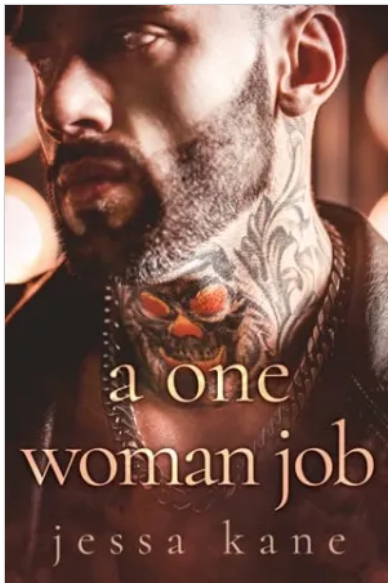




A One Woman Job

Author: *Jessa Kane*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Meg is in big trouble. A loan shark is demanding repayment of her fathers debt, but as the sole breadwinner for her four younger siblings, money is stretched to the limit and she cant afford to pay—at least, until shes offered an unconventional solution. Seduce a recently retired hitman into returning to his post. If she cant accomplish her goal, the safety of her whole family will be in jeopardy.

After being confronted by his past in bloody fashion, Koen no longer wants to lead a life of violence. He wants quiet and solitude in his home overlooking the ocean. But when a young, hazel eyed beauty has the nerve to almost drown in the turbulent waters and requires rescuing, hell stop at nothing to keep the one woman to ever challenge his surly nature, her ulterior motives be damned.

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1

Meg

I open the front door of my house to find a woman staring back at me.

My first impression is: boss bitch.

She's tall, her navy-blue pant suit is impeccable, gray hair pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Her hands are clasped behind her back. I've never had someone stare at me down the length of their nose, but that's exactly what she's doing. Observing me like a scientist watches a mouse trying to navigate a maze.

One of my four younger siblings is wailing for Cheerios from within the house and I really don't have time for whatever this woman is going to say, but this is not a salesman. Nor is she someone who gets doors closed in her face. I'm rendered sort of immobile as her sharp brown eyes trail down to my ratty sneakers, up the length of my bike shorts and oversized Ghostbusters T-shirt, stopping at my brunette bedhead and sighing.

"Child, please go get your father. And don't keep me waiting."

All bets are off now that she's been condescending. Above all things, I hate when someone assumes I'm insignificant. Too young or poor to matter.

"My father is sleeping off another bender, lady. What can I do for you?" I smile with teeth. "And I'm eighteen. Not a child. Old enough to work two jobs and one side

hustle to feed these various-sized monsters behind me. If you'll excuse me, I need to get them dressed and out the door for daycare and school."

A pause, accompanied by a flick of her eyebrow. "I don't excuse you."

"You must be really important to somebody. But that somebody isn't me."

"You're kind of a hothead, aren't you?"

I shrug. "Runs in the family."

The woman hums in her throat, eyeing me with new interest. "Are you a gambler, as well?" she asks. "Speaking of what runs in the family."

I'm hit by a blast of awareness. If I hadn't been too distracted by the family's morning routine, I would have realized who I was speaking to. Or at least why she was on my doorstep. "My father owes you money, doesn't he?"

"A very large sum of money."

I swallow hard. "How large?"

She runs her gaze along the sagging eaves. "This house wouldn't cover it."

Panic is beginning to settle in my middle. This isn't the first time someone has come to the door looking for money that my father has already gambled away. But last time, my mother was still around to handle it. She's not here anymore. I woke up one morning to find all of her belongings missing and a note beneath an empty glass of orange juice on the kitchen table. It simply read, "sorry."

Imagine leaving five kids behind and drinking the last of the orange juice.

There are layers of selfishness to my parents I will never understand—and I don't have time to try since I've taken on both of their roles in the house.

"I don't have the money to pay you," I say. "I can just about pay the mortgage and keep clothes on everyone's backs."

She squints her eyes in mock sympathy. "That's hardly my problem, is it?"

Maybe it's the chaotic morning or the fact that my impromptu visitor is going to make me late for my shift driving Uber...or maybe it's just this woman's vulture-like personality, but now I'm getting irritated. "God, are there any decent adults left out there?" I cross my arms and lean on the doorframe. "Because coming from the perspective of someone who has been answering to angry grownups my whole life, you all seem to fall into one of two categories. Either you're extremely entitled. Or you're bitter, disappointed with the way your life turned out and blaming it on my generation."

Not a flinch. "What does this have to do with the money you owe me?"

I stare back at her blankly. "I'm never going to be like you. Or them. I'm not going to let life shove me into one of those categories." I realize I'm raging at someone who doesn't really care what I have to say, making this a waste of time. "I don't have your money," I finish, reaching for the door to close it, mentally sorting through the cabinets for the Cheerios. Do we have any? I don't—

"Wait."

"Nah."

The woman releases a short, rusty laugh. "Okay, I must admit. Reluctantly, I find you very interesting, Meg."

My body jolts slightly in surprise. “How...do you know my name?”

Instead of answering, she furrows her brow as she studies me. A lot closer than before. “Before we go any further, I need you to understand something.”

“Who said we were going any further?”

“I’m Etta Krop. And Meg, I’m not someone you disrespect,” she says, her voice suddenly very quiet. Her brown eyes sharpen and the coldest shiver I’ve ever experienced tracks down my spine. Maybe I’m imagining things, but I swear, I can see the promise of misery and death in those eyes. She’s the kind of person who delivers those things, swiftly and without remorse. She communicates all of that to me in the space of a few seconds.

Whispers are beginning to come back to me. Etta Krop. I’ve heard her name around town, only spoken in hushed and fearful tones. At night, I work a shift cleaning commercial spaces and one of them is a lawyer’s office. One evening, as I was mopping the floor, something told me to remove one of my headphones and I overheard a phone call from one of the lawyers who’d stayed late. He was speaking to law enforcement about the lack of proof they’d been able to gather on a local crime syndicate. One that operates illegal gambling and drug operations that stretch across the entire state.

Now, I recall some of the words he used to describe this woman standing in front of me. Cold. Untouchable. Ruthless.

I’ve probably only guaranteed my own death. Me and my big mouth.

I can’t let anything happen to me, though. I’m all my siblings have in the world.

“You’re not someone I disrespect,” I say, tightly. “Got it.”

“Good.” She flashes a row of white teeth. “Now, if you’re ready to listen, I have a proposition for you. It could work out nicely for the both of us.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“You really don’t know when to shut up, do you?” Thankfully, Etta seems more amused by that observation than anything. “I find your...passion and bravery rather unique. You’ve obviously had a rough hand of cards dealt to you, but it’s only made your spirit stronger. As someone who had a similar upbringing, I admire that.”

“Cheerios!” bellows my youngest brother, shaking the rafters.

“I don’t even think we have Cheerios,” I say to Etta, uselessly. “I appreciate the compliments, but—”

“Against my better judgment, I’m going to offer you a way out of this.”

“A way out of what?”

“Oh, I didn’t mention?” She grins and paces forward a step, so I must tip my head back to keep eye contact. “If your father doesn’t pay me the one hundred thousand dollars he owes me, with interest, I’ll burn your motherfucking house down. With all of you inside of it.”

“Oh,” I breathe, winded, locking my knees straight so she won’t see them trembling. “And what was this way out you mentioned?”

“I don’t usually make house calls of this nature. I’m too important. I have someone who does it for me. His name is Koen.” She allows me to see some of her frustration. “He’s decided out of the blue to take some time off. But I need him back to work, you see. Now. He’s very...valuable to my operation. But I can’t seem to convince him to

return. No amount of money or threats have done the trick.” She looks me over one more time and nods. “That’s your job. Get Koen back to work.”

“What? But I’m busy! And...how?”

“Figure it out. But complete the task without telling him I sent you,” she enunciates, taking a phone out of her suit pocket and tapping on the screen. “I’m texting you his private address. I wouldn’t waste any time. I’m giving you a week, Meg.”

“How do you have my phone number?”

“I know everything .” She takes a moment to impress that knowledge on me with an icy stare, then begins to back away toward the street. “Better call your Uber partner and let her know you won’t be there for your shift.”

My legs are jelly by the time Etta disappears into the back of a black Rolls-Royce at the end of my street. My phone vibrates in the waistband of my bike shorts, and I extricate it with numb fingers, staring down at the words on the screen, which are nothing more than an address. But it’s a nice address, a few towns over, right on the ocean.

“Cheerios! Cheerios!” everyone is chanting now, blissfully unaware that our fragile world could crumble around us if I don’t make this woman happy.

Good thing I don’t know how to fail.

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2

Meg

A ll right, I just might fail.

Koen's house is not only surrounded by gates, it's perched on the edge of a jagged cliff, overlooking the turbulent ocean. I sit cross-legged down on the beach, staring up at the Batman-like home, wondering what this man did to earn the kind of cash one needs to buy a house this posh. Etta only told me he was valuable.

Valuable how?

That's the least of my concerns. Right now, I can't even figure out how to get into the house or what I'm going to say once I'm in front of this mysterious man. I've been set up to fail, but I can't. I don't doubt for a second that Etta will burn my house down and end the lives of my family members in the process. I don't doubt it for a second. And then what am I going to do? My brothers and sisters will probably be absorbed by the state and distributed to foster homes, tearing our family apart.

Not happening.

They've already lost a mother, and my father is a no-account shithead—although, thankfully, with the help of a neighbor, he has sworn to remain sober while I'm gone and look after the kids. After a major bender like the one he's been on, he can usually hold down the fort for a while and I have to trust that, because I have no choice. This task, given to me by Etta, must be completed. My siblings don't deserve the wrath of

a crime syndicate. They don't deserve any of the scrapped-together life they've been handed.

At least we have each other—and that's the way it's going to stay.

I must succeed.

Trying not to make it obvious that I'm staring up at the Bat Cave, I sneak a quick look at the wooden staircase winding up the cliff face. Should I just walk up there and knock on one of the giant windows? Maybe pretend to be lost?

No sooner does that thought come and go do I see a man pacing along the edge of the cliff. At the first sight of him, my toes burrow down into the sand and prickles of electricity crawl up my inner thighs. He's...young. Well, not as young as me. But he's perhaps in his late twenties, head shaven, tattoos covering his neck like a shackle. It's windy and cold, but he's wearing a black T-shirt and doesn't appear fazed by the temperature at all as the material ripples on his broad chest.

His scowl is terrifying enough to make the tide recede.

"Oh brother," I mutter, silently cursing Etta to a life of hemorrhoidal discomfort.

This is not a man I can simply approach and ask for directions.

How do I make contact with him? How do I break the ice?

Rather ridiculously, I wave at him. Just a friendly, casual gesture.

A beat passes. Then he gives me the finger.

"Oh." I turn away, taken aback. "This must be how people feel when they meet me."

What weapons do I have at my disposal here?

Obviously, he's not open to making friends.

A memory from last week drifts to the front of my mind. While I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the floor of an office bathroom, I heard a noise behind me and saw one of the daytime office employees in the shadows, taking a picture of my ass on his phone. Then there were the numerous times I've been asked out on dates by my Uber passengers. These incidents have led me to wonder if I'm kind of hot. I don't really have time to worry about my appearance, but...maybe I ain't so bad?

Maybe I can work with that to make contact with Koen?

Fortune favors the bold.

Before I can overthink my fledgling idea, I stand up and strip myself down to my cheap push-up bra and panties, leaving my pile of clothes on the shore while I wade out into the ocean. Normally, I wouldn't even leave my valuables unattended on an empty private beach, but the only valuable material item I own is my phone and I didn't think it wise to carry the device along on this mission, given it holds every piece of information about me when I need to be anonymous.

Just a girl on the beach.

About to freeze to death.

"Oh shit, that's cold," I say, my teeth already starting to chatter. The water is also...invigorating, however. Shocking in a way that unexpectedly causes some pent-up emotions to bubble to the surface and I find myself dunking my head beneath the surface, emerging with a gasp. Swimming farther and farther out, forgetting all about the man on the cliff. Letting my eyes well with the tears I haven't allowed myself to

shed in years, my body freezing. My life's circumstances have tried to smother me. All those hours of work. All the demands to be met since the day I could walk. All the neglect.

But I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm alive.

I'm so caught up in whatever is happening inside of me, I don't realize how far I've drifted from the shore. When I turn around and my clothes are nothing more than a tiny dot, panic tries to seize my lungs, but I don't let it. Calm down. Make your way back .

Has the sky darkened since I came out here?

My question is answered when rain starts to trickle down from above.

I'm swimming back to land, but I don't seem to be getting any closer.

Oh God, what is beneath me right now? Probably a great white shark. That would round out my day nicely. Am I in a rip current? Or am I just a terrible swimmer? I used to be a good one. Back in the day, when my mother used to bring us to the beach. Before my father's hopelessness rubbed off on her. Apparently, swimming is a skill that is forgotten if it isn't used, because I'm not going to make it back. In fact, I think I might be even farther out than when I started?

A wave slaps down over my head and I come up gasping.

That's it. I'm scared. Now, I'm scared.

My legs are getting tired and I can't breathe around the panic—

A flash of skin, then a pair of angry blue eyes is all I see before an arm bands around

my chest. Suddenly, I'm face up, rain pouring down on my face while I'm being dragged backwards through the water. My instinct is to cling to the person holding me—where did he come from?—but his hold is too tight and I can't turn around. All I can do is suck down oxygen while he swims.

“You must be the biggest idiot alive,” growls a male voice.

I'm too busy trying to breathe to agree. But I would if I could. The ocean is tumultuous and dark. A storm must have been right about to break before I went into the water.

What is the matter with me?

His body changes positions and stabilizes in a way that I know his feet are now touching the ocean floor and I'm so relieved I'm not going to die and leave my siblings to an uncertain fate, I go completely limp, leaving my good Samaritan to carry me out of the water. We've only gone two steps when I get a good look at my hero's profile and realize I should have known exactly who it was when he called me an idiot.

It's the man from the cliff.

Koen. My target.

He's...oh my goodness. He's the most gorgeous man I've ever seen in my life.

His jaw is carved from ice, his eyes glacial.

He exudes capability. Strength.

And total contempt.

“If you’re going to drown yourself, do you mind doing it on somebody’s else’s beach?” He settles me onto the sand with a gentleness that belies his harsh words, but as soon as he’s satisfied that I’m not going to pitch sideways, he backs up. “Fishing a drowned rat out of the ocean wasn’t on my agenda today.”

I don’t get tongue-tied. I’m usually pretty cool around men, even. I’ve just never met one like this. He’s approximately six foot three. Thanks to his dive into the ocean, his boxers and black T-shirt are molded to his muscles. His arms are full of tattoos, just like his neck and throat.

“Do you speak or not?” he barks, snatching his discarded jeans off the shore.

As my adrenaline continues to plummet, humiliation takes its place. I’m a competent person. It’s the one reliable thing about me. I don’t need anyone’s help. I rely on myself and I don’t let myself down. But this man has just witnessed the opposite. He watched me flail around and nearly die because of a terrible decision. I can’t stand the thought of anyone witnessing such foolishness, but especially this guy, who seems like he could rob a golden statue from an Egyptian tomb and sword fight a mob on the way out.

With his unspoken question hanging in the air, my face is burning and my throat is prickling. I just had a near-death experience, to boot.

In other words, I need to get out of here before I cry.

I’ll find a way to pay Etta the money my father owes. Besides, I can already tell there will be no convincing this man to do anything, let alone return to work, as Etta wishes.

My knees are still wobbly and my arms feel like limp noodles, but I manage to rise to my feet, swaying, stumbling over to my clothes and picking them up. Bundling them

to my chest, I walk away from Koen as quickly as humanly possible.

“Where are you going, Michael Phelps?”

