



Where We Began

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: My life was full of my sister's laughter and miles of green trees. Then the black car came. Strangers in sharp suits dragged my father back to a past he kept hidden. Worse, they made him choose one of us—his own children—to go and live with his enemies. It's a way to keep him working for them... and from running again. I'm a hostage. The food is fancy, the carpets are lush, but this bed isn't mine. I don't belong here and my head and heart know it. I'm painfully alone. And then I'm not. The first time I meet Dominic Bradley, he saves me from a maid with a pair of scissors. This sweet boy is nothing like the rest of his family. He becomes the only sunlight in these smothering halls. The one person holding me together. When he leaves for six years, it shreds my soul. It's nothing compared to when he comes back. Gone is my sweet boy. In his place is a hardened soldier ready to obey his father. He's gained new demons; and I've lost my only friend. Dominic acts like he's forgotten our past. But I can't. It's impossible to forget the moment I fell in love. I know where we began. I'm not sure where we'll end.

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- Chapter 1 -

Laiken

There's a baby deer standing in the field.

It isn't the first time I've seen one—but I could count the number of times I've seen one alone on one hand. “Shh,” my sister cautions me, as if I'd dare to breathe. Kara's lying beside me in the grass, her finger to her chapped, rosy lips. We're shoulder to shoulder. I can see the flecks of green in her blue eyes.

I don't nod, but she knows I've heard her. Both of us stare back out at the clearing. The sky above is gray as dishwater with a single vein of sun running through. It'll rain within the hour, if not sooner. It's warm on the ground but that's changing the longer I hold steady.

The baby deer isn't moving, except for its legs. Those have been trembling since we stumbled on the animal. I expect it's cold, or terrified. Where is its mom? I wonder.

I don't hear her speak, but suddenly, I can tell Kara is debating something. It's easy for me to read her. For all of my twelve years, she's been my companion and my best friend. So of course I recognize the mischief that crinkles the corners of her eyes, the slight uptick at the edge of her mouth. I pull in half a breath, ready to ask her what she's going to do.

Kara jumps forward, tearing through the brush, her arms over her head. “Hey!” she yells, rushing the animal. “Hey, whoo! Hi little deer! Hey!” Her shouts become

laughter. The deer has already bolted, too stressed to wait and see if Kara means it any harm.

I should be mad. I'm not. Kara's pink cheeks and giggles are contagious. Without hesitation I kick off the ground, dirt getting under my nails in my hurry to join my sister. Together we squeal, chasing after the deer. We know we can't catch the gangly-legged animal but we do our best anyway. Neither of us are quitters.

Playing in the forest around our cabin has made us both strong. Agile. While we won't catch the deer, we're on its heels. The brush is thick here, clawing at my tanned cheeks, my bare, wiry arms. When I circle around a gigantic oak trunk, the bark catches at my hair. I flinch from the brief spark of pain and keep running.

I'm used to it.

My brunette hair isn't sleek or tidy. It hides twigs. It snags on branches and briars. And when I run, the frayed ends swirl in the air behind me like a tattered cape.

My hair is wild like me - like us.

I love it -

especially because it looks just like hers.

Neither Kara nor I have ever liked getting our hair cut, but that took a new twist when, weeks ago, we'd started practicing braids. I'd been able to get over seven rows in my hair. Kara had only gotten six. In her distress, she'd insisted I trim my hair until we had the exact same length.

"We'll grow it out together," she'd explained, showing me the scissors. "Then, next summer, we'll see whose is longer."

I'd agreed. How could I say no?

“Wait up!” I pant, pushing through the sharp, raking branches. Kara has gotten ahead of me; she's reached the river. The deep thrum of the rushing water slides through my ears seconds before I see it.

She's standing on one of the slippery rocks near the closest bank. The deer is scrambling through the water, its head barely above the ripples. It climbs on the stones then slips in again. Suddenly, our fun game seems cruel.

My sister either hasn't sensed the same thing I have, or she's consumed by the chase, because she keeps hopping over the rocks. Each jump she makes, I expect her to fall. “Kara! Be careful!” I cry, sliding down the wet dirt to the riverbed. The river isn't much wider than twelve feet, but its bloated, the current dangerous from the recent rains.

I climb the closest rock; instantly I stumble, my whole right leg soaking through. Gasping, I retreat to the muddy, but solid, shore. Kara glances back, drawn by my panic. “Come on!” she yells, hands cupping around her mouth. “You can do it!”

Except I can't, and we both know it.

Kara doesn't wait for me, she returns to the hunt. The baby deer, for all its struggles, is standing on a stone, shivering, as my sister gets closer. Is it worse for it to fall back in, or for Kara to catch it? Couldn't they both get hurt in the rushing water?

Something bellows. It's a low, insistent sound that demands I lift my eyes and find the source. Standing on the other shore is a large doe. The baby's mom, I realize.

Its mother's arrival gives it strength, and the little deer leaps forward, making it to the far side without anymore problems. It bounces by the doe's hooves; they nuzzle. I'm

frozen as I watch the scene. It makes me think about my own mom... and my newborn baby brother.

The full-grown deer looks straight at me. Her brown eyes glisten, unblinking, and I feel strangely judged.

Then they vanish into the surrounding forest.

“Damn,” Kara says, breaking the spell. Blinking, I see that she's made it to the other side. Her hands grab her slim hips, feet spread as she surveys her prey's escape. From behind she looks like a warrior. Her hair blows in the wind, and when she turns to eyeball me, she brushes it from her face. “Are you not going to cross?”

“It's too cold,” I say, shaking my wet foot. “I don't want to fall in. Dad would kill me if pneumonia didn't first.”

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“It's August!” she scoffs, making a face. “You won't even catch a sniffle. Come over here!”

I almost do it. Kara made it. So did a baby deer. Surely, I'll be okay. The tip of my damp sneaker touches the first rock again. For a moment, I'm transported back to a winter years ago when I was small and even bolder than I am now, which is saying a lot.

My foot slides back to solid ground.

We stand there, split apart by the hungry river. Two sisters facing each other, not truly parted, but unable to touch. The sadness in me is wicked—I love Kara so fiercely that not doing as she asks, not being at her side, is torture.

But drowning would be worse.

“Sorry,” I say shaking my head. “I'll meet you at the bridge.”

“Hey,” she calls gently. I meet her concerned eyes. “It's fine,” she says, her dark eyebrows furrowing. “I shouldn't bully you like that. It's okay for you to say no.”

Smiling with relief, I nod. “Thanks.”

“It's a dumb river, you cross it all the time when it's calmer, so who cares.” She shrugs and starts to run. “Beat you to the bridge!”

Filled with energy, re-inflated by her understanding, I give chase.

Everything seems greener, brighter, by the water. It gives life to this wonderful forest I call my home - this secret place that no one knows about but my family. I've asked Dad why we're alone out here. He always says it's because no one understands how wonderful it is to live in nature. How can that be? One minute of running over the sun-kissed grass in bare feet, and anyone with a heart could see this is Heaven.

The bridge rises up ahead of me. Through the trees across the water I catch glimpses of Kara. Astoundingly, I'm beating her. Digging deep I demand even more from my young body. My legs are like a colt's, but so are hers. We're the same height. The same build. She's a year older than me but we're nearly twins, full of the inherent competition that only sisters know.

Gasping with effort, I jump onto the first plank of the bridge. Kara hits the wood half a second later.

I won.

“Wow,” she laughs, approaching me with her hands behind her head. “You really wanted to get here first, huh?”

I shrug. “Don't take the power out of my win.”

“Fair, fair.” She claps too loudly, her grin huge and toothy. “Congratulations! You won! Woohoo!”

“Okay, that's enough.” Sticking out my tongue, I lean on the wood railing. Its rough, one of the first structures our father had built out here that wasn't our house. We'd helped him, feeling so pleased that he'd let us chop the thinner logs. It had taken a few days and the hard work had left me blistered. I'd relished in the soreness every night.

Now, my fingertips trace the letters cut into the wood of the railing. My name is carved beside Kara's. We'd done it one after the other, and because she'd gone second, she'd made her name slightly bigger than mine. She'd sworn it was only because my name was longer, so this was fairer.

She puts her elbows on the railing beside me. Together we stare out at the river. "We should get back," she says.

"You think Dean is awake yet?"

"Probably."

"Then yeah," I agree, pushing off the wood. I dust my hands on my dirty shorts. "Mom'll want some help."

"You just want to hold him again," she teases, following me to the well-trodden path home.

I flash a shy smile. "So do you."

She waits a second. "Yeah. I do, actually."

Together we hurry over the flat ground. At some point I stumble; Kara catches me, her hand tangling with mine. We squeeze our fingers tight, staying like that. Hand in hand. The way we've always been... The way I imagine we'll always be.

I have no idea how wrong I am.

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- Chapter 2 -

Laiken

Ashiny black car is parked beside our cabin.

I've never seen that kind of car. I've also never seen any car here besides Dad's Jeep. As I'm gawking, Kara grips my hand tighter. I glance at her, spotting how she's gone pale. I wasn't scared, but now I am.

Our front door on the porch is open. There's a man I don't know hovering there, his broad back resting on the hinges. He's wearing dark sunglasses. It makes him more intimidating.

He turns his head, spotting Kara and me. His mouth tightens then he leans into the house—my house—like he owns it. I can't catch what he says, but soon, three more strangers appear on my porch. Just behind them, half in the shadows of the cabin is my father.

The raw distress in his eyes cuts me to shreds.

“Let's run,” Kara whispers in my ear. God, but I'm tempted. Whatever is going on here isn't good; I know it in my trembling guts. But I can't abandon my family. Running wouldn't make these men vanish.

Holding her hand fiercely, I tug my sister towards the porch. Everyone watches us as we stand at the base of the steps. “Dad?” I ask softly.

He pushes through the men, dropping to his knees so he can hug us both. It's not a warm hug. It drives ice into my bones, it makes me sure something is wrong and it might never be right again.

“Kids,” he says thickly, his forehead pressing to mine then Kara's. We're too close for me to see his eyes, and I wonder if he's been crying. I've never seen him cry before. I didn't know he could. “Let's go inside. We need to talk.”

“What's going on?” Kara asks before I can.

“Let's sit down first.”

“No,” I say, sliding out of his embrace. He looks at me, and the redness in his tired eyes tells me he's been crying. “Where's Mom? Where's Dean? Are they okay, who are those people?”

He glances over his shoulder. “Your mom and brother are fine. Everything is fine.”

“It isn't,” Kara whispers. “Don't lie.”

One of his hands lands on my shoulder. The other is on Kara's. I feel like we're all that's keeping him from collapsing. “You're right, I'm sorry. I don't want to lie... but I don't know how to explain what's going to happen. I just—I'm so sorry. God, I never thought this would happen. I was so careful, and—” he chokes, unable to finish.

Whatever childish anger has taken hold of me evaporates. Grabbing his arm, I squeeze it roughly. I cling on, my face buried in his sleeve. It smells like him, all smoke and pine and safety. I don't want to let go.

“Joseph,” a voice I don't know says. I lean away just enough to see a woman behind my dad. She's taller than my mother, her body sharp on the corners, made sharper by

her dark jacket and hemmed pants. I've never seen anyone like her in my life. She's beautiful, but when she looks down on me, fear makes my tongue numb.

“I know,” Dad whispers. He's frowning severely - it highlights all of the wrinkles in his face. Lines I only notice now. “Girls, please. Let's sit inside. I'll tell you what's going to happen.”

The woman smiles. I hate her.

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Kara grips my hand. This whole time, we haven't let go. We pull apart as Dad stands between us, guiding us up the steps. The men move aside so we can enter, and I think, this is our home, not yours. Don't act like you're allowing us inside!

Mom is waiting on the couch in the living room. Dean is sleeping in her arms. I wonder if he woke up from his nap, or if he did, then went back to sleep. It amazes me that he can be so peaceful with all these strangers in our cabin.

She watches us as we enter. She hides her fear better than Dad. Enough that I wish I were stupider, because then, I could believe everything was fine. Even if it were only for a few seconds, I'd relish those seconds.

“Sit,” Mom says, patting the couch beside her. I go to her, leaving tearstains on my father's sleeve. When I get close my stiff steps become a leap—I land with my arms around her neck. “Shh, shh,” she murmurs in my ear.

I lift my head and see that Kara isn't sitting. She stands over Dean, her fingers perching on his swaddled blanket by our Mom's wrist. That blue striped blanket hides his still too-skinny limbs. He's really small. Hannah, the midwife, told Kara and me that preemies are like that. I thought it was a funny word, “preemie.” Especially the way Hannah drawled it out.

Then I understood that it was short for premature. No one said it out loud, but I got the impression Dean's lucky to be alive.

He stirs; his little face scrunching, then he falls back to sleep. Dad is fidgeting near us, unable to sit, barely able to stand. “Girls?” He chokes the word out. I look at him;

Kara doesn't. "I—I'm trying to think of how to begin." His hands are wringing. "I love you both so much."

Of course he loves us. Why is he saying it suddenly?

Tension sways over the room. He stops talking, his jaw slack. "For God's sake," my mother snaps. She fixates on the tall, sharp woman. "Don't make us do this, Annie."

Annie is too sweet of a name for her. Her pale face is smooth and still as a buried onion. "It's the only way to keep him in check, Violet. You and Joseph both know it. Now choose, or I'll do it for you."

"You cold hearted bitch," my mom growls. I gape up at her. She's never been one for cussing. What is going on?

"Please," Annie sighs. "I'm being as kind as I can be. Or did you want me to take the baby?"

I jump off the couch, arms thrown wide to shield Dean behind me. "No one is taking my little brother!"

The strange woman gazes down her nose at me. "She's got your fire, Joseph." Crouching gracefully in her heels, she levels her eyes with mine. They're brown like molasses. She's smiling sweetly, curiously... but I know better. "What's your name?"

I don't blink. "Laiken."

"Well, Laiken." She cocks her head, the tight bun of hair not moving. "I'm here to take either you or your sister back to my nice big house."

It takes me a second to register her words. In that time, Kara grabs my shoulder.

“You're going to take us away?” Her voice cracks as she speaks.

“One of you. That's right.”

“But why?” I demand, my arms falling to my sides limply. Annie glances past me; I follow, noticing how my Dad's hands are balled in red fists. His mouth is quivering. He's upset but I'm furious. “Daddy! Why is she taking us? How can she take us?”

Kara's hand leaves me.

Our father is grimacing now. Mom is sitting there looking at Dean. Her chin trembles, large tears dampening the baby's blanket.

But no one is talking.

No one has answers.

“I won't let you!” It's Kara—her outburst shreds the awful silence. She retreats to the kitchen entrance, where the back door is. One of the men starts to reach for her but she's already running.

“Kara!” I cry, dodging the man as I chase my sister. As I run, I hear Annie say, “Leave them. Just wait a minute.” The door is open and I shove my way through. Outside, the last ray of sun is gone. The gray clouds and dampness makes our property feel like another world.

I scan the flat dirt with its stacked logs. Kara is easy to spot - she's crouched behind the wood with her hands over her ears. “Kara,” I say, kneeling on the cool ground. I grab her shoulders, hugging her fiercely. “Oh, Kara.”

“This isn't fair,” she sobs, putting her forehead to mine. “It doesn't make any

sense! One of us? And where to?"

"She said a house," I whisper lamely. I know it won't help to say it.

"It could be anywhere."

"I know."

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We stay like that, listening to the sky rumble above. Footsteps come next. “There you are,” Dad pants, crouching in front of us. This time, neither of us moves to hug him. “Come back inside.”

“No.” I shake my head firmly. “We won’t.”

“Please,” he says. The word steals the last of his strength. In front of our eyes he deflates, his head falling into his hands, elbows on his spread knees. “This was never supposed to happen. I was so sure no one would find me. Findus.”

Kara lifts her head. “Daddy, what did you do?”

He stares at the ground between his shoes. “It’s better you don’t know.”

That seems like a bunch of bullshit, but I bite my tongue. Kara doesn’t. “Then what do we need to know?”

Her cruel words clear some of his defeat. He scans our faces, as if trying to read us while we struggle to read him. “Girls... this is a tricky situation. Annie won’t leave without one of you.” My mouth opens; he raises a hand, silencing me. “Whoever it is will have to live at her estate in Massachusetts. Do you... did your mother teach you where that is?”

Our school lessons were brief. Kara and I preferred playing to academics. “Miles and miles from here,” Kara says. I nod once.

He breathes in then lets it out. He’s still torn to pieces but he’s working to keep it

together. “It won't be so bad. You'll get to see new things, eat amazing food. It'll be—” he hesitates. “Life changing.”

“For how long?” Kara asks.

“I just don't know, sweetie.”

“Then why?” I snap.

His smile is pained. “To keep me from vanishing again.”

I don't know what he's talking about. I don't need to. Seeing the haunted look etched into the face of the man that taught me how to fish... the man who lied with me beneath the stars as he told me their names... my anger slips away. I wrap him in a tight embrace. A second later, Kara joins me.

Wetness taps the back of my hand. Overhead, the clouds have split, assaulting us with cold summer rain. “Joseph?” our mother calls gently from the back door.

Dad clears his throat. “Inside, before we get sick.”

I'm already sick. It's been writhing in my stomach since I saw the strange car. “Give us one minute,” I say.

He squints down at me, eyebrows knotting.

“Please.” My fingers wrap in my sister's between us. Dad sees, and he inclines his head. When he vanishes into the cabin, I see that Annie is hovering inside. She watches us as if she's confident we can't escape. She's right.

If we ran, they'd take baby Dean instead. I'm sure of it.

Cringing at the idea, I pull Kara back to the logs. She fingers her wet hair, watching me closely. “We have to decide,” she whispers. She's always been the strong one. The challenger—the center stage star. But now she looks like the rain itself will crush her bones. Like she'll dissolve if we stay here too long.

“No, we don't.” I lock my fingers in the spaces between hers. “I'm going to do it.”

“What?” she gasps.

I shrug, like this isn't a big deal. Except my heart is quaking... my brain buzzing with how my whole world was turned upside down within minutes. “I already decided it would be me.” It's a brittle lie. I didn't think about offering myself up until I saw how this was breaking my sister apart. She's protected me my whole life. It's my turn to return the favor.

“You're strong,” she says softly. “Stronger than me.”

I hope she's right.

My wet hair sticks to my cheek. I brush it away then pause. “Let's make a promise.” Kara waits patiently, not breaking her stare. I hold my hair between us. “We said we wouldn't cut our hair until next year. Let's swear not to do it until we see each other again.”

Kara considers my frayed brunette ends. Everything looks darker thanks to the downpour. The noise of it muffles every word we speak. Still, I hear her clearly as her pinkie wraps around mine. “I swear it.”

“I swear it,” I repeat.

She holds on, looking at our hands. “You should know that I'd still win.” Her eyes

dart to mine, sparkling with tears and familiar pride. “My hair will be longer than yours. Just wait until you see.”

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My smile becomes a toothy sob. I'm crying with my mouth open. "I'll wait as long as I have to."

- Chapter 3 -

Laiken

Annie observes me saying my goodbyes. She's quiet the whole while, watching from the sidelines. I wonder what she thinks about all this. Is it easy for her to tear apart a happy family? My mother is right: she's a cold-hearted bitch.

I face Annie, waiting for what's next.

She lifts her thin eyebrows high. "Aren't you going to pack anything?"

"Why?" I scan the cabin and shrug. "I'll be back."

She doesn't respond, her lips sliding into an amused smile. Looking over me, she nods at my parents. "I'll be in touch." Her sharp heels take her out onto the porch. I trail her reluctantly, the smothering despair starting to work its way up my legs as this becomes real.

One of the soldier-like men hands her an umbrella. Annie pops it open, shielding herself from the rain. She stops to talk to three guys waiting at the bottom of the steps. I don't know what she whispers, but all of them bow their heads.

"Laiken." I turn, staring up at my Dad.

“It's okay,” I assure him—myself. “I'll see everyone again soon.”

“Lolly...”

“I'm fine.” The words come out hard. But I'm trying not to fall apart, and his pet name for me, this pity, is too much. I make myself smile. It gives me a headache. “Take care of things and... don't let Dean grow up too quickly!” My throat hurts and I'm almost relieved when Annie shouts my name.

I don't want to leave my home.

But the sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back. I'm certain of it.

Darting through the drizzle, I pull up short just outside the range of her umbrella. I don't want her help. Not even with this. Annie opens the back door of the shiny car. Inside, it smells like the flowers by the riverbed after they've been pressed between the pages of a book. I love drying them out like that.

“In,” she says. I climb over the leather seats, feeling some delight in how my muddy shoes mess up the pristine interior. “Seatbelt,” she instructs me. I clip it into place, and she slams the door shut.

For a minute I'm alone in a bubble - just the rain trampling the roof and me.

Annie opens the driver's side, tossing her wet umbrella on the floor near me. Another man gets in on the passenger side. I can't recognize him, they all blur together with their close-cut hair and crisp suits.

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He slides off his sunglasses, making me notice he'd worn them this whole time even with the rain. When he glances at me, I make sure not to flinch. "Hey there," he says.

I grit my jaw hard.

"I'm Miles." His arm drapes over the back of his seat. "You're a quiet one, huh?"

"Leave her alone." Annie shoots the guy a look, starting the car. "Just call Heidi the second we get some damn service out here. Jesus, he really hid himself in the middle of nowhere."

Miles plays with something I can't see, his eyes in his lap. "I'll tell you when I get a bar. Might not be until we get closer to the town." He's talking about Stutter's Valley, the place Dad visits every now and then for supplies. I've rarely been there. Two weeks back was one of those times, when he left us with the midwife so he could get Mom to a bigger hospital.

Annie glances in the rear-view mirror, watching me. Her eyes glow with a blue hue from the dashboard. This car is way nicer than ours; I don't understand half of the things I'm seeing. "Are you hungry?" she asks.

I shake my head.

She holds my eyes then stares out at the winding dirt road. The car isn't made for this terrain; it rolls over a rock, and Miles groans. "Fuck, this place is hell."

"No it's not," I say flatly. "It's Heaven."

Miles throws his head back as he laughs at me. “Sure, kid. Sure.”

I watch out the window. I count every tree, every wet and thorny bush. I'm inscribing our journey in my mind so that I'll never forget the way back home.

WE DRIVE THROUGH THE town and we don't stop.

People glance at us as we pass. It's enough for me to feel bitter. Why aren't they helping me? Why is no one stopping our car? Annie and her goons are evil and I'm not supposed to be here.

No one tries to slow us down.

“Hey,” Miles says, lifting something to his ear. I think it must be a phone but I've never seen one so small. The ones in books are all big with curly cords. “We're going to make it to the launch spot in fifteen.” He pauses. “Yup, we've got the cargo.”

I don't realize Miles is talking about me until Annie peeks at me in the mirror. Clutching my seatbelt, I stare as we drive towards a flat field. The rain has slowed, but there's still no sun in the sky. What I see waiting for us in the clearing takes my breath away.

The helicopter looks just like the drawings I've seen. Its yellow and black surface is wasp-like. The blades on top aren't moving but I picture them spinning in a blur.

“Ever been flying before?” Annie asks, reading my mind.

I say nothing. Silence is the only power I have.

The tires stop moving. Miles hops out, stretching. Annie comes around to open my door. She seems unsure if she should offer me her hand or not. I take the choice away by climbing onto the squishy ground. She curls her fingers and shuts the door loudly. “Refill the car in that town before you head back to the cabin, Miles.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let me shake out this stiffness first.”

Eyeing the helicopter, I see someone sitting inside, the pilot, most likely. I've never been scared of heights. I've spent hours imagining being a bird, soaring overhead, light as air. The sweat on my palms isn't from fear of flying. It's because this will make it impossible for me to memorize the way back home.

She leads me to the open door in the chopper. The pilot in the front seat is wearing a helmet of some kind. I can't see her eyes, but she flashes Annie a thumb's up. There are only two seats in the rear. I sit in one, clipping the belt into place without needing to be told.

I'm not scared of flying. But I'm not going to risk falling to my death.

The blades whine loudly. Annie bends over the pilot, saying something then joins me in the back. Once she's buckled in, we take off. As awful as leaving is, there's a thrill to being so high in the sky. I catch myself smiling too late; Annie sees, but she says nothing. The longer we spend together the more she seems unsure of how to interact.

“You're quiet,” she yells over the noise. “I expected you to have more questions.”

I have a thousand of them, but I want nothing from this woman.

“I'm not your enemy, you know.” She keeps talking, a person in love with her own voice. “I can even be your friend.”

“No you can't,” I scoff. Annie's grin is crooked; I gave her what she wanted. Burning red at my own weakness, I stare back out the window. I wish the space in here were bigger. I'm too close to her shiny heels. The cloying perfume she wears burns my nose.

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She sighs loudly. “What Joseph did isn't your fault. But because of him, you're being yanked from your family. If you need to hate anyone, hate him.”

Her barbs are too precise. I can't hold back, so I stop trying. “I love my dad. I always will. Unlike you, he's a wonderful person.”

“Wonderful?” She tastes the word, running her tongue over her teeth. “He really told you nothing. I knew he was a coward, I didn't know how big of one.”

The way she smiles is plastic, sickly-sweet. Her disgust for my dad is tangible. “You're wrong. You don't even know him.”

“I know him much better than you do.”

Scrunching my eyebrows, I face her fully. “Liar.”

She hunches forward. There's something smoldering in her eyes. It makes them look like pennies held up to the setting sun. “Then ask me. I'll tell you what he did, why this is all happening to you, if you just ask.”

My pulse begins to flutter. I'm holding my breath, poised to accept her answers. Annie's lips are stretched tight over her teeth. She's excited... eager to destroy my image of my father. And I worry that she can do it...that whatever she's going to say is venomous without an antidote.

“No.” Swallowing, trying to get saliva in my dry mouth, I turn away. “I don't want more lies.”

Annie doesn't push the topic. Two hours later we pass over the dark tops of oak trees. Evening has cloaked the world below in shadows. I can make out a long, paved road. Then I see something baffling.

The flat roof rises up ahead. Rows of golden-yellow light shine bright in the windows. There are hundreds of them—maybe thousands, I'm not sure. More than I can count is all I know. “What is that?” I whisper, the hum of the helicopter muting me.

She must have read my lips, because she says, “Bradley Estate. I guess you've never seen a house that big before. Don't worry, you'll get used to it. I've worked hard to make the place what it is today.”

Shock makes my eyes throb. “That's where youlive?”

“No. It's wherewelive.” In the reflection of the glass, Annie's expression is transparently cruel. “Welcome to your new home.”

- Chapter 4 -

Laiken

“Stop it!” I scream, struggling out of the arms of the hefty woman. She's red-faced and sweating, her hand clutching a pair of scissors. “Leave me alone!”

Her partner—who is her opposite in every way—wags a bony finger at me. “Quit acting so childish! You're a mess, we only want to clean you up.”

“You want to chop my hair off! I won't let you!” Panic makes me strong, but it's the hot-need to keep my promise that turns my hands into claws. I'll fight until my heart quits.

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The women share a look, blocking me against the corner of the bedroom. The scissors glint in the light. “If you don't calm down, I'll cut off more than your hair, girl.”

My eyes flash. “Try it.”

Soft arms snatch at me. I duck, but I end up in the solid grip of the wiry maid. She pins my hands to my hips. “Now just—oof!” Air explodes from her lungs when I get an elbow free and jam it into her belly. “You little... get her, Emma!”

A fist tangles in my hair. Filling my chest, I screech and howl. They're treating me like a wild animal so I embrace it. I channel my inner wolf, my feral spirit, my desire to keep every strand of hair on my head.

Emma shoves me to the smooth floorboards. “Get off of me!” I say, working to escape. The second woman sits on my legs. I'm tough, but I can't beat them both. There are scalding tears in my eyes. “Leave... me... alone!”

“What's going on in here?”

In the doorway stands a boy. I'm not quite sure from where I am on the floor, but he looks my height, his limbs as skinny as mine, his face on the verge between gentle youth and the leaning-out of older teens.

I don't know who he is. But I recognize a kindness in his deep, chocolate-brown eyes that no one has shown me since I arrived. “Help,” I say. “They're trying to cut off all my hair.”

“Nonsense,” Emma huffs. I hear the scissorsswishin the air. “It’ll just be some trimming. She’s got mud and who knows what else in here.”

The boy considers me. “Let her up.”

“Master Dominic...”

He focuses on the maid, his tone a razor blade. “I said get off of her. Now.”

Their weight vanishes. Sucking in oxygen, I scramble to my feet. My eyes dart between all three of them; I’m still ready to fight.

The boy—Dominic?—jerks his head at the door. “Get out of here.” The maids shuffle away like dogs tucking their tails. When they’re gone, I breathe easier.

“Thank you,” I say, looking the stranger over with new eyes. I was wrong about his height; I’m a little taller than him. “How old are you?” I ask.

His smile gives him a single dimple. “You don’t want to know my name first?”

“They said it. Dominic, right?”

His smile goes wider. It makes him look even younger. “Yes, and you must be Laiken.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Dominic cocks his head, seeming unsure about me. He’s wearing a half-sleeved shirt the same off-white color of an eggshell. It makes his hair stark. “I’m twelve.”

“Same.” I’m happy that he’s twelve, like me. Makes him feel kindred. I step closer,

lifting my hand to my scalp. "It's funny that I'm taller."

His ears turn red. "Have you never met a guy shorter than you before?"

"You're the first boy I've ever gotten this close to."

