



# Fallen Starboy

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** When you sell your soul to the entertainment industry, buying back your freedom often comes with a high price.

Altered permanently by my first forbidden love affair, I channeled my heartache and became a foreign liaison for the most scandalous, risk-taking record label in town, where I learned to be a cutthroat, hardened businesswoman in the process. My whole life changed in a heartbeat when my newest contract brought me face-to-face with the sexy, unforgettable ghosts of my past.

Kim Seo-Jun, former lead singer of STARBOYZ, was a devilishly handsome rogue desired by women everywhere. He was also the man who'd raised the child I'd abandoned against my will. And we weren't exactly on speaking terms these days.

If hating me kept him safe, that was a burden I'd bear. But he wants to make me pay, and the games he's playing with my heart are dangerous in more ways than one. When he wasn't glaring daggers of ice in my direction or cutting me with his words, his whispered reminiscing, barely-there touches, and protective attitude all had me falling back into his bed, just like I swore I wouldn't do.

Then the label who cut him loose turns up on my doorstep, demanding he come back—or else. I was well-versed in their methods of persuasion, but I made the mistake of letting them win once before. Now, there was more than one heart at stake.

Sometimes, the mistakes we make follow us for a lifetime. But this time, I'm not running from mine.

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# Page 1

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ARISTA

People like me were never meant to have our cake and eat it, too. Especially not when that cake was a happily ever after with a fucking superstar idol, of all things. Kim fucking Seo-Jun, to be specific.

Our futures were vastly different in terms of potential. We were on opposite ends of the potential spectrum.

Or, in our case, the social class spectrum.

I clutched the bundled-up baby in the basket closer to my body and fought back the tears just a little longer. Whatever the future held, I knew this was the only choice I could make to keep her safe. To give her the best chance at a future as I could.

Jun had his whole life ahead of him. He didn't need me. And his company seemed determined to make sure I knew it. The money they threw at me to solve the 'problem', as they dubbed my situation, was no small number. It was enough to support myself for ten years, maybe more, without lifting a finger.

Their reasoning was solid, too.

He's worth twenty times that in his first two years. In five, imagine the life he could have.

A life where I didn't fit.

I could leave, sure, but they were determined to not leave behind any evidence of our indiscretion, and that included the one currently sleeping in my arms, unaware of anything going on around her.

Our child.

The one his record label tried to erase.

The only mark on his perfect record.

Of course, eliminating such a blemish wasn't as easy as washing a ketchup stain out of a shirt, or replacing a broken toy.

A child was forever. And once that child was born, there was no going back.

There would always be evidence of his imperfection out there in the world, sharing his DNA, one press leak away from ruining the image of their cash cow.

I thought I could just leave, that abandoning him without a word was the right thing to do. But after one too many nights spent sitting around the fire, staring into flames that didn't hold the answers I so desperately sought in their flickering shapes and colors, I realized I had been stupid.

I couldn't give her the life she deserved. I could never replace the life she would have had with him.

I could never love someone else like I loved Kim Seo-Jun. And I could never be the mother she deserved.

Sneaking away to have the baby in secret was hard.

I went through the whole thing with no support system since telling my family, or his, was out of the question.

When I was due to go into labor, a freak accident involving a car whose brakes were cut clean in half almost caused us both to die before we'd met.

And now, after staring into her face that reminded me so much of him, brushing my nose over her soft head, the faint red peach fuzz giving me hope that she'd gotten something good from me after all, after doing all the things a new mother should do with her baby, I was doing the unthinkable.

I had to let her go. Just like I had to let him go.

It was best for both of them.

The Label might be able to bury me and our plans of marriage, but it would be impossible to bury his child once he knew of her existence. Once he held her in his arms, I knew he'd do everything within his power to keep her safe. He had money, reach, power?—

And I had nothing but a broken dream, and my body weight in regrets.

“You'll be okay,” I whispered to the sleeping baby wrapped in a soft, pink blanket, tucked into a basket like some fucking period drama orphan, tiny hands fisted against her rosy cheeks as she slept peacefully. “He'll make sure of it.”

Your father will give you everything I couldn't even begin to hope of ever giving you.

This is for the best.

The only person getting hurt here was me, and that was okay.

I could handle that pain, could handle his hatred when he realized what I'd done.

I could even handle it if he made an announcement and denounced me for leaving her on his doorstep.

I could even handle it if he hated me for the rest of our lives.

What I couldn't handle, though, was the thought of our daughter not living a good life.

And aside from some memories and a smile that would haunt me for the rest of my life, there was nothing here for me now.

The agency blacklisted me in the industry thanks to my pregnancy indiscretion involving one of their artists. Had I just shacked up with the makeup artist and gotten pregnant, it wouldn't have been an issue. Now, I was a liability, and I could understand that.

I couldn't let her suffer in life because of me.

She deserved the best. And this was the only way she'd ever get it.

With a sob that tore my heart in two, I kissed her soft forehead, covered her up with the blanket, and laid her basket on the stoop. I pulled a letter I'd prepared out of my coat pocket and tucked it in beside her, already hating myself for what I was about to do.

But I couldn't let them have her.

Once Jun claimed her as his own, they wouldn't dare touch her.

Right?

This had to keep her safe.

It had to. I could suffer all the pain, as long as it was for her.

My hand shook as I reached for the doorbell I'd rang so many times before when I snuck into their dorms after curfew to hang out with Jun and the others.

The tone sounded hollow as I quickly snuck around the corner and hid behind a garbage bin, watching from just far enough away to make sure someone answered and took her in.

When the door opened, bathing her in the light from inside, the tears started to fall, even as I reassured myself I'd done the right thing. It was Minseo who answered, his face scrunched up in concern as he found the basket on the step and leaned down to pick it up.

I couldn't linger any longer. It would increase the risk of being discovered. But I had to know they accepted her. I had to see her off safely. I would accept the risk to myself, as long as I could have this last moment in time to comfort me for the rest of my life.

"Hey," a voice shouted from inside the dorms, "what's up, Minseo? Did the delivery order show up yet?"

I watched as Jun appeared in the doorway behind Minseo, who'd sat down on the steps now, his hands hovering on the handle of the basket. His eyes found his bandmate, and then the basket, and as he fell to his knees, I realized I hadn't stopped

to think about how this would hurt him.

Would he want her after all this time?

Or would the sins of the mother be a stain on her future with him? Would he be unable to look at her without thinking of me? Would he take that out on her?

“Is that . . . ?”

Minseo nodded, lifting her from the basket, the letter fluttering to the ground as he dislodged it. “Looks like a baby to me, bro.”

Jun stared at her for a moment, then knelt to pick up the letter I’d written for him. The only thing he’d need to know once I’d disappeared into the dark night, and from his life, forever.

Keep her safe. Love her every day. Give her everything I never could.

Let her be your new Forever Star.

I’m sorry.

The three lines were enough, but guilt had me adding the rest. I wanted him to be sure she was his, that this wasn’t a joke. I needed him to understand how important she was.

For a moment, the world stopped as his eyes scanned the page in his hands. Then, ever so slowly, he looked at that baby in his buddy’s arms, then scanned the area around their door, as if he’d see me if he looked hard enough.

“Arista?” When I didn’t reply, he shouted louder. “Arista! I know you’re out there.

Don't be a coward!"

The loud noise woke the baby, who immediately started to kick and fuss, drawing his attention. I felt the heaviness in my chest as my body responded to her by instinct, wanting to soothe her as only a mother could.

He'll be your mother and your father now. He'll make sure you're taken care of.

Jun would be a good dad. When he reached down and took her from Minseo's arms, it only reinforced the knowledge. He held her like a little doll made of porcelain, like she was a treasure and he was afraid to break her.

"She's in your hands now," I whispered to him, wiping away the last of my tears as they disappeared into the house, closing the door behind them, the basket abandoned on the porch, along with any hope I had of ever loving anyone again. "Be good to her, Jun."

And so began my new life as I prepared the story I'd tell my parents when I returned home, nursing a hole the size of the moon in my heart, and lacking the recommendation I'd hoped to gain from my time in the industry.

Time would heal all wounds. But the scars remained forever.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

Chapter

One

ARISTA

Sometimes, murder seemed a justifiable option in the heat of the moment.

Like right now, in this fucking meeting with the worst boss to grace the halls of kNight Records.

I forced a fake smile to my lips and swallowed thickly, hating the fabric of my expensive pantsuit even though I was the one who picked it out.

It was too rough on the inside. A suit this expensive should have been lined in silk or satin, maybe even high-thread count cotton.

But the inside of my secondhand straightjacket from hell felt like cheap fake wool: rough to the touch, too hot, and itchy.

And that didn't help the anxiety rolling through my body right now.

Danielle Steele stared down the table at her upper echelon, her eyes piercing each of our souls in turn as she moved from one end of the lineup, like a coach preparing to cut players right before the end of the season.

"I'm unhappy with this quarter's margins.

We're small, but to compete with the big dogs here in Nocturna Beach, we're going to need more.

"She turned to Richard, our acquisitions officer, and smiled in a way that felt more like a threat than a gesture of happiness.

"Rich tells me we have several new options for the roster, looking to sing with anyone who will have them."

I didn't like the way that sounded— anyone who will have them. Made them sound like a dangerous gamble, and likely blacklisted in other countries, possibly even our own. Of course, that was the type of client we specialized in.

kNight Records was part of a bigger agency—Nocturna Beach's kNight Rising Entertainment.

At its inception three years ago, Danielle Steele, the co-founder and forward-facing public image of the music side of things, made the bold claim that her company's purpose was to give those wrongfully left with no other option another chance at stardom.

She even fucking quoted the damn Statue Of Liberty inscription, with a twist— give me your misbehaved, your unhireable, your irredeemable clients, all yearning for the same dream—stardom. Fame. Infamy, in most cases.

She hadn't been kidding, either. Her first hire had been a movie star from Britain who'd been involved in several cheating scandals while married.

Turned out, it was the wife who'd been stepping out—and she'd been leaking the press fake rumors about his unfaithfulness to cover her own ass.

But that didn't stop her from using the allegations to demand half of his assets on the divorce table.

When his agent dropped him, Danielle sent one of ours in and snapped him up quick.

Her next two hires were twin girls from Singapore who were arrested for stabbing the man who raped them in their own home.

I couldn't blame them. Their talent agency, however, did. And when they went abroad looking for new opportunities, Ms. Steele lured them in with promises of a new life, and now they earned the company—and themselves—a steady six figures with all their appearances in movies and television shows.

She had a vision, and she made it work for her.

In the three years since, kNight Rising Entertainment had earned its reputation.

We now fielded more interest than we had time to hire on.

Talent was slipping through our hands, and unless we started taking on more clients, we'd never shatter that glass ceiling.

As a fellow driven career woman, I wanted nothing more than to shatter that fucker.

Okay, well, that, and forget.

“Are you with us, Miss Simmons?”

My attention jerked back to the present, and I blinked rapidly, trying to back-process whatever the fuck she'd said before I zoned out.

I shook my head when it became apparent I wouldn't be able to fake this one. "Ah, sorry, Ms. Steele, I was distracted."

Her pin-straight golden hair fell over her shoulders in waves as she shook her head. "Shame. You know, I had such high hopes for you once upon a time."

I let that one roll off me. Arguing with the boss when you were caught daydreaming in a quarterly meeting wasn't the way to climb the corporate ladder. "My apologies, Ms. Steele. I was just reviewing my talking points for the meeting to be more prepared."

"Talking points?" Her head tipped to the side as she regarded me coolly, almost mockingly. "And what talking points do you bring to the table today, Rizzo?"

I flipped through my brain for a split second, latching onto the first thing I could think of.

"We haven't recruited talent from abroad in a year now.

Most of our new clients last year came from this continent, and I think we're missing a huge market of opportunity.

With Asian media and celebrities rising in popularity on a global level, we would be stupid not to search the talent pool for someone specifically suited to our company's core practices. "

All corporate jargon for hire a foreign talent or three, you moron.

"I see." Those hawk-like eyes slowly slid from me to the man on my left: Richard. Sorry, buddy. Better you than me.

“Rich mentioned he planned to send an agent over today to sign our newest acquisition. They’re from the K-pop scene. You’re familiar with that market, correct?”

Asking me if I was familiar with the Korean pop scene was like asking a fish if it had ever swam before.

“Ah, yes, ma’am, I am.” After all, I had flown all the way to Korea seven years ago as a foreign exchange student my first year in college to intern with one of the biggest names in the entertainment scene.

I immersed myself in the atmosphere, even learning Korean in my free time to communicate with coworkers who didn’t speak English.

After all, they weren’t about to talk trash in a language I could understand.

So yeah, I was familiar with the market in question.

Ms. Steele must’ve seen something she liked in my eyes because she nodded to herself and flicked a finger at her assistant, Tobias.

He held out a folder containing a contract with a copy in English and another in Korean.

“The client expects us to bring the contract for negotiation and signing today before seven. They’ll be landing in an hour, and we’ve already prepared a driver to pick them up, take them to check in at their hotel, and then meet us in the executive boardrooms when they’re finished.

” Her fingers tapped against the upper portion of her crossed arms as she regarded me coolly.

“You can serve as our interim assistant and translator, perhaps smooth the way between the new client and our employees. We have a distinct lack of available translators for foreign stars, especially those from Asian communities, and as we search for an adequate one, perhaps you could fill the role?”

I wasn't an interpreter. Sure, I was fluent enough in the two main languages here to translate a conversation and facilitate contract negotiations. But I was salaried. I was a senior staff of the foreign liaisons department, for fuck's sake. There had to be a better option.

What I wanted to say was respectfully, go fuck yourself, I'm not Google Translate. What I said was—

“Sure, I can help with that. Will they need a translator on-site at all times, or just while interacting with staff?”

Way to go, Rizzo. Some conviction and spine you got there.

“They'll need an assistant on hand who speaks the language, until we can hire out their staff. I assume that's okay with you?”

The position of department head was opening up soon. I wanted that promotion. And I wasn't above earning brownie points by playing translator for some random teenage boy from Korea who needed someone to order delivery food and translate interview questions.

Or girl. Women in Korea were just as likely to fall to scandal in the cutthroat purity culture of that market. If a girl got caught kissing a boy, she could lose her spot in the group. That was just the surface. If she ended up pregnant . . .

No. No way in hell we were going down memory lane today.

I didn't have time to spiral, and I couldn't afford to show up to this meeting with a new client while shitfaced, which was what I'd end up being if I let the past creep into my present.

We all made mistakes in the past. Some people drank to forget. I drank to numb the pain.

My ghosts always caught up to me in the mirror the following day, though.

I wonder if she still has my eyes?

"I can manage it, yes."

"Great. You'll wait for the lawyer's call and head to the hotel when summoned.

And remember, Rizzo. This is a huge opportunity.

The company is riding on this new talent pool, and if we can get this client to work for us, it's just a toe in the door compared to the opportunities that will present themselves. "

She was right. Once the door was open, word of mouth traveled fast. Other models, actors, singers, and idols would learn about the differences in our country's entertainment world and scene, and those cast out with nowhere else to go would think of us.

It was genius. And who better to spearhead the move than kNight Rising Entertainment?

Two hours later, I held the contract in the folder to my chest as I exited the taxi and struggled not to be swept away by the fierce wind blowing on the tail end of what felt

like monsoon season.

We were on day eight of straight rain, and I'd be lucky if my road weren't flooded out tonight.

I could check into the executive suite at our agency's preferred hotel and spend the night in luxury if I couldn't make it, but at the end of the day, all I'd want was the comfort of my bed and the conveniently stashed bottle of Tanqueray in my nightstand.

Water droplets flung from my watch's face as I shook it out, checking to make sure traffic hadn't made me too late.

Oh, good. I'm only ten minutes behind schedule, which leaves me five minutes to prepare before the clients arrive.

I spotted our talent lawyer and a new-ish agent, Fernando, huddled around the executive lounge, a drink in each of their hands.

So much for not drinking on the job.

Men always seemed to think they could get away with anything because of the dicks swinging in their pants.

As a woman, I had to work twice as hard to be seen, recognized for my work and not my tits.

To see their blatant disregard for professionalism made me want to throttle them both in plain view of the receptionist they no doubt flirted with when they walked in, like they weren't both married with kids that were very likely not their own.

I had a hard time imagining any woman would crawl beneath Fernando for a fuck.

Not even for the salary he took home every year, which made my measly paychecks look like play money.

The lawyer, whatever the fuck his name was, spotted me first, pointing in my direction with a sneer and a little wink as he nudged Fernando on the shoulder.

I pretended not to notice the interaction and mocking attitude as I strolled over to meet up with them, glad the contract covered the low neckline I'd chosen to switch into after finally ridding myself of that damned itchy-ass jacket.

Thankfully, the rain hadn't made it cold today, so losing the blazer was not only reasonable, it was understandable.

I'd forgotten the blouse I put on this morning was missing a button, though, which meant my cleavage was on full display for anyone and everyone to ogle.

Hopefully, I wouldn't have to endure a teenager staring down my top while we were supposed to be talking business.

There was only so much humiliation I could take in one day for the sake of my job.

"Shall we?" I asked the men, regarding them with my professional smile as they eyed me up from top to bottom.

Fernando held an arm out and waved in the direction of the nearest conference room, and I steeled myself for a conversation between a teenager from another country and two slightly inebriated men, no doubt hours of translating legal jargon in my foreseeable future.

Yay, adulting.

I fucking hated this job sometimes.

## Page 3

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Chapter

Two

JUN

“You guys go on ahead. I’m just going to get Yejin settled in with Pujin and I’ll join you.”

Yang-Jin and Minseo stared at me like I’d grown another head sometime during our long ass flight from Seoul to wherever the hell we were now.

Some fucking end-of-the-line city in a country I never wanted to set foot in for the long term, forced here thanks to a stupid slip-up on a public outing and the inconsiderate scum of a K-netizen who decided my private life needed to be their front page payout.

In this case, the damage wasn’t just to me, but to my daughter.

We had to upend her whole life when the label claimed plausible deniability and pretended ignorance of the fact that I had been raising my daughter out of wedlock, alone and in secret, when they damn well knew from the moment she’d been conceived.

They had asses to cover. I couldn’t be mad at them. At least my bandmates had escaped the fallout in one piece.

And then there were these two goons, who'd decided to escort me to the new label as a last little fuck you to the old company.

They'd never agreed with me leaving the band, and they made that very clear, but they couldn't afford to abandon SeoulSOUL, and I wouldn't let them do that for me.

It was time I stood on my own two feet. I had a daughter to raise.

Pujin, my security guard, had been the only one on my personal payroll, and he'd been more than happy to accompany us to keep her safe while we set up a life here in?—

“What the fuck is this place called again?”

Minseo stared at me and rolled his eyes.

“It's called Nocturna Beach, I believe.” He glanced around at the variety of night-crawling patrons coming and going around us, his lip twitching slightly as a scantily-clad woman wagged her brows at him and skated by quickly, joining another woman in the same garb by the door.

“Distasteful. If this is how everyone in this country acts, I vote you find a new one.”

“Ah, come on, don't be such a stiff, Minnie,” I teased, eyes on the man holding my sleeping daughter over his shoulder. “Yang-Jin seems to be enjoying the view.”

Sure enough, the quiet Yang-Jin was eyeing the crowd with avid interest, his gaze missing nothing as he cataloged and absorbed everything around him for later analysis.

He wasn't staring at the gorgeous girls giving him doe eyes or the men who sized him

up as immediate competition.

No, he was searching for any and all exits and hiding spots.

His lips turned down as another girl brushed too close, giggling with her girlfriends.

They turned as they passed us, clearly eyeing up our asses.

I shot one a wink and blew another a kiss, playing into my international playboy image.

Pujin brought our keycards over and offered one to me with a smile. “I can take Miss Yejin up to her room, sir. The receptionist says your party is waiting in conference room B already.”

We might not be late, but they were early, and keeping them waiting would only look worse on our part.

Yejin hadn’t flown frequently before, so it was no shock to me she’d fallen asleep on the car ride from the airport to here, and I doubted she’d wake up before we all rejoined her in the room. “If she wakes up before we’re back, just order some pizza on my card. We can fend for ourselves.”

Pujin nodded and disappeared around the corner, heading for the fancy elevators that required a special keycard even to call down.

The company, kNight Records, had paid for the very best money could buy, and I couldn’t say it wasn’t a little relieving to know random fans couldn’t just wander up to the floor we were staying on now.

I might not be as widely known as other idols abroad, but STARBOYZ had fans on

every continent.

It was only a matter of time before the company back home announced my departure, and those fans came looking for me here.

“Come on, Jun,” Yang-Jin deadpanned, his eyes glued to mine as I swiveled around with a heavy heart. “Time will wait for no man. And neither will money.”

“Your English proverbs are getting better,” I teased, slapping him on the back as we neared the conference room.

I could hear two men arguing and an occasional female voice that joined in with noncommittal noises of agreement or denial whenever prodded.

“Hell, before the end of the year, you might not even know you weren’t born speaking it.”

My jokes were met with his classic stoic attitude as a big hand landed on my shoulder and two annoyed eyeballs peered into the back of my skull.

“Don’t try anything stupid tonight, please, Jun.”

The company had put us up in dorms when we first debuted in Korea, and the living arrangements were cramped and left no privacy for anyone. Hell, you couldn’t jerk one out without your neighboring bunkie knowing how many pumps it took you to blow a load.

I wanted a spacious, roomy home for Yejin this time around. Staying at Yang-Jin’s sister’s house was a good alternative, but it was never our home.

“Ah, you’re here,” a male voice said in English. “We’ve been expecting you.”

Minseo and Yang-Jin stopped dead in their tracks before me, and I ran into their strong, broad backs because I wasn't paying attention. Whatever had them frozen in place, I wouldn't find out from my vantage point back here.

So I slipped around them, holding out my hand for the gentleman in a suit to shake, as was the American custom.

“Hi there, I'm Kim Seo-Jun. These two here are Yang-Jin and Minseo. Don't mind their silence; they're harmless. I hope it's no trouble that they've tagged along.”

The first man took my hand and shook it, moving sideways to allow the second man to shake it as well.

“I'm Fernando, talent agent and negotiator with kNight Records.

And this is Mr. Danvers, our legal representative.

We don't have a permanent translator prepared for you yet, but in the interim, one of our girls from the foreign liaisons department has volunteered to stand in for as long as needed.”

I finally spotted the woman in the room and cleared my throat as she stepped forward to introduce herself, hoping to score some brownie points with the pretty thing before we even started.

She wore a pair of long, elegant pants, half of a sharp pantsuit I'd seen some of SeoulSOUL's female idols gushing over recently.

It was an expensive piece, hand stitched and designer, but instead of wearing the adjoining blazer, the woman wore a daring, low-cut white blouse, her cleavage on full display.

As visions of what she might look like out of those clothes raced around my head, my eyes lifted from her tits to her chin, and finally, to her eyes.

And my heart stopped.

Time stopped.

Hell, the whole world felt like it stopped rotating as I stared into the eyes of the woman whose very existence both haunted and enraged me in the same breath.

Seven years ago, she'd stolen my heart. She stole the rhythm of the beat inside it and made it her own. She stole the very air from my lungs and watched as I fought for air. And for her, I would have gladly suffocated a thousand times over just to have her next to me.

Until she walked away and changed everything.

For seven years, I'd hated and loved her. I never thought, of all the people, of all the cities and markets and agents in the world, that one day I'd come face to face with the woman who broke my heart and soul all those years ago.

And here she was, inches from me, her eyes swimming with recognition, sadness, and something else. Something I didn't want to see in the depths of that traitorous gaze.

Manipulative. That's all she is, Jun. She left you, you idiot. Don't you dare give her another second of your time. Just shake her hand and pretend you don't even know her.

Over the past seven years, I told myself that if I ever ran into her again, I'd tell her exactly how I felt and what I thought of her for leaving like she did, abandoning us like she had.

Disappearing without so much as a goodbye, leaving behind a part of herself as if it cost her nothing to abandon a child she'd carried for nine months without even giving her a name.

Yang-Jin jammed his finger into my spine, and it stunned me long enough to take her hand and pretend I wasn't seething with all sorts of emotions I didn't want to analyze right now. "Kim Seo-Jun."

"Right." Those long lashes I'd spent nights staring at fluttered as she stared at our shoes, hoping to avoid a confrontation. In Korea, it might be seen as a sign of respect for a higher-ranking acquaintance or elder. In her homeland, refusing to meet my gaze made her a coward.

Nothing more.

Minseo watched as Yang-Jin shoo-ed me aside and flashed her a smile that spoke volumes without a single word. "Yang-Jin, ma'am. Pleasure to meet you."

What a joke. He was playing with her, and we all knew it. She'd worked alongside us for a year and a half in Korea before her abrupt departure. And here he was, pretending he'd never met her.

Minseo didn't offer her his hand, just an angry stare that did nothing to hide his contempt for her. These poor men who worked alongside her probably thought we were mannerless assholes from the way we treated her, but if they cared, they weren't showing it.

We all sat opposite the KR employees, putting a table between us and both our past and future.

Beneath the table, I could feel Yang-Jin's leg bouncing, the same move that always

happened when dealing with something that made him anxious.

Minseo's hands steepled atop the table as he regarded the contract in front of him like he hadn't read it six times through using a translation app and a dictionary to make sure he understood every word.

I wanted no surprises this time, and they were determined to ensure this new contract worked for me and the company I'd sign with.

I didn't want a repeat of our old label.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

Predatory contracts, no-dating clauses, and rules on everything from where we were allowed to be seen to what we should wear when leaving the dorms. As teenagers eager for stardom and fame, we signed anything that seemed like it'd earn us money.

As an adult, I had a child to consider, and I was tired of hiding her from the world, being punished for doing the right thing and keeping her.

Miss Simmons, as they mockingly referred to her, stayed silent for most of the conversation, as my English, which they'd been led to believe was atrocious at best, was better than expected.

About halfway through the reading, Yang-Jin held his hand up and smiled that sharktooth grin, staring directly at the lawyer while he worked out how to word his question.

“Is this part of the contract . . . ah, I'm not sure of the word here.”

The lawyer turned his head to our ‘translator’ and frowned. “Isn't this what you're being paid for?” He gestured at us and snapped his finger, an act that enraged me on her behalf as much as I didn't want it to.

If anyone deserved to make her feel less than, it was the man she'd done dirty, not this random fuckwit who was only here to make a paycheck he no doubt didn't deserve.

She flushed red and put a hand over her chest, trying desperately to hide her tits from us when she stood and moved around the table, leaning over Yang-Jin's shoulder to

read the portion he pointed out on the contract.

She uttered a few words effortlessly in damn near perfect Korean, and I watched Yang-Jin's eyes widen in shock.

She had never been that fluent when she worked with us. Hell, she'd barely known the little necessary to do her job in the middle of a busy Korean metropolis. Now, she spoke it like she'd been born to it, which opened up an entirely new side of her to my analysis.

When had she bothered to learn conversational Korean? And why?

“He wants to know if section four, clause two thirteen, line five, is ‘mutually exclusive’ to the artist or agency, or if it’s a broad blanket term that covers everyone who signs or is involved in this contract.”

The lawyer looked down, as did the agent, and dragged their fingers over the words until they came to whatever Yang-Jin had wanted clarification on.

The lawyer pasted that fake, weak grin on his too-thin lips while the agent frowned.

“We can remove it if it doesn’t suit the client.

The language is made to protect all parties—”

“That’s not what he asked, and I know you speak the language I translated it into. Is this clause mutually exclusive, or is it a blanket for anyone who signs the contract?”

The lawyer cleared his throat and began to squirm, his eyes darting to the agent for help. “I, ah, I’ll have to defer to my colleague—”

“The hell you will. I don’t do the legal jargon-ese. That’s what you’re here for.”

I had to restrain myself from standing and thanking them for their time. As it was, this was one of the few agencies willing to take on a fallen, blacklisted star. And the others hadn’t been nearly as generous in their contract terms.

I couldn’t afford to offend.

But Arista seemed to have no such hangups. She crossed her arms and stared the two men down, her eyes narrowed to slits as she picked her words with all the calculating forethought of a professional with time in the industry and a knowledge of its inner workings.

“I advise you to put in a request for clarification on this line, as well as the following three, before you sign anything. I would also suggest asking for an explicit termination clause, allowing you to back out for mistreatment or dangerous working conditions.”

I read over the section Yang-Jin was now highlighting, realizing she’d essentially told him to have an entire section voided or reworded for my benefit.

It would have been a loophole most companies would not hesitate to use to help themselves if they needed to later on.

She could have left it there and not said a word, given us lies in Korean, and made the contract more beneficial for her own company, but she didn’t.

Maybe there was some good in her still after all.

Or maybe she was playing some sort of long game here.

I wouldn't put it past her to fuck me over again.

"We will take it under consideration," the lawyer tried again, but Arista's hand slammed on the table, her eyes narrowed to slits now.

"You will do more than that. The client has expressed an interest in changing or eliminating the clause altogether. You will confer with the execs and alter the terminology to suit the client, or you'll have no contract to sign."

I watched Minseo pale to my left. He was probably thinking the same thing I was. She was trying to keep me from signing.

Did her hatred for me run so deep? Was she really this unwilling to work with me that she'd make a stink over a single line or two of language in a contract that was worlds above better than any others we'd seen in our long run as leading kpop idols?

I opened my mouth, but Yang-Jin's hand slapped over it gently, keeping my words at bay for a moment longer.

His smile to the agent and lawyer was as fake as a thousand-dollar bill ripped from the dollar store notepads. "Shall we continue?"

We went through the rest of the contract with minimal issues, save one other spot at the end where they had tried to slip in a higher rate of consultation fee for services I didn't need, but Yang-Jin needed no translator for that.

After drawing lines through the sections he didn't like, he passed the annotated contract to the lawyer, asking if he'd like a copy, or if he'd taken his own notes.

"Keep a copy of the annotated requests for Jun," Arista muttered, placing her hand atop his with a gentleness I hadn't thought she still possessed.

“If they didn’t make their own annotations, I can have a copy made for them from his at the front desk, and they can take that with them on their way out. ”

If these corporate thugs had shown disrespect to her when we’d walked in, they were seething with hatred and displeasure for her presence now. With a few simple words, she made them look incompetent and foolish and emasculated them in front of a new client.

I had no doubt she’d likely get a glaring report of her actions today given to her boss.

And then the lawyer laughed and offered his hand to her, waiting as she stared at it like it might bite her. “You are quite the cutthroat liaison, Miss Simmons. You’d be invaluable in the legal department, you know that?”

“Not interested,” she muttered, taking his hand and offering him a crooked smile. “But you know that already. I’ve only turned down the offer six times so far. One would think you’ve developed selective memory for the topic.”

That had me nearly choking on air.

When we met her, she was an inexperienced, quiet, shy girl. Somewhere along the way, she’d become a sharp and dangerous adversary in the music industry.

She was not the same girl we used to know.

I wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

The lawyer and agent shook our hands again and made for the door, but Arista didn’t follow. Something in the way she stood far away from the table clearly emphasized her lack of desire to be here.

