



Fated to Forever: The Fate Series Collection

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Category: Romance

Description: The Fated to Forever Collection has both stories from the Fate Series! Say It's Forever and Claim Me Forever. It's full of all the tropes you love. You'll get happily ever afters, no cheating, and sugary-sweet alphas. Watch first hand as these alpha men unexpectedly get brought to their knees by these innocent heroines.

Say Its Forever

He retired from being a hero. Until an angel showed up needing one.

Winter

My whole life has been a secret. Ive been hidden away from the rest of the world. If that wasnt bad enough, now Ive been promised to a terrible man. I have to find a way out.

Garrett

I enjoy my quiet recluse life. That was until she showed up on my doorstep in the middle of a storm. An angel, one I couldve never expected.

Claim Me Forever

One look spurred my obsession. She's too innocent. I should walk away But I won't.

Libby

I'm no good to anyone—at least that's what my father always told me. Until I met Ace. I keep thinking there's no way he really wants me, that I'm damaged goods.

Ace

I started a new life, content to run a business. At least I **was** content until my blue-eyed girl. Now my new life won't start until she's in it. Ill burn the world to keep her.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:14 am

GARRETT

I take a sip of the warm beer I've been nursing for the past hour. I'm ready to get the fuck out of here, but I have another thirty minutes before I can. I always live up to my word, but the second the time is up, I'm fucking out.

"When you check your watch every two seconds, it hurts my feelings." My brother holds his hand over his heart like he is truly wounded. He's full of shit. Or maybe he's not. I don't know these days.

"A storm is coming. We should cut out early." He shakes his head at me.

"Are you a fucking witch? Is the rain going to melt you?" Ace chuckles. "Can you live a little for once?"

"I've lived enough." Before checking the time again, I take another sip of the beer. I hate the taste of this shit, but my brother still always gives me one when I get here.

I might only be pushing thirty, but I swear I feel as though I have lived a thousand lives already.

I am semi-retired at this point. I paid my dues.

Now I should get to live my life out in solace, alone.

I only come out twice a month for the meetup with my brother because he all but demands it.

If it weren't for him, I'd be content in my life of solitude.

I also know, God rest her soul, that my mom would be pissed if I didn't.

We promised her that we would stay close.

That we would always stick together no matter what.

I would never break my word to my mother.

It's always been the two of us together.

Since my twin brother and I came into this world, our lives have run parallel to each other.

We are like-minded in so many areas of our lives.

We joined the Marines together, served on the Star Team, and then did some private work as well.

Mercenary work. I never cared much for the title.

We took on job after job when we left the Star Team, trying to fill our time and make as much money as possible.

That was until one mission went to shit. That changed everything for me.

Since then, I've retired completely. My twin still goes on jobs. He's tried to talk me into a few, but I'm good.

I enjoy being alone out in my cabin. It's quiet there.

I can forget about the rest of the fucked-up world because it doesn't matter how many missions you go on, how many fucked-up people you take out for the government, there is always another motherfucker right behind them.

It never ends. They're like cockroaches.

"Have you ever thought about getting a woman at least?" Ace nods to the dance floor. It's filled with women that are half-dressed grinding against each other. I have no interest.

One thing I enjoy, now that I don't have to hunker down in holes or share tight quarters, is having my space.

I'm not inclined to have someone all over it.

It racks my nerves. It's why I bought a cabin in isolation.

No one is there to bother me. I'm alone with my thoughts. I'm more than comfortable with that.

"Why don't you go out there and get one for yourself?"

"My brother doesn't have much room to talk when it comes to the ladies. He is charming, and they flock to him. It has always been that way. We might be identical, but they don't swarm me the way they do him.

Thank fuck for that. I'm sure it has something to do with my pissed-off expression and mood.

Most people in town know I'm not one for small talk or who cares to be bothered.

They usually give me a wide berth when I come out.

For all the smack he talks, I've never seen Ace take anyone home either. I mean, it would be so damn easy for him since his place is above the bar. In saying that, I do only come to his bar twice a month. It's my check-in so that he knows I'm still alive.

"Women don't like when you disappear for a few days." Ace lifts his beer, chugging it back. I suppose they don't. I'm not sure why he opened this place. It seems like a big responsibility since he is still taking at least one job a month. You never know how long you might be gone.

"When are you going to stop taking jobs?"

"What else am I going to do?" He shrugs.

"You have this place," I remind him.

"This just gives us some roots here."

"Roots? Why the fuck do we need roots?" Ace has settled into town with ease, but he has always been good with people. Me, not so much.

"You picked this town," he reminds me. I had. We'd stopped here once when we'd been on a road trip with Mom. I remember how much she loved it. The way her face lit up with happiness when we explored it. It reminds me of her.

We lost her not long after we graduated.

It's part of why we enlisted. We didn't have much growing up, but Mom always did what she could.

She made every trip special, no matter if it was us just driving and camping somewhere.

She was the absolute best. I fucking hate that she isn't here today.

Now Ace and I have more money than we need, and we'll never get the chance to take care of her.

"Well, now that you know I'm still alive, I'll be on my way." I love my brother, but it's time for me to hit the road. He stands when I do, giving me a hug before I head out of the bar.

"Garrett," I hear a female voice call out when I'm almost to my truck. I turn around to see Mindy making her way toward me as quickly as she can. She almost trips, her heels not doing her any favors on the gravel parking lot.

"Got somewhere to be," I tell her, opening my truck door. Snow has already started to fall. A thin layer covering my windshield. It won't be long until the roads get bad, and the last thing I want to be is stuck in town.

"Like here?" She lets out a giggle that sounds forced and juvenile. "You don't go anywhere."

With a small town, it doesn't take long for people to pick up on your habits. It had only taken me a couple of days to clock almost everyone in this town's routines, but that is my nature. I'm trained to watch and notice every single detail around me. That's how you stay alive.

"Home," I grunt, slamming my door. Mindy jumps back, her bright pink lips pursed.

I know I'm being a dick, but I don't care.

She knows I'm not one for small talk. I have no fucking clue why she tries to talk to me when I'm always an asshole to her.

I can't stand her. She's a toucher, and it pisses me off.

I pull out of the parking lot, heading for home. I'm sure Bear is waiting for me. I have the cabin stocked up, so I won't have to worry about shit no matter how long or bad the storm gets. In fact, one of the best parts of this town is the snow storms.

I just didn't know this one would turn my whole world upside down.

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WINTER

“Don’t cry; your tears will freeze.” My sister, Libby, presses her warm hands against my cheeks.

I drop my forehead to hers. I don’t want to leave.

Okay, I do, but I don’t want to leave without her.

Libby and I have been together our whole lives.

I haven’t gone one day without seeing her.

I can’t even imagine her not being in my life on a daily basis.

“Come with me,” I whisper. We both can leave this life behind. What for, I’m not sure, but it can’t be worse than this. There is a whole other world out there. One we’ve only gotten small peeks of.

“I’ll slow you down.” She gives me a sad smile.

Libby has always said her limp is both a blessing and a curse.

It makes her less desirable for marriage.

That is a plus around here. Girls are married off young and to men twice and sometimes even three times their ages.

The thought alone makes me want to vomit.

When Libby was fourteen, she fell off the back porch.

Well, if I'm being honest, she was more pushed by our father, but the healer could only do so much to help her recover.

Since then, she has had a limp. I begged my father to take her to the hospital.

I can still feel the sting of his backhand for even making such a suggestion.

I'll never forget my sister's screams. Our parents refused to take her.

I should say my father refused because my mother really doesn't have a say.

She does whatever he says. That's the way things work around here for women.

Ultimately, their stupid decision to call a healer to tend to Libby caused her to have a permanent limp.

It was a bunch of crap. No one here is a doctor or even a nurse.

None of us get to go off to school. We all go to school together on the compound.

"I don't know if I can leave you." Libby and I aren't twins, but a lot of people think we are. I'm older by ten months. She isn't only my sister but my best friend. The only person I could speak openly to. We share our secret hate of this place together.

"You have to." She steels her voice the best she can, only making me smile at her. Libby doesn't have a stern bone in her body. The world could be shit to her, and still she is sweet as can be. "There is no other option. You can't marry him."

“I know.” My stomach turns thinking of Joseph.

It was supposed to be every girl's dream to marry him. He is a prophet, after all. Our parents had never been more proud than when he'd come to ask for my hand in marriage.

Making me his third wife. The first had died, and the second has yet to give him a child.

I know he wants me for childbearing more than anything.

Libby and I have always held firm to the belief that he killed his first wife.

Not that it matters. Even if that is true and everyone knew it, they'd come up with some reason why he did it.

I'm sure it would be along the lines of it was God's will. That's what they say about anything whenever a man speaks on something or has questionable actions.

It's always the same, them pretending to speak for God. I hate them all.

“You'll do what you have to.” I nod in agreement, knowing what she means.

“I'll get help.”

“The police.” Libby says the forbidden word.

We've been taught to fear the police and government.

That they rip families apart. I believe that many families here should be torn apart.

Still, a fear that has been instilled in me lingers about the police.

It's hard to know what is true when you're kept away from the rest of the world.

It was only on a very rare occasion that we got to leave our homes and the compound.

"I promise I'll speak to whomever I have to so I can come back for you," I vow. I might have to leave her behind tonight, but I will be back for her. Nothing would ever stop that.

"Take this." Libby slips off her coat. I try not to take it, but it's pointless.

"I have one." She ignores me, putting it on over mine.

"It's snowing," Libby points out as if we're not standing in it for me to see. The only light comes from the full moon, which is bright in the sky even with the snow falling all around us. "You remember which way the town is?"

"Yes."

Libby takes my bag from me and manages to tie it so that I can wear it around me without having to carry it in my hand.

A month ago, Father had taken us into town. He'd been in a good mood and needed help picking up an order. The other boys that would normally go with him had been busy building a new house. So we were the only other option he had if he wanted help that day.

We'd noticed it was closer than we thought.

I just had to find my way back, and then I could get help.

I don't think our parents can keep us here against our will if someone out there knows we want out. That is the problem, though. Getting the heck out of here isn't as easy as just walking away.

There are consequences for people that try to leave and get caught.

"I love you."

"I love you too." I wrap Libby in a tight hug. I'm still worried that she might take some kind of wrath from our parents when they find out I'm gone. Hopefully that won't be until tomorrow.

"Now go." She snuffles, stepping back from me.

I give my sister one last look before I take off toward the woods, hoping the trees will help protect me from the wind and some of the snow that is getting thicker by the second, but thankfully the moon never falters, giving me the light I need to make my way through the thick trees.

It doesn't take long before my toes start to ache from the cold.

I'd put on a few pairs of socks, but my shoes are covered in snow, soaked through.

I push myself to keep going. I should have hit the road by now.

I stop and spin around in a circle, realizing I'm not sure which way is which.

The snow covers my tracks as quickly as I make them.

"Please," I beg anyone that will listen. I drop my head back and stare up at the sky. The cold is quickly spreading throughout my body. I feel it settling into my bones.

Keep going . I push myself. I have to keep moving.

If I stop now, I'll never make it out of here.

I would truly leave my sister behind then.

The snow grows thicker with each step I take.

My breath catches when I finally see a break in the tree line.

I sprint toward it, stumbling out of the woods to see a wooden cabin. A porch covers the entire bottom level.

I debate for a second what I should do. I have no freaking clue who lives there. I'm still in the middle of nowhere. I decide it doesn't matter. I can't make it much farther. It's collapse in the woods to die or take my chances.

I walk up the steps to the front door. I'm about to knock when a giant dog—maybe even a wolf—steps around the side of the deck, its eyes trained right on me.

The moon gives them a bright yellow glow.

It tentatively walks toward me, trying to figure out my scent.

I step back to the door. I try to knock on it, but no one answers. The dog moves closer.

“You're a big boy.” I hold my hand out. The dog sniffs it, then ducks his head so it goes under my hand so I can pet him.

I let out a breath. My knees give out from the mixture of panic and the cold taking

over.

The dog moves in close, pressing its body against mine.

I wrap my arms around him, burying my face in his fur.

The rest of the world melts away as I slip into darkness. My sister's face is the last thing I see.

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GARRETT

When I pull up the long driveway through the path of trees I had to make when I built my cabin, I already know everything isn't as it should be. Bear should be out here. He always comes rushing out of the dog door when he hears my truck, meeting me in the driveway to run alongside me, but he's not there.

I know this cold snowstorm wouldn't stop him.

I'm not sure anything actually could. I lean over and grab my gun from the glove box, wanting to be prepared for whatever comes my way.

I pull around, my lights hitting the front of the house.

Bear lifts his head from where he is sitting in front of the door.

I tuck my gun in the back of my pants when I see there is someone wrapped around him.

The small figure has a mess of long blonde hair.

She doesn't move. My chest grows tight for some reason. A rush of adrenaline fills me.

I'm used to dead bodies. It comes with this job. This, however, hits differently, and I'm not sure why.

“The fuck!?” I jump out of my truck, rushing up the stairs. My eyes track the snow on the ground, but I don't see any evidence of her footprints. The girl has been here for at least thirty minutes. This is not good, especially with the current temperature.

“Bear.” I have to force him to move, tucking my arm around the small figure so she doesn't fall onto the porch. I turn her in my hold, her hair falling back from her face to show me she's not a child but a young woman with the face of a fucking angel.

Her lips are full and thick, yet her features are delicate and small, just like the rest of her.

I easily lift her into my arms, punching the key code for the front door.

The lock pops, and I push it open, carrying her inside.

I lay her down on the couch before starting a fire and hurrying down the hallway to grab some blankets out of the closet.

Bear sits beside the couch, not leaving the girl's side. I don't blame him.

I don't want to either. What the fuck? I push that thought to the back of my head.

I thought Bear was just as grumpy as me. He doesn't care much for company either. Now he's hovering over this girl.

“Where did you find her?” I ask Bear, tossing the blankets on the back of the couch as I stand over the girl, knowing what I have to do next.

I have never seen hair as blonde as hers.

I'm not even sure you could call it blonde; it might be white.

It rests against her pale skin, which is free of any marks except for a small freckle next to her lips. Every inch of her is perfect.

I run my hand down my face because she truly does look like a fallen angel. She appears too flawless to be real. A fucking vision. One that is causing chaos inside of me.

Bear lets out a whine, then nudges the girl's hand. She doesn't wake.

I can see the rise and fall of her chest. The pulse in her neck.

Her breathing is steady, but she's out. Where did she come from?

She's not from town. I know without a doubt that I've never seen her before.

I would remember her. There isn't a chance in hell that I could forget her.

"All right." I exhale deeply as I reach for the buttons on her coat. I quickly notice that there's another coat underneath hers. After removing the two drenched coats, I discover she's wearing a worn-out long dress that appears to be older than her actual age. It's damp too. "Fuck me," I mutter.

I'll have to remove it. I go for her shoes next. They are also worn and not designed for the snow. When I get them off, along with the socks, I wrap my hands around her delicate feet. They're so damn cold.

I rub my thumb across her tiny toes. I lean in and stop myself, jerking back before my mouth can press a kiss to one of them.

"What the fuck is wrong with me?" I stand, letting her feet go. "Get it together," I tell myself, heading to my room to grab a pair of thick socks. I put them on her feet.

Bear lets out another whimper. “She’s going to be all right,” I reassure him, and I tell myself, too.

I do my best to not stare when I remove her dress, leaving her in a simple white cotton bra and panties.

I wrap one blanket around her, then lay another one over her. I place a pillow under her head.

She lets out a small sigh and snuggles in deeper.

A pressure in my chest that I hadn’t realized was there lifts.

Bear’s giant ass jumps up on the end of the couch by her feet.

He faces her, keeping his attention trained on our snow angel.

I decide at that moment that I’ll call her Snow until she’s able to tell me her real name.

When my phone goes off, I debate answering it, but it’s Ace. He’ll keep calling, or worse, show up here. That is the last thing I want right now.

“What?” I say when I answer. I sit down on the end of the couch next to her. My fingers drift down her jaw, noticing that her cheeks are starting to turn pink. That’s a good thing. Her thick lashes lay against her cheeks, making me wonder what color her eyes are.

“Damn, just calling to make sure you got home okay. It got bad out there quickly.”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I respond absently. Snow scrunches her nose, and I wonder what

she might be dreaming about.

“Garrett!” my brother barks through the phone. “Are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” I grunt, standing to step away from the couch. My snow angel clearly needs rest.

“What is going on? Something is up.” Of course, he can tell I'm off. I glance back toward the couch. I tell my brother almost everything, but for some reason, I don't want to share this. Not yet.

She's mine.

I grit my teeth at my own barbaric thought, finding it absurd.

Perhaps I am losing my mind up here alone.

I don't have a clue who this girl is or where she came from.

What I do know is that no one out here wanders around in those clothes she had on in a snowstorm without a reason, and that reason can't be a good one.

Not if she was willing to freeze to death for it.

“It's nothing,” I tell him so that he'll leave me alone.

“Bullshit.” Ace calls me out right away. “It's not Mindy, right? She returned to the bar, pissed.”

“You think I would have something going on with Mindy?” I'm actually offended.

“No, but what the fuck else could it be? Bear okay?”

“He’s good.” Great actually. I’ll have to make him a steak as a reward for taking care of my girl.

“Fine, whatever. I’ll call you in the morning to check on you.”

“I don’t need a fucking check-in.”

“Too bad,” Ace responds before ending the call. I shove the phone back into my pocket, then go back over to Snow. I sit down in front of the couch, leaning back on it. I don’t want her to wake alone and scared in an unfamiliar place.

It's probably not going to be any better to wake up to a man who is easily twice her size. Fuck. Maybe three times. But I’m not leaving this spot. Not until she wakes up, and I can make sure she's okay.

My Snow will open those eyes and show me what beautiful color they are because I know they will be breathtaking... like the rest of her.

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WINTER

I cuddle deeper into the blanket, feeling warm and cozy. When did my bed get so soft? “Libby,” I mutter. A whine for a response has my eyes flying open as I jerk to sit up. I come face-to-face with a massive dog.

“Bear.” A deep voice rumbles next to me. I let out a small scream and jump. Not that I go anywhere. I’m on a couch. My eyes lock on a massive-sized man. He goes with the massive-sized dog. Holy crap!

“Green,” he says, a half-smile pulling at his lips. It makes him appear less intense. I relax a little.

“Green?” I repeat because I can’t find words of my own at the moment.

“Your eyes. Been wondering what color they’d be.”

“Oh.” I take in the man sitting on the floor next to the couch.

He's wearing a plain black shirt that hugs his arms tightly. Tattoos run up his arms, disappearing under the shirt. My whole body warms as I take him in. A reaction I’ve never experienced before.

This man is full of sin. I can hear my mother's words in my head.

His eyes drop, and I follow them. “Oh my gosh!” I grab the blanket and yank it up to cover my bra.

How did I not realize I was only in a bra and underwear?

I can feel socks on my feet, too. “My clothes.”

“Put the dress in the dryer.” The man speaks as he stands, his deep voice once again having an effect on my body.

What the heck is going on with me? I drop my head back and stare up at him.

How does he look even bigger? I really had no idea that they made men this size.

No one looks like him on the compound. I bet it costs a fortune to feed him.

“Why did you, ah”—I hold the blanket tighter to my body—“take it?” I can’t seem to string a whole sentence together in front of this man.

“You were soaked and freezing. I did what I had to.” He gives no apology for that. “Stay put,” he orders before walking off. I turn to watch him go down a hallway and disappear into another room. A small sense of panic builds in me in his absence, which is ridiculous. He’s a stranger.

I take the moment to soak in where I am.

His home is nothing like mine. The walls and floor are all wood.

There is a massive stone fireplace with a robust fire going.

Over it hangs a flat-screen television. We don’t own a television at the compound.

It isn't allowed. Though a select few members have them, they are higher-ups in the church. Of course, the normal rules don’t apply to them.

The living room area opens up into a kitchen with shiny appliances.

This man must be really rich. Didn't he say he put my dress in the dryer?

We hand wash and hang all our clothes. I've never even used a washing machine.

I know what they are, but we weren't allowed to have them.

It was actually one of the many things Joseph had told me about that he had in his home.

He was always trying to tell me how much I was going to enjoy being married to him.

That I would have an easier life. If it meant I didn't have to be his wife, I'd rather just keep washing my clothes and hanging them.

"You can wear this." I jerk my attention away from the fancy kitchen back to the giant man. He hands me a shirt. "It's mine, but it will pretty much be a dress on you."

I take the shirt from him. "Not from where I come from." I pull the shirt over my head. "Dresses go to your ankles."

"If you say so." He drops down in a chair next to the couch, his attention fully on me. "How are you feeling, Snow?"

"Snow?"

He shrugs. "It's what I've been calling you."

"Oh." I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. Why do I like that he gave me a name?
"It's Winter actually."

“So, I was close.” He gives me another half smile, which makes me relax back into my seat. If he was going to hurt me, he would have done it by now. “I’m Garrett, by the way.”

“Garrett,” I repeat. I really like that. The dog wiggles closer to me, wanting some attention too. I give him a pet on the head, remembering how he tried to keep me warm.

“That’s Bear.”

“He’s handsome.” I give him a hug again. “Thank you, Bear.” When I lift my head, Garrett is still watching me. “I’m sorry that I passed out on your porch.”

“Don’t be. I’m just glad you’re okay.” He leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees. “Are you okay?”

“I think so.” Everything feels fine. Well, physically anyway. Before I passed out, I couldn’t feel my feet. Now they’re nice and warm.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Right.” I duck my head, focusing my attention back on Bear. Why do I suddenly feel shy about this? Or it could be that it’s embarrassing.

I don’t even know where to begin with everything. When Libby and I came up with this plan for me to escape the compound, I hadn’t expected to end up practically naked in a strange man's house. A very handsome man at that.

“How old are you?” he asks, giving me a second to get my thoughts together.

“Twenty.”

“Thank fuck,” he mutters, shaking his head.

Not sure why that's such a good thing. I'm actually on the older side. A lot of the girls my age are married and have a few kids by now, but some of the rules had changed after one of the prophets was taken. He had not yet returned, and all we knew was that the government was attempting to destroy us. That's the rhetoric we were told.

After that, a few things changed, but not much.

“You cursed,” I stupidly point out. If a curse word ever crossed my lips, my father would make me live to regret it. Even if he said them all the time when he thought no one could hear him. Not Garrett, though. He just said it right here in front of me.

“Yeah, I tend to do that.” He leans back in the chair once more. “Now tell me. Are you all right?”

“No,” I whisper.

“You're running from something?”

“Kinda.”

“Kinda?” Now he's the one repeating my words.

“I escaped, but I have to go back.”

“Escaped.” Garrett is on his feet. “Escaped who?” The concerned expression that he was wearing only a moment ago has disappeared. His jaw is now tight, and I can tell he's trying to hold it together.

“My family.” I lick my dry lips. “My fiancé.” I hate calling him that, but he laid

claim to me. Could I just break it if I was no longer there? I'm not sure how these things work.

"Fiancé?" Garrett fists his hands against his sides.

"Supposed to marry him in a few days." That was before the storm rolled in. Things might have been delayed, but I couldn't risk it.

"You ran from him?" I nod. "You don't want to marry him?"

"Gosh no!" I wrap my arms around myself. "But it's not really my choice."

"You're twenty. It's your fucking choice, Snow."

"Winter." Did he forget my name already?

"I know, but I found you. My little snow angel passed out on my porch." I swear there is a possessiveness to his words. It warms me deep inside in a way I don't understand. But I'm finding I want to.

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GARRETT

With those big green eyes of hers, Snow watches me.

I'd imagined they were green in my mind.

I think most would have guessed blue, but I get the sense that my little snowflake is always full of surprises.

What I didn't expect was that they'd be filled with such innocence.

I can't remember seeing that in many years.

It makes a protectiveness rise up inside of me.

Her eyes follow me as I double-check the front door.

After grabbing the bag she dropped, I made sure to lock it, but my mind was slightly scattered.

I'm not used to that. In fact, the world could blow up around me, and I could still always stay on target.

Not having that control is filling me with a sense of uneasiness.

I take out my phone, check that all my alarms are turned on, and also activate the ones outside.

I installed them a few years ago but kept them off for the most part.

Animals could trip them up, and I wasn't worried about someone trying to sneak up on me out here. Now I am. If this snow angel was my fiancée, I'd do whatever I needed to get her back.

So I need to take every precaution I can to protect her.

When I see everything is secure, I grab the girl's bag next to the door. I carry it over to the coffee table and dump it out.

“Hey!” She scrambles to grab some of the things as they land on the table.

“Stop.” I snag her around the wrist with a gentle but quick hold. When she reels back as if I'm going to strike her, I release my hold on her and hold my hands palms up. “Shit, Snow, I'd never hit you.”

She clutches whatever it was she grabbed off the coffee table to her chest. I can see she's unsure.

Her expression is like a hot blade slicing through me.

I kneel in front of her so that I don't tower over her.

The last thing I want her to be is scared of me.

The thought alone is enough to fucking kill me.

“Hey.” I try to gentle my tone. I'm not sure if I did it right.

I've never tried that before, but I'll do whatever it takes right now to put her at ease.

The last thing I want is for her to run away from me. I don't want to imagine how that might go. Not with some of the shit that's been swirling in my mind since I found her, watching her sleep for the past few hours. "Has someone laid hands on you before?"

"Laid hands?" Her nose scrunches.

"Hit you." Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, answering the question without words. "I swear on my life, Snow, I'll never strike you."

"Ever?" she whispers the one word with uncertainty. I want to rage, but I shove that shit all the way the fuck down. God help whatever motherfucker touched her. I'll kill them with my bare hands when the opportunity arises.

"Ever. Even if you hit me."

"I wouldn't hit you." She looks at me like I've lost my mind for even suggesting it.

"Maybe you should learn."

"To hit you?"

"To defend yourself if someone ever does try to hurt you."

"I could do that?" Her body starts to relax again. I feel myself starting to do the same.

"You can do anything you want." I extend my hand toward her. She doesn't flinch away. Slowly, I cup her soft, round cheek in my hand. Snow leans into my touch. "Now what do you have in your hand?"

Her cheeks begin to flush a scarlet color. With her fair skin, I bet my girl blushes all

the way down her chest to her perky pink nipples. I know I shouldn't be thinking of this shit right now, but I can't help myself.

“Why are you dumping my bag out?” Her bottom lip puffs out, and it takes everything in me not to lean in and suck it right into my mouth.

"I want to make sure there's nothing in there that could track you."

“Track me?” Her brows pull together in confusion.

“Like a phone or maybe some kind of tag.”

“I don't have a phone.”

“Like you left it behind?”

She shakes her head adamantly as if it's insane that she would have a phone. “I've never had one. It's not allowed.”

I stare at her for a long moment.

Her innocence, her clothing, her reaction to me cursing and all the other small things begin clicking into place in my mind. How the fuck did I not think of this before? Probably because I'd only ever heard of it and never ventured near where I heard they resided.

It all makes so much more sense. Her not seeming to understand everything I say. Even some of her behavior.

“You're a part of Heaven's Temple?” Her eyes drop, and she pulls back from my touch. I let my hand fall away. She doesn't want to admit it. She has no reason to be

embarrassed. I'm sure she was born into the group. "You're running from them?" Snow nods her head.

Good girl.

"But I have to go back." Her words invoke a level of protectiveness I never knew existed inside of me to come rushing forth.

"Fuck no, you're not. You're staying right here until I know you're not in danger.

"I don't know a ton about the group. I've overheard the people in town speak about them.

They called them a cult. I need to dig deeper into them and learn everything I can.

I'll need to know every single detail if I'm going to protect my girl.

"I have to." Snow springs to her feet, but her legs give out on her. Before she falls, I wrap my arm around her, pulling her into me. Her hands came to my chest. She doesn't push away from me. In fact, her body seamlessly molds into mine, as if she has always been mine.

She has been.

"I can't let you go back to a fucking cult, Snow.

"I can't get the edge out of my voice. It's a miracle she made it out and to me, the one person in this town that could keep her safe from them.

I'm confident that they will come looking for her soon. When the storm dies down. And when they do, I'll be ready and waiting.

I wouldn't wait for the storm to die down, but I'm a different kind of man.

“My sister. I told her I'd come back for her.

” A sister. Fuck. I think of having to leave my brother behind.

I wouldn't be able to do it. I get the sense she won't be able to either. Even if it'll put her back in danger and what I'm guessing in an arranged marriage.

My hold on her tightens at the thought of her getting married to someone else.

Over my dead fucking body.

“All right, I'll get your sister for you.”

She opens and closes her mouth. “Really?”

“If it keeps you from going back there. Yeah.”

“You'd really do that for me?”

I think I might do anything for her.... Except let her go.

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WINTER

It couldn't be this easy, could it? What are the chances that the first person I found is willing to help me get my sister back? My father always told me no one ever does anything for free. What does Garrett want? I really don't have anything to offer him.

"I can't pay you or anything. All I have is in that bag." I start to hold up what I have in my hand but jerk it back.

"I've already seen your panties, Snow." I drop my face to his chest to hide the blush that has spread across it.

"I'm being serious. I don't have anything to offer you in return for helping me.

I mean, you've gone out of your way and done enough for me already.

"There is no way I can let him go through with this.

His life would be at risk. The thought of something happening to him because of me does not sit well with me.

"You can just take me to the sheriff in town, and they can help me." I lift my head from his chest to look into his eyes.

They're a gray color, and they remind me of a storm, changing when things intensify.

And my last words have them doing exactly that.

“We’re not involving the sheriff. I’ll handle this my way.

There are not many people we’re going to be able to trust,” he says, his eyes softening a bit as his hand comes up to cup my cheek once again.

I lean into it, loving the comforting feeling.

I know by the way he’s staring at me that he’s not going to take no for an answer.

I should just leave and keep him out of this, but his words keep flitting around in my mind about not being able to trust everyone.

Joseph and Heaven’s Temple have a far reach.

They may keep to the compound, but from what I’ve overheard, there are men in power outside to make sure things stay in order.

It’s crazy how before Garrett, I’d never even thought about trusting a man, and now I’m willing to so easily instill my trust in him in less than twenty-four hours. Be brave , I remind myself.

“Okay. I agree.” Instantly I feel his body relax. “But I have a few conditions.” Speaking freely is all new to me. I would never speak to a man on the compound in this way. Women don’t make demands on men there. Not without suffering consequences, anyway.

“Go on.” Garrett must sense my hesitation.

“If I stay here like you suggested and I let you help me get my sister, then I need to repay you in some way.”

“Snow.” When Garrett says my name, it sounds gruff. I feel his fingers flexing on my back, pushing me closer to him. “You don’t have to do anything. Just stay here.”

Just stay here? That’s part of why I want to pay him back in some way. He’s going to let me stay in his home. I’m not sure for how long, but I have to do my part. Everyone is supposed to chip in. Well, at the compound you are. The women at least.

“I could cook and clean,” I offer. “My sister is a better baker, but I—”

“Snow.” He cuts me off. “How about we worry about that later?”

“But I’d like to do something for you. Is there anything you need? I’m a quick learner.”

“You’re not ready for what I want from you.”

What the heck does that mean? I feel something hard flex against me. I glance down, but I can’t see anything. My body is pressed firmly against Garrett. I’ve never been this close to a man before.

“What is...” I trail off as I realize what it is.

I know about sex. You have to have some knowledge especially when dealing with livestock, but I’ll admit that what I know is pretty basic.

It actually sounds terrible. My mother told me about what a girl experiences the first time, and it scared the crap out of me.

I’m at a loss as to why anyone would want to do that.

But as I feel Garrett’s manhood press into me, a warmth pools deep inside of me,

settling between my thighs.

“Don’t be scared of me, Snow. I’d never do anything you don’t want.”

“I don’t think that,” I admit, licking my lips. I should step back from him, but I don’t.
“We’re not married, so it’s not even allowed.”

“You make up your own rules now. Theirs don’t apply to you any longer. Like I said, you can do what you want.”

That realization rains down on me, tilting my world on its side.

He’s right. I can do whatever I want. Those rules aren’t mine to follow anymore. I no longer belong to Heaven’s Temple.

Unless they find me and drag me back . That thought sends a chill through me.

I don’t want to live that way any longer.

Once Garrett gets Libby out of there, we’ll both be able to live a life making our own choices.

“I know I’m supposed to do something for you, but could I ask you for one thing?” I want to do this for myself. To get to pick this one thing.

“You can ask me any damn thing you want, beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” That makes me smile.

“Surely you know you’re beautiful.”

“I suppose. The prophet did ask for my hand in marriage.” A low growling sound is coming from Garrett.

“You’re not his.”

“I don’t want to be,” I agree. I want to belong to a man that would love me so deeply that he’s never thought of causing me harm or wanting to have another wife. I want to be a man’s whole world, but I don’t think that’s how it works.

With Joseph, though, I was happy there would be other wives. It would be less time I’d have to spend with him, but that was because I didn’t love him. I never would. Now a man like Garrett, I don’t think I could share him, but maybe I can have a taste.

“You won’t.” His words come out with a finality to them. “Now tell me what you wanted to ask for.”

Before I can think too much, I blurt out, "A kiss.

" The words rush past my lips before I become too shy to ask for it.

“Not that you have to kiss me, but—” I stop talking when Garrett brings both his hands to my face, cupping my cheeks.

Every time he does this, he makes me feel delicate and precious.

