



Fall (Fair's Fair #2)

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Category: Horror

Description: One bad choice. One stupid text. And one shot at survival.

When the two masked men from the haunt show up at my apartment full of affection and promises, I'm sure that nothing more can go wrong. They spared my life because of their new obsession with me, so I should be safe with them.

But that isn't the case at all.

After our first "real" encounter turns horribly wrong for me, I wake up in a place I don't recognize—isolated, unfamiliar, and cut off from any hope of rescue. A place only they control.

They say I have to prove I'm worthy of their trust.

Otherwise, they'll never let me go.

But when the price for my freedom is something unthinkable—something that could turn me into a monster—I know there's no way I can follow through.

Even if it's the only thing that could keep me alive.

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Will you let us in to play?

The words echo inside my head as I stand there, blocking my door as I look over the faces of the men who fucked me to within an inch of my life last night, and came close to murdering me. In fact, there were several moments I was sure they were going to murder me, all things considered.

I should tell them to leave.

I should call the cops and spill my guts about what they'd done.

What I absolutely shouldn't be doing is trying to remember if I picked up my dirty laundry from my bedroom floor so they won't think I'm a mess of a person.

"I..." With no idea what to say, I take a step back in the small entryway to my apartment, my back hitting the closet behind me. "Y-you want to come in?" God, I wish my brain was working correctly this morning. But I'll blame the chloroform soaked rag for that, even if it's long dissipated from my system.

Ravage smiles almost sweetly, arms folded over his chest and ankles crossed on my porch. "Are you telling us no?"

That has me shaking my head, and I gesture with flicks of my fingers, trying to communicate in spontaneously made up sign language that they're allowed to enter.

Though it isn't until Harrow closes the door behind them that I question my decision. They're murderers. And while I'm not sure what the minimum body count is to be considered serial killers, I'm starting to wonder if they'd qualify for that as well.

Fuck, maybe this is an awful idea.

But I only get to have a few more seconds of internal crisis, because Ravage is suddenly right in front of me. His eyes search my face as he reaches out to press a hand to the closet door beside my head and leans his weight against it. "Well?" he asks.

He doesn't say anything else, and my mind races while I try to figure out if I'm missing some important context clue or maybe blacked out for the first part of his question. Based on the last twelve hours of my life, I wouldn't put it past my brain to have some oxygen-deprivation induced trauma. Belatedly, I realize Harrow closed and locked the door, which does absolutely nothing for my panicking heart.

"Well...?" My brows climb toward my bangs as I wait for Ravage to give me something else to go on. My fingers press to the closet door behind me, and from the corner of my eye, I watch Harrow stride up the stairs like he owns my damn apartment.

Ravage snorts and leans closer. "You were willing to risk your life to see my face last night," he purrs, face inches from mine. "So tell me, princess. Was it worth it?"

Oh.

Oh...

Tentatively, I reach up and drag my fingers down his jaw, toward his full lips. He's almost sweetly handsome, as opposed to Harrow's sharp, model-like looks. They're a

perfectly opposite pair, like two ends of the attractive murderer spectrum.

“You’re a little full of yourself, aren’t you?” I murmur while trying to sound braver than I feel. “And it wasn’t like a conscious choice last night to try to pull your mask off. I didn’t mean to.”

“You didn’t seem to mind the consequences very much.” He turns to brush his lips along my palm, and I jerk slightly in surprise. That only makes him chuckle, then Ravage pulls away to jog up the stairs after Harrow.

It leaves me staring at my apartment door from the inside, alone, and wondering why the hell I let them in. I stand there for too long, eyes fixed on the faux-wood grain until I swear I start seeing patterns in it.

A sudden knock jolts me out of my thoughts, and for one brief, stupid moment I wonder if the last couple of minutes had all been a figment of my overactive imagination. I push off the closet door, reach for the doorknob, and turn it with no idea of what or who I’ll find on the other side.

When my eyes land on two uniformed officers, my heart drops immediately. I glance up the stairs, suddenly sure there’s some kind of manhunt going on for Harrow and Ravage, and that they’re here to lie low like high-ranking members of the mob.

“Noa Torrance?” the shorter, friendlier looking officer asks. There’s an indulgent, almost condescending smile on his face as he looks me over. “Is that you?”

“Yeah?” I croak. I’m sure I look petrified, but I’m not sure how to fix that. “Can I help you?”

“We’re just here to check on you.” The man gives me a nod. “Could we step inside?”

Oh, right. My shoulders fall in relief as I remember Sierra called the officers here to make sure I wasn't dead, dying, or approaching that point. It makes sense, after my lack of communication last night, but it's not as if I can tell her the truth about what happened.

"Yes, absolutely. I'm so sorry. Sierra called you, right?" I beckon them inside, refusing to look around like I'm expecting the two guys to pop up. There's no way for them to know I'm not alone, and even if they did, there's no reason for them to suspect Harrow and Ravage of committing a crime or twenty.

"Your friend is pretty worried about you," the taller, dark-eyed officer tells me. "She said she couldn't get a hold of you all night and that you were acting a little weird on the phone. She's a pretty good friend in my book, since she wasn't willing to just let it go." He looks at his partner, then back at me. "She let us know you have a bit of a history of dropping contact with people when you're struggling."

Of course she told them that. But I can't really blame her when she's right. It dawns on me then that this probably resembles a few other incidents of me going off the reservation mentally that she's dealt with over the course of our friendship.

"That's a nice way of putting it." I sigh, giving them both a guilty, apologetic smile as I lean against the closet again. "She's right. I have a history of some mental illness issues and, umm, she needed to call a wellness check on me once before that went a little not-great."

Not great is an understatement, but I'm sure they already know that from looking at my file. I smooth my hair back over my ear, still forcing myself to keep my relaxed and casual facade. "But luckily, this isn't that kind of thing. I was at a haunted house last night and I met, uh..." I trail off and give them the look, figuring that partial honesty is my best policy. "I met a new friend."

Both of them grin, sharing in my little inside joke. “I wouldn’t have thought a haunted house on Halloween was a good time to make new friends.” The shorter one chuckles. “But do your friend a favor and keep her informed, would you? She was pretty worried about you.”

“I am so sorry.” I have the grace to look mortified, and I give them both another apologetic smile. “Seriously, I didn’t mean to make you waste your time. I know you have better places to be. But yeah, I’m all good. Just uh, pretty tired, you know?” I tilt my head to the side and bite my lip, still going for the same facade that I’m pretty sure will get me out of this.

“All good,” the nicer, shorter man assures me.

The taller police officer looks like he disagrees with his partner’s words and glances flatly at me with a sigh. “Just try to keep better communication in the future,” he grumbles, turning and opening the door. I can tell he’d rather be anywhere but here, listening to me allude to the sex I had last night. But it was a pretty solid tactic, judging by how fast I’m able to get the two officers out of my apartment.

“Thank you!” I call, leaning on the door. “Sorry, again!” The shorter man waves back at me, but his partner just stomps to the car and gets in, slamming the door behind him hard enough that I wince in sympathy for the car.

Well, at least that was easy to deal with. If they would’ve pushed the wellness check, then today would’ve been significantly worse. And I don’t feel like having the shoelaces yanked out of my sneakers or the drawstring cut out of my waistband today.

Especially not with two murderers in my apartment who may or may not have ransacked the place by now. Though I’d like to think that if that were the case, I would’ve heard them doing it. A huff leaves me as I close my door, and I take a few

moments to rest my forehead against the fake wood as I listen for any sound and try to figure out what to expect when I walk up the stairs.

Unfortunately, I can't hear anything, and my brain is unhelpfully blank. I trudge up my stairs, eyes fixed on the top, where I can see my orange and white cat sitting and washing a paw. Bagheera, my sleek black cat, is probably under the biggest piece of furniture he can find, while Clearwater clearly doesn't mind the intrusion of strangers in our home.

In fact, when I get to the top of the stairs and see Harrow on my sofa, I'm pretty unsurprised to find Finn stretched out on his lap and purring while the man strokes his ears. I stop at the landing, next to the half-wall dividing the stairs from the small kitchen, and stand there.

I just...stand there.

Because what am I really supposed to do with the two of them in my apartment? I feel like I'm stuck on buffering, so why not stand in place and let Clearwater use my legs to rub against? At least then I'm being useful to someone.

"So..." My heart races a little, reminding me of all the things that happened at the haunt last night. It's hard to look at Harrow and not think of his hands, his boots, his voice, but I manage to just look at him.

Because I hadn't been able to last night.

"Do you guys, uh, have names?" He looks at me halfway through the question, causing me to stumble over the end of it. I know I look like an absolute idiot, but I can't help the nervousness, the anxiety.

The anticipation.

“You don’t think our parents named us Ravage and Harrow?” His voice is soft as he looks at me with dark, almost black eyes.

I rise to the balls of my feet and drop back to my heels. “Not at all.”

A small smile twitches at his lips, never fully forming and definitely never meeting his eyes. His fingers don’t stop moving on Finn’s ears, and I can see the cat plotting to keep him here until he says otherwise, clearly. “Kieran,” he answers, drawing my attention back to his face. “Nice to meet you, Noa. I’m Kieran.”

“I’m Val.” Ravage strides out of my bedroom, an arrogant grin slashing over his lips. “Well, if you want my full name, it’s Valentin.” There’s a bit of an accent in his words as he says it, though it’s not present in his everyday speech. “Just don’t look me up because that’s also not my legal name.”

“Yeah, let me just...hack into some government database and hunt you guys down with first names only.” Finally, I force myself to walk to the kitchen, and I move to the counter to hop up on it, my heels tapping lightly against the cabinets under me with every twitch of my legs. I can’t sit still, and keeping my distance feels like the safest option.

As safe as I can be with both of them here, in my apartment, with me.

Alone.

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2

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I ignore it in favor of studying the two men while listening to the unsteady, nervous thumping in my chest. At least until my phone buzzes again, prompting me to drag it out of my pocket with a huff.

You okay??? Was it the wellness check? I can feel Sierra's frantic worry even through text, and I snort as I consider telling her the truth.

Not that I plan to.

"So my friend sent the cops to do a wellness check on me," I tell the two men awkwardly. I have no idea if there's some unwritten script I should be following, or if I should be looking for a knife in the drawer beside me to protect myself.

After all, I really know nothing about these men. My gaze strays to the drawer, my hand inching towards it just in case.

"How sweet of her." Harrow's— Kieran's —words drip with sarcasm. "Did you tell her you're fine and dandy? Just a little sore?" He tilts his head to the side as he watches me, and Val snorts.

"Should I?" I roll my eyes, trying for a bit of bravado. "Or should I tell her to do hourly checks on me, just in case the two murderers I let into my apartment decide I'm next?"

"Nah, because you'll miss those checks while we play," Val tells me, stepping closer

until he's only a few feet away. I look down at the space between us, then back up at him, unable to stop myself from anxiously worrying my lower lip between my teeth. "Oh, don't do that, princess," he drawls. Valentin reaches out for me, thumb pressing against my lower lip and dragging it free. "If you make yourself bleed, then I'll get too excited to have a conversation with you."

My eyes drop to his bandaged hand, and he grins. "Same goes for if you make me bleed."

"Text your friend back. Tell her whatever you want." Kieran just sounds bored, and when I look at him, I see he's also on his phone.

Well, that certainly makes me feel a little dismissed. But neither of them seem to really care what I tell her. Judging by the way Val is making jokes and Kieran just...really doesn't give a damn. Surely, if there was a problem here, they would try to wrestle the phone from me or hold me at knifepoint to make me lie to her.

Besides, they had all the time in the world to kill me last night. But they knocked me out and brought me home instead.

That makes up my mind for me. I pick up my phone and send Sierra a slightly lengthy message, feeling self-conscious as I tap away at the screen to assure her I'm fine. My 'new friends' just want to hang out, and she doesn't need to worry.

In return, she reminds me of her trip, and makes me promise to call her while she's in Portland with her mom. Once that's done, I set my phone down on the counter and gaze between the two men.

I don't know how this is going to go.

I don't know why they came back.

“Do you guys, umm, live around here?” I ask finally when they don’t take any initiative to speak. “Or do you guys...like, roam nomadically and murder?—?”

Val reaches up to wrap his fingers lightly around my throat, and a noise of approval goes through him when it immediately makes me shut up. “So nervous.” He chuckles. “You’re just babbling, trying to make conversation. Are you trying to prolong this, princess? Trying to figure out our motives ?” Before I can stop him, he drags me off the counter, and my hand makes an instinctive grab toward the drawer.

My finger hooks over the knob, and Val stops when I manage to pull it open a few inches to reveal the silverware inside. “Oh, yeah?” He snorts, then his hand goes out, and he pulls out one of the sharp steak knives to hold it up between us. “Still want to cut me, Noa?”

“It’s just kind of a knee-jerk reaction.” My blood rushes in my ears as he examines it, though I let out a sharp exhale of relief when Valentin only drops it back into the drawer and closes it.

“I’m not looking to get stabbed by a steak knife today. And seeing as I don’t trust that you actually sanitize your blades well enough for me not to catch something...I think we’ll keep your knife free for now.” Without another word, he yanks me forward, taking advantage when I stumble and pulls me into the living room that’s sparsely decorated with only a coffee table, sofa, bookshelf, and my TV. He doesn’t stop, doesn’t let me go, and he’s strong enough to sling me toward the sofa just as Finn bolts for my room in surprise.

My cat’s exit makes room for Kieran to pull me onto his lap with a huff and chuckle. “You’re a feral little thing even in the daylight,” he murmurs against my neck. “I already bandaged him up once, from your enthusiasm. I’d prefer not to do it today.” Though I wiggle against him, Kieran only presses a hand against my stomach to force me back against him.

“God, she’s just so fucking pretty.” Without warning, Val drops to his knees on the carpet, crawling forward until he’s seated between Kieran’s thighs. “Even prettier in the daylight, princess. Though...” He sits up, resting his elbows on Kieran’s thighs while he looks me over. “I think she’s prettiest when she’s covered in blood. This is cute. Very seasonal.” He reaches up to trail his fingers through my ombre hair.

“I would like to protest being covered in blood ever again.” The words come out quick and nervous, as I cringe away from the memories of what they did to the others at the haunt. “Why did you kill those people? You mentioned last year, right? Is this something you?—”

Kieran grabs my face with his free hand, jerking me around to face him. “It’s too early for questions,” he murmurs. “And we came here to play, not to tell you all our secrets. Unless you’re too sore, darling...” His other hand trails downward, pushing my thighs apart to stroke over the seam of my too-short shorts.

I can’t help the sound that leaves me. It’s something like a whimper and a gasp, though I’m jerked back to earth when Val’s fingers push the hems of my shorts upward and he sucks in an appreciative breath through his teeth.

“Look at you, princess.” The husky roughness of his voice makes my stomach twist, and I tense as he reveals more and more of the marks they left on me. “You know what you look like, don’t you?” He grins up at me, and I squirm uncomfortably on Kieran’s lap.

“A trauma scene? A domestic violence poster child?” I ask flatly, unable to help my sarcasm.

Kieran chuckles against my shoulder and Valentin scoffs.

“Nah, that’s not it.” He runs his fingers over the marks at the tops of my thighs, light

green eyes fixed on them like they're some kind of work of art. "Show me the rest of you." It isn't a question, and he doesn't give me time to think or comply with his request.

Val lunges forward, greedy in his excitement, and grabs my tank top in his hands. He barely manages not to rip it at the seams, and even as I yelp a protest, it's over my head and tossed somewhere else in the room.

The action leaves me mostly naked for their eyes...again. It's a no less vulnerable feeling than before, and my arms instinctively come up to cover myself. Only for Kieran to snatch them away, using one of his hands to pin my wrists at my lower back with a soft growl.

"You know, it's only fair for you to take your clothes off, too. Both of you. At some point," I point out while trying to sound casual. And failing in an epic manner, of course. Even I can hear the tremor in my words, and normally I'm an optimist about my success in all things deception.

Val's gaze drags up to mine and I bite my lip, only for him to reach up with his thumb to stop me again. "You have got to stop doing that." His grin widens. "You make it hard for me to control myself."

Kieran shifts behind me, a small huff on his lips. "You want to play with us, don't you darling?" he murmurs against my ear. "Do you want Val to make you come?"

This is definitely not how I was expecting my morning to go. Val doesn't wait for me to answer before he's dragging my shorts down over my thighs, and he easily tosses them over his shoulder.

"What a gorgeous, good girl," he compliments. "But I'll admit, I'm excited to see you feral again."

Squirming in Kieran's grip, I give him a bemused look. "Why do you think you'll see me feral again? That was only when I had a knife and you were threatening to kill me." God, I feel so unsure, vulnerable, and delicate here, with nothing on and with both of them holding me.

Val just chuckles. "Maybe I just think you have it in you." His voice is soft and velvety, and he lifts onto his knees again as Kieran pulls me back to more comfortably pin my back against his chest.

It also allows Val all the access to the marks he could possibly want. A low sound of approval escapes him as he leans forward to run his fingers over the marks on my hips and sides. He matches the fingerprints with his own hands, his touch soft and warm and wanting.

Fuck, this shouldn't be as hot as it is. It's hard to remind myself they're murderers when I'm not in danger. Harder still when all I can think about is how well they fucked me.

And how much I was into more things last night than I care to admit.

I gasp, not having predicted Val to lean forward to graze his teeth over the bite imprints. He bites down ever so slightly, tongue teasing over the marks. His hands slide from my hips to my thighs, pressing them open until they're hooked over Kieran's knees.

"Gorgeous, perfect thing," Kieran murmurs in my ear. "You look so good covered in our marks." The hand not still holding my wrist comes up to cup Val's jaw, and he cradles his face in one hand. "You said you wanted to play," he reminds him, and earns a reproachful look from the other scare actor.

"Do you guys have, uh, plans today? Bodies to hide or crime scenes to burn?" I hate

the way my voice is uncertain, but I can't seem to help it.

Neither of them speaks for a few seconds. But that's more because Kieran's mouth is on my throat, probably leaving a few more marks of his own while I struggle not to make any embarrassing sounds or movements.