Ouch. This guy is a dick.

I don’t answer. I can’t. My throat has shrunk to the size of a pinhole.

I just keep walking, my pace picking up—

The world turns upside down as Koen rounds in front of me, drops his shoulder and throws me over it, backwards and face down. “Now you’re trying to get hypothermia?”

“Put me down.”

“Oh, wow. She can form words, after all.”

“Fuck you,” I snap at his wet boxer-clad butt. “How do you like those?”

His steps falter, ever so slightly. “Fuck me? I just saved your pathetic life.”

“If you’d let me catch my breath, I would have said thank you. But you decided to shout at me and call me an idiot, instead.”

When a moment passes and he speaks again, his voice is quieter, but I don’t dare hope it’s regretful. “Like I said, this is my beach. If you don’t like it, don’t come here.”

“A little late for that. Can you please put me down so I can go home and...” I realize we’re climbing up the steps that lead to his house and start to squirm “Oh no. You’re

not bringing me into the Bat Cave. Not with that attitude!”

“Bat Cave?” he chokes.

What am I doing? My goal was to get inside this house, face to face with this man. Now that I have the opportunity, I’m trying to wiggle out of his arms and run for my life?

The faces of my siblings materialize in my mind. Bex who always has peanut butter smeared in the corners of his mouth. Quiet, serious Molly who just wants to hide in the closet and read books. Orla with her Harry Styles scrapbook. Vincent who is kind of creepy, but we love him, anyway.

I slowly stop struggling.

I can’t fail them.

“You’ve either tired yourself out or you’ve seen reason,” Koen remarks.

“Shut up.”

Is that a laugh or a whip of the wind? I’ll never know, because we step into his deathly silent house, the door closes, cutting off the storm.

And I guess it’s showtime.

God help me.

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3

Koen

I should have just let this girl walk away.

What the hell do I care what happens to her?

She's a skinny mess with big, ridiculous hazel eyes, scraped knees and hair that hasn't seen the business end of some scissors in half a decade. At least. She doesn't want to be here, either...and yet I've chosen her to be the very first guest in my home. Ever.

I could have let her drown, I suppose. I've been responsible for dozens of lost lives, what's one more? I'm not sure what made me hurtle myself down the stairs at a breakneck pace and tear out into the ocean to save her. Except at one point, before she started to drown, I saw an outpouring of grief and sadness on her face.

And I recognized those things.

Now I'm carrying her into the downstairs guest bathroom, which has never been used, determined to make her warm. Just so I can button up this unusual and unexpected situation and return to drinking myself to death.

When I drag the girl off my shoulder and settle her onto the marble vanity, I'm caught off guard, my hands lingering in mid-air as I back toward the tub. I was too irritated down on the beach to notice she's quite... pretty up close. As she raises her

chin stubbornly, shielding her see-through bra by crossing her arms, I amend that. No, she's stunningly beautiful. She's wrapped in drenched, long, dark brown hair, her skin soft and absorbing the muted bathroom light, as if it's drawn to her. Dying to be soaked in by her.

"Suddenly you don't seem all that concerned about me catching hypothermia," she says, turning her head to let out a delicate sneeze.

"I didn't say I was concerned," I bluster. "I just don't want you to die on my beach."

"Dead young girls lower the property value?"

Not for the first time, I have the urge to laugh in this person's presence. Why?
"Exactly."

"Hmm."

"Speaking of young, how old are you? No lying. I'll know."

That vow seems to rattle her, but not for long. "Eighteen. Swear."

"Hmm."

I stare her down for long moment, but she doesn't so much as flinch. And goddammit, the fire in this girl is beginning to make my dick hard. Unbelievable. I locked myself away to feel pain, not experience pleasure. The very act of looking at her, tracing the line of her cupid's bow lips, is enough to constitute pleasure in itself.

Enough.

With a snarl, I go toward the bath, keeping the girl in my periphery. Just in case she's

been sent here by Etta to kill me. An angry flick of my wrist turns on the tap and the water is filling the tub in seconds, steam rising in the mostly dark bathroom.

Silence is filled by the sound of rippling water, but I find...

I wouldn't mind hearing her voice again. Once more. She'll be out of here as soon as I make sure she's not going to drop dead.

"What's your name?"

My abrupt question causes her arms to momentarily drop away from her breasts and I see them. Through her cheap bra. Creamy and tipped with rosebuds. Full. Sweet.

"Um."

"That's an answer that shouldn't require a thought."

"Meg. I'm Meg." She huffs a breath. "Sorry, you just make me feel unnerved."

"Good. Stay that way."

Without missing a beat, she slides off the vanity and marches out the bathroom door. I'm embarrassed to admit my jaw hangs open for a second, before I reanimate and go after her. I only give myself a few steps to enjoy the shake of that ass in wet panties, before I wheel myself in front of the girl, blocking her from going any farther.

"Where are you going?"

"To hurl myself off the cliff, so I don't have to spend any more time with you."

I heave a humorless laugh up at the hallway ceiling. "This is what I get for trying to

help. No good deed goes—”

“Oh God .” She sags dramatically against the wall. “Are my ears bleeding yet?”

The bravery of this one. “Get in the bath, smartass.”

She actually tries to dodge me. “No.”

“Why haven’t you asked for my name yet?”

She snaps her fingers. “Ooh. Quick, tell me so I can forget it.”

“It’s Koen. And you’re not going to forget it.” I scoop her up with a forearm under her ass, deviously satisfied when her nose bumps mine and she sucks in a breath, probably because I separate her legs and perch them on opposite hips. Something stops me from pulling her pussy flush to my stiffness, though. I think it’s something about wanting her to calm down enough to feel safe with me, which is fucking ridiculous.

No one is safe with me.

“What are you doing, Koen?” she asks as we enter the bathroom, our progressing bodies moving the steam in a swirling pattern.

“Getting you in the bath the only way I know you’ll stay put.”

“How?”

“Stop talking, baby.”

I climb into the full bathtub and sit, hissing through my teeth when she slips down

into my lap, her wet tits crashing into my chest. Her softness pressing down on my shaft. Oh fuck, then it happens. She moans and I moan back, as if my vocal cords can't help but respond in kind, my cock turning even more steely between her thighs, due to the perfection of her weight and shape. The harmony of our vocal reactions.

She's alarmed, though, her cheeks splashing immediately with pink, her hands pushing against my chest in an attempt to sit up.

This girl is a virgin.

Jesus Christ.

"Relax," I demand.

"How?" she breathes, looking up at me.

"I wouldn't make you do anything you didn't want to do."

"What, like take a bath? Enter your home in the first place?"

"Okay, from this point on, I won't make you do anything against your will."

For good reason, she's giving me a skeptical head tilt. "Say something nice. One thing. And I'll believe you. It doesn't even have to be about me."

"Something nice? " This girl is surprising. I've never been surprised. Not ever. "Why?" I ask, fighting the urge to hold my breath, lest I don't hear her answer.

"So I can lie to myself later. So I can say, 'but he seemed so nice,' when the police ask why I trusted you."

I hide the danger that statement rouses inside me. “You’re not planning to call the police on me, are you, Meg?”

Despite my efforts to appear trustworthy, she’s smart, this one. She detects the danger inside of me. “No,” she whispers, slowly making a crisscross over her heart.

Weirdly, I believe her.

Or maybe I just want to. Badly.

Why?

“Something nice?” I ask.

She nods.

Has it been so long since I spoke kind words out loud? Must be ages, because my throat feels scrubbed raw when I say, “I’ve always claimed to have the best judgment, but now I’m not so sure. I don’t know how it took me a full five minutes to realize you were...”

“What?” Meg asks, after too much time has passed.

I swallow hard. “To realize you’re so beautiful. To realize you’re...”

I just keep nodding, because I don’t know how to finish that sentence. In the glow of the dim bathroom, her face dewy with steam, I’m fucking overcome. She’s a goddess.

A confused one. She looks incredulous.

“Didn’t you know you’re beautiful?” I manage, out of my depth.

“No,” she hedges. “Well, some of my customers ask me out.”

The danger inside of me is fully flexed now. “What fucking customers?”

“The ones I drive in my Uber.”

“You drive an Uber?”

I don’t know what’s happening inside of me. It’s like a terrible/wonderful swelling of responsibility and irritation and possessiveness. It’s something I have no experience controlling or feeling and it’s running roughshod through my system, setting my usual cool calculation on fire. I’m inundated by the need to know everything about this girl. Perhaps so I can solve why she’s having such a...a huge effect on me. “Why were you upset out there in the water?”

Her incredible eyes shoot to mine, vulnerable, incredible. “I don’t know,” she says, so quiet I can barely hear her. “I think because I’m so tired. In so many ways, you know?”

“Yes,” I rasp, my chest deteriorating. “Rest on me, Meg. I won’t let anything happen to you. I swear it on whatever you believe in.”

“I only believe in myself.”

Shaken to my very core, I realize that somehow, quite unexpectedly, I’ve just found my kindred spirit. In the form of a waifish girl, at least a decade younger than me. Our souls feel the same age, however. Our souls feel...like they’ve just had a reunion. “I understand that more than you know.”

Her throat works with a swallow, her eyes beginning to grow drowsy. And then the most incredible thing happens. This remarkable young girl who has no reason to trust

me, who should not trust me, lays her head on my shoulder and falls fast asleep.

I'm rocked all the way to my soul.

Carefully, I band an arm diagonally across her back, securing her to my body, and it feels so fulfilling, my eyes roll to the back of my head and I begin whispering vows.

To protect Meg.

To pleasure Meg.

To keep Meg forever.

Meg.

Meg.

Meg.

Meg.

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4

Meg

I wake up in the largest bed I've ever seen.

It's twilight. Windows are open around the room, causing curtains to billow every which way, the sound of waves crashing below reminding me where I am.

I'm inside Koen's house.

I feel asleep on him in the bathtub. On a stranger! Who does that?

How much time has passed since then?

Hours or days?

I'm drowsy and my body doesn't want to move from this sumptuous down bedding. Normally I sleep on the floor in one of the kids' bedrooms or, if I'm lucky, I get the couch. This is a level of comfort I never thought I'd experience. But I'm not here for a spa retreat. I'm here to do a job. Convince this man to return to work for Etta.

How?

I've spent one measly hour with Koen and I know if this man doesn't want to budge, he isn't going to budge. Although...

I don't know how it took me a full five minutes to realize you were...

To realize you were so beautiful.

I convinced him to say that, didn't I? Did he...really mean it?

When I realize my heart is about to pound out of my chest, I sit up straight with alarm, the soft cotton sheet slipping down to my waist. I'm still wearing my bra and panties. They've long since dried, reminding me of the fact that I've been here too long. My cleaning shift has to be starting soon and if I'm late, I get fired.

With a whine of regret, I get out of bed, finding my clothes in a pile by the door. It is incredibly difficult to dress myself because my pulse is rattling at the thought of Koen carrying my nearly nude body in here, tucking me in. My breath is short thinking of how his body felt beneath mine in the bathtub. That stiff part of him that lay against my stomach.

I'm just shaken because I've gone from zero intimacy with a man to straddling one in a bathtub. That's the only reason my hands are clumsy and my skin is on fire.

I'm not, like, feeling him. Or whatever.

Because that would be a real conflict of interest.

Fully dressed now, I take a deep breath in front of the bedroom door and push it open, stepping out into a dark marble hallway. Violin music is coming from downstairs, and I slowly make my way in that direction, every part of me sensitizing at the scent of Koen that hangs in the air. Hot winter spice. Cloves. Cinnamon. The tiniest hint of apple.

My mouth is only salivating because I'm hungry.

Right. Hungry.

There's a staff lounge at my cleaning job and I usually steal a granola bar for my dinner. Hopefully it's not just a bunch of oatmeal raisin—

My thoughts descend into static when I enter the gigantic, high-ceilinged living room and see Koen standing in front of the picture window overlooking the ocean, a violin perched on his bare shoulder. He's shirtless. Barefoot. In a pair of low-hanging slacks. Just like the rest of him, his back is a haven for ink, but...

Are those bullet holes, too?

Before I can squint and confirm my suspicion, Koen stops playing.

Lowers the violin slowly.

Turns.

The intense way he zeroes in on me nearly melts me into the floor.

That broad chest rises and falls. "Did you sleep well, Meg?"

Is it possible for thighs to blush? Mine turn molten at the deep pitch of his voice, telling me yes, it's possible. When this man talks and gives me his undivided attention, thighs can blush. "I think that's the best I've ever slept in my life, actually."

I'm definitely imagining the deep satisfaction that crosses his features. This man is the meanest dude I've ever met. He can't possibly be gratified by my superior nap. "What part of it did you like?" he asks, walking slowly in my direction, gaze intent on my face. "The sheets? The pillows? The temperature of the room?"

“All of it.”

“Nothing you’d like to change for tonight?”

I’m beset with confusion. “What do you mean?” It’s hard enough to trust my father to maintain the kids’ schedules during the days while I’m doing Etta’s dirty work. But missing their nighttime routine and my shift at my second job? That would be asking too much from the universe. “I’m not sleeping here tonight. Could we, like, do lunch tomorrow, or something?”

“Lunch?” A muscle snaps in his jaw. “Why can’t you stay the night?”

“I have a job.” Why do I tremble more and more the closer he gets? I’m not scared, per se. I’m more...giddy? Breathless? What is wrong with me? “I have two jobs, actually, and a side hustle.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Live with the disappointment, I guess.”

“God, you’re a smartass.” His fingers flex around the violin bow in his hand. “What is your second job? Besides the Uber.”

“I would rather not say. But you can ask me about my side hustle.”

I wait.

His right eye begins ticking. “Well?”

“I make paper planes.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize how juvenile they sound, but I don’t let the sudden insecurity show. “I’m something of an

expert, thanks to making a million of them for my brothers. There are rich kids in town willing to pay me five dollars per plane. Five dollars . For some folded up paper. Crazy.” I shake my head, warming to the story now, despite his silence. “I stumbled into the paper airplane biz by mistake, you know. I took my brothers to the park one day and everyone had kites. Everyone but us. So I sat on the bench and made a paper airplane so we could play catch with it. Suddenly, every kid in a ten-block radius wants one. But I’m not a charity—my time is valuable, bro. I started charging.”

“I don’t understand this,” Koen says, after a prolonged pause. “Most of the time, when people talk I want them to shut the fuck up. But every time you talk, I only discover more questions I want to ask.”

“Go ahead.” I flip my hair. “I know you want to ask me to make you a paper airplane.”

“I...” He trails off, growing visibly bewildered. “I do, actually.”

I waggle my eyebrows. “Got any paper?”

“This is the most ridiculous day of my life.”

“Thank you.”

He’s still studying me with semi-astonishment. “There’s some in my study. Wait here.” Koen begins striding in the opposite direction from which I came, toward a different dark, marble corridor, but he stops before the darkness swallows him. “You’re not to go in my study, Meg. Ever. Is that clear?”

Sensing now is not the time to make a joke, I nod. “Yes.”

He keeps me pinned with his glacial blue stare another moment, before vanishing down the hallway. A minute later he returns holding a single piece of paper between his thumb and index finger, handing it to me. As I'm wont to do, I immediately drop down onto his buff-shined floor in a cross-legged position and start folding the paper.

"There is such a thing as tables, you know."

"This is faster. And I really have to go." The room is silent, except for the gentle sound of paper being manipulated. "You know, if you ever needed a side hustle, you could play your violin at the train station. You'd make a killing."

"Is that your way of telling me I'm good?"

"You're better than good." I slide my finger down a crease. "Maybe you should learn one or two happy songs, though. For side hustle purposes."

"If I learn a happy song, will you come back here willingly?"

"Willingly?" I laugh.