It causes butterflies to take flight inside me.

“Going to kiss you.”

I nod my head. He slowly lowers his mouth to mine, making it clear what he is doing but giving me a chance to back out if I want. I don’t. Instead, I close my eyes and feel

his lips press to mine.

I wrap my arms around his neck, rising onto my tiptoes to press my lips back against his. Garrett groans against my mouth. A thrill unlike any I have ever had courses through me. His tongue comes out and swipes against my bottom lip, making me gasp.

When my lips part, Garrett's tongue slips into my mouth.

I don't move. His tongue strokes against mine.

It makes a whirl of thoughts flash through my mind.

Me with my legs wrapped around Garrett. Him pulling at my clothes as he takes me down onto a bed.

One by one, they swirl in my thoughts. I have no idea where they come from.

I've never seen anything like it before.

My mind creates each on its own. All with Garrett front and center.

"Kiss me back," Garrett orders before his mouth is right back on mine.

Wanting to be close to him, I slide my tongue into his mouth, trying to match what he did.

I have no clue what the heck I'm doing. When he lets out another one of those deep, hungry groans, I know I must be doing it right.

I moan right back. I couldn't have stopped the sound if I wanted to.

Garrett manages to deepen the kiss more. He's kissing me with a wild, untamed, sinful passion. The warmth that flooded my body becomes hotter. My body is now acting on its own accord. Human nature is taking over, my natural instincts drawing me to him.

"Yes," I moan. I don't know if it was me that climbed him or he picked me up, but my feet left the floor.

I wrap them around him. "Don't stop," I say when he takes his mouth from mine, but it doesn't leave me.

His kisses travel across my jaw and down my neck.

I let my head drop to the side, allowing him to take what he wants.

My fingers sink into his hair as I start to rock my hips.

"Fuck," Garrett grunts. The next thing I know, I'm back on the couch, and he's clear across the room, his back to me. I touch my lips, still feeling him there, wondering what I might have done wrong.

"I'm sorry." I think I took things too far. Oh God, what is wrong with me?

"Don't apologize," he says but doesn't turn around. Tears burn in my eyes. I stand up and rush down the hallway. When I spot a bathroom, I duck inside, shutting the door behind me. I push the lock so that I can have some privacy.

"Snow!" I hear Garrett call after me. On the other side of the door, I see his shadow.

"Baby, open the door. I'm fucking sorry." Did he call me baby?

"You say the F word a lot." I sniffle.

“You want me to stop?” He sounds so calm now.

"If I asked, would you do that?"

“Yeah.” Garrett says it simply. This man is so strange.

But not in a bad way. It's definitely different from what I'm used to. He's bigger than any male I have ever met. He could probably snap ours in half with one hand, but he's also the sweetest man I've ever met.

No man has ever treated me the way he has.

“You'd just let me boss you around?”

“You keep letting me kiss you, and I'll do anything you ask me.”

I can't help but smile, but my smile falters when I remember why I ran off to the bathroom. “You don't like my kisses,” I remind him.

“You've done lost your mind, beautiful. The problem is I like them too fu—” He corrects himself. “Freaking much.” I put my hand over my mouth to smother a laugh. I don't want him to think I'm laughing at him, but it's really adorable.

I pop the lock. I don't get a chance to open the door. Garrett does. He steps into the bathroom. I step back to make room for him. “Don't lock me out.”

“Sorry.” I shake my head. “It's your house. That was rude.”

“No, I just don't like you locking me out from getting to you.” He lifts me up easily, sitting me on the bathroom counter. His hands come down on either side of me.

“I stopped kissing you because I was about to take more than you’re ready for.” He leans in closer. “You were rubbing your pussy against my cock. I was two seconds from tossing you onto the couch and taking something you believe should be saved for marriage.”

I’m not so sure I believe that anymore. Garrett has me thinking oh so differently.

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GARRETT

A blush blooms on Snow's cheeks at my dirty words. I'm sure she's not used to them, but I can't help myself. Her tongue comes out, swiping across her bottom lip, wetting it. The sight doesn't help my cock at the moment. My balls ache. Is this what blue balls feel like?

I've heard other guys mention it, but I've never felt that shit before.

It fucking hurts, but fuck me, it is worth it.

Her name might be Winter, but my girl tasted like sunshine and warm sugar.

I bet her pussy tastes just as good. My mouth waters thinking about burying my face between her creamy thighs.

"I like kissing you." Her words come out in a whisper.

I more than fucking liked it. It took every bit of my self-control to stop.

I may have only gotten a taste, but I'll take whatever I can get.

I was her first kiss. I know it, and I'm going to be her first everything else.

The only. I'll kill this Joseph fucker for even thinking she was his.

By the time I'm done with him, he'll beg me for death.

“So we clear now? You know that I want you. I didn’t kiss you because you asked.” Her brows lift. “Well, I did, but I fucking wanted to since I laid eyes on you,” I admit. “Shit, sorry.” I can’t stop cursing. Old habits, I suppose. I’ve spent way too much time with all men.

"You can curse. I was just curious when you said you'd stop for me." Her eyes are wide with wonder.

It gives me a glimpse of the kind of men she's grown up with. Yeah, I’m going to enjoy getting my hands on those assholes.

They'll get a taste of what it feels like when someone bigger comes after you. I hope to strike fear in them the same way I’m sure they’ve done to all the women they’ve come in contact with.

How someone could ever lay their hands on a sweet angel like her, I’ll never understand.

Everything inside of me wants to protect and keep her.

I decide to keep that little bit of information to myself for now.

Snow has been caged for far too long in her life, and now I’m trying to do the same.

I want to kick my own ass, but I can’t stop those thoughts.

“Are you hungry or tired?” I need to worry about taking care of her, not my dick. I’ll show my little snow angel what it would be like if she stayed with me. That I would be different from all the other men she’s had in her life. I have to get her to want to stay here.

I don't know how I've come to this place. I'd gone from wanting everyone to fuck off and leave me be to not wanting her out of my sight. When she ran to the bathroom, my heart sank thinking of her taking off on me. She is a runner, after all.

On my last mission, one of the men stepped right into a trick wire. It blew him all to hell. I'd been thrown a good thirty feet from the blast. I'd taken a pretty severe blow to the back of my head. The doctors ran a bunch of tests and said I was clear and damn lucky.

I'm not sure that's true with the thoughts that have been invading my mind since I found Snow.

The docs might have gotten the cleared part wrong because never in my life have I felt this way or had these kinds of thoughts.

But they were right about me being damn lucky.

I barely know the girl, but that doesn't stop anything.

"I'm kind of both, but what about my sister?"

"We can't do anything about that right now with this snowstorm." No one will be doing anything until it comes to an end.

"Right." Her shoulders drop, and I hate to see the disappointment in her eyes.

"Hey." I use my fingers to tilt her chin up so that her eyes are back on me.

"That doesn't mean I'm not going to do anything.

I'm going to start putting some feelers out and send for whatever information I can

get from people I trust. Get things going, but I also need your help.

” She knows that place inside and out. I’ll need to know every single detail.

“My help?” That perks her right up.

“You know that place better than anyone.”

“I do!”

“Come on. I’ll feed you, and you can tell me everything you think is important.” I take her hand and lead her into the kitchen. Bear follows right behind us.

“Okhraniay,” I tell him. Bear's ears go up before he darts for the dog door.

“What was that?”

“He’s Russian.”

“The dog?” Snow laughs. The sound is as sweet as her. It manages to go straight to my dick. My eyes drop to her bare legs. She’s only got my shirt on. I’m going to have to learn to live with this ache in my balls.

“His commands are in Russian. He’s going to do a check.”

“It’s a blizzard out there. He can’t go out. He’ll be cold.” She walks to the window to look out. I love how concerned she is for Bear.

What would have happened if she’d gotten lost out there? She would have died. I run my hand down my face to shake the thought. Not going there.

“He’s made for this weather. He’ll do a check and come back in.

” I go back to Snow's bag and look through it. She has a few dresses and a couple cans of food. I snag her panties off the floor. When I kissed her, she must have dropped them. I still can't believe she asked for a kiss.

It takes a lot to surprise me, but I'm learning that she sure as fuck can.

I shove them in my pocket as she drops the curtain and turns back to face me. “Wanted to make sure they didn't put a tracker on you.”

“I don't think we have those.”

If they wanted to, I'm sure they could. You can get them online easily. They don't cost much. I'm sure those assholes have a lot more technology than they let on. If Snow was mine, I'd have one on her ass for peace of mind alone.

“I'm not a great cook, but I can make a few things.” I head back toward the kitchen.

"If you want, I can cook. I told you I want to help out.”

“Sit.” I point to one of the chairs at the kitchen island.

“But I—” I clear the space between us. When I grab her by the hips and pick her up, she doesn't flee or back away. She lets out a little squeal followed by a giggle as I put her ass in the chair. I never thought I would enjoy having someone in my space, but I'm finding that's exactly how I feel with Snow.

It pleases something deep inside of me that she's getting used to me quickly. Maybe she feels this strong connection too. I remember my mom always telling us when we found the right woman for us, we'd know. I guess she was right, but then again, she always was.

“You’re tired. I’ll cook.”

“You’re bossy,” Snow says this with a smile on her lips.

“That bother you?”

“No, your bossy is different. You’re different.”

“Knowing where you come from, I’ve got an idea of the kind of men there, so I’m taking that as a good thing.”

“It is.” That smile of hers grows, and, fuck, I want to keep it there, but I need information. As much as I can get.

“Talk to me, babe. Tell me about Heaven’s Temple.” She takes a deep breath and begins to speak. As I cook her spaghetti with garlic bread, I pay close attention to every word she says.

I have to keep my anger in check when she tells me about her childhood and how they grew up.

So isolated from the world. These girls were born to be brides and nothing more.

Not every bride is loved. I don't think Snow gets that it's not about marriage and kids; it's about fucking sex.

I don't care what any of them think or say.

All of it comes down to money, control, power, and fucking young girls.

They hide behind their beliefs in order to take what they want.

It's disgusting, and I intend to bring justice down on as many of them as I possibly can.

And I'm not talking about the law, either.

They deserve a different kind of justice, the kind that only men like me and my brother are able to deliver.

"Here." I place the bowl of pasta in front of her. I'm in a boiling rage. I try to keep my tone light, but I think I'm failing. Her nose scrunches up.

"You're not going to eat?"

"Not hungry. I'll be right back." I don't wait for a response.

How could I eat after that? Worse, I don't think I'm much better because I want to keep her for myself, and yeah, fucking sex is a part of it, but I'd cut off my dick before hurting her.

I'd have Snow begging for it before I sank inside of her.

I need her to want me. Not be with me because it was some order from above.

I head down the hallway to my bedroom, then into the closet. I slam my fist into the wall. The shot of pain through my arm helps, but not much.

"Garrett!" Snow gasps. How the hell did I not hear her follow me? I really am off my game.

I turn to see her standing in my closet's doorway. She has a horrified expression on her face.

Fuck me.

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WINTER

Blood drips from Garrett's hand. I stand in shock for a long moment. I followed him because I could tell he was off. He'd become short in his responses to me. I sensed his whole mood shift. I swear even the air around him grew thicker.

I know it's crazy, but I could tell he was being different with me. I don't know what came over me, but I just followed him. I don't think I could have stopped myself if I wanted to. I needed to check if he was okay or if I had done something wrong.

"Winter, I—"

"You're bleeding." I see a towel on top of his hamper, so I grab it. I press it to his injured hand. He doesn't stop me. Garrett only watches me. "Don't do that."

"Sorry, I was pissed." He drops his head.

"I didn't mean hit the wall, but yeah, maybe don't do that either." His eyebrows rise.

"Don't do what, then?"

"Call me Winter." I lick my lips. "Unless, I don't know. Has something changed? All of a sudden you're not calling me snow angel after I told you about my life."

"Fuck no; I'm worried I scared you, and I'm trying to back off. I'm pissed and on edge."

“Pissed at me?”

“Never you, Snow.” With his other hand, he cups the back of my neck, pulling me into him.

His mouth comes down on mine in a soft kiss.

“I want to hurt all of them,” Garrett says, placing another kiss on my mouth.

“Maybe even kill them.” Again, his mouth is on mine.

This kiss is as gentle as the others. He is so mad, but still sweet and gentle to me.

His reactions are so different from what I’m used to.

Usually, when a man gets worked up and anger takes over, I stay out of the way.

But that’s not how I reacted when I thought Garrett was upset.

I think it’s because I have no doubt that he would never hurt me.

In the short time I have known him, he’s more than proven that.

“You’re mad for me.” I smile against his mouth.

“More than mad, Snow.”

“Let me clean up your hand.”

“It’s fine.”

“Please.”

“Fuck me,” he mutters.

“What?”

“You give me that face and a please, and I’ll let you do any damn thing you want.” I laugh. Why does that make me feel so dang special?

“Then let me do it.”

“All right,” he agrees. He leads me out of the closet, which is larger than my bedroom, and into the bathroom.

“Holy crap,” I whisper when we enter it. His tub could be a mini pool. There are even two sinks! Why does a bathroom need two sinks? We only have one bathroom in our entire house. “Are you rich?” I blurt out before I realize it. “I mean, ‘cause the two sinks and all.”

“Two sinks?” He laughs.

“Why are there two?”

“It’s pretty standard for a master bathroom. A his and hers.”

“His and hers?”

“Well, here it would be. I suppose in some homes, it could be a his and his or a hers and hers.” I still don’t get it. “It’s for a couple. They each get their own sink.”

“Oh, wow. So you are rich.”

“I do all right.” He says it with a laugh. Garrett opens a drawer, pulling out a first aid kit.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s rude.”

“Snow, I always want you to say what you’re thinking. I’m sure it’s a bit of a different world out here. I want you to be yourself.”

I guess it’s okay if I ask the next question I’ve been thinking about since he told me why there are two sinks. “Have you ever had someone use the second sink?”

My curiosity is a double-edged sword because I want to know but I also don’t.

I like thinking that I’m the only one Garrett acts this way toward.

But I know that’s probably not the reality of things.

Out here, a lot of couples live in sin, as my mother would say.

They would cohabit and fornicate, often breaking up and finding another partner.

His lips twitch. “It’s just Bear and me here. All it’s ever been.” Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I know I have been busted.

“It’s not my business. I’m—”

“Stop apologizing.” I’m about to say sorry again but catch myself. “You have nothing to say sorry for. You can say whatever the fuck you want. No one can stop you.”

“Out here, I suppose.” Garrett flexes his fist. “Hey, stop that,” I order, and he does.

“There is only an ‘out here’ now, Snow. You’re free.”

That’s all I’ve ever wanted, but right now I’m not sure I want to be free of Garrett.

“This might burn,” I tell him when I go to wipe the cut I see on his knuckle with an alcohol wipe. He doesn’t even make a face when I do it. “It doesn’t hurt?”

“I have a high tolerance for pain.”

“Must be nice,” I mutter. I wish I could say the same.

“I’ll kill them.” I jerk my head up to meet Garrett’s eyes. It’s the first time I see darkness in them.

“Don’t. You’d have to live with that.”

“With killing a man?” I nod. Though the world might be a better place without some of them. “It wouldn’t be my first time, babe.” My hand freezes.

“You’ve killed someone before?”

“I told you that you can ask me whatever you want and I’ll answer you, but keep in mind there are some questions you might not really want the answers to.” Our eyes stay locked for a long moment.

I’m not scared of Garrett, but this is a stark reminder that I don’t really know this man.

“It’s time to eat.” He breaks through my thoughts by shutting the first aid kit. “My hand will be fine. I’ve dealt with worse.”

“Garrett—”

“My story is for another day, Snow. You need to eat and get some rest.” I nod, but I don’t want him to think it has changed anything. Maybe it should have, but whatever this is I feel for Garrett is still there, even with the things he’s admitted. So I lean in and press my mouth against his.

He has accepted everything he's learned about me. I want to do the same for him, even if it does make me all too na?ve.

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GARRETT

I scoop Snow into my arms and carry her to my bed. We sat on the couch for a while after I fed her, and she continued to tell me more about Heaven's Temple. I am going to burn that place to the fucking ground as soon as I get the chance.

I lay her down and pull a blanket over her. In my bed, she looks smaller and more vulnerable. I brush my fingers across her forehead to move some of her hair that has fallen onto her face. Bear jumps up on the bed, going to the end to sleep by her feet. He's as enamored as I am with our snow angel.

I fucking hate to think about how she grew up and what she endured.

I know she didn't tell me everything. There were moments when I could see she felt shame about her upbringing, as if she was somehow responsible for it.

That gutted me. What she didn't understand yet was that because of her, soon that place would be nothing but ash.

Unable to help myself, I lean down and brush my mouth against her.

She lets out a little sigh. "Garrett." Snow mutters my name in her sleep.

I close my eyes, my chest growing tight.

No clue what she has done to me, but there is no going back.

My whole world is going to change, and for once, I want that.

Snow has knocked something loose inside of me.

I give Bear a head rub, leaving him to watch over our angel while I dig into Heaven's Temple.

I'll have to reach out to my brother at some point.

He already knows something is up. He sensed it when he called me.

I can never hide shit from him. Not that I wanted to; I just wanted Snow to myself for a bit longer.

I understand it's selfish, but with the raging snowstorm outside, there's not much I can do right now.

If it were solely a kill mission, the weather would be ideal, but it's not.

This is going to be a rescue with likely a few kills along the way.

Joseph is at the top of my list. Regarding Snow's father, I have yet to make a definitive decision on how I'm going to handle him.

I will have to get a sense from Snow in regards to him.

I pull up my email and a secure line. Ace and I might be able to get in and shut shit down, but we'll need help afterward. These women and children will require a safe haven. Heaven's Temple is all they've known their entire lives. They will need time to get acclimated to the outside world.

I reach out to a few of the men I used to work with outside of the government, and then I reach out to a few higher-ups who are employed by the government. I don't know how deep this cult might go, but it would likely only be local. There's no way they have enough money to buy off senators.

When I'm done, I clear everything out. I should have responses in the morning.

I open the trick door in my office and punch in the code for the safe room.

It's not big, at six feet by eight. I didn't design it as a panic room, although it could serve that purpose. It's where I keep all my weapons from the days I worked as a mercenary.

I pop in a few clips and do a count. I still have my handgun tucked into the back of my pants.

I grab another two to place throughout the house just in case.

When it comes to Snow, I am going to be prepared for anything that might come our way.

I'm not taking any damn chances. Her safety is my top priority.

In fact, at some point I may have to teach her how to use a gun herself.

I have no idea what these people are capable of, but I know what I would do if they had Snow hidden away in their home, out of my reach.

The lengths I'd go to in order to get inside and get her back.

I need to keep those kinds of thoughts in check. So far, I've been lucky with not

having scared Snow. When she saw me put my fist through the wall, I was certain that I was fucked. This girl has been through so much but is still so damn sweet.

When I make it back to the bedroom, Bear is still lying at her feet. I put my gun on the nightstand before pulling my shirt off. Normally I'd sleep in my boxers, but that's not a good idea tonight. I find some gym shorts to put on before I get into bed next to her.

I roll to my side to watch her. I left the bathroom light on in case she wakes up. I don't want her to be scared. My fingers itch to pull her into me. There is no way I'm going to get any sleep tonight. Not with how my mind is going over everything.

At least, that's what I thought until Snow rolls over and presses her small body against my side. Fuck it. I wrap my arm around her, holding her close. I feel myself start to relax. Somehow, I manage to fall asleep.

When I wake hours later, Snow has her head on my chest, one of her legs thrown over mine. Her delicate hand lies on my shoulder. I want to reach down and adjust my cock, but if I move, I might wake her. Snow needs her rest, and fuck am I enjoying the feel of her on me.

I hate people in my space, but Snow could crawl inside of me if she wanted. God knows I want to be inside of her.

"No," Snow whispers, her legs shifting. Her eyes remain closed, her brows furrowed together. "Please don't." Her words come out in a plea, and I know she's dreaming.

"Snow." I gently stroke my hand down her back, wanting to pull her from the nightmare.

She tenses before her eyes fly open. I let my hold of her go when she starts to sit up,

not wanting her to feel trapped.

The last thing I want is for Snow to be scared of my bed. I only want her to feel safe here.

"Garrett," she breathes out my name like a prayer.

"I'm here." I sit up. My hand goes to her cheek. I don't know why, but I always feel the need to touch her cheek. Each time, she leans into my touch. I'm not sure if I'm comforting her or she is me. "You all right?"

"I'm better." She gives me a small smile. "I'm happy to wake up here, but knowing my sister is still there haunts me."

"I'll get her out. I promise."

"Maybe I'm still dreaming." Snow gently rests her hand on my chest.

If we're dreaming, then I don't want to wake up.

WINTER

Garrett doesn't stop me when I run my fingers up his bare chest, trailing across the hard lines of his body.

"How does someone get a body like this?" I wonder.

"I used to be in the military." I jerk my hand back to cover my mouth. I hadn't meant to say that out loud. Garrett takes my hand, guiding it back to his chest. "Remember, you can ask me anything."

"I hadn't meant to say that." My cheeks are heated, and I'm sure he can see it on my fair skin. "It's nice to be able to speak freely." Garrett's chest flexes, and I know he's mad about what I said.

He's not angry with me, but rather with the life I've led.

I have never had a man get mad on my behalf or want to defend me.

"I enjoy listening to you."

"Even when it makes you mad?"

"I'm never mad at you," he quickly says.

"I know. You're a big sweetheart." His brows lift in surprise as though no one has ever called him that before. "What? You're not?" I find that hard to believe. He's

been nothing but that way toward me.

“Not everyone would say that. Most think I’m a dick.”

“Ah.” I lick my lips. I can do this. “Dick?” I laugh. “As in...” My eyes drop to his, and there is no missing it.

“Dick can mean asshole. Jerk-off. Same shit.”

“Right,” I mutter.

"I'm sorry, but you're touching me, and you're in my bed only wearing my shirt." Garrett adjusts his cock, and I realize I was staring right at it.

“Oh, God. I’m sorry.” I again go to jerk my hand back from his chest, but Garrett is quicker. He flattens my hand against it.

“Like you touching me too. Nothing to be shy about, Snow. You can touch and look at any part of me you want.” I’m not sure how to respond to that, but I love that he is telling me I can do anything I want.

“Why do people think you’re a dick?” I don’t think it’s my question that makes him smirk, but me saying the word dick .

“I live out here because I enjoy being alone. I’m not too friendly when I go to town, and people bother me.

” I would never have guessed this about him in a million years.

Not with the way he is with me. I mean he barely even knows me, and he welcomed me to stay in his home and offered to risk his life to help me save my sister.

“But you want me to stay.”

“You’re different.” I’m hoping that’s a good thing. Before, when I lived at the compound, I would have said it was a negative thing because of how people looked at me when we went into town.

“How?” I find myself asking while scooting closer to him. Garrett can move quickly, I’ve noticed, but when he reaches for me, he’s slow in his movements, making it clear what his intent is so I could stop him if I wanted. I don’t.

Garret effortlessly lifts me by the hips, pulling me into his lap so I’m straddling him. He leans up against the headboard. I place my hands on his shoulders.

“You don’t feel it?” he asks before shaking his head. “I don’t know. I may sound fucking crazy, but there's something special about you. I like having you close. I enjoy your voice and your gentle touches.”

“You don’t like that from other people?” Irrational jealousy suddenly fills me at the thought of anyone else having this with him.

Garrett is right. I do feel whatever this is because I have never felt that toward another person.

Joseph had another wife, and I was happy about it.

I hate the thought of Garrett having a wife.

“No.” Garrett runs his hands up and down my bare thighs.

His rough hands feel nice against my skin.

“When I was on active duty, I would get jammed in places with people. There was always someone on top of you. When I got out, I built this place. I only go to town a couple times a month. I primarily go for supplies and to visit my twin brother.”

“You guys are twins?!”

“Yeah, he’s the charming one.”

“I think you’re pretty dang charming.”

“Don’t be getting any ideas. You’re mine, and I don’t share.”

“Men don’t share.” I roll my eyes.

“You share, babe?” I glance down at his question. “They do it where you are from.”

“Not from there anymore,” I snip, surprising myself. I even glare at Garrett, making him chuckle. “What’s so funny?”

“Done told you that I only like you touching me. You think I’m going to let someone else?”

“Maybe not today, but—”

“Not ever,” he cuts me off. “If I’m anything, it’s loyal, Snow. I live and will die by my word. Always know what I say is the truth.” I believe him.

“I think I feel it too,” I admit. “You’re different from me, too. I should be scared of you. You’re so big, and then the tattoos.” I trace the design on his chest using my fingers. “Most men hurt women. You won’t hurt me, will you, Garrett?”

“Never.” His hand cups the back of my neck to pull me in. My chest pushes against his as he claims my mouth.

This time I’m bolder. I don’t wait for him; I slide my tongue across his bottom lips. He parts them for me. His tongue meets mine. I didn’t even know people kissed this way.

I felt the hard ridge of his cock press against my sex through my panties. The sensation is overwhelming and unlike anything I have ever experienced before. I need more of it. My body is throbbing for it in a way I don’t understand, but I want to.

Garrett rocks my hips for me, knowing what I need. I cry out his name. “You like that, baby?”

“Yes,” I whimper against his mouth. “I need more.”

“You’ll get all you want.” His mouth goes to my neck.

He kisses me there the same way he did my mouth, his tongue coming out to get a taste and then sucking on my skin.

“That’s it. Rock that pretty, untouched pussy on my cock.

It’s all yours.” His words spur me on. If I wasn’t so turned on, I’d probably die of embarrassment, but there’s no way I’m missing out.

“Garrett,” I moan, my hips moving. One of his hands slips up under my shirt to cup my breast. They feel tender and heavy. They seem to ache too. What has this man done to my body? “I need...” I trail off, unsure of what it is I’m asking for. His mouth comes to my ear.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers in my ear. His thumb brushes across my nipple. “I will always take care of you.”

Garret's other hand slips into the front of my panties. His fingers stroke between the folds of my sex. My breathing grows heavy, unable to process what is happening to my body.

“Let go. I’ll catch you.” His fingers graze across the spot I need them the most. My whole body suddenly tightens. I do exactly as he asked; I let go, dropping my head back as the explosion goes off inside of me. A flood of pleasure courses through me. I relish every second of it.

Garrett holds me close as I melt into him. My body goes completely lax. His arms wrap around me. My head falls to his chest, directly beneath his chin.

“What was that?” I whisper in awe.

I've always been taught that sex is solely for a man's pleasure.

We show our sacrifice by submitting. My mother told me to grin and bear it, and then one day I'd be blessed with children.

This struck me as peculiar, given that I don't believe she liked us on most days.

When Father took his anger out on her, I always knew she'd come for one of us. I made sure I was the one in her path.

“A taste of what life could be like if you stayed here with me.”

“Hmm.” I moan, closing my eyes.

Life really is a whole lot different out here. I can never go back. Heck, I'm not sure I can go anywhere. I want to stay right here forever.

But I know I never get what I want. Life has never been that easy, and if it's up to Joseph and my parents, it never will be.

GARRETT

“ I ’m making breakfast.” Snow holds the spatula up like she’ll whoop me with it if I try to fight her on this.

“All right.” I hold my hands up, stepping back. It makes a smile light up her face. “A big one.”

“What do you mean?”

“The whole nine yards, pancakes, bacon, eggs, some hash browns, and maybe even biscuits and gravy.” I list off a bunch of my favorites. Snow’s eyes go big. “I can help.”

The truth is, I want to feed her. I get the sense that she isn’t fed properly.

I bet the men clear out the food, and the women get what’s left.

I’m sure they do it on purpose to control them.

It's even used as a war tactic for prisoners. It is better to keep them weak so they don’t have as much fight in them.

They won’t push back or have the energy and will to try and escape.

They obviously underestimated my snow angel. She’s a fighter.

“No, I can make all that; it’s just a lot of stuff.”

“I can eat for three, so it will need to be a lot.” Snow’s eyes drift down my body and back up.

When she licks her lips, I have to fight a groan.

I can still taste her pussy on my lips. I’d licked her off my fingers.

Nothing has ever tasted sweeter. I’d be happy to spread her out on the kitchen counter and feast on her for breakfast. Her cunt could keep me going for weeks alone.

“You are pretty big.”

“You have no idea.” I walk over and drop a kiss on her mouth. “My fridge is loaded. Use what you need. I’m going to check on some things.”

“Some things?” Her brows lift.

“Told you, there might be a blizzard going, but I can start getting a few balls rolling.”

“Thank you.” I see tears fill her eyes.

“Don’t cry.” I cup her cheek. “That shit will destroy me.”

“My tears?” She gives a watery laugh.

“Yeah, babe. You’ve got a hold on me.”

“I don’t think anything can hold you.” She pokes my chest.

"I didn't think so, but you proved that wrong." I plant another kiss on her plump lips before pulling myself away. I wouldn't mind watching her cook, but I made her a promise, and no fucking way I'm going to break it. I'm trying to prove I'm not like the men she's used to. I want to earn her trust and her heart.

When I make it to my office, I call my brother. He called me twice this morning, but I didn't pick up. Not when I had Snow in bed with me. The rest of the world has to wait.

"The hell is going on with you?" Ace says when he answers.

"Morning to you too."

"Seriously?" I almost want to laugh. This conversation is backwards.

He's normally the one with the pleasantries, and I'm trying to get to the point.

I hate being on the phone. I hate a lot of things when it comes to dealing with the outside world.

But I'm finding that none of that shit matters when it comes to protecting Snow.

I'll talk to whomever and do whatever needs to be done.

"I assume you got my email."

"Yeah, I got it. Why the hell do you care about this cult? Are you back to taking jobs?"

"No. This is personal."

“Personal?” Ace sounds confused. I don’t blame him. I give him a small rundown of what happened the other night and how I came home to find a girl on my doorstep. “And she’s still there?”

“Yes.”

“In your house?” I can hear the surprise in his voice.

“Where else would she be?” I half-growl into the phone.

“I don’t know. You hate people.”

“I don’t hate them.” Hate is a strong word. They just annoy the shit out of me.

“Right,” Ace mutters dryly. “You’re off.”

“I know.” I don’t bother trying to argue. He’s right. I am off. “I need your help.”

“You never have to ask for my help, Garrett. You know I’ll be there. Whatever you need, brother.” I do know this without a doubt. Ace can be overbearing at times, and I can be a dick, but we always have each other's backs.

“I know, but my emotions are getting involved now.” I toss that out there too, because when that shit happens, you can make mistakes, and I know that. I want my brother to be aware of this as well, so he can remain vigilant.

“You like this girl,” he says in awe.

“She’s mine.” Might as well get that shit out there too, so it’s clear.

“Well, fuck me.” I can hear the smile in his voice before he snaps back to the task at

hand, knowing it's important to me now. "We can't go to the sheriff."

"No shit." I have no clue if anyone local is involved, but I'm not going to find out the hard way. "I have to get the sister out."

"All right, I got you. I'm going to go do some recon while the storm is still going on."

"I'm going to have Snow make a map of the buildings and such. I'll send it over to you."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Thank you," I tell him. I knew I could count on him.

"Thank me when we get the sister back."

"I'm burning that place to the ground, Ace."

"Trust me. I know that. I'm sure when I get a peek inside, I'll have the same gut response myself."

"We don't have to play by the rules. If we get our hands on this Joseph guy, it might be less messy."

"I was thinking the same," Ace agrees with me.

We go over a few more things before I end the call and check my emails to see I have a couple.

"Breakfast is done," Snow says, poking her head into my office. "Is that a computer?" Her eyes light up. I push my chair back to make room for her when she

comes around my desk. Like she's done it a thousand times, Snow drops down to sit in my lap.

"Is that about Heaven's Temple?" she asks, seeing what is up on my computer screen.

"Yeah."

"Can I see it?"

"I'm not sure what might be in the email, Snow. That's from a friend of mine, Zero. He's a computer whiz, so who knows what he might have found. It might be shit you don't want to see. Some things never leave you."

She peeks over her shoulder. "Kind of like you saying I should be careful of the questions I ask you?"

"Yeah." I wrap my arm around her, slipping my hand under her shirt so I can rest it against her stomach, wanting to be skin against skin. "I was in the military. Did other things after." I give her a taste of my past.

"I want to see."

"All right." I nod toward the computer. A small smile pulls at her lips when she touches the mouse.

"I have only ever seen someone use a computer before."

"You can use it anytime you want. I can teach you the basics, but we'll see about getting you a tutor."

"A tutor?" Snow turns to face me more.

"Sure, there are a bunch of things you might want to learn."

"I want to learn everything." She says this with such hope and awe.

"Then you'll learn everything." Snow's hands come to my face as she plants a kiss right on my lips. She twists her body farther to straddle me. "You want to come again, baby?"

"Yes." She wiggles her ass in my lap. "But this time I want to give you pleasure too." I'm about to tell her we can worry about me later. I want to take care of her, but when she slips her hand between us to stroke my cock over my pants, I know there is no going back.

I only have so much willpower when it comes to my snow angel.

WINTER

All Garrett has done since he found me is fill me with happiness and pleasure. I want to do the same for him. The whole time I cooked breakfast, all I could think about was what he'd done to my body. I had no idea that kind of pleasure was possible. I desperately want to give that to him.

"You don't have to do this because of the tutor thing, Snow. I want you to know you don't owe me anything." I think I owe him my life, but I won't tell him that. I'm not sure he'll want to hear it. It will make him feel guilty, and he might stop me, and that's the last thing I want.

