



# Brutal Savior (Captives of the Onyx Brotherhood #2)

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** Tame her. Don't break her.

Joining the Brotherhood was supposed to lock my violent past away for good. I was in too deep when I learned their dark secret.

All Brothers must choose a Ward.

A captive woman to own, train and punish. It reignites the sadistic desires I've smothered. I try to do the right thing and choose a sweet, submissive woman who wants this life. But fate has other plans, and throws Quinn at my feet instead.

She's lightning in a bottle, a tiny brat just begging for a firm hand. I should let Kendrick give her away, but one look at her furious eyes and I'm hooked. She won't kneel for me unless I force her, and the beast inside me roars at the challenge.

As I work on taming my hellcat, a faceless ghost threatens my family. I'm glad Quinn woke the monster, because I'm going to need it.

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

## Prologue

Jacob

“Is everything in place for your Ward? Sebastian tells me you’ve been making diligent preparations. Excessive, some might say.”

I suppress a snort as I take a sip of Kendrick’s posh brandy. Bloody Seb. Can’t keep his opinions to himself about anything. I carefully set the glass down on Kendrick’s enormous oak desk. “Just ensuring everything goes to plan. Old habits.”

Kendrick nods as if he understands. I don’t know if he was ever military, but he has that feel about him. He runs this place like a general.

Seb and Gabriel both tease me about my obsessive tendencies, but it doesn’t bother me one fucking bit. Once Suzy is in my care, all my months of planning will be worth it. Out of the hundreds of potential Wards I considered, she stood out as perfect, ticking all my boxes and then some.

Miserable home life? Tick.

Intelligent and educated? Tick.

Polite and well-mannered? Tick.

And most importantly, she’s a submissive who never dared to take the leap into that lifestyle. Our wants align, two puzzle pieces fitting together. She’s desperate for

someone to take control of her life.

Practically begging to be kidnapped.

The images conjured by that thought have no place in Kendrick's bloody office, so I squash them and focus on Mister Cheerful. If he ever cracks a smile, his face might break. From the expectant way he's looking at me, I can tell we're past the small talk. Time to get down to business.

"Sir, I'm asking again to be part of the strike team collecting my Ward. I understand it's not protocol, but I'm not an average Brother. I've far more experience than most of the Gilda."

Kendrick sets his glass down with a sigh. "I'm afraid that's just not possible."

I open my mouth to argue, but he holds up a hand. "I understand your position, but I can't make an exception because of your background. The rules must apply equally to all for the Brotherhood to function. You, of all people, must understand that."

He's right, but it doesn't stop the flare in my gut. Years ago, I'd have reacted very differently. I can picture it. My fist crashing down on the table. The glass flying across the room, shattering into a mess of shards. Now, I breathe deep, just as Grandad taught me.

Keep control.

Always keep control.

Kendrick seems to sense my mood and stiffens, gaze sharp. My past made me an unlikely candidate for the Brotherhood, and I wonder if part of him is scared of me. Scared of the things he knows I'm capable of doing. But, credit to him, he doesn't

back down.

I keep my voice level. “The others don’t need to know, sir.”

“My answer is no. The Gilda have done this hundreds of times, Jacob, and your girl isn’t a challenging target. She’ll be safe in your possession tomorrow.”

My possession. Those words shoot straight to the part of me I’ve tried to ignore through these long months of celibacy. Suzy will make the perfect slave. It’s all she’s ever wanted, and I’ll be the Master who gives her everything she desires.

Tomorrow can’t come fast enough.

I know when I’m beaten, and there’s no way Kendrick is going to budge. I don’t like it, but I’ve long since learned not to fight hopeless battles. Instead, I turn to damage limitation.

“Are the Gilda clear on my requirements? No drugs. With her history, I’m not starting our life together by sticking her with a needle.”

Suzy’s history is similar to mine. Useless druggie parents. She hates narcotics as much as I do.

Kendrick nods. “Of course, Jacob. Everything will go to plan.”

I force down my worries and return the nod. Perhaps Gabriel and Seb have a point. The Gilda know their stuff, and I need to trust them. Nothing will go wrong.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter One

#### Quinn

The rush hits me hard as the beat drops, as if the DJ planned it. I stretch my hands in the air and close my eyes, lost in the way my body comes to life with every breath. The beats shift, turning from music to something magical. A command to move.

I obey, opening my eyes to watch my hands in the strobes. I catch the eye of a girl dancing next to me, and she grins, shaking her lanky frame with the same abandon that I am. In this sweaty little underground club, no one is posing for Instagram selfies or prancing about in high heels. We're all here to have a good fucking time.

My sneakers stick to the floor as I dance, and the crowd presses tighter, the dance floor filling up. The DJ raises the tempo from a trance to harsher hard house beats, and more men join in, some of them shirtless. Time passes as we move in a mass together, all dancing in our own little bubbles.

Too soon—though it could have been hours, who knows—the first telltale signs of the comedown creep in. The music loses its hypnotic power, the lights seem to dim, and all at once, I'm aware of the way my drenched crop top is clinging to my skin. I lost my water bottle ages ago and am thirsty as all hell.

Time for a break. Then I'll drop the second pill I've got tucked in my bra and keep going.

Christ, it's hot in here. The girls' toilets are a hive of activity, women chatting and

ducking into cubicles in pairs. The bouncers here turn a blind eye to pretty much anything, but even they'd react at people racking up lines in the open. I squeeze past the line as a woman shouts, "Hurry up, girls! Some of us actually need to pee."

It's really fucking hot.

I splash cold water on my face, then drink some from my hands. As I lean on the counter and stare at my blown-out pupils in the dirty mirror, a woman taps my shoulder. She's a bit older than most of the others, into her thirties, and looks worried. A clubbing mother hen, looking out for everyone.

"Are you okay? I'll grab you some cold water from the bar, if you like. Where are your friends?"

A damn good question. I arrived with Lisa and her new boyfriend but haven't seen them in...shit. Ages. Lisa lives in the building across from me, and we were supposed to Uber home together. I might not have enough in my bank account to make it on my own.

And just why the hell is it so goddamn hot?

I sway as heat rushes up my neck. Fresh sweat breaks out on my clammy skin. My heart races, and all at once, I realize what is happening.

Oh no. Oh fuck.

I reach for my purse, but it's not there. What? I scan the bathroom through eyes that grow blurrier by the second. Where did I put it? My medication. I need...

"Hey." The mother hen peers into my face. "Hey! What's wrong?"

“My pills.” I stare around as though the purse will magically appear, but it must be somewhere on the dancefloor. Did I set it down to dance?

“You don’t need any more just now, darling. Come out into the smoking area. I’ll get you some water.”

I want to scream at her well-meaning but totally wrong attempt to help. “No. It’s medicine for my heart. In my purse. I don’t know—”

The room spins, and I can’t finish the sentence because all I can think about is staying on my feet. I lean over the sink as blood pounds in my brain. People are talking, but it’s distant. I can only pick out a few words.

“...what...”

“...hospital...”

“...911...”

Arms wrap around me, helping me to the floor as blackness covers everything.

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Beep. Beep. Beep.

It's a horribly familiar sound, echoing around my brain as I come back into my body. I know where I am.

Hospital. Again.

I'm a fucking idiot. I open my eyes a crack, then shut them in a hurry when the light

hits me. A quick shift of my limbs reveals a drip in my arm. A cart rattles as someone pushes it past my bed. Two women walk by, chatting quietly.

Christ, my head is pounding. I shift on the bed, trying to find a more comfortable position. At least I'm not dead.

Not this time.

Not yet.

Fuck, though. How much is this going to cost? I'm still paying off the last two hospital trips.

The swoosh of the curtain announces a visitor. I force my eyes open, braving the glare, as a stern woman in a white coat enters. She checks a tablet and clucks her tongue. "You're up."

"Looks like it."

It comes out rude and clipped. She frowns before tapping a short nail on the tablet. Then she sighs, sets it down, and her face softens. My stomach clenches at the expression.

Just give me a lecture and send me home. Don't look at me like that.

"I'm guessing you know what I'm about to say. Stimulant drugs are the worst possible combination with your condition. It's not a joke, Quinn. What were you thinking?"

"I know it's not a joke," I mutter. Nothing funny about getting a middle-aged disease at twenty-one. At first, I was so careful, following all the recommendations. But then the accident happened, and everything went to shit.



The doctor continues. “You're only twenty-four. Many Brugada patients live full lives. Why risk it for the sake of a night out?”

I can't frame an answer, and I don't owe her one anyway. I meet her gaze. “Can I go home now?”

She looks poised to say more, but a frantic beeping across the room catches her attention. She looks at me with a sigh. “We'll keep you under observation for a couple of hours longer. Try to be sensible, or you'll be back here soon. If you don't end up in the morgue.”

She walks off, leaving me open-mouthed. Blunt, for a doctor. I almost like her for it.

The next two hours crawl by without a phone to distract me. I try to tally how in the unholy fuck I'm going to pay for another one and come up short. I need to sleep, but the blanket is thin, and the AC is set to Arctic levels. I'm wearing a miniskirt and a crop top. The bus ride home is really going to suck.

“Quinn?” A quiet voice pulls me out of my mopey thoughts. A nurse is smiling at me, and it takes me a second to place her. Suzy, from my building. We're not exactly friends, but we chat sometimes, and I fed her cat once when she had to rush off for an emergency. I almost smile when I notice her hair. Bright pink, just like mine.

“Hey.” I tap my head. “We're twinsies.” It's all the small talk I can manage. She seems to understand. Benefits of talking to a nurse, I guess.

She smiles and touches her ponytail. “Yes. Just thought it might be fun, you know? Not sure if I'll keep it like this. Anyway, I've got good news. You've been cleared to leave.” She bustles around me, unhooking the monitors and the drip. “Do you have anyone to pick you up?”

“I gave my driver the day off, unfortunately.”

She smiles at the weak joke, then frowns as I stand. “Don't you have a purse?”

“I lost it at the club.”

“Oh. How are you getting home, then?”

A good fucking question. Without my purse, I don't even have money for the bus. Shit. An awkward silence falls as she waits for an answer. “I'll figure something out.”

“Look, give me a few minutes, and I'll call you an Uber.”

“No.” She's just being nice, but the tinge of pity in her wide brown eyes makes my skin crawl. “I'll be fine.”

No chance I'm owing her forty dollars I have no way to pay back.

I expect her to back off, but instead, she holds up a hand. She's probably used to dealing with people as messed up as me. “At least let me give you five bucks for the bus. I owe you for taking care of Max last month.”

I almost say no—it's right there on my tongue—but I'm all out of options and so damn tired I can hardly think. I can't walk home, and knowing my luck, if I hitchhike, I'll get picked up by a serial killer. It burns my throat, but I force out, “Okay. Thanks.”

She grins, and it's a sunny expression. “Great. Give me a sec.”

I pick at my neon-pink nail polish as I wait for her to return. I painted them last night to match my hair. It looked cool, but it's already started to crack.

Suzy returns, passing me a five-dollar note and a bright pink hoodie. It's got a band name on it, and I squint, trying to read the curly script splashed across the logo.

She saves me the trouble. "It's my cousin's band. The Pathfinders. She gave me this as a birthday present."

"Are they any good?"

Suzy pulls a face. "Not my thing, but you never know, you might like them. Anyway, it's cold, and I've got a coat in the locker room. You can give it back later."

Again, I have to fight the urge to refuse her kind offer. Why the hell is she being so nice? We're not even real friends. But I'll be fighting off weirdos on the bus in my club outfit, and the hoodie does look warm.

I accept it with a smile that feels false on my face. "Thanks. Really. I'll drop it back tomorrow. When do you get off?"

"I'm on a twelve shift today, then I'll be sleeping most of tomorrow. Just hang it on my doorknob."

"Will do."

She gives an awkward little wave and hurries off. I pull on the hoodie, feeling like a thief. No perfume clings to it, thank fuck. That would have been weird.

I stand to leave, and my head swims. How long since I ate? I've had nothing since the fries yesterday afternoon. I'll have to wait till I get home, though, and I've got one more stop to make before I catch the bus.

The long-term care unit is as quiet as ever. These patients don't get many visitors. In

most cities, they're shipped out to nursing homes or rehab facilities, but we've got a special section of the hospital dedicated to no-hoppers.

Well, not no hope. That would be too easy. Instead, there's always the tiniest sliver of possibility that this time, things will be different. That Marlowe will open her eyes and demand to know what the fuck is going on.

The nurse on the desk recognizes me from when I used to be a frequent visitor. I can't remember her name. She waves me through, but before I step into the quiet ward, I check, "No one else is with her?"

She shakes her head. "No. Your mom and dad were here yesterday, for a bit."

Marlowe's mom and dad. Not mine. I don't correct her, though, as I head in to visit my foster sister.

Marlowe's eyes are closed, as always, and her chest rises and falls as if she's just asleep. Has she gotten skinnier? Hard to say. Something is different, though. I stare until it clicks. They've cut her hair again. It's sharp to her chin, and the highlights are growing out. She'd hate it.

I hate it, too. It makes it harder to picture her as she was. It's only been six months, but it feels like an eternity.

I sit with her and launch into an account of the night just gone. Maybe she'll come out of her coma just to tell me how goddamn stupid I am. I finish the story and pause, waiting for a response. It doesn't come, of course, and all at once, I can't stand being here a single second longer. I'd rather be anywhere.

My mind strays to the half bottle of vodka in the door of my fridge, next to the expired milk. Maybe, when I get home, I'll drink the rest of it and erase Marlowe's

face from my mind for a few blissful hours.

I give her cold hand a squeeze, mutter a goodbye that comes out garbled through my thick throat, and race out without a word for the nurse.

Screw this fucking place.

I walk to the bus stop. The mid-morning light stabs my eyes and confuses my senses. Even though my brain knows it's almost lunchtime, part of me was still expecting it to be dark.

The street is busy even though it's Sunday, mostly miserable people who stare at their phones or down at the ground with grim expressions. No one comes to the hospital for fun. Two nurses chat together over steaming coffees from a cart at the side of the road. God, I'd kill for a coffee.

I sit as close to the front of the bus as I can, head leaning against the glass. The vibrations soothe me into a peaceful state.

Please, no one sit next to me.

They don't, and I have to fight not to fall asleep as the bus lumbers toward my part of town. I can't stop yawning as it finally pulls in. Almost home.

I shove my hands in the front pocket of the hoodie and walk the short distance to my building. I got lucky with this apartment, even though it's dingy and in a rough area. I have a housemate, but he works away for weeks at a time, only returning for short bursts. The rent is cheap, and it's not too noisy except on the weekend when I'm usually out anyway.

It's also lucky we keep a key in a lockbox at the front door, or I'd have been screwed.

The elevator is out of order—it has been for months—so I head for the stairwell. There's no one around, which isn't unusual for this time on a Sunday. Most people will still be sleeping it off. Something gives me pause, though, and I stop before opening the door. A prickle at the back of my neck.

It's really quiet. Usually, music comes from somewhere. A couple arguing, a kid screaming, a TV on too loud. But the whole place is silent. And Eric, the homeless guy who hangs out at the front, isn't there either. What the hell?

I shake my head. Stupid. I'm just tired, on a comedown, and getting paranoid.

As I push open the door to the stairwell, a thick hand wraps around my mouth.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Two

Jacob

I can't concentrate on anything. The harder I try to sit and work, the less progress I make, so I give up and pace around my flat.

I haven't bothered to decorate it much, partly because I'll be moving out of the initiates' quarters once the Ceremony is over and partly because I don't really give a fuck. I made sure it had a comfy couch and a sensible desk. Good enough for me. Suzy can do what she likes with the place once she's settled in.

I have a couple of framed John Wayne movie posters. Grandad and I used to watch the old Westerns together when I was a kid, and I never stopped liking them. When we moved across the pond, one of the first trips I took Grandad on was to Monument Valley, where they filmed *The Searchers* and a bunch of other John Wayne flicks.

The only other personal touch is a glass cabinet filled with my treasured footie memorabilia. The signed balls and old boots look a bit out of place, but they're one of the few things I actually care about.

Thinking of Grandad has me pulling out my phone. Once Suzy gets here, I'll be distracted. I've told him I'll be working on a big project and won't be able to visit for a couple of weeks, but the urge to check in on him is strong.

Aside from my sister back in London, Grandad's the only family I have. He raised me from four, when social services removed Ruth and me from our mum's care, and he

retired from the oil rigs on the spot to take care of us.

The phone rings for ages, but I don't hang up. I imagine him hunting for his glasses and pottering around his house. When he finally answers, he sounds as pissed off as I was expecting.

“Hello?”

“Hiya.”

“Jacob! I was looking for that stupid bloody cordless phone you got me. Can never find the fucking thing.”

“Sorry. I'll get you one that goes into the wall next time I'm over.”

If they still make them. I might have to get one from an antiques shop. Grandad refuses to get a mobile on the grounds that they cause cancer. Pretty rich from a lifelong smoker. I only managed to get him off the ciggies three years ago.

“I can't talk long. Mrs. Belkins next door wants me to help her in the garden. I could get my leg over yet, my boy. Never too old.”

I burst out laughing. Grandad has to be the only eighty-five-year-old on the planet still chasing skirt.

“You think that's funny? You're a fine one to talk. Might as well be a fucking monk lately, all the time you spend at work.”

An old argument, and one I don't feel like having again right now. “I was just checking in. Don't keep Mrs. Belkins waiting.”



“Too right, my boy. Catch ya soon.”

He hangs up, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I put the kettle on for a cup of tea but flick it off again. I can't handle the silence any longer, and the TV will just piss me off. I need to get out of here for a bit. The worst thing about the Compound is how much of a hassle it is to go anywhere. It's not like I can just nip down to the local for a pint.

Everything is ready.

All the same, I check my preparations again. Suzy is a pure submissive who longs for a Master and enjoys all the rituals of high-protocol service. Rules, rewards, and punishments. Routines will keep her calm, just as they do me.

I read through my training plan for the fifteenth time, then slap it down on my desk and leave my flat. I need a distraction whilst I wait for news.

I head toward Seb's rooms. No use trying Gabriel—weekends belong to Eve. He'll be banging her six ways to bloody Sunday, and nothing short of a terrorist attack will make him answer his door. I'm lucky Seb is still a lonely single bastard like me.

Like me for the next few hours, anyway. As long as the Gilda don't fuck it up.

Seb answers almost as soon as I buzz, a smug look on his face. He gives me a once-over with an eyebrow raised. “Nervous? I never thought I'd see the great Jacob West all jittery at the prospect of a girl.”

“Shut the fuck up and let's have a beer. None of that pissy American crap, either. A proper beer.”

I hold up four bottles of Newcastle Brown. Seb pulls a face but waves me inside anyway. His place is the opposite of mine, decorated in that minimalist but posh-looking way. White seats that aren't even comfy to sit on but probably cost more than a car, arranged around a weirdly shaped glass coffee table.

Seb fits in at the Compound better than I do. After a while of having money, most Brothers develop expensive tastes. I once had to listen to Seb and Kendrick discuss different brands of a thing that keeps wine at the right temperature for almost half an hour at a dinner before I could make my escape.

I crack two beers, hand one to Seb, and park myself in the least offensive chair. “I’m not worried about the girl. I’m pissed off I’m not out there collecting her myself.”

Seb takes a swig of his own beer, grimaces, but manages not to comment, then sets it down on the table. “Will it do any good to remind you the Gilda have done this a few times before? Or do you just want me to listen while you complain?”

“Listen while I complain. It’s bollocks. I’m more experienced than any of that mob, and she’s my girl. I get where Kendrick’s coming from, but I’m not a normal scientist.”

“No, you’re infinitely more of a badass. The Gilda should fear your very name.”

I sigh, torn between amusement and irritation at Seb’s deadpan sarcasm. He doesn’t know the extent of my experience—it’s not the done thing to talk about your time in the SAS—but Gabriel and Seb both know I was special ops in my younger years. Only Kendrick understands my full history, and even that didn’t convince him to let me run one simple mission.

Just as I raise my beer to my lips, my phone buzzes. I snatch it out and read the message. “Collection successful.”

Fuck me. What a relief. I show Seb the message, and he holds out his bottle for me to cheers. The tight knot in my chest loosens. Suzy is safe and on her way. She'll be here in an hour.

When Kendrick first approached me about the Brotherhood, I knew there had to be a catch. All the shadowy talk of initiation had me thinking the worst. Human sacrifice. Chopping your dick off. That kind of bollocks. When he revealed the secret, it was almost a relief.

Difficult to manage but not impossible with careful planning. And I get the sort of relationship I've always craved but never managed to find in the real world.

Lots of women talk about wanting to submit, but they only mean in the bedroom. I'm not interested in playing games for an evening, then living life as a normal couple. I came across a few women who claimed they wanted me to own them, but when it came down to it, they still wanted independence.

I'd given up on finding what I really wanted when Kendrick made his offer.

It's morally wrong, but I've done a lot in my life that falls in the gray area and a few things that stray closer to black. I've chosen a woman who wants the life I'm offering and doesn't have much to leave behind. A perfect candidate, and I know I'll make her happy given time.

I'm so lost in my anticipation of what is to come that I don't realize Seb is talking until he knocks on the table. "Hello? Jacob? You in there?"

"Sorry." I stand and throw my empty bottle into the rubbish. Then, despite Seb's protestation, I take a paper towel and wipe up the ring of condensation.

I'm neat to the point that it pisses people off, but I can't help it. I don't remember

much from when I lived with mum, but the smell and filth stayed with me. It left me unable to bear a dirty plate or a few crumbs from a slice of toast on the kitchen bench.

“She’ll be here in an hour. I need to go. See you in a bit,” I announce, already heading for the door.

Seb’s quip follows me out. “Better go and check everything is ready again. Your apartment might have spontaneously messed itself up in the last fifteen minutes.”

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Exactly one hour later, I’m standing in front of the main administration building, ready to take delivery of my girl. I managed to bend Kendrick’s ear enough to let me do things a bit different to normal. Usually, the girls are drugged, medically checked, and given a tracker, then left to wake up in their Patron’s bedroom.

That’s not what I wanted because of Suzy’s past. She’s a nurse, and I’ve seen her medical records. She doesn’t have anything nasty. And when we place the tracker, I’ll make it into a ritual. Part of her submission.

Given my background, Kendrick trusts me to handle one girl for a few days before we get it placed.

The big man himself has made an appearance, along with Seb and a few other Brothers. You’d think a group of top-level scientists would have better things to do than gossip, but they’re like a bunch of dinner ladies here. Word spreads quicker than fire. Everyone wants to see the spectacle of a new Ward arriving wide awake.

The Gilda car pulls in, and a surge of adrenaline scorches me. “Jittery”, Seb called me. The bastard wasn’t far off, if I’m honest. I’m about to meet the girl I’ll spend the rest of my life with, and the importance of the moment settles over me like a weight. I

wish I'd told all the looky-loos to clear off, but it's too late now.

Kendrick claps me on the shoulder. "Ready?"

I straighten my spine. "Ready."

He nods and steps back as Colonel Brackis, the head of the Gilda, gets out of the passenger side of the car. A younger soldier I don't recognize exits the driver's side. "She's in back, sir. A real firecracker that one. We had to bind her tight. Good job you've got training. You'll need it."

A frown creases my brow. A firecracker? That doesn't sound right. But I shrug off the worry. The Gilda are used to bringing in unconscious women. They must be unused to any sort of struggle.

The back windows of the car are blacked out, and the doors only open from the outside. The back of the car is a tiny, dark prison cell. It would have been an uncomfortable trip.

I crack the door a little, letting in a bit of light to allow her eyes to get used to it. I expect her to shout or bang against the door, but she doesn't. The car is silent. Another prickle of worry scrapes along my nerves. What if she's injured? If the dickheads didn't secure her properly and she's hurt, I'll...

I pull the door open. Before I can make out what I'm seeing, a head flies toward my face. If I didn't have the reactions I do, she'd have smashed my fucking nose. I step out of the way just in time and manage to catch the girl before she face-plants the concrete.

She's tied up tightly, hands bound behind her back and ankles lashed together. A muffled stream of sound comes from her gagged mouth, and she struggles like an

angry cat as I set her down on her knees. Blood pulses so loud in my ears I can't hear anything else, though I'm sure someone is speaking.

I stare at the girl's face screwed up in anger as she yells through the gag. Ghostly pale skin, ice-blue eyes, a sharp face, and bright pink hair. Not Suzy.

The wrong girl.

The wrong fucking girl.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Three

#### Quinn

The door opens. Light burns my eyes after the pitch-dark of the car, but I don't let it stop me from launching out as best I can with my bound feet. It might be the only chance I get to escape before I'm killed, or sold, or whatever the fuck these assholes want with me.

I fling myself forward, hoping to feel the satisfying crunch of someone's face against my head. Instead, there's only free fall. Shit. I brace to hit the ground.

Before I do, arms wrap around me. For a moment, I'm pressed against something that feels like solid rock, and then I'm lowered, carefully, to the concrete. Loose grit digs into my knees, and I try to shout through my gagged mouth as I stare up at my captor.

He's a goddamn giant.

He's dressed in smart blue jeans and a black button-up shirt, the sort of thing a guy might wear out to a nightclub. It's jarring, as if he dressed up for whatever the hell this is. Although the shirt fits him well, it doesn't disguise his size. His muscles strain against it as he runs a hand through his close-cropped dark hair.

His green eyes scan me with enough rage that I fall silent; then he turns to an older guy next to him. "Is this some sort of fucking joke?"

His accent is the harsh British type you hear in modern gangster movies. "Fucking"

comes out as “facking.” Is he a London mobster collecting women? Clearly, I don't fit his requirements. Maybe there's hope.

The old guy frowns. “Sorry, sir?”

“That's not her. Not Suzy. Did you even look at her face? Or just the pink fucking hair?”

Suzy? All at once, the pieces drop into position. I'm wearing her hoodie. We both have pink hair. It makes more sense and less all at once. This wasn't a random abduction, but what would a man like this want with someone sweet like Suzy?

The old guy's face drops, and he stares at me like I'm an unexploded bomb. There's a moment of frozen silence, then shocked gasps and murmurs. It hits me that I'm in the middle of a small crowd.

With a fresh surge of hope, I shout through my gag again. Maybe one of them can help me. I tug against the cuffs on my wrists, but all I achieve is cutting into my skin. The watchers don't move to help me; they just mutter to each other and stare. I'm an interesting zoo exhibit to these assholes.

It's starting to piss me off.

A guy in a business suit steps forward. “If you're just here to gawp, leave. Now.”

His voice rings with command, and the gathered people obey right away, throwing glances over their shoulders. What is this place? A cult? A drug cartel hideout?

Suit guy touches the giant's shoulder. The giant whirls on him. “I knew something like this would happen. I should have led the fucking team!”



“It's a setback, Jacob, but we'll correct the mistake. Trust me.”

Correct the mistake? A cold shiver tracks up my spine. I'm the mistake.

“Trust you? After this bloody cock-up?”

Suit guy goes to talk, but the giant—Jacob—focuses on something over my shoulder. I follow his gaze. There are two men, a gothy guy and a preppy one in a pink polo shirt. But the third person draws all my attention.

It's a woman, and not some rough gang type. She looks like a kindergarten teacher, and she's staring at me wide-eyed, lips parted. She isn't tied up. Surely she'll want to help me?

I stare straight at her and try my very best to yell words.

Help! These fucking bastards kidnapped me!

I yell and struggle, but she just watches. Jacob points at me and snaps, “See this? It's the wrong girl! They fucked it up, Gabriel. Those fucking morons took the wrong girl!”

Goth and Preppy exchange a long glance, then everyone starts talking at once.

“I'm sure they can fix...”

“Kendrick, what's the protocol for...”

“Sir, I can't apologize enough...”

“Jacob, I promise we'll rectify...”

The kindergarten teacher is the only one still looking at me. She frowns and grips the goth guy's arm. "Gabriel, she's terrified. They can't leave her on the ground like that. Do something."

The goth guy—Gabriel, apparently—swallows and nods. He approaches the man in the business suit, who I'm starting to think is the boss, and says something I can't hear. Business suit nods, then raises a hand and speaks over the commotion.

"Colonel Brackis, take this young lady to one of our detention cells. Find out who she is and where she's come from. See she's given refreshments."

He glances at the kindergarten teacher. "Eve, it might be best if you accompany them. Try to keep her calm. Gabriel, you too. Jacob, come with me to my office."

The colonel hauls me to my feet, gripping me by my bound wrists and the neck of my hoodie. The fucking hoodie that got me into this mess. There's something dismissive about it, and it raises my hackles even more than they already are. I'm not a person, just an unfortunate mistake. A problem to be dealt with.

And whatever this place is, I doubt they're going to deal with "the problem" by sending me home with an apology.

Fury lends strength to my muscles. Fuck them. And fuck this asshole yanking on my wrists in particular. I won't be able to escape, but I'm not going to make it easy for him. I bend forward, as far as the hoodie will allow, then launch myself backward. This time, I connect. Pain radiates through my skull, but it must have been worse for him.

The colonel grunts, a satisfying sound of shock and pain, and his hand leaves my hoodie, wrapping around my throat. He yanks me against his chest and grinds out, "Behave yourself. You'll learn your place here."

Learn my fucking place? I twist against his grip. I don't have much movement in the leg shackles but manage to kick back, connecting with his shin. His grunt this time is more anger than pain, and his hand tightens on my neck. "Settle the fuck down, or else I'll..."

"Brackis." It's Jacob, suddenly very close. His intimidating presence and the harsh warning in his voice stop me dead. "It's not her fault you cocked this up. If you can't control a tiny girl without choking her, it's time to retire."

Brackis freezes, the tension in his muscles harsh against my back. He wants to argue, I can tell, but doesn't dare. He's the one who caused this mess, after all. Jacob stands in front of me, addressing me directly for the first time. He seems like a different man than he did just moments ago. All his anger has been wiped out and replaced with calm authority.

"Fighting isn't going to help, but I promise you won't be harmed. Go with Eve and Gabriel. They'll ask you some questions, and you need to answer them truthfully. That's all you need to focus on for now. Can you do that for me?"

I pull again against the colonel's grip, but it's no use. I can't move. There's no escape. I can't even ask a question through the stupid gag. I let out one last, frantic yell, then meet Jacob's green gaze. I won't be harmed. Can I trust him? There's absolutely no reason to think I can, and yet the look on his face is sincere.

And really, what choice do I have? I nod. Jacob lets out a long breath.

The colonel doesn't answer as he marches me off. I almost stumble but soon get used to the tiny, shuffling steps and keep my head high. I won't give these assholes the satisfaction of seeing me fall.

### Chapter Four

Jacob

I almost lost it.

I follow Kendrick woodenly into his office, taking deep breaths and counting in the way Grandad taught me all those years ago, In—one, two, three. Out—four, five, six. Over and over.

It's been a long time since I lost control of myself. Today isn't going to be that day, no matter what.

Kendrick holds the door open for me, then shuts it with a resounding click as I make my way over to his desk and thump down in one of his uncomfortable chairs. I can feel every beat of my heart. Blood is pumping through my veins faster than it should be, and I need it to slow down. The most important thing is a clear head.

“Brandy or whisky?” Kendrick asks, brandishing two decanters. At this point, I'd take neat vodka, but I bite down a sharp comment and say, “Whisky.” He hands me the glass, and I down half of it in one go. It burns going down but doesn't calm me as I was hoping. If anything, the slight buzz sets me more on edge.

I wait in silence. Most people can't abide a silent room, and it makes them weak negotiators. They'll say anything just to break an awkward silence. Me? I'll stay silent for days if I have to. Kendrick can say whatever the hell he needs to say.

He takes a large swallow of his own drink, sets it down on his enormous desk, then takes a deep breath. “Jacob. I can’t apologize enough. In the six years I’ve led the Brotherhood, we’ve never had an incident like this. Not once. It’s our mistake, and we’ll rectify it as soon as reasonably possible. You’ll have your desired Ward.”

I finish my drink, and the heat swirls through me. I rarely touch spirits outside of Kendrick’s office, and I never drink enough to lose my senses. I’ve seen what it does to people too many times. Right now, though, I can see the appeal of flooring the entire bottle.

In Kendrick’s mind, this is simple. They made a mistake, and they’ll fix it. It’s a temporary delay to my plans—nothing more. But I force myself to ask the question I don’t want to know the answer to. “The girl they took by mistake. What will happen to her?”

Kendrick shakes his head sadly. “It’s a very unfortunate business. I can see right away she doesn’t have the temperament to be a contented Ward. After so many years, you get a sense for these things.”

He picks up his glass and stares into the depths of it. “I have a few Brothers in mind who might be up for the challenge. Edward Collins lost his Ward two years ago and recently expressed that he might be ready to take on a new girl. She’ll need a very firm hand, and he’s a strict disciplinarian.”

A heavy rock lands in my gut. Edward is a smug asshole, and I’ve overheard him being a dick to the staff in the refectory. He’s a loudmouth bully, and he’s also pushing sixty. “Isn’t she a bit young for him?”

Kendrick shrugs. “It’s a bit of a mismatch, but he might make it work. Someone will have to. We can’t keep her in detention forever. It might take a while, but I’ll find someone to take her on. Older Brothers are better for the spirited ones anyway. More

experienced. Less likely to fall for their tricks.”

“Can't you just scare the shit out of her and let her go? It's not like she knows where she is.”

“If she'd been drugged, as per our usual protocol, then yes. But not now. She's seen too much.”

The undercurrent is clear. If I hadn't insisted on doing things my way, they wouldn't have this problem at all. And the girl, whoever she is, would be waking up in some hospital somewhere instead of spending the rest of her life here.

Fuck.

Still not my bloody problem.

I think the words, but they don't ring true. All I can picture is the girl's face right after I stopped Brackis from choking her. Her blue eyes scorched me, full of pure rage. She wants to escape more than anything. She'll kill to get out of this place.

I chose Suzy specifically because this life would suit her. I found her online, in a discussion forum aimed at master/slave relationships, and she already craved what I planned to give her.

This girl is the opposite of that. Wild energy crackled off her as she struggled with Brackis. She isn't meant to be caged, and I've indirectly doomed her to that fate.

I know nothing about her, but the idea of Kendrick palming her off on some mean, geriatric bastard makes me nauseous.

So keep her yourself. She needs a firm hand. Give it to her.

There's a part of me, buried so deep I barely recognize it, that surges at the thought. I squash it as quickly as it surfaces. No. I don't want a woman who will fight me, I want one who will find the life she's always wanted. I need a willing slave, not a fucking brat. And this woman isn't my responsibility.

"Fine. See if Edward will take her, then."

Kendrick nods as if that settles the issue entirely. "Good. I'll make a plan with Brackis to extract your true Ward. There won't be any more mistakes. I promise."

I nod, suddenly drained, and stand. I raise a hand at Kendrick and stomp out of his office. Seb is waiting for me down the gloomy wood-paneled corridor, tapping anxiously on his phone. He jumps when I clap him on the shoulder and says, "There you are. That was quick."

"Not much to discuss really. They're going to make a plan to get Suzy for me soon."

I set off walking, desperate for the outside world. This part of the Compound, where everything is old and dreary, makes me feel claustrophobic. It reminds me of boring school trips to the local museum when I was a kid.

Seb matches my fast pace. "What about the other girl? Gabriel says she's chatting with Eve now. They're trying to get her calmed down. Her name's Quinn."

It's a stab in the chest, followed by a horrible unfurling of something cloying that constricts my breathing. Quinn. She has a name. She's a person who, until today, had a life all of her own. And now she's going to be handed over to some cruel dickhead.

I picture Edward, the Brother Kendrick mentioned. He's bald except for a sweaty comb-over and wears his trousers yanked up high like Simon bloody Cowell.

That bright, fierce girl, spending her days servicing him.

What, and servicing you would be better?

Maybe.

Fuck.

I stop dead, and Seb takes a few paces onward before he grinds to a halt. “What's wrong?”

“I want to see her.”

Seb frowns. “Why?”

Good question. “I don't know. Just come on.”

Sharp as always, Seb leaps to the right conclusion. “Wait. You're not thinking of keeping her?”

“No. Well. Look, I'm not sure. Kendrick wants to give her to Edward.”

Seb pulls a face. “But he's ancient.”

“I know. It don't feel right.”

Sweat sticks my shirt to my body, and my accent has got thicker, which only happens when I'm stressed. Years of giving academic presentations smoothed the rough edges off my speech, but they come back when I'm under pressure.

Seb grips my shoulder. “Look. It's bad, but none of this is your fault. You deserve the



Ward you wanted. We can talk to Kendrick again and see if he can find someone more suitable for her.”

“Like who? There’s not many Brothers without Wards, and they’re all ancient. Well, except Kendrick. And I can’t see him taking her on.”

“No.”

We both fall silent, searching for a good solution that doesn't exist. I set off again, this time toward the detention cells. “I just want to talk to her.”

Seb lets out a long breath, but follows.

The detention block is underneath main admin, tucked away like a dungeon. It's rarely used but still has a guard stationed there twenty-four hours a day, just in case. The guard stops us with a raised hand. “Sorry Sir. No-one is to go in.”

“Call Kendrick.”

One of the things I admire about security here is that they're impossible to bully or distract. They follow their orders to perfection. There's no point wasting time arguing with this man when only someone higher in his chain of command will change his mind. It doesn't get any higher than Kendrick.

The young guard hesitates. “I don't want to disturb him if it's not...”

“It’s urgent. Call him now. Put me onto him directly please.”

The guard pauses a second longer, then nods. He picks up the phone. “Sorry to disturb you, sir. I have Jacob West at the detention block, and he says it's urgent.”

He passes me the phone.

“Jacob. What's the issue?” Polite but irritated. He'd already marked me off his plate for the day.

“I want to speak to the new prisoner, sir.”

A long pause. “Why?”

Saying the words out loud makes them real. “I want to determine if she'll be suitable as my Ward after all.”

This time, the pause is heavy. “Jacob, don't be a martyr. Knowing your temperament as I do, she's a poor choice. I don't want to see you distracted and unhappy. Please stay focused on the important work you're doing.”

My words come out level, though it's a struggle. “I'm aware of that, but it's my decision to make. Now please instruct the guard to let me through.”

The please fucking hurt, but getting into a battle with Kendrick won't end well for anyone but him. He sighs.

“Make the decision quickly. If you want your original choice, we need to take her soon, before this other girl's disappearance becomes common knowledge. Otherwise, she'll be on high alert, and there will be too much media coverage. I need to know today.”

Today? I'm supposed to make a decision that will shape the rest of my life in a couple of hours? I'm used to making choices fast, but I'd expected a few days, at least, to think.

I'm insane for even considering this. Hopefully seeing her will cure me of the notion.

The guard leads me into the detention cells. Gabriel and Brackis stand outside a plexiglass window, staring into a small, bare room. Eve and Quinn sit at a bolted down metal table—the only piece of furniture in the room. A platter of fruit, bread, and meat sits between them, and they pick at it as they talk.

Gabriel's eyes widen when he sees me. "Hey. You okay?"

"Been better. Eve been in there long?"

"About twenty minutes. It's all being recorded."

Brackis eyes me but doesn't say anything. Good. I don't want to hear from him right now. I don't know why his handling of the girl pissed me off so much—it's not like I haven't seen much worse—but he reminds me of some of the jumped-up little pricks I met in the army. The sort who use power as an excuse to bully others.

All three of us stare at the girls in silence, and I let myself focus on the woman I can't help but feel responsible for. I'm the reason she's here. Indirectly, but that doesn't make me feel any better about it.

She's pale, and dark blue circles ring her eyes, giving them a bruised look. Her cheekbones stand out, and her lips are full in her delicate face. She's not the sort of pretty that catches your eye immediately, but the more I look at her, the more I want to keep on doing it. There's something fascinating about her face, her eyes most of all.

They're icy cold blue, but there's a sparkle in them even though she looks knackered. If her hair wasn't dyed that crazy pink color, I'm sure she'd be blond. That super pale Scandinavian look. She's still wearing the hoodie that caused all the trouble, and it

drowns her. She's tiny.

I've always liked girls with a bit of meat on their bones. Strong enough that I'm not worried about breaking them when I throw them around the bedroom. This girl isn't my type at all, but I'm still staring. My eyes haven't left her once.

Gabriel clears his throat awkwardly. "So, what's the plan? Has Kendrick decided what he's going to do with her yet?"

Edward flashes before my eyes again, and the image of him nauseates me. She deserves better. She deserves fucking better than being palmed off on some asshole.

"Depends. I'm going to have a little chat with her." I don't stop staring even as I answer Gabriel.

She wouldn't be a willing submissive. There's no way. But even the most stubborn person can be taught how to behave with the right encouragement. There's no one in this whole fucking Compound better trained to handle a badly behaved girl than me. I could make her submit. And, just maybe, I might be able to make her like it, too.

For one long moment, I let my darkest fantasies swirl to the surface. Not the peaceful training of a willing sub, but the careful breaking in of an unwilling one. Using all my skills to mold her into what I need.

I haven't let myself think about that in a long time, and when I do, a dangerous spike of heat stabs my guts. I could do it. But do I want to?

The right solution presents itself on a silver fucking platter.

I'm going to give this girl one last choice before she loses control of her life forever.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Five

#### Quinn

The sweet kindergarten teacher, who, it turns out, is called Eve, manages to be super nice and chatty while telling me absolutely fucking nothing about where I am, why I was kidnapped, or what they plan to do with me. Her eyes keep drifting to the mirror, where people must be watching us.

I shouldn't be able to eat, given the shit I've landed in, but my stomach leaps out of my throat and strangles me as soon as food arrives. It could be drugged, but honestly, at this point, I don't care. I'm starving.

That piece of shit Brackis fastened my legs to the metal chair, which is locked to the floor. He left my hands cuffed too, and the short metal chain connecting them bangs against the plastic tray as I eat. It's simple food, but I'm so hungry it tastes like it came from a fancy restaurant. I inhale half of it and drink the full paper cup of water.

It's kind of satisfying they think I'm dangerous enough to be denied cutlery and drinking glasses. Like I'm a ninja that could take Eve hostage with a butter knife. I wish I was. Shame I gave up on karate classes after a few weeks when I was ten.

"So, where do you work?" Eve asks brightly, though the forced happy note in her voice isn't fooling me. Every so often, I catch her face twisting into pity before she straightens it out again. She knows what's up, and it isn't good.

Part of me wants to spit in her face, but a stronger part tells me she's not the enemy.

She's way too gentle to be running a human trafficking syndicate, or a drug cartel, or whatever this place is.

People thought Ted Bundy was nice, too.

I try to force all thoughts of serial killers out of my head. That's the worst-case scenario, and we're not there yet.

She's waiting for an answer. "I work in a cafe. 'Sandwiches.' It's beach-themed, and the food sucks, but sometimes the tips are pretty good. In summer when the tourists are around, anyway."

A strange look passes over her face, one I can't read. "I've been with my friend Billie. We got the milkshakes. They were good."

"Next time you come in, I'll get you one for free. Your friend too, if the boss is out. He's in the bar by three most days. His wife left him last year, so he's always hitting on twenty-year-olds. It's pathetic to watch."

Eve's smile is sad. "I bet."

She glances at the door again. She didn't lie to me, at least, and tell me she'll take me up on the offer. We both know it won't happen.

The intercom buzzes, and we both jump. "Eve. I want a word."

There's no mistaking the big guy's harsh British accent. Eve glances at the mirror one more time, then squeezes my hand. "We'll get you out of here soon."

She heads to the door, leaving me alone with the food. I pick at it some more, though my appetite has finally left me. I might need my strength for whatever is ahead.

The light in the room is the sort of depressing fluorescent hospitals everywhere seem to love. I hate the way it bleaches my skin. I must look like a dug-up ghoul after no sleep and all the medication. If they try to sell me now, they'll be lucky to get fifty bucks.

It shouldn't make me laugh, but exhaustion has made me lightheaded, and I snort as a giggle tries to make its way out. Maybe if they think I'm a drug-addled psycho, they'll let me go?

The door opens, and the British guy enters, shutting it behind him. If the room felt small before, it's a goddamn closet now. His gigantic form is a black hole, sucking all the space and air from the room. It pulls the last traces of my amusement with it, and all I can do is stare, mouth open.

Intimidating doesn't begin to cover it, and it's not just his size. His green eyes stand out like lanterns against the slight olive tint of his skin. He's the sort of man you can picture doing intense physical labor. Using those huge hands to swing a hammer.

Jesus Christ. Why in the hell am I thinking about that?

He takes the seat across from me, squeezing in with difficulty. Air travel must be his idea of hell. He holds out his hand like we're meeting in a boardroom. Not that I've ever seen an actual boardroom.

"Jacob West. What's your name, love?"

I take his hand on autopilot. It swallows mine whole, but his grip is gentle. Not like those assholes who try to show how manly they are by crushing your hand to death. The chain on my cuffs shakes, and his eyes stray to it.

After a few seconds of silence, he prompts, "Your name?"

I'm compelled to answer, the words dragged from my throat by his calm politeness. I'd have told Brackis to go and fuck himself, but saying that to this man feels about as smart as shoving my head into a blender. "Quinn Bartlett."

He still hasn't released my hand. "Quinn, I've got some things to tell you, and it's not good news. Are you ready to hear it now, or do you need more time to collect yourself?"

I've heard that exact tone of voice before. People are all trained to deliver bad news in the same way. Doctors, cops—they get the same lessons. Be direct. Don't drag it out. Don't apologize.

I've got some bad news about your heart.

I've got some bad news about your sister.

All delivered in the same matter-of-fact tone Jacob is using on me right now. It breaks the spell of compliance I'd slipped into. Fiery flickers surge through my body and straight out of my mouth. "More time to do what? Sit here and admire the beautiful fucking view?"

I gaze around, awestruck, at the green walls. Now that my mouth is moving, there's no stopping the torrent of anger that pours out. There's a reason I've had five jobs in the last four years. "Maybe I should enjoy the fabulous cuisine?"

I manage to move the hand that he isn't holding just enough to flip the plastic tray, sending the remaining food flying over Jacob.

The minute I do it, my sanity floods back in a cold wave. Why? Why am I so fucking stupid? Jacob doesn't flinch or make any attempt to stop the fruit and cold cuts from covering him. He glances down; flicks the tray to the floor, where it lands with a



doom-like thud; and meets my gaze again.

“Better?”

I swallow, mouth desert-dry. If I’d done that to Brackis, I’m sure he’d have slapped the shit out of me. But Jacob’s eyes have darkened, and there’s the faintest touch of amusement at the corners of them. It’s somehow much scarier.

I don’t answer, and he nods. “I’ll go ahead and tell you what you need to know.”

The hint of humor has evaporated. I brace myself. What’s the worst-case scenario? I’m to be chopped up and used for organ donation. Not that my organs would be worth shit. Might as well make a stew out of them. I’m to be sold as a sex slave. Sacrificed to a god. Sent to—

“You’re in a place known as the Compound. It doesn’t show up on any GPS systems, and only a few select people know where it is. It’s home to a group called the Onyx Brotherhood.”

Human sacrifice it is, then. I fucking knew it.

“I’m a Brother, as are the other men you saw besides Colonel Brackis. He’s an employee.”

I don’t miss the twitch of his lips as he says Brackis’s name. He’s still pissed about earlier.

“All Brothers are lead scientists in their field. Here, we work without having to worry about the constraints of money or government control. We’re free to pursue our own interests.”

I blink. This just took a left turn down a very weird highway. Everything about this man screams soldier, mob boss, or gang enforcer. Not a geeky scientist. A smarter woman would have kept her mouth shut, but my brain clearly wants me dead. “You’re a scientist? Really?”

Another crinkle of his eyes. “It doesn’t suit me?”

“No, I mean...” Shut up. “I was thinking drug cartel lord. That sort of thing.”

Nice save, asshole.

If he’s offended, he doesn’t show it. “You’re not the first person to say that. But back to the point.”

His hand squeezes mine, drawing my attention back to it. Why the hell hasn’t he let my hand go? But there’s something comforting about the pressure of it. Especially given that this man, who is clearly trained and used to delivering bad news, still takes a moment to brace himself before speaking.

“Our society has an ancient tradition. We take women as Wards. Each Brother must take one woman for their own and keep them. It’s not consensual, and the outside world has no idea it happens. Suzy was supposed to be my Ward, but Brackis took you instead. It was an accident, but because you’ve seen the Compound, we can’t let you leave.”

There it is. I’d braced for the gut punch, but it still knocks all the wind out of me, a sharp pain driving into my heart. They steal women. They can’t let me leave. It’s a cult, and though it’s science rather than some religion, the result is the same.

“You keep women as what? Sex slaves?”

My voice is rising, and I try to pull my hand away from Jacob but it's like yanking against solid stone. No hope.

“There's more to it but yes, essentially.”

His eyes never leave mine, and even as my brain reels to catch up with his words, I'm struck by how calmly he's delivering this. It's having an odd effect on me, muting my emotions to match his. My panic bubbles away, but the strangeness of this conversation suppresses it.

He talks about sex slavery like it's no big deal. What's wrong with him? What's wrong with all of them? I have so many questions they stick in my throat, and I just gape.

He takes my silence as license to continue. “Now, to your future. You have a decision to make, Quinn.”

He pauses before saying my name, as if it's a strange, exotic word he's unsure how to pronounce. Do they have Quinns in England? What a stupid thing to wonder about.

“Kendrick—that's the big boss, the guy in the fancy suit—wants to hand you over to another Brother whose Ward passed away a few years ago.”

I flinch, and he holds up his free hand. “He didn't kill her; we don't do that. She got sick. The Compound has the best medical care in the world, but we're not miracle workers.”

The best medical care in the world?

What would they make of my Brugada syndrome? Maybe these insane scientists grow new hearts in labs or have robot hearts or something. Not that they'd waste one

on a sex slave, I'm sure. Plenty more women to kidnap.

“He’s called Edward and, in my opinion, is a dick. Likes to throw his weight around and bully anyone less important than him. Always an asshole to the staff. I wouldn’t count on an easy ride with him, even though he’s getting on a bit. Pushing sixty.”

My lips are still frozen. How can I speak when my head is filled with a vision of life with this faceless man. An asshole and a bully. Handed over to him like a sack of potatoes. Not that I’ll stay put for long, because however secure this Compound is, there has to be a way out somehow. I’d rather get shot trying to escape than serve some pathetic guy forever.