A beat passes. "You're coming back either way, Meg," he informs me.

I pick up the finished paper airplane, holding it at different angles to study my handiwork, as if my nerves aren't trapped in a constant tremor. Because, yeah, I believe this man has just threatened to kidnap me. And avoidance is how I plan to handle it?

Yup.

"Are you ready to witness her maiden voyage?" I ask, tremulously.

He hums, holding out a hand to help me to my feet. I place my hand in his grip, unable to breathe when he hauls me up, his head tilted to study my face when I'm at my full height. His gaze skates everywhere—over my mouth, the crown of my head, down to my throat. Did his eyes always glitter like that? Almost...madly?

"It's better if I stand on a chair or something to get some height," I say, wetting my parched lips. "Does this work?"

He nods briskly and follows, helping me onto a leather ottoman. "I suppose I should go stand on the other side of the room, so I can catch it?"

"Yes."

Koen hesitates, his chest going up and down. "You're not going to fall."

"No."

"Here's hoping you're better at balancing than you are at swimming."

I wrinkle my nose at his retreating back. "You want me to come back here and visit you. Why would I do that when you continually insult me?"

When he reaches the other end of the living room and turns, I catch the barest peek at his expression. It's regret. His mouth is moving, as if he might even be berating himself. "I'll say something nice again to balance it out."

I sniff casually, as if I'm not overcome with anticipation.

What is he going to say this time?

"I guess I'll accept those terms." I pinch the body of the paper airplane between my

thumb and middle finger, holding it aloft and aiming, one eye squinted. And then I let it fly, crossing my fingers that it finds its mark. The plane cuts a path through the cool air of the living room, soaring beautifully straight, eating up the impressive distance while making a swish sound...and Koen catches the folded paper, just as my creation begins to dive.

“Okay, fine.” He dips his chin. “That’s a superior paper airplane.”

Pleased with his compliment, I hop down off the ottoman. “Did you play with them when you were a kid?”

His gaze remains locked on the floor a moment. “No, Meg. I didn’t play, period.”

I don’t know what compels me to cross the room and stand in front of Koen. He’s mean, insulting, bossy and has threatened to kidnap me (I think). But there’s a mournful note in his voice that strikes a chord in me and suddenly, I’m just there. I’m sliding my arms around his neck and holding him tightly, my cheek resting on the space between his pecs while his breath accelerates. Faster, faster.

As much as I’d like to believe I’m trying to get closer to him, so I can convince him to return to his job, I’d be lying to myself.

I’m touching him because I’m drawn to him. In an undeniable way that scares me.

You must stay objective. There’s so much on the line .

But as soon as I attempt to pull away, he crushes me into his embrace, lifting me off the ground and burying his face in my neck, inhaling so deeply, it’s a wonder the air isn’t sucked from my lungs. “Where the hell did you come from?” he rasps.

I can’t stop trembling. “A couple of towns over.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.”

His head lifts to study me with those mad, blue eyes, fingers shoving into my wild hair and gripping, tugging my head back. “Every little thing you say and do seals your fate, you know,” he says, slicking his tongue up the curve of my throat...and oh my god, oh my god, my sex grows wet, as if he’s commanded it with a single lick. A lick I didn’t even know I wanted. Or that I would like. I whimper and turn damp between my legs, the suddenness of my body’s first response to a man making me shy.

“Koen...”

He lays me down on the couch and peruses the length of me like he can’t believe what he’s seeing, his jaw snapping with tension. Watching his own hand with fascination, he slides two fingers beneath the waistband of my jeans and draws it down slowly, slowly, nearly to my privates, before lunging at the flesh just beneath my navel and lapping it roughly. “Everything I lick becomes mine,” he informs me in the darkest, most resonant voice I’ve ever heard come from a human. And then he proceeds to lick every inch of my skin. My face, my neck and throat, my cleavage, my fingertips, my thighs.

Although he stops just short of licking anything covered by my bra and underwear, within minutes, I’ve soaked through my panties and sobs are firing up from my belly when he flips me over with a snarl and gives my back the same treatment. Licking my entire spine, bottom to top, with a long groan, pulling down my pants and underwear so he can lick the cheeks of my backside, down the backs of my legs to my ankles, locking his teeth around them and growling. I’m covered in wet love marks by the time he tears himself off me and begins to pace in front of the couch, the front of his slacks clearly tented, a fine sheen of sweat covering his tattooed torso.

Why does the sight of his arousal make me yearn so deeply?

As if I would know what the heck to do with a man.

You'd learn for him , says a new, sultry voice in the back of my head. For now, his visible unrest is making my chest feel tight.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He swipes a hand down his face. "I'm trying not to fucking terrify you." His laughter is dark and humorless. "Hell, I'm trying not to terrify myself."

"You don't terrify me," I murmur.

"Oh, Meg." He stops pacing in front of me and leans down, whispering two words against my ear that make me wonder if I'm the most naive human being alive. " I should ."

Suddenly, I'm very aware of his tattoos.

The utter violence woven into them. The mayhem and horror.

How many times the artwork includes a scythe. The kind carried by Death.

I was in such a hurry to do as Etta asked, I didn't stop to consider I'd be putting myself in a whole shitload of danger. She's asked me to persuade a man who is not to be messed with. Or fooled. And my body is magnetized by him. More than my body.

All of me. Every second that passes, I'm drawn deeper.

"Koen?"

His mouth is still against my ear. “Yes.”

“How did you get this big house? What do you do for living?”

Silence.

“Go to work, Meg.” His hand wraps around my throat. “One way or another, you’ll be back later.”

5

Meg

My hand hesitates over the office phone while I psych myself up for this planned call to Etta. 10:20 PM. I told her I would call and update her on my progress with Koen, but what progress do I even have to report? None. I spent most of my time with him sleeping. Not convincing him to return to a life of crime.

This little check-in isn't going to go well.

I guess I should just be grateful my father appears to have a handle on the kids and hasn't had anything to drink. Who knows how long that good fortune is going to last, though. When I called them a moment ago, they were all laughing and walking home from town with ice cream, but the next time I call, he could be snoring in an alleyway somewhere and the kids could be running amok.

To distract myself from the frustration of the unknown, I pick up the phone and dial the memorized number. Etta answers after two rings.

"Well?"

I hate this bitch. "I'm at work—the legal kind—so I'll make this quick. I've made contact with...him." Even saying his name out loud to her feels disloyal. Although, when did I become loyal to him? "We have plans to see each other again—"

"Excuse me?" she laughs. "Try again. Tell me the real story."

My nose wrinkles. “What do you mean?”

“Do you really expect me to believe you simply ‘made contact’ with one of the deadliest...” she trails off, clearing her throat. “That you met him so easily? He doesn’t people very well. One does not simply strike up a conversation with him.”

“Well, I did.”

And we took a bath.

And he licked me. Everywhere.

“What color are his eyes, then?”

“Ice blue. Like a glacier.”

There’s a pause. “Lucky guess. Name some other defining traits.”

I take a deep breath and hit launch. “There are tattoos all over his body. Chest, neck, back, both arms. Throat, even, with a red heart over his Adam’s apple. Shaved head, but his hair is beginning to grow in black. He’s extremely surly. He called me an idiot. Then he called me Michael Phelps.” Why am I smiling against the phone’s receiver? “He’s intense. Private. But he’s also...curious. And kind of confused about why he wants me around. I’m confused about it, too.”

The silence on the other end of the line is thick. “Holy shit, you really did make contact with him. How did you do it?”

Easy, I nearly drowned . “I have my ways.”

“This man rarely has face-to-face contact with anyone. If you see him, odds are

you're...about to have a terrible day. Even I have been communicating with him via messages in a social security box for years."

If I didn't already have a strong feeling Koen does something very bad for a living...I do now. "I might have made his acquaintance, but I don't think I'll be able to persuade him to go back to work for you."

"Your family being burned alive isn't enough incentive?"

My blood freezes. "Please don't do that," I beg, my voice wobbling.

"Six days," she purrs, hanging up.

My fingers are so numb, I can barely manage to put the phone back in the cradle. The office is still as death around me, but I've been in bad situations before. Perhaps not this bad. Still, I put in my headphones and get the hell on with my responsibilities.

That's what women do.

And that's what I do.

Koen

I only allowed her to leave my home so I could follow her.

There is nothing among her possessions to identify her. No phone or wallet. No clues about who she is or where she came from. And so, I let her go to work, hoping to learn what I need to know.

Which is fucking everything. I need to know everything.

I'm sitting in the front seat of my nondescript SUV, my eyes fastened on the entrance to the building Meg disappeared into moments earlier.

Carrying cleaning supplies.

My girl is a cleaner.

I'd been attempting to write a happy song with my violin, because for some disturbing reason, I am desperate to fulfil this silly request, but ever since she walked past my SUV with a caddy of chemicals and rags, humming to whatever music is playing in her headphones, the instrument has sat paralyzed in my lap. I should not have allowed her to leave my house, because now she is cleaning up after inferior people who should be kissing the ground on which she walks.

Now, I want to smash the windows of my vehicle.

It's hard to compose a song while filled with rage.

Focus. I'm renowned for my cold, calculating calm, yet it is deserting me now. I'm personally involved here. That's the difference. Normally, my jobs are filled with anonymous faces and locations I'll never return to twice. No part of my job has ever felt real to me. Not until my most recent job.

That's why I'm done.

I'll never go back.

An image of an elderly woman's lined face twisted with grief, her body draped and sobbing over a freshly deceased body, threatens to choke me.

How did I let that happen?

How did I not know?

I'm drawn sharply from my thoughts when a white Porsche pulls into the parking lot. It's the only other car besides mine, because Meg took the bus. She took the bus . With cleaning supplies. As soon as I find out her full identity, she's never working another day in her life. I suppose I could have simply asked for her last name and run the background check, but old habits die hard. I'm accustomed to only believing what I can see on a screen or written in black and white. Humans are faulty. Humans lie.

Now that I know the name of the office building she cleans, I'll be in contact with their cleaning service to get Meg's information. The right amount of money—or threats—will have me her social security number by morning.

A man alights from the white Porsche and I sink back into the shadows, staying very still, but my sixth sense is beginning to throb. He's looking around the parking lot, as if to verify no one else is around. I don't like the way he slides his hands into his pockets and whistles his way toward the side door. It's nine thirty at night. Presumably, there's no good reason for anyone to be here, except for Meg. If he'd merely forgotten something at the office, he'd be moving with more urgency.

As soon as he unlocks the side door and slips inside, I'm cutting through the darkness. Keeping to the shadows of the parking lot, I approach the building without a sound, all while removing my black leather gloves from my back pocket and putting them on. I silence my phone and enter through the same door, staying on the balls of my feet, my back to the wall.

What I see turns my blood into fire straight out of hell.

Meg is bent forward on her hands and knees, her shorts showing off her bare thighs and a significant part of her ass cheeks. The man is standing right behind her and she has no idea, because she's singing along with her music, scrubbing a scuffed

baseboard that runs along the base of the hallway wall. When I hear the metallic slide of his zipper coming down, I don't wait another second.

I appear behind the dead man like a phantom, take his head in my hands and snap his neck like a fucking twig, catching his body as it drops, dragging it out of sight before he ever hits the floor. Looking down at his everlasting expression of shock, I lift shaking fists and bellow without sounds, the scathing need to batter him bloody so fierce, I nearly give in. That would leave a mess, unfortunately. And it would lead to me explaining to Meg that I'm a monster.

"Hello?"

My muscles seize at the sound of Meg's nervous voice.

"Is someone there?"

I quietly lock the door of the break room where I've apparently ended up with the pervert who chose the wrong fucking girl, and I hold my breath when the knob rattles.

"Oh shoot," she mutters. "No granola bar tonight, I guess."

My narrowed gaze zips to the basket of snacks sitting by a coffee maker. She wanted one of those granola bars? She's hungry?

My own stomach draws in on itself as if experiencing hunger pains.

Setting aside the agony caused by that realization, I jolt into action once Meg is no longer outside of the break room, hiding the body in a place that won't be immediately obvious until I return and either dispose of him and his vehicle. Or make his death look like an accident. Tomorrow is Saturday, so I should have time.

Satisfied that I've left no trace of myself behind, I exit quietly through the break room window and return to my SUV. As soon as my hands stop shaking from anger, I pick up the violin again, staring at the instrument like it's a foreign object.

"Happy song," I mutter. "Write a happy song."

It's another twenty minutes before Meg emerges from the office building. She stops short upon seeing the white car in the parking lot, turning back to peer into the premises before tightening her hold on the caddy holding her cleaning products and hustling away.

Good girl.

You never saw a thing.

From my position across the street, I have a vantage point of the bus stop and I wait, watching with a heavy chest as she yawns and nearly falls asleep, seemingly undisturbed by the danger than can befall a young woman out this late alone. Thank God she ended up on my beach. Thank God I was chosen to save her from drowning.

Thank God, Thank God, Thank God.

I'll keep you safe, Meg. I'll guard you with my life.

When the bus appears to pick her up, I follow at an undetectable distance, my eagerness to see where she lives multiplying by the second. I never asked if she had a boyfriend, but if she does, she won't for much longer. And anyway, based on her innocent reactions when I touch—or lick—her, she's never known a man.

By morning, that will no longer be the case.

Ahead of me, Meg jumps off the bus after only one stop and starts sprinting.

“What the fuck?” I roar, hitting the gas and swerving around the stationary bus, watching in shock as she tears across a field at full speed, ponytail whipping behind her in the wind, her cleaning supplies apparently still on the bus. I don’t even hesitate, I turn into the field, busting through a wooden fence and gunning the SUV to her left around front of her, skidding into her path and slamming on the brakes. I’m diving out of my vehicle in a split second and she’s already starting off in another direction, leaving me no choice but to run after her. “Meg,” I shout. “Stop. I would never hurt you.”

She doesn’t slow down. Not at all. “Why are you following me, you psychopath?”

Is she speculating or does she know how close that diagnosis is to the truth? “I couldn’t risk not seeing you again,” I growl, finally catching up with her, throwing an arm around her waist and yanking her backward, leaving her legs dangling as she struggles mightily against me. The fifth time she delivers a painful backward kick to my knee, she leaves me no choice but to pin her down on the ground, her cheek pressed to the ground. “Don’t fight me. There’s no need.”

“You were back at the office, weren’t you?” she whimpers. “Watching me?”

“Yes,” I hiss, no idea why I tell her the truth. No idea why it feels so good to tell her the truth. To trust her with information that could implicate me in a crime—a huge deal-breaker in my world. “The number of ways you could be taken from me at any given moment is unacceptable.”

“In order to be taken from you, I’d have to be yours. And...and I’m not.” Her voice falls to a whisper. “Am I?”

“Yes. I know it’s happening fast, but I’m begging you to accept that. And Meg, I

never fucking beg. Not for anyone or anything but you.” Now that I’ve caught Meg, her scent is drugging my senses. I use my teeth to drag the hairband out of her hair, work my open mouth through the fallen strands, raking my stubble up the side of her neck, over the love bites I left behind earlier. “Accept that you’re mine. That I’m yours. That I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m scared,” she whispers, but hell if she doesn’t tilt her head so I can kiss her neck more fully, biting her lip when I suck a spot beneath her ear.

Still, she’s scared. Might as well saw me in half. “Of me?”

“In a way, yes. But more...more like...the feeling I’ve gotten myself into a situation I don’t know how to handle.”

I plant my knees on either side of Meg’s hips in order to turn her over, her tear-stained face breathtaking in the spill of moonlight. “I’ll handle it for you,” I vow.

She squeezes her eyes closed and shakes her head.

“Yes,” I rasp on top of her mouth.

“You don’t understand.”

