



Deadly Rival (Captives of the Onyx Brotherhood #3)

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Category: Urban

Description: I've waited ten years to punish her.

Ophelia, the Calder family's untouchable princess, drove my sister to take her own life. Now I'm taking hers - and I'm going to make her my obedient little pet. All brothers must choose a Ward, and she'll be mine. Forever.

She'll dance at the end of my leash while her father's spies report every humiliating detail back to him. And when he comes for me, the Brotherhood will wipe him off the map.

A perfect plan. Except it isn't.

When Randall Calder demands my head in a box and the Brotherhood gives it serious consideration, I realize I've miscalculated. Now, my only hope for survival lies in the girl I've stripped bare, body and soul.

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Prologue

Sebastian

“Take a seat, Sebastian.”

Kendrick barks the order before I’ve even closed the door. His sharp gaze bores into me as I cross the room. This isn’t going to be a casual conversation about a new wine or whiskey he’s discovered. I lower myself into an uncomfortable chair—I swear he picks the damn things as a power play to make his guests ill at ease—and wait.

I know what’s coming.

He steeples his hands on the desk. “Your initiation ceremony is coming up, and you haven’t selected anyone. I hope you’re not planning a repeat of Gabriel’s last-minute approach?”

I bite back a sharp response. Normally, I get on with Kendrick better than my friends, who find him cold and stiff. I can appreciate the aesthetic he’s going for, and the suit of armor is a genius touch. He wants us to see him as untouchable. A duke in his manor or a king on his throne.

Gabriel is in awe of him, and even Jacob gives him a lot of respect. But they don’t know the stress he’s really under or how hard he has to work to keep the Brotherhood together. In the world I came from, the Brotherhood is seen as a wounded behemoth. And there’s no shortage of people waiting to make the final kill.

This school-teacher tone, though? It gets right the hell under my skin.

“No, sir. I’ll make my decision soon. There are still a few variables I need to consider.”

More than he can possibly imagine. Like the probability algorithms I run all day long, tumbling possibilities fill my head.

If I do X, then Y.

If she turns left here, I grab her there.

If I fuck this up, I’m dead.

His eyes narrow. “Why the secrecy?”

There’s no reason I can give him that won’t sound false, so I hide behind rules and regulations. Maybe I should have been a lawyer, just like dear old Dad always wanted. “With all due respect, I’m entitled to make this decision in my own time, sir. I don’t need to share my selection process.”

Kendrick’s lips tighten, but he knows I’m right. He probably reads the Brotherhood code every night in bed, cuddled up in fuzzy pajamas with a teddy bear.

Well, there’s an image that will haunt me to my dying day.

Focus, for God’s sake.

Kendrick rubs his temples, then reaches for his whiskey decanter and two glasses. He’s realized Bad Cop isn’t working, so he’s going to give Good Cop a try. Thank Christ for that. At least Good Cop comes with top-notch liquor.

“Glenglassaugh forty-year-old single malt,” Kendrick explains at my questioning glance as he pours the drink. “We’ll see how it stacks up against the Macallan twenty-five.”

He hands me the glass, and I breathe in the heady scent. I love the smell of whiskey. It takes me back to my uncle’s house, the relief of being away from Dad for a few days. The first sip is always the best. I close my eyes as flavor explodes on my tongue and burns a path down my throat.

I should comment on the subtle notes of oak and peat but can’t marshal my thoughts. As the big day looms, everything else fades into the background. Ten years. I’ve waited ten years, and it’s almost here.

The day I fuck the Calders’ lives up for good.

Kendrick clears his throat. Shit. I’ve zoned out. His forehead creases as I take a second sip to gather myself.

“I’m concerned. If you won’t discuss this with me, then please reach out to your friends. Jacob, in particular. He’ll help you work through whatever your issues are. But do it quickly. You’re running out of time.”

As if I don’t have a giant clock in my brain, ringing out every second that passes. I take a breath, smile, and hold the whiskey up to the light. “A beautiful color. On first impression, I’d say I prefer it to the Macallan.” I drain the last of the liquid. “It’ll take me another couple of glasses to decide, though, and I’ve got work to do. Busy day on the markets.”

My mask is back in place, but it doesn’t fool Kendrick. He sets his own glass down. “Remember what I said. You don’t need to face this alone.”

Oh yes, I do. I'm not dragging anyone else into my shit.

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One

Ophelia

“I want to speak to the manager!”

Alicia flicks her gaze to me, desperate for help. She’s already tearing up as the customer leans over the countertop. “Right now.”

I clench my fist, plaster on a bright, professional smile, and head over. “Excuse me, ma’am. I’m Ophelia Calder, the owner. How may I help you?”

The woman turns to face me, blond bob cut swishing, and I flinch at the blotchy red patches on her skin. She has the sort of face that is ageless at a distance, but close up, there are signs even our advanced treatments can’t quite cover.

There’s a slight hang to her neck and crinkles at the corners of her lips. She’s in her fifties and looks me up and down with the disbelief I’ve grown used to in women her age. “The owner? You?”

I don’t let my smile falter, though my body stiffens with the effort. “Yes. What seems to be the problem? ”

“Are you fucking kidding me? The problem”---she points to her face---“is this”. Three-thousand dollars for skin resurfacing, and two weeks later, I still look like I’ve got leprosy.”

Cool relief takes the edge off my stress. Her mistake, not ours. “Recovery takes at least a month, ma’am. This is normal. You’ll look great once the healing process is complete.”

“Two weeks? I have a wedding this weekend. This isn’t good enough. No one explained the process to me. I want my money back.” Her lip curls, a nasty little smile forming. “Maybe you should employ some staff who actually know what they’re doing.”

Thank God for paperwork. “Ma’am, in the forms you signed when you came in for treatment, it would have clearly explained—”

“I don’t give a shit about the paperwork. I want—”

“Is there a problem here?”“

The deep voice behind my shoulder drops my stomach to my boots. Why now? Why fucking now?

The uber-bitch in front of me jumps, and her pinched face relaxes into wide-eyed amazement as she takes in my father. “Oh. Hello. Are you the man in charge around here?”

Dad graces her with his thousand-megawatt smile, white teeth gleaming. “Something like that. Is there an issue, darling?”

The woman’s blotchy face turns beaming red, and I swear she actually simpers. Nauseating.

“Well, sir—” She emphasizes “sir” with a flirty glance down. “I had a treatment two weeks ago, and it wasn’t explained right. Now I’m going to look just awful for my

niece's wedding.”

“Well, that won't do at all.” Dad's face creases in false dismay. Does she actually believe it? “Ophelia, please provide this lovely lady with a full refund and a complimentary makeover on the day of the ceremony. And see that the staff member who made the error is dealt with.”

Just smile and say yes.

But I hesitate, and Dad's gaze swings toward me like a laser.

Agree with him. Anything else is pointless.

The whole reception area falls silent, chattering conversation replaced by avid curiosity. My father, over six-feet tall and dressed in a sharp black suit, stands out like a beacon against the aggressively feminine lobby.

I have no say in my clinic decor. I'd go minimalist with it. Upscale, classy. But instead, rose-gold accents are everywhere, the walls have a lattice with actual honeysuckle, and the cherry on top—pink marble counters. Pink! It's a Barbie makeover studio brought to life.

“Ophelia?”

And there's the tone. The one I got when I said I wanted to quit cheer squad for softball. Or when I suggested I move out and get my own place at twenty-three. The warning tone that means I need to fall in line.

The customer smirks behind his back, and it's enough to tip me over the edge. “My staff did nothing wrong. She signed the paperwork and knew recovery would take longer than two weeks. There's no reason to issue a refund.”

Black clouds roll in across my father's face. For just that second, the mask he shows the respectable part of the world cracks, revealing the shark beneath. His gray eyes darken, and there will be hell to pay later.

It's gone the next moment, and the smile returns. "Don't be silly." He turns to Alicia behind the desk, who watches him like a rabbit watches a fox. "Issue the refund, and get this lady booked in for her makeover. Now. "

"Yes, sir," she stammers, and I tense my muscles to keep myself steady. This clinic has my name on the deeds. I own it, and even though I never wanted to run an overpriced beauty clinic, I'm doing my best to run it well. But I'm not in charge here, and everyone knows it.

"Ophelia. Office." Dad doesn't bother to wait for an answer before he turns his back and strides toward my office. MY office, yet I follow him there like I've been called in to see the principal. My sensible heels click on the marble, and I want to throw the stupid things into the ornamental fountain. But I don't dare. I'm in enough trouble already.

As soon as the door clicks shut behind me, Dad whirls, all traces of his smile gone. "Do you know who that ugly bitch out there is?"

Even his voice is different, a staccato edge tarnishing the cultured tone. A ghost from growing up in New York City. My nanny, Maida, who pretty much raised me, once let slip after a couple of glasses of wine that he spent thousands of dollars on elocution lessons to lose the accent.

"No idea, Daddy. Who?" I try to match his anger with nonchalance, but it comes out forced and brittle.

"She's married to Ashton Parker." At my blank look, he shakes his head. "Parker

Pharmaceuticals? One of our biggest clients?”

The name snaps into place. Shit. Double shit. “I’m sorry. I—”

“You didn’t think. You never fucking do.”

My buried anger flares. “She was wrong, though. She was—”

“It doesn’t fucking matter what she was!” I take a half step back as Dad’s roar fills the office. Will the staff be able to hear? Are they gossiping about it right now? “You do understand what you’re doing here, right? ”

With painful clarity. Running a “legitimate business” to clean my family’s filthy money.

“Giving some dumb old bitch her money back doesn’t matter. Pissing off a client does.”

I don’t want to look away from his burning gaze, but I do. Coward that I am, I stare at the shiny points of my shoes as his tirade continues. “I know you enjoy playing at being the boss here, but you work for me, Ophelia. Don’t fucking forget it.”

“I know. I know. Sorry.”

I hate the meek quaver in my voice. I hate the relief when I glance up and see the storm has passed and the fury in his eyes is banked. For now. I hate that I knew exactly the right tone to take to pacify him after so many years of practice.

He nods, and his face changes in the eerie way it does, danger sliding away, replaced with an affable mask. “Good. That’s good, sweetie. I’m proud of what you’re doing here, I really am. You just have to keep the interests of the family at the front of your

mind.”

Family first. Of course.

He smiles, and most people would find it charming, paired with his handsome face. “Now, the reason I dropped by. We’re going for dinner tonight with the Stormbergs, and I want you to look your best. Wear something pretty. Demure, of course, but pretty. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

I don’t have the energy for another argument.

“It’s important. There’s a big contract up for grabs. Harrison will be there too, and we need a united front. Their youngest son is coming.” His eyebrow twitches in a knowing way that makes my skin crawl. “Handsome, by all accounts. Could make a good match for you. ”

Gross. Dad’s ideas about dating are Victorian in the extreme. Between him and my brother, Harrison, my love life is dead on arrival. Dad wants to see me married off to some son of a business acquaintance. A perfect marriage for his perfect princess.

My face hurts as I force a smile. “We’ll see.”

“I knew I could count on you. Now, while I’m here, let’s take a look through the books.”

It takes everything I have not to scream as I open my laptop.

Two grueling hours later, he finally leaves. Once the door clicks shut, I kick off my shoes and collapse onto the white leather sofa in the corner. This room was the only space I had any control over, and it's decorated in the simple, clean style I prefer.

The frilly, overdone girliness of the main clinic is a pneumatic drill in my brain.

I grab a beer from the mini fridge in the corner and take a long swallow. Dad doesn't approve of me drinking beer—unladylike—but I enjoy it after a long day. The cold liquid slides down my throat as I work to piece myself back together.

Dad's evisceration of my accounts was as brutal as I'd expected. He has a head for figures, and I certainly don't. In school, I loved biology and hated math. Dad went line by line through my figures, finding every error. Each mistake dragged the corners of his mouth lower.

When he stood to leave, he delivered his final jab. "Christ, Ophelia. Imagine if you'd actually gone to med school. With this many fuck-ups, you'd be in jail with a trail of bodies in your wake. "

There's no point arguing. Just like the marketing degree he persuaded me to enroll in and the salon he insisted I open, he'll always win.

I let myself finish my beer and relish the silence for a moment longer before I slip my shoes on and head out into the noise and bustle of the clinic. As soon as I appear, staff surround me.

"Ophelia. Thank God, I thought you'd never come out. The supplier only delivered one batch of Juvéderm, and we're almost out. Can you—"

"Ophelia, I'm so sorry. We've double-booked Rachel tomorrow with two Vampire facials at once. I don't know how it happened. The computer glitched. Can you—"

“Ophelia, a customer called. She went to the emergency room last night. Some sort of reaction to her anti-wrinkle. She’s threatening legal action. Can you—”

I don’t want to be here.

I don’t want to be here.

I don’t want to be here.

God, I sound like the worst spoiled little rich girl on the planet. Poor me. Daddy bought me a business, and it’s too hard. But those thoughts don’t help one bit. My chest tightens, the dreaded constriction hitting me all at once. My heart is too big. It’s beating too hard. It’s going—

“Excuse me.”

I push past my staff, through the double doors, and out onto the street. No one follows me, thank God, and I lean against the door frame, trying to breathe. I just need—

“Ophelia! Before I head in, can I talk to you? It’s my friend’s bachelorette this weekend, and I need Saturday off. Sorry, I forgot to put it on the system, but it’ll be okay, right? I can’t let her down.”

Can no one in this place give me a single second of peace? I whip my head round and meet Phoebe’s gaze. She’s arriving for her afternoon shift and—I check my watch—is ten minutes late.

And she’s hitting me up with this now? Saturday is my busiest day. I can’t just...

Something else catches my eye. Oh no. She hasn’t.

“What the hell is that?” I point at her nose, where a shiny stud glimmers. Dad hates piercings on women almost as much as he hates tattoos. When we set this place up, he was very clear on the dress code.

I can’t deal with this right now. I just can’t.

Phoebe covers it with her hand, then gives a nervous laugh. “Crap. I forgot we’re not meant to have them. I just got it done, so I can’t change it for a clear stud for a few weeks. It’ll be okay, right? No big deal?”

“No, it’s not fucking okay!” I hardly recognize the shrill shriek coming out of my mouth. “Take it out right now.”

Phoebe’s lips thin. “No. It cost me sixty bucks, and I’ve wanted it done forever. I can’t take it out.”

And if Dad stops by again and sees it? I’m dead meat. I straighten my spine and channel my inner Calder, bringing my voice down from shrill to icy. “That’s not my problem, Phoebe. Take it out, or you’re fired.”

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Two

Sebastian

She hasn't changed one goddamn bit. Still the same stuck-up princess who made my sister's life hell. As I'm operating without Brotherhood support, I haven't managed to install cameras in Ophelia's salon, much less the Calder mansion. But I did set one up outside to track her comings and goings.

There's no sound, but the scene doesn't need subtitles to give it clarity. Ophelia points an imperious finger at her staff member, who touches the stud in her nose. They argue, Ophelia's sculpted face hard and unyielding.

Eventually, tears streaming from her eyes, the poor girl on the receiving end pulls out the stud with a wince, throws it on the ground, and pushes through the door into Ophelia's salon.

Old anger, which I can forget about sometimes but never really leaves me, flares into vivid color as the image of the tearful girl blurs into my little sister, Maggie, aged fourteen. Of all my memories, the one of her crying her eyes out, black mascara and eyeliner streaking her cheeks, is the most vivid.

That day, one of her last, Ophelia and her group of bitches cornered her at recess. They shoved her head in the toilet, told her to scrub off the gothy makeup she liked to experiment with, and left her in the bathroom crying her eyes out. I only found her there because a sophomore girl took pity on her and fetched me.

Ophelia is the same bully now as she was then, imposing her prissy little vision on the world. I'm almost glad to see it because of what lies ahead for her. I zoom the camera in and really focus on the woman who has one single day of freedom left.

She's beautiful in a boring way. Natural, honey-blond hair curled into waves that cascade down her back. Subtle makeup, a tailored suit, and a single pair of diamond drop earrings. Everything is pristine, perfect, and so sensible it makes her look much older than twenty-four.

She straightens her shoulders and heads back into her salon. I've been so focused on the logistics of the capture that I've hardly thought about what comes after. Tomorrow, if all goes to plan, she'll be in my room. Will she remember me? I'm guessing yes, though I don't know if she'll recognize me at first.

I can't wait to see the shock in her eyes when she realizes who I am.

Enough.

Not dying tomorrow is my top priority.

I jump out of my skin when my phone rings and cringe when I see the name. Jacob. He's way too smart and knows something is going on. And of all the people in my life, he's the last one I want to find out about my plans. He'll either stop me or want to help and get dragged into my disaster of a plan. I don't know what would be worse.

I answer. "Hey, man."

"All right, mate? What're you up to later?"

Possibly enjoying my very last day above ground .

“Not much. I’m pretty tired. Probably going to get an early night.”

A long, weighty pause presses down on me. Jacob’s voice has dropped when he speaks. “Look, I’m taking Quinn to trivia night at the bar. Come with us. With you on the team, we’ll be in with a shot at winning. They always throw in some bullshit questions about rich people stuff. I think they do it to impress Kendrick.”

I force a laugh. “Much as I’d love to help you peasants out, I’m just not feeling great. Let’s catch up tomorrow.”

Jacob’s sigh echoes down the phone. “Okay, mate. Are you coming to Brian’s lecture tomorrow? Gabriel roped me into it.”

“I’d rather stab my own eyeballs with knitting needles, thanks.”

Jacob laughs, but it sounds strained. Or maybe I’m just imagining it. I’ve been jumping at shadows for weeks, sure every innocent question has a deeper meaning. The foolishness of what I’m doing feels like it should be a beacon flashing over my head for all to see.

Behold, the dumbass who wants to piss off the Brotherhood and their biggest rivals all at once.

“Can’t say I blame you. I might drag Quinn along to liven things up. We’re going to Grandad’s bingo night tomorrow evening. You fancy that?”

“Sure. Why not?” I hope it sounds more genuine than it feels.

We say goodbye, and I stare at the phone for a while before forcing myself to move, prowling my apartment. I chose every item of furniture myself, with the help of a designer who seemed delighted to work with someone who appreciated his talents.

Most Brothers are like my two best friends—too caught up in their work and their Wards to give a shit about decor. But I know the value of making an impression. My home is my castle, just like Kendrick’s office is his.

I take a seat on my Edra “On the Rocks” sofa and run a finger over the rich gray fabric. The designer just about came in his pants when I suggested it, and he planned the whole apartment around the statement piece. There’s something soothing about the muted colors throughout the place, broken up here and there with splashes of vivid brights.

I grew up surrounded by the showy trappings of wealth—sports cars, the latest electronics, gold and marble on every available fucking surface. If there’s such a thing as a stereotypical mob lawyer house, my house was it. As a teenager, I shunned it all and dressed like I was broke, but as I grew older, I realized that was stupid.

I allowed myself to like nice things again and ended up with tastes as expensive as my goddamn father, if a lot more subtle. Ironical, really, since my aggressive scruffiness was one of the main reasons we used to argue. He’d be proud of me now, if we were still on speaking terms.

I love my apartment. I love the work I’m doing here in the Brotherhood, and I’m happier here than I’ve been in my entire life. Why am I risking it all? I could take the sensible approach. Choose a Ward I might actually like instead of lumbering myself with one I already hate and leave the past where it belongs.

But Maggie won’t let me.

Now I really am starting to sound like a lunatic. I drag myself to my computer and go through the plan for the millionth time. It’s going to work. It has to.

** *

Not for the first time, I'm glad my Tesla is silent. I pull up outside the gates of Brighthaven, the tiny, exclusive nursing home facility with a grand total of ten residents. Every Thursday, without fail, Ophelia visits her ancient old nanny, Maida. Thursdays are late-opening night at her salon, so she takes a couple of hours off in the morning.

From my clumsy attempts at surveillance and capture planning, it seems like the best time to grab Ophelia. Brighthaven sits on acres of woodland so, according to the cheerful brochure, residents can enjoy the peace and quiet of nature in their golden years.

On Thursday mornings, twelve times out of thirteen, Ophelia is the only visitor and the only car in the car park. Probability is in my favor, and I always seem to beat the odds. I used to do well in Vegas, before they clocked me for card counting and added me to the banned list.

I hold my breath as I creep toward the facility. The gates at the front require a code to get in, but the wire mesh fence around the side isn't well-maintained, and in several places it's come detached from the posts. I don't suppose many people try to break into nursing homes.

A couple of stone-age security cameras guard the gate, but hacking them took less than five minutes. They'll show nothing but a blank screen on playback.

I slip through one of the loose sections, creep through shrubbery to the parking lot, and scan it from behind a bush.

One car. Ophelia's custom dusky pink Mercedes. It's a pretty car, exactly the sort of thing I'd imagine her driving, down to the cheesy numberplate—OC1.

I'm really fucking doing this.

I've dressed in a plain black long-sleeve and jeans, and my skin grows clammy in the warm breeze. Adrenaline heats me from the inside out as I take a careful look around, searching for anything that might cause me a problem.

The black asphalt parking lot gives way to grass and shrubbery on the side opposite me. Gardens for residents to take a stroll in, supposedly, though I've never seen anyone out and about. The facility has a shaded terrace at the back, and that's where the nurses take the geriatrics for fresh air.

Groundskeepers, or staff taking a sneaky smoke break, are my biggest threat. Right now, all is clear, but that could change. I check my watch. Ten minutes until Ophelia usually makes her exit, though sometimes she lingers up to twenty minutes longer. She must love her nanny. If her upbringing was anything like mine, the nanny probably raised her.

Will Maida miss Ophelia's visits? Will she wonder why she's not coming anymore? My stomach wrenches as I imagine a sweet old woman, all dressed up, waiting for a visitor who doesn't arrive. I'd bet my fucking life Ophelia's asshole brother and the old man never visit.

No. Not my problem. I can't let myself go down that path, or it'll drive me insane. Ophelia deserves what's coming to her, and her disgusting family deserves it too. That's all that matters.

Seven minutes.

I edge forward, crouching out of sight behind the car. Ophelia helpfully parked with the passenger door facing away from the facility. Sweet of her to make my job easy.

Five minutes.

I pull on my balaclava. Ophelia can't see me until we're safely within the walls of the Compound. I'm counting on her assuming this is a basic hostage taking, someone after Daddy's money.

She'll go along with what I say as long as she's confident she'll be rescued. If she sees me too early, she might lose her cool.

Two minutes .

I pull the gun from the back of my jeans. It's heavy in my hand, and a shudder tracks through my body as I imagine pointing it at another human. At Ophelia. I've been practicing on the range, in secret—not that I have any plans to fire the fucking thing. My main goal is making sure I don't accidentally shoot myself or anyone else.

Zero minutes.

I wipe the sweat from my palm and clutch the weapon, waiting for the clacking of heels on the asphalt. Most Brothers get a sanitized version of this experience, their Ward delivered to them wrapped up like a Christmas present. If they had to do it themselves, how many would go through with it?

Focus. Not important right now.

Clicking heels come toward me, and my adrenaline spikes to apocalyptic levels.

Shit.

This is it.

Her door opens, and she climbs in. Before the door closes fully, I yank open the passenger door and jump inside, gun leveled right at her. She shrieks, eyes glued to

the weapon, as I say, “Drive. Now.”

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Three

Ophelia

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I glance at the man in the black balaclava, grip the steering wheel, and shift the car into drive. I bite my lip to hold back a sob as I reverse the car out of the space. He's got a gun. It's pointed right at me. The spot it's aimed at burns as I head toward the gates.

Dad can be an asshole, but at least he prepared me for this. Keep calm. Do what they say. Don't give them a reason to hurt you. I'll get you home safe, princess.

"Straight out of the gate. You'll see a silver car. Pull in behind it."

Sweat breaks out all over my body. What is he going to do to me? Throw me in his trunk? My body spasms, a panicked shudder, and the car lurches to the side before I get control of myself again.

"Watch it!" I jerk again at the guy's growled instruction. Why is he talking like that? Does he think the weird, gravelly Batman voice makes him scarier? The gun does that without the theatrics .

He keeps the gun trained on me as he picks up my purse from the passenger footwell. He checks for my cell, then throws it into the back seat.

Calm, calm, calm. He's taking me for ransom. It's a hazard of being a Calder; everyone knows my dad is loaded. Dad will pay the guy, then wipe him off the face of the earth once I'm safe. I just need to survive until then.

Oh God, what if he hurts me?

Tears blur my eyes as I pull up behind the silver car. I could run. Make a dash for it into the woodland or back toward the facility. But that goes against what Dad drilled into me and isn't likely to work. This guy has a gun and, from the brief look I got at him, seems fit. He'd catch me easily.

No. Stick to the plan.

"Turn away. Hands behind your back." I do and, though I'm expecting it, yelp as he fastens something hard around my wrists, cinching them tight. Shit. Terror drenches my nerves as I pull against them. Now I can't defend myself. The vulnerability opens a fresh chasm in my chest.

What if it isn't a ransom? What if he's a serial killer and I've just let him cuff me like a sheep walking into a slaughterhouse?

Before I can process what's happening, the man pulls my hair up and wraps something around my mouth. Tape. Panic overwhelms my senses, and I thrash, yanking my hair at the roots.

"Stop that. Behave, and you won't be harmed. I'm sure Daddy will pay more for you in one piece."

A ransom. It's a ransom. He wants money. I force myself to still. I'll survive. He's not going to chop me into pieces. I just need to get through the next few hours.

Or days. Oh God, what if it's days? Days in some basement.

Calm. Fucking. Down. You're a Calder. Act like it .

It's maybe the first time I've ever been grateful for Dad's voice in my head. Act like it. I can do that. I drag air in through my nose, short, ragged breaths.

The man jumps out of the passenger door. If he hadn't handcuffed me, I could have bolted. God, I wish he was that stupid. I jerk back as he wrenches the driver's door open. Black jeans, black long sleeve, black balaclava. A Halloween costume of a bad guy. All he needs is a stripy sack with "Swag" written on it.

The gun in his hand stops it being funny.

"Out. Don't even think of running for it."

That wasn't as growly, or as deep. Something prickles right at the back of my mind, a tingle of something, but it's gone before I can catch it.

"Move. Now." Batman again. I try to push down the uneasy feeling as I wriggle my way out of the car, struggling to balance with my hands bound even though my heels are sensible. I used to take my shoes off to drive, but Dad said it was a trashy habit, so I learned to cope.

At least they give me a little extra height, so I can look my captor in the eyes without craning my neck too much. He's at least six feet tall.

The prickle of wrongness grows, spiky in my gut as I stare at him. Why hasn't he stuffed me in the trunk yet? Why is he just looking at me? I glance at his hands. No tattoos, no chunky gold rings, and the skin is smooth. The nails, clean and neat.

Nothing about this guy screams gangster, and I've met enough of them to know what they look like. Although Dad keeps me sheltered from the shady side of the family, he can't lock it away completely. I've seen the guys he uses to enforce his power, and they don't have clean, manicured hands. They don't put on fake voices to sound tough.

And they wouldn't freeze in the middle of a kidnapping .

As if he's read my thoughts, the man surges forward, grabs my hair, and drags me toward the waiting car. I stumble along to keep from falling and catch the car's badge as we pass. Tesla. Seriously? He came to kidnap me in a Tesla? It doesn't feel right. None of it feels like it should, and as he throws open the rear door, my banked panic breaks free.

I yank my head back, but his grip is strong, and it just wrenches my scalp hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. I flail against his hold, but it's too little, too late. If I ever had a chance, I missed it. He manhandles me into the back passenger footwell.

I kick out with my foot and must have hit something soft, as he yells, "Shit!" It's a victory, but a small, useless one. I try to sit up, but before I can, he's on me, wrapping tape around my legs. It's rushed and clumsy, but it works, trapping me like an Egyptian mummy.

All my flailing has left me face down, and I don't have a shred of leverage to get back up again. My face presses into the carpet. The spotlessly clean carpet, which still has the lingering smell of the chemicals they use when they valet the car's interior. I should know. Dad has a man come once a week and do every car top to bottom.

He's taking me for ransom, and he got a \$300 valet service to make sure his car was nice for the occasion?

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

It's a gong in my head, ramming home just how unlikely all of this is. The prickle grows into a wrecking ball, slicing my guts. He isn't what he's pretending to be. This isn't what it seems. It's a trap, and I walked right into it.

The door slams, then he gets into the driver's seat. There's no warning, no rumbling engine announcing our departure. The car just lurches forward, and I roll with the motion, unable to stop myself.

From this new angle, I can see the seat back, which looks suspiciously like custom gray leather. This isn't a normal Tesla; it's a top-of-the-line model. Maybe he stole it? I can't make myself believe it, though. He feels like he belongs in this car.

"This won't be a comfy trip, I'm afraid," he says in his phony growl. Why is he talking to me? It's not like I can talk back. "I've thought about this day for a long time."

He what? Ice cascades along my nerves. He's thought about this? Oh no. Oh no, no, no. That can't be good.

He turns on some music. Not the radio—smooth, electronic beats. The sort of music that makes me think of sipping cocktails on a beach, sun baking my skin. He's a smooth driver, and thank God, because if he wasn't, I'd be black and blue.

Maybe the cops will pull him over and find me here. Drag this asshole away to jail. But it doesn't seem likely. It's guys speeding in beat-up old junkers that get stopped, not a man in a high-end Tesla driving like an old lady.

I focus on the small amount of movement I still have. The handcuffs are a dead loss—no chance I'm getting out of them. But what about my legs? I shift them back

and forth, small movements, but the tape doesn't loosen one iota. My shoulders ache from the awkward position, and something hard—maybe a seat runner—is jabbing my hip. How much longer?

Are we there yet?

It strikes me as funny, even trussed up like a Christmas ham, but the tape around my mouth muffles every sound. The pain slowly grows as minutes tick by. I try to see out of the windows, but all I can see is the sky. Nothing helpful.

“Nearly there.”

The man's voice has slipped into a higher register again, and my nerves spring to life, overwhelming even my growing discomfort. That voice. I know it but can't place it. It's not an immediate memory—it's distant—but the more I replay it in my head, the more sure I am.

The car pulls to a halt, and the man's voice rings out again. From the clipped sentences punctuated by pauses, he's talking to someone on the phone.

“Where are you?”

“Can you do me a favor and not ask any questions?”

“I need you to get Kendrick and meet me at the gate. Call me when you're there. Can you do that?”

Kendrick? The gate? None of it makes sense, but the wash of familiarity eclipses the words. He didn't disguise his voice that time, and I was right. I know it from somewhere.

Where? Where is it from? Think!

A long time ago. College, maybe? I run through the few men my brother permitted me to get close to. No. None of them. Earlier, then. Belvedere Prep? An image flickers at the back of my mind. A boy, dark blond hair grown out in a straggly Kurt Cobain tangle, wearing a black hoodie and baggy jeans.

His finger jabbing at me. “This is your fault, you evil bitch. You drove her to this. You fucking—”

Then my brother’s fist slamming into his face.

No. God, no.

The car moves again, and I twist against the tape, but it’s useless. This isn’t a ransom. That voice...Maggie’s brother.

Maggie Grange.

Nauseating guilt swamps me as I think her name. My fault. Her death was my fault. Her brother. I can’t remember his name. Why can’t I remember his goddamn name?

He has me. He has me, and he’s taking me somewhere with a fucking gate. Sweat coats my skin as I struggle to breathe. It was easy a moment ago. Why is it so hard now? The car slows, and I try to claw the ragged edges of my composure together .

I’m a Calder. Wherever this is, whoever he was talking to, it doesn’t matter. My family name is my shield, the thing that can save me from whatever revenge he has planned.

I’ve thought about this day for a long time.

I bet he has. Almost ten years.

Keep. It. Together.

The door opens, and light spills in. Maggie's brother grabs me and hauls me out of the car. My knees thud on the concrete as he places me on the ground, and I twist to get a look at him.

What the hell?

For a single, blissful moment, I'm sure I'm wrong. I must have mixed his voice up with someone else, because there's no way the man I'm looking at is Maggie's brother.

His dark blond hair is styled into a preppy sweep. He must have taken the time to fix it after he pulled off the balaclava. Piercing blue eyes glare at me from a sharp, defined face. His jawline could cut glass.

The image of the scruffy boy I've carried in my head shimmers, dissolving into the man looming over me. Then someone gasps, and I tear my eyes away. We're not alone.

A group of people is watching us. I straighten my spine as best I can and mumble through the gag. If they realize who I am, maybe they'll let me go. Maybe they'll—

Maggie's brother speaks, and the words brand themselves into my soul.

“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.”

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Four

Sebastian

This is it. Will Kendrick honor the terms of the Brotherhood's ancient laws? I haven't broken any of them. Ophelia is twenty-four and unmarried and has no children. She meets all the requirements for a Ward.

Of course, practical man that he is, Kendrick might order her delivered immediately back to her father and throw me in detention. Or have me shot right in the middle of my stupid forehead.

I glance at my friends, registering their confusion. They don't know the woman at my feet is a hand grenade lobbed right into the heart of their home. I've endangered not just them, but their Wards too. Will they forgive me once they understand what I've done?

I force myself to meet Kendrick's gaze. His mouth hangs open, all his usual poise destroyed. "Sebastian. What have you done?"

The words stick in my throat, but I force them out anyway. "I'm sorry. It was the only way. She's the one I want."

Kendrick doesn't speak, only steps closer, staring at Ophelia as though she might disappear if he wishes for it hard enough. Even Ophelia stops her mumbling. Only the screech of a bird in the forest interrupts the taut silence.

When Kendrick tears his gaze away from Ophelia, his jaw tightens and his eyes lazer into me. “Are you insane? Do you understand what this means? That’s Ophelia Calder. This is going to start a war.”

At the distant edge of my hearing, Jacob mutters, “Fuck’s sake,” at the same time Quinn whispers, “Who?”

I’ve practiced this over and over, until the words burned themselves into my brain. Kendrick values traditional values, history, and logic. I clear my throat. “Sir, if you—”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Sebastian.” Kendrick’s voice is a hard, unfamiliar rasp. He gestures to a waiting Gilda soldier. “Sedate the girl and take her to Medical.”

The guard salutes, then pulls a box from a kit bag at his feet. Do they just walk around with fully loaded syringes? Seems excessive.

Focus.

Apparently they do, though, because he pulls out a syringe filled with clear liquid. Ophelia’s eyes widen, and she tries to shuffle away. She unbalances, and I crouch out of reflex, steadying her before she hits the floor. Our eyes meet, hers wide, gray, and full of tears. Does she know about the Brotherhood? Has she realized what this means for her yet?

She mumbles and gives a sad little shake of her head as the Gilda soldier grips her shoulder, holding her still as he sinks the needle into her neck. She flinches, and I keep my arms wrapped around her as the drug hits and her eyes droop. Her body becomes a limp weight in my hands.

“I’ll take her from here, sir.” The Gilda soldier grips her under the arms and hoists

her up, draped over his shoulder. She's on the tall side for a woman, but slim, and he gets to his feet as though she's no encumbrance at all. For a mad instant, I want to follow him. Then Kendrick's voice snaps me back to the real world.

"Inform Medical to keep her under until I reach a decision. Sebastian, my office. Now."

No one has shot me yet. That has to be a good sign. Maybe I'll get to use my carefully prepared arguments after all, if Kendrick calms down enough to listen once he has a glass of whiskey in hand. He's already striding off, so I trail after him.

Jacob and Gabriel flank me.

"Are you fuckin' mental, mate?" Jacob's accent is as strong as it ever gets, a sure sign he's stressed. "This is why you've been all shifty? Plotting to steal the mafia princess like some bad fuckin' movie? You realize people could die over this."

"Why did you have to have her in particular?" Gabriel cuts right to the heart of the matter. He gets it. Eve was a dangerous choice, too, though the only person it endangered was himself. "Do you already know her, or..."

He lets the question hang. Now that the deed is done, the urge to spill my guts is overwhelming. I've been holding it all in for so long that the pressure has built up to the point where it has to blow. Kendrick, though. Kendrick first, and I can tell the guys everything once I'm sure I'm not going to die.

"I'll explain. I will, but not now. After."

Gabriel starts to speak, but Jacob cuts him off. "Yep. Get things straight with the big man, then find us when you're ready." He lowers his voice. "That's if he doesn't blow your stupid fuckin' head off first."

Ah, Jacob. A ray of sunshine in every situation. Gabriel snorts a laugh, and it almost makes me feel better. If they can joke about it, it means it probably won't happen. Right ?

“Thanks so much for the vote of confidence.” I punch Jacob in the arm—might as well punch a wall—then speed up to catch Kendrick.

I draw level with Kendrick, and he shoots a glare my way, then turns back to the path, lips thin. The short walk takes approximately twenty years, the thick pressure of Kendrick's anger surrounding us like a cloud. We pass through the pretty, manicured Compound gardens, but it might as well be a torn-up, post-apocalyptic wasteland. It certainly feels like the end of the world.

We finally reach Main Admin, and Kendrick presses a hand to the entry door without a word. Just that one action summons his special elevator, and it's waiting for us when we enter the lobby. The doors slide open with an ominous hiss, and we step inside.

No. I can't stand the silence anymore. Not in this enclosed space. “Sir, I—”

“Quiet.”

I snap my mouth closed and watch the light as it marks our glacial progress up the tower. My clothes are too tight against my hot, sweaty skin. I hate this. I'd rather a screaming fight than the sort of tense, awkward silence that marked so much of my childhood. When your parents despise each other, dinner times are not much fun.

The two Gilda soldiers outside Kendrick's door salute as we approach, and he uses his palm to gain entry. Guarding his office has to be the most boring job in the entire Compound. Who would come here willingly? What would they do, steal the suit of armor as a prank?

The door shuts behind us, and Kendrick stalks to his desk. He sits but doesn't suggest I do the same, so I hover, trying not to shift from foot to foot. All the lines of Kendrick's body radiate tension, from the crease between his brows down to his steepled fingers. He stares at his desk for a long time before meeting my gaze.

His voice is soft and dangerous. "I was advised not to allow you into the Brotherhood because of your family's connection to the Calders. Did you know that?"

No. No, I hadn't, though it makes a lot of sense. I manage, "No, sir."

"I overrode their objections. You're a bright young man with a brilliant mind. I didn't want your birth to define your opportunities."

Each word is a hammer blow to my heart. Not many Brothers see behind Kendrick's carefully constructed image, but I do. I'm one of the few who understands how precarious his position is. He took a risk because he believed in me.

Shit.

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Do you have any idea what this will mean?"

I do. I've gone over it a hundred ways to Sunday.

"I'll have to restrict Brothers' movements. Put security details on their families to prevent retaliatory attacks. Reduce external staffing levels to the absolute minimum to prevent infiltration."

I know. I know. I know. Except he's already been infiltrated. But Kendrick's right. I've screwed the others until things settle down. I'm not going to be very popular for a

while.

“Sebastian, what you’ve done today will deeply impact the life of every Brother in this Compound, including me.”

Guilt begins to wrap me in spidery webs. I open my mouth to explain, but Kendrick isn't finished.

“We've long known of the Calders. It's been an uneasy coexistence of sorts, with neither side willing to risk all-out conflict. They steal from us, and we block them. They threaten to unveil us, and we disrupt their operations until they back down. But this...” He shakes his head. “You've brought a war to our doorstep.”

Only one thing keeps me from crumbling into dust. Maggie. I did it for Maggie. Her face gives me the strength to look Kendrick in the eyes.

“I’ll take all the blame, sir, and the consequences.”

Kendrick lets out a long, weary sigh. “That’s meaningless, and we both know it.”

Of course it is.

Kendrick taps his index finger on the desk, a staccato rhythm that scrapes at my nerves. “You’re going to tell me exactly why you made this insane decision, and you’re going to do it right now.” He pauses, then flicks a hand at the uncomfortable chair. “And for the love of God, sit down.”

I do, though it hardly feels better than standing. I open my mouth, but Kendrick holds up a hand. “Straight talking, Sebastian. I don’t need you to sell this to me. Just the facts.”

Shit. He knows me too well. I take a second to reorder my thoughts, stripping nuanced argument down to bare essentials. Where to start? With the only thing that really matters. “My sister killed herself when she was fourteen years old.”

Kendrick’s face softens, though only for a moment. I half expect him to interject and ask me what the hell that has to do with anything, but he’s too smart for that. After a second, I continue. “Ophelia Calder pushed her to it. She and her friends bullied Maggie until she couldn’t take it anymore. Dad wouldn’t do anything to stop it, of course.”

I don’t try to hide the bitterness. “All he cared about was the Calder contract. And after she died, nothing happened. They squashed the investigation. That fucking woman—” I jab a finger down, toward medical. “—never got a single day of suspension. No punishment. Nothing. And when I confronted her, Harrison stepped in.”

Kendrick makes a noise low in his throat. “I’ve heard the Calder heir is every bit as cutthroat as his father.”

I snort. “You could say that. The recovery from that day...” I shake my head. If Kendrick pushes me, I’ll give him every sad little bit of teenage trauma. The weeks in the hospital. Dad pulled me out of school and assigned me private tutors, because God forbid I disrupt his relationship with the precious Calders. Kendrick can have it all and more, but he just nods.

“I think I understand. So, this is about revenge?”

“It’s about justice. They think they’re untouchable.” It sounds ridiculous, but Kendrick doesn’t laugh.

Another uncomfortable silence falls as Kendrick rubs his temples, then, thank every

deity under the sun, reaches for his decanter. I need alcohol like a desert traveler needs a cool oasis. It takes all my restraint not to grab the bottle out of his hand and chug it like a kegger.

The hefty measure he pours me feels like a tentative truce. I close my eyes as I take a long sip. Heaven in liquid form.

“I understand your logic, but this isn’t what the sacred bond of Ward and Patron is supposed to represent. Look at your friends and the wonderful relationships they’ve developed. You only get one chance at this, Sebastian. One. Do you really want to spend it like this? On a woman you despise?”

He makes it sound bleak, but his words do nothing. I’ve thought all this through so many times it’s lost all meaning. None of it matters.

How much should I tell Kendrick? I hesitate for a moment before deciding. All of it. He needs to know the whole thing. “I’ve known about the Brotherhood since I was a teenager. ”

Kendrick’s brow lifts at my sudden change of topic. “Really? How?”

A brief smile passes over my lips at the memory. “My father’s computers were so easy to hack. He might as well have pinned his private documents to the fridge. His files on the Brotherhood made interesting reading.”

Kendrick leans forward, lips a hard line. “What did he have on us?”

“More than you’d want him to. He had lists of some members, the location of the Compound, and information on the practice of taking Wards. It didn’t capture the truth of it, just that women were held here at the Compound and never released. Nothing on the ceremony or that they belong to just one Brother. But enough to give

me an idea.”

“An idea?” The soft, dangerous note is back in Kendrick’s voice, and I try not to let my nerves show as I grip the glass.

“Yes, sir. When you approached me, I’d been planning it for years. I did everything I could to bring myself to your attention and receive an introduction to the Brotherhood. Everything I did led me to this point.”

“And what point is that?”

“The point where I ruin all three of the Calders’ lives. They have eyes in here, however hard you try to stop it. They’ve spied on the Brotherhood for years. And now, Harrison and Randall are going to see exactly what I make Ophelia into. They’re going to watch me turn her into my obedient little pet.”

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Five

Sebastian

Kendrick stares at me for so long I start to fidget. Did I go too far? Should I have held back the truth and tried to paint myself in a better light? I don't think there would have been any point. Nothing about this situation makes me look good.

Finally, he shakes his head. The heavy disappointment in his voice worms its way under my skin. "And you didn't decide to share any of this information? You didn't think I needed to know the full extent of Calder infiltration? We've supported everything you do. The sort of long-standing security breach you're describing could spell disaster for us all."

Lead weights lodge in my chest as I hear the words he isn't saying. He supported me, and he's going to face intense criticism from the other high-ranking Brothers for his decision. I could have provided him with intel to strengthen his position but chose not to.

Shit. I'm an even bigger douchebag than I thought.

"I'll help now. I'll do everything I can to close the gap but..." Kendrick's lips thin as I search for the words. "It's already gone too far, sir. The Calders know everything. The only reason they haven't gone public is because it suits their agenda not to. If that changes..."

"I'm well aware of what would happen if that changes." Kendrick pushes his chair

back, standing with an angry jolt. I freeze in my seat. Should I stand to match him? Stay where I am?

He points at the door. “You may go. I’ll be in touch shortly with my decision.”

I open my mouth, ready to argue my case, but self-preservation kicks in just in time. Nothing that comes out of my stupid mouth will help my cause. What would a sane person do? They’d get right the hell out of here and leave the boss to brood in peace.

Sounds like a plan.

I get to my feet. “Yes, sir.”

Turning my back on Kendrick in his current mood feels risky, but I do it anyway, trudging to the door as his gaze burns into my back. I knew I’d messed things up, but I hadn’t realized quite how badly. Now, it’s bitterly apparent.

The Gilda soldiers usher me into the special elevator, and it spits me out onto the ground floor. As always, Main Admin is full of people, and most of them give me smiles or nods as they pass. They don’t know what I’ve done.

When Ophelia fails to turn up to work, her staff will raise the alarm. It won’t take long for word to get back to her father. He’ll be investigating her disappearance soon, expecting exactly the sort of kidnapping for ransom I play-acted. How long until he discovers the truth? With the resources he has, not long.

All Brothers have families on the outside. Any one of these people could lose someone in revenge.

What to do now? Go back to my room? No. Unbearable. I can already feel the silence pressing in, and I’m not even there yet. The guys, then. Yet another grim

conversation. Might as well get them out of the way all at once.

I pull out my phone but pause. Medical is unbearably close. Like a fish on a line, I'm pulled toward the last place I ought to go. Will Kendrick be even more pissed? Maybe. But my feet are moving, and there's no stopping me now.

The glass doors swish open, and the scent of antiseptic hits me as I enter the small but ultra high-tech hospital. Just last week, I chatted with the Brotherhood's medical director, and he told me they were working on regrowing eyeballs.

Fucking eyeballs. The pictures he showed me on his phone will haunt me forever. Who walks around with pictures like that? As if he lives for the thrill of ruining people's dinner.

A younger doc in a crisp white coat greets me when I enter. Not a Brother, just an assistant, but he steps in my path with confidence. "Sorry, sir. I can't wake your Ward up until I get the go-ahead from Kendrick."

"Of course. I understand." I grace him with my best smile, the one that opens up VIP tables with a single wink. "I'd never expect you to go against the boss. I just want to have a quick look at her."

He hesitates, and I lower my voice. "It can't do any harm. Just a minute, to set my mind at ease that she's okay. I'm a little worried about her."

"She's fine. Her vitals are strong. She's a healthy young woman." He lowers his own voice to match mine. "And she's very pretty, sir, if you don't mind me saying so."

Pretty. It's too soft a word to describe a Calder. Of course Ophelia is attractive. Beautiful, even, but pretty? It doesn't fit.

I've got the doctor right where I want him, though. I give him a knowing look. "She sure is. So, can I see her, just for a minute?"

"Eh, why not." He gives me a big grin. "Right this way. "

Why am I here? I'm not really sure. I just needed to see. To study the woman I've hated for so long up close and personal. I've spent hours watching her from afar, through various camera feeds. I've surveilled her from across the street. But up close? No. Far too dangerous.

The doctor leads me to a small room and opens the door carefully, waving me in. He follows behind me, and we both stare at the woman on the table.

A drip is taped to her arm, and wires attached to sticky pads monitor her vitals. Her suit jacket is gone, and they've rolled the sleeve of her pale pink blouse up to accommodate the drip, but other than that, she's dressed for a day at the office. All her staff wear uniforms, but she never does. Probably sees it as beneath her.

Honey-blond hair, artfully curled, pools around her shoulders. When she's upright, it stretches halfway down her back. She's never dyed it. She used to tease Maggie about her hair, the bright, clashing colors she experimented with.

Now, I decide how she looks. Maybe I'll try out a brassy red bob cut down the track. Or bleached bimbo blond. It's all up to me now. And won't she just hate that?

IF Kendrick decides in my favor. It's a big IF. A giant, apocalyptic IF.

Pretty. I run the word through my mind again as I study her face. Maybe it would describe her, if she wasn't who she is. Her eyes are closed, but the memory of them, gray and full of tears, is branded into my brain. Those eyes are pretty, and her face, from her delicate cheekbones to her parted lips fits the description, is too.

I haven't let myself think beyond my goal. Right up to this moment, I don't think I even thought of Ophelia as a woman. She's the object of my revenge. But looking at her helpless form, other thoughts surface, too.

I have to do what I have to do. But maybe, if I let myself, part of me might enjoy it.

The doctor clears his throat, and I jump. How long have I been staring? It didn't feel long, but I've been known to gaze at a wine rack for half an hour, zoned out by indecision. I could have been staring for ages, for all I know.

I give the doc what I hope is a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Sorry. Got distracted for a minute there. Thanks for bringing me in. I'll head on now, until the boss gives the go-ahead."

"As soon as he does, I'll have her brought to your room. Better for her to wake up there."

Is it? Is it better? Suddenly, the thought of real, live Ophelia in my apartment is daunting. She'll be there, hating me, the whole time. How am I going to keep things together? I'll probably forget to close the door or something ridiculous.

"Of course. I'm looking forward to it. Thanks for your help." My jaw aches with the effort of forcing another smile, but the doctor can't see how phony it is. His answering smile is warm.

"No problem."

Oh, there are lots of problems. They just all belong to me.

Half an hour later, I'm seated in Gabriel's living room, surrounded by a jury of my peers. As I finish my sorry tale, Eve's monstrous black cat, Belladonna, plonks her giant self on my lap. Thank Christ I'm still wearing my "rough kidnapper" costume instead of something designer. I start to pet the thing against my better judgment, and she lets out a giant, rumbling purr.

