



Fragile Twisted Vows

(Savage Vows #1)

Author: *Callie Vincent*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: A dark mafia romance with forbidden heat, forced marriage, and an obsession that burns

He's her sister's husband. Now he says she belongs to him.

Lucy Fairchild has nothing left—no money, no support, no future. Then he shows up.

Damien Reed: the man who once saved her. The man who once married her sister.

He's richer.

Colder.

And far more dangerous than she remembers.

When he offers her a way out, it sounds like salvation—until she realizes the price.

A forced marriage.

No escape.

And a man who doesn't ask. He takes.

He needs a bride. She needs a lifeline.

But this isn't a love story. It's a transaction.

One with rules—secrets—and consequences she can't begin to understand.

But every look burns.

Every touch erases her resistance.

And the deeper she falls, the more dangerous he becomes.

She was supposed to be a pawn.

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one

Lucy

“I heard their new scent is supposed to smell like Gwyneth Paltrow’s Pussy Candle.”

I tilt my head towards the direction of the fake blond with massive breasts because clearly, my head is curious even though my ears are practically bleeding.

“Yes! No GMO’s, completely organic and apparently, an aphrodisiac. It’s a win-win in my book. Maybe one day they can make a perfume that can also be a tincture for premature wrinkles,” the brunette laughs.

It’s a rich laugh. An extremely rich laugh after a typical sentence that any uptight, rigid pilates mom would say in downtown Manhattan.

“That would be lovely, but it would also put my plastic surgeon out of business.” The blond laughs as they giggle and walk away from the store front.

Both her fake tits and botox are definitely not organic and GMO free. I know that’s for certain. But who am I to judge?

I’m the one standing in front of a luxury perfume store in SoHo, wearing my best friend’s borrowed wrap dress and somehow, I’ve already managed to ruin the fabric with a splatter of coffee. Something that might be impossible to wash out of a cream-colored dress. Something that’s totally visible and not good for a first impression.

Fleur de Femme is not only the most sought-after perfume company in the world, but it's also the most sought-after brand for literally every marketing firm worldwide. I did extensive research on them during my time in college, and it was a dream to take them on as a client when I was interning at my first firm, but life had other plans.

Which is why I'm here now, standing in a stained, cream wrap dress with my resume and portfolio hugged tight to my chest. Because life has led me down a road of tragedy and now instead of taking Fleur de Femme on as a client, I am forcing myself to walk inside and schedule a potential interview with the lead sales rep. I'm tired of working long hours at the same bar every night. I'm tired of men grabbing my body when they please, tired of the shit tips and even shittier benefits. Or lack thereof.

I'm also tired of living on my best friend's couch. Apparently, the feeling is mutual for her as well. Because as soon as I was sliding on my worn, scuffed, nude pumps and rushing out of her studio apartment door, she showed me a very large and sparkly engagement ring on her finger. Her college boyfriend has finally proposed after five years and now, they're moving. Because unlike me, they graduated. Unlike me, they have money to move. And unlike them, now I am practically on the street and out of options.

Because also, unlike them, I don't have a family to back me up and support me. I haven't in a very long time.

So, here I am. Taking initiative. Making the first bold step for a better future. A future where I don't rely on a single soul for help. A future that isn't fueled by dirty money, but earnings made from hard work. A future on my own with no one else to judge me or control me.

A good future. A peaceful future.

A future that also doesn't require me to work day and night at a bar, only to have

enough money to pay for my unfinished student loans, half of rent, and a handful of groceries.

I smooth a strand of light brown, wavy hair away from my face and tuck it back into my long ponytail. When I pull my compact mirror from my worn, brown leather satchel, I stare at my tired, bright blue eyes. I tried every bit of eye cream and concealer to get rid of the tired bags beneath them, but the double shifts from the last two weeks have taken their toll.

“Here we go,” I say into the mirror before closing it and shoving it back into my old bag.

I stare up at the beautiful storefront. The glass windows display rows of elegant flowers and expensive bottles of perfume. Some from here, from Italy, from France. And hopefully, I’ll be able to work my way up to corporate ladder to travel to those designer firms and help with their marketing campaigns one day.

A girl can dream. For now.

“Let’s go sell bottles of Gwyneth Paltrow’s pussy,” I mumble, plastering on my best, fake smile as I walk up to the large, double glass doors with gold handles.

When I step inside Fleur de Femme, my nose is immediately assaulted with thousands of expensive, luxury scents. I want to fall into them, let them wrap around me tighter than this dress that’s definitely a size too small. The coffee stain is the least of my worries. I don’t want my ass to rip it open-

“Can I help you?” an attendant at the counter asks as I reach it.

She’s older, maybe in her forties. Her hair is blond and tightly gelled back into a perfect bun. Her lips are painted red and her white, crisp collared shirt is neatly

tucked into her tight, black pencil skirt. She wears a large, expensive watch and a single diamond ring on her middle finger. I spot the gold plated name tag on her breast and it reads Priscilla.

She looks me up and down, her assessing eyes traveling from my old satchel to the coffee stain on my dress. I smile sheepishly at her.

You're off to a great start, babe.

"Yes, um, hi," I stammer, gently placing my portfolio on the glass countertop.

She sneers at me, glancing down at my unpainted, overgrown fingernails that are in desperate need of a manicure.

"I'm here to speak with your hiring manager or someone that's in charge of the interviewing process--"

"That would be me." She cuts me off, the scrunch in her small nose high, making me worry that she might ruin her very obvious and expensive nose job, but I smile at her anyway.

"Great. My name is Lucille, Lucy for short." I chuckle nervously and she gives me a fake, judging smile as she nods slowly.

"Right, well." I remove the resume from the portfolio and slide it towards her.

"I used to be a student at NYU and I studied marketing that specialized in global sales. While I haven't finished my degree, and I've been working at a restaurant downtown for the last three years, I did used to intern at a small firm here in SoHo and I would love the chance to work for your--"

She holds up a firm hand and silences me instantly.

“I’ll pass this along to our store supervisor,” she says with a smile that looks very much like a sneer.

Don’t give up, Lucy. Keep trying.

“Is she here? I have some of my mock campaigns with me as well-” I try to explain, but she waves that very same hand that silenced me before.

“She’s in a very important meeting right now, but I’ll be sure to leave a message. Take care,” she says with that sneer as I stand there awkwardly in silence.

“Okay...um, well, thank you for your time,” I say as I turn on my heel, hoping my defeat doesn’t color my voice like it’s coloring my face right now.

She stops for a second, glancing down at my portfolio.

“Fairchild,” she reads, my last name rolling from her red painted lips.

“Say, you’re not related to Senator Michael Fairchild, are you?” she asks, her eyes sparkling just a little as I turn around and meet them.

I’m his disowned daughter I think, but I don’t say this. Not like they would know if I was disowned because no one really knows what I look like. I was too unruly, too unmanageable to bring out into the world for the public eye to view. My older sister was the perfect one. The rigid one, the obedient one. I was nothing but a wild child with her own thoughts and opinions.

“No, sorry. Just a...coincidence or common last name I guess,” I stammer as I smile and ramble nervously.

She nods, that disgust filling her dark eyes again.

I sigh as I turn and I swear that when I walk away from the counter I hear her crumpling that paper up, but I can't focus on that because as soon as I walk past the large display of samples near the winding staircase by the crystal chandelier, I think I see a ghost.

A very beautiful, familiar and distracting ghost.

Damien Reed.

My sister's husband, and owner of one of New York's largest enterprises.

He's talking with a woman in an expensive, tight red dress. Her hair is voluminous and the richest shade of brown, baring a very nice blowout that every woman dreams of having. He extends a long, suit-covered arm to fix the strand of expensive pearls around her neck. The sleeve of his jacket molds to his muscles and she's tilting her head back and laughing at something he says.

Which I know must be a fake laugh.

Because Damien Reed is not funny.

He's serious, cutthroat and very dark. He's a secretive man with many shadows trailing behind him. The only nice thing I've ever seen him do was for me. And that was one time nearly three years ago, right before my sister filed for divorce.

I run into the display shelf and knock several small bottles onto the marble floor.

"Shit!" I hiss, scrambling to bend down and pick them all up.

Priscilla walks over, her black heels clicking loudly against the marble floor.

“Ugh, just leave them,” she growls, but I continue to grab the bottles, hoping that I’m hidden and Damien’s not able to-

“Lucille?” I hear him call, his rich and deep voice rolling through me.

Don’t respond, don’t react.

“Lucy,” he says, but it doesn’t sound like my name, it sounds like a command.

Something that Damien is great at giving.

I leave the bottles and Priscilla and stand slowly, some of the hair from my ponytail falling in front of my eyes. I swipe it away with a nervous, breathless smile.

“Damien! Hi! I didn’t know I would run into you here,” I say as he looks me up and down, the woman in the red dress now standing behind him with a grimace that looks very similar to Priscilla’s.

“I’m working on a merger with Fleur de Femme,” he says and I try to keep my jaw from dropping.

A merger with a designer perfume company? God, the campaigns I could create-

“What are you doing here?” he asks, his eyes going from my face to the stain on my dress.

Lie.

“I’m um, well, I’m...” I look down at my scuffed heels and scattered bottles.

He would never believe that I'm buying an expensive bottle of perfume. Even if he didn't know that my parents cut me off, I definitely don't look like I could afford one of these. I look like an imposter. A try hard.

"Well, I'm applying for a job, but I need to get going to my other one. Business calls!" I say with a nervous smile.

"Hope you're well," I say as I start to back away.

He looks as beautiful as he always did. Tall, so unbelievably tall. His shoulders so broad that I swear they might rip through his tailored, designer suit. His skin is just as dark and golden as I remember, like he spent years lying in the sun. His black hair is still a little long and smoothed away from his unshaven face, something my older sister always hated, but I admired it. I liked that he was a little edgy, unkempt.

I liked the big, crooked nose that I was too afraid to ask about because it was definitely broken once. I liked the small scar that runs from his right, thick brow down to the top of his angular cheek. Something I was also too afraid to ask about.

Because Damien is ex-military, a former Marine, I've known not to mess with him since my sister brought him into the family. I was young when he came around. He's ten years older than my sister which makes him sixteen years older than me. When he knew me, I was barely a woman.

And when he saved me that night years ago, I was still barely a woman. A woman he never got to see again. Because after that night, Megan filed for divorce.

"And you, are you well?" Damien asks in a low voice, the baritone drawl rumbling through my veins.

His hazel eyes almost look golden in this lighting. Like the richest, most luxurious

treasure.

“Y-yes. I mean...no. My best friend just got engaged and I’ve been living on her couch so I guess that means no home for me.” I chuckle nervously as I swing my arm in a mock victorious pump.

He just stares at me, his eyes slightly narrowing.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know why I told you that. I shouldn’t even...shouldn’t even be talking to you. Megan would be upset,” I say, referring to my older sister that he once married.

His head tilts at that, a strand of his dark hair falling over the thick brow that bares his scar.

“And does your sister talk to you often? Does she know about your...situation?” he asks and my cheeks flush slightly with embarrassment.

“Not a lot and no, she doesn’t. Not like she would help anyway. Our parents would kill her for giving me any sort of handout. They cut both me and contact with me off a few years ago, so I’m not sure they would be pleased if she were to take me in.” I grimace and then shake my head, my ponytail skimming my back as I do.

“Again, sorry. Not sure why I’m telling you this.” I sigh as I rub my forehead, frustrated and defeated from today’s events.

“Look, I have to go. Thanks for...talking. Take care of yourself, Damien,” I say as I turn on my scuffed heel.

“You do the same, Lucille,” he says, my full name running across my skin like silk when he says it.

He's still your sister's husband. Get a hold of yourself, Lucy.

Technically he was her soon-to-be ex-husband , but that was irrelevant. Even if he never married my sister, I'm nothing but a street rat beneath him. He owns a successful firm. He's got more money than my own Senator father and I've more than likely given him a savior complex.

I rush out of Fleur de Femme and push out the big breath I didn't know I was holding when the large doors close behind me and the bustling sounds of Manhattan fill my ears.

I think back to that horrible night nearly three years ago. I was out for drinks with some friends on campus because I had just turned twenty-one. Someone must have spiked something because before I knew it, I was being dragged into an alley by some frat boy. Damien was visiting my sister for her graduation before she would leave for law school. He found me there, half naked from the waist down. My attacker apparently was just zipping up his pants and getting ready to abandon me when Damien found us and beat him within an inch of his life.

The boy got expelled. Damien's charges got dropped and I got pregnant. And when Megan and Damien split up only months later, my parents decided to split from me too. And then eventually, so did my unborn baby. I didn't last a full trimester before the pregnancy terminated on its own.

I was a grieving mother, trauma victim, alone, scared and a college dropout.

Jenni was the only one that helped me and to be honest, she's the only one that's ever helped me in my entire life. Although my parents were both rich and famous, my life was hell. I never fit their mold to begin with. Megan was clean, well put together, thin and proper. She went to school for law and found a job that pairs well with the family image. Her hair was dark like my mother's, cut and trimmed neatly right at her

shoulders. Her makeup was clean. Her nails always bore the same, perfect French tip manicure and she only ate a few almonds and leafy salads at major dinners. Or really at all.

I was wild, joyous, curious and innocent. I didn't want to deal with dirty people or dirty money. I wanted to be good. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to travel the world. I wanted to eat every bit of delicious food I could find, soak in every culture and experience. I wanted to live life fully. The mousy brown haired, curvy, eager girl could never fit into the shadowy family she was born into. They were waiting my entire life to cut me off. To be rid of me.

And now, after today, I wish I could be rid of myself as well.

"Of course he would show up today of all days," I growl as I start to walk down the busy Manhattan street, cursing the man that has plagued my thoughts and made me question my morals for years.

"Fucking Damien Reed."

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two

Damien

I watch Lucille Fairchild walk out of Fleur de Femme wearing a tight fitting wrap dress that has my mind traveling to a million places.

One of those places is back to her sister, who is supposed to be meeting with my lawyer and I to go over the finalization of our divorce papers. And the other place...is forbidden.

She filed the papers three years ago and since then, it's been a battle of back and forth. Partly because I've had more important matters to tend to, mostly because she only filed them for attention. To get a rise out of me I suppose. Our relationship had been dead for so long that I wonder if it had ever been alive in the first place.

But Lucille...she is very much alive. Alive and much more of a woman than I remember her to be. The once meek and quiet girl with constant smiles that were forever shut down by her family has now morphed into a very...interesting adult. A nervous adult. A woman shrouded in poverty which is confusing because I know the family that she comes from.

A family of power. Of wealth and greed and an intricate list of connections that I was lucky to have in my back pocket for so long.

“Mr. Reed, did you hear me?” Allison Mayfield asks.

I turn to her and nod quietly, grabbing her hand to shake it gently.

“I did, miss, thank you. I’ll be in contact with you and your team shortly. My assistant will send over the calendar to schedule our meeting for the proposal,” I say as she thrusts her chest out slightly, giving me a view of her ample and fake tits in her dress.

I lean forward and kiss her cheek. She smells of designer perfume, a lot of it. The scent is as overpowering as this store.

I never understood why women want to layer themselves in expensive, scented alcohol when the natural scent of a woman is beautiful enough. But that question doesn’t really matter. Not when this merger is set to make me at least another three million.

The truth is, I don’t need money. I have plenty of it.

What I need is a distraction and also a reason for the copious amounts of money that I do have. Mergers like these, sales and purchases of these companies, are nothing but ploys. Little covers to keep people like my ex-wife’s father and my own father out of my back pocket.

I pull away from Allison and nod at her and the blond woman that I watched sneer at Lucille. I exit the store and as soon as my shoes hit the sidewalk, my phone starts ringing in my pocket.

“Christ,” I growl to the sky.

I just want one moment. One moment of peace and quiet.

“Yes, Bruno,” I say as I press the phone to my ear.

“Megan and the attorney are at the loft,” he says, and I sigh heavily into the phone.

“Of course they are. Tell the driver I’m ready.” I’m not surprised in the slightest that she’s there an hour before she’s supposed to be.

I adjust my watch on my wrist and fix the lapel of my dark blue Armani suit as I wait for the car in front of the store. My designer shoes stomp on something as I walk further onto the sidewalk. When I bend down and retrieve the piece of paper that I stepped on, I realize it’s just a random resume. I’m about to crumple it and toss it, but my eyes latch on the name Fairchild.

This is Lucille’s resume.

I look at the bare work history, from when she worked as a file sorter for the local library in high school, up to her internship at the Lucas Brothers firm. I see her current job as a bartender, but there is no name. Just the name of her supervisor. Her education ended three years ago and I realize that it’s impossible for her to graduate in just a few years, which means she dropped out.

Which means that either her family is no longer paying for her schooling, or something happened. Which would explain the job at some random bar that I will find the name of.

Truthfully, as much as a headache that her older sister is, Lucille’s current trajectory is making me curious. After all, I do have some lingering interest in her father and his business, although I’ve never fully been able to trust the man. And while I no longer have the desire to deal with her sister, Lucille might be the perfect way back into this family. She might be the greatest ploy of them all.

“Poor little Lucy,” I say as I fold the resume and place it in my pocket.

It must be awful for her to always be in the middle of her family's crossfire, but I don't care. Her father owes me an obscene amount of money for his most recent campaign, money that I intend to collect without the knowledge of his bitchy eldest daughter. And since he's been trying to evade me, I think it's time for me to remind him that he's still in a bit of debt. Even if he could have the feds snooping around my offices and homes.

Because Megan not only filed those papers for attention, but also because her father was sticking his nose into my business when I left the military and came into money. He had way too many suspicions and way too many questions. I think it's time for me to collect my money and keep his nose away from my life once and for all.

After all, nobody wants a politician snooping around the leader of a cartel business. Not really the wisest decision to make, but Michael Fairchild isn't truly a smart man.

My driver arrives and I slide into the back seat of my blacked-out BMW. When he speeds off down the streets of Manhattan, I unfold the resume from my pocket. I punch the name of Lucy's current supervisor in a text to Bruno.

Find out what this man owns.

I hit send and then stare out the window as we drive from Fleur de Femme, all the way to my apartment where the wicked witch of the west awaits.

* * *

"There you are," Megan Fairchild purrs as she walks towards me in a dark gray pencil dress and black heels.

She's always dressed modestly, never showing her chest because she doesn't have much chest to show. Every dress clings to her small, thin frame just slightly, because

she barely ever eats. She's practically a skeleton with a dark brown bob and even darker eyes.

At one point, I used to find her beautiful. Stunning even. The classic, clean beauty that many men often fall for when they're looking for a wife. And I was. I was looking for security, for a way in. And I found it with Megan Allison Fairchild. But over time, she grew cold and her appearance matched it tenfold. She slowly began to morph into her mother and now, she's even worse.

She's an ice queen in a slightly baggy, dark gray pencil dress and honestly, I can't wait to get rid of her.

"You're early," I say as I slide off my suit jacket and place it on the marble kitchen island.

She stares at the tattoos on my arms as I roll up my black sleeves, a slight frown pinching her thin brows together. She hates my tattoos and the way I keep my hair. Hates the scar on my face and the beard as well, which is exactly why I keep those things. Like a human using garlic to ward off a vampire.

But still, her dark eyes travel from my forearms to the top of my chest that's exposed from the buttons that are undone from my black dress shirt that's tucked neatly into my tailored pants. She assesses me from head to toe and while usually I enjoy women admiring me, this one I want to throw off my balcony.

"Aren't you going to say hello? I haven't seen you in months and you've been ignoring my phone calls." She pouts and I want to slap that spoiled, entitled look right from her thin lips, but I refrain.

We're supposed to be civil. And if biting my tongue and squaring my jaw means that these papers will get finalized today and she will be out of my life forever, then so be

it.

Plus, I've got another Fairchild that piqued my interest.

One that's quiet, moldable. One that's gullible enough to believe my bullshit and not question my fucking business like this one does.

One that's not thin like this one, but has curves all throughout her athletic body. One with bright blue eyes and mousy brown hair. One with freckles that dust over her small nose and pink, full lips made to be wrapped around a man's-

"Earth to Damien. Are you going to respond?" She hisses like the serpent she is and I rip my mind away from the strange thoughts I have of her younger sister.

"Hello, Megan. How are you?" I say as I rub my jaw, my fingers scratching my short beard as she rolls her eyes and walks away from me.

"Fine, not like you care. I'm early because I wanted to review some things in the paperwork before we finalize," she says as she smooths her hands over her dress.

Of course she does.

Because why would she ever make things simple or let go of the past?

"Damien, this is my colleague, Brian. An attorney at my firm. He's come to review some things with us alongside...Adrian." She sneers as she looks over at the attorney I've had for the past ten years.

She's very ballsy. Staring at a man like that who could snap her neck in under a second, but who I am I to warn her? She's not my wife anymore. She's never really been mine to protect anyway.

I've got bigger priorities. Ones more important than Megan Fairchild.

He leans back in his chair at my table, eyes narrowing on the witch that stands in my dining room. A blond man appears from the corner and walks towards Megan. His hand wraps around her thin waist in an all-too friendly gesture as she pats his light gray suit.

Oh yeah, they're fucking.

And thank God for that.

"Mr. Reed," Adrian starts, "I was not aware there would be another lawyer present," he says in an agitated tone, equally ready to be done with this as I am.

"Neither was I," I growl as I pour myself a glass of scotch from the kitchen counter.

I carry it with me to the long, glass dining table set in front of the floor to ceiling windows that overlook Manhattan.

It's a beautiful loft, one that I've made home since she's been living in our house in upstate New York. Never mind the apartment she still has near the firm.

Brian sits at the table and I give him no reaction. Quite honestly, I've got no problem that he's fucking my soon-to-be ex-wife. We haven't had sex in years, even though she's tried many times. Her horrid personality has made her unattractive to me. And I know she only wants to fuck me for money or gifts.

I hope he's fucking her. Because I hate her. And I want her out of my life.

For good.

“I want to renegotiate the house,” she says as she stands above Brian, asserting her dominance and playing the role of Alpha that she never got to play with me.

Because I would rip her fucking head off if she tried to. And she doesn’t like that.

She wants men she can toy with, manipulate. Men that will give her puppy eyes and say please and follow her around like a dehydrated dog.

Men that I never was or ever will be.

“You can have it,” I say as I sip my scotch and turn my chair to look down at the city below.

She scoffs.

“You’re playing with me. Be serious, Damien, we need to get this done,” she says in a fake, exhausted tone.

Because she’s trying to play the role of the victim. She’s trying to make it seem like I am the one that’s dragged this on for the past three years.

But she’s not. And quite frankly, I don’t care how she feels or how she acts.

And I definitely don’t give a shit about some house that she had one hundred percent control of. The design is trash to begin with. It lost market value from her reconstruction alone.

I look at her over my shoulder as I cross a leg over my knee, sipping my scotch as I sigh in annoyance.

“Exactly,” I growl, my voice dropping an octave.

“Which is why you can have it,” I say as I drain the contents of my glass.

“I’m sorry, uh, what?” She laughs nervously, glancing down at Brian and Adrian in confusion.

“You can take the house and everything inside of it, Megan,” I say as I look down at my phone that vibrates with a text from Bruno.

Found him , it says, with an address of the place where Lucille works. When I open it, I try to hide my shock as I stare at the risque establishment the youngest Fairchild daughter is employed at.

“Matter of fact,” I say as I close the text and slide the phone back into the tight pocket of my dark blue suit pants.

I reach for the papers near Adrian’s hand and pull them to me. I sign every line on my set of divorce papers and I slide them right back to my attorney, not once glancing at my ex-wife and her fuck toy.

“She can have anything else she wants,” I say to Adrian, no longer speaking to her as she scoffs and throws an airy temper tantrum with nothing but sighs.

“Except for my key to the penthouse. You will take that from her before she leaves here today. It was never in the contract to begin with and I’m in no mood to deal with her antics today. I have important matters to attend to,” I say to my attorney as Megan tries to get my attention.

I remove myself from the table and walk to grab my suit jacket. When I slide it on and head for the door, her heels click angrily against the floor as she marches up to me and grabs me.

I turn then, giving her a very lethal, and angry stare as she swallows nervously while I dust her frail hand from my suit.

That's right, princess. I'm in control here. I always have been.

"You got what you wanted. Now don't show your face here again. That's a warning," I say in a low, gravelly tone.

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water, but I don't stick around to listen to any other useless words she might have for me. I walk out of the loft and slam the door in her face.

I dial Bruno as I walk down the hall and step into the elevator.

"Yes, boss," he says as I descend down to the main floor.

"I have an assignment for you," I say. The elevator makes it to the lobby, Lucille Fairchild and her innocent face now fully on my mind and my agenda.

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three

Lucy

Okay, so I work at a sex club.

And that's the only reason why my best friend Jenni is pissed at me as I walk into the living room of her apartment.

Not because of the coffee stain on her silk, wrap dress, but because I'm choosing to go bartend at a sex club instead of going out to celebrate her engagement.

"I'm sorry, Jenni. But I need the money. I didn't get another job today and I've got to find a place ASAP. And I'm also sorry for the dress." I grimace as she sighs and pulls me down onto the same couch that I've been sleeping on for three years.

"You know I can ask Doug for you to come with us. You don't have to be on your own. I'm always here to help," she says as she leans her head on my shoulder.

I'm not going to be the reason her fiancé leaves her. I've been a burden for too many people all of my life. I won't do it to her either.

"I'm not going to third wheel it and be the mooch on your guest bed while you plan a wedding and finally move in with the love of your life, Jen. I can't do it and it wouldn't be a good, friendly thing for me to do when I'm supposed to be the one supporting you and helping you through one of the happiest moments of your life." I sigh as I smooth her silky black hair from her face.

Jenni Lee is one of the most beautiful people I've ever met, both in and out. Her parents are Korean immigrants and have pushed her to become a doctor since she was a child. And even though her dream was to be an actress, when her mom got cancer, she continued down the path she laid out for her. And now, she's going into med school. She's getting married. She's living the life her mother always hoped for her to have, and I can't be the one to hold her back from that. I won't be.

"I'm sorry I can't make it tonight, but I will ask Bob if I can either get off early so we can celebrate when you get back here, or I'll get someone to cover half of my shift tomorrow, either way, I'll figure something out. Promise," I say as I hold my pinkie up for her.

She smiles against my shoulder and takes it.

"I don't care about you not making it or the coffee stain on the dress, you know. I care about your wellbeing, Lucy. You're tired. Exhausted even. I don't want you to continue down this path when you deserve so much more." She sighs.

"Tell that to the bitch at Fleur de Femme," I groan and she shoots up immediately.

"What happened?" She frowns and I sink into the couch and stare at the ceiling.

"Well, for starters, she threw my resume out as soon as I left the counter. And second...I ran into someone," I say, swallowing tightly as my sister's beautiful ex-husband invades my mind once more.

"Who?" she asks, and I look at her from the corner of my eye.

"Damien. Damien Reed," I say and she gasps, her small hands covering her mouth as her new, solitaire diamond engagement ring stares me right in the face.

I don't know why, but the sight of it makes me want to cry. And not because I'm happy for my best friend, but because I'm selfish. Selfish and miserable and wondering why my life led me here when all I ever wanted to be was good, when all I ever tried to be was good.

"Megan's Damien?" she says in mock horror.

"The one and only," I say, and she rolls her eyes and drops her hands.

"Lucy, who gives a shit. He's her ex-husband and that bitch has done nothing for you anyway. Good riddance to them both," she says, but I fall silent and she stares at me.

"Lucy, you can't actually still have some crush on him. Be serious-" she starts, but I cut her off.

"He saved me that night, Megan," I say, and her eyes darken as she remembers that nightmare I lived. She's the one that picked me up from the hospital after.

She brought me here when no one else called, when no one else cared. Not even Damien. Not even the man who pulled that monster off me.

"Wait, is this your first time seeing him since that night?" she asks and I nod slowly, tears threatening to blur my vision, but I shove them back.

"Oh, Luce. I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking-" I shake my head at her as she stammers.

"No, don't be. You didn't know. Plus, I did have some stupid little crush on him growing up, didn't I?" I say with a sheepish smile as she laughs.

"Oh, the biggest. And the worst. Not that I blame you, the man is a god. Like if Aaron Diaz doubled in size and became a scruffy, tatted marine." She sighs as she

once again refers to him as a muscular version of her favorite TV crush.

“Alright, I have to get ready now,” I say, ready to end this conversation about Damien and end all thoughts about him for good actually.

“Lucy,” she says as she grabs my hand when I get up from the couch.

Her dark, pretty eyes stare intensely into mine.

“I’m serious. Do not sell yourself short. Keep putting yourself out there. In the ways that matter. In the ways that serve you better, not make you worse,” she says and I nod, offering her a tight smile before I turn around and head to the makeshift closet next to the front door.

I grab my favorite pair of worn, black leather knee high boots alongside my black shorts and work tank top. Velvet Lounge has a very...loose dress code for the staff, especially for the bartenders on the main floor. While many of the girls wear skimpy dresses and fish nets, or just pasties with panties and heels, I opt out for the most modest thing I can get away with. Which is short shorts, a low cut tank and knee high leather boots.

I take my belongings into the bathroom and step into the shower. The hot water sprays down over me and I sigh into it and melt away, hoping my stress melts with me, but it doesn’t. In fact, my thoughts of Damien grow stronger now. His hazel eyes plague my mind as the memory of him in that tight-fitted, dark blue suit with his black shirt undone unravels me. I’d be a fool to say that today was the first time I’ve thought of him. In truth, I’ve thought of him every single night for the last three years. Both in my dreams and in my nightmares.

Jenni was right, I did have a big stupid crush on him as a girl. And it changed when I grew into womanhood. It changed because I got attacked. It changed because he’s the

one who rescued me after he beat that monster to the ground and took him far away from me. It changed because he's the one who brought me to the hospital.

And then it changed because I never heard from him again. Because he never called or checked up on me. Not when I was discharged, not when I found out that I was pregnant. Not when my parents kicked me out, not when Megan turned her back on me. And not when I lost the baby either. And sure, he was going through a divorce with my sister. He left his high-ranking job in the military. He funded a new, multi-million-dollar company and he lost himself to the dark ways of the world. He had his own demons to worry about. Mine didn't need to add to them.

But I would be lying if I said I didn't resent him for it. That I didn't hate him for never speaking to me again during the hardest part of my recovery. That I didn't hate him for saving me in the first place.

Now, every night that the monster comes back to haunt me, Damien shows up. Sometimes like a knight in shining armor, most times like the devil. Taunting me, calling me weak while I lay on the damp ground of the alleyway. His hazel eyes burn into me while his scar reddens. While that same stupid, beautiful strand of dark hair falls over his eye and caresses his tan cheek.

"I fucking hate you," I say to both him and the monster, for two more men that have failed me in my life.

And now, I whisper this in the shower as I stand under the water that mixes with my tears. My hands ball into fists at my sides as I let the tears fall and the anger out in the small space of the apartment shower. Today was taxing, it made me feel both defeated and worthless and it once again brought back the trauma that I've never been able to address. It made me feel exactly how I felt every single day in the house I grew up in. Unfit and unworthy.

I step out and dress into my clothes as I let my long hair down. It's naturally wavy and dries fairly quickly. Usually by the time I'm done with my twenty-minute walk from the apartment to VL, it's already dry. Thankfully, one less thing to worry about. Not like I wear much makeup anyway. My father always hated it and I was only allowed to wear a simple, light blush and gloss along with mascara. Nothing more, nothing less. And because I don't have a lot of spare cash, I've stuck with that very simple makeup routine.

I dress and leave the apartment, sliding on my silver bangles and cheap bracelets as I head out the door and down the sidewalk. The sun is setting over the skyscrapers and I glance down at the silver plated, twenty-dollar watch and realize that I'm a few minutes behind. I rush as fast as I can, but as I do, I feel an anxious, burning feeling in the skin of my back. Like someone is watching me. And not only watching, but following.

I've always known to stay on high alert since moving downtown. People get taken every day here even in broad daylight, but I've never had this feeling before and right now, it has me walking even quicker down the busy Manhattan sidewalk. I turn to look over my shoulder as I see that VL is straight ahead. I see an unmarked, black SUV following a few taxis.

"Probably just another high profile celebrity," I mumble as I reach the Velvet Lounge.

The bouncer nods as I walk inside. When I enter the lobby, the lights are already dimmed and red, waiting for the crowd to enter and create yet another busy Friday night.

I make my way to the bar and start setting up. My bracelets chime against the glasses and my hair continues to fall in front of my face. I tuck a few strands behind my ear and start to polish a wine glass when a couple walks in and heads for the elevator.

The man is much older than the woman and quite frankly, much richer looking. Which isn't a shock. I see it every night that I'm here.

The Velvet Lounge isn't your ordinary nightclub or bar or even sex club. It's a place that's been divided both for Manhattan's richest and the youngest. While many people come to the bar for overpriced, specialized martinis and imported wine, most of them come for a separate club upstairs. I've seen so many people walk through these doors and go straight to that elevator. I assume it's almost like the red light district up there. I'm not entirely sure because I've never actually been up there.

My boss has tried to get me to cover some shifts at the bar up there or even train as a cocktail waitress, but I have zero interest in looking at mostly naked women walking around with drink trays as people fuck all around them and I also don't want to be one of them. I haven't even had sex or been intimate with anyone. The attack I suffered through all those years ago was the first introduction I've ever had to intimacy, and I vowed it would be the last.

So, working at the bar beneath a sex club seems a bit abstract, but it was the only place within walking distance of Jenni's apartment that would hire me. And I've been here ever since. Pouring wine for old men, shaking martinis for bachelorette parties that giggle as we drown out the thumping noises from upstairs, and smiling through the endless comments that men make about taking me up to that space where the thumping resides.

It's all so fucked in its own way, but it looks like I'm stuck here for the time being, so I have no choice but to deal with it. And thankfully, my entire shift goes by smoothly. Most of the men took the elevator up and the bachelorette parties were minimal. Just a bunch of comers and goers looking for a quick drink after work to start the weekend and at least that is something that I can be thankful for, even if it means that I'm getting out of here past one in the morning.

I load up the trash and carry the bags with me outside after I close down the bar and swing my satchel over my shoulder, my long hair falling in my face as I haul the garbage with me to the back door where the dumpster is. I toss all of my belongings and say good night to the cooks who stare at my tits a little longer than I'd like as I make my way around the club and to the busy streets of Manhattan.