"I'm not aboy," he says, squinting. "I'll be thirteen next month. How have you never met any others?"

"Just haven't." Running my hands through my hair, I squeeze it, wrapping it in my fist. The door is open and I'm wondering if I can run and hide somewhere. I don't want the maids to find me again.

He follows my eyes. "If you don't want your hair cut, I'll tell them to leave you alone for good."

My mouth drops open. "Can you really?"

"Of course. They'll listen to me. My parents own this whole place."

I harden my grip around my hair so much that my roots tingle. "You're Annie's son," I whisper. I start backing away.

"Whoa, hey." Dominic holds up a hand. "It's okay."

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“No, it's not.” My shoulder blades grind against the wallpaper covered in red and black swallows. “Your mom's the reason I'm trapped here!”

He balks, his hand dropping to his side. “Oh.” Whatever he feels contorts his eyebrows, his lips, making him seem older. I remain still, partially hoping he'll leave... and afraid that he will. He's shown me the only kindness since Annie put me in that car.

Dominic lifts his head enough to focus on me. “It's okay for you to hate her. Please don't blame me, though. I didn't have any part in taking you hostage.”

Hostage. The word flips my stomach inside out. I know what it means, and it puts a name to my situation that I'd been incapable of doing myself. Of course, I'm their hostage. They're keeping me here so they can prevent my dad from...how did he put it...vanishing again?

I regret not asking Annie for answers when I had the chance. Eyeing her son, I lick my bottom lip nervously. “Do you... know what my dad did?”

He shakes his head slowly. “No, only that my father hates his guts. He's talked about Joseph Greene as long as I can remember.”

“My last name is Laurel,” I mumble defensively. Dad changed his last name? He really had tried his best to hide from these people.

Dominic leans to one side, rocking in place. “I'm sure you miss your family. Maybe you'll get to call them on a cell-phone. I've got one you could use.”

“A what-phone?”

He staggers, like I've slapped him. “How do you not know what a cell-phone is? Everyone knows.”

“I know lots of stuff. Probably all kinds of things you don't.”

His shoulders slide upwards; he's trying not to laugh. “Like what?”

“Well, how about the right way to bait a fish-hook! Or how to tell when it's time to pick a tomato.”

The laughter rumbles out of him. It reminds me of the rain clouds earlier, but... nicer. “Okay. You've got me there. Someday you can show me those things.”

I'm smiling, but I don't know why. It feels good, after everything. “Okay.”

“You should get some sleep,” he says kindly, moving into the hall, half-closing the door. “Goodnight, Laiken. I'll see you tomorrow.”

A pathetic part of me wants him to stay. He stepped in to save me from those cruel women. That kindness is something I'm ready to cling to. But I remind myself I don't know him. I can't ask him to sleep here, watching me all night. How weird that would be.

“Night,” I reply, staring at him until he shuts the door. He's gone, but the air still smells like him; like cloves and old books. Is that how all boys smell?

I'm sure I won't get any sleep. But when I climb beneath the unfamiliar blankets with the lights still on, I pass out. It's so quick I don't have time to think. I don't even dream.

I wake up confused. That isn't my ceiling, what...? I tangle in the blankets and crash to the floor. The pain jolts me into remembering everything: the strangers, my promise to my sister, and Annie.

The door wrenches open. A maid that looks like Emma, but isn't, gawks at me. "What happened?" she asks, edging closer.

My glare stops her in her tracks. "Nothing. Go away."

She falters, giving me a wary look. "There's no need to be like that. Manners will get you much further under this roof than rudeness."

"I said get out!"

That time she listens.

No one checks on me until mid-morning. Annie shows up, her face cool as she observes me crouched in the corner. "Get changed, then come eat."

"I don't want anything from you."

"No, but you need food and water, regardless of your wants." She throws open the closet. Inside are tons of clothes on hangers. She holds up a pair of jeans that are crisp, navy blue, and look to be my size.

My heart squeezes. "How long were you preparing for me to come here?"

Annie blinks. I think I caught her off guard. Her recovery back to neutral is immediate. "Be happy there are things for you to wear. Get changed. Go explore. It's not like you're a prisoner."

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“No,” I whisper. “I’m a hostage.”

She throws the jeans at me; I catch them. “Who called you that?”

I jut out my chin. “It doesn’t matter.”

Annie moves closer. She’s wearing heels again, red ones today. “Was it a maid?” she asks. I say nothing. “Or was it my reckless son?”

I’m exposed under her hard eyes. Her tiny smile fills me with guilt. She knows.

Sighing, she turns away. “There’s a bathroom with a shower. Use it.” Then she leaves, the door swinging whisper-shut. I don’t hear it click; there’s no lock. This fills me with dread—no locks means they’re confident I can’t escape.

Even if I could, so what? I don’t know my way back home. And if I leave, they might do something to Dad. Or Mom... or Kara. Or Dean. Shivering, I glance at the jeans in my hands. They’re brand new. I don’t know much about fashion, but looking at this place, I guess these pants are expensive.

Kicking the blanket off, I rise. She acted like I haven’t explored this room. It was the first thing I’d done after Annie had shoved me inside. It was the rest of the house I hadn’t seen; I’d been brought directly here once the helicopter landed.

Then Emma and her friend had arrived with the scissors.

Pushing down a wave of unease from the memory, I enter the bathroom. The walls

are some kind of hard ceramic, uniformly flat, consistently white. Nothing like the uneven log walls of my cabin. The shower is different too, but I figure it out quickly. The pelting water steals my soreness away. It's hot enough that it distracts me from my situation.

There are too many different kinds of soaps inside the niches of the shower wall. One is shaped like a pink shell. I've never been to the ocean, so I use that one. It smells like roses, the steam weighs the scent down, and together, they make me dizzy.

Gasping for air, I turn off the spray and climb out. The huge oval mirror on the back of the bathroom door is fogged up. Running my hand down it, I create rows that drip. I see myself in the lines—my skin glows pink.

I feel a little bit better. Just a little.

Dressing in the jeans, I shift my hips back and forth to break them in. The motion reminds me of Dominic; how he fidgeted last night the longer we spoke. I hope I've found an ally in that lean boy. Not a boy, I remind myself, smirking. Or that's what he thinks. My eyes work fine—I know he's a kid like me. That's why I think I can give him a chance.

There are bras in the closet arranged like fine china on a tiny dresser. I finger the lace of one; heat spreads over my cheeks. Mom has talked to me about starting to wear one of these, but I told her I thought they were dumb. Also, when I tried one out, it dug in weirdly.

I didn't need one while running in the woods. I don't need one now.

Sliding on the plainest looking shirt I can find—a robin's egg blue tee—I spot a parade of sneakers, flats and heels that are just like Annie's. They are all in my size. I ignore them and put on my own dirty shoes.

There are marks on the back of my shirt from my wet hair. Quickly, I stick it into a loose ponytail. When I slide my fingers down to the frayed ends, I think of Kara. That makes my eyes ache. Inhaling, I exit the bedroom.

The long hallways are less scary during the daytime. Tall windows allow vibrant light to spread over the red rugs that run along the floors. I'm not sure why no one is waiting for me. Annie said I'm not a prisoner, but I know better. Even if running is impossible, do they think I won't try? Are they not worried about me at all?

Inching my way to my left, back where I remember we came into the house, I glance at the walls. The paint is a calming fern green with white accents. Bits of red show up in the form of flowers. I want to hate this whole place... but I'm too busy marveling at it.

We had rugs back home. They weren't as soft as the ones under my sneakers. Struck by a desire to feel the texture on my feet, I balance on one leg. Off comes my left shoe...with it goes my sock. Eagerly, I set my toes on the crimson rug.

“Oh,” I say. My toes wriggle with pleasure. Its like rabbit fur but firmer, thicker. Before I think it over, I kick off my other shoe. Smiling in delight, I stroll down the hallway, pretending I'm walking on a path of fresh flowers - or the back of a furry snake - either way, I love it.

“What are youdoing?” a feminine voice squeals. A woman in the same stiff gray and tan maid uniform gawks at me; she's standing in an open doorway. In her hands is a pitcher of water.

My sneakers are hooked on my fingers. I show them to her, shrugging. “I'm going to get breakfast. Is this the right way?”

“Put something on yourfeet!” She's seriously aghast. The color of her whole face

matches the rugs.

Judging her distance, then the fact she's burdened by a jug of water, I smile. "No thanks." My calves tense, sending me sprinting down the hallway. The maid shouts after me, which makes me jog harder. I can't hear her now but I keep going because I adore running.

A corner rises up; I think I can take it without slowing down. But I'm not used to the rugs. When I pivot, my heels glide on the smooth fibers. Without any control I fly around the corner and slam into something hard. My shoes go flying from my grip.

"Ouch!" Dominic hisses, staring up at me. He probably didn't see me until it was too late to dodge. I sure didn't see him. But now I'm straddling his stomach, our faces inches apart. I can taste my own beating heart.

"Sorry!" I say, jumping to my feet. I reach down to help him, but he stays where he is.

"What were you running from?" he asks, pushing himself up to sit.

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I don't hear the maid coming. "Nothing. I was just running for fun."

Dominic narrows his eyes. Smoothly, he stands without my aid. He's wearing khaki pants; he dusts them off, moving his way up, making sure his black and gray shirt is clean. It has two buttons at the top, he's done them both up, but the collar is still loose around his elegant neck. I notice I'm staring just ashenotices. "How did you sleep?"

I'm blushing - I blame my idiotic crash landing. "I don't remember that part. But I woke up on the floor."

He laughs, shaking his head while his easy smile slides into place. It calms me. "Between that and being barefoot in the halls, I take it you really like floors."

"Have you ever felt this rug?" I ask, pointing down. "It's super soft."

"I've walked on it in socks," he says.

"Not the same. Try it out."

Dominic's mouth curls into a knot. Then he bends down, untying the laces on his glossy brown shoes. His socks the same color as his dark hair—he yanks them off. Moving beside me, he puts his weight on the balls of his feet. "Huh," he says, toes sinking into the red fibers. "That is nice."

"Right?" Beaming, I retrieve my shoes from where I dropped them. "Now you get it."

"I guess." The pinched-skin above the bridge of his nose makes him seem torn. He

glances down the hall, where he was coming from.

“Are you worried someone will yell at you?” I ask, crossing my arms. “A maid snapped at me. But who cares?”

Dominic breathes in slowly. “Father is coming home today. He'd probably hate seeing me like this.”

My arms unfurl. “Why?”

Instead of answering, he crouches so he can put his shoes back on. He knots the laces so tight I hear the material squeak. “I doubt you ate yet. Let's go get something from the kitchen.”

I know he's changed the subject. I'm fine with that.

I only wish I knew why.

- Chapter 5 -

Laiken

The kitchen is big and bright. Bold, yellow colors decorate the room on every surface; towels, tea kettles, even seat cushions. There's a spread of leftovers on a long, shiny table. The savory smell travels through my nose into my belly, shaking everything up.

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Five maids eyeball us as we enter. I count each of them, recognizing Emma and the bony woman. What's interesting is how surprised they are to see Dominic beside me. That cinches my ability to trust him—if he was spying on me, they wouldn't be shocked to see us together.

He passes me a muffin.

Climbing into a chair, I sniff it. “Aren't you going to eat?”

“I ate already.”

I look at him pointedly. “My mom would say you could use another meal.”

He goes a tad pink where he's sitting next to me. We both face the French doors that lead out to a beautiful grassy yard. In the distance, I can see a patch of pine trees surrounded by a chain-link fence.

“What's that?” I ask, pointing.

“The preserve.” He sees my blank face, and says, “It's where Father keeps animals for hunting.”

My eyes widen. I want to ask more, but I'm so hungry. The muffin is different than the ones Mom makes. It's got big chunks of sugar stuck on top, blueberries staining the fluffy bits purple. The first bite causes me to whimper. “Oh, wow. That's so good!”

“Don't talk with food in your mouth,” Emma snaps.

Rolling my eyes at her, I grin at Dominic. He laughs and pours me a glass of orange juice, handing it over. I drink deeply, reveling in the explosion of tangy sweetness.

I'm just starting to feel relaxed when Annie strolls in. Her attention slams on me, twisting the food in my stomach. I wish I hadn't eaten at all. “Here you are,” she says, walking towards us.

“It's where you told me to go,” I reply.

“Not you.” She stands behind her son, hands on the back of his chair. “Dominic, your father just settled into his study. He wants to talk to you.”

Dominic's color depletes from his cheeks. “Okay.”

Annie shifts her stare to me. “But, I think he should see you first, Laiken.”

My limbs become cold. Don't let anyone see that you're scared. Holding my head high, I take another bite of the muffin. It muffles my words. “Show me the way.”

Her eyebrows make perfect arches. “Dominic can. Seems you two are getting friendly.”

He's looking at the food on the table, but not seeing it. Not really. The gloss has left his gentle eyes, and what remains is exhausted defeat. His mother is drilling him... working to make him feel ashamed. Does she not want us getting along?

Clearing my throat, I look straight into her eyes. “You're right. We've become fast friends.”

Dominic gawks at me. The milky-color of his skin does a slow burn back to health. There are sparkles of pride in his eyes. It thrills me to think I made him so happy.

Annie hasn't quit watching me. Her hands are tense on her son's chair. Every maid has stopped working to watch our show; she whirls on them with a frown. "I don't pay you to stand around with your mouths flopped open!"

They rush back to work as Annie leaves. Dominic breathes easier; I slide my drink to him. He lifts it up, hesitating. There's a smudge on the rim where my lips were. Tilting the glass back, he chugs the juice. The knob in his throat moves like a fishing lure in a river. It's fascinating.

"Okay," he says, setting the glass down hard. "Let's get this over with."

Together we climb from our chairs. As we round the table, heading for the exit, I take a final glance back at where we were. I don't know why, but I want to check on one thing—and when I see it, confirm it, I smile shyly.

His lips left a smudge on the empty glass,

right on top of mine.

THERE ARE A LOT OF people walking through the hallways. Each of them nods politely to Dominic. Most avoid looking at me, or they stare when they think I can't see. Do they know who I am? Why I'm here?

I wonder if any of these adults could be allies, like Dominic. There's a chance they could help me—but even if so, I don't know what I'd ask them to do. My situation is becoming clearer as time passes. I'm free to roam, but not to leave. I'm here to keep

my dad in check. There's a ton I don't know... maybe Dominic's father will explain the rest.

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“Here we are,” he says, pulling up short outside of a heavy wood door. The handle is a muted gold shade. It looks like all the other doors I've seen here, but the way Dominic is fixated on it, I know it's different.

And I know Dominic is scared.

“Hey,” I say, reminded of Kara in the rain, “It's fine. He can't do anything to me.” I say it confidently. I'm anything but.

Dominic closes his eyes, like he's gathering his strength. I think he's going to tell me something. He looks at me, then at the far wall. “Knock. Then go inside.”

Following his instructions, I tap with my knuckles. There's no answer. I go to knock again, except the door cracks open. “In,” a gruff voice says. Through the gap I catch a glimpse of a weathered jaw, a single eye that's oddly wide and excitedly expectant.

Steadying myself, I push into the room. I nudge the door shut behind me. Only then do I notice that this place is quiet, a room where no sound can escape. Once, when Kara and I went exploring, I fell into a hole. The dirt pressing around my ears was just like this.

The man who opened the door is standing in front of a desk. It's shaped like a crescent, with him inside the curve. The edges are uneven—it's been carved from a giant tree trunk. “So,” he says, gazing down on me. “You're Joseph Greene's kid.”

His eyes aren't like Dominic's. They're not even like Annie's. The puffy edges look wrong with how sunken in his sockets are. His dark hair is thinning around his

temples, the rest cut clean to his scalp. He's trying to smile, but it's all wrong.

I'm frozen.

I don't know why I'm scared. He's just an old man in a room full of papers and books. Is he that old? I wonder, squinting at his lined skin. He could be close to Dad's age. But where my father normally radiates energy, this man is sucking it from everything around him.

“Well?” he asks, leaning against the desk. “Answer me. Are you Joseph Green's daughter?”

Swallowing, I shake my head patiently. “No. I'm Joseph Laurel's daughter.”

His angular brows fly upwards. He's gripping the wood behind him violently. The veins on the backs of his hands flex; he inhales, laughing so sharply it makes me flinch. The sound turns into a wet hack. He grabs at his chest, there's a little triangle of maroon in his jacket's breast pocket. Like him, his outfit is all severe angles and lines. He yanks out the fabric, coughing into it for a long minute.

It sounds awful. I wonder if he's dying.

Tucking the handkerchief away, he nods at me. “Laiken, correct?”

“Yes.” Speaking to him is easier now that I've done it once.

His lids become hooded. “You look like him around your cheekbones. Tell me, are you anything at all like your coward of a father?”

Stunned by his insult, I ball my hands. “He's not a coward!”

“How loyal of you.” A thin sheet covers the window behind him. It lets only a fractional amount of sun into the room, leaving him more shadow than anything else. Pushing off the desk, he makes his way to me. His approach calls forth all the terrible monsters from my nightmares. Except when I blink, I don't wake up.

The top of my head reaches his ribs. His scent is crisp like parchment—like his son's—but it covers a sickly sweetness that roils my breakfast. I know he's my enemy the way a newborn bird knows to stay silent in its nest when a hawk is near.

I think about elbowing him.

I think about biting his thigh.

I think and think... and I do none of it.

Never have I stood in the presence of someone so paralyzing. I don't even know his name. But I'm unable to move my tongue from the roof of my mouth. When he bends in half, gripping my chin, I feel tears slide from my eyes.

He sighs heavily. His breath is sour. “Don't cry, girl. I'm not going to hurt you. Think about it. Your father won't do as I say if I do anything too terrible, hmm?”

There's a whining in my ears that grows the longer he stares at me. I nod stiffly.

His fingers fall away as he remains where he is. “Annie told me that you weren't interested in hearing your father's history with us. You don't have to know, if you don't want. But living here will bring whispers to your ears. You won't be able to block out what others say when they think you aren't listening. Wouldn't you rather the truth, than fragments that could be lies?”

He's oddly persuasive. “Yes,” I say softly.

“Good.” His thin lips spread benevolently. “Then I’ll tell you the important parts.” Standing to his full height, he moves to sit in the wing-backed chair behind his desk. The wall is covered with shiny plaques and medals with different colored cloth; far enough away I can’t tell what the words on them say. Did he earn all of them?

I draw closer. There’s an engraved, gold nameplate in the center of the desk. Silas Bradley. It must be his name. A small, stump-shaped chair waits in the deepest curve of the desk. I settle on the lacquered surface.

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His fingers come together like two crashing waves. He stares at me over the top of them. “Years ago, long before you were born, your father and I worked together. He was brilliant at his job.” He hesitates. “Hopefully he still is.”

I'm hunching close, with my breath boiling in my lungs. “What was his job?”

“On paper he was a programmer, a systems analyst. In reality he was a devious hacker.” I don't know what any of that means—he spots my crinkled brow. “He worked with computers. My god, you don't know even know what those are, do you? Of course not. Joseph would have kept away from any technology that could be traced back to him.”

It's like my brain is swelling, unable to fit in my skull. “I don't understand.”

Silas leans back in his chair. His mouth is drawn tight. “When I said I'd tell you, I assumed you'd grasp the basics. Your father has done you a disservice by letting you grow up stupid.”

“I'm not stupid,” I say seriously.

He glances down his nose at me. “You are.” Putting his fingers to his temples, he takes a moment to think. I know I'm frustrating him, but I'm just as irritated. “Do you know what money is?”

“Of course I do.”

He purses his lips doubtfully. “My family's business was built on protecting people's

money. Your father helped me build it into something even bigger. An empire.” Drumming his fingers on the desk, he stares out the window. I don't know why; he can't see anything because of the blinds. “Joseph was my confidant. We did much good together. We also did some things in the name of the greater good, only.”

My muscles hurt from perching on the stump without budging. He said he'd tell me the truth, but none of this makes sense.

He can tell he's lost me again. “Your dad was in charge of stealing secrets and keeping them. He was supposed to zip his damn mouth. Then when things got too hot for him, he vanished, nearly ruining everything I'd suffered for!” His fist slams down on the desk; I startle. In a blink he goes from languid to wild, his lips pulling back over his teeth. “As I said, he's a coward.”

Blood is swishing through my pulse at rapid speed. I can't look away. I worry if I do that he'll strike the way a feral dog would.

Silas puts his palms together at his chest. He starts breathing in a deliberate pattern until he's calm. “You're my anchor, you know? You're the thing that will keep Joseph from ever, ever thinking of betraying me again. As long as you're in here he won't run. And as long as he doesn't run...” He gives me a smile that's the closest to genuine I've seen from him yet. “You'll be perfectly safe.”

There it is. The last bit that I need to know.

My fate is wrapped up in my dad's. Once, he'd escaped whatever work he was doing with Silas. Thanks to me, he can't do it a second time. Or he could, but—No, I tell myself firmly. He won't do anything that could put me in danger. I have to believe it or I'll fall to pieces.

“Any questions?” he asks. Of course I have plenty. I'm more eager to get away from

him, so I shake my head. “Then leave, and tell Dominic I'm ready for him.”

Sweat sticks to my throat. I want to run, but I'm nervous my legs will give out, so I walk to the door instead. When I open it, air and life and every day sounds become music to my ears.

Dominic is waiting for me against the wall. He scans my face, then my trembling hands.

His smile is tragic. “If it's any consolation, it'll be worse for me.”

- Chapter 6 -

Laiken

I count all the redflowers in the wallpaper before the door swings open again, releasing Dominic into the hall. His eyes are beyond tired. I imagine his father draining his life as a giant mosquito would.

He spots me and jumps. “You're still here?”

“I waited for you.” Standing, I stare at the door behind him. He shuts it solidly, motioning for me to follow him. I go eagerly. I'm ready to get as far away from that room as possible.

We walk until we're in an unfamiliar area of the house. It's quieter here, the noise fading as we approach a wide set of glass doors. “What did he say?” I ask, unable to resist any longer.

Dominic opens the doors, revealing a gigantic room with floor to ceiling shelves stuffed with books. My parents had books, but not such a limitless amount. This is a library.

“Why are we here?” I pry, trying to get him to look at me.

He shakes his head, half-jogging down the shelves. There's no one else here that I can see.

His singular focus bothers me. “Dominic, what's wrong?” Still he ignores me, serious in his mission. Together we weave through the aisles, me on his heels.

Grabbing a stack of thick books, he sets them on a circular table. Dust flits up; I sneeze without covering my mouth. “Here.” He taps the tomes. “These are where we'll start.”

“Startwhat? Dominic, what did your dad tell you?” I clench my hands, thinking all kinds of terrible things. “That guy is really creepy. I can't believe he's your dad, but whatever he did or said about you, it's probably all lies, and—”

The sound of another book slapping down cuts me off. “Stop.” His eyes flash at me. “Don't insult him so loudly. He's still my father, okay?”

I falter. “Sorry.”

He stares me down, the tension erasing from his features bit by bit. “I'm sorry, too. It's not like he makes it easy for me to defend him. He said some awful things about you when I was in there.”

Prickles run up my spine; I laugh out of surprise. “Likewhat?”

“He called you an idiot.”

I crinkle my nose. “Well, I'm not.”

“I know that.” Dominic taps the top book. “But you're not familiar with modern things. Your world and mine are completely different. People who work with my family expect a certain level of intelligence. As you are, no one will take you seriously.”

That gets my hackles up. “So you think you're better than me.”

“Laiken—”

“Maybe you know lots about cell-phones,” I wrack my brain, “And computer things. So what? You know who knew all of that stuff? My dad.” Heat blooms behind my eyeballs. I'm ranting and I can't stop. “You think that helped him at all when it came down to it? Huh? It didn't. Because if it had, I wouldn't be trapped here!”

Dominic braces himself against the table, staring at me. I'm humiliated by my outburst. Before I can run, he reaches across and grabs my hands. His touch is warm. It makes me jump. “You're right,” he whispers. “Knowing about technology can't fix everything. I just want to help prepare you for life here, Laiken. That's all. I swear.”

Inhaling until my chest burns, I let the air out loudly. My fingers squeeze his—Kara enters my mind. She'd adapt. She'd excel just to show she could. “I'm happy to learn. Half of what your dad said sounded like made up stuff.”

He smiles with one side of his mouth. “I'll teach you whatever I can before I leave.”

My joy dissipates. “What?”

Palming his neck, he sits at the table. “That's what my father wanted to talk to me about. He's enrolled me in a military boarding school. I start next month.”

My bones aren't doing their job. I crumple into the other chair, staring at him. “But we only just met.”

Propping his chin on a fist, he goes quiet. “Are you that attached already?”

Fire swims up my throat. I avoid his eyes. “You're the only one I've met so far that

seems trustworthy.”

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“Then we should take advantage of these coming weeks. I'll show you around, get you settled, and teach you what I can. And no more fighting. We don't have the time to waste. Deal?”

I don't want to make any more deals. I'm so tired of them. But I meet his kind stare, the warmth of it lighting up my heart. Thanks to it, I can breathe a little easier. “Deal.”

DOMINIC WAS SERIOUS when he said he'd keep the maids away from my hair. They never flashed a pair of scissors in my line of sight again. Instead, they leave me brushes with silky bristles, bottles of shampoos, conditioners, and countless oils. Everything is presented in tissue paper stuffed baskets. The wrapped gifts accumulate in the small room that's supposedly mine.

It isn't mine. I know where my real bedroom is.

I spend my days reading books, exploring the estate, and waiting for news about my family. It's a painful process made somewhat tolerable thanks to Dominic.

“You really have to go?” I ask, lying beside him. We're both stretched out on the manicured backyard, posing the way you'd make snow angels if it weren't September, the lingering summer fighting off any hint of fall.

He stares at the blue sky. “Father wants it, so that's that. I don't get any say.”

“Well, it's stupid,” I grumble. He chuckles, which makes me smile. And it makes me loath that he's leaving even more. “Do you even want to be a soldier?”

“They teach lots of other things there. I'm hoping to learn programming. I could even join the air force, become a pilot.”

“I like that idea. You could fly me around the world in a plane!”

“Definitely. I'd love to do that with you.” He plucks a blade of grass, blowing it against his lips so it whistles. “Dad spent a lot of time picking the right school. He thinks the discipline they provide will be good for me. He was in the army, did you know? Grandfather was too. It's important to remember the past.”

I remember the past every single day. Thinking about my family makes me queasy. “Won't you be lonely there?”

“My cousin Bernard will be joining at the same time. We get along really well, he's kind of like the brother I never had.”

I miss the brother I DO have. I rush to change the direction of the conversation. “When will you come back?”

He flicks the grass away. It twirls on the breeze, vanishing. “I'll get some holiday breaks. The first one is this December, that's only three months away.”

I nod sagely, frowning. “Too bad. I bet I won't see you.”

“Why?”

“I'll be back home by then,” I respond, like it's as obvious as water being wet.

He turns away, saying nothing as he studies the cloudless sky. There are lines in his young face that remind me of how my father looked when I hid beside the logs with Kara weeks ago. It cools my mood. Makes me wonder what he knows that I don't.

“Maybe,” I say slowly, following his example and eyeing the sky, “We'll be able to meet outside of here someday.”

The grass crunches lightly under his head. “I'd like that.” I know he's watching me, I feel the warmth of his eyes. He's the first boy I've gotten to know. Our friendship came easy. It's what's forming beneath—this fluffy, inexperienced thing—that haunts me and makes my heart thrum. That leaves me awake in the late hours. His smile imprinted behind my eyelids. I don't want to name it yet. I don't think I can.

But I do know one thing: Dominic and I are destined to remain friends.

I'm sure of it.

- Chapter 7 -

Laiken

Dominic manages to teach me plenty before he leaves. I learn what a bank is, and that the Bradleys own one of the most influential banking companies in the country. I learn what computers are, too, though his attempts to explain the Internet goes nowhere. He tries to show me directly, until Emma catches us with a laptop under his blanket in his bedroom. I don't know what she thinks we were doing, but she's furious.

The staff watches us closely after that,

not that it matters.

The morning before he turns thirteen, his bags are stacked by the front door. I know it's time for him to go. I've been counting the minutes, but it's surreal anyway. Men pack his suitcases into a black car waiting outside.

Annie observes from a distance, one arm over her stomach, the other perched on the frames of her sunglasses. She looks like a giant fly with those shiny things on her face, a big, scowling bug.

I'm pressed against the white siding, unsure what to do. I think Annie's staring at me. I really can't tell. Where is he? The sound of heavy footsteps catches my attention. Dominic rushes out the front door, staring around frantically. His eyes find me. Only then does his panic fade. "I thought you wouldn't say goodbye," he says, coming

closer.

I'm stiff all over from trying not to cry. "How could I not? I was waiting inside, but I didn't see you."

"I was talking with my dad." He's right in front of me now. Over his shoulder, men keep loading bags. Annie's jaw turns imperceptibly. Yes, she's definitely watching us.

We stand there, two awkward people, both unable to explain how much this hurts. I didn't know it was possible to grow so close to someone so fast. But I have. The way my heart chokes is living proof.

He breaks first, grabbing me in a hug. My arms circle him, squeezing, and I have a childish idea that we're locked together. No one can pull us apart no matter how hard they try. I love that thought.

"Dominic," Annie calls. Her voice is clean. Saying goodbye to her son isn't painful for her, not like it is for me.