Minseo turned to her the second the door closed behind her colleagues, his hands balled into fists.

“You’ve got some nerve sitting at a table with us today.”

The words landed as intended, and she physically recoiled from the venom he laced them with. Her eyes flashed with hurt before she schooled her features and turned to him with a frown.

“Minseo, I know we four have a past, but for the sake of your employment and mine, I think it’s best if we don’t inform anyone else of that.

I’m here in a business capacity only. My job is to help Jun navigate anything he’ll need a translator for and assist in keeping cultural gaps and misunderstandings to a minimum as he adjusts to his new life as a talent with kNight Records.

The secondary purpose of my being here is to protect a business asset for our company.

If he slips up in public and commits an accidental faux pas that reflects negatively on our company, it’s my duty to find ways to mitigate the damage and prevent further issues. ”

“I thought people hired PR teams for that these days,” Yang-Jin spit at her, crossing his arms to mock her stance. “Not translators.”

“My job description is senior staff of foreign liaisons. Typically, I would be responsible for wining, dining, and negotiating relationships with potential foreign clientele. I am only here today in this capacity as a courtesy to my boss, Ms. Steele, who I am sure you’ll be meeting soon enough.

” Her eyes landed just to the right of my face, and I growled as she pointedly refused to meet my gaze.

“With any luck, she’ll have a replacement for me before the end of business tomorrow. ”

“Good,” Minseo spat, his eyes narrowing even further as we all moved into the deserted lobby, venom lacing his words. “The less time we spend with you, the better.”

He muttered under his breath in Korean, and I watched in real-time as the words not only registered in Arista’s ears, but stopped her in her tracks. She whirled on him, ears red, comprehension of his slur written in her eyes and every line of her face.

The eyes I’d spent many a day staring into in the form of our daughter flashed a dangerous shade I hadn’t seen in a long time.

“Jun might be a client with kNight Records, Minseo, but you are not. I am not afraid to kick your ass right here in the middle of a public hotel lobby for calling me that.”

His jaw dropped as she turned her attention away from him and pulled a card from the pocket of a jacket slung over her shoulder. I barely registered it all until she shook the little square at me and sighed.

“This is my business card. It has my personal number on it, as well as my email and my office address. Since you’re familiar with this country and the way it operates, and your English is passable, I expect you should be able to get yourself settled in on your own.

” Her eyes scanned the lobby, and she frowned, obviously not seeing what she was looking for.

“I have other things to attend to. If you have any questions before the lawyer calls back with an updated contract, you can call me.”

Minseo chuckled at her attempt at formality. “So you’re abandoning your new client in a strange hotel with no idea if he needs anything?”

“I’m not abandoning my client,” she snapped back, her hackles rising. “He hasn’t signed with us yet. As such, he is a prospective client?—”

“All the more reason for you to wine and dine him as you said,” Yang-Jin insisted, his grin wicked and cunning and very much unwanted in this situation.

“After all, your company is very interested in him. And you yourself said you’re the head of foreign liaisons.

Shouldn’t you act in the capacity of your main role, not just the temporary one you’re filling? ”

Her eyes narrowed to slits, and she glared daggers into his chest, but he didn’t seem to notice. “When did you get so cunning, Jinnie?”

He leaned back and crossed his arms, daring her to step up and make a move. “About the same time as you got fluent in Korean.”

“Checkmate,” I muttered, rolling my eyes for good measure. “I’m going up to the room. Unlike the rest of us here, I have a daughter to care for.”

I didn’t give two fucks about the little gasp of surprise she let out as I turned on my heel and marched off, already frustrated that I’d likely have to deal with her regularly, even if I didn’t need a translator.

After all, she worked for the company I planned to sign with. I couldn't avoid her forever, could I?

But I'd be damned if I let her get to me again. I'd done some bad things to keep our—no, my daughter safe, and I didn't plan to open her up to more pain by letting this woman back in our lives.

She walked away once before. I'd make the choice easy for her this time.

There was nothing to walk away from when you'd already ruined it.

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Chapter

Three

ARISTA

With Jun's departure, I was now left with the two men who hated me the most: Minseo, and Yang-Jin, his best friends. Also my sworn enemies, if the looks on their faces were any indication.

I heaved a sigh and turned my back on them. I was not about to pander to these two when they'd been nothing but pointedly hostile toward me since they realized who I was.

A hand fell on my shoulder just as I started to walk away, pinning me in place though here was the last place I wanted to be right now. I didn't move, but his voice was clear behind me, filled with anger and barely contained animosity.

"There's gotta be someone else," Minseo growled at me, "someone who's not?—"

"Who's not me?" I waited patiently for an answer I already had. Of course they were irritated with the situation. But at the end of the day, it didn't matter. They weren't staying, and I wouldn't have to deal with them once they got back on their plane and went home.

Just Jun, and?—

And our daughter.

“I’ll talk to the label and see if I can arrange a replacement.” I didn’t think they’d bite that hook, but it was worth the shot. “Anything else, Minnie?”

His growl reminded me of one of their debut albums, when Yang-Jin and Minseo had both growled and howled in the background during the chorus for effect. When they performed it on the stage, they barked, sending the crowd reeling.

Their presence off-stage was just as intimidating.

Unless, of course, you knew them and their real selves. Which I did.

“You can drop the bad guy act, Minseo. I know better.” My eyes cut to the left, catching his sneer before he managed to wipe it off his lips. “How long are the two of you here?”

“Til tomorrow,” Minseo said, just as Yang-Jin muttered “through the weekend.”

I quirked a brow. “Having a misunderstanding?”

Their faces mirrored each other as they went into defensive mode, hiding their lies under silence. That was fine; they could play this game with each other. I had big girl shit to do.

Like my normal job. The one that just so conveniently got me as far away as possible from my ex, and the daughter I abandoned.

“Sorry, boys, I’d love to stay and chat, but I have important shit to do, so if you don’t mind—” I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone, swiping the screen over to search through my contacts list. “I’ll be going.”

“Sure, go ahead,” Minseo erupted, rage etched into every line of his body. “Walk away again. You’re good at that, aren’t you?”

Like a dagger straight in my heart, he wounded me with no concern for my emotions. It didn’t matter if he didn’t know the truth, he thought he did. And the truth he knew wasn’t the right one, but it was the only one, and I wasn’t fond of the idea of shattering his delusions.

If they hated me, it made it all easier. There wasn’t room between hatred and resentment for me to catch feelings or get attached.

“Yeah, sure, I’m good at that,” I muttered, shaking his hand off my shoulder. “So let me do what I do best.”

I marched off before either of them could say another word.

The next two days passed in relative silence.

On day three, however, I got a call from my boss, inviting me to join her for an impromptu meeting with the department head.

Like any good employee vying for a promotion, I didn’t bat an eyelash before marching my ass into that conference room ten minutes early, ready for anything.

Okay, so anything was an exaggeration, as it turned out. I wasn’t prepared to see the other person in the room.

Jun.

His eyes found me the second I walked in, then cut away, staring pointedly out the window at nothing.

My boss, whose job was about to be open once he worked out his remaining days to retirement, sat in the chair at the head of the table, his lips pursed as he watched the client—or prospective client.

I still hadn't heard whether or not he'd signed the altered contract.

As a matter of fact, I'd thrown myself into other jobs over the weekend in the hopes I could forget all about the awkward reuniting with my ex in the hotel conference room.

The other person in the room was Ms. Steele herself, holding what looked like one of our run-of-the-mill contracts.

But why was she here? The head of the agency rarely got involved, and certainly not with things as mundane as a contract negotiation.

She held out a hand and motioned for me to take a seat next to Jun. I wasn't about to disobey, but the way his whole body tensed as I lowered myself into the chair to his left didn't go unnoticed.

I held my breath, waiting to see what this meeting was all about. If Jun was here, then it wasn't about a promotion.

"I hear you're gunning to take Ryan's seat when he goes into retirement, Rizzo. That true?"

I dared to glance in Ms. Steele's direction. "That's correct, yes."

Her brow quirked in shock, perhaps at my candor, or perhaps the balls it took to outright claim your ambitions, even in today's career world. "And you'd do anything to secure that position, I assume?"

That was the million-dollar question. I could go any direction with the answer, but from one woman to another, I didn't think she was looking for the standard answers that men in my position would give. I leaned into the female stereotype and opted for funny.

"Well, I draw the line at sleeping with you, Ms. Steele. You're attractive, but unfortunately, not my type."

The answering smile on her face, accompanied by the choking sounds from the men in the room, told me I'd picked right.

"You're cocky, sassy, and confident. I like that about you, Rizzo." She tapped those expensively manicured nails on the table, then stood, marching over to the window where she could look down on the rest of the city like a queen did her subjects. "So I'm going to make you the offer of a lifetime."

The chair creaked a bit as I leaned back in it, crossing my arms. "I'm listening."

"Our newest addition to the agency, Mr. Kim Seo-Jun, needs a temporary all-rounder. You know the ins and outs of operation at the management level, according to your original resume you submitted to us when you were hired, isn't that correct?"

A lump the size of Texas appeared in my throat. "It is."

She turned her back to the window, glancing between me and Jun. "And you, Mr. Kim, don't have a current manager, agent, or assistant, nor do you like the candidates I've presented to you."

He nodded, his eyes guarded, hands in his lap, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.

"I think Rizzo here could fill those roles perfectly and aid you in the transition from

foreign idol to a branded talent, at least until you've found a suitable candidate."

Now, it was my turn to fidget. "Ma'am, all due respect?—"

Ms. Steele held her hand up, effectively cutting me off. "I am aware there is some history between you two. As a matter of fact, that's part of the reason I think you're perfectly suited to this job."

Jun and I exchanged a look of pure horror. How could she know ? —

"After all, you interned with his debut band. You know his habits, his likes and dislikes, his strengths and weaknesses, the way daily life as an idol operates. Plus, you'll be able to weed out prospective staff applicants and find ones that suit his personality and work style."

The tension dissipated from my body. She didn't know we—that Jun and I—about ?  
—

"All I'm asking for is a couple of months. Do the job well, and the position you've got your eye on as head of foreign liaison is yours." She examined her nail bed with disinterest. "Unless you think you're unsuited for the job for some reason."

"I'll do it," I whispered, already hating that I was so desperate for that position that I would willingly walk into a hell of my own creation, sit down in the sand pit, and build a fucking castle. "When do I start?"

Ms. Steele's smile spread across her face in a manner reminiscent of a crocodile preparing to eat something half his size.

"Today." She tossed me a key on a stretchy band, nodding sagely.

“I’ve sent you the address of his new temporary residence.

The estate has been cleaned and outfitted to suit your daily needs.

You will temporarily reside in the main house, and you will need to be available at all times for any of his needs. ”

Now it was Jun’s turn to grin wickedly. “All my needs? Surely you don’t expect her to handle the mundane things.”

“As your interim head of staff, she will see to the task of screening and vetting applicants for the positions you need filled. I was informed you brought your own head of security, but nothing more.”

“Correct.”

“Then I’ll have the agency’s people send him the proper paperwork to be put on the payroll.”

With that, she marched out the door, my boss hot on her heels, leaving Jun and I alone in the room.

Suddenly, the air was thicker than chowder that had gone cold. I couldn’t breathe, for fear that I might choke on my own tongue, or the words lurking on the tip of it.

Jun slammed a fist down on the desk, swearing in both English and Japanese, his native language. I only knew what he’d said because he’d used it differently when things weren’t so volatile between us.

“I can’t believe I’m stuck with my?—”

His eyes were wild and pupils blown wide as he turned on me, all the animosity that'd built over the last seven or so years coming out in full force.

I knew it was inevitable, but here wasn't the place to do it.

These walls had ears, and if the agency got wind of our real relationship from seven years ago?—

Well, I could kiss that promotion goodbye. And quite possibly my career.

I slammed my hand over his mouth and shoved him against the wall, forcing him to stand still and pay attention to me. He growled like an animal as I leaned in and whispered in his ear.

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“You can vent your frustrations on me all you want, but not here. These walls are thin, and gossip spreads. Do you really want the whole world to know your secrets when you just freshly joined the company?”

He glared at me over the top of my hand, and I squealed when he nipped the sensitive skin of my palm with his teeth, forcing me to let him go.

“What happens now?” he spat, dusting imaginary lint off his shirt.

I held up the key and wagged it in front of his face. “Now, we get you settled in your new home.” I swallowed thickly as I imagined living so close, yet so far away, from my ex. “Then, we sit down and figure out what staff you need.”

“That’s it?” His eyes narrowed, but he wasn’t fighting me anymore, so at least there was that.

I nodded slowly, watching him for any sign of another outburst. “That’s where we start.

There’s more to come later, but for now, we’ll focus on getting you staff you can trust and work with.

” A dark cloud hung over my next words, one that threatened to suffocate us both with the implied meanings.

“You can work out things like schedules and appearances with your permanent manager. I won’t be around forever, so it makes sense to hold off on that until you’re

with your permanent staff. ”

“Right,” he mumbled, eyes narrowed nearly to slits now. “Wouldn’t want you to stick around for the long haul. We all know how fast you run away from commitment when given the option.”

Like knives in my back, the words opened wounds I’d tried desperately to cover up over the years. “Listen, since we’re going to be working with each other for a little while, why don’t you and I call a truce?”

I held out a hand I didn’t really expect him to take.

He had every reason in the world to want me as far away from him as possible, but since things were what they were, we didn’t really have much of a choice.

Neither of us could afford to rock the boat.

He was new talent, just getting a foothold in the agency, and I was vying for a promotion.

For either one of us to cause problems, it would mean the dismissal of our goals.

He leaned forward and gripped my hand in his, animosity still roiling in the depths of his eyes.

“Let’s get a few things straight here.” I tried to pull away, but he refused to let me, his grip like iron around my tiny hand.

“You’re the last person I want to work with ever.

It makes me sick to even look at you when I think about?—”

“How about a few ground rules, then?” I gripped him back, refusing to let him think he’d won.

I’d played the hardened bitch all this time, the least I could do was keep up the image.

“We don’t talk about the past. We stay out of each others’ way.

If we need to meet, I’ll let you know. And in the meantime, I’ll devote all the time I have to finding a replacement for my position.

” I blinked away the pain building in my chest, refusing to let the tightness there win.  
“Sound good?”

He pumped my hand once, then dropped it, the feeling returning to the tips of my fingers once released. The renewed blood flow was like pins and needles, and I hissed as I flexed them, willing the pain to stop.

I took his nod as acquiescence.

“I’ll contact HR and have some temp staff sent over to the hotel to collect your things. Your head of security can bring your—your?—”

“My daughter?”

I bit my lip and nodded. Why the hell was it so hard to say? “Right. Your daughter. Send him the address?—”

“I need the address to send it to him.”

I held out my hand, and the fucker had the audacity to stand there and stare at it like it was a poisonous viper, ready to strike.

“Hand me your phone,” I huffed, already feeling like the room was closing in on me from so much prolonged contact with the last man on the earth who wanted to be near me.

“Like hell,” he spat, tucking the damn thing behind his back. “Hand yours over.”

I didn’t worry that he’d find anything inappropriate on it. But at the last minute, I realized he’d need the lock code, and as I opened my mouth to ask for it back, he swiped his finger across the screen in a familiar pattern, chuckling to himself when the screen showed him my home page.

“How did you . . .”

There was an innocent, almost playful lilt to his voice as he smirked, staring down at the contacts page on the screen. “You never change your passcodes. You always forget them when you change them. It’s still the same?—”

Still the same as when we were together.

A light blush crept up his throat as he cut himself off and quickly entered his information, almost throwing it back at me in his haste to cover up the fact that he knew me so well.

I stared down at the new contact he’d saved himself as, and chuckled.

Your Worst Nightmare.

How fitting.

“Shall we, sir?” I asked politely, gritting my teeth as I extended a hand toward the door. “I’ve got a company car ready downstairs to transport us to your new home.”

As if he'd done this a hundred times, Jun stuck his nose in the air and strode past me like I wasn't even there, heading confidently in the wrong direction.

I couldn't stifle the giggle that slipped unbidden from my lips.

The glare he pinned me with didn't kill the sound, either.

"Car's this way," I said, pointing in the opposite direction. "Unless you're planning to exit out the back and walk around the building to get there."

"Ladies first," he snarled, mimicking my hand motion.

I didn't bother to dignify his mockery with an answer.

This was going to be torture.

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Chapter

Four

JUN

I hated everything about this arrangement.

Hated that I was stuck with Arista as my assistant.

Hated that I didn't know where anything was in this town.

Hated that the guys had already been called back to Korea for an impromptu meeting with the label.

Hated that I had to share a house with my mortal enemy. Hated that she'd be so close to Yejin?—

Fuck. I had to explain the situation to Yejin.

She'd never seen the idol side of my life in person. All she knew was her daddy was a star, and sometimes she saw me on the tv, dancing and singing on a stage in front of thousands of people. She'd never been subjected to the lifestyle of a celebrity, since she'd grown up in secrecy.

Now, though, she'd be facing it head-on, with no warning. I needed to explain the changes to her before they overwhelmed her.

The company car Arista spoke of felt cramped, with just the two of us occupying the interior. I tried desperately to ignore her presence, but it was quickly proving impossible.

Her scent filled the air, forced its way into my nostrils, teasing my brain with the slight familiarity.

She still wore the perfume brand I'd bought her as a birthday gift all those years ago.

Her hair, once pin-straight in an effort to fit in, was tied back in a severe ponytail, wisps of her bangs hanging in the front to accentuate the shape of her face.

I still noticed the way she chewed her bottom lip when traffic got heavy on the freeway.

She still gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white when she was fighting the urge to yell at idiots who cut her off or swerved too close.

I hated it all.

Hated the way it reminded me of better times. Hated how it made me want to turn back the hands of time and make her stay. Or go with her. Hated how weak I felt, especially as the urge to touch her rose inside me.

I hated her for making me forget I was supposed to hate her still.

The silence was deafening. I had to say something, anything, or I was going to go crazy. Even if it was just arguing with her, it would be better than the stony lack of sound echoing in my ears.

“You stop listening to music in the car or something? Sheesh, adulthood really

sucked the fun out of you.”

Her hand darted out and switched the radio on, her eyes glued to the road as she fiddled with the controls by memory until she found what she was looking for.

“The high today is a stifling ninety-five, folks, so make sure you’re staying hydrated and staying cool out there.

Next up on our rotation is a local band from here in Nocturna Beach, Daytime Darkness.

Their new hit single, Follower, is climbing the charts fast, and critics are raving. But I’ll let you decide for yourself.”

The band was good, their song even better. I found myself tapping my toes to the beat, in time to the way Arista’s fingers tapped the wheel as well. When the last chords echoed in the cab of the car, she smiled wistfully and turned the volume down a hair.

“What do you think?” she asked slowly, absently, her eyes still forward.

“It’s music.” My eyes trailed to the window on my right, everything passing us in a blur as we merged onto an exit ramp. “They’ve got potential if they keep putting out bangers like that.”

“They’re a new talent with kNight Records. Signed last year. One of the members writes all their songs. She used to submit lyrics and songs to our label as an anonymous lyricist. We hired her on and found out she had a talent for singing, too.”

“Good for you,” I snapped, not wanting to hear about all her success stories. “Did you seal the deal with them too?”

She shrugged, not picking up on my emotions. “I recruited the bassist from Spain, and the drummer from Sweden. Both very nice fellows, too. Still don’t speak a lick of English, though, so they have a permanent translator on their team.”

“You didn’t volunteer to translate for them, too?” The worn leather of the armrest had a hairline crack down the center, and I picked at the fissure absently, needing to do something with my fingers. “Shocker.”

“I don’t volunteer to translate for just anyone.”

The urge to roll my eyes was strong. “Right. Just ex-boyfriends.”

There it was.

Her grip tightened so much on the wheel that I could hear the leather cracking under her fingers. “I was given the job, I didn’t volunteer for it. And had I known who I’d be working with, I likely would have run in the other direction.”

Wow.

Turned out she hadn’t changed a bit. She was still running away from me, even now.

Not that I wanted her to stay.

I didn’t want her. She only brought pain. And pain and disappointment were the last things I needed right now in my life. I opened my mouth to say so, but what came out instead was?—

“I told her you were dead.”

Arista nearly rear-ended the car in front of her at the red light. My neck ached as my

head snapped forward and then back, the brakes clearly working in this damn vehicle.

She threw it in park in the center of our turning lane and twisted in her seat, looking at me—no, looking through me, as if she'd seen a ghost.

“Dead?” she said slowly, softly, like there was no fight in her anymore. “You told our daughter I was dead?”

“Seemed like the best option at the time.”

And I didn't plan to correct that misconception.

Not now, not ever.

To me, the woman I'd planned to give up everything for, she was dead, in the truest sense of the word. She killed everything I ever felt for her when she disappeared, had my child, and then abandoned us both in Korea when she ran home with her tail between her legs.

For a few years, I hired a PI to watch her, keep tabs on her. I thought maybe she'd eventually see the error of her ways and reach out. I thought she might change her mind.

After the third year with no contact and no hint of change, I told him to drop the case and swore to myself that my memories of us were dead and buried.

That my feelings were dead, too. I put it all in a little box in the back of my memory and locked it away, refusing to entertain my own delusions anymore.

But now . . .

Now, I wasn't so sure I'd done a good enough job at locking all that away.

She shook her head and tried desperately to ignore me until we pulled up in front of a house bigger than anything I'd ever lived in when I was under my old label.

“What the hell is this place?”

The smug smile on her lips was a flashback to the past that I definitely did not need right now. “This is your new home,” she said sweetly, as if I were an idiot for not realizing it. “What did you expect?”

“Do all kNight talent acquisitions get houses this nice?” I whispered in awe, remembering the dorms we'd been smashed into when we signed as debut artists. “Or is the company showing off to impress their new client?”

“You should see the place they gave GirlCore. Fifteen bedrooms, and there's only two of them.”

I shook my head and followed behind her as she led the way up the steps to the huge, modern-architectural dream home the company had seen fit to put me up in.

There was so much to take in.

Granite flagstones led up to the porch of the fancy A-frame, outfitted with a few plants and a single motion-activated light, just enough to give the sense that someone lived there and nothing more.

The yard was freshly mowed, manicured pristinely, every tree trimmed and the bushes uniform and shaped in a neat little row.

A privacy fence lined the property, which made me feel a little better about the whole

thing, for Yejin's sake.

And then she opened the door and stepped inside, and my jaw dropped.

The interior was worlds fancier than the exterior.

Leather seating in the living room area, fancy artistry on the walls, and avant-garde statues on stands and shelves made of metal and glass.

The carpet was white, the walls were white, and the backyard was visible through a floor-to-ceiling wall of glass windows, which let in so much natural light it was insane.

Someone had been by recently, it looked like, because there was a fresh pot of coffee sitting on a warmer in the kitchen. I could smell it from the foyer.

But though my nose was in the kitchen, my eyes were on the open floor plan and the half-moon staircase leading to the second floor.

I could see several doors from my vantage point, lined up on a half-hallway, half balcony design, and below the second floor was a set of double doors leading to a completely walled-off mystery room.

My curiosity was piqued.

Arista must've noticed, because she heaved a sigh and slipped her shoes off by the door, padding around the entryway barefoot. The second her toes hit the carpeted flooring, a smile crept over her face, and she hummed softly, breaking the silence.

"I'm going to grab a cup of joe. You go ahead and explore, if you'd like." She waved her hand in my direction as a dismissal. "None of the rooms should be locked

currently, but each bedroom has the capability to be locked, for personal privacy needs.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, already halfway up the stairs.

The rooms were easy enough to pick out. Someone had already gone through the task of picking out basic furniture.

The smallest room was outfitted with an obstacle course bed frame that Yejin would just adore, along with cute little rainbow cubbies and a window seat that would let her soak up the sunshine even on cold and rainy days.

The floor was hardwood, but had a huge area rug in the center, filled with a fantasy scene that looked like it’d been plucked right out of a kid’s novel.

The room directly across the hall from it was slightly bigger, with very sparse decorating.

A neutral toned futon couch sat along one wall, a desk outfitted with a printer, a computer, and some other odds and ends to the left, and a chest of drawers on the right.

The walls were empty, and there wasn’t much of a personal touch to the place.

I assumed this would be either a spare room after Arista was gone, or an office space for myself, should I want one.

Hell, maybe I could give it to Pujin, since he pretty much stayed with me on a permanent basis for Yejin’s safety.

But where was her bed? Or was she planning to post up on the futon? That could get

uncomfortable fast.

What does it matter? Why should I care about her comfort?

I shook the unwarranted and undeserved compassion for her situation from my mind and closed the door, heading for the third.

The door beside her room was a bathroom, and it was huge—bigger than her room, actually.

It had a separate door leading to what I could only assume was the master bedroom, with a lock that was very much engaged at the moment.

The tub was huge, the vanity had two sinks, even the cabinet was outfitted with more plush towels and robes than one man could ever need.

Was there only one bathroom in this whole house?

That could get annoying.

I pushed the only complaint from my mind, opened the second floor's last door, and walked right into a room reminiscent of the presidential suite at a high-end hotel.

The bed was on a riser in the center of the room, the carpet wall-to-wall shag in a deep shade of slate grey.

There was no dresser in here, but a built-in sliding door revealed a walk-in closet as big as my first shared room at the dorms back in Korea.

My jaw dropped as I dragged my fingers over the drawers built into one wall, display cases for ties and jewelry just waiting to be filled.

Empty poles for hangers sat waiting for a wardrobe fit for a king.

A full-length mirror adorned one wall, and I imagined what it would be like to stand in front of it and try on outfits, preparing to make a public appearance in style.

And then a voice behind me caused me to jump so high I nearly smacked my head off a pole I'd bent down under.

“Not what you're used to, is it?”

I spun on a dime and nearly came nose to nose with her, standing there with her hands behind her back, a shit-eating, proud grin on her lips.

For a second, I didn't breathe. I didn't blink; I couldn't even think past how many nights did I dream of what I'd say if I ever got her alone again ? —

“Appa?”

## Page 8

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Chapter

Five

ARISTA

“She speaks Korean because of Minseo and I, and English because she’s been learning with Yang-Jin.”

I sat at the table with Jun across from me, his eyes anywhere but on me.

Currently, he was watching our—no, his daughter—in the backyard with their head of security, Pujin.

A stout man with a stubborn personality, he was immediately apologetic to Jun when he thought he’d messed up by allowing Yejin free rein of the house without consulting him first.

Yejin. Her name was Kim Yejin.

“Don’t think I’m telling you because I want you to care or something.

Obviously, you’re incapable of that, or you wouldn’t have abandoned her.

” His hands balled into fists on the top of the table as he spoke, his words harsh and intended to cut deep.

“Just stay away from her as much as possible, and nobody gets hurt.”

Except for me. But I deserved every ounce of that pain.

“Right,” I agreed, hating that I couldn’t just open my mouth and tell him the truth.

It’s not like he’d even believe me. I made damn sure to give him as little information as possible in my own favor.

I didn’t want him trying to follow me or hunt me down.

If the label thought I hadn’t made a clean cut, both my life, and theirs, would have been in danger.

The label tried to kill me once before. Running for my life, and leaving hers in his hands, felt like the safest option at the time. He had the kind of money that could ensure no harm came to her. I didn’t.

Getting close to her, to him, to them both, would do nothing good for any of us.

I didn’t harbor any delusions that Jun would ever forgive me.

“She gets attached to people easily, and I don’t want her getting attached to someone else who will only leave her in the end.”

Drip, drip, drip. The metaphorical sound of my blood hitting the floor as I bled out emotionally from his bladed words.

“I understand,” I said slowly, focusing only on keeping my breathing even and under control. “You’ll probably want to interview daycares and nannies first, then, so that you will have someone reliable and trustworthy to watch her when you have to work

away from her.”

“Mmm,” he muttered, staring off into space, clearly lost in his thoughts. “Do you know anyone?”

“Yeah, let me just pull out my reference sheet of all the childcare I’ve hired in the last seven years,” I snapped, hating the bitterness that had built up in me when I wasn’t looking. “No, Jun, I don’t.”

Jun’s eyes shot up and locked on mine, shock filling their depths as neither of us spoke.

Clearly this job would be harder than I thought.

“But I know where to start.”

Two hours later, Jun was arranging interviews with as-needed childcare professionals, Yejin sitting patiently at the table while he bounced between his cellphone and washing fruit he planned to slice for a snack for her.

I watched from the balcony of the second floor as I poured through a list of assistants the company had hired as temps for other clients.

As long as I got him someone who could get him through this transition period, I didn’t need to find a permanent person.

He could keep the temp, or find someone else.

I just had to fill the gaps, so I didn’t have to do it anymore.

“Now, listen, Yejin. I want you to practice your English as much as you can while

we're here, okay? You'll need to use it in school."

"Okay, daddy," she said smoothly in response, switching easily between her two primary languages. Hell, it'd taken me years to pick up a second language as an almost adult, and here she was at seven, a veritable prodigy already.

Of course she was. Look at the people she grew up around.

I couldn't stifle the tears that threatened to fall the second she walked in from the outside and fell all over Jun, seeking his approval, eager to tell him about all the cool things she liked about their new house.

He'd pulled her into his lap and immediately indulged her, listening intently like the good dad he was.

A stray tear fell on the screen of my tablet as I sighed and blinked the rest of them back, refusing to let myself imagine what it would have been like had I stayed, had we just left and embarked as parents on our own, together.

There was no point imagining something that I couldn't undo.

Time travel wasn't real, and dreams didn't fill the gas tank.

She's not yours anymore, I told myself, but see, when you've never seen the thing you're giving up, it's infinitely easier to walk away from it.

When you don't know what someone sounds like, what kind of person they are, what they'll look like and how they smile, you can't know what you're going to miss.

But here I was, confronted with her in reality.

I could see her smile, hear her perfect little laugh, and bask in the joy of her childhood.

She had red hair, just like me, but it was a tad darker in spots, almost like when she turned her head a certain way, parts of her father bled out and showed their face.

“Daddy, who’s the nice lady you were talking to earlier?” Yejin kicked her feet back and forth as she waited patiently, processing everything around her with a quickness I envied.

I heard the metal clang of the knife hitting the inside of the sink, and my eyes found him standing stock-still in the kitchen, his back to his daughter, hands still poised to slice into the apple he’d just washed. For a long time, I held my breath, wondering what he’d say to her.

Would he tell her the truth? Or would he keep up the lie, for her sake?

Did I even want her to know about me?

Most of the voice in my head was in agreement with Jun: she shouldn’t know. But a small part of me yearned to know my daughter, to be her mother, even though I didn’t deserve it.

“Ahem,” I cleared my throat pointedly, peering down from the railing as Jun turned around. “I have some potential assistants lined up to interview with you tomorrow, if you’re available.”

His eyes were stony and indifferent as he shrugged and picked the knife back up. “Just pick one. You know what I like.”

I did, indeed.

“Of course. I’ll get right on it.”