I know all of this is happening quickly, but for once in my life, I don't want to have to think about every single move I make. I just want to do what feels good. I don't want to miss out on another second of living.

I rub my hand back and forth across the hard bulge in his pants. "Garrett." It's so freaking big. I'm curious what it looks like. "I know when I'm here I get to do anything I want." I lick my lips. "You even said so," I remind him, pressing down hard to rub him.

"Fuck me," he growls, closing his eyes. "You're going to make me come just doing that."

"Really?" I'm surprised because I have no freaking clue what I'm doing.

"Snow, my cock has been hard since you opened your eyes for the first time." I

remember that. The first word he spoke was "green." My mom hated my eyes. She wanted them to be blue, but with her, everything is about appearance. Libby has striking blue eyes.

"Does it hurt?" I feel silly, like I'm just petting him, so I stop.

"A good hurt." I recall the throb I felt when I was in his lap this morning. It felt the same way for me. I even have it now. It's growing with need by the second.

"Can I keep going?"

"You can do anything you want, Snow." Garrett grips the sides of his chair.

"I'm kind of shy and have no clue what I'm doing," I admit.

"You can do no wrong." Not sure I believe that. "Promise," he adds. "What did I tell you about my word?"

"You always mean what you say."

That gives me the courage I need to slip my fingers into the waistband of his pants and tug. Garrett watches me as I free his cock. I tentatively wrap my hands around it. I can barely get my fingers around him.

"It's soft," I whisper more to myself. "I mean, it's hard but—" Heat flushes my cheeks. "It's soft and hard." I didn't know that was possible. "And big."

"You're making it bigger." Garrett's voice comes out rough. I can see the desire in his eyes.

When I see a bead of liquid form on the tip, I lick my lips.

I wonder what he tastes like. When my mother told me about sex, she said sometimes you have to take your husband into your mouth.

That you should do anything in your power to please your man.

I swore I'd never do that part of it because I would throw up all over them, but now, here with Garrett, I want to do that. I want to taste him.

I swipe my thumb across the head of his cock. "Snow." Garrett's tone is filled with warning, but I'm not sure why. I don't stop. I bring my thumb to my mouth and suck. It's salty but not terrible. "Fuck me." His grip on the chair's arms tightens, and I hear his voice grow louder.

"Show me." I wrap my hand around his cock again. Garrett wraps his hand around mine.

"A little firmer." He tightens his hold. "Now you stroke." Garrett moves his hand up and down over mine, while I continue to hold his cock. After a few strokes, he lets go, going back to gripping the arms of the chair.

His breathing starts to grow more rapid as I speed up. I slip off his lap and down to my knees. "Snow," he barks.

"What?" I lick my lips. "Aren't I supposed to take it into my mouth?"

"You aren't required to do anything." I swear Garrett's eyes are darker now. I can sense he is on edge. It's taking everything in him to stay in the chair. What would he do if he left it?

"But I want to." I lean forward, swiping my tongue across the head again to get the cum that has leaked out. The second I do, another bead forms.

When I wrap my mouth around the head, Garrett lets out a growl. His fingers sink into my hair. “That’s it, babe; take more into your mouth,” he tells me. I sink farther down. “Suck.”

I do as he instructs me, taking as much of him as I can.

I suck at the same time and start to use my tongue too.

More of his sweet saltiness fills my mouth, letting me know he’s enjoying what I’m doing.

That only spurs me on more. I never knew that I would react this way to giving a man pleasure. But I know it’s only because it’s him.

“Ah, fuck. That’s it. You’re sucking me so good.” My core clenches as heat floods my entire body. I open my mouth wider, trying to take more of him. “Such a good girl, aren’t you?”

I don’t know why, but his praise only makes the throb between my thighs grow. I do want to be a good girl for him. To make it so good that he can never let me go.

“Eyes on me.” Garrett gives my hair a small tug. My gaze locks with his. “Enough,” he barks suddenly, making me jump. His cock slips from my mouth.

“Did I—” Garrett plucks me off the floor and places me on the desk. Things fall, hitting the floor. He reaches under my shirt, ripping my panties down my legs.

“Need to taste you.”

“Taste me?” I asked, confused. He answers my question with his mouth, just not with words. Garrett buries his mouth between my legs. I let out a gasp of shock. I didn’t

know this was a thing.

The sensation of his tongue pushing through the folds of my sex causes my body to shudder.

“So fucking sweet,” he groans against me. One would think he is getting as much pleasure from this as I am.

His mouth explores me, his tongue dipping lower to thrust inside of me. I let out a loud gasp, my fingers sinking into his hair. Garrett's hands grasp my cheeks to lift me off the desk, allowing him to thrust his tongue deeper into my body. It's too much but also perfect at the same time.

“Garrett, oh God, Garrett.” I start to chant his name. “Please.”

He pulls his tongue out and licks all the way back up to the sensitive button. His tongue circles it a few times before he sucks it into his mouth.

“Garrett!” I cry out his name as the orgasm hits me. It echoes through the room. My mind goes blank as pure pleasure takes over. There is only Garrett and me and what he can do to my body.

My eyes flutter open when I feel Garrett shift between my thighs.

He pushes up my shirt, then slides down my bra, causing my breasts to spill out.

His hand is wrapped around his cock. I watch as he begins stroking himself quickly.

I thought seeing him between my thighs was the sexiest sight I'd ever seen, but I was wrong.

Watching him pleasure himself shoots to the top.

"Snow!" he groans. I watch in awe as he comes all over me. His warm release hits my skin like a branding mark. One that I more than welcome.

His other hand comes down on the desk as he leans over me, his breathing heavy. I can't take my eyes off him. I don't want to miss a movement. After a long moment, he lets go of his cock and runs his fingers through the release that covers my stomach, thighs, and even my sex.

Garrett rubs it into my skin, seeming to almost be in a trance.

"Oh," I moan when he thrusts some of it inside of me with one finger.

"Fuck, you're tight." My hips move in tandem with his finger as he thrusts it in and out of me. "We need to stop." I never want to stop, but Garrett pulls his finger out from inside me and sucks it into his mouth.

My mother was right. Men out here are sinful... and I want to live in sin with Garrett.

GARRETT

“E at.” I put more food on her plate.

“You’re still eating.”

“So?” What does that matter? Snow presses her lips together, giving the impression of uncertainty. Then it hits me. “We eat together. If we run out of the food we made, we make more.” I push the plate even closer to her.

“I know.” She lets out a little sigh. “I have to get used to things being different.”

“You need to get used to being an equal. Hell, with me, you’ll be on a damn pedestal. I will go without before you ever do.”

She gives me a soft smile. “I would be happy with equality.” Snow picks up her fork and takes a bite from the pancake I added to her plate.

Snow might be content with equality, but I sure as hell am not.

I don’t want her to be my equal; I want her to be my everything.

Believe me, I get it. The whole everyone should be the same bullshit.

I’m not trying to take anything away from her, I just want to make her life better.

To give her everything she deserves and a fuck ton more.

To treat her like the queen she is. We aren't the same.

I am meant to love her and make sure she wants for nothing.

It might have been seeing my mom bust her ass, but women are to be cherished.

I've even worked with a few in the field.

Their grit and determination are unmatched.

It's a whole other level that I always respected.

Their fierceness is unmatched and infused with compassion.

Women are just different. It is what it is.

The purpose of placing men on this earth was to safeguard them and kill any potential threats.

Because the reality is, life begins and ends with them.

"Can you think of anything else we should add to this map?"

"I think I got everything." I'm pretty sure she did too.

Snow even put the names of the households on the homes, along with the number of people inside.

She gave details of what happens in each building.

Then, she drew up a schedule that most people adhere to, mapping out the specific

locations and times when people are present in each building.

“Need you to tell me about your sister. What does she look like?”

Out of everything, the main objective is to get Snow’s sister. That’s why I agreed to this in the first place. I know others need help, but I’m more focused on my girl. I don’t tell her that, though, because, like I said, women are different. She would care more about the bigger picture.

“We actually look a lot alike. Our hair is pretty noticeable.” She runs her fingers through her long hair. It is eye-catching. It is so blonde it’s almost white. “But her eyes are blue.”

"Is there anything else that would confirm her identity if my brother Ace or I were to cross her path?"

“We have the same freckle here.” She points to the one freckle on her face near her upper lip. “And she has a limp when she walks.”

“Did she get hurt or was she born that way?” I feel like I already know the answer to the question. The sadness that washes over Snow’s face confirms it. When she tells me about how Libby got that limp, it only fuels the fire inside of me to end all of those fuckers. I would take pleasure in it.

“How will you feel if something happens to your father? If he puts up a fight?” Snow drops her gaze to her lap, where she is wringing her fingers together now.

I want to make sure I know where she stands on this.

There is no way in hell I would do something that she would resent me for. I couldn’t bear it.

“Whatever needs to happen to get my sister out.”

“Hey.” I put my finger under her chin, lifting her head so that her eyes meet mine.

“You don’t have to shy away from anything when it comes to me, Snow.

You want him dead, all you have to do is say the word.

” I want her to know that there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.

Well, unless she asked me to let her go.

“You make me feel kind of powerful.”

“Good.” I want that for her. For her to know that no one is going to fuck with her. That she could have them torn apart if they dare try. I lean in and press a kiss to her mouth. “Now, finish eating. I’m going to send my brother this information.”

“Mmkay,” she tells me with hooded eyes, and I know where her mind has gone.

I could see the desire in her eyes when I kissed her earlier.

I love that after everything she’s been through with men that she looks at me that way.

That she has put her trust in me. It’s something I’ll never take for granted.

It nearly kills me, but I tear myself away before I have her over the kitchen island with her panties around her ankles and my cock deep inside her tight little pussy.

I’m already worried I took things too far in my office earlier.

When she swiped her finger across my cock and then tasted my cum, I almost lost my shit.

Then, sinking to her knees in front of me.

Fuck me. I know I should slow things down, but I will never tell her no when it comes to new experiences with me.

She's had enough rules to live by for an entire fucking lifetime.

Not sure if Snow realized the fucked-up shit I did when I pressed my cum inside of her with my finger. I don't know what came over me, but there was no stopping me. I had this need to mark her inside and out.

I'm going to blame it on the fact that I know some fucker out there thinks she belongs to him. This dipshit offered her to be his third wife. This man is seriously fucked in the head. How could you even want to touch or be with someone else when you have Snow?

I review everything and forward it to my brother, then go back into the kitchen.

"Can I snap a picture of you?" I ask her.

I don't want to send a picture of her to my brother.

I'm still not ready to share her yet, but anything to help find her sister has to be put above my fucked-up head right now.

"Might help my brother find Libby easier since you said you two look alike."

"Of course." Snow tilts her head, giving me a smile. She's stunning. I snap the

picture and send it before I try and talk myself out of it. “When do you think we’ll be able to do something?” She slips off her chair, going over to the window.

“Ace is going in now.”

“What?” Snow spins around. “Really? It’s still pretty awful out.”

“It will work in his favor.”

“Really?” Her nose scrunches. “He won’t freeze?”

“He won’t freeze. We’ve experienced worse situations,” I admit. “He’ll be dressed in white from head to toe, and he’s taking a drone.”

“A drone?”

“You want to see one?”

"Yes, but I also want to know what you meant when you said you've been in worse situations."

"All right," I agree. If I want Snow to give herself to me, I'm going to have to do the same. I just know the men around her have been cruel, and I never want her to see me as she does them.

WINTER

“ I ’m no longer a snow angel, I’m now a snowball.” I laugh. “I’m not wearing this coat, it's wearing me.”

“Still sexy as hell.” To prove his point, Garrett lays a long, hard, possessive kiss on me.

“That’s one way to keep me warm,” I say breathlessly.

“I’m trying to put clothes on you, Snowball, not take them off, so stop tempting me.” He pulls a knitted hat over my head. The coat he gave me put mine to shame.

“This coat is a lot warmer than mine.”

“We’ll go to the city and get you your own winter gear.” He puts it so simply. As though it’s no big deal to buy me new things or for me to actually go to the city to purchase them at the store.

“Like the city city?”

“Yeah, town has a few places that sell winter gear, but I want better quality.”

“I’ve never been to the city.” I have seen it from a distance while inside a car, but that’s as close as I have ever gotten.

"If you're interested, we can stay for the weekend. Probably a good idea. We’ll need

to get you a lot of things.”

“You can’t just buy me everything.” This man is so damn kind.

I never knew there were people like him in the world. My parents and the church taught us to fear everyone that wasn’t in our group. That they were all evil and corrupted by the devil, and they’d do the same to you if you got too close to them.

“I can, and I will.”

“But—”

“Are you my girl, Snow?”

“Your girl?” I’m confused by his question.

“Do I belong to you and you belong to me?”

“Like married people?”

“We don’t have to be married to belong to each other, but we can be if you want.” He puts gloves on me next. I stand there, slightly shocked by what he’s saying. “It’s up to you, Snowball.” He taps the end of my nose.

“I’m your girl.” I love the way it sounds.

“And I’m your man.”

A smile breaks out across my face. “And you are my man,” I repeat. Before Garrett, I had no desire to have one of my own. I would never share him, but he already told me he’d never make me do that.

"Damn straight." He winks at me. "These might be hard to walk in, but you'll be standing outside more than moving around." Garrett drops to his knees in front of me. I brace my hands on his shoulders to step into the boots.

"So that thing flies?" I glance at the box he's opened and placed on the bed.

"Yes, you can see everything on this screen." He hands the thin pad to me.

"This is going to be so cool. How did you learn to use these?"

"When I was in the military. I can maneuver them better than the average person. It wasn't my specialty, but it's good to know how to use everything in case shit goes sideways. My brother is damn good with them, but I'm a better shot than him."

"Like a gun?" They always scared me, or maybe it was the men that carried them around the compound that were scary. Women weren't allowed to touch them.

"Yeah, I'll train you on them."

"I'm not sure I want to." I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. Garrett uses his thumb to pull it free.

"I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to, Snow, but I have guns around the cabin, and it would be good to give you some safety lessons. You don't ever have to point and fire it, but you should know how they work and how to handle them safely."

He makes it sound so different and more about protecting me than using them to intimidate. "Okay." I nod my head in agreement.

"That's my girl." He lifts the drone out of the box. "Ready?"

“Yep!” Excitement bubbles up inside me. Garrett leads me out onto the front porch. The second I step out, I have the urge to run back in. Until Garrett takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. Bear follows us out but stays by my side.

“No one will take you from me, Snow. I’m not trying to be cocky, but those men are no match for me. I can handle myself.” There's honestly no doubt in my mind that he can.

“What is cocky?” My eyes drop to his crotch, making him chuckle.

“It means to have an ego. To boast too much.”

“Oh.” Then I know a lot of cocky men. “But don’t you have a reason to be?” He only shrugs.

I could imagine what would happen if one of the men from the compound had Garrett's size and the same skill set. They’d be terrorists.

Not Garrett, though. When he told me about his mom this morning, I could see his soft spot for women.

She might be gone, but Garrett still holds respect for her.

He wouldn’t do anything that would let her down, even if she’d never know about it.

Men from my life don't respect women at all.

You'd think maybe their moms or wives, but no. We're merely property to them.

I wish I could thank his mom for giving me this man.

It would have been nice to grow up with a mom like her.

She sounded wonderful. Life had dealt her some crap, but she always pushed on for her kids.

When my mother had a rough day, she took it out on us.

I grew up living in fear of her instead of being loved by her.

Garrett steps off the porch and places the drone on the ground. The snow is still coming down heavily, but not as much as last night. He comes back over to me, takes the pad to turn it on, then pulls out a controller.

“You hold the screen for us.” I take it back from him as the drone starts to rise from off the ground. I watch it in awe. Garrett flies it around for a bit, then lets me give it a try.

“This is so cool.” I didn’t even know things like this existed. I’m not sure how long we’re outside, but Garrett brings the drone back down before leading us back inside.

“We can have more fun with it later. I think you’ll enjoy it more when there isn’t a storm out. You can see a lot more.”

“You’re really good at it. Not sure how someone could be better.” Garrett sets everything down on the table in front of the fireplace.

“We can fly them inside buildings and through tight spaces all while taking out targets at the same time.”

“It can take people out?” Garrett starts to pull at my gloves to take them off for me. I love how he’s always trying to take care of me. I’ve never had someone besides

Libby do that for me.

“Not this one, but yeah, some can fire shots.”

“You really have lived a wild life.”

“Wild?” He barks a laugh. “Never thought of it that way.”

“You have only given me small pieces, and it sounds wild to me. I can't fathom what you haven't shared with me.” Garrett helps me out of my boots then starts to shed his own gear.

I really want him to open up to me. I want him to understand that I will not pass judgment on him. The same way he didn't when I told him my story. I have faith that whatever Garrett has done, he did it on the side of what was right. He's that kind of man.

“I suppose that life is really all I know. I joined up when I was eighteen. My brother and I moved fast up the ranks. We worked damn good together. He and I don't even need to speak and we're on the same page. It got us on a special unit.”

“A special unit?” I'm not exactly sure what that means.

“Top secret,” Garrett explains as he toes off his boots. “We carried out missions that were hidden from public knowledge. Direct orders from the president.”

“Holy crap.” Garret's eyes search my face. “Not a bad holy crap, actually kind of cool.”

“It wasn't always cool. It could get messy, and there were a couple of times when we were pretty sure we weren't coming back. If not for how well Ace and I were

together, we wouldn't have."

I step closer to him. "So, you're like some war hero?"

He gives me one of those shrugs of his. "You won't see our names on any lists for medals or missions.

We were ghosts." I don't think that bothers Garrett.

He doesn't have an ego that needs stroking.

Pretty sure he knows who he is and what he is capable of.

I wonder if he knows how much it draws me to him.

He has a strong force around him. It's alluring.

"But you don't do those things anymore?" Gosh, it would be hard to watch him walk out the door and not be sure he'd ever come back. The thought alone has my stomach sinking.

"No, Ace and I both retired. We did private work for a bit, but when one job went sideways, I left that behind too. My brother still takes jobs. He occasionally tries to talk me into coming."

"Have you ever thought about going back?" I place my hands on his chest.

"I won't go back now." His hand cups the back of my neck. The way he always does when he's about to pull me in closer for a kiss. "I have something at home that I don't want to leave behind," Garrett says before he kisses me.

I slide my hands up and around his neck, deepening the kiss. Garrett groans into my mouth, his hands going to my butt to pick me up. I wrap my legs around him.

“Take me to bed,” I mutter against his mouth. My words are thick with desire for him.

I want to be his somebody at home.

I want to be his girl.

I want to be his everything.

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GARRETT

I 'm not sure if she's clear on what she's asking me.

That doesn't stop me, though. She asked me to take her to bed, so that is what I'm going to do.

I carry her through the house and into the bedroom.

I sit her down on the edge of the bed. There is no way in hell I can tell her no.

Not with the way she's looking at me. Fuck.

I promised myself I would slow it down. Give her time to adjust and figure things out.

Snow reaches for the button on my pants, but I stop her.

I'm pleased that some of her shyness has faded away, but I need to make things clear before I take this further.

Even if this kills me. But the last thing I want is for her to have any regrets.

I want both of our first times to be special.

I may not have known at the time that I was saving myself for her but the wait was worth it.

Sure, I want to sink my cock into her virgin pussy and claim her for my own, but the long-term goal is to keep her permanently. I won't do anything to fuck that up.

"You know what is about to happen, Snow?"

"Yes." She licks her lips, tempting my resolve.

"You told me sex was for marriage," I remind her. I swore that regardless of how much I wanted her, I would wait. Even if I had to cut my dick off.

"That's what I was taught." Snow peeks up at me through her lashes. "But I'm your girl. Those rules no longer apply to me. I get to pick." When she tugs on her hand, I release my hold on it. "And I'm picking you."

This time I don't stop her when she flicks the button of my pants.

I discard them and my boxers too. Snow watches me intently as I reach behind me with one hand to pull off my shirt, then toss it to the floor, leaving me completely naked in front of her.

I love the way her eyes roam over my body. I can see her desire for me.

Snow reaches out, wraps her hand around my cock, and begins to stroke me. "This will be over before it begins if you keep touching my cock." I go for her clothes.

"Oh my gosh." She laughs when I have her stripped bare within a second.

I pick her up, place her in the center of the bed, and climb over her.

Snow is so damn small, and I need to keep that in mind.

She'd been damn tight when I worked a single finger into her.

"You're so big." She runs her hands up my chest.

"I'll go slow." I try to reassure her, but she only smiles up at me. Her trust in me is as much of a turn-on as anything else.

"I'm not scared, Garrett. I was taught that sex was only for a man's pleasure, but I don't think that's true with someone who cares so much."

The men in her world are so fucked in the head. I never wanted to beat my chest more and roar than when I made her cum on my mouth. To see the pleasure that I gave her. That shit is addicting. It's something I plan on doing a lot more.

"I more than care about you, Snow." I fucking love her. I want to tell her that, but I have put so much on her already. When her eyes light up at my words, I think, Fuck it . I'm not going to hide shit from her. I won't be like anyone from her past. "I love you, Snow."

She lets out a small gasp, but I cut it off with a kiss, not giving her a chance to respond.

I don't want her to feel like she's obligated to say it back.

Snow probably thinks I'm crazy for declaring my love for her so quickly, but what other explanation could there be?

I have never felt or been this way with anyone before.

I never believed in love at first sight until I laid eyes on her.

“Need to taste you,” I tell her, trailing my mouth down her jaw.

“I want you inside me,” she all but pleads.

“Trust me, love. I need you ready to take me.” I want to savor every damn inch of her, but her begging me for my cock isn’t doing anything to help me take my time.

“I trust you.” Her words are like a balm to my soul. That is more than I can ever ask for from her with the life she has led.

I make my way down her body, my hand cupping one of her tits. “So damn perfect.” I lick around her nipple before I suck it into my mouth. Snow’s back arches off the bed, pushing more of her breast into my mouth, offering herself to me. Fuck she’s perfect, every goddamn inch of her.

“I’m going to taste every part of you.”

“Yes.” Her lips part as her breathing grows faster.

I do the same to her other nipple before continuing to kiss down her stomach. Snow’s fingers sink into my hair. Her eyes follow my every movement. The desire I see in them makes me feel like a king.

I settle in between her thighs. She’s so damn small that I throw her legs over my shoulders before burying my face inside of sweet heaven.

The sounds she’s making do nothing to temper my need.

Pretty soon she’ll be moaning my name as I give her every single inch of me.

I have to thrust my cock into the mattress to try and ease some of the pain.

My balls draw up tight. The second she comes against my face screaming my name, I come with her.

But I don't stop. That first orgasm was to get her ready for me.

I thrust one finger inside of her. "Fuck, you have a pretty pussy, Snow. Has anyone ever told you that?" Her mouth falls open at my dirty words.

"Of course they haven't because it's all mine.

Only mine. No one will ever touch you here besides me.

I'll be the only one to know how you taste. "

I work a second finger into her. I can tell she enjoys my filthy words because she's becoming wetter by the second. Snow starts to work her hips against my fingers. Her body tries to take over. I use my forearm to pin them down into place.

"I'm fucking your pretty little virgin pussy, Snow. Not you." I pump faster.

"You have a filthy mouth."

"And you fucking love it." She nods her head in agreement, but I wasn't asking.

"You'll always love what I do to your body, Snow, but know that when my hands and mouth are on you, I'm the one in control."

"Yes," she moans in agreement.

"All you have to do is feel." I lean down and suck her swollen clit, which is begging for attention, into my mouth. I feel her pussy start to flutter around my fingers, and I know she's close.

My cock never went down, not ever after coming all over myself like a teenage boy seeing a Playboy for the first time. I suck hard on her clit, flicking my tongue back and forth. My fingers never relent, I curve them inside her, hitting the deep spot she needs.

Snow goes off for me. Her whole body tenses. I move, knowing she is lost in pleasure. I pull my fingers out and climb back up her body. My cock going to her tight virgin hole. The head easily slips inside.

Snow's eyes remain closed, engrossed in the pleasure of her orgasm. I grit my teeth as I thrust inside of her, quickly wanting to mix the pain with pleasure to lighten the impact. She lets out a small gasp. Her hands grip my shoulders. I'm seated as deep as I can get, and remain as still as possible, waiting for her to adjust to me.

The pleasure is all-consuming. It's taking every single ounce of my self-control not to take her fully. My instincts demand that I move. That I rut into her until she's screaming my name in pleasure, but I tamp those desires down. The need to not hurt her any more than necessary overrides them.

It's not long before I feel her relax, her body molding to mine. Her beautiful green eyes pop open to meet mine, reminding me of the first day we met. It seems like a lifetime ago when it's only been a few days.

"I need you." Her words come out breathy.

"You have me." I lean down, taking her mouth in a kiss as I give her exactly what she is asking for. The same way I plan to do for all eternity.

I wish I could say that I will take my time, but the way her pussy is gripping me already has me close to orgasm. Listening to her little moans as I pump in and out of her is not helping. But I need our first orgasm to be together.

I pick up the pace, her legs relaxing and dropping open more to welcome every thrust. It's not long before she's matching my movements, our bodies in a rhythm that each other will only ever know.

“That's it, babe. Move that sweet pussy on my cock.

” I angle my thrusts to hit her sweet spot.

I can tell she's close. “You're gonna come all over my cock, and I'm going to spill my seed deep inside of you.

” With that, she throws her head back, closing her eyes as her legs begin to shake, and her pussy clamps down around my cock. “Eyes on me, Snow.”

She follows my command, locking eyes with me as she screams my name before we both go over the edge.

I have never been much of a religious man, but I know I have found my heaven.

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WINTER

I lay with my head on Garrett's chest. His fingers drift up and down my back. I never knew life could be this way. It angers me how much Heaven's Temple kept from us.

How much they have taken from all of us that we can't get back.

It wasn't only the women and girls. They often tossed the young boys out when they got older.

There would always be a reason, but after some conversations with Garrett, I've come to the realization that it was because they didn't want to share wives.

All this talk about marriage and having as many children as possible was utterly ridiculous.

They were in the business of ripping families apart.

"You all right?"

I tilt my head back to meet Garrett's eyes. "I told you I'm fine." I smile at him.

He has asked me this question more than once.

Garrett is so worried he hurt me. The first time he thrust inside me, there was a sharp pain, but it was also accompanied by immense pleasure.

Another thing my mother was wrong about.

Sex can be good for both partners if the other cares, and my Garrett more than cares.

“Good, but you got tense for a second. You thinking about your sister?”

“Was more just thinking about that whole world. The things they tried to brainwash in my mind. Sometimes, I have to correct my thinking, knowing that the thoughts they ingrained in me are not my own.” I’m lucky because Garrett has been so supportive which has made it easier for me.

“I think you’re coming along faster than you realize.” Garrett brushes a piece of hair out of my face, tucking it behind my ear. “After we handle this and get your sister back, we’ll find you someone to talk to.”

“Someone to talk to? I like talking to you.” I start to sit up, but Garrett keeps me tucked in close to him.

“You can always talk to me, babe, but you have been through something big. A professional can help you sort through those thoughts.”

“I don’t know.” A small knot forms in my stomach. “When you needed someone to talk to at the compound, you always had to speak to one of the prophets.” I’m not comfortable putting that trust in anyone else besides Garrett at the moment.

“No,” he half-growls. That sound always makes me smile. “This will not be someone shoving any religion on you. This profession requires years of schooling and training specifically for these types of situations. It will be a woman.”

“All right. I know you only want what's best for me,” I agree, trusting Garrett. I think it would be easier if it was a woman.

“I won’t make you do anything you don’t want, but the option is there. You can even just go meet the person and then decide.”

“Thank you.” I press a kiss to his chest over his heart.

Garrett rolls, pinning me under him. “Stay put,” he orders, pressing a kiss to my mouth before he gets up from the bed. I watch his sexy, naked self stroll into the bathroom, hearing the water come on a few seconds later.

"I think you could use a soak in the tub," he says when he comes back out of the bathroom. Garrett easily scoops me up in his arms, carrying me back into the bathroom with him.

"I have been eyeing this tub," I admit.

"The warm water will help you be less sore later.

" He lowers me into the water. I let out a small sigh as the warmth envelops me. “Rest,” Garrett orders before dropping a kiss on the top of my head. “I’m going to check on a few things and grab some more wood. Then see about making us something to eat.”

“I want to cook,” I protest. “Please.”

“You know I can’t tell you no.”

“I don’t see how that is a problem.” He merely chuckles and gives me another kiss before leaving the bathroom.

I lean back, letting out another sigh. My mind replays our lovemaking. We’ve had sex twice.

A different side of Garrett peeked out when we made love. I could see the more domineering side to him. He was also possessive. Even when he revealed that side of himself, it was as if he knew I needed it. My body ached for it.

He told me that he loved me. It took me by surprise. Growing up, my home was not a place to freely give words of love. My sister and I would always express our love to each other. But she is the only other person to have said those words to me.

What I feel for Garrett is intense and actually a little scary.

There is a fear that he could be taken from me.

I don't even know how I would handle that.

What I do know is that my heart would shatter into a million pieces if something were to happen to him.

This has to be love. It's different than the love of my sister, but both are bone-deep.

I need to tell him. I don't want another second to go by without him knowing how I truly feel.

When I step out of the tub, I wrap a towel around me. Bear is lying on the bed when I exit. I go into Garrett's closet and find a shirt to pull on and a pair of his boxers. I have to roll them a million times to get them to stay.

Bear lets out a low growl that has me stepping out of the closet. His ears are up, and he is standing in the center of the bed. Then, he slowly slips off the bed, not making a sound.

I watch as he leaves the room. I follow after him, wondering if there might be

something wrong.

Before I catch up to him, I hear another growl.

Only this time it's louder and more fierce.

It sends a shot of fear through me. When I round the corner of the living room toward the kitchen, I see Bear, his teeth fully showing.

That's when I see Joseph standing on the other side of the kitchen island with a gun pointed at Bear, and my heart sinks.

"Get the dog, Winter, or I'll shoot him." I can see the fear on Joseph's face, even though he's the one with a gun.

I try to recall some of the commands I've heard Garrett use. He would always explain the meaning of his commands to me. The most common command he used was Okhraniay, which meant "guard," and Bear would remain by my side until Garrett released him.

"Winter!" Joseph shouts at me, making Bear bark too and let out another growl of warning.

"Ryadom!" I call out. Bear steps back to my side, but he's still tense. His teeth are showing.

Joseph pulls out a walkie-talkie, keeping the gun trained toward us as he does.

"Ethan, Micah," he speaks into it. "I've got her." A sick smile slides across Joseph's face. I should be terrified of what he is going to do to me, but all I can think about is Garrett and where he might be. Did they do something to him?

“You thought you could get away from me? You’re mine,” he spits out.

“I’m not yours,” I grit out. Joseph’s eyes widen at my response. I’m sure he’s shocked that a woman would not only dare to disagree with him, but also speak against him.

“Did you fuck him? Did you let that man take your innocence?” His eyes roam up and down my body, lingering on my bare legs.

Disgust and rage take over his expression.

“You will be punished for this!” he shouts, making Bear growl, but he stays by my side.

I put my hand on his head, trying to calm him.

I don’t want him to attack and get shot.

“Ethan, Micah,” Joseph calls into the walkie-talkie again. Nothing comes back. “Come on. We’re leaving.” He gestures with his gun, signaling for me to move.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I don’t move an inch.

“You think you have a choice?” He steps out from behind the kitchen island to come toward me.

I’m about to tell him that I know I have a choice, but the next thing I know, Garrett is behind Joseph. It happened so fast I’m not even sure where he came from. He grabs him by the hair and yanks him hard. Joseph’s neck snaps back only to be met with Garrett’s gun to the back of his head.

“Drop it,” he orders.

Joseph releases both the gun and the walkie-talkie. They hit the ground with a loud thud. “You really have gifted yourself to me by coming into our home. I mean, I couldn’t have asked for a better gift than this.”

I don’t miss the word our.

“She doesn’t belong here,” Joseph tries to insist.

To my shock, Garrett releases his hold on Joseph with a shove. He tumbles forward, barely managing to stay on his feet. He spins around to face Garrett. I can see the rage in Garrett’s eyes, but the rest of him is utterly calm.

That’s when I see the blood on his white thermal shirt. I know it isn’t his. Joseph sees it too.

“Where are Ethan and Micah?”

“Micah had an accident.”

The blood drains from Joseph’s face. “What did you do to him?”

Garrett gives a lazy shrug of his shoulder. “He’s not a very good or quick shot. I, however, am rather good with my ax.” He smirks.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, putting my hand to my mouth, knowing that Joseph won’t make it out of here alive either.

GARRETT

It's not often that your prey comes to you. He has made my job so much easier. They came onto my land with guns. Cleaning up is going to be a whole lot easier than I'd anticipated.

I try to keep my focus on Joseph. You never take your eyes off the target, but Snow is difficult to resist. I flick a glance her way. Her eyes are wide, her hand covering her mouth. I can't help but wonder how she sees me right now. Is she scared? Will she see me in a whole other light after this?

Because I did kill Micah. The little shit thought he'd sneak up on me. I knew the second they'd stepped onto my land, setting off one of my sensors.

I'd been out getting more wood for the fire.

So I set a trap. I grabbed my ax and began chopping away, deliberately being loud.