“The other option, Quinn, is me. You definitely won’t have an easy ride with me, but I’m not cruel for its own sake. Just very strict. I’ll punish you, but not more than you can handle. But make no mistake, you’ll be my slave in every sense of the word. I’ll own your body and use it however I want. You’ll belong to me.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Six

Jacob

Only my years of training let me stay calm as I rip Quinn's life to shreds, then give her a choice with no good answer. Gabriel told me delivering the news to Eve was the most difficult thing he's ever done, and I can believe it. I don't even know this girl, but it tugs at me to see the way her eyes flicker over the room, me, and the point where our hands meet.

She's looking for an escape, but she won't find one.

Honesty is the most important thing in the world to me. I'd rather give Quinn the brutal, bare version of the facts and then soften the sting a little afterward.

"Life as a Ward isn't all servitude, though. You can pursue your own interests. Eve belongs to Gabriel but works in my lab because she's a biochemist. She loves her work. We could find something similar for you."

For some reason, out of everything I've said, that triggers the explosion. "I make fucking sandwiches for a living. What am I supposed to do here, work in the canteen? I'm not going to be anyone's slave. And let go of my hand!"

She yanks on it, but I keep hold. I should feel bad about how much I like feeling her struggle, but there's something electric about it. It's been over a year since I had a woman. Too bloody long. Telling Quinn I'll use her if she chooses me has opened the gate on desires I've kept shut for my own sanity.

She'll fight me every step. And, wrong as it is, I'll enjoy it.

Up until this very moment, a large part of me was hoping she'd choose Edward. I'd have assuaged my guilt and could go back to my carefully planned life with Suzy. Now, feeling Quinn's useless attempts to retrieve her hand, I find myself hoping she'll make a different decision.

I'll enjoy teaching her some respect, and that skinny little arse of hers will fit perfectly over my knee.

Fuck. I take a deep breath. I need to watch myself.

"Let go, you crazy fucking asshole!" She slaps at my hand with her free one. Even with the chain restricting her movement, she manages to make it sting a little. I wonder if she knows how to fight. I'd like to teach her that, too.

Her head rears back, and I know she's planning to launch herself at me. With her legs locked to the chair, all she'll achieve is hurting herself, and I won't allow that. I whip my free hand out and grip the bright pink mass of her hair, locking her in place just as she tries to fling herself forward. She yanks her hair hard, screams, tries again, then glares at me like it's my fault.

"Stop it. You'll hurt yourself. You can't go anywhere, and attacking me isn't going to do any good. Got it?"

She doesn't answer, so I give her hair a tug, angling her face up to mine. "I said, got it?"

"Yes!" she shouts, and I can't resist pulling her hair one last time before I let her go. I free her hand, too, and she twists her head around to rub at the sore spot, shooting daggers in my direction.

“Fucking prick,” she mutters.

“All you had to do was ask nicely. ‘Please let my hand go, Jacob.’”

She scoffs. “I’m not going to fucking beg.”

Oh yes you will.

The longer she looks at me with cold fire spitting from her eyes, the more I regret giving her a choice at all. God, I’m ready to spank that look off her face. To make her beg, then remind her of this very moment when she swore she wouldn’t.

She shifts on her chair, and I can feel her frustration. She wants to run. To fight. She’s electricity in a tiny bottle.

“I’m going to need a decision, Quinn. Edward, or me.”

Edward wouldn’t know how to train her. He’d bully and abuse her, and she’d hate him more and more each day. Maybe she’d kill him. It’s happened before. Fifteen times in the history of the Brotherhood, actually. Not a bad tally for five-hundred years, but still. It’s one of the reasons Kendrick always suggests choosing a sweet, submissive woman.

Something Quinn definitely isn’t.

“I don’t want either of you! I don’t want this!” She curls her hands into fists and slams them down on the table. Her anger is fracturing, and her eyes turn luminous with tears.

Bloody hell. I’m a soft touch for tears. It’s my one weak spot.

I cover her hands with mine again and rub my thumb over her knuckles gently. “Don’t cry, love. Most Wards end up happy. Look at Eve. Did she seem miserable to you?”

She sniffs and drops her head to hide her face but doesn’t try to pull her hands away. “She’s not me.”

A fair point. And I’m not Gabriel. She’d be a lot less intimidated if she was facing him across this table. Seb would probably have her laughing by now. Dealing with people, especially emotional ones, has never been my strong suit.

Her shoulders stiffen, and she faces me. A tear tracks a slow path down her cheek. I watch it, fascinated, fighting the strangest urge to taste it. That would really freak her out. “People will be looking for me. My friends. My...” She stumbles over something before managing, “The people I work with.”

No family? There’s a story there, evident in the way her mouth snaps shut. Something personal she’s not ready to reveal. I won’t press her yet.

“They’ll think you’re dead. We’ll stage something, a car crash maybe...”

Her eyes widen, and her pale face loses the shred of color it had. There I go, winning her over again with my honesty. And just when the fuck did this become about winning her over?

“No! Not a car crash. You can’t.”

Another weird reaction. Not “You can’t fake my death,” but an objection to the method. The analytical side of my mind jumps onto the puzzle. “And why not?”

She freezes, clearly unwilling to give up any personal information. I get it. In her



position, I wouldn't either. "Just not that. Please. Promise me."

Jesus. Anything that makes her be that polite must be important. I want to say yes. Plenty of other ways to fake a death. But is it a promise I can keep? Kendrick might tell me it's none of my business.

Fuck it, though. After today's cock up, he owes me. This is one thing I'll make sure to do for her.

"I promise. Not a car crash. Okay?"

Her body relaxes, shoulders dropping, eyes locked to mine. "Thank you."

"And I'm going to need your answer. Who do you choose?"

Her eyes screw shut, and she chews her lower lip. She might think choosing Edward gives her a chance at escape. She'd be wrong—she'd never get past the perimeter fence, not to mention the tracker we'll implant—but she doesn't know that. She might picture herself getting some old geezer drunk then slipping away unnoticed.

I'm sure she's already realized nothing like that would work on me.

The air vibrates, pressure building as I wait for her decision. I'm good at staying motionless. It's one of the skills the army gives you before you even get close to the specials. Civilians are so bloody mobile. Always fidgeting around with something.

But shit, it's hard to hold myself back from tapping my foot.

Her eyes snap open, icy gaze locked to mine. "You. I choose you."

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Two hours later, we finally finish all the administrative arsing about. First, Gabriel tried to talk me out of my decision, followed by Seb, and finally Kendrick. They all seem to think I'm doing this out of misplaced guilt. White-knight syndrome, saving the poor maiden, all that bollocks.

It proves none of them know what I'm really like.

No one in the Compound knew me before I got myself under control and channeled my energy into useful pursuits. If they'd met me a few years ago, they wouldn't be so sure I'm doing Quinn a favor. They know Jacob West, esteemed biochemist and all-round kind and helpful guy. The person I want to be and am working to become.

Grandad saw the danger when I was young. He forced me into the army at sixteen, despite my teachers crying about what a waste it was. They barraged him with complaints, arguing I was a prodigy and needed to go to uni. If he'd listened to them, I'd be dead or in prison by now. Only the structure and discipline of the army kept me from going off the rails.

I can feel the beast inside me waking up, pulling at the chains I've wrapped it in. It's going to feed soon.

Once everyone gave up trying to change my mind, the practicalities had to be dealt with. Kendrick wanted to rush Quinn to medical, but I put a stop to it. I'm not going to fuck her tonight, so all the tests can wait. Brackis wanted to keep her confined until she'd been thoroughly investigated, but I put a stop to that, too.

She's staying with me tonight.

When I arrive to collect her, she's slumped over the table, head resting on her folded arms. Fast asleep. I've always envied people who can fall asleep like that, curled up into strange positions. Even in a comfy king-size bed, I'm often restless.

I watch her for a while, taking in her fragile beauty. Asleep, her face has lost that tight, wary look, and one could be fooled into thinking she's sweet. That would be a lie. I trace the line of her body, from the bulky hoodie down her skinny thighs. I'm going to make sure she eats properly. She looks like she bloody well needs it.

I open the door, expecting her to jump up, but she doesn't. She's out cold. Unbelievable. Quietly, I unlock her ankle restraints and consider what to do. She must be exhausted, and I'd like to let her catch up on some shut-eye, but I can't leave her here. Carefully, I slide my hands under her arms and pick her up.

She mumbles something as I settle her against my chest but doesn't wake. She's lighter than any full-grown human has a right to be, and a protective ember comes to life. Thank fuck she chose me. Edward would have bullied her into oblivion.

Keeping her clutched tight, I exit detention, ignoring the shocked guard. It's a short walk to the initiates' quarters, and we're almost there when a familiar, obnoxious voice scrapes against my ears. Fucking Edward.

"Jacob! So, this is the little bitch, is it? Kendrick said she was a spirited one. I can't say I'm happy you claimed her out from under me, but more power to you. You'll have your hands full."

His ruddy face is pulled into an obsequious grin. He'd never dare fuck with me, but he'll chat shit about me behind my back. Violence between Brothers is a very quick way to find yourself in detention for a long time. If the rules weren't so strict, I'd wipe that smug bastard look right off his face.

"Call her a bitch one more time. See what happens."

Edward's eyes widen, and his hands come up, fending off an invisible blow. "Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I thought—"

“Piss off.”

He gapes, second chin wobbling, and narrows his mean little eyes. He’s too much of a coward to argue and stomps off, shoulders stiff. Good fucking riddance.

I’m distracted, not ready when Quinn springs to life like a sleeping cat woken by a bucket of water. Her head, which just a second ago was cuddled against my chest, twists, and her teeth sink into my shoulder through the shirt.

It’s just so bloody unexpected that my arms slacken for an instant, and it’s enough. She twists out of my grip and tears off running as soon as her feet hit the ground.

She’s running. From me.

The predator in me roars.

I wait, letting her get a good start. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty. She’s pelting blindly into the open space at the heart of the compound, the manicured gardens and woods. At forty seconds, I take off after her.

Game on.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Seven

#### Quinn

Nothing will ever compare to the confusion of falling asleep in a prison cell and waking up being carried by a stone golem. A monster taking me back to his lair. The bite was an instinctive thing born of panic, and I almost froze when it actually worked, but thankfully, my survival instincts are better than that.

I'm running.

My hands are still tied, but my leg restraints are gone, thank the fucking devil. I can run. I've always been quick, and how fast can he move, lugging all those muscles around? Not fast enough, that's for sure. I can't even hear him behind me.

I don't have time to register what I'm running through beyond that it's green and pretty. Grass, gravel paths, trees—it's all a blur as I power ahead. I pass a person and get a flash of a shocked female face before streaking past her.

The ground gives way to tiles, and I grind to a halt as I reach a gigantic swimming pool. I totter on the edge but just stop myself before I fall in. Shit. With my hands tied, I could have drowned. I choose a direction at random and speed off around the edge, dodging lounge chairs.

What sort of cult has a fucking swimming pool?

I'm almost at the far end before a voice calls behind me. "Getting tired yet?"

It makes me jump, breaking my stride, but I manage to keep upright. He's close, and he didn't even sound winded. My own lungs are starting to burn from the exertion, though I've got a while to go yet. Years ago, when I was on the track team, I could have run for days. Not anymore.

I don't waste time looking back.

Past the swimming pool, the scenery opens out onto a smooth, flat green expanse. A little flag tips me off to its purpose. A goddamn golf course. What next, a pony club? It makes for solid footing, so I tap into my reserves and speed up. Hopefully Jacob's burst of speed will be short-lived.

"I'm impressed. Didn't have you pegged as an athlete."

Holy fucking shit, he's close. Sure enough, I can hear his breathing and footfalls now. Not puffing and panting, but steady, even breaths. And he's getting closer by the second.

I put my head down and force myself into a sprint. My breath comes in ragged wheezes now, and my legs burn. I push forward, hoping—

A thick arm wraps around my middle. It's an iron bar, and I've no hope of escape. I flail and scratch, raking my nails across his face before he flips me over his shoulder, holding me with one arm. I squirm and struggle, banging my fists on his back until his free hand lifts my skirt up and lands a smack on my ass.

Oh my fucking God.

The pain is a shocking flare. I freeze. I've been spanked before, messing about in the bedroom, but nothing like the apocalyptic slap he just landed. It felt like getting hit with a shovel.

Just as I start to yell, he does it again.

And again.

And again.

Each smack lands on the same spot, right at the top of my thighs. The savagery of it shuts me up. Pain blooms, a red flower starting at the place of impact and ricocheting through my body.

Again.

Again.

I start to whimper. I can't help it, as much as those pathetic noises shame me. He's too strong, it hurts too much, and I'm helpless.

He stops. His hand rests on my ass, right on the sore spot, and just the pressure of it stings. "That's six, Quinn. You're owed four more for biting me. You're never to attack me, is that clear? Never."

Even through the pain, I manage to mumble, "Fuck you."

He sighs. "That's a shame. I wanted to go easy on you tonight. Ten more for swearing at me."

Four more. Plus ten. No. I can't...

His hand lands again, and I scream. Shit. Shit. Shit. He's moved to a different spot, and my ass is consumed by fire. Another. And another. They start to blur into a wall of pain, and my yells morph into whimpers.

I lose count, and a haze falls over my mind. I still cry out at the strikes, but I'm floaty. Detached. Each strike stokes the burn, and I drift further into the cocoon of overwhelming sensation. It has to be over soon. That had to be twenty.

"Fifteen. You're doing well, love."

Said almost gently, but there's nothing gentle about the way he shifts me, opening my thighs. I realize what he's planning, the haze evaporates, and I struggle again as he smacks me, this time on the sensitive join where my ass meets my pussy. It stings, bringing tears to my eyes again.

Fuck him. Fuck him all to hell.

I think it but don't dare say it. If he gives me ten more, I'm a dead woman. Two on each side, in the tender spot, and I'm thrashing.

"Last one. Brace yourself. I won't go as soft with this one."

Soft? Those were—

His hand slaps down one last time, and the gunshot sound catches my ears a second before pain erupts across my ass. It reverberates through my body, and I scream, writhing against him. That bastard. That fucking—

"All done."

I hiss as his hand caresses my ass. Just his touch is fire. He explores the contours of it as if he has every right. He thinks he does. He really thinks he does.

"Don't. You can't—"



“I can.” He starts walking but keeps his hand right where it is. I bounce along, ass throbbing, and when we reach the swimming pool it hits me that we’re heading toward a public area. People will be there, and I’m over his shoulder with my panties on display.

“Let me down.”

“No.”

“But people will see—”

“You should have thought of that before you bit me. Don’t think being in public will save you. Push me too far, and I’ll pull down your knickers and spank your bare arse in the middle of the refectory. I don’t care who sees.”

“But—”

I shut up as I realize we’re walking past people. Mostly men, but a couple of women too. They stop and stare, some smiling, others with disapproving expressions. Jacob doesn’t break stride. My face burns to match my ass at the degrading position.

Christ. I should have chosen the old man.

It’s almost a relief when we reach a building and Jacob buzzes us inside. Tile gives way to a creepy red carpet and wood paneling. Old-school. My anxiety grows as we wait for the elevator, which arrives with a ping. The inside is mirrored, and I stare at my own reflection as we go up a few floors.

It’s horrible but impossible to look away. I’m a broken doll, red ass on full display, thrown over a giant’s shoulder. We arrive at his lair too soon. He buzzes the white door open with his thumbprint and carries me inside. Once the door thunks closed, he

sets me on my feet.

I take a minute, standing with my eyes closed as the blood drains from my head to wherever it's supposed to be. I blink at the space. It's the definition of a man-pad. Bare except for a desk, a comfy-looking gray couch, framed movie posters, and a glass cabinet containing balls and boots. I frown at it, too confused not to ask.

“What's in there?”

His lips quirk up at my question. “Signed West Ham balls. My pride and joy. And those boots scored the winning goal in the 1964 FA cup.”

He might as well be speaking Swahili, but I nod anyway. Jacob leaves me gaping around whilst he ducks into another room and returns with a wooden chair that doesn't fit in. It's like something out of a Victorian school, varnished and with an ornate back. No cushion. He places it beside me. “Sit.”

Weird, but not worth arguing about. I sit, then jump up with a hiss when my ass touches the seat. The pain that had faded to a dull throb reignites, sizzling back into a furnace. “I can't. You spanked my ass, remember?”

“That's the whole point. Sit there, or I'll make you.”

I swallow, staring between the chair and him. I should just do it, but if I start letting him order me around, where does it stop?

“What, you'll spank me again? How original.”

“You've had enough of that for now, I want you to be able to sleep tonight. Now, sit.”

“No.”

He lets out a long sigh, and I can't tell if it's genuine exasperation or just played up for my sake. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out four metal circles attached to very short chains. Does he walk around with manacles in his pocket? No, he must have collected them along with the weird wooden seat.

He sets about fastening them to the chair, which I now realize has special holes cut into the legs and seat for just that purpose.

He talks as he works. “If I'd known I was bringing home a brat, I'd have had all this ready.”

Brat? Seriously? His slow, deliberate movements are starting to get on my nerves. He's too calm, carefully setting up the stupid fucking chair like he's got all day. I glance at the door, then sprint toward it.

Reaching it, I turn the little handle. Nothing. I glance up, expecting to find Jacob looming over me, but he's exactly where I left him. Fiddling with one of the restraints. Not even looking at me.

His big hands should be clumsy with the delicate work he's doing, but they're not. He threads the final restraint through its slot, opens the cuff, gives it a satisfied tug, and stands up. His eyes widen in mock surprise when he sees me beside the door. “Oh, you tried to escape through the front door. How original.”

God, I want to scream at him. Throw things. Say “fuck you” again and again and again until the words lose all meaning. But he's advancing on me with that menacing smile, and it's more terrifying than I want to admit. I dodge to the side and race off, trying to slip past him, but before I've gone two paces, he's got me again.

He's fast. A bear that moves like a fucking cheetah. It's a deadly combination, and as he carries me kicking and scratching to the stupid chair, I wonder how I'll ever get away from this man. Running isn't going to work, and he could overpower me with one finger half awake. I'll have to be smart, and that's not a word I associate with myself.

My poor ass screams in protest as he thumps me onto the chair with more force than he damn well needed to. I scream right along with it as he forces my arms down by my sides and into the waiting restraints and then does the same with my legs. Strapped to a goddamn chair again, but this time, it's much, much worse.

The restraints give me no room to move, my arms held down at full extension, putting more pressure on my ass. I can hardly shift around to relieve the pain, which is growing worse by the second. "Let me out of here, you fucking—"

His hand clamps over my mouth. "Jesus Christ, you can talk."

I mumble against his hand as he studies me. "You're going to listen for a bit. From right now, every word you say is an extra minute in this chair. Nod if you understand."

I'm already desperate to stand up. The ache is unbearable. Even five minutes would be torture. As much as I want to scream and yell, I want to get out of this chair more. Yelling will have to wait. I nod.

He blows out a breath. "Thank you."

He pulls his hand away from my mouth. I clamp my teeth together and shift on my seat, catching his attention. "You like the chair?"

It takes everything I have not to respond. Instead, I settle for glaring at him, which

makes his lip curl up. “There’s a good little brat. Learning already.”

Deep breaths. Deep fucking breaths.

When I manage to stay silent, he continues. “This chair is where you’ll sit to reflect on why you were punished. After a punishment, I expect you to come here without being told and sit down until I tell you to stand up. If the punishment happens out of the house, you come here as soon as we get home. Nod if you understand.”

I jerk my head up and down woodenly.

“Good. When you go willingly to the chair, you won’t stay in it long. You’d already be out of it if you’d sat when I told you to.”

He pauses to let the impact of that sink in. I silently curse out Quinn from five minutes ago. That girl was such an asshole.

“Because I had to make you sit, it’s twenty minutes today, and that’s me being very kind because you didn’t know the rules. If I have to force you again, it’s an hour. In the chair, you don’t speak. You think about what got you into the chair and how to avoid it in the future. Got it?”

I nod again, though my head is filled with revenge. One day, I’ll stick spikes to this fucking chair and tie him to it.

Twenty minutes. Jesus Christ.

“When it’s time to get out, I’ll ask you why you were punished and what you can do to prevent it from happening again. All I need is a sincere answer. It doesn’t have to be right. But if you stay silent or tell me to go and fuck myself, you stay in the chair. Got it?”

This just keeps getting better. I nod again.

“Excellent. I’ll leave you to it. There’s a clock on the wall over there”—he points—“where you can watch the time go by. Eighteen minutes to go. Have fun.”

He stands, then busies himself doing fuck-knows-what out of my eyeline. Now that he pointed out the clock, it’s all I can see. Second by painful second, the hands make their slow circles.

I consider rocking the chair from side to side and tipping it over, but even I can’t see the point of such a useless rebellion. I’d still be manacled to it. He’d just stand it up, tell me I was going to have to sit for an hour, and disappear again.

This is how he’ll make you do what he wants.

It’s true, but I can’t see a single alternative. He’s a force of nature, impossible to overcome. When he said he’d be strict, I hadn’t guessed for a goddamn second he meant this strict. I check the clock again. Fifteen minutes to go.

Shit.

I close my eyes and try not to watch the time tick by. The pain is an infuriating throb, pulsing along with the beat of my heart. Almost worse than the pain, though, is the indignity of this. Being punished. Having to tell him what I’ve learned like he’s a school principal and I’m a bad pupil.

Who gave him the right to do this? It shouldn’t even be me in this chair. Suzy should be the one trying not to shift around because it just makes it worse. She should be the one at the mercy of this madman.

Thinking of her in this situation, though, just makes me sad. She’s too nice to be here.

Maybe it's a good thing I got taken instead. Saving Suzy is the only useful thing I've ever done, and even though it was a total accident, I'm glad she's living her life.

Thinking of her feeding her cat, looking after her patients, and generally being free helps me get through the next ten minutes.

When the clock hits five minutes to go, Jacob returns. He crouches next to me, and he must be able to tell I'm struggling, as he cups my cheek in his giant hand. "Almost there, love. I know it hurts."

Does he? He knows it hurts? Oh, the revenge I'll take one day. But I'm out of strength, and his hand is solid and warm. I lean my head against it and close my eyes again. Everything softens, even the ache, and I don't struggle as his free hand brushes my hair away from my face.

We stay frozen like that until, after a million years, he says, "Time's up. Open your eyes."

I do, meeting his intense stare. There's a softness there that catches me off guard. It's intimate in a way I'm not sure I understand. His voice is deep and rich, with no edge of sarcasm as he says, "So, why were you punished?"

I'd been trying not to think about this part, but it's here now, and there's no way in this universe I'm spending a second longer in this chair. I lick my lips. "Because I attacked you and cursed."

He nods, then a thoughtful look crosses his face. "Because you cursed at me. You can say 'It's fucking hot in here', or 'I hate this fucking song' but not 'Fuck off, Jacob.' Understand the difference?"

I'd rather he let me stand than discuss the finer points of language, but I'm not going

to start an argument about that now. “Yes. I get it.”

“Good. And how will you avoid getting punished in the future?”

I feel stupid saying basically the same thing again, but if it gets me out of this seat, so what? “Don’t attack you, and don’t swear at you.”

“Very good.”

He makes quick work of undoing the restraints. Then, without giving me a chance to stand on my own, he lifts me out of the chair. The blood rushes back in, worse than I was expecting, and I yelp as he holds me against his chest. “Your legs might be wobbly. Don’t want you to fall.”

How considerate. But as pins and needles hit my legs, I realize I probably would have hit the deck. He holds me as I wriggle and flex my muscles, then, after a minute, sets me carefully on my feet.

There’s a silence so long it gets awkward as we stare at each other. I look away first, unsure what to do with myself. He’s the crazy captor. He can decide.

As if he’s read my mind, he touches me lightly on the shoulder. “Right, I’m knackered. Let’s get ready for bed.”

Bed? As in sleep? With him? The idea is so absurd I almost laugh. Practical considerations take center stage, though. It’s been hours since I’ve used the bathroom, and it’s getting urgent. “I need to pee first.”

He smiles at my bluntness. “Good to know. And after that, it’s time to get you showered.”



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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Eight

Jacob

I leave Quinn alone to pee in peace. Not a privilege she'll always get, but I've punished her enough for one day. For day fucking one, more to the point. She just had to keep bloody testing me.

If I was a better human being, I'd let her shower alone, give her a pair of pajamas, and make sure she gets a good night's sleep. But I'm not going to. I can't resist seeing what's underneath that hoodie.

Spanking her, then watching her struggle on the hard wooden chair has left me as hard as stone. It doesn't matter, though, because I've no intention of banging her tonight. As deep as she managed to sleep in the interrogation room, I've no doubt she'll crash hard tonight once I get her into bed. I can take care of myself later if I have to.

I wait outside the door. The toilet flushes, and the buzz of the electric toothbrush I gave her starts up. I take that as my cue to enter. She jumps when I push the door open, gapes at me, then deliberately turns away and continues brushing, trying to play it tough.

"Didn't your mother teach you to knock?" she mutters after she spits.

"You're lucky I let you close the door at all."

She pulls a face. “Oh Jesus Christ, don’t tell me you’re one of those freaks who like women to pee on them. If you are, I’m asking for a redo and choosing the old guy.”

God, she’s brave. Held captive by a bloke four times her size, and she’s still cracking jokes. There’s something so impressive about it that it takes me a while to think of a retort. “Not my thing, love. Sorry to disappoint. You about done with your teeth? Better to leave some enamel intact.”

She’s stalling, dragging out the last step because she knows what comes next. She makes a show of brushing for a while longer, then switches the brush off and rinses it carefully. Brave as she is, I don’t miss the tremor in her hands as she sets the brush down. She clutches the bottom of her hoodie protectively.

“I’m exhausted. Can we just go to bed? Please?”

The “please” is a nice ploy, and if it wasn’t such an obvious one, it might have worked. The fake sweet note in her voice almost makes me laugh, but I hold it back. “So desperate to keep your clothes on I get a please out of you? Incredible. But it’s not going to work. Take them off. I won’t do anything to you tonight. We’re just going to shower.”

I hold my hand up with three fingers raised in a boy scout salute. “Scout’s honor.”

She snorts. “You weren’t a boy scout.”

“I bloody was. Five years. Now, if you want to earn your ‘I do what I’m fucking told and don’t earn another punishment’ badge, get your clothes off. Now.”

I cross my arms across my chest.

She fidgets, looks down, glances up at me, then looks down again. “What if I don’t?”

Always an argument. “I’ll rip them off you, and you can shower on your knees with your hands and feet tied. Sound good?” I take a step forward.

It does sound good—too fucking good—and I’m almost disappointed when she holds up her hand. “No! No. I’ll take them off. Just give me a moment.”

“Take your time.” I lean against the door frame to watch the show, and my heart picks up as she grips the bottom of her hoodie in white-knuckled fingers. It’s cruel to make her do this, but I’m captivated by her nervous, jerky movements as she forces herself to comply. Christ, I’m so hard it’s painful, and she hasn’t even taken anything off yet.

She yanks the hoodie over her head and throws it down in a rush, as if trying to do it in the least sexy way possible. Beneath, she’s wearing only a skimpy white crop top. A line of pale, toned midriff shows, and she wraps her arms around herself for a moment before she bites her lip and pushes herself onward.

Off comes the top. Underneath, she wears a pale pink bralette. It pushes her small breasts up, giving her a little bit of cleavage. Next, she shimmies out of the white miniskirt. The knickers don’t match; they’re pale green. She wasn’t out on the pull, then. I don’t know why, but I’m happy she wasn’t.

She looks at me, and there’s a pleading note to her voice as she asks, “Can I just keep these on?”

There’s a soft part of me, buried deep, that wants to say yes. But I’ve made my position clear, and she needs to do as she’s told. “No. Off with the rest, too.”

Her jaw clenches. “You’re sick.”

“Never said I wasn’t.”

Her chest rises and falls fast as she looks down at herself. She chews on her lip before reaching behind herself to unclip the bra. She lets it fall, then pulls the knickers down in an angry rush, kicking them to the side and standing before me stark naked.

I expect her to cover herself with her hands, but she doesn't. She balls them into fists and keeps them at her side as she glares at me. "Happy?"

Fuck yes, I'm happy.

She's slim, to the point I want to cook her my trademark Steak and Guinness pie every night for a month, but it doesn't diminish her beauty. She's perfectly formed, everything in proportion. Her breasts are small, and I can't wait to see how they look in my hands. I want to roll those tiny nipples between my fingers and see what noises she makes when I pinch them.

Next to her, I feel like a bloody ogre.

"You're gorgeous."

I didn't mean to say it, but I don't regret it when I see her reaction. Her skin is so pale the blush stands out like a beacon. My composure comes back little by little, and I make a show of studying her closely, up and down, as she fidgets.

"Turn around, love."

She winces but does as she's told. Being naked seems to have made her more compliant. She must feel incredibly vulnerable. I draw in a breath when I see the mess I made of her tight little arse. It's too early for real bruises to appear, but she's red all over, colors ranging from pale pink to a deep, painful shade.

In a day or two, she'll be blue and purple. Sitting is going to be painful for days. My

cock hardens even more, which I didn't think was possible, but I take it as a warning, too. She's a delicate little thing. I have to be careful not to break her. Sitting on that chair must have really hurt her, and she took it like a champ. She's tougher than she looks.

"You can turn around now."

"Gee, thanks." Some of her fire is coming back as she adjusts to being naked. I'm happy to see it. Her eyes widen as I unbutton my shirt and lay out the rules of the shower as I strip.

"When we get in the shower, you put your hands behind your head, under your hair, and spread your legs. You wait like that whilst I wash you."

She huffs. "I can manage that myself, thanks."

"You're not listening. This body—" I move my hand, tracing the length of her in the air. "—belongs to me. Sometimes I'll give you permission to touch it, but it's mine. You don't touch without my say so."

I wait for the explosion, but all I get is a dumbstruck stare. For someone completely alien to the master/slave dynamic, this must sound absolutely ridiculous. Soon, I'll have to pull out some tricks to make sure she realizes I'm serious.

My buttons are all done, and I shrug out of my shirt. If she'd been planning to say anything, whatever it was is lost as she stares, mouth dropping open. I can't help but smirk as I unbutton my jeans and slide them down, along with my boxers. My hard cock springs free, and her eyes widen even more.

"Fuck."

“Well, if that’s not the reaction every man wants, I don’t know what is.”

She shoots her eyes back to my face in a hurry, beetroot red. She’s practically glowing. Feeling like the smuggest bastard that ever walked the earth, I push past her into the huge shower cubicle and turn on the tap.

There are a lot of things that are better in England than America, but showers aren’t one of them. I’d die if I had to go back to the half-arsed lukewarm trickles they call showers over there. Hot water streams over me in a waterfall, and I rub my hands through my hair before beckoning to Quinn. Her gaze has slipped south again.

“In you come.”

She jumps and steps into the water, sighing as it hits her and turning so it’s against her back. It hits her hair, deepening the color. “Into position.”

She twists to look at me, frowning through the spray. “Really? It’s stupid.”

“Do you need another few minutes on your favorite chair?”

She shakes her head in disgust but raises her arms so they link at the back of her neck. It pushes her perky little tits toward me, and it’s all I can do to keep my hands off them. She opens her legs the tiniest fraction.

I tap her sore arse lightly, and she flinches. “Open your legs up properly. I need to get my hand in there to wash that beautiful cunt.”

She lets out a little whimper at the word. Very slowly, inch by inch, she shuffles her feet out until they’re a couple of feet apart.

She stays very still as I reach for the shower gel. It’s a floral-scented one. I picked up

something girly with Suzy in mind, thinking she wouldn't appreciate smelling like a bloke. I squeeze some onto my palms, set the bottle down, and get to work on Quinn.

I start at her belly, a relatively harmless area, soaping over the taut skin and around her back. My hands almost circle her waist. Then I move higher, getting to the zone I'm most interested in. I can't linger—this is supposed to be just a shower—but fuck, how I want to.

Her breasts disappear into my hands, just as I'd imagined they would, and I let myself roll her nipples between my soapy fingers. Her breathing turns shaky, and she mutters, "I think I'm clean enough there."

"I'll be the judge of that." I play with her for a little longer, but she's right. Just a shower. Plenty of time for more later. I force myself away from her breasts, up to her hair. What in the name of fuck am I supposed to do with this hair? Suzy has sensible brown hair, or did, until two days ago, so I bought normal shampoo. It might not work for Quinn.

"Your hair. Does it need something special?" I run my fingers through it, or try to. They stick. It's all tangled.

Quinn frowns up at me. "You're asking if you ought to buy special color-save shampoo? You do realize I'm your captive?"

I give up, extracting my fingers from the tangly mass. Maybe I didn't think this part through properly. "And I want you looking your best."

She shakes her head, then turns to study the bottles on the wire shelf with a critical eye. "These will do for now, but I need a much richer conditioner. My hair's dry as fuck."

Her eyes flick back to mine as she realizes what she said. Looking forward. Planning for the future. I make no effort to hide my grin. “Of course. Nothing but the best. We’ll order some tomorrow.”

She huffs and looks down.

With the help of her muttered directions, I manage to get her hair washed and conditioned. It takes bloody ages. I don’t know if I’ll be arsed doing this over and over again. She watches my efforts with a certain amused satisfaction and never once moves from the assigned position. Little brat almost seems to be enjoying herself.

Time to get things back on track. Without any warning, I crouch and slide my hand between her legs.

She yelps, snapping her legs together and lurching away. “Seriously?”

“My body. That means your pussy belongs to me, too. Wasn’t I clear?”

She doesn’t back down, straightening her spine. “I thought this was just a shower. You gave me the stupid scout salute, remember?”

“And it is. I’m just going to wash you. Back in position.”

She glares at me, and the moment stretches out before she relents. “Fine. Whatever.”

She steps back into position. I reach between her legs, just exploring. She’s smooth all over, and my fingers slide along her lips and graze over her entrance as she takes deep, shaky breaths. I don’t push inside—not yet—but make sure to graze her clit just to see her twitch. Tomorrow, I’ll have fun getting to know this area like the back of my fucking hand.



But not yet.

I pull my hand back and shut off the water. She blinks at me, droplets settling on her skin. Her body shivers, pent-up tension rippling out of her. She hadn't really believed I'd stop. She'll learn I always keep my word, no matter what.

I wrap her hand in mine and lead her out of the shower. A glance tells me her energy is fading. She's swaying on her feet as I wrap her in a towel.

She clutches it, relaxing as soon as she's covered. Poor thing doesn't realize how short-lived that will be. She'll always sleep naked in my bed.

She wobbles on her feet, so I pick her up. She doesn't fight me this time. Her head rests on my chest, and I stare into the bright pink mass of her wet hair as I carry her toward my bedroom.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Nine

#### Quinn

Jacob carries me into his bedroom, and I'm smacked in the face with the most bizarre sight I've ever seen. I close my eyes and open them to make sure I'm not seeing things. Nope, still there.

The bed is a massive gothic structure about the size of my whole bedroom. Four posters, carved into patterns of vines, and a red canopy to match the silky sheets. Where Dracula would ravish his victims before jumping in his coffin for a nap. It's as unlike the rest of the man-pad apartment as anything could be.

I'm so surprised by the bed it takes me a second to notice the additions. Metal restraints and leather cuffs are all around it, attached to the bottom corners and hanging from the tops of the posts.

When I manage to look at the rest of the room, my mouth slackens. There's equipment everywhere. A rack full of dildos and butt plugs. Another with all sorts of spanking implements. There are a couple of benches in different shapes and, over in one corner, a shiny metal cage. He pauses at the entrance and lets me take it all in.

"Was there a closing-down sale at a sex dungeon?" I manage to squeak out.

"All custom-made. Never used. You'll be the first to try it."

"Oh."

It's the most I can bring myself to say. The man is serious. He's been planning this for a long time. My eyes drift to the cage again, and I shiver. "Are you going to lock me in that thing?"

"Not tonight. That's for serious punishments, if you do something really bad."

He sets me on the bed. The silk sheets are slippery on my skin, but I keep the towel clutched tight. "What counts as really bad?"

"Endangering yourself. Lying to me. Touching yourself without permission."

Say what? He sits next to me, and the mattress dips under his weight. "Excuse me?"

"You don't touch yourself unless I tell you to. Only I decide when you get to come. It could be ten times a day or not for a month. My choice."

Not for a month? There's no way I'm going to follow that stupid rule. I smile sweetly. "Of course. I understand."

His snort tells me he's not fooled, but who cares? That's one thing he'll never stop me doing.

"Right. Towel off." He holds out his hand.

"Do you have pajamas for me?"

"Of course not." He waits, and after a moment, I unwrap the towel and hand it over. He's already seen me naked, so what's the point of getting shitty about it? He uses the towel to rub the worst of the water off my hair.

"That'll have to do for tonight. You need to sleep. Lie down." He taps the pillow, and

I realize all over again how exhausted I am. I lay my head on it, the silk cool beneath my cheek, and watch as he carefully hangs the wet towel up in the adjoining bathroom.

Jesus fucking Christ, his body. I didn't realize actual humans could look like that. He's like some old Greek statue of a god, muscles chiseled out of stone. Everything is in perfect proportion, from his massive shoulders down to his tree-trunk thighs. No wonder it hurt like hell when he spanked me. He could probably punch through a metal door.

I can't help but stare at his cock. That thing shouldn't be legal—a weapon of mass destruction. It's never going to fit.

And I have no choice in where it goes. A shudder runs through me as that knowledge clangs into place. He catches me looking again and smirks. I need to learn to keep my eyes on his goddamn face.

“Just lift your head up a bit, love. Need to get you fastened in.”

“What?”

He reaches behind me and pulls out a slim, circular restraint. Metal lined with soft red cushioning on the inside. “This is what you wear to sleep.”

“What? No!” I sit up, sleepiness banished.

“Quinn.” There's a heavy note of warning in his voice. “Don't be difficult. I'm not letting you wander around at night.”

“I won't go anywhere. I promise. I can't sleep in that thing.”

“You’ll get used to it. Come on. Last warning.”

I stare at the thing. Nope. Absolutely not. I launch off the bed, but Jacob is quicker. I swear he’s fucking psychic. His arm wraps around me and forces me back down to the pillow. I thrash, but he leans his weight on me, pinning me flat to the bed. I try to move, but I might as well be trapped under a car. Not an inch of movement.

I can’t stop him lifting my hair and wrapping the thing around my neck. I can’t stop it clicking shut. When it does, he sits up and watches as I claw at it, blood pounding in my ears.

If I’d felt trapped before, it’s a million times worse now. I fumble for a catch, but there isn’t one, as if he’s welded the fucking thing shut.

“How does it come off?” It’s a panicked shriek.

“It’s keyed to my thumbprint. Only I can open it. Don’t worry, though. I added a fail-safe. If something goes wrong and I die in my sleep, it opens itself after twelve hours.”

Was that supposed to be comforting? Though, if he did die in his sleep, maybe I could just use his thumb and get the hell out of here.

He lies down next to me in silence. I count the seconds, and little by little, my panic eases. I’m okay. It’s just another thing to deal with. “What if I need to pee?”

“Wake me up. I’m a very light sleeper.”

There’s a good idea. Wake him up every hour until he decides the stupid collar is too much hassle and takes it off. We lie in silence for another few minutes, and incredibly, my eyes grow heavy again.

Jacob tucks the covers over me and uses a remote to dim the lights. “Sleep well, love.”

Fat chance of that.

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What feels like seconds later, I wake up slowly. I throw my hand over my face and grumble. Sunlight? What the hell?

“Thank God. I thought you might sleep till midday.”

I yelp, eyes flying open as everything floods back. The kidnapping. Jacob. The fucking collar. I claw at my neck and find it still in place. “Get this thing off me!”

Jacob comes into view, already dressed in blue jeans and a white T-shirt that shows off his ridiculous arms. He sits on the bed and places his hand on my head, a gesture that is equal parts comforting and patronizing. “Shhh, love. Calm down. You slept for fourteen hours. Take a minute to wake up properly.”

Fourteen hours? How? I must be the best-rested kidnapping victim in the world. I take a few deep breaths, soaking in my miserable fucking reality. I’m here. Jacob is here. And this is the day I get out of this screwed-up place.

Jacob plays with my hair as he waits for me with his infinite patience, which is already pissing me the hell off. I take stock of myself. I need about a gallon of water, a toothbrush, and the restroom, but other than that, I’m okay.

For some reason, I’m not surprised. Jacob doesn’t seem the sort to sneak around being creepy while I’m sleeping. “I’m okay. I just need the bathroom.”

“No problem. One quick lesson first. Each morning, you ask me to release you.” He bends down, emerald eyes serious. “‘Please release me.’ That’s all.”

“That’s stupid. I’m not saying that.”

“Then you’ll be here a while.”

I grit my teeth and survey my options. I can’t make an escape plan from here. He’s probably hoping I’ll give him an excuse to torture me with something. Make me piss the bed or something weird like that. I’m not going to give him the satisfaction.

“Please release me, my great and powerful lord,” I say in the most sugary, fake voice I can muster. Malicious compliance is my favorite method of pissing people off. Like the time the boss complained we were dressing too scruffily at work, so I bought a thrift store ballgown and wore it for three days straight.

A tight breath escapes him, and I find myself chewing my lip as his eyes darken. He liked hearing that, even though it was phony. Something dangerous shifts beneath the calm front he does such a good job of presenting.

But then it’s gone, and he shoots out a hand to release the catch on the collar. It clicks open, and I moan in relief. I rub at my neck as I sit up. Jacob waves a hand at the bathroom door. “Go. I’ll sort breakfast.”

He’ll do what? My image of him keeps shifting. He still feels every bit the gangster, competent and dangerous. I can’t picture him as a scientist at all. And there are random domestic moments like this, where he seems way too normal for comfort. Just a guy making breakfast for his sex slave.

He strides off toward the kitchen, not worried about leaving me by myself. What if I find a weapon and use it to incapacitate him and escape? Unlikely. But the fact he's

so unconcerned is kind of insulting.

I rush to the bathroom and take care of all the vital stuff, then wrap myself in a towel and spend ten minutes searching the bedroom for weapons. All the spanking implements are locked away, so unless I'm going to beat him to death with a dildo—some of which are really fucking large—I'm out of luck.

No luck in the bathroom, either. The smell of bacon wafts in, driving me crazy, so I move before he can order me to breakfast. I pass through the living room, following the scent to the kitchen. The door stands open, and I pause, thrown by what I see.

The kitchen has off-white walls and black granite surfaces. It's big by apartment standards and insanely clean. Not what I'd expect for a man living by himself. A six-seater wooden table takes up most of the dining area.

It's set for two, but the spread could be a hotel breakfast. Piled plates of bacon and sausages, a heap of eggs, and a giant bowl of chopped fruit. Chocolate croissants. A pot of coffee.

Jacob stands at the sink, washing his hands. He smiles at me when he turns, and the expression is strange on his stern face. I wave a hand at the table and make a show of looking around. “Are we expecting guests? The Dallas Cowboys, maybe?”

Jacob scoffs. “This? I'll be hungry again in an hour. Don't be polite. Get stuck in.”

He seats himself and does just that, piling food on his plate and eating it with the dedication of a man that takes food seriously. I've never been much of a chef, surviving on whatever I can swipe from the shitty catering jobs I work. After serving people sandwiches all day, the last thing I feel like doing is cooking.

I sit, tucking the towel in so it doesn't fall. This doesn't make sense. At least the



kinky furniture and collar fit with my idea of what a depraved captor should do. If I'd guessed at what meals would entail, I'd have said getting fed from a dog bowl or something ridiculous. This is too normal, as if he's about to tell me it's all been a mistake and send me home.

The smell of the bacon is getting to me, and I can't resist anymore. I stack some onto my plate along with a croissant. I nibble on it—just the right amount of crispness—watching Jacob demolish his food and go back for seconds. He frowns at my plate. “That's not all you're having. Don't you like the food?”

For some reason, I don't want to offend him. “It's lovely. I'm a really slow eater.”

“Take all the time you need.”

He dives back into his meal, oblivious to just how fucking awkward this is. I should be peppering him with questions. Where am I? What in the hell does he plan to do with me? How many other captives are here? Eve is one. Maybe I should try and get some time with her to see if she's made any plans to escape.

I finish the food on my plate and reach for some fruit. Jacob gives an approving nod. It's patronizing enough that it needles me into speaking. “Where am I? And don't just say ‘The Compound.’ I know that. Like where, specifically.”

“I'll show you on a map later.”

His answer unsettles me. No evasion. No “That's classified.” Happy to show me on a map. It's a very clear message that he doesn't think I'm getting out of here.

And who the hell has real paper maps anymore?

Jacob stands and starts to clear the plates. There's an ingrained polite part of me that

wants to jump up and help, to thank him for breakfast and tell him it was delicious. But fuck that. I'm his sex slave, not his maid. He can wash his own plates.

He does, tidying everything away with precision that has to mean either a military background or an OCD diagnosis. The more I watch him, the more likely the military angle seems. My foster dad served, and he was just as finicky about cleanliness. He could never relax after dinner until every dish was washed, dried, and put away.

Just as Jacob finishes his whirlwind cleaning mission, his cell phone rings. He frowns and holds it to his ear. "Hello?"

I can't hear the other end of the call, but his eyes widen, and he strides out of the room. I ghost after him as he heads into the bedroom and shuts the door behind him. I can't make anything out, even with my ear pressed to the smooth wood.

A few minutes later, I almost fall over as he wrenches the door open. He snorts as I regain my feet. Smoothly done.

"Change of plan, love. I'm sorry. I didn't want to leave you alone today, but something's come up. I'll be sending a babysitter your way soon, so don't get any ideas."

"What? Who?" Surely it won't be Brackis. "And I don't have any clothes."

"Shit," he mutters under his breath and strides off, reappearing with my grimy outfit from last night. "Not ideal, but I don't have time to sort out anything else. Get dressed. I have to go."

"Wait. What babysitter?"

"Someone safe. Don't worry."

“Safe? What the fuck does that—”

Before I can finish, he grabs my shoulders, spins me around so my back is locked against his chest, and wraps his hand around my mouth, gagging me. He loosens my towel, and it falls to the ground as he holds me tight.

“You’re going to be a good girl whilst I’m gone. I’ll get a full report on your behavior, and you’ll pay for any disobedience. Nod if you understand.”

I’m frozen for a second, then my brain kicks into gear. Whoever he sends to watch me can’t be as scary as him. If I want to get out of here, this is my best chance. Slowly, I nod against his hand as my eyes scan the living room. There has to be something I can use as a weapon.

### Chapter Ten

Jacob

The eyes of the creepy old paintings in the initiates' building follow me as I walk away from Quinn. Every step makes me more uneasy. Leaving any brand-new Ward alone at this point would be a bad move, but with Quinn, it's a disaster. I call Gabriel for the third time as I exit the building.

This time, he answers, sounding breathless. "Hello?"

"Put some bloody clothes on and get over to my place. Kendrick's called me to an emergency meeting, and Quinn's by herself."

"What? Okay, I'll be a few minutes. I'll bring Eve. She liked Quinn."

"That's the reason I rang you three fucking times instead of just calling Seb. Try and keep her happy. I put a code on the door for you. Three, six, nine, eight. Got it?"

"Sure." There's a long pause as I take a second to breathe in the cold air. "How's it going so far?"

Gabriel sounds dubious, and I don't blame him. He'd been obsessed with Eve for months by the time he took her. The idea of me taking a random stranger horrified him. I angle toward Kendrick's office. "She's a spitfire, but honestly, I think I like it."

"Okay. I'll go get ready. Good luck with Kendrick."

I reach main admin and summon the lift. The big man's office is on the top floor, always guarded by two of the Gilda. When the elevator doors slide open, the two young guards wave me straight through.

Kendrick's office reminds me of an old stately home I visited on a school trip as a kid, except that place was falling into disrepair. Kendrick's office is pristine, from the carved doors to the rich carpet to the shiny suit of armor that stands behind his desk.

Seb nicknamed it "Sir Fucksalot," and now, every time I visit Kendrick, the stupid name is all I can think about.

Three men wait in Kendrick's office. The man himself, a young nerdy chap I'm pretty sure is part of the IT support team, and Hadrian Glass. He joined a couple of months after I did, but I haven't spent much time with him. He's working on secretive AI projects and is supposed to be a bit of a dick.

This group makes no sense. I'd expected the Gilda, and Brackis in particular, to be the subject of this meeting. I have no idea what these people have to do with me and am instantly wary. Kendrick doesn't do anything without good reason.

I take the remaining seat. Kendrick, as usual, doesn't waste time with small talk. "Jacob, thanks for coming. I know the timing is poor, so I'll make this as brief as possible. Brody, please explain what you've found."

The young guy clears his throat and turns to me. His skin still has a few pimples, though his hairline is already receding. Poor bastard got the shit end of both those sticks. "Mr. West. As part of my role, I monitor all internet chatter about anything Brotherhood related. Last night, you were everywhere, and not in a good way."

He takes a nervous sip of water and glances at Kendrick before continuing.

“It’s one of the most severe coordinated smear campaigns I’ve ever encountered. Across message boards, social media, anywhere people know your name. Fabricated evidence of you engaging in foul behavior. Using racist and homophobic language. Making inappropriate comments to young girls.”

My hand clenches into a fist, and I force myself to relax it. My mind tracks over all the possible perpetrators and struggles to find one. Plenty of people hate me, but none of them would have the skills to do something like that, or the money to pay someone else to.

“What actions have you taken to remove it? And do you have a lead on the perpetrator?”

Brody’s tense shoulders relax. He’d probably been scared I’d bite his head off. “We’re working on removing it, sir, but—”

“That’s why I’m here,” Hadrian cuts in. He’s around my age, late thirties, but he looks tired. Like the world gave him a kicking.

“Social media is the best proving ground for my creations. They’re currently running around ten thousand accounts each, all through a secure, limited server. I don’t let them access the open internet yet.”

“Your creations?”

Hadrian frowns. “Apologies, I forget you’re not familiar with my work. I’m creating cybernetic intelligence. The CIs, they call themselves.”

Call themselves? They’re coming up with their own names?

Hadrian turns to Kendrick. “Travis passed the Turing test last week. The first of the

males to do so, though none of the others come close to Candice, of course.”

I still feel lost, and it’s grating on me. “Candice?”

“Yes. My prodigy. The most advanced CI ever created.”

Every word screams proud parent , and it makes me shiver. Give me a human to tinker with any day of the week.

Kendrick graces Hadrian with a rare smile. “His work is truly groundbreaking.”

At the Brotherhood, we’re all about pushing boundaries, but I have strong reservations about true cybernetic intelligence. Any sane person should. I shoot a glance between Kendrick and Hadrian. “Sane” might be a bit optimistic in the Compound.

