



Eden's Deliverance (The Eden Trilogy #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Edens Deliverance was supposed to be the answer to all my problems

What more could you ask for when attending a secret kink club?

Complete anonymity? Check.

Acting out all your wildest fantasies? Check.

Having whatever partner you want without any exclusivity? Check.

Everything was perfect until they set their sights on me. Now I cant shake them.

Theyre everywhere. Always watching, always waitingalways one step ahead of me.

I call them the Chaos Twins, but theyre so much more.

They know exactly who I am. Uncheck.

They only care about acting outtheir fantasies, not mine. Uncheck.

They sabotage any other connection I make, so nobody can have me but them. Uncheck.

But they have secrets of their own ones that will turn my life upside down forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:18 pm

Scarlett

“How do you feel about choking?”

I’m pacing the floor of my bedroom, gnawing away at my fingernails while Penelope bombards me with questions I don’t have the answers to.

“I’m sorry, what?” I stop dead in my tracks to face her.

She’s lounging on my bed with her laptop open in front of her. “You know, breath play. There’s a bunch of reasons why people like it.” An unmistakable sparkle shines in her eyes, letting me know she is very much into breath play. “Cutting off oxygen to the brain releases endorphins and gives you a major head high. It’s supposed to feel good,” she explains. “Other people just like the power dynamic of it all.”

“Isn’t there anything a little...tamer?” I ask, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. I don’t want to sound too ‘vanilla,’ but I’m not used to having it any other way.

I haven’t had a good lay in months, which is fucking depressing because I used to think there was no such thing as bad sex.

The reality has been disappointing, to say the least. Every encounter has resulted in a whole lot of suffocatingly heavy breath in my face, amateur boob fondling, and a complete lack of orgasms .

They’ll ask, “Does that feel good, baby?”

Sorry, but no.

There's no class. No heat. No passion.

I am in serious need of a sexual awakening, so I asked Penelope for help. I'm tired of sleeping with men who have no idea what they're doing, and she has a solution that could change my life.

"Scarlett, I love you, but I can't dictate your future sexcapades. I've got my own to plan for, so you have to help me out here. Give me something to work with." She means for it to come off playfully, but I can tell she's over my bullshit.

Perching beside her on the bed, I hover over the laptop to review the application she has pulled up. "Let me take a look. I'll get something together, I promise."

She may have handed me the key to answering my problems, but I have to unlock the door myself.

A few months ago, one of Penelope's girlfriends invited her to this fancy sex club called Eden's Deliverance. It's an underground sort of establishment, where visitors are encouraged to explore a plethora of dirty kinks with complete strangers. The club is only open from Friday through Sunday, so it's crazy exclusive. While anybody can visit, the sexy-time part is only for members who've been approved to participate.

She goes almost every Saturday night and thinks it's exactly what I need. While Pen may be the slutty devil on my shoulder, we've been best friends since fifth grade, and she's rarely steered me wrong.

I mean, there was that one time when we got caught smoking-up in the high school parking lot. There was also that time last week when she encouraged me to go home with this sweet, sensitive, and conveniently hot guy from the bar.

He turned out to live with six fat cats who were named after old '80s rockstars. It was weird as hell, but Motley was pretty cute.

I'm completely overwhelmed by the extensive application process, which is what we've been working on for the past hour. If the required STI testing wasn't enough to scare me away, I should be able to handle this...I'm just having a really hard time making a concrete decision.

"What's this bit here about?" I ask.

Listed on the application is a checklist of gemstones: Ruby, Topaz, Amethyst, Sapphire, Emerald, Pearl, and Onyx.

"Oh my god, you're going to love this part! It's what makes the place so mysterious." Penelope claps her hands with enthusiasm. "Based on the kink you choose, you'll be given a mask to wear while you're at the club, and you can only boink people who are wearing the same mask. Every kink is paired with a color, but Onyx is meant for the general public," she explains. "Each color is supposed to replace your identity, so think of it like a giant game of Clue. No murder though...just a bunch of raunchy sex."

"Well, I want to be Miss Ruby, duh."

It's not even a question. Maybe I'm full of myself, but I can't help gravitating towards anything red in nature because of my name. Red hair, red lipstick, red dresses, red shoes. It's been a way of life since creating my own identity for college.

I like what I like, sue me.

Penelope clicks a few links on the website, opening a completely different page showing all the gemstones and their respective kinks. "I don't know about that, babe.

Ruby represents edge play which is the more extreme stuff like knife play, blood play, and consensual non-consent.”

I’m immediately flooded with disappointment. I was really hoping Ruby would turn out to be a good match for me, but Hell will freeze over before I ever consider tampering with knife or blood kinks.

Just the thought of it makes me shudder. Yikes . The more I think about it, the more this club feels a little too surreal.

“What about the other gems?” I ask, hopeful that I’ll find something better suited for me.

Penelope continues, “Topaz is for delayed orgasm, or in other words, edging. Amethyst is for impact play, which is spanking, whipping, blah blah. There’s Sapphire for breath play—that’s me. Emerald is for heavier BDSM themes like hardcore bondage, degradation, and things like that. Real ‘dom daddy’ stuff. Pearl is as close to vanilla as you’ll get, but you’re allowed to participate in light BDSM if both partners agree. No matter what gem you are, everyone has to agree on a safe word before they’re allowed to play with their partner. If you’re ever uncomfortable, just say your safeword and they’ll check in with you.”

I try to disguise my hesitation, but she picks up on it and speaks again before I can respond. “Let’s sign you up for Pearl. It’s your first time, so maybe you should only dip your foot in. Let me just...click here, here...and done!” She selects the appropriate gem, then uploads my negative-STI results.

Just like that, it feels like my life’s been signed away with the press of a button. I’m nervous. Like, so fucking nervous that my hands are shaking and I’m sweating in places I didn’t know a person could. I know I should be excited to try something new. And I was...until it became final.

Now, I can't think of anything more terrifying.

The idea of having sex with a masked stranger isn't the scary part. If anything, that's probably a kink of its own I'd totally be into. What's agonizing to me is the vulnerability. I'll probably be the least experienced person there, and I can't stand the possibility of looking like a fool.

It's taken so many years of my life to build up a healthy confidence in my body, my persona, and my art. I couldn't handle that assuredness crumbling because it turns out I'm just as boring when it comes to sex as I've considered my previous partners.

I'm tired of settling for the mundane.

Taking this step will either embarrass the shit out of me, or it'll be the best thing I've ever done for myself. Either way, what's done is done. I can only move forward from here and hope for the best.

It's painful to do because of the knot in my stomach threatening to expel my lunch, but I offer Penelope a half-baked smile of appreciation. "Thanks, Pen. I obviously couldn't have done this without you."

She slaps her palms onto either side of my face, pulling me closer until our noses touch. "Scar, if friends can't help each other get a good fucking down, what are they for?" She plants a wet kiss on my forehead before letting me go to complete her own application.

Ding .

My phone lights up with a notification, and for a second, another rush of anxiety sparks at the idea of facing such an immediate response. Hearing back so quickly after any kind of application is almost always a bad sign and a sure rejection.

Fortunately, it's only a text from my dad asking if I'll come to dinner tomorrow night, and I'm quick to reply with a big fat yes. I've been juggling so much shit this summer, it's been nearly impossible to plan so much as a phone call with him.

Between attending my college courses during the day and squeezing homework sessions in where I can—not to mention finally landing a tattoo apprenticeship at a place that understands my hectic schedule and is willing to teach me on nights and weekends—I'm lucky just to have time to breathe.

Penelope and I are in our third year at Pennbriar University where I'm studying for my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. It's not a requirement for me to become a tattoo artist, but my degree's concentration in illustration should be extremely useful when it comes to designing tattoos.

The issue lies in the fact that I'm doing everything I can to graduate as soon as possible, and staying an extra year isn't an option—even if it means lightening my schedule up. I'd rather be a busybody than a super senior like my stepmother's son.

I roll onto my back and lay beside Penelope on the bed, wondering how the hell I'm going to fit sexual depravity into my jam-packed life. “Hey, when am I supposed to hear back from Eden, anyway?”

She spares me a glance, taking a moment to ponder her answer before turning back to the laptop. “I forget when I got my first acceptance letter, but my weekly confirmations usually come through on Sunday nights. Then, they mail out masks early in the week, so we have plenty of time to prep for the following weekend.” Looking back at me with a soft smile, she says, “Tomorrow, hopefully.”

The hour-long drive to Dad's house is full of pitch-black roads that wind through blankets of surrounding forest—not unlike the darkness swirling through my head as I make the trek.

It looks like a scene straight from a horror movie.

Despite checking my email every five minutes since waking up, I haven't been able to manifest my acceptance letter into existence. Surely it can't be that I'm not kinky enough, else they wouldn't allow any Pearls, right?

Right .

That's what I tell myself as I pull off the main road and down the long, shrouded driveway of my dad's place, shaking with anticipation.

I'm jamming out to "Teeth" by 5 Seconds to Summer when I see a red car parked in my usual spot, causing my heart to instantly plunge. Dad conveniently omitted the fact that his wife's son would be joining us for dinner.

I really hate that fucker. The man is Satan incarnate.

Dad met his mom, Gretchen, two years ago when helping Penelope and me move into campus dorms for our first year. At the time, her son was starting his third year.

As the story goes, my dad grabbed some breakfast at Café Noir—the only acceptable coffee joint in Pennbriar—where he met a woman who was visiting her son before the semester started. They spent the next few hours bonding over the joys of parenthood, and the rest is history .

When they got married this past fall, she moved into our family home and assumed her motherly role with an annoyingly positive disposition. I get along with her well enough, but her son is a different story.

Thankfully, she didn't bring the dirtbag when she moved in; he shares an apartment near campus with his friends, like Pen and I do now.

The screech of my tires echo through the trees when I pull in and park next to Satan's car, leaving only inches between us. My driver's side door flies open, indelicately clipping his Audi when I exit and head for the house.

I'm about to push the handle on the front door when it's ripped from my fingers, swinging wide open to reveal Satan himself.

He towers at least six inches above me, looking menacing as ever. His shiny black hair is pulled into a neat bun, and his round, kempt beard looks like it's been combed through meticulously.

He basically looks like a cleaned-up version of Judah from Bojack Horseman , if he was dipped in ash and tar.

It's all very fitting for a man named Skylar Cole.

"Tell me I didn't just watch you ding up my ride with that fucking lemon of yours," he spits. When I look up to meet his gaze, there's ire radiating from his hazel eyes.

Yeah, he's basically Judah...if Judah was a complete asshole.

I wouldn't normally be so bitchy over his petty attitude, but this kid makes it so incredibly easy to instigate a fight. When I'm around him, I just want to stoke his fire and watch him fucking burn in it.

I don't know what I ever did to him, but he's always seemed to hate my guts. We play nice for holiday visits to our parents, but as soon as we leave, it's back to pretending the other doesn't exist.

I deliver my best hand of feigned innocence, though we both know it's artificial. "I have no idea what you're talking about. "

Refusing to break eye contact, I squeeze past him and walk into the house. My hips brush against his leg, causing his entire body to stiffen—like I’m poisonous or something.

Asshole.

Dad and Gretchen are finishing dinner preparations in the kitchen, so lost in a giggle fit, they don’t notice when I enter. They’re clearly drunk already, but I have to admit it’s fucking adorable.

It’s been a long time since my dad’s been this happy, let alone to the point of breathless laughter. God knows he deserves a medal for surviving everything he’s been through while still managing to provide me with the best life he could.

I owe everything to him.

“Hi, Daddy,” I chime, giving him a big kiss on the cheek. With a small wave towards Gretchen, my niceties have been covered for the evening.

I’m ready to eat. My social battery has expended about as much energy as it’s going to, so I need sustenance if I’m going to make it through the rest of this visit.

I help myself to my own full-to-the-brim glass of wine while we sit together at the kitchen island, catching up on any recent events that haven’t been exchanged over the phone or text.

Dad talks about the work he’s been doing on the house. Gretchen brags about her green thumb and flourishing garden. I ramble about the apprenticeship and what classes I’ve been taking for my Summer Semester.

“Skylar, honey, come have a drink with us!” Gretchen raises her glass towards the

looming entity in the kitchen doorway. “Did you say hello to Scarlett?”

“Of course.” Skylar’s eyes flicker to me momentarily before returning to her. “We caught up when she pulled in. How’s dinner coming, Mom? Anything I can do to help?”

Satan really knows how to put on a show for his mother. I wonder if she knows that her spawn turned out to be a vindictive, bullying prick.

Doubtful .

She worships the ground he walks on. Seemingly, he has enough respect to keep his narcissism checked at the door whenever she’s around, but how he acts on campus is a completely different matter.

At school, Skylar and his super-senior friends run rampant, terrorizing anyone they consider to be beneath them. I’ve personally witnessed him and his henchmen intimidating, demeaning, and smacking down all the ‘losers’ at school—which happens to be just about everyone who doesn’t fit in with their circle jerk of jocks.

Is lacrosse not the most arrogant sport you’ve ever heard of? They could literally play anything else and it would be an improvement.

Luckily, the only real time I actually have to spend around him is when we’re visiting our parents. My classes are in a completely different building than his psychology courses, and even when we’re forced into the same vicinity like the lunch hall, he and his friends eat on the opposite side of the room.

The only one of his friends I actually know is Julian. Skylar drags him along to all of our holiday breaks at home, so I’m always stuck with the two of them.

“My angel,” Gretchen says dreamily as she cups his cheek in her palm. “You can go ahead and pull the roast out of the oven and set it on the table, honey.” She gives his face a small pat before twisting to grab him two oven mitts from the counter behind her.

I stick my tongue out at my dad, but he gives me a playful smack on the arm and says, “Knock it off, you. Just let the boy be. C’mon, let’s eat.”

“Okay, Dad. Keep your blindfold on if you must.” I rise from my stool at the island, squeezing his shoulders before swinging around him to head for the dining room.

I can’t help but check my phone one last time to see if my acceptance came through. All I find is a text from Penelope, raving about her own confirmation email .

I know she had to do this once—wait for her application to be approved—but once you’re in, you’re in. She doesn’t have to deal with the heart-pounding suspense anymore. I could use a little sympathy here.

In the dining room, Dad and Gretchen are already taking their seats at opposite ends of the table, leaving me to take post in the chair across from Skylar.

I manage to avoid meeting his full-on stare, but from my periphery, I swear I catch the hint of a smirk on his stupid face. The fucker’s always got something to snark at, so I wouldn’t be surprised. He lives solely to piss me off. But like I said, my social battery is too dead to handle another charged interaction right now.

The bread and vegetables are passed around while Dad circles the table and scoops everyone a helping of the roast and potatoes. He makes it over to Gretchen just as Skylar passes the bread, shooting me a dirty look when he hands it to me. Except...he won’t actually hand it to me.

He's holding the damned thing with a vise-like grip, refusing to let go.

"What's the magic word?" he asks snidely. This time, there's no mistaking the nasty grin spreading across his face.

"I believe it's 'fuck you, very much,'" I retort, keeping my voice low. Dad and Gretchen seem to be in a world of their own, totally removed from our conversation.

"Be careful what you wish for, Red."

Ew.

Skylar finally relents, and I proceed to grab two rolls for my plate when a familiar ding chimes from my pocket.

I squeak aloud, causing everyone to turn and look at me. "Sorry. Just gotta check this quickly," I say, ripping the phone from my pocket to tap away at the screen.

I'm so lost in the news, I don't realize I'm wearing my excitement like a mask until my dad coaxes, "What is it, sweetheart? I haven't seen you this excited since...who knows when."

I instantly regret opening my stupid mouth. Heat pricks at the surface of my skin like a hundred tiny needles, and it's like I'm on fire—caught under the magnifying glass of interrogation by the rest of the table. Everyone is looking at me, and I get the sense my cheeks probably look like two fat tomatoes on my face.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just some community project Pen and I are working on. I just got confirmation that we're allowed to go ahead with the..." I hesitate, trying to think of the best way to start and finish this conversation so it can never be brought up again, "food orders for the local church. We're going to be donating to the food drive, and

they gave us a list of items that would be most helpful. You know, non-perishables and such.”

Well, that’s not convincing at all.

I’ve never stepped foot inside a church, and I never would—if I could help it. I’m pretty sure my hair would burst into flames the minute I crossed the threshold.

Satan, who I’m sure would also combust if he ever entered a church, raises a condescending eyebrow at me. “Is it often that you donate to the church? You don’t seem like the charitable type,” he scoffs.

“You should really get to know your sister better, Sky,” Gretchen encourages, and I refrain from cringing at the implication Skylar and I could ever be considered siblings. “She’s donated dozens of her paintings to the art gallery and thrift shop in town. She’s absolutely a giver.” A prideful smile flashes across her face, but it’s undeserved.

Truthfully, those ‘donations’ were pleas for money—I was just too embarrassed by the rejection and settled for donating instead.

The life of a starving artist, you know ?

“Oh, I bet she is,” he says, narrowing his eyes. The slimy fucker rests his elbow on the table and curls his fingers around his chin, suggestively swiping his thumb over his bottom lip.

Again, ew.

Dinner drags on painfully after that. Gretchen spends half of it babbling about her spawn’s accomplishments while I sit back and pretend like I give a shit.

“Did you hear that Skylar made the Dean’s List last semester?”

Boring.

“Oh! Did you hear about the award Sky received for his immaculate tutoring lessons?”

Yawn.

Also, it’s a bunch of bullshit lies. Skylar, a tutor? My ass.

I am so tired of hearing about Skylar, Skylar, Skylar. If I never heard his name again, I would die happy.

By the time we’ve all finished dessert and coffee, I’m eager to get out of here and share the big news with Penelope. It doesn’t take me long to say my goodbyes to Dad and Gretchen, but I make sure to flash Satan my favorite finger as I walk out the door. He responds in kind with a sly wink and a salute off his temple with two forefingers.

The warm night air feels incredible on my crawling skin.

Through a patch of clouds, the nearly full moon shines on the surrounding trees, illuminating everything around me with an ethereal glow. It’s beautiful, but before I have time to decompress and appreciate it, I freeze just a few steps from my car.

That motherfucker!

I spin towards the house to storm back inside and slap the prick across the head, only to find him standing at the bay window. He’s been watching me already, having a little chuckle at my expense.

In large capital letters, the word CUNT is carved into my driver's side door. It's almost an upgrade for my beat-up Camry and gives her a bit of character, but it's still completely unwarranted .

I know for a fact I didn't actually cause any damage to his Audi. Trust me, I checked. I was utterly disappointed—even more so now than before—to find not so much as a dent.

After further inspection, the cuts along my door are clearly much deeper and cleaner than a key would make. He must have used something really sharp like a knife.

Jesus, who is this guy?

Planning to do some damage of my own, I rush to grab my keys from the bottom of my purse. My fingers lose their grip when my enthusiasm gets the better of me, sending the bag and its contents tumbling to the pavement.

My limbs shake furiously when I crouch down to scramble for the loose items, a new sort of hatred bubbling to the surface. I don't think I've ever truly hated someone's guts like I do now. Apparently, he hasn't realized yet that I'm not someone to fucking mess with.

Once I've found my lanyard, I decide to ignore the rest of my things and go straight for his car. With my house key pinched between my fingers, I press the tip into the flawless red paint of his Audi.

I barely manage to drag the blunt edge an inch before someone grabs my hair at the crown of my head. The intense pressure is so tight on my scalp, I'm forced to stand on my feet so they don't rip my fucking hair out.

The key slips from my fingers and clatters to the ground when I wrap both of my

hands around my assailant's wrist. I close my eyes as a violent scream rips from my throat, but a hand clamps over my mouth to stifle it almost immediately.

The pain on my scalp sharpens when they pull my hair, forcing my neck to fold backwards as they shove me into the side of my car. When I find the courage to open my eyes again, Skylar is standing there in front of me.

We commence in a rageful staring contest while I puff hot breaths onto his hand, hoping my eyes convey the absolute disdain I feel for him. My head hurts, I'm tired, and it's all I can do to will my unshed tears not to fall—the fucking psycho would probably get off at the sign of weakness .

“Don't even think about it, little girl,” he says, removing his hand from my mouth, only to point a finger in my face. Every word spoken seems to merit an exclamatory jab against the bridge of my nose.

It pisses me the fuck off—so much, in fact, that I jump forward to cinch my teeth around his fingertip and bite down. Hard.

I don't take well to idle threats.

I am so over this piece of shit running around like he can do whatever he wants, consequences be damned. Still, I'm not in the business of severing phalanges, so when he shakes his hand free, I let him go.

Before I know it, his palm cups the underside of my jaw with his fingers digging painfully into the flesh of my cheeks. He looks like he wants to actually murder me. “Try that again, I dare you.”

Fuck, his hand is massive.

I do not have a thin face by any means, and he's handling me like a stuffed animal trapped in a claw machine. The pressure is becoming almost unbearable, and a tear finally slips free from its prison.

He tilts his head to examine the tiny rivulet, and suddenly, that shit-eating grin is back. "Aw, is little Red crying?" He twists my head to the side, and I feel his wet tongue trailing up my cheek, effectively devouring the teardrop. That seems to satiate him, because he suddenly shoves me to the ground where my purse lies. "Now get the fuck out of here."

It takes a second to gather my belongings, but when I rear up and turn to face him, he's leaning against his pretentious car with his arms crossed.

Like he won the battle. Like he's got power, and I should be afraid of him. Like I should follow his orders, because I'm weak enough to be commanded.

Sorry, Satan. I don't fucking think so.

Once I'm inside my own car, I take a second to breathe and compose myself before flipping through my music for something epic to set the scene for what I'm about to do. I settle for "I Don't Give A..." by MISSIO and Zeale, cranking the volume up when the chorus hits .

A spoonful of spiteful medicine keeps the assholes away.

Skylar meets my gaze over the dashboard, and the memory of him laughing from the bay window fuels my fire. I don't miss a beat, giving him the same vicious smirk he's had on his face all night. Cutting my steering wheel all the way to the right, I slip the gear shift into reverse and floor it.

He has to jump out of the way to avoid getting knocked over when our cars collide,

but his horrified reaction to the collective sight and sound of the destruction is fucking beautiful.

I know I'm probably going to pay for that, but fuck , I'm finding it hard to see the price tag over all the disgust on his face. How dare he lay his hands on me? I deserve this win, and it's not the only one I've gotten tonight.

I've been accepted to Eden's Deliverance, and in less than a week's time—as Penelope so gracefully said—my sexcapades are about to start.

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Skylar

This fucking cunt.

I can't do much but watch as she peels out of the driveway, taking half my fucking car with her. I tried to warn her—if she wants to fuck around, she's going to quickly learn what going toe to toe with me actually looks like.

Let's see if Daddy has any contributions to make towards his daughter's destruction.

I find our parents lounging in the den, watching some childish reality show on TV. It's one of those bullshit popularity contests Netflix hosts, where they reward whoever proves to be the most chronically online.

"Hey, Gene." I walk up and plaster on a convincing smile, praying they didn't overhear our discernible spat at dinner. "Scarlett dropped her phone in the driveway, so I figured I could swing by her place and return it on my way home. Do you have her address on hand?"

"Oh shoot!" With a soft chortle, he waddles over to the foyer table and pulls a notebook from one of the drawers. "I tell you, that girl would lose her head if it wasn't attached to her shoulders." After scribbling down the address onto a Post-it, he hands it to me.

Bingo .

"Thank you, I'll be sure to tell her to be more careful," I say.

It's laughable, really. I won't be using this piece of paper to do anything good, but I think I'll hold onto it for a while—the opportune moment will present itself soon enough.

She has no idea what I have in store for her.

Eugene laughs again, giving me a brief nod before rejoining my mother in the den. I follow behind him to give her a proper kiss goodbye, with lots of promises to come back soon.

I let myself out and hop into my car, avoiding the atrocities I'm sure to find when I check the exterior more thoroughly tomorrow. I'll take blissful ignorance, thanks. Leaning back against the headrest, I close my eyes and try to calm my fucking nerves.

That bitch is lucky I didn't rip her goddamn hair out. If it weren't for my poor mother, Baker Drive may have made it to national news for the massacre of the century.

“Man brutally slays his stepsister in the driveway of their parents’ house after a heated altercation.”

It has a ring to it.

Also, what was with all the bullshit dramatics in blasting the soundtrack to my Audi's death? I need to get that fucking song out of my head before I blow a gasket.

I open Spotify and blast “Granite” by Sleep Token at full volume as I take off. The bass reverberates through my whole body, eliciting the tranquil sensation I've been aching for.

Fuck , I've needed this. I love my mom, but spending a whole evening with her dopey husband is more than I can handle.

I do my best to space out, tapping on the steering wheel to the beat of the song, but something from earlier keeps popping into my head .

“I just got confirmation that we're allowed to go ahead with the food orders for the local church.”

What are the chances of a church charity drive sending out messages this late on a Sunday night? I give my wrist a small shake, checking the watch face for the timestamp on my notification from Eden. Eight o'clock—the same time Scarlett pulled her phone out and gave her little speech.

Could it be a coincidence?

Possibly .

Is that likely?

Not in this lifetime .

Scarlett just received her golden ticket, and judging by her reaction, I'll bet it's her first time. There's no way I wouldn't have noticed her at the club, had she been there before.

At the next stoplight, I lower the convertible roof and untie the bun at the back of my head. The wind immediately whips my freed hair around when I accelerate. The cool sensation is a relief—I've been suffocating since I laid eyes on her in the driveway, and my skin feels hot and itchy.

I pull up Julian's contact information on the screen and tap the 'call' button. The dial tone rings three times before he answers, "Hey man, what's up? How's your mom?"

Julian's had this fascination with my mother since high school, and he makes sure I know it. Intimately .

"Don't talk about my mom, fuckface," I mumble. "I'm on my way home, just wanted to give you the heads up. Also, I've got a job for you."

"I hope you gave her a big, sloppy kiss for me." A barrage of smooching sounds ring through the surround sound before he continues. "What do you need?"

"Do you know who gave Penelope Whitlock the invite to Eden?" I ask. "I need you to find out when she's going next. I think Daddy's darling just got her acceptance letter, and I doubt she would go without Penelope. "

I flinch at the sudden, boisterous laugh echoing in my ears. "No fucking way Red got in. Has she even had sex before? She'll get eaten alive."

But that's exactly what I'm hoping for.

She was fucking delicious tonight. Her crimson hair was as vibrant as I remembered, and it felt so soft wrapped around my fist. I almost lost my shit when she bit me, just watching the way her plump, red, fuckable lips pursed around my finger. And fuck ...her juicy ass and double-wide hips almost gave me a goddamn heart attack when she slid up against my leg in the doorway.

I want to eat Scarlett alive.

I want to see her crumble. I want to watch a waterfall of tears pool in her eyes when I force her open on my cock. I want to know if her pussy tastes as sweet as that tear

did.

“I’m almost positive she got the email. She had this wild reaction at the same time I got my own,” I explain. “Can you get the intel, or not?” I’m trying not to sound as frustrated as I feel, but this raging hard-on straining against my zipper won’t get on the same page.

“Have you met me, brother? I’m Julian Finch.” Cocky motherfucker. “Getting what I want is like stealing candy from a baby. I’ll have it for you by the time you get home.”

Considering I’m only a few minutes out, I’m cynical, but I’ve never been one to discourage Julian from a challenge. “See you in ten,” I say before hanging up.

“Red Flags” by Stellar picks up where the last song left off, killing all hope I had of getting Scarlett off my mind. As I listen to the lyrics, she’s all I see—shining like a flame with that red glow I crave so much.

It’s crazy to think you can want to kill and fuck someone with equal measure, but that’s exactly how I feel. The question is: would I fuck her first and then kill her? Eh, that might ruin my afterglow. Maybe I could kill her and then fuck her, but that would make me a necrophiliac. Not really into that, either.

This girl makes torture feel like a hobby .

It’s just so easy when everything I do provokes a reaction. The more she fights, the harder I dig in. I have to wonder what it would look like to deliver a healthy amount of pain and punishment while I’m buried inside of her. I didn’t think I’d ever get the chance...

Until now.

There's no time to dwell on it. I approach our house and park beside Julian's Mustang, keeping my eyes averted from my bumper when I walk inside. If I even think about what happened tonight while my blood's pumping like this, I know I'll end up using that Post-it to go strangle her in her sleep.

Julian's standing in the living room when I enter, phone to his ear. He points an aggressive finger in my direction as he starts wrapping up the call.

"Of course, darling, you've been a huge help. More than you know, really. Hope to see you soon," he croons, then hangs up before whoever's on the other line can respond.

"So?"

The corners of his mouth tighten into a wide, menacing smile that shows off his flawless teeth. "Saturday night."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:18 pm

Scarlett

I might die .

Somehow, I've made it through almost an entire week without losing my cool, but now it's Saturday, and I just might die.

Penelope and I are trying to maximize my sex appeal by digging through my closet for the sluttiest things we can find. All I've managed to unearth is a black-and-red leather corset, still sporting its tags from when I bought it.

She fervently approves of the top, and after searching through the fallout of my torn-apart wardrobe, she pieces together something that seems to fit the occasion.

We crowd in front of my floor-length mirror, twisting into different angles and positions in order to survey our images as a whole.

"I look so...frumpy." My shoulders slouch in defeat. "I'm taking bets on immediate rejection. Shit, can that happen?"

I'm dressed head-to-toe in the red corset, black faux-leather pants, and a pair of red heels that are covered with dozens of silver spikes. They're ungodly sexy, except they're about three inches too tall for my liking .

Penelope is a true vision, though. Her platinum hair is tied in a long braid that hangs over her shoulder, while her slim body is draped in a gorgeous blue minidress I could only hope to pull off.

“You. Are. Stunning.” She emphasizes each word with a slap to my boob. “There’s no pressure to pair with anyone, but you’ll have options. If worse comes to worst, we just hang out with the Onyx normies. We can drink, dance, and just have a good time. This is supposed to be fun!”

“But look—”

“Scarlett, this is the real world. Nobody grovels over stick-thin anymore. Guys want huge titties and an even bigger ass. You’ve got both. Nobody cares if you’ve got a belly, except you.” She reaches for both our masks sitting on the bed, handing me the white one. “Put your big-girl panties on and let’s get going, we don’t want to be late. Early bird fucks the worm, and all that.”

Ten minutes later, we’re piling into the car. She passes me the AUX cord, giving me permission to pump us up with whatever filth I see fit. To elevate my mood after our last conversation—and also to set the vibe for the night—I turn on “Treat Me Like A Slut” by Kim Petras.

When Penelope hears the opening, she bursts out in laughter, and I follow suit. We sing and dance to our hearts’ content as one song fades from another to another, until I’ve finally calmed down enough to feel like I can breathe again.

Pulling out my phone, I read through Eden’s list of guidelines one more time before we arrive.

Attendants must keep their masks on at all times, and are strictly prohibited from exchanging any information that may compromise their anonymity.

All attendants are allowed to socialize together, however, only those with matching masks are permitted to enter the VIP section.

The only exception to this rule will occur on Rainbow Nights, in which all VIP guests are invited to intermingle in the Rainbow Room .

I turn to Penelope in the driver's seat, eyes wide with curiosity. "What's the Rainbow Room?"

"The Orgy Room," she laughs, and I'm sure it must be a joke until she elaborates. "Everyone gets together in a huge suite, and they just go wild. There are no rules, except you still have to protect your anonymity." She gives me a side-eyed smirk. "Honey, you are nowhere near being ready for the Rainbow Room, so don't even think about it."

In what world does she think I'd even consider something like that? I can barely have a successful sex-session with one normal person, let alone a whole group of kinky freaks. "Trust me, you never have to worry about me stepping inside that room."

I think.

The city is alive and bustling as we drive towards our destination. Everywhere I look, people seem to be aimlessly stumbling down every street and alleyway. The streetlights illuminate their faces, and I watch with fascination, wondering whether any of these city folk are about to get ravaged in a secret nightclub like I am.

I turn the mask over in my hands and fiddle with the ribbons, debating how much control I need to surrender in order to guarantee that tonight goes off without a hitch.

I'm always calculated and concise with my decisions, so it's not like this is much different. I'm still me—I still chose this and planned it accordingly. I signed up, got in the car, and I'm holding the damned mask. I'm sure forfeiting some of my usual restraint will be a liberating experience.

So why do I feel like I'm about to give up so much more of myself?

We pull into a driveway that wraps around the side of the building, opening into a massive parking lot in the rear. The car comes to a halt, and the countdown strikes zero.

“Alright bitch, put your mask on. It's time.” Penelope smiles brightly at me while she ties the blue mask around her eyes.

I manage one last gulp of unadulterated air before the night begins and my life changes. Arm in arm, we walk around the building until we're standing in front of the main doors. Above them, a large sign reads:

brAXTON SUITES

I don't come to the inner city often, and I'm far too comfortable being at home to give a shit about exploring. There's always so much going on, it never felt like a priority. But this place is incredible, and it already makes the trip worth leaving the house.

The lobby alone is like nothing I've ever seen before.

Its white marble floors are streaked with glistening gold, the surfaces still glassy from their last polishing. The walls are covered in golden marble wallpaper, and the ceilings are lined with gilded tile. Directly in the center of the room, a three-tiered fountain acts as the centerpiece that brings everything together.

At the tippy top of the structure, a golden badger stands on its hind legs. The second tier is a little wider than the first, filled with a kaleidoscopic arrangement of different kinds of foliage. Red and white flowers protrude from a bushy, waterfall-like stream of greenery that hangs over the rim. Beneath the second tier, an ornate column

connects to the final stratum. One section of the column curves outward like a vase, where four golden badger heads wrap around the sides, spouting water from their open mouths and into a pool at the bottom basin.

Along the left wall of the lobby is a bar that matches the rest of the color scheme, with white marble countertops and a golden frame. Tall, backlit shelves filled with expensive alcohol line the wall behind the bar, and it's no wonder there's already a group of guests stationed there .

This place bleeds money and lavishness.

A woman with a black dress and matching mask sits perched upon one of the gold-and-white bar stools, chatting happily with two other women. The moment her eyes meet mine from over her shoulder, her face drops.

If I wasn't such an observant person, I'd probably have missed her subtle gesture towards me. At her command, the two friends turn around and give me a head-to-toe assessment. It's impossible to mistake their interaction for anything other than the catty bullshit it's meant to be. In perfect character, they all toss their heads back with a shrieking cackle that spreads across the room.

Fucking women and their highschool drama.

I guess it's a good thing I spent my entire childhood getting bullied for my weight and whatever other shit children like to tease about. It hardly fazes me anymore.

With an equally condescending smile, I make a show of tapping on my mask before lazily dropping the finger to point in their direction.

Only one of us is getting a prize tonight—I've already won.

As Pen and I continue through the room, I take in more of the exquisite scenery to focus on keeping my mind clear. Opposite the bar, a couple of white-and-gold chaise lounges are paired together with glass coffee tables between them.

Spanning the entire width of the far wall is a concierge desk that looks like it was built to match the bar. The woman sitting there beckons us forward. “Hello ladies, welcome to Braxton Suites. Can I help you?”

Penelope places her hands on the countertop, returning the woman’s sweet smile. “Hello! We’re here to visit Eden’s Deliverance, where salvation can be found in the darkest of dreams.”

This line comes directly from the rules and guidelines that every applicant receives when they’re accepted. It’s a little too corny for my taste, but beggars can’t be choosers .

Apparently, if you don’t have the password, you aren’t even given the time of day. You’d think our attire would give away our purpose for being here, but alas.

“Thank you, Miss Sapphire.” She gives Pen a polite nod, then to me. “Miss Pearl. Please proceed to the elevator, here.” The woman gestures with her hand to a set of metal doors on her left. “Head on up to the 12 th floor lobby, and you will be directed from there.”

Inside the elevator, I have a gut-wrenching feeling this is all some sort of wicked game; there are no buttons indicating any other floor than the 12 th .

I do notice that there’s another elevator across the lobby, so maybe that one is for normal guests while this is exclusively for entry to Eden. Penelope doesn’t hesitate, though. She presses the button and waits patiently for the elevator to ascend.

The machine climbs higher and higher, like the anxiety rising in my chest. There's no turning back now—not when I'm about to face a challenge incomparable to the hardships of college and my apprenticeship combined. Those are easy; I know where I'm headed when it comes to traversing the paths of my education and career.

I'm lost when it comes to this.

I can't remedy this pit in my stomach. If anything, I feel more ill when the doors finally chime open. Stuck on a fancy, golden door with a matching filigree frame, is a large plaque that reads:

THE RAINBOW ROOM

Penelope must see the panic on my face, because she grabs my hand and drags me down the hall to the left. "Relax, Scar. This is just a halfway hall for the coat check. It's all connected."

That doesn't make me feel any better, but we go ahead and leave our coats, bags, and phones at the check counter. The receptionist there invites us to climb into a second creepy elevator, directly adjacent to the one we came up from .

This elevator has no buttons at all—the doors just open when we approach and send us on a three-second-long ride to what I can only assume is the 1th floor.

How fitting.

Almost instantly, the nervousness drains from my body when I take in the sight before me. An enormous room opens up to us, the red walls and dark lighting creating a completely different ambience than the rest of the hotel has.

A massive ornate chandelier hangs from the ceiling directly in the center of the room,

high above the heads of a sea of people all wearing masks of one color or another. Past the crowd is another bar, except this one is black and red, just like the rest of the room and its furniture.

It's beautiful—magical even.

“Pink Party” by Isaac Dunbar plays on the speakers, and a few dozen attendees are out on the dance floor, grinding with and groping one another to the upbeat music.

It's all so...sensual. If this is any indication of what the rest of the night will lead to, I'm excited, to say the least.

Penelope shouts something over the music, but I can barely make out a single syllable, so she gives up and drags me through the mob of wriggling dancers. The song switches to “Shake it” by Jake Miller, but thankfully, we make it to the bar before the throng turns more animated.

She orders my favorite cocktail without even needing to ask—a true sign that she knows me more than anyone else in my life—and a few minutes later, we're getting our buzz started.

“Have you seen anyone you like yet?” Pen asks, no longer needing to shout for me to hear her.

Honestly, I've been too overwhelmed to look. I've been so enthralled by what's going on around us, I almost forgot our whole reason for being here. I already love this place, even without the sex.

Hopefully with the sex, too .

“I was wondering the same thing myself,” a low voice rumbles in my ear. When I

turn around, Mr. Sultry Ear-Breather is standing so close he can probably smell the adrenaline pumping through me.

Mr. Ruby, as it turns out. Shame.

He's got gorgeous, flowing hair that comes past his shoulders a bit, and a short, smooth beard. I can't tell if it's just the club lighting, but it almost seems like his hair and beard have a red-burgundy tone to match his mask.

Either way, he's fucking ravishing.

"Buzz off, guy." Penelope cuts in, killing the vibe immediately. "She's clearly not going anywhere with you tonight, so make room for the others." She shoos him away with a wave, spinning her chair back to face the bar.

"Well, I'd say I hope you go choke on a fat one, but I guess that's what you're here for. Isn't it, Sapphire?" He turns to me and reaches up to swipe a lock of hair out of my eyes. "Maybe some other time. Good luck, Pearl."

His knuckles trail a path down my jaw and collarbone, brushing so tenderly against my skin, I don't realize I'm chasing his touch until I nearly fall from the stool.

Then, he walks away, leaving as soon as he came.

"What did you go and do that for? The man was fucking Adonis in human form, Pen." I lightly shove her shoulder, reprimanding her for scaring away the first person to speak to me.

"I'm not gonna let you stray from the goal and get sucked up by all the crazies. You can't go breaking rules on your first night here." She pulls me to my feet, heaving me towards the dance floor after we get a new set of drinks. "Come on, let's dance!"

It's only natural when my hips start swaying to the beat of "love me" by Ex Habit, but I'm not used to this overwhelming feeling of calmness. I don't know if it's the alcohol, but I've never felt more worry-free. Goosebumps coat the surface of my skin, and it's like my body's floating on air .

Our hands travel up and down each other's bodies to the rhythm of the music, soaking in every bit of sexual energy the club feeds into us. If she doesn't let me fuck somebody soon, she's going to have to do it herself.

I'm going fucking crazy.

Towards the end of the song, a second pair of hands lay on my waist, pulling me back against a rock-hard chest and even harder groin. His cock grinds into my ass, making the clothes separating us feel irrelevant—I can feel every inch of him.

The song fades into "I Want To" by Rosenfeld, setting a more fitting pace for the movement he's encouraging as he guides my hips. I let go of Pen to reach my arm behind my head, wrapping my fingers around the nape of my new partner's neck.

I know it's just dancing, but this interaction alone is already dripping with the passion I've been desperate for. The music helps to set the mood, but this man knows exactly what he's doing.

I throw my head back to rest against his chest, and his hands begin exploring a bit of their own. From my waist up to my ribs, then across my stomach and down to my thighs, his fingers glide over my body.

Everywhere they go, a lingering burn follows in their wake.

"Would you like to join me in the White Room, Miss Pearl?" It's said dangerously low, and the hot breath against my ear sends a shiver right down my spine.

Just to make sure I heed Penelope's advice and don't get myself into trouble, I spin around to check him out. My hands trail across the expanse of his chest, but he grabs my wrists to stop me.

At least he's wearing a white mask, so I know I'm in the clear.

Unfortunately, I feel more self-conscious now than before. Those girls in the lobby started it, but the fact he won't let me touch him doesn't help. If he's going to turn me away, I just hope he lets me down easily.

"Is that what you want?" I ask as seductively as I can muster so there's no mistaking I want whatever this is .

Instead of a verbal reply, he gives me a cheeky, lopsided grin and takes my hand. I turn to Penelope and mouth a silent scream before getting dragged off, watching her wave at me through the growing distance between us.

He leads me through an archway off the right side of the bar, taking us down a hall with doors lining both walls. The sounds emanating from behind all the closed doors send electric shockwaves straight to my clit.

I can hear every one of them—all the women being fucked the way I'm about to be. Their screams and moans of pleasure dig into my brain, painting a picture-perfect vision of what's going on in the privacy of their own rooms.

He takes us all the way to the end of the hall where the Pearl rooms are. Each door has a small sign indicating the room number and designated gem, as well as an occupancy marker for privacy. They're all vacant though, so we rush into the first one we come across.

I guess it makes sense; this is a kink club. I didn't get a full scan of the other

attendants, but I didn't notice anyone else wearing a Pearl mask, so we may very well be the only ones.

Then, the panic sets in.

I know I can do this. I didn't put on this slut suit and liquor myself up for nothing. I'm here, I found someone, and he's looking at me like he wants this as much as I do.

I can do this.

But what if I can't...even though I want to?

I don't know if he can read my face, but he doesn't allow me the time to host an internal freakout. Before I even have time to survey the room we're in, he grabs me behind the neck and sinks his mouth onto mine.

The taste of bourbon on his tongue burns, but when it mixes with the cranberry juice on mine, our kiss becomes an exploding cocktail of ecstasy. I want to drown in it.

I need more—but I also need to breathe .

He lets me break away from the embrace long enough to lean back and get a good look at him in this new light. Obviously, it's hard to catalog everything because of his mask and the dark lighting of the room, but the features I can see are impeccable.

His soft, golden-brown hair sits on the top of his head in short curls, with a faded cut down the sides behind his ears. His nose and jaw are so perfectly sculpted, they look like they could have been plucked right from a modeling magazine.

My hands act with a mind of their own and reach up to trace his hairline, following the path behind his ears and towards his neck. I can feel him tense beneath my

fingertips, but at least he's letting me touch him this time.

"Like what you see, darling?" he teases. He's astonishingly attractive and not at all shy about showing it off. That must be nice; to be so confident in your appearance that it's just expected for people to gawk in awe. "You seem nervous. Is it your first time?"

I shouldn't be shy—especially after that sexual showdown on the dance floor—but I can't seem to get any words out, only offering him a wary nod.

He touches my waist again, slowly fluttering his hands over the boning of my corset. I wonder what that might feel like on my bare skin, and what it'll be like to be touched and appreciated by a man who knows what a woman wants.

He could also be another amateur fondler, but I don't get that impression. No. He knows how to handle a woman properly, even if he is cocky about it.

"Let me take care of everything then, hm? Have you picked your safe word?" he asks.

I'm having immense difficulty convincing my vocal cords to spit out a sound, but I know I need to—at least for this. The way he's fucking me with his eyes isn't doing anything to help, though.

"Oklahoma," I answer timidly .

I can tell he doesn't mean to, but out comes this uncontrollable bark of laughter that has me giggling right back. "Sorry, I'm not judging. Can I just ask where that came from?"

I respond honestly, no matter how stupid it sounds. "I heard it in a joke once.

Something about how funny it would sound if your mouth was full of—” Idiot. Why would you say that? You could have picked anything else. “But yeah. That’s it, I just thought it was funny.”

He gives me a kind smile, thankfully not turned off by my crudeness. I mean, how could you be that sensitive in a place like this, anyway? It’s a good joke.

His fingers trail up the column of my throat before spreading to wrap around my whole neck. He’s testing the span of his hand across it, and I get the sense he’s deciding whether to grab me or not.

“Oklahoma, it is,” he whispers. “I’m going to fuck you now.” It’s said without ceremony—matter-of-factly.

I don’t know how else to respond except with one word. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he repeats. His forefinger gives a little spin in the air to signal for me to turn around, and I obey thoughtlessly.

He begins unlacing the corset, and with every inch of released pressure on my torso, I let out little sighs of relief. I can hear him humming in approval, sending hot puffs of breath straight to the shell of my ear. Fuck, this guy really knows what he’s doing to me. I’m not even naked and he’s got me eating out of the palm of his hand from these eargasms alone.

With a roughness I’m not expecting, he yanks the corset from my body, catching me when I trip into him. His hands are anything but gentle now, squeezing and grabbing at any pound of flesh he can wrap his fingers around.

“Wait, wait, wait…” I grab his wrists and restrain his hands when they reach for the button on my pants, drawing a breathy growl from his throat. “Don’t you have a safe

word, too? ”

The man flicks his wrists outward and rolls them from my grasp, only to thread his fingers through mine as he drags them to my hips. Leaning down, he whispers in my ear, “Trust me, I don’t need one. Do your worst.”

Fuck.

“Keep It Down” by Migrant Motel starts playing through the speakers. As I listen to the lyrics, I can’t help but think it’s suggestive of what’s about to go down here. I’m drowning in the music and his touch, so I close my eyes and lean my head back to enjoy the attention.

The hands on my breasts are nothing like the amateur ones I’m used to; that’s made clear in the way he methodically massages my nipples between his fingertips, making me writhe in pleasure. It feels so fucking good, and I’m not prepared for it to stop. But when he orders me to lay down on the bed, I obey.

I’ll do whatever he says, as long as he keeps touching me like that.

As long as he doesn’t stop.

Another sly smirk creeps across his face with the realization he’s turning me into a puddle for him to play in. He follows me onto the bed and positions himself near my feet, wrenching my pants off my hips and all the way down to my ankles before removing them completely.

When they’re gone, he flashes me a wicked glance.

Oops, no panties.

He's still fully clothed, and the vulnerability of my own bare body being on display makes me feel like nothing more than exposed muscle and bone.

To even the playing field, I sit up and grab at the hem of his shirt in an attempt to lift it over his head, but he stops me. In an instant, both my wrists are trapped in his firm grip.

“No touching,” he says, squeezing tightly enough for me to wince at the force of it. I nod in response, but that’s not enough for him.

In a tormentingly unhurried movement, he pushes forward until I’m lying on my back again with my arms extended above my head .

I can’t see anything but the fabric of his shirt brushing against my nose, but I feel the cold bite of metal encircling one of my wrists. The click that ensues is unmistakable—he’s handcuffing me to the bed.

Holy shit.

Can I handle this? I wasn’t expecting things to go this far, this soon.

As if reading my mind, he checks to make sure that I’m alright and gives me the chance to use my safe word, if I want to.

Fuck no, I don’t. Give it to me.

My second wrist joins the first, and now I’m lying here in all my glory, splayed out for him to do whatever he wants to me. If his resistance to my touch wasn’t enough of an indicator, the look in his dark eyes is all I need to tell me how much he likes being in control.

In a swift motion, he removes his shirt to reveal an abdomen so solid you could sharpen a knife on it. His hip bones are two giant, neon-flashing signs pointing south—and I've always been pretty good at following directions. With bated breath, I watch his hands fiddle with the buttons and zipper of his jeans in a slow, teasing fashion.

He bathes in the light of my curious eyes, tilting his head against his shoulder while he studies me in return. I don't know what he's thinking, but a mischievous grin twists across his lips.

Before I know it, he's leaning down close and wrapping the discarded shirt around my eyes. "No peeking."

I'm seriously trying my best to keep calm, but my heavy breaths mimic the pace of my rapidly beating heart. All my senses are heightened with the loss of my vision, and I get chills every time his jeans brush against my skin.

He's everywhere and nowhere, all at once.

There's a small, tingling sensation—fingertips a hair's breadth from the surface of my inner thigh—skating towards my bare pussy. Without any warning, I feel a finger or two prodding at the entrance before they're shoved inside me .

My body reacts wildly, back arching off the bed while I struggle with the restraints. There's nowhere for me to go.