I slipped away before he could say anything in return, already skimming the prospective list to narrow it down. Jun had specific tastes, and I wanted things to be as smooth as possible for him. The easier the transition, the easier it would be to slip away.

When I’d gone through the list several times, I still had three names on the list that were prospective candidates based on their performance, strengths, experience, and age.

Dylan, Connor, Merchand, and Vincent. All fine, upstanding . . . men.

Next up was the stylist. Each client got to pick their own, and it was an easy choice. Jun preferred female stylists because, in his opinion, male stylists tried to push him into looks that didn’t suit his style. Women were more easily bullied into giving him his way.

So of course I picked out a pretty dominant, stubborn male stylist who’d just recently stopped working with another client of ours because of irreconcilable differences.

The differences being that he didn’t like anyone questioning his choices in design.

Why was I intentionally causing Jun problems?

Maybe a part of me was still hurting from his cruel, cold words.

Maybe a part of me wanted to hurt him back.

I went through the list over the course of the day, narrowing down candidates for each position until I’d lined up all his interviews for the next few days.

He'd be squeezing some of them between meetings with the label and signed appearances and sound checks, but that wasn't my problem.

The busier he was, the less time I'd have to spend with him.

The less chance of him and I running into each other.

The less chance there was to catch those stubborn feelings that never had fully faded.

I must've passed out at my desk, because when I came to, it was to the sound of insistent knocking at my door, soft but with intent.

Shaking the grogginess from my head, I rose from the chair, hands resting on the back of the wooden door as I opened it a crack to find not Jun, not his daughter, but Pujin, his head of security.

"I'm sorry, miss, I didn't mean to disturb," he said slowly, bowing at the waist. "But Mr. Kim said I needed to ask you about getting a spare key for myself for the premises and such."

"Mmm, yes, right," I mumbled, swiping tiredly at my eyes. "Have a seat at the desk and I'll grab the paperwork the company sent over for you to sign, as well."

"Killing two birds with one stone," he muttered, his huge frame taking up a fair bit of my desk chair. Hell, if the man were any bigger, he'd need a second chair to hold him. And he was all muscle, too. A tank.

A good choice for head of security. He'd be a hell of a deterrent to crazed fans, paparazzi, and overeager media and press.

"So, Pujin, was it?" I asked as I loaded up the contract he'd already discussed with

the company's lawyers on my tablet. "How long have you been with Mr. Kim?"

"He hired me on when Yejin was one," the burly man answered, his eyes skimming the screen I handed him. "I've been responsible for their safety ever since then, though my priority has always been Miss Kim."

"Mmm. Good. Then he trusts you immensely."

"I suppose so." His eyes lifted from the screen momentarily. "Forgive me for speaking out if I shouldn't, but I sense you and Mr. Kim are familiar with each other."

I wasn't sure how to take that. "I interned with his debut band when he signed with SeoulSOUL eight or nine years ago." The safest answer, and one that didn't give anything away. "I had no idea the company here was interested in him, though, so his joining our label was a shock to me."

Pujin handed me the tablet, then smiled softly, as if he knew more than he was letting on. "You've come a long way from that internship, I see."

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“Worked damn hard to get where I am.” Spite, anger, and self-hatred were great motivators. “It’s no walk in the park, but I like my job.”

“I am glad we can both be happy in the choices we’ve made, career-wise.”

I reached into my bag as he made small talk, grabbing the envelope that contained his key to the main house, a paper with the passcodes for the security system, and a copy of his contract. His smile never wavered as he accepted it with a nod.

“There’s a fully outfitted suite in the basement.

There’s a card on file with the local supply stores, should you like to alter your residence.

Any equipment you need for your job, feel free to purchase it and have it delivered here any time.

If you’re unable to stay and sign for it, I can call in a temp or intern to be here to receive packages. ”

“Thank you, ma’am. If you need anything, please feel free to let me know.”

When Pujin had left, I no sooner had grabbed a change of clothes and bathroom supplies than another knock sounded at the door. I assumed Pujin had returned with a question, so I didn’t bother asking who was there before I answered the door.

Of course, it was Yejin. She was all smiles as she stared up at me from the floor,

holding something in her left hand that looked suspiciously like Jun's debut microphone.

"Hello, Miss," she said in flawless English, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "I'm Yejin."

I looked at her outstretched hand in awe. Here I was, face to face with my daughter, for fuck's sake, and I couldn't bring myself to my senses enough to shake her hand.

Thankfully, before I had a complete meltdown, Pujin came up the stairs, his eyes widening as he found Yejin standing in the hall before my room.

"Miss Yejin, you shouldn't be bothering your father's new manager," he said sternly, scooping her up from the floor in a hurry. "My apologies, miss. I will ensure she leaves you alone so you can work in peace."

"Oh, she's no bother," I assured him, afraid I might forget how to talk again if I looked her in her eyes. "Just curious, I'm sure."

"Here," Yejin said suddenly, holding out the microphone for me to take. My hand moved of its own accord, and I accepted the heavy equipment from the little girl with a smile. "My daddy doesn't know I had this. Can you sneak it back to him so I don't get yelled at?"

"Sure," I muttered, staring down at the jeweled handle, remembering how proud he'd been when the company let the group pick out their own colors for the hand mics.

It's the color of your eyes, he'd said with a laugh, holding it up beside my head for comparison.

Now it'll be like I've got a piece of you with me when I'm on stage.

A piece of you.

Now, he had more than one piece of me.

When Pujin had successfully carted Yejin off to her room, I slinked down the hall, hoping against hope that Jun was occupied with other things, and I wouldn't get caught in the act of sneaking into his room.

The running water in the bathroom was indication enough that luck was on my side. I pushed the door to his room open and sucked in a breath.

I'd found him here earlier, when he'd been engrossed in the closet. We'd been so close, I could have leaned forward an inch and kissed him, were I so inclined. But I wasn't, and neither was he.

"I'll just put this in his luggage for now," I whispered to myself, tip-toeing across the floor to keep from alerting him to my presence.

I knelt on the floor beside his suitcase and unzipped it slowly, hating the loudness of the zipper even though I knew the spray of the shower would prevent him from hearing me.

When I'd tucked the microphone under his clothes, I closed the lid and started to slide the zipper around again, my mind so focused on the task at hand that I hadn't noticed the water being shut off.

"Already breaking into my stuff, huh?"

I spun around and landed on my ass, staring up at a very naked Jun, who was currently dripping water all over the floor as he stared down at me.

He hadn't even bothered with a towel, and though I tried not to, my eyes trailed over his body, which was just as I remembered it, and yet so, so different.

I'd known Jun as a teen, his striking boyish looks just beginning to turn into the body of a man. He'd been impressive at seventeen, but now that he was in his mid twenties, he'd outgrown the boyish phase and skipped straight to sex icon.

Funny, I didn't remember his cock being that big before.

I had the decency to cover my eyes and pretend I wasn't drooling at the sight of the man before me. That I didn't wonder what kind of new tricks he might've developed while I'd been . . . working. Clawing my way up to the top in an effort to forget.

"I didn't take you for a thief, Arista," he muttered, kneeling to get on my level. I scooted back and my spine ran into the side of his bed, effectively pinning me here.

"I'm not," I mumbled, hating the situation I was in. Hating myself more for not paying attention to the shower sounds or moving faster. "Just returning something Yejin brought me."

His eyes darkened dangerously. "I thought I told you to stay away from her."

I was on my feet in a flash, desperate to leave this room as anger threaded through his tone. "I didn't go looking for her, Jun," I protested, dropping my hand to meet his stony glare. "She came to my door with your debut mic and asked me to return it so she didn't get in trouble."

"I don't care what excuses you make up," he snapped, straightening to his full height in an effort to be imposing and tower over me. "I won't repeat myself. You made your choice concerning her when you walked away and left her on my doorstep."

“Yeah, cause that was such an easy decision to make,” I spat, hating that he thought it was easy for me.

That I hadn’t deliberated over that mistake, that decision, that heartbreaking choice to put my daughter’s safety before my own selfish desires and love.

“You know what, forget it.” Turning off my emotions was easier said than done, but it had to be done.

I had to walk away before the seven years of hard work came crashing down around my ears and ruined everything I’d worked for, everything I’d hoped for when I gave up all my hopes for the future in exchange for hers.

“I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in the morning—and don’t forget about your schedule of interviews between stuff for the label. ”

I didn’t wait for him to retort with anything sassy or snarky or even cruel, I just turned and left and shut the door as gently as I could on my way out.

There was no point in alerting the rest of the house to our little spat.

Hell, the last thing I wanted was everyone in this house knowing there was something going on between Jun and myself.

That was history, and it belonged in the past, where I’d buried it long ago.

I couldn’t afford to mess up both our futures by rocking the boat now.

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Chapter

Six

JUN

This was an ever-loving nightmare.

In Korea, my old label knew better than to schedule me before lunch. Yet here we were at six in the morning, on set for a photoshoot to announce my joining a new label.

kNight Records wanted to get things moving quickly. It wasn't an option to have a late start.

From the evil glint in her eyes when she banged on my bedroom door before fucking sunrise, I assumed she was enjoying herself, knowing damn well I didn't do mornings.

You don't have a choice. This is from the higher-ups.

And I'd just fucking bet she had nothing to do with it. Not even a single word she uttered in their ear had anything to do with their decision.

Sure.

If this was the best she could do for revenge against me, then let her.

I could suffer through one or two mornings of hell.

I'd do it with a smile on my face if it pissed her off more.

If she thought she could chase me off by doing the worst job ever as an assistant, then she had another thing coming.

And I wasn't about to tell the label that I could speak perfect English. They never asked, so that was on them.

It was no skin off my back or money out of my pocket to give the woman I didn't think I'd ever have to look at again a fraction of the karma she should get.

I didn't feel ashamed in the least that my actions were petty or childish. A better man might've just let things go and let her do her job.

I'd rather watch her squirm.

I'd been back in Korea, raising a daughter while balancing tours, studio time, interviews, guest appearances, and everything else that came with idol life.

And she'd been here, playing proverbial leapfrog with her career.

She headed her own department, for fuck's sake.

That took a hell of a lot of dedication . . . or a lot of time on your knees.

I viciously wondered if she'd put that mouth to use to further her career once she came back home.

And in my next breath, I hated myself for that thought.

She'd never been that kind of person before. I doubted a change in location would have warped her so much.

"Mr. Kim? We're ready for you now."

I glanced up from my phone, which was conveniently dead, a heavy sigh settling in my lungs. "Right. I'll be right there."

Yejin was sitting near the backdrop, her eyes glued to the photographer and his magical cameras that made her daddy look so good.

From the moment I started bringing her on set for shoots and filming music videos, she'd been enamored with the videographers and photographers and how they managed to make things come to life with a single click of a button.

Well, okay, so I knew there was a lot more to it, but she was enamored, and if it kept her entertained, I'd let her have her fantasies.

The photographer, a woman with kind, wide-set eyes and a generous smile, had taken to Yejin instantly and spent the time between photos and poses showing my daughter what she did and how she did it.

She had an eager assistant now, though too short to actually man the camera, and between Yejin's giggles and the photographer's praise, I managed to make it through the shoot pretty quickly.

So quickly, in fact, that I had a free hour and a half between this and my next appointment—with a stylist.

New location, new agency, new look, new me. At least, that was the idea. In theory, it was solid. In practice, I didn't know what to expect.

I just hoped things panned out fast, for Yejin's sake.

"Daddy?" she asked me as we headed to the waiting area where Arista paced back and forth with her trusty tablet in hand, "can we go eat?"

"I think we have time for that." My eyes followed my temporary assistant, watching her skirt swish around her legs as she moved, remembering the times she'd worn a skirt around the old group as she flitted from station to station, filling role after role as needed.

Her steps had been more unsure back then, filled with the eagerness of youth and inexperience.

Now, her stride was purposeful, the walk of a woman who knew what she wanted and was determined to get it.

Her eyes lifted from the tablet for a second, and she spotted me and Yejin almost instantly, her expression going blank as she pointedly held my gaze. "You're already done?"

She acted surprised, but I doubted a lick of it was genuine.

I shrugged. "Yep. Photographer says she's got everything she needs, and she'll send the photos over to the company later tonight.

" I tucked Yejin behind my leg subconsciously, wishing I could avoid dragging her around to listen to business day in and day out.

"So we have time to grab some breakfast."

I didn't want to ask her to take us, but I didn't have a car yet. That was on tomorrow's

schedule—driver, car, and security. Today was photos, stylist, and a few interviews, none of which I was looking forward to.

The only thing that could make this day worse was if something went off the rails.

And then, Arista's phone rang, and she stared down at it with a frown that only deepened as she answered it.

"This is Arista." Her discontent at the caller only grew, lines forming on her forehead as she started pacing again, this time in a tight, controlled circle in front of us.

Everything else was forgotten as she argued with the person on the other end of the phone.

"No, we agreed on noon. Unfortunately, I can't reschedule that far out.

It's urgent that we —" Her eyes shot to me, before she started dragging her finger across her tablet angrily. "Let me take a look at the schedule."

I knelt beside Yejin and handed her my phone. "Why don't you go on over to the couch and watch some videos while you wait for Daddy to finish?"

Like the good girl she was, she obliged, her feet kicking back and forth as she giggled and rocked to the theme song of her favorite show.

Arista turned to me and sighed. "Your noon appointment with the news outlet the company approved has been pushed up. They're not giving me much to work with, and the stylist can only bump you forward on his schedule, not back. Which means?—"

"Which means I have to go now, don't I?" The subtle droop in her shoulders told me

all I needed to know. "Fuck."

"It's your call, but that means?—"

"It's fine." My eyes drifted to Yejin, still sitting on the couch. "She's used to her schedule being bounced around."

Her gaze softened as she watched our daughter sit and watch cartoons for all the world like she'd been born into stardom.

In fact, it had taken all my efforts over the years to keep the entertainment industry's filthy claws out of her innocent life.

They saw me, a successful idol, and immediately pushed for her to join the life early.

I didn't want this life for her unless she wanted it.

And I hoped she never would.

My heart sank as she lit up when I knelt at her side, all smiles and sparkle and excitement for things that would, once again, take a backseat to my life with her.

Being an idol was all I knew. Raising a child took money. And as long as I walked this road, she'd never want for anything.

"Okay, Yejin. Breakfast has been canceled. We're eating on the run to Daddy's next appointment."

Like always, there was no outburst, no disappointment, no sass in her tone as she agreed and slid off the couch, handing my phone back to me with a giggle. "Okay, Daddy."

She took my hand in hers, and not for the first time, I wondered who was leading who: me or her?

We arrived at the stylist's appointment with minutes to spare. Unfortunately, there was no kid-friendly space for Yejin to wait. Frantic, desperate, and frustrated beyond belief, I scrambled as he tapped his toes, trying to figure out a solution.

Pujin was balls-deep in interviewing new candidates for our security detail, so he couldn't come pick her up.

And as of yet, I didn't have a nanny to turn her over to.

With nobody to trust, and no other choice, I turned around and prepared to deliver the bad news to my little assistant that the whole day's schedule had to be reconfigured.

And then it hit me.

There was one other adult here I could trust her with.

Okay, so maybe trust was too strong of a word. But even though I wanted to hate her, wanted to punish her, I had no other choice right now than to grovel and hope she agreed.

"Arista."

She looked up from her tablet and held up a finger. Quickly switching off her Bluetooth headset, she marched over to me with a curious expression on her face.

"What is it?" she asked, staring between me and the stylist behind me. "Is there an issue?"

The stylist tossed a finger in Yejin's direction, his voice not even muted in the least as the disgust bled through his tone. "I don't work with children. It can't stay here while we outfit and adjust Mr. Kim."

"You're telling me you have no sitting room?" Her hands moved to her hips, the tablet still clutched tightly in her grip. "That's ridiculous, Rico."

Rico, the temperamental asshole currently referring to my daughter as an it, pursed his lips in annoyance. "It messes with the vibe. And a lot of what we do here isn't appropriate for a child."

Arista sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Give me five minutes with my client, Rico. I'll figure something out." She dragged me off to the side, Yejin trailing close behind.

When we were out of earshot of the asshole whose hands were about to turn me into a masterpiece, she cleared her throat and sighed.

"He's the best stylist in our city, Jun. And you want him behind your new debut, I can promise you that." She glanced down at Yejin, a soft smile cracking the stoic, bossy veneer she put on for the rest of the world. "What about your security man?"

"Busy with interviews," I muttered.

"The security we brought today? They could watch her in the car?—"

"Absolutely not. I don't know them," I pointed out, hating that I was about to open my mouth and say the words I swore I'd never say.

She cut me off before I could get them out. "Jun, we have to get you in his chair, and fast. You have a full schedule all day?—"

"Watch her for me?" I blurted out, my lips curling in a sneer. "I'd ask literally anyone else, but I don't know these people."

Her eyes flashed in surprise, fixating on our daughter, the one she'd left behind in her quest for a new life. "You said to stay away from her?—"

I put a hand on the back of her neck, dragging her close enough that we couldn't be overheard.

"Plans change. It's a one-off. And if you'd done your job, we wouldn't be in this situation."

"I released her with a whispered swear and knelt next to Yejin again, taking her hand in mine."

"Yejin, baby, I'm going to go with Mr. Rico to get ready for the interview today."

And my assistant is going to take you for some breakfast. Isn't that right?

"I glanced up at her with malice in my glare, daring her to challenge me."

She wouldn't. I knew her too well.

She'd never been able to tell me no, even when we were fighting.

She swallowed audibly and sagged in defeat. "Sure is!" Her gaze turned to rainbows and fucking unicorns as she turned those lying eyes on Yejin, sweetness dripping from her lips like honey. "What's your favorite breakfast food?"

"I like pancakes!" Yejin shouted enthusiastically, putting her hand in Arista's outstretched one like she'd known the woman her whole life. "Can we get ones with

strawberries and syrup on them?"

"Sure," Arista said smoothly, handing me a business card. "Your daddy can call us when he's done here, and we'll come back and pick him up. What do you say to that?"

I'd never been far from her, even when I was on tour. And now I was handing her off to a woman I swore she'd never meet—a woman who I never wanted in our lives again. Was this the kind of sacrifice I had to make to give her a better future?

It was only temporary; we'd have an interview with a sitter or three soon, and I'd find someone trustworthy to watch Yejin while I got the preliminaries out of the way.

Once things settled, it'd be back to normal, just me and her, except for the odd occasion.

I just had to get through this transition phase first.

Everything would settle down soon.

Chapter

Seven

ARISTA

I sat across from my daughter—Jun's daughter. She wasn't mine. I had no claim to her, no matter how much I looked like her. No matter how similar we might be. No matter how much I regretted my choices, she was never going to be mine, and I had no claim to her.

She happily chowed down on a blueberry pancake from the street vendor around the corner, rolled up so she could dip it in her syrup without getting her hands sticky.

She was seven, but honestly, how much did I know about handling kids? I didn't know if she was past the whole messy fingers phase. I'd never spent a day in my life raising a kid?—

And there it was again, that regret I carried with me even before she and her father stepped foot into this country. The regret I thought I could live with every day, the regret that seeped into every porous bone in my body and took root like an invasive vine.

She was beautiful. All smiles, chatty, and trusting. And so fucking smart.

“Who taught you to roll your pancakes like that, Yejin?” I wondered aloud, not expecting her to actually answer.

Instead, she grinned around a mouthful of food, swallowed, and batted those eyelashes at me, every inch the little princess. “My uncle Minho. He said he learned it from—” she looked around and leaned in, her voice a conspiratorial whisper behind the back of her hand. “From a girl he used to know.”

I knew damn well which woman she referred to. Minho used to be so messy as a teen. And he liked to sleep late, which meant breakfast for him was usually on the go.

The memory brought a smile to my lips. Even though I hadn’t been there, the echo of my presence lived on. And Yejin had grown up with that echo.

A pitiful substitute.

“Why are your eyes watering?” she asked me suddenly, peering up at my lashes where tears had begun to collect. “Do you have allergies?”

“Uh, yeah, allergies,” I agreed readily, glad that she’d given me an easy out. “I forgot my medicine today.”

She handed me a napkin, all smiles again. “Daddy makes his phone tell him when he has to do something. Maybe you should have a reminder like that, too.”

I smiled at the idea of Jun needing six alarms to remember a damn thing. “Maybe.”

Just as we were finishing our dinner, my phone began to vibrate. I flipped it open to see a text from Jun, and another from an unknown number. Shoving the likely spam message to the side, I opened Jun’s instead.

Hair is a multi step process. Will be a few hours. Security says they’re taking me from here to the interview, and can bring me home. Make sure my daughter makes it home safe.

I frowned at his message, the passive-aggressiveness bleeding from every letter on my screen.

You knew he would hate you, likely for the rest of your lives.

And once upon a time, I'd been okay with it.

If he hated me from a distance, I'd never have to be subjected to his hatred and resentment in real time.

Having someone loathe you this deeply, in the house you share, every single second of every day, was harder than I'd thought.

I had to get him an assistant, so I could get away from this, and fast. Staying would only hurt us all in the end.

Running was what I did best.

Instead of heading right back to the house, I decided to take Yejin out and do something.

I didn't need a bodyguard—Yejin was safe with me.

Nobody here knew who she was, nor did I draw any eager eyes of cameras.

Jun, in full makeup, however, was an international icon.

If he came out in public without a disguise, he'd need an entourage to keep the mobs away.

“Miss Arista, Miss Arista, look!”

I followed her little finger and spotted the huge blue parrot perched just feet from us.

His beady eyes regarded Yejin coolly, along with all the other kids around her at the exotic bird exhibit of the zoo.

A child in the corner started crying, and the parrot turned his direction, mocking him with a mimic of his wails.

Which, of course, set the other children off in fits of laughter. All except Yejin.

She tilted her head to the side and regarded the bird with confusion, her tiny brows scrunched together. “Why is he being mean?” she asked quietly, her eyes never leaving his as he mimed the other child’s call for his mother.

“Mama! Mama! Birds are scary! Mama, mama!”

“He’s a bird, sweetie,” I explained slowly, hoping a simple explanation would placate her. “He doesn’t understand things like we do. To him, there is no right or wrong. There just . . . is.”

She seemed to ponder my words as the bird turned away, returning its attention to the original crying child. His mother had come running in response to his cries, and she now knelt at his side, comforting him with hushed murmurs and a soft smile filled with sympathy.

“He’ll be okay,” I assured her, seeing the way her brows scrunched up and her frown deepened. “His mom will take care of him.”

“Is that what moms do?” she asked suddenly, so quietly I nearly missed it. “Take care of you?”

I froze, realizing we were suddenly in very dangerous territory. “It’s one thing they do for you. But daddies do the same thing. And you have a very good daddy, Yejin.”

“Yeah,” she sighed, twisting her skirt in her fingers. “But he’s not a mom.”

I didn’t know what to say to comfort her.

I had no words that would ease her obvious sadness.

And anything I could say got stuck in my throat as the urge to hug her rose in me.

Like Yejin, though, I settled for twisting a stray lock of my hair around a finger, busying the itchy hands that wanted to comfort my daughter.

The one I left behind.

I’d done this to her. Left her with a hole she couldn’t fill. A sadness her father clearly wasn’t enough to ease, no matter how amazing of a dad he was. And that reminded me all the more of the weight of my decisions all those years ago.

“What would you like to do now, Yejin? Your daddy won’t be finished for a while. We could?—”

“It’s okay, Miss Arista. You don’t have to take me places today. I can just wait for Daddy like I always do.”

Her devotion to Jun was commendable. But I wasn’t about to let this day go to waste for her. “What’s something you’ve always wanted to do but didn’t get the chance?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lot I haven’t done.”

I smiled down at her, suddenly realizing how I could turn this day around. “Then let’s do it all!”

We hit the arcade, the chocolate factory, the petting zoo, even the museum, before finally finishing out the day at a local bakery I frequented for their delicious morning muffins.

By the time we rolled back into the house, it was growing dark outside, and the lights on inside the house were like a beacon of judgement.

It didn’t even occur to me how long we’d been gone. All I’d done that day was prioritize a little girl’s whims, giving her everything she wanted that Jun was too busy for.

I opened the door, juggling an armload of plushies from crane machines, Yejin hot on my heels.

And was met by a stern, angry glare from a pair of eyes I’d frequently drowned in a long time ago.

“Daddy! Look what we got!” Yejin bounded over to him with an eager smile, unable or perhaps unwilling to read the emotion in the room, or the animosity in his gaze that stayed pinned on me. “I won this for you.”

He accepted the little penguin she handed him with a soft smile, turning to her to examine the rest of her haul.

“It’s almost as cute as you.” His eyes cut to me, then back down to her, the momentary flicker of rage disappearing in a flash.

“Why don’t you take all these pretty animals up to your room and find them homes

while Miss Arista and I have a little chat? ”

She was gone in a flash, talking to her new friends as she took the stairs two at a time, before the sound of her door shutting echoed over the railing.

And just like that, Jun was grabbing my wrist to drag me into the kitchen, where we wouldn't be overheard by prying ears.

“Hey, now, wait just a second—what's the big idea, huh? Let me go!”

He stopped dead center of the room, refusing to release his grip as we faced off in what had to be the most tense and drama-filled moment of our lives. A standoff that the wild west would have been jealous of. Instinctively, I crossed my arms over my chest, ready to fight fire with fire.

If I make him angry, maybe he'll fire me. At least then I can get out of this fucking situation.

“And just where have you been all day with my daughter?” His eyes cut to his watch, then back to me, putting on the pressure, using tactics that reminded me of sitcom dads when their teenage daughter came home after curfew.

I was no teenager, and I wasn't about to put up with this, either.

“All over,” I replied icily, “doing educational and fun things to keep her busy.”

“You were supposed to bring her home,” he growled, taking a step toward me. “Not run all over a strange town with no security and no protection.”

“Neither of us needs protection, thank you,” I said with a smirk, knowing I was right.

“Today proves that. Nobody recognizes her on the street here. She's just another kid

out with her?—”

His eyes narrowed, those lashes tempting and mesmerizing. “Her what?” His gaze raked over my body from head to toe, making me feel somehow inadequate in the pregnant pause between his words. “Please, go ahead and finish that sentence. I’d love to hear the rest of it.”

“I took her to the zoo, the museum, the science center, the arcade, and she had three square meals today. Most of which were even healthy, thank you.” Dismissing his murderous glare, I turned my back to him and opened the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water.

“And you never specified what I was supposed to do with her, by the way. I’m not a hired nanny. So I winged it.”

Those brows on his perfect fucking face rose as I lifted the water bottle to my lips and took a swallow, relishing the cool liquid against my throat. “How gracious of you to spend your hard-earned money taking my daughter out on the town today.”

I shrugged, playing it off. “The company paid for it all. I have a business card I use when I’m on the clock.”

Apparently, that was the wrong answer. He stepped forward again, and his arms came up to cage me in on either side, pinning me against the fridge door. “I warned you about getting close to her, Arista. And you know I hate to repeat myself.”

I wouldn’t be cowed by his bullshit posturing as a tough guy.

I brought my free hand up and jammed a long, manicured nail in the center of his chest. “I acted in the manner I determined best to complete my duties today, Jun. Whether or not you would have chosen different is of no consequence to me.” I flung

the taunt out there, goading him, hoping that maybe he'd take the bait I was about to lay on the hook.

“If you're so unhappy with my performance, then fire me.

I'll be glad to go back to the company and let them know you've decided to go it alone.”

His glare hardened to stone at the suggestion. “You know damn well I can't do that.”

I did, in fact, know just how bad it would be for him if he did.

It would look like he was being ungrateful, a difficult client.

And though kNight Entertainment had dealt with worse, it wasn't wise to make yourself look like a problem this early in a contract.

There was literally nowhere else to go after us.

We were the last chance for many of our clients.

“Then perhaps you'd like to back the fuck up and quit riding my ass, yeah?

Since you're so against my decisions in this temporary role, I'll be sure to push up the interviews for your assistant position to the next available time slot on your schedule.

It will be my top priority to find you a replacement?—”

“Don't play games with me, Arista,” he growled, closing the gap between us as my hand pressed insistently against his chest. His very taut, muscular chest, hidden only beneath a thin layer of fabric. “I'm not the easy-to-rile teenager you used to know.

I've grown up."

As I breathed in, his scent flooded my senses, filling me with nostalgia and memories I'd buried a long ass time ago, hoping they'd stay there.

His hand gripping my wrists, holding them above my head as his lips caressed the sensitive skin where my throat met my shoulder.

Fingers on his other hand inching my skirt up, teasing my outer thigh as they met the hem of my panties.

Hot breath fanning over my ear as he whispered promises and fantasies in my ear before his teeth closed over the shell of it and nipped me playfully.

The hard, insistent curve of his cock through his pants as he ground his hips against me, moaning softly in an uncharacteristic display of vulnerability and need.

Did he ever replay those scenes in his head of us?

Did it even matter?

We were like fire and gasoline—when we met, sparks flew, but we burned anything we touched.

It was better if we never happened again. Things were better like this for all of us.

Maybe if I told myself that enough times, it'd be true.

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Chapter

Eight

JUN

I had her pinned against the fridge, just inches away from our noses touching as I towered over her and tried to throw my weight around. She'd never been one for physical confrontation, so I leaned into that, wanting her to feel as uncomfortable as possible.

I didn't want her to know how worried I was about them both when she wasn't here when I arrived.

How much restraint it took me to not call her a thousand times, demanding her whereabouts.

I'd trusted her with Yejin; it was my own fault that I was so worked up.

But I refused to put the blame on myself.

Instead, I lashed out at the one person I felt deserved to feel bad here.

The woman who'd played mommy to a daughter she never wanted. A daughter she abandoned.

A daughter she had no rights to.

My daughter.

Her hand seared my skin beneath the fabric where she touched me, sending a thrill through me that resonated in every inch of my being. As if remembering how it felt to be inside her, my cock twitched insistently, throbbing as it stiffened behind the zipper of these too-tight pants.

I couldn't let her find out she still affected me like this. I didn't want her to affect me like this. I hated her, and I wanted her to feel that hate every second of the time she was forced to spend with me.

So why was I suddenly imagining how beautiful she'd look bent over the table as I railed her from behind?

My cock twitched again, and I closed my eyes momentarily, humming the Korean national anthem under my breath, anything to calm my racing heart, my boiling blood, to keep the filthy thoughts of her at bay.

Those thoughts would not be happening, not now, not ever. Not if I had anything to say about it.

Two fiery eyes lifted to meet mine in a battle of wills. "I'm not the naïve girl I used to be, either, Jun," she spat at me, her nose crinkling in distaste. "Now back the fuck up and let me go. Or do you treat all your assistants like this?"

I shoved away from the wall with a barely-contained growl. How dare she act like I was the unreasonable one? The audacity?—

"Don't worry about Yejin anymore," I snarled, crossing my arms as I gave her the cold shoulder. "Push up my interviews with the caretaker company to tomorrow morning. I'll make sure you don't need to be a stand-in babysitter anymore, since

you're so bad at it."