It's soothing. Maybe this is why people have the stupid creatures.

Gabriel's new place is bright and cozy, thanks to Eve. She's filled it with squashy sofas and bean bags, and every wall is covered in funky art, draped with fairy lights. A bit too first-year dorm room for my taste, but still better than Gabriel managed.

The guys both sit on a gray suede sofa, staring at me with identical alarmed expressions, while the girls sit together on a giant bean bag, legs curled under them and faces wary.

Jacob shakes his head. "You're a fucking idiot, mate."

"I know."

Gabriel taps his fingers on his knee, a nervous habit he's never managed to shake, and there's a hard crease in his forehead. "So, this could fuck everything up. We could be in danger. Eve could."

"Gabriel, don't—" Eve interrupts, but Gabriel holds up a hand.

"No. He needs to hear this. If anything happens to you, I'll—"

"I know. I'm sorry." It's not good enough, but what would be? Absolutely nothing.

"I'll speak to Candice. She'll help. She can delete all their files so they don't know

where anyone lives.”

Quinn’s confidence in her virtual friend is touching but misguided. “Their cybersecurity is first-rate now. They upgraded after they got hacked last year. Everything on separate servers, away from the main web. She won’t be able to get in.”

Quinn flicks her hair behind her ear. Green now. What would Ophelia look like with green hair? Awful. She’d look awful .

“She might surprise you. She got into a big tech firm just last week because someone’s kid brought in an iPad.”

“We can try. Though I bet Randall Calder has paper copies of everything important.”

Quinn’s face falls. “Oh. Not much she can do about that.”

Jacob gets to his feet. “I’ll go and see Kendrick. There are a few strategies we can use to hit them first, before they get a chance to come at us.”

Quinn jumps up, setting a hand on Jacob’s arm. “Woah. Settle down, He-Man. He’ll need to cool down first. Don’t bother him yet.”

Jacob grunts but thumps back down onto his seat, fists clenched. “It won’t take them long to figure out Seb nabbed her. Once they do, it’s game on. We lose the advantage of surprise.”

“And Kendrick knows that just as well as you do.”

Jacob huffs out a long breath as my phone rings. I jump out of my seat, snatch it from my pocket, and answer without looking at the caller. “Hello?”

“Sebastian.” Kendrick’s voice, stern and clipped. “I’ve reviewed my options and decided to honor the ancient law of the Brotherhood. We’ll deliver your Ward to your room. I hope you’re prepared for the consequences.”

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Six

Ophelia

Consciousness is a slow drip, creeping back in drop by drop. Everything feels so heavy. I must have taken one of the good sleeping pills last night. My alarm hasn't gone off yet. Maybe I'll just lie here a while longer.

I do, half in and out of sleep, until something starts to nag at me. What is it? A tick. A clock with a loud, irritating tick. Not mine. What the hell?

I still can't open my eyes. They're heavy, the lids pinned down with iron weights, just like the ones pressing on my limbs. That tick, though...

Consciousness slips away again.

The tick, and something else. This time, some of the fog has cleared, but it still lingers. What else? The blanket. Mine is furry; this is smooth. What...

Memories. The gun, the car, the man with the fake batman growl. Maggie's brother.

Sebastian. That's his name. It comes to me in a rush, along with a flood of images of him at high school. But they fade away, overlaid by one. His face, watching as the drug pulled me under. He's a man now. He's a man, and he's taken me captive .

The fog is swirling away, and I almost miss it. Cold, spiky reality tears away the last of the comforting sleepiness, and I force my sticky eyes open.

“You’re finally up.”

I yelp and try to sit up, but Sebastian’s hands land on my shoulders, pressing me to the bed. I’m in a dimly lit room, and the light casts his face into sharp angles. His eyes are the deep blue of the ocean at dusk, and my gaze is drawn there like a magnet as his weight presses me into the mattress.

“Careful. Don’t move too quickly. It might make you sick. I don’t want to deal with you throwing up all over my bed.”

His bed.

His bed.

Just why in the hell am I in his bedroom? A cell would have made sense. But his bedroom?

I try to speak, but it turns into a cough. Why is my mouth so dry? How long have I been out? Sebastian slides his arm behind my back and lifts me upright. Then he holds a glass to my lips. Water. I sip at it, more of my father’s words echoing at the back of my fuzzy brain.

If you’re held for ransom, eat and drink when you get the chance because you’re at their mercy. Take what you can get while it’s offered.

Too soon, I’ve drained the glass. Sebastian pulls his arm away, and I shift back, pressed against the headboard. The lingering drugs in my system are making me slow but keep me calm. The knot of churning terror in my gut is muted, buried under a sluggish haze. I scan the room.

Floor-to-ceiling windows cover one wall, but black-out blinds mean they’re no use to

me. The light comes from a few artfully placed downlights and a statement piece lamp twisted into the abstract shape of a woman. Each item my gaze lands on—subtle artwork, a single chair with a twisted back—seems chosen with a purpose.

It's an overwhelming impression of luxury, and my eyes flutter closed again, my thoughts blurring, turning fuzzier by the second. I need to stay awake. I need to find out what in the hell is going on. I need to...

I'm lying down again. When did that happen? I push straight up, and this time, there's no Sebastian here to stop me. I pull the blanket down and look at myself. I'm still wearing my work blouse and skirt, though my shoes and jacket are gone. I feel my body all over, from my head down to my toes. Nothing hurts, except a lingering pulse at the back of my head.

Moving like an old lady, I shift my legs off the bed and get to my feet. There's a moment of dizziness, then my head clears again, thank God. The last thing I need is to collapse.

What did Sebastian say when I woke up before? His bedroom. I'm in his bedroom. My stomach lurches, and I'm not sure if it's the drugs or the solid lump that just dropped into my guts.

Sebastian hates me, and he has every right to. I never even apologized for what I did. He wouldn't want me like...that...would he? If anything, he should want me dead. But however much I repeat it to myself as I walk to the blind-covered windows, I'm not really that naive.

I've heard the stories.

My father had a business rival, and he ordered my brother and his friends to teach her a lesson. One night, when I wasn't supposed to be home, I lay awake and listened to Harrison and his drunk friends gloat over exactly what lessons they taught her. Sebastian might not want me at all, but that wouldn't stop him teaching me a lesson just the same.

Shit.

Reality rolls in, and the calm I've been clinging to with my fingernails shatters. Nausea hits full force, and just in time, I see an open door leading to a bathroom. I race in, drop to my knees, and throw up all the water I drank into the toilet before the heaves dissolve into sobs.

Why am I here? What does he want with me?

It plays on an unbearable loop, in time with my pulsing headache. I sob until my throat is raw and my eyes are puffy from crying. Only Dad's voice pulls me back from the brink.

Pull yourself the fuck together, Ophelia. You're a Calder. Act like it.

Act like it.

Yes.

I wipe away the tears with some tissue paper and stand to survey the damage. The bathroom is as elegant as the rest of the apartment—gray marble with subtle silver accents. The one thing making the place look ugly is me.

The person staring back from the mirror isn't a Calder. She's barely even a human. Streaked mascara, red eyes, hair in a sweaty tangle. My mouth tastes horrible. No.

This won't do. I can't face what's coming looking like this. I need to fix it.

Does the bathroom have a lock? No. It was far too much to hope for. I open the cupboards and find a huge array of grooming products. As many as I have in my cabinet at home, if not more. I find the ones I need and do battle with the monster staring back at me.

Cleanser first. I remove all traces of the ruined makeup and follow up with toner and moisturizer to control the redness. There's no makeup to replace it with—he's not THAT much of a pretty boy—but it'll do.

As I work, calm creeps back inch by inch. I'm not some random girl dragged off the street. My family are dangerous, connected, and better resourced than any outsiders know. Sebastian mustn't understand the extent of my family's power. If he did, he would have left me alone. I need to convince him I'm too valuable to hurt.

Or to teach a lesson.

Another nauseous twist hits me at that, but this time, I control it. That girl, the pathetic one crying over a toilet, is weak. I'm strong. I need to keep every shred of dignity.

Next, my teeth. Digging in the cupboard, I find an unused toothbrush still in the box. Did he buy it for me, or does he have regular visitors? It doesn't matter. I scrub and scrub, cleaning every trace of nastiness from my mouth, and my confidence climbs a little higher. I can do this. He's going to regret whatever plans he's got for me.

Now, hair. An array of combs, ranging from thick to thin-toothed, do the job. Why does he need so many? His hair isn't even long.

The more I tidy myself up, the more my body relaxes. My tight muscles loosen, and

my breath returns to a normal level. Every time I argued with my dad for some freedom or other, I started by perfecting my appearance. This is just a battle with a different adversary. And, by the look of his toiletries, one just as obsessed with appearance.

After half an hour, I can finally look at myself in the mirror without flinching. I'm ready to tell Sebastian Grange exactly how big a mistake he's made by taking me and exactly what he's going to do to fix it. He's smart. He'll see sense.

But where on earth is he ?

I try the only other door in the bedroom, and it's locked. I expected it. This might be his bedroom, but it's my prison cell. I wind up the blinds and am greeted with a mass of forest. It's getting dark. Going by the color of the sky, it must be around seven. I've been drugged for hours.

From the brief snapshot I got between getting dumped out of the car and having a needle jabbed in my neck, I'd expected woodland, but this is something else. It stretches out for miles, as far as I can see. Where the hell has he brought me? Given the height of this window, I must be in an apartment block. Another building, a tall, gray block studded with windows and balconies, is just visible to the right.

This isn't some hunting lodge. Gears start to turn in my brain as the shock of what's happened recedes enough for me to think. Maybe this isn't personal after all? Everything from when I left the car is blurry—I was too busy trying to yell for help to listen. Stupid of me.

There was some sort of argument about me. Am I just a piece in a deal? Is he mixed up with a cartel and decided to join business with his own goals, settling an old score? I don't remember Sebastian as the bad boy type, but people change a lot in ten years. For all I know, he could be into some serious shit.

God, I hope so. If it's business, I have a good chance. I can convince someone higher up to see sense. If it's personal...

No. Don't think about that.

A search of his bedroom reveals nothing beyond thousands of dollars' worth of designer clothing. He knows how to dress. Nothing stands out as strange, except a single drawer stuffed with trashy women's outfits. Microskirts and ridiculous push-up bras. He must have a girlfriend—one with terrible taste .

It's comforting, though. He has a girlfriend. How bad can his intentions toward me be?

The more time ticks by, the more my gnawing fear melts, little by little, into irritation. Who kidnaps a woman and then keeps her waiting? What does he have to do that's so much more important?

It's bad manners. An insane thought, but it's true. Why did he bring me here just to ignore me? I'm starving, and drinking water out of the faucet is getting old. The sky has darkened to total black, and my eyelids start to droop. Whatever drugs they gave me must not be out of my system yet.

The bed looks more inviting every second, but I don't want to give in to the temptation. I'm dressed up, ready for battle. If I fall asleep, I'm vulnerable again. He can surprise me in my sleep, when I'm weak and confused.

No.

That's probably his plan. I'm not going to make things easy on him. I'm hungry, tired, and at the end of my goddamn tether.

I only hesitate for a second. Then I march to the bedroom door and hammer on it, wrapping myself in all my courage to yell, “Hey! Hey, Sebastian! Get in here. You’ve made a big mistake, but we can fix it. Open the goddamn door!”

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Seven

Sebastian

“Should I do it now?”

Ophelia’s image moves in crystal clear high definition as she thumps on my door. I’ve hardly moved from this spot for the last few hours, captivated by the figure on the screen. When she crumbled, I had a moment where I almost felt bad for her. But then I remembered my sister sobbing over a toilet in much the same way, and the guilt evaporated, turned to vapor by the burning memory.

Jacob didn’t even try to be polite when he insisted on working out a plan to tame Ophelia. “You’ll fuck this up, and she’ll eat you alive. I’m helping.”

Together, we came up with something much nastier than I’d have managed on my own.

She hammers on the door again, yelling so loud it echoes through my apartment. Jacob, seated on my swivel chair at my desk like a security officer while I pace the room, shakes his head. “Nope. Don’t let her think you run on her schedule. You’ll communicate with her when you’re good and fucking ready. Another couple of hours at least. ”

Jesus. I’m already about to claw my own skin off to let the nervous energy out. Two more hours will be worse for me than for Ophelia.

Two hours later, Ophelia has given up shouting and sits on the bed, shoulders slumped. She investigated my room more thoroughly, pulling out all my clothes and throwing them on the floor. Jacob snorted when I winced. “Count yourself lucky. Quinn would probably have pissed on them by now out of spite.”

Yuck.

It didn’t take long, though, before she gave up and sat on the bed, staring at her hands. She’s been there for over an hour.

“Do it now.” I jump when Jacob speaks. He’s so good at sitting statue-still; he blends into the furniture. “She looks like she’s about to pass out. You want the idea in her head before she does.”

Right. The first small step toward turning her into what I need her to be.

I open the folded piece of paper one last time.

Ophelia,

If you want to leave the bedroom, you have a task to perform. The second drawer down in the closet contains your new clothing. Choose any outfit from the selection—underwear too—and I’ll open the bedroom door. We’ll have dinner together. You have one hour.

If you refuse, you’ll get another chance tomorrow at breakfast.

Sebastian

The note feels heavier than it has any right to. I walk to the bedroom door, pause outside, stare at the smooth wood, and imagine Ophelia inside. She has to be starving

by now and bored as all hell. I picture her staring morosely at her knees and slide the note under the door. I give a short, loud knock and race back to my desk and its monitors.

“That made her jump.” Jacob glances at me then back to the monitor. She’s on her feet, staring at the piece of paper but making no move toward it. Does she think it’s poisoned? Or going to explode?

Minutes drag on as she watches the paper, then inches closer. She’s so patient. I’d have grabbed it the moment it came under the door, just to relieve the tedium. Finally, she picks it up. I lick my lips, surprised to find my mouth dry. Why am I so anxious? She’ll do as she’s told sooner or later. No rush.

She frowns as she reads it, then carries it back to her spot on the bed and sits. I let out a long breath. It’s anticlimactic, though I’m not sure what I’d been expecting. My apartment is too quiet, all of a sudden. I have to break the silence.

“What’s the bet?” I whisper, though there’s zero chance she’ll hear.

Jacob turns away from the screen, pure incredulity etched into his face. “You want to bet? On this?”

Is it inappropriate? Yes. But talking helps the tightly coiled tension in my muscles as I stare at the woman on the screen. The woman I own. The woman I’m in charge of. The gravity of the situation is choking the life out of me.

“Yes. I think she’ll do it.”

“You’re a disgrace.” Jacob shakes his head, and I regret ever saying it in the first place, but then he adds, “You’re so wrong, mate. How can you not read her well enough to know she’s tougher than that?”

Not inappropriate, then. He just thinks I'm wrong. Par for the course.

Jacob returns his attention to the screen, studying Ophelia. "She'll hold out until tomorrow, but I'll take your bet. Once this is settled, you have to let Quinn pick an outfit for you and wear it for a whole day."

Oh, hell no. No way I'm wearing what Quinn picks out, but it doesn't matter. Jacob's wrong. I know Ophelia better than he thinks. "She'll do it. You watch. You'll have to come with me on a night out to the country club and not complain once."

Jacob snorts. "Deal."

Ophelia crumbles the note into a ball, throws it across the room, pulls the covers back, and climbs into bed.

Shit.

I sleep in the guest room, though "sleep" is putting it strongly. All night, I alternate between watching Ophelia on the night vision cameras, pacing the apartment, and staring at the ceiling, wondering just what the hell I've got myself into. When the sun starts its slow creep up the wall, I can't wait any longer. Jacob said to wait until seven, but screw that.

I'm doing it now.

Ophelia's night went better than mine. She passed out around ten and didn't stir until just after four. She must be absolutely ravenous by now, so I order a breakfast buffet from the kitchen, check all the knives and scissors are locked away, and push through the second note.

Ophelia,

Get dressed in your new clothes, and you may join me for breakfast.

Sebastian

A dark shiver runs through me at the words. Power. It's a dark lake, and I'm sinking into it. Power over someone who deserves every bit of this. All of it and more.

In late-night, alcohol-fueled conversations, both Jacob and Gabriel confessed to fantasizing about the very situation we have found ourselves in, but I never did. Kinky role play? Sure. But having another person under my control twenty-four hours a day? Far too much work.

Watching Ophelia pick up my note, though, I can't deny the thrill. What will she do? I lean closer, not wanting to miss a single expression on her face. Her pretty face. It's true, she is, and I'm seeing it more every moment.

She wraps the note in her hand, crushing it, then closes her eyes. What is she thinking? Is she wondering how far I'll go? Whether I'll really let her starve? The answer, of course, is no, but Jacob assures me she'll crack long before we reach that point.

She uncrumples the note and reads it again. No throwing it straight in the trash this time. She stares at it, then throws it to the floor and stomps to the closet.

She yanks open the drawer, digs her hands in, and dumps the contents on the floor.

God, I had fun picking these clothes. Nothing in the whole pile cost more than forty dollars. I chose cheap, stretchy fabric and brassy, clashing colors, and made sure everything is as short, tight, and low-cut as possible.

She picks through the pile, examining each item, then throwing it down again. To most people, this would seem petty and ridiculous. Someone like Quinn wouldn't have given half a shit. But Ophelia? I recognize her type. She's like Kendrick. Like me. She works hard to present the face she wants to the world, and this is going to rip it to shreds .

Petty for some people, but agony for her.

Good.

The available underwear is just as tacky and cheap as the rest of the clothes—push-up bras that will have her almost spilling out of the tops. She picks up a lacy red one and holds it up, frowning. She rubs the material between her fingers. Is she imagining how she'll look in it?

Minutes pass as she studies every single piece of clothing. Then, finally, she bundles up some items and heads to the bathroom. Does she actually think I won't have cameras in there? Silly girl. Privacy is a thing of the past for Ophelia, and I'll make sure she knows it.

In the bright bathroom lights, sequins glimmer on the outfit she's picked out. It's probably the least offensive option, but I still smile. A miniskirt, black flecked with silver, designed to sit low on the hips. And a bright red top with spaghetti straps and gaudy sequins across the bust. The bottom will stop just under Ophelia's tits, and hideous tassels hang from the bottom.

She'll look like a stripper in a cowboy-themed strip joint. I should get her a matching hat.

She starts to undo her silky blouse, and my amusement fades. Gabriel watched Eve for months on camera before he collected her. Did it make him feel like a creep? I do,

but it doesn't stop me from leaning closer as she peels off the blouse and folds it neatly before setting it on the vanity.

God, her body is perfection. Of course it is. She wouldn't allow it to be anything less. Her height gives grace to her curves, a willowy elegance, but her breasts are fuller than I expected. She hides them under sensible clothing, but now they're all I can see.

It's been a while. Months of flirting with beautiful women but never taking it further has me on a hair trigger, ready to explode. I love women. I wouldn't call myself a playboy, exactly, but the thrill of the chase, and the fun that comes after, is my favorite pastime.

I don't have the patience for all the tedious gym work my friends use to work out their frustrations, so I mostly just watched porn and complained. Now, the real thing is right in front of me, and she's reaching behind her to undo her bra.

Jesus. It's like being fourteen all over again.

Her breasts spill free, and oh, I wish I was in there with her. They're natural, no implants, full and heavy.

You hate her.

Yes, I know, but just look.

You own her.

Oh, God. I do.

I could walk in there right now. Force her to remove the rest of her clothes. Tie her to the bed. Do whatever I want. And no one, not a single person in the Compound,

would hold it against me. There it is again, that black lake. The lure of unshackled power. The temptation to dive in is almost too strong.

She picks up the cheap bra she selected from the drawer and shrugs into it in a rush. She must suspect I'm watching. How does that make her feel? My blood races faster as she squeezes into it. It's the right size but designed to shove her tits upward, and that's exactly what it does.

The top doesn't help her at all. The neckline skims the top of the bra, leaving oceans of exposed cleavage. She tugs at it, shifting it this way and that, but nothing helps. My lip curls up as I watch her struggle, the rush of lust mingling with something darker. This is all part of her punishment. The more uncomfortable she is, the better .

Finally, she gives up. Her hands fall to her sides, and she stares at herself in the mirror, biting her lip. All dressed up for me. How she must hate it.

The skirt next. She unzips the sensible suit skirt, folds, it and places it on top of the blouse. Her round ass juts out as she rips off the pale blue panties she was wearing and drags on the barely-there black thong. The flimsy black line circles her hips, and I'm almost sad when she steps into the miniskirt, yanking it over her hips.

She shifts it down as far as she can without exposing the line of the panties and turns to survey herself in the mirror again. She tilts her head to the side as she studies her own reflection and closes her eyes. Then she opens them again, as if what she's looking at will have magically changed.

Christ, she's like a different person. She looks at least five years younger, her actual age, stripped of the overly sensible power suit. Her hair falls around her shoulders, and she pulls it in front, as if it will help hide the cleavage. All it does is enhance the cheap sexiness of the outfit, and she must see the same thing I do, because she pushes it back behind her shoulders again.

She gives herself a long, hard look in the mirror and strides from the room. My skin flushes hot as I realize what comes next. She did as she was told, like the obedient little pet I'm going to turn her into.

I take a minute to straighten my own outfit—refined and elegant, of course, to provide the best contrast possible.

Time to greet my guest.

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Eight

Ophelia

It's just clothes. A silly, juvenile trick to set me off my game and make me feel weak. I'm a Calder, and it doesn't matter if I'm dressed in a suit, naked, or wearing a goddamn clown costume. Nothing can change that fact. Even as a captive, I have power.

I repeat the words as I stare at myself in the mirror, but it's hard to believe them. I've been here less than a day, and he's already made me dress myself like a stripper. My stomach growls, reminding me why I went along with his demands. It's been a full day since I ate anything, and that was just a slice of toast.

I've never been this hungry before. My hollow stomach aches, and my legs wobble as I walk to the door. Logically, I know I'm nowhere close to starving—humans can go days without food and be fine—but logic isn't helping right now, and the hours by myself with nothing to distract me from thinking about food have worn me down.

If I refused to play his stupid game, he'd have made me wait for lunch. Then dinner. On and on, until I finally cracked. I should have just done this last night, when I felt stronger. Refusing gained me nothing, and now my emotions are boiling close to the surface. I want to scream, or burst into tears, or both. Neither will work.

My hands twitch toward the skirt as I reach the bedroom door, but I force them down to my sides. It won't help. I'm sure he's waiting right outside, ready to gloat at his little win.

What is his endgame here? What does he want? I need to work it out, but anxiety is a swarm of buzzing bees, drowning out my thoughts. He dressed me like a cheap hooker. Is that a sign of how he plans to treat me? When he opens this door, just what in the hell is he going to do to me?

My hands shake—whether from hunger or fear, I’m not sure—and I ball them into fists. Breathe. You can do this.

I still jump when the door opens. I try to stand straight and tall, but instinct takes over, and I stumble back a step as adrenaline scorches my bloodstream. The clothes felt ridiculous a moment ago, but now, faced with Sebastian in the flesh, all I can think about is how exposed I am. How I’m dressed up as he demanded, for his amusement.

I finally force my eyes to focus on the man in the doorway. He’s tall, and not in the gangly, high-school way my lingering memory tells me he should be. He’s filled out in the last ten years, still lean but strong, broad shoulders complimented by his perfectly tailored suit.

He’s immaculate, and everything, from the pale gray suit fabric to the eggshell shirt to the cufflinks with a hint of blue to match his eyes, tells a story of time and care taken to select it.

I’m used to powerful men having a rough edge. My father and brother both aim for elegance, but there’s savagery there, too. Sebastian is almost too handsome to be scary, but when he smiles, a shiver runs through me. There’s something predatory about it. A darkness hiding behind his perfect face .

And worse, he’s enjoying this.

His gaze tracks up and down my exposed skin, and I fight the urge to wrap my arms

around myself like a stupid teenager. No. That's the reaction he wants, and he's not getting anything he wants from me. Not a single damn thing. I've already given him way too much by dressing myself like this.

“What do you think of the outfit?”

His voice, free of the affected gravelly rasp, is deeper than I expect. There's melody to it, and the cultured tone perfectly matches his appearance. Everything about him is so tailored, and none of it gels one iota with the boy I remember. It's like this man erased that person from the world and took his place.

But here it is, the battle I've been craving. I straighten my spine and look him right in the eye. “Let's move past this silliness, shall we? I'm not sure what point you were hoping to make, but I'm a busy person, and I'm sure you are too. Why have you brought me here? What do you want from my family?”

I imagine myself dressed in my suit and heels, speaking with an antagonistic business associate.

Think win-win.

How can we both leave the table feeling like we've had a victory? Sebastian tilts his head to the side, and his brow creases. “From your family? Absolutely nothing. I don't think your father would suit that outfit half as well as you do.”

The throwaway comment should be ridiculous, but the predatory gleam in his eye means it isn't. Not even a little bit. Sebastian leans against the doorway, relaxed and casual. “Spin around.”

The order is so far removed from the conversation I'd expected that I trip over it. “What?”

“Spin around. I want to see how your ass looks in that skirt. It looked great on camera, but there’s nothing like the real thing. ”

On camera. Does he mean in the bathroom? Jesus. My skin heats, blood rushing to my face. I’d wondered but hadn’t really thought he’d watch me. Or I just hadn’t wanted to.

Control is slipping away, if I ever really had any in the first place. “No. I—”

“Okay. Just stay still, then.”

He saunters forward, and my body locks up. My instincts scream at me to run, but the part of me still clinging to the hope I can negotiate my way out of this holds me in place. If I run, I’m prey.

If I run, he’ll catch me. And I can only think of one thing that would happen next.

I stand like a statue, frozen in place as he makes a slow circuit of me, eyes roaming my body. I swivel my head to keep him in sight but don’t move to obstruct his view. Any movement at all feels like it would snap the invisible force keeping him at arm's length.

He comes to rest in front of me, a satisfied smile on his lips. “Good girl. And I definitely underestimated how curvy you are. You hide it well under those sensible clothes, don’t you? That’s the kind of ass that’s just begging for a smack.”

All I can do is stare. Guys don’t talk to me like this. No one dares. With a father and brother as terrifying as mine, the few men who actually make it past them to the dating stage are polite and respectful and keep their hands to themselves.

Why isn’t Sebastian scared? Why does he think he can treat me like this with no

consequences?

The thought bolsters me, even as my skin burns from his scrutiny. He's talking to me like this because I'm letting him. I need to put him in his place.

"If you stop this nonsense right now, there's a chance I'll be able to stop my father from killing you. If he doesn't already know I'm here, he will soon. What do you think is going to happen when he arrives? Let's be real. Stop these games. Tell me what's really going on." I pause, then another thought springs to mind. "And just where the hell are we?"

His smile widens at that, and it ratchets my nerves up an extra click. It feels like I've stepped into a trap, and the impression solidifies when he says, "I thought you'd never ask. Come."

He turns his back on me and strides out of the room. I stare after him, torn. Following him feels like obeying his dismissive order. But I also really, really want to leave the bedroom. Trying to have a conversation with a bed right there isn't helping at all.

I hesitate a moment longer, then follow him out of the room.

I walk out into a living room that's as classy and expensive as the bedroom. Stylish furniture, subtle lighting. I recognize the hand of a professional designer who knew what he was doing. But all that pales when I lay eyes on the dining table.

Food. It's covered in food. My nose catches up with my eyes, and the smell of fresh baked bread sets my empty stomach roaring. Bread, butter, jam, croissants, pastries, muffins, cereal. A steaming pot of hot coffee. My eyes latch on to it, my feet stop moving, and my damn stomach lets out a loud, undignified growl.

Sebastian stops and turns to look at me with a smirk. "Hungry? We'll get to that in a

moment. I want to show you something first.” He turns away again, heading for the huge, floor-to-ceiling picture window that covers almost all the wall. Through the glass, the forest stretches out. In any other situation, it would be beautiful. Now, it just chills my blood.

He stares out of the window, his back to me. I glance between him and the food. My stomach twists again, and I make my decision. Screw him. I head to the table and reach for a muffin.

“Don’t. ”

The word is the crack of a whip. My head snaps up to find Sebastian’s gaze locked on me. My hand freezes of its own accord. His face is deadly serious. No knowing smirk.

He takes a single step toward me. Then another. I can’t stop staring at his eyes. Were they that shade a moment ago? In this light, they’re a Mediterranean sky, vivid and trained on my hand like lasers.

“You don’t touch that without my permission.”

His permission? Alarm bells scream at the serious look on his face, but that word mutes them to a dull roar. He wants me to ask his permission to eat? No. Just no. I’m starving, and I’m having a goddamn muffin. I stretch out my hand.

He moves but doesn’t race toward me. His steps are measured, and his eyes don’t leave mine as I grab the muffin. I clutch it as he reaches me, close enough I can smell his light, spicy cologne.

Run.

My instincts scream it, and my body vibrates with the need to move, but I fight it. I fight it with everything I have, because if I run, this is real. If I run, then he's not a foolish man messing with the wrong woman. If I run, he's my captor and I'm his prisoner.

Run.

No. This is all bravado on his part. He won't touch me. He won't dare. He won't—

“Drop it.”

Danger. Danger. Danger.

You're a Calder. Act like it.

I draw myself up as high as I can and will my trembling hand to move. The damn muffin weighs a thousand pounds, but I force it to my lips.

“Last chance.”

My stomach contracts, and if I had any food in me, I'd probably throw it up, but I open my mouth to take a bite.

Sebastian's hand flies out, knocking the muffin from my grasp. Before I can react, he surges forward, and my feet leave the floor as he grips me around the waist and lifts me up, pressed against his hard chest. Shock paralyzes me for a second, and then I scream, flailing and kicking. It does no good.

There's a scraping noise, then he thumps me down onto a chair. His weight bears down on me, holding me in place. His rough breaths are loud in my ear as he grabs my wrist and drags my hand down to my side. What...

Something hard clicks around my wrist. I stop fighting long enough to stare. Handcuffs. He's locked my wrist into a cuff attached to the back of the chair.

No.

When the panic hits, it hits with all the pent-up force of the last twenty-four hours. The locked bedroom door, the outfit, the dirty remarks. I could just about believe they were part of a game, some ploy to soften me up before he made his demands. But this? No. Something about that metal cuff around my wrist lets loose the terror I should have been feeling all along.

I throw my other hand up, though I'm not sure what I'm trying to achieve. Punch him? Fend him off? It doesn't matter, because he catches it easily, then locks it into the matching cuff on the other side. I yank at them so hard the metal digs into my skin, but it's no use.

"Help!" My shrill voice hurts my ears, and the force of the scream rips my throat, but I don't care. "Help! Someone help! Please!"

I lash out with my legs, and one of them connects with Sebastian's shin. He steps back with a grunt, then drops to the side, grabbing my flailing ankle. I know what's coming, but I still scream when he clips a cuff around the ankle, too. In another moment, both my feet are secured.

I'm trapped.

"Help! He—"

His hand clamps over my mouth. I mumble into it, but he just waits patiently until I fall silent. He shifts his body so he's kneeling in front of me, hand still pressed to my lips. One look at his face has my body shaking as he examines me.

There's something wild about him. His perfect hair is tousled, and his jacket sits askew, but he doesn't seem to have noticed. His wide, dark pupils push the vivid blue to a thin ring. And his lips—God, they're parted in a way that makes me think he's going to bite.

The air between us charges as his gaze slips lower where, I realize, my top has been yanked down in the struggle. My breasts jut out, shoved up by the stupid bra, and he draws in a long breath as he runs a finger along the top.

It's a quick touch, just a single moment of contact, but it burns. It burns because he did it. He touched me.

With a warning look, he pulls his hand away from my mouth. I lick my lips out of reflex, and there's a lingering taste of salt. I can yell again but don't. He hasn't explained one single thing, but his actions have said more than words could.

This isn't a business deal. He's not softening me up for negotiations. I'm his captive, this is all real, and I need to be very, very careful.

His throat works, and his chest rises with an unsteady breath. He looks at the hand he used to touch my breast, then back to my face. Slowly, he tugs his jacket straight and smooths his hair back into place.

Then he smiles. "Now that little tantrum is out of the way, let's try and have a civilized conversation."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:53 pm

Nine

Sebastian

My body shakes with the effort of holding myself together, and I drop my hands to make sure Ophelia doesn't see. My heart is a battering ram, trying to escape my ribs. So much energy courses through my veins right now that I can't begin to quantify it, so I just concentrate on the controlled facade I need to present.

Looking at Ophelia doesn't do anything to help calm the raging...something that just ripped away all my senses. Her legs are spread wide, and thanks to the tiny skirt, I can see almost everything. I trace my gaze along the curve of her thigh, and it takes all I have not to run my finger up that smooth, tempting skin.

And I can. If I want to, I can. She's trapped and mine to play with. And all at once, I do want to. More than anything else. How soft would her skin be? What noise would she make?

It's been a while since I've spoken. I drag my gaze back to her face, and the wide-eyed terror there edges me back toward reality. She's looking at me as if I'm a serial killer with a mask and knife. I need to capitalize on this.

Get it together, for God's sake .

Fear. She's afraid of me, and that's good. She needs to be. It was Jacob who suggested cuffing her to the chair and denying her food until she gave in on the clothes. I can't believe how well his tricks seem to be working, but I shouldn't be

surprised. I'm pretty sure he knows how to do actual torture, so mind games like these would be child's play for him.

I get up from the floor and take the seat next to her, leaning on the arm as if we're having a pleasant chat in a restaurant. She watches in silence as I select one of the huge, buttery croissants and take a bite. I've eaten at plenty of Michelin-starred restaurants, and the food here at the Compound stacks up well against them all. I give thanks every day for my speedy metabolism.

I tear off a chunk of the soft pastry and hold it up to her lips. She frowns, lips pressed tightly together as if I'm trying to feed her toxic waste. I run the tip of my finger over her lower lip, and she jerks her head back, shaking it from side to side.

Maybe fear has made her forget her hunger for the moment, but she definitely needs to eat. I tap her cheek. "Let's play a game. For every bite of food you eat, you may ask one question. You must be dying to know where you are."

And I'm dying to tell her. Both Gabriel and Jacob told me delivering the bad news to their Wards was horrible. I'm pretty sure Gabriel is still traumatized by it. But I've been looking forward to this for a long, long time. The moment I tell Ophelia I've locked her into a cage and she's never getting out.

Her gaze skitters around the room, landing on everything except me. Maybe looking for something to latch her hopes on to. Bad luck, pet. There's only me.

She doesn't respond, and I shrug. "Never mind, then. You can go back to your room for a few more hours."

"No. I need to know. "

She snaps the words, and I raise a brow. I keep my voice calm, though my blood

surges again. “Well, then. You know what to do.”

She swallows, then opens her lips. I don’t push the food in. Following a dark instinct I didn’t know I had, I hold it away from her face, forcing her to stretch out her neck to take it. A light blush colors her cheeks, and watching her do something so demeaning has my breath coming faster. The excitement trickles lower, and my cock stiffens as her soft lips brush my skin.

Christ. This wasn’t supposed to be part of the deal.

She snags the food and yanks her head back, gray eyes hard as she chews and swallows. She doesn’t rush into her question but still asks the most obvious one.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in my apartment.”

She stares, waiting for more, but I just tear off another bite of the croissant and hold it up.

She shakes her head. “That’s not—”

“Fair? This is my game. I decide what the rules are.”

She locks eyes with me, and the struggle is beautiful to watch. She’s desperate to tell me to go to hell but can’t. After a long moment, she stretches her graceful neck out again and takes the food.

Fuck. I could play this game for a long time.

This time, she frames her question with a lawyer’s care. “Where is your apartment,

specifically, in the world?”

“In the middle of the Feinhart Forest.” Accurate, but not informative. I hold up another bite, and this time, she takes it without fuss.

“Why have you taken me captive?”

“You’re to be my Ward.” I watch her closely for a flash of recognition but don’t see anything. Maybe dear old Dad never told her about the Brotherhood and our weird, arcane practices. She takes another bite.

“What is a Ward?”

Oh, good. The fun part. I keep my tone light and conversational, as though I’m not slamming a wrecking ball into her life. “My captive sex slave. For the rest of your life.”

It doesn’t register at first. I can see by the way her brow creases as she runs the words through her mind. Then the dawning horror I’ve been waiting for hits. She presses herself into the chair, and a clank echoes around the room as she jerks on the handcuffs.

“What?”

Can I keep my hand steady? I have to. I hold up another bite. “Was that a question?”

“You can’t...” She tugs on the cuffs again. The metal must be cutting into her skin. Her chest heaves, the gasping breaths obvious in the tight top. Then her fingers curl into fists, and her defenses snap into place, one by one. It’s fascinating to watch. Her breathing slows, her hands relax, and she looks me in the eye again.

“My father will find me. He’ll make you wish you were dead.”

I move my hand, bringing her attention back to the food. “Take another bite, and I’ll show you exactly why that isn’t going to happen.”

This time, she darts her head forward like a snapping turtle. I have to work not to jerk my hand away from her teeth. I grip the back of Ophelia's chair and yank it, spinning it to face the window. “You see the forest out there?”

“Sure. The same one I was staring at all goddamn night.”

I know fake bravado when I hear it—you can’t kid a kidder—but I don’t bother to call her out on it. “From this angle, you can see something different. See the metal, there, at the gap in the trees?”

Her eyes narrow, she leans forward as far as she can in the chair, then snaps a curt, “Yes.”

“It’s one pillar of an electrified metal fence surrounding our Compound. There are armed guards every few feet. It’s as hard to escape as San Quentin, though a lot more pleasant.”

There’s a long silence, then she mutters, “No,” but it sounds like it’s to herself. The hard set of her face never changes. She’s good. Much better than I would be if the situation was reversed.

She twists to face me. “What are you into, Sebastian? Who is in charge here? Is this a cartel thing or...”

She trails off, turning back to the forest. She’s used to having a solid grip on her life, and not understanding is driving her crazy. I press a grape to her lips, and she takes it

with a sigh, chewing slowly.

“Technically, that’s three questions, so I’ll ask one of my own. Have you heard of the Onyx Brotherhood?”

Her forehead creases, and I catch the flicker of recognition. She’s heard the name before, but how much does she know? She didn’t know about Wards, that’s for sure.

“No.” It’s a lie, but a convincing one. If I hadn’t been watching closely, I wouldn’t have spotted it. I don’t blame her for keeping her cards close to her chest.

“I’ll give you the full history later, but for now, all you need to know is we’re an ancient organization and far more powerful than your family. Taking a Ward dates back almost five hundred years. I have the support of a private army to keep you here, and we’ve already implanted a tracker right here.”

I wrap my hand around the back of her neck, and she jerks at the contact. “It’s subdermal, microscopic, and can never be removed. Even if you escape, we’ll find you. ”

I don’t move my hand. She has to get used to me touching her if she’s going to become my obedient little pet. And I have to get used to touching her. I’ve never placed a finger on a woman who didn’t smile at the contact and lean in for more. Ophelia is stiff, her shoulders high and tense. Part of me wants to snatch my hand away, but the other part wants to explore more of her.

She deserves this. She deserves all of it and more.

Seconds pass, and she seems to realize I’m not going to take my hand away. Finally, she asks, “Why me?”

Her eyes are wide and innocent, but it's an act. She knows why. She fucking knows. The banked anger in my blood surges, and I almost forget to make her eat. At the last second, I grab a big chunk of blueberry muffin and shove it into her mouth. She splutters, struggling to swallow, and a nasty laugh escapes me as I watch her battle with it.

It's undignified, and she'll hate it. Good.

"I had to choose someone. Why would I snatch some poor, innocent woman out of her life when I could have you? You killed my sister. Maggie slit her wrists, but you were the one who forced her to it, with your little cabal of bitches. They've all suffered, but I wanted to save something really special for you. What could be better than this?"

I take my hand away from her neck and gesture down her body. She follows my gaze, and I wonder if she sees what I do. I've already turned her into a trashy little toy, and all at once, I can't wait to show her off. If she thinks she's miserable now, just wait. Just wait until she has dozens of sets of eyes on her. Wait until she hears the whispers.

I'm bored of this part of the game. Jacob cautioned against this, but I can't make myself care. Why me? How dare she ask that? How fucking dare she ?

I unclip the handcuff from her right hand and spin her back to face the table. Her eyes never leave mine as she wipes the residue of the muffin from her mouth. I feel her gaze as I get to my feet and walk to the small dresser by the front door. Another fun part, coming up. I turn to face her as I open the drawer.

"Finish your breakfast." I hold up a leather leash with a thick black collar attached. A little circular tag dangles from the front, Ophelia etched in curly script. "Then we're going for a walk."

Ten

Ophelia

This can't really be happening. Can it? There has to be some deeper motive at work. A way to twist this situation that doesn't end in me wearing that collar and leash. Sebastian places it carefully on the table, out of my reach, turned so I can see the shiny tag.

Ophelia.

Seeing my name is worse than some demeaning word. Those carved letters chill my blood and turn my stomach. He's planned this. Not just the capture, which had to have taken weeks of surveillance, but this, too. The ways in which he'll torment me while I'm here.

The Brotherhood. I've heard the name spoken but always quietly and always in the context of a business rivalry. Dad and Harrison never let me near the criminal side of the family's dealings, but I know enough. We deal in information, stealing tech from cutting-edge companies and selling it to whoever pays the most.

If I'd had to guess, I'd have said the Brotherhood was a secretive tech firm with a weird, anachronistic name. But how the hell does that gel with Sebastian's ramblings about sex slaves and a private army? Maybe he's insane.

Sebastian strides to the window and stares out. "Ten minutes. Eat up."

His voice is flat now, but it wasn't earlier. He enjoyed feeding me. He got off on telling me his crazy story. But as soon as Maggie entered the conversation, all that twisted happiness drained away.

Even now, staring at the leash with my name on it, I can't fight back the guilty lurch. Something about Maggie, how much freedom she seemed to have, always plucked at my nerves in high school, and I lashed out, targeting her. None of it was her fault, and I'd give absolutely anything to change the way I treated her. When I learned she'd killed herself, the guilt almost destroyed me.

Maybe losing her pushed Sebastian over the edge?

"Eight minutes."

Sebastian's clipped words bring me right back into the present. I can't waste time on regret. Sebastian hates me, with good reason. He might well be insane. I'm locked to a goddamn chair in his apartment, and this might be the only chance I get to eat today. However sick it makes me feel, I have to eat while I can.

I attack the food with wooden efficiency. A chocolate pastry. Some fruit. I'd kill for a coffee, but the jug is out of reach. I'll die before I ask Sebastian to bring it to me, so I make do with the orange juice closer to hand.

As I eat, the empty, shaky feeling diminishes. I have to be smart. I grew up around dangerous men. I can handle Sebastian Grange, even if he's all grown up and fucking terrifying.

He doesn't move from his spot at the window, and he doesn't look at me. I try to picture him as I remember him. Long hair, pasty skin, baggy clothes. And when my brother beat the living shit out of him for confronting me, he hardly fought back at all. His blood dripped onto the concrete from his busted nose, and I grabbed my

brother's arm. "He's had enough."

"No, he fucking hasn't."

Then a savage kick to the ribs. It was the last time I saw him. What has he been doing for the last ten years?

They've all suffered.

His words rush back. What did he mean by that? I search for memories of my high school friends. The ones who used to torment Maggie right alongside me—though I was always the ringleader. Were any of them reported missing? Has he been picking them off one by one?

Sebastian moves. I think he's going to come close, and my body locks up, hand clutching a piece of strawberry. I watch his back as he disappears into the bedroom. Maybe I can shuffle the chair a bit. Is there anything I can use as a weapon? Even something makeshift, like a jail shiv?

Jail.

It's a lightning strike, scorching a name into my brain. Cecilia Faulkner, the girl who helped me force Maggie's head into the toilet, has been in jail for two years. She worked as an investment banker and got caught stealing millions from a pension fund. If I remember the scandal right, she's serving fifteen years.

They've all suffered.

Sebastian appears from the bedroom with a pair of insanely high platforms. He holds them up for inspection. "You'll wear these. I'd prefer stilettos, but they make far too good of a weapon. We'll switch once you're my good little pet."

Pet. That word again. Coupled with the leash, the little word grows heavy. But my mind is still snagged on Cecilia. I shouldn't antagonize Sebastian, but I have to know.

"Cecilia Faulkner. She's in jail. Was that—"

"She was so easy to set up. If she manages to keep her nose clean in jail, she'll only serve ten years. Free by thirty-two. And of course, they sent her to one of those lovely, open prisons with gardening classes and a lacrosse team. More an extended holiday than anything else. Not bad for taking a life. Don't you agree?"

I can't think of a single thing to say. He set her up. She lost her freedom because of him. I'm clinging to the idea that he can't do what he's threatening to me, but he already fucking has, just in a different way. If only he'd used that method on me. I'm sure my dad could have lined the right pockets and gotten me out.

Which is why he didn't use that method on you.

Of course. I have to remember that Sebastian is smart. Harrison used to laugh because he had a private math tutor—he was too advanced for the class, and my dumbass brother thought it made him a nerd. And I heard somewhere he went to CalTech. If he's been planning this revenge for ten years, he'll have planned it well.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

The composure I've been clinging to wobbles, and I close my eyes, willing it back. I can do this. I'm strong. He won't break me with a stupid outfit and a ridiculous collar. He can march me around naked if he wants. I'll still be Ophelia Calder.

Why did I think that? Once that image brands itself into my brain, there's no

scrubbing it out.

“Ophelia.” Sebastian’s sharp voice pulls my scattered thoughts back together. “Look at me.” I do, really studying him as he unbuckles the strap on the platform. His long fingers make deft work of the process.

Then he spins my chair away from the table, sinks to one knee beside me, takes hold of my foot, and places it into the shoe .

I don’t know what I’d been expecting, but this wasn’t it. There’s something so intimate about the act that I freeze as he cinches the strap around my ankle, lifting the cuff to get it in the right place. His fingers are gentler than they should be, given where I am.

The shoes are gaudy monstrosities with a see-through PVC platform heel and glittery silver straps, but he fastens them with care, checking the strap sits snug to my skin. Once the first is secure, he moves to the second, and my paralysis breaks. “I’ll never be able to walk in these things.”

Why, of all the things happening to me, did I choose that to complain about? Maybe because it’s a small problem. Something I can see the beginning and end of.

“You’ll learn. We’re not going far, but people here are very curious about you. I want to show you off. Ophelia Calder, at the end of my leash.”

Amusement and satisfaction vibrate through every word, and it sends a rush of heat through my chest, up to my cheeks. Showing me off. As if I’m a prized possession.

Sebastian finishes with the second shoe and pulls back to look at me. His pupils are still large, blotting out the vivid blue of his eyes. He’s excited. Or something worse. He runs the tip of his finger over my flaming cheek with a smile.

“Does that embarrass you? I wonder what your father and brother will think once word gets back to them. I’m sure there are some little moles in here that will give them every detail. Maybe even a photo.”

God. I hadn’t even thought of this in those terms. My father and brother have always guarded me like a bone china figurine, erupting if I dared show too much leg or cleavage. I have to be beautiful but demure. After a while, it became the way I felt comfortable .

Seeing me paraded about like this...

I shake my head. “It’ll kill them.”

I don’t even mean to say it out loud, but Sebastian’s smile grows. “Fabulous. Let’s get going.”

He stands, moving behind my chair to detach the remaining cuff from the seat. It still dangles from my wrist, and before I get the chance to stretch my shoulders, he’s gripped my right hand, pulling both behind my back. “No, please. I’ll—”

He ignores me, snapping the cuffs into place. Fuck. Why didn’t I realize he was going to do that? Why didn’t I try to stop him? I’m slow, dopey from the shock and stress. I need to be sharper. Not that I could have fought him off, but I should have tried. He can’t start to see me as easy prey.

The cuffs press into the small of my back, forcing me to arch, and the move shoves my tits forward. The damn bra pumps them up so far you’d swear I have huge implants. A sharp breath from Sebastian tells me he’s noticed exactly what the position is doing, and the next second, he’s in front of me, staring down with a look I can’t define.

His brows crease, and he examines me with a critical eye, as if I'm a car he's thinking about buying. Then he reaches down and adjusts my top. He tugs it down even lower, so the lacy top of the bra shows. Somehow, that little strip of fabric makes the outfit ten times skankier. "Better. Don't you think?"

My mouth comes back to life. How dare he? "No! It's disgusting. What are you trying to prove with this? Do you think it makes you a scary, tough guy? It doesn't. It's pathetic."

"And when word gets back to Daddy, he'll hunt me down and string me up by my balls?" He offers the suggestion with a knowing eyebrow raised. "Or slice me into tiny pieces and mail me to my father? Not that he'd give a shit. "

He doesn't sound the tiniest bit concerned. Is it all an act? He knows what my family is capable of. His dad used to be our lawyer.

"Only if my brother doesn't get hold of you first."

I feel dirty even saying it. My father can be savage as all hell, but at least he follows his own twisted code of ethics. My brother, though? He's something else. Sometimes, I think even Dad is scared of him. Sure, Harrison would kill Sebastian for what he's doing to me. But then he might just kill me too, if he thought he could get away with it.

The last time a man touched me and he found out, it got very messy very fast. I'd shamed the family. I was damaged goods. Even if I make it out of wherever this is alive, will I be safe from Harrison?

Don't think about that now. The man in front of me is a big enough threat.

Sebastian's mouth is a thin line. "Oh, if your brother comes looking for you, I'll be

ready. Don't you worry about that, pet. "Now—" He holds up the collar. "—walkies."

"Fuck you." It's out before I can consider whether it's a good idea or not. The heat is back, rushing up my neck, and knowing he'll see the blush makes it so much worse. "I'm not wearing that stupid goddamn thing."