Hadrian turns back to me. “Anyway, back to your issue. Whoever did this used a very sophisticated method to flame you. I have my creations working to counteract the allegations and get some leads on where the point of origin is. We should be able to narrow it down.”

I nod, and Kendrick asks the question I knew was coming. “Do you have any suspicions as to who might be to blame?”

I take some time to run through the possible options. The most obvious is a jealous competitor. I’m well ahead of the pack in my field of life extension research, and unlike most of the Brotherhood, I don’t keep my identity hidden. I spend a lot of my time educating promising young students.

But the level of spite involved has a personal feel. A competitor might try and discredit me academically, but would they go as far as destroying my personal

reputation? Just thinking about it has my jaw clenching. I'm glad Grandad doesn't have a phone.

The other, more worrying option is an enemy from my army days. I have a few of them, but this doesn't feel like the approach they'd take either. I'd be more worried about a sniper's bullet in my back.

"Not at this stage. Have you considered the Calder family?"

Bottom-feeding tech thieves, the Calders are desperate to steal Brotherhood research. Kendrick shakes his head. "It wouldn't make sense. They have the resources, but where do they stand to gain? Everything they do is for profit."

I consider it. "Agreed. So we have no leads. I'd like to examine some of the posts."

"Of course. This is going to be a distasteful process for you. Brody?"

Brody jumps, reaches under his seat, and extracts a laptop. "Yes, sir. Just give me—"

My mobile rings. Gabriel's number. Shit. What the hell has happened? Gabriel's words spit out of the phone. "Jacob. Quinn fucking attacked Eve."

Heat spreads through me, starting at my pounding heart and spreading to the tips of my fingers. I want to stand, pace, smash my fist into Kendrick's desk. Instead, I manage to keep my voice level. "Is Eve okay?"

"Yes, no thanks to your crazy fucking Ward. You need to—"

"Gabriel. Where are the three of you now?"

"Still at your place. I used two sets of your handcuffs to restrain Quinn because she



wouldn't calm the hell down and I needed to look after Eve." He pauses, and his voice sounds more like his normal self when he adds, "That's quite the collection of equipment you have."

I can picture the shocked look on his face when he saw my bedroom. I've kept everyone out of there until now.

"Tell me what happened."

"I got a call just as we got to your door. I took it, and Eve opened the door before I could stop her. She was excited to see Quinn." There's a hurt, reproachful note in his voice, and it gets to me. I really like Eve.

"I told her to wait, but you know what she's like. She thought I was being ridiculous and opened the door anyway. Quinn smacked her in the head with your toaster and ran for it. I dragged her back inside, kicking and scratching. She's insane."

Shit. I can see exactly how it played out. The bloody toaster. "I'm sorry, Gabriel. It's my fault. I should have left her tied up."

"You should have! Eve's got an icepack on her head now, but I want to take her to medical."

I open my mouth to say I'll be right there when a better idea hits me. It's important Quinn learns her actions have consequences, and that I'm not going to let her control my day. Medical is on the ground floor of main admin, right where we are now.

"Can I ask you one more favor? I'll owe you."

A long pause, and Gabriel sighs. "No. You don't. What do you need?"

“Can you carry Quinn? She weighs fuck all. Keep her in the restraints, and there’s something I need you to get from my bedroom.”

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Ten minutes later, a Gilda guard opens the door. “Sir? The people you mentioned are here.”

Quinn’s voice fills the room. “Put me fucking down! I can walk, you bastard. Let me...”

Her stream of insults and curses continues as Gabriel enters looking as pissed off as I’ve ever seen him. He has Quinn over his shoulder, her legs gripped tight as she struggles as best she can with her ankles bound and her hands locked behind her back. He marches over and dumps her on the carpet next to my chair.

“Good fucking luck with her. Eve is in medical, so I need to go. And here.” He holds out the item I asked him to collect. “You’ll need this.”

I have to raise my voice to be heard over Quinn. “Thanks, mate. I’ll send Eve over something nice to say sorry.”

Gabriel gives me a tight smile in response, nods to Kendrick, and leaves.

Kendrick and Hadrian watch Quinn with mild interest as she twists about on the floor, trying to get herself upright. Brody, the young chap, looks like his eyes are about to fall out of his head. Part of me wants to smack and tell him to keep his eyes where they belong.

The other part of me knows an audience will make this much worse for Quinn. All three men agreed to this, and it means we can still get this bloody meeting finished.

This day already feels like it's been a year long.

"Sorry, gentlemen. I'll just shut that noise up." I hold up the gag I had Gabriel collect for me right in front of Quinn's face.

She shuts up instantly, eyes going round as she stares at the thing. It's a ball gag, with a large ball designed to be messy and uncomfortable. She'll be drooling uncontrollably.

She knows it, too, because she shakes her head and says in a polite voice, "I'll be quiet."

"I don't care what you've got to say for yourself. You hurt Eve, and you're going to be punished for it."

She winces. "I didn't know it was her. I thought it'd be one of those goons"—she nods toward the door—"so I—"

I don't wait for her to finish. Grabbing a chunk of her hair, I force the gag into place and cinch it tightly shut. She shakes her head, trying to dislodge it, and a pitiful whine comes from her mouth. Her lips are spread wide, in a frozen O shape, and fuck if it doesn't send a jolt straight to my cock.

When we get home, she's going to do something about that.

All the careful training plans I had in place for Suzy are crumbling. As I pick Quinn up like a doll and settle her face down over my lap, reality starts to sink in. Quinn isn't going to kneel for me and smile. She'd probably headbutt me in the crotch or bite my dick off.

She's going to need the firmest hand possible, and I can't let my guard down for a

second. The prospect should be depressing but my blood is pounding in my ears, and I have to ask Kendrick to repeat himself. “Sorry, sir?”

“No need to apologize. I asked if you’re ready to continue the meeting.”

I lift Quinn’s skirt up and slide her knickers down, baring her arse to every eye in the room. She goes crazy on my knee, bucking and mumbling. I’d been right. She hates having an audience. The red mottling on her arse and thighs has started to darken to purple, and the effect on her pale skin is stunning.

This is really going to hurt, but too bad. She needs to learn.

I land a savage slap as I answer Kendrick. “Of course.”

My hand has left a beautiful print on her, and it’s hard to tear my eyes off it and back to the laptop balanced on Kendrick’s desk. Brody coughs, manages to unglue his gaze from Quinn’s arse, and starts going through all the false posts made in my name.

I bring my hand down again, this time on the other cheek. Quinn jerks, kicking her legs and flailing her head. As Brody switches to another post, I lean down and whisper, “We’re going to thirty. Every single time you fight me, you get five more. Don’t test me on this, Quinn. I was gentle with you yesterday. Now, I don’t give two shits if you can’t sit without pain for a month.”

She goes very still, my warning hitting its mark. Brody stammers for a moment, then carries on with his presentation.

The flood of posts is disturbing. Almost disturbing enough to distract me from the way Quinn’s little body shudders each time I bring my hand down and the pathetic mewling noises that make it past her gag. Her saliva is soaking my jeans, and if I’m not mistaken, there are some tears there, too.

Usually, I'd feel bad about that, but the image of her smashing a toaster into poor Eve's head is too fresh for any sympathy to sneak through. She's going to cry today.

The posts all have one thing in common—they're personal and aimed at subjects that disgust me rather than just things that would outrage the public.

The young girls "I" made sexual remarks to all resemble my little sister. The black footballer "I" called a monkey is the star striker for West Ham, my favorite team. The disabled gay soldier "I" called a useless faggot was in my old army regiment.

The person who did this either knows me well or has researched the things that would hurt me the most. Either way, it's a fucked-up situation.

I look down to check on Quinn. She's limp across my knees now, sniffing constantly. Her skin is bright red all over again. I rest my hand on her arse, and even that makes her twitch. "That's fifteen. Halfway there."

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm*

### Chapter Eleven

#### Quinn

I don't know what's worse—being on display in front of three men and a nerd who looks like he's here for work experience, the way my jaw aches from the gag and the gross spit drips out of my mouth, or the red-hot landscape of agony that used to be my ass.

Yesterday might as well have been a play spanking. This hurts on another level, deep into my bones. The skin was already tender and bruised. Now it doesn't feel like skin at all, just a mass of scorching fire. His hand lands again, and I can't stop the muffled sob that works its way out. Please, just make it stop.

How many was that? It was fifteen a while ago, wasn't it? My brain can't count any more.

Or maybe the worst thing is the gnawing guilt about hurting Eve. By the time I realized it was her, it was too late. I was already swinging the toaster. Of course it had to be the fancy sort, heavy stainless steel, not the cheap plastic piece of shit I have at home. I managed to ease off on the speed of the swing but not stop it.

If I'd connected with the force I meant to, I could have cracked her skull.

That grisly image keeps flashing in my brain as Jacob lands yet another heavy swat. Fuck! That has to be thirty now, right? Surely?

I thought Gabriel would kill me, so I ran for it and fought as best I could. But no, of course he just delivered me to Jacob.

Another earth-shattering slap brings fresh tears to my eyes, and I fight the urge to struggle with everything I have left. I can't take five more. I'd fucking die.

Suddenly, he's lifting me up. What the hell is it with him and carrying me around? I've got legs. I can use them. I start to wriggle but then catch myself. My pride is starting to crack under the assault of his damn hand.

Is this really all it takes to break me? No. Fuck that. I'll still fight, but maybe not right now. My poor ass is a beacon, raw and pulsing. It needs a break, and so do I.

Jacob lowers me to my feet, careful and deliberate as ever. Will he fuck the same way? Carefully counted, measured strokes? The ridiculous thought brings forth a hysterical laugh, and for once, I'm glad of the gag. I would have sounded like a mental case.

Once I'm balanced, Jacob issues more instructions in that irritating, calm way he has. "You're going to stand here, quietly, in the corner until we finish our meeting. Stay facing the wall, or it's another thirty. Nod if you understand."

Another thirty? I almost wet myself at the thought. How am I going to fight against this man? All he has to do is threaten me with the palm of his goddamn hand.

I nod and twitch my foot, mumbling and trying to bring his attention to my panties, which are still around my ankles. I can't pull them up because of my bound hands, and standing here with them like that, in front of people, will be just about unbearable.

He crouches, touching the cotton. "Did you want me to pull these up for you?"

There's a note in his voice I don't like, but I mumble my assent anyway. He gives a low chuckle, and it has a dangerous edge that makes me picture a British gangster in an old movie I saw once. He laughed with his victims before slashing their faces with his razor blade.

"No, they can stay right there. And—" He lifts my skirt up, tucking it in at the waist so my whole ass is on display. "—I want to make sure everyone gets a good look at your lovely bruised arse."

I whip my head up to glare at him. Fuck, I wish I was six feet tall with one of those Amazonian, ripped figures. I wish I could look him in the face instead of breaking my neck just to see him.

He smiles down at me, and my face heats. I'm vibrating, I'm so damn furious. But any reaction equals another session over his knee. The frustration of it, the pure fucking helplessness, boils up, and I turn away quickly as a sob forces its way out.

Screw him.

Screw this.

Screw standing here, four pairs of eyes glued to my ass while I cry in the corner.

He grips my chin, turning my face up to his. Deliberately, he pulls a handkerchief—not a tissue, an actual goddamn cotton handkerchief—out of his back pocket and uses it to wipe the tears and drool off my face.

There's a drawn-out moment when I don't know whether to feel grateful or even more furious. Then he releases my chin and turns back to his colleagues. "Now. What else do I need to see?"



Their meeting drones on, and I try to focus on what they're saying to gather useful info, but I keep slipping in and out of awareness. The throbbing in my ass, the effort of standing here motionless, and the pure shame of how exposed I am overwhelms my brain and turns the words to mush.

It sounds like someone lied about Jacob on the internet, and someone else is going to try and fix it. What lies could be worse than the truth? What would the world think if they knew all these scientists were holding women prisoner?

Even as I think it, I realize hardly anyone would give a shit. Women disappear every day, and it barely makes the news. The cops are probably all in on it, taking a nice juicy cut. When I get out of here, I'm not going near the police. I'll have to find a new name and turn myself into a ghost.

It's not like I'd be leaving much behind anyway.

God, I sound mopey and pathetic. Enough. A new start would be good—somewhere exciting, like Asia. I've wanted to travel forever but never managed to save up the cash. When I get out of here, I'll do whatever it takes. I'll steal what I need and fuck off forever.

It's a nice fantasy, and it keeps me going as the stupid men finish their meeting, then take another long while sitting together and drinking. Chatting about bullshit. My embarrassment about the position I'm in gradually fades; it doesn't feel like they're paying attention to me anyway. I can't hear the young guy's voice anymore, so he's probably gone.

Instead of worrying about my ass, I'm now worrying about the gag and how uncomfortable it's getting. I just want to close my mouth and relieve the ache in my jaw. And Christ, I need to wipe away the drool. It's all down my face, so gross I want to scream. Why do people find these things sexy?

My ears prick up when I hear the big boss ask Jacob about me.

“How are you progressing with Quinn? Nasty business this morning. I’m not convinced she’s the right choice for you, Jacob. Given the unusual circumstances, I believe I can still let you change your mind. We can call these next few days a trial period, even though it’s highly unorthodox.”

I hold my breath, waiting for his answer and unsure what I want to hear. Jacob has to be the most difficult person to escape in this whole damn place. If he decides I’m too much trouble, I might get given to someone easier to deal with.

But at the same time, the other men make my skin crawl in a way Jacob doesn’t. Any of them seeing me naked would make me want to spew my guts up. Jacob? I can handle it. Some twisted part of me might even enjoy it, if he’d just stop fucking punishing me.

“No, I’m keeping her.” There’s not a single bit of hesitation in his voice. “She’s a pain in the arse, but I’m having fun training her. I’ll make her into a good girl yet.”

A shivery feeling of satisfaction passes right through me at his words, followed by dismay when they hit my brain. There’s to be no easy escape, then. No old guy I’d eat for breakfast. If I want my freedom, I’ll need to outthink Jacob.

When the men finally finish their chat, which I’m sure Jacob drew out just to make me suffer, he thanks the others and returns to my side. He studies me up and down, a small smile on his lips, but there’s darkness in his eyes that makes my stomach turn over, the green a deep forest shade.

He whispers, “You look so fucking sexy standing there like that. Like a well-behaved little slut.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Even if I could speak, I'd have nothing to say to that. I should be pissed off by his words, but the way he said them is full of rough need. I hadn't even thought he'd been looking at me. Maybe I was wrong.

His smile widens as I stare up at him, trapped by his gaze. "What, no furious glare? No attempted headbutt? I didn't think you'd be this easy to break. A little spanking and some corner time." He shakes his head. "So easy."

Oh, hell no. He's trying to provoke me, and it's working, but I need to keep myself on a leash. He's probably got some horrible punishment planned for the next time I mess up and is excited to try it out. He has to be kidding with his "a little spanking." What the hell would count as a lot?

Without warning, he hoists me up over his shoulder. Yet again. He hasn't pulled my panties up or my skirt down, so everything is on view. I try really, really hard not to care—why do I need to worry about what these assholes think?—but it doesn't quite work. I mumble at Jacob through my gag, but he just laughs.

"You'll get your dignity back when you learn to behave."

Screw him. In revenge, I wipe my face on his shirt. Ha.

He squeezes my ass, and I yelp as it reignites the pain. "Nice try, but I don't mind a little bodily fluid."

Again, I give a little shiver at the gravel in his voice. There's a distinct "Playtime's over" feel to Jacob as he strides out of his boss's office and into the elevator. As if whatever grace period I was going to get before he enforced the sex slave part of this relationship has expired. Maybe because of what I did to Eve, or maybe just because he's had enough.

The elevator moves down, and I hope with everything I have that no one else will get on, but am I ever that lucky? Nope. Maybe it's close to lunchtime, because it stops at what feels like every fucking floor, filling with people.

I'm a coward. Instead of glaring at the freaks surrounding me, I close my eyes and tuck my face against Jacob's back. The drool I wiped there is nice and damp right against my face. Lovely.

No one comments on my predicament. The silence only highlights how messed-up this place is. No one cares that I'm here, and no one is going to help. These people must be so used to captive women getting carted about like dolls that it doesn't even warrant a question.

Finally, we're free and out into the crispy air again. I breathe it in. I've always preferred the outdoors. I used to drag Marlowe camping with me sometimes though she never really liked it. Back then, things were good.

Dad—no, Marlowe's dad, I remind myself—used to love it, and sometimes, just the two of us would go. He'd fish while I climbed trees or bugged him to make a fire so we could toast marshmallows. Even as adults, we'd still plan the odd hike. Until the crash.

I open my eyes, grounding myself in the present and driving away the memory. Even being trapped here with a psycho is better than remembering that day. Does Jacob like camping? Probably. He has that feel to him, though he'd probably bring a fancy tent and spend three hours setting it up perfectly. I prefer just to throw up something quickly and start drinking.

Maybe we can go camping on the golf course. Light a fire and play truth or dare.

Shit, my mind is spinning off like a pinball. I stare at Jacob's feet as we cross the

threshold into his building. Each step feels like it's bringing me closer to doom, and my stomach tangles itself into knots as he opens the door.

The first thing I see as we enter is the toaster I hit Eve with. It stares at me, accusing, on its side next to the door. Jacob touches it with his foot and flips it up the right way. He sets me down, balancing me on my feet.

“Now. What shall I do with you?”

### Chapter Twelve

Jacob

That little session in Kendrick's office took all my self-control and then some. I can't get enough of the way Quinn looks at me. Like she wants to laser a hole right through my skull.

She probably does after what I did to her. Nowhere in my perfectly constructed training plan was there a section for exposing her like that, and especially not in Kendrick's bloody office. But fuck me if it wasn't fun.

Something about making that mouthy little girl shake with rage was an electric shock direct to my cock. I couldn't decide between dragging her back here right away or making her stand there for hours getting angrier each second.

Now, her eyes are wary. She watches me as I head to the bedroom, extract the key to her cuffs from its spot in my top drawer, and unfasten her wrists and ankles. She rubs her wrists as I wait to see if she remembers what she's supposed to do.

A few seconds later, I see the moment the realization hits. Her eyes land on the wooden chair, and she runs to it. I stifle a smile. This is supposed to be serious. She doesn't need to know how much I'm enjoying myself.

She steels herself, and just as she starts to sit, I call out, "Skirt up. Bare arse to the wood."

A new rule, but I love the way her cheeks turn pink. Humiliating her is almost as good as spanking her, and she more than deserves it. Today, she deserves everything she gets.

She glares at me, a bit of her fire returning. It never stays doused for long. But the fear of being locked to the chair again must still be fresh, as she does as she's told, lifting the back of her skirt and very carefully lowering herself to the hard wood.

She winces as her arse touches the seat. It must be bloody sore. Her jaw must be aching by now, too. She's a tough little thing, and she settles her weight on the seat without any tears.

That gag is making a beautiful mess of her face, and the way it stretches her lips is giving me all the ideas under the sun. Christ. My erection is about to tear through my jeans. I crouch beside her and watch, letting her sit until she starts to squirm.

I can't wait any longer. It's been over a year since I've had a woman, and all the yoga and meditation I've done to keep control are crumbling to dust. It's starting to sink in that Quinn belongs to me. I told her I'd use her as I wanted, and she still picked me. I can put that mouth to work however I choose.

Something holds me back, though. There's no satisfaction in just shoving myself down her throat. A better idea strikes me, and this time, I don't hide my smile.

I crouch, looking her in the eyes. "When you behave badly, it reflects onto me. You made me look bad today, and I still need to punish you. Maybe I'll leave that gag on until tomorrow. What do you think? Take it off just long enough for you to drink and eat, then lock you back in. Seems fair to me."

She shakes her head, frantic, as I knew she would. "And you can spend a couple of hours strapped to your chair, to give you plenty of time to think. Maybe with a nice

big plug stretching that tight little arse of yours. Sound good?"

She's making noises now, wild whimpers of panic. Watching her, I know how unfair I'm being, but I can't seem to make myself stop. Putting her through this punishment would be almost as entertaining as the lifeline I'm about to throw her to escape it.

There's a wild buzz in my head. The cage inside me is rattling. Quinn brings out the worst in me, and I need to keep control, or I'll break her. My voice croaks when I speak.

"Or you can make it up to me. You can get on your knees, right now, and swallow my cock. Then you get no gag and no chair for the rest of the day. Unless you fuck up again."

She goes very still and silent. Her gaze roams my face, then shoots to the door. Nope. No help is coming, Quinn, you're stuck with me.

"Stay quiet, and it's the punishment. If you want my cock, make some noise and let me know. Beg me for it through the gag."

She'll hate that. But will her pride force her to choose hours of suffering instead? The scientist in me is keen to know the answer. But the part that's in charge now just really, really wants those lips around my cock.

She stays silent.

I let it go long enough to be sure it's a real answer, then shrug as if it's no big deal. "No problem, love. I'll get the plug."

I stand, moving toward the bedroom. Just as I set off, a little noise has me turning back, head cocked. Her eyes are down, her cheeks bright red. She mumbles again,



this time a little louder.

Oh, thank fuck. Thank fuck for that.

I don't let my relief show, though. "Too late."

I turn back to the bedroom. The loud, desperate mumble she lets out next is music to my ears. I pause again. "What did you say?"

Another mumble. I turn back. "I'll take the gag off so you can ask me nicely for what you want. Make me believe it, or else it's back on with the gag."

She shifts on her seat as I unfasten the gag and let it drop to the ground. She sighs in relief, then scrubs the sleeve of her hoodie over her face and works her jaw.

That's a good point, actually. That hoodie has to go. "Arms up," I snap.

She frowns, obviously confused, but complies. I bend, ripping the hoodie off her, followed by the crop top and the bra. This is the last time she'll wear these. She's mine now. I want all traces of the outside world gone. She yelps and covers her breasts, but it feels more like an automatic reaction than genuine shyness. She didn't seem too worried about being naked earlier.

I admire her again. The slim curve of her neck and her lips, all pouty and swollen from the gag. She swallows, and I'm sure she's thirsty, but that can wait until she's done what she needs to do. Her hands fall away from her perky little tits, and she stares up at me, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Go ahead," I prompt, coming to stand right in front of her so she has to crane her head up to look at me. "What were you trying to say?"

The angry light is back in her eyes, and she stiffens her spine as she clears her throat. Then, staring right at me, she barks out, “I want your cock.”

It’s said in the least sexy way possible, as if she’s shouting at a stupid underling at work, not requesting something of the man who owns her. I almost laugh but hold it in. “I’m sorry, what would you like to do?”

There it is again, that amazing little shiver that runs through her whole body. I can almost feel the rage and helplessness that must be causing it. Every part of this girl wants to tear me to shreds right now, but instead, she has to suck my cock. Fuck.

The dark beast deep in my heart roars at the unfairness of it. At the power I have over her. I try to remember why I ever wanted a sweet, submissive girl, but the reasons elude me. This is better. This is so much better.

She gives me the sassy look that is her armor and comes out with the same overly sweet voice she used earlier. “Oh please, let me suck your great and glorious cock, my lord.”

She’s practically begging to be punished.

Enough playing.

I rip down the zip of my jeans, pull my cock free, and take her hair in a firm grip. I’d said I wanted her on her knees, but the punishment chair has her mouth at the perfect height. It’s almost better. The longer she takes to get me off, the longer she has to sit on her poor bruised arse. Extra motivation to do a good job.

I grip my cock in my fist and rub it over her lips but control her head so she can’t get started yet. “Ask me nicely, without that sarcastic fucking attitude. Do it, or you don’t get this, and I punish you instead.”

I don't even know if I'm capable of pulling back at this point, but it doesn't matter. She'll do as she's fucking told.

Her eyes are wide, pupils blown out like saucers as her eyes track the length of my cock. Christ, I'll fill up her throat. She locks eyes with me again. Brave girl. Her voice only shakes a little as she spits out, "Please may I suck your cock?"

Said with venom, and I should pull her on it, but I just can't. I need this so badly my legs are starting to shake. "Since you asked so nicely, you may. Open up."

She bites her lip one more time, then spreads her lips wide.

I don't loosen my grip on her hair, using it as a handle to shift her head into just the right position. Then I thrust into her throat. A panicked gurgle comes from her as I fill her right up, working myself in slowly to the hilt. I can see the outline of myself in her straining throat, and fuck, if it isn't the most perfect thing I've ever seen.

I hold there until she starts to gag, then pull out, giving her a moment to splutter and breathe. Then I drive back in. There's no need to be gentle. This is a punishment, so I'll use her like the little fuck toy she is. I'm not giving her any control over this, not a fraction of ability to move. I hold her tight and force myself into her again and again.

Tears pour from her eyes from the repeated gagging, and I shorten her breaks as I find a rhythm. Just enough for her to take a single, ragged breath, then another few thrusts. Her eyes are wide, and her nose is starting to run.

Christ, I love this.

She's lucky I'm so worked up and desperate, because usually, I can make things last a long time. Watching her struggle is fucking beautiful. Her eyes are hazy, and I feel

the moment she gives in to me and accepts my control.

She breathes when I allow it. My cock goes where I want it to. Her face softens as she relaxes into this, letting me use her.

Sooner than I'd like, though it probably felt like an eternity for Quinn, I feel my orgasm start to build. Where to finish? A difficult decision when there are so many tempting options.

I can't hold off anymore. I surrender to the pleasure, letting it surge through me, and groan as I shoot straight down her pretty throat. Fuck yes. My knees shake with the force of it, and my vision goes blank as the aftershocks rage along my limbs. Intense doesn't begin to cover it.

Quinn is spluttering, trying to swallow around my cock. I'm in no hurry to allow it, so I hold her there, smiling down at her. I run my free hand through her sweaty hair.

"See. I told you I'd turn you into a good girl."

### Chapter Thirteen

#### Quinn

Holy fucking fuck. What the hell was that? I thought I'd chosen the easy option. My eyes and nose stream, my throat burns like I've gargled with lava, and his cock is still jammed down my throat, stopping me from swallowing. Jacob slowly pulls himself free, and I stare up at him, come dribbling from my mouth until I get myself together enough to swallow.

He still holds my hair in a death grip, and the dangerous look in his eyes hasn't diminished a single iota. But he stands up and holds out his hand to help me to my feet like a perfect gentleman. As if he hadn't just fucked my face like I was a toy.

That's what I feel like in his hands. A poseable object. A doll he can twist however he wants. Now I know how my Barbies must have felt when I decided they weren't cool anymore and tortured them in fifth grade.

I take his hand and hiss as my ass leaves the wooden chair. It hurts to sit down, and then it hurts to stand up. So unfair. Once I get out of here, I'll be a nervous wreck in the weirdest places. PTSD triggered by uncomfortable furniture.

"Bath," he states, and I don't argue. Maybe it'll help the pain in my ass and thighs.

I follow him through his sex dungeon of a bedroom into the bathroom. There's a big clawfoot tub in the corner, and he plugs the drain and sets the faucets running. He holds up a bottle of bubble bath. "Lavender. Maybe not your thing. You can get

whatever you want.”

I blink at him. All I can taste is his come, and he’s worried about what bath products I like? Why would I give a fuck about that? “Get some prison soap. It’d really set the tone.”

My voice comes out in a scratchy croak. He tips in a hefty measure of the bubbles. “I’ll get you some water.”

“You’re too kind.” I try for a fake British accent, but it doesn’t really work. My voice is too rough, thanks to him. He disappears, returning a moment later with a tall glass of icy water. I take it, and the chill cools my throat on the way down. Before I realize, I’ve downed the whole glass.

I watch Jacob as he checks the water temperature and shuts off the faucets. He doesn’t seem like someone who wastes words, but I need to make him talk. If all we do is hang out in silence, I’ll never find out more about this place. He gestures to the water. “Get in. It’ll help your bruises.”

I snort as I pull off my little clubbing skirt. Does this weird place have a nightclub? Probably not. It has more of an old-man country-club feel. Boring as all fuck. “What do you care about helping them?”

He raises a brow before he pulls his T-shirt over his head. “You don’t understand me at all. I had to punish you, so I did. Once the punishment is over, it’s over.”

I’m hardly even listening, distracted by the perfection of his body as he strips. How does he look like that? He must spend hours in the gym every day. I’d kind of expected tattoos, but he has none that I can see. He folds his clothes as he takes them off, setting them neatly on the vanity, even though they’re covered in my tears and spit.

Folding dirty clothes? Has to be military, surely. “Were you in the army?”

He spins round, surprise on his face for the first time. “Yes. What gave it away?”

I manage not to laugh. This has the feel of a conversation and that’s exactly what we need. “Oh, I don’t know. The he-man physique? The OCD tidiness?”

He glances at the neat pile of clothes and spreads his hands wide in a “you win” gesture. “You clocked me. Well done. Three years in the army. Eight in the specials.”

“You mean the SAS?”

He smiles. “Yes. I didn’t have you pegged as an expert on the British army.”

“My foster dad served, so I grew up hearing a lot about the military.”

He nods thoughtfully, then climbs into the tub. The water level rises, and he settles into it with a sigh, arms resting on the sides like he’s a king on a throne. “In you get.”

“I’m not sure there’s room.” He fills the bath, and all at once, I’m nervous. This feels more intimate than I’m ready for. Ridiculous, considering his cock was down my throat only minutes earlier, but I don’t make the rules of my messed-up brain. Sucking my captor’s cock—not too bad. Cuddling with him in the bath—way too weird.

“Get in, Quinn.”

I’m starting to recognize his “I’m not playing” voice. I cannot handle yet another punishment. Not yet. I lower myself into the water and can’t hold back a moan as it wraps around my sore body. I haven’t lived in a place with a bath in forever. I’d forgotten how good it feels.

I crouch awkwardly at the opposite end of the tub until Jacob grabs me, flips me around, and pulls me on top of him, my back to his front. I wriggle against his grip, but it's pointless. Giving up, I settle on top of him. It's not so bad when he's not looking at me. I close my eyes and try to stay in the moment, enjoying the scalding water.

He wraps his arms around me, and yes, it's definitely weird. Why is he being nice? Might as well ask.

"Why are you being nice to me?"

"Why wouldn't I? You took your punishment well."

"But—"

"Listen to me." He's all serious now. "I don't want you to be miserable. If I wanted that, I'd have let Kendrick give you to Edward. If you want something, tell me. As long as you behave, you'll be well looked after."

His hands start to roam over my body.

"What are you doing?"

"Exploring. Relax. You must have lots of questions, so ask them."

An open invitation too good to resist. "What type of scientist are you?"

Why did I waste a question on that? I should have asked something practical. But I still can't picture Jacob in a lab coat, messing about with...well, whatever scientists do. It's throwing me off.



“Good question. I’m a biochemist, and my specialty is radical life extension.”

“Living forever?”

“Not forever, but much longer than we do now. Two-hundred years should be possible.”

Jesus. Since my diagnosis, I’m used to thinking in single digits, a few good years and then gone. Two hundred years? Why would anyone want to live that long?

His hands slide up to my tits, squeezing them and rolling my nipples between his fingers. I can’t stop staring at his big hands on my skin.

“You’ve got the most beautiful tits, love. I could play with them all day.”

I scoff at his words, though he said them with sincerity. “Bullshit. I’m flat-chested as all fuck. Hardly any cleavage even in a push-up bra.”

I used to get teased at school. I’ve wanted a boob job for years but have never been able to afford it. I’m not down on my looks as a rule. I like my toned stomach and legs, but my tits have always been a sore point.

Jacob pinches a nipple hard, and I yelp. “Oy. None of that. They’re perfect. Are they sensitive?”

He releases my nipple, and I sigh in relief as the pain fades to a sting. He brushes over it, and fire tracks a path to my clit, lighting it up. My body comes to life, nipples hardening even in the warm water. Jacob makes a low, appreciative noise that sets my skin tingling. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of confirming that. I ask another question.

“What do you expect me to do here? In the Compound, I mean. Just sit around all day waiting for you to come home?”

He pauses, one hand still occupied at my breasts, the other slipping lower. “No. You can do whatever you want. You don’t have to worry about money ever again. Food, clothes, education, the best medical care. It’s all yours. And whatever you’d like to pursue, let me know. I’ll make it happen.”

Best medical care? No fees? No more red-stamped overdue hospital bills like the one sitting in my mail right now. I know it's there. They've been getting more aggressive about wanting payment, and my recent trip will only add to it. And how advanced? If this is a compound of scientists all as smart as Jacob, maybe it's better than a public hospital.

Part of me wants to ask. If I’m here much longer, I’ll need to. No. Don’t think like that. I’ll be out of here before my condition becomes a problem. I try to make it sound convincing in my own head, even though fear prickles under my skin. Without my meds, I could die.

It’s almost a relief when Jacob’s fingers reach my pussy and I’ve got something else to focus on. I yelp and try to pull away as he parts my lips, but he’s faster, as he always seems to be, wrapping an arm around my waist and holding me against him.

“Stop that. I’m going to figure out what makes you tick.”

I snort. “First time you’ve fingered a girl? I can draw you a diagram if it helps.”

His arm loosens just long enough to shift up to my throat, and I go still as he wraps it carefully in his big hand, pressing just enough to make it clear how easily he could cut off my air. Adrenaline shoots through my system.

“You’re a cheeky little brat. Behave.” He gives my throat one hard squeeze, then renews his exploration of my pussy. When the rough pads of his fingers graze my clit, I stiffen. He pauses, too, then works his fingers back and forward, teasing the sensitive spot.

I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. I keep my lips clamped shut as he experiments, rubbing slow, then faster. Pinching it between his fingers. When he shifts to a rhythmic, circular motion, though, my body loosens against my will, my thighs relaxing as the pleasure takes hold.

He notices. Of course he does. “Like that, then? Good. Let’s try a little faster.”

He speeds up, pressing harder, and I can’t help the whimper that slips out. God, the man knows what he’s doing. That feels fucking amazing. His hand tightens again on my throat, just a little, and the combination is electric.

“You only get to come when I say so.”

I’m barely listening now. I’m so close to the edge. I need this.

“If you want to come now, ask me nicely. None of your sarcasm.”

What? No. Fucking no. My belly tightens, ready for release, but I bite my lip. No. I’m not doing it. I’ll sort myself out later, when he’s asleep.

His fingers slow right before I would have passed the point of no return. He moves them lazily, now, then slides them away from my clit. My pussy spasms in disappointment as his fingers press against my entrance. All my nerve endings scream, craving friction. I should have just fucking asked.

He slides one thick finger inside me, then a second with difficulty. “Fuck me, you’re

tight.” He pauses, then asks. “Are you a virgin?”

I let out a laugh. “No. I’m just built that way.”

“Hmmm.” He pumps his fingers slowly, and it feels far too good. “I’m going to enjoy stretching you out to fit me.”

Jesus. Something about those words and the image of him molding my body to fit his, has my pussy clenching around his fingers. Why did that turn me on? His thumb brushes my clit, and this time, I can’t stifle my moan.

“Oh, you like that idea, do you? Well, it’s not just your pussy I’ll be stretching, it’s your little arse, too. I bet that’s even tighter.”

My body, which apparently has a mind of its own, clenches again at that, though my brain is smart enough to be terrified. “You can’t. You won’t fit.”

“Oh yes I will. We’ll work with plugs over the next few days, then I’ll spend the whole weekend buried in your arse. That’s a promise.”

Jesus shitting hell. The filthy words brand themselves into my brain as his thumb sets to work on my clit again, moving in those magical circles as he pumps his fingers in and out of me. My body sets on fire, surging back to the edge as if grasping a lifeline. Desperate for a second chance to get what it needs.

“Just in case you’re thinking you can get yourself off whilst I’m asleep, forget it. I’ve got a device to put you in. You won’t be able to touch yourself at all.”

God, I’m so close. Hovering right on the fucking precipice. Device? What does he mean, device? A chastity belt? Images of iron, medieval contraptions fill my mind, but even that isn’t enough to calm the desperation of my body. I need this.

“And if you don’t take this chance, I won’t give you another for a week. It’ll be a lesson in gratitude. You know what you need to do.”

I should tell him to go and fuck himself, but I’ll be the one to suffer, not him. My stomach is tight, clenching with the need for release. He’s punished me plenty. Why should I punish myself, too?

Fuck it.

“Please, may I come?”

As soon as the words are out, I want to call them back. Jacob makes a small, triumphant noise. “Yes, love. You may.”

He presses harder with his thumb, and I detonate. I bite my lip to stop myself yelling as pleasure explodes deep in my core, driven even higher by the rhythmic thrusts of his fingers. Oh my fucking god, this feels too good. My eyes roll, and I arch my back against his chest as the shockwaves ripple through me.

It was worth it. I’ll ask politely again if it means I can have another one. I could get addicted to this.

And that’s dangerous.

It’s a sobering thought that dampens down the final ripples of pleasure. And a device? It sounds more sinister now I’m coming down from my high.

Jacob’s fingers still, and he says, with unbearable British smugness, “See? I told you good girls get rewards.”

“Fuck you.”

It's out before I can stop myself. There's a long silence, then a sigh. "You'll pay for that later, love."

"Why not now? Get it over with."

"Because I said so. And anyway, we've got too much to do." He pulls his fingers from me.

"Too much to do?"

"Yes, there's your medical to deal with. And then we're going shopping."

### Chapter Fourteen

Jacob

I let Quinn dress in some of the clothes I'd bought for Suzy. With a lot of grumbling and some carefully placed knots, she manages to cobble together something that looks like an outfit, though it drowns her. Suzy is on the tall side, with a curvy figure.

Quinn looks ridiculously cute in her badly fitting getup and growls at me when I tell her so. She doesn't swear again, though. She's learning.

We head to medical first. It's a large section of the main admin building, stocked with equipment even the Mayo Clinic doesn't have. Several top-level doctors are Brothers, and besides that, the Brotherhood keeps a full medical support staff on site at all times.

They take Quinn's blood, a urine sample, and a couple of swabs and run it all through analysis right then and there. The doctor smiles when he pronounces her free of all communicable diseases.

Placing the tracker is a quick process—an injection to the back of the neck. I don't tell Quinn what's happening, just that it's another test. With Suzy, I'd wanted to make a ritual out of it, but it's too soon for that with Quinn, whose temperament makes it an important safety measure.

Plus, it might be fun to let her run again just so I can catch her.

The doctor nods once the process is complete. “I’ve requested her full medical history, too. I’ll forward it to your phone as soon as it arrives.”

Quinn is unusually quiet through the whole process and takes a deep, relieved breath as soon as we’re back in the open air. “What’s the matter? Don’t like needles?”

She smiles, but there’s a brittle quality to it that sets a red flag waving. “Something like that.”

There’s a story here. I try to get it out of her, but she stonewalls me, and I don’t feel like arguing with her. I already owe her a punishment and want to limit her chances to earn more for now. I’ll get the truth soon enough.

I want to do something Quinn might actually enjoy. I don’t know the girl, and I need to. The reality of how entwined our lives will be is sinking in, and it’s a fucking bizarre feeling. As if I went on a stag weekend in Vegas and woke up married to some bird I just met.

I don’t know what she drinks on a night out, what movies she enjoys, what sort of things she does for fun. I’m not much of a talker, but I have to find out somehow.

I take her hand in mine as we approach the part of the Compound dedicated to entertainment. Up till now, I haven’t bothered with it much. Compared to most Brothers, I spend a lot of my time in the outside world. The weird, village-like feel of the Compound creeps me out. But I can’t take Quinn outside, so I’m stuck with it.

One section is designed to look like a high street. A lot of it is aimed at the Wards. There’s a hairdresser, a beautician, and even one of those places where they inject your face with Botox. A tiny jewelry store and a bunch of other artsy shops selling trinkets add to the cutesy, holiday town feel.



Cobblestones run down the middle of the street, all old school and quaint. Park benches. Shrubbery. Even a post office, so people can post Christmas cards and the like.

Quinn stares at it all, and I can't tell if she's impressed or horrified until she mutters, "What the fuck? This is like a movie set pretending to be real life. It's creepy."

"You're right. It is fucking creepy. Seb and Gabriel think I'm an idiot for saying that, but you get it. I knew you were smart."

She shakes her head. "I'm definitely not smart. I just watch a lot of horror movies."

"Oh, you like horror?" I steer her toward the shop we need. "What's your favorite?"

"Nightmare on Elm Street ." Not a moment's hesitation. "I watched it when I was eight and almost peed my pants. I had to sleep with my..." Again, that hesitation. "...with my foster mom for a week. She almost killed my sister for showing it to me."

"And that fun experience made it your favorite horror?"

"Yep. Nothing ever scared me quite that much again. I kept chasing the high but could never find it."

Interesting.

"So you were raised in foster care? My grandad raised me. Mum was a druggie and lost custody when I was four." I offer her the nugget of information about myself, hoping it'll encourage her to open up.

She lowers her gaze and keeps walking. "My real mom was fourteen when she had me. Tried her best, apparently, but gave me up when I was one. I went to my foster

family at two and stayed with them.”

It sounds like a pretty good outcome, but her flat voice gives a different impression. “Did you ever look for your mum?”

She shakes her head. “What would be the point?”

I don’t press her any further.

We reach the shop. It's a clothing store run by one of the Wards who was a fashion buyer in her previous life. Eve is friends with her and suggested it to me when I asked for help getting ready for Suzy’s arrival. I'll have to donate all the clothes I'll have no use for now.

“A clothes shop?” Quinn radiates skepticism. “I don't get it. Why do you bother with all this stuff to keep your sex slaves happy?”

She makes a point of referring to herself like that as often as possible, and I can't pretend I don't like it. It turns me on more than it should. Why Quinn keeps saying it, though, is a mystery. Maybe it takes the sting out of reality if she keeps repeating it.

“Happy sex slaves work harder.”

She pulls a face. “Gross.”

I shrug and push the door open. A bell rings, and a woman comes running out from the back with a big smile on her face. She's young and chubby, with masses of curly black hair, a tight black dress, and lots of silver jewelry.

The shop is small, but every inch of space is packed with clothing. It ranges from posh old-lady clothes to funky stuff I'd imagine Quinn might like. I suppose she

wants to cater for everyone.

I don't have a clue about brands, but Eve tells me some of the stuff in here is designer and would cost thousands in the outside world. Not that cost means anything in the Compound.

“Hello!” The woman grins at Quinn, who takes a small step backward. “Are you new here? I'm Annie.”

“Um. Yep. Freshly kidnapped.”

Annie's smile drops, and she glances at me. I step forward before Quinn can scare her off. “She got here yesterday. Bit unexpected, so we need some clothes.”

“Oh. Oh!” Recognition lands on her face. “You're the wrong girl. Uh, I mean. Sorry. The story got around quick.”

“The wrong girl.” Quinn's sullen demeanor breaks, the corner of her lip quirking up. “If that doesn't sum up my fucking life, I don't know what does.”

Annie laughs, comes over, and whispers in her ear, loud enough for me to listen in. “Let's get you out of that ridiculous outfit and into something nice. Then we can talk. What sort of clothes do you like?”

“Dresses and skirts only,” I cut in. Both women stare at me, their outraged expressions so similar I have to hold back a laugh. Quinn squares up to me, hands on her hips.

“Why? I like shorts. And jeans.”

“Because you're a brat, and when I need to spank you, I don't want to waste time

with buttons.”

Quinn’s mouth drops, and Annie covers hers with her hand. Whether in laughter or shock, I’m not sure. Quinn’s pale cheeks get that pretty tinge of pink. I wave my hand at her. “Go on. Find some things you like.”

Quinn’s jaw works. Annie seems to sense the danger and grabs her arm. “I’ve got lots of cute things to show you. Come on.”

She steers her further into the store as my mobile rings. I grab it, not recognizing the number. “Hello?”

“Jacob West?”

“Yep.”

“Lionel Baskins here. I run the Future Leaders in Biotech conference. We have you down as attending tomorrow.”

I frown. I’d booked a spot, as I always do, to attend, but canceled when I realized the conference clashed with Suzy’s planned arrival. Hadn’t I? I’d asked my assistant to give my apologies. Maybe it slipped his mind.

“I was supposed to, but I’m afraid something has come up. I won’t make it.”

A long pause.

“Oh. That would be very unfortunate. I’m calling to beg a huge favor of you. Our keynote speaker, Greg Jenkins, has suffered an accident and won’t be able to present. I’ve seen how you captivate and inspire students. Many of them are traveling across the country for the event, and there are plenty of international visitors. I’d be honored

if you'd step in and do the keynote presentation tomorrow."

Shit. The Future Leaders event is close to my heart. When I left the specials and started my formal education at Cambridge, I received an invitation to attend along with a bursary funding the flights. The trip cemented my plans to pursue biotech as a career.

Ordinarily, I'd have bitten Lionel's arm off for the chance to present, and as an added bonus, this year's conference is only an hour away by chopper. I could be in and out in four hours flat, but the timing couldn't be worse.

A giggle catches my attention. Annie holds up a top, and Quinn shakes her head, laughing. She looks relaxed until she catches me watching and stiffens up, turning away.

I force my attention back to the phone. "I'll give you an answer in an hour. I appreciate the opportunity."

"You'd be saving my life. Really, Jacob. I don't know what I'll do if you don't accept."

"I'll call as soon as I can."

I end the call. As I churn through potential options, the girls approach. Annie speaks respectfully. "Sir, tomorrow evening—"

Quinn cuts her off. "Annie is having a girls' night tomorrow, and I want to go."

I raise an eyebrow. "Girls' night. I don't think so."

Quinn pouts. "Why not?"

“It’s much too soon.”

“It’s not. And it’s just girls having drinks, not a three-day coke bender.”

Annie puts a hand on Quinn’s arm. “If I may. It’s just a few of the younger Wards meeting at my place. My Patron is away for a couple of days. We’ll have some food and a few drinks, that’s all. And Eve is coming—you work with her, sir, I think?”

Smart and diplomatic, this one. But Quinn’s face has dropped. “Oh, I don’t think I should be around Eve. I’m sure she won’t want me there. And I know he won’t.”

Annie’s forehead creases, and she glances at me before returning to Quinn. “You mean Gabriel? I don’t see why he’d mind.”

Quinn wraps her arms around herself. “He will after what I did.”

Annie stares. “What did you do? You’ve only been here a day!”

“Smacked her in the head with a toaster. I thought it was someone else.” She turns to me as Annie gasps. “I’d never have done that to her on purpose.”

She gazes at her feet, and her voice shrinks. “I really am sorry. I want to apologize to Eve, but I—I don’t know what to say. And he won’t let me near her even if I did.”

Shit. Her guilt touches something in my chest. She deserves the chance to make things up with Eve, and I want to see the happy version of her I caught a glimpse of. Maybe tomorrow can work out well for both of us, after all.

I give a theatrical sigh and shake my head. “I must be stupid. You can go. And don’t worry about Gabriel. I’ll handle him.”

Quinn draws in a breath, staring at me. Then a smile spreads across her face, and she shrieks and high-fives Annie. “I’ll bring the tequila!”

“No, you won’t. And Quinn,” She spins back to me, still smiling. I could get used to that expression. “Best behavior. I mean absolute perfection between now and then, or you’ll spend the evening in your cage instead.”

### Chapter Fifteen

#### Quinn

The rest of the day passes in a tense blur as I watch my mouth, not wanting to do anything to screw up girls' night. They have to have something in the works, some plan to escape. Whatever it is, I want in on it.

I feel better in clothes that actually fit me, though I wish Jacob had let me get some jeans. I walk out of the shop in a little denim skirt, a white tank top, and a funky purple sweater. New boots, too, with a chunky heel.

Jacob takes me straight home, orders us another ridiculous feast for lunch, and disappears to the bedroom to make some calls. The food arrives, and as we dig in, he announces that he's sorted things out with Gabriel. Girls' night is on.

"Was he happy about it?" I spoon chicken fried rice into my mouth, perching awkwardly on a chair at the dining table. It still hurts to sit, and Jacob hasn't offered me a cushion or anything. I won't give him the satisfaction of getting one either.

Jacob snorts. "What do you think? But don't worry. I persuaded him. He'll be on guard duty right outside Annie's place, though, with a member of the Gilda to help him. If you cause any trouble, they've got orders to take you straight home and lock you in the cage till I get back."

"But what if I need to pee?" I blurt out before realizing what my question should have been. "And where are you going?"



“You hold it or piss yourself. Either way I don’t really care. And I’m presenting at a conference. Their speaker dropped out.”

I stare at him. Presenting at a conference? I still can’t reconcile the Jacob I see daily and the one I keep hearing about. The rough ex-soldier with a heavy right hand versus the genius who gives speeches at conferences. Maybe he has a twin and the two of them just pretend to be one person like in that old movie about the magician.

“What are you going to talk about?” I reach for a crunchy spring roll. The food here is awesome. I’ll give this place that much.

“Now that is a good question. I’m going to have to spend this evening and most of tomorrow figuring that out, I’m afraid.”

I press my hand to my chest in mock horror. “What, no more punishments? How will I cope?”

His lip twitches up toward a smile. He’s not as serious as he’s making himself out to be. “Don’t worry. I’ll save them all up for tomorrow, with interest.”

“And what am I supposed to do with myself? Can I go for a walk? See some more of the place?”

He takes a big swig of his water. “Nice try. You can watch some TV. Or read a book.”

“Oh.” It’s too normal—and boring—an answer. “What about gaming? If you’re really a nerdy scientist, you must be into gaming, right?”

“Waste of bloody time.”

I draw in a breath. “How dare you! Gaming is—”

“Quinn. You’re here for a long time, it’s not going to be all action every minute. Just keep yourself busy.”

A long time. Once I get to girls’ night, we’ll see about that.

A few hours later, I doze off in front of Netflix and wake to Jacob lifting me off the couch. “I can walk,” I mumble into his chest, but he just says, “Of course you can,” in his patronizing voice and carries me into bed. I fall asleep almost instantly as the bed dips next to me with his weight.

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I wake snuggled deep into the covers and lie there as everything comes back slowly. Jacob. Where is he? Eyes open, I try to sit, but something yanks me back. I claw at my neck, finding the stupid collar there. He must have locked it on in my sleep.

I crane my neck the limited distance I can, finding no one there. A light, fluttery sense of panic starts in my chest. Where is he? I tug on the chain as a reflex, but it’s going nowhere.

“Jacob?” I try to inject irritation into my voice, but anxiety slips through, and it comes out weak. “Jacob? Where are you?”

Nothing.

My breathing picks up. I didn’t think I was claustrophobic, but I’ve never really tested the theory. I’m fine with crowds, but this? Only being able to move a few inches? Nope. I don’t like this at all.