Reluctantly, he pulls away. His hands squeeze my upper arms, holding me a foot away from him. It's like he's doing me a favor. He has to know I wasn't going to let him go, this is all on him. "Goodbye," he whispers, his voice thick.

My mouth trembles. "Goodbye, Dominic. I'll see you again someday."

Hope and guilt and fear ripple in his chocolate eyes. He spins away, moving without grace, as if his limbs are made from cement. He goes to stand in front of his mother. I think about how I clung to my parents when I left my home. How they crushed me in return.

Annie gives his shoulder a single pat. "Good luck," she says.

His head bobs down, and it stays there. A man opens the rear door of the car and Dominic climbs in. I stay there by the house, watching as the boy I adore winds his way from my life.

The gigantic gates spread open as his car approaches.

I don't cry until he's gone.

I'M SITTING IN THE grass near the animal preserve, observing from a distance. I really want to climb the fence. I think if I do, I can get inside. I can explore the trees and get close to the deer. I'll also stop thinking about HIM so much.

Dominic is consuming me.

Footsteps approach. Turning, I see Annie and Silas together.

“Laiken,” he says. I jump to my feet. “Come with us.”

“Why?” I ask haughtily.

I don't see Annie's hand until it stings me on the cheek. It's not a hard hit, but being struck is a brand new experience. Clasp my face, I gape at her. “He told you to come with us,” she states, emphasizing each word, daring me to give her more attitude.

My muscles knot up as blood flows to my cheek. The skin she slapped thrums; I debate hitting her back, because I don't know how else to react. I'm raging. I'm embarrassed. She actually hit me?

Silas hasn't moved. He's an observer. I glance from him to Annie, grasping that she's performing for him. I don't want to see what her next trick is if I disobey again. Straightening up, I nod my head. “Fine. Lead the way.”

They stride back towards the house. I keep my distance as I follow. My mind is racing with a hundred ways to get back at Annie. I don't care if she attacked me to prove something to Silas, or if she did it because he told her to. I can't find any reason to accept her actions.

My parents have never been violent. Kara and I wrestled, we had spats, but we never hit each other. It was never needed—it didn't occur to me that a mother would slap a kid, especially in the face. I'm reminded that I'm not in control here, that I don't know the Bradleys in any sense of the word.

I have to be wary.

It's the only way I'll survive.

When we round a hallway that leads to the sunroom, I freeze. Through the tinted glass I can see someone sitting. Waiting.

It's my dad.

His head comes up, allowing him a second to prepare for the impact of my hug. "Daddy!" I cry, calling him something I haven't since I was small.

He squeezes me so roughly my spine cracks. I try to do the same to him, but I can't and that's fine. Everything is fine, now.

"Oh, Lolly," he whispers. "How I missed you."

I'm crying, oblivious to Annie and Silas. I look into his face and laugh. "Where's Kara, and Mom, and baby Dean? Are they here to pick me up, too?"

His smile vanishes. "No."

Paranoia tugs at my heart. "But you are taking me home."

He looks beyond me at Annie and Silas. "Can I talk to her alone?"

"By all means," Silas says, ushering his wife down the hall.

My dad stays quiet until they're out of view. "I'm not here to take you home. Not yet."

"I don't understand." Disappointment cools my heart. I pull away, ending the hug. "Then why are you here?"

He runs his fingers through his hair. It's only been a month since I saw him—why does he seem a decade older? “Silas is rewarding me for my recent work.”

Deflating onto the wicker chair, I scowl. “Oh.”

“I'm sorry. But isn't this nice, still?”

Folding my arms, I shut my eyes. “Yes,” I admit. “I only thought... I guess I was sure, for a minute, that this was all over with.”

The wicker squeaks. He clasps my shoulder, forcing me to look at him. “I'm sure it will be soon.”

I believe him because I'm still innocent.

“Soon” turns into a whole year. I spend it enduring the strict home-school teacher they hire for me. When I can dodge her, I explore the estate, running over the tidy grass even as the landscapers shake their fists.

I cling to the word “soon” like it's my last speck of food and I'm starving. I keep faith, and each time it fades, I see my father again and feel it renewed. It goes on like that; him visiting twice a month, me mollified by his presence that soon is coming.

On my eighteenth birthday, I've almost stopped believing.

That day, as we sit in the sunroom sharing a single piece of cake between us, a soldier guarding the door out of earshot, my father leans in to kiss my cheek. The kiss is really a whisper. “The next time I visit, I'm taking you home.”

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After six years of living someone else's life, I'll get to see my mother. Cuddle my brother. Hold my sister's hand.

I pop more cake into my mouth to try and hide my rapidly giddy smile.

I'm really going home.

“Soon” is happening.

- Chapter 8 -

Laiken

My long hair is no longer tangled in knots. If you search it, you won't find any brambles. But even though it spends its days restrained in a braid that tickles the backs of my thighs, it's an illusion. My hair is still wild, like my heart.

All the fancy loops and hairspray in the world will never change that.

“Get back here!” Emma groans, flapping her hairbrush.

“You've done plenty,” I say, dodging around my bed to avoid her. “I'm wasting my day in that chair.”

“Just let me add something pretty for once, and—Laiken!”

I laugh from my belly as I rush out of the bedroom. I managed to sit patiently as she

wove my hair. But when she tried to add sparkly pins into the mix, I bolted. I've been fidgeting anxiously all day - all night, really. But how can I keep still?

My dad is coming to take me home.

Annie told me last week that he was going to visit tonight. I had to keep my entire face stern so I wouldn't grin. She didn't know this wasn't a normal visit. In the next few hours—I didn't know how yet—Dad was going to get me out of here.

The day is crawling by too sluggishly. It always does when you're waiting for something. I'd lost Emma, so I slip through the kitchen doors, grabbing two biscuits and skipping towards the animal preserve.

Behind the estate, in view of the east side of the house, is a perfectly manicured miniature forest. It's a little over a mile in diameter, and it takes around two thousand steps to cross it. I counted that myself one day.

The fence that rings it is mesh. Deer can't get over it, but I can, and did, until I met the caretaker. Wyatt gave me a stern talking to when he saw me dangling from the lip of the fence. On the surface he seems like a hard man with no patience for anyone but the animals.

I took a quick liking to him.

I see him now as I approach the gate. He waves at me, dropping his shovel so he can pop the lock and let me in. "You look happy today," he says, squinting suspiciously.

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“I guess I am.” I like him, but I don't trust him. Wyatt has worked for the Bradleys since before I arrived. He won't tell me how old he is, says it's rude to ask, but I can guess he's at least my dad's age. That's too much time being loyal to Silas and Annie for my comfort.

He scratches his cheek with a garden-gloved finger. “Fine. Keep your secrets, I don't care.”

“Watch the pouting,” I tease, offering him one of the biscuits. “I bring gifts.”

His sun-browed skin creases by his mouth. “This your way of saying you want something from me?”

“Oh, Wyatt.” A light laugh bubbles from my lips. I feel so good. “You let me come in here whenever I want, you even let me help feed the deer. You've already given me more than I could think to ask for.”

The man's salt and pepper eyebrows dip over his shining blue eyes. He knows I'm being genuine. On the day I met him, he guided me deep into the preserve. In a quiet clearing, surrounded by bird song, he gave me a handful of pellets. To my amazement, a doe appeared from the brush. Wyatt coaxed it to nibble from my palm. I knew then that this place would keep me sane until I could be with my family again.

And now it's time to say goodbye.

There wasn't much I'd miss about the estate. But this was one of them.

The other was...Stop. Don't think about him.I hadn't seen a glimpse of Dominic since the day he left for school. He never returned for breaks, or vacation, or just to check in on me. There were no letters. Nothing.

I'd only known him for three weeks so, by logic, there wasn't much to dwell on. Yet I still did, especially when it was just me with my thoughts buzzing in the middle of the night.

“You alright?” Wyatt asks, biscuit crumbs sticking to his tan work shirt. “Got a far away look in your eyes.”

I shake myself. “I'm fine.”

“Then eat your food so I don't appear rude.”

Grinning, I take a huge bit from the soft bread. We finish eating at the same time. I didn't bring anything to drink. With easy familiarity, I go over to the water pump by the gate. He wipes his hands on his stained pants then pumps water while I crouch down. Holding my hair out of the way, I drink straight from the spout. It's shockingly cold, hurting my teeth and filling me with energy.

Rubbing my forearm over my mouth, I sigh. “Perfect. Thanks for helping.”

“Not a problem.”

My attention goes to the shovel. “What are you digging?”

“Trench for the rain that's coming.”

Scanning the sky, I shield my eyes. “But it's so sunny!”

He shrugs, jamming the tip of the shovel into the ground. “Storms are on the horizon, trust me. Rain can really soak through this preserve. It makes the ground too soft for the tree roots, causes them to rip out in the wind.”

I nod with admiration. “Can I help?”

His sharp shoulders shrug. “You ask like you expect me to say no this time.”

Flashing a smile, I grab a spare shovel from the small shed by the water pump. I know where everything is. He's right, he's never told me I can't help. Whether it's digging, or weeding, or hoisting heavy brush to be cleared, I'm eager to do it. Physical labor warms my soul.

Two hours later I'm splattered with soil. Sweat sticks my thin cotton shirt to my body, and I've torn holes in the black yoga pants that I constantly wear. Annie is probably sick of seeing me in them. She updates my wardrobe every few months with new dresses or silky tops, as if to passive aggressively point out that I have options. If she wanted to remove all my active-wear clothes, she could. She hasn't yet.

I stab the shovel next to the trench. “Whew. Okay, I need to go shower.”

Wyatt chuckles dryly. “Got plans tonight?”

He's so close to the truth that my heart skips. I wonder if he sees the guilt in my eyes. Or the twinge of regret that comes when I think about never seeing him, or this tiny forest, again. “Hey,” I say, too thickly. I clear my throat. “Thanks for everything. It means the world to me that you share this place with my stupid face.”

His eyes soften. I wonder if it's possible to sense the gravity of my silent goodbye; I come so close to breaking and telling him everything. He blows air between his chapped lips. “Sharing this little gem with someone who appreciates it is my

pleasure. Honestly.”

Unable to hold back, I grab him in a tight hug. Before he can respond I'm running out the gate, waving over my shoulder. It worries me that my mask almost broke. I can't be so reckless, emotions be damned.

As I'm jogging over the expanse of grass, heading towards the house, I see movement. There's a car in the winding driveway—cobalt blue, not a mark on its elegant surface. I don't know the model but it's expensive.

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Curiosity guides me closer. I hop over the flat stones that border the yard, splitting the greenery from the front. The sun hits the car's windshield. Squinting hard, I slow down, only a bus length away now.

The angled door pops open. Hair the same shade as morning coffee comes first. It's styled close to his head, but still long enough that you could run your fingers through and tug. A chiseled jaw layered with a carefully shaved beard. Not wild, but deliciously rugged.

A thick neck and thicker shoulders are enhanced by the tight, rust-red shirt. It leaves most of his arms exposed. Muscles twitch, decorated here and there with tattoos. What strikes me most is how tall this guy is. I'm near enough to tell that I'd come up to just his collarbone with the top of my skull.

He slams the door and everything in me shudders, as if the sound jumped straight into my blood and never left. His head turns—I get his dagger-sharp profile—then his eyes fix on me. They're the color of a violin left alone in an attic and forgotten with cold black centers that pierce relentlessly.

I know this man.

But I don't know those eyes.

“Dominic?” The name whistles as it leaves my lips. It reaches him, his only reaction is how he rolls his gaze from my face, down to my toes, then back again. I'm fully dressed but I feel naked.

We stand across from each other. I think of the first time I saw him... that scrawny boy who kept insisting he was not a boy. Well. He sure isn't one now. His jeans grind together over his powerful legs as he takes two steps my way, but that's all. "Laiken."

My tongue tingles when he speaks with a velvety, base-of-a-canyon tone. "Yeah, it's me. I—you look good." Real good. What does he think about how I look? I've changed, too. Those bras I avoided are familiar to me now. My sharp limbs have softened in places, but my running around the estate has kept me fit.

Not like him, though. He looks like he wakes up every morning and does a thousand push-ups. Dominic is icy steel.

"It's good to see you," I say, hoping to break this painful discomfort. We should be hugging—laughing! Why is he acting like he wants an excuse to leave?

His full lips smooth out. "It's been some time."

"Yeah. It has." I buzz with the fact we're having a conversation. I start to think this unease is only in my head. I'm acting weird, suspicious, and it's on me. "I'm... really happy to see you again."

"You are?" he asks, like what I said is crazy.

"Of course I am," I half-laugh. "Dominic, it's been six years! Why wouldn't I be happy to see you?"

He scrutinizes me. "You didn't hear the rumors." It's a blunt statement.

"What rumors?"

His fingers smooth over his sleeve where it chokes his bicep. "Never mind," he

finally says. "I need to go. I'll see you around."

"Okay," I mumble. I want to grab his arm from behind and ask him everything that's happened in his life. Did he go straight from boarding school to college? Is he working for his father? Where has he been for so long?

I want to know. And I want him to ask about me, too.

His back is ruler-straight as he enters the mansion. What did he mean by rumors? I'm sure I'll never find out, because there won't be time to tell me. It makes my heart ache to realize this is it for us.

It seems our fate is stuck on repeat. Last time we met, he left so soon. Now he's returned, and I'll be the one leaving. It's cruel to do this to me all over again. It doesn't matter. Or it does, but I can't let it. Nothing is going to wreck the chance I've been holding my breath for. Not even my heart.

Tonight, I'm finally going home.

- Chapter 9 -

Dominic

I leave like it's easy. Like my blood isn't screaming at me to turn around and face her - talk to her. Grab her in my arms so she can feel a hint of the pressure on the fabric of my being that swallowed me the minute she said my name.

It's not easy.

But I do it.

Years of training at military school have given me discipline. That alone wouldn't be enough to resist the pull, though. It's the lead-heavy weight of my inner demons that gives me the power to turn my back on Laiken.

The farther I get, the easier it becomes. I'm through the elegantly fashioned metal and painted glass front doors of the mansion in twelve steps. Inside, a security guard in plain gray is talking with a maid wearing matching colors.

He glances at me, then back again, aghast. His walkie-talkie beeps, then crackles with a muffled warning that came too late. "Dominic Bradley is here!"

The guard turns his walkie off and faces me proudly. "Sir, I didn't know you were coming."

Of course, my father didn't warn them. "Where's Silas?" I ask briskly. The maid is

boggling at me. I don't recognize her. Six years can do a lot for staff turnover, especially with my mom's temperament.

“Your father?” the guy says stupidly.

The maid clears her throat. “Master Bradley is in his study, Sir.”

Not surprising. A number of awful memories creep on me. I crush them down, passing around the pair.

The guard steps aside, giving me a wide berth. “Welcome home, Sir,” he says, his words trembling on the corners. He's wondering why I'm back. The word will spread, then everyone will wonder.

Just like Laiken did. I make tight fists. Stop it. Focus.

The more time I dedicate in my head to her, the worse this is all going to be for me... and for Laiken.

She didn't hear what happened. I'm still marveling at that. I was sure the whole house would be swelling with whispers about me. But then, Laiken was never the sort to gossip with the staff when we were young. She might have maintained her avoidance of the people working for my family this whole time.

It almost, almost gives me some hope. But I crush it down, because I know too well what hope is good for: creating a happy glow that leaves a darker shadow in its wake when it's snuffed out.

If Laiken is going to ultimately hate me, I won't indulge myself in her joy... in how her lips spread as she saw me standing in the driveway.

That smile was innocent.

And I'm certainly not.

- Chapter 10 -

Laiken

I make myself go through the motions of preparing for a normal visit. My damp, freshly showered hair is woven in a braid that reaches beyond my hips. I don't know Dad's plan, but I expect it'll involve needing to move fast, so I've put on soft gray tights under a loose, green empire waist top.

Sneakers are a given. I prefer them anyways. Annie has forced me into a few pairs of heels over the years for the occasional private event they host. She likes me looking "pretty" for Silas's friends and coworkers. I endured those parties. I'm delighted I won't have to anymore.

On my way to the sunroom, I spot Annie crossing ahead in the hall. She's alone, and that prompts me to speak. "Dominic is back."

Her purple pumps lock in place on the carpet. She's at the tip of the T that the floors create. I can't get to sunroom without passing her. "You say it like you knew before I did."

I'm used to her barbed manners. Plus, I'm extra cocky with my freedom so near. "You didn't miss him at all, did you?"

There's a mystery injected in her smile. "Did you?"

Yes, I think. I come close to spilling it. "I need to go meet my dad, excuse me." I get

halfway around her. The dark sleeve of her sheath dress blocks me.

“You've been here a long time,” she whispers. Her molten amber eyes remind me of how Dominic's look now. “But you're still terrible at lying to me.”

Panic bolts into my throat. It creates beads of sweat. “What?”

“When you say excuse me, you should sound like you mean it.” She backs away, releasing me from her glare. The way she strolls off, I might as well not exist. That's how little she's thinking about me.

Holy fuck, I think, wiping at my neck. I'm all hot and nervous. For a second I was sure she knew my plans. But if she did, she wouldn't leave me alone. No one is that confident, not even Annie.

Summoning my strength, I half-run to the sunroom. The guard nods at me, his shirt stitched with the name Theo. I recognize him because I've committed everyone who enters this estate to memory.

Dad isn't here yet. That's normal. Since his original visit years ago, I'm always early. It's easy for me because I live here. He has to drive all the way from some apartment complex where he lives with my family. They were moved there right after I left our cabin.

It had made me depressed at the time, thinking about our empty cabin. But that's all going to change after today. Setting myself on the wicker couch, I slump comfortably. I'm too happy to be anxious. This sunny room, with its fresh flowers, has brought me many blessings. It's a wonderful room.

I survey it, and I think, Goodbye.

THE SUN HAS MOVED BEHIND the clouds. Dad has never arrived later than dinnertime, and it's rapidly approaching.

Theo's walkie-talkie beeps sharply. He lifts it to his broad mouth. "Yeah?"

"Code orange," a robotic voice buzzes.

Theo blinks. He clicks the device again. "What's that?"

I lean forward, listening in as my paranoia grows.

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“Code orange, code—he's fucking run again, dick head!”

I inhale so violently it burns my nostrils. Again. That word removes all questions on whom code orange is about. Theo peeks at me, then he starts running down the hall. “On my way!” he hisses into the walkie-talkie.

I'm left there in the sunroom with nothing but my growing despair. Dad said he was coming for me. But he didn't. Maybe he tried, I think quickly. Did someone figure everything out, so he had to leave without me? That has to be it.

It makes sense. Too bad it doesn't heal my damaged heart.

Dad ran again.

He got free.

And I didn't.

There's a hard ball in my guts. It expands, causing great waves of nausea. I cross my arms around my middle, gritting my teeth. What if he took everyone else but me? I think of my mom, of Dean who's no longer a baby, and when my hair swings around and tickles my knee... I think of Kara.

What would she do? I close my eyes, certain she wouldn't sit here feeling sad for herself. Kara always shined like a star that burned those around her. I can burn, too, I think, looking at the hallway.

In the time that I've lived here, I've never tried to escape. Not once. I was sure that the magical time called “soon” was waiting in the wings. But I was wrong. No one is going to save me. It's time to do it myself.

On the balls of my sneakers, I inch out of the sunroom. There's no one in the hallway. Holding my breath, I creep closer to the front doors. Hot pressure throbs through my skull the closer I get to the exit.

Voices float my way; I pick out pieces:

“...all the cameras acting strange.”

“Heard it was a fire, or something, but...”

“Wait, who was supposed to be escorting him?”

I stick enough of my face around the corner to see the front room. There are more guards gathered there than I've ever seen in one place. I count them, my heart racing. That's every single guard on the estate. They're here, trying to figure out where my dad is. And they're angry, their faces crimson as they shout blame at each other. Someone is in big trouble—this is a huge fuck up.

If they're all here, no one is watching the grounds. Backing up, I scurry quietly towards the kitchens. There are voices here, too, but less of them. I can see most of the wide room from where I flatten myself in the hall. Two women are whispering by a stove, huddling.

“Laiken?”

Startled by Emma, I spin. She's got her arms full of tablecloths.

“If you're not busy,” she says, moving closer, “Help me with these.”

I think my eyes might fall from my head. She pauses, considering me with her eyebrows scrunched. She can tell something is wrong. Her hands adjust on the clothes like she's about to drop them and snatch at me.

I bolt.

“Laiken!” she screams. Ignoring her, I sprint through the kitchen. The two maids gape as I blast by them. It takes me three seconds to reach the French doors and yank them open, but it feels like eternity.

Then I'm outside.

October has turned the evening crisp. I'm glad for it; my whole body is scalding. It grows hotter as I run over the grass, guided by the lights along the property. I don't have much of a plan, just a drive todo something.

Remember, the guards are distracted inside! No one is watching the gates! I slip on the greenery under my sneakers. It's brighter where the long driveway is. Through the painted glass front doors I hear the men's voices rising.

There are no stars above, but when I pass Dominic's blue car, I swear it sparkles. Then the headlights blast me, leaving me blind. I throw my arms up and wince. “Laiken!” It's Dominic—he was in the front seat, ready to drive somewhere.

I freeze like a deer. It's brief, but I know it costs me. Dominic is out of the car already. In the evening his eyes are black pools. No light reaches them. He's fuckingfast, long limbs powered by raw muscle. I can't escape.

Then I think about Kara...

And I try anyway.

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“Laiken, stop!” His voice is commanding. It grapples with some primal part of me that wants to do as he says. It's confusing, because I never listen to anyone. My cells think Dominic is different. I scream at my body that it's wrong, to listen to me, and keep running.

He tries to snatch my arm as I cut over the driveway towards the gates. Amazingly, he misses. Spurred on by hope I dig for every ounce of energy I have. I'm the fastest person on this estate.

Or I was until Dominic came back.

Thick fingers catch my long braid just as I reach the curved gates at the end of the driveway. “Ah!” I cry, ignoring the pain, gripping the metal poles as I work to shake him off. Dominic holds my hair tight. My promise to my sister to never cut my hair becomes a liability.

Kara.

Red blooms in my vision. “Let me go!” I scream, thrashing in spite of the pain. He releases me, but the joy is brief—both palms clamp down on my shoulders. He spins me in a single motion; it's easy for him.

“Hold still,” he growls.

“No!” My forearms twinge from how fiercely I pull away. He doesn't relent. When he shoves my spine against the fence, the cool metal helps clear my head. He looms over me like a bad dream. Everything in his expression is blurred by shadow. “Dominic,

let go of me,” I beg. “It's my only chance to escape. Please.”

In the distance I hear shouts. More guards are coming.

“Please,” I say again.

He's quiet, barely breathing. Our bodies are pushed together. The fence is hard, but somehow, he's harder. Is he thinking it over? My joy grows anew; it's fragile but it's there. Dominic knows me. Once upon a time, he even saved me.

I know he'll help me. He has to.

I'm vibrating with adrenaline. On edge, I easily hear how he pulls in a ragged breath. It forces me to realize how his chest is touching mine. I've never had a man so close to me, especially not someone like him.

His eyes narrow. His grip goes slack, teasing me with a hint of freedom. He snatches my wrists and chokes the circulation away. “Why would you think I'd help you escape?”

The despair I experienced before returns. I scowl, standing on tiptoe and bringing our faces closer. “Because you're my friend!”

His attention darts to my lips. I don't know if he thinks I'm going to spit on him or kiss him, and I don't know which I'd rather do. “Whatever you think you know about me? You're wrong.” The guards reach us, flashlights making spotlights on the grass. They blind me, but not before I stare into his eyes one more time. They're pure ice.

Whatever happened to the sweet boy from my past is a mystery. But Dominic is right.

I don't know him.

I wonder if I ever did.

- Chapter 11 -

Dominic

When I get to my father's study there are multiple guards outside of the room. He's inside, sitting at his desk, but when he sees me he jumps up, throwing his arms at the men in uniform. "Go!" he shouts, "Get out of here. Annie, close the door."

I didn't see my mother in the corner when I walked in. She slams the door, leaving us three alone. His study smells like stale dust and uncomfortable memories. I hate this room. I hate everything about it

"You," he says, pointing at me. "Sit. Talk."

I don't sit, but I move over to the circular chair like I'm going to. "I don't know what happened," I say. "When I left the complex he was still inside."

My mother barks a laugh. "I don't know why I'm shocked that you managed to mess everything up just by coming home."

I'm used to her insults, my wounds are covered by layers of scar tissue. I keep my eyes fixed on my father. "If you want to yell at someone, yell at your idiotic security team. Not just the ones at the complex—the ones here were loitering in the front of the house, not paying attention to where or what was going on around them. Laiken got all the way to the gates before I caught her."

"You should've let her go," he says. "She could have led us right to her dad."

I frown mildly. "You think she knows where he is."

"Of course she does!" my mother shouts. She strides around the room, her legs cutting like shears. "Letting Joseph have so much privacy was a mistake. We rewarded him, and this is how he thanks us, by siphoning our accounts?" Her hair is tied back in the same bun it always is. It makes her forehead gleam like an egg. "Feeding his plan to Laiken would have been simple. They met, what, twice a month?"

My father clutches at his skull, his face glowing an awful red color. "If she knows anything, we need to find out."

A wriggling, sickening hunk of unease sticks in my throat. If my parents think Laiken has any information, they won't show any mercy to get it from her. Why do you care? I ask myself. Let them do what they need to. You should be thinking the same way.

Success at all costs.

And yet... "Her escape seemed desperate," I say slowly. "Not well planned. I don't think she knows anything."

"Your instincts have already failed us," Annie says. Her heels click over the floor, reminding me of the chattering of bugs at night. She passes by me on her way to the exit; a woman on a mission. "Laiken can help us find Joseph. That's a fact."

A worthless, dangerous, painful spike of protectiveness that I want nothing to do with spreads through my whole body. I clench my fists, trying to end this desire to intervene. My mother is right. Interviewing Laiken is the logical next step.

"Who will you get to interrogate her?" I blurt the question.

Annie grabs the doorknob, not gracing me with a glance. “I’ll do it myself. If she knows even a lick of info, I’ll slice it from her body.”

Ice travels the length of my spine at the wordslice. I’m worried she plans to literally cut Laiken into pieces.

“Dominic?” Silas asks.

I’m crushing the tops of my thighs with my own hands. Forcing my tendons to relax, I fold my palms together. Thinking about that girl with her easy smile and quick tongue being assaulted by whatever horrors my mother can come up with makes my stomach turn. Part of me wants to block it out. If I focus on our goals, what my family needs and wants, I can forget about her.

I dare to look at my mother's face.

There's a gleam in her pupils, a hint of eagerness. This isn't about getting information, not entirely. She's ready to hurt Laiken, not out of obligation, but because she lusts for it.

“No,” I say. My mouth is parched, my words gritty. “I’ll do it.”

Annie lets go of the door, flustered by my offer. “What, you?”

My father's pointed glare shuts her up. I suspect he's trying to prove to her that it wasn't a mistake to let me back into their fold. “Fine. She's all yours,” he says seriously. “Drain her of everything she knows.”

Two emotions tug me apart—relief and regret. I start for the door, dreading what I've agreed to do. As I come level with my mother by the exit, she speaks to me. Her voice is crisp as a frozen pond. “Don't go easy on her. If you do, I'll know. It's

important you don't disappoint us.”

When I arrived today, I had every intention of never disappointing my parents again.

I was sure I could do it.

Now I'm not.

- Chapter 12 -

Laiken

I'm taken to my bedroom by the guards. The lock on the door 'clicks' on the outside; the first time I've heard that sound. I'm reeling with the events. Pacing the room, I squeeze my arms into a pretzel. How could this happen? It's a catchall sentence for everything: my dad's escape without me, and Dominic's reveal as my enemy.

Remembering his scolding glare makes me shiver. I slide my hands up my arms, touching my shoulders where his hard fingers were. I can't believe how wrong I was to assume he'd help.

When we were young, I hadn't asked him to be part of any escape plan. He hadn't offered, either. Back then I'd been sure my release was just weeks away. Hell, I'd thought I'd be gone before Dominic's first holiday break from school.

He hadn't even come home. He's here now, though. But he's nothing like I expected him to be. Something has changed him, I tell myself. That's the only explanation. My memories about him aren't wrong—they can't be. He was kind. He was my friend. He's something else entirely now.

I traverse the room from one side to the next. I pivot, fingers drumming on my forearms. If I can't hold still, I'll stay busy. Opening my bathroom door I head to the sink. My skin is tight all over, like I'm an overheated grape. I could split apart any

second. Running cold water I splash my face. My braid flips over my shoulder, the end getting soaked in the basin. I leave it.

Why did he come back?The question catches me by surprise. Not because I didn't wonder earlier when I saw him by his car, but because it shouldn't be at the forefront of my mind now. I should focus on my situation; what I'll do now that Dad is gone.

The bedroom door slaps open. It hits the wall stopper, bouncing back, and Dominic catches it. I lock up by the sink with the water still running. We can see each other through the doorframe. "Did you know?" he growls, his massive form advancing, blocking me in the bathroom.

I arch my head high, my braid falling back behind my shoulder. It rains water down my legs. "Know what?" I match his angry tone.

"That your father was going to escape tonight?"

Don't react,I tell myself. I continue glaring up at him. I wonder if I can win this contest. I don't know what's at stake if I lose, but it can't be good. "No, I didn't."