"Not your decision." He smiles, and I catch a hint of teeth.

"I'm not—"

He grabs my hair. He doesn't wrench it, but his grip is iron-hard as I try to twist away. It tugs on my scalp, and he tuts. "Don't. It'll ruin your beautiful hair."

"I don't care! Fuck—"

He wraps the collar around my throat. The stiff, unyielding leather sits high, forcing my neck straight. I freeze as he tugs the buckle tight. He could strangle me. Keep squeezing until the life leaves me for good. He could, but instead, he fusses with the collar, adjusting it so the tag dangles right at the front. I can just see it, though I can't look all the way down.

"This is a training collar. It's designed to be uncomfortable. Once you learn to behave, I'll get you something easier to wear. In a few weeks, maybe."

A few weeks? No. I won't be here in a few weeks. I won't even be here in a few days. I swallow, and the leather presses hard against my throat. "It's too tight."

My voice sounds quavery and scared. The crushing pressure of the leather, the sensation of being trapped, saps the fight from me again.

“It’s perfect.” He unfastens my ankles. I could kick him, but just what in the hell would that achieve? Am I planning on running away? The high platforms are so tightly strapped to my feet that I couldn’t remove them with my bound hands. I’d break an ankle in five seconds flat. I’m not even sure how I’ll get to my feet.

But I needn’t have worried. Sebastian wraps his fingers under my arms and lifts me gently up. I wobble in the shoes, all the scarier since my hands are behind my back, but he keeps a steady hand on me.

“I won’t let you fall.” He gathers the leash in the hand not keeping me from face-planting and gives me a gentle tug.

The collar at my neck tightens against my throat, and I gasp against the pressure. The degree of control he has over me is sinking in moment by moment. It happened so fast. I only arrived here yesterday.

He relaxes the leash but doesn’t let it drop. “Come on. Walk. You’ve worn high heels before.”

“Not this high.” With the heels, I’m still a few inches shorter than him, but it’s easier to look him in the eye. I straighten my spine. Maybe the heels aren’t the worst thing in the world. He walks, and I totter next to him.

He leads me to the door at the far side of the room, which must lead out of the apartment. Next to the door is a shoe rack lined with pairs of immaculate designer shoes and a floor-length mirror. I don’t try to hide my amusement.

“You like to look perfect, don’t you? Is this to make sure you don’t leave home with a hair out of place?”

He doesn’t answer until we reach the mirror, then turns me to face it. “No. I added

this especially for you. Take a good look at yourself before we leave.”

I do. God, I do.

The heels force me to stand with my ass and tits pushed out just to balance. With my hands behind my back, it looks like I’m thrusting them forward. Begging for them to be touched. It’s horrible and fascinating all at once. I’ve never worn anything like this. The sensible suits and dresses I wear aim for elegance, not sexuality.

This outfit is pure filth painted on my curves.

Sebastian’s expression doesn’t waver from his usual predatory amusement, but I can feel a change in the air. His eyes roam my reflection, and his grip tightens on the leash so subtly I’m not sure he knows he’s doing it. It makes me bend my back toward him, and his eyes widen. He glances down to the leash in his hand, then loosens his grip.

He turns away, tugging me toward the door. “It’s a beautiful day out there. I wonder how many people we’ll bump into.”

Eleven

Sebastian

It all seemed so easy and logical before I had a living human being at the end of a leash. A stunning human who keeps looking at me as if I'm a serial killer. She's terrified of me—of course she is—and seeing those little shivers, the way her throat works and her gaze darts away, is almost killing me.

I knew I'd enjoy punishing Ophelia, but I didn't think I'd enjoy it the way that I am. I've been rock hard from the moment I put on her damn shoes, and watching her struggle to walk in them isn't making things any easier. Her ass rolls as she totters, and I want to grab it but content myself with the steadying hand I have on her bound wrists.

I'm not an animal. I can do this properly.

I didn't miss Ophelia's flinch when she mentioned her brother. I'm not surprised he's an asshole to her as well. I'd be amazed if anyone on the entire planet actually likes him. If she thinks he'll come after her first, rather than Daddy Dearest, that's just fine by me. I have three fake teeth and a rib that still twinges from our last encounter. The next one is going to be very different .

Her gaze darts around the creepy corridor. I often wonder if they made the initiates' quarters so grim and weird just to put the fear of God into new Wards. Nothing says "cult" clearer than a sinister red corridor lined with pictures of men in hooded robes.

“Do you like the decor? It’s not to my taste, but don’t worry. After we go through our ceremony, we’ll move to a much nicer place. I’ll show you soon.”

Maybe I’ll take her to visit Gabriel and Eve in the lovely accommodation reserved for full Brothers so she can see where we’ll spend the rest of our days. I could invite Jacob and Quinn, too. It would be fun to watch Jacob try not to explode at me disregarding his very sensible advice to keep Ophelia inside for a couple of days.

I should have listened. Tensions will be high at the moment, and parading her around might not be the smartest move. Whatever, though.

“Ceremony?” Ophelia’s question has a weary edge, as though she’s heard enough bad news for one day. Tough luck.

“Yes. It’s in a month. You’ll walk to me, naked, in a room full of people, and I’ll tattoo you with my mark. Then you’ll kiss my hand and thank me for choosing you.”

She laughs, a loud, unladylike bray that has me hiding a smile of my own. Her father came from New York, and there’s a hint of that accent in the sound. “As if. I’d rather die.”

“People say that a lot, but they rarely mean it.”

I leave that sinister phrase hanging in the air. Hopefully she takes it to mean I’ve killed plenty of people.

It works. She snaps her mouth shut and hurries onward. We reach the elevator, and I stretch past her to summon it. She stiffens as my body brushes against her back. The doors slide open, and our reflections stare back from the mirrored walls. God. I love seeing her like this.

The collar prevents her from looking at the floor, so all she can do is stare at her own reflection. She'll like it even less soon. She tries to stand still and glare me down but rocks from foot to foot, ruining the effect. "Are your feet sore?"

"Would yours be, in these shoes?"

"Absolutely. Don't worry. You can sit down soon." Another short, gloomy corridor, and the door slides open, letting us into the light. It's just past the breakfast rush, but the street is still busy, as Brothers and their Wards make their way to wherever it is they spend the day.

My friends find the Compound claustrophobic, but I enjoy the gentle, manicured feel of the place. It reminds me of the gated estate I grew up in—gaudy mansions separated by well cared for common grounds.

My home wasn't a happy place, but the safety of the estate meant I was allowed outside on my own from a very young age. The Compound reminds me of escaping to play in the woods and parklands.

I was expecting curious glances—leashed Wards aren't unknown but aren't exactly common either—but every head snaps to stare as we walk by. Whispers follow us, and most of the looks aren't friendly. Word got around, then. It's not a surprise. Brothers and Wards, stuck here with limited entertainment, are all gossips.

I try to ignore the death stares and focus on Ophelia instead. Her lips are parted, and she's twisting from side to side, staring at the people with wide eyes. She sees them look at her. She sees them register her collar, the leash, the bound hands. Then she sees them turn away .

Her bottom lip gives a single quiver, and it tugs at something in my chest, but I stomp that feeling down hard. No. She doesn't get a single shred of pity from me. She's here

because she deserves to be.

A woman approaches. Annie. She's friends with one of the girls, or maybe both of them. Cute in a chubby, gothy sort of way. She runs the little clothing store, and she's the first woman we've seen by herself. Ophelia lurches toward her.

"Help, please! I've been kidnapped. I—"

She reaches the end of her leash and jerks to a stop as it pulls taut. Annie freezes, staring between me and Ophelia.

"Sir?" She looks at me with a question in her eyes. I've never got used to the Wards I don't know calling me that. Quinn and Eve don't because we're friends, but the rest are expected to.

Ophelia shouts over me. "He's holding me prisoner! Don't you get it. Call someone. Don't just stand there..."

She trails off, and her shoulders slump. Ophelia is a lot of things, but she's not stupid. I jump on the golden opportunity she's just given me.

"Ophelia, meet Annie. She's a prisoner too. Every woman you see is. You'll get no help from them."

Annie's face falls at my words, and I can't shake the guilty twist in my chest this time. The Wards hate to be reminded of their captivity, and I just threw it right in Annie's face. She didn't deserve it. She's not Ophelia.

Annie swallows, then forces a brittle smile to her lips. "It's not too bad here once you get used to it. I run the clothes shop on the high street. You should drop by."

She nods to me, then speed-walks away. Ophelia stares at her retreating back. When she turns to me, her eyes are wide, gray pools. “I don’t...”

We’ve reached the high street, and she studies it for the first time. Quaint little shops, a cobbled street, and olde-worlde lights with hanging lanterns. It’s a scene from a Christmas card, just lacking snow.

“This place. It makes no sense.”

I lay a hand on her bound wrists and guide her forward. She moves without complaining, eyes drinking in every detail. She’s shell-shocked, but her gaze is still sharp. How much of her dazed attitude is genuine, and how much is calculation? I have to remember who she is and the environment she grew up in.

“We’re almost there.”

“And where would that be?” Snappy. She’s nowhere close to losing her bite.

“You’ll see.”

At that, she plants her feet and spins to face me. I can’t decide if she’s furious or trying not to cry. Frustration boils off her, a raging cloud. “Just stop. Stop, Sebastian. Stop acting all mysterious and treating me like—”

“Like my property?”

I might as well have slapped her. She jerks back, stumbles when her heel catches a cobblestone, and I only just manage to catch her. Her weight lands in my arms as I wrap them around her back. She stares up at me, mouth a shocked O, as I help her back to her feet.

Christ.

Her body presses into me, and it's almost too much. Months of deprivation, and now this. I want to grind myself into her like a rutting animal. Rip the tacky top from her skin and strip her bare right here, in the middle of the street.

She must sense the danger, as she struggles, squirming in my grip. It's not helping matters. Oh, God, it's not helping them at all .

Calm. Be the one in charge.

"Stop that. You'll fall." I use my sternest voice, and it works. She plants her feet. I release her slowly, stepping back far enough to get my head on straight. One spaghetti strap has slipped off her shoulder, so the top hangs down. She looks at it, then back to me, and I force a sardonic smile, though my heart is beating fast.

"That's unfortunate." I make a show of rolling the leash up tight in my fist and ignoring her wardrobe malfunction. "Keep moving. We don't want to be—"

"Sebastian." A rough, male voice. I turn to see Fred Ballard bearing down on us. He's only in his early fifties but looks much older. Some Brothers lose all discipline faced with free-flowing booze, food, and whatever else they want. Fred falls into that category.

His tailored shirt does little to hide his beer belly, and broken capillaries decorate his face. I don't know much about him besides the little I've picked up from general gossip. His work—something in particle physics that Gabriel would probably understand—never lived up to its initial promise, and he's done little in the past few years.

There are several Brothers like him in the Compound, whose life's work turned out a

dismal failure. Thinking about it is a heavy weight pressing on my chest. Some find new directions to pursue or team up with other Brothers in their field. But others, like Fred, become angry and bitter. Even Kendrick once warned me he's someone best avoided.

He squares up to me, though his head only reaches my chin. Some chivalrous instinct makes me put myself between him and Ophelia. His mouth twists as he realizes what I'm doing. Sour sweat and fresh alcohol waft off the man. It's not even ten .

He's a fucking mess. What would it feel like, to be a failure in a world of geniuses? Does he wish he'd stayed outside, where he could have reigned over the other mediocre intellects in his field like a king?

Focus. None of that matters now.

“What do you want?” Ophelia moves to stand beside me, and Fred's eyes flick to her.

“You think this is clever? You three think you can do whatever you want, don't you? Kendrick's special trio. The most promising minds in a generation .”

He spits the words, mimicking Kendrick's somber tone with an accuracy that would have been hilarious if he'd done it at a party. Not so funny now.

He leans closer, nasty breath washing over me. “He's already announced restrictions. All non-essential trips out of the Compound, banned. No new contractors allowed in. Have you heard? Or have you been too busy fucking the Calder slut to look at your phone?”

Blood rushes hot in my veins. He pokes my chest before I can answer. “I had plans, and you've fucked them up. Now I'm stuck here. We won't stand for it. Mark my words. She'll be back to her daddy in—”

I grab his poking hand and twist. I don't have anywhere close to Jacob's level of skill, but I've spent years studying Hapkido. I love the technical nature of the art, the way using the right pressure points can reduce a grown man to tears. There's something satisfying about finding just the right angle and—

“Fuck! Let go!” Fred flails at me with his free hand, but I just increase the pressure until he tips forward with a howl.

I bend down. “Stay away from me, and stay away from her. Got it?”

“Yes. Yes! ”

I release Fred's hand, and he steps back, nursing it. My heart hammers, giddy excitement washing through me. I've never used Hapkido against a real opponent before. My sabeom would be so proud.

I didn't even drop Ophelia's leash in the commotion. This is a good day.

Fred stomps away but shoots back over his shoulder, “It's not just me who's pissed. Kendrick can't protect you forever.”

I really, really hope he's wrong.

Shit. Ophelia didn't need to hear that. Now she'll be all giddy with hope for escape, waiting for someone in the Brotherhood to decide she's too much trouble and give her back to her dad. I'm going to have to work ten times as hard to get her in line.

Ugh. I should have kept her inside. Jacob was right. What a depressing thought.

I tug on her leash before she can start asking questions. “We're running late.”

“Late for what?”

At least she sets off moving, careful and slow on the cobblestones.

“Nothing unpleasant. I’ve organized a few beauty appointments for you.”

Twelve

Ophelia

“A beauty appointment.”

I can't handle one more thing that doesn't make sense today. At this point, I'd take being locked in a basement with a hood on my head, because at least that's what a kidnapping is supposed to be. At least my mind could comprehend the shape of what's happening.

From the moment we left Sebastian's apartment, I've been trapped in one of those dumb seventies movies made by people with more LSD than sense. The goth girl called Sebastian “sir” like it was no big deal and asked me to visit her damn shop. How can she have a shop? Isn't she supposed to be another captive?

And the cobbled street we're walking down right now, lined with pretty little shops. It reminds me of a trip I took to a seaside town, back when Mom was still alive and Harrison hadn't turned into a complete asshole. I was eight, and we ate ice cream on the beach. It's one of the only times I remember my dad relaxed, actually enjoying spending time with us.

But this isn't a normal street .

I peer into the windows as we pass shops selling jewelry and trinkets. I don't see a price tag on anything or any signs with deals to entice shoppers inside. People walking by see my collar, see my bound hands, but not one single person asks if I'm

okay. Most shoot daggers at Sebastian with the same hostility as the man who confronted him.

I can use that anger.

It's the first thing I've discovered since I woke up in this nightmare that gives me a sliver of hope. These people are scared of my family and what my capture might mean for them.

They're right to be. My cousin was taken for ransom last year and lost two fingers in the process. My dad paid the money, got him back, then spent the next six months systematically taking out everyone involved. All I have to do is convince someone important that I'm not worth the risk, and they'll set me free.

That easy.

So why don't I believe it?

Sebastian steers me toward a shop that's a much more tasteful version of my own clinic. The outside is simple, bordering on minimalist. Clean lines and "Mirror, Mirror" in clean silver script. A cool name, and the sort of decor I'd have selected if I had a choice.

A man in military gear waits outside, incongruous as a cactus in a patch of daisies. He nods to Sebastian and doesn't so much as look at me. "Sir."

Sebastian nods back. "Show her the syringe, please."

My body stiffens, and all the food I ate earlier roils in my guts. No. They can't drug me again. Not now that I understand why I'm here. What would happen to me while I was unconscious? A million images rattle through my brain, none of them good .

Sebastian shifts his hand, settling it around my waist in a way that could be comforting if it wasn't him doing it, as the soldier pulls a syringe from a box.

"Ophelia, meet Private Barnes. That syringe holds the same drug we used on you earlier. We won't use it unless we have to. Would you like to avoid going under again?"

A stupid question, but I rush to answer, galvanized by the pointed needle. "Yes. Please don't drug me."

I can be tough later. Right now, avoiding that needle is my only consideration.

"Smart girl. You're going to have a few beauty treatments, that's all. Nothing permanent, and nothing very painful. You're going to look the way I want you to from now on, and I've got a few changes in mind. If you don't cooperate, that's when the needle comes in. Does that sound fair?"

The strangest river of emotions rushes through me, leaving my knees weak. He wants to change how I look? What's wrong with how I look? It's a splinter in my heart, even though I know it's ridiculous.

On the heels of that pathetic reaction comes a welcome swell of anger. I dive into it, letting it wash away the sad little voice that came before. He already has me as a captive, and now he wants to take this away from me, too? No. He can't decide how I look. It's too much.

Like I ever had a choice anyway.

I try to bat the thought away, but it's a mosquito whining in my ear.

Take that off. You look like a slut.

If you dye your hair black, I'll find out who helped you and break her fingers.

Did you mean to look like you were born in the gutter ?

Words shoot out in a rush. "Why the fuck do you care what I look like? You want to punish me, I get that. But this—" I jerk my chin at the guard holding the needle, and the collar presses tighter on my throat. "—it's messed up. Playing dress up. You're sick."

All my tirade gets me is a smile. "Playing dress up. I like that, but you haven't answered my question. Will you behave, or do you need the needle?"

Movement behind the window catches my eye. Two women stand, watching the show. Prisoners. If what Sebastian said is true, they're prisoners as well.

Think. Drugged, I'm helpless. Stacked against that, who cares what he does to my appearance? There are people here who want me out of this place. If I'm drugged and trapped in Sebastian's room, they might not be able to help me.

"Don't drug me. I'll do what you want."

It's the sensible course of action, but I hate hearing the words. Sebastian nods to the soldier. "Wait outside, please, until we're done. Thanks for your help."

"Sir."

The soldier steps aside, but I'm stuck on Sebastian's words. Thanks for your help. It doesn't fit. It's too polite. Too kind for the image he's projecting. Harrison would have pushed past the guy without a second look.

I follow Sebastian into the salon. It's empty, apart from the two women who watch us

like hawks. I'm guessing even in this fucked-up place, women being marched in here collared and at needlepoint isn't the norm. One of the women is in her fifties, solid and with a stern, lined face. She reminds me of my dad's secretary, who has worked with him longer than I've been alive.

Just another puzzle piece that doesn't fit. Sebastian said all the women here are captives. Sex slaves. She doesn't match that stereotype. The other woman does, however. She's small and absolutely stunning, with masses of dark hair and a delicate face like a doll.

Sebastian bends to whisper in my ear. "Be nice to them. They had a full morning of clients and canceled them for you. They're going to have to deal with some grouchy ladies at the social brunch this weekend."

I don't bother to ask what in the hell he's talking about. It's a waste of time. So there's a social brunch now? Great. I've been to plenty of those. Maybe I'll get to speak to someone who isn't crazy.

"I'm going to free your hands and take off your collar. Don't even think of making a dash for it. If you do, it's the needle. No second chances."

God, I want this collar off me. Without it, I won't feel like such a freak. Sebastian attends to the cuffs first, unlocking them. Before I can move my hands forward, he wraps his fingers around my wrists, massaging where the metal had been digging in. With all the stress, I hadn't noticed the pain, but now, the flood of sensation hits me in a rush.

"A little too tight, perhaps," he mutters, but I don't think he's talking to me. More like a note to self for next time. What the hell does he care if my wrists are sore? All part of the fun for him, right?

When he releases me, I roll my shoulders to relieve the ache as he moves to the collar. It pulls tighter as he works the buckle, and my stomach clenches at the pressure. If he strangled me, right here in this weird salon, would anyone care? Would the women run screaming for help? Would the soldier outside rush in to stop him?

Or would everyone just watch, dead-eyed, then organize to have my body tossed in a furnace somewhere ?

Dad's voice saves me from spiraling.

If anyone fucks with you, they answer to me.

Damn right. These people wouldn't dare. The man—Fred—already proved they're scared. I just need to stay alive long enough for Dad to find me.

The pressure eases on my neck, and I sigh with relief as Sebastian pulls the collar free. I twist my head from side to side, enjoying the freedom to do so. Sebastian wears a thoughtful expression as he comes back into view. He studies the collar, rubbing his finger over the nametag.

"I haven't decided on your tattoo. I don't have any of my own, mainly because I've never been able to make up my mind what to get. Imagine getting the wrong thing and regretting it. Do you have any already?"

I snort and answer honestly without thinking. "If anyone tattooed me, my dad would have chopped their hands off. I'm sure he'll do the same to you. Along with anything else you put near me."

Sebastian's eyes widen, and the look he gives me is almost guilty. Like I surprised him doing something he shouldn't. He glances at the women waiting quietly and is all

business again.

“Which chair would you like her in?”

The older lady bustles forward, holding out a beefy hand for me to shake. I take it without hesitating. Thank God. At least one person in this place acknowledges I exist. Her accent is European, but I can't place it. Somewhere eastern, maybe?

“Hello, darling. I'm Anya. I'll be doing your hair today. This is Ella. She's beauty.” A smile softens her stern features, and she points to a swivel chair. “Take a seat here, please.”

Better manners than half of my staff. I take a seat and actually look at the salon interior for the first time, tracking the products and equipment. It has the look of a one-stop shop. Hair products and manicure and pedicure equipment. A couple of treatment rooms branch off from a small corridor. Perhaps they do waxing or laser as well?

The decor is a little old-school but funky. One black feature wall is filled with pictures of smiling women that don't look like models. Maybe some previous clients? I stare at the wall and spot the goth girl from earlier, grinning with her jet-black hair curled into Victorian ringlets.

It's all so normal and familiar. Even the faint chemical smell feels like stepping into my own clinic, and I breathe it in with a shiver as Anya addresses Sebastian. “You're sure about the color? Her hair is so beautiful. It'll take months to get it back to this shade.”

Months? That means black or red, then. I used to long to dye my hair those colors when I was a teen, but now? They'll wash out my complexion. Which matters not at all, because I'm a goddamned captive.

“Yes. I want her to match my eyes.” Sebastian gives Anya a charming smile, and it changes his face. The tightness vanishes, and his eyes light up. It’s such an open, engaging expression that even Anya’s stern face gains a pink tinge.

All I can do is splutter, “Match your eyes? What?”

As his eyes meet mine in the mirror, his expression darkens, and the warm smile gains a predatory edge. “Yes. You’re going to be the perfect accessory.”

“Blue? You want my hair blue?” I don’t know why I’m so stuck on this point. It’s hardly the worst thing that’s happened to me today.

“Yes,” he says, as if I’m the strange one for questioning it. “Anya, please go ahead. ”

As she mixes up the product, the other woman, Ella, steps forward. Her voice is barely a whisper. “And you want nails, lashes, and lips, sir?”

Sir.

It grates on me, that word. Anya didn’t use it, and Sebastian didn’t correct her. He probably didn’t dare—she looks like she could shot-put him through the salon window. Why did I never take up powerlifting as a hobby?

Sebastian turns his dazzling smile on Ella, and the poor thing melts. Her cheeks flush deep red, and she twists her hands together in front of her. Seriously? She just watched him walk me in on a leash. Is that not a red flag in this place?

“Yes. Nails to match the hair, but glittery. It’s not like my princess will be doing any housework.”

Then the bastard winks at me in the mirror, bends his neck, and kisses the top of my

head.

It's an electric shock, and I jerk away from him. "I'm not your fucking princess."

His smile doesn't falter one iota. "Sorry, darling. Does your daddy call you that?"

Yes, actually. I'm not telling him that, but my silence must have spilled the beans, because he says, "I'll just stick with pet, then."

He turns back to Ella, whose eyes are huge, round saucers. "Dramatic lashes, please. Not too heavy on the lips. I don't want her to look ridiculous."

Wait. "What are you doing to my lips?" I direct the question at Ella, and it comes out in my stern manager's tone.

She jumps, glances at Sebastian, who nods, then answers in her quavery little voice. "Just a bit of filler. Please don't worry, I know what I'm doing." She gives a nervous smile. "You'll look pretty. Not that you don't now, I mean, but...it'll suit you."

I want to snap at her, but it'd be like punching a kitten. I take a deep breath and direct my anger where it belongs. Sebastian's smile is gone, but those deep blue eyes—that I'm about to be fucking matched with—flash with amusement.

"You said nothing permanent or painful."

"Eighteen months isn't permanent. And I said not too painful. You need to pay closer attention."

"I don't need filler. I don't like—"

He whips his hand out, wrapping it around my throat. Ella takes a step back, and I

hiss as his hand tightens. He's not crushing me. It's a light, insistent pressure that's almost worse. A warning. "What you like doesn't matter anymore."

He squeezes, and I freeze. "You're mine now. I'm full of ideas for what to do to you." Before I can take a breath, the hand not gripping my neck cups my breast. He lifts it as if testing the weight. I stare at the scene in the mirror, and shock makes it seem as though it's happening to someone else, though I can feel the pressure of his hand through the bra.

He's touching me. There are people here. Surely stern Anya will do something? He can't just grab me in public.

"These are a good size, but maybe we could go bigger. What do you think?" His twisted smile is back. A glimpse of a predator. Is it an act designed to scare me or the real him?

He gives my breast a squeeze. "Answer the question."

"No! No. I don't want that."

"Hmmm. I'll think about it." He drops his hands away and kisses my head again. This time, I don't even react. "Relax and enjoy your treatments, pet."

Thirteen

Sebastian

I need to jump in an ice bath. Or go for a fifteen-mile run. Or do basically anything except watch Ophelia being altered just for me. I wish to God I hadn't grabbed Ophelia's tit, because now all I can think about is doing it again.

Watching the ladies work on her is beyond fascinating. Anya covers her with a gown and applies shiny dye while Ella puts numbing cream on her lips, then goes to work on her nails. I smile at the glittery fake tips. She'll hate them.

I don't, though.

I love trashy little touches on a beautiful girl. Fake nails and eyelashes. Pouty lips. It shouldn't turn me on as much as it does, and I'm sure it makes me a misogynistic prick, but hey, I have a sex slave now. Misogynistic doesn't begin to cover that one.

Ophelia tries to get information out of the ladies, but they avoid all risky topics, as I instructed. She learns nothing more about the Compound, the Brotherhood, or me. Instead, she gets to hear all the gossip from the last big social night and a long-winded story about a Ward who got drunk and dared everyone to skinny-dip in the swimming pool. Come to think of it, that might have been Quinn .

The new Ophelia takes shape before my eyes. Once her nails are done, Ella injects the filler into her lips, and I have to force myself not to flinch. It looks painful, and Ophelia's eyes shine with tears, but it's over fast. Her lips swell, puffed up and

bruised from the treatment, and my cock swells right along with them. She looks good. Better than good. Much, much better.

Eyelashes next, then Anya rinses the dye off her hair and gets to work styling. I feign disinterest, staring at my phone. Stacks of messages from Gabriel and Jacob, questioning where I am and just what exactly I'm doing. Eve and Quinn are demanding to meet Ophelia. They will soon, but not yet. She's all mine for the rest of the day.

God, this takes a long time. No wonder women are always complaining about it. I'm picky for a guy, but even so, my hair takes twenty-five minutes max. Unable to sit any more, I pace the salon and peer at all the products until finally, finally, Ella says, "Excuse me, sir. She's all ready."

I turn, and I swear my soul leaves my fucking body.

Her hair isn't the sort of tacky, bright color teenagers dye their hair. It's shiny, curled into loose waves that hang over her shoulders like a sea goddess, and the deep shade of a mountain lake on a clear day. A perfect match to my eyes, but the color makes hers stand out. They're wide gray pools as she scans herself in the mirror.

The long, dramatic eyelashes frame them, and the effect tightens my chest. And the lips... Christ. This might not have been the best idea I've ever had. The blood that was lingering in my brain plummets south, and all I want is to be alone with this beautiful girl.

My girl. My property.

Fuck .

Anya grins and speaks to Ophelia. "See? I told you it'd look stunning. It's like you

were made for that color. You and your man together, my goodness...” She shakes her head. “It’s such a shame they don’t allow babies here. Yours would be something really special.”

It shocks me out of my haze. She wasn’t supposed to drop that information and realizes as soon as it’s out of her mouth. Her hand flies to her lips, and her eyes meet mine. “Oh! I didn’t mean—”

I force my trademark smile to my lips, and she relaxes instantly. “It’s not a problem. I’m sure she’ll be relieved to hear I’ve had a vasectomy. Isn’t that right, pet?”

Ophelia’s mouth drops open, and I’m distracted again, pulled into staring at those lips. I have to be gentle with them for at least a day. Right now, it feels like a life sentence.

I force my mind back to the present. “When we join the Brotherhood, we sacrifice a wife and a family. We get a Ward in return. I’m sure you’ll make it worth my while.”

Ophelia doesn’t answer, and I don’t blame her. Today has been hammer blow after hammer blow. Shock after shock. In her position, I wouldn’t even be hearing words anymore, just buzzing. It often happens when I’m tired. Or when Jacob tries to explain the plot of one of the awful movies he likes.

She heard, though. I don’t know how she feels about having children. I’m sure her family expected her to get married young and start popping out kids to ensure the family line. All families in my dad’s world are the same. Harrison already has a wife. Hopefully she’ll be grateful when I kill the bastard.

“Good,” she finally spits, and it sounds genuine. Is she against pregnancy in general or just against getting knocked up by the man holding her captive? Something else I’ll need to find out about her .

I stand a few feet away, close enough to smell the lingering scent of dye in her hair, and make a show of examining her. “Let me see your hands.”

She huffs but holds one out for my inspection. The nails are fabulously trashy, glittery blue to match her hair. Another savage pulse of desire hits my cock, and the walls of the salon start to close in. We need to go.

“You look incredible.” I mean it, and Ophelia gives me a sharp look.

“I don’t look like me.”

“Yes, you do. That’s what makes this so much fun.”

I thank the ladies and promise to send my compliments to their patrons. Ophelia balks when I retrieve her collar but falls into line when I point to Private Barnes waiting outside with his trusty needle. Maybe I should get myself one of those. Though, knowing my luck, I’d accidentally stab myself with the thing.

I leave her hands free, and she wraps them around herself, twined into the tassels of her top as we walk to the initiates’ quarters. It’s almost lunchtime, but I’m not the slightest bit hungry. I’ll order food for Ophelia later.

A few people shoot daggers at me as we walk, but no one else confronts me. We’re almost at my front door when Gabriel calls, “Seb. Wait.”

He stomps over, eyes locked on Ophelia. I don’t have to worry about him ogling my girl—he’d walk past a thousand naked porn stars to watch Eve eat a sandwich—but I can feel the confusion rolling off him. I’m sure she’s the opposite of what he expected.

She takes a step back from him, and he holds up his hands. “Woah. It’s okay. I’m

Gabriel, one of Sebastian's friends. I'm not going to hurt you. My Ward, Eve, is really excited to meet you. "

"Oh," Ophelia manages, watching him warily. Thank God Jacob wasn't the one who found us. He doesn't have a calming effect on women. Or anyone, really.

Gabriel tears his eyes from Ophelia. "Can we talk privately for a moment?"

I hesitate, then spot a bench. I point. "Sit. If you don't, I'll make you, and it won't be fun."

Ophelia opens her mouth—she has to stop doing that—but thinks better of arguing and sits. I make quick work of handcuffing her to the arm, then join Gabriel. "Can't this wait? You might have noticed I'm a little busy."

"Quit the fucking badass routine. Things are going crazy." He lowers his voice further. "Kendrick called Jacob. Her dad sent an ultimatum directly to Kendrick's phone. How in the hell did he get the number? He's given us 48 hours to return her. Some of the top brass are away at a conference, but they're all traveling back now. There's a council meeting tomorrow."

Shit. That was faster than I thought. "Am I going?"

Gabriel rolls his eyes. "What do you think? Of course you are. Jacob too."

"Oh." I stare at Ophelia perched on her bench, head cocked as she tries her best to listen in. "Can you—"

Gabriel cuts me off with a sigh. "Yes, I'll fucking babysit. Why is it always me who gets stuck looking after new Wards? She'd better not be as crazy as Quinn."

I smile, though my whole body is tense. “It’s your sweet, non-threatening nature. You’re a natural.”

“Go fuck yourself. Make sure she’s restrained when I arrive. I’ll bring the girls to cheer her up, but if she lifts one finger in Eve’s direction—”

“I know, I know. Fire and brimstone. Scorched earth. ”

“That’s about right.” He pauses, and I think he’s going to leave, but then he adds, “Are you doing okay? Really, I mean. Without all your usual bullshit.”

A good question. “Sort of. I don’t know. She’s...” I’m drawn to look at her again. She’s twirled a lock of hair around her finger and twists it this way and that in the light, studying the color. “She’s a lot more interesting than I thought she’d be.”

“Interesting. That’s one way to put it.” The amused edge to Gabriel’s voice tells me he’s seen right through me. “Just be careful. These first few days are so important. Don’t let her get the better of you.”

“Says the man whose Ward escaped through a bathroom window on day two?”

Unexpectedly, he smiles at the memory. “Oh, yes. What came next was a lot of fun.”

I roll my eyes. “You might have told me the story once or twice. Or ten fucking times. What time is the damn meeting?”

“Nine. In the boardroom.”

Ominous. Neutral territory, rather than Kendrick’s center of power. It doesn’t bode well.

“I’ll see you then.”

“Good luck.”

He strides away, and Ophelia watches his retreating back as I unfasten her from the bench. “What was that about?”

“None of your concern.”

She knows, though. I can tell by the almost pleased expression on her face and the way she walks calmly beside me without argument. She knows it’s some drama involving her and hopes it’ll turn out to her advantage.

Damn Fred and his big mouth .

I need her unsettled again, not feeling like she’s got the upper hand. “I have to go to a meeting. I’ll leave you in Gabriel’s capable hands while I’m out.”

I shoot a glance her way as my words hit. She takes a deep breath, and her shoulders relax. Good. She’s on the hook, thinking she’s safe for a while. “The good news, though, is it’s not until tomorrow. We’ve got the rest of the day all to ourselves.”

Her head snaps to face me, and I smile. That’s the look I wanted. I make a show of checking my watch. “Twenty-one hours, in fact. What should I do with all that time?”

We’ve reached the door to my building, and I open it as her face pales. I tighten my grip on the leash in case she bolts, but she’s too smart for that. She stares at the street. A couple of people glance our way, then hurry on. She’s getting no help there, and she knows it.

I’m almost proud of her as she turns away from her escape route, squares her

shoulders, and marches through the door.

Fourteen

Ophelia

For one beautiful moment, I thought I was safe. Well, not safe exactly, but back in the invisible protective bubble I've lived in my entire life. The untouchable daughter of someone too scary to cross.

I let myself believe that protection had caught up with me here and a new hairdo and ridiculous lips that sting like hell would be the worst I got out of this experience. Better than losing a finger. I might be able to laugh about that sort of thing one day.

But the look on Sebastian's face as he popped that bubble? It wasn't funny. We step into the elevator, and it's a coffin lid closing behind me. My reflection stares back from the mirror, and it's not me. It can't be me.

How can a few small changes turn me into a different person? I thought the dark hair would look terrible, but it doesn't. My skin, even without makeup, has a glow to it. My eyes, framed by the eyelashes, stand out much more than usual. The swollen lips pull my face into a sensual expression, even though it's the last thing I'm feeling .

It's not me. I lean closer, staring at my face as the elevator dings.

“You look amazing. Come on now. Plenty of mirrors in my place.”

Of course there are. I can't stop a hysterical laugh bursting out, the unladylike honk my dad hates so much. Sebastian just smirks, and his gentle hand on my lower back

might as well be the jaws of a trap. We have twenty-one hours together, at least. We're about to be alone. He's made his intentions perfectly clear.

Sex slave.

Property.

Pet.

Call it what you want. It all leads to the same place.

The apartment door closes behind us, and I study it for the first time. It has a palm pad to open it, just like the entry at the front door. Do all the rooms have built-in security? Is every door we've passed a little prison cell?

Sebastian fills a glass of water and hands it to me without a word. I stare at it, then up at him, brows creased.

"It's called water. You drink it." he supplies as he fills his own glass and takes a long drink. "I'd offer you juice, but it'd be painful on your lips."

He's right. I know the recovery procedures, but why does he? "What do you care?"

He shrugs. "I don't really. Drink what you like."

I resist the urge to throw the glass at his head and take a sip. I wince as my lips touch the cool glass, and Sebastian watches with interest. "Are they sore?"

"Yes. You bastard."

"Women pay thousands for them. It can't be that bad. You own a clinic, for God's

sake. Don't be a baby. ”

I almost choke on my next mouthful of water. My hand tightens on the glass. I could throw it. He'd probably dodge, but it'd be—

No. I study his face and force my arm to relax. The blown-out pupils and the cruel twist to his lip is a warning siren shrieking into the space between us. He's goading me, and if I lose my cool, he wins. He wants an excuse—any excuse—to do what he's clearly dying to do.

My hand shakes as I set the glass down. Something is holding him back. A tenuous thread, keeping the predator under control. What is it? Can I find it? Maybe, just like my dad, he has a twisted moral code that he follows. And maybe, just maybe, forcing himself on me is outside the boundary. If so, it's another bubble of protection. Weak, but all I've got.

I try to inject disdain into my voice. “So, I suppose now you shove your dick in me, right? Show me what a big, tough guy you are?”

His jaw twitches, the only visible sign I've hit the mark. “That depends on you. We're going to play a game.”

The air leaves the room as he says the words, and every muscle in my body freezes. A lifeline, but a frayed one that could snap at any second. Scenes from the Saw movies tumble through my head. A game? What fucking game?

He closes the distance between us, a stalking cat, and I shrink back against the door. “The game is you do exactly what I say the moment I say it, and I don't fuck you today. Does that sound fun?”

My head spins, but these sort of mind games are familiar to me. Growing up, my

brother liked to trick me into agreeing to stuff. I try to block out Sebastian's looming presence, though his spicy cologne washes over me and I swear I can feel the heat from his body even though he's not touching me .

I lift my chin and meet his gaze. "What, so you order me to stab myself in the face or drink bleach, and suddenly it's my fault I'm getting fucked when I refuse?"

His brows raise for the beat of a heart, then his face resets to smooth amusement. "Clever question. I won't order you to injure yourself, leave the apartment, or do anything to change how you look. Like telling you to shave your eyebrows off or anything like that."

There's a lightness to his voice that wasn't there a moment ago. He likes that I'm engaging with this game. He wants me to argue the rules. What else should I ask for? One huge possibility springs to mind. "And you won't touch me."

A tiny smile quirks his lips. "No can do on that one. Request denied. Any other suggestions?"

I shiver, and his eyes darken when he notices. His patience is waning, and I'm running out of time. I blurt out the first image that comes into my whirling head. "You can't stick anything else into me. No fucking me with a broom handle or—"

I cut off as he splutters a laugh. "Jesus. If you want to give me ideas, you're going about it the right way. Deal."

Deal. Shit. "And I won't—"

"No. That's enough rules. It's time to play. Oh, one more thing." He pauses, an orator aiming for dramatic effect. "From now on, you need to call me sir."

Seriously? What a sad little power play. As if I care. I mutter, “Fine,” and look away, but his fingers find my chin, dragging my gaze back to him.

“That’s not how you say it.”

Oh. Right. Okay then. “Yes, sir.”

It’s just a word, but heat scalds me as the phrase leaves my lips. Sir. Why the hell should he be sir? Why does he deserve it? He doesn’t, and it’s meaningless, but my face flushes anyway. It must be a crimson beacon.

“That’s better. Ophelia Calder calling me sir like a good little pet. I’ll have to video it. Make sure it gets back to dear old Daddy.”

Ugh. God, no. I could just about handle Dad seeing me dragged around on the leash, but complying like this? I’d die. Even though it’s not like I have any other options. If my face gets any redder, it’ll set alight. Maybe I can burn this whole building down with the force of my embarrassment.

Something prickles on the logical side of my brain. Does he want to antagonize my family? The rest of the people here seem averse to that. Why isn’t he scared of them? Does he know something the others don’t?

“He’s already going to kill you. The more you piss him off, the longer it will take.” I wish I sounded more like a confident crime boss and less like a petulant teenager.

Sebastian just grabs my dangling leash and tugs. “Come. No more backtalk. Complete obedience, or you know what happens.”

The heightened color in his cheeks and his rapid breathing tell me he’s really, really hoping I lose this game. Then he’d have his excuse, and hey, suddenly he isn’t

violating me. It's just a game. It chills my blood, and I follow quickly.

"Stand here." He points to a spot in the middle of the floor, and I, good little pet that I am, take the allocated position. He drops the leash and circles me, taking me in from every angle as I try to stand tall in the heels and not fidget. My feet ache, and the collar's restrictive pressure makes my breaths come faster as he says, "Get those clothes off."

Predictable, but knowing it was coming and hearing the words are millions of miles apart. My blood races, adrenaline pouring into my bloodstream. I can't. I can't do this. Not just because he's told me to. It's too shameful. Too weak. I'm a goddamned Calder. He can't do this to me.

He sinks gracefully down onto the designer sofa. His movements are smooth, hinting at power beneath that elegant suit. Power I don't want directed at me. Power that will be if I disobey. He leans back, arm relaxed on the arm, face expectant.

After a long beat of silence, he adds, "The response I'm waiting for is, 'Yes, sir.' Then you take off your clothes. In case you weren't clear."

Damn him all the way to hell and back. There's a hole in the pit of my stomach, and it's growing second by second. He doesn't say anything else to hurry me along, and why would he? He doesn't want me to do as I'm told. He's counting the seconds, waiting for enough time to pass to satisfy his twisted moral compass. Waiting for the moment he can do what he really wants.

If I let my pride take over, he wins the game.

"Yes. Sir." I spit the words, which gains me a knowing smirk. Then I grip the bottom of the hideous top and pull it over my head. Don't think about what I'm doing. Don't look at his smug goddamn face. Get the horrible clothes off my body, and have done

with it.

The top tangles in the leash, and I battle with it for a few mortifying seconds before I get it free. It lands on the floor, and I kick it away.

Don't look at him. Pretend he's not even there.

Bra next. I unhook it, freeing my breasts from the extreme, uncomfortable push-up, and fling it to the side. Sebastian lets out a rough groan as my breasts fall free. "Oh, that's a good little slut."

What the fuck did he just call me ?

My head snaps round, the sudden motion digging the collar into my neck. All my resolve to pretend he's not there evaporates. I look at him, and oh, God, I wish I hadn't. He leans forward, legs spread wide, all the relaxed elegance he showed a moment ago long gone. His expression is pure feral desire.

The refined veneer he wraps himself in has shattered, and what it's revealed is so, so much worse.

"Carry on," he demands, gaze burning a path through all my defenses. I've never felt so vulnerable, but that expression keeps my hands moving. It doesn't matter. He can call me what he likes, he can strip me, but if I play his game, I'm safe for tonight.

And tomorrow, I'll get out of here. I'll find a way.

I yank down the skirt and lacy panties. Don't look at him. Just don't look. I clutch the chain of my leash, just to give my hands something to do. I'm not going to cover myself. That would make it worse.

He makes a noise, and it sounds almost like a laugh. What? My head turns, drawn by a magnet, to see his lips twisted up in the way that is starting to scream danger. He relaxes into his seat, some of his composure back, and scans me up and down.

“This is the best game of Simon Says I’ve ever played. What should I make you do next?” He makes a show of thinking. “I know. Jump up and down.”

Fifteen

Sebastian

Jacob and Gabriel warned me this could happen. That the sudden rush of power, of realizing I have complete control of another human being, could unbalance me and send me spinning along a path I never meant to go down. They gave me tips to overcome it, to stay calm and not lose track of what really matters, but they're not working.

Blood pounds in my ears, and God, Ophelia is just so fucking beautiful, naked in her collar and high heels. She's beautiful, and the horrified disbelief on her face just makes this even better. I wasn't supposed to enjoy punishing her, but, Christ, I am.

"What?" Her voice is high, and I can't tell if it's anger or hysteria.

"What, sir. And you heard correctly. Take the shoes off first, if you like."

A bit of the Calder haughtiness makes itself known as she balls her fists. "I'm not doing that."

I shrug, though inside, I'm screaming. She's calling my bluff, and even I'm not sure what I'll do next. I get to my feet. "Okay. If you're forfeiting the game—" I drop my hand to my belt buckle .

"Wait! No." There's panic in her voice. Panic, and true fear. When did I become such an evil bastard? I pause, head cocked.

“You want to keep playing? Tell me properly.”

Her knuckles whiten as she drops her gaze, though the collar keeps her head up.

“Yes. Yes, sir.”

I sit, affecting nonchalance even as triumph surges through me. She’s really going to do it. She’ll do whatever I say.

Fuck. It’s almost too much.

She bends to remove the shoes, and her perfect, rounded ass juts toward me. I can’t wait to touch her. My fingers itch, but I hold myself back. First, I can enjoy the show. She makes a meal of removing her shoes, delaying the inevitable, but before long, she’s facing me, skin beaming red.

I twirl my hand like a Roman emperor. “Go ahead. Until I tell you to stop.”

She closes her eyes and mutters something, I don’t know if it’s a prayer or if she’s telling me to go fuck myself. Either would be understandable. Then she jumps, delicate little lifts on her toes. It’s every bit as ridiculous as I thought it would be, and the way her tits bounce has my hand straying to my crotch, rubbing the aching iron bar of my cock through the fabric.

She’s looking everywhere but at me. I almost command her to look me in the eyes, but I don’t trust myself to speak, I’m so caught up in the way her body moves. Her skin gradually deepens from its usual light tan to a deep, beaming red. Is she getting tired yet? Bad luck, if she is, I could watch this all day.

Her leash jolts around to the rhythm of her jumps, and the end catches under her foot. She stumbles, grabs the leash and shoots me a desperate glance. She’s breathing hard now. I should put an end to her misery.

Not yet, though.

“I didn’t tell you to stop. ”

She flinches at the words, but gets back to work. She grips the leash tightly now, knuckles white on the leather. Her tits are probably getting sore from all that movement. I really should let her stop.

Soon.

There it is. That swell of power. I should feel embarrassed by how much I’m enjoying this, and if she was a helpless woman, maybe I would. But she’s a fucking Calder, and she’s performing just for me.

Christ. If I make her keep going much longer, I’ll come in my pants. And that would be a terrible waste. I raise a hand. “Stop.”

She does, panting hard. I give her a few seconds to recover, then snap, “Hands on your head.”

She lets out a small, pained groan but complies right away. It mustn’t seem like much, after what I’ve just made her do. I study her, top to bottom. Red tinges her chest, neck, and face. Her eyes are a gray storm angled off to the ceiling, and there’s shimmer in them too. She’s fighting tears.

But she deserves this. I’m delivering justice, even though it’s in a messed-up form.

I stand, and she flinches back a step. I give her the full benefit of my friendliest smile, the one that makes old ladies blush. “Relax, pet. You’re doing well. Keep your hands where they are now. I’m going to inspect my property.”

She swallows, an anxious bob of the throat, but doesn't argue. She's slipping into obedience, and I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed. I come close, only inches away, and she looks me in the eye for the first time in a while. The position she's in pushes her breasts up in the most tempting way, and I can't resist any longer.

I bring my hands to her waist and almost groan at the softness of her skin. It's been months since I touched a woman, and I grasp the silky texture as if I'm drowning. She sucks in a sharp breath as I trace the bottom of her ribcage, just exploring.

This wasn't part of the plan. Humiliate her, then send her to bed to think about it—that's what was supposed to happen. But I'm human, and God, she feels like heaven. I slide my hands up higher, skirting the soft swell at the bottom of her breast. I want to go higher but force myself to linger. Am I teasing her or myself? I can't think beyond the next breath.

Higher. The soft weight of her tits just about kills me. I find her nipples and roll them between my finger and thumb. She bites her lip as they slowly harden, and I duck my head to her ear. "That feels good, doesn't it?"

"Fuck off."

"No. In fact, I think we'll move this to the bedroom. Come." I grab her leash and give it a sharp tug.

She gives a last, longing glance at the door as she follows me to my room.

The bedcovers still lie in a tangled heap. No cleaners allowed until I've got into some sort of a routine with Ophelia. I throw them onto the floor and point to the bed. "Up you go."

She obeys but shoots to the corner of the bed, knees tucked up, hiding herself away.

Her voice quavers when she says, “Remember. The game. You promised.”

“Don’t worry. We’re just going to watch a movie.” I grab the remote, turn on the TV, and pull up the feed from the miniature hidden cameras in my living room. I select the one I want, rewind to the spot I’m looking for, and set it to loop. Ophelia appears on the screen, naked and jumping.

I get the reaction I hoped for. Ophelia shrieks, covering her eyes. “No. Turn that off.”

I climb onto the bed, shift the pillows up like I’m settling in for a Netflix binge, kick my shoes off, and sprawl. I hold my arm out. “Come here and open your eyes. That’s an order, pet.”

She crawls over, eyes open but not looking at the screen. I pull her into the crook of my arm and point at the screen. “Watch yourself. Look what I made you do. Should I release this, do you think? Leak it out onto the web? Kendrick would kill me, but I’m not exactly in his good books right now anyway.”

He’d flay me alive and eat my eyeballs, probably. But she doesn’t need to know that.

She stares at the screen, a miserable groan dropping from her lips. “Please. Turn it off.”

I don’t. Instead, I raise up on one elbow and start to play.

Her eyes stay locked on the screen as I trace her curves. She’s stiff under my hands, but when I reach her sensitive nipples, her breathing changes. It’s subtle, but if there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s this. I can spend many happy hours finding the pleasure points on a woman and making full use of them. I know when I’ve struck gold, however much she tries to hide it.

Let's see what else I can find.

I move down the bed, and she shoots me a shocked glance as I place my hands around her feet. I start to massage them, fingers moving in firm circles, and she barks, “What the hell are you doing?”