But when I do, when I turn the corner and make my way up the very short and quiet road around the building, I feel that same, anxious burning feeling I felt on my way here earlier. And it has me shuffling in my heeled boots and tucking my hair away from my face once more as it threatens to cloud my view. But it's useless. My attempt to both scurry and clear my line of sight. It's all useless because as soon as I look up, I find that I'm staring into a pair of dark, expensive looking sunglasses. A very tall, broad-shouldered man is leaning against a blacked-out SUV. I freeze in place and look around, hoping that someone, anyone walks by so that if I scream, they can help me.

But that doesn't last. I don't even have a chance to back away because that large, broad-shouldered man with a slicked back ponytail is grabbing me by the arms with a tight grip and shoving me into the vehicle.

"Hello, Lucille," he says as he tosses me in the back seat and gets in beside me.

"There's someone that would like to meet with you," is all he says before he pulls a gun from his belt.

All I remember is my eyes widening in fear and terror lacing its way through my veins before he slams that very gun into the side of my head and knocks me out cold.

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four

Damien

Bruno hauls her into the office of my penthouse and throws her down on the dark green, velvet chaise next to the black, floating coffee table.

It is fairly dark here, except for the bright light of downtown Manhattan that shines through the abundant windows. We're standing twenty stories above the city, and I bought this place for both the view and the fact that the walls are made of windows that can easily be covered if I felt like anyone was watching from twenty stories to begin with.

I bought out the entire top floor and had it renovated into my own living space equipped with five bedrooms, one office, a gym, a study and even a sunroom with access to the pool on the balcony. The one luxury I've allowed myself while I gave practically everything else away to the sister of the girl that's passed out on my chaise right now. Megan can keep the house. The loft. The cars. But I get this safe haven. I get the businesses that I bought once she filed the papers. And now, I get the sister that she never wanted.

"How long has she been out?" I ask Bruno as I lean on the marble, black bar across from my desk.

"About twenty minutes. I got her pretty good, but I'd say she'll probably be waking up here soon," he says as he removes his sunglasses and cleans them with the bottom of his black tee shirt.

“Lovely. You can keep watch in the lobby. I’ll call if I need you,” I say, and he nods as he slides the shades back on and taps on his earpiece.

“Stand guard by the elevator in the penthouse and lobby,” he says to my men before he turns on his heel and leaves the room.

I lock the tall, black door and walk back to the bar where I pour myself a stiff glass before making my way back to my desk that’s several feet away from where sleeping beauty lays.

When I approach her on the way, I get a clear view of Lucille Fairchild and I realize that she is no sleeping beauty whatsoever. In fact, right now, she looks more like a cheap hooker. Her tank top is cut low and reveals part of her black, lacy bra that covers her ample breasts. Her shorts nearly kiss the tops of her thighs and her scuffed boots wrap around her delicate, pale ankles. Her light brown, long hair is thrown over her face and her abundant, cheap bracelets dangle as her arm falls limply to her side, fingers skimming the floor.

I smooth her wavy tresses away to reveal her face. I don’t know why, but I am pleased to see that she’s not wearing a cheap, heavy amount of make up to match this horrid look. Her face is nearly bare, showcasing both her youthfulness and abundance of freckles that trail from her cheeks to her button nose. Her lips are full and parted, those nearly exposed breasts rising and falling as small puffs of air leave her delicate lips.

She’s never looked like this before. I remember her as an awkward girl. A meek little thing that would often hide in her room or be found smiling in the library or garden. She always preferred the pretty, mundane things in life. Nothing at all like her sister.

And she’s definitely nothing like her sister now. The girl that I barely knew has now aged into a beautiful young woman. A beautiful young woman that apparently only

owns stained dresses and cheap, revealing clothes.

I walk away from her and sit at my desk, staring at her files as I sip my scotch and listen to the ticking clock and dark wind that blows against the windows of my office.

Lucille Rosyln Fairchild

25 years, born in Hartford, CT

Father Michael Fairchild, Senator of New York

Mother Ann Fairchild, CEO of Trust Bank

The file is both plain and simple, much like her. Michael Fairchild had kept his youngest daughter away from the world for the majority of her life mostly because of her inability to morph into a cold ice queen like her sister and mother, but also because she was born out of an affair, something not many people know, including her.

I don't know why Michael told me this. Maybe it was the copious amounts of Johnny Walker or the endless amounts of women covered in diamonds that would parade around him in nothing but thongs in the basement of his office in the upper west side. Maybe it was because he wanted to brag that he not only fucked his intern, but also got her pregnant and paid her a large amount of hush money to keep her quiet. Shitty for him, her bargain was that he would keep the child and raise her, since she wasn't even a college graduate yet. Ann never said a word, then again, I'm sure it was something she was used to.

Politicians are known for both scandals and affairs, as are wealthy businessmen like my father. The wives either bow their heads and keep quiet, or they have their own, or they're sent away and are unable to be found like my own mother. Rich assholes

like Lucille's father and my own father can get away with whatever they want, because money and power allow them to.

And yes, I could be the same way. With the wealth I've obtained over the last year, I have earned just as much power as these men, if not more, because of the line of work I am in. Because of the leader I have become.

So, maybe that's why Michael Fairchild confided in me all those years ago about the child that he created from infidelity. Because he knows I could be just like him. Or that I'm worse.

Which, in truth, I am. I am much, much worse than Michael Fairchild. But I do it for a reason, not for political gain.

I do it to establish a hierarchy, to maintain law and order within the world I have found.

I do it because a leader like myself has no choice but to be powerful and cutthroat in this game. It's either kill or be killed in my line of work. And from being Chief of Special Operations in the Marine Corps and being the leader I am now, I've killed many people in my thirty-eight years of life. I've seen so much blood, so much loss, so much grief. I've lived through my own grief. And that's exactly why I'm in the position I am in today. Because of men like Michael Fairchild and my father. Because not only did my father have an affair and keep the child, but he also sent my mother away to a place filled with nothing but war and famine.

And that's why I joined the military. That's why I asked to be deployed to Mexico. Because I found a file much like Lucille's in my father's drawer. Except this file belonged to my banished mother. Who not only lives in Mexico, but in the most dangerous part.

I climbed the ranks quickly as a Marine and I had but one mission, to be head of special operations that oversaw illegal criminal activity, drug trafficking and border patrol. You see, my birth mother not only lived in a dangerous place, but she worked for dangerous people.

People like Eduardo Aguilar. The most powerful, dangerous, head leader of the most notorious group in the world, The AG Cartel.

I didn't expect to meet this man. Hell, my only goal was to infiltrate his group and shut down all operations in hopes of rescuing my mother, but when I met her while on a brief leave, she was happy where she was. She was fed, clothed, with a roof over her head and enough protection to keep her out of harm's way as long as she did her job and pledged her loyalty, something my father not only failed to do, but refused to do.

So, I not only met Eduardo, I befriended him. I was ashamed of my government and did not agree with the heinous things that were done or handled at the border. And with The AG, I at least understood why they did what they did. They were businessmen, plain and simple. And if anyone got in the way of their business, if anyone threatened their business or the safety of their family, they would take care of it. It was justified. And that's exactly why I went undercover and started working with them whilst staying in the Marines.

I gave them every bit of warning, every bit of information that I could give in order to let their people cross safely and also get their product by. Did the drugs bother me? No, not really. Did the guns? No, not really. Because as justified as some of their actions were, I'm still a piece of shit. I still thrive on chaos and brutality. It's exactly why I joined the military in the first place. My rage that I've had since childhood needed some place to go.

And now, my rage is amplified. Because just this year, my dear friend Eduardo was

brutally murdered in front of his family by the CIA. Something I had absolutely no idea about, because I had left the military nearly three years ago to work for him.

And because we were good friends, because I proved and pledged my loyalty to him, he left his throne to me. He left his business for me to run and with that, he left me all of his mess and all of his bullshit.

Because the CIA doesn't quit. People like Michael Fairchild do not quit. People like my own father do not quit. They sniff around and stick their noses in places they don't belong. And right now, I've got many noses sniffing in places they don't need to fucking be.

Which is exactly why I need to be in good graces not only with a trusted, all-American family, but a particularly strong one at that.

I couldn't stay married to Megan, it was too dangerous because she became a narc herself. And though her father owes me an obscene amount of money and I know all of his secrets, he's also a danger, because he's a nosy bastard.

So, now, I have the next best thing, slowly waking from my dark green chaise in my office. I have the outcast of the family, the girl no one wanted that still bears the blood of a trusted, all-American family. One with many secrets that would tarnish their reputation.

One that I can marry and maintain a very clean, rich image with to keep the feds out of my ass and her father humbled.

I have found the greatest merger of all.

"Good evening, Lucille," I say as she rises from the chaise and looks around in confusion, her eyes widening in horror when she finally spots me.

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five

Lucy

When I awake in a large, dark penthouse, I must admit that I'm not only confused.

I'm mortally petrified.

"Hello, Lucille," his voice says from the far side of the room.

His eyes are pinned on me in the dark, only the lights of the city beneath us illuminating his face.

But I don't need to see his face to know who he is.

I've memorized his voice for years on end. I've heard it in both my dreams and nightmares.

And now, I hear it, taunting me as I blink away the haze and migraine that overwhelm my mind.

The last thing I remember is leaving my work and being abducted by some strange man in sunglasses. I don't remember where we went, how we got here, hell, I don't even remember what he used to knock me out.

I lift my hand and feel around my temple where the soreness pulses. A tender, swollen lump rests on the side of my head and I do my best not to panic.

I've survived Damien Reed once, I can do it again.

"Why am I here, Damien?" I whisper, trying my best to sound bored or at the very least annoyed.

Definitely not afraid.

But, I'm not so sure he believes me. Especially when my voice cracks on the last word.

He smiles at me, teeth gleaming white. It's not a particularly happy smile. In fact, it resembles a wolf baring its teeth right before it snaps its jaw on its prey.

And right now it seems that not only is Damien the hunter, but I am his prey.

I stand still by the chaise. The dark green, velvet fabric is taking up my vision and I let it practically swallow me whole. I keep my eyes fixed on it because I refuse to look back up at the beautiful monster who's trapped me here.

"What, you don't like my penthouse?" He scoffs in fake disgust and my fist balls at my side while the other presses into my throbbing head.

"I'd like it better if you would've simply invited me," I hiss as tears start to well behind my eyes.

Don't cry. Don't let him see your fear.

"You know I'm not one for formal invitations," he growls, and I sniff back the terrified tears that threaten to fall.

He's right. He's never been the type for any of the invitations my family was so fond

of giving. He practically never showed to any of my father's lavish and over-done events. I would hear Megan bitching and moaning to her aristocrat friends about it over too many martinis while I would draw in my notebook in the corner.

He's also not the type to enjoy any bit of formality.

In fact, when I saw him in the store earlier today, it was the first time I had seen him look so sophisticated. He hates suits. Hates styling his wild, dark hair. Megan would bitch and nag about that too.

Damien likes to be wild through and through. He thrives off being unkempt and free. He's not one to conform or be told what to do. Which surprised me when he married my older sister. She is nothing but control. All law and order. As is the rest of my family.

But I'm getting sidetracked here.

I can't forget that this wild man not only divorced my sister, but he just had one of his men knock me unconscious and kidnap me.

"I'm assuming the door is probably bolted." I sigh and he clicks his tongue at me.

"Smart girl," he praises, but it doesn't sound much like praise at all.

"And there's probably a line of guards spread all throughout," I say as I rub my forehead, trying to scrub the migraine away.

"You'd guess right," he says, and I scoff.

"My father trained you well, I see," I say with a humorless, clipped laugh.

And that gets a reaction out of him.

An angry one at that.

He gets up quickly as he slams his hands on the desk. A glass shatters on the floor and I jump from the sound.

“Let’s get one thing straight, princess.” He sneers and I want to roll my eyes at the nickname.

After all this time, I’m still nothing but a child to him.

“That man taught me nothing. Your family did nothing for me. Nothing but raise hell for me,” he growls, and I look up at him, hate blazing in my eyes.

“That’s a lot coming from you, Damien. They did more for you than they ever did for me, and I was their fucking daughter,” I say with both of my fists balled at my sides now as anger seeps through me.

“God, you’re just as spoiled as Megan. I’m surprised you’re no longer together. You really are the perfect pair!” I shout and move away quickly.

I rush to the door, not caring if it’s locked. Not caring if there are guards standing outside of it. If I die here, then I’ll die trying. I’ll die screaming for help even though no one will hear me.

Not like anyone ever has anyway.

He catches me before I reach the handle. He hauls me back and slams me against the marble counter adjacent to the doorway. The edge digs into my spine and I yelp before he clamps his hand down over my mouth.

He looks into my eyes, his pupils so largely dilated that they almost look black. No trace of that beautiful hazel in sight.

“You’re lucky I don’t slap you for that,” he growls as his face inches closer to mine.

My eyes widen as his hand clamps down harder. There is nothing in my view but him. Right now, my entire world consists of Damien Reed and I hate every moment of it.

“You’ve spent your whole life playing the role of the victim that not once have you realized that you’re no better than them. You’re just as spoiled. Always whining and crying because how could anything possibly happen to a Fairchild?” He growls and the tears I tried to keep at bay spring forward now.

Because that is the furthest thing from the truth.

This man doesn’t know me. Doesn’t know the abuse or struggle I’ve survived through. All on my own.

But that’s not what hurts.

What hurts is that he said that, all the while remembering the night he saved me from the most sadistic attack I’ve ever endured, putting my father’s drunken fist to shame.

He saw me on the ground of that alley. He watched the man zip his pants and kick me to make sure I was still breathing. And then he practically beat him to death.

How could he say those things after that night?

He watches the tears fall from my eyes and wet the skin of his rough fingers that press down over my mouth. He doesn’t soften from them. He doesn’t apologize or

realize the true effect of his words. In fact, I don't think he's even capable of understanding the gravity of them. Because right now, I don't think he's staring at Lucy Fairchild.

I feel like he's looking at my sister.

He thinks I'm her even though I'm nothing like her.

"You're nothing special, Lucille," he spits.

"You had everything handed to you. Everything I have, this empire I've built, has come from blood, sweat and tears. Not a spec of it came from your father. Not a dime," he seethes, and there's so much anger in his eyes, so much malice and hatred that it staggers me.

I always suspected Damien was involved with... much darker things. I mean, my father's a politician, he thrives off dirty work. This isn't news to me.

What Damien is involved in is much heavier, much more sinister. I can see it in his eyes and around this expensive penthouse suite. This must be what Megan saw, what my father was suspicious of.

And as evil and conniving as my family is, I have this intense feeling that Damien Reed is much, much worse.

He stares at me long and hard, his eyes traveling from mine to my tear-stained cheeks. He sneers then and rips his hand free from my mouth. I gasp like a fish out of water when he does.

He pulls away, dusting off the sleeves of his jacket and straightening his lapels.

I can't help but wonder who this man is. I knew he was an asshole, but when did he morph into a rich asshole wearing a designer suit?

Megan must have really left an impression on him.

"Now," he starts as he runs a hand through his slicked back, dark hair.

"Instead of throwing a temper tantrum, why don't you let me explain why you're here," he says as he walks from me to the chaise opposite from the one I woke up on.

I rub at my mouth, desperate to wipe any bit of him off me. But it's no use. His words have branded my soul and the damage cannot be undone. What I can do is wipe the tears.

I don't know why I let myself cry in front of him. To be quite honest, I've never cried in front of anyone except for my best friend. Not in front of my father when he would punish me. Not in front of my mother when she would berate me. Not in front of my sister when she would belittle me. I didn't even sob in front of my attacker, even though I wanted to. And I definitely didn't cry in front of the doctor when I was going through an active miscarriage.

Truth be told, I think I've been so numb throughout my life that my body has reserved my tears for when I'm alone. But tonight...my body has betrayed me. Damien has somehow cracked through the brick wall of numbness I usually have up and some of that fear and sorrow leaked out, right onto his hand.

He doesn't seem to care about it though. He watches me through narrowed eyes, annoyance evident in his gaze. He crosses one long leg over his knee and leans back on the chaise, arms stretched across the velvet back of the lounge chair.

If he wasn't such a monstrous piece of shit, he might actually look beautiful right

now.

“Sit,” he barks, pointing one long finger at the chaise across from him.

His thick brows furrow over his eyes as he waits. I rub my palms on my shorts as I stand tall and wince from both the pain in my head and now my lower back. I take a deep breath and move, my heart pounding in my chest as I slowly walk to the lounge chair.

His eyes stayed glued to me the entire time, traveling from my face down my torso until they land on my legs. Heat creeps up and colors my cheeks. I feel exposed under his gaze. Out of place and overly assessed. I can't remember a time when I felt this uncomfortable before.

When I sit down, I refuse to meet his gaze. My eyes stayed glued to the floor as my hands rest on my knees to try and stop them from shaking.

But it's no use. I can feel his eyes burning into me.

“What do you want with me, Damien? Has my sister pissed you off again and now you're taking it out on me?” I whisper as I squeeze my eyes shut.

“In short, yes. But not entirely,” he says with a low rumble.

Why am I always paying for my family's sins? Even when they don't want me?

“Megan has pissed me off, but that's nothing new. And to be fair, there's not much to take out on you, Lucille. I would have to care about her in order to hold a grudge.” He sighs and I open my eyes.

They slowly lift from my knees to his face.

He licks his full lips now, one hand stroking the neatly trimmed, dark beard on his square jaw and perfectly chiseled face. His dark hair is so sleek, that the city lights practically bounce off of it. The suit that he's wearing forms every muscle perfectly and the top button of his shirt underneath his blazer is undone, revealing a glimpse of dark skin and a gold chain. His leather shoes gleam and he smells of an expensive cologne that would otherwise have me melting inside.

And if I wasn't so afraid of him right now, I would be melting inside.

Because he looks like a painting.

Something expensive and priceless all at once. Unique and unable to be recreated. He looks like he belongs in the Louvre. Sitting in his own room, demanding everyone's attention to admire his dark, tantalizing beauty.

I'd imagine that this is what Satan would look like if he wasn't a serpent in Eve's garden.

He'd look just like Damien Reed right now.

"Then why am I here?" I whisper as I bite down on my bottom lip, desperate to keep my emotions in check.

He makes me feel so conflicted. Like I am at war with both my survival instinct and womanhood.

"You're here because your sister failed to provide security for me here. I've got a lot of slimy people after me, Ms. Fairchild. And as powerful as I am, I need something a little...more. The American Dream I guess you could say." He chuckles as he rubs his chin and tilts his head to the side to eye me up and down.

I don't like that look. I don't like the way that makes me feel at all.

I feel like a piece of meat in a butcher's shop. Like game with a price tag on it.

"Why are people after you?" I ask and I know I shouldn't have done that.

Because now he really does look like the devil when he smiles at me.

"Because I'm a bad man. And they want to punish me for my crimes," he growls.

Jesus. How did I get here?

"And what am I? A distraction?" I ask and he shrugs.

"In a way. Though, I like to think of you as a ploy. Nobody wants to fuck with the senator's daughter," he says.

"That's what you think. My family hates me. I'm an outcast." I sigh.

"Exactly. Which makes you an even better ploy. You are still kin to a very important man here, Lucille. And you have no ties to them now," he quips back.

"My sister is kin too. Why did you go and divorce her then if you needed a ploy?" I scoff.

"Because she and your father were too busy snooping around and trying to get my ass in trouble rather than providing me any bit of security," he groans.

He's speaking in riddles here. Who is he and what the fuck does he want with me? Why am I once again caught up in bullshit that I want no part of?

“What is it exactly that you do, Damien? Who are you really?” I ask as my eyes narrow on him.

He’s quiet for a moment, staring at me with dark, sinister eyes.

The silence fills the room and wraps around me like a boa. It’s more uncomfortable than when he speaks. Mostly because I feel like when he does speak again, I won’t like what he has to say.

And I’m exactly right.

“I’m the type of man your father tries so hard to get rid of,” he says, and I freeze then.

My father has had many missions in life, and most of them I could care less about. I never wanted to pay attention to any of his campaign trails or debates or elections, but there is one thing that’s universally known about Michael Fairchild.

He’s been after the cartel for years. He’s been trying to lock these men that have filled the city with drugs and crime up for years. It’s why he gets the votes. Because he vows to make New York safe.

And I know when Damien mentions this small, little comment, he’s talking about those men.

He is one of those very bad, very dark men.

And he’s abducted me.

Oh god, I’m sitting in the penthouse suite of a cartel member. And with the riches he’s obtained so quickly, with the aura of dominance and power he exudes, I think he’s higher up on the ladder than I want to admit.

My eyes drift down his long arms. They land on the massive platinum Rolex that adorns his wrist. I look at the gold chain on his neck, the expensive cufflinks on his jacket. I look at the Italian leather, designer shoes.

Alone, this man's outfit probably costs more than a couple hundred grand. As rich as my father is, he doesn't make that kind of money.

Dirty money. Blood money. The kind of money that could buy you the world.

The kind that would buy you a brand-new penthouse suite alongside several other properties and businesses.

Christ.

"And...what do you want with me?" I ask, hoping my voice doesn't come out as a squeak.

The corner of his full mouth lifts slightly, an evil smirk forming on his handsome face.

He looks like he's about to eat me alive.

And he most likely is.

"I want you to be my wife, Lucille Fairchild," he growls, and I can't help it, I can't stop the anguish and fear from pouring forward.

However, my fear doesn't come in the form of a scream or a cry.

Instead, I lean forward and vomit all over those pretty, expensive designer shoes he's wearing.

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six

Damien

“Oh, for fucks sake!” I shout, jerking my foot away from the spray of vomit that leaves Lucille’s mouth and lands directly on my leg, ruining my pants.

She places her small hand over her mouth, her nostrils flaring as she takes deep, heaving breaths.

I’ve made many women react in many different ways, but I’ve not made them do that.

“Get a hold of yourself, girl,” I hiss as I stand and hobble over to the counter to grab the roll of paper towels.

I clean my pants in disgust, wondering why I’ve even decided to go through with this plan to begin with.

Because the senator wants you behind bars. And you want to use his outcast daughter against him. Because you need to buy yourself some time before you can migrate this business to Mexico and stay the fuck away from America.

“Oh my god. You can’t actually be serious!” Lucille cries as she wipes the remaining bits of vomit from her mouth and rubs at her forehead with the other.

“I was serious a minute ago. Now I’m debating throwing you into one of my

warehouses and forging your signature on the marriage license,” I growl in her direction, shooting an evil glance her way as her full, bottom lip wobbles in fear.

Has she always been this bratty? This much of a giant baby?

“I don’t know what you don’t get here, Damien.” She sighs, pushing through her fear even though her eyes are still filled with it as she stares at me in shock.

“They don’t want me. They banished me from the family and threw me out on the streets. They won’t care if you marry me. They don’t care about...me,” she says, those large, blue eyes filling with tears.

I don’t care about those tears, Lucille.

So, why do they hit something in me? Why do they make me pause?

“Why did they throw you out, Lucille? Did you steal from them or something?” I ask as I toss the paper towels into the trash can and scrub my hands in the sink.

She’s quiet. Too quiet actually. Her silence stretches on for minutes and I grow sick of it and bark at her.

“Lucille-” I start, and she stands abruptly when I spit her name at her.

“Because I got pregnant, okay? Is that what you wanted to know so badly? The heartless truth about why my family discarded me like trash?” she shouts, her small hands balled into fists at her sides.

For the first time in a while, I am stunned into silence.

But she doesn’t let up.

“Because that attack you saved me from. That monster didn’t just defile and traumatize me, he ruined my entire life. My entire future. And my family resents me for it,” she cries, those tears that welled up in her brilliant eyes now spilling down her flushed cheeks.

When she mentions that night, mentions that man that I found her with in the alleyway, my vision turns red.

I try not to think about it much. It’s not the first time I’ve caught a piece of shit in an act of monstrosity and punished him for it. But it was the first time I...cared. Because it happened to an innocent. Because it happened to her .

“Lucille-” I try again, but she cuts me off once more.

I usually do not let a woman do that. Hell, I don’t let anyone do that.

But this woman is on the verge of hysteria and she’s unstoppable.

“Oh, but don’t worry. I don’t have a child, Damien. You don’t have to worry about a kidnapping on top of an abduction or trafficking situation.” She seethes, her full lips puffy from her anger and tears.

“I lost the baby shortly after I found out. I had a miscarriage in a cheap motel in Brooklyn,” she hisses, her eyes dropping to the floor as she tries to sniff back her sobs.

“I had no money. No job. I didn’t get to finish college. I had nothing. I didn’t even get to have my baby,” she says, her voice cracking when she mentions her child.

“Thankfully Jenni took me in. But now...now I don’t even have a random couch in a shitty downtown apartment because she still has a chance at a future. And it doesn’t

involve me sitting in her living room. Now, I have nothing once more. After years of working my ass off, I still have nothing to show for myself.”

I think that if I were to have a heart, maybe some of it would break for this girl. This girl who had to become a woman way too quickly.

But I don't. I lost that heart long ago when my father shred my life apart. When I watched my men die in war. When I watched innocent people get bombed and slaughtered.

I haven't had a heart in a very long time.

Which is why instead of sympathizing for the broken woman before me, I hear her words as more of an opportunity.

“Is she kicking you out?” I ask, my head tilted at her as I eye her shaking body that's clad in that cheap, disgusting outfit.

“Not entirely. She's moving in two weeks. Got engaged. I don't have enough time or money to get my own place. I've been busy paying off my student loans and hospital bills.” She sniffles, wiping her tears away.

“So...you're homeless,” I say, and her head snaps up in my direction, anger fuming in her bright eyes.

“Jesus, Damien. Do I need to spell it out for you?” she growls, and I narrow my eyes at her, shooting her an evil glare so that she backs down.

Which she does. She snaps her mouth shut and submits quickly.

Good girl.

“Sounds to me like this is the perfect time for your own engagement then, huh?” I ask, a smirk lifting the corner of my mouth as she glares at me.

I walk towards her then, keeping some distance in case she decides to pull the sick card and throw up all over the rest of my suit.

“Sounds to me like you need a warm bed. A place you don’t have to pay for. So you can go to school. So you can build your life again. Without your family or friends’ involvement,” I say, trying to bargain with her, but she doesn’t take the bait.

“It’s not that simple. I know you won’t make it that simple,” she breathes, and I shake my head at her and click my tongue.

“Ah, but you don’t. You barely know me Lucille. You were just a girl when you met me. You have no idea who I am or what I’m capable of,” I say, my words sounding more like a threat as I speak.

I’m a heartless bastard and she knows it, but she doesn’t cower.

“Like beating a man black and blue in a college campus alleyway?” she whispers and when she mentions that night again, my anger rises.

Something inside of me tries to surface, but I shove it right back down.

“We’re not talking about that night,” I bite, and she shakes her head at me with a scoff.

“But why? Why do you refuse to address or acknowledge it-”

“Enough!” I shout, that darkness swirling in me like a tornado.

She quiets instantly.

I sigh and look at the ceiling, trying to shove the memories down.

Her lying there in the alleyway, her clothes torn as her numb eyes stared at the night sky. That sick, drunken frat boy zipping his pants up before I grabbed him and slammed him against the dumpster. Megan screaming for me to stop instead of rushing to her sister's side.

Megan walking away when I wouldn't stop beating him.

Lucille was all alone on the ground while I beat a man to death and her family left her alone. Nobody helped her. Nobody cared. I was the one that drove her to the hospital. And then, I left her too. I never once checked on her while she was there.

I don't have time to think about this now.

I can't.

"How do you think this could actually work, Damien? If they've been worried about your...activity, then why do you think I could stall them?" she asks, shattering those memories so I can grab them and shove them into that place I refuse to visit.

I look at her, her eyes so filled with defeat and uncertainty.

Has anyone shown this girl compassion? Has anyone cut her some slack or held her when she needed it?

No.

Which makes her more like me than I care to admit.

Which is why I am not the one to give her those things.

But I can give her a place to stay while I use her for security and distraction. She can at least not wander the streets or bartend at some sex club downtown.

And when I'm done with her, when I finally get myself far away from here and away from these bastards that are determined to ruin me, I will let her go.

If she's not ruined in the process.

"Because you're my reason for the suspicious activity," I say as I eye her intently, confusion filling her blue gaze.

She really does look nothing like them. Which is why she's been cast out. Because her real mother isn't a Fairchild. Because she really isn't much of family at all.

Which is why my ploy is the perfect, most believable ploy there is.

"Because I wasn't involved in crime or anything of the sort. I was hiding away because I was having an affair with you," I smile, my mouth snaking up in a curve as she stares at me in horror.

"No--"

"But yes. Don't you get it? Megan got suspicious of me as soon as you went away to college. I wasn't around much. I was always on my phone. A phone she was never allowed to see. I didn't spend my nights with her. Because you and I were here, in this penthouse, fucking and falling in love," I say, baiting her like the devil I am.

She shakes her head at me, refusing to go along with this even though this could keep her off the streets.

“I can’t lie to her like that. She wants to be district attorney. If this gets out, it will taint her reputation,” she says.

“And why are you so concerned with her reputation? She wants nothing to do with you. She left you in an alleyway, Lucille. She let your family throw you out and never once took you in. Correct?” I growl, the truth pissing me off as soon as it’s aired out.

“Yes, but...I can’t let her think that I betrayed her like that...” she whispers, and I can’t help but laugh at her.

“She’s betrayed you your entire life. What makes you think she wasn’t fucking around on me? She hated me. This is only hypothetical in our world. It’s just a lie that will serve you and I both,” I say, knowing damn well that I slept around on Megan too.

She just never found out about it.

Because she never knew how often I was in Mexico.

She had no knowledge of my other life.

And even though she got suspicious before the divorce, now I have the perfect fucking reason.

And it’s this little, blue-eyed brunette standing before me, eyes wide with both fear and curiosity.

“And what if I don’t go along with this?” she asks, twisting her hands in a knot in front of that stupid, cropped shirt that I want to set on fire.

“What if I say no?” she asks as she meets my gaze, which doesn’t just turn serious.

It turns deadly.

“Then you die,” I say simply, shrugging my shoulders as if it’s a fact she should already know.

Because she should know this. She knows I’m a careless son of a bitch.

I’m only doing this to save myself and my family.

I don’t give a shit about her or her half family that hates her.

Even if she’s innocent. Even if she’s been abused. I’ve seen much worse.

Lucille Fairchild has zero effect on me.

Then why does the memory of her pain bother me so much?

The distant thought flutters through my mind and I wipe it away as quickly as it appeared. Because I don’t have time to think about another person’s bullshit. It’s got nothing to do with feeling anything for her.

It’s about me and my focus.

“You won’t kill me,” she scoffs, and I know she’s only saying it because she’s trying to make me into a decent person.

Because as much as I don’t care, I still saved her.

No matter what I show her, no matter what she sees or what I’ve done or have yet to

do, I am still a savior in her eyes.

And I can't wait to shatter that illusion into a million little pieces.

I stalk toward her then, coming up on her in an instant. Her eyes widen as my hand wraps around her throat. I squeeze hard, restricting her air as my thumb presses against her thumping pulse. Her face reddens and those blue eyes bulge as her hands try to claw at mine.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Lucille. I've killed many people in my life. If they get in my way, I wipe them from existence. Plain and simple," I growl, my face barely a breath away from hers.

She makes small, choking sounds and I know that I should stop, I should let go.

I should allow her to run out of this room and never look back.

But I won't.

Because I am no savior.

I'm the devil reincarnated.

"Now, are you with me or against me? Make your choice," I seethe, my lips close to hers as small bits of air try to escape her trembling mouth.

She lets me hold her like this only for a moment. Only until she has no choice but to slowly nod her head at me.

I release her instantly.

“Good girl,” I say with an empty, small smile.

I throw her down on the chaise and she whimpers as she hits the velvet green seat. She turns both her head and body away from me, refusing to meet my eyes as she tries to stifle her sobs while I grab a pen and paper from my desk and walk it over to her.

Good. Let her see me as the monster that I am.

Let her see me as anything but a savior.

I slap the pen and paper on the coffee table and she jumps, quieting her little cries as she wipes her tears and keeps her eyes away.

“Let’s write our first letter then, shall we?” I growl as she bites her lips and turns towards the coffee table.

She stares long and hard at the pen and paper before she slowly lifts those big, blue eyes to me.

And when we lock eyes, when I hold her soft, sky-like gaze, I see her resolve.

I see her submission.

And for some stupid, fucking irrational reason, it pleases me.

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seven

Lucy

I'm standing in front of a large bedroom in Damien's penthouse suite with just two duffel bags in my hands.

One has my sketchbooks, paints, pencils and a few canvases, while the other holds some face wash, shampoo bottles and my clothes.

He didn't allow me much time to grab all of my belongings from Jenni's apartment, and said he'd send a driver over to get them. In fact, he drove me over there late last night and stood outside the door to watch me pack with a sneer on his face. He hates my clothes, and he made that abundantly clear.

He also made it clear that I would write a letter to Jenni, detailing that I had finally decided to move in with my secret lover. That I had been sleeping with my sister's husband for years and I've finally agreed to marry him now that they're legally divorced.

I must admit that my hands trembled the entire time I wrote that letter. Because eventually, Megan will find out. And as terrifying as Damien is, I still don't feel like I'm protected from her or my family's wrath.

They hated me then. God only knows what they'll try to do to me now.

I can kiss whatever hope I had for a reputation goodbye.

I walk into the large, luxury bedroom.

Like the main living area of the penthouse, the room is filled with windows that overlook downtown Manhattan. The bed is a king, dressed with plush, white linens and it sits against an upholstered, black leather headboard on the far right. All of those tall, floor to ceiling windows surrounding that one, upholstered wall.

There's an elegant oak vanity area, with both an electric fireplace and closet doors and shelves surrounding the big mirror and white, wooden chair. To the right are the glass doors of a very white, marble-looking bathroom. And in the very center of the room is a small set of marble stairs that lead up to an alcove surrounded by windows. It's the perfect area for an easel. For an artist.

If I wasn't in the situation that I'm in right now, I might actually be excited.

Okay, I'm lying. I'm a little excited. But the threat of my death and the dark, asshole of a man standing in the doorway watching me has that excitement pretty much evaporated now.

I set my duffle bags on the bed, unpacking my limited clothes as he makes a sound of disgust in the corner.