The dumb ass came right to me. I hadn't even given him a chance to speak.

I merely spun around and chucked the ax at him. He went down easily.

Then there was Ethan. None of them appeared to have received any training. I was about to head back to the house to secure Snow, but Ethan came right toward me. Yes, I knew who they all were.

Zero, who I'd reached out to, got me information on Heaven's Temple. The FBI

already had a thick file on them with all the top-ranking members. Lucky me, they all decided to show up on my property.

While Ethan panicked over finding Micah with an ax in his face, I came up behind him. I'm a bit sad that both of them got such an easy death. They should have suffered some. They should have experienced the fear and misery they frequently inflicted on others.

I am, however, enjoying watching the fear and panic wash over Joseph.

He thought he could come into my home and take what was mine.

Men like Joseph always let their power go to their heads.

Their egos get out of control, and they think they can do anything they want without any consequences.

It usually works for them because they prey on innocent people, but I'm far from that.

Honestly, I can't blame Joseph. I'd enter anywhere to get my Snow back.

"What, ah—" he stumbles over his words. "Ethan."

"No dice." I give another shrug.

"You killed them." Why he sounds shocked I have no fucking clue. Maybe they believe that bullshit they spout over at Heaven's Temple that they are untouchable. He is about to experience a startling awakening.

"I did," I clip out. My tone makes it clear that it means nothing to me.

Joseph's gaze drops to the gun I still hold at my side. "You're going to shoot me?"

"Nah." I step forward, and Joseph retreats a few steps. Snow shifts around, so he's not close to her. I do, however, go over to her. "Hold this for me, baby." I hold out the gun to her.

I double-check that I clicked the safety into place before she tentatively takes it from me. "You can go to the bedroom with Bear if you want."

Snow shakes her head no.

"Now..." I turn to fully face Joseph, my arms open in an invitation.

He casts a quick glance through the kitchen toward the back door.

His skinny ass had wiggled in through the dog door.

I'll need to investigate the possibility of installing a sensor on Bear's collar to restrict its opening to him alone.

I haven't worried about it before now. I didn't think anyone was stupid enough to try and get into my home.

"You'll never make it," I warn.

"I've got money, lots of it."

"Don't give a shit." I step toward him. He steps back, bumping into the couch. There is nowhere for him to go. He's a caged, scared little rabbit, and I'm enjoying every second of it. I want him to feel fear.

“Girls? We have lots of them.”

I backhand him, sending him tumbling over the couch to the other side. It takes Joseph a minute to get back to his feet. “What do you want then?” he pleads, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth, making me think I knocked a few teeth loose. I clearly didn’t knock any sense into him.

“Already got everything I need.” I glance over to Snow to make it clear what I mean.

“I can get your sister!” Joseph rushes to say as I come around the couch to clear the space between us.

“Stop!” Snow shouts, halting me in my tracks.

“I can get your sister,” I tell Snow. “We don’t trust lying, fake prophets.” My words get the reaction I was hoping for. Joseph charges me. Perhaps he thought he would surprise me or that I was unaware of the blade he was concealing in his hand.

I shift, allowing him to pass me in his charge, but I still grab him from behind.

I wrap my arm around him, gripping his hand.

I squeeze, making him cry out. I feel a bone or maybe two crack; his hold on the knife releases, and I take it from him.

I wrap my other hand around the front of his throat and bring the blade up against it.

It sinks in, making blood trickle down his neck.

“Please,” Joseph starts to beg.

Snow suddenly speaks. "Did Carla plead with you before you killed her?" She steps in front of him. I love that I'm able to give her this. That she gets to take back some of the power he stole from her.

"What are you talking about?"

I press the knife in deeper. "Don't play games with her," I warn him. "Answer the question." I feel him swallow.

"She broke our vows," Joseph admits. "Lay in our bed with Nora." He spits the last part. "Then tried to run away."

"That's what happened to Nora?" Snow's eyes fill with tears.

"It was sinful!"

"Sinful!" Snow shouts right back at him. "You fuck other women in that married bed too, and don't say they're your wives so it doesn't matter."

If looks could kill, Joseph would be done for. I have never seen this level of anger from Snow. Normally, it's all sadness. Now a fire is lit inside of her, and I fucking love to see it.

"It's the way of things."

"No, it's the way you forced upon us. Gave us no choice because we both know that in the real world, you'd be nothing. No woman would want to be your wife."

"You bitch! I'm—" The slide of my blade over an inch has his words cutting off.

"You're no one. That's who you are," Snow tells him.

“I have a feeling you’re not going where you think you are,” I tell Joseph, letting go of the knife. “Don’t want your blood on her.” With that, I snap his neck. His body hits the floor.

Snow stares at me with wide eyes for a long moment before she flings herself at me. I catch her easily, pulling her into me.

“I was so worried you were hurt or something.” She rains kisses down on my face. There is no disgust in her expression. It’s as though Joseph’s lifeless body isn’t even lying on the floor.

“You think I’d leave you to these fuckers?”

“No.” She gives me a watery smile.

“Don’t cry on me.”

“I’ll try not to.” She sniffles.

I step over Joseph’s body, carrying her back to the bedroom. She has seen enough fucked-up shit for a lifetime. My phone starts to go off in my pocket. I sit Snow down on the bed before I pull it out, knowing already it’s my brother.

It’s a text.

Ace: The Target is acquired.

Well, fuck me. He was only supposed to be doing recon.

“Ace has your sister.”

“What!? How do you know?”

I show her my phone.

“What does that even mean? How do you get that from a text? Can you call him?”
Snow fires off one question after another.

“If he could call, he would. He's probably still on his way out.”

“Are you sure?” Tears start to stream down her face.

“Yes, I’m sure that’s what his message meant,” I reassure her. I know her tears are happy ones, but they still bother me.

“You really did it. Everything you promised me.” She wraps her arms around my neck, tugging me until I fall onto the bed on top of her.

I start to speak, but she covers my mouth with her hand.

“Last time you cut me off, so now it’s my turn.

” She says this with a huge smile on her beautiful face.

"I was so scared that if they took me away or something happened to you, I'd never get the chance to tell you that I love you too. "

I never thought hearing her say those three little words would have such an impact on me. I should have known better when it comes to Snow.

“Say it again,” I all but demand it.

“I love you.” I close my eyes and savor the words.

“Then, marry me.”

“Of course I’ll marry you.” Her hands come up to my face. The same way I’ve done to hers so many times. “But what about the dead bodies?” Snow deadpans.

I throw back my head and laugh. She bursts into giggles under me, letting me know that Snow can not only handle my past but our future too.

EPILOGUE

WINTER

“This is always so cool to me,” I tell Garrett as the doctor does my ultrasound.

It’s been years since I left Heaven’s Temple, but technology still fascinates me.

You’d think it did Garrett too, by the way he’s intensely staring at the screen.

But this isn’t his first rodeo. That’s evident by our baby girl he’s holding on his side.

He picked her up so she could clearly see the screen too.

“Is it a sissy?” she asks. Her curious little eyes probably have no clue what they’re looking at.

Rose has been hoping it’s a girl. When I told her it might be a boy, she gave me a horrified expression. I had to hide my laughter. All Garrett cares is that it’s healthy, and I’m much the same. Though he is a really good girl-dad. Every time I see him with our girls, I melt inside.

“It has to be a girl,” Daisy says from beside Garrett, who she calls Dad.

He and I are really all she knows. She was only two when we adopted her from Heaven’s Temple’s demise.

I'm thankful she doesn't remember that place at all.

It can still haunt me at times. I don't want that for her. To know how cruel the world can be.

She's ours now. We even named our little one Rose to match Daisy's name, and if we have another girl, Daisy picked Lily for her already.

I love the family we've created. If someone had told me that I had to go through all of the suffering at Heaven's Temple again in order to have this life with Garrett and our girls, it would be a no-brainer. Never in a million years did I think this was possible.

The doctor turns her head toward Daisy. "You got yourself another sister." Both she and Rose break out in cheers. My husband gives my hand a squeeze with a smile on his handsome face. It's the same one I got when we got married.

This is a side of Garrett that only his family gets.

I'll never forget when we first met and he told me people in town thought him to be an asshole.

And maybe he was to them. I didn't believe it. Not until we'd started to go to town together.

Then I got to see people's shocked expressions at how he was with me.

Garrett doted on me. He behaves exactly the same way with his baby girls. He's a big marshmallow for us. Everyone else gets the glares, which leads to them giving him a wide berth. It often makes us girls laugh.

"Everything is looking great." The doctor wipes the gel off my stomach so I can pull

my shirt down over the small bump. She hands the girls each a sonogram picture, then gives me a stack of them. My sister is going to be so excited when I tell her.

Garrett leads us out of the doctor's office and toward his truck. We have it all packed up. We spent the weekend in the city knowing we had the doctor's appointment on Monday. We come for a long weekend every other month.

The first time we came, it was overwhelming, but with time, I got used to it.

I enjoy going, and the girls always have a blast, but I love our cabin, tucked away.

I also adore our town. It really came together when Heaven's Temple was exposed, and many people needed places to stay.

It's in those times that you see the true nature of people.

I'll always be grateful to the townspeople for how they stepped up.

"How are you feeling?" Garrett asks, reaching over and taking my hand when he pulls onto the highway heading home.

"Happy."

"I'm happy too, Mommy!" Rose singsongs from the back seat.

"Yeah, no boys!" Daisy adds in. "No offense, Daddy."

"None taken." He chuckles. "I'm good with the no boys policy."

I let out a laugh. I'm sure he is. God help any boys that ever try to get near them.

That's such a change from the father I had.

He was ready to auction both my sister and me off.

We were nothing but property. Garrett treats us like we're the most precious things in the world and must be protected at all costs.

Not only will any boys that want to date our girls have to get through Garrett, but they will always have to live up to the standard he has shown them a man should be to their wife.

"Can we go to the diner for fries?" Daisy asks when we hit the edge of town.

"I could go for fries," I chime in. Even if we had a giant breakfast delivered from room service this morning.

"We can get fries." Garrett runs his hand over my small baby bump. "But you'll need to get more than just fries."

"When have we ever only gotten fries?" I smirk.

The man consistently tries to feed me. I think in the first year we lived together, I gained twenty pounds. It was much-needed weight, but it always warms me how he makes sure I'm taken care of in every way. The man misses nothing.

"Don't try it," my husband warns when he pulls up and parks in front of the diner. I roll my eyes at him. He returns it with a wink.

He thinks the truck is too high for me to get in and out of without his help when I'm pregnant.

Not sure why he installed the electronic step-bar if he won't even let me get to use it.

But I keep my butt in place. Garrett will do anything to make me happy, and I'll do the same for him.

If it makes him feel better for him to help me, then I'll wait.

He helps me out before going to get the girls. "Hey, Winter," Sara calls to me.

"Hey." I wave back.

"Tell us what you got cooking in there," Mr. Walker calls from across the street, where he's sitting on the bench in front of the hardware store.

"It's a girl!" Daisy shouts before I can.

"I knew it," Ginger says, stepping out from the little bookstore next to the diner. Her arms are loaded with books. She's one of the kindergarten teachers over at the elementary school.

"We so called it." Daisy rushes over to Ginger, giving her a high five.

"I called it too." Rose goes in for her own high five.

A few more people stop to talk to us before we enter the diner, where once again, everyone is asking about the baby. It takes us almost fifteen minutes to finally get to a table.

"Oh! It's Olivia and Emma." Daisy bounces back to her feet. "Can I?"

She doesn't need to ask me the entire question for me to understand what she wants.

Garrett looks to me to answer.

“If their mom is okay with it.” Daisy rushes out of the diner to the sidewalk, where Olivia and Emma are with their mom. Daisy is best friends with the twins.

Sidney, the twins’ mom, glances up through the window into the diner at me, and I give her a nod. She smiles and tells the girls to go ahead. They run back inside. Sidney points to the bookstore, letting me know that’s where she’ll be.

The two girls join us, and they all order milkshakes. I lean into my husband, sliding my hand into his. This is how life is supposed to be. What a real community is. You don’t need religion and fear to bring people together. All you need is love, respect, and compassion.

Garrett's mom called it special, and she was right. She will never know that with a few words she changed and saved the lives of so many. She brought the Anderson brothers there, and the rest will forever be history.

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ACE

I go over the information my brother gave me for a second time, making sure I have everything correct and memorized. The map is where I focus a lot of my attention.

Here I thought I was going to be stuck over at the bar while I rode out the snowstorm alone.

There wasn't much to do in this town to begin with.

I own the only bar in town and live above it.

It's not that I can't afford a real home; I just don't need one.

It would be pointless. All that empty space would likely drive me insane.

When I envision a house or a home, it usually involves a family, something I don't have. I hadn't thought I wanted one until recently, when a blue-eyed girl came into my life as quickly as she left.

Not sure you can even count it as coming into my life.

I'd only seen her in passing when she'd been in town in the back seat of a car outside of the hardware store.

I was standing across the street when she turned her head, her eyes striking me.

You could see the bright blue from blocks away.

Then, before I had a chance to react, the car she was in began to pull away.

That moment in time had changed me, making me feel emotions I hadn't thought still existed for me.

Sometimes I wonder if I'd made it up. I even tried searching the vehicle's license plate she'd been in, but it came back to a different car that had been salvaged two years ago, which made no sense.

I have since resorted to going over the feed at the end of the day of the cameras outside of the hardware store, hoping for her to return again, but there has been nothing.

I knew she wasn't from town. I would remember her. I know everyone here. That meant she might have only been passing through, and those eyes will haunt me for the rest of my life if I'm unable to find them. So living above the bar is where I'll be staying.

I'm not sure what I was thinking when I bought this place.

All I knew was this is where my twin had wanted to retire, so if I wanted to be near him, then I would need to lay my own roots down here.

Garrett and I have always been close. We might look a lot alike, but we're far from the same, and it suited us and also played in our favor when we enlisted after our mom passed.

We moved up quickly in the ranks. Garrett and I were thick as thieves on missions.

We didn't even have to be in communication to know what the other would be doing or thinking.

They sent us on a shitload of missions before they moved us to the Star Team, where we spent some years before getting out.

It can be a hard life. Spending days in the freezing cold or in the middle of the desert. Shacked up in places no one would ever want to be. Once we left, we ventured into the private sector, often contracted by the government. The best part of it was we had the freedom to choose our own jobs.

I still do private work here and there, but my brother is completely out.

I should be too, but what the fuck else am I going to do?

I thought this bar would keep me from going stir crazy, but that's far from the case.

I thought about selling it, but then I would end up in a cabin in the middle of nowhere, outside of town like my brother.

He only comes to town twice a month, and it's because I demand it.

I don't know how he does that shit. I've spent enough time alone for a lifetime.

I don't get him sometimes. He chose for us to live in this town, but he has never expressed a desire to integrate into it. But my brother has never been a social butterfly. That was my role. I am the talker and smooth one. He is more brute force and action. We play well off each other.

That's why I was more than surprised when I woke up with an email from him that he'd sent me in the middle of the night.

I had a feeling that something was up with him when I called last night.

He'd been at the bar the night before for one of our two-week check-ins.

The snowstorm had started getting worse when he was leaving.

I called to make sure he made it home okay.

The roads leading up to his place are steep and windy.

He'd actually cut out the path to the cabin he'd built.

He was short on the phone, which isn't abnormal for him, but I noticed his tone was off. No one else would have picked up on it, but I did. My suspicions were all but confirmed when he was suddenly asking questions about some cult that is outside of town.

From what I gathered, they had a large amount of land hidden away.

A patrol kept watch over the area. I hadn't even known about the place until now.

I'm all kinds of fucking curious. Especially since one of the members ended up on my brother's doorstep. He found her when he'd gotten home, and I think he might be more than a bit smitten and possessive.

It's not often that my brother can surprise me. Actually, not sure if he ever has. This, however, has. When Garrett comes to the bar, women always try to get his attention. I think it's a challenge for them since he only glares back at them and tells them to step away.

Now he's got one in his home, and I could feel the possessiveness he had over her

with each word he spoke.

He has never been that way with a female before.

Garrett has always valued his privacy, especially since his retirement, and I don't hold it against him.

We often got stuck in tight situations where you had to hunker down.

What baffles me is how he manages to avoid feeling lonely.

The quiet has always irked me. I actually thrive under pressure, especially when there is chaos around me.

I go over to my bookcase and give it a tug to reveal the hidden door. I punch in the code before placing my thumb on the scanner. It pops open. I grab a few guns, knives, and other toys before I debate which drone I should take with me.

“Rather be prepared.” I push the aerial surveillance UAV drone over that has no counter weapons on it.

The Loitering Munition Drone is overkill.

This isn't a blow everything up mission and suicide my drone.

I give the box a pat before shifting it over and grabbing the combat drone. The best of both worlds.

Garrett used to give me shit in high school with all the video games I played, but it paid off. He might be a better shot than me, but I'm killer with a drone. I mean that figuratively and literally. I drop everything down onto the bed.

My place is an open-floor plan directly above the bar. It's like a giant studio. I had it all updated, but you can lie in bed and see right through the living room area into the kitchen. The only other rooms are the bathroom, closet, and my hidden one. It's more than I need.

I check my phone to see if I have any new information from my brother or any of our contacts that we put feelers out to that might know details about Heaven's Temple. The FBI must have a comprehensive file on them.

My objective for today is to solely explore the area.

The snowstorm is going to help provide cover, and it would also mean most people would be inside.

I imagine that there would be minimal, if any, patrols.

That all works in my favor. Not seeing any new updates, I text my brother for a description of his girl's sister. She is the main focus, after all.

Garrett wants to locate her and see if it would be possible to extract her easily or find out how much gun-power will be needed to come up with a strategy to get her out.

In my closet, I find my winter gear, and I don't mean everyday winter wear. It's what I'd use on missions that involved cold and snow. It's completely white from head to toe, keeping you hidden and preventing your dick from freezing off. It also protects you from being picked up by heat sensors.

Garrett: Blonde hair, blue eyes, one freckle above her lip, and walks with a small limp.

The limp thing might help, but blonde hair and blue eyes in a cult could be pretty

standard. I might not be able to get close enough to spot a freckle.

Garrett: Snow says they look a lot alike except for their eye color. They're only ten months apart.

Irish twins.

Me: Can I get a picture?

After I sent the text, I realized my mistake. With how my brother has been with this girl, I quickly correct it.

Me: Of YOUR girl.

Garrett: Hold on.

I start arming myself before pulling on my snow gear. I check the drone over to make sure it's good to go.

Just as I finish getting ready, my phone goes off. Perfect timing.

The second I see the picture, everything changes. The girl in the picture bears a striking resemblance to my blue-eyed angel, with her blonde-ish-white hair. Only this girl has green eyes.

Me: Her name?

Garrett: Libby

Me: Tell me something I can tell her so she knows her sister sent me.

Garrett: This is recon. You can't get the girl out alone.

Does my brother forget who he is talking to?

This is no longer a recon mission... I won't be leaving without the girl.

LIBBY

The harsh wind burns against my skin through my open window. I attempt to collect some of the snow that has fallen on the window ledge and place it into the small plastic bag I have. When I have enough, I quietly close the window, not wanting anyone to hear.

I spin the bag to secure it before pressing it against my swollen, cracked lip.

“Crappers,” I hiss at the sting. It’s been a while since my father hit me, but he has been in a rage since he found out that my sister, Winter, is gone.

I anticipated that I might get some blowback from her escaping this life, but my hope is that it will be worth it in the end.

There is no doubt in my mind that she will come back for me.

“Libby!” he shouts, and the bedroom door flies open, hitting the wall with a loud bang, startling me. The bag falls from my hand to the floor. “I heard the window open.”

“I was only getting some snow.” I point to the bag.

I can’t bring myself to move. My father terrifies me.

I often can’t move when he goes into one of his rages.

Panic usually sets in and freezes my whole body.

It's been that way since the time he shoved me off the back deck, when he was merely passing by me after storming out of the house from a fight he had with Mother.

I landed on my leg, and it snapped. To this day, I swear I can still feel phantom pains from where the scar is.

My limp is a daily reminder. He hadn't taken me to the hospital. No, that would never happen, no matter how hard Winter begged him. That had earned her a few hits of her own, but Winter always put herself in front of him when it came to me. She's the best person I know. I miss her like crazy.

"Martha!" my father shouts. "Bring me my work bag."

My fear starts to rise, not sure what he is up to. His work bag is full of tools. "You think you're going to run away too?" I shake my head no rapidly. I'd never make it. Not on my leg. That's why Winter had gone alone. She was supposed to get help.

"Here you go." My mother comes rushing in to hand my father the bag.

She is always quick to do his bidding. I often wonder if she hated Winter and me or if she feared my father more.

I think it's a mix of both. I almost get her not trying to save us in front of him because she could get his wrath too.

But she never offers comfort when he isn't around either.

"You know we found her," Father says as he rummages through the bag. My heart

sinks. No, he couldn't have. "She'll be back here soon enough." He smirks when he pulls out a hammer and then a couple of nails. "Stupid girls." Father goes to the window and starts to hammer the nails into it.

How had they found her? Where is she then?

My mind races with so many questions, but I don't dare utter any of them.

I was filled with worry when she took off.

The snowstorm had only just started, but it was her only chance.

In just a few days, she would marry the prophet Joseph.

Winter was set to become his third wife, but in a way, his second.

The first died, and the second had yet to give Joseph a child. She had to leave to spare herself that life with him. She was on his radar. I, on the other hand, don't have to worry about that. Most of the people here see me as broken or defective.

Joseph is no prophet. He is the devil himself, if you ask me. Not to mention, Winter and I are pretty sure he killed his first wife. She just disappeared one day. No one talked about it. We all knew better than to ask. Joseph can do no wrong in the eyes of most people here.

I wasn't surprised when he asked Winter to marry him.

Well, ask is putting it nicely. It wasn't really a question. It was more a formality to Father. No one says no to the "prophet." I honestly think most of the men here would give Joseph their own wives if it was something he wanted. All of it done in the name of God. He's a coward who uses religion to have power.

I think my sister is the prettiest girl on the compound. That can be a curse around here. Because of my leg, I have yet to be asked for my hand in marriage. How could I both hate and love my limp? But that is my reality.

“The wedding will go on as planned,” my mother adds. She was all too happy to hand her daughter over to the disgusting man.

I want to ask a million questions, but I know better.

Not only would I face punishment, but I wouldn't receive the answers either. I have to bite the inside of my cheek so I don't.

I can ramble when I'm nervous or excited.

I seem to have two modes. I'm either as quiet as a church mouse or I can't shut up. There is no in-between.

My mother stands in the doorway, glaring at me. I'm sure she's mad about my father being in a terrible mood. There's no doubt in my mind that he's been taking it out on her, the one person who would do anything for him. Even sell out her own kids to make him happy.

“Don't get any ideas,” my father says when he hammers the last nail into place. “Understand?” He uses the hammer to point at me.

“Yes, sir,” I answer. He gives me a curt nod before turning to go but stops in the doorway. “Don't forget to say your prayers.” With that, he closes the door. I hear the lock click into place.

I fall back onto my bed, huffing out a breath.

The simple action makes my lip sting. I hate them so much.

I'm trapped, and if what my father said is true, soon Winter will be too.

I should have told her to just leave me behind, to not worry about getting help.

At least one of us could have been free.

Warm tears slip down my cheeks. I don't bother wiping them away.

I roll over and pull a pillow into my arm.

I bury my face in it. I must doze off at some point.

When I wake, I can see that it's daylight out.

The snow is still coming down. I listen but don't hear anything.

If they really found Winter, wouldn't they bring her back here?

Crap, I'm honestly not sure what they would do. I pull myself from my bed, going over to the window. My leg aches with every step. It's always the worst when I first wake up. The cold doesn't help it either.

You can't see much with the snow still falling so heavily, but I do notice there are some people out and about in the far distance. Our house sits a touch higher than some of the other buildings and homes on the compound.

I jump back from the window when I hear a yelp that is quickly cut off. I stand there waiting to hear more, but there is absolutely no other sound. If my father was going at it with my mother, there would be yelling and more, but it's utterly quiet.

When I check the door handle, it's still locked from the day before. I debate whether I should unlock it. My sister taught me how, but then I would get busted for knowing how to pick the lock.

My eyes catch a shadow in front of my door. I quickly step back, forgetting that my leg is still stiff. I nearly lose my balance, but I manage to steady myself by gripping the dresser, just in time to hear the lock click before the door opens.

I see the last thing I'd ever thought I would see again.

I recognize the man from the town I visited with my father months ago.

It's so shocking to see him here that it takes me a moment to catch up with everything else.

Such as the gun in his hand. My mother is standing next to him with fear written all over her face.

"Get warm clothes on," he says when he finally speaks.

"In." The man, brandishing his gun, motions for my mother to enter the room.

She quickly does as he orders. He steps in behind her, closing the door.

"Libby, get dressed and put shoes on." How the heck does he know my name?

Maybe I'm still sleeping and this is all a dream.

I mean, it wouldn't be the first time I've dreamt of the handsome stranger.

"We have to get moving." His deep voice sends a shiver through my body, letting me

know I'm definitely not asleep.

"But—" I open and close my mouth, finally getting my wits about me.

"It's you." I could never have forgotten him.

It was an unforgettable experience. Father never allowed us to go to town, but on that particular day, the other boys were too busy to assist in picking up an order from the hardware store, so he took Winter and me instead.

We were leaving after getting everything loaded up, and I spotted him across the way. It was his size that initially caught my attention. I'd never seen a man built like him. He was solid. Even his height is unmatched. Compared to this man, every man on the compound looks like a damn skeleton.

More than anything, it was his eyes that captured my attention. They'd stayed locked with mine. I'd felt attraction in a way I never had. Who am I kidding? I have never experienced attraction toward anyone. I'm surrounded by terrible men.

"It's me. Now I need you to get dressed. We're getting out of here."

"What!" my mother hisses. "You can't take her."

"I told you I'd gag you if you didn't shut up." My mother presses her lips together tightly. "Libby."

"I can't go with you. I don't know you." It's a stupid thing to say.

I want the hell out of here, but there are still fears of people from the outside.

They're dangerous. They are all going to hell for their sinful ways.

That rhetoric has been driven into us for so long.

Plus, Winter. If Father is to bring her back here, I can't leave.

I would never be able to live a happy life thinking about what consequences she would be suffering for running away.

"You're coming with me." His tone holds no argument. When I don't move, I see a muscle in his jaw tick. "Winter sent me." Both my mother and I gasp. "Now move it."

As quickly as I can, I search for a sweater to put over my dress. It goes all the way down to my ankles.

"You don't have pants?"

"No." I shake my head at the ridiculous question. "That's sinful." I hate my words the second they cross my lips. His brows pull together. "Against the rules here."

He mutters under his breath a few curse words that I have only ever heard when other men didn't know I was in earshot. My mother glares at him, but he clearly doesn't care.

"Shoes, babe," he orders again. I scurry to get them. Did he really call me babe? Isn't that a flirty pet name shared between lovers?

When I glance over at him, I see him watching my every step. His expression has changed. I can tell he's irritated and maybe a bit pissed off. In our world, you learn to read men.

It dawns on me that he's probably noticing my limp. He probably is annoyed that it's

taking me so long. It makes my heart drop, which is silly. I guess I had this lingering hope that he was attracted to me too. He clearly remembered me from that day.

My limp is the reason I have not been offered a marriage proposal.

I'm damaged goods, as my father would say.

However, he never seemed particularly upset about it.

I would simply remain here, he said. Does my father forget he is the one that did this to me?

I'm sure not. He'd say it was God's will if it was thrown in his face. I hate when they said that.

I sit on my bed to put on my shoes. I can't just balance on one foot. That would put too much pressure on my bad leg.

"Anything else you need?"

"My sister."

"We've got her." I want to ask who we is. Heck, I want to ask a million questions, but this isn't the time. "She's your mother?" I nod my head. "Does she stay or go?"

"Stay," I say without a thought.

"Figured. She's been a bitch." My mother's mouth falls open. I cover mine so as to not laugh out loud. I have to admit that it's nice to see her get a taste of her own damn medicine.

She wasn't averse to occasional slaps to the cheek. I don't know why, but she has always shown more disdain for me than she did for Winter. Sure, she was mean to us both, but with me, it was another level. I never understood why.

“Let’s go.” Those two words are the sweetest I’ve ever heard.

“You can’t take her.” My mother grabs my elbow as I walk by. Her fingers dig into me, making me wince.

“You don’t dictate what she can and cannot do.”

“She’s a young girl. My daughter.”

“I have a feeling you were no mother to her.” He steps closer to her. I swear I can feel his anger radiating off him. Is it on my behalf? Only Winter ever cared what happened to me. “Now let her go before I physically make you.” Not only does she release my elbow, but she steps back.

“Come on, darling.” His hand, no longer gripping the gun, moves to my back, guiding me out of the bedroom.

He closes it behind us, flipping the lock before he pulls out a metal piece, slipping it into the lock and turning it.

It snaps off inside, so no key can be used to open it back up. They’ll have to break the door down.

“Why'd you do that?”

“To give us time. With the window being nailed shut, she’s trapped.”

“How did you know that?”

“I tried it first.” He tried to come in my window. “Questions later. We need to get out of here.”

I nod in agreement. I would go anywhere with him.

ACE

Rage courses through my body. I try to keep it in check, not wanting to scare Libby. I hadn't realized from a distance how tiny she was. I might be three times her size. I'll have to be careful with how I handle her.

It wasn't too difficult to find her. Winter's map was quite detailed.

I think she wanted to make it as easy as possible to find her sister.

Even if that hadn't been the goal my brother and I had set for today. I was supposed to inspect the area and assess the situation. That wasn't fucking happening.

Once I knew it was her that was here, there was no way in hell I could let her stay for another second.

I have to slow my pace so that Libby can keep up with me. There is no fucking way she is going to be able to make this trek through the snow. Not only are her shoes and clothes useless, but the snow has piled up. It would be almost impossible for her to walk in it.

I could carry her, but I need to be able to have my gun available if needed.

So far, I have managed to not use it. Not that I haven't come across a few of the men roaming around on the Heaven's Temple compound.

I easily took them down without making a sound and bound them.

They better pray to their prophets they're found before they freeze to death.

Tick-tock, you sick motherfuckers. I couldn't care less what happens to those vile humans.

When we're almost to the front door, I pause, putting my arm out to stop her. I step to the side and guide her back behind me. The door opens, hiding us from view.

"Martha!" a man shouts. The cold air rushes into the house before he closes the door.

Martha shouts a muffled response back as the man sees me.

His eyes widen, but that's all he can do before I drive my fist into his kidney.

That is for the busted lip my girl has. I'm sure he's the one that gave it to her.

Nothing is more painful than a punch to the fucking kidney, except perhaps a punch to your nuts.

He lets out a silent scream and doubles forward, making it easy for me to knee him right in the face.

The piece of shit crumbles to the floor where he belongs.

If I had more time, I'd shackle this asshole to a chair and take my time making him slowly pay for laying his hands on my girl.

Yes, I know who he is. Our contacts gave us a list of the higher-ups here at Heaven's Temple, and he was one of them.

I swiftly remove the zip ties from one of my pockets and bind him.

I glance over to Libby, sensing that shock might be taking over.

Her delicate hand is covering her mouth. Blood pours from her father's nose.

"He had it coming," I mutter, not wanting her to feel sympathy for him.

Worse, I don't want her to think I'm a monster. I am still basking in the high of her remembering me. I wasn't sure she would. But I'll never forget the rush of relief I had when I found her.

I'd cased the house before I got closer.

Knowing which room was hers, I'd peeked in the window.

She was sleeping peacefully in her bed. The tension I'd had inside of me since I realized I'd found her eased up. Not all the way, but some.

It also gives me a rush of adrenaline to finish this. I'm not leaving here without her.

The Father, William, groans. I'm sure his brain is rattled. "Libby." He moans her name. It only intensifies the anger raging within me. I tamp it down. Not going to beat the fuck to death in front of Libby. That could be for another day. Instead, I search his pockets, finding the keys.

"Let's go," I tell Libby.

"You can't take her. She's mine," William gets out.

"Might want to turn around," I tell Libby. She does, thankfully.

I give William a kick to the head. I tell myself it's to knock him out, but him saying

Libby was his pissed me off. Yeah, that isn't going to fly. I see Libby flinch when she hears my foot make contact. I wrap my arm around her waist to guide her back to the door, not allowing her to see him.

"Holy crap," Libby hisses when I open the door, a gust of wind getting her.

I think to myself, Fuck it and scoop her up into my arms after closing the door behind us.

I run toward William's truck, putting Libby inside.

I have to fist my hand so that I don't reach up to stroke my thumb across her cracked lip.

I want to go back inside and kick her father in the head a thousand more times.

To finish what I started. To send him to hell where he belongs.

"Can you drive?"

"Kinda?"

I debate for half a second and shut the idea down before closing the door and jogging to the driver's side. I start the truck up, blasting the heat before I pull my controller out. Libby watches me with curiosity.

"We can't just drive out of here. The woods is our best option."

"Not taking you through the woods." It isn't a chance I'm willing to take with her. She's so damn small, and her clothes will do nothing for her.

“I can make it.” Libby sits up straighter, wanting to be strong.

There’s nothing more I want at this moment but to give her that strength.

It will have to wait for another day, though.