Dominic leans closer. Our noses are an inch apart. He's quiet, hoping I'll breakdown under his intensity.He's done this before,I realize. It comes natural for him. He's an inked beast, ready to dominate anyone who challenges him. I'm almost done counting his eyelashes before he turns away. "If you didn't know, then why did you try to break out at the same time?"

I consider not responding.Give him something; he might go easier on you."I overheard the code orange stuff."

"And that, what, motivated you?"

“It was...” I flex my hands, too tired to fight my actual bitterness. “I saw a chance and took it. Can you blame me?” My chuckle is humorless. “I waited here all this time like a good little prisoner, and in the end, he runs off without me.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Not even a little bit.”

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He stares at me then wipes his whole face with a palm. Something is bothering him. “They're not going to believe you're clueless.”

He means his parents. A painful lump moves down my throat. “Why does that matter?”

His head hangs lower. He reminds me of a bull about to charge. “Think about it. You and him met twice a month. What are the chances he kept you in the dark?”

A little fingertip of terror traces up my neck. “I seriously don't know anything.”

“That's hard to believe, Laiken.”

I'm breathing too fast—my lungs ache. I remember the day I sat with Silas, his scratchy fingers squeezing my chin. He'd told me I had nothing to fear, because hurting me was pointless. I was only leverage for my dad if I was safe.

My safety net is gone.

“Dominic, why did they send you up here?” I ask warily.

“I'm responsible for getting the truth out of you,” he whispers. Flexing his hands, he surveys the bathroom. It's small, and his presence makes it a tomb. When he shuts us in, the sound of the door is a clap of thunder in my veins.

Fuck. Fuck, what's he planning to do?

“Sit there.” He points at the toilet.

Bravery has been my shield all my life. But that strength was powered by my belief in others being there to catch me if I fell. I had many people in the beginning; my sister, then after she was taken away, I had Dominic. Something took him, too. My last security was my father and, without him, my confidence has taken a dive.

Moving slowly, I shut the toilet lid. He watches me the whole time. When I sit on it, he leans against the sink, considering me until I begin to squirm. “What matters the most to you?” he whispers.

“Going home,” I say automatically.

“No, what matters to you here. In this room.”

I work my jaw, feeling lost. “I don't care about anything in here. It's just a bathroom.”

There's no color in his eyes, just hollowness. “Yes, you do. Think harder.”

Squinting, I scan the white walls, the mirror, the grand bathtub... and then I get to him. A flutter attacks my heart. I smother it so my smile can be unkind. “If you're asking if you matter to me, the answer is no.”

He doesn't react. I wish he had. “You're getting closer.”

My back goes straight as a rod. He means me. “Yes, I obviously matter to myself.”

With a half-nod, he pushes off the sink. “Turn around.”

“What are you going to do?” Nervously, I wrap my hands around my braid. Counting the elegantly woven rows helps relax me. It makes me think of my promise to Kara. I

wonder how long her hair is now, if she's beating me.

His attention goes to what I'm doing. "Turn around," he growls again.

My muscles obey his instruction. I adjust on the toilet seat, showing him my back. I'm waiting for him to speak. He doesn't, his pointed silence making my ears ring. I strain to hear him because I'm desperate for a hint at his plan.

I see his shadow grow on the wall in front of me. His shoulders shift. I catch his arms rising. Is he going to strangle me? Would he go that far? It's awful that I don't know what to expect from him anymore.

His fingers slide through my hair. They start at the cap of my skull, inching down with an immense patience reserved for glaciers moving through the sea. I'm hyper-aware because of my fear. His nails scrape the base of my head sinking in, a gentleness that's out of place in this tense room. "You let it grow so long," he whispers.

Warm breath caresses the curve of my ear. I shudder, but not from disgust. I want to lavish in hatred for Dominic. But my body has other ideas.

I've never been touched so intimately. He's doing nothing but brushing my hair with his fingers, and it's more enticing than if we'd kissed...than if we'd fucked. I know this, even though I've never done either.

Metal squeaks the cabinet over the sink. His arms are long enough that he can reach it without budging from my side. I start to turn my head, to check what he's doing, but his fingers bind into my hair and force me still. "What are you going to do?" I ask, my voice frail.

His presence behind me is an inferno. "I'm going to get the truth from you."

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My pulse quickens, it's a struggle to pull in a full breath. "Dominic, please."

"Shh." He strokes through my hair, undoing each loop of my braid like he's enjoying the experience. No rushing, just a luxurious sensation of him playing expertly with the brunette strands. All the while there's a cloak around us. Doom is tickling at the corners of my mind.

This feels good. So damn good.

And it shouldn't.

I close my eyes, but it's worse, because in the darkness his presence becomes more powerful. I'm transported to a place that consists of his scent, his warmth, his dominating aura, and nothing else. "I swear," I say, "I told you everything I know."

He glides his hand through my hair, the last loop tugging free. "I don't believe you." Blood returns to my scalp, as the once looped hair swings free. The sensation makes my cells tingle. I do this to myself before I shower. Being fully untied from top to bottom always makes me smile.

It's different when he does it to me. I'm exposed. Vulnerable. He sweeps my hair aside, leaving my neck bared. I wonder if he can see my goose bumps. "Last chance," he says, his tone flat. "Tell me what you know."

Theor elseis left unsaid.

"I don'tknowanything! Dominic, I—if you're going to hurt me, just do it." His grip

loosens. He's listening to me, I press on quickly. "Whatever you plan to do is pointless. You can't get blood from a stone." As I talk, my confidence grows. "Even if I did know, I'd never tell you. Got it? So you can chop off my hair." I'm sure that's what he's plotting—he took scissors from the cabinet. There was nothing else in there.

I think of Kara; my eyes throb. "Rip me apart until all that's left for you in this room is your own guilt," I say. "There's no answers for you here."

A heartbeat, then five, six passes. Dominic takes in a greedy breath. His hand vanishes from my hair. "You sound a little too eager about the idea of being torn to shreds."

I turn in place so I can see him. Oddly, there's no scissors in his grip. Was he faking me out? "I'm not suicidal."

"Then you must figure you've got a future to live for."

"Of course I do. Eventually I'll get out of here and make it back to Dad and the rest of my family."

His mild smirk reminds me of his mother's; the time she got me to talk to her when I was trying to stay quiet. "What if I told you we already have him?"

I stiffen, all the wind going out of me. "That's not possible." More than that, it makes no sense. Why—if they had him, what was Dominic spending his time fucking with me for?

"Caught him just before he got on a plane. Why would he risk flying, of all things?"

Confusion delays my response. "I—I don't know."

“Guess he was itching to burn the money he stole from us. Ready to take a vacation on a little island somewhere.”

My father stole their money? This deluge of info rattles me. “He didn't tell me anything about that,” I insist.

“It doesn't matter.” He checks his phone, reading something—his smile is sickening. He knows he's won. “Do you think my parents will care if I give my guys the okay to break his legs? Can't run, that's a bonus. We can't damage his hands, he definitely needs those to—”

“No!” I scream, launching myself at him. “Don't hurt him! Don't you dare!”

Dominic manages to wrap his arm around me without dropping his phone. In a clean motion, he pins me chest first against the door's full-length mirror. His beard scratches along my temple, his whisper lava-hot. “I'll tell them to back off, but only if you come clean. Right now. And tell me everything about the plan you two had.”

“Okay,” I sob, going limp in his grip. “I... I did know he was going to escape.” Salty tears well in my eyes as the information floods out of me. “I was supposed to go with him. He never said to where. I didn't even know how he'd get me out!”

“And the money?”

“He never said a word about taking any money! I had no clue about a plane or an island or any of that, either. It's the truth, Dominic. Please believe me. Please, don't hurt him!”

I'm a sniffling mess when I lift my head. Through blurry eyes I see Dominic's stare in the mirror. There's regret in his expression, guilt in the edges of his subtle frown.

He sees me looking, and all his emotion melts away. He backs up as he releases me.
“You aren't lying, are you? You really don't know where he is.”

My breath catches. “Wait,” I say thickly. I rub the tears away with the jittery heels of my hands. “Are you saying you don't have him?”

“We're still searching. This was an attempt to get you to reveal his hiding spot.”

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I suck in great gulps of air. “You... you tricked me.” My head is pulsing, a migraine grappling me in a vice. “How could you do that? I was terrified, I was—I kept picturing him all bloody and hurt because you lied to me!” I slam my hands into his chest. The impact shakes my joints. For my effort, he's motionless as a boulder. “You piece of shit,” I seethe. “How could you hurt me like this?”

He holds my stare boldly. “I had to.”

“No. No one has to do something like this. Only monsters.”

Dominic flinches. He towers over me, but when I look at the black centers of his eyes, there's emptiness beyond the void. His muscles are a shell; the strength is purely on the surface. I think... if I tried... I could knock him over.

Something has broken inside of him.

Something I fear can't be fixed.

Swallowing loudly, he steadies himself. “If it was someone else interrogating you, someone other than me, this would have been worse.”

I press my molars together, searching for something to spit back. All I find is the tiny rational voice in my head. He did this himself... as a kindness. My limbs go slack. The righteous fury abandons me.

“But you're right.” He rips the door open. His final words reach me just before he exits my room. “I am a monster.”

- Chapter 13 -

Laiken

It must have been decided I'm not worth drilling for information anymore because, the next morning, I'm not locked inside my room. I think Dominic told them that I've got no idea about my dad's location. I want to ask him about it, but when I spotted him in the house at breakfast, he avoided me. He's worse than the deer in the preserve; he slips off effortlessly, leaving me behind.

You'd think, considering how awful he's been since he got back, that I'd be happy to stay out of his way. But I'm not. I can't let go of the sorrow in his eyes when I accused him of being a monster.

I'm walking in the garden when a maid chases me down. "Master Silas wants to see you," she says, breathing like she's run a mile. My belly twists, but I make my way back to the mansion. On the way I see an array of guards posted. They're everywhere, and at their sides are Dobermans with black, bullet-shaped heads. The Bradleys aren't messing around.

I knock on the door of the study, and for a second I'm twelve again, about to face a ghoulish man in his domain. The door opens, his tired voice speaking, "Come in."

Silas is on his way back to his chair when I enter. I shut the door, my ears straining as the heavy silence settles. "You wanted to see me."

He drops into his chair with a groan. His thick gray suit hides his body; I believe he's lost weight this past year. "Sit. Let's talk."

Nervously, I place myself on the stump. It's smaller than I remember.

He studies me with his long fingers pressed to one side of his face. “When you tried to run last night, did you think it through?”

I look him fearlessly in the eye. “What was there to think about?”

His lids widen to their full limit for a single second. “Still so much fire in you. Even in the best-case scenario, if you'd gotten off the property, what was the next step? Going to the police? No,” he says, waving the idea away. “They'll never believe we kept you trapped here. They'll want proof, and no one here will give you that.”

I scowl openly. “But I'd have gotten away from you.”

He watches me, his fingers rubbing at his temple. His hand drops to the ever-present handkerchief in his pocket. I think he's about to cough, but he just plays with the fabric. “Did you assume that because Joseph is gone that the rest of your family is, too? That we don't have them in our grasp?”

My tongue flattens on the roof of my mouth. I had hoped that, actually. “How do I know you're not lying?”

“You don't,” he says, biting off each word. “I think you're a nice enough girl that the assumption will keep you from anymore reckless escape attempts.” Silas twists the tip of the handkerchief, like he's pantomiming choking someone's tiny neck. I fight the urge to clasp at my own. “Dominic claims you weren't involved in Joseph's trickery. In fact, he made it sound like you're angry you were left behind.”

I wonder what Dominic said exactly. “Yes,” I begin, picking my words. “Not many people would appreciate being abandoned.”

His chuckle gives me goose bumps. “Fair. It's awful, him dumping us a second time.

Thanks to his efforts our company was growing again. Joseph acted like an eager worker bee, before playing us like fools.”

My hands wrap around each other as I shift on the stump. “Can I ask how he got away?”

“Why, so you can try the same method?”

“I wouldn't,” I say firmly. “Especially not if you have my mom, or my siblings, like you said.”

He purses his lips. “You're sly, like your father.”

I come very close to saying thank you. It's a real compliment, if you ask me.

His head swings side to side. “No, I won't tell you. I don't have a reason to.” He reclines in his chair, steeping his fingers. “Annie wanted you lashed to a pole and beaten, you know. She was ready to record it and send it to every employee on our roster, all in the hopes Joseph would see, then come back to save you.”

All the color drains from my cheeks. I'm sick from the casual way he tells me this. “That's... why would she...”

“Because she's furious. But more than that, she's helpless.” He shrugs, shaking his head. “What do we do now? Your father drained most of our liquid cash. To stay afloat, we're going to need to sneak money from our investors while hoping they don't notice.” He laughs sardonically. “Our competitors crumbled because your father made them look weak. The second anyone finds out he did the same thing to us, we'll fade away.” He squints at me. “You don't care what happens to my business, do you?”

There's no right answer. I bite my tongue, waiting for him to move on. Silas peers at me with his eyebrows pressing closer to the middle of his forehead.

“Do you care what happens to you?” he asks.

It's too close to what Dominic asked me while he pretended he was going to chop off my hair. I nod multiple times.

He spins his chair so he can look at the far wall. “My wife has a temper. When she's directionless, she doesn't know how to use it. And what's making her soup set right now, is feeling like our bank empire is going to disappear. It almost did the first time we lost your father. All our work, our suffering, made redundant.”

The thudding of my heart is so violent I worry it'll smash my rib cage.

“My advice?” His smile holds no empathy for me. “Find a way to make her happy before she aims her violence at you.”

I DON'T REMEMBER LEAVING the study. I'm too consumed by how my world is shattering. The pieces are breaking off in a way that blinds me like rain. I can't think of how to put them back together again; the shape of them is wrong.

What's happening to the Bradleys' company has nothing to do with me. But the affects of their failures will be felt; Silas has made that very clear. Over the years, Annie has kept her distance. I thought, at the start, that she was desperate to connect with me. But I must have been wrong, because she quickly began ignoring me. The only conflict we had came from the time she'd slapped me.

My guess? Dad made their business bloom, like they'd hoped, so she had other things

to focus on. Good things; the problem of more money and more bank branches. Now, if Silas is to be believed, the good times are over...

unless I can find a way to stall things.

But I don't know where to start, I think, wandering the halls blindly. I don't know enough about their company to create a damn solution. Crossing into a new section of the house, I see two people at the hall's intersection: a guard, and Dominic.

I'm torn between bolting and trying to talk to him. His eyes, as cold as ever, find mine. My temptation to flee grows... but then I hesitate. I don't know the ins and outs of the business. But HE definitely does.

That settles it. I can't let him scare me away. He's my first hint at a solution, a way to keep Annie happy and save my own skin. Breathing in, I march towards him. He watches me approach and says something quietly to the guard. The other man glances at me before vanishing around the corner.

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It's just Dominic and me now.

“What do you want?” he asks, before I can speak. There's a window behind him. The light makes his edges glow, his front-half sharper with shadows.

“I want to know more about your family's company.”

“Why?” His eyebrows inch up.

I lick my lower lip—he watches me do it. “It's the only way for me to help you and your parents out.”

His mouth glides into a bemused smile. “You want to helpus?” In a smooth motion, the kind meant for dancers, not muscled bodies like his, he blocks me against the wall. “The people who've trapped you here? People that threatened you, controlled you, and kept you from your loved ones?”

Over his shoulder I see the green wallpaper with the red flowers I've counted just for fun. His presence makes the hallway treacherous. How is he capable of turning a sunny stretch of carpet and windows into a dungeon?

His hand rams onto the wall next to my cheek. I jump, but I don't waver. I can't. “You don't need to remind me. I'm not doing this because I like my situation.”

“Then why?”

“Because it's the only way to keep your mom off my back.”

His eyes flinch. “Who told you that?”

“Your dad. He said I need to make her happy, or she'll start taking her moods out on me.”

The bridge of his nose is full of grooves; they smooth away. Dominic's stare goes elsewhere. From my angle, I can see his collarbones cutting through his fitted charcoal shirt. When he inhales, his broad chest swells, nearly grazing mine. His scent swims into my nose. Once, he smelled like parchment... like books. That's been replaced by grass, and something musky; the way stags smell when they're rucking for a mate in the middle of a forest.

He's looking at me again; was I zoning out? “You're hoping you'll come up with a plan so successful, we don't need your dad back.”

I shrug. “If we can do anything that brings in more money, it's enough, I think.”

Dominic smirks. “We?”

“I'd do it alone if I could. It's easier with your help.”

“Tempting,” he says, backing away. “How do I know this isn't just a way for you to help your father stay hidden?”

“You don't, but would it matter? You want your parents happy too, or why else bother chasing me last night? You'd have let me go if you didn't care what they think.”

His eyes narrow. “I told you. Stop assuming you know me, or what I want.” He turns partially, the sunlight illuminating him so that it splits him in two. He's impossibly gorgeous. Just looking at him turns my knees to jelly, and I curse myself for it.

“We're not on the same side.”

My chin inches upwards. “But we can be, Dominic!”

That beautiful devil watches me for a fraction too long. “No. We can't.”

I stare at his back until he vanishes around the corner. Without his company, the light seems brighter... cleaner. But everything also becomes stale. When he's near me, it's like a fog is lifted. So why the hell do I want to punch him in the nose?

Dammit, I think, flustered by how he turned me down. I start to pivot on the ball of one foot, working to figure out my next steps, except I don't have any.

Dominic is still my best option. I just have to convince him that helping me is helping him, too. He doesn't think we can be on the same side. I'm sure he's wrong. He was my confidant once, my savior. He can be that again.

I'm determined to prove it.

- Chapter 14 -

Dominic

I march across the carpet at top speed, as if I'm running from some cataclysmic event.

But just like an avalanche, running from my reaction to Laiken is impossible.

Turning her down should have been easy.

It wasn't.

For some reason, in spite of my common sense telling me to keep my distance, I'm instinctually pulled to her. Even now, when I can't see her, I feel like I know where she is. I could close my eyes and find her in the dark. Her heart and her warmth calls to me.

It's distracting me from what I need to focus on. When she told me she had to find a way to keep my mother happy, I was sympathetic. I know too well what it's like to be on the other end of her wrath. But I meant what I said; we're not on the same side.

Yet her comments made me realize that her situation isn't so different from mine. We have similar goals right now, though our methods for reaching them are probably different. I don't know what she was hoping to achieve by asking me for information about my family company. I doubt that anything I could tell her would change her fate.

For all I know, six years have passed and she's still the same wild girl from the woods. I don't know what she's been doing. I never came home during the holidays. All my information came from the occasional phone call and an extremely rare meeting with my father. Bringing up Laiken to him was nerve-racking.

He'd told me a lot of vague, hand-waving bits about how she still had all her limbs, nothing major having happened to her. It was a fucked up way to tell me she was fine.

I clung to every tidbit that had to do with her like a madman.

Maybe that's why it's so hard to be around her now. It's been six years but it feels like we're back to square one.

Except were not.

The way she shivered while I was leaning over her last night... how intoxicating her hair felt wound around my hands... We've never been in a situation like that. Our childlike innocence is long gone.

Focus on what you need to do, I tell myself angrily. Laiken really is dangerously distracting. I go through all the details I have as I walk faster. No one knows anything about Joseph's location. Everyone we've talked to hasn't been much help. The security at the complex has no footage, Joseph clearly hacked the system to keep his escape invisible.

The car he took was found early this morning, only ten miles away. He abandoned it in the middle of nowhere. Him, and our money, have both dissipated into the ether.

I need someone to tell me what to do next. I'd prefer it be my father, but I saw him leave this morning. Much as I don't want to admit it, I have to talk to my mother. I

wouldn't say that I'm afraid of her. Fear isn't the right word.

What I have is a massive sense of self-hatred whenever I'm in her presence. My mother has never hidden her disappointment in me. And after what happened yesterday with Joseph, I know I'm on her shit list.

She didn't want me coming home. I wonder if she'll make me leave now, convince my father that this is a waste of time. It doesn't matter that I took control last night, interrogating Laiken like I assured them both I would. To my mother I'm a useless piece of trash.

I suspect I always will be.

Squeezing my fists, I force myself to pull it together. I'm stronger than this self-doubt is making me out to be. My instructors in school drilled me, along with the rest of the student body to learn how to focus and disconnect from stress, so that we could perform.

I channel that as her bedroom comes into view. On the small table outside the room is a fresh vase of daffodils. The door is mostly open; I tap on the doorframe, alerting her to my presence. "Mom?"

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She's standing by the window. The curtains are open and the sun makes her shimmer like a ghost. She doesn't turn at the sound of my voice. I can see her hands where they wrap around her biceps from behind. They're digging into her skin; she knows I'm here.

I wait a second then force myself to cross into the room. I don't go farther than that before she finally speaks. "Why do you think you can come in here and talk to me?"

I steel myself, keeping my voice calm. "I know I messed up." Admitting it cuts me to the bone. I'm ashamed of my mistakes. "I just want to do whatever I can to make everything right. Tell me how I can help."

"You want to know how you can help?" she asks coolly. Her hips kick to one side then she turns to eyeball me with disdain. I might as well be a cockroach at the moment. "Can you go back in time, prevent me from making the mistake of bringing you into this world?"

Her words sting. I think they won't because I've heard them so many times, but they always do. "I can't change the past, but I can change the present. Just tell me what you want, Mom. Do you want me out there looking for Joseph? Do you want me at the company downtown with Dad, fixing things there?"

She laughs, and there's no humor to it. "There's nothing you can do to make this better, not unless you have some secret way to drag Joseph back to my feet, kicking and screaming. Do you have that, Dominic? Do you have a way?" She advances on me and I tense up. She's a tall woman, but I'm still much bigger. I looked down on her and hold my breath.

She watches me like an owl considering a mouse when it's already eaten enough. Her arms uncross; she heads back to the window. "I don't know how I can trust you with anything. The least you can do is try to keep us from losing Laiken as well. Keep an eye on her. Don't let her off the estate. If she escapes like her father did, not even Silas will stop me from tearing you to shreds."

I swallow, considering how to respond. "I'll figure something out," I say. She doesn't even shrug. She gazes out the window and ignores me.

Our conversation is over. I think about a hundred things I could say to her, things I always wished I could. The names I could call her, the ways I would scream and shout and force her to accept that I exist, that I'm here, and I'm worthy of her attention.

I retreat through the door and close it partially behind me. Something moves at the corner of my eye. I jerk my head up, honing in on whoever is watching me.

It's Laiken.

She's standing nearby, not quite blending in with the wallpaper. She startles when my eyes fix on her. My heart instantly beats faster. "What are you doing here?" I ask, more sharply than is needed.

She doesn't waiver, she approaches me, reaching for my hand. I realize she wants to get us away from my mother's room. I avoid her grip, leading us around the corner. When we're out of earshot of the bedroom, Laiken jumps in front of me. "I heard everything," she says.

My eyebrows fly to my hairline. "Everything?"

Her lips part and she shakes her head a few times. "Okay, not everything. But I heard her talking to you, the tone of her voice. She's mad, isn't she? What did you do?"

God, what a question! “What didn't I do?” I respond, shrugging. Some of my armor rusts away and I feel my sadness seeping through. I recover as quick as I can hope and she didn't see.

“I did hear one thing clearly,” she says. Looking me in the eye she flashes a devious smile. “She wants you to keep an eye on me, right? That won't be easy if I try to avoid you. I'm pretty fast. I think you saw me in action. I could hide in a ton of places on this estate and make your job really hard.”

She's something else. I love the hint of playfulness in her angled grin. The way she folds her hands behind her back, leaning towards me with her head tilted. It's... refreshing. I've lived my life under a black cloud. Around Laiken, the sun peeks through, breaking apart some of the storm.

I run my fingers through my hair, chuckling dryly. “I do remember how fast you were. I also remember I was faster.”

Her confident grin doesn't even twitch. “I guess. But if you take my deal, I won't make you chase me at all. I'll make your job real easy.”

Combining the thought of her and the word easy thrills me to my core. My muscles bunch up, I'm tempted to catch her right now, right here. Just to see what she'd do.

Looking her over, I finally give a short, but real, laugh. “You don't give up, do you?”

“No,” she says, deadly serious. “I never have.”

I pull a sharp, short breath through my nose. “Here's the deal. If you're keen to hold still, letting me keep you in my sight, I'm inclined to tell you whatever you want to know about my family's business. Who knows, maybe you'll come up with something that makes my parents happy. We'd both like that, I think.” Her eyes light up—I hold

up a hand. “However, we're still not on the same side. I'm not going to quit searching for your father.”

A spark of relief brightens her smile. “Still, I want to thank you.”

“Don't thank me. I'm getting involved for my own benefit.”

I say it like it's plainly obvious.

Why do I feel like I'm trying to convince myself?

- Chapter 15 -

Laiken

“I’m guessing your daddidn’t wake up one day and just decide to open a bank.”

We’re sitting in the library. He looks out of place, like the chair is too small for him. When he was a teenager, he could have fit three of himself there and had room to spare.

“My grandfather started it, not Dad,” he says. “He built it from scratch. It was amazingly hard work, I imagine. Tech has made everything easier.” He considers me, suddenly curious. “Did you ever learn what Joseph did for my father?”

Playing with my braid, I nod. “System hacking. He explained it before I really understood. I had to research it myself to grasp the details.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “You researched it?”

“Don’t act so shocked. You were the one who impressed on me how little I knew about modern things.” I wave my fingers in a set of air-quotes. “With all these books, and all my free time, I did what I had to.”

What I don’t say is how I clung desperately to his instructions, because they’d come from him. I’d trusted Dominic. I’d believed his every word. If he thought I had to read about computers or social events or dinner etiquette, than I did it. Sometimes regretfully, but I never left a book unfinished.

His full lips push together then go soft. I stare too hard—I'm eager to see any hint of something soft about his existence. "You know what hacking means," he says. "Did you know the extent of how he utilized it for Silas?"

I squeeze my hair. "Not exactly. But I don't need to. I just want to get the ins and outs of the basic—"

"He stole information." Dominic sounds like a dragon purring. "Anyone that they could blackmail, they did. Anyone they could manipulate, they did. If there was a rival bank handling foreign transactions, your father leaked their clients' info until that company shut down for sloppy security. What he did gave Silas a shortcut from the middle to the top." Hunching forward, he sneers. "You can't replicate that."

His deluge of info throws me off. I knew that my dad was doing questionable stuff, bad enough that he couldn't go to the police for help, but this... this is insane. "He really blackmailed people?" I ask.

"Silas did the blackmailing, Joseph provided the ammunition. Neither of them has clean hands." He pushes his muscled shoulders up. "It's not uncommon to do most of your deals in the shadows. It's modern day assassination."

"My dad didn't kill anyone," I snap. "He's not a damn murderer."

Dominic avoids my eyes. His fingers spread on the table, the tips white as he presses them against the wood. "You're confident he wasn't responsible for anyone's deaths? Imagine an investor balancing on the edge of ruin. Your dad's tricks destroy his savings, his spirit, and his life. His wife leaves him. His family turns their backs. Is it hard to picture someone brought so low ending their own life?" The whole time he's talking, he's putting his weight on the table. I can't look away. I'm holding my breath, my lungs warning me to quit it and provide some oxygen.

Of course I can see the awful picture he's painted.

But I don't want to.

The burning shifts upwards, attacking my eyes until wetness builds. I barely keep the tears at bay. My head is full of images—my father and mother laughing, my brother asleep, my sister chasing me in the woods. I've been brought low. I know how devastating it is to lose it all. But to take my own life, I don't know if I could. Wouldn't everyone I love be terribly sad?

I start to shake; I hug myself to stop it. “Do you think my family is okay?”

Dominic puts his hands on the chair's arms. “Don't waste time worrying about them. Worry about yourself.”

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A helpless smile crawls over my face. I sniffle knowing a single drop of water has run down my cheek. "My heart's big enough to do both."

He fixates on me, noticing how upset I am. I wish I could hide it better but everything he says is true, and all of it is horrific. I can't meet his stare; I look at my feet under the table.

His chair scrapes, as if he's about to stand. My pulse speeds up as I think about him circling the table to comfort me, to curl me in his solid arms and hold me. I haven't been held like that since I was small. Suddenly I'm desperate for it, even from him.

Dominic doesn't rise to his feet. He balls his hands on the table, inching them towards me. He could reach if he stretched even a little. He doesn't. "Your heart can't help you get home," he whispers solemnly.

A surprised laugh erupts from me. Wiping my eyes, I smile at him with all my teeth showing. "You're right. I'll need my brain if I want to get back there." Home. Hearing the word gives me new strength.

His hands remain on the table. I'm close enough to them to see that, for as rough as he acts, his skin looks smooth. Like polished stone. Before I think it over, curiosity controls me. I place my fingertips on the back of his left hand.

Static weaves through my skin. Dominic sucks in a wild breath, wrenching away from me. He's wide-eyed, his nostrils flared, his lips twisting into a silent gasp. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

I shake my head over and over until I'm disoriented. "Sorry, I just—wanted to see how your hands felt." Admitting it makes my skin boil. I bite my lip, digging my nails into my palms. Fuck, that was weird. I'm weird. What was I thinking?

Wrapping his chiseled arms over his chest, he keeps watching me. "Let's get back to work."

"Yes, okay. Right." Taking a deep breath, I sigh. "I'm not a hacker like my dad. But you went to school for programming, right?"

"I can't do what Joseph did. Not even close."

