



Look What You Made Me Do (Legacy of Lies #5)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Twisted Lies.

Psychotic Love.

And campus god intent on punishing me.

In the darkness, he's always there.

Silently watching. Waiting. My stalker.

The masked figure that looms over my bed and sets my pulse racing.

He showed up after my boyfriend died, and I wonder if it's his ghost haunting me. But the masked man is all too real, and when he touches me, I crave dark things I'd never admit to anyone

According to him, I have to pay for what I've done. And what have I done, exactly? Your guess is as good as mine. But he's demanding payment regardless, and that payment is me, on my knees, ready to serve him.

Honestly, I might have been willing, if not for the secret I just uncovered. It's so shocking that it blows my world apart, and forces me to question everything, especially the ruthless monster in my bed...

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Page 1

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PROLOGUE

Wyn - Initiation

I've never done anything like this, and now that I'm here, I realize how insane it is. But this has never been about what I want. Tonight is about duty, tradition, and soul-crushing expectations...

The Burning Crown is a centuries-old secret society on the Exeter University West campus—ExU for short—and being accepted as a member is an incredible privilege. At least, that's what my parents tell me. They're both members, as were their parents before them, and so on. So naturally, when I was accepted into ExU, it was assumed I'd initiate into the society.

So here I am, standing in the center of a windowless room, naked beneath my dark robe, my entire body trembling. No one would tell me what to expect, so I'm going into this completely blind, which only heightens my anxiety.

After long agonizing minutes of standing alone in the center of the room, the door opens, and several masked figures start filing in, all wearing navy blue cloaks. Leading them is someone holding a gold ball on a chain, white smoke billowing from intricate cutouts.

My heart leaps into my throat as they start chanting something in Latin, still moving in a single line, coiling around me like a snake, until I'm completely surrounded. Only when the circle is closed do they stop chanting.

This shit is creepy as fuck. Is it too late to nope out?

Before I can even entertain that thought, though, the leader stops directly in front of me, peering at me from behind his gold mask. “Gwendolyn Renee Barker,” he intones. “You come before us with the desire to become a child of the Society of the Burning Crown.”

Now would be the time to speak up and say, “Just kidding,” right? Instead, I find myself nodding, guided by that suffocating sense of duty. “Um, yeah.”

“You come of your own free will.”

I clasp my hands in front of me, squeezing them into fists. “Yes.”

“You agree to serve the order, to do whatever it requires of you without question or hesitation,” the leader intones mechanically.

“Yes.”

He nods once. “You will now be given the opportunity to show your willingness to submit to the order. You may halt the ceremony at any point, but in doing so, you will be escorted off the premises and forbidden to enter forevermore...”

Having the agency to stop the ritual gives me a small degree of comfort, especially since I have no idea what’s about to happen. I’m naked under the robe, though, so that’s my first giant red flag. If I had to guess, maybe public humiliation? Paddling? I’ve heard that’s a thing in secret societies.

I nod in response to whatever the guy just said.

“You need to say it.”

Oh. “Okay,” I say quickly. “I mean, yes. I agree.”

With another nod, he hands the smoking ball off to someone, exchanging it for a gold chalice. He approaches me with it. “Drink deeply from the chalice of knowledge.”

I grab it from him so quickly that the amber-colored liquid inside sloshes over the lip. I just want to get this shit over with. Lifting the chalice to my lips, I tilt my head back and drain it, then hand it back. Whatever that was, it tasted like really sweet orange juice, and it makes my lips pucker.

The chanting picks up again, and I allow my gaze to scan the circle. I’m new on campus, so even without the masks, I wouldn’t know anyone. But the masks give the ritual an extra menacing vibe, and if that’s what they’re going for, then bravo. Well done.

After a couple of minutes, that anxious feeling in my stomach starts to fade and a warm sense of euphoria washes over me. Clever. They must’ve put a sedative or something in the drink to calm me down.

But that doesn’t bode well for what’s to come, does it?

I’m feeling very floaty when a female member steps toward me and unfastens the rope belt that’s holding my robe together. She slides it off my shoulders, exposing my naked body to the entire room.

My muscles go rigid as the fabric falls away, and a wash of cold air brushes over my skin. My nipples instantly harden, and my hands move to my front, shielding my trimmed patch of pubic hair.

A female member steps forward with a long feather in her hand. “This feather represents our forbearers, looking down on us, guiding us in the way of the order...”

She brushes it over my skin lightly, then steps back into the circle. Someone else then steps forward, a wooden paddle hanging loose at their side. My heart rate kicks up about a thousand notches when I see it.

Without saying anything, the person nudges my shoulder, turning me around, so my back faces him. Then he applies pressure to the small of my back, instructing me to bend over.

“This paddle represents the adversity you will endure in defense of the society,” he says.