I'm so focused on thrashing and fighting against the sudden assault, I don't notice the fingers have been removed until he pushes them into my mouth. "Relax. Just breathe. You're a good girl, aren't you?" he coaxes.

I'm hyperventilating against his hand, but he waits for my panic to subside before

continuing. When I finally nod, he says, “I know you are. Now be a good little slut and suck my fingers clean.”

They slip past the resistance of my lips and teeth, gliding alongside the top of my tongue. He doesn’t stop when the first knuckle disappears behind my lips, nor the second.

He shoves his fingers further down until I gag, my throat closing around them to protect my airway. “Shh, breathe through your nose and open your throat,” the man instructs. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

That can’t possibly be true when he’s using his fingers as a tongue depressor like some crazy, pervy doctor. He doesn’t pull away—not through my whimpering or cries for mercy—but he also doesn’t do more than I’m ready for.

That’s when I realize he’s waiting patiently for me to follow his orders. He wants me to show him I can listen and be obedient.

Though my attempt is a sad one, it’s an attempt nonetheless.

Breathing only through my nostrils, I open my throat up for him and accept my fate. He’s not gentle about it in the slightest; his fingers pump relentlessly into my mouth, only stopping momentarily for him to shush me through my panicked gagging.

I should probably feel embarrassed about needing to be coached through something as simple as breathing, but I can’t be bothered. Just when I’m finally starting to get good at taking him without choking, he pulls his fingers out.

I hate to say I’m disappointed, but even I can admit that was hot as fuck.

If this is the foreplay, how kinky is the sex ?

There's a shifting on the bed, then he stuffs my pussy with the same fingers he just used to feed me my own tangy arousal. Despite working through the attack on my throat, all that goes out the window when it comes to the way he's fingerfucking me.

I don't know exactly what he's doing, but it's like nothing I've experienced before. If it didn't feel so fucking good, I'd be concerned about the aching pressure against my bladder. It's too complicated of a sensation to call painful, but there's an odd discomfort mixed with a steady wave of pleasure.

"Please..." I'm nearly in tears, but I don't know if I need him to stop or keep going—I just need to come. I'm hovering right on the ledge, but he won't give me what I need to dive off.

Although I have the power to stop him, I'm doing my best to relinquish control. He clearly knows more than I do here, but he's taking his sweet time getting to the point.

The more I wriggle around, the more frustrated he becomes. He fucks into me like a madman, thrusting faster and harder with every reactive shift of my hips until I'm left a blubbering mess.

When he's had enough of it, he rips his fingers out and gets off the bed. I take the reprieve as a gift, but he comes back full force. He pinches my cheeks until my lips separate with a whine, then I feel a rough cloth being shoved behind my teeth.

"No. Fucking. Talking," he hisses, placing his palm over my mouth. "You're going to lie there and take it, or you won't get anything at all."

I may have a pussy, but I've never acted like one.

And we all know how I feel about threats.

Even though I'm enjoying myself, pulling this primal aggression from him feeds my fucking soul. It's sexy as hell and I want more of it, so he can't blame me for the mumbling that comes out through the fabric in my mouth. Unfortunately for him, it's just in my nature to fight dirty.

A little egging-on never hurt anybody .

I feel the bed dip again before he turns me into a rag doll, effortlessly flinging my calves over his shoulders before burying his head between my thighs. His angry, heavy breath assaults me, and I can't help but raise my hips in an attempt to delocalize the intense blaze of heat.

SMACK.

Did this goddamn caveman just slap my bare pussy?

My scream is instinctual, though it didn't necessarily hurt. My stinging flesh is begging for any kind of attention, soothing or not. Honestly, I'd take another slap.

Anything.

He doesn't make me wait long before answering my prayers, but instead of smacking me again, his wide tongue licks a wet path from my ass to clit.

I'd apologize for squirming if I wasn't drowning in complete euphoria, letting my vocal cords finally sing into the gag silencing me. Despite my—clearly more earnest than before—fidgeting, he doesn't punish me like he threatened to.

His tongue doesn't stop its sumptuous dance around my clit, but he does dig his fingers into my thighs with a force that draws a pained cry from my throat when he struggles to hold me down. I won't be surprised if I'm covered in bruises tomorrow,

nor will I care.

I'm overcome with the need to grab onto something, but I have nothing besides the chain of the handcuffs tying me down. I want to come so badly, and I'm so fucking close I can taste it. His tongue laps at my clit in perfect, uniform motions that leave me shaking with full-bodied tremors. But when he reintroduces the pressure of those two fingers to the upper wall of my pussy, I'm in shambles.

He's got me climbing higher and higher, and I can hear his own animalistic rumbles of hunger as he feasts, finally sending me towards the precipice of Eden's promised salvation. Then, everything stops.

Everything .

There are no hands wrestling my hips down, no magical tongue stealing pleasure from deep within my soul, no fingers abusing my G-spot. I'm completely bereft of all physical touch—at the exact fucking moment I need it.

I'm speechless, and not just because of the gag. I don't even have the energy for a whimper or a cry or a plea. I'm drained.

And fucking pissed off.

His soft breath against my ear startles me back into reality. "If you want more, you'll meet me in the Red Room next time."

What?

The fucking Red Room? He's got to be joking. I try to speak, but my words are incomprehensible behind the gag.

I scream once more in agony when he takes one of my nipples between his fingers, pinching it and giving a hard pull until it snaps back. The cloth is gently pulled out of my mouth so I can talk again, though my throat is dry as sandpaper.

“What was that, darling?” he asks.

“I said...I can’t.”

“Can’t what, come? I’m fully aware; I made sure of that.” He’s teasing me, but I have no idea why. I didn’t do anything to him.

I’m seething now.

What was the point of bringing me here—of working all that magic—just to leave me panting for an orgasm like I’m a 1-year-old boy? This isn’t the Yellow Room.

“I can’t come to the Red Room,” I pant, still catching my breath.

“Not with that attitude, surely. What’s wrong with the Red Room?” He actually sounds dumbfounded, like I or anybody else would be crazy not to sign up for all that psycho masochistic bullshit.

“I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it, it’s just not for me. I’m sorry.”

No, I’m not sorry. Why did I say that? Maybe because I’m still tied up and blindfolded, and I want to get out of here safely .

Maybe because I wish I was strong enough to handle being a Ruby, but I just don’t see that in my future.

“ Well, that’s unfortunate. I was really looking forward to having another taste of that

sweet pussy. Come and find me again when you're feeling a little more...adventurous." The clink of the handcuffs above me signifies the sweet sound of release, but before I can pull his shirt off my head, the door clicks shut behind him.

I'm alone, wound up, writing for his touch, and completely unfucked.

Rejected .

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:18 pm

Julian

Skylar is going to cream his pants when he hears about this.

Bastard might just kill me, but I'll have to remind him that he gave me the 'go ahead.' I can still taste Scarlett's sweet juices on my lips, and I'm only a man—I can't help but lick off what's left of her to savor the flavor.

The girl had me genuinely surprised.

Sky always talks about her like she's this bucking bronco who will stop at nothing to win a confrontation, but she was putty in my hands. She let me take charge, and even when she was 'fighting' me, it was obviously all for show.

She wanted to be played with and used, and she took it so fucking well.

I still remember how her throat felt pulsing around my fingertips when I forced her to choke on them, and my dick keeps twitching at the thought of it.

I may have left her wanting, but I didn't get off either, and that shit's torture on my balls.

He's sitting at the bar when I walk up, drinking some nasty clear liquor on ice. The bartender comes over to get my order, and after exchanging booze for cash, Skylar is itching for answers. "So? What happened?"

"You don't want to know, brother," I say regretfully, waving my hand .

He may think he does, but he really doesn't. The kid has been pining over this girl for a year—so caught up in hating her guts, he would probably rip out her spine before ever actually talking to her like a human being.

“Uh, I obviously do. Why do you think I sent you in there, to give you a late birthday present or something?”

I bite out a soft chuckle and explain, “Well, I wouldn't complain if that were the case. I'd probably have to thank you, because that was by far the most fun I've had toying with a broad in ages. And I didn't even have to fuck her.”

He looks relieved at that notion, but he's not finished interrogating me. I'm not going to get away with bare-minimum details here. “Just tell me, don't make me fucking beg for it like an asshole,” he scoffs.

But I love begging, and he knows that. I wholeheartedly believe it's the sweetest song to be sung from someone's lips.

“I told her she'd have to come to the Red Room if she wanted the real deal, just like you told me to. She wouldn't bite. Said she can't. ‘It's not for her.’ Some bullshit like that.”

“And before that?” he coaxes.

I just shrug. Guy's really a glutton for punishment. I was trying to spare his feelings, but if he insists on knowing the nitty-gritty, who am I to say no?

“I took her in there, sucked her tongue like a goddamn lollipop, stripped her and tied her to the bed, blindfolded her, finger-banged her until she cried, and then crammed my fingers down her throat 'til she choked.” His fist is clenched so tightly around his glass, I'm actually worried it might break...but the dick wanted details. “Let's

see...then I gagged her, licked that cunt until she was just about to come, and left her squirming before she could get off.”

I’m expecting a punch to the gut more than the words that come out of his mouth next. “How did she taste?”

Interesting .

I don’t really know how to answer that, especially without sounding like I’m as obsessed with her as he is. “I’m not gonna lie to you, Sky. You know how I feel about giving head. It’s a fucking chore and you can never guarantee what you’re going to get.”

“But?”

“But,” I say, pausing to take a sip of my drink, “I could eat her pussy all day. The way she cried for it was totally worth the effort, and I would have actually liked getting her off. She kept making these little whining noises, and if she wasn’t gagged, I’m sure she’d be begging for more. And the taste? Fucking delicious, man. Like her desperation was just seeping through. If you get her beneath you, you’re done for.” He holds up a hand, signaling for me to shut the fuck up, but I shrug him off. “I’m just saying, is all. I don’t know if you really want to go there.”

He takes a sip of his vodka before slamming the glass on the bar. “And what, let you have it all for yourself? I don’t think so. She’s mine to do what I want with. You can have the scraps.”

“You’re a downright prick, you know that?” I extend my glass, and he taps it with his own. He doesn’t have to say anything. We’ve got this inside-language, the two of us.

No hard feelings.

Scarlett emerges from the VIP hallway, and I nudge Skylar with my elbow while nodding in her direction. “Now, that’s what I like to see,” he mocks.

Her face is red and swollen from crying, her round cheeks blushed with frustration. Fuck, now my dick is hard again. I love it when they cry.

She makes eye contact across the bar, and we raise our glasses toward her. She looks from me to him, then back to me. Ah, the cogs seem to be clicking into place for her—they must be, because she’s wearing the same face of shock from twenty minutes ago when I stopped pleasuring her.

We may have altered our immediate appearances tonight to ensure she wouldn’t recognize us, but she seems to be recalling that the man next to me is the same one who approached her earlier at the bar. She knows we’re a team now.

Her shoulders rise and fall with this adorable huff of anger before storming off, no doubt to look for Penelope so she can tell her all about what happened .

Skylar is intent on getting her into the Red Room for his own personal torture session. We may be willing to break a few rules here and there to get her where we want her, but ultimately, that’s where things need to happen.

Truthfully, I’d have her anywhere. White Room, Blue Room... her room. I’d do anything to see her—hear her—unfolding beneath me again. Not that he would let me get another go at her, anyway.

We may be childhood friends, but he’s never shared. Not then, not now, not ever.

Not that I’m watching her like a hawk or anything, but she reenters the dance floor with Penelope a few minutes later, and the two resume dancing.

She's beautiful, and that corset makes her tits look fucking phenomenal, so it's no surprise to me when another man in a white mask propositions her.

What does surprise me is the man. He's not supposed to be in white, and he's not supposed to be talking to Skylar's girl.

They leave the dance floor to return down the same hallway I led her through, but not before she flashes me a spiteful look over her shoulder. There's no doubt he's going to finish off what I started, so she can keep the attitude to herself.

"Let's go home," I mumble, finishing off the last of my bourbon.

I need to get Scarlett off my mind, get this temporary hair dye off my head, and have a good jerk-off session. And if I tap into the spank bank for a few images of Scarlett laid out on that bed for me...

What Skylar doesn't know won't hurt him.

The past few days have been a serious fucking downer. It's a little hard to get a chick out of your head when she's the only thing your roommate wants to talk about. Really, I'd settle for discussing the weather .

"So, this weather, huh?" I ask, taking a step forward to crane my neck towards the sky.

"I don't give a shit about the rain, I was fucking talking, dude." Yeah, I guess that was too much to ask for. Skylar takes another drag of his cigarette and pretends like I didn't interrupt the most diabolical shit to come from his mouth. "We've got to make her want it so bad she's crawling for it. What if we both go in white masks next time, but neither of us take her into the back rooms? Or we could—"

“You want to commit a whole night to pretending you’re a Pearl, just to get nothing out of it? That sounds like a lose-lose, my guy.” A drop of rain splashes on my hand, so I duck closer under the awning before my own cigarette gets doused out.

“You’re not fucking hearing me,” he snaps. “We already know she wants us, but we have to draw it out. Don’t you want her to beg? You love that shit, psycho.”

“As if you’d ever let me touch her again. It sounds an awful lot like I’m just doing you sexual favors ‘cause I’m such a nice guy.” I’m not. “Sorry, I don’t see the appeal in icing out my balls for your entertainment. My sack was the size of a snowball last time, asshole. And it won’t even be worth it to blow my load for some vanilla slut after I’m done teasing your bitch.”

He’s getting angry—he needs me, and we both know it. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping he would offer to sweeten the pot, but that’s about as likely as me falling in love and settling down.

I stare blankly into the dark night as I smoke, contemplating what that might look like. I don’t know how to treat a woman if it’s not in the bedroom, so I couldn’t be a partner, a husband, or a father. It’s just not for me.

Funny, Scarlett said the same thing.

“I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it, it’s just not for me.”

I know what my mother would say. It’s the same thing all those red-eyed zombie mothers who secretly hate their life say to people who express the desire to be child-free.

“You’ll understand when it happens to you.”

Hm, that's an idea, isn't it?

She might change her mind if I could convince her this is something she could want. She just needs to give it a proper chance.

“What if I would?” Skylar's voice drags me from my own diabolical thoughts, and it takes a minute to register the implication.

Still, I need that shit in writing so he can't revoke the offer.

“Would what?” I ask. I already know what he's about to say—and I love the guy—but I love watching him cave against his better judgment almost as much.

“What if...” You can tell he's really struggling with it internally. Like I said, this kid has never liked sharing his toys. “What if I let you have her too? If we can get her, what if I let you in on it?”

“I thought you'd never ask.” A greedy, victorious smile invades my face, and you can almost see the regret on his. “In that case, I have an idea.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:18 pm

Scarlett

Penelope and I haven't talked much about what happened last week at Eden, and I'm eternally grateful for the silence of it all.

I gave her a brief rundown; that it didn't totally pan out the way I was expecting, but I want to keep trying. I'm sure it was hard for her to see me in the state I was in after that guy left me in the White Room, but she's kept a slack enough leash to allow me the space I need to move past it.

The truth is, even though I was mad at the time, I can't deny the excitement I feel when I relive the memory of what happened. I may have ended the night with another man, but all I can think about is him .

As the days have passed and I've spent more time processing everything from that night, I don't think it was a rejection at all. The whole purpose of the club is to explore your sexual fantasies.

While orgasm denial may not have been on my bingo card for the year, I still learned a lot about myself from the whole experience.

Apparently, I'm really into being tied up and ordered around.

I'm sure there's some psychological reason why someone like me—who is usually cold and calculated in her decision making—would prefer to have an alter-ego in bed, but I don't pay much mind to the thought .

I just know I want more.

Penelope and I made a quick stop at the post office in order to return our masks from Eden, but all I can think about is when I'll receive a new one.

We're having dinner at Andy's Diner, talking through plans for our next visit. "Why don't you try being a Sapphire with me?" she suggests, shoving a french fry into her mouth.

I considered returning as a Pearl, but I think I'm now looking more in the direction of Emerald or Amethyst. Obviously I liked getting tied up, but I know from the porn I watch that hardcore BDSM can get a little too extreme—maybe too much for me.

"I was thinking about going for Amethyst. Do you think I'd do alright with that?" I ask, hoping she'll give me an honest answer rather than whatever she assumes I want to hear.

I'm not totally confident about impact play, but I think getting spanked in the Purple Room might be less of a plunge into depravity than getting choked out in the Blue Room.

I try to recall my favorite parts from the other night with that man, but I just keep rolling around the idea of bondage. There was something so hot about having my mouth stuffed and my hands tied.

The blindfold felt a bit unfair, but who am I to say?

Penelope mimics my thoughts, as usual. "I don't know, babe. It seems like you might be more into the helpless thing than punishment. You could always ask the dom to slap you around a bit, if you're comfortable with that. I don't have much experience in there myself, so I can't really say."

I pull up the application on my phone browser, sorting through the list of kinks again as I contemplate my choices. It's only the Friday after our first visit, but I want to make sure I'm set for next weekend.

Spending tomorrow night inside will give me some extra time to reflect on what I want and how I'm going to handle things, should I meet that man again .

I'm much less nervous than I was the first time I did this, but even knowing I fit somewhere in this world, finding the right place to slot into is still intimidating.

I don't know how many attempts it'll take for me to find where I'm supposed to be, or exactly what I want.

It's hard living with a general distrust for people, but I have to remember everyone else is held accountable to the same rules and guidelines—they wouldn't be allowed in if they didn't uphold them.

He may have edged me without discussing it, but the man from the other night respected me in every other sense. He waited for me to relax before testing my limits when I gagged on his fingers, and he was adamant about checking for my safe word.

"Alright," I concede. "What's the worst that could happen? Is it horrible that I'm hoping to see one of those guys from the other night? They did ask for me to come back."

Penelope giggles, tossing a fry at me across the table. "Scarlett, please. If anything, it's just a testament to how fucking hot you are. I haven't had anyone at the club promise me seconds. I get a 'wham, bam, thank you, ma'am,' and that's all I can hope for. You're a goddamn fox, so take these boys for all they're worth."

The club isn't any less exuberant than it was two weeks ago.

People flood the dance floor, grinding senselessly to “Shimmy” by MISSIO and Blackillac when we enter. Penelope and I pre-gamed before riding over in an Uber, so I’m already tipsy and raring to go when we head to the bar and order our signature drinks .

Apparently, the personal space she graced me with last week has run its course, because she’s back in protection mode. Despite assuring her multiple times that I can handle myself, she won’t let go of the mama-bear act and keeps criticizing every prospect I find.

It isn’t until we’re three drinks deeper that she finally turns her attention away to seek out her own partner. Now, she won’t quit asking me to scout out Sapphire men for her to go ravish—as if she’d be the one doing the ravishing at all.

After a few minutes of scanning the crowd, I spot my mystery guy from the White Room. He’s with some blonde girl, swaying to the music in perfect unison as his hands travel the length of her waist.

That was me, two weeks ago.

I know what it’s like to have those hands on me, making me feel things I didn’t know I could—or even knew I liked at the time. I won’t say I’m jealous, because that would be stupid. Like, really stupid, because I don’t even know the guy, and he doesn’t owe me a second round.

But also, that girl can go fuck herself.

“I’m gonna go outside and get some air!” I don’t even wait for Penelope’s response before hopping off the bar stool and making my way to the balcony.

The view is gorgeous from out here; we’re so high up you can see the city for miles.

Dark wood flooring expands a few feet out and wraps around three-quarters of the building. It's all enclosed with beautiful glass half-walls, adorned in etched filigree that remind me of the gold accents on the door to the Rainbow Room.

I'm leaning against the railing, taking in the sights below me, when I hear the flick of a lighter and someone inhaling. I don't want to be nosey and turn around, but when footsteps sound behind me, they put me on guard. My pulse quickens, and my hands tighten around the railing to keep myself from wavering.

The presence radiating at my backside is as dark and foreboding as the familiar voice that speaks. "What, you don't have any interest in joining me tonight? If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're trying to avoid me, darling. I know you were watching me," he whispers directly into my ear.

His low, sexy tone makes me shiver, but I'm not giving in to his mind games. If he wants to play, I'll play back.

I spin towards him and look up into his eyes with my head cocked, ready to tease with a smirk on my face. "Join you, why? So I could rob that poor girl of what I'm sure would be a lovely evening of torture she didn't agree to? No thank you, I'll take my chances elsewhere." I rip the cigarette from his hand and pull it to my lips. Leaning back against the glass wall, I take a long drag before letting out the smoke in a French-inhale. "I'm not here for games. You either want to fuck me, or you don't."

The look on his face is a mixture of something I can't quite make out. Maybe he's surprised or impressed, but either way, it seems like he wasn't expecting me to call him out on his bullshit.

After a moment, he straightens to compose himself, eagerly watching my lips through the smoke before he responds. "Of course I do. But you're still not wearing a red mask."

I tilt my head to the opposite shoulder as I take in his attire. “Neither are you,” I taunt. He’s wearing a green mask—the same as me.

I’m genuinely confused. Somehow, he’s matched me both times we’ve met, but he insisted I’d need to follow him to the Red Room if I wanted more.

His hands shoot out to grab the railing on either side of my body, effectively caging me in. He bends down to whisper against my lips, “I can’t do the things I want to do to you if we’re anywhere else.”

I don’t know how to respond. I want him, but I’m not willing to go to the Red Room or put on any mask I’m not ready for.

“I guess that’s too bad.” I take another drag of the cigarette and blow it directly into his face before turning around—ceremoniously claiming it as my own.

“Fine. Then come back with me tonight. ”

Interesting . But I don’t take the bait. “No.”

“Why not? I’ll play your game, you win.” He’s trying to intimidate me—to make me bend to his command again. The honeyed words dripping from his lips don’t make the truth any less obvious.

Nobody gives in that quickly, especially not when he’s been so stubborn about making me put on a red mask.

“Why would I? So you can toy with me again, get me close to coming, just to leave? No, thank you.” I can’t help but instigate, not when he’s playing into my own game. “I’ve already got someone to clean up after the mess you made, I’d rather skip the middleman.”

My issue is that these sweet nothings aren't doing it for me, and they just make me want to fuck with him more—to bring back the primal instinct he had last time. Getting me into bed doesn't require all the chauvinistic crap he's spewing out.

He only needs to take a different approach.

His fingers reach around to pinch my chin, turning me to meet his eyes over my shoulder. “What if I promise not to, hm?”

Like I said, honeyed words.

“Hmm, how about...no.” I rip my jaw from his grip to take another drag of the cigarette. “I don't believe you.”

I'm not buying it. The issue isn't that he'll most likely deny me another orgasm if I agree to go back with him. Truthfully, I didn't mind it so much since I was able to get that other Pearl man to finish me off.

My problem is this fake bullshit.

I've seen how he is in the bedroom. I know what it looks like when he takes what he wants, and it's not this. I want him to take it.

I'm half-expecting more whispers and pleas. Instead, he fists my hair and slowly pulls my head back against his shoulder. “How about...” His soothing voice in my ear leaves goosebumps across my skin, but then he bites my earlobe so hard I let out a yelp. “You're coming back with me, whether you like it or not.”

Yep. That'll just about do it.

“Okay, okay...yes.” At the end of the day, I'm a bitch in heat for this guy, and I'm

too horny to feel ashamed. He could do anything he wants to me and I'd say, 'Thank you, sir.'

Stealing the cigarette back, he takes a final drag before tossing it off the balcony. He leads me hurriedly down the same hall we entered before, his hand never leaving the small of my back as we approach the set of doors across from the Pearl rooms.

This one is a little different than the last.

While the bed is still the main focus, there are also some wooden contraptions off to the side—one of which looks like a giant 'X' with black-leather cuffs at each arm. Along the wall at the foot of the bed, a large cabinet sits with various toys, paddles, and whips lining the shelves.

The man circles me while I observe our surroundings, his eyes filled with the promise of all the things he wants to do. "Are you going to be good and take off your clothes, or am I going to have to make you?" he purrs, stepping between me and the cabinet.

After the display of phony begging on the balcony, I'm not inclined to give him anything unless he forces it out of me. I don't usually play nice, especially not after getting a workaround.

A defiant grin pulls at the corners of my mouth, and I can see the exact moment it clicks for him.

I'm not going to go the easy way.

"So that's how it is, huh? You're a fucking brat." His hand comes up and wraps around my throat—not tight enough to choke me, but enough to prove he's in control. "Can't say I mind it. I've been waiting to break you in...break you down. I've even dreamt about it, you know. How to make you mine."

He dreamed about me ?

I'm not sure if this is more flattery meant to sweeten me up, but it doesn't seem to be. His thumb strokes my pulse point with a gentle reverence, as if he's savoring the moment.

Just by how he's acting, I can tell he wasn't happy about how things ended during our last session. He would have done more—he wanted to—and he's been regretting it ever since.

My throat bobs against the palm of his hand when I swallow, taking a gulp of air before asking, "Even though we're not in the Red Room? You haven't even had me in a normal room. How could you possibly know that you want me—"

"Did I ask for your opinion? Good little girls keep their mouths shut." He tightens the grip around my neck, and in an instinctual panic, I grab his wrist with both my hands. "You'll see one day, but the Red Room is my normal room. It's where I do my best work."

My nails dig into his skin, but he doesn't ease up. "I'm not going there, so get it through your big f-u-cking head," I struggle to get the words out—on account of the fact he's nearly strangling me—but I fully intend to act the brat he's accusing me of being.

The impact of his fingertips meeting my cheek leaves a throbbing sting. My lips part on a gasp, but he doesn't give me a moment to recover before pulling me in closer. He pants against my open mouth until we're forced to share the same cloud of hot air.

"Clothes off, now . Get on the bed," he hisses through bared teeth. "I'll show you what a big head looks like."

He shoves me backwards, the pressure on my esophagus causing me to gag and sputter as I stumble across the room. I collapse to my knees, but just when I rear up to charge at him, he points a finger at me in warning.

I shouldn't be so turned on, but I've never been slapped before and it's doing something to me—something terribly mind-altering.

Choosing to play obediently for now, I carefully strip off my knee-high boots and red dress, then place them neatly on the nightstand .

The longer he spends watching me, the more impatient he becomes. “ All of your clothing. Let's go.”

I shoot him a nasty glance over my shoulder before removing my bra and panties. I know he's seen me naked before, but it's not easy to ignore the fact he's standing there fully clothed while I'm forced on display.

The man walks up to me, completely unbothered when I cross my arms over my chest to cover up. “Bed...now. On your knees with your arms behind your back.”

I do as instructed, despite the curiosity tingling up my spine when I hear him rummaging through the cabinet. “See? You do know how to behave. Wouldn't you rather be rewarded than punished?” he asks sardonically.

The shuffling sounds behind me cease, and it's made clear he wasn't asking rhetorically; he actually wants me to answer. What a pretentious piece of shit.

I scoff instead. “Is that what this is, or just more teas—”

SMACK .

The whack to my ass knocks me forward, but supporting myself with my hands only puts me in prime position for more abuse when I bite back, “You motherfuck—”

SMACK .

Dragging me by the hair into a kneeling position again, he holds me still and starts wrapping something around my upper arms. “Shut your mouth, before I give you something to really cry about, Sca—” he pauses to catch his breath, already winded from wrestling my arms together. “Scream all you want; it won’t matter in a second.”

Two cuffs are strapped around my biceps, and a cold piece of leather hangs down my back from between them. It’s got my shoulders pulled so tightly I can’t move an inch.

With my arms now locked in place, he forces me to bend my elbows and lay my forearms parallel on top of each other. Another leather contraption binds them together, and a buckle keeps them trapped. The only thing I still have control over is my hands.

I hear him moving again behind my back, and though I’m anxious for what he has in store, my heart is racing dangerously fast. In an attempt to get clearance and keep my panic at bay, I ask, “Why? What are you—”

Before I can finish, he hooks two metal pieces into the inside of my cheeks. My gut drops when I realize what the device is, but struggling is futile. He wastes no time wrangling me down to secure the buckle at the back of my head, stretching at the corners of my mouth until it hangs wide open.

“That would be why,” he points out, circling the bed to step in front of me.

I put up a real fight and he’s sweating now, looking entirely flustered as he runs his fingers through his hair. The image of him just riles me up more.

He's beautiful, and I can't help but think how lucky I am to have him like this when it might have been that blonde girl in my place tonight.

"Now, you said something about a big head, right? I think it's time you're properly introduced," he mocks, staring into my eyes with pure, fiery lust. "Is your safe word still Oklahoma? I know how funny you think it would sound with a dick crammed down your throat, so if you're going to say it, at least let me get it in there first."

As I watch him and listen to the filthy words spewing out of his mouth, my mind wanders in loops. This man has become a revelation, the salvation Eden promised, and my sexual guide—all wrapped into one kinky package.

This is what I've been looking for. This is where I belong.

SMACK.

I spit a muffled shriek out of the open-mouth gag. A dribble of saliva comes with it as I hang my head down, trying to shake off the slap to my bruising cheek. The man cups the underside of my chin and forces me to look up at him once more. "Answer me."

I nod my head slowly in defeat as he bends at the knee, meeting me at eye level. He releases my chin from his grip, moving his hand to brush light, tender touches across my stinging cheek. It's hard to not lean into it when he shushes me so sweetly.

But it's a trap, and I fall for it instantly.

Before I know it, his fingers creep through my open lips, slide along my tongue, and tease the back of my throat like he did in the White Room. Naturally, I start to panic, but he winds his other hand into my hair to keep me still.

His soothing voice coaxes me open for him. “Shh, you’re a good girl. I know you can take it like last time.” He fucks his fingers into my mouth, talking me through it until I no longer choke when he’s at full depth. “I’m just getting you ready for me.”

The fingers give up their abuse on my uvula, only to readjust and hook around my bottom teeth while his thumb sits under my chin. He pulls me by the jaw until I reposition myself, sitting at the edge of the bed with my feet dangling at the floor.

I should probably get a rag doll tattooed on me to commemorate him, because fuck ...I love it when he treats me like one.

Now that I’ve been arranged to his liking, he gets in close and stands directly between my open thighs. I watch in awe as he unbuttons his jeans slowly, and it’s a sight to behold—the way a man can make mundane actions look so sexy.

It’s enchanting to watch the way his muscles flex and bulge with every movement. The pop in his vein when he pinches the button. The strain of his chest muscles when he pulls down the zipper. The way his hand looks wrapped around the thick beast he just released from his pants.

He must see the nervousness in my eyes, because he shushes me again, cradling the back of my head with his free hand. “Sorry, darling. Couldn’t trust you not to bite me with that attitude of yours. I’d say open up, but I guess you don’t really have a choice, do you?”

That’s the last thing he says to me before forcing the head of his cock through the gag. I quickly realize nothing short of this level of depravity will ever be enough for me .

This is the point of no return.

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Julian

I am so fucked.

She looks ambrosial in the way she's all tied up, her skin bulging around the restraints—plump and ripe for the picking. I'm staring into her open mouth, and all I want is to stuff her full of my cock and the cum I've been saving up for her.

But this isn't about my pleasure, and fuck Skylar for stealing it.

I'm supposed to be buttering her up and making her want us so badly she has no choice but to come to the Red Room. But seeing her like this, completely at my mercy...fuck, I just want to savor it.

Is that too much to ask?

I grab her hair, tilting her head back all the way so she's facing the ceiling. What I wouldn't give to take a picture of her like this as a permanent reminder of just how nasty she can get with a little bit of handling.

She wants it so fucking bad—she wants me —and Skylar isn't here doing a fucking thing. Why should he get to reap the benefits?

I lean in close to her face, then gather some saliva and spit it directly into her mouth. As expected, she spooks easily and rears back for a second, but I slap the same cheek already bearing my bright red handprint .

God, she's a vision like this—all open and wanting, glaring up at me with tears in her eyes. She's pretending to be angry, but I don't buy it because she's also emitting this ravenous aura; she's hungry for it.

Such a good girl for me.

I straighten again, then grab my dick by the base and line myself up against her open mouth. Her tongue dances around as if she's trying to make room for me to fit, but it finally settles at the bottom of her mouth when she can't find a better position.

Perfect .

Without any extra warning, I slowly slide my cock through her red lips. Her tongue is so wet, her mouth a reservoir of her own drool and my spit. I haven't even made it inside an inch, but I already feel like I might blow my load just from watching her take it like this.

“Fuck, you're such a sweet little thing. Can you take more, darling?” I ask.

I don't actually care—this thing is making it to the back of her throat whether she chokes or not. I just know she won't panic as much if she thinks she holds a little power.

I wait for the inevitable nod of approval before feeding her more, slotting the shaft right along her tongue as it slides further and further back. A groan I don't mean to let out escapes through my own lips.

I could have ruined the whole thing earlier when I almost let her name slip. Luckily, I caught it before she could register what I said, but this girl is doing something to me. My brain feels like fucking mush when it's just her and I.

Not so secretly, I was excited to find out she's a brat. The broads I usually pair up with at Eden are all too eager to senselessly follow commands like robots.

There's no challenge, no playing, no bark or bite. It's like a bad porno with the gaudy moaning and shoddy connections. This girl is a fucking scientist; there's so much chemistry happening in this room .

Skylar doesn't understand her. He wants to inflict torture with no resistance, but forgets that half the fun lies in her attitude. She's willing to take what I give her, but it comes with a price I'm happy to pay.

He loves to hate her and somehow gets pleasure from making her feel like shit. He wants her to cry over deranged insults and cheap shots to her self-esteem.

I want to see her cry in ecstasy, so overwhelmed with pleasure that she's not sure she can handle more. I want her to be proud when she works through the things that scare her, only to realize she's stronger than she thought. Like the way her eyes are bulging and tearing up right now with the head of my cock snugly fixed in the back of her throat. She can't breathe, she's panicking, she's terrified. But if I just pull back at the right moment...

She gasps for air, and I stroke the top of her head and wait until the color settles back into her face. Skylar will never give it to her, but encouragement and positive reinforcement are all she needs to keep going.

"Amazing. You're such a good girl, but I'm not done with you yet. Get ready," I whisper, running my knuckles along her cheekbone.

You can be dominant without being a prick about it. You can talk a woman through these things without needing to feel all-powerful. Me? I do it for that look in her eyes—so hazy and dream-like, but still eager to please.

She nods again, but instead of me having to feed my dick to her, she leans forward and takes it at her own pace. I let her do whatever she wants, curious to see how my little chemist makes magic when she holds the power.

She does not disappoint.

My cock slips back through the gag, and she swallows a few inches before pulling back to run her tongue along the head, giving extra care to the frenulum.

I wonder who taught her that.

A few weeks ago, I joked with Skylar about thinking she was a virgin. Obviously I was kidding, but nobody comes to Eden because they're happy with their sex lives .

I can't figure out why she's single with tricks like this up her sleeve. What kind of man wouldn't give the world to a woman who can work her tongue like that?

The pretty little thing continues bobbing for apples with my dick, and I'm so lost in thought, I don't realize I'm about to come until it's too late. Skylar is going to fucking kill me if he finds out I got off without doing what I came here to do.

I fist her hair with both hands and try to pull her off, but the little minx thinks it's a challenge. She fights against my hold, sinking faster and deeper onto me before burying the head of my cock in her throat again.

She keeps it there for a minute—like she'd rather die from lack of oxygen than do anything else—then swallows around me, constricting my dick like a fucking boa.

I shoot my cum straight down her throat, releasing an embarrassingly pained moan that I'll deny if she ever mentions. I have to rip myself from her mouth because she won't stop swallowing, and the overstimulation is fucking killing me. Somebody

taught this girl how to suck dick, and I don't know why, but that idea makes me twinge with jealousy.

“That...” I can't catch my fucking breath, but I regain composure enough to grab her by the chin and force her look up at me. “That deserves a reward.”

After tucking myself back into my jeans, I go to the cabinet to grab something before kneeling back at her feet. The proud look she had on her face is instantly replaced with one of confusion, but she lets me feed her feet into the loops of the sling anyway.

With every rising inch of the restraint up her legs, I plant little kisses in its wake until I've made it to the thick of her thighs. When both loops are in place, I command her to lay down on the bed.

“You're doing such a good job,” I praise. “Just remember to breathe. You can handle it. Can't you, darling?”

She's hesitant but stays committed to the bit, nodding like the obedient slut she wants to be. When she leans back, I use the sling base to push her knees up towards her head and secure it around the nape of her neck.

I had to do it when she wasn't expecting it so she wouldn't fight against the restraint, but the yelp she squeaks out in surprise is totally worth it.

Now this is an image to hold on to for my dreams. She's bound and gagged with her pretty pussy on full display for me. She's shaved without a hair in sight, and though it's not really my preference, I respect a lady's choice.

I can tell how much she loved me fucking her mouth, just from a single glance. She's soaking wet, so I tease a finger over her pussy to collect some of the moisture before

sliding it inside her.

Her deep moan is enough to spur me on, wondering what else I can unveil from her perfect lips besides the drool pouring from the corners of her mouth.

I lean forward and run my tongue along her tight ass, eliciting a very curious reaction indeed. Her hips shimmy around, but she can't go far because of the sling keeping her spread for me. When I peer up through her open thighs, she looks embarrassed.

I can't for the life of me understand why. What's the big deal?

I collect a pool of spit on my tongue, then carefully drip it off the point until it falls on her ass. With the same finger I used in her pussy, I spread everything around to get the area nice and wet.

She hasn't seemed to have realized yet that her whines only send me into a frenzy, so when I hear her squealing, all bets are off. I slowly insert my finger, wiggling it back and forth as I sink it in further. Now her hips are really squirming, but I use it in my favor. When I start licking her clit, she gasps through the gag and clenches her eyes shut.

I don't like that one bit.

"Open your eyes, now," I command. "You're going to fucking watch when I make you come."

She obeys, but when she looks at me, all I see are tears .

It's not enough for me to stop, though. I hold her stare while I dance my tongue across her clit, alternating between long, continuous laps and quick flicks. She's so wet, a steady stream of her arousal runs right down to pave way for my finger still

working her ass.

She's getting close—I can tell by the way she's trying to buck her hips and chase my tongue, no longer embarrassed by what I'm doing to her.

Seems like the perfect time to stop.

I may be having a blast, but if I abandon the purpose of tonight's visit, Skylar will be writing my obituary by morning. Not to mention whatever he'll do if he finds out I came in her pretty little mouth.

I don't find immense pleasure in hearing her angry sighs when she realizes I'm about to do this to her again , but the choice is hers this time.

I sit up, getting to my knees as I reach into my back pocket. "You asked why the Red Room matters so much, and why I want to have you there." She eyes me curiously, but the color drains from her face as soon as she registers the object in my hand. "You wanted to know what I could possibly do to you in there that I can't do here." When I eject the blade from the knife handle, the screaming starts.

"Oh..cuh..oh..uh. Oh..cuh..oh—" she tries to beg, spitting fragments of her safe word through the open-mouth gag.

She was right; it does sound funny.

"Relax. Just fucking..." I jump off the bed and snatch her panties from the nightstand before stuffing them into her mouth. I keep the palm of my hand pressed against her lips while still giving her enough leeway to breathe through her nose.

Her eyes, once drunk with pleasure, now cut through my heart.

Repositioning myself between her legs, I try not to meet her stare, but she's watching me like a hawk. I tip the blade to the skin of her inner thigh, pressing lightly enough to leave an indent.

"Say you'll come to the Red Room," I say, though it sounds more like I've switched roles and resorted to begging .

She shakes her head violently, still screaming through the fabric.

Fair. I couldn't have expected anything less .

"Settle down, now." I dig the knife a little deeper into her flesh, being careful not to break the skin. She turns to stone—aside from her heaving chest as she hyperventilates through her nose. One last time, I demand, "Say you'll come."

I can see her mind working as her eyes flicker between each of mine, no doubt searching for the answer to why I'd do this to her.

She doesn't need to know why. Not yet.

When she nods her head reluctantly, I know it's probably just to appease the psycho breathing like a madman on her pussy. There's something else, though.

A new calm washes over her features, and a softness returns to her eyes when she drops her legs to relax over my shoulders. I don't know if she just gave up or entered her subspace, but I'm glad to know she's thinking about it. If she took the time to consider what I'm asking, she might understand and even enjoy it.

She just has to try.

"Good girl. Now, I'm going to make you come your fucking brains out."

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Scarlett

Twigs snap under my feet as I sprint through the woods.

I can just barely make out the shape of the moon past the trees, but I keep my focus on it to distract myself. My calves start to cramp, so I duck behind the closest tree and take a second to catch my breath, panting loudly with my hands on my knees.

There's a rustling of leaves to my right, in the direction I came from. He's not far behind now. I don't know how I got here or when he started following me, but I do know I'm in danger.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are, Ruby." His voice echoes through the trees, but I can't judge how far away he is.

Another pile of leaves crunch, so I dash from behind the tree and haul ass again, keeping my eyes on the moon. Something smacks into the tree next to me, causing me to scream and give my position away. Except, I guess he already knew where I was...judging by the knife jutting out of the tree near my head.

The motherfucker is throwing knives at me.

He can see me, but I have no idea where he is. I'm not willing to look back, either. I run for what feels like hours—and I could be hallucinating—but I swear I keep passing a tree to my left that has a knife stuck in the bark.

Then, I trip .

I fall flat on my stupid face, and he's on me before I can find purchase in the leaves and twigs that litter the ground. I try to scream, but he's pushing down on the back of my head, suffocating me in the dirt. All hope seems lost until I feel a tugging at the waist of my leggings.

That gives me the strength to thrash and buck around, finally getting enough grip on the dirt to turn myself over and look directly at my attacker.

He's masked, but not a jeweled eye-mask like at Eden. This one covers the entirety of his face, completely disguising his identity. It sort of looks like the Anonymous mask from V for Vendetta , except it's a dark crimson-red color with devil horns on each temple.

I wiggle one of my hands from between us and try to rip the mask away, but he's faster. All of my strength has been replaced by fear, and I'm still as a statue. It's cold here on the forest floor, with snow covering the ground in little patches that haven't been melted by the sun yet.

He takes advantage of my petrified serenity, somehow gathering both of my wrists in one of his hands to pin my arms above me. His free arm disappears behind his back, emerging with an object I don't even need to see with my own eyes.

It's a knife; it has to be. It's all I've been dreaming about since my last run-in with the mystery guy from Eden's Deliverance, two weeks ago.

I've been avoiding the club ever since.

"Say you'll come to the Red Room, Ruby." The masked man's voice is ominous and slow. "Say you will, or else I won't let you come."

It doesn't matter, he's going to kill me either way. I shake my head, crying and

begging for mercy—but even in my dreams, he doesn't care.

I'm not in control. I'm never in control.

He cocks his head, glaring down at me with eyes I can't see. In a flash, he hovers over my face with the blade pressed to my throat. The sound of his frustrated breathing inside the mask only makes things worse. He's furious at my rejection, and it's so much more painful when he's angry.

“Why do you do this to me, Ruby? You know I just want to play with you. I want to taste you. I want to feel you. I want to make you scream.” A sharp pain comes when he presses the tip of the knife into my skin, but I don't scream. I won't give him the satisfaction. “Why do you fight this? You know, deep down, you want it just as badly as I do.”

I wish I could say that he didn't know. He isn't real, and he doesn't know a thing about me. Except, he does. He is a figment of my imagination, after all.

“Fuck you,” I spit back.

The man barks with laughter, tilting his head to the other side as he brings the tip of the knife up to my cheek and slices a clean cut down the side. I wince but hold back my screams. “You will, Ruby. That's the whole point. You will. You know it, and I know it. You're only delaying the inevitable.”

He sits up again, straddling my hips between his thighs as he reaches up to remove his mask. I'm surprised; he's never done that before. I watch him, sick with anticipation and so eager to finally see the man under the hood.

He tosses the mask away, but what emerges from the hoodie isn't a face at all. Out comes a creature with hundreds of insanely long teeth, snapping its vertical jaws

together while acidic saliva drips onto my stomach and burns holes into my exposed flesh.

What the fuck?

Now, I scream. I scream until I can't anymore—until my throat is hoarse and until a long alien tongue slides out of its mouth.

He leans over me again, and that tongue is everywhere. It's curling around my cheek to suck up the blood from my cut, diving into my ears and nose, and then it's in my mouth.

I choke and sputter, trying to evict the tongue and the horrible taste it's leaving on my own. But it's impossible. It snakes farther and farther towards the back of my throat until I swear it's reached my stomach.

I can't breathe, I can't talk, and everything is going black.

Sitting up in bed, I cough and heave until the realization sets in that I'm awake and safe. The byrus from my dream starts to make a little more sense when I see Dreamcatcher 's credits roll across my TV screen.

No more horror movies before bed.

The soft buzzing of my tattoo machine is a welcoming sound—a win I've really needed after the past few weeks of doubt and isolation. The world around me feels like it's been getting smaller and smaller.

Most nights, I find myself slipping into the darkest corners of my mind, shutting out everyone and everything else.

Until today, I've only been allowed to do basic things around the studio, with a focus on drawing and design composition. My mentor, Jill, has me on this guided curriculum for my apprenticeship—a checklist of skills for me to master as I go through the learning process.

For the first few months, I was studying the basic history of tattooing before I moved to drawing flash. During that step, I was allowed to start sitting in on her own tattoo sessions so I could observe her techniques, but now I'm finally allowed to practice tattooing my own designs onto fake skin.

I picked out this really pretty floral design I made of a Pat Austin rose with a few leaves sprouting off of it, and I'm working on the shading when Jill comes over to check my progress.

“Really nice, Scarlett! You've seriously got this down, I don't see why we can't have you working on live guinea pigs soon,” she exclaims. “Do you have a list of people worked out yet who will let you practice on them?”

“I have at least one, for sure. Penelope, you've met her a couple of times. She's been begging me since I started with you.” We share a laugh about Pen's candidness, then she sends me off with a few pointers on how to bolden the piece and make it stand out more.

The door chime rings, and I look up from my work to check on the customers—as is my apprenticeship duty—but almost instantly, I'm contemplating whether or not I really need this job.

Skylar and three of his friends burst into the lobby, making a fucking ruckus, but I can't duck down fast enough before he spots me across the room. All the chipper energy fades from his face. He's seething, just like any other time we're in the same room.

“Scarlett, can you go check on those guys for me? See what they need and let’s get them taken care of, okay?” Jill suggests.

Really, it’s not a suggestion. Apprentices don’t have the privilege of saying no to their mentors, and being the desk-girl is one of my biggest responsibilities.

I make my way over to the desk and fiddle with the computer’s scheduling system so I have a reason to look at literally anything else when I address the group. “Hi guys, welcome in. What can we do for you today?”

One of the guys, I think his name is Tommy, wraps his arm around Julian’s shoulder. “My boy here’s looking for someone to finish up his back piece. Got anybody who works with black and grey? What about you?” He winks, but I look right back at the computer screen to separate myself.

“Oh, um...I’m just the apprentice, sorry. We’ve got two artists who work with black and grey. There are a few portfolios over on the table by the couches if you wanna have a look.” I nod towards the waiting area. “If you see someone you like, I’ll go ahead and get you connected with them for scheduling.”

As much as I’d like to refrain from looking any of them in the eye, the last thing I need is for a gaggle of jock fucks to leave some kind of bad review about me being horrible in customer service.

I glance up at Julian with an artificial smile specifically meant for customers, but he’s got this really weird look on his face.

Despite the odd skew of his facial features at this moment, he’s very pretty. Not necessarily pretty in a feminine sort of way, but like someone you could just see yourself looking at all day. Almost like a painting in a museum.

He's got straight blonde hair the color of straw, except maybe he used gel to tousle it for that out-of-bed image. That's sort of how he looks right now—almost like he hasn't slept or taken care of himself in weeks—but the disheveled visage still looks good on him .

It's a stark contrast to Skylar, who looks as groomed and immaculate as ever. Not that I'm looking.

That would be gross.

It's just that he's handsome too, and they all run around like a bunch of smoking hot psychopaths whose emotional capability is limited to putting their fists through walls. I'll never really understand why Skylar is studying psychology, unless he intends to use his degree for self-reflection.

“We'll have a look. Thanks, Red,” Julian says, and they all snigger together like I'm the butt of some joke.

I really hate it when they call me that. Like it's some insult that I have red hair, and wear red tops, and red shoes, and...

Fucking whatever . I get it; I like red.

While the guys are looking through the books, I head down the hall to the artists' rooms and give them a heads up about the potential booking. It's not really in my range of expertise yet to give suggestions based on anything other than recommending an artist for their style, and I don't need to see Julian with his shirt off.

Since avoiding Eden, I haven't pursued anything with the local riffraff like I used to, so I'm a wired-up horn dog who can't really handle being around a man as pretty as him right now.

I might do something stupid.

Jason, the artist Julian chose to work with, takes over talking and scheduling with the boys. I return to my post and continue working on my fake skin, not lifting my head again until they've all left.

I'm fucking exhausted by the end of the night, having taken well over an hour to sterilize the studio and prep for everyone who's coming in tomorrow.

The apprenticeship is good, school is good, everything's good. Everything's fine. I'm fine. My life is fine.

But I miss Eden.

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Scarlett

It's taken a few weeks, but I've made it back in the saddle.