"Well, what the hell did Silas do before he roped my dad in? You said your grandfather started the company, no way he was a hacker."

"No. He was in the Korean war, a sergeant." He pauses, gathering his thoughts. "Things were... different then. Old school handshake deals made over whiskey in a bar, or at private events."

Private events? I scan my brain, digging through all the books I've inhaled over the years. "You guys have a ballroom here," I say, my voice growing more excited. "Your mom has forced me to parade around in it before with your dad's co-workers. Why don't we host a party, a huge event, like your grandfather would have?"

He frowns to his full capacity. "There's a reason the company didn't transform from middling to an empire until Joseph. Tech sabotage is powerful. A tray of champagne glasses and polite conversation won't grow Bradley Banks."

"We don't have to escalate the company's growth! Just stall its decline." I nod to myself, consumed by the idea. "It could work. People meeting, talking, drinking until they agree to bring their business into your dad's hands." I jump to my feet, hurrying

over to a shelf of books. I don't check to see if he follows me. I'm possessed by hope...

by the memory of a perfect cabin.

My home.

“Like this,” I say, yanking down a pine-green book. I flip through it as the scent of paper fills my nose. Inside are drawings of women in grand dresses, men half-bowing in dark suits. “It can be as simple as this, Dominic. It could...”

My eyes flick upwards. He's standing over me between the rows of shelves containing thousands of novels. This place is always quiet but right now it's bottom-of-a-lake deafening.

There's something in his eyes that takes me a moment to place. I haven't spent much time around guys my own age, but I'm not naïve. I never needed someone to explain what hormones are, or what sex is. I had a hazy idea when I was twelve. The books in this room filled in the details. Beyond that, my own body was a wonderful teacher. I'm acquainted with the demanding throb between my thighs.

I feel it now as Dominic watches me.

He looks me up and down, reminding me of the way he stared as we hovered by his car yesterday. That single moment feels so long ago. “When I first met you, you were so resistant to the idea of learning about things like this. And now, you've managed to sit down and figure out a solution before I could,” he says.

The glow in his eyes is admiration. He respects that I've spent years learning whatever I could, all because of his initial advice. I'm pulled in by a peek at the boy that I remember. The enthusiasm in his face mirrors what he had when he was a teen.

Before time and suffering and who knows what else transformed him into the man in front of me.

It's the first time he's really spoken about our past. As I step closer, my hair brushes my lower back. It sparks a thought. "Dominic," I whisper. "Do you remember saving me?"

He breathes faster. His obsidian pupils shoot to my braid, then back to me. Right then, my soul lightens. I'm sure he hasn't forgotten but I want him to say it. It would be easy to answer me, so what's holding him back?

"Something's happened to you," I say, reaching up to touch his jaw. Tension forms at the corners of his eyes. My hand freezes in midair—I'm anxious to touch him, worried it will shatter the moment. I think of myself as wild but it's Dominic who's acting like an animal ready to bolt. "You don't have to tell me everything, but please, I need to know."

He opens his mouth; I think he's going to answer my questions, remove this false but terrifying mask he's been wearing. He cups my shoulders, his grip as present as gravity.

Then he kisses me.

I always dreamed my first would be with Dominic. It took me sometime after he left to recognize my young, slowly growing feelings for him were more than friendship. He became a fantasy to me. More than once I dreamed about him rescuing me again, only this time, he was a full-grown man and not a skinny child.

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The real him is more than my imagination was capable of conjuring. His palms move up to hold my face. He tilts his head to kiss me deeper. A thud fills my ears. I dropped the book. Neither of us cares.

Deep down, I know I shouldn't be doing this with him. Not until I understand what he wants, what he's been through. He might as well be a stranger to me and here I am, giving myself to him in the middle of an empty library.

Thick fingers play through my hair. One makes a fist, tugging my braid until my scalp tingles. The sensation drives a cold image into my mind—Dominic catching me from behind as I tried to flee.

Your heart can't help you get home.

“Wait,” I say, forcing myself out of his grasp.

Dominic watches me with his chest rising rapidly. The red, burning coals haven't left his eyes. I retreat a step; he follows. “I can't wait,” he whispers, his voice husky. “All this time, Laiken, I've thought about you. I want you more than you could ever understand. More than I understand.”

His raw admission steals my strength. I come close to falling into his arms, but before I do, I see the book lying on the floor. “Dominic, no.” The rejection cracks my heart. I see it hurts him too. “You were right earlier. I can't use my heart, I have to use my brain to get out of this mess, to get myself... my family... home. Letting you close to me, when I don't even understand who you are anymore, is reckless. What are you hiding from me?”

His body coils like a spring. I think he's going to tackle me, but he stays where he is, his every vein bulging. My eyes slide over his hard abdominals that push through his shirt. That's when I see the massive shape of his erection flexing through his jeans.

I've never seen a man naked before. I'm a virgin, through and through.

Once, last summer, there were some landscapers working in the yard. One of them was my age, his hooded eyes making his intentions known as he stared at me whenever I was around.

He got me alone one evening and tried to kiss me. He didn't care if I said no. He thought I'd be easy. I wasn't. After I bit his forearm, he left me alone. Word got around and no one else tried to approach me after that.

I want so badly to see Dominic in all his glory.

"I can't tell you the things you're asking about," he whispers, gritting his teeth like he's being stabbed.

"You can't tell me now, or ever?"

He closes his eyes. His lashes are thick and beautiful. "I'm not sure." He opens his mouth, shuts it. When he looks at me again, some of the icy cold has returned to his expression. "No, I definitely can't ever tell you."

"Then this," I say, motioning between us. "Can never happen again."

He laughs, the brittle sound echoes through the room. "You're going to have your work cut out for you, do you understand that?"

"What are you talking about?" I didn't think he'd laugh at my threat.

“You want me to say no to you?” A wickedness moves through his voice and enters my blood. It sticks there, making me shake with an excitement that feels wrong. “Fine, I’ll do my best to hold back when you’re near me. But are you sure you’re going to be able to do the same? Living under the same roof and seeing me constantly is going to take a toll.”

I’m stunned by how he twists my words around on me. “I’m not an animal, I can control myself.”

“That’s good,” he says, and though he doesn’t come any closer, I feel his presence as if it’s rubbing over my whole body. “Because if you wanted me as much as I want you right now, this would be impossible to prevent. So thank goodness,” he chuckles, turning away, “that you’re strong because I’m not. The first hint I get that you’re about to break and to give yourself to me,” He smiles. I can taste the kiss that we experienced just minutes ago. “I’m going to make you mine.”

- Chapter 16 -

Dominic

My own threat hangs heavy on my heart long after I part ways with Laiken.

Our kiss unlocked something chained inside of me. It's more than an animal, more than a feeling. There's no one alive that understands the sacrifices I've made. Inside of me is a damn black hole. The part of every person that is pure, that goes cockeyed when they think about happiness? It's missing from me. For the past year, I was sure it never existed in the first place.

She changed all of that.

When we kissed, the nostalgic time we'd spent together came rushing back. I'm not crazy enough to think that anything she can do to me would heal the gaping wound in my psyche. She can't make me whole. But I don't need Laiken to be my salvation. I can settle for her being my drug - something to neutralize the bitter acid swimming in my veins.

Even if it was brief, she brought out a sensation that I thought was beyond me. Kissing her was a mistake. I know that. But it's a mistake I plan to make again.

I wasn't kidding when I told her that the first whiff of desire I catch on her, I'm going to pounce. Maybe I'm just fucked up, but the idea of chasing her is exciting. I can't wait to do it.

Part of my plan involves moving forward with the one she concocted. Except every time I try to get a hold of my father, it turns out he's not around. This isn't strange. When I was young he was rarely home as well.

I've never known him as anything less than a workaholic. What bothers me is that he isn't telling me what he's doing to try and patch the leak left behind by Joseph. I'm left in the dark to knock on his door, call his phone, and pray that I won't have to run Laiken's idea past my mother.

My father and her are two sides of the same coin. Neither has ever embraced me the way families in feel-good movies do. My father keeps his disgust barely hidden beneath a veneer of strained patience. He's capable of being cordial with me. Annie isn't.

She wears her emotions for me on her well-tailored sleeves. She's never said a good word about me. I've always been a disappointment to her. More than once, I've caught her looking through me, seeing a life in which I don't exist.

Those moments are the only time she graces me with a smile.

That's why I need to prove myself.

I need to show her and the world that my existence matters.

Why the fuck isn't my father answering his phone? I wonder furiously. My car roars out of the driveway. In the rearview mirror I glimpse the estate behind me. It didn't feel like home when I first left it years ago. I was never homesick for it. When I returned, it didn't feel anymore welcoming.

All Laiken wants is to go home, I think as I pull through the wave shaped gates. I wonder what that feels like. Going home.

Thinking about her brings up the delicious memory of our single kiss in the library. I shudder, slamming my foot on the gas pedal and ripping down the long road that leads to the highway. My estate is in a very private location. I'm not sure if it was my father's choice to stay here after my grandpa died, or if it was just easier to remain in the one place he's always known. He can definitely afford to move anywhere he wants.

As I speed down the pavement, the oak trees blur along my peripheral vision. The green reminds me of the highlights in Laiken's eyes. It's shameful, but I especially like how bright the colors stand out when she's staring up at me with uncertainty. It's thrilling to make someone as confident as her breath faster in my presence.

I didn't used to be like this. The boy I was before I went off to boarding school is less than a memory. He's an imaginary figure in a pretend world that I have no idea how to get back to. I wonder if Laiken does.

I take the exit that brings me close to my father's flagship bank downtown. Most of the work is done here - the real, on-paper-number-crunching-bottom-dollar stuff. No one else knows what Joseph was doing with my father's blessing. The inner workings of that side of our company would destroy us if they got out.

I have to appreciate Joseph's self-preservation, honestly. He knows he can't go to the police. Not unless he wants to end up in a jail cell, and if he's going to be trapped like that, he's smart enough to know that he's better off working under our thumb.

It wasn't enough to keep them from running a second time, though.

I'm so furious with myself. I feel like an idiot, knowing that he played me. Played all of us, I remind myself, to try and soothe my shame. It doesn't work.

I park my car in the covered lot reserved for my father and his most important

colleagues. Slamming the door, I lock it and rush to the elevator. I'm hurrying, and it's about more than getting to my father so I can convince him to host a party. No, I feel the string that links back to that damn woman. I'm longing for her like an addict, furious that I'm here and not at her side. The sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can get back to her. I want to spend every second I can breaking her down.

I'm consumed with the idea of making her mine.

I know I can't have her properly. A woman like her is too wild to be content staying trapped in a mansion forever, even if it's with me. I don't want to think about it, but I know that eventually, her and I will have to part ways. Whether that's before or after I find her father remains to be seen.

“Mr. Bradley,” the receptionist says when I exit the elevator. She jumps to her feet behind the crescent shaped white desk, glancing at my father's office door. “He just came back from a meeting, he doesn't want to be disturbed. Can I leave him a message for you or—”

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I don't respond. I just knock on the door loudly. "It's me," I say. There's no response. I wait with my arms folded, not planning to budge until he talks to me.

The receptionists stares like I'm on fire as she sits back in her chair. She's acting cagey, eyes darting to me. When I look her way, she investigates the ceiling then the papers on her desk, like she's doing important work. This isn't because I stormed inside the office. She's fidgeting, a woman ready to dart into the elevator to get as far from me as possible.

She's finally heard the news. Someone has spoiled the broth.

Now she's afraid of me.

I remind myself that I can never allow Laiken to know what I did.

I wouldn't survive her looking at me like that.

The door opens, and my father waves me inside. "Get in here," he snaps.

I follow him in and shut the door behind me. "Why aren't you answering my calls?"

"Because I am in the middle of figuring out how to handle the loose ends that Joseph left behind. So unless you've brought him with you in the trunk of your car, make this fast."

"I don't have him, but I do have an idea. Something that will help keep this company from taking a nosedive."

He sits in his padded leather chair and pours himself a glass from an expensive looking bottle of whiskey. I cringe at seeing him drink. I know how quickly he can spiral, and I know what happens when he spirals. “Tell me you're amazing idea,” he chuckles.

“It's not my idea, it's Laiken's.” My dad lifts his eyebrows, but he let's me continue. “She thinks we should try to have a party. A big event where we can wine and dine some current clients and some new ones, ensuring that we raise our bottom line and prevent the shareholders from scampering off in fear.”

My father swirls his glassed then sips it. “This is her idea, you said?”

“All her.”

“That doesn't make you suspicious?”

“Why would it? Her idea is good, and right now, it's all we have.”

He drains the glass, closing his eyes as he enjoys the burn of the liquid. “You know she's doing this to save her own skin, right? I told her she had to make Annie happy, this is what she comes up with.”

“It doesn't matter to me why she's doing it. What matters to me is that it helps us. And it's going to.”

He considers me with his eyes glittering like dark jewels in the deep hollows of his face. The years have not been kind to him. His skin has sunk into the deep grooves of his cheekbones and every other place it can as the meat beneath erodes away. He reminds me of a dried out piece of fruit.

“Do you plan to help her with this?” he asks, his voice soft and thoughtful.

I nod my head. “I was going to spearhead it. It's easier for me to arrange things than her. I doubt many of the staff will listen to her instructions. But they will listen to me.”

“Of that I'm sure of,” he says, laughing dryly. “Everyone on our estate has heard what happened in Switzerland last year.

I tense up, hoping not to have this conversation now, preferably ever.

“They're terrified of you, you know,” he whispers.

I keep my voice steady. “Good.”

He watches me for a long minute. Refilling his glass, he takes a quick swallow, smacks his thin lips. “Thinking about that whole mess, I wonder if we can even get your uncle to show his face at this party. His connections go very far. If our hope is to get new blood, he could easily bring some in.”

“I can't ask him,” I blurt, shaking my head. I'm losing my cool as I imagine seeing my uncle Vahn's face again. “He hates me, you know he does.”

“And rightfully so,” my father says, talking more to his drink than to me. “I understand the meaning of diplomacy. I'll get someone else to reach out to him. You, meanwhile, should head back and begin the process of arranging this event. It's not worth doing if it won't be done right.”

Excitement trickles up towards my heart. It makes it pump faster. “I'll get right on it,” I say, turning towards the door. As I leave, I think about how much of my life has been this: me visiting my father in a place where he's powerful, where he can fit in his chair and stare down his nose at me. A scene that's repeated so often in my memories, you could switch them around and not tell which happened when.

Uncountable times I've told my father I would do what he's demanded. It should bother me more. It's hard to be upset when I'm getting what I want.

- Chapter 17 -

Laiken

“For the last time, I have no idea why you're asking me this.”

The woman stares at me like I have two heads. She holds up the sheet covered in square blocks of color. “Because someone has to pick the color of the table cloths, and I was told that person was you.”

“Table cloths for what?” I ask in exasperation. “And who would tell you to ask me anything?”

“I did,” Dominic says. I turn and see him standing in the kitchen doorway. His shoulder is propped against the white frame, and with his sandy brown shirt touching the paint, he reminds me of a snowcapped mountain. His eyes stick to me, refusing to move even an inch in any other direction. He's removed all pretenses about his hunger for me, and knowing that, while being under his hot stare, makes me squeeze my thighs together.

The woman sighs, flapping the color board at Dominic. “Sir, she won't pick a tablecloth color.”

A look passes between the two of them. “Wait, is this for what I think it's for?”

The side of his mouth pulls up sharply. “I talked to my father, he says we should move forward with the party.”

I'm blown away. The burst of relief that hits me leaves me boneless in my chair. I'm glad I'm sitting. "Dominic, that's such good news." I'm grinning so wide that my cheeks hurt.

He moves into the room, and as he does, he brings a sexual energy that I'm not prepared for. My excitement has left me open, and I barely recover before he stands in front of me. "I didn't think it was right to leave the details about the party up to anyone but you, considering it was your idea."

I inhale, trying not to take in too much of his scent. "That's nice, but expensive things like this aren't really my style. Have you looked at me?" I mean it as a self-deprecating joke. He purposefully runs his eyes over me, like I am a delicious dessert created just for him. I swallow nervously. "My point is I'm not a fancy socialite."

"Honey," the woman says, clucking her tongue. "You don't have to be a socialite to decide if you like green or gold or blue. Just pick a color, and we'll go from there."

I glance up at Dominic and he shrugs. "If you hesitate here," he says softly, "this party is never going to happen. There's going to be a lot of choices to make."

Stealing myself, I eyeball the selection of colors with a critical eye. "When is the party going to happen?"

"A week from now, in November."

I nod to myself. "So it'll be cold, but not quite winter. Is it still okay for things to be white?"

"Go with your gut," the woman says.

"My gut says I don't know what I'm doing. But white sounds nice. Let's go with that."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am

Looking relieved, the woman tucks the board under her arm. "I'll get back to you with the next decoration choices soon as I can, Miss."

She leaves, and I cover my mouth to stifle my laughs. "She called me Miss. No one has done that before."

Dominic puts his hand on the table very close to me. I wish he would sit; having him tower over me is reminding me of how he hovered with the same crackling energy while we were in the library, before we kissed. "It's probably the first time you've ever told someone what to do around here," he says. "They're going to start thinking that you're in charge."

I lower my eyes, furrowing my brow. "Except I'm not in charge. I don't have any actual power here."

"You have more than you think," he whispers. The strain in his voice draws my attention back to him. I know he's talking about something other than the staff addressing me with respect.

"Dominic, I told you. Stop trying to make something happen between us."

He pulls air in, then breezes it out, bending closer to me. "You wouldn't have to tell me nothing was going to happen, unless you were worried it was."

I'm locked in place, gazing into his eyes and losing myself in the rich molasses color. We're alone in the kitchen. The air should smell like cinnamon and strawberry pastries, but instead it's that wild animal smell he has. A promise that he'll let me

know the sounds we'll make in the dark if I peel back my desperate need to protect myself for a single second laid bare. A simple blink, and I could be his.

Careful to avoid letting any part of me touch him, I glide my chair backwards. "I'm going to go help Wyatt in the preserve. I might be too busy with party planning from here on to spend time there this coming week."

"If you need some air, I understand." His cocky smile gets bigger. He slides into the chair I was in, filling the space with his every muscles flexing. The way I know he wants to fill me.

His legs spread wide. The kind of slouch an emperor would hold as he sits on a throne and plots how to rule the world. I imagine his skin absorbing the warmth I left behind in the chair.

He runs a fingertip over his chin. "Weren't you leaving?"

I shake myself free of the urge I have to climb into his lap. "Yes. Right, I've got to go."

Dominic's lips curl into a knowing grin. "I'll see you soon."

His cryptic promise licks at my ankles as I jog my way to the fenced-in miniature forest. I wish it were farther away. Leaving this state, this city... the planet might not be enough to slip from his enticing grasp. If I found my way to a hole in the moon, I'd sit there in the dark, still burning with lust for Dominic Bradley.

"Laiken," Wyatt says, waving as I approach. He's got the gate open, he must have seen me coming. I dart through then bend over with my hands braced on my thighs, sucking in air. "You look like the devil's chasing you, girl."

I shoot him a wary glance. He is, I think. "I just wanted to see you."

"Please, I'm not that charming." Closing the fence, he locks it. "What's happening? Out with it."

His bluntness is one of my favorite qualities. "I'm going to be busy for the next week. I'm in charge of planning a party."

Wyatt flexes his neck, leaning backwards, like I just turned into a giant snake about to strike. Then, to my shock, he shakes his head and laughs. "That's not what I expected you to say."

My smile starts slow then it keeps going. "I know. I'm not the type."

"You're not," he agrees.

Unsaid words roll between us. I sense he wants to ask me why I'm doing this, and simultaneously, he knows it's not a good reason. We don't talk about my situation, not here. Not in this place. That suits me fine; I don't want Wyatt pitying me for being a kidnapped girl growing up in a stranger's home.

Overhead, the sky is free of clouds. The symphony of wildlife reaches my ears. Inhaling the earthy scents, I point at the garbage can on the path. "Don't let me slow you down. Put me to work."

He breaks his stare. "Someday, you'll realize this is hard work, and you'll regret offering to do it."

I smile slyly, because I know I won't.

Wyatt and I drag the can deeper onto the trail. The only 'trash' is dead branches or

sometimes a small animal carcass. There's nothing left by humans here because no one ever visits but us two. As I toss refuse into the can, I'm struck by a question. "I always wanted to ask, but isn't the point of this preserve to be used for hunting? Why have I never seen or heard anyone come out here and shoot a deer?"

"Wondered that myself. When I moved in and started as the caretaker, the place was already flourishing. Whoever built it had nearly full-grown trees shipped in. It was expensive, for sure. Someone got their money's worth."

I muse over what he's said while we work. The sun is high, but the weather has cooled enough that I'm not sweating. October is fading into the next month, bringing orange and red leaves as it goes. Only the pine trees resist with their hardy green needles.

Thinking about the coming chill brings the party to the forefront of my mind. Next comes Dominic. He's curling through my brain like cloying smoke. He's determined to help me plan the party. I'm glad for that, I can't do it without him. I just don't want to be in the same room as him. When we're yards apart, and he looks at me, I visualize his mouth on mine so powerfully that my tongue gets heavy.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am

“Lot of work to be done still,” he says, shading his eyes so he can squint at the sun. “Going to be a cold season. That rain is coming, I promise you.”

It's been a few days since he warned me about the storms. The trench we dug sits dry as a bone. We'd finished it on the day of my attempted escape. He hasn't asked me about any of it, though he has to know. I appreciate him avoiding the topic. It let's the preserve remain... innocent.

Thinking of the seasons, of holidays, wedges a thought in me. It sticks in my ribs like a bad meal. I have to toss it out, get it in the open, before it's too late. “Wyatt,” I say, taking a second to gather myself. “Do you know why Dominic never came home during his school breaks?”

“My guess is his mother didn't want him here.” He drags the garbage to the entrance, gets a new bucket and fills it with food pellets—honey-soaked ones the deer love. “That woman has never been good at hiding her dislike for her own son.”

I've seen the wretched looks he's talking about. “I don't get how a mom can be that way. Even if she doesn't want him here, what about his dad? Silas must have some say.”

Wyatt hesitates and dusts his gloves on his smock. “I don't know all the ins and outs, Laiken. Sometimes the answer is as simple as it seems.”

A pang of anger makes my core clench. “It's awful, the way she treats him.”

“Maybe,” he murmurs, hoisting the bucket. “Or maybe she sensed he wasn't worth

loving.”

That freezes me in my tracks. “What do you mean?”

Wyatt's face contorts; he shoots a nervous look around the preserve, then at me. Whatever he sees in my eyes makes him turn away so he can avoid looking at me. “It's not my place to talk about. Forget I said anything.”

“I can't forget, Wyatt! That's impossible.” I chase after him through the trees. “Dominic can be rough, and I'll admit he's turned into kind of a scary asshole, but to say he's not worth loving by his own mom is just... it's unfair.”

The older man strides through the preserve. He grunts as we cross over fallen branches, ducking thorns that raise up to assault us. I let him keep his silence as we move towards the feeding area. It's a habit; I always hope to see the deer, and you can't if you're noisy.

After we fill the grooves in the wooden troughs with pellets, we back away, lingering in the brush. The air vibrates around us—birds chirp, squirrels rustle high above. No deer come, and following Wyatt's cue, we back away towards the entrance.

We're almost to the gate when he finally speaks again. His tone is strained, thick with unease. “I can't say why she treated him poorly before he left. That's on her. But if my son had done what he did last year?” He frowns then throws the bucket into the tool shed harder than he needs to. “I would never welcome him back into my home.”

“What did he do?” I ask, terrified to learn—needing to know.

“Because you're forced to stay here, you're better off not knowing. But my advice?” Wyatt curls his callused hands at his sides. There's a mixture of disdain in his glistening, shrunken pupils, but beyond that, I see the shadow of terror. “Stay as far

away from that man as you possibly can.”

- Chapter 18 -

Laiken

Gold. Silver. Crystal. The choices that Mellie, the party coordinator, keeps bringing me are staggering. After hours spent selecting cutlery and ribbons for the backs of chairs, I think about choking myself with the curly satin strings.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am

“You look stressed,” a familiarly unpleasant voice says behind me. Turning, I jump off the wicker couch at the sight of Annie in the sunroom. It's the quietest place I know of, perfect for getting work done. But now that she's here I feel like I'm in a barred prison cell. The sunlight warming my face through the giant windows doesn't help at all.

Annie's been avoiding me the way Dominic used to. I hadn't seen her at any meals. I'd started wondering if she wasn't in the house at all. Her eyes slip from me, to the pile of papers on the table. “What are you working on?”

“Just ideas for the party,” I say. I don't stop to think she might not know about it. Dominic said he got approval for us to go forward, there's no way Annie's in the dark.

She steps closer, resting her fingers on a slip of white silk—fabric for the seat cushions. “You're really putting thought into this, hmm?”

“Of course.”

Her dark eyes stab at me. “Of course,” she mocks. Straightening up, she folds her hands behind her back. Though we're the same height now, I always remember how she looked standing over me on the day she stole me away. The way she stared as I said farewell to the people I loved. “You're on your best behavior these days. Ready to do anything, so long as you get what you need out of it.”

I keep my expression neutral. “Wouldn't you?”

Annie's painted lips crinkle in the corners. Her frown shifts to something like self-

doubt, but I've never known her to question herself—not ever. She looks me over with her head cocked to the left. The peek at her inner thoughts is gone. “You'll need something to wear.”

“Yes,” I reply, my voice rising from confusion. “I have dresses in my closet.”

“You don't own anything nice enough for this event.”

I fight down a snort. Everything I own is stuff you gave me, I think to myself. If it isn't nice enough, that's not on me. But I also have trouble imagining anything nicer than the long dresses hanging in my closet. They're all beautiful, most never worn once. I always resisted unless forced.

“I'll have some options sent to you,” she says, pulling out her phone, typing.

“Why do you want to help me?” I ask, thrown off by her actions. I thought she was going to strike me down in this room when she appeared. Now she's making sure I have something nice to wear?

Annie stops typing. She doesn't look at me, though—her attention is on the phone's screen. “I'm not doing this to help you. I'm doing it to help me.” Lifting her chin, she squints at me, and I feel like a cockroach she's debating crushing under her pointed heel. “This party idea is archaic. However, it is possible for it to work. If we can bring in enough powerful people, woo them with our generosity, getting them on board with our banks, then I want to do everything possible to make that happen.” She shoves her phone into the pocket of her purple, flared jacket. “Men love power. They also love sex.”

I flush at her statement. “What does that have to do with giving me a dress?”

Her hips swing as she comes towards me. She's moving with exaggerated motions,

driving home a point that climbs its way up to my brain just as she speaks it out loud. “You're very attractive, Laiken. I'm sure you know this.” Her fingers lift, stroking my cheek, making me tremble. Her voice is an odd whisper. “I thought you looked like your dad. As you grow, you're becoming more like her.”

I can't move. I'm stuck there, frozen by whatever is possessing Annie to behave in a way she never has in my presence. The backs of her polished nails are smooth on my skin, like stones along a riverbed. Her eyes focus on mine; clarity returns, she rips her hand away and backs up. Her shock shifts into fury, like she's humiliated herself, done something stupid, and it's my fault.

Spinning, she heads for the door at record speed. “The men we want to impress like to see pretty woman in prettier things. I won't have you looking like roadside trash. You'll pick one of the gowns I send to you, that's final.”

Unable to respond, I watch her leave the room. The sun heats up my shoulders through the window glass. I don't feel it. Not even a single degree.

I'm too busy remembering how terrifying her nails felt on my cheek.

AFTER MY LITTLE MEETING with Annie, I struggle to focus on my work. It's impossible, though. The sensation of her touch keeps wriggling into my mind. I can't concentrate; all I want to do is get out of the house. Fresh air and a nice run will shake off my uneasy mood. It always has before.

I stop at my room to change into some workout clothes. Most of what I wear normally could be called athletic wear, but because I plan to run—and run hard—I slip on a sports bra under the new outfit.

Bouncing down the hallway to warm-up, I make a beeline for the front door. Before I reach it, I spot movement through the giant windows. I pull up short, my sneakers squeaking.

Dominic is doing push-ups on the flat cement driveway.

I'm fascinated by the view. He's wearing a sleeveless tank, the scoop neck displaying the top of his pecs. It stretches over his broad back, his lateral muscles bulging through the wide arm openings.

Sweat makes his tattoos glisten. It reminds me of an oil painting that's just been created. I wonder how hot his skin is right now. My fingers move to the windowpane; I glance at them, then scold myself and yank my hand down to my side.

I'm pathetic.

How can I long for him so badly after Wyatt warned me to stay away?

At least he can't see me gawking at him. It's especially good he can't hear me, because when he stands up, drinking from a water bottle, spilling it down his shirt so the material clings to him, I groan.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am

I'm hopeful that he's done. Then my stomach sinks as he sets the bottle down, grabs the top of the porch's overhang, and begins doing pull-ups. He's exerting himself to the point of grunting. Every tendon under his skin flexes with effort. Is this what he had to do in school? It must be, all those physical drills are the reason he's become so solid.

I swallow then tap my own cheeks like I'm smacking sense into myself. I really want to go outside and workout, like he is. But if I open the front door he'll see me. Use the kitchen exit, I tell myself. With a final hungry glance at his bare arms, I jog to the kitchen and through the French doors.

The air outside is a bit cool, in spite of the high sun. November is sweeping in. I love how everything smells so fresh. While I adore summer, there's something special about the gentle march of autumn as it takes over the land.