“We need to work on that tone of yours. Disrespect earns punishments. Do you want me to drag you down to the refectory in just your collar?”

“No,” she mutters, and I pause my massage, waiting, until she adds, “sir.”

Every time she says that, it's a lightning bolt straight to my cock. I've never dabbled seriously in BDSM, nothing beyond a bit of role-play. Making a girl call me sir or master never appealed—too fake and cheesy. But hearing it from Ophelia doesn't feel fake at all. She remembers, or she gets punished. She's respectful, or she pays for it.

Jesus.

I try not to let my whirling thoughts affect the firm pressure I apply to her feet or the even cadence of my voice as I ask, “Do the shoes make your feet sore?”

I press my thumbs into her arches, and a tiny, satisfied noise escapes her. “What do you care?” A pause. “Sir.”

I gesture at the bedroom. “I like to keep my property in good condition. You're no different.”

She makes a quiet, disgusted sound, then answers my question. “Platforms aren't too bad. Better than stilettos.”

“Good.” I part her legs, just slightly, then move up her calves. The muscles there are

tight. She's been holding herself so tense since she arrived; she has to be all knotted up. Her gaze drifts back to the TV screen, to the looped video of her debasement, and her face twists.

"Keep watching the screen."

I move higher, parting her thighs and tracing patterns on the soft skin there. I concentrate on the silky-smooth texture, resisting the urge to hurry this or look at her. I want to drag this out, to have her wondering if I'm ever going to move on. The only sound is her erratic breaths. Is she watching me or the screen? I don't want to break the moment to find out.

I push her legs wide apart, and she makes a plaintive little noise as I finally let my finger graze the very outer edge of her pussy. She's spread out before me, and the glisten of her arousal almost finishes me off. I finally let myself look at her.

Wide pupils stare back at me, black pools in her stormy gray eyes. There's high color in her cheeks, and her puffy lips are parted in the most delicious way. Her voice is soft as she says, "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" I drag a fingernail along the edge of her slit, and her eyes flutter closed.

"Touching me like this. You hate me."

It's the first time she's said it, and the words jolt me out of the mesmerized state I'd dropped into. I do hate her. And as much fun as it is working out what spots on her body light her up, she needs to understand this is all part of her punishment.

"You're right. I do." I drop my head down, right to her pussy, and spread her apart. The heady scent has me drawing in a deep breath without even meaning to. "And

even so, look how wet you are.”

I swipe a finger through the moisture and hold it up for her inspection. “I’ve abducted you. Collared you. Humiliated you. And with all that, you still can’t resist me.”

I give her a devilish grin and swipe the pad of my thumb over her clit. She shudders.

“You were born to be a slave. Just a lost little pet desperate for a master.”

“No!” Her voice is stronger now, pure indignation. I’ve touched a nerve. “I hate this. I hate you.”

“Sure.” I rub over her clit again and, this time, get no reaction at all. “Your soaking wet pussy says otherwise.”

She opens her mouth to answer, but I pull back, and she shrinks away as I lean over her to open my bedside drawer. Her brows knit in confusion as I pull out a tiny bullet vibrator. “Another game.”

Sixteen

Ophelia

I hate him. I hate him so fucking much. But even more than him, I hate that he's right. It's been so long since I was touched like this, and my body is grabbing on to what it can get, no matter the source.

Ever since Harrison almost killed the guy I was sneaking around with in college, I've forced myself to be the sweet, not-quite-virginal daughter the Calder family expects me to be. But dirty novels and vibrators can only scratch an itch so far. Years of frustration takes its toll.

And now, this absolute asshole is using it against me.

Sebastian activates the vibrator, and the sound sends a pulse through my clit. God, I'm pathetic. The sound of an inanimate object has me clenching my thighs.

"What game?" I manage. What more can he possibly do to me? My eyes stray to the hideous video again. I've never seen anything more degrading. He made me do that, and I've only been in his clutches for one day.

"I'm going to make you come while you watch your favorite show. If I fail, I'll leave you alone the rest of the day. You can lie in bed, watch TV, eat whatever you want, and I'll keep out of your way."

Tempting. Very, very tempting. I'd be able to get my head on straight, and maybe, by

tomorrow, I'll be out of here. But I'm already having to fight to keep from squirming on the bed. I swallow before asking, "And what if I fail?"

He smiles again, and I'm pulled in by the expression even though I know it's a mask. The combination of the flash of white teeth and the amusement in those vivid blue eyes, is dangerous. "If you fail, then I get to come all over that pretty face of yours. And we play the game over and over again until I get tired of it."

I'm drenched in feelings, floundering in a sea of them. There's a hot, traitorous pulse between my legs, which I try to ignore, and a sticky dose of revulsion, bolstered by anger. He's not doing that to me. Absolutely not. He'd probably photograph it and send it to my dad as a Christmas card.

Why? Why did I have to think that?

"Do I get to refuse?"

"Refuse, and you forfeit. I'll come on your face anyway."

There's something about the matter-of-fact way he says these things messes with my head. It's as though he's laying out the rules of Monopoly. Shouldn't he be cackling maniacally or look like a disgusting creep? Shouldn't he be more obviously messed up?

Stop. Nail down the rules. "How long do you have to do it?"

"Five minutes. And you have to relax and let me do as I please. If you fight, you forfeit."

Damn it.

“This is gross and sick. You realize that, right? You know this is wrong? ”

His thumb finds my clit, and unprepared, I don't have time to school my face. My lips part, and I sigh as he circles his thumb. I didn't think it was possible for him to look more smug. I was wrong.

“I don't care. And soon, neither will you. You'll beg for this.”

Arrogant bastard.

He makes a show of checking his Patek Philippe watch. It's subtler than some I've seen but still flashy enough to catch the eye. Irritatingly, it suits him rather than looking overdone. He turns it to me, showing me the time. “Relax and watch yourself on the screen. Five minutes. Starting...now.”

Thank God he told me to watch the screen. If anything is a mood killer, it's watching myself bouncing like a trained monkey. Pathetic. Weak. I let the rage and revulsion fill me as I stare at myself. The footage has already looped, back to the start. Was it really only a few minutes? It felt like forever. With that sight in front of me, this should be easy.

I expect him to dive right in, target the vibrator aggressively on my clit, but he doesn't. He presses to the side, so the vibrations only tease. Then he rolls one nipple between his fingers and lowers his head to the other.

Oh my God.

Lines of white fire shoot from his fingers and tongue, straight into my needy clit. The light vibrations, too far from where I want them, have me desperate to press my knees together.

No. Don't be stupid. Focus on the screen.

I do, but even that pales as Sebastian twists one nipple and sucks the other. Why is he being so fucking gentle? Why is he...

He shifts the vibrator, rolling it over my clit for a second before pulling away. Then he does it again. And again. Everything between my legs is on fire, and I could almost grab his stupid, teasing hand and put the vibrator on my clit myself .

What the hell am I thinking? The screen, the anger. Focus.

I try to, but my eyes are drawn down by the magnetic power of watching what Sebastian is doing. His strong fingers stretch my nipple, twisting just enough to hurt, and I gasp as my core spasms with need.

He looks up, and our eyes meet. His have darkened from a summer lake to an evening sea. He watches my reaction as he twists my nipple again, harder this time, and I can't hide the way it makes my thighs clench.

How long has it been? Five minutes, surely. I must be safe now, right?

He moves the vibrator again, and this time, he doesn't tease. He presses it to my clit, and my body surges toward pleasure.

No. No.

I stare at the screen, trying to summon the rage. The anger. It has to be there. I need it to protect me.

But the vibrations roll over my sensitive skin and force me toward the edge. I try to fight it. To will my body to behave. It's useless. I can't stop the blistering orgasm that

rolls through me, and I can't even hide it. My pussy clenches, and moisture spills from me, dampening my thighs, Sebastian's fingers, every damn thing, and my breath comes out in a desperate whoosh.

Don't moan. Don't moan.

I bite my lip, but Sebastian sits up anyway, pure triumph on his face. He twists his watch to face me. "Two minutes and fifteen seconds."

I stare at the time. The numbers are right, but I can't believe it. Surely not. It can't be right. Can it?

The aftershocks of my climax still pulse as Sebastian slides his fingers over my soaked entrance. "Are you sure you don't want me to fuck you? Seems like you're pretty desperate for it."

I hate him. I hate him so much.

I force out, "No. Fuck off."

"You weren't saying that a moment ago."

It's too much. He's too self-satisfied, his words too cutting. It's stupid and childish, but I whip my hand up and slap him right across his smug face.

I expect he'll stop me, but my hand connects with a crack so satisfying it almost drowns out the terror that comes next, boiling through my veins. What will he do now?

He jerks back, eyes wide, and presses a hand to the red mark on his cheek. I don't breathe, don't blink, waiting for him to strike back.

Then he laughs. It's real and unaffected and fills the room. I can only stare as he gets himself together, gaze finally settling back onto me. "My God. Wait till Jacob hears about this. I'll never live it down."

I'm frozen, trapped between relief he's not retaliating and offense that he finds it so funny. My voice rings sharp as I say, "Who the hell is Jacob?"

"It doesn't matter." He smiles down at me and brushes a strand of hair from my face. The heat from his finger remains, a track across my skin. "I didn't think you had it in you. You've been such a good, compliant little thing. I'm happy you've got a bit of fight."

Every word is calculated to enrage me. Sugary, patronizing, and cutting far too close to the bone. I try for another slap, but he curls his hand around my wrist. He might be dressed in elegant clothes and talk with a cultured accent, but his fingers are iron bars, and he forces my hand down to the bed with no effort at all. "Time for your medicine."

I can't fight him. I know what comes next, and my skin flushes hot. I shake my head. "Don't. Please. "

"A game is a game, and you lost. You had your fun. Don't try to deny me mine."

Quicker than I believed he could move, he shifts, straddling my hips. His weight presses me down, and I try to struggle, but he's an immovable object. Panic surges, and I flail my free hand up, scratching at his face.

He plucks it from the air, too, and presses both to the bed. I can't move. I can't do anything but stare up into his face, where all traces of amusement are long gone. He studies me, and there's a feral light in his eyes, a cruel twist to his lips that quells my urge to keep struggling.

“Behave, Ophelia. If you do, I’ll let you clean up afterward. Keep this nonsense up, and I’ll tie you to the bed and leave you in the mess until I feel like letting you go.”

Ugh. It’s an unbearable image, and it rips the last of the fight from my muscles. I go limp, staring up at him with all the hate I can muster. He shakes his head. “Wow. If looks could kill, I’d be...”

He lets go of my wrist and mimes slicing a blade across his neck.

Oh, good. Back to the joker.

“Get it over with, then.” I try for disdain, but it comes out shaky.

“Since you asked with such beautiful manners.” He frees my other wrist and pauses, waiting to see if I’ll strike. I want to—oh, I want to so much—but it’s useless, so I force my arms to lie limp against the covers.

He undoes his belt buckle.

I don’t want to look at what he’s doing down there. It makes it too real, so I focus on his face. His perfect hair got mussed up somewhere along the way, and it softens his face. His lips part, and his breathing grows rough .

Don’t look down.

My eyes flick there anyway. His hand is wrapped around his cock, and he works himself like his life depends on it. My God. If the girls at school knew he was hiding that monster, they wouldn’t have made fun of his scruffy jeans.

I drag my gaze to his face. With great effort, he grinds out, “I’ve been hard for hours. Open those beautiful lips.”

I squeak as his free hand grabs my breast. His fingers dig in, and he lets out a rough groan. A tiny, sick part of me rears up. It's the sort of noise I fantasized about as I lay alone, bringing myself to orgasm after dull, unsatisfying orgasm. It's raw, and for one blissful second, I forget where I am and who I'm with.

He moans again, and I close my eyes, lips parting as he lets go, splattering sticky fluid across my face, neck, and tits.

"Oh, good girl. Good girl." It doesn't come out as mocking this time. I don't open my eyes. If I keep them shut, it's not real.

I taste salt on my lips, and they sting. Reality crashes in, popping my bubble. They're sore because of what he did to me. This isn't one of my harmless fantasies. He's my captor, and as I open my eyes, what I see rips any lingering pleasure away.

His phone is clutched in his hand, and he's wearing the smirk that makes my hands itch to slap him again. "Say cheese."

He snaps another picture.

That bastard.

He spins the phone around. The photo he took before I realized what he was doing fills the screen and stops my breath. My eyes are closed, my stupid bee-stung lips are parted, and I look, for all the fucking world, as if I'm enjoying myself. What the hell?

He presses buttons. "That's my new background. Perfect."

I can't find a single thing to say .

The rest of the day passes in a haze. I'm naked for all of it, and Sebastian's hands are

on me for ninety percent of the time. At least he removes the collar. I even eat naked, picking at a platter of food spread out on the bed.

Once he finally gets bored of the looped video, he hands me the remote and tells me to put on whatever I like. I stare at it, confused as a time traveler confronted with some strange new device. “What?”

He stares between me and the TV. “A TV show or a film. Choose one. If it’s a tricky concept, I can find you an instructional video to watch?”

“No. It’s...” I gesture around the room. “You kidnapped me. I can’t just choose a show. It doesn’t make sense.”

He shrugs and snatches the remote back. “Fine. I’ll choose.”

Then he stretches his long legs out beside me on the bed and chooses a thriller.

He forces four more orgasms on me and follows up by painting me with his own each time. Either he’s got the stamina of a marathon runner, or he’s been deprived as long as I have.

I’m yawning by seven and dozing off by eight. Every time I try to needle my brain into thinking about my predicament, it shuts down. Too much has happened, Sebastian is invading every inch of my personal space, and all I can focus on is what his hands are going to do next. I’m freshly showered, my skin clean, but his scent is everywhere. On me, around me.

I’m drowning in it.

My eyes slip closed again, and when I force them open, he’s watching me. His thumb brushes over my cheek. “Time to get you set up for bed, pet.”

I'm in bed. I've been in bed for hours. He nudges me with his shoulder. "Go on. Brush your teeth, all the usual stuff. "

I should snap back, but I'm far too tired. I trudge to the bathroom. As I brush, a few bumps and bangs grab my attention. A tight, anxious thread pulls me out of my daze.

What now? I open the door.

On the floor, next to the bed, is a monstrosity that clashes so horribly with the tasteful decor it hurts my eyes. A giant pillow, pink and white striped with a frill all around the edge.

I take a step forward, trying to make it make sense. Then I see the name embroidered in loopy script across the top.

Ophelia.

Seventeen

Sebastian

I'd love to film her reaction to the bed, but I'm annoying myself with my constant need to record Ophelia. I'll just have to remember this the old-fashioned way.

Ironically, the revolting bed is one of the most expensive items in my apartment. It turns out custom-made memory foam beds cost a lot, and persuading a reputable luxury craftsman to upholster it like a five-year old's drawing costs even more. It's sized to allow her five-foot-seven frame to stretch out and should give her an excellent rest.

If she can get over the shame of actually sleeping on it.

She takes a step back and glares at me, arms crossed in a way that pushes her tits up delightfully. It took no time at all for her to get used to being naked. I don't think she's naturally shy, just buttoned up and used to acting prim and proper. Is there time for one more round before bed?

"I'm not sleeping on that." Bold words, but her voice has lost its stern Calder snap. There's a quaver to it, and even her brave posture doesn't last. Her shoulder slump, and her gaze slips from mine to the floor .

Dark circles ring her eyes, and she looks close to collapse. I don't blame her. Today has been rough. I'll save the next round for tomorrow.

“It’s nice you’re so desperate to sleep next to me, but I’m afraid you’ll have to earn that privilege.”

She scoffs. “I’d rather sleep on the floor.”

“I can’t stop you from doing that. It’ll be cold and miserable, but that’s your problem.”

I leave her to debate her options and head to the bathroom to set up the final surprise of the evening. As I expected, she follows when she hears the clink of metal on metal, peering through the door. “What the—”

“Just an extra safety measure to make sure you don’t try to smother me in my sleep. It’ll let you reach your lovely bed and the toilet, but you won’t be able to reach me.”

Getting the special leg shackle and chain the right length took a fair bit of wrangling and moving of furniture, but now it’s perfect. It’s designed to look medieval—a chunky metal cuff attached to a length of clanky chain—but I had the inside lined with soft fur so it won’t damage her skin.

I’m too generous with her, really.

Her mouth works as she watches me lock the chain to the hidden anchor point behind the toilet. She stares from the cuff in my hand to the bedroom door, which we’ve already established she can’t open.

“Why?” she asks softly. “Why do you need all this? You could just lock me in a room, away from you.”

I could—I probably should—but I really, really don’t want to. There’s something enticing in the thought of having her right here, at my fingertips. Sleeping.

Vulnerable. It's sick, and I'm really starting to worry about my mental health, but whatever. I want her on the damn pet bed .

“That wouldn't be any fun, would it? Now, the shackle is going on one way or another. Where you sleep is up to you.”

She clenches her hands into fists and closes her eyes. I can almost hear her counting to ten, then she sticks out her foot. “Fine. I'll be out of here tomorrow anyway.”

I clip the shackle on tight and wait until it's safely locked in place before I answer. “Is that really what you think?”

She bends to examine the cuff, running a finger around the edge. “Nobody wants to get on my dad's bad side. I'm sure your superiors understand that. They'll probably hand him your balls on a silver platter too, for good measure.”

Tough words from a chained, naked woman. A little flicker of something almost like pride flares for an instant before I snuff it out. I open the closet and pull out her blanket—striped to match the bed and embroidered with her name, naturally—and hand it to her. She stares down at it as I sit on the bed and unbutton my shirt. “Let me tell you a story.”

She watches as I undo the first three buttons, then looks away. Not shy but wary of seeming interested in me, I think. She tests the length of the chain, then wraps herself in the blanket and sits on the floor. It's polished wood and can't be comfortable, but she crosses her legs and looks at me defiantly.

I shrug. “The Brotherhood formed over five hundred years ago. Since then, we've had thousands of Wards. Do you want to know how many escaped?”

She doesn't answer, but I carry on anyway. “Twelve. And every single one was more

than a century ago. In the last hundred years, every woman that entered the Compound has never left.”

It hits her hard, but only little signs give it away. White knuckles as she clutches the blanket. Tightness around her jaw. “ I’m sure most of you freaks do as you’re told and choose sensible targets.”

“Not at all. Back in the eighteen hundreds, one Brother took a liking for the president’s niece. Can you imagine? He took her, and even though records show the Brotherhood was pissed about it, they never released her. Choosing a Ward is a sacred duty, and interfering with it goes against everything we stand for. Some cowards might complain, but they’ll lose the debate. I’m keeping you.”

I strip my shirt off and throw it into the hamper. The silence stretches as I do the same with my trousers. As an afterthought, I toss a pillow onto Ophelia’s bed. Her gaze is locked on the floor, but I don’t think it’s anything to do with me. She bites her lip, then winces when she hits the sore skin. Her eyes shine. She’s fighting tears. My heart gives a dangerous lurch.

“Please don’t do this.” All the bravado is gone from her words, and I pause before turning off the light. “I’m sorry about Maggie. I’m so, so sorry. I was a stupid teenager. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Any shred of pity I’d been feeling evaporates. Crocodile tears and fake fucking words. I hardly recognize the cold hiss that comes out of my mouth.

“You know when that might have meant something? Right after she died. Or any fucking point between then and now. Funny how you’re so, so sorry now that I own you. Didn’t give a shit before, though, did you?”

“I did! But I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me. I wrote you a letter but never

sent it. I didn't want to cause your family any more pain."

There's sorrow in her words, and a small, pathetic part of me almost believes her. I crush it .

"Convenient. You know, if you'd actually reached out to me, you might not be here now. Maybe you'd still be out there, living your life, and I'd have some other poor girl shackled to my fucking toilet."

I spit the words and turn off the light. I'm so far from sleep that the next few hours are going to be torture, but I'm too stubborn to get up and do something else. Instead, I seethe in the dark, running her words through my mind. She's sorry. Sorry doesn't bring back the dead.

Ophelia's chain clanks as she shifts around, and it's music to my ears. I'll teach her to be sorry. It doesn't take long for her to give up on the floor and move onto the pet bed. I smile as I hear her settle in and the little sigh she gives as she realizes how comfy it is. Some of my anger drains away at that noise.

She's not really Ophelia Calder anymore. This revenge of mine will kill that bitch forever. She'll just be Ophelia, my compliant, beautiful little pet.

She's still asleep when I wake up. I'm so used to sleeping alone that the soft sound of her breathing shocks me into full awareness as soon as sleep starts to dissipate. I sit up, covers tangled around me, and study her in the dim, early morning light.

Her deep blue hair spills across the pillow, and her lips lost their puffiness overnight, settling into exactly the subtle pout I wanted. She's kicked the blanket half off in her sleep, and it displays her shackled ankle as perfectly as if I'd posed her for the photo.

Way too good of an opportunity to miss .

I snap a few shots, then scroll through my gallery. Which should I use? An easy choice. The one of her on the pet bed and the one I took yesterday the moment she opened her lips when I shot my load on her face.

Adrenaline sears me as I find the numbers I need and hit send.

There's a moment, once the message is sent and can't be called back, that my heart stops. What did I just do? Until that exact moment, this could have ended peacefully. The Council could have overruled Kendrick, forced me to relinquish Ophelia, and cut a deal with the Calders to limit repercussions.

Now, though? It's over. I've burned the crops, and I salt the earth with my next message.

She's a good girl. I think I'll keep her.

Then I block Harrison and Randall Calder's numbers and head to the shower.

I let Ophelia sleep in, pacing the apartment until the intercom buzzes. When my friends pour in, it's almost surreal. Yesterday was a break from reality, where it felt like only Ophelia and I existed. The sudden press of people in the apartment ratchets up my nerves as reality kicks down the door. I've fucked everything up for everyone, and it's time to face the music.

Quinn barges in first, iPad clutched in one hand as usual. She rarely goes anywhere without Candice, bringing her CI friend along to dinners, parties, and basically anywhere Jacob lets her. I once asked if they'd had a threesome, and Jacob told me, in his dour British way, not to give Quinn any ideas.

“Where is she?” Quinn demands, staring around the living room, then glaring at me. “You’d better not have her locked in a cage. ”

“No, only your wonderful man is twisted enough for that. Sorry to disappoint.” I pause, then can’t resist adding for dramatic effect, “I’ve got her chained up, sleeping on a pet bed.”

“What?” Quinn’s shriek could shatter glass. “Let me see.”

“Quinn.” Jacob points a beefy finger at the couch. “Sit. Or you know what’ll happen.”

She does as she’s told but sticks her middle finger up when he turns his back. I stifle a laugh—the nerves are making me jumpy—and he whips his head back to face her. “What was that?”

I wink at Quinn. “Nothing. Sit down. You’re making me nervous.”

“You should be fucking nervous. I just spent an hour with Kendrick. He’s worried, mate. Get everything sorted here, and we’ll head to mine. We need a game plan before we go to the meeting.”

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Maybe I don’t need to worry about the meeting. Jacob might crush my throat with his bare hands when I tell him about the texts I sent this morning.

Jacob snaps his fingers in front of my face. “You in there, mate? Hurry the fuck up.”

“Yes. Right. Gabriel, come with me. I’ll introduce you.”

Gabriel rolls his eyes. “I can’t wait. You owe me for this.”

He squeeze’s Eve’s hand, and she sits next to Quinn. Their excited chatter follows me as we make for the bedroom. I push the door open, half expecting to find Ophelia still asleep, but she’s up, blanket clutched around her.

“Jesus,” Gabriel mutters, “You weren’t kidding.”

I give Ophelia my most patronizing smile. “Morning, sweetheart. Glad to see you slept well. ”

I’m braced for a smart remark, or at least a “fuck you,” but her gaze is locked on Gabriel. “Why is he here?”

It takes me a second to understand the direction of her thoughts, and for some reason, I rush to reassure her. “He’s just here to babysit. Don’t worry, pet. I love to show you off, but I don’t share.”

I use my thumbprint to open the locked drawer next to my bed and hand Gabriel the key to the shackles. “You can unlock her with this. She’s only allowed the clothing in this drawer—” I gesture with a flourish. “—and don’t let her spend the day in the blanket. It stays here.”

Gabriel nods. “Got it. Any other rules?”

I shake my head. “If she gives you any trouble, lock her back up and leave her in here all day.”

“Will do. You’d better get going.”

Yes. I'd better. I give Ophelia one last look. "Be good."

Then I head out to face the music.

Eighteen

Ophelia

Sebastian leaves, and it's just me and the goth guy. He said his name yesterday, but I can't remember it. I grip the blanket tighter than I've ever gripped anything. I never thought I'd be sad to see Sebastian go, but this guy could be worse. Sebastian doesn't share, but does this man give a shit about that?

He takes a seat on the edge of the bed. "Don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you or take that blanket away. Promise. I'm Gabriel."

"Ophelia." I pause, then add, "Calder."

"I know who you are." There's a long pause, and he seems to be debating with himself, but at least he's not coming near me. My heart rate starts to slow, but his next words fling it up into the stratosphere.

"I don't know how much you know about your family business, but a few months ago, a Calder spy abducted Eve. My Ward. He planned to steal my research, kill me, and sell her into slavery. Human trafficking." He studies my face. "Did you know about that?"

What? Stealing research and tech? Sure. But my family aren't in the skin trade. My dad has his faults—a lot of them—but he wouldn't allow that. Harrison? Maybe. But he's not in charge. Not yet.

“No. That can’t be right.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrow, and his gaze is a laser, staring into my soul. “You really think that?”

I lift my chin. “Yes.”

His face relaxes, just a little, but his gaze never wavers. “I’ll leave the rest of that discussion to Sebastian. But pay close attention to me now. Out there”—he jerks his head toward the bedroom door—“are two women. Eve and Quinn. They’re very excited to meet you, and they’ll help you get settled in.”

He glances to the window, then back again. “I know you’ll be desperate to escape. You might even be tempted to threaten or hurt one of the girls to get your way. You might not understand everything your family does, but you’re still a Calder.”

There’s no real threat in his voice, but my skin prickles anyway as he continues. “I love Eve more than anything else on this planet. Jacob feels the same way about Quinn—and when you meet Jacob, you’ll understand why pissing him off is a really, really bad idea. If it crosses your mind to raise a finger to either of those girls, squash that thought. Do you understand me?”

There’s only one answer, and it’s out of my mouth before I even consider it. “Yes. Of course.”

Do I mean it, though? Sebastian said all the women here are captives. Could I hurt one of them if it meant getting out of here? My dad would in a heartbeat. And does this guy seriously expect me to believe he’s in love with his slave?

The longer I spend in this place, the less sense it makes.

Gabriel watches me for another long moment, then nods. “Okay. Give me your leg, and I’ll unlock the shackle.”

I do, trying not to flash any more skin than I absolutely have to. Gabriel works the key in the lock, and the shackle falls to the wooden floor with a clunk. He holds up the key, then pockets it. “One wrong move, and you’re in here till Seb gets back.”

Great. Another man, telling me what to do. He gets to his feet. “I’ll send the girls in.”

What? Now? I almost tell him I need to dress first but then remember the clothes I’m allowed. If I’m going to meet new people, the blanket is preferable. “I need five minutes.”

I don’t call him sir, even though, apparently, it’s expected, and he doesn’t remark on it. “Okay.”

I spend the next five minutes in the bathroom, mostly staring at my face in the mirror. Yesterday, with everything, I didn’t have the chance to process the changes to my appearance. Now, it’s all I can see.

The worst thing is, I don’t hate it.

When I was younger, I longed to dye my hair crazy colors, but Dad would have killed me. One of the reasons I picked on Maggie was her hair. She had a new color every few weeks, and her parents didn’t give a shit. Jealousy turned to hatred in my dumb teenage brain.

I wrap the blanket around me like a dress, tucked in tight, as I study my lips. They don’t hurt anymore, and the effect is subtle, not like the duck face some women love. It adds sensuality to my features, and I can’t stop staring. I touch them, and even the glittery nail tips don’t look out of place, paired with the hair and eyelashes. It’s

different, but I can't convince myself it's all bad.

Only the bedroom door clicking open pulls me away.

"Hello? Ophelia?" a bright voice calls. "We're coming in, okay?"

I take a deep breath and step into the bedroom. Two women hover just inside the door. One is tiny, with a mass of bright green hair, a crop top, and a miniskirt that covers about as much of her as my outfit choices will me .

The other is a little taller, has her long brown hair in a sensible ponytail, and wears jeans and a black T-shirt decorated with a Cheshire Cat grin. The curly script reads Step into Wonderland. A choker circles her throat, and though I can't be sure, everything about it screams collar.

They couldn't be more different, though they both wear identical pairs of metal cuffs on their wrists. Weird. Which one is Gabriel's Ward? His slave? My stomach clenches as I think the word while looking at these two real women, these human beings, trapped here for the pleasure of sick men.

The smaller one squeals. "Oh my God. Your hair is fucking amazing. I wish I could get mine shiny like that, but it's damaged as all fuck." She brandishes a chunk of her thick hair in my direction. "See?"

I stammer, "Uh..." as the taller girl gives me a warm smile.

"Hi. I'm Eve, and this is Quinn." Her warm brown eyes flick to the pet bed, and my face heats as her hand flies to her mouth before she covers her shock. "I'm guessing you've had a rough first day."

"You could say that." To my horror, my bottom lip wobbles, and I breathe hard to

stifle a sob. I've been clinging to control for so long that it won't take much to strip it from me.

Eve nods. "We've both been through it. We know how you feel. I cried my head off at first."

"And I set fire to Jacob's favorite stuff," Quinn chimes in. "Though in my defense, I was really, really fucking drunk."

I stagger to the bed and collapse onto the edge, head in my hands. The girls sit either side of me, and one of them wraps an arm around my shoulders. Eve speaks. "You're not on your own here. We don't know each other yet, but we will. You've got friends."

Not don't worry, we're getting out of here .

Not these bastards won't win in the end.

Not we'll kill these assholes together.

Friends. They want to be friends. They're just as messed up as everything else in this place, and I'll get no help from them. My skin heats, and my blood pounds in my ears. If what Sebastian said was true, I might not get released today. They might actually decide to take my family on. How long can I survive here? There's nothing I can do to help myself. Nothing at all.

Jesus Christ, stop being a whiny, pathetic little girl. You're a Calder.

My dad's voice rings through my head, pulling me back from the brink.

Eve speaks again. She seems to be in charge, out of the two of them. "I know it's a

lot. You must have a million questions. We'll answer them, if we can."

Just what I need. Rote answers from brainwashed zombies. So helpful.

Except, maybe it is.

When we were setting up my salon, my dad lectured me nonstop. The most valuable asset in the world is information. While your girls stick preservatives into these dumb bitches' faces, listen to what they've got to say. Chances are they'll drop something useful once in a while.

The jittery edge of panic recedes, as it often does when I give myself a problem to chew on. Even if these women are institutionalized, they're still useful. They'll have information and might be able to move around without a guardian.

I force my shoulders to relax and my head to lift. Eve and Quinn glance at each other, then Quinn bounces to her feet. "First step—let's get the fuck out of this room. Away from..." Her gaze shifts to the pet bed. She takes a slow step toward it, as if dragged by an invisible force.

"Quinn." Warning resonates through Eve's voice. "Don't you—"

"I have to. Sorry." Quinn flings herself onto the pet bed and wriggles up to the pillow. "Oh. Oh my fucking God, this is comfy. I bet Seb had this hand-stitched by some blind Italian that only makes one bed a year or something."

She sits up, grinning at me. "If you like fancy rich person shit, you got the right guy. Seriously. I'm going to ask Jacob for one of these. Perfect for gaming."

Eve lets out a long sigh. "For God's sake. She's only just arrived."

It should make me angry, Quinn making light of my captivity, but looking at her in the bed loosens the suffocating shame that's been choking me. Seen through her eyes, it's different, something to laugh at. And she's right, it is insanely comfy.

For the first time since Sebastian forced me into his car, a smile touches my lips. My voice comes out quiet, but the girls turn to me, listening. "At school, Sebastian always wore baggy jeans and ratty, old T-shirts. I can't believe how discerning he turned out."

Quinn's eyes widen. "I need all the gossip right now. Anything I can use against him the next time he makes fun of me."

Eve chimes in, "That does sound fun, but we need to get her dressed, remember?"

She turns to me, face coloring. "Sorry. I didn't mean to talk about you like you aren't here. It's one of my pet hates, and it happens a lot in the Compound. Gabriel said you need to get dressed. Seb insisted. We'll head out to the living room, but don't worry, Gabriel won't hover around. He's going to work in Seb's office. "

Seb. She calls him Seb. As if he's a friend, someone she's comfortable with. It grates against my nerves.

Quinn jumps up. "Ooooh, what clothes do you have? I bet it's all designer, right?"

My heart sinks again as my eyes stray to the closet. I sigh. "The opposite. He's gone for more of a ten-dollar hooker vibe."

An awkward silence falls, which Quinn breaks almost instantly. Defeating uncomfortable moments seems to be her superpower. She gestures dramatically to herself. "Don't worry. Jacob won't let me wear bras. Or anything except fucking skirts, and most of them are tiny. Pretty sure everyone in this place has copped an

eyeful at some point. No one gives a shit.”

There’s something so goddamn reassuring about Quinn’s attitude. If she was in my place, she wouldn’t be wallowing in shame and self-pity. She’d probably give Sebastian the finger and walk out the door stark naked to call his bluff. I need a little more of her attitude and a little less of my own.

“Where are they? It can’t be that bad. We’ll make it work.” Eve smiles reassuringly as I point out the drawer. Within ten seconds, Quinn has everything dumped out and spread across the floor. She snatches up a silver miniskirt and squeals. “Holy fuck. I love this. What size are you?”

“You can’t steal her clothes.” Eve sounds annoyed, but it’s the friendly annoyance of people who love each other’s company.

Quinn huffs and puts it down before grabbing a miniature blue halter top that would barely cover my breasts. “This one. You’ll look smoking hot in this, and it matches your hair. Come on. Drop the blanket and try it.”

There’s a big, big part of me that wants to roll myself up in the blanket, throw myself down on the pet bed, and refuse to move until someone makes me. But that won’t bring me any closer to freedom. Getting the hell over myself and facing this, though? That might actually help.

I steel myself and examine the clothes. “Okay. What else do you think?”

Two hours later, I’m seated on the sofa with the girls, watching some ridiculous reality show Eve insisted I’d love. I don’t, but I’m not going to argue when she and Quinn are clearly having a good time and just being around them is lifting my mood. It’s a wrench to my heart when Quinn glances at the clock and leaps up.

“Shit. I need to get to Medical. It’s my checkup.”

Eve frowns. “Again?”

“Yep. My ECG was a bit off last week. Probably nothing, but they’re checking me every fucking day. It’s so annoying, but if Jacob finds out I skipped, he won’t let me come for a week. I’ll die.”

I ignore that comment, tempted as I am to pry into it, because something just pricked my brain and I’m trying to catch it. I keep my voice neutral as I ask, “There’s a medical center here?”

Quinn grins. “Oh yeah. The fanciest one on the planet, and it’s all completely free. One of the benefits of being a sex slave.”

“Jesus! Quinn!”

I should ask why Quinn needs the ECG, or at least give some sign I’m still in this conversation, but the wispy memory thread just got stronger. My dad and Harrison, celebrating.

Right in the heart of the place. Fucking Medical.

It’s tenuous, but I clutch it. My family has spies everywhere. I try to remember more of the conversation, but at the time, I gave it zero thought. Could they have been talking about the Compound?

Only one way to find out.

Nineteen

Sebastian

“Right. Kendrick is at my place. It don’t look good, mate.”

Jacob’s words hammer down as we approach his door. There’s that broad accent again. Not a good sign.

“Kendrick? Why?”

“He wants a word with you before the meeting, and for us to walk in together. A united front. He’s really stickin’ his neck out for you. Try not to do anything else fucking stupid.”

Like texting Ophelia’s dad and brother detailed pictures showing exactly how I’m degrading her? Like that?

Shit.

Jacob opens his door, and I follow him inside. The place has transformed from the miserable man pad it once was. Quinn’s quirky personality screams at me from every available surface, from the gloomy stuffed deer and boar heads to the gaming merch to the colorful pop art on the walls.

Kendrick, thunder-faced in his ever-present dark suit, looks like a funeral director in a playground. He’s seated at the dining room table, glaring at his phone, and his head

snaps up when we enter. “About time. What kept you? ”

I resist the urge to hide behind Jacob and meet his glare head on. “Just getting my Ward settled, sir. It’s still early days.”

“And those days might be numbered, along with your own, if this meeting doesn’t go our way.”

Our way.

It’s shameful how much relief that one word brings. Our. The big man, as Jacob calls him, has my back.

For now.

“Sit. We don’t have long.”

Jacob and I take our seats as Kendrick sets down his phone. He looks out of place with technology, as ridiculous as that sounds in the Brotherhood Compound. He seems like he’d order horses to be saddled. Ravens to be sent.

Christ, I’m spiraling, thoughts dissolving into nonsense as my heart races. Deep breaths. Deep fucking breaths.

“There’s been a development, and it’s not good. You both know Anthony Harker?”

Jacob nods as I force my whirling brain to concentrate. The connection clicks into place. A youngish Brother working on something in computing. He works in my building and keeps to himself. I don’t want to ask the next question, but I have to. “Yes. What about him?”

“His mother and father were attacked last night. Men broke into their home, battered them, and left them tied up. His father will pull through, but it’s touch and go for his mother. They’re in our hospital now. The Calders claimed responsibility early this morning.”

It’s a punch straight to the gut. My fault. My stupidity. My drive for revenge. I knew this might happen. Didn’t I? Yes, but that doesn’t come close to the brutal reality.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter, and Kendrick shakes his head .

“That’s not worth much. I also received a second message from Randall Calder at eight this morning. He doesn’t just want his daughter back. He wants you, Sebastian. Alive or dead.”

Right around the time I sent my message. The ever-present dice in my head roll, falling out just as I predicted. My message raised the stakes, and now my life hangs on how highly the Brotherhood value it. Exactly as I planned. Mission accomplished.

Fuck.

“Of course, I have no intention of letting that happen. You’ve acted in the most thoughtless, callous way possible, but even though you’re yet to be initiated fully, you’re still a Brother. It’s a sacred bond, and I won’t see it sullied to pander to this criminal scum.”

See? Ravens.

Focus.

Kendrick’s gaze sears me. “Not everyone will be of the same mind. This meeting is a fight for your life. When called to speak, focus on the ancient dignity and tradition of

the Brotherhood. Don't try to argue what you did was correct—it wasn't—but call on your Brothers to honor their duty anyway. We are all flawed."

Kendrick? Flawed? I doubt it. But I nod anyway. "Yes, sir. I understand."

Jacob glances at his battered, old watch. "We need to move."

"In a minute." Kendrick narrows his eyes at me. "Is there anything else I need to know? I don't like surprises. If something I'm not aware of comes out at this meeting, I won't be pleased."

Kendrick's not pleased is anyone else's really fucking pissed. I close my eyes, say a small prayer to the patron saint of ridiculously stupid people, and explain about the photographs I sent. When I finish my sorry tale, the silence has actual physical weight. It crushes me into the floor.

Kendrick's voice is a snake's hiss. "And why, may I ask, did you feel the need to antagonize Ophelia's father further? Was abducting his only daughter not sufficient?"

I clench my fists. "You said it yourself. They're bottom feeders. Scum. I don't want to cut a deal with them. I want to end them. I just made sure the feeling was mutual."

Jacob's long sigh holds all the thoughts he's keeping to himself, thoughts I'll no doubt hear later in painstaking detail.

Kendrick gets to his feet. "Well, you've made the bed, and now we all have to lie in it." His voice drops. "Don't disappoint me again. I like you, Sebastian, but even I have my limits."

We walk three abreast to Main Admin, where we angle toward the Boardroom. I've only been there once, to demonstrate a highly successful new algorithm to a group of

senior Brothers.

It's ironic, really. I came from money, and my greatest skill is making more of it. My predictive algorithms have thousands of applications, but financial trading is by far the most fun. I make a game of it, the numbers meaningless digits, and I'm sure it won't hurt my situation that I bring millions of dollars each week to the Brotherhood coffers.

If it wasn't for that, my head would probably already be in a box on Randall Calder's doorstep.

The Boardroom falls firmly in the gloomy old country club side of the Compound's aesthetic. A heavy oak table, shiny from years of varnish, sits in the center. It's over three hundred years old, one of the Compound's original features.

Oil paintings stare down from the wood paneled walls, and the ugly green brocade carpet would look at home in some disheveled, old stately home filled with ghosts. The whole setup is designed to intimidate and depress, and even knowing that, it works.

We're the first to arrive, and Kendrick takes his seat at the head of the table, flanked by Jacob and myself. A clear statement of intent. Jacob might not be a full Brother, but his place is assured—Quinn has been going around telling everyone how excited she is about the ceremony. Also, his public position and military background give him serious clout.

I've heard rumors people think Kendrick is grooming him to take over one day, and I'm not sure they're wrong. Jacob snorted and told me to fuck off when I asked him, but that doesn't mean anything. The people best suited to lead are usually the ones who don't want to.

Kendrick speaks quietly. “All five councilmen are attending. My vote holds the weight of three, and it takes five votes to carry a motion forward. If two support us, we succeed. If all five go against me, I can’t protect you.”

I lean forward, interested despite the circumstances. The Brotherhood keep their politics secret, leaving Kendrick as the visible face of all decisions. “What if it's a tie?”

“A tie is the same as a loss. The motion is dismissed. We keep proposing alternatives until one passes outright.”

All in all, not a terrible system, but I’d always imagined Kendrick would have the ultimate power of veto. Five votes, and I could be done for. The balance of probability sits in my favor, but I’m a long way from safe. A really, really long way.

I jump when the door opens, and Jacob shoots me a frown. I can almost read his thoughts. Keep it the fuck together.

One by one, the councilmen exchange polite greetings with Kendrick and take their seats. None speak to me or Jacob.

My stomach turns over, and I’m glad I didn’t eat this morning. Isn’t there some line about condemned men eating hearty breakfasts? Not today, I didn’t. Once all five are seated, Kendrick thumps a smooth rock with a little hammer, and I jump again. Fuck. I hadn’t even noticed the stupid thing in front of him.

“Welcome, all, and thank you for attending this extraordinary general meeting. Is anyone present unaware of the reason?”

A chorus of negatives punctuated with hostile glances in my direction follows, and Kendrick nods. “To business, then. Randall Calder has demanded not just his

daughter's return, but Sebastian's life. As this demand is clearly unacceptable, we must decide on a response."

"Why unacceptable?" a ginger-haired, bearded Brother who looks like he'd play an angry dwarf in a fantasy movie asks. His honking Texan voice doesn't fit his looks. He should be Scottish. "You want all our families to pay for his mistake?"

A rumble runs around the table, but I can't tell if it's agreement or anger. Kendrick doesn't miss a beat. "The Calder family are low-life criminal scum. We've tolerated their interference in our affairs for too long as it is. And you want to offer up one of our own as a sacrifice?"

"Not one of our own yet. Just an initiate. I know he's part of your special little club, Kendrick, but that doesn't make him a full Brother."

Special little club. Interesting. Is that really how the other Brothers see us? Fred said something similar. Something to think about later. If there is a later.

Kendrick's face tightens. "Sebastian's work has been impeccable. I don't need to remind any of you how much money he's brought into the Brotherhood bank accounts. And his initiation is only a month away."

A different man, tall, bald, and with jet-black skin, speaks. His deep voice echoes around the Boardroom .

"His initiation won't happen. There's no way that girl will submit to his authority. A month or a year, it doesn't matter. She's a crime lord's daughter, and there's a good chance she already knows what happens if she refuses to obey. She'll act up out of spite to see him dead."

Fuck. Does she know? She didn't act as though she knew the Brotherhood, but why

the hell would she? I'm sure she's hiding what she knows.

The poison dwarf chimes in again. He's not even a real dwarf, but now I can't get the name out of my head. His loud voice batters my eardrums. "And everyone the Calders target in the meantime will have suffered for nothing." He gets to his feet. "I call a vote. Red to end this charade and hand the idiot over."

My blood freezes as the Brothers reach under the table and pull out smooth, flat stones. White covers one side, vivid blood red the other. Appropriate. Kendrick sets his down immediately, white side up. "Three for white. Anyone who chooses red is choosing a path of utmost cowardice. To sacrifice the life of a Brother..."

His pale face and the tight set of his lips scream true rage. I'm not sure even he believed it would actually come to this.

The two Brothers who already spoke set down their stones, blood-red side to the roof. The color sears my retinas, burning a path to my brain. Another Brother sets his stone down, red side up, without a word.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The man on the end, small and mousey with wire-rimmed glasses, slaps the table. "I can't believe we're having this conversation. Kendrick is right. You're pathetic cowards." He slams his stone down, brilliant white side showing.

Kendrick bangs his hammer. "Four for white. The motion can't carry. Dismissed."

The relief is icy water on burned skin, tracking through my veins. I want to run over and hug the little man, spin him round and round like we're in a yogurt commercial. I catch Jacob's eye, and don't miss the way his muscles relax as if he's backing down from a fight. If this had gone against me, would he have done something stupid?

It's a sobering thought. I shouldn't have placed him or Kendrick or anyone else into this position. And what about the fifth councilman? Kendrick didn't wait to see his vote before dismissing the motion. Did he want my head in a box, too?

The brave little man, my new bestie, gets to his feet. "I call a new vote. Red for immediate retaliation against the Calders. Full force. Everything we have. Scorch them off the planet."

Holy shit. Dramatic music should be playing in the background. I love this man. He slams his stone to red and takes his seat.

I hold my breath. This is it. What I've wanted for years. The entire reason I set this insane plan in motion. Can it really be this easy? Dice roll in my mind. Please, let them land on six.

Kendrick flips his stone. "Three for red. Full force is the only option."

The three who wanted me dead flip their stones to white. Poison dwarf, their fucking spokesman, opens his stupid mouth yet again.

"And what if it's not that easy? We don't know their full capability. They've surprised us before. Our families will pay the price if they retaliate, and for what? Olwani is correct. The girl won't submit. It's too much to go to war for an idiot who'll die at initiation."

Everyone falls silent, staring at the one Brother who didn't vote in the previous round. He's tall, skeletally thin, and older than all the rest. Easily in his seventies. "I have sympathy for the young man, but I can't support taking such a risk for someone whose initiation is far from settled."

My heart drops to my boots as he lays his stone down, white face upright.

Fuck.

Kendrick's hammer thumps down. "Motion dismissed."

Skeletor isn't done, though. "I propose we let the lad go through initiation and make a call. If he fails, as you say, the problem is solved. If he succeeds, we go to war."

Yes. Yes, yes, yes. Not quite as good as striking right now, but not far off either.

Kendrick sets his hammer down. "Are you calling a motion?"

"Not quite yet." Skeletor turns to me. "You're confident you can get this girl of yours to behave?"

I clear my throat and try my best to project all the confidence I don't feel. "Yes. Absolutely."

He graces me with a single brief nod, then addresses Kendrick. "The Calders can do a great deal of damage in a month."

A rumble of assent ripples through the room.

"I propose we bring initiation forward. Five days should suffice."

My stomach drops again. Five days? Jacob and I speak together. "That's not..."

"No, he can't..."

"Silence!" Skeletor again. "Initiates only speak when addressed in a council meeting."

Kendrick snaps, “They’re right, and you well know it. He’s only had his Ward for two days.”

“Well then—” Skeletor gets to his feet. “—let's allow the young idiot some grace, shall we? Ten days.”

The three who want me dead mutter and nod. They don't think I can do it.

Skeletor formalizes it. “I call a motion. Red for bringing the initiation forward to ten days’ time. He succeeds, we go to war. He fails, he goes to Randall Calder in a box.”

Twenty

Sebastian

Ten days? Ten fucking days? Even Gabriel had fourteen, and Eve is the nicest person on the planet. I'd been worried about training Ophelia in a month, given our history and her background. But ten days? I might as well chop my own head off and send it to Randall Calder wrapped up like a Christmas present.

Which is exactly what Skeletor wants. Did he and the others plan this beforehand? A way to back Kendrick into a corner? He can veto this vote if my new bestie votes with him, but what then? The vote to go to war right away has already failed. And although I don't want to admit it, these people have a point.

The Calders can hurt a lot of people in a month. And every single thing they do will be another knife in my gut. Another stone on my conscience.

Ten days. I'm not Jacob, with his years of experience, but I'm good at getting under people's skin. I've spent years making people believe what I want them to. Ophelia needs to believe, with every fiber of her being, that she should behave at the ceremony .

Ten days. If I can do it, then maybe no one else will get hurt by my quest for revenge.

Kendrick reaches for his stone. Before he has the chance to flip it to white, I say, "I can do it."

This time, no one berates me for speaking. Jacob frowns, but Kendrick studies me, lips tight, as I push on. “I can do it, sir. This makes sense. I don’t want to cause any more damage than I already have.”

I turn to the four who want me dead. “And when Ophelia Calder kneels and kisses my hand, I expect all of you to clap.”

The poison dwarf snorts. “If she does, I’ll kneel and kiss your fucking hand myself.”

“Enough!”

Kendrick’s raised voice is enough to quiet the room. It’s hard to judge his expression. His face is still tight, but there’s something in the way he’s looking at me that might just indicate respect. Or maybe I’m imagining it and he still thinks I’m an idiot.

He picks up his stone. “If you believe you can do it, Sebastian, I won’t stand in your way. Three for red.”

The thud of his stone is followed by five more thuds. A sea of red stares back at me as Kendrick lifts his hammer. “Motion carried.”

He brings it down with a crack.