“Make me.” And then I kiss her and the world explodes with light. “Make me,” I say again, thickly, mentally, physically and emotionally overwhelmed, my lips moving on my behalf, pressing her softer ones open and seeking out her tongue, my cock stiffening brutally when she gasps, tentatively stroking my tongue with her own, her young body shifting beneath mine in obvious heat, her breath releasing in a shudder when she feels what she’s doing to me.

Just by living.

Just by breathing.

“I know I told you earlier that you should be scared of me, Meg, but I can’t think of anything worse.” I angle my body to one side, running a palm up along the valley of her side and molding one of her perfect tits in my hand, teasing her nipples with quick, little strokes of my thumb until she’s glassy-eyed. “My life was ending while you were running from me.”

“Y-you stalked m-me.” Her back arches on a breath. “I-I...that feels so good. Why does it feel so good to be with you when...when I know this kind of behavior is wrong?”

“Maybe wrong is right for us. Wrong might be all I have—I don’t know. Wanting someone the way I want you is new for me. For now, let me show you how sorry I am for scaring you,” I say, drawing her shirt up slowly, giving her a chance to say no—and when thankfully she doesn’t, deftly unsnapping the front clasp of her bra. Groaning when her breasts are left exposed to me, to the moonlight. So sweet and gorgeous, I don’t know how every male in the world isn’t here in this field, trying to fight me for her. “And if I can’t make you any less scared, let me show you why a little fear of me is going to be worth it.”

And then I rip her tiny shorts off, right there in the middle of the field.

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6

Meg

Koen splits my shorts down the middle in his bare hands and tosses them sideways like yesterday's newspaper. Looking me right in the eye, his cheekbones high with color, he gets down on his belly and in the grass, hooks his grip around the outside of my knees and drags me toward him with a possessive curl to his upper lip, resting it on my mound and closing his eyes, his inhales, exhales hot and shallow.

This is when I should kick him as hard as I can in the face. Fight for everything I'm worth. Scream.

I do none of those things. Instead, my fingers bury in the earth and a wave of dark excitement rides so furiously up my chest, it knocks my head back and I inhale the night air and lingering rain, my flesh weeping between my legs in a way I don't understand. No one has ever explained in detail the business between a man and a woman when it comes to pleasure. The mechanics of baby making, sure. I get that.

But I don't know why Koen's mouth is on me there, his lips pursed and rubbing to side to side against my slit. I'm still wearing my panties, but the sensation leaves me feeling naked. I feel everything —and while my body seems to know exactly what it wants, my mind is in turmoil.

To be honest, I don't know what I was running from when I got off the bus.

Fear of Koen.

Or fear of having to lie to him.

This man is a locked chest full of untapped emotions and they're all clamoring to break free. Unbelievably, it's because of me. I'm doing this to him.

Even more unbelievably, he's having a similar effect on me.

Ever since leaving his house, I've inwardly strained to get back there. To him.

I'm losing my objectivity where he's concerned. I'm supposed to be convincing him to go back to work. But without even knowing exactly what he does for Etta, the thought of being anything but authentic with this man holds me back from even questioning him. Or making any meaningful strides in the direction Etta needs him to go.

"These aren't the panties you were wearing when you left me." He kisses me through the thin material of my underwear, his lower lip stiffening and working my flesh apart and oh my, oh my God, when he travels over this one particular spot, my hips twist and I'm convinced he's discovered some terrible secret of mine. My privates are ticklish. It's more than a tickle, though, it's like this spot is connected to my breasts and brain and ability to think, affecting everything. Everything. "Where did these come from?"

"Uh. Uh," I stammer, because he's teasing that spot with his thumb now while he works his mouth in rough kisses against my opening, still through my panties, which I'm causing to be soaked more with every second. "Uh. I don't know."

Danger sparks in his eyes. "You don't know where your panties came from?"

"Oh. I keep spare clothes at Becca's house. She's...she runs the cleaning serving out of her garage and she lets me shower there if I just came from my Uber shift."

“But you didn’t go to your Uber shift, Meg.”

“Are you always so curious about everyone’s day?”

“I don’t give a good goddamn about anyone’s day but yours.” He licks along several inches of my inner right thigh, followed by the left, making a savoring sound each time. Like I’m made out of chocolate mousse. “I want to know why you changed your panties when you hadn’t done an Uber shift.”

My face is on fire. “Because...”

“Because?”

“When I left your house, they were...”

He snaps his teeth around the waistband of my underwear. “Wet.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

My panties are ripped in half and all I can do is whimper. “Somebody enjoyed the way I licked her all over and called her mine.” He plants soft kisses down my parted slit, then his tongue flickers out and touches me there. In that spot. “Didn’t you, Meg?”

I can’t do anything but nod when I’m this vulnerable and he’d see right through me. “Yes.”

He rewards my honesty with a groan. By melting into me. There’s no other way to describe how his tongue slides through and parts me while his face is flush to my sex, as if he would inhale me were it possible, his mouth opening and drawing on me with suction, before switching into a more concentrated attack, the flat of his hungry

tongue riding over that secret spot, over and over again, his hands growing more demanding on my knees. Squeezing and pressing them open, his assault becoming eager, deep, animalistic resonances coming from inside of his chest.

“You are fucking delicious,” he growls, his eyes catching the moonlight and making him look otherworldly, the shine of me on his cheeks and chin. There’s no time to feel embarrassed about that, not when he’s licking it off and savoring it, lowering his mouth again to take and give and take and give, scooping up the cheeks of my backside and kissing them when he needs to come up for air, his chest heaving powerfully, obsession projecting on me through his eyes. That’s what this is.

I feel it, too. Oh God.

“What do you think, baby? Is my tongue worth a little fear?”

“Yes,” I sob.

Triumph dances across his features, but it’s quickly blanketed by lust, the middle finger of his right hand pressing slowly past my opening, slowly, slowly, until it’s fully inside of me and I’m gasping for air. “Jesus Christ,” he pants. “I’ll tell you what, this pussy is worth losing my fucking sanity over. I’m happily kissing my common sense goodbye tonight, because I won’t see reason now. I’ll only be thinking in terms of fucking my little Meg. Fucking and fucking and fucking her!” he roars, spitting on me once, twice. “You’re my asylum now. And this cunt is tighter than any straitjacket they could put me in. God. God. Throw away the fucking key.”

I’m crying out, opening my thighs for him, and a gripping rush is beginning that I can barely comprehend, only that I know he’s building me toward something I couldn’t do alone and he needs me to need him, and I do. And I show him that. My filthy fingers leave the earth and bury in his hair, a hoarse call of his name blasting from my lips when the clenching starts. The rhythmic clenching that seems to make him

crazed, his eyes locked on me while he licks that spot furiously, his thumbs pressing into the insides of my knees. I can't stop the crash that hits me, blurring my thoughts with cranberry-colored fuzz and taking hold of my entire lower half, the tickle turning into something big, bright, essential, pulsing deep in my sex, tension gathering, ebbing, gathering, ebbing while I scream myself hoarse, my shaking thighs wrapped around Koen's head.

Blackness hits me like a two-by-four and my body goes limp. I attempt to struggle through the sudden lethargy, and it has almost beaten me when I notice a granola bar sticking out of Koen's shirt pocket.

He notices me looking at it, stunned. "Eat, baby."

I'm too undone and overwrought and hungry to do anything but take the granola bar and unwrap the damn thing, biting into it with gusto. "Chocolate chip," I sigh.

His left eyebrow arches. "You thought I'd bring you oatmeal raisin?"

Uh oh. Belonging to this man is becoming more and more acceptable.

The last thing I remember is being carried to Koen's SUV and, once I've finished the last bite of my granola bar under his watchful eye, I'm laid gently on the backseat, the engine rumbling beneath me as he takes me back to the Bat Cave on the cliff, his eyes finding me in the rearview at every single stoplight. Tonight, I'm letting myself forget all the reasons I can't get attached to this man.

But tomorrow?

Tomorrow, I have to remember.

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7

Koen

Meg blushes when she wakes up and realizes she's in my arms.

It has been hours since I carried her into my home and laid her in bed. Leaving her here alone while I disposed of the dead man and his car was rather irritating, but I'm back now, holding the angel as she rests. I should be in the kitchen, fixing her something better than a granola bar to eat, but I can't bring myself to abandon this feeling. This fiercely beautiful girl snuggling into the crook of my arm, her bent leg resting on my thighs. Her bare pussy is warm and soft against my hip, which has left my dick very hard for a very long time. I still haven't relieved myself since getting her off in the field—and I don't want to.

Not until I can be inside of her.

I'm fixated on doing exactly that. My willpower is being poured into resisting the urge to roll Meg onto her back, stroke and kiss her until she's wet, then take her virginity.

I need it so bad.

I need to be her first and last. Need it understood that no one else will ever have the privilege of holding her while she sleeps. The privilege of fucking her.

Before Meg, women were no more interesting to me than a mile marker on the

highway. Of course, every once in a while, sexual energy needs to be expended, but the act was always impersonal. Like everything else I do, I make goddamn sure I'm the best in case those skills will serve me in my line of work. So I studied the physical responses of these faceless women. Listened to their screams and pinpointed the parts of the female body that need the most attention to reach climax.

I never expected to feel reborn in the face of woman's pleasure.

Meg's.

When her body shook so sweetly for my tongue earlier, I was blessed with a new purpose in life. Give this woman a lifetime of bliss, any way I can.

None of this is hidden in my expression when she blinks into a state of consciousness and looks up at me, yawning drowsily. Blushing. I don't deserve to experience innocence this closely, but I can't look away. Can't stop the obsession for her that is growing inside me so rapidly, I can feel it snapping tethers inside of my body.

"Hi," she says softly, turning her pink face into my bare chest. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Four hours."

Worry creases her brow, but she stays silent, staring off into the distance.

"Are you concerned about something?" I ask, my fingertips stroking a path from her temple to the curve of her shoulder. "Tell me what it is."

"I'm..." She swallows, seeming unsure. "I'm usually home now. My brothers and sisters need me and I'm not there."

I absorb this information about her like a greedy sponge. I've been too busy to make inquiries about Meg's background, and to be honest, for the first time ever, I think I want to find out about her naturally. I want information about her to come freely, from her perfect mouth, because she trusts me. "Brothers and sisters," I repeat, trying not to sound too eager. "How many?"

"Four. All younger."

"Are your parents in the picture?"

Does she realize her heart is knocking faster and faster against my side? Why is this line of questioning bothering her so much? "My mother left, but my father is still there. That's who is watching them right now." Under her breath, she adds, "Hopefully."

"This is why you work two jobs and a side hustle. You're supporting your family." My throat feels strange. "At just eighteen."

"Mmm."

"You've been doing it a lot longer than that, though, haven't you?"

"I love them," she says simply.

"What can I do, Meg? Would you like to bring them here?"

Those hazel eyes are astonished when she turns them on me. "What?"

"You heard me."

"I...no. No, I wouldn't bring that chaos to your doorstep. Plus, I think they would just

be confused. After all...”

“After all, what?”

“Even I still don’t know very much about you.”

My shields are rising, but I fight to keep them down. Some of them, at least. I’m gratified that Meg wants to know more about me. Surely that’s normal. Two people entering a relationship with one another would exchange information, wouldn’t they?

“Is there something specific you want to know?”

Her index finger starts drawing lazy circles in the valley between my pecs and my God, if she knew what that minor touch was doing to my cock, she’d run for the exit.

Or maybe not.

She loved having my tongue between her legs.

Nearly gave my whiplash when she came, her long, lithe thighs were so tight around my head, her pussy dripping everywhere. She wasn’t shy about spreading her legs for my mouth, maybe she’ll do the same for my dick.

Don’t be greedy. You’re lucky to simply be holding her. Speaking to her.

“Um.” Her tone is shy, and I must be sicker than I realized, because that only serves to make me hornier. “Do you have...family?”

Thankfully, the shield guarding my personal life is up. Saying these words out loud can’t hurt me. “No. I have no family. My parents owed a debt to a powerful woman when I was young. I was given to her as payment. She trained me to work for her.”

“Koen,” Meg chokes out. “I’m sorry.”

Her sympathy kicks at my shield, leaving a dent. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Meg,” I rasp, in desperation. “Can you...ask me about something else?”

My eyes slide closed when she begins those lazy finger circles again. “What sort of work did she train you to do?”

I shake my head. “This was a mistake.” She recoils as if I’ve slapped her, quickly drawing her hand away and I realize she misinterpreted my statement to mean she is the mistake. Being with her. As if that could ever be true. Panicked, I grab her wrist and bring her fingertips back to my body. “The questions, Meg. I meant allowing you to ask me questions was a mistake.” Possessiveness snaps in my blood, disturbed by even a hint of her withdrawal.” You assume my mind could change when it comes to you? I promise you, it won’t. I am murderously serious about you. Please don’t stop touching me.”

I don’t relax until she resumes the gentle circles.

But she doesn’t speak again.

I’ve shut her down and the longer the silence stretches, the emptier I feel.

“Meg.” Am I actually going to say this out loud? To the girl I want to stay with me forever of her own free will? “My job is unusual.”

“You’re talking to someone who makes paper airplanes for cash.”

An odd sound leaves me, almost like a strained laugh, but nothing about standing on this precipice is funny. “What I do is...Meg, I don’t know what to say.”

“Koen.” She raises her head to look at me, scared but brave. “I already kind of pieced together that what you do is, um...illegal.”

My lungs aren’t working. Is she going to run? “That’s putting it mildly.”

Visibly deep in thought, she wets her lips. “Drugs?”

“No, baby.”

“You don’t traffic people.”

“No, Meg. God, no.” I take the heaviest breath of my life and make sure my arm is around her as securely as possible, in case she bolts. This is the moment I realize...I wouldn’t let her leave, if she tried. Jesus, I’m in very deep. “But I’ve killed a few men who do.” My swallow is heavy. “I’ve killed a lot of men, Meg.”

Her back stiffens and she blinks several times, tears swimming in her eyes. “I think maybe I already knew,” she whispers, barely audible.

“I’ve stopped.” I remember the man’s neck I snapped last night. “Mostly.”

There’s a long pause. “Why did you stop?”

“I can’t talk about that,” I say quickly. I don’t have shield for this. I haven’t had time to develop one. There’s nothing but a gaping wound and thinking about what happened on my last assignment only pours more and more salt into the injury. “Okay?”

She's disappointed, even though she's nodding.

I can't bear it.

Shouldn't I reward her for not running when I revealed I'm a professional killer?

"There was a job," I say, my lips numb. I'll only tell her surface level stuff, just so she won't be disappointed. I won't get too detailed. "I was hired to remove someone, Meg. And...I didn't recognize the name when I received the assignment. I've seen so many names on paper over the years." Stop here. You should stop here. But I don't. Because she slips her hand into mine and kisses my shoulder and it all comes spilling out. "His grandmother used to feed me, before my parents traded me to cover their debt. I would wait at her backdoor, covered in filth and she'd give me a paper plate of whatever they'd eaten for dinner that night. She was so kind to me. The only person who'd ever been kind to me and I...I killed her grandson. She discovered him in a pool of his own blood."

I'm shocked to feel moisture trickle down my side. It's Meg's tears.

She's crying for me?

"Why did you kill him?"

"He was a cocaine smuggler. He made a deal with a rival operation. My boss wanted to make an example out of him. I didn't even think, I just fulfilled my duty. That's what I always do. It's just an endless cycle of violence."

"And you don't want to do it anymore."

"No." I pull her closer and kiss the top of her head. I can't believe she isn't trying to leave me. "Problem is, I don't know how to do anything else."

“You play a mean violin.” She wraps her arm around my middle and holds me, too, as if she can sense I’m about to fall apart. “Maybe...maybe the problem is that you never take a break? Maybe you need a vacation from your job...before you go back. That’s normal, isn’t it? Professional burnout?”

