the other society members would have to engage in over the years was enormous. Besides that, Tatum had admitted to selling herself here, back when she was still on the island. I'd even seen the contract with her signature on it.

I suppose Camille Gorham could've donated her eggs and had them frozen before she went missing. I knew Dr. Paulson said it was unlikely as the egg freezing technology wasn't as good back then as it was now, but I'd done a bit of research into it. There were cases of frozen oocytes being used for IVF as far back as 1988. So even though

it was incredibly rare back in those days, it still happened on occasion, and my parents would've had access to the best doctors and most cutting-edge medical tech due to their wealth.

Camille could've donated her eggs to my parents in late 1991 in return for some cash to help her out with expensive student loans, and then she could've gone missing in early 1992 under circumstances that had nothing to do with being hauled off to captivity. Perhaps she got unlucky and ran into a psychotic killer on her way home one night. Terrible as it was, it happened sometimes.

Yes, that had to be it.

But even though there was likely an innocent explanation for everything, and the girls were all here willingly, I still wanted to get to the bottom of it. Just for peace of mind. As always, that meant keeping my thoughts entirely to myself and trying my best to get to the third level of the society.

Right now, I wasn't sure I'd even be considered for it, given how short my father had been with me today. He'd invited me to the Lodge for some shooting but he'd barely said two words to me all afternoon.

I had a sneaking suspicion it was because of last night. I was expected to share Tatum with the other men at the party, but I didn't want to let any of them touch her. She was mine. The thought of any other men laying their hands on her made me want to punch someone's teeth out.

I also didn't participate in any activities with the other women at the party, which was considered quite strange at those events. But I didn't want to do that either. Why touch anyone else when I already had the perfect girl to satisfy all my needs? No one else's lips could possibly be sweeter than Tatum's. No one else's pussy could be tighter or warmer or wetter.

“Nice of you to attend last night’s party,” Dad finally said. His voice was stiff and sour, confirming my suspicions. He was pissed.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I said, pretending I didn’t notice his attitude. As far as I knew, Lodge party attendance was mandatory for anyone who wanted to be considered for the third level. So even if I didn’t particularly want to go to any of them, I had to.

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“You left early.”

What he really meant by that was ‘you didn’t share your girl or take part in fucking multiple other girls’.

I shrugged nonchalantly. “Yeah. It was our first party, so I figured we’d ease into it. I’ve also been working on my thesis, so I was pretty tired from that.”

“You know there are people who can do that for you,” he said sharply. “There’s really no reason a King should have to stoop to essay-writing.”

I snorted. “Maybe I actually want to learn. Yeah, it’s boring as fuck sometimes, but I’d rather pass on my own merit instead of cheating just because I have money.”

“Hm. I suppose that’s actually quite admirable.” He paused and cleared his throat. “I noticed Tatum wasn’t wearing a collar last night.”

Shit. He didn’t miss anything, did he?

I didn’t want Tatum to wear one of those slave collars. It would be hot as fuck to see her crawling toward me with one around her neck, sure, but at the same time I worried she’d revert to that terrible vacant state again if I pushed her too hard. So I had to wait. Take things slow. Let her get used to the idea of submitting to me in every way in her own time.

It wasn’t something I expected my father to understand, given his feelings toward her. He still hated her for what she’d done to our family, as far as I knew, so he’d be

beyond pissed if he found out I didn't hate her anymore.

I didn't want to anger him like that. I was his only son; the only one who could carry on his legacy, as he constantly reminded me. He wanted me to be exactly like him. Even though I wasn't, it was easier to lie and keep him happy rather than tell him the truth. What he didn't know couldn't hurt him.

Besides, the truth wouldn't get me any closer to the third level.

I distracted him for a moment by firing my rifle at another target, and I came up with a decent bullshit explanation as the dark shards rained down on the patchy snow fifty yards away.

"I decided not to make her wear one. That way she'll think she's extra special. That I really care for her and feel something for her. She'll eventually fall in love with me, thinking I'm on her side, and then I'll pull the rug out from under her by telling her the truth: that I still hate her and she'll never be anything more than a lowly slave to me. I can't think of a better way to truly destroy someone. Can you?"

It was hard to believe that was actually my real plan once upon a time, back when I truly despised Tatum. Now, the thought of destroying her made me feel slightly ill.

I expected my father to look impressed, but instead he stared over at me with a disbelieving expression. "That's not what she told me. I asked her last night, and she said she needed the collar altered because it didn't fit."

Fuck. As usual, he was one step ahead of me.

I couldn't blame Tatum for telling the lie. She probably thought she was defending me. It was actually quite sweet.

“That’s where I got the idea,” I said, smoothly skating over the giant hole in my story. “It didn’t fit when I tried to put it on her, and I told her I’d get it fixed. She looked so grateful and happy to not have to wear it yet. It made me realize once and for all how much better it would be to destroy her if she was in love with me.”

Dad was silent for a moment. Then his lips curled up in a smile. He reached over and patted me on the back. “Couldn’t have thought of a better plan myself,” he said. “You really do take after me, don’t you?”

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. He believed me.

He paused, then went on. “To be frank, I’ve had my doubts on occasion, but I suppose I always knew on some level that you have what it takes.”

“For what?”

His smile grew wider. “Your twenty-fourth birthday is coming up soon. Normally you wouldn’t be considered for the third level till after the date, but the council has decided to start the vetting process a bit earlier. That way, if you make it through, you’ll reach it on the day of your birthday, rather than a few weeks afterwards. That’d be something to celebrate, wouldn’t it?”

My eyes widened. I wasn’t expecting to hear that. “Shit, really?”

He smirked. “There are a few benefits to having a father on the council.”

“You’re not just on the council. You’re the fucking president,” I said with a snort. “And I thought you said you couldn’t give me any special consideration just because I’m your son.”

“Of course I said that. Had to keep you on your toes, didn’t I?” he said. “Couldn’t

have you thinking you were a shoo-in and doing nothing to earn your place.”

“Right.” I pressed my lips into a thin line. I should’ve known he was screwing with me.

“This is a good lesson for you. Corruption and nepotism is everywhere in our world, even in places that claim to be above it.”

I scowled. “So that’s the only reason I was chosen for consideration?” I asked. “Because I’m a King?”

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Dad shook his head and chuckled. “No, of course not. There are many other factors that go into the decision to start vetting someone for third-level status. But we’ve been watching you these last few months, and you’ve passed all our tests. So your first interview with the council is later this afternoon. That’s the real reason I invited you out here today.”

I gaped at him. “Today?”

He glanced at his watch. “Yes. In forty minutes, to be precise. We better get moving.”

We trudged away from the private shooting range, back toward the mansion.

“You know your way around the Catacombs, right?” he asked as we stepped inside.

I nodded. Underneath the main Lodge building was a vast subterranean maze of tunnels, chambers and waterways. I wasn’t sure why it was originally built—the most common rumor was that it had something to do with Prohibition back in the 1920’s—but it was nicknamed the Catacombs due to its dark labyrinthine passageways and general creepiness.

I’d been exploring the place since I was young, so I knew my way around every passage and secret entrance like the back of my hand.

“You know the small chamber right beneath the central courtyard?” Dad asked, raising a brow. “The one with the carvings all over the walls.”

“Yeah.”

“Make your way there in twenty minutes. You have to be alone, and you must be wearing your second-level robes. If you didn’t bring them, then have a maid fetch you a spare set from upstairs. You can use a flashlight to navigate your way through the tunnels, but you need to turn it off before you enter the chamber.”

He briskly headed away, presumably to make his way to the chamber with the rest of the council before my arrival.

My pulse raced with excitement and anticipation as I retrieved my robes and then headed for the main kitchen on the ground floor. The closest Catacombs entrance was in the back of one of the many storage cupboards in there.

I pushed aside some boxes to reveal the weathered brick arch at the mouth of the entrance. Once I was inside, the light died like it had been swallowed. I used the flashlight on my cell phone to make my way down the twisting black tunnel.

It smelled of earth and stagnant water. Stones crunched beneath my feet as I walked. Even the lightest of breaths seemed to echo around me, and my light cast an ominous glow throughout the place. When I reached the passage that led to the chamber I was expected in, I switched it off.

I dragged my right hand across the wall, picking up dust and grime. When it gave way to a spot of cool air, I knew I was at the entrance to the chamber.

With a deep breath, I stepped inside. “I’m here,” I called out.

The chamber was steeped in darkness. A red laser pointer went on, hovering above a point about three feet ahead of me. “Sit,” said a deep, commanding voice.

I stepped forward and carefully located the chair beneath the hovering laser. I squinted, trying in vain to see the council through the gloom. I could make out

thirteen chairs a few feet ahead of me, arranged in a semicircle, but I couldn't see who occupied them. All I could make out was a jawline here, the curve of a chin there.

"Mr. King, you know why you're here. Let's not waste any time," said a booming voice from somewhere on the left of the semicircle. "We have many questions for you."

The first thing I was asked to do was to list my personal sexual preferences. Every single one of them. After that, I was required to reveal my entire sexual history in chronological order and discuss what I considered my peak moments. Then I was asked to discuss every single reward and punishment I'd ever given to Tatum. The method, the reasoning behind it, the result.

After that, the questions moved on to more general topics of ethics and morals. Fictional scenarios were posed, and I had to say what I'd do if I were there in that instance.

I had a feeling I knew what they wanted to hear in regards to that. The men of the council probably weren't interested in members who liked to abide by strong ethics. Like my father said earlier, corruption was everywhere, and given the goings-on at the parties, it seemed obvious to me that they enjoyed the company of those who shared their taste for darkness. Those who weren't bound entirely by strict morals.

I told them exactly what I thought they wanted to hear, but I didn't hear anything that might hint at how it was going so far. No murmurs of approval or mutters of dissatisfaction. Not a peep.

"What are your intentions with Tatum Marris?" came a sharp question from somewhere in the middle.

I hesitated. As much as I'd tried to quash my feelings for Tatum and tell myself it was just lust, I knew they were there. They were real. I couldn't stand it, couldn't stand what she'd done to me, but here we were. I felt something for the girl.

I knew that wouldn't score me any points with the council, though. The majority of Crown and Dagger men didn't like mushy feelings or 'girlfriend experiences' with women. If they wanted that, they could just go to their wife or any old brothel.

But no, that wasn't enough. They wanted to truly own women for as long as their contracts allowed—no rights, no liberties, no voice. They viewed the girls as nothing more than objects to be paid for then used and abused until the novelty of their pussy wore off, upon which they'd be tossed aside for a new model. That much was clear from everything I'd seen over the years. Why else would they dedicate so much time and energy to the Lodge and the training facility? They needed things done their way, needed to ensure their darkest desires would be perfectly catered to.

"I intend to keep her as long as it takes to destroy her," I finally replied. The deceitful words felt like acid on my tongue, but I had a feeling they would score me extra points.

"You attended your first Lodge party with her last night, but you refused to share her with anyone. You also refused to touch any of the other girls. Could you explain that?" said an icy voice from the right.

My pulse started to race. Shit. This wasn't going as well as I thought. I needed a good reason to placate them, and I needed it fast.

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“I understand that many members like to share, and that’s fine. But someone else’s sex slave is of no interest to me,” I said slowly. “If I didn’t break her or train her, she isn’t mine to use. I don’t like to take what I haven’t earned.”

There were a few murmurs of approval at that. I breathed a sigh of relief. They liked that line of thinking.

“As for why I don’t want to share Tatum,” I went on. “I have a long-term plan for her, as I was discussing with my father recently.”

“Please elaborate.”

“She can’t be owned by me in the same way you all own your girls, because she genuinely hates me. Hates the King name in general,” I began. I cleared my throat. “She had absolutely no idea she would be given to me when she sold herself to the society, and after her subsequent behavior, I quickly realized she would never submit to my ownership with the usual methods.”

“So what is your new method, then?”

I took a deep breath. “I intend to make her fall in love with me. When I finally let her discover the truth, she will be so crushed that she will become permanently broken. After that, I have a feeling she will become the most submissive sex slave this place has ever seen.”

There were more whispers and murmurs at that, louder this time. They sounded positive.

“That’s an interesting strategy to break in a slave, Elias, but I think we are all in agreement that we strongly approve,” said a crisp voice from somewhere on the left. “It’s cruel. Inventive. Truly ruthless. In her case, it might actually work better than physical methods.”

“Exactly. No amount of money or physical punishment can stop her from hating me and refusing to submit. But preying on her emotions...” I trailed off and let the words hang in the air, my point already implicit.

There was another extended pause as the men spoke amongst themselves in hushed tones.

“Elias James King,” came a booming voice from the left a few minutes later. “You have passed the first council interview. Congratulations.”

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Take your robes off and throw them on the ground in front of you.”

I did as they said, tossing the robes at my feet.

“Now step on them.”

I stamped right on them. “Done.”

“Today was only the tip of the iceberg. The easiest part.”

“I figured.”

“You will be observed over the next couple of weeks, and you will undergo many difficult trials. If you are successful in attaining third-level status, you will be brought

to the council and informed on your birthday. There you will receive new black robes to mark your advancement, and you will become privy to all our secrets. If, however, we deem you unworthy, your old robes will be returned to you, still soiled to signify your failure. You will remain at the second level, and you will never again be considered for the third level.”

Brutal.

“Got it,” I said.

“You must be aware that if you pass the trials, the only way out of the third level is in a coffin. Once you are in, it’s for life.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing they wouldn’t see in the gloom. I knew for a fact that shit about leaving in a coffin was all theatrics and hyperbole. Henry Davenport left the third level a couple of years ago, and he wasn’t dead.

“Sure,” I said. “I understand perfectly.”

“You may leave now.”

I didn’t reply. I simply turned on my heel and marched out, head held high, a satisfied grin quirking up my lips.

I was close now.

So close.

12

Tatum

I could hardly sleep from excitement, but I forced myself to lie in bed until eight the next morning. If this plan had even a sliver of a chance at working, I needed all the rest I could get before I tried.

Once I was awake, I headed down the hall to the east wing dining room and served myself a heaping plate of food: scrambled eggs, toast, berries, oatmeal, sliced banana. I also had three cups of coffee and a glass of orange juice.

When I went to sit down, Pri joined me. All she had was a small bowl of oatmeal with brown sugar. Her eyes widened as she looked at my spread of food. “God, that’s a lot!” she said. “What are you gonna do with all that energy? Are you planning on running a marathon later?”

Sort of, I wanted to say. Instead I smiled nonchalantly. “I’m just really hungry today.”

I wished I could fill her in on the plan and take her with me, but it was too risky. For all I knew, I’d be killed if I was caught, just like all the others who’d tried to escape before me. I didn’t want to be responsible for getting Pri killed too.

I’d made my peace with the fact that I might die trying to get out of here, though. Of course I didn’t want to die, not like I did back on the island, but at the same time I had to accept that it was a possibility.

It wasn't enough to stop me from trying.

I glanced over at a condiments tray by the wall. "Could you please pass me some salt and pepper?" I asked. Pri was closer than me.

She nodded and passed me two little sachets of each. I made a big show of using all the salt and one of the pepper sachets, and when she was distracted with a big mouthful of oatmeal, I slipped the second pepper sachet into my pocket.

Afterwards, Pri and I headed to our usual gym down the hall. We were expected to work out between nine and ten, but I didn't do anything. I needed to conserve my energy. I loitered around the weight machines instead, occasionally pretending to be setting something up whenever someone walked past, and when Pri questioned me, I told her I was still way too full from breakfast to exercise.

When our session was over, I headed back to my room and into my little writing nook. I got out a notebook and pretended to write (in case anyone was watching me on the surveillance cameras) and then I opened up the pepper sachet on the blank pages before me.

Using two fingers, I scooped up some of the pepper and rubbed it right in my eyes.

"Oh, shit..." I grimaced and drew in a sharp breath before gritting my teeth to stop myself from screaming as my eyes began to water. I knew the pepper would sting a lot, but it was even worse than I expected. It felt like someone had taken a blowtorch to my eyeballs.

When the worst of the pain was over, I stumbled into the bathroom and washed my hands and face. It took a few minutes, but I was finally able to open my eyes all the way up again, and when I looked in the mirror, I saw that the whites were now bright red. Just as I expected.

I headed out into the hallway and followed it down to the end. Mellie had her own room here, and I'd recently discovered its location.

I knocked frantically on her door.

"What is it?" I heard her say from the other side, a sour note in her voice. She swung the door open, hands on her hips and a surly expression on her bare face. I'd never seen her without makeup before. She looked so similar to me without it that we could probably pass for sisters. "Jesus, what happened to your eyes?"

I arranged my face into a distressed expression and pretended to sniff loudly. "Elias had flowers delivered to me yesterday. I must be allergic to them. I leaned down to smell them about half an hour ago, and my eyes suddenly went itchy and red. My nose is running too."

"Right. What do you want me to do about it?"

"Can you take me to one of the medical wings and get me some anti-allergy meds? Isn't that part of your job now; to help the girls with stuff?"

She rolled her eyes. "Can't you just get rid of the flowers? I'm sure the redness and itching will clear up as soon as you do," she said before stifling a yawn. She was still in pajamas. I must've woken her up.

"No. He'll be mad if I throw away a gift from him. And besides, he's coming to see me tonight. I can't look like this," I said, motioning to my red eyes. "Please, Mellie, I don't want to make him angry. You know it's my job to please him."

She pursed her lips, then sighed. "Fine. I'll take you. Just give me a second."

She went back into her room for a moment, then led me down another hall and

slipped a keycard into an electronic lock. The door swung open to reveal a small room with shelves and drawers lining the white walls.

Mellie dug around in a few of the drawers before returning to me with a box of Benadryl and a little bottle of eye drops.

