



Jamie (Redcars #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: Burning is control.

Craving Killian's touch is surrender.

Jamie has never claimed to be good.

He's a former hacker, a convicted arsonist, and an ex-con who's killed just to survive—but he's found a home at Redcars.

The men there aren't just friends—they're his brothers.

And when the man who held Robbie gives up a name before dying in flames, Jamie uncovers a network of monsters.

Rich.

Protected.

Untouchable.

For the people he calls family—for Robbie, who was broken and caged—Jamie would burn the world down and watch it turn to ash to keep them safe.

Only Killian—a lawyer with secrets in his blood and a war room built on vengeance—wants him to wait.

Killian unsettles Jamie in ways he can't explain.

His presence is a spark too close to fuel.

The fear, the pull, the heat—it all blurs into something dangerously close to want.

Killian doesn't try to fix Jamie's broken pieces.

And when his steady hands quiet the fire in Jamie's chest, Jamie doesn't know whether he wants to fight him... or fall apart in his arms.

Bound by revenge, addicted to control, and drawn to each other in all the wrong ways, Jamie and Killian are on a collision course of pain

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ONE

Jamie

The fire started in the kitchen.

Just like the last one.

The flames licked up the drapes, each faded flower vanishing in white sparks. I stood there, still holding the used match, and watched the edge of the fabric curl inwards, blackening, then opening with a hiss of release. The smoke thickened fast—it always did. Greedy. Hungry.

I didn't run.

I waited until the heat reached the hallway, caught the old linoleum, the newspaper bundles, and the cracked, piss-yellow chair, until the air turned hostile, burning my throat.

Then, I walked out of the front door.

It was early. The street was quiet but not peaceful.

Rows of tired brick apartments lined the block, tagged with graffiti and sagging with disrepair.

Trash rustled in the gutters, and a broken streetlamp still flickered behind me, casting

everything in a sick, pale glow.

A busted bike frame leaned beside the stop sign as if even it had given up.

Shitty neighborhood. The kind no one cared about. The kind no one came looking in unless they wanted something worse than answers.

But quiet.

Not like the house.

The house was screaming now.

Wood groaning. Glass cracking. That beautiful, chaotic roar meant nothing could be saved.

I sat on the curb across the street staring at the fire. No shoes. Smoke on my clothes. My uncle was still inside. Passed out on the couch, maybe. Maybe, he woke up trapped and terrified. Didn't fucking matter. I knew he hadn't gotten out. That was the point.

By the time the sirens came, I was calm but didn't know what to do with the silence. No belt snapping through the air, no fists, and no lock sliding into place behind me.

I was free.

When the fire crew arrived, I clutched my laptop close and didn't move. One firefighter tried to grab me, shouting something I didn't catch. His gloves smeared soot across my bare arms. He looked scared. Or maybe confused.

They always are.

The ambulance came next. Someone wrapped a blanket around me. I let them. A woman crouched beside me, her voice gentle, as though I was fragile.

“What happened?” she asked.

I looked past her to the smoke billowing into the sky. “It burned,” I said.

She blinked. “How did it start?”

I shrugged. “Match, I guess.”

Her expression changed. Not fear, exactly. Just the beginning of understanding. The moment when people realize I’m not the victim they thought I was.

“What’s your name?”

“Jamie Maddox.”

Then, the cops came with their questions, and when they searched my name and the other fire was flagged, the inevitable happened.

There’s a body, trapped, couldn’t get out, burned.

“...you’re under arrest for suspicion of arson and homicide.”

I didn’t fight them. I didn’t cry. I didn’t ask why.

They took my laptop away from me, but that was okay.

I’d hidden everything in the cloud, and no one would find it.

All my tools and things I used to steal were gone.

I walked to the cruiser barefoot, fingers twitching for another match I didn't have.

My skin itched for the flick of sulfur, the sharp tang of smoke.

I could still taste the fire on the back of my tongue, feel the way heat had kissed my face.

It wasn't only the burn I missed—it was the control, the silence it gave me, the way everything else fell away when flames were dancing.

If I could watch something fall apart correctly, the world could be wiped clean and made simple.

The cuffs were too tight, but I didn't complain. The pain felt real. Felt deserved.

I remember watching the dark smoke and the firefighters from the back seat. The house collapsed in on itself as if it had been waiting to die.

I knew that feeling.

They took me to a white room with plastic chairs and a table bolted to the floor. I waited. Eventually, someone came in and read me my rights. I asked for a cold soda, but they didn't give me one, handing me water in a plastic bottle with no lid.

They called it an accident at first. They suggested it could have been faulty wiring, an electrical short in the kitchen, or maybe the old microwave gave out. One neighbor swore they heard a pop. Another said they smelled gas.

But I was too calm.

Too clean at first glance.

No soot on my face. No burns. Just a folded blanket around my shoulders and hands that didn't shake. I hadn't asked questions. I hadn't cried then, and I hadn't cried when I watched the smoke curl upward as if it was writing my name across the sky.

And when they'd checked me for injuries and found the marks on my back and thighs, the cigarette burns and the cuts, and they asked me what happened, all I said was that I'd been in the kitchen.

I heard them talking about abuse, and they handed me pity in one hand and accusation in the other.

It didn't matter how badly someone hurt me.

That wasn't justification for burning them to death, and hell, no one walks out of a house fire that began in the kitchen without a mark on them. Not unless they'd set the fire.

They started looking closer.

And when they asked how the fire spread so fast, I said, "Accelerant helps."

Eventually, they stopped calling it an accident.

They sent me to a facility outside Los Angeles.

Not jail. Not at first. Psychiatric observation, they called it.

I played the game—quiet, cooperative, unreadable.

The diagnosis was difficult when pretending to be someone else was so easy.

They looked for remorse, for cracks in the story, but I gave them blank calm and vague sadness.

I could mimic empathy, mirror fear, and drip trauma in rehearsed doses until they believed what I needed them to.

The doctors said I didn't appear to understand guilt the way others did.

I agreed with them. I didn't feel guilty. I felt nothing.

Eighteen months of docs poking and prodding, of white padded rooms and meds.

After that, it was prison—two more years. I was under minimum security once the court accepted the diminished capacity argument, which I sold like a motherfucker. I kept my head down, memorized the schedules, worked in the auto shop they had there, and didn't light a match in all that time.

It didn't mean I'd stopped wanting to. I'd dream of it—heat curling under my skin, flames reaching for the sky.

Sometimes, I'd close my eyes and imagine it: the sharp snap of a match, the whoosh of ignition, the way light flickered against the walls as if it were alive.

Fire never judged. It didn't ask questions.

It simply consumed. It gave me power when everything else made me powerless.

It took things away, but only the things I never wanted to keep .

Fire made sense in a way nothing else did.

It was simple. Pure. I didn't need to justify why I liked how it moved or why watching something burn down to its bones gave me a kind of peace nothing else ever did.

Not even Tudor at Redcars, with all his calm and second chances, ever really saw the craving underneath—how it wasn't just about destruction. It was about clarity and silence.

I didn't understand either. I only knew that when things burned, my brain was quiet.

And for a moment, I could breathe.

I'd worked in the auto shop inside. Learned just enough not to look stupid and lied about the rest. Said the right things, kept my head down, let them think I was trying.

I wasn't.

The plan was simple—stay long enough to get off the radar, then vanish. Tudor came to my room, told me about Redcars, said it was the kind of place that gave second chances to the worst of us. I didn't believe in second chances. I believed in escape.

Tudor opened the garage door that first morning with oil on his hands and a don't-fuck-with-me stare. He looked me over like I was a car wreck—twisted metal, something he couldn't walk past. Then he gripped my chin, hard enough that I felt it in my jaw.

“You're faking this shit,” he said. “I see the fire in your eyes. That thing that wants to burn it all down just to feel something. You so much as fuck up on my doorstep, you're gone.”

You understand?" I didn't answer. I stared back, let him see it—the fury, the heat, the part of me that didn't give a damn.

But he didn't flinch.

"Fuck kid, you're trouble." He sighed.

"Whatever," I snapped. Fuck this bullshit.

"I'm not here to fix you," he said. "I'm here to give you the tools to fix yourself. You learn to control the fire, or it'll eat you alive. Your choice."

Then he turned his back on me and disappeared into the shadows of the garage, like he already knew I'd follow.

And I did.

Not because I believed a word he said.

Because I figured he'd be easy to play—just another bleeding-heart idiot with a savior complex.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

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TWO

Killian

The Cave wasn't on any official floor plan.

Tucked behind a fake panel in the back of my law office—past the respectable facade with its polished floors, brass door handles, and old-money charm—was a room where the rules didn't apply.

We called it the Cave, short for Bat Cave, because it was hidden, high-tech, and run on secrets.

But it wasn't a playroom for rich vigilantes, it was our situation room.

Our war room. Where we waged a kind of justice different from the stuffy law-abiding lawyer shit I had to use to cover up what we were really doing.

About the size of a midtown coffee shop, it had the vibe to match: brushed concrete floors, industrial-chic lighting, a \$5,000 Italian coffee machine we all pretended we didn't worship.

Three desks held laptops with enough processing power to scare the NSA, plus, of course, Caleb had his servers, which no one else was allowed to touch.

Not that Sonya and I would know what to do if we were allowed past the secure gate.

There were sofas for late nights, and then there was the cork board wall.

It held our current investigations, and most importantly, the list of people who used power like a weapon.

The list had way too many names, including the senator who covered up a disappearance. The CEO whose charity funneled money into off-the-books “retraining programs” that smelled like trafficking. The judge who let abusers walk because he believed “boys will be boys.” They were on our hit list.

But we didn’t kill them. Hell, I hadn’t killed anyone since I was fourteen when a john had thought a scrawny group home runaway was fair game for anything he wanted.

He’d had a knife and a bulky body too used to sedentary work and good food.

I was skinny as fuck, had quicker hands and more than enough rage in me to drive the knife into his heart before he could blink.

The cops didn’t care—just another john in a dirty, needle-filled alley, and a hooker who’d disappeared into the night.

But I remembered the man’s face, and not in a haunted-me kind of way, but in a fuck-yes-asshole way.

I didn’t carry guilt over what I’d done, but there was no pride, it was just another day I’d managed to survive.

It didn’t make me a killer. It made me someone who lived.

That night carved a line in me that never faded.

I'd crossed it once. I'd promised I'd never do it again.

So no, as much as I wanted to hurt the bastards who destroyed for fun, I didn't kill the people on our list. But my team and I made sure they couldn't hurt anyone else.

The people I hunted buried themselves with their arrogance, carelessness, and greed.

I simply gave the world a nudge to look in their direction.

In fast-moving media, people thrived on having monsters exposed and vilified, not executed.

Headlines were cleaner than blood stained hands.

Our small team didn't officially get paid.

There were no clients, no glory, no name on a plaque.

Just four people doing the work no one else could, and paying for it by skimming from accounts of the criminals they'd unearthed—money already soaked in blood and ruin.

We weren't blind to the ethical fog surrounding what we did.

We made our peace with operating in the gray, because up here in the Cave, black-and-white didn't exist.

Sonya, Caleb, Levi, and I .

An analyst, a hacker, a cop, and a lawyer.

We'd all once been headed for Ivy League careers and corporate success. All disillusioned before we turned thirty.

We'd met on campus, full of ideas about changing the world, and I was a cautionary tale about trusting appearances from the start.

The scholarship student who kept his past locked away behind a too-white smile and the polish of a Brooks Brothers suit.

They didn't know, not at first, that I'd grown up sleeping on the street, or that my mother had sold me to a dealer for rent money when I was thirteen.

That I'd survived foster homes, back alleys, and youth lockup.

They never saw someone who made bank through using their body, and they certainly never knew about the man I'd killed.

Same as I didn't know at first, that Sonya had been taken in by her uncle after her parents died—a man with a badge and a twisted sense of control, and a propensity for raping young girls.

He wore a sheriff's uniform, protected by the illusion of authority, and when she broke down and told us what he'd done, he became the first target on the List. We didn't just ruin his reputation. We annihilated him.

Levi was hardly ever in the Cave, our man on the outside, a detective now, with access to systems and records typically locked down.

His father had been a cop with a chip on his shoulder and a gun, and had lit the match that started a riot—seven people dead, including Levi's little brother, in the backlash.

That loss shaped Levi, broke something inside him, and made him razor-sharp.

He'd joined the force himself not to honor his father, but to make sure no one like him ever got to hide behind a badge again.

He used his connections, not to protect power, but to dismantle it from the inside.

Caleb was the biggest surprise. On paper, the golden boy, with code in his brain and an uncanny affinity for tech.

But beneath that bright-eyed techie charm was a fury none of us had seen coming.

He'd already gotten revenge for his dad taking his own life after the bank foreclosed on the family ranch.

Caleb had broken into their system, siphoned millions, and funneled it to every anti-eviction nonprofit he could find.

Robin Hood with a server farm. Of course, all trails he planted led back to the bank's management, five lives ruined to balance the loss of the father Caleb idolized and anyone else who had been damned for the sake of a bank's profit.

Each one of us had secrets that shaped us, wounds that bled into purpose, and when we shared them with each other, when the dam broke and everything spilled out, we became a team with a common purpose.

And we never forgot.

Because every abuser, every trafficker, every crooked cop, every corporate big guy, walked free. Financial institution, institutions and Big Pharma had money, lawyers, and foundations. Some even had buildings named after them.

So yeah, the list on our wall was precision vengeance because no one else had taken these people down, and we added more names each month.

Sonya was at her desk, dark curls pinned back, focused on an open file, with paperwork strewn all over her desk. Caleb, our in-house digital god, lounged sideways on the couch with a laptop balanced on one knee, his socked foot bouncing to a beat only he heard.

“And that,” he said, spinning his screen toward me, “is the final file on our favorite hypocrite. Senator Barlowe. All audio, video, and money trail evidence is packaged, encrypted, and queued. You want me to send it now, or wait until tomorrow?”

“Push it,” I said.

He tapped a single key. “Boom. Enjoy your early retirement, senator.”

I let my gaze drift to the board, where Barlowe’s picture would be pulled down.

We’d built an airtight case—audio tapes of the senator whispering payoffs, wire transfers from offshore accounts, a secret condo in Virginia where a missing girl had last been seen.

We didn’t fabricate any of it. We didn’t need to.

His own hubris had written the story for us.

All we’d done was find the threads and pull, and now the anonymous information was being sent out.

One more monster down. And this time, the headlines would do the rest.

“And the Redcars project? Have we destroyed all digital footprint for Roman Lowe?”

“All good,” Sonya said.

“Good” in our world meant more than a thumbs-up.

It meant I could look Enzo in the eye and say the team had buried any connection to Roman Lowe so deep that no one would ever find it again.

Good meant we’d pulled every thread and cut every tie, scrubbing him from systems both traffickers and governments had fingers in .

“And Mitchell?” I asked, quieter. Mitchell was the monster who’d imprisoned Roman Lowe for so long that the man, who now called himself Robbie, could barely remember when he hadn’t been in chains.

Mitchell was a middleman, a cog in a wheel, but the guys at Redcars—Enzo in particular—wanted him found and dealt with.

I’d seen Robbie’s scars; I’d witnessed his trauma—it was personal, and while my team wouldn’t be the ones to wipe Mitchell off the face of the planet, we’d clear the path without hesitation, and whatever Enzo did to Mitchell when he found him?

He didn’t just deserve it. He had it coming.

And then there was the money. Not only hush money or blackmail caches—these were blood-soaked crypto accounts holding millions, passwords handed over by a trembling Robbie, who had no use for the wealth of monsters.

We cleaned it, scattered it through a hundred banks under a hundred names, and every penny would resurface in survivor shelters, legal aid funds, and charities.

That was our kind of laundering. Making dirty money clean, and turning pain into restitution.

“I’m hitting brick walls, even with what Robbie gave us,” Caleb confirmed. “No idea who is above Mitchell, but whoever it is, they’re down a hell of a lot of money. I need more to track this upward if that’s what we’re doing.”

I glanced at the hundred or more names on the list on the wall—we may never get through that list, and did we have the resources to discover yet more bad guys?

“Once again, are we agreed to give Enzo the go-ahead to get Mitchell?” I asked, and Caleb and Sonya looked at me and exchanged a glance.

“You’re doubting we should do it?” Sonya asked, confused.

“We don’t do the killing part,” I reminded her and Caleb.

“Oh, I see,” she began, in a super sunshiny tone—always our first warning sarcasm was coming into play. “Someone should call Levi.”

Caleb and I stared at her. “Why?” I asked when she didn’t immediately explain, despite knowing I was playing into her hands.

“Then, the four of us could hold a philosophical roundtable on the ethics of knowingly setting a chain of events in motion that ends with murder? Maybe debate the death of a man who worked for, and with, traffickers, and personally held someone for eight years, in chains. Because if you ask me if I’m good with it, I am.”

Caleb snorted. “Me too. And you know Levi already had his say.”

When we’d presented the information to Levi, our cop, our clean front man, his jaw

was tight, he was furious, disgusted and he'd voted yes before anyone else.

"I'll call Enzo," I said and pulled out my cell.

Caleb reached out to hold Sonya's hand. This was big. We'd never gotten to the point where we'd given the go-ahead to ex-cons who wanted to kill.

I walked toward the wall of photos. It was full of faces, but none haunted me quite like Mitchell's. Robbie's captor. Violent. Connected. The kind of man who didn't only hurt people—he broke them.

When I'd first met Robbie, I'd seen a man stitched together with fear, silence, and survival.

He'd barely met my eyes. He flinched from sudden movement.

Scars mapped his skin like a story no one had the right to read.

I'd felt raw and enraged at that moment, but there was also guilt and recognition.

I'd lived a version of that life, though my hell had ended sooner than his, and I'd clawed my way out with bloodied hands. But Robbie? He'd been broken by it.

Seeing him wasn't only a reminder of what monsters like Mitchell could do. It was a mirror. It made me feel the violence I thought I'd buried long ago, the kind that lived in my bones like a memory. The kind I'd promised never to use again.

And the system wouldn't touch Mitchell. Because he paid the right people and the law had too many blind spots men like him knew precisely how to use to slip through.

That was what the list and the Cave was for.

The blind spots. The people and pain the system couldn't—or wouldn't—see.

Sometimes I felt righteous, as if we were the only ones holding a crooked world accountable.

At other times, I felt nothing at all. Numb to the lines we crossed, too tired to flinch at the fallout.

And then there were nights when it all caught up to me—when I lay awake wondering if we were fixing things or just shifting the wreckage.

But even then, I kept coming back because someone had to.

I placed the call on one of Caleb's encrypted cells. Enzo answered, his voice steady.

“Redcars, how can I help?”

“Hey, it's me. The parts are ready for the Corvette if someone wants to get over there and pick them up. We're sending the paperwork now.”

There was a pause. Then: “Thank you for letting us know.”

That was the signal. He knew what to do.

“So, boss,” Caleb said, and I turned to see him gesturing at the rogues gallery on the wall. “Who's next?”

“We find who Mitchell was working with or for, and we take them down.”

Caleb pressed a single button as if he'd been waiting for me to tell him that very thing.

“On it.”

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THREE

Jamie

I climbed a tree far enough away to watch the house burn.

Flames licked up the side where Mitchell's office had been, caught the porch pillars, greedy and elegant, curling around the old wood as if they'd been waiting all their lives to consume it.

The windows shattered one by one, sharp cracks echoing through the night, sending glass spraying onto the grass like scattered stars.

Inside, I knew John Mitchell was already dead because of what he'd done to Robbie. That wasn't why I was sitting here watching it burn. Not revenge. Not justice. It was about seeing something awful become magnificent for a few fleeting minutes.

"You're beautiful," I murmured, voice low and reverent, and palmed my cock, which was so hard I could blow right now.

I didn't often get hard when I burned, but tonight, killing Mitchell, watching him fight to stay alive, getting revenge for Robbie, that made me unsettled and yeah, hard.

I winced as sirens grew close, hoping they didn't get there quickly enough to save any of it.

My breath hitched, pulse slow but heavy, and a low throb tightened in my gut.

I was hard, and I didn't care. It wasn't about lust—it was about awe: that rush, that worship, that moment when everything ugly turned sublime.

Fire made sense in a way nothing else ever had.

No therapist, no drugs, no midnight walks had ever quieted the noise in my head the way flames did.

It wasn't about beauty alone—it was necessity.

A language I spoke fluently, the only thing that reflected my chaos back at me, and said, I understand .

I loved fire most when it came alive at night.

It moved as though it knew it was being watched, as if it performed just for me.

Brighter, freer, untethered. I wasn't close enough to feel the heat, but the smoke brushed over me and went partway to dissolving the tension I carried.

A bit of peace bloomed in my chest when the house didn't look ruined but transformed into art.

Every flame a kiss against the surface of something that used to matter .

My heartbeat was steady. I didn't flinch. I didn't look away.

There was peace in the heat, something holy in destruction. And as the roof caved in and sparks floated toward the stars, I felt that strange, guilty ache in my chest again. Not regret—not quite—but something close to longing.

I stayed until the fire had eaten everything, until the house's bones gave way and the night smelled like ash.

I watched from the shadows as the first cruisers rolled in, lights flashing.

Cops strung up tape as if they thought they'd find any evidence of what we'd done.

The trucks followed, bright and hulking, and their men swarmed the yard with heavy boots and shouted commands, turning my masterpiece into steam.

I hated them for it.

Every jet of water felt like an insult, like someone pissing on art. They drowned her, but she didn't go quietly, furious and defiant until the last of her breath curled into the air and vanished.

I waited even then, long after the blaze was gone. Only when the final ember dimmed and the heat finally lifted did I turn away, the taste of her still on my tongue.

Only then did I leave her behind .

I wanted more. I needed more. Tonight had been for Robbie, for family. I needed something for myself. I headed out to the highway turnoff where I'd left my car, pushed back into the shadows, and all too soon I was back on the road, and connecting a call to Rio.

"I'm heading out," I said as soon as he answered.

This was the rule: if I needed more , I told Rio first. He understood that my world made sense in those moments when the spark and choice were mine, but he gave me guidelines, he held me accountable.

I wasn't allowed to go out and burn things whenever I wanted, I had to have it make sense.

"Why?" Rio asked, exasperated. He told me I'd go too far one day, and then, they'd take me in. But I was careful. My marks were researched, and there were reasons for every place I burned and every kill I made.

"For me," I said. I needed the fire—the flicker, the pulse, the ache in my fingers to strike a match and feed it fuel.

Just the thought of flames licking up walls, devouring oxygen, made something in my chest tighten and release.

I could almost feel the blistering heat against my skin, smell the scorched paint, hear the deep whoosh as fire found fresh fuel.

My fingers twitched, itching for the spark, the flare, the roar.

It wasn't a want—it was a need, curling tight and hot in my gut as if hunger and desperation had collided and set each other alight.

I needed to feel in control again, to be the one who decided what stayed and what turned to ash.

Like the first time—kneeling in the yard behind my childhood home, a tin can stuffed with newspaper and twigs, my hands shaking as I flicked the lighter.

When it caught, all the screaming inside me stopped—just smoke and crackle and glow.

I remember the way it warmed my palms and lit up the dark.

Nothing else ever did that, not like fire.

I didn't know where to start with what Mitchell had told us tonight, but we had names now, and tracking the others down was for later, once the monster inside me calmed down—so for now, it was another target from my list.

“Call me as soon as you're done,” Rio ordered.

“I'll come straight home.”

Rio sighed. “I'll wait.” His voice caught a little, as if he wanted to add more but didn't trust the words not to betray his fear.

He was my best friend—the only one who understood me, and I owed him more than he could ever know.

He and Tudor both. Tudor for taking me in, teaching me a trade, and financing my hacking.

Rio for keeping me within rigid guidelines when the need to burn took over.

There was a long pause on the line before he finally said, “Don't go dark on me, Jamie. ”

“Once, Rio. It happened once.”

“And I nearly lost you.”

“It won't happen again. Later, Rio.”

I found a spot to park, jogging the final distance to the house I wanted, run-down,

blacked-out windows, and cars that came and went at hours too specific to be anything but business.

Meth. A distribution spot. Maybe more. And it was too close to Redcars.

I'd been surveilling it for weeks, cataloging faces, memorizing plates, and recording hours of footage using cameras no one else had noticed.

Police presence was a big fat zero. I guessed they either didn't have the resources or had been paid off, and Drift MC was moving into the space.

Meth and bikers. The place had to go, and tonight was the night to get shit like this done.

It needed to go. Burned from the map.

I pulled the hood up on my sweatshirt as I got nearer, walked the block like I didn't care who saw me, and caught a kid posted up near the stoop—fifteen, maybe.

Scrawny. Nervous energy all over him. Lookout.

Smoking something cheap. He spotted me and squared up, but I was already on the move, my mask up over the lower half of my face.

I grabbed him by the collar, and shoved him back against the chain-link, my hands on his throat.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He trembled. His eyes were wide and panicked, and his voice cracked with something raw as he scrabbled at the hold I had. “Don't hurt me, please.”

It hit me harder than I expected. He was terrified—barely more than a kid, caught up in something bigger than he could handle. I let go of his shirt and took a step back.

“How old are you?”

“F-fourteen.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“My mom... I needed money, I?—”

“Jesus,” I snarled, holding the man to my face and staring into terrified eyes—just a kid. I shoved my free hand into my pocket, yanked out the emergency cash I always had, well over a hundred if not more, then stuffed it in the kid’s shirt.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” he begged.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t hurt kids.” He fell to the ground and crab-walked back. “Run!” When he didn’t move at first, I took a step forward, and he was up on his feet instantly. “Fuck off,” I snarled, “Make better choices!”

He sprinted away, not looking back. Good.

In seconds, I was in the kitchen of 193 Maple Lane South, finding piles of pizza boxes, ashtrays spilling over, a couple of needles on one side.

I’d cased the place long enough to put it at the top of my burn list. There were four men inside, wearing cuts, not making meth with precision and dedication, but throwing shit into containers, cutting it with poisons, selling it low.

They were lucky the whole lot hadn’t gone up already.

Don't worry, guys, I've got this.

I had four dead bad guys, one skull bashed in, three shot with guy one's gun—not as pretty as a knife—but less likely to be investigated.

The kitchen backed onto the garage, and the whole structure was trash—drywall, grease, old plywood.

I slipped on gloves, then picked the lock before dropping a half-can of denatured alcohol in the corner.

I dumped accelerant across the counter and tossed in the bottle of heat gel I'd modified.

It hit hard and combusted on contact with oxygen—the perfect flash.

I grabbed one of the lab's spare gas canisters, cracked the valve, and left it by the stove .

By the time I crossed the street, it was ready to blow.

I ducked into the abandoned duplex, found my cameras—five of them, all mounted on cheap magnetic backs—and began collecting them until only the one pointed squarely at the front of the house remained.

When the explosion came, it was perfect.

A silent bloom of flame in the dark, beautiful in black and white. The building swallowed itself. I watched it all through the lens.

When the sirens grew close, I took the final camera, slid it into my bag, and returned

to the apartment I shared with Rio. When I got upstairs, Rio was waiting, arms crossed, hoodie slung over one shoulder as if he hadn't moved since getting home after getting rid of Mitchell.

"Did Enzo get back to Robbie, okay?" I asked, as if this were any regular night.

"Yes. Jamie, what did you do?" he asked.

At first, I said nothing, only pulled my laptop from the bag, powered it up, and opened the footage. I turned the screen so he could see, and I hit play.

The image flickered. The house. Then the flash. Then fire—wild, bright, silent.

"They were on the burn list, right?" he asked as if it would be any other way. I didn't burn shit for the sake of it.

"At the top," I said, annoyed that Rio had interrupted the show and was questioning me.

"Did you need that second burn, J?" he murmured, pressing a hand to my shoulder.

"You promised me you wouldn't escalate to more than one at a time.

" There was something raw in his voice, as if he'd already played out this conversation in his head too many times.

I caught the flicker of fear in his eyes—not fear of me, but of what might come next if I didn't stop.

Of how far I'd push this, before the fire took something we couldn't get back.

I shook him off, threw him a wide grin. “I never break my promises, asshole. Killing that Mitchell guy was for Robbie, I needed something for me, so it only counts as one.”

Rio didn’t smile back. His mouth was tight, eyes still locked on the screen.

His jaw twitched once, and he blocked the view.

“Jamie, this isn’t a game; two in one night is escalating.

” His voice shook slightly, and he ran a hand through his hair, pacing two tight steps before stopping to face me again.

His jaw was clenched, and he wasn’t just angry.

He was scared. The desperation and fear in his eyes stopped me cold.

“I saw you with Mitchell tonight— you enjoyed it. Jesus, I saw your expression when he died?—”

“He hurt Robbie. He touched my family,” I snarled, my voice raw and rising. “Are you telling me you don’t enjoy getting in the ring and fucking someone over?”

“Jamie—”

“Don’t tell me how I should feel about what we did, or what I needed after!

” I stepped forward, fists clenched at my sides to stop the anger inside me from exploding.

“You think I don’t know how far I’ve gone?

You think I don't carry that? So don't stand there and act like I'm broken for feeling this. For needing something to burn."

"I'm not, but fuck, Jamie... swear to me you can stop. I can't watch you lose yourself again—not after Stockton, not after what you did to that motel. I held your hand while you shook and begged me not to let you burn like that ever again. Please don't make me watch it happen twice.

I shoved past him and hit play again, pretending I hadn't heard. But the tension in the room didn't fade. It thickened, coiled between us like smoke that wouldn't clear.

We all carried something dark. Enzo found his purpose in the obsessive protection of the man he loved. Rio fought his temper, slipping sometimes, hurting before he could pull back. And me? I didn't fight whatever lived inside me. I let it burn and created the fires of Hell on Earth.

I watched the video on repeat.

And sue me if I got off to thoughts of the fire that had consumed Mitchell's house.

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FOUR

Killian

The morning after the fire that had killed John Mitchell, I stepped through the doorway into Redcars and was faced with a welcoming committee.

There was no sign of Logan or his new partner, Gray, which was a relief because Gray being a documentary maker freaked me out.

If he put me in his crosshairs—stand-up member of the community, lawyer, blah blah—then he'd find out about the other parts of my life and that wouldn't hold up to the scrutiny.

Rio Villareal was the first one I saw—a fighter, quiet, stoic.

His posture was relaxed until he noticed me, but I'd seen him fight; he was the kind of man who could strike fast and hard.

From how he stood between me and the rest of the garage, it was clear he was already weighing me up as a threat.

Arms crossed, feet planted—a man braced for impact, reading me like a puzzle he couldn't solve.

That kind of silent tension didn't need fists to speak.

I knew it too well. I'd worn it myself, threading rage through every courtroom exchange and every backroom deal made with men who could end lives without ever lifting a finger.

He looked defensive. Worried. Because he had to know I'd figured it out—he'd been part of what had happened to Mitchell.

And the last time we'd crossed paths, he'd just come back from handling Vinnie with Enzo.

He had too many secrets, and I knew too many of them.

That was why his stare felt more calculated than hostile. This wasn't only anger, he was nervous.

"Enzo. Jamie," Rio called.

Jamie Maddox stepped in, wiping oil from his hands with a rag.

Jaw locked tight, glare loaded for war. He was shorter than me, all fire and fury, opposite in every way—and magnetic as hell.

I couldn't look away. Every line of him was wound tight, one spark from detonation.

He didn't need words. His presence said enough.

And yeah, he was sexy. Blue eyes, sharp edges, and that undercurrent of something broken beneath his skin .

"What do you want?" Jamie asked.

“Easy there, Pretty ,” I drawled, low whistle and a grin to match, just to make him bristle. I didn’t know why I thought of him like that. Sure, he was gorgeous—blond hair, eyes like cut glass—but behind all that shine was something dangerous. Quiet danger. Patient, coiled, waiting.

It made no sense. He was the last person I should’ve been attracted to—volatile, closed-off, an ex-con with a past, complete with trauma all stitched together—but there I was, wanting to push him.

Not because it was smart. Because I needed to know what he looked like coming apart—how the fire in him burned when it wasn’t rage but something else.

I imagined it hot and unyielding in his kiss, reckless in a way that matched everything about him.

And I hated myself for it. For wanting the chaos.

For craving the exact kind of hurt I should’ve known better than to chase.

Not that I’d go there for real. Redcars had been my home once. Tudor didn’t need me fucking up the balance. I respected him too much for that.

I adjusted the cuffs of my suit jacket with the ease of someone long used to walking into rooms full of predators.

This wasn’t the first time I’d stepped into a space like this, and it wouldn’t be the last. These men didn’t know me much past my law degree and a moral compass prone to breaking when it came to Redcars.

But I didn’t miss the looks that were much more than a hatred for lawyers—maybe it was fear?

I couldn't get a read on either of them.

"Heard there was a tragic fire," I said, and with those six words, the energy in the room shifted. I held my hands as if I were scrolling a phone. "Yeah, local businessman John Mitchell, dead in a house fire. Arson suspected." I waited for one of them to crack a smile of satisfaction.

"Shame," Rio murmured.

I gestured at Jamie. "That's your MO, right Pretty?"

Nothing. Rio stoic, Jamie silent. Tough crowd.

"Okay, then, we got enough from Robbie's data for tomorrow's headlines to shift from tragic arson to 'murdered businessman with ties to organized crime.'"

"So job done," I widened my arms, stepping closer to Jamie, almost within touching distance. "Group hug?"

Jamie took half a step back before reining himself in. "Touch me, and I'll kill you."

His whole body buzzed like a live wire, every nerve sharp and ready to snap.

There was a current between us, a charge that made the air taste like static.

He wasn't loud, didn't need to be. That threat, that promise of violence, sat under the surface—quiet, deliberate, simmering. It made my skin prickle.

And fuck, it made him hot.

That tension in his stance, the tight coil of restraint in every movement—he was

precision wrapped around a fuse, and I wanted to see what happened when it blew. Not smart. Not safe. But Jesus, he was the danger that got under my skin. Not my type at all. And yet, I couldn't stop watching him.

Fucking an ex con would mess with my straight-laced lawyer cover, which had taken years to build. A bad decision, yes, but a one-and-done taste would be nice.

I removed my jacket and placed my briefcase on a familiar stack of tires.

“Who wants to start?”

“Start what?” Enzo asked as he joined us and we exchanged nods as Rio pressed a button to roll down the shutter doors.

“What happened last night?”

“Why do you need to know? I thought you wanted plausible deniability, Mr. Lawyer,” Jamie said with enough sarcasm to make the air sting.

I ignored him, but secretly enjoyed that flicker of personality slipping through his mask. Just a spark—but it made him real in a way that caught me off guard.

“Did he give up the names of people he answered to.”

Rio, Enzo, and Jamie exchanged brief glances—silent, guarded, as if they were about to clam up—and I wasn't about to let that happen. Not when they'd made me part of this by pulling me in.

“Back the fuck off, Suit—we got this,” Jamie said, and no one corrected him.

“Awww, you gave me a nickname, Pretty ? I like it.”

Jamie rolled his eyes with a scoff, muttering something that sounded a lot like “prick,” but there was heat in it.

I caught the flash of something he didn’t mean to show—something tangled and charged.

I’d gotten Caleb to dig into all the people at Redcars, watching out for Tudor, and for Jamie, there was a sealed juvenile record that Caleb had cracked.

Parents buried in an unmarked grave. Then, the murder of an uncle and psychological jargon pretending to diagnose Jamie as if he were a case study, as if any label could ever contain someone like him.

He was an intriguing fucking maze, all dead ends and razor wire, and the more I learned, the more I wanted in.

I chuckled low in my throat, unable to help it. “God, you’re fun when you’re mad, Pretty.”

Jamie stepped forward then. “I swear?—”

“Hi, Killian,” Robbie joined us then, and I blinked—the surgery he’d had was enough for me to take a second look, enough to fool most people. “Is everything okay,” he asked and smiled as Enzo collected him under his arm and held him close.

“Hi, Robbie,” I said. “How are you doing? I love the new face.”

I turned up the charm to see if I could get a reaction, and he blushed—so damn cute I couldn’t help but stare. Enzo growled under his breath.

“Down boy,” I snarked, shooting him a grin, but it wasn’t only Enzo looking ready to

snap. Jamie stepped between us, all sharp edges and stormy eyes. “Getting jealous of me checking out other guys, Pretty?” I deadpanned, reaching out to chuck him under the chin.

He didn’t flinch. Didn’t jerk away.

Just let me touch him.

His skin was baby soft, like expensive lotion and sin, and for one stupid moment, I forgot how dangerous he was.

I let my hand drift, fingers brushing along his jaw, thumb lingering a breath too long at the edge of his lower lip.

His mouth parted enough to tempt, and that was when I knew I’d pushed it too far.

His hand came up fast— crack! —knocking mine away like I’d burned him.

The look in his eyes was all fire and ice.

“Bold of you to assume it’s jealousy and not me fitting you for a coffin,” he said coolly.

“Flirting and threats in the same breath. You really know how to keep a guy interested,” I smirked.

Jamie snorted. “The day I flirt with you is the day Hell freezes over, and I stop lighting matches.”

I leaned in close enough to make him twitch. “Well, if you ever get cold, I’ll keep you warm, sweetheart.”

Jamie's eyes narrowed, a flash of irritation blooming into something almost predatory.

His tongue darted out to wet his lower lip—slow and deliberate, as if he knew exactly what he was doing.

A flicker of unconscious temptation? No.

This was intentional. Teasing. My breath hitched.

All I could think about was what he'd taste like, how he'd sound if I pushed him against a wall and kissed the fight right out of him .

“You wanna take whatever this is, outside?” Rio's voice was dry and unimpressed from behind us.

“Outside?” Jamie raised an eyebrow. “We're killing him. Can I go first?”

I snorted, couldn't help it. “Nice to know I'm on your kill list, Pretty.”

Jamie's glare could've stopped traffic.

Rio rolled his eyes, “the fuck is going on?”

“So, names?” I asked Rio, ignoring Jamie's mumbled, “And I said we've got this,” as if I hadn't heard it the first time.

“We need to take a beat on this, J,” Rio said first, low and even.

Jamie's jaw tensed. “Rio?—”

“Too much too soon,” Rio said, and Jamie subsided.

The shift was instant. No argument, no protest—just that tight flare of frustration in Jamie’s eyes before he swallowed it. That kind of obedience wasn’t fear or submission. It was history. Trust, maybe. Something deep. And I hated how easily Rio could calm him with a look and a few words.

For a second, I wondered if they’d ever been a thing. There was something about how Rio touched him—firm but not forceful, as if he knew how to defuse him without lighting the fuse further. And the way Jamie reacted... Respect. Familiarity. Longing?

Or maybe I was projecting. Because if I had that kind of influence over Jamie, I wouldn’t waste it on calming him down.

“First name is Marcus Kessler,” Rio said.

“Short, blond, always angry, and so much aftershave,” Robbie scratched his arms at the sense memory. “He liked to... he watched, and he would cut me.”

Enzo held him close, and Robbie closed his eyes.

“Kessler is a billionaire,” I said. “Invisible when it matters. Difficult to pin that fucker down.” He was on the list, but way down past the ones we could get to. It looked as if we would be pushing him up if he were in any way responsible for what had happened to Robbie.

“Second is Edward Lassiter.”

“Gruff voice, tall, dark hair, skinny, old,” Robbie said, his voice steadier, “He used to push things inside me, tear me up, he’d laugh and he would...” He stopped, his voice

choked.

“I’ve crossed paths with Lassiter before,” I said into the sudden silence, keeping it vague.

“District of Nevada, Federal prosecutor, takes on high-profile trafficking cases. Vegas-based. We’ve worked in parallel before, but not recently.

” I kept my expression neutral, but Jamie was already watching me as if he knew I was only giving half the story.

There’d been whispers after the one case I’d worked with him.

Nights I couldn’t sleep because I kept playing over and over what we’d done.

A file that had disappeared too fast. I didn’t want to believe Lassiter could be worse than I’d thought. But fuck.

I knew Lassiter—knew him well enough that his name on this list made me want to vomit. He wasn’t just a name in a file; he was someone my team had flagged months ago on much lesser issues than trafficking, abuse, and what else he had his hands into. But I couldn’t say that here, not yet.

Jamie’s eyes narrowed, cool and dissecting. He looked at me as if he could peel me open and catalog the truth in my lies. It made me shift where I stood, my throat dry. He didn’t trust me—and damn it, he was right not to.

“I’ll dig into both names.”

“I find them, I kill them, Robbie is safe from ever being found,” Jamie blasted, his expression murderous, his fingers flexing as if he were already holding a lighter. He

wanted fire and vengeance, and only Enzo's steadiness restrained him. I was almost grateful for it .

"Robbie is safe here with us," Enzo said.

"He won't be safe until every last one of them is dead!" Jamie snarled.

Rio stepped between him and Enzo, who dropped his hold on Robbie and clenched his fists.

"Settle down, Jamie," Rio said, placing a steadying hand on his arm.

"Yeah, settle down, Pretty ," I added because he was beautiful when he was all fired up.

"Fuck you," Jamie snapped, his voice a razor-edged growl.

"Fuck you too," I shot back, all bite and zero apology.

I wanted his anger, and I saw Rio's hand still on him, fingers curled lightly around Jamie's arm, and something sharp and possessive flared in my chest. I didn't like it.

Didn't like Rio touching him. God knows why, but I wanted it to be me with my hands on Jamie.

What the actual hell? I blinked, heart kicking into overdrive.

Lassiter's name short-circuited my brain, sent warning bells clanging loud enough to drown out reason.

That had to be why some deep, reckless part of me suddenly wanted to stake a

claim—because nothing else explained why my instincts veered from legal strategy to territorial craving.

“They need to die,” he repeated. Murderous .

I fought the urge to step into his space and confront him, chest to chest, to see how far I could push before he bit. To inhale his scent—smoke, oil, and something sweet beneath it all. Maybe grab him by the collar and kiss the anger out of him.

“No. More. Killing.” I snapped, and then, held up a hand when Jamie began to talk.
“Not yet.”

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FIVE

Jamie

I folded my arms tight across my chest. Not because I needed to look tough—though fuck if that wasn't part of it—but because it was the only thing holding me together. Killian's eyes were on me again, calm and cold, as if he were reading me and making notes. I hated it. Hated him.

Liar.

I hated that spark when he stepped too close and tilted my chin as if he owned me.

I hated that my body reacted as badly as when I craved the burn.

I was weak enough to imagine dropping to my knees for him after the fire was gone, still high on adrenaline and ash.

And that scared the ever-loving shit out of me.