"Something you'd like to say?" I ask, not bothering him to look at him as I grab my holy jeans and tee shirts to put away alongside a very short, skimpy black dress that I use for busy nights at the bar.

"Am I marrying a tomboy that works as a prostitute at night?" he growls, and I wish I could slap him right across his beautiful face, but my throat is still sore from when he choked me over an hour ago.

I've learned that defying him or being smart with him is not the wisest decision if I

want to stay alive.

But I learned that long before Damien Reed entered my life.

I've been controlled by asshole men since birth.

The only thing new is that this asshole works for an international crime organization. One that I'd really like to dig deep into, but God knows when or how I'll be able to do that.

"I told you, I don't have much money," I say simply, quietly as I fold my cheap clothes and put them away in the fancy armoire-style vanity that still has an obscene amount of empty space.

He's quiet for a while, but I can feel his eyes watching me closely. They practically burn into my skin.

"Right, well. I can't have the world thinking that I married a street rat," he continues after he clears his throat.

Prick.

"Get some sleep. I'll have Bruno take you to get some clothes in the morning," he says, but he doesn't leave.

I can feel him still standing in the doorway, watching me.

"Yes?" I sigh and a scoff leaves his lips.

"Maybe to the salon too. That hair is practically a rat's nest," he spits and I grab my hairbrush and throw it in his direction just as he slams the door hard in my face.

“Fucking asshole,” I mumble as I walk to the bed and collapse on top of it.

It’s soft. Too soft actually. I can’t remember the last time I laid on something this comfortable.

Which is probably why my eyes start to drift closed in exhaustion instead of fill with tears now that I’m alone.

I’m too comfortable to cry.

Which is both strange and unnerving to realize, but I don’t think about it for too long because sleep instantly pulls me into its arms.

* * *

I’m laying on a beach, feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin and the low, crashing waves wash over me when suddenly, something hard hits me in the face.

“What the hell-” I try to say as I’m jolted back into reality, the pillow that was just thrown at me now falling to the floor.

“Get up. Bruno’s waiting in the car outside,” Damien hisses as he stands above me in a fresh, dark blue suit.

Well, not a full-blown suit. He’s wearing a crisp, tucked in white collared shirt that’s once again unbuttoned at the top, showcasing the gold chain. He’s not wearing a blazer this time. In fact, that form fitting white shirt has the sleeves rolled up and my eyes can’t help but travel to the dark, tanned and muscled skin of his forearms before they glance at the dark blue, suit pants that are belted at his waist. His hair is slicked back once again and his beard looks both groomed and trimmed.

Once again, if he wasn't such a monster, he'd be really beautiful.

And I hate that.

"Have you always been this big of an asshole?" I groan as I turn my head into my arm, my feet dangling off the bed still from when I passed out late last night.

I can hear him sneer at me.

"Have you always been this big of a brat?" he growls and for some reason, I want to smile, but I don't.

Because he's not only the enemy, he's the goddamn devil.

And now, I am his little puppet that he gets to manipulate.

"Be outside and in the car in five minutes. No later," he commands as he walks to the door.

"Are you coming with us?" I ask as I rub the sleep away from my eyes.

"No. I've got a meeting with my attorney," he says in a clipped tone.

Thank God.

"Get up. Now," he growls as he rips open the door and slams it behind him.

"Does he ever open the door like a normal person?" I huff as I haul myself out of bed.

I don't have time to really shower, or marvel at the gorgeous penthouse bathroom. I rush inside of the glass, double-doored stall and rinse my body with the bar of soap

that I fished from my duffle bag. I brush my teeth quickly at the floating sink and toss my hair in a messy bun before I throw on my baggy jeans and big, black Jack Daniels tee shirt. I slip my worn, dirty Converse on and rush out the door and towards the living area of the suite.

Damien is standing at the kitchen isle, drinking a cup of coffee as he leans against the counter. He eyes me as I reach the door, disgust etched all over his groomed, tan face.

“You told me to hurry!” I huff and he scoffs at me as he shakes his head.

“That door leads to the boardroom I had built. Use the elevator.” He points to the steel, elevator doors near the glass staircase on the opposite side of the room.

I can’t help but wonder where those stairs lead to-

“Go,” he barks, and I raise my hands in angsty surrender as I rush to the elevator and push the button.

When I step in and press the lobby button, I turn to look at him.

“Don’t even think about running either. I own this entire building and everyone works for me,” he growls out from across the living space before the elevator doors close in his face.

Ah, silence.

Blissful, peaceful, silen-

The elevator doors open instantly and the lobby comes into view.

I swear, time flies when you don’t have much of it to spare.

I walk out onto the shiny lobby floors and make my way through the crowds of busy New Yorkers.

There's a large concierge desk with two women dressed in sleek black dresses, but it doesn't look like a hotel desk. Actually, there are several plaques with room numbers displayed behind them which indicates this building that Damien owns isn't a hotel or just his penthouse location, it more than likely is home to many of the businesses that he owns.

I'm walking out the door with my neck turned so I can look at all of the business names when someone slams into me.

"Watch it, bitch." A young woman with sunglasses, a cell phone, and a latte in hand sneers as she brushes past me.

She looks like one of the many influencers that's glued to their phones as they somehow seamlessly navigate the bustling city while snapping at people who enter their path or are in the way of their next basic selfie stationed in front of a store front or monument.

And that is New York in a nutshell.

Something I've had to grow used to since moving here for college. My entire life was spent at my father's beach house in Connecticut, so navigating this city took some time. But now, as rude and busy as it is, I'm still in awe of it.

"Ms. Fairchild." I hear my name called as I turn to look at the black Escalade that's parked in front of the twenty-story building that towers above me.

It's the same man wearing those dark sunglasses that's standing in front of the very vehicle he shoved me into last night.

I want to be afraid, but to be fair I'm more nervous that he called out my last name in public.

I don't want people to know who I am. I don't want them to find out that I'm the daughter of Michael Fairchild.

Which I guess everyone will know soon, since Damien will be my new...husband.

Jesus, is this actually my life right now?

"It's Lucy. Call me Lucy," I say to the tall, broad-shouldered man with the black ponytail.

He tips his head down and lowers his sunglasses to the bridge of his big nose. Brown eyes bore into me and a small smirk lifts the corner of his full, pink lips. He smells like cigar smoke and whiskey and his chest is so massive that I swear it might burst through his tight, long sleeved black shirt that's tucked into his suit pants.

"Lucy," he says, his accent thick and Hispanic and something I've never noticed before.

This man is devastatingly attractive.

He opens the passenger side door for me and I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Not going to knock me over the head and throw me in the back during daylight hours, I guess?" I quip and he winks at me before he slides his sunglasses back up.

"Sorry," he says as he pats the belt line of his pants that bulges slightly.

Because there is very clearly a gun hidden beneath it. And that's probably what he hit

me with.

“Boss’s orders,” he says as I sigh and climb in the front seat.

He shuts the door behind me and I realize then that he did it quietly.

“Vastly different from the boss I see,” I mumble as he hops in and starts the car.

“What’s that?” he asks as he shuts the door and buckles his seat belt.

I don’t know why, but that small seat belt strap that’s crossed over him looks ridiculous.

But he doesn’t pay any mind to my staring. He leans over the console and reaches above my shoulder, his face practically touching my breast as he does.

God, this man smells divine.

He grabs my seat belt and pulls it over my body, strapping me in as he buckles it.

“Safety first.” He winks before he leans back and puts the car in drive.

He peels away from the building and I look at it in the rearview mirror, a million questions fluttering through my mind.

I want to ask what Damien owns, what his main line of work is, slyly of course. I can’t just blatantly ask what types of drugs he traffics or if he’s the lead member of a Mexican cartel. I just want to snoop around a bit, but I know how much Damien hates snooping. Clearly. That’s why I’m in this position. So instead I ask, “Where are we going?”

“We have an appointment with Gabriella,” he says as he taps a finger on the steering wheel and leans back casually in his seat.

“Which is?” I ask.

“My girlfriend,” he responds.

Of course this man isn’t single. He’s a Greek god. Not like I would stand a chance anyway. I’m wearing jeans two sizes too big and there’s rips all over them. Not to mention, I’m supposed to marry his boss.

“Why are we going to see your girlfriend?” I ask, feeling like a child on a road trip.

Surprisingly, he doesn’t seem annoyed.

“She’s a hairstylist. Damien wanted us to meet with her first,” he says with a small smile.

Ah, that’s right. The rat’s nest on my head.

Such an asshole.

I let silence pass in the car, but I grow impatient. My head hurts and I want a cup of coffee, but I’m not sure if asking for that is on the table. Actually, I don’t know what is on the table. I just know I’m not allowed to talk back or escape. Basic conditions of any prisoner.

“So, how long have you worked for Damien?” I ask as I rub my sweaty palms over my denim clad thighs.

My question doesn’t seem to bother him. It seems to amuse him.

“A while,” he says and I nod as I chew on the inside of my cheek.

“Do you work all day and night?” I ask, remembering the time he took me from the bar last night.

“Not always. Sometimes I have some free time,” he says as he weaves in and out through traffic.

“And you spend that how?” I ask, picking his brain.

He shrugs then as he turns at the next light.

“By taking my woman to dinner and then fucking her after,” he says simply and I gasp as my face heats.

This makes him bark out a laugh.

“Oh, don’t be a prude, Lucy. You work at a sex club,” he teases and my face heats even more.

“I bartend at a sex club,” I clarify as he slows the vehicle along several store fronts.

“Same difference,” he says, and I shake my head as I look out of the tinted window.

“Not really. I’ve never even seen any of the rooms,” I say as we stop in front of Linclair Salon, one of the most luxurious spots in NYC.

Every celebrity stylist has rented this space out for their clients. It’s widely known and also incredibly expensive.

“Of course,” I sigh as Bruno hops out to open my door for me.

“Something wrong?” he asks as I step onto the sidewalk and stare at the gold and glass storefront.

“Nope,” I say as I walk to the doors.

He opens them for me and we are immediately greeted by a tall, slim and smiling brunette with golden eyes and beautiful makeup.

“You must be Lucille,” she says as she grabs my hands and greets me.

“I’m Gabriella. I’m going to be your stylist for today,” she says warmly before looking up at Bruno who bends down to plant a very passionate and seductive kiss on her lips.

I back away instantly, feeling both embarrassed and invasive.

“Enough with you!” She giggles as she swats his chest and playfully pushes him away.

“I’ve got work to do,” she says as she winks at me and pulls me over to the chair near the fancy looking hair drying stations and hair color wall.

I can’t help but wonder what a relationship like that must feel like. One with both passion and play, one with complete adoration. I haven’t really had the best examples of relationships except for Jenni and her soon to be husband. My parents weren’t really much of an example and clearly Damien and Megan both hated each other.

Damien...

God, I’m going to marry my sister’s ex-husband and I’ve never even really had a boyfriend before. I’ve had one kiss and that was in grade school. A boy felt me up my

freshman year during a game of seven minutes in heaven at my friend's birthday party and that was it until...that night I try to forget.

The night that Damien refuses to address.

"So, what are we wanting?" Gabriella asks as she throws the salon cover over me and pulls my long, messy hair from its bun.

It's down to my butt now. I can't remember the last time I had it cut. My mom never really took me to the stylist. Just wanted me to keep it brushed, braided, well-kept and out of my face. Mutable, palatable, hidden. While my sister got to have the sleekest bobs and most expensive manicures. In fact, the women in my family all have really short hair. It's why I've liked mine long. They've always been for the old, sophisticated money look while I prefer messy buns.

"Highlights would be nice," I say, always wanting lighter hair since I've been surrounded by dark brunettes while mine has been this light, mousy color.

"That would be pretty. We can always do a balayage," she says and I frown at her.

"What's that?" I ask but she's already pulling out her phone and showing me the most gorgeous, wavy chest length brown and blond ombre style.

I nod instantly.

"Yeah, that. Exactly that," I say and she chuckles at me.

"So simple and easy to please. I like you already," she says as she brushes my long, matted hair out.

At least someone does.

“I’m gonna go mix the colors in the back. Do you want some coffee while you wait?”

“Yes, please,” I say as she smiles and nods.

Before she walks away, she opens a drawer to her station and hands me a large sized, cherry red bag that looks like a designer’s makeup traveler case.

“Bruno mentioned you guys would be getting some...new attire today. I just figured that a man wouldn’t know how to get you the right makeup or hair care, so I’ve packed some essentials from Mac as well as a curling iron, straightener and product. I’ll show you how I use it and everything. I gave you the same palette I’m using now too, so if you want any tips or tricks with it, I’d be happy to share,” she says with warm, kind eyes.

For the first time, I feel genuinely seen. This woman, who I don’t even know, just gave me something I’ve never had the guts to ask my own mother for. Everything has always been handed to me with heavy instructions on how to use it.

I’ve never...had this before and it’s overwhelming honestly.

I try to hold back my tears as I smile tightly and say, “Thank you,” as she nods and turns to walk away.

I allow myself to sit quietly in the chair, peace finally finding me as I sniff back the tears that threatened to fall.

But it doesn’t stay long. Because I find my reflection in the mirror before me and when I look into the eyes of the mousy, brown-haired girl in the mirror, I realize that already, she looks different.

Already, she is different.

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eight

Damien

“She signed all of the paperwork and submitted it at seven sharp last night. I filed it at the courthouse today. Everything is finalized,” Adrian says as I lean back in the boardroom chair, gazing out of the window at the city as I circle the rim of my coffee mug on the conference table.

“Great,” I say, hating how for the last hour, I haven’t been able to focus because Lucy has been on my mind.

I’ve already texted Bruno a handful of times, wondering if she’s tried anything or pushed him in any way, but every response is a short and simple No.

Highly unlikely, I think.

Two hours spent with that woman and I already know she is both a brat and a smartass. Something I’m not entirely used to because Megan was just quite frankly, a bitch. And every woman I’ve been intimate with has either wanted my cock, my money or both.

I’ve never had one try to test me with smart remarks or quick-witted responses.

This world is entirely new for me to navigate and I don’t like it one bit.

Mostly because it clouds my judgment and takes my mind away from more important

matters. Like this contract I've drafted up and given to Adrian to look over.

"Let's talk about this," he says as he pushes the contract over to me.

Essentially, it's a consent form. Detailing and laying out every duty that I have for Lucille. What is expected of her. What isn't. What she should and shouldn't question.

Just to keep me safe. To keep my family safe.

"There isn't much to say," I sigh as I turn and drain the contents of my mug, hating how exhausted I feel even though this is the fourth cup of coffee that I've had today.

"What's actually going on here, Damien?" he asks as I look up at his concerned eyes.

He's only a few years older than me. I met him through Antonio. He's had connections up here in New York for decades and Adrian was the first he introduced me to. A young entrepreneur, but middle-aged attorney that had no issue getting checks from dirty money. He's got a quiet mouth and a sharp mind, which is why I've made him my business partner.

He's the kind of man that not only proves his loyalty, but he's also a cutthroat, smart son of a bitch.

"Nothing," I say as I check my phone for the fifth time, searching for an update from Bruno.

I told him that Lucy had no limit for her shopping, hoping she'd pick some nicer clothes but get agitated? with the selection. However, they've been gone for four hours and now I'm growing concerned. Not because of my bank account, because of what's in her fucking shopping cart.

I can't handle any more crop tops and ripped jeans I swear to God-

"Damien. Come on man, you've got to let me in. I'm your partner." Adrian huffs and I tilt my head at him, narrowing my eyes as I get up and shove my phone into my pocket.

"We've had some problems, I'm taking care of them," I say and he rubs at his temples with his elbows on the conference table.

"By marrying her little sister?" he groans, and I raise an eyebrow at him as I fish the keys to my Audi out of my pocket.

"You got a better idea to keep that family off our backs?" I ask, and he scoffs.

"Yeah, put the fucker in jail," he quips, and I bark a short laugh at him.

"Sure. Let's have the head, Mexican drug lord put the New York senator in prison. That'll work great," I growl, and he sighs at me.

"You know what I mean. You've got enough dirt on the guy," he says and I stop him there.

"And he's working up plenty of dirt on me. This will solve it. And will also turn his attention in another direction. He can't afford a scandal in the middle of his campaign. It's why he covered the affair with his wife so well. But, he can't cover this one. I won't let him. It'll keep him out of my fucking business for at least the rest of the election year so I can move some shit around, okay?" I say as I walk to the door.

"We're meeting you for lunch at one. I'll see you at Carbone," I say as I leave the room and make my way to the garage.

The drive to Bruno and Lucy's location is quick due to my speeding. And when I get inside and find him on the lounge chairs in the dressing area, I can see piles of clothes and shoes surrounding him with his head in his hands.

"Jesus..." I say as I take in blazers, corsets, some leather pants, high heels and really short fucking dresses.

All of which are nice, but incredibly...sharp and revealing.

"No, Lucy," Bruno groans as he gathers the piles and takes them to Anita, one of my stylists at the checkout counter.

I sigh and rub my face with my hands. Just then, I hear the door of a dressing room open.

"Hey, Bruno, can you help me zip..." Lucy stops as she spots me and my eyes lock onto her.

She looks....well. She looks fucking incredible actually and I hate that.

Her hair, now partially blond and a bit shorter is curled with a fresh blowout, the ends falling just at her breasts which are practically smashed up to her chin in the tight, short, light blue leather dress she has on. Her makeup is both light and seductive, illuminating the catlike slopes of her blue eyes and plump, pinkness of her full lips. Her legs go on for miles and my eyes travel the paths until they land on the strappy, nude heels she has on her feet.

"This," she whispers as she takes me in.

I don't know why, but her eyes look wanton when she gazes at me.

Which only flares that fucking feeling that's blooming in my groin even more.

Jesus, not now. Not here. Not her.

"Get back in that fucking room," I growl as I stalk and haul her into the small dressing room and slam the door behind us.

She's so close to me now and the vanilla scent of her freshly groomed hair drives me mad. She looks annoyed with me, which only hardens my cock more.

"Can you ever close a door normally, just once?" she groans.

I swallow tightly, my eyes narrowed as I try to force them to her pretty face and not down to her breasts which are pushed up so high in that tight, blue, little-

"I'll have Anita ring everything you've set aside. Put something on. Just not...that," I growl as I allow my gaze to travel down her large chest and shapely hips before my eyes snap back up to hers again.

She tilts her head and bites down on her bottom lip as a finger finds one of those freshly styled curls and twirls it.

Fuck...me.

"What? You don't like it?" she asks in a small voice as she sways her shapely body slightly.

And it pisses me off. Because I don't have time for this right now.

I shove her back against the dressing room wall, the mirror shaking as my hand finds her pale throat and wraps around it. Her eyes widen and her pulse quickens.

It's intoxicating. Because for a moment, she looks excited beneath her shock.

"Enough. This isn't a fucking game, Lucille," I hiss as her cheeks redden and her dark brows knit together in a frown.

Her little nose scrunches and the freckles beneath her makeup move with it. I hate that I want to lick that small, innocent spot. I hate every sudden bit of desire this woman has given me.

"Now put some clothes on and meet me outside. We have a lunch meeting to make. You have three minutes," I hiss as I shove her back and move away from her.

"Fine!" she spits out as she throws one of those strappy sandals at me.

Which misses because I slam the dressing room door right in her pretty face as my other hand moves down to my zipper to try and hide the stupid fucking erection she's given me.

God. Damn. It.

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nine

Lucy

“What the fuck is this?” I hiss over a glass of Chianti in one of Manhattan’s finest restaurants.

After the heated exchange with Damien in the dressing room, I forced myself into a cap sleeved, knee length, plum bodycon dress with black heels and met up with him at the front counter as he was handing the cashier his Amex.

“Modest enough?” I sneered and he looked me up and down, slowly, with approving eyes.

“It will do,” he grumbled before he turned back to flash the cashier a million-dollar smile.

“Prick,” I grumbled as I marched out to meet Bruno, who was nowhere to be found.

“Where’s Bruno?” I asked when Damien came out.

“With Adrian at the restaurant. Which we’re late for, because of your antics,” he said as he pressed some buttons on a key fob.

An all black, sleek Audi lit up before us on the store front and it took all my willpower not to stomp my Jimmy Choo heel into the Manhattan sidewalk.

The car ride was silent and tense, and I refused to look at him the entire way to lunch. And now, as I sit across from him and his attorney, I can't help but gape at him in absolute horror.

A contract. A fucking contract. Detailing every single term and condition that I must abide by as long as I'm with him.

Which is a year in total. Per the contract at least. And I can't back out of it, because he's threatened to kill me, which I refuse to bring up here at lunch in this restaurant in front of his lawyer.

So, needless to say, I am fucked.

I am so completely fucked.

"You can't be serious," I say to him as I lean back in my chair and try to keep my ravioli down.

Which he watched me eat the entire time with watchful eyes. But I refused to feel scrutinized. I know he spent a majority of his years with my sister who got full off of a handful of almonds and I'm sure he's fucked many thin, beautiful models who eat the exact same way.

I, on the other hand, enjoy food. It's one of life's most sacred and basic desires.

And now I'm trying not to hurl it up all over the white, silk tablecloth.

"As a heart attack, but please, don't have one at the table. I don't want to cause a scene by calling an ambulance," Damien says as he rolls his eyes in his chair.

He looks around the restaurant, a bored expression on his stupid, handsome face. All

the while his lawyer looks like he's going to pass out.

"You approved this?" I sneer at Adrian, whom I just met less than an hour ago.

He shrugs at me then, refusing to look me in the eye.

I look back down at the contract, my vision blurring as I stare at the text.

"No leaving the premises without contacting the party in which this contract was initiated by," I growl as Damien nods.

"No phone calls should be made unless authorized by the initiating party," I repeat as my eyes scan down the page.

"An allowance of twenty grand per month will be allotted to the signee," I say, the only line that I somewhat am okay with.

"No trips shall be made without the initiating party, and the signee must attend any and all events created for and by the initiated party both in and outside of the United States."

Great, so now I'm signing up for human trafficking.

Cute.

"The signee must attend routine, monthly visits to the doctor assigned by the initiating party with a staff member present." I scoff.

"Are you going to monitor my birth control too?" I growl and he raises his eyebrows at me.

“No need. You’ll be getting the shot every three months,” he says casually.

As if it’s not invasive.

As if it’s not controlling.

As if it’s not completely, ridiculously dehumanizing.

Oh, but that’s not all.

Not even the worst part.

“The signee must agree to be married to the initiating party within thirty days of the contract being signed?!” I practically scream and Damien’s foot instantly steps on mine under the table.

“Lower your fucking voice, woman,” he growls, threatening fire igniting in his eyes.

But I can’t calm down. My hairline is sweating and ruining my fresh blowout. My wine glass is about to shatter in my hand from the forceful grip that I have on the stem and my face now probably is the same shade as this tablecloth that I’m about to lose my lunch over.

“I need to go to the bathroom. I’m going to be sick,” I whisper before I look up at Damien and his lawyer.

“Unless you need to come with me, per the contract,” I growl, and Damien waves me off as he drapes a long arm over the back of his chair.

“Please, go. I’d rather not send another suit to my dry cleaner today,” he growls back, and I immediately get up and stomp towards the ladies’ room.

I rush into the nearest stall and sink to my knees above the toilet, my dark red, manicured fingers gripping the edge as I close my eyes and take deep, pulling breaths.

How did I get here? What have I done to deserve? this?

I've been ostracized, ridiculed, outcasted and banished from the life that held every threat inside of it and I've lived by and for myself since. I thought I eradicated every bit of danger that my former life once held.

But clearly, I am mistaken.

"Why me?" I whisper, as I flush the toilet and stand to straighten my dress before leaving the stall.

"Do you always victimize yourself when you use the restroom?" Damien mumbles as I practically ram my head into his chest upon leaving the stall.

"Jesus-" I shout, but his hand instantly slams over my mouth as he shoves me against the stall door.

"Enough," he growls from above me, his large, rigid body pressed tightly against mine.

His mouth practically hovers outside of his hand and my breasts are being pressed to his chest as I start to panic and flail beneath him.

He uses his free hand to grab both of mine and pin them above my head. I'm completely at his will now. I am the toy he has written on paper.

This is what he wants.

Complete submission.

Total control.

“You don’t have a choice anymore, Lucille. I’ve made that abundantly clear. This contract is only a written agreement which was already made verbally last night, do not forget this. You are mine now, whether you like it or not. And if you want to be safe, if you want to remain untouched and unharmed, I suggest you get with the fucking program and just listen to me, okay?” he says, and his words wash over me like acid rain.

Painful. Harsh. Abrasive.

“Now, are you going to be a good girl and keep quiet if I remove my hand from your lips?” he growls and I don’t know why, but my body instantly reacts to those words.

And not in a good way.

In a lustful way. In a way that I cannot begin to explain or control.

But still, I nod slowly. I agree with him.

Because he could snap my neck in an instant and cover my murder up like it never even happened in a restaurant bathroom.

A restaurant that he probably owns, mind you.

“So, what, you’re going to kill me if I try to move outside of the boundary lines in the contract? One failed step and I-”

“Could die. Yes,” he says after he drops his hand to his side, the other hand still

holding mine above my head.

“You’d really kill me so easily?” I whisper as I blink up at him.

He stares at me for a long, long while. His eyes are hard and dark as we breathe each other in.

“What don’t you get? It’s not me that you have to worry about, Lucille,” he sneers, and I can’t help but scoff at him.

“Why would I get it? You haven’t explained shit to me, Damien-”

“Because it’s for your own good,” he barks, and I quieten immediately.

He doesn’t scare me. Not at all. Okay well, maybe a little.

I don’t quieten because of fear.

I quieten because I’m hoping my little act of submission, of silent obedience and yield, might make him open up.

He sighs then and tilts his head back, eyes now aimed at the ceiling.

“Look, when some situations arise, when we meet at certain places with certain people, I will fill you in as I see fit. Enough to keep you aware, enough you keep you protected, but you have to keep yourself in line, understood? There’s people out there...people who would... do unspeakable things to you if you so much as look at them,” he says and I tilt my head at him.

“And you work for these people?” I ask.

His head drops then, those dark eyes darting to mine and penetrating them with the most lethal stare I've ever seen.

It's unnerving.

"I own these people," he growls, and I swallow tightly.

"But they're impulsive. Greedy. And they could do anything at any given moment, which I'm prepared for. But that's because my team and I are on the same page. Precautions are taken at every measure. Which is why you need to abide by this, by me. It's for your own--"

"Safety, yes. I've gathered that." I sigh.

I search his eyes then, for what I don't know. Maybe compassion. Maybe empathy. Maybe for a single ounce of humanity.

But instead, I find nothing.

I'm left with nothing.

"What is it that you really do, Damien? Who are you?" I ask, even though I know the answer deep down, I just refuse to admit it.

And he doesn't say anything, because he knows this too.

His actions, his money, his dominance, he's made it all clear.

So, I don't know why, even with this terrifying knowledge, I am now going to my toes, lifting myself so my mouth can line up with his. I don't know why I practically moan as my nipples slide up his chest through our clothes, why my heart quickens as

I breathe in his bourbon and expensive cologne.

And I definitely don't have an excuse for why my mouth locks with his, why I trap him in a kiss that I've dreamed about for so long, despite the fact that he's my sister's ex-husband.

Despite the fact that he's a monster.

And I don't know why he lets me, but he does.

He lets my lips brush over his, once, twice and then he lets my tongue slowly sneak inside.

But he stops it there.

As soon as I finally, finally get to taste Damien Reed, he stops it all.

And slaps me hard across the face as soon as he rips his mouth from mine.

I'm breathing deep, my heart erratically pounding against my chest as I drop my head and refuse to meet his eyes.

I am not only ashamed and embarrassed, I'm fucking mortified.

"Don't ever do that shit again," he says blatantly, and it takes everything in my power not to cry as he releases me and drops me to the floor.

I cover my mouth with a shaking hand, feeling not only dejected, but worthless.

And how pathetic is that?

I feel like the monster for kissing the man that's holding me captive.

He walks away and rips open the bathroom door, but my eyes lock onto his shoes because they pause. He pauses.

And so I let my eyes travel all the way up to his body to his face, and what I find there is staggering.

Because as soon as I lock eyes with him, I am met with complete, unrelenting lust.

But he doesn't say anything then. Doesn't try to explain it or address it, which is typical for him.

He just shakes his head slowly at me and straightens the collar of his shirt that's still undone at the top, revealing that gold chain against his dark skin.

And then he walks out and leaves me on the bathroom floor.

ten

Damien

I can still taste her on my lips as I walk out of the restaurant and towards my car. My cellphone is pressed tightly against my ear as I try to wipe her off my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Pick her up at Mario’s in five,” I hiss into the phone as Bruno picks up the call.

I paid the tab, snagged the contract, and ordered Adrian to be at my house at eight AM sharp tomorrow before I walked out of the restaurant and left Lucille on the bathroom floor in her tight, body-hugging purple dress.

The car ride back to the penthouse truly consisted of me gripping the steering wheel until the knuckles of my left hand turned white while my right hand grew numb from continuously rubbing my forehead in frustration.

It’s not that I don’t find Lucille attractive. Hell, I knew I was fucked as soon as she walked out of the changing room wearing that fucking dress with her hair all perfectly curled. To be honest, I was fucked the minute Bruno threw her unconscious body down on my couch yesterday.

Lucille Fairchild is nothing at all like her sister. And while I was under the impression that she was still the meek, quiet and easily hidden girl I once knew her to be, it seems that now I am gravely mistaken.

Lucille Fairchild is a spitfire.

She's sassy, witty and intellectual. And downright bratty. But she's also sultry, seductive and completely inexperienced. I can tell by the way her lips were eagerly waiting for me to claim them. I can tell by the nervous tremor I felt in her hands as I pinned them above her head. I don't think she's ever known the intimate, sensuous touch of a man. Never felt or experienced the beautiful feeling of being filled, of thoroughly and carefully fucked-

"Jesus Christ!" I slam my hand on the steering wheel as I park my Audi in the garage.

I don't have time for this. I don't have the time to sit here and imagine the contrast of my dark hand sliding up her pale, creamy thigh. Shouldn't be wasting my day sitting in a car garage, hard, wondering what her moans sound like. If they're loud and wanton. If they're wild and carefree. Or if they're soft and raspy.

And the world is quick to remind me that I truly don't need to be thinking about this right now. The ring of my phone is a loud shrill as it blasts through my car speakers.

"What?" I bark into it.

"We found the asshole that broke into your store on Ninth," Bruno says and I sigh in relief.

Finally, a fucking distraction.

Or obligation rather.

I've been looking for this prick for nearly three weeks. He stole over twenty thousand dollars from my jewelry store, and I've been wanting every finger and toe on his body alongside the cash he fucking owes me as payback.

“I want him in the basement asap. No less than thirty, you hear?” I growl.

“Yes, sir,” Bruno says as I hang up the call.

I should feel sorry for the guy. I eat up every minute of his day with my workload, and lately with the divorce and now Lucille, he’s been getting a lot of my frustration.

When the time is right, he’ll get a vacation. The man has given me all of his loyalty and dedication over the last three years, he at least deserves a few days in Barbados, fucking his girlfriend when he pleases.

At least one of us will be getting laid.

Perhaps that’s why I’m so wound up.

Definitely not because of the infuriating brunette I have held against her will.

I step out of the car and lock it, smoothing back my hair and readjusting my length in my pants, hissing as I do. When I make my way out of the garage and to the basement door on the back of the building, I make sure to lock it as I prepare the chair for the little thief Bruno is bringing me. I text my team to make sure all of my guards are on standby at their posts, shutting off my phone and shoving it into my pocket as I pick up the rope by the single chair in the concrete room.

A single light hangs here and as it flickers, I see old drops of blood on the cement floor. Many things have taken place in this room. Things I never wanted to do at first, things I was ordered to do, and eventually, that reluctance slowly morphed into need. Need for vengeance, need to punish. I’m a sick bastard and that’s exactly why I’m in this line of work. After all the gruesome shit I’ve seen in this world, fucking up punks and thieves for screwing around with my business is nothing, but it takes the edge off.

I make sure my gun is locked and loaded before I shove it into my beltline and pat the knife in my pocket. Once all my bases are covered, I adjust the gothic, platinum cross ring on my middle finger. It was passed down by my predecessor and packs a mean fucking punch when it needs to. And due to the fact that my mind is riddled with pale, thick legs and bright blue eyes right now, I'd say punching is the first on my list.

As time goes by, I hear the lock clicking on the door and I stand by the chair with my hands knotted in front of my waist, eagerly waiting for Bruno and the little asshole to walk into the basement. And when they do, my first inclination is to not beat the pathetic, panicked junkie to a pulp, but it's to ask Bruno if he was able to get a car to pick up Lucille.

And that, that makes me want to fucking kill this little jewel-stealing asshole now.

"Take a seat," I say to the man, the rope hanging from my pocket as I gesture towards the chair next to me.

His sunken, black eyes dart from me to the chair in fear as Bruno slams the door closed with his foot and drags him to me by the neck.

"You've been very hard to find, Joe. Have you been avoiding me?" I ask as Bruno swings him around and slams him into the chair, pinning him at the chest.

"I haven't done shit!" the junkie shrieks and it takes everything in my power not to roll my eyes at him, because it's a useless line, a typical one at that.

"Let's cut the bullshit and move on, yeah?" I growl as I walk around to face him now, Bruno instantly moving away as I place a hand on each side of the chair and crowd the junkie until he sinks back like the pathetic fuck that he is.

"I'm missing over twenty grand in very expensive, rare jewelry Joe. And I just want

to know where you put it. That's all," I offer, even though I already know where it is.

In the crack pipe that's fallen out of his pocket.

He looks down at it and curses, sweat dripping down his forehead and matting his thinning hair.

"I don't know shit man. I didn't take nothin', I don't even know-"

I punch him hard across the jaw, the sounds of crunching and wailing now echoing throughout the basement as I stand and straighten myself after the blow.

"One more time," I say as he spits blood onto the floor and glares up at me.

"It's real simple, Joe. I promise. Just tell me where it is," I say as I rub my jaw, the hairs of my beard rubbing against my fingertips.

"What do I get if I do?" he garbles, and I smile.

"You get to walk out of here alive," I offer and he rolls his eyes, blood dripping from his mouth.

"And if I don't?" he growls, and I shake my head at him and click my tongue.