“I suppose so.” My lips twitch, because I sense she’s trying to make light of a heavy topic, which is so like my Meg. But my amusement fades to dread. Dread of her answer to my next question. “Would you stay with me if I returned to my job?”

Several seconds pass. I hold my breath, but she finally nods. “Yes.”

I can’t hide my surprise. Or my immense relief. “You’re taking this very well.”

“I have no choice,” I think she says, her tone conflicted.

But I can’t be sure.

Later, I’ll recall this moment and be sure, though.

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8

Meg

Am I the sort of person who condones murder now?

No. No, it's wrong. Nothing excuses violence.

Except maybe a child being sold and being given no choice but to train and become an assassin or starve to death. If Koen hadn't been traded for the debt, what fate would have befallen his parents? He isn't a psychopath, otherwise he wouldn't feel guilt and grief over taking the old woman's grandson away from her. It's driven him into solitude.

Maybe I'm naive, maybe I'm making excuses because I have feelings for Koen that continue to expand and grow complicated, but...

I believe that, if anything, his ability to still feel guilt and pain after the life he's led makes him stronger of character than most.

I'm one of those women who marries an inmate, aren't I?

Oh God.

"You're still here," he says, planting a hard kiss on the crown of my head.

Speaking of the ability to feel guilt, did I really try and suggest he simply needed a

break from being an assassin? Maybe...maybe the problem is that you never take a break. My heart sinks into my stomach from simply replaying my own words. How can I do this job Etta asks of me? I should tell him to run. To find a peaceful life away from the world that did such a number on him.

“Of course I’m still here,” I say, turning my mouth into his shoulder. After a hesitation that comes from a place of inexperience, I...sip at his shoulder. I open my mouth partly and suck gently on his skin, my intimate muscles tugging between my legs when he sucks in a hiss, his hips shifting beneath the covers. “Do you...like that?”

“I can’t think of a single thing you could do to me that I wouldn’t like.” His nostrils flare when he cuts me a smoldering look. “Except run.”

I’m filled with the urge to make him believe I won’t. The deal with Etta means nothing right now. It’s an afterthought when this man is looking at me like I’m the axis of his world. Nothing can go wrong in this moment. There’s only now—and the need to make him secure in how I feel. How nothing has changed despite what he told me.

Garnering all of my bravery, I push up on my left elbow and look down at the sheet that covers his body from the neck down. My pulse is rapping wildly as I pinch the top and peel it down, down, down, revealing his flexed chest, so crowded with ink. My gaze on him is like a touch all its own, and his jaw slackens under my regard, the tendons in his neck and forearms growing more and more prominent.

“Are you restraining yourself?” I ask.

“Yes.”

Slowly, I lower my fingertips to the top of his abdomen, watching it shudder and

tighten in fascination. “Why?”

“After what I just told you...” His forehead is gathering a sheen. “I’m not going to attack you like an animal, Meg.” He swallows hard and gives me a look rife with meaning. “Next time, though. Next time, I will. Do you hear me?”

I suck in a breath when my nipples tighten, fast and painful, an ache erupting between my thighs. I’m finding a lot out about myself tonight. How much I’m willing to overlook when a man makes me feel like this. How I like the blunt way he speaks to me. How I’m pretty sure when he executes his promise, I’ll like that, too.

“For now, I want to see what you do.” He stacks his hands behind his head and shifts to give me full access to his powerful body. “There are no wrong choices, Meg.”

The ink on his skin draws me closer, inviting just the barest touch of my lips on his hip. “What if I lick your body the way you licked mine?”

His stomach hollows with a shudder. “Oh fuck. Please.”

I let my tongue out of my mouth, finding the smooth heat of his hip bone, tracing a slow path to his belly button. To go any further, I have to kneel and bend over him and I do that now, skimming my palms over his chest and shoulders while my tongue dampens the colorful patterns that decorate his body. In my periphery, I can see his sex stiffening into a monument beneath the sheet, his hips jerking and undulating when I reach his nipples and lick them soundly, his hoarse epithets making me stay there longer than anywhere else, before my face visits his neck, kissing and biting him there, enjoying his scent.

Remembering what he did to me in the field last night, I raise my head slightly, finding Koen watching me through glazed blue eyes. “Can I lick you...down there, too?”

“Yes, baby. You can.” He turns his face and nuzzles mine, his breath turning shallow. “You can lick it, kiss it, suck it, stroke it, tease it. Put it inside you. Sign your name on it. Just make sure it’s the last one you’ll ever see.”

We turn our heads and gaze down the length of his body together, my middle finger playing in the trail of hair below his navel. He makes an anticipatory sound when my touch slips lower, gripping the sheet and slowly uncovering his thick erection. My mouth dries up at the sight of it, the beating veins running every which way, the engorged head. Even with my precious little experience, I know it’s sensitive to the touch. I just know.

“Are they supposed to be that big?” I ask, sifting my fingers through the black hair at the base of his sex, hesitating a moment, then fisting him.

Hissing like a tea kettle, he lifts his hips sharply. “No,” he slurs. “God must have decided that Meg deserves a little more cock than everyone else.” I start a gentle stroke that tightens gradually while I move my body into position between his legs, my attention rapt on the slit at the top of his shaft, how pearls of moisture continue to appear...and I ache to taste them. There are no wrong answers.

With those words of encouragement echoing in my head, I bend down and lap at the newest glistening pearl, bringing it into my mouth and moaning over the salty earthiness of Koen. A rash of heat spreads down my body, that secret spot beginning to throb between my thighs. “Tastes so good.” My fist travels up and down the length of him, picking up speed. “If I suck, will more come out?”

“Oh my God.” His head is pressed back into the pillows, neck straining. “I don’t deserve this. I don’t deserve her.”

“Yes, you do.” I lower my head, dragging my lips side to side across the tip of his arousal. “But you’ve got me, either way.”

“Meg,” he chokes out, throat muscles working in a pattern. “Meg.”

“If I suck it...?”

“Yes,” he pants. “More will come out.”

I don't know how to describe the change that comes over me once Koen's steely sex is in my mouth, but it's as though I've been starved for this, for him, my whole life. More heavenly pearls find my taste buds and I whimper over the essential taste, purring when one of them flings to the back of my throat and slides down, down into my tummy where it belongs. More. I want more. I need more.

I want the entire length of him to feel the suction at once, so I push my lips down as far as they'll go, watching his stunned and lustful expression while I suck as hard as I can, all the way back to the tip, but I don't release him entirely. No. No! I refuse. I'm greedy for this big, salty part of him, my temperature spiking over the pulsations of those veins against my tongue. I hold the very life of him in my mouth. It's a privilege.

“My innocent virgin sucks me like a dirty cockslut, huh?” His hands are out from beneath his head now, his long fingers twisting in my hair, urging me on with slow, upward pumps of his hips. “You know you found the one that's going to satisfy your little pussy. That's why it tastes so motherfucking good, Meg. Listen to your body telling you I'm your Daddy.”

I transform in that moment and disappear into a blue haze. That claim of ownership and his obvious pleasure take me to a different world and I have no insecurities or hesitation here. Just my mouth that was crafted for sucking and my sopping wet sex that no longer alarms me, only makes me feel right. I know everything about me is right and perfect because of the possessive way he looks at me.

And so I don't hesitate to clamber breathlessly onto his heaving, sweat-slicked body now, locking our mouths together while his fist moves between my legs, guiding his length to my entrance, shouting a vile curse when he finds me ready, so ready, so ready, cramming himself inside of me with a decisive jerk of his wrist, my insides jarred and stupefied by the inundation of pressure, but it passes after a moment, the worst of it passes, and now I'm joined with him. It's the most tremendous victory I can imagine, my body fitting this man's and pleasuring it. Pleasuring him. He's had so little in his life and it becomes my duty now to rain it down on him, like the goddess he suspects me to be.

"You fill me up so tight, Daddy," I whisper against his mouth, my lips tilting like a feline's when his eyes roll back into his head and he clutches my butt cheeks, begging me with incoherent words to move, move, move. And I do. I move like no one before or after, in ways neither one of us suspected I could. I bury my face in his neck and smack my hips up and down, then in smaller, quicker humps that make him call for God through his teeth. "Put that salty stuff inside me," I whine, biting his ear. "I want it. It's mine."

"Fucking right it's yours." He rakes his open mouth up the side of my face. "It's called my come, Meg. My come is what you want. My body makes more of it every second of the day and we need to get it out. That's why your mouth and pussy are going to be swollen so goddamn often. My come."

"Then I love your come."

"Good girl." His hips lift me high and bounces me—repeatedly—his gaze hot on my breasts as they rebound and shake. I sob at the gathering of the unknown beneath my navel. It's a lot like last night in the field, but bigger. Fuller. Monumental. "I love your fucking come, too, Meg. It belongs on this cock. Drench my fucking cock."

I don't have a choice.

The vibrations start at a place within me I can't name. Or it didn't exist until Koen discovered it. The reverberations tremor up my hips, then arrow in toward my belly, diving in, diving low and intertwining with my sex organs in the most indescribable way. Yanking.

"Koen!"

"Meg," he rasps, turning me over, his teeth bared as he pumps between my spread legs, the patterns of his tattoos shifting in the moonlight. Flexing while that part of him that thickens more, more, more, threatens to either tear me in half or make me explode with pleasure again. I don't know which. Only that I covet his aggressions. His assault.

I beg for it loudly and brokenly.

"Do have any idea how tight you are?" he growls in my ear, his body moving frantically with mine, his hips pressing my knees wide open on the bed. "Don't you dare tell anyone your cunt is this fucking tight. That's our secret, Meg. I'll have to kill men to keep them away and I've already got enough blood on my hands. Jesus. You're a work of art."

His praise makes those delicate muscles quicken all over again, making me cinch around him even tighter and my hips move in a swivel, instinctively offering him friction. "I won't tell anyone it's so little, Daddy."

He roars when he comes, his muscular frame stiffening, choked sounds breaking from his lips while a great tide of warmth enters me, bathes me in the place I've needed it since I met him, without realizing why. The why is that my body belongs to Koen. Every inch. Every response he elicits from it. All of me.

"Mine!" he bellows, punching his fist through the headboard, splintering the wood.

But I'm not scared. No, not of this man.

He'd take on the world for me. That's what his body and words and eyes tell me.

"You're mine, too," I whisper back, slowly drawing his mouth down to mine, kissing him with all of the promise in my heart while he withdraws himself and lays down beside me, his intensity focused on me the whole time.

We cling to each other as we descend into sleep.

I'm going to have to find another way to pay my father's debt.

I won't dupe this man. I love him.

Koen

“ I have clothes at home,” Meg says in between bites of her omelet, her angelic hazel eyes sparkling back at me across the kitchen island. My beautiful, beautiful girl. “I don’t need new ones.”

Every time I think I’ve reached peak madness when it comes to this girl, it goes up another notch. I can almost feel a crank turning inside me, tautening the bow strings of my sanity at the mere suggestion that she has somewhere else to reside beside my bed. Under my roof. In my possession. “Meg, there is a major problem with the clothes you have at home,” I say, attempting to sound calm. Reasonable. Which I am not.

Her brows pull together. “What is the problem?”

“You’d have to go home to get them. And that’s not happening.”

Slowly, her fork lowers and my stomach ties itself in a knot. I swear to Christ, if she tries to leave, I will go fucking mental. “My siblings are at home, Koen. I take care of them.”

Stay calm. Stay calm. “I told you, they can come here.”

“You’re so ready to have this peacefulness shattered, are you?” she laughs.

“You’ve shattered my peace and given it to me at the same time.” Unable to stay away from her, I finish pouring my cup of coffee, then move around the island to stand in front of her, wanting to beat my chest like a brute over the fact that she’s wearing my T-shirt as a nightshirt. “I don’t know left from right anymore. I just know you’re not going home. This is your home now.”

She strokes the sides of my face with her fingertips, coaxing happiness through the panic. More happiness than I’ve felt in my entire life. With one tiny little touch, she wields magic. “If I left, I would only come back.”

“ No. ”

“I told you, Koen. I’m yours.”

“Then act like it,” I grunt, playfully nudging her forehead with mine.

Her face tilts up to mine, her tongue making the barest contact with the seam of my mouth. Ever so slightly, her thighs inch apart on the stool. “I thought I did a good job showing you earlier how completely I’m yours.”

Good fucking lord, she has my dick on a string. It stirs every time she breathes, let alone reminds me of our explosive chemistry in bed. The way she looked up at me with a mixture of realized power, encouragement, trust and obedience is addictive in itself, but there’s such an overflow of good fortune beyond that, I could never list everything that makes me want to fuck her repeatedly for eternity and beyond. Her flexible body, her instincts when it comes to my needs, my hunger . Her husky cries. Her pussy . I’m not joking when I say I’d pay a million dollars just to look at it while I beat off, let alone have the honor of fucking it. I’m sweating right now just picturing how my dick is going to look sliding into that little wet hole from the back.

FUCK.

Her body is a drug, yes, but even I am not emotionally blind enough to miss what happens to my heart and soul when she's letting me make love to her.

I didn't know it was possible to connect with another human being like that. It's not possible for me. Not with anyone but Meg. My Meg. A collision of wild happiness and blistering lust I don't think men experience often, if ever. Somehow, she is giving that experience to me. "What we did together, baby..." I have to pause, thanks to the emotion in my throat. "There are no adequate words."

"Not even fucktastic?" she deadpans.

I laugh through the choked feeling. I laugh in my own kitchen for the very first time.

Does she know she's a one in a million? Does the world know? I struggle between wanting everyone to witness her majesty and hide her away, so no one can ever see her. How is it that I'm the one who gets to keep this person? "Fucktastic. Let's trademark it."

Her nose wrinkles when she laughs, but it dissolves into a sigh. "I don't want you to buy me new clothes. I'm not...accustomed to someone supporting me. I've always done the supporting."

"And now you'll be rewarded for your selflessness. It's as simple as that."

"It's not. I like to earn my keep." I'm ready to start shouting about my nine-figure bank account and multiple investment properties, but she gasps, bringing me up short. "I have an idea," she says. "We should take your violin down to the bus station and perform for cash. I could dance for my cut. It'll be fun."

"You think I'd let you dance in front of people for money?" I recoil at the thought. "That's sounds more nightmarish than fun."

“You won’t let anyone bother me.” She hops off the stool, throwing her arms around my neck. “Come on, let’s go. You’ve been hiding in this house too long, reliving the darkness. Dwelling on it. But there’s a light side to this world, too, Koen.” She sways in my arms, her expression cajoling. “Let me show you.”

I don’t think I’m capable to denying Meg anything, especially when she speaks about it with so much passion. I want to understand what she’s feeling. The truth of what she’s telling me. And perhaps she’s right. I’d been closed up in this house with my unbearable thoughts right up until the minute she showed up on my beach. If I’m going to prevent that darkness from touching her, maybe I need to shed it. If such a thing is possible, she’s the only one who can help me succeed.

“Fine. Just this once.”

My lips move unbidden into a smile when she cheers and proceeds to demonstrate the dance moves she’s going to use while we busk. I don’t know what’s happening to my life, but I’m scared to imagine what would have become of me if she didn’t come crashing in to save me.

Meg

In the days since meeting Koen, my life has been a dream.

Perfect at times, confusing at others. Falling for him has challenged everything I thought I knew about myself. But I’ve fallen, nonetheless. Hard. Irrevocably. He’s woken up a sexuality inside of me that might have gone unnoticed forever, if the right man hadn’t made it come screaming out of me, unearthing my obsession with his own.

I am obsessed . With him.