I'm going to walk in there with my head held high—wearing any color but red—and Cunnilingus Casanova is just going to have to deal with it. He may be able to command me in the bedroom, but he needs to understand I'm my own person.

I refuse to be intimidated.

I think I'll even give him a taste of his own medicine by finding a completely different partner. I have no doubt he's going to approach me tonight, but this is perfect weather for a cold shoulder.

The elevator slides open, and it's comforting to see the usual mob of dancers gyrating under the chandelier while “Antidote” by NOT A TOY blares over the stereo.

Penelope and I make a pit stop at the bar to throw back our first round of drinks, then order a second pair to take right to the dance floor. Before long, we're jumping to the music, sweating our asses off, and laughing like we don't have a care in the world.

Fuck, I missed this .

There's something so hypnotic about Eden that I've never experienced anywhere else; I just can't put my finger on it. My head feels light and airy, like I'm floating with every step I take. My skin is so conductive, every brush of Pen's fingers against me sends a volt of electricity through my body and straight to my core. I can't move,

breathe, or touch anything without it eliciting pure euphoria and arousal.

Maybe it's the secret sex rooms in the back.

Maybe it's something else.

We're close enough that I've been able to scope out the bar while we dance, just lying in wait for him to appear. It didn't take long to spot him; I just had to look for the purple mask.

That makes three times now that he's miraculously matched with me, despite having no prior discussion about it. I'm beginning to wonder if he's watching me outside the club.

Unfortunately for him, his friend is sporting a blue mask like Penelope. It's the same man I've had my eye on since the first night at Eden when he approached us at the bar—before Pen scared him away.

“Let's go to the bathroom quick!” I shout over the deafening bass, then drag her by the wrist until we reach the ladies' room. “How much do you love me?” I'm still out of breath from dancing, but the struggle for air doesn't compare to the anxiety I'm fighting.

She looks concerned but humors me anyway. “Uh, you know I'd die for you, but what are you getting at?”

“Your mask,” I pant. “Switch masks with me.”

I wasn't anticipating her response to be this dumbfounded look on her face, but there it is. “Scarlett, no!” She rips her arm from my grip and walks to one of the sinks to fix her makeup.

“Pen, please. When have I ever asked you for anything? Just do this one thing for me,” I beg .

She crosses her arms over her chest, gawking at me with an unamused expression. “For one, you asked me for the ‘in’ to this place, and now you want me to help you break the rules? We could be banned for life if we get caught. What’s the big deal?”

I run my fingers through my hair, trying to think of the best way to explain so I don’t sound crazy. “I don’t know how to make you understand, but you’ve seen him. If he knows we matched masks again, he’ll convince me to go back with him...and I don’t want to.”

“So don’t do it. He’s just some fuckboy, it’s not like he can make you do anything.”

I join her at the sink and check my own face for touch ups. “I know it sounds stupid, but when he’s around me, I fall under his spell. I just want one night to be free of him, and to make a point that he doesn’t have any control over me.”

The puppy dog eyes I keep flashing her in the mirror seem to be working, because she sighs heavily and unties the blue mask from behind her head. “You owe me...like so big for this. And if we get kicked out, you’re finding us a new club,” she says, shoving the mask against my chest.

“Deal.” I smile while removing my own mask, then we help each other tie into opposite colors. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

“I’ll take your declaration in the form of alcohol. A lot of alcohol.” She tries her best to act disappointed, but it soon fades. “I can’t believe I’m about to get my ass beat to hell for you.”

She won’t admit it, but she’s very much like me in the sense that she finds rebellion

exhilarating. Maybe she'll come out of tonight thanking me for the change in scenery.

We make our way back out to the bar and order our drinks—a vodka cranberry for me and a bay breeze for her. I've conveniently chosen the bar stool next to Casanova, but I keep stealing glances around his shoulder to make eye contact with his friend. He notices me almost immediately, tipping his head slightly to the side in acknowledgement.

It's now or never.

I'm not a complete idiot; I saw them 'cheers' me from the bar when I was bawling like a little bitch after Casanova abandoned me. I know they're together. He probably told his friend all about the things he did to me and how upset I got—but that's not me anymore. Not tonight, at least.

I approach the long-haired beauty while keeping my back to Casanova, icing him out as he once accused me of doing. "Would you like to dance?"

That small head tilt he gave me earlier is nothing compared to now. Like an intrigued puppy, he bends his neck to the other side until his ear lays against his shoulder. His dark eyes survey me from head to toe.

I look decent tonight, having kept the three-inches-too-tall heels to pair with a new skin-tight red dress I bought specifically for my return to Eden.

"Does it look like I dance?" His voice is as deep as I remember, just a lot less friendly. Alright, Broody Brody.

I drop my shoulders, not sure what to do with this deflated balloon of confidence. "Well, can I buy you a drink at least?" I manage a small smile, looking up at him hopefully.

“Are you sharing? My friend here would love one as well.” He nods his head in the direction of the man behind me, but I don’t need to think about my answer.

“Just you.”

I’m not playing their games tonight. If they want to start toying with me, I’ll just find someone else.

“Hm, that’s too bad. Alright, I’ll bite.” He turns to the bartender and orders a vodka on the rocks . My kind of guy . “You know, this color doesn’t suit you. You sure you know what you’re doing?”

He doesn’t know a thing about me. Who is he to say what my color is? I know he’s referring to my mask and not my dress.

It’s not a coincidence that Broody was wearing a red mask on my first night—the same one Casanova has been endlessly trying to get me into. They’re both Rubies, but the pickings are probably so slim, they have to branch out just to get any pussy.

Well, that won’t be me.

“I know exactly what I’m doing.” I peek over my shoulder and flash him a defiant grin before turning back to Broody. “But more importantly, I know who and what I’m not doing.”

Casanova curls in close and rests his chin on my shoulder to whisper in my ear, “You’re playing a dangerous game, darling.”

It’s hard to ignore him when he’s breathing on my neck like that, forcing the eargasms to cloud my judgment. Fighting to hide the quake in my shoulders, I look back at him.

“Did I ask for your opinion?”

He chuckles, amused by the throwback of words he said to me during our last encounter. “Have it your way then. You two kids go have fun. I’ll be here prowling the watering hole.” He raises his glass before taking a sip.

For a second, I reminisce about the way Casanova’s bourbon tasted on my tongue when we kissed. The flavor encapsulated the bittersweet dynamic of our relationship.

Vodka mixed with vodka...just makes more vodka.

Still, I can’t get over how elegantly Broody’s hair flows around and in front of his face when he looks at me. His entire aura screams of authority, and it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to let him choke me.

I have to consider he could be in some pact with Casanova, only humoring me tonight to enact punishment for me rejecting his friend.

“Go on, then. Find a free room and I’ll be there in a minute,” he orders. There’s no excitement or desire to his tone; it’s dry. “Gotta finish the drink you were generous enough to buy for me.”

My palms turn clammy, anxiety suddenly creeping up at the prospect of being alone with him. “Well, I could have another drink. We could— ”

“I heard you were good at following instructions.” He turns to Casanova and asks, “Are you sure this is the same girl?”

Okay then. They definitely talked about me.

I shoot Casanova a nasty look as I turn away, but they don’t give me the courtesy of

gaining a safe distance before their laughter rings through the club. That's fine. He should enjoy a laugh while he can, because there's nothing he can do about me fucking his friend.

It's early enough in the night that many of the rooms are still vacant, so I choose the first one available and leave the door cracked for him. This room isn't far off from the White Room; it's basically just a normal bedroom. The only noticeable difference is a cabinet similar to the one in the Green Room, but in place of the whips and paddles are a collection of collars, chains, and weird rubber masks.

The door clicks shut behind me, but before I can turn to see him, something loops over my head and tightens around my neck. He steps against my backside while I'm scrambling to breathe, frantically grabbing at the thing cutting off my air supply.

"It's called a slip chain choker," a familiar voice grumbles in my ear, but it's not the one who should be here. "Nice, isn't it? You'd better relax, or it'll only get worse."

I manage to weasel my fingers under the chain, giving myself half an inch of relief to ask, "What the fuck are you doing? You're an Amethyst tonight."

I'll never get used to his derisive laughter without it giving me chills. "So are you," he retorts. "Did you think we wouldn't notice your little switcheroo in the bathroom? We've got eyes on you at all times. I thought you'd have realized that by now."

"You're crazy," I spit, still fighting just to breathe.

"Crazy for you, Ruby. I told you, you're playing a dangerous game. You thought you could pull one over on me, but that'll never happen." He gives the chain an abrupt tug, pinching my fingers between it and my aching throat. "Are you afraid, darling? Scared of being punished for lying to me? Worried that you'll like what I do to you?"

Here I am, fucking crying again. I can't stop it from happening; the tears fall without permission. I just wanted to try something different or someone new. I wanted to prove that even though I act powerless around him, I'm more than this.

I wanted to make him feel jealous, angry, and undesired.

Despite the fact that I would absolutely choose Broody in a heartbeat, I also wanted Casanova to give up on his mission to drag me to the Red Room. If I could just evoke that feral, possessive side of him, he might realize teasing me isn't worth it anymore.

He could fuck me right here—right now—without any of the games, but I'm not telling him that. Let him dig his grave.

“Please, I just want to go.”

He wedges his other hand between my legs, sliding it under my skirt. Rubbing it along the fabric protecting my pussy, one finger curls around the barrier to slip inside me. I let out a shrill squeak that only encourages him to explore further.

“See, I don't think you do,” he hums into my ear. “I think you were hoping he'd be different than me. You thought he might actually fuck you instead of playing with you.” His finger thrusts deeper on the word ‘fuck.’ “The problem is, he's worse than me. You just don't know it yet. Or maybe you do, and you were just trying to upset me. Is that it?”

“No.”

I'm a liar. A dirty, dirty liar. A dirty, dirty, horny, soaking wet liar.

He jerks the chain again, but this time it's meant to lead me like a leashed fucking dog. “On the bed, go.”

“Please, take it off. I can’t breathe.” My tears fall harder and faster than before, and I have to sniffle just to keep the snot from dripping out of my nose .

“Oh, Ruby. Did I ask for your opinion? ” He asks sardonically, brushing a lock of hair off my forehead. “Yeah, I caught that. I said...get on the fucking bed.”

The chain is pulled so tightly now, my fingers are losing circulation. I keep my hold on it but step towards the bed, and he rewards my obedience by loosening the choker enough for me to spin around without decapitating myself.

They must have switched masks like Penelope and I did, because I’m staring up into an angry face of blue—only made more so by the dim LED lights emitting the same color from the ceiling.

“Like I said, a dangerous game. If you didn’t want to get choked, you shouldn’t have put on the mask,” he says, pulling the choker taut again.

I examine the chain in his hand and follow it up to the section around my neck. It’s just a long metal rope that’s threaded through a hoop on one end, making it look exactly like the leash he’s treating it as.

When I don’t say anything, he continues. “I admire your dedication. You’ll really put on any mask but a red one, won’t you? Odd, seeing as it’s obviously your color.” He looks me over once before poking his tongue out to wet his lips.

I think we’re both a little surprised when he instinctively reaches down to grab behind my knees, then hoists me up so my legs wrap around his hips. I have to put my arms around his neck to steady myself, but he slams my back against the wall to keep me in place. The rough impact forces a breath from my lungs, but he steals it when his tongue dives into my open mouth.

I don't know what it is with this guy.

He's hot and cold, then smoldering and icy as hell. He wants me but won't have me, then refuses to let his friend have me, either. All of the back and forth, just to circle back around to wanting me again.

We're on a merry-go-round of lust that neither of us can jump off of.

"You've got me so fucked up, girl. I could wring your neck right now." He's panting into my mouth, but it's hard to decipher what he's saying when his cock is pressed so tightly against my pussy.

If I could just take it out while he's in the heat of the moment like this ...

I reach down to unbutton his pants, trying to distract him enough that he'll let me get them undone. "So just fu—" His hand clamps over my mouth before turning my head to gain access to my neck.

"Shut the fuck up. I tell you what to do, not the other way around. I'll fuck you when you start listening to me." If he's truly angry, he forgot the proper tone somewhere between biting my throat and grinding into me. "You said you'd come. You said you'd put on the mask."

My words are muffled by his hand, but I shoot off to the best of my ability and ramble about how I only agreed because he pulled a fucking knife on me. I'd have said anything to avoid him using it.

He doesn't seem too pleased with my defiance.

Pulling back to hook his fingers over my bottom teeth, he unhinges my jaw before spitting directly into my mouth. When I whine at the assault, he locks it shut again by

pressing his palm to the underside of my chin with his fingers pinching my cheeks—not unlike Skylar did at our parents’ house.

“Doesn’t your mouth get dry from all the talking back?” he whispers against my temple. “I will break you down, darling. We will break you, so you’re better off surrendering now.”

Never .

Tucking my chin down has the exact effect I want it to; he relinquishes his grip on my cheeks and drops his guard. I rear back and return the spit with enough ferocity that it covers his mask and drips down his face.

My ass meets the floor in less than a second.

Kneeling in front of me, he furiously pulls at the chain until my vision starts to blur. He’s so angry, he can barely stop his lips from trembling when he growls, “Go home, and don’t you dare come back here unless you’re in red.”

Then, he turns and walks right out the door.

This time I cry on purpose, purging all my hatred through the hot tears flowing from my eyes as I gasp for air. I’m a weeping pile of patheticism, thinking this must be the end .

The end of the mystery man and his sulky friend. The end of my masked adventures. The end of the thrill. The end of the passion.

They’re never going to want me without that red mask, and I don’t want to put it on. I don’t want to know how much nastier they can get. I don’t want to find out how else they could possibly hurt me...because make no mistake, they have something much

worse than this planned.

I hate them.

I hate them for making me want them so badly it's become a habit to lie here and think of all the things I'm missing—to think of what it might be like if they got their way.

Would they be nicer? Would they really make me feel better than he already has? Would I like it? Is there some secret to the Red Room I'm just too blind to see, and they're trying to show me the light?

I won't be sticking around to find out. I think I'll be much safer for the time being if I return to being a Pearl. If I can't find someone new, maybe I'll get lucky enough to run into the man I met after Casanova broke me the first time.

One can only hope.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 pm

Julian

The food at the cafeteria hall is atrociously bad.

Skylar doesn't seem to mind—he'll pretty much eat whatever's put in front of him—but I have higher standards, so we head to the courtyard and check out what the food trucks are offering today. It looks like a lamb and rice kind of afternoon for me while Skylar grabs a meatball sub.

We march our asses over to the nearest picnic bench, forcing the underclassmen sitting there to flee. Sometimes I'm grateful for our social standing, because I'm on my last nerve and don't feel like picking a fight.

I haven't told him much about my session with Scarlett last weekend, but it's time for us to come up with a plan for what needs to happen moving forward.

After we've settled into our meals and I get a few scoops of rice in my stomach, I say, "I think you've gotta take over this Eden shit, brother. I need a break from her."

"What are you talking about? It's working, isn't it? You're the one she built this fucking attachment to. You can't quit now," he scolds.

I could use some fucking sympathy here. Pointing my fork at him, I resort to raising my voice. "You're not fucking hearing me. I need a goddamn break."

"What happened?" He leans in, nearly dipping his elbow into the sloppy meatballs. I don't get heated very often, but this isn't something we should be shouting for the

whole campus to hear.

“It’s nothing, dude, I just...” I don’t want to sound like a pussy. “She spit on me. It’s whatever, you know I love the bratty shit. I’m just hitting my limit, man. If she’s gonna fight this hard, is it even worth it?” I ask, mindlessly pushing my food around with the fork. “I’m just in my head and need a break, that’s all.”

He looks at me with remorseful eyes as he runs a hand over the top of his head, smoothing away the frizz in his hair. “Fuck, Jules. I’m sorry, I—”

Holding up my hand, I cut him off. I don’t need him to apologize or feel guilty. “I’m just saying. You’ve gotta take over for a while, or we cut it out altogether.”

“I’ll take care of it.” He gives me a nod and I return it, thankful for the unspoken understanding.

Skylar knows what it was like for me growing up, and there’s a reason I spent so much time at his house when I was a kid.

My parents are pieces of shit.

I hate that I’m 23 years old, still cowering from trauma they inflicted upon me over a decade ago. I imagine it’s part of why I need to feel in control during sex. It’s why I can’t stand the touch of another human being. It’s why Scarlett keeps triggering me with her behavior. She doesn’t mean to—she doesn’t know anything about me—but it hits all the same.

It’s the entire reason I’m studying Sociology in the first place; I need to be able to help the kids who are voiceless and in danger. The kids with parents who don’t want them. The kids who are taught that abuse is a form of love, and they can’t possibly know any better. The beaten, broken, helpless kids who feel lost in the world.

The kids like me.

We had a neighbor once, Ms. Moss, who would babysit me after school while my parents were still at work. She was the only adult I felt like I could honestly trust, with the exception of Skylar's mom. Teachers at school didn't care, the counselor was overworked, and my parents were scum. But Ms. Moss listened to me, fed me, held me when I cried.

She even called CPS for me once after hearing a particularly violent spat through the walls. When the social worker arrived the following evening for her check, my parents were picture perfect. Mother invited the lady into our home, offered her coffee and cookies, then beat me half to death after she left. Dad came in later to finish me off, but when he heard the theme song to his favorite TV show playing, he decided that was more important.

Normal stuff, you know.

As an adult, I avoid them as much as possible. Skylar and I rent a house so I have a place to stay during holidays and between semesters. I never have to go back there if I don't want to—and I don't. Sometimes I come with him to visit Gretchen, and she's more than happy to be my stand-in mother. The woman is a saint.

Skylar's dad is a different brand of shit, altogether. 20 years of marriage down the drain because some hot, new thing came along and scooped him up. It's no surprise why Sky has abandonment issues, or why Scarlett is the bane of his existence. She bears a striking resemblance to his dad's mistress, with long, red hair that's so blood-like, he loves to imagine the color pouring out of her throat instead of her scalp.

Yeah, he's got problems of his own.

It didn't take me long to put the whole thing together. I was at their house during the

summer of the divorce, and we helped Gretchen pick up the pieces of her broken life. She doesn't know this, but we were the ones who found out about the affair. Put two 15-year-old boys in front of a computer, and there's no secret you can keep.

We found that shit immediately. The computer was littered with photos and emails between this slut and his dad, conversations planning for their future, and promises about leaving his wife .

Skylar confronted him and demanded that he come clean about everything we found, but instead of staying to fix his marriage, he left. Gretchen was a mess, and we felt responsible for it. Sky built up so much hatred, it seeped into his personal life. No dating, no strings attached. Just non-committal hate-fucking and a lifetime of frustration poured into sports and exercise.

That's why Scarlett's so fun for us to toy with.

For him, she's everything he hates. She's the perfect target for the revenge fantasies he never got to live out as a kid. He can pull her red hair and think about the woman who ruined life as he knew it. He can fuck her and throw her away—the way his dad should have done to his mistress but didn't.

For me, she allows me the control I need to keep my head straight. She lets me tie her up, spit on her, slap her around in the same way my parents did to me. The difference being, she knows I'll make it good for her afterwards. I can show her those actions have a place in the world—in the bedroom—without causing irreparable damage to the psyche.

Maybe one day, I'll even believe it too.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 pm

Skylar

I hate Statistics almost as much as I hate Scarlett McKenna.

Thankfully, it's my last class on Fridays, so Julian and I are heading home to unwind after a week from hell. We're supposed to go to Eden tomorrow night, but after him talking about needing a break from Scarlett, I'm inclined to agree. I haven't spent more than five minutes with her at the club, and even I know how infuriating she can be.

The dilemma is, I'm not willing to let the whole thing go...so according to him there's only one more option: I have to step up. I have to try to get her in a room with me, and there's no way she'll be willing to do that after the switch we pulled last weekend.

"Did your contact tell you what mask she's going to be wearing this time?" I ask.

Someone's on their way to losing their job at Eden for giving Julian such private information and asking for nothing in return. Not that I know of, anyway. But somehow, he manages to get the intel every week like clockwork.

"Yeah, man. I actually think we might have broken her. Maybe it really is time to call the whole thing off." When I give him a curious look, he says, "She's going as a Pearl. We're back to square one."

Fuck.

“Well, you won’t catch me in a white mask, so don’t even think about it. I can still keep her on her toes.”

“And how do you expect to do that? You can’t exactly be caught sneaking a little baby Pearl off into the Red Room,” he scoffs.

“I’m not taking her anywhere, but you can bet she won’t be following anyone else either.”

There she is, dancing with Penelope under the chandelier, and I can’t take my eyes off her. I hate that her tits are bouncing right in front of my face, but I can’t bury my nose between them. I hate that she looks so fucking delicious in those leather pants and spiky heels. I hate that she makes me want to ruin her.

I hate that she made Julian cave in on himself.

He really hasn’t been himself since their last meeting. There’s no doubt in my mind he spit on her first, but she doesn’t know him. You wouldn’t believe how many times I’ve wanted to sock this kid over the years, but I just couldn’t. He needs a safe place, and I’ve always been that for him. No matter how much anger I’ve got inside me, I can’t take it out on him. We may bicker, call each other names, and have a row here and there, but I’d never hit him.

Scarlett, on the other hand...

Fuck, the way her body moves is hypnotic. When she asked, I implied that I don’t dance. But the moment I see some creepy fucker slotting up behind her, I’m ready to prove myself a liar.

I slip from the bar stool, two drinks in hand—a vodka on the rocks for me, a vodka cranberry for her—and make my way over to the girls. The frail, little Pearl man

behind her only needs a rough jab from my elbow before he backs off and allows me to take his place .

This is where I belong...with my chest pressed against her back, my chin tucking into her neck with my lips on the side of her throat, and my arm around her waist—holding her so closely, the smell of her shampoo invades my nostrils.

“Did you miss me?” I whisper against the shell of her ear.

Penelope shoots me a glare over Scarlett’s shoulder when she stiffens, quickly realizing I’ve replaced her dance partner. I tighten my hold on her, making her sway with me to the rhythm of the music so she doesn’t cause a scene.

“Play with Fire” by Sam Tinnesz and Yacht Money blasts through the club speakers, the vibrations moving through my body and into hers. I’ve always loved that about heavy bass—the way I can actually feel it inside me, flooding out all the shadows in my head until there’s no more hatred or sadness.

“No.” Her tone is dry and disgruntled, missing its usual airiness.

“I brought you a drink, here.” I try handing her the glass I’m holding with the arm that’s circling her waist, but Penelope snatches it from my fingers and downs it in a few seconds. Bitch. My now empty hand flattens on her stomach, pulling her further into my orbit. “Looks like you need to pick your friends better.”

She’s unaffected, and it’s pissing me off. “Looks like you need to do the same. You can go now.” She pushes her ass out and shoves me backwards, but I keep my grip firm. I’m not willing to break contact and interrupt the peace I just found in the conductivity of her body.

“Excuse me, miss. Is this guy bothering you?”

Who the fuck?

Over my shoulder, some dude in a white mask reaches out to touch her shoulder. Instinctually, I swat his hand away before I get a good look at his face, but then she turns and full-on slams into my chest with both her hands so I'm forced to stumble back.

"Yes, he is." She looks up at me then, shaking with frustration. "Get the fuck out of here. I don't want anything to do with you and your fucked up friend anymore. Just leave me alone."

The man in the white mask takes her by the arm and leads her off, leaving me standing on the dance floor like a dumbfounded idiot.

Yeah, we definitely broke her.

I sit by myself at the bar for so long, I've lost count of how many drinks I've had. Scarlett hasn't come back from the White Room with that prick, and I'm fucking beside myself about it.

Julian opted to stay home tonight, keeping to his stance on needing a break from her, and fuck...I wish I did too. The only real advice he left me with was to try and get her to drink more, but I don't really see the point. It was a useless attempt anyway.

The one who really needs a drink—or seven—is me, because having to deepen and disguise my voice for her is fucking exhausting. My vocal cords feel like sandpaper, and it might be the worst part about trying to hide from her.

I wish I didn't have to put on this fucking show and could just be myself, but she would never have me.

It was one thing to watch her disappear in the back rooms with Julian. At least then, I'd hear about everything that happened later. I might not like it, but I wouldn't be left in the dark.

This guy is dangerous. I recognize him for the piece of shit he is, and I know he's had her in his sights since her first night at Eden. It's the same guy who took her back into the White Room after Julian left her crying—her white knight in shining fucking armor.

He's not the hero she thinks he is, but I can't tell her that. Julian and I are going to have to keep an eye on him.

If it was Jules back there with her, I wouldn't be sitting here imagining all the worst-case scenarios in my head. Is he kissing her, tying her down, fucking her like I should be? Like I should have just fucking done last week when she put on the blue mask.

I could have had her.

For once, she came after me instead of him, and I could have taken her .

The only bright side to the lecture I'm going to receive when I get home is that Jules will probably reclaim his place as her keeper, since I'm obviously incompetent. Somehow, things are already fucked up beyond repair, and I've only been in the driver's seat for five minutes.

I was supposed to make sure she didn't go back with anybody, but I fucking choked and let her disappear with the worst person possible. I froze up when it mattered, and I don't even know why.

There was something in her voice; it was like we hopped in a time machine and traveled back to that night in our parents' driveway. So much hatred and fire between

us with nowhere to go. It made me want to grab her hair again, to feel her squirm in my grasp, to feel her lips pressed to my palm. I'd even take her teeth on my skin, causing tangible pain to drown out the aching in my fucking chest every time I look at her.

This girl is going to kill me, and she doesn't even know it. A little piece of me died every time she was alone with Julian. A little piece of me is dying now, knowing she's getting fucked raw by some psychopath who stole her from me—just like Julian steals her from me.

Or rather...she gives herself to them.

It seems as though she'll give herself to anybody but me.

Scarlett

The birth of October means the coming of all my favorite things.

Balcony cigarettes always taste a little better when the air starts to get colder, the menthol hitting a little harder. The autumn breeze chills me to the core, sending goosebumps down my neck and shoulders that take shelter under the warm cardigan I threw on before stepping outside.

Nothing beats sweater weather for me; the extreme temperature contrasts of summer and winter are too much for my body, and spring is just too bright. There's a peacefulness to watching all the trees prepare for their seasonal slumber—to see their leaves transform before they die and paint the ground like it's one giant canvas of dirt and grass.

What's even better is that it's Friday the 13th, which means the tattoo studio will be flooded with eager people, and Jill has finally given me the green light to tattoo on real skin. Penelope has let me do a few small ones on her already, but this will be my first time actually taking on outside clients—so long as they're okay with being tattooed by an apprentice.

I've spent the last two weeks drawing a bunch of flash sheets made of cute little spooky designs, so all people need to do is choose one when they come in, and the rest is easy .

Theoretically.

The nicotine is betraying me, doing nothing to calm the building nerves in my gut that are threatening to collapse me. The woods behind our apartment help a little, giving me something else to focus on as I watch the wind blow through the trees and shake their vibrant leaves. Stamping out the ember on my cigarette, I take a final deep breath of autumn air before getting in the car.

The drive to the studio is even more beautiful than the view from my balcony, with trees lining the backroads that lead to my destination, creating canopies of color that flood my vision. I tap rhythmically on the steering wheel to “venus fly trap” by Brakence, singing along to get myself pepped up enough for the social drain I’m about to experience.

As expected, when I pull into the studio parking lot, there’s already a line of people at the door waiting to be let in. Jill and the guys are in the lobby talking with a few clients about their design choices, so I join them and set out my own flash sheets with a special note that labels them as apprentice tattoos.

Unfortunately, the first set of visitors seem to prefer the other artists and their flash...which is totally fine, and I’m not at all jealous or disappointed or sad or dejected. I watch them file in, one by one, then leave all the same. The sound of the bell ringing doesn’t even faze me anymore, so I don’t bother looking up until I hear rambunctious laughter pushing into the lobby.

Fuck me, no.

Skylar and his band of bros stand there unabashed, flipping through the flash on the table. Please don’t pick mine. Please don’t pick mine. Please don’t—

“Hey, Red! These yours?” Tommy Pritchett shouts across the distance between us, waving me over.

There's no getting out of this. If I soil the one chance Jill has given me to actually present myself as an artist to the public, she'll never let me continue.

Begrudgingly, I drag my feet on the way to them, still hoping they're just fucking with me and won't actually force themselves onto me as my first real clients. I approach and give a small wave, keeping my distance. "Hi. Yeah, these are all mine. But I'm just the apprentice, so you guys probably want to look here at Jason's stuff or—"

He cuts me off abruptly. "Nah, I definitely want you. I want this one here, the butcher knife." He points to the design on the page before turning to the others. "What about you guys?"

They all take turns flipping through my collection of drawings, and as if this wasn't already enough of a nightmare, Skylar picks one as well. All four of them want something, and this is sure to end in fire and brimstone—true to the holiday season.

They're going to psych me out and I'm going to fuck up, then they're going to shit all over me and the studio for letting someone so inadequate permanently mar the general public.

I run all of their stencils through the thermofax machine, then go through the steps in my head for proper application. Shave the hair around the area. Apply alcohol to clean and dry the skin. Rub in the stencil gel. Place the stencil. Let it dry.

Barely holding on to my sanity, I excuse myself to have a cigarette while their stencils settle. The biting chill is back, comforting my overheated skin until the sweat is gone and I can finally breathe again.

I don't know what to fucking do. I can't do this...I just can't.

I can't make small talk with them, and I can't handle their inevitable criticism. Skylar and I can barely stand being in the same room with each other when we're forced into tolerance around our parents. But here, in public? There's no way.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

Skylar and Julian emerge through the front door. I'm prepared for the barrage of battery that's sure to come from their mouths, but instead, Julian just asks for a light. I didn't know Skylar even smoked, but here we all are, huddled at the corner of the building and sharing a cloud of smoke between us.

"Have you done a lot today? "

"Huh?" I'd just come to terms with the fact that I might have some peace and quiet among this awkward exchange. I wasn't expecting them to talk to me again, so my mind was miles away.

"The flash. Have you gotten to do a bunch of them today?" It's Julian who's asking, puffing on his cigarette while he leans against the brick and looks down at me.

Fuck, he's pretty. His eyes vaguely resemble sapphires—such a deep blue, there's barely any shine to them in the sunlight. The color sends a shiver down my spine, reminding me of the visit to Eden when I made Penelope give me her Sapphire mask.

I'm still in recovery from that one.

Just thinking about it causes a phantom tightness in my throat that makes it hard to breathe. That night was such a turning point for me, driving me away from my mystery men and into the arms of a new, more thoughtful partner.

He's come to my rescue twice now. After Casanova abandoned me during my first

visit, he found me and finished me off. Then, when Broody tried dancing with me, he stepped in to scare him away.

My new guy takes care of me; he fucks me without the fight and pleasures me without the teasing. It may be safe, but it's comfortable.

“You're actually my first. I hope that's alright. Seriously, I won't be offended if you want to go to another artist. I know you're already working with Jason on your back piece.” If I thought I could manage one last plea for them to change their minds, I was severely mistaken.

“It's alright. We don't mind.” He's still looking at me with those deep pools of blue, and it makes my skin crawl.

Why the fuck is he being so nice? He's Satan's right hand. He's supposed to be picking on and torturing me, seeking approval from his master. And why does he keep looking at me like that? His gaze is penetrating, burning right through me with an intention I can't decipher. Like he's trying to read me, see inside me, or find some weakness I'm not willing to show .

We finish our cigarettes in silence, and it takes all my strength to avoid his stare. That doesn't do me much good when the alternative is looking into Skylar's eyes—the green edges of his irises burning into the brown around his pupils.

They're electrifying, and I don't get the sense he's feeling his usual hateful self. When I interpret his glare, there's an unsatisfied longing I know can't be meant for me.

Maybe he's as desperate to get out of here as I am.

“Okay, let's get started then.” I toss the butt of my cigarette into the receptacle

against the wall and lead the boys back inside.

Tommy is the first to go, opting to get his flash directly on the face of his forearm so he can watch and taunt me the entire time, no doubt. I'm careful to set up my station, making sure I run through the checklist in my head to avoid missing any steps that may embarrass me.

When I've confirmed that he's ready for me to start, I click the lining cartridge into my machine and hover the tip over his stencil. If I breathe deep enough and completely ignore his wandering eyes, it's pretty easy to get lost in my head and drown out my surroundings.

The needle lowers into his skin effortlessly, and I hold my breath when I pull the first line, staying as steady as possible. I make it through lining the handle of the knife, so all that's left is the long, straight lines of the cleaver blade.

I sense the sneer on his face, as if he knows this is the part I'm most nervous about. He's ready to attack and ridicule, and I'm the prime target.

Julian is standing directly behind Tommy, and I don't know why I do it, but I glance up at him. The kind smile he gives me throws off my prior perception of his character, yet it calms me, nonetheless. There's something so soothing about his presence here, way beyond the good looks. The little curve of his lips gives me the confidence I needed to push through.

To everyone's surprise—none more than mine—I manage to pull the line flawlessly, connecting the blunt edge to the tip of the blade. From then on, I only need to shade the handle, then we're done .

Tommy almost looks disappointed for the tattoo to have turned out so good. Fucking prick. I clean the wound and apply a second-skin bandage before breaking down my

station and setting it up for Julian to go next.

All in all, everything goes smoothly.

It took another hour or so to finish all their pieces, but now the boys are checking out the tattoos together in the mirror by the lobby. Tommy got the butcher knife on his forearm, Julian and Skylar got plastic vampire teeth on their biceps, and Nathan Carr got a ghost on his tricep. They're quick to pay and leave the studio, but on his way out the door, Julian tips his head to signal for me to follow them out.

Curiously, I oblige him, even if it's just an excuse to share another cigarette together so I can get lost in the ocean of his eyes and decompress from that roller coaster session.

I find him and Skylar in the smoking corner again, but it looks like the other two guys have left already. I preemptively toss him my lighter, waiting for him to return it before I light up my own cigarette.

"Thanks for being so cool back there, I really wasn't expecting anyone to get my stuff." I stare down at my feet, shuffling around awkwardly to avoid making eye contact for now.

"Why not?" Julian asks.

He's not even mocking me, but I'm not sure I can trust any civility that comes from these men, knowing who they are. Nothing has changed; Skylar is still Satan, and Julian is still his partner in crime.

So why does it feel like we're gripping two ends of an olive branch?

"It's just the way things are in the industry. Apprentices usually spend months trying

to convince their friends and family to drag themselves in for free, shoddy work.” A soft chuckle escapes my lips, and when I look up at him, he’s staring directly at my mouth. “Just...I appreciate it. Thank you.”

Julian’s eyes travel up to meet mine, and that heartwarming smile is back. Briefly, it’s interrupted by the cigarette sliding between his lips, and I study the way they purse around the stick—his cheeks hollowing slightly when he sucks in—and the way he blows out the smoke.

I monitor every movement, completely entranced by how sexy such a small action can make his mouth seem. Like I could imagine those lips doing other things with the same delicate maneuvering. Kissing. Licking. Whispering.

Fuck, I’m horny as shit.

When the smoke dissipates, it reveals a cheeky smile with perfectly white teeth. I suddenly realize I’ve been biting my own lip while watching. I hadn’t even noticed, but he sure did.

“Relax, Scarlett. It’s good work, you did fine. No groveling gratitude needed here.” Our eyes meet again, and if I had blinked, I might have missed the little wink he gave me. “Anyway, what are you doing for Halloween?”

Ah, Halloween. By far the best thing about October, because not only is it the most spooky and glorious holiday, but it’s also my birthday.

“Julian...” Skylar butts in before I can answer, apparently unapproving of the obvious invitation hovering on Julian’s tongue.

I guess he doesn’t have a hand in this olive branch—not that I’d expect him to. I never did anything to warrant the hatred he feels for me, so there’s no hope for us. He

decided a long time ago how he wanted things to stand between us.

Something is different about him though, it's just hard to put my finger on it. His beard does look a little shorter, and for a second, I get this horrible thought. In a way, he shares similar characteristics with one of the men from Eden's Deliverance—but that can't be right.

The texture and length of their hair isn't the same, and Broody's voice is much deeper and smoother than Skylar's. He also hates my guts, where Broody and Casanova have this weird fucking obsession with me.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch," I say to Skylar before turning back to Julian. "Me and Penelope are going to stay in and do horror movies or something, nothing special. "

"Well, can't do much on a Tuesday night, so Tommy and Nate's frat are hosting something the weekend before. It's gonna be this huge costume party at the Psi Rho Kappa house. You're more than welcome to come."

Psi Rho Kappa. PRK. Pricks...nice one.

"Thanks, Julian. I'll definitely think about it. Well, I should get back in there and fight off all my adoring fans. Thanks again, and just let me know if you have any issues with the healing, okay?"

I get another thought, then. If Skylar was Broody, it wouldn't be a farfetched idea that Julian could be Casanova. Their heights seem about the same, but Casanova's hair is curly and much darker. Julian's voice is also much sweeter and calming.

He nods, eyes following me as I toss out the remnants of my cigarette and go back inside, into the safety of my solitude. The truth is, Penelope and I already have plans

to go to the party at Eden for the weekend before Halloween. We received personalized invitations almost two weeks ago and have been thoroughly working out our costumes since then.

There's no way Skylar and Julian would skip their friends' frat party, but you can bet I'll see Casanova and Broody at Eden.

I don't know if this is normal for other attendees, but I've already been making plans with my new partner. The Pearl Prince, I'm calling him, since he all but swept me off my feet when I needed him the most.

We discussed it last weekend, and we're going to have a sort of date at the party. No fumbling with random strangers—despite still being unknown ourselves—just two people who enjoy fucking...making plans to do it again.

If last week was any indication, the mystery men got the hint and have decided to give up on me in turn. I didn't spot even a glance of them at the club. No hovering bodies against my back, no stares from the bar, no manhandling on the balcony. I felt the absence of them.

I still do .

A part of me misses them—or rather, the excitement of it all—and how every visit was different and full of splendor.

The Pearl Prince is far from being like Cunnilingus Casanova or Broody Brody. He does leave me satisfied, but the sex leaves me thinking about them sometimes. He doesn't hold me down, slap me around, or choke me out. He's safe. Not completely devoid of the passion I'm looking for, but the flame is muted compared to the bonfire those two stoke in my soul.

I'm just too afraid of being burned.

Scarlett

Apparently, slutty costumes and sexual exploitations don't stop at college parties, because Eden is housing almost a hundred of the most dirty, depraved, and underdressed individuals I've ever seen in one space.

I'm wearing a skimpy Red Riding Hood outfit while Penelope is dressed as some sort of provocative burlesque bunny, and even we seem seem to have the most skin coverage. The Prince didn't tell me what he would be wearing tonight, but he should definitely be able to recognize me in my red costume.

We don't waste any time making our way to the bar and ordering our drinks, scoping out the place to admire all the creative getups. My stomach flutters when I see a man with long hair out on the dance floor, but before I can get a closer look, two hands reach from behind me and cover my eyes. For a second, I start to panic but then I hear Penelope giggle.

"Guess who." The familiar voice drains the tension from my shoulders, and I lean back into the body behind me. His arms come down and wrap around my chest, hugging me closer so he can press a kiss to my cheek before he spins my bar stool around to face him.

The Prince is wearing the most ridiculously indecent nurse outfit, fitted in only a set of tiny white shorts and Crocs on his feet. A stethoscope is wrapped around the back of his neck, hanging down over his deliciously broad chest. I run my hands up and over his washboard abs, trailing further until I reach the instrument, then grab both ends and drag him closer for a kiss.

He invites me in, opening his mouth instinctively to attack my tongue in a battle that only becomes more vicious as the alcohol starts to hit me. The beer on his breath sours my taste buds, though.

I fucking hate beer. It doesn't matter how many variations I try; every single one tops the last on my list of 'most disgusting things that are falsely labeled as edible. Sauerkraut is a big contender.

I have to pull away from the kiss to avoid vomiting, but he doesn't seem to mind with the way he's looking down at me to inspect my costume. His fingers come up to fiddle with the ties of my cape while I play with his stethoscope.

"Does Little Red Riding Hood need a checkup? I know the Big Bad Wolf has been giving you trouble," he teases, but I can't help wondering if he's referring to Casanova and Broody.

I wasn't shy about telling him what Casanova did on my first night, and thankfully, he took pity on me instead of rejecting me for making him the obvious second choice. But when he scared off Broody, he marked me as his first choice—his priority—and I appreciate that more than he could understand.

"As long as my little rabbit doesn't mind us missing for a while." I glance back at Penelope, but she's got a shit-eating grin on her face. She's been very vocal about her approval of The Prince, though she keeps making jokes about me leaving the mystery men for her to handle.

They're not mine, so I shouldn't care. This isn't the real world; we aren't dating these people. Despite what arrangements I have with The Prince, there is no exclusivity. After the comment Broody made to Pen on our first night at the bar, I don't think they would even go for her, but that doesn't mean she won't try. Either way, I have to be supportive. I told her that I was done with them, so I'm sticking to it

.

With her official send-off, The Prince and I order a set of drinks to take back with us to the White Room. The butterflies are gone now, replaced with a silent calmness running through my veins alongside the alcohol that's numbing me from the inside out.

We've only had a few nights together, but I find comfort with him because I know he'll listen to my words, my body, and will give me what I need. I can't say the same for the mystery men who clearly enjoy torture more than they do pleasure.

Fuck, why am I still thinking about them?

It's not long before I'm pulled out of my thoughts. Suddenly, we're standing in the middle of the White Room without me even realizing we've entered. The Prince's hands cradle my face when he bends in for a kiss, and I'm not complaining. The man deserves credit where it's due—he knows what the fuck he's doing.

I melt into his embrace, throwing my arms around his neck and pressing our bodies so closely together, I can feel the heat radiating from his bare chest. A low grumble from his throat is the reward for my enthusiasm, and my uncontrollable smile breaks the kiss.

“You think it's funny, what you do to me?” he whispers against my mouth. “Fuck, I need you.” His hands slide into the space between my cape and backside, grabbing my ass in two giant fistfuls.

I do like working him up and doing my own bit of teasing. He's already proven that he won't get as feral as Casanova, but I can't help what I like.

Trapping his bottom lip between my teeth, I bite lightly and draw my head backwards

to yank on it. He lets out a deliciously deep moan, and the grip on my ass becomes punishing.

“I guess it’s time for my checkup then,” I purr.

Taking position in the middle of the bed, I lean back on my elbows and watch him traipse over before slowly climbing towards me on his hands and knees. As he should .

I bet Broody and Casanova would nev—

Stop. Thinking.

“I’ll start with your chest. Let’s make sure your heart is beating at the right pace for me.” He’s hovering directly over me, tugging at the ties around my neck until they loosen and the cape falls onto the bed beneath me.

His body looks cut from marble, and when he rises to his knees to put the stethoscope in his ears, the faint light in the room casts defined shadows across his abdomen and around each muscle.

The metal is ice-cold when it touches the skin of my chest, and I’m sure my heart rate elevates from the shock alone. He’s listening to me lose control, staring into my eyes as my heavy breaths fight against the diaphragm of the stethoscope.

Roleplay isn’t usually my thing, but this is hot as fuck.

The way he looks—the way he’s looking at me—with his dark, curly locks falling into his eyes, is enough to make me want to cover my face and hide. I’ll give him one thing; he may not have that ferality I loved from Casanova, but he isn’t lacking intensity.

The Prince looks at me like he wants to devour me; body and soul.

As if reading my mind, he rips my top down, folding it over the bodice I'm wearing. When he licks the path between my breasts, I arch my back and rise into him, chasing his tongue with an embarrassingly whiny yelp before the diaphragm returns to my chest.

The pleased hum he releases tells me that my heart must be fucking pounding—not that I couldn't tell, myself. I'm hanging off the edge of my seat, desperate for his touch.

I'm lost in the reverence of his affection, throwing my head back with eyes shut tight, soaking in the feel of his hands and lips on my breasts as they skate across my skin. From my collarbone to my shoulder, from my sternum to throat, he trails kisses across the expanse of my chest .

When I feel his hot breath covering my nipple, I gasp, rising to watch him suck the hardening bud with heavy-lidded eyes. He's already glaring at me through his lashes, and when our eyes meet, it only spurs him on.

His tongue dances frantically across my nipple before he sucks it into his mouth, biting hard enough that my entire body wriggles like there's electricity coursing through it.

My hips act on their own and buck up into him, seeking any kind of friction to ease the aching want between my thighs. But he doesn't stop. "Please, please, please, pl—"

He shushes me, crawling up to whisper in my ear, and I'm grateful for the show of mercy on my throbbing nipple. "I'll check on that next, don't worry. Be a good girl. Patience."

Good girl.

It's not an uncommon phrase—especially not here, I'm sure. But now there's no keeping Casanova out of my head. Not while The Prince nibbles on my earlobe, or when he licks into my ear with his hot, wet tongue, forcing goosebumps to span across my neck. Not when he kisses my throat, sucking on the skin as his lips trail a path down my chest. Not when he slides down the bed, grabbing the outside of my thighs tightly while his face dips underneath the hem of my skirt. Not when his tongue makes contact with my clit, or when his fingers enter me with a force that rattles my whole body.

No.

Nothing is keeping Casanova from creeping to the forefront of my mind and out of the deep chasm he was locked away in. I could almost imagine that it's him in The Prince's place, buried between my thighs.

But the tongue movements aren't quite the same, nor is the grip on my thighs quite as demanding or controlling.

If I tried enough, I could imagine him standing here, watching with rage as The Prince eats my pussy like a starving man. My eyes drift towards the door, fantasy fresh in mind, attempting to conjure the image of him to fuel the fire burning in my core.

It takes me a second to adjust, unsure whether I'm going crazy or if my imagination is just that fucking good. The room is dark aside from the dim light of the LED strips lining the ceiling, but if I squint hard enough, I swear I can see someone.

The door is cracked a few inches, but I barely remember entering the room so I'm not sure if The Prince left it that way. I don't know why he would, but who knows?

A small movement—a hand rising to press a finger to a pair of lips, signaling for me to keep quiet—is all I need to clear up the confusion. Someone is watching us. I can't see their face or costume through the darkness, but do I really need to?

It's him. Like a fucking manifestation of my sick fantasy, he's here watching The Prince go down on me.

I could blame it on the precision of his tongue or the strategic curl of his fingers, but truthfully, it's the desire to taunt Casanova that motivates me to put on the best show of my life. My fingers tangle into his hair, hips rising and falling as I command his mouth and close my thighs around his ears to trap him there.

But my eyes never leave the man in the doorway.

When the finger against his lips transforms into a tightened fist, I know it's working. Looking back on this night, I'll have to remind myself it was supposed to be The Prince's skilled tongue that drove me over the edge, not the prospect of finally breaking Casanova.

Oh well, whatever gets the job done. I crumble in pieces, throwing my head back with a shrill cry as the orgasm washes over my body.

The bed shifts and I hear the faint sound of a zipper, then The Prince's hands are prying my thighs apart to open me up for him. I'm so ready for it, aching to be filled with more than his fingers, but before he can even position himself between my legs, a blaring alarm echoes through the room. It doesn't take a genius to make out the source of flashing white lights and aggressive racket .

The motherfucker set off the fire alarm.

I'm halfway to dragging The Prince in by the neck for a kiss—because fuck that

asshole if he thinks he's going to stop me from getting laid—but he won't have it. He doesn't know it's a fluke. He doesn't know it's some fucking power play to hurt me.

Being the gentleman that he is, he corrects my top so my tits are covered back up, reties the cape around the base of my throat, then rushes me into the bar area.

Everyone but me is in an utter panic, running towards the exits while the staff does their best to herd them all to safety. Casanova is nowhere to be seen, otherwise he'd be getting a faceful of fist right about now.

The rage bubbling inside me is so fierce, and I have to seriously fight the urge to break the club's rule of anonymity. All I want right now is to take The Prince home and get fucked properly in a safe, private place where we can't be interrupted.

We somehow manage to survive the stampede of half-naked people as we escape down the emergency exit stairwell, the lot of us gathering outside the building—aimless and horny as shit. Staff members walk around to hand out our phones and bags, and for a brief moment, I consider giving The Prince my phone number.

A group of people to our left are talking about relocating to a nearby club, insisting that nobody has to take off their mask because it's still Halloween. It's a tempting offer, but the chilly night air is slowly killing my libido. Now, I want nothing more than to go home and curl up in bed, defeated and alone.

Penelope emerges from the crowd and rushes over to me, hand-in-hand with her own partner for the night. She begs for me to stay out with her, trying to convince me to hit up one of the campus parties instead, but I politely decline and tell her I'll just see her at home.

We're all sitting together on the curb, waiting for Ubers to take us in separate

directions, and I'm blabbing to The Prince before I even stop to think about what I'm saying .

"I'm really sorry about that." When his head tilts in confusion, I continue before he can say anything. "I was really looking forward to having a good night with you, and I'm just pissed that it had to end so early because of some freak incident."

He chuckles lightheartedly, clearly not as distraught as I am. "I still had a good time." I almost miss the grin on his face when he leans in close to my ear. "I'll just have to savor the taste of you until next time," he whispers.

Now I regret the Uber, because that springs my libido right back to life.

He grips my chin, turning me to face him, then his lips are on me without warning. I can taste myself on his tongue when he deepens the kiss, and as much as I appreciate the hot filth of the moment, I'm just thankful to have something other than sour beer on his breath.