I swallow, and squeeze my eyes shut, every muscle in my body tensing up in anticipation of the first blow. It comes without warning—a solid thud that pushes my entire body forward. Then a sharp sting, followed by intense heat, blooms across both my ass cheeks. My eyes water, but I manage to swallow back the whimper that bubbles up in my throat.

The person brings the paddle down two more times and by the end of it, silent tears are streaming down my face. My backside hurts so bad, I wonder if I’ll be able to walk tomorrow.

Relief washes over me when, from the corner of my eye, I see the guy with the paddle rejoin the circle. Thank God. I don’t know how much more of that paddle I could take.

Yet another person steps forward. By the size and frame of the person, I’m guessing it’s another female member. I’m still bent over, and she’s holding something I can’t see. She takes her position behind me.

“This whip represents the adversaries that will attempt to pry our secrets from you.” Her words have no inflection.

Wait, did she just say a whip?

I'm just starting to turn and say, "Whoa, hold up," but before I can even form the words, the whip comes down with a sickening crack. It's like liquid pain being poured over my back. On reflex alone, I arch and scream. The sting is so intense, I can hardly breathe. I can't pull enough air into my lungs. It feels like they've been stunned into malfunctioning.

There's a second of silence as everyone waits to see if I'll forfeit. But I've already come this far, so I don't say anything.

Squeezing my eyes shut and gritting my teeth against the pain, I reposition myself to receive the next blow. It comes quickly. The whip licks my back again, leaving a ribbon of fire in its wake. And this time, I don't even try to quiet the scream that erupts from somewhere deep in my chest.

There's one more strike after that, but the pain is already so intense that I don't even feel it. It must be the adrenaline that's shooting through my system.

When it's over, I'm given a few minutes to recover before someone steps forward, grabs my hand, and walks me over to a table that's being pushed forward. It's all wood with straps dangling from it. Honestly, it looks like something straight out of a medieval dungeon, and the sight of it sends my heart rate into cardiac arrest territory.

For a split second, I consider saying, "Fuck this," but something stops me. The crushing weight of expectation. My only goal growing up was to excel at everything and do all the right things, all to please my parents. They could be so suffocatingly critical, but when they were happy with me, life was great. When they weren't, well, it's like I didn't even exist.

And this, becoming a member of the Burning Crown, is all they've ever wanted. If I

back out now, I'll be dead to them. They'd never admit that outright, but I know it's true. The calls would stop. The money would stop. I'd be on my own.

So, yeah, I guess I'm doing this.

Someone guides me to the table, and I climb up, wincing when the skin on my back makes contact with the hard wood. Holy shit. Gingerly, I shift my body until I'm lying flat on the table, my thighs clamped shut.

The only thing going through my mind is, How can this possibly get worse?

In the dim light, someone steps forward. Everyone in this room looks the same—dark robe, gold mask—but there's something about this guy that commands attention. He's tall and even hidden beneath all that fabric, I can tell his frame leans toward muscular. I can't see his hair or his face, though. And it's too dim to see the color of his eyes. So his commanding presence is all there is to set him apart.

"This act consummates your forever bond to the society," he intones, his deep baritone skipping down my spine. "Do you agree?"

"Y-yes," I say, my voice trembling.

Everyone starts chanting, and he grabs my ankles, pulling me toward the end of the table. I yelp in pain as the smooth wood scrapes along my back, but he doesn't react at all to my distress. When my legs are dangling over the edge, he opens his robe, unzips his pants, and pulls his cock out.

I wish I had the presence of mind to take a good look at it, but I'm so terrified that all I can focus on is the very real possibility that being "scared to death" might actually be a thing.

He reaches up, and grabs a fist full of my hair, yanking my head back. I almost gasp because I'm not expecting it, but I swallow the sound before it can escape. I don't want this guy knowing I'm afraid, which is absurd because I'm sure he can see it written all over my face.

Arching over me, he brings his head down to mine and speaks directly in my ear, "Spread your thighs like a good girl."

Swallowing, I do as I'm told, and he releases my hair so he can grip both my thighs and pull me open even wider. Using one finger, he tests my entrance, and I'm mortified because I already know what he'll find. My pussy is soaking wet. Despite the fear, my body is responding to him...

A rumble of approval reverberates in his chest as he shifts his hips forward, pressing the head of his cock against my entrance. That's the only warning I get. A breath later, he pushes into me so deep, and so hard that my back arches, and a scream is ripped from my throat. He's so big, I wonder if he tore me. That's how bad it hurts.

The chanting continues as he thrusts into me, fucking me hard, mercilessly. I bite the inside of my cheek as his large hand closes around my breast and squeezes. It's painful, and I try to twist away, but that only makes him squeeze harder—his way of reminding me that he's the one in control here.