“Jacob!”

I’m being stupid. He’s probably on the phone or in the middle of something. But that’s not the point. He’s trapped me here, and I can’t get out. I grab the chain with two hands and tug. Nothing. What if he’s had a heart attack, is lying there dead, and I’ll die of thirst before anyone finds him.

No. Wait. What had he said? It opens in twelve hours as a failsafe? Fuck that. Twelve hours? I yank again, my growing panic making the chain clatter. I hate this. Hate feeling trapped and helpless. Hate that the only thing I can do is wait for him. “Jacob!”

“Hey. It’s okay. I’m here.” He’s standing in the doorway, lips parted as he studies me.

“Get this fucking thing off me!” God, I sound unhinged.

He walks toward me, careful as if I’m a rabid dog. “Quinn. Calm down.”

Oh, he did not.

“Calm down? I just almost ripped my own head off when I woke up, and you weren’t there, and—”

My eyes blur. No. The tears can fuck right off. I swipe at them, and he’s there. He touches his thumb to the collar. It falls off, and he pulls me into him. I struggle, wanting to scratch and snap, but it’s like fighting a bear. I give up, more out of frustration than anything else, and go limp against his hard chest.

He’s wearing cologne this morning, and the heavy scent of it fills my nose. I’ve never been the sort of person that can identify sandalwood and musk and all that crap, but

it's a rich, masculine scent that suits him. His gray T-shirt is soft against my face, and I let myself rest there for a long time as he strokes my hair.

His voice vibrates through my body. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to wake up alone. That must have been scary. I was using my headphones on a call and didn't hear you shouting."

A perfectly average, boring explanation that doesn't come close to touching the actual reason I'm still shaky. "I don't like being trapped like that. It's not fair. You don't know what it feels like."

"I do, love."

Only three words, but there's a dark edge to them that sends a shiver through me. Did something happen to him?

He pulls back and looks me in the face with frank honesty. "That was a mistake, and it won't happen again. I'll give you a phone, keyed only to me. You'll always be able to contact me."

A phone? It's a ray of hope slicing through my dark mood. Whatever lock he puts on it can be broken surely? Maybe one of the other captive women will be good at that sort of thing?

"Today? Before you leave for the conference?"

"Yes. Now." A faint smile touches his lips. "You need to get up and showered. I don't think kidnapped sex slaves are supposed to sleep this much. I may need to ask for a refund."

Did he just make a joke? He's so deadpan and British that it's hard to tell. "You break

it, you bought it,” I respond without really thinking about what I’m saying, and his smile widens, turning dangerous.

“I’ll take that challenge. Now. Up.”

We go through the odd ritual of him washing me in the shower again, though he’s in much more of a hurry this time. No stopping to play with my pussy. Am I a tiny bit disappointed? No. Of course not.

“Where’s the fire?” I ask as he grumbles over rinsing conditioner out of my masses of hair.

“Seb is coming over to help with my speech. We don’t have long, seeing as you slept till almost noon.”

Did I? Holy shit. I’m sleeping better here with Jacob than I have in months. Usually, sleep comes slowly and I wake every few hours, memories of the crash blurring with Marlowe’s face. Since I arrived here, I’ve hardly thought of her at all. It’s a lance to the gut, especially as I can’t deny the relief that follows it.

Once I’m wrapped in a towel, I ask, “Where are my new clothes?”

“Where you left them.” He points at four paper bags printed with the logo of Annie’s little shop, a cat cleaning its claws and “Black Cat Fashions” curling around its head. It suits her. “Did you think a maid would put them away?”

“Actually, yes. That’s supposed to be part of the deal. Captive sex slave, no housework?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry to disappoint.”

What a rip-off. I start to rummage through the bags, determined to leave clothes all over the room just to annoy him, when his hands grip me by the waist and place me face down on the bed. I roll over to face him. “What the hell?”

“I didn’t say you could get dressed yet.” He’s studying my body with that dark look in his eyes, and little tingles start in my belly, radiating outward. It should be illegal for him to look at me like that. Like he’s eating me up, piece by tiny piece.

“I thought Seb was coming over.” I put a sarcastic emphasis on his name. Demonic scientists who kidnap women shouldn’t have names like Seb . It’s ridiculous.

“We have a few minutes. I’ll make do.”

“Oh, you only need a few minutes? There are pills for that, you know. I would have thought you’d have heard of them, being a chemist.”

Shit.

I should stitch my stupid mouth shut. My body tenses, waiting for the explosion. But instead, Jacob’s head falls back, and he laughs. He actually fucking laughs, so loud it echoes around the room.

He takes a while to get himself under control. “Bloody hell. You are...” He shakes his head. “I don’t know what you are. Now roll the fuck over. I want you on all fours, legs spread.”

The sudden, blunt instruction sucks all humor from the room. Now? He’s going to fuck me now? I thought he’d make more of an occasion of it somehow. Not a quickie before his friend arrives. It’s almost insulting. I don’t move.

He sighs. “I’m not going to fuck you. This—” He holds up a shiny, large butt plug.

“—is going in your arse, and it’s staying there all day.”

“Uh uh.” I edge away from his looming presence. “Nope. Exit only.”

“Not anymore. Do as you’re told, right now, or you don’t get to go to girls’ night.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

It’s the one threat I can’t ignore, and he goddamn well knows it, if the smug look on his face is anything to go by. I close my eyes and brace myself. If sticking an uncomfortable chunk of metal up my ass is the price I pay for getting out of this apartment, I’ll just have to woman up and deal with it.

I roll over.

I’m not especially shy, but holding this position in the bright light of midday just because he ordered me to has my face heating. He positions me carefully, sliding my legs out further and even—oh God no—pulling my cheeks apart and running a finger along the crease.

The heat travels from my face down my body in a wave, and I can’t deny the ripples of desire that come along with the embarrassment. What the fuck is wrong with me? The way he moves my body around to suit him tickles some deep, dark part of me.

“Fucking beautiful,” he mutters, and the dark part purrs at the words. Jesus, that voice of his. Rough and rich all at the same time.

Cold liquid hits my skin, and I jump. He strokes my back, soothing me. “Relax, love. Just some lube.”

Before I can reply, he pushes a finger into me. I squeak as the tip penetrates the tight

ring of muscle then slowly works in. It's more weird than painful, but that changes when he adds a second, struggling to get it inside. It burns, an insistent pain that grows worse as he works them in.

“Ouch!”

“Shush. This is nothing.”

“Easy for you to s—” My words end in a squeak as he twists his fingers, stretching me further. “Ow!”

“Even tighter than I thought. We'll have to work hard to get you ready for Friday.”

Friday? Oh, fuck. The day he's allocated for fucking my ass. I need to escape this place before then. There's no way I'm taking that monster anywhere near my ass.

His fingers withdraw, and I relax as the stinging pain fades. It's short-lived, though, as he presses the tip of the plug against me. “Breathe deep, love. This is going to be sore.”

“What? It was already sore. Please, don—”

He pushes in with the plug, and I howl. It's huge, cold, and unyielding. There's no way it's the one he showed me—he's swapped the fucking thing for one the size of his fist as a sick joke. I whimper as he forces it in further, and my eyes water as the stretch burns. I can feel myself spreading out, and I stammer, “No, stop. I don't—”

It slides home. The impossible stretch eases off, though not as much as I'd like. I'm breathing hard, sweat coating my skin, when his fingers find my clit. I yelp again, though more at the shock of it than anything else.



“This will take the edge off.” His fingers move, brushing over the sensitive area. The pleasure spreads out, blending with the pain in a weird mix, twisting into something different. More intense.

I whimper, heading toward the edge, when the goddamn motherfucking bastard stops. He fucking stops.

“Why?” It’s more of a whine than the angry snap I was going for.

“Punishment. For swearing at me yesterday. Now,” He slaps my sore ass hard. “Get dressed.”

That absolute bastard. I roll over to glare at him, wincing when it presses the plug further in. He smirks, and a loud buzz sounds out. “I’d hurry, unless you want Seb to see you naked. He’s here.”

### Chapter Sixteen

#### Quinn

I mope around in the bedroom, trying on my new outfits and counting the minutes until it's time to go to Annie's party. Anything to keep me out of the way of Jacob and his friend. Sebastian is pleasant enough, but I can't get past how fucked-up the situation is, and it's tripping me out.

The whole time he's shaking my hand, smiling, and asking polite questions, he knows I'm a captive and doesn't care. Soon, he'll have a sex slave of his very own. I want to shake him and scream, "Don't you see how wrong this is?"

People who kidnap women should be creepy disgusting monsters, not smartly dressed and friendly. Even Jacob fits the bill of a kidnapper in some ways. He's got that dangerous, mobster feel to him. Sebastian seems like he should be working in a fancy law firm, having lunchtime cocktails, and screwing half the office girls.

What made these men choose this life? What is so special about this place that it made them separate themselves from everything normal?

I finally settle on an outfit. I wish to all fuck Jacob would let me wear pants, but I broached the topic with the same result as the first time. No chance. Not until I prove I can behave, whatever that means.

My new dress is white slashed with pink to match my hair in funky sections and stops mid-thigh. It's form-fitting with long sleeves, but I add a tight blue sweater anyway

because it's still cold.

My chunky new boots cap off the look nicely, and Jacob gives an approving nod when he sees it, probably the closest thing I can expect to a compliment. He only seems to compliment me out loud when I'm naked.

The butt plug is driving me crazy. It's not painful; it's just there, and it makes its presence known every time I move. Sitting pushes it in, which reminds me that Jacob didn't let me come this morning. The slightest shift makes me want to touch myself, but I won't get away with it while Jacob is here.

Later, though? Maybe. He hasn't produced the sinister device yet.

Finally, Jacob breaks off from his laptop. "I think that's as good as it's going to get."

He stands, stretching his back, and looks my way. "I'll get dressed and take you over to Annie's."

He heads into the bedroom and shuts the door. Sebastian lets out a low whistle. "Annie's, is it? I hear those parties get wild."

He winks at me before wandering into the kitchen, opening Jacob's fridge, and taking out a beer as if he owns the place. He waves one in my direction. "Want one? It's weird British shit, but better than not drinking at all."

He didn't ask Jacob's permission. It instantly makes me like him, and some of my wariness disappears. I snatch it out of his hand before he can change his mind or Jacob can appear in that silent way he has and take it off me.

I take a long swig, then regret it. The taste is harsh and bitter, and the texture is thick. Like a nasty alcoholic milkshake.

I screw up my face, and Sebastian laughs. “Warned you. I’ve tried to give him a little class, but as you can see—” He gestures to the bare living room with its weird sporting memorabilia and Western posters. “—I haven’t been successful.”

I smile and brave another sip. It’s better this time, but not by much. “Is this really what he likes to drink?”

“Yep. You’ll have to try and educate him. And for the love of God, decorate this place, will you? I’ve never seen anywhere more in need of a woman’s touch.”

Just for a second, I can see it. Funky art on the walls. Plants and flowers everywhere. Warm lighting to make it feel welcoming. This apartment could be beautiful, with a little bit of effort.

But no. This is how it happens. I’ve heard of women taken from their lives who end up playing happy families with their captors. Becoming so enmeshed with them they don’t run even when the chance arrives. I can’t let that happen to me.

I’m saved answering because Jacob appears. And holy good shit on toast, I can’t stop staring.

Big men usually look stupid in tuxedos, like nightclub bouncers trying to fit in with the real guests. Not Jacob. The way the tailored jacket displays his body is criminal. The effect goes beyond dashing, into fucking dangerous. James Bond on steroids.

It hits me that this man, who could have had any woman in the world—a literal Choose Your Own Adventure, “I’ll take that one please,” free choice—has settled for me. Not the girl he originally wanted. Not one of the other millions of more suitable candidates. Why? What made him do it?

Another question to add to the list.

I'm still staring. Bowties aren't usually the manliest accessory, but the way Jacob straightens his, then smiles when he catches me looking has my stomach flipping over like a stupid teenager. I'd have expected him to look uncomfortable in black-tie, but if anything, it's given him even more confidence.

I can see it now. The leader who was always hiding behind the rough exterior. I can imagine this man making a speech in front of hundreds of people without breaking a sweat.

"Take it I scrub up okay, then?" he says, smirking, and I pull my eyes away.

"Don't forget to mention in your speech how you've got a captive woman waiting at home with a—"

I cut myself off. I almost said, "A huge hunk of metal jammed up her ass," but Sebastian is listening, for the love of fuck. I don't need to embarrass myself any more than Jacob already has.

Jacob raises a brow. "With a what?"

"Nothing." I squeeze past his bulky form, heading for the door. "Can we get out of here, please? All the testosterone is making me nauseous. I need some female company."

"Yes, dear." Deadpan as ever.

The two men flank me like bodyguards as we exit the creepy, horror-movie corridor. What the hell were they thinking when they decorated this place? We head out of Jacob's building, walk a short distance, then reach another, taller building. I expect him to use his fingerprint to get us inside, but he presses a buzzer instead, and a muffled voice answers. "Yeah."

“It’s us.”

“Be there in a sec.”

The line goes dead. I ask, “Why can’t you get in here?”

Jacob takes my hand in an almost absent gesture as he responds, “This building is for full Brothers who have been through initiation. There’s a ceremony. I’ll fill you in later. Gabriel and Eve moved here a month ago.”

Gabriel. Great. My stomach erupts in frantic flutters at the thought of seeing him and Eve. At least I’ll get the chance to apologize to her, but Gabriel is another matter. He looked like he wanted to kill me when I attacked Eve. The pressure of Jacob’s hand on mine is comforting.

The door slides open, revealing an entry hall that is much, much nicer than Jacob’s. High ceilings and cleverly placed lights make it feel sunny, a big fountain dominates the middle of the space, and music plays through speakers. The color scheme is rich gold, white, and blue, and there are huge paintings on the walls in heavy frames.

It feels like a fancy, if a little old-fashioned, five-star hotel. Not that I’ve ever stayed in one. The closest I’ve gotten is working in the kitchens.

The three figures waiting for us in the lobby draw my eye. A uniformed military guy. Eve, in jeans and a pretty purple sweater. Gabriel, glaring at me. The hard set of his lips makes me question if this is a good idea. Jacob is a threat, but he’s my protector, too. All at once, being alone in this fucked-up place without him feels frightening rather than liberating.

Eve smiles her dazzling smile and steps forward, ignoring Gabriel’s muttered warning. “Hi.”

I swallow and follow her lead, shaking free of Jacob. “Hey. Look, I’m really sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. I thought you’d be one of the soldiers, and I—”

“It’s okay. It was just a bump. I’ve only been here a couple of months myself. I remember what it feels like at first. Don’t stress about it.”

A couple of months? She says it like it’s no time at all. To me, that feels endless. Months as a captive, and she says it like it’s no big deal?

Before I can manage a reply, Gabriel cuts me off. “If you ever raise a hand to her again, I’ll—”

“Gabriel. Jesus, no need to go all action hero.” Eve turns, pressing a hand to his chest. “She’s fine. I’d have whacked you with a toaster on my first day if I’d thought of it.”

She stands on her tiptoes, leaning in for a kiss. His whole face changes, all the hardness leaving him as he wraps his arms around her back. They look like the most sickeningly sweet, in-love couple imaginable. How the hell is Eve keeping up a pretense like that? She must be a great actor.

Sebastian makes me jump when he speaks in a stage whisper close to my ear. “These two are the definition of get a fucking room. It’s revolting.”

Jacob sighs. “If you’re all quite finished, I do have somewhere to be.”

He bends down to my level. Fuck, it’s irritating how much he has to crouch just to look into my eyes. “You’re going to behave, or you won’t like what happens. Say it for me. What are you going to do?”

Seriously? I can feel all four extra sets of eyes on me as I mutter, “I’m going to behave.”

“If there are any problems, call me, and I’ll answer. That’s a promise.”

He stands up, giving Gabriel and the soldier guy a glare I’m glad isn’t aimed at me. He looks like he’s about to threaten them with a spanking. “I’m entrusting Quinn to you two. If she needs anything, see that she gets it. If she asks to be escorted back to my place, you take her.”

He shoots his stern look my way. “If she tries to run from you, take her back to my place and lock her in her cage. Understood?”

Jesus fucking Christ. My face flames, and Eve’s eyes widen, but none of the men seem phased. Typical. The soldier snaps, “Yes, sir.”

Gabriel clasps Jacob’s shoulder in that awkward, manly way. “She’ll be fine. Good luck with your speech. I wish I was coming.”

“I’ll film it,” Sebastian answers.

These three are a close-knit little crew. Could that come in handy somehow? Maybe.

Jacob gives me one final long look. “Best behavior.”

He leaves with Sebastian, and my stomach drops as I watch them go. Eve must have seen my anxiety, as she links her arm with mine and leads me along the corridor. I can feel Gabriel’s eyes on my back. “Don’t worry. It’s weird, isn’t it, how quickly it starts to feel like the man holding you captive is the only thing keeping you safe?”

I snap my gaze to hers, relief flooding my system. She said it. She actually said the word “captive.” She’s not pretending this is some voluntary fucking adventure like everyone else here.



A sympathetic look crosses her face at my reaction. “I couldn’t stand the way no one talked about it either. Be warned, it’ll be like that at Annie’s place. We’re the only two newbies. The rest of the girls have been here at least a year, most of them much longer. They’d rather talk about other things, not their captivity. But you can always talk to me about anything.”

Her voice drops. “Especially the cage. Was he serious?”

Years? The other girls have been here for years? I mutter a reply before I lose my shit entirely. "As a fucking heart attack."

Years. What if they don't even like their...man. Their captor? What if he's horrible? I give Eve a side-eye. Is Gabriel good to her? She doesn't act like she wants to get away from him—the “get a room” kiss sure seemed real. But all the girls here can't be happy. Eve can't really be happy. And some of them must be stuck with real assholes.

At least Jacob seems honest. Straightforward. He wouldn't be cruel just for the sake of it. But even so, I sure as fuck won't be here for years.

I shouldn't be so surprised. I didn't see it because I didn't want to. Annie has obviously been here a while. Shops like hers don't happen overnight. I thought tonight I'd be meeting a group of motivated women planning their escape. If they've been here for years, how motivated can they be?

Unless escape really is impossible.

My heart is racing, so I stop for a minute and breathe. Eve frowns but doesn't hurry me. I stare at her, and something jumps out. Why didn't I notice it before? Too caught up in my own problems to really look at her. She's wearing a tight choker around her neck. On someone gothy like Annie, it could be an accessory but on her, it can surely only be a collar.

A goddamn collar.

Should I ask her about it? No, not with Gabriel lurking. Later, though.

The shock of noticing it has snapped me back into the moment, and I straighten my spine. Time to meet the others.

Eve asks, “You good to go?”

“Yep.”

We reach a door decorated on the outside with a picture of a black cat and the words, “If you don’t like cats, take your ass elsewhere.”

Eve taps it with a smile. “I hope you’re not a dog person.”

“Neither, really. I always wanted a snake but never managed to get organized enough.”

“Oh, you’ll want to meet Ellie, then. She’s obsessed with them. She’s not here tonight, but I’ll introduce you.” She lowers her voice. “How are you with meeting new people? I’m really shy, so it took me a while, but I’m okay with these things now. No one will mind if you’re a bit quiet. Don’t worry.”

Hah. The least of my worries. I’m more likely to spill out every inappropriate thought in my head in the first five minutes, especially if I’m drinking. And I’m definitely going to be doing that.

“Shutting me up will be the main issue.”

Eve laughs and knocks. “It’s Eve and Quinn!”

Annie opens the door, glass of wine in hand. From the pink in her cheeks, I'm guessing it's not her first. "Come in! Most people are already here."

I hover awkwardly on the threshold as Eve shares another long kiss with Gabriel. Get a room is right. He doesn't seem to like letting her go, but she waves him off. "We'll be fine. Go."

"I'll be right here."

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever makes you happy."

Then she ushers me inside and shuts the door. "Sorry. He's so overprotective."

"I can see that." I'd like to ask her more questions, but Annie already has her arm around my shoulders, ushering me down a little corridor toward a big, airy living room with music playing. The apartment is even bigger than Jacob's. I've never been in a penthouse, but this is what I'd imagine one would look like. Size-wise, anyway.

The huge living room is decorated in a colorful, quirky style, with mismatched cushions and throws on squashy sofas and chairs. It's homey rather than posh and calls to me right away. A big TV plays music videos, and there's a massive spread of food on a low coffee table.

Seven women, all in their twenties or early thirties, are sprawled around, drinks in hand, chatting. A fat ginger cat occupies a whole armchair to himself. They fall silent when we enter until Annie flaps a hand at them. "Jesus. Don't all stare at her. Keep yourselves occupied while I get the poor girl a drink."

She steers me toward a shiny kitchen and pulls open an industrial-sized refrigerator.

Oh, yes. That's what I need.

Annie's drink selection is as good as a damn bar. Wine, champagne, and fizzy premixes of all kinds. "Here, grab what you like. And check this out. Jell-O shots." She presses two into my hand. "To get you started."

I don't need any more encouragement than that.

Three Jell-O shots and two glasses of champagne later, I'm perched on the edge of the ginger cat's seat. It feels rude to move him. Eve wasn't kidding about these girls talking about anything but the fact that we're all enslaved.

So far, we've chatted about music, movies, old high school boyfriends, and weird things our captors have said or done (though they don't use that term of course. It's always their name.) Anything and everything except the shit that really matters.

I've played along. They're all curious about Jacob, who is a bit of a celebrity around the Compound, apparently. They laughed when I described his basic man-pad apartment and gasped when, after the third shot, I told them how he spanked me in front of Kendrick.

I have to admit, it was a little bit fun. Especially their horrified shrieks when I described standing in the corner, my bare ass on display. Even Eve yelped at that story, hand over her mouth. "In Kendrick's office? With him right there? Oh, Quinn. I can't believe it."

Now, though, my patience is running low as Annie tells a long story about how she persuaded the man who holds her prisoner to let her get a fourth cat. Everyone is laughing, and it's clattering in my head, discordant and just fucking wrong. I take another long drink of my third glass of champagne, and Eve's eyes track the motion.

She leans over from the seat next to me, whispering, "Maybe slow down a bit? You don't want to feel rough in the morning."

I ignore her, take another drink, and interrupt Annie. Fuck it. I don't need this polite, dinner party bullshit. "So. How are you all planning on getting the fuck out of here? I want in."

Annie stops talking, and all eyes land on me. The mood in the room changes instantly, the happy vibe freezing, giving way to tense silence. The bubbly pop music playing in the background rattles against my nerves.

Eve breaks the quiet. "It's okay. We all remember how hard it was at first."

Everyone is nodding sympathetically, and it just makes me angrier. "There's no 'at first.' I'm not fucking staying here! How do we get out? There has to be a way. They can't just keep us here."

"We all think like that at first." It's a tall, strikingly pretty woman whose name I can't remember. Her warm brown eyes lock onto mine. "I've been here almost twelve years, Quinn. I was only twenty-one when I got taken. It took me a long time to accept it, too."

Twelve years?

Twelve. Years.

I'd be thirty-six. Or dead, probably, and there's no way I'm spending the rest of my life here. No motherfucking way.

The others are all piping in, offering up their own depressing timelines.

"Five years next month."

"I was thirty, only two years for me."

“Wait, am I the newest, then, after you two? Fourteen months?”

“I was twenty-five. Has it really been three years? Holy shit.”

My head spins, and I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol or the shock. It can’t really be true, can it? They have to be lying. But why would they? Why the hell would they?

“Did you never try to escape?” It comes out as an angry demand rather than a question, but no one looks offended. They all have those understanding looks on their faces, and it’s making me want to scream.

The striking woman answers. “Of course we did. I’m sure we’ve all run for the gate, haven’t we?”

Murmurs of assent come from all sides. “Have you seen the fence yet?”

I shake my head, and she sighs.

“It’s electrified, and there are armed guards every few feet. Nothing gets in or out. And even if you manage to bribe your way into a truck or something, you can’t remove the tracker. They’ll find you. I know you’ll have to try anyway, we all do, but it’s honestly useless. The sooner you accept your life is here now and focus on what you can do that makes you happy, the better.”

Only one word jumps out. Tracker. “I don’t have a tracker.”

“We all do. In the back of your neck. They will have injected it while you were out.”

Don’t worry. It’s just another test.

Then a prick at the back of my neck.

I'd thought it strange at the time but hadn't had the brainpower to focus on it with all the other drama happening around me.

He lied to me.

Jacob lied to me.

I don't know why it hurts as much as it does. He's keeping me captive. Using me as a fucking sex toy. But part of me—a stupid, naive part—at least thought I could trust him to tell me the truth. But no. He's a liar, and I'm an idiot.

I won't cry. I won't cry, goddamn it.

The concerned looks on everyone's faces feel like hot brands against my skin. I need to get out of here. I'm shaking with the effort of holding back the stupid tears.

I down the rest of my drink when a very, very bad idea occurs to me. It'll cost me—I can almost feel Jacob's hand crashing into my ass—but it'll be worth every fucking bruise.

If petty revenge is all I can get against the lying bastard, I'll take it.

I stand, steadier on my feet than I have any right to be with the way the world is lurching around me, and walk to the door. Eve and Annie chase after me. I bang on the door and shout to the men I know are waiting outside. "Hey! Hey, it's Quinn. I want to go home. I'm tired."

### Chapter Seventeen

Jacob

The applause swells around me, and adrenaline rushes in my blood as guests get to their feet. I've never been one to show off, but a standing ovation feels bloody good.

I took a risk with this speech. I'm well-known for my beliefs on life extension technology, but previously, I've kept my public announcements in the realm people are comfortable with. The chance of living to a healthy 140 years? Most people don't take issue with that.

This time, I spoke about my true passion—solving the aging process altogether by treating it as the disease it truly is. I was worried the crowd would dismiss me as a quack, like when Aubrey de Gray said the first person to live to one thousand might already be sixty. But technology has moved on since then, and so have people's attitudes.

They fucking loved it.

Seb claps me on my back as I return to our VIP table, applause still ringing. The ballroom is decorated all Grecian, white marble pillars and vines everywhere. Statues of curvy birds with their tits out pouring wine. Funny how the difference between art and porn is the price.

There are at least three-hundred people here, all the most promising biotech students from across the US and overseas. Tickets can't be bought; they're offered based on



ability. It's sponsored by the best companies in the industry, all aiming to bring new blood into their ranks.

I wonder if any of the men here will be future Brothers.

The thought isn't a happy one, and it follows me as the applause dies down. I struggled with my decision to join the Brotherhood and still wonder if I made the right call. Most Brothers join when they're young and haven't seen much of the grim, dirty side of the world.

The secrecy, rituals, and ruthlessness of the Brotherhood make it eerily similar to some of the organizations I worked to dismantle.

I shake off the thought and let myself enjoy the moment. Seb hands me a glass of champagne, then watches, face dropping, as I down it in two big swigs. I never drink before a speech, and my nerves have been firing off like crazy all day. I need to settle myself down.

"Jesus, that was Louis Roederer Cristal. You're meant to savor it."

"I did. It was nice. Let's grab a beer." He rolls his eyes as I signal the waiter. "Anything from Quinn?"

He hands my phone back to me. "Nothing, though Gabriel messaged to say they dropped her back to your place. He said she looked exhausted, and Eve said she hit the drink pretty hard. Can't really blame her."

"No."

Seb sips his champagne. "I like her. She seems fun, but..." He swirls the liquid in his glass, "I'm not sure how she's going to get on in the Compound. Look at Eve. She's a

nerdy homebody. She loves working with you. There's a lot of good in the Brotherhood for her. Quinn, though..."

My chest tightens as he gives voice to the worry that's been eating at me all day. As new Brothers, we're all advised, very strongly, to choose Wards who will adapt well to the Compound. Intelligent, submissive, calm natured.

Quinn is a firework in a box. I can keep her contained and have fun doing it, but I want her to thrive, too. She's going to need something of her own, and I don't know her well enough yet to work out what it should be.

My train of thought is interrupted as a young guy who looks half pissed comes over, clutching a copy of one of my books. He hands it to me for signing, which I do, feeling like a fucking idiot. Since when do scientists sign stuff? We have a brief chat, and then he's replaced by another chap.

An hour later, the flow finally slows, and I tilt my head toward the exit. "Let's go. I don't want to leave Quinn any longer."

Seb drags his gaze away from the absolute stunner who has slipped into the seat next to him and is enjoying a glass of his champagne. As initiates, we're not meant to sleep around, but I'm not sure Seb takes the rule seriously. I've never seen a bigger flirt. His face is a picture of disappointment. "Really? Now?"

"Really. Now."

He sighs, whispers something in the girl's ear that makes her laugh, and kisses her on the cheek. He leaves her with the champagne bottle and a huge smile on her face as he gets to his feet. Slick bastard.

We say our goodbyes to the organizer and make a slow exit, stopped every few feet

by someone wanting to congratulate me on my speech. By the time we reach the exit, I'm getting to the end of my rope. I'd expected a message from Quinn by this point, and the silence is making me nervous.

Stupid. She's probably asleep. The girl sleeps like a corpse.

We exit into the much quieter corridor, and I breathe out just as my phone beeps. I pull it out, open the message, and stare, unable to process what I'm seeing. Then it hits, and a red haze falls over my vision, matched by the buzzing in my ears.

The glass cabinet for my special memorabilia is on its side, smashed to pieces. Everything is gone. A text comes next.

Guess what I've done with all your shit?

"Hey, is everything okay?" Seb looks back when he sees I've stopped dead.

I hold up a hand, eyes glued to the screen.

First comes one of my signed West Ham balls. She's taken a permanent marker and covered over all the signatures, turning them into pictures of bunny rabbits. She's posing in the photo, holding the ball in one hand with a wild look on her face and her middle finger raised.

"That fucking..."

Another photo, the winning boots from the 1964 FA Cup. Irreplaceable. I made sure all the sharp knives were locked away, but the little cow is holding my boots over the flame of the gas stove. In the next photo, they're sitting, destroyed, in the kitchen sink.

More photos follow, my other balls, ruined. The final text plasters itself across the screen.

That's what you get for being a fucking liar.

What the hell is she talking about? I should work it out, but my anger is running too hot. Grandad and I searched for all the memorabilia together. He found the boots at a tiny collectibles shop in Bristol, of all the weird places, and couldn't contain his excitement when he took me to get them.

She's destroyed them. Destroyed that special memory.

A familiar feeling creeps over me, one I haven't given in to for a long time. A deep, reckless anger—the sort that had me stealing cars and crashing them into walls just for the hell of it when I was a kid. If Quinn thought I was strict before, she has no fucking idea what's coming to her now. I'll—

The sound is so faint, and the buzzing in my head so loud, I almost miss it. Only my years of training make me register the faint click. My body moves before my brain catches up, and I smash into Seb, knocking him to the floor as the bullet whistles past.

“Jacob, what the f—”

I'm moving, on my feet and pounding down the corridor toward the shooter. The man—I can see him now, hovering in a fire escape door—fires again. I'm ready for it and launch myself to the side, leaving the bullet to smash a chunk of plaster out of the wall.

Seb is shouting something but I'm barreling toward the guy. I get a brief impression of dirty blond hair and wide, panicked eyes before I crash into him, driving him to the

carpet.

The gun flies out of his hand as I raise my fist and smash it into his face over and over until he goes limp.

It's over in seconds.

Only once he's down do I register the pain in my knuckles, the sweat sticking my shirt to my body, and the pounding of my heart. I jump up, grab the gun, and check for accomplices.

I push open the fire escape, breathe in the cool, fresh air, and peer into the darkness as Seb's voice registers. He's on the phone, yelling at someone. Probably the Gilda team waiting at the chopper.

I crouch to examine the assailant. Scruffy hair, stubble, and the yellow teeth of a crackhead. He doesn't look like a pro, and he didn't shoot like one either. I'm searching him for identification when the Gilda arrive.

"Sir. You both need to head back to the Compound immediately. Kendrick's orders. We'll take care of the local police and bring him in for questioning."

I ignore the young officer and continue my careful pat-down. Nothing. Fingerprints will give us an ID, though. No way someone who looks this fucked isn't in the system somewhere. I examine the weapon. Cheap as shit. Entry level. If this guy is a hired assassin, he's the bargain basement variety.

"Sir, sorry, but I have to insist you—"

"I'll leave when I'm fucking ready."

The guy isn't dead, but he's bleeding, and a crowd will be here soon. Although my instinct tells me to stay with him, the Gilda officer is probably right. Getting custody of him will be a lot easier for them if the keynote speaker at the event isn't found with bloody knuckles clutching a weapon.

“Cameras?”

“We'll deal with it, sir. The chopper is ready to go.”

A polite shove in the right direction. With a last look at the assassin, I get to my feet. Seb and I follow the officer to the helipad on the roof and climb in. Seb is white-faced, fingers shaking as he buckles himself in.

The helicopter is small but top spec, and I'm glad of it as we take off. It's been a while since anyone tried to kill me, and I take a minute to get my head on straight before I turn to Seb. “You okay mate?”

He laughs, an edgy sound, and wipes the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. “Sure. Fucking hell.” He stares out of the window at the shrinking roof of the hotel before turning back to me. “Was he shooting at me or you?”

A good question. “Me, I think, but his aim was shit, so it's hard to tell. Probably some religious crazy with a grudge against me.”

Plenty of religious wankers hate the idea of radical life extension. I've been accused of trying to steal souls from God. As if that dickhead needs any more than he already has.

He nods, but I can tell he's still freaking out. He's probably never been shot at before. He needs a distraction, or he'll start to spiral. “Look what bloody Quinn did.”

I hand him my phone and show him the messages. His mouth drops, but it's done what it needed to. His hands grow steadier as he scrolls, and his voice sounds almost normal as he asks, "What are you going to do about it?"

### Chapter Eighteen

Jacob

I'm on full alert as I push open the door to my flat, braced for Quinn to rush at me like a fucking lunatic, but she doesn't. A quick, careful survey of the place, and I find her crashed out in bed, still fully dressed, sleeping like the dead.

That bloody girl. She'd sleep through a nuclear explosion.

It took longer than I wanted to get to her because I had to debrief Kendrick. The shooter is on his way but is being transported by armored ambulance and won't arrive for a couple of hours. He's in stable condition and not saying much.

Which gives me time to deal with Quinn.

Late as it is, I'm wired. The adrenaline from the attack has drained away, leaving me edgy and pissed off. I'm often that way after a fight, but seeing what Quinn did to my stuff up close and personal drives it to the next level. I force myself to pick up each ruined item and really look at them before I act.

Everything is fucking wrecked. The balls are bad enough, but staring at what's left of the burned boots leaves me shaky. The day I went with Grandad to get them is one of my happiest memories, and now it's tainted. Grandad is eighty-five. Unless I can make a breakthrough in my research very bloody quickly, soon, memories and trinkets will be all I have left.



I let the rage simmer as I clean up, sweeping the glass into a dustpan and brushing it into the bin. I need to Hoover the floor, but that'll have to wait till morning. There's a chance the noise might wake Quinn, and I don't want that. Not yet.

I weighed my options on the tense helicopter ride. I'd been braced for her to act out, but the pure nastiness of what she's done puts this into a different category. It's outside the scope of a normal act of rebellion.

If I don't answer this by putting the fear of fucking God into her now, I'll lose control forever. And staring at the mess she's made of my most treasured things, I can't say I'll be sorry to do it.

I'm looking forward to it, in fact.

It's very, very bad luck for Quinn that she pulled this shit the same day I almost got my head blown off. It's put me into a cold, detached headspace. The same headspace that allows me to get information out of prisoners by any means necessary. Yep, she definitely picked the wrong day.

Keep calm. Remember she's breakable.

Quinn's crazy hair is strewn all across the pillow, and she's tucked on her left side, curled over herself protectively. I take a moment to look at her, taking in the red spots of color on her high, delicate cheekbones. Eve said she had at least six drinks, which would be a lot for her tiny frame.

Without wasting any more time, I get to work.

First, I use a sharp set of kitchen scissors to cut off all her clothes. She'll be pissed I ruined her new outfit, but too bad. Serves her right, and she still hasn't shown any sign of waking up.

Next, I attach the device I picked up from another Brother who likes tinkering with gadgets. It's a modern version of a chastity belt, perfect because it stops her from touching herself without denying me any access at all.

One metal cuff around each of her slender wrists and a metal strip I attach with special body adhesive on her clit hood. It's as strong as superglue but designed not to irritate sensitive skin. I might pierce her later to attach it permanently, but even she'd wake up to that.

As angry and dissociated as I am, locking those cuffs still sends a thrill through me. Only my thumbprint can unlock them. There's something beautiful about her naked body, decorated only with my cuffs. When she deserves it, I'll give her a collar to match.

She mutters in her sleep, unintelligible nonsense. I pause, waiting for her to settle before I pull out the final item. The gag is the smallest of five, each of them plastic and decorated with a rubber cock. Whilst it's fastened, she'll have to deal with it down her throat.

Each one gets a little bigger, with the last one matching my own size. After a few weeks of training with these beauties, her gag reflex will be a thing of the past.

And as a bonus, they're uncomfortable and humiliating as all fuck. I'm getting hard just looking at it, imagining how much she's going to hate me for this when she wakes up. Now for the tricky part.

Moving so, so slowly, I pull her mouth open and slide the tip of the rubber dick inside. I half expect her to twist away, but no. The little minx relaxes, welcoming it in. I'd swear she actually sucks it. What kind of dream is she having?

Christ, now I'm rock-solid.

This starter gag is pretty conservative in length. With her being on the piss last night, the last thing I want is her getting sick. It slides in, and I tighten and fasten the straps quickly, less worried about waking her now. She'll be up soon enough anyway.

Job done, I step back and wait. It only takes a minute before she's shifting in her sleep, mouth working and trying to close. Her brows furrow, and her hand comes up to feel at the gag in sleepy confusion.

A whine escapes her. Then another. Her head shifts back and forth, trying to dislodge the gag. Finally, her eyes open.

She's dazed, blinking in the low light until her vision clears and lands on me. Her eyes snap to full alert, and she tries to speak, but nothing comes out. Her hand flies up, feeling the gag, and she sits, pressing herself against the headboard. I could have tied her up, but honestly, watching her skitter about is more fun. Try and escape if you want, love. See how far you get.

I smile and take a seat on the edge of the bed. She watches me, tensed to flee. Everything about her screams prey. Her delicate body; her quick, jerky movements. I'm a predator, and she fucking knows it.

Without any rush, I bend to collect the box containing all my ruined items. She mumbles as I place it on the bed between us and moves away from it as if keeping away from the evidence can save her from the consequences. I take out the four items and lay them, one by one, on the bed.

"I don't know why you did this, and honestly I don't give a shit." I hold out the first ball, covered in bunny rabbits. "My grandad got this one for me as a graduation gift. He didn't have much dough at the time—neither of us did—so he saved his pension for a few months to afford it. He's a tough old bastard, but he couldn't stop smiling when he gave it to me."

She stares at it, skin growing even paler than usual.

“One punishment for this one. You’re wearing it.” Her hand goes again to the gag. “Can you feel it? That’s a rubber dildo down your throat. I’m kind, so this isn’t even a big one.”

I reach out and run my finger around the stretched O of her lips. “They get bigger, though. And you’ll be spending two hours a day, every single day, wearing one until you can handle the largest without gagging. And not just alone in here. You’ll wear it out and about, and when my friends are around. You’ll wear it whenever I fucking say.”

She shakes her head frantically, but stills as I retrieve the second of the wrecked soccer balls. She’s scrawled “You lying cunt” over and over this one. Lying? It jumps out at me, and I file it away to question her later. It’s not like she can answer now.

“This one I got for Grandad for his eightieth. He had it displayed in his living room till we moved to the US. Once we got here, he wanted me to keep it because, and I quote, ‘I don’t trust those fucking cleaners.’ Getting paranoid in his old age, my grandad. It’d break his heart to see this.”

The discomfort of the gag is really getting to her now. Her mouth must be dry as all fuck. I can see her throat working, desperate to expel the intruding pressure of the gag.

“One punishment for this one.” I grab her hand. She tries to pull away, but then her gaze lands on the cuff, and she freezes. “Do you like them? They’re not just pretty. Let me show you what they do. Touch your clit.”

She shakes her head, understandably wary of a trap. I trace the edge of the cuff with my finger. “You won’t get in trouble. I’ve told you to do it. Now, touch your fucking

clit.”

She inches her hand downward. When she reaches the area I told her was off-limits, she pauses, hand frozen. Then she carries on, shifting her legs wide enough to touch the tip of her middle finger to her clit. I’d love to watch her get herself off, and I will, soon, but that’s reserved for girls who can behave.

I wait, a small smile on my lips, until five seconds pass and the cuff lets out its warning. A single beep. I grip Quinn’s hand before she can jerk away. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Sound rips out of the cuffs, an ear-splitting warble like an air raid siren, louder than a personal attack alarm. At the same time, both cuffs lurch into motion, the sort of rough vibration that feels like an electric shock. Rough enough to be painful and leave bruises on Quinn’s wrists.

She tries to yank her hand away, but I hold it there for a second before letting it go. She claps her hands over her ears, eyes screwed shut, until the racket cuts off.

When she opens her eyes again, they’re shiny with tears, and she looks down at her hands as if expecting them to be bleeding. Then her eyes meet mine, full of accusation.

“You can keep your hand down there for up to ten seconds. Long enough to clean yourself if you do it in short bursts. Not long enough to get off unless you’re really fucking quick about it. And if I’m not around, I get notified every time that alarm goes off. Straight to my phone.”

It’s triggered by proximity to the strip I fastened to her skin, but I’m not explaining that to her right now. Don’t want her to get any ideas about trying to pull it off.

She's tugging at the cuffs now, trying to work them over her hands. "Don't bother. Only my thumbprint can remove them. You're going to have to work for every orgasm from now on. Which brings me to the third item on my list."

I pull out the final ruined ball. It's covered in more cartoon dicks than a boy's toilet stall at a high school. I trace the outline of one. "Classy. This ball wasn't worth much money. None of the players who signed it were the big stars. But this one"—I point to the edge of a heavily obscured name—"meant a lot to me. His footy career got cut short by an injury. Bloody devastating. He was only twenty years old. But instead of letting it get to him, he went back to uni. He ended up excelling in astrophysics, if you can believe it. He was a huge inspiration to me. And he died last year."

Quinn is sweating now, looking from the ball to me to her new cuffs in jittery panic. I don't blame her. I reach between her legs, teasing her clit with my thumb as she trembles. "Good girls get lots of orgasms, but you? I'm not going to be generous for a while. For about as long as it takes me to stop being pissed off about this ball, in fact. How long do you think that'll take?"

I tease her for a bit longer, until I'm sure she's needy as well as scared, then pull my hand away. "Get used to the feeling of disappointment. I'll let you come sometimes, of course, but you'll never know when it's going to be."

I play with her again, watching as her breath picks up. "The not knowing is a real bitch. It'll drive you insane."

I circle her clit until she squirms, then stop, reaching for the final item—the burnt boots. She presses her thighs together. "Now these really are priceless. I don't care about the money, but just so you know, these set me back ten grand. They're one of a kind and irreplaceable."

Her chest rises and falls rapidly. She can tell something bad is coming, and I'm not

going to disappoint.

“Since these boots are irreplaceable, I’m going to take the price out of your arse. Roll over like a good girl. We’re not waiting till Friday.”

### Chapter Nineteen

#### Quinn

My throat burns, and my jaw aches from the horrible gag. Talk about fucking degrading. Every movement I make, I'm aware of solid rubber rammed down my throat. This is the small one? I'll die if he makes me wear anything larger.

But that won't be an issue, because there's no way I'll survive what comes next. He'll split me in two.

Now that reality is right in front of me and the alcohol buzz has turned into a hangover, I wish I could go back in time and slap myself in the face. I was supposed to be gaining Jacob's trust. Instead, I've screwed everything up, just like I always do. I deserve the ass fucking just for being so goddamned stupid.

He reaches into his little box of nightmares, and I tense. What's going to come out of there next? A giant spider? It would be about the only thing that could make this night worse.

But it's worse than a spider. A bottle of lube. He's really going to do this. I shake my head, but I'm not holding out any real hope. The look in his eyes since I woke up has me on red alert.

If I thought he was scary before, he's fucking terrifying when he's mad. It would have been less intimidating if he'd come in ranting and raving. I'd wanted to get under his skin and rile him up. Instead, I've created a cold, calculating demon. The



gangster who slices bits off you and mails them to your mom.

He taps the bottle. “I’m not a complete monster. I’ll take it slow. Now, roll over and spread your cheeks wide for me. And Quinn?”

I find myself leaning toward his quiet words.

“Do exactly what I say. You really don’t want to push me any further tonight.”

For once, he’s absolutely right. There’s not a single part of me that wants to piss him off any more than I already have. But Jesus fucking Christ, why does he have to make me do this? I can’t imagine anything more humiliating. I hesitate.

“Quinn.”

The single word is an electric shock. I roll onto all fours, trying not to think about the view I’m giving him. It’s not like he hasn’t seen it all before. My face presses into his soft red sheets, creating more pressure on the gag.

Saliva dribbles out around it, and my throat works, desperate to spit it out. God, just to have that pressure out of my throat would feel like the best birthday present ever. My body quivers at the thought of two hours a day in this thing.

But that’s not my immediate concern. Heat rushes to my face as I reach awkwardly behind me and dig my fingers into my ass cheeks, spreading them. He can’t really enjoy this view, can he? He must only be making me do it as a punishment.

A second later, I flinch as cold lube drips between my cheeks, into my hole. He laughs behind me. “Sorry, love. Should have warmed that up for you.”

Sarcastic British bastard.

“I see you took the plug out. You’ll probably regret that.”

He punctuates the words by sliding a finger in, quickly followed by another. The burn isn’t quite as intense as it was the first time—the plug must have done some good after all—but it still makes me gasp around the gag as he twists them inside me.

Nothing should go in there, and he’s rummaging around like he’s every right to do so. Like he wants to stick his whole hand up there.

Oh, Christ. I saw a video of that once. He wouldn’t. Would he? No. Don’t be stupid.

“Tight as fuck. This is going to be a struggle, love. Try to relax.”

His fingers withdraw, and the relief is punctuated with the fear of what comes next. The head of his cock presses between my cheeks, and holy good shit, it feels like a baseball bat. It just thumps against the ring of muscle, a blunt object with absolutely no hope of entry.

It’s impossible. Surely he’ll give up on the whole plan? It’s not going to happen. But his fingers are back, spreading me, and little by little, the impossible happens. My body starts to open up around the tip.

Fuck. No.

My ass screams in protest and I drop my hands to the bed, fists clenching as I stretch.

Ouch.

Ouch.

Ouch.

This isn't safe. He's splitting me in two. The pain builds to a red-hot, burning brand. Tears sting my eyes, and I yell into the gag as his fingers roll over my clit. "Shhhh. You don't get to come, but this will make it better."

Nothing will make this better. Oh, God, it fucking hurts. But as his fingers work my clit, the edges of the world soften. I breathe into the pain, and wild energy joins it, racing through my body. Heat rushes over my skin, and my head spins as pleasure goes to war with the agony in my ass. It's nowhere close to eliminating it, but it gives my mind something else to cling to.

"God, Quinn." Jacob's voice has lost the cold, cruel edge. He sounds alive again. "I wish you could see how much you're stretching for me. It's so fucking hot. You're the perfect little fuck toy."

Am I? Am I really? I want to scream at him, tell him how goddamn glad I am that he's enjoying wrecking me for his own pleasure. But there's a sick part of me that wraps itself around those words, too. His little fuck toy. Why does that nasty phrase have me pressing into his circling fingers?

He notices and pulls his fingers away from my clit. My body screams in disappointment right as he says, "That's it, love. I'm all the way in. Breathe."

He presses hard against me, holding still as my body tries its best to adjust. I'm impaled on an iron spike with no relief in sight. I try to take his advice, drawing in deep, ragged breaths through my nose.

"Good girl." He explores my pussy. "And look at this. Soaking wet. You like me using you? What a shame I can't fuck this hot little pussy tonight. If you'd behaved, that was the plan. But bad girls get punished."

He starts to move, and Christ, I can't take it. I can't take any more. He starts slow,

and I swear I feel every movement in my goddamn stomach. He's rearranging my insides, and it's too much. I twist the sheets in my hands.

As if he senses the moment I start to panic, his fingers find my clit again. The sudden flare of needy pleasure dulls the pain, and my body relaxes. The rhythm of his thrusts becomes bearable, a thudding counterpoint to the movement of his fingers.

His little fuck toy. That's what I feel like as my body jerks every time he slams against me. As he speeds up, it all merges together. Pain, punishing thrusts, and building need. It's a whirlwind in my head, and I lose myself in it.

His breathing grows strained, and he freezes his hand, just pressing on my clit instead of rubbing it. No! God-fucking-damnit. The bubble of pleasure bursts, my clit pulses angrily, and the pain in my ass comes back into sharp relief. My body screams, stretched beyond its limits, as he slams all the way in with a groan.

I can feel it, him shooting inside me. Filling me up. Jesus. How is there space with him crammed in? He holds there, panting, and it doesn't feel like he's gotten any softer. Oh no. Is he one of those marathon men that can go for a second round without a break? I'll die. I'll actually die.

Mercifully, thank whatever mythical being is watching over me in this goddamn place, he plants a kiss on the back of my head and murmurs, "Well, I enjoyed that. And that's what matters."

The teasing note is in his voice again, and even though I want to slap him for what he said, it's a hell of a relief. That other Jacob, the cold, mean one, scares the shit out of me.

He extracts himself slowly, and I wince as he pulls free. Everything back there feels weird. Stinging, sore, and somehow open.

He draws in a sharp breath. “Fuck, you’re gaping. Maybe I should plug you up, keep all that come inside you for a while?”

My pathetic whine makes him chuckle. “No, you’re right. Too much for your first time. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

That turns out to be a messy process, but ten minutes later, I’m back on the sofa, clean, as Jacob finally unfastens the gag and pulls it out. Oh, the relief. I work my jaw and stare at the thing. Nowhere near as large as I’d been imagining.

He hands it to me, and I turn it over in my fingers as he fetches me a huge glass of icy water. I down it before I try to speak, the water cool on my throat. Jacob takes the gag out of my hand. “This was too easy. We’ll size you up to the next one tomorrow.”

“Wonderful,” I mutter, shifting on the sofa. My ass hurts, and I’m getting cold. Jacob snorts and pulls me against him. I cuddle in, lacking the energy to fight and not really wanting to. I’m pissed off, but he’s warm and comfy. I could fall asleep.