Right now, getting her out of here is what matters most. We have the rest of our lives for me to empower her and show her her worth.

“Trust me, babe,” I reassure her as I get the drone back up into the sky from where I’d hidden it.

I need to make a distraction. They likely won't think much of William’s truck driving around, but if someone is paying closer attention, they will notice he’s not the one at the wheel.

Let's give them something else to pay attention to.

Libby leans over to look at the screen. I see that her brows are furrowed together. “Is that a video game thingy?”

“You think I’d play a video game right now?” I’d laugh if I wasn’t still raging inside.

“Sorry,” Libby whispers, leaning back away, her eyes looking anywhere but at me.

“I was teasing you, babe.” I soften my tone, not wanting her to think I’m making fun of her.

She might not know what a drone is. "See?" Those gorgeous blue pools meet mine again. I tilt the screen toward her, wanting her to lean toward me again. It’s not what I should be thinking about right now, but I’m doing a lot of things I’m not supposed to

be.

“Oh.” I get what I was wanting. “That’s the front gate.”

“Yeah.” The drone flies over it. I notice an empty building devoid of any heat signatures.

“That’s our church,” she says, but I already know that.

Winter’s map didn’t leave anything out. I interpret it as a divine indication that the church is deserted, as I search for a structure to blow to pieces.

So that’s what I do. I lock the target in and fire.

“Is that...” Libby’s words trail off. A small gasp leaves her when the missile strikes.

A second later, we feel the ground shake below us. Direct hit.

“It’s gone,” I tell her, then spin the drone back around.

I lock it on the truck and engage defensive counters before I hand the controller to Libby.

She accepts it, her blue eyes widening once again.

They’re so damn expressive. I like that I can read her so easily.

That she's not trying to hide anything. It's right there for you to see.

“I don’t want to hit the wrong thing.” Libby holds it like it’s a bomb.

“It won’t respond to you.” I throw the truck into drive and take off toward the front gate. People are coming outside trying to see what is going on. The men are running toward the explosion.

When I conducted my last check, there were four people at the front gate. I glance at the screen and notice that only one heat signature is now visible. The body moves inside the hut at the gate—coming out. I’m sure to check us. I press the gas down harder. It’s now or never.

“Short,” I call out.

“What?” Libby asks, confused.

“Hit the left side of the gate in three.”

Libby lets out another one of her adorable little gasps as she watches the screen lock in on the gate.

“Target acquired. In three, two—” I see the man step fully out of the hut, reaching for the gun on his hip. “One.” Short fires, nailing his target, blasting the gates open. The impact is hard enough to send the man flying back through the air a good five feet.

“That was insane,” Libby says as I floor it through the gates knowing she’ll never return to Heaven’s Temple. No, by the time I am finished with them, there will be nothing left.

LIBBY

“ O h gosh.” I drop the tablet control thing when I realize I’m squeezing it to death. I know he said that it wouldn’t work for me, but this thingy is crazy. This is all so surreal. Could I still be sleeping? If I am, I don’t want to wake up.

“It won’t hurt you.” He shoots me a smile, but it never reaches his eyes.

I can tell he’s angry. My father had the same reaction around the prophet when he didn’t agree with what he might be doing. He’d paste a smile on, but it was fake and for show. That wasn’t often, but my father wasn’t keen on being bossed around. He took pleasure in controlling everyone else.

I hate him so much. I can still see him on the ground, so helpless. I’ll never forget that. All my life, he’s been so powerful. This one time I got to see that he isn’t. He just picked on people he was bigger than. People he knew he could win against.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It’s a drone.”

“A drone,” I repeat. I have never heard the word before. “You called it Short.”

"The technology within it is called Short Circuit. He’s in a lot of my gadgets. He only responds to my brother and me." The mention of him having a brother makes me think of Winter.

“My sister?” How had I forgotten her for even a second?

I guess I could cut myself some slack; the world has been blowing up around me. I bet people back at the compound think it's the Second Coming. They'll make up some nonsense like that to scare everyone into submission. Fear is their most used weapon.

“She's fine. We have her,” he tells me again. “I'll send my brother a message so they know I have you. We'll wait till we're back at my place before we call them.”

His place? I guess I thought I'd be going straight to my sister. He suddenly turns off the road going up a small hill and back down it. We're almost to the tree line when he stops.

“We're switching vehicles.” He takes the drone control back from me and clicks it a few times.

“Stay put.” He hops out of the truck before I can ask anything.

I watch him come around. He moves through the thick snow like it's nothing.

I would have tripped a million times. It would have been rough if he'd done as I suggested earlier, but he has a plan of his own. One that is working out well.

He opens the door for me. I stiffen when he lifts me into his arms. “Won't hurt you, Libby.

” His voice softens. I just nod and wrap my arms around him.

He takes off on a run like he's not carrying a whole person.

I never believed in the whole prophet thing that they taught us in Heaven's Temple,

but I might have if they were like this man.

He came in saving the day like a true avenging angel.

“Come on, babe. You can cling to me later. I need to get you out of the cold.” Lost in my thoughts, I lift my head.

It’s something I do often, and it drives my parents crazy. Not Winter, though. She’s always wondering what I’m thinking or dreaming about. Often, while we were lying in bed, I would conjure up entire stories. They were our own books, but all inside my head.

I see a big black truck with a layer of snow over it.

He puts me down in the seat before shutting the door and going around to the other side.

He gets in, starting it up. The heat blasts out rather quickly.

He messes with the drone control before putting it in the center console between us and pulling out a phone next.

“My sister?”

“Yeah.” He taps away on the screen before putting it up too. “Seat belt.” I start to reach for it, but he beats me to it. His arm brushes against my chest as he fastens it. I suck in a breath. “Sorry,” he mutters. “We’re almost out of here.”

This time, when he floors it, the truck really takes off. It’s not shocking. I’m not sure I could have climbed into it without his help.

When he pulls back on the road, I feel a sense of relief. We really made it out of there. I turn to look back in the direction we came, but there's nothing. A huge sense of relief fills me that there is no one trailing us. The snow is still falling so heavily that it is impossible to see far.

"Promise, Libby, you'll never go back." He reaches over and puts his hand on my thigh, giving it a squeeze.

I tense up. "Shit, sorry." He jerks his hand back.

I want to tell him it's okay. That my reaction wasn't because of his touch.

It's primarily about how I react to men. They always make me tense. I can't help it.

But I hate that I did it to him. The man saved me.

"I'm sorry, I can be jumpy. It's not you." I felt the need to clarify that.

"You don't have to apologize. You did nothing wrong." I nod, knowing he's right, but I still feel bad that I might have hurt his feelings.

"I don't know your name."

"It's Ace."

"Ace," I repeat. I've never heard that one before.

"And you know that I'm Libby."

"Your sister told me."

“You talked to her?”

“Well, my twin brother told me. She told him.”

“Will you tell me how your brother found my sister?”

“Think she more found him,” he says with a soft chuckle. “My brother tends to stick to his cabin. He doesn’t venture out. Winter seems to have ended up on his doorstep.”

“Oh wow.” That must have been so scary for her.

It doesn’t surprise me that she had the courage to knock on a stranger's door. And if it’s Ace’s twin, I’m guessing they’re built the same.

That would have been double-scary. Winter always does what needs to be done.

She is brave in a way I wish I could be.

“Will you tell me more? I’ve been so worried about her. She went to get help.” I smile. “She did it.”

“She did,” Ace agrees. He gives me a bit more of the story or the parts he knows. I guess his brother hasn’t filled him in on everything.

“Wait, you think they’re like a couple?” Whoa. “She was engaged a few days ago.”

“Do not say that to my brother.” Ace shakes his head. “He is rather possessive of her. Protective too. He didn’t even want to show me a picture of her.”

That makes me smile bigger. I really hope this is all true. It sounds kind of sweet, but I know I’m likely being naïve. I’ll feel better when I can speak to her.

“I didn’t mean it like it’s bad because she was just engaged.

It was more of a wow because we’ve been plotting to get her out of that engagement.

She was supposed to be getting married like right now.

It’s why she had to take off when the storm started.

I think she would have rather died in the woods than marry Joseph. ”

I would have felt the same.

“They just hand you off to random men? How old are you?” He glances over at me.

“Eighteen.”

Ace lets out another string of curses. I don’t know why it’s hot when he does that. Is it because it’s so different than I’m used to? He doesn’t worry that something or someone might smite him. He says whatever he wants whenever he wants.

“You have to be at least eighteen to get married. Not to mention if they touched you girls, what that would mean.”

“Yeah, that’s not a rule there. We’re taught a different set to abide by.”

"It doesn't matter what their rules are. It’s against the law. Those fuckers belong in prison.” I can see that Ace is trying to keep it together. He probably doesn’t want to scare me, but little does he know, his reactions do the exact opposite.

“You know, that’s what they always tell us. That the outsiders”—I motion to him—“you guys just want to live in sin and rip our families apart. It’s why we

shouldn't speak to you. Trust any of you."

"Of course that's what they would fucking say."

"You say the F word a lot."

"You can say it too, babe."

"Maybe." I shrug.

"They tell you all that bullshit to control you."

"I know. They use fear, but even knowing that, it is still kind of real. Isn't it? People out here can hurt you too."

Ace lets out a long breath. "Yeah, there are a lot of fucked-up people in the world, but you don't have to live trapped on a compound where all of them are predators."

"Not all of them. I think some don't know better, and some of the boys have it bad too.

They often get kicked out. They just toss them away.

"I'm guessing they don't want the older men to have to compete when it comes to the women.

I think about the last two boys who were only seventeen when they'd been kicked out.

Noah and John had been nice. "I always had mixed feelings when it would happen. Happy that they might be free but sad because I wasn't sure what they might be

facing. Alone.”

“Heaven’s Temple's days are now numbered.”

I snort a laugh. “Oh my gosh. I didn’t mean to laugh at that.”

“It needs to come to an end.”

“It does. It’s just kind of funny they are always talking about the rapture and end of days. The date is always changing. To see that day really come, but not in the way they’re thinking—” I shake my head and can’t help but smile.

"They'll be praying for the rapture by the time I finish with them." Ace’s words linger in the air. I believe every one of them.

ACE

“Home sweet home,” I tell her when we pull up to the back of the bar.

She peers out the window of the truck. Now I’m kicking myself in the ass for not having gotten a house.

I could fix that, but first impressions can mean a lot.

I don’t want her thinking I’m some player who hangs out at a bar all night for fun.

“Isn’t this a place people go to for alcohol?”

“That it is.” I watch her closely to see her reaction. “I know this is a big change for you, sweetheart, but you no longer have to worry about your safety. I’ll never let anyone touch as much as a hair on your head.” I want her to feel safe here.

“Bars are filled with sin.” A small smile pulls at her lips. She’s not wrong there.

I live in that bar, and the things I want to do to her are sinful.

Fuck, the things I have thought about doing to her while I got myself off inside that bar were just as bad.

That was before I’d even touched her. Knew that she smelled like vanilla and sweet apples.

Who knows what my mind will conjure up next?

I want to punch myself in the dick. This is so not the fucking time. She doesn't need this shit. I rescued her from a cult twenty minutes ago. Any time I touch her or move too quickly, I see her tense up. I'd be shocked if she wants to talk to men once she is completely free.

She'll never be free of me.

I'll have to punch myself in the head along with my dick at the barbaric thoughts I'm having. Neither of my heads are acting right. Not that I can stop that. Libby has this effect on me. It's her own little superpower. She is the only one in the world that wields it.

"I live above it." I grab my phone and the drone controller.

"I'll help you out. Stay put." When I exit the truck, I land the drone before helping Libby down.

I need to install a side step for her to be safe.

I add it to the mental list I already have going.

There is no doubt that she will be a part of my life.

It might not be in the way I want it right now, but my brother and Winter are together.

I don't think Libby will go far from her sister.

I'm careful not to pull her into me when I help her down.

The urge to hold her, comfort her, and make her feel safe is riding me hard.

It takes all my self-control not to be too overbearing.

What the hell is wrong with me? I have never had this problem before.

I interact with women all the time in the bar, but never have I had an ounce of interest in them.

“My leg isn’t that bad. I can get down on my own.”

“It’s not about your leg. It’s slick out and the truck is high.”

“Oh.” Her eyes brighten. She doesn’t want to be treated differently because of her leg. Libby has no idea I will treat her differently, and it has absolutely nothing to do with her leg. Which I will be getting checked out by a professional once she’s ready.

I punch in the code to the back door. The screen opens, allowing me to place my thumb on it. The lock clicks over.

“I feel like I’ve gone to the future.”

“I’m sure there is a lot you’ll want to see and learn.

” She nods. I flip on the lights before opening the door wider so she can enter the back entryway.

“The bar and kitchen are that way.” I gesture down the hallway toward the front.

“My place is here.” I nod to the stairs.

My hand goes to her back to guide her. The second I make contact, she stiffens. I jerk it back.

We both say sorry at the same time.

“It’s me that should be sorry,” I repeat. “I know you don’t want to be touched.” I need to work on keeping my damn hands to myself for now.

“It’s not that, really. Just not used to it.

I mean not without...” She trails off, and I find myself almost feeling grateful.

I’m not in the right frame of mind to hear the details of what she went through at the hands of the men at Heaven’s Temple.

I’d lock her in my home and go back to Heaven’s Temple on a rampage.

While it would be justified, right now, I need to focus on her. Everything else can be left for later.

“I know.” I say that so she doesn’t have to. Not until she is ready, at least. Libby gives me a small smile before heading up the stairs. I stay close behind her. When we get to the top, I once again enter the code before placing my thumb on the scanner.

“This is really cool.” A small laugh leaves her.

“It’s not really normal. I just have these kinds of locks because of my job.”

“At a bar?” I bark a laugh, opening the door for her. “What?”

“I own a bar. It’s not really my job. I have people manage it. It’s more for me to have

roots here. My brother relocated here, so I followed suit.”

“Oh.” Her smile grows. “So you all are close then. Winter and I are close too.”

“Yeah, we’re close. Whether he likes it or not.”

“Right, because he enjoys being out in his cabin alone.”

“Not alone anymore.”

“That’s still a lot for me to take in. My sister has a boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend.” I chuckle. I don’t think Garrett or I have looked like boys since the seventh grade if I had to guess.

“I guess if he’s your size, he’s not a boy.” I don’t know why, but her comment makes me want to puff out my chest. No, I’m no boy, but I need to fucking remember she is a young girl. I know she’s legal, but still. Fuck me.

“We are built pretty much the same.” I begin to remove my gear. Libby takes a step back. “Not getting naked.”

“Oh, ah—” She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “I didn’t think that.” Her cheeks flush. Damn is she cute when she gets flustered. How would she be if I got my mouth on her?

I turn to give her my back because my dick is coming to life again.

Those thoughts are not going to help. When I turn back around, her eyes are curiously running over my place.

I hadn't thought about how someone else might see it.

The only people who have ever been up here are my brother and a few contractors I hired to help with the construction of it.

"It's an open floor plan, but the bathroom is private." I walk over to the barn-style door and slide it over to show her.

"So I'm staying here?"

"Till the storm dies down." I really don't want to think about that right now. There is no way I'm letting her leave, but I can't say that. Shit, I shouldn't even be thinking it with what she's been through. I know it's messed up, but that doesn't change anything. She's mine.

"You live alone?"

"Of course." Has she been thinking otherwise? "I'm single." I hold up my hand to show her my finger is bare. Well, I was single until I laid eyes on her.

"But people out here live together before marriage, right?"

"They do. I'm not one of them."

"It's truly a whole new world for me."

"That scare you?"

Libby lets out a small breath. "Not sure what I feel. It's all so much. I thought I'd forever be under my father's finger. No one was going to marry me because of my leg." She shrugs her delicate shoulders. Again, I want to grab her up into my arms,

but I stop myself.

“Bullshit,” I blurt out. Her brows lift in surprise. “You’re fucking gorgeous. Not to mention sweet. Your leg isn’t putting anyone off.”

There is no way that shit is true.

“You know, sometimes I did wonder. I thought a few showed interest, but my father always told me there weren't any requests for my hand.”

He’s full of shit, and that gives me a real fucking unsettling feeling.

Why did her father want to keep her at home?

There’s no way in hell anyone with eyes saw Libby and didn’t want her.

By chance, she and I made eye contact, and she was all I could think about from that moment forward.

Which tells me that for some reason, her father lied to her.

“Did your father have other wives?”

"No." She shakes her head. “From what I was told, once they married Winter off, it was only going to be the three of us.”

My next thought ignites a burning sensation deep in my throat. I want to ask her if fathers have married daughters in their cult, but I don’t. I don’t want her mind going there either.

“You can make yourself comfortable if you want. Are you warm enough?” She has a

few layers of clothing on.

“Actually, kind of hot.”

“I might have something you can wear if you want out of that dress thing.” I don’t want her in it, but I won’t make her change. But I do go to my closet to find what I can. I come up with a shirt and a pair of boxers. “You can wear this if you want. It might be more comfortable.”

“Thanks.” She takes them from me. “Do you mind?” Libby glances toward the bathroom.

“You don’t have to ask for anything here, babe. Use what you want. Make yourself at home. You are free to use the fridge and kitchen.”

“Really?” That perks her up some.

“Of course. Anything you want,” I tell her. Fuck, she could ask for anything, and if I don’t have it, I’ll get it. She’ll never want for anything again. Her wish is my command.

“Thanks,” she says again, stepping toward me, my clothes clenched close to her chest. I don’t move, not wanting to spook her as she draws closer.

Libby lifts on her tiptoes, and I realize she is trying to kiss my cheek, but she’s still not tall enough.

I lean down some for her, anticipating the way those soft pillowy lips will feel on my skin.

Her lips press against me. I bite back a groan. It’s not only the feel of them, but she

braces her hands against me. Her sweet vanilla smell wraps around me. It's enough to take me down.

“You're a good man, Ace.”

If she had any idea what I wanted to do right now, she wouldn't think that. It took everything in me not to turn my head and steal a kiss. And fuck did I hate myself for that.

Libby has had enough taken from her. I would never do that to her. Even if it kills me.

LIBBY

I hold Ace's boxers in my hand. I can't believe I'm holding a man's underwear. This is a first for me. I've seen some before. My mother would wash Father's, but his were white and kind of resembling mine. They were more panty-shaped. Am I really going to put this on?

My legs are going to be on full display wearing these. Which has never been something I was allowed to do. We had to be covered. They made us all wear these long dresses at Heaven's Temple.

Rebellion lights inside me. It has me removing my clothes. I go to step into the shorts Ace gave me, all too eager to rebel, and forget about my leg, putting too much weight on it. The pain shoots through my body. I cry out, my knee giving out on me.

"Libby!" My name is shouted a half second before the bathroom door slides open. Ace is on me, his hands roaming over my body. "Where do you hurt?"

"I—" His eyes are searching everywhere. It dawns on me that I am naked.

"Libby, talk to me, please. I can't help if I don't know." This is the first time I have seen panic on his face. With all we've been through, how is this that moment?

"I'm naked," I whisper. He is seeing me completely naked except for my panties.

"Shit." He reaches over and pulls a towel off the rod.

The thing is big enough to be a blanket, but I guess if you're Ace's size, you'd need one that big.

He lays it over me before he scoops me up into his arms, carrying me out of the bathroom and over to his bed, where he lays me down. "Where are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, really." I start to sit up, but he stops me. I'm more embarrassed than anything. I hate when attention is drawn to my leg.

"I heard you scream." He runs a hand down his face. "Fuck, that scared me."

"Are you okay?" I think he's more out of sorts than me.

"I'm fine," Ace says gruffly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, just not used to that shit."

"Used to what?" I ask, confused.

"Fear," he says before he turns, going back into the bathroom. A second later, he returns with the boxers and shirt.

He's not used to fear? I felt that every day. "You weren't scared earlier? When we were escaping?"

"No," he responds without any hesitation.

Ace slips the shirt over my head, pulling it down over the towel so that he can then slide the towel out from under it, keeping me covered the whole time. It's long

enough that it pools around my waist, covering my panties.

“How was that not scary? You were sneaking around, blowing crap up. The man at the gate was armed with a gun!” I can’t wrap my mind around how he wasn’t terrified back at Heaven’s Temple with all the craziness going on. Yet my small scream scared him?

“I do that for a living.” He does that for a living? What kind of job is that? “What happened?”

“My stupid leg.” I wave it off, not wanting to talk about it.

I mean, it’s bad enough he’s going to have to see the scar.

To be honest, I hadn’t thought about him being able to see it before I had my moment of rebellion.

But Ace calling me gorgeous earlier and the concern that is now on his face has me feeling more comfortable by the second.

I can feel my cheeks burning. I’m not sure about what, him seeing me naked or falling like a klutz. I’d rather discuss his line of work, which involves blowing things up. He was proficient with that drone.

“Can I look at it?” I would normally say no to anyone but my sister, but he’s so worked up.

“If you want.” He sits down on the side of the bed facing me. I shift slightly to lean against the headboard. The action makes the shirt ride up, revealing my panties yet again. Ace’s eyes linger there for a moment before he turns his head. I see his jaw clench. I’m not sure what to make of it.

In the bathroom, it was like he didn't notice I was naked. Not going to lie. Even in my embarrassment, I'd noticed that. Of course, I didn't want him to be pervy, stealing a look or copping a feel, but I did want something.

What that was, I wasn't sure. I just know I didn't care for what I was sure was disinterest, but now his eyes are lingering. Perhaps it's because he's no longer concerned about my safety. Damn, Ace really is some avenging angel.

"I'm covered," I tell him after I pull the shirt back down.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"How about you stop saying sorry too, because you have nothing to be sorry for when it comes to me." He shakes his head, giving the impression that he doesn't believe me. Again, no clue what to do with that. Normally I'm pretty good at reading men's moods, but Ace has thrown me for a loop.

"Going to touch you now."

"You can touch me, Ace," I reassure him. I hate how I always tense up. He's going to start to think I hate his touches. When, in fact, it's the opposite. Once my body knows it's him, I actually feel safer than I ever have before.

His hand wraps around my ankle. "I'll get you some thick socks in a minute." Ace's thumb strokes my ankle before his hand starts to slide up my calf. It sends a shiver through my body. A good one that I can't even explain. "Tell me if anything hurts."

Yeah, hurt is not what I'm experiencing right now. He has no idea how intimate this is to me. Not that I want him to stop. It's just new and exciting. Men aren't supposed to touch. Not unless they are your husband. I never imagined a man's touch would be something I wanted more of.

Thoughts of Ace being my husband flit through my mind, making me gasp. His hand pauses. “Did that hurt?”

“No, it feels good.”

“How about this?” His fingers sink in deeper, and he starts to rub.

“Oh gosh.” I moan. “That feels good.” My head drops back.

“Don’t move.” Ace bolts up from the bed.

I want to grab him and pull him back, but he’s freaking quick.

He enters the bathroom, but he’s back a second later with a bottle in his hand.

“Lotion.” He sits back down. “A massage might do it some good.” I just nod because that sounds wonderful.

“Are you tender here?” His fingers trace the prickled skin where my scar is.

“No, not really. I occasionally experience a sharp pain there, but I’m uncertain if it’s real or in my head.”

“We’ll have a doctor decide that. There could be a nerve acting up.”

“A nerve?”

“You make me want to go back there and beat the shit out of all of them.”

“Over a nerve?”

“No.” He shakes his head, but a half smile tugs at one side of his mouth. “That they didn’t teach you girls the basics.” Ace starts to rub, all the while going on to tell me what he means. Things about the human body that I should know. It’s all so fascinating.

My eyes start to grow heavy as Ace works his fingers into my muscles. His words are soothing, almost like a lullaby, until sleep draws me in.

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ACE

I watch her sleep peacefully. I want to feed her, but I know that sleep is often the best medicine. I'm sure her mind is exhausted from everything she saw. Oftentimes people don't realize the mental load they are carrying until it catches up to them. Once it does, then they crash.

Her blonde hair is spread out across my pillow. Fuck me, she's really here. I thought I would never find her, but fate had other plans. I only wish I'd found her sooner. She's been living in hell. Thankfully my girl is strong. You have to be to survive what she did.

It's hard to look at her and not become enraged.

Her lip is swollen, but the cut isn't as red and irritated.

I keep rubbing her leg, knowing I should let go, but I can't bring myself to do it.

It's irrational, but I have this fear that if I let her too far from my reach, she'll up and disappear on me again.

Still, I need to be mindful not to come off as too overbearing. That might spook her, and I'm sure she's lived with enough overbearing men in her life.

I force myself to remove my hands from her soft skin. I grab the throw blanket from the end of my bed and cover her before forcing myself to get out of bed. I go to my safe room and take some of the rest of my gear off, keeping a few items on me.

I know I'm being overly cautious. If there had been someone following us, Short would have noticed. He trailed us the whole way back. Before I put the drone away, I made sure it loaded all the data it collected from Heaven's Temple onto my computer.

Make no mistake about it: Heaven's Temple is going to have to be handled one way or another.

Now that we have two of the girls out of there, we can see about calling in more higher-ups.

I just worry about some Waco shit happening.

That raid was a shitshow, but technically, it is different now.

I think an ops mission would be better. Libby cares about some of the people still there.

I could see it when she talked about them and said they weren't all bad.

Fuck, her mother probably isn't all bad, or at least she may not have been born that way.

Who knows what you'd turn into if you grew up in the shit she did?

The mind learns to adapt and survive. It would take deep deprogramming, and they would have to want it.

Yet something tells me her mother isn't going to see the light.

I think it's been too long, and she's too far gone based on my first impression of her.

I let myself get lost in research, going over everything. An alert appears, bearing my brother's name.

“The fuck?” I mutter, pulling it up as I reach for my phone at the same time. “Well, shit.” I guess there is no other option now. The higher authorities will be involved. Just as I’m about to call my brother, the twin shit must kick in because he’s calling me.

“You killed three people?” I say when I answer the phone. “I don’t think I killed even one.”

“Don’t think?”

“They might have frozen to death. Not sure, but Mother Nature will get that kill,” I half-tease. It’s often easier to make light out of heavy shit, even if some of those fuckers are better off not walking this earth. He lets out a low chuckle.

“Garrett.” I hear a soft voice in the background.

“I know, sorry, sweetheart.” Damn, it’s weird as shit to hear him talk this way. His whole tone is different. “My woman wants to know about her sister.”

“She’s asleep, but I’ll give it to you.” Garrett puts me on speakerphone, and I give them a play-by-play of what all happened. Winter lets out a few gasps here and there.

“But she’s okay?” Winter asks for reassurance.

“Yeah.” I push back from my desk, stepping out of the safe room when I think I hear movement. When I arrive in the bedroom, Libby is sitting up in bed, rubbing her eyes until they move to me and a smile forms on her lips. My chest grows tight.

I swear the emotions she provokes in me make me feel like a stranger in my own skin. I have never experienced a mix of them all at once. Especially not since my mom died. Hell, I've never experienced some of them at all before.

"Hi." Her eyes land on me. My shirt slides off one of her shoulders; her hair is a tousled mess. Libby appears to be sex personified.

"Libby!" Winter shouts through the phone.

"Winter!" Libby tries to spring up from the bed to come to the phone.

I swear I'm more aware of what is about to happen than she is.

I'm already in motion, sprinting across the room as she comes to her feet.

A small yelp leaves her right before her leg starts to give out, but I'm there before she can hit the floor this time.

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her to me.

I lift her off her feet a few inches so there is no weight on her legs.

Her hands come to my chest. "You're fast."

"And you're going to give me a heart attack."

"I just would have fallen." The bare shoulder gives a shrug. I spot a freckle on it. I have to fight the urge to kiss it.

"I don't want you to fall if I can prevent it." My hold on her tightens. Damn, she feels good pressed against me. She belongs here, and I hate that I'm going to have to let

her go here in a second.

“You can’t always be around, and I’m used to it.” I grunt my response because she isn’t ready to hear what I have to say when it comes to all that.

“Hello!” We both turn our heads toward the bed at the muffled shouts. I dropped my phone there when I was catching Libby.

“Ope!” Libby wiggles, rubbing against my dick.

I release her back onto the bed, thankful she doesn’t notice.

She grabs the phone, putting it to her ear upside down.

“Winter.” I flip it around for her. Libby erupts into a flurry of conversation.

Then she suddenly stops. “Okay, let me see.” Libby pulls the phone back. “They are calling with a camera?”

The phone starts to go off again. “Yeah, it’s called FaceTime.” I click it on for her. Winter’s face comes into view. Both girls burst into tears.

“Shit.” I stand there feeling the most useless I’ve ever felt in my life. I want to wrap myself around her. Hold her closer to reassure her everything is okay, but I don’t want to spook her.

Still, I can’t stop myself from moving closer to her.

I sit on the bed near her. Tentatively, I place my hand on her calf.

This time she doesn’t jump when I touch her, which doesn’t go unnoticed by me.

Her watery eyes meet mine, and she gives me a soft smile, so I stroke back and forth with my thumb.

Libby starts to calm down. Their conversation slows too. It's only when she begins to relax that I realize how tense I have been watching her get worked up.

“Is that him?” Libby asks. I lean forward so I can see the screen from a side angle. There is no missing Garrett hovering, not far behind Winter. I’m sure I look exactly the same on this end.

“Yes, this is Garrett. Garrett, this is my sister, Libby.” She introduces them. Libby gives him a little adorable wave. “He killed Joseph.” Winter says it so nonchalantly.

“What?!” Libby almost drops the phone. I clench my jaw when Winter gives Libby the details. I’m not a fan of her hearing them all, but it sounds as though my brother had some fun with Joseph.

“And now what?” Libby asks, chewing on her bottom lip. “Will he be in trouble?”

“No,” Garrett and I both respond in unison.

It’s not as though they can throw us in jail.

This was nothing compared to what we did for the government, and they came onto Garrett's land armed. Even without the government sending in a cleaning crew, Garrett wouldn’t have faced any charges.

It’s technically self-defense. But we all know Garrett was going to kill those fuckers one way or another.

Sure, he’ll get an ass chewing. Not that he cares. We’re supposed to try and keep a

low profile. We were ghosts even when we worked for them. You would never see our names on missions or anywhere else that was public.

When Libby's stomach lets out a small growl, I tell them maybe we should call back later. Garrett agrees, saying cleanup will be there soon. I guess the snow wasn't going to stop them either. They might prefer it.

"I love you."

"I love you, too," Libby tells her sister before they say goodbye. Those three words sound so sweet on her lips. Just like the rest of her. Hopefully it won't be long until she's saying them to me.

"Thanks for letting me talk to her." Libby tucks a piece of her hair behind her ears. I still have my hand on her ankle.

"You can talk to your sister anytime. In fact, I'll order you a phone."

"You'll get me a phone? Like one of my own?"

"Actually, I have a few extras. I'll just need to set up a line."

"Oh gosh!" she exclaims, her excitement mixed with uncertainty. "That's a lot for you to do for me."

"Babe, it's a phone. I got it. Don't worry about it."

"You make everything so easy." She leans forward and brushes her mouth against my cheek. Fuck do I want to turn my head and kiss her. "What if I make us something to eat?"

“You don’t have to.”

“Please?” She steps back, allowing me to see her pleading expression. I can't resist giving her what she wants. Those eyes of hers are unmatched by any weapon I have ever come up against before. This blue-eyed girl could take me down like no other.

I want to ask if her leg is up for it, but I don’t think she’d much like that question right now. I'll just keep an eye out. Then see about giving her another rubdown.

“The kitchen is all yours.”

“Yay!” Libby claps before moving to the side of the bed to get up. I have to release my hold on her ankle. I watch her to make sure she doesn’t almost fall, but she’s got it. “I’m going to—” She points to the bathroom. I nod. “Then I’ll start.”

When she disappears into the bathroom, I stand up, adjust my cock, and then return to the safe room to find a spare phone and establish a secure line. When I step back out, Libby is already in the kitchen.

“She looked so happy, didn’t she?” Libby asks while she rummages through my pantry.

I stocked up before the storm, but I have no clue if it’s what she needs.

I’m not the worst cook but not the best either.

I can throw a steak on the stove or whatnot.

Mom taught us the basics. But I’m not some gourmet chef.

“Yeah, they seem happy.” My brother is smitten, and I'm pretty sure he's in love.

If I weren't experiencing the same thing over here, I would think my brother had lost his mind. What's the likelihood that twin brothers fall for sisters?

Especially ones that needed saving. Also near a town my brother wanted to move to because our mom brought us here when we were younger. That word fate comes back to mind.

"I think we've got everything we need for biscuits and gravy." Libby does a cute little wiggle. Her whole mood is lighter. A bit of sleep and talking to her sister did her some good. She's more relaxed now.

"Are you sure you don't want me to cook?" I ask, unable to help myself.

This will give her an out if it hurts now that she is really up and moving around. The last thing I want her to be is in pain because she had to prepare a meal for us. I think the massage and the light stretching helped, but still, if she is in pain, I want her to sit.

"I love cooking," Libby tells me again. "You said I could use the kitchen."

"All right." I put my hands up to concede. "You're the boss." I drop down into one of the chairs at the kitchen island. I don't have a dining room area. I never thought I needed one. I assumed it would take up unnecessary space. Now I'm reconsidering many of my decisions.

All of them were based on me living a solo life. I never thought in a million years that the girl of my dreams would actually be standing in my space, wanting to cook a meal for me. I can't even express the emotions coursing through my body now that she's here.