However, even now, as I sit beside him on an old wooden bench in the train station, the violin resting in his lap, his protective arm around my shoulder, my responsibilities are calling louder and louder from the sidelines. I can't put them off anymore. I've been caught up in what's happening to me, to Koen, but my siblings are at stake. My father, too. As unreliable as he is, he's my blood. I can't continue to be selfish by ignoring what Etta sent me here to do—

The mere act of thinking the name Etta must spook me, because a woman in a sunhat meanders in a distance, before boarding a train. There's something familiar about her. Something about her posture that harkens back to the woman from my doorstep, but I'm just hyperaware of my deadline. Of my upcoming confession. That's all it is.

What I crave is one more magical moment...

And then I'll tell Koen everything. He deserves every bit of my honesty.

"What are you going to play?" I murmur, nuzzling his shoulder with my cheek.

He watches his own fingers intently as they stroke through the strands of my hair. "Something I wrote for you. Something happy."

I gasp, sit up straighter. "You wrote me a song?" I sputter. "When did you have time to do that?"

"When you left me to clean," he responds, his disdain for my job obvious. "It wasn't easy to compose something upbeat when I knew you were on the other side of the wall scrubbing baseboards."

A flare of alarm streaks through my stomach at the specifics of his statement. Scrubbing baseboards. "I thought I heard a noise. You came into the office?"

He inclines his head, jaw tight.

“What is it?” I ask, rubbing the center of his chest, overwhelmed by so many things at once. The need to climb into his lap and be wrapped in his arms. The need to confess why we met in the first place. The need to run away...even though I’d only make it two steps before sprinting straight back to him. “You can’t be this upset over me cleaning an office.”

“I could. Easily. But...” He studies me closely, as if deciding how much of an explanation I can handle. “I wasn’t going to come into the office. I was going to wait for you in the parking lot. A man arrived, though...”

“A man...” My memory of that night drifts back in freeze frames. “The white car. I saw that white car in the parking lot.”

“It’s been stripped down and compacted now,” he says slowly, gauging my reaction.

“Did it belong to...”

His blue eyes narrow to slits. “Belong to who?”

I take a few breaths and try to relax my pulse, but it continues to race under his intensity. Books and TV shows portray healthy couples as comfortable. Calm. Content. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to feel those things around Koen. What I do feel is alive. Highly aware of every molecule dancing in my body. Poised for anything.

And I can’t help it. I prefer this over comfort.

Mystery. Darkness. The unknown.

“Did the car belong to a man? On the shorter side with blond hair?”

“Yes,” he says, sharply. “Who was he to you?”

“Was?” I whisper, every inch of my skin beating like a heart. “I don’t know him. Never spoke to him. He just...he watched me clean recently. It was creepy.”

Koen’s voice is deadly cold when he says, “He’s never going to do that again, is he?” He leans in close to rub his mouth against the skin under my ear. “I might be unable to kill for a living anymore, but this is different. It concerned you . I snapped his fucking neck for looking at what’s mine. For thinking of doing more.” He presses his bared teeth against my neck. “The fact that my Meg was his final vision on this earth burns me alive. I want to claw my way into hell just to rip the image of you from his head.”

“Koen...” I whisper, my fingers clutched tightly in my lap, scared by the impulse to kiss him after he told me something so bloodthirsty.

“Am I scaring you?”

“A little,” I manage, trapped in a rush of awareness. Of him. Of myself. Of the entire universe. This is what he does—he makes me feel sharply awake. Perpetually energized.

Koen presses his forehead to my temple and without taking his eyes off me, he lifts the violin bow from his lap, sliding it down between my legs. Playing the inside of my high inner thigh, right on the edge of my stockings, as if I’m the instrument. “Have I convinced you yet that I’m worth a little fear, Meg?”

“Yes,” I breathe, my sex in an uncomfortable clench. Dampening in my panties.

“You could be saving a lot of lives by quitting your jobs.”

“I can’t.”

A whimper leaps out of my mouth when he presses the violin bow to the juncture of my thighs, right along that wet valley, dragging it up and down, up and down. “We’ll discuss your job later.” He cuts the station a sideways glance. “For now, let’s do what we came here to do. I’m getting jumpy with so many people around you.”

In a haze, I glance around the train station and spot four people, in total now, the woman in the sunhat long gone. “It’s practically empty.”

Instead of responding to that, Koen taps the bow against my pussy. Tap. Tap. Tap. “If I had my way, I’d be the only one who comes within a hundred yards of this.”

“I can’t always let you get your way.”

His right eye ticks. “Case in point, we’re in a train station when I’d like to be banging your fucking brains out in every room of our house.”

I trap a moan with my lips. “Our house?” I murmur a few seconds later.

“Everything that’s mine is yours, Meg. I’m laying it all at your feet.”

My heart squeezes up into my throat and I’m forced to blink away the moisture in my eyes. Is he still going to feel this way after I tell him I met him under false pretenses? That I have an agenda that involves sending him back to an unhealthy and dangerous lifestyle?

“Is it possible to fall in love with someone so fast?” I say out loud, failing to limit the words to the inside of my head.

“No,” he says, his voice unsteady. He drops the violin bow back into his lap and cups my cheek, turning my face so I can see the gravity in his eyes. Enough gravity to fill the cosmos. “I’ve loved you since the bathtub.”

“I love you, too.” If my heart constricts anymore, I’m going to flatline. “Maybe we should go home.”

I’ll tell him everything once we get there. I swear.

His lips twitch. He’s coldly beautiful when he’s speaking about murder. But when he’s amused, he could pass as a Hollywood heartthrob. “One song, then we’ll go. I want you to hear the music that plays in my head when I look at you.”

10

Koen

I settle the violin onto my shoulder and place my chin in the leather chinrest.

My bow waits on the strings for my equilibrium to restore itself.

Meg just told me she loves me.

Right on the heels of finding out I murdered a man for her protection.

I've found the one woman on this earth who could love a monster. Who could love me for exactly what I am, no qualifications. I think there's even a forbidden part of Meg that is excited by the predator inside of me, and I'll be grateful for that until the day I die. If the danger lurking inside me keeps her safe and makes her wet, as a bonus, I'm going to be the last one to question that blessing.

My bow begins to move on the strings. I've never played a happy song in my life and this music was only composed in my head, but it's the most accurate portrayal of my feelings for her. The high-pitched beginning and the slow, winding drop into dizzying notes of desire, obsession, commitment. There's the lighter section to represent her making paper airplanes and flying them in my living room. The way she teases me. The way she lifts the veil of darkness every time she walks into a room.

It's a song just for her, just for us—and she weeps happy tears as she dances to it, still clad in only my shirt, which falls to her knees, and a pair of sneakers. She leaps onto

benches and pirouettes like a ballerina, her dark hair loose and wild. There is no one like her. She's a treasure. My treasure. I'll never, ever, ever let her go.

As the song begins to wind down, she collects a few dollar bills from an elderly couple and I roll my eyes at her, but continue to play, my gaze drawn to the flashes of bare thighs, her pretty tits bobbing beneath the shirt. She drops one of the dollar bills and is forced to bend over to pick it up, reminding me she's out of panties. Wearing none, because I refuse to let her go home and haven't been able to stop touching her, talking to her, staring at her, bathing and feeding her long enough to go shopping.

Christ, I can't keep her in my clothes with no underwear indefinitely.

I'll remedy her lack of clothing first thing tomorrow.

Probably.

For now, she has this hard cock to deal with.

The song ends on a scrubby, off-key note to symbolize my blood rushing south...and she stops pirouetting, her hair settling around her shoulders, hazel eyes wide with awareness. Dawning heat. She recognizes the sentiment behind the ending and she wants to fuck, too.

I use my bow string to point at the parking lot. "March," I growl.

But instead of following my order, she gives me an impish smile and dances farther into the train station. I don't even hesitate a split second before following her, the beast beginning to snarl inside of me because it wants to possess Meg immediately and she's playing games. A significant part of me loves this lighthearted side of her, but my cock is a different story. It's swollen and irritable, because it has only experienced the tight clutch of her pussy one time.

Oh, she's going to get what's coming to her.

"Meg," I rasp in warning.

All I hear is a giggle and my heart rate picks up even more, my leather belt biting into the growing curve of my shaft, my mouth salivating at the anticipated taste of her neck when I bite onto it like a fucking apple. Conflict wars inside of me—the beast who wants to rut and claw its sexual frustration into her. And the man in love who wants to feel her orgasm build, build, build, hear the sweet music of her whimper when she wets me.

A flash of white disappears around the corner and I put my head down and start to run, experience allowing me to speed up behind her without making a single sound. She doesn't see me coming. One second, she's laughing and disappearing farther and farther into the deserted station and the next, I'm yanking her back against my chest with a crooked elbow around her throat.

"I don't advise running from me, Meg," I say very carefully, against her temple, kissing it to soften the danger in my tone. "Ever."

"I'm just playing around." Her butt squirms in my lap. "I wanted you to catch me."

"Why?"

"Because..." Red stains her cheeks. "You said you were going to be an animal this time." Her head falls back against my shoulder, her half-mast eyes perusing me. "Animals don't wait until they're home in a bed, do they?"

I'm torched by lust. Filthy, nasty lust.

Hers matches mine, too. That's what has me extra keyed up.

“You want to fuck right here, right now, little girl?”

“Yes,” she sobs when I squeeze her slim throat.

I scan our surroundings for a dark spot and find one several yards to the right, a shadowy section of the station where two brick walls intersect to make a private corner for what I’m about to do to her. The half of me that wants to treat her delicately rebels, but I remember she asked for it. Animals don’t wait until they’re home in bed, do they?

She tempts a demon.

“This time, you better march,” I say quietly, inducing a shiver in her. She moves in the direction of the shadows, her youthful Converse making progress on the pavement and when the darkness swallows us, it swallows me, too. I unhook my elbow from around her throat and set down my violin, along with the bow. “Put your hands on the wall,” I instruct, rising to my full height once more and unfastening my belt.

Watching her pale fingers spread on the brick, hearing the distant sound of conversation, wind, a train whistle. The button of my jeans being undone. Her swallow.

“Take off the shirt.”

Her wide eyes peer back at me over her shoulder. “Off?”

I don’t bother repeating myself, I simply take two strides forward and strip the shirt over her head, leaving her completely naked in the train station, save the sneakers on her feet. “Animals don’t wear shirts, either, right?”

She's trembling, but not from the cold.

No, her head is turned slightly, so I can see her parted mouth. Her furrowed brow.

Meg is learning something about herself.

Dying to continue her education, I fist her hair and twist it around my wrist twice, pulling her head back. "You better keep your mouth shut while I'm slam-fucking that tight cunt of yours, because anyone who comes searching and sees you naked won't live to see another sunrise." I unzip my jeans and her legs scoot together, as if she's trying to mitigate her horny reaction to my cock coming out, but I don't allow it. I slide my booted foot between her sneakers and kick them apart. "Let it ache, baby."

I think of the way she looked at my mouth when I told her I killed a man for looking at her. How heavy her lids became against her will, that pulse rollicking at the base of her neck. I keep that vision in my head while I pull the leather gloves from my back pocket and put them on in practiced tugs. Then I conform the front of my body to her back, nestling that tight little ass in my lap and skimming my gloved hands from the tops of her thighs, up her taut stomach to her tits, palming them gently. Gently.

Then I slide my right hand down to her pussy, gripping it savagely, and sink my fucking teeth into her smooth neck. Growling.

"You have thirty seconds to bury my dick where it belongs. I'm not helping you this time." I slap her pussy, gratified to hear the snap of leather against dampness, but I like the broken sound of her moan even more when I slide my leather middle finger down the split of her cunt and stroke her clit. "Show me how you fuck Daddy like a big girl."

"Oh. Ohhhh." Her butt squirms in my lap, her breath coming in hot, abbreviated pants as she pushes up on her toes, rubbing her wet flesh against my ready cock. She drops

her right hand from the wall and reaches between her legs to guide me to her slippery entrance, and I grit my teeth in sweet agony as she manages to push in the tip. “I can’t...it w-won’t...”

“Didn’t I tell you the hole was fucking tight?” She nods, writhing in whimpering circles on my dick, even though she’s only taken an inch. “Remember how it happened in my bed? You needed a good, hard shove to be filled up.”

“Yes. Shove it, please, shove it—”

I clamp my leather gloved hand over her mouth and ram myself home, flattening her to the wall in the process, her cry of bliss hot in my palm. “You’re naked for a reason,” I grunt in her ear, my balls immediately so sensitive, I can barely breathe. “Fuck me like you were taught.”

She starts stirring those magic hips and I nearly bust. The first time I took her, I couldn’t believe anyone’s body had the ability to move like Meg’s, let alone a virgin, but after only one fuck, she’s gotten even better. She levers up and wiggles down and grinds on that dick like something out of an unrealistic fantasy, clutched up around my cock the way a baseball player chokes up on a bat, riding up and down like she was born to fuck.

“Tightest little thing on the planet, I swear to Christ. Pussy this good should be illegal,” I say, my breath running short, her ass slapping up and down on my thighs while I play with her bouncy titties, her feet using the brick wall for leverage to push back and fuck me better. Harder. “Get ready for that slam-fuck, baby. It’s coming. Just letting you work me up first...and goddamn, you’re doing your job, aren’t you?”

“I love to make it good for Daddy,” she whispers, looking back at me with a sultry expression. Driving my last shred of sanity clear out of my head. Coaxing the animal she wanted to the forefront. I’m horny as sin, dying for a nut, mindless as I shift to

plant my feet more firmly on the ground, then I grip her one-of-a-kind hips and get pumping, my chin resting on the top of her head, mouth open and snarling.

“You don’t just make it good, Meg, you make me feel like a god,” I rasp in her ear. “You put my heart in my throat. You... God , you spoil my cock rotten . You make me want to live a thousand years so I can have them all with you.” Speech is beginning to grow difficult because I’m so close to climaxing. “You are perfect. You are mine. ”

“I’m yours. Forever, Koen.”

“Forever. Just keep grinding those young hips for me. Just like that. Oh God.” My head drops back, just envisioning the fat trunk of my shaft squeezing into her dripping slit, my balls making sharp swings, full of come to fill up my precious little masterpiece. “Baby. Baby . Fuuuuuck .”

Her orgasm is so slick and whiny and filthy, I have no choice but to pop off myself, giving her eight ferocious pounds against the wall and letting my lust loose, grunting like the beast I am every time another thick, piping hot spurt finds its mark, deep, deep in her incredible body, my right hand around her throat, choking her while she gets off, her thighs open wide like a dirty brat, hips tilted so she can rub her clit on me and make the most of her climax, using my overflowing come to grease her wheels.

“Good girl. Make a mess on the fucking ground.” I grip her jaw hard, surging my cock in one final time, emptying the last drops remaining in my balls. “Let everyone look at that wet spot in the morning and know someone got railed good and hard right here.” I lick the side of her face crudely and she moans, turning her face eagerly into my tongue, because she’s my perfect counterpoint. “They won’t know the half of how good it is, though, will they? No one knows but us. There’s no one but us, Meg. ”

“No one but us,” she whispers, turning to face me.

Throwing herself into my arms, letting me lift her. Hold her nude and sated body against mine like the world is ending, rocking and muttering words of love with my heart packed in my throat. And then I feel her tears in my neck.

“Koen, I have to tell you something.”

11

Meg

Koen watches me in stony silence while I quickly get dressed, my heart pumping twice as fast as usual. This is the moment. I must confess my ulterior motive for appearing in his life so suddenly. I've never felt closer or more connected to anyone on this earth and the omission is eating me alive from the inside.

Am I a little scared?

Yes. Scared that he'll cut me off. Scared he won't think my love is as pure and real as it is. But I'm not scared he'll hurt me. Not physically, anyway.