Val is sinking down between my thighs, his fingers tracing along my skin in random designs that have me twitching and nervous. "Something like that," he says finally, glancing up at me with something like regret and apology on his face, but it's gone a moment later. He leans forward to breathe against me, pulling a shiver from my body before he licks teasingly up my slit.

"Fuck!" I yelp, leaning back suddenly against Kieran. "Val—" He, apparently, doesn't care about more conversation. I writhe, wanting to get one hand free to tangle in his hair, but Kieran's grip is firm and solid, keeping me pinned in place. His mouth finds my throat once more, and he licks over the old and new marks like he's trying to taste them.

I don't get a chance to recover for even a second as Val swipes his tongue up my slit, then licks over my clit repeatedly. He seems insistent, impatient, especially when he slides two fingers into me with an approving sound.

"Still so tight, even after how we played with you last night." He leans back to gaze up at me as his fingers curl inside of me. My hips jerk into his hand and my mouth falls open, though I have absolutely no idea what to say.

"I'm..." It feels almost like an accusation or a compliment. I can't decide which. My cheeks burn as Val gazes at me with his fingers in my pussy, and I find his gaze harder to meet when Kieran's hand wanders down as well. He spreads me open and plays with my clit; he does it easily, considering the way my thighs are hooked over his. I pant out a breath, a word, something, in response to the overwhelming

sensations of their hands on my body and Kieran's mouth on my throat.

This really isn't how I thought my morning would go.

"Wait, wait— wait ," I whine, realizing with surprise that I'm already close. It feels like they're going to drag an orgasm out of me by force, and I don't have a lot of say in the matter.

They don't wait.

They don't stop or pause or even slow down. The two of them just keep going, playing with me like a toy, no matter what I say or do. By the time my words are just nonsense, I'm trembling, and my legs are clenched tight over Kieran's. My hands still twist and writhe at my lower back, and I can't stay quiet when Val's tongue joins Kieran's fingers on my clit for a few seconds before he pulls away.

"What are we waiting for?" he teases. "Permission? Princess ..." he trails off with a chuckle. "We don't need your permission to make you come. We just need you to love this, don't we?" His fingers curl and he adds another until he's fucking me with four. It's a burning stretch, it's just on this side of painful, and it's too much.

But it's perfect.

My hips arch, rocking into their hands. Kieran gives a soft growl as he bites down once more on my throat, harder than he has so far this morning. I cry out at that, my breath coming in short, sharp pants.

"I-I'm gonna?—"

Kieran growls against my skin. "Then fucking come, darling," he murmurs. "Come for us like I know you want to. I know you can, baby. I know you love Val's fingers

in your cunt. So come on. Come for me—” I cut him off with a sound that’s way too close to a scream for my comfort and I feel my body clenching around Val’s greedy fingers. Writhing and struggling have no effect when they’re both strong enough to easily hold me in place.

Val fingers me through my orgasm, not letting me come down from it for long, spaced out seconds. It’s intense and too much, though my mouth isn’t working well enough for me to voice any complaints I might have.

“S-stop,” I finally manage to whine. “Stop! Stop , you—” Kieran bites the other side of my neck and sucks a mark onto my skin, and somehow the sensation has me seeing stars all over again.

In what feels like way too long and yet way too short of a time period, I feel Val pull his fingers free. He strokes over my thighs and lets out a soft sigh. Then his lips brush against my kneecap.

“You’re so pretty when you’re desperate,” he murmurs roughly. “I hope I get to see it over and over again.”

“I thought...” I pant the words as Kieran shifts to his feet, though he easily sets me back down on the couch against the pillows.

“You deserve a break. It’s still early, after all,” he tells me. “And I know Val wants to play more, don’t you?” He glances sidelong at his partner, who grins guiltily.

“I always want to play,” he admits slyly. “Especially with you.” As Kieran walks towards the kitchen, Val hands me back my shirt and shorts, surprising me.

“But—” Maybe I’m confused. After all, they gave me the impression they’re short on time. Maybe they just wanted a victory lap, to gloat, or to let me see their faces before

heading out and going on their way.

Maybe this is the last time I'll see them. That thought hurts more than it should. I should not be already sort of attached to two terrible men, and it goes to prove just how awful my taste in people is, clearly.

"Don't worry, princess." Val's grin is bright and friendly. It's a new look for him, and he helps me tug my tank top over my head. "Seriously, the last thing you need to do is worry. You're too perfect for that." It's sweet. So is the way he sits beside me on the sofa as Kieran comes back with a glass of ice water.

"Who knew two scary psycho killers could be so...accommodating," I mutter as I take it from him. "Thank you." Kieran doesn't reply. He only tilts his head as I take a long swallow from the glass, then another. "Are you, umm, leaving?" I finally ask, not sure I want the answer. "Like, really leaving?"

Val glances up at Kieran, who still just doesn't answer. It's awkward. It's definitely really awkward as I take a few more absent sips of water while they just look at me as if they're waiting for something.

"That's good, right?" Val asks, leaning his chin on my shoulder. I have no idea what he's asking, and I open my mouth to tell him so before Kieran answers instead.

"Yeah. That's good. Where are your shoes, Noa?" Kieran reaches out and tugs the glass free of my grip, even as I make a noise of confusion and surprise. "And your jacket?"

"Uh...what?" I have no idea what in the world he wants with my stuff, though I glance toward my room instinctively. "Why? I have plans today that involve me staying here, eating pecan pie, and drinking coffee. I'm not going anywhere."

Yet again Kieran just looks at me, tilting his head to the side like I've said something amusing. A small smile tugs on his lips, and a sense of unease makes me pull away from Val and push to my feet.

My head spins suddenly, prompting me to reach out to grab the armrest for support. I reach a hand up to my face, a groan on my lips. "Yeah, this is why I say I'm taking today off. With pie." God, I really am more tired than I thought I would be.

"You should sit back down," Val tells me, tugging me back down to the couch beside him. I want to resist, to protest, but somehow it's all too easy for him to pull me off my feet.

Something's wrong with me.

Fuck, something is wrong with me. On the sofa I lean forward, nausea tickling at my throat. "I think maybe I need, like, a doctor? I don't get what's wrong with me. Maybe, like, all the stress and strain and—" Breaking off, my brain finally takes this moment to work.

That's good, right? That's what Val said after I drank about half of the glass of the water Kieran gave me.

"Oh, my god." I jerk my head up to look at Kieran, though my gaze swims. "You drugged me!" But my accusation is weak and strained, and I have to blink to keep him in focus.

Kieran kneels in front of me and reaches out, one hand cradling my face. "Yeah," he agrees. "I did. I need you out longer than the chloroform can do. Sorry, darling." I think he smiles, but then again, I really have no idea.

I can barely see him. My head is fuzzy, and I can't seem to feel my fingers.

Belatedly, I realize Val has me leaning against him, and he's murmuring something in my ear that I can't really make out.

"You can't...I thought..." Yet again, a feeling of helplessness settles over me, and I can feel the hot burn of tears in my gaze. "Why?" I manage to ask at last.

But if there's an answer, I don't get to hear it. The blackness takes me too quickly to even know if I actually said the word out loud or just thought I did.

Warmth radiating against my back hits me before my eyes even open. It's nice, and familiar, though not tangible, exactly. I turn my face against the pillow under me, inhaling deeply. For a few moments, it's great. I'm warm, I'm comfortable—though it doesn't feel like I'm lying in a bed—and nothing is wrong.

Until I remember.

With a gasp, I open my eyes and jerk upward, causing a light blanket to fall off of me. I turn toward the crackling sound and warmth, my eyes wide as I find a lit fireplace with flames licking over artificial logs. Seeing as there's no fireplace in my apartment, I know I'm not at home anymore.

“What the hell...?” I murmur, feeling more than a little bit out of it. My brain seems to be scattered, like it's still waking up from the best sleep I've probably had in my life. Even if it did happen against my will. Moving my hand, I flinch when I touch something near the pillow under me that turns out to be my shoes.

“Real brave of you, Noa,” I grumble to myself, pulling them on. A hoodie lies folded there too, though it's not one of mine. Still I tug it over my head, sort of wishing this one was mine because it's so soft and covers me to mid-thigh. The sleeves are perfectly too long, and I curl my fingers into the fabric to comfort myself.

Judging from the way no one has responded to me talking to myself or jumped out of the shadows to murder me, I can't help but wonder if I'm alone here. “Hello?” My voice seems too loud in the open, yet cozy space, and when no one responds I take

off at a stiff, slow walk.

Large, plush sofas face the fireplace and the tv hanging above the mantle, and where I'd been lying is a pillow, soft blanket, and even softer rug. The fire still makes occasional sounds, even without real wood, making me wonder when it was cleaned or looked at last. I would really like to avoid a death by gas fireplace in a strange cabin.

Turning, my eyes find huge windows lining part of one wall, though I have no idea what's outside. Everything past the glass is black, but it doesn't stop me from approaching to press my hands against them.

Where am I ?

No matter how I try to remember what had happened after I passed out— was drugged— nothing comes to me. I guess I really have been completely out of it, and that thought unsettles me.

What if they did something to me, and I just can't remember?

But...I don't feel any different. I don't feel bad at all, except for the twisting anxiety in my stomach and the way I want to yodel my fears into the air. Still, the thought makes me rub my arms as if there's something on my skin, and I push away from the window to trudge toward the small kitchen and breakfast nook. The table in the cabin isn't huge, and any table is an upgrade from my lack of one, I suppose. The wood grain looks real, not fake like everything I own, and I trail my hand over the surface of it as I look around this part of the cabin.

Along the back wall of the living room is a closed door, which I naturally open without hesitation. If I was kidnapped, then clearly I have permission to go anywhere I want. In my head, that makes sense. Though I notice there are suspiciously no

knives that I can find in the kitchen, even though I'm sure all kitchens have them.

I really don't want to have to use a fork to stab someone to get free.

When I push the door open, I see a generic, boring bedroom with a large bed, dresser, and two small, matching tables at the head of the bed. It's very cabin-chic, though I don't know what else I was expecting.

I am in a log cabin after all.

A door closing somewhere in the cabin pulls my attention from hunting through the ensuite bathroom drawers which yielded all of nothing. I listen to the murmur of voices while I stand in place, wondering if I should try to hide or learn to contort my body to somehow get through the small bathroom window.

"Noa?" Val's curious, bemused voice from the main room of the cabin does absolutely nothing to soothe my fears. In fact, it makes them worse. Quietly, I close the drawers and chew on my lower lip while trying, and failing, to come up with a plan.

The bedroom light turns on just as I step out of the bathroom, and my wide eyes find Kieran's as he leans against the doorframe and looks me over with an appraising look I'm starting to hate. "She's right here," he says in a voice no louder than it needs to be. Again my nails sink into my palms and I find it hard to stand still while I stare at him.

"What do you want?" I finally manage to ask as I flex my fingers. My nails bite into my skin with every move, and somehow the movement draws Kieran's attention.

"That looks like it doesn't feel great," he remarks, head tilting to the side. Without answering my question he strides across the wooden floor, his hand reaching out to

mine. When I flinch away, my back hits the edge of the doorway behind me and causes me to wince in discomfort.

“Don’t touch me,” I breathe, eyes wide.

Kieran just grins and, as if to make a point, wraps his long fingers around my wrist. “If I wanted to hurt you unnecessarily, darling, I would’ve killed you by now.”

“Is that supposed to be comforting?” Trying and failing to rip my hand free, I step back until our arms are stretched between us. His muscles have to flex to keep me from dragging him backward in my attempt to create distance or just generally be a problem.

His eyebrow raises, and with a quick jerk he pulls me forward, causing me to stumble into him with a huff of surprise as my other hand comes up to catch myself against his chest. “Let go!” Moving to pull back, I’m too slow, and he suddenly picks me up to throw me over his shoulder with practiced ease.

This leaves me with a view of his ass and the floor as he turns to walk out of the bedroom. A noise of protest escapes my throat, and I bend my knees with every intention of kicking him.

“I wouldn’t,” Kieran tells me flatly. “Do what you want, I guess, but seeing as I haven’t tied you up, cuffed you, or otherwise impeded your movement yet, maybe don’t push it.”

His words cause me to reconsider. I slowly relax, though I keep my grip on the back of his shirt as if I can somehow steady myself or maintain some kind of control of the situation.

Seconds later, I find myself unceremoniously dumped back onto the rug in front of

the fireplace, my knees pressed to the edge of the pillow before I pull back to look up at them.

“What do you want?” My heart pounds in my throat, making it hard for me to hear anything other than the blood rushing in my ears. “I thought...Why would you kidnap me?” Damn, I really never should’ve let them in this morning. That had been my first, and maybe last mistake.

Valentin sighs suddenly and drops to the rug behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist even as I fight to free myself. Not that he seems to care or really notice. Instead, he presses his chin to my shoulder before turning to kiss my cheek affectionately.

Unlike earlier today—when I would’ve basked in the attention and begged for more—I jerk away from him and sneer.

“Don’t be like that, princess,” he purrs sweetly. “Come on, you don’t need to be mad. We really don’t want to hurt you, okay? And before you ask, the only reason you were on the floor is that you were doing a lot of moving in your sleep and we didn’t want you to fall off the couch.” No matter how much I fight him, his arms stay locked around me.

“And the sooner you stop fighting us, the sooner you get an explanation.” Kieran goes to the sofa to sit down, sighing as he stretches his legs out in front of him.

“But if I maintain the motivation now, I won’t have to pep myself up for it after you explain why you kidnapped me,” I snap nervously, my fear making me frustrated and defensive. God, I wish I could just get my arms free, even one, so I could aim my elbow at Val’s nose. If I’m dying here in this cabin, then I’m taking Val’s good looks to the grave with me.

“Gorgeous, feral princess,” Val snarls in my ear. “But, unfortunately, if you don’t stop, I’ll have to get a little mean, Noa.”

“As opposed to drugging me, lying to me, drugging me again , and kidnapping me? That wasn’t mean?” I struggle to get my foot under me, hoping I can use the momentum of standing up to knock him over and get in touch with my inner cheetah to chew out one of their throats.

Or, as a backup, I am still willing to stab a man with a fork.

Managing to finally get one shoe pressed to the floor, I jerk upward. I make it a few centimeters before Val growls, the sound rough and more than a little feral, before suddenly I’m on my back with him straddling my hips, arm across my throat.

Worse, my head is right between Kieran’s boots, which feels more than a little ironic and unfortunate.

Kieran just sighs from the couch and doesn’t move, meaning that I don’t have many places to try to shift to get away from Val’s arm. “Stop!” I gasp, trying to suck in air. “ Stop it! I can’t breathe!”

“If you can bitch, you can breathe,” Val assures me with a sweet smile. “And if you weren’t trying to tear my face off, princess, we wouldn’t be here. So stop sneering at me and take a breath.”

“Let go of—” He rolls his eyes and presses down again, cutting off my words and twisting them into a surprised yelp of discomfort and severe lack of oxygen.

“Breathe,” he reminds me. “Not bitch.” After a few more seconds he lessens the pressure, and I take a deep breath followed by a few desperate pants.

“I would say I’m surprised,” Kieran remarks from somewhere behind my head. “I’d say I expected you to maybe act a little rational and hear us out. But well...I’m not and I didn’t. You really are such a feral little thing. I’ve realized you can’t help yourself when you’re backed into a corner. Most people would be begging for us to be nice, to let them go. They’d be simpering and pleading and promising to do anything. But you...”

Val grins in silence and leans down to bare his teeth at me in some kind of show of dominance or threat. For all I know, he could just be looking for approval on his tooth-brushing skills.

But probably not.

So I show him my teeth right back, kicking up at him just to see where it gets me.

Which is absolutely nowhere.

"What do you want?" I snap, letting my foot drop back to the floor with a thump of displeasure. "I thought you weren't going to kill me. You...you didn't last night. When you drugged me and took me home." Thinking about how long and exhausting my night was seems to remind my body of just how little rest I've gotten in the past twenty-four hours.

Part of me can't believe that's all it's been.

Kieran shifts and sighs like he's tired. If so, that makes two of us. "We would've brought you here straight from the haunt, truthfully. But Val needed to make sure this place was empty and the stuff I used to drug you last night wouldn't last as long as I'd like. Not with the drive."

The drive?

Biting my lip, I glare up at Val again, wondering if he'll choke me out for asking too many questions. "Where are we? Are we far from the city?" Without being able to see anything outside or being able to find my phone, I have no idea how far from Nashville we could possibly be. The idea that I'm hours from my apartment and my cats makes my fingers flex and the urge to whack Val in the face goes through me again.

"I fed your cats and gave them extra water. Changed the litter boxes for you, too," Val remarks, drawing my attention to his grin. His eyes glitter sweetly, like he really thinks he's done me some great favor that will sway me into not freaking out.

"Wow. You're such a saint. My absolute hero—" He presses down again on my throat, his smirk turning rueful as he tips his head to the side playfully.

"We don't want to kill you," Kieran continues. "Neither of us. But we aren't going to risk going to jail for you, feral little thing."

Fear prickles up my spine, causing my fingers to flex against Val's arm. My heart rate picks up, and it occurs to me they're definitely going to murder me. But if so...why not do it while I was unconscious?

Unless they've kept me alive to torture me like the other people at the haunt.

My sudden realization must show on my face, because Val's face turns a little apologetic. "Don't do that," he murmurs, and leans forward to brush his lips to mine. "No, princess, it's not like that."

"You don't know what I was thinking," I breathe, trying not to let my fear show in my voice.

But he just smiles against my lips and huffs a soft chuckle.

“We figure you don’t want to die.” It’s frustrating how Kieran can just sound so casual about this, as if he’s not talking about whether they’re going to end my life, or not. Again my fingers flex, nails digging into Val’s arm as everything in me screams at me to figure out how to run.

God, I really wish I could.