He stepped closer again, and I held my ground. Not flinching. Not giving him the satisfaction. But the air between us was electric and sharp, like the moment before a fire took hold. I hated that I wanted to lean into him. Just for a second. Just to see if his touch burned hotter than fire.

“Okay, so no killing yet? But, what do we do instead? How do they pay?” Rio's voice cut through the noise.

“Simple. We want the entire network,” Killian said, and I wanted to punch that calm out of his voice. “You want Robbie to be truly safe? Then, we need to take down as much as we can. Dismantle the whole thing.”

“And we do that how?” Rio asked, glancing pointedly at me and Enzo. “There are just three of us.”

“Four,” Robbie said and straightened up.

He still looked fragile, but there was a sharpness to him now, a core of something forged in fire instead of broken by it.

He stood taller, straighter—not much, but enough that it made me pause.

The shadows in his eyes hadn’t gone; they hovered like ghosts behind glass, but there was something new there, something solid.

He wasn’t just surviving anymore—he was stepping forward.

Enzo held him close; arms wrapped around him like a shield.

I didn’t hate it, not really. I couldn’t understand it.

That kind of gentleness—offering me safety like it was second nature—felt impossible.

Foreign. A code I’d never learned to crack.

I watched Enzo steady Robbie, and for the briefest moment, I wondered what it would be like to be that for someone.

But even as the thought formed, I knew the truth: I wouldn't know where to begin.

"Four," Killian agreed without dismissing Robbie, then checked behind him. "No, Logan?"

"In San Diego with Gray," Rio said. "He stays out of this."

"Agreed," Enzo said.

"This isn't a quick job," Killian said. "If Mitchell gave up two names, what did he say they did? Did he work for them? Did they work for him? Someone talk to me."

Everyone was quiet—no one wanted to explain what Lassiter and Kessler had done.

Robbie cleared his throat. "When business meetings were at the house, I was the party favor for two men and was expected to perform and learn what secrets they had so Mitchell could add to his intel on them. He was stealing millions from them, and I knew it, and I was expected to smile and play the part of a toy they could hurt. Mitchell watched. Every time. Sometimes... he picked who went first. They would talk about business like I wasn't there, movements of drugs, guns, percentages...

people... kids. I had to remember it all."

He lifted a hand and brushed his fingers behind his ear, revealing a thin scar I hadn't noticed before.

"Lassiter held me while..." His voice broke, and he couldn't finish.

Enzo tightened his arms around him, pulling him close as if he could absorb the pain.

Robbie leaned into it, but his hands shook.

“I need to do something,” I blurted, itching to kill both of them, and Rio’s eyes widened. He knew what I meant—I needed action rather than words.

Killian held up a hand. He was pale, but his eyes were emotionless, and his voice was steady as if nothing Robbie had said affected him. Was he made of stone?

He cleared his throat. “Networks like this have layers and redundancies. These two names, Kessler and Lassiter, will be just the surface. I need to take this to my team and work out a game plan before you go anywhere near them.”

“No!” The word left me before I could stop it.

I slammed my fist on the bench, tools jumping in protest. “While we’re sitting around talking, Kessler and Lassiter are doing God knows what to other people.

” A spike of heat flared in my chest before I locked it down.

My temper, buried under layers of cold strategy and practiced calm, reared its head with teeth bared—an old companion I kept caged, because the moment I let it out, I stopped being useful and all I wanted to do was burn.

He clenched his jaw—just a flicker—but I saw it.

“You think I don’t know that?” Killian stepped in again, bringing that smell of expensive cologne, overlaid with the memory of ash. “But if we move too fast, we’ll take down two men and leave a hundred more to carry on. Is that what you want?”

Oh, that was an easy question. “What I want? I want to watch them both burn. Slow. Loud. Screaming. Knowing this was about what they’d done to.

..” I couldn’t drag Robbie’s name into this—not when the rage boiling in me was

mine alone.

This fury wasn't his burden to bear. My thirst to erase anyone who hurt the vulnerable, to scorch the earth beneath their feet—that was all me. “Innocents,” I finished.

And I fucking meant it. Every twisted, gut-deep word. I wanted their world to catch fire with them inside it. I wanted to hear them beg, to see the terror in their eyes as they realized there was no escape. For Robbie, I wanted more than justice—I wanted vengeance, visceral and scorching and final.

“They will,” he murmured, his voice lowering to something intimate and dangerous. As if he was promising me damnation and deliverance in the same breath. “But like Mitchell, when you strike, you do it clean. Surgical. No mess. Nothing leading back to my team.”

I should've walked away right then. Should've shoved aside the weird weight of his voice, the way it burrowed under my skin like a hook.

But I didn't. I stood there, watching him—the ice in his eyes, the chill in every word—and wondered how deep the frost went.

I didn't trust Killian, not even a little.

But God help me, some reckless part of me wanted to see that control shatter.

Wanted to be the one to make it break, to light a fire under all that cold until he burned, until he was unraveling and screaming.

And worse—twisted and wrong—I could feel my body reacting in ways it shouldn't.

That control, that power in his voice, was lighting something up inside me, and I hated that I wanted more.

My thoughts were chaos. Anger, fire, violence, grief, confusion—and now desire?

My gut clenched, a flicker of heat crawling under my skin that had nothing to do with fury and everything to do with how he stood so calm and sure, as if nothing could touch him.

How could I want him when I hated him? Why did I want to know what he tasted like?

Would he be cold, or would fire be hidden beneath all that ice?

Would he fight me in bed or let me pin him?

Or better—take control and ruin me from the inside out?

I flinched away from it, disgusted with myself.

This wasn't the time, the place—he wasn't the person.

I hated that those thoughts had even found room in my head.

But once they were there, they were hard to shake.

What the hell was wrong with me?

“Killian's right, J. We need to be smart,” Rio said, calm but insistent—the tone he used when he was trying to stop me from doing something reckless. I bristled anyway. He wasn't wrong, but I hated being told what to do. “Tell him about the

other files.”

My spine went rigid. Killian turned that analytical stare on me, slicing through my barriers as if they were nothing. “What other files?”

Damn it. I wanted to comb through the files first, map out my own plan for how to take those two down. That intel was power, and I hadn’t been ready to hand it over—not yet. Of course, eventually, I’d give Killian and his cryptic team a copy. Just not before I took what I needed .

“He pulled data from Mitchell’s computer,” Rio added. “Tell him, J.”

Killian’s eyes narrowed slightly. I clamped my mouth shut. I wasn’t about to tell him the full truth—not about the scripts I’d used, or how easily I’d slipped back into a skillset I’d buried years ago. That part of me wasn’t for public display. Definitely not for someone like him.

“Files.”

“Yep.”

“Send them to me.”

No .

Then I forced a nod. “Sure,” I said instead.

Killian grabbed a card from his case. “Encrypted upload,” he said and passed it to me. “Do you know how to use that?”

I flicked a glance at the card. “Yep.”

“Upload it all, and my team will dissect every byte.” Killian said, as if he owned the room. As if he could dictate how this went. I wanted to argue—God, I needed to—but Rio stepped in again, a steady hand to calm the rising firestorm in me.

“If there’s anything on there about Robbie, I want it gone,” Enzo said.

“That’s our priority.” The slick lawyer veneer cracked for a split second, revealing something that might’ve been compassion.

Then it was gone, replaced by steel. “But on the rest of it, we move with precision,” he said.

“These people aren’t just criminals. They’re connected, protected, and insulated by power and money. We rush in, and they vanish.”

“So what’s the plan?” Rio asked.

“My team maps the network,” Killian replied and his eyes found mine again, and fuck, it was like being pinned under a spotlight.

“I understand you want to ignite a war, Pretty, but we can’t go in guns blazing.

So leave it to us to find their weak points, and stay out of it until we give you permission to get in there. ”

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“‘Permission’?” I echoed, my voice dripping with disbelief and fury. I stepped into his space, deliberately closing the distance, forcing him to feel the heat radiating off me. “You think I need your permission to act? You think I’ll sit on my hands like some obedient dog while monsters walk free?”

He smiled, the edges of his mouth cutting like a knife. “No. But once we’ve got proof on as many of them as possible, we decide how this ends. And if it’s you lighting the match, Pretty—then you set their world on fire.”

The air shifted. Even Enzo was quiet now. Robbie stared as if he didn’t recognize Killian anymore. Welcome to the club. It was as if he didn’t care what I did or how I did it. Almost as if he approved. And that confused the hell out of me.

“You’d do that?” Robbie asked, voice barely audible. “You’d let Jamie... I mean, you’d help us eliminate them.”

“I’m not here because I love the smell of motor oil,” Killian said. “I’m here because what happened to you—what’s happening to other kids, women, the undocumented, the unhoused—that doesn’t get to stand. Not on my watch.”

I stared at him. Trying to reconcile the tailored suit with the fire in his voice. Didn’t add up. The room went quiet. “Didn’t take you for a crusader,” I finally said.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Pretty.”

“Stop calling me that,” I growled. And meant it. Except, maybe I didn’t.

He turned from me and spoke to Rio. “I need those files. All of them. Make sure he sends them to me”

I bristled. No one was in charge of me.

Well, maybe Rio was the exception. His rigid rules didn’t just keep me in check—they sharpened me. Turned chaos into precision. Made me better at the one thing I was already deadly at .

“How long until we get to take them out?” I asked because I needed to count down the days.

Killian shrugged. “At least two weeks to map it out. Maybe longer.”

“That’s too long,” I snapped. I couldn’t keep still. Started pacing, the lighter in my hand, flame flickering, daring it to burn me. “The minute they think they’re compromised, they’ll scatter.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Killian sounded frustrated. “But rush this, and we end up with two dead men and a network that goes underground. Then, good luck finding them again.”

“This is bullshit,” I snapped.

“Jamie,” Rio said, a warning in his voice.

I looked at Robbie. At the scar ringing his neck, recalling the day he arrived. Then back to Killian, who stared at me as if he knew my decision.

“Fine,” I bit out, snapping the lighter closed like a final word.

“But if anything happens to anyone else while we’re being patient, Suit, it’s on you.

” I instantly regretted moving so close.

Killian was solid and close enough to touch if I wanted.

He didn’t flinch. Just stared, as though he wanted to be challenged.

“I know.”

“But when my team is done, when you want to burn the whole thing down, I can show you exactly where to light the match.”

Show me where to light the match? I wanted to deck him.

Or kiss him. No—definitely deck him. But the more he spoke, the more my fury dimmed enough to see the brutal clarity in his logic.

And hell, that made it worse. Killian’s voice was all smooth control.

But underneath, I caught a glimpse of something darker—danger in a tailored suit, a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. What the fuck was he really playing at?

“What about the money Robbie hid?” Rio asked.

Killian leaned forward slightly. Not enough to be obvious, but I caught it—the shift in posture, the focus in his gaze.

He was wearing a mask, and something about that look irritated the hell out of me.

But it also lit something low in my gut.

I couldn't tell if I wanted to punch that smug expression or pull him closer to see if anything under his armor could burn.

"Already taken out," he said. "And transferred out to charities."

"How much did you keep?" I asked,

Killian's eyes flicked from one of us to the next. "Enough to cover my team," he finally offered.

"Profiting off other people's misery."

Killian met my stare, his silver eyes unflinching, although I swear there was something there—a trace of temper, maybe. "You've made up your mind about me already, haven't you, Pretty?"

The way he called me that made it feel like both a slur and a caress—each syllable edged with something sharp, intimate, dangerous. I couldn't decide which unsettled me more.

"It's blood money," I replied, keeping my voice steady despite the heat crawling up my neck.

Killian's smile widened, all teeth and no warmth. "Blood money that's building schools and hospitals instead of sitting in offshore accounts. But please, my pretty pyromaniac murderer, tell me more about the view from your moral high ground."

I leaned forward to match Killian's posture. Two could play at being clever. "Must be nice, counselor, to sleep at night knowing your bank account grows every time someone's life falls apart."

Killian didn't flinch. If anything, he seemed amused by my anger, which only stoked it further. He loosened his tie—a calculated move, I was sure. Everything about him seemed calculated. I flicked my lighter, let the small flame sear my finger enough to ground me, waiting for him to answer.

“You know what I find fascinating?” he asked, voice low. “How quick people are to judge what they don't understand.” He reached over and caught my wrist, his thumb pressing my pulse point. I fought the urge to jerk away. “The flame suits you.”

I yanked my hand back. “Don't touch me.”

Killian leaned back again, studying me. “Your file doesn't do you justice, Pretty.”

My blood turned to ice. “You have a file on me?” How much did he know? Apart from the obvious, of course, that was all a matter of record. But the sealed Juvie stuff? The hacking?

“I have files on everyone in this room,” Killian said, his eyes locked on mine. “Yours was... fascinating reading.”

“If you've got a file,” I replied, my tone flat, “and you still call me a pyromaniac, then you didn't read it properly.”

Killian's jaw twitched, but he didn't interrupt. So I kept going.

“According to my release notes from the asylum, and I quote: Subject Jamie Maddox sets fires to regain control, to silence intrusive thoughts, and sometimes out of desperation or righteous vengeance.” I paused.

“They concluded that I lean closer to arsonist than pyromaniac, but with deeply emotional and compulsive undertones due to insanely heavy childhood abuse. If

you're going to throw labels around, counselor, try using the right ones. ”

“You weren’t in a fucking asylum,” Killian corrected, his voice suddenly sharp. “It was a forensic psychiatric facility.”

“Asylum, facility, whatever,” I smiled. “Are you going to add that correction to my notes?”

“I’m not adding shit to your?—”

“Enough!” Rio shouted. “We’re getting off track. The job?—”

Killian took a step back from me, then he spoke. “The job requires you to back off and trust me. I don’t expect any of you to trust me immediately. But I do expect professionalism because it’s my team that’s going to be exposed if one of you goes off burning shit down.” He was judging me .

“I don’t burn without reason.”

“Your reason being what, exactly?”

“You’ve got my notes, you tell me.”

He huffed. “Is it that little voice in your head that says ‘this looks flammable’?” Killian’s words were sharp, but his tone remained infuriatingly even.

I will kill him.

Rio stepped between us. “Both of you, enough.”

I crossed my arms, my lighter still warm in my palm. “You don’t get this done quick,

or you fuck us over, and I promise you'll be the first thing to burn."

He raised an eyebrow. "Noted."

"Lassiter dies screaming, Killian. Don't stand in the way."

He shrugged then. "Believe me, I won't."

And God help me, I hated how much I was drawn to how he didn't back down. I recognized a control that mirrored my own, a survival instinct honed razor-sharp. And maybe it should have pissed me off, seeing it reflected in him like that. But instead, it unsettled me.

What would happen if his mask cracked?

I wanted to show him the absolute chaos in me, terrify him, put him in his place.

But somewhere beneath the need to kill the fucker, was a darker thought I hadn't let myself examine too closely: what if I didn't kill him?

What if he saw all of me—the sharp edges, the heat, the mess—and didn't flinch?

I caught myself staring too long, too intently.

Tracking the line of his jaw, the shift in his shoulders, the glint in his pale silver eyes that never quite matched the smile on his lips.

I was disgusted at the twist low in my gut.

I didn't want to feel lust. Didn't want to feel anything.

But there it was, curling hot and wrong under my skin.

And hell, I didn't want to be the kind of fool who got caught watching the flames and wondering how it might feel to step into it.

But I was. And I hated that, too. And if he thought he could lie to our faces with that half-smile and silk voice? Then he didn't know me at all.

"Later, Pretty," Killian said, and glanced back once before disappearing through the door. I took a step to follow him, almost called out, but instead, I watched the arrogant, unreadable bastard go and loathed how much space he took up in my head.

And I hated that he hadn't told me I couldn't burn down Lassiter and Kessler's lives. It was as if he didn't care what I did—or worse, that he approved. That kind of tacit permission? It messed with my head in ways I wasn't ready to unpack.

The second Killian had gone, and Enzo had taken Robbie upstairs, Rio turned on me as if a switch had flipped.

"You need to let Killian figure things out," he said, tone low but sharp.

"Sure," I said, a lie so smooth it didn't catch in my throat.

Because those files I'd pulled from Mitchell's place?

I'd already started running encryption and plotting networks.

Killian's team would receive the files, and I'd already decided to send them some of the files that were already open—I had no idea if Killian's tech guy was any good.

Lassiter was my focus—it was he who had the most intel I could collate—and I

wouldn't take a direct shot at him, but I could still apply pressure. Let him feel hunted. Let paranoia creep in. It'd be a start if I could make him even a fraction as terrified as Robbie had been. Then, Kessler next.

Rio stepped closer, more serious than I'd seen him since what had happened in Stockton. "I mean it, Jamie. Tell me if you need to burn, and I'll stand with you. But not with these guys. Not now."

I didn't answer at first. The fire was coiled tight under my skin, humming as if it were alive. Triggers were everywhere—stress, memory, shame, injustice. The heat in my chest right now? Prime kindling.

I clasped his hand and pressed it over my heart. He was my brother in all but name. "I promise I won't touch Kessler and Lassiter until you tell me it's okay."

It wasn't much. But it was all the truth I had to give.

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SIX

Killian

The engine purred—too smooth, too quiet for how loud my head was screaming.

I gripped the leather-bound steering wheel of the Audi as though it was the only thing anchoring me to the here and now.

Everything about the car was a study in precision.

Heated seats, perfect stitching on cream leather, digital console glowing like a goddamn cockpit. It was sleek, powerful, and expensive.

It was proof. Of who I'd become and what I'd survived.

And still, my breath hitched. I'd worked for Lassiter once, and had never suspected he was anything but an overzealous federal prosecutor. How could we not have known ?

I didn't remember pulling away from Redcars.

The drive blurred past me, as if I'd been on autopilot.

What jolted me back to the present was the crunch of tires over cracked concrete, the kind that hadn't seen a repair crew in over a decade.

I eased the car to a stop and looked around.

A ruined Blockbuster with boarded-up windows had a placard on the fence declaring it part of a regeneration project, as if that somehow made it less dead.

I left the engine running. The warmth from the heated seats coiled around my spine, but it couldn't touch the chill in my chest. I was a block of ice. Frozen from the inside out.

What Robbie had revealed back at Redcars cracked something open in me. I hadn't seen it coming. Didn't want to feel it. But his words had burrowed in, slow and merciless. And now, they were dragging memories up from places I'd locked tight.

The way some clients smiled, as if they owned me, the second the money hit.

Tuition didn't pay itself. Rent didn't wait.

Groceries didn't appear like magic. The right connections wouldn't happen if the people I tried to ingratiate myself with knew there was a street rat with a past sitting opposite them.

I'd never been ashamed of the sex.

But there were names that I'd never say out loud— men who wanted silence and who paid for obedience but didn't want a person, just a thing. And I'd given them what they wanted. I smiled through it. Played the game. Got what I needed even if it left scars. Some shallow. Some still bleeding inside.

My hands tightened on the wheel. I was shaking.

"Stop it," I muttered, low and sharp.

I forced my eyes shut and breathed deep. Made myself think of something else—someone else.

Jamie.

Beautiful, infuriating Jamie. All edges and heat and danger.

He made me want things. There was something magnetic about how Jamie thought—no grey, no compromise—and a razor-sharp conviction that bad people deserved bad endings, especially if it meant shielding the ones he cared about.

It was brutal, maybe, but honest. Clean. And God, I envied that clarity.

I exhaled. Still shaking. But breathing again.

I turned off the engine. Let the silence rush in.

What would it be like to fuck Jamie? To strip away all the bullshit and feel —him, me, the burn between us.

To pin him down, feel the fight in him, the surrender.

Or for him to flip the script, take control, drag every hidden nerve out of me.

That idea made my skin burn hotter than shame ever could .

I groaned and dropped my head to the wheel, leather cool against my forehead. This was ridiculous. Dangerous. I was Killian McKendrick, and I didn't do distractions. I didn't indulge.

But the thoughts didn't fade. They lingered in my bloodstream, thick and hot and

wrong in the best way.

I sat there for another long breath, then forced myself to head for my office, walking straight through and into the Cave. Caleb was at the wall removing pictures of Mitchell, Sonya next to him, taking the pins as he handed them to her.

“Leave that on there,” I said, and Caleb didn’t argue, pinning it back. “And I want Lassiter’s picture up front and center.”

Caleb frowned. “Federal Prosecutor Lassiter? You’re bumping him to the top of the list? He’s low-level.”

“Nope, top of the list. He and Marcus Kessler.”

The room fell into stunned silence. Caleb blinked as if he hadn’t heard right, and even Sonya froze with a pin halfway to the board.

“Kessler?” she repeated, her voice sharp with disbelief.

The name hit like a punch, the kind that made your gut clench and your mind reel.

For a moment, no one moved, the weight of it dragging the air down thick between us.

“Billionaire, social media, owns half the world, Kessler?”

“Yep.”

“That’s gonna be difficult,” Caleb said. “Kessler, I mean.”

“I know. So, we go in hard on Lassiter and see what shakes out.”

“Are these the names you got from your meeting at Redcars?” Caleb asked, and he exchanged a confused glance with Sonya.

I didn’t question how Caleb knew where I’d been; I think he always knew where Levi, Sonya, and I were at all times. He probably knew I’d stopped at a freaking Blockbuster to have a meltdown.

“They were Mitchell’s ‘business associates’ that he reported to, and he would give them Robbie as a gift when they talked business.

They hurt Robbie; they nearly fucking killed him.

There’s more than just the money we took from Mitchell’s accounts; there are links to trafficking on files that Redcars are sending over.

” I regretted we hadn’t connected the dots way back on the only case I’d worked with him.

We’d been building a slow, deliberate case against Lassiter for over a year, but it was admin shit.

Contracts with too many loopholes. Real estate that didn’t line up.

Money redirected overseas. It all reeked of someone who knew how to stay within the lines.

Polished crime, buried under layers of legality and offshore accounts.

He was not the only one abusing power; he was just another in a long, ugly line.

But now, after what we’d learned, he wasn’t only another name.

And billionaire tech giant, Kessler, who hadn't even been on our radar, was suddenly right up there beside him at the top of the list. He was a fortress—so wealthy, so deeply connected, he was nearly untouchable.

Despite his public image—cutting-edge space tech, next-gen fusion batteries, and a PR-friendly relationship with government leaders—he was someone we watched from afar.

Too big, too protected for our small unit to touch.

He had a private army of hackers wiping his trail, and he controlled a colossal server farm that funneled a chunk of the country's internet traffic.

He was top of our wish list, but we'd need more to get anywhere near him.

Lassiter was our primary focus, and who knew, something might emerge from our actions regarding Lassiter that could provide more information on Kessler.

What Robbie remembered—the fragments he recited with that blank, clinical detachment—had rewired how I saw our one solo dealing with federal prosecutor Lassiter.

What I heard wasn't that he was part of some white-collar scheme.

It was filth. Flesh. The list was endless, men buying boys, women auctioned off in back rooms. Debt paid in bruises.

Control bought with silence. Everything off-grid.

No emails. No bank transfers. All in Robbie's head, run by Mitchell.

Nothing that could be traced, because it wasn't meant to be seen—it was meant to be felt .

Pain instead of paper. That was how they kept it hidden.

“Files are coming in,” Caleb said, frowning at the screen. The fuck?” He peered closer, pausing one screen. “Okay, this... this is weird.”

“What is?” I asked, stepping closer.

“DaemonRaze. But that can't be right.” He glanced up at me expectantly, as if I might know what he was talking about, and I waved for him to continue, with an added roll of my eyes.

“DaemonRaze was a gamer, a hacker, huge when I was getting started. One of the names people respected . Ethical hacks, leaks with purpose, whistleblowing-level shit. Then nothing for years. And now he's back and working with some lowlife asshole like Mitchell?

That's not the guy I remember. He had a code.

He gave a damn. I looked up to him—not like a hero or anything, given that we started doing our thing around the same time—but still... I expected better. ”

“Show me where his name is on this.”

“Hmmm,” Caleb muttered, eyes flicking across multiple screens as he opened and closed tabs with the kind of speed that looked like sleight of hand. Windows stacked, collapsed, reopened. Lines of code blurred past before he froze, sat back slowly, and stared.

“Oh wait. No. DaemonRaze’s code is embedded in files Mitchell had stashed on a deep server.

The name isn’t screaming from the metadata, but it’s here.

Shit...” He clicked some more. “This is sloppy work. This was taken from Mitchell, then rerouted through DaemonRaze’s systems to get to us.

Thank fuck he’s not turned to the dark side. ”

“It can’t have come from a hacker. Enzo said Jamie was sending these files using your encrypted software.”

“Nope,” Caleb popped the P. “They arrived directly, already encrypted. Oohh...” He sat forward. “Does this mean Jamie is DaemonRaze?”

“He can’t be. He was locked up for murder , not hacking, and he’s a mechanic. You keep saying how fast things change, so how would he have kept up when he was locked away?”

“True,” Caleb murmured. “But I’m adding it to my list of things to research. ”

Still, doubt itched at the back of my mind even as I said it.

He wasn’t like Rio or Enzo. Not only in the killing-people-without-blinking way; though, that was part of it.

There was something else. An edge. An intensity.

He didn’t look at me—he saw right through me.

Every movement in a room, every shift in body language.

When he wasn't locked in that all-consuming need for revenge, there was a precision to him, as if his mind was constantly assessing threats.

"I'll work it out," Caleb said, fingers flying. Then he froze—completely. The blood drained from his face.

"No," he whispered. A beat of silence. Then, he swore under his breath and shoved himself away from the desk as if the keyboard had burned him. "Have you seen what's on here?"

"Not yet," I said.

"What is it?" Sonya asked, stepping behind him. She stopped short, lifting her hand to her mouth as files began flashing across the screen, line after line, projected onto the wall. Then, the photos started. One after another.

"Killian..." she murmured. "Have you seen this..."

Image after image. Children. Women. Men.

Eyes blank. Faces hollow. No names—just numbers.

Shipping manifests. Dates. Routes. Ledgers of drugs and guns and flesh, detailed down to the last gram and heartbeat.

The weapons were bad. The drugs were worse.

But it was the people who stopped me. Each photo and file proved the kind of crime you didn't come back from.

And it was all here. Neat. Documented. Organized.

I felt sick.

Sick to my soul. But turning away was wrong. I owed these people more than that; if I couldn't save them, the least I could do was see them.

I pulled Robbie's notebook from my coat and flipped through it with shaking fingers.

"I have this as well." My voice came out rough.

His notes were frantic, raw. Some of the pages were barely legible, the ink smeared as if he'd been crying when he wrote.

One line had been underlined so many times the paper had torn.

I tore it out and dropped it next to Caleb, who was still frozen, pale and staring, his jaw locked as if he were trying not to be sick.

"This isn't just blackmail, or money laundering, or dirt on powerful people," I said. My throat was tight. "This is more than we thought. This is Hell."

The board was filling up.

Strings of red, yellow, and black connected names, photos, and fragments of information, a spider's web of decay stretching wider with every lead.

We didn't have much on Kessler—according to Caleb, he was a ghost with a sealed financial portfolio and no digital footprint worth a damn.

We'd have to take him down the old-fashioned way, through Levi and his fellow

cops.

However, we had more than enough on Lassiter to start examining his side hustles.

Enough to start pulling threads, digging into the shadows he operated in.

So that was where we started.

And from Lassiter, the rot spread fast.

We uncovered connections to shell companies, fake charities, real estate fronts, and offshore accounts that facilitated a complex web of money laundering.

But it wasn't numbers and transactions. It was people .

We traced names from Lassiter to private security contractors, unlicensed clinics, and encrypted networks involved in trafficking more than weapons.

We followed his connections like blood trails, and the deeper we went, the clearer it became. We might not have had dirt on the billionaire, Kessler, but for Lassiter, we had trails running the gamut from trafficking to laundering to blackmail .

Lassiter. Friend of the undocumented, on the board of several charities. A smile hiding the devil inside.

The man now at the top of our list needed to be taken down.

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SEVEN

Jamie

Back at the apartment, I sat in the armchair, my laptop open, scrolling the chaotic mess of transactions, fake accounts, and offshore names Mitchell controlled.

I tried to focus on the trails I was finding, but everything inside me buzzed as though I'd mainlined adrenaline.

Killian had a point—I knew he did. I needed to back off and let other people finesse their way through the minefield of connections.

But my skin felt too tight, every part of me restless and wired.

And that itch, that constant itch, I couldn't ignore.

I wanted to make Kessler and Lassiter squirm.

One of the bottom feeders for cash both men benefited from, whatever they had going on, was a club called The Bonehook, run by RP, who I soon found out was Ricardo Price, a small-time player who'd been paying Mitchell like clockwork.

The accounts showed steady payments up the ladder toward Lassiter, but there was no apparent connection to Kessler.

So Lassiter was my first target.

Not him, but the world that kept him rich.

The way I saw it, with Mitchell off-grid—aka completely fucking dead—he'd be pissed. Money gone dark tends to make powerful people very nervous. And angry.

The Bonehook and Ricardo were part of a Ponzi scheme with the center snapped—what did that make Ricardo? Desperate. Exposed. Probably scrabbling to pull cash together before someone noticed?

I flicked open my lighter, watched the flame dance, then snapped it shut.

The sharp sound, the flick of metal on metal, the smell of gas—the only rhythm that brought any order to my brain.

Light. Shut. Breathe. I stared into the flame every time it caught, hypnotized by the flicker, the illusion of control.

The flame didn't ask questions. It didn't care that everything in my head was chaos and red flags and warning bells.

It burned—steady, obedient, and gone on command.

Rinse and repeat. It helped me sort through the mess .

The front door opened, the sound sharp in the quiet.

Rio stepped inside, unwrapping his hands slowly, methodically. His knuckles were bruised, his face flushed, a cut from his temple to his left eye with butterfly bandages holding it closed. He didn't say a word as he tossed an envelope thick with cash onto the counter.

I raised a brow. “You fighting at The Pit?”

He snorted, heading for the fridge. “Yep.”

I glanced at the envelope, then at him. “Enzo’s not gonna like you being down there again.”

“Nothing he needs to know about,” he shrugged. “I needed the cash.”

“You needed to make someone bleed,” I corrected him, and he shrugged. He had as many demons riding him as I did. “I can get you cash if you need it.”

“I earn my money.”

“You get beaten up for your money,” I corrected.

He pulled out a carton of eggs and glanced over his shoulder. “You want something to eat?”

Rio was a master of deflection, but I nodded, suddenly aware of how empty my stomach felt. “I could eat.”

He set the carton down and started cracking eggs like any other night. Like none of it—bruised fists, dirty money, our unraveling web of lies—mattered.

Rio slid a pan onto the stove, then nodded toward the laptop still on my knees. “So, what’d you find out?”

I sighed, tapping a few keys. “Names. Places. Shell companies. Clubs with untraceable ownership that somehow loop back to a foundation supposedly set up for inner city kids. Which is cute if it wasn’t so fucking disgusting.

Here—” I tilted the screen so he could see.

“These five accounts? All tied to Mitchell’s laundering scheme.

This one here? Dubai. This one—Macau. Cayman Islands, obviously.

But this?” I tapped the screen, anger rising.

“There are clubs with money moving out of them faster than it’s coming in, which means someone’s panicking. ”

Rio stared at the screen, then at me. “You gonna burn them all down? Should I be worried?”

I snorted, then closed the laptop, tension radiating through my shoulders. “Killian wants us to back off.”

Rio raised a brow and gestured at the laptop. “And this is you backing off?”

“Yep, backing off,” I lied to my best friend.

Rio leaned against the counter, flipping the eggs with exaggerated care. “What was it with you and Killian today?” he asked, his tone too casual to be anything but deliberate.

Of course, he’d noticed. How could he not? The way I’d gotten too close to Killian when we argued. Voices low, sharp, like knives being drawn. We never backed down. That tension—it wasn’t a fight. It was a fuse, lit and burning fast.

Killian was under my skin before I’d even realized it. He saw too much. Read me too well. And he’d never looked away.

Calling me Pretty? That smug little nickname?

It lit me up. Mocking and intimate at the same time, as if he knew how to twist the knife.

He hadn't flinched when I snapped. Hadn't blinked.

Just stood there—calm, still, in control.

And I'd fucking hated it, because some part of me wanted to shove him against a wall.

Wipe that calm off his face to feel something that made sense.

Not tension. Not heat. Something real. I'd been hard. Turned on. Furious. Wrecked.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I wasn't built for this. I didn't want anyone. Never had. Want made you weak. But he hadn't backed down when I burned too hot—he'd leaned in. As if he liked it and wanted to see me fall apart.

And I was close.

That calm of his? It undid me. Tugged at something I'd thought long buried. Made me feel things I didn't have words for. And yeah, it made me want him. Not only his body—everything. And I hated that most of all. I didn't want to need what I thought Killian could give me. I didn't want him.

"He's an asshole," I muttered, not looking up. "All that frozen, buttoned-up lawyer shit. Every inch of him is just... tight. Restrained. He walks into a room, and the

temperature drops ten degrees. Always acting as if he's got the moral high ground, as if he's already figured me out."

I swallowed down the rest, but it stuck in my throat. Killian was fucking sexy. But every time he stood there calm and still while I burned, had only intensified the fire.

"And you hate that," Rio said.

I grunted. "Yeah. I do."

Rio smirked. "So that's it, huh? Ice to your fire. Makes you wanna punch him and kiss him at the same time?"

"I don't want to fucking kiss him! Jesus! Shut your fucking mouth," I snapped, but my voice lacked heat.

He was grinning as if he'd won a prize.

"You want to burn him then?" he asked smugly.

"Fuck off." I turned back to the laptop, though I wasn't seeing the screen. I hated that Rio saw things in me I hadn't figured out yet. That he could look at me and know . And yeah, maybe what I hated most was that he was always right.

"You go anywhere, do anything, take me with you," he said.

I frowned. "What?"

"You so much as burn a sheet of paper—I'm there."

My jaw locked. "I don't need a fucking babysitter."

He didn't answer while he stared at the eggs. That silence? Infuriating because he'd already decided I was going to screw up.

Ever since Stockton, he'd tracked every flicker of heat in me, stepped in before I could light the fuse. He didn't need words—he instinctively knew when I needed to burn. And that pissed me off. Because it meant I wasn't hiding it as well as I thought.

We shared our shitty apartment for a reason.

He kept me steady when the world tilted.

He talked me down without trying to fix me.

Gave me space to fall apart without judging the wreckage.

I owed him more than I ever said out loud.

But I never asked to be managed . Some days, I wanted to set a fire.

Let it take everything. And Rio? He never let me plan it alone.

Always watching. Always stepping in. Like, I couldn't be trusted with my own match.

He was probably right.

But it didn't stop the anger rising whenever he caught me before I fell.

“What do you know about The Bonehook?”

Rio leaned against the counter, stirring the eggs, and said, “The Bonehook? Cheap

joint. Not pulling in big money, but always open. Always shady. Out in El Sereno, near the bail bonds office.”

“You know someone in the club?”

“I know the bonds guys next door, but nah, no one in the club.” He didn’t even look up as he went on. “Drugs mostly. Light stuff, moving just under the radar. And the other stuff—girls, maybe boys, not the kind of scene anyone wants to admit exists.”

“Ricardo Price?”

He frowned. “Doesn’t ring a bell. What about him?”

“He was sending money up the chain to Mitchell, who was supposed to pass it to Lassiter and Kessler. Runs the club.”

Rio dished up the fluffy eggs and thick slices of buttered toast, and I let him do that before pushing him to answer—Rio liked his thinking time .

He swallowed his food and paused. “That’s your target?”

“No. Yes. Fuck knows.”

“Talk me through it, J. Step One...”

“Fuck off Rio, I’m not doing this shit again.”

He reached over and tilted my chin up, his other hand brushing over the scars on the back of my left hand—the ones from the time I’d come too close to getting caught. He’d pulled me back that day in Stockton. He tried to keep me steady and rein me in, as if he were in control.

“Don’t mess with me, J,” he growled. “What’s step one?”

“Intel to determine target.”

He nodded in approval. “Two?”

“Fuck! Observation, exits, routines.”

“And three?” he prompted.

“Ritual, location, and execution.” Balancing the need for vengeance with the beast inside and keeping innocents off the table by minimizing risks.

“And then?” Rio prompted.

“We don’t need to do this,” I whined.

Rio squeezed my chin, reminding me of why he was doing this, the only person allowed to touch me, and I stared right into his dark eyes. “What’s next, J? ”

“Aftermath,” I said. Watching it burn. I needed to see the burn, feel the justice, the cleansing. “Peace.”

He finally released me, and I swear, I whimpered as soon as he looked away. “Observe, report, fix a date, I’m going with you when you do it.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“But, Killian told us?—”

“I don’t care about Killian; I’m looking at you. You do this so it doesn’t connect to what Killian is doing. You’ll be safe. I’ll be there.”

After Rio headed to bed, I was still buzzing, still wired from everything we’d uncovered.

I needed to move, to do something, anything.

I paced the living room in tight circles, flicking my lighter open and shut, the flame a pulse steadying the chaos in my head.

The Bonehook. Killian. Lassiter. Everything felt tangled, and the need to pull at the threads itched like fire under my skin.

Eventually, I dropped into the chair by the window, opened the laptop, and stared at the glow of the screen. I opened a fresh document and started making notes.

Step One: Observation.

Target: The Bonehook.

Owner: Ricardo Price.

Connection: Money to Mitchell ? Lassiter ? ???

Possible heat: Desperation? Fracture in the pipeline?

I added notes faster. I needed to build the plan piece by piece so I wouldn’t slip.

And then, I hesitated.

Killian McKendrick.

What did any of us really know about him? Not much. Not enough. So I pulled up a new tab and typed his name. I added parameters: Killian McKendrick + legal + court record + education + associates + prior employment.

Then further: Killian McKendrick + known associates + law firm + Redcars + McKendrick family.

And finally: Killian McKendrick + criminal defense + Vegas.

The browser started to populate. Slowly at first, as if the system was thinking. I let the searches load and opened another tab, pulling up real estate records. Maybe he owned something. Perhaps he didn't. Maybe there was nothing there at all. But I had to try.

I stared at the screen as the browser began pinging back hits.

Court documents, old law firm bios, social media tags with his name blurred into sports articles from fifteen years ago.

Early school years, no family, in care, then Redcars.

Then Harvard Law. And a blank space between.

At Harvard, a prestigious internship. The missing years. The silence. I bookmarked everything.

When my eyes blurred with exhaustion, I set the laptop aside and stretched. My mind was still a battlefield, but the lists helped. The act of compiling, of noting, of watching... it grounded me.

Tomorrow, I'd start observing The Bonehook. Start watching Killian the way he'd watched me.

Because this time, I wanted to be the one who saw everything first.

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EIGHT

Killian

How did a place like this stand to lose that much money and stay open?

How much did Ricardo know about Mitchell's loss, and was Ricardo doing something to make up the difference in Mitchell's balance sheet without him knowing?

Caleb had created a background that would hold up under scrutiny.

According to the new legend, I was Lucas Grant—a high-rolling investor sniffing around for something off-market, something exclusive.

A man with tastes leaning toward the extreme.

Ricardo didn't know me, didn't know Killian either, which was precisely how Caleb had planned it.

Clean separation. No shared history. Just a hungry newcomer with enough cash and curiosity to get in the door.

Lucas Grant didn't look like me. Not really.

Caleb had built the identity, but I brought it to life.

The clothes were sharp—designer jeans that clung, a shirt unbuttoned low enough to hint but not tell.

I kept the stubble thick and the hair artfully messy—effort made to look effortless.

Dark glasses hid my eyes, allowing people to project whatever they wanted onto me, and I slumped a little to disguise my height.

Attitude did the rest.

Lucas moved as if he owned the space. Like the world already owed him more than it gave.

My gaze was full of contempt, shoulders looser, cocky smirk ready to go.

My temporary identity was the kind of guy who didn't need to ask questions—he expected answers.

And if someone didn't offer them, he made them regret it.

That was the vibe. And tonight, that vibe was going to get me in the door .

Caleb had found evidence of cash payments funneled into a holding account, proving Price was doing something to earn money. Was Ricardo running something other than drugs out the back?

Kids maybe?

“Tell the boss Lucas Grant is here,” I told the nearest bouncer.

The guy didn't move at first. Chewing the inside of his cheek as if he were deciding if

I was worth the trouble. Big guy, thick neck, fists like hams. He looked me up and down as if he was trying to place me, then gave a little grunt.

“You got an appointment?”

“He knows what I’m here for.”

He dragged his gaze from my head to my toes, checking for weapons maybe, although I wasn’t hiding anything in this outfit, or maybe he was judging me. He thumbed his radio, murmured something low, then turned slightly, shoulders tight.

“Wait here.”

Of course I’d wait. I always did what I was told when people were watching.

Ricardo Price was down at the bar in minutes, armed with a grin and a white shirt unbuttoned to his waist. “Mr. Grant,” he purred, sliding over to me, shaking my hand, his free hand on my waist. Every muscle in my body wanted to recoil, to break his fingers individually.

I didn’t flinch. Didn’t lean in either. “I assume you know why I’m here.” I said.

He ordered us drinks without asking. “On the house,” Ricardo said, with an expansive wave of his hand.

“Nice atmosphere,” I commented, all innocent.

He glanced at the near empty place, his smile faltered a little, the practiced lines on his face cracking with something like suspicion. I could almost see the quiet desperation in his expression. Do you have money?

“Always quiet on a Thursday,” he defended.

“Of course,” I said, and pretended to sip my drink, the whiskey burning my lips, but nothing more. I turned to face him, hooking my foot on the rail, keeping an eye on my back in the mirror. “So what do you have for me?”

“What are you looking for?” he asked, leaning in. He smelled of sweat and desperation and was ripe to be played.

“What do you have?”

“Any drug you want.”

I huffed. “I was looking for something different.”

“Like? ”

I lowered my tone, licked my lips. “Something unique and young. Male.”

He didn’t act surprised. “What makes you think I got that?”

“Heard through the grapevine.”

He eyed me with suspicion, and I didn’t move. I hoped to hell any background checks he’d run when I’d made this damn appointment had held up. Finally, he seemed to decide I was dark enough inside to earn a right to what he was selling.

“Got some young ones fresh off the farm.” He dipped his gaze, smiling, oily and cruel. “ Real fresh, if you know what I mean.” Then, he added a wink, and I wanted to smash my glass into his face.

“Yeah?”

“Interested?”

“Maybe.” My stomach turned, but I swallowed the bile and flattened my tone.

I needed him to keep talking. I scanned the bar, pretending to listen as I did.

Two exits marked staff only had cameras and keypads; security at each of them.