I could get used to this. Who the fuck am I kidding? I already am.

LIBBY

Ace watches me as I move throughout his kitchen.

I enjoy the feel of his eyes on me. At the compound, I was bothered by the stares of some of the other men.

Even my own father would watch me intensely.

Not sure what he thought I was going to do, but it all irked me.

It's so different with Ace, but then again, everything is.

"You don't have to watch over me. I swear I won't fall or burn the place down.

"As much as I enjoy him watching me, I don't want him doing it out of obligation. The last thing I want him to see me as is a burden. He shouldn't feel obligated to keep me here because it's the right and good thing to do.

Unfortunately, that is probably the case. He might like me just fine, but it doesn't mean he wants me all up in his space forever. I'm sure he has a whole life of things he might need to handle.

"Maybe I enjoy it." I turn, giving him my back so that he doesn't see my giant smile or the flush to my cheeks. "Not used to having someone here, let alone cooking for me." I like that I can offer this to him. He has already done so much for me that I could never repay.

Jealousy fills me thinking about Ace having another girl here. I'm sure he has a million options. He is the hottest man I have ever seen in my life. Not to mention he's this badass.

"No courting for you?" I ask, peeking over my shoulder at him. I don't want to poke too much, but I know if I don't ask, my curiosity will kill me.

"Courting?" He chuckles. "Nah, not big on the dating thing."

"Why's that?" Ace is older than me. Men of Ace's age were married and engaged to a second wife by now at Heaven's Temple.

"Went from high school to enlisting. After Garrett and I left special operations, we pursued private work. You never know when or where that may lead."

"Hmm," I say, pondering that. "Like you could leave at any given moment?" A feeling of unease fills me.

"It's not like when I was working for the government. I can turn down work, so if I don't want to leave, I don't have to." I'm not going to lie, the thought of him leaving makes me panic a little inside. I know it's insane because he doesn't owe me anything. But that doesn't stop the dread I feel.

"Do you turn down work?" I ask, wanting to get a better handle on my expectations.

"Not really. I get bored. Gotta keep busy."

"I suppose." I check the biscuits in the oven. "We were always busy doing things on the compound. I swear, from sunup to sundown, we were working."

"Not the way life is supposed to be." I hope that's true. It could be miserable.

“I guess I’ll see that soon enough for myself.” I turn back around to face him, leaning up against the kitchen island.

“You won’t be by yourself.”

I’m not so sure about that. My sister has Garrett now. I bet they’ll get married. If anyone should find happiness, it’s Winter. She has spent her whole life taking care of me. I need to start taking care of myself.

“Special ops, like missions and stuff?” I ask to change the subject.

“Yeah.” While I finished cooking, Ace told me about some of his time working for the government and how the private sector operates. He’s starting to remind me of a super soldier. With how he’d come into Heaven’s Temple, he kind of is.

“You want some orange juice?” Ace asks when I set a plate down on the island.

“Yes, please!” Orange juice was a treat on the compound.

Ace pours me a giant cup, which I chug half down.

“Wait,” I say when he starts to refill it.

He doesn’t stop, though. He fills it back up to the top and places the jug on the island.

“That’s a lot of orange juice. It’s expensive.

” We never took seconds at the compound.

It most likely would have led to punishment.

“I promise it’s fine, sweetheart. Now sit.” He pulls out one of the chairs for me.

“I guess I really don’t know the price of things.

” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

"I'll need to find a job and then possibly find somewhere to live." My mind starts racing with things. “What qualifications do you need to have a job? I’m good at cooking and cleaning. I’m not bad in the garden, but I’m terrible at sewing. I mean, I can do it; I’m just not quick enough. You should see Winter. She’s like a machine.”

“Babe,” Ace cuts in. “Let’s slow down.”

“Could I work in your bar?”

“No.” He says this without even thinking about it.

“Right, sorry. It was a stupid question.” I mean I have absolutely zero clue what to do in a bar.

I’ve never even been in one before. I take a deep breath, trying to get the burst of anxiety I’m experiencing under control.

I really had not thought this far ahead when Winter and I were making our escape plan from Heaven’s Temple.

“Shit,” he mutters. “That’s not what I meant.”

"No, it's fine." I wave my hand. “I get it. I don’t know anything about bars. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“You can ask me anything, Libby.” He tries to reassure me, but my pride took a hit.

“I’m going to move your chair.” Ace doesn’t wait for me to respond.

He turns sideways to fully face me before hooking his foot in the bottom of it to pull me right between his legs.

He’s so close his woodsy scent surrounds me.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m making things more clear. I’ll give you a job if you want one, but I think right now you just need to relax.

” He slowly moves his hand to let me know he’s about to touch me.

Ace’s hand comes to my bare thigh, his thumb drifting back and forth in a soothing motion.

“Want you to start by getting used to people.

A bar can be loud and filled with different types of people.

Let's take a breath and let life settle in for a bit.”

“Okay,” I agree, loving his hand on me. His simple touch always calms me so much. Ace grounds me even in a way Winter couldn’t.

“Now eat,” he orders.

Ace picks up his fork, digging into the biscuits and gravy. He leaves his hand on my thigh. His thumb strokes me the whole time.

I don't care about adjusting to other people. I simply want to learn everything I can about him. I hope the snow keeps on falling so I can stay right here forever.

ACE

I suppress a groan, determined not to awaken the sleeping beauty.

Once again, I woke up to Libby plastered to me.

Not that I'm complaining. I don't want her to wake up. I enjoy my time just feeling her body pressed against mine. I can watch her openly. I didn't know sweet torture was a thing, but here I am.

I have been experiencing it for the last week.

The first night here, Libby and I watched a movie in bed.

It's something we've done a lot over the last week.

She's enjoying it immensely. I love watching all of her different reactions.

It's actually teaching her a lot about how people interact with each other.

And they say television will rot your brain.

We'd both dozed in and out at times. When night finally came and it was clear she couldn't stay awake any longer, I said I'd take the couch.

Libby protested, saying she was smaller.

I told her my mother, rest her soul, would have my hide if I allowed her to sleep on the couch.

So Libby suggested we share the bed. That it was big enough.

It is a king. Not that it matters. She always found her way over to me in her sleep.

She was embarrassed the first few times she woke up pressed against me.

I shrugged it off and downplayed it. I told her I didn't mind her cuddles at all.

Not a lie. It's all part of my plan to get her used to my touch. I want to get Libby comfortable with me so she never wants to leave. Each day I get more of that, but I'm worried it's about to come to an end.

The blizzard had subsided for a day, but another one quickly followed. Now that one is dying down. I know the town is already starting to plow the roads and get things back on track. That means Winter is going to be coming here soon.

I know the sisters are excited to see each other, but I have a feeling Winter is going to want to take Libby back home with her. I have noticed with their conversations and stories that Libby tells me that Winter might be her sister, but she takes on a mama bear role with her too.

"Ace," Libby mutters in her sleep, burying her face in my neck.

I close my eyes, ignoring my dick. I want to soak this in. She always smells so damn good. That sweetness she has covers her inside and out.

How the fuck am I going to handle her leaving?

I can't demand she stay. As much as I would want to, I know that's not right for her.

Libby has been told what to do her whole life.

I don't want her to think I'm like those men at Heaven's Temple.

It would kill me if she thought of me in that light.

Plus, I think we're making progress on her leg.

With the stretches and rubdowns I've been giving her, it's becoming less noticeable.

She also mentioned that the pain is not as intense as it used to be.

There is no way Winter can rub her deep tissue if her hands are as tiny as Libby's. There's absolutely no way I would even consider allowing my brother to do it. I'd break all his fingers, which would upset Winter, and that would upset Libby.

Libby's body gives a small shake, a giggle bubbling out from her. "Why are you growling?"

"I wasn't." Was I? I do a lot of things I've never done before since she came into my life.

Her being in this bed sleeping next to me is on top of that list. So I wouldn't be surprised if I had been.

I do have barbaric thoughts when it comes to her.

I have thought many of them to be animalistic.

Yeah, I'm going fucking crazy, but I don't care.

"You were." I can hear the smile in her voice. "Why?" Libby asks again.

"You get enough sleep?"

"Hey." She slides over me, sitting up and straddling me.

Her hands come down on my chest. I don't think she has a fucking clue how sexual this position is, but she is up high enough on my stomach that her ass doesn't rub against my dick.

"Don't do the thing where you ask a question to not answer mine.

" Her bottom lip puffs out. I want to sit up and suck on it.

I bring my hands to the top of her thighs, resting them there. Again, no reaction from her.

"I do that?" I give her a playful smirk. Yeah, I do. I don't want to lie to her, and there are some things I don't think she is ready to hear.

Like how I want to bury my cock inside of her and bond her to me for life.

How I want to see her belly round with our child.

And many, many other thoughts that I need to keep to myself.

"Come on." She rocks on top of me. This girl has the potential to ruin me. Hell, I already am. All I'll ever want is her. The need for her only intensifies with each passing day. I slide my hands up her soft thighs farther. "You can tell me things. I tell

you lots of things.”

That she does. I notice my girl has two modes. Either really quiet or talking nonstop. I enjoy them both. I could listen to her talk all day, but I also like that we can fall into a comfortable silence together.

“I’m not sure you’re ready for that.” When I let my fingers brush the inside of her thighs, Libby sucks in a deep breath.

“Sure I am.” Her tongue comes out, wetting her bottom lip. “I’m considered an adult, right?” If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was trying to kill me. She’s pushing my self-control to its boundaries. The crazy part is, she doesn’t even know it.

“Yes,” I grunt. Her skin is velvety under my touch. As soft as rose petals.

“So then, tell me.” Her eyes drift downwards. I want them back on me. “I don’t like not knowing stuff.” Well, shit.

“I’m a man, Libby.”

“Trust me.” A small laugh leaves her pouty lips. I had never paid attention to a woman’s mouth before. Hers I’ve memorized. I have used those memories trying to burn the lust I have for her off in the shower so that I don’t cross a line Libby isn’t ready for yet. “I am aware you are very mannish.”

“Mannish?”

“More than I have ever seen before.” Her fingers dance across my bare chest. “I mean, like, your size, not just ah?—”

“Nakedness,” I fill in for her. Libby nods her head. “Even that made you blush, babe.

That's why I don't think you are ready to know why I'm not telling you certain things."

"Oh." Her mouth forms a perfect O shape. Again, those damn lips. So many dirty thoughts flash through my mind. "But I want to know about those things too." Her ass shifts, a small wiggle.

Fuck me. Is my girl getting turned on? I'd noticed her doing that same shift when we watched a movie and an intimate scene would come on. It could be something as simple as a kiss and she would get fidgety. I bet if I reached my hands between her thighs she'd be wet for me. Fuck.

"Libby." I slide my hands back to the outside of her thighs and up under my shirt that she has on. She doesn't stop me as I grip her hips. "Need you to be real careful right now." Whatever is left of my self-control is waning. I won't be able to hold out much longer if she continues down this path.

"Because you're a man?" Her tone carries a hint of challenge. I only grunt a response. "Like I said"—her fingers trail down my chest and down between her own thighs—"I know."

"Libby." My hold on her hips tightens. My fingers grip the soft, delicate skin, which I have no right to touch, but I do.

"Would you kiss me?" She lifts her head. "Like we saw in the movie last night?" Fuck. I love this confident, rebellious, take what she wants side to her.

"I can't kiss you that way, Libby."

"Oh." Her shoulders drop. I sit up. I have to move her hips backwards as I do. Her pussy lands directly on top of my cock. Her eyes widen at my sudden shift.

"That kiss you saw last night was barely a kiss. I'll want more." I don't think I could stop at a simple peck. I'm too greedy, and my control is a splinter's edge.

"Really?" Libby resets her hands on my shoulders.

"Would you do the thing where they slip their tongues into the other's mouth?" She begins to wiggle her tiny ass once more. I grip her ass, stilling her movement.

"Cause I think I'd really like that.

"When her eyes drop to my mouth and she licks her lips again, I'm done for.

Nothing could stop me from kissing her now. I just pray that I can stop at only giving her my tongue.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:14 am

LIBBY

Ace's eyes are so intense. I'm not sure what he is going to do. As my shyness begins to take over, I attempt to lean back, but Ace quickly pounces on me. He was like an animal waiting for its prey to move, and he pounced the second he thought I might be trying to get away.

His mouth comes down and he presses his lips against mine.

I let my eyes fall closed as he starts to move his mouth over mine.

I have spent days dreaming of kissing him, and it's finally here.

His hands deepen their hold on me further, making sure that I can't go anywhere.

I don't want to. In fact, I moan at the possessive hold he has on me.

It's not something I was expecting to find pleasure in.

It should scare me. I have been caged my whole life, but even with how close Ace keeps me, I'm still free. He gives me that. Ace is my protector, who only wants to keep me safe.

His tongue slides across the seam of my mouth, and I part my lips for him. It slips inside, stroking against mine. A spark lights deep inside of me, and I tentatively kiss him back, trying to match him. When he lets out a low groan into my mouth, it has me pressing my mouth firmly to his.

My fingers trail down his shoulders, exploring him. This is the first time I've ever touched a man in this manner. His body is so big and hard. "Ace," I whisper against his lips, desperate for something more.

"Fuck, say my name again," he orders but claims my mouth again. "Say it." His mouth kisses along my jaw, causing goosebumps to break out along my skin.

"Ace," I moan, my head dropping back. "I need to..." I trail off, all sense escaping me as the way he's making my body feel overwhelms me.

"What do you need, sweetness?" I try to shift, but I can't. "You need to move?"

"Please." The second he says it, I know he's right. I do need to move. Not away from him either. No, the sensation of him being pressed against me is incredibly satisfying. I'd get closer if I could.

"Do you know why you need to move?" he asks before latching on to my neck and sucking. I moan out his name, my back arching. "Do you?" I shake my head; it's too hard to form words now. "Your body does." He's right. I have no idea what I'm doing, but my body seems to understand. "I'll show you."

"Yes." My head drops forward, our eyes meeting. His are darker than I ever remember them being before.

It reminds me again of a predator. Ace is very much a different kind of man. Over the last week, I have gained a deeper understanding of him. He is like this in many aspects of his life. It's always there, lingering under the surface.

He moves me, rocking my hips back and then pulling me forward again. I let out a gasp when I realize what is happening. His hardness presses into my sex, hitting the small button between my thighs.

“That feel good, baby?”

“Yes.” I grip his shoulders tighter.

“You like rubbing your pussy on my cock?”

“Oh God.” I moan at his filthy words. It only makes this all so much hotter. Never in my life could I have imagined that the sexiest man on earth would be talking to me this way and making me feel pleasure I never knew existed.

“Have you ever come? Ever put your little fingers between your legs and played with your clit?” I shake my head no. “Fuck.” Ace leans in and claims my mouth in another kiss.

It’s sweet, and I love it, but I need more. An ache is forming inside me. I don’t think I can reach it on my own, but I know Ace is the key. He knows how to unlock me in ways I don’t understand. And I’m here for it. I want him to be the one that I discover myself with.

“I’ve got you,” he tells me, releasing my mouth. “Got you,” he repeats. Who knows—those words could mean so much. Even more so because I know they are true. Ace turns his head so his lips graze my neck. My breasts feel heavy now.

“It’s, oh—” He gently rocks my hips back and forth. Each stroke hits my clit.

“I know,” Ace groans out now, sounding pained. Does he have this ache too? “I’m going to make you come for me. I need you with me.”

“I’m with you,” I cry out as the pressure suddenly releases. Stars burst into my eyes as a sweet sensation radiates through my whole body. I soar to heights I couldn’t have dreamed up.

“Libby,” Ace moans out. His body jerks against mine. His arms wrap me around my waist, pinning me to him. I let my body melt into his, getting lost completely in him. My eyes are falling closed.

We both struggle with our breathing until we find a common rhythm. Ace’s hold relaxes, and I tighten my own hold on him, not wanting this to be over. I have my face buried in his neck. It’s where I often wake to it being. My body is always seeking him out, even in my sleep.

“Not going anywhere,” he reassures me. His fingers drift up and down my back, stroking me gently. This man loves having his hands on me, and I’m not complaining in the least.

He takes me with him as he lies back down on the bed. I kiss his neck. His cock jerks between us and presses against my clit, making me gasp. It’s so sensitive now.

“You gotta stop wiggling,” he rumbles. “Still on edge.”

“On edge?” I’m not sure what he means.

“Don’t worry about it.” He keeps stroking my back.

“Ace.” I brush my mouth against his neck.

“Truth for you, Libby?”

“Please.”

“I’m two seconds away from flipping you over, ripping my clothes from your body, and taking that cherry you got between your thighs for myself.”

" His words stun me. "And I already fucking came, and I still need it. Want to take it." I gasp at how he says the last part. His words are harsh and angry. "Fuck, I'm sorry."

Ace turns, pressing me against the bed. I think he might be about to kiss me, but he pulls back. My hold on him breaks. I'm no match for him. I watch in stunned silence again as he walks to the bathroom, closing the door without a glance backward, the click of the lock echoing in my ears.

I stare at the closed door. What did I do wrong? He's never used that tone with me. Then he apologized. I touch my lips, still feeling him there. I pray that feeling never fades... but it already is.

ACE

I stare at myself in the mirror, hating that I'd taken it too far with Libby. My hold on the sink tightens, making it groan. "Shit." I step back and pace inside the bathroom. It does nothing for my dick that is still hard as a fucking rock. When did I lose all self-control?

I'd come right along with her. The hardest I ever have in my whole damn life, but my dick is still demanding more. Hell, my whole body is. I roll my shoulders, trying to get myself in check. What I need is a long run or a few hours in the gym.

A mission. Something to keep me occupied.

I shake that thought from my head. I'm not going fucking anywhere. But missions are how I always burn off steam. I can forget about the rest of the world and focus on it. That's how my brother and I have always been different.

The silence suits him. I have never been comfortable with it, especially since my mom passed away. I was always the one to make everyone laugh. I was easy with a smile, but that shit could be wearing. Except with Libby. I enjoy those compatible silences with her.

I flip on the shower to clean myself up.

I'm not surprised I came all over myself.

Not with how easily Libby can work me up.

I don't know how she does it. There's this mix of sweet naivety that comes from her and the curiosity in her gaze that gets me going.

I want to be the one to show her all the pleasure that could be had.

Watch her light up as she experiences it all.

When I step out of the shower, I realize I don't have any clean clothes with me.

I dry off before wrapping the towel around my waist. I take a deep breath, trying to get my shit together.

That's what Libby needs. Not someone to paw all over her while she's trying to heal. I can't lose control again.

When I step out, I don't see Libby anywhere. My heart sinks, but I know she couldn't have gone anywhere. Not without me knowing. My alarms would have triggered. This place is on lockdown.

I tilt my head and listen. It's light, but I follow the sound of her voice into my closet. When I step inside, I see her sitting on the floor, her knees pulled to her chest with the phone in front of her blocking her face from my view. I hear a sniffle. A fist wraps around my heart at the sound.

"Libby?" I step closer so that I can see her.

My blood turns to ice when I see the tears in her eyes.

"I'm talking to my sister. Do you mind?" There is a snippiness in her voice that she has never had before with me. I did that. I made her feel upset.

I want to tell her that I do mind, but I only nod, grabbing some clothes and leaving her be.

Even if it kills me to do so. Now is not the time to push her.

Even though that's exactly what I want to do.

I want to lift her up and cradle her in my arms until she's smiling, laughing, and looking at me as though I'm the best person she's ever laid eyes on.

The fuck is wrong with me? I took it too far.

Now I've screwed it all up. Here everyone is always saying I'm smooth.

Yeah, not when it counts, I'm not. I have no clue what the hell I'm doing.

Not sure what to do, I go into the safe room, seeing a few alerts on my system.

This is what I can do. What I should be doing.

I need to get more shit together so that I can finish taking down Heaven's Temple.

That is what Libby needs. Then she can leave that all behind.

She and Winter can be free of that worry for the rest of their lives.

I dig into the information I've been sent.

I reached out to a few outsiders from my mercenary work.

One of them, Zero, sent me over a treasure trove to go through.

He got into their systems and started tagging and linking lines.

Even to people who weren't living inside their caged fort at Heaven's Temple.

They have people on the outside—as my brother and I both figured.

None of the names, however, raise red flags as people in any sort of power. Which works in our favor.

“These assholes.” These Heaven's Temple assholes won't let their followers—no, scratch that— victims near technology while they are using the fuck out of it. I guess they think we can't get to it because they keep off the grid as much as possible.

Nah, that's not how shit works anymore. They too are na?ve in their own right.

When I catch sight of the time, I curse myself.

How the hell did four hours pass? I glance behind me.

Libby never came to check in. She always pops her head in when I am in here.

It doesn't matter if it had only been twenty minutes; she always checks in, asking if I need anything.

A heaviness fills me thinking about when she leaves.

That there will be no more check-ins from her.

I have really fucked this up. I run my hand down my face, not sure how to fix this, but I have to talk to her. I flip on the cameras outside to see what is going on. Several streets have already been plowed. I really am running out of time. I close everything

up before going in search of my Libby.

She's not difficult to find. She's spread out on the bed, exactly where she belongs. From the sounds coming from her phone, it sounds like TikTok. Some of the jokes she doesn't often get, and I have to explain them to her, but it gives her a peek at how the rest of the world lives. Libby is getting a crash course.

"Babe." I sit down on the side of the bed. She drops the phone, rolling to her side to face me.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, catching me off guard.

"You're sorry?" The hell is she apologizing for? I detest her belief that she must always apologize. It's been ingrained in her.

"I pushed and made you do something you regret." I bark a laugh that has no humor because that statement is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.

"Libby, you gotta be kidding me." I stand back up.

"What?" She too moves, sitting up.

"I should be the one to apologize. I took it too far. You aren't ready." I run my fingers through my hair, giving it a small tug. Keep it together, Ace .

"I asked for it, though." Her little nose scrunches. Even when she does that, it turns me on. I want to lean down and kiss the tip of it like some sap and not a trained killer.

"Yeah, because I worked you up and got you needy for it. I knew what I was doing when I sat you on my dick."

Pink blooms in her cheeks. It's the same flush but a few shades lighter than when she comes. I'll never forget the sounds or her expression as she came undone for me. It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Why were those dumbasses over at Heaven's Temple worshiping false prophets when Libby was right there? I'd worship the fuck out of her all day, every day.

"I still liked it." She shrugs one of her delicate shoulders, causing my shirt to slip off the side. It's then I spot the mark on her.

I did that. "I marked you. Shit, I'm sorry." It's a fucking lie. I'm not sorry. I should be. I'm a bastard for not being, but that doesn't change the truth.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:14 am

LIBBY

Ace can be hard to read at times. Right now, for example. I'm not sure if he's horrified or proud of whatever he is talking about. It's not that out there for me to not get it. I'm learning a lot of new things. Especially when it comes to men.

"Marked? What does that mean?" It must be slang. I'm noticing that many words lose their intended meaning when used in different contexts, but this fancy phone is helping me catch up. The world is a whole lot bigger and different than I ever understood. It's scary and exciting all at once.

There are times, like this one, when I'm utterly confused. That can be frustrating, especially when it comes to Ace.

"I put a hickey on you." He fixes his gaze on my neck. Ace runs his tongue along his teeth.

"What's a hickey?"

"Fuck me." He drops his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"Sorry, I don't know." I drop back down onto my butt. This isn't how I thought this conversation would go. I actually didn't know how it would go at all.

"I'm pissed at myself, not you, Libby." His head falls back forward. "Never you."

"You could have fooled me."

My heart broke a little when he ran off to the bathroom. I'd had one of, if not, the best moments of my life, and he had to get away from me as quickly as possible. I freaked out and called my sister.

I didn't tell her what happened. Only said I was teared up because I missed her. I wanted to see her face. I thought it would help, but then I felt bad because I didn't want to talk to her about what happened with Ace. Because honestly, I didn't know what happened.

"Can I touch you, Libby? I really need to fucking touch you for a second."

"Yes," I say without hesitation. I want him to touch me forever. Not for only a second. Ace slips back onto the bed, pulling me into his arms.

"I'm trying to be good with you. There is so much for you to learn."

"You're the best with me." I try to make him understand that.

"You won't say that when you see your neck."

"What?" I touch my neck, not sure what he's talking about.

"Here." He snags my phone on the bed, turning the camera on, he flips it so it shows the two of us. Without thinking, I reach up and press the button that will snap the picture. "Trying to show you the mark, babe."

"Oh." I see the small purple thing. I lean forward to get a better look. It doesn't hurt. "Is that a hickey?"

"Yeah."

"Your mouth did that?" I laugh.

"Yeah," he says again.

It's kinda silly, but it makes the tingling sensation come to life inside of me. I run my finger along it. I'm not sure he'd be okay with me saying I like it. He's upset that he left it there.

"Is it a terrible thing?" I peek up at him.

"Depends."

"Could I give you one?"

"Fuck me." He groans under his breath. "You're not helping me keep it under control."

"Ace openly adjusts his cock in his sweatpants."

My eyes linger there. I'd felt that between my thighs, and I really wanted to see it, but I don't want him to freak out again and run to the bathroom.

This is when I could really use my sister to pepper with questions, but that would only get some shot my way.

"Is it always hard like that?"

"You have that effect on it." Ace picks me up and places me back on his lap, leaving me straddling him.

"Is this okay?"

“That’s on you, Libby.”

“You’re confusing.”

“Trust me, babe. I’m fighting with myself here.”

“Why?”

"It would be devastating for me if you ever felt regret for anything we did."

“I would never.”

“You don’t know that yet.” I’m sure he believes that. I don’t.

“So now what?”

“Like I said.” He gently rests one of his hands on my shoulder. He rubs the marked spot with his thumb. “That’s up to you.” I lick my lips.

“Are you saying that I could?” My eyes drop to his neck.

He reaches behind him with his other hand, grabbing the back of the collar, and pulls the shirt off, tossing it away.

God, I love when he doesn’t wear a shirt.

He probably thinks I’m a weirdo because I’m always rubbing my hands all over his chest. But I can’t stop myself.

I love the feel of his skin on my fingertips.

“Libby, you can do anything you want to me. I’d never tell you no.”

I lean in and brush his neck with my mouth. Ace digs his fingers into my hair as I gently kiss his neck. “What do I do? Suck?”

“Yeah.” The one word is gruff. I swirl my tongue around before I latch on to him. “Libby,” he groans. His cock jerks against my ass. I keep going, knowing he’s enjoying it. I suck harder, and once again I start to rock my hips, my body wanting the pleasure it knows he can provide.

This time, Ace allows me to take charge. I open my legs wider to find that perfect spot on his cock. “That’s it, baby, take what you need.” I do.

I let any doubts, shyness, or insecurity I have melt away. It’s only Ace and me right now. I rub against him, finding the pleasure I need until I come again. Ace groans my name too as I collapse onto his bare chest.

“Are you going to run to the bathroom again?” I tease after a long moment.

“Maybe.”

“Really?” I sit up so I can see him.

“Kinda want to see the damage.”

“Damage?”

“The mark, babe.”

“Oh.” I sink my teeth into my bottom lip.

I gave him a way bigger one than he did me.

Actually, there are a couple. I guess I moved my mouth around a lot.

I have an immediate understanding as to how Ace felt when he left his mark on me.

Because I feel it too, looking at mine on him.

He's mine. I just hope he doesn't think I got carried away.

"Don't make that face." Ace says.

He grabs the phone, flipping the camera on. He points it at us. A smirk pulls at his lips. He turns his head and kisses me as I hear him snap a picture.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:14 am

ACE

It kills me to do it, but I slowly work my way out of Libby's hold.

After I'd gotten her to come again for me, we ate, watched a movie, and she crashed on me again.

My watch has alerted me several times that I need to check some messages.

I'd rather do it while Libby is sleeping so I don't have to worry about it while she's awake.

Then I can have all my attention on her.

I place a kiss on her head before I go back into the safe room.

I mutter a curse when I see Joe's Jeep out back and the alerts on my phone.

Joe has a key to get into the bar, but I'd engaged the more secure locks.

I never had to use them before, but I wasn't taking any chance with Libby's safety.

I turn them off and send a text back indicating that it's safe for her to enter.

This only makes it that much clearer that time really is up. I click through a few of my feeds and see people outside moving about the small town. The hell am I going to do? I worry that if I ask Libby to stay, she might do it out of obligation. I know how

badly she misses her sister.

Swiping out of the feeds, I check my secure messages to see if there are any new updates on Heaven's Temple.

What they didn't do was alert the police to anything that had happened.

I'm sure they are freaking out that one of their prophets is missing.

Unfortunately, that's what he'll be forever unless he somehow resurrects himself from the dead.

I doubt it, considering if there is a hell, that asshole went straight to it.

The cleanup crew made sure he'd never return.

I'm sure Joseph and whoever he had with him that went after Winter onto my brother's land are mere ash by now.

That doesn't mean that others might not try to come for Libby.

I'd seen the look in Libby's father's eyes.

It made my throat burn and my stomach turn.

I wouldn't be shocked if he was pleased about what he'd done to his own daughter's leg. It gave him a reason to keep her locked down under his roof. I won't rest until I know the man is dead or in a cage.

Whoever manages to capture him first will determine the outcome, as I know exactly what I'll do if it's me.

An alert is activated on the staircase leading up to my place from the bar. I see Joe coming up the stairs for some reason. I notice that there are a few more texts, each asking if I'm okay. Before I have a chance to respond, she knocks on my door.

“Shit.” I rush out, not wanting to wake Libby. I open the door right before Joe can knock again.

“You okay?” Joe inquires when I open the door.

“Yeah, just handling stuff.”

“Oh, did you go away or have you been here the whole time? I haven't been able to reach you for shit.”

“I've been here.” Joe calls it going away whenever I dip out for a mission.

I don't share details with anyone except my brother. The people that work for me have no clue what I'm up to, but it's not anyone's business.

I like Joe, but she is still an employee.

She holds down the bar better than I can.

I tense when I hear soft footsteps behind me. “Ace?” Libby calls out to me. Joe's brows lift in surprise. I'm sure this is the last thing she expected.

“You got a girl in there?” I can tell Joe wants to push inside, but I don't let anyone up here.

“I'm just talking to Joe. She manages the bar downstairs,” I tell Libby. Her hair is disheveled, and my shirt slips down her shoulder. My mark is clear as day on her. She

appears thoroughly ravished right now.

“Can I meet this girl?” Joe asks. I glare at her.

She holds her hands up but laughs. Libby approaches, and I realize there's no way I can avoid introducing them. I step back to make room for Libby. I want to grab her and pull her back to me, but I'm doing my best to control myself.

This really is like a first test for me.

This is the first time that the outside world is intruding into our world.

"Libby, this is Joe. Joe, this is Libby." Joe hops on her heels, extending her hand toward Libby.

“Hi,” Libby says shyly, taking it.

“Hey.” Joe winks at her. “Sorry, I didn’t know Ace had someone up here or I would have stayed downstairs.” Joe glances over her shoulder at me. “But there is an issue downstairs with one of the coolers that is beyond my expertise.”

“All right,” I grunt, annoyed. “I’ll be down in a minute.” This is exactly why I wanted it to keep snowing. I’m not ready to get back to reality. I want to stay with Libby in this little bubble we’ve created.

“Nice meeting you.” Joe adds before heading back down the stairs. I shut and lock the door behind her.

“You don’t have a shirt on,” Libby points out, taking a step back. She’s wringing her fingers together in front of herself.

Damn, is being around people going to be hard for her? The noise from the bar can get loud at times. I want to avoid overpowering her with the commotion. I'm kicking myself again for having never gotten a real place of my own before, but this has always been convenient.

"I'll get dressed before I head down." My eyes roam over Libby. The shirt almost reaches her knees, but still, I don't want anyone to see her like this. At least Joe got the message Libby is mine. At least it would appear that way.

People tease that I'm a smooth talker, but Joe is the one who garners the most attention from the ladies. She is a heartbreaker, and I don't want her getting any ideas with my Libby.

"You're leaving?"

"Only to check on whatever is going on with the cooler. It shouldn't take me long.

"I pull Libby to me. "I'm not leaving." I wonder if she is worried about being alone.

"I'll only be downstairs." She nods against my chest. I kiss the top of her head.

"I bet some of the clothes I ordered for you will come today."

If I had to guess, I'd say the post office is loaded up with packages that need to be delivered. "Okay." Libby steps back again.

"Babe, everything is going to be okay."

"I know." She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear.

"Is there anything you want to ask me?" I want to put her at ease any way I can.

“No, it’s fine. You should probably check on the cooler.”

I’m about to say fuck the cooler when Libby’s phone goes off. She scurries back over to the bed, answering. I dip into my closet to pull on some jeans and a shirt.

When I step back out, Libby is talking to her sister. She glances in my direction and smiles at me. I’ll be right back, I mouth to her, knowing that she and her sister can talk for over an hour on the phone. She nods.

I enter the safe room, grab my own phone, then retrieve a handgun and holster it under my shirt. Heaven’s Temple roads are clear, and I’m not sure what might head this way. Either way, I will be prepared. No one will ever hurt Libby again.

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LIBBY

My emotions are all over the place. I'd fallen asleep in Ace's arms. I felt warm and protected.

Now everything is changing. I know it's partly my fault.

When I called my sister this morning with tears in my eyes, telling her that I missed her, it put her in gear.

She'd called to tell me that she and Garrett were on their way here.