My phone vibrates at the exact time a car horn jolts me into awareness, ripping me from the dream that is The Prince's embrace. I toss him a sympathetic look, but he gives me a soft smile and a peck on the cheek before helping me to my feet and into the cab.

The entire ride home, the tingle of our kiss lingers on my lips, and I'm starting to rethink not bringing him home with me. The car drops me off in front of our duplex, and I've only just walked through the door when I hear the TV in my room—which is pretty fucking weird, because I'm sure it wasn't on when we left the house.

'Tis the spooky season, I guess.

I don't bother turning on the bedroom light. Tossing my purse onto the bed, I sit and

remove my boots before using the glow of the TV to head straight out to the balcony for a midnight cigarette.

In the light of the moon, I look down and notice various red splotches scattered across the skin of my chest and neck. I'm not normally into hickeys, but I don't hate the sight as much as I thought I would.

Outside the bedroom, they draw judgmental attention that isn't worth the hassle or bouts of embarrassment. Inside the bedroom, I love the idea of being marked up. I might even like doing the marking myself. It feeds into our natural human instinct to claim and to own, and I never said I was better than a man.

I only picked up smoking a few years ago, and I know it's an unfortunate habit to have, but fuck...nothing beats it—not that I've found anyhow. There's something to the ritual of it that I can't shake, and I've tried. It doesn't even feel like an addiction to the nicotine; it's more that the whole process is a sort of therapy for me and my anxiety.

It's the schlick of the lighter and the first pull that ignites the tobacco and paper, creating a beautiful orange ember. It's the three pulls after the first one, watching the cherry expand as the stick burns away slowly. It's the steady inhalation, in case I ever have trouble regulating my breathing. It's the exhalation of the smoke, like a tangible representation of my stress being ejected from my body. It's the fact that I know it takes me exactly ten minutes to smoke a full cigarette, so if I'm ever in need of liminal grounding, I have a personal timer to keep myself in check.

A creak comes from what I can only assume is the floorboards of my bedroom. I glance quickly over my shoulder, but the room is still dark aside from the dim light of the TV. Stupidly, I ignore it and turn back to look out into the woods behind our house.

Another creak. Then another.

“Little Red Riding Hood is in trouble.” The dark, ominous voice makes me jump enough that I drop my cigarette when I swing to look towards the doorway. Two figures emerge from the back of my room, silhouetted against the TV behind them.

I don’t move. They don’t move.

It’s too late, and I’m too tired to deal with their bullshit right now. Putting aside the fact that they’re in my fucking house and must have followed me home from Eden, I’m more concerned that they’re continuing to ruin my night .

I just wanted a quick cigarette before I crawled into my nice, warm bed. But here I am, standing on my balcony while two maniacs loom invasively in my bedroom—blocking my only means of escape.

I get an idea, but it’s not a safe or smart one by any means.

There’s a trellis next to my balcony that runs the entire length of the house; I could climb down it, but then I’d have nowhere to go. I’m shoeless, there’s alcohol in my system, and my phone is inside. I can’t drive anywhere. I can’t call the police. Penelope isn’t home.

I’m completely alone and vulnerable here with them, but I have no other option except to stall them. “And what, are you The Big Bad Wolves?” I’m mocking them. That’s probably not smart either, but I’m still riding a buzz and my reasoning skills are clearly a bit altered.

“No.” I recognize the voice as Broody’s, so deep and harrowing that it rattles my bones to hear him talk.

“We’re worse,” Casanova drawls, stepping through the doorway enough that the shadow slides off his form, revealing his costume for the night.

He’s wearing a pitch-black robe with a long hood that covers half his face. He’s not wearing a jeweled mask from Eden, but he is indeed wearing a mask.

A red Anonymous mask with devil horns.

The same mask from my nightmares.

There’s something different about this one, though. The bottom of the mask is cut away below the cheeks and nose, brandishing an evil, teeth-baring smile. It’s repulsive, and all I want is for him to go the fuck away, but he steps closer. Broody comes up behind him, and it’s no surprise he’s wearing the same demonic garb.

I’m trapped between two psychopaths and the ledge of a balcony, with nowhere to go but down. As quickly as I can, I pivot and reach out for the trellis, vaulting over the railing once I’ve got a solid hold.

The trip down isn’t as graceful as I’d like it to be, but I manage to right myself after slipping on one of the rungs. I can’t steady my breath, but hyperventilation is the least of my worries right now .

I have to push forward; I can breathe later.

The leaves on the ground crunch beneath my bare feet when I reach the bottom, and all seems well until I look up and see one of them leaning over the railing with a knife pointed directly at me.

The other one is already halfway down the trellis.

There's no time to think. There's no time to breathe. There's no time to hesitate. They're seconds behind me, and I don't want to find out what their intentions are. With the last bit of sense I can gather, I decide that bolting into the forest is my only option.

Why is this happening? How is it possible that I'm not dreaming right now? There's no way that they could know about that mask—that exact mask—unless they read my journal. And if that's the case...

They might actually kill me.

Julian

The best part about a chase is the illusion of a head start.

Little Red Scarlett is a few feet ahead, sprinting between the trees to get us off her trail, but it won't work. The smell of her fruity perfume is so strong that it hovers in the cool air like a palpable mist. Skylar and I aren't in any rush, though. She'll get what's coming.

I have to admit, living out this fairytale fantasy is really getting me worked up. Like the wolves we're meant to be, we stalk through the woods, sniffing out her scent until I catch a glimpse of red.

I put my hand out against Sky's chest to stop him in place, then grab one of the knives from my pocket. Preparing for this little event wasn't cheap; we had to dish out a few hundred dollars to buy extra knives that won't be missed if they get left behind.

"Do you know what happens to all the bad little girls in the fairy tales?" I shout through the trees, ejecting the blade while I position my body, shoulders square to her. My wrist is locked tightly, knife handle fitted between my fingers when I raise it to my ear and aim strategically. "They get eaten by monsters."

The knife soars through the air and sticks perfectly into the tree she's hiding behind. Her scream echoes through the forest—right to my ears and down to my twitching dick. Scarlett never screamed for me at Eden, not like this...not without a gag muffling the pretty sound of it.

Let it ring, darling.

She darts from one tree to the next, disappearing further into the darkness while Skylar and I unleash a cascade of flying knives around her. If he's thrown as many as I have, there are only a few left, and I don't want to run out before we get to the good part.

Good on him for having the idea to check for a journal; I wouldn't have even considered it, but I guess getting into people's heads is a perk of his degree.

Finding a way into her apartment was difficult, but it gave me something to do on the night Skylar went to the club alone. I don't remember what the original plan was, however, discovering her journal was the jackpot we needed.

The last 30 or so entries were mostly about her nights at Eden's Deliverance, either recounting actual events from our time together or her thoughts about it in the days following.

I still lay in bed some nights and jerk off to the way she described the things I did to her and how it made her feel. I made sure to snap a photo of each entry so I can look back on them whenever I want to.

Finding out about her nightmares was the cherry on top of our delicious Scarlett sundae, but making the masks was the best part. My mind was racing the entire time, just picturing what it would be like to wear it and take advantage of her fears.

What spoiled things for me was when the journal entries stopped reporting on us and switched to The Pearl Prince instead—the shithead she's been fucking after we toy with her. Reading about it is one thing, but watching her with him tonight was enough to make me see red, both literally and figuratively.

I'll just say, the chronicles of Broody Brody and Cunnilingus Casanova were a much better read.

She can hide from us, but she can't escape her own thoughts. Half of the recent pages in her journal were about me and Sky—not only how much she thinks about us when she's alone at night or when she makes plans to visit the club, but also when she's with him. She can't deny the fact that she wants us, and her little boy toy isn't doing enough to convince her otherwise.

The thing is, I'm done with the hiding. I'm through with her pretending she hates us while we're around, only to fucking fantasize about us when she's alone. She wants us, we want her, and we're going to have her.

Without warning, I take off, sprinting after her through the woods. She can talk shit about us playing lacrosse all she wants, but she doesn't seem to have any complaints about the physique it's given me.

Reading that fucking journal only made me want her more. I'm starving for it—for her to look at me in person as pensively as she writes about me.

Skylar's footsteps are on my heel, and she must hear us too, judging by the yelp that sounds a few feet ahead. I cut to the right and book it, aiming to get ahead of her, then duck behind a tree that's directly in her path. When Scarlett breaches the side, I throw both arms around her waist and lift her off the ground, restraining her against my chest.

"No! Put me down, you psycho!" she screams, kicking her feet against my knees like a madwoman.

But I'm not letting her go. Not anymore.

“I don’t fucking think so.” Leaning into her ear, I whisper, “We know all your secrets now. We’re not going anywhere.”

The thrashing continues until Skylar grabs her ankles, locking them together as we lower her to the ground. When I pull a knife from my pocket and flick it open with emphasis, her entire body freezes. She’ll never admit it to us, but thanks to the journal, we know all about how much she wishes she had the courage to put on a Ruby mask.

Apparently, her nightmares started after one particular Eden session—the one where I pulled my knife on her after tying her up and making her suck my dick. It might just be my favorite night with Scarlett so far, especially now that I know it left such a mark on her soul .

Aside from the dreams, she’s confessed that the knife play excited her, however brief of a moment it was. I read pages upon pages of her thoughts on it—how it made her feel, and how she sometimes fantasizes about it when she makes herself come.

Now that she’s still, I kneel by her side and pull the cape away from her shoulder a bit before plunging the knife through the fabric and into the ground. Skylar follows suit, crawling up her body to stick one of his own blades through the fabric at her right shoulder. She’d either have to slip down through the hood or untie the collar to escape, but that won’t be happening.

“Get her hands,” I order, not even bothering to look at him. He positions himself behind her head so we each have a point of control.

“No! Please-please stop,” she begs, trying to rip at the strings that tie the cape around her neck, but Sky’s already wrestling her arms above her head.

He flattens her hands to the ground and plants a knee on each palm, using his own

hands to keep her elbows pinned. It must hurt, because she lets out this little whine that shoots straight to my dick.

She's not looking at me, but when I straddle her waist, pull out a new knife, and press the blade into the center of her chest, her eyes shoot down to watch.

The soft, fluffy cloth of her undershirt cuts like butter, falling away to reveal her perfect tits. Well...perfect except for these fucking hickeys marring her skin. I tap each one with the point of my blade, taking note of the way her breath seizes every time the metal makes contact.

"Why are you doing this to us, Ruby?" I quote, reciting the same words the attacker from her nightmare used. There's no way she doesn't know by now that we've read the journal, but when her eyes widen, I smirk maliciously. "Yeah, we read it all. The dreams, your fantasies..." I bring the knife up to her cheek and lightly run the blunt end of the blade down her face. "I know how turned on you get from my knife, don't deny it."

"Please. "

I hover the blade over one of the hickeys—specifically the one on her left tit. Her voice squeaks when I press the tip into the mark, watching the flesh indent without breaking skin. "I know you think about me when you're with your fucktoy. Is that what happened tonight? You were thinking of me, and when you saw me in the doorway, it made you come. Didn't it?"

"No. You disgust me," she says through clenched teeth, clearly trying to hide the pain of Skylar's weight. She's so close to crying, but she wouldn't be our girl if she wasn't resilient as fuck.

The knife digs harder into her skin until a small bit of red liquid bubbles around the

tip. “Don’t lie to me, Ruby. You’ve already done that once. How many more chances do you think I’m going to give you?” I look down at her, but her eyes are focused on the blood. She’s entranced, face completely washed over with stupefaction. “Tell me.”

She looks up then, but the awe is gone.

“You wanna know what made me come?” She asks with a nasty grin, only continuing after I give her a slow nod. “I came when I saw you, because the thought of how fucked in the head you’d get over seeing me with another man brought me so much pleasure, I couldn’t hold it in.” With the final word, her head jolts forward and a glob of spit smacks against the plastic of my mask.

It takes a second to compose myself, every nerve in my body flaming with white-hot anger, but when I hand the knife to Skylar, she knows she fucked up.

“Is that so?” I smush her breasts together in my hands, squeezing and massaging them roughly with my fingertips. “Then maybe you can think of him while I replace every single one of these marks with something better.”

I was purposefully vague, and the shock on her face makes the ambiguity worth it. She thinks I mean to cut her beautiful skin, to make her bleed from all of these pretty bruises. But I won’t...at least not on the outside.

I start with the blotch on her left tit—the one that’s bleeding—licking up the crimson blood before wrapping my lips around the spot and sucking as hard as I can. Her legs thrash wildly at the shock of my brutal assault, but when they freeze, a quick glance upward reveals why. Skylar has the blade of my knife pressed against her throat, and the tears I’ve been waiting for finally make an appearance.

I might not have gone that far, but then again, he and I work differently.

Releasing her skin with a loud plop , I sit up to admire my work. “Are you crying, darling? We’ve only just started.”

“Fuck you.”

My hand shoots up to grab her face, pinching her cheeks assertively until her lips pry open a little. “I would say don’t threaten me with a good time, but you sort of already did before you took it back. Or did you forget the little promise you made about coming to the Red Room? Open up.” Skylar backs off and there’s an awful attempt to shake her head, but I use my grip on her face to pull up an inch before slamming her skull back to the ground. “Open your fucking mouth.”

Fighting through the discomfort with a defiant glare—her eyes cutting as shallowly as my blade did her flesh—she opens her mouth and spitefully hangs her tongue out over her bottom lip.

“See? You still know how to be my good girl.” I let some saliva pool on my tongue, then lean down and spit it into her mouth. When I tap the pads of my fingers against her cheek, she swallows obediently. “Are you going to let me finish now?” She nods but the tears fall faster, so I wipe them away with my thumb before returning to my mission.

Scarlett McKenna is a bitch, but every encounter seems to break her down more and more. Soon, we’ll have her exactly the way we intend to. Then, she’ll officially be our bitch.

The fact that she already thinks about us while she’s getting fucked by some other dude is a start, but we need to break her enough that she can’t stand the thought of anyone else touching her.

We need to leave a stronger impression.

Scarlett

I am in hell.

My chest is on fire, throbbing violently as Casanova sucks on the only mark left that hasn't been transformed from a blotchy red to a vivid plum. My pussy is soaked, but I've only managed a few fruitless attempts at rubbing my thighs together for friction before Broody gets pissed off and digs the knife into my throat.

"Please, just go." I have nothing left to do but plead. I have no physical power here, only verbal, and we've seen how that plays out. "My roommate will be home any minute, and she'll call the cops if she notices I'm gone."

"You don't have to worry about that, darling. You'll be lucky if she makes it home before morning." His hand disappears behind his back, but the brush of his fingers through the fabric of my skirt makes it clear what he's doing. There's no hiding it. The second he touches my slick pussy, his shoulders twitch in surprise. "Why are you such a little liar? Drop this fucking douchebag you're with, it's not a dating pool. Come back to us. Let us take care of you."

"All you want to do is cut me up. I don't want to play your fucking games." The blade bites into my throat, but I don't care. I'm fucking livid.

Do I want to go to the Red Room and let him ravish me ?

Sure.

Will I?

No.

The fucker keeps threatening and manipulating me. I have half a mind to tie him down, edge him out, take what the fuck I want from him , and then leave him there.

That's actually not a bad idea, if I could pull it off. Not that he would let me. I doubt he's ever let a woman take control in the bedroom, and that's fine. Maybe it's not his thing, but what he's been doing isn't really my thing either.

Except, maybe it is and I just don't want to admit it.

Despite hating their fucking guts, there's no escaping the absolute rush of excitement I got from being chased. And the knives? They're a little hot. Like, it's a crazy kind of hot, sure—the kind you read about in romance novels with stalker tropes.

There's something to be said about the thrill of using a weapon like that in an intimate setting, the trust that has to go into allowing your partner to play with your safety. I don't trust them, but the way he knows how to instill the fear of pain only to replace it with pleasure, is pure genius. He knows how my body works.

In some ways, even better than I do.

Casanova removes his hand from my skirt and bends to hover over my face, pressing his wet fingers against my lips. I don't know what happened to my composure, but when he tries to push them into my mouth, I let him.

“Let us in, Ruby. You promised,” he lures.

I try to speak, but his fingers press against my tongue and secure it to the bottom of

my mouth. Broody pulls the knife away as Casanova's thumb closes around the underside of my chin, using the new grip to turn my head so he can reach my ear.

"Do you want to hear that it worked?" he asks. "That seeing him eat your pussy, when it should have been me, infuriated me so much I wanted to hurt you? To steal you?"

It must be the cool air that's making my nipples harden, definitely not the arousal at his words or the way his hot breath makes me shiver. It's definitely not because of the way my flesh erupts in goosebumps when his tongue peeks out to run along the shell of my ear, or the cocky tilt of his head when he sees my body's reaction to him. It's most definitely not because he's fucking his fingers into my mouth, pushing at the barrier of my throat until I gag.

After a few thrusts, he pulls his fingers out and reaches back down to my pussy so I can talk again—well, as best as I can after the initial shock of them stretching me open.

"I don't...I don't want anything from y—" When his fingers curl up into my G-spot, I throw my head back with a gasp. I hate him for knowing exactly what I need.

"Let me taste."

Opening my eyes to stare straight up at Broody, I wonder if I heard him correctly. He's never expressed any real interest in me aside from my first night at Eden, which I'm sure was just a fluke to get me warmed up for his friend. But he looks hypnotized when he leans forward—knees sinking heavier into my palms—as he waits for Casanova to oblige.

To my surprise, he does, removing his fingers and plunging them into Broody's open mouth. He licks them clean, sucking enthusiastically until Casanova pulls them away.

Fuck me. Maybe I really am in a stalker novel.

The porno doesn't stop there. Broody aggressively grabs him around the back of the neck and rips him forward until they crash together in a kiss so fucking hot, I could come just from the sight of it. Their tongues fight against each other, like they're seeing who can come out victorious with the flavor of me stuck to their taste buds .

From my vantage, I have the clearest view of all the action, and I'll need to smack myself later for the whimper that escapes my throat. I don't know which of the three of us are horniest right now, but my body doesn't seem to care.

It doesn't matter that I hate them or even that I just had an orgasm less than two hours ago. In this moment, I want them.

I shuffle my limbs to get their attention, and they finally break away from one another to look down at me. "I think our girl wants another taste," Casanova says, sticking his fingers back into my pussy to scoop up some of the wetness before feeding it to Broody. "Give her what she wants."

He's hesitant to reposition himself but ultimately resigns, inching backwards to take his knees off my hands. I could take advantage of my newfound freedom. I could rip out chunks of his long hair. I could pull off his mask and ruin his anonymity. Or I could sit here and be good, feeding into their sick fantasy.

But is it theirs, or mine?

Broody kneels in close, lining himself up with my lips—despite the fact that we're facing opposite directions—and kisses me. It's soft at first, but when his tongue pokes at the crease in my lips, I open my mouth and take him in. The kiss becomes deep and hungry, similar to his battle with Casanova, except this feels like a conversation.

Like he's trying to tell me something.

Casanova abuses my lack of vision and shoves his fingers inside of me unexpectedly, but when I let out an involuntary gasp, Broody grabs my throat with his free hand. His fingers curl around the entirety of my neck and cut off my air supply until I'm not only fighting his tongue, but also struggling to breathe. It's obvious he gets off on it, because the feral grumble vibrating against my lips is something to write about.

A moment later, Casanova interrupts and forces Broody to pull away, but I'm not sure if it's out of jealousy or if they're in a hurry to leave.

"We've got something to talk about. Obviously, you aren't keeping your promise about coming to the Red Room, so we have another proposition for you." I eye him curiously, but Broody hasn't removed his hand from my neck, so I have no way of responding. "Keep your plaything for now, have your fun, stay as a Pearl if you really want to. But Eden is hosting a New Year's Eve party in the Rainbow Room, and we'd like for you to join us."

With a furrowed brow, I try to decline, but Broody crushes my windpipe until I'm panicking for air.

"We know you want this," Broody spits. "We've read your journal, so we know exactly how much. Stop fighting it. We'll be there, but if you're not...we're moving on. No more sessions at Eden, no anything. You can go back to being a good little Pearl and fuck around with some vanilla dick. Or better yet, maybe we'll make sure you're completely cut off—"

"Enough!" Casanova snaps. He stands up, removing the knives that are pinning my cape to the ground. "Think about it, that's all I ask." He brushes his knuckles softly across my cheek, then turns to walk back through the woods.

“Don’t be stupid. You’re already making this harder than it needs to be.” In direct contrast to Cas’s goodbye, Broody smacks my cheek with a harsh snap before leaving.

I shouldn’t be surprised; it’s become our routine. I’m here, half-naked and alone, horny and unsatisfied. They’re walking away, triumphant and fulfilled, already planning their next torture session.

Unfortunately, I won’t be humoring them.

Skylar

I guess that Post-it did come in handy. Who'd have thought?

Julian and I are trudging through the woods, trying to navigate the way back to my car. I'm fuming, and if I don't put my fist through something soon, I'm going to lose it. I can still taste her on my tongue, and it's drowning out all of my thoughts and senses.

"What the fuck do you mean, 'just think about it'?" I bark out.

"Can you not wait five fucking minutes until we get to the car? Shut your fucking mouth," he hisses, not willing to indulge my antagonization.

Whatever.

The second our doors slam shut and I get the car in gear, I punch his shoulder. Hard. To hell with not hitting him. He deserves it. "What are you doing, fucker? We're supposed to be making her think she has no choice, not lay out all the options for her."

"You don't get it. You haven't been in those rooms with her—" he cuts himself off, hands raising in surrender when I hold up my fist again, ready to strike. "I just mean...she likes to feel a little control, like she has some power and isn't completely trapped in a cage. Your temper is going to shut her out for good. Get a fucking grip, dude. Seriously, what is your problem with her? You obsess over her, then you wanna kill her, then I watch you suck her face for 60 seconds. Now you hate her

again.”

He thinks I don’t get him, but he’ll never truly get me. Nobody—not even me on most days—will ever understand the push and pull I feel for this girl. The why of it all.

Yeah, I’m attracted to her, and I think about her every time I’m with a woman or even when I’m by myself. She’s in my head like a fucking plastic straw up a turtle’s nose—she shouldn’t be there, but the world is so fucked up that she just is , and there’s no getting her out.

“Does it have anything to do with your d—”

“Don’t fucking talk about my dad,” I snap, slamming on the brakes. “Stop trying to psychoanalyze me, just drop it. It is what it is, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

How did I know he’d try to pull some bullshit like that? As if I can’t just want to torture the same girl for a year because I feel like it. There’s got to be some underlying reason behind it.

I pull up “lipstick” by jordn day, and crank the volume to snuff out the sound of his annoying, patronizing voice as we drive home. Of course, it just reminds me of her.

Everything does.

She’s a fucking parasite, digging her way into my brain so she can suck out everything I am...until she’s the only thing left.

And now that I think about it, fuck him up the ass for having the balls to mention my father. I haven’t thought about that asshole in almost eight years; not since he walked out on us when Julian and I found proof of him cheating with that red-headed skank.

When my mom stopped crying over him, I was free to let it go.

It's only a -minute drive to the other side of campus, but the air inside the car has become stale with our sour moods. When we finally make it home, we separate in silence .

I need to wash off the scent of her perfume before it drives me fucking crazy, and he probably needs to go jerk off to the memory of his bruises covering her chest.

Hell, maybe I do too.

The hot steam of the shower may wash away her essence, but it also flushes out any restraint I had left to push her into the back of my mind.

When I close my eyes, all I can see is her laid out on the ground in front of me, the feel of her combative arms trapped beneath me, and the sight of her frantic pulse beating against the blade of my knife. I can smell the remnants of her perfume, taste her tangy arousal on Julian's fingers, and hear the sound she made when I kissed him.

I wasn't expecting her to get so worked up about it, and if I knew how much it would have turned her on, I'd have done it sooner.

We aren't hoity-toity dude-bros like everyone wants to think.

We may keep our sexual exploits private—for the most part—but I've never seen a problem with getting down with a guy, especially when a chick's in on it too. It's a little party trick we like to do at Eden's Deliverance when we want to get a girl back with one of us, or something we explore on Rainbow Nights when there's a whole crowd of people to get nasty with.

God, the way she went stone-still when he pulled the knife on her...

He's gotten to see her fettered and afraid more than once now, and I might just hate him for it. No matter what he says, that prick strong-handed me into letting him in on this. I know how he plays his games. He buttered me up—the way he's supposed to be doing with her—and made me think I couldn't get her without his help.

I didn't think that could be true until I saw the way her body reacted to him. She was only good for me because I was threatening her life...but him?

Him sucking on her chest turned her on so much, she tried getting off to it. I put that shit to a stop when I noticed her thighs rubbing together, because tonight wasn't about her getting some kind of reward. It was a punishment .

“Your temper is going to shut her out for good.”

I don't know how else to be with her, though. He said she's a brat in the sack, but I can't handle that like he can. When she gets mouthy, I see red. Not even the red of her hair or her clothing, but genuine red-hot rage that makes me spiral. It sparks visions of someone else's red hair—hair that's not attached to her pretty face—and my whole body shakes with an anger I need to expel.

Scarlett just happens to be the recipient.

I don't owe Julian an explanation for my internal cocktail of lustful hatred. It's mine to feel, mine to own, and mine to succumb to if I want.

But there was a kiss...a moment when it was just me and her together.

Or it would have been, if he wasn't finger-fucking her like a maniac, making her cry in a way that wasn't meant for me. To be honest, that's why I choked her, not just to shut her up or take control.

She moaned for him, and I lost my cool.

She's not going to come to the Rainbow Room. Not after he's made her believe she has the option not to. He may think he knows her, but at the end of the day, she's just like any girl. She'll do something—or not do it—simply to spite you. Just to make you squirm before you can do it to her instead.

She's not going to come to the Rainbow Room.

Not unless I make her.

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Scarlett

“Fuck, Scarlett. That’s some crazy hot shit you’re dealing with. Seriously, I will take them off your hands if you need me to.”

Penelope and I are smoking on my balcony, recounting Saturday’s slew of horrific events. I admitted that the fiasco with the fire alarm was just a ploy to get me away from The Prince, but I couldn’t bring myself to confess what happened when I made it home. I had to make up some story about them cornering me in the club to demand I go to the New Year’s party.

I scoff, taking another drag of my cigarette. “Of course it’s fucking hot, but that’s beside the point. Are you listening to yourself? You’re as crazy as they are. They have no boundaries, no limits.”

“That is my point, I’ve never been more jealous than I am right now. You have men committing crimes in your honor, just to sabotage their competition. It’s hot. So...” She taps her thigh awkwardly. “Do you wanna go? ‘Cause I was thinking about it myself, but I don’t have as much fun going when you’re not with me.”

I’d be stupid not to see their visit for the threat it was meant to be. They know where I live, where I sleep, and they have access to me no matter where I am .

I could toy with them; I could make them come to me and teach them I don’t play by their rules—especially if they’re going to break all the ones we supposedly agree to at Eden. But I’d be naive to think it would end in anything considered a win on my part.

I only have two choices: go to this party and let them finally have me, or lose them forever to somebody else.

What's not really making sense to me is where Broody fits into this dynamic. Sure, he tried to hit on me that first night, but after Penelope scared him off, I thought that would be the end of it until I saw him sitting with Casanova at the bar.

Are they partners themselves? There's no way that kiss in the woods was their first. Not with the chemistry they had.

I find myself imagining what it might be like to pull on Broody's long hair. Would I be in control then? I already saw how Casanova lost it when I sucked his dick with enthusiasm rather than letting him force it into me.

I bet they each have their own little weaknesses—something that would have them bending at the knee for me instead.

“So, what do you think? Should we go?” Penelope repeats.

None of this makes my decision any clearer. If anything, I'm more confused. “I don't know, Pen, but I promise I'll let you know when I do. Okay?” I don't mean to snap at her, but I need time to think on it.

She's pouty about my answer, to say the least, but lets it go for now.

It is my birthday, after all.

I only have two classes on Tuesdays—painting and sculpture—but that doesn't stop the day from dragging. Three years of pottery has done nothing for me. Aside from throwing on the wheel, I'm atrocious at building anything of significance when it comes to ceramic work.

My degree's concentration is in illustration since it'll help me the most with tattooing, but sculpture is the only medium I can't seem to find inspiration in.

By the time I get home, I'm exhausted. I'm tired of this day. I'm tired of my thoughts. I'm tired of impossible choices. I'm tired of everything.

Normally, I would be excited to walk into the apartment and find that Penelope surprised me with a visit from my dad. But today, I'm just not here for it.

I guess it's a good thing that I'm fantastic at masking.

We spend a few hours together catching up on recent news, ordering takeout for dinner, watching a horror movie, and finishing the night with a cake Dad brought. It's a sweet gesture, but when it's time for him to leave, I'm more relieved than anything else.

The day has come full circle; I'm sitting on the balcony with a pack of Marlboros, chain-smoking until my nerves dissipate. The longer I look, the more blurred the colors become when I trace my finger along the green line separating the black top from the white bottom.

Ding.

Thoughtlessly, I reach for my phone, instantly dropping it when I read the notification. It bounces off the stone floor and lands a few inches away but I scramble to get it, not even bothering to check for cracks.

Well, what in the actual fuck am I supposed to do now? Block them? I probably should, but it doesn't really fit our habit of dramatic antagonization.

Probably, yeah. I just figured they followed me home from Eden.

I don't know why I feel possessed to instigate when he doesn't answer right away, but I do.

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

If they broke into my house and read my journal, I can easily assume they've snooped through my other personal belongings. If they had access to my phone, they would know my real name, they'd have seen pictures of my dad and Penelope, and they probably know all about school and my apprenticeship.

Unless they're stupid enough to threaten the people I love, I doubt they know anything that would actually bother me.

I light up another cigarette while waiting for his reply, but it doesn't come. I don't know why I care, anyway. I shouldn't even be entertaining his delusion because it's only feeding into my own—the idea that they actually want something with me and wouldn't throw me away the second they get it. I don't know what to make of the way they keep pursuing me, but I do know it's not healthy.

Crunch.

A twig snaps, or maybe it's dry leaves, but it means something is moving out in the woods. I could chalk it up to the nocturnal animals of the forest, but I know better.

A figure emerges from behind a tree, wearing a sweatshirt and the same Anonymous mask from Halloween. The reddish tint of his long, flowing hair shines in the moonlight from beneath the hood, and suddenly it all makes sense.

This is fucking ridiculous.

Here we are, watching one another text from across the yard like a couple of

teenagers who are too shy to actually talk. It's another game. He's daring me to push him enough to come up here, and I'm daring him to do his worst.

I'd be stupid to think the little bit of blood they drew on Saturday was enough to appease them, especially with the way Casanova slurped it up like a fucking vampire. But I also think there's a reason they won't go to the full extent of what must be their Red Room shenanigans.

They want me to want it. They're testing me, and I'm failing .

I don't like pain. Tattoos are an exception I make work because of my lifestyle and aesthetic, but I don't get them because I like the feeling. If I could kill my pain receptors, I would. Pain absolutely does not make me feel alive.

But Casanova cutting me? That triggered some fucked up part of my brain, and I barely felt it at all. I'm not sure if it was the adrenaline of the chase, being held down by Broody, or something else. I just know it was fucking hot.

And I'm still horny as shit.

The second he reads my text, his whole body jolts into action as he makes a break for the trellis. I'll admit, the sight of him sprinting towards me is enough to make my skin crawl, but if I want him really wound up, I've got to push more.

With less-than-perfect aim, I chuck my lit cigarette down at him when he starts climbing, getting a little laugh out of the way he frantically swipes at the burning embers on his shoulder.

I only just breach the doorway of my bedroom when he catches up to me, tugging my hair with one hand while the other covers my mouth to stifle an involuntary yelp. The tension eases on my scalp, but then there's the familiar flick of his knife before his

arm comes around the front of my body, pulling me closer.

“I think you have things skewed, Ruby. You can bet your ass I’m worse than him. I don’t need to learn a goddamn thing. In fact, I think you do,” he says. “Who knows what vanilla bullshit your little Prince has been showing you. Maybe it’s time you took a step into our world.”

It’s hard to think about his words when his hot breath is blowing directly into my ear. I don’t know if it’s just an erogenous thing, but I spiral into a frenzy whenever their mouths come within an inch of my ears.

The hairs on my body stand at a point—my skin chilled and sensitive to the touch—and I’m helpless to the way my head leans back against his shoulder.

Broody takes a few steps, dragging me further onto the balcony until I feel the thud of his back hitting the railing. The small whimper I release into his hand from the impact makes him tighten his grip for a second, then he’s spinning me around. My mouth is free, my hands are free, I can do whatever I want.

But I just want to taste him again.

He must sense it, because when I reach my hands up to grip his hair and pull him in for a kiss, he’s already surging forward to meet me in the middle. With one hand curled around the nape of his neck and the other tangled in the hair against his scalp, I claw my way in, shoving my tongue further into his mouth until we’re one being.

His hands don’t stay in one place for too long; they’re all over my body—running from my ass up the expanse of my back, in my hair, and on my waist. They finally land on my face in that tender way you always see people kiss in the movies, his thumbs rubbing my cheek while his fingers curl around the sides of my neck.

Where the fuck did this come from?

He's kissing me with passion and reverence, not hatred and fire. I don't know if I like it. I need him to be anything but this . I do the only thing I can think to in the moment. Biting his lip and pulling his hair at the same time, I do my best to physically rip him apart.

That does it .

He takes his hands off my face and holds me by the waist, lifting me off the ground before I can protest. My first instinct is to kick, but when my ass hits the railing and I start propelling myself backwards over the ledge, I freeze.

“What are you doing?!” My flailing hands find purchase in the fabric of his sweatshirt, but it isn't until I feel his arms wrap around my back that I actually relax.

“Don't you trust me, Ruby?” He's being facetious, and I don't appreciate it very much. Of course I don't trust him. “I told you, I'm going to teach you what it's like to live in our world for a minute.”

The railing isn't wide enough for my fat ass to sit on without toppling over, and I don't have anything to hold on to except for him. I'm only wearing a T-shirt and panties, so the icy wind bites at my skin with every passing breeze.

“I saw enough the other night. Please, I just want to get down. I'll do whatever you want!” I can't control the panic in my voice or the tears that well in my eyes. If he drops me, I could break my goddamn neck.

I don't trust either of them—not with my body or my life.

“This is what I want, aren't you listening?” Despite the condescending tone of his

voice, his hands travel underneath my shirt and run along the skin of my back so sweetly, I almost want to give in. Almost. “This is what it means to come to the Red Room. Giving your life to someone else, letting them hold it in their hands, to play with it—”

“To take it?” I ask contemptuously.

He cocks his head, hands freezing in place at the same time. “Why would we do that?” He seems genuinely curious, like I’m the one who’s crazy between the three of us.

“Why wouldn’t you? All you guys have done is torture me, and you won’t stop unless I go there. I can only imagine my life ends where my self-respect does.”

He smiles at the comment, grinning in a way that makes me want to either slap or kiss it off his face. “We’re just boys on a playground, Ruby. We want you, so we torture you. We only want you to want us back...and you do, even when you hate us. So, what’s the problem?”

“That’s juvenile. You’re a bunch of fucking children if you really think that w—”

I scream when he lets me tilt backwards, but then his hands are on me again—one pressed to my mouth and the other hugging my waist.

“Watch it,” he warns, “I’m just saying. You want us, we want you. You like being tied up. You like being hit. You even like it when he spits on you.”

If my senses weren’t completely heightened, I might have missed the way his fingers twitched at the last statement.

Is he jealous of Casanova?

He continues, “I think you’re afraid of how much you’d enjoy it if you gave in. We aren’t blind, I saw the look on your face when he cut you. There’s nothing wrong with this lifestyle. It’s not for everybody, but I think we all know it is for you. So, we’re going to try something. But I’m warning you, if you scream, I will drop you.”

His hand leaves my mouth, traveling down to grab a fistful of fabric in the center of my chest. I don’t have time to register what he’s doing until he leans forward with his arm extended, using his grip on my shirt to dangle me over the edge of the railing.

“Wait, wait!” Grabbing his wrist with both hands, I try my damndest to claw up his arm so I don’t fall. “Please stop, please.” I’m trying not to scream but the tears are flooding my cheeks and I’m on the verge of a full-blown panic attack. He has me floating in midair, suspended at a 45-degree angle with nothing to keep me from plummeting to my death.

Broody doesn’t say a word. He wedges himself in between my thighs, bringing the arm that was supporting my waist down to finger at the cloth of my underwear. Another wave of terror washes over me when I feel his fingers dip beneath it to run along my pussy .

There is no way. No way in hell this is his idea of pleasure, for himself or me. If he makes one mistake, I’m dead. If I alert anyone, I’m dead. If I squirm too hard, I’m dead. There is no way I get to walk out of this alive.

If he doesn’t want to stop until I orgasm, we’re going to be here all night. Nobody has ever been able to make me come from just their fingers—only I have. Even Casanova has only brought me there with his tongue, whether his fingers were involved or not.

“Please, I swear I’ll do anything else, but I can’t—oh. Oh, fuck...”

Okay, maybe I was wrong.

Somewhere in the middle of my plea, Broody stuck two fingers in my pussy, and is now working some sort of magic on my clit with his thumb. As much as I wish he would move the fingers inside, he's keeping a nice, steady pressure and moving gracefully over my clit in small, circular motions.

I'm not saying I trust him, but the fear of falling has gotten muddled somewhere between the ecstasy of his fingers and the satisfying rumble humming from his throat.

Without the threat of death at the forefront of my mind, it just comes natural to lay my head back and moan along with him, drowning in the euphoria of it all.

I wrap my calves around his hips and ride his fingers until the electricity creeps its way to the top of my spinal cord, erupting in a display of fireworks that shoot from my mouth in the form of a silent cry. My limbs turn from stone to jelly, and if I fell right now, I think I would die happy.

Unfortunately, he rips me forward instead, catching me around the waist when I fall from the railing. I don't have to say anything—not that I could, anyway—he just scoops up my immovable body from behind the knees, cradling me in his arms while I lie here lifelessly.

I don't know if it's an adrenaline crash, but I can barely keep my eyes open. As he carries me to the bed, I unintentionally slip further into unconsciousness. The last thing I remember before I fall asleep is my heavy blanket being laid over my body, then an even heavier kiss being pressed against my temple .

“Happy Birthday, Scarlett.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 pm

Scarlett

It's been three weeks.

Three weeks since Broody came to my balcony. Three weeks that I've been going to Eden with The Prince to 'have my fun' as Casanova said to. Three weeks that I've had to fake orgasms, because it's no longer within my power to keep those men out of my mind. The Prince isn't enough anymore.

I think they know it, too.

Like clockwork, I'd found them sitting at the bar every night, watching me emerge from the White Room—studying my overwound body. They studied the way I walked with stiff legs instead of floating happily. They laughed at the way my forehead sweated in frustration instead of overstimulation. They celebrated the way I slammed down drinks with anger rather than sipping on them in a dreamy afterglow.

They're in my head. All. The. Time.

Unfortunately for him, The Prince is a straight up golden retriever and hasn't seemed to notice anything amiss. He still followed me around, did his very best in the bedroom, and left happy. He doesn't know I'm stuck in a nightmare—one where my satisfaction is being held prisoner by two psychopathic men that are asking me to write a check I can't cash .

Maybe I like the chase. Maybe I like the fight. Maybe I meant what I said...that I think my life will be over if I step into that room with them.

I've thought about it, time and time again. I've written about it, paragraph after paragraph of thoughts on a page, arguing with myself over the pros and cons of becoming a Ruby.

The name sounded so sweet on Broody's lips, like maybe it was actually meant for me. No matter how much I try to convince myself it's what I want to do, I can't bring myself to commit to it.

What if I can only handle what they've done to me so far because it's just a fraction of the real thing? I doubt Casanova only wants to poke me with his knife. If I gave my body to him, he'd probably slice it to shreds. Broody clearly enjoys when I struggle to breathe, so what's to stop him from strangling me completely?

Regardless of how positively I've reacted to the adrenaline rushes lately, I'm not a junkie for it. I'm not in this to fear for my life. I just wanted a damn orgasm.

How has it turned into this?

"Use Me" by PVRIS and 070 Shake plays through the car stereo, and much to my dismay, Penelope turns up the volume. We're traveling back to our hometown for Thanksgiving, but I haven't been an attentive passenger. The song lyrics sink into my brain, making me think about the boys more than I already was before, if that's even possible.

I didn't tell her about Broody's visit on my birthday. I don't want him to be right about my fear of her stealing them away from me, but I still can't bring myself to tell her everything.

Can she really steal them when they aren't mine? And if they want me so badly...why would they ever have her?

We arrive at my dad's house in one piece, pulling into the driveway just in time for dinner. Skylar's Audi is parked outside, regrettably looking brand-spanking-new as if I never even hit it.

Pen already agreed to stay for dinner, but she has no idea what she's about to walk into. I warned her that things will probably be weird and hostile, but it's hard to convey exactly what that means. I've only told her about Skylar in passing, so she doesn't get the full picture.

We make it inside just as the food is being passed around. Right on cue, Satan starts his shit. "Look who finally decided to show up."

Our parents might pass it off as a harmless joke, but all this douchebag wants to do is get under my skin. I am too wound up and horny to deal with his bullshit right now.

My entire body aches. My skin is itchy and irritated. I feel like I'm burning from the inside out, and I just know I'm probably going to have to hump a pillow to get any sleep tonight.

"My apologies," I spit. "Some of us have jobs and priorities. You know, something to be proud about. What do you have, Skylar?" I start in on him, but Dad gives me a stern look.

Letting it go for now, I sit down and help myself to some food.

Penelope leans over to whisper in my ear, "Uh, what's the situation there? Why is he looking at you like he wants to rip your clothes off?"

"Murder me, is more like it. He's a fucking prick, just ignore him," I advise, but can't seem to follow through myself. He is looking at me like he wants to do something to me, I'm just not sure what.

Fuck, he really does look like Broody from a distance.

His beard is more pointed, scragglier, and even with his hair pulled into a bun, there's no waves in it like Broody has. But if I squint my eyes enough I can almost imagine it. The resemblance is so eerie, I'm actually starting to question everything I think I know.

What if they are the same man?

It's hard to tell if my mind is playing tricks on me—making me see them everywhere I go—or if I'm just coming to terms with some reality I've been refusing to accept.

I pull out my phone and type a quick message, then wait. My eyes are glued to Satan's smartwatch, but to my relief, it never lights up. When I look up at his face, he's already watching me with those fiery eyes. He really is good-looking, if you're into whatever it is that makes him an evil asshole.

Ding.

"It's rude to be on your phone at dinner, Red. Especially after getting here so late," Skylar comments snarkily.

"Sky, leave her alone, it could be something important. I swear, you two bicker like siblings fighting over a toy," Gretchen reprimands, though there's no actual sternness behind her delivery.

Satan and I share a look when she compares us to siblings, neither of us very fond of the implication.

We are not siblings, and never will be.

He doesn't break eye contact with me until the meal is over and it's time for me to walk Penelope out. We say our goodbyes and plan what time she'll pick me up on Sunday to go back to campus, but I already wish we could leave now. At the very least, I wish I could stay with her instead of here in Satan's lair.

Dad and Gretchen head to bed soon after, intent on waking up early for Thanksgiving dinner prep, so I go up to my room for a shower.

The hot water doesn't do much to clear my head or relax my muscles; I'm still reeling from Skylar's comments at dinner and the way he kept staring at me.

Penelope's remark from earlier comes to mind, and I wonder if it's possible there's any truth to it. The last time we were here for dinner, he did make a sly joke about me being a 'giver,' then did that thing with his thumb and lip—some kind of innuendo.

I thought it was just him being an asshole as usual, but maybe there was something else to it .

I don't want to seem conceited and come on to him like a freak, but if there's any validity to Pen's theory, I could use it to my advantage. I seriously need to get off right now, and when I looked at him tonight, it just reminded me of Broody on my birthday.

I cannot stop thinking about that night, or the fact it might have been the best orgasm I've ever had—apparently, the orgasm to end all orgasms, if the past three weeks have been any indication.

I toss on an old T-shirt that's long enough to be a nightgown, then lay on my bed and finally allow myself a deep breath. I will say, it's comforting to be in my old room again. Dad left it exactly how it was before I went to live on campus, so it's always a safe place for me to call home when I need it.

I thought so, anyway—until I spy the Post-it note stuck to the mirror of my dresser.

See you on New Year's Eve.

That's it. This is pushing it way too far. If it's not Skylar, then how would they know where my dad lives? How would they know I'm here right now and not on campus still?

I find him on the back deck, smoking a cigarette by himself.

"Are you fucking with me?" I shout, shoving him against the wall he's leaning on. Now that I know he smokes, it wasn't too hard to find him.

"What the fuck are you talking about, you crazy bitch? Get out of my face."

Shoving his chest again, I go all in, standing as close as I can manage without fear of retaliation. "I'm talking about the note in my room. I'm talking about Eden. Don't act stupid—"

Ding.

I step back to check my phone, only feeling more confused when I see the message.

"Seriously?" Skylar's booming admonition forces me to look up from the screen. His arms are spread wide, taking an aggressive stance against me. "You're the one who came out here and attacked me. Now you have more important things?"

Fair. I did attack him. "I just thought—"

"Thought what? What is your fucking issue?"

I won't apologize, not when he never has for the way he talks to me. "Nothing. Nevermind, forget it." When I spin on my heel to go back in, I'm yanked back painfully by the wrist. He's holding me tightly enough to cut off my circulation. "Let go of me, asshole!"

He gives a sharp tug that sends me tripping forward, but his other arm catches me around the waist. Using the momentum of my fall, he spins me around until my back hits the same wall he was just standing against.

Both his hands are on me, the pain in my wrist so extreme, I'm starting to overheat from the intense need to get away.

The light touch of his hand on my waist is uncomfortable, far too gentle for the man in front of me. The smell of his cologne—laced with hints of bourbon and oak—is so heavy, it almost makes me choke.

He's so close... too close .

"If you're accusing me of something," he starts, using his hold on my waist to shove me forcefully into the wall, "then I deserve to know what you think I did."

His eyes radiate with their usual ire, but I can't seem to care when there's no room for me to breathe. I'm trapped between him and this wall with nobody around to stop him, and all I can do is stare. I watch his mouth while he talks, wondering if this is the first time I've ever stopped to notice how soft his lips look against the rough beard surrounding them.

I could do it. I could kiss him if he let me .

What would Broody think of that? He already let on that he's a jealous man, even of his own friend. Is he still here watching me, or did he just leave the note and go back

to whatever hole those men crawl from?

It takes the sharp pinch of Skylar's hand around my wrist to snap me out of it, and I realize he's still waiting for an answer—I just don't have one to give him. It was already bad enough that I spewed half my secrets in the accusation alone; I can't go and explain them now.

"I made a mistake, just drop it. Somebody fucked with my room, and I thought it might have been you. Don't pretend like it's not something you would do, Satan."

"Satan?" He laughs at the name. "What, are you 12 years old?"

I flash him a mocking grin. "Well, you call me Red. I had to come up with a fitting nickname for you too."

I've become so numb that I don't even realize he let go of my wrist until his hand comes up to fuss with a lock of my hair, twirling it playfully around his fingers.

"Red is hardly an insult. You're the personification of the color, it's just what you are. You radiate it." The hand floats closer to my face, fingers curling under my chin while his thumb swipes over my lips. "Red everything...everywhere."

Okay.

Maybe Penelope was right.

His featherlight touch isn't sending the same message as his penetrating gaze, though. I don't actually know what he wants. His fingers are searching for the warmth of my skin, but his eyes seem like they're hunting—waiting for me to make a move so he can tear and devour.

“And you’re just a devil.” His eyebrow shoots up in amusement, but I can’t bear to look in his eyes anymore and subject myself to his ridicule. I find his lips again, watching the way his tongue peeks out to wash away the dryness. The subtle movement is hypnotizing. “You’re mean,” I say. “You’re nasty for no reason, always ready to pick on me and anyone else you feel like hurting. It’s evil. You’re evil.”

His hand travels along my jawline and down the column of my throat, the sensation of his fingertips surprising me as they curl around the side of my neck. He just holds them there, like feeling my pulse beneath his touch is enough, without the need to squeeze. Planting his thumb on the bottom of my chin, he tips my head back so I’m forced to watch him peer at me from behind his long, beautiful lashes.

“Don’t act like you don’t love it—like you don’t live for going toe to toe with me.” His voice is almost a whisper, so low and drawled that I have to strain to hear him. For a second, I think he might kiss me when he pitches forward. Instead, he ducks down to run the tip of his nose along my jawline, teasing the skin from my chin to ear. “Just admit it, you like the fight.”

Fuck. He’s doing that thing with my ear that makes me crumble. With every word and exhale, the hot air of his breath blows directly into my canal, making me shiver in a way I can’t hide.

Not with the way he’s touching me. Not with how close he is.

“So what if I do? Why do you care?” I’m sure I could sound more intimidating if my knees weren’t ready to fold, if my pussy wasn’t aching for any kind of attention, and if I wasn’t sighing every time the touch of his nose tickles my sensitive skin.