This place was wrapped tight tonight. I turned to face the sparse crowd, the camera in my button catching what I hoped was enough to gather more intel.

And that was when I saw him . For one heart-stopping moment, I thought I was hallucinating. But no—there he was in the worst possible place at the worst possible time.

Jamie.

Fuming. His hands clenched into fists. Staring at me as if I’d dragged him into Hell. Right in the middle of the dance floor, like a fucking beacon of idiocy, the rest of the world spreading around him.

For fuck’s sake.

I muttered something to Ricardo about needing the bathroom and ducked out, inclining my head to the idiot mechanic, weaving through the sweat and alcohol.

Cold water, a locked bathroom, all of them separate here, and maybe five minutes to have a fucking talk with him, and ask what the hell he was doing here.

That was all I needed. I waited until he turned the corner, saw where I was, and thank god I stepped back from the door because it slammed against the wall as he burst in, and he was in my space before I could breathe, a whirlwind of temper.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he snarled, His anger burned hot and fast, and tonight it was aimed at me. I locked the door and leaned on the small sink. I didn’t answer. I didn’t have to. He was already vibrating with fury. “Why the fuck are you letting Ricardo Price touch you?” he snapped again.

I straightened, calm on the outside, and took him in—the way his leather pants clung like paint, the tight shirt revealing tattoos that twisted like secrets along his arms. Every inch of him screamed deliberate temptation.

Dark glasses perched in his messy hair, his lips parted enough to make him look dangerous, and the way he moved—as if he knew everyone wanted him and didn’t give a damn—was enough to make anyone stop and stare.

He looked like sex and violence wrapped in velvet, and he vibrated with a tension that had nothing to do with nerves. He was dressed to be touched and dared anyone to try. And that attitude? It was a weapon all on its own.

“What are you doing here, Jamie?”

Jamie took a step closer. “Why is Price all over you?” And just like that, the whole room narrowed to his eyes, blazing with hurt and heat. Not jealousy. Rage. Maybe both.

I smirked. “Ricardo?”

Jamie laughed, bitter and sharp. “You flirt with scum like that for fun?” He pressed a hand to my throat, pushed me back to the wall, acting as if he had control.

“He’s a mark, and I flirt with scum like that to learn things, Pretty .”

He didn’t move. Didn’t blink. But his voice dropped to something raw and jagged, as though it had been dragged through glass. “Don’t fucking do it again.” His gaze didn’t soften. If anything, it sharpened and sliced straight through me.

“What are you doing here?”

I could feel the heat coming off him, fury radiating like static. I turned away to break the tension, to stop myself from saying something I’d regret, but then he caught my arm—fingers iron-hard, voice cracking with something close to desperation.

That was the moment. The shift. The match struck the fuse.

He surged forward as if he wanted to shake or kiss me—I couldn’t tell which. We collided, words and breath tangling between us, fury giving way to something more raw. Something neither of us could name yet. And then all hell broke loose.

He slammed me against the bathroom wall, mouth hot and hungry on mine.

My fingers tangled in his hair, pulling hard enough to hurt as our teeth clashed.

This wasn’t sweet. This wasn’t tender. This was raw need, frustration boiling over into something primal.

He was marking me in a way that felt like insanity.

Jamie’s hands were everywhere, ripping at my clothes as if they’d personally offended him.

I matched his urgency, shoving his shirt apart so that I could dig my fingers into the

lithe muscle.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” he growled at my throat, biting down hard enough to make me hiss. “Coming here alone.”

“My undercover persona doesn’t need anyone backing him up.” I grabbed his hair and yanked his head back, forcing him to look at me. “And what’s your excuse for being here alone?”

I didn’t let him answer, crushed his mouth to mine again, lifting him onto the sink. His legs wrapped around my waist, drawing me near, and I felt the hard length of him through our jeans. His hands slid under my shirt, calloused fingers tracing fire across my skin.

“I’m observing,” he confessed between ragged breaths, voice rough with desire and something like shame.

I should have been angry. Should have pushed him away, told him to leave. Instead, I dragged him closer, losing myself in the heat of his mouth, the pressure of my body on his.

The bathroom was filthy, the bass from the club vibrating through the walls, but none of that mattered. Nothing mattered except Jamie’s hands on my skin, his breath hot, the way he said my name like a curse and a prayer .

He worked open my jeans, and I fought to open his, his eyes darkening as his fingers wrapped around me.

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The sink creaked beneath our weight. Someone pounded on the door—once, twice—but we ignored it, lost in a haze of anger and need. Jamie’s head fell back to the mirror as I marked his throat, claiming him in ways I had no right to. His legs tightened, drawing me impossibly closer.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I growled. “You have no idea what these people are capable of.”

He laughed, bitter and breathless. “And you do? That’s what scares me.”

His was faster, rougher, and I matched his rhythm. We weren’t making love—we were fighting, still arguing with our bodies instead of words.

The bathroom door rattled again, followed by muffled shouting, and it pulled me back to myself.

“Fuck. Not here,” I muttered, backing away, quickly tucking myself back in and zipping up. Jamie did the same, his movements jerky, cheeks flushed with arousal.

“Killian—”

“Not anywhere! You need to leave. Now.” My voice was steady despite the chaos inside me. “Go out the back exit, don’t talk to anyone or look at anyone.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m not leaving you here with Ricardo fucking?—”

“Yes, you are.” I grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to focus. “This isn’t a game,

Jamie. These people aren't the kind you mess with." I lowered my voice, trying to keep the desperation from showing. "If they see you with me, and they track you back to Redcars, then you're fucking everything up.

The pounding on the door grew more insistent. "There's a line out here!"

"Occupied!" I shouted, heard cursing, but the voices grew quieter. "Let me be the smart one here."

Jamie clenched his jaw, and something dark and conflicted flashed in his eyes. "This isn't over."

"It never is," I muttered, running a hand through my hair.

I cracked the door, checking the hallway. Two drunk girls leaned against the wall, eyes shooting daggers at us. Perfect cover. I grabbed Jamie's arm, pulling him close one last time.

"Count to thirty after I leave, then go. Don't look back."

His fingers caught my wrist, squeezing hard enough to bruise. "What are you doing, Killian?"

"Thirty," I repeated, maintaining eye contact .

I left and headed back to the bar, catching sight of myself.

I needed to get myself under control. Jamie was a distraction I couldn't afford right now, not when I was this close to something.

I took a deep breath, straightened my shoulders, and headed back to Ricardo, who

was watching the crowd with predatory eyes.

“There you are,” he said, pressing fingers to my lower back. “Thought you’d fallen in.”

I palmed my hard cock—thank you Jamie—and laughed, leaning into him just enough to keep him talking. “Just needed a minute.”

“I’ve got them ready.”

I let my gaze wander over the club, as if I were bored. “Sure,” I said. Anything to get into the back rooms with a legitimate excuse as opposed to my stupid idea to investigate with stealth.

He led me down a hallway past the restrooms, nodding to a bouncer who stepped aside.

My skin crawled as we moved deeper into the club’s back rooms, away from the pounding music and into spaces where the bass was a distant thrum.

I counted doors, memorized the layout, noted the cameras in each corner, and pretended not to watch him enter the code.

“Is all this necessary?” I asked casually .

Ricardo’s smile tightened. “Had some inventory control issues.”

Yeah, I bet. To the tune of 1.2 million in crypto disappearing from Ricardo’s bank balance. He punched another code into the final door, his hand blocking my view of the keypad. The lock clicked, and he pushed the door open.

“My office,” he purred.

The room beyond was dimly lit, all dark wood and leather furniture.

It looked like an upscale gentleman’s club with a small bar in the corner.

But it wasn’t the décor that caught my attention; it was the three young men lounging on a large leather couch, none looking a day over sixteen, all with the same vacant stare from heavy sedation.

My stomach turned. I’d seen that look before in places where people became products. I’d seen that in the mirror.

“Fresh from Idaho,” Ricardo said, stroking one boy’s hair. The kid didn’t even flinch. “This one’s only been in the city a week.”

“What the fuck?” I didn’t have to fake anger. “They’re no good to me drugged-up, Ricardo!”

He pouted, as though I’d ruined his night. “Cocaine, speed, we’ll get ’em started.

I kept my smile frozen, forcing myself not to react— not until I had the information I needed. These kids hadn’t only been drugged; they were being broken in, conditioned to accept whatever came next—human merchandise. And Ricardo was treating it like a business opportunity.

“I like them aware. I like them fighting.” I said, stepping closer, letting my voice drop to something dangerous. I glanced around the room, memorizing faces, details. Evidence.

“Can’t move ’em if they’re fighting.”

“Move them?” I fake-pouted as if that was bad news to my Lucas persona who would react as if his toys were being taken away.

“Yeah, unless you want one yourself. Two hundred K gets you exclusivity.” He sipped his whiskey, gesturing toward the hallway behind us. “Otherwise, we ship them wherever needed. Rich guys in Dubai, private islands, you name it.”

My blood ran cold, but I kept my expression neutral. This club was part of a trafficking network, leading all the way up to Lassiter. I needed names, locations, everything I could get.

“That one I got straight off the bus,” He pointed to the one who seemed the youngest, maybe not a day over fourteen. Someone’s child. Stolen and abused. He nudged me with an elbow, and I swear he was going to die at my hand one day soon.

This was abhorrent, and I was already thinking of ways to get these young men out of here, but were there more? Were there children here?

“What’s your inventory like tonight? You got anything else that isn’t drugged to their eyeballs?” I glanced at him. “Younger?” I tagged on.

His gaze took on a greedy gleam. “Nah, we’re low, just these three tonight.

” He picked up a bag with white powder. “This will make them more...interested,” he smirked, but was distracted by a knock.

He opened it and called to a guard, then there was a garbled sound, a curse, a scuffle and by the time I turned to the door, Ricardo was on the floor, throat cut, blood pooling around him, and splattered on Jamie’s shirt, his hands steady as he wiped the blade.

This was the Jamie who was so pretty, deadly, and someone who knew exactly how to slice a carotid artery.

“We have five minutes to get them out of here,” Jamie announced and thumbed at the drugged boys.

“Five minutes, Killian, tick-tock.”

I stared at him in disbelief, my mind racing to catch up with the sudden shift in reality. This wasn't the reluctant mechanic I'd been dealing with. This was someone else entirely—someone who cut throats with practiced efficiency and didn't flinch at the blood spattering his boots.

“You... what the fuck did you just do?” I hissed, heading toward the nearest boy, checking his pulse. Slow but steady.

Jamie was already pulling one of them up, supporting his weight. “I did what needed doing. You were taking too long playing spy, and these kids would have been out on the next truck.”

“I was getting information!” I grabbed the smallest of the three, throwing his arm around my shoulder. “Information we need about who else is involved, where the other victims are?”

“The back exit has a delivery truck waiting. Keys are in the ignition.”

“How—” I started, but there was no time for questions. The third boy was starting to stir, mumbling incoherently. I nodded to Jamie. “What about cameras?”

“Disabled. Four minutes now,” Jamie cut me off, cold and methodical.

“Then what happens?”

Jamie grinned, all teeth. “Boom. ”

Fuck! Fuck! “You get them out. I need two more minutes.”

“Killian—”

“Two minutes, Pretty,” I repeated, already moving to the desk. “Get them to safety. I’ll be right behind you.”

Jamie’s eyes hardened, but he nodded once, sharp and decisive. As he herded the barely conscious boys toward the exit, I rifled through Ricardo’s desk drawers, grabbing his laptop and shoving any paperwork into my pocket.

I pocketed three USB drives that had been discarded in the bottom drawer, then turned to leave.

Was that more than two minutes? Was I going to get caught in an explosion or a raging inferno?

What the fuck had Jamie done? What about all the people outside, innocents, was he going to destroy this place without?—

The fire alarms activated, so fucking loud, and I sprinted for the back door and tumbled out into cold air. Jamie was leaning against the van and checking his watch. “Nice timing. Get them somewhere.” He gestured at the truck, then strolled past me, back into the club.

“Jamie! What the fuck are you doing? ”

He pulled out a container and flicked a lighter. “What I’m good at.”

“Fuck—”

“I’ll see you back at your place.”

“My place? What?—”

“Get the fuck out of here, hide your face. Cameras everywhere that no one can fix in a few seconds.”

And then he vanished. People began exiting through the back doors, a buzz of excitement mixed with concern.

I scrambled to the van, leaving as sedately as I could, with the visor down and my jacket up over the bottom half of my face.

I was thankful the victims in the back were at least hidden in the paneled van.

I abandoned the vehicle a quarter mile from our destination, opening the back doors to reveal three frightened young men who looked a little more alert than before.

“Reed Way Hostel,” I pointed in the direction. “Pride flag in the window, ask for Mickey. Got it? Mickey.”

“Mickey, Reed Way.” The most lucid of them repeated.

“Get help, say nothing; keep your fucking heads down.”

They scrambled out of the van, throwing me frightened looks, stumbling and crying as they headed toward a place I knew they’d be safe.

I sent a quick message to Mickey to keep an eye out, wiped down the van's steering wheel just in case, then sprinted back toward the city, calling a cab as soon as I hit the city limits.

Then, not knowing how to deal with the clusterfuck Jamie had created, I headed home.

NINE

Jamie

I sat in Killian's apartment in the half-dark, the only light coming from the streetlight outside that spilled through the blinds in thin stripes.

His place smelled of him, all expensive cedar cologne and coffee, which did nothing to settle the way my pulse jumped every time a floorboard creaked or a car passed.

I should've left after dismantling his security, but I didn't.

Not with the scent of burned lacquer still clinging to my clothes, sweet, acrid, and thick in my lungs.

Not with the image of the back rooms at the club lit up in orange and gold, flames licking through shadows as if they were hungry for secrets.

I'd watched until the fire caught the bodies of the two guards and Ricardo, and then, I'd joined the milling crowd of shocked partygoers and waited for the arrival of the firefighters.

The blaze I'd started had been perfectly controlled, surgical, and beautiful.

It calmed something in me that hadn't settled in weeks and stirred something else.

I was still hard, the tension in my gut wrapped tight with the memory of heat and

light.

That feeling—arousal and peace, blood and fire—was always strongest after I burned something that needed to go.

The front door clicked. I stilled. It was too quiet to be Killian—he'd come in loud, furious with what had happened at The Bonehook. This was stealthy, intentional.

A man stepped into view—not Killian—gun drawn, his movements smooth and calculated.

He swept the space with sharp eyes, posture tight but fluid, cautious, practiced.

Trained. Military, maybe. Special Forces, more likely.

He didn't just enter a room; he cleared it and catalogued every angle as if it might bite him.

His finger rested near the trigger, not on it, and his stance told me he knew how many exits the room had—and how quickly he could use them all.

Average height, wiry, dark hair, and glasses that screamed I file taxes for fun. The security detail had arrived. Unless this was Killian's boyfriend. My gut turned sour at the thought.

"Five minutes, not bad," I said, and the man's arm snapped in my direction fast. A Glock 19, matte black, pointed right at me, no hesitation.

"Hands where I can see them," he barked. I didn't flinch. I raised my hands, my fingers spread. "Cops are on their way." Ah, yeah, there was a bluff.

“No, they’re not.” I said with a smirk, and he stiffened.

“Everything in this room is being recorded and sent to off-site servers.” He stepped closer. His voice was calm, clinical. Not scared. Not bluffing, either.

I smiled, slow and sharp. “You mean your system used to transfer to off-site servers,” I said, and flicked on a light as I gestured at the innocuous-looking panel on the far wall, wires hanging from the bottom like guts from a corpse. “I fixed that.”

The man with the gun hesitated a beat, then stepped closer so he could see me fully, his eyes widening. “Jesus. Jamie freaking Maddox,” he said.

I nodded once. He lowered the Glock, tension shifting in his shoulders. Still wary, but not ready to shoot me in the face anymore. Progress.

“What the fuck did you do to my system?” he asked, glancing back at the board as if I’d killed something precious.

“Not that this means anything to a rent-a-cop, but I reprogrammed the root subroutine to kill the transfer protocol,” I said. “Oh, and looped the internal surveillance with a deepfake overlay.”

“And I’m supposed to be impressed?” he asked.

I examined my nails with practiced indifference. “I worked through the biometric lock as well.”

That got a reaction.

His eyebrows shot up, and for a heartbeat, he froze like a program glitching mid-run.

The soldier melted away with startling speed, shoulders loosening as the tension drained from his stance.

In its place was something quieter and more intelligent.

The edge of military precision gave way to academic curiosity, and he holstered his weapon with a distracted flick, like it no longer mattered.

There he was. The nerd under the combat shit. The analyst masquerading as muscle. Eyes sharp behind his glasses, now lit up as if I was a rare exhibit in a zoo. And for the first time, he was intrigued.

“How the hell did you bypass the vascular print scanner?”

“Usual shit,” I said, voice even. “Condensation from Killian’s coffee mug gave me enough for a thermal imprint. I mirrored that data against a bluff profile, created a synthetic vascular map, and layered it over a subroutine loop that mimicked pulse detection.”

He blinked. “But that shouldn’t have worked. The scanner’s designed to detect spoofing?—”

“Not when you decouple the real-time feedback buffer and rewrite the confirmation delay protocol. By the time it realized something was off, I was already inside.”

His lips parted as if he were about to argue, then closed again as he considered what I’d said.

“You added a rollback kill-switch, too, didn’t you?”

I smiled. “Made it look impenetrable. And when I was done, it was.”

He gave a low whistle, impressed despite himself. “All that, but you still tripped the backup perimeter,” he pointed out. “Rookie error.”

I shrugged. “Nah, I wanted to see what the response time was.” I checked his watch. “Five minutes. Good thing I’m not here to take out Killian.”

That earned the ghost of a smile. “Killian’s a hard man to shut down.” He sat opposite me, folding his hands in his lap as though we were about to negotiate a ceasefire. “I’m Caleb,” he said. “I work with Killian.”

“Define ‘work.’”

He leaned back slightly, assessing me again. “I’m his systems partner. Digital infrastructure, logistics, and threat assessments. Everything that keeps us one step ahead of the people who might find out who we are and what we do.”

“Lawyering?” I deadpanned.

“Yep. Dangerous world. With very sharp teeth.”

I tilted my head. “So you’re a tech guy with a gun?”

“I write code that keeps us all safe. Sometimes that means firewalls; sometimes that means firepower.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Multitalented.”

“I prefer not to get shot while debugging code,” he added with a shrug.

I snorted. “You always greet guests with a gun?”

“Only the ones who gut our firewalls for fun. And even then, I usually bring coffee.”

Before I could respond, the door slammed open with a force that rattled the hinges. Caleb shot to his feet, and I stood too, instinct kicking in.

Killian stormed into the space, eyes already scanning, jaw tight, and his jacket still halfway off one shoulder. Everything in him stilled like someone had slammed on the brakes when he saw me. The silence stretched. Then snapped.

“Are you insane ?” he roared at me. “You set off alarms at the club, you killed three men? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

His anger was delicious, it was heady. I wanted all of it.

He turned his ire on Caleb. “And you! Why the hell did you let this murdering pyromaniac into my home?”

“Arsonist,” I corrected.

“Shut the fuck up!” Killian shouted.

Caleb held up a hand. “I didn’t let him in.”

“Nope,” I said, “I hacked your security.”

Killian spun on his heel and stalked into the kitchen, vibrating with so much fury he looked as if he might explode.

He slammed his palm down on the counter, then pressed his thumb to a hidden biometric lock built into the cabinetry.

A gentle click echoed in the quiet, and a concealed drawer slid open.

He reached in, pulled out a matte-black SIG P226 and gripped it tight, his knuckles bone-white.

He pointed it at me.

The fury in his face was wild and sharp-edged, making it clear he didn't know what else to do with it. Not with me here. Not after what I'd done.

Caleb stepped between us as if he might stop a train wreck with his body. "Killian, I thought you said you were working with these guys?—"

"Stay out of this," Killian snapped without taking his eyes off me.

"He's good, okay? He's broken systems I thought were unbreakable!" Caleb added, but that didn't slow Killian down. "I was right, this guy is DaemonRaze."

"Get the fuck out, Caleb!" Killian bellowed, his voice cracking like a whip through the tension-choked room.

"Killian—"

"I don't need your calm voice and logic right now. I'll handle this! Get. Out."

Caleb, ever composed, took a slow breath and placed a hand on Killian's chest—not in defiance, but as if he were grounding a live wire. "Do I need to call a cleaner? Because if you're planning on turning this place into a crime scene?—"

"Out! Now! Before I put a hole in the wall behind you to make my point."

Caleb gave me a tired look, one part warning and one part apology, then shrugged as if to say, This is your circus now , and walked out with the quiet grace of a man used to navigating tempests.

Where was the smooth, urbane lawyer with his thousand dollar suits, sarcasm, and the sharp smiles that could charm a confession out of a dead man?

Where was the calm tactician who probably dissected courtrooms with logic and confidence?

All I saw now was fury—raw, unfiltered, blazing in his eyes as if he'd set himself on fire to burn me.

“What did you do?”

I pulled out my lighter, flipped it open with a click , and stared into the flame as the small blue core flared, steady and mesmerizing. I snapped it shut. “You were there. Right?”

Killian didn't answer right away. His jaw flexed. “I told you to stay away?—”

“He had his hands on you,” I bit out, my voice sharp and low, every word burning as much as the fire still smoldering in my chest. I snapped the lighter again. Flame. Snuffed. Flame. Snuffed. “And you just let it happen.”

“Jesus!”

The rhythm of the clicks filled the silence; each flick easing the need crawling under my skin. “No one touches you.”

“I'm not a fucking damsel in distress. I can handle myself,” Killian snarled, his voice

a whipcrack of rage.

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I didn't flinch. I welcomed it—the heat rolling off him, the way his rage lit up the room like sparks off dry tinder. I needed it as much as I needed fire.

I stalked past him, knocking the gun to the side with the back of my hand. He didn't stop me, just growled low in his throat. I reached the door, slammed it shut with a brutal crack that made the frame rattle.

The silence that followed buzzed with tension.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Killian snapped, voice hoarse with rage, the gun trembling slightly in his hand.

I turned to face him slowly, deliberately, and unafraid, his pulse thrumming under my skin like a war drum. His eyes were wild, his chest heaving, every inch of him vibrating with fury—and I wanted it. I needed it. The way he looked at me was as if he might destroy me and love every moment of it.

“Whatever it takes to make you snap,” I said, voice low and guttural. “To make you push me to my knees and fuck my face like you mean it.”

Then, moving fast, reckless, and unhinged, I was on him before the words finished echoing, close enough to feel the heat of his breath, to taste the violence in the air between us.

I wished he'd stayed to watch the burn with me.

He could've taken me right there, with the inferno lighting the sky behind us.

He could've shoved me to the ground and fucked me while the air still smelled of ash and victory.

That was how sharp it had been in my veins—fire and fury, smoke and need.

And I was still hard. Still wired from the bathroom and the fire. Still not done.

I lunged, catching him off guard, shoving him back hard enough to make the breath punch out of his chest. I twisted the gun from his grip, the barrel cold and slick in my hand, and tossed it across the room.

He stumbled, caught himself too late, and sprawled across the sofa, one hand braced on the cushions, the other curled like a claw ready to strike.

“Force me to my knees!” I barked, my voice raw, demanding, almost a dare. My hands were fists, shoving, grabbing, shaking with adrenaline and hunger. I wanted him furious. I wanted him to snap. I wanted to be the match that lit him up from the inside out.

“No!”

I grinned, all teeth, feral and bright. “Come on, Killian. Show me what you’re made of.

Rage suits you better than that smug courtroom mask you hide behind.

” He surged up from the sofa, but I met him halfway, pressed in close, taunting.

“Push me down!” I yelled at him, took his hand, and bit him, scratched at his skin, and he grew angrier, louder, and violent.

He was a bigger man than me, could easily hold me in place while he fucked me and fixed me and made me feel.

I laughed—low, breathless, defiant. “Make me.”

He lunged like a storm breaking loose, his hands on me in a flash, fists full of my shirt, slamming me back to the sofa. My spine jarred on the edge, half on the cushions, half off, legs tangled, knees buckling under the sheer force of him.

“You want to be broken, Pretty?” he growled, eyes blazing. “You want to see how far I’ll go?”

His hand found my throat—not squeezing, just there, a warning, a promise—and I arched under the touch, already gone, already giving in.

“Do it!”

“You’ve got no fucking idea what you’re asking for,” he spat, pinning me.

I scrabbled and bit and fought, clawing at his arms, dragging my nails across his skin to feel him react. He twisted my leg and shoved me down, the air knocked from my lungs with a gasp.

He was hard as iron, the heat of him scorching through layers of clothes, and I could feel the way he trembled—not with hesitation, but with the effort of restraint. His breath hitched as he hovered over me, and my heart pounded. I was on fire again—and this time, the inferno had a name.

Killian.

“You need to stop!” he ordered. His eyes—blazing, dark, wide with temper, one

breath from giving in, from letting the fury take over. He looked at me as if I was both the trigger and the target.

“Use me.” I snapped, and his hold on my throat tightened. “Do it!” I tried to scoot down, to get my hands on his cock, to inhale him, swallow him, choke on him, but he wriggled back and threw me away from him in disgust.

This was what I needed. His hatred, his anger. He took a step from me, and I whined—was he leaving me? I fumbled for my zip, lowering it and pushing my hand inside to grab my cock. If he wasn’t doing it to me, then I was getting off on my own, right here in his cozy fucking home.

“Hands off,” he growled and yanked my hand out of my pants with a vicious snap of his wrist. Before I could blink, he was tearing my T-shirt over my head and pinning my arms behind my back, his grip bruising, desperate.

“Open your mouth.”

There was no room to argue—he didn’t wait.

He shoved his cock between my lips with a violence that stole my breath, one hand fisting in my hair, the other braced on my shoulder to hold me in place.

He drove in deep, raw and relentless, until my throat convulsed around him and tears blurred my vision. I gagged, fought, then surrendered.

Panic and fear flashed white-hot across my nerves—but under it, the exhilaration, the spark of being wanted like this, used like this, owned.

It broke me open and pieced me back together all at once.

My chest heaved, pulse thundered, and every broken part of me sang as I choked around him, grateful for every inch.

He didn't slow down. The grip on my hair tightened, and he used me like a weapon, like a punishment, as though he needed to purge something violent from his soul, and I was the only person to help him.

His hips snapped forward with precision, and every thrust scraped something open inside me—fear, need, belonging .

My fingers curled into the cushions as I fought for air, tears streaking down my face, spit slicking my chin. And I didn't want it to stop. I wanted to drown in him, in the weight of his rage, in the proof that I was still real, still wanted, even if it came through violence.

He hissed my name, guttural, low, then pulled back just long enough for me to inhale, to drag in one ragged breath, before slamming forward again, deeper, harder.

He wasn't kissing me. He wasn't touching me gently. He was fucking my mouth as if he hated me—and maybe he did. But despite the hatred, there was heat. Connection. Fire.

His orgasm slammed into him, and he held his cock in my throat, yelling his release, then easing it out and stumbling back. "Get the fuck out," he snapped, then stalked through another door.

I squirmed in the grip of my twisted T-shirt, desperation clawing through my veins. I got my hand on my cock and stroked hard, fast, frantic. My orgasm was brutal, ripping through me in a flash of relief and fury. I doubled over, gasping, shaking, every nerve frayed to ash.

Panting, I wiped the come off my stomach with the same shirt Killian had torn off me, dragging it across my skin like a final insult.

I let the damp fabric fall from my fingers, grabbed my backpack—the one with the tools I’d used to break into his life—and slung it over my shoulder as if nothing had happened.

And then I left. Shirtless. At peace. Back to Redcars.

Back to somewhere that stopped me from bleeding out in slow motion.

From chasing fire that burned me raw. From begging Killian to tear me apart to feel something as good as fire.

Because that was what it was, in the end.

Need. Not love. Not lust. Not even revenge.

Just the desperate hope that someone, somewhere, could burn hot enough to cauterize the holes in me.

Killian’s fury, his touch, the violence of his release had grounded me. Made me real. There was no shame in it, not for me. Shame came with pretending I could want gentle, could be touched with care, when all I’d ever understood was pain wrapped in need.

The garage didn’t ask for explanations. Redcars didn’t care why I flinched at kindness or why fire felt like peace. It was the only place that held me without condition. It was all tools, oil, and broken men who didn’t expect me to be whole .

I didn’t look over my shoulder. If I had, I might’ve run back to him.

And I didn't trust myself not to beg.

And now, I had to face the music, and when I told Rio what had accidentally happened, he was going to kill me.

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TEN

Killian

I leaned against my bedroom door, the wood solid against my spine, and tried to catch my fucking breath.

Jesus Christ.

My jeans were still tangled around one ankle, my thighs trembling, and all I could think about was the sight of Jamie on his knees, lips slick and red, pupils blown wide with hunger.

That wicked tongue, those greedy hands, the way he'd looked up at me as if I was the only goddamn thing in the world worth worshiping.

And I'd let him. Hell, I'd needed it. Needed him .

And now?

Now, I was wrecked.

But not in a bad way .

Not like before .

I scrubbed a hand over my face, the echo of his name still caught in my throat.

Jamie. Brilliant, dangerous, chaotic Jamie.

The man who moved like smoke, burned like fire, and had more fury in him than sense.

The same Jamie I'd watched kill Ricardo without blinking, then turn around and help a bunch of terrified kids into the back of the truck as if he hadn't just committed murder.

More than one, given the two lifeless guards in the hall.

He hadn't hesitated. I had . And I hated myself for it.

Back then, there'd been nothing but chaos in him, in me. I'd looked at him and seen every bad decision I'd ever made staring back at me with haunted eyes and blood on his hands. I'd been so fucking furious—because he wasn't supposed to do that shit on this case. Not on his own.

So I'd shoved him to his knees, half-mad with anger and need and fear. And maybe that made me an asshole, but fuck, he'd needed it— we had. That control, that surrender. It had been a way back for both of us.

I tipped my head against the door, eyes closed .

I wasn't sure if I was more terrified that I needed him... or that he needed me.

And if I let him stay—if I let this become more than a fuck in the dark or a coping mechanism with teeth—what the hell would that make me?

I breathed out, slow and shaky, and finally peeled myself off the door.

This wasn't over.

Not even close.

My phone chimed where it had landed on the floor, screen up, far enough out of reach that I had to bend for it with a groan. My thighs still trembled. I caught the message as the screen lit up—simple, direct, no punctuation.

Mickey : Safe

A knot in my chest unspooled. I sank on the edge of the bed, head in my hands, for a second before I typed out my reply:

Killian: Thank you. Couldn't have done this without you. Sending funds now.

Then a quick message to Caleb, the closest thing I had to a conscience most days.

Killian : Extra 10 to Mickey.

I watched the message go through, then stared at the thread with Mickey for a long moment.

Caleb's uncle was our safe place for anyone who needed help, fierce, providing a sanctuary, which our team funded from what we retained from the bad guys. And now, Mickey had taken in the ones Jamie had helped to save. All of them.

Caleb: On it

Caleb: Your guest has left?

I let out a slow breath and opened the app linked to the camera system outside my

building.

I flicked to the front entrance and waited until the timestamp updated.

Then, there he was—Jamie. Bold as fuck, walking right out of the front doors of my high-end, glass-and-steel mausoleum as if he hadn't dropped to his knees twenty minutes ago.

He didn't look back.

Of course, he didn't.

I watched him until he was out of frame.

Killian: Yeah

Caleb: Team needs to talk about this shit

Killian: Tomorrow

Only then did I strip, my skin tacky with sweat, and I didn't let myself think too hard as I walked into the bathroom, turned the dial to scalding hot, and stepped into the shower, letting the water wash away the exhaustion.

I leaned into the tiles, one hand braced flat against the wall, chest heaving as if I'd run a mile, not just walked across my bedroom and stripped down.

My head throbbed with too many things—talking to Lassiter, trying to get intel, the kids, the fire...

Jamie's mouth, Jamie's eyes, the way he'd looked at me when I'd pushed him to his

knees as if he wanted me to destroy him.

He'd killed those men. Slit their throats, left them to burn, as if it didn't matter to him.

As if nothing could touch him.

And I wasn't a killer. That line— that line—I hadn't crossed. Not yet. I told myself I wouldn't. I told myself that was what kept me clean. But I'd watched him kill Ricardo. Watched him. What the fuck did that make me? My jaw tightened.

The steam closed around me, hot and thick and blinding, but guilt clawed at the back of my throat, mixing with the sick twist of relief that the kids were safe, or the unbearable, maddening, hard truth of what my body was doing now. My cock was hard.

Already.

As if it couldn't tell the difference between power and panic, fury and lust. As if it didn't know Jamie had blood on his hands and I still wanted to pull him back here and take him . I squeezed my eyes shut.

You're not a killer. That was what I told myself.

But if Jamie had looked up at me again, had touched me again—God, if he'd begged—I would've done whatever the hell he wanted.

And that scared the shit out of me. I scrubbed a hand down my chest, trying to will it away.

The tension. The need. But I couldn't shake it—his voice, his breath on my skin, the

way he'd opened for me like it was the only thing keeping him sane.

The only thing keeping me sane. This wasn't clean. It wasn't safe. It wasn't right .

And still, my hips jerked forward, chasing friction, release, and something that might feel like control but never would be.

I wanted to be angry with him. I tried to hold on to that fury.

I had to keep our distance, but all I could feel was the echo of my cock in his mouth, the desperate way he'd needed me to claim him, ruin him, anchor him.

And all I could see behind my eyes was the moment he'd slit Ricardo's throat.

No hesitation. My hand slammed into the tile with a hollow thud.

I wasn't ready to deal with what that meant, and I lost myself in thoughts of fucking an anonymous mouth, not blue-eyed, blond, Jamie, with his eyes full of fire.

Not Pretty .

But when I painted the tile with my release, I couldn't catch my breath.

And that fucking hurt .

Awake and heading for a new day, I stared at my reflection—impeccable.

Pressed. Polished. The mirror didn't lie, but it didn't tell the whole story either.

As if nothing had happened. As if I hadn't spent the night sweating through thousand-thread-count sheets, flinching awake every hour, replaying the grainy flashes of

memory from a club backroom soaked in blood and adrenaline, the kids we'd gotten out, and Jamie's wrecked, beautiful mouth.

My court armor was midnight black Tom Ford, a crisp white shirt and a surgical and deliberate knot in my tie.

I adjusted my cufflinks with steady hands, though my stomach hadn't unclenched since 3 a.m., when I'd jolted out of another restless half-sleep and rechecked the camera feed and the app on my phone, which Caleb had created to track news. And again. And again.

There'd been no more messages from Mickey overnight. No news of the kids, which meant they were safe and alive. For now. But my mind kept circling the same cold, jagged loop: Were there cameras we didn't know about at the club?

Caleb had been working last night and would have scrubbed any footage he'd found of me, and I hoped to fuck, Jamie, as well.

Had someone caught us on tape that Caleb couldn't fix?

The kids out the back? Jamie in that hallway?

Me a shadow behind him, blood on the floor, a knife in his hand?

Did I look surprised? Or had I acted as if I were complicit?

I didn't do this shit. I was calm and composed and in control.

Caleb had already started to spin the story with whispers on the right platforms. Three bodies.

Two with records. One still unnamed. Gang-related shooting in an underground club with suspected drug ties.

That was what they were saying. Clean, clinical, sleazy.

Wrapped in enough implication to turn everyone off caring.

“Fuck,” I mumbled, then straightened. “Good,” I said in my best court voice. “Let it stay that way.” There, that was better.

Let the world think it was simply another score settled between scumbags.

I didn’t care what the public thought of the dead—I just needed them not looking too closely at the living.

Because if anyone started digging? If someone put my name near that place, near that night ?

If the wrong defense attorney caught a whisper of it in the wind?

I couldn’t protect anyone. I couldn’t do my job.

I smoothed down the lapels of my jacket, adjusted how it sat across my shoulders, and pulled on the version of myself no one questioned.

The one who won arguments with a raised brow and took down district attorneys with three words or less.

The one who hadn’t let a killer fall to his knees and beg for ruin.

This was my compartmentalization. My ritual.

Six a.m. Caffeinated. Dressed like a lawyer. Due in court by ten.

I looked perfect even if I didn't feel clean. I fastened the final button on my jacket, stared myself down in the mirror, and shut every door inside me. I couldn't afford to feel today.

When I reached my building, I stepped out of the elevator into the 17th-floor reception to my law office all calm as if I hadn't watched someone die twenty feet from me less than twelve hours ago.

"Good morning, Mr. McKendrick," Andrea said, stepping in smoothly beside me, latte in one hand, tablet in the other.

"Court at ten, but Judge Alston's already running behind on the Jenkins pre-trial.

You've got ten minutes to brief with Diaz and Chen.

You asked to see the statement edits for Barrett, I flagged the key changes?—"

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“Email those to my phone, please,” I said, taking the coffee, nodding as if I’d slept more than two hours and my bones didn’t ache from clenching through every hour of the night. I gave her a small smile I didn’t feel. “You’re the best, Andrea.” She smiled back. “Can you give me an hour?”

She knew exactly what the team huddled in the Cave did, but she stayed away from it all—plausible deniability—on my instructions. She was the everyday face of what I did, and she understood I needed that separation.

I shut the door behind me, inhaled the scent of dark roast, bergamot, and leather.

Familiar ground. My office looked the same as it always did—clean lines, chrome and charcoal, a view of the city’s bones below.

Controlled. Ordered. Mine. I locked the door, then moved to the side entrance into the Cave.

Caleb was already there, laptop open, sleeves rolled, the edge of his tie slightly crooked.

He looked as if he’d been up all night too.

“And?” I said, sipping my coffee.

Caleb nodded, fingers flying over the keyboard as windows and tabs cascaded across his screen.

“We had three angles on the entrance. One traffic cam two blocks over, one drone—user-tagged footage from an influencer with a vape sponsorship, of all things—and a probable illegal internal feed from the back hallway. All cached. All scrubbed.” He turned the laptop so I could see it.

“Dark web forums have already deleted the threads. I reached out to a contact in Metro Server Compliance—whispered in the right ears about shutting down that backchannel surveillance company. The botnet that indexed the club’s social tags is down.

And the local news stations are running the gang line, nothing else. Then?—”

“Cut to the chase, nerd,” I deadpanned.

Caleb looked up with a raised eyebrow. “It’s all good.”

I let out a slow breath and leaned back in my chair. “Thank you.”

“You want to talk about the shit that went down?”

“No.”

He nodded, sat back, and folded his hands. “Okay. Then let me cut to the chase. Jamie freaking Maddox? On scene. Three bodies and a fire.” He’s a loose cannon. Volatile. He killed three men; he burned the back rooms. That’s not nothing. Why is a former hacker, who is also a pyromaniac murderer?—”

Arsonist,” I corrected.

Caleb cursed. “What was he doing at the club, and did he even have an exit plan? Oh, and why did he take down the security at your place, which needless to say, I’ve fixed

everything remotely, but the wiring... what he did..."

Caleb was working his way up to a meltdown. "I know," I said quietly .

"We need to manage him. He could wreck everything if we're not careful."

As much as we could manage a live flame.

I didn't answer. Not right away, because the truth was—Jamie was a loose cannon, and it scared me, and intrigued me all at the same time. I had a lot to lose—we all did, and Jamie was the unknown quantity.

"Watch him."

"Already on it," Caleb said, and turned back to his laptop and screens.

Two monitors showed the outside of the apartment Jamie shared with Rio, and the other the garage.

"We have internal hookups to the security system, I assume Jamie aka DaemonRaze installed, and so far, he hasn't cut it off despite knowing we're in there.

" He hesitated, then added, "I'm not happy about this. "

"But you'll keep an eye on things, yeah?" I said, glancing over.

"Damage limitation," Caleb muttered, fingers flying over the keyboard again.

Our private elevator chimed, and Sonya came in holding a paper bag, dropping the pastries on the table and tossing me a sharp look. "What the fuck happened last night, Killian?"

All I could do was groan—I didn't want to go through this again. "Caleb can explain," I said, already moving toward my actual office. "I have court."

By 9:59 a.m., I was back in full performance mode—file under my arm, mask locked tight, coat buttoned with precision as I entered the courtroom.

Judge Alston didn't look up as I slid into my seat at the defense table, but I caught the flick of her pen. She never looked at you until you were close to losing.

Across from me sat Martin Calloway.

Silicon Valley transplant. Private equity vampire. A man who'd built three fake holding companies to funnel investor funds into shell corporations. The SEC had noticed when a junior analyst flagged a 1.7 million dollar transaction for "ecosystem regeneration consulting."

Translation: Calloway had paid his mistress to keep her quiet, and paid off the two hookers he'd nearly beaten to death.

I wished he was there answering for the latter, but, no, like Al Capone he'd go down for financial reasons, not the pain he'd inflicted.

Calloway was guilty. Rotten to the core.

And I'd known it the second I shook his hand.

So the team and I had laid the groundwork weeks ago.

Sloppy motions. Just enough missed objections.

Hints of incompetence tucked in like breadcrumbs.

The judge would never accuse me of tanking the case—but I knew how to help a guilty man go down.

The plea had come in at 2:48 p.m., right on schedule.

Three counts of securities fraud. Ten years suspended to five with federal supervision, full restitution of 5.

6 million dollars in investor funds. Probation recommendation: denied.

Calloway was stunned, but I'd already packed my briefcase.

The poor bastard still thought he might walk. I kept my expression grim.

“Mr. Vance, your client accepts the terms?” Alston asked, peering over her glasses.

I stood. “He does, Your Honor.”

“We'll enter it into the record.” Bang . Gavel. Done.

I leaned into Calloway and dropped my voice. “This is the best outcome under the circumstances.”

He muttered something about an appeal, about how his former CFO would fold under pressure.

I nodded and didn't bother answering. He wouldn't last long in prison, not with one of his victims being related to a con inside—someone with a reputation for shivving anyone who so much as looked at him the wrong way.

By the time he spluttered some other shit about appealing, I was already heading back

into the corridors of cold marble and fluorescent light.

Inside? I was relieved . Because letting him fall was the first thing all day that felt clean.

By the time I returned to the office, the sun was beginning to dip behind the high-rises, casting sharp golden streaks across the glass, and Andrea was at her desk, typing something at inhuman speed.

“All good, sir?” she asked.

“A loss,” I said with a wink, and she smiled. “Feel free to leave early.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Nothing.”

She hesitated, closed her laptop, gathered her coat and bag, and was gone with her usual quiet grace.

I headed through the quiet outer offices until I reached the Cave.