"What is it, Meg?" He finishes zipping up his pants, straightening his shirt. "What do you need to tell me? If it's important enough to make you cry, I need to know now."

My skin is sensitive with pinpricks, my chest developing a wheezy sensation. "Um." I squeeze my fingers together. "I'll start from the beginning. A few days ago, a woman arrived at the door of my house while I was trying to get my brothers and sisters ready for school. I didn't know this woman. Never seen her before. But, um..." I take a bracing breath. "She told me my father owed her a debt. A very significant one. And she was there to collect it."

Koen turns eerily still.

He watches me without blinking. Without breathing.

“My father has a lot of problems, you see. With drinking and gambling. It’s why my mother left. It’s why I have to work so much to support everyone.” He still hasn’t moved, but the quality of his gaze has turned lethal and I start to shake. “This woman—”

“What did she say to you?” he asks, silkily.

“I’m getting to that.” I press a hand to my hollow stomach. “I’m scared.”

“Why?”

Some of the moisture in my eyes spills over and tracks down my cheeks, but I don’t have the arm strength to wipe it away. “She told me I had one week to convince you to come back to work for her or—”

“She did what?” He stares off into the distance now, as if piecing together the last few days, recalling every second. “You weren’t on my beach by coincidence.”

“No,” I whisper, adding, “Well, the drowning was real.”

But he doesn’t laugh.

No, nothing about this is the least bit amusing to him and I can only tremble harder when all ten of his fingers stretch at his sides, as if they want to wrap around someone’s throat. Mine? He’s looking right at me and there’s a deranged facet of his expression I haven’t seen before. Somehow, I know this is how he appeared when he killed the man for looking at me in the office building. This is Koen, the killer.

“I love you,” I breathe, winded. “I fell in love with you.”

“Earlier, when you said you would stay with me even if I went back to work as a hit

man..." He walks toward me slowly, those long fingers flexing at his sides. "You were still trying to play your angle?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry . My brothers and sisters are at stake, Koen." I realize I'm backing away from him, my knees wobbling more and more with every second that passes. So badly that I fall into a kneel in front of him, my hands automatically lifting in prayer. It's this beggar's position that makes me realize I need to be terrified right now. I've betrayed a very dangerous man and he's angry with me, looming above me with his hands prepared to strangle a throat. This is worst-case scenario. "If you see fit to kill me, I'm begging you to please help them. Please don't let her hurt them."

Koen's steps halt abruptly, a choked sound leaving his mouth. "You think...you think I'm going to kill you?"

"I don't know," I whisper, my tears splattering on the ground.

Five seconds pass in a heavy, charged silence and then I'm being lifted off the ground. Swiftly. I'm tossed up into his arms like a sack of grain, Koen staring straight ahead while he carries me back in the direction from which we came. "Apparently, Meg, I haven't done a good enough job expressing how fucking profound my obsession is with you," he says through his teeth. "You could betray me twice a day for the rest of your life and my sanity would still hinge on there being breath in your lungs. If you die, I die. No matter what you did to me, I could never harm you. I'd turn a gun on myself first."

Relief assails me, carried on a wave of love so heavy and consuming, I can't stop myself from turning in his arms and rubbing my face in his neck, wanting to climb inside of him and live there. "But you're so angry," I whimper, tasting the salt on his skin.

"Of course I'm angry. At her." We're in the parking lot now, not far from his SUV,

his legs eating up the distance with purposeful strides. “I’m not going to lie, though, Meg. I’m...feeling a little fucked up. Knowing you were on my beach with a motive, I’m not as convinced that your feelings for me are genuine now. Not as positive as before. I’ll need to take certain precautions to make sure you don’t try and run.”

My throat constricts to the point of pain. “My feelings are real, Koen. They are.”

“Say what you want, I won’t risk you leaving.” We’ve reached the SUV and he stands me up, using his body to pin me hard to the side of the vehicle, his eyes scanning our surroundings, a new, heightened awareness in his gaze. Does he think we’re being watched? By her? “I’m bringing you back to our home while I handle this.”

“No.” I reach up and stroke his face. “Let me help.”

“Meg...” He laughs without humor, the sound so dark it rivals the night. “If your precious skin got so much as nicked, I would go on a fucking rampage. No.” He opens the passenger side door, picks me up by the waist and installs me in the seat, his forehead pressed to mine while he engages the seatbelt in its slot. “No, you’re going to remain safe and sound at our house.” He kisses my mouth. “I’ll make sure the cuffs aren’t too tight.”

Koen

I’m on the edge of violent oblivion, trying to prevent myself from being caught up in that addictive whirlwind. I want to let the beast inside me out of its cage, but my ire involves a threat to my Meg, making me worry that if I set that animal free, I’ll never get him locked back up. And I can’t be a beast when I have a woman to love.

A woman who thinks I could hurt her.

As I carry her into my study and sit her down on the edge of my desk, I want to howl with pain at the memory of how she dropped to her knees in front of me, as if to beg for her life to be spared. How could she love me and fear me at the same time? Is that even possible? No. Yes? I'm unsure.

That's why she'll be chained until I have a clearer understanding of her feelings for me. The fact that she can experience fear in my presence only proves I need to retain my manhood. My humanity.

But my God, it's hard.

I'll slaughter Etta for what she's done. I'll slit her throat with my sharpest blade and be a mile away by the time she loses enough blood to expire. Threaten my girl? Threaten my fucking girl? I'm going to make an example out of my former boss. I'm going to inspire even more terror in the underworld than I already have, but the focus of it will be Meg.

Look at Meg and die. Speak to Meg and die.

That's the message I'll send tonight.

I keep one eye trained on Meg while I cross to the hidden door on the other side of the room, punching a code into my phone to make it pop open. Not bothering to keep the contents hidden, including weaponry and disguises, I retrieve restraints from a higher shelf, followed by a knife and I close the door once again.

"Please don't chain me up," she sniffs.

My heart slams itself into my ribcage. "You know I have to, Meg."

"No, you don't." She scoots off the desk and books toward the door, but I anticipate

her move, catching her with an arm around the waist. The metal restraints hit the ground with a clang, because she's struggling so much and it takes both hands to wrestle her down to the floor, using my body to flatten her petite one on the rug. Looking at me with a fighting spirit in her eyes, she tries with all her might to free herself, but every movement she makes causes the nightshirt she wears to twist around her body, eventually uncovering her pussy and tits, so blessedly bare and young. Chafed from my whiskers and love bites.

Ignoring the eager swelling of my cock, I lean down to bring us nose to nose. "It's only until I get back."

"Get back from where?" she cries.

"Dealing with Etta."

Meg is already shaking her head, the fight mostly gone from her frame. "I don't want you to kill anyone else on my behalf. I want you to live a life without violence. That's why I had such a hard time doing what I came here to do in the first place." Tears pool in her eyes. "I want you to be free."

A voice in my head whispers listen to that...she really loves you . But I can't believe it now. Not yet. I need one hundred percent assurance I won't lose her.

"I don't want to kill anymore, either, Meg. But I will consider any murder justified if a person has the bad judgment to threaten what's mine. She knew she risked death by sending you here," I say, reaching for the restraints. Flipping up the edge of my carpet, I find the metal loop installed for the purpose of holding criminals for interrogation purposes. The fact that I'm using it on my girlfriend gives me pause, my stomach sinking with dread, but I remind myself it's only for the night. "I'll unchain you as soon as I get back."

Gone are the tears, and now, she's just pissed off.

She glares at me, her rosy little tits puffing up and down...and goddamn, is she something. Her eyelids get noticeably heavy when I draw her wrists up above her head and click the cuffs around her wrists, securing them to the loop in the ground. My hips are between her thighs and I look down her stretched-out body now, feeling like a sicko for wanting to bang her hot, horny body just like this. Chained up on the ground.

I can't. You can't.

Still... "Do you need my cock one more time before I go?"

"No," she pouts, redirecting her glare at the wall.

"I can feel your nipples against my chest, baby," I groan against her cheek. "So stiff. Needing me to suck and play with them."

She shakes her head, but she's breathing hard, her face flushing pink.

"Meg..." I trail my open mouth down her chin, over her throat and down between her tits, inhaling the soft, feminine musk of her body. "You weren't destined for a nice man. You would walk all over one of those, wouldn't you?" I curl my tongue around her left nipple and listen to her stifle a moan over the slow, wet friction, her tight body already trembling beneath mine. "You won't walk all over Daddy, though. Oh, no. And you damn well know it. And it gets your pussy wet. Doesn't it. Knowing I can handle you. Knowing I'll still fuck your little girl brains out on the floor of my office while we're in the middle of an argument. You love that. Don't you?"

Her lips press together hard, but she can't keep them that way, because she needs to breathe. Needs to pant. Which she does within seconds, her ribcage expanding and

retracting beneath me, her body beginning to squirm. “Y-yes.”

“Yes, what?”

She closes her eyes. “I love that.”

“I know, baby,” I rasp, triumph grinding like gears in my throat, pushing two fingers inside her tight pussy and jiggling them a little roughly while she gasps, yanking hard on the chains. “I know it’s confusing to be mad and scared but want my dick so bad anyway.” Quickly, I unzip my pants, position my tip so it rests right on top of her sweet, wet hole. “But you’ll never be confused once I’m inside you. That’s when everything makes sense. You’re on your back to fuck your Daddy, Meg. There’s nothing confusing about that.”

“Please,” she says, her teeth chattering now. “Please, please, please.”

I drive into her with a roar, surrounding myself in perfect, too-snug heat that immediately transports me to heaven. “I’m the man you need in your life, even if I’m not as good as you deserve,” I growl into a kiss, looking into her dazed eyes while I buck, buck, buck my hips. “I’m your world now. I’m your family. My cock is the only father figure you need. Open those gorgeous legs for it.”

It’s borderline nasty the way I fuck her, humping and grunting on top of her, my jaw totally slack, but son of a bitch, her enjoyment of being restrained increases with every pump of my length into her mouthwatering body. I tear the shirt off, so I can see her tits bounce like a lecher, flattening her on the ground when my balls begin to pulse wildly at the sight, hammering deep, rocking and moaning without giving a shit how I sound or look. I’m in an unbreakable headlock of lust and love for this creature and she’s at my mercy.

Better yet, she wants and needs to be there.

Her eyes say it all, bright with her approaching orgasm, her teeth drawing blood on her full lower lip. “I’m going to...I’m...” She twists in her bonds, screaming as I take tight hold of her butt, tilt her hips and press deep, groaning at the hot squeeze of her cunt, my sperm spurting into her rhythmically, the pleasure so complete, I feel it in the quieting of my brain and the sudden weight of my heart. Perfect, perfect, perfect.

“I’ll never leave you,” she sobs. “How could I ever leave you? I love you.” She leans up to plant kisses on my shoulders, my face. “Don’t lock me up. Believe me.”

“Meg,” I say, shaken. Conflicted. “I’m new at love. Just...just bear with me.”

She studies my face and whatever she sees causes her to nod, resigned. “Fine. Maybe I don’t deserve to be trusted again yet.”

“You deserve everything, Meg.” I reach up and shake the chains in my hand. “This is caused by my own madness.”

“I love your madness,” she murmurs, projecting adoration up at me, which only strangles me with guilt. “I love all of you.”

“I love you. I love you. I love you,” I say hoarsely, kissing every inch of her face. “I’ll be back as soon as I take care of this situation. No one is going to hurt you or your family.”

“I trust you,” she says, without hesitation.

Do I deserve the honor of that responsibility?

I’ll soon find out.

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12

Meg

A pproximately twenty minutes after Koen leaves me chained on the floor of his office...I start to feel anxious. Very anxious. He's covered me with a blanket, but I kick it off with a restless movement, trying to put my finger on why I'm growing more and more unnerved. Of course, I have the right to be nervous. I'm chained up on the floor! There's a corrupt woman planning to kill my family if I don't deliver on my mission...and that ship has sailed. There's no more mission.

I fell wildly in love, instead.

Four more days remain before Etta actually acts on her threats, though. That's plenty of time for Koen to handle the problem, however he decides to do that. Why am I so jumpy, then?

I go very still when a recent memory drifts to the fore.

At the train station.

There was a woman in the parking lot when we arrived. She stood facing the vending machine, hands on her hips as if it had ripped her off. She was dressed in jeans and a sunhat...but her posture gave her away. Etta. She was at the train station.

I'm suddenly positive of it.

Which means, she would have been watching me with Koen.

Would have witnessed the unmistakable bond between us.

A woman that smart would recognize two people in love...and like she said on the phone, feelings get in the way of doing a job. What if she decides to deliver on her threat to my family sooner than later, because she knows I'm not going to complete the task she gave me?

Suddenly, I'm positive she will. She's going to burn my house down, just as she promised. It's the middle of the night right now. What better time?

I have to move. I have to get home and prevent this from happening.

I have to save them.

It's my fault if they die.

"Oh God," I cry out, yanking futilely on the chains. "Koen!" I scream, on the off chance he hasn't left the house yet. "Koen!"

No answer.

I twist around onto my stomach and examine the cuffs. He didn't secure them on the tightest setting—and he could have. Easily. My wrists are small. Maybe he didn't want to bind me tight enough to make me sore? Could I slide my hands out with enough effort?

Determined to succeed, I start to twist my wrists in the metal bonds, wincing at the painful chafing and the marks I'm definitely creating with every twist and turn of my hands. But my hope builds when I start to make progress, painful as it is. One second,

there is no chance of escape and the next, I'm halfway free of the bonds.

"Come on," I whisper, twisting, crying out. "A little more."

One of my wrists comes out, followed by the next. Filled with an overwhelming sense of urgency and responsibility, I stand and fling myself out of the office, taking the stairs to Koen's bedroom two at a time, finding a pair of boxers and a T-shirt, throwing them on as fast as possible before hurling myself back downstairs and out of the house.

Intuition tells me it will be a miracle if I arrive in time to save my siblings...

But I have to try.

Koen

I'm standing in the shadows of Etta's living room when she waltzes inside, taking off a strange sunhat that I've never seen her wear before. She's humming to herself, no idea she's about to die a miserable death for threatening Meg.

Bad call.

Although now that I'm seeing Etta again in the flesh, it occurs to me that I might never have crossed paths with Meg if Etta hadn't sent her to deceive me.

And that gives me pause.

Perhaps I'll kill her fast, as a thank you.

Yes. Fast. That way, I can get back to my girl. Release her from the restraints.

Should I have chained her like that? My body has been in a state of shock since leaving her, as if my conscience is coming back to life more and more because of Meg. And now it's the very thing making me feel like a fucking monster.

Do the job. Go home. Tend to her.

I'm going to give her a bath, feed her and finally figure out some clothes.

Maybe...maybe I'll bring her to visit her family. I don't know. I'm not sure yet. If she wants to return to them, I'm not sure I'd react well.

Stop thinking. Act.

Blade in hand, I step out of the shadows.

Etta catches the movement in her periphery and spins around with a gasp, backing into the kitchen and immediately reaching for a drawer.

"The gun isn't there, Etta. You taught me better than that."

She scoffs. "I have more than one weapon."

"They aren't there," I enunciate slowly. "Anyway, we both know I could throw this knife end over end and bury it in your jugular before you manage to open that drawer."

The jugular in question shifts with a heavy swallow. "Why are you here?"

"You know why I'm here. Her." My stomach sinks with indescribable love. "Meg."

Silence stretches. "Who?"

“I’ve decided to kill you quickly for sending her to me. Play dumb with me again and I won’t be so kind.”

Her face is white as a ghost. “You would kill the closest thing you have to a mother?”

“You’re not the closest thing I have to a mother. A mother doesn’t turn her son into a killing machine.” I flip the blade over in my hand. “I had someone closer to a mother. You had me kill her grandson while she slept upstairs. You’re the real monster.”