She handed me the bottle as she read the back of the box. “Okay, take one of these now,” she said, pushing out the foil packet and removing four tablets. “Another at lunch, and then two more before bed. Don’t take them all at once or it’ll knock you out for hours. You don’t want that if Elias is expecting to see you tonight. Oh, and use the eye drops for the redness.”

“Thanks.”

I went back to my room and headed into my writing nook again. Using another notebook as a cover, I crushed the four tablets into a fine powder with the end of a pen. Then I left it sitting there, covered by a folded piece of paper.

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Elias showed up for dinner earlier than expected. I was still in gym clothes, but that was fine. It actually suited my plan.

He wasn't alone. A few maids were with him, fussing over a little table that they'd brought in for our dinner. They set it up by the window with two chairs.

"Hey, Doll," Elias said, arching a curious brow as he took in my yoga pants and tank top. "Been exercising?"

"Yes. You look very pleased with yourself," I replied, looking back at him. His eyes were alive with excitement.

He smiled. "I got some good news earlier today."

"Oh?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "I'll tell you another time. No need to get into it now. Anyway, take a seat. Dinner will be ready any moment."

"Will there be wine?" I asked in a hopeful tone. Please say yes.

"If you like. Red or white?"

"Red. But only if that's okay with you," I said demurely.

He nodded and muttered something to the maids. They left the room. I sat down at the table with Elias, and a few minutes later, two of the maids returned. One had a

bottle of pinot noir and two wine glasses, and the other was pushing a cart with multiple silver cloche trays.

“I’ll serve it,” Elias said, dismissing them.

When they were gone, he pulled two plates off the cart and put our dinner on the table with a flourish. Wagyu beef tenderloins with hand-cut fries, truffle aioli, and salad on the side. Simple but pricey.

“Thank you,” I said with a shy smile. “It smells delicious.”

“You’re welcome,” Elias replied, returning my smile as he filled our wine glasses.

I felt a pang of guilt at what I was going to do to him. Ever since he rescued me from the storm and brought me here, he’d acted like a changed man. So patient and generous. He only punished me when I wanted it, only hurt me in the ways I liked and craved (even though he’d probably never admit that in a million years), and he seemed to be making a real effort to have things run smoothly between us.

My feelings for him were growing stronger every day, and I had a sneaking suspicion that he was beginning to return them. But at the same time, I knew he would never let me go. I would always be his prisoner.

As much as I might care for him and want him, I still wanted freedom more.

I picked up my glass and took a sip of wine, licking my lips as I swallowed. Sensually, slowly. Then I flashed Elias my best attempt at a seductive smile. “Would you excuse me for a minute? I think I should change into something more suitable,” I said.

He nodded. I stood, still holding my glass, and headed out of the main room, letting

my hips swing invitingly.

I knew there was a chance he might follow, so I moved as fast as I could once I was in the closet. I hurried over to the writing nook and held the glass at the front of the desk so I could sweep the powdered Benadryl into it. As I waited for it to settle into the wine, I changed out of my gym clothes and into a sexy black dress which pushed my breasts up and together to give me killer cleavage.

“Wow.” Elias raised his eyebrows when I stepped back into the main room. “That looks fucking incredible on you.”

“Thank you.” I gave him a shy but coquettish smile. “I figured it would be better for tonight than sweaty gym clothes.”

“Damn right about that.” He crossed over to me in a few powerful strides and wrapped his arms around me, one hand groping at my ass. My glass tipped to one side, and the wine very nearly spilled.

“Oh, careful,” I murmured, trying not to let any panic seep into my voice. I held the glass out and away from us, keeping it as steady as possible.

“Fuck the wine. Fuck dinner. I want to have you now,” Elias growled.

Shit. This wasn't part of the plan.

I tried to think of a way to get him to sit back down but failed miserably. My mind had gone completely blank.

Luckily, Elias drew back when I didn't respond. “Wait... I promised you this dinner, didn't I?” he said, a frown creasing his forehead. “And you're probably hungry after all that exercise today.”

I swallowed hard and nodded. He led me back toward the table, but not before giving me a hard slap on the ass. “Naughty little tease. You’ll pay for that later,” he said. “But you were probably hoping for that, weren’t you?”

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I feigned a giggle and set my wine glass back down on the table. Then I looked over his shoulder at the TV. “Would you do me a favor?” I asked. “Could you go and turn that on?”

He narrowed his eyes slightly. “You want the TV on?”

I gulped. “There’s a channel that just plays music. I thought it might be nice to have some on in the background.”

The confusion vanished from his expression. “Good idea.”

He headed over to grab the remote, and when his back was turned, I quickly switched our drinks.

He returned to the table a few seconds later, none the wiser. I breathed a sigh of relief and sipped at my new glass of wine, watching him do the same with the tainted one. His upper lip curled slightly at the taste, but he kept drinking it anyway. Thank god.

Dinner went well. I did my best to seem calm and affable, nodding and agreeing with everything Elias said. When it was time for dessert, he got up to fetch the tray from the cart and stumbled to the side instead. “Woah,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t feel so good.”

“I don’t either,” I lied, clutching at my stomach. “Maybe it’s the food?”

“Maybe.” He sat back down and put his head in his hands. “I’m so fucking tired. It just hit me out of nowhere.”

“Why don’t you lie down?” I suggested.

His head was lolling now, and he yawned, eyelids drooping. “Yeah. That sounds good. Sorry, Doll, I know I promised you a fun night. I’m just...”

His voice trailed off as he yawned again. I smiled and stood up, extending a hand to him. “It’s fine. I understand,” I said, helping him to his feet. “You said you got some really good news today. Maybe all the excitement wiped you out? That can happen sometimes.”

“I guess so. Is your stomach okay?” He raised his bleary, concerned eyes to me. “You said you didn’t feel well.”

“It hurts a bit, but it’s not too bad,” I said softly. I wasn’t lying. My stomach was in knots from guilt, especially since he’d so kindly asked me how I felt.

I helped him onto the bed, trying to tell myself it was all okay. I shouldn’t feel guilty. As much as I’d grown to tolerate and even crave his company, this man was still responsible for my captivity. I shouldn’t feel sorry for him at all. Besides, I wasn’t killing him. The allergy meds would simply knock him out till the morning. They wouldn’t do any long-term damage.

I waited till midnight, sitting on the bed and watching over Elias. He was out cold, snoring gently. I poked him, hard, and he didn’t even stir.

It was time.

13

Tatum

I went back into my closet and changed into thick black yoga pants, several dark layered tops, a sweater, a thick charcoal gray coat, woolen socks, and sneakers. That should be enough to keep me from freezing to death outside. I grabbed a dark chunky-knit scarf as well, just in case, and then I headed back out to the bedroom and fished around in Elias's pockets.

I found his Crown and Dagger keycard a moment later. Leaning down, I gave him a quick kiss on the forehead. "I'm sorry, Elias," I whispered. "But I have to do this for myself."

I slipped out of my room and crept down the hall as quickly and quietly as I could. There were security cameras everywhere, so someone was bound to see me sneaking around sooner or later. I just had to make it to a door and get outside before that happened.

I reached the stairs and hurried down them, and when I arrived at the nearest door that led outside, I slid the keycard into the electronic lock. It beeped and flashed with a green light. Breathing a sigh of relief, I let myself out, making sure to close the door behind me as quietly as possible. Then I stole through the main courtyard and gardens, heading for the expansive patch of snowy grass which led to the forest.

When I reached the grass, I began to run as fast as I could. One of the guards monitoring the camera feeds would've noticed me by now, and it was only a matter

of time before a team was sent out to retrieve me. I had to get to the forest and use it for cover.

As I reached the tree line, I heard shouts in the distance, but I didn't turn around. I couldn't waste even a fraction of a second.

The forest was dense and ancient, tree trunks thick and old with twisted roots. The soil had a rich, loamy smell, and the canopy was so dense that I could only see the occasional streak of moonlight through the leaves and branches. Fortunately, there was enough to guide me, and I only tripped over the roots or small bushes a couple of times.

Leaves rustled in the wind and dead trees creaked ominously as I headed deeper into the woods. My teeth chattered like mad. The air was colder than ice, already seeping through my jacket and climbing up my spine. I was struck with an urge to give up and curl into a ball to keep warm, but I kept going, kept pushing.

Voices were drawing closer to me now, and I caught occasional glimpses of flashlight beams cutting through the trees. Shit. The guards were catching up faster than I expected.

Fear and adrenaline flooded me, and I doubled my already-fast pace, practically flying through the forest. Unfortunately, my burst of speed was short-lived, because I tripped over a small log only a few minutes later. I let out a yelp before falling flat on my front. Hard.

I gasped for breath, winded. The voices were getting even closer now. I was screwed.

No wonder no one ever escaped the Lodge. Every girl who made the attempt probably thought she was different than the others who tried before her. Faster. Stronger. Wilier. But in every case, reality caught up with them fast, and they found

themselves in an early grave.

Soon, I would be no different.

A wild sob tore through me as I forced myself up to my hands and knees, still trying to get my breath back. That was when I saw the cave.

It wasn't a proper one, carved out of weathered rock over millennia. It was an enormous tree hollow in a giant old oak, but it looked like just as good of a hiding place as a regular cave, because it was at least three feet tall with a wide mouth of impenetrable blackness.

Once again, the darkness would become my sanctuary.

I crawled over to the hollow and gingerly headed inside, watching the moonlight dissolve into the surrounding darkness. The dry space inside was so big that I could tuck myself around a corner, away from the hollow mouth. If any of the guards spotted it, they could shine a flashlight in and still not see me. The only way they'd find me is if they crawled right inside on their hands and knees like I did. I just had to pray that it didn't occur to them to do so.

For a moment, the only sound was the sighing wind, but then the voices returned, louder this time.

"She can't be far. Fan out!"

I put my hand over my mouth, keeping my breaths shallow. Even the smallest of sounds might be enough to alert them to my location.

The deep voices grew louder, and soon I could hear heavy footsteps clomping around the area.

“I think I saw her!” a guard called out. “There’s something in that tree hollow.”

“Go check it out.”

A silent tear slipped down my face as horror and resignation flooded me all over again. Footsteps drew closer to the hollow, and then a bright yellow beam of light cut through the darkness. Whoever was standing outside couldn’t see me yet, but there was no doubt in my mind that they were going to search the entire hollow any second now.

There was a sudden squeak, and I felt a brush of fur and little feet skittering over me. I clamped my hand down even harder on my lips, swallowing a shocked scream.

“Fuck... it’s just a squirrel!” the guard shouted. The light vanished.

I’d never believed in guardian angels before, but I did now. Apparently, mine was a furry little animal.

The voices and footsteps turned fainter, drifting away on the wind as the men headed in a different direction. Soon the only sound was the rustling of the leaves outside.

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I didn't risk leaving my safe haven for hours. When the faint orange glow of dawn began to creep into the hollow, I crept out and glanced around. There wasn't anyone or anything nearby except trees and bushes, and there hadn't been a sound for hours. Wherever the men were searching, it wasn't anywhere near here.

I tentatively headed in the direction I'd originally been running in. After what felt like three hours or so, I spotted a wooden fence. My heart leapt at the sight beyond it. A road.

I crouched low, just in case the Lodge guards had cars out looking for me. Then I waited.

Fifteen minutes later, I spied a white RV in the distance. I stayed down, waiting for it to get close enough for me to assess if it was a threat. As it passed, I saw two people in the front. A middle-aged couple. The license plate wasn't local, and an enormous, colorful Dixie sticker took up a large portion of the side.

Definitely not Crown and Dagger affiliated.

I ran out onto the road and waved my hands, praying they'd spot me in their mirrors. Thankfully, the RV screeched to a stop a few seconds later. I hurried toward the passenger side.

"Please!" I said to the confused couple as they put the window down. "Help me!"

"What happened, hon?" the woman said, wide green eyes searching my tearstained face for answers.

I was too choked with emotion to speak for several seconds. For the first time in months, freedom was a real option for me, and it was hard to believe it wasn't all a cruel dream. "They... they... I was kidnapped," I finally stammered. "They're still after me. Please, you have to help me! Please!"

The gray-haired man got out and headed to the back of the RV. He returned with a blanket. His wife got out too, bundling me up in the thick fabric, and then she helped me into the back. "We'll get you to the nearest town, okay? You're not hurt, are you?" she asked, forehead wrinkled with worry.

Only mentally and emotionally, I said to myself. "I'm okay," I said. "I just need the police."

"Honey, can you look it up on the GPS?" she asked, glancing over at her husband. She looked back at me. "Or can you guide us?"

I shook my head. "I don't even know where we are."

"Oh, sweetie..." She shook her head. "Don't worry. You're safe now."

She kindly sat in the back with me, holding my hand. Twenty minutes later, we pulled up at a police station in a picturesque town. The couple came inside with me and demanded to speak to whomever was in charge.

"We found this poor mite on the edge of the road," the woman said sharply when a tall man with a chief's badge appeared. "She says she was kidnapped and she's shaking like a darn leaf. I just watched a documentary about a serial killer yesterday, so I know damn well that this stuff happens all the time. Even here. You better take this seriously!"

The chief nodded politely. "Don't worry, ma'am, we'll do everything we can," he

said, holding up a stern but placating hand. “I’ll need you two to go with Officer Stanley so he can take your statements.” He waved his hand toward a younger man in uniform, then glanced at me. “Would you like to follow me, Miss? I’ll have someone make you a cup of coffee, and then I’ll take your statement.”

I looked at the couple. “Thank you so much,” I murmured tearfully. The woman patted me on the shoulder before following the officer with her husband.

I watched them enter a room down the hall, and then I trailed after the chief and headed into a room on the opposite end. After I’d taken a seat at the table, the chief smiled and gently informed me that he’d be back in a moment.

When he returned, he had a steaming mug of coffee. He set it in front of me. “There you go. Can you tell me your name?”

“Tatum Marris.”

“Can you tell me what happened? Just in simple terms for now.”

I was silent for a moment. How could I put any of what had happened to me in simple terms?

“I... I was kidnapped by a group of men,” I finally said. “They’re from a secret society.”

He frowned. “What?”

“They’re called Crown and Dagger. They drugged me and took me to an island. It’s called...” I racked my brain for a second. “Oh, Albemarle Island! And after that they—”

He cut me off. “Miss, are you feeling all right?” he asked in the sort of tone one might normally reserve for small children or the mentally unstable.

“I know how it sounds. Totally crazy. But it’s true. They kidnap women and keep them all in this giant mansion to serve the men. There’s still at least a hundred of them there. All prisoners. You have to get them out!”

The chief almost certainly thought I was a babbling lunatic, but he had to listen to my story. He had to investigate it. Right?

He let out a deep sigh. “Look, why don’t you finish your coffee before we get into the details?” He pushed his notepad aside and leaned forward. “You should take a few minutes to get yourself a little more centered.”

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“I am centered,” I said indignantly.

He held up his palms in the same placating gesture he’d aimed at the couple earlier. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I just meant that you’ve obviously been through some trauma, so it might be good to take a few minutes to relax and collect your thoughts now that you’re finally in a safe place.”

“Okay,” I said in a small voice. He had a point. I was still teetering on the edge, barely used to my newfound freedom. It might take a while for me to fully accept it.

“Is there anyone you want me to call?”

For a split-second, I was struck with the urge to ask him to contact Elias. I wanted him to know I was safe and warm and so very sorry for drugging him. Leaving him.

No. I dismissed the notion immediately. Not sorry.

The chief sat with his hands clasped on the table, waiting patiently for a response. I stared down at my lap, trying to figure out who he could call for me. Obviously not my parents. They got me into this horrible situation in the first place. Not my friends, either. They were mad at me over the bullshit my parents told them, so they’d probably think it was a crank call and hang up if I gave the police their number.

In fact, everyone else I could think of right now would think it was a crank call too. My story sounded completely insane. But there had to be someone who would listen...

“Henry Davenport.” I finally looked back up. “He... he’s a friend of mine. I don’t want to talk to anyone else. Not even my family.”

I didn’t actually know Mellie’s brother, but I had a feeling he might help me. He’d once tried to warn me about Mellie, after all. On top of that, he was the only person in the world who would immediately believe what I had to say, seeing as he’d gone through a similar nightmare with the secret society.

The chief picked up a pen and scribbled down the name. “Number?”

“I don’t remember it off the top of my head. But he lives here in Connecticut. If that’s even where we are.”

He nodded. “Yes, we are. I’ll try to track down your friend. You sit tight.”

He stood and left the room. Fifteen minutes passed. Then another five. I slowly sipped at the coffee and nervously twiddled my thumbs, waiting, waiting, waiting...

Black horror suddenly struck me, and my stomach dropped. I’d made a cataclysmic mistake. Mellie told me that Henry was always being tracked and monitored by Crown and Dagger to ensure he kept his mouth shut about them. That meant they were listening in on his phone calls too. As soon as the police called him and told him about me, the society would know exactly where I was.

Shit, shit, shit!

How could I be so stupid?

I ran out of the room, but I knew I was probably too late. Chances were high that they’d already called him. Still, I had to try and stop Henry from getting in trouble because of me. I could say I misspoke, and that I meant to give them a different

name. Harry, not Henry. Something like that.

“Hello?” I headed back out to reception. There was no one there. I shouted louder. “Hello? Please, I got tongue-tied and said the wrong name! Not Henry Davenport. Harry. Harry Devon! I was just... I was confused!”

A door opened, and the chief appeared again, a frown on his face. “Miss Marris, please go back into the interview room. Everything is fine.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said the wrong name. Please don’t ask Henry to come here!”

“Calm down. I didn’t call him,” he said soothingly.

My shoulders slumped. Oh, thank god.

“Your father is coming to pick you up,” the chief went on.