I take out my knife then and switch it open, lowering it so the blade can gleam in his face as his sunken eyes widen.

I grab his hand then, ripping it towards me as I hold it against my stomach while he flails in the chair. The blade is sharp and a clean cut, it slices all the way through his thumb as he screams in shock and pain.

It's like music to my ears.

I slice his thumb off slowly, dragging out the pain as he shouts and cries. When I'm done, I shove his limp body back into the chair and dangle his bleeding, amputated thumb in front of his face as I smile wide.

"I get more of these if you don't. In fact, I get all of them," I sneer.

"And if you don't tell me by the time I'm done cutting off your fucking toes too, then I get a leg as well." I take a deep breath, offering him a second to say something, but...nothing. Nothing but little whimpers.

"So you don't have a chance to walk out of here until you tell me where the fuck my money is," I roar in his face as he trembles and shakes beneath me.

"You pathetic little cunt," I growl, feeding off of his fear. It fuels me, angers me, makes my blood boil and hungry for more.

"Boss," I hear from Bruno, a warning, but I ignore it.

This little bastard will pay.

I stand up and drop his thumb to the floor as I wipe the blood from the knife on my pants and drop it too, reaching for the rope.

"Damien, man-" Bruno tries again, but I turn and snap at him.

"What!" I bark, enraged that he would chime in like this, which he never does.

"Someone's coming," he announces and my eyes immediately lift to the door as the knob starts to jiggle.

“Are you in here?” a female voice huffs out from the other side.

A very raspy, angry female voice.

Lucille.

“Don’t-” I try, but the thief instantly drops and grabs my knife, scrambling up from the floor and making it to the door just as Lucille opens it and stares at the scene with wide, blue eyes.

This is the sloppiest job I’ve ever done. And once again, it’s because of her.

God damnit.

The thief doesn’t have time to reach her, even though his uncut hand is gripping the knife, ready to stab.

He doesn’t get a chance to make contact because I pull out my gun just as he tilts his head a few inches to the left, out of her line of sight. That’s when I pull the trigger and shoot.

He falls to the floor just as I look at Lucy, whose beautiful face is now covered in blood along with her purple dress.

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eleven

Lucy

I'm frozen against the basement wall as I watch a man bleed out before me on the ground.

His blood is covering my body and I wish it was also covering my vision so I don't have to look at his head spilling out as I stand here frozen in shock.

"Lucy." I hear my name being called in the distance, but I don't respond.

I can't.

I don't know how I got here. I'm lucky I remember my name. I've seen some terrible things, been through terrible things, but this is...this is otherworldly.

This is carnage.

"Lucy." It's Damien's voice, but it does nothing for me.

I'm worried I might be stuck like this forever.

"Lucille." A growl now, a very close growl that's somehow able to penetrate through my haze and roll over my body with its vibrations.

He grabs my face in his hands, forcing me to look at him, but I can't. My eyes stay

glued to the corpse on the ground.

“Look at me,” he commands.

“I...” I try to say, my voice low and shaky, unable to get the words out.

There are no words for this.

“How did you get here? How did you find this place?” he barks, and that’s when I lift my eyes up to his.

And in them, I see fear. I see panic.

I swallow tightly then, inhaling through my nose. The air smells metallic.

“I followed Bruno,” I choke out.

I am unable to cry. Unable to feel anything other than...numb.

“Why?” he growls as he starts to examine my body and I let him.

I let his hands roam over me even though he just shot a man in the head. A man that was charging towards me. He killed a man and he could’ve killed me.

“Am I...did you...” I stammer then, but my voice is low and oddly calm sounding.

He looks me dead in the eyes, serious confidence burning within them. It’s staggering, honestly.

“No. You’re safe,” he sighs, like a prayer.

It sounds like a prayer on his lips. Like he's grateful.

Who is this man?

"Come on. I need to get you washed up," he says in a low voice, pulling me into his arms.

He doesn't turn me or force me to walk, he lifts me in his arms and carries me out the door.

"You're going to get blood on you-"

"I don't care," he growls as he walks us around the lower half of the back building and into the car garage.

I'm quiet the entire way, staring at my new, ruined dress that's covered in blood as he walks us past expensive cars and into the elevator. The ride up is quiet, but not tense.

I can't feel anything right now.

And oddly, I am grateful for this.

When we get to his penthouse, he carries me straight to my bedroom and into the marble, adjacent bathroom. He sets me down carefully in front of the floating sinks and opens the large, glass shower door, turning the gold knob until warm, steamy water sprays from the waterfall spout.

I don't see him turn to look at me because I'm staring at myself in the mirror.

I'm covered in another man's blood, from head to toe. My freshly-done hair is now matted and my face is covered in red. I bring my hands out, staring down at them

before I turn on the sink and try to start scrubbing.

“Lucy,” Damien says from behind me, his breath on my neck.

“I have to get him...this...off me,” I mumble, scrubbing so hard at my skin, like I’m trying to wipe something deeper than the blood clean.

I’m trying to wipe the trauma clean.

And not just the trauma from what just happened.

The trauma of everything that’s ever happened to me.

It all hits me now, years of it slamming into me like a box truck.

“Lucille, stop. Get in the shower,” Damien commands but I shake my head at him.

“No, I have to get it off. Need to get all...of it,” I say through gritted teeth.

He doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t growl or get angry or issue a command.

He just leans over me and turns off the sink. I let my eyes lift from the watery, red drain and meet his in the mirror. His gaze is both soft and intense, but not remorseful.

His hands go to the zipper on the back of my dress and slowly drags it down. I don’t tell him that I’m not wearing a bra. I don’t say anything. I’m frozen by his tentative touch.

When he slides the dress down to my hips, I inhale sharply. My breasts are on full display in the mirror, and even though he sees them, he pays no mind to them. He just slides the dress to the floor, leaving me only in my heels and black lace thong.

I wish I wasn't covered in blood. I wish this was earlier in the restaurant bathroom. When I was needy for him, when I was throwing myself at him like an idiot.

Which is why I followed Bruno down to the basement anyways. To yell at Damien for making me feel stupid, to dismiss my want. To tell him it was a mistake and that I hate him.

He goes to his knees then, his large, rough hands running carefully down my thighs as he does. It's intimate, but given the circumstance, the air doesn't feel sexual or tense like earlier. It feels...intimate. A different kind. A kind of intimacy that holds attention and care and empathy. Three things that Damien is not capable of.

He unbuckles the straps of my heels and slides them off one by one until I'm barefoot on the bathroom floor. When his hands drag up and grasp my panties, he pauses.

I don't say anything. I'm holding my breath until his fingers carefully slide my underwear from my hips to my ankles until he lifts my feet gently to step out of them.

When he stands, I meet his eyes in the mirror once more.

There's a trace of lust there, a small trace as his tall, broad and beautiful body stands behind me. I'm naked from head to toe, covered in disgust in front of the man that's keeping me here.

The man that's going to be my husband.

He places his wallet, phone and finally, his gun on the sink and I swallow tightly, staring at the weapon that caused all of this.

Held by the man that did all of this.

My savior and my monster.

It's all so fucked, isn't it?

So, why am I allowing him to lift me? Why am I letting him carry my naked body into the shower?

Because as wounded as I am, I'm also a masochist.

A total sadist for liking this. For wanting him to cleanse me. For wanting him to wash it all away. The muck and the memories. Every bit of it.

He's fully clothed when we step in, his clothes now saturated as he closes the shower door and traps us under the warm water. The glass is filled with steam and the air is thick around us. I'm pressed against his chest even though there's ample space in the stall. His shirt skims my breast as he reaches around to grab a sponge and bottle of soap from the tiled shelf, lathering it before pressing it to my face.

He washes me carefully, attentively. He gently scrubs every inch of my face, turning and inspecting it until it appears that all of the blood is gone. Then, he rinses the sponge and lathers more soap on before turning and pressing it to my chest.

I don't realize that I'm holding my breath again until he circles the sponge around my neck and down to my breast. He looks at my body the entire time he washes it, his eyes void of any emotion, but I swear I can see a bit of desire in there. And maybe a little...disappointment.

Finally, those eyes lift to mine.

"Are you upset with me?" I ask, not knowing why the question even enters my brain.

“Yes,” he says without pause as he runs the sponge down my torso.

“You could have killed me,” I say simply, staring at his wet, dark hair that now falls over the sides of his face. His scar is on full display now, red and agitated from the warm water.

He’s so devastatingly beautiful and I hate it.

“No. I couldn’t have,” he says simply, confidently.

I scoff then.

“You shot a man nearly an inch away from me,” I exclaim and he shrugs as he scrubs at my arms now.

“You forget that I was a sniper,” he says, and I fall silent.

He was. Special forces too. This man is probably trained better than anyone.

And given his new line of work, that training has now made him lethal.

“What did he do?” I ask then, watching his dark hands run from my wrists to my hips.

“Stole from me,” he says quietly, his focus on my skin now.

My pulse quickens when the sponge rubs at my hip bone, right where my thigh meets it. I flinch, hissing through my teeth.

Because it feels good. It feels too fucking good even though there is blood trailing down the drain.

“Sensitive?” he asks, a ghost of a smirk on his full lips.

I shake my head slowly, watching him as he slowly sinks down to his knees in the shower before me.

He lifts my right leg by my calf, staring at it as he runs the sponge down my entire leg, pausing at the inside of my thigh. That hissing sound leaves my lips again and his eyes lift and lock onto mine.

And in them I now see...admiration. Like he almost finds me attractive.

Like he likes touching my naked body.

Instantly, I get wet. Which is stupid, but his dark head is practically between my legs and now he's dropped the sponge and is rubbing the suds along my leg with his bare fingers and it feels so fucking...good.

“You'll pay for it, you know,” he quips suddenly and I tilt my head at him in confusion.

“What do you mean? Pay for what?” I ask and he shakes his head at me as he clicks his tongue and drops my leg to lift the other one in the same way.

He continues the same, tortuous rubbing along my left leg now too.

“For snooping,” he says in a husky tone that practically has me panting like a dog.

Dear god, what is wrong with me? Who am I?

“I wasn't snooping!” I gasp and he lands one hard, wet slap to my left thigh and I sink my teeth into my bottom lip.

“You were. And you’re going to pay for it,” he growls as he drops my leg and slowly stands until his body is pressed into mine.

And even though he’s in wet, heavy clothes, I can still feel the hard outline of his massive length press into my hip. I flutter my eyes, trying to blink away the desire that starts burning through me.

“H...how am I going to pay?” I ask, another stupid question that shouldn’t even be forming.

He smiles at me then. A slow, wicked smile.

And I realize then that I like it. That I want to see it all the time.

And that is how I know that I am a masochist for certain.

“Like this,” he growls.

He places two fingers at the base of my throat, pressing against my thumping pulse before he drags them down between my breasts. They’re heavy, larger than most women I’ve known. I’ve always been ridiculed for it, like they’ve made me some sort of whore even though it’s just natural biology. And it’s made me hate them.

Except for right now.

Because right now, Damien is looking at them with so much intense need and want, that it has my heart trying to escape from my chest.

His fingers continue their path from my sternum to my navel, a low gasp leaving my lips as they do. And when they reach my most intimate area, when they hover over the space that’s generating so much heat and need, I swear I might die right then.

He growls then, low and rough in my ear as he allows those fingers to lightly press against my clit. I mewl quietly in his ear, whimpering from the contact, begging for more. For anything.

But he gives me nothing.

Instead, he grabs me by my matted hair and spins me around. He pins me against the wet shower wall and uses his other hand to grab my hips and lifts them so that my ass is in his line of sight.

And then, he does the unimaginable.

He does something that I never thought Damien Reed would ever do to me.

He spans me. Hard.

It's just once at first, like he's readying me for more blows.

And when my breath comes out in one harsh whoosh, he lands another.

And another. And another.

He hits me until I'm panting against the shower wall and clawing at the tiles.

And not because I'm in pain, but because I...like it.

I like him punishing me.

And he gets off on it too. He grunts as he spans me, his fingers gripping the skin of my ass each time before he pulls his hand away to deliver another blow. His dick is so damn hard and pressed into the back of my thigh that I wiggle to get more of it.

And then...he stops.

And the air is quiet. It is still and tense.

It is full of regret. And not from me, but from him.

But I don't think it's regret for hitting me, for punishing me, it's regret for being here with me in the first place. And stupidly, that hurts more than his punishment.

He rips away from me then, pushing the shower door open as he angrily steps out of it.

"Wash your own hair," he growls, like he's disgusted by me.

But I know he's not.

I know as he grabs his things and rushes out of the bathroom that Damien is not disgusted or angry with me, he's angry at himself.

And as I wash my hair, as I finish cleaning my body thoroughly, I realize that I can't be mad at myself for this, for his self-loathing that's been projected onto me. I realize that none of this has anything to do with who I am and has everything to do with the fact that he wants me and he shouldn't. And I shouldn't want him either.

But I do. God help me, stupidly, I do.

And that's why when I sit on my bed in just a towel, my body scrubbed clean of today's massacre because of his touch, that's why I pick up the pen from the bedside table and sign the contract.

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twelve

Damien

“Here,” Lucy says as she slaps a piece of paper down on my desk, her dark red fingernails stark against the white sheet.

That shouldn’t be hot. That shouldn’t make me imagine what those nails would feel like dragging down the skin of my back.

This is why I’ve put two days’ worth of space between us. Because of that intense moment in the shower, when I had my hands all over her wet, curvy, fucking delectable body. Because she’s starting to unravel me and it’s making me go insane.

And also because I had to find a way to dispose of yet another dead body.

“What is this?” I say as I glance down at the sheet on my desk as my pen drops from my hand.

I slide my glasses up the bridge of my nose. I haven’t shaved nor worn my contacts in the last two days. I’ve been too erratic and all over the place to focus on even the most mundane tasks. My hair is probably wild, but I could give a fuck less.

All I care about is trying to get those shapely, creamy looking thighs out of my mind. Thighs that are now bare and in my line of sight as her black skirt starts to ride up as she crosses her long legs and plants her plump ass right on my desk.

I rip my eyes away then, locking them onto the piece of paper.

It's the contract. And it's signed.

Ah, so she is a good girl.

"I have a condition," she says simply and I roll my eyes and take my glasses off as I lean back in my chair.

Should've known.

"Of course you do," I sigh as I pinch the bridge of my nose with two of my fingers, the week starting to wear on me.

She ignores my comment and continues, turning to face me full on, those legs dangling in front of me as I drag my gaze up the length of them until I am locked on her full breasts that push against the thin fabric of her white, short sleeved body suit.

Jesus Christ, she's wearing a bodysuit.

Fuck me.

"I want to take my allowance and use it to go back to school. I want to finish my degree," she says quietly, and the statement takes me by surprise.

I meet her eyes then. Her face is almost bare except for the bit of smoky shadow that accentuates the cat like curve of her eyes and the gloss that plumps her pink lips even more. Her hair is smoothed back into a tight ponytail. She looks...breathtaking.

And once again, fuck me.

“Fine,” I growl, looking back down at the contract before I rip open my file cabinet to put it inside and slam it shut.

“But you’re going online,” I hiss as I go back to my computer.

“Okay,” she says, a simple agreement.

No rebuttal. No bratty refusal.

Just okay.

Just...acceptance and obedience.

What is she up to?

“Great. Now get off my desk. I have work to do,” I grumble, and she raises her hands like I’m a cop about to handcuff her.

Which I would very much like to do.

Jesus, Damien. Get a grip on yourself.

She turns to walk out of the room, but I hear her pause at the door as I open the tab for my email.

“What?” I bark and she sighs.

“Do you have like...a library or anything? I ran out of my art supplies and I’m a little bored,” she explains and I pause for a moment, mulling over her words.

“Down the right hall, past the dining room on the left side,” I say distantly, and she

mutters a low thanks before walking out and closing the door to leave me in silence.

Overwhelmingly still silence.

I sigh and lean back in my chair as I rip off my glasses and throw them onto my desk. I pinch the bridge of my nose, angry that she has distracted me once more. And even though my mind has been filled with images of her wet, naked body, now it's filled with her long legs beneath that short skirt. Now it's filled with the outline of her breasts pressed against her tight body suit. And to make matters worse, now it's filled with all of those paintings that once filled her bedroom at her family's home in Connecticut.

Paintings that nobody gave a fuck about, except for her.

There would be countless times her mother would be running late to yet another one of her husband's political events because neither she nor Megan could pull her from her bedroom in time. And when they did, she would be wearing those same oversized overalls splattered in paint. She would be chastised, mocked and then harassed.

A pointless hobby. A useless endeavor is what they would call it. And though I never paid much mind to it, I often admired that she had some form of talent, a hobby or obsession that didn't involve fucking people over. Rather, it involved creating life outside of the one she suffered in. It involved color and hope, something I've never truly had myself.

And while I appreciate art, expensive art at that, I prefer much darker pieces, less abstract and pretty. If it's not simple, or modern or black and white, it's a Da Vinci that depicts an image of suffering. Whereas Lucy is all flowers, all beautiful, lively landscapes or abstract lines woven with vibrancy.

And that is why her family mocked her. Not because she wasn't good, but because

she was. She was great at something they were incapable of seeing. Life, beauty, color.

I pull out my phone and text a quick errand to Bruno. He's supposed to meet with me at Fleur de Femme in a couple of hours, but an idea has come to mind.

An idea that will occupy the woman that has slowly taken over my mind and taken it hostage.

thirteen

Lucy

I'm walking out of Damien's office and heading towards the main living area of the penthouse when a tall, lanky man locks eyes with me in the massive, contemporary style kitchen.

His hair is light, most likely bleached, but perfectly quaffed. His mustache is small and trimmed to his clear face, much darker than his styled hair. He wears a casual outfit, but it's very...fashionable. Colorful. And he smirks at me when he swings a hand towel over his slim shoulder and pauses chopping some vegetables.

"Good afternoon," I say, my voice shaky and unsure, because I can't trust anyone that works for Damien Reed or is close to him.

The man looks me up and down, his light pink, manicured nails pearly and short as he turns on the long, iron faucet and starts scrubbing his smooth hands.

"And you are?" he asks, his tone both sassy and annoyed sounding. I feel scrutinized and out of place, but mostly embarrassed.

"I'm-" I stutter, but he cuts me off with a laugh.

"Relax, I know who you are. Damien filled me in," he says as he turns off the sink and removes a pot from the double stove.

Did he tell you that I'm his ex-wife's sister and that he's holding me hostage?

"Shocked to meet his new fiance even though I never met his former wife," he quips and it's a burn, one that I feel everywhere.

"It's okay though." He winks up at me as he throws the vegetables in a bowl and drains the water from the pot, "I heard she was a complete bitch." He shrugs and I sigh, because he has no clue.

"I'm Henry, by the way. Private chef." He says, confidence practically oozing from him as he speaks.

"Lucy," I say as I walk to the countertop.

"Pleasure," he says as he tosses the vegetables and reaches up to open the glass door of the white marble cabinet.

"I swear, everything in this place is made of marble," he says in astonishment, and I roll my eyes, which he catches as he brings down some plates with a raised eyebrow.

"Not your taste?" he says with a mock sneer, and I smirk.

"It's extravagant and boring all at once," I say as I look around, this entire house is all in black, white, grays and marble.

Sterile. Cold. Plain.

Except for his art, which is similar and also mildly horrendous.

Da Vinci has no place in a contemporary, modern home, but hey, I wasn't allowed to go for interior design or art history when I went to school, so what do I know.

“What was that?” Henry asks and I shake my head, not realizing that I muttered that last part out loud.

“Sorry, just rambling I guess,” I say and he smiles as he puts delicious orange-looking pasta and colorful salads on some plates, which are also white.

“Go on. No art school for Lucy?” he quips as I take a seat on one of the iron barstools at the counter.

“No, my choices were either political science or medicine.” I sigh and frown.

“Surely there’s more choices than just those two careers. We’re in New York,” he says in disgust, and I shake my head with a smile.

“Wasn’t up to the school. My parents,” I say, and he gives a look of disgust, which I appreciate.

“Well they sound both extravagant and boring,” he says and I laugh as he slides me a plate, the smells circling my nostrils.

“Penne Alla Vodka and Caprese salad. Enjoy,” he says as he dries his hands on the towel over his shoulder, his bright green eyes locked on me in anticipation.

I take a bite and practically moan in bliss as he smiles with satisfaction. And I continue to devour his food while he cleans up the kitchen.

“So, what did you choose?” he asks as I look at him in confusion, my mouth stuffed full with pasta.

He rolls his eyes and I find that I like his personality.

“The degree. Medicine or-”

“Oh, right. I started with nursing school but never got to finish,” I say and he pauses, waiting for me to finish as I wipe my mouth and wave my hand.

“Long story, not important,” I say as I drink some water that he hands me.

“What would you do? If you could go back?” he asks as he leans forward and places his chin on his hand, eyeing me closely.

He feels...familiar in a way. Reminds me of a friend I once had in high school. A friend my father never allowed me to keep. They were too abstract. Too wild and rebellious.

They were free. Simply put.

“Probably Art Theory or Art History,” I say as he nods.

“What about you?” I ask, and he sighs.

“I came out of the womb cooking. The universe decided this for me,” he says, and I know exactly what he means, it’s how I feel about painting.

But the universe never got to decide for me. Or if it did, then the universe definitely hates me since it left my parents in charge.

“And would you change it? Would you rather do something else?” I ask as he picks at his salad.

“No, I love this, but I also love fashion. I’m going to stylist school part time. Thankfully, clients like Damien pay me enough to do so,” he says with a smirk, and I

want to roll my eyes again, but I refrain.

“Yes, he’s very generous,” I say as I hop down from the stool and grab my plate, but he takes it from me.

“No need, it’s why he pays me,” he says, and I nod.

“Thank you. For everything. It was delicious,” I say, and he gives me another one of those cocky winks again.

“Pleasure was all mine. I’ll see you around sometime, Lucy. Don’t get lost in the boring extravagance here,” he says, and I snort as I walk away from the main area.

When I walk to the hallway in search of the library, I stop at the staircase near the elevator. I can’t help but think that it’s a bit odd for a penthouse to have a staircase leading upstairs, but Damien owns this entire building, so I’m sure every abstract renovation is his doing. Still, I can’t help but feel curious. Something is pulling me along each step as I climb the staircase now. I noticed it the other day and couldn’t help but wonder what is at the top of these stairs, but now, I’m going to find out.

And when I arrive, I realize that it his bedroom. His massive, designer, expensive-looking bedroom. I know I shouldn’t snoop, but this room is begging for snooping. It’s something out of a contemporary fairytale. Practically the only room inside of this place that has any style. And mostly because of the chandelier and light walls on either side of the king-sized bed, which also has a floating frame. I could spend all day here, but something else grabs my attention.

A door. A door with red light peeking out from underneath it. The only pop of vibrancy that this place has to offer and I have to inspect it. I have to see what’s on the other side of that door. And even though my blood is running with curiosity, nothing could ever prepare me for what I find once I open this door.

Not only is this room vibrant, but it is...otherworldly. And as I step inside and look at the four poster bed, when I look at the dark walls with light fixtures and chains, when I look at the random contraptions, unique furniture, and glass display cases filled with...toys, I realize this is the most vibrant room of the entire place.

Because it is a sex room.

My jaw practically drops to the floor when I take it all in, and even though it is both intimidating and downright terrifying, I can't help but walk further inside of it.

I run my hand along the contraptions, some leather, some steel, all black. Some have chains, some have bolts and loops. And it's the same with the walls, especially the main, upholstered wall that houses many different toys including paddles, whips and even rope.

I walk past the four-poster bed that has even more straps and loops to gaze at the wall full of toys. I have no idea what half of these are used for, but I know a lot of this equipment definitely induces pain. So why doesn't that knowledge terrify me? Why doesn't the sight of this place make me want to run for the hills? Why am I intrigued?

I run my hand along the rope that's dangling from the wall, my fingers twisting around it as I stare at it in fascination. And I wonder what it must feel like when it's tied tightly around the delicate skin of my wrists.

"Find anything interesting?" I hear Damien ask from behind me and I instantly jump away from the wall with a mortified shriek.

I stare at him now as he leans casually against the door he just closed, locking us in this strange space that my stupid brain is somehow enthralled by. But right now, I feel embarrassed. Because I got caught. Because I found something so intimate that not only belongs to him, but was created by him. For him. For his pleasure. To fuck

women that are not me.

And right then, I feel another stupid emotion trying to poke through.

Jealousy.

“I’ll be going now,” I say as I walk away from the wall and towards the door, my head hung in shame.

When I reach him, he doesn’t move to open it. In fact, he blocks my only form of exit entirely. I want to tell him to get out of the way, to look up at him, but I find that I can’t. My face is so hot and red that I know if I do, he’ll either mock me or berate me, which will not only make it worse, but it will make me want to crawl into a hole and never return.

“Look at me,” he orders, but I shake my head.

He knows what he’s doing and I can’t play along with him right now. I can’t be submissive here in this moment. Here in this space.

I’m not the woman this room was designed for. I’m not the woman he even wants in this room to begin with. I’d like to be, which is fucking absurd. It’s absolutely insane that I want to be the woman he binds with that rope. It’s sick that I want to feel his hand mark my skin even harder than last night in the shower.

And it’s not only absurd, it’s irrational.

Because even though I would like to be seductive. Even though I want to bring him to his knees and make him give into the desire that I know we both feel, I can’t. Because in reality, I’m nothing but an amateur. I’m nothing but a fraud. I’m playing the role of a woman that I have no idea how to be.

“I said, Look. At. Me,” he growls, his finger traveling beneath my chin before he pushes it up forcefully, making me gaze into his eyes.

His brilliant eyes that are filled with so much lust, so much want that it staggers me. That it not only makes my face heat up, but causes a wildfire across my entire body.

His face is so close to mine and his scent is wrapping around me like a fierce hug, pulling me into him even further. I’m lost in him now. In his darkening gaze and rich scent, in his everything quite frankly. I’m a moth to a flame and he knows it.

“Do you want to see how it’s used?” he asks, and I don’t question him.

I know exactly what he means.

He’s talking about the rope. The thing I marveled at. The thing I imagined him wrapping around me. And even though I should say no. Even though I should be turning away or running far from him, I don’t.

Because I’m forced to be this man’s wife.

Which means I need to know all of him.

And sadly, I want to know all of him. All of his wants, his needs. All of his darkest desires and tendencies.

I want every single bit of it.

Even though I shouldn’t.

“Yes. Please,” I whisper finally, staring into the eyes of a man that intends to swallow me whole.

I will never be the same after this.

fourteen

Damien

Her words are a husky, breathless whisper when they leave her pouty lips and I'm a goner as soon as I hear them.

Her eyes are wide and dark, sparkling in the dim lighting of my sex room. I didn't expect to find her here, though, I had a feeling her curious little feet would wander where they're not supposed to. There's something about her that's been different from the start. Her family keeps their heads down, but hers has always been perked up and looking for things she doesn't know about.

She can't keep still.

And as angry as I am with her, I'm glad she didn't this time.

I'm glad she didn't listen, thrilled she didn't follow directions and stumbled upon this place. Because now she can actually get a taste of me, of the real me.

She gets to relinquish all control and let me take every bit of it.

Which is what she wants. I can see it in her sparkling blue eyes, could taste it on her curious tongue when she kissed me in the bathroom.

Lucille Fairchild wants me. And I can't help but admit I fucking want a piece of this girl too.

It's why I ripped away from her lips. Why I touched her delicious body in the shower after she watched me kill a man. Why I rewarded her with a taste of my punishment. Because she doesn't shy away from me when she sees the kind of monster that I truly am. She just grows more curious.

And that makes me really fucking excited, which is both stupid and alarming, but mostly, it's why I've kept my distance from for the last forty-eight hours.

I want to show her. I want to show her just how sick and twisted I truly am.

"There's ground rules before we start," I grumble out, and her eyes light up further as she nods.

Jesus, she's fucking eager and hell if that doesn't make my cock harder.

"You keep quiet unless I say otherwise," I growl, and she nods slowly, as my hand moves from her chin to circle tightly around her wrist.

"If it gets too much, you think of a word that tells me to stop," I say, and one of her dark brows raises in question.

"Can't I just say stop?" she asks and I shake my head at her while she eyes me with confusion.

"No. Because the body tricks you," I say as she tilts her head at me.

I can't be frustrated with her questioning. She's new to this.

To all of this.

"Sometimes, stop means it's too much, too good for the body to handle, too

confusing when you mix pain with pleasure. There has to be another word when you've had enough, when things go too far," I explain, and she inhales deeply.

"And would you?" she asks.

"Would I what?" I say.

"Go...too far," she whispers as her eyes search mine.

She's looking for reassurance and she won't find it here.

Not with me.

I lean in close, lowering my head so that our lips are but a breath apart.

"Sweetheart, I will push every boundary that you didn't even know you had." I growl at her, my eyes dark and heavy as I stare menacingly at her, but she doesn't back down.

She doesn't cower away or show fear. In fact, she looks enthralled. Her curiosity completely takes over and it's god damn addictive. I want to eat every bit of it up.

"So say it," I hiss, ready to get started because quite frankly, my cock is bursting at the seams.

I've touched it relentlessly over the last few days, her beautiful face and delectable fucking body taking over my sick mind as I did every time.

She's quiet, taking in my words as I grip her wrist tighter with impatience.

"Your safe word. Give it to me," I command and she bites down on her pink, fleshy

bottom lip before she answers me, the sight turning my cock to granite.

She thinks carefully for a while and I can see the wheels turning in her pretty little head. I shift on my heels as she does, ready to just say fuck it altogether until finally, she speaks.

“Enough,” she says the word sharp and clear.

And I don’t argue against it. I don’t tell her that it’s too close to No or Stop.

Because she says it with such conviction, such brutality that I know that word would never get confused with the alternatives.

“Fine,” I say through gritted teeth, ready to throw her against the nearest wall so I can finally scratch this stupid fucking itch that I have for her.

“But one more thing,” I hiss as she inhales through flared nostrils, her body signaling that she’s impatient too.

“No kissing,” I bark and she narrows her eyes at me, rejection and disappointment shining through them.

But tough shit. I’m not going there with her.

“Why-”

“Because it’s too intimate. And this isn’t about intimacy,” I grunt, cutting her off as she falls silent instantly.

“What’s this about then, Damien?” she growls, angry that I’ve denied her.

Oh fucking well, princess.

I grab her face with my free hand, squishing her flushed cheeks together as I force her to look at me head on, my other hand still wrapped tightly around her wrist.

“This is about relinquishing control. About giving me every bit of you so that you know you are mine. This body is mine. Every inch of it,” I growl, her breath coming out in heavy little puffs through her flared nostrils.

“It’s about pushing you, testing you, seeing how far you are willing to go until you are ready to give in. Until you are ready to show me your submission, your complete obedience. And then...then you will see the pleasure that comes with compliance. With acceptance,” I vow, and she practically sighs when I release her face.

She bites down on her lip once more, a move I’m slowly becoming fascinated with. She seems tantalized by my words, enthralled by them. A while passes as she lets them sink in, but I wait.

As impatient as I am, I don’t take women until I’ve had their consent.

I’m a heartless bastard, but I’m not that sick.

“Fine,” she says after a while, her body twitching as she eyes me up and down.

“Are you going to fuck me now?” she asks with a needy whine, and I want to laugh at her, but I don’t.

Because I do want to fuck her. Very bad and very hard.

But that’s not how this works. And I intend to show her just exactly how this works. Very slowly and very thoroughly.

“Yes, Lucille. I’m going to fuck you,” I huff out, trying to hide the need in my own voice.

She smiles widely at my words, proud of herself. It’s so fucking remarkable that I want to lean forward and kiss it away from her lips, but I don’t.

Because I can’t.

Because this is as far as I can go with Lucille Fairchild.

Fucking is one thing.

Marrying her is business.

But kissing...that’s a form of intimacy we cannot touch.

We are bound by contract and that is all.

“Nothing more,” I huff out and her blue eyes search mine.

“Say it,” I growl, my hand going to her wrist, tugging the rope from her delicate fingers as she releases a shaky breath.

“This will be it. Body and name. No heart. No soul. Nothing more,” I say over her lips, my own dying to just claim them.

But I know what I’m doing here.

I’ve got everything under control, like always.

She bites down on her bottom lip, her mouth receding from mine. I can’t taste her

breath when she pulls away and I hate that it bothers me.

She looks me dead in the eye, her baby blues darkening as they start to rake me from head to toe.

She wants this just as bad. Craves me just as bad as I crave her.

And I know that after tonight, it will never be enough.

I get to claim something forbidden, something I never once should have thought of.

And now it is all mine.

“Nothing more, Damien,” she says in a husky tone, those nipples hardening beneath the white bodysuit I’ve been dying to rip apart since she stepped into my office today.

“Good girl,” I growl as my hand tosses the rope to my other one so that my fingers can tightly circle around her wrist.

I pull her towards the large, four poster bed in the corner. The fabric is a rich, deep burgundy, all crushed velvet with silk sheets. Perfect for naked skin. And I can’t help but grow hard at the potential sight of her skin against my sheets.

The contrast, the touch and the feel...

She sighs as I grip it tight and spin her around in one fluid motion.

Her gasp echoes throughout my room and I love the fucking sound of surprise.

I have to admit that I haven’t heard it often here.

Yes, I've fucked plenty of women in here, but they were rich, entitled socialites. They're used to making a spectacle of things. Life is nothing but a show to them, but I couldn't care.

Though, I realize now as I take Lucille's delicate wrists in my hand and tie them around the bedpost, it's been quite a while since I've had a woman in here. Work has been busy, stress has been at an all-time high for me and although burning it off through endless amounts of fucking would seem like the best sort of remedy, it's not.

Because I grew bored of the socialites. Of the beautiful, predictable women.

I need excitement. Thrill. Shock. And mostly, power.

Everything that those women couldn't give me.

Everything that Lucille will.

I tighten the rope around the pale flesh of her wrists and give it a slight tug, making sure they're holding her, but not tight enough to cut skin.

I don't ask her how she's feeling, because I can see it in her brilliant, now darkened eyes.

She's enthralled with the sight before her, with her wrists tied to my bed post.

When they travel away from her own skin, they land on me, and the look she gives me has my cock hardening to fucking stone.

"Now what-"

My hand clamps down over her plump lips.