“You can’t just keep me here or bury me in the woods.” I cast around my brain, searching for a reason to back up my statement. “My friends will notice. Sierra?—”

That pulls a laugh from Val and he sits up, not moving his arm. “ Princess ,” he admonishes. “Come on. We were in your apartment when you oh-so-conveniently told the cops and your friend that you were fine, just busy. And I took the liberty of texting her for you once her first flight landed. I think she’s too busy to come check on you, seeing as she’s all the way in Portland .”

Fuck.

I hoped they’d forgotten that, or hadn’t thought to check my phone.

“All you have to do”—Kieran’s boots slide on the wooden floor, and when I blink, he’s leaning over me, his eyes on mine—“is prove to us you aren’t a liability. That we won’t regret letting you live, and that you won’t betray us, Noa.”

Seconds tick by as I digest that knowledge into my bones. I bite my lip, barely registering Val’s soft murmur when I do. “How?” I ask finally, carefully.

Kieran grins, lips quirking into something not so friendly, and it occurs to me he was just waiting for me to ask. “Well, that’s the question, isn’t it? How do you prove to two murderers that you won’t—you can’t—betray them?”

To my surprise, Val lets me up a few seconds later, and even offers me a hand. Not that I take it. I scramble to my feet on my own and back away from both of them until my shoulders hit the glass and I can once again feel my heart in my throat. My nails dig crescents into my palms as I once again flex and unflex my fingers, then force myself to take deep breaths in an effort not to panic.

Or at least not panic any harder.

“Just tell me how.” Looking between them, I kick myself for trusting these two men not to hurt me. The signs had all been there. Literally in my face and all over my hands. Wrapped around my wrist, in one case of unfortunate entrails; the thought of which makes me want to retch. “Tell me how, then let me go home so I can forget about this and you and pretend this never happened.”

“Oh, no. No, darling.” Kieran pushes to his feet and crosses the distance between us, eating into my personal bubble without hesitating. He rests his arms on the window behind me, leaning his weight against it casually. “There’s no going home and forgetting about us.” Kieran’s grin is sly as he brushes his lips almost sweetly against mine, though it only makes me shudder. “Not anymore. We’re the consequences of your curiosity and your”—he pulls away and looks me over from dark eyes as if appraising every bit of me—“feral little self.”

I move to dart away from him, or attempt to, but he’s faster. Kieran grabs me by my throat and sighs. His head tips to the side and he gives me a curious look. “You’re not going anywhere. Not until we figure this out.” Letting out a breath, he adds, “You’re

hungry, right? You have to be by now.”

Embarrassingly, I realize that I am. I didn’t get my pie and coffee like I’d planned, and it’s definitely been at least a day since I’ve eaten. That’s probably what’s giving me the start of a headache, but I’m certainly not about to admit it.

“I don’t suppose you brought pie and coffee to make up for kidnapping me?” I ask witheringly, leveling an unsteady glare at Kieran’s face.

I don’t expect Val to snort, and I watch as he walks into the kitchen, then to the fridge. Meeting my gaze he opens the door, showing me the contents.

And the two boxes of pie.

“Lemon meringue and pecan, or apple’s in the freezer. Since I feel a little bad about this. But also, I hope you like pizza because surely you did not plan on eating just pie today, did you?”

“Uh, yeah. I absolutely was.” Again I try to sidestep Kieran, but this time he drops his arm and lets me, to my surprise. In fact he gestures me toward the kitchen, and even though I want to argue with them and not accept food...

I really am getting hungry.

“While pizza isn’t exactly what I would consider healthy, you aren’t just eating pie,” Kieran informs me.

“Thanks, Dad ,” I can’t help but snap, though I level a nervous glance in his direction as I drift toward the cabinets.

And the drawers

Where the forks live.

My hand goes out, fingers reaching, just for Val to slide in front of me to block my way, a crooked grin on his lips. “You wouldn’t like trying to stab us with utensils.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His eyes narrow in amusement, just a little, and he gives a soft chuckle. “And yet you were heading straight for the forks, weren’t you? Since I hid the knives and all, I figured they would be your next weapon of choice.”

I hesitate, eyes flicking around the kitchen to see the oven light is on and there are two pizzas perched on the racks, cheese slowly turning golden. “So you think I’m going to sit down at the table and play house with the two of you?” My hunger is making me a little irritable, now that it’s at the forefront of my brain, and I relinquish my quest for a fork with one step back from Val.

“Yep.” Kieran sighs, grabbing my shoulders and steering me towards the table. “Sit. Stay.” He pushes me into a chair, and I rest my hands on the smooth tabletop.

God, I couldn’t feel more awkward if I tried. Part of me would rather be in an auditorium with a PowerPoint of all my embarrassing moments playing for everyone I’ve ever come in contact with on the screen, in HD, than be sitting here about to eat pizza with two murderers.

“So...what do I call you?” I ask as Val checks on the pizza. From a bag on the counter he reveals paper plates and napkins, which he sets on the table before giving me a bemused glance.

“Val and Kieran work great,” the younger man informs me sweetly. “Ravage and Harrow work too, if that’s your kink. Maybe not in public, though. That might be?”

“Indicative of you being murderers, or serial killers?” I cut him off without really meaning to, and I tap my fingers rhythmically against the table as Kieran eases into a seat behind me like he’s sore.

When I look at him with curiosity, not concern, he gives me a flat grin. “I’ve been cleaning up bodies for a lot of the day, in between taking care of you. Cleaning up crime scenes and moving bodies is hard work. Cut me some slack until the Advil kicks in, won’t you? And to answer your question”—he looks at the ceiling thoughtfully for a few moments—“serial killers. I’m not sure where the cutoff is for murderer vs. serial killer, but I’m sure both of us have gone over it.”

“Way over it, for some of us,” Val mumbles as he glares at the pizza for a moment. I watch him, a jolt of surprise making me uncomfortable, and I tap my fingers as he goes to the fridge once more to gesture at the contents. Specifically at the bottles of soda and water lined on the top shelf.

“Looks like you’ve stocked up,” I comment without thinking, then close my eyes with a sigh of absolute regret for my recent life choices.

Maybe I did something in a past life to deserve this. There’s no other explanation for how my life got so fucked up in the past twenty-four hours just because I got lost and went to the wrong haunt.

Val sets a bottle of water down in front of me, then reaches out to brush my hair back from my face. I flinch away from him, finding myself just as terrified of them as I had been last night. Frankly, I should’ve been terrified of them all day, instead of letting them lull me into a false sense of security.

Maybe if I was smarter—and not thinking with my lady bits—I would’ve known to slam the door in their faces and call the cops.

“I know what you’re thinking.” When I look up at Kieran’s words, I find a surprisingly sympathetic look on his face. He smiles almost sweetly and settles back in his chair. “You’re thinking that you shouldn’t have let us in this morning. You’re thinking you should’ve called the cops on us and locked your door.”

It’s a little uncanny how he can read me so well. That, or I guess maybe I’m not as subtle with my expressions as I hoped I am. Barely glancing up at him, I instead busy my hands by reaching for the bottle of water and let the condensation cool my palm while I hold it.

I’m not thirsty, and my hunger comes and goes as my fear builds and recedes like the tide. “Yeah,” I mutter finally. “That, uh, that would be what I’m thinking right now.”

“Well, don’t worry so much about it. And don’t blame yourself. We had a backup plan for if you didn’t let us in. You just picked the easier, less traumatic way of coming with us, darling girl.” His words don’t instill any comfort or confidence in me. Instead, my skin prickles and I roll my shoulders in an uncomfortable shrug.

But I know I need to get over this shock, this almost catatonic state my brain seems to be in at the moment.

There’s no one else around to save me, so I need to figure out how to save myself. Ideally, before I’m completely out of options and they really do kill me.

I take a breath, then another. In and out, I count the seconds of inhaling and exhaling air. I force myself to push past the shock, the horror, and the urge to curl up in a corner until all of this goes away or I wake up from what should be a nightmare. That fear and cowardice aren’t going to help me now.

Easing back into my seat, I set down the bottle of water and watch Val pull the pizzas out of the oven. I hate how good it smells, especially when my stomach is suddenly

eating itself in desperation for food. As he brings it to the table, I tuck my hair back over my shoulder, eyeing the tangled black and orange strands. I'm sure I look like the feral thing they call me, considering my hair really needs to meet a brush and some detangler.

"They aren't fancy. Just stopped at a convenience store right before we got here," Val remarks as he sits down heavily in his chair with a lopsided grin. I don't reply, though. Instead, I file away the information that we're not completely removed from civilization if he stopped somewhere close.

Something makes me glance at Kieran, and I find him studying me with interest. His elbow is pressed to the table, chin in his hand, and his eyes dance like we're sharing some inside joke I'm not aware of.

If I'm so easily read, does that mean he knows what I'm thinking right now? How I'm wondering about the convenience store, the possibility of a small town, and whether their cops know how to use their guns?

If he did, he'd probably have me tied up before I could deny it and feed me pizza off a fork. Since I don't want that to happen, I huff a sigh and try to relax against my chair. Not that it works. The hard wooden slats press against my shoulders and spine, and I find I can barely sit still. I busy myself with taking a slice of cheese pizza, though when I look down at my plate and the bubbly, golden cheese, my stomach suddenly twists and my hunger becomes nausea.

But I really do need to eat something.

As Kieran and Val talk about something that doesn't concern me, I force myself to take small bites of my pizza, chewing thoroughly and swallowing hard as hunger wars with the nausea in me. Occasionally, my eyes dart up between them, catching their expressions as they chat so casually, like they haven't kidnapped me and aren't

threatening to kill me.

With that thought, I can barely finish my big slice of pizza. Even when I swallow the last bite of garlicky crust, I have to suck in breaths through my nose and look up at the ceiling in order not to vomit.

“You’re fine, you know,” Val tells me, prompting my gaze to flick down to his. He’s on his third slice of pepperoni pizza, and still chowing down happily. “You’re not in any danger at the moment. You should be working with us to figure out what we need from you, Noa. Not sitting there looking like a trapped animal ready to rip off our faces.”

“Seems like ripping your faces off would be a valid option,” I point out sourly. “I mean, that certainly would make it so you don’t have to worry about me anymore. Since you won’t be able to.” I can’t help my sharp, humorless smile, and Kieran chuckles at my words.

Like I’ve made a joke.

Like I’m not weighing the possibility of stabbing them with forks and maybe the odd spoon.

Val snickers at my words and sits back in his chair, wiping his hands off with a napkin. “All right,” he says. “Let’s make a deal, hmm?” His words surprise me, and even Kieran glances at him, like he’s not quite sure what Val is going to say.

“A deal? With you?” My eyebrows climb toward my bangs and I mirror his pose with my arms tucked against my chest. “Yeah, you guys seem to keep your word so well. How do I know this deal is real, and not just a trick to get me to do what you want?”

“Oh, you don’t,” he assures me with that sweet and savage grin. “But you’ll just have

to take us at our word one more time. Your body needs to chill. You need to have some downtime, and you definitely need to eat more. We're not looking to make this bad for you, Noa. Not one bit. We don't want to hurt you, or kill you, or scare you more than we already have."

All of that sounds like preachy bullshit to me, but with Kieran watching me closely, like he's waiting to jump on me, I don't say it.

"We're all tired," Val adds. "So here's what I'm thinking. We call a truce for the night. You don't try to stab us or escape, and this will be the nicest cabin getaway with the two of us you could hope for. No more scaring you. No drugging you or tying you up. If you act like a good girl for us, we'll make everything feel okay."

I hate how the offer is strangely tempting. I hate that I'm considering it , and that's only because I'm so tired of being terrified and I just want to sleep a normal sleep after stuffing my face with food and pouring chocolate milk down my throat with a funnel.

"What if I don't?" I inexplicably find myself asking. "What if I think that sounds way too good to be true, and I'd totally rather hype myself up to stab you guys with forks?" It's too easy for my voice to lay on the sarcasm. And way too easy for me to imagine myself with the Psycho sound effects as I stab them with fork prongs.

"Then you don't. And I open that door over there for you." His eyes darken, something predatory entering his expression as he leans forward. "You run, you try to find help, you scream and cry, and do whatever else your panicking brain tells you to do."

It can't be that easy, but I glance toward the door, anyway.

"And after a couple of minutes, we come after you. We play a game, Noa. Your goal

is to get away from us, and your prize is success. But we'll be trying to catch you, and if you run, you're giving us permission to do whatever we want with you until we figure out if we can trust you, one way or another. So it's your choice, princess." He cradles his face in his hands, elbows on the table, and grins. "Do you want to do this the nice, sweet, easy way? Or the very exhilarating, hard way?"

For a moment, I'm sure I've heard him wrong. Judging by Kieran's face, he's less terrified and more intrigued by the proposal, though he drums his fingers on the table with a sigh.

"Did I happen to mention I spent all afternoon cleaning up bodies and entrails and blood?" His voice is deceptively mild, but when I really look at him, I can see the complaint is just a front. The way Kieran's gaze sharpens as he watches Val shows me he's certainly into the idea of...

Well, if I'm being honest with myself, I doubt he's looking for me to pick the good girl option. The smarter, safer option, maybe. Unless Val is lying to me about it. And judging by how much they've lied to me in the twenty-ish hours that I've known them, I can't really take either of them at their word. I suck in a breath, then another, while my eyes dart between them as if I can find some secret part of this that they aren't telling me.

"So if I stop dreaming of stabbing you guys with utensils and pretend I like you, you'll be nice to me?" I ask, unable to keep the disbelief and slight sarcasm out of my tone. "You'll pretend you didn't kidnap me and aren't keeping me in a cabin in the middle of somewhere?" Glancing at the windows, I stare at the pitch-black glass as if I'll suddenly gain the ability to see in the dark.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you, princess," Val purrs. "I'll be the best boyfriend you could ever dream of. You'll forget all about not being able to leave, and we'll figure out what we need from you together."

I don't believe him.

Not for a second.

I lean back hard in my chair, still eyeing them as I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. Running isn't really my favorite athletic activity, and I have no idea where I am. On the other hand, I have a very particular set of skills thanks to my camping obsessed family and apparently my latent love of old Liam Neeson movies.

Not that I think I could be a real threat to these two with my particular set of skills. But I know how to survive in the woods, and I'm not afraid of them. I won't let this turn into a horror movie where I get lost, panic, and start jumping at every imaginary noise or shadow before tripping and breaking my leg before the big bad killer comes to chop me up.

To their credit, neither of them pushes me into making a fast decision. I'm as grateful as I can be, though belatedly I wish I was wearing leggings instead of shorts when they kidnapped me. Even though we're in Tennessee rather than the North Pole, I don't love the idea of running around on the first night of November in what I'm assuming is a forest outside this cabin.

"How long of a head start do I get?" I ask at last. There's only two of them, and I like my odds if I'm smart about this. Only two of them, one of me, and the dark won't help them either. As long as I don't panic and flail around screaming or stomping or breaking every noise-inducing object I can, I should have a real chance.

But would he really offer if you did have one? A small voice in my head whispers while Val visibly considers my question.

"Five minutes," he says at last. "Not a lot, but let's be real. We're not going to just let you make it too far for us to find at all. Five minutes of us being in here without

looking for you.” Kieran nods his agreement when Val glances his way, then their attention is all on me.

It would be stupid to run.

It would be more stupid to stay.

I’m tired of talking, of worrying, of waiting for the moment they turn on me in this small, warm place.

I’m so fucking tired of sitting here when every nerve in my body is ready to run, to escape, to take my life back.

“Fine.” Without hesitating, I push to my feet, jerking my chin up in an arrogant facade that I’m sure neither of them believes. “Five minutes start when I walk out that door.” It’s not a question, and I barely glance at the door before my eyes are back on the two of them. I definitely sound a lot braver than I feel, since I’m about to shake myself apart in fear and desperation.

But I managed to not die last night...

So, I can make it through tonight as well if I just keep going. That’s what I’m going to tell myself, anyway, as adrenaline courses through me and leaves a ripple of goosebumps on my arms.

“All right,” Val agrees. But when I move toward the kitchen, he jerks his chair back, causing it to slide across the floor with a god-awful noise. I wince away from it, and when I start to ask him what he’s doing, my eyes find his shit-eating grin and the words die on my lips. “No utensils. No weapons. We’re not bringing any, I promise. So you don’t get anything from here, either.”

“Fine.” I wonder if I can find a sharp rock or a particularly pointy and sturdy stick outside. Relinquishing my desire for a pronged object, I take a step back with my hands up and fingers splayed in surrender. “Five minutes,” I repeat, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

“Five minutes, princess.” God, Val is enjoying this way too much. Kieran isn’t doing much better, though. Even though he hasn’t said much, I can see the excitement rolling off of him. When our eyes meet, I notice his attention is trained on me like he’s a bloodhound and I’m the prey about to be flushed out for him to track, catch, and kill.

Maybe that’s a pretty accurate analogy, all things considered.

My steps take me to the door across the room, but I don’t bolt out of it immediately. Instead, I lean my forehead against it, listening to my heart beat a continuous warning in my chest. “If you catch me...” I trail off, gazing at the door only inches away from my face.

“If we catch you...?” Val prompts when I don’t finish the question. He’s nice enough not to argue with me on the if, but I shut down the thought that I don’t have a chance as quickly as I can. Before I can talk myself out of this.

I have to get away from them to stay alive.

“Will you just kill me?”

My words are met with silence, prompting me to clench my fingers into my palms at my sides. I want to turn to look at them, to see their expressions and discern what I can from them. But I force myself to stay here, just like this, and focus on taking deep and even breaths.

“No.” It’s Kieran who answers. “And maybe when we do catch you, you’ll see we really don’t want to kill you at all. But you still have a choice here, darling girl. Come back to the table. We’ll make you some coffee and cut you a slice of pie. You don’t have to open that door.”

Fuck , it’s awful how good of an option that suddenly sounds like. But I shake my head slowly, still staring at the door. “I can’t,” I say with a huff. “Because I don’t trust you. And this sort of feels like my only chance of survival. So...” Before I can stop myself, I push off of the door and glance back at them. “Five minutes.” I can’t really stop them if they choose to cheat that number, but I have to believe they’ll stick to it. Even in three minutes, I hope I can be far enough away that they won’t find me.