The Bradley Estate is around seventy acres in size. It's shaped like a piece of toast, with the two big curves the furthest from the house—this is where the preserve is nestled. There are trees around the entire property that gives it privacy. Most are behind the huge green fence that keeps people out—and me in.

I start out at a low impact run, enjoying the way the grass cushions the bottom of my shoes. The light windbreaker I put on quickly becomes too warm. My hot breath explodes in the air, leaving white wisps behind me like breadcrumbs.

It takes me a few minutes before I reach the fence to the west of the house. From this angle, if I look back, I can see the driveway. But I wouldn't be able to see Dominic - he was too close to the doors. So there's no reason to look back.

Inhaling until my lungs burn, I run harder. My muscles are warming up, my pace finding a rhythm. I'm all the way towards the preserve, my blood clapping in my ears, before I hear a twig crack.

Peering towards the house, I spot Dominic running at me. He's half an acre away, close enough that I can see the determination in his serious face. His hands pump at his sides, slicing the air. His form is perfect.

It's how he caught me when I tried to escape.

Is he trying to catch me again? Spurred on by that memory—and my own competitiveness—I face forward and sprint. I don't know why he's coming for me, and I don't care. I planned to avoid him today and that hasn't changed.

Let him chase me. Let him see what I can really do.

Picturing the days I would run on all cylinders while racing Kara, I burst over the green yard towards the distant trees. The fence is straight ahead. Dominic's pounding feet are all I can hear, my body coiling hard. I'm about to slam into the green metal.

At the last second I shift on my heel, darting to the right. I glance back just in time to see him try and copy me. His foot stumbles on some fallen leaves, his shoulder ramming the fence. His shock is delicious; I laugh, and he looks straight at me.

I almost fall from the power of that stare. Dominic's fingers wrap around the fence, his muscles bulging, glinting in the sun. Using the fence to slingshot him forward, he chases me again. It's different this time. I can sense it in the air, taste it on my tongue.

Dominic has no plans to let me get away from him. Our game has grown unspoken stakes. I don't know what he wants, but I'm sure if he catches me, he'll get it.

My chest is struggling as I demand that my body run harder. Every breath is made from fire. Gasping, I shoot a nervous look over my shoulder. I knew he was close, I could hear him, but I didn't know he was just a few feet away.

His hand swipes out—he's going for my hair. No, not this time! I grab my braid and hold it tight, keeping it near my body as I sprint. The fence is to my left, tree branches overhead drifting red leaves, casting our part of the estate in cool shadows. I'm losing energy. My desire to win our little race isn't enough.

Dominic brushes my elbow. That one touch tells me I lost.

With a surprised shout, I topple onto the ground, tucking myself into a ball so I won't get hurt. I half roll, half slide on my shoulder. Dominic's weight crashes on me; he fell, too, and less gracefully than I did.

I'm dizzy from the fall, and too busy filling my lungs with much needed oxygen to get back up. Lying there, I gaze upwards at the sky. There's no sky, only Dominic. He's stretched over me, naked arms on either side of my head, his hands gripping the grass. There's a leaf in his coffee-colored hair and wild heat in his eyes.

His mouth is open so he can draw long breaths. He's just as exhausted as me. We both pushed ourselves to the limit. I can see all the way inside his mouth. His teeth are porcelain white, perfectly even. They look extra sharp because of his rapid panting. Primal.

“Why did you run from me?” he suddenly asks.

I shift under him; he doesn't budge. His biceps ripple, rock-hard thighs trapping my legs in place. He's the most beautiful cage I've ever been in. “Why did you chase me?” I spit back.

His mouth shuts tight. All the air comes out of his nose. He's acting like he's regained his composure while I'm struggling. "I was working out in the driveway. I spotted you jogging in the distance, so I—"

"You thought it was okay to come hauling ass after me?" I say, searching his face for some hint of guilt. "You didn't think I went out the kitchen door because I wanted to be alone?"

There's no guilt waiting for me. Dominic's head dips lower, his body pressing into mine, pushing me into the grass. The pressure is delicious. I gasp softly, unable to stop it before it gets free. "Laiken, you're projecting way too much."

"I'm what?"

He studies my face then tilts his head so that I can see nothing but the dark line of his eyelashes. "You don't need to avoid me. Unless you're afraid something will happen between us." As he talks, he grinds his hips against mine. The heat of his body is through the roof thanks to his workout.

I run my tongue across the contour of my lower lip. I'm searching for words that I don't have.

Dominic brings his molten-core stare back to me. He inhales quickly. "You smell so fucking good. Like salt. And strength. And sex."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:23 am

My inner walls flex; I wiggle my hips, unable to stop it. He grins as he feels my soft tights rubbing against his workout pants. The material we're both wearing is thin. His erection has now here to hide. It digs into the groove of my pussy straight through the clothing, promising me sweet, wonderful, dirty things.

Things I can't imagine.

Things I want to.

“Dominic,” I whisper.

“Hmm?”

Channeling all the strength I have, I press my hands to his chest—and I regret it, because his muscles are spectacular. “You know I won't do this. I'm not giving in.”

At first he doesn't move. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me.”

I can't do that. I'm not a good enough liar.

Lying there, I drop my hands from him and go limp. My eyes shut as I seek enough strength to turn him down.

His shadow clears away from me. The pressure of his weight vanishes, too. When I open my eyes, Dominic is standing apart from me. Confused, I sit up with my hands on the ground for support.

Staring at the house, he processes something. “I told you I'd wait until you broke for me. If you can manage to close off like you just did, then you're not there yet.” The wind runs its fingers through his hair. All the sweat that weighed it down is gone, the pieces ruffling gently in the breeze. “But,” he says, touching his lips, like he's reliving our kiss in the library. “It won't be long now.”

I watch him jog back to the house. I don't get up until long after he's gone. My heart is pumping like it's about to fail, and it has nothing to do with all of the running I just did.

- Chapter 19 -

Laiken

There's a note taped on the outside of my bedroom door. I pluck it free, reading the cursive, elegant letters.

Laiken,

Here are a few options. Make your choice.

Emma will remove the rest.

– Annie

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:24 am

Trepidation makes my mouth taste funny, like stale crackers. I'd managed to forget about my encounter with Annie. Putting the note in my pocket, I take my time opening the door, as if there's an army inside ready to ambush me.

A rack has been arranged in the middle of the room. The sight of it makes me whistle. Strung on hangers are a variety of gowns. Each sparkles like a lake in summer, their colors ranging from ruby to spider-silk white.

I leave my door half-open, too amazed to think about shutting it. My hand extends, brushing over the sequins of one dress. The gold fabric shimmers.

“Wow,” I say out loud. Annie was right. The dresses in my closet are nothing compared to these. I feel like I'm about to play dress-up, slipping on a costume that will disguise me as a queen. That's who should be wearing these gowns.

Intrigued by the texture of the gold one, I rub it between my fingers. Just try it on. You have to pick one, anyway. See what it looks like. In the floor length closet mirror, I catch my absent grin. No point in fighting the urge; I want to wear this dress.

Stripping down to my underwear, I unhook the gold gown from the rack. Pressing it to my chest, I sway in a pretend breeze, studying myself in the mirror. There's a zipper on the back of the dress. I peel it down, spreading the cloth like it's golden scales shed by a giant snake. It feels like that, almost—the hard discs rattling under my nails.

I step into it carefully. It shimmies over my hips, the A-line style hugging my waist. It's not all the way on, and I can already tell it's gorgeous. The lining isn't rough like

the sequins; it's similar to being wrapped in warm silk.

It's obvious the design isn't meant to work with a bra. Without hesitation, I throw mine off onto the bed. Reaching back as far as I can, I yank the zipper upwards. It takes all of my flexibility to notch it into place, but the effort is worth it. Holy hell, I think, turning side to side. I grab the hem and fluff it, then let it hang heavily from its own weight. It reaches my ankles, the bottom of the dress dedicated to hiding skin, while the top... is less so.

It leaves my shoulders bare, a sweetheart neckline that clings to me thanks to some boning and the zipper. Imagining myself waltzing around the ballroom, like a princess in a story, I spin slowly. I take a few more twirls, captivated by how the gold glitters, before I finally slow down.

My fingers touch my collarbone. I think he'll like me in this. "He." That title has come to mean one man, and one man only. Dominic.

Shivering just thinking about his square jaw, his wicked smile, I reach back for the zipper. There's no reason to keep the dress on. I'm nervous I'll stain it or tear it. I'm sure it costs a fortune. "Urgh," I grunt, struggling to catch the zipper. I tug it, but I can't get it past my shoulder blades. Is it caught on the fabric somehow? Fuck.

"Are you stuck?" a masculine voice asks.

My head whips up; I spot Dominic in the mirror. Turning, I stare at him where he's lingering in my doorway. I was stupid to forget to close the door. His eyebrows arch, silently repeating his question.

"Whoever invented this dress is a sadist," I say.

"Do you want me to help?"

“Yes,” I answer, before I think about what I've agreed to. With his heel, he shuts the door. He comes up behind me, his face peering over my shoulder in the mirror. Expectation has colored his cheeks red, his eyes warning me not to move. My hands are still reaching for the zipper.

He touches my wrists, and the contact sends fire to my belly. With an easy strength he moves my arms down and out of the way. Two fingers press at the nape of my neck, then they stroke over the metal teeth that run from the top of the dress, down to just above my ass. “You look so amazing in this,” he whispers. “I almost don't want to help you out of it.”

It's obvious from his hungry stare that he wants me stripped down to nothing. I shiver at the idea of being naked in front of him. I don't know if I want it or if I don't. Remember what you told him, I think seriously. You can't do anything with him. He's not the boy you knew. He's a stranger. Resist.

His nails scrape gently over the material, tracing my shoulder blades until he's back up to the dress's collar. My skin still feels like he's running his fingers over it and I clench my hands by my hips, demanding my body hold still. I don't want him to know that he's getting to me.

He steps closer and something hard rubs against the cleft of my round behind. His breathing grows louder in my ears. Gripping the zipper he begins to inch it down, moving at a snail's pace. Each inch he exposes of my spine is torturous. Over and over, small bursts of pleasure pop in my blood like freshly poured champagne.

His desperate arousal is infecting me; his need for me is turning me on. I've never felt so wanted and I've never wanted someone so much. And I know it would be so easy to simply turn my head and taste his lips again. I remember how warm they were, how delicately his tongue had flicked the roof of my mouth.

Our one kiss had been unfairly brief, like a story that's cut off after the first few chapters. I want to know how a real kiss with him would end.

“Are you okay?” he teases. “You seem to be breathing heavily.”

“I'm fine,” I insist.

His chuckle makes my skin vibrate. With his free hand he follows the curve just beneath my right breast, going down until he hits the widest part of my hip. Then he comes back up, feeling everything he just did from the opposite direction. He does this three more times and at the end of each stroke, he moves the zipper down a fraction. It leaves me disoriented.

His fingers spread over my flat stomach. He presses hard in front of me and from behind, pelvis thrusting forward. The hard thing digging into me is his massive erection. I groan before I can stop myself. Dominic growls like a bear, his reaction to mine is 10 times stronger. He knows he's getting to me and it's turning him on, which is turning me on, creating a crazy feedback loop.

His fingertips glide down the front of the dress over the creamy material. He's pushing insistently through the thin fabric, so much so that when he reaches the elastic rim of my panties he can feel the fine line. His breath comes out like a shudder as he traces the top of my panties from one side to the next. “I want to fuck you so bad,” he says into my ear.

My eyes roll in my head and my inhibitions crack. The warm, throbbing pulse between thighs is maddening. I feel painfully empty no matter how hard I push my knees together or squeeze my muscles.

“You want me to fuck you, too, don't you?” he asks. His fingertips glide lower and he stops on the mound of my pussy beneath the dress. I don't think he should be able to

tell where anything is when he can't even see, but those two fingers perch right above my twitching clit. My mouth is open; I'm panting wildly.

“Dominic, wait. You need to know something.” I hesitate before I press on. “I'm a virgin.”

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He makes a noise in his throat. I'm thinking he'll stop and back off, but it's like my admission has woken something in him. He rocks his hips rhythmically, rubbing his hard-on against my ass. We're doing an erotic dance, my body following his guidance as I shift side to side.

He makes little circles through the fabric of the dress, not touching my clit, but almost. My mind connects the dots; it's like he's fingering me already, the heat washing through my muscles, into my brain, until I see spots.

“You're actually a virgin? Does that mean you waited all this time for me?”

I whimper, wishing I could deny it. My hesitation ruins any chance at letting him claim responsibility for the fact I've never had sex with anyone else. “Dominic,” I say again, his name coming out like a plea.

“I'll be gentle,” he promises.

“We can't do this.” I continue to roll my hips desperately. The pressure inside of me is torture and I feel liquid clinging on the inside of my thighs. I've never been so aroused. And he hasn't even touched me yet, not really. “We really can't. I told you before.”

“I told you that the first hint that I got of you—”

“No,” I say, cutting him off. “I know what you said and I get it, and... I'm just not ready.”

He nuzzles my ear. “Then I won't fuck you,” he purrs. His hand slides lower, hoisting my dress and exposing my thighs. In the mirror I can see my tan skin and the front of my white panties. They're sheer from being soaked through with my own juices. “I'll just finger you until you come.”

I blush head to toe. Arguing is pointless. I'm too transfixed on the sight of us—of me. I've never done anything like this. If I don't think about it too hard, I can almost pretend I'm watching someone else. I watch my lips part, my teeth bared. I moan helplessly as he slips two fingers down, creating a V the outside of my damp panties over my lower lips. He traces me, dipping low, then coming back up, massaging my pussy with expertise.

His lips come down, kissing the side of my neck. The hand on my pussy goes still, making me painfully aware of how little it's moving. Of how he's stopped bringing me pleasure. He runs his fingers side to side over my panties, stroking my eager clit. “Watch me,” he whispers. I look in the mirror to see that he's fixated on me. “I want you to watch me be the first man to ever make you come. You'll remember this moment for the rest of your life.”

He's absolutely right. I used to dream about stuff like this with him, before I knew the man he would turn into. I'm excited, but I'm also nervous. I'm afraid what this will mean for us. If he makes me orgasm, will my body remember it all the time? Will I be able to move on?

My skin on my shoulders feels cooler. He's sliding the dress down my ribs, getting it out of the way. As it peels down my body, he reveals the fact that I'm not wearing a bra. He sucks in a sharp breath and my heart beats faster. “You're stunning,” he whispers. He follows the curve of my neck, down my shoulder, with his free hand. The one clasping my pussy in a handshake remains where it has for the past minute.

I'm shivering, and I blame those compulsive twitches on why I press myself into his

palm. His chuckle is devilish in my ear. “You can't wait for me to make you come, can you?” I don't say anything. He gives my pussy a squeeze. “Tell me. I want to hear you say it out loud.”

“Dominic, I can't... I can't say something like that.”

“Of course you can.” He makes a light circle on my clit over my underwear; I moan obscenely. “Tell me that you can't wait for me to make you orgasm, or I'll stop.” He rubs my clitoris once more, just to remind me how good it feels. Then he places his fingers so that they're on the inside of my right thigh, no longer in contact with my dripping panties.

My heart is thudding so loudly I can hear it reverberating in my head.

“Say it,” he growls

I breathe faster, staring at myself in the mirror, at the black hunger in his eyes. He wants to devour me, and I want to give him that nourishment. I can't fight anymore. When I look at his hand resting on my leg, juice coating my skin where my panties have stopped being able to hold it, I wonder why I'm fighting this at all.

“Make me come,” I groan.

Dominic's face changes. My filthy words transform him in front of my eyes. He rips the dress down my hips, leaving me in just my panties. My nipples are firm nubs in the air, so sensitive, so ready to be touched. He puts his lips on my shoulder; I feel his teeth. It's not painful, just like he's biting down to tell me that he could leave marks if he desired. A perverse part of me loves the idea of him marking me.

His hand cups the side of my right breast. He hefts it, like he's checking the weight. “Your tits are fucking amazing.” His breath is coming hot and fast on my throat. He's

drying out the sweat that keeps appearing on me. I rock side to side, grinding on his hard-on through his pants. He squeezes my leg, pulling me against him.

His fingers trap my nipple, giving it a small tug. Then he circles the tender tip, pushing my nipple in all directions, playing with me, figuring out what I like or don't like. Problem is, I like everything he does. I'm terrified of that, I don't know if I can handle the inability to tell him no. I thought I had limits. Rules.

All of them are dissipating in front of me.

“I wanted to touch you like this for so long,” he whispers. “I'm going crazy right now. It's taking everything I have not to yank my cock out and push it into your convulsing pussy. I can't wait to make it mine, to be your first. Because I'm going to, Laiken,” he swears. “I'm going to be your first in everything.”

I whimper, barely able to watch myself in the mirror anymore. I don't recognize myself. The red glow in my face, the way my mouth hangs open as I pant wildly. My chest rises so fast that my breasts quiver. As he moves his hand over to play with my other nipple, he cups my pussy then wraps his fingers in my panties. He pushes them into my slit, driving the wet fabric against my empty cleft. The pressure against my clit is delicious. The reminder that there's nothing inside of me is torture.

“Touch me,” I breathe. “Please, Dominic, I can't take this.”

“Not yet. You think you know what suffering is? What it's like to ache for someone so badly and not be able to have them? You turned me down in the library, Laiken. I swore then that I'd break you. That's happening now, but I'm not through with you. I want you begging me to make you come. I want you to know that I'm the only one who'll ever make it happen.”

It's an insane promise he makes. I know it, and I wonder if he knows it, too. But

what's even crazier is how turned on it gets me. My arousal is skyrocketing; a flash of hot, delicious pleasure making me thrust my pelvis forward into his touch.

“I really can't take it,” I whimper. “I feel like, if you just touch me a little bit, I'll come.” A strong breeze could knock me over the edge.

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He chuckles, then presses the tips of two fingers on top of my clit through my wet panties. It's a single deliberate push. Like his fingers are kissing my swollen button. Like he's holding it down, capturing it. "This is mine," he growls. "You're mine. Say it."

"I'm yours," I say, because right then, I'll tell him anything he wants. The muscles in my lower belly tense, screaming for release. I need to climax so badly.

His thumb strokes my clitoris from top to bottom, unzipping me. I feel myself come undone. He turns me to kiss him, not caring any longer if I'm watching in the mirror. He knows what I know; it doesn't matter if I watch. This is burned into my mind forever.

I moan against him, his fingers speeding up, moving in quick circles on my pussy. The heat inside of me blooms, a maddening rush all heading down towards my inner walls until finally, I groan into his open mouth and come.

I shudder, nearly collapsing as he holds me up. I've never felt anything like this; the pleasure is immense. It blinds me, steals my ability to hear myself. The fog in my brain takes some time to lift, but through it, I hear him groaning as well. His cock is violently hard against my ass cheeks.

"Dominic," I whisper.

He pulls away, looking into my eyes. His are hooded, the molasses color dangerously crisp. "Leave," he says.

“What?” His sudden seriousness clears my head like a bucket of cold water has been poured on me.

He pulls my dress up to hide my breasts; I wrap my arms around the top to keep it from falling down. “Get out of here right now, this is a warning. If you don't leave through that door in the next five seconds I'm going to push you against this mirror and I'm going to fuck you from behind, and I won't care that you're a virgin.”

I'm intrigued—I'm scared. I don't know what I am. His face says that he's not joking. And the tent in his pants is huge and threatening. Maybe more than his words are. Even though I've orgasmed, my pussy cries out at the thought of being filled by him. I don't even know what that would be like, just that my body wants it.

I can feel his tendrils sinking into my blood. But as tempted as I am to go all the way with Dominic, he's giving me an out. I have to take it because I'm just not ready. He's changing me, and until I know the consequences of this transformation, I can't let myself go all the way.

Without another word, I turn and run from my own bedroom.

- Chapter 20 -

Dominic

I need her.

I need her.

I need her.

I know I shouldn't. I'm sure resisting is still the best course.

But I don't care anymore.

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She spoke the words.

Claimed she was mine.

Now it's the truth.

I need her.

- Chapter 21 -

Laiken

“Adry run?” I ask, strolling through the halls with Mellie.

“It's just to get a feel for the atmosphere.” She drags her feet as she walks, and it makes her hair constantly frizz with static. I remind myself to be careful if she tries to touch me, she's already shocked me once. “It'll only be you and me.”

I nod slowly, but now she's got me wondering. “Do you have a list of who's coming to this event?”

She watches me with one eye. “Master Silas told me to keep that from you.”

“What, why?”

“I don't know. I'm sure he has a reason, and I'm not getting in the way of it.”

The reason becomes obvious. He doesn't trust me, he must think there's a way I could use that information. Use it for what, to escape? Does he still think I'd try? Running away has been pushed to the back of my mind. I want to save myself, but I've been assuming Silas wasn't lying about having my family in his clutches.

Fleeing would harm them.

“Then tell me this,” I say, rounding on her outside the ballroom doors. “Are there at least some important people coming? Big names, very rich, you know the type.”

She chews at the corner of her mouth. I press on, sensing her sympathy. “Mellie, this party going well is possibly life or death for me. A huge part of that is making sure that some of the guests will be notoriously well known. Please, just blink twice for yes.”

“Stop,” she sighs. “No one is listening in on us.” She gestures around the empty hallway. “I'll say this, but you didn't hear it from me. Got it?” I nod enthusiastically. “Yes, there are some massively wealthy people who have RSVP'd to this event.”

I fan my fingers over my heart. “Thank goodness.”

“Now quit playing around and focus. Those ‘big names’ as you called them are used to grand parties. We need everything to be perfect.”

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That word swirls in my mind. It stays stamped there as I scan the wide room with its polished floors, domed high ceiling with gold metal accents, and sconces that give the place a fairytale glow. Perfection is my goal. Perfection consumes me like an itch I have to scratch.

Perfection is the word of the day when Dominic strolls into the ballroom.

My breath catches in my throat at the sight of him. He's adjusting the buttons on a silver vest, a jacket framing his chest like a pair of open black curtains. He sees me as I see him, and he ingests the fascination in my unguarded stare before I can hide it away.

“Master Dominic,” Mellie says, heading to meet him by the entrance. “Is there a problem with the suit I left you?”

He hasn't stopped staring at me. The ghost of a smirk appears on his face. I'm freed of his ravenous eyes when he looks down at Mellie. “It's almost perfect. The vest is just a little tight.”

“Let me see,” she says, moving behind him. She deftly removes his jacket, vanishing behind his muscular torso and legs. I can hardly see her. There's nothing standing between us, now - nothing but air that swims with tension.

I wish I'd stop gawking like a drooling idiot, but... he's magnificent. The suit is tailored to his body expertly. With the jacket gone the vest hugs his broad chest. Mellie toys with the back, then undoes the buttons. “You're right,” she says, “It's tight. I'll fix it quickly. What about the color?”

He shrugs.

“Never mind,” she huffs. “Let's ask a feminine eye. Laiken?”

I blink. “Hmm?”

Mellie gestures at Dominic with the vest in her hands. “How does he look? Good?”

Good isn't the right word. It's not strong enough. It's a pale excuse for describing the experience that is Dominic's fit body in a crisp black suit. With the silver vest gone, his coal-black button-down is one layer closer to the naked skin beneath. Long sleeves hide the tattoos snaking over his arms, but I know they're there.

“He looks... great,” I say, my voice cracking. I shake myself out of my haze. “Very, very nice.”

Dominic grins, showing me a hint of sharp teeth. “Thank you.”

“Okay,” Mellie says, scrunching her button nose. “I'm glad you think so, but I was talking more about the color of his clothes, not how great he looks in them.”

My god, I've never blushed so hard. “Oh, uh. Well. That... is also nice. The color, I mean.” Fuck I'm so dumb.

Mellie rolls her eyes, handing the jacket back to him. “I'll fix the vest later. Can you do me a favor while you're here?”

“Of course,” he says.

“Go stand in the middle of the room. I want to get a sense of scale when people start arriving, the flow of the space and all that.”

The treads on his patent black shoes brush over the floor, like he weighs nothing. I never noticed how quietly he walks before.

“Yes, that's good,” Mellie says as she taps her chin. Dominic stands in the middle of the room like a flag that's been planted to claim a country. It's fitting, this is his estate after all. Thinking about him as a conqueror is natural.

He's playing along, but I can tell he's growing bored. His hands slide into his pockets, one leg partially bent. Soon, he'll probably start tapping his toe.

“Laiken?” Mellie asks. “Lighting looks good to you, right?”

I study the way the glow from the chandeliers paints his dark hair with bright golden highlights. “It looks perfect,” I whisper.

“Go over and stand near him,” she says dismissively. “One person isn't enough for me to get a full picture of the setting.”

I glance at her, then across at him. He watches me expectantly, waiting for my approach like he assumes it'll happen. Wyatt's message tickles at my memory. He made it very clear that it was in my best interest to stay as far away from Dominic as possible. Wyatt knows something that I don't, and whatever it is, it paints this man in a negative light. I trust Wyatt; I know I should heed his warning. Only an idiot wouldn't listen.

My idiotic feet carry me into Dominic's personal space.

The closer I get, the faster my heart beats. He's expressionless, barely smiling. I remember how he looked at me the night he returned to this property—like he loathed me. If he still acted like that, it would be much easier for me to resist him.

“Great,” Mellie yells across the room. Her voice echoes in the emptiness. “That's wonderful, you two look great.”

“Hear that?” Dominic whispers. “We look great.”

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I say nothing and stare at the space just over Mellie's head.

"I guess she doesn't need to tell me that though, you already did. Right?"

I bite down on my tongue so hard my eyes water.

"You look great, too," he says gently. His tone gets raspier. "But you looked better yesterday in the mirror, with my hand owning your pussy."

My body responds, reliving the memory of how he stroked my swollen clit until I came in his arms. "Stop it," I hiss at him.

"You're thinking about it right now, aren't you? Remembering how good it felt, how nice it was to let go and let me take over, make your pussy sing for me. I can't stop thinking about it either, Laiken. Last night, God, I was so damn hard. I lay in bed jerking myself off three times before I finally fell asleep."

Now I'm really thinking about it. His fist on his cock, a piece of him I still haven't seen. I have a vivid imagination and even though I can't picture it in detail, the idea of him touching himself while he thinks about me makes me breathe faster. I can taste the steam in the air around us.

"Focus," I say seriously. "I'm trying to get work done here."

"So am I."

He's playing with me, and even if my body likes it, I need him to understand how

much is riding on this party. “Dominic, you should leave. It was supposed to be just Mellie and me in here, anyway.”

“Am I distracting you?” he asks, though he already knows the answer.

Shaking my head, I walk away from him, quickly heading back towards Mellie. “All set?” I ask, unable to handle standing so close to that tempting man anymore.

She pulls out a notebook, writing something down. “I think so. I need to get this vest tailored to the right size, so we might as well end now. This is shaping up nicely though, it'll be the biggest event we've had in some time.”

Her eyes are sparkling. That makes me feel good, knowing that my plan to keep Annie off my back is having the side effect of making other people happy. “Do you need me to work on anything else?”

“Well, I was going to ask you to do one thing. I've seen you spending time down at the animal preserve, you're pretty close with Wyatt Jones, right?”

“Yeah, what would you need?”

“It was just an idea I had, one I wanted to run by you. We could buy some pinecones for rustic decorations to touch up this place, really add to the winter feel that your color scheme seems to be going for. But I know the preserve has a whole bunch of them on the ground by now. I wanted to ask Wyatt to give me some, but he already went home and the sky is looking a little cloudy. We can't use them if they're wet.”

“Say no more. Wyatt won't mind if I go in and gather some. How many do you need?”

She lights up with relief. “I think 50 should do it. You can probably fill up a plastic

garbage bag and that would be perfect. Then I can have the staff glitter them up, then arrange them into centerpieces.”

“I can help,” Dominic says sidling up next to me.

“No.” I eye him nervously. “I can do this alone.”

Mellie squints at me. “Don't turn down an extra set of hands, let him help you gather pinecones. It'll be faster this way, we really don't have time to waste.”

My arguments go out the window. Next to me, Dominic reaches up like he's going to smooth his hair. Instead he rubs his thumb over his bottom lip. The thumb that drew obscene moans from my throat.

I know Mellie means well.

It's not her fault she has no idea she's sabotaging me.

- Chapter 22 -

Dominic

The sky overhead is slate gray greased with black splotches. Storm clouds are rolling in. The air has an electric charge to it. “We should hurry,” I say, noting the clouds.

She's ahead of me by a few feet—has been since we left the ballroom. It's the most polite running away anyone has ever performed. “This shouldn't take long,” she says as we approach the tall fence.

“How do you normally get in?” I ask, watching her as she hands the plastic garbage bag to me.

“Normally? Wyatt just lets me in. But I have an old shortcut that will work.” To my amazement, she grips the chain-link fence and begins to climb in her sneakers. I've seen her sprint like a pro, but she's just as good at climbing.

The tights clinging to her long legs leave nothing to the imagination. I'm grateful for my angle, I'm able to watch her muscles flex; her perfect, round ass looks amazing in those tights. She ascends the fence in seconds, her braid spinning behind her. When she crests the top she crouches, and my heart drops as she jumps to the grass below. She rolls gracefully, coming up like a circus performer. There's pride in her eyes and her smile when she looks at me through the metal wires.