"Bad at it?" The indelicate snort that left her was so unladylike, so familiar, so reminiscent of how she used to react when the guys in the group got on her nerves. "Hmph. As if you'd know. When was the last time you took time out of your busy idol schedule to spend a whole day with her?"

Those words cut like a knife between the shoulder blades. My blood ran cold. "You have a lot of nerve, saying that to me."

The silence in the room was thicker than a dense fog at dawn in the fall.

It wrapped its chilled fingers around me and strangled the soul from my body.

The idea that I'd neglected Yejin in any way, even by accident, while I struggled every day to give her the kind of life she deserved, was heart-rending.

But I didn't want to let her know she'd wounded me. If anyone should hurt, it should be the person who left. It should be her.

"At least I stayed. At least I tried. I didn't leave her on a porch stoop, ring the doorbell, and run the fuck away like a coward."

She didn't say a word to me as she strode past me, her back ramrod straight as she marched up the stairs and shut her door behind her. All the pleasure I'd taken in hurting her like she'd hurt me fled my body as she disappeared from view.

Had I gone too far?

No. No, she knew what she was asking for, accepting this job. I wouldn't hold back or play nice just to keep from hurting someone who'd hurt me so deeply. Who'd cut

out my heart and served it back to me on a platter, the blade still stuck in the center of it.

She deserved every last cutting moment of pain that was a result of her own actions.

Fuck Arista. Fuck her feelings. She was a coward and a bitch, heartless and cold, and I'd do well to remember that.

Hours later, after I'd showered, made a quick meal, and responded to a few emails, I sat at the edge of Yejin's bed with a book in hand, feeling like ten kinds of the worst dad in the history of ever as she told me about her day.

"After we had breakfast, Miss Arista took me to the zoo. I got to see all kinds of animals I've never seen before, Daddy.

There was a big blue parrot who made fun of some crying boy, but Miss Arista told me the bird didn't understand right from wrong.

The boy's mom took him away, gave him a balloon to make him feel better, and dried his tears.

"She paused for a minute, cocking her head to the side like she always did when she was trying to think of how to phrase something.

"Why don't I have a mom, Daddy? Will I ever have one? "

I closed the princess book in my hands and stared down at my lap, wishing I had thought about this answer sooner.

She'd asked me about her mother before, but I always just told her she was gone.

I never thought I'd have to explain beyond that.

Selfishly, I thought she'd drop it like she did whenever I answered one of her questions.

Of course, this would be the one thing she couldn't let go.

"Your mom," I started, the words dying in my throat. "Ahem." I cleared my throat and tried again, hoping the words would magically make sense. That they'd just come out of me without even trying.

But I had nothing. Nothing that would satisfy my daughter, anyhow.

"You're not the only girl who doesn't have a mom, Yejin," I said instead, hoping a different direction would help divert her attention. "Plenty of kids only have one parent. There's lots of reasons, too."

"My friend Yoo-ra back home doesn't have a dad. He died in a car accident." She frowned, staring down at her lap. "Did my mom die?"

Telling her that would be easy. It would give me an exit, an easy solution. But I couldn't bear to see my daughter hurt like that. "She didn't die, no," I found myself muttering as my eyes trailed to the door. "She had some very important things to take care of, so she gave you to me."

It was more generous than Arista deserved. It might've been better had I told her she was dead. Then there wouldn't be more questions later, when the answer I gave wasn't enough anymore.

"Will I ever meet her?"

Those were the words I'd dreaded from the second she learned to talk.

"I don't know," I told her, wondering if I'd have the heart to tell her the truth even when she was old enough to have kids of her own.

Wouldn't keeping her in the dark be better overall for her mental well-being? "That's not my decision to make."

"Read me the story, Daddy," she said suddenly, all the disappointment hidden behind her cheerful front. "I wanna hear about the princess who slays the dragon and saves her kingdom."

So I read her the story. The words on the page began to blur as I reached the part about the princess finding out who her family was, and I glanced up to see if Yejin had noticed as my words wavered.

Her arms were wrapped tightly around a stuffed animal she'd had since the day she was brought to my doorstep. It'd been tucked neatly beside her tiny body in the carrier when I brought her inside and claimed her as my own.

It was also a stuffed animal I won for her mother on our first illicit, secret date.

The little ragged dinosaur had been her constant companion for seven years now, accompanying her everywhere she went, and not once in that time had she ever left its side.

When it needed to be put in the wash, she accompanied it, sitting alongside the machine until it was safely back in her hands.

When a neighbor dog snagged it and ripped a hole in its tail, she watched on as her beloved Uncle Minho stitched it up with his rudimentary sewing skills.

It was like a child to her, and she was utterly devoted to it.

It was also the one part of my past with her mother I couldn't bear to take from her.

But she had no idea that the thing in her hand was a symbol of the love that created her.

A love that was now dead and buried.

Yejin was all that was left of that fleeting moment in our lives.

"Sleep well, little firefly," I whispered, tucking the blanket up around her and her little dinosaur. I slipped her book back on the shelf and snuck out of the room, careful not to wake her as I slowly shut the door.

I turned around in the hallway, my eyes still watering from the sting of my choices, and stared at the door separating my past from my future.

Arista had been everything to me once upon a time. Everything. And now, all she was to me was an enemy, a thorn in my side that ached when you touched it, when you were reminded it existed only to cause you pain. I couldn't stand the sight of her.

And yet . . .

And yet, something buried in the deepest recesses of my mind stirred at the sight of her.

At the mere mention of this woman, I was confused, aroused, and angry all at the same time.

When I heard her voice in my house, it was like waking up from a dream and finding

out that what you thought was reality was all a lie.

It was disappointment and comfort, a simultaneous blow to the psyche that left me reeling, unsteady.

I wanted her gone.

But I also wanted her to stay.

I wanted to torment her like her memory and actions tormented me for years now.

But I also wanted to tie her to my bed and fuck her senseless.

I burned for her, hot and cold alike, simultaneously freezing in a hell of my own making and combusting in one of her creation.

Fate chose that moment to intervene, and I froze in place as the bathroom door opened and Arista herself slipped into the hallway wrapped in nothing but a pair of towels—one on her head, and one clinging precariously around her torso, barely covering her thighs from view.

All the blood rushed from my head and pooled . . . elsewhere.

Her eyes lifted from the floor, and she pinned me with a stunned gaze, her hand still on her head to dry her hair. “What are you doing here?”

My brain short-circuited as my mouth fell open like a fish gasping for air. “I live here,” I managed to recover spectacularly, hating the defensiveness in my words. “You got a problem with that?”

“Maybe keep your eyes to yourself,” she muttered, following my gaze as it

instinctively trailed down her body. “Or do you ogle all your assistants like this?”

The tenuous threads I’d worked so hard to weave around myself, to keep me whole when I wanted to fall apart, snapped.

Closing the gap between my present and my past, I stepped forward, crowding her in against the wall of the hallway.

My arms became a cage as my palms slammed into the drywall, our faces mere inches apart as she instinctively cowered from the intensity in my stare.

“I’ve only ever looked at one woman like this.” I leaned in until I could feel her breath against my lips. Until my hair dusted her forehead, and I could count the lashes that fluttered against her cheeks. “And she ripped my heart from my chest, stomped on it, and returned it to me beyond repair.”

Chapter

Nine

ARISTA

My night was supposed to be simple: shower, answer a few more emails, review the schedule for tomorrow, send out any changes, and then maybe sleep for a few hours before I had to get back up and do it all again.

And here I was, standing with my back to a literal wall, face to face with a monster of my own creation. And I didn't have a stitch of clothes on me. I was defenseless, and here he was, ripping open scars and staring into my soul like he wanted to fight me or—or fuck me.

Or maybe both.

All of a sudden, my tongue glued itself to the roof of my mouth in uncharacteristic fashion, and my mouth dried up faster than the Sahara Desert in a drought.

Speaking came naturally to me. I knew a multitude of languages and it was literally my job to run interference for people from other parts of the world.

And yet my vast vocabulary was suddenly missing, like my brain was a library and someone had checked out the book that contained all the words.

I couldn't think past what was staring me in the face, which was a very intimidating

and intense Kim Seo-Jun, caging me in like an angry predator cornering his prey.

His lips curled up in a smirk as I failed to respond, likely taking my silence as admission of guilt.

“You aren’t going to defend yourself? Nothing to say to me?”

When I just stared blankly, his smirk started to wilt.

Those gorgeous eyes I’d stared into many a night when we were younger searched my face for a hint of emotion, but he’d find none here.

I learned how to hide the things I felt a long time ago. Once you put on a mask like that, it’s hard to just take it off. It becomes a part of you, your only defensive wall between you and the rest of the world.

My mask was a part of me, and I didn’t know how to take it off. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

Especially not around Jun.

His gaze fell to my lips, tracing them with a slow, languorous movement.

Instinctively, they parted for him, perhaps remembering a time when that gaze would have been followed by a deep, passionate kiss.

“Do you think you can just walk around here like you didn’t drag me over hot coals like I was nothing?”

Like you didn’t break me in two when you walked away?

” The hoarse, rough words rasped from his throat like it pained him physically to say them.

They dug into my skin, flaying me alive, cutting into old wounds and baring them to the world again.

“I . . .” There were no words. Nothing I could say would change what I’d done to him.

Nothing. And yet, I wanted so badly to tell him the truth.

It burned a hole in my throat, made me bleed internally.

I’d choke on the weight of it if I stayed here much longer.

“Move, Jun,” I snarled, forcing my voice to sound irate, pretending I wasn’t dying inside.

“Unlike someone here, I have things to do.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond as I ducked under his arm and practically sprinted to my door even though it was only feet away.

I slammed the door between us and pressed my back against it, hoping and praying he wouldn’t follow.

Secretly wanting him to bust the door down to shake the truth from me, yearning for him to stop looking at me like I was evil, a horrible person, the worst of the worst.

A part of me so badly wanted him to know. But I’d had my chance. I made my choices.

I couldn't go back on them now.

The floor broke my fall as the tears started to fall, sinking to my ass on the hardwood planks as choking sobs threatened to reveal the depths of the pain it caused me to pretend like I didn't care.

I'd been strong for so long, I thought I could handle this.

I should have known living under the same roof as Kim Seo-Jun, and our daughter, would be a Herculean feat.

Across the room, my phone lit up, practically vibrating off the desk.

I almost wanted to just let it go, fuck anyone and anything that could possibly require a call to my personal phone this late at night.

I had to shove that desire down, though, because there was no telling who was on the other end of the line.

It could be my boss, calling to tell me they were sending a replacement.

It could be someone calling to reschedule their interview or appointment or who knew what.

With loathing in my broken heart for the person who'd made mourning my losses in peace impossible, I crawled over to the desk and yanked the phone off the edge, snapping it open without checking to see who it was.

My voice was sharp, on edge, but it was close enough to my normal tone and attitude dealing with clients and coworkers that nobody would think twice about it.

“This better be good,” I snapped, wiping away the remnants of the tear tracks running down my face.

The other end of the line was silent for a long moment, and I almost hung up the phone, thinking it was a scammer, or maybe a telemarketer, neither of which I had the desire to deal with.

But then, the sounds in the background caught my ear, a familiar tune that played every day in the elevator on my way to the floor I worked on.

The caller said no words, made no attempt to speak, just breathed into the receiver as they rode the elevator up. Each floor they passed, the automated voice echoed from the speakers, letting them know what floor they were on.

I worked on the fourth floor.

“Second floor,” the elevator lady said cheerfully, her voice muted in the background. More heavy breathing, and a faint, almost too quiet to hear, whimper of pain. But it wasn’t close enough to be the caller?—

“Third floor,” the disembodied voice said again, and now I was completely on edge, something in my gut telling me this wasn’t just a normal butt dial. There was something almost sinister in the atmosphere on the other end. I could feel it, as if I were standing right there with them.

“Fourth floor,” followed by the telltale ding that told me they’d stopped there, and now the whimpering got louder, the sound resembling a plea from behind a gagged mouth?—

“Hello?” I asked again, hoping for some sort of answer. “Who the hell is this?”

The line went dead, leaving me with a chill that ran down my spine and shook me to my core.

I hung up reluctantly, making a mental note to check in with the security team when I got to the office in the morning.

Tonight it was just a skeleton crew for patrols and night watch, so it would do me no good to talk to them.

And there was no reason to call the cops. What if it was someone pulling a prank?

No. It was best to just deal with this in the morning.

As I slipped on my pajamas and slid between the covers, I shivered, the palpable anxiety lingering. No matter what I did, the feeling wouldn't go away. And of course, when I got like this, I knew sleep would elude me.

I ended up in the workout room an hour later, trying desperately to forget the way that phone call made me feel.

Trying to bury the resurrected fear I'd lived with when I first came home to this city and lived my life perpetually looking over my shoulder.

Always alert, always on edge, always an anxious mess.

Sweat dripped from my brow, dotting the floor as I ran on the treadmill, increasing the speed every few minutes until it was all I could do to keep up with the belt whizzing by beneath my feet.

When running became impossible, unbearable, I shut it off, gasping for air, and moved to the next machine.

Sunrise found me guzzling a bottle of water like I'd been dehydrated for years. My hair had barely dried from the shower before I spent a whole night running myself ragged, and now it was drenched again, straight through to my scalp. I was a mess, and exhaustion was just starting to set in.

And now I had to clock in as a fucking assistant to the last person I wanted to follow around all day.

Fuck me, life really comes full circle to bite you in the ass when you least expect it.

I threw a towel around my neck and sighed, leaning my forehead against the steel door of the fridge as my eyes drifted shut.

I just needed a minute. One fucking minute.

Of course, who should walk right in but fucking Kim Seo-Jun himself, dressed to the nines in his own workout gear.

I glanced at him out of the corner of one peeked-open eye, and heaved a sigh at his refreshed, immaculate appearance.

He stood there, eyeing me like it was physically painful to look at me.

His hand wrapped around the handle of the fridge, but I didn't have the strength to move just yet.

Nonetheless, he tugged on it anyhow, sending me stumbling toward the nearest wall in surprise.

Until two strong arms caught me round the waist and steadied me, of course.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Trying to get hurt?” He glared down at me as I slumped in his arms, too weak and exhausted to even pick myself up and stand on my own two feet yet.

All I could do was stare into his eyes, imagining what it would feel like to smooth the crease in his brow like I used to when he was worried about something.

Would they feel the same under my fingers, or had every part of him changed over the years?

“You’re the one knocking me over,” I said dryly, my eyes fluttering shut for a second. “I was just minding my own business?—”

“You were sleeping against the fridge,” he pointed out, and damned if he wasn’t one hundred percent right. “Why?”

“Don’t act like you care, Jun.” I struggled, but between my wounded pride and my stubborn refusal to keep him from seeing weakness in me, I managed to stand up on my own, shoving him back a step, albeit a bit weakly.

“If you don’t mind, I have things to do.

Like manage you until you’ve hired a replacement. ”

“How are those coming?” he asked suddenly, turning back to the fridge. “You find anyone suitable yet?”

“You’ve got an interview block set up at noon today for three candidates.

” None of which he’d like, once he got to know them, but they were strong interviewers.

If they didn't come out and reveal themselves from the start, I could foist him off on one of them and be out of town before he could even realize what I'd done.

Hell, maybe the new kNight Records office in Khula City had a position I could fill temporarily. Maybe a transfer was just what I needed.

Yeah. A transfer would solve all my problems. Distance between me and my past, that was the answer.

Chapter

Ten

JUN

Arista was hot and cold. One minute she was limp in my arms, sweating like she'd run a thousand miles and damn near unconscious from the effort, and the next she was barking out orders, that little tablet from hell in her grasp as she made notes and phone calls and organized every aspect of my life effortlessly.

She was an efficient machine the likes of which I'd never had around me in my adult life, and it was comforting on a certain level to know that everything would be taken care of and that it would all fall into place without my hands on the wheel, but . . .

I could see the toll it took on her, being near us.

She couldn't pretend our past never happened when we were in close quarters every day.

Hell, she was practically itching to get the fuck out of here.

I could see the pain-filled glances at Yejin every time she made a noise, and the frustration in her eyes whenever she had to interact with me.

Not that how I treated her helped the situation, but .

. . only Pujin got her calm, friendly demeanor.

Only my head of security got the girl she used to be.

Fucking pissed me off.

How could she sit there and hate me and her own fucking flesh and blood so damn much that it physically dug into her and drained her life force to just be around us? What right did she have to hate either of us like that?

She was the one who'd done us dirty, not the other way around.

And if anyone deserved to have their life disrupted, it was her, not us.

And disrupt it I would.

My first action as a pain in the ass was to cancel the interview block at the last minute, claiming I was too exhausted to deal with it.

She dutifully rescheduled for tomorrow, even as she growled at me under her breath, watching me stretch across the couch and pretend to nap in the middle of the day while Yejin retreated to her room to attend her online tutoring.

She, in return, stormed around the kitchen and loudly held court with her superiors as she checked in and did whatever it was she did for work when she wasn't being forced to assist the man she hated and the daughter she abandoned.

I gave up on the faked nap about two hours in, pulling out my phone to check emails that had been piling up for days now.

I hadn't opened a single one since I touched down here in Nocturna Beach.

Hell, I could have gone another week without answering most of them, but as soon as I opened the damn app, the first one nearly screamed at me and stopped my heart.

It was from my old label's email—and judging by the header, they weren't pleased.

IMMEDIATE ATTENTION NEEDED: HQ SeoulSOUL Contract.

As the fuck if. I didn't plan to go back, not now, not ever.

Mr. Kim,

It's come to our attention that the choice to discharge you from StarBOYZ may have been hasty and a bit premature.

We would like to discuss a renegotiation of your contract (which is still active in our systems) at the earliest opportunity.

We've included a return ticket to Seoul for you on the next flight out and eagerly await your cooperation in this matter.

SeoulSOUL Entertainment

I couldn't believe the audacity in the few lines they'd included.

Never mind the fact that I didn't plan to go back, their plane ticket was a waste of expenses they'd no doubt write off.

And the vaguely intimidating language they used was a familiar tactic, meant to bully and strongarm me into doing what they wanted.

Fuck them.

They broke it off clean and clear when the netizens in Korea broke the story of my ‘love child and secret baby’, and I signed papers bowing out gracefully from the group to save the rest of them from going down with the ship I was on. There was no renegotiation going on, not now, not ever.

Fuck SeoulSOUL. Fuck the manager who took advantage of us, fuck the media that dragged Yejin’s name like a rotten fish in a barrel of koi.

Fuck everyone who doubted my ability to make money and music and perform just because suddenly they were aware I had a kid.

And fuck all the fake ass fans who immediately insisted they’d never listen to anything I produced again because I was no longer some pure paragon of innocence.

At twenty fucking seven, I was supposed to have never loved, never lived, never done anything they were allowed to do.

Idols were held to the same standards as monks and nuns, expected to live a life of purity and chastity and innocence from anything that could even be considered fun, all because some fans thought it was unacceptable for us to shatter their delusions.

Last year, Minseo had to file a restraining order against a woman who had a shrine of him in her house, and had convinced half her circle of friends she was engaged to him.

They stopped him at a local cafe and accosted him for getting involved with another woman .

.. our intern, who was picking up coffee.

Before that, Yang-Jin was stalked and nearly poisoned by a fan who thought she was

his soulmate, and who took offense to him saying in an interview that he preferred redheads and would like to settle down with a nice foreign girl someday.

She was nothing like his ideal type, which wasn't anyone's business to begin with, but the fucking psycho drugged him after managing to sneak into our dorms as a cleaner, and had we not come home when we had?—

Well, I didn't like to think about that.

Fucking saesangs were crazy. Another band from a different label announced one member's return after a year long hiatus, and the fans dug up insane rumors from his youth and dragged him over coals, even resorting to sending funeral wreaths to his workplace and sending threats and death wishes to any account on social media even remotely tied to them.

Their group went dark for days, and the social media was scrubbed, but that stain never went away, and the fandom was still healing. No telling what kind of damage that did to the band as a whole. Or the guy who inevitably got dropped two days after the announcement of his redebut.

People were cruel. And the entertainment business didn't care much about anything but their bottom line. I'd lived some of the horrors, and seen worse. And there were rumors even I couldn't bring myself to believe.

I typed up a succinct response, then deleted it as fast as I'd written it, deciding to run it by the new label's lawyers before I did anything that could backfire on me or Yejin.

I had to be responsible about this. I couldn't afford to do something rash and regret it later. I had more to worry about than myself.

A faint knock on the wall caught my attention, and I shoved my phone between two

cushions on the couch like a kid who'd been caught with something he'd had taken away.

Old habits died hard. And I still remembered the days when none of us were allowed to have our own social media. Phones were prohibited.

Arista's brows lifted in amusement, and I wanted to wipe the smirk off her face as she strode over to me and pulled the phone back out, setting it calmly in my hands.

"You know, you're not back there anymore.

You're a big boy. I think you can handle a social media account or two without embarrassing yourself too badly. "

I knew her words were meant to comfort, but something in them felt patronizing, scratched at the raw edges of my open wounds. "Do you always have to be such a bitch?" I snapped, tucking my phone into my jacket pocket. "I don't remember you being this insufferable."

Her low growl reminded me of the sound Yang-Jin used to make when he wanted to strangle me for something stupid I'd done.

"And I don't remember you being such a dick, but here we are.

" She pulled that fucking tablet from her side and shoved it in my face, a calendar app open on the screen.

"Here's your amended schedule, since you had to nap today instead of attending pre-scheduled interviews.

One of the interviewees canceled, citing the inability to work for someone so

inconsistent and unreliable. That leaves two.”

“Good,” I mumbled as I sifted through the week’s itinerary.

“I can’t work with someone who can’t roll with the punches.

I’ve got a kid. Nothing ever runs as smoothly as you want it to.

Whoever works for me needs to understand and accept that.

” I cut my glance to her frown, a fresh round of resentment rising inside me.

“Not that you’d understand how that works.

You’ve never been tied down a day in your life by responsibility like that. ”

She stopped breathing, her eyes glazing over as she broke our stare first and turned away.

“You have an appointment today with the label to discuss your plans for releasing a new album, and tomorrow we meet with the studio scheduler to plan out your times there. You’ll get to pick a producer, and I’ve lined up the best three in our label to meet you there?—”

“I can produce my own music, Arista,” I said flatly, matching her dull, monotone inflection. “Or have you forgotten everything about me since you left?”

Her eyes brimmed with tears when she turned around to face me, and an unfamiliar feeling of shame washed over me at the realization that I’d broken something in her with my words.

The other part of me, the part that still hated her, rejoiced in my newfound power.

I could make her hurt, just like she'd done to me.

She deserved it. I shouldn't feel bad about it.

She had it coming, that and more. So much more.

But I'd never been the kind of person to rejoice in hurting another.

"I remember a lot more than I care to, Jun," she said simply, refusing to let those defiant tears fall.

I had to admire her spirit. She was giving as good as she got, but something still didn't sit right with me about the whole thing.

I shook the itch down my spine off like it was nothing and pivoted topics.

"What's good to eat around here? I'm starving, and I don't feel like eating anything in the fridge. "

"I ordered some burgers and wings from the local hole in the wall about twenty minutes ago. Should be here soon."

"I hope you got?—"

"I ordered you half spicy buffalo, half the house bbq mix, and extra ranch, just like you like." She eyed me carefully, like she was afraid I'd bite. "Or, like you used to like."

I was dumbfounded. That she'd remember my comfort food after all these years, and

not only know on an instinctual level that I was hungry, but also craving something familiar, and took it upon herself to?—

“Old habits die hard,” I said instead of all the things circling my brain right then, knowing that nothing that came out of my mouth would be good for either one of us. “Sounds good.”

“I ordered Yejin a burger and some chicken tenders; from what I’m told, all kids seem to like those.”

My head bobbed sagely, not even up to the task of making a snide remark about her lack of knowledge of her own daughter.

“She’s not a picky kid. She’ll try anything once, too.

” I blinked slowly, the words slipping out under my breath, perhaps a little louder than I intended. “She gets that from you.”

Arista must’ve heard the comment, because I suddenly found myself alone in the kitchen, nothing but the lingering scent of her perfume in the air to keep me company.

And then, there was one.

Chapter

Eleven

ARISTA

“You’re supposed to keep him on schedule and make sure these sorts of things don’t happen!”

I winced as my boss’s voice echoed in the small office, accompanied by the asshole who’d reported me snickering in the background as I was reamed for not reaching out sooner.

It was my own fault. I’d avoided Jun for two days now, and as a result, he’d not only missed an important photoshoot but managed to get into an argument with his stylist over a color scheme for the costumes in his debut single’s video.

Now, the poor man had threatened to quit, and I was here, being ripped a new asshole for failing to keep control of my client, instead of smoothing things over so we didn’t have to pivot entirely to a new stylist and theme.

A waste of time.

And of course, it was Andrew who had ratted me out.

Andrew, the hand-picked assistant-in-training I’d foisted on Jun earlier this week.

I should have known picking an asshole like Andrew to spite Jun would backfire on me.

They were all buddy-buddy to each other's faces, but secretly, they hated each other.

He wouldn't last long, not with a wild card like Jun, but he'd cause enough chaotic upheaval that it would piss Jun off tremendously.

And though that was the goal originally, what I hadn't planned on was his two-faced bullshit with office politics, and his run-and-tattle personality.

Right now, I wanted to squash that prick under my boot. Unfortunately, I needed this job. And to leave as soon as possible, I'd need to bring Andrew up to speed so that by the time they realized they weren't suited to work with each other, I'd be far, far away, and well out of reach of the fallout.

A part of me, though, felt bad for leaving Jun with this scuzwad of a dude.

"Are you even listening, Rizzo?"

I shook the cobwebs from my brain and snapped back to attention. "I share your concerns, sir. This isn't outside of my capabilities, but it isn't something I'm used to doing every day. There are bound to be a few hiccups. I'll deal with it immediately."

"You'd better," he growled, leaning back in his chair. "Otherwise, you can kiss your new promotion goodbye. I know Steele has you earmarked to head that liaison department, but if you want that seat, you're going to have to work for it."

That seat should have been mine years ago.

Even in a woman-led and woman-owned company, I still faced daily misogyny.

It was bullshit was what it was, but I wasn't about to go whining to someone about the violations of my rights; from a woman's perspective, it would be seen as weak and become a target on my back.

Doesn't play well with others. Inability to solve problems within her department. The list of black marks it would cause on my record with HR went on and on. No, if I wanted to go anywhere in life, I'd need to deal with this on my own, or suck it up and let it slide.

Even if the way Andrew stared down at me made me wanna show him how easy it was to swallow your own balls if kicked properly.

"Secure the stylist and reschedule the photoshoot. If you can't make it work, I'll find someone who can."

And you can kiss your new position goodbye.

"Understood, sir," I assured him, half asleep on my feet and already ready to drop. Hell, it wasn't even lunchtime yet, but two hours of sleep a night was far from enough to properly function.

I hadn't been able to sleep well for a few days now. Probably another thing that was all thanks to the situation with Jun.

The meeting was cut short when the phone rang, and my boss waved me off, nodding for Andrew to follow me out the door. Of course, after he ran to tattle, he'd still have to finish his training with me.

Of course, as soon as the coast was clear, I turned around on a dime and gave him the most intimidating glare I could work up, all things considered.

"Listen, Andrew. You're new here, so I know you're not used to how things work.

But let me give you a little piece of advice for the future.

" I pretended to flick an imaginary piece of lint off my shoulder, staring away from him intentionally.

"If you can't fight your own battles, you'll find yourself reliant on the scraps of those above you.

And if you ever want to go anywhere in this business, your relationships with your coworkers and expertise field will be invaluable.

So ratting on someone for having an off day or two isn't likely to earn you any brownie points around here. "

His grin faltered for a moment. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"And I'm sure you do." My lips tightened into a straight line as I regarded this young upstart as an adversary, a stepping stone in the way of me getting what I wanted.

"You want to play stupid, that's fine with me, too.

Just don't look my way when you realize how deep of a hole you've dug yourself by crossing lines and burning bridges. "

I began to walk off, and this time, the boy had wisened up. His following distance was far greater than it had been, and the look in his eyes had changed from satisfied smugness to a sort of fearful awe and wariness.

Good. He should fear me. A healthy respect for the person who'd basically hand-

selected you was a necessity in this industry.

What did it matter if I'd only picked him to be a pain in the ass?

"Ah, ma'am, are we stopping for lunch today?"

My heels clicked to a stop at the top of the escalator to the main floor, blocking the path as I glanced over my shoulder. "Why don't you arrange Mr. Kim's lunch and stop to get yourself something along the way while I drop in and visit the stylist and sweet talk the photographer?"

Andrew didn't look like he planned to argue, so I tossed him the keys to the company vehicle and nodded, stepping onto the descending staircase.

At the bottom, I flipped my phone open and ordered a taxi, already running through the various ways I could kiss ass and promise favors without digging in too deep with Rico.

He was known to extract a blood contract over the smallest perceived slight or insult.

\* \* \*

I must've phased out on the ride over because the next thing I remembered was stepping out of the car, tipping the driver, and walking up the stairs to Rico's studio, tablet in hand, a throbbing pain in the side of my skull.

Rico was in the middle of an appointment, so I was relegated to the waiting room like some common client, not a liaison for the biggest entertainment company in town.

It didn't matter to Rico if I brought him over half his business.

He had the talent, the reputation, and the black book to fill the holes I'd leave if I took our talent away. And he knew it.

Which was why he made me wait over an hour to see him, even though he'd finished his work twenty minutes ago.

The fucker strode into the office like he was a god in human form, his nose securely in the air, and I was fast developing a regret in the pit of my stomach that I'd fucked myself over by aiming to piss off Jun through inconvenience.

Rico splayed in his chair and stared me down like I was a bug under his boot, even though just days ago, he'd been singing my praises and flirting with me.

It was always a shock to the system, how fast he flipped the switch.

Made you kind of concerned for his general mental state, made you wonder if he might be more dangerous than he looked.

I knew his secret, though. He was all bark and no bite. The posturing was all a ploy, and it worked so well.

On everyone but me.

“So,” he began, his eyes cutting over my body, a slight curl of distaste teasing the corner of his mouth. “You’re here to beg me to take that degenerate fuckboi client of yours back, aren’t you?”

Subtlety wasn’t Rico’s strong suit. But his ego, if handled correctly, could be manipulated. I leaned forward in my seat and grinned like I’d already won the game. “Actually, I’m here to thank you.”

His brows climbed up his forehead in a hilariously cartoonish manner. “Oh?”

“Exactly. If it weren’t for you refusing to take him back, I wouldn’t have discovered Tatiana De La Cruz is taking on new clients.

” I leaned back in my chair and spread my legs to match his posture, challenging his domination of the situation.

“She’s not only willing to take him on with short notice, but she’s eager to take on more of our clients in the future.

So I really must thank you, because now, I have more options under my belt to choose from, and her artistic vision aligns wonderfully with our label’s plans and goals. ”

It was a lie—Tatiana had reached out to tell us she’d eventually be taking on new clients, but she only worked with women.