Forcing my legs to move, I yank open the door and stride out onto the small porch. A motion light flicks on, illuminating the shapes of towering trees that look particularly menacing in the darkness. Realizing I have no idea what time it is, I also decide it doesn’t exactly matter right now.

Five minutes , I remind myself like a mantra and pull the door closed behind me. I don’t run, though. That would be a recipe for disaster in the dark. I expected woods and it seems we’re in a forest, though the temperature already has my bare legs prickling with cold.

My mind races as I stride through the trees, barely able to see anything once the light goes off somewhere behind me. My steps are loud, and my hands brush tree branches and trunks as I go. Between the darkness and trying to stay upright, I can’t tell anything about the area and the back of my neck prickles.

After what has to be five minutes, I stop to listen to the surrounding woods. I don’t hear crashing steps or my name being yelled or yodeled. All I hear are the far off rustles of wildlife and the natural, whispering noises of the woods.

The clouds shift, revealing the half-full moon that's bright enough to filter through the thick trees in some places. The light provided isn't much, but my eyes adjust enough so I can pick my way through the trees to follow the patches of it. Nearly stumbling makes me realize I've found a small hill, and I carefully work my way down it toward the sound of running water. I won't call it rushing, exactly. I doubt I'm near some impressive river or even an overly large creek.

Sure enough, the brook I find is small. The water looks like it might come up to my ankles in some places, but no more than that. Still, it gives me something to follow?—

A twig snaps somewhere nearby and I look up as my heart races, anticipating the worst. My eyes scan the darkness and the patches of moonlight patterning the ground through the branches for any sign of something bigger than a mouse.

But there's nothing. Despite standing there listening for a solid thirty seconds that I count out in my head, I don't hear or see anything at all.

I can't keep standing here, I tell myself, and force myself into movement again. I veer off of whatever imaginary path I'd been following, instead choosing to follow the small brook. Surely it has to lead to something. Eventually. Hopefully. That's what I cling to at least, as my quick, nervous steps take me further into the trees.

When I do end up on an actual trail—even though it's small and probably rarely used—I can't help the ripple of surprise and relief that flows through me. I can't be too far from civilization if there are trails cut through the woods, right? It also makes it easier for my steps to speed up, until I'm almost jogging while using the moonlight to look out for roots, stones, or anything else that might trip me.

Though the second a spiteful cloud covers up the moon again is the moment I really needed it to see by. The toe of my shoe hits something hard and curved, and I yelp

with unhappy surprise as I flail, trying to keep myself upright.

Naturally, I don't succeed. I was going too fast and paying too little attention, and my knees hit the ground hard enough to drag a pained cry from my chest. At the same time, my palms scrape against the dirt; my left hand naturally nails a few sharp stones that make me suck in a shocked and very unhappy breath.

For a few moments, I don't move. My knees hurt, and my hand stings like a bitch where I hit the rocks. Still, this can't stop my escape. Everything in me is screaming for me to get up, and as I throw my head back so my hair is out of my face, the moon does me the favor of peeking out from the clouds once more.

Just to illuminate a small, reflective object tucked into a nearby tree. Curiosity gets the better of me as I stumble to my feet, and I make my way toward the Y-shaped tree that bends and twists upward toward the sky. The whole time I'm walking, I go through what it could be in my head, though none of the answers are realistic or appealing.

I reach out and feel around the object, finding it anchored in place instead of just sitting in the V of the tree trunk. Plan B requires me to stand on my tiptoes and pull myself up until I'm barely on my toes, but it works well enough when the moon is finally clear of any clouds and shining down onto my patch of forest.

“ Fuck !” It's the first thing that comes to mind when I realize what it is. “Fuck ,” is also the second thing I yelp as I drop down and back away from the tree.

And the trail camera.

My heart pounds wildly in my chest as I stare at the spot like the camera might grow legs and start chasing me. I tell myself it might not belong to Val and Kieran. That they might not have access to it, and maybe these cameras are monitored by park

rangers or...

Well, I'll take anyone over Val and Kieran.

My fears are confirmed, however, when I hear footsteps echoing through the trees from somewhere far enough that I can't tell where, but close enough to be audible. Without stopping to think, I take off at a jog, knowing it's stupid of me since it means I have a lot more opportunities to trip. Especially since I've gone off of the trail and I'm running through the trees at random. There can't be cameras everywhere in this forest, so staying off the trails could help me stay away from them.

Still, I can't help but wonder how many of them I've unknowingly passed, and how many Val and Kieran could've seen me on, if they are the ones with access to the cameras. There's still a chance they aren't, since I'm not even sure the cabin belongs to them. But I'm definitely not willing to take the chance.

It takes about a minute for me to fall again. This time isn't quite as bad, though it makes my hand ache as I struggle to my feet. Panting, I realize I need a better plan than just running through the woods, which is what I originally wanted to avoid doing.

"Stop panicking," I murmur, standing straight and closing my eyes. "You're okay, Noa. You just need to stop panicking and think ." I force myself to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then I force myself to do it again. I can no longer hear any noise in the trees around me, which relieves at least some of the tension holding my body too tightly.

This time, I take off at the same quick walk I used before. The trees are thicker now, I finally notice, and the moonlight that manages to cut through the branches and leaves is sparse. It makes my escape harder, and I have to feel out any obstacles in my path when I set my feet down, instead of relying on my vision.

Footsteps approaching again have my heart racing, though this time I work to not freak out. Slowly, I move to press myself against a tree, wishing I had the skill to actually climb into the branches without falling and breaking my neck.

With my heart beating so hard I'm sure the whole forest can hear, I listen to the footsteps getting closer and closer, though they aren't accompanied by voices. When I'm sure they're coming from the other side of the tree than the one I'm standing against, I gain the courage to peek around the trunk, scanning the patches of moonlight for any sign of movement.

Sure enough, it doesn't take long for me to see Val prowling through the undergrowth, dressed in clothes a lot warmer than mine. It must be nice to be prepared, I think sourly, nose wrinkling with jealousy. I'm sure by now my legs are scraped and raw, and my poor hand is throbbing along with the steady pounding of my heart.

Val doesn't look my way. He's also alone, with no sign of Kieran anywhere behind him. He's so different like this, I think to myself. Val looks almost inhuman as he prowls through the moonlight while occasionally stopping to listen for any sign of me. The moonlight makes him look sharper, somehow. More graceful and like some kind of nocturnal predator I'd never want to meet when he's out hunting.

He's gorgeous without even trying to be, though I beat that thought away with an imaginary broom. This really isn't the time, and I've already gotten myself into enough trouble by swooning over the two of them.

Finally he's far enough away that I can't see him any longer, and I can barely hear his steps. A sigh escapes me, relief flooding my chest, and I press my back against the large tree I'm hiding behind, taking a few moments for myself before opening my eyes and working on the next phase of my terrible plan.

But when I see who's standing in the patch of moonlight a few feet in front of me, that plan goes right out the window.

Kieran is just... existing. Merely standing there, with his arms folded over his chest and his head tilted slightly to the side, while he watches me. All the relief I felt just a moment before streams out of me and into the cold ground below, taking my warmth with it until I can no longer repress a shudder.

"How long have you been standing there?" I whisper, though my voice seems too loud in the empty woods.

He doesn't answer right away. He's just as quiet as he was at the haunt, though this time, at least, there's a bit more distance between us than there was in the tiny storage closet when he made me?—

"He's pretty, isn't he?" The words don't make sense for a moment, until I realize Kieran must be talking about Valentin. "So gorgeous in the moonlight when he's hunting. You've got him all worked up. This is his favorite game, you know. Though usually it ends with him satisfying his insatiable bloodlust."

The words send a tremor down my spine, and I'm glad I have the tree behind me to lean my weight against. My brain seems to be buffering, and I have no idea what my next move is going to be unless I get in touch with my inner 'feral little thing' and attack him.

It's not the worst idea, all things considered.

Until he steps forward and all thoughts of me fighting back against him fly out of my head along with most of my composure.

"Run, little girl," Kieran purrs. "Run away so I can chase you and catch you, and

teach you how to be good for me.”

I wish I had it in me to stand up straight and refuse to move. To deny him the joy of the chase and act like I’m not afraid. The scenario plays out in my head in the blink of an eye, and I know the amount of satisfaction I’d feel at denying either of them what they want would be absolutely glorious.

But I can’t. I’m too afraid, and too much of a chicken. My body doesn’t give me a choice before I’m wheeling around the tree and bolting into the space behind it where Val had been. But I don’t follow where he went. I try to pick a different direction, one that seems to have more moonlit patches on it than any other place I can see. I know I shouldn’t all out run, that I’ll pay for it by eating shit eventually, but I can’t help it.

I run until my shoes are splashing through the brook again, though I resume following it instead of passing through. They know where I am, so being quiet and hidden won’t get me much. I follow the trail winding alongside the brook while desperately praying for the moon to stay visible, even if it means I’m more easily seen under its illuminating glow.

When I hear running footsteps behind me, splashing through the water, I don’t look. I can’t look while I’m praying for any unseen force to help me, to let me make it somewhere I can find people to intervene.

Stumbling only barely slows me down, though I yelp when my already injured palm scrapes against the rough bark of a tree I use to catch myself. My legs ache, and my lungs are burning so much I can barely breathe in gulps of cold, stinging air.

I can’t do this for much longer. I can’t?—

Arms wrap around my waist when I stumble again, keeping me from going down while also yanking me back against a strong, familiar body. “Oh, princess ,” Val

snarls in my ear, prompting me to let out a hoarse scream from my stinging lungs and fight against him. I dig my nails into his arms, but he doesn't seem to mind, no matter how much I fight.

“Chasing you has been more fun than I’ve had in ages. But you know what’ll be even better?” He spins me around so I’m facing him, and in the moon’s glow I see the predatory, cruel grin that curls over his lips. “What I’m going to do with you now that I’ve caught you, my perfect little prey .”

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“I’m not your—” I don’t get to say the word prey as part of my terrified protest. Not when Val easily jerks me off of the trail only to shove me back against one of the large trees beside it. My feet scramble in the leaves and debris, and I can’t help the way I’m trembling from both cold and fear.

“Poor princess,” Val snarls against my ear. “You’re so cold, aren’t you? Though I think some of your shaking isn’t just from the cold. I like to think I’m contributing to some of it, too.”

“Y-you’re so fucked up,” I murmur, my hands grasping against the tree for something—anything I can use as a weapon.

Val chuckles, a soft and menacing sound, while lifting his hands to cradle my face. “To be fair, I absolutely gave you a choice,” he’s quick to remind me. “I told you we could stay in the cabin and I would be the best you’ve ever had. But you know what?” He shifts until he’s gripping my throat in his fingers. My hands fly up to his wrists, and I wrap my fingers around them as I meet his gaze in the moonlight, my eyes wide.

“Don’t,” I murmur, heart racing. “I don’t want—” He cuts me off when his fingers tighten, restricting my air as he slides into that sweet spot under my jaw that makes my vision go fuzzy. All the embarrassing thoughts running through my head remind me they’ve never gone away. “Val don’t!” When he doesn’t let go, I dig my nails into his wrists, my scraped palm stinging.

“Think you can draw blood?” he asks oh-so-sweetly. He steps closer, until our bodies are pressed together, and leans in close like he’ll kiss me. Except, my mouth is open and occupied as I gasp for air, so I don’t see how he even can.

Before I can think further, Val shows me that he absolutely can. His lips brush against mine, teasing me as he tastes every desperate grab for air that he can from me. He nips at my lower lip and tugs on it with a low growl, his fingers still so fucking tight. Suddenly he releases the pressure on my throat, though he doesn’t remove his hands, and I finally manage to suck in much needed oxygen as I sag against the tree.

I don’t see it coming when Val takes advantage of my somewhat relaxed stance. Maybe I should’ve, and my oxygen deprived brain just isn’t noticing everything it should in this state. One hand leaves my throat, gripping my jaw, and he yanks my face up toward him before crushing his lips to mine.

A low growl leaves him, vibrating against my tongue, and when I answer with a soft whine, he eats it up with pleasure. Belatedly, I realize I’m still gripping his wrists, so my arms are nearly crushed between us with how hard Val is pressed against me, keeping me in place.

Keeping me trapped .

“I could devour you happily. Every part of you, until there’s nothing left but bones.” His voice is soft against my ear, but the words send a full body tremble through me that possibly isn’t just from the terror. Though I’m definitely terrified by that statement, and it makes me wonder if Val is a fucking cannibal or just royally fucked up.

“But I don’t want to kill you,” he goes on, still ignoring the dig of my nails into his wrists. “If I kill you, then this is all over. You won’t get to be ours , and I won’t have every opportunity to remind you of how much I want you whenever I want, and

whenever you need.”

“Y-you’ve sort of ruined that,” I gasp against his lips. Val pulls away to look at me quizzically, and I bite down on my lip as my head spins, still a little off from the oxygen deprivation. “If I get away from you two, I never want to see you again.” I try to put as much commitment into the words as I can, and I hold his gaze as I throw the words at Val.

But he just looks at me, the questioning look becoming amusement as he twists his hand away from one of mine. “Is that what you think will happen, Noa? You think you can so easily escape the consequences of your actions? Princess, you’ve been ours from the moment you showed up at our Haunt instead of Grim Descent and refused to leave. Oh, we tried and tried to make you get the message. We really did.”

He pauses to turn my hand over in his, finding the scrapes and cuts from rocks and bark. “I didn’t take you for being clumsy.” There’s disapproval in his voice, like I injured myself on purpose.

“It’s dark! I don’t know these woods!” I gasp indignantly. “And by the way?” I flex my fingers, though he doesn’t let go. “Why didn’t you tell me about the trail cameras before I agreed to this?”

Slowly, expectantly, Valentin turns his gaze up to mine to gaze at me balefully. It takes me a few moments to realize why, and it makes me feel so stupid about all of this.

“Because it was on purpose,” I murmur, answering my own question. Val takes his phone out of his pocket and shines the light at my palm, revealing the smeared stains of blood and raw spots to his eye. None of it is serious, and I curl my fingers against my palm just to deny him what I can. “You wanted me to do this, didn’t you?” Jerking away from his grip as he puts the phone back into his pocket, I shove against

Val's chest as hard as I can when my eye catches the shape of something tucked into his pocket. "You wanted me to pick this option. For me to run from you so you could chase me. You lied to me!"

"Lied is a strong word. You didn't ask me anything about what might be out here. I thought you would. You're so smart, Noa," Val praises as he leans in again to cradle my face in his hands. "You're so good at escaping, at finding a way out. I thought for sure you'd do something I didn't expect."

"Something you don't expect?" I drop my fingers from his wrists, holding my hands at my sides. My fingers are numb with cold and my hand aches from my falls, but I'm not done. I'm certainly not beaten, and most importantly, I am no one's prey. "I can give it my best shot, though."

Without warning I lunge forward so our bodies are pressed together with his forearms awkwardly pinned to my shoulders. My left hand goes out to find his pocket, and when he realizes what I'm doing, he snarls and yanks away from me.

But he's not quick enough. I manage to palm the knife just as he jerks back, and when he reaches down to check for it, a self-satisfied grin curls over my lips. "What do you think?" I ask, pulling the small hunting knife out of its sheath and holding it out between us. I toss the leather case back to him, and to my surprise, he catches it even in the dim moonlight. "Was this unexpected enough?"

"You'll hurt yourself, princess," Val warns me slowly with his hands up and fingers splayed. But he doesn't try to step toward me. He just waits, and I wish I could see his expression more clearly to figure out if he's serious, amused, or afraid.

Though I definitely doubt he's anywhere near terrified of me. Even with a knife.

"You mean I'll hurt you," I correct as I sidestep the tree trunk with my heart

pounding loudly in my ears. “I have no intentions of hurting myself, trust me. I’ve put way too much work into getting away from you for two damn nights in a row.”

When he opens his mouth to reply, I decide to do something he hopefully really won’t expect. I whirl around and stumble into a run, not caring about what’s on the ground and hoping that somehow, by some miracle, I don’t trip over something.

I make it all of five steps before Kieran steps out from behind a large tree and effortlessly catches my hand that’s holding the knife. He drags me to him, ignoring my howl of protest, and twists me so I can’t stab him as I kick at his legs in an attempt to get him off of me.

“I’m done chasing for the night, Val,” he informs the other man. “Stop letting her take your knives. And you ”—he looks down at me, disapproval heavy on his face and in the twist of his lips as he frowns—“don’t be a child. Running with a knife out here in the dark is a very quick way to impale yourself when you fall. It’s irresponsible.” Before I can stop him, he wrestles the knife away from me, then shoves me staggering backwards.

Right into Val’s grip that encircles my waist and shoulders.

“I’m going to reset some of the cameras that were off,” Kieran remarks casually. “So you can have your fun with your prey .” He looks over me as he says it. “But I did just as much as you, so when I get back, she’s mine.”

“You’ll have to ask nicely,” Val snaps, baring his teeth in a feral expression of possessiveness.

Kieran just fixes him with a look , refusing to justify the taunt with an answer. Then he slides the blade into the back of his jeans while pinning me with his glare. “You won’t like testing me like you do him. It’s mine now, and it’ll stay mine.

Besides...”—he tilts his head, a humorless smirk on his face—“I don’t think you’ll have enough time to come up with a plan to get away from him and get the knife from me. You’ll be too busy with him.” He nods at Val, then without another word, he pivots with his phone out and walks away from us and into the woods.

“You’re awful,” I hiss, when he’s out of sight. “You’re literally—” Val spins me around mid-sentence, prompting me to gasp reflexively. But before I can stop him, I’m once again pinned to the tree by my throat. “Stop!” I shriek, frustrated and terrified and ignoring how my body reminds me we’ve discovered a new kink.

But now is certainly not the time for awkward realizations about myself, no matter how hot Val is or how hot my blood in my veins is as it roars in my ears.