“Not a sound, remember?” I growl and she nods slowly, moaning softly against my palm, soft enough to vibrate against my skin, but loud enough to hear.

It sends shivers down my own spine.

“But if you have trouble...” I trail off as my eyes skim from her breasts to her bare thighs as the short skirt she’s wearing hikes to the top as she shifts on her knees on the bed.

Jesus, I can’t remember the last time I’ve been this hard.

“Take this,” I growl as I remove the tie from my neck. Her eyes light up as she realizes what I’m about to do and fuck if that doesn’t excite me.

I move behind her now, her knees on the edge of the bed as her front faces the post that her wrists are tied to. My feet dig into the floor as I tie my dark grey tie around her face, sealing it over her lips as her breasts rise from her sharp exhale. My cock presses against her plump ass that peeks out from beneath her skirt. The body suit she’s wearing underneath is more like a thong, giving me ample view of her perfectly round ass. I see silver buttons and thank god or the universe for giving me equal access.

I don’t have time to undress and savor her after her punishment.

I want to take her hard and fast after I mark her skin.

I want her sweet little pussy to wrap around me like a vise as I lose myself inside of her, something I’ve imagined too often, for too long.

Something I never cared to admit.

Until now.

I grab her jaw with one hand, pulling her head to my throat as my dick presses deeper against her ass and her back arches. Her shoulder blades are pressed firmly against my chest.

“I shouldn’t enlighten you, but I can see that you’re curious,” I rumble, my teeth at her earlobe as she shivers in my hold.

“I never got to finish what we started in the shower the other day. Your punishment for defying orders and following me into one of my very private jobs.” I growl as my hand moves from her jaw to her ponytail. I twist it around my fingers and give it a rough tug.

I watch as her long nails dig into the wood of the post, her wrists bunching beneath the rope as she grows excited from my words.

It makes me fucking excited too.

I push her forward, my hand still wrapped in her blond ponytail as I bend and manipulate her luscious body.

She arches her back for me without even a command, giving me a full view of her ass.

I know she’s inexperienced. I know for a fact she hasn’t been with many men, mostly because I know she’s desperate to keep out of the spotlight due to her father. She likes to hide in the shadows, like he’s taught her to all of her life.

She’s doing this because she’s eager. She’s moving her body and following my guidance because she’s excited for me.

Then again, she did work for a sex club.

She could have done a lot in the last three years.

And that prospective thought has jealousy filling me at a blinding rate, even though it shouldn't. It has me grabbing a handful of her ass as her forehead presses against her bound wrists and back arches like a fucking cat.

I bring my hand back and deliver one quick and hard slap.

The sound echoes throughout the room and I'm a fucking filled with a myriad of emotions.

Jealousy.

Slap.

Rage.

Slap.

Confusion.

Slap.

Frustration.

Slap.

Desire.

Slap.

Need.

Slap.

Over and over again, I deliver these blows to her delicate skin until it turns bright red.

Until her body is trembling in my grasp and her ass is inching closer to my hardened cock, despite the pain I've given it.

Despite the pain I've given her. Both mentally and physically, she takes it. And she takes it like a goddamn soldier.

I can't help but admire it, her tenacity, her strength. I can't help but admire the beautiful, wet flesh that greets my fingers when I pull the thin strap of her bodysuit away from her body only to find that she's bare underneath.

Bare and needy.

Her pussy sucks my fingers eagerly, her soft moan vibrating against the tie. I can't scold her for the sound, because it was so natural sounding, so fucking sincere and raw. I haven't heard a sound like that in years, if ever.

And it grows louder and more animalistic as my fingers sink in deeper and start to pump in and out. She rides them shamelessly, her hands now wrapped around the bed post as she fucks my fingers relentlessly. I stand there and watch in awe as my cock begs to be set free, the tip seeping as if it's crying, dying to get to her. Inside of her. So she can ride it just like she's riding my fingers.

But I don't dare move. I'm too enthralled. Too fucking overtaken by this beautiful,

strange woman who's practically giggling and roaring simultaneously as she rides my fingers to completion. Her orgasm slams into her so hard that it hits me too, she's filled with both groans and laughs as she rides out the waves on my hand, the tie slipping from her mouth as her magnificent sounds fill the air.

Sure, I've heard women shout out their climaxes. Heard them moan and scream, dramatically, countless times, but I have never heard a laugh, a breathless giggle. Which makes me realize something.

It's pure joy she's feeling. Complete and unabashed pleasure that solely came from me.

It fills me with both amazement and pride.

Two very foreign things.

And when she turns her head over her shoulders, when her sparkling blue eyes meet mine, I know I'm lost forever.

I'll never admit it, but this woman has stolen a piece of me right then and there.

I'll never admit it because I will never speak or think of this feeling again after I bury myself inside of her.

It's too dangerous.

And so I pull my fingers from her pulsing sex as she gasps, her swollen lips opening as I bring my saturated fingers to my own and suck down her taste.

It's fucking magnificent, makes me want to go to my knees right then and there and make her cry out those breathless giggles over and over again.

But I don't. I can't.

Because the guttural sound that she lets out as she watches my tongue suck down her climax has me completely undone.

It has me unzipping my pants in an instant, my cock springing free before I grab the length and guide it to her dripping wet pussy. She grips the bed post even tighter now and I wonder if the wood might splinter because of it.

I should stop now, because I'm not wearing protection and she's not on the pill. I should, but I can't. The heat of her wet flesh as the tip of my cock circles her entrance has me growling like a fucking unhinged animal.

Because I am.

I'll call the doctor first thing in the morning. He'll be over with here shots in an instant. So fuck it. Fuck it all, because right now, I'm shoving my cock to the hilt of my fiancé's tight, warm flesh and I never want to look back.

This is every sinful, beautiful thing I've imagined. And there's no going back.

Nothing more, right?

We're both damned.

fifteen

Lucy

This is the second man to ever be inside of me. And it's the greatest fucking feeling on planet earth.

Sure, I've fooled around with a couple of men over the last few years, but never went past oral honestly. I got too scared, my PTSD would go into overdrive at the thought of letting a man inside of my body since my virginity was taken away from me by force.

But right now, there is no fear. There is no pain.

Yes, my ass is stinging from the constant blows that Damien's hand just dealt. My wrists are going to be bruised by the end of this, and my heart is already thrown at his feet because I'm a stupid idiotic girl.

But it feels fucking good .

As soon as my body grows accustomed to his length, it feels otherworldly. That stupid little crush I had on him years ago now morphs into a full-blown obsession. It started when he tied me to this bed post. It ignited when he marked my flesh again, when he brought me to the brink of pain only to soothe it with his amazing fucking fingers right after.

It exploded then, the crush, the feelings.

It blew up right there with me and obliterated my entire being, the pieces of me flying around the room before eventually falling at his feet while he slid inside of me for the very first time.

Finally.

Finally.

I feel like every atom, every fiber of my being has been pulling me towards this moment, towards him. Every bit of pain, every awful thing, has now evaporated because Damien Reed is inside of me and fucking me like we're the last two people on earth.

"God, it's fucking tight," he groans as his fingers move to find my clit while he drives into me with a fast and erratic force.

I can hardly catch my breath, not that I want to. Who needs air right now? I sure don't. All I need is this . More of this. All of this.

I'm so greedy for him and I know that he can tell, but I don't care. Hell, I don't think he cares much either because he keeps talking to me and praising my body, lifting me up past the pedestal to fuck me right on cloud nine.

"Look at how wet she is for me, Lucille," he growls out as he circles my wetness around my clit as his massive length continues to retreat and drive forth until it touches the fucking barrier of my soul.

He's invading me from the inside out, exposing every bit of me and we're not even naked.

"It's your fault!" I cry out, another climax building as the wet, fast sounds of our

fucking fill the air.

I don't know what to say, I don't know how to react or respond. My consciousness is long gone and in its place is pure, unabashed desire. And it's a fiery, unhinged monster.

"Yeah?" he half growls, half chuckles. The sound is sweeter than honey. I didn't think he was capable of such a sound. Then again, I never thought this was even possible.

"My fault, baby girl?" he growls and my heart stutters in my chest at the pet name.

Did he mean to call me that? Or does he say that to every woman while he fucks her?

Don't do that, Lucy. Don't think about him fucking other women.

I don't know why that fills me with anger, he was married to my sister for god's sake.

And that thought hits even harder. That realization fills me with both guilt and rage, and I think he feels it too.

But he doesn't stop. And surprisingly, I don't want him to.

No, instead, he takes that rage and guilt and fucks it into me with such a force that it leaves my body altogether because there is no space for those feelings here. There is only space for this, for he and I at this moment.

I want to keep talking with him. We barely ever talk, we're always arguing. At least with this, there's ecstasy. There is pure lust, even if it's mixed with hatred.

"It's all your fault, Damien," I groan, my teeth biting at my rope as I groan. "You're

the reason it aches,” I say and I don’t care how it sounds. Like he’s at fault for more than just this intimate ache, he’s the reason for all of my ache.

I meant that and he knows it, but he doesn’t stop. Actually, he grabs my jaw and rips me away from my wrists so he can bite at my throat while I tighten around his pounding length.

“I know, Lucille. I make it ache really bad,” he growls as his hand digs into the skin of my jaw while the other circles and pinches my clit as I cry out from yet another impending release.

“I make it ache and then I take it all away,” he whispers and I can’t deny him, because he’s right.

He causes the hurt and then he eases it. He makes the mark and then he soothes. He is the ultimate cause and effect and he has no problem doing or being so. And I’m beginning to wonder if I care either, if it even bothers me deep down.

I don’t think it does.

Mostly because deep down, a part of me has always been in love with Damien Reed. Even since my sister first introduced him. It’s been forbidden, it’s been ignored. He’s hurt and he’s inflicted pain with his ignorance and cold heart, he’s wounded me over and over again with his lack of acknowledgement, and then he’s healed it all when he saved me that night.

And here he is now, soothing all of the ache and hurt that he’s caused over the past few days. Doing what Damien does best. Fucking shattering me from the inside out.

And I do just that. I shatter from the inside out, but this time, I do it around him.

I come hard and I come for what feels like forever, all the while crying out his name before my mouth finds his thumb. I suck on it then, drowning out my cries and tasting whatever flesh that he can give me. It's pathetic, I know, but I can't help it.

I'm in love with him. I always have been. You see, Jenni was wrong. It wasn't a stupid crush.

It was always an obsession.

I'm in love with him and he will never be in love with me, but at least I can have this.

Despite all of the bullshit behind me and ahead of me, right now, I have this.

I have him.

And he's coming inside of me, growling out my name as our orgasms bleed into one.

I don't want the moment to end, because I know as soon as it does, reality will come crashing in, so I soak up every passing second. I soak up the tremors in his body as he releases into me, the feeling of his climax as it starts to seep out of me when he retreats. I try to ignore the empty, cold feeling when he pulls out and backs away from my body. He doesn't caress me, doesn't hold me, and I know that he won't because that's not what this is about.

Hell, this wasn't really about anything. He saw me in a short skirt and he wanted to fuck me, that's it. I know better than to read further into it, despite my own, desperate, stupid feelings. Desperate feelings that have me focusing on the sound of him gathering his breath. Desperate feelings that have me clinging to the sting of his hand on my ass because it's the only touch I have to remember after tonight.

I know as soon as I turn around, after he removes this rope and my wrists fall from

the bed post, Damien Reed will be long gone. I'm an intelligent woman, I've been through enough to have a bit of wisdom in my day, but that doesn't mean that hope and love can't make me somewhat stupid.

Okay, a lot of stupid.

He does exactly that too. He removes the rope and releases me instantly, never standing too close. I can hear him shuffle around to gather his clothes as I straighten myself on the bed. He never undressed me, but I am a mess underneath my clothes. Does it make me gross if I don't want to clean up? If I don't want to wipe him away from me?

Maybe I am sick and twisted like him.

"I have to go," he grumbles as he zips up his pants and grabs his tie from the bed.

I watch him from the corner of my eye as he stares at the tie for a second too long.

I left bite marks on it. Wet indents from my teeth. Evidence of my arousal. And he's eyeing it up. Will he wear it? Will he put it back on because he wants the reminder? Because he wants to remember the sounds of my muffled groans as he fingered me?

The answer is no. Because eventually, he shoves it into his back pocket as he straightens his shirt.

I sigh through that small bit of rejection that I feel and stand as I take out the ponytail he messed up. I run my hands through my waves as they fall to my breasts and when I look up, I find him watching me. And there's lingering arousal in his gaze, but suddenly, he seems annoyed.

"I have to clean up the mess you made the other day in the warehouse," he growls

out, and I want to roll my eyes at him, but I stop myself because the memory of blood and a blown out head fills me.

He has to dispose of the dead body of the man he killed right in front of me. A man that he killed for me because he was running at me with a knife.

I want to stand there in the fear that the memory suddenly brings, but I know better.

I am stuck in this lifestyle of Damien Reed whether I like it or not. I cannot hide from his brutality, from the cruelty of his world. The best I can do is face it. And face it head on.

Which is exactly why I meet his gaze once more and cross my arms with a sharp and quick demand.

“Take me with you,” I bark softly, trying to sound both cold and clipped.

He’s surprised by this, but his annoyance is still clear as his hazel eyes narrow on me.

“No-”

“Yes,” I grunt out, cutting him out.

“It’s my fault, like you said. I should help clean up my mess, shouldn’t I?” I propose, his head tilted at me in curiosity now.

“Look, you’re forcing me into marriage. I watched a man die because of you. I can at least see how you plan to cover this up. I need to be in this with you if you want this to be authentic, if you want me to cover your ass when you need it. No secrets,” I say, and his eyes are still narrowed on me, though I can’t tell what emotion lies within them.

“I’ll never need you to cover my ass, Lucille. I’m a grown man-”

“Who’s marrying the senator’s other daughter because the government is snooping around your shit. So you want this one to be clueless as well?” I bite back and I know he wants to decline, I know he wants me to be clueless, but he should know by now, I don’t shut up until I get what I want. And if I do, it’s because I’m plotting a way to escape quietly to get what I want. It’s what my family taught me to do, forced me to do.

And I guess after a while, he does get this. He does realize who I am and what I will do. Because eventually, he sneers at me and turns on his heel. And when he reaches the door to leave, he gives me a quick wave to come after him.

And I do instantly.

Well, after I stop by my room to change clothes, which agitates him even further, but I haven’t had a second to clean up after what we just...did. I swear, my legs are shaking the entire journey that I make from his room to mine. Initially, I planned on changing into comfier clothes, ones that I don’t mind getting...dirty. Being as the last time I witnessed him working I ended up covered in blood, however, when I reach my room, I’m rendered speechless.

There sitting in the small, two step alcove with bay windows lies a massive easel with a fresh canvas on it. My mouth drops as I walk to it, my eyes moving from the canvas to the wooden art station next to. It is filled with brand new acrylics, brushes, oil pastels and even water colors. I’m mesmerized by all of it when I run my fingers down the side of the easel, tears threatening to pool in my eyes because I’ve never had anything this nice before. My parents refused to buy me any supplies other than my books and pencils. All of the paints and small canvases came from my own pocket so nothing was very lavish. My mother didn’t want me ruining her carpet or drapes and I never had space for something like this at Jenni’s.

This is a first for me. A dream come true. And I can't help but realize that today is suddenly filled with a lot of suspiciously wonderful things.

I hear Damien clear his throat behind me, but I don't turn to look at him when I speak. I am too enthralled with this.

"Did you do this?" I whisper, my voice shaky and choked up. I know he can hear me though. I can feel his discomfort in the air.

I know this because Damien Reed is not used to doing nice things for people just as I am not used to receiving nice things from people.

He's quiet for a while and his silence is answer enough. I want to ask why, but I fear he will just have some short, curt response. Maybe he'll say it's to distract me, to keep me out of his hair whilst he lives his life. And I don't want to hear that. I don't want to hear that Damien doesn't like being near me unless he's starting at my body or fucking it.

Though, I do love it when he does that.

No, I want to continue to be ignorant and believe that Damien did this because he wanted to make me happy. Because he wanted to see me smile. Even though I know that is the furthest thing from the truth.

"Hurry up. We need to be in the garage in two minutes," he barks out, but there's a small softness to his words, I can barely detect it, but I know it's there. I can feel his gaze as it burns through the skin of my back.

But I'm left cold once more when I feel his presence recede and hear the quick click of my door closing.

I smile then, walking away from my new art area to rush to my closet and change quickly. My cheeks hurt from my lips spreading them, but I can't help it. I know reality will come and crash down on me, but right now, I'm in blissful ignorance. Right now, I have this moment.

He didn't slam the door.

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Damien

She approaches me in all black, skin-tight athletic wear with her sports bra peeking out slightly from beneath her form fitting jacket.

Jesus, with the way this outlines her curves, I'm wondering if it's worse than the skirt. The realization that she can make anything look sexy has me shoving my phone into my pocket aggressively. I punch the button for the garage on the elevator and step inside, not wanting to look at her.

I can't be distracted by her right now. Even though we just fucked each other to oblivion. Even though I punished her and she seemed to love every goddamn minute of it.

Even though she looked me dead in the eye and told me she wanted to come and watch me dispose of a dead body. One that I killed in front of her. One that I killed for her.

She's silent the entire way down and I want to peek at her from the corner of my eye. She's never this quiet, not since she was young actually. I'd like to be pleased that she's listening to me, but for some stupid reason, it brings me back to a moment I witnessed in the Fairchilds Connecticut home years ago.

"So, Damien, how long have you been in the Marines?" Michael Fairchild asks me from his long, plastic covered, expensive couch.

He holds a glass of scotch in one hand and a lit cigar in the other. I can't help but eye it and want to laugh at the hypocrisy. They cover their couches but still smoke inside of their beachside mansion?

Fucking rich people.

"Since I was eighteen sir. Nearly twelve years now," I say as I clear my throat and straighten my uniform, afraid that I might stain their white carpet with my combat boots.

But I am clean, polished. Formal and presentable for the senator, my girlfriend's father.

"I climbed the ranks fairly quickly. I've been head of special forces for quite some time now," I say, my tone low and confident, but not braggy.

I don't want to brag to a piece of shit that loves to brag. All politicians do. I'm pretty sure it's in the handbook or something.

"I wanted to protect this country and our fellow citizens since I was young, and I set out to do so when I graduated high school. I got my masters in Nuclear Engineering during my time there as well," I say, knowing that only the first part of the sentence was a lie.

I didn't join because I cared about this country or its people. I joined because I needed an outlet for my rage, because I wanted to make enough money without my father's help to travel this world and hopefully find my mother. My real mother.

Megan's small, manicured hand finds my thigh and I want to narrow my eyes at her fingers for creasing my uniform, but I keep my eyes on the senator who is now giving me a wide smile.

“You’re straightforward, Reed. I like that about you. I can see why Megan has taken quite the interest in you, though I’m not sure why she’s kept you away from us for so long.” A puff of his cigar leaves smoke billowing throughout the air. I try not to choke on it.

“Daddy, you know I’m busy with school. Damien works out of the state most of the time.”

That’s partly true.

“It’s hard for me to get alone time with him and also schedule a trip for us out here to meet my family,” she says in a slightly whiny voice, but he does nothing but smile at her.

She is the perfect apple and his eye. Megan could do no wrong, which is one of the many reasons why I’ve decided to propose to her soon.

One of the many selfish reasons.

I’m about to ask him about his time in office, but am quickly interrupted when I hear a small, frustrated growl followed by stomping footsteps enter the room.

“Father, did you tell Marcela to get rid of my notebooks?” a young, short girl asks as she stomps into the room and stops directly in front of Michael, unphased by the billowing clouds of smoke from his cigar.

Her light brown hair is long, and braided down her back. She looks different from the rest of them. Different from her well-groomed father, from her perfect and thin sister that’s now sneering at her, and definitely different from the tall, frail looking woman that now enters the room behind her.

It must be their mother, who practically serves as Megan's twin. God only knows how much botox this woman has had in her lifetime.

He doesn't look at her when he speaks, in fact, he doesn't speak at all. Just barks out a short and curt laugh as he rolls his eyes at her, annoyed by her presence.

It seems like everyone in this room is, especially her mother who growls at her in disgust.

"You were getting charcoal all over my sheets and floors, Lucille. Your little art projects are making a mess around the house that I've worked so hard to maintain. It's entirely disrespectful. I wanted them gone," she hisses and I want to laugh at her, because I know she doesn't maintain this home.

The maid does. Marcela.

The girl, Lucille, turns to glare at her mother and I see every ounce of color drain from Michael's face as she does. She doesn't speak or flinch when Michael shoots up and grabs her small arm, tugging her out of the room and into the foyer whilst muttering a short "excuse me".

I look at Megan then, because quite frankly, I don't know where else to look. Their mother pisses me off and I know that if I look in the direction of the foyer, they'll likely judge.

She's mentioned her sister only once. She's eighteen and enrolled in a marketing program at the local university, which everyone disapproved of. So she's forced to double her major and go to???

Megan offers me a small, plastered smile, one that she's so good at giving. I swear, if she wasn't so good at giving head, I might hate her mouth altogether.

I hear Michael bark orders at her, Lucille. I hear her whine slightly and try a rebuttal, and then I hear the hard slap that echoes throughout the room. I'm pretty sure we all do, but none of us react. I don't move or say anything, because I know this scene all too well. I've had it play out in my own home for years. Except I didn't have a younger sibling like Lucille, I was Lucille.

I know I should probably offer her a look of sympathy when they both re-enter the room, but I don't. I keep my eyes on the white carpet and take Megan's thin hand in mine. It's cold like always.

Lucille doesn't say a word, but Michael makes a sound in her direction, a wordless command.

"I apologize for my theatrics, Mr. Reed. It's lovely to have you here," she says quietly, robotically.

Jesus, this poor girl. Why am I not trying to help her? Why am I trying not to care? Have I really turned into that much of a heartless bastard over the years?

"Damien. Call me Damien," I say as I glance at her, her bright blue, sad eyes locking with mine as she nods her head silently before knotting her hands and staring back down at the carper for the rest of the time.

I can feel Megan eyeing me close, but I pay no mind to it because her father is already grabbing the bottle and a new crystal glass after he puts out his cigar.

"So, Reed, you like old scotch?" Michael asks as he offers me the glass that I take with a half smile.

No, actually. I fucking hate it.

“Yes sir, I do,” I say as we clink our glasses together whilst he and the women in the room chuckle.

Everyone but Lucille. Who’s staring at me now.

“That’s my boy!” he exclaims as he claps an old, hard hand down on my shoulder.

That night, I became an official member of the family. And like the rest of them, I ignored the quiet, meek, brown haired girl that was condemned to the corner, a quiet shadow in the room that everyone refused to acknowledge.

I became just like them.

“Damien.” I hear her voice cut through the air and I realize the elevator has stopped moving.

“We’re at the garage now,” she says, her blue eyes locking with mine.

I don’t feel much remorse, well, I don’t want to address what I feel, but her eyes are so much different from that night. They’re older now, sadder. Exhausted from the world and dim from all of the brightness that she probably did deserve at one point. I hate that for a moment, I want to put light back inside of them. I hate that I feel like she’s deserving of good things. Nobody really is. We’re all equally as shitty, we’re just shitty in different ways.

“Let’s go. Don’t say a word when we arrive,” I order and she nods at me robotically, something she’s become great at doing.

We walk to my blacked-out Audi and I get a text from Bruno that he and Andy are already at the warehouse with the body. I head that way and Lucy is quiet most of the time.

It's a business that I own on the upper east side. The basement serves as a partial warehouse where the main floor is a butcher's shop. I bought it mostly for the equipment, but also because of its discreet location.

When we arrive, I sigh and kill the engine.

"You don't have to go in there, you know. It's not in the contract. In fact, I'd rather not include you in such personal--"

"I'm going." She cuts me off, short and clipped.

There is no emotion on her beautiful face. She is cold and emotionless, but not like her family can be. She's made a wall of protection around herself and I can see right through it. She's using her quiet strength as a defense mechanism and I can't help but admire it because it's one of the first things I learned in basic training.

You are a wall to the hideous despair you will see in the outside world. Do not let anyone or thing try to break it down, not even anguish or guilt. Nothing.

"I'm ready," she says, her blue eyes dark in the moonlight, her face hard as stone as her hand wraps around the door handle.

"Let's go," I say, trying not to admire her. Trying not to be in awe of her.

I walk with her to the back alleyway that snakes down and leads to the door of the warehouse. The butcher shop is closed and won't be open for a few more days due to new renovations, so this job doesn't have to be rushed, though I'd really like it to be.

When we enter, Andy and Bruno are unzipping the body bag and laying him on the table next to the meat grinder. I stand there with my hands behind my back as I give them a short nod when they take in Lucy's presence. They are not fazed, though, I

pay them not to be.

I look over at Lucy, whose arms are crossed over her breasts. Her eyes never travel to me, they are locked on the saw that Bruno pulls out. They don't close, don't even blink as he starts to saw the body into several pieces so that it can be put in the meat grinder. She doesn't speak, I'm worried that she might not even be breathing. But despite all of that, I can tell by the pensive look in her eyes and twitch in her thick brow, a question is brewing.

"Ask it," I command, hating that I want to know what's going on inside of her head.

"If they are taking care of this, why are you here?" she asks as she watches Bruno slice the body while Andy wipes the blood.

"To make sure it gets done right," I say, even though I trust Bruno, but when you're dismembering a body and covering up a murder, you have to make sure you know that it was taken care of. I've seen too many men grow ignorant and complacent and they've either wound up in a Colombian prison or with a bullet in their heads.

Once the body is dismembered, Bruno and Andy push the parts one by one into the meat grinder. It is a loud machine and all we can hear is the crushing and grinding of a man who will be wiped from existence. Lucy watches the whole thing and I watch her.

"What did he do?" she asks quietly as her eyes remain locked on the machine that grinds a man down into nothing, the meat of his flesh falling into a large bucket.

"Stole from me. Stole a lot," I say as I eye her closely.

"Is that why you killed him?" she asks, and I tilt my head at her.

“No, I killed him because he was running at you with a knife,” I say honestly and she snuffles then, but doesn’t look at me.

Time passes and silence stretches, except for the grinder as it continues to pull body parts through. Andy sparks a match and ignites a fire in the large stone oven that’s built into the wall of the warehouse. It’s used for smoking large portions of meat, but also does wonders for an impromptu burning. The chimney extends to the very top of the store, so the smoke will mostly smell of cured or smoked meat, something not too uncommon for an overnight butcher shop in New York City.

“If I didn’t show up, would you have let him live?” she asks, turning to look at me now, her eyes void of all emotion.

I want to reach out and move the strand of hair that falls to her cheek, but I refrain.

Instead, I shrug.

“It was his first offense. I would have taken his fingers for the crime, but allowed him a few days to find me the money. If he didn’t, then I would have killed him.” I answer honestly, looking at her closely as she takes in my words.

She doesn’t say it, but I can see the fleeting emotion on her face and it speaks volumes. She regrets walking in because it could have spared a man’s life. She blames herself.

“Don’t do that,” I order, and she tilts her chin up at me as I walk closer and tower over her frame. “He was a thief, a selfish one at that. He had no family he was fighting for, no loved ones he was trying to feed or get to. He did it for drugs and himself,” I say, and she remains silent, immobile.

“This is a business, Lucy. People do bad things in this world and in my business, they

pay for it. When they fuck me over, I do it right back. An eye for an eye,” I say, and she tilts her head at me.

“So you’re Karma? Taking the initiative to make the whole world blind?” she rasps out and I sigh, because in a way, she’s right.

But that’s just the way the world works. Surely, she should know this by now.

“I’m ready to go,” she says and I nod, knowing the job is practically done anyways.

“Clean up when you’re done. Dump the ashes in the sewer. I’ll see you bright and early,” I say to the men as they nod at me before we turn on our heels and leave.

She’s quiet when we enter the vehicle, quiet most of the way home actually. It has me curious, dying to know what’s going on inside of her head. And I hate that. I hate that her silence bothers me, that I want to know what she’s thinking, what she’s feeling.

I’m beginning to wonder if she is my own Karma.

“My lawyer finalized the contract,” I start, as she turns to look out of the window, eyeing the glimmering city as we pass through it.

“We’ll be married by the end of this month,” I say and she nods, not uttering a single word of acknowledgement.

It’s driving me fucking mad.

Who is this woman? What is it that she’s thinking? Shouldn’t she be freaking out? Stomping her feet in protest or running for the hills in fear?

I put the car in park in the garage and she goes to undo her seat belt, but my hand

snaps out to stop her.

“What is it that you want, Lucille?” I despise the words as they leave my lips, but I can’t stop them.

She eyes me closely, almost shocked that I asked them.

“It doesn’t matter what I want. You’ve made that abundantly clear,” she says as she swallows tightly, her hand twitching in my grasp.

You’re right, it doesn’t.

But fuck, I wanna know.

“Humor me,” I say, my eyes locked with hers.

The air in the car is tight, thick with many things.

Tension. Confusion. Frustration.

Lust.

So much fucking lust.

I can see it pouring from her gaze, I can feel it in the curl of her fingers. I watch it as she bites down on her lip and leans closer to me, her large breasts pressing against my biceps as she breathes into my mouth. She smells like peppermint. I want to swallow the scent down.

“I want you to fuck me again,” she whispers against my lips, her mouth moving against mine, but never pressing against it.

Because she's listened to me about the no kissing rule. Because she's such a fucking good girl.

I exit the car rapidly then and pull her from it. I haul her over my shoulder and walk us to the elevator, my hand squeezing the back of her thigh as it climbs to the top. When we get inside, I take her to the bathroom and strip down. When she goes to take her clothes off, I stop her.

"I never got to undress you earlier," I ground out, my heart pounding in my throat as I start to peel her tight clothes away from her delectable body.

I don't know why my body reacts like this with her, but it does. It feels a rush of excitement that I haven't felt in a very long time. I know I shouldn't lean into it, shouldn't lean into her, but fuck, it feels too good.

She feels too good.

Once she's naked, I turn on the shower and walk us into the warm spray. I take her into my arms and lift her. She wraps her shapely legs around my waist and my cock instantly presses to her opening. She shifts her hips so that I slide in and then I push forth, filling her hard and deep. She moans as I fuck her, low and slow. It matches the rhythm of my thrusts.

I take my time with her tonight, I fuck her long and thoroughly under the shower and she comes around my cock over and over again, moaning my name each time.

When I feel my own climax surge, I take her nipple into my mouth and pull out, splattering on the floor of the shower as the water washes it away. I was careless earlier, I can't be this time.

"We will get you on the shot tomorrow," I huff out to her and she nods against my

shoulder.

When I ease her down to wash her hair, I can't help but catch a glimpse of the disappointed look in her eyes. I can't pay any mind to it, can't even entertain the thought of having a baby with anyone, especially her. Especially since the idea of it makes my heart begin to pound a strange and unfamiliar rhythm.

"No more lies after tonight," she whispers as I spread soap along her soft body.

She turns to look at me, her eyes dark under the dimmed light of the bathroom.

"I'm going to be your wife, your partner, whether I like it or not. So the least you could do is keep me in the loop and not lie to me. I've had enough of that my entire life." She sighs and I nod at her.

Even though I just lied to her right then.

Because there are many things I am keeping from Lucy. Her actual ties to her family being one of them.

My fucking growing feelings for her being another.

"Nothing more," I ground out and she nods, her own lie shining through her eyes as she looks at me.

"Nothing more." Even though I know she means anything but that.

Because I know what she actually wants. Lucille wants me to give her everything, she wants all of me, and she's trying to hide it from me. Just as I am trying to hide what I'm beginning to feel for her, what I've felt for her in the past. Maybe in a way, she knows that. Or at least hopes for it. Maybe she's hoping that this arrangement will

defy all odds and bring us closer together, a true union.

But I know that I will crumble that hope into ash.

And she knows that I can give her nothing.

seventeen

Lucy

It's been a week since I watched a man get shoved through a meat grinder and then reduced to ash. I haven't said much about it, then again I haven't tried to think about it much either.

Even though my thoughts come through every day when I try to paint.

It's all the same when I touch a new canvas. Blacked out shadows with charcoal covering an unidentifiable face of a man. Splatters of red throughout. Fire. Lots of fire.

Today, I decided to take my hand and just smear different shades of red throughout the canvas. And now I've been staring at it for two hours.

Apart from the images of death, other things happen too.

Like fucking Damien.

Fucking Damien all of the time.

In the shower, in my bed, on the kitchen counter. In his office. One time, on his conference table when all of his team left. Never in his bedroom though. And not in his sex room again either, which slightly disappoints me. And he never kisses me, which also disappoints me, but he laid that rule out in the beginning. And no matter

how intimate the sex can be sometimes, I know by the end of it when he leaves, that's all it ever was. That's all it will ever be.

We're so intimate that he ordered a doctor here to give me a shot of birth control. Something I neither refused or felt excited about. It's a smart idea, using birth control. There's no way I should be getting pregnant by my sister's husband or the leader of a cartel, but then again, I probably shouldn't marry him either.

Yet, here I am. Staring at a wet canvas full of red and white, wondering how the fuck I got here and where I will go from here.

There's a brochure next to my art station for the university I once attended. They're offering a marketing program online now, since the state of the world is becoming more and more remote. I want to go back, but I've yet to bring the idea up to Damien. When I emailed admissions, they stated I would have to go in for in-person registration. I don't know how he would feel about that, me going into a university I once attended. It's too risky, I could run into anyone there and I know that would piss him off greatly.

But I can't stay hidden forever. Especially if I'm going to have his last name.

"What is that?" Damien asks as he appears behind me.

It doesn't startle me anymore. The man creeps up out of nowhere. I hate to admit it, but I feel him long before he even speaks. I can feel his eyes on me, feel his breath near my skin before he opens his mouth. I can smell him and my body goes absolutely wild. I'm pulled to him in every way, and it's unnerving and intoxicating all at once.

I don't know if he's referring to the painting or the brochure, so I decide to throw all caution to the wind and tell him anyway.

I need to get the fuck out of this penthouse.

“I want to go back to school,” I start, my voice clear and steady as his finger makes a trail from my bare shoulder to my wrist. I’m wearing a short sundress today, and from the way he presses his length into my back, I can tell that he likes it.

And I like to please him. In fact, I fucking love it.

I love him .