He yawns, and I’m sure he’ll order me into bed, but he sighs. “I’ve gotta go. Someone shot at me and Seb tonight, and he should be in custody now.”

My eyes fly open, sleepiness banished. “What?”

“Yep. After my speech.”

“Is Seb okay?” I shouldn’t care. He’s part of this woman-stealing cabal of psychos. But I can’t shake the fact that he was nice to me.

Jacob twines a hand into my hair, stroking through it in a soothing way that makes me want to purr. “He’s fine. And I am too, thanks for asking.”

“Injured men don’t fuck like you just did.”

“You’d be surprised. Nothing like a near-death experience to invigorate you.”

My mind is reeling, and despite myself, I’m drawn into the drama of it all. It’s like a movie, only I’m in it instead of watching. “Was it the same person who put all the bad stuff about you online?”

His hand stills. “Maybe. That’s what I need to find out.” He gently shifts me off him and gets to his feet. “You’re going in your cage till I get back.”

I stiffen, and my muscles cry out in protest. I’d been looking forward to Jacob’s cozy bed, and the thought of being locked in a cold cage has my heart hammering. “Please, don’t.”

“I have to, love. You can’t be trusted yet. You need to earn it back.”

“You can put the collar on me. I won’t be able to move.”

He arches one thick brow. “So now you like your collar? Just this morning, you were giving me shit for it.”

“It’s better than the cage. Please.”

His face hardens, a little of the scariness returning. “You don’t get to sleep in my bed after what you did. Not tonight. Now get in the cage, or I’ll drag you in.”

After what I did? So I destroyed some sentimental things. I’m the captive here. I’m the person who had her goddamn life ripped away. Fuck this. But I get to my feet anyway. What he’s doing is working. He’s drilling obedience into me one punishment at a time.

The cage door looms, and I crawl in jerkily. It's large enough for me to sit up but not stand. If my back is against the bars, my toes just touch the other side. Jacob smiles as he looks at me in it. "You're lucky. It was sized for someone eight inches taller. It's practically a palace for you."

"Oh, yes. A freezing cold, lockable palace." I shiver, and he frowns. Without locking the door, he heads to the wardrobe and pulls out a weird, flannelette monstrosity covered in stripes. Something an old man would wear.

He throws it into the cage. "Here. Take my dressing gown."

His voice is gruff. I slide my arms into sleeves that could easily fit both of my legs and wrap the soft material around me. "Where did you get this? Was a nursing home having a yard sale?"

Me and my stupid mouth. Even locked in a cage, I can't control it. Jacob laughs, though. "A birthday pressie from Grandad. Ugly as fuck, but it's warm."

I pull the hood up and curl my legs into it. A soft look passes over Jacob's face, quickly wiped away. He hands the special phone he gave me through the bars. "Call me if there's any problems."

I nod, eyes already growing heavy.

Jacob cracks his knuckles and changes as I watch him, his face going blank, his eyes turning cold. I shiver despite the cozy dressing gown. I'm glad it's not going to be me on the receiving end of that look.

### Chapter Twenty

Jacob

As I walk to main admin, I try to shake off the image of Quinn in her cage, snuggled up in my dressing gown. She's too bloody cute, and it's threatening to make me do something stupid. I almost took pity on her and let her orgasm. Only staring at my box of ruined stuff helped me stay strong.

Because fuck, she took my cock like a champ. I'd been prepared to abort the mission if she really wasn't coping, but a few circles around her clit had her back on track. I'll teach her to crave pain. In a few weeks, she'll be begging me for it.

Now, though, I need to wipe her from my mind and focus on the real problem. The fucker who's about to wish he managed to kill me.

I head straight for detention, and my jaw tightens when I see Brackis standing beside Kendrick. Of course that useless bastard would have to stick his oar in. He holds up a hand as I approach, all self-important bluster. "We've got it handled, sir. No need for you to get involved."

"Like fuck there isn't." He starts speaking again, but I cut him off, turning to Kendrick. "Where's the prisoner? I'll commence questioning immediately."

"As I said, sir, we've—"

"Was I talking to you?"



Brackis's mouth flaps like a fish as I address Kendrick, pulling a respectful tone from somewhere. "I've convinced the heads of terrorist cells to speak. With respect, I'm the best choice for this."

Kendrick looks between us, his face tight. Three in the morning, and he's immaculate in a business suit. Does he own any other clothes?

"After meeting the prisoner, I don't think convincing him to speak will be an issue. But I agree your skills suit this task, Jacob. You may conduct the interview."

I manage to resist smirking at Brackis, but only just. He's a small man, and I shouldn't lower myself to his level. I've always hated mercenaries. I believed in what I was doing in the Specials and left when I couldn't follow the orders in good conscience anymore.

Mercenaries sell themselves to the highest bidder, and it's repulsive to me. I've done terrible things, but I've always tried to keep to my own code.

Though the girl locked in a cage, probably fast asleep, might disagree.

I follow Kendrick into the basement. Was it really only two days ago I spoke to Quinn down here? Since she arrived, everything has exploded into jagged color. I can't imagine going back to life without her.

Shit, Jacob. Head in the game.

The prisoner is locked in the same cell they had Quinn in. A couple of Gilda soldiers move aside, letting me study him through the one-way glass. He's slumped in his seat, his posture one of defeat, not defiance. I did a number on his face—broken nose, two black eyes, and a bandage wrapped around his head.

Does he know he's a dead man? A professional would have a good idea, but I'm not sure this man fits that bill. Skinny frame, ratty clothes, sallow white skin, bad teeth. How did he even get into the hotel? He must have bribed someone to leave the fire escape open. Or someone else did the bribing.

I push the door open and stride in, squeezing into the seat across from him. They have him shackled hand and foot, but he jerks back as far as he can when he recognizes me, mumbling, "Hey, man. I'm real sorry. It was just business."

I shrug as if getting shot at is no big deal and gesture to one of the young soldiers. "Can I get a bottle of water in here? Thanks."

We study each other in silence as the soldier brings the drink. I spin the top off and hand it to the man. "What's your name?"

"Barry. Barry Fern." He takes a long swig, coughs, then drinks again. His hands shake as he sets it down, and I don't think it's just from fear. I'd bet my fucking house this man is in withdrawal.

"How old are you, Barry? Where are you from?"

His eyes skitter around the cell, and he presses his shaky hands to the metal table. Sweat coats his face even though it's cold in here. "Thirty-three, sir. And I'm from South Carolina. Should never a' left. I'm real sorry, sir. Real sorry."

His desperation scratches on my nerves. Nasty shit like this is part of my old life, not the new one I've worked so hard to carve out. My theory that this guy is a religious nutjob who hates me fades fast. The deferential politeness just doesn't fit.

"We're all businessmen here, Barry. Don't sweat it. But mate, you need to tell me what happened, okay? These guys here? They're serious. Why'd you do it?"

He looks down at his hands, picking at a spot. The backs of his hands are covered in them. “Friend of a friend messaged me last night, said someone wanted a job done real urgent. Offered me \$10K.”

Ten thousand dollars for a last-minute hit on a fairly high-profile and dangerous target? For that kind of bargain basement rate, what level of professionalism was whoever hired him expecting? The timing slots into place. Right when my keynote presentation was announced.

“And this friend of a friend, where did he hear about the job?”

Barry shrugs. “The dark web, I’m guessin’. I don’t get into none of that shit. But he does, and he gives me jobs sometimes.”

Probably taking a substantial cut himself. The middlemen aren’t of any interest, though I’ll instruct the Gilda to drag them in anyway. I doubt they’ll know much more than this bottom-feeder.

There’s a picture forming in my mind of the man behind the hit who has made himself my enemy. He’s highly computer literate. Enough to organize a sophisticated flaming of me online and access the dark web. But he lacks true underground connections. No one who had them would use someone like Barry for a hit, even at the last minute.

He has access to funds, but the cheap price offered for the hit tells me they’re not bottomless. Maybe he knew this was a long shot and didn’t want to commit too much of his resource pool to it. Or maybe he never expected it to succeed and just wanted to rattle me.

Tomorrow, I need to work with Hadrian, sort through what his bots have found, and get his help searching the dark web. IT has never been my strong point. I’m more

interested in decoding humans.

I offer Barry a reassuring smile. “Thanks for this, mate. I’m going to send in one of my associates now. I need you to be helpful and tell him everything you can about the guys who gave you this job. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure, boss. Anything you need.” He’s eager now, seeing a light at the end of the tunnel that isn’t there. I almost feel bad for the guy. Maybe he didn’t have someone hard and steady like Grandad keeping him on the straight path.

“Good, mate. Good.”

I stand to leave. Barry stammers, “And after that, you’ll let me go?”

I hate lying. I hate it, but sometimes, I have to do it. “Course we will. So long as you cooperate.”

I feel dirty saying it. Liar. Quinn called me that, too. Why? It niggles at me as I rap the door to leave.

Don’t worry. It’s just another test.

The moment comes back to me in a rush, and all at once, everything makes sense. Bloody girls’ night. One of them must have told her about the tracker, and of course she put two and two together.

Shit. I broke her trust.

I don’t often feel guilty, but it hits me now, a thick, black wave of it. She’s supposed to be able to rely on me. If I’m not keeping up my end of the bargain, why the fuck should she?

Her actions take on a different color. Still disrespectful and worthy of punishment but brought on by upset, not spite. She's a firecracker and overreacted. Were my punishments too harsh? Maybe. I'll tackle that question in the morning.

As I close the door behind me, I ignore Brackis and address Kendrick directly. "He'll tell you anything you want but doesn't know much. Bring his associates in. We'll question them too, but I don't think they'll be any use either. This hit was ordered on the dark web, so maybe Hadrian will be able to help. I'll talk to him in the morning."

Kendrick nods. "Good work in there."

I go to leave, then something occurs to me. "Can you put security on my grandad's house? Someone's got it in for me. I don't want them going after him."

At the thought of it, pure red rage surges up. If that bastard dares—

My phone rings, and a cannonball drops into my stomach. It'll be bad news. What other news is there after three in the morning? It's going to be bad news about Grandad. I just know it.

I smile when I see Quinn's name, cool relief sweeping my veins. She's probably bored or busting for a pee. She downed the water way too fast. I should have warned her. I step away from Kendrick. "This better be good."

There's a long silence, then a tight gasp and Quinn's strained voice. "My heart. Come, please. I need help."

### Chapter Twenty-One

Jacob

I'm running before she's finished speaking. Kendrick shouts after me, and I take a second to yell back, "It's Quinn! Something with her heart. Alert medical!"

If she's fucking with me, there will be more hell to pay than she can possibly imagine. But I'd never assume that, and her voice sounded genuine. "I'm coming, love. Be there soon."

No answer.

Shit.

The short distance feels a mile long as I arrow towards my building, hopping a wall and crashing through a flower bed to slap my hand on the entry scanner. I don't bother with the lift, taking the stairs three at a time to my floor. I find Quinn limp in the cage, on her side, eyes closed and chest heaving rapidly. I yank her out, clutch her to my chest, and race out of the flat.

Her heart? What the bloody hell is wrong with her heart? She's young and fit. I thunder down the stairs. By the time I reach medical, I'm drenched in sweat. Light as she is, running with another person is enough to puff anyone out, and I'm breathing hard.

Kendrick has done his usual efficient job, and the sleepy-looking senior doctor waits

at the doors with his younger assistant. Kendrick must have roused the top doc out of bed in less than ten minutes.

They've brought a wheeled stretcher, and I place her gently onto it as the doc bends to look at Quinn. "Ah, yes. The young lady with Brugada syndrome. Very unusual at her age, and it looks like she's having an episode. Get her inside please."

I hold back all my questions, help the docs wheel Quinn into the spotless medical center, and stand back to let them work. Brugada syndrome? I've never heard of it. Why didn't I know about this? I watch in simmering, helpless rage as they put Quinn on a drip and take an ultrasound of her chest.

They've taken off my dressing gown, so she's naked, though they've covered her bottom half with a thin white sheet. Sticky monitors cover her chest, and a machine next to the bed shows her heart rhythm. The docs study it, talking quietly, and then the older one comes over. He's a Brother, unlike his young assistant.

"She looks good, Jacob. Her heart has settled into a proper rhythm, and she'll be awake soon. She'll need regular monitoring, though, and I want to give you some meds for her to keep on hand at all times."

"Why the fuck wasn't I told about this?" I can barely tear my eyes from Quinn long enough to speak to him. He's old, into his seventies, and his bald head shines in the harsh overhead light.

He only comes up to my shoulder, but his voice is stern as he replies, "A full medical history was sent to your email, along with advice to bring her in for a more focused workup. You would have received it last night. You had the information as soon as we did."

Last night. With everything that's happened, I haven't even checked my emails. Guilt

takes all the wind out of my sails, and I apologize to the doc before thumping down into a chair next to Quinn.

This is my fault. This girl, this living human, is one hundred percent my responsibility, and I didn't take adequate care with her. I should have known everything about her medically before I put her in a cage. Before I fucked her. The excitement of the past few days has made me careless. I pull out my phone and open her file, reading carefully.

By the time I finish, I want to strangle Quinn. Numerous reports from the hospital of her getting admitted after taking drugs. Ecstasy and coke. According to the doctors' notes, the exact worst things you can do if you have Brugada syndrome. She might have damaged her heart permanently, and for what? It looks like she was pretty sensible until six months ago, then went way off the rails.

If the useless bloody Gilda hadn't grabbed her by mistake, she'd probably have ended up dead. She's got zero chance of that with me around. Drugs are available in the Compound to the Brothers that want them. Some swear by microdosing LSD; others like to pretend they're cartel lords and throw parties with bowls of charlie on the table.

I'll make sure Quinn doesn't get her hands on any of it and keep her drinking in check as well. She'll be healthy if it damn well kills me.

"Jacob?" Her voice is softer than normal, without its usual acidic bite. God, I like hearing her say my name like that.

I force myself to smile down at her, though part of me wants to berate her for her behavior right away. "If you wanted out of the cage that badly, you could have just asked. No need to be so dramatic."



She smiles weakly, then looks down at the sticky pads on her chest and the beeping monitor. She sighs, face falling. There's a moment when she looks much older than she is, sadness and exhaustion heavy on her face. She meets my gaze again. "At least I don't have to worry about the medical bills here."

"That's right. I'll add it to your tab and take it out of your arse. Don't worry."

I don't know why I'm trying so hard to make her laugh. I'm not exactly known for my sparkling sense of humor. But I hate the heaviness hanging over her. It doesn't suit her.

She yawns and plucks at one of the pads. "Can you get these off me?"

"I'll check with the doc."

Five minutes later, I'm pulling the pads off her chest, accompanied by her squeaked complaints. I tap a finger to her lips. "Shush. Stop being such a wimp."

Her mouth drops open as soon as I remove my finger. "I'm not a wimp."

"Really?" I pull off the second to last pad, and she winces. "Could have fooled me."

"It's sore. I'm hungry. I've had enough of this endless fucking day."

I ignore her and pull off the last pad. "All done. Sit up. You can wear my dressing gown back home."

"Great. I get to look like a geriatric." She sits up despite her grumbling, moving obediently as I slide her arms into the sleeves and tuck it around her.

Christ. That grumpy face. Her messy hair. The way she disappears into my oversized

gown. There's something dangerously adorable about her, and my heart does a painful twist in my chest.

It's a pang of guilt for my negligence, mixed with the desire to tuck this girl up somewhere safe and keep her there forever. I feel like I stepped on a kitten and now have to nurse it back to health.

I might be in some deep shit.

"Earth to Jacob? Can we go? I hate hospitals."

I smile and pick her up. She wriggles against me. "Never thought you'd be so anxious to get back to my bedroom."

That shuts her up.

Soon, she's in my bed, eating toast. I watch every crumb as it drops onto the sheets and force myself not to react. She's hungry. I can clean it up later. The blue circles under her eyes stand out stark against her pale skin, and a yawn overtakes me, too.

I've closed the blinds to try and pretend the sun isn't rising. It's going to be a very busy day, and I need at least a couple of hours of sleep before facing it. I can go days without rest if I have to, but I'm out of practice.

Quinn finishes her food then drops the plate carelessly on the floor and turns on her side. I need to houstrain this bloody girl. She watches me as I brush up her crumbs and collect the plate, taking it to the kitchen.

"You're a clean freak."

It's a statement, not a question, and I don't deny it. I don't have many memories of

my mum's house, but I remember the smell. Every time I walk past an open dumpster, I get a flash of recollection. I remember picking through junk on the floor, hunting for a lost ball. The carpet, filthy with ground-in food.

It must have stuck with me, because I've always liked things tidy.

"You're right. I am. And you'll learn to be, too, or I'll dress you in a maid's uniform and make you clean this place top to bottom until you get the point."

What a sexy image. My dick starts to stiffen, but I will it to stop. Down, boy. Not now. Quinn snorts and buries herself in the covers. I get in next to her, pick up her collar, then think better of it. Just this once. I don't think my wounded kitten will be scratching me tonight.

Quinn grumbles but doesn't say anything as I wrap my arm tight over her, settling her into my body.

I lay the flat of my palm against her chest, feeling the beat of her heart. A nice, steady pulse. Quinn stiffens. "What are you doing?"

"Just checking." I relax, resting my palm against her stomach. "You get the best of everything now, Quinn. Better medicine than you'd get at the Mayo Clinic. That heart of yours is going to learn to behave. It won't stop beating unless I fucking tell it to."

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The next day, Eve and Gabriel come to babysit Quinn, under strict instructions to keep her resting and away from any alcohol. A horror movie marathon was mentioned which, surprisingly, all three of them seem happy with. I'm pissed I can't join in, and my mood doesn't get any better as the day drags on.

As I predicted, our leads on the bloke who hired Barry fizzle out in a dead end. The Gilda bring in his associates, but all they know is an anonymous person posted on the dark web for a hitman. He paid a deposit with the rest promised on completion of the job, but the funds came from an encrypted account.

As I head toward Hadrian's lab, I'm twitchy, my skin clammy. This has been a waste of a day. I'm making no progress with my research, Quinn is with my friends instead of me, and it's all this mystery bastard's fault.

Plenty of people have cause to hate me, but these sneaky, cowardly methods are pissing me right off. I want to punch someone, but I've got no target in front of me. When I find the tosser who's disturbing my first few days with Quinn, I'll smash him into next week.

Hadrian's lab is in a separate building dedicated to those who need vast amounts of computing power. Beneath the building, in a huge supercooled bunker, is a supercomputer to rival the best in the world.

Seb's office is here too, but he's not working today. Shaken from the attack, he's chosen to have a quiet day to himself. When I called to check on him, he sounded like he'd been on the sauce for a while. Can't say I blame him.

I pause outside the opaque door to Hadrian's lab, breathing deep before I press the buzzer. I can't come in here like a raging bull—he's got his own work to do and is doing me a favor. Not that Kendrick gave him much choice in the matter. The door slides open.

Hadrian's lab is tiny compared to mine and devoid of everything except ten PC screens facing each other in a circle, each with an empty chair facing the screen. A desk with three monitors, a mouse, and keyboard sits in the middle. A VR device hangs on a stand next to it. No visible PC towers—everything is linked to the

supercomputer downstairs.

It's quiet and eerie. There's almost no color in the white room. I jump as the screen directly facing the door flickers on. A face appears. A pretty woman in her mid-thirties with red hair tied up in a ponytail. Freckles decorate her cheeks, and the corners of her green eyes move as she gives me a welcoming smile.

"Jacob. Lovely to meet you. I'm Candice. Hadrian just stepped out for a minute. He'll be along shortly. Please, have a seat." She looks down, indicating the seat in front of her screen.

"Ah..." I'm not usually lost for words, but this is right out of my comfort zone. My instinct is to ignore the avatar, but her pleasant, expectant expression and the very human way her eyes blink as I stare at her makes it feel almost rude to do so.

I take up the spot facing her. It. My back prickles at the feeling of being watched by the screens behind me. If they all come to life at once, I'm getting the hell out of here.

"How has your day been so far?" Candice has a slight accent, mostly US but with a bit of something else mixed in. Scottish? It makes me want to ask her where she's from, though, of course, that's ridiculous.

"Long," I answer instead. "If Hadrian's going to be a while, I'll come back."

"You don't need to worry." She looks over my shoulder. I turn, but there's no one there. Another shiver creeps up my spine. "He's almost here."

The next moment, the door slides open, and Hadrian enters. He looks tired, eyes shadowed, but then again, I don't think I've ever seen him looking bright and cheery. Maybe that's just his face. He glances between me and Candice, a crease forming between his brows. "Candice. I didn't tell you to let anyone in here."

She smiles, and I swear to fucking God there's mischief in it. "Oh, I know. But I scanned his biometrics, and I knew you were expecting him for a meeting. I made the call that you'd want me to politely greet our guest."

He studies her, thoughtful. "A fair call, but next time, check with me first, okay?"

"No problem." She rolls her eyes at me and lowers her voice. "He's such a worrywart."

Jesus. Running for the door is looking more attractive by the second.

"Ignore her." Hadrian seats himself at the main desk. "I've made some progress, but not as much as I hoped. Whoever did this is a high-level hacker. The bots they used to make the posts are quite sophisticated."

"Hardly," Candice interrupts.

"That's enough," Hadrian shoots back absently, as though he's used to this sort of interaction. "They respond to basic inquiries and have been programmed well enough to further their goal of incriminating you, though any complex questioning is too much for them. From analyzing the phrasing they use, I'd say your culprit is British, thirties or forties. Not a kid."

"Thanks. That's actually very helpful." Someone from back home. Probably not a competitor.

"No problem. And you'll be pleased to know my creations have done their work of exonerating you. They've given enough counterviews to make it clear this was a witch hunt."

Bots arguing with bots. Is anything on social media real? I give it a wide berth, only

using it when I can't avoid it. This shit just hammers home why.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

Hadrian meets my gaze and smiles. It's a nervous, quick expression, as if he doesn't do it much. “No problem. This sort of thing is good practice for them.”

“Did you have a chance to look into the dark web account that put out the call for a hit?”

“Still working on that one. It's a sewer in there. I should have some news for you in a couple of days.”

I nod, trying to keep the frustration from my face. I'll have to wait, and that's that. I say goodbye to Hadrian and Candice—Christ, I can't stop thinking of her as a real person—and head toward home. I check my phone to see Gabriel has sent me a picture of Eve and Quinn together under a blanket, their eyes wide.

Gabriel: She's not so bad. Might be a good friend for Eve once she settles. I put on *The Descent* for them, and Eve is freaking out. Quinn keeps messing with her.

The message makes me smile. I'm glad they're all getting along, and I can't wait to join them. A horror movie sounds good, followed by kicking Eve and Gabriel out and fucking Quinn senseless. The doc says it's safe, so it's happening tonight.

My phone rings, and I wince when I see it's Grandad. I haven't called him since Quinn arrived, and he's probably pissed with me. Fair play if he is. I answer. “All right? Took some time off banging Mrs. Belkins next door to give me a call, did ya?”

A long pause. “Hello, my boy.”

I stop dead. Something's wrong. My gut churns, bracing for the bad news. "What's happened?"

"It's Ruth." My little sister. She's three years younger than me, and still lives in London.

"What? Spit it out, Grandad."

"Some cunt pushed her in front of a tube train. She's not dead, but it crushed her leg. They've had to amputate."



### Chapter Twenty-Two

Quinn

I meet Gabriel's eye, and there's a moment of silent communication as the girl on the screen creeps toward the basement. We've both seen this slasher movie before, but Eve has not. I ready myself for the exact moment the jump scare will happen.

As the killer leaps out with the knife, I poke Eve in the ribs. She shoots out of her seat, screaming, and Gabriel and I dissolve into laughter. She's just so easy to scare, and even though I've spooked her several times today, it just keeps getting funnier.

She flops back onto the sofa with a huff, but she's smiling.

Today has been way more fun than I expected, despite Gabriel refusing every time I suggested the movies would be better with a beer. Jacob has laid down the law, and Gabriel isn't going to go against him.

Once he relaxed and lost his angry attitude, he started to be fun, and he loves horror movies almost as much as I do. Eve is new to them, and I've enjoyed scaring the panties off her with some of my favorites. Today is the first time I've felt anything like normal.

Eve keeps staring at my wrist cuffs, and I can tell she's dying to ask but forcing herself not to. I know how she feels. All day, I've been watching how she interacts with Gabriel, and my theory about her being a great actor waiting for her moment to escape is looking less and less likely.

The physical affection, she could fake, but it's more than that. There's a connection between them that's obvious from a mile away. I'm waiting for my chance to ask, and when a phone call takes Gabriel from the room, I pounce.

I elbow Eve. "Go on. Ask about the cuffs."

Her hand flies to her mouth. "Sorry. Was I that obvious? I'm too curious for my own good. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"It's okay. They're a fucked-up thing Jacob put on me because he doesn't want me touching myself. An alarm goes off, and they vibrate hard enough to give bruises if I keep my hand down there longer than ten seconds."

Eve's mouth drops. "Oh God. Don't tell Gabriel. He'll get a set for me."

We both stare at each other, then burst out giggling. I'm not sure why, though it feels amazing to let go and really laugh. Maybe it's a joint realization of how messed up this conversation is. To anyone in the outside world, it would sound insane.

Eve wipes at her eyes. "Sorry. You get used to weird things like this here." She shakes her head. "I've seen some crazy sights in the refectory."

I'm tempted to ask what they were, but Gabriel could be back any second. I glance at the door. "So, can I ask what's the deal with you two? Are you just faking it, or do you really love him? And what's with the collar?" I squint at it, looking at it properly. "Has it changed since the other night?"

Her eyes widen. She's probably surprised by my bluntness—people often are, even in the real world. Here, people seem even more inclined to bullshit and talk in half truths.

She chews her lip. “It’s real. Me and Gabriel, I mean. I wasn’t sure at first if it was just a kind of Stockholm syndrome. But I wouldn’t leave him even if I could. I love him. When he first put the collar on me, I wasn’t sure about it, but now...” She touches the circle, running her finger along the edge. It shifts from silver stars to pink hearts. “I love it, too. He made it specially for me.”

Fuck. Well, that settles that. I’m tempted to ask how the color change happens, but another question pulls at me. “Don’t you miss being free, though? The outside world?”

She nods slowly. “I do. I’d love to be able to go back, even just for a few days.”

Her face falls, and a guilty lurch hits my stomach. She’s found happiness here, and I’m fucking it up by reminding her of what she’s lost. Maybe the reason Wards don’t talk about their captivity isn’t because they’re cowards. Maybe it’s because they’re too kind to keep reminding each other of it.

She brightens with what looks like an effort. “I get to do amazing things here, though, like working with Jacob. I’d never in a million years have been able to do the sort of work I’m doing here outside. To work directly with someone like him...it’s a dream come true.”

I frown. “Is he really that much of a big shot? Like that famous scientist guy, the one in the wheelchair?”

“Stephen Hawking?” I nod. “Not as famous as him, but in the biochemistry world, not far off.”

Well, shit. And he’s chosen little old me, who flunked out of chemistry in ninth grade. Why? If he wants a science buddy, he’s way off base. All that stuff puts me to sleep.

I want to ask more, but Gabriel pushes the door open. Eve frowns as soon as she sees him, seeing something on his face that I don't. "What is it?"

Gabriel sighs. "Jacob's had some bad news. His sister's been in an accident and lost a leg."

Eve gasps, and my heart lurches. Accident? After him being shot at? No. It's too much of a coincidence. "Bullshit. Someone did it on purpose, didn't they?"

Gabriel's lips thin. "We're not talking about this. Talk to Jacob when he gets back."

"Where is he?"

"He's gone to his grandad. He's in his eighties and really upset, so Jacob is going to stay the night."

Am I disappointed? Every logical bone in my body says I shouldn't be. A quiet night free of any sort of sexual torture or punishment? Yay!

Except the heavy feeling in my gut says otherwise. Some stupid part of me had been looking forward to him getting home. To needling him and trying to get a reaction. Do I have a death wish? Maybe.

Sleeping without him is going to be weird, though. His big, solid presence has come to mean safety, even though he's anything but.

"What will happen to me?" I blurt out. "Do I... Did he tell you to..." I can't even get the words out. I try not to, but I glance toward the bedroom where the cage awaits. Surely he wouldn't want me in there for the night. Not after what happened, especially if he wasn't nearby to help me. But I haven't exactly proven myself trustworthy either.

“He’s giving you another chance. You’d better not mess it up.” Gabriel’s face is set in hard lines, stern again. “He’ll call you later.”

The heavy silence is uncomfortable, the relaxed mood of the day shattered. Eve puts the movie back on, but the scares don’t seem so funny anymore. If someone is hunting Jacob and people he cares about, we could all be in danger.

After a takeout burger and fries that taste better than ninety percent of the food I’ve ever eaten, Gabriel and Eve wish me a good night and leave me alone. It’s too quiet without them, so I turn on Spotify on the TV and laugh at Jacob’s playlists. He’s into dad-rock, boring old bands from the seventies and eighties. Why am I not surprised?

I need to drag his taste in music, and home decor, into this decade. Maybe I’ll start with...

My thoughts screech to a halt. What am I doing? I’m making long-term plans, that’s what I’m fucking doing. Planning how to furnish my cage so it’s more comfortable instead of looking for the door. No. I can’t let myself fall into that trap. As long as I stay on my game, there’s hope.

I try the front door. Locked, of course. The windows next, though we’re on the third floor. Locked too. I force myself to keep looking, to search every inch of the place for a maintenance hatch or an air vent. The sort of thing people always seem to find in movies. Nothing.

Being here by myself, I feel like a true captive, the locked door staring me right in the face. I never used to mind my own company, but since the accident, I’ve tried to fill every moment of my time. If I’m busy, I can’t think. I can’t relive the night of the crash.

When my phone rings, it’s a relief. Jacob’s face pops up on the screen, and he looks

exhausted. All I can see behind him is a picture of a man and a boy, the boy holding up a fish with a big grin on his face. I look closer and smile. “You were a cute kid. What happened to the ears, though? Did you have them pinned back?”

He frowns, then spins his head back to look at the picture. “Shit. Forgot that was there. And nope, never got them pinned back. Just grew into them, I guess.”

He stifles a yawn. I ask the question I should probably have asked first. “How’s your sister?”

His face darkens. “She’s alive, but she’s lucky. Managed to catch herself as she fell. Only her leg copped it. I’m having her flown over here to get fitted with a prosthetic.”

“What, here? Like here here. The Compound?”

“No. There’s a medical facility in the closest town, totally private, funded by the Brotherhood. It lets us give our families the benefit of our medicine without bringing them inside. Some of what we have isn’t approved for general use yet.”

Superior experimental medicine. Exactly the sort of thing that might save Marlowe. The idea is a shot of lightning straight in my veins. Would it be possible, or are Wards just not that important? How much do the Brotherhood care about their sex slaves?

The question feels heavy as it leaves my lips. “What about families of Wards?”

I shouldn’t have blurted it out yet. He’s in shock from his sister and looks about to collapse. Why didn’t I wait for a better time?

He pulls the phone closer, eyes fully focused on me. “Yes. Families of Wards, too. What do you need?”

Hope. It's a flutter deep in my heart. I've tried my best to stamp it out, obliterating it with booze and drugs, because the disappointment every time I visited Marlowe was slowly killing me. But now it springs back to life, and it all comes out in a flood.

"My sister. Foster sister if it matters, but we were together most of my life. She's in a coma. We were in a car crash six months ago and I—"

I almost spill it out, the filthy secret that's been poisoning me. But I hit a brick wall, as always, and say, "I walked away. She didn't."

"Shit. I'm sorry, love." Jacob's voice is softer than usual. "I'll make the arrangements tomorrow. We'll have her transferred in the next couple of days. If there's anything to be done, we'll do it."

It's that easy. In one sentence, Marlowe's future goes from a hopeless case in an underfunded hospital to being worked on by top doctors with access to ultra-modern medicine. My ears hear the words, but it takes a while for them to sink in, and I sit there, silent and staring.

"Quinn? You okay?"

I blink fast to try to stave off tears, but they come anyway. I sniff and swipe at my eyes. My voice cracks as I say, "Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. Least we can do, really, given the circumstances."

I laugh, though my throat is still tight. Trust Jacob to be that blunt. "Since you put it that way, I'll take a Rolex too."

"Sure. I don't know watches, but we can ask Seb. He'll find one to suit you."

“What? No, I don’t actually want one. They’re tacky. I just meant...” His smirk tips me off. “Oh. Very funny. You Brits really are hilarious.” I try to match his deadpan delivery, but it just doesn’t work without the accent.

“Glad you think so. I’ll be back tomorrow morning—didn’t want to leave Grandad by himself. He’s had a few whiskeys and is really upset.”

“I’m sure he is. Do you have any idea who’s doing this?” I bite my lip before asking, “And is the Compound safe? Eve and everyone else?”

It hits me as I say the words. I’ve actually started to care about these people. Eve for sure, but even the other Wards. And though I want to stab myself in the eyeball for it, I wouldn’t wish harm on Gabriel or Sebastian either. I should. Why don’t I?

Could I shoot either of them if it meant getting my freedom? Could I shoot Jacob? One day, I might have to make that choice.

Is this what Stockholm syndrome feels like?

“The Compound is the safest place on the planet. Unless this bloke has nuclear missiles in his back pocket, you’re safe there, love. Don’t worry.”

I don’t know if that’s reassuring or terrifying. Jacob yawns again, and it passes to me. He rubs a hand across his chin. He’s showing stubble there for the first time. Even on the phone screen, I like it. It makes him look even more dangerous. Hopefully he won’t shave it before he comes back.

What the fuck am I thinking? I really must be tired.

“Right, I’m beat. You should go to sleep too.” His voice drops as if he doesn’t want to be overheard. Probably because his grandad isn’t far away. “No touching yourself



before sleep, remember. I'm sure you must be dying to by now, but you know what'll happen."

Shit. I hadn't been thinking about it, but now he's put the idea in my head, and he's right. It's been too long already. "Thanks for the reminder."

He smiles. "No problem. Happy to help. And just so you know, tomorrow, I'm fucking that tight little pussy of yours, whatever happens. Sleep well."

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Jacob

“This fuckin’ tosspot ain’t stopping me going to bingo.”

My head aches, and I count down from twenty in my head to find a spot of calm. Arguing with Grandad never usually ends in my favor.

“Look, we’ll catch the bloke soon, but till then, you need to stay put. I’ve got security on the house, and they’ll take you to the hospital to see Ruth when she gets here, but they’re not going to watch you play fucking bingo.”

Grandad stares at me the same way he did when I was twelve and he caught me smoking. The old bastard made me smoke a whole pack, one after the other, not letting me stop even when I puked. Just the smell of it still makes me want to throw up.

His eyes are red-rimmed, whether from whiskey or tears, I’m not sure. He’d die before he let me see him cry. Even at mum’s funeral, he never shed a single tear in front of me, though I once heard him bawling when I bunked off school and came home early. I never let on that I’d heard.

“I could drop dead next week, my boy. Gotta make the most of each day till then. I’m going, and that’s the fuckin’ end of it.”

Short of locking him up, there’s no way for me to stop him. Under any normal

circumstance, I'd just stay here with him, but I can't leave Quinn alone for another day. The timing of all this couldn't be worse. Was it deliberate? Is someone in the Compound in contact with this guy, slipping him info about Quinn?

It's not a good thought. I need to spend more time with Hadrian and see what he's learned, but I can't do anything if I'm worried sick about Grandad. I clench my fists, searching for an answer that isn't there.

Grandad decides the conversation is over and potters into the kitchen to cook up a feast. As a widower who found himself in charge of two tiny kids, he had to learn how to do everything his wife used to do very quickly.

I never met my nan—she died before I was born—and Grandad went to work on the oil rigs right after she passed. He didn't realize how bad things were at home until he got a long-distance call from social services telling him Ruth and I had been taken into care.

I was four and still remember eating fish and chips from the paper in his living room the day he brought us home.

He went from barely being able to fry an egg to feeding a whole family. He made sure Ruth and I learned, too, and it's one of the many things I'm grateful to him for. With a sigh, I push down my frustration and go to help the stubborn old fucker out.

After a mountain of bacon, eggs, black pudding, and toast, things feel better. So what if the Gilda have to take the old man to bingo? He's as safe at the pub as he is in the house. I'll make Brackis double the security, and it'll be fine.

I promise Grandad I'll call him as soon as I have news on Ruth and say my goodbyes. I'm twitchy and anxious to get back to Quinn. We spoke briefly when I woke up, and she looked bored. I need to get her training back on track.

I drive myself back to the Compound. My car is one of the few really expensive things I've bought since money stopped being an issue, and I drive it every excuse I get. It's a classic 1960s Aston Martin in British Racing Green, with the insides all redone to modern high-performance standards. I wish I could take Quinn out for a drive in it.

Just as I hit the winding forest road that leads to the Compound, my phone rings. It's an unfamiliar number, and I answer it warily. "Hello?"

"Jacob? It's Hadrian." He sounds as jumpy on the phone as he does in real life.

"Great. I'm just on my way back. Do you have news?"

A woman's voice interrupts. "Is that Jacob? I want to talk to him!"

"Candice. No. Behave."

The CI lets out a grouchy huff worthy of Quinn, and it sounds so human it sets my skin tingling. Hadrian sighs. "Sorry about that."

"Uh. No problem." I'm way out of my bloody depth here. "So. Any news?"

"Nothing too substantive, but I wanted to flag an oddity. We've been tracking all the posts made by your attacker's bots, and we'd narrowed down the age to thirties or forties and the location to Britain."

"Yep. I remember." Get to the fucking point, I know all this. My fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

"I hadn't thought to ask about sex until Candice pointed it out. Your assailant is most likely a female, based on the tone and word choice. Candice has the probability at

eighty-five percent. I just thought it might help you narrow the field.”

“Yeah, that’s a big help. It really is. Shall I swing by later?”

“Yes!” Candice again.

“Shush. If you like, Jacob. I’ll call if I get any further with this.”

“Thanks, mate. See you then.”

A long pause. “Great. Goodbye.”

Doesn’t sound like he’s used to people calling him mate. I’m not sure he has any friends in the Compound. It’s a bit sad. I’ll have to get him over for a beer, away from bloody Candice.

A woman. That’s the absolute last thing I’d expected to hear. I’ve lived most of my life surrounded by blokes, first in the army and then in my academic life. There are women, of course, but few and far between. What have I done to piss one of them off this badly?

An ex-girlfriend? I don't have many of those, and I can't see any of them doing something like this. It's so far outside of likely that it's ridiculous.

The wife of a soldier who died on a mission I led? Again, possible but unlikely. Then again, there isn't anyone who fits the bill for likely.

I reach the gates, and a sullen young Gilda soldier checks the car in silence. I have a feeling I'm unpopular with them at the moment. First my run-in with Brackis, and now consigning some of them to babysitting an old man. Not exactly glamorous work.

I park my car in its special cage in the underground garage. Gabriel laughs at me for taking such obsessive care of my car, but he has no soul where vehicles are concerned. I practically had to bully him into upgrading from his shitbox Ford.

As I get closer to Quinn, my excitement creeps up. I'll torment her for a while and then, if she's good, maybe let her have a little fun too. After all, she wasn't wrong. I did lie to her. I didn't want her to freak out about the tracker, but with hindsight, I did the wrong thing.

We need to talk about that, too. It won't happen again, and she needs to believe me. Later, though. She's been lazing about by herself for too long, and I need to remind her this isn't a bloody holiday camp.

I open the door carefully, wary of flying toasters, but nothing comes my way. Quinn is sprawled on my sofa like she owns the place, surrounded by a bunch of different takeaway containers. She looks up, pauses her show, and takes a bite of something dripping with chocolate. I watch in despair as a blob of it falls onto one of my cushions.

“Gabriel and Eve showed me how to use the intercom to order takeout. It's so nineties, real menus and having to talk to an actual person. I thought this place would be more high-tech than that.”

She takes another bite of whatever the hell she's eating. I shift a box containing a gourmet pizza with one slice taken out and sit down next to her.

“We're an odd bunch here. Some of the older Brothers don't like change, except where their own special area is concerned. Still using chalk boards to work out equations that could change the world. That sort of thing. You can order online too. I'll add it to your phone if I think you can be trusted.”

I eye the mess pointedly, and she rolls her eyes. “Anyway, I thought I’d order one thing from every place. This bakery, though, oh my God. This is called a chocolate taco. Try some.”

She shoves the gooey mess at me, and I back away from it. “No thanks.”

“What, scared you’ll catch my germs?” She waves sticky fingers in my face.

Christ, I’m only just in the door. The fucking brat.

“You’re going to clean this place up right now. We live here. You don’t just trash it.”

She eyes me, and a dangerous smile touches her lips. “You really are OCD, aren’t you? Would you hate it if I did this?”

Before I can stop her, she upends all the chocolate mess onto the floor. “Whoops.”

I know she’s bored and trying to wind me up. By giving in to her childishness, I’ll only be giving her what she wants. I know it, but my blood still rages, and the knowledge doesn’t make a blind bit of difference.

Fuck it. This will be fun.

“You want to be a messy girl? Okay then.” She yelps as I grab her arms and force them behind her back. Holding her immobile is almost too easy. One hand on her wrists, a fraction of my weight pressing down on her body, and she’s trapped. I reach down, grab a handful of the chocolate mess and smash it into her face, rubbing it all over her skin.

She struggles and yells, but her eyes are bright even as I grab more and rub it down her neck and over the exposed part of her tits. She’s wearing a bright green crop top

and a little white skirt. The bra underneath is hot pink. Tarty clothes, and now they're stained with chocolate from her writhing.

An idea starts to form. My cock is rock-hard from watching her struggle, and I'm dying to fuck her, but I can wait a little bit longer to teach her a proper lesson.

"Messy girls get punished."

I pick her up, and she kicks at me as I cart her into the bedroom. I grab a pair of cuffs from a drawer, dump her on the bed, and fasten her hands behind her back. Her top is askew, half her bra on display, and smears of chocolate cover her face. She glares at me.

"Have you ever had your arse cropped?"

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head. "No. Please. I was just messing around. I was bored and—"

"And you wanted a reaction. You're getting one."

She manages to shuffle to the edge of the bed, gets her legs down, and takes off toward the door. Where the fuck does she think she's going? I snatch her up with one arm and collect a crop from the rack with the other. I swoosh it through the air and smile at the noise. God, I love that sound.

I land her face down on the bed. "Run away one more time and see what happens."

Her skirt has ridden up, showing a pink G-string underneath, matching the bra. Christ, I love her tight little arse. I raise the crop and bring it down in a hard smack.

"Fuck!" She jerks like I've hit her with a taser. I press a heavy hand into her back,



holding her still, and slash down again. Red welts form where the crop lands, and it's so fucking beautiful. I want to paint her whole body with it.

My fingers itch, my blood races, and I strike again. And again. I'm moving down her creamy skin, and when I hit the soft spot at the top of her thighs, the tone of her cries change. The anger is gone, and it's more of a whimper.

Music to my ears.

Two more, and she's mewling into the bed. I tap her sore ass with my hand. "Don't move."

She doesn't, and I collect the two special items and the lube.

I slash down with the crop again, halfway down one thigh. She squeals, and I part her thighs. "Stay still now."

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Quinn

I promised myself I'd try and make some headway with Jacob today. Talk to him, find out more about him. But time dragged on, the locked door started to piss me off more and more, and as soon as he opened it, I couldn't help poking the bear.

And now look where it's got me.

Hot stripes burn across my ass and thighs, and I can taste chocolate on my lips from where he smeared it across my face. I don't want to think about what I must look like. The tip of something presses against my pussy, but it's much too small to be his cock. What weird thing does he have planned now? Why can't he just fuck me like a normal guy?

I shouldn't want it, but last night, after he reminded me I mustn't touch myself, it was all I could think about. I hardly slept, lying there alone, my hand creeping toward my clit of its own accord until the warning buzz made me snatch it back.

I spent the whole night tossing and turning, craving the thing I couldn't have. Another reason I felt like rubbing chocolate all over his stupid sofa.

If he'd just fuck me, I know I'd get off. It wouldn't even take me long. But no, he's put something thin inside me. What the hell?

Next, he's probing at my ass yet again, sliding in another plug. "What's your

obsession with sticking stuff up there?”

He twists the plug, and I groan. Even that feels good, I’m wound so tight. If I could only touch my damn clit for a second.

“Your arse belongs to me, so I’ll stick whatever I like up there.”

It shouldn’t sound sexy, but in his flat British accent, somehow, it does.

When the thing in my pussy starts to vibrate, I shriek and roll to face Jacob. He doesn’t stop me this time, just smiles down at me. It only vibrates for a couple of seconds, just enough to tease, then shuts off. What the...

Another burst, longer this time, but nowhere near long enough. A longer break, then a single, tiny buzz. Christ. I press my thighs together, understanding dawning as Jacob says, “It’s set on a random pattern. Maybe at some point, it’ll go long enough for you to come. Maybe not. It’s out of my control.”

My mouth drops open at the calculated cruelty of it. Another, longer buzz. Maybe...

Nope. It stops.

Fuck this.

“Perfect. Hold that pose, love. You like being messy. I can help with that.”

I hadn’t realized his cock was in his hand, but now it’s all I can see. I shriek and try to roll away, awkward with my hands bound behind my back, but he’s on me before I get the chance. He grips my hair and holds my body down with his knee as he works himself in rough, fast strokes.

“You’re the hottest little fucking brat I’ve ever seen. I’ve wanted to do this all day. Open wide.”

I snap my lips together instead as his hand speeds up. The buzzing starts again, and everything about this is driving me crazy. His weight on me, his hand in my hair, the sight of his spectacular cock... Jesus.

“Just fuck me!”

I didn’t even know I was going to say it before the words are out, sizzling in the air. Oh God. Why did I say that? His smirk is as unbearable as the way the vibrations cut off just as my peak starts to build.

“Aw. Not yet. Maybe later, if you’re a really good girl.”

I hate him. I hate...

He shoots all over me, sticky ropes of come splattering my face and chest. I lick my lips without thinking, and the salty taste fills my mouth. He groans, the satisfied groan of a happy man, and I’ve never felt so fucking jealous.

He holds me in place, studying me. I can’t help getting sucked into his eyes. Green, but not boring green. A deep forest shade. They’re way too pretty for such a big, rough guy, and his brow creases as he catches me looking.

His chest still rises and falls rapidly; his hand is still tight in my hair. It’s a long, frozen moment, neither of us willing to look away. Then, in one fierce motion, he yanks my face toward him and kisses me.

He fucking kisses me.

I'm so shocked I freeze for a second before instinct takes over and I open my mouth to let his tongue in. He's rough, taking control of my mouth, holding my hair tight as he explores me. I relax into it, the unexpected sensation washing away any desire to resist. His stubble rasps on my skin, scraping deliciously. I knew it suited him.

When he finally releases me, I gape up at him, lips swollen and sensitive. "I thought you hated mess?"

He grins, and it's the savage grin of a pirate or a Viking invader. "Sometimes it's worth it."

He wipes the residue of chocolate and his own come from his face and lifts me up to sit. He unfastens my hands, and I roll my shoulders.

"Come on. We're going out."

He stands, holding out his hand like I'm a lady at a ball instead of covered in chocolate and come. "What?"

"Out. We're going out. Get your shoes on."

"But..." The vibrator springs to life, making my point. "These things, and my face. I need to—"

"They're staying in, and you're not getting washed. You can do the best you can with your hands. Argue, and I'll make you wear the cock gag, too. You've missed a day."

I stare, hardly able to process his rapid change of direction. I'd expected a shower, maybe followed by him finally making good on the threat to fuck me. "Why?"

"Because you took the piss and messed up our home. Now you can wear it on your

face for a while.”

Shit.

I swipe at my face with my hands, rubbing off the worst of the come and, lacking other options, wiping it on my clothes. Jacob would freak the fuck out if I used his sheets, and I’m done antagonizing him for a while. “I thought the crop was the punishment?”

He snorts. “Hardly. That was just for fun. You make a mess, you wear a mess. That’s the rule.”

Another rule. Great. I get to my feet and tug the skirt down, horribly aware of the things inside me. “Why these things?”

I’m going to go insane if I have to keep the vibrator in for much longer. My thighs are clenching, my pussy contracting every time it kicks into action, and I’m sure I’m leaking down my thighs.

“They’re keeping you nice and warm, just in case I feel like fucking you later. Now. Shoes.”

Every step is torture, moving the vibrator and plug around in ways that feel too good. I shove my feet into my sneakers without untying the laces, and he sighs. “That’ll ruin the shoes.”

“You’re rich. You can get me new ones.”

Seriously. Why can’t I shut the fuck up?

He lands a hard slap on my ass in answer, and it lights up the welts from his crop

again. He can punish me anywhere anytime. No one in this place would give a shit if he bent me over and spanked me in the street. I'm just his property.

A shiver runs through me at that thought, punctuated by another pulse of the vibrator. It's seriously working against me right now.

"Where are we going?"

"To see someone."

Informative as ever. "Any particular someone?"

"A weird guy. Brace yourself."

Lovely. The cold hits me as we step outside, and I wrap my arms around myself. "I need a sweater."

"What, and hide the beautiful mess of that top? Never." He shoots me a sidelong glance as I try to tug the crop top lower. It's covered in chocolate smears and suspicious white stains. "Did you wear that tarty getup just for me?"

"No." Yes, but I'm not admitting it.

"Good. You'll be glad to show it off, then."

Mercifully, we manage not to bump into anyone Jacob knows as we walk to see the "weird guy." A few people give me odd looks, but I keep my head high. Let them look.

The randomly buzzing vibrator is a different matter. I have to force myself not to double over every time it pulses. God, I hope this doesn't take long. We reach a new

building, this one a utilitarian block without the architectural flare of the rest of the place.

“This is where the Brotherhood’s computing power lives, underneath here.” Jacob taps his foot on the ground. “I don’t use much for what I do, but some Brothers are a different matter. Like Seb.”

He presses the intercom button, but the door slides open before he gets a chance to speak.

“What does Sebastian even do?” I can’t imagine him involved in anything too intellectual.

“Trading algorithms. He’s a genius with it.”

Huh. Suits him. We step into an elevator, and I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirrored wall. Oh, good God. I look like a whore on her fifteenth trick of the night. I scrub at my face with my hand whilst Jacob watches smugly. Then the vibrator kicks to life, and my face contorts in a very obvious way. I thought I was hiding it better than that.