My eyes widened. A cold black stone of pure fear dropped through my guts. “No!” I shook my head wildly. “Please, you can’t let my parents come here. It was their fault! They sold me to the society in the first place!”

“He’s already on his way. I know how confused you are, Miss Marris, but everything will be fine.”

I sank to the floor. “No, no, no!” I wailed. “You don’t know what you’ve done!”

“Trust me, I do. This is my job. Everything is going to be okay,” the chief replied in that annoyingly peaceful voice. He had no idea.

I decided to make a break for it. My father probably wouldn’t get here for at least an hour and a half, given how far away we were from the coastal city he lived in with

my mother, so if I could get the hell out of this place and find a ride to another town, I could start over there. Find a smarter police chief. Not this idiot who'd found and contacted my fucking family against my will.

I got up and dashed toward the main station door. Then I froze in my tracks.

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Through the glass, I could see that Tobias King had just exited a black car on the other side of the street. Now he was striding right toward the station.

My eyes wide as saucers, I turned to the police chief. “Ah, there he is. Right on time,” he said crisply, looking past me to the doors.

“Oh my god...” I shook my head wildly. “You... you’re in Crown and Dagger’s pocket! They pay you to take care of any escapees who show up, don’t they?”

He stepped over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said with a gentle smile. “There’s no such thing as Crown and Dagger. It’s just a silly urban myth. Tobias King is your father-in-law, and you’re simply confused.”

“You’re a monster,” I hissed, my lips trembling. “You’re supposed to protect people. Not hand them right back to fucking criminals!”

He didn’t respond. Instead he looked back over my shoulder and tilted his chin downward in a respectful nod.

The air around me suddenly seemed thick and volatile. Every hair on my neck stood up, and my blood ran cold. I turned around slowly. It felt like I was fighting my way through an acrid fog the whole time.

Tobias was right behind me, a mirthless smile on his face. “Hello, Tatum,” he said. “It’s so good to see you again...”

14

Tatum

“I’m not going with you,” I said, a tremor in my voice.

Tobias smiled. “Yes, you are. We’ll do it one of two ways. I have a needle in my pocket with a tranquilizer, and I can jab it in you and have my men carry you out unconscious. Or you can be a good girl and come quietly.”

I used to love it when Elias called me a good girl, but now that the words had left the lips of his evil father, they seemed tainted. Repellant.

He arched a thick brow when I didn’t respond. “So what will it be?”

I bit my bottom lip. I knew I was screwed. It was just a matter of which choice was worse for me.

I’d already been drugged by these Crown and Dagger assholes before, and there was nothing worse than waking up confused, sore and disoriented, then later terrified as the memories flooded back in. So as much as it pained me to agree to go with Tobias without making a scene, it was at least the better of the two options he’d presented me with.

“I’ll come quietly,” I murmured, my shoulders slumping with defeat.

“Good.” He put a hand on my upper back, pushing me toward the door. I turned my

head to see one of his cronies handing a stuffed envelope to the police chief.

Unbelievable. Was there anywhere in the world that remained untouched by corruption?

Tobias pushed me into the back of the black car. Then he sat down on the same seat, by the opposite window. His upper lip curled in distaste as he looked at me. “If anyone at the Lodge asks you what happened, you will say you simply got lost on a walk and accidentally spent the night in the woods.”

I shrugged dejectedly. I doubted most people would bother asking anyway, and those who did would already know I was a captive who didn’t simply go for a walk. So what did it matter?

“You’re sick,” I muttered.

Tobias leaned over and grabbed my scarf, yanking me close to his livid face. “And you’re a stupid little cunt. Do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

I couldn’t help but let out a scoff. “Lucky? Are you kidding?”

He narrowed his pale, reptilian eyes. “I found out from Ms. Davenport that you gave Elias allergy medication. If it had been painkillers instead, I would’ve wrung your skinny little neck the second I saw you this morning.”

My brows furrowed. “Why?”

He let out a short, angry breath. “My son had some unfortunate mishaps with certain types of drugs when he was nothing more than a child. He doesn’t touch them at all anymore, just in case, but I know he has quite an addictive personality. So you’re damn lucky you didn’t give him anything stronger than Benadryl to knock him out, or

there'd be hell to pay."

"Seems like there will be anyway," I said under my breath, trying to turn away.

He didn't let me. He leaned even closer, fetid breath hot on my face. "The one thing you should know about Elias is that he eventually gets over all the things he finds himself fixated on. Right now, you're it. But he'll get over you too, and when that happens, you'll be cast aside like the worthless garbage you are."

I swallowed hard and pictured myself in a year or two, working as a maid at the Lodge after Elias had ditched me in favor of a new slave. I would never be free from the place, so I would have to see him there with her all the time. Then the next 'her' once he grew tired of my replacement, and the one after that too. Forever.

Multiple waves of sadness and jealousy struck me at the mental image. I knew it wasn't a normal response. I shouldn't feel sad that my captor might no longer want me, and I definitely shouldn't feel jealous at the idea of another woman being held captive by him. I should pity her.

Unfortunately, my brain clearly wasn't normal, because I was jealous as hell. Seething, white-hot levels of jealous. The thought of seeing Elias put his hands or mouth on another girl made me want to scream and tear someone's hair out. He might be my captor, but he was still mine.

I pinched myself, hard, trying to squash the wildly inappropriate thoughts. I had to stop having these feelings for Elias. Had to. I would never be able to concentrate on a proper escape if I kept this up. Leaving him behind was hard enough last night, so doing it again might be impossible if I didn't take my feelings for him and lock them away.

But even as I thought it, I knew I was already a goner. I couldn't fight my emotions

any longer.

I knew that I'd started to develop feelings for Elias recently, but that was different. Those feelings were up in the air. Intangible, elusive. I was never quite sure what to make of them. Now they'd settled into a solid picture right here in front of me. Stark and crystal-clear. I didn't want to start falling in love with him, but I was already well on my way...

I bit back a sob and looked out the window. I didn't want Tobias to know the truth. Didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how I felt. He would only tell Elias, and then they'd laugh about it together. Laugh about how insane and pathetic I was.

As fond as he was of fucking me, he would never feel the same way about me.

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at the black iron gates of the Lodge. When we reached the main building, I wasn't let inside. Instead, Tobias and two of his men escorted me around to one side of the mansion. One of them opened some sort of trapdoor near a stone wall, and then Tobias pushed me forward, down a series of old stone steps. The other guard picked up a torch and set it aflame with a cigarette lighter, leading the way.

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“Where are we going?” I asked, my voice shaky again.

“Shut your mouth, slut,” Tobias replied. “You don’t get to ask questions anymore.”

The temperature dropped as we descended beneath the mansion, sending a violent shiver down my spine. Without the guard leading us, it would be pitch black. Our vision was confined entirely to the circle of flickering yellow and orange light cast by the torch.

We kept walking, heading further down. We were in a narrow tunnel now, jagged stone teeth hanging from the shadows above. The light went out for a second, plunging us all into black, and the guard cursed. My hands shook. The darkness was like an invisible force-field, crushing my chest, squeezing the life out of me.

The guard managed to get the torch lit again, and Tobias pushed me forward. Small, loose stones littered this part of the tunnel, causing me to stumble.

“Stupid girl,” he muttered. As if it wasn’t his fault.

As we headed further into the subterranean maze, winding our way into a different passage, the light from the flickering flame showed frigid pools of inky black water on either side of us. I could also hear flowing water up ahead, turbid and splashing somewhere along the walls.

A huge arched doorway came into view, carved out of pale gray stone with intricate ornaments sculpted along the top. The air grew colder as we approached and entered, stepping into a dim chamber.

“Stop,” Tobias muttered to me.

The guards went ahead of us, lighting sconce torches along the walls, bathing the entire cavern in a yellow glow as they glittered against the stone like sparkling jewels. If I wasn't so scared, I would've gasped in amazement at the sight before me.

We were in an enormous grotto with carved sculptures lining the edges. Directly ahead of us was an underground lake with small streams flowing in or out from natural entrances along the smooth stone walls. The murky water rippled in the firelight.

Around the lake was a wide stone walkway which led in a circle around the chamber, and in the middle was a tiny island, so small it probably couldn't fit more than ten people if they were all lying down back-to-back. There was also a carved bridge leading over the lake to the island from where we were standing.

In the center of the island was a black coffin.

All the air went out of my lungs. When I was brought back to the Lodge in one piece, I thought I would just be punished. It hadn't occurred to me that this might be an execution. Really, I should've known. Mellie once told me that none of the girls who attempted to escape in past years had survived.

I fell to my knees, pathetically clutching at Tobias. “Please don't kill me,” I begged.

A savage flash shot across his eyes. “After all the shit you've pulled, there's nothing I want more. Unfortunately, my son would very much like to keep you around for now.”

For now.

I screamed as the two guards returned and hauled me across the bridge. One of them held me still as the other opened the coffin lid. Behind us, I could hear Tobias crossing the bridge.

“Tie her wrists and ankles before you do it,” he commanded.

The guard who’d opened the lid pulled two black ropes from his pocket and made quick work of tying me up. Then he and his colleague picked me up and put me inside the coffin.

“Hopefully the time you spend in here will be enough to make you realize how lucky you’ve been so far,” Tobias said, eyes glittering with malice as he looked down at me. “Oh, and by the way—don’t try to move. You might just manage to make the coffin roll all the way into the water, and you’ll sink to the bottom of the lake, however far down that may be. No one’s ever checked, but we know it’s deep. Eventually, the water will leak through the cracks near the hinges, and you’ll drown before my men manage to get you out.”

He waved a hand, and then the lid came crashing down. My world turned pitch black.

I gulped down deep, panicky breaths, already feeling like I was suffocating even though the logical side of me knew I wouldn’t run out of air. There were cracks near the lid hinges, like Tobias said. Enough oxygen would make its way in here, even if I felt like I had an elephant sitting on my chest.

Trying to stay still was absolute hell. The more I tried to concentrate on keeping my arms and legs motionless, the more they inadvertently twitched and trembled, even with the ties around my wrists and ankles. I had nightmarish visions of the coffin tipping into the lake and slowly filling up with dark water, visions of myself waiting to die.

I knew Tobias was a sadistic bastard. He would probably keep me in here for hours. I couldn't sleep to pass the time, as exhausted as I was, because if I did I might roll around without even knowing it. The idea of waking up underwater filled me with yet more dread and terror.

I concentrated on getting my breathing under control instead. Slow, steady. Calm.

Then I tried to keep track of the minutes, timing them in my mind. One-Mississippi. Two-Mississippi. Three, four, five, all the way to sixty. I repeated that four more times.

God, that was just five minutes. I was already so bored that my eyelids were drooping.

Don't go to sleep. Don't even close your eyes.

I tried a new tack. Instead of counting out the seconds, I thought about my next move. Clearly, the forest escape plan was a bad one, and I was lucky to be alive after being caught. It seemed obvious to me now that all the towns surrounding the Lodge would have police departments in Crown and Dagger's pocket, just in case. I should've already guessed that.

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Still, I was undeterred. I wanted freedom, craved it like my lungs craved air.

Tobias and his men obviously thought I would be tired of fighting after stuffing me in this box. Broken, beaten. They thought I'd give up, but all they were really doing was making me even more determined to get out of this hellhole and expose them to the world.

Unbeknownst to them, I still had another trick up my sleeve.

My old tentative plan to suck up to the society and try to get voted in as a hostess for the next Artemis Festival was still on the table. The festival was coming up very soon, at the beginning of spring, so time wasn't on my side, but I was still resolute. Tobias and Elias might not vote for me, but I could still try and make sure the other members did.

Whoever won me as the grand prize wouldn't set me free, but he'd take me far away from this place, and wherever that was, it had to be better than here. Had to be easier to escape from. I wouldn't stop trying, wouldn't stop fighting.

And then, when I was finally free, I would make Crown and Dagger pay.

My blood felt like fire in my veins as I psyched myself up for the plan. As much as I'd succumbed to weakness after failing to escape in the past, I wouldn't this time. I was done with that. Done with giving up and crying and going into dark places in my mind, the kind of places that tried to force me off cliffs just to end the pain. Never again. They could do whatever they wanted to me here, and I would only come out stronger each time. More hell-bent on revenge.

But I couldn't let them know that. In order to be selected for the festival, I had to be memorable to every man here. I had to seem happy, like I'd finally accepted my place in the Lodge and learned to love it. I had to be subservient, obedient, welcoming. The perfect slave.

From now on, that would be me. I would be sweet and charming and smile invitingly at every member I saw, not just Elias. I would do things to get noticed by all of them in a positive way. I would say what they wanted to hear, do whatever they commanded, move the way they told me to move. Fight back by pretending not to fight. Pretend to be good, pretend to be happy, pretend to want every single man in this place. Tatum Marris, the perfect slave.

The perfect festival hostess...

It was just like the idea I had right before I nearly slipped over that cliff all those weeks ago, only with a slight twist in that the sucking up didn't only apply to Elias. It now extended to every single man in Crown and Dagger. By the time I was done, every man here would want me and vote for me.

After what might've been one hour or three—I had no way of knowing—I heard something from outside the coffin. Pounding footsteps. Voices echoing through the cave.

My heart simultaneously lifted and sank.

Elias had arrived.

15

Tatum

“What the fuck is going on?”

I heard Elias shout at his father, and then I heard hushed mutters. Tobias was no doubt telling him everything about my recapture, giving themselves something to chuckle about later on.

“This is completely fucking unacceptable,” I heard Elias say a moment later. Okay, so he wasn’t laughing. “She isn’t yours to punish. She isn’t yours to decide what to do with.”

“Well, if you’d bothered showing up before now, you could’ve done what you wanted,” Tobias said, his voice smooth yet deadly.

“I was fucking drugged! I only just woke up a few minutes ago, and I can still barely keep my eyes open,” Elias snarled. “Now get Tatum the fuck out of that coffin so I can punish her myself!”

There was another mutter. The lid swung open. Elias was standing right above me, his face twisted with fury. “Get up,” he commanded.

I did as he said, silently and obediently. He grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the coffin, and then he dragged me out of the chamber. Tobias and the guards followed us.

We headed into the mansion, up to the third floor. Elias muttered threats in my ear the whole way, and when we reached a red door at the end of the hall, he held me in the rough grip of one hand and opened the door with the other.

The room beyond was similar to the playroom at the Finishing School, only ten times bigger. It had dark red walls with crosses and racks filled with whips, paddles, ropes and chains.

He slammed the door behind us with a loud promise to punish me so hard I wouldn't be able to sit down for three days afterwards. I didn't fight it. I simply closed my eyes and waited.

For nothing.

Confused, I opened my eyes again to see Elias standing there staring at me. He didn't look mad. He just looked... confused. Vulnerable. "Why?" he said, shaking his head slightly.

I knitted my brows. "Why what? Aren't you going to punish me?" I mumbled.

"No. I only said that to get everyone off my back. I might need you to scream every so often in case they're listening outside. Hopefully they don't look at the surveillance cameras." He glanced at a flashing red light above us.

I stared at him, flabbergasted. "So you aren't angry about what I did?"

He sighed and rubbed his chin. Tiredness was etched into every feature. He looked five years older, but it actually suited him. "I'm not angry at you, Tatum. Not anymore. I haven't been for a while."

"What?" That was all I could manage to get out. I had no idea what the hell was

going on.

He stepped closer, eyes narrowing. “I know you think I’m loyal to my family, but I’m not blind. I’ve had some suspicions for a while, as much as I’ve tried to push them aside. When I woke up this morning to hear you’d tried to leave, I knew once and for all that they weren’t just suspicions. Something is going on, and I need you to say it. Tell me why you tried to run. Again.”

Comprehension slowly dawned on me. I knew what this was now. Another game. Another ploy. He wanted to trick me into thinking he cared about my welfare, only to use it against me later.

I wouldn’t let myself get sucked in. Not again.

Just because I’d started falling for him didn’t mean he felt the same way about me. He might have been nicer lately, but that wasn’t love. It was just lust. A desire for power and control. At the heart of things, he was still my captor. The sort of captor who liked to play fucked up games with me and mess with my head.

After all, he’d done it before.

I bowed my head. “I didn’t run. It was a mistake.”

He snorted. “A mistake? So what... you accidentally drugged me, stole my card and let yourself out? All so you could go hiking in the woods? Come on, Tatum.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I swallowed hard. “I meant... I thought I wanted to go home. But I was wrong. I changed my mind. I want to be here with you, Master.”

“Bullshit. Tell me the truth.”

“I did.” I cowered, suddenly afraid he might hurt me if I didn’t say what he wanted.
“Please...”

“Tatum. Look at me. Now.”

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I kept my head down. Goosebumps broke out across my arms.

Elias tilted my chin up, forcing me to look right into his eyes. “Are you really here willingly?” he asked. He looked stricken as he spoke. I almost believed it wasn’t part of an act to break me further. Almost. “Did you really sell yourself here?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “How stupid do you think I am?” I said softly. All I could think of was the time he pretended to be surprised when I told him I was a captive. Back then, I thought I had a chance at help, but it was just a game to him. He went and laughed about it with his father afterwards, laughed about how dumb I was for thinking he might actually be unaware. That he might actually help me. “You think I’ll fall for that again?”

“Fall for what?”

“Forget it,” I muttered. “Yes, I’m here willingly. I signed the contract. Now just punish me for what I did and let me go back to my room. Please.”

“You’re not getting out of this fucking room until you tell me the truth.”

My head spun. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. He used to shout at me and punish me in order to make me ‘admit’ to one particular thing, and now he was trying to force me in the opposite direction. Trying to force me to say something else entirely.