“The program is online and I only have a year left before I get my bachelors in marketing,” I say quietly and his hand freezes on mine as his lips skim my shoulder.

My eyes practically roll into the back of my head.

“What’s the catch?” he whispers across my skin, his free hand snaking up the back of my thigh to cup my bare ass.

I’m not wearing underwear. Damien hates underwear. I know this because he praises me every time I go without, and I love receiving his praise.

I’m so ridiculous, but I can’t help it.

“They want an in-person registration,” I whisper and he scoffs as his hand moves to slide a finger down the center of my growing wetness. I shift on my heels, angling for his invasion.

It doesn’t come. He’s fucking with me.

“Please,” I beg silently and I feel his smile against my ear.

“Please what? Please touch you or please let you go and risk running into your family?” he growls and I bow my head.

My father gives the college massive donations every year, because my sister got her law degree there. He’s there constantly for his rallies, which are abundant right now since he’s running for office again. I know Damien is trying to avoid that.

“You plan to marry me in three weeks, Damien. They’re going to find out. At least let me get my degree. I’ve done nothing but listen and obey. I haven’t asked any questions. I’ve kept to myself. I’ve done it all for-”

“Do you want an award for that? A gold star perhaps, Lucille?” he taunts and I grow angry and pull away from him, but I can’t do more than turn around and face him because he immediately has me pressed against the canvas. Wet paint now seeps through the back of my dress.

“Fuck you,” I seethe and he smiles wickedly.

He pins my wrists against the canvas and kneels before me, my anger dissipates slightly and I hate that. I hate that he does this to me and that I let him.

He hikes my dress up to my waist, baring my wet flesh to his mouth as he settles on his knees to the floor.

He leans forward, but doesn’t press his lips to my flesh. All I can feel is his breath as he speaks. It makes me shiver.

“Okay,” he says, short and simple as he eyes my pussy.

My eyes drop down and lock with his. Surprise fills me.

“Okay what?” I ask, shocked that he would agree so quickly. I expected more of a fight.

He leans closer and licks a line from one hip bone to the other, my ass rising and pressing against the wet canvas in response.

“You can go. But Bruno attends with you and you make it quick. Pay for the semester in full. I’ll deposit the money in your account tomorrow morning,” he says as he breaks my gaze to stare at my pussy. My heart is pounding against my chest. It’s hard to focus on this conversation because now all I want is for him to lick me to completion.

“Why aren’t you-”

“Just shut up and take the offer, Lucy,” he growls, and I quiet instantly, mostly because as soon as he is done speaking, he licks me from my clit to my opening and I choke on my moan because of it.

He eats me with an intensity I’ve yet to see from him, like he’s been dying to taste me all day. I don’t question his actions or even his motives at this point because it feels too god damn good. I’m nothing but a stream of choking gasps and orgasms. My dress and skin are both stained from my paints and he’s growling as I start to come on his tongue.

But he doesn’t stop then. He continues until I’ve had three more climaxes, until I’m shaking and nearly to the point of tears in his grasp because every nerve ending is alive and sensitive.

“Such a good girl,” he growls, and I know then from his praise that’s why he’s agreed, because I’ve been good.

And he's noticed.

And he's rewarded me for it.

It's all I've ever wanted in this life. To be recognized for my efforts or seen period. And he does. Damien watches me close and he sees me. And I shouldn't be seeking validation like this, especially from him, but I can't help it. I've been in the shadows for so long that even if my captor praises me for my good work, I brighten like the sun. I feel warmth spread all around me and it's both confusing and addicting. I want it all of the time.

I want him all of the time.

He stands and pulls my dress down, even though it's covered in paint. When he pulls me away from the easel, we both stare at the artwork that we've just created. Everything is smeared, except for the bottom, where you can see where my ass was pressed against it and where both of our hands touched it.

I look down at Damien's hand because it smacked against the canvas during one of my orgasms. Red covers his skin. When he moves his eyes from the canvas to his own hand, he smiles that wicked smile again.

"I think this is your best work to date," he says, and I beam at him,

He stares at me then, taking in my smile for what feels like an eternity. I want to ask what's going through his mind, but I refrain. I just stand there in my post orgasmic glow and admire him.

"I finalized the merger with Fleur de Femme yesterday," he says after a while and I tilt my head at him.

“How did that go?” I ask and he bites down on his lip as he smoothes a strand of hair away from my eye with his clean hand, something he does often.

“I fired the PR team and most of the staff,” he exclaims and my eyes widen in shock.

“Why did you do that?” I ask and he shrugs.

“Because they were trash at their jobs. The business has been sinking money for years,” he says and I sigh, not sure what else to say in response.

They turned me away in an instant, money be damned.

“Anyways, I need a new head for the marketing staff. That’s why I’ve agreed to the degree. I need someone to be well versed on the job when they take it,” he says and I tilt my head at him in confusion, mostly because I don’t want to believe what he is saying.

“You start next week. Make sure the classes align with your schedule when I send it to you,” he says as he straightens his shoulders and goes to leave.

Me? The head of marketing at a major fragrance retailer? This is too good to be true.

“This is a handout,” I say and he stops at the door before he turns slowly to face me.

“No, this is an opportunity, Lucille,” he says in a dark tone, narrowing his eyes at me. “So, I wouldn’t fuck it up if I were you,” he growls before he leaves with the door open, leaving me alone with his warning.

This is a test. Yet another that Damien loves to give.

I should sit here and ponder over it, maybe even lean into more of my anger and

frustration, but I pay no mind to it. Instead, I grab my laptop and respond to the admissions counselor at the university and schedule my meeting for tomorrow afternoon.

As fucked as everything is, as fast as everything is moving, I have a plan. I'm going to get my life back on track. That way, when everything crashes and burns, when Damien inevitably leaves me on my ass, I'll have a back-up plan.

And then maybe my heart won't be so shattered when the time finally comes.

Maybe.

* * *

I arrive at my old school with Bruno leaning against the Escalade. He gives me a short nod as Andy follows me into the admissions office. He's new apparently. Bruno mentioned Andy was transferred here from Columbia a month ago. He doesn't speak any English which I don't mind, because that means we never have to talk. He's just my shadow. Simple as that. I tend to find his presence comforting as well. Safe even. Andy seems like the type to rip anyone's head off in a millisecond, which is terrifying to most, but he's been nothing but polite to me. He even smiles at me, which is quite the contrast to the rest of Damien's team that I've only met briefly.

The meeting with the admissions counselor is short and sweet. My transcripts state that I only have a total of fifteen credit hours to complete, just under a year as I predicted. I'm almost thrilled, but a part of me hates that I won't be going for my dream degree. I'll only get to take a couple of art classes, most of them being graphic design. But maybe one day I can go back and get my masters.

"So, what loan servicer will be providing payment with us this semester?" the old counselor asks as she types aggressively on her keyboard, eyes trained to the

computer as she speaks.

“None, I’ll be paying in full,” I say as I hand her my new AMEX.

Damien deposited fifty thousand dollars into my bank account this morning. Thirty thousand more than my monthly allowance that was stated in the contract and twenty thousand more than the cost of the actual semester, which I explained to him at breakfast this morning.

He didn’t respond. Just waved at me as he read whatever was on his phone.

The counselor looks at me and then the computer. I know she thinks that my father is paying for this, my last name is all over this city right now because of his re-election campaign. However, this college cares about Megan, not me. They’re the very few people that even know I’m his other daughter, and they’re only nice to me because I bear his name.

They never ask questions, probably because he told them not to when I first enrolled.

I can’t believe I’m grateful for one thing my father ever did for me, force a university to turn a blind eye to me. I’m only grateful because it’s covering my ass now.

She takes my AMEX and plugs everything in before handing it back to me with a heavy stack of paperwork.

“Fall semester starts in a month, so you barely missed the deadline,” she exclaims, straightening her glasses on her wrinkled nose.

She smells of roses and cotton and it burns my nostrils as she leans close.

“You have two weeks to finalize your schedule and get your books. Most of them are

QR codes, since everything is online, but you still will have to pay to access them, obviously,” she says, still avoiding eye contact with me.

“Since you’re technically going part time, I would recommend getting started on your thesis now. The professors are very picky when it comes to our marketing degree, mostly because it’s such a saturated career. They want to make sure you stand out,” she says, a slight sneer in her voice.

I don’t show that I’m offended, instead I offer her a smile and extend my hand.

“Wonderful. Thank you for your time today, Mrs. Guthrie,” I say as she tentatively takes my hand to shake it with a bored expression plastered on her old face.

I walk out of the admissions office and place the paperwork in my bag. I turn to Andy as we walk down the hall past the president’s office, there’s a bathroom at the end of the hall and I have to go.

“You don’t need to follow me in there,” I say with a sigh as I push the door open. “I’ll be quick,” I continue and he nods at me.

When I finish and go to wash my hands, I stand and stare at myself in the mirror. For the first time in a while, my eyes have a bit of sparkle to them. My cheeks have a bit of color and my face has filled out since Damien’s chef is ordered to feed me constantly.

I look...healthy. Happy even. The sight should unnerve me given the circumstances, but instead I am enthralled.

That is until someone enters the very small bathroom near the president’s office. Someone that’s very thin and tall with the sleek black bob that I’ve memorized to detail.

Megan.

My sister.

Oh, Jesus Christ this cannot be happening right now.

My heart drops into my stomach and my blood runs cold. Every strand of hair on my body rises as I look down and finish scrubbing my hands before turning the water off, praying that she doesn't notice me.

"Lucille?" she calls, her voice holding the same rigid, icy tone as it always has.

Fuck.

I turn around slowly and straighten my bag on my shoulder as I shift in my boots. I look casual today, despite the Prada tote that rests against me. A bag that my sister is now eyeing with suspicion.

"Hello, Megan," I say as I meet her dark eyes, my body filling with dread as I speak to my sister for the first time in years.

The sister who always ignored me. The sister that neglected me. The sister that taunted me. The sister that abandoned me when I needed her the most.

The woman with an ex-husband that I'm supposed to marry in three weeks.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, that hint of disgust still present in her tone.

Lie. You'll have to anyway.

"Getting my transcripts," I say as clench my fists at my sides, her eyes track the

movement.

She's in the same, dark pencil skirt and loose, modest top. If she wasn't so bitchy and had an eating disorder, my sister could easily be the most beautiful woman in the world.

But instead, she's like the other mother from Coraline. Or I guess, the other sister if there was one. My mom has the other mother in her fucking back pocket.

"Interesting," she says, eyeing me close as I try to stand tall and remain unphased, which is a total and complete failure since my voice shakes when I speak to her.

"Why are you here?" I ask and she smirks at me with a scoff, as if I should know.

As if I should know anything about her or her life since she's ignored my phone calls for the last three years.

"Freshman seminar. They asked me to come as a guest speaker for the incoming law students," she says with a proud, brag-like sophistication that makes me want to hurl all over her Jimmy Choos.

But, I refrain.

Mostly because I want to get the hell out of here.

"Well, good luck with that-" I start to say as I move closer to the door, but she stops me with a fake smile.

"We should have lunch sometime. Catch up," she says and I know she doesn't want to have lunch with me, I can tell by the suspicious look in her eye. My sister is notorious for prying. It's why she's my father's head lawyer.

She's built to unveil secrets and spill them for his benefit. She is built for sabotage.

"Maybe. I've been really busy lately. It was good seeing you," I say, even though it wasn't.

Even though I'm lying to her face as I desperately try to flee from her.

"I'm sure," she says with narrowed eyes and an even icier tone.

I leave the restroom quickly and rush down the remainder of the hall before descending the staircase as fast as possible so I can get to the lobby and get the hell out of here. Andy is behind me, and doesn't say a word. Thank God. I knew this man was decent.

When I reach the Escalade, Bruno opens the door for me. I slide in, with a feeling that I'm being watched. I try to chalk it up and imagine that it's just Damien's two men that are escorting me, but when Bruno closes the door and I look up at the window of the admissions hallway, I find Megan standing there, watching me as the car drives away.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Damien's going to be so pissed. But if Andy doesn't say anything, if Andy didn't see anything, then I should be in the clear. I won't have to mention that I ran into Megan today. He doesn't have to know.

He doesn't have to know. Even though we vowed not to lie, he doesn't have to know. It's not a lie if he doesn't ask, right?

“Bruno, roll down the window,” I bark as a wave of nausea fills me and I start to grow lightheaded.

He does as I ask and I lean out of the window and vomit my breakfast all over the Manhattan street as we make our way through the city.

eighteen

Damien

I arrive outside of Michael Fairchild's downtown office by noon and stomp on my cigarette as soon as I flick it onto the sidewalk.

I remember the first time that I met him, I was so bothered by the smoke of his cigar, but now, I smoke like a chimney. But I'm not a straightedge anymore, I've seen some shit in my time.

And some of that shit was dealt by this man.

I walk past his secretary and she tries to stop me.

"He's in a meeting-" She cries as she gets up from her desk, but I brush right past her.

"He's expecting me," I growl as I fling the young woman with an obscene amount of plastic surgery to the side as I enter his office.

He's not expecting me, actually. And judging by the way the young redhead falls away frantically from under his desk, I can tell she wasn't either.

His eyes widen as he spots me, then they narrow as I hear him zip his pants beneath the desk.

Gross bastard.

“Crystal, leave. Now,” he barks and she exits the office immediately, wiping her mouth with her head down as she speeds past me and out the door without meeting my gaze.

I don’t need to look at her. I can feel her shame. This room fucking wreaks of coercion. It always has.

“What do you want?” he growls as he stands to pour himself probably his fifth scotch of the day, not bothering to offer me one.

He hasn’t in quite some time actually. In truth, Michael Fairchild has probably hated me since the day he met me, but he’s definitely despised me since I divorced his eldest daughter.

“Not even a hello?” I flash a fake smile at him as I sit down and cross my leg in his cheap, squeaky leather chair in front of his desk.

He sneers at me from his spot as he sips his drink.

“Did the divorce papers not finalize?” he grumbles and I shake my head at him as I roll up my sleeves.

“Oh, they did. Thank god. Your eldest daughter is quite the pest,” I say with a sinister grin, and his face turns red.

Easy now, don’t have a heart attack, you old fuck.

“Speaking of daughters, how is your youngest? Lucy, right?” I ask, and his eyes narrow on me.

He doesn’t know because he hasn’t spoken to her in years. He left her on the streets

pregnant and alone, abused and terrified.

I could kill him for that. I could kill him for many things.

Then again, I abandoned her too. I guess guilt is easy to wash away when you turn a blind eye to it.

“I’m sure she is fine. Why are you here, Reed?” He growls as he sits down and sparks up a cigar.

Why is it only gross when he does it?

“I’m here to collect my money, Senator,” I say, and he scoffs at me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says and I lean forward to eye him close with my elbows pressed to my knees.

“I think you know exactly what I’m talking about,” I say, growing more and more irritated by him.

It’s why I’ve put it off for so long. This man infuriates me, mostly because it’s like dealing with a perverted child. I don’t need thirty grand that badly, I just need him out of my hair.

Then again, marrying his youngest daughter won’t solve that. He still wants to sue me, put me under investigation. Because he’s a snoop bastard.

“Or are you too stacked on other hush money trials to remember our little deal, Michael?” I sneer as he glares at me, knowing damn well he owes me money because I helped fund Megan’s best friend, another woman he fucked and paid to keep quiet about.

“You think you know about everything, don’t you, Reed?” he says, and I shrug.

“I know a lot. Head of Special Forces, remember?” I smirk and he continues to glare at me, except this time, he’s assessing me.

“But you’re not anymore, are you, Reed? As far as I’m concerned, you haven’t been for quite some time.” He puffs on his cigar, confidence exuding because he thinks he has a leg up on me.

But I’m always ready to bring him right back down to Earth.

“No, I’ve been too busy loaning money to people who pay for their daughter’s friend to get an abortion because their dad decided to fuck them,” I retort, and he falls silent instantly.

“Actually,” I remove my phone from my pocket and pull up Lucille’s file before turning the screen to face him.

“I think I have an actual example for you,” I say, his eyes pinned to Lucille’s hush money file that I dug up on him. “This one might be a little close to home too, right?” I taunt.

His eyes stay narrowed and I don’t back down.

“It’d be a shame for this to become public before the end of the year. Really might steer the opinions of some of your younger voters, huh?” I say, and he swallows tightly, eyeing my phone for ages.

Yeah so, marrying his youngest daughter might not stop him from launching the feds at me, but it might be a little difficult to launch an investigation on the husband of his love child. People won’t really want to believe a man who impregnated his underage

secretary and then paid her to lie about it.

Then again, he doesn't know I'm going to take this a step further anyway. I'll save that surprise for later. I'm still going to oust the bastard, just after Lucille is legally my wife. And definitely after he signs a check right now.

The thirty grand he owes me is just a little bonus.

A fund for his little girl's wedding day.

"What do you say, Michael?" I grin as he sighs and leans back in his chair, his eyes locked on the ceiling as his hand moves to the drawer of his desk.

"You know, Reed," he starts as he opens the drawer and pulls out his checkbook.

"I really thought you would make a great son in law," he says as he writes the check and rips it out, slapping it on his desk with a sour expression on his face.

Oh, trust me, I will.

Again.

I grab the check and put it in the pocket of my suit jacket before straightening and standing tall.

I offer him a smile and a quick nod before I turn on my heel to leave his office.

"It was a pleasure doing business with you, Senator," I say as I leave.

"Burn in hell," I hear him mutter as I close his door.

What he doesn't seem to get is that I've been burning for a very long time.

"Bruno," I bark into the phone as I step into my Audi.

"Tell my event planner to meet me at Terrace in Queens by three. I've got some details to smooth out." I end the call and make my way towards Queens, ready to get this wedding planning shit out of the way.

* * *

When I arrive later that evening, my head is pounding from the day's events. I cashed the check and immediately gave it to Terrace on The Park, a wedding venue near the East side. With the amount of money that I'm paying both the venue and my event planner, I have no reason to worry about the wedding at all.

Lucille will be married to me in front of all of my friends and employees by the end of this month. She'll get the dress, the pretty little marriage in the park, the big party in the massive reception area, all of it. Everything that a girl could dream of in my opinion.

Then again, this is not the ideal scenario. But I try not to think about it. Megan planned every single detail of our wedding in Connecticut and it was filled with socialites and politicians. The thought of having that again is enough to make me hurl, but I know it's impossible. Lucille Fairchild has no one to attend her wedding. No father, or mother, no maid of honor. Then again, I could talk to her little friend she lived with, but I have bigger things to focus on.

Her contentment shouldn't be my priority, even though a stupid part of my brain wants to please her.

I look to my chef who's already preparing dinner. The house smells of roast chicken

and he hands me a glass of white wine that I try not to swallow in one large gulp.

Jesus, my head.

“Where is she?” I ask as I set the wine glass down on the marble countertop.

He shrugs as he chops carrots on the cutting board, his towel draped over his shoulder. I’ve noticed he and Lucy have taken a liking to each other, and a part of me would be jealous since we’re fucking and she’s mine, but the man is engaged to another man. She’s not really his type.

She shouldn’t even be my type.

“In her room. She didn’t eat lunch when she got back. Just went there and mumbled that she had some studying to brush up on.” He mentions it casually, but I grow suspicious.

It’s unlike her to skip a meal, something I’ve grown fond of. I’ve been around her sister and supermodels for so long, I forgot how sexy it is for a woman to have a normal appetite.

I tug at my tie and remove it with my suit jacket before laying it on a nearby barstool. I make my way down the hall to her door. Not bothering to knock, because this is my fucking house, I try to barge right in.

But it’s locked.

Another first.

“Lucy?” I call out, agitated.

I hear scrambling on the other side, her little mumble to tell me that she's coming. When she unlocks the door and opens it, her hair is wild and her face is flushed.

She looks...nervous. Aroused even.

My eyes rake her entire body. From her form fitting, low cut black shirt. To her skin tight jeans that are tucked into a pair of brown leather boots. She's casual, but so fucking sexy.

And she's hiding something from me.

I stalk her then, backing her into the room before I shut the door behind me. When I look around the room, I spot her laptop slightly open on the bed. She watches me as I eye it.

"I was brushing up on my marketing. I only have a month to get my schedule together and the counselor suggested that I start on my thesis since I'm only going part time." She's rambling, her voice frantic sounding.

I narrow my eyes and walk to the laptop, opening as she rushes over to me near the bed and grabs my arm.

"Damien, don't-" she starts, but she's too late.

I already see it all.

Several tabs open on porn sites, google tabs with the same question reworded over and over again and articles with the same topic of...

How To Give The Best Blowjob.

Jesus, this woman.

“I was...you...I mean earlier today you did...you know and I realized that I haven’t done that for you yet...or anyone for that matter. So I just wanted to make sure...well, I wanted to be sure that I was doing it right or...” She trails off, her cheeks flush with both embarrassment and evident desire.

When I look down, I realize that the brown leather belt of her jeans isn’t latched all the way and her zipper is slightly down.

I want to grin then, but my cock hardens instantly.

“Were you playing with yourself, Lucille?” I growl, all of the blood that was once rushing to my brain is now pulsing through my cock.

The thought of Lucy touching herself to porn is...well, it’s a fucking aphrodisiac.

She drops her head and stares at the floor, hiding her face from me.

I hate that she’s embarrassed. She should feel empowered.

“I just wanted to make sure I knew how to please you,” she whispers and I’m lost right then and there because those words send me over the goddamn edge.

I drop the laptop on the comforter and grab her chin with my hand, forcing her to meet my eyes.

“Get on the bed,” I growl and her eyes search mine before she sits down in front of me on the edge of the bed, her eyes now level with my hardened dick.

I trace her lips with my thumb as I cup her jaw, she really is so beautiful.

I'm in deep with this one.

Deep shit that is.

“Your first lesson starts now,” I growl out as she smirks at me, stealing yet another frozen piece of my heart away from me.

Deep, deep shit.

nineteen

Lucy

I really was studying marketing. As soon as I got back from the university, I opened my laptop and tried to refresh myself with my old Powerpoints and essays, but my mind was still reeling from my run-in with Megan.

The only thing that could quell both my anxiety and nausea was thinking about Damien. Thinking about fucking Damien. Thinking about how to please him because I feel guilty about having to lie to him about talking with my older sister.

Oddly enough, finding ways to give him the perfect blow job was both distracting and arousing.

Look, I've watched my fair share of porn. A lot of it actually.

But then I met Damien when I was eighteen.

And then I bought a vibrator.

And then I didn't need porn anymore because pleasuring myself to the thought of my sister's current husband at the time was enough for me. It was risky, forbidden, taboo. Everything that porn couldn't really provide.

And it's been enough for me for nearly seven years.

But after today, I realized that apart from the actual act of fucking, or really even that, I'm inexperienced. This man is both rich and gorgeous. He's probably been with countless beautiful women before and after my sister. And although that knowledge fills me with a jealous rage, it also fuels me.

To do better. To be better, for him.

Even though I have every reason not to be.

But with the way he's looking down at me now, with his thumb tracing the outline of my lips, I want to be every perfect thing for him. I want to make him forget every woman before me, including my sister.

Especially my sister.

I've been ignored my entire life, until now. Feeling ignored can leave a deep, aching emptiness. It's as if your presence doesn't matter, your voice is lost in the void, and your value is overlooked. When you start to believe you're not good enough, it's like carrying an invisible weight that drags your spirit down. The pain of thinking you're not worth anyone's attention or respect cuts through the core of your self-esteem. It's a harsh, isolating experience that can make even the strongest person question their worth. I've been questioning my worth since I was a little girl.

Which can be an intense inner battle. Doubt creeps in and whispers that you don't measure up, despite your accomplishments and strengths. I've always found myself comparing everything to my sister, amplifying feelings of inadequacy. I wasn't thin like Megan. Wasn't smart like Megan. Wasn't good like Megan. And every attempt I made to measure up to her was worthless.

My parents never cared. No one did.

It's as if every effort was met with skepticism, and every success felt like a fluke. This constant internal questioning overshadowed the unique talents and qualities I could've had, I should've had.

But right now, I don't feel like a comparison to my sister, oddly enough.

I feel seen, I feel desired.

And when Damien unzips his pants, when he unveils his hardened length that now presses against my lip, when he tilts his head back and moans just from that small movement, I don't feel inadequate. I've succeeded in one thing.

I've driven Damien Reed wild.

He cups my jaw still and I can't help but smile before I open my mouth and drag my tongue slowly up and down his length. He hisses in response, which only makes me do it again and again. I don't follow what any of the articles said or what the porn showed, I just feel the moment. I feel him.

So when I wrap my hand around his hard length and suck him slowly into my mouth until he hits the back of my throat, I know all I can do is lean into his hold. I can only feel his body, and listen to what he likes. I can let him guide my movements and please him in the way that I feel is appropriate.

"Fucking good girl," he hisses and I beam beneath him as I start to suck him harder and faster, drinking down his essence for all it's worth,.

Years of longing can create a powerful, almost palpable tension. For me, every moment without knowing what his touch would be like felt like an eternity. Would he moan for me? Would he tilt his head back and sigh my name because my own touch felt too good?

He is right now.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't dream about moments like this with Damien Reed. I have. I've dreamt of the day when I could finally feel the warmth of his skin, the strength of his hands. The taste of his cock. Each passing year only deepened my desire, making the thought of him almost unbearable.

But, here I am now.

The forbidden and unthinkable happening before me.

He starts to twitch when I swirl his cock with my tongue, shaking harder when I start to gag and let saliva pool from my mouth. It's messy and unlike me, but he makes me defy all odds. Us together, right now, is defying all odds. And judging by the heated look in his eyes when he gazes into my own, I can tell he likes me like this.

He's fucking obsessed with me like this. I can see it all over his beautiful, contorted face. But just when I think he's about to come, he pulls away. It all happens fast, I don't have time to protest or question his motives because he's unbuckling the rest of my belt and ripping it from my jeans. He lays it on the bed and pushes me backwards.

"Lay down," he barks, a rushed command. It sounds needy. He looks needy.

I do exactly what he says and he stalks me then, his knees touching the bed as his own hand circles his cock. I start to grow unbearably wet from the sight.

"Touch yourself. Show me how you please your body," he growls and I start to grow nervous, but an excited kind of nervous.

I'd rather have him do this, but the thought of Damien stroking himself to the image of me playing with myself has me unbuttoning my jeans and sliding my hand inside.

He frowns and his free hand pulls on my jeans, lowering them to where my boots stop at my knees. I move my thong to the side and circle my clit, gathering enough wetness to start playing before him, just as he asked.

He watches me the entire time. His length somehow continues to extend and his muscles bulge in his arm as he strokes harder and harder. I'm speechless from the sight, from the sensation of it all.

He's leaning forward, gripping my bare thigh as my feet dangle off the bed with my jeans and boots slipping down to my ankles. He's bent over and stroking his cock furiously as he watches me play with myself, as I moan and gasp and arch my back from the intensity of this moment.

"Tell me what you think of when you touch this pussy," he growls and I shudder from his rough voice.

I don't know why I grow shy then, but I do. Maybe because I don't want to admit the truth to him. Maybe because he already knows. He knows I'm both guilty and pathetic for lusting after him for so long when I shouldn't have.

"Tell me, Lucy," he barks and I bite down on my lip as an orgasm threatens to overtake me.

I shake my head at him, but it doesn't last long because his hand moves from my thigh to wrap tightly around my throat. My mouth gapes open as he presses against my pulse, as he leans closer so that his cock is now touching my circling fingers.

"Say it. Now," he growls and for some stupid reason, tears form in my eyes.

"You!" I shout. My bottom lip is wobbling in defeat and he looks at me so intently, so thoroughly, I might turn to ash right here from the fire of his gaze.

“I think about you. I always have. Every time,” I admit, feeling hopeless. Feeling embarrassed and young and stupid.

I don’t know what I was thinking.

I’m not some strong and empowered woman. I am still that same stupid girl lusting after a man that’s been with supermodels. That’s been with her older sister.

I just admitted that he’s been my fantasy for the last seven years and I’ve never felt more pathetic.

My hands stop and I try to pull away from him, but he pins my wrists down above my head with his other hand as he clasps tighter around my throat.

“Oh, no you don’t. You’re mine now, don’t you get it?” He growls, sounding possessive, sounding pleased.

I can feel his power fill the room. I definitely feel it when he grabs my belt and loops it around my wrists so that he can release me. And when he does, he stands tall and drops his pants to the floor, his cock still hard and pulsing. He rips his shirt from his body and the evening sun that peeks through the penthouse window of my bedroom illuminates his tan, muscled torso. He’s so fucking beautiful it hurts.

He tears my boots away from my legs and throws them on the floor before he rips the jeans clean off my body. For a second, he bends down, retrieving something from his pants. When he stands back up and leans over me, I see the gleam of a knife before he starts to cut my shirt, and then my lace bra away from my body.

I inhale sharply, daring not to move.

He watches me.

“Are you afraid?” he asks, and I shake my head at him.

I’m not. I’m not afraid.

In fact, I’m strangely excited.

“Every time, huh?” he whispers, dragging the knife lightly up my sternum before he brings it to my lips.

I nod and I feel his groan as it leaves his lips.

He likes it. He likes that I’ve touched myself to him for years. He doesn’t find it immature or laughable or ridiculous, he finds it hot.

I want to ask him too, but I know he won’t answer. I don’t bother wasting the words.

He presses the blade to my bottom lip and I feel the blood pool out, only slightly. My breath catches in my throat when he leans forward, his hazel eyes locked with mine as he licks the blood from my lip and swallows it down.

I don’t have to ask him if he’s thought of me too, if he stroked himself to the image of me. I don’t have to because I can see it on his face. Right there, I see it.

I’ve thought of you too, Lucy.

You’ve plagued me too,

Maybe I’m imagining things. Maybe I’m so caught up in the moment or so fucking delusional that I’m imagining his need for me, but I don’t want to face this very probable truth.

I want to live in this fantasy world with him. Where I feel seen, where I feel wanted.

He brings the knife down to my throat again, resting the tip of the blade near my pulse. I don't move. I just let him kneel on the bed and drag my knees open so that I'm open and bare to him. The cool air hits my wetness and I sigh. He bites down on his lip as he watches me.

"You're mine, you know," he growls, his cock touching my inner thigh. It's wet too. He's wet for me too.

"You have been. Well before you signed that contract. You've been mine since the first night you touched this pussy to the thought of me, Lucille Fairchild," he growls, and I gasp.

He's right.

He's so fucking right and it hurts.

"You keep ruining my clothes," I say as he snaps my thong in half.

He shakes his head with a smirk, his knife still at my throat as he settles between my bent legs.

"I'll buy you new clothes," he says.

He sinks into me with one big thrust. I'm so wet that he slides effortlessly. He grabs my knee and wraps it around his pumping waist with one hand while he continues to press the knife to my throat with the other.

I'm going to come hard and fast, and that should make me feel sick.

This kind of thing should terrify me. It should be flaring my PTSD from that awful night he saved me from years ago, but it doesn't. Instead, it frees me.

Because Damien is the one tempting me, pushing me, pleasing me. He brings the ache just enough to soothe it. And he will not do anything to injure me or cause me physical harm.

Because even though he's got a knife pressed to my throat, even though he's threatened to kill me, I know I'm safe. I know he won't hurt me.

Because he beat a man to death for me. He killed a man for me. He licks me to completion every night before I fall asleep and he fucks me like I'm the last woman on Earth.

This man would never do anything to harm me. Not physically.

No, Damien Reed is going to kill me by heartbreak. And that's the only thing that I have to worry about.

"I'm going to come," I whisper, my breath shaky as it comes out in puffs.

He fucks me harder.

"Come all over this cock, baby," he growls, his hips stuttering. I know he's seconds away from coming too.

"Tell me it's mine. Tell me I fucking own it," he growls out and I start to shake uncontrollably as I cry out.

"It's yours!" I say as I start to gush all over him, my heart pounding in my ears as I come with an intensity I've yet to discover. "It's always been yours," I sob.

Tears start to pool in my eyes as millions of emotions start to flood through me, I turn my head to bury my gaze in my arm so he doesn't see. All the while, he continues to thrust into me. Until he drops the knife to the floor. Until he drags me up by my lower back with one hand, my shoulders still against the bed as I slink like a cat. Until his other hand places itself over my pounding heart. Until he roars my name and comes inside of me with a force I've never known.

He was right after all.

He owns me.

But he doesn't just own my body or my heart.

Now, he owns my soul too.

twenty

Damien

“You’re falling in love with her,” Adrian says from his desk across from our office downtown.

I wave him off, but he’s right.

I’m falling in love with Lucille Fairchild and it’s quite honestly the dumbest decision that I’ve ever made.

I didn’t sleep at all last night, mostly because I was in bed with Lucy until one in the morning. Right now, I am filled with confusion, frustration and a massive fucking headache.

“I don’t want to get into this right now,” I groan as I rub my forehead with my fingers.

Adrian scoffs at me.

I’ve been lying to him and he knows it. Hell, I’ve been lying to everyone. Brushing things off because I got too much shit to worry about, shoving things under the rug because I don’t want to think about any more bullshit than I already have to.

Lying, for me, feels like a skill I’ve mastered. The words roll off my tongue with ease, and the guilt that once tugged at my conscience has long since faded. It’s like

slipping into a well-worn coat—comfortable and familiar. I navigate my interactions with a sense of detachment, aware that my lies shape the reality others perceive. There's a certain power in that, an ability to control the narrative to my advantage. The truth, with all its complications, seems like a burden I no longer need to carry. Instead, I focus on the outcomes, the benefits, and the ease with which I move through life, unburdened by the weight of honesty.

But ever since Lucille Fairchild entered my world, all of that has gone out the window.

Now, lying gnaws at me from the inside out. Each untruth I weave seems harmless at first, just a way to smooth things over, but the weight of my deceit grows with each passing day. It's as if I've created a tangled web that ensnares my conscience, pulling tighter every time I face those I've deceived. The guilt lingers in the back of my mind, a constant reminder of the trust I've broken. Sleepless nights become the norm, as I replay my lies and the potential fallout. Something I've never done before. The facade I maintain feels like a prison, trapping me in a cycle of dishonesty that erodes my sense of self-worth. It's a burden that I can't easily shake off, a shadow that follows me everywhere.

It's something I've shoved so far away inside of my mind because the heaviness of it is too much to bear. Because there isn't time to let things like lying weigh you down. Everyone has secrets.