He lets out a little hum when his head moves, bringing his nose to my cheek, then to my chin and lips. His thumb wraps around the other side of my throat and he gives a little squeeze, keeping me still while he electrifies the skin of my face.

It's too much.

"Maybe I don't. Maybe I'm just mean and want to make you look weak," he taunts. "I can feel you trembling. I bet you're fucking soaked right now. Maybe, the second you let yourself admit it...you can actually do something about it," he whispers directly against my mouth, his lips brushing over mine .

I don't want him. I hate him more than I hate Casanova and Broody, but I need sex. They won't give it to me, and they've gotten in my head enough that I can't even enjoy my time with The Prince. I'm dying for something new—for somebody to satisfy me the way I deserve.

Skylar's here. He's touching me. He's an able body.

I'll take what I can get.

"Fuck it," I surrender, surging forward to meet his hovering lips.

He keeps me restrained though, holding me against the wall by my throat so I can't move. "Say it," he insists.

Of course, it was too good to be true. "Seriously?" He was fucking with me like he always does, just toying with my obvious desperation so I'll look like an idiot.

"'Fuck it' doesn't really do it for me. Say it, Red." He smirks, so pleased with himself for making me have to beg.

"Fine, Satan . I like the fight. I want you, alright? So just fu—"

He steals the words from off my tongue, locking our lips together in a struggle that encompasses who we are to each other—two people who hate one another so deeply,

the rage we expel has nowhere to go except to merge into one giant bonfire of lust.

He lets go of my neck to slide both hands down my waist and the curve of my hips. Then, he bends his knees and taps the side of my thighs. We may disagree on a lot of things, but we're totally in sync here.

I throw my arms around his neck and jump when he gives the signal, wrapping my thighs around his waist with my ankles locked to stabilize myself.

Because of my size, I don't like the idea of being carried. But he makes it seem effortless when he slams me against the wall, forcing the air from my lungs with a heavy grunt.

Even in this moment with somebody new, my thoughts scrounge up the memory of my last Eden visit with Casanova. It was probably the only other time I've ever let someone carry me, and we all know how that ended .

Ass, meet floor.

Fuck, I don't want to be thinking about him. I need to get my shit together or I'm going to ruin this as soon as it starts.

It's a little easier to stay in the moment when Skylar's hands cradle my ass, squeezing it roughly every time I grind against him. Right now, I'm thanking whoever created lacrosse for giving this man a body so hard you could bounce a coin off it.

The rugged texture of his jeans is heaven against my aching clit, only separated by the thin fabric of my panties which slide with me as I ride the bulge of his pants.

"Fuck," he moans into my open mouth, tongue licking inside to swirl around my own before closing the kiss off again. "Do you know how long I've wanted this?"

I don't.

Maybe I'm just an idiot, but I had no clue he wanted anything to do with me until twenty minutes ago. He's never shown me anything but the worst of himself. He's never made any moves on me. He doesn't even call me by my real name.

I don't know how long he's wanted this, but I have a feeling he's about to show me.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 pm

Skylar

This is either going to be the best decision of my life or the worst.

Only time will tell, but I'm not about to dwell on it. She's finally here in my arms, saying yes for once—actually choosing me instead of Julian or some other tool from the club.

She tastes so sweet, the mint of her toothpaste touching the tip of my tongue when I dip it into her mouth. The scent of her shampoo surrounds me, invading my nostrils with every breath.

Every time I grind into her pussy, she lets out these sexy little sighs that only spur me on. I've got her up against the wall, hands squeezing the flesh of her bare ass, swallowing all the helpless breaths of air she feeds to me as if I could save them for later.

I'm impressed with my level of improvisation tonight, and it's insane to think we'd almost had a completely different interaction. It wasn't hard to tell something was up with her at dinner. She kept looking at me, and not like she usually does. She was starting to put it together; she recognized me.

There hasn't been enough time for my beard to grow back in since I last saw her as Broody, so I had to comb it out to look longer.

The second I saw her eyeing my watch before frantically typing on her phone, it was obvious what she was doing. I only had to write out my own message while she was

looking down, then discreetly send it when she was eyeing the watch again.

After that, it was easy to prepare myself for this particular confrontation. She never answered Broody, so I typed out the second message and waited for the opportune moment—her explosion on the porch—to pull the trigger.

I know it seems like I'm just a fanatic for mind games, but I can't really help it if things work out that way. It's better for everybody, clearly. She's mad at Broody for disrespecting her personal space, so I get to reap the benefits of her revenge ploy.

"Please," she mewls, pulling away from the kiss to bury her face into the side of my neck. When she starts nipping at the skin, I really lose my shit, ripping her from the wall to march us inside.

The guest room where I stay is on the first floor, through the kitchen—where the back door is—and down the hall. Thank fuck, because there's no way I'm about to ravage Gene's daughter in her childhood bedroom, right across the hall from his own. What would my poor mother think?

I only make it a few steps past the threshold when she bites into a chunk of my neck, sucking like her life depends on it.

This bitch is going to kill me.

I'm not going to make it. Spinning to my right, I find the nearest countertop and set her on it before stealing another kiss. She's crying for it, begging for me to take her, but I want this to last as long as possible.

I've waited so fucking long for this. I bided my time by watching from a distance, dreaming and fantasizing about her whenever possible. I need this more than I've needed anything else in my life, and it's worth the wait.

Her shirt lifts easily when I dive in, suckling on her breasts like a fucking infant. Her tits are beautiful—so big and heavy, they could smother the light from my eyes and I'd still ask for more .

She squirms like she's having a damn seizure when I suck on her nipple, twirling my tongue around the hardening bud while her hips buck into me. I'm having the time of my life until she says, "This is so fucked up."

I'm confused. Her feet are digging into my ass, forcing me closer. Her hand is curled around the nape of my neck, unwilling to let me move from her chest.

I manage to pry myself loose, straightening up to meet her gaze. "Do you want to stop?" I ask, but I'm not sure I could handle her saying yes.

She throws her head back when I tuck into her neck, peppering kisses along the expanse of her chest and throat. "I don't know...what if it's weird? What if our parents—"

I clamp my hand over her mouth, kissing up to her ear in the way I know she goes crazy for. Whispering against the shell of it, I say, "Think about yourself, for once. Or better yet, stop fucking thinking." I hoist her off the counter so quickly she squeaks in surprise, giggling into my neck as I carry her to my room.

Huh.

I've never heard her laugh like that before. I guess I wouldn't, seeing as I really only have been a jackass to her. Maybe one day, she'll forgive me.

Her lips keep drawing me in like a magnet, so plump and red that I want to steal the color for myself. I want to take some of her red and store it away, because when I inevitably lose her all over again, I'll need something to keep me going. If I could

bathe in it, I would. If I could trap her in my bedroom forever, I would.

I'd do anything if it meant having her to myself.

She plucks sweetly at my bottom lip, tugging it between gentle teeth as she grinds senselessly against my cock. That would be fine and all...if I wasn't trying to open this fucking door with her wriggling all over the place.

I slam her against it, trying to hold my balance when I reach for the handle, but she notices my struggle and takes pity by turning it for me.

Once we're inside, it's all easy then.

I don't even have to remove my tongue from her mouth when I throw her down onto the bed and cradle into the opening of her thighs, giving her the friction she's been seeking this whole time. I'm in the middle of some of my finest dry-hump maneuvers when I get the notion that only one thing could make this moment better.

Music.

My laptop is still open on the desk in the corner of the room, connected to my wireless speaker from before I stepped outside to have that cigarette. I've been religiously listening to Sleep Token's discography on repeat, so I reshuffle the playlist and choose "Sugar" to play first.

The mood is set. The girl I've been pining after for a year is in my bed. She wants me. She's ready to go. I'm ready to go. Fuck Julian. Fuck The Prince . This is mine... she is mine.

"I like this, it's nice. Who sings this?" she asks, sitting up from where she was lying on the bed to stare at me.

I take a moment to share how I found the band and even some of my favorite songs, but when I lock eyes on her again, I see the hesitancy. She's stalling.

Nope.

We've come too far to quit now. Stalking towards the bed, I grab my shirt behind the neck and rip it over my head before tossing it on the floor.

Her eyes go wide for a second before she exclaims, "Oh! Let me see how your tattoo healed. Did you have any trouble with it? Any blowouts or—"

"Scarlett." I reach the bed, plant a knee beside her, and crawl up the length of her body. As I get closer and closer to her face, she leans back in tandem with my own positioning.

"Yeah?" She looks nervous, but it's not clear whether she's still feeling doubtful or she's just anxious to do this. I've never called her by her real name before—except as Broody on her birthday—so the shock on her face is bittersweet.

"Shut the fuck up."

I grab her by the jaw and press my lips against hers. It's hungry and wet and sloppy, but our tongues work together now instead of fighting .

When we're like this, we move in perfect unison; her mouth opening for me when I need to taste her, my lips closing around hers when she needs to take a breath. Our bodies exchange pleasure like a currency, each of us receiving while the other prospers.

She claws at my back, so I growl into her ear and send goosebumps across her skin. I suck on her neck, and she whines so softly that my dick twitches against her

throbbing clit. She bites my lip, so I tug gently at the hair on her scalp where my fingers are threaded. I lift her shirt to suck on her tits, and she wraps her legs tighter around me until there's not an inch of space separating us.

She breaks away for a second, crossing her arms to grab the bottom of her shirt before slowly peeling it off. Now, I've got plenty of room to kiss the length of her body without obstruction, but I'm focused on how fucking pretty she looks when she's sprawled out like this for me. The curves of her waist fit my hands perfectly, and the heat radiating between us is intoxicating.

Then, I see it.

It's faint enough that a passing eye would miss it, but I'd recognize it anywhere. I was there when it was made, after all. Bringing my lips to her left breast, I kiss the scar before trailing down her stomach, being careful not to linger suspiciously.

Having her as myself, without the disguise, is better than I could have imagined. I don't have to tease her. I don't have to edge her out. If I want to eat her pussy, I'm going to treat it like a fucking buffet.

When I wedge the panties down her legs, there's no more reluctance on her face. Our eyes don't break away from one another, so I see it all—the intrigue, the anticipation, the desire. It's all for me.

I just hate that Julian had her first.

I should have been the one to taste her, and it should have been me feeding him the cream from her cunt. He wouldn't have her at all if I didn't let him. But no matter what he does at Eden, he can't take this from me .

I waste no time diving face-first into her pussy. She still smells mostly of body wash,

but the second I get a taste of the arousal dripping from her, I go wild. I should probably be embarrassed by the rumbling groan I make against her, but I couldn't give a shit. I'll make whatever sound she wants as long as it keeps drawing out those sweet cries.

I'll never be able to take my hair down around her because I've made it a part of my Eden identity. There's not much for her to hold on to as I fuck her with my tongue, but man, she tries the best she can.

Her nails dig into whatever she can reach, scratching against my scalp, my shoulders, and the forearms I have wrapped around each of her thighs to keep her in place.

I'm still learning what she likes, but I have noticed she moans more deeply when I flatten my tongue rather than using the point of it. If I wander too far from the sweet spot, she's not shy about shuffling her hips into a different position, taking exactly what she needs from me.

I love it.

The way she responds is so satisfying, like we're perfectly compatible to communicate through body language alone. Like this is enough for us. Like maybe it's okay that we fight all the time, because this is where we're meant to shine together.

I know she's close when she stops making noise, solely concentrating on grinding her clit against my flattened tongue in rapid succession. Just to send her over the edge with a bang, I stick two fingers inside her, curling them upwards to find her G-spot. She does the rest of the work, gyrating her hips to steal her pleasure as she rides my tongue.

Scarlett is completely soundless when she comes. Only two indications give her

away: the tight contractions of her pussy walls suffocating my fingers, and the way she digs her feet into the bed to raise her hips away from me.

I don't fucking think so.

I want her to be overstimulated. I want her to beg me to stop.

Tightening my grip on her thigh, I rip her back down and devour her, not daring to quit until she wails so loudly that it might actually wake our parents.

I don't think it'll give me away to make her taste herself, so I crawl back up her body and feed my coated tongue through her panting lips. This dirty bitch sucks on it like a piece of candy. She's fucking perfect for me, and I need to have her. Now .

There's no going back from here—once she's mine, that's it. If I get naked, I can never let her see me like this at Eden. In the back of my mind, I wonder if I'll even need to pursue her there after tonight. Could this be it for us? Will she still want me tomorrow or the next day?

She's lifeless when I stand to kick my pants off, basking in her afterglow like she's lying on the beach under the sun. My cock springs free from my jeans, and the temperature difference almost hurts when the cool air blows over my flushed skin.

I kneel between her spread legs and toss her calves over my thighs, scooting as close as I can. Eager to feel her warmth, I run the head of my cock up and down her pussy, soaking it with her cum until she's literally dripping off me.

I wish I could pause this moment in time and archive it away in my brain so I'll always remember it perfectly.

I want to relive the heart-pounding elation I feel when lining myself up for the first

thrust. I want to recall the taste of her on my lips when I crawl up her body to press our mouths together. I want to experience the phantom tingles of her hands caressing my lower back when she wraps her arms around my waist to brace herself. I want to memorize the connection I feel when I bury myself inside her, tangling my fingers through her hair and pulling against the crown of her head to ensure I'm as deep as I can possibly be.

At first, I'm worried it might be too much when she expels a pained cry as the head of my cock digs into her cervix from the added weight. I'm reminded of a thought I had all those weeks ago, after our last encounter here. I contemplated what it might be like to see her cry as I fuck her—but that was just a daydream.

The reality is so much sweeter.

Her cry turns into a soft moan with every slow drag of my cock, and it fuels my drive. I cradle her skull in my hands, pulling her further down so I bottom out every single time I roll my hips into her.

I want her to feel all of me. I need her to be sore for days afterward so she can be reminded that I was here, and she's the one who let me in.

She either adjusts to the pain or feeds off it, because when her feet dig into my ass and suck me into her orbit, I know she's enjoying it. This is how it has to be with us—an amalgamation of pain, pleasure, hate, and lust—because two fractured souls like ours couldn't settle for less.

I know Scarlett's pain; I know the loss of a parent, I know the hardships of school, I know the lack of passion in a partner.

I'd be lying if I said I ever tried to have a real relationship or indulge anyone's feelings before her. Although my mom is the picture-perfect parent, I've seen the

horrors of the world. I know what it looks like to pour love and trust into another person, just for them to destroy it in front of your very eyes.

I'm not saying I want that with Scarlett. It's just that filling a void with sex still requires something fulfilling, and I haven't been satisfied. I've tested my compatibility with partners at school and Eden, but it's all fake and full of vanity.

I'd rather have a steady fuck buddy I share sexual chemistry with than hook up with random broads for the fun of it. I want passion and heat as much as the next person—as much as Scarlett does.

She wrote in her diary about how that was her whole purpose for going to Eden. She wanted something new, satisfying, and enlightening.

I have that with her; I just wish she felt the same way.

Her nails dig into the flesh of my back and pull my mind back to her in the present, but it just reminds me how close I am to the edge.

It's something in the scrunch of her brow, the weakness in her tongue as it fights to keep up with mine, the pressure of her legs trapping me inside, and the way she keeps purposefully tightening the muscles of her cunt around me .

I straighten up to sit on my heels and wedge her thighs apart, just admiring the view of us together. Pulling my hips back to watch my cock nearly slip from her pussy, I take notice of the way she keens when I slowly push it back in.

The sight of her makes me salivate, so I let a glob of spit fall onto the point where we meet. When I take aim, I glance up at her face and see she's tracking the saliva with enchanted eyes.

Julian has definitely trained her to love being spit on.

When it lands with a splat , I use my thumb to spread it around, coaxing another orgasm from her the same way I did on her balcony. I want to feel her come before I do; I want the constriction of her pussy to be the thing that sends me over the edge, milking every ounce of jizz I feed into her.

I don't know if it's because I used my tongue the first time and my fingers now, but she does not come silently, spurting out this feral groan as she grips the pillow beneath her head.

Instinctively, I drop down to her and wrap one hand around the crown of her skull while the other goes for her mouth. Together, we ride the waves of her orgasm until my own follows.

Pulling against her head to claw myself deeper with every thrust, I pump her full of my cum while she screams into the palm of my hand. My heart rate rises to a dangerous level as I pant against her temple, but I wait patiently until she's silent again to remove my hand and kiss her. Our breaths are hot and still taste of her first orgasm, but I soak it all in, content to share anything with her.

We take a few moments to clean up before redressing and walking to the porch for a post-coital cigarette—the best of all cigarettes.

I don't really know how to handle this part, though.

An awkward silence fills the air, the two of us just puffing on our smokes as we stare blankly into the night. We're not speaking or reminiscing, only quietly enduring the aftershock.

Do I make small talk? I can't think of anything to say when the only thing at the

forefront of my mind is fucking her again, as soon as possible .

She's the one to take initiative, stamping out her cigarette before walking towards the door. Her head turns to peek at me over her shoulder, a small grin on her face. "Night, Satan."

Satan...not Skylar.

"Night, Red," I return. My delivery isn't as dry as I mean for it to be, but it's not even remotely friendly.

Scarlett walks inside, presumably to go sleep in her own bed, leaving me alone on the porch. Without realizing it, she answered all the questions I've been ruminating on since taking her into my room.

I'll always be Satan to her.

She doesn't actually want me. Not now, not tomorrow, not the day after that. Never.

Pulling out the burner phone I've been using to text her, I type out a quick message, then send it through without hesitation.

Scarlett

I stare at the phone screen, smiling to myself at the absolute gall of this douchebag. How dare he say anything about who I fuck when they're the ones who told me to go 'have fun' until New Year's Eve.

Not that I need their permission.

They haven't seemed to learn yet that I'm my own woman, and I'll do whatever the fuck I want, whenever I want. They don't own me, so if I want to fuck someone, they can't do a goddamn thing about it.

I wanted to fuck Skylar.

I might have had second thoughts when I remembered our parents were only a floor above us, but I enjoyed it. It proved to me these men aren't the only ones who know how to please a woman, and I no longer need to subject myself to their torture for the sake of an orgasm.

I'd rather do it myself.

The thing is, I wasn't.

For the first time in weeks, I lived in the moment and stuffed the chaos twins into a tiny box at the back of my mind. I'm not saying I wasn't surprised by it, but Skylar demanded my attention like I've never seen before; it never felt like an option to think of anyone but him.

I could only focus on what he was doing to me.

He's right.

It was difficult enough coming to terms with it myself, so I don't owe him the admission. I liked it way more than I should have, but they're not supposed to know that. They're not supposed to know anything about me, but that's what happens when you let the wrong ones in.

I know I should be doing anything else right now, but I'm too worked up to sleep. I need to speak my mind and get rid of them for good.

No answer.

Thirty minutes pass without any word from him, so I send another text.

With bated breath, I stare at my phone for a whole ten minutes like some crazed teenager. When he still doesn't reply, I take it as a win.

My bed is small but not entirely uncomfortable; it's just a reminder of the girl it was once meant for. She was full of hopes and dreams, and hadn't been hurt by a boy yet—so ignorant of the brutality in the real world.

I've only just settled in and closed my eyes when my phone vibrates.

I know he's bluffing—just like I was. I may have been lying about calling the cops, but I meant what I said about being done with them. It's all just a fucking game to him and a way to keep me in check.

My birthday ended with traumatic self-discovery and a life-threatening orgasm that forced me to question my hard limits. But this?

Now I'm paranoid at three in the morning, putting on pants to walk downstairs and do the unimaginable. The room is dark when I open the door, and the scent of sex hangs fresh in the air.

"Skylar?" The same playlist from earlier is flowing softly through the speaker on his desk, but it's barely audible over the drum of my beating heart. Creeping to the side of the bed, I hover over his sleeping form. "Skylar?" I call again, reaching out to touch what I think is his shoulder.

I can't see two inches in front of my face, so when he grabs my wrist and yanks me onto the bed, I scream in surprise.

His groggy voice finally breaks through the silence, "What the fuck are you doing? What time is it?" Despite his shaken demeanor, his hands explore my body like he's trying to sooth my trembling limbs.

It takes a minute to find the words because I suddenly feel like the world's biggest pussy, embarrassed to even be here. I could go back to my room, ignore Broody's idle threats, and get a good night's sleep before tomorrow's holiday disfunction.

But I don't like that he threatened Skylar.

He may be an asshole, but he doesn't deserve to be targeted by some maniac with unstable emotions—especially not because of me.

"It's going to sound stupid," I whisper.

"Just spit it out, Red. I was sleeping, so unless you're asking for a round two, I'd like to get back to it." I don't even think he's joking, and it makes me blush.

Thank god there's no lights on in here.

“Would you come sleep with me? I’m sorry, I know it’s dumb...” His hand brushes against my leg, so I throw my knee over his thigh without even thinking about it. “I just don’t wanna be alone right now. We could put on a movie in the living room and sleep on the couches, or I could sleep on your floor. I don’t care.”

He must have night-vision or something, because I can’t see a thing, yet he knows exactly where I am. A thumb runs along my bottom lip, unexpectedly pulling it down to flatten against my teeth .

It’s an odd gesture, but when he says, “You’re not sleeping on the floor...let’s go,” I’m just grateful for his compassion.

After agreeing to have another cigarette before laying down, we head out to the porch to unwind in the chilly night air. He hasn’t asked what’s wrong with me, but I get the sense he knows I don’t want to indulge any more information.

I keep scanning the backyard for signs of Broody, but he hasn’t shown his face. I don’t want to underestimate his threats in case he’s crazier than I realize—I’d prefer to never find out.

Skylar notices my unease and drags me into a protective stance, his arm wrapping around me to pull my back flush against his chest. Truthfully, nothing about this feels awkward or unsettling. It’s not what I’m used to getting from Skylar, but I’d like to think we broke through some boundaries today.

Obviously, there’s the sex thing. But more than that, I feel like we have more solid ground to stand on—an understanding that our mutual hatred was probably just pent-up sexual tension.

Now that we’ve gotten it out of our system, we can act like decent human beings. Maybe we could even be friends.

“Thank you,” I say. It’s not much, especially if I’ve put his life in danger, but it’s what I can give.

His fingers strum lazily across the skin of my shoulder in a metronomic motion, though he doesn’t say anything back. His arm is solid across my chest, every exhale he takes compressing against me in a way that squeezes the anxiety out.

It also helps that he keeps not-so-subtly nuzzling into my hair when he pulls away from his cigarette, almost like he’s smelling my shampoo. I would even say it was cute, if it wasn’t so frightfully out of character for him.

We should probably do the mature, adult thing that’s supposed to happen after intercourse—define the relationship, or whatever—but I have a feeling this was only meant to be a one-night stand. Really, I’m not sure it was meant to happen in the first place .

I walked away afterwards because I’m not daft enough to expect something more from him. We’re not dating, and we’re not even regularly fucking. It was nothing more than a hate-fuck.

I think.

I wonder, though, if he wanted to talk about it because he did sound sort of annoyed when I went to bed. He hasn’t mentioned it, but I could tell he was pissed about something.

We just found something in common, and I don’t want that to get thrown out the window because I didn’t let him say his piece.

“Did you want to...” I stumble over my words, painstakingly rearranging the thoughts in my head to form a comprehensible sentence. “I just mean...are you okay

with what happened? You haven't said anything." I try to peek at him over my shoulder, but his chin digs into the top of my head, demanding I stay put.

"Neither have you. In fact, I distinctly remember you dick 'n dashing, but I wasn't about to make you feel bad for it." His sleepy tone is comforting, despite the criticism.

He's not wrong, but the everlasting desire to push his buttons takes over. "Since when do you not want to make me feel bad?"

Skylar chuckles like he's genuinely amused, and the resulting burst of compressions against my back make me want to laugh in turn.

I settle for a secret smile as I tuck my chin into the heat of his forearm.

The hand on my shoulder pulls back, sliding across the width of my throat as his lips suddenly whisper into my ear, "Is that what I did in there, make you feel bad?" His fingers tighten when I swallow, threatening to follow through on the second round he mentioned.

Undecided on where I stand with that idea, I tease, "Are two orgasms supposed to make up for years of trashy behavior? One per year?" His mouth is so close to my ear, I can actually feel him smile when his lips stretch outward.

"One for every time you called me Satan, maybe," he says, thumb rubbing gently along my pulse point while his other fingers dig in .

Seriously? That's what got him in a huff?

My breath is unsteady from the pressure on my airway, but I try to hide it for the sake of this super-mature conversation. "Is that supposed to be a punishment? Wouldn't

you expect me to just say it more, then? To keep fighting?”

“Maybe I’m just waiting for you to realize it doesn’t have to be that way. That I don’t have to be that way.” I can tell the amusement is long gone, his voice deviating to the same nasty cadence I’m familiar with when he drops his arms to sever our physical contact.

I turn to face him, full of bewilderment, because he’s the one who said our fighting is what made us hot for each other. I tell him as much, adding, “I never did anything to make you act that way in the first place. You’ve done it all on your own. So yeah, I think you do have to be that way. It’s just who you are”—I jab my finger into the center of his chest—“Satan.”

In a flash, he grabs my wrist, pulling me closer while his other hand fists a chunk of my hair.

This is our game.

Fighting comes as second nature to the two of us, so I don’t know why he would want me to see him as anything more than what’s right in front of my face.

He rips my head backward, those familiar balls of ire piercing right through me when I look up. Digging my fingers into the fabric of his shirt, I say, “You don’t like me, Skylar. What could you possibly want from me?”

The shift in his eyes has me wishing I never asked. Now he just looks hurt, like I forced him to open a can of worms he wasn’t prepared to delve into yet.

“You think I’ve been waiting over a year to touch you because I don’t like you?” he snaps, the pained crease in his brow tightening. His fingers leave my hair to come forward and stroke my face with an unexpected tenderness.

“We hate each other, isn’t that our whole shtick? You clearly needed to get laid, and so did I. You said it yourself, we live for going toe to toe. Nothing wrong with getting a good hate-fuck out of our systems so we can move on,” I explain. “We both got what we needed.”

He eyes me scornfully and takes a step back, forcing a distance between us that leaves me completely bereft of his touch. “Clearly , you did,” he scoffs.

The disappointment on his face might actually hurt more than anything he’s said or done to me before. “Sky—” I reach for his arm, but he turns and storms into the house without another word.

Great.

One more thing I’ve fucked up.

It feels like I’m mourning all over again. I’ve been seeking passion so ardently, I think I might have just spat in the face of the first person to really show me what it’s supposed to look like.

The Prince tries, I think, but it’s hard for me to accept and reciprocate when I’m always wishing it was coming from Broody and Casanova instead. Those two have their own prerogative, and while our interactions aren’t devoid of passion, it isn’t their priority. Torture is more their thing.

Skylar’s been honest about his feelings; he does want something from me and wishes I would return the sentiment. I may have shown interest in the moment, but not when it mattered most to him.

Not afterwards.

I'm completely expecting to find the living room empty, a sign that the failure to hold up my end of some unspoken bargain means he can do the same. But there he is, plopped down on the long couch with a pillow. He must have brought the bedding from his room while I was still outside, because another pillow and the comforter from his bed are lying on the adjacent couch for me.

He's wearing a sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his head, his arms crossed against his chest to keep warm without a second blanket available. When I creep towards him, he turns inward to face the back cushion of the couch.

The TV is playing one of my favorite horror movies, *The Conjuring*, and I think it must be a coincidence. There's no way he knows that about me.

Or it means I just fucked up really bad.

His eyes remain closed when I bend down to kiss his cheek. I only give him a small peck to show my appreciation, but he lets me. "Goodnight, Skylar."

I wait a second, but he doesn't move or speak. He's likely not asleep, but I'm just thankful for him being here. I don't need anything else.

The comforter and pillow almost bring me to tears when I settle onto the couch and tangle myself between them, my mind racing with all the possible ways I could have made tonight go differently. There's so much I should have said or done, but it's too late to go back now.

I'm cocooned in his scent, stealing a warmth that was meant for him—yet he chose to give it to me instead. The first tear falls when his soft voice murmurs across the living room.

"Goodnight, Red."

I probably deserve that.

The weekend with Skylar crawled by as agonizingly slow as I thought it would, even before the secret sex. Dad and Gretchen were their usual cheerful selves while each of their selfish, spiteful children glared daggers at one another from across each room of the house.

I tried to make up for my shortcomings with him, but he didn't care. After Wednesday night, he spent every single day sewing together the pieces of his cold, dead heart until he returned to his normal self. Any attempt I made at being friendly or apologetic was squandered immediately.

How do you even apologize for breaking someone when you weren't aware you were doing it in the first place?

I continued calling him by his name, but he never stopped calling me Red. I tried to be cordial at dinner by offering him food and drinks, and he blatantly ignored me. If I came outside to smoke with him, he would promptly return to the house.

I can forgive all of it though, because despite the apathetic, blatant disregard for my existence during the day, he still slept in the living room with me.

Every. Single. Night.

That's not something he would do if he truly hated me. Not that the way he acted was mature, like at all, but being able to stuff it inside while we slept still meant something to me. I won't forget it.

I don't even think I dislike him anymore.

He may not have fully accepted my olive branch, we may not be friends, and he may

not have any feelings towards me anymore—romantic or lustful—but I wasn't missing them before, and I won't miss them now.

I'll keep showing my appreciation for his kindness by extending my own, and remain hopeful that one day he finally accepts it.

It's Sunday now, so Penelope and I are officially free to go back to our apartment and put this disastrous holiday behind us. There's no point in telling her about my masked visitor showing up at my dad's house; he's basically a second parent to her, and she would probably be as pissed off as I am about it.

It's why I can't tell her about Skylar, either.

Sleeping with one's stepbrother doesn't really fall on the list of things a stable person would do, whether we're actually siblings or not. She'd probably think it's her fault for encouraging my sexual exploration, and it would lead to a guilty spiral about how far I've fallen from grace while under her watch.

Plus, what happened between us feels a little sacred after he revealed what it supposedly meant to him. I don't want to soil that by spreading it around.

It's just for us.

Julian

“I’m sorry, you did what? ”

Skylar has this wicked smirk gleaming across his face, like he can’t wait to spell it all out for me until I get the full picture. Like he can’t wait to rub it in that he got to have her first, despite all the work I’ve put in. Like he’s so proud to have scored her by himself, when we’ve been flopping as Broody and Casanova.

“You should have seen her, man. When she came on my c—”

“Cole! Finch!” Coach hollers from the sidelines, interrupting what I’m sure was a wonderfully tasteful proclamation about our girl. I guess not our girl, anymore. His girl. “Are you two gonna stop yappin’ like a bunch of schoolgirls and play the fucking game, or should I replace ya?”

Not that I even want to be a part of this conversation, but the team definitely can’t afford for us to call Coach’s bluff. Skylar, Tommy, and I are the attackmen, and there’s a reason we’ve retained our positions for the entirety of our last four years here. I’m not about to let Skylar blow it for me now, so I shove him away with my stick and run into position.

Practice only lasts for another hour, then the team is off to Andy’s Diner for dinner. It’s a tradition I appreciate more than the rest of them probably do. With the way I grew up, cheap and greasy diner food was my version of a delicacy .

I’m halfway through a full stack of chocolate chip pancakes when Skylar tries to start

up his bullshit again.

I shut it down immediately, keeping my voice low enough that the rest of the team can't hear over the commotion they're causing themselves. "Listen, I'm happy for you and all, but we've still got New Year's Eve to figure out. We don't even know if she's going to come after what we did on the night of the Halloween party. And even if she does, she'll probably be with Dario." I turn to face him, making sure he sees the seriousness on my face when I say, "We cannot let that happen."

The Prince has been keeping a secret from Scarlett, but Skylar and I know exactly who he is and what he has planned for her. Moving forward, we need to do everything in our power to keep her as far away from that creep as possible.

If Sky gives a shit about her, he'll put aside his pride to get it done.

"That's what I've been trying to say, Jules. With how she was acting last weekend, I think I can get her to stop going to the club altogether." There's that smirk again. So much for putting aside his pride. "I just need to convince her into something else."

I scoff, "What, dating? I'm sure your parents will love that."

"Fuck no, but I could tell her I want to be exclusive or something. She might go for it."

She wouldn't, and he knows that.

Scarlett told her journal that she's on some 'sexual exploration' to find out what she likes and to experience different partners without the commitment of settling. She's looking for the opposite of exclusivity, especially if Skylar—the only person she hates more than Broody and Casanova—is the one propositioning her.

“And when exactly are you supposed to get the opportunity? Are you going to approach her in the cafeteria and ask her to go fuck you in a closet somewhere?” I ask, hoping he understands just how stupid he sounds. “There’s no way she’s coming over to our place or any chance of you going to hers. The next time you’ll be alone with her is on Christmas, and it’ll already be too late if she decides to go to the party.”

A scowl of displeasure replaces the grin on his face. “Then we’ll just have to make New Year’s work, I guess. I already know she’ll be there. We just have to get to her before he does.”

“How do you know? She told you she was going?”

I didn’t let him get to the pillow talk segment of his story, so she very well could have discussed her plans for the holiday. I won’t be asking for the missing details—I’d like to forget he even mentioned it at all.

“I just know. Now shut up and eat your pancakes.” He smiles again, but I don’t like the look of it. Not at all.

The past three weeks have been absolute torture. Every day has been the same mundane routine: I go to school, think about Skylar fucking Scarlett, attend lacrosse practice, think about Dario fucking Scarlett, eat dinner, then jerk off to whatever my imagination can conjure up from Skylar’s description of their night together.

I’ve seen her a few times since Halloween; once at the tattoo shop when I was getting my back piece worked on, and another two times at Eden while she was with Dario .

She barely even spared us a single look, intent on making sure we believe she’s moved on. Unfortunately for her, she’ll only end up with him over our dead bodies.

It's hard to see the point where our selfishness stops and our protectiveness starts—it all looks the same now.

Yes, we want her for ourselves, but we're also trying to guard her from a danger she has no fucking clue she's about to get into. Really, she's already there. Every second she spends with that guy is a step towards the edge, and we might be the only ones who can stop her from plummeting.

Still, I want her so fucking badly.

I'm pathetic, lying here in my bed and stroking my cock to the thought of Skylar eating her pussy. I might not know how it feels to be enveloped in it, but I do know what it tastes like. I'm the one who got that first. I'm the one who fed him the sweet juice from her pussy when he fucking begged me for it.

Playing with her was supposed to be for the both of us, but he snaked his way through a loophole and thought I'd just be cool with it.

Well, I'm not.

Now, I only want her more.

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Scarlett

It's been decided; we're going to the party.

I'm not even worried about Broody's menacing notes and texts, because this is about standing my ground against them. I'm with the Prince now, and there's nothing they can do anymore to ruin that for me.

Penelope and I have already submitted our applications with updated STI tests, which seems to be required every two to three months. We've received our masks in the mail, but we still need to find something to wear for the occasion.

We've been to three different stores now, looking for the perfect dresses to match the elegant, golden-filigree masks we received for the event. Pen is hoping to find something in blue or silver to match the holiday theme.

I'll be wearing red.

At the seventh dress department we visit, I finally find the perfect one. I wonder how many minutes it will take for the dress to be torn from my body.

It's Christmas Eve, and Gretchen made reservations for all of us to dine out so we can relax before tomorrow's holiday mayhem. Pen is coming with us before she goes to her parents' house for the rest of vacation, which is why we did our shopping today.

Unfortunately, we're running late .

That would explain why Dad and Gretchen are standing in the living room when we walk through the front door, already ravenous and raring to go. We hastily apologize and excuse ourselves up to my room to put away our shopping bags and get ready for dinner, but Satan comes down the staircase right when we start climbing it.

Fuck. How did I forget he would be here? Of course he would. It's a holiday, and as far as I know, his mom is the only parent he spends time with.

I don't know anything about his dad. I've never heard Skylar or Gretchen talk about him—not that she would anyway, with my dad being her new husband and all—but I am curious. My dad doesn't shy away from talking about my mom's death, but I'm not sure what else they've discussed.

Gretchen is nice, but damn...I miss my mom.

I wonder what she would say about my recent dilemma. Would she scold me for doing something as out-of-pocket as going to a sex club in the first place, or would she be supportive of my sexual journey?

I'd like to think it would be the latter. My mom and I were always completely honest and open with each other, and I think that was my favorite part about our relationship. Nothing was too taboo, too crazy, too personal. She was my best friend.

Skylar and I separated on Thanksgiving weekend with an awkward air stuck between us, his hostility steadily returning despite the nightly couch sleepovers. I can only hope that Julian being here means he might behave himself.

“It's pretty inconsiderate to keep us all waiting on you, Red.”

Nope, back to his normal self.

Two can play at that game. Shoving against his shoulder, I force him out of the way so Pen and I can pass. “Stop fucking calling me that, Satan. We needed to shop for a party, and there wasn’t much time before the holiday. Not that I have to explain anything to you, so back off,” I spit .

I’ve tried being nice to him, but if he keeps pushing my buttons, we’re going to have a problem on our hands. If he wants to go right back to hating each other, I’m fine with that too.

Before we enter my room, I steal a quick glance over my shoulder, only to find him statically fixed to the spot where I left them on the stairs. He’s just staring at me, but not with the same attitude he had prior—there’s something else in his eyes. Both of their faces are washed with intrigue, like I said something amusing.

It doesn’t matter, I’m over the back and forth with Skylar. I can be mean if that’s what he’d prefer. He can go eat rocks or suck a dick for all I care.

I wonder whether Casanova and Broody have ever...

Nope, not going there. Not today. Not anymore.

Well, that was fucking weird.

The boys spent the entirety of dinner gawking at me while whispering to each other. They weren’t even subtle about it. Even now, Julian and I are on the porch having a cigarette, and he won’t stop looking at me.

I’m doing my best to hold eye contact, because I’ll be damned if I let him judge me for something Skylar did too. I thought it would stay a private matter between the two of us, but that’s clearly not the case.

“If you have something to say, just say it. Don’t stand there staring at me like a turkey in the rain.”

He tilts his head, eyeing me curiously as he brings the cigarette to his lips. “ You know that’s a myth, right?” he points out, like I need it to be mansplained.

“You know it’s a simile, right? Doesn’t need a fact check,” I snip, flicking the ash from my cigarette in his direction.

Chuckling, he takes a step towards me.

Communicating from a distance is sort of our thing, so I’m caught off guard when he closes in until we’re only a few inches apart, pressing my back against the same wall Skylar cornered me at weeks ago.

“Well, maybe you can give me a fact check of my own.” His cologne smells of vanilla, citrus, and cedar—the scent enveloping me like a warm blanket as he hovers over me and whispers against my temple. “Skylar said you tasted like honey. Fact or simile?”

I’m fighting my body’s urge to tremble, intimidated by the overbearing presence of him. “He shouldn’t have told you that,” is all I can manage to say.

“No, he shouldn’t have.” I’m surprised by his rapid agreement until he clarifies, “It might have made me a little jealous though. Unless I’ve been reading your body language wrong, I thought you and I had...” He hesitates for a moment, waiting until our eyes connect again. “Similar interests.”

He’s not wrong.

There was the olive branch on Friday the 13th —his abnormal kindness, the vote of

confidence, and an invitation to their friends' party—and our bi-weekly smoke sessions at the tattoo studio. We've developed an oddly comforting camaraderie.

Julian invites me outside during his session breaks, where we make small talk and smoke while eye-fucking one another. Mostly, I stare at his mouth for the majority of the time until he catches me, usually flashing a naughty grin with his perfect fucking teeth.

It's become a routine.

Julian is attractive, there's no denying it. The problem is, fucking Skylar's best friend won't keep me off his radar, and I don't need to give him any more of a reason to hate me.

But Julian's looking down at me through his blonde lashes, eyes heavy with desire, and I can't help but consider that maybe I don't actually care what Skylar thinks. It doesn't seem like Julian does either, because he inches forward slowly and brings a hand up to cup my cheek .

The kiss is soft and slow, yet still the perfect pace to show off his delicate skill. I have to bend my neck all the way back to accommodate his height, but he does most of the work. His lips are as delicious as I imagined, but before the shock dissipates enough for me to enjoy it...

“What the fuck?”

I pull away from Julian with a gasp, staggered by the interruption. Skylar is standing in the doorway, apparently just having finished whatever he was doing with impeccable timing.

The two of them aren't focused on me, though. Skylar is a statue, hands balled into

white-knuckled fists while he stares at Julian, who continues puffing on his cigarette like he hasn't a care in the world.

Well, I have no interest in being anywhere near this.

I slide from the wall, rushing towards the door to squeeze around Skylar and make a beeline for my bedroom, not once looking back at either of them.

I really need to stop making a habit of getting horny at my dad's house, because now it's starting to look like a smorgasbord of men—all handpicked to my particular taste, and all mine for the taking.

I'll settle for a shower masturbation sesh.

Call me a freak, but being surrounded by steam during an orgasm causes a lightheadedness that I chase like a high. That, on top of what the scalding water does to my sensitive skin, isn't something you can find anywhere else. It's a different kind of euphoria.

Unfortunately, the way I go about it is unconventional and not very comfortable. I'm crouched like a frog—one finger in my pussy, another in my ass—thrusting into myself with one hand while I rub my clit with the other. My head is thrown back against the wall, eyes closed as I imagine being fucked by two men.

It's a rollercoaster; I allow myself to reach the crest of explosion only to shove it back down, prolonging the orgasm while the shower steam assaults my senses. For a brief moment, I open my eyes and see a shadowy figure standing on the other side of the glass.

The shower door slides open just as I rise to my feet, but before I can yell at the intruder, his hand is on my mouth. Skylar steps in and shoves me against the wall, my

bare nakedness pressed to his fully clothed body.

He's enraged.

I don't see how, when he's the one who's invading my fucking personal time and space, but nothing he does ever seems to feel justified. I can't do much but glare up at him, brow scrunched in frustration as I try to pry his hand from my face.

"Is that how it is now, you and Julian?" he asks. "Do you need me to say it? Do I have to fucking beg you?"

When I try to speak, he finally frees me. "What are you talking about? You want nothing to do with me, you proved that much at Thanksgiving. I pissed you off, and you were done."

My hands slide down his forearm as he trails his fingers down my throat, stopping in the center of my chest.

"So you'll just fuck my friend instead. Trying to get back at me?" He flattens his palm to my sternum, applying enough pressure to make the air feel heavier than it was before.

"It was just a kiss."

"We kissed. We fucked. I don't want you to be with anyone else, let alone my best fucking friend, Scarlett," he bites out, baring his teeth when he says my name. Finally .

Putting aside the fact that he chose now to treat me like a person, I'm not going to allow him to tell me what I can or can't do. "I understand why that would upset you, and I'm sorry," I explain. "But we aren't dating, Skylar. We're not together, so you

can't dictate what I do."

He looks down at the hand between my breasts, skating his fingers across my skin until they brush against my nipple. My breath hitches at the sensation, electricity zinging to my swollen and abandoned clit, but he notices immediately. When his eyes find mine again, I know I'm about to do something stupid.

This man has crawled into my skin, my head, my fucking shower, and now he's looking at me with the same desire that's building in my gut from the feel of his hands on me. He's standing here in wet clothes that hug the muscles of his body, and all I want in this moment is to tear them off.

So I do.

Springing into action, I throw all inhibitions to the wind. My hands go to the button of his pants while he rips at the back of his shirt, but when he gets it off before I've even managed to pull his zipper down, he interrupts my efforts with a burning kiss. It's hotter than the water raining down on us, our tongues continuing the fight where our words left off.

The only thing on my mind is the everlasting memory of how he felt inside me last time. It's the same memory that's been creeping into my head every time I'm with The Prince, forcing out the fantasy of Casanova and Broody altogether.

Honestly, after everything he admitted to me about his feelings, the idea of it being a one-time thing started to bother me. It was exhilarating, and even though we rarely see each other, I've been hoping we would find a way to reconnect.

The Prince's touch is reverent, sweet, and compassionate. Skylar's is completely different. It's greedy and all-consuming—like he's completely bewitched by my existence and couldn't live without it. I try to do him the same honor when I finally

get his cock free, squeezing it in my hand so he can feel just how much I want him back.

But he's an impatient man.

Without even taking his lips off mine, he grabs his dick in one hand and lifts my thigh with the other, bending at the knee to line himself up before bucking into me.

I moan into his mouth and toss my head back, which only gives him access to suck on my neck. The sound of him slurping at the water on my skin only makes things hotter, plus the fact that he doesn't care where we are. He'll do whatever it takes, as long as he can have me.

"I'm not trying to dictate," Skylar whispers into my ear. "I'm asking you. Only me, please." He accentuates each word with the jabbing thrust of his hips, pounding so roughly that my back chafes against the tile wall. "Promise that you'll only be with me."

"I can't."

I'm meant to see The Prince at the New Year's Eve party a week from now. We're going to have sex—it's a damned orgy, for crying out loud. Everybody is going to be having sex.

As if trying to persuade me past the natural temptation of his offer, he spits on his fingers and reaches between us to rub my clit, leaning back to watch.

I can't tell him what he wants to hear, though. I know from Broody and Casanova that unkept promises will get me in trouble, and I'm not willing to hurt Skylar any more than I already have.

“I can’t...I can’t...I can’t...” I repeat over and over, defectively pushing against his chest as I feign restraint, but all I can focus on is my impending climax.

I come undone with the exact lightheaded bliss I sought earlier, legs going limp beneath me. Tucking into my neck to plead with the softest whispers, he curls around me to chase his own orgasm.

He’s not happy to know I’m still unspoken for, but he does me the kindness of carrying me to bed anyway, easing my spent body into the warm sheets.

It probably won’t be the last time we do this, but he’s back to being angry with me. At least until next time.

I’ve somehow managed to survive the holiday dinners from hell .

Skylar and I have been pretty successful in staying out of each other’s orbit while we’re living under the same roof, with the exception of that first night.

It’s time for the Rainbow Room party, and I don’t need him or anything else to get me down. I can do that all by myself.

“Scarlett, I don’t have any words, babe,” Penelope exclaims. I look up to find her gawking at me with tears in her eyes, cupping her hands over her mouth in astonishment.

I barely recognize myself in the mirror, and I have to do a double-take to make sure it’s not some trick.

The dress I picked out is a gorgeous, deep-red silk gown with a huge slit up the thigh. The bust is split into two sections: one side is sweetheart-shaped with golden filigree accents that feather down to my waist, and the other side is a continuation of the red

silk into a puffy-shoulder sleeve.

I look amazing.

Pen looks incredible, as always. Her gown is a midnight-blue masterpiece that has a semi-sweetheart neckline and off-shoulder sleeves. Metallic golden rays extend from the bust all the way down the hem of her dress.

We're fire and ice, the perfect contrast to one another.

During the Uber ride to the club, we sip on champagne and share whatever local hometown gossip we've been able to scrounge up while we've been home.

I give a purposely vague retelling of an argument with Skylar from Christmas dinner, and she goes on about her mom's tennis club drama. They're worse than we are, even at their age—something's always going on with those ladies.

We make it to the club and tip our driver well for putting up with our nonsense. Now we're here, standing outside in our expensive gowns and masks that glimmer with gold accents so shiny the moon is probably jealous, but I can't go inside.

Penelope is tugging on my hand to follow her, but I can't move.

"Scarlett..." She snaps her fingers in front of my face. "Scarlett, baby. You can do this, okay? Listen, I'm going to be there with you the whole time, right? I may be getting pounded by some dude on the couch right next to you, but I'll be there." Her hands rub up and down my arms to warm my skin, and I love her for it all.

"Okay." I manage the word, but I'm lacking the confidence behind it.

"Okay? Okay, let's go."

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Scarlett

The suite is glorious.

Through the front door, the foyer table is lined with champagne glasses for the taking, so we each grab one and proceed into the main den. I know what this room is meant for, but that doesn't make it any less of a wonder to behold.

Everywhere I look, people are fucking—tables, chairs, couches, and even the floor. Like a burning car on the side of the highway, I find it hard to stop watching.

Standing around the entwined couples are a bunch of schmoozers, all sipping their glasses of champagne as if they're completely unaware of their surroundings.

Pulling Penelope closer, I ask, "Can we go to the balcony for a cigarette? It's a little overwhelming in here." I need some goddamn air.

Stepping over the half-naked bodies in our path, we make our way through the den to the balcony on the other side of the room. Outside, I immediately spot three men fucking one woman in a hot tub, plus a few more couples on some lounge chairs.

Not really the space I was looking for, but I'll take what I can get.

I grab the smokes from my clutch to share one with Penelope as we stare out over the railing, trying my best to act like everything is normal .

It hasn't escaped me that Casanova and Broody weren't a part of the crowd inside, at

least not that I saw. The Rainbow Room is a penthouse suite that takes up the entire 12 th floor, so I'm sure there are bedrooms by the dozen that I just couldn't see from the foyer.

I can't help but wonder if tonight is all part of their game. Did they encourage me to come tonight just to fuck with me and totally blow me off? Will they take another girl instead, when they see that I'm with The Prince? Or maybe they finally get the hint that I'm not interested in playing anymore.

Not likely.

"Alright, if I'm gonna do this, I'm going to need something a lot stronger than champagne," I lightheartedly exclaim.