Such a sick, twisted game. When would it end? Would he keep going until I blindly repeated every single thing he asked me to say, even if one statement completely

contradicted the previous statement he demanded from me? Did he want me that broken? That soulless? Or was he simply hoping I would say something that he would consider a lie, just so he could punish me harder than ever?

I gritted my teeth and steeled myself. “That is the truth.”

“No.” He roughly pushed me down to my knees, and I yelped. “You’re mine. That means you need to submit to me. Properly. You need to trust me and tell me the truth. No more fucking lies,” he said, glaring down at me. His pupils were dilated, and his eyes looked more dangerous than ever. “Do it.”

“I did. I’ve already submitted to you,” I whispered. “I’ve told you everything you wanted to hear. I’ve been telling you for weeks. Months.”

He scrubbed a hand across his face. “That’s the fucking problem. I thought what I wanted to hear was actually the truth,” he said. “But it’s not the truth, is it?”

I looked up at him. Looked at his perfect, deceitful face. I was falling for this man, and yet I’d never hated him more. How was that possible? To love and hate someone at the same time? It didn’t make any damn sense, and yet here I was, swinging between the two intoxicating emotions.

I guess that old saying was true: there’s a thin line between love and hate. Both stemmed from passion somewhere along the line, and they were both capable of sending us all downhill again and again.

“It is,” I finally bit out. “I’m not lying.”

He crouched down to my level, eyes flickering with irritation. “I’m asking you to trust me.”

Another warning bell jangled in my mind. Don't fall for it.

I gave Elias a sweet, shy smile. "I do trust you, Master," I whispered. "And that's why I finally told you the truth all those weeks ago. I sold myself here. That's it. The truth."

He shook his head and muttered. "Jesus Christ." He dragged me to my feet. "Come on."

I thought he was taking me over to an X-framed cross to whip me, but instead, he pulled me toward the door and yanked it open. "Pretend you can't walk," he hissed in my ear. "Or my father will make things worse for you."

Ha. I could believe that, at least...

I feigned a pained expression and a limp. Tobias sneered at me, and Elias scooped me into his arms. "I hope you've learned your lesson, little slut," he snarled down at me. "I doubt you'll be able to walk properly for a week."

Tobias looked pleased, and he nodded at his son before striding away.

Elias carried me all the way back to my room on the second floor. When we were inside, he locked the door behind us and deposited me on the bed.

"Get some rest," he commanded. "You need it. But we aren't done with this conversation. I don't care how long it takes; I'm getting the truth out of you one way or another."

"I already told you the truth," I repeated.

His eyes narrowed as he shook his head. "No, you didn't."

I suddenly felt ill, like I'd been drugged again, although I knew I hadn't. I clutched my stomach and curled up in a ball on the bed, my head pounding. Shit. I'd probably caught a chill after spending the night out in the forest. Or maybe it was the stress. Either way, I was exhausted. My limbs felt like soggy noodles.

"I know you don't believe me, Tatum, but I want to take care of you," Elias said, sitting down.

I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. He lay down beside me, wrapped me in his arms and kept talking, muttering all sorts of sweet little lies in my ears. He said that he cared for me. That he wanted to protect me. That if I just admitted the truth and placed my faith in him, he'd find some way to help me.

Yeah, right.

I might be falling in love with him, but I would never fall for his games again.

16

Elias

Tatum dozed fitfully, her hair messily splayed out on the pillow behind her, limbs twitching every moment or so. She looked pale. Exhausted. Scared even in her sleep.

I couldn't blame her. She should be scared. I wasn't too proud and insecure in my masculinity to admit that I was too.

After I woke up to all the furor about Tatum going missing, the first thing that struck me was fear. I worried something terrible had happened to her. A kidnapping, or a horrible accident. But then one of the security guards told me she'd actually tried to leave the Lodge by herself and been 'caught' in a nearby town.

While I was still passed out, they'd gone and watched the recent surveillance footage from her suite. From what they managed to glean, she'd drugged her wine glass while she was in the closet before dinner—I barely even noticed she took it with her when she got changed—and then switched it with mine when my back was turned.

No wonder I felt so drained. Allergy meds had a way of wiping a person the fuck out if they took too many.

I was supposed to be angry at her for violating the terms of her contract by trying to leave. I was supposed to punish her. But why the fuck would I do that? After this most recent attempt, I could no longer deny that something heinous was happening here.

The first few times she acted out and tried to run, I thought it was because of me. She hated me, after all. Hated my whole family. Besides, it was in her contract that she was supposed to fight me.

Allegedly.

At the time, I didn't care. I hated her too, and I wanted her to fight me. But now I saw something different. I saw a girl who desperately wanted to leave; not just me, but this whole place. I saw a girl who wasn't acting or playing along with any contract clauses. She was genuinely terrified. She genuinely thought of herself as a captive.

Because she was. She had to be.

I could feel it in my bones. All the suspicions I had over the last few weeks, all the things I tried to convince myself were just overreactions and conspiracy theories... they weren't unfounded. Why else would Tatum keep behaving like this?

Acting out and pretending to fight back was one thing. But going to all the effort of obtaining allergy meds and sneakily drugging me with them just so she could steal my keycard and run away was another thing entirely. That wasn't fucking acting. There was nothing pretend about it. She clearly wanted to escape, and she'd do anything to make it happen.

I reached out and stroked her hair, twisting my lips in fury. The thought of her being here against her will made my guts churn and my blood boil. I hated myself for not seeing it till now. It all made so much sense, especially considering the cliff incident on the island, and yet I'd been so blind to it in the past. I treated her like shit when she tried to tell me the truth. I broke her down so much that she was too scared to even say it anymore.

I knew I wasn't overthinking things this time. When I asked her if she was here

willingly just an hour ago, I saw a momentary flare of fear and indecision in her eyes. The restless panic of a wild bird trapped inside a house. That look alone confirmed everything for me. She was scared and she knew she didn't belong here, but she didn't want to tell me the truth because she was afraid I was playing her. Of course she'd think that, after the way I'd treated her in the past. After the way I punished her for telling me what was very likely the actual honest truth.

I drew my hand away from her like it was scalded. I didn't deserve to touch her.

With a heavy sigh, I put my head in my hands and closed my eyes. So many questions had been thrown up by all this shit. How did Tatum come to be here if it wasn't willingly? Was it really her parents, like she tried to tell me all those months ago? And my father... what was his role in this?

Obviously he'd fucking lied to me about everything. But why? People didn't just do things for no reason. There was always some kind of motivation, so something made him do this to Tatum. To me as well. His reasoning might be fucked up and downright evil, but I still wanted to know what the hell it was and how the hell he thought I wouldn't find out.

There was also the question of the Lodge in general. Was Tatum the only captive? Or were they all captives?

The thought alone made me want to vomit.

I exhaled deeply and shook my head. I knew I couldn't just wait until I reached the third level of Crown and Dagger to get to the bottom of Tatum's captivity. I had to do something now. Had to find out once and for all if I was right so that I could form a solid plan to fix things for her.

Unfortunately, I wasn't going to get the truth out of her again anytime soon. She was

far too petrified. That meant taking matters into my own hands and trying to figure out a way to prove she didn't belong here all by myself. Without that proof in my possession to show her I was genuine, she'd never let me help her. She'd think it was all part of some sick game.

I looked back over at her beautiful face, my lips set in a grim line. How many times had I ignored her? Disregarded her and treated her like she was nothing? Hurt her?

I kept trying to tell myself it wasn't my fault. I didn't know. I thought she wanted this, thought she sold herself here for this very reason. To be a slave. To earn money for her family. To punish herself for what she'd done in the past.

At the same time, I knew it was my fault. I should've fucking listened to her. Should've realized the very first time she acted out and told me she didn't belong here that something wasn't right. But I didn't want to. I wanted to punish her for what she'd done to Ben. I wanted a slave to fulfil my every dark desire. So I ignored her. I refused to listen when it was clear she wasn't lying, and I tried my best to break her instead.

But she was never really broken. I was.

Monster.

My father was an even fouler monster. There was no way he was innocent in any of this, and it made me wonder what the fuck else he'd lied to me about. Like my biological parentage, for instance. All the shit with Camille Gorham and her disappearance was playing on my mind on an endless loop now. Was she like Tatum too? Was she kidnapped by my father and kept here just like her? Forced to donate her eggs so my parents could have a child?

Something else struck me a second later.

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Not long ago, Tatum claimed to have seen two pregnant women somewhere upstairs. I blew her off at the time, figuring they were just the wives of guests, but now that I was actually thinking about it properly... how in the hell did that make any sense? What kind of pregnant women wanted to hang out here? Sure, the Lodge was the height of luxury and placed absolutely anything a person could desire right at their feet, but it still wasn't exactly the kind of place a pregnant woman would want to spend time at.

So who were those women? Was there some innocent explanation for their presence like I originally thought, or were there actually other women here who were similar to Camille Gorham? Forced to donate their eggs to rich men's wives or act as surrogates?

Christ.

How fucking deep did this rabbit hole go?

I pulled my cell out and headed through Tatum's bathroom and into her closet. Then I called my father. He answered on the third ring. "What's wrong?"

I tried to make myself sound as nonchalant as possible. "Nothing. Just had a question."

"Well, I'm at one of the bars on the first floor, near the old State Room. Just come down here if you want to chat."

"Can't. I'm still with Tatum. Anyway, she mentioned seeing something the other

week. I just want to know if she's full of shit or not, like she usually is." I feigned a derisive chuckle. I couldn't let him know I was onto him yet.

Curiosity crept into his tone. "What did she claim to see?"

"Some pregnant women in a medical wing on the third floor. What's that about?"

He paused, a little too long. "Oh, them. They're the wives of Ron DuPont and Glenn Covington. They're staying here right now."

I frowned. "Who the hell are those guys? And why would their wives want to be here while they're pregnant?"

"They're Crown and Dagger members, of course. You don't remember them? Old friends of mine. Glenn is an investment banker from New York, and Ron works in the oil industry."

"Never heard of them," I replied. They probably didn't even exist.

"Well, there's over six hundred men in the society. A hundred in the third level alone. I suppose you can't remember every single name, can you?" He chuckled in what I imagined was meant to be a lighthearted manner. Instead, it sounded forced and fake.

"So why are their wives here?" I repeated. I wasn't going to let him evade my main question that easily.

"One of the doctors we have here used to be a maternal-fetal medicine specialist at Mount Sinai in New York. He was a great one, too. We offered to pay more than the hospital ever could, though, so he quit that job and chose us. But he still sees pregnant women on occasion. Glenn and Ron want the best for their wives and babies, and they also enjoy being here at the Lodge, so they brought them here for the

remainder of their pregnancies.”

Even over the phone, I could tell he was lying through his teeth. The too-long pauses, the overly-smooth tone, even the way he told me such specific details.

I once read that was the easiest way to spot a liar. A person telling the truth tended to glaze over most details or skip them entirely, thinking it wasn't relevant. But a liar... they wanted their story to seem as genuine as possible, so they'd overcompensate and invent all sorts of random detail, thinking it would add more realism.

“I see,” I said, trying not to let my anger seep into my voice. “That explains that, then. Anyway, gotta go.”

I stared at the wall for a moment, trying to figure out my next move. Then I remembered the file my father once showed me. Tatum's contract. He kept copies of the girls' contracts in every office he owned, which meant there should be one in his office here too.

Obviously, the contract had to be fake, but if I could get a look at it and compare Tatum's supposed signature to her real handwriting, I'd have solid evidence that she never signed it. Then, if I showed her that, she wouldn't be able to deny it anymore. She'd have to believe that I was on her side. She'd have to let me help her.

I called Brett next. “Hey, man. How's your break going?” I listened to him drone on about his vacation for thirty seconds or so, and then I finally cut to the chase. “Listen, I want to know something. When the island flooded, did the underground cells flood too?”

“Yeah, they all did.”

Damn. I thought they did, but I was hoping I was wrong.

“Was anything rescued from them?” I asked, a tense note in my voice.

“You mean apart from the girls?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, apart from them. I’m looking for a notebook that was in Tatum’s cell.”

The notebook in question was filled with her handwriting from when I’d forced her to write lines. It was the best thing I could think of to compare with the contract signature.

“No. Pretty sure everything down there was destroyed,” Brett said.

Fuck.

“Thanks anyway. Gotta go.” I hung up and dropped my phone in my pocket, my forehead creasing in a frown.

My eyes fell on the writing nook in the corner of Tatum’s walk-in closet, and my spirits lifted again. I’d given her pens and notebooks to write in when she first arrived here. I just had to hope she’d actually written something. Even just one sentence.

I went through every single book. They were all empty except one. She hadn’t written much inside it—a few pages about the Lodge and her room, and what appeared to be a couple of short stories—but it was more than enough.

I marched out of her suite and headed to my father’s study on the fifth floor. A regular keycard wouldn’t allow entry to the room, but fortunately, I knew the code for the door. He’d always trusted me way too much with shit like that. It was part of his attempt to make sure I knew I was his only hope for the future. The only one who could carry on his name, as he said so often.

It was a shame he never trusted me with the truth about anything else, though. Then I could’ve figured out what a piece of shit he was years ago.

I punched in the keypad code and strode over to his filing cabinet. As I expected, there was a copy of Tatum’s contract in the ‘M’ section. I flicked through it, searching for a page with a signature. Finally, I located one.

My stomach dropped as ice crept through my blood.

There was no fucking way she wrote this. Even though most people's signatures were different to their regular handwriting, I could still tell this was a forgery. The general slant of the text, the style of the 'a' and even the height of the letters made it clear. Tatum's writing was straighter and shorter, and the way she wrote the lowercase 'a' was more like the typographic style than the natural oval-with-a-flick style in this supposed signature.

I didn't need to be some sort of forensic handwriting analyst to know I was right about this. This fucking contract was a fake, and Tatum never signed a damn thing.

My father must've had the bogus paperwork created just in case I ever asked to see any proof that she sold herself to the society. Or in case I ever asked why she acted out so much, upon which he could point me to the bullshit clause where she was supposed to fight me.

As always, he'd tried to remain a step ahead, predicting my every move. My every question. But not this time. I was a step ahead of him now, and I wouldn't stop until I exposed all his secrets. Wouldn't stop until I had enough dirt to bury him and all his sick friends.

Of course, that meant I had to find out what the rest of his secrets actually were first. They were no doubt held in the trust of Crown and Dagger's third level, so for that, I'd have to wait. Luckily, it was just two and a half more weeks until I found out whether I made it or not.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I looked behind me to see my father standing at the office door, his eyes narrowed. Shit.

I cleared my throat. I had to act natural. Like there was a valid reason for me being

here, rooting around in his documents.

“Oh, hey,” I said casually, standing up. I held out the contract as if I had absolutely no issue with him seeing that I had it. “I was looking for this.”

“Why?” he said sharply.

“Because I’m sick of all this shit with Tatum’s attitude. I wanted to show this to her to remind her that she belongs here. That she fucking chose this and signed her rights away for as long as her master chooses to keep her. Maybe it’ll knock some sense into her.”

“I see.” His shoulders visibly relaxed. “So your plan to make her fall for you isn’t exactly working, then?”

I scoffed. “This little attempt of hers to leave was just a minor setback. I think she was pissed at something I said the other night, and she wanted my attention. But the more I get to know her and her little quirks, the easier it’ll become to manipulate her. It might be a while until she really starts to fall for it, but I’m patient.”

God, I was so full of shit. I guess I inherited my ability to make stuff up on the spot from him.

He grunted. “You’d have to be patient, to put up with her,” he said, a malicious gleam in his eyes. “Showing her the contract to remind her of her place is a good idea, though. Take it with you. I have plenty of copies in my other studies.”

“Yeah, I figured. Otherwise I would’ve asked you before coming in here to grab it.”

“Indeed.” His eyes fell on the notebook in my other hand. “And what’s that?”

I pasted on a cold smile and held it out to him. If I tried to hide it or brush it aside in any way, he'd be suspicious. I couldn't have that. Not yet. For now, until I knew exactly what the fuck was going on here, I had to act like I was on his side with nothing to hide.

"I got Tatum this notebook to write in when we first arrived here, as a reward for good behavior. But after this latest bullshit performance of hers, I confiscated it. She doesn't get it back until she starts behaving herself again." I paused, then let out a callous snort. "You should look at it. On one of the pages, she's written several paragraphs about what sort of dresses there are in her closet. That's it. So fucking vapid and airheaded. No idea how she ever got into Roden."

I kept holding the book out, waiting for him to call my bluff and read it, but he sniffed and ignored it instead. "Really goes to show you what happens in the minds of women, doesn't it? It's all clothes, makeup, and how to manipulate men."

I snorted again. "No shit."

He smiled, but I noticed it didn't reach his eyes. Had any of his smiles ever done that?

Looking back, I couldn't think of one single time he appeared to be genuinely happy or satisfied, though I never thought anything of it until now. Never realized what a relentless sociopath he was, even though the signs were always there in front of me, bright and red and flashing like a neon light.

He cleared his throat. "I have some calls to make. I'll meet you for dinner at the restaurant on the east wing terrace at eight?"

"Sure."

I gave him a big fake smile of my own and strode out of the study. My heart pounded

the whole way back down to the second floor, and with each step I took, my outrage grew.

When I stepped into Tatum's room, she was still asleep. I shook her awake, and she grumbled and rubbed her eyes. "What is it?"

"This." I held the contract in her face. "We need to talk."

17

Tatum

“We need to talk.”

Elias was in my face again, holding out a sheaf of papers. “What’s that?” I mumbled.

“Sit up and read it.”

He waited patiently for me to collect myself. I took the document and leafed through it, my pulse doubling with each page. It was a contract detailing my sale to Crown and Dagger with my express permission.