Clouds of sage-scented smoke engulf us as he continues his assault on my pussy, taking me hard and deep. Then something happens. Something inside me shifts and pleasure slowly bleeds into the pain. My hips arch into him, and my body opens up a fraction more.

He moans inside his mask, and that sound sends a jolt of satisfaction zipping through me. His thumbs flick over my sensitive nipples, and he arches over me, his cloak and large body shielding me from the room of people.

He falls into a ruthless rhythm, pounding into me with so much force that the solid wood table moves beneath me, the feet scraping against the tiles. His hand grips my breast so hard, it makes my eyes water. But the pain feeds something inside me, something I didn't even know was there.

With a deep, primal growl, he thrusts one more time, pushing in as deep as he can, then stills as he pumps his cum into me. Enveloped in the cocoon created by his robe, I breathe him in, my body cracking open. And once that fissure is created, there's no stopping the tidal wave of heat that crashes through my wafer-thin resistance.

I choke back a moan as wave after wave of warmth infuses my veins, and I'm left panting, my body vibrating. He still doesn't pull out of me. Instead, he gathers me up and holds me against his body as his hips continue to rock against my clit, drawing out the last little tremors of uninvited pleasure.

When it's all over, he pulls out, then grabs my robe and drapes the heavy fabric over me. It feels oddly protective, especially since no one cared about me being naked five seconds ago, but, I don't know...maybe they do that with everyone.

My attendant rushes forward and helps me down from the table as someone else steps forward, places a crown in the center of the circle, and lights it on fire. The flames surge, licking the air as everyone closes in around me, pulling me into their ranks.

I guess I passed?

I'm sore and every muscle aches. I'm sure I have cuts and bruises all over my body, but the throbbing between my thighs is next level, and I feel more wet than usual.

As the leader of this thing closes out the ceremony with a string of Latin, I covertly dip a finger between my thighs. When I bring it back up to look at it, my fingertip is bright red. The stranger fucked me so hard, he made me bleed...

Page 2

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CHAPTER ONE

Wyn - One Year Later

God, I feel nauseous.

I should just cut and run right now, and never look back.

For the last couple of months, I've avoided all Burning Crown events. But as with all secret societies, there are rules, and one major rule is that no member can miss more than three consecutive events without facing the consequences. And the consequence of missing too many society events is having to be re-initiated. My first initiation shook me so hard, I'm still trying to catch my breath. So, yeah, not trying to do that again.

Tonight is the Founders Day celebration at Rush House, one of the biggest events of the year. It's the society's birthday, so there's a lot of booze involved, which, if I'm being honest, is one of the pluses of attending any society event.

But I'd been avoiding all of this, because two months ago, my boyfriend, Gabriel, took his own life, and I've heard whispers that some in the Burning Crown blame me for that. One person in particular.

Lucas West.

I don't need him to blame me. I feel enough guilt to last a couple of lifetimes, so the absolute last thing I need is people leering at me with hate and judgment in their eyes.

Blowing out a breath, I stare at the path leading up to Rush House, the ocean-front Victorian mansion that serves as the Burning Crown headquarters. My friend, Alexis, is with me, and she grabs my hand. She's one of those sassy chicks that I immediately gravitated to when I joined the society a year ago. She's a bit of a witchy, earth-mother type, with long wavy brown hair, dark eyes, and an easy smile. Her magnetic personality has a way of pulling people in.

"Let's do this," she says. "It's going to be fine. You're going to be fine."

I glance at her and smile. Thank God she's here with me. We joined the Burning Crown at the same time, our freshman year, and we've been pretty close ever since. She's one of the very few who stuck by me after Gabriel's death.

What's that saying, "Hard times will always reveal true friends?" Damn, that's the truth. Most of my "friends" scattered to the wind when they heard Lucas blamed me for Gabriel's death. He's one of four Sacred Sons, the elite of the elite within the Burning Crown, and whatever they say is gospel, apparently.

I sigh. "I have to get back on the saddle at some point, right?"

When we reach the front porch, Austin is standing there with a basket, silently demanding we turn over our phones before entering the house. Austin has always been nice to me, so as I drop my phone into the basket, I flash him a smile. There's no answering warmth on his face. With an uninterested expression, he just spreads his arm, indicating the open door.

Okay. Whatever.

Alexis and I step through to the foyer, and there's already a crowd gathered, waiting to be let into the study, so we can change into our ceremonial robes. I don't even know why I shaved my legs for this. By the time we get our robes on, everything is

all covered up anyway.

We all stand around awkwardly for several minutes, waiting for the Sacred Sons to show up. They're the ruling elite of the Burning Crown, and we can't start without them. But the fact that all four of Sacred Sons live in this house, yet still manage to show up late to every ceremony is classic rich-boy bullshit.