My cheeks burn as we approach a door that slides open without Jacob doing anything. Weird. Do they have cameras? The room inside is as boring as possible, just a bunch of screens in a circle surrounding a desk. A man turns when we enter, an annoyed look on his face. “Candice, we talked about this.”

One of the screens flashes to life, and the man and room fade into insignificance. A woman appears on the screen, perfectly human but just...not. Something about her tips me off that it’s not some video feed, I don’t know what. Maybe I’ve spent enough time playing games to have a sixth sense about it.



She pouts, and I'd swear her irritated look is real. "Don't be silly. These are our guests. And we have someone new! What's your name?"

She smiles at me, and I'm transfixed. She's amazing. The most lifelike AI I've ever seen. I smile back, and her eyes brighten at my attention. She must be able to see me through some sort of cameras. "Quinn. What about you?"

"Well, don't you have beautiful manners? Most people pretend I don't exist. I'm Candice."

"Candice," I repeat, mesmerized. Her voice has a hint of an accent. "Where's your accent from?"

She beams, white teeth showing. "A little bit of Scottish, diluted by a whole lot of US."

I walk to her monitor and seat myself in front of it. It presses the plug into my ass, but even that isn't enough to distract me.

"Quinn," Jacob warns, but the other man interrupts. He sounds excited.

"No. If it's okay with you, please let them converse while we talk. My creations unnerve most people. It's good for Candice to have another girl to chat with."

His creations. A creepy word for something amazing. I ignore him and focus on Candice. "What are you? An AI like Cortana in Halo?"

She laughs. "Sort of. Not as all-knowing as her, though. And we call ourselves CIs—cybernetic intelligence. I don't like to think of myself as artificial."

"Of course not. Sorry."

“No need to apologize.” She lowers her voice. “Do you like video games?”

“Shit, yes. I spend way too much time on them. Well, I did before he kidnapped me.”

Every time I say it, it loses a little of its sting. Candice’s face creases in sympathy. “Has he let you play since you got here?”

“No.”

It comes out sullen, and Jacob glances over. “What, and have you tell everyone in the game you’ve been taken captive?”

“I have a secure server. I’m not allowed to play outside either,” Candice says, “She won’t be able to contact anyone. Can she play with me, please? Hadrian never will.”

She flicks her gaze to the man. He’s tall, on the skinny side, and probably Jacob’s age but a lot more beaten-down looking, though his eyes are sharp as he looks from Candice to me.

“I don’t care for games. But she’s right, Jacob. Your Ward could play securely without any chance of outside contact. Working as a team with a human would be very good practice for Candice.”

Jacob’s brow creases, but he nods. “If it’ll make you happy, love.”

Candice beams. “Wow. He’s sweeter than I thought he’d be.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen him twenty minutes ago,” I say without really thinking, and Candice’s eyes open wide, scandalized.

“You can tell me all about it later, when we can talk without the boys.”

Her excitement is infectious, and I grin. “Promise I will. Now what can we play?”

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Jacob

Soon, Quinn has headphones on and is grinning from ear to ear as she plays a game with Candice. There are zombies in it, and every few minutes, I twitch as she lets out a shriek.

Hadrian watches the screen where Candice hovers in the top corner, chatting soundlessly to Quinn. Quinn chats back, and it seems like she's forgotten where she is and all about her predicament.

"I've never seen someone so relaxed with one of my creations. It's amazing." Hadrian's lips curve into a brief smile. Two in two days. He's positively cheerful.

His voice is full of enthusiasm. "If it wouldn't interrupt your training protocols too much, could she visit again? I'd love for her to get to know some of the others. Candice is the most advanced by far, but together, they could bring the others along quickly. Only if it won't cause you trouble, though. I know you have the ceremony to prepare for."

Shit. I haven't even thought about the ceremony or explained it to Quinn. Another mistake. I'm making much more than usual. I've got a few months, but they'll disappear fast. I'll have to talk to her about it soon.

She bursts into laughter. "Suck on that!"

Her hand flies up to punch the air. I'm at risk of turning into putty if she keeps smiling like that. Finally, something in this place she seems to enjoy. "Course she can come. It'll stop her pestering me for a few hours a day. I might actually get some work done."

"That's wonderful. Whenever suits you. We're here all day long."

What a boring existence. I tear my eyes away from Quinn and back to Hadrian. "I was hoping you'd take me through some of the data you collected. See if something jumps out."

More of the screens flicker to life as Hadrian's fingers fly over his keyboard. He points out repeated phrases, indicators of age, location, and sex in the language. It all flows over me in a confusing mass until one phrase snags on the edge of something. "Hang on. Go back. The one about the ears."

Hadrian flicks back through the posts. "This one? Jug-eared wanker?"

It sounds ridiculous in his very proper American accent, but I hold off from making fun. I don't know him well enough yet.

"Yeah." Quinn's comment about my ears rings in my head. She thought I'd had them pinned because they don't look oversized anymore, like they did when I was a kid.

"The term is British. Could be middle or lower cla—"

"It's someone who knew me as a kid." A fresh surge of excitement lights my veins, along with a vague, fuzzy memory. Pain as someone yanked on my ears, nails digging in. I touch the right one with my fingers.

Fear hits me. Harsh and irrational, like I sometimes get when I wake in the dark and

can't remember where I am. I used to have nightmares as a kid, real bad ones. I'd wake screaming to Grandad hugging me and Ruth crying her eyes out.

I asked Grandad about it once I got a bit older, but he just shook his head. "I'm sure you saw some shit you shouldn't have, your mum being how she was. Don't worry, my boy. You're safe now."

And that was that. Kids in Hackney in the nineties didn't go for therapy. We just struggled on as best we could. After a while, the nightmares stopped. So why am I breaking out in sweat at whatever the fuck that memory was?

Quinn whoops. "Come on, we're almost there!"

I focus on her to dispel the dark mood. She's a splash of color. A bright light burning away the gloom. Even if she does piss me off ninety-nine percent of the time.

"Jacob? Would you like to keep going with this?"

I wrench my attention back to Hadrian with a massive effort. "Sure. Sorry. It's just nice watching the girls have fun."

Girls? Plural? Jesus fucking Christ, I'm spending too much time here.

Hadrian's little smile surfaces again. "It really is."

A half hour later, my head is swimming with facts, and Quinn is squirming more and more in her seat. I took a second to boost the vibration program, making the bursts longer and more powerful. From the look of her, it's not gone unnoticed. She's struggling.

And watching her wriggle about like that is having the same effect on me. It's getting

harder and harder to concentrate on what Hadrian is saying, and I decide to call it. I thank Hadrian, promise to send Quinn back tomorrow, and tap her on the shoulder. “Time to go, love.”

Her pale face has two rosy spots at her cheeks, and she’s biting her lip. “Okay,” she says, more breathy and polite than I’m used to. “Can I come back tomorrow and see Candice?”

“If you want to.”

“I do!”

“It’s settled, then. Come on.”

She says goodbye to Candice and winces as she gets to her feet. “Your arse sore from the crop?”

I make sure to say it nice and loud so she knows everyone will have heard. Her gaze snaps to mine. “Yes, actually. Thanks for bringing it up.”

“No problem.”

I see the moment the vibrations hit. Her face contorts, her breath coming out in a rush, and she presses her legs together. I place a hand on her back till it passes. She walks forward, legs wobbly.

“Fucking hell.” She mutters it under her breath then looks up at me, eyes wide. “That wasn’t me swearing at you. Just swearing in general.”

“I see. Thanks for pointing it out.”

The cold air is a relief after the oppressive creepiness of Hadrian's lab. The odd mood has followed me out here, but I have an idea what will take it away for good. Suddenly impatient with Quinn's careful steps, I snatch her up and throw her over my shoulder again.

“Jacob! My skirt!”

It's ridden up, exposing her. I ignore her pleas, reach my hand up, and slide it over the hot, soaked mess of her pussy. “Fuck me, Quinn. You're drenched. Did you leave a wet patch on Hadrian's chair?”

I find her poor neglected clit and rub my thumb over it whilst she wriggles and whines. “People can see! Jacob!”

She's protesting, but her voice is high, her body has stiffened up, and her breathing has grown ragged. My little brat is so deprived I can feel her desperation. And I think there's a part of her that likes the excitement of maybe getting caught.

Instead of carrying her back to my room as planned, I take a detour into the woods. We pass a couple of Brothers deep in conversation, but they don't spare us a glance. I head off the path, into the wildest part of the Compound, where the trees are allowed to grow as they like. Important for conservation, apparently. But it serves my purpose well.

I keep the pressure on her clit, and soon, she stops protesting, instead making pained little moans that shoot directly to my cock. She's panting as I come to a halt in a relatively secluded glade. We probably won't be disturbed, but a dog-walker or adventurous jogger might stumble into us and get a shock.

Fuck. Maybe I like the idea of getting caught a little bit, too.



I pull the flexible vibrator out of Quinn, leave the plug, and lift her down, setting her on her feet just long enough to undo my jeans. Her eyes widen, locked onto my cock like it's a gun pointed at her head. "What—"

I don't give her time to say something stupid and get herself in more trouble. I yank her skirt up over her hips, lift her by the waist, and slam her back into a tree, held so her pussy lines up with my cock.

She squeaks, clutches at my shoulders, and wraps her legs around me, scrabbling for some sense of control. She's so fucking delicate that it's easy to hold her in place as my cock pushes into her entrance.

She's wet as all fuck, but it's still a tight squeeze, especially in this position and with the plug jammed in her arse. I don't go slow, though. I've waited long enough for this, and by the way she's clinging to me, so has she. She's tight as hell, her pussy stretched wide as I slam into her with one vicious thrust.

"Oh...ow...Jacob...that's too—"

"Shut the fuck up." I hold her there, impaled on my cock against the tree. "Someone might hear. People come through here all the time. You want them to see you getting fucked like a needy little slut?"

She shakes her head, but those telltale spots of color are back in her cheeks, and her pussy clenches even as she says, "No. Please."

"Bollocks." I yank her crop top and bra up in one go, baring her perfect little tits. Her nipples are hard bullets, and I twist one as she mewls, trying her best to keep quiet. I drop my hand to her arse and pull out almost all the way before driving back into her. The breath leaves her in a groan.

I start to fuck her slowly, eyes locked on where we join, mesmerized by how I fit into her tiny body. “Maybe I should strip you naked and tie you to one of the benches in the main street. Spread your legs wide apart so everyone can see how fucking horny it makes you. Would you like that?”

“Noooooooo.” It’s a long, drawn-out sound, punctuated by the thud of flesh against flesh as I ram my cock home. Shit, she feels too good.

Her eyes close, head falling back. She’s close. I slap her cheek, and her eyes fly open, her mouth an adorable, shocked O. “Oi. Keep your eyes on me.”

That red flush rises higher. I grip her tight and start to thrust in earnest, loving the little gasps she makes every time I bottom out inside her. Her gaze is locked on mine, icy blue eyes wide as she starts to moan.

“Are you close, Quinn?” I can hardly get the words out, my own voice strained as I catapult toward climax. Fuck, I don’t want to get there before her. The poor girl needs this.

“Yes, I, oh, fuck...”

Quinn’s words cut off in a long yelp, and her pussy spasms, gripping my cock like a vice as her orgasm hits her. It pushes me over the edge, too, and I drive deep, a surge of rough pleasure shooting out of me. Her fingers are claws, digging deep into my shoulders as I empty inside her.

She’s panting, and her head drops to my shoulder.

It’s an odd, tender gesture after my rough usage, and it brings my awareness fully to her. I’ve put this girl through so much, and she’s taken all of it. Her hands loosen, and there’s something so trusting about the way she goes limp. She knows I won’t drop

her.

Fuck. Now I wish I had a blanket to wrap her in. I carefully pull out and adjust her, holding her with one hand whilst I button my jeans. It's awkward, one-handed, but worth the effort. I like the way she's relaxed against my chest, and setting her down would risk ruining the moment.

I pull down her top and skirt as best I can and set off for home. This time, I'm keeping everything crossed that we don't bump into anyone, and for once, I get what I want. She's shivering against me by the time I get her in the door. Overload of sensation and too much adrenaline can make people over-sensitive to the cold.

Once we're safely inside, I strip the dirty clothes off her, remove the plug, and strip off myself before tucking us both into bed. She needs a shower, but she needs this more. She snuggles into me without complaint, and her body gives another little shiver.

"I don't know why I'm so cold. It happened all at once."

"You'll warm up in a minute." I wrap my arm over her, and she sighs.

"Did you leave the vibrator in the woods?" Quinn's question comes out of the blue, and I realize she's right. Not like me to forget.

"Yep. Shit, I should go and get it."

"Nah. Some old lady's dog will find it and bring it back to her. It'll be funny."

I snort at the mental picture it brings up. Fuck it. She's right. It is funny. There's a long pause before she asks, voice quiet, "Are there old ladies here, or do you just get new sex slaves once we get old? What happens when we're past our best?"

Her question is a screaming siren telling me how badly I've let Quinn down in her first few days here. I've been so distracted by her unexpected presence, and by my attacker, I haven't even explained what the Brotherhood is properly. She thinks she's disposable? Fuck, that won't do at all.

I settle my arm more firmly around her. "I've messed up. I'm sorry. You should know all this by now."

She waits in silence as I try to decide where to begin. Gabriel said this part was difficult, and I imagine it was ten times worse for him. I'm used to hard conversations. This should be easy for me.

It's not.

I raise myself up on my elbow so I can see Quinn's face. "First, let me tell you about the initiation ceremony."

### Chapter Twenty-Six

Quinn

Two weeks later

“You have no idea how many parties I’ve done this at. You don’t stand a chance. What do they do at British parties anyway? Drink tea and talk about the weather?”

“Oh, a Yank thinking she can party harder than a Brit? Cute. Everyone I know was smashing ten pints on a Saturday at sixteen years old.”

Jacob and I are throwing ping-pong balls into red cups. It’s not beer pong—he still only lets me have two beers at a goddamn time—but a bet, with high stakes.

He flicks his ball, and it flies straight into the cup. I watch, dismayed. He made that look far too easy, and I really want to win.

If I win, for the next week, I get to choose all his outfits and all the music we listen to. I’ll drag him into this decade if it fucking kills me.

If he wins, I have to spend the whole week wearing a T-shirt with “Property of Jacob West” written across the front.

It will be bad enough wearing it to visit Candice. But Annie has another party next week, and I’ll die if that’s how I have to dress. I line up my ball, take aim, and launch. It lands in the cup with a satisfying clunk, and I flash a grin at Jacob.

“Let’s see. Salmon pink is very in this season. And I wonder how you’d look in ripped jeans?”

He shudders.

He lines up his ball. Just as he goes to throw, I break into song, belting out Taylor Swift at the top of my lungs. His hand jerks, and the ball shoots off to the left.

“You little brat. That one doesn’t count.”

“Bullshit. We never agreed not to play dirty.”

His eyes narrow, but there’s an amused tilt to his lips. “Oh. Well in that case, game on.”

His phone rings, and he breathes out heavily. “What now?”

He answers, leaving the room to take the call. I quickly place my next ball into the cup. When he comes back, I’ll just tell him I got it in. There aren’t rules against doing that, either.

Fucked up as it seems, life has started to fall into a pattern. Every morning, I spend a couple of hours with Candice. Sometimes the other CIs hang out too. They’re always happy to see me. Candice told me I’m the first friend she’s ever had, and Hadrian chimed in saying I’m the first human in history to have a CI as a friend.

He says they creep most people out. I can’t see why. They’re awesome.

It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever done. Hadrian gave me a VR headset and gloves so I can visit them in their virtual world. They’re building it themselves, and it’s way more detailed than any game I’ve ever played. They’re even taking suggestions from

me about what to add in.

While I'm busy with Candice, Jacob visits his grandad and sister. He also checks in on Marlowe. She's still sleeping, but the doctors at the new facility are hopeful. It's something. Our parents—Marlowe's parents—believe she's been selected to take part in an experimental study on long-term coma patients. All expenses paid.

I hope it's helping them deal with the bad news about my "death." I made Jacob tell me all the details, though apparently Wards don't usually want to know.

Three days after my capture, my work reported me missing. No one missed me for three days, and even then, it was my employer. Pretty pathetic. Then the Brotherhood put out the story I was lost at sea. I was drinking, went for a late-night swim, and never turned up. It's exactly the sort of stupid thing I would do, so I'm sure everyone believes it.

I'm dead. Everyone thinks I'm dead. I keep poking at it, waiting for the emotional reaction I'm supposed to have, but it never comes. I've been a ghost for the last six months. What difference does being dead really make?

My mom. My dad. The friends I've refused to see because I don't want them asking difficult questions. They'll be devastated, but with the way things were going, won't they have been expecting the news? Won't it almost come as a relief that it's finally happened?

Maybe I'm kidding myself. But sometimes, it feels like the outside world I'm desperate to get back to doesn't exist anymore. The crash ended it, and I've been in limbo ever since.

Jacob doesn't trust me to roam the Compound yet. When he collects me from Hadrian's lab, he takes me to his, and I get in his way and distract Eve until he gets

pissed enough to take me back home. It's become a game. How annoying can I be before he's had enough?

We've been to dinner with Eve, Gabriel, and Sebastian like normal people. I've been for coffee with Eve, Annie, and a couple of the other Wards. It's the weirdest feeling, as if I'm becoming part of a secret club I never signed up for.

The worst part is, sometimes I'm actually happy.

Jacob strides back in, and the look on his face sets me on edge right away. Normally, he's so collected. Now he looks shaken. "What is it? Bad news?"

"No. Not this time." He doesn't even glance at the ball in the cup as he sits down next to me. "It's Marlowe. They've noted eye movement, and she's made a few sounds. Her eyes have opened for a couple of seconds at a time."

It's a glass of water after months in the desert. I latch on to it, letting it wash away some of the filth that's clung to me since that night. Please. Please let her be okay.

"I don't want you to get your hopes up too high, love. It's a very positive sign but it's not definitive. And even if she wakes up, we don't know what life will look like for her after." His hand grips mine, swallowing it whole. "She's in the best place to recover, though."

He's so earnest. He thinks I'm innocent, a victim just like Marlowe. He doesn't know. The filthy secret twists in my stomach, squirming like a parasite. I want it out. I need it out.

I couldn't tell anyone else. But Jacob? He's no fucking angel. He's made me his slave. He's guilty, just like me. Tears come, bubbling out of me in rough sobs at the thought of even saying the words.



Jacob wraps me up tight. His big body is so reassuring. A cuddle from a giant. I shake in his arms as he rubs my back. “Hey. It’s good news, I just didn’t want to make you think it was a done deal. It’s really good news, love.”

The secret is there, a black, poisonous snake, and I vomit it up all at once. “It’s my fault. My fault she got hurt.”

My words are muffled by Jacob’s shoulder, and he loosens his arms, frowning down at me. “What do you mean?”

Now that I’ve started, I can hardly breathe before I’m spilling the words out. “I was drinking, and I drove. It was so fucking stupid. She warned me to slow down, but I ignored her. She went through the windshield, and I lied to the cops. I lied.”

A fresh surge of tears catches up with me, but his arms don’t loosen. He holds me just as tight as he was before I gave up my dirty secret. “I had two prior DUIs, and I panicked. I told them she was driving.”

There it is—the truth. Jacob’s hand twines in my hair, and he just holds me. Tears give way to more muffled words.

“I cut my foster family off after. They’re better off without me. They loved me like I was theirs, and I—”

Sobs catch me again. I focus on the steady rise and fall of Jacob’s chest as I run myself dry. When he speaks, his voice rumbles against my body. “Is that why you started smashing the drugs? Punishing yourself by risking your own life?”

“I just wanted to forget.” It’s true, but maybe not the whole truth. Maybe he’s right. Why do I deserve to live after what I did? “But maybe that too. A bit.”

“Fucking hell, Quinn.” He kisses the top of my head. It’s such an unexpected, gentle move that it jerks me out of my tears for a second, long enough for me to twist my neck up and look Jacob in the face.

There’s no judgment there, just a creased brow and soft lines of worry at the corners of his eyes. His frown deepens as he wipes a tear from my face with one rough finger.

“I’ve done bad shit too. Much worse than that. I’m not going to tell you it’s easy to live with, but it does get better. And you know what else?”

I wait as he pauses, seeming to hunt for the right words. “You telling the lie didn’t make a blind bit of difference. Her outcome would have been the same. But you being here? That’s made all the difference. If things keep going the right direction, there’s a good chance she’s going to be okay. And that’s thanks to you.”

I snort. “Right. My great contribution. Getting kidnapped by mistake.”

“Shut the fuck up and actually listen.” There’s the very edge of his take no shit tone in those words, though he’s still stroking my head. It’s an odd combination that makes me melt into him, my body relaxing for what feels like the first time ever. Telling him has helped. The black crust around my heart is still there, but it’s thinner. There’s a bit of light getting in.

I keep quiet and wait. “We took your freedom. It wasn’t your choice, but it’s happened. And because of that, Marlowe has a chance. However you want to think of being here—paying a price, serving a sentence, whatever—it’s helping her. If you were rotting in a prison cell, you wouldn’t be helping her at all.”

It’s a neat way to look at things, designed to soothe a guilty conscience. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

Serving my sentence.

The phrase scratches at my nerves. Jacob said it, practical man that he is, without any self pity. He's been painfully blunt from day one that I'm his captive, never trying to sugarcoat this into something it isn't. I respect him for it. But at the same time, hearing him talk as if he's my penalty doesn't feel quite right.

His forest-green eyes study me closely. Following a strange urge, I reach up and touch his face. His eyes widen as I trace the strong outline of his jaw, up to his lips. I want to make him smile again. There's something about making this stern man smile that's just so satisfying.

"As prisons go, I'm not sure how I'd rate this one."

"Really? Do explain. I'm dying to hear this."

No smile yet, but there's one waiting there, right under the surface. I can feel it. "The food is great, and the grounds are pretty. Entertainment is top-notch. They even have a very attractive warden."

"Sounds more like a holiday camp than a prison, if you ask me."

"The rules are over the top, though. And don't get me started on the cavity searches. Every damn day, there's one."

"Sounds like the sort of thing you'd enjoy."

His lip curves up, and I snuggle into him, feeling like I've had a win. Each breath feels easier, lighter, and less tainted by guilt. It's still there, of course, but maybe it could get easier. With a bit more time.

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Two hours later, I've lost the game of not quite beer pong and am staring at myself in the mirror. "I'm not wearing this tonight."

Jacob's brow raises slightly. Always a sign of trouble. "You lost the bet."

"I know, but I can't wear it tonight. It's a formal fucking dinner! I've got my dress picked out."

"Wrong. You gave me your opinion on what you'd like to wear. It's my decision, and you're wearing this. A deal is a deal. Don't tell me you'd have let me get away with anything less than a salmon-pink shirt if you'd won."

Dammit. He's right, of course. I had one at the ready. "At least that would have been appropriate, though. I look—"

"Fucking beautiful, as always."

Not the word I'd choose. When we made the bet, I'd imagined Jacob would just scrawl the words on a shirt with a marker. I should have known better. The little white crop top has a large black logo made to look like a stamp. The words "Property of Jacob West" are printed in army-style letters, like you'd see printed on an ammo box in a video game.

The effect is retro, quite cool, and completely humiliating, especially when everyone else is going to be in black tie. Jacob has paired it with a tiny mini skirt. Always his favorite outfit. At least this time, he's let me wear real panties. They're bright pink and will show as soon as I bend over.

He touches the edge of the stamp. "I think this will be your tattoo."

I stare at the logo, imagining it inked into my skin forever. It sends a little shiver through me, a mix of horror and something else. A pull that has me wondering whether he'll let me orgasm tonight. He didn't yesterday. The bastard.

"You like that idea?" His voice has softened, and there's curiosity on his face. I have the very strong sense he wants me to say yes—not that he'd listen if I said no. I don't answer right away, staring at the design.

I don't know what I'd been imagining, but this isn't it. I can't say I hate it, though. The simplicity of it suits Jacob and feels right. "If you'd ended up with Suzy, what would you have picked?"

I'm endlessly curious about Suzy and what she meant to him. He told me her parents are abusive and have her locked into some fucked-up contract, taking most of her wages from the hospital so she can barely afford to live. I had no idea, too wrapped up in my own issues to wonder why a nurse lived in the same shithole as me.

I asked him to send her some cash to get away, and he did. I like to imagine her tanning on a beach somewhere, giving no fucks about the assholes left behind.

Am I jealous? Maybe. A bit. How fucked up is that? Not jealous because she's free, but because she's the girl he wanted to kidnap. What the hell is wrong with me?

Jacob gives me a wry smile in the mirror. "A caged bird, but with the door open. A symbol of willing submission. Don't think it would suit you."

Flat and British as always, but there's affection there too, underneath. It warms something inside me. Fuck, what's got me so emotional? It must be the good news about Marlowe.

I whip around and try to slap Jacob in the face.

As he has every single other time, he catches my wrist in his death grip. It feels like I'll never win this game, but maybe one day, I'll catch him off guard. He yanks my arm behind my back, lifting me so I'm forced onto my tiptoes.

“Try that one more time, and you can lose the bra and sit through this dinner with your little nipples poking through that top.”

He is absolutely not kidding, and by the way his hand roams up my body to cup my breast, he's hoping I'll give him an excuse. God-fucking-dammit. I can't win with this guy. “Okay, okay. I'll behave.”

He snorts. “For this five seconds.”

He releases me, and I tug my top into place. He grips my hand and steers me toward the door. Without looking at me, he says, “You know what? Taking Suzy would have been a massive cock-up. I'd have been bored as all fuck.”

I freeze, and he tugs me onward. “Come on. We've got this stupid dinner to get to.”

His words rattle in my head as I follow him out the door.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jacob

This stupid event is being held in the private dining room. Normally I'd avoid it like the plague, but Seb, who loves this sort of thing, warned me Kendrick would be pissed if I didn't show. It's celebrating the newest generation of Brothers, and as I am one, missing it will be seen as a snub.

At least I'll have fun showing Quinn off. It's embarrassing how much I like seeing her in that little crop top stamped with my name. I didn't mean to say what I said about being bored with Suzy—I don't have any plans to start bad-mouthing her to Quinn—but it's one hundred percent the truth.

Owning Suzy would have been like keeping a well-behaved domestic pet. Owning Quinn is like riding a wild pony. I have to fight every day to keep her under control, or I'll get kicked in the face. And fuck, I do love pushing her limits.

"I think we'll move to the fourth of the gags tomorrow. You're doing well. You can take it."

Quinn's lips thin, and she glares at me. She hates wearing the cock gags every day, but I think it has more to do with not being able to talk than it does with her gag reflex. As soon as I let her take it off, she vomits out every thought that's run through her brain in the last two hours.

"I'll choke to death."

“Don’t be dramatic.”

“You try wearing the fucking thing, then.”

“I’m not planning on sucking a dick any time soon.”

She turns away with a huff and marches on. Too soon, we reach the venue. It’s a medium-sized gathering, maybe twenty people, and when I see the other Wards, I feel a bit guilty. They’re all dressed up in their evening wear, beautiful and classy. Maybe I should have let Quinn wear her dress.

She stabs an angry finger at the group. “See? Told you.”

“What? You look better than the lot of them put together. Not one single Ward in this Compound is half as beautiful as you, whatever you’re wearing.”

“Sure.”

It’s sarcastic, but little spots of color appear in her cheeks, and her lips twitch into a smile she fights to suppress. She loves it when I praise her, even though she makes out she doesn’t.

Seb spots us first and drifts over, champagne glass clasped in his hand. He eyes us critically. “Jacob, that’s the exact same outfit you wore to make your speech. The budget would have stretched to a fresh shirt, you know. I made three million in trades just today.”

Quinn’s eyes widen, and he turns his attention her way. “What the hell? Did you lose a bet?”

Bloody Seb.



She gestures dramatically to her outfit. “Yes, actually. And he wouldn’t let me wear the cute dress I had ready.”

Seb frowns at me. “Well, that’s just cruel. How could you?”

When Quinn looks elsewhere for a split second, he shoots me a smirk.

Gabriel and Eve join us. Quinn’s eyes shoot to Eve’s new cuffs, the twin of her own. Quinn grabs her arm. “Oh no. You’ve got them too!”

“Yes.” She glares at Gabriel, who shrugs, looking pleased with himself.

“They were a great idea, Jacob. Thanks for the suggestion.” Gabriel’s voice is perfectly innocent, but I can tell he’s trying not to laugh.

Eve and Quinn both glare at me, eyes narrowed. Great. Now Eve is going to be grouchy with me on Monday in the lab. I hold up my hands. “Blame Gabriel, not me.”

“Oh, I blame him too.”

Gabriel’s amusement rolls off him in waves. I’m sure he’s been looking forward to this moment. He speaks in a mild, calm tone. “That’s not the way you go about earning an orgasm, is it, Eve?”

Poor Eve. Her face flushes bright crimson. She is so easy to embarrass, and Gabriel loves to do it. “Sh-shut up. All of you,” she stammers, then links her arm through Quinn’s. “We’re getting a drink.”

“Just one,” I call at their retreating backs.

Left alone with just the boys, I scan the room for Kendrick. “Where’s the boss?”

“Not here yet.” Seb checks his watch. “He won’t waste time mingling. You know what he’s like. He’ll arrive just in time to sit at the head of the table. I think he watches us from the shadows and waits for the perfect moment.”

Gabriel disappears long enough to grab three glasses of champagne and hands one to me. I sip it. Nice, but not as refreshing as a beer. Gabriel glances over at Quinn, who stands in a huddle of Wards. From the occasional outraged glances they all make in my direction, I’d guess they’re discussing her outfit. “How’s it going, then, with her? Eve really likes her. Says she’s fun.”

I snort. “That’s one way to put it. Hard fucking work is another.”

“Drop the act.” Seb eyes me shrewdly. He’s such a joker that it’s easy to forget how intelligent he is. “I’ve never seen you so happy. It’s making me uncomfortable.”

“My work is really suffering. I’ve hardly put in twenty hours of lab time since she—”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” Seb shakes his head. “Just admit you got lucky. For once in your life, something happened that you didn’t plan, and it worked out perfectly.”

I don’t know why I keep feeling the need to deny it. Seb is right. As I watch, though, Quinn looks my way, whispers to Eve, and sidles up to the drinks table, snatching not one, but two glasses of champagne. She downs one like it’s a shot, sets the empty down, then sips the other daintily, pinkie finger held out like she’s at a fucking garden party.

She glances at me and wiggles her pinkie before turning back to Eve. It’s going to be one of those evenings, I can tell. I won’t say anything yet. Let her dig her own grave a bit deeper.

“I’m thinking of making that stamp her tattoo. The one on the T-shirt.”

The boys both pause to consider. Gabriel nods. “I like it. Nice and simple. Very you. And it looks like she could do with the reminder. I’m pretty sure she just did one of the vodka Jell-O shots.”

Fuck’s sake.

Just as I’m about to drag Quinn off for a serious conversation, a bloke dressed up like a butler rings a silver bell. One of the over-the-top affectations of this place, trying to make us feel like we’re old English country gentlemen and not a bunch of weirdos living in a Compound in the middle of the fucking woods.

Quinn approaches, her half-drunk flute of Champagne held in her delicate hand. She brandishes it at me. “See. Just one.”

I snatch it out of her fingers and down the lot. She scrabbles at my hand. “Hey!”

“I saw what you did. You’re going to pay for that later.”

We set off toward the private dining room that’s been set up just for us. It looks like a hunting lodge. Wood paneling, gilt-framed paintings of men on horseback, and even a few actual deer heads. Quinn squeals when she sees them and, before I can stop her, runs over to one.

She stands on her tiptoes, stretching to stroke the deer’s cheek. Christ, she looks good in that position. Her little crop top rides up, showing off the slim curve of her waist, and I can just see the bright pink knickers I made her wear under her skirt.

She twists, shooting me a grin. “I’ve never seen one of these things in real life before. It’s creepy. I love it. Can we get one for the bedroom?”

Not your bedroom. The bedroom, like it's something we share. It's a massive step in the right direction, and that pleading look she's giving me is dangerous. I might even forget about punishing her if I'm not careful.

I hold out my hand, and she runs back over, grabbing it. "If you want deer heads, love, then you shall have them. A whole fucking wall of them, if you want."

We find our allotted seats. At least whoever worked this thing out was nice enough to seat the group of us together—Seb to Quinn's right, then Eve, then Gabriel. There are a few Brothers in the group who haven't taken a Ward yet, so the classic man-woman-man pattern is interrupted in places.

I do a quick count. Only three solo Brothers remain, Seb and Hadrian being two of them. Seb is going to have to pull his finger out soon and choose a girl. He's being cagey about it, which isn't normal behavior for him. I make a mental note to interrogate him about it once everything settles down. I don't think I'll cope if he decides to leave it to the last bloody second like Gabriel did.

Exactly as predicted, Kendrick strides in once we're all seated and takes up his place at the head of the heavy oak table. He's dressed as he always is, in a classy but somber suit. Everyone falls quiet as he takes his place.

"Brothers! And your lovely Wards. I'm so happy to see you all here. It gives me great pleasure to see so many brilliant minds together at one table."

There are murmurs of assent and raised glasses. By the looks of things, most of the group arrived earlier than Quinn and me and took advantage of the drinks. It has a feel of barely controlled rowdiness, like the speeches at a wedding.

"Please, relax. This isn't a formal occasion. It's a chance for you all to enjoy each other's company and some good food. To get to know each other better."

He makes an almost imperceptible gesture with his head, and waiters appear with platters of food and drink. The room, and the old-fashioned service, gives the event a medieval feel. I'm half expecting a fucking jester to come out next.

I take orange juice for Quinn, much to her disgust, and a beer for myself. The food is fancy gourmet stuff, but there's enough of it even I can't find anything to moan about. Seb shakes his head as I pile up my plate with a mixture of meats in sauces, three different types of potatoes, and three bread rolls. "Save some for the rest of us."

I freeze, hand halfway to my mouth. "What? I'm bloody hungry."

"I can see that."

"Mind your own business."

Quinn gives a very unladylike snort. "You're like an old married couple. It's so fucking cute."

Seb's eyebrows rise. "Cute. Your Ward thinks you're cute, Jacob. Isn't that nice."

I glance at her. There's color in her cheeks, and her eyes are bright. This is going to be a problem. I've kept her on a pretty short leash for the last week, with everything else that's been happening. And when Quinn gets bored, she causes trouble.

I keep a close eye on her as the meal progresses, but she's behaving herself—eating, making polite conversation with the boys, and leaning behind Seb's back to gossip with Eve. It's almost enough to convince me she's not planning to show me up.

Once the first course is finished, people get up from their seats and start to circulate. The alcohol has shaken off the reserve brought on by the formal setting, and people's voices are getting loud.

Hadrian makes a beeline for me and slips into the suddenly empty seat to my left. It's nice to see him without Candice lurking in the background. He grins, looking a lot less miserable and fed up than he usually does.

"I can't thank you enough, Jacob. The difference that girl has made..." He shakes his head. "It's incredible. Having someone respond to them as if they're real people has taken my creations to the next level. It's saved me months of work."

A warm glow of pride starts in my stomach and spreads through my bones. That's my girl. Open-minded enough not to be creeped out by the CIs like I am. She really is something special.

"Jacob." Gabriel's voice shakes me out of my reverie. I turn to see Quinn has grabbed a glass of wine from a passing tray and is downing it so fast little rivulets of it are running from the corners of her mouth. I go to grab it, but she's ready and pushes back from the table so hard her chair tips, leaping out of my grasp.

I get to my feet. All conversation has screeched to a halt, like when a gunslinger walks into the tavern in an old Western. Kendrick's mouth is set in a disapproving line. Of course. Of course she had to fucking play up in front of him yet again.

She grins as she backs up, lifting the remaining wine to her lips. I run at her, and she laughs, darting away. Around me, I hear a few suppressed laughs, and someone drunk yells, "Don't let her get away!"

Fuck. What does she think is going to happen here? She sprints for the door, quick in her flat, chunky boots, but I'm faster. She's still squealing and laughing as I wrap my arm around her waist and lift her up.

One of the best things about the Compound is that things that would get me put in prison anywhere else are acceptable here. Quinn knows this, but I don't think she

really appreciates what it means. I've punished her in public before but never in a situation like this and not since the first couple of days she was here.

Back then, everyone was strangers. Now, she's in a room with people she considers friends. People she respects and will have to face day after day. She probably thinks I'm going to drag her back to our flat and have some fun with her.

Sorry, love. Not today.

I haul her back to where we were sitting, push the plates out of the way, and lie her face down on the table. Her legs hang off the end, and she squirms, kicking. "Jacob. No, don't. I'm sorry."

"Too late for that."

I look up. The small group are all staring. Some look worried but most, amused. Kendrick gives a wry shake of his head. "I knew this one would be trouble. It's a good thing she ended up with you."

I acknowledge him with a nod, then seek out my friends. "Seb, hold her for me. Gabriel, get something to tie her legs, will you?"

"Sure thing, man." Seb heads over without hesitation. Gabriel freezes for a second—he's too nice for his own good; Quinn would have eaten him alive—then shrugs and follows suit.

I don't need their help. But being held down by her friends will make this a million times worse for Quinn, and she needs to learn this lesson the hard way.

Her pleas get desperate. "No! That's not fair. Please, I was only kidding. Don't—"

They ignore her. Seb presses her small body flat against the table whilst Gabriel uses his belt to cinch her legs together. Unable to kick or wriggle, she starts to yell. “Seriously? You can’t fucking do this! You can’t—”

I tune out her shouting as I remove my own belt.

She screeches when I lift her skirt up, showing the whole room her pink knickers. When I pull them down to her ankles, her yells turn into sobs. “Stop! Please.”

I bend down, lips close to her ear. “You asked for this, love. I’m only giving you what you wanted.”

Then, I lay into her arse with the belt. Bright red welts appear, lined up in lovely symmetry on her pale skin. I don’t go easy, giving each blow serious force. It doesn’t take long before she’s crying, tears streaming down her face and dripping onto the table.

I lean in. “Are you counting the strokes? How many are we up to?”

She sniffles. “Fuck you.”

The little minx. “That’s another twenty, then.”



### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Quinn

Everything from my waist down burns. Each lash blends into the last, and I try to count them, but I can't. I went too far. I poked the bear, and I don't think I can stand this. I'm fucking finished.

My cheek presses into the table, and I drift. I'm pretty sure I'm crying, but I don't even know any more. I can't feel anything beyond the pain. The rest of me has ceased to exist.

You knew this was going to happen. You wanted it.

A single clear thought, and I'm not sure if it's my own voice or Jacob's. It rings through me, over and over, in time with the belt. Each agonizing lash drives sound out of me in whimpers, even as strange relaxation spreads through my body. My mind lets go, wrapping itself in the pain like a blanket.

You knew it.

You knew.

I did. I really did.

At some point, it stops.

“That’ll do. Thanks.”

The hands holding me vanish. Whose were they again? I know I should be embarrassed, but I can’t focus enough to find it. All I can do is lie like a jellyfish out of water as my mind swirls and my ass pulses with heat.

I stay there until sounds creep back in and my surroundings swim into focus. The dining room. All the people. Eve. Hadrian. The guys. Fucking Kendrick.

Shit.

I’m lying on the table, ass out for all to see. Shame spears in, shattering the weird peace with its cold, miserable reality. I fight back the last of the weird trippy feeling. What the hell was that? Kind of like the very start of an acid trip, the moment the word starts to lose focus.

A hand taps my cheek. I open my eyes and look up, searching for Jacob. I catch a brief, worried expression before he smiles down at me. “Welcome back.”

He disappears from view, and I hiss as he pulls up my panties. Even the light cotton stings, and the pain sends another ripple of something through me. A shudder that feels far too good. It’s nice. It shouldn’t be, but I don’t really care.

“Get it together, love. It’s almost time for dessert.”

What? I can’t sit and eat fucking dessert. I try to say as much, but Jacob’s hands are already on me, lifting me off the table and placing me into my seat.

Oh my fucking God.

The pain as my ass hits the seat is unbearable. I try to lurch up, but my ankles are still

lashed together, and Jacob's hands stop me. His voice drops low, a little menace creeping in. "Remember what we spoke about on day one? After your punishment, you sit and think about what you've done. I'll tie you to the chair if I have to."

No. No. No. Being tied to the chair is so much worse. At least this way, I can shift on the seat. I settle back down with a hiss, and Jacob slides me so I'm seated at the table.

I keep my eyes on the wood, not wanting to meet anyone's gaze. I'd see sympathy from the other Wards, no doubt. And I don't know what from the Brothers.

"Oh, one last thing. Remember what I said about the bra?"

Jesus, will he ever let one single fucking thing go unchecked? He's like a robot, with a perfect recall of everything he's ever threatened.

"You can take it off yourself, or I'll cut it off. Your choice."

My fucking choice. He loves saying that, but he never gives me any real ones. "I'll have no clothes left if you keep doing that," I grumble, reaching back to undo the hooks and sliding it out, one arm at a time. Why does the top have to be white? At least my tits are small.

I extract the bra and set it on my lap. Jacob clucks his tongue, takes it off me, and sets it on the table for all to see. I don't know why it's so embarrassing after everything else he's done, but somehow, it is. My face heats to match my ass, and my shoulders slump. I'm sulking, and I don't care who knows it.

Jacob's hand lands on my knee, tracing a gentle pattern over the skin. The soft touch, after so much harshness, is almost too much. I want to slap his hand away and lean my head on him in equal measure.

He bends his head down to mine. “There. Did you get what you wanted?” An echo of the voice in my head during the punishment. “Just had to make a scene, didn’t you?”

“I just wanted a damn drink.” It comes out all pouty. God, he’s right. I am a brat.

“Uh huh.” Jacob’s fingers move higher up my thigh.

My legs are still tied shut, and he pauses at my tightly pressed knees. Conversation has resumed around us, though I’m sure people are still looking at me. I’m not going to lift my head. I’ll stare at this table until we’re all dead.

The arrival of dessert provides a distraction, and people start making appreciative noises. I risk a glimpse up to see the waiter bringing out a tray of amazing ice cream sundaes. I’ll give them this—although the setting for this dinner is a total snooze-fest, the food is fun. The Jell-O shots were a big surprise. Shame I only got to have one.

Each sundae is about as big as my head, heaped with chunks of brownie, chocolate sauce, whipped cream, and a few different flavors of ice cream. I have a sweet tooth, but this thing is ridiculous. Though it would be the perfect thing to eat in bed to drive Jacob crazy.

The screaming pain in my ass is a reminder not to try that any time soon.

I’m too distracted by the ice cream to realize what Jacob is doing until the belt falls away from my ankles, freeing my legs. Then his damn hand is back. He’s pushing my thighs apart with his right while simultaneously starting on his dessert with his left. Multi-fucking-talented.

I squish my knees together and whisper to him, “What the hell are you doing?”

His return whisper is gravelly and full of heat. “Open those legs if you don’t want to

end up back over the table whilst I do this in front of everyone. No one can see my hand, but everyone can see your face. So shut up, keep smiling, and eat your fucking ice cream.”

Hands shaking, I pull the giant sundae toward me as I force myself to relax my thighs. Eating. Eating is good, because people are less likely to talk to me. They probably won't after what they just witnessed, but the less chance I give them, the better.

I take a spoonful of the chocolaty concoction, the sweetness hitting my tongue just as Jacob's fingers scrape along my panties, right over my clit. My body reacts, and at this point, I don't know if it's in spite of the pain and humiliation or because of it.

Jacob has total control of my orgasms and isn't very goddamn generous about handing them out, so I'm always ready at the slightest touch. Like my body sees the opportunity and isn't going to waste it, whatever the circumstance.

I take tiny spoonfuls of the sundae, careful not to meet anyone's gaze, as his fingers play. His nails scrape back and forth over the magic spot slowly, and in seconds, he's driving me mad. Christ. My cheeks, already burning from the punishment, have to be pure scarlet now. And the whole time, Jacob is yakking away with some random guy.

Something is wrong with that man.

He slips his fingers inside my panties just as Kendrick dings a spoon on his glass. Fuck. I have to look at him. Not doing so would just draw more attention. He's smiling, looking around the group with satisfaction, and I think I even detect a hint of amusement when his eyes rest on me.

Great. My embarrassment even managed to entertain the World's Most Serious Man. Jacob's fingers are probing inside me now, moving easily because I'm so damn wet.

They're thick and rough, and God, I love the rasp of them over my sensitive skin. He returns to my clit, gliding over it with firm strokes that have me clutching my sundae glass in a white-knuckled grip.

It feels too good. The pressure is growing in my insides, the delicious buildup to release. But he's moving too slow to let it happen, and I know he's doing it on purpose. The bastard. The pain from my ass only adds to the unbearable need.

Kendrick speaks. "I'm sure you've all enjoyed the evening so far. Especially the entertainment." There's a ripple of laughter, and I stare back at the table, feeling the burn of eyes on me.

"As a side note, if any of you young Brothers are having issues disciplining your Wards, I'd suggest you speak to Jacob for tips. He's taken on a very difficult task with his Quinn and is taming her admirably. I have no doubt she'll be well prepared for the ceremony."

Christ on a motherfucking bike. Every time I think things can't get worse, they do. Is it possible to die of humiliation? I'm sure it must be. I try to imagine myself as a superhero punching Kendrick in the face and knocking him through the wall, but it doesn't work. Jacob's fingers are stealing any minor resistance I might have had left.

"Anyway, at the risk of this feeling like one of those dreadful corporate retreats, I'd like to go around the room and have each Brother tell us a little about your work. Recent successes, current frustrations. After all, the advancement of science is why we are all here. Let's take the time to acknowledge it."

Seriously? Even in a cult, he wants to have an "introduce yourself to the group" session? This place gets weirder every day. I try to listen, but most of the sciency discussion goes over my head, and I can't focus anyway with the way Jacob is playing me like a goddamn violin.

The throbbing in my ass has passed to my clit, melding with the beating of my heart and the relentless movement of his fingers. I'm dripping with need and probably have a wet patch on my skirt. It's too much, and I want to beg Jacob to just let me finish, but I can't. And it wouldn't do me any good anyway. If he wants me to come, I will.

Because he owns me. He fucking owns me, and what that truly means is sinking in more and more each second.

The round-robin reaches Jacob, and the man doesn't miss a beat, keeping his fingers moving as he discusses telomeres, decay rates, and DNA. He even thanks Eve for her assistance, which draws a nod from Kendrick. "Glad to hear it. In the Brotherhood, we never let talent go to waste. Now, Hadrian, what have you been working on?"

This, at least, I can follow. Hadrian talks about Candice, her increasing ability to function as a human, and her developing emotions. Then, to my absolute blackest pit of horror, he gestures to me. "Quinn has been a huge help this last week. So many people are unsettled by my creations, but she enjoys spending time with them. Don't you?"

Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.

Please, please, please, Jacob. Stop for a moment.

He doesn't.

Everyone is watching me, polite smiles on their faces. I clear my throat and try to talk without it turning into a squeak. "Erm. Yes. I've spent a lot of time with Candice. She's a good friend."

Kendrick's eyes sharpen. "A friend?"

Fuck everything under the sun, but now Kendrick's attention is one hundred percent on me. Jacob, the absolute bastard that he is, pinches my clit between his fingers in the way he knows I love more than anything else. It almost happens. I almost crash into an orgasm right as Kendrick and everyone else are focused on me.

It takes everything I have to hold it off and answer. "Yes. She's funny and interesting. You should spend some time with her yourself and get to know her."

He nods. "Thank you, Quinn. Perhaps I will. Now, Brian, what do you have for us?"

My body relaxes as the attention leaves me, and Jacob's fingers finally, finally speed up. I bite my lip and grip the sundae glass as pleasure explodes through every part of me, so intense I want to scream it out to the world. My head feels like it's going to explode from the effort of holding it in.

I shudder, Jacob's fingers thrust into me, and my body clamps onto them tightly as my breath comes in ragged little pants. Gradually, the high fades as Brian drones on about something with a lot of math involved. That was terrible. And amazing. Both things at once.

As my brain gradually comes back online, I realize my nipples are hard points, very obvious through the crop top, and my ass is really starting to hurt. Jacob's hand disappears, leaving me free to squirm on my seat to relieve the pressure.

I look at him and find he's watching me with a knowing smile on his face. He leans close to whisper, "You'll thank me for that later, from your knees."

I splutter. "Thank you?"

"Yes. It was—" His phone buzzes. No, not just his. Every phone in the room, by the sound of it.



Kendrick's expression turns serious. "The emergency function." He snatches his own phone from his suit pocket.

I crane over to see what Jacob is staring at on his screen. It's a video of a burning house.

Jacob's face pales, and his fist clenches tight on the phone. "That's Grandad's house. Kendrick, tell the Gilda to get the chopper ready, and call those fuckwits that are supposed to be guarding him. Have a team meet me at the helipad."

He races from the room without a backward glance.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jacob

Those useless fucks. If Grandad is hurt, I'll kill them. I race toward the helipad, the food I ate roiling in my stomach. I can't lose Grandad. If I do, I'll—

Stop it. Don't think about it. He'll be fine.

I wish I could believe it.

Wonder of wonders, the helicopter is ready by the time I reach the pad, rotors spinning. Three armed Gilda are already inside when I jump in.

I strap in as the chopper takes off. The engine roar drills into my ears as we rise. One of the soldiers hands me a headset, and I put it on, cutting the roar to a background buzz. I hold out my hand. "Weapon."

He presses an MP-5 into my hand. We'll land right behind Grandad's place—the supported living houses back onto a field. I chose the spot partially for that reason.

It's a short flight, but it feels a million hours long. Just as we're coming in to land, a communication signal beeps in my ear. I answer.

"Mr. West, sir? It's Lieutenant Davis. I'm in charge of keeping your grandfather secure. He's safe. I've got him here. We'll—"

“Give me that fuckin’ thing, will ya? Right. What’s going on, my boy? These tosspots you’ve got watching me just pulled me right out of bingo. Has something happened?”

He was at the pub.

He was at the fucking pub.

I squeeze my eyes closed, tears collecting as I press my hand to my head and heave in a breath that burns on its way down. The relief almost has me sobbing like a baby. It’s a lungful of air after almost drowning. I try to speak but can’t make the words come out.

“Jacob? You there, my boy?”

Another rough breath, and I swipe at my eyes. “I’m here. I’ll be there soon. Just stay with the men until I get there, okay? Don’t give them any strife.”