Pen smiles before dragging me back inside to the kitchen where a bartender is serving mixed drinks. As always, we order our signature cocktails and set off to explore the suite.

Probably not the best idea, but hey. It's a party.

The sex definitely isn't limited to the den. Each closed door we pass is emitting loud sounds of pleasure. Spanking, moaning, screaming, crying, muffled screaming, pleading. Every single animalistic sound you can imagine a human making—they're echoing through the air around us.

One room at the end of a hall is set up like a mini movie theater, with the large screen playing a news station's broadcast of the ball drop. It's almost an hour until the new year hits, and it's starting to look like I won't be receiving my midnight kiss after all.

We return to the kitchen and throw back as many drinks as we can to pass the time, but I'm not too worried because at the very least, we'll have each other. It's not like

we're strangers to kissing at parties anyway.

As we're taking our third shot, two delicious men in pressed suits walk up to us, and I finally let out a breath of relief. The Prince brought a friend with him, and Pen attaches to him almost immediately. When they ask us to join them in one of the bedrooms, we give each other a quick glance of approval before they lead us away, hand in hand.

This is happening.

"All The Time" by Jeremih, Lil Wayne, and Natasha Mosely is playing on the surround-sound speakers spread out around the suite, and I'm fucking loving this new vibe. As soon as we make it into what seems like the only available bedroom, we're all on each other in an instant.

I lock lips with The Prince, and Penelope straddles her guy on the bed to kiss his neck. The Prince steps backwards until his knees hit the edge, pulling me down onto his lap to mirror the other couple.

I'm so ready for this. I've been a pent-up mess since Christmas Eve with Skylar, and I don't even care that Pen is about to watch me get fucked. I guess I'm going to watch her too.

I know the alcohol is running deep in my veins when the euphoria sets in. The Prince kisses down my neck, trailing from my throat all the way to the swell of my breasts, and I throw my head back with a low groan as I savor the attention to my sensitive and neglected skin. His lips suck fresh bruises into my tender flesh, and I squeeze my thighs around his hips, grinding down on his cock to seek the friction I so desperately need.

Something about Eden sets my soul and body on fire. I don't know if it's the

atmosphere, the superb bartending skills, or something else...but I've never felt as free and transcendent as I do when I'm here.

As if perfectly scheduled to ruin my buzz, the door to our room crashes open behind me. I don't even get the chance to turn around and see what the commotion is about before I'm being lifted off The Prince's lap, thrown over someone's shoulder, and carried out of the room.

From a distance, I hear Penelope and the two men going off about what the fuck just happened, but we're already at the end of the hallway and reentering the den of degenerates .

I kick and scream to the best of my ability, but the position I'm in is making me lightheaded, and every kick just results in a hard thwack to my ass. Not one person has run up to save me or even ask if I'm safe. They all think it's part of the party's shenanigans, but I'm in trouble.

Real, ass-spanking, punishing trouble.

We pass through to the opposite side of the den, but before I can scream one last time for help, we enter a bedroom and the door slams shut behind us.

I'm thrown down onto the bed, but I'm quick to gather my bearings now that the blood has drained from my head. Rising to my knees, I turn to confront him, absolutely fuming. "What the hell do you think you're doing? I was fucking busy!"

SMACK.

A hand strikes me so hard that I fall to my side with a gasp, instinctively grabbing my cheek to soothe the singed skin. When I look back, they're both standing at the side of the bed with their arms crossed—dressed to the nines in navy-blue suits.

In what I think is a sly move, I slide from the bed and charge at Casanova, shoving his chest with both hands to offset his balance.

He grabs my wrists, forcing them down and around his waist, effectively locking me in close with my arms trapped behind his back. I struggle to break free, but he somehow ensnares both of my wrists with one hand, using the other to rip my hair back until we're face to face.

Panting heavily against each other's mouths, we share a cloud of hot, angry air before he attacks. He kisses me with such fervor—such passion and heat—that I can't breathe anymore. For a moment, I almost forget how pissed I am at him for stealing me away from what could have been a new and exciting experience.

He finally pulls away to give me the chance to breathe, only to mock my intelligence. "Did you think we forgot about you? What, you don't trust us to follow through?" he asks with a smirk .

My lips are swollen, tingling with every word. "Is that a serious question? When have you ever followed through with me?"

All they do is leave me hanging, waiting like a dog for its bone.

"But you came."

"You threatened me!" I shout, but his face twitches at the accusation, like he doesn't fucking know what I'm talking about. I turn to Broody, the person who most definitely does. "I found his note. I got his texts. Coming to my apartment was one thing, but my dad's house? That's really fucked up, even for you two."

His entire demeanor flips like a switch before he releases me. "What the fuck did you do?" At first, I think he's talking to me until he turns to Broody. "You left a note at

her house?”

“Don’t look at me like that.” Broody gestures toward me. “We wanted her to come, and now she’s here.”

Casanova faces me again, cupping my face between his palms. “He can be a real prick sometimes.” It’s hard to think when he’s thumbing my sore cheek, making me melt into his touch. “Stay with us.” Kiss. “We’re all finally together. Let’s enjoy it.” Kiss. “No Red Room, just the three of us, here. Let us make you feel good.” Kiss.

I’m startled by the warm hand grazing my neckline when Broody presses himself against my backside, trapping me between them. He swipes the hair off my shoulder before nosing into the crook of my neck, his other hand firmly planted on my waist.

Fighting through the pleasure and sensual touches heating me from the outside in, I lean back into Broody and ask, “Are you going to hurt me?”

“Yes.”

“But...” Casanova cuts in, sensing my tension. “You’re going to like it. I promise.” He thumbs my bottom lip, coaxing my mouth open for a kiss that requires little effort on my part.

Being with them is always effortless when they take control—like two brilliant puppeteers pulling the strings of their broken marionette .

I have to make a decision. I may have chosen to come tonight, but this is my final chance to walk away if that’s what I truly want.

But do I?

How can I walk away when the man behind me is running his tongue from my neck to my ear, electrifying my skin? How can I walk away when the man in front of me is devouring my lips, our moans harmonizing in the most beautiful way?

All I can muster is a nod, eager to keep our lips locked so I don't have to feel responsible for letting them play me again.

Is it really my decision if I don't speak it aloud?

Casanova's instant smile breaks our contact, and when he whispers, "That's our good girl," the white flag of surrender waves frantically. "Why don't we show our friend how well you can take his cock, hm? Fuck, you look so beautiful tonight. It'll be a shame to ruin that pretty dress."

Broody is a lot less broody now, slipping from behind me to take his place on the edge of the bed. The sound of his zipper opening makes me shiver, but Casanova gives my cheek a soothing stroke of encouragement before nudging me into action.

Without the two of them blocking my vision, I examine the room they brought me to. We seem to be in the master bedroom, but it's too dark in here to see the entirety of it. The only source of light comes from LED strips lining the top trim of the walls, casting a sultry glow of red and purple.

The bed is massive, clearly fitted to host an orgy. I wonder how they claimed this room before anyone else could, though. Did they get here early and block people from entering?

Not that it matters anyway. It's ours now.

Broody sits there, leaning back on one arm while sliding his other hand up and down his shaft, getting worked up for me. He eyes me curiously as I lift my dress and kneel

between his knees, shifting uncomfortably as I try to steady myself on the ground.

I'm hesitant to touch him. We may have shared something private on my birthday, but he's the one who broke into my dad's house—something that apparently wasn't discussed and agreed upon.

Now, I want nothing more than to hurt him back.

I don't realize I've been absentmindedly tearing a hole into my dress until a hand covers mine with a tight squeeze. "Don't even think about it. You agreed to play, so be nice." Casanova's voice is stern in my ear, and when I glance over my shoulder, I catch him kneeling on the floor beside me.

Like a good dog on a leash, I heel. For now.

Broody waits for me to fist his cock before leaning back on both hands, obviously apprehensive after witnessing my scolding. He thinks I'm going to hurt him, and that's good enough for me.

I still might.

I lean forward to pull him into my mouth, sucking and hollowing my cheeks to apply pressure as I sink down further. Carefully, I uncurl my lips and scrape my teeth against him when I pull back.

He jumps back and responds with a sharp hiss, "I'm not going to put up with your bratty shit like he does, I'll tell you that right now. Keep fucking pushing me, Ruby, and I'll rip every one of your goddamn teeth out."

Casanova grabs me so roughly around the nape of my neck that I wail in pain. "Do I need to find another way to make you behave?" he asks. When I shake my head

vigorously, he lets out a pleased hum, swiping a few strands of hair away from my face. “Good, then open up or I’ll get the gag. That’s it, just like before.”

I’m doing my best to open my throat and breathe through my nose like he taught me, but I start to panic when his hand presses down on the back of my head.

I’m seriously going to die by dick.

He’s choking me on Broody’s cock, forcing me down until it lodges in the back of my throat. The lack of air has me fighting for my life. I push on his thighs to lift myself off, but Broody grabs my wrists and yanks backwards, using my arms to keep himself suspended.

Just when I think I can’t take it anymore, Casanova lets go of my head and allows me a gasp of air. Even then, Broody has me stretched so far forward, his cock barely leaves my lips before I’m falling back onto it.

To avoid further punishment, I use my tongue to caress his shaft when I take him in, abandoning my malice. He seems to like it this time, and though I’m not happy about him winning, I’m still on a mission to find his weakness. I need to find that thing that will make him bend—aside from his blatant jealousy issues—and maybe it’s here in the tip of his dick like it is for his friend.

When I give extra attention to the frenulum, he moans so seductively, I have to stop my pride from flaring up, else I’ll fall right into his trap again.

“Fuuuck. Did you teach her this shit?” He rewards my handiwork by stroking his fingers lightly across my skin in appreciation, easing up the tension on my arms.

Casanova chuckles, clearly reminiscing about our own time together when I did this for him. “Nope. Little minx does it all on her own.”

Immediately, Broody's nails dig crescents into my wrist where he was caressing me only moments ago. Apparently, the idea of me having some sexual experience outside of their torture room is just too much for this caveman to handle.

I've just about had it with this guy now. In retaliation, I bite the head of his cock when I come up for air, no longer giving a shit what they do to me.

As long as I make my point.

"God damnit! You fucking bitch, I swear—" Shoving me backwards, he forces me to the floor and climbs on top with a hand wrapped around my throat. His other hand pushes through my lips, where he curls his fingers around my bottom teeth and yanks on them—just like he threatened to .

"Alright, that's enough." Casanova pushes Broody off, then grabs me by the hair until I stumble to my feet. Pointing a finger in my face, he says, "Remember, we tried to do this the nice way. Take off your dress and sit on his lap."

Trying to fight against his hold, I shove at his chest, but he springs right back to tear at the sleeve of my dress. Instinctively, I swing my arm and land a slap across his cheek, stopping him dead in his tracks.

His head remains frozen in place where the strike left him, but I can see the rage building on his facial features. His brow tightens, his nostrils twitch, and his jaw clenches shut.

Shit.

When his hand shifts slightly at his hip and I hear the familiar sound of his knife flicking open, I'm the one to stiffen. The only movement I can manage is to raise my hands in defeat, pleading for mercy.

I didn't plan for this, but it always felt inevitable. I knew one of these days they were going to use it on me...like actually use it instead of just threatening me or leaving tiny wounds. That has to be their big plan for the Red Room. I can't think of anything worse, and I know that room is for the most dangerous kinks.

These guys obviously have a hard-on for knives, and I'm reminded of the cycling nightmare with my masked predator—the different ways he cuts and stabs me when he finally catches up to me in the woods.

I know these two wouldn't kill me, but how badly are they looking to hurt me?

“Do I have to cut you out of that dress, or are you going to be good and take it the fuck off yourself?” Casanova turns to face me and takes a few steps before pressing the knife into the dip of my throat. I've never seen him so angry.

“I-I'll be g-good.” I'm shaking, trembling with fear—or maybe arousal—but I quickly shed my dress and panties until I'm completely nude. They're still wearing their suits, of course, so I'm back to feeling like an exposed skeleton on display for their amusement .

Before I can take a step backwards to the bed, Broody grabs my waist and hoists me into his lap, throwing my calves over each of his thighs so my legs are fully spread. Really, I'm sitting more on his lower abdomen with the hairs on his groin scratching against my ass. I have no idea what the plan is here, and I can't control the hyperventilation that ensues when I run through all the possible scenarios in my head.

Loud shouts of glee suddenly boom from the den, and I can just barely make out what they're saying over my heavy breathing.

“Ten! . . . Nine!”

There's ten seconds until the ball drops, and I'm in the worst position I could have gotten myself into. I'm naked, sitting on the lap of some guy whose dick I just bit, and I'm about to be punished. There's no doubt about it.

But how badly?

"Eight! . . . Seven!"

Casanova creeps over to us and situates himself between our legs. Down comes his fly, and the beast returns, swollen and leaking from the tip. He strokes the length of it, staring directly at me with his lips pulled into a tight, unamused frown. Swiping his thumb over a bead of precum, he collects it on his fingertip before pushing it into my mouth.

"Six! . . . Five!"

He gets down on his knees and spits directly on my pussy, then runs his fingers through the moisture until I'm dripping wet. Not that I needed it, anyway; I've been squirming for their touch since the moment we entered the room.

I throw my head back, reveling in the attention to my clit when he starts circling his thumb around it. Broody wraps his arm around my shoulder to grab my throat, applying enough pressure to keep me still and unable to move my head.

"Four! . . . Three! "

Casanova must be doing something to Broody's dick that I can't see. He starts bucking up into my ass, a moan escaping the lips now wrapped around the space between my neck and shoulder when he bites into my tender flesh.

It doesn't take long to put together the fact that he was sucking Broody's cock to wet

it again, because I suddenly feel it brush against my inner thigh and it's as soaked as I am. The head slides up along my pussy, but instead of the penetrating pressure I'm expecting, something else happens.

I soon realize he's slotting his own cock into position, right on top of Broody's. They're both pushing slightly, stretching my entrance to accommodate the pair. They're stretching me to fit both of them, at the same time.

"Two! . . . One!"

The panic sets in and I fight. I wriggle as much as they'll allow me to, but Broody's hold keeps me trapped and Casanova plants a hand on my thigh to steady himself, bracing for impact.

I'm not going anywhere—literally or figuratively. I didn't leave when I had the chance to, so eager to finally have them, but now I'm sandwiched between them and physically incapable of doing anything but accepting it...exactly how they've always wanted me.

"Happy fucking New Year," Casanova taunts, just as I'm ripped open by the force of them.

Julian

In perfect unison, we thrust into her, digging our way inside.

I have to keep Skylar's dick in position so he doesn't slip, but with the proper guidance and stretch, we've got it handled. She's putting up a great fight, and if I didn't want to draw this out for as long as possible, I'd come right now just from the whole picture of it—the three of us, together.

I'll admit, I almost lost my cool when she slapped me. I've been hit plenty of times, sure, by my parents and prudes alike. It's sort of the reason I started coming to Eden's Deliverance in the first place. Normal chicks get scared off by the things I like in bed. A harmless suggestion turns into a smarting cheek and a woman running for her life.

The thing about Scarlett is, she does want it. She fights, she screams, she pushes...but she wants it. She wants us. She's just a fucking brat, and Skylar is right about me loving that from her, but even I have my limits.

I've been waiting months for this night to happen—for these cards to be laid out in the right order and at the right time—and nothing is keeping me from having this.

Not Skylar. Not her .

She won't stop screaming, so I shove my fingers into her mouth and press on her tongue, tucking my thumb under her chin to keep her in control.

Goddamn, she's so tight with the two of us in there together. My dick feels like it's

losing circulation, but I can't seem to care. A quick glance at Skylar over her shoulder tells me he's struggling not to bust too.

What's the harm in turning this into a little game of 'who can last the longest?'

I slide my hand from her thigh and reach beneath them to grab his sack and fondle his balls, squeezing a little bit for the added pressure. His dick flexes in response as he spits out a reluctant moan, biting into Scarlett's shoulder to quiet himself like he did when I sucked him off a few minutes ago.

That just gets her worked up more, and now she's wriggling her hips, shifting our cocks inside her when we're already holding on for dear life.

Skylar and I pump into her in turns, careful not to push the other one out. The slow drag of his dick against mine is really putting me into a dangerous headspace. It's taking all I have not to grab her hips and pound into her like the psycho they both think I am.

In and out...in and out...in and out.

I'm losing my shit and need to switch things up.

When my cock slowly slides out, she makes this soft whimper against my fingers in her mouth—like she's mourning the loss of it. "Don't worry, darling. I just want to give you a reward for taking us like such a good girl."

I glance down and get a good look at them, knotted together like dogs in heat. It's fucking hot, and she's still swollen and stretched from the both of us. He slowly rocks his hips into her as well as he can from his position, but I tap the side of his thigh to get his attention. "Move up on the bed, plant your feet so you can really get in there," I say.

They're both pretty good at following instructions...for the most part . He pulls out and slides back on the mattress, but she lets him readjust without taking the opportunity to run. I'm half-expecting her to, but she doesn't move an inch .

I'll take that as a good sign.

Once he's comfortable, I climb onto the bed and crawl between their legs. When I look up at her and notice she's already staring at me with dazed eyes, I realize I've trained her to do this—to watch me when I give her head.

I'd bet she's never seen two men together though, and all three of us know just how excited she got in the woods from watching us kiss. Without breaking our gaze, I take hold of Skylar's dick and slide it into my mouth, taking him slow and deep. I'm expecting his groan, but I'm genuinely surprised when her mouth opens with a little 'oh.'

I only suck him off for a few seconds before lining him up at her pussy again, and they both take the hint. Scarlett's propped up with her hands on his chest, keeping her eyes on me when she sinks down onto him.

We may be playing her, but she's playing us right back. Throwing her head back, she makes a big show of it for my sake. This broad knows what she's doing to us. I should thank her, because it's definitely one of the most erotic things I've ever seen.

Luckily, I know how her body works, and she abandons her little show when I cover her clit with my tongue. I lick slowly—exactly how she likes it—giving it the attention she deserves but throw in a nip of my teeth for what she did to Sky.

Despite the yelp she lets out, I can literally see her pussy constrict around his dick in response, and know it's only adding to her impending climax.

She's amazing to watch when she comes. Her voice disappears completely for a few seconds in a silent scream, then she releases this deep, animalistic groan I've never heard another woman make.

Chicks think we want the porno screams and those tight, high-pitched moans. We don't—at least not me. I want her to be so overcome by her ecstasy that she can't control the noises coming from her mouth, no matter how ugly they may seem to someone else.

“Fuck, I can't hold it much longer like this,” Skylar groans .

Yeah, he's losing his shit, but that's no surprise with the way her pussy is suffocating him. Luckily, I'm here to help. Kneeling on the bed beside them, I pry her lifeless limbs from his body and cradle her in my arms to reposition her somewhere else.

Earlier, Sky and I set up restraints on the headboard for what we have planned, so I place her in the right spot. Taking advantage of her come-drunken stupor, I take the time to carefully bind her arms.

She's still pretty hazy and doesn't seem to mind—seeing as she's enjoyed every other time we've tied her up—but when she sees the knife in my hand, things change. Kicking her legs out, she wrenches her head from side to side while she pleads for me not to hurt her.

Fuck, the begging.

It has the opposite effect of what she's hoping for; my cock only twitches in excitement. Climbing onto the bed, I trap her thighs between mine and grab her face to get her refocused on me.

“I need you to trust me. Haven't I proved that I know what you like?” I ask.

She's still begging as tears flow down her cheeks, soaking my fingertips. "Please, please, please don't. I was good, I was good, I was—"

I immediately cut her off and attempt to curb the panic. "Yes, you were very good for us, darling. This isn't a punishment," I clarify, stroking my thumb across her cheek. "You have your safe word. If you really can't take it, I'll stop. But I'm begging you to try. Do this with us, please."

She doesn't answer, doesn't nod, doesn't shake her head. The only movement that comes is the quivering of her lip and the flick of her eyes to the knife every so often.

She's trying to yield to us, and I'll take that as a win.

"Get over here." I beckon Skylar, and he plants himself on the bed against one of her hips while I climb off her and kneel on the other side.

With a suggestive nod to her chest, he catches on quickly and pops her nipple into his mouth. I watch for a second as he keenly swirls his tongue around with a hunger I've never seen in him before. She responds well to him, bucking her hips into the air as she seeks a different kind of sensation.

Taking a deep inhale, I force myself to come to terms with the idea she may use her safe word, and I'd be a real fuck not to honor it. I may not want to, but I also don't want to torture her the way Skylar does. I have such a strong feeling that she'll enjoy it, but if she really doesn't like it, there's not much I can do.

Starting at her navel, I run my tongue all the way up to her sternum, watching the goosebumps erupt across every inch of her skin. I want her sensitivity at its peak before I make the first cut. Since Skylar is on her left tit, I opt for the right one.

It's been too fucking long since either of us have gotten to indulge in this fine

pleasure—we've been saving it for her. The problem is, we'd rather not involve her at all if it means she might discover things she shouldn't know about our practices . But we've become so fucked in the head over Scarlett, keeping her distanced from it feels impossible now.

Especially now that Dario has his sights on her.

Skylar's been kind enough not to blame me yet, but I know how he must feel about her first night at Eden. If I hadn't fucked with her and pushed her away right off the bat, she would have never been vulnerable enough to fall into Dario's trap.

Now, we're stuck. She's in a viper pit of danger but has absolutely no idea, and we can't even tell her without exposing ourselves. It's probably our fault she's in this position, but that's a small part of why we need to convince her to leave him and stay with us. We may be one of the biggest dangers to her, but we can also protect her.

I shake the thought from my head, eager to stay in this moment without catastrophizing. The tip of my knife presses into the swell of her breast, but I steal a glance at her first. She must have been watching me before, but now her eyes are clenched shut as she braces for the pain .

I take it for the gesture it's meant to be and sink the blade into her flesh—just shallow enough to bleed without leaving a scar. I trace a line down about two inches until a good amount of blood has pooled into the center of her chest. Skylar tracks every movement, his eyes going wild.

“Open your eyes,” I command. Reluctantly, she obeys, looking like she might be sick until he and I dive in.

I need her to see what she does to us—what we've been waiting for.

Skylar and I fight over the steadily streaming crimson rivulets, flattening our tongues to scoop up as much as we can. In the heat of it all, we meet in the middle, crashing our mouths together in a kiss that's all teeth and tongues. He pushes the blood he gathered into my mouth, and I feed it right back to him with a mixture of what I caught myself.

“Oh fuck...”

We break from our embrace, turning to find the source of the mousy expletive. Scarlett's watching us with a stunned expression on her face, practically drooling.

Yeah, I knew our girl would fucking love it.

Neither of us have to guide the other when we're sharing one mindset like this. We both crawl up her chest to hover by her face, but Skylar kisses her first.

She eats that shit right up.

Blood smears across her lips, and I'm ravenous at the sight. It's not easy, but I force the angle and weasel my tongue into the space where their mouths meet.

We're all lost in it, sometimes stealing deep kisses from one another, sometimes sharing them at the same time. At some point, I decide to go back in for her pussy, leaving the two of them to suck tongues as I make another shallow cut on her inner thigh.

He swallows her resounding yelp, but she still hasn't said her safe word, so I continue, gathering the blood on my tongue before lapping at her sensitive clit.

She squirms, folding her knees around my head to pull me in closer, and I'm more than happy to oblige. It doesn't take as long to make her come this time. As soon as I

hear that fierce groan, I rise to my knees and toss her calves over my thighs before slamming into her cunt.

Skylar must be jealous, because he climbs on top of her chest to stick his dick in her wanting mouth. She sucks him down without a fight, humming around his length while he fucks her face. I guess she's over being angry with him.

He's moaning, I'm grunting, she's squealing. The three of us fuck one another in the most beautiful display of teamwork I've ever seen.

Being college jocks gives us more opportunities to have a threesome than attending Eden does. It's not explicitly in the rules whether you can take multiple partners or not, but because of Rainbow Nights, nobody seems eager to participate during regular visits.

However, the simplicity of having a house off campus means we can bring girls back whenever we want to. We just can't do the things we actually want to do, or they'll get scared.

Now, there's a clear difference between the average threesome and the depravity we're enjoying with Scarlett, but we make do. Like I said, women usually run screaming if I open up about my kinks, so the pickings are slim. That's not to say I'm trying to convince her into this with us because she's our only option—I just don't want anyone else. I've been with other Ruby women, and it's fine.

Just fine.

I couldn't say exactly what my problem is or why I won't give up Scarlett to go backwards. I would be lying if I said her innocence wasn't extremely appealing, but that sounds a little more predatory than I mean for it to.

I'm not proud of the things Skylar and I have gotten ourselves into—things we know Dario is deep-rooted in—but I can't complain either. I gave myself over to something bigger than myself, and I was rewarded in return.

I have a decent life now; I was able to leave my trashy home and put myself through college with the purpose of injecting some actual good into this shitty world. Plus, Skylar and I have never been more bonded .

Scarlett is something else to me, and she's even more to Sky.

Maybe I do like the prospect of squeezing her into the mold of what I like sexually. Maybe she's different from other Ruby women because she doesn't play the helpless victim, she bites back like no one I've met before, and the fire in her soul reminds me a little of myself. Maybe it's because she keeps coming back, no matter what we do to her—like she's as obsessed with us as we are with her.

The thing about obsession is that it doesn't always come with a reason. It's irrational, toxic, overwhelming, and sometimes hypnotic. It's mind-altering.

Whatever the reason—be it her pliable innocence, her brattiness, or her willingness to put up with our crazy asses—I want her to be mine more than I've wanted anything in my life.

Skylar's erratic thrusting comes to a halt with an embarrassingly stuttered grunt. He fists her hair and buries himself in the back of her throat, his hips twitching as he comes on her sweet tongue. She chokes on the invasion but perseveres like the good little girl she is.

Guess I win after all.

I don't keep them waiting, immediately spilling my jizz into her swollen pussy at the

sight of him abusing her pretty lips. She tightens around my cock as if begging me not to leave, but she doesn't have to worry about that anymore.

My hips draw back slowly, and a stream of cum drips from her when I remove myself. Scooping up every drop before it falls, I stuff it back inside her with my fingers.

Scarlett hasn't yelled at us for the unprotected sex, but I imagine that's because she knows we saw her birth control when we snooped through her room. After watching my cum flow from her pussy, I don't think I could bear to use a condom.

However, this is the part I don't love dealing with. Taking one for the team, I interrupt my afterglow to uncuff her wrists before Skylar and I collapse onto the bed at each side of her spent body.

That was really something .

It's probably not as perverse as we'd have liked to get, but props to him for sharing her without ripping my head off, and props to me for my infallible puppeteering.

Together, we made magic, and my little chemist was the catalyst.

Already, I'm thinking about what else she might let me do to her—us, rather. Now that we've both had her, I don't see us ever fucking her separately. At least...I thought so, until Skylar started this mission to steal her outside of Eden. He made it pretty clear what he thought about me kissing her on their porch, so bring on the territorial pissing match.

She's not his by any right.

I can only hope the trust she's gained in me tonight is enough to finally get her to put

on the red mask. That's when the real fun begins.

Skylar

Scarlett's shoveling food into her mouth like a starved woman, as if I didn't just feed her a gallon of cum last night.

My eyes stay glued to her lips like a moth to a flame, because I know exactly how that mouth feels wrapped around me. I know the texture and taste of her tongue, and I know the shape her lips twist into when she orgasms.

I know what her blood tastes like.

"Skylar, baby, you're awfully quiet tonight." My mom's voice pulls me out of the fantasy replaying in my head from yesterday. "Did you party a little too hard last night?"

She doesn't know the half of it. Only three people at this table know exactly what happened at midnight, even if one is unaware of the full extent.

Scarlett looks up for a second—apparently curious to hear the answer to my mother's pestering question—but returns her attention to the plate in front of her when our eyes inevitably meet.

I haven't stopped staring since she sat down.

She's not giving anything away, but I'm dying to know how she feels about what went down. We only had a few uninterrupted minutes of post-coital bliss before she redressed and ran from the room without a single word .

Julian and I didn't know what to make of it; we were confused, because it seemed like everything went fucking perfectly in the end. She finally let us have her, and then she left us.

The same way she left me after I had her as myself.

I turn my gaze to Mom, blood suddenly boiling in frustration. "Nothing special. The boys had a party at the frat house, we just got back pretty late and haven't had much sleep."

She smiles sweetly but doesn't press further, thankfully willing to let it go without making a big deal of it.

"What about you, Red?"

My eyes shoot to Julian across the table, trying to shut him up before he does more damage. He knows she hates that name, but for some reason he's trying to fuck with her. Now is not the fucking time. It's too soon, and she's clearly still processing it.

Scarlett glowers at him in response, her face bearing a striking resemblance to the one she wore last night when Jules called me out for the note in her bedroom.

How could I forget? She was so angry she bit my fucking dick.

I'm not into the bratty shit, but fuck. Seeing the fire in her eyes really gets me going and fuels my own explosive desire. I want her so badly it hurts.

In similar fashion to what happened last night, she completely ignores him and excuses herself from the table to disappear upstairs.

I kick the fucker under the table, but he just smirks back at me. He's going to ruin

everything, and I've never regretted it more than I do now that I let him be a part of this.

For hours after dinner, Scarlett doesn't leave her room. Julian and I stay downstairs after Mom and Gene go up to bed, but she still hasn't come down.

The porch feels empty without her, and I hate that I've gotten so used to us sharing nightly smokes. Her absence shouldn't feel this heavy.

A nasty thought pops into my mind. It's cruel, but I never claimed to be a saint. Pulling the burner phone from my pocket, I type out a message and send it, ignoring Julian's blatant hovering as he tries to read the screen.

"What's that about?" he asks, nodding to the phone. "I didn't even bring my mask with me. Did you?"

It takes a minute to process the words, my attention completely focused on the three dots that keep flashing at the bottom of the screen before disappearing again.

Five minutes go by with no response, so I text again.

I tuck the phone away before lighting up a new cigarette. Now, we wait. "You'll see."

Julian looks annoyed, clearly frustrated by my reluctance to explain. I would tell him, but I don't want to jinx it. If I've pegged her correctly, she should be storming down the stairs in a matter of seconds.

But she doesn't storm out.

The glass door slides open slowly, and out steps a red-faced Scarlett, tears fresh in her eyes as she walks sheepishly towards us on the opposite side of the deck. I only

glance up for a moment before turning back to Julian as if we were engaged in an important conversation.

Let her come to me.

I'm a fucking asshole, and it's probably worse that I let Jules read the texts over my shoulder, but I can't stand not being around her anymore.

I need to feel her presence and her fire.

I need to feel like she's mine .

Whatever I have to do to make that happen is worth it to me. I don't care about the consequences.

"Skylar," she starts, huddling up against my shoulder to whisper in my ear, "could we watch movies again in the living room?"

I turn to her and feign bafflement at the appearance of her blotchy skin and swollen eyes. My hand rises to cup her cheek as I thumb away a loose tear. Thankfully, she leans into my touch, quickly closing her eyes to hide when I ask, "Scarlett, what's wrong? What happened?"

Her lids open to reveal two golden-caramel irises staring up at me, glazed and wet. It only takes a second before she shamefully locks them shut again. I'm not proud to see her looking so distraught at my hand—I'd rather it be because I fucked that look out of her—but it means I have her wrapped around my finger.

I don't know how else to deal with the spiraling thoughts I have about her. What's even worse is that I have no idea what's going on inside her head. She's been the model 'bigger person' between the two of us since Thanksgiving when I opened up

about my feelings. I mean, I guess I didn't straight up tell her how I feel, but it was implied: I want her, I want to share something that's worth a damn, and I've wanted it for a while.

She rejected me so nimbly, like my feelings were a joke she'd discovered the punchline to on her own. She all but spat in my face with it before crawling back just because Broody threatened her. She proved that I'm no more than a warm body to use for protection when she's lonely or scared .

"Scarlett," I repeat, holding her round, puffy cheeks between both of my palms. "Answer me. What's wrong?"

She opens her eyes, and I wish she hadn't. Tears pour down her face as she resists my comfort, shaking her head in denial. "I can't tell you."

The only thing left to do is channel my inner Broody . If she's so scared of him—of me—my only hope is to show her I can be worse.

I slide one hand down to wrap around her throat, applying pressure to her pulse point with my thumb. My other hand travels back to tangle in her hair, using a tight grip to pull her head back in a demanding embrace. She needs to understand how fragile she is in my hands. I could do so much to her if I wanted to, but she needs to be afraid that I will .

"I won't ask again. Tell me, now."

Scarlett's brow furrows, and it's a good thing I know exactly how to read her. She's comparing me to them . "You swear, you don't know about Eden?" she asks.

Her eyes flick back and forth between my own, waiting for me to break—waiting for me to reveal that I'm who she's long suspected me to be. But that won't happen.

She can never find out who we are.

I glance away for a second and notice something peeking through the collar of her shirt. Releasing her throat, I trail my fingers down and stretch the fabric to reveal what's underneath.

Two arched rows of tiny horizontal bruises line the space between her neck and shoulder. I brush my thumb lightly across the skin there, my mind circling back to last night when I bit her.

I'd already been inside her twice on my own, but Julian's punishment turned out to be more than I could have hoped for. We didn't plan it that way. Really, we didn't have any sort of plan going into the night—aside from the restraints. As a matter of fact, we were late to the fucking party because we couldn't decide on how to approach the situation, only settling on the fact that we'd have to play it by ear .

When we found her with Dario , all hell broke loose. I've never seen him act so impulsively, but when he ripped her off the guy's lap, I knew she was done for. I wasn't about to get in his way and risk ending up on the wrong side of his knife. I saw it in his eyes; he's not letting her go, not anymore.

Not after last night.

I don't share well, and he knows that. I was clear that I didn't want him in this, but he convinced me anyway, and now we're caught in this fucking predicament. I want her for myself. There's no denying that last night was a blast, and we've shared women before, but this isn't some trashy college hookup.

This is Scarlett McKenna we're talking about.

Scarlett, the woman wearing an imprint of my teeth marks. The woman who chose

me twice without me having to play a game of chase. Scarlett, the woman who makes my blood boil and my skin set ablaze whenever she's around me. The woman who moans so perfectly for me, like a siren singing her song of death.

She's got her claws in me.

I won't give her up for anything or anyone.

"Is that who did this?" My thumb presses gently into her neck, turning the teeth marks from red to white as the color leaves her skin. "Who is Eden?"

I'm such a fuck.

Her eyelids flutter as she strains to hold our gaze through the tears, ultimately closing them as her shoulders slump in defeat. "No," she whispers.

"Then who?"

"I-I can't—"

Her teeth click when I thrust my palm against her chin and wrap my fingers around the bottom of her jaw, shutting her mouth. "Either you tell me now, or I find out on my own. I bet Penelope would be more than happy to explain what the fuck's got you so worked up," I warn.

I wouldn't talk to Penelope if my life depended on it, but she doesn't know that. Her eyes light up with panic, and she digs her nails into my wrist until I let her go .

"No! Skylar, please. I don't want to say, it doesn't matter. It d—" When I pull on her hair and threaten to silence her again, she finally explains. "It's this club we go to, Eden's Deliverance. It's-it's a sex club, alright?"

Tell me something I don't know.

“And?” I raise an eyebrow, trying to act unimpressed so she feels more comfortable sharing without fear of judgment.

“That's where I was last night when this happened.” She tries to look down at her shoulder, but I don't give her an inch, locking my fingers tightly in her hair. “I was with somebody. I have been for a little while, I'm sorry.”

Her chin drops in shame, but I press my thumb underneath and tilt it back. She's apologizing, and I'm so genuinely surprised by it, my feigned indifference almost slips.

“You don't need to be sorry, Red. You made it clear that we weren't exclusive,” I point out, but when I see the hurt in her eyes, I deflect. “Did he do something else to you?”

Fuck, I think we really broke her last night. Suddenly, she bursts into a violent sob, the tears flowing too quickly for me to wipe them away.

“He got my phone number somehow, and now...and now...” It takes a minute before she calms down enough to catch her breath. “Now he's threatening me. And you. I didn't mean for any of this to happen, I just wanted to try something new, and everything was fine until it wasn't, and now—”

I can't handle the crying, I can't handle the ranting. I didn't want this. “Stop. Scarlett, stop,” I say, pulling her closer to wrap my arms around her. One hand cradles the back of her head while I lightly stroke her hair, and the other is pressed against her back, keeping her tight against my chest. “Don't go there anymore. Don't see him.”

She nestles her cheek into the warmth of my sweater and whispers, “He'll come for

me. He'll hurt me again, or he'll go after you."

"Nobody's coming after me," I assure. "And nobody's coming after you, I promise. I'll make sure of it."

"He knows where I live, though. He knows things about me. On my birthday, he broke into my room and almost killed me."

That gets Julian's attention.

His head shoots up, and for a second, I had forgotten he was even here. The scowl on his face proves otherwise; he's been listening the whole time. I never told him about what happened on her birthday.

Oops.

"You know Julian and I live off campus too. We can help. Nothing is going to happen to you, I swear it. But you have to cut this off before you get hurt. Don't go to that place anymore. It's clearly not safe." I know she's considering it when she wraps her arms around my waist to hug me back. "Come on, let's set up the couches. We'll stay with you."

I turn to Jules with a hard stare, making it clear that he'd better shut his mouth and follow my lead. He may have been in charge last night, but that's not the case anymore. This is my house and my girl.

"Yeah," he says, meeting my gaze, however defiantly. "Yeah, Red. We'll help out."

Leading her into the house with my hand on the small of her back, we never break contact—not even when we reach the living room. I tuck in behind her on the couch, throwing my arm around her waist while she curls her body into mine.

Julian watches us from a couch across the room, throwing knives at me with just his eyes. He's jealous, but there's nothing he can do to change the facts of the situation. She's mine.

Scarlett

For once, I've kept a promise.

The last thing in the world I'd ever expect is for Skylar Cole to be offering me help, but he's been so amazing since New Year's. We made a deal that he wouldn't tell Penelope what was going on as long as I agreed to check in with him to make sure I'm safe. I made it extremely clear that she couldn't know about what happened to me.

Call it shame or guilt, but I'd take Broody and Casanova's wrath over Penelope's any day. If she knew the truth about the Halloween party, my birthday, or the Post-it...she'd be furious. This is her home too, and they broke in here to defile me. Twice . My irresponsible choices have put her life in danger, not to mention my dad's .

Lying to her has made weekends even more difficult, though. I never have a good enough explanation for why I won't go to Eden anymore, and I can tell she's suspicious. Whenever she asks me about what happened on New Year's, I beat around the bush and give some excuse or another, saying I ran out of there before anything could happen.

But something did happen.

Something happened to me.

I still don't know how to come to terms with the events of that night and what it did to me internally. Truthfully, it scared the shit out of me...but not for the reasons I

thought it would.

Double penetration via two maniacal men wasn't on my New Year's resolution list, but it happened anyway. I didn't go to the party expecting to get cut up, but it happened anyway. I couldn't have anticipated for the two men to fight like wolves over blood pouring from a wound on my chest, but it happened anyway.

I didn't want to find enjoyment in any of it...but I did anyway.

Casanova shouldn't be able to read me so well. He doesn't know anything about me, and there's no way he could have known how I would react. Yet somehow, he was right. Somehow, he knew I would love it.

He insisted I would take pleasure in the things they did to me, and even when I denied it until I was blue in the face, I ended up reveling in every second of disgusting debasement. I licked my own blood from their tongues, for christ's sake.

Who does that?

I don't want to find out. I'm not one to kink shame, but I don't want to find out what's on the other side of the Red Room's door. I have too much going on in my life right now.

This journey was meant to help me discover what's out there for me and to find sexual gratification in strangers who wanted the same thing. But I never wanted this. If my big sexual revelation is the fact that I'm apparently into repulsive debauchery...I don't want any part of it.

They can keep it to themselves.

Penelope hasn't taken my rejection of Eden's Deliverance well, but we've finally

found a middle ground. Without going into detail, I explained that I'm only comfortable visiting the local watering hole for now.

Pennbriar has a dive bar on the corner of Main Street where we used to go out before she introduced me to Eden, so here we are, making a reappearance.

It's been a month since the New Year's party, and I haven't been back since. My head has also never felt clearer. It's like that place put some sort of spell on me every time I went, and without obsessing over my mask color or whether I'll see those guys or not, I finally feel at peace.

Skylar was right, too.

I stuck to my guns and ignored Broody's threats, and I haven't heard another word from him since. They had to know what they did would scare me away, else they wouldn't have waited so long that they felt the need to trick me into it. They knew I'd never come back.

"Hello! Earth to Scarlett," Penelope calls to me, waving her hand in front of my eyes. I hadn't realized I was spacing so badly.

I give a hearty chuckle, turning my attention to her. "Sorry, Pen. What were you saying?"

"I wasn't saying anything." She points her nose at me, and for a second, I'm confused until I realize she's gesturing to something over my shoulder.

Grabbing the bar counter, I spin my stool and come face to face with the most handsome man I've ever seen. If I thought Broody's luscious hair or Casanova's chiseled jaw were things to fawn over, I was mistaken.

They've got nothing on this man with his curly brown locks and trimmed beard. He has a prominent nose that stands out from his face, but the feature makes sense when he opens his mouth.

"Hello, bellezza . May I buy you a drink?" he asks. His thick Italian accent rings through my ears and straight to my clit, like a fucking aphrodisiac.

"You," I start, swaying slightly when I poke him in the sternum, "can buy me anything you'd like." I may have already had a drink or three, so I can't be blamed for my behavior.

While the man gets the bartender's attention, I turn to Penelope with my mouth agape, slapping her arm in exasperation.

Ding.

God, what a time to be cock blocked.

Pulling out my phone to check the messages, I roll my eyes to nobody in particular when I see that Skylar has texted me not only once, but five times in the past hour. I never answered his text from last night when he offered to come over if I needed him, so now he's blowing my shit up.

Jesus, this guy. I put my phone face-down on the bar and tune out the incessant buzzing that ensues. I've got a date with a delicious foreigner.

The man returns with two bay breezes for us girls, and I accept it graciously, even though it's not my drink of choice. Neither is the beer he's sipping on, but I'll let it slide on account of the fact he's well on his way to making it into my bed tonight.

"So, stranger," I say before wrapping my lips suggestively around the straw in my

drink, “what’s your name, and what are you doing here ?”

“Dario.” He flashes me a shiny smile, his eyes lingering on my mouth for a second too long before meeting my gaze. “You can call me Dario . And you?”

Fuck me. Penelope is going to need earplugs tonight if he doesn’t stop talking to me like that. To make things worse, he reaches for me to curl his fingers around mine, then kisses the back of my hand like I’m a goddamn queen.

“Scarlett. You can call me Scarlett.”

“Scarlett,” he repeats. “Like the color red?” he asks, eyes lit up with fascination as they scan over me from head to toe—from my crimson hair to my ruby-red heels.

A gentle smile creeps up, but it’s not meant for Dario. I remember something Skylar said to me on Thanksgiving, and it might be the most meaningful declaration he made that night.

“Red is hardly an insult. You’re the personification of the color, it’s just what you are...You radiate it...Red everything. Everywhere.”

That’s exactly what I’ve always wanted, but I didn’t think he ever recognized it for what it was. I assumed he was always teasing and just trying to insult my obsession with the color. I know now just how wrong I was about him.

“Yes,” I answer. “Like the color.”

Dario leans his head back slowly to look down his nose at me, nodding slightly in amusement. “Ah, yes. I see it. It fits you, diabolina. ”

“Diabolina?”

He tucks his fingers under my chin and rubs his thumb over my bottom lip. A wicked grin spreads across his face when he says, “Little devil.”

Immediately, I break out in a full-faced blush, my cheeks burning from the inside out. I shy away, but his fingers hold to their command and force me to keep eye contact. The alcohol rushes to my head and drops me into a daze I can’t control. Blame it on the drinks, blame it on a month of celibacy, or blame it on his accent...just don’t blame anything on me.

“Would you like to find out?” I ask, tilting my head towards the front door. When he nods in approval, I turn to Penelope as I grab my phone from the counter. “You can make it home okay?”

She winks, turning her attention instead to Dario’s crotch when she says, “You two have fun. I’ll give you a head start.”

I give her a kiss on the cheek before downing the rest of my bay breeze, then follow Dario into the parking lot. As we walk, I check my phone to see what new bombardments Skylar left me with while I was ignoring him.

A slew of notifications pop onto the screen, revealing I missed seven calls and one final text message.

When I’m safely in the passenger's seat of Dario’s BMW, I decide to respond, though my head is fucking pounding and the screen hurts my eyes to read.

His response is immediate, and I regret texting him back at all.

I’m not dealing with his overprotective crap tonight. Bitch is about to get laid, and I don’t need him on my mind when I do it. Tucking the phone back into my purse, I shut him out completely .

Despite keeping me in check for the past few weeks, Skylar and I haven't rekindled our old flame from the holidays. I think he must understand the fragility of my situation, because he never tried, and I've been thankful for that. Fucking him in the middle of my processing period would have just confused things too much for me.

At this point, I hold more appreciation for him than attraction. He helped me through a catastrophic, life-altering event without ever judging me, teasing me, or making sly comments. He's given me nothing but careful and delicate handling.

Just maybe a little too delicate for me.

What we had together was fun, but it was always going to be temporary. I needed it to move on and grow, but now he's become something else. A friend, maybe.

After managing to guide Dario to our duplex—quite poorly, I might add, because the alcohol has overtaken my constitution and reason—we finally arrive outside. We're here and I'm supposed to be showing him what a devil I really am, but I don't feel like one at all.

I feel sick.

It could be my pathetic tolerance, my nerves surrounding the fact that I haven't been intimate with anyone since them, or my frayed self-confidence rearing its ugly head. Whatever it is, I just don't feel good anymore.

As much as it pains me to do so, seeing as I'll probably never come face to face with this beauty again, I tell him the truth. "I'm sorry Da-ario, I think I need to go ri-right to sleep. Can I make it up to you?"

The sweetheart chuckles lightly, reaching over the console to press a soft kiss to my cheek. "Of course, diavolina. Let us exchange information, and we can get together

when you are feeling better.”

We hand off our phones to one another, and I insert my phone number into his contact list as Diabolina with a devil emoji next to it. When he sees it, his mouth twists in a smirk before offering to walk me to the door .

But walking is hard.

My head is dizzy, images spinning and swirling before my eyes until the only thing keeping me from toppling over is Dario’s rough grip around my waist. We only make it a few steps up the porch before I hear shouting on the street.

He lets go of me to turn around and check on the noise, causing me to stumble into the wall when I lose my footing. The brick feels magical under my fingertips, each tiny bump on the rough surface prickling at the pads of my fingers when I slide my hands up and down. Aside from the lack of spatial awareness, all my other senses are heightened.

I can feel cuts forming on the face of my palms when I dig them into the jagged texture of the brick, but I welcome the stinging sensation without fear of pain.

I can smell the pine trees in the midnight air as the cold moisture sinks heavily into my lungs. Even the faint scent of chocolate reaches my nostrils from the factory a mile away.

I can taste the rum on my tongue, but a unique flavor lingers alongside it that I’m not familiar with. I don’t usually drink bay breezes, so I can’t put my finger on what it is.

I can see, when I turn to look over my shoulder, two dark figures approaching one another in the front yard. Dario stands with his hands up in surrender, while the other person storms toward him with a raised fist.

I can hear them shouting over the distance. Dario apologizes over and over, pleading with the other person to believe there's been a misunderstanding—switching between English and Italian in his frantic attempt to calm the situation. The other person speaks up, but it's not just any voice.

I know that voice.

“Skylar!” I scream from the top of my lungs, but I'm too late. His fist strikes Dario's cheek and sends him crashing to the ground.

On wobbly legs, I rush down the porch steps and reach the pair just as Skylar straddles Dario's waist, hovering above him as he pounds relentlessly against his face. A waterfall of blood pours from his nose and a cut on his brow, turning his gorgeous face into a Pollack painting.

With every ounce of strength I have left, I shove Skylar until he falls in the snow beside Dario's lifeless body. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I cry, but he doesn't answer so I turn my attention to Dario.

It takes a few minutes before he fully regains consciousness, but I stay by his side and help him to his feet when he's able to stand. “I am sorry, bellezza. I did not know you had somebody else.”

I look up at him in confusion, my mind still spinning from the alcohol and impending panic attack threatening to surface. “I don't—he's not...” I can't get the words out. I shouldn't fucking have to. He shouldn't even be here right now, and none of this should be happening. My eyes pan to Skylar who's still sitting in the snow where I left him. “He's my brother .” I emphasize the word, making sure he's looking directly into my soul when he hears me say it.

I want it to hurt.

Dario gets into his car after accepting a million apologies for Skylar's erratic behavior, promising that he still wants to see me despite the unfortunate blow up. I don't know if I believe him, but I'm not prepared to do any more mental gymnastics tonight.

I need to go to sleep and turn my brain off. This night has been a disaster, and only proves that I wasn't meant to be getting into any new situationships.

I'm not ready, and I never will be until I let go of all my baggage.

Skylar included.

I don't even acknowledge him as I return to the house, passing him without a second glance as I climb the porch stairs and fumble with the keyhole to the front door. It takes a few fruitless attempts, but when I finally get it open and stumble inside, I feel his presence behind me.