Caleb and Sonya were already in there. Sonya cross-legged on the floor, laptop balanced on her knees, earbuds in, a pen tapping against her leg.

Caleb was by the six-foot stretch of pushpins, yarn, and printed photos that was our cork wall. Old school. Deliberate. He threw me a smile. “Good result there, boss.”

“Yep,” I said. ”Okay, so...” I pinched the bridge of my nose. Now we had to face the next big fuck-up. “Coffee first.” I dropped my briefcase and moved toward the coffee machine. “Anyone else need a hit?”

Sonya lifted her cup without looking away from the screen, and Caleb raised two fingers.

Doing something with my hands helped push the static out of my brain.

I'd been focused on putting Calloway down, unable to deal with the whole Jamie thing, which was so noisy in my thoughts I was starting to lose my shit.

I handed out coffees, then joined Caleb. Standing beside the new picture at the center of the wall—fresh printed and tacked with two steel pins—was the photo of Lassiter, Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Central District and prosecutor for organized crime and human trafficking cases.

A guy who'd made a name for himself hammering on predators.

The kind of man who liked televised raids and soundbites about justice.

He went to church every Sunday. Perfect blonde wife named Camille.

Two grown kids—Christopher, a surgeon; Ellie, a tech CEO in Silver Lake.

Their house in a gated community in Bel Air Crest, a family home, and he genuinely seemed to live that life.

I stared at the photo. The man in it was smiling—big, white teeth, an expensive suit, and an American flag lapel pin. “Okay, let’s start from the beginning.”

ELEVEN

Jamie

The smell of coffee hit me a second before the sound of someone shifting at the edge of the bed. I cracked one eye open to find Rio sitting there, calm as anything, holding out a mug.

He was already dressed for work in his faded Redcars T-shirt, the sleeves snug over his biceps, and jeans streaked with grease at the thigh.

His expression was unreadable—but not closed.

He looked like someone waiting to continue a conversation he'd already started in his head.

I had been half-expecting him to confront me the next morning, but it took him two nights and a full day to finally speak up.

He'd ignored me at work yesterday, and for a while, I'd convinced myself that he didn't know what I'd done, but he'd known .

And now it was time to pay the piper.

“Morning,” I muttered, sitting up and taking the mug. The heat of it felt good against my fingers.

Rio didn't smile, just leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his posture casual, but I braced myself for the storm. When he showed up with this tension in him, it was because it mattered.

I mattered to him.

“What did you do?” he asked. There was no judgment in the question. Just a quiet need to know. Just Rio, being who he always was—steady, grounded, someone who could look at the ugliest thing about you and not flinch. I sipped the coffee before I answered.

He was to me what others would call a best friend, but he was also the lightning rod to my storm.

We were both angry men, sharp around the edges in ways that didn't always show.

But where Rio threw his fists, I threw fire.

He'd grown up fighting in alleys and gyms, learning control and earning cash with his fists.

I'd grown up behind a keyboard and a wall of flames, learning to make something burn enough to vanish and give me what I needed.

He'd seen me early on—really seen me. Not the smart mouth, twitchy hands, or half-smiles I used to deflect people.

He'd pulled me into the garage as one of Tudor's rescues, handed me tools with grease still on the handles, and told me cars were simple.

If something broke, you fixed it. If you didn't know how, you learned.

I already liked the big old muscle cars, and I took to mechanics like a duck to water.

He acted as if he was way older than me when, in fact, he only had five years on me.

“Stick with these over killing,” he’d said once, wiping his hands on a rag while I stared at the guts of a rebuilt V8. “It’s slower. Makes you breathe.”

I tried.

I stayed away from computers for a while. Let the fire rest. I focused on things I could hold and fix with patience instead of destruction. Tried, for once, to be something close to normal. But some nights, the itch came back in nightmares. One night, it had gotten too loud.

This half-collapsed house wasn’t far from the shop—forgotten, empty, but still standing as if it had something to prove.

Dealers had used it for years. A hole in the world no one would miss.

I slit the throat of the man inside, then lit it without thinking.

I watched it go up like a matchstick palace, the flames licking high and hot, and I stood there until the heat got too close and the happiness settled in my chest .

Rio found me. He’d followed me, watched my back, and didn’t yell. Didn’t lay into me. Just stood beside me in the dark, watching the building crack and groan as it fell. Then, he’d grabbed my arm, pulled me toward the truck, and said quietly, “You done?”

I hadn’t answered. Couldn’t. He hadn’t waited for me to explain; he told me not to be so fucking stupid and drove us back to Redcars in silence.

Later, when I'd stopped shaking, when I could finally look him in the eye again, he said, "You want to burn something, you can. But you have to talk to me first, and I'll have your back, and you have control. That's the deal."

"And if I don't?"

He'd stared at me, then made me promise. And I did.

Then Stockton had happened. Somehow, he'd taken control of me and made himself my safe place.

Now, sitting on my bed like it was his right, he was waiting and letting the silence stretch until I filled it.

"I did what I had to," I said finally, not quite looking at him.

I'd lost control, seen Ricardo with his hands on Killian, and the red mist had descended.

I'd only been there to watch, following up on a pattern I'd analyzed with three missing men, and somehow, it had become a rescue mission.

I only meant to get them away. I hadn't meant to kill.

But Ricardo had touched Killian.

How did I explain that to Rio?

Rio's eyes didn't waver. "Don't bullshit me, Jamie."

"I'm not."

“How many did you kill?”

“Three, people-traffickers. I burned to cover it up is all.” I glanced up at him. “I didn’t go there intending to burn.”

He didn’t move, didn’t flinch. Just breathed slowly and deeply.

“You could’ve told me where you were going.”

“I didn’t plan on burning anything.”

“You felt it coming.”

I didn’t deny it. I’d felt the need for days, and part of me had known I was going to let it out, but I thought I’d have time to talk to Rio, to keep my promise to tell him.

Rio sighed. “I don’t care what it is you need or why. I need to know so I can protect you.”

My throat felt tight.

“I know,” I said. “I do. ”

His hand touched my shoulder gently—no squeeze, no lecture. And for a second, I could breathe again. “Tell me what happened.”

“Killian was there,” I said quietly.

Rio’s eyes widened, not in surprise—more as if he’d been expecting that name to come up sooner or later.

“And?” he asked, voice still calm. Still Rio .

I took another sip of coffee. It had cooled, but I barely tasted it.

The words sat heavy on my tongue, not because I was ashamed, but because saying them out loud meant they were real.

I couldn't pretend it was just a moment, something that hadn't sunk its teeth in.

“Jamie, talk to me? Did he see you kill? Did he see you burn?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, Jamie!”

“And I went to his place,” I blurted. “After.”

I set the mug down on the nightstand and rubbed a hand over my jaw. I wasn't shaking, but something in me felt loose. Raw. Like skin scraped too thin.

“He saw it,” I said. “The whole thing. The kids, the blood. He didn't stop me.

Just... watched. Then, he got the kids away, okay?

So, that was good, right?” Rio didn't interrupt.

He knew how to listen. How to wait without pressing.

“I think he hated me for what I did,” I continued.

“Or maybe I hated myself. I couldn't tell.

But I didn't want him to fix any of the noise.

I didn't want to see him after to talk. I just—" I blew out a breath.

"I forced him to put me on my knees," I said, finally.

The words hung in the air, heavy and absolute. No shame. No apology. Just the truth.

"I needed that," I added, voice lower now.

"Not comfort. Not redemption. Just... control. I needed him to take it. To push me down and remind me there was still something stronger than the chaos in my head." Rio was quiet, eyes unreadable.

"I didn't want to fall apart," I said, staring at the blankets bunched in my lap.

"Not in front of him. So I gave him something else. Let him pretend it was about sex. Let myself pretend."

"But it wasn't just that?"

"It never is."

"You trust him that much?" Rio asked, tone careful now.

I looked up at him. "I don't know why," I said. "It's fucking stupid, I know."

Rio exhaled. His hand lifted from my shoulder. He leaned back a little, giving me space but not moving away. "No," he said. "It's not stupid. It's risky. But not stupid." He studied me for a long moment, then added, "Just tell me one thing—was he what you needed in that moment?"

I didn't even have to think. "Yeah. He was."

Rio nodded. "Then, I don't give a fuck what it looks like to anyone else."

That meant more than I could say. Because if Rio had judged me, I didn't know what I'd do. Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. He was the line I didn't want to cross.

"You know I've got you, right?" he said, more serious now. "No matter what."

I nodded. "I know." And I did. Because when the world burned, Rio was the one person who'd never let me go up with it.

"But if you go off alone again, bring that shit to Redcars, around Cassidy, around Robbie, I swear, I will smack you into next week."

The garage was quiet.

Rio was out on a delivery, Enzo was picking up parts, and Logan was still away with his man down in San Diego. I was the one here to watch over things, and I wandered past the lineup of half-gutted engines, caught a whiff of oil and something sweet—vanilla, maybe cinnamon. Sugar.

When I passed the doorway to the little kitchen off the break room, I caught sight of Robbie hunched in a chair, one knee pulled up to his chest, a worn hoodie bunched at the elbows.

He had a couple of coding books spread out in front of him, old-school hardcovers with cracked spines and faded print.

I slowed.

“Those are ancient,” I said, grabbing a cookie from the cooling rack. “ Perl isn’t even a current coding language anymore. It’s practically digital Latin.”

Robbie looked up, then down at the open page as if he was only just realizing what he’d been reading. “Yeah, I figured. It mentioned something called CGI scripts, and I had to Google what the hell that even meant.”

I snorted. “Jesus. That’s, like, GeoCities-era shit.”

He smiled, a little crooked. “They were in a box in the upstairs office. I thought they might be useful.”

“They’re not,” I said, chewing. “But the fact that you were willing to read them? That is .” I leaned against the counter, grabbed another of the cookies cooling on a rack, still warm. “You know you can just Google that stuff and get something way more current, right?”

“I like books,” he said with a shrug. “Easier to focus.”

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I took a bite of the cookie—sweet, with a little kick of salt. “Fair,” I said, through the chew. “Still, these are ancient in tech terms.”

Robbie glanced down at the open page. “I figured. Some of the coding syntax doesn’t match the stuff in the online courses Enzo got me.”

That tugged a little at something behind my ribs. I loved Enzo for Robbie, and Robbie for Enzo. The big man was born to care for Robbie, and they fit together like... I don’t fucking know... like two things that fit.

I watched him for a second longer. The kid—God, I still called him a kid, even though I knew he hated that—had come a long way since Enzo and Rio had found him half-dead and terrified, covered in scars and hollowed out with pain.

But now? He looked... not fine. But better. His hair was longer, messier, and he no longer dyed it, so it was a head of blond waves. He wore Enzo’s too-big hoodie like armor, and there was still a shadow behind his eyes if you knew where to look—but he was sitting here. Reading. Studying. Trying .

And baking. Which I loved. “These are dangerous,” I said, holding the half-eaten cookie.

He gave a little laugh and ducked his head. “Logan likes them. Said they help keep the team from yelling.”

“I’ll take five dozen to go.”

That got me a full smile this time. Small, but it stayed.

I moved around the counter, grabbed another cookie, and said, “If you want something better to learn from, I can hook you up. I’ve got access to a few private online archives, and we could print them out.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“I know,” I cut in. “I want to.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

I didn’t say you’re welcome. Didn’t need to.

We sat quietly for another moment, the fridge’s hum the only sound between us. The kind of silence that wasn’t tense, just... full. He turned another page as if he wasn’t in a rush, and I suddenly felt awkward in my skin—as if he needed his quiet and I needed...

Fuck knows what I needed, but the air felt too still, too easy, and I wasn’t good at easy.

So I grabbed five more cookies, still warm, stacked them in a napkin, poured myself a second coffee, and headed back out to the ’6868 Charger I’d been elbow-deep in all week.

She was right where I’d left her—hood up, guts exposed, engine halfway through a rebuild that had taken twice as long as it should have.

I wasn’t in a rush. The rhythm of the work mattered more than the finish line, and the owner wanted the best.

I set the coffee on the workbench, the cookies next to it, and leaned over the frame to see where I'd left off.

Carburetor was still being a bitch. I picked up the socket wrench and let my hands do what they knew best, and tuning out the world should've been easy.

But the second the silence settled again, my brain betrayed me.

Killian.

Just the thought of his name sent a prickle down the back of my neck, the same as from a fire I'd forgotten was still burning. What a fucking mess that was.

He was everything I shouldn't want—too clean, controlled, sharp-edged, and shut-down.

He wore suits that cost more than a car and looked at the world as if he were already five moves ahead of it.

But underneath all that polish was a man who had watched me kill—watched me—and still pushed me to my knees to give me what I needed—still touched me like I wasn't broken glass held together by spit and rage.

He'd been so fucking angry, on the edge of blowing up, and I was getting hard thinking of the way he'd forced himself into my mouth.

I twisted the wrench, metal groaning beneath my hand.

My jaw clenched. He'd looked at me that night as if he couldn't decide if he hated me or wanted to kill me.

I didn't blame him for being confused. All I could think about was how his hand had curled in my hair.

The sound he'd made when he came undone and the guilt in his eyes, as though he'd crossed a line he couldn't uncross... insane.

He probably hated himself for it. But I hadn't stopped thinking about it since I left his apartment.

The wrench clanged into the tray as the garage door creaked open, yanking me out of my spiraling thoughts.

Enzo stepped through, a gust of cool air following him, sleeves rolled to his elbows and dark sunglasses still perched on his head, hauling two heavy boxes that looked like they'd been through a war.

He dumped them onto the workbench beside the Charger with a grunt.

"Turbo kit for the Camaro rebuild coming in Thursday," he said, brushing dust off his hands .

Robbie came jogging in from the kitchen, his too-big hoodie flapping behind him. The second he spotted Enzo across the bay, he lit up as if someone had flipped a switch. And then? He climbed him like a fucking tree.

Enzo caught him without missing a beat, arms wrapping around Robbie's waist as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and they were kissing before I could so much as blink.

Not sweet, not slow—just hungry. As if they'd been apart for weeks, not half a shift.

I grabbed a rag and wiped grease off my hands, pretending not to watch.

Gentle kitten kisses had never done anything for me.

Too slow, too wrapped up in feelings I didn't always trust. But the way those two went at it?

Like they couldn't breathe without the other?

I got why people wrote songs about that.

Was it what I wanted with Killian?

No, not with him.

"Jesus," I muttered. "Get a room."

"Good idea," Enzo said, already turning away. "Lunch break."

Before I could say anything else, Enzo was carrying Robbie out of the door, one hand under his thighs, Robbie clinging to him as if he'd never let go. And then, the garage was empty again .

Just me, the Charger, and five cookies I suddenly wasn't hungry for anymore.

I was restless, annoyed with myself, and as soon as the day had finished, after Rio told me he wasn't going home but heading to a fight, there was only one person I wanted to see, if only to get my head straight that he wasn't everything I wanted right now.

Killian.

TWELVE

Killian

I arrived home to find an alert waiting on my phone before I reached the penthouse. Jamie was in the corridor outside on my floor.

Not inside. Not breaking in this time. Just sitting there, back pressed to the wall next to my apartment door, arms crossed over his chest, head tipped back as if he might've been asleep. But I knew better—his jaw was too tight, his posture coiled.

I stopped short. How the hell had he gotten past front desk security?

“What are you doing here?” I asked as soon as the elevator doors opened.

Jamie opened one eye. “We need to talk.”

I glanced back at the elevator door, nerves tightening in my gut. I had the penthouse—if anyone saw him up here... “How in the hell did you get up here?”

“I have my ways,” he said, not moving.

“You can't be here.

“Let me inside.”

“Jesus, what if someone saw you?” I snapped, voice low but sharp. “Do you have any

idea?—”

“Well to be fair, you wouldn’t be happy if I broke in again,” he cut in, standing now. His tone was clipped, tension rolling off him in waves. “Thought I’d try the front door like a normal person.”

I stared at him for a beat too long. Then, I cursed under my breath and yanked the door open. “Get the fuck inside.”

He stepped past me, buzzing with something I couldn’t name, and I followed him in, slamming the door behind us.

The silence inside stretched taut, brittle enough to snap.

I turned on him the second the door clicked shut. “What are you doing here, Jamie?”

He didn’t hesitate. “You’re in my head,” he said, voice raw, barely held together. “I can’t get you out. And I liked being on my knees for you.”

There was no shame in the way he said it—just quiet intensity, as though it had meant something more than sex.

As if he’d found a moment of silence in the chaos when I’d had my hands on him.

Maybe it wasn’t about submission or giving up control—maybe it was about choosing to hand it over, for a breath, and trusting someone not to hurt him with it.

That hit like a punch. Not only the words, but the honesty of them. His eyes were wild with something that looked too much like need.

I dragged a hand through my hair, pacing once before facing him again. “Jamie, you

have a record, you can't come here. Jesus, you killed your parents."

"Accidentally," he said and narrowed his gaze at me.

"There was a suspicion that the son they'd tortured and abused might or might not have set a fire to kill them, but hey, the electrics were bad and it was a happy accident.

" He leaned into me. "And it was fucking amazing to know they weren't going to hurt me anymore. "

"And then your uncle."

"Oh yeah, torturer number three. I definitely planned that one."

"Fuck!"

"I'd like to."

"Jesus, what we did... that wasn't a thing. That was you desperate and me losing my goddamn mind."

He flinched as if I'd struck him, then squared his shoulders. "You didn't look like it wasn't a thing when you were shaking above me."

I breathed out hard. "Don't."

"You don't get to tell me it didn't mean anything when you fucked my mouth and enjoyed it."

I pressed my hands to my hips, trying to find steady ground.

Was this what he thought he wanted? For me to shove him down, get rough, force my cock down his throat as if that act alone could patch up all the cracks inside him?

Was it punishment he was chasing? Validation?

A moment where he didn't have to think, just feel?

I couldn't tell, and that terrified me. I wasn't a mind reader, and I wasn't about to use him as a means to feel needed if I didn't understand what I was walking into.

The Dom/sub thing wasn't even my lane. Yeah, I liked it rough.

Yeah, I was a top. But I wasn't some magic cure-all for someone chasing subspace like it was his salvation.

“Whatever you think you need—I'm not that guy. ”

“You don't know what I need,” he said evenly, but there was a flicker in his voice—something brittle.

He stepped toward me slowly, deliberately, and I felt the shift in the air.

He looked calm, too calm, as if he'd stuffed all the chaos down where I couldn't reach it.

“It's just sex, and you liked it last time. ”

“You were insane, you?— ”

“Just sex,” he whispered.

But I didn't believe him—not really. His voice sounded too careful, too level, as if he were trying to make it easy for me to walk away or maybe, not scare me off.

Where was his fire? The snarl? The sharp edge of him that refused to bend? It was gone, buried beneath a mask I couldn't see through. And that scared the hell out of me because I didn't know if he was holding back to protect me, or to protect himself.

“You're very tall,” he observed as if we weren't talking about sex at all.

“What are you—six-five?” I didn't answer.

I was too caught up in figuring out how to get him to back off.

“I'm only five-ten, I probably weigh like fifty pounds less than you, because hell, for a lawyer, you're built.

I bet you could hold me down enough to fuck me hard. ”

I met his gaze. “You need someone who isn't me.

As much as I want it...” I couldn't believe I'd admitted that to him, but his eyes widened at the words, and I sighed and put all my wants and needs back in the dark space where I kept them.

“Shit, Pretty, I'm not a safe place. You want someone who can fix you when you lose your shit.

” I gestured between us. “I don't even know what we're doing. ”

Jamie's jaw clenched, then he tugged his T-shirt over his head and met my gaze.

His blond hair fell messily over one eye, his blue gaze locked on me like a challenge. Pillow-soft lips, the kind that had looked so fucking good wrapped around my cock, parted slightly, the hint of a pout still there—and I wanted him. Fiercely.

Then, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a condom and a handful of lube sachets, setting them on the side table like an offering.

I have a perfectly good bottle of lube in my bedroom.

My cock was hard. Obvious in my damn suit pants. I tugged off my jacket and draped it over the back of the chair, loosening my tie as heat prickled at the back of my neck.

Jamie's eyes widened as if to ask—are we doing this?

And fuck me, I didn't know. But I wanted to.

I stared at him, throat tight, because the truth was—I did want him again. I wanted to be buried in him, until he didn't know any broken, brilliant part of himself that I hadn't touched— But wanting him and being right for him were two very different things.

And I wasn't sure which one mattered more. "I'm not what you need," I repeated, but the words felt weak against the way he moved.

He toed off his sneakers, slow, deliberate, then reached for the button on his jeans, popping it with a flick of his fingers. His gaze never left mine. His hips rolled as he pushed the denim down, revealing black boxer briefs stretched tight, and then, those too were gone in one smooth motion.

He was cut. He was perfect. And he knew it. Every action he made was calculated—confident, but not cocky—as if he was letting me watch, not asking for

approval, not begging, just offering . A silent dare wrapped in pale skin and defiance.

My breath caught. Every nerve in me lit up. The line between want and need blurred to nothing.

I still wasn't what he needed.

But damn if he didn't make me want to be, and that made me angry at myself—I'd promised to keep the darker side of me locked away the moment I'd met my friends in college and we became a team.

I vowed I'd be the good guy, the one who didn't give in to the hunger that sometimes twisted low in my gut. And fuck... I'd been so good.

But Jamie was sin personified.

He turned, walking past me as if he hadn't torn me in half with a look.

He climbed onto the sofa, braced his knees on the cushions and leaned over the back, arms trembling slightly as he reached behind himself with lube-slicked fingers.

One hand planted for balance, the other began to work himself open—awkward, determined, deliberate.

And all the while, he stared back at me. Over his shoulder. Blue eyes locked on mine. Daring me. Tempting me.

I saw the lube glistening on the curve of his ass, the way his jaw clenched, and I lost it. A growl tore out of me—low and dangerous—and I was heading to him before I knew it, crossing the room and yanking his hand back, away from himself.

“Mine,” I growled, voice unrecognizable.

What the fuck was that growling for? I wasn’t possessive. I fucked and ran. That was the rule. That had always been the rule. But this... Jamie... , slick and panting and wide-eyed beneath me, wasn’t only sex. And I didn’t know who the hell that made me anymore.

I pressed my palm to the small of his back and watched him arch for me slightly—just enough. “Stay like that,” I rasped. “Fuck, Pretty. You’re already dripping. Is that all for me?”

Jamie bowed his head, his hair falling in a curtain that hid his face, but I caught the flush crawling down the back of his neck. He pushed his ass back toward me in answer, needy and raw.

I slicked my fingers, easing them inside, and he moaned. I felt him trying to muffle it. “Don’t you dare hold back on me,” I said, voice low and tight. “You want to be fucked open, you make those sounds. Let me hear what you need.”

He trembled under my touch, back arching deeper. I pressed in further, curling my fingers, opening him up slow. More lube. More stretch. I wiped the excess on his discarded T-shirt like a man possessed, not even thinking.

I rolled on the condom with shaking hands, reached for another packet, squeezed more slick into my palm, and coated myself with a hiss. My cock ached—hard and desperate—so tight I could barely breathe.

“Look at you,” I muttered, lining myself up and letting the head drag across his hole. “Perfect little mess, bent over and begging with your eyes.”

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Jamie whimpered, gripping the edge of the sofa as if he needed the grounding.

“Say it,” I demanded, my voice guttural. “Tell me you want it. Tell me who’s gonna make you come.”

“You,” he gasped, breath catching as I nudged the head of my cock against him, teasing, circling. “You, Killian. Please?—”

I pushed in with a slow, steady pressure that made him gasp and jerk forward, but he didn’t try to move away. Didn’t flinch. Just held on tight to the back of the sofa as I filled him, inch by inch.

“That’s it,” I groaned. “Take it. Fuck, you feel like heaven.”

He moaned—low, rough, desperate—and started to reach beneath himself, fumbling for his cock, slick with need.

I growled and slapped his hand away without thinking. “Don’t,” I snapped. “You don’t get to touch yourself unless I say so. You come when I tell you, Pretty, and not a fucking second before.”

He whimpered, head bowing lower, as if begging me to take control of everything. The moan he gave next was deep, dark, needy as hell—the kind that vibrated in my spine.

I grabbed his hips and drove deeper, the sound of skin meeting skin echoing through the apartment.

“You want to come so bad?” I gritted, hips pistoning harder. “Then take all of me first.”

“Killlliaaaaan,” he whined.

“So good around me, Pretty.” I grabbed a handful of his ass, squeezing until my fingers dug into the muscle and he yelped—sharp, breathless—then melted into it.

I flattened that same hand and slapped his ass, hard enough to echo, watching the skin bloom red beneath my palm. He whimpered, low and wrecked, his knees spreading a little wider, offering himself up.

“You like that?” I growled, leaning over him, cock buried deep. “You like me using you like a fuck toy? Taking what I want, how I want it?”

He gave a shaky, needy moan, nodding into the cushion. “Hurt me.”

Fuck . I slapped his ass again and pushed back inside, forcing him forward and he was pleading nonsense.

“You’re my perfect hole tonight, Pretty. Just here to be used. Just here to take my cock. Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” he gasped, wrecked. “God, yes. Please, don’t stop.”

“Not planning on it,” I growled, snapping my hips forward and dragging a ragged groan from him. “You’re mine tonight. Mine to fuck. Mine to ruin. Mine to make beg.”

He choked on a moan, the sound breaking into the cushion as his body rocked with every thrust.

“I’m close,” he gasped, trembling .

I gripped his hips harder, grinding deeper into him. “Not yet. You don’t come until I say so. You understand me?” He nodded frantically, sweat sheening his skin. ”Say it.”

“I—won’t come.”

“Good boy.”

I drove into him harder, my rhythm relentless now.

Sweat dripped from my brow as I leaned over his back, my mouth close to his ear.

“You’re taking me so fucking well,” I growled, voice ragged.

“As if your body was made for me.” I gripped him hard, and Jamie let out a shattered whimper, his fingers white-knuckled around the cushion’s edge, back slick with sweat, trembling with need.

His hole clenched around me like it didn’t want to let go, every thrust drawing a new sound from his throat—whines, curses, pleas he couldn’t form.

“You feel that?” I whispered, dragging my cock out to the tip before slamming back in. “That’s me, Pretty. That’s every inch of me claiming you.”

“P-please, Killian?—”

“Not yet,” I growled, grabbing his hair and pulling his head back, forcing him to look over his shoulder at me. His eyes were glassy, lips parted, wrecked .

I reached around, wrapping a hand around his cock. “Now,” I breathed. “Come for me, Pretty.”

He shuddered beneath me, the cry he let out punched out of him as if it had been ripped from his soul.

He spilled over my hand, his back arching hard as his release overtook him.

And fuck—seeing him like that? That undone?

It dragged me over the edge too, hips snapping, cock pulsing deep inside him as I buried myself and came with a groan torn from my chest.

I didn’t let go. Not immediately. I pressed my forehead between his shoulder blades, both of us shaking, breath mingling in the thick, humid air.

His skin was slick with sweat and lube, hot beneath my touch, and I inhaled the scent of sex, of oil.

My cock still twitched inside him, oversensitive, and every inch of me throbbed with what we’d done.

I could feel the rapid thud of his heart, the tremble of his muscles under mine, and I stayed there, letting myself breathe him in. Letting myself feel it all.

“Pretty,” I whispered again. “Fuck... Jamie.”

He was still trembling, visibly so, even as I eased out of him and stripped off the condom. I kept a hand on his lower back, grounding him with touch alone, before coaxing him to stand.

He didn't speak. Just let me take his arm and guide him to the bedroom as if he couldn't quite hold himself together.

I cleaned him with a warm cloth, gentle touches—no teasing, no talking.

He let me. And when I nudged him onto the bed, he went without resistance, loose-limbed and pliant, letting the sheets cradle him.

I came back with a bottle of water and a fistful of snacks. Jamie was still lying there, watching me with heavy-lidded eyes, his expression unreadable.

I handed him a granola bar.

He blinked, took it. "No cookies?"

I rolled my eyes. "Eat. And drink. You'll feel like shit if you don't."

He chewed slowly, sipping water as if he hadn't realized he needed it until it hit his mouth.

Somehow—I didn't even remember lying down—I ended up with Jamie draped across me. His head on my chest, his leg tossed over mine, one hand curled loosely on my side. He was already asleep, breaths huffing against my neck.

And I didn't move.

Didn't want to.

THIRTEEN

Jamie

I woke up sore.

Not injured. Not aching as though I'd gone ten rounds with someone who hated me—but sore, in all the best ways. The kind of ache that hummed along every muscle, deep in the bone. The kind of ache that said last night had been real. Intense. Fucking unforgettable.

I blinked into the half-dark, warm and comfortable, and it hit me slowly that I wasn't in my bed. The sheets were too new. The pillow smelled wrong. Correction—Killian. It smelled of Killian. Spiced soap and aftershave and heat. I shifted and stiffened when an arm tightened around my waist.

Killian mumbled something in his sleep, voice low and rough with exhaustion, his breath ghosting along the back of my neck.

Carefully—quietly—I extricated myself from his hold, trying not to wake him. He let go with a sigh, and I slid from the bed and padded to the bathroom.

Of course, his bathroom was luxury incarnate—heated floors, rainfall shower, spotless counters. Fluffy folded towels that probably cost more than my monthly rent. The mirror was lit around the edges, glowing warm and golden.

But it wasn't the mirror's light that stopped me. It was what I saw in it.

There was a bruise on my ass, the imprint of a hand, faint but distinct. A bite mark bloomed red-violet at the top of my shoulder. I turned and winced as the memory of a slap across my ass flared like a phantom echo.

Jesus.

I pressed a palm to the counter to steady myself.

It had been amazing.

Hot and brutal and raw, and something else I didn't have the right word for yet. I looked like I'd been fucked. Properly, thoroughly, deliberately fucked. And I didn't regret a second of it.

Even if part of me didn't know what to do with that .

I exhaled and leaned in closer, running a fingertip over the bite.

Killian fucking McKendrick had marked me.

And I'd let him.

Behind me, the door creaked open. I caught his reflection in the mirror before I turned—Killian, shirtless, hair rumpled, sleep still heavy in his eyes. He looked softer in the morning light, as though all his sharp edges had dulled overnight.

“You okay?” he asked, voice gravelly with sleep.

I nodded, though my throat felt tight. “Yeah. Just... processing.”

His gaze dropped, taking in the bruises, the mark on my shoulder, the way I was

standing.

He stepped forward, slow and deliberate, until he was behind me, his hands resting on my hips. “Too much?”

I shook my head. “No. It was... perfect. Just more real this morning, you know?”

He met my eyes in the mirror, searching for something. “You look beautiful like this. Marked.”

A shiver rolled through me, and I hated how much I wanted to hear that.

How much I wanted it to be true. “It was good,” I said, knowing that wasn’t enough to explain the transformation that’d happened when he was fucking me.

All the noise in my head had receded, and for a few blissful minutes last night, I hadn’t needed to think at all.

He took a new toothbrush from the drawer, still half-asleep, and passed it to me.

Then, he stepped back, not far, but enough to give me room, his fingers trailing away as if he didn’t want to let go.

I focused on brushing my teeth—mundane, grounding, normal—but my neck was burning with awareness.

The intimacy of it—the fact he was brushing his teeth beside me at the other sink as if we did this every morning—was unreal.

Two sinks. Matching towels. And him, rumpled and real and so close I could feel the warmth coming off his skin.

I felt wrong, because now that the ache had settled and the adrenaline was gone, embarrassment was starting to creep in.

I'd asked for it. All of it. I'd begged. And fuck, I'd loved it. But that didn't stop the second-guessing, the part of me wondering if I'd gone too far. If I'd looked desperate. If he'd been into it... or if he'd just given me what I wanted because I asked.

My eyes flicked to him in the mirror again. He was watching me—quiet, unreadable—but not pulling away. Not judging.

And I wasn't sure if that made it better or worse.

Killian set his toothbrush down, stepped closer again, and without saying a word, kissed me, softly at first, testing—but when I didn't pull away, he deepened it, his fingers curling at my hips.

“Come on,” he murmured, “shower with me.”

We stepped into the glass-walled shower, steam already curling through the air. The water was hot, pouring over my back as Killian reached for the shampoo. He worked it into my hair with slow, gentle fingers, massaging my scalp, rinsing it out and tilting my chin to avoid getting suds in my eyes.

Then it was my turn. I lathered his hair, smoothing it back and feeling the tension slide from his shoulders. We passed soap between us, washed each other without teasing or rushing, hands on skin with something that felt dangerously close to tenderness.

Still, my head was a mess.

He must've seen it in my eyes as I leaned back on the tiled wall. “Talk to me.”

“I don’t know,” I muttered. “I feel... sad, I guess. A little selfish. Like maybe I needed it just to make the noise stop.”

Killian’s expression didn’t change. “There’s nothing wrong with needing something.”

I swallowed, throat tight. “Even when it’s getting my ass slapped raw and begging for your cock? ”

“Yes,” he said firmly, stepping into my space. “Even then.”

His kiss came again, firmer now, and when he backed off, I was already sinking—dropping to my knees on the warm tiles, water cascading around me.

I looked up. He was already hard.

I reached for him with shaking hands, but he gently nudged one away and rested his palm against the top of my head.

“Start slow,” he murmured, voice thick. “Take me into your mouth. And touch yourself, Pretty. I want you to come like this.”

Heat surged through me as I leaned in, opening my mouth to take him in. His hand guided my pace, firm but never cruel, and I stroked myself as I hollowed my cheeks and let him fuck my mouth.

And somewhere in the sound of rushing water, I let go of the chaos and sank into the pleasure.

His fingers threaded tighter into my hair, his hips rolling with more force now as I moaned around him, the vibration making him curse under his breath. I kept stroking myself, matching the rhythm he set, heat coiling deep in my belly, tightening with

every thrust.

“You look so fucking perfect like this,” he groaned, hand tightening, not enough to hurt—but enough to keep me grounded, tethered. “Taking me so well. I’m coming.”

Pleasure crashed through me, my body tensing as I spilled over my hand and onto the tile. My moan choked off around him, and he came a moment later, thick and hot, hips stuttering as he held me there, then eased out.

He helped me up, kissed me—tasting of steam and salt—and wetoweled off in silence, our movements slow and unhurried.

I dressed, and he handed me water, then coffee, then walked me to the door as if it wasn’t hard for him to let me go.

But I saw the way his hand lingered, twisting into the back of my hair as he kissed me one last time. The pain-prick was sharp, brief, and beautiful.

“See you soon,” he said, low and certain.

I didn’t answer.

Because I wasn’t coming back.

Not for more of Killian. Not for more of this.

It had been everything—and that was precisely why it had to end.

Except it didn’t.

The next night, I found myself back at his door.

I didn't even remember making the decision.

One second, I was alone in my room listening to Rio fuck whoever he'd brought back with him, and the next, I was knocking at Killian's door.

And when he opened it, said nothing, just pulled me inside and kissed me, I let him.

And then it happened again. The night after that.

Three nights in a row.

Each time, I told myself it was the last. That I was scratching an itch. That it didn't mean anything. But that was a lie, and I knew it. Because every time I left, I carried more of him with me. And every time I came back, it was harder to pretend I didn't want more.

I didn't understand what was happening to me.

Why couldn't I stay away? Why did I keep letting him touch me, taking me apart with his hands, spanking me until I was raw and pliant, bending me to his will until everything else disappeared?

He made the chaos stop. He made me feel seen, wanted, and wrecked in the most addictive way.

I needed that high, that release. I needed him like oxygen.

I had to stop.

The fourth night was different.

I can do this. I can stay away from Killian.

We were all staying late to work on a project—the Pontiac 1970 GTO none of us was in a hurry to finish, because the experience of our blended family bonding was everything that helped me forget about fires, or, worst of all, Killian.

Robbie and I were shoulder-deep in rebuilding the suspension, greased up to our elbows and teasing each other through the whole mess.

Rio turned up the radio and started dancing like an idiot, hips jerking, laughing when Robbie threatened to throw a wrench at him.

Enzo joined in to tease Robbie—shirtless, smug—and even Logan showed up, his partner Gray in tow. Cassidy followed, her laughter filling the space, dragging Tudor along for the ride.

It was chaos. Loud, happy chaos. It felt like family.

And then it ended.

People left. One by one. The lights dimmed. The quiet settled in. The noise started, the cravings, the need... And I didn't know what to do with myself.

I felt jittery. Restless. And then, like gravity pulling the tide, I found myself at Killian's door.

Again.

FOURTEEN

Killian

I might've looked casual—elbow hooked over the back of the chair, fingers tapping my coffee cup—but I was keyed up beneath the surface as Caleb presented his findings.

I couldn't blame it on the nightly visits from Jamie or the constant sex my body couldn't believe it was having.

I was trying to concentrate on the map of people on the wall in the Cave, but the espresso beside me had gone cold fifteen minutes ago, untouched as I stared at photos and forced myself not to think about Jamie.

Across the room, Caleb stood and paced in front of the big screen, sleeves rolled up, tie loosened just enough to signal he was past polite.

“In summary, I'm still unpicking threads from the access codes Robbie recalled,” he said, pointer flicking from one cluster of names to another, “and correlating it with what Enzo, Rio, and Jamie pulled from John Mitchell's system.

Layers of garbage routing, but there are consistencies.

All linked to one word. Lyric . And Lassiter?

His name keeps orbiting the edges enough that it trips my searches. ”

Sonya sat silently nearby, laptop open on her knees, eyes narrowed and tracking fast. I didn't need to prompt her. If she had something, she'd say it. Caleb, on the other hand, always circled his point like a hawk.

“And?” I said, voice clipped.

Caleb clicked the remote. The screen changed to a timeline with financial trails, maps, and key org names.

“We know that Edward Lassiter's a walking press release on paper.

Weekly church, spotless home life. Mortgage-free.

Tax-sheltered. No personal debt. Every public move paints him as a golden boy for federal justice.

Potential political moves. He has the Kennedy sheen, and at first glance, it seems real.

But look here—” He zoomed in on a financial path winding through three shell companies, one of which was tied to a community resilience nonprofit in Arizona.

“They're moving money through adoption assistance charities.

International ones. Two of them were flagged when I searched on that Lyric tag. ”

“Any movement of minors?” I asked.

“Three cases. At least. No names are in the open, but the pattern is there. Same donation amounts. Same transfer timing. The IRS flagged it, then backed off. Someone fixed it, and the name I got was from Robbie's list, Emmerson Dran at the FBI.

This Lyric tag is tied to the movement of minors, using charity fronts and international adoption organizations as covers.

Their operation is sophisticated, including shell companies, encrypted transactions, and digital laundering. It's a maze."

Before I could speak, my phone buzzed hard across the table, a call transferred from Sylvia.

"AUSA Lassiter for you, sir," she murmured in introduction.

"Lassiter?" I said, and the room went deathly quiet. Caleb waved at me and flicked buttons so we could record on multiple devices. "Thank you, Sylvia, put him through."

"We need to meet, McKendrick," Lassiter said without preamble.

I glanced at the clock. "Can I ask?—"

"Scarlet Grapes," he interrupted. "An hour." Then the phone went dead.

All three of us were quiet.

"What the hell?" Caleb muttered .

Sonya raised an eyebrow. "Why is the man at the center of our takedown calling you ?"

We exchanged glances. "I have no idea."

Caleb stalked over to me, fists on the table. "Unless he has proof you were at that

fire? If he does, Killian, you can't meet him. It's dangerous."

"You know I'm going," I said, and Caleb muttered and started to pace again.

"Go into it with your eyes wide open," Sonya said, "and get your game face on."

Caleb passed something to me. A small, sleek Pride lapel pin. "Wear this," he said.

"Mic?"

"Records locally, uploads remotely."

I pinned it to the lapel of my charcoal suit, fingers pressing it flat. Then, I rolled my neck, slowly and deliberately, trying to bleed some of the tension out of my spine.

"I'll be less than a minute away if you need me," Caleb added as he slipped his jacket on, carefully over the sidearm now holstered at his hip, his training as an operator with Delta Force in every line of him.

"Okay, but do not approach unless shit is going south."

"Got it."

Lassiter sipped his water as if he were tasting fine scotch, then set it down and steeped his fingers.

The top button of his shirt was undone, his tie loose as if he'd pulled it free in the car and forgotten to fix it.

He looked sharp, dangerous even—polished with just enough fraying around the edges to suggest the pressure was getting to him.

Maybe he was nervous, or he knew where I'd been and was angry.

It took everything I had not to think about what he'd done to Robbie, and the violent urge to leap across the table and shove a glass into his smug face clawed at my gut.

Calm. Collected. I breathed once, slow and deep. See what he wants first . Taking down one man left us with nothing. We needed to know how far the rot had spread.

"I'm in need of your brand of investigation," he began.

"Go on."

"I recall the work you did on the Hillway-Spencer case."

The Hillway-Spencer case? That was why he was talking to me now?

The team had provided evidence to exonerate Zachary Hillway-Spencer, which was a case that Lassiter had been prosecuting.

Of course, we'd sent the deep dive stuff to the defense anonymously, but we'd also had to work damn hard to let Lassiter come out of the mess smelling of roses, because if he'd found out about my extracurricular work, we were finished.

"That was a long time ago," I said conversationally. "What about the case?"

"I know it was you."

"Me?" I tried for innocent, but he rolled his eyes.

"One of the defense team suggested that the information to clear Hillway-Spencer had come from my side of the bench. With your constant doubt over the client's guilt,

I assume it was you, or at least someone you knew, who'd pulled out the information that not even my best investigators could find."

"Not me," I lied. He pretended to believe me, knowing I'd never admit to such a thing. I made a mental note to get Caleb to close that down—opposition thinking it was me that passed them information was a step in the wrong direction.

"Whatever," Lassiter said. "There was a fire at some downtown club a few nights ago. The Bonehook," he said, voice gravel-thick but casual, as if he was discussing the weather. "Do you know it?"

I kept my expression neutral. My training kicked in—relax the jaw, don't blink too long, breathe evenly, don't act too surprised.

"It's near the bail bond office in El Sereno," I said smoothly, and there were no lies there.

He made a slight, disdainful sound in the back of his throat. "Low-class. Low-rent. But... a friend of a friend had some money in it. Investment, I imagine. Cash flow. That sort of thing."

I nodded, slowly. "Okay?"

"Your office," he began, and I tensed, although I kept my expression even. "Quite aside from what you may or may not have shared on the Hillway-Spencer case, you fixed things for me."

Fuck, did I regret that now.

"My legal team supported you with the information we'd found in discovery," I said.

It was all lies. We'd dug so deep we'd discovered way more than would ever be seen in a typical search.