My four enemies exchange smug glances as Kendrick speaks again. This time, his voice crackles with authority. “And I’m setting a seal on this meeting. Nothing discussed here is to leave these walls. It’s absolutely vital the girl doesn’t learn of this, and if she does, I’ll know one of you—” He glares at each councilman in turn. “— is a traitor. And you’re all well aware of what happens to traitors. Meeting dismissed.”

Their faces sober instantly, and my curiosity kicks into overdrive. What do we do

with traitors? Boil them in oil? Stake them out in the sun, covered in honey, for ants to eat? Not that we have those sorts of ants here. Do we? Maybe we'd import them from Australia or somewhere like that.

“Sebastian.” Kendrick’s voice makes me jump yet again, and the poison dwarf notices. He shoots a smirk at me. Screw him. I really need to find out who the hell he is and what I’ve done to piss him off. “I’ll see you and Jacob in my office.”

Kendrick’s office is almost soothing after the nightmarish meeting, and I accept the drink he pours me with great relief. Jacob shifts on a spindly chair, and it lets out an ominous creak. If it breaks and sends him sprawling, it’ll almost be funny enough to make up for all the stress. To my great disappointment, though, it holds.

Kendrick wastes no time. “That went as well as could be expected, I suppose. It worked in your favor that Andrews despises Brant and Olwani. Once they opened their mouths, he would have voted against them no matter what. He also loves a fight, though you wouldn’t think it to look at him.”

Andrews must be my white knight. My hero in sensible spectacles.

“But all that aside, you have ten days. How do you intend to make it count? I can help you adjust your training plan for the reduced time you have. Do you have it to hand?”

I don’t, because it doesn’t exist. A familiar feeling unfurls in the pit of my stomach, and my body tenses. Angry, frustrated shame at my own uselessness. I’m back, standing at the teacher’s desk, trying to explain why I forgot my homework for the third time that week. That I spent half the class jotting ideas for something totally unrelated to the lesson because I just HAD to.

I failed in school, badly, for years, until I finally got a private tutor who understood the way I learn and unlocked my potential. I know how this conversation will go, and sweat coats my skin before I even open my mouth.

Disbelief at my carelessness. Disappointment that he stuck his neck out this far for someone who hasn't even bothered to make a formal training plan. Strict instructions to do something that I'll mess up, then the whole cycle will start again.

Jacob, the beautiful bastard that he is, saves me. "It's a living document, sir. Given how unstable this situation is, we worked out a set of guidelines that could be adjusted to reflect any eventuality, even this one. We've got it under control, and Ophelia will behave at the ceremony. You can count on it."

Once all this is over, I'm taking Jacob to do whatever stupid thing he wants. We'll watch soccer, drink his horrible British beer, and eat the soggy monstrosities that pass for fries in his world. Anything to let him know how grateful I am.

Kendrick visibly relaxes. "Ah. I'll take your word for it."

Of course he will. Who wouldn't?

We finish our drinks and spend a few minutes discussing the ceremony before Kendrick lets us go. Only Jacob and I will be initiated this time. Once we're out in the fresh air, I heave a few deep lungfuls of it before collapsing on a bench. Jacob sits down beside me, staring off into the distance.

"Could be worse," he says after a long silence.

"It could." Exhaustion hits me in a toxic wave. I didn't sleep much last night, not like Ophelia on her pet bed. She slept like a log. Maybe I should lock the bedroom door and have a nap on it later. I rest my forearms on my knees and yawn.

“Oi.” Jacob jabs me with an elbow. “You need to be sharp, mate. Lots to do.”

“Yep.” I stifle another yawn and force my head up. “Those guidelines you mentioned. Do they actually exist? Care to share them?”

Jacob grins. “Thought you’d never ask. To make her submit, you can’t just bully her. She needs to be scared of you, sure, but there’s more to it.”

“Enlighten me.”

“She needs to see a life for herself here, something more than being trapped in your room. You need to find something she’ll enjoy.”

“This is supposed to be a punishment.” I hate how sullen the words sound, but I can’t seem to stop it.

Jacob snorts. “You stole her life. If this goes the way we want, her dad and brother will probably die, too. Pretty decent punishment, if you ask me.”

Always so logical. It must drive Quinn crazy. I sigh. “So you want me to go all soft on her?”

“Fuck no. You need to be strict as all hell. But she needs happiness, too. And there’s another side to it.”

“Oh, good. And what’s that?”

“She needs to really understand the security here. All Wards think they can escape. She needs to believe no one is going to help her and there's no way out. The only way she’ll submit to you is if she’s decided making the best of it here, with you, is her only option.”

I raise a hand, ticking off on my fingers. “So put the fear of God into her, make her believe she’s here forever, and give her a sense of happiness and fulfillment. All within ten days. ”

“That about covers it.”

The weariness rushes back, and I lean against the bench as Jacob gets to his feet. “Right, I’ll love you and leave you, mate. Quinn should be just about done at Medical. She’ll be happy when I tell her we’re moving initiation forward.”

A tiny smile touches his lips, and his features soften in the way they often do when he talks about Quinn. “I can’t wait to see my tattoo on her.”

Oh, Christ. The tattoo. I haven’t even thought about what to do for Ophelia—I always imagined something would leap out at me as I got to know her better. So far, nothing has leapt.

The rest of the day stretches out in front of me. Ophelia and I, alone in my apartment. What will I do with her? My skin tingles, banishing some of the weariness. That odd, intoxicating sense of power creeps back in. Whatever I want. That’s what.

But at the same time, Jacob’s words needle me. I need to get her out of my room. As Jacob raises a hand in farewell, I ask, “How about dinner later? Dress Quinn nice, for once.”

I open the door to such an oddly domestic, peaceful scene that it freezes me in the doorway. Eve and Ophelia sit together on the sofa, legs curled under them, chatting. The TV is on, but neither of them is watching. I catch the end of Ophelia’s sentence. “That’s so interesting. I never heard of it bef—”

She cuts off, and her gaze lands on me. Even though I'm the one who forced it on her, the change in her appearance surprises me all over again. In the hours we've been apart, my mental image of her had reverted to the prim, buttoned-up blonde .

Ophelia did as she was told and dressed in the clothes left for her, but there's something different about the way she's sitting. Shoulders back, chin up. Not hiding herself.

She's paired a silver miniskirt with a red satin bra and layered a sheer black top over it. The effect should be tacky, but it compliments her hair. Someone—I'm guessing Quinn—has done her makeup, and the bold eyeliner sets off her long fake lashes. A hint of red stains her full lips.

Christ, she looks incredible.

I catch Eve smirking at my reaction and put my jaw back where it should be. Ophelia flinches slightly as I give her a slow once-over but otherwise doesn't react. I give her my brightest smile. "Good news, darling. That silly business with your family is all sorted out. You're staying here with me."

Her chest rises with a deep breath, but her voice comes out hard as she replies, "Bullshit."

I make a show of looking around. "I don't see anyone here to escort you home. My head isn't in a box, making its way to your father."

Another shuddering breath, and her gaze flicks between me and the door. Eve gets to her feet, face tense. A sliver of guilt edges under my skin. She's a captive, too, for all that she's head over heels for Gabriel. It can't be easy for her to hear me taunting Ophelia. She flashes me a tight smile. "I'll let Gabriel know it's time to go."

She heads toward my office, but Gabriel appears before she reaches the door. He slips his arm around Eve's waist, and she leans into him, body relaxing at his touch. Ophelia watches them, brow creased.

"Did she behave? No toaster incidents? "

Gabriel rolls his eyes at the memory. "No. She's much more sensible than Quinn, though that's not exactly difficult. How did it go? You're still alive, so I'm guessing well."

"Of course. Just a few mutterings from some nervous old men. Kendrick put them in their place."

"Good. I'm glad she's staying. A better influence on Eve than Quinn, I think."

Eve's jaw tightens, but she doesn't respond. She can see the game we're playing and isn't going to ruin it. Gabriel will have hell to pay later, though, if the look in her eyes is anything to go by.

"Yes. In fact, now that everything is sorted out, I thought we could head out to dinner tonight. Jacob and Quinn are coming." I turn to Ophelia. "You'll enjoy La Table Royale. It puts three-star Michelin restaurants to shame."

"Sounds good," Gabriel says.

He's lying, of course. Both my friends hate La Table Royale, the stuffy, upmarket restaurant that sits above the refectory. Even I find it a bit too formal and old-fashioned. It definitely caters to the older generation.

The main point, though, is that today is a Friday, and that means the place will be packed.

Twenty-One

Ophelia

Sebastian's nonchalant act isn't fooling me. Sure, I'm still here, and so is he, but there's more to this than he's letting on. I've always had a sixth sense for when I'm being played, and this little back-and-forth with Gabriel feels like a scam.

But...I am still here. The military guys haven't thrown a hood on my head, bundled me into the back of a car, and dumped me on my dad's doorstep. My optimistic hope that rescue will come without action on my part deflates like a two-week-old balloon.

I'm here, Sebastian is here, and Eve is about to leave.

I'd started to relax with the girls. Logically, I know they're brainwashed, but they don't seem like they are. Nothing they say is sparking my bullshitometer, and even Eve and Gabriel's affection seems genuine. I know it has to be some toxic Stockholm syndrome, trauma-bonding crap, but no one has ever looked at me the way he looks at her. Sad but true.

Eve detaches from Gabriel and comes over. There's an awkward moment, and I can almost read her thoughts on her anxious face. Well, time to get sexually assaulted by your captor. Have fun. See you at dinner.

She gives my shoulder a squeeze. "We'll see you later."

At least she doesn't tell me everything will be fine. Gabriel raises a hand in farewell,

then wraps it around Eve's. They leave together, looking like a pair of happy newlyweds. It's too strange, and all at once, I can't stand to look at them. I turn away, staring out of the window as the door closes.

The trees stretch out, and I can't help searching for the metallic slash of the fence. The girls assured me that part of Sebastian's story is true, and I believe them. The trackers too. The time might come when I'm desperate enough to throw myself at an electric fence, but it hasn't come yet.

A reflection on the glass warns me of Sebastian's presence before his hand wraps around my waist. A casual touch, the way a boyfriend would stand with his girl. Not that I've ever experienced that sort of relaxed intimacy. The two guys I've been with only saw me as forbidden fruit. A crime lord's daughter—the sex equivalent of bungee jumping off a skyscraper.

Sebastian grips my shoulders and gently turns me to face him. The smug, fake expression is gone, and he studies me more frankly than he has up to now. His skin is paler than it was yesterday, and dark smudges ring his eyes. Either he didn't sleep well, or whatever happened this morning took a lot out of him.

He rubs the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. "This came out perfect. Do you like it?"

Yes, actually. When Quinn insisted on doing my makeup, I couldn't stop staring at my lips in the mirror. But I'd stab myself before I'd admit that. "No. They look stupid."

"They don't, and you know it." His hand slides up to my hair, running a lock of it through his fingers. "You look absolutely fucking incredible."

I shouldn't feel anything at his words, but my heart pulses anyway at the raw desire

in them. All I can think about is the pleasure he forced on me the previous day. Over and over, while I begged him to stop. My pussy clenches at the memory, even as my face heats.

I can't help but study the hard angle of his jaw and the midnight-blue pools of his eyes. Men who look like him shouldn't be dangerous, but that's what he's giving off now. A smile flickers across his face, and it's the one that makes me shiver.

"We played a game last night. Do you remember?"

I'll never forget until the day I die. I grunt in assent, though hope sparks. Maybe we can stick to the same rules as before.

"The ceremony we discussed yesterday? We're going to practice for it. If you behave and get it right, you get to pick where I fuck you. If you mess up"—he shakes his head—"I get to choose."

"But...I... You can't..." The words clump together. I can't get over how casually he's saying all this. Like it's normal and I'm the crazy one. Maybe I am.

"I can, and I'm going to." His face softens. "This will all feel normal soon."

The echo of my thought sends a chill through me. Will it? Based on Eve and Quinn, who both seem like intelligent women, yes, it will.

He claps his hands as if it's a done deal. "Right. The ceremony." He pulls out a chair and sets it on its own in the middle of the living room. "You need to imagine this is a stage and you're off in a room to the side. They might let you have Eve with you while you wait. Quinn will probably go first because..."

He falls silent, and I have the distinct impression he almost said something he

shouldn't. He doesn't seem good at keeping secrets. If I'm smart, I might get him to reveal something he doesn't want to. "Why will Quinn go first?"

"She's been here the longest. That's how they do it."

I'm not buying it .

He raps the back of the chair with his knuckles. "The real chair is a big, heavy carved thing. I'll sit on it to wait for you. You'll strip and walk out to kneel at my feet."

Said as if he's explaining how to make a cake. He seats himself in the chair and watches me expectantly. "Go ahead."

My eyes are drawn back to the window. I want to be out there. Anywhere else. Not here. Kneeling for him is just...no. I can't. I shake my head. "It's ridiculous. You're not a king, and I'm not your servant."

"No, I'm an ordinary man." He lets out a long sigh. "I hadn't planned on fucking you in the ass for a while, but I suppose I'm going to have to. Maybe it's your thing. Do you prefer it?"

I've never even tried it, and the thought makes me clench up protectively. It'd hurt. It'd be messy. And worse, it'd be degrading. He'd probably take a goddamn photo.

I stare out of the window again, then back at Sebastian patiently waiting on his seat. Would he really do it? I think so. He's made a new game, and this falls within his new rules. Plus, in a way I can't put my finger on, he seems different. Like the gloves are off and everything is suddenly more serious.

Kneel, sit, stand. They're all just body positions. What difference does it make? Quinn wouldn't give a shit. Be like her.

Good advice, but can I heed it? I clench my fists and take a step toward him.

“Strip first. My God, Ophelia, we’ll be doing this for a long time if you can’t remember that much.”

The amusement is back, and so is the darkness. He’s a kaleidoscope, shifting second by second. Why couldn’t I get a sensible captor?

The thought is so stupid it almost makes me laugh, and it gives me the strength I need to strip. He spent hours looking at my naked body yesterday. It’s not like I’ve grown anything new since then. It’s still difficult, though, with the way he watches me. He wears the self-satisfied look of a man who knows he’s going to get everything he wants.

This outfit, chosen with Quinn’s help, isn’t completely hideous, so I take the time to fold it neatly and place it on the arm of a chair. I’ll wear it to dinner later. It’s much better than any of the other options.

When I turn to face him, a smile tugs at his lips. “There’s a good little pet. Well done.”

I wish he wouldn’t do that. And I wish there wasn’t a sad, affection-starved little part of me that warms up when he does. I ignore it, stare at his feet, and force myself to walk toward him.

“On the day, of course, you’ll be onstage in the auditorium. Two-hundred or so people will be watching.”

I know. He’s already said that. He’s just trying to unsettle me. I thump down to my knees as gracelessly as possible and meet his gaze. “What now?”

“I thought we decided on sir?”

I go blank for a moment, then the rule comes back to me. I’d forgotten. And, it seems, so had he, until now. He reaches out and plays with my hair almost absently. “Try that again.”

“What now, sir?” I don’t make the words any more polite, and his smirk returns. He gives his head a little shake. He speaks to me as if he’s talking to himself. “You know, I can’t tell you how strange it is, having you at my feet and knowing I can...”

He slides his fingers down my cheek and over the hollow of my neck. I should flinch back, but his touch is so gentle I almost lean into it. “It would be strange with any girl, but with you...”

He takes a deep breath and drops his hand away. Back to business. “Then, you kiss my hand and recite the following. ‘Thank you, Sebastian, for choosing me as your Ward. I am yours, and yours alone, forevermore.’ ”

Ridiculous. Like some ancient marriage vow. If everything he’s told me is true, it is, in a way. In the past, a lot of marriages weren’t exactly voluntary. Consent is a modern concept, really.

It feels like a revelation, and I can’t help but share it. “All this would have made sense five hundred years ago. If you’re all scientists, why haven’t you modernized? Why are you still like this?”

He dips his head, brow creased. “I’m so glad you’re comfortable enough on your knees to start a philosophical discussion. I imagined you’d be keen to get this over with.”

He starts to play with my hair again, running his fingers through the silky strands.

One advantage of never being allowed to dye it. It's in beautiful condition.

"I once asked Kendrick—that's the big boss—the exact same question. Most Brothers aren't exactly comfortable with the idea of taking a woman captive, you know. We're not total psychopaths."

"Really." I keep my voice flat. Despite the awkward position, I'm glad to talk. "You don't seem too concerned. Neither does Gabriel, from what I've seen."

He laughs. "You wouldn't say that if you saw Gabriel before he took Eve. My God. The man was a mess."

Sebastian slides his fingers through my hair, rubbing my head in a way that is so goddamn soothing I want to close my eyes and relax into it.

"What Kendrick told me made a lot of sense. With what we do and the discoveries we make, we can't lead normal lives. Relationships, kids, divorce. Even using prostitutes. It's too messy and would lead to our work getting stolen. Diluted or destroyed. But we're not monks, and we can't live like we are."

He keeps going with the soothing head massage, and his other hand moves to my breast. He rolls my nipple between his fingers, and it feels too good. It's hard to make myself concentrate on the conversation.

"So, what? The Wards are just sacrifices to your great deeds?"

I can't include myself in the group yet. It's easier to think of Wards as an alien species, which will never include me.

"Yes. You are. At least here, we're making the world a better place. Outside, you were just helping your father make it worse."

The remark cuts, and the worst of it is I don't have a comeback. I'm not stupid enough to believe my family serves anyone but ourselves. More money, more power, more influence. More, more, more.

“And how are you changing the world for the better?”

He pauses his hands for a second. Surprised, maybe, that I didn't bite back at him? Then he moves the tip of his finger to my lips and traces the outline of them. They're still sensitive, and the tingle melds with the pleasure from my nipple, heating my clit until I can't help shifting on my knees. Does he notice? The smug expression returns. Of course he does.

“I'm working on predictive algorithms. I'm practicing with the stock market at the moment—it's fun and useful—but I plan on using them for much greater things once they're perfected. Used right, they'll predict the future. We'll be able to head off disasters before they happen.

Big words and bold dreams. “And you need a sex slave to achieve that?”

He slips his finger into my mouth. It's such a shock that I don't react at first, and the salty taste of his skin lights up my nerves. I have the strangest urge to explore it. I slide my tongue over the tip before I realize what I'm doing and freeze.

Sebastian groans. “God, you're just dying to suck on it, aren't you? Do it. Do it right now. ”

Christ, where did that gravelly tone come from? Full of command and need. I risk a glance at his crotch, and the hard swell of his erection is impossible to miss. My tongue moves of its own accord, sliding around his finger, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world to take a tentative suck.

My eyes are drawn to his, and his darken as I watch. His breathing grows rough and ragged. His free hand moves to his crotch and rubs through the fabric, and my nipple aches from the loss of sensation.

“You lost the game, Ophelia. You didn’t say the words.”

Shit. I’d forgotten what was riding on this. Why did I let myself get drawn into conversation? My words come out muffled and stupid around his finger. “That’s not fair. I…”

“Shhhhh.” He kisses the top of my head. “It’s okay. You got lucky. I don’t choose your ass. It has to be your mouth.”

Twenty-Two

Sebastian

This wasn't how this was supposed to go, but I'm certainly not complaining.

I don't think Ophelia quite realizes how she ended up at this point either. Her eyes widen, but she doesn't pull back. Doesn't run away or try to bite my finger off. In fact, by the way she's shifting about on her knees, I'd say she's enjoying this more than she wants to.

"Good little pet," I murmur, and I swear she leans toward me. The praise gets to her. She drinks it in like a flower turning toward the sun. I can work with that. I don't take my finger from her mouth as I undo my trousers and free my aching cock.

Her eyes flick to it, black and gray pools, and I swear it grows another inch as she sucks harder on my finger. Does she know she's doing it? Fuck.

I stick to the deep, soothing voice she seems to like and speak words I know she'll find patronizing as all hell. "Now, you're going to switch from my finger to my cock, and you're going to do such a good job. Because you're my perfect little slut, aren't you? Say, 'Yes, sir.' "

I hold my breath to see if she'll actually do it. When the mumbled "Yes, sir" comes, it's music to my battered mind. When I'm with her like this, the endless madness of my thoughts settles. There's only her and what I'm going to do to her next.

I pull my finger free, replacing it instantly with the head of my cock. Her mouth is warm, wet, and heavenly, but the stretch of her lips is the best thing I've ever seen. The fleeting urge to take a picture comes and goes. No. This moment is just for me.

I slide in, control already starting to fray. I promised her I'd fuck her, and I'm not going to disappoint. I'm desperate to grab her hair and get to work but can't resist drawing the torment out a little longer.

"You have no idea how beautiful you look with your lips around my cock. This is what you were made for. Just this." I grip her hair. "Your mouth belongs to me, and now I'm going to use it."

I punctuate the words by sliding all the way in, pressing her head down until she starts to fight against my hand. I loosen my grip, and tear-filled eyes stare back at me as she gasps in a breath.

Christ, she's so vulnerable. I've taken a strong woman and stripped her down to nothing. Just a body. Just a mouth. That dangerous rush of power urges me onward, and I force her head down again.

I wait until she struggles. Then a little more. A little more. I decide when she breathes. She doesn't even get to control that. This time, when I release her, her eyes are wide and frantic.

Make sure she's scared of you.

No time like the present.

I fuck her in earnest, all traces of tenderness gone. She's a puppet, a thing that only exists for me to use. She claws at my arms, desperation in every jerky movement, but I ignore her. I'll do whatever the fuck I want.

I breathe deep as I force her head down again. And again. And again. Pleasure starts to build, but I keep it at bay. I want her to feel this every time she swallows. I want her voice to croak at dinner and to tell everyone the reason why.

I feel the moment she accepts her fate. Her hands fall, her throat relaxes, and I take full possession of her mouth. Her eyes and nose stream—such a beautiful mess—and the image sears itself into my brain. A core memory. The moment Ophelia Calder surrenders completely.

I can't last much longer with her looking at me like that.

I speed up, raw need taking over, and drive myself up to the edge and past it. "Good pets...don't waste...their food," I grind out as I spill down her throat. She twitches and mumbles, but I hold her there until white liquid dribbles from the corners of her mouth.

When I finally let her go, she doubles over, gasping. Some come and spit flies from her mouth, but most of it went right down her throat. Where it belongs. I relax into the chair and catch my breath as Ophelia gets herself under control. She swipes at her eyes, glaring at me.

I let a cruel smile grace my lips. "What? I know you love it when I'm gentle, pet, but I can't be soft all the time. And of course the gentlemanly thing would be to let you orgasm, too, but that'll have to wait for later. I'll make it up to you, don't worry. I've got something special planned."

"What is it?" She's aiming for a snap, but it comes out as a scratchy croak that makes my heart glad.

"You'll find out later."

I lean to kiss her head again, and she tries to pull away, but I wrap her in my arms before she gets the chance. As my lips meet her brow, I whisper, “You’re the best little fucktoy I could have hoped for. Incredible. Let’s take a nap before dinner.”

Ophelia is oddly quiet and compliant as I lock her into her shackle and tuck the blanket over her on the pet bed. “Are you wondering why you enjoyed that?” I ask as I strip.

“I didn’t.” A sharp response, but color stains her cheeks.

“Of course not. What sort of lady would?” I climb under the cover. “But you’re not a lady, are you? I’m going to enjoy making you admit it, pet.”

I sleep deeper than I have in weeks. Months, probably. Ever since I began planning to take Ophelia, I’ve slept in short, fitful bursts, mind filled with probabilities. Success or failure. Satisfaction or death. But nowhere, in any of my models, did I factor in that I might actually feel something for the woman who killed my sister.

How vulnerable she is, sleeping in her little bed, does something to my heart that it shouldn’t. I used her roughly, but she still let me tuck the covers around her and kiss her cheek. I’d expected a bitch—cold, tough, and ruthless. I didn’t prepare for Ophelia’s quiet intelligence.

I shouldn’t keep praising her, but I can’t seem to resist it. I’m fascinated by the pink spots that rise in her cheeks when I do and how she looks away, afraid I’ll realize she likes it. It’s adorable and splitting my heart in two. It’s so hard to reconcile this Ophelia with the vicious one from my teenage memories. Even when she tries to be tough, it doesn’t suit her.

She can act the Calder princess all she likes, but it's paper thin, and underneath, she's fragile .

Fragile and mine.

She's kicked the blanket off in her sleep, and I can't help tucking her back in as I creep out of the room. In the silent apartment, the ticking clock on my life is all I can hear.

Ten days.

240 hours.

14,400 minutes

And...I pause as my brain locks in the numbers...

864,000 seconds.

Item one on my agenda, preparing Ophelia for the ceremony, is an abject failure so far. I won't have time to get to it again today. But item two, making sure she understands that no one is going to help her, will be getting a workout later.

"Sebastian?"

I jump. How long have I been standing here? Long enough for Ophelia to wake up and wonder where the hell I am, clearly. Through the window, the sunset over the forest is incredible.

Sunsets always hurt. Maggie loved to paint, and the more color she could add, the better. I used to tease her about her paintings and tell her they looked like a rainbow

threw up. Six months before she died, one of her sunset paintings won first prize at the school art fair.

She rubbed her victory in my face every chance she got, annoying the hell out of me until I threatened to throw the damn thing in the fire.

I kept the huge canvass on my wall for years until I couldn't stand to look at it anymore.

I lean my head on my fist and take a long, slow breath. I'm the wrong person for this, and it's becoming more obvious with every passing second. Instead of planning, I'm zoned out, staring at a fucking sunset. I try not to think about the mammoth task that lies ahead and walk to the bedroom .

Ophelia has the blanket wrapped around her but not clutched tight like she did this morning. She's becoming less and less worried about me seeing her body—one small win on my part, I suppose. Her hair is still messy from sleep, and her eyes are wide and confused. Maybe it's my imagination, but she seems to relax a little when I come in.

“Oh. There you are. It was so quiet. I thought...”

To my great satisfaction, her voice still rasps a bit. It's an electric shock to the new savage side of myself, and part of me longs to grab her hair and use her mouth all over again. I can. She's mine.

No. She needs some kindness, too, if only because I don't want her to run screaming from me at the ceremony.

“You thought I'd left you all alone? I wouldn't do that, beautiful.”

I fetch the key to her shackle, unlock it, and massage the skin where it lay. She tenses but doesn't pull back. Nor does she resist when I peel the blanket off her and study her naked body. I could watch the way her hair falls over her breasts for a long, long time. Again, I picture her as a sea goddess stretched out on a rock. Absolutely stunning.

I hold out my hand. "Time to get up, pet. You've got a busy evening ahead."

She blinks at me, a wary crease forming between her brows, and I can't blame her one single bit for being suspicious. She takes my hand, though, and gets to her feet. Quiet and compliant. It's nice, but I don't trust it. I'm sure she's scheming, looking forward to getting out of the apartment for the evening. But I'll enjoy it while I have it.

As soon as she stands, her gaze locks onto the flaming sky. I lead her to the window and wrap my arm around her waist, tucking her against me. She fits perfectly, and I can't help breathing in the scent of her hair. A hint of fruity shampoo and, underneath it, her.

The sun is just falling below the tree line, and it paints the sky every shade of red. "Maggie loved to paint. Sunsets, especially."

I don't know why I say it. The colors forced the words out, I suppose. Ophelia stiffens but doesn't back away from the topic. "I remember. She won the art contest. She was very talented."

It's my turn to stiffen as a familiar wash of anger, so old it's almost drained of meaning, cleanses the softness from my thoughts. "You remember. Why do you remember? You treated her like shit."

She turns to me, and the deep sorrow etched into her face can't be real. Can it? It has

to be an act. A way to win me over.

“I hated myself for years. My dad told me I needed to get over it, but how was I supposed to? I was jealous of Maggie. She got to do so much that I wanted to but wasn't allowed. It was that fucking stupid. I lashed out at her from spite, and she...”

Tears fill her eyes, and she turns away. “I know you won't believe me, but I'd give anything to change it. I'm sorry.”

My body short circuits, pulled in two directions at once. The part I've lived with since I was sixteen, the grief that never really lessens, wants to shove Ophelia away. But her eyes are stormy pools, and I'm sucked into them. My arm is still locked around her waist, and I don't know if I'm holding her captive or giving her comfort.

Comfort. What the fuck am I doing? I let her go, step back, and take a second—just a second—to get myself together.

Then I force a cold smile to touch my lips. “You’re in luck, then. Because you get to spend the rest of your life on your knees, making it up to me. ”

I turn away before the flash of pain across her beautiful face can weaken me any more than I already am. “Get showered. We don’t want to keep everyone waiting.”

Twenty-Three

Ophelia

There was a moment he almost saw me as human. I caught it, right before his cold mask slammed back into place. I can't blame him for dismissing my apology. I would too, if I were him. It's too little, too late, and I'll never forgive myself for hurting Maggie. Why the hell should he forgive me, after what he lost?

My throat still hurts from how he used me, and every time I swallow, it takes me back there, on my knees, as he fucked my throat.

Part of me is horrified at the memory, revolted that he took what he wanted from me in such a brutal way. But he hypnotized me with his gentle touches and his damn praise until even his savagery felt like affection. No one would judge me for not fighting—he has all the power—but I'm judging myself because, in the moment, I didn't want to.

I wanted him to touch me.

Ever since, I've been floating in a strange, distant headspace. I need to snap the hell out of it and focus on what matters. I'm leaving the apartment. I'm seeing more of the Compound. And, most importantly, I might get an opportunity to see the inside of Medical for myself. If my family has a spy here, I need to make contact.

The more time passes, the less it feels like I'm getting out of here any time soon.

I shower just as Sebastian ordered. Following his instructions comes easier and easier with each passing hour.

I exit the shower to find Sebastian immaculately dressed as ever in a pale gray suit complete with a blue shirt that matches his eyes. And my hair, of course. My stomach flips. The more time I spend with him, the more fascinating the perfect angles of his face become. I'm starting to recognize that when his eyes darken, it's with desire.

They're dark now, and my nerves spark like crazy as he smiles. "There you are. Drop the towel, lie on the bed, and spread your legs."

I clutch the towel reflexively. The blunt words don't sound right, not when he's a poster boy for elegant perfection. I know he'll fuck me for the first time soon, but I didn't think it'd be yet. He seemed excited about whatever he's planned for dinner. And why did he bother getting all dressed up?

"Relax, pet. Your virtue is safe for now. But do as you're told like a good girl, or I might change my mind about your dinner outfit."

He inclines his head toward the bed, and for the first time, I notice a dress. My breath catches, and I reach out to feel the silky fabric. It's stunning, the slippery blue silk gliding through my fingers like water.

Tiny blue jewels cover the neckline, which plunges in a deep V almost to the waist. My breasts will be covered by a thin strip of fabric and prayers to the fashion gods, and the sides are slit to the hip, but the effect is sultry and daring rather than trashy. It's something an actress might wear to the Oscars if she wanted her photo front and center on everyone's newsfeed the next day, the sort of outfit I always imagined myself in but would never in a million years have been allowed to wear.

"Like it?" Sebastian's voice has lost the mocking edge. He sounds genuinely curious,

and a small, stupid part of me is touched.

My voice croaks as I answer, “Actually, yes.”

“Then do as you’re told like a good little pet.”

Oh. Of course. The dress distracted me from his instruction, but now the humiliating reality is back in full force. It’s not like he hasn’t already seen me, every part of me, in great detail. At this point, I honestly don’t think I care about him seeing me naked anymore. But what he’s asking is just...demeaning.

“Why?”

I don’t drop the towel, and he leans toward me. His voice drops. “Do it in the next five seconds, or you’re coming to dinner in just your collar and leash. And be polite about it.”

Shit. He means it. I drop the towel and scramble for the bed. Better to be embarrassed here in private than in front of God only knows how many people. “Yes, sir.”

I stare at the ceiling as I lie on my back, legs bent, knees and ankles pressed together. I stretch my fingers out and find the silky dress, gathering it in my fingers. It’s a distraction, something to focus on, and it lets me slide my legs apart.

This position, in front of a fully clothed man, is just too much. The exposure, like a doctor’s visit from hell, heats my skin, especially as he just stands there, watching. I steal a glance at his face and catch a flicker of amusement. “Hold that position if you want the dress.”

The bastard. He disappears, leaving me contemplating just what my life has brought me to. Through the window, all I can see is a speckling of stars above the thick,

impenetrable forest. Even if I could escape, I'd probably get eaten by wolves. Or bears.

My only experience of woodcraft came from a single, miserable high school camp just for the girls, designed to build character. All it built in me was a strong desire never to go camping again. One thing I'm fairly sure Sebastian and I have in common, if nothing else.

It feels like a long time until he returns. I'm braced for something terrifying. An extra-large dildo or, worse, a speculum. Something about this position has me fearing the worst. But he just holds up a little plastic tub and unscrews the lid.

"The thing about STEM guys is, sometimes we get bored with working on our serious projects. As well as the world-changing stuff, Brothers have invented things that don't have much practical value but can be a lot of fun. And some Brothers are quite creative, especially where their Wards are concerned. Like Eve and Quinn's cuffs."

I shudder at the thought of those cuffs. Quinn explained, in agonizing detail, exactly what they do. At least Sebastian didn't come in here brandishing a pair.

"This stuff"—he holds up the little jar—"could probably make a lot of money out in the world, but so far, no one has bothered tackling the red tape to get it approved. It's popular here in the Compound, though. We call it hot salve. Hold still."

Before I can react, his hand is between my legs. I yelp as he spreads a thick layer of it over my clit. "What the..."

Heat. It builds from a tingle to a furnace, radiating from my clit deep into my body. My lower belly tightens, like the start of an orgasm, but the heat doesn't stop there. It spreads right through me, a wave of sensitive desire.

I breathe deep, trying to tamp the sensation down, but it just builds. Sebastian strikes again, swirling a little balm onto each nipple, and oh shit, they stiffen into aching, sensitive peaks as the heat starts there, too.

Fuck. Fuck. I close my eyes. Sebastian runs his finger over my clit, and I moan as pleasure spikes deep into my belly. Too much. Far too much.

“Fun, isn’t it? It lasts about three hours. Right through dinner.” He rolls my nipple between his fingers, and I swear I’ll tip over the edge from that alone if he keeps it up. He lowers his face to mine as he plays, and his smile should belong to the devil himself.

“You’re going to beg me to fuck you. I might even say yes. How does that sound, Ophelia? Do you want my cock inside you right now?”

He slides a finger inside me. God, I’m soaking. And it feels far, far too good. Good, but not enough. I need more. I bite my lip as he brushes my clit again, sending another spasm through my body.

“Just say the words. ‘Please fuck me, sir.’ That’s all I need, and I’ll do it. You can come as many times as you like and go to dinner satisfied. What do you say?”

I want to say yes. It takes everything I have to hold the words in. Not trusting myself to speak, I shake my head.

He sighs in mock disappointment. “That’s a shame. It’s going to be a long night, and you’re already dripping down your thighs. Wherever you sit is going to be soaked. It’ll smell like you forever.

Jesus. I can’t tell where the raging heat from the potion ends and the flush of shame starts. It doesn’t matter anymore anyway. I’m made of lava.

He pulls his hand free, and I want to grab it and put it back. I want to grind myself against it. He dips his head and kisses my cheek. “Get dressed, pet. We don’t want to be late. ”

He stands, and my hands move without any input from my brain. One goes to my aching nipple, the other to my clit. Sebastian moves like a striking crocodile, snatching my wrists. “No you don’t. You know what you need to say. Any more of that, and it’s just the collar and leash, no pretty dress.”

Damn everything about this man. I sit and look down at myself, surprised I’m not actually glowing. I should be. My thighs press together, and I can’t suppress a moan at the way the pressure makes my clit pulse. I’m never going to survive dinner. I’ll spontaneously combust.

I get dressed in a daze under Sebastian’s watchful eyes, and even though the cool silk rubbing over my nipples is a new kind of torture, it feels good to be clothed. I stare at myself in the mirror, turning side to side.

My God. I never knew I could look like this. The dress clings to me, highlighting the narrow curve of my waist and the flare of my hips. It outlines my breasts in a way that feels more revealing than the trashy costume from earlier. My rock-hard nipples will be obvious from across the room.

When I twist, the dress reveals my legs all the way to my waist, and I’ll have to be careful not to flash my ass. “Panties?” I ask without much hope.

“What do you think?”

He motions me to sit as he selects my shoes from a drawer. Still towering, and this time, the heel is thinner, not a platform. They sparkle, a perfect midnight blue to compliment the dress. He kneels to put them on, and it has the feel of a ritual as he

slides my foot in. I might be mistaken, but I think he enjoys this.

He rubs his thumb over my instep, and I melt as another wash of desire hits. Every nerve in my body is wide awake and shouting. He gazes up at me through his long lashes as he buckles the thin ankle straps .

“I should cover you in this stuff permanently. How long do you think it’d take for you to lose your mind completely? Forget your name. Forget anything except how badly you need me to fuck you.”

He punctuates his words by sliding a finger up my thigh to my throbbing clit, then back down. I’m losing my mind already. It’s gone.

He dips his head between my thighs. For one long, desperate moment, I think he’s going to eat my pussy, and my whole body lights up in anticipation. But he just lands a kiss on my inner thigh and gets to his feet. The spot his lips touched is a red-hot brand.

He fetches my collar from his top drawer, and my heart sinks at the sight of it. The bulky leather will ruin the look of the dress. He follows my gaze, and a smile touches his lips. “You haven’t earned a pretty collar yet, pet. Sorry. And I love how you look in this, even if you don’t.”

He fastens it around my neck, and the tight leather presses against my oversensitive skin in a way that isn’t entirely unpleasant. I risk a look in the mirror and draw in a breath. The collar transforms the sultry dress into something wicked, as if I’m all dressed up as a sacrifice, ready to be ruined.

He offers me his hand, and I get to my feet. I wobble on the ridiculous heels, and he steadies me with one hand as he grips the leash with the other. “Don’t worry, beautiful. I won’t let you fall.”

As I totter out the door, my one remaining rational brain cell shoots an idea to my frazzled brain. I need to go to Medical. Maybe these shoes are my ticket.

Twenty-Four

Sebastian

I could slam Ophelia against the wall and fuck her right now, in the creepy corridor, and I don't think she'd care. I could, but the tiny part of me that isn't completely corrupted is holding me back. I want her to ask for it. Beg, preferably. And yes, using the hot salve is a dirty trick, but I don't care. It's happening today.

She shifts on her feet as we wait for the elevator. Gabriel and Jacob have both experimented with the salve before and told me they had fun teasing the girls until they went crazy. Neither of them was a big enough asshole to use it in public, though. That honor is all mine.

Ophelia's dilated pupils and the way she reacted when I first applied it show it's not going to disappoint me, either. I didn't tell her the effect will get stronger over the next two hours. I'll let her discover that fun fact all by herself.

She's quiet as I lead her through the streets to the restaurant. A summer breeze makes the air pleasant, but it doesn't do anything to calm her flushed skin. I keep a firm hand locked through her arm to help steady her—the shoes I chose really are stupidly high, but the way her ass looks as she totters along is worth it.

I pause as we reach the stairs up to La Table Royale. She has her lip between her teeth, and her eyes meet mine as I study her, then adjust the strap of her dress a fraction to the right. I brush her nipple with my thumb, and her lips part, eyes closing as she moans. “Oh, God, please don't.”

I ignore her and circle it again, fascinated by the way her breathing picks up. This is only half an hour into the process. What will she be like once it hits its peak? My cock is already rock hard, and this will probably be as bad for me as it is for her, but that heady rush of power is in the driving seat again, pushing me onward.

“You know the magic words. Let’s go.”

I slip my arm around her waist as we climb the wooden stairs.

Unlike most of the entertainment spaces in the Compound, which lean toward masculine decor, La Table Royale is pure chintzy French elegance. Spindly tables with white cloths hold bouquets of pink and white flowers, and the napkins are shaped into fussy fans.

Oval pictures hang in gilt-edged frames, showing scenes from before all the royals got their heads chopped off. Women in gowns and men in tights. It’s the polar opposite of my style, and one glance at Ophelia’s bemused face tells me it’s not what she was expecting. I bend my head to whisper, “Revolt, isn’t it? But the food is good.”

She smiles at the comment, then catches herself and looks away.

The restaurant is packed, though the crowd is mostly much older. There’re a lot of Brothers in the sixty-plus category, and their Wards all love this place. It’s a mix of couples and a few larger groups. One packed table has a bunch of balloons and a sign reading “Happy 65th Birthday, Yvette!”

Perfect. As I hoped, Ophelia stares at the people, eyes wide. “Are all these women...”

“Yes. Wards, all of them.”

“How long have they been here? The older ones, I mean.” Her voice is quiet, and she’s stopped fidgeting.

“I don’t know. Most Brothers join before they turn thirty. A few come later, but almost none after forty. So, assuming their Wards are a similar age, thirty years, give or take? Some longer.”

The birthday table breaks out in raucous laughter, and Ophelia jumps. I steady her, but she doesn’t even seem to notice. She’s staring at what must be the birthday girl, if the silly plastic tiara is anything to go by. She’s grinning, sipping on a glass of champagne like any old lady enjoying a night out with her friends.

For a moment, I’m as entranced by the scene as Ophelia. I’ve let myself grow too used to this place. I’ve stopped noticing how twisted the Compound is, but brought back to reality by Ophelia’s shock, the weirdness smacks me right between the eyes. These women are captives. They’ve spent their entire lives in this one small place, and yet, somehow, they’re making the best of things.

“Seb!” A voice jerks me out of my reverie, and I turn to see Jacob and the rest of my friends seated at a round table, watching me with a frown. “We’re over here. You okay, mate?”

A few other diners turn to us—Jacob’s booming voice isn’t exactly subtle—and frowns replace smiles. I’m still the ugly duckling of this place, then. Big fucking deal.

I squeeze Ophelia’s hip to get her attention. “Come on. Everyone’s over here. ”

Everyone, I see, includes Hadrian and Candice. I didn’t invite either of them, but Candice is pretty much a given wherever Quinn is, and she’s made it her mission to bring Hadrian out of his shell with limited success. He’s never rude but just doesn’t seem used to speaking with actual humans.

Quinn leaps up, grabs Ophelia's arm, and drags her into the seat beside her. "Holy fuck. That outfit is amazing." She glares at Jacob. "I want Seb to pick my clothes from now on."

I hold up my hands as I seat myself next to Ophelia. I have Eve on my other side, and it feels like a deliberate maneuver. What's the army phrase? A pincer movement. "Not a chance. Though, if you like, I'll give Jacob some suggestions that go beyond Annie's boutique."

Quinn rolls her eyes and lowers her voice. "Why this place? We're the youngest people in here by, like, thirty years. Might as well have gone to bingo with Grandad."

I wrap my hand around Ophelia's leash and give it a shake. "I don't think you'd want me to bring her to bingo like this?"

There's an unspoken agreement between all of us that we play things as cool as possible around Jacob's grandad. Quinn opens her mouth, but Eve cuts her off. "Maybe you ought to introduce Ophelia to everyone else?"

Eve. Polite and ladylike even in the craziest of circumstances.

Ophelia, oblivious to what we're talking about, stares wide-eyed at Candice's screen. The CI is smiling right back, and Ophelia looks about as comfortable with her as I first was. Well, I am supposed to be blowing her mind today. No time like the present.

"How rude of me." I gesture around the table. "This is Jacob, Quinn's Patron. This is Hadrian. And this is Candice."

They all offer polite greetings, Candice included. Ophelia looks from her screen to me and back again. I would have let the awkwardness drag on forever, but Quinn

jumps in. “Candice is a cybernetic intelligence. The first of her kind. She's a good friend. I'll bring you to the lab and show you the world we're building!”

The pride in her voice is heartwarming, and I don't miss Jacob's small smile. He'd been worried Quinn wouldn't find a place in the Compound, but things settled as soon as she met Candice.

“That'd be wonderful.” Candice says with her odd accent—US with a distinct Scottish twang. “Where's somewhere you always wanted to travel but never got the chance?”

“I...” Ophelia glances around the table. She's probably worried this is some sort of setup to make her look like an idiot.

Quinn grins. “Just talk to her. She's a real person.”

Debatable, but I certainly wouldn't say that in front of Quinn. If there is ever a campaign for cybernetic rights, Quinn will be the figurehead. Or she would be, if she wasn't stuck here.

“I...Well...Egypt, I suppose. I've always wanted to see the pyramids.”

“Oooh. Me too.” Eve's voice has a wistful note, and I have another of those moments where reality hits and everything wobbles. She never will, and it's as much my fault as anyone's. All of us Brothers are as guilty as the rest, keeping our dirty little secret.

I shake the mood off as dinner progresses. I pre-ordered a tasting menu for the table, ten courses paired with wine, and Ophelia chats with the girls through the first three. She won't even look at the guys, and I can hardly blame her. Having dinner with your new friends and the men holding them captive has to be tricky to get your head around.

By the time the fourth course—paté with wafer-thin toast points—comes out, she’s squirming on her seat. It’s time.

I slide my hand onto her thigh. She squeaks, then covers her mouth and sits with a fixed expression as I draw circles on her skin. It’s so, so tempting to push her knees apart and go straight for her clit, but by this point, she’d probably orgasm from a single touch. Entertaining, but not what I want.

She clutches her knife and fork as though she’s going to stab me with them but doesn’t touch her food. Conversation has shifted away from her, and I need to drag it back. As soon as there’s a lull, I say, “Ophelia used to own a beauty salon. Didn’t you, pet? What was it called?”

All eyes lock on her. I pause my fingers long enough for her to take a shuddering breath, then give her a light pinch just as she speaks. “Kallos!”

It’s a high-pitched shriek, and confused glances pass around the group. I rub the spot I just pinched. “That’s a pretty name. What does it mean?”

She’s clamped her thighs together but can’t stop me from working my finger between them. I tease the spot just above her clit, and she lets out a tiny whimper before she forces out, “It’s Greek for beauty.”

“How did you come up with that name?”

Her face is bright red, and she gives me a single, pleading glance.

“Are you all right, Ophelia?” Eve’s soft voice cuts in.

“She’s fine. I just gave her a good dose of hot salve before we left. She’s finding it a bit distracting.”

The table is slow to react. Hadrian and Candice look confused. Gabriel smirks—he was the one who first told me about the salve. Jacob mutters something about just wanting to have a nice fucking dinner for once, and the girls both shoot me laser death stares I'll feel for months .

“You bastard!” Quinn shrieks, and some of the old coots send disapproving glances our way. “You take that poor girl home right now.”

Eve shakes her head like she's not mad, just disappointed, and it bothers me for a second, until Ophelia lets out a strangled whimper. I stop my fingers dead. I almost pushed her over the edge.

“She had her chance for that but didn't want to take it.” I shrug, as if baffled by her choice. “All she had to do was say one simple phrase. But we're here now, and I think I'll give her a choice.”

I move my hand again, and she shudders. She must be right on the edge. Which of my two terrible options will she take? It depends how desperate she is, I suppose. I give Ophelia my full attention and raise my voice to make sure everyone, even the surrounding tables, will hear.

“I can make you orgasm right here, in front of the whole room. Or you can spend the rest of dinner on your knees beside me while I feed you, and I'll do it later. In private.”

I watch her face for the moment I know is coming, and it arrives right on queue. She looks for help. To the girls first. All she gets from them is a sympathetic look from Eve and a mouthed “Fuck him” from Quinn.

Then she tries Jacob, who she must think has some sort of authority. People often do. He shrugs. “Sorry, love. What your Patron says goes.”

Next, she scans the rest of the room. Most of the other diners have gone back to their meals, our brief scene forgotten already. The few still watching return her look without expression.

She tries me, and I return her pleading look with the flattest stare I can muster. “The rules are different here.” I move my fingers again, and her eyes flutter closed. “I make them.”

Will she let me push her over the edge? I can’t decide what I want more. Having her at my feet would be fun, but if she climaxes here, it’s a victory. The moment balances on a pin head, stretching out until she jerks away, shoves the chair out from under her, and drops to her knees.

There’s fury in her eyes, and it’s beautiful to see. I smile down at her. “Only a few more courses to go. I’ll—”

A chair scrapes, and Quinn thumps to her knees right next to Ophelia. “Well, I guess this is how we’re all eating, then.”

My eyes are drawn to Eve. She hesitates, then her face sets and she gets to her knees. She looks up at Gabriel, and I swear he fucking melts. He bends to whisper something in her ear and pets her hair. Zero chance he’ll pull Eve into line.

This is turning from a teachable moment into a joke.

Jacob’s hand covers his mouth, and his shoulders shake. No help there either. If I want control of this situation back, I’ll need to do it myself.

Fuck.

Twenty-Five

Ophelia

I can't believe Eve and Quinn did that for me. It's a single bright spot in the fucked-up nightmare of this evening, the one thing that stops it being unbearable. I've only known these women a couple of days, and they're on their knees in their lovely dresses. For me.

The pathetic thing is, I can't think of one person I know in the outside world who would do anything half as kind.

My dad only allows me to be friends with a certain type of woman. Any friends who don't fit the social mold he wants are discouraged, first subtly and then with a firmer hand. I have a lot of acquaintances among the wealthy socialites, women I exchange air kisses and vapid gossip with. But not a single one would dirty an evening gown for my sake.

The Compound should be the loneliest place on earth, but it isn't.

Quinn gives me a wicked grin, then stretches up to Jacob. They aren't as in-your-face affectionate as Gabriel and Eve, but even so, I can see the connection between them. The little glances and subtle touches. He's terrifying, a giant who could snap her in two, but she needles and sasses him like it's a game .

She returns clutching a toast point smothered in pat  . Before she takes a bite, she whispers, "The hot salve is evil. Jacob once tied me up and covered me in it as a

punishment. I had to lie there and watch one of his stupid soccer games, and he played with my nipples the entire time. He gagged me to keep me from screaming.”