I, Tatum Marris, of sound body and mind, relinquish my rights and agency to Crown and Dagger. I do so for an indefinite period at the discretion of the Crown and Dagger member who takes responsibility for me. I understand, agree with, and accept the terms laid out in sections 1, 2, 3, and 4 of this contract, including any sub-clauses.

That paragraph followed several pages of terms and conditions. Underneath it, with a blue-black flourish, was my signature. Except it wasn’t really mine.

I dropped the contract. The sight of it, the sheer evilness of it, made me feel nauseated. My stomach suddenly contracted so violently that I wasn’t sure I’d have time to make it to the bathroom, and I practically flew off the bed and through the door. I got there with seconds to spare and heaved my guts up in the toilet. The acid stench of vomit filled my nostrils, and I surveyed the mess with watery eyes as I

continued to heave.

Elias wordlessly handed me a glass of water and a capful of mouthwash. I mumbled a ‘thank you’ and headed back to my bedroom.

I wasn’t sure why he showed me the contract. To make me feel bad? More of his sick games? I sat back on the bed, my stomach churning as I waited for him to say something.

“What do you think of that?” he said, glancing at the contract. “Real or fake?”

I gritted my teeth. So it was simply more of his wicked game. He wanted me to tell the truth—that it was a fake contract—just so he could lift my hopes up before crushing them all over again.

Nope. Not playing today, Elias.

“It’s the contract I signed,” I lied.

“Then why did you throw up at the sight of it?” His eyes narrowed.

I didn’t miss a beat. “I feel sick because I’ve caught some sort of chill. I’m sure you remember that I spent last night in a freezing forest.”

“Yes. Your hiking trip gone wrong, or whatever it was you claimed. Just a mistake.” He pressed his lips into a thin line.

“I never said that.”

“You never said the truth either, which is that you were trying to run because you’re a captive here.”

I glared at him. Why was he still trying this crap with me? Surely I already made it clear earlier that I wouldn't fall for any more of his trickery.

"I told you before, I'm not a captive." My eyes fell on the contract. "I mean, look. It's all there in those pages. I sold myself here. That's my signature."

He leaned in close, one hand going to my shoulder. "I don't think it is. It's not your writing," he said firmly. "I know you're too scared to tell me right now, and I get that. But you don't belong here."

I shook him off, incensed. I was so sick of this bullshit. "So you're going to pretend you never wanted me as a captive?" I hissed. "You're going to pretend you never hated me for the whole Ben thing? You're really going to pretend the thought of having me here without my consent never turned you on?"

He exhaled deeply. "Jesus," he muttered. "Look, Tatum, I'll be brutally honest. Yeah, before I had you with me, I fucking hated you. Just like I told you that day on the island. Sometimes I used to picture you crying because of me, screaming because of me, terrified because of me. I'd picture you kneeling in front of me, your eyes filled with fear, your hands tied behind your back, your body covered in bruises. I'd picture you as my hostage, begging me to let you go, and in my head, I never would. Never."

I froze in place. I wasn't hearing his words with just my ears. My whole body was picking up on it, blooming with goosebumps that started on my neck and spread out across every inch of my skin. Evil.

Elias skimmed a hand over his jaw and went on. "No, that's a lie. It wasn't sometimes," he said. He stood up, his eyes darkening. "It was all the time. You were constantly in my thoughts, tied up and destroyed. And when I found out you wanted to sell yourself to the society, I didn't even think it was good enough. I didn't want you to be willing. I didn't want your consent. I'll admit that."

A thrill of pure fear shot through me. I felt even more nauseated now. “Well, there you go,” I whispered.

“I’m not done. Let me finish,” he said. “I thought I wanted all that. I thought I hated you that much. I thought that was the kind of guy I am. The kind of monster who’d be okay with all that. But then, all those months ago, you told me you didn’t sell yourself. You told me it was your parents. And suddenly there was this crack inside me. It didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel good. I didn’t want it anymore when I realized I had it. Or at least I thought I did.” He paused to scratch his head. “So I went and spoke to my father. He showed me that.” He nodded toward the contract. “He said there was a clause in there which stated you have to fight me. Pretend not to give consent or know what’s going on.”

I bit my lip. I knew what he was talking about. I saw it while I was reading it earlier. “Yeah. Page four,” I muttered.

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“He convinced me you were lying to me because of that. Fairly easy to believe, because you’d lied before about what you did to Ben. So I thought, once again, that you were here willingly. Until today.”

What I allegedly did to Ben, I wanted to scream. I didn’t bother. “What’s your point, Elias?”

“My point is that I did want you as a captive. At least I thought I did. But the second I found out you might actually be here against your will, it made me fucking sick. And now I know it’s true. I know you’re a prisoner. I know that contract is bullshit.”

I pursed my lips. “It’s not,” I said quietly. It was so hard to say the words when they weren’t true, but I had to. Self-preservation.

Elias sat down again. “Look, I can’t help you if you won’t admit it.”

Don’t fall for it. There’s no help coming. Not from him. You can only help yourself.

“I don’t need your help,” I said stiffly.

“You do. But like I said, I can’t get you out of here if you won’t even listen to me or trust me.” His eyes were wide, pleading.

Christ, he was a good actor.

I crossed my arms. “If you actually thought I was a captive, and this wasn’t just some sick game you’re playing, you’d call the state police and get me out of here. But you

haven't. I wonder why?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Because I have no fucking idea how deep this shit goes, that's why! My family has a shit-ton of connections. If my father really wants you here—and it seems obvious he does—then he'll make it happen. I can guarantee you he has connections with law enforcement, especially local. Wouldn't put it past him to have them apprehend you under false pretenses and bring you right back here."

I chewed my lower lip. He wasn't wrong. His father did have connections with law enforcement, as I'd so alarmingly discovered this morning.

"And that's just my father," he went on. "There's no way he's the only one involved in all this. The rest of the society has connections too. I just need to wait and find out exactly what the fuck they're hiding. How deep it all goes, how dangerous it is for you. Then I can come up with a plan to get you the fuck out of here and keep you safe."

"And how exactly would you figure out their secrets?" I crossed my arms. I could feel my curiosity creeping in, getting the better of me. "Hypothetically."

"I'm working on it. I have a feeling it's something to do with the third level. I'm so close, Tatum. So fucking close."

I almost cracked. Almost started to believe him. But then it all came flooding back. All the things he'd done. All the ways in which he'd hurt me. As strong as my feelings for him were, I couldn't do it. No way.

"Even if your offer was genuine, which it obviously isn't, I wouldn't need your help to get out of here, because I don't want to leave. I want to stay here with you. My Master." I gave him a sweet smile.

That was what he truly wanted to hear.

I knew if I agreed with him and said the contract wasn't real and I didn't want to be here, his tune would change and he would reveal that it was just more silver-tongued trickery. More testing to see what a loyal slave I was. I was sure of it, and I'd already made a vow earlier to never fall for it again. I wasn't going to go back on that vow within just two or three hours.

No, I was stronger than that now. More resolved than ever. I didn't need his false promises of help. I had my own plan to get out of here. A real plan.

Elias put his hand on my shoulder again, fingertips slowly stroking me. "I know why you don't trust me. I get it. You're scared. But I'm not going to give up. I'll wait as long as it takes, and when you're ready to accept my help, I'll try my best to get you out."

I let out a sharp, angry breath. "You'll be waiting forever."

"Tatum, please. Just think about it."

My head was pounding again. It felt like my skull was trapped in a vise, and my guts were still churning. "I feel sick. I need to sleep off this flu or whatever it is."

He shook his head and sighed. "Fine. I'll have someone from the medical wing come and see you later. For now, I'll leave you to get some rest. But I meant what I said. I'm not giving up."

"Right," I muttered. "Sure."

"I know you don't believe me, but at least trust me on this: we need to act like everything is normal. Like I don't know anything. It's the only way I can keep you

safe for now. Okay?”

Jesus, he was really laying it on thick.

“Okay,” I said.

“I’ll be back later. Don’t say a word about this to anyone.”

I didn’t intend to. Why would I? It was all a load of crap. I nodded anyway, just to keep the peace and get him out of here as fast as possible.

Elias stared at me for another long moment, an unreadable expression on his face. Then he strode over to the door.

As I watched him leave, I could still feel his hand on my arm, the place where he caressed me burning like a brand.

18

Tatum

“Remember to behave yourself. Don’t do anything out of the ordinary.” Elias leaned over and muttered in my ear, one hand on the small of my back. “We’re only here because it would look suspicious if we didn’t attend.”

We were in the arched doorway to the Lodge’s main party room, about to step into yet another Crown and Dagger orgy. The darkened room was teeming with men and women in various states of undress. The heavy beat of the music made my legs quiver.

“Yes, Master,” I said in a low voice.

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your Master,” he hissed in my ear. “I told you, we’re only pretending for now.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. Elias had proven himself to be very dedicated to his latest game with me. Two weeks had passed now, and he hadn’t touched me once. All he’d done was come to see me every day to tell me he knew I was a captive and that he’d help me if I’d only let him.

As much as I hated myself for it, I was beginning to slip. Sometimes I found myself dreaming of saying yes and running away with him, only for the dream to descend into a nightmare when I discovered my suspicions were warranted all along, because it was all a lie.

I knew I had to stay strong. Stay grounded. Rely on my head rather than my heart. My heart would only cause trouble, because it was my feelings for Elias that threatened to betray me. Every time I saw him, sparks of desire shot straight to my core, a burning need threatening to consume me as my blood turned to lava.

Sometimes I wondered if refusing to touch me was part of his new game. He could be hoping to get me so desperately aroused that I'd beg for him, tell him anything he wanted to hear, just so I could feel him inside me again.

I'd managed to keep myself from begging. Barely. I'd distracted myself by sticking to my Artemis Festival plan, doing everything I could to ensure that as many Crown and Dagger members as possible voted for me to be their hostess.

I smiled invitingly whenever I ran into members in the halls or on the grounds during my daily wanders, and I even flirted with a few of them. One time, a couple of them stopped me and asked where I was from, so I put on a big, fake display of telling them exactly how I chose to be here. How happy I was to serve the society. How well my family was doing now that they had enough money to live, all because of my personal sacrifice.

That last part was technically true, I suppose.

All around me, every day, I saw many of the other girls doing the same thing. Flirting, batting their eyelashes, making all sorts of dirty promises as they tried their best to get themselves picked. The festival was coming up very soon, and I hadn't heard anything that might suggest I'd been chosen over any of them, but I couldn't give up. Besides, tonight's party would be my greatest attempt yet.

We wound our way through the room and sat down on a long leather lounge by the edge. A few people were already seated, their faces flushed and sweaty as they leaned back and watched the show. Right in front of us, naked bodies tangled together, lips

smacking, hips thrusting, hands groping. It was a dark sea of moans and grunts and screams of pleasure.

I could do better.

I turned to Elias. “Could I have a canapé? We didn’t get dinner again, and I’m starving.”

If he wanted to keep pretending to be nice and caring, I was happy to take advantage of it.

As I expected, he nodded. “Sure. Let’s go.”

“I’ll wait here. I’m tired,” I said.

His eyes narrowed slightly, but he nodded briefly and stepped into the crowd, heading for the nearest bar.

I waited until he was several yards away, and then I made a beeline for the shimmering indoor pool. I yanked out the slave collar I’d been hiding under my dress (I’d asked Mellie to get me one earlier) and slipped it around my neck. Then I slid out of my dress and made my way into the water, letting the warmth coat my nakedness, turning my skin slick and shiny.

Several pairs of lecherous male eyes focused right on me. I held one hand out and beckoned to the nearby group. “Come on,” I said, shimmying my hips in a display of shaking all the water off. “Come over here.”

They did as I said. Within seconds, my side of the pool was bounded by six men, and I could see heads turning elsewhere in the room. Easy.

I slowly stepped out of the pool and stood on the edge, holding my arms out wide. “My Master has an announcement he wants to make through me,” I called out, making sure my voice was loud enough to carry over the thumping music and wanton moans. Several more heads turned to me, the men gazing at my body with naked, unashamed desire.

I went on, slowly, haltingly, as if this wasn’t my idea. As if I were being ordered to do this. “He has commanded me to tell everyone that I am available for sharing now, like the toy I am. Any men, any number, any hole. Anything. He says I must be punished as hard as possible, and he told me to tell you all how happy I am to serve you. How much I love it.”

I slid one arm down over my belly, my hand snaking between my thighs. My breasts jiggled slightly as my chest rose and fell with faux-excited breaths, and one of the men nearby stepped even closer and roughly pinched my right nipple. “Ooh, please do that again, sir,” I said with a breathy moan.

His fingers were hard and callused, and it hurt. I hated it. But he didn’t have to know that.

He moved behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, his hand going between my legs now, shoving mine out of the way. The slave pendant on my collar tinkled as his other hand wrapped around my throat. “I’ve been waiting for this,” he growled in my ear. “The only new pussy I haven’t had yet.”

I felt sick. Filthy. Degenerate. But I had to keep going. I had to make these men think of me and only me so they’d choose me for the festival. It seemed to be working so far. I had the rapt attention of at least twenty men now.

Including Tobias.

He smiled thinly at me, and then he leaned down to listen to Mellie, who'd just started whispering something in his ear.

"I can feel how hard you are," I murmured, turning my head over my shoulder to the disgusting man behind me. "Do you want to be the first one in my pussy tonight? Or would you prefer my ass? Master loves how tight I am there."

His hand moved around to my ass. Just as he was about to slide his finger to my puckered entrance, Elias strode up and wrenched his hand away. Then he glared at me, eyes alive with fire.

"Kneel," he commanded, his voice rich and furious.

I immediately did as he said. It wouldn't look good for me in front of all these men if I refused my current Master's orders.

"My apologies. My stupid, irresponsible little slave has her dates wrong," Elias said, eyes glittering with rage as he stared down at me. "I'm waiting for the festival to begin before I allow her to be used by anyone else. That way everyone will be here. Everyone will get to use her, one after the other, until she screams and cries and bleeds. I feel like the wait will be worth it to witness such a punishment."

The men murmured and nodded, some of them exchanging knowing glances and grins. The one behind me let out an angry breath, but he told Elias he understood and stepped away.

Elias wrapped his fingers around my right arm, squeezing me so tightly I almost cried out. “Come with me,” he growled, dragging me to my feet. “Now.”

He hauled me out of the party and over to the stairwell. When we were back on the second floor, I called out breathlessly as he trailed ahead, dragging me by the arm. “Are you going to take me to that red room and punish me, Elias?” I said. “Finally going to admit this latest act of yours was a game?”

He stopped in his tracks and turned back to me, eyes narrowed. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to distract me with this shit. It’s not going to work.”

He roughly pulled me into my room and slammed the door shut before continuing.

“I know exactly what you were doing back there, too,” he said. “You’re trying to get picked as the hostess for the Artemis Festival, aren’t you?”

“So what if I am?”

“I’ve heard rumors of the deal.” His eyes blazed. “One girl gets picked for every festival, and she gets sent home with a new master, right? His and his alone until her contract ends?”

“Yes, that’s right. Are you jealous?” I was taunting him now, just as angry as he was.

He pushed me up against the wall. “Whether I’m jealous or not isn’t even fucking relevant. What’s relevant is that you’re obviously doing this because you think it’ll make it easier for you to escape this place.”

I shrugged. “If you say so.”

The truth was sitting right in my mouth, threatening to spill out. I had to force myself

to swallow the words like bile.

“But you’ve been claiming to be here willingly. If that’s true, why are you so desperate to leave? So desperate that you’d tell a hundred men they can all fuck you if they want?”

“Maybe I’m just horny because you haven’t been touching me.”

“Christ, Tatum.” He stepped back and pressed the bridge of his nose. “Have you even thought this through at all? How do you know it will be easier for you to escape the new guy’s place? Sure, it might be, but what if it’s not? What if he’s totally sadistic and throws you in a windowless dungeon?”

“Well, I’ll just have to take that chance, won’t I?” I shot back. I immediately clamped my hand over my mouth.

“So you admit it. You want to escape.”

I hesitated. Shit. “I... I didn’t say that. You misinterpreted me.”

“For fuck’s sake!” he said. “Just say it! You’re a fucking prisoner here!”

I shrank back, pressing my back right up against the wall. “I can’t.”

“You can.” He grabbed both my shoulders again, but his face softened. “Look, I understand that you think it’ll make it easier for you to escape if you go home with another master, but it won’t. If you just wait—”

“Wait for what?”

“For me to figure out a way to get you safely home. It’s not going to be easy, Tatum.

I've told you that. It won't work if you don't trust me. We need to be on the same side."

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I scoffed. I was so done with this shit. “God, we’re really still playing this game, huh?” I said, shaking my head in disbelief. “The one where you pretend as if you didn’t know I was a captive all this time? As if you’re actually gonna swoop in and rescue me?”

The words poured out before I could stop them. Elias smiled thinly, victoriously. “Finally, the truth comes out.”

My shoulders slumped in defeat. Oh, hell. What was the point in trying to pretend with him anymore?

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth. “Yes, I’m a captive. My parents sold me here. Now go ahead, Elias. Pretend like you didn’t know, pretend you’re totally gonna help me, then leave me hanging and laugh about it behind my back like you did last time. I know that’s the plan.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“Oh, for god’s sake.” I threw my hands up. “Stop fucking pretending. I know all about your games, Elias. I know all about the time you laughed behind my back about how pathetic I was for thinking you might actually help me. Why do you think I’ve been refusing to fall for it again? I’m not stupid enough to think you actually care!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I shoved him away, hard. My anger had finally reached its boiling point, exploding out of me in a hysterical burst. “Stop lying! Your father told me all about it!” I

screamed. “Do you have any idea what that was like for me? Do you know what it’s like to think you finally have an ally? Someone who might actually help you? Then you find out it was all a lie, and they knew you were a captive all along. They just wanted to fuck with your head and make you have hope so they could tear it away!”