“Stop?” he parrots, leaning in close to me so our bodies are pressed together. “You chose this. You knew the consequences of not outrunning us. Poor thing,” he purrs. “My poor, feral princess. Besides, I did you a favor by ending your escape.” He grabs the front of my hoodie and twists to pull me onto my tiptoes, his face illuminated by moonlight so I can see his smirk.

“Why’s that?” I demand, my hands grabbing at his wrist.

“Because from the start, you were going the wrong way. You’re only getting further from the road and the convenience store we stopped at. Not closer.” His smile is almost apologetic as my struggles cease for a few seconds as I take in the information.

If he’s right, if he’s telling the truth, then all this really was for nothing. My throbbing hand and stinging, scraped knees could’ve been avoided if I’d made a better decision tonight. “Fuck you,” I spit instead of giving him a reaction he’s looking for. Without hesitating, I kick out at him, and my foot connects hard with his knee and causes it to give.

To my surprise, Val lets himself fall. For a few brief moments I wonder if I've discovered some miraculous Achilles' heel, or if something weird is going on, but that train of thought evaporates when he uses his grip on me to drag me down to the dirty, wet ground with him.

"You want to get free? Fight me for it," Val growls as he holds me by the front of my hoodie. "If you escape me now, Kieran isn't here to stop you. Come on, Noa." He leans in and clicks his teeth together close to my face. "Fight me."

Even though I know I shouldn't give him what he wants, the adrenaline and terror coursing through my veins has me too worked up to stay calm and relaxed. Or, well, at least less frantic than I could be. But that disappears and I lunge for him, shoving him back as I try to go for his throat the same way he likes to grab mine.

To my surprise, I succeed. Val tips over until he's on his back with me over top of him, my eyes wide as I stare down at his mostly dark figure in the darkness. "Good girl," he praises. "That's my good girl?—"

"Don't call me that!" I demand, feeling a bit more confident when I'm the one on top with my grip on his throat. "Don't you ever—" He flips us suddenly, his arms coming up between us and ripping my hand off of his throat as he does. Seconds later, I'm on my stomach in the dirt with him draped over me. In this position, it's hard to do anything to fight back because I need my arms to keep my face out of the dirt while he presses against my back and hips.

"Don't call you good girl?" Val asks wickedly in my ear as I pant and writhe. "Funny. I thought you liked that. But maybe you're just not in the mood, hmm?" One hand curves around my waist and he yanks me back against him so our bodies are pressed together as much as they can be, given our position.

"So you'd rather be my filthy little slut, then?"

The words catch me off guard, but I can't ignore the bolt of electricity that slithers down my spine. "Your... What did you just say?" I demand, looking to give myself a moment and not really needing him to repeat himself. I'm just not sure how to take those words, or how to react to them.

"You heard me, Noa. But I don't mind saying it again. It seems you don't want to be my princess tonight. You don't want to be our good little girl. I'm telling you that's fine. Because clearly if you don't want to be good, then you want to be a filthy"—he nips the shell of my ear and I flinch in surprise at the sharp, almost painful sensation—"feral"—this time his other hand comes to rest on my lower back, though I'm too stunned and still too trapped to move—"needy little prey."

Without hesitating, he grips my shorts and pulls them down my thighs before I can stop him, despite my yelps of protest. "Valentin!" I shriek loudly, one hand leaving the ground to grope back towards him. My fingers brush his shirt, then his shoulder, and when he buries his face against my throat, I only manage to tangle my fingers into his soft, thick hair, causing him to growl against my skin.

It occurs to me, in some stupidly calm part of my brain, that if either of us is feral, it's him. His growls and even his movements scream predator, and I remind myself that this is not the time to find it sexy.

"Stop!" I gasp, trying and failing to get out from under him. My pulse races, prompting me to work harder to get free, and I whine in my throat when I feel his hand curl over my waist and slip between my thighs. "Val!" I can't use my other hand to fight him. Not when I'm using it to brace myself against his weight.

"You don't want me to stop. I think you're just upset about how much you know you'll enjoy this, princess." He brushes his fingers teasingly along my slit, pulling a shudder from me that I would've rather kept to myself. "See?" he huffs happily. "You know you want me to breed this pretty pussy of yours with your knees in the dirt in

the middle of the woods.” He can’t keep the excitement out of his voice, and I just groan in frustration as my fingers tighten in his hair.

“You’re the worst.” My voice is soft, but he chuckles anyway and shoves two fingers into me without preamble, pulling a sharp, surprised sound from me.

He wastes no time scissoring his fingers inside of me, eagerly fucking me open on them. “Better relax,” he growls against my ear before he nips it again. If he even feels how tightly I’m gripping his hair, he doesn’t seem to care. But I’m sure that it has to hurt.

Maybe he’s into that, my brain unhelpfully adds.

“Because I’m not waiting for you to remember how much you love it when I fuck you with my cock, Noa.” I meet his words with a strangled cry when he adds another finger, and I grit my teeth together to try to prevent anything else from escaping my lips.

But I hate that he’s not wrong with his arrogance and his irritating claims. I do love it when either of them fucks me. Frankly, I probably love it too much, all things considered. Embarrassingly, I can feel my body heating with anticipation, and I can absolutely tell when his fingers can thrust in and out of me much more smoothly, lubricated by my arousal.

Naturally, he notices too. How could he not? Lifting his head, he suddenly pulls his fingers from my pussy to grip my chin, smearing my skin with my wetness. “I love you like this,” Val informs me. “Desperate and dirty and so fucking wet for me, even though you want to deny it. You should run from me more often, Noa. Out in the woods like this. Maybe next time, I’ll even let you take a weapon. Do you know why?”

Without waiting for me to answer, he kisses me harshly, biting my lower lip and demanding entrance to my mouth. He doesn't give me an option. Not with his grip on my chin so tight and his mouth so full of coercion and sharp, perfect bites.

I'm panting when he finally pulls away, and it feels like my hand in his hair is the only thing anchoring me to the ground and stopping my brain from spinning away like a cloud. He lets go, but I barely notice. I'm too busy relearning how to breathe to realize he's no longer holding my face. Instead, Val gently pries my fingers free from his hair, causing me to drop my hand to the dirt to give my other arm a break it's definitely grateful for.

"What are you doing?" I pant when I feel him sit up on his knees behind me. But when I try to move, he's quick to splay his fingers across my lower back in a warning.

"Stay," he tells me sharply. "And to answer your question..." Suddenly both of his hands are on my hips, and he teasingly slides his cock against my slit, getting it wet with my growing arousal. I don't have time to do anything except curl my fingers in the dirt and part my lips as a thousand incoherent protests try to bubble over my tongue.

But I don't get the chance to voice any of them. Val slams into me without mercy, not stopping until he's as deep as he can go. My arms give out, folding easily, until my hips and ass are in the air while my shoulders and face are in the dirt.

That doesn't seem to be part of Val's plan, however. He growls softly, his fingers tangling in my hair and jerking me upward until I'm forced to turn and look at his face in the moonlight. "When I chase you, it makes me all the more eager to claim you. To own you, to breed your holes until you're dripping and unable to go anywhere. I want you to remember who you belong to, and I want you covered in enough of my marks so everyone other than Kieran knows to stay the fuck away from

what's mine.”

My mind is too far gone already to even reply to that. Especially since it takes me an embarrassingly long time to digest the words and their meanings. My first reaction is excitement. My thighs tense, and my stomach tightens in anticipation of him making good on his words.

My second reaction is horror . Because this is so fucked up on both sides. Him for saying it, for wanting it, and me for not being horrified first, turned on second.

Or, even better, not turned on at all.

“Nothing to say, princess?” He starts moving, fucking me with harsh, thorough strokes that cause his hips to slam against my thighs. He adjusts his grip on my throat, letting me brace myself on my arms once more with his fingers wrapped around my neck.

Choking me really does seem to be one of his favorite hobbies, which should be way more concerning than it is.

I should be terrified. I should be screaming for Val to stop, to let me go, or looking for an escape while he's somewhat distracted.

I definitely shouldn't be rocking my hips back into him, meeting his thrusts and causing him to sink deeper into me. I'm ready and into this enough that while the pain from him not really preparing me isn't enough to distract me, it's definitely there.

And it's not a bad thing like it should be. The edge of too much, too big, too fast, is a burning ache inside me only fueling the pleasure of it. Soon enough, I'm gasping around his tightening fingers while my fingers flex and dig into the dirt under us. I

don't even register the cold anymore. Not with his weight blanketing me as my blood races and boils in my veins.

I have to get a hold of myself. I really need to think straight, instead of just being dazed and on the verge of whining for more.

Thankfully, his grip prevents me from saying anything embarrassing when he presses his middle finger and thumb into those spots just under my jaw. I cry out in both discomfort and anticipation, knowing by now how quickly my vision will go spotty and I'll feel the dizzying heat of oxygen deprivation in my entire body.

Sure enough, he doesn't let go as he fucks me. His words continue, praise and filthy promises falling from his lips like rain while he holds me tight and fucks me so hard I see stars.

That, or I'm seeing stars from oxygen deprivation. It could be either one, quite honestly. I know I'm getting close to losing consciousness from the way my brain is focused on the wrong things, and how I can't quite tell if my eyes are open or closed when black spots dance in my vision.

"You know what I think?" Val's purr reaches my brain, and I whine a response I'm not sure actually makes it past my lips as I gasp for a breath I can't draw in. "I think you like this more than you thought you would. Hell, you're more into this than I expected. Look at you , Noa. You should be ashamed of yourself. On your knees in the dirt, getting bred by a serial killer and basically begging for more. Don't you feel like such a filthy little slut, princess?"

The shame from his words only adds to the burn between my thighs, and he definitely knows I can't answer. Though a second later his grip loosens, allowing my brain to gain back the blood and oxygen it needs, so I don't actually black out.

“Breathe, Noa,” Val murmurs against my shoulder. “Just breathe for me. You’re going to come so hard, princess. And when I’m done fucking your pretty little cunt, maybe I’ll carry you back to the cabin and let Kieran do the same. Maybe when you’re dripping with our cum and unable to stand up without it dripping down your thighs, you’ll be too embarrassed to run away from us. What do you think, hmm?” He nuzzles my shoulder, then grazes his teeth against my skin when he manages to stretch out my hoodie enough to bare most of my shoulder to him.

“You’re the worst,” I finally pant, and I get a soft laugh that I feel just above my shoulder blade in response.

“Nah, I don’t think so. You’re just upset by how much you like this. How much you like me .” He shifts slightly, and I realize he’s been still for the last few seconds, ever since he let go of my neck, though his cock is still buried inside me. “Take a breath for me, because I’m not letting you breathe again until you come.”

“W-what?” I yelp, trying and failing to twist around to glare at him. “You cannot— ” His fingers tighten threateningly on my throat before letting go.

“Deep breath, Noa. Be grateful I’m still giving you the chance.”

Fear and anticipation war in my chest and I shudder as I lean forward as much as I can in his grip. But I really do need the air, so I take one deep breath and let it out, trying to grant my body as much of a reprieve as I can. On my second breath, Val’s fingers constrict the veins in my neck once more, and the uncomfortable feeling is almost immediate. It burns in a way, especially when I lean into his hand with a whine and parted lips.

“That’s right, just enjoy it.” He pulls out just to slam back into me, causing all of my captured air to exit my lungs in a yelp. That only makes him chuckle, however, and he doesn’t stop. Nor does he slow down. Over and over he fucks me, and this time he

bites me as well, his teeth grazing and nipping at the skin of my upper back.

The seconds tick by so slowly that it feels like we're here for an eternity. Rationally, I know I can only last a minute or two of him clamping off my oxygen, so it can't be as long as my brain is promising it is.

Embarrassingly, my fears about not being able to come before I black out are unfounded. Somehow when he does this, it works me up so fast it should be illegal. So, before I know it, I'm trembling and leaning most of my weight into his grip on my throat when my arms start to buckle.

"Look at you," Val growls, his words slurred and rough. "Just fucking look at you, Noa. On your hands and knees for me in the woods while I breed your perfect little cunt. You should be glad we like you, and not just because it means you might get to live. Nah, that's not the real reason." He thrust into me harder, pulling a breathy sound from my abused throat. "You should be so grateful to us because no one else on this entire planet could satisfy your depraved needs, you know? But don't worry, Noa." He sounds almost soothing for a moment, but his words are undermined by his fingers being so tight that I'm definitely about to black out.

"I'll always be here to fuck you in all the ways you need. Over and over and over ." He slams into me again, then once more, and my orgasm hits me suddenly with the force of a Mack Truck. I can't make much of a sound, though I certainly give it my best try. Not only that, but I nearly shake myself apart under him as I ride out my release.

Val groans, then snarls against my shoulder, before I once again feel the sting of his teeth on my skin. But it's not just teasing this time. Instead, he bites down hard enough that I scream with it. Or try to, anyway. He bites firmly and keeps his mouth on me, like some kind of predator holding on to their mate while they fuck them. He holds on like he needs to, all the while rolling his hips into mine as he comes for what

feels like forever.

My arms give out just as he lets go. Thankfully, Val is fast enough to catch me before I faceplant on the ground. He sits up, finally letting go of his mouthful of my shoulder, and distantly I can hear his soft, pleased laughter.

“Just relax,” he purrs, his other arm wrapping around my waist. Carefully he sits back, pulling me with him, and manages to keep his cock buried in me while he arranges me on his lap with my head back against his shoulder. “Relax, princess,” Val says again, his fingers reaching under my hoodie to graze my skin. “It would be a shame if you actually blacked out, you know.”

“Why?” I manage to gasp in the middle of panting for air. “Because you want to insult me more?”

“Insult you? I’ve been complimenting you. And no. That’s not quite it.” His fingers curl over the sides of my face, holding my chin in a tight grip. “If you’d blacked out, then Kieran wouldn’t get to play with you.” He jerks my face to the side, where Kieran is leaning silently against one of the bigger trees. “And that wouldn’t be at all fair to him.”

My breath catches in my throat, leaving me unable to draw oxygen into my abused lungs. My stomach twists in anticipation just as my heart sinks, and I can't help the soft groan that leaves me at the idea of Kieran putting me through this all over again.

He must see it on my face, however, because when he pushes away from the tree and walks towards me, it's to reach out and gently comb his fingers through my messy, tangled hair. "Don't worry, little girl," he tells me in a deceptively comforting tone. "I'm not like Val. I don't get off on scratching, biting, and choking you in the dirt. You're both filthy, by the way." Gently, he works his fingers through some of the looser knots, though his ministrations still cause me to give a slight wince. "Tell you what." He shoves Val's hand off of my face and steps closer so he can cradle my cheeks in his hands and tilt my face up to him.

"Why don't you just sit right there for me, okay? Keep Val's cock nice and warm in your pretty pussy and let me fuck your mouth." This time, the shiver that goes up my spine is only partially from anxiety. I'm exhausted and half out of my mind from everything that's happened in the past day.

But I don't have it in me to argue. It's hard to even want to, when I remember his touch, his attention, his control from last night at the haunt, when he fucked my face in the storage closet. He barely even said a word, yet it was one of the hottest things I've ever experienced.

Val's arms wrap lightly around me, one snug around my waist to pull me back to sit more comfortably on his lap. He wraps the other one around my chest, lifting my

hoodie to just the level where he can easily cup my breasts and brush his thumb over my nipples. When he does it for the first time, I can't help but shudder, eyes closing as Kieran lets me lean my weight on his hands.

"Good girl," he praises softly. "Such a gorgeous little thing, aren't you?" With my eyes closed, I can hear when he unbuckles his belt and follows that by unzipping his jeans. Distantly, I'm jealous that he's wearing pants while I'm here just in my hoodie and sneakers, as my shorts hang from one ankle.

My eyes open when he presses his thumb against my bottom lip, prompting me to open my mouth for him. I see he's hard already, and a prickle of shame goes through me at the idea he's turned on because of what he saw Val and me doing.

Behind me, Val gives a soft growl, and he rocks his hips upward against me, causing my mouth to open wider in a gasp. I'm sore and too-sensitive, and even just that small movement is too much right now.

"If she bites down because of something you do, I'll string you up in that tree," Kieran remarks casually, his grip shifting to the back of my head, fingers tangling in my hair once more as he uses his other hand to guide himself against my lips

"Rude." Val only chuckles, his fingers moving incessantly as he kneads my breast and continues to tease my nipple. "Don't be such a bad sport, Kier. She knows not to bite you. Don't you, princess?" He licks at my neck on the side where my hoodie is stretched and a little bit torn to reveal my shoulder to him.

I can't exactly answer with Kieran's tip resting against my lower lip, though it makes me keep my mouth open in expectation. Slowly, he slides into my mouth and over my tongue, before pulling out to do it again without pushing me right off the bat.

Not that it takes him very long to change that. With his fingers keeping me in place,

he thrusts into my mouth, brushing the back of my throat as I close my eyes and remind myself not to gag and to breathe through my nose. It becomes easier when I actually do that, and my brain drifts to focus on Val's hand still teasing me, though now he's moved onto my other breast and his attention has me wanting to squirm on his lap.

"So gorgeous," Val purrs in my ear when I breathe in deeply and my eyes threaten to water. He rolls his hips against me, pulling a shudder from my body.

"Easy, darling," Kieran murmurs when I stiffen ever so slightly. "You're being so good for me. You take me perfectly and you know how to do this. Just relax for me, all right? Let me do all the work to fuck your pretty face." He doesn't exactly wait for me to adjust or think about it. In less than a minute he's going deeper, filling my mouth and throat with his length that makes my eyes water uncontrollably.

But I'd be lying if I denied enjoying this. Soft sounds fall from my throat, and I feel the slide of his silky length against my tongue while I open my eyes to stare up at him. That's really all I can do, except for reaching up to grip his jeans like I need some sort of physical sensation to keep me anchored.

Maybe I do, quite frankly. None of this seems real, and it's so easy to just drift a little as they hold me between them and do whatever they want while murmuring compliments and talking to each other.