Not that Lassiter would have known that.

We hadn't worked for him as the lead prosecutor on the case, but I'd thought Hillway-Spencer was innocent, and we were more than happy to pass over what we knew in our most subtle of ways.

My worlds colliding was just fortunate. "I didn't fix things for you. I'm not some fixer."

Lassiter's expression narrowed and cleared—too quick for me to even think about it usually, but now that I knew things about him, or at least suspected him, that expression was telling.

"Of course not," he said, flashing a smile that never reached his eyes.

"I didn't mean fix in a bad way, but my friend's friend has certain charitable endeavors that would be severely impacted if this Bonehook loss isn't accounted for."
"

There it was again— friend's friend. Twice now. It was too specific to be casual and too vague to be honest.

"What specifically do you want from me?" I asked.

"Not me, I don't want anything," he said hurriedly.

"But I want to help ensure any ties between my friend's connections and the club are...

removed,” he paused, smoothing his expression.

“Legally, of course. It’s a messy business, and I’m sure it’s far beneath what you usually deal with now that you’ve established yourself after working that case with me. ”

I didn’t blink—I was where I was now by being me, I didn’t owe Lassiter anything.

He cleared his throat and continued. “Anyway, the charities affected...” Any minute now, he was going to add think of the children , and yep, I was going to beat him if he went there.

“Yes, the charities—” He lifted a hand, vaguely, as if he might swat the detail away, “—whoever started the fire might be connected to another man who recently died. An unfortunate house fire. And at the club, they took a laptop.”

My gaze didn’t flicker. “A laptop.”

The laptop. It had been relatively clean at first glance—aside from the typical drug deals and human trafficking activities—but there’d been nothing on it linking to Lassiter, and the memory sticks had been corrupted.

Given our new interest in the man, I made a note to have Caleb dig deeper and pull out more than just the surface level.

Had he missed something on the laptop, and was it possible to examine the memory sticks more closely?

He was listening to this, and knowing him, he was probably already on it.

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He waved his hand again, casual as anything. “Or something. Doesn’t matter, I’m sure. But it’s odd that low-rent rival gangs, or whatever, would steal a laptop, isn’t it?”

“Anything they can sell...” I let the words lie.

“True. But then, there’s this man I mentioned that may or may not be connected, a certain John Mitchell.

” Fuck. He went there. And it was a move in the right direction.

Or the wrong one. This was why he wanted to see me.

He watched me over the rim of his glass.

“Tortured and burned alive in his home. Ghastly, really. The media was all over it.”

“I don’t think I saw anything,” I lied and sipped my water. “Is he, sorry, was he connected to the club you’re worried about?”

“I’m not worried,” he defended. “My friend... well... this Mitchell owed a lot of people a lot of money, and with him gone, my friend’s money is gone. I mean, the money for the charities is gone.”

Lassiter was covering his bases in case the investigation revealed a connection to him.

He tapped his glass. “Or not. I mean, who knows.” I held my body still, every nerve pulled taut.

“My friend’s friend,” he said again, a bit too deliberately, “would appreciate anything your investigation could turn up. Purely informally, of course. There would be a payment involved, and no mention from me about your passing information to a defense team.”

“Which I didn’t do,” I lied.

He nodded. “Of course. But I wouldn’t want people to think this was true.”

He leaned back in the booth, smiling again.

But something had shifted if he had to resort to subtle blackmailing.

The crack in the surface was there if you knew where to look—just a hairline fracture, a flicker in the way his fingers tightened around the glass.

Maybe he wasn’t unraveling. Not yet. But he was watching the ground shift beneath his feet, and wondering who else knew, so perhaps Jamie setting the fire had been a good thing. Go figure.

A server set two plates in front of us and disappeared as quickly as he came, leaving behind the subtle scent of garlic and perfectly seared meat.

I glanced at the plate—a thick slice of steak glossy with jus. It had been plated with care, garnished like something out of a magazine, but the sight of it turned my stomach. I hadn’t eaten all day, but I wouldn’t start now. Not with him watching.

Lassiter picked up his silverware with ease, his posture open and actions unhurried.

He looked every bit the seasoned public servant—affable, experienced, confident in the quiet power of a life spent shaking hands in closed-door rooms. He cut into the rare steak on his plate, blood oozing from inside, and took a bite, chewing slowly, deliberately, as though the world could wait and what he was asking me wasn't as crucial as fuck to him.

I reached for my glass of water, took a measured sip, and set it back down.

My hands were steady, but inside I was wound tight.

The calm I projected was just the outer shell.

Beneath it, my thoughts were moving too fast—calculating every word he'd said, every pause, every sideways glance and any too-casual phrase.

He glanced up, fork midair. "You're not eating?"

"I had a huge business brunch with a client," I lied, using the same smile I employed in court when I needed to appear relaxed but unbothered. "I might have to leave this." I reached for my wallet, but he stopped me.

"Put that away, you know it's on me whether you eat it or not." He chuckled, that rough-edged smoker's laugh that had probably once been charming in courtrooms and at donor dinners.

I met his eyes and held them a beat too long before I looked down at my plate again, feigning interest in the food I wasn't going to touch.

He took another bite, slower this time, then wiped his mouth with a crisply folded napkin. "You understand discretion."

I offered a polite smile. “I try.”

“Good, good,” His voice became more conversational, as if we were buddies.

“In the process of this deep dive for my friend , should you stumble across something incriminating that doesn’t quite make sense at first glance...

I would advise you to bring it to me directly.

Let me clarify before you jump to conclusions or speak out of turn and ruin what could be an excellent relationship in the future. ”

“We’ll tread very carefully and run everything we find through you first.” I lied again, and leaned back slightly, folded my hands on the table’s edge, and gave him what he wanted.

Attention.

Interest.

And enough smiling to keep him talking.

I didn’t let any of my feelings show, not even the chill working through my chest, or the quiet fury low in my gut.

I kept my expression neutral, the corners of my mouth twisted into something polite and unreadable.

I nodded once, not too fast, and offered Lassiter a thin smile that could be read as gratitude if you didn’t know better.

Across the table, Lassiter eased back in his seat, lifting his wineglass with the comfortable satisfaction of a man who believed he was putting something in place to help him.

I let the conversation drift, letting him carry it away from danger, back toward safe, meaningless territory—state funding updates, judiciary reshuffles, a retiring judge. I responded where needed, matched his rhythm, and said just enough to keep the illusion alive .

But behind the performance, my mind was already shifting gears.

This recording would go straight to Caleb as soon as I was clear.

Sonya would run audio pulls, check stress patterns, analyze the pacing, and dig through every gesture and inflection.

Caleb would comb through Lassiter's phrasing, match it to chatter inside the data he'd collated, pull up metadata on the nonprofits we knew were laundering money.

We'd triangulate everything—locations, bank flows, digital signatures. All of it.

Lassiter was panicking, and that made him all the more dangerous. It also made him predictable.

I picked up my fork and cut a bite of steak, finally, chewing as he moved on to small talk.

I nodded where appropriate, even laughed once, all while something inside me shifted into place.

The play was clear now. Let him keep talking.

Let him think I was a man who would take his calls, shake his hand, and report to him.

Let him believe I hadn't already begun to dismantle everything he'd built.

Because when the time came, when we had enough— more than enough—he'd never see the blade coming.

I looked him in the eye as he talked, matching his tone, body language, and false warmth.

“...opportunity, with Lyric-Night investments. ”

The name caught my attention. “Sorry, could you repeat? I was considering dessert.”

He chuckled, swirling the wine in his glass as if we were old friends instead of circling predators.

“Investments,” he said smoothly. “A collective of business-minded philanthropists. We specialize in urban revitalization—gentrifying old neighborhoods, converting forgotten corners into profitable opportunities.”

He leaned in, just slightly. “Should you be able to assist my friend out of his current predicament—and keep me informed first, of course—I'd be happy to sponsor you.

A seat at the table, full investor privileges.

Most people only hear about the kind of opportunity after the door has already closed.
”

My stomach turned, but I kept my expression relaxed, as if he were offering me

season tickets instead of a way to get my hands dirty for profit.

I nodded slowly, as if I'd consider it. And then, we were done.

He paid for the meal, shook my hand, and we parted ways.

I headed straight back to the office, using the private elevator to take me straight to the Cave.

Caleb and Sonya were staring at me, and Caleb was still wearing headphones from listening in.

I slumped in the closest chair, scrubbing a hand down my face as if I could wipe away the weight Lassiter's words had left behind.

"Jesus, Killian, he offered you a seat at the fucking table at Bad Guys Inc.," Sonya said, and I nodded.

"You heard the word lyric in there, right?" Caleb added. "The same that was coming up in our searches. No trails on Lyric-Night Investments or any variation of the name," Caleb replied, already clicking through windows.

"But you could track it down through Lassiter's financials?"

"I'm already on it," Sonya said, tapping her pen against the edge of her laptop. "We'll start with his shell holdings and cross-reference transfers linked to any flagged charities."

I leaned forward, resting my forearms on my knees. "So what do we do now that the devil thinks we made a deal with him?"

Sonya looked up, her eyes hard. “We build a prison around him. Quietly.”

Caleb huffed. “Brick by fucking brick.”

FIFTEEN

Jamie

I didn't know why I was here.

The street was clean. Like, aggressively clean.

Not a scuff on the pale sidewalk, no graffiti, not even a loose bit of trash floating past on the breeze.

Just the hiss of traffic, the occasional chirp of a crosswalk signal, and the echo of designer heels clicking on polished concrete.

Across the street from me, a boutique coffee shop already had a line stretching to the corner, all sleek suits and curated leather bags, phones pressed to ears as if they'd been born conducting million-dollar deals.

Beside it, several high-end boutiques blinked awake, metal shutters rising on clean glass and white-lit displays.

A curated kind of chaos. Perfect on the surface.

The building Killian worked out of stood tall among them—an old thing, probably a hundred years or more, but renovated and modernized in all the right ways.

Stone pillars, polished brass fixtures, and the kind of heavy glass doors that didn't

open for just anyone.

It reminded me of the LA I'd only ever seen in movies—old money, old power, and the kind of shine that masked every rotten thing underneath.

Killian's office was on the seventh floor, and he had a private elevator.

I pictured him inside—tie loosened, sleeves rolled, tearing someone apart across a conference table with that razor-sharp voice and cold smile.

Probably looked fucking good doing it, too.

Untouchable. Controlled. Everything I wasn't.

Coffee cooling in my hand, my hoodie pulled low, I watched the people come and go.

Leaning close to the door, flush to the building, with the keypad, I examined it closely.

It was biometric, and if I spent too long standing here trying to mess with it, people heading into work would eventually notice.

I didn't exist for them at the moment, but then, they'd never see the things I did.

They wouldn't clock the guy across the street loitering with his phone upside down, casing the jeweler's shop one block over.

Wouldn't notice the battered old Corolla parked at the curb, windows tinted so dark you couldn't see who was inside.

The way the engine idled too long, as though someone was waiting for something-- -

or someone—to make a move.

They wouldn't see the shadows in the corners. But I did. Always had.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

The snarling voice didn't surprise me—I'd hoped for him to find me. But I didn't expect my cock to be so happy, stiff and desperate just from Killian's anger as it cracked something open inside me—ragged heat, memory, want. I'd only seen him last night, but I needed to see him now, and I hated it.

I didn't want that. I wanted him to take it all back—the control, the way he stripped me bare without touching me.

I tried to erase the desperation curling hot and tight in my belly, the part of me that ached for more even as I fought it.

I wanted to snuff it out like one of my fires, leave it in ash and ruin.

But I couldn't. Not when the truth that I wanted more burned.

More of the way he looked at me as if I were worth wrecking.

More of his hands on me, rough and unforgiving.

More of that dark promise in his voice when he called me Pretty, as if he knew exactly how fucked up I was and didn't care.

More of his anger at what I'd done, putting me in my place.

My skin buzzed with the memory, my pulse racing.

I didn't want to want it—not the rush of heat low in my gut, not the hunger curling like smoke through my veins—but I did, every inch of me traitorous and aching for more of what he could do to me.

I sipped my bitter lukewarm coffee, then, “How far have you got?” I asked. Can I destroy it all yet?

He didn't look at me as he used to. Not with that unreadable heat or the smug tilt of his lips.

Today, his stare was cold. Controlled as if he'd shoved every emotion behind a wall just to stop himself from breaking something.

Or someone. And yet, I braced for it anyway—half expecting him to yell, to shove me to the glass, to kiss me as if he had no choice.

“I should haul your ass out of here,” he muttered, voice low and venomous. “You don't get to stand outside my office. Do you know how many cameras are pointed at this fucking place, and if someone sees an ex-con, a fucking murderer , standing outside here. What the fuck, Jamie!”

I kept still. Didn't flinch. Didn't answer.

Because what could I say? That I needed to know I could burn?

That there was something about him that made me want to crack?

That I didn't know where else to go this morning because I wanted his touch as much as I wanted to burn, and I didn't understand any of it?

“You wouldn't be standing here with me if you didn't already know that this is a

camera blind spot,” I said, and I swear he growled.

“You think this is a game?” he snapped, stepping closer, and for a second, I thought he might grab me. Shake me. Pin me to the wall as he had before—not with fury, but with lust.

“I need to keep my family safe,” I said.

Lied. I needed to keep them safe, but it wasn’t enough.

Not even close. I needed vengeance like oxygen.

I needed to watch something burn. I needed fire licking up the sides of my soul, the kind that turned everything else to ash.

I needed it in my bones, in my blood. I needed it now .

“Fuck!” He snapped and placed his hand on the scanner, and the elevator doors opened smoothly. He yanked me inside, and I didn’t argue. If he was taking me in there to kill me, I wasn’t going to make it easy—he had the height, the smooth moves, and a lot more weight on me, but I’d still fight.

The doors closed, and I expected him to press the inside hand scanner to take us up.

Instead he stared at me and the elevator didn’t rise.

We were private, contained, but I didn’t kid myself that we weren’t being recorded in here.

This was spy-level shit, and I might not know cameras and recording devices as well as I knew the insides of code, but I wasn’t stupid .

Fear lit something up in me. It wasn't just adrenaline—it was raw, wrong, arousal. The kind that hit low and hard and came from how he looked at me as if he knew me. As if the nights of sex meant he had a window into my soul.

No one knows me.

“What have you found?” I asked again.

He stared at me, eyes dropping to my mouth, his pupils flaring wide.

Then, his tongue flicked out to wet his lower lip, slow and deliberate, as if he didn't mean to do it—or maybe he did.

The air between us thickened, dense with something unspoken, raw and electric.

He didn't understand me, not really. But I didn't need him to.

All I needed was an answer to the one question that mattered—was I free to destroy the people who had hurt my family?

“Just because I'm fucking you doesn't mean you get to come here and cause issues with me and the team.”

“What have you found?” I repeated.

He stepped closer, hustling me into the corner. “We're still plotting all the links.”

Frustration bit deep, hot and restless under my skin.

My fingers itched for something, anything.

I slipped a hand into my pocket, curling it tight around my lighter.

Cold metal. Familiar shape. I clutched it like a lifeline, as though it could ground me—or spark the chaos I needed.

One flick and I could breathe again. One flick and maybe the pressure would bleed off enough to make the waiting bearable.

I blinked at Killian, who crowded me. “I just need to fix things,” I blurted.

Killian cut me off with a sharp look, voice steel-edged.

“No more bullshit, Jamie. I know what you need.” His voice was hoarse with restraint.

His hand drifted low, adjusting himself with a tension that crackled in the small space between us.

Of course, he knew. Killian wasn’t stupid.

He was furious—and confused—and fuck, that was worse.

I’d expected him to rage. I hadn’t expected the ache beneath it. “Do you need it now?”

I whimpered. I bit down hard on the sound, but it slipped out anyway—raw and desperate—before I could catch it. I had to have kept that inside, right? But his breathing hitched, and I knew he’d heard me.

He dragged a hand through his hair, breath sharp. “Talk to me, Pretty.”

I opened my mouth. Closed it. He deserved the truth, but all I could offer was, “I need to hurt them for what they did to Robbie,” I blurted. “I need to hurt them, burn them to ashes.”

His jaw flexed .

And still... he didn't press that damn button to take us up, or let me out.

He placed a hand on my shoulder, exerted only the tiniest amount of pressure, and I fell to my knees and pressed my face to his groin, inhaling the fresh scent of his suit and the warmth of him.

I nuzzled his hard cock, and then it was his turn to whimper.

His hand curled in my hair, unyielding. “Open,” he said, voice like smoke and steel, and I obeyed, my knees aching on the elevator floor as I looked up at him.

He unzipped slowly, deliberately, watching every twitch of my expression, every ragged breath I took. When I leaned forward and took him into my mouth, his grip tightened just enough to remind me who was in charge.

“That’s it,” he murmured, low and possessive. “Good boy.”

I moaned around him, the praise sparking something wild in me. I hollowed my cheeks, let him guide the pace, let him use me. All the noise in my head quieted, the fire simmered down to something sharp and focused.

He didn't thrust hard—yet. This wasn't fast and filthy, not yet. This was control. Dominance. A reminder. My throat burned, my eyes watered, but I didn't stop.

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His free hand cradled my jaw as he rocked into my mouth, gaze locked to mine. “Look at me,” he growled. “I want to see those pretty eyes when you take it all.”

I did because I needed this. Needed him. Needed the weight of his cock, the power in his hands, the punishment and the promise wrapped up in every groan slipping from his lips.

He didn’t wait for my answer. His thrusts deepened to the limit of how much I could take.

I gagged once, and he eased back, letting me breathe, his hand gentle for a moment—then he pushed forward again, steady and ruthless, and this time he didn’t let me breathe.

He gripped the back of my neck, fingers digging in, holding me still as he fucked my mouth with unrelenting control.

His rhythm was measured, precise—punishment and reward in each motion.

Every time I flinched or gagged, he paused only long enough to make me feel the absence of him before pushing in again, deeper.

“Take it,” he growled. “You came to me like this—desperate, filthy. You want to be used? Then fucking earn it.”

I whimpered again, and this time it was all need. His voice coiled around me like barbed wire, dragging everything raw to the surface. The fire in me surrendered, and I

pressed a hand to my cock, but he pulled out abruptly, and I gasped, drool on my chin, eyes wide.

“Hands behind your back,” he ordered. “You don’t touch unless I tell you to.”

I did what he asked, my shoulders trembling, and need was a vicious pulse.

He didn’t just take control—he stripped everything else away until all that was left was me, aching and obedient at his feet.

He made me wait, his cock heavy on my tongue, hips still, breath ragged above me.

I could feel him tremble before the tension snapped.

“Swallow,” he gritted out.

I did. Took every drop as if it meant something, as if it might fill the hollow space inside me. His taste hit the back of my throat, and I swallowed again, needy and obedient and desperate for any part of him he’d give me.

Then, he yanked me up roughly, my knees weak, vision blurry, his hands still in my hair. He pushed me hard into the corner of the elevator, his body crowding mine, heat and command radiating off him like fire.

He shoved a thigh between mine, pinned me there with nothing but pressure and presence, and then, his hand cupped me through my jeans.

One stroke. That was all it took.

I came with a broken sound, hips jerking, my body betraying every wall I’d ever built. It was raw. Messy. Humiliating. Perfect.

Everything was quiet. Still. I felt nothing but peace.

Killian zipped his pants and leaned into me, his breath still sharp, but slower now.

He adjusted my clothes gently, straightening my jacket and smoothing down the front as though it mattered how I looked.

Like I mattered. His fingers lingered on my jaw, tilting my face up.

He didn't kiss me. Didn't whisper cute shit.

But he met my eyes, and that was enough.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice low.

I nodded. Couldn't speak.

He took a handkerchief from his inner pocket—fucking typical, as if he'd planned this—and wiped my chin with careful precision. Then, handed it to me without a word.

"You don't have to be fucking nice," I snapped, too raw, too close to breaking again.

Killian didn't flinch. He held my gaze, his voice even but quiet.

"You think this is me being nice, Pretty?" he asked.

"This is me making sure you don't fall apart five seconds after giving me everything.

" He tipped my chin so I stared up at him.

“You gave me control. You don’t just get to crawl out of that and pretend it didn’t mean something. I take care of what’s mine.”

The deliberate way he said it made something in me twist. Not fear. Not want. Something I didn’t have a name for, but maybe needed more than either.

I shoved him away, and he moved into the far corner.

His jaw was tight, his breathing still uneven, and for a second, his gaze dropped—not cold or commanding, but something else.

Regret? Restraint? His hand flexed once at his side, as if he wanted to reach for me again but couldn’t.

Whatever war he was fighting behind his eyes, he didn’t let it show for long.

He straightened, smoothed his suit, and when he looked at me again, it was as if nothing had happened.

Almost. “Caleb tells me you’re some old-school hacker called DaemonRaze?”

I blinked at him. That was what he wanted to ask me now?

I hadn’t hidden the code when I uploaded the files.

I hadn’t even tried because whoever he had working with him, or maybe Killian himself, needed to know I could see the same things as they did.

I might not have access to everything they did, but I knew the names and locations of the people I needed to burn.

I met his eyes. Cool. Sharp. No accusation in them. Just a question. A guess.

“Does it matter?” I asked, voice raw, throat aching, lips wet. The door slid open and light flooded in, real life intruding on whatever we’d done in the elevator.

“Can we open our eyes yet?” A woman called out, and I was mortified and proud all at the same time.

“After you,” Killian said and gestured for me to step into the light and meet whoever was on the other side.

I recognized Caleb, sitting back in a desk chair, smirking, but the other person, a woman, was new to me, and yeah, she had her hands over her eyes.

“It’s all good, Sonya,” Killian murmured, and Caleb snorted a laugh when Sonya revealed her eyes one finger at a time.

“Morning,” she added with a wink at Killian.

I should have felt ashamed, embarrassed, or any of a million things, but I didn’t.

Not with him. Not after everything that had passed between us.

With Killian, I was past shame—past fear of what it meant to want this, to need him.

He saw through every mask I wore and still hadn’t walked away.

If anything, he’d stepped closer. And somehow, that made me feel seen.

Whole. Maybe I wasn’t broken after all—just waiting for someone who could hold the pieces without flinching.

But I felt quiet and proud. I'd done that to Killian, pushed him to the edge, swallowed him, made him come, and he'd wanted to touch me.

"Sonya, intelligence; Caleb, less intelligence, more computer." Killian was introducing them, and Caleb huffed.

"I resemble that remark," he deadpanned, then tilted his chin at me. "We've met; Redcars ex-con, blah blah, aka DaemonRaze, I assume?"

I hesitated, and Killian must've read that in my silence. "You made your choice when you stalked our elevator, Jamie. DaemonRaze or not, you're in this. Call in sick because you might as well enjoy some air-conditioning while you watch us work."

"Daemon? Uhm... DaemonRaze? Take a seat." This was from Caleb, who waved at a chair. I'd left DaemonRaze behind in the fire that killed my uncle, and I didn't want that millstone around my neck.

I stared at him, then at the two others.

"Call me Jamie."

SIXTEEN

Killian

I made coffee. For everyone, not just Jamie, though I poured his first.

He looked ill, exhausted, slouched in the office chair next to Caleb. I tossed him a protein bar, too. He scowled at me, but the last thing I needed was him passing out on me. I'd aftercare his ass until he accepted it.

He grumbled his thanks, eyes narrowed as if he were suspicious of me being nice, then tore the wrapper with his teeth and devoured it in record time. I'd never seen anyone eat like that.

Sonya caught my eye, cocked an eyebrow, and I gave her a short nod. She slipped out and returned twenty minutes later with a paper bag from the café down the block. Breakfast sandwiches were greasy, hot, and loaded with enough calories to keep Jamie upright.

He didn't say much, but I caught how his shoulders relaxed a little as he bit into one.

From the corner, I heard him mutter into his phone. "Hey, it's me. I need a day." His tone was too formal for Rio. That meant Enzo, maybe Logan. Possibly Robbie, though everyone treated him with the kind of caution usually reserved for explosives.

With good reason.

Robbie had cracked this whole thing open.

Half the intel on the wall behind me came from the chaos in that man's head.

We had names, lines, arrows, photographs, account details, human movements—Mitchell's picture marked with a thick black cross, judged and sentenced already—and above him, two names: Kessler and Lassiter.

Lassiter was dirty. We knew that now. The man had his fingers in too many pies, while pretending to care about justice and law. But Kessler? That was murkier.

To all appearances, Kessler, a billionaire businessman, was clean—no aliases, no shell companies, no obvious leverage points.

But Mitchell had named him. And Robbie, when we asked, described a man who fit Kessler to a T, in terms of height and the smug way he smiled as if he knew he'd never get caught.

Still, Robbie hadn't given us anything solid on Kessler.

And then there was Emmerson Dran, regional director of the FBI, who'd been on the payroll at fifty thousand a month, and had somehow kept it hidden. Not to mention his brother Samuel, whom we had data on proving he washed dirty money.

It was like watching mold on a wall, and every one of the past seven days since we'd taken the intel from Robbie and Mitchell's computer, the network had grown.

Every new name pointed us back to the same central sources: Lassiter and Kessler.

Everything that hurt stemmed from them. Everything broken could be traced to a decision Lassiter had made, a deal he'd backed, a name he'd erased in court.

We were on the verge of shutting Lassiter down for good. We had enough to burn him in court and ruin him in public.

But Kessler was trickier. He was the kind of man who didn't need blood on his hands to be the one pulling the strings. Clean. Silent. Dangerous. Too fucking rich to get caught.

I hated not knowing what his game was .

“What are we doing with Lassiter?” Caleb asked on my side.

“What did the club laptop and the memory sticks show?”

I'd been in court the last few days, and I was missing a lot of what they'd discovered, only seeing the headlines and not the meat of it all.

Also, there was the small matter of Jamie turning up at my place every evening, and things had slipped.

I couldn't keep this up when people out there needed to be destroyed.

“Evidence that the club's owner was paying Lassiter, no links to Kessler.”

Fucking Kessler.

“Okay, here's what we're doing,” I turned to face the room.

Sonya stopped typing, Caleb watched me, but Jamie stared at his lap, and at the remains of the sandwich sitting there.

Okay, so he might not have eyes on me, but he was listening.

“The only way to crack Kessler is to get intel from Lassiter. So I call him, and we meet.”

Jamie’s chin lifted. Was he worried about that? Or pissed I’d be in the company of someone he wanted to erase? What did I care?

“I’ll tell him we found what he was looking for, in that concerned I’m-working-for-you way, and we see what shakes out. ”

“I don’t like that,” Caleb muttered.

Sonya nodded in agreement, and Jamie said nothing. With eyes on him, I called Lassiter, and he answered on the third ring.

“McKendrick?”

“I have some information for you. We need to talk.”

“Talk,” he repeated.

“Just talk. You’re paying me not to judge what my team found.”

There was a pause, and “Same place, an hour?”

He hung up.

Jamie stared at the screen as if it might blink back at him, and the silence between us twisted tight. I should’ve eased him into this, should’ve built a bridge before dropping him into the abyss. But I hadn’t. I’d thrown it all down like a gauntlet, and now the fallout was coming.

Countdown to detonation: five... four... three...

And God help me, I deserved the blast.

“You’re working for Lassiter!” Jamie yelled, his voice cracking with fury as he shoved me back a step. His whole body was tense, vibrating with rage, his eyes wild. “Are you playing us?”

I caught his wrists before he could shove me again, gripping tighter this time. His pulse thudded under my fingers.

“I’m playing him,” I growled, jaw tight. “I’m leaving.”

“The hell you are,” he snarled, jerking away. But I moved fast, grabbing his arms and dragging him with me. He resisted hard, heels skidding on the floor, his free hand punching at my shoulder.

“Let go of me!”

“Not until you shut the fuck up and listen!”

He struggled the whole way, throwing his weight back, but I muscled him forward until we were nose-to-nose with the board. I shoved him lightly, enough to make him stumble the last step and land in front of the mess of names, photos, and red marker lines.

“Look,” I snapped. “Look at this. These are the names of people Robbie gave us. Victims. Dead or missing or broken. Every one of them matters. I’m doing this for them. And for him. For Robbie.”

Jamie stood rigid, chest heaving, fists clenched at his sides. I saw the fire in him

flicker, burning bright—then shift. Rage gave way to something colder. His shoulders sagged.

“You need to let me do what I have to,” I said, blasting through the static between us and making him listen. “You want to stop Lassiter? Then, let me get close enough to drive the knife in. Trust me.”

His eyes flicked to mine, and his jaw worked as if he had more to say but couldn’t find the words. The silence stretched, brittle and heavy.

He didn’t speak.

But he didn’t stop me either when I left ten minutes later, wearing a brand new recording device, this time in a pocket square.

I hoped he’d be there when I got back.

When I stalked into the restaurant and over to the table where Lassiter was waiting, I didn’t sit. I tossed the file onto the table between us like a challenge. The digital forensics were enough to put him away if anyone gave a damn.

“Recovered the laptop,” I said. My voice was ice. “Encrypted. Buried. But not deep enough.”

Lassiter’s expression didn’t flicker. “Who had it?”

I leaned forward. “Does it matter? It came into our possession. That’s the part you should focus on.”

He steepled his fingers. “You said if you found something, you’d hear me out?—”

“And I will because it’s your dime. Your name’s on there. Directly tied to money movements. Millions. Offshore routes. Dead ends and closed doors. So go ahead and tell me a story. Just make sure it’s a good one.”

He blinked slowly, calculating. I didn’t break eye contact.

Then, he smiled and sat back in his chair as though we were discussing golf scores instead of federal crimes.

“You know how it works, Killian. I invest in opportunities. Sometimes those opportunities have complicated histories. Shell companies. Silent partners. I don’t vet every name on every account.

That’s what I pay accountants and lawyers for. ”

He shrugged, all faux innocence. “If someone used my name to grease wheels I wasn’t aware of? That’s unfortunate. But not illegal. Not unless you can prove I knew. And we both know you can’t.”

I stepped in, close enough to cast a shadow across the pristine table.

“You think I care about legal? This isn’t about a court case, Lassiter.

It’s about the fact that every single file in that laptop leads straight to you, and if I cover that up, I’m not just complicit.

I’m implicated.” I dropped my voice, low and sharp.

“You might be used to politics, but I don’t work for you.

If I go down, I’m dragging every last one of you with me.

So don't give me your investor bullshit.

Give me the truth. Or give me a reason not to burn this whole empire to the ground. ”

Lassiter didn't flinch. He leaned in, his smile tightening into something more serpentine.

“Burn it down if you want. But be sure you're not standing too close when the flames hit.

You think you're the only one with something to lose?

I've spent twenty years weaving threads through every corridor of power you can imagine.

Politicians. Judges. Bankers. People you shake hands with every day.

People who smile for the camera and shake in private.

You torch this, and it won't be me who burns first.”

He picked up the file, flipped it open, eyes skimming the contents as if they bored him. “You're smart, Killian. Smarter than this. So unless you're ready to die on a hill no one remembers, I'd think twice about where you plant your flag.”

Then, he set the file down, gave me a look as if we were two old friends at a crossroads. “Be careful, son. Some doors, once opened, can't be closed.”

I let the silence stretch between us for a beat longer than was comfortable. Then, I nodded, slow, like maybe—just maybe—he'd managed to rattle something loose .

“You think I haven’t been careful? You think I haven’t already paid for every door I opened?”

I turned the file back toward me, flipping a page as though I needed the words to give me courage, as though I was wavering.

“It worries me,” I said, quieter now, eyes still on the page.

“That Marcus Kessler is named in here, too.” Lassiter flinched.

“That’s not a name that just shows up by accident.

So, how much is this worth to me? And I don’t mean petty shit like blackmail; I want a real percentage of the money you’re pulling in. ”

Lassiter’s eyes flickered, a momentary crack in the mask. Did he see me as the same kind of bad guy as him? If he did, then I needed a freaking Oscar for my acting efforts when all I wanted to do was call 911 right now. Strain tightened his jaw before he forced a smile.

“You want money? I can get you money,” he said, voice low, oily. “I know who you are under the suits, Killian. Street rat. Prostitute. But I can make you more than that. I can make you powerful. Protected. Paid.”

He leaned back again, the offer laid out like poison wrapped in gold .

I stared at him for a long moment, then pulled out the chair and sat across from him.

“Now we’re talking.”

But inside, my stomach turned. I hated the way the words tasted coming out of my

mouth, hated how natural it felt to slip into the role he expected of me. The kid from the streets who'd do anything for money. The fixer who knew when to take a deal instead of making noise.

Let him think I was cracking. Let him believe I could be bought. That was the point because if I wanted him to confess, to lower his guard, I had to play this right. Let him think I'd crawl into his pocket.

I wasn't here for power. I was here for justice.

For Robbie. For the ones no one remembered.

And if I had to play the Devil's game to get it, so be it.

This wasn't only business, it was personal.

Robbie's fear haunted me—the photos I'd seen of him when he'd first arrived at Redcars, bloodied, terrified, small beneath the weight of what they'd done to him.

Redcars wasn't just a garage. It was a line in the sand.

A place where survivors became something more than victims. It was the only thing standing between men like Robbie and monsters like Lassiter.

And if I let Lassiter walk, if I let him keep poisoning everything he touched, then what the hell had any of us bled for?

Robbie believed in me. Rio did. Enzo, Caleb, all of them. And I'd drag Lassiter into the light kicking and screaming if I had to. Because Redcars was built to fight men like him, and I was done playing the good cop.

He wanted a fixer. Then he'd get one.

But I'd be the last one he ever tried to buy.

SEVENTEEN

Jamie

After that day in the office, I'd stayed away from Killian for two days.

Two days since I'd heard his anger and the command in his voice, the weight of the control he took from me. The fire hadn't quietened the noise in my head this time. It licked at the edges but didn't touch the core, and I was spiraling because he'd helped me.

He'd called me Pretty.

That word shouldn't have wrecked me, but it did.

It made me ache in ways I didn't have language for.

It wasn't about the sex. It never really was.

It was about surrender. About someone strong enough to take what I gave and not flinch.

I needed the brutal steadiness of his presence, the way he stripped me bare and left nothing but truth.

I needed the collar back around my throat, the burn of punishment and the grace of being seen.

I needed to be kept, and fuck, I hated that almost as much as I craved it.

And, I was craving it.

Every fucking hour.

The silence was worse than anything. There were no messages or visits, and I didn't go back to his office. It was absence, stretching longer and sharper with each morning I woke up in my place, pretending I didn't care about what I'd done, or what he'd done for me.

Not to me.

For me.

I wasn't on a killing-everyone lockdown, not exactly, but Rio had made it pretty clear we weren't taking action on anything or anyone until Killian gave the go-ahead.

I was supposed to wait. Stay still. I didn't want to.

But Rio didn't know about the connection between Killian, his team, and Lassiter.

I needed a target.

Anything to kill this quiet.

Instead, I was stuck with the endless hum of waiting, the sick twist of withdrawal not from fire, but from him . From the chaos in my head that stilled when I was on my knees, the pull of him when he was angry and real and too fucking close.

I woke early. Not that I'd really slept.

Rio returned from wherever he'd been sometime after four, probably another fight at The Pit.

I caught the low thud of boots kicked off and then...

the unmistakable rhythm of sex. Loud. Fast. His partner begging, the crack of a hand on skin, Rio groaning, the headboard hitting the wall, and I lay there with my heart in my throat, shame crawling hot under my skin.

At least someone here knew how to get what they needed.

A door slammed. Mocking laughter. More shouting. Silence.

I gave up trying to sleep after that.

By five-thirty, I'd dressed in the half-dark—sweats, hoodie, lighter in my pocket like a comfort blanket—and slipped out.

The streets were quiet, the sky still that subdued purple before dawn.

I walked the long way to Redcars, a circular route past warehouse blocks and down side alleys where shadows pooled thickly.

I didn't expect anyone to be awake when I got there.

I was half-hoping I'd be alone. I entered the code and opened the side entrance, wincing at the creak.

My footsteps echoed on the concrete floor.

Dim light seeped under the office door, but the main bay was empty—no Logan,

Enzo, or Robbie.

Just me and the thick smell of oil and old rubber.

I drifted toward the kitchen, tried to start the coffee maker, and cursed when it hissed at me, but finally, I had a coffee and a purpose. I wanted to be out there doing something. I even had a new property tied to Lassiter that I could go out and watch.

Not to burn.

I need to burn.

But we were on killing pause and not to touch anyone. I fucking hated it. Who were Killian and Rio to tell me what to do?

“Couldn’t sleep?” Robbie murmured from behind me, his voice barely more than a breath. I spun, coffee sloshing over my hand. He flinched at the sudden movement, but didn’t retreat. I didn’t scare him. That was something. Maybe the only good thing.

“Robbie?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “Where’s Enzo?”

“Upstairs. We stayed over.” His words were slow, as though they weighed something. “I needed to...”

He shrugged and went to the fridge and pulled out a tray of cooled cookie dough rounds. His hands trembled as he set them on the counter. He looked pale in the dim light, eyes shadowed with deep purple smudges, as if he hadn’t slept. As if he’d been crying .

Last night must’ve been bad. Bad enough to come back to Redcars, bad enough to bake. He slid the tray into the oven and stepped back without another word.

“Did your favorites,” he said, curling into the nearest chair, legs pulled up tight to his chest. He looked small like that. Lost. His hair was mussed, his sleeves too long, and his gaze fixed on nothing. Vulnerable. Sad.

The air smelled like brown sugar and cinnamon, warm in the stillness.

I saw it when I was about to turn away to give him space.

“Robbie... you want to talk?” The words came out stiff, awkward, and too loud in the quiet kitchen. I rubbed at the back of my neck, glancing anywhere but at him. “Or... I dunno. I could sit here and not say anything. Whatever you need.”

He didn’t look up, but his shoulders hunched and began to shake as he cried, breaking my heart, and I froze, unsure of what to do with the sharp twist in my chest. I was useless when Robbie still had terrors in his sleep and it fucking hurt—worse than anything I could set alight.

The helplessness and stillness crawled under my skin like an itch I couldn’t scratch.

My temper sat just beneath the surface, fizzing like the hiss of gas before the flare.

I wanted to burn something to feel in control again.

“Robbie? Talk to me.”

He flinched but didn’t look up at me as he wiped his face with his sleeve, smearing a streak of flour across his cheek. “I’m okay.”

He wasn’t. Anyone could see that. I watched him, trying to ignore the hollow ache tightening its grip because I needed to fix it all.

I wanted to protect Robbie and tear apart whatever nightmare still clung to him.

I tried to find the people who'd done this and make them afraid.

Burn down the shadows. Dismantle every fucked-up thing that hurt the people I cared about.

I needed to do something. To hand out justice with my own hands, judge the guilty, and be the fire that kept my family safe.

I wanted to erase the fear from Robbie's eyes, remove the weight on his chest, give him even a single night, without waking up scared.

But I couldn't. I wasn't fucking allowed. And that helplessness? It made me want to explode.

"Why do you love fire so much?" Robbie's voice was barely above a whisper, but it cut through the silence like a blade.

I didn't answer at first. I wasn't sure I could. But he waited .

"Because she doesn't lie," I said, voice low, raw. "She takes what you give her, no more, no less. You show her weakness, she devours it. But if you treat her right and understand her—she's beautiful. Powerful. Pure."

He frowned, watching me too closely. "You talk about it like it's alive. Like a woman."

"She is," I whispered. "To me. She's the only thing that ever made sense." Or was she? Killian silenced the craving when he beat my ass, and fucked me to orgasm, then cradled my face in his hands and asked me if I was okay. Seemed like fire had a rival

in my affections.

Robbie looked away, then back again, eyes shining. “I don’t get it.”

I let out a hollow laugh. “You don’t have to get it. No one ever did. When people hurt me , I couldn’t cry—I set things on fire. I stopped feeling pain and started watching the world burn, and it was the only thing that made sense.”

Robbie stared at me for a long moment, then reached for my hand and gripped it tightly.

“I wish I were that brave,” he murmured.

“Robbie, you escaped,” I said, voice hoarse with conviction. “You lived through it all, and you got away. You’re the bravest person I know. ”

He blinked, surprised, then a small, genuine smile tugged at his mouth. “Maybe we’re both brave then.”

Enzo padded into the kitchen, barefoot and bleary-eyed as the oven timer dinged. Without a word, he crossed to the stove, flicked the timer off, and crouched in front of Robbie.

“Come back to bed, sweetheart,” he murmured, voice rough with sleep but so damn gentle it broke something in me. Robbie let himself be gathered up, arms winding around Enzo’s neck, face buried there as if he could hide from the world.

“I’ve got this,” Enzo said over his shoulder, his eyes meeting mine with quiet reassurance. Robbie clung tighter, and Enzo kissed the top of his head. “Nightmares,” he mouthed to me.

I nodded. What else was there to say?

“I’ll pack the cookies away when they’re cool,” I offered, moving toward the oven.

“Don’t you dare eat them all, Jamie Maddox,” Robbie whispered, his voice watery.

Enzo chuckled as they climbed the stairs. “He won’t if he knows what’s good for him.”

“I’m promising nothing!” I shouted after them as the scent of warm cookies filled the air, all sweetness and the opposite of the sparks vibrating under my skin.

I should’ve said something more to help Robbie, but instead, I stared at the tray of cookies as if they might give me answers, my heart thudding in a rhythm that had nothing to do with sweetness or comfort. I didn’t feel hunger.

I felt fire. I wanted to find the men who hurt him, and I wanted to burn them to ash.

The day didn’t get any easier. Logan was back in the office, and he and Enzo had been shut away in there since lunchtime, the door closed, the low hum of conversation just loud enough to piss me off.

It felt deliberate—like they were making plans without us, deciding what came next and whether we were part of it.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Robbie asked me again, for the third time since the door had clicked shut. His voice was too casual to be casual. His fingers fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, and his eyes were fixed on the closed door as if he could will it open.

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I shrugged, jaw tight. “Dunno. Logistics? Cars? More waiting while they decide what crumbs we’re allowed to know. Probably.”

He didn’t respond, but he nodded as if he understood .

“Cool. Because being kept in the dark is great for my mental health,” I muttered, too low for him to answer. The sarcasm didn’t help, but it was all I had. He was uneasy, and I hated that too—that he was scared and unsure and not being told what was going on.

And I hated that I didn’t know either. I should’ve been in there. I wanted to kick the door in, demand answers, demand to be useful. Instead, I sat here, chewing on the inside of my cheek, the fire curling tighter in my gut with every minute we were kept out.

I buried myself in work, trying to quieten the rage clawing at the back of my throat.