My rage was bitter, fiery, endless. I wanted to punch Elias right in the face. Tear his hair out. Make him feel every ounce of pain he ever made me feel.

“My father told you I did that?” he said. His voice was like ice.

“Yes! Why the hell do you think I stabbed him that day?” I said. Tears were rolling down my face in earnest now, and I knew I was bright red, my skin hot to the touch. “I wanted to kill both of you! Only you weren’t there.”

I expected Elias to look disappointed that the jig was up; that I knew his game. Instead, he shook his head slowly. “That’s why you don’t trust me,” he muttered. He rubbed his jaw. “Fuck, I knew he was a lying piece of shit. But I didn’t know about that.”

I sniffed, trying to stop the flood of tears and mucus. “Are you saying it’s not true?”

He looked me in the eye. “I swear on my life it’s not true. My father made that up.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know. I guess he wanted to fuck with you. Break you down. Or make sure you put up even more of a fight with me.” He ran a hand across the stubble on his chin. “Why the hell didn’t you say something sooner? If I’d known you thought I—”

I cut him off. “I didn’t say anything to you because I believed him. So what was the point? I figured you’d just mock me again.”

“I never mocked you,” he said quietly. “That was all a lie. I promise you, Tatum, I never knew you were here against your will. I never laughed about it behind your back.”

“Oh, bullshit!” I shouted, the fury returning. “How could you not know I was a captive?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, shaking his head. His face was pale, his voice ragged. “I should’ve seen the signs. But I didn’t. I honestly thought this place...” He trailed off midsentence, leaving the words hanging in the air for a moment. “I saw the contracts. I heard all about how much money the girls were offered. When I visited in the past, none of them ever approached me and said they were here against their will. They seemed happy and compliant. It all seemed legitimate.”

I narrowed my eyes scornfully. “Really? How could you seriously think so many girls would just sell themselves to your society?”

“It made sense when I was told about it. My father said the society would track down girls who were in dire need of financial aid. They’d interview them and let them know what they were offering, and if they accepted, they’d go to the School for training and then come here to serve out their contract period. If they rejected the offer, they’d sign an NDA to make sure they didn’t mention it to anyone, and then they’d go back to their regular life.”

“So you honestly thought that many girls would want to give up all their rights and let themselves be fucked and abused by gross rich men for god knows how long, just for some extra cash? Give me a break.”

“You’d be amazed at what people will do for money, Tatum. I’ve seen some shit in my life you wouldn’t believe.”

“Well, I’m not like that. I’d never sell myself. So congratulations, you got me to admit it,” I said bitterly.

He stepped closer and took my hands in his. “I know, and I told you, I want to help you. But I need you to trust me, or else you’ll never leave with me when the time comes, will you?”

I shook my head. “No. How can I ever trust you?”

He ran a hand across his face and sighed. His silence said it all.

“See? I can’t,” I said.

“Try. Please.”

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I narrowed my eyes at him. “No. Just stop it,” I said. “I’ve been telling you for two weeks now: there’s nothing you can possibly say to make me believe that you actually want to help me!”

“What if I told you I was falling in love with you?”

All the breath left my lungs. I felt like a fish yanked from the sea and left to flounder on a dock. I stared up at Elias with my mouth hanging open, electrified and petrified in equal measure.

“No. Don’t say that,” I finally mumbled, ducking away.

He took a step closer. “Why?”

“Because I know it’s not true.”

“It is. I can’t fucking help myself. I want you. I need you.”

“Please just stop,” I murmured.

“No.” His eyes burned with passion as he stared right into mine. “I love you, Tatum.”

I accidentally bit down on the inside of my bottom lip so hard it began to bleed. The pain wasn’t enough to stop the trembling, the way my insides had suddenly turned to liquid, the fire in my core.

Oh, no. I was so close to letting go. So close to letting myself believe him. There was

a crack running all the way around the wall I'd put up around my heart, and with just a few more pushes, it was bound to come tumbling down.

"God, how far will you go?" I said in a ragged whisper.

"To save you? I'd go to the ends of the fucking earth. The thought of something happening to you makes me want to fucking die. Even the thought of what's already happened to you." He looked stricken, face still drawn.

I shook my head. "No. I meant how far will you go to convince me?"

"I'll do whatever it takes."

"Lying about loving someone is a really sick thing to do," I murmured.

He steeled his jaw. "I'm not lying," he said. "Can you really say you don't feel anything for me? Because I know there's something here. Something real."

"It doesn't matter what I feel," I said abruptly, avoiding his piercing gaze. "I just want to be free. If it means having to leave you behind, then so be it. Everyone here might think I'm trash because I wasn't lucky enough to be born into a good family, but I know better. I know I deserve better than this."

"I don't think that about you at all. But you're right. You deserve better than this," he said.

"Great. We finally agree on something." I began to well up with more tears. I didn't want him to see me cry. Didn't want him to see me being so weak and pathetic yet again. "Could you please leave?"

Pain twisted his face. "No. Tatum, I really do—"

I pushed him away, glaring daggers at him. “Don’t say it again. Don’t you dare fucking say it! If you actually loved me or cared about me, you would’ve believed me when I told you I didn’t sign that contract and didn’t sell myself to this hellhole!”

He lowered his gaze to the floor. “I should’ve listened to you then. I fucking regret that now, believe me.”

There was a long pause as I figured out how to respond. “Well, you can’t erase history,” I ended up mumbling.

“But I can try to fix it. And I will. I’m going to figure out a way for you to escape, okay? But it won’t be quick. Knowing what I know now, my father and a lot of the other society members are seriously dangerous, and they’ll go to any lengths to cover things up. They could hurt you if you went back out into the real world, just to shut you up. So I need to plan it out properly, and I need you to trust me. Please. I’m literally begging you, and you know I don’t fucking do that.”

He looked so earnest now, and his words had a disturbing ring of truth to them.

So maybe he really wasn’t lying after all...

I swallowed hard and looked at my feet. Brick by brick, my walls were crashing down. A silent sob punched through me, ripping through my muscles and guts. My heart felt like it was being yanked right out of my chest, then pulling back in. Over and over. In and out.

Part of me still didn’t trust him. Another part of me yearned for him, begged me to start believing him. But I was so scared. I still felt like the second I told him I believed him, it would all be revealed to be a game. A horrible trick.

“Do you believe me?” Elias asked, drawing me closer to him. I didn’t fight it this

time. Even after everything that had happened, that same old jolt of attraction was there. That tingle of pure desire.

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“I... I don’t know. Maybe. I need some time to think,” I replied, a tear slipping down my cheek.

He nodded and gently wiped the tear away. “I understand. Just know this. One way or another, I’m gonna get you out of here. I promise.”

“I wish I could know for sure that you were telling the truth.”

He framed my face with his hands. “You’ll know for sure soon.” He let go and turned toward the door. Then he looked back over at me. “One more thing. When you’re free and safe, you never have to see me again if that’s what you want. I don’t want that, but if you do, I’ll accept it, and I’ll still get you out of here. I promise I’ll leave you alone after that.”

The expression on his face made it seem as if saying those words physically hurt him. It made it all the more believable.

“Okay,” I whispered, looking down at my feet.

“I’ll leave you to think things over, and I’ll come and see you again soon. Goodnight, Doll,” he said.

I didn’t reply, and I didn’t look at him as he left. I was too afraid I’d jump on him and kiss him, but I knew I couldn’t do that. Not yet. I needed time and space to think things over before making any decisions like that, or else I might wind up regretting it later.

It took a moment for me to realize I was still naked. I padded into my closet to grab a warm fluffy robe. When I came out, there was a knock on the door. Elias must've forgotten something.

"So much for giving me space," I called out in a weak attempt at humor as I opened the door. My eyes immediately widened. "Oh."

It was Tobias. "Hello, Tatum. You and Elias left very early this evening."

"Yes, I... I still haven't been feeling well after I spent the night in the forest," I said, my legs trembling. "Elias made me see a doctor the day after, but she said it was just a bug. I guess it's taking a while to clear up."

That was actually true. I'd still been experiencing pounding headaches these last couple of weeks, along with stomach cramps and dizziness.

"I see. Well, I'll have her check you out again. I'm sure there's some sort of antibiotics they can give you to settle things once and for all."

"Thank you, sir," I murmured. I hope you get hit by a truck, sir.

He regarded me with heavily-lidded eyes for a moment. I wanted to shrivel up on the spot. Finally, he spoke again. "I spoke to Ms. Davenport earlier. She told me she suspects you are vying for the hostess position for the upcoming Artemis Festival."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say.

His upper lip curled. "As much as it pains me to say it, you've come out as a bit of a dark horse in the race. The vote was just ten minutes ago, and the men were in overwhelming support of you."

My brows shot up. “Wait, what?”

He smiled thinly. “Congratulations, Tatum. Your wish has been granted. The next Artemis hostess is you.”

19

Elias

The Artemis Festival had begun four days ago in a riot of music and color, everyone hyped up on whiskey, beer, molly and coke.

I'd been to a few of these week-long festivals before. All in all, they weren't much different than Crown and Dagger's other events—places of unrestrained fun and debauchery. There were drinks, drugs, feasts, nightly parties, hunting trips for those who were into collecting trophies, and constant entertainment in the form of shows.

Oh, and sex. Endless amounts of dirty, loud, hardcore sex.

Now, I knew it was more likely rape. Tatum wasn't here willingly, and that meant any number of the women at the Lodge could also be trafficked victims, pretending to be eager and willing out of sheer terror. That wasn't true consent. Just because a woman said yes to fucking these men didn't mean she truly wanted to. Not if she was beaten and frightened into it.

Bile rose in my throat at the thought.

I still couldn't believe how blind I'd been. Couldn't believe I actually once thought the Lodge was no more than a pleasure palace built to cater to the mega-rich and all their wild demands. It was so much more. Beneath the extravagant surface was a nest of vipers, poison and pure evil lurking in every corner.

One day, I was going to burn every single one of them.

I sipped at a glass of scotch as I watched Tatum out of the corner of my eye. She was sitting at the end of a long wooden table in one of the biggest courtyards, holding a golden goblet while a middle-aged man regaled her with a story about one of the previous festivals. She looked beautiful, as always, and her skin glowed golden-brown in the early afternoon sun.

She'd been picked as the festival hostess, which afforded her certain privileges and opportunities. For one, she was allowed to attend and eat at all the third-level dinners and parties—events even I wasn't allowed at yet—and she wasn't expected to service her master or anyone else during the festivities at any point, like the other girls were.

Her task was to entertain the men with tinkling laughter and friendly conversation during the feasts. While performing these 'duties', she was required to wear a flowing white gown and an elaborate gold filigree mask which wound around her eyes, flawlessly framing them. A fairly simple and cushy job, all in all.

Still, I knew the idea of speaking to these guys made her want to stab someone right in the face. Fortunately, she was handling it well, behaving graciously and easily pretending to give a shit about anything they had to say to her. The perfect hostess.

I knew why she wanted to get picked for the position, and I understood her reasoning, but I was still disturbed at the thought of what might come about if she didn't start trusting me within the next few days. If that happened, she'd go home with another man at the end of the week, and I had no idea what the fuck he'd do with her.

I couldn't allow that.

As promised, I'd given her space to think about what I told her the other night, but I needed to get through to her soon, because time was running out, and I knew she'd

never leave with me if I couldn't get her on my side. She wasn't easy to reach, though. She didn't trust me. For good reason, too. I could only hope my admission of love was enough to make her try.

I hadn't even realized the extent of my feelings until I blurted out the words. But as soon as they were out there, I knew they were true. I didn't just care for Tatum. I fucking loved her. I'd do anything for her.

I tried to catch her eye from the balcony I was standing on, but she didn't notice me. She'd focused her attentions on the show going on behind the table, some sort of musical theater performance.

The costumes on the actors, singers and dancers from the shows marked the beginning of spring, as colorful as a gardener's paradise with bold reds, bright yellows, emerald greens and garish magentas. There were sequins sparkling in the sun and feathers in every color, along with painted faces and masks. Music filled the air, festive beats lifting everyone's spirits.

Everyone except me.

The man closest to Tatum slung his arm around her shoulder and ran his fingers through her long shiny hair. Other than that, he didn't make any moves. Still, the idea of another man touching her in any way at all made me want to run down there and beat him black and blue.

I almost did, but in those few seconds of fury, I finally caught Tatum's eye. She looked up at me and shook her head, her eyes widening as she mouthed something to me. I wasn't sure what it was, but I got the impression it was something along the lines of 'don't do it'.

I swallowed hard and breathed deeply, uncurling my fists. She was right. If I was ever

going to get her out of here, I needed to stay calm and act like I had no idea what was really going on. I had to act like I thought Tatum was here of her own volition, a highly-paid escort, until I had everything I needed to plan her exit.

It wouldn't be much longer.

Today was my birthday, which meant my final third-level trial was happening very soon. If I passed, I'd be trusted with the society's deepest, darkest secrets, and once I had all the information I needed from that, I'd be able to start planning Tatum's escape. Eventually I'd also figure out a way to take Crown and Dagger down for good and let all the other women go free too.

I had no doubt I'd pass the test and make it into the third level today. The last two weeks had involved more interviews and so-called trials in the Catacombs, and I knew I'd performed well. After discovering that the society was happily condoning sex trafficking, I realized exactly what they wanted from a third-level prospect. They wanted someone who shared their values and vision, as dark and sinister as they were. Someone who'd happily participate in all their sordid shit.

So I lied. I pretended to be one of them.

During the last few meetings in the gloomy chamber beneath the Lodge, I told them exactly what I thought they wanted to hear. The interviews were similar to the first one, only the questions were darker now. Much darker. They wanted me to tell them my deepest, most depraved fantasies. Not the stuff I told them before which was basically vanilla child's play to them (though it wouldn't be to anyone else in the world).

I made up the sickest, filthiest shit imaginable. Lies upon horrifying lies. I told them I fantasized about beating and raping women. Choking them till they gasped for mercy and vomited. I even told them I jerked off to the thought of killing people sometimes.

Women in particular.

That should be enough to make the council want me within the third-level ranks. Or so I hoped.

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I glanced at my watch. My final trial was in twenty minutes. I gave Tatum one last look before stepping inside and running downstairs toward the nearest Catacombs entrance. My mind was buzzing, my limbs so charged with excitement that walking simply wasn't an option.

“Elias.”

I came to a skidding halt at the sound of my father's voice. I turned to face him, plastering on a genial grin. “Hey. I was just on my way to the chamber.”

“I'm heading there too, obviously,” he said with a knowing nod. His eyes narrowed slightly as he stared at me, and he tilted his head to the side. “Before we go in, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

His eyes narrowed. “You've been acting quite strangely these last few weeks. Is there something I should know about?”

Shit. He always saw right through me, no matter how many fake smiles I put on for his benefit.

I sighed and ran a hand over my chin. “There is something, actually. But I don't want to talk about it.”

“I'm your father. We can talk about anything,” he said sharply.

Sure.

I feigned an embarrassed expression. “It’s just... I’m worried I won’t make it to the third level. I didn’t want to tell you how nervous I am because I figured you’d think I’m a pussy.”

Not true at all, but it seemed like a believable enough excuse for any recent reticence or weirdness.

Dad chuckled and patted my shoulder. I wanted to cut that fucking hand right off him. “I understand. I felt the same way when I was under consideration for third. It’s nerve-wracking,” he said.

I nodded slowly. It was strange to try and imagine my father at my age, not yet in the upper echelons of the society.

“Don’t worry about it,” he went on. “Obviously I can’t say anything yet, but the fact that you’re even being considered by the council at such a young age bodes well for you. It’s very rare. Some members aren’t considered until they’re well into their forties. I was twenty-seven myself when I was sworn into third, and I didn’t become president of the council until I was fifty.”

“Right. Well, that’s a positive sign, I guess,” I said, keeping my tone level and amiable.

“I’d say so, yes. And if you do make it in, it wouldn’t surprise me if you replace me as president one day,” he said, lifting one brow. “The King name certainly helps.”

No shit. When he was younger, his father—my grandfather George—was the council president. Before that, his great uncle headed up the society. In fact, over Crown and Dagger’s two hundred year history, nine of the elected presidents had been Kings.

If I'd gone down a different path in life, turned out to be a different kind of guy, this opulent den of sin might very well have been mine to control one day. I'm sure the thought of that power and influence was tempting for others in the society, but unlike them, I actually had a fucking conscience. A soul.

I smirked. "Yeah, and I bet the fact that our family owns most of the Crown and Dagger real estate wouldn't hurt my chances either."

My father laughed again. "I'm sure it wouldn't. Anyway, I need to go. Wait another five minutes before heading down there."

"Sure."

I watched him go, wishing my gaze could turn him to stone.

Five minutes later, I breathed in deep and stepped into the dark mouth of the north wing Catacombs entrance. From there I made my way to the same chamber all the interviews and trials had been in so far.

It was the same as every other time. Darkness, shadows, a laser pointer directing me to a particular spot. I knew there were thirteen council members, but aside from my father, I had no idea who any of them were. Some of the voices sounded familiar, but I couldn't place them.

"Elias James King, you have showed great potential in recent weeks. You share our ideas, our vision, and our morals," a voice boomed out from my left.

Morals? What fucking morals? I almost laughed.

"But there is one more test," the voice droned on. "One more aspect of your personality must be examined before we make any decisions."

I set my jaw. “I’m ready.”

“Bring him in,” said another voice.

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Two torches flared with fire, lighting up the chamber. I could see the robed and hooded council members around the sides, faces still veiled in shadows. Directly ahead, a shirtless man was being dragged in through one of the other entrances by two Lodge guards. The guards brought him close to me, and one of the council members stepped closer too.