Ace is downstairs, so I'm unable to tell him. I wonder whether I should head downstairs to find him. Why hadn't I thought to add his number to my phone? Probably because he is always next to me. That is about to change now that the storm has passed.

Then he'll be here with pretty Joe while I'm off to the woods with my sister to her love-cabin.

That is going to be hard to be around because my sister is madly in love.

There is no way it is not going to pour off her.

Heck, half the time Winter calls, she is sitting in Garrett's lap or he is very close by.

They're adorable, and I love that for her, but I want it too.

Not with anyone but Ace, but I have no clue what we are to each other.

He has been introducing me to the outside world, and I am uncertain if our touching and kissing are simply a component of that.

Sex and relationships are drastically different here.

We couldn't even hold hands with a boy where I'm from.

This for Ace could be casual, and I don't think I can ask him either. It would put him on the spot.

I pace back and forth, craving to see Ace.

I grab another pair of his boxer briefs and roll them up along with a new shirt to put on and my shoes.

I want us to have a moment to ourselves before my sister shows up here, but that might not be possible.

He's with Joe. That thought makes my stomach turn.

I can't help but be bothered by that. Joe was nice. I can't forget how beautiful either.

She was freaking tall, too. I bet she was six inches taller than me.

Not as tall as Ace, but still. Her long, dark hair cascaded down her back, accentuating her curves.

I look down at my own body, engulfed by Ace's shirt. I've never once thought of myself in that way.

I huff, annoyed at myself. Joe is all woman, where I'm all girl.

Not to mention my limp. My father consistently stated that no one was interested in marrying me because of it.

Ace said that's bullshit, but he's always sweet, trying to build me up.

He's a good man. One that I might have taken advantage of even if he tries to deny it.

I open the door but pause at the top of the stairs. When I hear Ace's voice, I start to go down, but when I reach the bottom, the week before comes flooding back. The first and only time I actually came through this back door. The day my whole world changed. I take a deep breath to calm myself.

My eyes linger on the hallway Ace pointed out that night, saying the bar was that way.

I listen again but don't hear anything. Then a feminine laugh filters down the hallway.

I fight the urge not to turn and flee back up the stairs because I know that laughter has to be over something Ace had said to Joe.

Have they even had casual sex before? Did he kiss and leave hickeys on her skin too?

I follow the sounds of Joe's voice. I can't make out what she is saying, but I don't hear Ace respond. I stop in front of a metal door that is open wide. I lean forward to peek in.

Ace is down on his knees working on something while Joe is standing over him with a flashlight in her hands. My eyes meet those of another man. He's in jeans and a flannel shirt. He appears to be significantly older than Ace.

He quickly removes his white cowboy hat. “What do we have here?” he asks. Both Ace and Joe turn their heads my way. Ace's eyes narrow as they scan up and down my body. He abruptly stands and shoves a silver-looking tool into the other man's chest.

“Finish it,” Ace orders before he’s stalking toward me. I take a few steps back and stop when my back meets the wall. “What are you doing?”

“Are you mad or something?” I can feel the tension rolling off of him. But I’m unsure of the reasoning behind it. Is he upset that I interrupted his time with Joe?

“I thought we didn’t ask questions to not answer other questions?”

“My sister is on her way.” Ace clenches his jaw; I see a tic. “Why are you so mad?”

“I’m just trying to fix the air pump so everything doesn’t go to shit.” I don't believe that's the reason he's upset. I tilt my head to the side, staring up into his handsome face. “Don’t want you roaming around down here.” His hands come down on both sides of me, caging me in.

“Why?” Is he embarrassed of me? He hadn’t seemed like he wanted to introduce me to Joe either, but there wasn’t much of a choice. Now this man with the cowboy hat.

“Babe—”

“Libby!” my sister shouts.

“Winter!” I push on Ace’s chest to see my sister stepping through the back door. I bolt toward her. She meets me halfway, wrapping me in a giant hug. It’s all too much. I burst into tears. Winter does too.

I knew we were both out, but finally getting to see her in person makes it all that much more real. “We did it.” Winter presses her forehead to mine.

“You did it.” It was thanks to her that we managed to escape. Winter had the courage to leave that night for the both of us.

“We. Without you, I don’t think I could have pushed myself to do it.” I hug her again. “Now you gotta meet my Garrett.” Winter snuffles, stepping back. I have met him, but not in person. He and Ace are built the same, but Garrett has a much more stoic expression. It’s intimidating.

Winter runs her hand up Garrett’s chest. She is clearly not intimidated by him in the least. “This is my sister.” Winter beams.

“Nice to see you in person, Libby.”

“Nice to meet you too.” I give him the best smile I can muster up right now. I’m not sure how I feel, but I am grateful. “Thank you for everything.”

“And thank you,” Winter says loudly. I turn to see Ace standing right behind me.

“No thanks needed.”

“You got my sister back for me. That means everything to me.” Winter takes my hand. “I brought you some clothes.”

“I have some that should be delivered today,” Ace cuts in.

“I’m sure you’ll need more, but these I have now.” Garrett hands her a bag. “There somewhere you can change? I’m sure you want out of your shirt dress.” Not really, but I can’t say that. Can I?

“Do I get jeans too?” I’d been so excited to see her I hadn’t noticed what she was wearing until now.

“I got you jeans,” Ace cuts in again.

“Thank you, Ace,” I say, but now he too has a stoic expression.

“We need to talk,” Garrett tells Ace. “The girls can use your place to get changed, right?”

“Yes,” Ace acknowledges, but it doesn’t seem as though he truly agrees.

“Come on.” Winter tugs on my hand. “It’s up here, right?”

” She keeps on pulling me toward the stairs.

I have no choice but to follow her. “I thought he was the more upbeat twin,” Winter asks when we make it back up to our place.

Crap, Ace’s place. It’s not mine. I need to keep reminding myself of that before I become too attached. Even though I believe it’s a bit too late for the latter part.

“I don’t know. He’s been acting kind of different today,” I admit. Maybe Winter can help me figure out what the heck is going on with Ace. Not that she has any more experience with men than I do, but she is dating and living with his twin brother. She has to have some sort of insight.

“Something happened?” Winter puts the bag down on the kitchen island and starts pulling out clothes.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “He’s just grumpy, I guess.” Winter tilts her head to the side.

“Garrett says Ace is pretty laid back. Always giving him a hard time and has to be doing something.”

“He can be laid back.” I only know Ace with the two of us. This is the first time we’ve been around others. What if I don’t really know him at all? I push that thought away. I won’t accept that. I have been with him day and night for the past seven days.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me? You seem off.”

“It’s just a lot.” That is the truth.

"Yes, it is, but in a good way." She wraps me in another tight hug. “I still can’t believe this. That we made it out of there and are free to live our lives the way we want.”

“I know.” Tears burn in my eyes. Every night, I have been worried that when I went to bed, I would wake up back on the compound, not next to Ace. Sadly, part of that is going to come true, I think. I can't stay with Ace forever. Can I? He hasn't asked me to.

“But it’s not over.” Winter lets out a long breath at my reminder.

“There are others back there.” I nod.

"Garrett assured me that everything will work out, and he hasn't been wrong yet. He always lives up to his word."

“They are really badasses, aren't they?”

“Badass?” Winter laughs.

“What? I can curse now.”

"Yes, you can. It's pretty fucking awesome. Isn't it?"

“Ahh!” I laugh with her, loving how carefree we get to be now.

“Go change. Then we can head home.”

My laughter dies. “Home?”

“Well, yeah. You're coming home with Garrett and me, right?”

“What about Ace? Do I just leave?” Winter glances around Ace's home.

“Do you want to live with him? Above a bar? He also still does missions.” Her brows pull together. “Do you not want to come with me?”

“What? I didn't say that.” I grab her hand. I do.

“Then, what is it? Is it Garrett? I know this wasn't the plan.”

“Don't, Winter. Of course it's not Garrett, and really, was there a plan past getting out?”

“I mean, the plan was that it would be you and me.”

“It will always be you and me.” That will never change. “Now, why don't I go change?” I grab the bag off the kitchen island. Winter nods, but I know she wants to say more.

I simply know that I'm not yet ready.

ACE

“What’s wrong with you?” Garrett asks the second we cross the threshold into my office.

“What are—” He levels me with a stare. “I want her.” No point fucking hiding it. If anything, my brother should be able to relate.

“Shit,” Garrett mutters. “Does she know that?”

“I’m not sure.” I sink into the chair behind my desk. Libby is still trying to figure herself out. She shouldn’t be worrying about what I need.

“You want her for keeps, right? You’re not fucking around.” Garrett steps closer, and there’s an edge to his words. Did he really ask me that?

“You think I’d do that? When do I fuck around?”

He relaxes, shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t know what you do here. You own a damn bar.”

That’s bullshit, but maybe how easy I am to talk to everyone does throw people off. This is a small town; if I were to invite someone back to my place, the whole town would know. Gossip is quick to spread around here. Not that Garrett pays much attention to it.

“You chose for us to move here,” I remind him.

“You’re fucking welcome.”

Shit, he’s got a point there. If we hadn’t been here, what would have happened to Libby and Winter? I can’t think about that. My head is already fucked up.

“Libby is so damn innocent and na?ve. Sweet too.” I run a hand down my face.

“Snow has mentioned that.” Garrett has been calling Winter “Snow” since he found her passed out on his front porch in the middle of the snowstorm, but I think he calls her Snow because of her hair.

Both of the sisters have such blonde hair that it’s almost white.

"She's willing to do anything for anyone and is easily persuaded.

That's why Snow's been so worried about getting her out of there because she was no longer there to watch over her.”

I'm the one that should be watching over her now. Libby is mine. I hate that someone else would be. It’s going to drive me insane.

I don't have any choice at the moment. Not if I want to make sure Libby has that person. Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful to Winter for keeping my girl safe.

I know I sound the opposite, but I want to be her protector now. The one she looks to for strength.

“And the father?” Garrett asks.

“The father? As in their dad?” I glance toward the door to make sure no one is there. I don’t want Libby or Winter to hear the disturbing hunch I have in regard to their dad.

“Think he’s got an infatuation with her.”

Garrett’s brows lift. “That’s fucked.”

“You’re telling me. The way he looked at her.” I grit my teeth.

“All right, cool it.” Garrett flicks a glance to the door. I inhale deeply, gathering my thoughts. “Now what?”

“I don’t know. I’m guessing you’re here to take her.”

“Hey.” Garrett puts his hands up to show he’s not trying to start a fight over this. “Even if she does go with us today, she’s not far, Ace. Not like she’s disappearing. My Snow is staying put, so Libby will stay put.”

“I know.” That doesn’t make it any easier.

“Hey, boss,” Joe pops her head inside my office. “Mitch got it fixed.”

“Thanks.” One less thing I have to worry about. Not that I really care at the moment. If Libby were to stay with me, I wouldn’t care if this place burned down.

"Does anyone want to tell me about the two pretty blondes?" A smirk plays on her lips.

“No.”

“Off-limits.” My brother and I speak at the same time, which makes Joe laugh.

“I wouldn’t go stealing your girls. I’m just shocked y’all are finally getting one. This town is gonna be pissed.” Joe rubs her hands together excitedly.

"Get to work," I order.

"So we're opening tonight? I'm already getting calls."

"Sure, but I might not be around."

"Cool deal." Joe gives us a wave before she leaves my office.

The silence falls between my brother and me. "I won't force her to stay," I say, even though that's exactly what every fiber of my being is demanding that I do.

"But you want to." It's not a question. Garrett is starting to get it.

"If she asks to stay, though..."

"That's fair," he agrees.

"Still need to deal with Heaven's Temple." I can't wait to get my hands on them again.

The stories that gradually emerged from Libby over the past week left me feeling more enraged than ever. They will all pay. It's their turn to know what it's like to be caged and under someone else's control.

"I know. Snow put in a statement letting the higher-ups know that there are others inside that want out. That she had to sneak out to get away."

"That will definitely set the process in motion." I wonder how fast. I want to be a part of it. "It's the only way. As much as I'd enjoy the fuck out of this being a private mission, there is going to be a need for support for the members that want freedom."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"I'm going to—" I stop talking when I hear the light sounds of footsteps headed our way. I stand when Libby comes into view.

She no longer has my shirt on. She is now wearing a pair of jeans that fit her snugly, paired with a pink fuzzy sweater that covers the mark I left on her.

"You like?" Libby asks shyly.

"You look good, Libby." More than good. I honestly don't know how the fuck I'm going to watch her walk out of here if she chooses.

Her choosing to leave might be the one thing that breaks me.

It's almost laughable that the life-threatening missions weren't the thing that took me down, but a blonde beauty in a pink fuzzy sweater.

"Thanks." A pretty pink spreads across her cheeks.

"Garrett said he'd take us to the diner. Doesn't that sound fun?" Winter says.

"I did."

My phone starts to go off, catching Garrett's attention too because he knows that alert sound.

"I gotta get this."

"Well, I guess we'll head out, then?" Winter's eyes bounce between us all. I don't speak. I can't bring myself to say goodbye to Libby.

"Yeah, guess so," Libby agrees. I keep my eyes on her, but she won't meet mine. In fact, I think she is trying to make sure she doesn't.

"Update me?" Garrett says. I nod, grab my phone, and turn away. I can't watch her leave. I don't have it in me.

"Ace," I say when I answer.

"You get word that Star Team is moving?"

"I'm not on the Star Team anymore," I remind Zero.

"No shit," he mutters. I glance back to see my office empty. My chest grows tight. She's gone. "They're moving in on Heaven's Temple."

"Really?" I walk over and close my office door. "There more I should know?"

I didn't think they'd use the Star Team for this.

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling. A few got spooked and have taken off."

"Shit," I mutter.

"I'm sending you some information over now. I have obtained some video footage of the individuals who managed to escape."

"When is the raid happening?" I head back out of my office and upstairs.

"They have already initiated a call out."

This implies that the team will arrive within the next two days, if not sooner. The

team will be pulled in, briefed, and then they'll all be airborne this way.

There is no way I'm going to miss this. I'll have to call in a few favors, but I don't care. I want to be there when they burn that place to the ground.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:14 am

LIBBY

I thought this phone was the coolest thing in the world when I got it. Now I want to throw it at the wall. I keep checking to see if Ace has texted me.

Shortly after we left his place, he texted me his number. Then he told me that I can call and message him anytime if I need him. That is the crappy part. I don't need him. I want him. That's a big difference.

All my needs are taken care of here at Garrett's.

I'd been on the verge of texting Ace when I asked over dinner the other night what he was up to. Garrett said he was on a mission. I hate the feeling of not knowing what is going on with him. We'd gone from spending almost every second together to no communication at all.

Garrett's response had partially addressed my question about whether I had been interfering in his life.

I was barely out the door, and he was on one of his missions.

It all but confirms that me staying there was impeding on his regular life.

He must have been eager to get back to it.

I need to face the truth, which is that Ace saving me had been a favor for his brother.

It was nothing more than a job. I mean, it is what Ace does for a living.

He's a real-life hero. One of the good ones, and that's what he'd been to me.

I think I'd read too deeply into it. Maybe we both got caught up in the moment when I was staying there.

"Libby?" my sister calls before knocking on the door.

"Come in." I roll over on my bed as Winter enters my bedroom. She has boxes in her hands.

"These are the clothes Ace had ordered for you."

"Is he here?" I sit up quickly. My heart gives a flutter of excitement.

"No, he asked the postman to forward them here."

"Oh." Winter sets the boxes down on the bed. I can't help the disappointment that fills me.

"Were you hoping he was here?" I shrug. "Libby." Winter sighs and drops down on the bed next to me. "You've got to talk to me."

"We talk all the time." It's been nice being able to freely talk to each other without worrying who might be listening. There is no fear of getting in trouble. It's all still so surreal.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"Is Ace still on the mission?"

“I can ask. Are you worried about him?”

“Yes.”

“I get it. I think I’d go a little insane if Garrett still went on them.”

“Ladies.” Garrett knocks on the open door with his knuckle. “We’re going to head into town. Swing by Ace’s bar.”

“Is this your two-week check-in?” Winter asks. I recall Ace telling me how he made Garrett agree to come to town every other week to check in.

“Something like that.”

“Does that mean he’s back from the mission?” I ask.

“Should be, but we’ll find out for sure when we get there.”

“Cool.” She hops up from off my bed. “Libby, we’re going to a bar.”

“Are we even allowed to go to a bar?” I know I lived above one for a week, but I thought there were some laws or something. Heck, we don’t even have identification, but Garrett said he and Ace would get that all worked out.

“I know the owner, so I think you’re good.”

“Did Garrett actually make a joke?” I laugh.

He is always very stoic and to the point.

Not in a bad way. His personality differs greatly from Ace’s. At least with how they

express themselves. I think Ace hides a lot of his real feelings behind a smile to reassure people, while Garrett doesn't care to lessen the mood for anyone.

Except my sister. He's like a big marshmallow when it comes to her.

His whole demeanor changes when she's in the room.

"I have my moments." He shrugs. "We'll leave in thirty."

"Oh, we have to get ready." Winter starts opening the boxes. A few seconds later, Garrett is back with more.

"Ace sent those too?"

"What was delivered." He sits them down and returns with another batch.

"Holy crap," I whisper. Ace did way too much.

"Dang, he went all out." Winter and I open a few more of the boxes.

My face turns bright red when she lifts up a pair of silky white panties.

I snatch them from her. "He didn't forget anything, did he?"

"She then holds up a matching bra. "Size looks right too." I want to wipe that playful smirk right off her face.

"Oh my God." I snatch that from her too. "Don't you need to go get ready?"

"Fine." Winter laughs. "Be right back."

Since I left Ace's, I have missed wearing his clothes. These aren't his, but he got them for me, so that will have to do.

I dig through and find something to wear for tonight.

It's still cold out, so I go with jeans and a white sweater.

The sweater features a deep V at the front, revealing the tops of my boobs.

I tilt my head to the side, running my finger along where my hickey had been. It's still there, but it's faded and barely visible. Not sure anyone would notice it if not looking for it. I hate that it's almost gone. It's disappearing from my life the same way Ace is.

"Hey." Winter comes bouncing into my bathroom. "Dang, girl. Showing them off."

I shrug. "Why not?" Before brushing out my hair, I also applied some lip gloss and mascara. It feels so strange to be able to get dolled up but also very empowering.

"Here." Winter clips part of my hair to one side with a white bow clip that matches my sweater.

I stare at myself in the mirror. As sad as I am about Ace, I can't help but smile.

"He picked really good for you."

"He was really good to me all around." No matter what happens in the future, I will always be grateful to Ace for his kindness toward me and for showing me that all men aren't bad.

"He was. I can even tell the difference with your leg." I'm not receiving my usual

massages, but I continue to perform the stretches and a few exercises Ace and I had been doing every day.

That familiar tingle, which only he could have brought to life, begins to form in my body.

I miss his touches so much. I miss having him in bed with me every night.

I've tried to touch myself there, recalling Ace asking me if I ever had.

I closed my eyes and thought of him while I did it, but it got me nowhere.

It only made my chest ache to be with him again.

"Come on." Winter leads me out of the house, her arm linked with mine. It doesn't take too long to make it back to the bar. At night, with the lights on, it appears so different. The parking lot is full of vehicles. There are people lined up outside too, smoking.

Winter keeps her arm linked with mine as we make our way inside. The music hums through the whole bar. A group of girls is dancing on one side of the bar, while many others are watching them. Most of them are men. Garrett leads us over to one end of the bar that has a few empty seats.

"Well, isn't it my lucky night?" Joe says. "What can I get you lovely ladies to drink?" She winks at me. I want to dislike her, but Joe is both nice and incredibly charming.

"Water?" I shrug. When we went to the diner, we got milkshakes, which were delicious, but I'm guessing bars don't have them.

"I think we can do better than that."

“Get them a couple white wine spritzers,” Garrett answers for us.

“You want a beer?”

“Not tonight.”

“Is Ace here?” I ask right before she can slip away to get the drinks.

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

“Hey.” Joe reaches out and grabs my hand. “If he was, he’d have been on you by now.” She squeezes my hand, then lets it go. She’s off before I can ask her what she means.

“She’s lucky Ace isn’t here. He wouldn’t have liked that shit,” Garrett mutters from behind me.

“Why?” Winter asks.

“He just wouldn’t.” He kisses the top of Winter's head.

Joe drops off our drinks a few minutes later. I take a small sip of it. "Not bad." I nod in agreement with Winter, then return to observing people.

Everyone is so free to do as they please. We really had been sheltered from the rest of the world. It makes me wonder what might be going on back at Heaven's Temple right now.

"Do you want to dance?" Winter asks. She has always been more courageous than

me.

"I don't know," I say, feeling shy and a little self-conscious. The two of us have danced together but always alone. I would sing, often making up the songs as I went along.

"Come on." I take another sip of the drink before I let her lead me out onto the floor. "All that matters is that we have fun," Winter says over the music. It's louder on the dance floor.

I notice that Garrett has followed us over but stands on the edge of the dance floor. A lot of the men are doing that, but Garrett has his arms folded over his chest, that stoic, hard expression on his face. The other guys are more laidback.

A new song comes on. "I know this one!" I shout. I've heard it a million times on TikTok. Winter and I dance together. I forget about all the other people. That is until I feel a hand come to my hip, making me jump.

"Hey, back up!" Winter shouts as I turn to see a man I don't recognize.

"She can speak for herself. Can't you, baby?" the man responds. His eyes are trained on my boobs, so I'm not sure if he's talking to me or to them specifically. Right now, I'm gonna say my boobs.

"I'm dancing with my sister." I step forward, away from him. I catch Garrett out of the corner of my eye watching, but his expression has changed. I swear he might be fighting a laugh. What's so funny all of a sudden?

"And now you're dancing with me." He briefly grasps my hips once more before abruptly pulling away.

My mouth falls open when he flies backwards a few feet before hitting the floor, his body colliding with a table, making it fall over.

The drinks that were on it fall to the floor, glass shattering and soaking him in whatever was in them.

“Ace,” I whisper when I see him standing over the man. My brain has finally caught up and realized that it was him that grabbed the man. He is so zoned in that he doesn’t hear me call his name. Or if he did, he doesn’t respond because he’s going for the guy. His brother steps in front of Ace.

“Take a breather.”

“I want him out now,” Ace orders harshly, making everyone grow quiet.

“Joe is already on it.” Garrett isn’t wrong. Joe is pulling the man up by his shirt.

“Okay, she’s pretty badass too,” Winter says, coming to stand next to me. I nod my head in agreement. Everyone is watching as the music cuts off.

Ace turns around to face me. My breath catches.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen the look that he’s currently wearing.

His jaw is tight, and he looks as though he’s one second away from losing his shit.

I know this isn’t the time, but he also looks so damn hot.

He is as handsome as I remember. He’s in jeans and a black shirt.

His hair is wet, like he just got out of the shower. But I can tell he’s tired.

"Hi," I say. He shakes his head. I swallow, wondering if I did something wrong.

"Hi?" he responds. "That's all I get?"

"I ah—" I know everyone is watching us. Ace did tell me this is a small town, so I'm sure everyone knows everyone. I can feel everyone's eyes on us, so I'm not sure how I should respond.

"I'm tired, Libby. I really fucking am. I can't do it anymore." My heart sinks. Is he saying that he doesn't want to be around me?

"I get it," I whisper. My heart is breaking into a million little pieces.

"No, you don't." In three long strides, he's in front of me.

"Ace." I gasp when he lifts me off my feet and tosses me over his shoulder. What the heck?

I hear people hooting and hollering before Joe shouts over them, "Show's over! Music back on!"

Those are the last words I hear as Ace carries me to the back of the bar. I don't understand what's going on, but I don't do anything to stop it, either.

ACE

I snapped... and I don't give a fuck.

Could anyone really blame me? He touched her. That fucker put his hand on her. On my girl . My sweet innocent Libby. Who I haven't even gotten to touch in days. I should have broken his fingers. Gouged his eyes out for the way he was looking at her.

If it weren't for my brother, I would have. I don't think he expected my reaction to be so strong. I could see the surprise on his face, but he knew he was going to get one. That's why he stood there, his gaze shifting from me to the man who had been closing in on Libby.

The past few days without her have been unbearable.

The only relief I've experienced is the destruction of Heaven's Temple. Well, it isn't ash, but the people running it that had been there at the time the raid went down are all in jail cells now.

It would have been nice to burn the place to the ground, and maybe in due time, but right now there are still women and children there.

Hopefully with some help, they will be able to get on track to live normal lives.

While the National Guard was en route to bring more supplies and provide everyone with the necessary help, it was best to let most of them stay for the time being. They

already had homes there, which would facilitate a smoother transition. At least that's what the professional says.

All I've been thinking about since I walked out of there an hour ago was getting back here to shower and go see Libby.

I can't stay another day being away from her.

I need to touch her. To beg her to come back.

My life has been shit since she's been gone.

I haven't gotten a wink of fucking sleep, either. She's the only thing I can think about.

This small slip of a girl has ruined me, and I don't care. I have no regrets. I'd willingly let her ruin me over and over again. She embodies a sweet innocence in a world filled with darkness, and I desperately need that light. I didn't know how badly until it was gone. I can't live without her.

I should head upstairs, but that is too far. I go into my office and kick the door shut before flipping the lock into place. It cuts off all the outside sound.

"Ace?" Libby's got her fingers in the back waistband of my pants, holding on. "Oh gosh, is that a gun?"

I slowly pull her back down off my shoulder, allowing her soft body to brush against mine while keeping her snugly close to me.

"Yeah, it's a gun."

“Right.” She drops her head back. “Are you mad at me?”

“I could never be mad at you. How many times do I have to tell you that?” Who could be mad at someone so damn perfect?

“Then, what? What did you mean out there?”

“I missed you.” I sink my fingers into her hair as I bring my mouth down onto her. I can’t resist her for another second. “He touched you,” I say between kisses. How did I go days without this?

“Who?” she tries to ask, but I keep on kissing her. I don’t want to take my mouth off her. Damn, I’ve missed her sweet honeysuckle taste. I’m addicted to it. Addicted to her.

I lift her by the ass, carrying her over to the desk to sit her down. “Tell me to stop.” I kiss down her neck and to the V of her shirt to get to her tits.

“Don’t stop,” she moans.

“My mark is gone.”

“Put it back.” Libby tilts her head in invitation. I lock my mouth on the same spot and suck. I still have hers on me. I wore that shit like a badge of honor. “I missed you, too,” she whispers. Her words are a balm to my soul. “Ace,” she moans out, making my dick ache.

“You wet, babe?” I’m dying to taste it. To lick her little peach clean.

“Yes.” She shifts, trying to get closer.

“You trying to rub your pussy on my dick?” Libby nods her head. I keep kissing her.
“How bad do you need it?”

“Bad.” Again, another shy, needy whisper. I love how she blooms under my touch.

“I’m going to need more than that.”

Libby licks her lips. “I was missing you. I tried on my own to make the ache better.” I lift my head to meet her eyes. “To put my fingers there.” I closed my eyes and groan.
“It didn’t work. I think it only works for you.”

Fuck me. How does this woman make me want to worship at her altar but also make me feel like a damn god?

“You want me to make you come, baby?”

“Please.” Her breaths come out in little puffs. Libby can’t keep her ass still.

“I want you to come on my face this time.”

“What? Okay, sure.” If I wasn’t turned on, I might laugh.

Even though she doesn't understand what I'm saying, she still allows me to do it. Her having that blind trust in me only makes my cock harder. It shouldn’t turn me on as much as it does, but fuck me, it does. I’ll get to show her everything.

All of her firsts will be with me and only me.

No one will ever know her in this way other than me.

I reach down and pull her sweater off. Libby's eyes widen, but she doesn't tell me to

stop or cover herself either.

"You wore the bra I bought you?"

"I like it." I run my finger along the top, making goosebumps break out against her delicate skin. I can see her hard little buds poking through the fabric, begging for my mouth to be on them. One day I'll make her come just sucking on them.

"You got the panties on too for me?"

"Yes."

"Show them to me," I order, still riding a razor's edge. I should be softer with her, guide her, but Libby must like it because she goes for the button of her pants like a good girl, following orders.

Only my fucking orders. Ever.

But the reality is that Libby holds all the power. I prove that to her, dropping to my knees in front of her and helping her work the jeans down her legs, not stopping until she's only wearing the silky white bra and panties with that matching bow in her hair.

"You're going to kiss me there?"

I drag her ass to the edge of the desk. "I'm going to devour you there." I spread her thighs. "Look how wet you are for me." I rub the damp spot over her panties.

"I can't help it." Her voice sounds so fucking needy. I love that she's that way for me.

"I'm going to lick every drop of it up." I slip my fingers into the side of her panties, letting them graze her clit. Her hips jerk, begging for it.

“Ace.” She grips my shoulders. “It aches.”

No more teasing. I don’t want my girl to ache.

I want to fill her with pleasure. Get her addicted to me.

There will be plenty of time in the future for me to drag shit out.

Right now, I need to take care of her. I need to take the edge off me too.

So that I don’t go out there and rip that fucker from limb to limb.

I slip my hand out, bringing my fingers to my mouth to get a taste of her.

I want to savor every second of this, but I know Libby needs me.

I bring my nose to her panty-covered cunt, breathing her scent in before pulling them down her legs.

I could stare at her like this for hours.

Her cunt glistening with arousal for me. She’s fucking perfect.

“This belongs to me,” I say before burying my face between her legs. My tongue teases her little bud, knowing it won’t take long to push her over the edge. Libby lets out a moan, pushing herself more into me. “Tell me it’s mine, Libby.” I stop.

“It’s all yours. Only yours.” She gives me what I want.

I return the favor, latching on to her clit this time, and that’s all it takes to push my girl over the edge.

“Ace!” she screams as her fingers reach down to tangle in my hair, holding me to her as she comes for me.

Her legs go lax, and her hands drop from my hair.

I stand up, my cock begging me to have a taste of her as well. Hearing my name on her lips as she came for me has me close to going over the edge. She looks like a fucking sexy, naughty angel. Her eyes are closed, her cheeks pink.

“Open your eyes, babe.” Those innocent blue eyes immediately fix on mine.

“I’m gonna mark you again but in a different way.

Do you want that, Libby?” I grab my cock, stroking it.

I’m so close to the edge, but I won’t do anything until she tells me she wants it.

She nods her head, her eyes glancing down at my cock. “Need your words.”

“I want it.”

“You’re gonna get every single drop of it.

” I know I’m being a bastard, but I need my mark on her to keep my sanity.

I press my cock against her clit before stroking myself against it.

My release is quick and sprays all over her sweet pussy.

I don’t stop there, though; I continue to move the head of my cock against her clit until my girl is once again going over the edge, taking me right along with her.

LIBBY

A ce pulls me into his lap as he collapses in his chair. His bare cock rests against my sex. It's covered in his release. I rest my head on his shoulder. I want to cling to him and never let go. This is the first time in days I feel like I'm where I'm supposed to be. Home. That is what he is to me.

"That was—" I search for a word. I'm not sure there is one good enough. What is happening between us is unfamiliar to me. I have never experienced anything like it before. It's scary and exciting all at the same time. This man holds so much of me in his hands.

"Tell me, Libby, I need to know. What was that for you?" There is a hitch to his voice that has me sitting up so that I can see his face. Gosh, I have missed him so damn such.

"More than I could have ever dreamed of." I didn't know it could be this way between two people.

"That's good, baby." He places his hand on my shoulder, his thumb stroking my neck.

"I really missed you."

"I really fucking missed you too."

"Really?" I shift, running my hands down his chest. Even doing this, only touching

him I missed. “You didn’t call or anything. Stop by.” I kept hoping he would. I feel kind of needy admitting that, but what is the point of hiding it? It would get me nowhere.

“You think I didn’t want to?” He shakes his head. “Libby, baby. I’ve been going insane without you.” Hope blooms inside my chest.

“You went on a mission.” He left. I don’t know why that hurt so much. “The second I was out of your hair.”

“Out of my hair,” he half-growls. “If I could, Libby, I’d keep your little ass connected to me.

” I smile at that. I kind of love that idea.

“Yeah, I needed to keep busy so I wouldn’t track your ass down and drag you back here. I did some work that needed to be done but not my normal. I was going to come out to Garrett’s tonight. I only wrapped up an hour ago. Came here to shower and head out. That was until I saw your change of location.”

“My what?” It makes me happy to hear that he was coming to see me.

“I might not have been there, Libby, but I’ve had eyes on you. I always know where you are.”

“You’re worried something still might happen?” I wouldn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to go onto Garrett’s land again.

“Because I need to know. For me, Libby. I lost you once. I’m not letting that happen again. I’ve been searching for you for months. I know I shouldn’t be tracking you. You’re supposed to be free now, but I can’t fully let you go.” I suck in a breath,

trying to take in everything he's saying.

"Since the first time?" I'll never forget that day. I've thought about him too. Actually, I dreamt of him many times.

"Yeah. Thank fuck fate made sure to bring you back to me." His arm wraps around me, pulling me snuggly into him.

"You kind of found me," I point out. Why does that day feel like a million lifetimes ago? My life has changed so much in such a short span of time.

"And I had to finish what was started. I didn't leave, Libby. I've been here but working. We carried out a raid on Heaven's Temple a few hours ago."

"What!" I gasp. "What does that mean? What happened?"

"I knew they said it would be taken care of, but I thought it would be weeks before something happened.