Control. That's what this is. It's what the Sacred Sons thrive on. They want us to wait, so we know who's in charge.

But as we all stand in the foyer, I notice I'm getting a lot of side-eye, and whispers thrown in my direction. More than I anticipated. Gabriel was a gregarious, and well-known member of this community, and his sudden death impacted a lot of people. But they didn't know the other side of him. The angry, bitter side. He'd become absolutely unhinged when he got high.

Alexis grabs my hand and squeezes. "It's okay," she whispers to me. "In a month, they'll all be gossiping about some other drama."

"They blame me," I whisper back harshly. "Gabriel jumped in front of that train, but I'm the one facing the judgment for it."

Grief is a weird thing. Sometimes I'm sad, but eventually, that sadness melts into anger that grips me so hard that I often find it difficult to breathe. I can't imagine what was going through Gabriel's head when he decided to end everything. All I know is that the ripple effect from that night almost destroyed me. And now I'm just trying to get back to a place of normalcy, which is a lot harder than it sounds.

"I've actually heard whispers that the police suspect Lucas could have had something to do with Gabriel's death," Alexis whispers. "Someone just mentioned it today in class."

Lucas West. King of the Sacred Sons since Roman Rush stepped down a couple of months ago. Lucas was Gabriel's cousin and best friend, and he's made it abundantly clear that he hates my guts.

The feeling is one hundred percent mutual.

"Why?" I ask. "The police said Gabriel's case was pretty cut and dry."

She shrugs. "They said something about a witness coming forward, but that was it. Class started and they dropped the subject."

Alexis is so sweet, but she can also be so clueless sometimes. If I'd overheard something like that, I'd be up those people's asses, asking questions the second class ended. "You didn't ask them who the witness was, or what they said?"

"It just sounded like gossip, Wyn. I'd take it with a grain of salt."

Yeah, maybe she's right. How many crazy things have been said about me in the last couple of months? Everything from me having a secret baby that pushed Gabriel over the edge, to me goading him into doing it. None of it was true, obviously, but that didn't stop people from speculating.

Finally, after waiting around for a half hour, the Sacred Sons—Lucas, Christian, Jackson, and Ash—saunter down the main staircase like kings of their domain. Christian is first. He's tall, muscular, and male model-level hot, just like his twin, Lucas—the only difference between them is that Lucas has wavy blond hair, and Christian's hair is straight.

You'd think Christian would be just as upset by Gabriel's passing as Lucas was. They were both Gabriel's cousins. And he was upset from what I've heard, but Lucas' pain went beyond grief. He was completely shattered by Gabriel's death. Some people say

it changed him.

Jackson is next down the stairs, his large, muscular body nearly taking up the entire width of the ornate staircase. His dark features give him a tough, weight-lifter vibe, even though he mostly just surfs. But beneath that tough exterior, he's actually really nice. He helped me when Gabriel and I were struggling—offering me advice and giving me a guy's perspective...

But he was also one of the “friends” who ghosted me after Gabriel's death. We weren't besties, but we were close-ish. And after everything went down, he never reached out, never checked on me. Nothing. And that really stung.

Alexis and Lux were the only ones that stuck by me.

Ash comes down next. He's the newest Sacred Son and the classic image of a surfer—messy sun-bleached hair and vibrant blue eyes that look into a person and seem to perceive more than what's on the surface. Initially, he had mixed feelings about becoming a Sacred Son—something about not wanting to contribute to a corrupt patriarchy—and because of that, there's been a fuck-ton of tension between him and the other guys.

Lucas is the last one to come down. Of course, he is. He walks slowly down the staircase while he rolls his shirt sleeves up and adjusts his mess of boho bracelets like he's in no rush to get where he's going. He enters every room with the kind of confidence that only comes with knowing he's rich, powerful, and insanely hot.

It's a fact, though. So I can't even say he's wrong. He's over six feet tall, tanned, and muscular with wavy blond hair and a pair of striking blue eyes that made me gasp the first time I saw them. No lie. It was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. Right after it happened, there was a second of silence, and then he just laughed, but mockingly. I wanted to launch myself off the nearest cliff. It's been a year, and I

still think about that horrifying moment weekly.

He probably gets that all the time though. That's what I tell myself, anyway. Of all the Sacred Sons, Lucas is the most popular with the Debs—short for debutants, what we call the female members of the Burning Crown. He's on every Deb's fuck list, and he knows it. Everyone knows it.

When I first arrived on campus, I did try to get his attention, but he never seemed interested in me. Then a week after my initiation, I started dating Gabriel. So my attraction to him was a moot point after that.