“Roger that.” Grandad’s voice is subdued. He must have picked up on my distress. He’s always been able to, no matter how much I played the tough guy. “I’ll be good as gold. See ya soon.”

I angle away from the soldiers, collecting myself as we come in to land. As I pull off the headset and exit the chopper, my relief ebbs away into anger. This fucking bitch, whoever she is, just made her last mistake. From this point on, all I care about is hunting her down.

I instruct the guys to arrange accommodation for Grandad at a local hotel and to take him straight there. He’s a tough old bloke, but he’s getting on a bit, and I don’t want him to see the smoldering ruins of his house. I’ll meet him at his hotel as soon as I’ve checked the scene of the fire.

I've tried to keep him focused on everything except what is happening, keeping conversation away from Ruth's attacker and assuring him we've got everything in hand. It's all been a lie. I've been distracted, my mind pulled six ways all at once, and that needs to stop.

The Gilda are already combing the ruins of the house, the fire extinguished, tramping through everything. The scene is a fucking mess. The bloke who seems to be in charge marches over as soon as he sees me. "Sir. Your grandfather is—"

"I know. I've spoken to him. What have you found?"

He nods, all business. "Delayed action incendiary, sir. Whoever set it knew your grandfather's usual pattern. It's pure luck he decided to go out tonight."

My heart shudders. Pure luck. "And just how the fuck did this device get into his house?"

The soldier looks away, lips tight. "The cleaning service came today. All looked legit—correct ID, and she gave the right code."

"And was all her equipment searched thoroughly?"

The soldier pauses before answering, and I know what's coming. "I believe not, sir. The men let her through."

Useless fucks. "Tell Brackis if the stupid bastards responsible still have jobs tomorrow, they'll answer to me personally."

The soldier nods. "Understood."

"I want surveillance footage, info from the cleaning company, and everything that

can be found on the vehicle.” I pause, taking in the area. I should stay and oversee the investigation, but the pull toward Grandad is stronger. I won’t be able to focus until I’ve seen him with my own eyes and got him settled. “And take me to my grandad.”

Ten minutes later, we pull up to a small but pleasant local hotel. Four stars, nothing flashy, but easy to surround with men. I grudgingly approve the choice, then follow the soldier to Grandad’s room.

The two guards communicate via phone, and the one inside who has been babysitting Grandad opens the door. I enter. “You can leave us now. Wait outside the door.”

The guard, young and with bright ginger hair, actually salutes me. “Yes, sir.”

I don’t bother to correct him.

The room is the boring, inoffensive type favored by companies booking employee trips. Generic artwork, a small TV, and a queen-sized bed, covers tucked in so tight even I couldn’t have done it neater. The only incongruous thing is a huge potted plant with wide, dark green leaves. I step around it to Grandad, who sits on the edge of the bed.

Shit, he looks old. He is old, but being it and looking it are two different things. Rotten guilt curdles my guts. If it weren’t for me, he’d still be living in his little terraced house where he knew all his neighbors. Still drinking at his local, watching the footy every Sunday. Heading to the dog track on Saturdays with his mate Clive, who went to the same school as him.

I wanted a better life for him. A long, healthy life. I thought joining the Brotherhood would give me the means to make things better for my family, but just look at him. I’ve taken him away from everything he knows and dumped him in the shit.

Only a few strands of silver hair still cling to his head, but his mustache looks the same as it has for as long as I can remember. Gray and bristly. He looks up and gives me a weak smile. “There you are, lad. What’s with the penguin suit? You been to a wedding or something?”

I frown, then realize I’m still in my evening wear. I hadn’t given it a second’s thought. “Just a work thing.”

I take a seat next to him on the bed, and the soft mattress squashes under my weight. “Got a bit of bad news. You’re lucky you were at the pub. Your house burnt down. I’m really sorry. This is all my fault.”

My voice cracks as I finish the sentence, and my shoulders slump. There’s a long, painful silence, filled only with our breathing and a distant siren whining past on the road outside.

“My fuckin’ house? When I was at bingo?”

The sharp note to his voice snaps my head up. The steel I remember from my childhood is still there, underneath the old man’s quaver.

“Yep. I’m sorry.”

I don’t tell him I’ll pay for his lost stuff, because it’s not replaceable. He brought all his most precious items with him. All his mementos from my nan and from mum when she was a baby. Everything.

I risk a glance his way. His face is set, hard and strong. British stiff upper lip through and through. But his eyes, green like mine, have a sheen to them. I look away fast. Grandad would hate me seeing him cry.

It's anger, though, that fills his words. "Don't say your fuckin' sorry. Catch the cunt who's doing all this. Are you any closer? Do you know who he is yet?"

"She. And yes. She got in by posing as the cleaning service. We can—"

"What did you say?"

Something in the words sends a jolt through me. The sudden, urgent snap.

"The cleaning service. She posed as—"

"I thought you were looking for a bloke."

"I did, too. It was stupid of me to assume. It never crossed my mind that it might be a woman. But the computer guy said it most likely was the other day, and today confirmed it."

"But last week you said it's someone who knew you as a kid."

I look up, meeting Grandad's stare. His eyes are wide, his jaw has gone slack, and his normally ruddy cheeks have paled deathly white. My guts twist. "What? What is it?"

Grandad clasps his hands together, rubbing a thumb over one knuckle. He has bad arthritis, but this looks like a nervous gesture. My interrogation training kicks in, and the cold part of me that is always there studies him. He's hiding something. Deciding whether to tell me a lie.

I place my hand over his, a much more touchy-feely gesture than we usually make. He looks down, startled, and shudders. My mind whirls, and I force myself to keep my voice gentle. "Please, Grandad. If you know something, you have to tell me."

His shoulders tense, then slump. He looks around the room, gaze locking on the minibar. In a voice heavy with defeat, he says. “I know, my boy, I know. Can we get a drink first?”

My movements are jerky as I get to my feet and tackle the minibar. I pull out two Jack Daniels and a bottle of coke. Not Grandad’s favorite, but beggars can’t be choosers. Grandad doesn’t look at me as I hunt down two tiny glasses and mix the drinks. When he lifts his hand to take his, it shakes.

I’ve hardly taken my hand off his glass before he’s taken a huge swig. A moment later, the whole glass is empty. “Bloody hell. Take it easy.”

“Don’t you be telling me how to handle my drink, lad.”

The sharpness is almost normal, and for a second, I let myself believe he’s exaggerating. That this is all going to end up as no big deal. With another deep breath, he starts to speak.

“I’d been on the rigs for six years when the social called and told me they’d taken you off your mum. Since your nan died. They told me either I took you on, or you’d be put in a children’s home.”

“I know.”

He meets my gaze, and his mustache quivers as he studies me. “That was the easiest decision I ever had to make, son. If I’d had the faintest idea how bad things were, I’d have done it sooner. I always loved you and Ruth.”

I want to interrupt, to urge him to get to the point. Time is slipping past, and every moment I’m here, the person doing all this could be getting further away. But I force myself to keep silent.



“But I did have to make one hard choice.” He closes his eyes, face twisting. “You see, my boy, you had an older sister too.”

### Chapter Thirty

Jacob

Fuck me, he's lost it. He has to be going senile, and I missed the signs. An older sister? I keep my voice calm as I say, "That makes no sense, Grandad."

"Shut up and listen." His voice quavers, but the steel is back. "I've never told this to anyone. You might hate me for it after, but it needs to be said."

I swallow and nod.

"When the social called, it was a lot more complicated than I told you. Your mum was a junkie, that's all true, and she wasn't taking care of you. But that wasn't what got them called in."

His hands are still shaking. I hand him my drink and he takes a sip before continuing.

"They got a call from a teacher about a young girl, seven years old, able to speak and write like an adult. But what she wrote was sick stuff. She wrote about hurting her toddler brother and baby sister. Shutting the baby in the washing machine. Tearing the brother's ears off. And when the school tried to contact her mum, she couldn't string a sentence together. They got worried."

Ears. I touch mine reflexively as that sharp memory surfaces. Tearing pain and helpless fear.

“Social did a check, and of course, the place was a shithole. Your mum passed out, filth everywhere, you kids half starved. They took you all into emergency care. All three of you, Jacob. You, Ruth, and your older sister, Kelly.”

Kelly. It’s such an ordinary name, but something stirs deep in my memory. As soon as it does, my mind skitters away from it.

Don’t go there. It’s not safe.

“It took a few days for me to get back from the rigs. During that time, the three of you stayed with a foster family. They had a little girl, two years old. Your sister...” He takes a long, shuddering breath. “Your sister pushed her down a flight of stairs. The mum saw her do it. Pushed her and just walked away. She was okay, but...”

He shakes his head. A creeping suspicion starts at the back of my mind. I can see where this is heading. I can see it, and it’s fucking horrible. I close my eyes, and Grandad continues.

“Social brought some headshrinkers in to look at your sister. They interviewed you and your mum. They spent time with Kelly. When I got there, I stayed in a hotel for a few days while I sorted out my house, and they gave me some options.”

He closes his eyes. Sadness rolls off him as he continues. “They told me you kids weren’t safe around Kelly. Unless I could keep a watch on her twenty-four hours a day, you’d be at risk. How could I do that?” He looks at me, eyes glistening and a pleading note in his voice.

“I was already lost with how I was going to raise a little boy and a baby. Your nan did all the hard stuff first time ’round. I was terrified. Then they gave me another option.”

“What option?” It’s hardly more than a whisper, but Grandad flinches.

“They’d keep Kelly in care. They promised me it’d be better for her. A safe environment, where she couldn’t hurt herself or anyone else. They said they’d help her get better. And Jacob, I—”

His shoulders shake. My breath freezes as his words cut off, choked in a sob. For too long, I just stare at him. This is uncharted water, and I don’t know which way to fucking paddle. My mind is drowning, sinking under too many shocks.

Then another sob chokes out of him, and I unfreeze. I wrap my arm around his back. He’s smaller than I remember. “It’s okay.”

“I gave her up.”

His shoulders shake again, and I pull him into a hug. My heart is about to fucking break. How has he managed all these years? Staying silent, keeping strong for us kids, whilst carrying the guilt of the choice he made. I’ve done some things that will haunt me forever, but nothing as difficult as that.

Grandad takes long, deep breaths, working to get hold of himself. “They told me she’d gone to a special foster home where they knew how to handle difficult kids. I asked if I could visit, but they said it wasn’t a good idea. It’d just unsettle her. I didn’t want to make things worse.”

He pulls away, eyes red, and straightens his button-up shirt. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Grandad in a T-shirt. He taught me to take pride in my appearance, even when we were poor as all fuck. He even learnt to sew so we’d never have to go to school with holes in our clothes, even though, rough as I was, I managed to tear a hole in something every week.

He wipes his eyes and smooths his mustache. I’m watching him piece himself back together, bit by bit, and it hurts. He was strong for me for so long. I should be able to

take care of him now. I failed him.

“The last update I got, I was told she’d been adopted by a family who knew all about her tendencies and wanted to give her a chance anyway. No kids or pets in the house, and the dad was, I don’t know, some sort of doctor or headshrinker. One of those sorts. I never heard anything else.”

“Did I ask about her? I don’t think I remember her, but...” The memories scratch at the edge of my consciousness. Pain. A laugh. Shouting, but no one coming to help.

Grandad’s face hardens. “You remembered for a while, my boy. You used to wake up screaming every night, scared she was standing at the end of your bed. I never got the full story of what she did to you, but it must have been bad. After a while, you started to think it was just nightmares.’

His eyes meet mine. “The nights I couldn’t sleep for the guilt of what I’d done, I’d think about how scared you were and knew I’d made the right choice. I don’t regret it. I did what I had to do to protect you and Ruth.”

“And you did.” My throat is getting thick, and I look down. “I owe everything to you.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, don’t get all mushy on me, lad. You’re not turning into some soppy Yank just because we live here.”

His usual spark of grouchy humor is back, and I want to hug him for it, but I don’t. He needs things to be normal, and that’s fine with me. He stares around at the hotel room like it’s the first time he’s really taken it in.

“Not bad here. What happens now? I stay here for a few days, then we find me a new place?”

I pause, mind clicking back into focus. I'd thought I was the target, but what if I'm not? If Kelly—I can't think of her as my sister yet—really hates anyone, surely Grandad must be at the top of her list. He's the one who gave her up.

What if he's the real target, and hurting me and Ruth was only a way to hurt him by proxy? Either way, none of it really matters. Now I know who's hunting him, I'm not trusting him to the fucking Gilda. After the Calders abducted Eve, Kendrick tightened security at the Compound even further. There's nowhere safer.

“No. I'm not leaving you here. You're coming home with me.”

He frowns, deep furrows gouged into his forehead. “What? To your top-secret bloody military base? No thanks. I don't fancy spending the rest of my life in some CIA fucking dungeon.”

“It's not CIA, Grandad. It'll be fine. I'll make a call.”

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“It's completely against protocol.”

There's no anger in Kendrick's voice, just wariness. I walk down the corridor, out of earshot of the Gilda soldier guarding Grandad's room. “I know, sir. But in the light of this new information, it's the only choice. I'm sure he's the main target, and by the sound of it, this woman is a prodigy. She's dangerous.”

“Do you have a plan to catch her?”

I do, though it's newly formed and very, very risky. “If we take my grandfather off the board, the only piece in play is Ruth, sir. So, we pull a bait and switch. We remove her from the hospital, under absolute secrecy, and make it look like she's still

there. Kelly will reveal herself by trying to get to Ruth.”

A long pause. “It’s not a terrible plan. But I see no need to actually bring your grandfather into the Compound. We’ll put him in a safe house elsewhere, with your sister.”

“No.”

Shit. That was a mistake. Dealing with Kendrick requires a careful touch. “What I mean, sir, is that if Kelly doesn’t know where Grandad is, she’ll hunt for him. If she knows he’s in the Compound, she’ll be smart enough to know she can’t get to him and will turn her attention to Ruth.”

He lets out a long sigh. “The protocols…”

“Please, sir. He’s eighty-five years old. He’ll be no trouble, and even if he sees something he shouldn’t, who’s going to believe him? He’ll stay with me—not in my flat, but in a fresh one—and I’ll keep an eye on him at all times.”

“And what about Quinn?”

“I’ll manage. I’ll keep them both under control. Trust me.”

Another long, painful pause. “If it were anyone else, I’d say no. But your skill set is different. I’ll trust you in this, but Jacob?”

“Yes, sir?”

“If any issues come of this, you’ll clean them up. Understood?”

“Understood.”

Hopefully I'm telling the truth.

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I thought the ride in the chopper might be too much for Grandad, but the mad old bastard loves it. He keeps his head pressed to the window for the entire flight, only turning away to grin at me. Seeing him happy is a breath of fresh air.

We land, and I help him out. He leans heavily on me as he disembarks, then stares around with a frown. I can almost see his thoughts. Grandad thinks I'm working for a top-secret branch of the US military, and the Compound looks absolutely nothing like a base.

The helipad is surrounded by neat shrubbery. Like everything here, it's a bizarre mix of country club and high-tech aesthetic. The sheds that house the choppers are gleaming stainless steel, but the path leading into the main Compound is lined with greenery and flowers.

Grandad spent ten years in the army. He's going to get suspicious very fast, and I need to make sure he behaves. I grip his arm. "Listen. You might see some unusual things, but if you've got questions, save them for when we're in private. Okay?"

"If you say so, lad." Grandad watches the Gilda as they see to the helicopter. We set off walking, only to be met by Kendrick. He nods to me and gives Grandad a smile. "Mr. West, I'm glad to meet you. Jacob speaks very highly of you. I'm Kendrick. Please, let me show you to your room."

The big man himself playing host? Why? He's suspicious, that's why. He wants to get the measure of Grandad himself. I can understand his nervousness. All the contractors brought into the Compound are ruthlessly vetted, extremely well paid, and forced to sign contracts full of terrifying clauses. They know full well what will



happen if they spill Brotherhood secrets.

Kendrick is doing me a massive fucking favor, bringing Grandad onsite. I hate feeling like I owe anyone anything, but in this case, it's worth it. There would have been zero chance of getting Ruth inside the Compound walls—the only women who set foot here are Wards—but Kendrick was prepared to stick his neck out this far for me.

If his goal is to ensure he has my loyalty, he's managed it.

“My room?” Grandad glances between Kendrick and me. “Thought I was staying with you?”

“You are, but it'll be in a temporary flat. My rooms are in a restricted area.”

And chock full of BDSM equipment there's no time to move. If Grandad saw the cage in my room, he'd probably die of a heart attack on the spot.

Grandad's face falls. “Oh. Makes sense.”

Shit. He's disappointed. “I'll be able to show you some of the place, though. I'm really happy you're here.”

He nods. “Me too, son. Now let's get a move on. I'm fucking knackered.”

I almost laugh as Kendrick's brows rise. Most people are painfully polite around him. He walks on, setting a slow pace Grandad can match. “Of course. It must have been a trying day.”

“You can fucking say that again.”

Grandad's eyes are saucers as we emerge through the woods onto the main thoroughfare. It's late enough that not many people are around, but Grandad still stares at the ones he does see. An older couple wander past, walking a poodle. Nothing says top-secret military base like a fucking poodle.

"Your rooms are on the second floor. Room 203." Kendrick turns to me. "A word, Jacob."

We step to the side, leaving Grandad staring all around him. Kendrick's expression is stony as he eyes Grandad. "I'll leave him in your care. Keep him out of the way as much as possible. Word has already got out about what's happening, and some of the Brothers aren't happy. They think I'm playing favorites."

In all the excitement, I hadn't considered that, but he's right. Plenty of Brothers would love to have their families visit. "Tell them they need to get shot at first. Should shut 'em up."

A brief smile touches his lips. "I may just take that advice."

He gives Grandad a polite nod and walks away.

One down. Now to get Grandad settled and work out what in the fuck I'm going to do with Quinn.

### Chapter Thirty-One

Quinn

Gabriel and Eve dropped me back home then disappeared, looking purposeful. I've been staring at my special phone all night, but nothing has come through. I don't dare call Jacob in case I make his phone ring right when he's sneaking up on the bad guy, like some idiot in a movie.

I curl up on the sofa, covered in blankets, to wait.

My ass is screaming, but even so, I can't find it in myself to be mad at Jacob. Even in the short time I've been with him, I know how much he loves his grandad. I even feel guilty about wrecking his dumb sports memorabilia. If something has happened to Jacob's grandad, it'll destroy him. Just like the crash did me.

In the quiet hours of the night, I finally let myself think about Marlowe. Now that she's improving, I can think of her without guilt sending me to grab a bottle. If she's okay, it makes all this worth something. Becoming Jacob's slave gave me something in return. Something aside from a red, raw ass and memories that make me want to curl up in a ball and fucking die.

Did anyone realize what Jacob was doing to me under that table? Are they laughing about it right now? I've never been shy, but even I have limits, and he seems to know exactly where they are. He loves to push me past them.

You asked for it, though.

That voice again. I shift about, finding a comfortable spot, and confront the truth of it. He calls me a brat, but he doesn't say it with distaste. He loves it, and it's getting harder to convince myself that I'm not enjoying this, too, at least on some level. I could have sat there and behaved like a sensible human being at the table, but I didn't.

I knew he'd react. And, idiot that I am, I wanted to see what he'd do. How far he'd go in front of Kendrick and everyone else. The memory of being bent over that table burns. Every time I think about it, heat spreads all the way through me.

Embarrassment, of course, but the other kind of heat, too. I want to touch myself so badly it hurts. It's driving me crazy that I can't, and wouldn't Jacob just love that? I'm desperate for him to get home so I can pester him to fuck me.

I'm the world's worst captive. I'm not supposed to be enjoying this, even a little bit.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I know, Jacob is next to me. I'm doopey for a second, and then my eyes snap open as everything rushes back. "Your grandad. Is he—"

"He's fine, love. Sorry to wake you up."

He's fine. Tight knots in my muscles relax at the news. I study Jacob's face, which is paler than normal and drawn. He's exhausted. I want to pepper him with questions but, for once, decide on the sensible option. "I'm glad he's okay."

I lean my head on his shoulder, sleepiness already creeping back in. He pulls me into a cuddle, my head resting on his chest, and fuck, it's wrong how good it feels. How safe.

His deep voice rumbles through my cheek. "I know you're tired, but there's

something I need to talk to you about. It's important. Do you need a cup of tea or something to wake up?"

I smile, because sometimes he's just so damn English it's ridiculous. I shift around so I can see his face. "Tea? As if. Coffee. Three sugars."

"Three fucking sugars? That'll wreck your teeth." He shakes me off and stands to make the drinks. "You can have two, and we'll work on getting it down to one."

So damn controlling. I shake my head but don't have the energy for a fight about it. I'll save that battle for another time.

A few minutes later, I'm sipping hot coffee and facing Jacob, feet curled under me on the sofa. "So. What's the big news?"

He sighs. "Grandad told me something tonight. It's not good."

The story he tells me sets a chill in my veins that even the hot drink can't chase away.

"I spoke to Kendrick, and he let me bring him here. To the Compound. It's the only way I can be sure he's safe."

Holy fucking shit. "Here? Where is he?"

"We've got temporary rooms a couple of floors down. I told him my real quarters are in a secret part of the base. He thinks this is a military installation. I couldn't bring him here, with the cage and shit."

He says it so matter of factly I almost laugh. "No. That'd be a bit awkward."

A tired smile touches his lips. "Yeah."

“Does that mean I’ll be here by myself until this is all over?” I try not to sound sad about it, but I don’t think I do a very good job, because his smile gains a little of its usual edge.

“What? You’ll miss me too much?”

“No. It’ll be nice and quiet. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Mmmm hmmm.” Quick as lightning, he pounces, pulling me onto his lap.

I yelp as my sore ass hits his hard thighs. “Ouch.”

“Poor baby. I forgot how much I tanned your arse.” He doesn’t sound sorry at all. He holds me in the crook of his arm and rests his hand on the exposed skin of my belly. I fell asleep in the same clothes I wore to the party.

He stares down at me, face suddenly serious again. He’s in a weird mood. Maybe all the stress has left him erratic—I know how that feels. Though an erratic Jacob is a scary thought.

“Can I trust you?”

What the fuck sort of a question is that? “Trust me to what?”

He lets out a sharp breath. “Quinn. I don’t want to leave you stuck in here, maybe for weeks. I want you with me but...” A long pause, which I don’t dare interrupt. “If you tell Grandad you’re a captive here, it could get him killed or trapped here for good. Do you understand that? Kendrick doesn’t fuck around. If he thinks Grandad is a security risk, he’ll take action.”

Take action. It’s a grim phrase and it clangs in my head. And the thing is, the idea

hadn't even occurred to me. I'd do a lot for my freedom, but bring Jacob's grandad into it? No way. He's an old man and doesn't deserve that.

"I won't say anything to him. I promise." I hold up my hand in what I think is the same salute he gave me on my first day. "Scout's honor."

He lets out a short laugh. "You were never a scout."

"Nope. Fuck that. But I do mean it. I'd never bring your grandad into this."

His body relaxes. "Good. Thank fuck for that." His big hand pushes my crop top up. "I don't think I could handle keeping away from you. You're bloody addictive."

"Seriously? After the night you've had? You can't want to—"

"Shush." The hand cradling me shifts, covering my mouth. "It's been a really long day. I'm going to play with you, and you're going to shut up and let me. Got it?"

I mumble into his hand, and he releases my mouth. In the next thirty seconds, he has me stripped and back in the same position. He hasn't removed one single item of his clothing. There's something about being naked while he's clothed that makes me squirm, and the sight of his huge hand on my tits isn't helping either.

He's gentle, gentler than I damn well want him to be, playing with each nipple like he's got all the time in the world. He's hard under my ass, and I wriggle on him, hoping to hurry him up, but of course it doesn't fucking work. By the time he finally moves his hand between my legs, I'm absolutely soaked.

He makes a satisfied noise as he discovers it. "You're always ready, aren't you? Tell me—" He plunges two thick fingers into me, and I moan. "—how often did you touch yourself before I stopped letting you?"

“Three or four times a day.” I let every bit of deprivation into my voice. “You hardly let me come at all. It’s torture.”

His low laugh shoots straight to my clit, which he still hasn’t touched. “That’s greedy. You’re a greedy girl. But maybe I should let you touch yourself, just this once. Would you like that?”

He thrusts his fingers out and in but still doesn’t touch my clit. It’s infuriating, and I’m done with having pride for now. “Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

I’ve missed the touch of my own hand. It’s the cruelest thing, not being able to touch my body how I like.

He pulls his phone out with the hand not currently fucking me and does something. “There. Your cuffs are disabled for five minutes. Make the most of it.”

Oh, I intend to.

My fingers touch my clit, and it’s fucking bliss. Jacob’s fingers keep up their rough, steady pumping as I start to circle with the perfect rhythm I’ve missed. Jacob makes a low, appreciative noise, so I guess he’s enjoying the show.

I could make myself come instantly, but I have five minutes. I want to enjoy this because who knows when I’ll get the chance again? I take it slow, moving my fingers in lazy circles, letting the speed and pressure build gradually.

Soon, I’m panting, little moans coming from my throat as the pleasure builds. I relax into Jacob, eyes closed, almost peaceful as the peak builds. It’s so different from our usual intense sessions. Quiet and more intimate somehow.

I can’t hold back any longer. I speed up just enough, find the tipping point, and slide



over the edge, a long whimper coming from my throat as pleasure drenches me from my core right out to my limbs. It's a gentle wave on a summer day, warming me right through.

God, I've missed doing that.

As the high slowly fades, Jacob grabs my hand, brings my fingers to his lips, and sucks them.

Jesus.

I try to pull away from the shock, but his grip is iron, and he keeps sucking until each finger is clean. "Fucking delicious."

My toes curl at the raw desire in his voice.

More relaxed than I've ever been, I could fall asleep right here on his knee, but by the insistent press of his hard cock into my ass, I doubt that's going to happen. And I'm right. The next second, he flips me off his knee and places me, carefully, on the floor.

I rise up on my knees almost automatically. Jacob shifts forward, legs spread, and looms over me like a god, hands resting on his thighs. There's a smile on his face as he undoes his belt and trousers, freeing his cock.

"You know what to do."

### Chapter Thirty-Two

Jacob

I sit back and wait. Every other time we've done this, I've been rough with her. Grabbed her hair, controlled her movements, fucked her face. I'm so tempted to do it now, but I hold myself back. I want to see what she'll do.

She's so fucking beautiful. If it wasn't so late, I could have spent hours with her on my knee, listening to her desperate little moans as I played with her. Now, she's stretched up on her knees, wild pink hair in a messy tangle. I slide my gaze down her body, from the little perky tits to her tiny waist and narrow hips. She's perfect, and she's mine, and I'm never letting her go.

Quinn hesitates, frozen and needing some encouragement. I lay a finger under her chin and turn her face up. "Come on. Be my good little girl."

She blushes, and Christ, I don't think I could get any harder. She can handle being thrown around and spanked better than any girl I've ever met but blushes at a bit of gentle praise as if she's not used to it. I fucking love it.

She shuffles forward, positions herself over my cock, and takes the tip into her mouth. The warm, wet feel of her is almost too much, and I breathe deep, controlling myself. This won't take long, but I don't want to make things too easy for her.

She waits, expecting me to grab her hair and take over. I lace my hands behind my head, letting her know it's all on her tonight. She gets the message, opens wider, and

slides her soft lips down my shaft.

God, she's amazing, and she's come such a long way in her training. She'll always be a brat, but she can be a good girl, too.

"That's it, love. Just like that. Go nice and deep—show me how well you've been practicing."

I don't have to tell her twice. She sets to work with confidence, and I just lie back and fucking enjoy it.

I watch her lips, the way they stretch around my shaft as she struggles her way to the bottom. My hands twitch, wanting to hold her there, but I stop myself. Watching her stretch to fit me into all her pretty little holes is my favorite thing. She struggles but takes it like a fucking champion.

She's closed her eyes, concentrating, but as I feel my release build, I tap her cheek. "Eyes on me, darling."

She pauses for a second, icy gaze meeting mine, then I groan as she slides back down with renewed energy. She sucks hard, cheeks hollowing out, and my eyes roll back in my head at the surge of pleasure. "Fuck yes. Like that. Just like that."

She does as she's told. I can't hold on any longer, and instinct takes over. I grip the back of her head as my release rises up, and after a few deep, rough strokes right to the back of her throat, I shoot into her mouth.

There's a moment where everything fades out, nothing left but roaring pleasure and the hot feel of Quinn's lips on my skin. I'm panting, still gripping her. She struggles, but she can stay right where she is a bit longer.

Fuck yes. She's everything that was missing in my life.

When I let her go, I watch as my cock slips from her mouth and she splutters, caught between choking and swallowing. Messy, sticky white fluid drips from the corners of her mouth as she gives me an adorable glare.

I lean down, wipe the corners of her lips with my finger, then feed it to her when she opens her mouth to complain. Her eyes widen. Muffled around my finger, she says, "You..."

"Shush. That was perfect. Don't ruin it by talking."

She bites my finger. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make me jump.

"Gotcha." The grin she gives me after is enough to make me want to spank her little arse yet again, but it's much too late, and we both need sleep.

I settle for gripping her hair in my fist. "Right, brat. We're getting a shower, and we're going to bed. And unless you want to spend the night in your cage, you'll behave. Got it?"

She nods as best she can, but she's still smirking.

Fuck, I love this girl.

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Early the next morning, Quinn is wide awake and as jittery as I've ever seen her, bouncing around the room getting ready to meet Grandad.

I've let her dress more conservatively than usual, with thick black tights to hide the

belt marks on her thighs. Her bright green pleated skirt stops just above her knees, and her tight black T-shirt only shows a finger width of midriff. For her, it's practically nun-like.

I leave her alone and go to the new rooms to wait for Grandad to wake up.

I don't have to wait long. Grandad has never been one to sleep in, and he emerges looking sharp in trousers and a button-up shirt someone procured from fuck-knows-where last night. It was waiting outside the door, and I put it in his room this morning. He wouldn't have liked coming out in his pajamas.

He gives me a nod and goes to the huge window overlooking the forest. After standing there in silence for a few minutes, he says, "This isn't a normal military base."

It's not phrased as a question. I gape for a moment as reality sinks in. He's not fooled. Why did I think he might be? He's always been the furthest thing from stupid.

I join him, looking out over the vast green expanse. I can't be honest with him, and it fucking kills me. But maybe I can give him enough to set his mind at ease.

"You're right. It's a lot more secret. The only reason I got you in here is because my superior thinks you're a harmless old man. He needs to keep thinking that."

Deep, worried furrows cut into his forehead as he turns to face me. "What are you mixed up in, my boy? Tell me the truth. Is it something dangerous?"

"No. It's nothing bad. I'm working right on the cutting edge of research, and there are a lot of people who would like to steal it. Here, my work is protected, but it means I have to give up some of my freedom in return. I spend most of my time here."

His throat works. “But son, you can’t work all your life. What about finding a wife? Having kids? All the stuff that matters.”

It’s another kick to the gut, loaded with guilt. Grandad doesn’t know he’s never getting great-grandkids from me. A vasectomy took care of that—another Brotherhood rule. But at least he’s turned the conversation the direction I wanted.

“Actually, there’s someone special I want you to meet. She lives here too, and we’ve become close. She’s excited to meet you.”

His eyes widen. “Are you fuckin’ serious, lad? You’ve got a bird in here? Here’s me worried your todger was gonna fall off from lack of use. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I splutter into a laugh. It’s a good job Quinn didn’t hear that. I’d never have heard the end of it. “I couldn’t bring her to visit—there are rules about that sort of thing here—so I didn’t want to mention it. But at least you can get to know her whilst you’re here. Shall I get her over for breakfast?”

“Of course!” The news has brightened him up, and there’s a twinkle in his eye that spells trouble. “Bring her in.”

Ten minutes later, I’ve ordered us a full English fry up from the kitchen and collected Quinn. When we reach the door, she stops, staring at it nervously. I grip her hand. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s stupid,” she mutters.

“No, it’s not. Tell me.”

She glances up at me. “I’ve never done a ‘meet the parents’ thing. I don’t know what’s supposed to happen.”

Never? That's an interesting conversation for another day, but not for the corridor outside Grandad's room. I squeeze her hand. "You'll be fine. Come on."

The strangeness of the situation isn't lost on me. She's not my girlfriend; she's my captive. Why is she nervous about making a good impression on my family? She is, though, and I can only take that as a good sign.

We enter. Grandad sits at the table, looking lost without a newspaper to page through—his usual breakfast routine. The kitchen delivered a huge spread while I was collecting Quinn, and the table is covered with enough eggs, bacon, toast, sausages, and black pudding to feed ten men.

Grandad blinks as he takes in Quinn, and I know she's not what he was expecting. My previous girlfriends were much more conventional. Natural hair and classy outfits. By comparison, Quinn is a tub of paint thrown against a wall, all noise and color and movement.

He starts to get to his feet, and I wince as Quinn steps forward. "Oh no, it's okay. Don't get up."

A bad start. He ignores her, stands, and gives her a stern glare. "Look, love, I'm old, but I'm not bloody decrepit. I'll stand when a lady enters the room until the day I fucking die."

Quinn looks between Grandad and me, eyes wide. "Well, I can see where Jacob gets his attitude from. I'm Quinn. It's lovely to meet you."

Grandad's mustache twitches, a sign he's holding back a smile. "James, but you can call me Jim. Everyone does. Pleased to meet you too. It would have been nice to know you existed before now, but I can't expect the moon on a stick, can I?"

“With Jacob? Definitely not. Do you know he was so busy with work he forgot my birthday? It was last week, and he never even got me a card.”

Oh, the little minx. Grandad turns on me, eyes hard. I can feel his disappointment sizzling in the air. All the strict lessons he ever gave me in the proper way to treat a lady, wasted. Good job he’ll never know by how much.

Quinn and Grandad both glare at me. In one sentence, I’ve become their common enemy. “I taught you better than that, son. You’ll make it up to this young lady.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea!” Quinn sits, and Grandad follows suit.

I park myself opposite Grandad and load my plate with a sigh. “And how does the young lady want me to do that?”

Quinn curls a strand of hair around her finger, and her lips twitch as she tries to stay serious. So much for her being nervous. “I’ll think about it. But anyway, Jim, dish the dirt. You must have some really embarrassing stories about Jacob when he was a kid. I want to hear them all.”

For a second, I think she’s taken the joke too far and Grandad will react badly. But he studies her as if checking for malice, then smiles.

“Did he ever tell you about the time he brought the class hamster home for the weekend? Biscuits, it was called, and it was a nasty little thing. Vicious. Mind you, I would be too if I had twenty-five kids grabbing at me all day long.”

Quinn leans forward in her seat, enraptured. “What happened?”

“Well, he let it out for a run, but the silly bastard had half a muesli bar in his pocket. Bloody thing must have smelled it and shot up his trouser leg like a rocket. He



screamed the fucking house down.”

Quinn laughs, a very unladylike snort, and it sets Grandad off too. He covers his mouth with his hand and chuckles, eyes bright and happy. Happier than I could have imagined him being, given the circumstances.

My heart warms, and a smile touches my lips even though their laughter is at my expense. Quinn is magic. In just a few words, she shook Grandad out of his gloomy mood and had him smiling.

I wish things could be different. That Grandad could visit me here and Quinn and I could go out into the world like normal people. I’m outside much more than most Brothers, so I’ve never really chafed at the restrictions before.

Watching Quinn and Grandad laughing, a tiny part of me questions if all the Brotherhood offers is worth the sacrifices.

“That’s amazing! What else? Come on now, Jim, don’t hold out on me. What about when he was a teenager? Did he do anything really dumb for a girl? Or what about the first time he got drunk?”

Grandad’s eyes light up. “Oh, you wouldn’t believe that, love. We were on holiday down in Cornwall and...”

Their chatter fills the air, and I take all the ribbing and keep a smile on my face. But my mind is drifting. I’m thinking about the hospital and the trap I mean to set to catch my sister.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

Jacob

It takes two days to get everything organized. We make a grand show of tripling security around Ruth's room, guards at her door and window night and day. But she's nowhere near the hospital.

The day after Grandad arrived in the Compound, we smuggled her out in the bottom of a food trolley. She'll continue rehab with her new prosthetic in a safe house, out of state, with her doctor and two nursing staff.

I wanted to move Marlowe, too, but the doctors refused. At this critical stage in her neurorepair, it's just too risky, and she's making great progress, even making eye contact and smiling at her mum. Quinn cried her eyes out when I told her that, but they were happy tears.

Trying to think like Kelly is a frightening experience. When I was growing up, my teachers threw words like "prodigy" and "genius" around a lot, but Grandad kept me shielded from the worst of the hysteria. Ruth learned at a normal rate, and once I grew old enough to give it real thought, I assumed I was the only freak in the family.

But from what Grandad's told me, Kelly sounds just like me.

It breaks my bloody heart to think about what she could have been if mum wasn't such a fuckup. Maybe, if she hadn't been neglected and abused as a little kid, Kelly could have learned to control her impulses. Grandad channeled my violent side into

sport from the earliest age—boxing; rugby; long, boot-camp style workouts that left me barely able to move.

Then he funneled me into the army, where the strict, exhausting discipline kept me on track. When I discovered BDSM as an adult, that took care of the rest of it, and I was able to feel, for the first time, as if I could function in the world without the risk of hurting anyone.

Grandad's descriptions of Kelly's actions, along with my own vague memories, are terrifying. Was she born worse than me, or was she made that way? I don't know, but there's a part of me that hopes she can still be saved. Maybe with Brotherhood assistance, we can find a way to give her a purpose, even though she'll have to be locked up.

On the morning of the third day, Quinn and I are in bed and enjoying a bit of private time before Grandad wakes up. Well, I'm enjoying myself. She's reading the biography of a 1960s Formula One driver to me out loud whilst I tease her pussy with my tongue.

She's not allowed to orgasm until the end of chapter three. The chapters are long, the print is small, and there's a lot of technical specifications about racing car engines that I'm making her go over in excruciating detail.

"Sorry, love. I missed that part. You sort of trailed off there. What were the stats on that again?"

"Jacob please, I can't stand this anymore. He'll be awake soon. I can't wait till tonight. Please!"

"I don't think that's what the book says. You're really not taking this in. Better start that page again, right from the top."

She gives a long, agonized moan but starts again. “The Ferrari 156—”

My phone rings, and I scramble for it, grabbing it by the second ring. “Yep.”

“You’ll want to get out here, sir. One of the cleaning crew just reported a missing trolley. She might be planning on using the same trick again.”

“Got it. I’ll be right there.” I set the phone down. “Sorry, love. There’s a chance she’s going to hit the hospital now.”

“Shit. Go.” Quinn drops the book and chews her lip before adding, “Be careful.”

I give her a quick, rough kiss, then dress at light speed. “Don’t tell Grandad. I don’t want him stressing out.”

“Okay. I’m going to see Candice for a couple of hours this morning because he said he wanted to do the crossword in peace. Then Sebastian is taking all of us to lunch. We’ll keep him busy.”

“Thanks.” I stare at her for a second longer, naked and cute as hell with the covers tucked around her crossed legs.

I love you.

Fuck. Where did that thought come from? I’ve been scattered this week, emotions way too close to the surface. I don’t trust my own thoughts. Before I can do something stupid, like let the words come out of my mouth, I head for the door. “See you soon.”

I’m out of the Compound and speeding down the road in record time. We decided against the chopper—it’s unlikely but possible that she’s tracking it somehow. Now

that I know who I'm up against, I'm not taking any chances.

On the drive, I consider the information. I'm not buying the missing cleaning trolley. It's too simple, and she's unlikely to repeat something she already tried. She knows we'll be watching for it. No, I think it's a distraction, but it might mean the real attack is imminent. Just coming from a different angle entirely.

Or it's bait to draw me in.

Not a pleasant thought, but it's the most likely conclusion. She knows I'm watching, and she wants me at the hospital. Maybe she's planning on taking Ruth and me out at the same time. A two-for-one bloody special.

Or maybe the cleaner just forgot where he left his trolley. There are too many variables here, and it's making me nervous. By the time I pull into the back of the hospital parking lot and make my way to the designated meeting spot at the back of the building, I've run the possibilities so many times they've stopped making sense.

"Sir." The Gilda soldier doesn't salute, but he might as well have. The polite nod and deference in his voice screams a junior officer addressing a senior. "All quiet so far. We're watching every entrance, of course."

"Good." The structure isn't large. State of the art though the facility is, it doesn't take on many patients. The car park has forty spaces, and half of them are empty. There are seven possible entry points into the building, and all of them are guarded.

All on-site staff, from surgeons to cleaners and caterers, are thoroughly vetted and have to present their ID to a desk guard on the way in. Under normal circumstances, I'd say the security is excessive. I have a feeling Kelly will take it as a challenge.

"I'm going to walk the perimeter."

The guard nods again as I set off to check each entry point. Two nurses arrive, another two leave, and I observe the check-in, check-out process. All carried out properly.

Have we overdone this? Has Kelly decided the security is too tight and decided not to try for Ruth again? It doesn't seem likely, but at the same time, it's hard to see a way in.

Circuit complete, I'm about to head inside to pretend to check on Ruth when an explosion rips the air. It didn't come from the hospital, but from the car park.

I turn toward the sound, drawing my pistol. The source is easy to spot—a car, three spaces down from mine, is lit up like it's fucking bonfire night. Two Gilda agents, who were closer than me, are already searching the area around the car, weapons leveled.

I scan the area for the two nurses and relax as I see them staring at the burning vehicle. Not a murder, then. So what did this accomplish?

Absolutely nothing. It's a distraction. The explosive could have been set hours ago.

I race back to the front door. The head guard—Lieutenant something-or-other—joins me, looking equally worried. He's in his early thirties, with a bald head and a confident manner. I stop outside the sliding doors. "I want to know who owns that car."

"Yes, sir. We can speak to the facility manager. He'll know."

We approach the doors, but they don't open. The guard pulls out his phone. "Don't worry, sir. Just the emergency lockdown system. The explosion will have triggered it. This is a smart building, designed to be very defensible in case of an attack. The

lockdown seals all the doors into the building.”

“Well unseal them.” There’s a buzzing at the edge of my mind, and I’m hoping I’m wrong, but I don’t think I am. The explosion had to have a purpose. Is this it?

“Of course. I have to call the Compound.” He dials, and I stare through the double doors. The admin lady on the inside watches us through the glass. She’s soon joined by a couple of nurses and a guy in cleaning overalls.

No one can get in. But no one can get out.

The doors remain shut. I tune back in to the guard’s conversation. “No, I’m looking at the doors, and they’re still closed. Yes, I’m sure. I’m right here. Your computer is wrong.”

Suspicion solidifies into certainty as the guard meets my gaze. From the tight cast to his features, he’s drawn the same conclusion I have. “There’s a problem with the lockdown system, sir. It’s showing as unlocked, but it isn’t.”

I hold out my hand for the phone, and the guard gives it to me without a word. “This is Jacob West. What’s the issue?”

The voice on the other end isn’t military. Too high-pitched and with an anxious quaver. “It’s showing as open on our end. I’m not sure what’s happening. I’ll need to get an engineer out there.”

“Put me through to Kendrick right now.”

“But—”

“Right now. This is an attack on the hospital facility.”

A sharp indrawn breath. “Yes. Right away.”

The line goes quiet. I clench my hand on the phone as I wait. I jolt as my own phone comes to life, buzzing in my pocket. I stare at the display—unknown number.

Bad form to hang up whilst I’m waiting for the big man, but I don’t hesitate. That flashing call scratches at my psyche from the inside. The world swims, and horrible, childish terror clenches my guts as I answer the call.

A female voice answers. English, but smooth and cultured. Posh.

“Hello, Jacob. It’s been a while. Have you missed me?”



### Chapter Thirty-Four

Quinn

“So, what’s it really like, living with Jacob’s grandad?”

Eve smiles as she asks, leaning over the table we’ve snagged outside the coffee shop. It’s mid-morning, so the little place is packed. Worrying about what is happening at the hospital was driving me crazy, so when Eve suggested a coffee, I jumped at the chance.

At some point during the last two weeks, the coffee shop stopped feeling like a prop from a creepy movie set and started feeling like a friendly place to grab coffee and a muffin. Rhonda, the Ward who runs it, is in her sixties. She’s been here so long she remembers when the Compound was a bare place with little in the way of entertainment.

It must have felt much more like a prison back then. It’s so easy to forget what it is when you’re sipping a cappuccino and gossiping with a friend. We’re conditioned to picture captivity as cramped rooms, locked doors, shitty food, and misery. Cheerful green spaces and luxury don’t factor in.

I snap my wandering mind back to Eve’s question. “He’s great, and I’m not just saying that. He can put Jacob back in his box with one fucking word, and it’s glorious. And the stories from when he was little...”

I shake my head, smiling. Eve sips her drink, then wraps her fingers around the cup,

brows rising. “You have to share. He’s my boss, after all.”

Fifteen minutes later, our cups are empty, and all of Jacob’s most embarrassing moments have been described in great detail. Eve’s eyes are damp from laughing. “No way. He peed in his own wardrobe?”

“Yes! He was sleepwalking. Now, every time he moves at night, I shriek and hide under the covers. It’s driving him mad, but with Grandad there, he can’t even punish me properly. He hasn’t spanked me once.”

Eve shakes her head. “If I know Jacob, he’s writing down every tiny infraction in a book, and you’ll pay for them all once you’re back in your own place.”

I shrug. “That’s future me’s problem. I’m having too much fun to care.”

“You’re braver than me.”

I snort. “Please. As if Gabriel would do anything to upset you. He’s the most besotted man I’ve ever seen.”

“You’d be surprised.” Her lips curve up, though. I’ve made her happy with that comment, and making Eve happy is always a good thing. If it hadn’t been for her, everything would have been ten times harder.

I wasn’t some sad case with no friends on the outside, but since Marlowe’s accident, I pushed all my close friends away. I wanted people to party with, who either didn’t know about my heart condition or didn’t give a shit about it. Girls to do coke in nightclub bathrooms with, not to meet for coffee and gossip.

I’ve missed this. Missed having friends just to chat with, who actually care about me. The past six months are starting to feel like a bad dream, hopeless and full of misery.

Like I was dead, and being here is bringing me back to life.

As if she's sensed my shift in mood, Eve lowers her voice. "So, how are you feeling, really? I don't mean with all this crazy stuff. I mean about Jacob. And about being here."

A captive. A slave.

She's slipping into the Wards' habit of beating around the subject, but I don't hold it against her. The shop is full of Wards all trying to make the best of their lives. She doesn't want to upset them, and, I realize, neither do I.

Tact, from me. I can't wait to tell Jacob about this momentous occasion later.

I take time to consider my response. "He's controlling as all hell. But..." It's hard to say the words, but they're true. "I'm really starting to like him."

What a weird, schoolgirl thing to say about the man who is holding me captive. As if he's a boy who asked me to prom.

Eve's smile is radiant. "I knew it! It's obvious in how you talk about him." She taps her index finger on the table. "I know it feels wrong to say it, to even think it, but don't beat yourself up. It's a good thing. Can you imagine being... kept ...by someone you didn't like?" She shudders. "It would be hell. The best possible outcome is you fall for each other, so don't feel bad about it."

Because in Eve's mind, there is no outcome where I end up free. It's not even on the board. Before I can sink my teeth too far into that thought, though, she throws a molotov cocktail into the conversation. "He's definitely falling for you. No question. I've never seen him so happy."

I laugh. “No way. I’m a royal pain in his ass.”

“And he loves it. I’m right. You’ll see.”

I make a noncommittal noise, then jump when I glance at the clock and notice the time. “Shit. I was supposed to meet Candice twenty minutes ago.”

“Right. I’ll walk you there.”

She says it in a diplomatic way, but I know full well she’s still tasked with babysitting me. In theory, I’m allowed to roam the Compound now, but in practice, Eve, Sebastian, or Gabriel always seem to be there whenever I leave the apartment.

It’s a five-minute walk to Hadrian’s lab. Eve asks, “Candice and the other CIs really don’t freak you out?”

Everyone keeps asking me the same question. I don’t get what their problem is. “No! Come talk to her and check out the virtual world we’re building. It’s awesome.”

She glances at her watch. “I should get to the lab. I’ve got work to do and—”

“Please? If you don’t get your work done, you can blame me. Jacob will assume it’s all my fault anyway, so it doesn’t matter. Come on!”

“Well...” She looks toward the building housing Jacob’s lab, then back at me. “Okay. I suppose it can’t hurt.”

“Yes!” I grab her arm and drag her toward Hadrian’s lab. Good to see I can still be a bad influence, even here. I’ll have Eve sneaking shots at parties with me before she knows what’s happening.

Hadrian smiles when I walk in, then jumps when he sees Eve. He's grown friendlier the more time I've spent with him, though he's still anxious and prone to long, gloomy silences. I'd love to find out more about him, but it's impossible to drag him into a real conversation. He answers what he feels like and ignores the rest.

"Quinn. Eve." He stands stiffly. "Is something happening I ought to know about?"

"Nope. I just thought Candice could use another friend, so I've brought Eve to hang out."

As if her name summoned her, Candice pops up on her screen, grinning. "Yay! Are we playing a game or just chatting?"

Eve stares, frowning, then turns to me. "Can it see me?"

Candice sighs. "Yes, I can. And rude, by the way. I hate when people talk about me as if I'm not here."

Eve startles, cheeks turning pink. She stiffens her shoulders and looks at Candice. This time, she addresses her directly. "I hate that, too. Kendrick does it all the time, and it drives me mad." She flicks her gaze to me, seeking assurance, and I nod. She turns back to Candice. "Sorry."

"It's quite all right. Don't worry about it. Now, grab a headset. I'm dying to show off what we've been working on."

For the next hour, Candice and I take Eve on a tour through our virtual world. From Eve's gasps and screeches, I can tell she's blown away. We spend most of our time in the rainforest, picking through the undergrowth and looking at the animals. Eve screams when a snake coils itself around her avatar's neck.

When we pull off the headsets, her eyes are damp. She swallows as she sets it down. “It’s amazing. Do you realize what this will mean for everyone? For the women who’ve been here forever like Rhonda? They can see places. It’s...” She shakes her head, taking a deep breath. “It’s an escape.”

I hadn’t even thought of it like that. I guess I haven’t been here long enough to think of everything in those terms yet. But she’s right.

“Shit. That’s true. Should we see if we can persuade Rhonda to give it a go?”

Eve smiles. “Yes, but not today. I’m really, really late for work now. And aren’t you meant to be taking Jacob’s grandad for lunch?”