It should be humiliating, and maybe it is. Maybe when I'm not so tired I'll question all of this, and wonder why I didn't fight back harder against them. But for now, all I can do is sink into the pleasurable warmth of my brain to focus on both of them touching me, and the feeling of Val's cock still buried in my pussy while Kieran fucks my mouth.

"She's starting to drift a little," I hear him say, and my eyes flick up to his with my

mouth too full for me to even frown. “Yeah, I’m talking about you, darling,” Kieran confirms with a smirk. “Look at you, so good at being our submissive little princess .” He purrs the word princess, sending a shudder through my body that has me leaning into Val’s hands.

“Not so feral when your holes are filled and you’ve gotten to come, huh?” Val chuckles against my shoulder. His hand lifts to my throat, though he just holds his fingers there instead of pressing, and I wonder if Val can feel Kieran’s cock as he fucks my mouth.

A harsh thrust from the man in front of me jars me to reality, though I keep my mouth open and try not to wiggle too much on Val’s lap. It’s followed by another, until he’s moving his hips in fast, thorough strokes that have me seeing stars and breathing harder through my nose.

When his hand tightens in my hair and Kieran’s eyes lock onto mine, I realize just how close he is to coming. My hands grip harder at his jeans, and I don’t look away from his harsh, intense gaze. He growls at my look, letting out a soft “ fuck ” under his breath before he drives himself into me again. And again. Until at last he falters, and with a huff he buries himself in my throat, my nose pressed to his pelvis while my heart pounds and I breathe in his sharp, musky scent.

“Good girl,” Kieran compliments as he comes down my throat. “Good girl, Noa. Just take it all for me. There you go, perfect girl.” He holds me there, and I can feel him softening in my mouth as I try to stop myself from hyperventilating from breathing so hard through my nose.

As if he can sense my discomfort and growing desperation, Kieran steps back quickly. His cock falls from my lips, which allows me to take a deep, gasping breath into my abused lungs. God, they’re really getting a workout tonight, with face-fucking by Kieran and all the breath play from Val. If I don’t end up with some kind

of bruising and hoarseness for the next few days from this, I'll certainly be surprised.

Exhaustion hits me like a baseball bat, but before I can fall forward onto my hands and knees, Val has me in his grip. He pulls me off his lap, letting me rest on my knees on the ground while he pushes to his feet and adjusts his clothing until he's just as dressed as he was before he caught me. When I look up, Kieran is back to almost perfect too, though there's a sheen of sweat on his brow and I can just tell from something in his expression that he's pleased.

"Come on, princess," Val murmurs, and without warning, he pulls me to my feet. He deftly helps me put my shorts back on, and just when I'm wondering how in the world I'm going to hike back to the cabin or if I have it in me to make another escape attempt, Val turns and crouches down slightly, gesturing to his shoulders.

I just stand there, shell-shocked and completely confused.

"I'm not carrying you in my arms, princess. So it's a piggyback ride or I drag you back." He chuckles casually without looking at me.

Biting my lip, I shift my weight from one foot to the other and say, "I could always make a run for it again." Sure enough, my voice is tired and hoarse, making me wonder if I'll have any voice left at all come morning.

Kieran snorts and fixes me with a look, then trails his gaze up and down my body, like he's scrutinizing me to see if running away is a possibility. Obviously it's not, though, considering the way he folds his arms comfortably over his chest and adopts a bored posture.

They're right, honestly, and my shoulders fall when I realize it. I have no idea where the hell I am, and I can't keep doing this tonight. With a heavy, reluctant huff, I awkwardly lean forward to wrap my arms around Val's neck loosely, gripping my

opposite wrist against his chest.

“Lean against me,” he instructs, arms coming back to find my legs. When I do what he says, he wraps his arms around my thighs to yank them forward over his hips. It’s weird as hell when he stands up and easily takes my weight.

It’s even stranger when he actually starts walking. He doesn’t seem to care that I’m attached to him like a barnacle. He barely seems to notice at all with his easy, measured strides that easily keep him beside Kieran.

God, I’m so tired. I listen to them talk about things that don’t concern me, bringing up names I don’t know and wondering if I should try to file away any of this information for later. It takes me a few minutes and a few small adjustments to get comfortable, but I find Val’s body heat helps a hell of a lot more than I could’ve expected it would.

He’s just so warm , and I’m starting to really notice the chill in the air now that my brain is so quiet and dotted with cotton fluff. Absently I turn to bury my face into his shoulder, and on my next inhale I can smell his sharp cologne, and a perfect, warm scent underneath that’s something uniquely his. I want to remind the two men I hate them, and that I’m not okay with this.

That once I get out of here, I never want to see them again.

But my mouth is dry and my tongue feels heavy as I think about actually saying the words. So instead, I let out a sigh against his shoulder and close my eyes with the intention of giving myself a few seconds to regroup and figure out what my next move should be.

Yeah, I tell myself silently. Just a few minutes of my eyes being closed. I’ll be fine . I won’t fall asleep.

I definitely won't fall asleep.

All I can really think about when I wake up is how warm I am.

And how fucking sore .

I'm sore enough that I really don't want to move, and I'm definitely not willing to open my eyes. Not even when I realize I'm in a bed, under blankets, and insanely better rested than I've been in a few days. But I also can sense the dirt and blood and worse still smeared on my skin. And since I definitely don't remember taking a shower or submerging myself in soapy water in some other way, I know I'm still filthy.

Even opening my eyes is a lot of effort, though I manage to glare up at the ceiling and the lazily spinning fan above me. The more I watch it, the more I swear I can hear a soft whooshing sound from the fast-moving blades.

That, or I'm just breathing really weird right now.

Trying to move reminds me that I am, in fact, just as sore as I expected. A groan trickles from between my lips when I shove myself upward into a sitting position, only to find that my hoodie and shoes are gone. Instead, I'm just wearing my tank top and shorts, in a king-size bed I remember seeing last night.

Though any possibility of today being a welcoming, sunny day is snuffed out by a distant roll of thunder.

“You don’t have to get up yet,” a sleepy, pleased voice tells me. Turning, I see Val sitting up in the bed as well, his hair tousled and smile sweeter than candy. He’s so good at flipping personalities, I’ve noticed, from psychotic, primal predator to kind and full of rainbows, meet-your-parents guy. As I watch, he leans over to the nightstand to pick up a bottle of water and a foil packet, both of which he holds out for me.

“Tylenol,” he says, showing me the unopened red packet before he rips it open to drop two white pills into my hand. He even cracks open the seal on the bottle of water and hands it to me, making me wonder if I look too fragile to do it myself.

Another roll of thunder has me glancing toward the window as I swallow the pills, and I see the light from behind the curtains is dim from the approaching storm clouds. “Man, if only I had my phone to see what the weather will be like today,” I remark flatly, prompting Val to snicker. I hand him back the water, though that earns me a reproachful look as he gently pushes it back toward me.

“Uh, no. You’re drinking all of that. You’ve had a couple of really rough days, and I’m sure you’re teetering on dehydration.” He rolls his eyes and gets to his feet, leaving me to appreciate all of his bare skin on display, seeing as he’s dressed only in a pair of low-slung sweatpants.

It should be illegal for murderers to be so hot.

“It’s supposed to storm all day, and taper off tonight,” he tells me finally, turning to glance at me when I don’t move to take a drink. In response, I frown with my shoulders hunched, and tip my head back to down half the bottle.

All the while, I look him over. His tan, smooth skin is perfect, save for the marks I don’t quite remember leaving. Not that I doubt I did, given how desperate I was to get away from them. “I thought I only got the nice boyfriend experience if I didn’t run

from you,” I can’t help remarking flatly. “I thought anything else would get you only doing what you want with me.”

That earns me an amused glance from his bright eyes, and he grins slyly. “You think I only want to fuck you on your knees in the dirt? You think I’m that simple of a man, Noa?” He sounds teasing as he prowls back to the bed and leans on it so our faces are on the same level. “How boring of you.”

“You really don’t want to know what I think of you,” I assure him, rolling my eyes. In the daylight, and after a lot of sleep, I don’t feel quite as terrified of him. But that’s probably just me too far in shock to react appropriately, since I should absolutely be attempting to claw out his eyes right now.

He scoffs at that and stands with a wince, stretching toward the ceiling with his arms over his head. “If you want to shower, you can. You were looking around last night, so I figure you know where the bathroom is.” Still, his eyes flick toward the open door on the other side of the room, and a second later he’s striding to the other door that leads into the rest of the cabin.

“You’re leaving me in here alone? What if I jump out the window and make a break for it?” I get to my feet and try not to cringe, or swear, or place a curse on Val’s entire bloodline.

“Well, the window’s locked, so you’d be jumping through the glass. If you’re that desperate then I guess I won’t stop you, but I don’t think you are.” He flashes me his winning smile once more before leaving the room and closing the door behind him to give me the illusion of actual privacy.

For a few moments, I just stand in the middle of the room, listening to the fan above me with my eyes closed. All things considered, I could be in worse shape. My neck is the sorest part of me, then with my knees, and my palm stings enough that I know

it'll be a bitch to finish cleaning.

It also occurs to me they must have cleaned me up somewhat before tucking me into bed last night. I should be way dirtier than I am, and my palm is somewhat clean, with only the scrapes and cut remaining. My knees are a tragedy of scrapes and red patches from the ground, though I choose to ignore that. It's too easy to insult myself with the idea of being on my knees so much last night.

Even though I'm the master of self-deprecating humor most days, I quickly decide today is not the day. I make my way to the bathroom and glance at myself in the mirror, unsurprised to see that I look like a walking, talking, war crime. My neck is bruised with fingerprints dotting my skin, and I brush my fingers over the prints just to see if I can match them with my grip. I can't.

While the shower is heating up, I strip, unsurprised to see the same fingerprint bruises along my hips and thighs. I have a few other assorted bruises as well, probably from falling in the woods, though the only actual wounds on my body are on my knees and my hand. And of those two, only my hand is something I'll maybe bother to put a few Band-Aids on.

The water is delightfully hot when I step into the shower, and I tilt my head back with a grateful moan as the water runs over my skin and sends warmth seeping into my bones. My hair is an abomination, and after I wash it, I grab the conditioner from the lip of the tub. I pour enough of the product into my hair that I could style it in a mohawk that could hold all day.

Finally, I scrub my body thoroughly, getting rid of any lingering dirt from the woods and any other grime or blood I may have picked up over the last couple of nights. I'm not quite as tired as I was yesterday morning. Though if I had my way, I'd spend today sleeping and surrounded by pie and coffee like I wanted to do yesterday.

A particularly loud rumble of thunder interrupts my self-pity, and I lean against the shower wall to let the water run over my shoulders and down my thighs. I love storms. I've always loved to sit and listen to them, whether it's day or night. Though it's been a long time since my mom died, I remember sitting on our porch with her while she pointed out approaching sheets of rain and we listened to the thunder together.

Thinking about my mom sends an unexpected pang of sadness through me, and I hate how vulnerable and raw I feel.

And how much I miss my mom.

"God, I wish you could just swoop in and save me," I murmur to no one. "You'd so know what to do in this situation, Mom." She was always such a problem solver that it was unreal how many people came to her to vent about their issues. It was something I loved about her, and definitely something I unfortunately did not inherit.

Finally, I rinse the conditioner out of my hair and turn off the water, though I don't leave the warmth of the shower enclosure for a few more moments. When I do, I wrap a towel around myself and lean over the counter, rubbing my hand over the mirror to clear off the condensation.

I look like a drowned cat. My face is pale, and the dark circles under my eyes are particularly vibrant today. My hair is still a mess, and when I yank open the top drawer, I'm happy to see a brush there I can steal. If I don't take care of it now, then I will hate myself if I have to deal with it later.

Once I've dried off and stuck some Band-Aids on my palm over the worst of the abrasions, I tug the brush through my hair a few times. I'm not going for perfection. I'm just hoping for an improvement to looking like I've been living in the woods for the past week.

But after five minutes or so of gritting my teeth and dragging the brush through my blonde tangles, I suddenly wonder if I'll look good with short hair just so I can avoid doing any more of this. I decide to say fuck it, and when I move to grab my clothes I'd left in a pile by the door, I find they're gone. Instead, my shorts and tank have been replaced by a pair of long black sweatpants, a new t-shirt, and a zip up hoodie. None of which are mine.

I don't want to wear their clothes , the stubborn part of me complains silently. I hesitate with the towel wrapped around me, wishing I could sensibly turn my nose up at the offered clothing. We aren't friends, or lovers, or anything other than kidnappers and victim, who happen to have amazing hate sex.

But I'm also not so sure I'd love putting my filthy clothes back on right now, and these look a lot warmer. With that thought, I drop the towel and tug on the too long sweatpants, not minding at all how they pool around my heels. The shirt fits a little better, making me think it's Kieran's instead of Val's, since the latter is the more muscular of the two. The hoodie I don't bother with for the moment, though. Not when I'm actually pretty comfortable now that I've reminded my body what it's like to be warm.

Finally I sigh, and for a few seconds I press my forehead to the door while considering the merits of just hiding in here until someone miraculously shows up to rescue me, or I fade away from desperation.

"No, nope," I murmur. "You will not perish in some cabin in the middle of the woods. Hopefully." With that resolution, I yank open the door, drape the hoodie on the bed, and walk to the closed door of the bedroom.

When I open it, I'm definitely not expecting to find three people in the open area of the cabin. Kieran is leaning against one wall, quiet as always, while Val stands in the middle of the room, closer to the stranger.

Looking at the man, I find something familiar in his stance, in the way he carries himself, and just him, though I can't figure out what it is or where I know him from. He's attractive, in a cold way, his dark brown hair is slicked back with gel and tattoos cover every inch of arms exposed by the rolled-up sleeves of his dress shirt. When he sees me, he stops whatever he's saying and turns to look at me with dark, almost sapphire blue eyes.

"Why hello," he greets in a slow, smooth voice that doesn't do a lot to comfort me. His smile is slow and thoughtful, but I can't help noticing that it doesn't quite reach his eyes. Kieran shifts audibly, drawing the new man's attention and causing his smile to turn into a smirk. "Oh, calm down, Kier," he dismisses. "I trust you to take care of it."

It occurs to me that the it he's talking about might definitely be me. My fingers flex against my palms, though I wince when I accidentally press against the cuts under the Band-Aids on my palm.

"You spell your name interestingly, Noa," the man remarks without waiting for Kieran to reply to him. "No H. I've never seen that before."

"It's Hebrew," I reply easily. I've heard this before, and corrected countless people when they instinctively put an H at the end of my name. "Have we met?" I can't stop myself from asking, or keep myself from being curious.

"You've met," Val tells me flatly. "You've just never seen his face." He adjusts his arms and settles against the back of the sofa. "Why can't Erika take care of it?" he asks, his attention back on the man.

The stranger looks at me slowly, brows raised in a silent question, but Kieran sighs and provides an answer instead. "Noa's already a liability until we figure out a way to make sure she isn't," he points out. "It doesn't matter what she hears you say."

“You met me as Nero the other night,” the man tells me at last. “That’s how I know you. Though I definitely don’t know as much about you as Kier or Val.” A smile twitches at his lips, and his eyes warm just a little. He turns to glance at Val and shakes his head. “Because it’s Erika ,” he points out. “She barely managed to keep her room under control. And apparently, she didn’t do enough research.” He rolls his shoulders in a shrug while I try to ignore my growing curiosity and desire for popcorn—or the pie in the fridge—to enjoy while listening to this drama.

Instead of standing awkwardly in the doorway, I prowl to the sofa, figuring this might not be a good time to demand my freedom, make a scene, and declare any radical intentions I may have for the day. So I sit and curl my knees up to my chest, grateful for the cozy, slightly too big clothes and the warmth of the cabin itself.

Though I’m definitely not grateful for the men I’m here with.

“Also...” Nero glances my way, his look morphing to one of concern. “Are you in love with her, or just trying to torture her? She’s a mess , Kier.” He turns to look at the taller man, whose chin jerks up in surprise.

“You’re blaming me?” Kieran snaps. “ Me ? You know I’m not into leaving marks like that.”

“But you’re the more responsible of the two of you,” Nero admonishes. I’m liking him more and more by the minute, and it’s hard to remind myself that he’s definitely not on my side either. “And I know you know the meaning of aftercare, Jesus...”

Kieran shakes his head and leans back against the wall once more. “You’re an ass,” is his only response, and Val glances my way, a bit of a guilty look on his handsome face while I fight back a satisfied smile.

Nero is definitely on my list of ‘less awful serial killers I’ve met,’ unless he has a

reason to remove himself from it.

“All right then, Ravage ”—Nero tilts his head toward Val, pulling his attention off of me—“you get to help. Kieran’s done his share of the heavy lifting, and it looks like she might deserve a break from being gnawed on by you. Ever consider how she’s going to explain those bruises on her throat to her friends if you let her go?”

His use of if makes my stomach twist uncomfortably, but I don’t let the sudden anxiety show on my face. Instead, I keep my features carefully impassive, and listen to their conversation with rapidly growing interest.

“Can’t you ask someone else?” Val grumbles, scuffing his foot along the floor. “Literally anyone else? This is Erika’s problem, not mine?—”

“Sure, absolutely.” Nero’s voice is sweet, almost mockingly so. “How about I take Noa with me? I’m sure she’ll love tracking down some dead girl’s brother more than being cooped up here with the two of you.”

“Absolutely,” I agree without hesitation, even though I know it isn’t a real offer. “Amateur detective work? Sign me up. I’ve binged Criminal Minds . I’ll totally be your profiler.”

All three of them look at me with varying degrees of humor on their faces. Though Kieran’s ‘humor’ looks a lot like exasperation instead, weirdly enough.

“Maybe next time, pretty girl.” Nero chuckles with the flash of a grin. “I’m sure I could use your profiling skills in my job.” I want to ask what his job is, but I’ve used up my bravery for the moment. So I just listen as Val continues to complain, though before long he’s pulling on his shoes and grabbing his jacket from the table.

“I’ll bring him back to you in one piece, probably,” Nero assures me, as if I was

worried about that. I just raise my brows at them, ignoring Val as he blows me a dramatic kiss before following the taller man outside and closing the door behind them.