That there would be more talk of it. "How did it happen already?"

"I fire off one question after another.

My mind starts to spin, thinking of all the people still back there. I hope the innocents made it.

"Babe." He cups my face. "Everything is okay." I stare into his eyes and start to relax. "As much as I don't want to let you go right now, maybe we should get your sister and Garrett." I nod in agreement.

Ace lifts me off his lap onto my feet. He starts to dress me. I let him, enjoying him

taking care of me. I also missed caring for him.

“Libby.” Ace snags my attention, having gotten lost in my thoughts of our days together spent at his place. All the small things we did for each other. “Before we go out there, we need to be on the same page.”

“About what?”

“You’re not leaving with your sister tonight. You stay with me,” he orders. “Shit, that came out wrong.” Ace runs a hand down his face.

“You don’t want me to stay?” I can’t hide my disappointment. I don’t have it in me.

“I do, but I’m fighting myself here. I don’t want to tell you what to do, but I can’t let you go either.” I love how bossy he is but also how considerate at the same time. My insides melt. This is love. It has to be. So I tell him the truth.

“I like when you boss me around.”

Ace’s nose flares. “Careful, Libby,” he warns. “You won’t be able to take that back.”

“I don’t wanna take it back. I want to experience more of it.

Of you. I trust you, Ace. I never want to leave.

” Before I can say any more, Ace has me in his arms, his mouth on mine.

The kiss is deep and possessive, and I love every damn second of it.

I pour all of the emotions I’ve been feeling into it.

There is nothing more in this world that I want than to be his.

ACE

When we exit my office, I tuck Libby into my side, making it clear that she's my girl. I'm sure most picked up on that before. This only makes it that much clearer. I know word will spread through this town fast. For once, town gossip doesn't bother me. I want everyone to know Libby is mine.

I'm thankful that when we enter the front of the bar, most have cleared out for the night. It will make it easier for us to talk. I spot my brother and Winter together at the end of the bar. Joe is leaning up against it on the other side, talking to them.

"People are staring at us," Libby whispers to me. I glance around and notice that most are, although some are trying to hide it.

"They're not used to seeing me with anyone, and you're fucking beautiful, so I'm sure it's a mix of the two." It's hard not to notice Libby.

"Really?" Libby peeks up at me through her lashes. Despite my cum covering her pussy, she still radiates innocence. The girl has no clue how beautiful she is.

"Libby, you're the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen. I saw you and obsessed over you." The girl has ruled my every thought since I first saw her.

"And that's never happened to you before?"

"No, babe," I laugh. "That's never even close to happened before." That makes her smile bigger.

Thank fuck for that. I acted like a caveman, but still she wants to be with me. When she said she enjoyed me bossing her around, I let go of my doubts about going too fast with her. I'm not going to hold anything back now.

"That's sweet, but I was more interested in knowing why they never saw you with anyone. I've heard you're rather charming, and sex is more casual out here." I stop walking and turn her to fully face me.

In her world, men took multiple wives. They could pick who they wanted and did all kinds of fucked-up shit. I might be barbaric with her at times with my obsession, but it's only for her. There never has been and never will be anyone but her.

"I don't do casual hookups, babe. I might be a smooth talker.

My smooth talk has helped me and my brother navigate life, but I don't play around. My father did that shit to my mom. I'll never be that kind of man.

"I tell her the truth. Something I've never felt the need to tell anyone else.

My father was a piece of shit who up and left our mom knowing she was pregnant with twins.

I knew I'd never do that shit. That I wouldn't put my dick inside of a woman I wouldn't be willing to marry. Sure, I could wrap it up, but I wasn't taking that chance. Hence why my dick has never been inside a woman before.

"I'm sorry." She glances down. "I didn't mean to imply?—"

"Hey now." I cut her off, putting my finger under her chin to make her tilt her head back so I can get those eyes of hers back on me. "If you want to know something, I want you to ask me. I'm not offended. You're learning, and I get that."

I know Libby never means harm with her questions. It's not her nature. She's too damn sweet for that, but I also don't want that sweetness to stop her from asking a question in fear of a response.

"Okay." She smiles up at me.

"Plus, if we had spoken up about how we felt days ago, you never would have left our bed."

"I hated not sleeping with you." That shit will never happen again.

"Good, because I didn't sleep at all." I lean down and kiss her. My girl parts her lips for me, her body melting into mine.

"So now are you going to tell me about this?" I lift my head at Winter's question. She's got her attention trained on Libby.

"I didn't know what it was." Libby presses herself into my side. I put my arm around her shoulder, hating that she doubted what she meant to me. "If we were a thing."

"More than a thing, babe."

"I'm happy for you," Winter admits. "You know that, right? I wouldn't keep you from Ace. I get it more than anyone."

"I know. For once, I was trying to figure it out on my own."

"Not sure that I love that," Winter huffs.

"We can talk about that all later, I promise, but Ace has news," Libby tells her sister.

“Let’s sit down.” I motion to head back over to the end of the bar. I grab a few chairs while shooting my brother a glare that lets him know I’m not done with his ass.

It only earns me one of his rare smiles. I know what that fucker was doing letting that man get close to Libby. He was fucking with me. Who knew Garrett could be a matchmaker? He got Libby and me to clear up our shit real quick with that stunt.

“The raid go good?” Garrett asks when we all sit down.

I’m sure he’s been keeping tabs on it. He knew we were going in. He wanted to come with me, but I needed him to stay with the girls so I could keep my focus. I knew Libby was safe with him. He had already had his fun. It was my turn.

“Raid?” Winter glances between the two of us.

“We went into Heaven’s Temple tonight.”

“Oh God.” Winter gasps. “Is everyone okay?”

“There were no female or children casualties.” I give the best honest answer I can.

“Casualties?” Libby asks.

“Deaths,” I clarify.

“Oh.” I pluck her out of her chair and put her into my lap. “There was no choice. They weren’t willing to go down without a fight.”

“Because they believe all those crazy lies,” Winter snips out.

“Or are a part of them and would rather die than face the consequences of their

actions,” Garrett adds.

“But I’d say it was rather successful. We’re uncertain about a few members, so we’ve separated them until we gain a better understanding. You two could potentially provide valuable assistance with getting them sorted out. Not everyone will tell us the truth about some of the members. They will still feel compelled to defend them.”

“They will,” Libby says softly. I squeeze her hip.

“But they’re safe, and that’s what matters,” I reassure her.

“Where are they?”

“Still there for now. There are teams of people that will be coming in. This won’t be a quick fix.”

“But it’s a start.” Winter smiles.

“It is,” I agree.

"Can we assist with more than just answering a few questions?" Libby asks.

“In due time.” I had a feeling she would want to. I actually think a lot of people in town will want to help if they can.

“Our parents. You haven’t mentioned them.” Libby tenses at her sister’s question. Garrett pulls Winter closer.

“We have your mother. Your father took off a few days ago. I’m guessing he and a few others were spooked when I took Libby and Joseph didn’t return.”

“I don’t like this.” Winter shakes her head. Libby is too damn quiet and still.

“We’ll find him.” Garrett’s eyes lock with mine.

“That’s a promise,” he vows.

I am far from done with Libby’s father. In fact, I haven’t even started.

LIBBY

“ I got you!”

“How could you?” I gasp before I dramatically fall backward onto the fluffy snow.

“Libby!” Fate shouts my name. I hear her tiny feet running toward me, accompanied by the crunch of the snow beneath her boots. “Are you okay?”

“Got you!” I grab her, pulling her down onto me. She lets out a squeal of laughter as I start to tickle her.

“I give, I give,” she says through laughter.

Those giggles never cease to make me smile, and I often need that around here.

It’s been a week since the raid on Heaven’s Temple.

A few days later, they allowed Winter and me to enter.

We have been helping where we can. The first days after the raid, it was us who answered questions about who some people are and what they have done.

Even though I knew this place was terrible, it's jarring to see everything so clearly laid out in front of you. I think you shuffle some things to the back of your mind. It’s how you learn to deal with each day. Everyone has a great amount of healing to do. Some more than others.

“Hot chocolate time!” I hear Nora call out.

“Marshmallows!” Fate jumps up excitedly. “You coming?”

"Yes," I reply, brushing the snow off both of us as we follow the other kids. They are handling things the best, already getting a taste of the outside world. Literally. Hot chocolate was never something we had.

There is still a mix of people that are pushing back. A lot of women. My mother is one of them. A few want out, but paperwork takes time. A lot of us don't have birth certificates or Social Security cards.

A few men are still missing. My father is one of them. A couple have already been tracked down. I spot my sister on the other side of the room cradling a baby. I have a feeling that this will soon become her reality.

I get a hot chocolate for myself and Fate, then grab some coloring books.

Someone puts on some Christmas music. This was a holiday we never celebrated, but that isn't stopping us now.

The rec area already has a tree up, and we spent yesterday decorating.

There has been an outpouring from the town, and a lot of resources have been pulled in to help as well.

Ace and Garrett have also been in the thick of things right along with us.

“Story time,” someone calls.

“I got this,” I tell Fate before giving her a kiss on the head and picking up the

crayons.

“Will you be back tomorrow?”

“I will.” Fate gives me a tight hug that makes my eyes water.

I hate leaving her. She has been staying with her second mom, Gina. Her birth mother died a year ago, but I could tell Gina was overwhelmed with her own kids and that Fate was often left out. Her father is now in jail, and Ace said he’d be staying there.

“You okay?” Winter comes to stand next to me, still cradling the baby in her arms.

“Yeah.” It’s a mix of emotions. You want to be happy because you should be, but there is still a lot of sadness that is lingering here. “You try to see Mother?”

“Not today.” Winter doesn’t ask if I did.

Not after the first and only time I tried to visit her.

She had some very vile things to say to me.

Not to Winter, but me. That I’d ruined her life and stolen the only thing she ever had.

My father. Which I sure as hell didn’t understand.

That man was cruel to me. He treated me the worst out of all of them combined.

I mean, he literally scarred me for life.

“I’m done with her.”

“As you should be,” Winter says without hesitation. “I’m glad. They’re not our family anymore.” I nod in agreement. They never really were.

I smile when two arms wrap around me from behind. “You ready, babe?”

“Yeah.” I turn in Ace’s arms and give him a quick kiss, feeling something in his coat.

“Let me go say hi to Fate. I promised her I would.”

“What’s in your coat pocket?” I ask before I let him go.

A sheepish expression crosses his face. “Go on.” I laugh, knowing that he's carrying a stuffed animal for Fate. I watch him go over to her. He drops down to be level with her. Fate throws herself at him. He wraps her in a hug. A wave of emotion fills me, seeing their reaction to each other. It’s the most adorable thing I’ve ever laid eyes upon.

“I think I found us a place,” Ace says on the drive back to our place.

“What?”

“I wanted to find us somewhere to live for the next year. Until we can build a house of our own.”

“Wait.” I laugh. “I need to catch up here.”

"We can't continue living over the bar."

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“It does me. I found a place close to my brother. It will work until we can build.”

“Build?”

“Yeah, build. My brother owns a substantial amount of land. He and I already found the perfect spot. I’ll take you tomorrow to see it. We have even mapped out the road that will connect the houses.”

“That’s what you were up to today?” I reach over, putting my hand on his thigh. This man is always ten steps ahead. I’m not surprised in the least. He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Was that before you went and bought a teddy bear to smuggle in?” I tease.

“She likes them.” Ace smirks. “She really likes it when she thinks we’re doing something sneaky. We’ll have to keep an eye on her.”

“Yeah, a close one,” I agree.

“Libby—”

“Hmm?”

“What did I say about you not asking or telling me things because you’re unsure?” I chew on my bottom lip.

“Fate?”

“Yeah, Fate. Fate is kind of our thing.”

“It is.” I couldn’t agree more.

“That’s why we can’t live together over a bar. She’ll need her own room.” Tears burn in my eyes at his words.

"We're about to have a child, but we've never performed the act of creating one," I point out. Oh, we have done a lot of things. His mouth is always on me, and he's taught me how to use mine on him. But we've yet to take it all the way.

"Been waiting." He pulls into the back of the bar.

"For what?" Ace reaches over and unclicks my seat belt. He easily lifts me out of my seat and into his lap.

"I wanted to make this right for you. To make sure you're ready."

"I think I'm more than ready, Ace." I wrap my arms around his neck.

"Then when are you going to tell me that you love me?"

"I do." I don't know why I suddenly feel so shy.

"You know that I love you."

"I do," I repeat again. Ace shows me that he loves me in everything that he does.

"Are you getting shy on me?" He smirks playfully.

"Say it, Libby." Ace gives my ass a small smack with the order, knowing what that will do to my body.

His bossing me around always gets me worked up.

I know it's crazy, but when he takes over, I feel so free.

I don't have to worry about anything. I know Ace has it.

I just gotta let go. He handles the rest.

ACE

“ I love you.” I had no idea that three simple words could make you feel like a king, but that's exactly how my Libby makes me feel. She's always giving and showing me things I didn't know. Libby thinks I'm showing her the world, but she's doing the same for me. Just in different ways.

“That's my girl.” I brush my mouth on hers. “I love you, too.”

“Then make love to me,” Libby whispers against my lips.

“Now you're giving the orders?”

“Maybe this one time.”

I can't help but smile. Mom had always told us that we would know when we found the one. I can't help but think she had a hand in it somehow. I don't care if that sounds crazy. I never believed in things like that until now. Fate is making me a believer.

“Babe, we both know who's really in charge,” I say before I claim her mouth. The teasing is over. I need her. I can't wait another second to fully make her mine.

I carry her inside and up to our place. I don't stop until I make it to the bed. “Naked,” I grunt out.

I've been dreaming about this from the moment I laid eyes on her.

I watch as she follows my orders. Stripping off her clothes, baring herself to me.

Not only in the physical way, either. She's giving herself to me completely in this moment, body and soul.

Instilling her trust in me. Giving me the most precious part of her.

I'm going to cherish her and every second of making her completely mine.

"So fucking beautiful." She's a vision.

I don't deserve her, but that's not going to stop me.

I reach back, grabbing my shirt and pulling it off.

I quickly lose the rest of my clothes. I watch as Libby's eyes run all over my naked body.

She eats me up, and I love every fucking second of it.

Gone is that shy girl. I love how confident she is now in front of me.

It only makes me desire her more. I want her to have that with me.

"Ace." She reaches her hand out to stroke my hard cock. I let out a groan, feeling her soft touch against my skin. "Make me yours." She is already mine; God knows she owns every part of me.

I lean down, taking her mouth. I should probably be gentler, but my control is slipping.

She matches my vigor, letting me know she wants it this way.

We might have been getting each other off over the last week, but we both needed it.

It was all still a tease leading to this.

It's how I want her. I need her to want this.

"On our bed," I order. "I want your legs spread for me." She lets out a little moan. My girl loves when I boss her around. She doesn't hesitate to follow my orders.

I stroke my cock as I take her in, watching her spread her beautiful thighs for me, showing me the heaven between them.

Every inch of her is perfection. I'm not sure how she can look so innocent and yet so fucking naughty at the same time.

I can't take another second of this torture.

I need to touch her, taste her, and bury my cock deep inside of her.

I make my way up the bed, climbing between her thighs. I lean down, taking her mouth in a quick kiss. My cock brushes against her wet heat, begging me to slide into her. But I know I need to get her ready first. Take it slow, I remind myself. I need to make this good for her.

I proceed to place open-mouth kisses down the column of her neck, making my way down to her tits. I suck one of her tight buds into my mouth. Libby writhes underneath me.

"Ace. Please," she begs.

I release her nipple from my mouth, giving it one last lick before I continue my journey down, kissing her soft belly until I get to her sweet spot.

I kiss the inside of each of her thighs, her hips rising off the bed to try to get closer to my mouth.

I give her what she needs, my mouth descending on her, sucking her hard little clit. She goes off for me instantly.

As her orgasm courses through her body, I insert a finger inside of her, getting her ready for me. I've been doing this over the last week. She's so damn tiny. I've been working her up to this.

"You saved this for me, didn't you, Libby? You're my good girl, aren't you?" I work another finger into her. "Need your words."

"I saved it for you." She screams as I hook my finger inside while my tongue circles her clit.

She goes over the edge for me again, flooding my mouth with her orgasm.

I drink every drop of her down. I give her clit one last kiss before I position myself over her.

We lock eyes as I line myself up with her entrance.

Libby opens her thighs wider in invitation.

I push in a few inches. Her hands grip my shoulders.

"I saved it for you to love." I thrust fully into her. I grit my teeth as her tiny, warm

cunt locks around my cock. I have to fight to keep from coming already. Libby's nails dig into me, but she never breaks eye contact. My girl is tougher than she knows.

"Damn, baby, you are so tight." I pull out and thrust back into her. "You kept it sweet for me, didn't you?"

"Yes," she moans.

"Kept it locked up tight so only I could have it." I thrust faster.

"Oh," she moans again for me.

"That's right, baby. It's all mine, and I'm taking it."

"Ace." I feel her pussy start to flutter. My balls draw up, but I fight it. I'm not coming until she does, and my filthy words are working her up.

"You can't stop it now. All of you belongs to me." I tilt my hips to hit deep inside of her, making sure I grind against her clit. "Now come for me. Milk my cock with that virgin pussy. Make me belong to you."

That sets her off. Her cunt locks down hard around my cock. Libby's body is doing as I ordered. I groan as my release spills inside her. She pulses around my cock, taking in every drop of me. I bury my face in her neck, breathing her in. Libby is worth everything I've done in life to get here.

"Wow," she whispers. Her fingers stroke up and down my back like she's soothing the beast. The beast she just conjured because that's what I was. Her beast. I'd do anything for her, to protect her. "Now you marked me inside and out."

I roll, pulling Libby into my arms to hold her close. “You marked me too,” I tell her. She lets out a sigh, relaxes into me, and drifts off to sleep.

I could watch her sleep forever. That’s what I want to do right now, but I still have one more thing to handle. I press a kiss to Libby’s forehead before I slip from the bed. I pull the blanket up over her naked body before I get myself dressed quietly. I don’t want to wake her.

In the safe room, I check my clip before popping it back into my gun and cocking one into the chamber. I screw on the silencer before securing it on me. Then I check my feeds and my phone. I see the alert from Garrett. I power down the surveillance and disengage my locks.

The trap has been set. Every day we left, I made sure to only lock the handle of the back door. You can’t make it too easy. I’d like to think that no one is that stupid, but I know that they could be. Criminals are some of the dumbest.

Libby’s father had no fucking clue who I was.

His obsession with Libby also clouded his judgment.

Libby had no idea why her mother loathed her so much.

I’m not sure telling her would help. Who wants to find out their mom doesn’t like them because their father has a sick fascination with them, so she’s jealous?

She’s been one of the many pushing back at Heaven’s Temple.

I’m at a loss for how to handle the women.

Her mind is warped. I’m not sure if this is a reflection of who she is or if life has

shaped her this way. However, her mother was among the first followers. She hadn't grown up in this life.

There was a choice on her end. They all broke off from another church.

It too had radical ideas, but not this bad.

I slide on a pair of gloves before I give Libby one last look. She's sleeping soundly. I leave her to her dreams, slipping out the door and carefully down the stairs, evening out my breaths. I press my back against the wall and wait. It doesn't take long for the fucker to pick the lock.

I let him slip right in, but not far. He barely makes it a few inches before I round the corner and wrap my hand around his throat, while the other easily yanks the gun from his hand and tosses it away.

"You—" I cover his mouth, slamming him hard enough to the wall to knock the air from his lungs. I jam my knife into his thigh. The same spot he scarred my girl. He screams into my hand as I twist the blade, leaving it stuck there. I pull out my own gun, pressing it under his chin.

"Me." I stare into his eyes. "She's mine." I pull the trigger.

He's had a chance to get away, but he'd made his choice, so I made mine. I let his body slide to the floor, opening the back door for Garrett.

"That was quick."

"My woman is waiting in bed for me." I wasn't going to waste my time on this piece of shit. He'll never be a threat to her again.

“I get that.” Garrett smirks. “I got this.”

“Thanks.”

“What are brothers for?” I shake my head but chuckle.

I strip off my clothes and drop them down on the ground for Garrett to take care of before heading back upstairs. I shower and change before I slip back into bed with Libby. She rolls, snuggling her face into me, her hand coming to rest on my chest, our legs tangled together.

“Did you get up?” she asks, not opening her eyes.

“Yeah, I had to grab something.” I take the ring I’m holding and slip it on her finger. It’s a blue sapphire with diamonds that surround it. It’s a perfect match to her eyes. Those eyes captured my heart from the moment they first met mine.

I’ve now Claimed Her Forever , in every way. Libby claimed me long ago.

EPILOGUE

LIBBY

Many years later

“ You didn’t save me a seat?” I tease my husband, who has been trying to get me to come sit down for the past twenty minutes.

“I am your seat.” Ace pulls me down to sit in his lap. I roll my eyes, pretending I’m annoyed at his behavior. He wraps one arm around me so that I stay snug against him. His other hand comes to rest on my stomach. I’m only four months along, but I’m already showing. “How is your leg?”

“It’s fine.” My leg is actually better than fine. A few months after everything calmed down, Ace got me into a doctor who had me undergo a microsurgery. The repair did wonders.

“I’ll be the judge of that later.” I know he means a rubdown. I cannot wait for that.

“In the tub,” I suggest with a sigh. It has been a long day. Yes, a long soak in the tub sounds delicious right now. I have been on my feet all day, but I have loved every second of it.

It’s Christmas Eve, and it’s the town's annual holiday show. It’s a tradition that Winter and I started. Fate has a lead role this year. The whole town is jammed into Town Hall.

This town really came together to help the victims of Heaven's Temple. I will forever be grateful to everyone in it. A lot of the members now live here permanently too. It's nice to have everyone settled. It has taken time, but we've done all we could.

That is one of the things I love about living here.

Heaven's Temple drilled into us that we had to stick together.

The outside world was a horrible place. We were stronger together.

The freaking irony is this town is actually everyone supporting each other while maintaining their individual freedom.

This is what a community is supposed to be.

"And where is my wife?" Garrett starts to get up with our niece Rose in his arms, but Winter comes hurrying toward us.

"I got cookies."

I laugh, taking one from her.

"You think I didn't get you some?" Garrett holds them up with his other hand.

"Now we've got extra." Winter is more pregnant than I am. "I'm just going to say it." My sister leans over to whisper to me. "Fate and Daisy are the cutest ones here. Those dresses." She smirks.

Of course she loves the dresses. She made them.

I, however, wrote the play they'll all be performing tonight.

It was one of the many stories I made up long ago when Winter and I would lay in bed at night pretending those stories were a mini escape.

A few years back, Winter talked me into putting them down on paper.

I had no idea what it could turn into. I've recently sold two of them to a publisher for children's books.

“That goes without saying.” Both Winter and I had grown attached to little girls that needed homes. We both adopted. A few other families in town had done the same. Even Joe did when she fell hard for June who had two little girls of her own. They got married, and she adopted both girls.

Fate was always meant to be ours. We love her so freaking much.

That girl lights up a room when she enters it.

She was so excited when she found out I was pregnant.

I was worried how it might go over. She's had all of our attention, but she's been over the moon about it.

I might have cried, but that's normal these days.

She's been helping me decorate the room, even painting a mural on one of the walls.

We watch as they come out on stage. Ace pulls out his phone and makes sure to catch every second.

Seeing the way he is with Fate only makes me fall in love with him more.

We all stand up and cheer at the end. The girls come running over to us.

We all celebrate together and cheer with the town before it's time to head home.

"We'll be over in the morning," Winter says, giving me a kiss on the cheek.

It's my year to host Christmas. We switch off. If the drive wasn't so short from their house to ours, I'm sure they'd be staying over, but it's only half a mile. It's nice that we live so close. It makes the girls closer than cousins. They're pretty much sisters. We all do everything together.

"She's out. I'll carry her in," Ace says when we pull into the garage. "You go get ready for me."

"We have Santa duty," I whisper to remind him.

"Babe, I got it."

"Right." I lean over and kiss him. He is always three steps ahead.

"She's out like a light," Ace says when he enters the bedroom. "I can't wait to see her in the morning."

"Because you bought the whole store?" Not only that, the man drove six hours last weekend to get a dollhouse. It was the last one left. He'd been a man on a mission, only his missions are different these days.

"I got something for you too." I laugh, already knowing what it is.

He scoops me up into his arms, carrying me into the bathroom. This is one of my favorite rooms in the house. I always joke that our tub is a mini pool. He sits me

down on the counter.

I watch as my husband draws a bath for us, adding all the extras that I like in it before he starts to get undressed. He tugs at the tie of my robe so that it falls open.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.” His fingers trace down my side and over to my round stomach. I let the robe slip the rest of the way off. Ace picks me up and carries me over to the tub, stepping in and sitting down so that I’m straddling him. “How are you feeling? It was a long day.”

“It was, but I loved every second of it.”

“How’s my other girl doing?”

“She’s good.” I place my hand over his on my stomach. “I was thinking... Now that we know it’s a girl, I thought of a name.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Destiny.” His eyes fill with surprise. It’s his mother’s name. “It fits perfectly with Fate too.”

It is, after all, because of Destiny that all of us were brought together. A woman driving through a town with her two sons, telling them how much she loved it. That it would be the perfect place to live.

“This family is going to be overrun with girls,” he says with a giant smile on his face. I lean down and kiss it.

People think destiny is a matter of chance happening. It's not. It's a matter of choices you make in life. It's not to be waited for... it's to be claimed.

I hope you enjoyed the Fated to Forever bundle. Want more Lucy Darling? Check out the first book in the, A New Reign series, Vow of Obsession , available now! Keep scrolling to get a sneak peek.

TOVA

“Marks,” I warn in a low whisper. Don't die, don't die , I chant over and over in my head.

“I'm cracked, but I'll make it.” Crap. I'm not sure I believe that, but I keep my mouth shut. If anyone can, she can, though. “I'm going in.” I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't say that's a terrible idea because what the hell do I know? I'm dead!

“Heal off!” I warn again.

“Not this time, motherfucker.” Marks' voice is filled with glee before two quick shots strike the target.

The body drops. “I'm a big clip that!” Marks shouts, making me pull my headset away from my ear for a second.

“Get rekt.” Marks lets out an evil laugh that has me letting out a small one. “Take your L.”

I think Marks enjoys shit-talking more than playing the game. I'm not a giant fan of the game, but she always talks me into playing with her. She carries me. I don't know why I ever doubted her. The girl is a killer shot, hence the nickname Marks. She never misses her mark.

A knock sounds at my door a few seconds before it opens partially, my dad poking his head in. I pull my headphones off.

“Can your mom and I talk to you for a minute?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there.” He gives me a nod; his mouth forms a tight line, making me think something is wrong. I slip my headset back on.

“My parents want to talk. I’ll hit you up later?”

“I’ll be here,” Marks singsongs as I flip off my PlayStation.

Marks and I have been friends for a few years now. We met in an online book club. Both of us loved the same books, so we were always recommending ones to each other. Our friendship blossomed from there. We can be so opposite at times but also the same.

I place my headset on the dresser before pulling on a sweater.

Dread forms in my stomach because this isn’t normal.

If Mom or Dad wanted to talk to me about anything or let me know something, they’d simply come into my room and sit down.

The fact that they asked me to come and talk to both of them means this is bigger than normal.

Our talks like this seem to always be connected to the Marino family. The first time my parents ever had a conversation this serious with me was when I was in high school. That time I’d been informed that we were moving. So I’m guessing this is something of that magnitude.

No one wants to hear that they are moving in the middle of high school, but it turned out better than I expected.

We moved out of our small apartment into a cute home on the Marino estate, but everyone refers to this place as “the farm”.

It does have a farmy feel to it with all the land around us, but we’re not far from the city.

There are a handful of small houses on the farm, a few barns, and sheds.

Then there is the main house, which is massive.

That is where the Marino family stays when they are in town.

Mr. and Mrs. Marino used to stay here more often, but over the past couple of years have traveled more and spent a lot of time in Europe.

They have four adult children. Three are men, and the other is a daughter about my age, but she is also never around much; she’s mostly off at school. It’s the three brothers that are most often here. War being the oldest of them.

He is in charge, slowly taking over for his father.

That’s the vibe I get, anyway, and vibes are all you can get when it comes to them because you’re not supposed to ask.

Hell, you shouldn’t even be paying attention.

Mind your own business is the motto around here when it comes to the Marinos.

That was instilled in me from the start by my parents.

It didn’t take long for me to put together that the Marino family might not live by the letter of the law.

Which means my dad must not either. He does, after all, work for them.

Our lives have shifted dramatically since we came to live on the farm.

Mostly for the good. We no longer go without, and there is no more counting every penny.

When I enter the living room, my mom and dad are on the couch, my mom whisper-yelling at my dad. She cuts off when she sees me, giving me a warm smile. This must be bad. It's not often, if ever, that I see them fight.

I'm guessing this isn't about the trip I asked to take the other day. I want to go visit Marks. There is no way I could ask if she could visit here. Everyone has to pass through the gate to enter the farm. This place is a fortress. Let's just say the Marinos don't like strangers coming and going.

"What's going on?" I brush one of my unruly curls out of my face.

My mom stands, coming over to me. The only thing my mom and I have in common when it comes to appearance is that we're both short. My mom is on the tiny side all around with blond, straight, short hair. She presses a kiss to my cheek.

"Have a seat, sweetheart." Oh God. That feeling of uneasiness I had ramps up even more. I almost feel sick with nerves.

"Is one of you dying?!" I blurt out. Mom's eyes soften.

"No, not today," she reassures me, so I go and sit down on the loveseat.

"This isn't about me going to see Marks either, is it?"

"No, honey," my dad says with a small sigh. "This is about War."

“Is he okay?” I almost come out of my seat, but I manage to keep it together. The first time I ever saw War, I’d fallen right on my ass. Literally, I tripped over my own stupid feet.

His real name is Warren, but everyone calls him War.

He’s an impossible man to miss. He easily towers over most people with a broad, thick frame.

I know he has at least a foot on me. That’s not saying much.

I’m barely five foot five. But what stands out to me the most about him is his striking blue eyes.

They are such a contrast to his inky black hair, olive skin, and all-black suits that fit like they were tailored specifically for him, which I’m sure they are.

Then there are the tattoos. I can’t even get started on those and how they peek out the top of his buttoned-up shirt, wrap around his neck, and show when he rolls his sleeves up.

There have been many nights I’ve dreamed about seeing the rest of them.

What it would be like to trace my fingers along them.

"He's fine," my dad says, but his tone is off. Does he not want him to be okay?

I'm guessing my crush on War was easy for my parents to spot. I'd still been a teen, so I must have been easy to read. My dad had told me to stay away from War, that he wasn't someone I should try to befriend or get close to. Plus, there was his age. He was at least ten years older than me.

It wasn't difficult to do as my dad told me.

War didn't linger when I was in the main house.

If I even said hi to him, I'd only get a grunt of a response.

Every now and then, he'd cut me with a glare, but there had been a couple of times I thought he was watching me. I swear I felt his eyes on me, but he always kept his distance. There's a high likelihood I imagined him paying attention to me because of the crazy crush I had on him.

"We owe the Marino family," my mom says.

"Like money?" A pit forms in my stomach. I ball my hands into fists in my lap. There have been a few times I saw some bloody men being dragged from the main house. I ducked my head and never spoke of it.

"No," my dad responds, my mom shaking her head.

"I'm truly sorry, sweetheart." That warm smile my mom gave me when I entered the room has faded away. I wish they would get to the point already. Waiting for them to spring whatever news they have on me is like torture.

"I didn't know this is what would have been asked of me." Dad closes his eyes as if in pain. I have never seen him this way. My dad is a big guy that can handle himself. I recall when I was younger, he'd work late nights as security at bars.

"Dad," I press. "Tell me. You're freaking me out."

"This isn't how I thought this would go." Mom's shoulders drop.

"The Marinos have come to collect the debt I owe them," my dad finally says. "They

have requested your hand in marriage to War.” I stare at my dad, not sure I heard him correctly. Did he just say I’m expected to marry War?

“Requested. Really?” My mom pops up from her chair. “I doubt that was a request, Corbin.” She starts to pace back and forth.

“You want me to marry War?” I ask out loud, more to myself and also in confusion. I reach down to pinch my arm to make sure I’m not dreaming. Nope. I’m wide awake.

“Do I want that? No,” my dad responds. Right, I was supposed to stay away from him.

“Can’t it be one of the other brothers?” Mom turns back to face Dad. “Z or Ronan.” I don’t want to marry Z or Ronan. Both my parents glance over at me for a second. If I had to pick between the two of them, though, I’d choose Ronan.

“I asked.” My dad’s tone is defeated. I unclench my hands, fighting a smile that wants to take over. They are miserable over this, and I want to jump up and do one of those victory dances Marks does on the corpses of the people she kills in-game. My parents are acting like this is a nightmare situation for me, but to me it’s my very own fairy tale come true.

"When?" I ask, hoping it’s sooner rather than later.

This is insane. I’ve found myself transported to a realm where arranged marriages exist, yet it doesn’t seem that far-fetched. I remember War’s sister once discussing the possibility of having an arranged marriage in the future, similar to how her parents were married.

That wasn’t the world I knew, but then again, my whole world has changed since I came to live here. I guess I’m a part of this world too... now, so it seems, more than ever.

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