Keeping secrets can sometimes feel like possessing a hidden strength. These unspoken truths give me an edge, allowing me to maneuver through social dynamics with a certain finesse. They offer a layer of protection, safeguarding my vulnerabilities and providing a sense of control over my narrative. By holding back certain information, I can avoid unnecessary conflicts and maintain an air of mystery, which often works to my advantage. These secrets become my silent allies, empowering me to navigate life with a discreet sense of confidence and

independence. In a way, they act as a buffer, shielding me from potential harm while enhancing my ability to manage relationships and situations effectively.

I first learned this when I was a small boy, when I saw my father abusing my step-mom. He taught me about secrets at a very young age.

I remember when my father first taught me the art of deception. I was five years old, and I had no idea that the little white lies he encouraged would become a significant part of my life. One evening, he sat me down and explained that sometimes, telling the truth wasn't always the best option. He shared stories of how keeping secrets and bending the truth had helped him navigate difficult situations. At first, it felt like a game, a skill to master. But as I grew older, I realized the weight of his lessons. Keeping secrets became a way to protect myself and those I cared about, while lying became a tool to maintain control over my circumstances. These teachings shaped how I handled relationships and challenges, and though the burden of deceit often felt heavy, I couldn't deny the power and advantage it sometimes offered.

And then, I started keeping my own secrets. I started lying to the very same puppet master that taught me the art of deception.

I remember the days when my father's anger would fill the house like a storm. His manipulative ways were a constant presence, shaping my actions and thoughts. He had a way of twisting words and situations to his advantage, making me feel small and powerless. Every decision I made was influenced by the fear of his wrath and the need to avoid his manipulative tactics. It was a suffocating environment, where I learned to tread carefully, always second-guessing myself. The impact of his behavior lingered long after I left home, shaping how I viewed relationships and trust. Even now, the memories of his anger and manipulation are a reminder of the strength it took to break free from his control.

And when I found out that he was keeping secrets from me, his wrath became my

own.

I remember the day I discovered the truth about my mother. It was like a punch to the gut, leaving me breathless and reeling. My father had always been a shadowy figure, but I never imagined the extent of his actions. After I was born, he sent my mother away to Mexico, hiding her from me and the world.

The realization that he had kept her away from me all these years filled me with a mix of anger, sadness, and betrayal. It was as if a piece of my identity had been stolen, and I was left to pick up the fragments of a life I never knew I had.

The weight of this secret was overwhelming, and I couldn't help but wonder how different my life would have been if I had known her from the start.

Not trusting my own father was a painful realization that took years to fully sink in, but as soon as I found my mother's files in his office during my freshman year, it hit me like a box truck.

His words, once a source of guidance, became tainted with manipulation and deceit. Every promise he made felt like it came with hidden motives, and I found myself constantly questioning his intentions. The moments of genuine connection were overshadowed by the nagging doubt that he was playing another one of his mind games. It was a lonely feeling, knowing that the person who should have been my rock was instead the cause of so much uncertainty and pain. This mistrust seeped into other areas of my life, making it hard to open up and rely on others. The foundation of our relationship was cracked, and no amount of effort seemed to mend the damage.

In fact, this broken foundation only made me hate him.

Made me hate him so much that as soon as I graduated high school, I packed up all of my shit and left for the Marines.

When I went to bootcamp, I learned that the art of deception traveled far. Even into foreign parts of the world. Into governmental powers.

During my time in the military, I learned that deception is an essential tool in our arsenal. It wasn't just about brute strength or tactical maneuvers; the art of misleading the enemy was a skill we honed with precision. We were taught to create elaborate ruses, to manipulate perceptions, and to plant false information to gain the upper hand. It was a delicate dance of strategy, where every move had to be calculated and every detail meticulously planned. The training emphasized that deception could save lives, disrupt the enemy's plans, and turn the tide of battle. It was a sobering lesson, realizing that victory often depended on our ability to outwit and mislead. This aspect of military strategy became ingrained in me, shaping how I approached challenges both on and off the battlefield.

But I didn't realize that the strategy was actually played against us and not for the benefit of saving innocent lives. I learned that when I climbed the ranks and landed in Special Forces. When I was tasked with tracking the Mexican Cartel. When I found my birth mother living inside one of them.

"Adrian," I say as I twirl my pen in my hands, unable to focus on yet another merger I'm meant to sign off on.

"What is it?" he asks, clearly annoyed with me and my constant bullshit.

Hell, I'm annoyed with myself too.

"Do you remember when I found my mother?" I ask and he swallows tightly, offering me a short nod and nothing more.

"We found her that night when we got our disguises. We had a truckload of coke that border control gave us and we transported it from Texas to the residence. You were

scared shitless,” I say and he nods, because he was.

And I was too.

“We were mules, you know?” I say as I lean back in my chair, the sour taste that’s forever been in my mouth growing stronger.

“That’s it. Lifeless cattle meant to transport goods and information. They didn’t care if we were shot to pieces on their drones or plants. But Eduardo and his father...they cared,” I say, and I can tell from the look in Adrian’s eyes, he remembers.

“They knew we were tapped the whole time,” Adrian said, and I nod.

“And they never killed us,” I say, and he sighs.

“Because they didn’t want a bigger war with the feds-”

“Because they clothed and fed my mother. Because they knew the woman that worked so hard for them for years, only wanted to see her son,” I growl, and he falls silent.

Eduardo’s father was the head of The AG when I first was introduced.

Meeting the head of a cartel was an experience that left an indelible mark on me. The room was thick with tension as I was ushered in, my heart pounding in my chest. He sat at the head of the table, exuding an air of authority and menace. His eyes, cold and calculating, seemed to pierce right through me. Every word he spoke was measured, every gesture deliberate. I could feel the weight of his power, the fear he commanded. It was a world I had only heard about in whispers, and now I was face-to-face with its reality. The encounter was brief, but it left me with a profound understanding of the dangerous game I had stepped into. The memory of that meeting still haunts me, a

stark reminder of the fine line between survival and peril.

But his son, his son was vastly different.

Meeting Eduardo was an unexpected twist in my time there. I had braced myself for someone hardened by the world he was born into, but instead, I found a kind and gentle soul. He had a warmth in his eyes that contrasted sharply with the cold, ruthless environment he came from. We talked about our lives, and I was struck by his genuine curiosity and empathy. Despite the shadows that loomed over his family, he carried a light within him that was impossible to ignore. It was a reminder that even in the darkest places, there can be unexpected moments of humanity and connection.

We bonded over the course of the week that Adrian and I were there.

He made me feel safe. Safe enough to tell him that I was working for the Feds and that I wanted to find my mother.

It turns out, Eduardo was good at keeping secrets too.

He kept my secret about working in special forces until I quit, just as I had kept his secret about how he had slowly been poisoning his father until he died so he could take over.

I trusted Eduardo. And he trusted me.

He knew what it was like to be controlled by the devil, just as I did. He knew what it was like to lose an important woman in his life, just as I did.

Joining The AG was a decision that changed my life forever. I remember the day vividly - the tension in the air, the weight of the choice I was about to make. It wasn't

a path I had ever envisioned for myself, but circumstances had pushed me to the edge. The allure of power, money, and a sense of belonging drew me in. The realization that my mother was there and that she was cared for. The initiation was intense, a test of loyalty and resilience. As I stood among the seasoned members, I felt a mix of fear and determination. The reality of the cartel's world was harsh and unforgiving, but I was ready to embrace it. Eduardo had my back just like I had his. That moment marked the beginning of a journey that would shape my identity and challenge my morals in ways I could never have imagined.

"She reminds me of them both, Adrian," I say as he narrows his eyes.

"Of my mother and Eduardo," I explain, and he sighs as he taps on his chair.

"She's warm like my mother, hard-working like her. She's honest and obedient, for the most part that is. But she's also determined. She's steadfast in her approach. She can be hard when she needs to, handle the bullshit life throws. She's different than Megan. Different than all of them," I say, and he shakes his head at me.

"It's not her I'm worried about, man," he says.

"It's them. It's her fucking family. You almost got out of their web and now you're falling deeper into their shit. You're practically signing your own prison sentence, Damien," he says, and I can't help but sigh, because he is somewhat right.

But I have bigger things to worry about than the Fairchilds.

"They're not my biggest problem, Adrian," I say, hating that I feel guilty for keeping this from him. This secret I've had for the last twenty-three years.

I also hate that I have a fucking conscience now. And I blame it on Lucy. I blame it on her ability to crack open parts of me and rip them right out of my chest.

“What have you done?” Adrian asks in a low tone with skeptical eyes.

“My father works for the CIA,” I admit and I swear, Adrian almost throws his chair against the wall.

In fact, he does.

It slams hard against the wooden door, splintering it with a loud crash.

I don’t flinch.

“Are you fucking kidding me man?” he shouts, practically pulling his hair out of his head as he screams.

“Chill out-”

“No,” he waves a finger in my face and I think about breaking it right in half.

“Don’t you fucking tell me to do that. It’s not just your ass to worry about here, Damien. You have a team of people working for you. People with families, wives, kids. People like me, asshole.” He growls and I scoff at him.

“And you knew that you would risk your life and well as your family’s by signing on to this. I was transparent about that,” I hiss, and he rolls his eyes.

“You weren’t transparent about your father working for the fucking CIA,” he barks, and I rub my forehead once more, the headache still present.

“He’s not after me, as far as I know. I just wanted to be transparent about this too, asshole.” I groan and he sighs as he drops his head to look back at the ceiling.

“One year. That’s all I need man. One year until these contracts are up and I can sell these companies for triple the price and we can both retire before fifty,” I say, and he scoffs.

“You’ll never retire,” he says, knowing damn well, that despite all of the stress, I love the fucking thrill of this life.

And I gave both Eduardo and my mother my word.

“I’ll be in Mexico, but you’ll be free. Free of me, and free of this bullshit,” I say as I stand and sign the paperwork on the desk before walking out.

“You have my word too, asshole. As much as you stress me out, I gave you my word in Afghanistan, and you still have it here,” he says, even though he’s angry with me.

We experienced a lot in the war, but we made a pact. And we’ve both stuck to it.

“Go home to your pregnant wife, Adrian. Take a vacation,” I say as before I shut the door and head to my office on the opposite end of the building.

When I step inside, I freeze. Because the headache doesn’t fucking end. In fact, it grows even stronger.

Because Megan Fairchild is sitting on my desk with a dark red dress that resembles the devil she is.

“Who let you in?” I growl and she smiles wickedly at me.

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” she whines as she walks to me.

She places her hands on my chest and I notice that her nails are the same shade of her

dress, something not like her.

She usually remains quite plain. Because her personality is anything but that.

It's fucking infuriating.

"I still have the key card and code, remember?" She winks as she flashes her key card at me.

"This isn't technically my office, Megan. It's in Adrian's name. I can have security here throwing you out on your ass as a trespasser in a millisecond if you don't get your fucking hands off me," I seethe, sickened by her appearance.

She pouts at me, but it's so forced, so fake, that it makes me want to rip her hands from my body, but it's pointless because she's already dropping them to my cock.

What the fuck-

"I know you miss me, Damien," she whispers in my ear after she grabs the back of my head.

"I can feel the kind of mood that you're in. The stress of your little hidden life weighs on you more and more each day. Remember how you used to fuck me when you would get stressed like that?" she says in a fake, sultry voice.

I do remember.

I fucked her like I hated her. Because I did. And most of the time I did it with her facing away from me, or blindfolded so I that I didn't have to look into her cold, heartless eyes. And I almost never came.

I'd go to the shower after every time and stroke myself to completion.

Sometimes, with Lucy's face in my mind.

A lot of the time actually.

It's exactly why I didn't tell her that yesterday. I couldn't admit that I had done the same thing she had for seven years. Touched myself to the forbidden girl, the outcast girl.

The girl that's ten times sexier and smarter than this demon before me.

I push her to the ground then and she falls right on her flat ass. When I look down at her shocked face, I'm tempted to squash her with my shoe like a bug.

She glares up at me before she gets up and sneers.

"Get the fuck out-"

"I know you're fucking her," she growls, cutting me off.

I glare at her, wondering how she knows I'm with her sister. Because I can tell from the venomous look in her eye that is exactly who she is referring to.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I growl, and she scoffs at me.

"Oh, cut the bullshit, Damien. I saw her leave with Bruno the other day," she says and I feel my spine freeze.

"Where?" I hiss and she smiles at me, cocky because she's right. Which she fucking loves to be.

“At the university in the bathroom. Are you giving her a free ride for riding you, Mr. Reed?” she snarls, and I want to slap her clean across the face.

Fucking Lucy. I knew she was hiding something.

I should have never let her go to that school.

“She’s fucking worthless, you know. You’re wasting your time. She’s dirty, and mindless and-” I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze so hard that her eyes start to bulge.

“Shut your fucking mouth now before I rip out your tongue,” I hiss, and she stares at me with so much fear, so much terror, that I have to back away.

Even though she deserved it.

“Don’t tell me that you fucking care about her, Damien,” she chokes out, trying to pull as much air into her lungs as possible.

Lie.

“Oh, but I do,” I smile, a sinister grin, even though I want to punish Lucy immediately for exposing herself so soon.

I had a plan for all of this and she fucking ruined it.

She fucking lied.

“I’ve cared about her for quite a while. Especially when I started fucking her in our bed three years ago.” I grin and all the color drains from her face.

A speed start to the plan, I guess I have to release Michael's blackmail sooner than intended. Which means the wedding needs to get here ASAP.

"You don't mean that," she sneers and I press the button for security.

"Oh, but I do, sweetheart. Because you don't hold a candle to that woman, I can assure you," I growl, all truth coming out then, even though I'm so immensely pissed at Lucy for lying to me.

Even though I've been doing it to her since day one. Because I've been doing it to protect her. Just as I did that night three years ago when I ripped that slimy monster from her screaming ?bottom? and beat him until he was lifeless and dumped into the Hudson river.

Something nobody knows about.

"I can press charges for this, you know," she growls as she rubs at the red marks on her throat.

I shrug as soon as security shows up.

"Not really, you're trespassing. Technically, it was self-defense. I'm sure you know all about that right?" I narrow my eyes on her as she sneers.

"Get her out here and bar her from the premises immediately. She's on the do not enter list anyways," I say with a wave of my hand.

Security grabs her as she bitches and struggles the whole way, cursing at both them and myself until the door slams behind her.

I sigh as I pour myself a glass of whiskey and drain it in one gulp.

I'll need half of this bottle before I go home and confront Lucille. She has no idea what's coming for her.

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twenty-one

Lucy

I'm sitting on my bed, reading a powerpoint from my sophomore year when Damien nearly kicks down my door.

It's late, nearly midnight when he enters. I've been worried about where he's been all day, even sent a few texts on the new phone he's given me and still, no response.

Until now.

And judging by the furious look on his face and pungent odor of whiskey coming off him, I can tell it's best he didn't respond. Except right now, he looks terrifying. He feels terrifying.

He stomps near me on the bed and I move my laptop aside, my eyes wide with fear as his nostrils flare. His eyes are bloodshot and right now, and I'm reminded of my father during one of his many drunken rages.

I'm terrified.

"Damien what-"

"Why didn't you tell me that you saw her?" he growls as he smacks his hand against the wall, causing me to flinch.

Megan. He's talking about my run in with Megan.

Fuck.

"Don't look all scared now, Lucille. Answer me!" he roars, hitting the wall even harder.

I don't know this man. I don't know who he is.

"Damien, you're scaring me. Stop it and let me explain," I say, my voice almost a whimper as he speaks.

He freezes as his eyes widen for a moment, taking in my words. It doesn't last long because they narrow on me almost instantly.

As I gaze into his eyes, I can see the storm brewing within them. His anger is palpable, a mix of frustration and hurt that cuts through the air between us. The intensity of his stare makes my heart race, and I feel a knot forming in my stomach. Each glance feels like a silent accusation, a reminder of the rift that has come between us. In this moment, words seem futile, overshadowed by the raw emotion in his eyes. I want to reach out, to bridge the gap, but the anger swirling in those eyes holds me back, leaving me grappling with a mix of fear, regret, and downright terror.

"No. You're done talking. I can't believe a word that comes out of your mouth anyway," he hisses, and his voice is almost unrecognizable.

His voice, normally so familiar and comforting, now sounds foreign and sharp. It's as if the anger has transformed him into someone I barely recognize. Each word he speaks is laced with bitterness, cutting through the air like a blade. The person standing before me feels like a stranger, his features twisted by the intensity of his emotions. It's disconcerting to see him this way, a stark contrast to the man I've

known over the last couple of weeks, this is more like the Damien I remember. The anger in his voice creates a chasm between us, making me question if the person I thought I knew ever really existed. It's a haunting realization that the one I love can change so drastically in the heat of the moment.

Maybe this is who Damien really is, who he's been all along. I've just turned a blind eye to him completely.

"You're coming with me. It's time for you to be punished. Good girls don't lie," he growls, ripping me from the bed and hauling me over his shoulders.

I don't scream, I don't protest. I just hold my breath as he takes me from my room and climbs the stairs to his own. We walk through his bedroom and he opens the door to the dungeon he tries to hide away from the world. A room that once excited me. A room that now terrifies me.

He throws me against a large, wooden board with shackles on it and my body freezes in terror.

My mind instantly goes to that night as Damien undoes his belt and moves it closer to me, ready to snap it.

I didn't expect this to happen, didn't realize my mind would wander to this place, but it's too late now.

"Please stop!" I cry, tears spilling from my eyes as my mind goes back to that night.

He doesn't listen, he just walks closer. He is not Damien right now, he is my attacker from three years ago. His eyes are dark blue and he smells like vodka. His hands are rough and calloused and he hisses at me like a snake. When he pins me, I scream. When he lashes me with his belt, I weep. I beg for help. For someone, anyone.

I ask him to stop. But he doesn't listen, just presses me down and whispers my name in an angry hiss.

I try to sneak back to the present moment, try to make my way through the blurred lines of memory and reality and when I do, I shout the one word that makes him freeze altogether.

"Enough!" I scream.

His belt drops to the floor and I am catapulted back into the room, into this actual moment and not like that night years ago.

My breath is coming out hard and fast. My cheeks burn from my tears. I'm shaking, almost uncontrollably as my eyes move from the belt on the floor to meet with Damien's.

He looks normal now, except he's terrified. He's staring at me in such shock and belief, and beneath that, disgust.

"Lucy-I..." he starts, but chokes on his words.

He realizes what he's done. He saw the terror in my gaze. Heard the safe word. And he stopped. He's Damien again. My Damien.

"I thought you were him," I cry softly, dropping my head as he backs away from me.

"Lucy, I'm not. I'm sorry- I was just pissed and I thought you understood the dynamic. I thought you could handle-"

"Not when you do that to me! Not when you act like the men who have fucking abused me!" I sob, dropping to my knees on the floor as I bury my face in my hands.

I realize then, that all of the intimacy I've had with him, all of the pain I've taken and searched for, was nothing but a coping mechanism for what I've been through. I've been hiding from my abuse for years and I finally found a vice.

Sex. With my savior.

Except now, the truth is laid out and bare.

Damien is not my savior. He is just a man. And I am nothing but a broken girl who has refused to face her trauma.

He pulls me into his arms and I do not flinch, but rather lean into him. He smooths back my hair and rubs my back as I sob and he kisses the top of my head while whispering that I'm okay and that I'm safe, that I can trust him.

That he's sorry.

And I believe him. I really do. No matter how fucked up that sounds.

Because look at our dynamic, look at what I've allowed.

He's threatened to kill me and I've invited him into my body. He showed me his deepest, twisted desires and I let him in my body. I watched him kill a man and grind him into pieces and I still let him inside of my heart.

I am just as fucked up as he is.

Of course he thought this moment of rough, make up sex would be okay.

After a while, I pull back to look at him. He looks so lost and ashamed, unlike the Damien I've known. It's raw and pure. I realize now I've seen more sides to him in

the last ten minutes than I have in the last seven years.

“You thought I was him,” he whispers as he wipes the tears from my eyes.

“I don’t know what happened-” I try to say, but he cuts me off

“I do. I showed you the monster that I am,” he says, his eyes to the floor as he speaks.

Oh Damien, you broken, shattered boy. What has made you this way? What has made you so cold, so callous, so filled with guilt and shame that you have to hide behind it?

And why am I the one who breaks down pieces of the wall you’ve built around you?

“I didn’t say anything to her. She cornered me in the bathroom and I left immediately. That’s it. I should have told you. I’m sorry,” I say, knowing that Andy probably confessed about what happened, I don’t blame him. He was probably following orders.

“Jesus Christ, Lucille,” he hisses, backing away from me before he stands and shakes his head. “Don’t fucking apologize to me after what I just...after what I tried to...” he shakes his head violently as more of that disgust and shame spreads over his beautiful, tired features.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this disheveled, this undone.

It’s the most human he’s ever looked.

And it’s beautiful and confusing and fucked up all at once. Just like him.

“Damien, stop-”

“I could’ve hurt you. You thought. I. Was. Him.” he says, his voice a chant almost, his face breaking.

“Damien, don’t do this. You stopped. You listened to the safe word, it’s okay-”

“No it’s not! Fucking none of this is!” He roars as he turns away from me and makes his way to his bedroom.

I don’t know why, but I follow him.

I grab at his arms and he fights me through it.

“Don’t run from me,” I growl, as he tries to flee.

“You’re being a coward! Face me!” I shout at him as he freezes near the bed.

“Face the consequences of your actions. Like a man,” I say, my fists balled at my sides as he turns slowly to face me, his face twisted in despair.

You poor, broken man.

“You’ve fucked up, countless times, but you can’t run from it. You can’t manipulate it any way that you’d like when it feels uncomfortable. When it’s too tough. Too real. That’s what cowards do,” I say and he stares at me, a slight bit of wonder and confusion in his eyes.

I realize then that neither of us have ever had a single form of a healthy relationship. I haven’t with my family, and I can definitely tell he hasn’t with anyone else either.

So I guess it starts now. I guess we start from square one.

“You didn’t need to freak out on me, we could have talked and avoided all of this,” I explain as he goes to sit on his bed, his eyes still on me as I speak.

“I kept the truth from you, and I’m sorry. But you don’t get to treat me like that. You talk to me and confront me like a man, not a monster,” I say and he starts to retreat, but I walk to him and grab his jaw, forcing him to look up at me like he’s done so many times.

“And you don’t get to run away when shame starts to fill you, when actual, real, guttural emotions confront you. You face them, like a man. Like a human should,” I say and his eyes search mine.

“I am not your enemy, Damien. I’m here because you want me to be your wife, because you need me, for some stupid reason, you need me. Whether you care to admit it or not. I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t. You wouldn’t fuck me like you do if you didn’t,” I say and he swallows tightly.

I can tell he wants to run right now, away from the feelings that are rushing forth, away from the inevitable words I have to let out.

“I love you,” I say, and he closes his eyes on a sharp exhale.

“Look at me,” I bark, and his eyes snap open instantly.

“Don’t hide. I love you and some stupid part of me always has. It started when I met you in my father’s living room, it expanded when you beat a man that attacked me. It grew alongside my hatred for you, alongside my sadness when you abandoned me. It grew when I knew that you chose her, that you were with her every night while I suffered,” I say, a tear falling from the corner of my eye as I speak my truth.

“I’m not saying this because I want to, or because you need to hear it. I’m saying it

because it's truth. Because I promised no more lies. Because I know that you will never feel the same about me, but I would be doing you and myself a dishonor by keeping it from you," I say as I stand and press myself against his knees.

"You're just as broken as me, Damien. Just as twisted and fucked up as I am, but I know there's good in there. There's good in everyone, just as much good as there is sadness. Just as much good as torment," I say, and his breath catches at my words.

The "I love you" hangs in the air, creating a palpable tension that fills the room. My heart pounds in my chest as I watch his reaction, his face a mixture of surprise and uncertainty. The silence that follows is deafening, each second feeling like an eternity. I can see the wheels turning in his mind, processing what I've just confessed. The atmosphere is charged with anticipation, every breath I take weighted with the fear of rejection and the hope for reciprocation. It's as if time has slowed down, and we're both suspended in this moment of vulnerability. The room, once a space of comfort, now feels like an arena where the future of our relationship, of whatever the fuck this complicated mess is, hangs in the balance.

He doesn't move for a while, but when he does, he shifts to retrieve something from his pocket. It's a box, a ring box actually.

"I was going to give this to you this morning. I saw it at one of my stores last week. It just felt like...you," he says as he opens the box to reveal my engagement ring.

The centerpiece is a massive, pear-shaped black diamond, its dark facets gleaming with an almost hypnotic intensity. Encircling the dramatic stone are tiny, shimmering white diamonds that create a stunning contrast, making the black diamond's rich, deep color even more striking. The platinum band is sleek and elegant, perfectly complementing the opulence of the ring. It's a bold, unique piece, exuding sophistication and mystery, just like me.

And in a way, just like us.

“I’m sorry, Lucy. I’m so fucking sorry,” he says, and I can’t tell if he’s apologizing for his actions or for not saying that he loves me back.

With the way his eyes search mine, I realize that I don’t care. Right now, with the way that he’s looking at me, it’s enough.

He slides the ring onto my finger and I watch as he does.

“I can’t promise you the world. Can’t promise you much at all really. But I can promise that I will keep you safe. Safe from the world. Safe from me,” he chokes on the last word and I can’t ask what he means by it.

I can’t really do much at all because as soon as the ring slips onto my finger, Damien rises. He grabs my face in his hands, stares into my eyes with so much emotion that it renders me speechless, and then he kisses me. For the very first time.

As soon as his lips press to mine, it feels like a fire igniting within me. His lips are urgent and demanding, sending shivers down my spine. The intensity of the kiss takes my breath away, and I can feel the raw emotion and desire behind it. It’s as if the world around us disappeared, leaving only the two of us in that moment. Every touch, every movement, is filled with a fervor that makes my heart race. It is a kiss that speaks volumes, a silent declaration of the depth of our connection, whatever it is.

It is powerful, like this kiss. It is remarkable, like this kiss. It is unforgettable, like this kiss.

We tumble back on his bed and I start peeling the clothes from his body. He lets me, but doesn’t break contact with my mouth. He swallows me down with lips and teeth and tongue. Consumes me for all that I’m worth. Like he’s been dying to kiss me.

I can feel the heat radiating between us, our breaths mingling as we lose ourselves in the moment. Every touch, every movement, is filled with a raw, unspoken emotion that leaves me breathless.

I am suspended through space and time and I can't tell where I end or where he begins, but I don't care. I'm kissing Damien Reed.

He peels my clothes away tentatively, sliding down my yoga pants to find that I'm already naked underneath all my clothes. I straddle him then, my wet center pressed against his hard length. I'm dying to take him now. Right now.

He breaks the kiss to look at me, and when he does, I feel like I can see the entire world through his eyes. I trace his scar as he slides inside of me. My teeth sink into my lip and his hands wrap around my hips, holding me still, memorizing every detail.

It feels like the first time our bodies ever joined.

It's...different. Much more intimate. Like our souls are mating this time.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers, and I start to ride him, deep and slow.

"Take me. Take all of me," he growls and I do, I listen to him.

"Use me how you want to," he says and I sigh as he hits a spot inside of me that has my head tilting back to look at the ceiling.

"So tight. So fucking perfect," he praises and I know right then I'm going to come fast.

I start to shake around him, but before I burst, he pulls me down to claim my mouth in yet another all-consuming kiss.

He doesn't need to say I love you then.

I feel it all right here in his lips. I feel it when he comes with me. I feel it when he holds me after, when he wakes me up again to make love to me soft and slow. I feel it when we drift off sometime before sunrise, when he holds me against his body tightly, shielding me away from the world.

And the parts that kept this side of him from me.

* * *

The next morning, I awake, still in Damien's bed. His body is curled around mine and I smile against his forearm as his snores vibrate against my spine.

My stomach growls and I realize I never ate last night, or really at all yesterday.

I reach for my phone on the nightstand and open up a food delivery app. I search for the closest coffee shop and order two coffees for us and a box of delicious looking pastries that I spend way too long looking at. Once the order is placed, I rest my head against his arm and I inhale his scent and soak up every bit of this moment.

As the first light of dawn filters through the curtains, I find myself wrapped in a cocoon of warmth and comfort. His arms are around me, holding me close, and I can hear the steady rhythm of his breathing. The rising sun casts a soft glow over the room, and everything feels peaceful and right. In this quiet moment, there's no need for words—just the gentle reassurance of his presence and the shared intimacy of our embrace. The world outside may be waking up, but for now, all that matters is this tender connection, the perfect start to a new day.

Time passes and peace overtakes me until my phone vibrates against my chest.

The delivery driver alerts that the order has arrived downstairs. I sigh and leave the bed as quietly as possible, shifting beneath the sheets before I slide out and away from Damien, who is snoring loudly on his bed. I look around for clothes and only find something of his. It's his suit jacket from last night. I slide it on and it drops to my knees as I wrap it around me and inhale his whiskey scent. There's a faint smell outside of that, something more...feminine. Something familiar.

I know he told me he had a meeting at Fleur de Femme yesterday, so that's probably it. However, as I walk from his room upstairs down to the front door, I can't shake the triggering feeling that this faint scent gives me.

I slip on my flats near the door and make my way to the lobby. When I grab the order from the driver, I turn and realize that I am face to face with my sister.

"Megan..." I gasp, her eyes narrowed as she glares at me on the sidewalk, wearing nothing but her ex-husband's suit jacket.

Her eyes lock on the engagement ring on my finger and I know right then and there that I am fucked.

"What are you doing here?" I ask and she scoffs at me.

"It's downtown Manhattan, Lucille. I'm walking," she growls, and it's a lie.

She's loitering outside of her ex-husband's business.

"The real question is, what are you doing here, little sister?" She sneers and I know then that I'm caught.

There is no running, no hiding.

I have to face the truth. Right here on the Manhattan sidewalk.

Or rather, the lie.

I don't know why, but my free hand slides inside of the pocket and presses the side button of my new phone, starting a video immediately in my pocket.

Why do I feel the need to record my older sister speaking to me? Is it because she's conniving? Or because I have to tell Damien about this immediately and show him the recording so that he knows I'm not lying this time?

Either way, I'm fucking uncomfortable.

Either way, I have to start lying now and ways.

Why is shame filling me?

"We've been having an affair since that night he saved me on campus," I lie, my bottom lip trembling as I speak. "He picked me up from the hospital that night and we've been inseparable ever since. He proposed to me last year, we had to wait until you finalized the divorce." Lie, lie, lie. I find that's all I ever do since I've been in Damien's world.

She eyes me for a while and seems unbothered by my words, which is shocking, then again, she is just as cold as my mother, she's great at manipulating and hiding her emotions.

"I see," she says as she starts to back away to call a taxi.

I'm shocked to see her retreat so quickly.

I want to say something, but I refrain as soon as a taxi pulls up and she opens the door. She turns to look at me, a ghost of a smirk on her lips.

I know that whatever words come from her lips, they're going to wound me. As they always have.

"Since you'll be married soon, you should probably know that I came by his office downtown yesterday," she starts, and I shift on my heels.

"He fucked me on his desk before going home to you, Lucille. You cannot trust this man," she says, and her words slice right through me.

"I- I don't believe you," I say, and she laughs at me, she actually laughs at me.

"I wouldn't really worry about believing me when I should be the one that doesn't believe you," she says icily as I freeze and stare at her.

She holds up a hand for the cab driver to wait before she approaches me, walking slow. I try to back away but she stops me and leans forward to speak so low that only I can hear her.

"He didn't pick you up from the hospital that night, Lucille. Because he was with me, helping me toss the body of the man that raped you into the Hudson River," she says, and my whole world tilts on an axis.

"Might want to make sure your stories align before you fabricate. It's the first thing I learned in law school, sweetheart." She grins before hopping in the taxi and slamming the door behind her.

As it speeds away, I stand there frozen on the sidewalk. Unsure of what to do or say or feel.

Before I can dive into her admission of covering up a murder, I have to dissect her words about him fucking her yesterday. He did come home flustered and disheveled; he was incredibly angry with me.

My stomach turns as I catch another whiff of the perfume that is on Damien's jacket, a smell that was present in front of me just moments ago. It is a fragrance I know all too well and my heart sinks into my chest as I recall the scent now.

Amber and saffron, a scent Megan has worn all of her life.

The anger in his words were jarring, and the perfume served as a silent testament to the lie. I can feel the betrayal cutting deep, the trust I had built crumbling before my eyes all from the realization of her fucking perfume. The mixture of anger, confusion, and sadness is overwhelming, and it's amplified when I think of her admission. When I remember what she said about the man that attacked me.

He did beat him, I was out of it, but I watched him through my blurry vision and I heard the man's screams in the distance, but the president at our school said he was expelled, never once was a murder mentioned.

Then again, I never googled him, never cared to since he had ruined both my body and my life.

I stop the recording on my phone and sniff back the tears that threaten to spill. I have to get off this sidewalk. I take the elevator all the way up to the penthouse, my heart pounding in my chest the higher it climbs. When the doors open and I step inside, I find Henry setting up his knives in the kitchen. I must have missed him on my way out.

I hide my face as I drop the coffee mugs on the counter.

“Has he come downstairs yet?” I ask as I start to walk in the direction of his office.

“No, I think he’s sleeping,” he says as I rush down the hall on the opposite side of the penthouse.

“I would have made you coffee!” Henry shouts, and as I shut the door of Damien’s office behind me, I almost wish he had too.

I lock the door and rush over to his desk, knowing that I’m really risking it all by doing this, but I could care less at this point. This man has been using me and manipulating me for almost two weeks now, I’ve risked my body and my self-worth at this point. I’ve got nothing to lose.

I rummage through his drawers. Pulling out file after file, searching for the name of my attacker, yet nothing. I open google and type his name on my phone and all that I find is a missing persons report, which is still shocking, because we never heard anything about a fellow student going missing.

Then again, I wasn’t enrolled in school for too long after that attack. Maybe a couple of weeks at best. It probably takes just as long to file a missing persons report.

Which means that Megan very well could be telling the truth.

Which makes me sick to my stomach. Nausea creeps up on me again and threatens to spill all over Damien’s desk, but I swallow tightly and still search through his files for some sort of truth, any truth.