But Gabriel and Lucas were close and hung out all the time, so I got a front-row seat to Lucas' many hookups, which was a special kind of torture. I compared myself to every girl he brought around. I watched how they interacted, wondering what it was about this girl that caught his attention. Was she quiet, or outspoken? Was she funny, or more serious? There was never really a pattern. He just seemed to fuck whichever chick he was in the mood for that week.

At the time, I felt like I hid my attraction to Lucas well, but looking back, maybe I wasn't as slick as I thought I was. Gabriel was always jealous of Lucas, and every time we fought, he accused me of wanting to fuck his cousin. So, it was either me giving him that vibe, or Gabriel was just going off the fact that everyone wants to fuck Lucas. Either way, he wouldn't let it go.

Mason thumps his stick and everyone lets out a “Hoo-ah,” which snaps me back to the present. With the Sacred Sons now here, we all shuffle into the dressing room, which is just off the study, so we can change into our robes.

Alexis turns to me as she's pulling her cloak off the hook. “We're getting you some dick tonight,” she whispers.

I shrug into my robe. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“It’s only been two months since Gabriel...” My gaze darts around the small dressing room, but thankfully, no one is paying attention to us. “People would talk.”

“Wyn, we both know you’d emotionally checked out of that relationship long before Gabriel died.” She rushes to add, “Not that his death wasn’t painful for you, and I get that. But a good fuck would improve your mental health. No one needs to even know about it.”

It’s a problem when Alexis starts making sense, because it’s true, things with me and Gabriel had been bad for a while. He was always so angry. No matter what I said, he would twist my words and use them as evidence that I was betraying him in some way. It was exhausting.

But, I don’t know, maybe if I’d been a better girlfriend, he wouldn’t have stepped in front of that train. Ugh. It’s an endless cycle of guilt.

Pulling the hood over my head, I flash Alexis a smile. “We should vote to get rid of these stupid hoods. Fucks up my hair every single time.”

“Oh, fuck you.” She flashes me a bright smile. “You always look hot, and you know it.”

I sigh and my gaze darts around the room. I’m always searching for that one face, that one pair of electric blue eyes. But I don’t see any of the Sacred Sons, which means the guys must have already gone through to the ballroom.

Once we’re all robed-up, we’re ushered into the ballroom, which is down the hall, on

the far side of the house. It's the room we use for ceremonies that includes all members because it's the only spot in the house large enough to accommodate everyone.

Inside the ballroom, the lights are dimmed, and candles flicker around the edge of the room. This place is creepy on a normal day, but the orange flickering glow of the candles takes that to a whole new level. It's giving Victorian seance vibes.

Everyone instinctively forms a large circle, shoulder to shoulder, naturally falling into complete silence. The only sounds are our shoes shuffling against the wood floors as we position ourselves.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Mason appears in the center of the circle, cloaked like the rest of us, his chin held high, a gold stick in his hand. He calls everyone to attention, even though we're already silent and fucking staring at him.

"The Sacred Sons," he says, introducing them with a flourish of his arm like he's announcing a band at Coachella. We all stomp our feet in unison, ending on a "Hoo-ah!"

So much of what happens in the society is theatrics, and I work hard to keep from rolling my eyes. But I'm here, so whatever. I just need to get through the night, so I can go back to ignoring all these people, except for Alexis, of course.

The Sacred Sons and their consorts file into the center of the circle. Jackson, Christian, Ash, and Lucas are at the center of all this, but it's Lucas who takes the lead because he's the oldest. I mean, technically. I think Christian is only younger by a minute. But in a patriarchy like this, one minute might as well be a lifetime.

Lucas' hard gaze sweeps the circle. "Tonight, brothers and sisters, we honor our forefathers. It is due to their foresight, their sacrifice, and their leadership that this venerable society exists today."

More stomping, and another "Hoo-ah!"

Raising his arms, Lucas lapses into a long string of Latin that none of us understands. I half-wonder if he even knows what he's saying. He could be vowing to sacrifice babies for all we know, but no one seems to care. As long as they're part of the cool crowd, they don't give a fuck.

I do, though. I give a fuck.

Everyone chants a couple of things in unison, and then, thankfully, the ceremony starts wrapping up. Tonight is more about the drunken revelry afterward. That's what Founders Day is really about. Honoring our forefathers by drinking to excess, and fucking in dark corners. You know, typical secret society mayhem.

Lucas closes out the official part of the ceremony with the ominous words, "Semper Fidelis." Always loyal. I don't know why, but in my head, I've always added, "or else..." to the end of that statement.

Once the official ceremony is done, we remove our robes and hand them over to members who will hang them back up for us. I guess shaving my legs was necessary, after all.

On the far side of the giant room, the DJ is already set up on a platform and starts pumping out music. The candles are snuffed out, and colored lights start flickering in time with the pulse of the bass.