“Gabriel uses it on me, too,” Eve chimes in. High spots of color stand out on her cheeks, and her words run together as though the wine is hitting her. “Sunday is our day together. Some days, he reapplies it all day long because he loves to make me beg.”

She covers her mouth, cheeks growing redder. I doubt she normally shares this much.

The confessions should horrify me—they’re one more example of how messed up this place is—but all they do is make me feel better. Eve and Quinn have been through the same thing. I’m not pathetic for how I’m reacting to the stupid salve.

Sebastian’s hand on my head snaps me out of the slumber party mood. He finds my ear, and it’s yet another spot he can use to torture me. I didn’t even know I was sensitive there. Why do I have to be? He traces his finger along the edge, and everything comes to life again. My body is a rollercoaster, and every time I hit the downslope, I almost lose my mind with need.

He grabs the leash where it meets the collar and gives a gentle tug up. I rise with the pressure until I’m high on my knees, staring up at him in his chair.

I expect him to be angry, but I’m wrong. I never seem to guess his moods correctly. He angles his seat so I’m between his thighs and smiles.

The intimacy of the position hits me in a rush, and I start to sink back down, but he keeps a tight grip on the collar. “No, you don’t. You’re not having a picnic with the girls under the table. This is where you stay.”

Waiters arrive, older men in tailcoats and white gloves. They don’t even glance at the

three kneeling women, just clear the plates and replace them with the next course. It's like we're invisible.

The next dish is a tiny coil of thin steak, rare and coated in some sort of sauce. Sebastian spears it. "Open up."

"I'm not hungry." It's a lie, but my stomach is coiled up in knots.

He sighs. "I didn't ask if you were hungry. Do as you're told, pet, if you don't want to add a public spanking to this evening's fun."

No. I can't take one more indignity today. I open my mouth and let him feed me the bite-sized morsel. It's really, really good, melting in my mouth with the perfect mix of spicy and sweet. I won't starve in this place, that's for sure. The food is insane.

Sebastian watches me swallow like it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen, then spears the steak from his own plate and holds it in front of my lips.

I frown. "That's yours."

"I don't care. Open up."

I do. I can feel myself slipping into compliance again, but what other choice do I have? If this evening has proven anything, it's that the men here can do whatever they want to their Wards. I'm sure he could strip me naked, bend me over the table, and fuck me right here, and all he'd get would be a few disapproving looks.

Something deep in my core clenches at the lurid image. Eyes on us. Watching my debasement. Why isn't that as horrifying as it should be? The salve must be messing with my head .

As I swallow the second bite of steak, Sebastian sets the fork down and takes a deep breath. I can see the moment darkness descends on him. His pupils dilate and his lips part, and my skin prickles like I'm sensing a predator. One hand grips my collar, tight enough to press on my throat, and the other goes to my breasts.

Oh God. Oh no.

If I thought it was intense before, I was wrong. How I felt earlier was a warmup for this all-out assault on my senses. He twists my nipple through the dress, then makes a frustrated noise and shoots his hand underneath, knocking my strap to the side. I yelp at the exposure, but then his fingers are on my sensitized skin, and everything else ceases to exist.

It's too much and not enough all at once. A lightning bolt of pure need drives into my center. I moan, eyes closing. Gabriel's voice makes it through the haze. "She's hitting the peak. If you're planning on doing something about it, now's the time."

Sebastian fixes my dress, then gets to his feet, pulling me with him.

He wraps his arm around my waist and just about carries me through the room. The other diners' faces blur as we reach a door and he pulls me through it. A sweet, lemony scent hits me as Sebastian sets me down and makes sure I'm steady on my feet before he lets me go.

We're in a five-star bathroom, complete with a marble sink, a selection of expensive perfumes and cologne, and an enormous mirror, oval and edged with swirling gold just like the pictures outside. Sebastian locks the door, then points at the vanity, danger crackling off him in a cloud.

"Bend over. Hands on the bench. Now."

His intentions couldn't be any clearer. I picture it and can almost feel it, which sets off another blinding surge of need. I don't want this, but fuck, I need it. I need it more than anything.

Still, I hesitate. Once this is done, it can't be undone. If he has me once, he'll do it again and again whenever he pleases. His reluctance to take that final step has been a paper-thin bubble of protection, and even though my body is screaming at me, it's dangerous to let it go.

He takes a step toward me, then another. Then he's up close, his hand is wrapped around my collar, and even the scent of him makes my blood race and my pussy clench. He turns my head up to face him as he shoves his hand between my legs.

There's nothing gentle about how he touches me now. He grips me by the pussy, and the rough pressure of his fingers makes me yell and moan all at once. Everything else evaporates. My whole world narrows to the pressure on my clit as he drags me to the vanity and flattens me against the cool marble.

It's happening. Oh God, it's happening, and even though I'll hate myself later, I can't find a no. It's vanished from my vocabulary. He lifts my skirt, bunching it up around my waist, and the pure humiliation of it hits me. Our first time, and it's not in his bed or some beautiful place. I'm bent over a sink in a restaurant bathroom like a whore.

My pussy clenches again as the chink of his belt buckle hitting the floor rings through the room. Then his cock presses against my entrance, his fingers find my clit, and I forget where we are altogether.

He's pressed against me, just the tip inside, but he's not moving. Why isn't he moving? I push back, all shame gone, but he holds me in place against the marble as he whispers, "What do you say? I told you the magic words."

What? He moves his finger the tiniest fraction against my clit, and I cry out. The frustration is shredding my brain. Words? What fucking words?

“Say it, Ophelia, or I swear I’ll tie you up, cover you in the salve, and spend the rest of the night fucking your mouth. Last chance.”

It comes to me, and I stammer the words in a rush. “Please fuck me, sir.”

The wash of shame mixes with desire, and I don’t know which is stronger as he pushes inside me.

Yes. Oh my God. Yes.

I’m soaked, wetter than I’ve ever been in my life, but still feel every inch of him as he fills me. There’s pain as my body stretches, but the pleasure swallows it, consumes it, and uses it as fuel to burn even hotter. He feels good. Better than good. Better than anything has ever felt.

He groans as he settles all the way in, and it echoes through my bones. “Fuck, Ophelia. Jesus.”

He holds there for a long moment, then shifts his fingers on my clit and starts to thrust. Slowly at first, but he builds to a punishing rhythm. It’s almost too much pleasure at once, his fingers grinding on my clit as he fills me, and my control shatters right along with my goddamn mind.

That can’t be me yelling and moaning, can it? It can’t be me pushing back into him and spreading my legs to take him as deep as I can. I’m lost, riding a wave of pleasure that drowns everything else. When my climax hits, it’s an explosion on an oil rig. Every muscle in my body clenches at the searing wave of sensation, and I scream.

Too much. It's too much .

Instead of fading like a normal orgasm, it goes on and on, small eruptions following the volcanic blast. I shake, my body spasming like a puppet, as Sebastian growls, "Yes. Fuck. Yes."

He grips my collar and yanks my head up. In the mirror, I see a feral woman, lips parted, hair stuck to her sweaty face, eyes devoid of anything but lust.

"Look," he commands. The man behind me is a wild creature. His lips split in a savage grin, then his eyes close, and he groans. His hips slam forward one last time, pinning me to the vanity with bruising force. My eyes close, too, and I feel it as he shoots inside me. There's a finality to it, and I can't fight the sense of being claimed.

I'm his now. I belong to him.

Stupid. Sexist. Laughable. But it doesn't stop it from feeling true.

I don't know how long we stay there, but awareness creeps back in short bursts. Wetness on my thighs. An ache in my back and feet. Sebastian slides out of me, and it stings. I'll be sore tomorrow, but all I feel is a pleasant ache. A sense of relief.

There should be shame, and maybe there will be later, but right now, I really don't give a shit if what I just did was wrong. I'm trapped in this horrible place, and Sebastian is determined to break me. So what if I did something that felt good? No one cares about proper behavior here. I could walk out into the restaurant naked, and no one would judge me.

It's a tiny bit liberating.

Sebastian smiles, and the darkness is gone—for now. He helps me tidy myself up,

kisses my cheek, and calls me his good little pet. It should be demeaning, but I lean toward it in the blissful aftermath of pleasure. I can still feel the hot salve, but its power is fading. Soon I'll be my normal, boring self again .

When we exit the bathroom, our table is almost empty. Only Jacob and Quinn remain, surrounded by empty plates. Quinn gives me a knowing smile. "Better?"

"Much."

Her smile widens as we sit. "Thank God you're back. "This gorilla"—she jerks a thumb at Jacob—"just ate everyone's fucking food. The full five courses."

Jacob rolls his eyes. "Please. As if that counted as food. Those tiny little bites? Pile it all on a plate, it wouldn't even be breakfast."

Sebastian drains the remains of his wine. "Where did everyone go?"

Jacob snorts. "Gabriel lasted all of five minutes with Eve on her knees before he dragged her off. Then Candice flagged an issue with one of the other CIs, and she and Hadrian left to deal with it. We were just about to go."

Sebastian lays his hand over mine on the table. "Are you still hungry, pet? Should I ask for a doggie bag?"

Quinn rolls her eyes at his choice of words, and I shake my head. "I'm good. Tired, actually."

Quinn nods. "It's the salve. You'll sleep like a baby tonight."

We get to our feet. My heel slips on the wooden floor, and it drags my mind back from the sleepy, comfortable place it'd gone. The shoes. Medical. My plan. I can't let

myself get lazy.

The staircase is my best chance. I clutch the railing as I take careful steps down. It really is a deathtrap in these shoes; no need to fake it. But if I want to end up in Medical and not propped on the sofa with an ice pack, this fall has to look convincing.

Five steps left. Four. It's time...

I let my foot twist under me. Sebastian clutches my arm, but I drop my weight and slip from his grasp, crashing down the last few stairs.

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Twenty-Six

Sebastian

Ophelia tumbles forward with a yell, smacking the ground. I jump the last stairs and drop to my knees beside her. “Shit. You okay?”

I help her to sit on the stairs. She looks at me wide-eyed, then studies her arms. Nasty scrapes cover her forearms and wrists.

She shifts her foot and winces. “My ankle. It’s sore. The shoes...”

The stupid fucking shoes. I made her wear the damn things. This is my fault. I’m an idiot. I should have taken better care of her.

“I’ll call Medical. Make sure they’re ready.” Jacob, practical as ever, already has his phone out.

Quinn crouches in front of Ophelia. “You’ll be okay. The med center is brilliant.” She pulls a bottle of water from her enormous purse and hands it to Ophelia. “Here.”

She takes a sip. When she hands the bottle back, I get to my feet and crouch. I slide one arm under Ophelia’s legs and the other behind her back. She doesn’t complain as I lift her up, though she lets out a pained squeak. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I’ll try not to jolt you around. ”

She’s quiet as I carry her the short distance to Medical. A man in a white coat waits

outside with a stretcher, and I lower Ophelia onto it. He's small, with a bald head, and has to be in his seventies. The glares he gives us tells me he's a Brother. "I don't need a cheer squad. Which of you is coming in with her?"

I meet his gaze. "I am."

Quinn gives Ophelia a hug and promises to check on her tomorrow, and they leave. The doc and a younger assistant wheel Ophelia in, and for the next hour, I'm a spare part, hovering as they do their thing. Several tests later, she's smiling again as they pronounce her free of broken bones.

"So, this machine isn't an X-ray?" Ophelia's gaze is sharp as she studies the printout of her ankle.

"No. Much more advanced. It shows everything from sprains to hairline fractures. You can see here—" He points to a faint red shaded spot. "—a little soft tissue damage."

"That's amazing. What sort of imaging do you have for areas like the brain? Do you have equipment that detects cancerous cells earlier than on the outside?"

I'm sure her barrage of questions will irritate the doctor, but he just smiles. "If you're really interested, come back tomorrow. I'll give you the grand tour."

Ophelia glances at me, and I can see her struggle as she realizes she needs to ask my opinion on the matter. It gives me a sick little thrill. "Can I?"

I raise a brow. "Not if you ask me like that."

She bites her lip, then forces out, "Please, can I, sir?"

I smile. “Of course you may. Anything to keep my pet happy.”

The doctor leaves, and I bend to pick up Ophelia from her bed.

“I think I can walk. Just not in those shoes. ”

I ignore her, picking her up anyway. She’s stiff at first but soon relaxes, her head a pleasant weight on my chest. She has to be exhausted. “You’re never wearing those fucking shoes again.”

She’s quiet as I carry her back to my room, a sharp contrast to her animated chatter with the doctor. She hobbles when I set her down, but she doesn’t seem in too much pain. A few minutes later, she’s right where she belongs, naked and shackled in her pet bed, the shackle on her good ankle, of course.

The possessive rush I get as I lock her in is almost too good. She’s mine, and now there’s nothing holding me back. She begged me to fuck her, and that memory will keep me warm until the day I die.

I don’t give her the blanket right away. I sit on the edge of my bed and can’t stop staring at her. I own her. This woman right here is my property. It’s wrong on every level, but I just don’t care. Is a little power all it takes to turn me into a monster? Does it work the same for everyone? It would explain a lot about the world.

She notices me staring and frowns. “What?”

“What, sir,” I correct, but there’s not much intention behind it. I might get bored of the whole sir thing eventually. It doesn’t matter what she calls me. She’s mine.

She rolls over, tucking herself up in a ball so she’s not giving me a full-frontal view. Shame. It was a beautiful view. “I didn’t realize you were interested in medicine.”

If the question throws her, she doesn't show it. "I always was. I wanted to be a doctor or a nurse when I was a kid, but I was nowhere near smart enough."

I don't like that. Not the words, not the flat resignation in her voice. "What makes you think you weren't smart enough? Did you struggle with biology?"

She sighs. "I have dyscalculia. It's not severe, but I struggle with math. I know some people still manage to do medicine with it, but they need special tutoring. My dad said it wasn't worth it. He pushed me toward marketing and management instead, and that's what I studied in college. I thought I might enjoy it but..."

It wasn't worth it.

Randall Calder's net worth is thirty-two million declared and God knows how much in offshore tax havens. And he didn't think a tutor was worth it? Bullshit. He had his own agenda. Medicine would have taken Ophelia out of his orbit. Out of his control. Running a legitimate business for the family? It kept her right under his nose.

Has she worked it out? Or does she keep telling herself, against all evidence, that her dad is a decent person? Gabriel said she seemed shocked about Eve's abduction. Maybe she really doesn't know how shitty her family is. Or doesn't want to know.

I tuck Ophelia's blanket around her. She looks small under it, and I get an almost unbearable urge to squish into the bed next to her and give her a cuddle. I can't, though. Maybe I can relax a bit after the ceremony. For now, everything depends on her respecting me.

Her eyes close, and I can't resist stroking her hair. The silky strands slide through my fingers like water, and it's weirdly soothing. "My dad thought I was stupid, too."

Her eyes shoot open. "Aren't you a genius? Isn't that why I'm here?"

“I struggled at first, though.” I tap my head. “Severe ADHD. I’m sure it comes as a great shock.”

She smiles, and it’s genuine. “How did you end up here, then? ”

“A teacher figured it out and told my parents. The right meds and some private tutoring, and everything clicked. My dad thought I’d follow him into law after all. I got to disappoint him all over again.”

I climb into my bed but settle on the edge so I can still see Ophelia. When I dangle my hand down, wonder of wonders, she takes it.

“I don’t think my dad would have let me be a doctor anyway. Too many late nights and bodily fluids. Not the image he wants for his precious daughter.”

The tired hurt in her voice blurs the curated image of Ophelia I’ve carried with me for ten years. The hard-faced, money-driven socialite. The perfect Calder princess. Nowhere in that image is a sad girl pushed into a role she never wanted, cut off from doing what she loved.

“You can learn medicine here, you know.” I throw it out casually, but it sounds ridiculous, and her incredulous expression speaks volumes.

“Right. I’m sure you people train your sex slaves to be doctors. Makes perfect sense.”

“You’re not—” I cut myself off. She is, and it’s not going to change. “You’re not just that. You can do what you enjoy, too. And if that’s medicine, I’ll make it happen.”

She’s silent for a while, then quietly says, “I’d like that.”

I should be pleased, but it feels off. She agreed too quickly to something that has to

sound insane. Maybe she hopes saying yes will give her more time out of the apartment. More time to plan the escape I'm sure she still thinks is a possibility.

I squeeze her hand. "Good, then. I'll talk to the doctor tomorrow."

** *

Next morning, I wake up early and call down for breakfast. Jacob says I'm lazy because I never bother to cook, but why the hell would I? When the chefs learn how to make tailored prediction algorithms, maybe I'll learn to make scrambled eggs that don't taste like rubber. We all have our talents.

The smell of bacon must invade Ophelia's dreams, because as soon as it arrives, she's calling to be set free. I breathe through the heady rush it gives me. I'm getting addicted to it, to the constant reminders that she's in my power.

She dresses in the clothes from her drawer without a word of complaint. The tiny denim miniskirt and pink crop top should be tacky, but she makes them look good. Her long, long legs could keep me entertained for hours. She doesn't seem half as self-conscious as she used to be. I can't tell if it's real or if she's just getting better at hiding it.

She attacks her food with gusto, and it makes me smile. I wasn't exactly fair to her during dinner last night—I doubt she even tasted the food. I'll have to take her again. Or, better still, order the food to be delivered and have it as a picnic somewhere away from the stuffy restaurant.

The direction of my thoughts jars me. Why am I planning fun dates for my prisoner? With the woman responsible for my sister's death? I should be thinking up new ways to punish her. But as I watch her tear into a chocolate croissant as if she's been starving for days, the urge to make her suffer is muted to a quiet background buzz.

As Jacob said, I stole her life. Isn't that punishment enough?

We spend the morning practicing for the ceremony. She picks the words up quickly, but I make her do it over and over again. Maybe I enjoy the part where she has to kiss my hand a little too much. Can I be blamed? If we do it enough times in practice, it should come easily on the day. Muscle memory and rote repetition should take over.

Her eyes keep straying to the clock, and when it nears her appointment at Medical, she blurts out, "It's almost time to go."

"I'm well aware of the time. Do this again, perfectly, and you may go."

She tenses at my little power play but doesn't dare jeopardize her morning out by arguing. Another perfect run-through, and we're on our way to Medical. I let her wear white sneakers to protect her healing ankle, and the outfit looks unnervingly like something Quinn would wear. I need to reassess Ophelia's wardrobe.

The doctor who greets us isn't the old guy from last night, and Ophelia's face drops as he says, "I'm sorry. Richard isn't well this morning. He left an hour ago—food poisoning, we think."

"Oh." Ophelia is the definition of crestfallen, and my heart twinges.

The doc—I don't recognize him, but I'm never in here—says, "Don't worry. I'll show you around, if you like. He mentioned you were interested in what we do here."

"Yes!" Ophelia grins as I wave her inside. "Very."

They start to chat, and a message comes through on my phone. I cringe at the noise. Another one to add to the growing pile of unanswered messages. It's from an anonymous sender.

I stare at the screen, black words on white that blur together, and a Zoom link.

Click the link in twenty minutes if you want to know the truth about your slut of a sister. Harrison Calder.

Twenty-Seven

Ophelia

“I have to go.”

I jump at Sebastian’s voice. I’d been so caught up in what the doctor was saying that I’d almost forgotten he was here. I turn to face him and draw in a sharp breath. He looks sick, skin pale and eyes wide.

I almost ask if he’s okay but hold myself back. I need to remember why I’m here. As fascinating as I’m finding my tour of the medical center, some time alone with this doctor is exactly what I need. Dr. Wade is young, and there’s a feel to him that’s setting my alarm bells ringing. He’s got an edge beneath the friendliness, and something tells me he’s my guy.

Sebastian addresses Wade. “Jacob West is on his way to keep an eye on Ophelia until you’re finished here. Don’t keep her too long.”

With that, he turns on his heel. I stare at his back, unease bubbling in my gut. No smart remarks, no making me promise to be good. No goodbye kiss on the cheek. It stings, ridiculous as it is, and it’s not like him. Something has happened, and it can’t be good.

But bad for Sebastian could be good for me. Maybe my dad has sent an ultimatum the Brotherhood can’t refuse. Maybe I’ll be out of this place sooner rather than later. Back with my family.

It should bring a flood of relief, but instead, the conversation with Gabriel echoes around my brain. He said my family tried to kidnap Eve. To sell her. It can't be true. Can it? Just imagining it makes me shudder. Eve's a captive here, but she's happy and loved. If my family really planned to sell her...

No. They must be mistaken, or maybe Gabriel just wanted to scare me into behaving. I'll ask Quinn later—I trust her to give me a straight answer.

The door closes, and Wade whirls on me, his pleasant expression replaced with sharp urgency. "That was lucky. We don't have long."

A thrill banishes my lingering worries. I was right. He's a connection to the outside world. A gateway to freedom. I don't waste time with bullshit. "Are you my father's man?"

"Yes. Listen, something is in the works. They brought your ceremony forward, which never happens. I haven't managed to find out why yet, but I will. Can you get back here?"

"Yes, if you tell Sebastian you're happy for me to train in medicine with you. I wanted to be a doctor when I was young. He'll believe it."

Wade snorts. "Right. A doctor. But if he's dumb enough to believe that, let's run with it."

Of course he thinks it's stupid. The Calder princess, a doctor. Ridiculous. Tightness wraps my chest as I turn the words over and over. Sebastian hadn't thought it was stupid.

And so what. So fucking what. I'm his captive. Focus on what matters.

“What shifts are you on? ”

“Don’t worry about that. The old man will be out of action for a week at least, and he’ll never eat shellfish again. I slipped him something and convinced him it must be the prawns he ate last night.”

Wade smirks like I’m going to praise him for his cleverness. It sends a nasty prickle over my skin. “Will he be okay?”

He shrugs. “Probably, once he stops shitting himself. See if you can get pretty boy to agree to a daily lesson or something.” He rolls his eyes. “That way I can keep you up to date on what’s going on.”

“Have you spoken to my dad? How is he?”

He lets out a long breath. “How do you think he is? Pissed as hell. His daughter used as a...”

He looks away. At least he has enough compassion to feel bad about saying it out loud. “Anyway. He’s mad, and he’s working on getting you out. Your brother, though? He wanted to storm the place. Had a big fight with your dad. They aren’t talking.”

I want to ask more questions, but the door opens. Jacob enters, followed, thank God, by Quinn. He’d be way too intimidating by himself. Wade gives them both a warm smile. “Take a seat. I won’t keep you too long.”

“It’s okay, mate. Don’t rush on my account.”

Don’t any of the geniuses in this place do any work?

Quinn winks at me, and the two of them sit. He wraps a thick arm around her, huge hand swallowing her skinny thigh, and she leans her head against him. It's such a relaxed, natural pose I have to drag my gaze away. How? How is Quinn, who doesn't seem like she takes shit from anyone, so happy with her captor?

Wade snaps back into doctor mode, explaining the regular checks everyone in the Compound undergoes.

"It's really important that the Brothers and their Wards stay healthy. I'll have to check with one of the Brothers, but I'm sure they'll be glad to have you assist here, if you like. It's always easier for them to use talented people within the Compound than go through the hassle of bringing in external staff."

There would have to be a lot of background checks done. But sneaking people through background checks is one of my father's particular areas of skill.

He recruits people who are one hundred percent clean, draws them in with the promise of huge payouts, then keeps them on the payroll, under the radar, living their normal lives, until a job comes up where he can use them. It takes patience and the commitment to spend money, sometimes for years, before seeing results.

Most criminals don't have the foresight, but my father does. An odd sense of pride tugs at me. My dad might be harsh, but he's smart, and he came from nothing. I've always thought of him as an old-school gangster. Savage, but with his own moral code. He wouldn't condone trafficking. There's no way.

Wade wraps things up quickly now that Jacob is watching and promises to speak with someone in authority to see if I can work at the clinic if Sebastian agrees. All decisions have to be filtered through him, of course. It's a niggling frustration, but not a new one. My whole life has been the same. At least this time, I'm confident Sebastian will say yes.

“Sebastian said he might be a while,” Quinn chirps as we exit Medical into the watery sunshine. I’m right on the edge of chilly in my tiny outfit, but it doesn’t seem to bother Quinn, who wears less. She hasn’t even got a bra on, and I don’t think she gives a crap about it.

She tugs on Jacob’s arm. “Let’s not take her back right away. She has to be sick of being stuck inside. Let’s go to the park.”

“I’ll check with Sebastian.” He pulls out his phone as Quinn rolls her eyes .

She leans in as if to whisper, then hisses loud enough that anyone in a ten-foot radius will hear, “He’s such a goody two-shoes.”

I stifle a laugh at the look Jacob gives her. He’s a terrifying giant, and yet I’m starting to feel a bit sorry for him. A message comes back only seconds later, and Jacob nods. “We need to have her back in an hour.”

An hour in the fresh air. It’s pathetic how good that sounds, even though I’m not exactly an outdoorsy type. I have to ask, though. “What’s going on with Sebastian? He left in a hurry.”

“Just a work problem.”

It’s a rote response, and I don’t buy it for a second, but there’s no point pushing Jacob for answers. Has my dad done something? Or my brother? Wade said Harrison was furious, but I wouldn’t kid myself that he’s concerned about my welfare. He’s pissed Sebastian is soiling a valuable family asset.

Quinn keeps up a steady stream of distracting chatter as Jacob leads us into a pretty shaded park. After the restaurant last night, I should be getting used to the place, but I still can’t make it make sense. Benches sit around ornamental ponds and fountains,

and trimmed shrubbery creates artful little private spaces.

I can't imagine the upkeep. Even our garden back home has two full-time gardeners to keep it in check. This place must need an army of men. How do they do it? How do they keep this place so secret and protected when every single day, the grass has to be cut, the sidewalks swept, the trash emptied.

I look at it through the lens my dad instilled in me. Wide open. Ripe for the taking. No wonder he has spies in here—how many more does he have? Wade has access to a lot of personal details about the Brothers, but I'll bet as a doctor, he doesn't have access to go anywhere except Medical and the communal spaces.

A cleaner, though? A cleaner could get right into the heart of the place. Someone has to clean the big boss's office. If I were trying to infiltrate, that's what I'd do.

"Ophelia? You home?" Quinn snaps her fingers in front of my face, and I jump out of my reverie.

"Sorry. I was miles away."

"Clearly. This is my favorite spot to get some sun." She stretches out on the edge of a massive fountain with a sigh. In the center, old-fashioned cherubs pour water out of huge carved jugs.

I take a seat on the edge. Jacob parks himself on a bench, tense as a security guard at a presidential address. Does he think I'm going to make a run for it? Probably. I'd bet my life Quinn did.

My mind strays back to my conversation with Gabriel. It's a thorn deep in my brain. I can't stop returning to it. I should ask Eve, but it might be a traumatic memory for her, and I don't want to make her relive it. I gather my courage and tap Quinn on the

foot.

“So, Gabriel said something the other day. He said Eve was abducted and my family were going to sell her. I know it’s not true, but I want to know what happened.”

As soon as the words are out, I wish I’d phrased it better. It came out harsh and confrontational. Defensive, even.

To my shock, it’s Jacob who answers, and his rough voice is gentler than I’d have thought possible. “It’s true, love. Sorry. I know how it feels when people you trust let you down. Your family has a lucrative sideline selling women, and it’s what they planned for Eve once she’d outlived her usefulness as bait. ”

“No. My father wouldn’t allow it.” The shrill note in my voice matches the rising heat in my chest. Quinn sits up, gaze flicking between Jacob and I, face tight.

Jacob’s sympathetic look hurts more than anger would have. “They got a spy in as Gabriel’s assistant. If you think someone could have pulled that off without your dad knowing, maybe he was in the dark about the whole thing. Otherwise...” He shakes his head. “Maybe your dad isn’t who you think he is.”

Twenty-Eight

Sebastian

Oppressive silence wraps me as I stare at my phone. I usually love my office. The quiet, distraction-free space lets me focus on my algorithms for hours at a time—sometimes days—taking breaks only for the necessities.

Now, though, the quiet is a weighted blanket dragging me further and further down into useless rage. What the fuck does that asshole think he knows about Maggie?

I reach for calm, but it's slippery, and I can't grasp it. This is probably a trick to force me into doing something stupid. Harrison and Maggie weren't friends or even acquaintances. There's nothing he could know about her.

Still, all the what-if's tumble through my brain as the time slowly ticks down.

Right on the dot, I hit the link.

I'm placed in a waiting room and spend the next five long minutes pacing. Such an obvious, pathetic power play. But it works, and that pisses me off even more. I'm getting more riled up by the second, and that's not what I need for this call.

Calm. Calm. Calm .

The screen changes, showing Harrison Calder seated on a chair in a bare room. He's only my age, but time isn't treating him well. It's already obvious he'll look like crap

in his thirties.

He has the puffy face of someone who likes booze and cocaine far too much, and he must have gained thirty pounds of flab since high school. So much for the athletic guy who kicked the shit out of me.

He smiles, a wide, shit-eating grin that makes me want to throw the phone. “Sebastian. You’re looking well.”

“Can’t say the same for you. Get to the point, Harrison, I don’t want to keep your sister waiting.”

Childish, but it has the desired effect. His grin slips, revealing a flash of savage rage. “Whatever you’ve done to her, I’m going to do to you. Ten times over.”

I raise a brow. “Really? I didn’t think you swung that way, but I’m not one to judge. Now, did this call have a purpose, or did you just want to chat?”

He smirks, and it sends a shiver down my spine. Whatever this is, he’s looking forward to it, and that can only mean bad news for me.

“Why did you choose Ophelia? Plenty of other girls out there. I know all about your sordid little Brotherhood. Hiding in the woods with your captive sluts. Why her?”

“I’m not here to answer your questions,” I snap back, but of course, I can’t stick to my own rule. “But you know why. Maggie.”

“Hmmm. Revenge, then? I bet it makes you feel better about yourself, doesn’t it? You couldn’t just take a girl because you fucking wanted her, like a man. No, you had to give yourself an excuse. Pretend you’re doing something good. Still the same self-righteous little prick you were in high school. ”

Unnervingly accurate. My skin grows clammy, even though the AC is cranked up. There's a niggle at the edge of my mind, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

"Why I chose her is none of your business. I'm glad I did, though. She's incredible in bed. So enthusiastic."

I shouldn't feel as satisfied as I do when he flinches, but what can I say? I'm an asshole, too. It's short-lived, though. Harrison shakes his head.

"You really are naive. You think Maggie killed herself over a few childish pranks? You think she slit her wrists in your hot tub because Ophelia shoved her head in the toilet? You might be that weak and pathetic, but Maggie wasn't."

"You don't fucking know her."

Don't lose your cool. Don't.

It's too late. The night I came home and found Maggie is etched onto the deepest layers of my psyche. It took months before I stopped waking up, heaving my guts out, as I relived it in my dreams. His words brought it all back, and now that image is in the room with me. It's shredding my self control into nothing.

"Don't I?" That self-satisfied smirk is back. "I knew her, Sebastian. A lot better than you did."

"Bullshit." I force the word out, though my throat is constricting. The edges of my vision waver, blackness edging in.

"It's true. My dad and I kept Ophelia locked down tight, but you never set rules for Maggie, did you? No one bothered to keep a leash on her. She did what she wanted, and we had plenty of fun for a while."

“She was fourteen!”

It can't be true. It can't. But dice are rolling in my head, probabilities clicking into place, and the picture they're painting is bleak .

Harrison shrugs. “And I was sixteen. Big deal. I'm pretty sure you were the only sad virgin at that school. Girls that age are hot little sluts if you play them right.” He whistles. “And boy, did I. I still remember the night I broke in her tight virgin—”

“Shut the fuck up! She wouldn't have looked at you.”

He scoffs. “Please. A lonely girl desperate for her daddy's attention? All I had to do was pretend to give a shit about her. I spent a couple of weeks listening to her pathetic problems and—” He makes a swooshing motion with his hand. “—boom. It was so easy. Too easy to be fun, if I'm honest. I got bored pretty quickly and moved on.”

Sometimes I wish I could turn off my brain and bury myself in comfortable lies like most people do. But I can't help seeing the plausibility in his words. It could be true. But it could also be horseshit designed to provoke me. “And, what? You're saying she killed herself because you dumped her? She was smarter than that.”

There's a look people get, playing poker, when they know that whatever you do next, they win. That look, that smug look, spreads over Harrison's ugly fucking face, and my stomach turns over.

“You're not wrong there. A smart kid, your sister. But, as you say, she was only fourteen, and girls that age panic when they get pregnant.”

It's a punch to the gut. A sledgehammer to the back of my head. The numbers click into place, the dice land, and I can see the truth of it in plain black and white.

Memories assault me, one by one.

Our housekeeper, bringing in a stack of her patented waffles with cherry sauce. Maggie's absolute favorite. Maggie, pale, shaking her head.

Maggie wearing a frumpy one-piece on a trip to the beach .

Maggie sobbing in her bedroom. Swiping at her eyes when I go in to comfort her. "It's just some girls at school. Real bitches."

My father refusing to let me speak to the coroner after the autopsy. "It's grown-up business. Keep out of it."

I never pushed further. Why would I? She was dead. I can now, though. I can access the coroner's records at the touch of a button. As soon as I'm off this fucking call, I'll find out the truth once and for all.

As if he's read my thoughts, Harrison says, "I'm sure you can check with the morgue."

He could still be bullshitting me, trying to make me act without thinking, but that possibility is a shrinking needle in a haystack. He knows I can check, and he knows I will. If he's making this up, he'll look like a fool.

"She rang me, of course. So scared of your dad finding out. She wanted my help, but I wasn't about to let a stupid piece of ass ruin my reputation. I told her if anyone ever found out I was the father, I'd kill her myself. That shut the little bitch up."

He's calculated every word to upset me, but there's more to it. He's enjoying the memory of Maggie's pain. I can tell by the way his fat tongue flicks over his lips. My stomach cramps, and I have to breathe deep to keep my breakfast down.

“I didn’t think she’d kill herself. She could have just made up a story to save face. Said she got raped or something.”

His shoulder lifts, a dismissive little twitch, and I’ve never known hatred like this in my entire life. It boils up from a dark place in my soul, turning every nerve in my body to ash.

He’ll pay for this. He’ll pay.

All this time, I’ve been torturing the wrong Calder.

That realization slams into place, bringing with it a suffocating wave of guilt. Ophelia didn’t kill Maggie. I’ve taken her, and used her, and she wasn’t to blame .

“Looks like I’ve given you something to think about. If you want to have this out, I’m at 14 Layman Avenue. If you come with an army, I’ll be gone before you get there. Come by yourself, and we’ll settle this like men. What do you say? You want to avenge your sister, or keep hiding in your Compound like a bitch?”

My vision swims, the blackness creeping further in. It’s a trap, of course. An obvious trap, but I can’t make myself care. I keep a gun in my bedroom, and I’m going to shoot Harrison Calder right in his smug fucking face.

First, though, I need to get past Jacob. I’m not bringing him, or anyone else any deeper into this shit.

“I’ll be there.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Harrison smirks as he ends the call.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I pace my office, trying to calm down enough to think. To get to the point where I can fake calm, even though I'm nowhere near feeling it. I've always put on a good show. Always managed to portray exactly what I want to portray to get what I need. It's a game, and one I'm very good at.

Usually.

I force myself to stand still, hands pressed on my smooth wooden desk. It's thin and practical, not luxurious like Kendrick's office or my apartment. I trace the wood grain with my eyes, moving from one end to the other, until my heart rate slows from its full racing gallop. Until my hands stop shaking.

First, check his story. I wake my computer and set to work. Ten nauseating minutes later, I have my answer.

That bastard. That fucking bastard. I picture Maggie laughing over some stupid joke I can't remember, and a dangerous wave of misery threatens to sweep away my resolve .

Don't think about her. Just move.

Good idea.

I set off, making myself walk instead of run. Jacob has a bloodhound nose for trouble, and he'll be suspicious already. I need a story to get him out of my way, fast. By the time I reach my door, I've come up with a plan.

Showtime.

Three pairs of eyes land on me as I open the door. Ophelia, Quinn, and—to my surprise—Jacob are all settled on the sofa. Quinn grins as I enter. “Hey! You’re just in time for the good part. Ophelia loves horror movies, too.”

My smile feels painted on. “Good. Jacob, could I have a word?”

His brow creases as he gets to his feet. “Sure thing, mate.”

He follows me into the corridor. “What’s happened?”

I press my hand to my forehead. “I...it’s just...” I clench my fists and take a deep breath. “I’m really fucking this up. She’s never going to be ready for the ceremony. We’ve hardly practiced, and I’m freaking out. I can’t do this.”

“Fuck that shit.” Jacob grips my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “You can do it mate. Get to work right now. Spend the afternoon practicing with her.”

I glance toward the door. “I don’t know. She’s having fun with Quinn.”

“Doesn’t matter. Plenty of time for that later. We’ll get out of your hair so you can get stuck in. You’ll be fine.”

I nod. “You’re right. Thanks, man.”

“No problem. Come on. Let’s break up the party.”

Minutes later, the door shuts behind Jacob and Quinn. I wait, counting in my head. Give it time. Make sure they aren’t coming back .

“Sebastian?” Ophelia’s nervous voice is a knife in my chest. “What is it?”

I turn to face her and ask the question that's been burning me up. "Did you know?
Did you know what your brother did?"

Twenty-Nine

Ophelia

Sebastian looks like someone just showed him his own death. From the moment the door shut, the thin veneer of normalcy he's been wearing cracks. His sharply angled face only enhances the pallor of his skin, but his eyes are the worst—dull, lacking the sparkle I hadn't realized I liked until it disappeared.

And his words fill me with sick, coiling dread. Do I know what my brother did? Not even a tenth of it, and what I do know still sickens me. He's nothing like my father, with his twisted but still strong sense of right and wrong. Harrison is a snake, and whatever Sebastian thinks he's done, I'm sure he's done worse.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say gently, wary of unleashing the rage below the surface. I've had many years of practice tiptoeing around angry men. Be calm. Be quiet. Don't trigger them with a shrill tone or a harsh word.

"Maggie! Did you know? Did you know he—"

Sebastian breaks off, face twisting as he turns away. I wish it were difficult for me to put together the pieces, but it isn't. My pig of a brother has always had a thing for younger girls—he went after enough of my friends growing up. But understanding doesn't make it any less revolting. "Oh no. I'm sorry, Sebastian. He's disgusting."

"He got her pregnant!" Sebastian spins to face me, eyes wild. "He's the reason she killed herself. Not you. It was never you."

His words hit, and I stagger backward, hand pressed to the hole in my chest that just opened wide. Pregnant? He got her pregnant? The world tips, and I stumble to a chair before I fall. I can feel Sebastian's gaze boring into me, and when I meet his shiny eyes, he whispers, "You didn't know."

It's not a question, but I shake my head anyway. "No. I'm sorry. That's—"

"Stop apologizing for him!" The snap in his voice makes me flinch. "I punished you when I should have—"

His fists clench, and he strides into his bedroom. I stare at the open door. It was never me. I should feel relieved, but all I can manage is nausea. I can imagine Harrison's reaction when Maggie told him. Threats and fury. And while she was dealing with that, I made it worse with my stupid teenage jealousy.

Harrison, though. The bastard. He saw what I went through after Maggie's death, the guilt that almost broke me, and let me carry it all. Probably too scared of what our dad would do to him if he found out. I've known for a long time that my brother is a piece of shit, but each time I think he can't get any worse, he does.

Sebastian exits the bedroom with something clutched under his suit jacket, and it doesn't take a genius to know what it is. He strides toward the front door, face set. I rush forward and put myself in his way. "Don't. If you go after Harrison, he'll kill you. He doesn't play fair. He'll have people waiting."

For a single instant, his face shifts. He looks at me, eyes wide. "And why would you care? "

I open my mouth, but the words stick. I can't answer that. I really can't, because I don't know. After all he's done to me, I should be glad to see him dead. Shouldn't I? Surely if he dies, I'll be released. But the thought of my brother blowing a hole in

Sebastian's head has me planting my feet.

"Don't let him win. If he's told you this, it's to goad you. He wants you to go rushing in. Don't be stupid."

A shadow of a smile flickers over his lips. "I'm happy you care so much about my welfare. The door will unlock in four hours if I'm not back. Jacob and Quinn are one floor up. Number 14."

"Jacob. Isn't he military? Take him with you, at least."

"No. I'm not letting anyone else get hurt."

He takes a step toward the door. I don't move, and he sighs. "I can leave you chained up in time-locked cuffs if you prefer. It'll be uncomfortable, though."

And I'd have no chance to do anything to stop this madness. I step aside. He pauses at the door, lips parted as he studies me. "I'm sorry."

Before I can ask what for, he's gone.

The door clicks shut. I wait long enough for him to make it into the elevator before tugging on the handle. Locked. That was too good to be true anyway.

Panic scrabbles at the inside of my chest as I stare at the locked door. I imagine Sebastian exiting the building and finding his car, wherever it is. I don't have long. I don't even know where he's going. Stupid. Why didn't I ask? Not that he would have told me.

Think.

There's no point screaming. Even if someone heard me, I'm sure no one would care. Women must scream all the time here. I shudder at the thought. Why am I so intent on saving Sebastian again? Is it guilt for Maggie? Anger at my brother?

Or is it just because he's the only person who has really listened to me in a long time?

The thought comes out of nowhere, and I try to squash it, but it grows like a weed. I fell asleep happy last night, with his fingers clutched in my hand. I can't bring myself to want him dead. Dad would be screaming at me if he could see me now, but I don't care. I'm not like him.

Think. I can't get out, but I don't need to. All I need to do is send a message. But how? I stare at the door, and my vision wavers. I'm trapped. No phone. Nothing. How much time has passed now? Half an hour? If I know my brother, he'll be somewhere close by. He wants Sebastian in a blind rage, not thinking.

Should I stick a note under the door and hope someone sees? It's a start. I run into Sebastian's office. His desk is a chaotic mass of knickknacks and paper surrounding a huge mouse pad with a Star Trek logo on it. Seeing the symbol, I can't help but smile. Is cool, sophisticated Sebastian a secret Trekkie?

I yank open his desk drawer to hunt for a pen and find an iPad. I almost ignore it, but then a memory makes me snatch it up. Dinner last night, and Candice smiling from her screen. Is she locked to just that screen? No. While we were at dinner, she was monitoring something back at Hadrian's office that called her away. She can probably be in ten places at once.

Could she access this screen?

I press the power button, but it's out of battery. Of course it is. A quick hunt finds me a charger, and agonizing seconds pass as I wait for the iPad to come back to life.

Maybe it's broken? No. The low battery image appears, and then it turns on. No lock screen either. Maybe he doesn't think he needs it here, or maybe he just hasn't gotten around to it.

Either way, I'm in. So what now ?

The home screen is a jumble of apps. Streaming services, games. No email or banking apps. This must be a device he only uses for entertainment. I flick, desperate, until one catches my eye.

Room service.

Didn't someone mention it at dinner last night? That we should have ordered the food for delivery? My heart races, skin growing clammy as I open the app. When the list of Compound restaurants pops up, I almost cry with relief. Someone will be looking at the orders. Someone will see.

I select Main Refectory, pick a random food item, then go to checkout. There's a box for notes. Fingers fumbling, I type.

HELP. Sebastian in danger. Candice, or someone, please contact. I'm trapped in his room. Ophelia.

I hit send. Probably won't—

“What's happening?”

Candice's image fills the screen. I yelp and drop the iPad. Jesus. The back of my neck prickles at how fast she appeared. But questioning the wisdom of creating life can wait for another day.

“Get Jacob. Please. Sebastian’s gone after my brother, and it’s a trap.”

Candice’s face shows a very good replica of shock. “Oh no.” A pause. “I’m talking to Quinn now and tracking Sebastian’s car. He left his phone in his office.” She pauses, then frowns. “Crap. He’s stopping.”

Stopping? Shit. Where the hell has my brother sent him? I try to remember the journey here, though it’s mostly a blur. He must have found a vacant house in a town close to the forest.

“Jacob and Quinn are on their way. I’ve also let Kendrick know what’s happening.”

Three conversations at once. It’s unnerving, even in this situation. How powerful is Candice? And are there more like her? At least she’s on our side. For now.

“He’s not moving, just sitting in his car with the engine running. There’s a village on the edge of the forest, and he’s on one of the outer streets.”

The front door bangs open. I jump up to find Jacob and Quinn in the living room.

“Ophelia. Give me the short version.” Jacob looks every bit the military guy now, and he listens calmly as I explain.

Jacob nods. “Your brother. What is he like?”

I pause, confused, before it hits me what he’s really asking and why. He wants to understand my brother better so he can work out the best way to approach the house. To save Sebastian.

And probably to kill Harrison.

Family is everything.

My dad's voice. It's been quiet lately. But if family is everything, why did Harrison let me suffer? It'd have cost him nothing to take away some of my crippling guilt. Just one word from him would have saved me so much pain, and he couldn't even do that.

He doesn't deserve my loyalty.

"He's a hot head but isn't stupid. He'll stay out of danger and have men doing the dirty work. He'll let them capture Sebastian, then come in once he's restrained." I swallow. "And he won't drag things out. He might take a few minutes to hurt him, but killing him and getting out before anyone shows up will be his main priority."

Jacob's face hardens. "Thank you. Kendrick is readying the chopper. We'll get there in time."

Candice pipes up from her iPad. "His Tesla just went dead. You'd better hurry."

Thirty

Sebastian

I kill the engine. I parked a couple of streets down from the address Harrison gave me, but I doubt I'll keep the element of surprise. He's probably got guys watching for my car. Or drones, or God knows what else.

I'm way out of my depth.

I'd be out of my depth if Harrison were some two-bit criminal, and he's a long, long way from that. The Calders are sophisticated. They've been a thorn in the Brotherhood's side for years. Why, exactly, do I think I can do this?

It's a good question, but it doesn't stop me getting out of my car, hand wrapped around my gun. Harrison Calder kicked the shit out of me once for accusing Ophelia. How funny he must have found that moment, smashing his fist into my face, all the while knowing what he did. He felt nothing. No remorse. No shame.

I should do the sensible thing and let this play out the way I originally planned. I should be coming to this moment with the full strength of the Brotherhood behind me, not alone with a gun I've only fired at a range. I've always wondered whether I'd be able to shoot a person, but now my mind is settled on that point.

If that person is Harrison, the answer is yes.

The house is a run-down, cottage-style property on a big patch of overgrown garden.

This rough little village mostly houses seasonal farm workers, and it shows in the condition of the properties. This one is in worse shape than most, though, and feels abandoned.

A man in a checkered shirt walks past, cap pulled low, but only spares me a single sharp glance. Did he see the gun? Will he call the cops? I doubt it. This seems like the kind of place where people mind their own business.

Do I burst in the front door? Creep around the back? The night we saved Eve from her asshole ex, Jacob kicked down the door and went in like a raging bull, but that was two idiots who thought they were safe. Not a crime mogul on high alert.

I push my hair back from my clammy forehead, and my blood pounds. If I survive this, Jacob will kill me himself, but at least he'll make it quick.

The front door is a bad idea. From my brief drive-by, the house has a big back veranda and what I think is a side door. Maybe the overgrown bushes in the back will give me some cover. I edge toward the—

“Drop it.”

Fuck.

Where the hell did he come from? Metal presses against the back of my neck. A hand decorated with spider tattoos grips my arm. “I’ve got orders to kill you if you don’t.”

Fight or comply? Dice roll, lightning fast, calculating the odds. Will he really shoot? Are there others here?

Yes and yes .

I drop the gun. Harrison won't want to look like a coward in front of his men—maybe I can goad him into a fight. Then what? Nothing good. Nothing fucking good.

I'm an idiot.

“Move it.”

The man urges me forward. I shrug off his hand and walk toward the house. “No need for that. I'm here to talk to your boss.”

He grips my arm tighter and bangs the gun into the back of my skull, a sharp tap. “You'll do what you're fucking told.”

A flash of white-hot rage sears me, but I keep it in check. Save it for Harrison. Don't get shot on his doorstep and tossed into some river before I get a chance to turn his stupid face into mush.

I hate this. Hate the loss of control, the sense of being dragged along on someone else's string.

Imagine how Ophelia feels.

No. Don't go there. I don't need my head clouded any more than it already is.

The door opens as we reach it, confirming my guess that other guys were waiting to jump in if I made trouble. It creaks, and a musty smell drifts out. A damp, moldy reek. Definitely abandoned. Peeling wallpaper in ugly 1970s cream and brown lines the entryway, and nicotine stains add to the depressing appearance.

My feet crunch on the carpet. I don't want to know what I'm stepping in.

Spider tat guy and another man built like a linebacker usher me into a dingy living room. It holds some rotten soft furniture, a few random chairs, and a filthy stained old mattress. There's a pile of beer and liquor bottles in the corner and graffiti on the walls. A spot for teenagers to get wasted .

Harrison Calder sits on one of the chairs, in a pose that's trying too hard to look relaxed. I'm pushed toward him but don't need the encouragement. I want to look him in the eyes. I stare down at him, gun still pressed to the back of my head.

“One wrong move,” spider tat hisses.

“Relax. Harrison assured me we'd settle this like men. He's not going to go back on his promise. Are you?”

I raise a brow at Harrison. He looks even worse in the flesh than he did over the phone. Soft and paunchy, sweaty face, and pallid skin. I study him up and down. “My God. Weren't you a track star? What happened?”

He studies me lazily. “You’ve changed too, Sebastian. Where did the grungy eco-warrior go? High school was a long time ago.”

His voice hasn’t changed. Still the same braying, superior tone that used to make me cringe in the cafeteria. My dad always urged me to befriend Harrison and hated that I refused. Did he know Harrison was the one who got Maggie pregnant? Did he even care?