A jolt of surprise shot through me as I realized that the shirtless man was Matthew Towne, one of my father's chief accountants. They'd become friends decades ago after meeting in college, and as a child, I'd spent quite a lot of time with Matthew when he came to visit my father for lunch or shooting sessions. Nice guy. Smart, funny.

"This man is a traitor," said the council member who'd stepped forward. He was only a yard or so away now, but he was wearing a bronze mask, so I still had no clue who he was, other than that he had a strong square jawline and a thick neck. "We entrusted him with many of our secrets, and he recently attempted to betray us."

"No! Please, this is a mistake. I didn't do anything!" Matthew shouted, struggling in the tight grip of the guards.

"The penalty for your betrayal of Crown and Dagger is death. Elias, take the dagger."

One of the guards held out a large silver dagger. I reached forward and took it.

"Prove your worth. Prove your loyalty to the society," said the masked council member. "Execute this traitor for us."

“Please!” Matthew screamed. His gray hair was dripping with sweat. “Elias, you know me! I taught you how to ride a bike when you were six! Remember? You can’t kill me. Please!”

I didn’t think twice. I lifted the knife and aimed it at Matthew’s chest, and then I plunged it downward. Hard. Fast.

There was no scream. No blood. Just as I expected, it was a trick knife, similar to the one they always used in the second-level initiation ceremony shows with the fake virgin sacrifice.

“That never gets old,” Matthew said, laughing as he rubbed his chest in the spot I’d jabbed him with the trick knife.

“Good job, Towne,” the masked council member said, clapping him on the back. “You can go back to the festival now.”

He and the guards left the room, chuckling with amusement. I held onto the dagger and stayed where I was, waiting with bated breath.

“Elias,” the council member said, turning his gaze back to me. “You performed well. The last three second-level members we had under consideration failed miserably. The first two outright refused to stab him, and the third waited too long. But you... you didn’t hesitate. You immediately did as we asked of you. No questions. No bargaining.”

“So I passed?”

“You passed this test, yes. You demonstrated that you trust us beyond a shadow of doubt, no matter what we ask of you, and you also proved that we can trust you. You proved you would commit murder for us if the need arose.”

How admirable.

“But you aren’t quite there yet,” he went on. The other council members rose and stepped over as he spoke. “We must discuss this privately for a moment. Please wait here.”

The burning torches were snuffed out, and the council filed out of the chamber, through the entrance on the other side. If my memory served me correctly, there was another large chamber through that door, one with a polished granite table and stone benches.

I waited patiently in the dim room, entertaining myself with thoughts of Tatum. Her lips. Her body. Her eyes. Her hair. When she stepped into a room, something in the atmosphere changed. Everyone turned to stare, every single time. She was beautiful but she didn’t know it.

She should know it. She should be told how gorgeous she was every fucking day.

It wasn’t just her looks that drew me in, either. It was her mind. I loved her stubborn nature, her rebellious streak. Loved her determination and her strength. Even when she was at her lowest point all those weeks ago, right on the verge of breaking forever, she turned it around and refused to let herself be destroyed.

It was fascinating to me, because I hadn’t faced much hardship in my life. At least not compared to the majority of people.

I wondered just how strong I’d be if I didn’t have the richest family in the world behind me, handing me everything I could possibly want or need. I wondered how I would’ve acted if I’d been forced to claw my way out of poverty instead, always knowing there was no one to catch me if I fell.

Would I be as strong as Tatum? Or would I crumble under the pressure?

I guess I'd find out soon, when I got her out of here and went against my family and Crown and Dagger. Only then would I know my true strength. My true nature.

Right now, all I knew was that Tatum made me want to be a better person.

The council members returned a moment later, shuffling in slowly, murmuring softly amongst themselves. They didn't light the torches again. Did that mean something, or was I just overthinking things?

There was a long, tense silence. My impatience was quickly replaced with worry. What if I didn't make it? I might've passed today's trial, but the council had never said a word to me about how my other trials and interviews went. I simply assumed I performed satisfactorily. Typical King hubris.

Another minute passed. Not a word. I couldn't wait any longer.

I cleared my throat and raised my head high, steeling my jaw. "So," I said. Clear, loud. "Am I in or out?"

20

Elias

There was a grim silence for another few seconds. Then the council charged forward. Two of them went behind me and grabbed my arms. Another forced a dark hood over my face.

“Hey! What the fuck?” I tried to shout but my voice was mostly muffled by the hood.

They dragged me forward. I kicked and struggled, but there were at least five of them holding me now. One guy was no match for that amount of strength.

There was a sudden flush of coldness at my core. This could only mean one thing. I failed. I would never make it to the third level and discover everything I needed to know to take them all down. Worse, the way they were treating me now suggested they knew what I was up to. They knew I was onto them.

The men stopped pulling me. Someone yanked the hood off my head. I rubbed my eyes, still trying to process what the fuck just happened. I was in a different chamber now; the room with the granite table and benches. It was dark, but one of the council members was in the process of lighting candles everywhere, sending brilliant arcs of gold over the black walls.

When he was done and the chamber was alive with flickering light, he took off his mask. So did the others. They were all smiling, including my father.

“Congratulations, Elias,” he said. He leaned down and picked something up, then held it out to me. A set of black robes. “I’m so proud of you.”

A flush of adrenaline tingled through my body. I was in.

“Sorry about that little trick,” another man said. “Just a stupid game we like to play with the newbies.”

“The look on your face was perfect,” my father added with a snort of laughter. “Don’t worry, we’d never kill someone in such a messy manner.”

My heart was still racing, but I forced my shoulders to relax as I pasted on a smile. “You got me good.”

I looked around at every council member. There were a lot of men I recognized. Chuck Van der Veer, an old friend of my father who’d become a billionaire with the rise of dot-com stocks twenty-odd years ago. Garrett Davenport, the Roden Dean. A couple of others who worked as CEOs at King-owned companies. A few high-ranking politicians, too.

“Congratulations, Elias,” they said in unison, echoing my father’s earlier words.

“Thanks for accepting me,” I said as I put on my new robes, smoothing the thick fabric down over my shirt and pants.

“You know, you’re actually one of the youngest members we’ve ever had in the third level,” Van der Veer said as he watched.

I nodded. “That’s cool. So I guess I can attend all the third-level-only events now, huh?”

“Not yet.” My father handed me a slip of paper. “Before you’re in all the way, you need to take this oath before us.”

“Right.” I took the paper and read aloud. “I, Elias James King, pledge my allegiance to Crown and Dagger. I swear to protect and keep all secrets, take action against any traitors, and uphold all society values. I bind myself under no less a penalty than that of having my throat slit and my lips sewn shut before sinking into the deep waters of the Catacombs in a coffin, should I ever knowingly or willingly violate this solemn oath and obligation as a third-degree member.”

What a fucking joke.

After the oath, all the men shook my hand before taking their places around the large table. I took a seat too.

“In regard to what you were saying before: yes, you are now able to attend all third-level events. Before that, however, we have a lot to discuss. You are allowed to know all Crown and Dagger secrets, and you will learn the basics of them now,” said Davenport. “Firstly, though—introductions. You already know me, but out of sheer formality, I am Garrett Benjamin Davenport, council treasurer.”

They went around in a circle with the introductions. Only my father was left out.

Finally, he looked me in the eye and nodded. “You know who I am, obviously,” he said with a smirk.

Yeah, I do now, I thought to myself. I finally know the real you.

He continued briskly. “You’ll be able to speak with all the other third-level members at a dinner we’ll hold for you in a couple of weeks to celebrate your induction.”

“Cool.”

“Right. Before we begin, do you have any pressing questions?”

“Yeah.” I waved the piece of paper in the air and looked at Davenport. “All this death stuff... you don’t really execute people who betray the third level, right? I mean, I used to be friends with your son, Garrett. Henry. I know he left, and he’s alive.”

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Davenport pursed his lips. A couple of the men muttered amongst themselves, their voices too low and soft for me to hear what they were saying.

My father smiled thinly. “You should know that in most cases, we take the oath very seriously. Henry was... different. He wasn’t just any member.”

“Yes, he’s my son,” Davenport said bitterly.

“He wanted to leave, so we reached a deal. Instead of death, we allowed him to go quietly, as long as he agreed to be monitored on a permanent basis to ensure he doesn’t breathe a word of our secrets to anyone else. We have a private security detail following him around at all times. He can’t see them most of the time, but they’re always watching. They listen to his phone calls, monitor his texts and emails, and track all his activity.”

Jesus.

“That sounds like a shitty way to live.”

“I’m sure, but it’s preferable to execution,” my father said crisply. “Henry was lucky he had a relative and ally in such a high place.”

Good old nepotism.

“So you really do kill other traitors, then?”

Van der Veer raised an eyebrow. “Do you remember a man named Jonathan

Wilkinson?”

“You mean the guy who ran for President back in 2008?”

“Yes, him. He was a third-level member. He tried to leave. He thought the nature of our society would prove to be a major conflict with his political campaign, if anyone tried to dig deeper into his background. Now, we knew it wasn’t possible for anyone to dig that deep, given the sort of connections we have, but we knew he had to be dealt with anyway, for the mere suggestion that he could leave the order.”

I lifted one brow. “But he died in a plane crash.”

I still remembered all the news articles about it. Wilkinson’s private jet had gone down over a lake in Michigan in the middle of the presidential primaries.

“That unfortunate accident was arranged by us,” my father said.

I frowned. “But he wasn’t the only one who died. His advisors, his wife and kids, the pilots, and the cabin crew all died too.”

“Collateral damage. Our secrets must be protected,” Van der Veer said.

A cold feeling slithered through my guts. Holy shit. I knew these guys were dangerous, but I didn’t realize just how far they were willing to go.

I plastered on a satisfied grin, hoping it masked the turbulent feelings of disgust beneath. “Nice. Brutal as fuck.”

“I’d say ‘efficient’ is the more apt word. But anyway, I’m sure you’re itching to know what else we’re hiding up here on the top level,” Davenport said. His eyes glittered deviously.

It almost felt like I was in some sort of junior school club with silly so-called secrets like ‘all girls have cooties’ and ‘I hate my teachers and my mom’, along with a ‘no girls allowed!’ sign hanging over the pillow fort entrance. Unfortunately, after hearing how Jon Wilkinson was murdered along with several totally innocent people, I knew it was all deadly serious.

“Of course,” I replied.

“First you must understand our process,” he said. “The first level is for members we consider to be... not serious. Those who could never align themselves with our values. We are happy to have their money and connections and share ours in return, but that’s as far as it goes.”

I nodded. I already knew that.

“A select few each year are chosen for the second level. These are men who have shown promise and potential in terms of sharing our worldview. We allow them to discover and explore their darker tastes and desires at this level. Many stay at this level forever. But for some of them, like yourself, it’s eventually no longer enough.” He paused for a second. “It’s not real enough. Not the sort of darkness they are truly interested in. So that’s what the third level is for.”

I feigned confusion. “What are you saying?”

He exchanged glances with my father and the others. “Before we tell you anything else, we must apologize to you. When a member is still at the second level, we lie and mislead them out of sheer necessity. We had a feeling you would suspect things, as all lower-level members tend to do from time to time, so we falsified so-called evidence, made up convenient stories, and so on.”

“About what?” I asked, cocking my head to the side as if I didn’t already know.

There was a long, dramatic pause. Every council member exchanged a glance, their brows drawn and foreheads creased. Was it just me, or were they nervous?

They fucking should be.

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“This may come as quite a shock to you, Elias, but...” Davenport left another theatrical pause before speaking again. “The women we keep at the Finishing School and the Lodge are not exactly willing.”

“Huh?” I widened my eyes just the right amount to simulate pure shock. “You mean they’re captives?”

His lips curled upward. “Yes. All of them.”

My stomach lurched. I already knew this, and yet it still hit me like a ton of bricks when they confirmed it for me this casually, as if they were simply handing out a coffee order.

“Including my slave?”

“Yes. Every single sex slave in the history of our organization has been an unwilling hostage.” Davenport narrowed his eyes. “You made it clear during your trials that you shared our vision. I hope we weren’t mistaken.”

I forced a smirk. “Hell no. You have no fucking idea how happy it makes me to hear that.” I paused and held my hands out wide, palms facing them. “Knowing it’s actually real, not just some hooker putting on a performance for me... fuck. It’s amazing. It’s exactly what I always wanted.”

Even saying the words hollowed me out, made bile rise in my throat.

“See?” My father smiled. “I knew he was one of us.” He looked right at me, pride

glimmering in his eyes. “You’re just like me, son.”

I leaned back and rubbed my chin, pasting on an expression of casual interest. “Can I ask how exactly we get away with it? What’s stopping a rogue third-level member from telling everyone what’s happening here before you can get to him and kill him?”

Van der Veer smiled. “Think about it. Once you’re in, you can’t really tell anyone, can you? Why do you think we let all the second-level members have access to the Finishing School and the Lodge? It’s so they automatically become complicit before they even make it to third.”

“I see.” Clever.

“You could never try to tell anyone, because then you’d have to admit you fucked a girl—or many girls—against her will,” he went on. “No one would ever believe you if you said ‘I didn’t know, I thought they were just prostitutes’. So you become one of us, sharing our many secrets. You can never reveal them, because you are just as guilty as the rest of us. If you ever tried to go public, you would be branded as a torturer and a rapist the same as everyone else. Even in death, that is how you would be remembered.”

“So why kill or heavily monitor the ones who want to leave, if they’d be too ashamed or scared to admit it anyway?”

“Just in case. Who knows? Maybe one of them wouldn’t care what people thought of him, and he’d just want to get the information out there despite the stain it would leave on his name.”

“Ah. Makes sense.”

“It’s very rare we get anyone like that, though. We pick the third-level members very

carefully.”

“Of course.” I leaned forward, intertwining my fingers. “So how are the girls selected?”

“You’ll get to know the more intricate details as we go along, but basically, most are from poorer families who are given compensation in return for giving up their daughters. They can’t tell anyone either, if they change their minds, because then they’d be seen as ‘that family’ who sold their own child. Shame is a wonderful tool to keep people complicit.”

“You said most. So not all?”

“Not all,” my father confirmed. “Sometimes, one of us will spot a girl they want, but her family aren’t the sort who would give her up. So instead of purchasing her, we will arrange for her to be abducted for him. A cover story will usually be put in place. Rumors will be spread that the girl was a drug addict, for example. Or that she was mentally unstable and planning on running away.”

“And my slave?” I raised my brows.

“Her parents sold her to us. I approached them myself to broker the deal,” Dad said with a smug grin. “I wanted her for you as soon as she came onto my radar, with the Ben Wellington case.”

I gritted my teeth. “I see.”

He mistook my expression for annoyance. “I really am sorry that I had to lie to you, son. I couldn’t let you in on the truth before you made it to the third level.”

I waved a hand, arranging my features into a neutral expression again. “I understand.

You did exactly what I'd do in that situation." I paused for a few seconds. "Anyway, what happens with the slaves once they are no longer wanted by anyone?"

Davenport cleared his throat. "They work at the School and Lodge in various capacities. Maids, kitchen staff, gardeners, makeup artists for the girls. And..." He hesitated and glanced at my father, who nodded. "This is actually a good segue into the next topic we wanted to discuss."

My heart thudded. "What is it?"

"The girls who we consider to be the most physically in shape are used as surrogates once they hit their late twenties or early thirties," he said. "Sometimes members have fertility issues with their wives. In other cases, their wives simply don't want to be pregnant because they are afraid it will ruin their bodies, or their husbands worry about that. So we'll use IVF procedures to implant a fertilized egg into the captive woman we've chosen for the surrogacy, and they grow and give birth to the baby for the couple. Of course, this isn't a common thing. Only a few of the women will be used for that every year."

My mouth hung open slightly. Aside from the shock and disgust of hearing about the forced surrogacies, the supposed logic behind it alone was unbelievable. I'd never really thought about kids or pregnancy that much, given my age, but the attitude that it would 'ruin' a woman's body seemed incredibly juvenile and rooted in the dark ages, even to someone like me who'd admittedly never considered it in great detail.

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The attitude that a captive woman's body was seemingly okay to 'ruin' was even worse.

My face hardened. "So the wives of third-level members are all in on it?"

"Oh, no. They'll know there's a surrogate that we've arranged, but they are blissfully unaware of the truth behind it," Davenport said. He looked so fucking gleeful. I wanted to smash his face into the granite.

I turned to look at my father. "So that's how I was really born, then? Mom couldn't get pregnant so you took a girl and used her as a surrogate?"

He shifted his weight, looking nervous for the first time. "Not exactly. You were a special case, Elias. It wasn't planned at all."

I folded my arms. "I'm listening."

"Again, I apologize for keeping the truth from you for so long. I didn't like it, believe me. But anyway..." He paused and coughed. "Your biological mother was a woman named Camille Gorham. I first saw her in New Marwick one day back in 1991 when I went to visit Garrett at Roden. Or maybe it was 1992." He frowned and shook his head. "Anyway, I wanted her the second I laid eyes on her. I looked into her background and quickly figured her parents would never sell her to us. They were good people. A respectable family. So I didn't even bother asking. I just took her instead. Got the girl I wanted and saved myself a few hundred grand in the process."

Everyone chuckled at that. Hilarious.

Fucking scum.

“I’ve heard about that case,” I said, once again feigning ignorance. “A lot of people use her name in those dumb old Roden Strangler urban myths.”

He smiled. “Yes. Anyway, I made her my slave. She was a tough one. Lots of fight in her. A lot like your Tatum, actually. But that was exactly what I needed at the time as I was going through a rough patch with your mother, due to our difficulties in conceiving a child.”