A busted alternator gave me an excuse to get my hands dirty, and I leaned into it—grease up to my elbows, the sharp sting of coolant in my nostrils, the clang of tools grounding me.

I tightened bolts that didn’t need tightening.

Checked wiring twice. I was doing something with heat—had the soldering iron in hand—mumbling to myself, “Just fix it. Just keep your hands busy and your head quiet.”—repairing a cracked terminal, and without thinking, I held my finger close to the iron.

Close enough to feel the heat bite—just short of burning, but sharp against me.

I stayed like that a beat too long, mesmerized, the heat dancing under my skin. It made the noise in my head settle, the chaos draw back, soothed by the promise of pain I could control.

“Jamie?” Robbie’s voice cut through the fog.

I jerked my hand back, blinking. He stood there with wide eyes and that uncertain frown that always made me feel like a villain in someone else’s story.

“It’s nothing,” I muttered, wiping my hands on a rag. “Just lost in thought.”

I left the second I could, as soon as the workday was finished, with Enzo and Logan still talking.

I fucking hated waiting.

As soon as I was back home, I pulled up my research—not the new information tied to Lassiter and Kessler, but my old list—the unresolved cases, the ones where the bad guys had gotten away with hurting people like me and Robbie.

Names that had once kept me up at night were now bookmarks in a file I kept hidden.

I started clearing them out, pruning the ones who’d fallen off the radar, and highlighting those still circling too close to the edges of our lives—the ones who might bring danger to Redcars, to my people.

I don’t need to burn tonight because observation is enough. Right?

I need to burn. I need to fix things. I need to feel.

I'd promised I'd talk to Rio first—he'd know whether I should act or hold back, but Rio didn't return to the apartment until midnight.

When he finally stumbled through the door, he was bruised and bloody, his knuckles split from a fight, his eyes wild and too bright.

A huge guy was dragging him in—bigger than him, which was saying something.

All muscle and menace, the kind of man who looked like he bench-pressed small cars for fun.

Rio never had anyone small fucking him into the mattress—only 'roided out monsters.

He grabbed a bottle of something strong and disappeared into his room with his latest hookup, the slamming of the door like a punctuation mark.

And I was left alone. With the noise. With the fire.

I lasted an hour.

I told myself I was smart and that holding back was part of the plan.

That discipline was control. But at one a.m., adrenaline roaring and my thoughts on a razor's edge, I followed that lead from the Lassiter research.

One of the ghost properties. A condemned house tied to one of his shell LLCs, funneling money through fake tenants and bogus contracts.

Paperwork so clean it almost gleamed. Almost.

I crouched in the dark, the boards of the second floor groaning under me, eyes trained on the space below. No one was coming. That wasn't the point. I was here to watch. Observe. Document. Strategize. Control.

Except my brain wasn't controlled. It was chaos, sparking behind my eyes like a fuse waiting for the match. My breaths came too fast. My hands itched.

The tools were in my pocket. It wasn't a complete kit because I wasn't here to burn.

I carried the tight roll of jute twine soaked in accelerant, and a tiny bottle of clear alcohol-based gel that burned hotter than it looked, the way other people carried mace.

For me, along with my lighter, it was a source of comfort.

The smell of it, even unlit, calmed me down. It promised something.

I rolled the lighter between my fingers, thumb brushing the ridges.

Didn't open it. Didn't strike. Just let the weight anchor me while my eyes flicked over the room's corners, noting exits, signs of squatters, and possible security setups.

The place was empty, condemned; it wouldn't hurt to destroy it and send another message, another warning.

I was doing what I was told. Waiting. Watching and being useful.

"Because that's all I'm good for, right? Sit still, look pretty, and let the grownups handle the big decisions." The words slipped out bitter, and I felt as if I was about to fucking shatter .

I hadn't planned anything. Hadn't scoped exits.

Hadn't observed routines. I was so fucking angry.

My fingers shook as I pulled out the soaked jute twine.

I coiled it loosely in the far corner, where the floor dipped and the wall had disintegrated.

The gel followed, streaking across the baseboard and onto the cloth—just enough to catch.

This wasn't tactical. It wasn't careful. It was compulsion.

I struck the match.

The flare bloomed like it knew me. It welcomed me back.

It whispered in the crackle of dry wood catching flame, in the curl of smoke twisting toward the ceiling, in the way the shadows shifted and danced. I crouched low, watching the fire grow, a hollow peace carving out the chaos inside me. It was beautiful—golden, hungry, merciless.

I didn't move. Not even when the flame licked up the side of the wall too fast. Not even when the beam above popped with heat.

The structure was weaker than I thought.

I stepped back, and my foot went through a crumbling patch of floor, the brittle wood splintering with a groan. My leg dropped into the dark, a flash of the basement gaping beneath me before I yanked myself free.

Acrid smoke filled my lungs. It clawed its way down my throat, stinging my eyes, and still I didn't panic. I didn't run. Not yet.

The fire was beautiful.

I stood there briefly, watching it consume the walls. The structure would go. No one lived here. No one would die. It was fine. It was controlled.

Only seconds after the fire had taken hold, I turned to leave, but the fire was tricky—it had crept behind me, silent and sly, curling up the wall and across the floorboards as though it knew exactly where I'd go.

It hemmed me in, licking at the edges of my escape, painting the doorway in searing orange and hungry gold, a halo of flames transforming my exit into a furnace mouth.

Smoke thickened, hot and clawing, and I coughed once, staggered back, eyes watering as panic began to spark under my skin.

I didn't want to die. The house cracked—a sharp, splintering sound above me like a rib breaking.

Then the groan of collapsing timber. I threw my arm up a second too late.

The beam hit me, a brutal thud to my shoulder that knocked me sideways.

Pain flared, white-hot and blinding, and I hit the floor hard, coughing, choking, gasping as the world tilted.

Flames roared in my ears. My head spun. I scrambled up, dragging myself toward the window, but the fire had changed—faster now, hungry, alive. It wanted me.

How can I keep my family safe if I'm not here?

“You promised me, Jamie. Stay alive. That's the deal.” Rio's voice wasn't real—not really.

This is like Stockton.

“Fuck! Jamie!”

Then someone shouted my name, yelled, pushed, and shoved, and I gripped hard as I was propelled out of the room.

Am I dead?

Someone was coughing and cursing, furious and half choking, but I thought I was smiling.

My beautiful, wild girl of flame tried to win.

She reached for me with greedy fingers and burning breath, coaxed and threatened in equal measure, all heat and hunger.

But I knew her too well. I danced with her, but pulled back a moment before she could sink her claws in.

Not today. Not yet.

EIGHTEEN

Killian

Caleb was driving—tight-jawed, eyes flicking to the rearview as if Jamie might combust again in the back seat.

I sat beside him, still tasting ash, my hand braced under his elbow to keep him upright.

He was half-slumped against the door, silent, his jacket stuck to his shoulder with blood and blistered skin on one arm.

His knuckles were raw, maybe from crawling, but no burns there. Maybe from fighting. Maybe both.

He stared straight ahead. Hollowed out.

My place was closer. Safer. I punched in the code at the private elevator and bundled him inside, holding him up when his legs buckled. Caleb followed, muttering about fucking idiots, but opening doors and helping where needed.

Once inside, I got Jamie to the couch, lowering him gently as he hissed through his teeth. His breathing was shallow and uneven. He didn't complain. Didn't scream. That scared me more than if he had.

I pulled out my phone and dialed a number I'd never had to use myself but had on

speed dial.

Doc answered on the second ring, his tone as pleasant as always. “Someone dying?”

“Burns. Smoke inhalation. Blood.” I glanced at Jamie—eyes closed now, skin gray around the edges. “I need you to come to my place. Tonight.”

A beat of silence, then a sigh. “It’s fucking three a.m.; you’re gonna have to sweeten the deal.”

“I’ll double your usual.”

“Not enough.”

I clenched my jaw. “Ten thousand. Cash.”

“For a paper cut, maybe,” Doc drawled. “But burns? Blood? Risk of infection? Fluid therapy? You want me to lug my gear across town and play ER at the ass crack of the night? You’re in deep-pocket territory, sweetheart.”

“Doc—”

“I’m not a charity. Twenty. Final offer.”

I didn’t rise to the bait. “Fine. Twenty.”

“Smart choice. Send me your door code. I’ll be there in twenty.

In the meantime, strip whoever the fuck it is down, keep them warm, and elevate their legs if they get cold.

Don't touch the burns, don't pop anything, and for fuck's sake, don't give them water if they're coughing—last thing we need is aspiration on top of everything else. ”

“Doc—”

He hung up without another word.

I shoved the phone into my pocket and sat beside Jamie on the couch. The air stank of smoke and scorched fabric. His lashes were clumped with soot. His fingers twitched as if his body didn't know the fire was over.

I reached for his jacket, trying to peel it back gently. Caleb moved in beside me, crouched low without a word. Between us, we eased it off—slow, careful, but Jamie still flinched when the lining dragged across the burned skin on his arm. He didn't make a sound.

His boots were next, untouched by the fire, but his jeans were singed at the hem, and they stuck to his skin in places. We stripped them off anyway.

Then came the shirt.

Or what was left of it.

Melted in places. Fused to the blistered skin beneath .

“Should we take it off?” I asked, voice low, almost hoping Caleb would tell me no.

He gave me a look, baffled and a little panicked. “How the fuck would I know?”

“Scissors,” I snapped. “Kitchen drawer.”

Caleb bolted. Came back fast.

Between us, we cut the fabric away in strips, working around the worst of it. Some parts peeled off clean. Others clung. Fresh blood welled up where the cotton tore skin. It dripped down his ribs, soaking into the white leather beneath him, and I—I didn't know how to stop the bleeding.

"Doc's coming," I told him, and he responded immediately.

Jamie attempted to shove us away. "Fuck. Don't want that a-ass-asshole anywhere... near... me." Jamie coughed.

"Don't fight me on this."

"How much?" He cracked open his red and inflamed eyes. "How much?" He tried to get up, shouted at us, but fell back on the sofa, mumbling about antiseptic and things that made no sense. Like I was going to tell him how much Doc was charging—I didn't have a death wish.

Doc arrived, pushing past Caleb, and my cell pinged with an alert. "Payment up front," Doc ordered.

I scrolled to the link and sent him what he'd asked for, not even blinking at the amount.

Doc waited until something showed on his screen to say he'd been paid, and only then did he narrow his gaze at the blistered skin on Jamie's arm.

Ugly, wet burns, red-edged, and I hated to think how much worse it could have been if I hadn't dragged him out.

Then, he checked the bleeding on his shoulder and grunted.

“Shoulder needs stitches.” He poked at Jamie’s chest and lifted his arms. “No broken ribs. Burns seem okay, but I charge extra if I need to graft,” Doc muttered. “Hazard pay, if he bites. And double if he bleeds on my good coat.”

“Whatever.”

Doc’s eyes gleamed; money was his thing.

Jamie opened his eyes. “I d-don’t want Doc!”

“You’re burned,” I explained, and he tried to push Doc away, who grunted and forced Jamie’s arm down.

“I’m good,” he rasped, though the tremor in his voice betrayed him.

Doc pressed something caustic on raw, open flesh, and Jamie shrieked—sharp and guttural—his whole body arching off the couch. Tears streaked down his soot-smudged cheeks, hot and unbidden, and he scrabbled at the cushions as if he could claw his way out of the pain.

“Who the f-fuck is p-paying?” he choked out between sobs that cracked in his throat.

“I am.”

He looked at me like that was the worst thing I could’ve said.

Doc’s hands were steady, impersonal as he bandaged Jamie up as if it were a chore, working fast and rough.

For the burns, he flushed the worst of them with saline, then laid down silver sulfadiazine cream with the precision of someone who'd done this too many times to care.

Gauze was applied in thick layers, taped at the edges to prevent the blisters from breaking further.

When he reached the wound on Jamie's shoulder—a gash edged in soot and blackened fabric—he cleaned it with antiseptic that made Jamie scream again, then used a skin adhesive to close the edges and stitched the worst of it without warning.

No anesthetic. No comfort. Just speed, efficiency, and the cold silence of someone who saw bodies as meat to be patched and moved.

“Nothing is as bad as it looks.” He shoved a bottle of pills across the table without looking twice. “Take two. Or don't. Not my skin peeling off. Pain worsens, or you get dizzy—go to the fucking ER like a normal fucking person.”

“What do we need to do now for his injuries?” I asked, already knowing I'd regret it.

“Google burn care,” Doc said, and then, he was gone, the door slamming behind him hard enough to rattle the frame. All that remained was the stink of antiseptic and smoke and the sharp reminder of why I never wanted to call Doc again.

“I didn't need saving,” Jamie hissed, already shoving upright. His face was drawn tight, but the fury in his eyes hadn't dulled—not one bit. “And you called Doc? Of all people? I don't have the money for that shit.”

“You'd rather we took you to the ER and put you on the radar for any unexplained fires?” I deadpanned.

“I’d rather die than have a fucked-up asshole like him jabbing me with needles and charging me for every breath I take!”

“Maybe I should have let you stay in the fire.”

“Maybe you should!” he shouted.

I know he wanted a reaction. Something he could shout to prove he wasn’t already unraveling—something to spark, control, and twist back into power on his terms. That need for resistance, for someone to push until he broke, wasn’t just about anger.

It was about permission to let go. But right now, whatever was in those pills was knocking him out, and I pointed to the bedroom.

“Bed.”

“Fuck you!” He tried to roll off the sofa, but he was wobbly, and grimaced in pain.

I tried to help, but he shoved me, and it was Caleb who caught him and held him upright as they headed for the bedroom.

Caleb helped to lay him down, fixed it so he had water next to the bed, and watched him succumb to sleep.

“What the fuck, Killian?” he asked me when he came back. “Why was he setting a fire, and why didn’t he get himself out?”

I wish I knew about the second part, but the first part was all too easy to understand. He’d wanted the fire and had chosen a property connected to Lassiter.

All I could do was shrug.

Then, I called Rio to tell him that Jamie was at my place, hurt, and that went down as well as a lit match in a powder keg.

Rio exploded—shouting, cursing, demanding why I hadn't called him sooner, why was Jamie near a fire, and why I thought bringing him to my place and not straight to Redcars was a good idea.

What was it with all the questions right now ?

“You probably need to ask him why he was in a fire. But hey, not tonight, yeah? Let him sleep this off. I'll call you in the morning.”

Rio muttered something and cursed. “Call Doc if you need to, we can cover it.”

“Already done. Already paid.”

“Fuck,” Rio snapped.

Yep. Fuck .

NINETEEN

Jamie

I sat on the edge of the bed, wrestling with the waistband of a pair of tailored black trousers I'd pulled from Killian's closet.

Fabric was smooth and cool on my thighs, but way too long.

The man was built like a goddamn Armani ad—broad shoulders, long legs, and abs you could use as a cutting board.

I, on the other hand, was compact chaos with scars and bad habits.

The pants sagged low on my hips even with the belt on the tightest hole, slipping down in that way that made me feel like a child playing dress-up.

I rolled the cuffs up a few times, but they still puddled around my ankles.

The room smelled of him—the familiar clean linen and something sharper beneath, like smoke and cologne—and it wrapped around me as a reminder I'd decided I didn't belong here.

I tried to stand, tripped on the hem, and crashed sideways into the full-length mirror with a yelp and a muffled, "Motherfucker!"

The door creaked open a second later.

Killian stood there, one brow arched, suit jacket gone, sleeves rolled to his elbows.

His eyes swept over me from the wrecked mirror to my half-dressed, unsteady form.

The heat of embarrassment crawled up my spine, but layered beneath it was something else—a pull I couldn't name.

He looked at me as if he saw everything: the weakness I tried to hide, the pride barely holding me together, the war I waged against letting anyone in.

I straightened, defiant despite the burns and my aching shoulder, but the damage was done.

I felt seen. Exposed. And some sick part of me didn't hate it.

“You planning to destroy my entire closet or just the mirror?”

“Don't start,” I muttered, kicking the pants away and grabbing the dresser's edge as if I could stop my legs trembling. “I'm getting out of here.”

Killian didn't move. “No, you're not. You're limping, bruised, stitched, burned, and so pale you look like one bad decision away from a blackout.”

“I'm going home,” my voice sharpened .

“You're sitting,” he said, already crossing the room as if it was his territory. “Now.”

“Why the hell do you care?” I asked, as I let myself drop back onto the edge of the bed, jaw tight.

“Someone has to, Pretty,” he said without missing a beat.

I looked away. That wasn't fair. Not when everything inside me was stretched thin and fraying.

Not when I didn't know what to do with how he looked at me like I was breakable and dangerous in the same breath.

Killian was close enough I could feel the heat from his body.

His hands didn't touch me yet, but they hovered, waiting for permission he probably wasn't going to ask for.

"Let me check the stitches."

"I'm fine."

"You say that one more time," he murmured, "and I'm going to assume you've got a concussion on top of everything else."

I scowled as he reached for the hem of the shirt I'd stolen from him—button-down, too big, smelled like expensive soap and something darker underneath. His fingers brushed my skin, slow and steady as he lifted the fabric. My breath hitched.

He paused. "Tell me to stop if you want me to."

I didn't .

He peeled the shirt back gently, revealing bruises blooming purple across my ribs, the taped stitches on my shoulder. His jaw tightened.

"What the hell did you go in there for?" he asked quietly.

I tilted my chin. “I needed to do something,” I defended.

He rolled his eyes. “You’re a fucking idiot. You just wanted to burn.”

“I wanted to make things right,” I snapped, but that made no sense.

His eyes met mine, silver storm clouds, and I couldn’t hold that stare. His hand settled on my hip, grounding me, firm enough to steady but gentle enough not to spook me.

“Breathe,” he said, his voice lower now. “Your body’s locked up.”

“I’m not—” I started, but it came out like a lie. Because his touch, even as clinical as it was, had heat coiling under my skin.

“You’re wound tight,” he murmured. “Does this hurt?” His fingers skimmed the side of my waist, then stopped at my elbow. I flinched. He froze. I’d been burned before; this was nothing worse than the morning after hard sex; it was a beautiful reminder of what I’d felt .

He didn’t say anything. Just pressed his palm flat to my ribs—solid, warm, a weight that anchored instead of constrained. I couldn’t breathe for a second.

“You’re okay,” he said, and I believed him, although I didn’t want to.

My heart kicked in my chest and I wanted to push him away.

Instead, I sat there, bare-chested, half in his clothes, pinned under his gaze, while he touched me as if he wasn’t afraid of what he’d find. And I hated that it felt good.

“Why didn’t you come here?”

Well, what in god's name could I say to that?

You scare me! I'm dragging you down! I don't understand any of this!

Instead, I grunted, and he passed me two tablets and poured some water from a bottle into a glass, gesturing for me to take them. I hesitated; he waggled the glass. I muttered; he rolled his eyes.

I swallowed the pills; he smiled.

“Good boy.” He paused. “You're hurt. You're exhausted. You don't get to make reckless decisions about leaving right now because you're scared of what happens if you stay.”

“And you don't get to make decisions for me,” I snapped, as my heart thudded against my ribs.

He let go of my wrist and stared at me with those cold eyes that saw way too much. “You want to leave?” he said. “Go ahead. Walk. But don't lie to yourself about why you're doing it.”

I stood instinctively, ignoring the pulse of pain in my side. “Fine.”

But before I could step past him, he moved—crowding me, one hand braced beside my head on the wall, the other closing around the base of my throat. Not squeezing. Just there .

I shivered.

“Don't lie to me either,” he said, voice low and dangerous.

“You like this. You want me to tell you to stay so you can rest and heal, you just don’t know how to ask for it.

” My breath caught as his thumb stroked the side of my neck—barely a whisper of touch—and I swayed forward before I caught myself.

He was holding me, but he wasn’t hurting me.

How was that possible? “I think you need someone to tell you when to stop,” he continued, that dominant calm threaded with something hotter now.

“I have Rio.”

“He’s not here.”

“I can call him.” I really didn’t want to call him, because I’d fucked up so bad and I couldn’t face his anger and worse, his disappointment.

“Go on then,” he said, indicating my phone, with its cracked screen, charging in the bedside cabinet. He can come and get you.”

I hated how my knees went weak. “Fuck you.”

He tightened his grip for a brief moment, “I could make you stay,” he said, lower now, a breath against my jaw. “Strip you out of my shirt, press you back into the sheets, and hold you there until the meds kick in.”

I swallowed hard. “You’re not in charge of me.”

“No,” he agreed. “But you want me to be.”

That snapped something in me. “You don’t know what I want.”

His gaze dropped to my mouth, and for one suspended second, it felt as though the air between us might catch fire. “I know you want to fight something,” he said. “I know you want to push back until you hit something solid. Until someone won’t let you fall.”

I didn’t respond. Couldn’t.

He stepped back just enough to let the space fill with my silence.

“You want to leave?” he asked again, cool, calm, and controlled. “Say it. Or get back in bed.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut. I stood there, throat dry, skin flushed, heart hammering as if it didn’t know what it wanted.

Leave? I could. I’d done it before. Walked out, cut ties, and killed anyone who hurt me, until the smoke choked me.

But something about the way Killian watched me, still, sure, waiting—not begging, not commanding—just expecting —made me feel like running would destroy something in me.

I hated that. Hated him. Hated this.

So I did the only thing I could.

I sat.

The bed creaked under me, the cotton sheets cool.

My hands trembled, fists curled in the fabric, grounding myself in something—anything.

Rage, shame, relief, I couldn't tell which was winning.

My body obeyed, even while my mind screamed at me to run.

And that scared me more than anything—that staying felt worse than burning.

Killian didn't say anything right away as he reached for the edge of the sheet.

He drew it up over me with care, tucking it around my waist and legs, not letting it drag across the burns.

His hands were steady, impersonal in the way a good lie is—no lingering touches, no sharp edges. Just control. Just care.

Then, he leaned in and pressed a kiss to my forehead. My nose. Gently to my lips. And it burned hotter than any fire I'd ever lit. "I could have helped, Pretty. You should have come to me." I squirmed away as though the contact had scalded me, and he sighed. "Sleep."

That was all. One freaking word. But it was enough. Like everything else he did, it came wrapped in command and comfort, and despite every instinct telling me I had to run... I closed my eyes.

TWENTY

Killian

I hadn't slept all night, and I was now hunched over my laptop, working on one of my mainstream cases that didn't—so far—include murder, mayhem, or men trading in flesh.

I managed a shower when I knew Jamie was more unconscious than asleep, but I hadn't shifted from the counter in the kitchen since then.

I was close enough to the coffee to keep going and had a full view of the door.

The city beyond the window buzzed, a mix of neon and horn-blare static, but none of it reached me in my apartment. Not really.

The building Jamie had gone to had been empty.

There had been no fire. Not yet. But I knew he'd gone there to burn something down.

Thank fuck Caleb had planted a tracker on him—the same one he used for all of us, apparently.

I barely remembered parking next to Caleb's bike in the shadows at the back of the building.

He'd been waiting for me, and we had smelled it.

Smoke. I had forced my way through the gap in the door.

Flames had been blooming in the hallway, dancing up drywall, chasing shadows. And somewhere through it?—

A violent crash and a shout.

“Jamie!” I’d roared, diving through the smoke, ignoring the sting in my eyes, the way heat had clawed at my skin.

I hadn’t been able to see him. I’d only been able to hear him.

The heat had been choking, visibility near zero, smoke clawing at my throat.

I had seen a gap ahead—not much of one, but just enough.

Caleb had grabbed my arm, shouting something I couldn’t make out over the roar.

I had shaken him off hard, lungs screaming, heart pounding.

And then, I’d jumped through the gap.

The fire had curled around the edges of the hallway, as if it wanted to swallow me whole, but I’d pushed forward, my jacket pulled over my mouth, my eyes burning.

A beam had groaned and crashed behind me.

I’d ducked and stumbled, but kept going.

My ears had rung. The air had been a furnace.

My body had reacted on instinct, driven by one thought: Jamie.

Then—there. Blood on his shirt, soot streaking his jaw. He'd looked up as if he hadn't believed I was real, and laughed. He'd goddamned laughed!

“She’s fucking beautiful!” he’d said as if it was some religious experience, as I’d reached him and scooped him up into my arms. The gap in the flames I’d used was gone, blocked by a fresh wave of fire licking up the walls like it had been waiting for us.

I turned in a circle, coughing, my eyes burning, searching for another way out.

Jamie sagged against me, only half-conscious, and I could feel how hot his skin was through my shirt.

Then, a beam above us groaned—loud, warping, screaming with heat—and crashed to the floor behind us, punching a hole through what looked like a storage room wall. Dust and smoke burst out, and we had a path for a brief second.

I saw Caleb’s silhouette in the haze.

“Caleb!” I shouted, and he’d reached through the space, yanked me, and we staggered through the gap, Jamie in my arms, the broken wall giving way to clear air.

Caleb met us at the threshold, pulled open what was left of a service door, and we stumbled into the alley together.

As soon as we crossed the line into the open air, Jamie collapsed in my grip, and I dropped to my knees with him.

We’d made it. Barely. But we had.

And we'd left before the sirens or anyone saw us, but still...

I'd lost one of my nine lives, more because Jamie had nearly died as well, plus now Caleb was pissed at me, as well he should be. I'd jeopardized everything by being there. All the names on our board would stay there for Caleb, Sonya, and Levi to deal with.

And now I was sitting in my kitchen and, even though the adrenaline had worn off hours ago, I was still wired.

I wiped the counter for the fourth time and stared at the empty cup in front of me.

Jamie was asleep, if you could call it that—out cold in the bedroom, half-mummified in bandages, breathing shallow but steady.

When the knock came, I walked to the door and opened it.

Caleb stepped inside without a word. He was a big guy, taller than me by a hair, broader in the chest, and he walked in with a tightness I recognized.

Watching him was like staring at a lit fuse—tense, humming, seconds from detonation—but somehow, he kept it all locked down, and that made me feel more guilty than if he'd yelled.

He was holding himself together by a thread.

He dropped onto the stool at the counter, elbows braced on the surface, and ran a hand through his hair but didn't say a word.

I turned to the coffee machine and started grinding beans.

The hum filled the silence. The click of the scoop, the hiss of the kettle.

My hands worked on autopilot, and I followed muscle memory, placing a mug in front of him without asking.

Black, strong, bitter. Within five minutes Sonya and Levi had arrived, and I made sure the doors between the kitchen and Jamie were shut tight.

He might still be comatose, but what if he woke up right now when I knew I was about to have my ass handed to me.

Levi leaned on the counter, Sonya sank to a stool, both were quiet. Caleb picked up his coffee, staring into it as if the answers might be swirling somewhere in the steam. For a second, I thought maybe no one would say anything. That maybe, miraculously, I'd get a free pass.

Then Caleb began: "What the hell was that last night?"

What could I say? I'd seen the fire, heard the crash, and the scream, and I'd gone in. That wasn't a strategy. That wasn't the job. That was me—raw, reckless, desperate .

Caleb didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. His restraint was louder than a scream, and it made my chest ache. That calm, measured fury of his—it was worse than shouting.

"You don't do that. You know the rules," he added.

I nodded, knowing I deserved this. If things were changing, if Jamie being in our lives meant that I was reckless, then Caleb was right to call me on it.

"The deal is that you keep your front-facing persona," Levi interjected. "You stay the

clean one. The lawyer. The guy who plays by the rules while the rest of us work in the shadows. That's the whole point of you .”

Still, I said nothing.

Caleb set the mug down. “You threw yourself into a fucking fire. What would’ve happened if you’d gotten hurt? If Jamie had died after lighting his own goddamn funeral pyre, and you ended up front and center on every news report? You think our secrets would’ve stayed buried then?”

I didn’t flinch, but his sharp words hit their mark.

“Do you get it, Killian? If you go down like that—reckless, visible—it all unravels. Me. Sonya. Levi. Everything. ”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. My voice felt like gravel. “He was going to die.”

Caleb stared at me for a long moment, tension tightening his jaw.

“Then, next time you leave it to me, you send someone who isn’t the fucking linchpin.

A security cam or a medic with a camera phone, and you’re headline news.

They start digging into you, and we don’t just lose the team—we lose everything we’ve done so far. ”

He gestured toward the closed bedroom door. “So tell me something, and don’t lie. Did you cross the line for a civilian in danger... or something more? Because we deserve to know, Killian.”

I looked down at my hands, which were curled around the edge of the counter. I didn't answer. Not because I didn't want to, but because, maybe, I didn't know myself.

Caleb's expression didn't change, but his tone shifted—low, grave, final.

“You don't get to be reckless.” He waited a beat, then leaned forward, voice even quieter now, every word deliberate.

“You're attracted to an ex-con, Killian.

Worse—someone who's clearly out of control. What the fuck are you thinking?”

My throat was dry. I tried to speak, failed, and tried again. “I didn't plan this. ”

“No, but you didn't stop it either.”

He wasn't wrong. And that made it worse. Silence settled between us again. He picked up the coffee. Took a long sip.

“I'm sorry,” I murmured, and he rolled his eyes.

Levi huffed in exasperation. “‘Sorry’ implies you won't do it again, and we get Redcars means something to you, but this Jamie thing...”

“Jamie is... he... fuck, I don't know.” I slumped onto the stool on the other side of the counter.

Then, it was back to Caleb. “If this is more than fucking, if this is enough to have you walking into a fire that he set, then you'll never be able to keep him a secret part of your life. He's compromising your control and your disguise because he's

uncontrolled and a threat to all of us.”

“What are you saying?”

“Ditch Redcars, ditch Jamie, do your thing the right way.”

“And what if I can’t?”

“You mean what if you won’t?”

“Maybe I do mean that. Tudor and Redcars gave me a second chance, made me see myself as something better than I was. I owe them for that.”

“As a lawyer who can help out every so often, not fucking one of the ex-cons with their dubious pasts and ties to gangs and sealed fucking juvenile records!”

“I’ll control Jamie?—”

Caleb snorted. How will you control him?”

“He listens to me?—”

“You gonna take away his matches?”

“Fuck you, Caleb!”

“No, fuck you for messing this up by not thinking. Are you stupid?” Caleb rounded on me as he spoke, his hands in fists, but Levi stopped him with a firm grip, and Caleb backed off.

This wasn’t who we were. We were a team—united, focused, built on trust. We had

each other's backs, worked toward the same goal.

We didn't fall apart like this. We didn't turn on each other.

Everyone fell quiet, but it was Caleb, with his brutal honesty, who laid everything on the table.

"If you get in trouble, it's the end of our team and the list. Using what we found, taking people down the legal way needs you out there clean as a fucking whistle, not getting your rocks off with some random ex con. "

"Caleb—"

"We don't take the bad people out by killing; we do it the right way!"

"I never signed up for murder," Sonya interjected.

"You say that, Son, but we all agreed to give what we knew to Redcars so they could take out John Mitchell," I said.

She blanched and shook her head, "That's not fair, Killian."

"Life isn't fair, Sonya," I said.

Caleb shrugged off Levi's hold and stood between us. "Don't you fucking dare turn on us, asshole!"

"We're accessories to murder, already. You don't think some of what we've found and leaked hasn't led to some of the perpetrators committing suicide? Aren't we complicit in their deaths?" I was on a roll, but I knew in my heart none of it made sense. What the fuck was I saying?

Sonya crossed her arms and fixed me with a look that could melt steel.

“You want to play both sides, Killian? Then own it. Don’t come at us with half-baked moral outrage, then justify dragging an unstable man out of a fire you knew he started.

You act like you’re the only one with skin in this game, but we all bleed for this team. You fuck up, and we all burn with you.”

I opened my mouth, but she wasn’t finished.

“You think you’re the only one who’s been tempted to cross lines? The rest of us didn’t just magically grow a conscience. We make choices. Every damn day. And yes there is a side of me that feels guilt, but you know that Jamie would have found John Mitchell if he’s as good as you say he is.”

“I’m sorry?—”

“Don’t interrupt me!” she snapped. “If you want the team to survive, you better start remembering that your actions don’t just affect you.”

Regret flooded me. “I know. Shit, I didn’t mean that, Son, I’m sorry. I don’t know where my head’s at.” I peered past Caleb to see her expression.

She closed her eyes briefly and nodded. “It’s okay,” she said.

But it wasn’t okay.

What would my life be like without the team? I was the vigilante dressed in three thousand-dollar suits to fool everyone; I had my place with the team. We did good things, but Jamie...

“I couldn’t let anyone burn,” I defended one last time.

Caleb sighed. “Not even if they were the one who started the fire?”

“There’s something there, a connection, to the old me.

” The one who’d thrived on chaos and fire, who hadn’t just hurt people, but had killed a man and never looked back until the guilt had finally found its teeth.

That raw, violent part of me that used to claw its way to the surface when I felt cornered, helpless, or angry.

I saw it in Jamie—in the way he chased destruction because it was the only thing that made sense in a senseless world.

I recognized the need to prove something.

To punish. To be the one in control of the pain.

And Caleb saw it too. “You promised us you could lock those parts of you down,” he said, the weight in his voice impossible to ignore. “The whole point of the team is to find legitimate ways to take the bad guys down.”

I nodded once, throat tight. “I know.”

And for the first time, Caleb didn’t argue. He drank his coffee and kept watch, as if daring me to figure it out before the next storm hit.

Sonya exhaled sharply, her voice lower now. “I don’t even get why it has to be him,” she muttered.

“Jamie?” I asked, and she nodded. “There’s something about him, and it scares the shit out of me because I can’t explain why.”

Caleb let out a breath, and Levi stared hard at the floor, as if he didn’t want to admit he had an opinion. But the silence was confirmation enough. No one could quite understand why Jamie got under my skin. He just did.

Sonya shook her head and stood, brushing her palms on her jeans as if she was ridding herself of something she couldn’t name. “I need air.”

Caleb followed her out without another word.

Levi hesitated at the threshold. Then turned back to me, his voice low. “You want to be with him, that’s your business, unless it takes down the team with you. Don’t be stupid, Killian.”

“I would never endanger any of you?—”

“But that is what you’re doing.”

He pulled the door shut, and I stared at the wood, hurt, worried, and stressed.

Now what?

Well, fuck, that would be Rio turning up in reception and demanding to see me. I buzzed him up.

This wasn’t going to go well.

TWENTY-ONE

Jamie

I didn't know how long I was out, but the first thing I was aware of, after the gentle kissing, was shouting. My eyes flew open as the door slammed into the wall so hard the frame shuddered.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Jamie!" Rio's voice, raw and furious, filled the room a second before he appeared, stalking in like a storm, with fists clenched and chest heaving. Killian was right behind him, equally tense, voice low but no less angry.

"Rio—"

"You're supposed to come to me when you want to burn. You promised me. After what happened in Stockton—we pulled those people out—you fucking cried, Jamie. You told me never again. You promised me."

"Listen—"

"You acted without a plan, backup, or even telling me. You lit a match without knowing what you'd burn down... again—and look at you!"

Guilt turned to anger, and I pushed myself upright, wincing as the sheet slipped down and the burn pulled tight along my ribs. Killian reacted as if he might steady me, but I waved him off with a sharp shake of my head.

“Can you give us a few minutes?” I asked him, voice rough.

Killian didn’t move right away. He crowded Rio, eyes flashing, the air crackling between them like they were seconds from violence—two big guys locked in a silent war of will and territory.

“Watch your tone with him,” Killian said, quiet and dangerous.

“Or what?” Rio snapped. “You think I’m scared of some slick-suited manipulator who thinks he knows what’s best for Jamie?”

“Back off,” Killian growled. “Show him some fucking respect.”

“‘Respect’?” Rio took a step forward, invading Killian’s space without flinching.

Then, he shoved him—two open hands to the chest. Killian rocked back half a step but held his ground, shoulders squaring like a wall settling into place.

Rio might’ve been shorter, but he was all power and coiled fury, the kind that came from knowing what kind of damage he could do.

And Killian? Killian was calm in that terrifying, precise way that said he’d seen worse and wasn’t going to be the one to blink.

“I’ve been protecting him since we met,” Rio bit out, their bodies almost touching, heat and adrenaline spiking between them.

“Enough!” I barked, loud enough that they both looked at me.

“I need to talk to Rio. Alone. Please.”

Killian's jaw clenched, but he finally nodded and stepped back, shoulders tense as he left the room without another word. The door clicked shut behind him, leaving only silence—and Rio's fury.

Rio paced like a caged animal, fists still clenched, breathing hard through his nose. He pointed at me as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Why didn't you tell me?"

My laugh was bitter. "When, Rio? When you're at The Pit fighting? When you're high? When you bring home whatever guy looks good enough to bleed and drink with until you pass out? When you stagger in reeking of smoke and sweat and can't even look at me? "

His jaw tightened.

"I waited for you," I said, voice breaking.

"I waited for you last night, and you walked right past me. You tell me I can tell you, but I can't, not every single time.

My brain won't let me, and you don't see me even when you're not fighting, or whoring, or...

" I sat straighter, blinking through the sting behind my eyes.

"It's not on you, Rio, but tell me—how could you ever be enough to stop me when all I want to do is burn? "

He opened his mouth, then closed it. Anger warred with something else—guilt, maybe. Or shame. I didn't know. Didn't care.

“Jesus, Jamie?—”

“You don’t get to storm in here and act like I betrayed you when you don’t understand, and you haven’t been around to keep that promise real.”

“I never meant to—” he started.

“You’re my best friend, but I’m fucked-up, okay?” I said. “It still happened. It’s not your fault, but it’s not my fault either.”

He slumped to the bed. His hands dragged over his face, elbows on his knees, eyes glassy with something that wasn’t just anger anymore.

“I should have seen you were spiraling,” he muttered.

“I knew you wanted to do something. I could feel it. But I thought I’d see it and catch the signs like I always have.

I thought I had more time. That you’d come to me before it got bad. But you didn’t. And I missed it.”

“This isn’t about you, Rio?—”

“You could have died.” His voice cracked on the last word, and he looked at me as if he saw the full cost for the first time. “You could’ve gone in and not come out. I keep thinking about that—how I would’ve found out in a news alert or a fucking phone call from Enzo.”

He scrubbed his hands down his face again and looked up, jaw tight. “I’ll fix this. I’ll do better. I’ll stay home more. I’ll check in every night. I’ll—fuck, I’ll do whatever you need. Just don’t shut me out again.”

I shook my head slowly. “Rio... I don’t need you to fix me.

I know you want to help, but you can’t be the net every time I fall.

No one can be there for me every time I lose control.

I was the one who made the call to go in, and I’ll probably make more mistakes like that.

That’s not your fault. It’s not even about blame.

It’s who I am. And yeah, maybe one day, I won’t get out of the fire.

Maybe that’s what’s waiting for me at the end of this road I keep charging down.

Maybe that’s the price I’m wired to pay for all the lives she’s helped me take.

And when it comes... maybe that’ll be my turn. ”

Rio’s face twisted. “That’s not okay, Jamie.

” He stood, angry all over again, pacing a few steps before turning on me.

“You don’t get to say that like dying is just something you’ve penciled into your future.

That’s not how this works. You matter. You matter to me.

” His voice cracked, and he dragged a hand through his hair, all restless fury collapsing into something more gentle.

“You matter more than you know. I should’ve been there. I wanted to be there. I just...”

He slumped as the fight left him, and when he finally looked back at me, it wasn’t with anger anymore—just quiet desperation.

“Please, Jamie, don’t make me bury my best friend.”

“I’ll try.”

Rio sighed. “I’ll take that.” Then, he sat down, elbows on his knees. He stared at the floor for a long second before speaking. “How’s the pain?”

“Okay. Burns, stitches in my shoulder. Not as bad as Stockton.”

He nodded. “Still pretty fucked-up though.”

“Yeah.”

There was a beat of silence before Rio exhaled again. “Killian paid Doc. He won’t tell me how much, but I have the money.”

“I know,” I said quietly. “We’ll figure it out. But for now... let the rich guy pay, yeah? No extra fights. No hurting yourself to get money for this.”

Rio scoffed under his breath. “Says the guy who walked into a fire.”

“Says the guy who bleeds for sport and fucks as if he’s looking for a reason to break his dick,” I shot back.

He huffed a bitter laugh and rubbed his face. “Touché.”

We stared at each other. Two disasters in different flavors.

Same damage, different masks. Then, he reached out and gripped my hand.

We pulled into a crooked, awkward bro-hug neither of us was good at, but both of us needed.

His chin knocked my temple and my shoulder twinged, but I held on just as hard.

When we let go, something had shifted. Not healed, but less sharp.

Rio gestured to the closed door. “So... are we going to talk about whatever this Killian-Jamie situation is? Because I’ve got questions. Like, is this a thing? Did he sleep in here with you? Is he fucking you? You fucking him? Do I need to punch him in the mouth or threaten him with a wrench? ”

I groaned, dropping my head back to the wall. “Don’t start.”

“I’m serious. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. And you’re all ‘yes, sir’.”

“Fucks sake, Rio!”

He grinned, all mischief now. “Hey, I’m just saying... dude’s got the bossy top vibe.”

I threw a pillow at him, then sighed again—I’d been doing a lot of that. “He makes the noise in my head stop.”

Rio raised an eyebrow, but that was all I was giving him.

The rest was my secret.

TWENTY-TWO

Killian

A call woke me from a doze—head in my hands, elbows braced on the kitchen counter, the cold laminate pressing into my skin. My phone buzzed against the inside of my forearm, sharp and insistent. I blinked at the screen, heart stuttering once before settling into a slow thud. LASSITER .

Of course.

I swiped to answer and forced some steel into my voice. “McKendrick.”

“You’ve been too quiet.” Lassiter said, smooth and cool as though we were old friends catching up over drinks.

I straightened, rubbed my face with my free hand. “Long week. ”

“I expected results by now. What have you found?”

I paused a beat too long, still not fully clear-headed. “Still piecing things together. Trail’s messy. Shuffled names, dead ends. You know how this goes.”

There was a beat of silence on the other end, then a sharp inhale. “I hope you’re taking this seriously, McKendrick.”

I flinched at the tone—polite on the surface, but hard beneath. Not a threat. Not quite.

But close enough to make something in my gut coil.

“I am,” I said flatly, trying to sound calm and controlled. “But the kind of mess I’m digging through doesn’t resolve in twenty-four hours. I’m working it,” I said, voice sharpening before I caught myself.

“Good.” The word was clipped, final. “Because my friends don’t like waiting. Keep me posted.”

The line went dead.

I stared at the phone for a long second, then set it down, knuckles white where I gripped the edge of the counter. My head still ached, but the haze was gone. Replaced by something colder. Clearer.

Lassiter was watching. And he was getting nervous.

Good.