I make a show of checking my watch, and Harrison’s greedy little eyes lock on to it. He knows how much it’s worth. I’m sure he’ll enjoy taking it from my dead body and wearing it like a trophy. “Can we get on with this? I left Ophelia chained up in her little pet bed, fast asleep. I wore her out. I’d hate for her to wake up alone.”

He smirks. “You think you can hurt me with that shit? A sister for a sister? Let me tell you a secret.” He drops his voice to a stage whisper. “ I don’t give a fuck. She’s soiled goods. Your Brotherhood can keep her. Pass her on to whoever they want once you’re dead.”

I must have failed to mask my shock, as his smirk grows nastier. “We’d planned to marry her off to an important associate. I spent months on the deal, but he got wind of what’s happened. He doesn’t want her now—who would?—and neither will any other real man. She’s worthless.”

Worthless. Ophelia’s sad words from the previous night come back to haunt me. I was nowhere near smart enough. My dad said it wasn’t worth it. All these years, I thought Ophelia was a pampered princess, the precious jewel of her family. Loved.

The truth makes me sick.

Harrison lets out his horrible, braying laugh. I’m a world-class poker player, for fuck’s sake. I need to guard my feelings better.

“Oh. Oh my God, this is pathetic. You actually feel something for her, don’t you? You’re such a useless simp. Take a woman captive and fall for her? Who do you think will get her after you’re dead?”

If I die, she’ll be free, but Harrison doesn’t need to know that. I hate the thought of her back in his clutches almost as much as I hate imagining who Kendrick would pair her with if they kept her. No one would want her, given the trouble she’s caused.

God, what have I done?

Get it the fuck together. Poker face. Make him believe what I want. He needs to see me as a cold, sadistic bastard. An asshole just like him.

I sharpen my gaze and let a lazy smile spread across my face. “Oh, I feel something, all right. You have no idea what a good fuck she is. Seriously, man. It’s like she’s been starving for years and I’m the first man to let her eat. If I die, I pity whatever old bastard she gets passed to. They’ll be dead in a month from exhaustion.”

He rolls his eyes. “Sure. She’s a frigid bitch, and we both know it. But forget about her. Let’s talk about you. Who the fuck do you think you are to steal from my family?”

“Your family are low-life pieces of shit.” I keep my voice calm and mocking, and it riles him in a way nothing I’ve said about Ophelia managed to. He puffs out his chest, and his cheeks redden.

“You can talk. Your dad would eat my dad’s shit if he’d told him to. He swept what happened to Maggie under the rug, all to keep the peace.”

My dad’s bigger than your dad.

The pathetic schoolyard nature of the conversation scrapes nails across my brain. I left this world and found a better one. But I couldn’t keep away.

“I’ve disowned my father. You’re right, he’s a pathetic lickspittle. I stepped out of his shadow a long time ago. You should try it.”

Another blow. Pretty soon, he’s going to order me shot or start throwing punches. I need him pissed enough to use his fists. I try for one last jab. “Do you really just want to sit here chatting? Even your sister put up a bit of a fight. At first. But I suppose, given the state of you, you’re too scared.”

I have absolutely no idea if I can actually beat Harrison in a fist fight. Hapkido is all about disabling your opponent, and I want to smash his stupid fat face into oblivion.

He jumps to his feet, chair flying out behind him, and adrenaline surges through me. We're doing it. It's happening. I tense, ready to fight, until Harrison says, "Hold him."

Two of his goons grab my arms and wrench them behind my back. I struggle and twist but can't get free, and spider guy smacks my head with the gun hard enough to make me stagger. "Keep that up, and I shoot out a kneecap."

Shit. My head rings, and I don't see Harrison winding back for a punch until it smashes into my cheek. The pain rips into me, and through blurred eyes, I see Harrison shaking his fist as though he hurt it on my face. A big gold ring sits on his middle finger, and it's sliced me. He pulls back for another blow. Another. Another.

My face. My ribs. My gut. Everything hurts. The metallic tang of blood fills my mouth. One eye won't open any more. Every time I breathe, it's like I'm being stabbed.

From my one good eye, I see Harrison wipe sweat from his brow. My words come out mushy through swollen lips. "Most exercise you've had in a while?"

He snorts. "Such a smart mouth. Did you really think you'd walk out of here alive? I didn't get where I am by fighting fair, Sebastian. Aren't you a genius? Didn't you know that?"

He leans in close enough for me to smell his sour sweat.

"The first time I fucked your sister, she cried because it hurt. I told her that's how it always feels the first time. Dumb bitch believed me and came back for more. The first time I fucked her ass, she cried again. Your parents really did a number on that girl's self-esteem. I spat in her mouth once, and she didn't even complain."

I spit all the blood gathered in my mouth into his face. He steps back, swiping it off with his shirt sleeve. The sweat stains under his armpits make me want to retch. This man, this piece of human garbage, destroyed Maggie. And instead of playing the smart game I should have to get revenge, I handed myself to him on a silver fucking platter.

The pain is sapping my energy, and my knees want to buckle, but I make myself keep upright. I won't go to my knees in front of this asshole. I'll die first.

It takes everything I have not to flinch, though, when Harrison holds up a knife. It has a thin blade, and a stylized handle covered with skulls. He positions it in front of my good eye, pointed tip right in the center. "I think we've fucked around enough here. I want you to cry, just like your slutty little sister did."

Thirty-One

Sebastian

Don't flinch. Don't cower. Don't let this fucking asshole see how terrifying the point of that knife really is. The world shrinks to the point of metal shifting closer and closer to my eye. Sweat coats me, my guts churn, but I will not, will not, will not throw up.

The point comes closer, and I screw my eyes shut. When it comes, it starts in my forehead. He carves a slow path over my skin, and it's a new level of torture, deep and sickening. He's damaging me, hurting me in a way that can't be undone.

When the tip reaches my eyelid, I scream. I can't help it. I scream, and it blends with Harrison's laughter.

My knees give way. I dangle between the men holding me up until the moving tip finally, finally stops somewhere on my cheek. The searing agony in my eye consumes everything.

"Drop him." The hands let go, and I collapse to the floor. My ribs scream as I land, but even that is muted, sucked into the vortex in my eye. I can't see. I'm blind.

Get a grip. You still have one eye. Get a grip.

It doesn't work. The panic might as well be alive. It rips and rages through me, shredding my thoughts .

“Boss. Chopper.”

The urgent words just make it through the haze. Chopper. How?

“Ah. Looks like your friends found you. Shame. I was having fun. Time to wrap things up, though.”

A gun cocks right in front of me. This is it. I’m going to die on my fucking knees at Harrison Calder’s feet.

No. Just no.

With the last of my strength, I lunge forward. I slam into Harrison, and the yelp he lets out as he crashes to the floor is the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard. I can’t see, but I don’t need to. I raise my fist and bring it down. It hits something soft, and Harrison grunts.

Gunfire blasts out, a deafening barrage of automatic fire. Something—the windows, maybe—shatter. When the sound cuts out, my ears ring so badly I can’t hear anything else. Deaf as well as blind. Awesome.

Underneath me, Harrison shifts. Good. The only sense I need right now is touch. I slam my fist down again. Again. Again. Sometimes I hit squashy skin. A couple of times, bone. Didn’t he have a gun? Maybe he lost it when he fell. In any case, all I care about is bringing my fist down, over and over, until a hand grips my wrist.

“Mate.” I can just make out Jacob’s voice through the ringing. “Mate, you can stop now. He’s out. I’ll take care of it. You need the medic.”

I want to kill him myself. But I’m blind, and all the pain my rage drowned out is coming back. My eye. My fucking eye. I can’t shoot a gun if I can’t see.

“Do it.”

There’s no whimper from Harrison, and he’s not moving. I must have knocked him out. Go me. Hands help me move backward, and a single shot rings out, muffled in my damaged ears. It’s done.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, I go limp.

The journey back is a whirl. Someone with a calm voice wraps my damaged eye in a bandage, and I’m lifted onto a stretcher. An injection brings with it a blissful wave of peace, pushing the pain to the background as I float. The chopper sends ripples through my body, and Jacob keeps up a steady chatter as we fly.

“Not long now, mate. The docs will sort you out. Wait till Quinn sees you with an eye patch. You’ll never hear the end of the fucking pirate jokes.”

Ah, British humor. Why let mutilation get in the way of a good laugh?

By the time we land, I’m barely conscious. More bumping. A bright light in my face. “We need to operate immediately.”

Nothing.

Consciousness creeps back, and I wish it wouldn’t. It’s nice here, in the dark. No pain. No memories. Just a cozy black blanket protecting me from the world.

It doesn’t last, though. Little by little, it all comes back. The pain. The helplessness. The feel of someone damaging me beyond repair. I raise a shaky hand to my face and find a tight bandage over my left eye. The right is puffy and sore.

I take a deep breath, which hurts my ribs, and open my right eye. Light stabs me, but it's beautiful. At least that one still works. Thank fuck. I let out a shuddering, relieved breath as Jacob says, "Welcome back. "

Gradually, I adjust to the light enough that I can actually see. I'm in Medical, and my bed is angled up slightly so I can see the room. Jacob and Gabriel sit at either side of my bed. No Kendrick. No Gilda guards ready to take me into custody. That has to be a plus. Right?

"Ophelia?" My voice croaks.

Jacob answers. "She's with the girls. She was pretty upset, so Quinn took her to Hadrian's lab to distract her while we waited for you to wake up."

Upset. Of course. Her brother. We killed her brother. He was a bastard, but he was her flesh and blood.

Gabriel hands me a glass of water, and I clutch it. It hurts when I press it to my lips. I must be a mess. The cold water clarifies my thoughts a little. "She knows he's dead?"

Gabriel frowns, then rolls his eyes. "She's not upset about her brother. She's upset about you, you fucking dumbass."

"What?" I must still be slow on the uptake. I have to be, because this makes no sense.

Jacob says, "She found your iPad and sent a help message through the room service app. Clever as fuck. She didn't want him to hurt you. If it wasn't for her, you'd be dead."

"Shit." I close my eyes. Eye. It's aching already.

Gabriel sighs. “Enlighten us as to why that’s a bad thing?”

“She doesn’t deserve this. It wasn’t her fault. She shouldn’t be here.”

There’s a long, drawn-out silence before Jacob speaks. “Mate, neither should Quinn. Or Eve. Or any of them. But for what it’s worth, I think she’s going to fit in here. You’ll just have to live with the guilt of taking her, like we all do.”

I open my eye again. Gabriel’s lips are tight. “Sometimes I look at Eve and just fucking hate myself. I want to give her the world, but she’ll only ever have this little sliver of it, and it’s my fault. I don’t know how she’s as happy as she is. I don’t deserve her.”

I’ve never heard him speak like this before. Gabriel and Eve are the gold standard—the most sickeningly in love couple in the damn Compound.

Jacob, practical as always, says, “There are plenty worse places to live than here. Some of the places I’ve seen, the people would give anything for what the girls have. It’s not ideal, but it’s not the worst thing on the planet either. And her family seem like a pack of cunts, to be fair.”

That, I won’t argue with.

My left eye twinges, and I ask the question I’ve been dreading. “Did I lose the eye?”

There’s a beat of silence that feels like forever before Gabriel answers. “Not the eyeball, no, but you might not see out of it again. They won’t know for a few days. They operated with a laser to try and save the retina.”

A few days. Christ.

“The rest of you is a mess.” Jacob sounds far too cheerful about that. “Bruised ribs—you’re lucky none broke—you’re black and blue all over, and you’re going to have a killer scar. Right across your eye.”

“Like a pirate,” I add without really thinking, and he grins.

“Yep. Not a bad thing, if you ask me. I reckon Ophelia will love it. It’ll make you look dangerous.”

“Hmmm.” I close my eye again, tiredness creeping back.

“It’s less than you deserve, mate. What the fuck were you thinking? Kendrick is going to rip you a new one.”

“Oh, good. A lecture.”

“He’s fucking livid.”

“Wonderful. ”

With that cheerful thought in my head, I drift back off to sleep.

I wake again, more easily this time, to a soft pressure on my hand. I open my eye to find Ophelia seated where Jacob was before. It’s a much, much prettier sight, and I take a minute to enjoy it.

Her eyes are closed, and she almost looks asleep. She’s tied her hair back, and the profile of her face, her beautiful lips, are just perfection. That possessive lurch surges in my chest.

She's mine. All mine.

But she shouldn't be. It's cold water splashed over my desire. She's a victim, just as surely as Maggie was, and I can't believe I didn't see it before. First, she suffered because of Harrison and her father. Now, she's suffering because of me. And yet she's still holding my goddamn hand.

I grip her fingers in my own. I can enjoy it, can't I? Punishing myself won't set her free any more than punishing her brought Maggie back. It's useless.

She jumps, then turns to face me. "You're awake. It's late. The doctor said not to wake you. I thought you'd end up spending the night here."

I rub my hand over my face and wince. "Where is everyone?"

"Don't worry. I'm not unchaperoned. Your guard dog is right outside."

Guard dog? Oh God, she must mean Jacob. I smile, though it hurts. "I can't wait to tell him you called him that."

Her lips twist into a tiny smile. "I'm starting to think he's not as scary as he seems at first. "

She might not think that the next time Quinn decides to make a scene in public and Jacob unleashes his personal brand of hell on her. But we'll cross that disturbing bridge when we come to it.

"Wait till you see him eat breakfast. It's terrifying."

I let go of her hand and struggle up to a sitting position. My torso screams. Is the doctor sure there are no broken ribs? It feels like my bones are broken glass. Ophelia

raises her voice. “He’s awake.”

A white-coated man appears, middle-aged and short with thinning sandy hair. Another doctor, not one I’ve seen recently. From the stern, non-deferential way he addresses me, I’m sure he’s a Brother. “You can go home, but to rest. No strenuous activity.”

“Deal. Netflix in bed. Got it.”

“And leave the bandage alone. That eye needs to be undisturbed to give it the best chance of recovery.”

Ophelia’s face twists at his words. Guilt. She’s feeling guilty her asshole brother blinded her captor. This girl needs some positive male role models in her life. I want to shake her and cuddle her and have her on her knees at my feet all at once. And I’m too sore and useless to do any of them.

“Sebastian. Is that clear?”

“Yes. Sorry, I was miles away. I’ll leave it alone.”

“Good. I’ll get a wheelchair.”

“No. I can walk.”

“Can you now? We’ll see.” Definitely a Brother.

** *

It turns out, with Jacob and Gabriel’s assistance, I can. Each step is a little victory, and by the time I collapse into my own bed, I’m exhausted but satisfied. The guys

leave quickly, shutting the door behind them, sealing Ophelia and me in. She still can't leave this room without my thumbprint.

It seems redundant now. She went out of her way to save my life. She's hardly going to stab me.

I strip off my shirt. I insisted on putting it back on, even though the guys told me it was stupid. I wasn't walking across the Compound wrapped in a blanket like a crazy old man. Ophelia hisses, and I can see why when I look down at my body. Deep purple and blue mottles my skin. "You should see the other guy," I say, then curse my stupid, stupid mouth.

The other guy. Her brother. Who is dead.

She lets out a bitter laugh. "Trust me, Sebastian, I'm glad I'll never see the other guy again. Truly. I knew he was bad, but—" She shakes her head. "—I think I pretended he wasn't as bad as he is." Her face falls. "But I'm worried about my dad. He'll take it hard."

Worried about her dad. After everything, she still cares about him. I suppose it makes sense. She cared enough about me to save my life.

I unbuckle my belt, then stop myself. Ophelia hasn't taken anything off yet, and I can't be naked when she isn't. That would set the power dynamic all wrong, and even after everything, I need to keep it. That primal part of me, the part that wants to own this woman forever, insists on it.

"Get undressed," I command, then wait. If she says "Or what?" I don't have an answer. I'm in no shape to make her do anything.

She pauses for a long time, and I can practically hear her thinking the same thing.

Then she shakes her head and pulls off her top. She reaches behind herself to unhook her bra, and her beautiful breasts tumble free.

God, I wish I wasn't broken. The one part of me that seems miraculously unharmed presses against my trousers as she slides off her skirt and panties. Her firm, round ass is almost too beautiful to look at when I know I'm incapable of touching her. It's torture, and as she watches me, a look passes over her face, brief but clear. Amusement.

The little minx. At least some small part of her is enjoying this.

Fuck.

The surge of desire burns away all my newfound scruples. Guilt? What guilt? Maybe I shouldn't have taken her, but she's here now. She's here, and she's naked, and I can't do anything about it.

Or maybe I can.

I'll hate myself for it later, but I can't bring myself to give one single shit. It's been a bitch of a day. It might as well have a happy ending.

"Come here." I reach out my hand—they still work—and she climbs onto the bed, a confused frown on her face. Wondering why she's doing what I say, perhaps? That makes two of us, but I'm not going to question a good thing. I run the tip of my finger over Ophelia's lips. They part, and she looks at me, eyes a confused gray storm. I know what to do.

"You've been such a good girl today, pet. I'm so proud of you."

As always, her cheeks color with the praise. I'm a bastard. I'm taking advantage of

her very unhealthy need to please others. I should stop.

I won't, though .

I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and pull her gently toward me. Her lips touch mine, and it's heaven. She freezes for a second, as if, very sensibly, she's questioning what the hell she's doing. Then I flick my tongue over her lips, and she melts into me.

My lips are swollen, and it hurts, but it's worth every bit of the pain. She tastes so sweet it makes my head spin, and the little moan she makes against my mouth as I find her nipple sends an electric shock straight to my cock. After what feels like a long time, I twist my hand in her hair and pull her back.

She's dazed, and I know how she feels because my head is swimming, too. I'm right on the brink of exhaustion, and she can't be far behind. We should go to sleep. But all the aches and pains in my body are secondary to the ache in my cock.

I keep my voice gentle, though that possessive fury is in charge now.

She belongs to me.

“Be a good little girl for me now and unbuckle my belt.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ophelia

Sebastian can barely move. For the first, and probably last, time in our relationship, he can't make me do anything. I might pay for it tomorrow if I disobey, but right now, he'd struggle to get off the bed without help. So why am I drawn toward following his command?

Because that's what it surely is. An order wrapped in praise that makes my blood heat and my stomach flip. He ordered me to strip, and I did it. The way he came back to life at the sight of me did a lot to banish the black cloud that's followed me around all day.

I can't seem to tell him no. Drawn as if by a magnet, my hands move to his belt buckle, and he sighs at the touch. His face is a bruised, swollen mess, but his one good eye is the same captivating blue as before, and he watches as I work the buckle.

There's no threat, nothing making me do this apart from the fact he told me to. It makes me hot and shivery all at once. Up until this point, I could tell myself I was an unwilling participant, but now? Now I'm obeying because it feels right. And because I want to hear his smooth, beautiful voice tell me I'm a good girl for doing it.

I should be ashamed of myself. It's weak, giving in like this, isn't it? But something inside screams it's untrue. I'm doing this because I want to. What's weak about that?

"That's it." His voice has the low, hypnotic tone I'm coming to love. "You know

what I need, sweetheart, don't you?"

Fuck. His words are so patronizing it makes me want to scream, but my toes curl, and my clit throbs at the same time. Before I realize what's happening, "Yes, sir" escapes my lips.

He draws in a sharp breath at my use of the title. I strip off his trousers and boxers, careful not to press on the livid purple bruises covering his skin. Even so, he hisses at the movement before carefully settling his hands behind his head.

There's something powerful about the pose, despite his immobility. He's the master; I'm the servant. Why does that have me shifting on the bed?

He notices. Even with only one eye, he notices. "Spread your legs and touch yourself."

I jump. "What?"

"I want to watch you get yourself off. I really, really wish I could fuck you, pet."

He wraps his hand around his thick cock, and my stomach tightens, remembering how it felt inside me last night. When my eyes make it back to his face, he's wearing the ghost of his usual smile.

"This is worse for me than it is for you. Trust me." His voice drops. "Once I'm mobile again, I'm going to chain you face down on this bed with your ass in the air. I'll spend the whole day fucking you. And when I run out of steam, I'll fuck you with a dildo instead. You'll be begging me to break in your ass just to give your pussy a rest."

It shouldn't turn me on. It shouldn't, but the image is too vivid to ignore. Chained and

helpless, just a body for him to use as he wants.

Fuck.

I lick my lips, settle myself back on a pillow, and open my legs so he can see. He groans, and there's a desperation to the sound that vibrates through me. "That's it. You're a good little pet. Get those fingers nice and wet for me."

I don't need any more encouragement. I press two fingers into my pussy. I'm soaked, and a flicker of shame cuts through the heated haze in my brain before Sebastian says, "That's it. Fuck yourself, Ophelia. Fuck yourself like I want to."

Everything else leaves my head. I thrust my fingers deep, then withdraw and plunge in again, the rough movement different from my usual self-pleasure. I'm not just touching myself. I'm putting on a show for him, and the realization adds a new wave of moisture.

"Look at me. Don't be shy, sweetheart. You're beautiful. Look at me while you stretch that pussy. Add another finger."

His words melt me like a wax figure, leaving me a puddle on the bed. Another finger, and the stretch makes me moan. I meet Sebastian's gaze, and all I see is the need on his face. Not the bruises. His hand works his cock in hard, rough strokes as he watches me.

"Touch your clit now. Make yourself come for me."

I add my second hand. I'm so wet my three fingers slide easily in and out once I get past the initial stretch, and he tracks every movement. I keep it up as I rub my clit, and Christ, it feels good. I wish it were him inside me .

The building pleasure comes easily under my own hands. He gives a steady stream of murmured encouragement as my lips part, and my breathing comes faster. “That’s it. Good girl. Make yourself come. Do it now.”

A few more rough circles of my clit, and I obey. My body clenches as pleasure fills me, coating my fingers as I crest. I cry out as it hits me, eyes closing as I thrust my soaking fingers in and out, riding the wave.

Before it has a chance to ebb, Sebastian’s strained voice pulls me back. “Get your lips around my cock.”

I open my eyes, dazed. His hand is pumping fast now, and a shudder runs through me at the indignity of what he wants me to do. Catch his come. For some reason, it feels worse than giving him a blowjob. At least then, I’m an active participant. Here, I’m just a hole to be filled.

“Now, pet. Be good.” His warning tone. I’m drawn to obey.

I crawl up the bed, heat rising in my cheeks as I angle my head, lips parting to wrap the end of his cock. I flick my tongue over the head and taste tangy salt on the tip, and he lets out a deep groan. “That’s it. That’s—”

He cuts off, groaning as liquid fills my mouth. I splutter even though I was braced for it, holding still as he pumps, his cock twitching. “Now swallow.”

Carefully, I do. I’m getting used to the taste, and I can’t claim to hate it. I’m not sure what I can claim to hate anymore. Why did I just do that? There wasn’t a gun to my head. I could have let him finish all over himself and left him to deal with the mess. I didn’t want to, though. And I can’t understand why not.

When I meet his gaze, he’s smiling. “Come here. Lie down next to me. ”

I do, though it's awkward, too couple-like to feel sane. He turns his head to look at me as I settle next to him. "I could die happy with my cock in your mouth."

It's such a ridiculous thing to say that I snort—a loud, unladylike sound—and his smile widens for a second before he winces. "Ouch. Don't make me laugh, please. It hurts."

That kills my amusement. I shouldn't feel bad for Sebastian, but my brother is such an asshole it's hard not to.

Was. Was such an asshole.

I can count the happy memories I have with Harrison without moving on from fingers to toes. He was only two years older, but it always felt as though we were miles apart. Dad kept me sheltered and childish while pushing him to experience everything far too young.

I think I always knew there was something wrong with him. Bits of my childhood creep back as I stare at the ceiling. An overheard argument not long before Mom died, where she begged my dad to send him to therapy. My dad's typical alpha male response. Over my dead body. She won't talk. I've paid her father ten times more than she's worth.

Harrison would have been fourteen then.

Things escalated the older he got, until I think even my dad started to worry. What could he do, though? Harrison was his only son. His heir. God, how will Dad cope with his death? Not well. Not well at all. If he wanted Sebastian dead before, I can't imagine how he'll feel about him now.

I glance at Sebastian. His good eye is closed, but I don't think he's sleeping. I force

myself to study the mess my brother made of his face. The cuts, swelling, and bruising. It doesn't look right on him. He's not a natural fighter, and he's in way over his head .

He opens his eye and catches me staring. "I'm not going to win a modeling contract any time soon, am I? Jacob says it'll be much worse tomorrow. He sounded happy about it."

"He was pissed you left without him."

Sebastian finds my hand where it rests on the bed and wraps it in his fingers. "And rightly so. If it wasn't for you, I'd be dead. Thank you for that, pet."

The nickname, which he chose to humiliate me, now sends a warm little curl through my chest. His pet.

"Why did you do it? Why didn't you just let me die?"

I've been asking myself the same question all day and haven't been able to come up with a good answer. I turn back to the ceiling and try to voice my thoughts.

"He already destroyed Maggie. I couldn't let him do it to you, too." It's the truth, but not the whole truth. I ought to stop there, but exhaustion and the need to stop pretending force me onward. "And I don't want you dead. I should, but I don't."

There we are. The words are out, and I can't put them back.

"You don't want me dead." He squeezes my hand. "It's a low bar, but I'll take it."

He shifts, as if to sit up, but winces and lies back down. "I don't think I can lock you in tonight. You might as well sleep here."

He says it casually, but I catch the tension. Sleeping in his bed. It's a step in a new direction, but I'm not sure what that direction is. I match the fake, chatty tone. "Might as well. I've saved your life once today. I don't particularly feel like smothering you in your sleep."

"Good to know."

He squeezes my hand again, then falls silent. His breathing slows, and I think he's fallen asleep until he says, "Pet? "

I jump. There's an odd note to the word. I twist to face him. I can't pick up the expression on his battered face, but something in the way he's looking at me makes me shiver. "What?"

"If you misbehave at the ceremony, they'll set you free. They'll send you right back to your father. If you want to get out of the Compound, it's all you need to do."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Sebastian

I just signed my own death warrant with a single sentence, and all I feel is relief. I'm sure the panic will come later, probably once the painkillers wear off, but looking at Ophelia's wide-eyed, trusting face, none of that matters. She's been a victim her whole life, and I'm not going to be the next in line to screw her over.

If she stays here as my pet, it'll be because she wants to.

"And what happens to you?"

Christ, of course she asks that. Of course her first thought is what will happen to her kidnapper. She's too smart and too good. I force a wistful smile. "Oh, not much. I have to deal with another year of celibacy, and then I get to try again. Another Ward. No one would hold a candle to you, of course, but I'd have to make do."

I hate that I'm so stiff and everything hurts. I should have waited a couple of days before I did this. Waited until I could look her in the eye properly and give this conversation the solemnity it needs. But I've never been able to keep my thoughts in my head, so why would I start now? It's only my life on the line. Nothing important.

I grip her hand tighter. It's all I can do. She whispers, "Why are you telling me this?"

The million-dollar question. I pause before answering, trying to order my messy thoughts. The weight of the day returns full force, smothering tiredness creeping over

my limbs. “Because your brother and your dad have fucked you over enough. I don’t want to be the third man to ruin your life.”

I wrap my hand around her wrist and squeeze, trapping her arm to the bed. “I want you. But only if you want to be my good little pet. I think you do, deep down. But it’s your choice. I’m not supposed to tell you, though. It’s a secret. Don’t tell anyone what I said. Even the girls.”

The unbearable heaviness presses down, a lead weight, and my eyelids close.

Healing is a glacial thing. With all the bright minds in the Brotherhood, it seems like we could speed things up, but no such luck. Every movement involves pain, sweat, and more curse words than I thought I had in my vocabulary, but the worst part is the thinking.

Half a day into it, and I’m ready to launch myself out of the window. A whole day, and I’m clinically insane. I don’t know if I’ll ever see out of my left eye again. It probably won’t matter anyway.

Sometime the next day, Kendrick visits, chews at me long enough to make me wish Harrison had sliced my ears off instead, then leaves. The unflappable man is well and truly flapped.

Even Jacob and Gabriel are subdued when they visit. Happy to see me alive but clearly dealing with some sort of aftermath. They know something I don’t. It seeps out of their pores until I want to tie them down and torture it out of them. As if I’d get a single finger on Jacob before he broke my neck. It might still be preferable, though, to this waiting.

I caused all this. I should be taking the full brunt of it, but no. I have to recover before they hit me up with whatever the bad news is.

Ophelia doesn't bring up the ceremony again, and I don't dare ask what she's thinking. It's obvious. Isn't it? She won't give up her chance at freedom. No one would.

So, yeah. I make it three days past the stupidest day of my life before I finally snap. Pretty good, really. Longer than I would have thought. Pain meds helped. It's just the guys; the girls have gone to lunch, and I can walk now, so I fetch us all a beer. I choose my words carefully and say, "Less than a week to the ceremony. Going well, I think."

I haven't told them what I blurted out to Ophelia. They'd tell her that if she messes up, I'm dead, and she'd go through with it because she's too goddamn nice not to. I know she would, and even though I really, really don't want to get my head chopped off, I can't live with more guilt, either. I've done enough damage already.

They exchange another of the loaded glances I've seen far too much of recently, and I slam my beer down on the table. "What the fuck is it?"

Jacob doesn't flinch, but Gabriel's guilty glance at him confirms my suspicions. "Out with it. I'm not stupid. "

Jacob sighs. "Kendrick has an update. He's coming later to fill you in."

"Wonderful. You might as well talk to me now, though, so I'm prepared."

Jacob runs a finger over his temple as though battling a headache. I'm not surprised. Quinn is great, but living with her would give me a permanent migraine.

“It’s bad, mate. You know Alfred White?” Jacob pauses, then shakes his head at my blank look. “I’ll show you his picture later. Look, there’s no good way to say this. The Calders killed his brother.”

Even though I’d braced for the words, they still cut me as deep as Harrison’s knife. I set my beer down, and it rattles on the table until I let go. “What?”

“He was in hospital, and they made it look like an accident, but Randall Calder claimed responsibility the next day. And there’s more.”

More? Worse than someone’s blood on my hands? I press my hand to my face and flinch at the sudden burst of pain.

“Randall blames you for Harrison’s death. He’s given Kendrick an ultimatum. Your head on his doorstep by tomorrow night, or he keeps killing Brotherhood family members. One a day until you’re dead.”

Too soon. Blood rushes through my veins, turning my skin itchy and hot. I want to rip the bandage off my eye and throw it away, just to be free of the constant scratchy pressure. Fuck. All the terror I’ve kept at bay surges up.

“Will he move the ceremony forward?” Is that my voice? How does it sound so steady? It should be quavering like an old man’s. I close my eye, and Jacob presses the cold beer into my hand .

“Have a drink, mate. It’s okay. He won’t if you ask him not to.”

And every day between tomorrow and the ceremony, someone will die. More Brothers will lose people. Gabriel’s mom could be a target. Jacob’s sister. There’s a good chance Randall knows who my closest friends are, and he’d be spiteful enough to hurt me through them.

I take a long drink of my beer. A few extra days don't make any difference. I'm not going to convince Ophelia a life of servitude is her heart's deepest desire in that time. Tomorrow, the next day, or right fucking now, I'm a dead man. No one else needs to die for my fuckup. I can do this.

"No. Tell Kendrick I'm good. We'll do the ceremony tomorrow."

Both the guys start to talk at once, but I hold up my hand. "If it were you, what would you do?"

The heavy silence is an answer in itself. I turn to Jacob. "Does Kendrick have a plan if she goes through with the ceremony?"

A savage grin splits Jacob's face, revealing the predator that hides under his affable demeanor. "Oh yes. All-out assault. It's going to be fucking beautiful."

A man can dream.

An hour later, the girls return with Ophelia, still laughing. She's so relaxed. All the time I spent watching her, and I never once saw her look so happy. I put it down to her being a bitch, but I was wrong. She just didn't have much to be happy about. I smile as she catches my eye. "What's so funny?"

Quinn answers before Ophelia can, complete with actions. "Oh my God. Some guy—don't know who he was—brought his cat to the refectory. His fucking CAT. It was on a leash, but it kept yowling and jumping about. Then his hand slipped, and it escaped, and..."

She and the girls dissolve into another fit of laughter. Jacob rolls his eyes. "Guess you had to be there, love. Come on, we've got to go."

Quinn's hands land on her hips. A bad sign. "Why? Ophelia's working at the med center soon. We were going to hang out here until—"

"Not happening. And don't argue, or there'll be trouble."

Eve and Quinn both look between Ophelia and me, worried, then Eve smiles. "No problem. We'll catch up tomorrow."

With a little more muttering from Quinn, the group leaves. Ophelia gives me a shrewd look, eyes narrowed. "What's going on?"

I tap my knee. "Sit, pet."

I don't miss the little shudder that runs through her at my words. She's starting to like being called that. If I'm not mistaken, she's starting to like it a lot. If I want a miracle to happen, here's how I bring it about.

She swallows, then walks over slowly and perches herself on my knee. The little outfits I allow her don't seem to bother her anymore. I brought in a few pieces more to my taste—still tiny, but beautiful fabrics in shades that compliment her rather than make her look cheap. She's not cheap. If she's a pet, she's a pedigree.

Today's selection is technically lingerie, but who cares? It looks incredible. Shimmery blue fabric wraps her curves, stopping high on her thighs. I let her wear panties for her trip out with the girls. I'm generous like that.

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her close. She still smells of fruity shampoo, and I close my eyes, breathing it in. This might be my last day with her. My last day on the planet.

"What is it? Has something happened?" She sounds nervous now .

I trace my fingers over her hip. Christ, she feels good under the slippery fabric. “The ceremony is tomorrow. They’ve moved it forward.”

She flinches, eyes going wide. The expression gives me a tiny moment of hope. It’s not relief. Not excitement at the prospect of getting the hell away from me. If anything, she looks horrified, though she covers it almost immediately. “Oh.”

The silence stretches. I’d give everything I own for a peek inside that beautiful head. I can’t imagine her thoughts. I can’t imagine feeling anything but hatred for someone who treated me the way I did her. But unbelievably, she leans her head on my chest.

God, she’s perfect.

I reach behind me, ignore the warning shriek from my healing ribs, and pull out a box wrapped in blue tissue paper. She takes it with a questioning look. “What’s this?”

Why do people always ask that? “Open it and see.”

She does, giving me a suspicious glance when she uncovers the large velvet jewelry box embossed with Ophelia in curly gold script. It’s tacky, but in such an over-the-top way that it goes full circle and comes back into being stylish. I think so, anyway.

As she opens the box, I hold my breath. My last flimsy hope hangs from a thread, and her reaction to this could snap it for good. She draws in a sharp breath when she sees the custom-made piece.

The collar shimmers, the same blue as her hair and my eyes. It’s almost an inch wide but flexible, made from an experimental alloy that moves like fabric with the strength of steel. I half expect her to throw the box down, but she plucks the collar straight into her hand instead, twisting it between her fingers.

“How is it so light? And soft?” She holds it up, watching the sparkles .

“That’s a very dull explanation involving a lot of math. If you like, I’ll arrange a talk on the subject.”

A smile flickers over her lips. “I’ll take your word for it.”

I let her examine it at her own pace, waiting for the moment she finds the next surprise. She frowns as she runs a finger over the oval depression. “What’s this?”

“Oh, that just lets me change things depending on my mood. And on how you’re behaving, of course. I’ll make more as time goes on.” I open the hidden compartment in the bottom of the jewelry box and show her the engraved tags.

Good Girl

Sebastian’s Pet

Punish Me

Pretty Little Slut

She turns them over in her fingers, one by one. I take Sebastian’s Pet and touch it to the depression, where the tiny magnets lock it in place. “We’ll go with this one for now. Lift your hair for me.”

She hesitates, and I sigh. “I thought saving my life earned you the pretty collar, but if you love your training one so much, I’ll go and fetch it.”

“No!” It’s an instant response. What motivated it? The threat of the thick leather collar or not wanting to lose the pretty one? She gathers her hair up and lifts it,

turning to allow me to fasten the collar. It shuts with a satisfying click.

I sigh as she lets her hair fall. It's perfect. Everything about it is perfect, and it fucking kills me that she might only wear it for a day. I never want to see her without it.

The same thought must cross her mind, as she runs a finger over the smooth back of the collar. "How does it come off?"

I give her the smile I know sets her on edge. She pretends not to, but she likes a little danger. It must run in her blood. She's a crime boss's daughter, after all. "That's the fun part. Without me, it doesn't."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ophelia

I shouldn't humor him. I shouldn't go along with this. The ceremony is tomorrow, and I'll be free. Free to go back to my life. I'll never see Sebastian or Eve or Quinn again, and this place will be a distant, weird memory I'll never dare to speak of, even with my therapist.

I should feel a rush of joy at the prospect, but I don't. I run my finger around the collar. It fits perfectly, of course. Sebastian is such an odd mix of chaos and thoughtful consideration. I scan the collection of tags again and, for a guilty second, allow myself to imagine what life would be like if I stay.

Waking up every day with a shackle on my ankle. Knowing, every moment of every day, my body doesn't belong to me, that whatever Sebastian wants to do to me, he will. A deep, needy shiver runs through me at the thought. He can be cruel, but he always seems to know what I need to hear. The right bit of praise to make me melt .

Dressing in the clothes he gives me. They felt shameful at first, but there's something liberating about them, too. He's showing me off because he wants to, and in this place, no one cares. No one judges. I imagine going back to the prissy suits I'm obliged to wear outside, and it's more restrictive than the collar at my throat.

I'll miss the girls, friends that don't expect anything from me and who share the rawest details of their lives without shame. Back home, I have to put on the same act with all my acquaintances. Everything is wonderful. Business is great. It's what I've

always wanted.

“Pet?” Sebastian’s smooth voice. He puts so much into that one word. There’s a nervous edge to him now, though. He cares what I think of the collar, insane as it sounds.

“What do you mean, it doesn't come off?”

He reaches his hand to the back of my neck and touches the spot where a catch should be. “It’s coded to my DNA. Only I can remove it. And if you stay, I won’t. Ever.” He trails his finger around the smooth metal to my throat. “Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful” comes out far easier than it should. His body relaxes underneath me. He wanted me to love it.

When was the last time someone gave me a gift and cared what I thought about it? Every year for birthday and Christmas, Dad gets me something suitable chosen by one of his assistants. Diamond earrings or a designer bracelet. Nice, and I’m grateful for them all, but it’s never anything tailored just for me.

Sebastian ducks his head and lands a kiss on my forehead. My body warms at the touch of his lips, and it’s almost a disappointment when he says, “Come on. We’ll try out your new leash. I’ll walk you to the med center for your shift.”

My shift? I’d expected him to cancel it, given today is my last day. “You still want me to go? ”

“Of course. It’s important to you, so it’s important to me. I hear you’ve been learning a lot. If you stay, maybe you can take your medical exams in a few years. I’ll get you a tutor.”

He's planning ahead. Planning for a life together. He can't really imagine I'll stay, can he? But again, there's that tug in my chest. I haven't seen Wade since our first meeting, and instead, elderly doctor Richard has been teaching me a lot. Yesterday, a Ward came in with a broken arm, and I helped set the bone.

I've enjoyed it more than I've enjoyed anything for a while. Well, apart from some of the things Sebastian has made me do.

"Go on. Stop daydreaming." Sebastian tweaks my nipple through the thin fabric of the dress and drags my mind back to the room. "Get ready. You may put on your work outfit."

I'm allowed sensible clothes just for the med center. Because, Sebastian says, some of the Brothers are ancient, and seeing me in next to nothing would give them heart failure. I inject a sarcastic edge into my voice. "Oh. Thank you so much for the privilege."

"And that attitude just lost you your underwear. I hope it's not too cold in the med center."

Shit. I hop off his knee and head to the bedroom before I can get in any more trouble. As soon as I enter, the mirror stops me in my tracks. I stare at myself, fascinated by the collar. The training collar, clunky and over-the-top as it was, always looked like a prop, something from someone's kinky fantasy, not anything to do with real life.

This is different. It hugs my throat, the color a perfect complement to my hair. It shimmers as I move, such a perfect fit it looks painted on. When I told him it was beautiful, I only meant it in the abstract—a pretty object. But seeing it on myself, I really feel it. I love the way it looks against my skin. The way it feels

He'll have to take it off before I leave.

Before I can spend too much time thinking about it, Sebastian appears. “It’s very pretty, but you’ve got work to do. And I wasn’t kidding about the underwear.”

Once I’m dressed, he clips the new leash to the collar. This, I’m still not used to and might never be. Not that I’ll have much chance to acclimatize in the time I’ve got left. It’s a thin, silvery chain which, he informs me, is strong enough to hold a two-hundred-pound weight suspended.

“Is this really necessary?” My skin heats as he wraps the chain around his hand and gives me a gentle tug. “I’m not going to run away.”

“I know. But having you at the end of my leash is the best part of my day.” He flashes me his wickedest grin.

“But Dr. Richard—”

“Is under no illusions about your status and doesn’t give a flying fuck about it. No one here does. Come.”

Another tug on the lead, and my stomach flips over in the strange mix of shame and need I’m starting to find addictive. What will Sebastian have planned for me when this shift is over? Maybe something special, as it’s our last night together.

My mind turns through the possibilities as he leads me to the med center and gives me a kiss, unclipping the chain. “I’ll be back in three hours. Be good.”

“Yes, sir.” I still stammer over the words, but they come easier every day.

Wade greets me, eyes sharp as Sebastian retreats. “Thank fuck. It’s been a nightmare trying to get any time with you. The old fucking coot thinks you’re a natural at this.”

He rolls his eyes like we're sharing a joke, and I have to work to keep my face straight. Screw him. It's not a damn joke. But I push it to the back of my mind—I've been dying to see Wade for one important reason. "My father. Have you seen him? How is he holding up?"

My brother deserved what happened ten times over, but it will have hit my dad hard. I've been thinking of him grieving alone. He doesn't have anyone.

Wade teeters his hand from side to side. "You know your dad never shows what he's feeling. I honestly think he's more disappointed than anything. He thought Harrison was too smart to go rogue like that. And he's said for years that shit with Maggie would come back to haunt your brother. I guess he never expected it to happen like this, though."

It takes a second for the words to sink in—casual throwaway words delivered by someone who doesn't know me. Who has no interest in me whatsoever, aside from keeping in my dad's good books. "He knew? My dad knew what Harrison did?"

Wade gives me an odd look. "Of course he did. He needed your old man to make sure he was covered in case Maggie's dad went to the cops. He didn't, though. Your dad paid him off."

A wave of dizziness hits, and I take a seat on one of the patient chairs. Years. I suffered with guilt for years, and my dad knew all about it. He comforted me, in his brusque way, and told me it wasn't my fault Maggie was weak. But never, not once, did he tell me the truth.

The truth that could have changed my life.

Before I can ask any more questions, the door bangs open, admitting two middle-aged men, one supporting the other as he limps along. "Accident on the Squash

court,” the supporting man says. “Hope it’s not broken.”

Wade smiles, snapping right into doctor mode. “Let’s get that looked at. Ophelia, bring the stretcher over.”

For the next three hours, I’m kept busy by a steady stream of minor ailments and injuries. When the last patient—cluster headaches, poor lady—leaves, Wade breathes a sigh of relief. “Fuck’s sake. Thought we’d never get a minute. You actually are pretty good at this.”

“Thanks.” I smile at the compliment, but he’s already moved on.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Nothing does, except what I’m about to tell you. You need to play up at the ceremony. Whatever he’s told you to do, don’t do it. Swear at him, run for it, cause a scene, whatever. Just don’t behave.”

I nod. Old news, but Wade carries on. “The top cluster of assholes here, the ruling council or whatever the fuck they call themselves, made a deal. If you fuck up, you get sent home to Daddy.” He leans forward, lowering his voice. “Along with pretty boy’s head.”

He sits back, smug and satisfied. “What do you think of that? Don’t ask me what I had to do to get that info.”

I open my mouth, and it takes a minute before I can stammer out, “Sebastian’s head?”

“Yep. In a fucking box, like some mafia movie. Your dad insisted on it. Badass, right? Imagine walking into your dad’s house holding that. The man who killed his son. Don’t forget to mention I gave you the tip-off.”

I turn away, and my face must have showed my dismay, as Wade frowns. “What’s

wrong? Don't tell me it's made you queasy. You're a Calder, Ophelia. This sort of shit is in your blood."

"I'm just tired. Didn't sleep well." It sounds fake and dead in my ears, but Wade shrugs and gets to his feet.

"Don't worry. Only one more day to get through, and then you're safe. Your dad'll never let anything happen to you again."

It's one last blow in a day full of them. He'll keep me locked up forever. I'll be a princess in a fucking tower, only allowed out with bodyguards. My dad, who could have saved me from years of guilt but chose not to. Who watched me cry over Maggie and never said a word.

My dad, who demanded Sebastian's head in a box.

What the fuck is wrong with him? Wade starts tidying the room, and I try to wring some sense out of the conversation. My dad made a deal with the Brotherhood, but his main goal isn't my release. Oh no. His goal is revenge. Taking out the man who wronged the family.

Not me.

It was never me, was it?

Never.

Did he ever put me first? I wrack my brain, searching for a single incident. For just one time he considered what I wanted above himself. Above the family. Above Harrison. Above the opinions of people he wanted to impress.

I try and try and try.

Nothing.

And now he wants Sebastian dead. Wait. I glance at the door—no sign of him yet. “Wade.”

“Yeah?” He pauses tidying a cupboard and looks over.

“Does Sebastian know? Does he know what’ll happen to him if I don’t complete the ceremony?”

Wade smirks. “Yep. He must be shitting himself.”

He knew. All this time, he knew, and he told me how to free myself anyway. Why? Does he have some other agenda I don’t know about? Or is it possible, just maybe, that he cares that much?

That he wants me to be happy and is willing to sacrifice himself for it?

The door opens, and Sebastian steps through, a big smile on his face and my leash in his hand.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sebastian

Ophelia smiles as I enter, but it's a brittle expression. Her face is pale. I frown and take her hand as she gets to her feet. "Is everything okay?"

She meets my gaze. "Yes. I'm just tired. And hungry. It was a busy shift."

"She did great," Wade says. I hadn't even noticed him lurking in the corner. I'm not sure I like him but can't put my finger on why. He seems nice enough.

"Of course she did. She's amazing." I hold out my hand, and Ophelia clutches it, gripping hard. There's something desperate about it, as though she's drowning.

Something is bothering her. I mean, of course something is. Throw a dart at Ophelia's brain, and you'd hit a million things that might be stressing her out. She's a captive. Her brother is dead. Her dad is an asshole, and she's about to go back to him. Her head must be a scary place full of shadows. I should take her home and let her rest .

But actually, fuck that.

This could be her last night here. It could be my last night alive. I'm not going to spend it moping about, and neither is she. Once we're clear of the med center doors, I clip her leash to her collar and set off in the opposite direction from my apartment.

"Where are we going?" Her voice is still distant, as though she's not really interested

in the answer.

“Out.” Mysterious and cryptic. Hopefully annoying enough to pull her out of her own head.

It works, of course. She looks at me properly, eyes focused. “Out to where, sir?”

She gives the title a playful, almost sarcastic lilt. I don’t think I’m supposed to like it, but I do. Oh God, she’s not going to turn into a brat, is she? I’m the worst possible person to enforce rules. I don’t even bother about the ones I make for myself. Most of the time, I can’t remember what I’ve said. I need her to be sensible enough to keep track.

Focus. It won’t matter tomorrow anyway.

“You’ll see. What’s your favorite type of champagne?”

She blinks at the question but gives it thought. “I know it’s a little tacky, but Krug Rose. I like the sweetness.”

The girl has taste. I knew it.

“Well, you’re in luck. We have the best wine cellars in the world.” I steer her toward the quaint little social hub, with its cobblestones and old-fashioned signs. We stop outside the bar.

It’s still early, and a weekday, so there are only a few patrons already drinking—an ancient couple at a table outside, two middle-aged Brothers perched on barstools arguing about something, and four women dressed for the country club, chatting at a table inside. I scan them quickly. No Portia, thank God. I don’t need to deal with the formidable Queen Bee of the Wards right now .

Ophelia pauses, studying the bar. “It looks so normal.”

I’m not sure if she’s talking to herself or to me, but I answer anyway. “After a while, it is normal.”

We head inside. The bar has a speakeasy feel, dark wood and velvet furniture. It feels like it should smell of smoke, but cigarettes are banned inside here just like they are everywhere else. Not that I’ve ever smoked. I tried it once and threw up in a bush.

I lead Ophelia to a cozy booth right at the back, tucked away from prying eyes. The bartender arrives right away. Though he’s in his seventies and dresses like it’s 1940, we’re good friends, Michael and I. Always keep the most important people close.

He grins at me, showing a gold tooth. “Sir! I thought you must have fallen down a well, it’s been so long. I’ve got some interesting new drops I think you’d enjoy. Should I bring up a selection?”

I return his smile. “Soon. The lady is choosing today, though. A bottle of Krug Rose, whatever vintage you prefer.”

He nods to Ophelia. “Ma’am has excellent taste. I’ll call one up right away.”

He departs, leaving a cloud of heavy cologne behind him. Ophelia stares after him. “He knows you well. Is he here every day?”

“Every day except Monday. Never come here on a Monday.” I shudder. “He lives in the Compound. Hardly any other outsiders do. He was a top sommelier and got depressed after he retired. Kendrick brought him in, and he loves it here.”

She pulls her gaze back to me, brow creased. “Does he know about Wards? That we’re all captives?”

We. She said we, and it's another painful sip of air into my waterlogged lungs. She's not excluding herself from the group yet. "Sort of. Most of the outsiders think it's a kind of voluntary captivity. A kink thing. And they know not to talk to the women."

Any reply she might have made is cut off when Michael returns with champagne in an ice bucket and two chilled glasses. For an old guy, he can still carry a lot. He sets it down with a flourish and pours two perfect glasses. Ophelia takes a sip, eyes closed, and sighs. "It's wonderful. Thank you."