Leaving me alone with Kieran in the cabin while he just looks at me from his same spot on the wall.

“You’re definitely hungry,” Kieran sighs after a few moments of us listening to a car engine start and seconds later get fainter and fainter as the two of them leave. “Remote’s on the table beside you if you want to watch something.” With that, he pushes off the wall and heads for the kitchen, feet scuffing on the wooden floor before he yanks open the fridge to stare inside.

“I could run away. One-on-one is better odds than two-on-one?” I offer, looking around until I find the remote and pick it up.

He doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he stays silent as he does whatever it is he’s doing, and I flip on the television while giving the front door, which I know is unlocked, yearning glances. Eventually I settle on some documentary about America’s most haunted places, though I’m barely paying attention. I don’t know how I can pay attention considering everything that’s going on.

When Kieran sits down beside me on the couch, not giving me much personal space, I glance up at him in surprise. But he just hands me a small plate with a piece of pecan pie on it, and a glass bottle of coffee. Specifically, a white chocolate latte. “Thanks,” I can’t help murmuring, though I glance up at him with narrowed eyes when his thigh brushes my knee. “You know there’s a whole couch on the other side of you, right?”

“Yeah, I do.” He glances up at the TV, snorts, and looks back to me as another rumble of thunder sounds outside. “And to answer your other question, just because Val isn’t here doesn’t mean you have any better chance of getting away from here.

Actually, he'd be better for you in that way. You might be able to beg and plead and promise with him. Maybe he'd even believe you."

"And you won't? To be clear, I wasn't offering to give you a private PowerPoint presentation, Kieran." My words are flat and brittle, though when he just gives me the look, I feel my bravado wilt.

"I know what you were suggesting, little girl. Eat your breakfast before you start planning escape attempts." I can't really argue with that. Not when he's given me two of my favorite things for breakfast. Instead, I focus on eating, happy as hell with the cold pecan pie and bottled coffee. And I'm hungrier than I expected, given the fact he handed me a piece of pie that normally would be a bit too big for me to comfortably finish in one sitting. Much less in under five minutes. But soon enough it's gone, leaving me to daydream about what other kinds of pies they have on the premises.

Not that I'll let myself be won over by pie and shitty documentaries.

Minutes later Kieran finishes his as well, and he wordlessly plucks my plate from my hands and carries both them and his now-empty coffee back to the kitchen. "He'll be gone for a while," Kieran tells me, his voice drifting from the other side of the cabin.

"So I have all day to stab you, steal your keys, and make my getaway? By the way, since I don't have my phone, could you tell me the weather forecast for the rest of the day?" Turning, I rest my chin on my arm that's looped over the back of the sofa to watch him move around the kitchen.

"Sure you do. And it'll be storming all day and tonight. Why? Are you afraid of lightning?" Finally, he's done washing off the plates and forks, and he puts them back where they belong before turning to prowl back to my side of the cabin.

"One of my cats is," I say, my heart twisting at the idea of completely leaving them

alone. I know they'll be fine, as long as what Val told me is true, but I still can't help but aggressively worry about them. "But I'm not. I like storms." My eyes follow him as he comes back to sit down on the sofa, and yet again, he invades my personal bubble without a word. This time he's facing me more fully, and he reaches out to tuck my hair behind my ear.

"You're a mess," he murmurs softly, looking me over. "Nero's right about that. You do look like the poster child for domestic abuse right now."

"Thanks. That's so flattering—" I break off when he gets to his feet, confused while he wordlessly disappears into the bedroom.

When he returns, he's carrying a brush in one hand, and he sits down on the other end of the couch this time. "Come here." Kieran gestures to me with his fingers as he drops one leg to the floor invitingly.

But I just sit there, my eyebrows climbing toward my bangs in surprise and bemusement. "Oh yeah? You're going to brush my hair ? I didn't take you for Mr. Domesticity."

"You only take me for a murderer. And you don't know anything about me. So..." He gestures for me to move closer to him again.

Yet again, I open my mouth to refuse. I have no reason to trust him anymore after everything that's happened. But then he tilts his head to the side and gives me a new kind of look. One that's actually sweet and a little pleading. His hand reaches for me, still held out into the air between us, and God, it's hard to ignore him when he looks like that.

"I trusted you yesterday morning, you know," I murmur without moving. If anything, I tense, dragging my knees more tightly to my chest. "I trusted both of you." My

voice breaks, and I hate the sudden pressure of tears behind my eyes that I have to fight to blink away. “And now you want to unalive me in the woods.”

“I do not want to unalive you in the woods,” Kieran disagrees. “Neither of us do. If we wanted that, you wouldn’t have woken up yesterday morning. That wasn’t just some kind of weird victory lap for us to taunt you. But I cannot place your safety above ours. All I’m asking is for you to give me a little bit of time to figure this out, all right? To make sure we can trust you won’t go to the cops about us.”

“I wasn’t going to.” The words come out soft, and I unbend my knees from my awkward and uncomfortable position. “I really wasn’t.”

“But things change. Your infatuation with us wouldn’t have kept your lips sealed forever. Eventually guilt would’ve won out, and you’d tell the police about us. All of us.” His smile turns a little regretful, though he’s still holding his hand out to me. “I need you to have a real reason not to go to the cops. I need it to affect you too, darling.”

I can’t trust him. I know I can’t trust either of them. But God, I sort of want to. “If you find a reason, you really won’t kill me or keep me here? Or kidnap me again?” I ask finally, hating how soft my voice is.

“I swear on my life.” It’s so honest that it shocks me. His tone isn’t what I’ve come to expect from Kieran, nor is the look on his face.

I can’t trust him.

“I don’t trust you,” I whisper, though my words are uncertain and hesitant.

A wry smile curls across his lips, and he scoffs lightly. “Of course you don’t,” he agrees. “Because you’re not stupid. But you don’t have to trust me to let me brush

your hair, Noa.”

I could snap back at him and tell him that’s not true. I could find some comeback that will make me feel better about myself. But I can’t seem to find the words, and it hits me that I’m so tired of being afraid.

Besides, it’s not like this can get much worse.

“If you secretly have drugs in that brush to knock me out again, or if you drugged the pie, I will scoop out your insides with a spoon ,” I say flatly, maneuvering my body until I’m on my knees near him and hovering awkwardly. “How do you want to do this?”

“Turn around and sit closer to me. I don’t bite.” Kieran chuckles, a hint of wicked humor in his dark eyes. He tugs gently on my hip when I move until I’m sitting cross-legged on the couch and half-leaning against his thigh that’s pressed to the back of the couch. Finally, I rest my head in my hands, elbows braced on my knees, with my skin prickling in anticipation.

No one has brushed my hair for me except my mom, back when she was alive. I expect Kieran to be rough and hurried, to drag the brush through my hair and rip out as many tangles as he gets undone. But yet again, he surprises me. Using his other hand to make sure he isn’t hurting me, he starts with the left side of my head, starting at the bottom and gently working his way up.

I quickly start feeling awkward at the affectionate way he does it, and I can’t help but appreciate the warmth radiating off of him. “So…” I tap my fingers against my face when the silence broken only by the TV becomes too much. “You said I don’t know anything about you. You’re right, since I unfortunately cannot read minds. Maybe you want to, uh, tell me something about yourself?”

He's quiet for a few moments, and I can't see his face to tell what he's thinking. Finally Kieran says, "I like storms too. Val isn't as much of a fan, though. He doesn't like being caught out in the rain."

"Oh yeah? I wouldn't have expected that with how much he liked being in the dirt last night." I can't help but wonder how often in the past Kieran brushed someone's hair. While I know it isn't exactly a difficult task, he just seems...practiced.

"His adoptive parents used to lock him outside when it was storming if he pissed them off."

This time I can't help but jerk around to face Kieran, my lips parted in surprise as he pulls his hands away from me. "What ?!" I ask, disbelieving.

The dark-haired man shrugs his shoulders, lifting a brow at my reaction. "This isn't a secret, not really. So you don't need to treat it like one or anything." He gestures for me to turn back around, and I do so with a soft sigh, resuming my position.

"He was adopted from Russia as a child. Val was...six, I believe? He's unfortunately representative of the not-so-great side of adoption. His adoptive parents were a very religious family. They renamed him, taught him fluent English, and wouldn't let him speak Russian, use his old name, or talk about his birth family. They thought he should be grateful to them and their punishments were...severe."

I'm horrified and glad Kieran can't see my expression as he explains. "What about you?" I ask after a few moments of comfortable silence. "Do you also have a really sad, heart wrenching past? Because if so, I'm not sure you can top that one."

I hear his soft chuckle, and he turns my head slightly to be able to get the rest of my hair. "Nah, I don't. I'm pretty boring. Grew up in the suburbs, went to boarding school. And Kieran was the name I was born with."

“Will you tell me about the Haunt?” I ask, surprising myself with the words. “Will you tell me why you guys did that to those people?”

For a few moments, he doesn’t speak. Moments turn into a minute, and he’s nearly done brushing out the tangles in my hair by the time he gives a slight exhale. “Because fair’s fair, Noa. No one in there was innocent. They all hurt one of us in one way or another. And I don’t just mean name calling or stealing someone’s parking spot.” He pulls away, and I hear him set the brush down on the table by the couch. Before I can move, however, Kieran wraps his arms around me to tug me back until I’m draped against him, my back against his chest.

Once I’m comfortably between his thighs, he drops his arm around my waist, his legs bracketing mine on the deep couch. Unexpectedly, he buries his face against my neck, inhaling deeply before brushing his lips against my skin. I shudder, surprised by the action, but I’m definitely not complaining about this sudden rush of affection from him.

“I didn’t take you for, umm, warm?” I admit finally, trying to keep my anxiety out of my voice. After all, I certainly don’t want to piss him off.

“And cuddly?” he finishes with a scoff, and nips at my throat. “Val would disagree with you. And before it really crosses your mind, I’m not just touching you so I can fuck you, darling. You’re tired and so am I.” He tugs the soft blanket off of the back of the sofa and drapes it over both of us. “So do me the supreme favor of not trying to run away today, all right? It’ll really ruin the mood, and all the work I put into untangling your hair.”

“I’ll consider it.” I sniff, unable to help relaxing against him even just a little bit. “And I’ll get back to you at a later date on my decision.” My words make him scoff, and I turn my head to watch the TV, not really sure what’s even happening as a woman stutters and stammers and gestures toward the camera.

I don't actually care, as it turns out. And my ambivalence reminds me how much I need to catch up on real sleep, given the past few days of physical exhaustion and emotional trauma I'll probably never quite recover from if they don't kill me here.

"I'll be really disappointed if you kill me," I remark, my voice betraying my drowsiness. But if Kieran answers, I don't hear it. While I promise myself that I'm only resting my eyes and not sleeping, once they're closed, I find it impossible to reopen them again.

“Do you want to go home, princess?”

The words jolt me awake instantly, better than smelling salts ever could. As I sit up from the sofa, I realize at some point in the last couple hours, Kieran maneuvered out from under me and replaced his body with a pillow. The blanket is still draped over me, and I’m delightfully warm in the small cabin while rain sounds against the roof.

“Really?” I ask blearily, the blanket falling off of me and all the way to the floor. “I can go home?” It doesn’t seem real, or possible, and the relief that rushes through me is tempered quickly by doubt. I gaze up at Val as I stand, studying his face as my brain comes back to life.

“Almost, okay?” He reaches out to cup my face in one hand and follows that with a soft kiss that’s just a brush of his lips against mine. “I told you we’d figure this out, Noa,” Val murmurs comfortingly. “Put on your shoes and the hoodie I left you this morning. We’re going outside.”

He turns to walk away, but when I don’t move, Val looks at me over his shoulder. “You okay?” he asks, watching as I worry at my lower lip.

“I just...” I take a breath. “Promise me this isn’t a trick?” I’m trying not to beg, but I need something. Some kind of security, even though he could so easily lie to me.

“I promise you, this isn’t a trick.” The words come from Kieran instead of Val. When I turn, I find him standing by the door, looking like he’s ready to go. His hair is wet,

just like Val's, and I wonder what they've been doing outside to get rained on. "We want to let you go home, and we've got this figured out. Just need you to trust us on this, darling." His eyes find mine, and a soft, reassuring smile curls over his mouth.

He's certainly never given me that look before. But I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not, and I rock back on my heels, still suspicious. Finally, I let out a huff of air and nod, my steps taking me to the bedroom where my shoes are at the foot of the bed where I dropped the hoodie earlier. Sliding on my shoes, I try not to consider every horrible possibility in my head. I try to tell myself that this is not an elaborate trick to get me out to the woods so they can literally kill me.

But I'm not quite able to convince myself that any of this is going to be okay.

Once I'm ready, I finger comb my now tangle-free hair and walk back out to the main room where Val and Kieran are waiting. Val is nearly vibrating with anticipation, and he flashes me a quick grin. "You're going to get rained on, but we aren't going far," he tells me apologetically. "Sorry. No way around it."

"That's fine," I'm quick to say, hovering close to them at the door with my hands shoved into the pocket of my borrowed hoodie. "I don't mind the rain." Though being out in it in November isn't how I usually spend my time if I can help it. Still, if it means I get to go home, I'm absolutely willing to deal with being soaked.

When both of them just look at me for a few moments, I'm reminded of Halloween night, and the way they'd seemed so cold behind their masks. For some uncomfortable reason, this feels a lot like that. It does nothing to put me at ease, and I look away after a few seconds, finding myself unable to hold their gaze.

"Let's go then," Val says at last. Kieran pulls open the door, revealing a steady drizzle outside. It could be worse, I suppose. It could be absolutely pouring rain. But I'm still going to get soaked if we have to walk for more than a minute. A fact that

comes true pretty fast as I follow them down the deck stairs and across the gravel of the driveway. In the fading evening light, the trees are just as menacing as they'd been in the pitch-dark, given the circumstances. So many of them are impossibly tall, and a list of areas near Nashville goes through my head as I wonder where we could possibly be.

When we walk past the SUV sitting in the driveway, I glance at it, my steps slowing. For some reason, I expected us to get in, to drive somewhere, or hell, maybe get shakes on the way back to my apartment. But the two of them keep walking without looking back to make sure I'm still trailing behind them.

But where would I go, exactly, if I weren't following the two serial killers? I don't know these woods, obviously, and getting away from them seems impossible. I'm tired and desperate, and at this point I'm willing to do anything to get home to my cats and my normal life. Really, all I want to do is curl up under my blankets and not emerge for three to five business days.

"It's not far," Val assures me again, turning to walk backward as he says it. "Literally like, five minutes of walking. I was way too lazy to go any further." He grins, and when I don't smile back, he only shrugs and turns away from me. But I'm not sure what joke I'm supposed to be sharing, since I have very little idea what's going on. Are we going into the woods to make some blood pact, where we all cut our hands and make a vow of secrecy? It feels a little Hardy Boys to me, but if that's all they're expecting, then I suppose I can swallow my fear of infectious disease and get with the program.

We don't take a trail through the trees, and nothing looks like a landmark, so I'm not sure how they unerringly know where to go. My feet crunch on leaves and forest debris, and my shoulders hunch as the rain soaks into my clothes. With my heart pounding, I glance upwards at the grey, darkening sky, my face immediately covered in raindrops that I shake off once I'm looking down again.

I can be home tonight , I tell myself whenever my nerves start to get the best of me. Whatever they want from me, I can do it. Then I can go home. I refuse to let myself consider what it would mean for me if they're lying. And I won't let myself consider a worst-case scenario. Not yet. Not until I'm given a reason to panic.

"We're here," Val announces, though he stops in front of me and waits, blocking my view. "But I want you to take my hand, all right?" He reaches between us, fingers outstretched, and I glance quizzically down at his palm.

"Umm. Okay?" Hesitantly, I place my hand in his, letting him intertwine our fingers. "Why?" From what little I know of Val, it really could be that he just wants to hold hands. But something tells me that isn't the case here.

His smile widens. "Good girl. Just don't freak out, okay? Seriously, you aren't in any danger here, and as soon as we're done, we'll take you home. I promise ," he tells me, but somehow it's not as reassuring as I'd like it to be. Still, I find myself nodding, and I try not to bite my lip anymore than I already have been.

After another moment of searching my face, he turns, pulling me along with him to where Kieran is already waiting, looking bored, with his hands shoved in his pockets as well. His hair is already soaked with rain, though the handsome man still manages to not look like a drowned cat. I'm sure I'm not faring quite so well. He meets my eyes as Val pulls me to him, my heart racing, and when Val stops, so do I. Standing between them, I can't help but fidget, and I'm ready to ask what the hell is going on when a strangled, frantic scream has me turning to look at a large tree a few yards away.

There I see a man pulling at cuffs on his wrists, his face smeared with blood. The cuffs are connected to a rope attaching him securely to the tree, and there's tape covering his mouth. When our eyes meet, he screams behind the tape, eyes wide and desperate as he jerks toward me until he hits the end of the rope that binds him.

“Wh-what the hell ?!” I gasp, stumbling backward as far as Val will let me. Kieran’s hand comes out as well, and he grabs my other hand when I instinctively move to pry Val’s fingers off of mine.

“I know, I know, but you really don’t need to freak out,” Val assures me. “Seriously, nothing is going to hurt you. He certainly can’t hurt you. Remember what we said, okay?” He reaches out to grab my chin, forcing me to look at him instead of the distraught, freaking out man. “Focus on me, princess.”

His words don’t help. My heart pounds and I swear I can feel it in my throat, threatening to choke me. “I don’t understand,” I finally gasp.

“We told you before that we need for you to have a reason, a real reason, not to go to the cops about us, remember?” His smile is soft, reassuring, and not the least bit crazy, even though he most certainly is psychotic as hell. “ This is that reason.” He drops my chin and reaches back under his hoodie, revealing the same hunting knife I took from him the other night. “All you have to do, Noa, is kill him.”

My stomach drops, and I feel like I’m going to throw up, but Val just beams.