Understanding dawns in her eyes. “That’s why you left.” She pauses, looking me over thoughtfully. “And now you’re going to kill me over some overzealous child who is too mouthy for her own good?”

Her words only inspire a searing affection inside of me. “Yup.”

Etta tilts her head and glee flits across her face, making my blood turn to ice. I know that look. She knows something I don’t know. “Do you truly love Meg, then?”

“Yes,” I respond, raggedly. She’s chained on my floor—

“Then you better hurry.”

It doesn’t occur to me until that moment that I never asked Meg why.

Why she deceived me.

What was the threat that caused her to do it?

She tried to tell me at the train station, but...I cut her off, didn’t I? Drowned her out with my fear of her leaving me? Not loving me as she claimed?

Oh my God.

Acid shoots from my belly to my throat, choking me.

She's chained on my floor.

She's...

I let her down. I've failed her.

She told me everything and I didn't fix anything.

"I gave her a week to convince you to return to work, but once I saw the way she looked at you tonight, I knew she'd never send you back to this dangerous world. Women who look at men like that only want to keep them close. Keep them safe. She is no use to me. And you know how I do things, Koen. I don't waste time once I make a decision." She taps her chin with her index finger. "I wonder if she'll love you back when all of her siblings and father die in a house fire while you were standing here chitchatting with me."

The knife slicing through the air can't be heard over my bellow of denial.

Meg

The house is already on fire by the time I arrive.

It's not fully engulfed yet, but fire is flickering quickly up one side, as if following a trail of fuel, like kerosene. I'm out of breath after hitchhiking to town, which was dangerous in itself, then sprinting the remaining mile. But I'm not too late. I'm refuse to be too late.

I run for the front door, my knees nearly buckling with relief when I find it open and I run inside, already formulating a game plan. Upstairs first—

Footsteps coming up the porch turn me around and I catch the barest glimpse of a man's nondescript face...right before he slams the house door shut, closing me inside. Panic clogs my throat and I lunge, trying the handle, but...it doesn't turn. It won't turn! He's put something beneath it to prevent anyone from exiting the house. In my haste to find a different means of egress, I look around and realize...

Boards have been hammered over all the windows.

Dizziness hits me hard, and I stagger back, but I don't lose hope completely. No. There has to be a way out. But first, I must alert everyone to the fire. They'll help me execute my plan, whenever one occurs to me. Better think fast.

As quickly as my legs will carry me, I run up the stairs, "Fire! Fire! Wake up!"

The sleepy faces of my sister and one of my brothers appears in the doorway of one room. "Meg?"

"Yes. Wake up Dad. Tell him there's a fire and then get downstairs. Move. Now!"

Their eyes widen with fright, but they do as they're told and I clamber back downstairs, beginning to hear a crackling noise. Fire. The fire is inside the kitchen now. How can it move so quickly? How? I don't have that much time. I have no idea how much kerosene has been used to accelerate the fire. And we're locked inside.

No help for it now, I'm so scared, I can hear my heartbeat rattling in my ears.

Koen's face materializes in my mind and I cry out for him, uselessly, knowing he won't survive my death. My soul mate. My twin flame. How unfair would it be to

find him only to have everything ripped away from us?

“Fire!” I screech, my voice starting to sound sooty. It’s the smoke.

It’s rising around me, my siblings and my father, who stumbles into the entryway, clearly drunk, but beginning to comprehend the danger we’re in. “The windows are boarded,” he slurs, blinking in confusion.

“Why are we locked in?” shouts my sister over the sound of the flames eating through wood, her hand furiously trying to turn the door handle.

Full of fear, I look around and deduce the flames are farthest from the back of the house, so I hustle everyone in that direction, picking up a chair on my way and wailing on one of the rear windows as soon as we hit that section of the house, hoping to weaken the board. When that doesn’t work, I stand up on the chair and attempt to kick the board free. Once, twice. It’s loosening a little, but oh Jesus, the flames are in the room with us now—

Koen enters the room, a dark figure appearing like a phantom.

He walks straight through the center of the fire. “Meg!” he roars, his distress palpable. Bigger than the fire. “Meg. Meg.”

“Help us,” I sob. “I can’t get—”

His fist goes through the board, tearing it from the window, so it’s no longer blocking our exit. “Wait,” he barks, taking a gun from inside his jacket and looking out the window, his expression deadly. “They won’t leave your deaths to chance. Someone is out there, waiting to pick you off.”

“ What? ”

“Protocol. But you know I won’t let that happen, don’t you?”

I’m already nodding. He came. He’s here. He walked through fire for us.

“Who is this, Meg?” inquires my father, as if we’re having a tea party.

“I’ll explain later.”

“You.” Koen turns his cold stare on my father. “This is your doing. You climb out the window. When I see where the gunfire is coming from, I’ll eliminate it.”

“What if the gunfire hits me?” my father sputters.

“I’m willing to take that chance on you,” drawls my hitman boyfriend. “But not with your daughter. Get out or I’ll throw you out. Everybody else get down.”

Apparently, my father still has a few working braincells because he doesn’t argue with Koen, deducing based on the way he handles his gun like its second nature that he is the more immediate threat. No, Dad might look nervous, but he swings his leg over the window frame, we all duck, and as promised, a bullet comes winging into the bedroom, lodging in the far wall.

Everyone, including me, screams.

Koen doesn’t even blink.

He calmly aims and pulls the trigger. “Target eliminated.”

I reach for my closest sibling, boosting them out the window and into the arms of my father, quickly doing the same three more times, assisted by Koen and then it’s my turn. “You’ll be right behind me, right?” I scream over the roaring fire.

“Always,” he says, planting a fervent kiss to my mouth. “ Always. I’m so sorry I let this happen, baby. Never again. You’ll never be scared again.”

Then he’s picking me up and urging me out into the cool, night air, though I won’t leave the side of the house until he comes out after me, pulling me into his side even as he takes action, searching the night with his gun raised, demanding everyone to get inside his SUV without delay. Within minutes, he’s peeling out of our yard and on the road, his gun disappearing back into his jacket in favor of holding my hand.

“Honey, do you mind telling us who this is now?” This, from my father.

I answer with all the certainty in my heart. “He’s my everything.”

With a hoarse sound, Koen brings our joined hands to his mouth, kissing my knuckles hard, a suspicious dampness in his eyes reflecting the dashboard light. “And she is mine.”

“Where are we going?” asks my sister from the backseat.

“We can’t go back. We can only go forward,” Koen says, looking at me with such an abundance of affection, I must hug myself tight or fly apart. “Together.”

EPILOGUE

Koen

Five Years and One Day Later

I 'm a family man now.

With my evening cigar in hand, I walk the back of the property, my gaze traveling over the swimming pool, the orchard to the north. Old habits die hard, so I check the eight-foot-high barrier that surrounds our home for signs of breached entry, taking a puff and blowing out a steady stream of smoke as I go. Sounds of music and laughter come from the house behind me, and I smile, if briefly, knowing the time my wife spends with her siblings and father make her happy. And Meg's happiness is my number one priority.

We never went back to the house on the cliff. Or the Bat Cave, rather. After eliminating Etta—and Meg's father's debt in the process—the danger was not worth the risk. I drove with Meg and her family for a full day before stopping, putting them safely in a hotel while I found us a new home. A place where we wouldn't be touched by my past, complete with new identities.

A place worthy of my wife.

And most importantly, a place with a separate, detached guest house.

Because while I might be a family man, time alone with Meg remains paramount to

my existence. They come over for dinner three times a week. Meg goes to their place to meal prep and help with homework. At first, that seemed exclusively like her gig, not mine, but over the years, I started self-defense training with the young ones. Swimming lessons so they wouldn't drown in my pool. They appear to like me. Quite a bit, actually. I don't know why. I've done nothing to earn their affection.

Meg tells me I couldn't possibly do more.

Thinking of my wife is making me anxious to see her. Hold her. Kiss her. Hear her voice go weak with pleasure. God, she looked so beautiful tonight in her red sundress. I actually had no choice but to leave dinner early or carry her upstairs to rip the goddamn thing off with my bare hands.

Doesn't she know what her suntanned shoulders and tits do to me? Her hair twisted up in a messy bun, eyes sparkling with mirth. I nearly snapped off the edge of the table out of pure yearning. Pure hunger. Obsession that only multiplies by the second.

I draw the cigar from my mouth hastily to check my watch. They've stayed a little longer than usual tonight to celebrate Meg's father reaching five years of sobriety. Some say the fire was the turning point, but Meg and I credit the six-month treatment program we put him in—and his own perseverance, of course. He's even started working for me at the successful private security company I've built over the years.

Meg doesn't need to work for the rest of her life, but she still makes paper airplanes for the kids in town and charges five dollars apiece. Once a hustler, always a hustler. We've attempted to give her a position at the security company on multiple occasions, but she never fails to end up bent over my desk before the morning coffee has finished brewing.

She does our accounting from home now.

The voices behind me grow louder and I mouth the word "hallelujah" at the purple

sunset-streaked sky. The family has grown on me, but I like my space. With my wife, who I married the day after the fire, inside a quiet, sunlit courthouse. Who I grow more infatuated with every time I'm in her presence. Who has freed me from my guilt-ridden, blood-stained life. Would I kill for her, again and again, if a single hair on her head was in jeopardy, however? Yes. Meg is my reason for existing and on nights like this, I look around at what I've given her and attempt to reassure myself it's good enough.

"Bye, Koen," calls Meg's father, followed by a chorus of goodbyes from the kids, who are becoming teenagers, one by one, God help us all. The girl brought home a boyfriend last week to watch a movie, and I found that oddly unsettling, until I remembered I taught her how to bust someone's nose with the heel of her hand and drop a man with a single, well-placed chop to the neck.

"Night," I call back, putting out my cigar when Meg waves goodbye to her family at the gate, then changes course to join me where I now sit in a deck chair by the pool.

Good God.

I can't even watch her approach, because the combination of hunger and happiness is too much. Seeing her outlined in the sunset like that, skin glowing, her face jubilant from a nice night with her family. Someone might as well drag a rake through my chest. My breathing is compromised, pulse going crazy in my neck, wrists, everywhere. What my wife does to me isn't normal. It's outrageous. I live for this burn. I live for her.

"Hi there," she purrs, letting her hair down when she reaches me, shaking out the dark locks that reach all the way to her ass now. "Doing your nightly security check?"

I respond in a voice already thick with need. "Keep you safe," I manage, her scent rearranging my senses. "I'm always going to keep you safe."

“I know,” she murmurs, stepping in front of me and sliding all ten of her fingers into my hair, drawing tiny circles with her fingernails on my scalp.

I drop the cigar, wrapping both hands around the backs of her knees and dragging her as close as possible, my groan loud in the backyard when my face finds the small valley between her plump, little tits and I confirm with two swipes of my tongue that she’s not wearing a bra. “Sit on my lap, baby,” I rasp, trailing my tongue up to her ear and kissing the skin there, razing my teeth against it and feeling her shiver. “Sit on the cock you make hard just by breathing. Play on it until I’m done playing.”

“You’re always done playing,” she says, settling into a straddle, lowering herself slowly, biting her lip when my erection meets the wet, swollen crotch of her panties.

“Are you saying I don’t give you enough foreplay?” I ask.

“I’m definitely not saying that.”

“If you want me to eat some pussy, just ask.” I drag my tongue along my bottom lip. “I always leave room for dessert.”

“No...” She bites her own lip teasingly, her hips pressing down, applying light pressure to my dick, flicking up and back gently. Too gently. Fuck . “You always leave the room for dessert. You’re never there when the meal ends. Why?”

“I can only be in the same room with you for so long before the ache is out of control, Meg. You know that. I smell you, I see you, I need to be buried in you.” With a growl, I reach beneath her dress and take tight hold of her butt cheeks, giving one a hard smack. “Hump my fucking cock. Hump it .”

This angel grips my shoulders, looks me in the eye and starts to work her hips.

My head immediately drops back on a moan.

As incredibly as she moved as an inexperienced eighteen-year-old, at twenty-three, she has talent beyond my wildest dreams. She can make me come in my pants with the right pattern—and she has, many, many times. As recently as yesterday, right there in my office chair. She brought me an afternoon coffee in a mini skirt and heels and...

If I keep thinking about it, there's going to be a replay.

My breathing is erratic now and I want nothing more than to let her work, work, work my dick until I blow, but I've been fantasizing all night about licking her clit, too, and I need the taste of her now. With a groan of pure, male pain, I flip our positions, putting Meg on her back and I don't waste a second shoving up the hem of her sundress, cursing raggedly over the sodden state of her panties.

"Message received," I say, snatching off her underwear, pressing her knees open and perusing what's mine, giving every inch of her naked sex my attention before lowering my mouth and kissing it reverently. "You ached during dinner, too."

"I ache for you constantly," she whispers, another round of moisture coating her flesh right before my eyes. "Maybe I'm just better at hiding it."

"Only until I lift up your dress, little girl." I undulate my tongue on top of her clit and her hands fly out, gripping my hair and the edge of the cushioned chair. I stay in that spot for a full two minutes, watching the arousal transform her body, making it rosy, puckering her nipples, glazing her hazel eyes. She loves having her clit seen to, but she won't come until I put at least two fingers in her cunt. Something tells me she wants my cock right away, tonight, though. Something about the way she's looking at me. "What is it, Meg?"

When she doesn't answer right away, I grow alarmed, rising up over her, pinning her down and pressing our foreheads together.

“Am I not making you happy?”

“W- what? ” It calms me slightly when she looks supremely baffled by the question. “You make me happier than I ever knew was possible. Not only that...you’ve...you’ve...” A little sob escapes her lips. “You’ve changed everything for the better. You’ve spoiled me, made me the most loved and cherished girl on this earth. And what you’ve done for my family...” I can barely withstand the pressure in my chest when she looks at me like this, like she loves me beyond human comprehension, the way I love her, but I sense she is in the middle of something important, so I focus on her beautiful eyes. “When I saw you standing here tonight, smoking your cigar and looking at the sunset, I thought...I thought...”

“You thought what, Meg?”

“I want to give you sons,” she finishes in a hurry. “You have so much good to teach a son. Or a daughter. I don’t want to deprive the world of that.”

I stare at her for a long moment, reeling. We’ve never spoken of having children.

We’ve had a business to establish and her siblings to raise, although they are getting older. More self-sufficient.

When I think of my wife with my child in her stomach, I have to reach down and unzip my pants, because the sudden pressure in my cock is overwhelming. “Oh God. Oh fuck.” I grit my teeth, the imminent eruption making me shudder. “Get you... pregnant? ”

She nods shyly and drops her thighs open wider.

My mind is wiped clean. There’s only mating.

Mate her. Mate her. Mate my wife.

I barely get my cock in all the way before I'm exploding, shouting hoarsely into the curve of my wife's smooth neck, her sweet pussy pulsing around me. Taking so gratefully.

So greedily.

Lord oh lord oh lord.

"That's it," she whispers in my ear, moving her magical hips in time with my frantic pumps, making me come harder than I ever have in my life, sights and sounds growing distorted around me, my focus narrowed down to only her. Meg. My universe. "You've given me everything. Now let me give you a child." She grips my ass and yanks me deep into her flexing pussy, eliciting a shout from the depths of my soul. "I'll still take care of all your aches, Daddy," she says against my cheek, licking it. "I promise."

My obsession with my wife becomes fucking unhinged that night.

In the proceeding years, I hide it as best I can, behind my family man facade.

We welcome a son. A daughter. Meg even convinces me to get a yellow lab.

But Meg remains the pinnacle of my existence. The reason my blood continues to flow in the right direction. Forever. Always. My wife, my best friend, my heart.

Meg and Koen against the world.

THE END