Someone is passing drinks around, and Alexis grabs us both a glass. It's straight

rum—the expensive kind—and I drain it in one swallow, my asshole puckering as the syrupy liquid burns down my throat like molten lava.

Daymn.

“Whew!” I say, blinking. “That shit made my eyes water.”

Alexis laughs, downing her own drink. She takes our empty glasses and sets them aside.

“Oh, shit,” she says when the song switches. She moves her body in time with the rhythm of music, her hips swaying energetically. She’s wearing a short black peasant dress that shows off her long legs. “Here we go. It’s time to partayyy.”

The rum is already working its way through my bloodstream, but even that isn’t enough to get me dancing. Alexis isn’t going to take no for an answer, though. She knows I hate being here, and she’s determined to cheer me up.

Grabbing my hands, she forces me to sway with her. “Come on,” she says, pouting. “You don’t want to dishonor the founding fathers, do you?”

I can’t help but smile as she pulls me close, smoothing her hands over my hips, and guiding me as we both find the flow. The base pulses through me, and soon I’m sweating, completely lost in the music.

Maybe Alexis was right. Maybe I did need this.

Two more drinks later, I’m feeling really good. And for the first time in two months, I’m not thinking about Gabriel, or what people think of me. The freedom of that is intoxicating. It feels like a two-ton weight has been lifted off my shoulders. And even if it’s only temporary, it feels amazing.

Alexis leaves to find us more drinks, and someone pushes up against me from behind. I can tell it's a guy because there's a very firm appendage shoved against my ass. I don't look back to see who it is. I just keep dancing, jerking my hips, grinding my ass into whoever it is. I'm drunk enough now to throw caution to the wind and let myself go.

When it's obvious I'm cool with his attention, the guy smooths his large hands over my hips, and pulls me more firmly against his hard shaft as if to say, “ You want this?”

Yes, please, and thank you.

I haven't had sex in months. I don't even know the last time, because Gabriel and I were in such a bad place toward the end that sex wasn't even a consideration. You have to get along for more than five minutes for shit like that to happen.

Turning around, I glimpse my new dance partner beneath the flickering lights. He's tall with a hint of muscle beneath his dress shirt, and when I look up at his face, I'm pleasantly surprised. It's Kai. I've seen him around, obviously, but I've never really talked to him.

He leans down to speak in my ear, “You wanna get some air?”

It sounds like an innocent question, but I know exactly what he means. It's code for “You wanna fuck?”

I smile up at him, feeling a little floaty and numb. “Yeah.”

His hand slides down my arm, his fingers hooking with mine, and he leads me out of the ballroom and into the foyer. People are already out here, fucking in the corners, their anguished moans filling the dark, stale air.

Kai pulls me outside, to the wrap-around porch, shoving me against the waist-high railing. It's cool out here, and the ocean breeze feels so good on my heated skin.

He pushes me up against the railing, his hand instantly dipping under my skirt. His lips are on my neck as he finds my panties and shoves them aside, one long finger stroking my entrance. "You smell like gardenia."

I smile because Gabriel used to say the same thing. But no one actually smells like a flower. It's probably just my shampoo.

"Mmmm," I breathe, tilting my head to the side, enjoying the feel of his soft lips skating over my skin. "That's feels nice."

"You like that?" he says, pushing his finger pushing into me. "Oh, yeah. You're already wet."

"Mmm-hmmm," I intone, reaching up to grip his shoulders.

He kisses his way up my throat to my jaw. "Thank God you're finally single," he whispers. "I've been obsessed with you since your initiation."

That kills the vibe and I freeze.

Initiation into the Burning Crown is a brutal ceremony for us girls. We're basically fucked by a masked figure—a male member—and we never really find out who it is. It's supposed to signify our total submission to the society or some shit. Depending on the girl's masked partner, initiation might be rough or soft or somewhere in between. My initiation changed something inside me, and I've never really come back from that.

Was it Kai who initiated me?

He can't tell me—that would be against the rules—but now I find myself analyzing every move he makes. Does it feel familiar? I can't tell, though. I was so damn scared that night, and the experience was so overwhelming, I'm surprised I remember anything at all.

I shake my head, but Kai is so into the moment, he doesn't even notice. His finger pushes in deeper, which sends my thoughts scattering to the four winds. I rise onto my tiptoes and moan.

Oh, okay. That feels nice.

“Yo,” a voice booms from somewhere beyond the shadows.

I pause. Kai pauses.

A hand curves over Kai's shoulder, and yanks him backward, tearing him away from me. I suck in a breath and jerk back, my ankles hitting the bottom of the porch railing.

Kai spins on whoever it is, ready to fight, but he stops short as soon as he sees the person's face. I see the guy's face at the same time.

Lucas.

He's at least two inches taller than Kai, and he looms over us both, the yellow porch light encircling his head like a halo and casting a harsh shadow across his face.