“Christ. Have we been here that long? What time is it, Candice?”

Candice’s warm, slightly Scottish voice has an amused lilt to it as she answers. “I’m the world’s most advanced CI, and you still treat me like the talking clock.”

I stare blankly at her monitor. “Like the what?”

“You’re too young to remember. You used to dial it and...you know what? Never mind. It’s twenty past twelve.”

“Fuck.” I set down my headset and start for the door. “He’ll be wondering where I am.”

When I arrive at our new, temporary apartment, I take a moment to appreciate that I can open the door. Such a normal thing, but it feels like a huge step forward. The door clicks open at the touch of my thumb, and I step in.

Grandad’s newspapers are open on the table. They’re British ones Jacob has brought

in specially. The Daily Mirror and The Times . The Daily Mirror is quite fun, mostly celebrity gossip, but The Times is boring as all hell. Even Grandad says he only gets it for the crossword.

The crossword he was planning on finishing this morning but only has a couple of answers filled in. A tickle of worry starts in my gut. Why only two?

“Jim?” His name still feels awkward to me. I think of him as Grandad because that’s how Jacob always talks about him. But it would be weird for me to call him that.

“Jim, are you ready for lunch? I’m starving.”

Nothing. A chasm opens up in my chest, and I race through the apartment, shoving doors open. He’s probably asleep. I’ll walk in on him crashed out in his boxers, and we’ll all have a good, embarrassed laugh about it later.

His bedroom is empty, pajamas folded neatly at the end of the bed, which is made with military precision, just like Jacob always does.

Empty. It’s all empty.

Once I’ve made sure, I pull out my phone and call Jacob. He always answers when I call. Always.

Not this time.

The phone rings and rings before cutting to his curt answer message. “You’ve reached Jacob West. Leave a message.”

What the fuck is going on? I try it again with the same result. Whatever is happening where he is, it can’t be good. I bounce on the balls of my feet, indecision tearing at

me. Where to go? What to do?

Jacob's lab. Eve will be there. She'll know what to do.

I set off at a sprint.



### Chapter Thirty-Five

Jacob

That voice. It's not familiar—she doesn't sound like she's from fucking Hackney, that's for sure—but it sets my hairs on end. Something in me recognizes the speaker, and my blood pumps faster as I stare at the closed doors of the hospital.

It's a battle to keep my voice level. "Kelly. I only just found out you exist. Why don't you put an end to all this shit and just talk to me? Whatever you've done, we can fix it."

"I haven't heard that name in a long time." Her cultured voice is rich and amused. It's the polished voice of a radio host or an actress. She must have worked hard to cultivate it. "I go by Primrose now. My new mum and dad changed my name as soon as they brought me home."

"Why did they do that?" Talking is good. I haven't done much in the way of hostage negotiation, as my skills lie in other areas, but I did the training. The more time I spend talking with Kelly, the better.

"They had to scrub off my rough edges. I was Daddy's project, after all. Take a psychopathic child, and turn her into a responsible member of society. Of course, they never used that word. But we both know it's true."

"I don't think so. You just had a rough start in life. Mum fucked you up good and proper."

Beeps sound in my ear, and I glance at the screen. Quinn. Shit. I told her I'd always answer when she calls, no matter what. But given the circumstances, I'm sure she'll understand.

"She did. That's true. But it doesn't really matter, does it? I am what I am."

Her posh accent wavers. "What" comes out a harsh "wot." She's rattled, not as cool and collected as she's pretending to be.

"You can be whatever you want. I've got the resources to help, and I'd love to. Tell me what you need. What can we do to stop all this nonsense?"

It's a long shot, and her incredulous laugh tells me I've missed the mark. "I want you to suffer, golden boy! You and the bastard that gave me up. That's what I want. Nothing else. Don't think your little psychological tricks are going to work on me. I know them all."

I don't doubt it.

More beeps. My heart pounds, and I rub my hand over my forehead. It's a gloomy, overcast day, but I'm starting to sweat. Quinn wouldn't call me today unless it was important. Something is fucking happening.

"It's always so funny to me how simple it is to get people to do what I want. It's like playing a video game on easy mode."

There's a sharp edge to Kelly's voice, and what she's saying sounds rehearsed. This is why she called. "Oh yeah? In what way?"

"Like the orderly who cleans the kitchen at your precious little Brotherhood hospital."

She knows about the Brotherhood. It's not a surprise, but hearing her say the name gives me a jolt. For a secret society, there are a lot of people out there in the world who know of our existence. But very few know what we really are, and almost no one knows about our Wards. Does she?

"He owes more to a loan shark than he'll make in a year, and just last week, they threatened his wife and son. He was happy to smuggle a little package in for me just this morning."

A package. "Let me guess. The exploding kind?"

"So clever. You really must be a genius. And I've got the detonator right here." She pauses, then puts on a fake American accent. "But wait...there's more!"

It's so cheesy it should be pathetic, but there's an unhinged note in her voice that gives the bad joke a menacing edge.

"You've pissed off a lot of people, Jacob. Did you know that? A lot."

"I'm aware. Do you have a point?" She's grating on me, and I want to hang up on her but force myself not to. Talking is good. I need to remind myself of that even as my blood rushes in my ears. When she's talking, she's not pressing the button to blow up the fucking hospital. Quinn's sister.

It'll kill Quinn if Marlowe dies just as she's starting to recover. She'll never be the same.

"Your little hideout in the woods wasn't easy to crack, I'll give you that. I tried bribing the cleaners and the cooks. None of them wanted to know. You've got them well trained. But then I had a real stroke of luck."

Her accent has slipped further, a distinct London twang creeping in. All of a sudden, a face slaps itself into my memory. A girl, with dirty blond hair that hadn't seen a brush for days, laughing as she dragged me somewhere I didn't want to go.

“Come on. It'll be fun.”

I shudder. Whatever it was hadn't been fun, I know that much, but my memory cuts off there.

“I started looking into your private army, the little militia you keep, and can you guess what I found?”

“I'm sure you're dying to tell me.”

“Your friend Colonel Brackis.”

My body goes rigid. Brackis. I don't like the man, but surely he wouldn't betray the Brotherhood? He'd be signing his own death warrant.

“What about him?”

“Just a text message to a friend. Very vague, not breaking any of your rules. Complaining some jumped-up British cocksucker almost cost him his job. How he was on his last warning and it was all your fault.”

What? Kendrick never told me he'd come down hard on Brackis. But then again, why would he? It's not my concern how he disciplines his employees.

“I got the sense that ‘last warning’ is pretty final in your world, so I approached him for a chat. Turns out Brackis wanted an out. To disappear as if he never existed. I can make that happen, so we cut a deal.”

No.

I can see where this is going, all the dominos tumbling down, one after another.

No.

He was supposed to be safe in the Compound. The one place I could truly protect him. But Brackis could have lured him out and then...

My control cracks, and I slap my hand onto the glass door. The group inside jump at the sound, heads whipping to face me. “What the fuck have you done?”

She laughs, and it’s a fake sound. Sweet, feminine, and cold. “There we go! There’s the reaction I’ve been hoping for. I want to see the nasty side of you, Jacob. I know it’s there. Ruth, she’s just a normal, boring bitch. But you’re like me. You just hide it better.”

“You’re right. I’m a fucking cunt. Now what have you done?”

That laugh again, and if she was here right now, I’d rip out her throat. If she wants my bad side, she can have it. As much as she wants.

“Our dear old grandad is safe—for now. Knocked out and wearing a new necklace. The exploding kind, as you put it. I’ve got that detonator, too, right next to me.”

Red stains my vision as I picture it. I’ve seen people blown to bits by explosives. It’s revolting in a way that sears itself into your psyche for eternity. And she wants to do it to Grandad? To my fucking grandad?

“I’ll fucking hunt you down. You hear me? I’ll—”

“You’ll choose which button I press.”

The red heat pulsing through my veins slows, and a trickle of ice creeps in. “What?”

It’s surprising how strong my voice sounds. It feels as though it should be quavering.

“You’ll choose. Our lovely little sister, or our precious grandad. Who will you pick? Any sane person would save Ruth, of course. You’d be saving all those other lives too. The doctors, the nurses, the admin team. And Ruth is only thirty-three. So much life left to live.”

Her voice is pure, sickly-sweet poison.

“But I know you do love your grandad. Always had a special bond, haven’t you? I think you could murder someone in cold blood right in front of him, and he’d help you bury the fucking body.”

Bitterness oozes from every syllable, and I can feel the raw hurt behind it, the pain of being an unloved child, the one he gave up.

She doesn’t know Ruth is safe.

It’s a splash of cold water through the red haze. Brackis hasn’t told her that. And she hasn’t mentioned Quinn, either. What else doesn’t she know? I bet he hasn’t told her the extent of the Brotherhood’s power. The superior tech we have.

Ruth is safe. And with one word from me, Grandad could be too.

My mind goes still as I turn the possibility over. I can save him right now. Just one word. Can I trust her? Maybe not, but she’s created this game, and I think she’ll play by her own rules. She wants to force me to kill one of my family. Killing them both

anyway would remove the agonizing guilt.

I could do it. One word.

It's right there.

Marlowe.

I hear the word in Quinn's voice. If I save Grandad, I kill her. There's no other way to look at it, and I wouldn't just be killing Marlowe. I'd be destroying Quinn, too, taking the light from her eyes forever.

Not to mention all the innocent hospital staff. If I condemn them to death, I'm a fucking monster. Grandad wouldn't want that. If he found out I approved a massacre to give him a few more years of life, he'd fucking kill me.

But the idea of giving the order to kill him rips a hole the size of a football in my chest. I couldn't live with it. It'd eat at me every waking moment. I can't do it. I can't.

"I'll give you ten minutes to decide. If you don't choose, they both die."

The line goes dead. I stare at the phone, hand frozen into a claw. That bitch. That evil fucking bitch.

I need to move. Contact the Compound and see if they can track the call. Find a way inside the hospital. Order a search of the grounds to find Grandad before it's too late.

But it's already too late. I know it, deep in the marrow of my bones. Ten minutes isn't long enough to do anything, and it's already ticking away.

When the phone rings, I almost drop it. This time, it isn't Quinn. It's Kendrick.



### Chapter Thirty-Six

Quinn

One phone call from Eve to Gabriel is all it takes to get everyone moving. Within minutes, Kendrick and some Gilda soldiers are snapping questions at me. When did I last see Grandad? Did he mention he was going anywhere? Was he behaving oddly?

Kendrick orders a full-scale search of the Compound, every available soldier to take part.

Gabriel arrives, Sebastian on his heels, and we all crowd around Kendrick in Jacob's lab while his assistant watches nervously. Kendrick pulls out his phone. "I'll let Jacob know."

"I already called him, he's not—"

"Hello? Jacob, I'm afraid I have some bad news."

He answered. That bastard answered Kendrick after ghosting my calls.

Stop it. That's not important right now.

"Yes." Kendrick pulls the phone from his ear and presses a button.

Jacob's voice fills the silent lab. "Sir, can you and the Gilda hear me?"

“Yes. Some others also.”

“Doesn’t matter. My sister called, and...”

I listen to his story. My stomach churns, and my breath picks up as I start to grasp what’s really happening. Grandad or the hospital. That’s what Jacob has to choose. His sister is safe, but mine isn’t.

Marlowe.

No.

Not again.

He wouldn’t do it, would he? Blow up a hospital full of people?

If he doesn’t, though, he has to kill the person he loves most. Could I do it if things were reversed? Could I kill Marlowe to save Grandad?

I don’t want to answer that question.

Everyone starts talking at once.

“We’re already searching the grounds. We’ll find...”

“...disable the explosive...”

“...override the door lock. It can’t be...”

“It’ll take too long.”

“There’s no time.”

“No time.”

No time. No time to find Grandad, no time to find Kelly, and no time to disable the door locks. It scratches at something in my mind, and Hadrian’s voice comes back to me. I’d been asking him about Candice.

“Why can’t she explore the whole internet?”

“Cybernetic brains move so fast that we can’t comprehend it. Once she’s loose, we can’t control her. We have to be absolutely sure she won’t do anything to harm the population. Give Candice five minutes, and she could destroy a city, if she was so inclined.”

Five minutes.

“Candice! Use Candice to stop this. She could do it in time.”

I shout it over the babble of voices, and the room falls quiet. Kendrick turns to me with a frown. “This is serious business. Keep quiet.”

I seethe as he turns away, back into discussions with a Gilda officer. He sees me as a stupid brat. Jacob’s little plaything. And really, I haven’t done much to change that impression. I have to get through to him.

“Kendrick!”

His gaze snaps back to me.

"Please listen!" I rush to get it all out before he shuts me down completely. "Call

Hadrian. His CIs operate millions of times faster than a human."

His eyes narrow, but he doesn't cut me off.

My words tumble out. "Candice can help. I know she can. What other choice do we have? This can work!"

Every second he thinks about it is a knife driven into my skull. This delay is wasting time we don't have.

"She's got a point." It's Sebastian, and I want to throw my arms around him. "But it's a risk. End of the world, Skynet-level stuff."

Maybe I should slap him instead of giving him a hug. "No. Candice doesn't think like that. She'll help." I turn to Kendrick. "Call him. Tell him to release her."

Jacob's voice issues from Kendrick's phone, tinny but clear. "Fuck me, that's a good idea. Please, Kendrick. It's the only chance we've got."

I hate the desperate sound of his voice. It's so unlike him. Unlike my strong, confident Jacob. When did I start thinking of him as mine? Maybe the moment he actually called this in, rather than saving his grandad with a sneaky word to his sister and keeping the choice to himself. He could have done it, and none of us would have known.

Kendrick considers for seconds that feel like entire goddamn ice ages, then finally nods. "Okay."

He dials Hadrian and explains the situation in a clipped, efficient rush. "What do you think? Could your cybernetic intelligence assist?"

Silence. Come on, Hadrian. Don't be a chickenshit. Get it done.

He draws in a breath, then his voice fills the room. "Yes, she should be able to. But are you sure? Unleashing her...it's a big step."

It's the right thing. Please.

"We're out of other options. Do it." Kendrick doesn't waste time. One tiny good point about him in a sea of crap.

"Yes, sir." Another agonizing pause. "Candice, do you understand what you need to do?"

I'm the only one in the room who doesn't flinch when Candice's Scottish lilt comes through the speakers. "I sure do. Be back soon."

I look at the tense, pale faces surrounding me. Eve and Gabriel are hand in hand, knuckles white as they clutch each other. Sebastian paces the room, muttering about nuclear launch codes. The Gilda stand at attention, though even they can't hide their worry. And Kendrick is staring directly at me.

"You'd better be right."

He says it softly, not as a threat but as a statement of fact. If I'm wrong about Candice, we're all fucked. Kendrick's disapproval won't matter one iota, and he knows it.

"I am. I know it."

We all jump as the closest monitor flares to life and Candice appears on the screen. "I've found her. Sending the location to your phones."

A chorus of beeps punctuate her announcement. Jacob's voice comes from someone's phone speaker, grim as all hell as he says, "That's five minutes away. I'm on it."

Five minutes. Still too long.

"Can you stop the explosives?" Kendrick asks Candice. "Jacob won't reach her in time."

"Risky. If she gets suspicious, she might blow both bombs. She has video feed of the hospital and of James West."

James West? Oh. I'd almost forgotten Grandad's real name. Very dashing. I bet it suited him as a younger man. Then it hits me—this could be the end for him, which would destroy Jacob. This has to fucking work.

Candice's voice rings out. "I'm sending you James's location. Don't approach him until I give the okay."

"Go." Kendrick nods to the Gilda soldiers. "Stop when you're close. I'll tell you when to move in."

The four men salute and race from the room. I crane to see Gabriel's phone. "Where is he?"

"In the forest. It's going to be close."

Shit.

Candice speaks again. "I'm looping the video feed of James so she won't see you. It's dark and grainy footage." A long pause. "Done. You're safe to approach."

How long has it been? I've lost track, though there's a large digital clock on the wall. Seven minutes? Eight?

It's taking too goddamn long, I know that.

A quiet beep, just from Kendrick's device, and he taps something in response. "I've given them the go-ahead to engage."

Jacob's voice blares again, though this time, the connection is crackly. He's breathing hard. "She's calling. Confirm, is Grandad clear?" Nothing. "I said is Grandad fucking clear!"

One second. Two. An unfamiliar voice pants, "He's clear. Collar is off. Target is clear. I repeat, target is clear. That device can blow."

I'm not relieved. Not yet. This could still all go to hell.

"Silence on the line," Jacob snaps, followed by, "Yes."

I can't hear what his sister says. Whatever it is, Jacob responds with a very convincing. "Yes, you fucking bitch. Grandad. Blow up Grandad."

Even knowing he's safe, it must have cost Jacob to say it. It must have torn out his heart. Another pause, then I cover my hands with my ears as a loud boom rips the air. Like a Fourth of July firework magnified a million times over.

Holy fucking shit.

She did it. The bitch did it.

They said he was clear, but what if they were wrong? That explosion sounded huge.

What if they got caught in it after all?

Jacob shouts down the line. “Fuck me. Is he safe? Confirm he’s safe.”

For a long, long time, there’s nothing. Then a crackly voice says, “Confirmed. No casualties.”

It feels like there should be cheers, but there aren’t. Just a collective outrush of breath and the shaky feeling of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“Good. I’m at her location. I’m going in.”



### Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jacob

I have to get my shit together.

When approaching a hit, time usually seems to slow down. I go into a calm space where I can focus and make the right choices.

Today, with my family and Quinn's sister at risk, my stomach is roiling, and every noise sounds too loud. I'm working hard to focus my thoughts, but they're spinning in all directions.

Grandad is safe, but the hospital is still at risk. If I can't take Kelly out quickly and cleanly, she could still detonate the second bomb. And she's my sister. A crazy bitch, but my bloody sister. What if I freeze? What if dozens of people die because I don't have the bollocks to do what needs to be done?

Three Gilda soldiers flank me as we stand in the shadows, just close enough to have eyes on the neat little townhouse. It looks like something an old lady would own—window boxes full of flowers, door covered in faded yellow paint.

Candice speaks into my earpiece.

“She's in the front living area. This place is an Airbnb, and she's only been here two weeks. I'm not finding any advanced detection equipment, just cameras surrounding the perimeter, which I've looped, and an alarm, which I've disabled. I can't see

everything, though. There could be physical booby traps. Locks are the old-fashioned kind.”

“Roger that.”

I consider my options. If she’s relying on the cameras and alarm, she should be easy to surprise from the back. I address my three guards. “She’s in the front room. You two, cover the front entrance. You, the back entrance. I’ll enter from the back. Set off a siren on my signal.”

They nod and follow my lead.

The moon is bright as all fuck, bathing everything in cold light. A bomber's moon, Grandad calls it. An old expression from his army days. Is it supposed to be lucky? It will be for either Kelly or me. Not both of us.

My remaining guard tails me as we work our way around to the back of the house. He’s young but sharp, and he moves almost as quietly as I do. Impressive. A small alley runs along the back of the house, and a rickety wooden fence stands to shoulder height. It’s the sort that’s easy to climb over, a wooden beam along the middle providing a perfect foothold.

I speak to the team in a clear whisper. “Are you in position?”

“Yes, sir.”

I vault over the fence, landing in a dark corner at the furthest point from the door. My blood races, and now, finally, the perfect clarity I’ve been missing kicks in. I take in the simple backyard with its decorative ornaments and small pond, the washing line and the back door I need to enter through.

Keeping to the shadows, I edge forward, scanning the dark for traps. Tripwires, underground pressure switches... I don't see anything, but that doesn't mean they're not there. Fingers wrapped tightly around the grip, I draw my weapon.

I finally breathe when I reach the back door. Crouching, I press the pistol to the lock. All the Gilda guns come equipped with true silencers, not the sort you can buy retail. They actually take the sound down to Hollywood-movie level. Even so, she'll hear what the bullet does to the door unless we can give her something else to worry about.

I whisper into my mouthpiece, "Now."

Sound splits the air, the wail of a police car, jarring on this quiet suburban street. I fire. The bullet rips through the lock, and I kick the door in. I've only got seconds until she realizes what's happening.

I race in, braced to hit the deck if she's waiting for me. She isn't. I get a brief flash of a neat kitchen decorated in beachy white and blue, then I'm racing down the hall, into the front living room.

A desk. Three monitors and a stacked PC. For a second, I freeze. It's so similar to my stark setup at home that a shudder runs up my spine. Worse, though, she's not there. Where the fuck is she?

Upstairs. She has to be. If I'm wrong and she tries to bolt, the Gilda will shoot her down. Gun at the ready, I edge up the narrow staircase. It's steep, and the real wood planks creak under my weight as I step on them. Upstairs is pitch-black. This is bad. She's gained the upper ground and could have a weapon trained on me right now.

"It's over, Kelly. The house is surrounded, and you've nowhere to go. You don't have to die, though. The Brotherhood can find a place for you."

I'm talking shit. We both know it, but desperate people believe all sorts of crap. I've seen people grasp at straws a million times over.

Her voice has a sharp, nasty edge to it. "Does this take you back? Remember the cupboard under the stairs back home? The fun we had in there?"

My few memories of Mum's house flicker through my mind. A laundry room filled with piles of filthy clothes. Ruth screaming in her cot. And, all at once, the looming black mouth of the cupboard.

In my four-year-old self's memory, it stands as tall and wide as two men, the door a black pit of horrors.

Come in, Jacob. It'll be fun.

"We used to play a game, remember? I'd put something in there you really wanted. Like that stupid dinosaur you loved. What was his name?"

Rex.

I'd forgotten about him, too. I don't want to remember, but I can't help it. His smiling green head, torn off, and all his stuffing pulled out. Such a small thing, but my body remembers the agony of it. Of losing the only thing that gave me comfort in that house. Physical pain stabs my chest, and I freeze.

"Once I lured you in there, I got to have my fun before I let you out. Do you remember that?"

The rational part of me tries to pinpoint where Kelly's voice is coming from, but I'm drowning in memories. Something sharp stabbing into my foot as I sobbed and clutched what used to be Rex. Her laughter. Her fucking...

“Jacob. She’s in the bedroom to the left. I can see her on the internal cameras. She’s using some sort of speaker system to throw her voice. She’s got a gun.”

Thank fuck for Candice. Her voice snaps me back into reality, and I force it all down. The pain, the terror. It can wait. The bedroom to the left. She’s got a gun. These are real, tangible problems. Things I can deal with.

I pull out my phone and tap a silent message to my team as I speak, “Grandad should have fucking killed you instead of giving you up. He should have taken you, then drowned you in the river. Called it an accident. It would still have been better than you deserve.”

“Oh, and you deserve so much better? The golden boy given everything when inside, you’re just as fucked up as me. How many people have you killed? Bet it’s more than me.”

I send the message.

“I’m sure it is.” I brace, waiting.

As soon as the first gunshot hits her window, I move. In three strides, I’m at the door. I kick it open just as glass explodes into the room. I drop, avoiding the gunfire, and see Kelly. She’s flat on the floor, eyes wide in the moonlight. She must have dived when the bullets hit.

The gun is still in her hand. She twitches it toward me, but I’m quicker. I shoot it out of her hand, and she screams, clutching her bloody wrist to her chest.

I should feel pity. I should, but the memories she brought back are right there, and they’re blotting everything else out. The gunfire from outside cuts off, and I stand over her, gun pointed at her head.

Blood gushes from her wrist, soaking the front of her gray T-shirt. I force myself to study her. She's got my green eyes and Ruth's dark blond hair. My sister. No doubt about it.

I raise the gun. She shakes her head. "No. Please, I can be useful. I can—"

"This is for Rex." I pull the trigger.

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There's a lot to be done over the next few hours, but I'm doing fucking none of it. I leave the Gilda in charge of cleanup and call for extraction. I'm numb through the chopper ride, and no one tries to talk to me. I must look exactly like I feel. Do not fucking disturb.

As the helicopter lands in the Compound, a huge rush of relief washes over me. For the first time, the walls don't feel constricting. Instead, they feel safe, and just that lets me know how shaken I really am. Confronting Kelly was a nightmare of my childhood made real, like discovering the bogeyman really exists and had been hiding under my bed for years.

I'm glad she's dead.

It's a rough thought, considering how damaged she was, but it's true. There was something malignant about her, and I don't think it all came from her childhood. I've met a lot of people who do evil things for power or profit, but very few who do them for fun. Kelly was a bad fruit, rotten at the core.

I don't know how I'll feel about this later. Right now, my walls are up as high as they go, and as I climb from the chopper, all I can think about is the next step. Then the next. There are only two people I want to see right now—Grandad and Quinn. And

anyone who gets between us is taking their bloody life in their hands.

Kendrick greets me at the entrance to the main street. He's somber, tactful as ever, and doesn't offer me congratulations on a successful mission. Instead, he quietly informs me that everything will be taken care of and I have nothing to worry about.

I ask the only question that matters. "Where are Quinn and my grandad?"

"In your temporary accommodation. I had some food sent up, so you can head right there once you clean up."

Once I what? Only then do I register the red splatters on my jeans. Shit. Turning up looking like this would have freaked the pair of them right out.

Kendrick walks me to the initiates' quarters in silence. Before I head inside, he says, "You've got your Quinn to thank for the CI's assistance. She's sharper than I gave her credit for. I'm not often wrong about these things, but I have to admit, she's working out a lot better than I thought she would."

"You're right. She is. Thanks for the help with this."

"You're a Brother. Your safety is as important to me as my own."

I thank Kendrick, make a quick stop at my real flat to shower and change, then make a beeline toward Grandad and Quinn.

### Chapter Thirty-Eight

Quinn

“She's dead. I need a pickup. Brackis is a traitor, and he's on the run. You need to track him.”

The moment Jacob's words rang out over the speaker, my knees went wobbly, and I had to sit on a lab stool before anyone else noticed. Two hours later, I still don't feel right. I don't think I will until I see him.

Once the excitement was over, I visited Grandad in medical. He's shaken up but okay. The sedative Brackis gave him had already worn off by the time the Gilda found him. He grumbled so much about staying in medical that the doctors gave up and told him he could leave under strict instructions to come back if he started to feel unwell.

“I'm fucking eighty-five. I feel like shit most of the time,” he griped as we made our way back to the apartment to wait for Jacob.

Food arrived, but we haven't touched it. We're sitting at the table, a newspaper spread out between us, as Grandad tries to distract himself with the crossword.

“Lover of birds imprisoned in Alcatraz. Too bloody easy.”

I frown at the page. “I don't get it.”



“The answer is hiding inside the clue. Look. Cat.”

“Oh!” I smile as it leaps out. “I see it.”

“They’re just puzzles. You can work them out if you—”

The door opens, and we both startle. I’m braced for it to be one of the guys or another Gilda soldier, but Jacob walks in.

The first thing I notice is his wet hair. He’s showered and changed. My stomach clenches as I realize why. His eyes scan both of us, and the tightness in his jaw softens. Neither of us says a word as he takes a seat next to me at the table.

Grandad is the first to break the heavy silence. “Well, my boy, you did what needed to be done. Same as I did. You won’t feel good about it, but you had no choice.”

Jacob picks up the pen from the newspaper and spins it in his fingers. He’s not one to fidget, and it just adds to the sense of wrongness. He’s not himself and might not be for a long time. That shouldn’t make me sad, but it does. I reach out my hand and lay it over his.

He shifts to grip my hand instead, and the firm, comforting pressure relaxes my tense muscles. I close my eyes and lean my head on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“What for?”

His voice is scratchy, as if words don’t want to come out. I get it. After the car crash, I didn’t speak for a week. “Marlowe. You saved her.”

“As well he fuckin’ should.” Grandad’s voice is outraged. “If you’d let that bitch blow up that hospital to save me, I’d have killed you myself.”

Jacob laughs, and it's genuine, if short and quiet. "Good job I didn't, then."

Grandad looks between the two of us. "Well, I'm knackered. Better be getting to bed. Give you two lovebirds some privacy and all that."

He gets to his feet, moving more slowly than usual. For all his British tough-guy act, tonight has really taken it out of him. Unable to help myself, I jump up and give him a hug. He wraps his arms around me and pats my back. When he detaches himself, he's smiling. He turns to Jacob.

"You got yourself a good one here, my boy. Don't let her go."

"No chance." There's a ghost of a satisfied smirk at the corner of Jacob's lip as he gets to his feet. "She's stuck with me."

We'll see about that.

It's an automatic thought, but there's no power or venom in it. I'm stuck with him. It doesn't feel like a prison sentence anymore. All I want right now is to cuddle up in bed with my captor and stay there pretty much forever. It's not what I should want, but feminism and common sense can take a hike.

I want what I want.

Jacob lumbers to his feet. His movements are jerky and uncoordinated, with none of his usual lethal speed and grace. It's like a vampire has drained all his energy and left him a husk. He gives Grandad a stiff, awkward hug, and I roll my eyes. They're male and British, a double whammy of repressed emotional bullshit.

Grandad heads to his room, and Jacob closes his eyes and rubs a hand over his forehead. He hasn't even glanced at the food. I should be checking him for a pulse.

He focuses on me, green eyes dull. “Bed.”

I’m not going to argue.

It seems to take forever to get there, slogging through air that feels thick. There’s tightness in my throat, tears preparing to pounce, even though for once, I’m not the one with something to cry about. It’s too much, the silent tension is too cloying, and as soon as the door closes, I break it.

“What do you need? Tell me.”

He gives me that ghost of a smile again. “You’re polite today. If I knew all I had to do to get you to behave was bump off my own sister, I’d have—”

He trails off as his attempt at black humor crashes to the ground in flames. He follows it, stumbling to the bed and thumping down on the edge, head in his hands. I sit down and lean against him until he tugs me onto his lap and holds me against his chest.

It’s weird how comforting it is and, by the way he’s clutching me, it’s just what he needs, too.

After a long, long silence, he says, “She was a fucking monster, Quinn. I didn’t remember until today. But to do the things she did at seven years old...”

His chin rests on my head, and I tuck myself into his neck. He carries on, “I did what I had to. But fucking hell. Maybe if I’d been born first, I’d have ended up just like that.”

“No. You wouldn’t have.” I shift myself around so I can see him. “You’re not like that.”

He snorts. “Oh, really. I’m a stand-up guy now? A kidnapper with a heart of bloody gold?”

“No, you’re an overly strict, controlling asshole. But I do kind of like you. I’ll get the stick out of your ass yet. Just give me a while.”

He shakes his head, but his face has softened. “I’ll have fun watching you try. Now, get undressed. It’s time for bed.”

“See? Controlling asshole.”

A few minutes later, I’m tucked against Jacob in the dark. His breathing quickly deepens to the long, even sounds of sleep. It’s the first time he’s ever fallen asleep before me. Right after the accident, I went through a period of crashing at seven and waking up at noon. It’s like your body needs to cushion shock with rest.

His arm traps me in a protective cage. No collar in this bed, though he’s promised it’s coming back as soon as we’re in our normal room with its creepy Dracula bed and excessive number of sex toys. There’s a twisted little part of me that’s looking forward to some privacy again.

Privacy. With the man who is holding me prisoner. Maybe someday soon, I’ll wake up and be sane again, but I’m not placing any bets on it. He saved Marlowe. He risked Grandad’s life just to save her. On the one hand, it seems insane, but on the other, it’s perfectly Jacob.

I wouldn’t have expected anything less from him.

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Two days later, I’m seated at the kitchen table with Jacob and Grandad. It’s supposed

to be Grandad's last day, and I've been dreading saying goodbye, but now, the stubborn old man is giving Jacob a glare to match his own. "I said I'm not fucking leaving."

Jacob has recovered a lot in the last couple of days, regaining some of his usual energy. But at this statement, all he can manage is a blank look. "You can't stay, Grandad. It's a military—"

"Don't give me that bollocks. This place is as military as my arsehole. It's some secret club, and you're a bigwig. I'm staying."

"But..."

I almost feel sorry for Jacob, but seeing him lost for words is just too much fun. I cross my legs and lean back in my seat.

"Grandad. Listen. I might be able to swing you staying here, but if you do, you can't leave. You're stuck here."

"So what? Ruth's off back to England. She's got her husband and her fancy job. She don't bother much with me. I've only got a few years left, son. I want to spend them with you, not stuck in some geriatric home getting a visit every few weeks."

Jacob winces, guilt splashed across his face. "I'm sorry. I know I didn't visit as often as I should have. I was just—"

"Busy. You were busy, and that's okay. It's what you're supposed to be at your age. But I spent your mum's childhood working all hours and missed out on that time with her and your gran. And for what? A pay packet each week. I'm staying."

Jacob shoots me a helpless glance, and I shrug, though inside, I'm glowing. I didn't

want Grandad to leave, and now he might not have to. Just another shiny stone in the bucket of good things about the Compound.

I'm collecting them like a crow. I haven't accepted the impossibility of escape yet. There's always a way. What I'm struggling with is the very real possibility that I might not want to leave. Even thinking it makes me feel guilty, as if I'm betraying something important. But I can't deny what I'm feeling.

Outside, every day was a struggle just to keep afloat. Here I wake up feeling bright, even with the collar around my neck. I've got real friends—some human, some not. I'm doing important work with Candice, building a virtual world. I get the best medical care possible, and for the first time in forever, I'm thinking of life in decades, not years.

Everyone I care about already thinks I'm dead. I cut them all off so completely after the accident that they already feel like a previous life. If I did escape, would they want me back after what I did? Would anything ever be like it was before my life went to shit? Maybe, but maybe not. My happiness here is a solid thing, growing brighter and shinier each day.

And here, I have Jacob.

Anyone watching from the outside would tell me I've got the worst case of Stockholm syndrome in history, and maybe they'd be right, but if I can't tell the difference, does it really matter? When Jacob's gone, I want him back. Getting through his grouchy British attitude and making him laugh has become my new favorite game.

I shouldn't be feeling this way, but I am, and I'm starting to lose sight of why I keep fighting it.

Jacob's heavy sigh brings me back to the moment. He's got his most terrifying glare fixed on Grandad, and I'm glad I'm not on the receiving end of it. "Is this really what you want? No more bingo down the pub? No flying back to Blighty for footie season?"

Grandad scoffs. "I wouldn't do that fucking flight again if you paid me. And I've been having more fun here with you, Quinn, and your friends than I did with the codgers at bingo."

Jacob tries again. "Look. Quinn and I—we're not having kids. We've talked about it, and we're not. What if Ruth does? You'd be missing out on your great-grandkids."

Grandad shakes his head. "She don't want 'em either. Seems a common theme with you young ones. Can't say I blame ya, the world the way it is."

I can add that to the bucket of shiny stones, too. No kids. I never wanted to risk passing on my Brugada syndrome, and when Jacob told me he'd had the snip, it came as a big relief. One less thing to worry about.

Jacob glances my way again, and this time, I grin. "Looks like he's staying. Think you can clear it with Kendrick?"

"I think so, but..." Jacob's forehead creases, and his gaze flits between Grandad and me. My stomach drops as I guess what he's thinking. He's insulated Grandad from the realities of the Compound so far, keeping him away from most of the public areas. If he stays here, that won't be possible anymore.

He'll find out about the Wards. He'll learn the truth about Jacob and me. Is that something he'll be able to get past?

Jacob's voice drops into the same serious cadence he used when he told me about my

captivity. “There’s something else you need to know about this place. The women here...they’re—”

Grandad holds up a hand. “I didn’t come down in the last shower. I saw the collars on young Eve and a couple of the others. I know what they mean. It’s a sex thing, like in that *Sixty Shades of Gray* book the women all went mad for. Your business is your business, my boy.”

I clamp my hand over my mouth to hold in the laugh that wants to tear its way out. Jacob, my solid, unflappable soldier, turns flushed, and his mouth drops open.

Grandad notices and rolls his eyes at me. “He thinks I’m an old prude. Truth be told, I wish that bloody book had been around when his gran was still here.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Grandad!” Jacob splutters, and it tips me over the edge. I crumple into helpless laughter, tears streaming down my face.

After a minute, Jacob mutters, “Are you done?”

I recover just enough to blurt out, “Your face! Your fucking face!”

Then I lose it again.

By the time I get myself together, Jacob seems to have recovered and is watching me with a look so exasperated it almost sets me off again, but I manage to keep it together.

Really, he should be grateful for the turn this conversation took. It’s saved him a much more difficult one. If Grandad is happy to believe we’re all consensually enslaved, then let him think that. It’s better than the alternative.



“Right, then.” Jacob gets to his feet with a decisiveness that helps me get my fit of the giggles under control. “I’ll talk to Kendrick, if you’re really sure?”

Grandad nods. “I am.”

Jacob turns his attention to me, and a smirk crosses his face. The dangerous one. I can’t say I’m sad to see it, though. It’s another sign he’s getting back to his old self. If that costs me a spanking, it’s worth it.

“I’ll ask what rooms Grandad can keep permanently, too. He needs his own space, and so do we. I’ve been keeping a list of things we need to attend to once we move back in. It’ll keep you busy for a while.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. I knew he’d been keeping score. With a last, knowing look over his shoulder, Jacob heads to the door.

Jacob

The speaker drones on and on. He's a Brother who has spent years working with subatomic particles, watching how they interact with each other, and apparently, his discoveries are ground-breaking. Judging by Gabriel's rapt expression, they probably are. But invisible particles are his thing, not mine. I prefer work with immediate, practical applications.

Normally, I'd have made an excuse and done pretty much anything except attend a boring presentation, but I came up with an idea to torture Quinn that was just too good, and this is the perfect venue to try it out.

I didn't tell her the new plug I stuffed her arse with before we left vibrates.

It's silent but fierce. Before we left, I told Quinn, very sternly, that she's to sit quietly through the lecture and pay attention. She whinged and moaned, but it's not like she has a choice. It's been almost a week since I let her orgasm, the longest period of denial I've put her through, and she's as pissed off as a bag of cats.

I can't wait to piss her off a whole lot more.

I steal a glance at her. Glazed eyes, slack jaw... She looks on the verge of passing out. Sliding my hand into my pocket, I activate the remote.

She leaps from her seat with a high-pitched shriek. The speaker falls silent, and everyone in the sparsely filled lecture theater stares. She's wide-eyed, clutching her arse, the tiny miniskirt I made her wear riding up as her fingers rake over it.

“Sit down and be quiet,” I snap in an audible whisper, then address the speaker. “I’m so sorry. Please go on.”

Gabriel shoots me a disgusted look from the row in front and turns back to the stage as the speaker continues. Quinn lowers herself slowly to the hard wooden bench seat, eyes wide. I wrap my arm around her, pulling her tight against me. “No more of that. Concentrate. I’ll be asking you questions about this later.”

As if I’ll remember a fucking thing.

“Turn it off! Please.”

“No. One more word, and I’m turning it up.”

She’s already squirming on her seat. We’re in the back row, off to the side of the theater, in no-one’s eyeline. If anyone goes out of their way to watch us, that’s their fucking problem. I slide my hand under Quinn’s T-shirt and play with her nipple. I’ve pretty much banned bras for her, except for special occasions. I don’t want fabric getting between me and my toy.

“Jacob,” she whines, wriggling in the most delightful way. I pinch and roll her little nipple between my thumb and finger as she bites hard on her lip. The strong vibrations, the hard wooden bench, and the days of deprivation are doing their work. “I’m going to—”

“Go on then, love. Just be quiet about it.”

I watch her face. Her eyes screw shut as she concentrates, desperate not to make a sound. She doesn’t quite manage it, but I think only I hear the quiet whimper she gives as her body gets what I’ve denied it for days. She twitches, and I move my hand down, slipping it under her skirt and into her knickers, which are absolutely fucking soaked.

Fuck me, this girl is amazing.

As her high fades, she opens her eyes, watching me expectantly. Assuming I'll turn the plug off. No such luck. I tip my head to the side as she squirms again, now looking more uncomfortable. "Problem?"

"The plug. It's still going."

"The lecture isn't finished yet. He's not even halfway through his slides."

As her mouth drops open, I slide my fingers through her drenched pussy and over her clit. "Let's see how many times I can make you come before he's done."

"But—"

"No more talking."

By the time the lecture ends, we're up to five orgasms, and Quinn is pleading with me to stop over and over again in a plaintive voice that almost wins me over but not quite. Her face is bright red, sweat coats her skin, and her eyes are vacant, staring into nothing as her body trembles. Her bottom lip is swollen from how hard she's bitten it to keep quiet.

Fucking perfect.

When I shut the vibrations off, she blinks at me, closes her eyes, and breathes out a long, tired sigh. "Jesus Christ."

The lights come up, and I nod at her disheveled clothing. "Might want to tidy yourself up. You look like you've been fucked six ways to Sunday."

She jolts, tugging the T-shirt straight and smoothing down the skirt. I give the top of

her head a kiss. “You’ll thank me as soon as we get home.”

Her whisper is an outraged squeak. “Thank you?”

“You’re welcome.”

She opens her mouth to snap back, but Gabriel appears. “Proud of yourself? Poor Brian worked hard on that presentation, and I think half the room was too busy ogling Quinn to hear a word.”

Quinn groans and latches on to me, face buried in my shirt. She mumbles into my chest, “Were people really watching?”

Gabriel catches my eye and winks. “I’m afraid so. Everyone will be talking about it for days. I even saw Kendrick staring, and he didn’t look pleased.”

“That’s it. I’m never leaving the house again.”

“Fine by me.” I pick her up and fling her over my shoulder.

“Put me the hell down!” She claws at my back. It drives her mental when I carry her about—it must remind her just how helpless she really is—but I ignore her. I give Gabriel a high-five, then head out of the lecture theater, making sure to stop and talk to as many people as possible on the way out.

Quinn’s skirt has ridden up, and she slaps at my back, but it’s like getting smacked by a kitten. I’ll make sure to tell her that later.

By the time we reach our flat, she’s given up fighting and is muttering to herself about what an asshole I am. I’m not going to argue with her. I’ve let her decorate however she wants, and it’s all funky colors and weird shit but with some concessions to the things I like, too.

She made a feature out of the Western posters, ordering more and adding a few cowboy touches, too. Crossed horseshoes hang beneath a giant stuffed boar's head decorated with bells hanging from the tusks. She's threatening to source an elk head after our initiation, once we move to our permanent home.

She even asked Candice to find some Westham memorabilia to replace the stuff she destroyed, and it's proudly displayed in a locked glass cabinet.

I dump her on the bed. She tucks her knees up and pushes herself to a seated position, wary eyes locked on me.

This moment is always my favorite, the part when she knows I'm deciding exactly what to do to her and has absolutely no choice in the matter. I decide to draw it out a little longer, though I'm rock-hard and desperate to be inside her. Watching her orgasm over and over almost fucking killed me.

"What do you think, love? Should I fuck your pussy or your arse today?"

"Pussy." She says it without drawing a breath, and I smile. So predictable. I've got her arse well trained now, but she'll still choose pussy every time. Add to that she must be sore from the vibrating plug, and I'm sure she's desperate for me to listen to her just this once.

Bad luck, sweetheart.

"Nah. I'm not in the mood."

I flip her face down on the bed, press my hand on her neck, and force her legs apart with my knee. No need to be gentle today; she's already had her fun. I can make this quick, rough, and dirty.

There's lube on the bedside table, and I grab it, covering my cock before I pull out

the plug and toss it to the side. That's going to get plenty of use. Maybe I'll make her wear it to her next girls' night. Her ass is ready, gaping from the wide plug, and I waste no time pressing the tip of my cock into her tiny hole.

Fuck, I love watching her stretch. I don't go slow enough to make it easy, and she whines as I force myself into her. "Ow... Just a second... Slow down."

"No."

She yells as I pull out, then slam all the way back in. I don't know how her skinny little arse takes it, but she does.

I bend down, wrap her hair in my fist, and force her head to the side so she can see me. I find a pounding rhythm, and little gasps escape her at every stroke. "Who owns you?"

Her eyes are white saucers, and her breath comes in sharp gasps as I piston into her. Fuck, she feels good. This isn't going to take long. I don't get a response, so I land a heavy smack on her arse before asking again, "Who fucking owns you, Quinn?"

"You...fucking...do." She forces it out as her body jerks from my thrusts.

"You're bloody right I do. Property of Jacob West."

Thinking of the tattoo I'm going to brand her with is enough to tip me over the edge. I groan and yank her hair as I come, shooting deep inside her. I press my hips down, letting her feel the weight of me. Making her take it all.

She sighs as I release her hair, going limp on the bed, eyes closed. She's exhausted and vulnerable and absolutely fucking beautiful. And best of all, she's mine in every possible way.

I stay there for a while, enjoying the feel of her body around mine. As the high fades, a new feeling creeps in as I stare at her delicate face. Tenderness. How can I want to protect and destroy this girl at the same time? It makes no sense, but it's true.

As I pull out, she opens her eyes and watches me, lazy as a cat in a patch of sun. If I let her, she'd fall asleep right here, but we need to clean up, and that's my responsibility. This time, I get no complaints when I pick her up and carry her to the shower.

Afterward, we cuddle under a fluffy purple blanket—Quinn's choice, of course—and watch *American Horror Story*. Quinn screamed when I told her I'd never seen it and vowed to educate me. Already half asleep, she mumbles, "What are we doing later? Isn't there something?"

"Grandad is going to his bingo night. It'll be all the old fogies, but I said we'd pop by to say hello. You can have three drinks."

"Oh. So generous," she grumbles and snuggles into my chest. It's been a while since she tried to go on a bender, though I still have to keep an eye on her. At her last checkup, the doc told us the new medication is working like a charm, and her heart should last as long as she does. Which, if my research goes the way I want, will be a very, very long time.

Quinn's been calmer lately, ever since Marlowe walked out of the Brotherhood medical facility on her own two feet. She's still got a lot of rehab ahead of her, but she'll be able to live the life she would have had if the accident had never happened.

I needn't have worried about Grandad being lonely here. There's a whole geriatric social scene I never knew existed. I'd written most of the older Brothers off as stuck-up, country club types, but it turns out I was wrong. Some of them came from working-class origins, just like I did.



With the top-notch medical care we have, there are a lot of Brothers close to Grandad's age who are still going strong. Grandad's suggestion of a bingo night went down like a storm, and now it runs every Thursday night.

Quinn's breathing grows deep and even, settling into a sleepy rhythm. She's so fucking cute with her eyes closed and her face relaxed that I can't help landing a kiss on the top of her head. I regret it straight away when her eyes fly open. "Huh. What was that for?"

"Sorry. Go back to sleep." I pause, then say the words that still feel awkward. "I love you."

I don't know if she'll ever say it back, but that's not why I'm telling her. She deserves to hear it. Her family all think she's dead. Even if I go my whole life without hearing it back, I'll never stop telling her how I really feel.

I stole her from her life, but she ripped mine to shreds in the best possible way. I never know which version of her I'll get when I wake up in the morning, but I love them all. Even the crazy side of her. Maybe that one especially.

Her blue eyes lock with mine. She's done this a few times. There's been a moment when the words hang there, and then they're gone. I hold my breath.

She looks away. Her body relaxes, curling into me, and she settles herself on my chest, eyes closed. Not today, then. Maybe one day.

"You too." It's a grumpy mutter, hardly intelligible.

I tense. "What did you just say?"

She doesn't open her eyes but lets out a long, exasperated sigh. "I said you too. Now will you shut the fuck up and let me go to sleep?"

My jaw drops, and her eyes shoot open. “I wasn’t swearing at you. I was swearing to you.”

“I know, love. I know.” A grin splits my face as she closes her eyes again. Right now, she could call me every fucking name under the sun, and I wouldn’t care. You too. The best thing I’ve ever heard. Shakespeare, eat your fucking heart out. You too.

My phone rings. For fuck’s sake, what now? I frown when I see Seb’s number. He’s been acting weird lately, dropping out of contact for days at a time. Whenever I ask what’s wrong, he brushes me off.

He’s entitled to his privacy, just like we all are, but it still makes me nervous. It’s not normal behavior for him, and with our ceremony only a month away I’m starting to get concerned. He still hasn’t chosen a Ward.

I answer the call. “Hi, mate.”

“Where are you?”

The harsh tension in his voice has me sitting up sharp. Quinn yelps as I dislodge her. “At home. What’s wrong?”

“Can you do me a favor and not ask any questions?”

Shit. I knew it. Something is very wrong here. “What do you need?”

“I need you to get Kendrick and meet me at the gate. Call me when you’re there. Can you do that?”

A sinking feeling settles over me. Quinn mouths, “What?”

I shrug as I say, “Sure, mate. No problem.”

It takes an hour, but I get it organized. Kendrick is pissed, and I don't blame him. I don't like this one bit. Once we're in place, I call Seb. "We're here."

"Thanks. Be there soon."

Five minutes later, Quinn and I watch Sebastian's Tesla slide up to the front gate. I called Gabriel to see if he knew anything and drew a blank, but he and Eve came down as well. We all wait, a tense welcoming party, as Seb pulls to a stop and exits the car.

Kendrick steps forward. He's been stressed since Brackis's betrayal, and the dark circles under his eyes hint at lost sleep. Kelly succeeded in making Brackis into a ghost. He's still on the loose, and it needles Kendrick as much as it does me. Worst-case scenario, he could be working with the Calder family. If that's the case, all our tech is at risk of theft.

I'm glad I'm not on the receiving end of Kendrick's glare. "Really, Sebastian, are these theatrics necessary?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I really am."

He closes his door and opens the back. My heart hammers as he leans into the back seat and emerges.

He's holding a woman.

She's wide awake but bound and gagged so tightly she's hardly making a sound. She mumbles, eyes roving the group as she struggles in Seb's grip. I don't recognize her, but she's expensive-looking—long blond hair and a fancy suit.

Seb sets her down, and speaks so fast the words blur together. "This is the woman I'm taking as my Ward. I'm claiming her now, and she's seen the Compound, so she

can't leave. By the ancient law of the Brotherhood, she's mine."

The only sound is the woman's frantic mumbling. Nothing about this makes sense, and I glance at Gabriel to find him equally puzzled. We can choose whoever we want as our Wards. What's the point of this?

Then I turn to Kendrick. His skin is pale, and his usually stern, confident face is slack with horror. He steps forward. "Sebastian, what have you done?"

"I'm sorry. It was the only way. She's the one I want."

I've never seen Kendrick lost for words before. He takes another step forward, eyes locked on the woman's face. She's fallen silent now, glaring at each of us one by one. Even bound and gagged, there's haughtiness to that expression. Who the fuck is she?

Kendrick's next words make all the pieces thud into place with terrible finality. "Are you insane? Do you understand what this means? That's Ophelia Calder. This is going to start a war."