I'm incredibly turned on by her athleticism. She opens the fence, letting me through. “That was amazing,” I say, and I mean it.

She smiles shyly, tucking some loose strands of hair behind her ear. “It's nothing. When I was little, my sister and I used to race to see who could climb trees the fastest.”

We walk through the preserve with Laiken leading the way. “It's only my second time ever being inside. The first time was because I'd been tossing a ball around by myself. It ended up getting over the fence. I met Wyatt that day, and he'd kindly let me inside, handed me the ball, and allowed me to look around.

I'd wanted to return after that. But then my mother had seen me leaving through the fence, meeting me in the front room of the house. She'd warned me to never dirty the preserve with my presence again. I'd taken her words to heart and kept my distance. Though she was never violent to me, Annie has always been intimidating.

Laiken scoops up a fat pinecone, tossing it to me. I catch it and put it in the bag. Mellie was right, there are tons of pinecones all over the ground. It doesn't take us long to fill the bag halfway. As we work, Laiken's long hair brushes over bushes, rubbing through patches of moss on rocks. She has to pick leaves out of it every time she bends down.

“Doesn't that bother you?” I ask. “It's got to get in the way constantly. I've never seen someone let their hair grow as long as you have. Especially someone who likes to spend so much time in the middle of a forest.”

She avoids my eyes, scooping up another pinecone. Turning it in her hand, she traces the gaps between the hard brown knobs. “On the day that I was taken away, I promised my sister I wouldn't cut my hair until we met again.”

I'm taken aback by her honest answer.

Laiken smiles fondly at the pinecone. “You must be thinking how ridiculous a

promise that is. Well, even if it sounds silly, it means the world to me. Picturing Kara all grown up like me, as we stand head-to-head to see whose braid is longer? It keeps me going.”

The plastic bag crinkles as I crush it in my hand. The promise was surprising, but my reaction is more than that. What she's told me makes me understand something about the seed of our beginning; the day when I first met her and saved her from the maids with their pair of scissors.

I'd made my oath to her, that no one would touch her hair, because of a childish sense of heroism. I didn't know that I was helping her keep a promise - especially one to hersister.

Black guilt makes my bones heavy. The bag of pinecones pulls my arm towards the ground. Overhead, the clouds rumble. A gust of wind comes, bringing the smell of rain a split second before the leaves on the trees above start to rattle. “We finished just in time,” Laiken says. “We should head back.”

“Wait,” I say, and the word has a thousand meanings behind it. “How can you do it? How is it possible to keep your promise to someone for so long, with nothing to show for it? If anything, your promise is making your life harder. That hair of yours would be easier to deal with if you just cut it. So why? How can you be so fucking strong?” I furrow my eyebrows, my forehead joining it. Every part of me wants to fold in on itself. “You don't even know if your sister is alive.”

The words come out all wrong. I realize it, and so does she.

Raindrops make their way through the branches, slowed by the foliage, but still connecting with us. The water comes quicker and before she answers me, both of us are soaked. “Being strong is all I have,” she whispers. “I have to trust that this is all going to pay off. If I don't, what do I have left?”

“It doesn't scare you?” I ask, and there's a part of me that's upset that she can be so confident. “For all your hope, what if you're wrong? What if you never see her again, won't you feel awful? Like everything you did wasn't worth it?”

“Of course it's worth it!” She whips her head side to side. Water flings off of her hair from the motion. “Maybe you don't know me the way I thought you did. But you definitely don't know my mom, or my sister, or my dad. If you did, you'd realize that all of us are strong. Not just me. None of us give up. When we make a promise, we keep it.”

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“Your father isn't good at keeping promises,” I say. My skull throbs. “He's happy to say whatever he has to, to get people to do what he wants.”

“Like I said, you don't know him!” she snaps.

I hesitate, torn between letting her win this argument and wanting her to understand my side of things. I wait too long, and my long stretch of silence exposes me to her. She reads between the lines, scanning my face, my uneasy frown, and her eyebrows arch upwards.

“Dominic, what aren't you telling me?” she asks warily.

I drop the bag of pinecone on the ground. I can't hold them anymore. “I'm not making wild guesses. I'm speaking from experience. Laiken, I've met your father. We worked together.”

The rain is coming down hard. It's soaked into her hair, made it look like black seaweed. Laiken could be created from nature, a dryad hiding among the plants and animals, beautiful spirit designed to judge my every flaw.

She stares at me accusingly. “How could you wait so long to tell me that you worked with my dad?”

I shake my head as I approach her. The ground is soft and slippery. “I didn't think it mattered. My work with him had nothing to do with you.”

“Everything that has to do with my father has something to do with me!” she yells.

“Dominic, this is what I'm talking about. These casual lies, this information that you hide from me, they're why I can't let you get close to me.”

“I wasn't trying to hide it,” I say, but as it comes out of my mouth it rings false.

She takes a step back, and I get the idea that she's about to flee. I don't blame her.

I'd run from me, too.

“Laiken, just listen.”

“Why, so you can tell me more lies? You'll manipulate me anyway you can to get what you want. Does it feel good to trick me into falling into your arms?”

“No,” I cringe.

“Then why didn't you tell me? What did I do to make you hate me so much?”

“It has nothing to do with you!” I yell back. Overhead the thunder booms, a flash of lightning turning her skin white. I'm breathing heavy, fingers flexing at my sides. “I didn't tell you... because I was ashamed. Telling you that I worked with your father would involve telling you that his escape was my fault. My fucking mistake.”

“What?” she whispers, the rain's constant rattle drowning her out.

“I was working with him on a project. I wanted to show my dad that I could be useful at the company. All the programming I learned, and I still wasn't anywhere as talented as your father. But I wanted to be. I thought if I worked with him, I could learn.” A bitter smile clings to my lips. “Instead, he pulled the wool over my eyes. He made me comfortable until I trusted him.” My attention shifts to her stunned face. “Just like he did to you.”

Laiken's head gives a single shake. "How did it happen?"

"He told me that he was coming back to the house for his monthly meeting with you. He told everybody else that I was in charge of escorting him. But I wasn't. I didn't know I was supposed to be. He got away, and now, I'll never be able to convince my parents I'm not worthless."

There's water on her face and I don't know if it's rain or tears. "You hid this from me, because you thought I'd hate you for making a single mistake? Do you really think so little of me?" I stare at her, ingesting her words like a man starving.

"There's very little I think about more than you," I admit solemnly.

Her lower lip trembles. A raindrop catches there, then dives to its death. "Dominic, I don't care what your parents think about you. They're flat out wrong. You're not worthless. Especially not to me."

Her feet move forward; she sinks on a patch of mud. Her legs go out from under her. She's about to hit the ground and the damp thorny branches, but I'm faster than gravity.

I jump forward, grabbing her forearms, keeping her upright. The rain makes her skin wet, and everything smells like fresh cut grass, like the world has been sliced open and all the green has poured out right here into our private clearing.

A flame of desire lights inside of me. It had dimmed during our fight, but the acceptance in her eyes pours on the gasoline. "Tell me," I demand. "Tell me all the reasons that you want me." Her eyebrows fly upwards. I watch her neck flex as she swallows nervously. "If you can't tell me why," I whisper, "then let me tell you why I want you."

I watch how her mouth puckers. She's thinking about kissing me and it drives me fucking mad.

“I want you because of the way you move,” I say. “I want you because of how your hair feels in my fingers. I want you because you're my light in the darkness, strength where there is none. Because you're the only person in this broken world that cares about their promises.”

Her pupils are round, undeniably shining with overwhelmed tears. “Dominic.” My name catches in her throat.

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“I'm not done,” I whisper hotly. The world around us is gray, but Laiken makes the colors saturated where we stand. “I want to see you smile, I want to see how gentle your face is while you sleep. I want to see every kind of face you're capable of making. I want you for so many reasons but right now, right this second? I've never ached so badly to see the way someone looks while I'm fucking them.”

She lets out a desperate moan. I move my grip to her neck, sliding up and feeling her pulse flickering beneath me. Her hair is heavy with water, her braid a mess, and I make it worse when I tangle my fingers in it. “I know you said nothing was going to happen between us,” I whisper. “You said that after our first kiss, you said it while wishing I would kiss you again in the kitchen, and you said it while I pet your beautiful pussy as I made you come in that ballgown. Are you going to say it now, here, when I can smell your juices even through the scent of the rain around us?”

“No,” she breathes out the word. “Dominic, I do want you. I've always wanted you, even before I knew what that word meant. I just didn't want the secrets.”

“Well right now, we have one less between us. Isn't that worth something?”

She focuses on my eyes, looking into them so hard, like she can read small words written on my irises. Water drops from her eyelashes careen down her round cheek. Standing on tiptoe, she presses herself on my chest, fingers wrapping in my soaked shirt, and she kisses me so hard that I feel our teeth come together.

“God, Laiken,” I mumble against her mouth. My tongue darts in a circle, chasing hers, pursuing it the way a hunter chases its prey. I want to kiss her and explore every crevice of her mouth. I want to count her teeth and her heart beats.

My arms wrap around her body, holding her to me like I can crush away all the mistakes I've already made.

I don't want to make anymore.

I know I still will.

- Chapter 23 -

Laiken

Euphoria wraps me in its warm embrace. I don't shake it off. I can't, or I'll realize I've come undone by the desperate words of a man I'm afraid to trust; someone in a mask who peels it back when he sees fit. Someone who thinks he can whisper sweet words, telling me he admires my strength, my candor, and my steadfast promises... all while he makes me break the one I made so recently.

I promised not to give in to him, not until I understood his wounds. Then I kissed him, and the promise unfurled until weaving it back into something solid became impossible.

“Dominic,” I whisper, tracing his name with my tongue. He pushes me under a canopy of thicker trees. The rain is reduced to erratic, occasional splashes here. That's good, but it's too late; I'm already overflowing.

“I love when you say my name.” He fans his hand on my jaw, forcing my head back into the tree bark. I see the orange leaves, the determined green pine needles above. His lips glide over my throat where he's stretched the skin tight to draw out the sensitivity. The sensation of his warm, wet tongue, moving ever so slow, makes my lungs squeeze. Hot flashes dart through my blood.

He blocks out my view of the foliage. He's taller than the trees, bigger than the world. "I need you so badly," he says. Rain has turned his brown hair shiny, shaded it and the rest of him darker than ever. "Laiken, I've thought about this so many times. Every night, imagining it brought so much hurt... and then, when I realized it could happen, it hurt even more."

I'm light headed. I can't break his stare. "It doesn't have to hurt."

He hesitates. "That's what I'm supposed to tell you."

Pulled back to the reality of his hands on my cheeks, his body flattening me on the tree, I shiver. He went from discussing emotional pain to the literal one he might cause me by taking my virginity. "Dominic, I'm not scared of this. Not anymore."

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He moistens his lips. “You should be.” He looks away quickly. “But I'm glad you're not.”

I struggle to understand him all over again. He's so confusing, but am I any better? I'm weak to him in ways I didn't expect. Then, at times, I remember my goals and shake his claws from my skin. It got harder after he kissed me. Every sign of desire—every hint of affection—that he graces me with erodes another layer of my strength.

Dominic leans away from me. His expensive clothes are drenched. He shrugs out of the black jacket; it hits the ground with a wet slap. The gray dress shirt beneath clings to his chest, leaving nothing to my imagination. It's so sheer I can see the ghostly shapes of his tattoos under the surface.

He's dressed so fine. I'm under-dressed in my tights and empire-waist top. Yet we're both soaked, laden with water and our invisible problems. The rain has unified us.

I lift my hands; they're trembling. “Right here, right now, let's have no secrets. Okay?”

“Laiken, I can't tell you anything about—”

“I'm not asking about your past,” I say. “Only new things.” Fascinated by the shape of his lips, I follow the contour with my thumb. His whole body tenses. “If we do this, I want it to be honest. I want to know what you're thinking all the way through.”

He pulls in a long, exerting breath. It's so compelling that I breathe in, too. “You don't

know what you're getting into.”

“I can handle it.”

He searches my face and wraps my wrist in his hand. “Maybe, maybe not. There's no backing out now... for either of us.” His nose brushes mine. “I'll tell you every single thought in my head while I touch you, Laiken. I'll let you hear every single filthy word all in the name of truth. All for you.”

My mouth opens, but I'm wordless with anticipation. I'm vulnerable to his next kiss; he captures my mouth hard, his lips sealing us together. Fingers tangle in my hair then his other palm explores my hip. I shut my eyes, dropping my hands from his face to his chest. His firm muscles set my heart matching the rhythm of the storm above.

When the kiss ends, I gasp for air. Dominic's grip hasn't eased up. “I can't get enough of your mouth,” he says, watching me closely. He's looking for my reaction to his honesty. “I've never tasted something as divine as your lips. I—fuck.” He interrupts his own admission with another kiss.

I have to shove on him to get enough room to speak. “I want to undress you.”

The dazzling glow in his pupils encourages me. “Do it.”

We're shaking, but I can't tell if it's from the cold or our anxiousness. Both of us want this. Both of us are desperate for it. I can see it in how he fidgets when I struggle with the buttons on his shirt. I'm full to bursting, my limbs unable to work the hard discs with any skill. His chest flexes, stretching the materials; I see his skin through the gaps.

The first button splits away. His collarbone winks at me, then the deep groove between his pecs as I undo more of the shirt. Water has soaked through, making his

lovely, inked skin slippery.

Grabbing his collar, I peel the shirt down his carved arms. He holds his hands out, helping me as he shrugs out of the clothing. The sight beneath makes me salivate. I try to look at all of him, all at once, but it's impossible.

I knew he was in amazing shape, yet witnessing it, touching it, is something else entirely. My fingertips skirt down his bare shoulder, exploring the curve of his deltoids, the ridges between each muscle. There's script on his skin here; it reads Faith. Outlining each letter makes my lower belly tighten.

Extraordinary feathered wings spread across his chest. I trace those next, following each individual feather. My eyes dart up; he's staring at me, his wonder matching mine. "You're beautiful," I whisper. I think I should have said handsome, or sexy, but it doesn't sound right. Dominic is unquestionably masculine, but standing half-naked in the rain, huddled under the trees, he's something else. Beautiful is the closest word I can find.

His eyes widen. Then his lips part, and it sounds like all the air leaves his body. "Nothing about me is beautiful," he whispers. "I don't need it to be. You're enough for both of us."

I can't blush. I'm already as red as I can get.

Grabbing my shirt, he rips it over my head. It's so sudden I'm stunned. I stand there, my hands flying to my chest. It's automatic—a built in need to protect myself from being exposed. Dominic eyes my bra straps greedily, grabbing my arms, pulling them away to expose the rest. "Fuck," he manages, swallowing the word. "I've seen your tits already, I thought that would make this mean less. But it doesn't. I'm more excited than ever, fucking hell."

My nipples are hard from the temperature, and my arousal. They needle into the padding of my bra. Water drops onto the rounded tops of my breasts from the leaves, the perfectly clear droplets sliding over my skin, into my cleavage.

Dominic bends low, shoving his face between my breasts. I gasp out loud. He breathes in, then sucks, taking a drink of the raindrops pooling there. When he looks up at me, his hair sticking to his forehead, shadowing his eyes, he smirks. “Delicious,” he says. “Everything that touches you tastes better.”

I'm speechless. I watch as he reaches for his belt. I don't want to be a passive participant in this event; I want him, I truly do—even if my mind is slowing down my ability to stay in control. Be honest, I remind myself. Show him you're here with him, doing this WITH him. “Let me,” I say, reaching for his belt.

Dominic's grin is like a hungry wolf's. “Please,” he whispers, “it'd be my pleasure to let you undress me more.”

Grabbing the hard metal buckle, I slip the leather through the loops. I can't ignore the huge tent in his pants. Those slacks are as wet as the rest of him. And like his shirt, it clings to the length of his cock. I can see the shape of it—the girth. I stare, fixated, forgetting what I'm doing.

“The belt,” he says flatly.

Startling, I nod and pull the leather free. It drops to the forest floor, lost in the leaves. I go for the zipper but he beats me to it. Dominic fondles his entire shaft through his pants, breathing heavily as he undoes the metal zipper teeth. The noise is louder than the thunder.

His cock jumps free into the air, already halfway peeking from the top of his black boxers. The tip is maroon, the brightest spot of color in the overcast forest. I can't

look away. Especially with how he's touching himself, jerking his own dick out of his boxers, gripping it erotically.

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He pumps his fist along it once, twice. Each time, my pussy squeezes hungrily. I've never had anything inside of me, but my urge is instinctual. I ache for him to the point of pain.

“Do you want this?” he asks me, cruelly coy. His cock pulls through his thick fingers looking more massive the longer he plays with it.

My breath comes out in the air as visible steam. “Yes. God, yes.”

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out a foil packet. I've never seen a condom in person, but I know what it is. He tears the wrapper, looks me in the eye. He offers it to me.

With reverence, I take it. It's somehow warm in spite of the cold water infecting everything else. I slide it fully from the foil as I glance at his terrifyingly tempting cock. I want to touch him. I'm afraid to do it. Both emotions mix, and in the end, the unsatisfied pulsing between my legs wins.

I kneel on the wet ground, carefully gripping the base of his cock. He watches me with turbulent eyes. He's worked up by the sight of this, maybe more than I am. His skin is deliciously hot in my palm. Guided by curiosity, I slide my fist up his length until I bump the ridge of his cock-head. He pulls in a strained breath through his teeth. The sound makes my clit throb.

Steeling myself, I unravel the condom from his tip to his base, just above his heavy hanging balls. I can hear him panting eagerly. I glance up, meeting his wild stare—glimpsing the beast swimming in his galaxy-dark pupils that wants to eat me

alive. I recognize it for what it is; the part of him he said to be afraid of.

And for a second, I am.

He crashes down on me, kissing me without remorse. “Fuck,” he growls, spinning me so my chest goes flat in the slick mud and leaves. “I can't wait any longer, Laiken. I need you so damn bad.”

The ground is cool under me. My excitement leaks outward, and soon, even the earth is searingly hot. Dominic's weight settles on my hips. I'm panting, anxious—rigidly expectant. His voice is a smoky whisper in my ear canal. It heads for my brain and fills the cracks. “Tell me you need me, too.”

“I need you,” I sob. What will that word mean after we're through?

My knees scrape on the rough path as he lifts my hips from behind. His firm fingers reach beneath me, digging into my soaking wet yoga pants. I feel him take hold of the material; it stretches, the tugging sharp and sudden. He rips a hole into the crotch of my pants with a single twist of his forearm.

Cool air rushes over my inner thighs. My muscles knot up, I brace myself in the mud. He runs his fingers down my spine, stopping at my bra strap. “Breathe, Laiken.”

I draw in a shuddering gasp. “I'm fine, I'm really fine.”

“You're not, you're trembling.”

He's right; I'm quaking all over. But he's got the wrong idea. “I'm not scared, Dominic.”

“Of course you are. What else could make you react like this?”

I twist in the leaves, bending so I can glance at him behind me. I force back overwhelmed tears. “I'm shaking because of how much I want you. I never thought—I hoped, but to be doing this with you, after all this time, I feel like I'm about to turn inside out. I don't know how else to describe it. It's just... I just really can't wait to have this moment with you.”

His jaw clenches, his eyelids joining in. “I've wanted this, too. I really did. I just never thought I deserved it.” His words drive a heel into my heart. I wish I could turn around and hug him, erase whatever pain is written all over his face. Then his eyes open, and the wild heat inside of them scalds me—reminds me of who he is.

Spreading my legs, he peels my pussy open from behind. “So god damn fantastic,” he whispers. “I could stare at your cunt for hours. Look, your little clit is twitching.” He reaches down, rubbing me there until I groan.

“Stop teasing me,” I whimper.

“I want this to hurt as little as possible,” he says. But his hand leaves me, in its place is a warm, solid object: his cock. He nudges me along my seam. Up, down, a gentle pressure as he tests how my pussy receives him.

I bury my fingers in the dirt. I can't hold still; my head turns, cheek to the leaves, and I taste the rain-sodden earth. My taste buds are alive. Everything is delicious right now.

An inch of his dick pushes inside of me. The condom might as well not be there, his warmth radiates through the latex and into my skin. My walls clench around him, pulling him deeper, begging him to come inside.

He kneels on either side of my thighs, squeezing my middle with both hands. He's holding my steady, grunting with the effort of guiding himself into my pussy without

going too fast. I appreciate his kindness, but I'm torn between wishing he'd go slower, and desperate for him to slam his cock into me balls deep.

I've never felt this before—this insane lust. “You make such perfect sounds,” he says, inserting another inch of his cock. I didn't know I was making any sounds, but I hear them now that he points them out. I'm moaning like an animal in heat.

Bearing down, I shove backwards. He stretches me out even more and I go dizzy with delight. My walls are milking him, greedy for more. Each time my heart beats I feel it in my clitoris. On the fringe there's some pain, but it's mild, numbed by the pleasure.

“Jesus,” he hisses, his weight settling on my back. He kisses my temple. His balls tickle my buzzing labia where it circles him at the root. He's all the way in. We're as close as we've ever been.

My whole body shudders; my inner walls flex. “You feel so good, I didn't know... I had no idea it could feel this perfect.”

Dominic's chest shifts on my spine. “Me either.”

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He slides backwards, giving me the first full thrust of his whole length. The impact dazzles me. He does it again, his pace maintaining a strict rhythm that seems impossible. I can barely think, how can he control his muscles at all?

Heat flashes through me. My pussy thrums, hugging his rigid cock, crying out for release from the ever-growing pressure in my core. I'm working up to something so intense it frightens me. I've come from his touch before, and that was leagues ahead of what I'd ever done to myself in my own bed.

Climaxing with him inside of me... I worry I might die.

My heart could stop.

But mostly, it's concerning that I think all of that and don't care to stop him. My drive, this growing addiction, is greater than anything else. If I come and my world becomes one big white ball of bliss... what a way to go out.

“Laiken,” he says against my wet scalp. “I need you to come for me. I have to feel it or I'll break apart. It's that fucking bad for me. Come for me, come hard on my cock, do it.”

I inhale until my ribs hurt. I'm tingling down to my toes, ready to burst. He keeps slamming into me, his movement getting erratic. His hard muscles scrape over my smooth skin. I'm naked except for my yoga pants, and they're getting torn apart from how rough we're being.

Above us, another storm cloud rumbles. It's how I feel—like there's thunder in my

veins. I need the lightning. Once it strikes, I'll explode.

"I—I'm so close," I whine. "Dominic, I'm almost there. I think... this has to be..." I close my eyes, smelling the rain, the electric atoms in the air, our sweat, our sex. There's a slight burning in my center, like something tore and salt is in the wound. But I don't give a damn if I'm being sawed apart. I won't stop until...

He fucks me once more, his cock-head so deep I swear he's in my throat. Every muscle in me tightens, balling up as my release hits. "Fuck!" I scream. The lightning crack is deafening, I don't know if it's real or in my head. I just know I'm trembling, squeezing his cock as I twitch and come. Nothing has ever felt so astounding.

I sense his hooks going further into my heart.

I'm doomed to love this man.

I just know it.

"Fuck, yes," he snarls. His hands dig into my shoulders. His beard grinds on my cheek as he pounds me harder, riding out my orgasm, chasing his own. "Perfect, so damn perfect. Laiken, you're mine. Did you know that? All fucking mine. From now until forever." He's rambling, his words slurring with his heavy breathing. My pussy is flexing madly with aftershocks. I'm sensitive enough to tell that his cock is swelling, just seconds before he groans into the open air, head arching back.

We stay like that, sheathed together, breathing in tandem. My senses are returning. They bring a sense of uncertainty with them. I wonder if Dominic is experiencing the same thing, the gravity of our actions... of our situation.

Turning my jaw, I let my opposite cheek settle on the wet dirt. I scan the area, spotting the garbage bag. The reason we came here seems like another lifetime ago.

Like who I was when we picked up pinecones was a different person.

He rolls off of me, but he doesn't pull out. Dominic wraps his arms around my waist. I snuggle against his body, my ribs locking against his, as if we were meant to fit together. The prickle up my spine warns me someone is watching. I look over at the wall of tress.

There's a deer standing there.

It's the biggest doe I've ever seen, majestic with its elegant neck stretching high. It blends into the branches. Its round, soulful eyes touch on me.

I hold my breath. I'm captured by the power of the moment, waiting to see if the animal bolts or not. Dominic's heart beats comfortably alongside mine; I'm not sure he's noticed it.

The deer's knowing stare goes through my skin and bones and into my soul. It reminds me of the time I chased the fawn through the river with my sister and how the mother had gazed me down. That day, it had found me wanting.

This time, when it leaves, I don't feel judged.

- Chapter 24 -

Dominic

A cough ruins the rare sweetness of my dream. That noise comes again, making my heart thud. Familiar, sour fear fills my mouth. Halfway between slumber and reality I can't move. I'm paralyzed. Run! Get away! I demand escape but my body doesn't listen.

Please.

Let me go.

Don't come in here.

Don't do this again.

"Dominic?" Laiken whispers. I open my eyes, my ears ringing with the memory of that wet, awful cough. The sky above is sprawling with pinpricks of light that watch us from between the tree branches. The clouds have cleared, the storm gone for the moment. "We fell asleep," she says, touching my arm.

I sit up, brushing dirt from my hair. The dream is a hazy memory. It fades entirely when I look at Laiken next to me. She's smiling like a conspirator. Leaning towards me with the kind of sly pride a lion wields after a successful hunt.

If I was worried at all that she'd regret having sex with me, I'm not now.

Leaning forward, I put my hand possessively on her knee. My lips graze hers; she sighs happily. “We should go inside.”

“I like being out here,” she replies, coming in for a second kiss. “The world tastes brighter after what we did. Reminds me of swimming across a big lake, racing a hundred people, and then winning.”

“Are you sore?” I ask, tracing her cheek.

She shakes her head. “Yes, and no. It's more than that.” Putting her hand to her chest, she exhales. “I can't explain.”

I don't need her to. I know exactly what she's talking about, because I feel it. Standing, I help her to her feet. The remnants of her yoga pants dangle from her hips, exposing all the places I tore through the fabric. There are scrapes on her knees, old blood drying on her inner thighs from taking her virginity. It fills me with guilt... and a shameful rush of filthy lust.

“Fuck, I'm sorry,” I say. “I meant to be more careful.”

She glances down, stretching a leg. She sees the blood and shrugs. “It's nothing.” But now that we're standing, and I can see all the damage clearly, I disagree. Between the ripped clothing, mud stains, and the foliage in her hair, Laiken looks a mess - an oddly sexy mess.

Her shirt barely hides her naked ass if she stands too straight. She takes a single step, grabbing up the bag of pinecones, and I glimpse her gorgeous pussy. My erection is instant—the rush of blood makes me dizzy.

Oblivious to my response, she climbs over a log, walking to a small shed by the fence's gate. She's inside briefly, and when she appears again, she's wearing an over-

sized gray smock that hides her down to her calves. “This will have to do,” she says. “I don't want the staff seeing me naked.”

I cover my mouth with a fist, struggling not to laugh.

Tilting her head, she squints. “Oh, so you think I look funny?”

I'm about to tell her yes. Then she turns to me, taking long steps over the night-blue grass. I see how precisely she places her heels down; like a great cat on the prowl. I catch a glimpse of her scraped knee when she rocks her hips. She holds my gaze the whole time; serene eyes a glorious shade of blue that makes her swollen lips redder.

My feet move, I meet her there in front of the exit. “Well?” she asks, dark brows creasing. “Am I funny looking?”

“No,” I whisper. “Laiken, you're the most beautiful person I've ever met.”

The flush of pink that blossoms in her cheeks is enough to heat me up again. Her lips part and silently beg me to kiss them. Before I can, a dog barks. “Shit,” she whispers, glancing at the house. “We need to go back, before the security guards can't find me inside and assume I bolted again. They'll lose their minds.”

She slips away from me. I know she's not gone, but the empty-ache she leaves in my chest is concerning. I dreamed of this moment. Making this woman mine was a craving I was worried to fulfill, then afraid of abandoning. But now that I've slipped around her body, buried myself in all that she has to offer, I expect to feel... happy, relieved, something other than this sensation of foreboding. It's like my heart is trembling behind my ribs, afraid of a thing that hasn't happened yet.

I don't know how that can be. Laiken is mine, in every sense of the word. I've taken her first kiss, her cherry, broken down every barrier of hers—and some of my own—to

reach this moment. Even if our desires are growing inside this walled-in excuse for a home, a place not fit for happiness of any kind, this is all we have. This is all we need. This is our ending.

It has to be.

- Chapter 25 -

Laiken

Emma stands back, observing me in the mirror. “You look lovely.”

I stare at my reflection, and I think she's right, but not for the reason she assumes. I do feel lovely. It has nothing to do with the elaborate weaving of silver flowers through my layers of loose waves of hair. Ever since Dominic and I had sex, I've felt... like I was glowing.

“Do you like it?” she asks, squinting.

I fondle the long ends where they drape over my naked shoulders. “Yes, but I'm surprised you styled it this way.” I'm remembering how she tried to cut off these brunette strands years ago.

Emma shifts side to side, her gray apron looking like a silent bell ringing. “I'm not a monster, young lady. I just want to do my job. If Master Silas wants you making conversation on the ball room floor, then, well... I'll make sure everyone fights to talk to you.”

Startling, I smile up at her. “Thank you,” I say solemnly.