A bad experience with men in the past had soured her on them, and I couldn’t blame her for her decision.

But there were still far more male artists and clients signed with kNight Entertainment than female, and that meant she wasn’t a viable option.

But she was Rico’s biggest competition. And just the act of dropping her name was enough to spur him to action.

His jaw dropped open like an old, oiled-up mailbox door, hanging there as he struggled to form words. “I?—”

“Of course, we’d need to formally end the contract with you, which you informed me

you were ready to do, so I brought a copy of the dissolution form with me so that we could?—”

Rico shot to his feet, sweat beading on his brow.

“Actually, Rizzo, maybe I was being too hasty in all this. After all, Mr. Kim is new to our culture. And I do sometimes let my emotions get the better of me.” Brushing his palms on his pants, he offered one to me, the skin still slightly clammy.

“Maybe we can just forget this incident ever happened?”

I’d like to see Andrew make something as amazing that.

Here I was, watching the unbendable, stubborn Rico practically beg to be given a second chance. The man who fired clients as quickly as he hired them, and who always managed to make the biggest deal out of the littlest thing, cowed by a woman. Two, to be precise, but nonetheless?—

I pretended to muse it over, knowing damn well even if I wanted to ditch him (and in the future, I would), I couldn’t at this particular junction in the contract. Jun’s debut depended on a flawless execution.

Restarting was out of the question. It would be a delay we couldn’t afford.

“I suppose it would be easier on me to let you finish out the client, rather than have to deal with Tatiana from scratch. But we’ve already lost time, and that means?—”

“I’ll push other clients back and make room for him.

I’ll stay late, if that works better for you.

Whatever you need.” Rico was one and a half inches away from prostrating himself on the floor.

Under normal circumstances, I might take a moment to gloat over that achievement.

But right now, I was exhausted, frustrated, and not interested in the power play like I normally would be.

There would be time for gloating later. Maybe after I’d left Jun behind in the hands of another and moved to my own office again.

When I didn’t spend my nights returning to the insomnia that frequented me when I first moved back.

“Deadline is now a week earlier than originally specified,” I muttered pointedly, watching as his eyes first widened, then contracted to damn near slits.

“If you think you’re capable of delivering on that, then just send my official email a request to rescind the termination, and I’ll note it on the record. ”

“Of course,” he practically whined, whipping out his phone that very moment. “When would it be a good time to bring him back in?”

Now it was my turn to pull out a phone, checking my calendar first, then Jun’s. “I’ll have to check with my coordinator at the studio first, but I think we have a gap in the schedule tonight after his interview that we can pencil you in for.”

Rico was known for his extravagant night party life. Asking him to miss out and take on a client after five at night was unheard of. He’d never in a million years go for it.

But I shot my shot anyhow.

“How does seven thirty sound?”

His nostrils flared. “At night?”

I nodded. “Of course, if that doesn’t work for you?”

“I’ll clear my schedule for the night. How soon can I know for sure if it’ll work for you or not?”

Now it was my turn to stand, a crooked smile spreading across my face as I walked to the door. “I’ll be in touch in a few hours.” After all, it wasn’t even noon yet. I had time. And a few other stops to make, too.

With that parting shot, rising a high I never thought I’d set foot on, I strode out of his office and into the midday sunshine, squinting against the brightness.

I still had a lot of work to do, but it was all downhill from here.

Crisis averted.

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Chapter

Twelve

JUN

I didn't see Arista at breakfast. According to Pujin, she'd already risen with the sun and gone off to who knew where.

Work, I assumed, but since she hadn't taken me with her, it wasn't anything I needed to worry about.

I settled down on the couch with a bowl of cereal after letting Yejin's new tutor in: a younger man with amazing credentials named Graham something-or-other.

He'd come highly recommended, and with Pujin's new men on the security detail, I was confident she was safe here in the house, learning from a veritable genius.

An hour later, I was starting to get antsy, though.

Here I was, nothing to do, up way too early for my liking, and Arista was nowhere in sight.

She never missed an opportunity to nag me, pester me, or just in general piss me off with whatever she could.

Ever since that interaction in the kitchen, though, we'd been like magnets with

opposing poles—repulsed to either end of the house, as far away as we could possibly be, even though our rooms were feet apart.

I should be happy about it.

I wasn't. In fact, I was the opposite.

I hated this feeling.

Working with the woman I hated was proving to be more confusing and complicated than I could have ever imagined. And the longer I avoided the issue, the worse the conflicting emotions in my head— and in my pants —got.

Around noon, Yejin emerged from her tutoring lesson with a smile on her face and a drawing in her hand. Graham followed behind her, giving me a curt nod before he launched into his overview on her progress.

“Her English skills are top-tier for her age. She must've been raised with it, I assume?”

” At my nod, he continued. “She's progressed far past the expectations for her age group, and quite honestly, she'll soon be beyond needing my services to fill the gaps.

” He pulled a slip of paper out of his shoulder bag and handed it to me.

“I compiled a list of top Montessori schools in the area, as well as a few more traditional ones, as well, for you to consider. I strongly recommend the first two, and I've got students I tutor from schools in this list who are worlds apart from their peers in terms of education. ”

“Uh, thanks,” I mumbled, already on overload. “I'll look into it. Appreciate the help.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” His hand fell on the doorknob just as it turned, and we both stepped back as a very frazzled-looking Arista strode through the opening, her tablet in hand, phone to her ear, voice tense as she argued with someone who clearly was giving her a run for her money.

“Listen, Ajax, it’s as simple as this. I pay you top dollar to make my clients look good in the press, and you know damn well you’re getting more than the market average.

So if I say I wanna reschedule an interview, your first words should be ‘yes, ma’am, what day works best for you,’ not two middle fingers up to me after all I’ve done for you.”

I recognized the name Ajax. It was the interviewer for the daily rag they called a newspaper in this town.

He also ran one of the biggest entertainment blogs in the country, and was active in all the circles that mattered.

He was also the man I’d cancelled on the other day because I felt like making things difficult for Arista.

Shit.

As if she could tell I was thinking about her, those piercing eyes cut to me, then to Graham, softening almost instantly as she offered him a smile and her free hand.

He took it and fucking bent over it like some fancy lad in a period drama, kissing the edge of her knuckles like a fairytale prince, and damn it if some sort of jealous rage didn’t roll right through my body at the idea of another man kissing her?—

Woah. Full stop, man. You don’t own her. She’s not yours anymore. And you’ve

made it perfectly clear you're not interested in patching things up.

It was easy to tell myself that. It was immensely harder to make myself believe it.

"Ah, Miss Simmons, how lovely it is to be blessed by your beautiful face again." His charisma dialed up to a twenty, and suddenly Arista was all fluttering lashes and coy smiles, pretending people didn't flatter her every day.

If they didn't, they fucking should.

"Oh, Graham, flattery will get you everywhere," she teased, taking her hand back before it became improper in his grip. "How are things?"

They walked off into the kitchen like this was her home and not mine, chatting like two old friends over his other famous clients and their progress.

Meanwhile, still clutching Yejin's picture, I fumed in place, unaware my daughter had also left me for greener pastures.

She sat at the island in the kitchen next to Arista, her pretty curls bouncing around her head as she animatedly told the woman who'd given birth to her about her lessons with Graham and how much fun they were.

Suddenly, it was like I was the outsider. Hell, she looked so much like her, you could almost mistake the three of them for a family, if it weren't for the telltale parts of me woven in between Arista's genetics.

We made beautiful fucking kids, at least.

I stormed into the kitchen, snarly and a total asshole as I slipped Yejin's photo on the fridge without even looking at it. Had I spotted it, I might've thought twice about

displaying it so prominently. I also might've avoided the interaction that came immediately after.

“Look, Miss Arista, Daddy’s hanging my picture! Mister Graham says I’m a natural with watercolors.”

As if on cue, all the eyes in the room turned to the painting I’d just released, and a collective gasp slipped from mine and Arista’s lips simultaneously.

Yejin had painted the lake just down the road from the house, but instead of two figures in the painting, there were three. A telltale streak of red hair on the third figure told me exactly what I was looking at, and my heart sank.

She’d drawn herself and I at the lake, and added in Arista.

Unknowingly, she was getting attached, and it’d barely been a few weeks since we moved here and she became entrenched in our lives again.

“It’s the three of us at the lake,” she said proudly, slipping off the stool she sat on.

“Maybe sometime we can take Miss Arista to see the ducks, Daddy. I think she’d like that.

She works so much.” As an afterthought, she cocked her head and smiled.

“You do, too. Uncle Minseo always said time off is important. But you don’t listen to him much. ”

Arista’s unladylike snort broke the sudden silence, and soon enough, I was cracking up with her, both of us doubled over at the very well-known fact that, despite Minseo’s unending efforts, I had never been much for taking time off.

He hated the workaholic in me, and never missed an opportunity to admonish me for it.

“Oh my god, remember the time he changed the locks on the studio to keep you from recording over the holidays instead of going home with him?” Her hair slipped slowly from the loose bun at the base of her skull as she giggled at the image I remembered all too well.

“You insisted I help you learn to pick locks so you could sneak in and hide from him.”

“You refused to teach me, if I remember correctly,” I mused, remembering the way I’d bent over her shoulder at the computer and practically whined that it was imperative to learn lockpicking to sneak into the damn recording booth.

As if two extra days was going to make that much of a difference. “So mean.”

My eyes shot to her tongue as she stuck it out at me, and all the blood rushed from my brain to .

. . other areas. I remembered what it felt like to have that tongue against mine, and suddenly the air was too thick for me to breathe.

Nostalgia held my tongue, arousal captured my body, and I was powerless to escape either as she sat there and worked her magic on me unwittingly.

Graham looked from her to me, then back again, and sighed, picking up his bag from the counter. “I’ll be going, then. I have an appointment with another client I shouldn’t be late for.” He turned his attention to me with a curt bow. “I’ll see you and Yejin again on Friday, Mr. Kim.”

“See you Friday, Graham,” I shot out, completely stuck on the woman in front of me.

Yejin had abandoned us for the fun she could find in the mini movie theatre, already no doubt queueing up her favorite shows on a screen that was disgustingly oversized.

And now it was just the two of us in here, alone with memories of the past, and unresolved emotional damage that threatened to tip the scales in either direction at the slightest provocation.

I didn’t speak, but my eyes were drawn back to the picture on the fridge as Arista cleared her throat and rose from her seat.

I wasn’t ready to let go of the only polite, friendly, not-forced interaction with her in half a week.

“I’m sorry I was so difficult this week,” I shot out, grabbing her wrist as she moved to leave the room. “You shouldn’t have to work extra hard to fix my mistakes.”

Her eyes searched for anything to look at that wasn’t me, and failed as they lifted to trap mine in an intimate gaze. “I’m used to fixing things. It’s what I’m good at.” Tears formed in the corner of her eyes, and she blinked furiously, trying desperately to hide this weakness. “Most of the time.”

It stunned me that she felt comfortable enough around me still, after all the bullshit I put her through, to show emotion of any sort. The sudden urge to chase away her tears overtook me, but laced within it was the thread of resentment still that I couldn’t quite let go of.

I stood, dragging her around to face me fully as I caged her in against the counter. “You can fix everything but your own problems, huh?” My left hand settled on the counter at her side, and she cringed away from it like touching me might burn her

alive.

Her hackles rose at my sudden intrusion. “I don’t have problems that need fixed,” she said defensively, trying to edge away from me. “But you do. So if you’ll excuse me?—”

I pressed in against her, letting her feel just what problems I was dealing with right then and there. “The only problem I have right now is the fact that I want to fight with you and fuck you at the same time, and I can’t decide which option is more appealing.”

It was like I was possessed, but I couldn’t stop.

I didn’t want to see her cry, but I was incapable of offering her support like a decent human would.

All I could do was goad her into more flammable territory, hoping like hell we didn’t burst into flames when I lit the match between us to distract her.

She held her breath as I leaned in, our noses practically touching, but she didn’t speak.

It was like words had failed her as surely as they were about to fail me.

But the second my nose grazed her cheek, the second my breath fanned across her throat, I felt her body finally react to mine—and when her hand trailed up my chest, I didn’t care if it was to stop me from going further or something else.

I trapped that hand there between my pecs with my right hand, and my lips grazed her ear as I admitted what I’d deny to the end of my life if asked.

“You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted this bad.” And I hated myself for that weakness. “You’re in my head and I can’t shake you.” Some days, I still touch myself to the memory of the last time we made love. “I hate it.”

“If you hate me so much, why are you forcing yourself on me?”

I reared back like I’d been shot. “Forcing?” I glanced down at her hand on my chest, and dragged it lower, slipping it under my shirt with a little groan. “Ari, babe, I’ve never had to force you a day in your life.”

I crushed my lips against hers, hungry to prove to her that she was as weak to resisting this as I was.

I wanted her to drown in this hatred with me, proving to her that she couldn’t forget, either.

I wanted to relish her defeat as she admitted to herself she still wanted me, still regretted leaving.

But victory wasn’t as sweet when you had to hurt someone to win.

Especially when you still cared about that someone.

I could taste it as her salty tears finally fell, mingling on our lips as we devoured each other, her hands creeping up the inside of my shirt, teasing the skin there like I’d imagined so many times over the years.

I heard a giggle from down the hall and was suddenly very aware that our daughter could walk in on us at any moment.

“Hold on tight, Ari,” I whispered against her throat as I lifted her by the hips and

guided her legs to wind around my waist. Carrying her up the stairs was easy—she weighed next to nothing, and I'd been spending more time in the gym lately to kill time.

In seconds, we were in my room, the door locked behind us, and I had her against the wall, pinned there with my hips as we groaned into each others' mouths, savoring the taste of a flavor we'd denied each other for far too long.

"Fuck," she muttered, her hands tearing at my shirt buttons with a little unsteadiness. "Jun, we?—"

"I don't want to hear about what we shouldn't be doing," I snarled, my hands yanking the shirt apart, buttons falling to the ground around me. "When have you ever known me to do what I'm supposed to?"

"A tiger can't change its stripes," she muttered, her nails raking lightly over my shoulders.

"You'd know better than anyone, I suppose," I snapped back, turning us around so I could toss her on her back in the center of my bed. Exactly where she belonged. "And I'm about to prove to you there's no point in denying it."

With a growl, I yanked her to the edge of the bed by her ankles, and stared down at her as those tears dried up and a mixture of arousal and anger filled the depths of those gorgeous blue orbs.

Perfect. Hate me all you want. But I bet you'll hate yourself more when you look in the mirror later.

The sentiment that had excited me not that long ago tasted like ash on my tongue.

Chapter

Thirteen

ARISTA

I was losing my damn mind. “Jun,” I pleaded, trying to rationalize with this feral man who looked like he might unhinge his jaw and eat me at any moment. “What about Yejin?—”

“She’s fine.” His long fingers wrapped effortlessly around my ankles and held me tight as he knelt on the floor at the end of the bed, those dangerous hands moving up my legs to rest on my knees. “You never worried about her before. Don’t start now.”

A wave of fresh regret slammed into me with his words. Here I was, about to let the man who hated me most in this world take my clothes off for a midday romp in the sheets. I searched around for my pride, but found none.

Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

It’d been so long since I’d let a man touch me—he’d been the last. And here I was, on my back on his sheets, prepared to throw all my common sense to the wind and let him fuck me senseless.

What was wrong with me?

His eyes followed the line of my legs until they disappeared into my skirt, and the

feral grin that spread over his face was nothing short of panty-melting. Once upon a time, he'd looked at me like that all the time. Now, there was an edge of malice in that grin that made me hesitate.

But like the whore she was, my pussy responded to his gaze as it raked over me again, drinking me in like a tall glass of water on a hot summer's day.

Gods, how I wanted this man even still.

"Your legs look better than I remember," he whispered, his hand trailing up the inside of my knees, teasing the sensitive skin there.

"Well, I'm not seventeen anymore," I pointed out dryly, rolling my eyes to break the intense gaze he leveled on me. "I'm sure parts of you are different now, too."

His grin widened. "Only in the ways that matter."

With that, he let those fingers move further up my body, snaking under my skirt to grip the edges of my panties. With a flick of his wrist, he had them down my legs and tossed across the room, only the thin fabric of my skirt hiding me from his gaze.

I shuddered in anticipation.

"Hold still."

My skin prickled under his touch, the tickling sensation of his skin against mine familiar and foreign in the same heartbeat. Nothing about this was the same as the boy I'd left behind, and yet . . .

And yet it was like coming home.

I breathed a sigh of regret for the missed time as those talented fingers crawled back up my thighs, curling around the edges of my hips as he tugged me even closer still.

My skirt hiked up, baring me to his gaze, and I felt the warmth of a blush crawl up my throat as I turned away from his intense stare.

I couldn't hide from his chuckle, though.

"You're hiding from me," he teased, his smile evident even in the tone of his voice. "Not so brave anymore, are you?"

"Fuck you," I spat, hating that I felt the need to shield myself from this man. I wasn't some pathetic coward. I had a backbone, and damn it, I wouldn't let him make me feel shameful about taking advantage of a mutual attraction.

With new resolution in my soul, and a fire banked in my blood, I propped myself up on my elbows and stared him in the face, refusing to look away no matter how warm my cheeks got. I wanted to wipe the smirk of victory off his pretty fucking face.

He beat me to it, though, when he spotted the scar on the inside of my hip, exposed to the room's dull light.

His finger traced the long, faint reminder of how close I came to losing everything, once upon a time. "How did you get this?"

I couldn't tell him his previous label had sent someone after me to kill me and his daughter.

I wouldn't hurt him like that, no matter how badly he hurt me with his misunderstandings.

His peace and security relied on me holding fast to the lies I'd built up around me, specifically to keep them both safe.

So I did what I had become an expert at doing to myself, and I lied.

"Car accident a few years ago." I tossed my hair back and sighed. "No need to pretend to be concerned on my behalf."

"I'm not," he said suddenly, almost angry in his intensity. "Just curious." His gaze returned to my pussy as he spread my legs, lowering himself between them with single-minded intent.

My blush returned as he closed his eyes and inhaled my scent like some sort of wild animal.

"Jun . . ."

"You smell like everything I've wanted for years."

As far as confessions went, that one wasn't bad. But it wasn't what I was expecting. Neither was the feel of his tongue on my clit as he fell to eating me out instantly, working my body like a seasoned pro.

A twinge of envy went through me as his tongue curled around my sensitive nub, unable to hide my curiosity as to where he learned a move like that.

When he slid two fingers deep inside my soaked cunt, I let out a moan and my eyes rolled into the back of my head, searching for absolution from the way I let my thighs fall apart in invitation of more.

"Mmm," he mumbled against me, his lips curling up in a smile between my legs. "I

still know how to make you weak for me.”

“Get fucked,” I growled, hating how much I ached for him.

“I’m about to,” he snapped back, yanking his fingers out of me as he moved up my body and caged me in against his sheets. “There’s a condom in my end table. Put it on me.” His eyes burned into my soul. “Wouldn’t want any more accidents between us.”

The tears burned against the edges of my vision as I recalled the words the doctor told me when he put Yejin in my arms after delivery.

You’ll never be able to have any more kids.

“No need,” I gasped, hoping he’d mistake my breathlessness for arousal and not weakness. “I can’t get pregnant.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time you told me you were safe and weren’t,” he pointed out, his words like knives in my soul. And yet, here I was, on my back in his bed, about to let him have his way with me.

Wordlessly, I inched up the bed and reached into his nightstand, yanking out the box of condoms with a grimace. Had he planned to use them on another girl?

It’s none of my business. He’s not mine anymore.

Wordlessly, I pulled a single foil wrapper from the box and tossed the rest away, unwrapping it like I’d done it a thousand times before. In reality, I’d only ever used them once or twice before, with him. Years and years ago.

But it was like riding a bike.

“Are you pulling it out or do I have to?” I stared at his pants as if I could undo them without touching him. Like the condom might magically put itself on if I just stared hard enough.

“If you want it, then take it.”

I had never been one to back down from a challenge, but I wasn't going to lay here on my back and let him play power games with me. I might be his assistant right now, but I was nobody's puppet.

With a well-placed leg hook move, I rolled us so he was on his back, my skirt hiding my lower half from his eyes as I settled back on his thighs and let my hands trail over his belt.

“You're the one who dragged me up here to ravish.

” I let my gaze fall to his bulge, which was impressive, now that I was up close and personal.

“But I'm not one to turn down a good time when it's offered to me. ”

Another lie. But he didn't have to know that. As long as I kept him at a distance, everything would be okay.

Without another word, I yanked his belt free of the buckle, tore his zipper down, and reached inside his pants like I'd been doing this to men my whole life.

Like I was some experienced pro at it. I didn't let it phase me that I hadn't held a dick in my hands in years. Not since his, seven years ago.

“Fuck,” he whispered under his breath, gasping for air as he stared up at me. “You

handle a lot of dicks in our time apart?”

For the first time since I’d promised myself not to get involved, I slipped up and let the cracks in my wall show.

“Just this one.”

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

Before he could process that revelation, I stroked him from hilt to tip, prepping him for the condom. With a flick of my wrist, I had the damn thing over his impressive cock, watching it twitch in my hand as a rush of power flooded my senses.

I’d dreamt of this day for so damn long, and now that the moment was here, all I could do was file away every soft sigh and moan of his for the future.

This wouldn’t be happening again.

“Ride me,” he demanded, staring at my hand on his dick like he’d never seen it in the grip of a woman before in his life. “I like to watch.”

Fuck, why was that so hot?

I groaned and lifted my skirt out of the way, his eyes like a physical presence on me as I inched upward and hovered over his cock, prepared to impale myself on him without remorse.

But it wasn’t like before. I wasn’t prepared for the way he stretched me out, all the way from tip to base, his cock twice the size I remembered.

“Shit,” I whispered, throwing my head back with a groan. “You’re so big.”

“That’s what they all tell me,” he mocked, clearly pleased with himself and his prowess in bed. “But I’ve had no complaints.”

“Well let me be the first.”

He chuckled, and it dissolved into a groan as I shifted my weight on him. “If you can find something to complain about, I’ll be surprised.”

I didn’t bother responding. Instead, I rose on him, falling with grace as I let him fill me up.

Over and over, like a woman possessed, I fucked myself on his shaft, riding him like my life depended on it.

Like I’d spent the last seven years dreaming of this moment.

Like he’d starred in every single one of my wet dreams and solo session fantasies.

Because he had.

Because It was always him. It was only ever him. And it would only ever be him.

There was never going to be another. Not in this lifetime, or the next.

Jun filled me up over and over, stretching me in ways I forgot my body could, making room for himself in a place I’d never let another man even think of being.

With every thrust, he carved his name on my soul, reclaiming his place in my life like he’d never left.

His hands moved to my hips, assisting me as I switched to rocking and bouncing, pushing him against every inch of my insides to feel him everywhere.

I needed to etch him on every part of me. Parts that would only belong to him. So that I would never forget him, even after he was out of my life again.

The tears that formed in my eyes refused to stay silent this time, and with a gasp, I tossed my hands over my face and leaned into it, hoping he'd mistake my sobs for body-shaking ecstasy.

"Fuck, Ari, babe, you're so good at this," he moaned beneath me, his hips rocking up to meet mine as I moved, shoving himself inside me as far as he possibly could go. "Been practicing?"

With each word he spoke, I broke apart a little more inside, whether he realized it or not. And the further he pushed, the harder it'd be to come back to myself when this was over.

I should walk away right now. This shouldn't go any further. But I was too far gone to care, too deep in the delusions and desires I'd locked up for far too long, to pull the plug on this last act of self-gratification now.

I wasn't strong enough to walk away anymore.

Chapter

Fourteen

JUN

I might not have the experience I let her think I did, but men talked. Men shared stories. And I'd always been a good listener. Every move, every technique, was learned through someone else. I'd never so much as held another woman the way I'd once held Ari, let alone fucked them.

But she didn't seem to notice.

Maybe she'd just been with that many losers that my learned skill was superior to what scraps she'd been living off of.

Her body sucked me in as I eagerly met her thrust for thrust, our bodies working in tandem as we both raced toward the finish line and sweet release. She felt like fucking heaven around me, so tight, so achingly perfect, like we were meant to be together.

A low growl escaped me as she tossed her hands over her face and arched her back, soft moans and whimpers leaving her with every shift in our bodies.

I was tired of being underneath her. It was high time I show her who was really in charge here.

Me.

In a quick move I'd learned with clothes on as part of a variety show, I hooked her with my arms and legs and flipped us so she was beneath me on her back, still hidden behind those hands.

She parted two fingers to peek out at me as I gave her back as good as I got, taking the opportunity to showcase my hips, the part most integral to an idol's marketable sexuality.

Her moans deepened, and as if she'd forgotten to hide from me, those fingers fell away, baring her face to my scrutiny.

She was crying.

Tears streamed down her face, giving me pause enough to slow my movements as her eyes met mine. And then I spotted the fire in the depths of her gaze and brushed that momentary guilt from my mind.

I shouldn't feel bad for her shame. If she felt a certain kind of way about what she was doing, she'd had multiple opportunities to back out.

"I'm not going to last long like this," I growled at her, grabbing for one of her hands as I spoke the words.

"If you want that orgasm, you'd better help me out a little.

" I guided her hand to her lower stomach, hoping she picked up the hints I was dropping.

I didn't want to do it like this. Everything within me screamed at me to touch her,

stroke her, show her pleasure that she'd never known before.

But my brain was at war with that softer side, insisting I take what I wanted and leave her to get her own on her own time.

I couldn't bring myself to pick a side, so this was the best middle ground I could offer.

Her tears shimmered in the corner of her eyes as she forced a smile to her lips. "Cheater." Despite the taunt, I could see the brokenness in her leaking out, no matter how hard she tried to hide it.

It should make me happy. I wanted to break her, to make her hurt like she'd done to us.

But suddenly, the victory wasn't as sweet as it'd looked when my dick wasn't buried in the only girl I'd ever loved, actively hurting her with the same thing that we'd once shared in our mutual love.

Fuck, I was a prick.

My balls tensed up as she reached down and touched herself, legs wrapped around my waist in invitation, pulling me deeper as she clenched around me and closed her eyes, a fresh wave of tears staining the sheets beneath her cheeks as her hips canted in my direction.

The move was so perfect, it had me seeing stars, and as her body began to shake, I let out a feral groan of pleasure and sank to the hilt inside her, stilling as I filled the condom with my cum.

Her hot, wet cunt clenched around me, milking me dry as my body grew weak,

threatening to give out on me. I managed to roll sideways as my arms trembled and gave out, flopping on my back beside her with a whoosh of air.

I carefully tugged the condom off my softening cock and tossed it in the waste bin beside the bed, refusing to look in her direction now that the deed was done.

I was childish, I knew. I could have been an adult about it and done right by her.

I could have gotten a towel and cleaned her up, maybe even let her lay there and gasp for air like I was.

Hell, when this had been an act of love and not a punishment, we'd spend hours in each other's arms post-sex, cuddling and talking about the future.

Now, all I wanted was to be alone with the shame of what I'd done to feed the monster I'd become. The jealousy and resentment I'd let control me.

"There's towels in the bathroom," I rasped, throwing an arm behind my head like I didn't have a care in the world. That's right, man. Let her think you're not affected by any of this. "Clean yourself up before you leave."

The bed went still around me as she processed my words, letting their intention sink in. When the reality hit her, she let out a soft, pained sigh of resignation, rolling onto her side to slip from my bed. I watched covertly as she marched in the direction of the bathroom.

I didn't miss the way she refused to look at me as she fished her panties off the floor when she re-emerged, and then slipped silently out of my room.

And once she'd left me with nothing but my own thoughts to keep me company, I realized just how deep my feelings ran.

I had always harbored a resentment for her actions, but I'd never stopped to disentangle the love I'd had for her, from the devastating betrayal that I felt when she left and didn't look back.

And when she left Yejin on my doorstep months after I thought I'd never see her again, it ripped open old wounds.

All the feelings had compounded onto each other until all I could see was what burned hottest: the rage. The hatred. The anger.

I'd never stopped loving her, beneath all that, though, and now that I could see myself actively hurting her, I wanted to puke.

How could I treat the woman who'd carried a child she clearly didn't want, for me, like a piece of dirt in my shoe?

How could I use her like that, say words like those to her?

How could I live with myself for treating someone's daughter like that, when I'd kill someone for looking sideways at my own?

I tossed around on the bed, confused and upset and disappointed in myself for the situation I'd created.

Only I could be blamed for the tangled mess of feelings drowning me right now, and if I didn't sort them out before I walked out that bedroom door in the morning, there was no telling how much more complicated it'd be going forward.

If it wasn't already too late.

Chapter

Fifteen

ARISTA

I layed in bed for an hour, just staring at the ceiling, debating my life choices and the sheer stupidity I'd just exercised by letting myself fall right back into bed with a man I couldn't ever have a future with.

It was stupid. Reckless. Irresponsible.

It was so fucking good.

Fuck, I could still feel him inside me, stretched and filling and holyfuckingshit ? —

“Get a grip on yourself, girl,” I muttered to myself as I puttered around the kitchen, throwing together something for dinner for the house.

Pujin was in a meeting with the agency at HQ, and the security team he'd left behind was shackled up with takeout in their little mobile unit outside.

I'd offered them food on several occasions, but they always declined, preferring their fast food and quick cleanup to actually intruding on us for a feast.

I couldn't blame them. Some people could keep work and personal life separate, and were smart about it.

Not me, clearly.

I should have just told the bosses I didn't feel comfortable taking on the job. Should have insisted I didn't have time. That I was needed elsewhere. Hell, I could have made up a million and one excuses for why I couldn't take this job.

So why had I just rolled over in an uncharacteristic show of submission when they told me about it?

Was I not over Kim Seo-Jun?

Of fucking course you're not. You never stopped loving him. To get over someone, you have to make a conscious effort to close the door on that chapter of your life.

Instead, I just opened it up again

My phone rang as I absently stirred the simmering vegetables, and I reached out and answered it without even looking at the caller ID.

"Hello?"

Breathing echoed on the other end of the line as Jun walked in the door, Yejin towing him along as she rambled about her latest lesson and the things she had learned.

He appeared to give her his full attention, but I noticed the subtle shift in his posture, the tensing of his shoulders as he spotted me out of the corner of his eye and did his best to avoid me.

Which was weird.

Jun hadn't ever been one to shy away from an awkward situation. And I mean, it's

not like he forced me to fuck him. He'd been right: I fell eagerly back into his bed, despite knowing better than to get involved.

"Hello?" I tried again, hoping to stimulate the other end of this call into conversation. "Is someone there?"

"You were warned," the voice rasped, then the line went dead.

I stared down at my phone in bewilderment and confusion. "The fuck was that about?"

"That's a bad word," Yejin piped up out of nowhere, her little smile lighting up the room as she climbed onto a stool and peered into the skillet. "But you're an adult, so you're allowed." She wrinkled her little nose and inhaled the scent of dinner. "Smells like home."