“Take any chick you want,” Lucas says, his gaze falling to me, our eyes catching.
“But this one is off limits.”

CHAPTER TWO

Wyn

What in the holy cockblock just happened?

As Kai stumbles away, mumbling his apologies, I level a scowl at Lucas, who is now standing in front of me, still wearing his robe, the deep hood pulled over his head, partially concealing his face.

He looks like a Sith Lord, cloaked in darkness, and maybe it's just the rum in my bloodstream, but seeing him like that makes my clit throb. Ever since my initiation, I've had a thing for the darker side of sex. A thing I've unsuccessfully tried to deny.

I gesture to Kai's retreating form. "What the fuck, Lucas? I was this close to getting some dick tonight."

Hatred flares in his eyes, and in the length of time it takes me to blink, he has me pushed up against the railing, one large hand wrapped around my throat, just below my jaw. "Two months," he grates out, his face nearly touching mine. "Gabriel has been gone for two fucking months and you're already whoring yourself out to the first cock that comes along?"

Fear spikes through me as I claw at his hand, trying to pry it free. I can breathe, but barely. With just a tiny bit more pressure, he could cut off my air supply completely.

Sheer panic compels me to reach up and claw at his face, just to get him to loosen his

grip. With a hiss, he shoves me, and I cough, bending over to suck in several gulps of air.

“You can’t even fucking pretend to grieve him,” he spits at me, his words filled with pain and vitriol.

Okay, now I’m fucking angry.

Lucas wasn’t there with me right after Gabriel died. He didn’t witness the countless nights I cried myself to sleep, wondering what I could have done differently. Wondering how I could have stopped Gabriel from stepping in front of that train. But I wasn’t there in those last moments. No one was.

Straightening, I step up to Lucas and shove my finger into his granite chest. “I’ve grieved more than you’ll ever know,” I bite out. “But I didn’t die that day, Lucas. I deserve to live, and not even the campus king is going to tell me what to do.”

Lucas steps forward, crowding me, his large body pinning me against the railing again. It’s a show of force, a reminder that as much as I want to believe I’m the one in control, I’m not.

His cold blue eyes take me in, falling from my face to my cleavage. “You want to play the whore,” he says, hatred dripping from every syllable. “But if anyone touches you, Wyn, I swear to God, you’ll both regret it.”

I swallow at the darkness in his voice. He’s being territorial on behalf of his cousin. But his cousin is dead, and I’m a free woman.

Emboldened by the rum, I take his cock and balls in my hand, stroking the hard ridge of his erection through the fabric of his slacks. Two things surprise me. First, he’s already hard. Rock hard. And second, he doesn’t pull away. He doesn’t even flinch.

“Who are you saving me for, hmm?” I ask, leaning forward. “Your cousin is gone, Lucas.” I curl my fingers around his long, girthy shaft. His size is impressive, actually, and my core throbs. “And guys want to fuck me, so I’m going to let them.”

I’m not, actually. It’s a total bluff. Kai was a one-off. As soon as the rum wears off, I’ll be back in my bed with my snacks, watching old serial killer documentaries, alone. But he doesn’t need to know that. As far as he’s concerned, I’ll be whoring it up, and it gives me great joy letting him think that.

His gaze darkens and he grabs my wrist, pulling my hand off his cock, holding it suspended between us. His grip is tight, bordering on painful. “Fucking try it,” he says angrily. “I’m serious, Wyn. I don’t make idle threats.”

I yank my wrist out of his grip. What the fuck? He never really talked to me when I was with Gabriel, and now, all of a sudden, he’s the guardian of my fucking virtue?

Rubbing my wrist, I narrow my gaze at him. “You really need therapy, Lucas,” I say. “Look into it.”

And with that last departing barb, I push past him and head back into the house. I consider flagging Kai back down, but I decide against it. Lucas is pretty pissed, and I don’t want to make trouble for Kai. Lucas being a Sacred Son means he can ruin a life with one fucking text. And he’s cruel enough to do it.

I’m suddenly tired as I weave through the crowd trying to find Alexis. I find her standing around, drinking, and laughing, and I tap her on the shoulder.

“Hey, I’m going to head home. You going to be okay?”

Alexis’s expression instantly shifts from amusement to concern. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m just really tired, and I have class tomorrow.”

“Ah, okay. Yeah, I’m good. I’ll catch a ride with one of the other girls.”

“Cool. I’ll text you tomorrow,” I say, leaving. I grab my phone from the basket and head back out onto the porch, so I can call a car to come pick me up. I just moved into a studio apartment, and it’s a few blocks from campus, which is farther than I want to walk in heels. And I’ve been drinking, so I can’t drive. I’ll have to swing back and pick up my car in the morning.

“You leaving?” A deep baritone forces me to look up. It’s Lucas’ twin, Christian.