Bowing her head, she turns and leaves me alone. I gaze back in the mirror, toying

with my hair, adjusting the bodice of my gold sequin dress. The party is starting soon. I know I should be downstairs, but once I start pacing, I can't stop.

Everything is good. Why do I feel uneasy? Traveling the room, I sit on my bed. My hands smooth the blankets, and as I do, a trickle of an epiphany comes. I'm freaking out because of how happy I feel. I shouldn't feel this great. My situation hasn't changed; I'm still a hostage. I'm still trying to keep myself afloat until I can find a way out of this mess.

Pretending to be a party-planner, letting myself be swept into Dominic's arms, it's all been a distraction. A wonderful one, but still... I can't let my guard down. Emma can act sweet, but she said it herself—her job is to work for Silas. He's going along with my plan now, but what if it fails? What if tonight bombs, and he lets Annie have her way with me?

I don't have a clue what she'll do when she's angry.

That's worse than knowing, in a way; the mystery of it.

Stop this, I warn myself. I glance in the mirror and stand taller. Prouder. You've got this. Save the moping for if the party fails. It could go great! The Bradleys might land a ton of big clients for their banks. Hell, maybe this will go so well, that they'll stop looking for my dad. What an idea that is.

Motivated by my new point of view, I adjust my dress one final time. On low heels, I trot out the door. And run straight into Dominic.

He's wearing a different jacket and shirt than the pair he ruined in the storm. The pale vest, though, is the one Mellie tailored for him. It's strapped tight over a new outfit that's ironed sharply, the lines uniform. He looks stunning. "There you are," he says, his smile going sideways. He takes me in with clear appreciation. "You look

amazing.”

“Thanks,” I say, playing with the draped, A-line hem. “You, too.” My eyes go past him, down the hall. “Are people showing up already?”

“Some, yes.”

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“I’m sorry, I should have hurried there sooner.”

He shrugs, running a hand down his silver tie. I watch, completely hooked on his tiny movements. They make me think of how precisely he can touch my body. “My parents have it under control. Don’t forget, this is their house. They’re not going to pretend this event was your idea.”

I’m taken aback. “Oh.”

He offers his elbow. “Walk with me. We’ll make a grand entrance.”

Lighting up with a grin, I wrap my arm around his thick bicep. It thrills me to be this close to him. He smells divine, and the walk to the ballroom goes too quickly. I could stroll down an endless hallway with this man.

We approach the double doors. Security is dotted around, and I realize that, for once, they’re not watching out for me. They’re checking their lists as people arrive, marking off names, and sometimes even peering into bags or coats. The Bradleys are rich and powerful, and I forgot they could have enemies. I’m not the only one who hates them.

When we get to the entrance, the security man—Miles, I recognize him—glances at us. He eyeballs our woven arms, but says nothing. He nods as we pass.

The room inside is breathtaking. Mellie took all of my input, and the result is a ballroom that is straight out of a winter wonderland. The tables around the perimeter are draped in white satin. Tall high tops circling closer to the middle are studded with trays of drinks. Every surface is decorated tastefully with silver-glittered pinecone

arrangements.

Seeing the pinecones make my heart jump. They remind me of Dominic and me in the forest... of his strong hands on my hips, his cock buried in me to my limit as we both orgasm. We haven't had a moment alone to repeat that encounter.

"I know what you're thinking about," he says softly beside me. I snap my eyes to him in shock; he's smirking. "I'm thinking about it, too. Maybe we can reenact our fun in here later, when everyone has gone."

I want to scream yes please! I bite my bottom lip because Silas and Annie are approaching us. He's dressed similar to Dominic, a red triangle sticking from his jacket pocket. The green fabric that clings to Annie shows off her small waist and streamlined hips.

"Dominic," Silas says, not offering a hand to either of us. Annie's openly staring at our arm-link the way Miles was. On impulse, I slide my hand away, hanging it at my side. She doesn't appear any less sour.

Silas clears his throat. "This event is starting well. There are a few prospects who want to chat with me, and the night is very young."

I manage a smile. "I'm happy to hear that."

He gives me a curious look. "It's good to see you taking your situation so seriously." His eyes narrow further, and I feel Dominic tensing. His protective aura is fierce. "It should go without saying, but I hope you weren't planning to cause any trouble tonight?"

"What kind of trouble?" I ask slowly.

Annie speaks up first, her voice a conspiratorial whisper. “Don't go begging anyone for help. None of the people attending would risk their own livelihoods by getting involved in yours.”

My mouth opens. I work my jaw, searching for a response. “I wasn't planning on trying anything like that.”

She nods curtly. With a final glance at us both, she sways off into the crowd. Silas lingers a second before he follows her. I shake my head, crossing my arms. “Amazing, aren't they?” I ask.

Dominic makes a gritty, sharp sound. I stare up at him and catch the anger leaving his face. He's calm as a stone, and just as welcoming. “She hates seeing us together.”

I blink twice. “Annie? Why does she care what we do?”

His lips twitch at the corners, becoming a bitter smile. “Seeing me happy makes her miserable.”

I place my hand gently on his shoulder. “Well. Then she'll have to get used to being miserable, I guess.”

Dominic fixates on my hand. Then, he gazes into my eyes, taking in my sympathetic smile. My heart beats quicker when he smiles back. “I guess so.” He nods towards the group. “You attended smaller gatherings here before, right?”

“Very small. Your dad sometimes had a few friends... or business associates I guess, over for drinks. I guess there were some holiday parties, too.” He tenses when I mention those. “The guys would flirt at times, but they didn't want to talk to me.” I scan the faces in the room, narrowing in on a few eager, creepy grins. “These guys, though, they look like they're ready to eat me alive.”

His eyes darken severely. “If anyone tries anything, tell me.”

I watch him makes angry fists, the veins in the backs of his hands dancing. It thrills me to know he's so protective. “Thanks,” I say, reaching out to brush his wrist. “I think I can handle them. But I'll let you know if it gets out of control.”

Dominic considers me for a long minute. “I almost want to leave right now,” he whispers. His body guides me backwards, my calves bumping the chair. “Take you upstairs to my room and forget all about this party.”

I've never seen his room, not since he came back. I didn't go in there once after he left for school. I wonder how it looks now. How his bed would feel. If we got under his covers, like we did as kids, what would happen?

His eyes are smoldering. They twitch, spotting something to my left. Intrigued, I follow his line of sight and see a man in the crowd. He's wearing a brown vest over a white shirt, the rest of his outfit as gray as an elephant. “Someone important?” I ask.

“Potentially,” he says, hesitating.

I read between the lines. “Go. Talk. It's why we arranged this event, after all.”

Dominic separates from me. I watch him go, lamenting that I'm now going to have to make polite conversation alone.

It's a large crowd that only grows, and I notice a pattern quickly. The men are older, sometimes with multitudes of wrinkles and graying hair. There are a few younger guys, like Dominic, but not many. The women, however, are really young and beautiful. Their dresses sparkle, like their job is to be an expensive handbag for the men to wear on their arms.

It sickens me, and mingling becomes a chore.

“Ah, you must be her,” a voice says. I prepare my false smile, turning towards the speaker. He seems to be Silas's age. They don't look alike, but there's still something familiar about him that I can't place.

Black, piercing eyes focus on me. His hands are shoved in his jacket pockets. I get the odd feeling that he's resisting the urge to touch me—if it's to harm, or to show affection, I can't tell. I'm busy waiting for him to speak while being held in place by his burning stare.

He rakes his eyes down my face, to my long hair. “Did you know they call you the Wild Girl in our circle?”

“Excuse me,” I say, gathering myself. “I didn't catch your name.”

He hasn't blinked. It creates a grim energy, and the longer he looks at me, the more damage I recognize in his expression. Those furrows in his forehead are exaggerated by his widow's peak. I'm getting used to recognizing trauma. I wonder what his is.

I wet my lips, noticing they're dry. I wish he'd just blink. “How do you know the Bradleys?” I ask, trying to force conversation, or find a way to exit.

His attention doesn't leave me. “I'm Vahn, Annie's brother.”

I see it the second he spills her name. They share a similar shape to their chins, their hair the same reddish brown, like a fox's fur. My lips twitch, unable to hold my smile. Anyone associated with that woman is bad news. “Oh.”

“Yes,” he whispers. “Oh.” He sneers as he repeats me. “She's told me a little about you. The rest I learned myself.”

My pulse is racing. I wipe my clammy hands on my dress. “Did you need something from me?” I fight to keep my tone polite. If Vahn is Annie's brother, anything I do will get back to her. Any words I speak, any poor behavior.

Finally he breaks his stare, and I breathe a hair easier. He's glancing over my head at something. I'm tempted to look, but I control the urge. “No. I hope I never do. I just wanted to look you in the eye for myself, and see how similar you were.”

“Similar to who?” I ask, baffled.

He doesn't respond. Vahn pushes past me, acting like I'm as interesting as a coat rack. With him gone, my adrenaline hits me hard. My spine feels like a length of ice cubes strung through me, my dress sticks to my sweaty stomach.

Queasy, I hurry towards the sidelines. I fall into a chair and close my eyes. The darkness spins, so I quickly stare at the bright ceiling instead. What the hell was that about?

Dominic replaces my view of the chandeliers. He towers over me, his eyebrows knotted with concern. “Are you okay?” he asks. “You look pale.”

“I’m fine.” It’s a white lie. I don’t want him to worry about me. “Just... I met your uncle a minute ago.”

His nostrils flare. “You met Vahn?”

“Dominic, what’s wrong?” I ask warily.

He keeps staring. “What did he tell you?”

“Nothing. Not really.” I run the conversation back through my mind. “He said he wanted to see if I was similar to someone. Do you know what that’s about?”

Ignoring me, he obsessively scans the ballroom. I catch the ripple of pain that creates wrinkles in his forehead. His eyes are an oil slick, moving around, unable to rest on anyone or anything as he searches. Is he looking for his uncle right now, or someone else? “Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yes.” He snatches the last champagne flute off of a table, swallows it in one gulp. “I’ll go get more—for both of us.” He wades through the packed crowd without giving me a chance to figure out what’s got him so edgy. Left alone, I get to my feet. I don’t want to leave without Dominic, especially if he’s coming back with drinks. He’ll expect me to be here. Looking for a way to kill time, I start studying the party-goers.

I make a game of counting the dress colors. Five red ones, ten blue... seven white. I’m

enjoying this. It's like bird watching, in a way. I'm happy to be doing something that keeps my mind busy.

The next dress I see is more interesting than the others. Transparent sheets with little crescent moons stitched in gold are draped over creamy silk that swallow the woman's legs. Heels that glitter like a thousand falling stars peek out beneath the hem. She's someone who doesn't care about movement, comfortable in her confinement.

I could never be that at ease. But I still admire her from behind, thinking she's a real beauty. Short, perfectly even hair tickles her earlobes. It's a glistening brunette cap on her head. I'm waiting for her to turn, painfully curious if her face could be as elegant as the rest of her.

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A young man approaches, speaking up at her elbow. The woman's hair barely shifts as she responds to whatever he said. I catch her gentle profile; her blue eyes with their green flecks. And as she comes into view, letting me look upon her face—more beautiful than I imagined—my stomach free-falls to my knees.

It's Kara.

My sister.

- Chapter 26 -

Laiken

I can't breathe. The room swings up around me then back again, like I'm in the middle of a boat in a hurricane. It can't be. But it is. It's her and there's no question about it. Kara is in the room with me, standing comfortably—like she belongs here. I abruptly feel like I don't.

My eyes won't move from her hair. It's shorter than it was when I said my goodbye. Time has turned her into a graceful woman. My brain struggles to connect the new Kara with the Kara of my past. The edges of my vision go fuzzy; I need to blink but I can't. What if she vanishes when I do?

“Here,” Dominic says, holding out a glass to me. “Nice and cold.”

Why is her hair short?

Did she cut it? Did someone else?

What happened to our promise?

“Laiken?” His voice is burdened with concern. He moves until he blocks me; I grab his arm, trying to push him out of the way. He doesn't budge. “Hey, what's wrong?”

Snapping out of my trance, I stare up at him. “It's... my sister. Kara is here.”

“What, where?”

I motion at her with my chin. “Right there. In the white dress.”

I'm too busy looking to see his reaction. Over my head, he whispers, “What's she doing here?”

His question snaps me from my funk. “I thought she'd be far away from this place. That Dad and her and the others...” I blink at him, suspicion making my neck hot. “Dominic, did you know she was coming?”

He shakes his head sharply. “I didn't, really.” He skips a beat, his voice softening. “I knew she wasn't with your father. It's only your mom and brother that got out with him. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. It seemed merciful to let you think everyone else escaped.”

I'm too surprised to be upset at him. “I need to talk to her.”

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“Yes, you do,” he agrees. Something cold touches my hand, the drink. I take it this time, thanking him with my nervous smile.

Swallowing the champagne, I revel in how it pops down my throat. While neither of us is old enough to drink, this is the Bradleys' home. They don't care that we're drinking at their little party.

I think about the things I want to say to her. I have a torrent of questions, a million stories both good and bad, and all are important for her to hear. We have years of catching up to do. And while I didn't think I'd see her so soon, or in a place like this, a part of me begins to soar as I cross the ballroom floor and close in on her.

“Kara?” I ask gently, though I don't doubt it's her. She might look different than she did when she was thirteen, but she looks like I do now—just with shorter hair.

The breath she pulls in steals the heat from the air. It makes her stand tall, like a length of string pulling her upwards to the ceiling from the top of her head. Kara turns until she's facing me straight on, her mouth a tiny circle, but she's less surprised than I was. The off-kilter way she stares at me melts into something cool. There's indifference in her eyes aimed at me. “Laiken, it's good to see you.”

“It's a good to see me?” I repeat, wondering why we aren't hugging. There's a strange force field around her, an energy that says don't touch me. It extends a foot in every direction. It takes everything I have to break through it and reach for her.

My arms circle my sister, and it feels like she's giving this to me, instead of reciprocating. Her arms start to come around, but they don't finish the circle. She

stiffens and then backs away, staring at Dominic beside me.

They eyeball each other. I can't read their expressions. I'm flustered, like I walked into a room of strangers when I expected it to be close friends. "Kara," I say, "this is Dominic Bradley."

She doesn't offer him her hand. "Nice home you have here."

"Thanks," he says, his arms stiff at his sides.

"I see you have drinks." She nods at our glasses. "I'm at a disadvantage, I don't have the comfortable numbness that alcohol brings. I'll go fix that."

"Wait!" I shout, stopping her before he leaves. Why does she want to leave? I stumble over my tongue. "Kara, this is weird. Why are you acting like it isn't? I haven't seen you in years! I didn't know what happened to you! If you were with dad, or trapped like me... and your hair... who did that to you?"

My sister brushes the fine ends of her cropped hair. She doesn't look at me, but instead over the heads of the partygoers. She's unaffected by my earnest panic. Just as placidly calm as any other stranger wanting to politely end a conversation.... and I realize something that's bothering me.

Kara, my wild sister, looks so natural among these elites.

She stands in her heels like she was born in them.

"Calm down," she says, still not looking my way. It's like she's talking to me but doesn't want anyone else to realize it, her words soft under her breath. "There are lots of things going on that you don't understand. But I'll give you a tip. Don't lose your cool in the middle of these people. The second you give them an excuse, they'll strip

your skin from your bones until you're nothing.”

“Kara!” I reach for her. She moves too quickly, like she did earlier, not letting me make contact. Her rejection has me swaying, ready to collapse. I'm not capable of being angry; I'm too confused, too destroyed by her casual distaste to muster up another word as she walks away from me. I stare at her elegant, naked back until she disappears into the black suits and too white smiles.

Suddenly, I'm suffocated by all of these fake people. I need air! I can't breathe! I book it for the exit. I have to lift my dress, but I still stumble, stepping on the hem—I hear the threads tearing. The noise drives me further.

Miles gapes at me as I rush by. I wonder if he'll radio a warning, but I don't care. Right now I want to vanish into thin air. I settle for bursting through the front doors, dodging a few new guests as they enter. All of them gawk at me, and I know I must be quite a sight.

Outside, the evening is blotted by storm clouds. The rain hasn't let up since it began the other day. I'm gasping, bending over at the waist under the roof edge. Rain dribbles a foot away. I could reach out and touch it. The yard is muddy, everything so cold. But it still feels more welcoming here, near the storm, than it does in the house at my back.

A strong hand captures my shoulder. It's Dominic. “Are you all right?”

I shake him off, spinning to face him. “Of course I'm not all right, how can I be? That's my sister, but she isn't acting like it. Goddammit, is it something in the water in this place? First you, now her. How is it possible for people to change so much?”

“Everyone changes.”

“Not everyone,” I argue desperately. “Not me. Six years of limbo, that's what you're looking at. I want the same things. I have the same goals! I used to know what she wanted, too. Now...”

He slips his hand over mine, able to cover it so that just the tips of my nails show in his huge hand. “Give her time, I'm sure she's been through a lot of things, like all of us have.”

“But why is she here?” I squint at him, trying to see into his head. “You really didn't know she was coming tonight? Your mom, your dad, they didn't say anything about this?”

“No.” He says it too fast. It makes me think he's hiding something.

“I'm so tired of feeling like everyone is part of some big trick, and when I look away, they're all laughing behind their hands at me.”

He sets his hands on my bare shoulders. My goose bumps rise, but my core tugs me towards him. “Let's go back inside,” he says.

I start to say no. Then I see the half-open painted glass doors. Light extends from the crack, stopping just before our feet. Like the event is motioning for us to go back inside.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:24 am

I'd just yelled at Dominic about my goals, how they were still the same. But here I am, ready to throw all my effort in planning this party down the drain. Taking his sleeve, I pull him inside. "Do you know how to dance?"

He chuckles, shrugging lightly. "There were a few balls at school. I know a couple steps."

I pull him all the way back inside the house. Miles sees us coming; he's talking into his walkie-talkie, but he stops, staring at us like we're ghosts. He definitely thought I was trying to escape. Now he looks frustrated, and I smile at the idea of him raising an alarm needlessly.

I take Dominic towards the middle of the ballroom, where the floor is so mirrored I feel like I'm standing on top of a clone of myself. "It's good you can dance," I say, "because I don't have any clue how. You lead, I'll follow, and we'll show these people that they made the right choice by coming tonight."

He sweeps me into his arms, obeying my wish. I've seen him move before—that time in the hallway, when he cornered me against the wall. I'm aware of his agility, his powerful speed. I think I'm prepared for what he's capable of, until he grips one of my hands, putting it on his chest.

His fingers swing down to my lower back, leveraging me so that I follow his movements on the dance floor. The music is gentle; stringed instruments twinkling through the expensive speakers arranged around the room. The Bradleys could've afforded a live band, but it was nice to have one less thing to arrange.

As we dance, I know people are staring at us. I don't focus on them, though. I'm too caught up in the liquid heat in Dominic's eyes. His grip is firm, but welcome. He makes me feel like I'm the only person in the room. There's a constant half smile playing over his lips, and it makes them tempting. I know they'd be soft if I kiss them.

We twirl and, though I warned him I'm no dancer, he prevents me from missing a step. He could lift me off the ground if he wanted to, but he does his best to create a pace that I can follow, to hold me up when my ankles twist the wrong way on my heels, to make every stumble that I have look like it's part of our dance.

My heart is racing. I can taste it in my mouth. It's filling me up. I'm one big pounding heart being hugged by his muscular arms. All I can see is his handsome face, the dark blanket of beard over his solid jaw. When I inhale, my stomach presses into the rock wall of muscle that is his torso. The buttons on his vest dig through my dress and into my skin. It's such a short moment, but I know I'll be thinking about it later tonight, maybe the next few nights.

A few other couples have joined us; they dance on my peripheral. But like everyone else, they don't matter to me. I told Dominic I wanted to do this so that people would be glad they'd come. Dancing people are happy, happy people are more likely to do what you want. I learned that in one of the Business 101 books in the library.

I hope several happy guests approach the Bradleys, wanting to bring their business to their banks. That will calm Annie down, according to Silas, and keep her from taking her rage out on me.

My long-term goal is to save my own skin.

But my short-term goal is

to embrace the distraction that Dominic brings when he touches me.

It's working. I'm lightheaded with lust. I so badly want to kiss him, but I worry with all the attention that it might be a bad idea. I don't know what his parents would think about us kissing. They might not want us dancing together, I think, suddenly uneasy. Could my impulsiveness mess things up? What if Annie gets so angry at the sight of us together that she lashes out, no matter how the party goes?

As we slow down, I search the room, looking for her face. But I don't see Annie, I see someone else: Kara. She's watching me from the sidelines. The glass in her hand is empty. Whatever she grabbed, she drank it already. I imagine her sucking it down the way that I had to make myself feel better.

Then I see another face—Dominic's uncle. Vahn and Kara look nothing alike. But as different as they are, they're watching Dominic and me with the exact same expression.

Disgust.

- Chapter 27 -

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:24 am

Laiken

It's late when the party ends. That's how I know it went well.

I linger, observing from the sidelines as several men shake Silas's hand before they exit. Yes, this definitely went the way I'd hoped.

I'm buzzing with relief. But that starts to fade the longer I wait around in the ballroom. I'd hoped that Dominic would find me here. He'd said he wanted to, and I'm eager for more of the wicked pleasure he can give me. It will definitely let me ride my high in the right way.

Eventually, I'm alone. The room is empty, my heels echoing as I circle the dirty tables. The maids will clean this all away tomorrow. It will be like the event never happened.

Not for me, though.

Even if the party went well... I can't forget that Kara was here. I didn't see her leave, I don't know who she came with. Without the party or Dominic to distract me, my mind starts a mile run of paranoia.

Why was she here tonight? To mess with me, like a cruel joke? Is she going to come back? Will I not see her again until I escape, and even then, do I have to save her too? Silas must have her on lock down somewhere else. That makes sense. He told me he had the rest of my family.

But then, did he bring her here? Does Dominic really not know? I want to believe him, but I already know he has secrets. This could be another one. I'm all fucked up with anxiety. After taking another circle of the room, I give the pinecones a regretful glance, then leave.

Dominic slipped out when I was talking to someone else. I'd thought he'd return before the party ended. Now, I'm worried something happened to him. Maybe he felt ill, I think, wandering the hallway towards my room. He could have gone to lie down. I pull up short, thinking of what he said before. About taking me to his room.

Pivoting, I change directions. My speed quickens as I traverse the quiet halls. The lights are low, but I can see fine. Not that I need to; I know this house exceptionally well. I definitely know the way to Dominic's room.

The closer I get, the faster my heart ripples. It's like someone tossed a stone into the puddle inside of my chest. For years, when I'd come this way, sadness would claw and attack me. It hurt so much to know his room was sitting empty.

Now... now, I'll get to open that door and see him inside. See his huge body filling the room, luxuriate in his sheets as he holds me down on the silk, kissing me until I sob. I'm nearly to the door when I notice there's a thin rod of light spilling from it onto the red carpet. I realize he's got to be inside, just seconds before I hear someone talking. The tone rises then falls, and my stomach drops as I swear I'm hearing two people.

I get near the door's crack. Through it, I see the side of Dominic's head. Glorious relief somersaults through me. I imagined a second voice. Was he talking to himself? I decide it doesn't matter—I can't wait to surprise him. I reach for the knob, preparing to let myself in.

“Don't lecture me,” Kara says, moving into view. Her eyes are closed, but not in a peaceful way. Her features are strained and tight. “I know I came off as cold. How

else was I supposed to be, though?"

My heart slams into my ribs with escalating tempo. Why are they talking alone?

Why are they talking at all?

"She's been wishing she could see you again for years, Kara. This wasn't the reunion she wanted."

"It's not the one I wanted, either," she seethes. Her eyes fly open, centering on him. "You know you have to end this. You can't put her in danger like you are. Dominic—"

"You don't get to tell me what happens next," he says. From my slim view of the scene I can see the vein in his neck; he's furious. "My promise to you had nothing to do with what happens between me and her."

"Fuck, you're so selfish." She puts her hand on his forearm, a pleading touch, a familiar touch.

As my world splits open, dripping me into the void, I realize something that should be impossible. A fact they both kept hidden from me.

Dominic and my sister know each other.

- Chapter 28 -

Laiken

I want to run. I want to vomit. If I turn around, abandoning this scene, I can do both without either of them knowing. They would keep their secrets, and I'd be left to wonder how their relationship started. Was it like how we began - Dominic and I?

Running is easy and I'm amazing at it. But the confusion in my heart grabs hold of my legs and shoves me forward. That first, stiff step is the hardest. The rest are a breeze.

Dominic and Kara look up in surprise. "Laiken?" he asks. "What are you doing here?"

"That question belongs to me," I say, snapping my eyes between the two of them. The distress in my voice reaches his ears and he manages to look worried. I expected guilt. He should be scrambling to explain what the hell is going on.

Kara turns towards me. She's still wearing that beautiful gown, and I think how unfair that is—how she can be so gorgeous while owning such ugly lies. "I'm guessing you want to talk," she says.

"You're going to talk, I'm going to listen."

My sister breathes out in exasperation. "Dominic, leave us alone."

“No, I want him to stay.”

“Well I don't want him around meoryou,” she hisses. Her eyes flash to him, like she can command him to go without him fighting back. I'm stunned when he inclines his head, walking around me towards the door.

I twist, grabbing his wrist as he passes. “You don't need to go.”

He frowns gently. “I do.” With a simple sway of his massive shoulder, he breaks my grip and leaves the room. I'm shut inside with Kara; it's the first time we've been alone together in six years. Since the day we made our promise.

She folds her arms, cupping her elbows. “Want to sit, or stand?”

“Don't act so casual!” I shout, marching closer to her. “I want to know how you and Dominic could possibly know each other. How is that—just how?When?”

Kara is emotionless. I don't know how she's capable of it. I'm losing my mind. “Really. That's what you want to know? Not what that piece of shit ishidingfrom you?”

I let my mouth gape. There's no way she knows what Dominic refuses to tell me. But the gleam in her almond shaped eyes is sharp. “You're talking like you want me to hate him.”

“I'm stunned you don't already.”

Bristling, I clench my fists. “Don't act like you know what I've gone through here. He never hurt me, he's the only one who's shown me any kindness.”

“It's all an act, Laiken. He doesn't actually care about anyone. He isn't capable.”

“You don't know him!”

“I know him more than you!” The cool sheet of ice that was covering her emotions shatters. It's water now, impossible to pick back up. For a second, she doesn't look like my sister, but a vile creature with bared teeth and gums. “Listen to me. That man is responsible for terrible things. I thought I wouldn't have to tell you, I was sure someone else already had! But now, after seeing the pathetic way he's drawn you to him, it's obvious you don't know what he really is.”

I'm shaking where I stand. This isn't the first time someone has spoken about Dominic like he's a literal demon walking the earth. But it's different when she says it. “Then tell me,” I say, trying to sound as confident as I want to feel. “Whatever you know about him, I want to hear it. It won't change my opinion on him one bit.”

Kara angles her head lower. She's staring at me through her fringe of lashes. Those bitter blue eyes used to shine with joy, especially when they were locked on me. This girl who would lie awake with me at night, our beds pressed together, whispering secrets that I was eager to hear, is about to give me one that feels like a curse.

“You think he's just rough around the edges. That military school made him big and hard and serious?” Her lips keep moving, unable to stop the landslide behind her teeth. “Laiken... he's more than some intimidating meat-head with tattoos. That man killed his own flesh and blood. He murdered his cousin.”

My heart parades until I expect it to collapse. I didn't hear her correctly, I couldn't have. “He didn't,” I whisper, my reply hollow in my ears. “He wouldn't.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:24 am

Kara's eyebrows lift a hair, her pink lips pushing outward. This is what pity looks like. She realizes that Dominic's hooks are so deep in my heart that I want to deny what she tells me because it will taint me.

It will taint him.

Also, if what she says is true, my life is going to change.

“Dominic killed Bernard,” she says. “Murdered him while they were alone on a ski trip.”

Bernard. I haven't heard that name in years. “How can you know this?” I ask, reeling.

Her soft features are marred by a sorrow I can't fully grasp. Her fingers come up, brushing through her hair, moving further like she's brushing the phantoms of longer pieces. “Because Dominic was the only one with him that night.” Then her anger returns ten-fold. “He denied it just enough to not get arrested, but he told his uncle he was responsible. He got away, free as a bird, while Bernard...” she trails off.

I reach for her, wanting to hug her and heal her pain. Her eyes go dull, unfocused, as she leans forward towards my touch like she has so many times when we were kids. At the last second she stops herself. I don't think there's room in me for more pain, but she proves me wrong. “Kara, what am I supposed to do?”

“Are you joking?” she hisses. “Laiken! He's a MURDERER! The only thing you should do is keep away from him. Nothing about him is good. It's all tricks and lies. All of it.”

I struggle to shout that she's wrong but my tongue is stiff as cement. I knew when Dominic came back into my world that something was different, something wrong, and twisted, and awful. He couldn't hide it. It winked at me from his black eyes... it simmered in his calculating, precise threats.

He was capable of dragging me back to this house when I tried to run.

He was capable of threatening me, terrifying me, interrogating me.

Again and again, he's told me lies.

I dig down, aching for a way to prove she's wrong but I can't find anything. Kara's words have struck my heart into silence.

These past few days with Dominic, I'd carved away the layers that hid his tender soul. I felt the warmth that burned between us even during a raging storm. I began to believe he was capable of loving me. None of that matters now.

Maybe some people are strong enough to love a killer.

But I'm not.

To Be Continued