I froze as she hopped back down and returned to her conversation with her father, like the whole interaction had been nothing more than a blip on her radar. But out of the mouths of babes, as they say.

Smells like home.

Such an innocent comment, and yet so very much loaded with potential.

The dish was simple, and true enough, it was Korean in nature: japchae, a stir fry of vegetables, beef, and glass noodles in a soy-based sauce.

Savory and yet a hint of sweetness, the dish was one that I'd grown fond of while I lived in Seoul.

And I made it about once a month or so, even when I lived alone.

It hadn't even been a conscious decision to pull it out and cook it tonight.

I had the ingredients, and I'd planned to make it later in the week, anyhow.

Now, it felt almost performative.

"Japchae?" Jun asked softly, his eyes lifting momentarily from our daughter to meet mine as I stared in shock. "You still know how to make it?"

I shrugged, suddenly very self-conscious. "Minseo would kick my ass if I'd forgotten what he taught me."

My heart ached as the little knives of our shared past dug a little deeper, twisted a tiny bit more in light of the skills one of our mutual friends had taught me in order to make Jun happy.

I'd asked him to teach me Korean cuisine so that I could cook for Jun's birthday.

Insisted he teach me how to pluck out a song on a guitar so that I could play something for him as he blew out his candles.

I'd been so in love with him it hurt just thinking about it.

"I love japchae!" Yejin exclaimed as she spun in her seat, eyes wide and tongue lolling out her mouth like an eager puppy. "Uncle Minnie makes the best japchae."

"I hope mine lives up to the hype," I muttered politely, reaching for a bowl to serve it in. I forgot all about that strange phone call as I set the food down and passed out bowls of rice, eager to have an excuse not to talk to anyone.

Jun picked at his dish, but Yejin ate with gusto, shoveling it down so fast I worried

she might choke on it. When she asked for seconds, the joy I felt, the validation, was new to me. I'd fed coworkers and friends before, but nobody had ever appreciated it like she did.

"Daddy," she said between mouthfuls, pointing at him with her fork. "Do you like Miss Arista's food? I think it's better than Uncle Minnie's."

Jun laughed awkwardly. "You'd better not let your Uncle Minnie find out you said that."

"The student must eventually surpass the teacher, right?" I smiled at the thought of Minseo eating his own words.

Once upon a time, he'd insisted I'd never master the dish.

I always made it too sweet, or not sweet enough, he'd say.

Funnily enough, he was the only one who ever complained, and even then, he still ate it.

There were never any leftovers.

Jun's laughter was awkward and stilted, and it set my teeth on edge to hear him force it in front of Yejin for the sake of normalcy.

I picked up my bowl of rice, shoveled a bit of the japchae onto the top, and excused myself to my room to work.

In reality, I was running away. Hiding. I was a coward.

I realized belatedly that I'd left my phone on the counter, but there was no way I was

going down to retrieve it until I heard Yejin and Jun's doors close for the night.

I waited for hours, scrolling through the schedule the company had sent to me for approval and revision, if necessary, trying—and failing miserably—to pretend everything was fine. Just as I heard the door across the hall close, a knock at my own shook me from my absent-mindedness.

Shit.

I almost opened my mouth to let whoever it was know to come in, but then the pain of being essentially booted from his room after serving my purpose returned in a flash, and bile rose in the back of my throat.

I shuffled across the room with my tablet in hand and opened it a bit, staring blankly at Jun as he stood there and stared right the fuck back.

“Oh. Hi.”

He glanced over my shoulder in my room, his eyes narrowed a bit. “You gonna let me come in?”

I glanced back at the state of disarray of my room and frowned. “No.”

Annoyance tainted his voice as he huffed, holding his hand out to me. It took me a minute to realize he was holding my phone.

He brought my phone up to me.

I took it and offered him a tight smile. “Thanks.”

“I put away the leftovers, and tossed the dishes in the dishwasher.” As if I'd thought

he might not. Was he looking for validation? Appreciation? “So, I?—”

“Sorry, Jun, but unless it’s important, it’ll have to wait.

I’ve gotta go through this week’s schedule and get it back for final approval by the company by morning.

” I didn’t wait for a response as I shut the door in his face and bit my bottom lip, wanting nothing more than to drag him back into my room so I could ask him to defile me again.

Which was exactly why I had to shut the door on that idea, and fast.

My phone vibrated in my hand, and I sighed, flipping it open as Liaison Dept flashed across the screen.

“Rizzo here.”

“Rizzo, we’re drowning over here without you.” Of course, Tanner, with no preamble, no greeting, right into the heart of things. “When do you come back?”

I sighed. “As soon as they let me. Steele put me on translator duty and assistant staffing for the foreseeable future. I’m working on finding him staff to replace me as quickly as I can.”

“Good.” Tanner took a short breath, and I sighed.

There was more, I knew there was, but he wouldn’t actually come out and tell me unless I asked. “Tanner? Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

I could practically hear the panic whoosh out of him. “Oh my god, Rizzo, there’s a

new client on deck that we're struggling with. She's not happy with anything we offer, and she's changed liaisons three times now. I'm worried we'll lose her if we can't lock her down."

I thought back over the list of clients we'd been planning to work, remembering the one I told them to be careful with. "Mi-Soo?"

"That's the one. She's been really giving us a run for our money the last week, and I'm worried she's thinking about pulling out of the contract."

I frowned. "How many more days are on her probationary contract period?" If we could keep her happy long enough, she'd be locked in and we could relax a little.

But with Mi-Soo, we'd signed a feel it out contract, allowing her to see if she wanted to stay with our company or seek elsewhere.

She wasn't blacklisted, per se, so she had options.

But her cousin had just joined our ranks, and he'd insisted she give it a shot.

If I'd known she was so damn difficult, I'd have told him no thank you. But she was a looker, and we needed some new models in our ranks.

"I'll have to check, but I think she's got a few days left. Maybe three?"

"And I assume she's aware just how many days she has left to make her decision with us.

" Because if she did know, it wouldn't surprise me if she was trying to push to see how far we'd bend until we broke.

“I tell you what, Tanner. Leave her to me. I think we’ll be close enough with tomorrow’s schedule to run into each other. Maybe I can work some magic for you.”

“Oh my god, that would be amazing, Rizzo. You’re the literal best!” Tanner didn’t waste time waiting for me to sign off. He just hung up and that was that.

And now I was back to doing two jobs in a mad dash to prevent the department I wanted to head from imploding while I was busy elsewhere. As if life wasn’t already hard enough.

I wanted off this damn ride.

Chapter

Sixteen

JUN

“Alright, people, places! We have to shoot this part of the video before lunch! Places!”

The director of the music video shoot screamed obscenities and orders left and right, determined to make everything perfect for the next section of the shooting. Of course, there was no such thing as perfect, but nobody seemed eager to tell him that.

I was no exception.

I took my spot and prepared to be micromanaged, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t concentrate. Not after the other night.

I didn’t need another distraction. But ever since I reminded myself what it felt like to bury myself in someone—in Arista, specifically—my brain was a hot mess of jumbled chaos.

I gave Yejin two different shoes to put on this morning. I forgot my phone on the counter when I left the house. Hell, I even managed to put my shirt on backward, and had a polite backup dancer not brought it to my attention, I’d likely have never noticed.

“Mr. Kim, are you with us?”

I shook my head free of the emotions clouding my thoughts and smiled politely at the man whose time I was taking up. “Sorry, director. I’m ready to go again.”

“From the top. I want you to really get into it this time. You’re back, you’re bigger than life itself, show me the zest! I wanna see life and excitement in every move you make.”

I nodded and put my hands atop the back up dancers’ connected hands, letting the music flow through me as we went through the movements. Left, right, up, down, circles, there wasn’t a direction we didn’t move. But it still wasn’t perfect.

“I’m not feeling you connect with the music, Mr. Kim. You’re here with us, but your heart isn’t.” The director called for a break, giving me a moment’s reprieve to breathe and regroup with my thoughts.

If I could get my runaway imagination under control, this would all be so much easier.

“Struggling out there?”

A steaming cup of coffee appeared in front of my nose, and I took it without thinking, closing my eyes as I inhaled the potent, rich scent. Fuck, I needed this.

Arista frowned as she surveyed me up and down, clearly concerned with my performance. “Whatever’s bothering you, you’d better deal with it. We don’t have time to pencil in a mental breakdown on your schedule.”

My laughter was as dry as her sense of humor. “I’ll try to remember that while the director screams at me about how my heart’s not in it next time.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Why does he think your heart’s not in it? Where else would it be?”

With you. “Right where it’s always been.” I jammed a thumb into my chest. “He’s just mad he doesn’t look this good when he wakes up.”

She rolled her eyes, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Crisis averted. “Okay, well, Mr. Perfection, we have to rush over to the company in a little bit. You have a short appointment with HR and legal, and then we’re off again to the studio.

” She glanced sideways at me with another frown.

“I assume you can handle yourself at the company without getting into trouble?”

“I’m not a child.” The fact that she would even suggest I wasn’t capable?—

“Okay. I won’t be far if there’s any issues.”

“Mr. Kim, are you still filming, or should we pack up and go home?”

I glanced back at the director, wishing it was appropriate to roll my eyes at the man. He had a way of sounding offensive and polite in the same breath. When I turned back, Ari was gone.

Great.

“Alright, I’m coming, keep your shorts on, man.”

We wrapped filming about an hour later. I’d never been so happy to leave the dance

studio in my life.

Arista was nowhere in sight, though. I spotted a familiar face at the corner of the room and made a beeline for Pujin as he scrolled through something on his phone.

“Pujin, my man!” I faked a friendly punch to his shoulder, and he checked me back, smiling from ear to ear. “What brings you here?”

“Ah, your detail had something to attend to today, so I took over his shift for the rest of the day.” He patted his pockets down and frowned. “We’re supposed to go to the HR department, but I don’t quite remember where it is. Miss Arista drew me a map, but I seem to have misplaced it.”

“Did you say the HR department?”

A vaguely familiar voice echoed from behind me, and I turned to find a face I’d rather not have run into anytime soon.

Han Mi-Soo, a Korean model and soon-to-be actress, flashed her pearly whites and winked at me, wrapping herself around my arm with a giggle that set my teeth on edge.

“Oh my gosh, Kim Seo-Jun, I can’t believe my luck! When did you join kNight Rising?”

I tried, and failed, to pry her off my arm, sighing when it became very apparent she wasn’t about to loosen her grip.

“I’m new,” I admitted, scowl deepening as Ari chose that moment to walk around a corner, her eyes zeroing in on my predicament.

“Listen, Mi-Soo, I think I forgot something in my car, so maybe you should head along on your own this time?—”

“Han Mi-Soo, just the woman I was looking for,” Arista said coolly, her eyes narrowed to near slits as she regarded the other woman like a shark eyes an injured seal. “I hear you’re giving my guy Tanner a hard time with the contract negotiations.”

Ari glanced at me and then just as quickly, her eyes returned to Mi-Soo, dismissing me in a flash. Mi-Soo, however, looked like she might throw a childish temper tantrum right there in the hallway of the label.

She pouted at Ari, crossing her arms over her chest and thankfully releasing me in the process. “I did no such thing. He’s being unreasonable is all it is.”

Ari’s lips twitched. “I’ll just bet.”

I took a step backward, preparing to bail with Pujin in tow if I needed to. Last thing I wanted to do was get in between two women who looked ready to kill.

“What was he so unreasonable about, Mi-Soo?”

Ari’s glare was on point, and it had me shaking in my boots. How Mi-Soo stood there acting like she wasn’t known for being the biggest pain in the ass in the industry was beyond me.

“He said there’s no precedent for me choosing my own staff.” Her foot stamp would have been hilarious if she was five. “I should be able to make any demands of my staff that I want.”

“You requested all male staff,” Ari said slowly, her nose twitching. “And then you said they’d have to look a certain way. And after that, you propositioned your

security guard?—”

“I would never!” Mi-Soo blushed, ratting herself out. “Whoever accused me of that is a liar.”

“I’m not here to play whodunnit, Miss Han.

I’m here to tell you that I’m no longer offering any negotiations on the contract.

As a matter of fact, I’m making some amendments to the contract to protect your future staff.

If you’d like to sign with us, then by all means, head down to legal and have them walk you through the changes.

But should you decide to go elsewhere, I wish you all the best.”

“Excuse me?” Mi-Soo probably had never been turned down in her life by a label. So for her to be summarily dismissed so out of pocket by Ari must’ve been a hell of a blow. “Do you know who I am?”

“I do. Han Mi-Soo, daughter of Han Do-Hyun, internet sensation and ex-idol. Cousin to one of our best male model clients. Oh, and you’re a spoiled brat, too, with a reference sheet to back it up that’s a mile long.” Ari cocked her head and frowned. “Did I miss anything?”

Mi-Soo looked like she might explode. I honestly hoped she would do it while I was around to watch.

“You’re a bitch, and I’m going straight to your bosses about this.”

“Contract expires in a few hours, Ms. Han. I would worry less about trying to get me fired, and more about whether your agent needs to submit your portfolio to other labels or not.”

Mi-Soo turned away from Ari and batted her lashes at me. “See how they treat their clients? It’s horrible.”

I shrugged. “I don’t have any issues with the label.” My eyes cut to Arista, and I fought to contain a soft smile that threatened the edges of my lips. “Or the staff.”

Mi-Soo reached for me again, but before I could move out of her way, Ari was there with a rolled-up newspaper, thwacking her on the arm like a puppy who piddled on the carpet.

“Hands off the merchandise, Ms. Han. You wouldn’t want any dating scandals to get back to your current label, now, would you?”

Mi-Soo’s eyes narrowed, and with a huff of frustration and defeat, she stormed off, hands balled into fists, growling like a feral cat.

I turned to thank Ari, but she already wore an expression of irritation that warned me away from opening my mouth at all. She probably thought there was something going on between me and Mi-Soo, but she couldn’t be more wrong.

Mi-Soo took a shine to me at an event a few years back, and ever since then, she’d been pushing her dad to try and put us together.

Fortunately for me, her father didn’t think I was good enough for his princess.

He had his eyes set on a doctor or politician for the family tree. And I was neither, thank god.

“You should probably keep your hands off of women like her. She’s nothing but trouble.” Her eyes crawled over me, making me feel an inch tall. “And you’ve got a daughter to think of.”

She had no right to tell me who I should and shouldn’t have around my daughter.

“I am well aware of my decisions and how they affect the daughter I’ve raised on my own for seven years now. Maybe you should mind your business regarding my love life.”

“Have it your way,” she said dismissively, crossing her arms over her chest. “Legal is waiting for you in the HR meeting rooms. Don’t keep them waiting.” Her finger pointed the way, and then without a word she left me standing there in the dust as she walked away again.

Just like always.

Chapter

Seventeen

ARISTA

I refused to take the bait. Mi-Soo was playing a game. I knew damn well she didn't have any better prospects lined up, and the longer she was off the market, the harder it'd be to get back on top. If she wanted to work in Nocturna Beach, she'd sign the new contract and stop jerking our chains.

Tanner understood. But there was no doubt in my mind I'd have a stern talking-to lined up from my superiors when they caught wind of the tactics I used.

Mi-Soo had been a frustrating, spoiled, entitled bitch from the start. And girls like that only understood one type of handling—the tough kind.

I had to force her hand to make things happen. I just hoped the bosses would understand.

But there was no hiding the emotion that ran through my veins when I spotted her hands all over Jun.

Rage. Jealousy. Anger.

I wanted to rip her arm off her body and beat her with it. I wanted to claw her eyes out. I wanted to do a number of things that could land me in jail.

But he wasn't mine. I had no say over his life. Hell, wasn't I currently rushing temp hires so I could run in the other direction from this shit show?

But seeing him with someone else still hurt.

I didn't wait for them to finish the meeting. I gave Pujin orders to escort Jun for the remainder of his daily schedule, and I bailed like a fucking coward.

I made it to the parking garage before I realized something was off.

I stopped walking, and behind me somewhere, someone else's footsteps halted a second after mine. If I turned around, it'd give me away. Instead, I pulled my cellphone out of my pocket and dialed our building's security team emergency line.

"kNight Rising, Dan here. Is there an emergency?"

"Hey, Kathy. I'm just heading down to the parking garage now. Are we still on for dinner tonight?" I started walking again, slower this time, listening for the second set of footsteps as I waited for the guard to pick up on the code.

"Yes or no, ma'am: are you currently in the east garage?"

"Yes."

"Are you in danger?"

I stopped, reaching into my bag as if I were searching for a compact. "Maybe. What do you think about that new restaurant in the main building? I hear the view from the third floor is amazing at sunset."

"Third floor, east garage. We're sending someone out to you right now. Please stay

on the line with us.”

My relief was short-lived as someone came up behind me and put what felt like a gun to the back of my head.

“Hang up,” a raspy voice whispered. “You can talk to your little friend later.”

“I’m sorry, Kathy, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you at the restaurant in a bit.”

The second I hung up, the stranger behind me pulled the phone from my hand and threw it to the ground, stomping it like a fucking bug under his shoe. “Now that that’s out of the way, let’s have a little chat.”

The cold metal muzzle of the gun dug into the base of my scalp as he led me around the corner and shoved me into the stairwell.

I managed to keep myself from slamming into the wall, but his weight pressed me forward, pinning me against the concrete as I struggled to get free. “What do you want with me? Who even are you?”

The snarl that left his throat sent a chill down my spine. “You should have just gotten rid of the kid when we gave you a chance.”

The kid.

Yejin.

Oh my god, they meant Yejin. They knew about her.

How?

“That’s right. You’ve figured it out, haven’t you?” He pressed the gun further into my skull, his other hand digging into my bicep. “We want our star back, and we’re not picky about how we make it happen.”

They had to be from Jun’s old label. SeoulSOUL had threatened my life, and Yejin’s, on more than one occasion in the past, but that was all done and over with. They washed their hands of him; that was why he was with us now.

Why demand him back when they clearly wanted nothing to do with him?

“You dropped him,” I protested, hoping to buy myself some time. “Why try to steal him back?”

“His popularity was supposed to tank when people found out about that brat.” The grip on my arm tightened more, and I could feel his nails digging into my skin, breaking the surface layer. “Either you get him to ditch the kid and come back, or we’ll have to take care of things the hard way.”

A door in the stairwell opened up a few floors below us and I shouted for help, twisting away from the assaulter and injuring myself in the process.

“Up here, up here!”

The perp made a run for it, skipping out before the guard could catch up. But he landed one more parting shot before he disappeared into thin air.

“We’re watching you.”

My heart hammered in my chest as the security guard rounded the corner, his taser already drawn and ready.

“He ran off that way—” I shouted, pointing in the direction the perp fled.

Without hesitation, the guard called for backup and went in search of the armed asshole who ruined this whole fucking day.

I didn’t realize how much the whole thing affected me until my knees gave out and I sank to the floor, shaking uncontrollably as a flashback from seven years ago washed over me.

“You’re asking me to kill my child to keep your cash flow safe.”

“We’re not asking, Miss Simmons. Asking implies you’re being given an option.”

I paced the floor anxiously, trying to find a way out of this. “What did Jun have to say about all of this?”

“What he thinks isn’t important. He’ll fall in line eventually. They all do.”

The strange man stepped toward me, a menacing glint to his eyes that set me on edge.

I found myself backing up until I hit the wall, my hands instinctively covering my stomach.

“Don’t come any closer,” I warned him, though what I could possibly do to overpower him, I had no idea.

I was a seventeen year old pregnant girl who barely weighed a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet.

He was almost double my size, and clearly worked out.

Still, I couldn't just roll over and give him what he wanted.

So I bolted.

I'd never run so hard in my life before, and to this day, I don't know where the speed came from. I took off and just kept going, with no idea where I was headed or whether he followed.

And I didn't stop running until I touched down in another country. Even then, looking over my shoulder became second nature. And it didn't stop when I left Yejin with her father. In fact, it only got worse.

The number of close calls with cars I had after Yejin was safely with her father couldn't just be bad luck.

"Miss? Miss Simmons, are you alright?"

The second guard was standing beside me, his hand out to help me off the ground. I took it gratefully, still shaken up and very much on edge. If not for his strong grip, I might've just slipped right back down to the floor in a puddle of anxiety.

Fuck, I hadn't been this shaken up in years.

"I'll be okay as soon as I'm out of here," I replied coolly, proud of how strong my voice was. "Did your partner catch the guy who?—"

"We're sorry, Miss Simmons, but we didn't find him anywhere.

Our team is looking through CCTV footage right now to see if we can get a good shot of him to spread to local police.

” He glanced over his shoulder as his partner approached with a disappointed expression on his face.

“We’d like you to come with us to make a statement at the security office.”

The last thing I wanted to do was to go back in that building. But they weren’t going to let me off the hook. With a situation like this, making sure it didn’t happen again, or to someone else, was of the utmost importance. That statement I gave could help other clients in the long run.

So I simply followed them back to the security office. I just hoped I could get back out of the damn place before someone spotted me again.

An hour and a half later, I walked out of the security office with a copy of the report in hand, a now-permanent scowl on my face.

I had wanted to be out of here sooner. I wanted to be at home, relaxing, avoiding anything and everything to do with my wayward emotions that I’d let get the better of me today.

Of course, fate was a cruel mistress, and she chose that moment to let none other than Pujin and Jun turn the corner and walk right in my direction.

When our eyes met, I hated to see the way they changed from malice and something else, to confusion, and then concern.

Was I really that easy to read?

“I thought you were leaving, Miss Simmons?” Pujin inquired gently, his smile friendly and innocent. Jun’s, on the other hand, looked forced. Clearly only one of them was pleased to see me. His eyes cast upward to the security office placard on

the door. “Did something happen?”

I shoved the report behind my back and cleared my throat. “Oh, no. I just had to stop in for some paperwork I was overdue filling out. It slipped my mind.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Well, since we’re all finished now, we could save some time and share a car home.”

Pujin’s suggestion was innocent, but it meant putting myself in a confined space with Jun. It meant close quarters I couldn’t exactly escape from. It meant?—

“Sure we can,” Jun said suddenly, throwing an arm over my shoulder.

“After all, she is my assistant for the time being. It’s completely natural for us to share a car.

” He glanced over his shoulder with a shit-eating grin and steered me toward the front doors, strolling smoothly along without a care in the world.

“Mr. Kim, I?—”

“I insist on sending you back, Miss Simmons. In my culture, it’s a sign of respect and almost expected of a man to make sure the women around him arrive home safely.

It’s the least I can do for all the work you’ve put in for me.

” He leaned closer, his lips brushing against the shell of my ear.

“Just play along,” he whispered, his words laced with honey but no less intimidating.

I wasn’t sure what the hell he thought he was doing, but I wasn’t in the mood to fight

with him in public. “Fine,” I growled out, my body stiff in his half-assed embrace. “The car’s waiting outside.”

Pujin took the front seat and Jun took the seat behind him, leaving the seat behind the driver as my only option.

I heaved a sigh of regret and slid inside, acutely aware of Jun’s nearness.

I had hoped to get home and sequestered in my room before he came home to avoid any interaction with him for the foreseeable future.

Now, we were a foot apart, and I could hear him breathing beside me, as loud as the heartbeat in my fucking veins.

The ride home was about to be more tense than a suspension bridge.

Chapter

Eighteen

JUN

She must be exhausted.

The minute we pulled away from the curb, Arista's head was already against the window, her eyelids drooping slightly.

By the time we'd moved into rush hour traffic, she'd all but started to snore softly, her lips parted just barely, lashes caressing her cheeks.

She shifted in her seat, and a piece of paper slipped out from behind her, sitting innocently on the seat between us.

So of course, since she'd been hiding it when we walked up, I was gonna read it.

I knew I shouldn't. I knew better than to invade someone else's privacy. But I rationalized it away by reminding myself I'd been balls deep inside her not too long ago. If she trusted me enough to let me fuck her, then dammit, she should trust me with whatever it was she was hiding.

I picked up the paper and skimmed through the first few lines, my eyes widening when I read the words Incident Report on the top.

What the fuck kind of incident had she had to file a report about?

My eyes raced across the page as the car slowed down to navigate congested traffic, my heart sinking with every word I read.

In Korea, I'd had to deal with stalker fans—saesangs, they called them.

One band had a girl sneak into their air vents and try to record them in various states of undress.

Another band had a run-in with a dude whose girlfriend had built a shrine to one of the members.

Dude nearly succeeded in kidnapping the member, but thankfully, the security team caught them at the last minute.

To find that the same problems persisted with international fans, too, was a little disheartening. I'd hoped to not have to deal with that in a new place.

Then again, it seemed like the ones here were more dangerous and brave.

He pulled what felt like a gun and put the barrel to my head, leading me to the stairwell as he instructed me to get off the phone.

The words on the page were so straightforward, each one sent a chill down my spine as I read about what she'd been subjected to the minute she'd walked away from me earlier.

He threatened me. His voice was unfamiliar.

The pen had left a single drop of ink between that word and her next line, like she'd

started to write something, then hesitated before continuing. Was she afraid to put down what happened? Or were her next words a lie?

I have no idea why he stopped me. Security arrived before I could find out.

I shoved the paper hastily back behind her hip and turned to look out the window, but my gaze didn't stay there for long. There was a ton of scenery to take in, all of it stunning, but my eyes only wanted to drink in the view beside me in the car.

Her.

I watched her chest rise and fall as she slept, a crease in her brows giving away the worry and frustration in her even as she slept. Every time her lashes twitched, I wondered what she was dreaming of. Selfishly, I hoped it was me.

I had no reason to want that, to deserve that, but I couldn't help it.

If she deserved to dream of anything, it was me.

She should have me on her mind any time she closed her eyes, or took a moment to breathe.

I wanted to be the thing that kept her up at night.

I hoped she had to live with the thought of me from the moment she broke my heart and walked away.

The driver swerved to avoid a car who nearly clipped us, and Arista slid sideways, practically landing in my lap.

I didn't want there to be any room for anyone else in that pretty little head of hers.

It was only fair, considering she was never far from my mind.

It was hard to forget someone when their replica stared you in the face every day.

I couldn't look at Yejin, at our daughter, without seeing her mother.

I caught her easily and let her lean against my chest, still sleeping soundly despite the abrupt movement. At some point, her hands clenched in the fabric of my shirt, and I didn't have the heart to pull them away.

Instead, my traitorous heart clenched as I tightened my grip on her and pulled her closer, breathing in the scent of her shampoo as she nuzzled against me all the way home.

When we pulled up, she stirred, but didn't wake up.

I didn't have the heart to wake her, so with a shake of my head, I dismissed Pujin and tugged her into my arms, finagling us both out of the car with minimal difficulty.

She clung to me as she snored softly, and I marched into the house and up the stairs like I did this every day.

Once upon a time, I had.

Ari used to get so tired on late night shifts, and when we all rode the shuttle back to the dorms, I usually volunteered to carry her inside.

She and the rest of the staff had a set of rooms across the hall from us, but I'd walk slow enough that they were already out of the hall and behind closed doors, so I could stay with her a little while.

Watching her sleep was my favorite pastime. She managed to look so innocent and helpless and happy in her dreams.

She didn't wear the same carefree face anymore when she passed out. I could see the worry lines and the stress in every inch of her pinched brows.

A part of my heart broke for her.

Somewhere along the way, she'd lost the girl she used to be. I wondered if it happened slowly, over time, or if one day she just woke up and broke apart.

For me, it was both.

For some reason, I didn't take her to her own room. Instead, I blinked, and we were in my room. My mind on autopilot decided she belonged in here, in my bed, instead of behind another wall, another door. She belonged to me.

I didn't feel like analyzing that thought, either. I wasn't a naturally possessive man by any means. But the more time I spent with Arista, the more I discovered about myself.

Though it was tempting to stay and watch her sleep like I used to, I batted away the urge and shut the door quietly behind me as I left the room, already calling for Pujin to up security around the house.

I wasn't sure if she'd really known the man who stood her at gunpoint, but I didn't want to take any chances where all of our safety was concerned.

Arista slept through dinner, which was just takeout I'd ordered from a local store.

With Yejin tucked into a corner of the couch with a book to read, I slowly climbed

the stairs, itching for a shower to take all this makeup and sweat and hair product off my body.

Fuck, the shit they dressed you up with to keep you looking good through a whole ass dance montage was insane. And sticky, too.

I shoved my door open as I ripped my shirt over my head, completely forgetting I wasn't alone in here as my hands moved to my zipper, preparing to unbutton my pants.

“Ahem.”

I froze like a deer in the headlights, my head swiveling to my bed, where Arista sat, dead center, her hair tangled and messy, confusion in her eyes behind the barely-concealed heat and attraction as she gave me a once-over.

Fuck, I liked her eyes on me.

Only me.

“See something you like?” I taunted, giving her a sly grin as I popped the first button with a wink. “All you gotta do is admit you want it.”

She licked her lips as I flicked another button, and then shook her head to clear her thoughts. “No, thank you.” The covers moved to the side as she slipped from my bed, making a beeline for the door. “But thanks for bringing me inside and letting me sleep.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, remembering the words she'd written on that report. “I figure having a gun to your head takes a lot out of you.”

She spun around in a flash, betrayal written on every line in her face. “You read my incident report?”

I shrugged, slipping my pants over my hips. They hit the floor at my feet and I stepped out of them, never once self-conscious about my nudity with her. “It was on the seat. I was bored. And you weren’t awake to ask.”

“You’re an asshole,” she spat, her hand back on the doorknob. “That’s an invasion of privacy.”

“We live together, and you’ve had my dick inside of you. I think we’re well past privacy, wouldn’t you say?”

Her snort of derision was like a knife to the back. Fuck, that stung. My ego wasn’t over-inflated, but she still knew how to hit me where it counted.

“I don’t remember asking for a repeat performance. Maybe don’t oversell yourself, Jun.”

And now I was bleeding, figuratively.

“You’re a fucking heartless bitch, you know that?” When she slipped out and slammed the door behind her, I threw a pillow off the bed at her back, raging like a fucking teenager again. “God, she’s so insufferable.”

Minutes later, I was still fuming, my hand pressed against the wall of my fancy shower as the other one gripped my cock, tugging and pulling while images of her raced through my brain.

I closed my eyes, remembering the way she looked atop me in my bed, riding my cock like she was made to do it.

The way she looked up at me with those tears glistening in her eyes as I fucked into her, caging her in with my arms, her hair fanned out over my pillow like an angel.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Arista,” I groaned, my hand speeding up as I pressed my forehead against the cool tile, hips jerking as I came across the wall and floor, painting the tile with the seed I’d rather put inside of her.

Fuck, why did she do this to me?

Even after all these years, here I was like a randy fucking teenager, humping my hand to get off to thoughts of her, of the girl I shouldn’t want, but still did.

“Fucking hell,” I swore, slamming a fist into the tile without thinking. And then I swore again, louder this time, as I realized my mistake.

My hand was bleeding, the tile was cracked, and I might’ve broken a knuckle.

Great.

Chapter

Nineteen

ARISTA

It'd been a week since the gunman had held me up in the damn stairwell of the parking garage, and I couldn't bring myself to go back in there yet. I wasn't even sure who this person I'd become was. It wasn't the first time I'd been threatened before.