I don't have the time for it, I don't have the emotional maturity to deal with it, and I'm not in the right headspace to verbalize exactly how much I despise him at this very moment .

"This is me ch-checking in for the last time," I mutter. "Close the fucking door on your w-ay out. I nev-er want to see y-your face again."

When I reach the staircase, I have to brace against the railing because my head is spinning so badly. I've never had alcohol affect me this much, and I think sobriety is about to join celibacy at the top of my list of priorities.

"Your brother, huh?" he calls after me, but I take my first step and ascend the staircase, leaving him in my wake—where I intend for him to stay. "Scarlett! Don't you dare walk away from me!"

The stairs suddenly shake from the weight of his footsteps trudging angrily behind me, but I react quickly enough to the brief tug on my sweater that I'm able to sprint up the last few steps and barricade myself behind my bedroom door. His fists pound against the wood on the other side, fighting me like he always does.

Always fighting.

The door flies open, catching me in the chest as it swings. Skylar doesn't give me time to recover before his hands are on me in a familiar hold—one hand wrapped around my throat while the other finds purchase in my hair to restrain me. His choppy breath blows against the strands still hanging in my face, pushing them around as he pants against my brow.

His eyes squint as they study my own, his hands twisting my head towards the moonlight coming from my balcony door so he can see my face better.

“What did you take?” he asks, but I just shake my head. I only had a few drinks. When he realizes I'm telling the truth, he jumps to a more ridiculous conclusion. “He drugged you.”

“You have n-no idea what you're talking about,” I scold. “I've been w-with him all night, he never gave me anything. I had a f-few drinks, that's all.”

He walks us towards the door, leaving me no choice but to step back until my back collides and causes it to click shut. The hand around my throat tightens and lifts me to my toes, the pressure too much for my already-throbbing skull .

“No, Scarlett. You have no idea what you're talking about or who you're getting yourself involved with.” His eyes are cold as the winter air when he demands, “Stay. Away. From. Him.”

No matter how hard I push against his chest, he won't let up. Every word is a struggle, but I have to say my piece.

"There you go, dic-tating again. You don't o-own me, Satan , and you sure as h-hell don't get to tell me what to do. We're not to-gether, we're not friends, so yeah. That just leaves you as my st-epbrother."

Skylar tips his ear to his shoulder, parting his lips while he stares down at my mouth. "Do you always fuck your brothers?"

He's too close, and I'm too drunk. I know he's trying to provoke something out of me, whether it's another heated fucking or one of our infamous arguments. His behavior only reminds me of Casanova and Broody's overbearing obsession with having me to themselves, and it disgusts me. I let them control me for far longer than I should have, and I won't let another person do that to me.

"Once or twice, but never again."

"Wanna bet?"

Skylar

“Once or twice, but never again.”

She actually looks like she means it, too. I might believe her if it wasn't for the nervous swallowing and rapidly beating pulse beneath my palm.

Her dilated pupils aren't the result of her obvious arousal—it's from whatever drugs he fed her—and while I'm glad that piece of shit ran off and she's safe now, I would never take advantage of her when she's not in her right mind.

Doesn't mean I won't stoke the fire, though.

“Wanna bet?” I taunt, running my thumb back and forth across the fair skin of her neck. Her body shivers at the touch, and it threatens to drive me over the edge.

I live for getting a reaction out of her, no matter the cause.

Leaning closer to brush my nose against hers, I inhale the sweet scent of her perfume. I'm immediately intoxicated by it and drift cautiously towards her lips before she stops me.

“Please, Skylar. Just g—”

“Scarlett! Are you home, babe? All the lights are off,” Penelope yells from downstairs, and Scarlett looks at me with panicked eyes. I know what she's planning before she even has the chance to act on it .

Her head flies back as she takes a deep breath and attempts to release it with a shrill scream, but I cover her mouth and scoop her around the waist with my other arm, lifting her off the ground and carrying her to the balcony. With my elbow, I get the lever handle turned and push through, shutting the door behind us with my foot.

Knowing Scarlett, I've just told her everything she needs to know about how serious I'm not when it comes to our deal. The amused tick of her eyebrow gives it away. She called my bluff, and I failed the test; if I was really going to tell Penelope anything, I wouldn't have been afraid of being discovered.

Pressing my back to the wall, I pull her in tightly against my chest, to keep her restrained and quiet as the sound of Penelope's footsteps echo through the door. She calls for Scarlett a few times, even coming inside her room to check for her, but ultimately retreats to her own bedroom on the other side of the house.

With a hard shove, I send Scarlett barreling towards the balustrade where she lands with a huff, the impact forcing the air from her lungs. She braces against the railing and turns to look at me, but I'm already stalking towards her.

"You think you're so smart, don't you? Did you think that was funny?" I ask, rolling up the sleeves on my flannel as I close in on her. Seems she's enough of her defiant, bratty self now, because she glares at me with a light in her eyes—like she's proud to be the source of my frustration.

Fine. Two can play at that game.

Scarlett rises to her feet and faces me, but before she can spit any of her venom, I've got her around the throat, pushing forward to send her leaning over the edge. Her feet lift from the ground only for a second to kick at my shins before she plants them again, so I tip her even farther back until she can no longer touch her toes to the stone balcony.

“Wait! St—”

No. Not a fucking sound from her, I won't hear it .

How the fuck did we get here? How did we go from texting every day...to me threatening to murder her in her own house? How has she been absent from Eden for a whole month, only to find herself back in that slimy fuck's orbit?

I've got to hand it to the guy, perfecting his American accent for the club was a nice touch. It's nothing Julian and I haven't done ourselves with her—deepening our voices and dying our hair to hide our identities—but his Italian ethnicity makes for the perfect disguise in the real world. I bet it gets all the girls wet in their fucking panties at the idea of dating a foreigner.

Scarlett's nails dig into the skin of my wrist, but I embrace the pain. If I thought there was no going back before, it's surely truer now than ever. She thinks I'm trying to sabotage her ability to date...and sure, I am. But mostly, I'm trying to protect her. I just can't tell her why, because Skylar isn't supposed to know anything about Eden—only what she's told me.

I can't exactly come clean as Broody either, because then I'd have to explain how I know Dario. If I tell her what kind of threat he poses, I'd inherently be admitting my part in all of this. She'd find out how similar I am to the guy, and then she'd be afraid of me...just not in the way that gets me off.

I'm talking about true, genuine fear.

Ironically, it's her lack of a fight that snaps me back to reality. Her arms go limp before I look down at her beet-red face and realize what I've done. When I pull her back to safety, she crumbles in a heap on the stone floor as she sputters for air.

“Scarlett...” I drop to a knee and inch closer to her side, but she slaps me across the cheek before I can say another word.

“How dare you! You knew—” She coughs, the inhale of cold air too harsh on her bruised trachea. “You knew what he did to me. Right fucking here!”

I stare blankly down at her broken form, accepting her fury like a man. I hurt her, I know that—twice in the same location, just as two different men.

“I’m sorry. ”

Her head snaps up, those hateful eyes seeking mine. “I m-meant what I said. I hate your f-f-fucking guts, and I never want to see you again,” she spits, using the railing for support to keep from falling over when she stands up. “Don’t speak to me.” Planting both palms on my chest, she pushes me backwards. “Don’t text me.” Shove. “Don’t come around here.” Shove. “Get the fuck out of my life!”

I don’t have a response, so she doesn’t have to worry about me not speaking to her. She deserves an explanation, but I’m a selfish fuck. Since the beginning, I’ve had dreams about ruining her...and I finally did it.

I ruin everything I put my hands on.

Scarlett

Peace, at last.

“Tell me everything about him, please! I’m dying to know.” She knows I hate when she chews with her mouth open, but here she is, shoveling forkfuls of steak and mashed potatoes through her lips after every sentence.

I thought dinner at Andy’s Diner would make a nice gesture to show her we can still spend quality time together without me going to Eden.

I can’t tell her everything. For one, I barely know much myself. And two, the biggest thing I do know about him is that Skylar beat the shit out of him last week, and he hasn’t shown his face around here since.

Neither of them have.

Dario still texts me, sure. He was absurdly understanding about the ‘miscommunication,’ insisting that a little scuffle over a woman’s honor is nothing to shy from. He may not blame Skylar for his behavior, but I do. Everything he did that night was completely unacceptable, and the bastard has been smart enough to heed my warning.

I haven’t heard a single word from him .

“I don’t know much about him, Pen. We’re still in the talking stage, and it’s kind of nice,” I explain. “Eden was fun and all, but I think it put me in a position where I now

see the beauty in just dating someone before jumping right into sex.”

Not that I’ve even had the chance. I pull out my phone to check our texts, a smile curling into my cheeks when I see his latest message.

Turning the screen towards Penelope, I say, “See for yourself. Mama’s got a hot date tomorrow night.”

She smiles brightly, but she’s not looking at me or the phone. “A hot date?” a voice sounds from over my shoulder. “I hope you are talking about me.”

Jumping from my seat, I turn to find Dario crouching down to scoot into the booth beside me. “Hey! What are you doing here? I wasn’t expecting to see you until tomorrow.”

I flash him a wide smile and he returns it, staring at my teeth in a way that would probably make me feel self-conscious, had I not become so used to men staring at my mouth lately.

“Me? I was running errands in town, walking to my macchina when I saw you in the window. But now that I have heard your laugh, diavolina, you cannot get rid of me.”

Fine by me.

Penelope plants her elbows on the table with her fingers locked together under her chin. “So, are you two lovebirds doing anything for Valentine’s Day?”

Is this crazy bitch trying to scare him off?

“Pen— ”

“Well?” Dario cuts in. “What do you say, bellezza ?” He turns to look at me, brushing the side of my cheek with his knuckles. His face still bears remnants of the bruises Skylar left there, and the cut on his brow hasn’t fully healed. It doesn’t matter though; he’s still beautiful.

I shouldn’t have spoken too soon about being excited to date, because honestly, I’m not fully convinced I’m ready for that. Especially a date on Valentine’s Day with a man I just met at a bar, a week ago.

“Let’s see how tomorrow goes. There’s still time to scare you off,” I say lightly, but the weight behind my words is heavy on my heart.

If I’ve learned anything in the past few months, it’s that my life and the people around me are too unpredictable to expect a simple plan to go smoothly.

Dario looks at me like he’s bewitched, and I may not know him, but I do know what infatuation looks like. I’ve worn it enough on my own sleeve to know exactly what it means, and the things you’ll do just to have some of it returned to you. I don’t have it in me to disappoint him.

Alright, I may have spoken too soon.

Dario is a complete gentleman, totally worthy of my infatuation. He’s pulled out all the stops for this date—the whole kit and kaboodle.

Not only did he start the date by bringing me a bouquet of flowers, but he’s been opening every door for me, offering me his arm whenever we’ve had to walk more than a few feet to our next destination, and just draped his jacket over my shoulders because he noticed I was shivering.

I’ve learned that he’s only in town until the end of the year while he does marketing

research for some company that deals in men's apparel—suits and whatnot—though I find it difficult to catch all the details when his accent leaves me hanging off the edge of every word he says .

I did gather that his family lives back in Italy where he has two brothers, four cats, and a gorgeous villa near the coast. He likes to spend his free time reading, visiting museums, and experiencing all that American cuisine has to offer.

“So,” he starts, pulling on my hand to lower me onto the bench next to him. We had been walking through a park near campus, and decided to stop for a second to rest and take in the gorgeous scenery surrounding the main fountain that sits in the middle of the park. “Tell me about your dreams, tesoro. What makes you breathe, what makes your heart sing?”

The steady eye contact makes me uncomfortable, so I look down at my hands and pick at my cuticles. “Art. That’s my passion.” I glance up at him with a smile before returning to my fingers, fiddling nervously. “I’m actually apprenticing to become a tattoo artist. I think self-expression is one of the most important freedoms we have, and tattoos are such an aesthetically pleasing way to show the outside world who we really are on the inside.”

“I like that. I do not have any myself, but I might hope to one day,” he says. “Would you tattoo me?”

I look at him dumbfoundedly, my mouth hanging open in shock. “Really? You know I’m only a beginner, I’m not very good. But I could introduce you to—”

“No, diabolina. Only you.” Dario leans in, his face so close to mine that meeting his stare is unavoidable. “I want to see your passion. I want to see your heart sing.”

Well fuck.

We meet in the middle, the distance quickly closed as he wraps his fingers around the nape of my neck, pulling me in while his thumb strokes the edge of my jaw. The kiss is soft and sweet—not what I’m used to, but welcome.

The problem comes when I try to deepen our embrace, growing hungry for something more. He follows my lead at first, opening for me when I shove my tongue in his mouth, but he quickly closes the kiss and grips me by the shoulders to push away .

“Easy, amorina .” Dario titters, but when he sees the pain of rejection on my face, he clarifies. “I just mean...” After looking around us, he nods his head to the pathway near the fountain. “We have company. I would rather keep you to myself.” Sure enough, a couple circles around and struts toward us.

Now I just feel like an idiot. I don’t mean to let it, but a tear escapes and trails down my cheek. I’m able to swipe it away before he notices, but I still feel shameful. I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t do dating. My brain has been hardwired to jump straight for sex, and I’m about to embarrass myself because I don’t know how to separate the two anymore.

“Scarlett.” My name sounds so sweet coming from his lips, but I can’t look at him. When I don’t answer, he tries another tactic, grabbing my chin to turn my face. “Diavolina , come. I believe you owe me for last week, no?”

I know he must see my watery eyes, and even if he doesn’t fully understand what’s happening in my head, he clearly thinks this is what I want. I can’t help but smile in response.

He’s not wrong, but I don’t want to fuck anything up.

Regardless, I take his arm when he lifts me from the park bench and leads me to the car, tucking my hand into the nook of his extended elbow as we leave the park.

The drive home is quiet, but my mind is booming with excitement. Dario has his hand sitting on the top of my thigh, his thumb rubbing my skin so tenderly that the sensation shoots straight to my clit. I shuffle my hips to find a more comfortable position and relieve some of the pressure between my legs, but when I separate them an inch, his hand slides up my thigh. I toss my head back against the seat, so thrown off by the sudden movement that it steals my breath.

“Dario—”

“Shh. Open for me, bellezza . Let me feel you.”

Well, okay then. I thought I was over being ordered around, but I guess not. It’s been so long since I’ve been touched, I’ll take anything .

Doing as he said, I spread my legs as wide as my seat will allow me to, glancing down to track the movement of his hand. It rises higher up my thigh before reaching the waistband of my leggings, then slides inside and disappears from sight.

He takes his time exploring my pussy, dipping low enough to coat his fingers in the proof of my arousal before bringing them up to tease my clit. He works in slow, controlled movements that steadily bring me to the verge of an explosion, but before I can tip myself over the edge, the car comes to a full stop.

So does he.

I let out an audible sigh of frustration, but he just laughs at me. Removing his hand from between my legs, he steals any hope for my climax. Dario parks the car and turns to me, bringing his fingers to the contour of his lips before slipping them inside. He makes a big show of sucking them clean of me, but I’m not turned on by it.

I’m pissed.

Do I have a large sign plastered to my forehead that says, ‘please edge me, I fucking love it’? I didn’t think so. So why does every man who touches me think it’s an acceptable thing to do?

“Was that fun for you?” I snap, making no attempt to hide the immature scowl on my face.

“ Sì .”

He offers nothing more—just one word and a smile so evil, it makes me sick.

He’s just another one of them .

“Perfect. Thanks for your time, asshole.” I practically throw myself from the car, slamming the door shut as I march down the pavement and up the porch steps.

I can’t get my fucking key to fit inside the lock because I’m crying so hard, and it’s only made worse when I hear Dario approach my backside .

“Get away from me,” I bite out. He doesn’t say a word, allowing me the courtesy to cross the threshold before following behind. I spin on my heel, ready to break his nose if he comes any closer. “What the fuck do you want?”

This arrogant prick takes a step anyway, thrusting his hand against the door before I can shut it in his face. “You have been too sweet. You promised to show me my diabolina ...” With every step he takes forward, I match him in the opposite direction. He creeps nearer, eyes glued to my mouth as he swings the door shut with a soft click. “Now here she is.”

It’s true; I did imply there was something worth experiencing if he came home with me. It’s the whole reason we ended up in that predicament with Skylar last week. But

I don't want to think about him anymore. Dario is here—healthy, horny, and waiting for me to show him who I really am. Penelope's away at Eden's Deliverance, so we're completely alone.

“So what are you waiting for?” I taunt, planting my hands on my hips. I didn't care much for the edge-sesh back there, so now it's his turn to make things up to me. I'll keep my end of the bargain later.

The malicious grin from the car makes a reappearance, spreading wide across his lips as he stomps toward me. I brace for impact, partially shocked when he ducks down to wrap an arm around the back of my knees before lifting me over his shoulder.

An involuntary squeal turns into a giggle fit as he carries me upstairs to my room with the help of some clumsy guidance. We land together on the bed and rip at each other's clothing, peeling off as many layers as possible in record time. When I reach for the buttons on his shirt, he grabs my wrists and pushes them to the mattress on either side of my head, keeping me held there while he kisses me.

I'm into it for a second—but just a second—before I grow frustrated. I refuse to fuck another man who won't let me see their body. I'm not going to be the only one on display.

Luckily, he isn't holding me prisoner and lets me reach for his shirt again, moving his attention to my neck as I undo the buttons. My god, I can feel the muscles on his abdomen before I've got the fabric separated. With my palms laid flat on his chest, I push him back until he's kneeling before me.

Taking in the full sight of him, I make note of his tan skin, washboard abs trailing down to a patch of hair above his groin, his nose, the dark coils sprouting from his head, and the way they fall against his brow.

It all feels too familiar, and I can't shake this one thought I keep having.

All he's missing is a white mask.

Scarlett

“Dario...” The panic starts to set, but I remain as calm as possible, scooting back on the bed as I search his eyes for the truth. “This isn’t the first time we’ve done this, is it?”

He runs his fingers through his hair to clear it from his face, looking down at me with remorse. “Are you angry, diabolina ?”

I slide from beneath him and spring off the bed, rushing to press my back against the nearest wall. “Shouldn’t I be? What the hell is going on?!” This cannot be happening. I haven’t seen The Prince since New Year’s Eve, and that didn’t end well. But how could he know where I live? Eden is a half-hour drive from here. When he doesn’t answer me, I threaten, “You have 30 seconds to explain yourself before I call the police.”

To prove I’m not bluffing, I dig my phone from the bottom of my purse and dial three crucial numbers, showing him the screen as a warning.

Dario turns to face me, scooting to the edge of the bed to sit with his feet planted on the ground, hands on his knees. He doesn’t look at me when he speaks, just hangs his head in shame .

“It’s fucked up, I know.” His American accent is flawless, and the final puzzle fragment of The Prince clicks into place. “At the Halloween party, I snuck a look at your phone when you had the Uber app open. I swear, bellezza , I’m not trying to scare you. I saw your name and the town you were going to, and I just had to see you

again.”

Okay, so the accent was fake—at least partly. That’s strike two.

I’m fucking blown away. It’s probably not as invasive as Casanova and Broody rooting through my diary, but it’s a close second. “Seriously, a fake accent? Are you even from Italy?” I ask. It’s definitely not the thing I should be focused on, but I’m fighting a panic attack here.

He laughs nervously. “I am. I’ve just been here long enough that my American accent comes naturally. It’s no secret that foreign accents attract American women, *bellezza*. I don’t like to rely on it at the club,” he explains.

“But you wanted to use it on me at the bar.” It’s not a question. He made the decision to mask his voice from the one that I knew. He was deceiving me on purpose. “That you stalked me to, by the way.”

He looks up for a moment, dropping his head again once he sees my defensive stance. At some point, I removed myself from the wall and stopped cowering—now fully engaged in bitch-mode.

“Yes. You have every right to call it that and be pissed, I’m just trying to explain my side of things.” The muscles in his back shift when he puts his hands together and starts picking at the skin on his knuckles. “I’m not saying it’s justifiable. We had something, *diavolina*, and then those fucks stole you from me at the party. I’ve been looking for you ever since, but you never came back.”

No, I didn’t. I was broken—physically and mentally—and I’m still trying to put the pieces back together.

“So what do you want from me?” I ask.

He doesn't turn away when he looks at me this time. Dario stands from the bed and walks over. "Isn't it obvious?" His hand comes into view, brushing a strand of disheveled hair away from my face so he can look me dead in the eyes. "It's always been you. I don't care about those other guys; it's a sex club and we weren't exclusive. The whole point is to explore. But I did my exploring, *bellezza*. I don't want anyone else. I'm asking if you'll have me, despite me being a total shit."

What the hell do I say to that?

I've had worse partners in bed and even worse boyfriends. But to start something on a lie seems completely disingenuous and makes for a faulty foundation. The one thing I keep fighting myself on is the fact that I wanted to reveal my identity to him at the Halloween party. I remember sitting there, thinking I wanted nothing more than to finish my night with him, no matter the cost.

If I take Eden completely out of the equation—since I no longer plan to attend—Dario makes a fine partner. Maybe he wasn't the most exciting prospect when I was dealing with Broody and Casanova at the same time, but I was happy. I was finally smiling again—finally confident I'd have a good time at Eden because I'd be with him.

Regardless of his manipulation, I can't forget that.

Maybe I'm just a fucking idiot, but I'll do anything once. "One chance," I exclaim, holding up a finger in his face. "You get one chance. You sought me without permission and broke my anonymity. That was strike one. Then, you persuaded me to go out with you on false pretenses. A foreign accent, seriously? That's strike two."

I don't know what I said that's so fucking amusing, but this stupid grin spreads across his face. "Technically, *diavolina* ..." He takes a step closer, pushing his hips into mine. The hand he used to sweep away my hair comes back to my cheek, knuckles

brushing lightly against my skin. “ You are the one who persuaded me to go out with you. ‘Would you like to find out?’ Don’t you remember?”

I do. Vaguely . I was a little out of it that night, and then the whole scuffle with Skylar happened .

“And you think you still deserve to?” I ask, meaning to sound more cross than I do, but I keep staring at the fullness of his lips. He’s so close I can smell him and the musk of his cologne. “I wanted to get your number that night at the party, you know. When I had my phone in my hands...I thought about it, but I was afraid of breaking the rules.”

Dario arches a brow curiously. “No, I didn’t know.” Slowly, he drops from sight and kneels on the floor at my feet. Oh, fuck. He runs both hands up my legs until they reach the waistband of my leggings, then hooks his fingers around the hem. “And what do you think of the rules now?”

Threading my fingers through the hair on his scalp, I dig my nails in as I lean back against the wall. He inches the leggings down, over my ass and past my knees, then to my feet where I finally step out of them.

Leaning forward, he pushes his nose past the crease where my thighs meet. Before I can stop him, he wraps his arms around the back of my legs and lifts me to his shoulders for some backwards-ass piggyfront bullshit.

I have nothing to hold on to except for his hair, but I make do.

There are no words to describe what he’s doing to my pussy right now, other than to say he’s fucking annihilating it. His tongue glides along my clit in a way that shatters me, rendering me entirely voiceless when I come, but he savors every second of my orgasm until it comes to an end.

Carefully, he returns us to the bed, bending low to drop me on the sheets with a soft thud . My legs are shaking uncontrollably from the strain to keep myself steady on his shoulders, though he didn't seem to have a problem doing it himself. I am so thoroughly spent—I don't know how I'm going to find the energy for sex.

But then he kneels on the bed at my feet, scooting closer as he grabs a condom from his back pocket, and I can't think about anything other than feeling him inside me. I study every inch of his body when he pulls out his cock, bites off a corner of the condom wrapper, and methodically rolls the rubber down his shaft .

I'm desperate for it, and the way he looks in my eyes when he slides inside is almost enough to completely undo me. He's sensual at first, like he was as The Prince, but there's something else now. The slow, rhythmic drag of his cock transforms into something hungrier—more wild than I'm used to having from him.

Collecting my limp ankles from where they hang over his thighs, he holds them together and pulls my legs flush against his chest. The stretch is tight on my hamstrings, but I manage. His hips draw back slowly again, only to pitch forward and slam into me with a force that causes me to cry out in pain. The pressure on my cervix is almost too much to handle, but it lessens with every thrust.

“I was easy on you before, diabolina .” SLAM. “I made a mistake...” Slam. “In letting you think...” SLAM. “I was soft.” SLAM. He hugs me around the thighs, using them as an anchor when he barrels forward.

The screams drawn from my lungs are nothing short of animalistic, and I instinctively cover my mouth to silence myself. He leans forward and rips my hand away, then commands, “No. Scream for me, bellezza .”

So I do. I let every single wailing cry out until I'm lightheaded with no breath left to expel. He keeps me folded over like a lawn chair as he pounds into me, eyes never

leaving mine. Not even when he comes with a deep growl, pulling out of my sore pussy to flop on the bed beside me. Not even when we lay there for hours and talk about whatever comes to mind.

Not even when I drift off to sleep, thoroughly and blissfully fucked.

Julian

My fingers push through the resistance of her tangled hair, every knot fighting against me when I run through the strands at her scalp.

The shower doesn't make the best place for a blowjob because the flow of water causes too much friction, but she makes it work. I apply pressure to the back of her head, and she follows my lead, sinking my cock deep into the back of her throat.

When she inevitably gags on it, I allow her to pull back for air and watch with intrigue as she quickly recovers. She's become so fucking good at taking me like this. There's no fight, no malice, no brattiness. Just a woman on a mission to please her man.

At least, that's how I like to imagine it.

I squirt another dollop of conditioner into the palm of my hand before fisting my cock. Starting from the beginning of my fantasy—the one I conjure every time I'm in the shower—I close my eyes and concentrate.

She kneels at my feet on the ceramic floor of the tub, staring up at me with those hypnotic pools of caramel while I stroke my cock, working it up for her.

Her hands come up to grip each of my thighs, and when she leans forward, I almost feed my dick into her mouth until I realize she has something else in mind. She dips her head lower than expected and sticks her tongue out to lick my balls.

Holy. Fuck .

My head slams against the shower wall when the sensation makes me jump, but she just fucking giggles at me.

I've never had anyone do that before—not that anyone's doing it now, either—but it's where my imagination goes.

For a while, she just runs her tongue along the sack like she's familiarizing herself with the territory.

Normally, I'd hate it if a chick switched maneuvers in the middle of something I was really enjoying. But just when I'm reaching the precipice of my orgasm, she pulls my sack into her mouth and starts sucking on one of my balls, massaging it with her swirling tongue. I lose it then, right on the spot.

I don't want to open my eyes yet...because there's nothing worth seeing. She's not really here, and she didn't just suck my soul out through my balls. She'll probably never give me the chance to find out if it's something she would actually do.

Skylar ensured that; both inside and outside of Eden.

The only consolation is knowing I'll still get to see her at the tattoo studio. I have an appointment today, in fact. That's why I'm getting my jerk-off session in early before I have to fucking look at her all day.

It's been torture. Not enough for me to consider switching what day I schedule my appointments for, but enough that I leave feeling more pain than the sting on my back.

Making a pitstop at Café Noir on my way to the studio, I grab some coffee and

pastries for Jason, Scarlett, and myself. Gifting treats has been one of my only successful forms of peacemaking with her—aside from sharing our smoke breaks.

She's not at the desk when I arrive, so I pop a squat on the couch until someone comes to get me. It's unusual for her to be anywhere else but the lobby, so my first thought is that she must be off today. I have no idea what's going on in her life anymore. I barely cross her path on campus, and she stopped coming to Eden's Deliverance altogether .

Skylar also doesn't get any check-ins from her—not since he caught her with Dario, three weeks ago. I really thought we had proven our point when we stole her on New Year's, but the guy is dramatically persistent.

Now that he knows where she lives, we have a real problem.

He didn't show his broken face for the following two weeks while he nursed his bruised ego, but I know for sure he made a grand reappearance at Eden last weekend. I guess Sky made a pretty convincing argument this time, because Dario finally started a new hunt.

You can imagine my surprise when Scarlett finally emerges from the back of the studio, strutting right past the lobby and out the front door, with Dario fucking Basile following at her heel like a puppy dog.

Neither of them see me, so I have just enough time to send a quick text before stepping outside.

The force of me barreling through the door startles Scarlett so much that she screams, turning to me with her hand pressed to her chest. "Jesus! Julian," she pants, crouching down with a laugh as she gathers her breath. "You scared the shit out of me. Sorry, I didn't know you were here."

“It’s no problem,” I assure her, but my eyes are locked on Dario’s. “I brought your favorite from the coffee shop. It’s inside.”

She audibly sighs in relief, clapping her hands together. “Oh my god, you’re the best. I really fucking need it. I’ll be right back!” she squeals before rushing through the door.

Dario and I don’t say a word—there isn’t enough time to say what either one of us really wants to—but his mouth curls into a little smirk. This slimy fuck. Can’t take her home from the bar without getting beaten half-to-death, so he comes to her work.

We aren’t the same; I didn’t follow her here. I came looking for work before I even realized she was apprenticing, so it’s only been a bonus.

Looking down at his arm, I see the familiar sheen of ointment spread across the skin of his forearm. Some of the stencil remains unfinished, and it looks like the tattoo is supposed to be a crown intersected with the blade of a sword. The lines don’t look as clean as you’d expect for the standards of the guys at this studio, but that’s when it clicks for me—she’s the one tattooing him. He fucking weaseled his way in by offering his skin up for practice.

Get in line, fuckface.

Scarlett comes back outside with the coffee cup pressed to her lips, already draining the contents of it. Setting it down, she takes a seat on the bench and pulls her cigarettes from her jacket pocket before tossing me the lighter—like she always does.

I couldn’t stop watching Dario even if I wanted to. I don’t trust him for even a second to risk taking my eyes off him. Pulling my own cigarettes out, I light one before tossing the lighter back in Scarlett’s general direction.

“Oh, sorry. Julian, this is Dario.” I know who he is, but why do you? “My boyfriend,” she explains, gesturing towards him with her lit cigarette.

That bit of information gets my attention. I instantly whip my head to look at her, but she gives me a sweet smile. It’s the kind of smile I only get from her when we’re at the studio—the same one I imagined this morning in the shower when she was licking my fucking balls.

“Boyfriend?” I ask, not really giving a shit whether I sound as blindsided as I feel.

She squints briefly at me before turning to Dario. “Hey, do you mind if we talk alone for a minute? I’ll be right inside.”

“Of course, *bellezza* .” He strides up to her on the bench and kisses her cheek before opening the front door. “Nice to meet you, Julian. Hope to see you soon,” he says with another one of those slimy smirks, but I don’t think Scarlett notices .

When I look at her again, she’s already prepared to stop me in my tracks. “Red—”

“Don’t. Don’t, Julian. Just...don’t.” She points a finger at me and rises to her feet, stomping over to where I stand a few feet away. “I don’t want to hear one fucking word. Do you understand me? Skylar did enough damage. Do you wanna end up on my shit list too?”

I missed her so much—that spice, that fire.

I’m already on her shit list in one way or another, whether she realizes it or not. But I love that she knows it’s something she has the power to hold over me. It means she knows how important this little relationship is to me, no matter how small. Does that mean she feels the same?

“I know it’s not any of my business, but—”

“No!” She surges forward and shoves my chest. “I said no. You’re right, it’s not your fucking business, so shut the fuck up. I’m happy. I don’t give a shit what you and Skylar have to say about it. You two need to grow the fuck up and leave me alone.” She takes a step back and tosses her cigarette at my shoe, not even bothering to finish it before she storms into the studio.

I’ll have to remember to give Jason an awesome tip next time, because I need to get the fuck out of here as soon as possible. Jumping into the mustang, I start the engine and dial Skylar’s contact info as soon as the smart screen lights up.

“Sky,” I say, rushing to cut him off before he can speak. “We have a mega fucking problem.”

“Yeah, you said. I got your text. What’s up?” He clearly doesn’t understand the gravity of the situation yet, because he’s way too calm.

“It’s Red. She’s with Dario.”

“Where, at the shop?” he asks. He knew I had an appointment today, so it makes sense for him to make that conclusion.

“Yeah, but also like...she’s with Dario. She said they’re dating.” I put the car in gear and peel out of the parking lot, heading straight for Scarlett’s apartment .

I need to find out whatever I can about this relationship—and I know just where to look.

“That’s impossible. He was just at the club last night and she wasn’t with him. Last week, too,” he scoffs, like I hadn’t thought the same thing myself.

“Right, because no douchebag has ever cheated on his girlfriend before. I’m telling you, it’s true. She wouldn’t even let me say anything about it, she just ranted about you and how we both need to leave her alone.”

Traffic isn’t too busy on Sundays, so I’m able to make it to her place in a matter of minutes. Switching Skylar’s call to my Bluetooth earbuds, I sprint to the back of the house where her balcony is.

You’d think she would have gotten rid of the trellis or at least made it unclimbable, but I think the fact it’s still here is a testament to just how much she enjoyed our little hunt after the Halloween party.

She would have let us do it again.

The gaps in the lattice are more than large enough for my boots to slide through, so I climb the structure quickly, vault over the railing of her balcony, and go inside her room.

The diary isn’t where I remember it being last time, but its new hiding place isn’t any more creative than the first one. Lo and behold, there it is—beneath the corner of the mattress. Fanning the pages open, I start from last weekend’s entry and move forward. Any bit of information is helpful here.

How long has she been seeing him? Has he made any more moves to drug her? What all has he told her about himself—what kind of lies can a man like him spin? Why is he playing the long game with her?

Diary,

I never thought it would happen, but I think I’ve finally transcended into true happiness. The first two years felt impossible, but I finally feel like I’ve figured out

how to juggle my classes with the things that are important to me...so nothing feels too overwhelming.

I've been spending more time with my dad now that I've tossed Eden in the trash (WHERE IT BELONGS)...and even though Penelope still goes, we've been focusing on spending more quality time together too—

“Did you find anything?”

Fuck, I forgot he was still here. “Shut up, I'm trying to read,” I snap, eyes panning the page to find the spot where I left off in her entry.

I don't regret giving Dario a chance, either. Getting to spend my free time with him has genuinely made my life better. I don't feel lonely anymore.

If I feel like texting him all day, he knows just how to keep up the conversation so I never feel disconnected. If I want him to come over and watch horror movies with me, he's here within the hour, carrying popcorn and snacks. If I want to test my boundaries during sex, he's there to listen and help me discover all the things I went to Eden hoping to find.

Maybe Eden's role in my life was to make the connection for me to find him. If you believe in fate and all that...maybe I wasn't meant to go to Eden to discover myself, but to discover him instead. My Pearl Prince.

I don't mean to sound like one of those sappy fucking schoolgirls with a man crush, but Dario has been here to pick up my broken pieces...every time. When Casanova fucked up my first visit, Dario was there. When Broody stalked me to the dance floor like some creeper, Dario was there. When I was trying to glue myself together after New Year's Eve...Dario came to me.

Not that I fucking approve of how he did it, but we talked about it, and I've put it aside. Whether I should have or not, I don't know...but I do know I'm happier for having done it.

He's the perfect gentleman when he needs to be, and a fucking demon when he wants to be. Which...I'm more than happy to accept. The way he folded me up la—

Fuckin' A, I don't want to read this shit. I flip to her most recent entry.

Diary,

I had the dream again...that's the third time this week. It always starts off in the middle of the night when the boys took me away from Dario. I go through the motions like I'm pressing play on the memory. They take me...they fight...I get on my knees for Broody...I bite him...and then they punish me.

Except...the punishment isn't a punishment, because it was the hottest thing I've ever been a part of. Hotter than any porno I've ever watched. And I actually got to BE in it.

Casanova makes me take off my dress, get on Broody's lap...then I watch him suck Broody's cock better than I ever could. He sucks it like a fucking popsicle while staring me in the eyes, pleased with himself over the shock on my face. But I loved every minute of it, and I'd give anything to see it again.

Dario is great, he really is. But even on his best day...even when he's full of determination to be the most indecorous partner he can be for me...he'll never be them. I don't want him to be, either.

They were special...one of a kind. And for a time, they were mine. I remember thinking once that they couldn't be considered mine, because the club wasn't

exclusive...so everybody was everybody's. But then Penelope does this thing where she talks about them, and even to this day, I get defensive.

I can't claim them from her if she wants to pursue them...because I have Dario. It doesn't make much sense for me to be protective over two people I haven't seen in almost three months. And it doesn't make sense for me to act territorial over them when I have an actual boyfriend now.

Sometimes it's easier to live in my dreams. There's no confusion there...just me and them. Broody hasn't texted me or climbed my balcony...they haven't sought me out like Dario did, so it's clear they got over me anyway.

I can handle that, I think. As long as it's not with Penelope. I love her with all my heart, but she still talks about them like they're fucking meat skewers on sample for her to grab. I still haven't told her anything, so it's hard to convince her to stay away from them when I'm not willing to admit exactly why I want her to. She loves Dario, and she'd berate me to hell if she knew I was still having these thoughts about them.

Oh well. Off I go to sleep...at the very least, I can have them there.

So, she misses us.

That's good to hear, I guess. Except she isn't fucking doing anything about it and is playing content by staying with this creepy fuck, despite him literally stalking her. Not like it's anything Casanova and Broody haven't done...but it's just me and Skylar. We already know where she lives by family association.

I can't get my mind off one thing, though. I search the pages until I find exactly what I'm looking for—an entry completely dedicated to this dream she keeps having about us on New Year's.

I want to know what it was like for her. We never got to find out exactly how she felt or whether she liked it or not. She just ran from the room, and we never saw her again, aside from the few days after...but we were Skylar and Julian then.

Diary,

Fuck my head. Fuck my life. Fuck Casanova and Broody. They've broken my brain to the point of absolute demolition. I haven't thought about them in a whole month. I finally started moving on and forgetting about that stupid club, those stupid men, and all the bullshit they put me through.

But now...one month later, I had a dream about the whole thing. Like, the most vivid dream I've ever had...and it's super fucking inconvenient.

I barely remember anything about that night before they took me into the master bedroom, so the dream started from the point they stole me from The Prince. I was sitting on his lap when the door burst open...and I didn't even get to see who grabbed me. I just know I was dragged off the bed and thrown over someone's shoulder, and every time I tried to yell, they just spanked my ass. I think those fucking spanks made me even wetter than I was with The Prince right before. I think it had to have been Casanova, because he's the only one of them who's hit me. And I fucking like it, okay? I fucking love it.

There doesn't seem to be any point to my morning shower jerk-off—my dick is rock fucking hard. With every word, my own memory of that night floods back to me. She may be ashamed of what happened, but I can honestly say it's been the best night of my life.

Well, no time like the present, I guess. I sit on the bed and zip down my pants, removing my cock to fist it in one hand while I hold the journal with my other.

Nobody helped me, no matter how much I screamed. They were all either too wrapped up in their own shit, or they just thought it was a game. I guess it was...in the end. Anyway, so they carried me to the master bedroom and tossed me on the bed, but when I tried to yell at them...Casanova slapped me across the face. It's not the first time he's done that, but it's the first time I really saw the full depth of his ferality...and I think that turned me on more than anything that night.

I wanted to see more of it, so I attacked him. I ran right for him, but he caught and trapped me before kissing me with more passion than I've ever had someone give me. It was what I'd been looking for all that time when I went to Eden. And there he was...giving me everything I wanted. But I told him a half-truth and said I only showed up because Broody threatened me...being the fuck he is. Then he used those honeyed words...and convinced me to stay because even if they hurt me...I'd like it. And I hate him every day for being right about that.

I agreed to suck Broody off for him to watch, but then I remembered all the shitty things he'd done to me...and I got pissed. I tried to be good, I really did. But when Broody hurt me just for having some fucking experience...I bit him. And I'm the one who got punished for it.

Casanova pulled his knife on me and made me get on Broody's lap so he could fuck me. But that wasn't enough for the chaos twins. They wanted to fuck me at the same time. And truth be told, I don't know if I would have wanted it any other way.

I'm surprised my hand hasn't started to blister with how furiously I've been stripping my cock, using only spit as lubricant.

The next few paragraphs recount what happened when we fucked her; the way Skylar bit into her shoulder as we destroyed her fucking pussy, how hot she got when I sucked his dick to get him nice and wet for her, and how life-changing her orgasm was when I licked her clit while he was fucking her.

It's the last part of the entry I've been wondering about the most.

They used my orgasm to their advantage and tied me up when I was fucked out of my mind. Casanova brought out his knife again and climbed on top of me so I couldn't move. I didn't have a fight left in me, anyway. It was always going to happen. So, I didn't say anything when he told me what he was going to do, I just kept trying to believe that he was right, and I might like it.

And fuck me...because I did .

Casanova cut me, and then the two of them licked the blood from my wound like a bunch of crazy, horned-out vampires fighting over a meal. And I fucking loved it.

At first, I thought it was just the fact that they were kissing. When they did it in the woods after Eden's Halloween party, there was no denying how much it excited me. But I don't think that's all it was. Not only did they kiss each other...but they kissed me. They kissed me with my own blood staining their lips...and suddenly, I became a part of the depravity. I was just as sick in the head as they were.

I let them use and abuse me, and I ate up every goddamn second of it. I sucked Broody's dick like a fucking pro while Casanova cut my thigh and licked my clit. I didn't fight. I rode his face until I saw stars. I swallowed Broody's cum, savoring every drop. I let Casanova come inside me and basked in my afterglow as he stuffed me full of every ounce that dripped out when he pulled away.

I burst like a fucking dam, grunting through the final strokes of my orgasm as I coat the pages of her diary with thick streams of cum. Tossing my head back with an audible groan, I bask in the afterglow until...

"Tell me you didn't just fucking—" I quickly hang up my earpiece before he can finish.

Oops. I really keep forgetting he's here.

Then, I ran. I ran because I'm the only one who's supposed to know about what I do and don't like. I ran because there's no way in hell Cunnilingus Casanova gets to tell me what I'll enjoy or not...even if he turns out to be right. I ran because if that's the kind of thing that gets me off...I'm afraid of it. I'm afraid of getting lost in something I can't be in full control of. I'm cold. I'm calculated. I always have a plan. I don't do well with losing control.

When I think about what those men are...it scares the shit out of me. They're everything I'm not. They're chaotic. They're shameless. They're dissolute. They're way more than I can handle right now...maybe ever. I need to forget them and focus on the things in my life that are actually stable and within my power to decide the outcome of. I'll focus on the apprenticeship. I'll focus on school. I'll focus on surviving as I am, because I'm not ready to become somebody new.

She's a coward. The little slut fucking loved every minute of what we did to her, but she's going to pussy out because being with us might alter her perfect little life? That's bullshit. Life is too short. If she thought she enjoyed bringing out the monster in me...let's see how she likes when I do it to her.

Tucking my dick away, I stand from the bed and correct myself before putting the diary back where I found it—jizzy pages and all.

Let her find it. I want her to know that I know just how much she wants me. If she wanted me to come back so badly, all she had to do was ask. I'll give my good girl exactly what she needs.

I always do, don't I?

Scarlett

I have this feeling.

I don't get them as often as I used to, especially not with how well things have been going lately. But there's this feeling. I've been waiting weeks for the other shoe to drop, but it's been too quiet. I know Broody and Casanova snuck into my room again, I just don't know when.

Two weeks ago—during a particularly devious horn-dog episode—I flipped back through my diary for a specific entry, but I found something else. Somebody blew their load all over the fucking page, rendering it completely unreadable and unusable for my masturbation sesh. I had to buy a new diary and everything because the pages were stuck together.

Plus, it's fucking gross.

They're nothing if not thorough, so I expected to hear something about how fucked I am for thinking about them, yet continuing to avoid them. But...there's been nothing. No texts. No midnight visits. No maskless ambushes at the bar to follow Dario's footsteps.

They want me to think they give a shit—but they don't.

Glancing at Penelope on the other end of the couch, I see that she's nose-deep in her phone, which means she's not watching the new movie I paid money for us to watch. She doesn't even look up when I toss a piece of popcorn at her. She's tapping away

on the screen like her life depends on it, and I thought it was funny at first, but now I'm kind of annoyed.

“Hello?! Pen, what's up? We only have a few hours left on this rental, or else we have to buy it again,” I scold, and she finally looks at me. There's something wrong with her eyes; they're glazed and glassy, like she's about to cry. “What's wrong, is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. Go ahead and start it over. Sorry.” She laughs nervously, but I'm not buying it. I have a smartphone, so I'm not ignorant of the fact she's deleting a text thread—quickly enough that I don't have time to lean over and see who it's from.

I pause the movie and adjust my ass on the couch until I'm facing her. Looking directly in her eyes, I ask, “Who was that?” She's doing everything in her power to avoid making eye contact with me, but I persist. “Penelope, tell me what's going on.”

She finally looks at me for a fraction of a second before dropping her shoulders in defeat. “Okay, but you have to promise not to be mad, alright? It's really not a big deal and your life is so good right now with Dario, and the apprenticeship, and school that I don't want you to get in your head and start overthinking and—”

“Penelope.”

“I slept with those guys...the ones you used to see at Eden before you met Dario. I don't want it to be a big deal. I know you liked them, but you said I could go for it, and so I did. But you were totally right about them having no boundaries, and he won't stop texting me now, and he threatened to tell you if I don't...” She pauses to take another deep breath. “So here I am. Telling you.”

There it is.

There's the other shoe.

She lets out a massive sigh of relief, like all her sins have been absolved because she finally told me the truth. Except, someone had to force it out of her. She just admitted that she knew what fucking them would do to me, else she wouldn't have gone on a fucking rant about how fucking perfect my life is.

Yeah, it's fucking peachy.

"When?" I ask, standing from the couch and carefully placing the bowl of popcorn on the coffee table.

"Huh?"

"When?" I repeat. "How long have you been fucking them? How long have you been keeping this to yourself?"

She jumps up, but I take a step backwards when she tries to come near me. She's crying now, the tears streaming down her beautifully pinched cheeks. "Scar, please." She cups her hands over her mouth and nose, shaking her head. "Please, I'm so sorry."

"Fine," I concede with a titter, pulling my phone from the pocket of my hoodie. "I have his number too, you know? If my best friend can't be honest with me, maybe her fucktoy will."

Penelope panics, throwing her hand out to stop me. "Three weeks!" she shouts. "It's been three weeks since it happened. It was only once, I swear, babe. Please-please-please—"

"Three weeks..."

I don't bother finishing the thought. Looking up to meet her gaze, I take in a different kind of horror than the one I was expecting to experience tonight; her face is blood-red, which doesn't mix well with the pale complexion of her skin.

All I do is nod my head at her and turn on my heel to go to my room—locking the door behind me to keep out the remnants of our frayed friendship.

I'd much rather have finished the movie.

I wasn't bluffing earlier .

I sit on the balcony for hours—a cigarette always lit in one hand and my phone in the other—with Broody's text thread open on the screen. I've been contemplating what I should say, or whether I should say anything at all.

Penelope's right about one thing; I shouldn't care. I told my diary as much, and that's why they did this. They knew it would hurt.

So did she.

Just because they knew, doesn't mean I'm not still an asshole for caring. I have Dario, she's right.

Dario, who I've been falling into the same comfortable habits with as I did when he was The Prince. Dario, who knows how to love me on paper, yet there always seems to be something missing. Dario, who if I really consider it, could probably sleep with Penelope and I'd be more angry at him than her.

Something's missing from this relationship, and I think there always has been. Something's missing from me . Casanova and Broody didn't just break me into a million pieces for the fun of it—they strategically cut the glass of my soul to fit their

own shattered fragments.

To make us one.

Reading through the text messages we've sent to one another, there's obviously more passion on this screen than whatever I have with Dario.

That's fucking sad, but it is what it is.

One stands out in particular, giving me an idea for my rebuttal. I know how much they like to recycle words on me, so I type out my message with a beaming smile, forcing the tears in my eyes to retreat.

"Why do I feel like you're not being honest with me, diavolina?" He's accusing me of lying as if he already knows—and yeah, I've been omitting the truth—but he can't be certain.

There's no reason for me to hurt him any more than this already is, and it's not like I cheated or anything. I knew he wouldn't take it well, but I wasn't expecting to sit here and overexplain it for an hour.

"I'm sorry, Dario. I mean it, I just have too much to focus on right now. I have a little over a month left until finals, and I'm already falling behind this semester. I have a plan...I had a plan."

I did.

I always have a plan, but they never quite work out.

Dario sits across from me in the booth, staring at me with disbelief spread across his face. I don't know how he didn't see it coming, honestly. I tried—I really did—to

make it work.

It's been three weeks since Penelope told me about her rollaround with the boys, and I tried to keep going. But I know I haven't been myself. I haven't been a good partner to him, and I haven't been a good friend. I still haven't spoken to Penelope, but she's giving me space.

I tried to continue my relationship with Dario as if nothing happened, but in the end, I'm finding it impossible. Every time he makes love to me, I wish they were fucking me. Every time he whispers sweet nothings in my ear, I wish it was Casanova's tongue doing that thing he knows I love. Every time I suck his dick, I wish it was Broody's cum sliding down my throat.

Every time I look at Dario...I see the absence of them.