"My pleasure. Anything else?"

"Yes," I say, "Please send up to La Table Royale for a charcuterie platter and fresh bread."

"Of course."

He departs, and I raise my glass. "To finding happiness in the strangest places."

She hesitates, that odd, distant look creeping over her again, before she chinks and takes a sip. "I'll drink to that."

An hour later, the bottle is almost empty, the food is eaten, and Ophelia's eyes are bright. From the pink spots in her cheeks and the animated way she's gesturing with her glass, I'd guess she's not a big drinker. I've coaxed her into gossiping about some of the clients at her salon, and now that the floodgates are opened, there's no stopping her.

"Oh. This one lady—she has a French name, not Marie but something like that—she always brings her dog in a handbag. But it's not like a chihuahua or a poodle. It's massive, maybe a Labradoodle? I'm not sure. It's in a giant carry-all. She rocks it like a baby, and the dog loves it. She's got biceps like a bodybuilder."

I laugh with her and refill her glass.

I'm not trying to get her drunk—I swear I'm not—but it's just so nice seeing her relaxed. When she lets her guard down, she's a lot of fun. She seems to be enjoying the break, too .

The bar is filling up, mostly with Brothers winding down after a stressful day. The table of chatty women left a while ago. I stare at Ophelia, with her bright eyes and rosy cheeks, and all at once, the table between us feels too much. I move over to her side. “Scooch over.”

She does, shifting into the corner, and our eyes meet as I rest my leg against hers. In the dim light, her eyes are the gray of a stormy day, and unless I'm very much mistaken, they're filled with expectation.

The magnetic crackle between us, which has been there from her very first day, urges me to touch her. I rest my hand on her knee, then slide it higher, pushing up the prim knee-length skirt I let her wear for work. Her eyes widen as I move it higher and higher until it's bunched at her waist. She whimpers but doesn't try to stop me.

Tucked in our corner, and with the table between us and prying eyes, it's unlikely anyone will notice. But I'm not done yet. I chose a very sensible blouse for Ophelia's working day—a blouse with buttons.

I set to work on them one by one, thanking the god of men with terrible impulses that she sassed me this morning and gave me an excuse to take away her bra. When I reach her breasts and keep going, her breaths come faster. “Sebastian...please.”

She should be calling me sir, but I don't give the slightest shred of a fuck right now. I love how my name sounds on her lips.

And it doesn't sound like she's asking me to stop.

I undo the last button but keep her covered for the moment. Then I slide a hand under the smooth cotton and find her nipple rock hard. I knew it.

"I love showing off my pet." I push the shirt to the side, exposing one breast, but cover it with my hand when she lets out a desperate squeak. "No one else gets to touch you. I'll never allow it. But I have a lot of fun letting people look."

I glance over my shoulder. Most of the bar is just as it was, but a few men shoot interested glances our way. I duck my head and whisper in Ophelia's ear as I move my hand, exposing her, "People are watching."

Ophelia's cheeks are bright red, and her pupils fill her irises. I nudge her legs apart and make an experimental pass between her legs. "Oh. Feel that." I push the tips of my fingers into her slippery entrance. "Absolutely soaked. You love this."

She closes her eyes and lets out a little moan that's lightning to my cock as I push the shirt away from the other breast. She's on display, her nipples are stiff peaks, and she presses her lips tightly together as I return my attention to her pussy, circling her clit.

"You're just too beautiful to keep hidden away. I like to show off what I have. All my most prized possessions."

She draws in a shuddering breath at the word, and I smile. I've got her now. A heavy dose of praise with a dash of degradation. That's the perfect mix for my Ophelia. I start to rub her clit in earnest, and she squirms on the seat.

An idea hits me, and it's so perfect I can't hold back from sharing it with her. "Every month, I run a poker night for serious players." Her eyes flutter open, confused, at the change of topic but quickly close again when I pinch her clit. "None of my friends

attend—they can't play for shit. It's a small group of acquaintances.”

She's working with me now, shifting herself against my fingers. The champagne really helped chase away what remained of her inhibitions. “If you stay, you'll waitress for me at one. Topless, of course. All night long. When you're not serving drinks, you'll kneel beside my chair like a good little pet waiting for your master's instruction.”

Fuck. Fuck, I can picture it, and it's perfect. I want it—I want her—so badly. I want her to choose this. Me. She opens her glassy eyes, staring at me as I work her clit. Her hands open and close. She's close. “How does that sound, Ophelia? If you like the idea, come for me.”

Unfair, but I don't give a shit. I push her straight over the edge, watching the flush stain her chest as she bites her lip and whimpers. Moisture coats my fingers. I ram them deep into her pussy, and she clamps around me like she's desperate for it to be my cock. Fear not, darling, your wish shall soon be granted.

I swallow her moan with a kiss. Her lips part, and I taste champagne as her tongue meets mine. I kiss her until the orgasm fades and her greedy pussy stops trying to crush my fingers. When I pull back, she blinks, then her gaze flicks around the room, panicked, before she presses her head into my chest.

We put on quite a show.

My cock is a rigid, aching bar, and I can't stand it any longer. I study Ophelia, then do up one single button beneath her breasts. I shift the fabric so it just skims her nipples. “We're going home. That's all the coverage you're getting. Say ‘Thank you, sir.’”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Ophelia

“Thank you, sir.” The words fall out before I consider them. I’m in a daze, and nothing matters. Nothing besides Sebastian, his fingers, and his filthy, filthy words. He put me on show, and I let him. I ground myself against his fingers without caring who might have been watching.

No. I’m kidding myself. I wanted them to look.

If tomorrow—

Stop it. I’m not thinking about it. I’m going to enjoy tonight and not let tomorrow’s decision drag me down.

Sebastian stands and gives my leash a tug. My thoughts melt away, swirling back into mush at the indignity of it. I look down, and my face heats. The single button he’s allowed me barely covers me at all. And he wants me to walk all the way home like this?

Home .

What does that word mean now? No. Don’t think. I shuffle out of the booth, tug the skirt down, and let Sebastian lead me out of the bar.

It shouldn’t surprise me that the street is busy, but as always, it does. Sebastian gets a

few friendly nods but more cold glances as we make our way back to the apartment. It's a relief to reach his building.

Sebastian hasn't spoken on the journey back, and it's starting to feel weird. Usually, he fills every silence. As he presses the call button for the elevator, I shoot a look up at him, taking in the tense line of his jaw. "What is it?"

His eyes are midnight pools, and he takes a tight breath. I yelp as he grips my ass and presses me tight to his body. His strained voice sends little shudders down my spine. "You have no idea how much I enjoyed that, pet. It's taking all my self-control to get you home before fucking you."

The solid length of his cock lodged against my stomach gives me a pretty good clue exactly how much he enjoyed it.

The elevator arrives with a ding, and he pushes me inside, caging me against the wall with his body as he hits the button for our floor. My stomach swoops as the elevator shoots upward. "You enjoyed it too. Didn't you."

A statement, not a question, but I squirm under it anyway. He's right, but admitting it to myself is very, very different than admitting it to him. "Maybe. A bit."

I mutter it, and he laughs as the elevator stops. "Oh. Well, in that case, I'll have to try harder, won't I? I'll strip you in the refectory, tie you to a table, and let everyone watch as I eat my dinner off your body. Imagine that. Legs tied apart, everything on display, and nothing you can do about all the pairs of eyes watching you. "

He's sick. Perverted. That doesn't sound good at all. So why the hell is my pussy throbbing with every beat of my heart? Seconds later, the door shuts behind us.

We're home.

He hammers out quick, staccato instructions. “Bedroom. Clothes off. Into your bed.”

My bed? Why? But his tone means business, and I can’t pretend I want to fight him. I’m lost to the madness of the evening, swept along on a tide of heat and humiliation that makes me want to obey. I shed my clothes and sit in my little bed.

Sebastian locks the shackle around my ankle and stares down with a look of purest satisfaction. “My God. I’ve waited far too long to fuck you here. I’ve imagined it ever since the first time I saw you in this bed.”

He strips as he talks, throwing off the suit jacket and racing through the buttons. His body is sharp and lean, splashed with the varied colors of his healing bruises. The dark shades hint at the darkness in his soul. The shadow that has my nipples rock hard again as he looms over me.

“Just look at you. Shackled and waiting for your master. Perfect. Spread your legs like a good little pet.”

As he sheds his trousers, I do. My stomach clenches at the demeaning instruction, and Christ, I’m soaked. A miserable, nagging part of my mind screams at me. I’m weak. I’m a slut for enjoying this. I should be fighting him like the Calder princess I am.

Fuck it. I’m sick of that voice. I spread my legs.

“Oh, there’s a good girl.”

Sebastian climbs on top of me, lines his cock up with my entrance and spears me in one rough thrust. I’m wet and ready, but the sudden stretch still makes me cry out .

He lets out a dark chuckle. “Shush with that noise. You’re made for this. Made to be fucked, by me, every day for the rest of your life.” He starts to move, and I moan at

the deep, deep satisfaction that liquifies my limbs. God, he's hitting something in me with every stroke, and it's melting my brain.

My eyes close, and his hand cups my face. His thumb presses on my lips, and I open up, tasting the salty tang of his skin. "That's it, pet. Let go. Let go and enjoy it."

His voice has gravel in it, turned rough by his desire. I shift my legs apart, and he groans, thrusting even deeper. He hits that magic spot, over and over, and all I can manage is a strangled squeak around his thumb. I can let go. With him, I can.

I let instinct take the wheel, mumble, "Yes, sir" against his skin, and press myself up to meet him thrust for thrust. It's a different type of pleasure, hitting hard and deep. I surrender to it, and my thoughts still. There's only him.

As he speeds up, my body builds to a new kind of peak. Too much and not enough all at once. It sends me feral, chasing the edge, and before I know what's happening, my hands are on his back, nails digging into his skin.

"Oh," he grinds out. "Oh, fuck, yes."

It's enough. I explode, clenching hard on his cock as another climax rips through me. I cry out, and my teeth graze his skin. He shudders above me, groaning as he slams in one last time, locking me to the bed with his body.

His weight is a comfort as he drops his head to my shoulder. All I can hear is the mingled sound of our heavy breaths. When he raises himself up on his elbows, smiling down at me, I miss the pressure.

"Well—" He pushes a sweaty strand of hair away from my face. "—I think that counts as letting go. Well done."

I match his smile as the pleasure ebbs and a tired sort of champagne fuzziness replaces it. I don't drink much—not a ladylike habit—and it went down much easier than I expected.

Sebastian kisses my forehead in that odd way of his, caring and patronizing all at once. It sends a cozy little shiver through me as he gets to his feet and covers me with my blanket.

“Don’t I get to sleep in the bed?” The words come out mushy, twisted up by impending sleep.

He strokes my cheek. “Not today. If you stay, this is how it’ll be. Sometimes you get to be the beautiful, smart woman you are. I’ll support you in whatever you want to do. But sometimes I want you as my pet. And right now, you’re my good little pet.”

It should annoy me, but it doesn’t. He’s honest, not trapping me here with pretty words. If I stay, it’s on his terms.

He strokes my hair as I fall asleep.

“It doesn’t matter what we wear. We’ll be butt naked.”

Quinn’s attempt to make me feel better doesn’t quite hit the mark, but I give her a weak smile anyway. I envy her. Since she arrived this morning, she’s done nothing but chatter about how excited she is. For her, this is a big day she’s worked toward for months. No life-ending decisions rest on her shoulders.

I woke with a dry mouth and a pounding head. Not long after coffee revived me, Sebastian’s crew of friends arrived in a big, noisy group, and it came as a relief.

Sebastian isn't himself today, and I can't blame him. Knowing your life rests in the hands of your captive would be enough to keep anyone quiet.

Quinn, Eve, and I are in the bedroom, getting ready. Eve is dressed up—a pretty sundress, heels, and an updo. She got her makeup professionally done at the salon and said there was a queue. Today is a solemn occasion for the Brotherhood, where everyone is expected to look their best.

The men are all wearing smart suits. No change for Sebastian, but Jacob and Gabriel both look so different it jarred me at first. Jacob, in particular, looks even more dangerous than usual. What will he do if I consign his best friend to death today? Will he accept it or pull out a gun and start shooting?

I can't even think of it without wanting to vomit.

I sit, mute, as Quinn does my makeup and tidies my hair. Eve starts to run us through the order of the ceremony one last time, but Quinn interrupts. “Oh my God, do you think Jacob will make me crawl over to Kendrick and kiss his feet like you did?”

Eve's face blazes bright red as I whip around to face her, some of my torpor vanishing. “What?”

“I...God, that was horrible. Gabriel keeps threatening to make me do it again in the middle of a formal dinner. I'm not sure he's joking.”

Quinn sits next to her on the bed. Her bright red crop top clashes eye wateringly with her green hair, but somehow, she makes it look good. “I wasn't here for the last ceremony, but they told Gabriel he had to give Eve a final challenge. Something he knew she'd hate. That's what he picked.”

I can't imagine it. Sweet, dignified Eve forced to humiliate herself in front of the

whole Compound. It's a dash of cold water. A brutal reminder of what sort of place this is and the true status of the Wards. Property. An amusement. Forced to perform at the will of our masters.

You didn't mind being forced to perform last night.

No. No, I hadn't. But that was one night. The reality of my choice is ripping chunks out of my soul. Sebastian has made a selfless choice—for me. He's put his life in my hands and hasn't even told me the true stakes. No one has ever done anything like that for me.

But saving him means giving up my freedom. Forever. None of the other Wards were given the chance to leave. I'm in a unique position, a captive granted the ability to walk away. Yes, I'd have my father to deal with, but the more I think of it, the more I think, fuck him. He doesn't own me. If I leave, I'm done letting him control my life.

He doesn't own me, but if I stay, Sebastian will.

My stomach turns over, terror mixed with pleasant tingles. The same duality I've been battling all morning. Could I really stay with the man who captured me? Who made me his pet?

The man who cares about you. Who wants you to be happy. Who pulled the goddamn stick out of your ass and woke you up to the fact you were wasting your life on your shitty family.

God, I wish there was a third option. Something less extreme than eternal captivity.

"Ophelia?" Eve pats my knee. "You okay? It wasn't really that bad. I mean, it was at the time. But I got over it. You will too, if it comes to it."

What? Oh, right. Kissing Kendrick's feet. If only that was all I had to worry about today.

Quinn snorts. "You'll be okay. Sebastian is a fucking teddy bear compared to Jacob. It'll be something like, 'You aren't allowed designer dresses or caviar for a whole month, the horror!'"

She pretends to faint, landing on my pet bed. Funny how I'm not even ashamed of it anymore. It's such a ridiculous performance I can't help laughing, and Eve follows suit. Soon we're all laughing with the wild, almost hysterical abandon that comes out of stressful situations. A knock cuts through the clamor.

Sebastian's voice comes through the closed door. "Sorry to interrupt your fun, ladies, but it's time to go."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Sebastian

Half an hour later, Ophelia and Quinn are escorted into the back area of the auditorium under Portia's watchful eye. Eve is allowed to go with them. It's still a couple of hours until the ceremony, but we won't see each other again until I'm seated in the middle of the stage.

I give Ophelia one last kiss, but she's quiet and tense. Will she miss me once she goes back to her real life? Will it hurt her when she finds out I died so she could go free?

Christ. That makes me sound like a noble warrior giving up his life for his lady, not the asshole who kidnapped her getting what he deserves. It'll cause her pain, though, and I hate it. She spent years wallowing in misplaced guilt, and now it might be even worse.

I need to keep thinking about Ophelia, to keep worrying about her, because if I think about what's going to happen to me, my resolve might fall to bits. I close my good eye and take a deep breath. I wanted the bandage off today, but the doctor said no. If I live, it'll come off tomorrow.

The auditorium stands by itself in a shady clearing, separate from the main street. There's grass and a few benches, so people waiting for performances or lectures have somewhere to socialize before the show.

I'm glad of the seclusion. Everyone I've walked past today has stared at me too long,

as if they're counting the minutes to my demise. It's a cool, cloudy day, but the damn bandage itches like hell.

Once the girls leave, Jacob and Gabriel settle into gloomy silence. Even without knowing what I told Ophelia, they understand the full weight of what today means. It's the one day the Brotherhood doesn't stand to protect its members, but to judge us. The one day we're truly at risk.

As usual, I'm the first to break the silence. I nudge Gabriel, who jumps. He'd been miles away. "Did you ever doubt Eve would do it? Not before the day, obviously. I mean while you were sitting there, waiting."

He considers before answering. "Sort of. It wasn't so much that I thought she'd mess up on purpose. Stripping like that in front of everyone, though. Most women would hate it, but her?" He shakes his head. "It was torture for her. I was worried she'd panic and bolt."

I turn to Jacob. "What about you? Are you worried?"

"Nope. Quinn's a brat, but even she won't fuck this up. I'm looking forward to it." He grins, and it has a dangerous edge. "I've waited a long time to see my tattoo on her. Oh. Shit." He smacks his head. "I forgot to say. We're meeting with the tattooist now. It'll be a rush job, but he's really good. He'll get it drawn out before the ceremony starts. "

The tattoo. Fuck. The fucking tattoo. What with losing an eye and my impending doom, I'd forgotten all about it.

"What are you getting?" Gabriel's question is all innocent curiosity, and I watch as his face slowly shifts to disbelief. "Wait. Please tell me you've decided."

I gesture to my bandaged head. “I’ve had a bit going on.”

Jacob snorts. “I get it, mate, but come on. You could have—”

“Are you fucking serious?” My fists clench. Punching Jacob would come in a strong second on the list of stupidest things I’ve ever done, but it’s taking everything I have to hold myself back. “She’s not going to go through with it. I’m going to fucking die today, and you’re worried about—”

I take a few paces away, breathing hard, and try to rein myself in. I’m not going to crumble. What happens today is already set, and there’s nothing I or anyone else can do about it. The guys give me a minute, then appear on either side of me. I’m braced for Jacob to tell me what a dickhead I’m being, but it’s Gabriel who speaks.

“Eve thinks Ophelia’s falling for you. They haven’t known each other long, but she’s got good instincts about this sort of thing. She called it with Quinn, and she was right.”

Jacob adds, “And you’re going to look like a proper dick if she does go through with it and you’ve no tattoo to stick on her. Let’s focus on that for now.”

Right. Good advice. Don’t prisoners on death row spend their time doing crosswords and stuff like that? No need to focus on my upcoming head removal. “How did you come up with yours?”

Gabriel shrugs. “It was easy for me. She loved the playing cards I sent her, and it just fit.”

Of course it was easy for the Compound’s happiest couple. I’m surprised a songbird didn’t whisper the idea into his ear. I turn to Jacob. “And you? Please tell me you struggled.”

“You’re fucking right I did. I had a tattoo all designed for Suzy, a bird in a cage but with the door open. It never fit Quinn, though. You know? I have to give her a firm hand, not coddling. The stamp is perfect. She needs reminding who’s boss.”

I smile at his very accurate assessment of Quinn, but I’m snagged on the tattoo he described. I can picture it. A beautiful blue songbird, caged but free at the same time. An elegant design, and if by some miracle we get to that stage, it would embody Ophelia’s choice to perfection.

I lock eyes with Jacob, who blinks at my no doubt slightly unhinged one-eyed stare. “What?”

“How pissed would you be if I steal your idea?”

He frowns. “The stamp? I wouldn’t care, but Quinn might. Matching tattoos with a friend would be a bit weird.”

“No. The cage.”

His face clears. “Oh. I wouldn’t give two shits about that. Take it if you want.”

Something in me relaxes. It might be the only good decision I’ve made this week, but it feels right.

I spend an hour with the tattooist, who draws up a beautiful design. By the time I venture into the auditorium’s main hall, it’s half full. I have a reserved space at the front, where I can watch Jacob’s ceremony before taking the stage for my own. I’m glad he’s going first. Nothing ruins a special moment like knowing your friend is getting decapitated.

Gabriel is already seated in the front row. As soon as I appear, whispers start, and

even though I can't make them out, the tone is clear. It's rare for Brothers to fail the ceremony, but it happens. Right before I joined, Gabriel witnessed someone fail. Today, people think it's a possibility, and weird energy zings through the air. Not bloodlust, exactly. More blood-expectation.

Before I can set out toward my seat, Kendrick materializes from somewhere. I swear the man is a fucking vampire. He claps me on the shoulder—affectionate, for him. “Are you ready?”

“As I'll ever be, sir.”

It's a glib remark, but Kendrick nods solemnly. He takes a minute before he speaks. The room has fallen silent, and I'm sure every single ear is pricked up, trained on our conversation. “You've made some foolish decisions, but you're an asset to the next generation of Brothers. I hope today goes in your favor.”

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? I settle for “Me, too.”

He sighs and disappears backstage. Not exactly a ringing endorsement of my chances.

I take my seat beside Gabriel, and we sit in tense silence as the hall fills. Every Brother, besides those too sick to attend, is here. Their Wards as well. Too soon, the lights dim, and Kendrick takes the stage.

“Welcome, all. It's wonderful to see you gathered here for our most sacred of occasions. In 1632—”

Kendrick's history lesson quickly loses my attention, and I nudge Gabriel as he drones on. “Hey. At your ceremony, Jacob and I didn't look at Eve. It felt wrong. Should we do the same for Quinn?”

Gabriel snorts. “She’s spent the last three months telling everyone how few fucks she gives about being naked. At this point, I think she’ll be offended if we don’t watch.”

He’s got a point. Kendrick finally wraps up his boring introduction, and Jacob takes the stage. The big guy plays it cool, but his movements are jerkier than usual as he sits on the huge, elaborately carved chair in the center of the stage. His face is red, too. He’s stressed.

Kendrick rattles off a brief introduction, then the ceremony kicks off in earnest when Quinn makes her appearance. Even she looks nervous, glancing at the crowd, then settling her eyes on Jacob.

It feels wrong, for a second, seeing her skinny body stripped bare, but my brain soon dismisses it and stops seeing it as weird. My eyes are more drawn to Jacob and the fierce pride on his face. I have no doubt Jacob would slaughter every single human in this building, myself included, for the girl kneeling at his feet. He’d throw himself under a bus for her.

Just like I have for Ophelia.

My chest lurches. Will she give me the chance to show her I care?

Quinn reins in her bratty side long enough to complete the ceremony perfectly. She even keeps silent, Jacob’s hand clutching hers, as the tattoo artist inks the Property of Jacob West stamp onto her inner forearm. Her body trembles from the pain, but she’s brave. How will Ophelia cope with it?

Don’t be stupid. It won’t get that far.

The main ceremony is over, but this time, no one relaxes. At Gabriel’s ceremony the sudden curveball of the extra task threw us all, but this year, both Jacob and I are

ready for it. I touch the item in my suit pocket. Funny how I remembered that and not the damn tattoo.

Kendrick steps forward again. “As before, Quinn must complete one final act to prove her loyalty. You are her Patron and her master. Command her, a true test. Prove to your Brothers how devoted your Ward is. Fail to test her, and I’ll instruct her myself. ”

Jacob bends down, and I swear he’s enjoying himself as he says, “Just one simple thing, love. Repeat after me. ‘To show my devotion to the sacred order of the Brotherhood, I swear to deny myself all pleasure for the next thirty days.’”

I can picture Quinn’s outraged expression as he lowers his voice and adds, “That means no orgasms. In case it wasn’t clear.”

Gabriel mutters, “That’s rough. I reckon she’d have rather kissed everyone in the building’s feet.”

I suppress a laugh. Solemn occasion. Impending doom. All that.

Quinn repeats the words, sounding so pissed it almost sets me off again, and then it’s over. Jacob dresses her in the traditional Ward’s robe, which brushes the floor on her, and they sign the book together. It’s done. Jacob’s head is off the chopping block, and I’m about to stretch out my neck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My whole body shakes as I get to my feet. It’s one thing to talk about going bravely to your death, but what kind of psycho can really do it? My heart thunders against my ribs, and my skin is clammy, covered in sticky sweat.

Fuck.

My breathing grows erratic, and I hope everyone puts my slow pace down to my recent injuries as I force myself to take step after impossible step. This must be what it feels like walking to the electric chair. Sealing your doom one step at a time.

I collapse into the chair. Kendrick's introduction is quick this time, without his usual flow. Keen to get down to business, one way or the other. Will Ophelia even appear on stage? Or just refuse to walk out? I stare at the door she should enter through. If we'd had more time, maybe I could have made it work. Maybe —

The door swings open. All the quiet background chatter from the crowd cuts out, and the whole room seems to draw in a collective breath. It's dark, and there's a flicker of movement in the shadowed entrance. Someone is there. Who—

Ophelia steps out, and she's all I can see.

The stage lights turn her hair into a shiny midnight river and highlight the soft, beautiful curves of her body. Pink stains her cheeks, and she keeps her eyes down as she carefully walks across the stage, hands clasped in front of her. She doesn't look at me until she sinks to her knees at my feet.

Her gray eyes meet mine, shiny with emotion, and I'm dying to ask her what the hell she's doing. I never thought it would get this far. If she's going to fail the ceremony, why walk across a stage naked? A tiny, unwelcome flutter of hope breaks out of the iron grip I'm trying to maintain, and I can't put it back.

Maybe. Maybe.

“Brothers and Wards, we welcome Sebastian Grange and his Ward, Ophelia Calder. This is a sacred tradition...”

She's staying quiet, just like she's supposed to. Why? Why the fuck is she doing this? Kendrick finishes his spiel and addresses Ophelia. "Ophelia, give thanks to your Patron and swear yourself to him."

Now. Now is where she's going to fuck it up. Right now, is the moment she'll—

"Thank you, Sebastian, for choosing me as your Ward. I am yours, and yours alone, forevermore."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ophelia

I seal my fate with a sentence. It should feel like a cell door slamming behind me, but it doesn't. I watch Sebastian's face, committing the moment to memory forever. His good eye widens, a blue pool of pure astonishment, and his mouth opens.

He thought he was going to die.

He's not supposed to touch me, but he strokes my cheek anyway, fingers trembling. "Pet. Are you—"

"Sebastian." Sebastian snatches his hand back at Kendrick's sharp word. "Make your promise to your Ward."

There's a distinct undertone of don't screw this up to the words, and it almost makes me smile.

"Yes. Of course. Sorry. Ophelia, I grant you my protection. You are mine, and mine alone, forevermore. I have selected this mark to grace your skin as a symbol of my ownership."

Ownership .

I keep my eyes locked on Sebastian as I let myself feel the full weight of the word. I chose this. He gave me the opportunity for freedom, but I turned it down. And it

won't be ownership in name only; he's made that perfectly clear. I belong to him, and he'll take full advantage.

And you'll love it. Sometimes, anyway.

I chose this. I can hardly imagine my father's horror. The disgust he'll feel when he hears about it from his spies. But with the thought comes a single, beautiful realization.

I don't fucking care.

He can think what he likes about me. He never loved the person I really am. I hope he gets to hear every detail of this moment and it chokes him. From now on, there's only one man's opinion I care about.

A guy who must be the tattoo artist, given his ink, appears with a trolley. The tattoo. I'd forgotten all about it. What will it be? I don't get a say. It's Sebastian's choice. It hits me all at once—this is the first of many decisions that are his to make.

My breathing picks up, and Sebastian must sense it because, under Kendrick's disapproving glare, he ducks his head to whisper, "Don't worry. I chose something beautiful. You'll love it, trust me."

Trust him. I do.

The tattoo artist sets himself up behind me and starts his design on my right shoulder. I yelp, not braced for the pain, and Sebastian takes my hands in his. "Don't be a baby. You're tougher than that."

I straighten my spine. I might be naked and kneeling, but I don't have to appear weak. Not because I'm a Calder—I'm done with being tough to protect my family

image—but for myself. I’ve chosen to be here, and if I want any respect in this place, I’m going to have to earn it .

The pain consumes me for a while, and I let it. I’ve done enough thinking in the last few hours to last me a lifetime. After an indeterminate amount of time, the tattoo machine stops. “That’s most of it. I’ll get her back in for another sitting to finish off the finer details.”

“Thank you.”

He addressed Sebastian, not me. Because he’s my master and I’m his property. That’s going to take a lot of getting used to.

The tattoo artist leaves, and Kendrick steps forward. I know what comes next, and my stomach turns over. This is going to be bad. I know it.

“Ophelia must complete one final act to prove her loyalty. You are her Patron and her master. Command her, a true test. Prove to your Brothers how devoted your Ward is. Fail to test her, and I’ll instruct her myself.”

Crap. So he has to be cruel. How cruel? Eve had to kiss Kendrick’s feet. Will Sebastian think of something worse?

I catch his eye, and he smiles. It’s not his sweet smile, but the one that lights me up from the inside out. The dangerous smile. The smile that says I’m not going to like what comes next but he will.

Oh God.

He dips his hand into his suit pocket, and as soon as I see what he pulls out, I know. I shake my head at him, but his smile turns into a vicious grin as he flings the small

rubber bone across the stage, right to the goddamn curtains. “Fetch, pet. With your mouth. And no standing.”

Maybe I should have let him die after all.

I stare across the stage, which feels a million miles long. Eve did it, I remind myself. She crawled across this very stage and survived. I can too .

The wooden stage is rough against my knees as I crawl toward the curtains. Blood rushes in my ears as I close the distance, and I’m hyper aware of the way my breasts move, but I’m doing it. It’s not going to kill me. You can’t actually die of embarrassment, though it feels like I might.

An eternity later, I reach the bone. Would he have thought to wash it? Most men, definitely not, but Sebastian? Probably. I grip it in my teeth, feeling stupider than I’ve ever felt when it lets out a goddamn squeak, and make the long journey back to Sebastian’s feet. I glare up at him as he takes the bone from my lips and pats my head. “There’s a good girl.”

He’s radiant, joy and amusement rolling off him in waves, and it manages to infect me despite the indignity of what he just made me do. I smile up at him. My master. My owner. I keep tripping over the words in my head, trying to make them apply to me. It still doesn’t feel real.

The relief in Kendrick’s voice is unmistakable. “Well done, Ophelia.” He disappears, returning with a silky blue robe, which he hands to Sebastian.

Sebastian holds out his hand, and I get to my feet. The robe is covered in tiny, embroidered flowers, and the watery silk caresses my skin as he wraps it around me. He bends his head. “This feels like a waste. I’ve got half a mind to keep you naked up here a while longer. Maybe make you do some star jumps.”

My face burns at his words, but a telltale curl of desire lodges in my stomach. I'm as twisted as he is, and the quirk of his eyebrow tells me he knows it.

I'm lightheaded as we sign our names in the huge, ancient book, right below Jacob and Quinn. Eve and Gabriel's signatures sit above them, and hundreds more before that. Thousands, maybe. I hadn't appreciated the age of the Brotherhood before, but seeing those lists of names pulls it into sharp relief .

The feeling as I sign is unlike anything else I've ever known. Weight and freedom tangled together. I might be captive in this place, but I'm finally free to be my true self.

Sebastian wraps his arms around me, tucking me tight against his chest. I look up at his battered face. The bruises have hit the purple stage, and his face is a mass of painful color. He still glows with happiness, and I can't blame him. He thought he'd die for me today, but I chose life for us both.

He kisses my forehead, and I close my eyes. He feels like home.

The next morning, I hold Sebastian's hand as the Brotherhood's military descend on my family home. We watch it all, in scattered bits and pieces through soldiers' bodycams, as Jacob snaps orders to the men. Kendrick didn't let him go in person, but they compromised on him supervising remotely. Weird, for a scientist, but I'm guessing he's got an interesting past.

At the same time they attack my house, they strike three other strongholds, none of which I knew existed. Dr. Wade is in Brotherhood custody, and I can't stop myself feeling guilty about giving him up. He wasn't exactly nice to me, but he wasn't an asshole either.

On the other hand, he was friends with my brother, which doesn't speak well for his character.

He's already revealed enough information to flush out another of my father's spies and one loose-lipped council member Sebastian has nicknamed "the poison dwarf" for some weird reason. Jacob thinks he'll reveal more, given time .

I should feel more emotion than I do when they smash through the front doors of our mansion. It's not like I have no happy memories. My nanny, Maida, taught me to bake cookies in the kitchen, and Mom and I had fun until she got sick.

Everything is tainted, though. The living room is where I listened as Harrison and his friends described raping some guy's girlfriend in revenge for whatever he'd done. The dining room is where I cried night after night, staring at my math books, and my dad told me not to worry. He'd set me up with something suitable.

The men round up our staff for questioning and go through each room of the house. What they pull out of Harrison's office makes me double over, trying not to vomit. His taste for teenage girls hadn't eased off any as he got older, if the photos and souvenirs in his safe are anything to go by.

Sebastian wraps a comforting arm around me. "You don't have to watch this."

But I do. I need to see the ugly truth.

If the house is bad, the strongholds are worse. Despite Eve and Gabriel's story, I'd still been clinging to the idea that they were wrong about the trafficking or that someone in the organization had gone rogue.

My dad is an asshole, but he's not that bad. He can't be.

He can.

After a shootout with some of my family's guards, the Brotherhood soldiers force their way into a prison. There are women there, filthy and starving in cells. Some of them are so young I have to turn away, and I finally let Sebastian lead me out of the room. Once it's over, we get the news I didn't want to hear.

No sign of my father.

Several of his right-hand men have disappeared, too. If I know my father, he weighed the odds and decided to retreat—but it won't be forever. The Brotherhood has taken both of his children. He'll want revenge, and he's a patient man.

For the first time since I arrived, knowing how isolated and secure we are feels comforting rather than oppressive.

I sit on a bench in the weak sunlight with Sebastian, watching the birds fly through the trees at the edge of the woods. Sebastian points out a strange-looking one, tiny and jewel-colored.

“There's a Brother called James who comes out here every day to feed the birds. If you value your sanity, don't ever ask him about that bird. I did and got a forty-five-minute lecture. It nearly killed me.”

I laugh and lean my head against his shoulder. The duality of my new situation is still making my head spin. Right now, we're on our way to Medical, not just to remove Sebastian's bandage, but to speak to Dr. Richard about starting my training in earnest. Sebastian wants me studying by the end of the week.

But before we left the house, he clipped on my leash.

We watch the birds in peaceful silence, though he keeps rubbing his bandage. His body is all tense lines. He's scared, and I can't blame him. Finally, he sighs. "Better get this over with, then."

Sebastian grips my leash in one hand and my hand in the other. It's oddly comforting.

Dr. Richard's expression is grave as Sebastian takes a seat on the examination bed. "I don't want you to get your hopes up. There's only a twenty-five-percent chance you'll see out of this eye again."

Sebastian flashes the doctor a grin. "I tend to cheat the odds."

It's amazing. If I didn't already know how terrified Sebastian is, I'd never have guessed from his performance here. He's far too good an actor. I need to learn all his little tells to keep up with him .

"Right, then." The doctor sticks a patch over Sebastian's good eye. "Let's see, shall we?"

I hold Sebastian's hand as the doctor unravels the bandage. I hiss as the damage is revealed. A thick scar bisects Sebastian's eye, and I tighten my grip on his hand.

"That bad, hey? Good thing I already own you, or you might have run for the hills." He tries to keep his tone light, but I can hear the strain.

"No. You were all boring and pretty before. Now you look dangerous, like an assassin. I like it."

He laughs, but it has a panicky edge. "So, what now, Doc? Do I try to open it?"

"In your own time, yes. It'll be painful, and don't expect to see clearly if the eye is

still functional. We're hoping for light and blurry shapes."

"Wonderful news."

Sebastian takes a deep breath and winces as his eye opens a crack. He snaps it shut, then tries again, this time getting a little farther. "There's light!"

I glance at the doctor, who gives me a small smile. "It's a good sign. Not definitive, but a good sign."

"There are shapes too. Is that you, pet? Lift your hand for me."

I do, and his smile lights up my heart. "I saw that! Now take off your top."

I gasp, and he laughs. "Kidding. I'm kidding. This is good though, right?"

"Yes. Very good, indeed."

An hour later, Sebastian is set up with an eye patch to allow the eye to rest and recover, and I'm signed up for a basic online anatomy course. The idea of studying still tightens my chest, but I'm excited, too. This time, I'll have all the support I need. We walk out of Medical hand in hand.

"Hey. How many fingers am I holding up?" I turn to see Quinn, both middle fingers raised in our direction.

Jacob smacks her ass hard enough to make me grab my own in sympathy. "Behave."

She turns the middle fingers on him. "After what you pulled yesterday? No. This month is going to be as bad for you as it is for me."

“Oh, I highly doubt that.” Jacob’s voice, low and dangerous, makes her drop her hands.

All Sebastian’s friends have been waiting for us. Gabriel asks, “So...are we celebrating or drowning our sorrows?”

“Celebrating.”

A round of hugs, high-fives, and manly back claps follows. I watch, smiling, until Quinn drags me off to one side. “You are so fucking lucky. I’d have fetched that bone a hundred times above what he did to me. Did you hear? The fucking audacity!”

She chatters on and on, and it makes the day brighter. I don’t just have Sebastian here. I have friends and a life. A weird, fucked-up one, yes. But normal wasn’t really working for me, was it?

For the first time, I’m happy right where I am.

Sebastian

Three Months later

“I can’t do this. I don’t want to. I’m not doing it.”

Ophelia examines herself in the full-length mirror, tugging at her costume. It’s a much, much sluttier version of a classic Playboy bunny suit—tiny black skirt with a fluffy white tail and black stockings with lace garters. Stiletto heels and a pair of white bunny ears complete the look. I haven’t given her anything to cover her tits.

She looks incredible, and the red-hot blush on her face and chest caps the outfit off nicely.

I stand behind her in the mirror and rest my hand on her hip. She says she doesn’t want to do this, but her blown-out pupils and rock-hard nipples tell a different tale. Still, I make a show of compassion.

“I understand. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I just need you to pass one little test, and I’ll call the whole thing off.”

Her eyes widen, and her lip quivers. Did I catch a brief flash of disappointment?
“What test? ”

“Lie on the bed for me. Legs spread. Knees bent.”

She shoots me a wary glance but obeys. Once she’s in position, I settle myself on the

bed between her legs. “If this pussy of yours isn’t soaking wet, I’ll cancel. Let’s see.”

“But. No. W—” Panic edges her words, and they cut off as I easily slide two fingers into her soaking entrance. I add a third for good measure and slide them in and out a few times, just to make the point.

She groans in defeat, and I smile down at her. “The guys will be here in twenty minutes.”

Her face turns redder than I would have thought possible, and she closes her eyes.

“Actually, hold that pose. I’ve got a present for you.”

Her eyes snap open. “What present?”

“You’ll see. Don’t move an inch.”

I like making her wait in humiliating poses. I take my time finding what I need as she squirms on the bed. “Won’t they think this is weird?”

“I’ve checked with them all, and they’re looking forward to it. And don’t worry, they know the rules. Absolutely no touching.”

She whimpers as I return to the bed. I hold up a towel, determined to make this as embarrassing as possible. “I just need to dry you off first, or it’ll never stick.”

“What? Sebastian, what are you—”

I reach between her legs and carefully dry the skin around her clit before attaching the tiny adhesive device. Ophelia’s breaths come in ragged bursts. “What is this?”

I pull the remote from my pocket and press the button. She squeals as the device

vibrates directly on her sensitive clit. It cuts off after two seconds, just as I've set it to. She wriggles when it stops and tilts her head to look at me with a question in her eyes .

“Just a little something to add to the fun.” I make a show of checking my watch. “Fifteen minutes. Make sure you've done everything you need to do. If you have to use the bathroom during the game, you need to ask my permission, and I imagine you might find that a little embarrassing.”

I don't know how I'm keeping my face straight when I'm having this much fun. But she needs me to be strict. Otherwise, she might really lose her nerve. “Do you remember what you have to do and the rules? Repeat it for me.”

She pushes herself up to sit next to me and swallows. “Answer the door and show everyone to the table, then kneel by your chair unless someone requests a drink. Don't speak unless spoken to, but answer all questions politely. Address everyone as sir. Don't cover myself.” She pauses. “And ask permission if I need to leave the room for any reason.”

“Good pet.” I kiss her head and can't resist adding, “And have fun. I know you'll enjoy this.”

She bites her lip and disappears to get ready. When she returns to the living room, I'm already seated at the poker table. I had it brought in just for tonight, and it's a classic Vegas design—circular and covered in green baize.

The cocktail table, where Ophelia will be mixing drinks, stands off to one side. I brought in a mixologist for a couple of days to teach her how to make the most popular cocktails perfectly, and she's been having fun with it at Annie's famous girls' nights. Tonight will be a little different.

The move into our new place went surprisingly well for two people as picky about

our home furnishings as we are. We've ended up with the slick, minimalist style we both like, enhanced with a few touches I never thought I'd have. Most notably our little Westie puppy, Alfie. He's spending the night with Quinn and Jacob .

None of my friends are attending tonight, just acquaintances who love poker. Of all the guests, Ophelia only knows one, and I can't wait to see her reaction when he walks in.

The heels force Ophelia to stick her ass and tits out, and my God, my cock is an iron bar already. Maybe I should cancel? I could spend the whole night fucking her on this very table.

No. This is going to be too much fun.

The buzzer goes, and Ophelia jumps as though she's been tasered. I hide my smile. "You're up, pet."

She stares between me and the door, and I see the moment panic hits. Her hands fly to her tits, covering them, and she shakes her head. "No. Please."

I'm on my feet in a second. I stand in front of her and gently pull her hands away. She whimpers but doesn't fight. "You can do this. I know you want to. Now be a good pet, and don't keep my guests waiting. Okay?"

She licks her lips, then steels herself. "Okay."

I take a seat, drowning in pride as she wiggles to the door in her silly shoes. Sometimes, I still can't quite believe she's here. That she's here because she chose this. Chose me. The tattoo on her shoulder is every bit as beautiful as I imagined it, and she loves it, too. She's even expressed an interest in getting more ink.

"Isn't that a bit unladylike?" I teased her when she mentioned it.

“Fuck being ladylike,” was her wonderful reply.

She reaches the door and pauses with her hand on the handle before she yanks it open. Two of my guests have arrived together, and they stare at Ophelia as she stands back to let them in. “Welcome, sirs.” Her voice squeaks, but it’s audible at least. “Please follow me to your seats.”

“Gladly.” They both shoot me impressed glances as Ophelia leads them to the table and takes up her position at my feet .

Before she’s had a chance to settle herself, the buzzer goes again, and my guests watch with interest as she gets to her feet. Thomas, a mediocre player but one of the chattier options I had for tonight’s guest list, mutters, “Congratulations. She’s impressive.”

Four of my guests arrive in quick succession and set Ophelia to mixing drinks. She’s still bright red, but focusing on the cocktails seems to settle her. She turns her back to shake a martini, and I call her on that bad behavior right away.

“No, pet. Face us.”

She does and gets to enjoy five pairs of eyes watching her tits as she shakes the drink.

Her eyes are downcast, and she looks embarrassed as hell; but her nipples are bullets, and she’s pressing her legs together. This is driving her crazy, and I can’t resist making it a bit worse. I set the remote control button in the center of the table.

“Every time you want a drink, gents, press this.”

Vishnu, the only player whose skill I rate better than my own, gives it an experimental tap. Poor Ophelia doubles over, face contorting. Again, the vibrations stop after only two seconds. Enough to torment her, but not enough to give her any

relief. “I think it’s broken?”

“No, it’s connected to her clit. Believe me, she’ll know.”

His face splits in a wide grin. “You’re evil.”

He taps the button again. “One old-fashioned, please, Ophelia.”

She manages a strangled “Yes, sir” and goes back to her work.

The door buzzer goes one final time. Ophelia heads to answer in a hurry, probably glad to be out of the limelight for a moment. A smile curls my lips as she pulls the door open and comes face to face with Kendrick .

She jumps back, then glances at me as though we’ve been caught doing something we shouldn’t. The same automatic guilt you feel whenever you see a cop on the highway, even when you’re doing the speed limit in a perfectly legal car.

He nods politely, and his eyes never leave Ophelia’s face as he says. “Ophelia. Glad to see you’re settling in well.”

Deadpan as if they’re at a tea party. I’ve never played poker with Kendrick before, and I suspect his poker face will be absolutely impenetrable.

“Th-Thank you, sir. I’ll show you to your seat,” she manages and leads him to the last remaining chair. We all welcome Kendrick, and he maintains the same calm expression as I explain the drinks ordering method. Not a flicker of amusement or desire.

He presses the buzzer once and politely orders a whiskey on the rocks. I stare. In all the time I’ve known him, he’s never once drunk whiskey in any form other than straight. Exactly two seconds later, he presses the button again. “My apologies,

Ophelia. I meant to order it straight.”

She squeaks out, “Of course, sir,” and he catches my eye. For one single second, his lip twitches up into a smile, then he’s straight back to his usual serious self. Maybe, just maybe, he might be human after all.

We settle into the serious business of poker. As the night progresses, I gradually turn up the timer on Ophelia’s buzzer. First three seconds. Then four. Her movements become increasingly jerky, and she gasps every time it’s pressed. She spills a drink on the table, and her hands shake as she cleans it up.

As we approach the end of the night, I change the setting to one minute.

She’s kneeling at my feet when Thomas presses the button. “Another martini please.”

“Yes, si—” She cuts off, staring up at me. I smile and watch her eyes widen as the vibrations don’t stop.

“Thomas asked for a drink, pet,” I prompt. “Don’t keep him waiting.”

“But I— It—” All eyes watch her as she presses her hands to the floor and bites her lip as the orgasm hits. She doesn’t quite manage to hold back her moan, and it rings out loud in the silent room. I wait until it passes before tapping her shoulder and speaking in my sternest voice.

“Drink. Now.”

She struggles to her feet, face beetroot red.

I lose count of how many more times she comes before I finally say goodbye to my guests. By the end, she’s covered in sweat and the drinks are thrown together

haphazardly, more pure alcohol than anything else. Kendrick takes the pot, and I make Ophelia kneel to present him with the vintage bottle of Hennessy Paradis I chose as the prize.

“Press the button one last time. For good luck,” I urge, and he does, watching calmly as Ophelia curls up at his feet with a tormented moan.

“She did very well tonight. I must say, I strongly disapproved of your choice, but she’s the perfect Ward for you. An excellent acquisition.”

The other guests agree, and I see them out myself, leaving Ophelia on the floor, absolutely spent.

We’re finally alone.

I pick Ophelia up off the floor and carry her into the bedroom. Tomorrow, she’ll be herself again. She’ll be my sharp, brilliant girl who is breezing her way through her anatomy course like it’s easy. Who is tackling her nemesis, math, with the help of an excellent tutor .

Tomorrow, she’ll be smart and funny and go back to lighting up my life with her wit.

But that’s tomorrow. Tonight, she’s none of those things. Right now, she’s just my pet, with nothing in her pretty little empty head beside a desire to please me. I love both sides of her. Everything about her, if I’m honest, and as I lock the shackle around her ankle, I’ve never felt happier.

“Just one last job, pet, before you sleep.”

She knows what to do.

I’m so desperate that the feel of her lips alone almost tips me over the edge. I don’t

draw it out—she’s barely conscious—so I use her mouth like it’s my hand, controlling her movements until I shoot down her perfect throat.

She gives a contented sigh, licks her lips, and settles herself into her pet bed like she was born to be there. She was. She was fucking made for me.

I cover her with her blanket and climb into bed. How long until I throw another poker night? I’m already so full of ideas; it can’t come soon enough.

The next afternoon, I finish work in time to collect Ophelia from her shift in Medical. Today is a big day for her, and she’s had mixed feelings about it. Hadrian’s Ward is arriving, and Dr. Robert is allowing Ophelia to assist with doing the testing and fitting her tracker.

I told her she didn’t have to participate if she wasn’t comfortable, but she insisted. “I want to care for everyone here. This is part of it.”

She’s brave like that .

Two Gilda guards wait outside Medical but nod and wave me through. I enter the silent clinic and almost jump out of my fucking skin when a man steps out of the shadows looking like something from a horror movie.

A mask covers his face. It’s demonic, stylized into a twisted expression, but it shifts as I watch it. The lips move, flowing like sand in an hourglass.

I take a step back, heart pounding, but he holds his hands up. “Sebastian. It’s me. Hadrian.”

I don’t recognize the voice, either. It’s far deeper, far more gravelly than his natural

tone. I lean forward to examine him. “What the hell is all this?”

“It’s a prosthetic and a voice changer.” He touches the side of his face. “She’s not going to know it’s me.”

“Who isn’t?” It takes me a second, but then it clicks. “Your Ward?”

“Yes.” He beckons me over. “Look.”

The eerie, horror-movie feeling doesn’t dissipate as I walk toward the sleeping woman on the table, covered to the neck with a sheet. Curly red hair spills off the table in a wave. A horrible suspicion settles over me, and as her face comes into view, it solidifies.

She’s the spitting fucking image of Candice.

He stands beside me. “Beautiful, isn’t she? We were high school sweethearts. Married for ten years until she betrayed me.”

“What?” I find myself glancing at the door to the staff room. Where the hell are Ophelia and Dr. Roberts? Why have they left me alone with this freak? Whoever this woman is, I pity her.

“She found my research unethical and turned me in. It set me back years. But”—he strokes a tendril of hair back from her face, revealing a spray of freckles—“after the divorce, I discovered something very interesting. ”

“What was that?”

He turns his sinister mask my way. I can’t see which way he’s looking, and it sets me on edge. “She had some interesting fantasies, my Juliet. She never shared them with me, but I found it all after I did some digging.”

He turns back to his ex-wife. “Masked men, abuse. You name it. And if that’s what she wants—” The mask twists, and I can only assume it’s supposed to be a smile, though the effect is eerie. “—that’s what she’s going to fucking get.”