“I see.” I gritted my teeth again. That poor woman.

“One day I discovered she was pregnant, with a boy. I suppose I wasn’t being careful enough with contraception. Or I may have been careless on purpose in a sort of subconscious way. After all, I wanted a child and she came from a decent family. Good genes. I knew she’d give me a strong, healthy son. So we kept it.”

“We?” I arched a scornful eyebrow.

“Well, I made her keep it, more specifically,” he said. He chuckled, and then his face darkened again. “I convinced Sylvie it was a blessing. Convinced her to raise you as her own child. I made it seem like Camille was just some stupid young woman I was having an affair with, but eventually she figured out the truth. When you were just three months old, I caught Sylvie trying to run away with you and Camille. They intended to tell everyone, and they were going to keep you from me. My son.”

I felt ice creeping through my veins. “So you killed both women?”

“Kill is such a strong word,” he said. “I prefer ‘disposed of’.”

His words sliced into me like a hot knife through butter. “Right. So Sylvie never

actually gave birth to me. Or died during the process, like you told me.”

“I’m sorry, Elias. I had to tell you something when you were younger, to cover the truth.”

I didn’t bother asking why he’d come up with that particular lie. No point; he’d have some bullshit excuse. But he could’ve told me Sylvie died of cancer, or was killed in a car accident... anything other than that she died giving birth to me. For so long, I’d felt an overwhelming sense of guilt over that. I’d never told anyone about it, but it was always there, this creeping sense of culpability. I killed my own mother.

Now I knew she wasn’t even my mother, and yet she died for me anyway, along with my real mother, Camille. They both made that ultimate sacrifice in order to try and save me from my father’s icy grip. But they failed. He got to them.

I wasn’t going to let their deaths be in vain, though. I was now more determined than ever to find some way to take down Crown and Dagger. My father especially.

I put on a stoic face. “Like I said, I’ve actually read about the Camille Gorham cold case before. Did you know some of her friends and family members are still searching for her, all these years later?”

Dad nodded. “I’m aware, yes.”

“It doesn’t bother you at all, that there might be all these people out there wondering about their loved ones?” I tried to keep my voice casual. Nonchalant.

He chuckled. “Let me ask you something, Elias. When you walk through a field, you might inadvertently step on thirty ants. Hundreds, even. Not to mention all the other insects and microorganisms you could be unintentionally destroying. But do you ever think about that when you walk through a field?”

“No.”

“That’s what the majority of the world’s population is to us. We’re the ones with all the power. The money, the influence. We’re the deserving ones. Everyone else...” He flicked a hand in the air. “They’re the ants. It’s not that we don’t care about them. It’s that they don’t even cross our minds at all. You see what I’m saying?”

“Yes. I feel the same way,” I forced myself to say, feeling sicker than ever.

These guys were so fucked up. They genuinely believed that people of the ‘lower’ classes were disposable, existing only to serve them and their needs, no matter how sordid they were.

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Honestly, I wasn't sure why I was even surprised.

The council members went on to reveal more of their 'secrets' to me. Most of it was relatively tame stuff. Insider trading deals and so on; all the ways they kept themselves rich under the table.

I also learned just how deep the society's tentacles reached. Terrifyingly so. They had connections in every law enforcement agency you could imagine, as well as the government.

All in all, there wasn't a single lawyer or police officer in the entire country who wasn't in their pockets somehow. Of course, the vast majority of them weren't actually aware of it, but if any concerns were raised to them, they would take it to their superiors, who were perfectly aware of their paid loyalty to Crown and Dagger.

That meant it was going to be much harder than I initially thought to take them down and bury them. Right now I didn't even know where the fuck to start. Their creeping tendrils were everywhere. I wasn't sure how Henry Davenport lived without losing his mind entirely, knowing there was no help for him anywhere. No one who would listen if he ever wanted to tell his story.

When they were done talking, I swallowed the hard lump in my throat and pasted on another fake grin. "So that's all of it?"

The council members bared their teeth in vicious smiles. "Oh no," said Davenport. "We saved the best for last."

And then they told me the darkest secret of all...

21

Tatum

Yawning, I stepped into my bathroom and stared in the mirror. After a long day of hosting duties, my makeup had begun to streak, and my hair was tangled and messy from the wind. My limbs felt heavy and awkward with exhaustion.

Aside from that, the hostess position was going surprisingly well. It was a lot easier than I thought. All I really had to do was talk to the men and pour the occasional drink. Of course, I had to be gracious and charming as I did so, and I had to wear certain outfits, but it was still a lot simpler than I thought it would be.

I'd worked the last three evenings as well as during the days, but tonight I'd been told I could rest and relax instead. Apparently Tobias would be coming by my room soon to explain more of my upcoming hostess duties to me, but after that I'd have free rein to read, take a warm bath, and sleep.

My ears pricked up at the sound of a knock on my bedroom door. When I didn't immediately answer, it turned into a series of frantic bangs.

"I'm coming," I called out, drawing my brows into a frown. I opened the door to see Elias. He was wearing a set of black robes and rubbing the back of his neck. A sheen of sweat covered his forehead.

"Tatum, we need to talk. Now," he said. I'd never heard him speak so fast, words tumbling out in a frenzy.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“This whole thing isn’t wh—”

He was cut off by another masculine voice. “Elias, what are you doing here?”

We whirled around to see Tobias striding up the hall toward us.

“I’m here to see my slave, obviously,” Elias replied, his tone and demeanor changing instantly.

“Well, you’ll have to wait. I have to take her for a couple of hours to explain some of her new hostess duties to her.”

I noticed one of Elias’s hands was clenched into a fist by his side. His face was reddening too. “I’ve barely seen her these last few days. She’s still my slave, and I want to use her.”

Tobias let out a disdainful sniff. “She has the night off, so you can spend time with her after we’re done with our discussion. I’m sure you can wait a couple of hours.”

Elias pressed his lips into a flat line. “Right,” he finally said. “It can wait.”

“Good.” Tobias looked at me. “Tatum, let’s go for a walk.”

He headed down the hall, and I followed him. I turned my head over my shoulder to see Elias staring at us, an intense expression hardening his features. His eyes were over-bright, feverish, and his posture was stiff.

As I rounded the corner with Tobias, I saw him mouth something at me. I thought it was ‘I love you’ but I realized a moment later that it looked more like: ‘I’ll save you’.

Tobias led me downstairs and through a wide hall before stopping outside a familiar doorway. “After you,” he said, waiting for me to step through.

It was the trophy room I’d discovered that day with Pri. I did as Tobias said and headed inside. He ushered me over to the far side, where a trophy cabinet sat next to the enormous doll collection.

“Not long until you get your own made,” he said stiffly, nodding toward the dolls. He was pretending to be polite, but under that thin veneer of civility was a pit of black animosity. I knew he was pissed that the other men had voted for me to be the hostess for this festival, and he’d been outvoted.

I didn’t quite know how to reply to him, so I stared awkwardly at my feet instead.

“Did anyone ever tell you how this tradition started?” Tobias went on, gesturing toward the dolls again.

“No, sir,” I said quietly.

“About a hundred years ago, the society had a council member named Jack Galbraith. He was very close with his mother. She loved collecting antique dolls. Sadly, she died quite early. As a tribute, Jack brought her collection here so it could be admired and appreciated by many people, which is what his mother always wanted. Her dolls are the ones at the very back,” he said, pointing them out for me. Then he motioned down to an inscribed plaque on the bottom of the cabinet; one I’d never noticed before. In memory of Mary Galbraith.

“That’s a nice story,” I said, surprised that I wasn’t lying to him for once. It really was quite sweet.

“Of course, most of the other members didn’t exactly want a doll collection here for

no reason other than that someone's beloved mother died," Tobias went on. "So a new tradition was born—the doll-making after the festivals, to honor our hostesses."

He paused for a moment, then reached in and carefully picked up a doll with flowing red hair and a midnight blue gown. "This was Anna Sarich. I quite liked her. She was with us about ten years ago." He held the doll out to me. "You can look."

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I gingerly held it in both hands, afraid I'd accidentally drop it. "The hair is beautiful," I said, admiring the glossy locks. "It almost looks real."

Tobias smiled. "It is real. You don't think a society like ours would skimp on the details and use synthetic hair, do you?"

"I suppose not."

"It's Anna's hair. She donated a few locks of it for this very purpose. The face was carved to look just like her, too, and the body..." He trailed off for a second and reached across, running his fingers over the pretty porcelain face before trailing down to the carved décolletage. "It's made from bone china. Do you know how they make that?"

"With bone ash?"

Tobias smiled. "That's right."

My skin prickled. The way he was smiling at me, the gleam in his eyes... something felt all kinds of wrong with this picture.

My stomach lurched as his previous words echoed in my head. Anna's hair. All the power was immediately drained from my limbs, replaced by unadulterated terror. I clenched my fists and swallowed hard, forcing myself to hold it together.

I had a good idea of what was coming next, but I willed Tobias not to say it yet, just so I could have a few more precious seconds of unknowing. Part of me wanted to turn

around and flee from the room, so I'd never have to hear it at all.

He cleared his throat. "This china was made from Anna's bones," he said smoothly, taking the doll away from me. That was probably a good thing, because I was about to drop it out of sheer shock. "Aside from the original dolls belonging to Mary Galbraith, all the others are the same. Made from the bone ashes of each hostess."

My whole body was jelly. Something inside me was crumbling, collapsing, like a building being destroyed by dynamite.

I should've known.

Pain and pity bloomed in me as I cast my eyes back over the rest of the doll collection. They were all ghosts, twisted remnants of the women they used to be before their lives were torn away by the awful men of Crown and Dagger.

I was next.

"Why?" was all I could get out.

Tobias chuckled. "Let's just say the Artemis Festival isn't exactly what it appears to be on the surface. We spread rumors amongst the women that being chosen for the hostess duty is a great honor and will bestow many privileges upon them, including a chance to leave with just one master. It's a lie, but it's a great way to make them behave. And the expression on the chosen women's faces when they discover what's really happening—far too late, of course—is one of the funniest things you can possibly imagine. Like your face right now."

"So what's really happening?" I asked in a low voice.

"Remember, it's a hunting festival," he said patiently. "We pick the girl who's proved

to be the biggest thorn in our side over the last six months, and on the final day of the festival, the third-level members hunt her in the woods. Afterwards, her remains are used to create a mini version of her. A trophy that we can all view at any time, whenever we want to recall the thrill of that particular hunt.”

Sickness swirled in my belly as dizziness overcame me.

This must be what Elias was so frantic to tell me earlier. He must’ve made it to the third level of the society today (he had the new black robes, after all) and he’d subsequently found out about their darkest tradition.

So that was why he mouthed ‘I’ll save you’ at me in the hallway earlier. It wasn’t like he could’ve said it out loud in front of Tobias, or else he wouldn’t stand a chance at helping me.

That meant he was telling the truth all along. He really did return my twisted feelings. He really did care for me, and he really did want to get me the hell out of here, before the other third-level men could kill me.

I should have believed him the other night. I should have let him help me.

Now it might be too late.

“Why me?” I asked, tilting my head up to face Tobias. If this man was going to kill me, he could at least have the guts to look me in the eyes.

“As I’ve already explained, we pick the girl who’s been the biggest thorn in our side. You stabbed me in the fucking neck, Tatum. What did you think would happen with that kind of behavior?”

“So this has been planned for months,” I said in a hollow voice. “It wasn’t really

voted in last week.”

He twisted his lips. “Not exactly. There were other factors which led to me and the other men overwhelmingly choosing you. The biggest one being your pregnancy.”

Time instantly seemed to freeze. My mouth dropped open. “What?”

“The doctor who saw you after your little escape attempt two weeks ago didn’t really diagnose you with a bug,” he said. His voice was like ice. “The blood tests showed that you’re pregnant. According to the doctor, you’re probably around five weeks along, judging by the amount of HCG.”

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My insides were cold, contracting. It felt like I'd just been punched right in the gut. I shook my head. "That... that's impossible."

"Contraceptive shots aren't a hundred percent effective. Close, but not quite. Sometimes one just slips through."

Instinctively, one of my hands went to my belly. The nausea, the tiredness, all the other weird symptoms I'd been getting lately... I thought it was just a bug, or a virus, or stress. I hadn't even considered that I might be pregnant.

"So you're going to kill me because of that?" I said, my stomach churning. Just when I thought this place couldn't be any more twisted, it turned out that another bombshell was awaiting me in the darkness, ready to explode and shatter my whole world.

He let out a derisive snort. His expression was as dark as a black hole. "I don't want you to have my first grandchild. I want Elias to have children with a girl from a respectable family. A girl with refinement. Elegance. You are none of those things. You are vulgar, insubordinate trash. Not to mention an attempted murderer."

I gritted my teeth. "For the millionth time, I didn't kill Ben!"

"I know. I said attempted. I'm referring to the time you stabbed me."

My eyes widened. I took a step back. "You know I didn't kill Ben?"

His eyes crinkled around the corners as a devious smile spread across his face. "Of course. Who do you think the court's secret witness was?"

It felt like the earth had just opened up beneath me. How many more cataclysmic shocks could I handle before I slipped into a state of catatonia, never to return to the real world?

“What did you just say?” I whispered. My legs were shaking so badly I thought I might actually collapse.

Tobias leaned closer, a devious smile playing on his lips. “It was me. Believe it or not, I was there that night. The mansion where that party was held belongs to a friend of mine. I was visiting, but then his daughter decided to throw a rager, so I took a walk along the beach to escape all the noise and annoying young people. I saw exactly what happened between you and Ben. I called the police and told them.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I... I don’t understand. Why would you do that? Your testimony kept me out of trouble. Why would you let that happen when you obviously hated me so much?”

“I didn’t hate you. I saw an opportunity in you. I knew you would be the perfect girl for Elias. The kind of girl who would force him to follow in my footsteps; make him see what women are really for. But it would only work properly if he hated you. So yes, I was the one who kept you out of prison. The courts had to believe the testimony of a relative of Ben, because what reason would I have to lie for the girl who supposedly killed him?”

“So you lied to Elias after that. You made him hate me by pretending you thought I actually killed Ben,” I said flatly.

“Yes. I had some fake wildlife camera footage shot to make it look like you pushed Ben right off the cliff. It wasn’t exactly hard for someone with my money and resources to pull off such an exploit.” He shrugged dispassionately. “I showed it to Elias. Convinced him you were guilty. Told him the footage was deemed

inadmissible and quashed during some legal process. All the hate he had in his heart for you after that... I knew it would work. He would pour that hatred into you and become the man I knew he could be. Then he would continue my work with Crown and Dagger, just as I always hoped.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. “So you were trying to force him to turn out like you. I guess it’s too bad it didn’t work.”

A sneer curled up his lips. “It did.”

I shook my head, my cheeks flaring hot with indignation. “No way. Elias isn’t like you at all.”

Tobias lifted one brow. “I think you’ll find he is.

“No.” I gritted my teeth. “I know your game. You only want me out of the way because you’re worried he might actually have feelings for me. And he does. He told me. He’s fallen for me, and he’s going to help me out of this. He’ll never let you and your cronies murder me, especially once he finds out I’m pregnant.”

He laughed. “Oh, Tatum. You poor, naïve creature. You don’t really believe that, do you?”

I nodded. “I do.”

“In that case, why don’t you listen to this?”

He pulled his cell phone out and clicked a few things on the screen. A recording started playing. The voice was unmistakably Elias.

‘As for why I don’t want to share Tatum,’ he was saying. ‘I have a long-term plan for

her, as I was discussing with my father recently.'

'Please elaborate,' said another male voice.

'She can't be owned by me in the same way you all own your girls, because she genuinely hates me. Hates the King name in general. She had absolutely no idea she would be given to me when she sold herself to the society, and after her subsequent behavior, I quickly realized she would never submit to my ownership with the usual methods.'

'So what are your new methods, then?'

'I intend to make her fall in love with me. When I finally let her discover the truth, she will be so crushed that she will become permanently broken. After that, I have a feeling she will become the most submissive sex slave this place has ever seen.'

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‘That’s an interesting strategy to break in a slave, Elias. But I think we are all in agreement that we strongly approve,’ said another voice. ‘It’s cruel. Inventive. Truly ruthless. In her case, it might actually work better than physical methods.’

‘Exactly. No amount of money or physical punishment can stop her from hating me and refusing to submit. But preying on her emotions...’

Tobias clicked off the recording, a triumphant grin on his face. “That was his plan,” he said. “He wanted to make you think he was falling for you, just so you’d be more destroyed than ever when you discovered the truth. Of course, it doesn’t matter now that you’re going to be killed. But what does matter right now is that he’s not coming to help you. No one is.”

My knees buckled. I shot a hand out to the cabinet in an attempt to balance myself as I swayed and stumbled forward. I felt like a baby taking its first steps. Weak, hesitant, faltering.

Finally, I fell to my knees on the floor, staring at nothing, my eyes no longer focusing. Just when I thought I had a dash of hope, it was stripped away from me all over again, just like every other time I’d dared to feel something other than despair in this hellhole.

“Elias doesn’t care about me,” I whispered, more to myself than Tobias. “He doesn’t love me.”

“No, he doesn’t. You’re nothing, Tatum. Accept it.”

He was right. In a place like this, I was nothing.

I slumped all the way to the floor and curled up into a ball, wishing I could melt right into the polished wood. My insides seemed to have been replaced with some kind of black hole.

Tobias stooped to my level, one hand jerking out to force my chin upward. He stared down into my eyes, his own dark and malicious, glimmering with sick amusement. "Two days, little doll."

"What?" I said, my voice a broken whisper.

"That's when it begins." He smiled and held up the index and middle fingers of his right hand. "You will be hunted in two days."

To be continued....