But make no mistake, I'm not breaking up with Dario for their sakes. I'm a decent fucking person usually, and I don't want to put someone through hell because I can't be in it as much as he is. I'm not crawling back to them. I'm not going to fuck them. They'll never touch me again, unless they beg me on their hands and knees—and even then, I might not let them.

No. I want to hurt them.

"It's them, isn't it?" he asks, and the question throws me off course. "It's the same as the last time you left me. You want those degenerate fucks. Admit it, Scarlett!" He slams his fist on the table, which only draws the attention of everyone trying to enjoy their meals in peace.

I thought Andy's Diner would be a nice, public place to do this. My mistake. I wasn't expecting his use of my real name to sting so badly. He hasn't called me anything other than diabolina or bellezza since we got together, so his intended bite has an

effect.

I put my palms on the table and slowly rise, sliding out of the booth to head for the exit. “I told you, Dario. I’ve got too much on my plate, and I can’t do this. I’m sorry.” I don’t allow him another word before I’m out the door and getting into my car.

It’s a short drive home, but somehow, I feel ten times lighter than I did on the drive over. I’m finally my own person again—without the weight of a boyfriend, backstabbing bestie, or chaotic duo making me feel like I have to do anything for someone other than myself.

Balcony cigarettes in April feel almost as good as they did when autumn rolled in. The wind whips through my tangled hair, fucking it up more than it already was. I haven’t showered yet today, but I will. I just have a few things to do first. I check my texts one last time before getting ready, but the same two messages have been sitting there for three weeks.

Setting my phone down, I pick up the package that was lying on the porch when I came home. It’s a little gift to myself for being such a good girl. If I’m going to do this—if I’m going to go back there—I’m not going without protection.

The packaging tape falls away with little effort, thanks to my new ruby-red stiletto nails. Inside is a gorgeous OTF knife with a shiny red handle. I test the spring a few times to get a feel for the blade and how it works. Can never be too prepared, you know?

It’s late by the time I finish eating, showering, and gathering everything I need for the night. Penelope stopped me in the hall and pleaded with me not to go, but if I don’t get to weigh in on what she does...she surely doesn’t get an opinion here.

Even now, she’s banging on my fucking door, begging me not to do this. She says I

don't need it, I don't need them. But I don't need her to tell me that. I turn up the volume on my laptop to drown out the sound of her incessant voice.

“Take Me Back To Eden” by Sleep Token seems like the perfect send-off song to start the night with. Thank you, Skylar, for your impeccable taste in music.

For once, I'm staring at my reflection in the mirror and actually like what I see. It's just missing one thing.

I opted for a red, floor-length gown with a thigh-high slit up the side of my left leg. Beneath the slit is my knife garter, strapped with my beautiful new blade. The silk fabric of my skirt comes to a high-waisted band and opens into an A-line halter top—the fabric crossing diagonally over my chest to leave a cut-out of skin where my sternum lies.

Taking one final breath of innocence, I throw away any ideas of who I used to be, and welcome the girl I'll be from this point on. The mask slips on nicely, and at last, the mirror's reflection is perfect.

Red is my color, after all.

Scarlett

Eden welcomes me like an old friend.

“Slayer” by Bryce Savage is blaring over the club speakers when I strut up to the bar, already having spotted my prey. The hunt is on.

I come up on Broody’s side when he’s not looking in my direction, eager to drag out the suspense. Resting my elbows elegantly on the bar counter, I wave down the bartender for a drink.

A vodka and cranberry, just how I like it.

Both of the men are wearing their red masks tonight, which feeds into my theory that they have access to my application information. It could just be that they’ve returned to old habits since scaring me away, but I doubt that.

I’m not scared now, and I’m not running away anymore.

It takes them far too long to notice me—which is pretty annoying, because I was trying to make a dramatic entrance—but when they do...let’s just say I feel bad for whoever has to clean the floor at the end of the night. Their jaws drop .

Good. That was my intended reaction.

“Problem?” I ask, acknowledging them both. When neither of them find the courage to respond, I poke harder. “You did say to ‘bring it on,’ didn’t you?” This time, I talk

directly to Broody, leaning in to whisper in his ear .

He straightens in his seat as if trying to act composed, but the knuckles wrapped around his glass of vodka are white with tension. His other hand comes up to run through his hair, and I can't tell if it's because he's nervous or if he wanted to clear it from his face to stare me down.

"I did. Not like you've ever listened to me before," he says dryly, taking a sip of his drink, but his eyes never leave mine.

I wish I could see them—both of them—through the souls in their eyes, but trying to see anything in Eden is like trying to see in a cave.

"Well, I'm here. So which one of you is it going to be?"

They share a look between them before turning to me. It's Casanova who speaks. "I thought we made it pretty clear that it's both of us, or noth—"

"Sorry." I interrupt. "I made the mistake of letting you think I was asking for your opinion. It's lady's choice, I'm just trying to decide who deserves it more." With my glass still in hand, I point out a finger and move it rhythmically between the two of them, mumbling under my breath.

"What are you doing?" Broody asks, looking more annoyed and broody as ever.

"Shut up. I'm playing 'eeny, meenie, miney, mo.' Now I'm going to have to start over." So I do, making a big show of it. They exchange another glance, but my finger lands exactly where I planned it to. "Casanova, I choose you. Let's go," I command, turning my back and heading towards the hallway off the left side of the bar—the opposite direction of the Pearl and Sapphire rooms.

I don't have to look behind me to know he's following. I can hear him. I can smell him. I can feel him. He's breathing down my neck when I turn the doorknob, but I don't let it faze me. I need to keep my cool for what's about to happen, and I'm through letting him intimidate me with his presence.

Opening the door, I realize The Red Room is mediocre at best.

They played it up to be this sexy, mind-blowing, and captivating experience—but it's just like any other room. The only difference I see, at first glance, are the red LED lights shining along the ceiling trim. It's not spooky at all. If I'm being honest, it's sort of underwhelming.

"This is it?" I ask, spinning towards him with my arms outstretched. "This is the big, bad Red Room? You boys really need to work on your marketing skills."

Casanova chuckles and steps up to me, his mind no doubt running rampant with all the things he wants to do—whatever deviant things he's always promised he'd be able to show me once he got me here.

"You haven't even given it a chance, Ruby." He reaches out to put his hands on my waist, but I step back and hold up a reprimanding finger.

Similarly to the other rooms, there's a cabinet at the foot of the bed with a wide array of toys sitting on the top shelf. I scoop a pair of handcuffs up with the tip of my finger and turn to show him my findings. These will do, I think.

"Get on the bed," I demand.

He's not laughing anymore. Instead, he cocks his head to the side and looks at the cuffs for a second before turning his attention to me. "Sorry, darling, that's not how it works here. You know that."

“It didn’t work that way before...” Holding the cuffs high—and my head even higher—I circle around him in small strides, reveling in the discomforted aura he’s radiating. “But things are different now. You get on the bed, or I leave. It’s as simple as that.”

He stops me, one hand grabbing the cuffs and the other catching my cheeks between his fingers. “What happened to you? Where’s my good girl?”

I can only smile, because of course his first thought is to wonder where my submission has disappeared to.

Much to his surprise, I curl into him. With my right hand, I grab a fistful of his shirt to steady myself, then lift my left leg up to wrap my calf around his hip. It’s a good thing he’s so transfixed with this embrace, because it allows me the stealth required to pull the knife from my garter.

The point of my blade is pressed to his throat before he can even register the sound of it springing open. “ You happened to me, you sick fuck. Get. On. The. Bed,” I say, enunciating each word perfectly so there’s no confusing my authority. His eyes flick to the door, but I dig the blade into his skin before he can make a move. “Now.”

If I wasn’t staring at his neck so intensely, I might have missed the tic in his jaw when he holds his hands up in surrender. It’s a lie; he’s not submitting to me, he’s just planning his next move.

It also happens to be the wrong one.

He drops the cuffs and grabs my wrist, but I slide my leg down and press my heel into the back of his knee. His leg collapses and we go stumbling towards the bed, all the while fighting to keep control of the knife.

He falls to his back on the mattress and I stay right on him, straddling his waist to regain my advantage. It's really unfortunate that he's bigger than me, because it doesn't take much effort on his part to keep my wrist trapped in his grip.

These aren't the throes of passion he was expecting to find in here, but this is who we were always meant to be. His hot, bitey breath chuffs against my cheek as we wrestle for the blade, and the smell of alcohol forces me to remember the first time I tasted the bourbon on his tongue.

I thought it was magical back then—the way two heavily-contrasted flavors could meld together so seamlessly—but now I fucking hate it.

The sounds of our struggle reverberate off the walls, surrounding us in a bubble of frustrated grunts and strained panting. I'm trying to rip my arm from his grasp, but he's holding on like his life depends on it. At least he still has some sense left.

I flash him a smile, leaning in close to whisper against his lips. "What's wrong, daddy?" I mock, but the word elicits an unforeseen response. He becomes still altogether; the heave of his chest disappears, the secure lock on my wrist falls limp, and his bared teeth retract until his jaw hangs ajar. Fucking putty in my hands. "I thought you loved it when your good girl put up a little fight. "

I know he's enjoying this. His buttoned pants are the only thing keeping his twitchy cock from piercing through me. My hips roll against him, grinding down against the bulging denim, and he throws his head back with a moan.

"Fuck, Ruby. What are you doing to me?" he murmurs, relinquishing his reign over my knife. Both his arms flop to the mattress on either side of his head, and he lays fully spread out beneath me.

Without ripping his shirt, I slide the tip of the blade down his arm at a hair's

breadth—trailing from his limp hand to his bicep, then across his chest. He flinches when I pop off one of his buttons, but otherwise remains frozen.

“Don’t you trust me, baby ? I can’t do the things I want to do to you if you won’t listen.” He lifts his head to look at me, the red glow of the room accentuating the muscles in his clenched jaw. “Scoot up on the bed. Hands above your head. Just like our first time.”

Despite the rage flowing through my veins, the intoxicating aura of Eden pulls me in like it always does. There’s always been something about this place that makes every touch feel as though I’m bathing in a tub of feathers.

He knows it, too. He adjusts his arms to run both his palms up the side of my thighs, resting them on my ass as a smile creeps across his face.

“Then you’ll be good?” he asks playfully, but I’m not interested.

I don’t answer, fully intending to keep my words as vague as possible until I have him in a less threatening position. His fingers tighten and dig into my ass when he pulls himself into a sitting position, our noses nearly pressed together.

Being this close again stirs up memories I’d much rather forget.

Call it Eden’s enigma, or whatever the fuck it is, but I find him irresistible. Even when he’s being a fuck. Even when he’s torturing me. The only thing I can do to stop myself from being pulled under his spell is to hold the knife perpendicular between us—pressed straight to his heart.

“Take off your shirt,” I insist, gesturing with a flick of the knife.

I’m the one in control. I’m the one with the power. I’m the one who gets to make the

demands .

He looks at me with panicked eyes before blatantly refusing me, not moving an inch except to shake his head. “My clothing stays on, or I leave. That’s the deal.”

The anger consumes me. Before I realize what I’m doing, the blade flies to the underside of his chin, and I’ve got my fingers tangled through his hair. He suppresses a grunt when the metal punctures his skin, sending thin rivulets of blood dripping down the handle and onto my arm.

“There is no deal,” I hiss through my teeth, yanking his head back to watch the crimson liquid flow from his wound. “You never gave me the courtesy of staying clothed. You stripped me, humiliated me, then left me alone. Time and time again.” Pulling my arm back to hold it between our faces, I study the red stains trailing down my forearm. “Why should I give you a kindness you never offered me?” I ask, then run my tongue through the blood—making sure he’s watching every second.

I shouldn’t have let my guard down, but I guess I understand now how they get so caught up in the sickness of this room. He manages to plant his feet on the ground and scoops me up in his arms, standing to his feet. Aside from a slight wince across his mouth, he doesn’t seem to mind when the cut deepens because of the rigorous motion.

Without a word, he sets me down, bends to pick up the cuffs, fastens one around his left wrist, then steps backwards to sit on the bed.

He moves with such majestic energy that I’m almost regretful for what I’m going to do to him. He’s fascinating to watch, and I just find myself wishing he’d never broken me so we could actually share something special.

He doesn’t remove the shirt completely, but when he slides on the bed to position

himself where I instructed, he rolls up the sleeves and undoes the front buttons to expose his chest.

I'll take it as a win—it's perfect for what I've been planning.

It's not until I walk over and kneel onto the mattress that he finally lays down, begrudgingly allowing me to mount him and secure the cuffs around a post in the headboard. Without hesitating, I recite the same words he said to me last August when we met. "No touching."

He laughs in response. I'm glad to see he finds humor in the situation, because he'll need to hang on to that for later. "Don't go easy on me," he mutters.

I find it amusing that he thinks he has to convince me, but I don't argue. Climbing down the bed, I rummage through the cabinet for the last things I need, then return with a roll of duct tape and a men's tie. He watches me curiously, but when I start removing my panties, I can see the ideas swirling through his head.

I wish it didn't feel so good to have him against my bare pussy when I straddle him, but it has to be done if I'm going to play out this scene.

"Don't worry. I wasn't planning on it," I assure, laying the tie over his eyes and securing a knot behind his head. "No peeking."

"Fuck, Ruby," he moans, thrusting his hips up into the cradle of my thighs. "Do you see what I was talking about now? How fucking amaz—"

He fights when I shove my panties through his lips, and I finally understand why he likes being in control so much.

If I don't want him to touch me, I can make that happen. If I don't want him to watch

me, I can make that happen. And if I don't want him to open his fucking mouth to spit more honeyed words at me...

“ No. Fucking. Talking. You're going to lie there and take it, ” I recall, the memory of him doing the same thing to me still painfully vivid in my brain. “ Or you won't get anything at all. ”

His hips buck frantically in an attempt to throw me off him, but when I press the tip of my knife into his left chest muscle, his legs tense up. The handcuffs clink together as he tries to find comfort in his position, but there's no way he can touch me.

That's all that matters. This is for me.

Despite the fact that he asked me not to go easy, he sure does fucking scream when I dig the blade into his flesh. I've never done this before, so I don't know exactly how deep I'm supposed to cut if I want to leave a permanent mark .

He isn't handling it as well as I thought he would. For being someone who loves to do the cutting, I expected him to have more nerve than this.

It just goes to show, don't dish it if you can't take it.

Regardless, I persevere through his trembling and keep my hand as steady as possible, being sure to take my time so each letter looks perfectly legible for him to admire later. I contemplate writing out my name—it's not like they aren't aware of it—but I want to keep Scarlett away from Eden.

Standing from the bed to appreciate my handiwork at a distance, I only have one last thing to say to him before I leave. “Since you were such a bad boy and didn't want to follow orders, I think I'll leave you here to consider the consequences of your actions. Goodbye, darling ,” I add before walking out the door.

I don't imagine I'll have much of a head start, because there's no chance of them letting this go. There will be repercussions.

But my work here is done, for now.

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Skylar

They've been in there for almost a fucking hour.

What could he be doing to her? And why the fuck would he go without insisting that we go together? He doesn't get a free pass just because she put on the fucking mask.

She's ours, or she's mine. There is no in-between.

This is complete bullshit. It's supposed to be me in there. How is it that she'll fuck me as her stepbrother when she's desperate enough, but when she's finally ready to succumb to being a Ruby, she still chooses Julian? I'm the one who made her comatose with that balcony fingerbanging on her birthday.

All he's ever done is leave her crying.

I'm ordering my fifth drink when I spot her in the corner of my eye, emerging from the Red Room hallway. I must be drunk, because it almost seems like she's walking right towards me.

Scarlett looks absolutely fucking delicious; that sleek, sexy dress hugging the serpentine curves of her body, those spiked heels I can't get enough of, and the cherry on top—her intricate red mask. She's finally embraced who she is, but I'm starting to get the feeling it may have been a mistake to push her there.

The look she's giving me is unscrupulous, and I can't help but notice Julian's not with her. She strokes the side of my face before sliding her fingers over my lips and

into my mouth. When a metallic tinge coats the surface of my tongue, I grab her wrist, only to realize her arm is drenched in blood.

“What did you do?” I ask, tightening my hold.

She just smiles. The corners of her mouth twist into a nasty grin like nothing I’ve ever seen before, but before I can ask anything else, she rips her arm away and storms out.

Fuck...fuck...fuck. What the hell did she do?

I bolt from the bar stool and get to the Ruby section as quickly as possible, opening every door until I find him. Julian is lying on the bed with his shirt hanging open, chest covered in blood. She somehow found a way to bind, gag, and blindfold him. There are no signs of resistance, so she must have tricked him—Julian would never let someone touch him like this.

I don’t know where to start first, but I figure the gag works best so he can tell me what the fuck happened while I’m untying the rest of his bindings. “Jules, it’s me,” I rush out, ripping the tape from his mouth and taking out the...panties?

Jesus, this bitch is adjusting to our malady faster than I thought she would. We’ve always said we knew she had it in her, but this is diabolical warfare.

Once he’s completely freed, I prepare myself for the incoming blast of rage and despair over getting tricked into captivity, but he says nothing.

I observe every action, study every facial twitch—anything to get a feel for his mental state—but still, he gives me nothing. “Julian, wake the fuck up!” Snapping my fingers in front of his face, I try to get his attention.

His neck is bent down, his eyes engrossed on the left side of his chest. Smearing the blood around, he clears away the crimson massacre to reveal a word. Not a word—a name.

RUB Y

His fingers trace each letter, and when they finish the tail of the ‘Y’, he murmurs something. “...her initiation.” I don’t understand what he’s talking about, though. Adérfia Aímatos doesn’t accept women, and this isn’t anything like what our initiations looked like. “Her name, signed in blood. She’s ours,” he clarifies, but I’m more confused than ever.

She mutilated him—this was done in anger, not acceptance.

“Let’s take you home, she’s got you all fucked up.” I refasten the buttons on his shirt, being extra careful not to irritate the wound on his chest when I make it to his collar. “Come on,” I insist, but he grabs my bicep before I can make it out the door.

“No. We have to find her.” His entire demeanor flips—the hint of that smile gone from his face and replaced with a stone-cold sense of purpose.

What the fuck is this zombie-brained asshole actually talking about? “Are you insane?” I rebuke. “She tore you up, I’m not letting her anywhere near you.”

I feel like I’m the only reasonable person speaking right now, but he looks at me with a raised brow as if I’m the idiot. “Do you really think she doesn’t know we’re coming? She knows how consequences work with us, and she did it anyway. She’s expecting us.”

“Yeah...well, I’m still wondering how she did it. Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“In the car.” He doesn’t give me time to respond before he’s out the door, so I just follow his lead.

Not like I can do anything else.

I’ve become a passenger on this road trip to hell, with Scarlett and I stuck in the backseat together while Julian drags us wherever he pleases.

I’m no longer in control.

“You told her not to go easy on you? Are you fucking psychotic, why would you do that?” I throw my hands up in exasperation, completely dumbfounded by his stupidity. “You know she’s on a warpath for the Penelope thing. What is wrong with you?”

The bitch slaps and spits on him, and he loses his mind. Yet when she points a knife at him and orders him around, suddenly he’s the ultimate submissive pet? That’s her fucking job, not his. Role reversals don’t work for us, and especially not for Julian. I don’t understand what’s going on with him to make such a turnaround for her sake.

He just shrugs his shoulders. “She made a compelling argument.”

“She called you daddy , you weak little shit. Have some fucking dignity. She got the better of you, and you know it.” I have to laugh, because I’ve seen how controlling he is over her—how vicious he was with her on New Year’s—but this pussy dropped his guard and let her play him like a damned fiddle.

“I’ll admit, I was thrown off. And I definitely didn’t expect her to carve my heart out, but it is what it is. Now it’s my turn.”

“ Our turn,” I clarify, in case it wasn’t fucking clear. “You seem to be forgetting why

you've even been able to fuck with her at all. Don't start being a prick now when I'm the only reason you can even do this shit."

I turn to look at him in the passenger's seat, and he's staring right back at me. There's something about him though. He's nothing like the Julian I know.

We're not strangers to a bit of razzing here and there. Like I said, we've had our fair share of fights, but the glare in his eyes is unknown to me.

He's never looked at me like that. Like he doesn't give a shit what I think. Like he doesn't care what I want or feel. Like he's got something else occupying his brain, and whatever—or whoever—it is, is pushing me out.

"Right. I'm the one being a prick. My apologies, your fucking highness," he scoffs, turning away from me to look out the window.

After making a quick pitstop at home for our cloaks and masks, I drive down campus to her house and park off the main road. When I visited on her birthday, I found a secluded area that's unfrequented enough to keep my car from sight during these hours of the night.

We take time donning our costumes before trudging through the woods to her balcony, but I'm not sure what the plan is here. Julian has a bag slung over his shoulder, but he hasn't spoken a word to me in the past 30 minutes, so I'm not holding my breath for an explanation.

I had no intentions of following her—this is all him.

All the lights are off when we approach the house. She's not on the balcony waiting for us like he thought she'd be, and the TV isn't on in her room. The house is completely dead. After climbing the trellis and stalking through the balcony door, I'm

surprised to find her in bed, slumbering peacefully beneath the covers.

Yeah, there's no chance in hell she thought we'd come after her immediately. She was saving her energy for the big comeback, so ambushing her in her sleep just feels boring and artless. That's not our game.

We wait. We watch. We stalk. We hunt.

We take our time coming up with punishments, but we don't act on impulse.

Julian hasn't lost his ambition, though. I watch as he gently sets the bag on her floor, rummages through it, and pulls out a few items. It's too dark in here to actually see what they are, but when he hands me a set of handcuffs, I get the impression he's going to recreate what she did to him.

He signals for me to follow behind him, coming up beside the bed to make our move. She's in that weird mid-way position between being on her side and rolling onto her stomach, so Julian takes advantage of it.

After ripping off a piece of duct tape and slapping it across her mouth, he jumps up to mount her ass and wrestles her arms behind her back. "The cuffs, now!" he bites at me through closed teeth, but the way she's barely trying to fight him off gives me pause .

For a second, I think she hasn't even woken up because she's laying so still, and the only sounds coming from her are a few throaty groans and huffs from her nostrils as she tries to breathe through the tape.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she was waiting for us. But then why go to sleep and leave herself vulnerable for an attack? That doesn't seem like her. I would assume she'd want to confront us as usual, not give up her chance to act the brat. Did she give

up her fight? She couldn't have—nobody who doesn't want to fight would do what she did to Julian.

I hand over the cuffs to him, not particularly interested in taking part in whatever this is. It doesn't feel right to me, and it's not the approach I would have wanted to take. This isn't fun for me, and this isn't the Scarlett I took pleasure in torturing.

Julian doesn't take long wrangling her into submission, and now she's bound, gagged, and...looking right at me.

What the fuck did I do?

He's the only one who's put his hands on her, but she won't stop glaring at me like I'm the goddamn problem. He ties something around her eyes before picking her up and hoisting her over his shoulder, not even bothering to check for Penelope when he opens the door and drags her downstairs.

I don't know if I should lock her door or leave it open so Penelope thinks Scarlett just went to work in the morning, but I do know it seems like I'm going to be spending the night cleaning up after a madman's mess if he won't include me in his plans.

I opt to lock the door from the inside, then climb back down the trellis to meet him around the front of the house. It shouldn't seem weird for her to be keeping Penelope out of the room—not with all the drama we injected into their relationship.

I still haven't had time to sit and regret that decision yet, but there will be plenty of opportunities later, I'm sure .

Across the yard, Julian's carrying her through the trees and straight for my fucking car. He doesn't bother to ask for permission or take the time to fill me in on whatever idea is bouncing around his head; he just opens the trunk and tosses her inside.

“Kidnapping?! Seriously, you fucking idiot, what are you thinking?” I storm up to him, but he closes the trunk in my face before I can reach her.

Grabbing my arm, he leads me a few feet away from the car—I assume so she can’t hear us arguing—but I shove him off when we’re safely tucked away in the shroud of surrounding forest.

“Look, I get that it might seem crazy, but you have to get on board because I can’t do this alone. Are you not in this anymore? What happened to wanting to make her suffer, make her scream, make her cry?” he asks.

“I did—” I don’t like to talk about my Scarlett shit because he psychoanalyzes me to hell, and I’m not going to let him do it now. “I do , but you’re acting like an insane person, and you won’t tell me what the fuck is going on. I’m not going to blindly go along with whatever you’re doing. We do this shit together, or we don’t do it at all.”

His head drops with a sigh before he nods lightly. “You’re right, sorry. She does have me fucked up, I know, but the idea just sort of came to me when we were riding over.” He looks back at the car, finally giving me the explanation I deserve. “I just want to have a little fun with her, that’s all. Then, we’ll let her go, but you saw her—she’s not fighting it. Maybe you’re still skeptical, but haven’t you realized she’s accepting us?”

I can acknowledge that something has changed, sure...but I don’t think it’s the green light he assumes it to be. “Just don’t cry to me when she hurts you, because I will say I told you so,” I warn. “So, what’s this big plan of yours? Where do you want to take her?”

The Julian I actually recognize starts to resurface, his conniving smile giving me a sort of comfort to know my friend is still in there. Whether I like it or not, we are stuck in this together. Scarlett rejected me as Skylar, but she came back for us at

Eden. If this is the only way I can have her, I'll take what I can get.

“The basement,” he says. “What better way to break it in than using it to break our girl?”

Julian

It still has a ring to it. Our girl.

Our girl, who stood her ground for months while we coaxed her into this lifestyle, never wanting to fully submit to us. When she finally gave in to her darkest desires and put on the mask, she used the first opportunity she had to corner me and show off this new side of herself—the one we shaped her into. Our girl, who carved her color into my chest with such finesse and mastery, I think I fell in love with her dark heart in that moment.

Scarlett is just as much mine as she is Skylar's, whether that means she's completely ours...or not at all. I'm not sure yet.

I noticed his hesitation in her room, but he wasn't there in the Red Room. He hasn't been there for a lot of my time with her, so I don't expect him to understand any more about her than what she blatantly tells him.

But me? I know how to read her, and I've been training for months to do so. I've read every page of her diary, so I know her truths on paper and have compared them to my memories of our nights together. I know which words were genuine and which were only being said to egg me on. I know what makes her tick, I know which fights were real, and I know my rage excites her.

So yes, I did know she expected us to visit tonight .

She knew we would come after her, but not only did she know...she wanted us to.

Sure, tonight was absolutely a revenge ploy to get back at us for Penelope. I'm also positive there will be more acts of retribution to follow, but I'll lie down and let her.

We hurt her. I'm not a pussy; I can handle taking accountability for my actions and the consequences that come with them.

The only thing that matters to me is that she belongs to us.

Unfinished basements really give me the fucking creeps.

Dark splotches of discoloration cover the low-hanging wood beams, splintered and nearly rotted from age alone. Spiderwebs spread across each corner where one of the beams meets a wall or column, giving off the eerie image of a killer's lair. It doesn't really have the appeal of a makeshift sex dungeon, but it's what I have to work with.

Attached to the healthiest beam I could find, a triangle spreader bar hangs from a rope I tied to the column, allowing me to raise and lower her as needed. My darling Scarlett sits on her knees, arms raised and bound by the spreader with tape still covering her mouth.

She's a true vision; her naked form displayed vulnerably in front of me, hair knotted from her interrupted slumber, her eyes covered with the same tie she used to blind me, and her poor knees cut to hell from the rough concrete flooring.

Her chest heaves in frustration as we sit and watch her, saying absolutely nothing to break the silence. Skylar sits in a chair behind her, legs spread wide while he leans back and soaks in this image of her. His fist is pressed to his mouth like he's fighting the urge to speak or moan, but his eyes are devouring every inch of her gorgeous body .

The good thing about blindfolding her is that we don't have to hide. We can take off

our masks, get undressed, and fully indulge in the greatest pleasures of her without our identities being compromised.

Really, that's the only thing that had me worried at Eden. She insisted I undress, and my life flashed before my eyes. I've been having my backpiece worked on for months now while Scarlett's been at the tattoo studio, so she would have recognized it in an instant and blown up our entire charade. Not to mention the flash tattoo on my bicep from Friday the 13th.

No artist ever forgets a piece they've done.

I crouch down to meet her on the floor and remove the tape, ripping my arm back when her teeth chomp out at me. "Vicious little thing, aren't you?" I tease.

She wets her lips before speaking, her tongue darting out to spread the moisture around. "You weren't supposed to kidnap me. I have a real life, you fucks. My friend will know I'm missing and they'll report it."

"Which friend would that be? We know about the spat with your blonde bestie. She'll give you the space we need for a few days of fun," Skylar joins in, standing from his chair to kneel behind her and twirl a lock of her hair around his fingertip.

He's on board, alright.

She flinches at the sudden touch, but otherwise remains unshaken. "My friend, Julian, and my colleagues. They're all going to be at my work today and they'll know if I don't show up."

Skylar's eyes flick to mine. Looks like one of us needs to go back for her phone. "Another boytoy, Ruby?" he whispers in her ear, but she curls away from him—his breath too sensitive on her skin, and his words too threatening. "How many suitors do

we have to fight off? That makes three now, huh?”

“I’m not with him, I swear,” she tries to explain, but he grabs her jaw and stretches her head back to rest his chin on her forehead.

“But you like him?” he pries. When she doesn’t respond, his fingers tighten until she whimpers a soft cry. “Answer. Do you like him? ”

A tear tracks down her cheek from beneath the tie, and I can’t help but smile. Especially when she says, “Yes, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not with him.”

Skylar won’t let it go, though. This is how he plays. “Well, it’s still a problem we need to deal with, isn’t it? Our friend here seems to think you’ve given yourself over to us, but that can’t be true if you’re still thinking about someone else.”

“Which is it, Ruby?” I chime in, running my fingers lightly over her chest and down through her cleavage. “Are you ours, or someone else’s?”

She sucks her lips in to stifle a moan when I reach her nipple, pinching it between my fingertips until it’s rock-hard. Skylar lets go of her jaw to grope her other breast, but she uses her freedom to pull one of the oldest tricks in her book.

Rearing back for a second before lunging forward, she sends a glob of spit flying onto my face.

Lucky shot.

“I’m nobody’s,” she hisses. “I’m not his. I’m not yours. I’m mine.”

“Right.” It wouldn’t be Scarlett without the fight. I try to remember that as I wipe the saliva from my cheek and resist the urge to fucking slap her. “We’ll see about that,” I

challenge, using my nails to cut into her nipple until she screams.

Skylar and I both stand, and he goes for the rope tied around the column when I signal for him to lift her. I search through my toy box for an especially fun gadget, then stalk back over to where she now hangs, toes barely touching the ground.

He takes his place behind her again, and when he sees what's in my hand, his arms reach out on either side of her head to grab the straps from me. Lying in wait, he holds each band of the ball gag while I fidget with the clamps chained to it, pinching the clasps open to position them on each of her nipples.

When she empties her lungs with a shrilling wail, Skylar pops the gag into her open mouth and secures the buckle at the back of her head. "That's the last time you'll ever spit on him, do you hear me?" he whispers in her ear before shoving her head forward

.

She sobs uncontrollably, saliva pooling around the ball and dripping down the corners of her mouth until she's fucking drenched in it. A drop falls onto her tit, so I lick it up and move to the clamp, swirling and flicking my tongue against the device until she's so overstimulated she can't stand.

When her knees buckle, I grab her thighs and hike her calves around my waist, cradling her against me. Like the good girl she is, she locks her ankles behind my back and hangs on for the ride.

"Say you're ours, Ruby." I grind into her pussy, and the sweet moan that comes through the rubber ball is immediately squandered when she tries to shake her head. Turns out, she didn't realize how short the chain is between the gag and the clamps—any movement of her head will pull them taut. "Say you belong to us, and we'll let you go."

I'm not looking for a coherent response. Really, any affirming sound will do. However, she either really loves what we're doing to her right now or is so stuck in her ways that she refuses to tell us what we want to hear. She makes her answer clear—well, as clear as she can through the gag muffling her defiant response.

No.

I really might be falling for this girl.

What I have a hard time understanding is why she never approached me after our kiss on Christmas. If she likes me—the real me—then why haven't we shared anything more than pointless banter at the studio? Why did she fuck Skylar right after kissing me, and why on earth did she date Dario after he admitted to fucking stalking her?

I motion for Skylar to come over. "Get my pants," I demand, then turn to her again. "You remember your safe word?" The frantic nodding that follows only assures I was correct about her enjoying this. She wants to be here.

Scarlett assists in shimmying her post higher up my torso, allowing Sky to unbutton and rip down my pants until my cock springs free. Being the helpful guy he is, he even stays to line me up with her pussy before I drop her down, fully impaling her in one hard thrust .

One thing about understanding her is knowing when she's on the verge of a panic attack. I can feel her shaking, and as much as I'd love to think it's from my magic dick, I know she's struggling with the gag.

For a while, I refrain from pounding into her to keep a steady roll of my hips, coaching her through every moan to make sure she uses her nose for steady inhalation.

Skylar takes advantage of our slow grinding to slot up against her back. He wraps his hand around her waist and down her belly, reaching between us to massage her clit. Her hips have a jerk reaction to the invasion as she tightens around me, but her breathing soon regulates enough for me to pick up my pace.

“Do you like that, darling?” I bait, dragging my hips back to ram into her sweet cunt. “You couldn’t stand to be with one man. That’s why you left your little boyfriend, isn’t it? One man couldn’t fuck you, play with your clit, and”—I look to Skylar, flicking my eyes down her body—“fuck your ass. Not at the same time, anyway. But we can.”

His free hand trails down her hip, sliding right through her ass cheeks when I spread them apart. I know the second he starts playing with her hole, because she mewls so beautifully, I want to fucking cry.

She doesn’t say her safe word and she doesn’t pull away. Instead, she rides my cock and his finger like a fucking champ, chasing her orgasm as he teases her swollen clit.

“Say it,” Skylar demands. “Say you’re ours.” His finger moves faster, causing her body to convulse between us.

Her lips tremble around the rubber ball as she attempts to speak, but I’m more interested in hearing her shatter than whatever else she wants to say. If she’s going to reject us, I don’t want to hear it.

“Say it, Ruby.” I bring one hand up to loosen the buckle at the back of her head, waiting until her orgasm peaks before I’m ready to remove it .

It’s a lot to manage between fucking her senselessly and waiting for Skylar to finish her off, but when I feel the walls of her pussy constrict around me, I rip the buckle apart and pull the gag from her mouth.

I've never heard a sweeter sound than what comes out.

"Yes-yes-yes, I'm yours-I'm yours!" she cries.

I'm fucking beaming, and even Skylar has a grin on his face.

"That's our good girl. Now, it's my turn," I say before wreaking absolute fucking havoc on her.

I can feel his finger moving in her ass, and the sensation sends me over the edge almost immediately. I'm in a frenzy, thrusting so animalistically that I have no problem biting into her neck to stifle an embarrassingly malodorous groan.

When I've emptied myself inside her and pull out, I notice her legs are squeezed together tightly, her thighs rubbing back and forth. I don't know if it's because she wants to keep my cum inside or she's still horny. Either way, I'd be happy with the answer.

Swapping places with Skylar, I'm eager to give our girl whatever it is that she wants. She accepts my replacement blissfully, confirming she's still horny. We'll fuck her all night if she wants us to.

As long as she's ours.

Scarlett

““Hi Scarlett, it’s Julian. Got your number from Skylar. Just wanted to make sure you’re going to be at the studio tomorrow. I know you said it’s none of my business, but I would like to talk to you about something.’ Doesn’t sound like just a friend, does it, Ruby?” Broody taunts.

Okay, apparently stealing me wasn’t enough. They also took my phone. Why would Julian be texting me, and why the hell would Skylar give him my number? I remember how he reacted when Julian kissed me, and there’s no way he would risk letting us talk privately.

“I told you, he’s just a friend I see at the studio sometimes. Wouldn’t we have each other’s numbers if we were together ?” I ask, tacking on a nasty, “Grow up.”

I haven’t seen the light—or anything for that matter—in two, maybe three days. The least of my worries is Julian having my phone number. I stink, I’ve been stuffed with two men’s jizz non-stop for days now, and I want to sleep in a damned bed. My arms fucking hurt.

“Do you wanna know what I think?” No. “I think, darling Ruby, we’ve been spoiling you, and it’s going to your head.” Casanova pinches my cheeks between his fingers. “I think it’s been a few days without your attitude being checked, and you’re forgetting who you belong to. ”

“Maybe,” I drawl, “that’s because you said you’d let me go if I admitted it...and I’m. Still. Here.” I rip my face to the side and evade his touch, but then there’s a long

pause.

“Admit what, again?” Broody asks.

If I wasn’t blindfolded, my eyeroll would probably hit the way I mean it to, but alas.

“You know what.”

“I want to hear you say it. Just one more time, and then we’ll let you go. Say it one more time, for real , and we’ll believe you,” Casanova whispers into the shell of my ear, stroking his finger against my ribs in a way that tickles so badly I start to squirm.

I thought I knew how I felt. I always think I know what I’m feeling, but then they draw me in like a fucking flame and I lose all sense of self. I don’t have to say the words—not for their sake, and not because they deserve it—but if I don’t say them aloud...if I just write them in my journal or overthink in my head, none of it is real.

Taking a deep breath, I force the words out. “I’m yours and no one else’s. I don’t like how you went about it most of the time, but yes, I want you like fucking crazy, even when I try not to.” I don’t know why I’m crying, but I’m glad they aren’t mocking me for it. “I hate that you hurt me to play some sick game, and I hate that you ruined probably the only good relationship I have in my life. I hate that I still want you, despite what you did. Yes, I’m yours. But I hate you, too.”

Another minute of silence—painful fucking silence—then the spreader falls, and I crumble to the ground. Casanova catches me, and I feel his warm chest against my cheek as his arms encircle my shoulders. Broody must have run over, because somebody is unlatching the buckles of my wrist restraints, finally freeing me from my prison.

They shove my arms through two tunnels of fabric and wrap it around my body, tightening it at the waist. A robe, most likely .

I don't think I could stand if I wanted to, so Casanova scoops me up and holds me against his chest. Instinctually, my hands seek the proof of my wrath, tracing softly over the scabbed letters I marred him with.

"It's not just that you're ours, you know," he says, low enough for me to hear because I'm so close, but probably too low for Broody. "We're yours, too."

It shouldn't, but the notion brings a smile to my face. It's the last thing I remember doing before I fall asleep.

A crash downstairs startles me awake.

My head is pounding, my arms ache like nobody's business, and I'm so fucking tired I'd love nothing more than to crawl back under the covers and pass out again. I don't though, sliding the blanket off me to sit up and check my phone for the time.

What the fuck?

It's four in the damned morning, and somebody is outside my fucking house. I say somebody ...because I hear Penelope snoring from across the hall like a fucking chainsaw, so it can't possibly be her. And I know it's not Casanova and Broody because they just brought me home and left immediately afterwards.

Sprinting to my closet, I snatch my phone from the nightstand on my way, then find something to wear. Call it my groggy, sex-drunk brain, or my complete lack of ability to put together a solid thought, but something draws me to my text app instead of the much obvious answer—calling the police.

I've never had to call 911 before and find out how long it takes for them to arrive, but I have had to answer to a different kind of authority...and I know exactly how quickly they can reach me.

What I'm about to do is even stupider than texting Skylar Cole after months of giving him the cold shoulder. I never did apologize to him for the way I acted after he warned me about Dario—not that he knew why I would eventually break up with him or even the things I already found odd about the relationship.

Whether he was just jealous or not, maybe he could have saved me from wasting a few weeks of Dario's life.

My phone lights up with a text notification:

Hiding isn't who I am anymore. Instead, I slowly creak open the balcony doors and look around, but I don't see anything that stands out. The trees are still trees. The grass is still grass.

Then, I see something that's definitely not supposed to be there—a man's shadow. The figure creeps along the wall of the house until the light of the moon reveals his face. You've got to be kidding me.

“Dario?” I call down to him, and his eyes shoot straight for mine. “What the fuck are you doing in my yard?”

A smile creeps onto his face, but he stumbles backwards and throws his arms out to the side when he screams, “Diabolina, I have come to win you back.”

This motherfucker is going to wake up the entire goddamn neighborhood or worse—Penelope. “Don't move! I'm coming down.” I throw a cardigan on, then carefully tiptoe downstairs, making sure Pen's still snoring savagely.

I really don't feel like watching Dario get beat up again, but if Skylar sees him here, that's exactly what's going to happen. I don't understand why he waited weeks to reach out to me if he wanted me back. I didn't block his phone number, so I know he could have texted.

He must be drunk or high to think this is okay. I haven't thought about it much, but his outburst at the diner should have proven what type of person he's been from the start. He's just another man who can't take no for an answer, not unlike some other men I know...but that's besides the point.

I make it to the last house in our row, but there's no signs of life, so I turn the corner and start walking through the back area by the forest.

"Dario!" Still, there's no answer.

Crack.

A branch snaps among the trees to my left so I carefully step towards the noise, but I don't see anything. The only other sounds come from a few owls and chirping crickets.

"Dar—" A body darts out from the shadows and collides with me, a hand quickly cutting off my scream before I can cry out.

"Hello, my diabolina . Did you miss me?"

Dario slams my back against the tree he was hiding behind, the rough and cracked bark digging painfully into my sore back. My limbs are still so numb, and none of my muscles have recovered from their abuse over the past few days.

I shake my head frantically, but he presses further into me, his hot breath stinging my nostrils with the scent of beer. A rustling of leaves to our right has me hopeful that Skylar is here to save me, but a different man emerges. I don't recognize him, though he bears a striking resemblance to Dario.

He must see the confusion on my face because he gives a chuckle at my panicked look. "One of my brothers," he explains, "I told you about him, remember?"

I realize he's actually expecting me to give an answer somehow, so I nod my head, turning back to meet his eyes.

"I've told him all about you, too. Isn't that right, baby brother?" he asks, and the man nods in response with a malicious grin. "See, Renzo has expressed the desire to know more about you, diavolina . And you're going to show him. "

He's not making any sense, and I have no idea where he's going with this until the hand on my mouth disappears, returning a second later with a straight razor clasped between his fingers.

"I know you left me for those two pieces of shit, bellezza . I know you put on a red mask for them. I know you let them fucking kidnap you. I know you let them fuck you," he spits out, slamming his fist into the tree above my head. "I know you didn't run from them when you should have, but I'm going give you that chance. So run, diavolina , because when we catch you, we're going to fucking ruin you."

"Dario, pl—" I try to plead with him, but this isn't a game like with Casanova and Broody. This is a threat.

"Dieci, Nove, Otto..."

Not wasting another second, I shove his chest and sprint through the trees. My feet are bare, and I only have on some night clothes along with my cardigan, so I'm fucking freezing. My legs still don't work properly, so I stumble with every stride, cursing Skylar for taking his sweet time. The ten seconds must be up by now—if he even bothered to finish the countdown—but it's too dark to see anything beyond the few trees surrounding me. The new spring leaves are blocking the moonlight from shining through, so I'm on my own.

I can't do this.

I'm going to die in these fucking woods, and Skylar will have been the last person I texted, and I'll have gone weeks without talking to my best friend, and I'll have never reached my dream to become a tattoo artist, and...if I die now, I'll never see them again.

I'm not ready to die.

Dario doesn't know that, or he doesn't seem to care. Barreling into me, he sends me crashing to the ground before mounting my waist with the razor held to my throat.

I'm not going without a fight, though. If I'm going to die today, I'm taking him with me .

My hips buck wildly like a bronco trying to throw off its rider, and my nails rip at the skin of his arms and hands. My legs thrash out to get any kind of traction against the leaves and dirt to give me some sort of advantage here, but Dario is huge, and my body is weak.

Renzo rushes over to us, and when Dario orders him to grab my legs, the tears finally come. No matter how hard I push, shove, scratch, kick, or try to throw them off me, it's not enough. Renzo manages to rip my shorts off and starts digging into the skin of my hips to get a grip on my panties, but a shouting in the distance distracts them.

"Go! Make sure no one comes this way, I'll take care of it," he commands his brother, and Renzo halts his efforts to run through the woods, back from where we came.

"You've become so much more of a problem than you're worth, you know that? But you already soiled this for me once, and you've been marked, so there's no letting it go." Dario slices the razor across my collarbone and down my chest, forcing a scream to burst from my lungs. My fighting already caused the blade to cut into my neck a few times, but the adrenaline stopped me from feeling that. "Don't cry now, Scarlett.

I still have you until the summer solstice. Then, you'll be free of all your worries."

"Scarlett!" Someone calls through the trees, and it's enough to make Dario spin around—finally giving me a moment of advantage.

I spot a decent sized rock near my shoulder, so I grab for it and immediately swing. It lands against his temple with a THUD , and just like that, his body rolls off me and falls to the dirt at my side.

In a sheer moment of overwhelming panic and anger, I hover over him and slam the rock against his head a few more times until I'm sure he must be dead. His body lies frozen, his knees still bent from straddling me and his arms limp at his side. An enormous gash across his brow is pouring dark red blood that would normally make me sick...

But I don't mind blood. Not anymore .

Skylar finally arrives, panting loudly as he keels over in front of me to catch his breath. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?" he asks, but I see his head spinning when he notices I have no pants on.

I reach out for him in an embrace I never thought we'd share again, wrapping my arms around his neck. He plops his ass on the ground and pulls me into his lap. "I'm alright...but I killed him I-I-I think." I can barely get the words out because I'm shivering and pushing through the worst panic attack of my life.

"We killed the other guy, too," he admits, hugging me back with one arm curled around my waist, the other stroking my hair. I'm confused at first what he means by 'we,' but then Julian comes through the trees—dragging Renzo's body with him. "Jules! Give her your jacket."

Julian approaches, his features grimacing at the state of me, though I'm thankful for

him not saying anything to draw attention to it. He removes his coat and throws it around my shoulders, bending down to grab me by the waist and lift me to my feet.

This is almost more awkward than New Year's dinner. We're standing around a dead body in triangle-formation, nobody saying a word. I know I probably should have called the police before, but when I suggest doing so now, Skylar has an opinion.

"We can't call the police, Scarlett. Nobody can know they're dead." He flashes Julian a look I can't comprehend—whether it's meant to be secretive or not—I'm just too fucked in the brain right now.

"He's right. We're going to have to bury the bodies. Nobody finds out about this. It didn't happen, understand?" Julian turns to me for an answer.

"What are you talking about, Skylar?! We just killed two people. The police will know it was in self-defense. We just—"

"What the fuck were you doing with him anyway?" Skylar blurts. "I told you to stay away from him. "

I'm fucking aghast. "Are you seriously victim-blaming me right now, you douchebag? Do you think I would have texted you if I invited him here? He fucking attacked me, you sick fuck!"

Stepping up to me, he towers over my frail, trembling body. "Right. But now, we have to bury two people because you didn't fucking listen to me, Red. I warned you. I told you to stay away, and because you couldn't do as you're fucking told, we have to—"

The slap echoes through the trees so loudly, I imagine it like one of those movie scenes where a gunshot goes off and all the birds fly away.

When I hit him, his head turned all the way to the side, but now that he's coming back towards me, I'm compelled to hit him again. I rear my hand back and let it fly, but he catches my wrist midair and yanks me into him.

"Don't you ever fucking think about hitting me unless you want it reciprocated, Ruby," he sneers. I try to pull my arm away, but he won't let go. His eyes are boring down on me—angrier than I've ever seen them.

"What did you just call me?"

"Sky—" Julian tries to intervene, but I'm focused on Skylar.

"What did you just call me? Why do you know that name?" I repeat.

"You heard me, Ruby. Don't act so fucking surprised." He grins, bringing his free hand to wrap around my throat. "I know you've always had your suspicions. It's not my fault you chose to ignore them."

The past eight months of my life flash before my eyes.

I remember every time I looked at Skylar or Julian and thought they could be comparable to Casanova and Broody—if only this or that was different about them. I remember insisting it had to be Skylar who put the Post-it on my mirror at Dad's place. I remember confronting him, but he somehow turned the tables, and I fucking slept with him instead.

I remember everything .

"No." Even now, denial tastes much sweeter than the truth. He still won't let go, no matter how hard I try to push him off. "It doesn't fucking matter. I'm not helping you bury them. I'm calling the police."

Skylar backs me into a tree, his fingers still tight around my throat. “You’re not. Because if you do, we’re taking you down with us.”

“You have blood on your hands, Scarlett,” Julian steps up to us, leaning his hand against the tree next to my head. “You don’t understand this yet, but you’re in danger. Either we bury these bodies so nobody finds out, or we send you to prison where we know you’ll be safe. I’d much rather you have your freedom, but it’s your call.”

Danger from what? Did we not just kill the danger?

“H-he said...” I fight to speak through this mongrel fucking strangling me, but when Julian taps his shoulder, Skylar lightens up. “He said something about the solstice and me being marked. What does that mean?”

The boys share another cryptic glance.

“It means they’re coming for you, no matter what,” Julian sighs, dropping his head in defeat.

“Who?” I ask, but neither of them answer me. “Who’s coming for me?!”

Skylar pauses for a moment, the hand choking me just moments ago instead coming up to stroke my cheek with tender knuckles. His eyes shift out of their anger and into something else entirely.

Sadness? Remorse?

Nothing good.

“Adérfia Aímatos—the Brothers in Blood.”