“Just kill him, okay? Then we’ll take you home and this will all be over.”

Unfortunately, I can't claim that I didn't hear him correctly. There's no way I've misunderstood, when the words kill him echo in my brain over and over and over. I stand there, trapped, and don't let myself look at the man who's still making desperate noises behind the duct tape. "No," I say flatly. "Absolutely not." With all my strength, I try to twist free of them, but they just hold on tighter. "I can't kill him! I don't murder people!"

"But he deserves it, Noa," Kieran murmurs against my ear, leaning in close and pressing himself to me in comfort. "He's a bad person. He's done so many awful things, and the world won't miss him. Do you want to hear about all the things he's done?"

Immediately I shake my head, eyes fixed on the knife that has my blood roaring in my ears and panic seeping into every nerve of my being.

But if Kieran notices, he ignores my vehement refusal. His free hand wraps around my waist, and he draws me against him, his radiator-like warmth pushing away some of the biting cold brought by the rain and the season. "No, I don't care!" I gasp. "I'm not?—"

"He beat his wife and their daughter. She couldn't find the strength to leave him until she walked in on him hurting her." The way Kieran says it makes the meaning clear, and I can't help glancing towards the average-looking man. He's back to trying to yank free, as if the rope or cuffs will give. "When he went to court, he got some of his friends to lie for him. He got custody of their child and he took out his feelings on her

whenever he could. She was so scared, Noa. She started to think it was normal. And started believing she deserved it.”

The words twist in my chest like a knife, but I can’t do this. Even if he does deserve it, if he is this terrible person, I am not a killer. I can’t be the one to punish him for his crimes, if they’re even real and not just made up by these two men to convince me. “Please don’t make me do this.”

“Then you don’t get to go home,” Val says flatly. He doesn’t look mad, or even annoyed. Neither of them do, and I wonder if they expected this to be my reaction from the moment they came up with this terrible plan. “Princess, if I could show you undeniable proof of what he’s done, I would. Really. But I can assure you, we’re not lying about him. Joe here really is the worst of the worst. He hurt his own family repeatedly. He’ll do it again if we let him go.”

“How do you even know that?” I whisper. “How do you know what he’s done?”

The two of them share a look, and it’s Kieran who answers. “Do you remember the girl who helped you get away from Val in the haunt? The girl in the doll mask?” At my nod, he continues. “That’s his daughter. She’s the reason we know what he’s done. Originally, he was going to be at the haunt for her. But she couldn’t face him again. She asked for one of us to find him and get rid of him, so he couldn’t hurt anyone else. Especially his new family.”

The explanation sends a shudder through me, and a soft sound of reluctance comes from somewhere in my chest. I’m barely listening, barely working through this in my brain, and it’s so hard to keep myself from looking at the man. At Joe, I correct myself. He’s not some faceless, nameless creature over there on a rope. He’s not an animal.

He’s a human , and they want me to kill him.

“I can’t,” I whine. “Please, can’t ! I really won’t tell anyone. I won’t go to the cops or do anything!” My heart pounds in my chest, and Kieran sighs against my hair.

“Poor little girl,” he murmurs, his words sweet and not condescending. “We really are forcing you into an impossible task, aren’t we? I’m sorry, Noa. If we could trust you without you doing this, we would let you go in an instant. I don’t want to force you to do this, but you have to see things from our side, okay? We have no insurance that you won’t go to the cops. And you can promise all you want, but what did I say earlier about your infatuation with us wearing off and the guilt setting in?” He lets go of my hand to tuck my hair behind my ear, still holding me against him. “The sooner you do this, the sooner you can go home. Can you do it for that, darling? You can be fast. All that matters is that you do it, and then we’ll take you home.”

Numbly, I jerk my chin in a nod. I can’t really see anything except the two of them, and the sound of rain seems so loud in my ears. My free hand comes up, fingers curled and shaking, and Val flashes me a winning smile as he gently sets the knife in my palm. “Don’t do anything stupid, okay?” he murmurs, eyes flickering with a silent warning. “This doesn’t have to be that bad.”

A moment later, Kieran steps back as well, letting go of me completely as Val does the same. I’m left standing between them, swaying, and feeling like a strong wind might knock me over.

If I do this, I can go home , I tell myself as I turn to look at the bloody handcuffed man. He meets my gaze with desperate eyes, struggling with the cuffs until they bite into his wrists.

I can go home , I repeat, taking a step toward him with the knife clutched in my hand.

I can ? —

He meets my eyes again and makes a desperate, pleading sound in his throat, reaching toward me with shaking hands.

I can't do this . Without thinking, without making a conscious decision, I drop the knife and whirl around, bolting into the trees.

But I don't make it very far. Arms wrap around my waist, jerking me off my feet as Val throws me over his shoulder. I scream for him to stop, unable to kick or really do much of anything once he traps my legs against his chest.

"Don't do this, Noa." He sighs, dropping me to the ground and keeping a firm grip on my arm. Kieran is holding the knife now, turning it over in his hands as Val drags me back to him. But I certainly don't intend to make it easy for him. I dig in my heels, trying to use anything on the ground as leverage to stop him. But he's easily able to jerk me forward every time I find a way to stand still until I'm stumbling into Kieran and he can pull me to him with his fingers in my hoodie.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry ," I sob, desperation in every word and every line of my body. "I'm sorry, I just can't. You can't make me kill someone."

The two of them trade a look, and Kieran absently lets go of my hoodie to press his palm comfortingly against my cheek. "Yes, you can," he tells me oh-so-kindly. "I promise you, Noa. When it comes down to it, when it's you or him?" He nods at the man. "You can do this."

"I can't ," I protest, tears running down my face with the rain. "Please don't ask me?—"

"Oh, princess, but we're not asking." Val loosens his grip ever so slightly on my arm, and I glance back at his face in concern.

He's no longer the sweet, caring boyfriend from this morning.

Nor is he the exciting, sexy hunter from last night who fucked me on the ground and made sure I loved it.

This is the killer I first met, the one who found me in the haunt and originally intended to end my life right there.

"He's right." Kieran's voice is cool and collected, his tone not brooking for an argument. Looking up at him shows me the same creature from Halloween night. The one who hid behind a mask. I mistakenly believed that once the masks came off and Halloween was over, they were normal people. Or at least, as normal as murderers can be.

Now I can see I was wrong. They aren't normal, and they never were.

They're monsters, with or without the masks. Harrow and Ravage don't disappear just because their facades do, and it's taken me too long to realize that.

"And we've decided we aren't killing you," Val tells me in a voice I think is supposed to reassure me, but most certainly doesn't. "So unfortunately, that means you have to kill him?—"

"I cannot ? —"

"Even if we have to hold your hand the whole time ." His low snarl in my ear is accompanied by his grip tightening on my wrist, and he pulls the knife from my fingers before dragging me toward the tree and the man bound to it.

"N-no, I can't—" I try to twist away again, but Kieran is there behind me, a mask of cold indifference on his face when I look at him for help. He grabs my other hand

when I move to grab Val's wrist, his pace picking up until they're both dragging me across the ground. I stumble, and I would've fallen if they weren't holding me up. But they don't stop until the man is right in front of us, his eyes wide and defiant. He snarls something at Val from behind the duct tape that I'm sure isn't friendly. Val kicks out at him, catching the man in the chest and knocking him down. Before he can move, Val lets go of me and walks forward, stomping down on the man's chest and keeping him there.

"He's not worth your tears, Noa!" Val calls over a sudden roll of thunder. He finds my gaze, his own burning with a terrifying intensity. "Or your guilt. He's a monster who hurts people." As he talks, Kieran yanks me to stand in front of him, then shoves me downward. But I lock my knees, head shaking back and forth as the rush of blood in my ears competes with the crash of thunder and the rain that's now pouring down on us.

But my refusal doesn't stop him. Instead, he shoves me to the ground beside the man, and I can't stop the tears or my desperate sobs. "No!" I scream as Kieran kneels down beside me. "I'm not a killer!" Fighting him is futile. He's impossibly strong, and committed, so when Val hands him the knife, he doesn't hesitate to force it into my hand and close my fingers around the hilt.

"Do you want to go home?" Kieran yells over the storm. "Do you want to go home to your cats, to see your friends again, to move on with your life? Or do you want to be stuck here, trapped, with us unwilling to let you leave?!"

"I want to go home!" I wail desperately. "But I don't want to do this! I don't know him—he didn't hurt me ? —"

"Yeah, well, beggars can't be choosers. Look at me." When I don't, Kieran grips my chin and jerks my face up so I'm forced to meet his gaze. "He is a bad man, Noa. I can't give you any more absolution than that. You can look him up—Joe

Addison—when you get home, but for now you need to take my word on this. You are doing the world a favor, and I will not let you back out of this.” He pulls me closer to him, his hand clenched tight around mine that’s forced into gripping the knife.

The man, still held down by Val’s weight, lets out every noise a human can make from behind the duct tape, plus a few more I didn’t know were possible. He lifts his hands, fingers splayed, but Val knocks them aside with his sneaker before pushing down on his chest again. “Don’t look to her for help!” he snarls when the man pins me with his gaze. “She doesn’t have a choice and you know you’ve had this coming. It’s called karma, Joe. And yours has been piling up.”

Pleas and whines fall from my lips as quickly as the rain, but the two men are deaf to them. All I can do is watch, my body feeling like it’s not quite my own, as Kieran pulls me up onto my knees beside the man on the ground.

My eyes meet the stranger’s, and I see something like a flash of regret, then overwhelming fear and desperation. He lets out another noise, something softer, and his eyes never leave mine.

That makes it worse.

“Don’t,” I whimper as Kieran lifts our joined hands above the man’s chest. “Please, I can’t—” The downward jolt takes me by surprise, as does the way it feels when the knife sinks deep into the man’s chest.

He cries out behind the duct tape, arching off the ground in pain. Blood wells around the wound, and when Kieran rips our hands free, it sprays up in an arc, hitting my face in a hot, stinging spray. But Kieran isn’t done. Not by a long shot. He forces me to stab him again, this time lower, and the man lets out a pained sound once more, as blood runs freely down his chest and stomach. When we rip the knife free again,

blood pools on the man's gut before flowing off the sides of his abdomen.

I want to vomit. My stomach rolls with nausea, but I'm no longer making any sound. Kieran forces me to stab him once more, but by now the man is mostly still, only shuddering, and the blood is slower to drip from his wounds.

But he never once looks away from me. His eyes remain fixed on mine, wide in the last wisps of light of the approaching night. And I find I can't tear my gaze away, either. A soft whimper leaves me, and Kieran releases my hand, then pulls me back against him as Val scoops up the knife from where it fell to the ground.

"You're all right," Kieran murmurs in my ear. "See, Noa? You're okay."

I want to tell him I'm definitely not. That I might never be all right again. But all I can do is stare at the man's now glazed over eyes and hope the rain conceals the tears streaming down my face as my hands shake and coldness seeps into my bones.

I wonder if I'll ever be warm again, or if being cold and numb is just my new reality.

The rain continues, at least in my head. All I can hear is the pounding of it against my skull as the rest of me continues to stay numb and coldly detached. I barely notice when Kieran and Val guide me back to the cabin and help me change. Their hands are impossibly warm, and everything they say seems to bounce off of my ears instead of actually sinking in.

Before I know it, I'm in another pair of borrowed sweatpants and my hoodie they'd kidnapped me in. Even though it's dirty and definitely needs to be washed, it's comforting to curl my hands in the familiar fabric once they've settled me into the back of the SUV.

When I blink, they're both in the car, and Val is turning up the temperature while he laments about heated seats or something. Blinking again seems to cause time to ripple and zip by, because suddenly we're out of the woods and back in Nashville.

I realize Kieran is looking at me in the mirror, but I don't have it in me to look away. I feel almost like a doll; a marionette with her strings cut. All I can do is sit here until someone notices and fixes my strings. Until then, I'm still and lifeless.

I'm barely even a person.

Again, I realize they're talking, but I still can't decipher what they're saying. The sound of rain and my heart beating are too loud, too predominant in my ears for me to make out any of their words. And yet, my sense of time is still off, because all too soon we're pulling into the parking lot of my apartment complex, which looks just as

normal as it did when we left it.

I should get out. I want to get out and run to my door. To slam it between us and get rid of any connection I have to these men. Even though the blood was cleaned from my face and hands, I swear I can still feel it, and I want to scrub at my skin until I'm sure it's gone.

But I can't do any of that, as I'm a marionette with cut strings and no way to fix them myself. At last I realize both of them are watching me, waiting, and their combined attention wakes some part of me that's been unconscious this whole time. The numbness departs a little, and my fingers twitch with the first sign of life I'm sure I've given in the last hour or so.

Not that it felt like an hour.

"Hey." Val reaches for me, curling his hand over my fingers. "You're okay, Noa. Everything's okay. We brought you home."

Everything is not okay. But I just tip my head and gaze at them without moving. Is this shock? I've never been in shock before, and even wondering about it is a distant, unimportant worry. Kieran sighs and I look at him as he gets out of the passenger seat. Seconds later, my door is open and the seatbelt is no longer across my chest.

"Come on, darling," he tells me, gently tugging me out of the car. My knees buckle when my feet hit the ground, so Kieran scoops me up into his arms, carrying me bridal style toward my apartment door while Val fishes my keys out of his pocket.

Along with my phone that I haven't seen in a few days. I want to fight, to squirm, to writhe away and demand that I walk myself into my apartment. But I can't find it in me to do more than open my mouth, though no sound comes out.

When I blink again, we're at the top of my stairs and Val places my keys on the

counter. Kieran doesn't hesitate, and carries me to my bedroom as Finn zooms down the hallway, doing his best impression of a fluffy bowling ball. It makes a detached smile twitch at my lips, and when I inhale the familiar smells of my apartment, it brings something back to life in me.

"I can walk," I murmur finally, just as Kieran pushes my bedroom door open all the way. With my arm around his shoulders, I grip his shirt and gaze up at him, still feeling strangely detached. "I can walk," I say again.

"I know you can," he replies, but he doesn't set me down until he can lower me to my knees on my bed.

God, I missed my bed.

My fingers find the comforter under me and I twist it in my hands, my heart starting to pick up speed in my chest. "Why?" I ask stupidly as Val pokes his head into the room. My question draws his interest, and he sits down beside me on the bed to rest his head affectionately on my shoulder.

"Because now you can't tell," he replies. "Now you're involved, too. No one will believe we made you do it. If you tell the police about any of this, they'll think you're our accomplice. After all, you were the only person not to die at the haunt. And you're the one whose prints are all over the hilt of the knife that no one will find as long as the cops aren't told."

I shudder at the blatant threat, but Val just reaches up to run his thumb over my lower lip. "Don't be upset," he tells me kindly. "One of us would've done it, anyway. He would've died, whether you were the one to stab him or not."

But I didn't kill him willingly, my brain screams. That truth is the only way I can get through this; the only way I can make any part of this make sense, so something might eventually be okay. "I didn't want to," I say, as if that was even a question.

“I know, princess.” Val leans towards me, and I stiffen. Part of me thinks I’ll jerk away from him, but I sit perfectly still as he kisses me sweetly, kindly, and warmly enough that I want to sob.

“You did nothing wrong.” Kieran’s voice is soft, and he wraps his arms around my shoulders to pull me back against him. “But this way, we know you can’t turn us in. Any of us. We needed a guarantee, Noa. We needed this to keep you alive.”

As if I’d chosen any of this at all. A spark of rage ignites in my chest, though a shiver that raises goosebumps on my arms snuffs it right back out. I’m so tired and cold. I just want to sleep and sleep and sleep.

“What will you do now?” I ask finally, when the quiet between us becomes too much. “Are you—Do you plan on staying here?” Two mornings ago, I would’ve welcomed them to stay. Even earlier today, I could’ve been convinced to let them hang out on my couch if they wanted to.

But not now.

Now, I want them gone so I can figure out what I’m going to do and how I’m supposed to move past this.

“We’re going to let you sleep,” Kieran says firmly. “We have a few things to take care of, anyway. But we’re not just leaving you forever, okay?” He speaks as if he needs to reassure me. Like them leaving me alone is the worst option.

I’m frankly not sure what the worst option is. I can barely form a string of coherent thoughts as I look between them, so I have no idea how to react to this. “Fine,” is the only reply I can come up with.

Not that my lack of enthusiasm seems to bother either of them. Kieran holds me against him while Val leans in to brush my lips with his again, and when he pulls

away Kieran pulls me closer to bury his face in my hair.

“You’ll be fine,” he promises. “You are fine, okay?”

“More than fine. You’re our perfect, feral little thing,” Val adds with his hand resting on my cheek.

Feral little thing suddenly feels like an insult and I don’t have the words to give them a reply. But they don’t seem to expect one. They both get to their feet, leaving me on my knees on the edge of my bed, and it’s Val that hesitates, looking worriedly back at me while Kieran heads to the door.

“Maybe we should...” He glances at Kieran, who eyes him with impatience as he sets my phone on the nightstand.

Kieran glances my way, surveying my face. But whatever he sees there makes him shake his head. “She doesn’t want us around right now,” he assures Val, who bites his lower lip. Gone are the monsters from the haunt and from the woods. They’re back to the two men I became infatuated with, terrified of, and intrigued by.

But now I can’t help but wonder which is the real version of them.

Are they Valentin and Kieran?

Or are they really just Ravage and Harrow ?

“Bye.” I don’t know where it comes from, but the word slips out from between my barely parted lips. It earns me an affectionate grin from Val, and even Kieran turns to study my face from the hall.

“We’ll be back, Noa,” Kieran says again. “You can’t get rid of us so easily.”

“Especially now,” Val agrees confidently. “There’s no getting rid of us ever again, Noa. Not when you’re connected to us permanently after tonight.” He flashes a grin my way as a shudder goes through me. Then I listen as the two of them walk through my apartment, down the stairs, and close the door behind them.

Finally, when I’m alone, I can’t hold myself up anymore. I fall onto my side and press my face into my pillow, muffling a scream against it as I try not to fall apart at the seams.