(Is this paragraph necessary?)However, when I came across one with my own name on it, I didn’t realize how deep I was digging through Damien’s graveyard of secrets. I didn’t know I’d be finding out a truth I had absolutely no suspicion of.

As I stumble upon a blank folder on Damien's desk, right next to his computer, a sense of unease washes over me. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I open it, only to be met with a shocking revelation. The documents inside detail a secret my father has kept hidden for years.

My life, as I know it, is a lie.

I have a mother, one that is not Ann Fairchild, or so this file states.

My real mother was paid off to keep quiet and disappear from my life. The words on the pages blur as I try to process this betrayal. My heart pounds, and I feel a mix of anger, confusion, and heartache. The foundation of my identity feels shattered, leaving me grappling with the truth of who I really am and questioning everything I've ever known about my family. Not only that, but I question every single thing I've learned about Damien Reed as well.

The file contained a woman's name, age, job, and the amount of hush money she received.

Amy Stark was a seventeen-year-old intern at my father's office during his first run for senator and she had an affair with him, leaving her pregnant, as a minor.

She was paid a lump sum of two hundred thousand dollars, and in the contract it states that she was to keep the affair quiet and that the rights to her child would be signed over to Michael Fairchild upon birth.

And beneath all of that, lies my official birth certificate and a photo of a young, blond woman holding her baby with tears in her eyes.

Did she not want to give me up? Or was it her condition for keeping this affair quiet? She was just a kid after all.

My mind swims with a million different questions and scenarios, an endless loop of twists and turns that my father is so great at creating.

He is a gaslighter, a manipulator, and a fucking monster at best. And this file is nothing but a reminder of that.

It is a stark reminder of the lengths my father goes to keep his secrets hidden. The details were meticulously documented, leaving no room for doubt. Each piece of information painted a clearer picture of the deception that had been woven into my life. The woman's name was unfamiliar, but her story was now intertwined with mine, a testament to the hidden truths that had shaped my existence. The hush money was a cruel confirmation of the price paid to keep me in the dark.

And it all makes sense now. The outcasting, the difference in appearance, the hatred. The constant, never-ending hatred. The abuse, the ridicule. All of it.

It's because I never truly was one of them.

I cover my mouth with a sob as I cling to the photo of my real mother holding me in the hospital. My vision is swimming with tears and my heart is cracking open in my chest. My entire world has shattered before me, and it's because of my father and Damien Reed.

Why does he have this file? How long has he known and why is it out on his desk?

I have to get out of here. He can't find me like this in his office.

I shove everything back into the drawers except for my file. I burst free from his office and rush into my bedroom, locking the door behind me. As soon as I'm alone in here, I collapse to the floor in tears.

twenty-two

Damien

When I awake in my bed, I find that Lucy is not there.

I take a while to leave still, the events from last night weighing heavily on me. Megan's confession, my drunken anger, Lucy's overwhelming fear. Lucy saying I love you. Lucy riding me.

Lucy saying I love you.

I'd be stupid if I said I was surprised, I'm not. And I'm not all that surprised that she confessed it either. Lucy Fairchild is many things, but she truly isn't a liar. I should have seen that yesterday.

I understand why she didn't tell me about Megan, no matter how much it pisses me off. She didn't put herself in this fucked up situation, I did. All of this is on me, not her. And I'm shocked that I am actually admitting that.

I'm shocked by a lot of things actually.

Like why she still isn't next to me in bed.

I get up and shower, dressing in sweats before I walk around the house shirtless and barefoot in search of her. Henry is in the kitchen and when I look to ask where she is, he gives me a guilty expression.

Fuck. What now.

“What happened?” I demand and he sighs, clearly exhausted from the ever-changing dynamics of this household. I wouldn’t blame him if he quit tomorrow.

“She ran into her room crying. Didn’t say a word to me,” he says as he continues to chop on the counter.

I look at the coffee cups from the cafe around the corner, suspicion filling me.

“What direction did she run from, Henry?” I say through gritted teeth.

He sighs as he points his knife to the front door, then down the hall where my office is, then finally, to her bedroom.

Fuck.

I speed down the hallway and jiggle the doorknob, and I can hear her shuffling around in her bedroom.

“Lucy, open the door,” I growl, and no response comes, just more shuffling.

I continue to jiggle the doorknob.

“You want to explain what’s happened in the last few hours?” I bark out and hear a small scoff.

A very depressing one at that.

“You want to explain what’s happened in the last seven years? Or rather, the last twenty-five years of my life?” she snarls, and I freeze then, her words chilling over

me.

“Lucille,” I hiss, ramming my shoulder against the door. “Open the goddamn door, or I will break it down,” I growl.

“By all means, go ahead. Nothing is stopping you. Nothing ever does,” she sneers and I step back and give the door one solid, wood splintering kick.

I continue to ram my body until it breaks off its hinges. When I step inside, Lucy turns to face me, her face pale and eyes swollen from crying.

“Before you freak out and try to manipulate me some more,” she says before she flings a folder full of papers at my feet, “You want to tell me about this?”

Not just any papers, but her file. The one I dug up on Michael years ago. The one describing his hush money case with her actual birth mother.

Shit.

“Don’t go quiet now, Damien. Be a man. Face the consequences, remember?” She taunts me, however her words are much more sinister than last night.

She doesn’t just hate me right now.

She fucking despises me.

I’ve been lying to her for years, alongside the rest of her family, and now she knows.

“How long have you known?” she asks, and I decide right then to do something I haven’t done in a long, long time.

I tell the truth.

“Seven years.” She gasps.

“Jesus Christ, Damien. Are you serious?” she cries.

“I didn’t like the way your father treated you that night, the first night I met you. Especially your father. It reminded me too much of... my own life growing up,” I confess, but she doesn’t bend or melt at my words.

She doesn’t need to.

I’m a fucked-up bastard and she’s known this from the start.

“My dad used to hit my stepmom. A lot. And I watched it happen. When I started to get rebellious, he started to hit me too,” I explain, and she falls silent. She stares at me with her arms crossed across her chest and her eyes narrowed.

“It wasn’t until I discovered what he did to my actual mother. How he abused her and sent her away after I was born. It wasn’t until then that I decided to start hitting him back,” I explain.

“It didn’t last long. I was in and out of the house and he didn’t care to see me. When I joined basic training, I never saw him again. I didn’t care to. I only cared about finding her, my birth mom,” I say.

“And did you?” she asks quietly, her voice still icy, still cold.

“Yes. While I was deployed in Mexico on a mission,” I say, and she snuffles.

“And then what?” she asks, and I inhale hard and fast, ready to tell her all of my

truth, ready to bare it all, because she's been nothing but vulnerable for me since the day that I met her.

"Then I joined the cartel that she worked for. And when the second leader died, my good friend, I took over." I explain, but she doesn't seem shocked. Doesn't seem fazed or surprised in the slightest.

In fact, she just looks sad. Defeated. Betrayed.

"And how is that supposed to help me, huh?" she sneers. "Am I supposed to feel sorry for you, Damien? Supposed to relate to you?"

"No."

"Good, because I fucking don't. I don't relate to you. Because I would never do something like this to you!" She cries, tears pooling in her bright blue eyes. She swipes at them angrily.

"You knew. You knew everything, this entire time and yet you did nothing," she bites, and I nod.

"I know." It's all I can say.

"You watched them treat me like an outcast, abuse me day in and day out, and yet you did nothing." She seethes and I nod again.

"I know."

"You knew I didn't belong there, you knew they were lying to me, that you were lying alongside them, and yet you did. Fucking. Nothing." She enunciates, the words sharp like a knife as she launches them at me.

“And when you found me there, with my rapist on top of me, you beat him to death and you did nothing for me. You did nothing.” She cries and slowly, I nod.

“I know.”

“You killed him and instead of coming to check on me in the hospital, you hid his body in the Hudson river with my sister,” she says, and I look into her eyes then, long and hard, before I nod slowly, confirming her suspicion. Though, I’m not sure where it came from. I had no details about her attacker.

“So, Megan was right then,” she scoffs and I see red, wanting to know exactly what happened when she ran into Megan the other week.

“What did she say to you that day?” I glare and she gives me a humorless smirk.

“Nothing. That happened this morning, when she was walking around on the sidewalk in front of your penthouse. She confronted me when I went to grab coffee from the delivery driver. There’s every sordid detail for you, since you know, no more lies right?” she hisses, and I want to get on my knees and apologize to her right now, but I’m too concerned that Megan was outside of my apartment this morning.

“Tell me, did you fuck her once or twice yesterday? Before you came home and fucked me?” she growls, and my eyes widen in confusion at her, my head snapping from left to right in shock.

“What the hell are you-”

“Don’t play dumb with me. It’s too late for that now,” she growls, and I try to approach her, but she backs away instantly with a finger raised.

“Don’t. Don’t you come near me. You can’t lie your way out of this one. I see right

through you. She told me you did and I smelled her perfume on your jacket this morning,” she hisses, and I want to shake sense into her, make her see that I really am telling the truth.

Then again, why would she believe a single word I say from here on out?

I’ve betrayed her too much, hurt her too badly.

“You’re not even sorry either. And why should I expect you to be? You don’t confront your demons, nonetheless your shitty, manipulative behavior. You won’t even talk to me about that night, because you’re a fucking liar. A god damn coward-”

“Enough!” I bark, wanting the insults to stop, no matter how much I deserve them. To be truthful, it’s not the insults I wish to block out. Once again, it’s mentioning that night.

That horrible, awful night that has haunted me for three(?) years.

“I don’t talk about that night because it killed me too, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear? That I had fallen in love with my wife’s younger sister, a woman that was too young for me, a woman that I was forbidden to acknowledge? It haunts me still, Lucy. Your screams, your pleas, the sight of your pants around your waist, the blood dripping from your head,” I pause, choking on my words as the memory hits me like a Mac truck.

“That night haunts me and so does every moment of your fucking life that I’ve witnessed. The abuse, all of it. Not because it happened, but because I didn’t save you. Didn’t hold you. Didn’t help you. Didn’t heal you. It haunts me because you’re right, I fucking did nothing.”

She’s quiet except for her sharp intake of air and sniffles as tears pool in her beautiful

blue eyes.

Eyes that have haunted me for nearly seven years.

There it is. My bitter truth,

My most sinister trait of all.

I am in love with Lucy Fairchild and I think I have been since the moment I first laid eyes on her.

“But it’s okay now?” she asks, breaking the long stretch of silence.

“What is?” I huff out.

“To touch me, to fuck me. To manipulate me now because I’m older. Because time has passed. It’s okay to use me now in any way that you see fit, Damien?” Her hands ball into fists at her sides and I swear I can hear her heart pound from across the room.

She’s angry.

And she has every single right to be.

“I fucking hate you, you know that?” she says, tears pouring from her eyes.

I want to go to her, to take her into my arms and hold her, but she is a wounded animal right now, all guarded and afraid.

“I know, I know baby.”

“Don’t fucking call me that! Stop fucking with my head!” she cries, and I shake my head as I approach her.

“No, I won’t. You can be as angry as you are, you can feel hurt, but you won’t tell me to hide my feelings now after you’ve spent years fucking pulling them from me,” I growl, “after you told me last night to face my consequences like a man. Well, here they are, sweetheart. Here is every feeling, every consequence from my actions,” I say as I stop right before her.

“I love you, no matter how fucked this all is, no matter how doomed it was from the start. I love you and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make up for the fact that I abandoned you when you needed me the most, when you needed someone.” Her breath hitches on a sob and I move to touch her, but she rips away.

“You could have avoided all of this, if you had just, if you had...”

“Told the truth? I know. I could have.” I sigh. “But here is the rest of it now. Your father has tons of hush money cases that I know you’re aware of, but I’ve been blackmailing him with this one for years. As soon as we’re married, I’m releasing it to the public and I’m taking your entire fucking family down for all of the turmoil that they’ve caused you, Lucille. I swear it,” I vow and her head drops, tears now splashing onto the carpet.

“It doesn’t matter now, Damien,” she whispers, so broken sounding, so lost.

“None of it matters now. It’s too late. The damage has already been done and you have been dealing with it as much as they have for years.” She won’t even look me in the eye when she speaks, she just pushes against my bare chest with one of her fists to move me away from her.

“We’ll go through with this contract. I’ll hold up my end of the deal, finish out my

degree, finish out this year, but that's all this will ever be, a business transaction. Nothing more. I owe you nothing and now, you owe me nothing."

"Wrong. I owe you the world, Lucy," I rasp out, but she shakes her head at me before meeting my gaze, her blue eyes now cold and vacant.

It's bone chilling. Heart breaking.

"As soon as the year is up I want out of this marriage. When I graduate, I'm fleeing the state, maybe even the country. I'm getting far away from my family and far away from you," she says, and the words slice me open like a knife, but I deserve them.

I also don't believe them. Because I have an entire year to prove to her that she should stay. That she will stay.

That she's mine and always has been. Always will be.

She turns around then and starts folding laundry on her bed.

"Have Bruno give Jenni an invitation to both the rehearsal dinner and wedding next week, she and her husband are the only family that I have and even though none of this is real, she at least deserves to see me fake happy," she explains and I want to touch her, to spin her around and shake some sense into her.

"I found a dress online and ordered it here yesterday morning, it should arrive by this weekend," she says before turning and facing me.

"As for the rest, I'd like you to leave. I'll sign the marriage contract as soon as Adrian brings it, I think your text said on Wednesday. And then we can be done with the theatrics by the end of this month," she explains, her voice void of all emotion.

I fucking hate every moment of it.

“As for now, I want you to get the fuck out of my bedroom and leave me alone,” she barks, and I have no strength in me to argue.

I can only do as she wishes in hopes that she’ll see that I’ve listened to her and that she will forgive me one day.

I turn reluctantly, dying to steal another glance from her, even though it’s filled with sadness. I’m dying to steal another kiss, to claim her once more, but I know it’s all useless.

Everything is fucked now.

When I close the door behind me, I hear her begin to vomit as soon as it clicks.

twenty-three

Lucy

I'm pregnant.

Early too. Four weeks today I might add.

I found out this morning in the bathroom of the guest suite at the Terrace. Jenni told me she was on her way and I asked her to grab me some tests because my period is late and lo and behold, there was the little, faint pink line.

The rehearsal dinner is minutes away and right now, I'm standing before my best friend with a positive pregnancy test and a million questions fluttering across her face, but she says nothing.

I say nothing.

I'm rendered speechless just like I was hours ago when Damien and I signed the marriage certificate together in Adrian's office.

Now, all of the nausea that's been plaguing me for weeks has somehow vanished. Mostly because the truth now sits in its place.

"What are you going to do, Luce?" Jenni asks, and I know she has more questions than that, but it's the most reasonable one to ask.

“I’m going to start the rehearsal walk through,” I say, my voice void of any emotion.

Because I’ve been sucked dry of them all over the past month. Especially these past two weeks.

I’ve locked myself in my bedroom, unwilling to face the man that has lied to my face for years. The man I am now legally married to. The father of my unborn child.

Okay, there’s the nausea.

A knock sounds at the door and both of our heads snap towards it.

“We’re ready ladies,” the event planner says on the other side, but I don’t move.

“Are you ready? I can run out this side door with you,” Jenni asks, and I’ve missed her so much that I start to cry.

God, I am so fucking tired of crying.

“I have to face reality at some point, right?” I ask, my eyes still staring at the little pink line on my test.

“We all do I guess,” she says, and I sigh and stand. She grabs my hand as I slide the pregnancy test in my bag. I’ll have to deal with that later, I guess.

Right now, I have to put on a fake smile and pretend that I am happy to marry the man that has single handedly shattered my heart to pieces.

Not that he hasn’t tried to repair it, he has.

He brings me a meal to my door every four hours, surrounds the hall with flowers.

He's sent me countless texts, each day a new memory he has for me, a new declaration of love I would've died to hear, but now am sad to read.

It's all too late and too much to bear now, his love. I'm ruined and I don't know if I will ever return to normal again.

We head out of the guest suite and to the rehearsal room, where Damien, Bruno and the rest of his men wait for us. It's awkward, this whole arrangement, but I plaster on the greatest fake smile that I can. One that my father taught me.

Damien sees right through it.

We go through our vows together and I try not to cry when I listen to his. It feels...earnest. Real. The honesty in his voice shows through and all I want is to crawl in his arms, which I almost do when he leans forward to kiss me. I almost break right then and there in front of everyone watching me. Watching us. Waiting for us.

He stares into my eyes as he grabs my hands, his thumb rubbing over the ring on my finger.

"You don't have to kiss me now," I whisper, but he shakes his head at me,

"I want to. I'm going to. Every day that you'll let me," he says, and shivers run down my spine.

God, I miss him. And I hate him, I crave him and I hate it.

I want to hate him.

He presses his lips to mine and breathes me in for a moment before I silently open my mouth and offer him inside, dying to taste him after weeks of denial.

Just one taste. One more.

He kisses the breath from me, steals every bit of air and rational thought and drinks it down like the vampire he is. And god help me, I let him.

I let him eat at my mouth in front of everyone, and I melt against him when he does. I let time and space evaporate because this is the first time I've felt good in weeks. This is the first time I've felt normal. Here, with him. Touching him, kissing him, becoming one with him even in this small, miniscule way.

He pulls away slowly, peppering my cheeks with gentle, feather-like kisses.

I want to cry from the tenderness of it all.

"My fate is in your hands now," he says against my lips before he pulls away completely and looks into my eyes. "It is you that owns me," he declares, and I want to ask him to explain to clarify, but my world explodes right then.

Or rather, the doors to the chapel do.

Everything happens too slowly at first?—

the gunfire.

The screams from Jenni and the event planner.

The shatter of glass exploding across the room.

Damien shoves me to the ground and stands in front of me, hands in the air.

I look up just in time to see it?—

a single bullet tearing through the hand I was just holding.

Blood splatters across my face.

I freeze.

I want to reach for him—to touch him, to make sure he’s still breathing?—

but I can’t move.

Because there’s a life inside me now.

A baby.

His baby.

Our secret.

“FBI! Hands in the air!”

The command explodes through the room.

People drop. Guns rise. Screams echo.

I should run.

I should hide.

But I can’t tear my eyes away from him.

From the man who swore he’d protect me.

From the man who just took a bullet.

My hands are trembling. My heart's not beating right.

And as they swarm him—shouting orders, snapping cuffs over bloodstained skin—

All I can think is:

They don't know what he's capable of.

But I do.

And it's only just beginning.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am

“You’re mine, Esmeralda.”

His amber eyes track me as I move away from him slowly. He’s a predator in the wild and I am his next meal. His scent and presence are so overpowering that it makes my knees tremble in anticipation.

Never have I been this attracted to a man, especially a man that I should hate. Especially from a man who’s taken everything from me.

Esmeralda is just one semester away from graduating college and on her way to opening the restaurant of her dreams. Dante is a ruthless mafia monster that walks in the daylight. Neither of them would've ever crossed paths until Esmeralda's mother makes a dire mistake that leaves them both merciless to the cartel and the whims of its captivating leader.

Blood and Beauty is a dark, modern-day, mafia spin on Beauty and the Beast. This is the first book in the new 'Owned by The Don' Trilogy from author Callie Vincent.

Chapter One

Esmeralda

The house is dark, but I hear the faint buzz of the television echo quietly onto the porch. As I place my fingers on the door handle, I steady my hand and inhale the cheap metallic smell from the fake plating.

I take a deeper breath and prepare myself for what's inside, though my feet stay

firmly planted on the ground beneath me.

It's like this most times.

Every time I decide to come home, whether from a friend's house or college, it's always a preparation. A steady brace for the war that awaits me in the living room.

She's there most times as well. Although there have been a few occasions where I've picked her up from the bathtub or kitchen floor, it's almost always the cheap blue couch that sits in our tiny living room. Television blaring and a cigarette dying in her hand, while I'm left wondering if she's actually dead or not.

Twenty years of my life have been composed of these moments, these deep breaths and planted feet. I should've taken the chance when I first went away for school to wash my hands clean of this woman, but she is blood and I'm beginning to think I have a savior complex.

I run my nose along the crack of the front door, trying to catch any other scent besides old metal. Maybe weed, maybe the biting fumes of meth, or maybe the silent stench of blow. It's mysterious, this house. Much like the woman who owns it.

I'd like to say it wasn't always like this. I'd like to say I'm the typical bastard child that had a single mother who gave everything she could to her daughter, but I'd be lying. And if that woman has taught me anything, it's to not be a shitty liar. And she's made me nothing but a bastard child by both her and my absent father. She's made me a single mother since my birth.

I catch my reflection in the window, the shades are down and I stare absently at the woman before me. She is young, but tired. Her green eyes bright, but haunted. Her dark hair is a veil of shadows around her.

I guess you could say it's a blessing that I don't look like her, my mother. Though we share the same eye color, I am the exact replica of a man I've never known. Which is my curse. One of many to be exact.

I've never asked her the story of this shadow man, this hole in our lives that is always gaping and pulling her into its abyss. If I've ever even tried to mention this mystery sperm donor, it's a swift smack to the jaw or a missile of curse words that billow out with stale cigarette smoke.

She sounds like a ray of sunshine, right? A queen in her own castle of misery. I'm not a slave to this house, not its keeper or ghost. I'm not even its caretaker. I'm hers. As much as I hate to be, I've been hers and I always will be hers. Her captive, her child, her mother, her blood. As much as I try to escape and rid myself of her, I can't. Because she's the only thing that's ever been mine.

I look away from my reflection and decide against my better judgement to open the door, waiting to see what new hell awaits me.

Immediately I'm overwhelmed with the smell of both bleach and Marlboro lights, a stench I've spent months trying to forget. The living room is empty, its small and dark corners vacant except for a couch, a couple of end tables and an old television that's set to the local news station. I drop my keys on the table by the door and set my bag on the couch, walking through to the kitchen while my ears pick up the news report.

"Welcome back Los Angeles, today on News channel nine we have a special report on the ever-present drug epidemic."

I look over my shoulder to the chubby man on the screen, he is grey and balding, but his voice sounds like he could control a room within seconds.

"Local authorities have seized control of a building on the fifth block of Skid Row in

downtown LA today and the findings are enough to attract even the attention of our beloved President."

I linger for a second longer to finish the report before I continue the search for my mother.

"Yes, today at around three in the afternoon, the LAPD arrested over twenty-five fugitives and obtained almost four million dollars in contraband that included several pounds of cocaine, heroin and over two hundred firearms."

The camera pans over to a blond woman in a red blazer, her cherry lipstick matching it almost too well.

"Yes, Joe, that's right. Our local authorities completed one of their biggest operations yet against the ever-growing battle with the Columbian drug cartel in over a decade. The authorities are saying that they may even lead to finding the head of the illegal operations, none other than the notorious El Oscuro."

She looks smug, proud even, as if she was a part of the crew involved in the bust. I roll my eyes and find the remote on the floor next to the couch, noting ashes on top of the buttons. I turn the volume down and set it on the cushion that's filled with both my mom's cigarette burns and my soda stains from when I was a kid. I still feel the sting of her palm on my shoulder from the incident and it was nearly ten years ago.

I hear the back door slam open and brace myself for the headache that is my mother.

"EMMIE!"

Her speech is slurred, but her movements to me are quick. I see a flash of red hair and then I'm being choked by both her clumsy hug and the stench of vodka. She pets my hair and starts humming enthusiastically.

For a moment I let myself fall into her. For a moment I let myself feel like a normal kid coming home from school to a mother that missed her. For a moment I let myself lie.

She pulls back and grips me by the tops of my shoulders. She's smiling but it doesn't reach her tired green eyes. I notice that more wrinkles have formed since I last saw her over six months ago. She's only thirty-six, but both the drugs and liquor have aged her another ten years.

I swallow the lump in my throat and put on a tight smile, trying to not let my annoyance show.

"Hi, Mom. It's good to see you. Have you eaten?"

I want to distract myself with cooking, my only joy in this house, but I already know her answer.

"No, baby I'm already on my afternoon cocktail, don't want to mess up a nice buzz while it lasts!"

She's on her fifth afternoon cocktail, not her first. I search her eyes to see if maybe she's dabbled in something else, but I only see a drunken haze. My eyes glance over her arms quickly, not noticing any new marks or sores.

I make my smile tighter as she releases my shoulders and grabs a beer can from the table closest to the kitchen. She tilts it toward me in offering and I shake my head slightly, already picking up my bag from the couch and making my way towards our small yellow kitchen.

I look around at the walls that are colored from both paint and smoke, smiling slightly to myself in remembrance of the first time I cooked pancakes on my own, to the time

when I made my own twist on a traditional Tres Leches cake.

My mother is not the same as me in many ways, but one of the biggest is heritage. Though my Hispanic roots come from my biological father, her Irish genes have culturally taken over my upbringing.

My best friend Ricky was born in Polanco and moved to America when he was three. His family is the closest thing I have to both my ancestry and a family itself. I've spent many nights at his house, flipping through his mother's cookbook and memorizing recipes to take home.

My mom, of course, never ate anything unless I forced it down her throat after another late night at the bar or God knows where, so I never got a real opinion on how my home cooking tasted, but Ricky was always happy to oblige.

I realize that now, standing in our small kitchen, is probably the best time to tell her why I'm actually here. Why I've decided to disrupt my peace with the personal hell that is this woman and this house. I need a signature to continue my third year of school, the tutoring program I did in high school has lasted me until my junior year of college and this is the last time I'll ever need to ask her for anything, which I know will already be an issue.

"Mom, there's a reason why I've come home early. I need you to sign off on my last tutoring installment so I can continue this next semester."

She immediately chokes on her sip of beer, and I want to rip my hair out in response, but I maintain my composure.

"Let me just grab a pen really quick. I have it all right here, and when you're done I'll make some dessert."

Maybe if I bake, I can get through this one night of bullshit and be on my way back to my new life, back to my blossoming future that I've fought tooth and nail for.

I set both the paperwork and a pen on my table and looked up, not liking the sight before me. She looks paler, her balance faltering and her face full of arrogance and maybe a twinge of...guilt.

What the fuck now?

"I've been meaning to tell you, Emmie. Some things came up and I needed to dip into your USC fund a little bit."

I feel the heat rising to my face and coming out of my ears. I clench my fists and nod for her to continue.

She throws her hands up, exasperated by my short and silent response.

"I needed it for bills honey, no worries. You'll be fine, the market down the road is still hiring and would love your help for the summer, I'm sure!"

Her words were slow and slurred. I maintain my composure, though I'm dying to combust at this given moment.

"How much did you take?"

She looks down and shrugs. Throwing her now empty can of beer in the overflowing trash can, she turns to grab a new one from the fridge. I rush in front of it, forcing her to stop and look at me. What I see, I don't like.

"How much did you take, Mom?"

She rolls her eyes, because she's the one that should be annoyed.

"How. Much. Did. You. Fucking. Take. Mom?"

Her face is flushed and there's a fire in her green eyes. I notice that I'm shaking now, my anger and weariness mixing in the pit of my stomach.

Please, please don't say it, Mom.

She looks up, her chin jutting out in defense.

"All of it."

I realize now that this is the moment when I will commit my first murder.

I can't hold it back, the rage. It's an ugly monster rearing its head and rushing out after twenty years of this bullshit. Of her bullshit.

"WHAT!?"

I push her back against the kitchen wall, slapping at her like a mad woman, knocking down the calendar behind her.

She's defenseless and drunk, a shit opponent to say the least, which works well in my favor because I'm about to kill this bitch. I'm about to beat the life out of my mother because she just confessed to ruining mine. Once. Again.

"Esmeralda May! You're assaulting your own mother!"

She sounds lifeless to me, her voice a void of no emotion. I'm shaking and crying and screaming and slapping. I want to kill her. I want to die. I want it all.

This was my last year. My last trip back home to her. My last stop before I sailed away to a life without her, towards a life with peace.

I should've known it was too good. There's no escaping this monster, this plague of a mother that God punished me with.

I'm about thirty slaps in when we hear a sudden pounding on the front door, stopping both me from hitting and her from screaming.

I release her and she runs to the door, letting me fall to my knees in despair. I am about to lay my head into my hands when I hear her scream again.

Two large men in black suits and sunglasses are in the living room, their hands holding my now unconscious mother.

I back away slowly, my heels tripping over one another. I'm on a rollercoaster of emotions that started with anger and have now led me down the path of fear in its purest form.

The men have a powerful air around them. They practically ooze fear itself and I'm praying to God to both save me and not let me piss myself.

I bolt for the back door, but only make it five steps before something hits my head and everything goes dark.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am

Esmeralda

My head is throbbing, and my stomach feels full of lead. I can't bring my eyes to open. The pain is too strong, and I think I may vomit.

Open your eyes, Esmeralda.

I hear a voice and it feels like chocolate. Can a voice do that? Can a voice even feel smooth?

As much pain and confusion as I am in, I want to find the source of the voice. I want to crawl into it and let it wrap around me. It sounds warm and deep, comforting in a time where the last thing I should feel is comfort.

I slowly lift my lids and let my eyes adjust to the light and room around me.

I'm in a board room. A fucking board room? There are two expensive leather couches seated across from one another in front of a large, stone fireplace. The heat of the flames lick my skin and I still shiver.

I look around the large room and spot a large, expensive looking desk. The wood looks rich and the leather chair behind it looks genuine, I think I can even smell it. It smells deep and spicy, even luxurious. When have I ever smelled luxury before?

I hear a grunt to my right and realize my mother is next to me, sitting with her hands tied behind her back. The sight of her makes me aware that we are both fully bound with rope and gagged with cloth.

I know better than to scream at this moment, I know we're in trouble and somehow I know that it's Cristina Ellen May, my piece of shit mother's fault.

She starts to flail and whine, pissing off the two guards that stand before us. I refuse to lift my eyes to theirs, and I sink further into the floor and stare at the burgundy, ornate rug beneath me.

It is when I decide to shrink into myself, that I hear the clicking sounds of leather shoes against the hardwood floor. I see them walking towards us and they, too, look expensive.

The shoes stop right in front of me, and I will my body to not shake in fear or move in any way. I realize now that I am a mouse trapped in a lion's den and if I make a sudden movement, I could very well die.

The shoe creeps toward me and the tip of it touches my chin, lifting it up to look at the man occupying it. Though I am gagged, I am left speechless.

The man before me was like a giant demigod, or I guess in this case, the devil.

He was large, much larger than the men behind him. Large enough to take up the entire space of a doorway. His shoulders broad, his arms thick. His dark hair slicked back in a sophisticated sort of way, but still curled at the ends around his jawline.

Which was strong and precise. It looked like a jaw that was hard to break. Though I'm sure nobody in their right mind would ever attempt to break this man's jaw. Dark hairs dusted over it and for some stupid reason, my fingers itched to touch his short beard.

He leaned down to get a better look at me and I immediately wanted to cower away from him, but my instinct told me that was probably not a smart decision to make. His eyes were intense. So dark, but golden in their own way. Almost...amber.

Is this the devil? Does the devil dress in Armani and smell like sex and whiskey?

His scent and presence made me drunk with confusion and fear, yet I was still pulled to him. He was beautiful. In a dark and lethal sort of way.

His full lips moved as he spoke his next words, my eyes drifting towards his strong nose that seemed crooked the closer he got.

"Buenas noches, pequena." Good evening, little one.

My mother may have raised me to be illiterate in my own culture, but my minor is in Spanish.

His voice is rich, the source of that chocolate sound I wanted to melt into earlier, the sound that roused me awake in the strangest way.

"Are you wondering why you're here in my office, pequena? You may nod."

I held his eye contact a second longer than I wanted to, the color both confusing me and alluring me all at once. Slowly, but surely, I begin to nod.

His mouth twists into what seems like a ghost of a smile, a sinister one that vanished as soon as it showed. He drops my chin abruptly as he places his foot back on the ground, walking away from me and to my mother.

I keep my eyes down, wanting to shut them forever. This can't be happening. This can't be happening. What have you done now, Mom?

"It seems mommy dearest has been stealing from me, Esmeralda. " He says my name as if he's trying it out for the first time, as if it fits his lips just right. I almost feel sick again.

My mother starts whining and flailing again, I can tell every one of us are annoyed by her attempts now. It only lasts a few seconds before the devil man wraps his hand in her hair and jerks her head back, the movement making the lead in my stomach sink deeper.

"I'm going to ungag you. You have one chance to be honest about what you've stolen. I'd choose your answer wisely."

He removes his hands from my mom's hair and slowly unties the gag and pulls it away from her mouth. Within seconds she's panicking and pushing out nonsense.

"I promise it wasn't much! I just needed some cash and some blow to get me by! Everyone at the club was using that stash! I swear I didn't do much wrong at all!"

I hear the cracking sound of his smack before I see it. Her cheek plants against the floor and for a second, her weary eyes meet mine.

He tips his chin at the men behind him, and they bend down to my mom, one gagging her again and the other pulling her head back, forcing her to look at the devil in the Armani suit before us.

"You've stolen almost three thousand dollars in both money and cocaine, Ms. May. I've been watching you since you stole your first bump."

Her eyes widen and I curse silently.

Stupid, greedy bitch. When will anything ever be enough?

He dusts off his dark blue suit jacket and stands, the fabric of his jacket hugging his arms as if it was stretching to be free of him.

I look down again and hear the click of his leather heels walk towards the direction of

the antique, wooden desk. The squeak of his chair echoing as he takes a seat and folds his hands behind his head, leaning back as if he was on a vacation, not holding two women hostage.

Maybe this was a vacation for him .

"You do not need to worry, Ms. May. While your sticky fingers have been in my establishment, I've already thought of a way for you to repay me."

My head snaps up in his direction and he clicks his tongue at me, letting me know not to make any further movements.

"I have many whores that can do many jobs at my businesses, but it seems my maid for this house that I'm residing in has also dabbled in sticky theft as well."

His eyes light up and I immediately wonder where that maid is now.

"You and your daughter will stay here under close watch until the debt is paid, until you are deemed worthy of forgiveness."

My mother and I look at each other, my eyes filled with confusion and hers with fear.

He abruptly straightens in his seat and I almost flinch.

"Where are my manners? Forgive me, I forgot to introduce myself."

He walks slowly to the space between both my mother and I, reaching down with his tan hands out in offering, as if to shake our bound ones.

"The name is Dante, many call me El Oscuro. If I were you, I'd just stick with Master. Welcome home ladies."

He winks at me, and my world goes dark once more.