But fuck, I was wide awake again and Jamie was in my room until late afternoon, so I had a lot of time to fill with research that led nowhere.

The sound of my bedroom door creaking open made my spine straighten.

I didn’t turn around at first. Didn’t want to crowd him.

I waited, listening to the shuffling of bare feet across the hardwood.

Jamie appeared in the hallway a moment later, clinging to the wall as if gravity had turned against him.

He was wearing my dress pants—the same pair he’d bitched about earlier when his legs had refused to cooperate—and one of my old button-downs. Pale blue, soft with age, the collar frayed. It swam on his frame, hanging off narrow shoulders. He was pale, drawn, but at least he was upright.

“I’m going home,” he said, voice flat.

I didn’t argue. Not immediately. Instead, I reached for the small duffel bag I’d packed earlier, half-hoping he wouldn’t be this stubborn. Inside: his lighter, his wallet, no cards, just a bundle of cash I’d found.

I handed him the bag and a printed set of instructions. “Aftercare. I googled everything Doc didn’t bother to say.”

He blinked at me, thrown. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” I replied. “Keep the burns dry. Watch for infection. Don’t pop the blisters. Hydration. Rest. Take the painkillers with food, or you’ll throw up. No soaking them, no friction, no tight clothes.” I hesitated. “You’ll need help changing the dressings after forty-eight hours.”

Jamie’s mouth twisted as if he wasn’t sure if he should be grateful or furious.

He glanced toward the door, then looked down at the shoes I’d left for him—his own, somehow untouched by the flames.

He leaned on the wall, hands trembling as he shoved his feet into the worn Nikes.

I watched as sweat beaded along his hairline, jaw clenched tight with effort.

Even though he looked as if he might collapse at any second, he finished tying his

laces, then pressed a hand flat to the wall, catching his breath.

Every part of me wanted to reach out. Steady him. Say stay.

Instead, I picked up my keys.

“I’ll drive you.”

“I’ll call a cab.”

“I’m driving you.”

Jamie shot me a sideways look, a flicker of something hot in his expression. Then, he relented with a sharp exhale and headed cautiously toward the door.

I followed, letting him keep his pride. I could’ve scooped him up in one motion, but that wasn’t what he needed. He wasn’t fragile. Not the way he thought I saw him. But he was hurting. More than he’d ever admit.

I helped him into the passenger seat of the Audi. He didn’t fight me this time. Just let me steady him as he lowered himself into the seat, his hand curling over the doorframe as if it hurt to let go.

The silence between us stretched as I pulled out of the basement parking and headed for the street.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said, voice barely audible above the engine’s hum.

“I know.”

“You act like I’ll shatter if I’m not wrapped in cotton wool.”

I snorted. “I think you’re walking around with fresh burns and a fever and trying to act like it’s a normal Tuesday.”

“I’m not yours to worry about, Killian.”

I gripped the wheel tighter. “You are.”

He looked out of the window as if he didn’t know how to respond to that. As if the idea of belonging to anything—or anyone—made his chest tighten.

“Doesn’t mean you get to decide.”

“I’m not deciding. I’m driving.”

More silence. Then, softer: “You printed instructions. ”

“Yeah.”

He didn’t answer. But when we hit a red light, I saw how his eyes drifted shut for a second, still gripping the seatbelt to keep it from his shoulder.

His fingers weren’t burned—how the hell had he walked out of there with nothing on his hands?

When we reached his apartment, he didn’t get out.

Just sat there, breathing, eyes still closed. I didn’t move.

“You didn’t have to find me last night,” he said.

I stared ahead. “I know. But I did.”

His laugh was broken. He opened the door, paused. “You’re a fucking idiot Killian,” he snapped, then got out, and I watched him until the door closed before climbing out and following him.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked.

“Making sure you’re inside okay, and then, I’ll leave,” I said.

The apartment was empty—no sign of Rio—and I glanced around at the evidence two men lived here.

The apartment was small but efficiently laid out.

Three doors branched off the main space—one open to reveal a bathroom with white tiles and a shower curtain that had seen better days, the other two likely leading to bedrooms. The lounge area was compact, with two overstuffed sofas arranged around a scratched coffee table, forming a rough square with a large TV in one corner still glowing faintly with standby light.

A laptop sat open on the dining table beside a half-eaten bag of chips and a tangle of phone chargers.

The air held a faint scent of smoke and cleaning products, as though someone had tried to scrub out the chaos but hadn’t finished.

It was lived-in, cluttered, but not messy.

Practical, with no attempt at decoration or warmth.

A space designed for function, not comfort.

I clocked the exits, the layout, the blind spots.

Old habits. Always assessing, always planning escape routes, even now.

“You leaving now?” he asked me.

I shrugged. “I could stay a while.”

He shoved the door shut trapping me in with him, his fists twisted in my shirt, and he yanked me forward.

And kissed me.

Hard. Desperate. All fury and hurt. His fingers clawed at my skin.

There was nothing gentle in it. Just heat and violence and everything he didn’t know how to say.

I didn’t want to hold him, didn’t know what hurt, but I bit his lip, and he moaned, half pain, half want.

He shoved me back into the couch, hands under my shirt.

“Hold me,” he snapped, and, careful of the bandages, I held him .

He yanked my shirt off. Tore it, I think. Didn’t care. His hands shook as he scraped them down my back.

“I need it hard,” he gasped. “I need—fuck, Killian, I need to feel something.”

I kissed him again, deeper this time, but still roughly. “You feel this?”

I grabbed his hips and dragged him toward me. His head tipped back. Eyes fluttered. God, he was so fucking raw.

We stripped fast, frantic. His pants hit the floor. I had enough sense left to grab the lube, slick my fingers. I pushed one in, and he gasped, clenching around me, body jerking like I'd hit a live wire.

“More,” he ground out.

I gave him two. Three. He took it all, his hands fisting in the cushions, jaw clenched, breath ragged. He didn't want slow. He wanted to burn.

So, I gave it to him.

I pushed in, burying myself in one rough thrust. He cried out—high and sharp—but didn't stop me. He pulled me closer instead, legs locked tight around my waist as if he'd fall apart if I let go.

We rocked hard and fast. The couch shifted.

Our skin slapped. My fingers dug bruises into his hips.

He bit my shoulder, dragged his nails down my back.

He wanted it brutal. Punishing. Needed to be used as if he didn't deserve anything different.

I refused to hurt him more. I was so careful of his shoulder and his burns and slowed everything down, then, mid-thrust, I kissed him.

Slow. Deep. He froze, as though it broke something in him.

Then, he shattered.

He came first, body convulsing, a sharp gasp tore from his throat. I followed, fast, buried so deep in him I didn't know where I ended and he began. My heart pounded. My whole body ached.

But I didn't move.

He was breathing as if he'd run ten miles. Face turned away. Silent.

I pulled out, carefully. I twisted one hand in his hair, the other over the thin stretch of his back. He didn't stop me, not even when I gathered him in my arms, not even when I kissed the side of his head and whispered his name.

He didn't cry, but he was shaking, and his breath hitched as if he wanted to scream and couldn't.

So, I held him.

Held him as if he mattered. As if he wasn't smoke and fury and pain wrapped in skin.

And he let me.

For a minute, he let me stay.

TWENTY-THREE

Jamie

The way Killian touched me, held me. How I came apart, not when he was rough, but when his voice was low, when his hands slowed and his mouth pressed gently against my jaw as if he gave a shit.

It reminded me of a moment I'd buried deep—a time when someone had touched me like that, once, before the world had taught me gentleness came with strings, with lies, with pain dressed in kindness.

That gentleness was the beginning of the end.

It always had been. Rough, I could handle.

Rough made sense. But kindness? That could destroy me.

What the fuck was that about? I couldn't handle that.

I didn't want gentle. Didn't want to be seen.

I needed hard and fast and meaningless. That was what kept me safe .

I pointed at him, not caring how much it hurt when my burns stretched. "Get out."

Killian blinked, but I didn't wait for him to argue. I got up, unsteady, and stomped to

my room, every step screaming.

“Fuck off!” I yelled because silence was too much.

I climbed into my bed, into the tangle of blankets and sheets smelling like old soap and the heat of old nightmares. Familiar. Safe. Mine.

I curled into myself and stared at the wall.

I didn’t want gentle. Not from him. Not from anyone. The last time someone had touched me with care—my dad on a good day—he’d smiled while breaking me in half. Kindness had been the mask pain wore, and I’d learned to run from it faster than I ever had from fists. At least violence was honest.

Because if Killian could make me fall apart with kindness, what the hell else could he break in me?

I woke up to pain.

Not the sharp kind that stole your breath, but the deep, dragging kind that settled in your bones like it was planning to stay. My muscles were stiff, locked tight. Every breath scraped raw across bruised ribs. The meds had worn off hours ago, but I hadn’t wanted to wake Killian .

Because the asshole had opened my door, brought in pills and water, and stayed.

That part made no sense. I’d told him to leave, but he was still here, quiet, still, sitting in a chair he’d dragged in from the kitchen.

“What’r’you’doin?” I rasped.

“It lives,” he deadpanned.

I tried to sit up. My body shut that down fast. “Fuck.”

Killian didn’t move. Didn’t offer help. Just sat there, hands resting loosely on his knees, watching me come undone one inch at a time.

I hated how much I wanted him to reach for me.

But worse than that was remembering what happened before I blacked out and how he’d pulled me apart with gentle freaking care.

“Why are you still here?” I asked, my voice scraping.

“You want me to go?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it again. “You shouldn’t have stayed.”

“I know,” he said. “I stayed anyway.”

The silence between us turned thick, too charged.

And I couldn’t stop remembering. The way he’d kissed me last night—as if I were something more than fire and sharp edges.

His hands on my face. His mouth on mine.

The frantic, tangled way we’d grabbed at each other like we were drowning and neither one of us cared what it cost.

I’d needed it. Needed him. And he’d let me have it.

“Last night was a mistake,” I said, but the words came out too fast, too brittle.

I hesitated, jaw tight, eyes flicking away.

“You shouldn’t have let me—” The end of the sentence frayed.

I wanted to blame him. Needed to. But the truth was messier, tangled with things I didn’t want to feel, let alone say.

“I didn’t let you do anything,” Killian cut in, voice low. “You weren’t in control. Neither was I. We both took what we needed.”

I swallowed hard, voice raw. “I used you.”

“Bullshit. You think I didn’t know exactly what was happening? You think I didn’t want it?”

“I didn’t ask you to want it.”

“No.” Killian’s expression was thoughtful. “You asked with your hands. With your mouth. And I said yes.”

“You kissed me like it meant something.”

“It did.”

The words landed like a fist to the ribs. I flinched. “I don’t need that shit,” I said, quieter now. “Why are you here? ”

“I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

“For you to stop pretending you don’t want someone to stay.”

I had no answer. I just lay there, hurting. Hating myself for the part that wanted to believe him.

I glanced at my arm where gauze wrapped tight around the worst of the burns, the edges stained faint brown with antiseptic. Medical tape tugged at the fine hairs on my skin, and underneath I could feel the throb of broken flesh and healing nerves, raw and angry beneath the sterile cover.

“More scars,” I murmured.

“We all have them,” Killian murmured. He rolled up his sleeve. A mess of patterns snaked up his forearm, jagged and unforgiving. I hadn’t seen them before—had I ever seen him naked? Barely.

“I said no to a john once,” he said. “Didn’t go well.”

It wasn’t a confession. It was a shared truth. Something fresh to match the new wounds I had.

I turned my face away. “You don’t get to swap scars to make me feel better just because you fucked me.”

“I didn’t fuck you,” he said with patience. “I held you while you fell apart. You trusted me and kissed me as if it mattered.”

“I fucking hate you!” I yelled, but the words felt hollow even as they left my mouth. What I really hated was the way he’d touched something buried so deep I didn’t have

a name for it. I hated that he stayed. I hated that part of me wanted him to. Needed him to.

“No. You don’t.”

I closed my eyes, throat burning. I hated him for being right. Hated myself more for wanting to do it again. Then, the door opened. The air shifted.

Rio stepped inside, filling the doorway like a storm cloud. Shoulders squared, eyes narrowed. He looked at Killian, then at me, then back again.

“Rio,” Killian said.

“Killian,” Rio replied.

Rio was big, but Killian was bigger—taller, broader.

He didn’t flinch. He didn’t try to puff up.

He just met Rio’s stare and nodded once.

Rio returned the nod. Some quiet understanding passed between them.

A boundary drawn, a warning acknowledged.

It pissed me off that they were having some silent conversation about me without including me.

“Stop doing that shit! You’re not passing me over to him as if he’s in charge of me now! ”

Killian stood. Didn't look at me. Didn't touch me. Stopped at the edge of the bed, as if he were checking that I could hold myself upright without him.

"Rest," he said. Not a suggestion. A promise.

Then, he left.

Rio stepped in after him and shut the door.

His expression was unreadable. Then, he looked around the room—the crumpled sheets, the mug on the sill, the folded hoodie Killian had left behind.

"I've seen the aftermath before," he said. "When you chase the fire just to feel something, you break, but this doesn't look like wreckage, more like someone other than me is trying to keep you safe."

I didn't look at him. "Don't read into it."

"I don't have to. It's written all over you."

I closed my eyes. "It was nothing."

"Was it?"

He leaned forward again. "I've got your back."

"You don't like him."

"No," he admitted. "It's not that I don't like him. He makes me... uneasy."

He rubbed a hand over his jaw, finally dropping into the chair beside the bed. "I've

been the one keeping an eye on you. Since the beginning. When things went to shit, it was me making sure you got out in one piece. And now there's him. It feels weird. Like I'm supposed to just... hand it over."

I turned my head, eyes narrowed. "I'm not a thing to be handed over."

Rio huffed a breath, sat forward, elbows on his knees. "No, you're someone who needs stability. An anchor. And maybe Killian is that." He looked away, his voice quieter. "Not some beaten-up enforcer like me who only knows how to make people bleed."

I smirked, despite myself. "I love that beaten-up asshole."

Rio snorted, shaking his head with a crooked grin. "Love you, too."

"I dunno how, but Killian makes me feel..." The words caught, tight in my throat.

There was so much emotion in me—rage, need, shame, fear—and I needed to vocalize it, but how?

I didn't have the language for softness.

I wasn't built for it. I only knew how to throw fire at what I didn't understand and hope it didn't burn me back.

"Yeah," Rio said. "Can he stop you burning?"

"I don't know." That's the part that scares me, too. Because wanting something real meant confronting all the reasons I'd lit matches in the first place.

I knew what the textbooks said about people like me.

Pyromania, arson—whatever the actual reason was why I burned—wasn't about destruction, not really.

It was about control. Release. A compulsion building pressure in your chest until fire was the only thing that made it stop.

The act itself wasn't about rage—it was ritual.

The anticipation, the ignition, the glow.

The aftermath. It gave structure to the chaos inside.

Most people thought it was about hurting others. It wasn't. It was about the ache that wouldn't let go, the one I tried to silence with flames. A temporary high, a flicker of control in a world that never gave me any.

But Killian—he short-circuited all of that. He looked at me like I didn't need to burn to matter. And that terrified me more than anything I'd ever set alight.

I lay there, silent. “I don't know how to want something without ruining it,” I whispered.

“I want him, but not just sex. I want him to see me— really see me—and still choose to stay, and that single thought terrifies me more than anything. I let him in, and now I don't know how to close the door.

Fuck. What if I need him more than he needs me? ”

Rio's eyes widened, and he sighed. “Fuck Jamie. It's okay to fall in love with someone. ”

“I’m not in love,” I blurted. “I don’t know how to be in love.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:17 am

“Same,” Rio said on a sigh, then he moved to the window. “I look at Enzo and Robbie, and they just...”

“Belong together.”

“Yeah. And maybe we’re allowed to want good things, Jamie. Even if they don’t come packaged the way we thought they would.”

I stared at the ceiling, eyes burning. “Do we deserve them?” The words tasted like ash.

Why had every good thing I’d ever touched always ended the same way—ruined, scorched, broken in my hands?

I’d learned to survive the aftermath, but I’d never once been taught to believe in something better. Not for me.

He looked at me, steady and unflinching. “Yes. But we’re gonna have to fight like hell to believe it.”

We took our coffees to the sofas, and sat quietly for the longest time, me lost in thought, and Rio clearly having something to say and not knowing where to start.

“We should talk about Stockton,” he murmured. “Before you... y’know, with Killian.”

Stockton. An old motel. Empty. Abandoned.

Boarded up. Rio and I had been out there picking up a 1969 Dodge Charger R/T—cherry red, with a 440 Magnum engine and rear quarter panels that looked like they'd seen one too many winters—and we'd slept overnight in Rio's truck because the owners wanted one more night to consider the sale.

I remember being hot, irritable, keyed up with nowhere to put it—the pressure building under my skin until it felt like fire was the only answer.

I didn't observe. Didn't look for patterns of habitation aside from the obvious, didn't think of the people in there who'd want to stay hidden from ICE.

Didn't have any reason to burn the place other than my selfishness.

I didn't see any signs that anyone was living there.

I needed to burn, and that desperate want overrode everything else.

I lit the fire as if it were a ritual, something sacred, but I didn't know anyone was inside until I heard the screaming.

Two families. Undocumented and scared. A toddler. Three other kids. Parents trying to survive on the margins. My fire took every possession from them and nearly took their lives.

I got them out. Every single one. They were so fucking grateful—thanking me with tearful eyes and shaking hands while smoke still clung to their clothes. And I stood there, ash-streaked and hollow, trying to reconcile the truth—I'd almost killed innocents.

Rio was the one who had yanked me back, physically and emotionally, as I broke down in the dirt outside. I cried not for what had happened, but for what almost did.

For how close I'd come to destroying something that didn't belong to me.

Grief tore through me then, sharp and unrelenting. Not just guilt, but regret so deep it felt as if it would eat me alive. I never wanted to feel that again. But even now, it still lived in my chest, quiet and waiting.

"It won't happen again," I reassured him.

"What if Killian doesn't care like I do?"

"Jesus, Rio, he walked into a fire to save me."

"He didn't stop you setting it in the first place," Rio reminded me.

I scrubbed my eyes. "No one can stop me apart from me," I said, tired and sore.

"You should tell him what happened. He needs to know if he's your anchor."

"Okay, Mom," I said, teasing, but the truth of it was that Killian did need to know. "If this gets serious, I'll tell him."

"Gets serious?" Rio scoffed. "Wasn't it you who just said he walked into a fire for you? I think that's plenty serious."

Love? My anchor? None of it seemed real.

I couldn't sleep; Rio's warning and the mention of love were messing with my head, so I dragged my laptop over and continued digging into the files concerning Lassiter.

I sat cross-legged on the sofa, the overhead light off, the only glow coming from my laptop screen and the string of LED lights around the window.

The room was quiet except for the whirr of the fan and the erratic clicking of my mouse.

I was now fully immersed in it, deep in the obsession I had told myself was curiosity.

But it wasn't. It was something else. A compulsion.

A need to find something—anything—on Lassiter.

Something Killian's team might miss. Something that might matter.

I reviewed public records, corporate filings, charity donations, and real estate transactions related to everything we'd downloaded from Mitchell's place, as well as what I'd learned through my old dark web contacts.

I compared company directorships and financial disclosures with the growing horror that only came when something started making too much sense.

The deeper I went, the more knots I found in the web.

One LLC led to another. Shell corporations were layered like Russian dolls.

Every once in a while, a whisper of Lassiter's name in a charity he'd consulted for, or a case Lassiter had prosecuted, which had died before it reached a jury.

And then I found it.

It wasn't listed as anything meaningful.

Just a ZIP file in a defunct law firm's document repository, buried behind bad indexing and half-broken links.

The folder was labeled Legacy Holdings – CLOSED CASES .

I opened the set of archived legal documents, heavily compressed.

I extracted them all. Most were dry dismissals, mergers, and settlements. But one was different.

A deposition.

I blinked. The metadata had been cleaned—someone had taken the time to wipe it thoroughly—but the language in the document made me pause.

Something about it felt... off. Coded. The tone was stiff, the structure clinical.

There were black bars over names, redactions over company identifiers.

But the questions—they circled power dynamics, corporate accountability, and an unnamed party who'd authorized hush money in a murder trial.

I scrolled, reading between the lines. An intermediary. A high-profile murder case that had been quietly buried before it reached trial. The words danced close to what I knew about Lassiter's favorite tactics—redirect, conceal, neutralize .

One line made my breath catch: Did you inform Mr. Lassiter of the potential legal fallout from the murder investigation?

The answer was redacted, but the following line wasn't:

For the record, the authorization from the Lassiter Foundation to settle the matter came directly through the intermediary.

Okay, a new level then for us to explore, an intermediary. My fingers hovered over the trackpad. I copied the bar number of the deponent, just out of habit, and opened a new tab to check it. It may have been someone high-profile and could lead to something useful.

The search loaded.

Killian McKendrick.

My breath whooshed out of me all at once, as if I'd taken a punch to the chest. I stared at the name on the screen, willing it to be wrong, to be someone else. But it wasn't. I clicked back to the deposition and scrolled again, looking at it with new eyes.

Killian had been in the middle of a Lassiter deal. Not on the edges. Not a bystander. This wasn't a favor or a passing connection. This was central. Killian had helped Lassiter bury a murder.

My heart thudded. The laptop screen felt too bright, burning my eyes. I leaned into the wall, vision tunneling. I'd almost thought I could trust him—but what the hell had I found?

“What the fuck, Killian,” I whispered.

I shut the laptop, pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, then scrubbed them over my face. The walls felt like they were closing in on me. I needed air. I needed to know why.

But more than that, I needed to understand why Killian was lying to us all.

So, I sent a message, grabbed what I needed, and left.

TWENTY-FOUR

Killian

The message was simple: a location and a we need to talk from Jamie.

The place he sent me to was an abandoned house, one of many left behind on a road littered with rusting signs for reinvestment opportunities.

These had been family homes once—before an extension to the main road had sliced through the neighborhood like a blade.

The man behind that decision had been dealt with by the Cave a long time ago, but it didn't make the sight any less depressing.

Mailboxes stood like gravestones. Porches sagged under the weight of years of neglect.

I parked down the block, out of sight, then walked the rest of the way.

No sign of a car. No cameras. Just a chain-link fence bent out of shape and weeds reclaiming cracked concrete.

I ducked under the broken fence and circled the house slowly.

A two-story structure, old clapboard siding faded and peeling.

The windows were boarded up in places, but the back door had been broken.

I stepped through it into a kitchen that still held the ghost of a home—cabinet doors hanging open, a stove rusted into silence, the stale scent of rot beneath the dust.

“Jamie?” I called.

“In here,” he answered.

Just hearing his voice made my chest ease a little. I followed it, through to a front room that felt strangely intact. The floor groaned under my boots. Dust motes danced in the air, silver in the low light. And then, I saw him.

Jamie stood by the window, flicking his lighter open and closed.

My gut clenched at the sight—something about the rhythm of it—too measured, too deliberate—set every nerve on edge.

The tension in the room wasn’t only in the air—it was in him, tight and coiled, and now it was winding itself into me, too.

The small flame reflected in his eyes and made shadows leap across his face.

He looked tired—bone-deep tired—but still sexy as hell.

Rumpled hoodie, loose jeans, one boot untied as if he’d thrown himself into this without stopping.

His hair curled a little, damp maybe from sweat or mist. I couldn’t see the full blue of his eyes from here—ten feet between us and the only light came from the moon spilling through broken blinds, a flickering streetlamp beyond the cordoned-off road,

and that damn lighter.

But I could feel them. That bright blue, watching me, challenging me, hurting beneath the surface.

I swallowed hard. My body knew before my brain caught up—something was wrong. The air was too quiet.

“What’s wrong, Jamie?” I asked, voice low, already bracing for whatever storm he’d pulled me into.

Jamie kept flipping the lighter open and closed, the metallic click a nervous rhythm. Then, without turning, he said, his voice eerily calm, “I should explain first that this entire room is rigged to burn.”

My heart stuttered at the matter-of-fact delivery, and for a second, the air around me felt thinner—too dry, too quiet—as though the house itself was holding its breath.

That stopped me.

“Huh?”

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes sharp now, watching me register the weight of what he’d said. “Not right now. Not by accident. I haven’t armed anything. But if I wanted to, I could turn this whole place into a bonfire in under fifteen seconds.”

I looked around, more carefully this time.

Wires snaked up behind the moldy couch and along the baseboards.

There was a faint chemical tang in the air, something sharp beneath the dust. I spotted

the glint of copper wire coiled near a cracked outlet, a bundle of what looked like tubes behind an overturned chair.

“You’ve been busy,” I murmured.

Jamie shrugged. “If I needed to destroy everything, it’s all here. I rigged it using old ignition relays and a salvaged Arduino module. One push of a button, the spark arcs, magnesium ignites, and boom. All gone.”

His voice was calm. Too calm. That same eerie stillness he got when his emotions ran too deep to show.

“You planning on burning me?” I asked carefully.

The question felt ridiculous the moment it left my mouth—but it wasn’t. Not really. Not here; not with Jamie standing in the center of a fire trap he’d built himself. My throat felt tight. Was it fear? Guilt? Maybe both. “Burning us?”

That got a smile. Brief, brittle.

“Well, that depends on what you know about State of Nevada v. Zachary Hillway-Spencer. You know, the high-profile murder trial dismissed on a technicality involving mishandled evidence and a missing chain of custody report.” His words spilled out, but the name Zachary Hillway-Spencer was enough to send chills down my spine.

It was inevitable that he’d find out what we’d done for Lassiter—I just wished he’d found out when I could control the narrative and be honest about my past dealings with him.

Long after Lassiter was dealt with when it wouldn’t damn me in Jamie’s eyes.

“Jamie—”

“Stop talking. You need to know what kind of room we’re standing in before you talk to me. Because after you tell me all your truths, you won’t be able to pretend anymore. Not about you and Lassiter. And not about what you did. I trusted you, Killian. I let myself believe in you.”

I took a step closer, the boards groaning beneath me. “It’s not what you think.”

Jamie let out a sharp, humorless laugh, the sound cutting through the heavy air.

“How did I know you’d say that?” he said, still not meeting my eyes.

“You’d tell me anything right now to make it out of here alive, wouldn’t you?”

All the pretty lies that mean you can carry on hurting me—like none of this matters. Like I don’t matter. ”

His voice cracked, but he covered it by flicking the lighter one more time, letting the flame dance before snapping it closed again. The silence that followed felt unbearable.

I took another step, more cautious this time, the old wood groaning again. “Pretty, you do matter. I never?—”

“Don’t call me that,” he snapped, his gaze meeting mine, sharp and full of fury. “And don’t lie to me.”

I stopped where I stood, frozen by the weight of those words. He thought he didn’t matter to me?

“Let me explain,” I said, quieter now.

Jamie’s expression twisted—hurt, angry, betrayed. But underneath it all, there was a glimmer of something else. Maybe it was still hope. Or perhaps the last trace of what we’d once been to each other.

He didn’t answer. Not yet.

I took a breath and ran a hand through my hair.

“Lassiter came to me. It was my first high-profile case—my shot. I was young and hungry and didn’t ask too many questions at the time.

I was part of the prosecution team, not the lead, but I had access to the information.

Then, I met the defendant, Zachary Hillway-Spencer. ”

Jamie didn’t move .

“The minute I looked him in the eye, I got this feeling,” I continued.

“A niggle in my gut that the man was innocent. It didn’t make sense with the file in front of me, but it wouldn’t leave me alone.

And I didn’t think Lassiter was crooked—not then.

Not at all. But something about the case didn’t feel right. ”

I stepped around a broken board, closer to Jamie, his gaze fixed on me. “So, I played the game. I kept my mouth shut so the Cave could dig. Quietly. Behind the scenes. They went through everything with a fine-tooth comb.”

I paused, heart beating hard. Jamie's grip on the lighter was tight, his knuckles white. Flicked on. Off. On. Off.

"We found that evidence had been tampered with. Reports rewritten. Photographs doctored. But nothing pointed directly to Lassiter building a case against an innocent person at that point. There was no smoking gun. Just a whole lot of wrong."

Still, Jamie said nothing. That silence was heavier than anything he could have shouted.

"The Cave found a way to challenge the case without exposing our hand. They focused on the evidence mishandling. Turns out, one of the detectives on the case—a guy named Collins—was sleeping with Zachary's wife. The same wife Zachary supposedly murdered."

I let the weight of that sit before continuing.

"Legally, it was a nightmare. Conflict of interest. Undisclosed relationships. The chain of custody for critical evidence was deliberately broken. Inadmissible. We handed everything over to the defense team anonymously, separate from Lassiter. The defense filed a motion for dismissal based on prosecutorial misconduct and contamination of the evidence trail. The judge had no choice but to throw the case out."

I looked Jamie straight in the eye, trying to get through the fury I saw there.

"Lassiter came out of it clean. The official narrative? He helped the DA's office avoid a costly trial once the evidence fell apart.

He got praise. Credit. He was furious that the whole thing had stopped being some huge show trial, but we thought nothing of it. "

My voice dropped. “And I regret every single thing I ever did to build his reputation. It was the only case I worked under his name, and I swear to you, Jamie—I didn’t know how deep his rot went until you pulled the name from John Mitchell.

Until then, he was just another political player.

I didn’t know about the money, the laundering, the trafficking, or the rest of it.

He was on our list as morally ambiguous, but way way down, and we never saw it. ”

Still, Jamie didn’t speak. But something in his stance had shifted, and I clung to that. Maybe he was still listening.

“Then, he called me, a while back, wanted me to look into a certain suspicious fire at a club, a missing laptop, aka your fire.” I paused to let that sink in. “He told me he knew that I’d handed over prosecution research to the defense team when he’d wanted it quashed.”

Jamie stiffened. “He’s blackmailing you?”

“I guess. It won’t work. He comes for me and my team, and we’d destroy him in a heartbeat. He just doesn’t know that yet.”

I took one more step, slow and deliberate, until I stood so close I could almost reach him.

“You won’t reach me in time to stop me burning this place,” Jamie warned, voice low and rough. “So don’t try.”

“I wasn’t going to,” I said, calm but firm.

“I want you to know I trust you. And if that means I stand here with you until you trust me back, then I will.” I let that settle for a moment, heart pounding.

Then added, “I love you, and if you go up in flames, I’m going with you.

That’s how this works. You burn. I burn. Together.”

Jamie’s eyes widened and then his lips twitched, a half-smile flickering and fading like the flame he kept playing with. “You’re an idiot.”

“Yeah,” I said, the hint of a smile tugging at my mouth. “But I’m your idiot.”

Another step, and I reached out, my fingers closing around the lighter in his hand. It was hot to the touch as if it had been burning too long. I didn’t flinch. With my other hand, I cradled his face, brushing my thumb along the sharp edge of his jaw, then up under his eye.

“I didn’t know about Lassiter,” I said, voice low, the words meant only for him. “I swear to you, if I had, I would’ve stopped him a long time ago.”

His breath hitched, and I leaned forward until our foreheads touched.

I stayed there, grounding both of us, waiting. “Do you believe me, Pretty?”

His lashes fluttered. Then, after a beat, he sighed and reached out to flick something on the wall behind him. I didn’t move. I just waited. No fire. No click. No hiss of ignition.

He trusted me. Maybe only a little. But enough.

“In the spirit of honesty,” Jamie murmured, “the wall of fire would’ve stopped two

feet back from me. And the window's unlocked for me to get out." I blinked, and he gave a lopsided shrug. "You'd have been the only one dying."

"Hmm, doesn't sound as romantic," I deadpanned, letting my voice drop into a mock-serious tone as I kept my forehead against his.

"Did you mean it?" he asked, softly.

I was confused by the shift in tone. "I swear, we didn't know the depths that Lassiter?—"

"No, the other thing," he interrupted, more insistent this time, his gaze locked onto mine.

"What thing?" I teased, brushing my thumb along his cheek again, the warmth of him grounding me.

"You said you loved me," he murmured, voice smaller now, as if it cost him something to say it aloud.

"I do," I said, without hesitation.

"Repeat it?"

I smiled. "I love you, Pretty."

"What does it feel like?" he asked, his fingers tightening at my hip.

"Me loving you?" I echoed, tilting my head so I could see more of his expression.

"Yeah."

“Obsession at first,” I let each word linger.

“Need.” I brushed my thumb along his cheek again.

“Quiet peace.” I took a shallow breath. “Anger. Lust.” My voice dipped lower.

“Desperation to touch... wishing for a future with you, whatever happens. That’s my love.

” I cupped his jaw fully, making sure he heard every word.

He hummed again, then his other hand slid to rest at my hip.

“Then, I love you, too, Killian,” he said, with all the raw honesty I’d been desperate to hear.

“But if you lie to me, if I find out that you’re not for real, then I will end you,” he said, not with anger, but with a cold finality that made my breath catch.

The words hit hard because they were true. Not a threat, but a promise born from pain. I nodded slightly, not to agree, but to acknowledge the weight of it. My chest ached with everything I still hadn’t said. This wasn’t a man bluffing.

“I know.”

“And fuck, Killian, for the love of all that’s holy, stop calling me Pretty.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Jamie

It had been three days since the love-yous—three days since Killian had watched me gather my tools of fire with a silence that said too much and not enough.

He walked me to his car, and the kiss he gave me before I left was brutal—hungry, as if he was branding me with the press of his mouth.

I'd whimpered into it, wanting to crawl back inside the heat of him, but instead, he'd pulled away and said he had work to do.

I hadn't seen him since.

It gnawed at me, this thing with Lassiter—how Killian was being blackmailed, how he'd carried it without telling me. Last night, I went digging, chasing any remote threads online that might connect Killian to Lassiter. I found nothing. No smoking gun, no secret files. Static.

Maybe I should have blind faith and trust in the man I said I loved.

But I'd said I loved my parents once, too.

And look how that had turned out.

It turns out that love doesn't mean you get to keep people. Or that they ever truly

belonged to you in the first place. They hurt you. They died. And I was left behind. So, no—I didn't trust easily.

Not even when I wanted to.

This morning, I'd woken up buzzing with something—need, hunger—but it wasn't only the fire this time.

It was Killian. It was the space he'd left behind and the way my chest kept caving in around it.

I didn't like the spiral I was falling into, didn't like the way every quiet second made me wonder if he was done with me, or worse, in danger and not saying.

I was supposed to be working. The clutch rebuild on a manual 1973 Dodge Challenger sat in pieces on the lift in Bay 2, and I'd already stripped two bolts trying to force parts into the gearbox casing that weren't lined up.

My hands were shaking—not a lot, but more than enough to throw off the torque and make my grip falter .

I exhaled hard, scraping grease off my palm with the edge of a rag, and glanced over at Rio.

He was ass-up in the trunk of a rust-riddled Chevy, muttering curses at a seized latch.

I should go over and talk to him. Explain to him how I was feeling, but...

Hadn't he made a big show about passing his responsibility over to Killian?

Rio was my best friend... he'd listen to me and stop the noise.

Right?

I reached for the torque wrench again, tried to focus, but ended up cross-threading the bearing sleeve. Metal clicked and ground wrong, and I hissed a curse through my teeth.

“Fuck this,” I muttered, tossing the tool down with more force than necessary. “Taking a break, Rio.”

Rio jerked upright at the sound of my voice and cracked his head on the lip of the trunk. “Shit!”

I winced. “You good?”

He grunted, rubbing at his scalp without turning around. If he bruised himself, no one would notice—not under the lingering mess from two nights ago. The cut under his eye had bloomed into a spectacular bruise, all jaundiced green and coppery orange, the kind you couldn’t fake .

Maybe it had come from a fight. Or maybe it was the aftermath of the enthusiastic sex I’d heard echoing down the hallway from his room.

I hadn’t asked. Didn’t want to. But it hadn’t stopped me from thinking about it.

From wondering what the hell Rio was burying under that usual swagger of his, and whether I was doing the same with my work, my fire, my silence.

Everything felt off.

The car, the air, my head. As if every gear in me was misaligned, and I was two steps from shearing my own bolts.

That was when Robbie wandered in, hands in the pockets of his hoodie. “Coffee and cookies in the kitchen. Fresh.”

I blinked at him. I didn’t need sugar. Or caffeine. What I needed was a walk around the block to clear my damn head. Maybe a call to Killian, even if he didn’t pick up. Maybe just screaming into the void.

But instead, I muttered a thanks, pulled off my gloves, and followed Robbie out to the kitchen.

The second I stepped through the door and smelled the bitter roast and warm vanilla, I gave in. Fuck it. I was spiraling anyway—might as well spiral with coffee in one hand and a mouthful of cookies. I fell on them like a man starved, shoving two into my mouth before the pot had finished brewing.

Determined now, I poured myself a mug, sloshing some over the edge, and made it my mission to clear the tray of cookies before anyone else had a chance to walk in. A tiny part of me knew it was dumb, that it wasn’t about hunger at all. It was control. Distraction.

Robbie didn’t say anything else. He just sat at the other end of the table, sipping his drink, watching me like I was a spooked animal, and he didn’t want to startle me further. Fair enough. I think I unsettled him sometimes, despite trying not to, and he wasn’t wrong to tread carefully around me.

“So, I have a question?” Robbie asked as he nibbled on his single cookie. He had his knees bent, feet flat on the floor, looking all neat and presentable—as if he was gearing up to welcome clients again. It was something he was trying, and to be fair, he looked the part.

And okay—he was cute. Enzo would kill me for thinking it, but there it was.

Not that it mattered. Robbie wasn't my type.

It wasn't a twink who did it for me. Robbie wouldn't take control.

Wouldn't grab me by the collar and drag me out of my own mess.

He wouldn't pull me out of the chaos in my head when the walls started shaking.

He was careful and kind in ways that would never be enough to calm the storm inside me.

But yeah. Cute.

“Go for it.”

“Is the dark web open to anyone who knows how to look for it?” Robbie asked, tilting his head. “Like, why don't the authorities just shut it down? And how do you even get on it?”

I froze mid-bite, the cookie crumbling in my mouth like ash.

Fuck.

Enzo would murder me if I answered that. Actually murder. Because just the fact that Robbie was curious—genuinely, naively curious—was enough to set every one of my alarm bells blaring.

“Why do you want to know?” I asked, wiping my fingers on a napkin. My voice stayed light, but tension coiled through my spine.

“Dunno,” he said with a shrug. “You guys talk about it sometimes, and I just... I

don't know what it is.”

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“It's real. It's open to anyone, yeah, but only if you know what you're doing.

And no, the authorities can't shut it down.

Not entirely. It's like... hundreds of tunnels under the internet, decentralized, hidden.

You use something like Tor to get there, and even then, you're walking blind. ”

Robbie blinked. “So... you've been on it?”

I stared at him. “That's not the point.”

He smirked. “That's a yes.”

I shook my head and muttered, “You ask too many dangerous questions.”

Because the thing was—yes, I knew the routes, the backdoors, the dead drops. But this wasn't a playground. And Robbie... Robbie was soft. Gentle. He didn't belong in that world.

I shoved another cookie into my mouth to stop myself from saying anything else. Because explaining more? That would be the exact kind of stupid Enzo would never forgive me for.

Robbie shifted again, nervous energy buzzing under his skin. “I've been working on the coding stuff,” he said, like it was no big deal, as if he wasn't about to send me into a cardiac episode. “Do you have anything I can practice my hacking on?”

This time, I choked on my cookie. Literally. Coughed so hard I had to slam my palm into my chest.

Enzo would kill me.

Robbie must've read the horror on my face because he went quiet, pulling his knees tighter to his chest.

"Okay, that's a no, then," he said. "I get you're trying to protect me." He tilted his chin, enough defiance to show me he wasn't backing off. "But I want to try."

I rubbed my temple, the sugar spike doing nothing to help the pounding in my head.

My thoughts drifted to the untouched heap of files I hadn't yet sorted through.

Data dumps tied to cases in which Lassiter had been involved.

Not black-market stuff. Not snuff videos or anything that would get Enzo frothing at the mouth.

Just dry intel. Cross-referenced timestamps.

Bank transfers. Anomalous behavior patterns. It was boring.

And Robbie was so good with numbers and recognizing patterns.

Having him look at the stuff was harmless.

Probably.

"Where's your laptop?" I asked, already second-guessing my decision.

Robbie brightened and rushed off, returning a moment later with the laptop Enzo had given him, still covered in Lord of the Rings stickers. He passed it to me, all innocent, all trust. I could've rewritten his entire OS in ten seconds flat .

"First off," I said, powering it up, "never hand your laptop over to someone like me."

He looked thoughtful. "Okay, but anyone like you. Not actually you, right?"

I grinned despite myself, fingers already flying over the keyboard. "Have a look at this."

I passed the laptop back. On the screen, lines of code filled one half, file directories and scan logs on the other. Robbie squinted, his brows knitting in concentration, then his face lit up.

"A search algorithm. I can change the parameters."

"Exactly," I said. "Have at it. Then let me know what you find."

He smiled, already clicking through windows, absorbing everything like a sponge.

"What am I looking for?"

"Anything that doesn't look right."

He nodded, serious as hell. "Okay."

"Pass anything you find to me," I swallowed, "and use the encrypted upload link that Killian gave us to copy your findings to Caleb, his tech guy."

"On it."

What could go wrong ?

Enzo slammed me up against the corridor wall, one forearm across my chest and the other hand locked around my throat.

“What the fuck did you do to Robbie?”

His voice was low, guttural, but his eyes—those were dead. Flat. Cold. The kind of look that said if I gave him the wrong answer, he’d finish what he’d started.

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I didn't fight it. Didn't even try. I hung there, arms slack at my sides, blinking through the shock. "I didn't do anything."

"Then why," he spat, his face inches from mine, breath hot with fury, "did he say he was doing stuff for you and, then, start crying so hard he couldn't breathe? Why did he lock himself in the filing room? He hasn't needed to do that in forever." His voice cracked on the last word.

That hurt more than the hand at my throat.

Because I knew what that room meant to Robbie and what it meant that he'd chosen to crawl back into it.

Enzo's grip trembled enough to tell me this wasn't rage for the sake of rage—this was panic. This was fear dressed up in fury because Robbie was hurting again, and Enzo didn't know why.

And I was the closest target because Robbie had mentioned my name. I raised my hands. Not to defend myself, but to show I wasn't going to run.

"He asked to help with the research I was doing," I said. "I gave him the safe files. Not the encrypted crap. Just boring data. Lassiter stuff. Nothing that should've?"

Enzo's jaw clenched.

"—nothing that should've triggered him," I finished, quieter.

The silence that followed was heavier than the grip on my neck.

“Let him go, Enzo,” Robbie said next to us, voice calm but firm.