But this time, it was personal. And it hit a lot closer to home.

Jun's new assistant was holding strong in his position, surprisingly, and through no small miracle, the two of them were getting along pretty well. I'd filled all the other positions needing filled, and felt good about cutting the cords.

Or at least, I had, until I had to sit down today and actually sign off on the last contract for his new team.

Jun had been conveniently absent for this meeting, off shooting another music video segment for his debut release.

Or maybe he was meeting with his stage organizer.

Or the concert team. He was so busy these days, it was hard to keep track of what the fuck he was doing at any given time.

And now that I wasn't the person making his schedule, I didn't know where every second of his day was allotted to.

Not that I cared.

I didn't.

This had always been the plan. I was going to cut this cord between us and go back to my old life, my new job, the status quo before he walked back into my life.

I was on autopilot the whole way home, fingers drumming absently on my thighs as I stared out the window and contemplated how to tell Jun I was leaving. That I was moving back into my townhouse and out of his life again.

He never wanted me there, anyhow. Not now.

The driver glanced up at the rearview mirror and watched me as we rolled to a stop at the light, his eyes sharp, alert. I could appreciate someone who was on top of things, especially after the incident last week.

"How was your day, ma'am?" he asked calmly, weaving in and out of the lanes with practiced ease.

"Uneventful," I lied, hoping he wouldn't press.

"Better than chaotic."

Yes, I supposed it was. I'd had enough excitement and chaos to last me a lifetime.

I didn't need anything more than a nice soak in the bubble bath and a good night's sleep.

And then maybe a well-crafted speech on why I was done being Jun's live-in assistant, that I'd deliver as I walked out the door.

I could have a good cry about it once I was in the safety of my own home.

He could never know how I really felt. I couldn't afford to put them in danger again, though I was afraid it was too late for that. Still, there was no point in going back on everything I'd done until now. He'd never believe me, anyway.

After all, I'd done a really good job at lying to him. At making him believe the worst in me.

My sigh was laden with seven years of regret as it fogged up the window.

When we pulled into the driveway, I wasn't surprised to see Yejin's tutor's car in the drive. Pujin was with Jun at the studio, but he'd left three men on guard at the house in his stead, all trustworthy blokes who did a bang-up job of keeping the whole place safe and calm.

But there was no guard at the gate when we rolled in. Usually, someone would swing it open for us, and then close it behind us.

Strange, but maybe there was an explanation. I mean, someone had to use the bathroom every now and then, right? Maybe he stepped away for a second.

"Wait here, Miss Simmons," the driver said as he put the car in park, his eyes scanning the front of the house as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a pistol I wasn't aware he was carrying.

Suddenly, I was on high alert. He wouldn't pull that unless he was afraid something was seriously wrong.

And then it hit me.

Yejin's not supposed to be having her lessons with Graham right now. They should have ended an hour ago. Graham never stuck around this late without letting one of us know.

For his car to still be in the drive, something must've gone very, very wrong.

My mind went blank, and I put my hand on the door handle with no hesitation, following the new driver into the fray as he cleared the front door.

He paid me a second's glance, and then swore when he realized I wasn't good at listening. "Miss, you were supposed to stay with the car—oof."

From around the corner, a hand reached out and disarmed him with ease, knocking him out with a well-placed pistol whip to the side of the temple. He crumpled like a cheap dollar, leaving me all alone.

Shit.

I heard a commotion from the theater room and sprinted down the hall, praying that everyone was alright. Suddenly very aware I could be walking into some serious shit, I pried the door open just a tad, and found?—

"Oh, hi there, Miss Simmons! Yejin and I extended our study session today to test out her comprehension and watch an educational video. Will you be joining us?"

As I opened my mouth to accept the invitation, I felt the familiar, cool sensation of a gun barrel digging into the side of my ribcage, just out of sight of the room's participants.

“Tell them you’ve got things to do,” a rough voice ground out in a near whisper. “Or I’ll shoot you first, and them second.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, adrenaline racing through my veins. “Sorry, guys,” I apologized, trying desperately to keep my voice even for their safety. “I have some things to take care of. You go on ahead without me.”

“Sure thing, Miss Simmons,” Grant said cheerfully as I closed the door, his attention already turned back to Yejin and the screen.

The door clicked shut, sealing my fate, and hopefully saving their lives in the process.

“Good,” the man said. “Now, you’re going to turn around slowly and walk over to the couch.”

I didn’t argue. I did exactly as I was told, fearing the worst. The raw emotions that threatened to choke me in that parking garage’s stairwell crawled back up my throat and suffocated me once more.

Fighting them back was a struggle, but if I didn’t get control of them, it could mean my death, and that of the ones that meant the most to me. Innocents.

Yejin. Jun.

Behind me stood a man I’d seen once before, at the wheel of a car that’d tried to run me off the road when I was eight months pregnant with Yejin. A man who tried to kill me on more than one occasion.

“So glad you showed up when you did, Miss Simmons. I’ve been expecting you. And I’d have hated things to get messy.”

The man who'd put a gun to my head in a stairwell a week ago and threatened me.

You should've just gotten rid of the kid when we told you to.

The man who'd made threatening calls to me, warning me this would happen.

Ding. Fourth floor.

A man who now held a gun to the side of my head, with my daughter in the next room.

"Let them go," I said calmly, though I was anything but. "They're not who you want." My hands clenched the cloth fabric of the couch at my side, hoping he'd shift so I could get to my phone and call the panic line, or 911."

"You're very smart, Miss Simmons," he droned on, sliding around to my left. "But so are we."

His gun moved around to the left side of my head, and I flinched to cover the subtle shift of my right arm as I slipped it into my pocket and held down the button to emergency dial.

I just hoped speed dial worked like it used to.

"What do you want from me?" I asked slowly, hating that I had no way to know if help was even on the way or not. The urge to get up and wrestle with him for the gun was building with every second that passed by, but doing something stupid like that would only make things worse.

"You could have solved this whole problem seven years ago, you know. But the foolish girl you were back then thought she could beat a powerful record label." His

gun slipped down the side of my cheek, cold and unwelcome and frightening.

“You couldn’t have just died when we tried to kill you, either.

No, not you. You were stubborn.” The barrel found the underside of my chin and tipped my head back, making me look my assailant in the eyes.

“You survived, you skipped town, and then you left that kid with the one person who would guarantee we wouldn’t touch her.

” His hands fisted in my hair, holding my head back as he traced the line of my throat with his gun.

“We had to take him as damaged goods or lose out on him entirely.”

“Having a kid doesn’t make him damaged goods,” I argued, needing to buy time.

“Why did you come to Mr. Kim’s house if you were after me?

” I hoped the security team was on the other end of the line.

That they could hear the clues I was dropping.

They’d track my cellphone eventually, but saving them time might be the difference between living and dying.

And I wanted so very badly to live right now. At least until I could see the interior of my own townhouse one more time.

“Having a kid means he’s a liability. An uncertainty. But we’re willing to deal with that.”

I watched his eyes flick to the theater room, where Yejin and Grant were holed up, unsuspecting, unaware. How long before Yejin decided she needed a drink, or Grant's lesson was over? How much time did I have before this became a situation involving them as well?

"So you're here to kidnap her and force his hand," I said suddenly, realizing the true intent behind their bullshit.

"Well, we're also here to tie up loose ends, too. You see, being smart isn't always a good thing, Miss Simmons. And since you know what we're capable of, and now what we're planning, I think you understand why we can't let you live."

Can't let me live? "I don't plan on dying any time soon."

"You don't get a choice in the matter," he growled, yanking me to my feet.

How much could I struggle against him without alerting Yejin and Grant in the other room?

He tugged on my arm, and I grabbed him with a snarl, digging my nails into the soft skin of his bicep. He didn't cry out, but the pain on his face gave me a little joy that buoyed me up even as his gun barrel dug into my side again.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

“You’re asking for it, whore,” he spat, his eyes narrowed to slits as he backhanded me and watched me fall to the floor. “You should beg me for your life; maybe I’ll just keep you as a pet instead of killing you.”

“Get fucked,” I spat, far from resigned to my fate. As long as I still had breath in my lungs, I’d fight this fucker. I might die doing it, but I’d give it a hell of a shot.

“Why don’t you do it for me?” he countered, jerking my body against his as that gun pressed against the edge of my temple again. “Might as well make yourself useful one last time.”

“Not a chance.” I didn’t care if there was a gun to my head or not, I was not about to let this man touch me sexually while there was breath in my body.

“Brave words for a woman with a gun to her head.” He shoved me at the arm of the couch, bending me over with his free hand as he brandished that gun at me with the other. “I’m not asking.”

“I said no, you piece of shit!”

I launched myself backward and slammed my head into his nose, catching him off-guard.

The gun moved away from my head and we toppled to the floor in a jumbled mess of limbs, rolling around as we fought for control of the deadly weapon in his hand.

The bastard underneath me rolled on top, and I winced as he delivered a knee to the

side of my ribcage, knocking the wind out of me.

“Arista!”

A third body launched itself into the fray, and I screamed when the gun at the center of the struggle suddenly went off, temporarily bringing our scuffle to a halt as we scrambled to see if it had hit anyone.

That’s when I recognized the third body in the room.

Jun.

Fucking Jun.

The gun lay abandoned on the floor, too far away from us to have been the source of the shot.

I glanced around, spotting Pujin in the doorway, his gun at the ready, pointed at the intruder in the center of the room.

Jun moved to my side, his eyes wild, sweat beading on his brow like he’d run all the way here from HQ.

Worry was etched in every line of his face, but he refused to meet my eyes.

“Next time, I’m shooting you and your kid, bitch,” the intruder spat as he took the chance Pujin’s moment of hesitation afforded him. “Kim is ours, and we’re not giving him up.”

I watched him slip out the open window to our left like he was a damned spectre in the night, the only indication he’d ever been here the trail of blood he left behind.

Pujin's shot must've landed a hit on him. He wouldn't get far.

Jun looked down at me as I turned and started patting him down, checking for injuries. "Are you okay? Where's Yejin?"

"She's with Grant and Pujin's second," he breathed, checking me up and down for injuries. "Why would you wrestle a psycho for a gun?—"

"I wasn't about to let him kill Yejin," I pointed out, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "They've tried it before, and they didn't win then. I'm not about to let them win now."

Jun stilled beneath my hands. "What do you mean they tried before?"

I realized my mistake a second too late. The cat was out of the bag now, and there was nothing I could do to take it back. "Nevermind," I said quietly, hoping he'd gloss over it if I redirected us. "You've gotta let Pujin know to send someone after him?—"

"He's already on it. We got an alert when you called the security office. He brought backup. I'm sure the guy won't get far."

"Yejin's safe?" I asked again, to clarify and ease my own mind.

"Thanks to you," Jun said with a hint of pride and astonishment. "But what did he mean when he said you should've gotten rid of her sooner?"

"Jun," I hesitated, knowing there was no way around it this time. The truth was in the air. I had to come clean.

"Ari," he demanded, his hands on my shoulders. "Don't lie to me."

“They tried to get me to abort her when I found out I was pregnant.”

His breathing halted. “Who?”

As if it weren’t perfectly clear who would have motive to do such a thing.

“SeoulSOUL, your old label.” The memories welled up in my head, strangling me bit by bit.

“When I refused, they tried to run me off the road once or twice, cut my brake lines. I fled the country to have her, and then . . . well, you know what happened after that.”

I felt the tears well up in my eyes as Pujin approached us warily, his gun down at his side again. “Miss Simmons, are you alright? Mister Kim?”

Jun waved him off. “We’re fine, just a little shaken up. Have the police arrived yet?”

Pujin nodded. “We caught the guy slipping out the window. They’re stuffing him in the back of a squad car now.” His eyes trailed over me and Jun, assessing before he gave in to Jun’s insistence. “They’ll want a report, and you might as well let the EMTs check you out, just to be safe.”

I let Pujin lead me out of the house, thankful for the interruption, even if it only bought me a few minutes to gather my thoughts.

Because all hell was about to break loose, and I would have to figure out how much to come clean about with Jun.

Something I’d been dreading from the moment he stepped back into my life.

Chapter

Twenty

JUN

I stared down at my daughter—our daughter—as the police finished with Arista.

I could tell by the uncomfortable look on the detective's face that he didn't like what he was hearing.

Yejin seemed otherwise occupied with my phone, so I tilted my head and tried to listen in, though I knew it was wrong.

“So you say you didn't recognize the person with the gun?” The detective scribbled on a notepad, his eyes never leaving Arista. “But you know who sent him?”

“That's right.” She made no move to elaborate, frustrating the cop.

“How do you know where he's from but not who he is?”

She pursed her lips, frowning so hard her brows creased her face.

“He's from SeoulSOUL Entertainment.” She hesitated, her eyes drifting across the living room to find mine.

When she found me staring, she didn't look away, but a sadness and regret welled up

within their depths.

“They’re here for Jun, and they’re not afraid to kill anyone who gets in their way. ”

“Surely he wouldn’t work for the company who killed his daughter?”

“They won’t kill her now. But they’ve tried before.

” She turned her arm over, showing the cop her wrist. “They caused a car accident meant to take my life while I was pregnant. They chased me across two continents, trying to force me to get rid of the baby that posed a threat to their income.” Only then did she break our locked gazes, her eyes drifting back down to the floor.

“As long as I was out of the picture, he’d keep working for them.

They didn’t care how or at what cost their desired results came to be. ”

“And you think this man?—”

“I know this man is working for them. He admitted it himself.” Her sigh was heavy and laden with regret and pain and sorrow.

“Listen, it’s been a long day, so if you have any more questions, I’d be happy to answer them—first thing tomorrow, with a lawyer present. Right now, I think I’m done talking.”

The detective presented his card and shook her hand, then followed his colleagues out of the house. Almost immediately, she pulled her tablet off the side table and got to work, scrolling and furiously typing away.

Two minutes later, I learned why.

“We’re not staying here. I booked us a suite of rooms at the Egress, our local luxury hotel.

” Her eyes traveled to Pujin, who stood in the corner of the room, watching like a hawk.

“Pujin, can you assemble a traveling team to provide security there? I can have backup sent from the company, should you need it.”

His nod was curt. “I can handle that, ma’am.”

“Good. I’m not sure how long we’ll be there.” Her brows nearly touched now. “The company wants to make sure the Kims are well protected.”

The Kims. She just as well as admitted to that cop that she was the target here, and yet they were worried about our safety, not hers.

What a joke.

“Who gives a fuck about us? They were after you.” I marched over and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her as if by doing so, I could bring her common sense back. “How are you so calm right now?”

She shrugged, her eyes a bit unfocused as she refused to meet my gaze. “I’m used to running liaison for artists in some precarious positions. This is what I did to get where I am now.”

I reached out to her, my hand falling short as she pulled away and curled in on herself. “But you’ve never been the target, have you?”

“I was the target seven years ago,” she pointed out, her tone dry and emotionless. “I

survived that, I'll survive this. But they're not only after me now. So let me do what I do best, and stay out of my way."

There it was. The old her peeked through as she deflected attention like she'd always done when she wanted you to look anywhere but at her. Ari, at her core, had always been horrible at accepting concern and care from others.

Some things never changed.

I put my hands up and backed away slowly, ceding the victory to her for now.

"Fine. You don't wanna talk, that's cool.

Do whatever it is you're going to do." I turned and marched out of the kitchen, determined to pack our bags in as little time as possible.

I itched to be back with Yejin, but she was safe next door, with Grant, who was being debriefed, and the rest of our security team, who Pujin trusted implicitly.

His trust was the one thing I'd never had cause to question, so I didn't. I didn't want Yejin to see our new house with a puddle of blood on the floor where she played. I didn't want her to ask questions about the police tape.

It took me twenty minutes to pack up her special sleeping stuffie, some clothes, and a few other odds and ends to keep her busy in a small hotel room. When I came back downstairs, Ari was nowhere to be found.

Of course, that caused panic to rise in me that made absolutely no sense.

Or did it?

I had to be honest with myself. When I saw her wrestling with that asshole for the gun, my heart fell through the floor.

I imagined a world without her in it, and time stopped.

Everything in me screamed to let a professional help, but I disregarded Pujin's warnings to stay out of the house.

Even after Yejin and Grant were clear of the damn place, I ran back in, knowing Arista was in there somewhere, at the hands of an evil piece of shit who threatened her safety and her life.

I didn't hesitate to launch myself into the fray when the tussle broke out.

All I could think was how to keep her safe, how to save a woman I'd been trying so long to erase, to move on from, who I'd never managed to hate as much as I deluded myself into thinking I did.

Because at the root of it all, I'd never hated her. I hated that she left.

Because if I couldn't have her, what point was having the family we'd both wanted so badly?

Because I was scared that I couldn't do this shit without her.

I'd let myself hate her for seven years to mask my own fears of inadequacy.

My fear of failure. Any time we'd fallen in our debut days, Ari had been there with a smile and sweets, ready to remind us that we couldn't get better if we didn't fail.

To shore up our egos and point out all the amazing things we were good at.

Ari was a rock, and we all leaned on her. Me more than the others. And when that support morphed into something new, did I once bother to stop and see what she needed from me?

No.

I continued to let her support me in my dreams. I let her take the weight off my shoulders. I used her for relief when I should have been worshiping her.

And when she got pregnant, I never once stopped to ask her whether this was something she wanted or not.

She kept the baby because I had always wanted a family. Because of my dreams. And she gave me that child, even though it put her own life in danger, because she knew how much it meant to me.

I couldn't imagine giving up Yejin for anything. But she did, for me, because to not have her would have been crushing for me. It would have broken me.

Even leaving was a calculated, selfless act. If she kept the baby, it would have ruined my career, because I would have spent my whole life searching for her. If she kept Yejin, the label might've caught up to her and killed them both.

Giving her to me kept her safe. The label wouldn't have put her in danger if it would ruin their chances with me.

Hiding her in plain sight was the most brilliant move, and I'd been so blinded by anger and betrayal and sadness that I hadn't seen it until it was too late.

Much too late.

It didn't take a genius to see how badly I'd screwed up. And because of my selfish desires, because I couldn't just let her go when fate brought us back together, she was in the crosshairs again.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the kitchen as I paced aimlessly back and forth, dialing her number, only to delete it again, then dial it all over again, staring at the screen while my thumb hovered over the call button.

Fuck, where did I even begin?

I'm sorry I was an asshole. I'm sorry I ever believed you would do this to hurt me. I'm sorry I let myself hate you when you didn't deserve it.

A lot of things to be sorry for. And she was nowhere to be found to express it all.

Pujin wandered back into the kitchen with his own go bag, a frown on his lips as he talked into his earpiece.

"Yes, we're headed there now. I'll secure the rooms and escort the Kims upstairs myself.

Hotel staff has already prepared the underground parking garage for VIP access, and security is in place.

"His eyes fell on me, then to the bag in my hand. "Yes, understood. I'll let them know."

He tapped his ear and smiled, the disarming grin leaving a bad taste in my mouth as I saw it for what it was: fake.

"She left, didn't she?" I asked quietly, my eyes searching over his shoulder, down the

hallway, a trace of hope and desperation tinting the words I muttered.

“I sent her with an escort, sir,” Pujin replied smoothly, refusing to tell me more.

Maybe he couldn’t. Maybe he didn’t know. Or maybe she’d sworn him to secrecy, wanting to make a clean break before I asked her to explain.

But I didn’t need an explanation. I’d worked it all out while I reduced our lives to a few bags of necessities. While I prepared to leave my own house because a crazed man tainted the halls where I walked, lived, ate, slept.

“Where did she go?”

Pujin shook his head forlornly. “I’m not at liberty to say, sir?—”

I lashed out, angry and afraid and emotionally wrecked. My hands gripped his collar and dragged him to me, our noses practically touching. “Where, Pujin?”

“She asked me not to say.” His eyes fell to the floor, shame rippling across their surface. “Sir?—”

“Whose man are you?” I spat, jealousy at his loyalty shift eating me from the inside out. “Where do you get off doing her bidding now? Did you forget who brought you to this country?”

I didn’t care if I was being irrational. The very real fear that she’d never come back again, the worry that while she was out there alone, they’d snatch her away and make good on their promises to kill her, boiled in my veins. It made me mad with worry, turned me into someone I wasn’t.

“You, sir,” Pujin replied, clearing his throat. “I follow you.”

“Then tell me where she went.”

Just then, one of his subordinates walked in holding a set of keys. “Sir, the car’s ready,” he reported, his tone inflectionless as he handed them over to his boss. “Should we move Miss Kim and her instructor now?”

“The tutor will be in the rooms across the hall from the Kims. Please see to it that he gets settled immediately.” He looked to me, his eyes sad and sympathetic, swimming with emotions I never wanted to see from my fucking bodyguard.

“I’ll bring the Kims along post haste. We have another stop to make before we check in. ”

I released his collar and dusted him off, suddenly ashamed of myself. “Sorry, ole boy,” I muttered, feeling very much like the child who’d been silently scolded for acting out. “Should I take this to the car?”

Pujin reached out and took the bag from me with a shake of his head. “I’ll handle the bags, Jun. You just figure out what the hell you’re going to say to her to bring her back with you.”

Chapter

Twenty-One

ARISTA

Leaving again hurt just as much as it did the first time, but it was for the best. For their safety. If I didn't leave, and those assholes sent someone else after me, who was to say someone wouldn't get hurt in the crossfire? I couldn't put Yejin or Jun in that position again.

It would be better for everyone if I went back to living alone, closed ranks around them with new staff, and returned to my old position in the label.

Who are you kidding? Do you think the label will stop seeking him out just because you're out of the picture?

He had Pujin. Pujin had a capable team of security detail personnel, all better equipped to deal with this situation than I could ever hope to be.

They'll hunt you down regardless. You're just running away to avoid the conversation you don't wanna have with the man you're still in love with.

And that right there was the crux of the matter. I didn't want to explain myself. I didn't want to rehash the old pain, go through the emotional roller coaster one more time. Jun would never trust me, never believe me, no matter what I told him.

He had an established life with Yejin. And a long time ago, I decided there was no place for me in it.

To change that would be selfish.

The plan had always been to get out as fast as I could.

So why was I filled with so much regret at my actions, when I was the one who made the decision?

I shuffled around my apartment, running the water to clear the pipes, opening curtains, even watering the plants the housekeeper had clearly neglected while I was away. Some of them might spring back, but others were long past their tipping point and would need replaced, or tossed out.

Rest in peace to my hydrangea, I guess.

Thoughts of what I'd lost a second time now raced through my mind as I stared aimlessly at the dead potted plants on my windowsill, until an insistent knocking at my door dragged me back to reality.

After today's ordeal, I wasn't sure I wanted to know who was on the other side of that door. Or if I even wanted to answer it. Fear raced down my spine, immobilizing me.

There's a security detail in the hallway. Nobody is coming after you. There's no way SeoulSOUL knows their man was apprehended yet.

Still didn't stop my body and mind from initiating the fight-or-flight instinct buried inside me.

"Ma'am?" The voice of the man Pujin sent with me echoed through the door. It only

slightly eased the tension in my body. “You have a visitor. Mr. Pujin says he’s cleared and safe.”

He?

“I’m letting him in, ma’am.”

I didn’t have time to form a rational response before the door opened in the next room and the soft sound of footsteps on the hardwood floor heralded the arrival of my uninvited guest.

I was only mildly surprised to see Jun turn the corner and stop in his tracks, his eyes searching mine, wary and concerned as he took in my whole demeanor.

“Arista—”

I turned my back to him, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill over. “You should be with Yejin at your hotel, locked down and protected. What are you doing here?”

“I thought you were coming with us.”

I couldn’t help but notice the betrayal in his voice. It cut deep, because at my core, all I’d ever done in his eyes was betray him. His love, his affection, his dreams, even our future together. Now I could add one more betrayal to the mounting list of misunderstood transgressions against him.

“I was never supposed to be a permanent part of your team. Your security team is more than capable of seeing to your well-being.”

The silence spread between us like a chasm of insurmountable proportions,

threatening to swallow us whole if we even tried. I bit my tongue to fight back everything I wanted to say, everything I had buried for so long inside me.

Jun, however, had never been one to pass up a challenge, even the ones that seemed impossible.

He took the first step, just like he always had. In his life, in his band, in our relationship.

Always the first, except for once.

“What if I say I’m not interested in letting you go?”

He doesn’t mean that the way you want him to. He’s talking about a job.

“I can’t stay. I have another job to do at the label?—”

“I’ll pay you double.”

My hands balled into fists as he basically diminished the blood, sweat, and tears that I’d poured into my career to get where I was. “It’s not about the money,” I spat, hating how nasty I sounded to my own ears. “I like my job, Jun.” And I did. I really did.

But not as much as I once did.

“Okay, fine. Keep the job. But stay with us.” I felt his presence close the distance between us, and his hands wrapped around my shoulders, pinning me to the spot. “Stay with me.”

Here it was. “Why, Jun? So you can make me miserable to pay me back for all the

ways you hate me? So you can prove to me that I'll still fall into your bed, even though you despise me to my core? To?—"

"I don't hate you!"

His words hung in the air, sticky and filled with emotions and truth I wasn't ready to examine too closely. "You do," I denied, the words hollow to my own ears. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out."

"I thought I did," he whispered, his hands twisting me to face him. "But I really only hated me. Pretending to hate you made it possible to look in the mirror every morning and lie to myself."

The truth shone in his eyes like a beacon, pleading with me to see through the fog of the last seven years, the lies and desperation we'd both been living in. It hurt to think that he was offering something I'd wanted so badly to me right now, when I knew I could never take it.

I didn't deserve that happy ever after.

"I know the truth, Ari." Words that didn't feel real. How could he know when I'd never told a soul? "They've been after me, too, in my emails. I knew they were coming. But until now, I didn't realize they'd come for you, too. On more than one occasion."

My mind transported me back to the night when I woke up in a hospital with a concerned nurse and doctor hanging over my bed.

They helped me get a flight back to the States, helped me escape the man who'd run me off the road after cutting my breaks, helped me slip out the back and keep my child safe until she was born.

Even then, I knew someday the label would come back for me. I just hoped that if I removed myself from their radar, they'd let me drift into a peaceful, non-threatening existence.

I should have known that none of us would ever be safe.

“The company will make sure I'm protected. I'll get a detail outside of my building and?—”

Jun didn't give me the chance to make false promises.

His lips crashed down onto mine with a reckless heat, devouring me like he'd been starving in the desert for years, and I was an oasis.

Melting under his touch wasn't a choice.

It was as inevitable as getting wet in the rain.

As unavoidable as a sunburn in summertime. As instinctive as breathing.

I closed the distance between us, hating that my resolve to remove myself from his life was crumbling with a single touch, an embrace, a frantic display of desperation between two people who'd fucked up every opportunity they'd ever been given.

I had all these grand ideas, this plan to fade back into the background and take my promotion.

To go back to how I'd been living before he walked back into my life and turned it all upside down.

And now, I couldn't think of a single one.

“Arista,” he breathed against my lips, “I’m tired of pretending you don’t belong in my life.

I haven’t been the same since you walked away.

” His hands trailed down the sides of my arms, snaking around my back to tug our bodies together so that all I could feel was him.

“I know why you did it. I know what happened to you. I should have realized it sooner.” I didn’t know where one of us ended and the other began.

Our heartbeats felt in sync, uniform, two beating as one.

His words were just the chain that cemented the connection, that made it impossible to escape. Not that I wanted to.

He’d always been my other half, my home.

“Please, don’t run away this time, Ari.”

The last walls around my heart shattered as his voice cracked, a single tear streaming down his cheek to mingle with our entwined lips.

The salty taste struck a chord in me, and with a desperate moan, I gripped his shirt and dragged him backward, never once breaking contact as I maneuvered us to my bedroom from memory alone.

My heel throbbed as I kicked the door open and backed into the room, a hand frantically searching the wall for the damned light switch. When I couldn’t find it easily, Jun leaned back, breaking the kiss, eyes searching mine as he reached out over my hand and found the fucking thing with ease.

Like he'd been here before.

Or like he belonged here.

"If we turn on the lights, are you going to run away from me?"

I didn't have an answer for him. Turning the lights on felt like a big step, but I wanted, needed to see him. I needed to face this demon myself if I was ever going to overcome it.

"I don't know."

"Then leave it off." His lips were on my neck, his hand over mine, curling our fingers together as he pulled it away from the switch. "Don't think. Don't focus. Just feel."

I swallowed back the instant urge to contradict him. To tell him I needed to see.

I didn't, really. And that was the part that scared me more than anything.

If I let myself feel, I might not have the strength to turn him away. And he knew that.

"Okay," I said finally, letting my head fall back as he kissed his way up the side of the column of my neck. "Okay."

Chapter

Twenty-Two

JUN

Three things happened at once with the whisper from her lips.

The blood rushed from every one of my extremities and pooled in my dick. My thoughts scattered to the wind like they were leaves in fall. And I blurted out the first thing that popped into the forefront of my mind.

“I’m never going to let you go again, Arista.”

My hands found her ass as I lifted her from the ground, hiking her hips against mine as her legs wrapped obediently around my waist. “The bed is straight back,” she whispered, her lips skating along the side of my ear as she nipped it with her teeth, tongue darting out to play with the sensitive skin behind my lobe.

“I hope you like it fast and wild,” I panted, already near to busting a nut in my fucking sweats. “We don’t have much time.”

“You’ve never been slow about anything,” she breathed, her voice raspy and thick with arousal. “It’s never bothered me before.”

“There will be plenty of time to take it slow later.” My nose dragged against her throat as I took a few steps forward, trusting her directions in the dark. “I plan to

explore you at my leisure in my own fucking bed very soon.”

I wasn't sure where this version of me had come from, filled with desperation and need and a hunger that no amount of food would satisfy.

There would be time later to dissect the situation.

Now, I wanted to make sure she'd never walk away from me again.

And if the only way I could do that was with my dick, then so be it.

“Jun,” she moaned as my shins hit the bed, “fall with me.” Her hands laced together behind my neck and she tipped herself back, taking us both to the sheets in a heap of limbs and giggles.

“I've been falling for years,” I muttered, the walls I'd built around myself crumbling now that I had given them permission. “I haven't stopped falling for you since I first laid eyes on you.”

My lips swallowed her soft gasp as I rocked into her, rubbing my hard cock against her through our pants. The pleading moans that erupted from her nearly undid me.

“Jun—”

“Just feel, remember?” I pressed my lips against hers, forcing her into silence. My left hand propped me up so she wouldn't bear my body weight as I snaked a hand between us and slipped it into her pants.

Fuck, she was so wet already.

My fingers slid inside her like they belonged there, thrusting as she lifted her hips off

the bed and asked for more without words.

Her body sang to me, playing a melody I knew all too well.

It had me singing in kind as she returned the favor, reaching into my sweats to wrap those slender fingers around my cock.

Tug after tug, she milked my body for what she desperately desired—my surrender.