Enzo tightened his grip; the muscles in his arm locked like steel. I pinched at his wrist, not fighting—just reminding him I needed air. Maybe reminding him that he wasn’t that guy.

“I found some old files,” Robbie continued. “Ledgers. Numbers that are linked to people. It just... shocked me, that’s all. I handled it and took my ten minutes. I’m okay.” He reached out, fingers brushing Enzo’s bicep. “Listen to me, my love; let him go, babe. It’s okay.”

That single word— babe —cut through the fury. Enzo’s entire frame jerked as if he’d come out of a daze. His eyes widened for a breath, then narrowed in pain. And at last, his grip loosened.

I slid down the wall as though my legs had stopped remembering how to hold me up, hitting the ground hard and clutching my neck with both hands.

Enzo stood there, breathing ragged, guilt bleeding through every line of his body. But he didn’t look at me.

He looked at Robbie, as if he’d almost lost something he couldn’t name. And then, they were moving toward each other, pulled by gravity or desperation—I couldn’t tell which. Enzo crushed him into his chest, arms wrapped tight as if he was anchoring them both.

Robbie clung back just as fiercely, legs wrapping around Enzo’s waist as he jumped into the embrace. “It’s okay,” he kept repeating, breath hitching between words. “I’m okay. I’m okay.”

Enzo buried his face in Robbie's shoulder, still shaking, and I could tell—this wasn't only relief.

This was the kind of fear that lingered, that gnawed at you long after the danger was gone.

And Robbie... he was holding them both together.

So fucking strong. I scrambled to stand, then made it back and away from the two men who needed their privacy.

I hunted down Robbie's laptop and found the lists he'd discovered.

They didn't mean much to me, but somehow Robbie had connected numbers to names and saved them in a separate file.

I saved everything, but uploading it from here wasn't working, so I saved the files in a secure place, left a note on the laptop screen to indicate where I'd gone, and left work an hour early.

I needed to see the team in the Cave and check on progress.

See Killian.

I arrived at the elevator door a little after five, as people were leaving their offices and swirling around me.

I stared up at the spot where I knew the tiny camera was located and waited.

The doors opened, and I stepped inside before they could shut on me and fell straight into Killian, who was leaning in the far corner.

The doors closed, and it was just the two of us left, and he wasn't pressing his hand to the pad for us to go to the office.

Instead, he stumbled into my space and, for the second time today, I was pinned to the wall, only this time it wasn't with a hand around my neck.

Although I wouldn't have said no.

Killian kissed me as if he couldn't get the taste of me fast enough. He kissed like a man possessed. Frantic, all teeth and breath and crushed lips, his hands gripping at my waist, my neck, my face .

"I missed you," his words spilled out between kisses. "I hated you not being with me. Hated the silence. The space. It makes me fucking wild."

He kissed me again, urgent and messy, hands pushing up under my shirt, sliding over my skin as if he was trying to memorize me all over again. "You get in my blood," he breathed. "Fire and passion and lust and obsession, Jamie—I can't think when you're not around."

I was so hard it hurt, every nerve alight with need. He pressed against me, our hips grinding, my head thumping back to the wall. I barely managed a gasp when he dropped to his knees in one smooth motion, yanking my jeans down with a desperation that made my knees buckle.

"Fuck," he whispered, voice reverent and raw.

Then, his mouth was on me—hot, wet, and perfect—and I was gone.

One hand braced on the wall behind me, the other threading through his hair, holding on because if I didn't, I might collapse.

He took me deep, greedily, and when I moaned his name, he hummed as if he'd been waiting to hear it for days.

One of his hands stayed tight on my thigh, anchoring me, but the other disappeared between his legs.

I caught the movement from above—his wrist flicking, the slow drag of his palm—and something in me short-circuited.

He was getting himself off. While blowing me.

I'd never seen anything so fucking sexy in my life.

My breath hitched hard, my back arching off the wall as heat spiked through me, wild and uncontrollable.

He didn't stop—didn't slow—just let the rhythm build between us until I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

My name on his tongue, the wet sound of slick skin, the tension in his jaw as he fought to take me deeper while chasing his own edge.

It was obscene and perfect and sent me over the edge fast—no chance of holding back after three days of wanting, aching, and spiraling toward this exact moment.

When I came, it was with a stuttered breath and his name on my lips, like a prayer and a curse in one, and he followed up a few seconds later.

Killian stood, eyes dark and wild. "Hi," he said, voice hoarse.

I glanced down between us, to the floor of the elevator. "Clean up on aisle one?" I

deadpanned.

He chuckled as we kissed again, cradling my face as if I were something precious. He tidied me up, tucked me away, kissed me so sweetly it almost made up for the fact that I hadn't dropped to my knees for him, too.

And somehow, the buzzing in my head—sharp and relentless for days—had stopped.

There hadn't been pain. I hadn't had to give anything up.

There'd been no power play, no guilt, only the gentle, grounding weight of his hands on me and the raw, unfiltered need in his eyes.

I'd existed in the moment, let him take care of me, let myself feel how turned-on he'd been by me, by what he was doing to me, by needing me so much he couldn't stop himself.

It was dizzying and steadying all at once.

And for the first time in days, I felt quiet.

"I love you," I whispered, the words barely audible between our breaths.

They hung there for a moment, fragile and fierce, and I marveled that I'd said them at all. I don't think I'd ever said those words like this before—where it meant something, where it cost something, where it left me bare and open.

"I love you right back," he murmured, and I got my first honest look at him—he was exhausted.

His eyes were bruised from lack of sleep; dark circles etched deep beneath them.

He wasn't in his usual sharp suit, but in sweatpants and a faded band T-shirt that clung to his chest. His hair was a mess, not just from my fingers yanking at it, but as if he hadn't tried to fix it in days.

"You look like shit," I murmured.

He smiled crookedly. "Thanks for that."

"In a sexy way," I amended, and he chuckled.

He gave me one last lingering kiss, then turned and pressed his hand to the keypad. The elevator jolted into motion and opened into the Cave, as if nothing had happened, even though everything had.

"Can you wait until I turn the internal cameras off next time?" Caleb deadpanned.

"Oops, my bad," Killian shot back, not missing a beat.

Caleb raised an eyebrow. "You owe me for the trauma. That elevator needs holy water."

"Add it to the expense report," Killian replied with a smirk.

"Asshole," Caleb said, then turned his attention to me. "Hey, Jamie."

"Caleb," I acknowledged. There was no sign of Sonya here, but another man sat at the far desk, suited and booted. He extended a hand for me to shake, which I did.

"Levi," he said.

"Our cop on the team," Killian explained.

“You have a cop on the team? ”

“Of course we do,” he said as if that was a thing every Bat Cave had. “Look, let me show you what we have.”

“Me first,” I said, “Robbie went through some files and found things, check this.” I pressed the go button on the file upload, and Caleb whistled as files began to download to his secure area.

“That’s a lot of files.”

“Names and numbers,” I explained. “Robbie said it was important.”

“On it.”

Then, I turned to Killian, who stood at the board beside Levi the cop, calm and sharp-eyed, taking everything in with quiet intensity.

Cops made me feel weird, and I wasn’t getting over that any time soon.

Sonya came in with a handful of files, greeted me with a smile, and slid into her chair.

The entire Cave group was here. And maybe that included me?

Killian tapped the top row of photos. “Lassiter and Kessler sit at the top. Everything starts and ends with them.”

Next to Lassiter was Kessler, the household name. Tech giant. Billionaire. A man so high up the food chain it was hard to imagine him in the same league as these others.

I saw Mitchell right under Lassiter, with a yellow Post-it stuck to the bottom of his image—I assumed that color indicated he was dead. “Mitchell’s dead, so why is he still on the board?” I asked.

“He was involved right up until the end. He doesn’t get to be erased from this,” Killian said, catching my eye.

“Kessler’s a problem,” Levi tapped Kessler’s photo.

Caleb sighed. “Yeah, he’s got no lines leading to anyone beneath him.

Not because he isn’t connected, and we won’t stop looking, but because he’s almost impossible to trace, his money shields him.

Everything he does is run through ten firewalls, five shell companies, and a rotating cast of proxies.

You try to follow the trail, and it vanishes like smoke. ”

Killian gestured to the next row beneath, where Mitchell sat among a cluster of faces.

“This is the next tier down—thirteen people, including Mitchell. Twelve remain—eleven men, one woman. The purple Post-its indicate we have enough evidence to take them down—testimony, payment trails, and intercepted communications. That’s eight out of twelve.

The remaining four have been harder to pin down. ”

“Maybe not anymore,” Caleb cut in, stepping forward.

He slapped three purple Post-its onto the board—over the FBI regional director, his

brother, and Senator Huxley at the far end.

“Robbie found exactly what we needed. Cross-referenced ledger entries and location data. That’s three more off the question list.”

“Who’s this?” I asked and pointed to a space where a photo would be, and the name Lyric Thornwood was written on a green Post-it. Yellow meant dead, purple meant fucked, and green meant...?

“Green is for ghost,” Caleb said. “The only Lyric Thornwood I can find has links to Kessler’s college years.

The name barely leaves a digital footprint.

There are no photos of them, and honestly, they may as well be dead for all I can find, but they’re still named on various transactions, so they stay there as a bad guy until we find out more. ”

“That’s why there’s no string connecting him to anyone?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said and sighed. I hated loose ends. “But the fact that his name, Lyric, is attached to those Lyric-Night investments that Lassiter wanted to bring Killian in on? That’s just another weird thing in a list of weird things.”

“Okay, so we’re missing Kessler and Lyric Thornwood, but we hit the rest,” Levi said, looking around the room, his voice steady.

“We take down who we can and isolate the ones we can’t.

We press the button on what we have now before anyone else is hurt or taken, and start a separate operation on Kessler and find this Lyric guy? Are we agreed?”

Killian nodded. “Agreed.”

Caleb tapped his desk. “I’m almost ready. I need twenty-four hours to get the information packets for these last three secured and ready, plus fixing where the information lands because shit, this is the biggest thing we’ve done.” He nodded then. “But after that, yeah, agreed.”

“I’ll help you with that, C,” Sonya offered. “And once all the ducks are groomed with little tuxedos and ready to be put in a row, then agreed,” she said.

All of them turned to me.

Why are they looking at me? This part wasn’t mine. I wasn’t one of them, not really—I was just waiting for the go-ahead to burn Lassiter to the fucking ground. That was my job. Not strategy, not evidence chains, not takedown plans.

“Jamie?” Killian asked, his voice gentle but sure.

I looked at him, at the board, at the weight in their eyes. Thought about Robbie, and Enzo, and the way this mess had wormed its way into all of us.

I could say nothing because they didn’t need me to agree. I could walk out now while they were doing their bit, light the match, and vanish until I could take down Kessler after that.

But Killian was looking at me, wanting me to be part of this, so instead, I nodded. “Agreed.”

And weirdly... I felt good.

Also, I hadn’t even mentioned killing Lassiter once.

TWENTY-SIX

Killian

It felt anti-climactic at first. After all the planning, the sleepless nights, the obsessive double-checking, we pressed the button.

And just like that, the first wave of packets were gone—routed to the agencies, the whistleblowers, the watchdog groups.

They were curated batches of evidence, each tailored to its recipient.

We held back on Lassiter. For now. Not because we didn't have enough to bring him down—we did—but because this was Jamie's part in this.

Holding back on his packet of information was the strategy.

Timing. Optics. One wrong step, and he'd slither free.

I told myself we were being smart. Tactical.

But deep down, I knew part of me wanted him to feel the walls closing in.

To hear the whispers and wonder when the axe would fall. To sweat .

He had to know. Somewhere, somehow, he'd feel the ground shift beneath his feet.

Inside the Cave, the tension was suffocating. No one spoke louder than they had to. Caleb moved like a man possessed, setting up a slow-drip media schedule from his command post at the center of the table. We had weeks of drops prepared—carefully tiered levels of exposure.

And then, it started.

The first article went live barely three hours later.

“Corruption at the Highest Levels—More to Follow”.

By the evening: “FBI Regional Director Arrested After Armed Standoff in New Mexico.”

Another one followed close after:

“Senator Huxley Taken into Custody on Federal Trafficking Charges.”

By the end of the day, headlines littered the media landscape. Bank seizures. Resignations. Sealed indictments. The machine was grinding forward, slow but inevitable.

I stood with my hands braced on the edge of the board, watching the news feeds flicker in real time.

The air in the Cave felt heavier with each headline.

My palms were damp against the edge of the board, jaw tight, heart punching a slow, deliberate rhythm behind my ribs.

This was justice in motion—but it didn’t feel like triumph.

Not yet. Not until everyone on the board was done.

And even though I hated Jamie not being next to me, my team was covering everything.

I was due in court in the morning, playing the game, acting as if I didn't have a thing to do with the chaos. Jamie wasn't here because he had his own war to wage, his own planning to finish—and that was on him and the guys at Redcars. Different battlefield. Same war.

Lassiter wasn't in the headlines, but he had to be watching. The storm was coming. And he had nowhere left to run.

At midnight, fueled by coffee and the righteous relief things were getting done, I sat back in my chair and asked for a status update from everyone.

Caleb leaned over his screen, tapping in a flurry of keystrokes before speaking up.

“I'm having to stagger packet delivery via rotating proxies.

If we keep pushing from the same source points, they'll trace the origin within twenty-four hours.

I've already started load balancing the uploads through Tier 3 mirror servers, but we'll need to reroute the media drops again tonight. ”

No one argued. I didn't understand what he was doing, it was all magic, but I bet Jamie would get it. We trusted Caleb with this—the digital battlefield was his domain. If he said the infrastructure needed retooling, it did.

He added without looking up, “I'm also drafting a fallback path for the final dump. If

Lassiter gets away when we release his file, I have a hard-coded trigger tied to two separate keys—mine and yours.”

I nodded slowly. It was overkill. It was necessary.

The elevator security pinged, and when I looked, there was my Jamie, staring up at the camera as if he owned the place. Just seeing his face knocked something loose in my chest. I cleared his access immediately, heart rate ticking up as the elevator began its climb.

By the time it dinged, I was already at the door. The second it opened, I pulled him close—my hand curled around the back of his neck, grounding, grateful.

“What are you doing here?” I murmured into his hair, not letting go.

He shrugged, a sheepish smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “Would you believe me if I said I can’t seem to go a night without you?”

I pulled back enough to look at him, hands still resting at his waist. “You just want to know what we’re doing,” I teased, shaking my head. “So transparent.”

He leaned in close, lips brushing mine. “But also...” he whispered, kissing me, slow and deep. “I genuinely can’t go a night without you.”

The weight in my chest shifted, something warm curling behind my ribs. I hadn’t realized how much I’d needed to see him until he was standing right in front of me.

“Hey,” he said and kissed me, wrapping his hands around the back of my head to hold me closer.

“Hey, Pretty,” I whispered and tightened my hold at his waist for a moment.

My heart swelled with the weight of it—how much I wanted him, how much I’d missed him.

And under it, fear bloomed. Because needing someone like this, needing him, wasn’t safe.

Not in this world. Not with everything we were walking into.

But in that moment, I didn’t care. I was his, and if it broke me, then I’d make sure the team was safe, and ... so be it..

He tasted so damn good, like warmth and home, and something dangerous I couldn’t quit. I kissed him again, deeper this time, and the way he melted into it undid me. Mine . God help me, he was mine. And I didn’t know what the hell I’d done to deserve him, but I wasn’t letting go .

“You want us to clear the room?” Sonya asked.

We stepped apart after one last kiss.

“Our bad,” I said, but couldn’t help smiling.

“I’ve seen the media storm,” Jamie said and stood by Caleb’s desk, “Bank seizures. Arrests for the other people on the wall. When are we hitting Lassiter?”

Caleb, not even looking up from his screen, called out from across the room, “I have eyes on him—he’s at home, packing a bag, and has already emptied his safe. His wife is asleep, but she took pills, so she’s out.”

“Do you have the location ready?” I asked Jamie, and he just gave me a sharp nod, passing the piece of paper to Caleb, which seemed so old-school given the amount of

tech we used.

Caleb entered the details, and three camera views appeared on the screen.

Warehouses, broken windows, no cars, and silence.

I gripped his hand, my fingers curling tight around his knuckles. “You’ve got this, right? You’ll stay safe? Promise me, Pr—Jamie.”

“It’s one of the properties on my list. I have surveillance; I’ve set it up, worked it out. This won’t be chaos, and Rio and Enzo will be there as well.”

“Not Robbie?”

“Never,” Jamie was adamant.

Caleb shot me a look—despite the whole murdering thing, Caleb and Sonya had been quiet, and Levi refused to talk about it, claiming plausible deniability.

“So what happens now?” Jamie asked and crossed his arms over his chest. The burns on his hands were no longer raw, but still a harsh reminder.

The scabs had mostly fallen away, leaving behind tender, pink skin and the shiny start of new healing.

He kept them covered, more out of habit than need.

I didn’t want to see burns on him again.

The thought twisted in my chest, but deep down, I knew what I’d signed up for.

Love didn't erase compulsion or the past. It didn't dull the urges or rewrite the wiring in his head.

It wasn't like my magic cock was going to reprogram him into someone else.

That idea made me huff out a quiet, wry laugh at myself.

"What's funny?" he asked with a frown.

"I was just thinking about my magic cock," I deadpanned, and we might have gone on teasing, but my cell vibrated and, at eighteen minutes past midnight, the call we'd been expecting had come in, although I waited a full three rings before answering.

"McKendrick," I said in my best approximation of someone who'd been woken up.

"Jesus Christ! Have you seen the news?" Lassiter burst out, his voice sharp and frayed at the edges.

"They're going to tie me to this, I know it—Jesus, the headlines, the timing—it looks bad.

It wasn't me, I had nothing to do with any of this.

I didn't know, but they'll dig and twist and, suddenly, I'm at the center of this whole fucking mess and?—"

"Woah, woah. Slow down," I cut in. "Start from the beginning."

He inhaled, as though he was trying to drag himself back from the brink. "None of what is happening out there is to do with me," he repeated, a little steadier now. "But I know it's going to be linked to me. I need you to find out what the fuck is

happening. I need a safe place to stay.”

No mention of his wife. So much for the strong family unit.

“I don’t understand?” I lied.

He was spiraling. I could hear it in the pitch of his voice—too fast, too panicked. He was usually slick, controlled, and measured to the point of arrogance. But now? He was unravelling as we expected.

“Fuck! Dran is a personal friend. And Senator Huxley? Fuck, we play golf. Jesus, Killian, help me.”

He was flailing, throwing names and half-formed connections at me as if I were the net that would catch them.

As if he said enough things, one of them would make it all make sense.

But what struck me more was what he wasn’t saying—any absolute acknowledgment that this was his doing.

He was acting like an outsider, like a bystander who happened to be caught in the blast radius.

And he didn’t believe that; he was desperate to pretend.

“You can’t come to me, I have cameras everywhere, home and office,” I said, keeping my tone calm, measured.

I picked up the piece of paper with Jamie’s neat cursive, “There’s a satellite office I use in the warehouse district.

Discreet. No cameras, no digital trail. I'll drop you a pin. Meet me there in an hour. Come alone."

"You can help me fix this, right?"

"Meet me and we'll come up with something that looks like a plan," I replied, voice dry.

"But this won't be clean, and it won't be easy.

You're an ADA, apparently with friends in low places.

If you want to avoid getting caught up in other people's mess, show up and tell me everything.

No more riddles, no more theatrics, no more blackmailing me to help.

We fix it or we bury it, and you pay me. Those are your options."

I hung up and sat there for a long moment, staring at my phone as though it might bite.

Everything about that call had stunk of desperation, of self-preservation, of Lassiter trying to shift his weight before the floor gave out beneath him.

He truly believed I was the guy who could fix this.

Hell, he even wanted me to believe he was innocent, or ignorant, or one of the unlucky ones caught in the fallout.

Fuck him for what he'd done to Robbie—shattered him, used him.

I could still see Robbie that first time we'd met—his body tense, eyes wide, flinching at every noise.

The way he'd curled in on himself when Redcars tried to offer safety.

The raw fear that bled out of him in waves.

That damage had two names: Lassiter and Kessler.

We couldn't get one, yet, but Lassiter was dead tonight.

Fuck him for the trafficking, for the lives stolen, for every scream muffled by money and power.

Fuck him for the hypocrisy when he worked trafficking cases, the polished lies, the way he hid behind good suits and righteous speeches while he orchestrated nightmares in the dark.

And fuck him most of all for thinking he could crawl to me and pretend he was innocent.

Jamie gripped my arm. "Killian?"

I placed a hand over his. "He'll be there in an hour. "

Something flared in Jamie's eyes—sharp, unfiltered, a mix of focus, excitement, and something darker.

Anger? Anticipation? I didn't know. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

But I recognized it for what it was: intent.

Whatever he saw in this moment, whatever thread he was ready to follow, it meant he was leaving. Soon.

And I could pretend he wasn't doing this, pretend he and the men at Redcars could let this go.

But that wasn't him. That had never been us . I knew his whole heart, and I reached for him, cradled his face in both hands, and forced him to look at me, to feel what I was offering him—not hesitation, not fear, but permission.

“Make him pay, Jamie.” He blinked, breath catching. “Make him fucking pay.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Jamie

Rio was where I expected him to be, pacing at our meet point, a short distance from where Lassiter would be in less than thirty minutes.

He was bruised and had a bandage over one of his eyes.

A shadow detached itself from the edge of the warehouse wall, and I didn't even need to look to know it was Enzo—his presence was a low thrum in the air, vibrating with tension.

He stayed back just far enough that he could watch without being seen, eyes fixed on Rio with a sharpness that promised violence. His silence wasn't calm—it was lethal.

“You went to a fucking fight?” I said in disbelief.

Rio's jaw was set, bruised and shadowed, his chest still rising fast from whatever adrenaline hadn't burned off yet .

“Of course he did,” Enzo snapped, stalking toward me, muttering under his breath. His fists were clenched as if he wanted to plant one right in Rio's face.

“You know how important this is,” Enzo snapped. “You could've lost and ended up unconscious in a gutter somewhere, and then what?”

Rio shrugged as though it didn't matter. "I don't lose."

"You couldn't leave it for one night? One fucking night?"

"Two, actually," Rio shot back. "You seriously wanted me on ice for forty-eight hours while Lassiter breathed free air?"

"Don't you fucking care what he did to Robbie?" Enzo was working his way past pissed and onto full-on temper.

"What the hell?" Rio snapped. "Of course, I fucking care." He lifted his knife. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"That doesn't mean shit when you went out and put yourself?—"

"Stop, both of you." I planted a hand on each man's chest, smaller than both of them; they could crush me like a bug, but despite Enzo's growls and Rio's defensiveness, they stopped and listened.

"Seriously, now is not the time. You both know why we're here.

We have a ten-minute clearance to get inside.

"I tapped my ear where Caleb was detailing exactly where Lassiter was. "Let's go."

They stared at each other a beat longer, energy crackling in the air between them before Enzo turned away with a snarl and Rio muttered something I didn't catch. Then, Rio slumped and turned back to Enzo.

"Shit Enzo, you know I care; you know this is what I want to do. I'm sorry man, okay?"

Enzo grunted, but they at least did this bro hug thing they had between them.

The warehouse loomed behind us—a long stretch of corrugated metal and rust-stained glass, isolated enough that no one would question the noise, the power usage, or the people coming and going at odd hours.

Inside, the air was cool and dry, thick with the scent of oil and dust and old concrete.

Rows of shelving units lined the far walls, stacked with unused machinery and crates covered in tarps.

Overhead, the fluorescents buzzed, casting everything in stark white light.

I'd prepped the space as soon as we knew the information had gone out. Lassiter would be spooked. Killian had said he'd reach out. He'd been right .

In the center of the open floor, I'd cleared a wide circle and bolted a steel chair to the concrete. It wasn't just for effect—it was necessary. The restraints hung loose for now, the cuffs on either side catching the light, and a board in front of it to hide it until Lassiter was inside.

We didn't know how this would go. But I wasn't taking any chances.

This was the endgame. And I could feel it—low and heavy in my chest, pressure building before the break.

This was it. One way or another, Lassiter wouldn't walk away from this untouched.

There would be fire. There would be reckoning.

And when it was done, one more piece of Robbie's past would be avenged.

Caleb's signal pinged in my earpiece again. "Lassiter's approaching. Two blocks out. You've got maybe three minutes." As I'd agreed, I pocketed the device, and the Cave team was effectively cut off from what we were doing here.

I turned back to Enzo and Rio. "Let's get into position."

Enzo melted back into the shadows by the far shelving unit, crouched low, his hand already on his weapon. Rio headed up onto the catwalk, his bruised face half-shadowed, knife sheathed but close. I ducked behind the control panel near the back wall, the chair still covered, the room silent.

We waited.

The metal door creaked open, and there he was.

Lassiter hurried inside, looking every inch the cornered man.

His suit was wrinkled, his tie hanging loose, hair damp and plastered to his forehead.

Sweat glistened at his temples despite the cold.

From my vantage point, tucked into the shadows, I could see the panic under his skin—eyes darting, sharp and jittery.

He wasn't here to posture. He was here because he was scared.

Good.

"McKendrick?" he called, his voice thin and anxious, echoing off the warehouse walls.

A ghostly Enzo emerged from the shadows, silent and controlled. He was behind Lassiter before the man even had time to turn. In one swift, brutal motion, he grabbed him—one arm locking around his chest, the other pinning his arms with precision.

Lassiter wriggled, cursed, and tried to break free, but it was useless. Enzo didn't budge. He was driven by love—raw and bright—for Robbie, by hate—dark and jagged—for the man he now held. And, of course, it helped that Enzo was just fucking enormous.

“Got him,” Enzo muttered, voice low and flat.

Lassiter's feet scraped over the concrete. “Get off me! What the fuck is this?”

I waited for the next bit. Five. Four. Three...

“Do you know who I am?”

There they were, the last words of a condemned man who thought the position he'd abused was enough to shield him from the reckoning we had planned.

Enzo didn't answer. He and Rio moved as one—silent, swift, practiced. Enzo shoved Lassiter forward, and Rio met them at the chair. Lassiter fought, twisting and thrashing, but it didn't matter. They had him.

His knees buckled as they forced him down, and Enzo clamped a hand on his shoulder while Rio secured his ankles into the cuffs bolted to the floor. The clink of metal echoed in the space, jarring in its finality.

Lassiter's voice broke into desperate pleas, words tumbling over each other. “Wait—no—you don't understand—I came here to talk?—”

He jerked sideways, but the wrist restraints closed, biting into flesh. He was sweating harder now, hair stuck to his forehead, jaw clenched in panic.

Then, I stepped in, drawing the rope across his chest and yanking it tight, looping it around the back of the chair. The cord dug into his suit jacket, pinning him in place, and still, he shook, heaved, wriggled like a man caught in a nightmare he couldn't logic his way out of.

It was over. He just didn't know it yet.

I gave an upnod to Enzo. You're on.

Enzo walked with a measured calm that made my skin crawl. He crouched in front of Lassiter, elbows resting on his knees, staring as if he was looking at something he'd already broken in his mind.

"What do you want?" Lassiter demanded, his voice shaking but trying for authority. "I'm a goddamned district attorney. I have people expecting me home."

Enzo didn't blink. He said two words heavy with pain and anger. "Roman Lowe."

Lassiter stiffened, panic flashing in his eyes, followed by a jolt of fear he quickly buried beneath a mask of control. "I don't know who the fuck you're talking about."

Enzo stood, glanced around, and grabbed something from a nearby stack of salvage—a broken metal pole caked in dust. He brought it down fast and hard on Lassiter's right knee.

The scream tore through the warehouse like a gunshot.

Lassiter heaved against the restraints, eyes wide, mouth slack with pain. "You

fucking psycho!”

Enzo watched him, calm as ever. He was good at this—finding weapons from nothing, turning junk into justice.

“You’re going to want to try that answer again,” Enzo murmured, voice like broken glass.

“I swear,” Lassiter gasped, panting through the pain. “I don’t know anyone called Roman Lowe.”

Enzo smiled, and it was the kind of smile that meant nothing good. “But you know John Mitchell, right?”

Lassiter flinched. “Does he owe you money? I have money. I have a lot of money.” His voice cracked, desperate and uneven. “If this is about a deal, I can fix it. I can make it go away.”

Enzo chuckled, low and humorless. “You think this is about money?”

He stepped closer, the broken pole still in his hand. “You’re not buying your way out of this one. Not with cash. Not with promises. Not anymore.” Then, he slammed it on Lassiter’s other knee .

This time Lassiter shouted—a high, broken sound of panic and pain that echoed off the walls—then whimpered, shoulders shaking. “What is this? Why am I here? Where’s McKendrick?”

Enzo crouched again, dropping the metal pole with a loud clang that made Lassiter flinch. “You mean our friend Killian?” Enzo said, voice low and rough. “I expect he’s out there right now... waiting for you to die.

“What? No, he’s...” Understanding flickered in his expression. “Fuck you!”

“So, Roman Lowe.”

“I don’t know what you’re?—”

Enzo placed a finger on Lassiter’s lips, and I watched him lean in close, his expression as hard as stone.

“Let me tell you who Roman Lowe really was,” he said, his voice flat and hollow.

“He was a kid. A boy without a family, a kid in the system, someone with too many dreams and too few choices. You hurt him every time you went to Mitchell’s place.

Every single visit. You caged him. You hit him.

You fucked him. You treated him as if he was nothing—as if he didn’t bleed, didn’t scream, didn’t matter. ”

Lassiter’s mouth opened and, from where I stood, I could see recognition in his expression, but no sound came out.

I watched Lassiter shrink in the chair, and for a moment, I saw it through Robbie’s eyes.

The terror. The helplessness. The way his voice had gone small when he’d talked about being owned.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:17 am

I wanted to burn Lassiter. But Enzo wasn't finished. He didn't rage. He didn't scream. He just told the truth. And that was somehow worse.

"It wasn't me," Lassiter wheezed, trembling, eyes wide with desperation.

Enzo didn't hesitate. He grabbed the steel pipe again and drove it across Lassiter's face with a sickening crack. The man's nose burst open, blood pouring down over his lips and chin. A second blow caught his cheekbone, splitting the skin and painting his collar in red.

Lassiter screamed, then choked, then whimpered. "Please—please stop?—"

Another blow silenced him.

Every time he begged. Every time he denied he knew anything. Enzo swung again.

By the time the pipe clanged to the floor, Lassiter was a mess—head lolling, drool and blood spilling from his mouth, breathing in ragged gasps.

"You used pipes, the same as this, on him, didn't you?" Enzo's voice was cold. "Shoved objects in him. Made him bleed. Scarred him."

"Please— "

He stepped forward, gripped Lassiter's hair to tilt his head back, then waved the pipe as he stared Lassiter in the eye. "Maybe I should do that to you."

Lassiter whimpered and coughed, thick and wet. No more denials. Just pain and fear and blood.

And still... not enough.

That was where Rio came in, crouching beside Lassiter and waving a harsh-smelling ampoule under his nose—something Caleb had sent, meant to jolt the body back from the edge. Lassiter groaned, shaking his head in frantic movements.

“No, no, no. I’m sick. I’ll get help. No, no,” he whispered, voice raw. “He’s dead now. It wasn’t my fault. No more... please... I’m sorry. Don’t hurt me. I’m sorry...”

Enzo knelt again, close enough that Lassiter could feel the heat of his breath.

“Roman’s not dead. He’s very much alive, and I love that man,” Enzo said, low and steady. “He’s the other half of my heart. And for what you did to him, you’re dying today. You get that, right?”

Lassiter made a sound, more animal than human, and Enzo held out his hand.

Rio, solemn now, handed him a blade—no hesitation, nothing but grim understanding.

“Some nights, he can’t stop crying, and even though I hold him, it’s not enough.

He tells me he’s okay, but he’s never going to be okay for real.

It breaks my heart.” Enzo wrapped his fingers around the hilt and turned it slowly in his palm, then leaned in and sliced into Lassiter’s wrist—slow, deliberate, not deep enough to kill, but enough to terrify.

He sawed through skin, shallow layers of flesh, and Lassiter screamed, head jerking.

“He’ll die too soon,” I warned.

Enzo stepped back, breathing hard, nostrils flaring.

He knew.

He just wasn’t ready to let the bastard off that easy.

Enzo tipped his head at me. “Do it.”

I pointed at the rough circle in the dirt, extending ten feet each way to Lassiter, and both Enzo and Rio stepped back.

Lassiter was messing with my peace, sobbing and begging.

I needed quiet. Because this next part? This was mine.

The spiral I’d drawn in the dust wasn’t symbolic—it was the burn path.

I’d spent hours setting it up: fuel line soaked into the dirt, measured accelerants, triggers wired to a single button hidden in my jacket.

Once lit, the fire would trace that perfect spiral inward, closing until it reached the center. Until it reached him.

The entire warehouse would go as well, long after we’d gone, but the design meant the center—Lassiter—would burn the longest. The hottest. He would see it coming. He would feel it close. And by the time the heat kissed his skin, there’d be no escape.

This was the hell I had made.

And it was what he deserved.

I pressed the button.

The fire didn't explode—it awakened. It sparked from six ignition points at once, racing toward each other in a perfect circle that closed in like a noose. And when the flames met, joining with a hiss and roar, the trap sealed. That was Lassiter gone. Caged in fire.

I didn't linger for the screams. I didn't need to. For me, the act was complete, and now, I wanted to watch the building burn. I stepped out into the cold air, Rio close at my back, the door open behind us.

We stood at a distance, watching the first licks of flame reach the wooden siding. It was slow at first, then greedy. The fire clawed its way upward, licking the walls, spreading wide. It swallowed the warehouse like it had been waiting to devour it all along.

Enzo emerged next, smoke curling around his silhouette. He'd stayed just long enough. I'd warned him how long he had.

He stayed because he needed the certainty of a death that couldn't be denied or covered up or erased.

For Robbie.

"She's beautiful," I murmured to my friends, as the roof groaned and buckled, the beams bowing, the structure beginning to fall in on itself.

Lassiter was long since ash.

But the fire was still dancing.

And all I could think was how much I wanted Killian here with me—to see this, to understand what it meant.

I wanted to lace our fingers together and show him that this fire wasn't just destruction.

It was cleansing. It was justice. It was the same wild peace I felt when I was wrapped around him, when he looked at me like I mattered.

Fire and Killian—they burned the same inside me.

But I didn't want to stay here any longer. Not with the smell of smoke on my skin and ash curling around my boots. I wanted Killian. I needed to see him, touch him, know this was really done.

But first... Robbie .

We arrived back at Redcars, and Enzo was out of the truck before it had even stopped moving. He strode inside like a man possessed, and Rio and I were close behind.

Robbie stood in the middle of the garage, and it was obvious he'd been waiting. His arms were crossed over his chest, his eyes red, tears tracking down his face.

"Enzo?" he asked, voice shaking.

Enzo didn't answer with words. He scooped Robbie up in his arms. "It's done," he whispered, holding him as if he'd never let go. All that was left now was pinning

down Kessler and finding this Lyric guy; only then would Robbie have peace, but for tonight, this was enough.

I saw Killian then, lingering near the office doorway, his expression unreadable until he caught my eye. Then he smiled, just for me.

I crossed the space without hesitation, and he met me halfway, lifting me clean off my toes as if I weighed nothing at all.

“Hey, Pretty,” he murmured, pressing his lips to my temple. “Did it go okay?”

I pressed a kiss to his neck, inhaling the scent of my man, my safety.

He was the breath I held onto when everything else burned.

The moment my lips touched him, the chaos dulled, and my heartbeat steadied.

Like Enzo had said about Robbie, this was more than love.

Killian was the other half of my heart, the fire inside that didn’t consume me, but kept me alive.

“Yeah,” I said. “It was beautiful.”

From a cell phone on the table on speakerphone, Caleb’s voice echoed dryly. “And done! I’ve sent the Lassiter data to the relevant people. It’s everywhere now.”

For Robbie.

Epilogue

KILLIAN

The day Jamie left the apartment he'd shared with Rio, he wasn't sad at all. He'd explained that he'd miss Rio, sure, but they'd still see each other every day at Redcars, and we weren't moving far.

We'd found a place to share as a brand new couple, and it wasn't fancy, unlike the penthouse I still owned, gathering dust and offering expensive views uptown on my visits to keep up appearances.

This place was old, low-key, and quiet. A little beat-up around the edges.

Tucked off a street just a few blocks from the garage.

It wasn't on any lease and didn't appear in any relevant database.

It was completely off the grid—just the way I needed it.

Because no matter how much I wanted to wrap my life around Jamie, he still had a record, and I still had a reputation to maintain to front the work the team did in the Cave.

The respectable lawyer. The clean-cut face of a courtroom defense.

That persona didn't survive cohabitating with a convicted arsonist—not on paper.

But this house? This was ours.

In the three months since everything, he'd only set one fire.

And I'd gone with him.

It was in the middle of nowhere, deep woods and an abandoned lumber mill, and I remember standing there as the flames took hold—watching his eyes light up, his chest rise slowly, as if the fire soothed something in him that I couldn't always reach.

I said it was beautiful. I meant it.

He didn't need to hear me say I was scared. Or that I wasn't sure I'd ever fully understand what fire did for him. What mattered was that he'd let me come. Let me see. And that one moment was enough.

Today was unofficial Sunday car day at Redcars. Everyone stayed late to mess with old rebuilds, drink beer, and talk shit. They'd decided that this one was for Jamie's moving-in day with the idiot lawyer. Enzo had texted me something like beer or bust with sixteen emojis I couldn't identify .

I pulled in after dusk. The garage door was open, music spilling into the cooling air. The half-finished Pontiac—Redcars' pet project —sat front and center while Enzo worked under the hood, pointing things out as he and Robbie laughed.

It was good to hear Robbie laugh. Inside, someone had lined the back workbench with snacks and beer, a few pizzas sweating in open boxes.

“Look who finally showed up,” Rio called. He was perched on the hood of an Impala, new bruises visible on his face. “Thought you were ghosting us on J's moving-in-with-you party.”

“I had to finish hiding his flamethrower collection from the movers,” I shot back.

“As if I’d wimp out and use one of those,” Jamie called, walking over from where he’d been talking to Logan and Cassidy. He looked good. Relaxed. His fingers found mine as soon as I was within reach, and he tugged me in for a kiss, long and slow, as if we were alone.

“You’re late,” he murmured against my lips.

“Fashionably,” I replied.

“I saved you a beer.”

“Is it warm?”

“Of course.”

I grinned, pressing another kiss to his mouth before following him inside. The rest of the night played out the way it always did with the Redcars crew—loud, sarcastic, messy, but underneath all of it, a kind of joy I hadn’t realized I’d missed.

We stopped partying a little after midnight; Enzo and Robbie went upstairs, and after we locked up, hand-in-hand, with Rio next to us, we headed out, Jamie stiffening when someone stumbled out of the shadows.

“DaemonRaze?” the man asked Jamie, weakly, his hand to his side.

He was short and wiry, wearing worn jeans and a leather jacket that had seen better days.

His long, dark hair was tied up in a messy bun, strands falling loose to frame a face half-lit by the amber glow of the streetlamp.

He looked tired—haunted, even—but not dangerous. Not armed. Not overtly threatening.

That didn't matter to Rio.

He snarled and shot at the man—silent, fast, all heat and muscle.

One second the man was talking, the next his back hit the alley wall with a sickening crack, his breath exploding from his lungs in a strangled gasp.

Rio had him pinned, one arm across his chest, the other fist twisted into the collar of his jacket, lifting him clear off the ground.

His feet kicked uselessly in the air, scraping for leverage on the brickwork as he wheezed, ribs compressed under the force.

“What the fuck—Rio!” Jamie snapped, pushing in, but Rio didn't budge. His face was pure fury—eyes sharp, jaw tight, breath steaming in the cold night air.

“Who the fuck are you?” Rio snarled at the stranger, his voice low and lethal.

The man clawed at Rio's arm, choking on nothing, eyes wide in panic. Not so harmless now.

Jamie shoved at Rio's shoulder. “Jesus, let him breathe!”

But Rio didn't let go, and he was in a world of his own where he was saving all of us. The red mist had consumed him.

The name the man had used set my pulse on edge—Jamie's hacker handle, or whatever it was called. Jamie assured me no one outside of Redcars and the Cave team knew his alternative name, that it meant nothing now anyway, but here was a

stranger staring at us with desperation in his gaze.

“Who’s asking?” Jamie said, his voice calm but tight.

I expected an epic hacker handle, something anonymous and cutting, like Jamie’s take on a burning demon, but instead, the guy deflated, not even fighting Rio’s hold. Shoulders sagging, mouth working like the words were hard to say.

“L-Lyric,” he forced, and my heart skipped. Lyric Thornwood? The man on the board, faceless, but with connections to everything that had happened. That was one hell of a coincidence.

"You fucker," Rio snarled.

Lyric let out a rasp, hands scrabbling weakly at Rio’s arm before falling away, strength bleeding out fast. His body trembled; his feet dangled, toes scraping at empty air.

The fight was draining from him, breath hitching in rapid, shallow bursts.

Jamie’s voice cut through—steady, measured—but my focus stayed on the man in Rio’s grip—his mouth working, no sound coming, head sagging heavier with every second.

If Rio held on much longer, we’d be looking at unconsciousness...

or worse. Hospitalization. Charges. A witness claiming excessive force.

My gut tightened. One more second, and this could cross a line we couldn't walk back from.

He was mumbling a word over and over, “Nightjar! Night... Jar...Root...”

I saw blood dripping from his hand, leaving a smear on Rio .

“RootNightjar?” Jamie asked.

“Y-yes...p-please”

“Let him down, Rio,” Jamie shouted, and Rio released his throat but held him still. Nothing was making the big guy let go of Lyric. “Talk,” Jamie ordered, and Lyric shuddered in fear and grasped at Rio’s arm as if it were an anchor, and he was about to snap in two.

“Kessler... I was off-grid... there’s a contract... wants to kill me,” he yanked at Rio’s arm. Not a good move, because he slammed Lyric back against the wall.

"Help me," he pleaded. "P-please."

Jamie was attempting to talk Rio down, and when Rio let him go, Lyric hit the ground hard and sprawled unconscious as if he were dead.

"Fuck!" Jamie snapped.

I went to my knees, checking for a pulse and already considering which cleaner to call to remove the body.

Rio was in shock, Lyric bleeding out on the concrete, and one thought burned through me—we’d rattled some cages, and whoever was hunting Lyric could be right behind him.

Kessler.

THE END