She had no idea she didn't need to work so hard for it. I would surrender willingly to Ari without a single word. All she had to do was look my way and I was putty in her hands. The work it took to keep from surrendering myself to her was monumental.

I was tired of fighting it. Tired of fighting my desire for her. My love.

I loved her so fucking much it hurt.

“Ari—”

“I need you inside me, Jun,” she begged, her voice whinier and needier than I'd ever heard before. “Please?” She twisted in my grip, sending my fingers deeper into her. “I don't have any condoms—shit?—”

With a snarl of possessiveness, I yanked my fingers from her dripping cunt, licking them clean of her arousal as she watched with the minimal light in the room. “We don't need a fucking condom.”

I felt her go still beneath me at the declaration. “But?—”

“You're protected,” I reminded her, a smile curling my lips as I reached between us and tugged her pants down, panties following suit right after. “And even if you aren't,

I don't give a fuck. The only man that's ever gonna put any kids in you is me."

I gripped myself in one hand and slid home in her waiting heat with a groan, panting through the urge to spill myself inside her immediately.

I wanted to mark her, needed her to be mine in a more permanent way.

The urge to give Yejin a sibling flashed through my mind, and I groaned, so close to orgasm I could practically taste it.

"Are you going to move, or just sit there all night?" She squirmed beneath me, nearly undoing all the hard work it took to hold myself together.

"If you don't hold still, I'm going to fucking come right now, and I'm not ready for this to be over yet."

She stilled suddenly, her eyes going wider than the dessert plates at our favorite restaurant.

Neither of us said a word as I stared at the ceiling and breathed like a trained runner prepping for a triathlon.

I'd never had the opportunity to practice my self-control in the bedroom between our past and present, and fuck me if I ever practiced patience and self-control outside of the bedroom, either.

I counted to ten in my head, closed my eyes, and admitted what I'd been too prideful to say out loud before. "Sorry, it's . . . been awhile."

Below me, Ari shrugged and glanced away, her eyes finding a spot on the wall to grasp while she blushed. "Me, too."

“No, I mean like a long time.” I rocked my hips into her and groaned, the feeling of Nirvana rushing through my veins. “Like seven years, long time.”

Her eyes met mine in shock. “But?—”

“Yeah,” I whispered, leaning down to press my lips against her temple as I fucked her slow, relishing every second our bodies were together as one. “Not since the last time we were together.”

“But you—there’s no way—that means?—”

“It means exactly what you think it means,” I breathed against her ear, speaking from the heart with nothing but truth for the first time in a long time. “It’s only ever been you, Arista.”

She blinked through tears; I could taste them on my lips as I moved up the side of her jaw, tongue teasing her skin as I drowned out her words and worries and fears with a deep, passion-filled kiss.

In and out, over and over, our bodies moving as one.

Never in my life had I even so much as looked at another woman the way I looked at her.

And I realized then that my life would never be the same without her in it.

I couldn’t let her go. Being without her was like breathing underwater.

Impossible. Painful. Pointless.

My body tensed above her, and I swore. “I’m not going to last much longer, Ari.”

Like a fucking queen, she reached between us, her fingers working alongside my cock to bring us both to orgasm together.

I came so hard, I nearly blacked out. My hips molded against hers as I filled her with my seed, my very fucking essence, with a prayer that I could get her pregnant again. This time, I'd never let her run away. I'd make her stay. I'd protect us all.

I had money. I could pay for enough security to staff an entire city.

Anything to keep her with me.

I didn't speak it aloud, though. I'd only just gotten her back. I didn't want to scare her away so soon. There would be plenty of time to build a future together. Have more kids. Enjoy life.

I just had to convince her to stay.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Three

### ARISTA

Feeling Jun inside me was a glimmer of something I hadn't let myself hope to ever feel again in real life.

Having him inside me now, raw, unprotected, filling me with his fucking volatile seed when I knew damn well that no birth control was foolproof, was flirting with danger.

And yet, somehow, it was more of a turn on than anything I'd ever imagined in the seven years since we'd been apart.

I wanted his kids. I wanted all of them. No other woman had touched him since I left, and when he admitted that, I realized that I didn't want to even think about another woman ever getting close enough to try.

I wanted him so badly it ached, like a festering bullet wound, or a missing limb in the throes of phantom pain. But being with him meant taking a huge risk, and putting more than just myself in serious danger.

I couldn't do that to him, and especially not our daughter.

Yejin was innocent in all this.

Jun, ever the fucking gentleman, wandered off to the attached bathroom in search of a washcloth to clean up with. I didn't expect to see him wander back in with a second one in his hand. I certainly didn't expect him to spread my legs again at the end of the bed and clean me up, as well.

Jun in his youth had never been so attentive. So careful. So considerate.

I stayed silent as his hands revived arousal in me, tempting me to beg for more. I wanted this moment to stretch on forever, because the second we put our clothes back on, we'd go back to being two people who couldn't be together.

No matter how much we both wanted to be.

He slipped his pants back on too soon, the zipper like the closing song on the album of our relationship.

My eyes fell to the floor, where I spotted his shirt, and I let one last tear fall before I stood up and marched into my closet, searching for literally anything that felt like a shield.

I needed every defense against his demands, because I knew what was coming next.

I knew what Jun's plans were. What he wanted. What he expected.

And I couldn't give it to him.

Or could I?

Was this just an irrational fear that kept me from having what we both so desperately wanted?

Jun stuck his head in the closet as I pulled a sweater from the hanger, a frown on his face as he looked around. “You don’t have a bag ready?”

“I’m not leaving, Jun.” I turned away from him again, shame rising in me at the hurt that flashed in his eyes. “What we just had was great and all, but I can’t?—”

“I’ll be damned if I’m leaving you behind to face this shit on your own, Arista Rae.

” He marched into my closet, rummaged around until he found a suitcase, and began tearing things from hangers and shelves, tossing it haphazardly into the waiting space.

“You’re coming with us, where you belong.

So just get that self-sacrificial shit out of your head right now and get with the program. ”

I stared in stunned silence, one leg in my sweatpants, the other still very much naked, as he sifted through my lingerie drawer and picked out a few lacy numbers, and then some surprisingly comfortable options as well. “What are you doing?” I asked him quietly, in stunned disbelief. “Jun, I said?—”

“I’m taking you with us if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out. Please don’t make me set a bad example for our daughter.”

The zipper on the suitcase was another sound of finality. As if the conversation was closed because he said so.

I didn’t have the heart to argue. Hell, a part of me was elated that for once in my life, someone wanted to protect me. That I didn’t have to do this all alone anymore.

“What are you going to tell Yejin?” I said quietly, tucking my undershirt into the

sweatpants with a sigh.

Jun set a pair of running shoes in front of my feet with a grin. “We are going to tell her the truth, like I should have done the minute she was old enough to understand.”

I hadn’t expected this turn of events. And so fast, too.

“Are you sure?”

He took my hand as I slipped into the shoes, tugging me out of the closet with my suitcase in his other fist. “I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life, Ari.

I’ve wasted seven years. I’m not wasting a second more.

” He grabbed my purse in the kitchen, turned off the lights as we left each room, and turned to me at the main door. “Keys? Meds? Anything else you need?”

I shook my head. “My whole life is in my purse. I’m all set.”

Jun needed no further encouragement. He ushered me into the hall, and then down to the car, where Pujin and Yejin were busy playing cards between the front and back seats.

Yejin didn’t even look up as the door opened, but Pujin met my gaze with a little smile and a wink. “I’m so glad you’re both here, finally. Yejin’s cleaning me out of spending money. Whoever taught her to play poker really should be shot.”

I cringed at the joke, but said nothing, turning my stare to Jun instead, who looked suspiciously embarrassed.

He peeked at my lifted brows and then cleared his throat. “It wasn’t me—I suck at

poker. Hey, Pujin, can you pop the trunk for me? This suitcase isn't gonna fit in the back seat."

"Sure thing, Mr. Kim," he said with a sigh, setting down a card between him and Yejin. "I lost this hand, anyhow."

Yejin beamed as she picked up the cards and tucked them between her tiny fingers, shuffling them like a seasoned card player. "Uncle Minnie taught me! He says I'm as good as Uncle Jinnie."

I slid into the seat to her left, very much afraid to make a sudden movement, lest I spook the tenuous situation.

"Maybe I'll let you take some of my money someday, then," I teased, silently cursing Minseo in my head.

That fucker taught my daughter how to play poker.

Who knew how long she'd been playing to be able to beat a grown man. "Uncle Minseo teach you anything else?"

The grin on her lips grew wider, practically encompassing her whole face as Jun slid into the other side of the backseat, eyeing us warily. "Oh, lots! He always taught me something new whenever they came home from tours."

The whole ride to the hotel was filled with Yejin's endless admissions as to what, exactly her uncle had taught her over the years. How to swim. How to fish. How to mimic accents. How to solve riddles. How to play her favorite song on the guitar.

How to sneak a bird into the house. How to kidnap feral cats. How to five finger discount the company pens when nobody was looking. How to play poker. How to

practically clone someone's voice on the phone.

Minseo had been a busy uncle, apparently.

I wanted to be angry, but realistically, I couldn't be. After all, it was my own fault that she'd been left with several barely legal aged boys who had no idea how to raise a child. It was inevitable that she'd pick up some of their more questionable skills and habits.

Did I even deserve to have a say in parenting her if I stayed with Jun?

Was I actually contemplating staying with him for a long haul? It wasn't like he'd asked me to fucking marry him, after all.

The hotel garage was quiet as the car rolled to a stop in the underground VIP parking section.

Our security team was already in place, and I breathed a sigh of relief as Pujin got out of the car and did his preliminary sweep, deeming everything to be okay enough for the three of us to get out.

Two burly men grabbed our bags from the trunk and led us to the elevator, where we traveled in silence to the fifteenth floor.

It was the only floor that required a special passcode to even take the elevator to. The chance of someone getting to us there was practically nonexistent.

Jun's hand wrapped around mine reassuringly as I tapped my fingers against my leg, effectively calming my nerves as we watched the floor numbers tick by, finally reaching our destination. "Relax," he leaned over to whisper, placing a soft, fleeting kiss on my cheek.

I damn near fell over from shock. Panicked and embarrassed, my eyes scanned the small group of us, relieved that Pujin and the other two guards, as well as Yejin, were all facing away from us. If they'd seen, I might've died on the spot.

"I am relaxed," I hissed, rolling my eyes even though my heart was doing flips.

For seven years, I'd yearned to feel this way with him again.

Mourned the loss of something I thought I stood no chance of repairing.

And now, here we were, mending something I'd broken out of fear, out of a misguided belief that they'd be safer if I was out of the picture.

After all, a kpop star could very well still have a career with a hidden kid.

But a kpop star whose affections were with a specific someone?

A star who'd admitted that he wanted to leave the kpop scene behind and start a family?

I was more dangerous to the idea of a perfect pop star than the illicit kid.

Or so I'd thought.

While Jun settled Yejin in the adjoining room, I took a moment to check the exits and viewpoints. I knew it was Pujin's job to deal with security, but after everything, I wanted to be sure. Now that I was here, I wanted to see that we were safe with my own two eyes.

Jun found me minutes later checking the sturdiness of the locks on the balcony doors, my face screwed up into a moue of concentration and frustration.

“What are you up to?” he asked casually, hands in his pockets as he watched me tug on the handle again.

I huffed in annoyance. “I could slip through this lock with a credit card and motivation. That’s not safe.” I motioned one of Pujin’s men over. “Let Pujin know the balcony locks need to be addressed. I want this place safe, not sort of safe.”

Before I had a chance to keep testing locks, Jun’s hands were on my shoulders, steering me into the bedroom I’d seen him point out to the guy carrying the bags earlier. “You need to chill the fuck out before you work yourself up,” he growled, shutting the door quietly behind him. “Sit down.”

It was almost instinct to cross my arms over my chest in an act of self-protection. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” he pointed out, his eyes narrowed. “Your forehead is wrinkled from all the frowning you’ve done this week, your eyes are tired, and you look like someone ran you over with a tour bus.”

“Gee, thanks, Jun. As if I needed a reminder that I’m not a flawless idol.

” I patted my hair self-consciously, fighting to resist the urge to check myself in the mirror.

“You’re no prize yourself, either.” I pretended to look him up and down with disdain, but then I was actually looking him up and down, and oh, would you look at that, he was sporting a fucking stiffie behind the fabric of his pants ? —

“My eyes are up here, Ari.”

He snorted as I blushed and turned around, facing the bed. “Who’s looking at you?”

His footsteps on the floor echoed in the silence of the room, setting my skin to crawling in a good way. I could hear him getting closer, but like a deer in the headlights, I was frozen, anticipating my eventual capture.

His lips grazed the shell of my ear as he leaned in next to me from over my shoulder, a smile in his words as visible as if I were looking at him eye to eye. “I like it when you look at me like you’re starving and I’m a snack on the buffet table.”

As if compelled by his words, I licked my lips, clenching my thighs together with a little whimper of need.

Nevermind that we’d literally just fucked like the world was ending in my apartment an hour ago.

Nevermind that our daughter was in the next room, that Pujin and a whole host of security guards were right there, as well.

I wanted him. I wanted this, wanted us. And I was well past denying it, because he could feel it, too.

“But you’re tired,” I heard him whisper as visions of the things we could do to each other, things I’d only read about, things I wished for years I could try out, faded from my mind. “Why don’t we lay down for a bit, grab some rest while Yejin is napping?”

I couldn’t hide the whole-body pout that washed over me. His laughter said he hadn’t missed it, either.

“I’m not tired,” I argued, though it was pointless. He knew me, still knew me, as if we’d never been apart. Nothing about me had changed in all that time, though I tried my damndest to become a whole new person.

“Liar,” he said simply, lifting me off my feet as if I weighed nothing. “Don’t argue just to argue.”

The three million and one tasks I had to complete, work I could be doing, raced through my mind like rabbits on speed. “I have to wor?—”

“Let me have this, Ari. Work can wait.”

The words were simple, but said with such emotion, such longing, I couldn’t fight him anymore. I wanted to give in to him, wanted to make him happy again. We’d been at each others’ throats for so long, the idea of playing nice was . . . strange. But with him in this moment, it felt . . . right.

“Work can wait,” I echoed, letting him arrange us in the center of the hotel bed. “For now.”

I passed out in his arms, content, safe, and warm from the inside out.

It felt good to not feel so fucking empty for once.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

JUN

The leisurely nap at the hotel was over too soon. Fucking labels had to go and ruin everything, man.

Ari's phone blasted the most annoying ringtone known to mankind, waking us up an hour after we'd laid down to sleep.

She stirred in my arms, but damned if I wasn't reluctant to let her go.

Every other time I'd let her go, she hadn't come back.

She'd run away from us, from me. And I didn't wanna take that risk again.

"Come on, Jun, that's the company," she mumbled into my shoulder as I tightened my hold, her hand already bending backward to reach for the damn phone on the stand. "Jun!"

"Fine, fine," I muttered, reluctantly releasing her. "I'll just lay here and freeze to death without your warmth."

"Dramatic," she chuckled, switching on her professional voice as she answered the call. "Simmons." A pause. "Right now?" Her whole body tensed, and suddenly I was

the nosiest person on the fucking planet. “I suppose we could, sir. But why now?”

I frowned as the other half of the conversation took shape by context clues.

Someone wanted us to go in to the office, right now, after being shot at and threatened and scared shitless.

The fucking audacity of it all really chafed my ass.

But what choice did we have? The label was the label, regardless of what country we were in and who was holding the reins.

“We will see you in an hour, sir.” She snapped the phone closed and turned to me with a sigh. “Put your shoes on, Jun. We’re wanted at the office for some debriefing and a formal report.”

“They don’t seem to care that we were all put through something traumatic just now, do they?” I rolled out of the bed, grumbling the whole way. I knew it wasn’t her fault, but she was within range, so she got my irritation, like she’d always done in the past.

“The upper management phrased it like they were working to ensure the utmost safety for you, so perhaps let’s not act like a dick when we get there, yeah?”

Forty five minutes later, we stepped out of the car on kNight Entertainment property.

Two hours after that, we’d been put through the wringer, and now all the big wigs knew we had a past with each other.

We’d been forced to disclose our previous relationship and lay it out on the table, thanks to the forwarded information from the police report.

But now, there was no need to hide our relationship. Well, whatever the fuck you wanted to call what we were now. I held Ari's hand in mine as we stepped out of the main building and into the night air, feeling freer than we had in a long ass time.

She'd called herself Yejin's mother.

I couldn't deny that it made me feel giddy to hear that come from her.

I was glad we left Yejin with Pujin at the hotel, but when we got back to the room, I planned to wake her up and explain it all.

Everything, we'd tell her anything she wanted to know.

I just hoped she'd accept Ari for who she was, that she could understand.

She was seven, not three. She was mature for her age.

"Jun, you don't have to hold onto me like the wind might blow me away, you know."  
Ari tugged on her hand, perhaps under the impression I'd release her if she asked.

I just gripped it tighter and tugged her against me. "I want to."

She shrugged, but she didn't fight me anymore. She might've even leaned into the embrace just a little as we approached the parking garage.

I was on cloud nine, floating on the feeling of having everything I'd ever wanted.

It was a miracle I spotted the man on the other side of the parking lot when I did.

My brows furrowed as he approached, because none of the guards we'd brought with us seemed concerned with this stranger closing in on their boss.

“So the company wants to release a mini-tour schedule on the continent. I was thinking we could aim for mid-fall, because that would give you enough time to practice with your new staff, and it’s a bigger buffer than you’re used to, so the workload won’t be as heavy?—”

I only partially heard the words she spoke as her thoughts ran a mile a minute. I knew she was just preparing the business end of things, but I didn’t have any capacity to focus. Something felt off, and it set my teeth on edge. Made my skin crawl.

“Do you guys see the dude over there by the company cars?” I asked a guard to my left, my voice stronger, more confident than I really was. “He’s not one of ours.”

The stranger in question suddenly glanced up and locked eyes with me, and then, as if this was some underfunded B-list action flick, his hand moved in slow motion, the gleam of metal catching in the moonlight as he brought a gun up and pointed it at me.

And then turned it in the direction of Arista with a feral snarl on his twisted lips.

“Die, bitch!”

I didn’t think. I didn’t breathe. My hand yanked Ari against me as I wrapped my arms around her and spun, turning my back on the shooter as the bullet left the gun.

She screamed, flinching against me as the sound echoed ominously against the concrete.

The bodyguards finally closed ranks around us, but it was too late.

The searing burn in my shoulder told me I’d taken the bullet meant for her. She was safe.

Ari was safe.

And that was all that mattered, as the world went dark and I sank to my knees, the sound of her screams ringing in my ears until I blacked out.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

ARISTA

“He’ll be fine, but he’s going to be out of commission for a few months at least, if not longer. Lucky it didn’t hit anything vital.”

The doctor pattered around his bedside, checking vitals, feeling his skin, checking him over with a satisfied murmur. I, on the other hand, was a wreck.

If I closed my eyes, I could still see the whole thing in real time.

The strange man heading right for us. The widening of Jun’s eyes as he registered the man heading right for us.

The feeling of being smashed against his chest as we spun around.

The way my lungs burst into flames trying to force air in and out as I hyperventilated.

The blood running down the white shirt now sticking to his torso.

The panic and fear that raced through me when he collapsed in my arms.

“You’re very lucky he took that bullet for you. With the height difference between you two, it would have likely hit you square in the forehead.”

Pujin stepped through the door, his face screwed up into a frown of disapproval. I hardly registered his presence enough to offer him a nod.

“I shouldn’t have sent you with the new guys.” He paced on the left of Jun’s bed, staring down at his boss as if waiting to be reprimanded. “I should have made sure you all were safe.”

“You were protecting Yejin, which is exactly where Jun wanted you, Pujin,” I whispered, hating that she was now curled up on the nearby chair, her hair in a messy bun, hugging her dad’s microphone like a lifeline.

I didn’t have the heart to take it from her when she showed up holding it, with Pujin in tow.

She looked so innocent, so sure of herself as she stepped up to her dad’s bedside and insisted he’d be fine with a little rest.

The doctor had thankfully not mentioned him being shot in front of her. All she knew was he got hurt at work.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Simmons?—”

“I’m not the one who got shot, Pujin,” I pointed out, wincing at the reminder. “You don’t owe me an apology for doing your job.”

My phone chose that moment to start singing, in the familiar tone of the label. Fuck me, when it rains, it pours. “I’ve gotta take this?—”

“Miss Ari? Please don’t go,” Yejin mumbled from her chair, still half asleep.

I settled back in my seat and nodded to her, smiling as best as I could. “I’ll be right

here, Yejin.”

“Kay.” Her eyes drifted shut again and she smiled in her sleep.

I opened the phone just before whoever was on the other end of the line decided to hang up. “Simmons.”

“Rizzo, hey. How’s the starboy doing?” Of course. Brady, in Public Relations, was already abreast of the intel, and likely was calling to see how much of a pain the PR campaign was about to be. “And you, of course, dear. I hope you’re both resting and recovering well.”

“Jun took a bullet, you insensitive prick,” I spat, at my wits end and not in the mood to deal with his shit. “He’s in a hospital bed. I’m physically fine, thanks to him.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to come off like a jerk, dear,” he insisted, turning on his media blitz voice. “How is everything? Is there anything we can do for you?”

Code for how are we planning to spin this shit show, of course.

“Keep the details to a minimum. They apprehended the shooter. His old label has already been implicated, but the company isn’t planning to release that, as the police have opened an investigation.

The man has a track record, and the news will likely blow it up to twice the size it really is to make him look truly horrendous.

Jun is stable, he took the bullet in the shoulder.

But he’ll be out of commission for a while.

That means the label will have to cancel his appearances for the next few weeks at least, and limit it to light work for a month or so after that, until his doctors clear him for return to active duty on the roster. ”

“Have you notified the label?” I didn’t bother to respond with the obvious answer. I mean, fuck, come on, dude, how do you think you found out? “Sorry, that was stupid, obviously you did.”

“Listen, Brady, is there anything else important that I can help you with?” My eyes drifted to Jun, whose body was as still as a stone on the thin hospital mattress.

“Do you know who might fill his slots that the company announced today for a continental tour?”

I sighed. “Brady, I’m a liaison, not a manager. Maybe you should ask the label who they plan to fill his spot with.”

“Well, I tried that. They suggested you might have a few prospects you could mention to us, that way we can start reaching out to gauge interest.”

“You think I just walk around with a contact list full of Asian idols that I can whip out to pull strings from?” Tangled knots caught my fingers as I carded them through my loose hair in frustration.

“Brady, I have no fucking idea who might be willing to sign temporarily and fill his slot while he recovers.”

“I might know a guy.”

I spun on my heel as Jun’s voice echoed around me, rough but strong, accompanied with a rouge-ish smile that melted me and had me blinking back tears. “You’re

awake!”

He held his hand out as if he wasn't sitting there with his other one in a sling, a bandage over a now-stitched gunshot wound. “Let me talk to him.”

I was too stunned to tell him no or insist that he rest instead. I just held out the phone for him to take from me, staring blankly as he brought it to his ear and smiled, clearing his throat.

“Brady, was it? Kim Seo-Jun.” He paused, listening for a moment as Brady likely melted down in his ear. “Yes, well I'm just glad we're all still alive. Thanks. Now about a filler?—”

Two minutes later, Jun was handing the phone back, having placated Brady with promises to reach out to a few friends in the industry who might be interested in a change.

The second my phone was back in my hand, his was magically appearing in its place, whipped out as he scrolled through his contacts.

He fired off a few text messages, then set it down, turning his attention on me.

I was still rooted to the spot where I'd turned around to find him awake and smiling.

He held out his good arm and the corner of his lips curled up playfully. “Come here, Ari.”

It was damn near impossible to be gentle as I sagged into his embrace, all the worry and fear and agony bleeding from me like a flood bursting through a dam.

I sobbed into his hospital gown for almost a solid five minutes, unable to stop, unable

to care how bad it made me look, how pathetic.

His hand slid up to the back of my head and smoothed my hair, soaking up the wetness as if it were nothing to him.

When I could find my breath again, when I wasn't afraid I might break down just by looking at him, I lifted my eyes and peeled away from his pecs, hoping I didn't look like a total mess but knowing damn well I probably resembled a red-eyed raccoon.

“You are an idiot, Kim Seo-Jun.”

His brows lifted as he regarded me in confusion. “Well, that's not exactly what I hoped to hear from you when I woke up.”

“Why would you do that? Step in front of a fucking bullet?—”

He leaned forward, wincing as his lips captured mine in a soft kiss.

It was barely there, but it was enough to silence me and my mounting protests.

When he pulled back, I glanced over to where Yejin lay, breathing a sigh of relief that she was still off in dreamland.

Pujin was standing against the wall, head down, waiting for Jun to spot him and say something. Jun ? —

“I would do it again and again, a million times over, Ari. I'd do it for you.”

I blinked back more tears, sniffing very unladylike. “Why?”

“Because I fucking love you, woman.” His stare was filled with frustration, as if I

should have known that. “What other reason do I need?”

“Jun,” I started again, breath catching in the back of my throat. “I’m not that important.”

His lips drooped as those beautiful, perfectly sculpted brows sank in a frown. “You are to me. To our daughter. And that’s what matters most.” His eyes scanned the room, softening when they landed on Yejin. “How is she taking it?”

“She doesn’t know much, so she’s convinced you’ll be fine. She thinks you got hurt at work.”

“Probably for the best,” he remarked dryly, watching her sleep. “Pujin?”

I nodded to the corner. “Beating himself up.”

The next ten minutes were filled with Jun and Pujin going back and forth over whose fault was what, and how much punishment Pujin deserved for allegedly not being able to predict the future. He and Jun went in circles until Yejin woke up, and then the argument was shelved for another time.

Yejin was ecstatic to see her father up and talking, a smile on his face.

She rained kiss after kiss on him until she tired of their game and complained her stomach was trying to eat itself alive.

When I offered to take her to the cafeteria, Jun declined, demanding a wheelchair for himself.

The nurses were leery of his request, but as I knew from experience, nobody says no to Kim Seo-Jun.

When he wants something, he'll get it, one way or another.

Which is how I found myself wheeling him down the hall, Yejin at his side, at 3am, heading for the after hours section of the cafeteria.

"Yejin," he began once we'd settled at a table by the windows that overlooked the city. "I have something to tell you, baby girl."

Yejin sat up straighter, shoving the entire chicken tender in her mouth with a grin. "Mmm?"

He looked at me for a second, his eyes uncertain. "It's about your mother."

Yejin looked bored, her gaze flitting between me and Jun as she reached for a french fry. "Miss Ari is my mother."

I blinked in surprise, and Jun was, for once in his life, speechless. "What did you say, Yejin?"

Her innocence radiated like a second sun in the darkness as she reached up and ran her fingers through my hair.

"You have the same kind of hair as me. And none of my daddy's friends have hair like that.

" She pointed to my freckles. "We have these, too." Her hand reached for mine, and the innocent child suddenly looked wise beyond her years.

"Besides. I heard daddy talking to you in the kitchen the other day. You were arguing over me. I'm seven, not stupid. "

Jun burst out laughing, doubling over to hide his wince of pain. “Oh my god, she’s definitely mine,” he wheezed, clapping his knee with his good hand. “Fucking hell, Ari, and I was worried about telling her?—”

“Does this mean I can call you my mom?”

My breath caught in my throat. “Call—what?”

Yejin just repeated herself with all the patience of a saint. “Can I call you my mom?”

Jun stared at her blankly. I fought not to get my hopes up. “Only if you want to. I wouldn’t want you to do it to make either of us happy.”

“I want to.” She grabbed my hand and Jun’s, holding us together like a unit.

A family. “I always wanted a mom. Uncle Minseo said you were dead, but I knew better. Daddy always looked at him like he wanted to beat him up when he said that. And Uncle Jinnie always said I’d meet you someday.

” Her eyes sparkled with happiness. “I think it’ll be pretty cool to have you for a mom. ”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just let the tears fall, determined to live up to this little angel’s expectations of me.

It would be hard, but I’d do it. I’d make up for every minute I missed, every memory she lacked, if it took me until I died to do it.

I’d been given a second chance. I wasn’t about to waste it.

“It’ll be an honor to be your mom.”

Her grin turned playful, teasing almost, as she looked back over at her dad. “I think you should be Daddy’s wife, too. Then we can be a real family.”

It was Jun’s turn to choke as the words registered in his brain. “Yejin?—”

I winked at her, a smile plastered to my face. “I don’t think your daddy can handle me as a wife.”

“If that’s a challenge, woman?—”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:24 am*

“So you want me to what, exactly, Jun?”

I’d been fielding calls the last two days from the people I reached out to. Of the three who got back to me, only one sounded remotely interested in uprooting himself and his entire life to move here for the short term.

Kaito Kubayashi was an old friend from my trainee days, one I leaned on in some of my darker moments when I was afraid to trust anyone else. When he arrived on Korean shores, he was like me—a loner without family or friends.

We bonded over our shared love of American pizza and soju. And girls. Oh man, did he love girls.

I might’ve had the womanizer moniker, but this motherfucker actually lived up to it.

He went through girls like I went through pants.

But he had a good heart and a kind, warm soul.

He’d give you the shirt off his back if you needed it.

He rescued fucking stray cats. He read to underprivileged children on the weekends.

And he was one of the only people outside of my old bandmates that knew about my daughter before I was outed to the media.

“I want you to sign with my new label and fill in for me while I’m recovering from a

fucking bullet wound.”

The other end of the line went silent. “You’re kidding me, bro. Like legit kidding me, right? You left SeoulSOUL and got shot for your efforts. And you want me to bail on my current label and take the chance that I might be next?”

I sighed, watching Yejin and Ari bond on the nearby couch in the waiting room as the doctors discussed my discharge. “Listen. What happened to me was a rarity. And I wasn’t even the target, bud. My girl was. I just took the bullet because that’s what you do when you love someone.”

“It’s what idiots do,” he retorted with a snort, and I could practically see the eye roll in my head that always accompanied them.

“Listen, I promised my brother I’d come to Khula City to meet him.

But you’re asking me to make my stay a permanent one, and I’m not so sure I’m down for that.

” Just then, there was a scuffle on the other end of the line, accompanied by some hushed arguing and a muffled shout of indignation.

I waited patiently for Kai to return to the phone, and when he did, his whole demeanor had changed.

“You know what, Kim Seo-Jun? I think I will take you up on that offer. Something’s come up, and an extended vacation out of the country might not be such a bad idea.”

“Kai, are you in trouble?” I couldn’t hide the grin in my voice. “Shocker. Did you knock someone up?”

“You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Jun?”

My brow quirked, but I said nothing. Not much could rattle Kai. If he wanted to get out of the country, it was serious.

I cleared my throat when I was sure I could keep from laughing at him. “So, how soon can you be here?”

“How soon can you get me on a flight?”

I chuckled despite the residual pain in my shoulder. “Pack your bags, Kaito Kobayashi. I’ll see you in Nocturna Beach first thing tomorrow.”