I glance around. Is he talking to me? I’m the only other person on the porch, so I guess he is.

“Yeah, I’m tired,” I say vaguely.

He pulls his keys out of his pocket and holds them up. “Lucas wants me to take you home.”

Lucas... what?

I turn to fully face him. “Listen, I don’t know why your brother is suddenly so interested in my life, but I’m fine. I don’t need a ride home. I’ve already called a car.”

Goddamn. I’m a grown-ass-fucking-woman.

He walks past me, and down the front steps before turning around to face me. “Come on, let’s go.”

I shift my stance, hands on my hips. “Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yeah,” he says impatiently. “But if I don’t take you home, then I’m going to hear about it all fucking night. So—” He gestures to his ungodly expensive sports car, which is parked thirty feet away, right in front of the house. “—can we do this, please?”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Not yet, which is why I’m the one stuck doing this,” he says, not even trying to sugarcoat his annoyance.

Perfect. That makes two of us.

Blowing out a breath, I follow him to his car. Whatever. It saves me the expense of hiring a car to take me home. I slide into the low bucket seat and shut the door.

As soon as we’re on the road, I give Christian my address and cancel the car I’d just scheduled. Then I shove my phone into my purse. It’s dark and Christian’s car smells like perfume. The stale, awkward silence is unbearable.

“So, what the fuck is wrong with your brother?” I ask, staring out the passenger side window at the occasional halo created by the streetlights.

“What do you mean?”

I look over at him. It’s so weird, being with Christian right after my exchange with Lucas. They’re fraternal twins (allegedly), but they look exactly alike. The only difference is their hair.

“He’s taking your cousin’s death really hard,” I say. “So much so that he’s obsessing over my life like I still belong to Gabriel.”

“Yeah,” he says somberly. “Gabriel and Lucas were tight. Tighter than any of us, really.” He glances over at me. “Well, you obviously know that.”

Yeah, but Lucas hardly acknowledged me when Gabriel was alive. Occasionally, I’d get a “hey” with a chin flick, or a random question about something, but we never really hung out. The most time we ever spent together was when we rode around looking for Lux’s missing friend Bree a few months ago. And even then, we spent the entire car ride in silence.

It’s weird. I always got the vibe that Lucas didn’t approve of Gabriel and me dating. Like he thought his cousin could do better or something.

“What I don’t get is Lucas’ sudden interest in me,” I say, hedging.

We pull up in front of my place, and Christian kills the engine, turning to face me. Fuck, he’s hot. He has his brother’s ocean blue eyes, straight nose, and chiseled jaw. But there’s an ever-present sense of amusement in Christian’s expression that’s completely absent from Lucas’. They may look alike, but their personalities couldn’t be more different.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he says. “Lucas is fucking weird sometimes.”

Spoken like a true brother.

But when Christian’s eyes shift away from me, I get the feeling there’s something he’s not telling me. Something that might explain Lucas’ strange fascination with my sex life.

“What aren’t you saying?” I ask.

He smacks his lips together and opens his car door. “Let’s get you inside so I can get

back and drink until I'm puking into my brother's hood," he says, ignoring my question.

Hauling myself out of his bucket seat, I slam his door shut just as he's coming around the front of the car.

"Thanks for the ride. My studio is right there." I point to the white door fifty feet in front of us. "So you don't need to walk me up."

With a nod, he folds his arms over his chest and leans against the car. "I'll wait until you get in."

Okay, whatever. Blowing out a breath, I head up the walkway. I pull out my keys and unlock my door, then turn back to wave at Christian. With a nod, he pushes off the car and slides back into the driver's seat.

Shutting the door behind me, I lock it, then sag against it.

"Holy fuck," I breathe. That whole evening was a lot, and I'm so exhausted, my limbs feel heavy.

Moving deeper into my micro apartment, I kick my heels off and flip the lights on. It smells nice in here. The second the room is illuminated I see why. It's hard to miss.

There, in the center of my bed, is a single flower, the thick white pedals contrasting sharply with my navy blue comforter.

It's a gardenia flower.

What the...?

That definitely wasn't there when I left this evening.

CHAPTER THREE

Wyn

My first instinct is to run back outside and flag Christian down, but I can already hear his car speeding off into the night.

Stepping forward, I clutch my phone in my hand and glance around. My place is tiny—a kitchenette to the left, a small closet, a dresser, a queen bed, and a bathroom. That's it. My closet door is open, so if anyone is hiding in here, then they're a fucking contortionist and crammed into one of my two cabinets. Unless...my gaze shifts to the closed bathroom door.

It was open when I left. It's just me here, so I never close it.

My heart hammers against my ribs so hard, my entire body is vibrating. Fuck. What do I do?

I glance down at my phone and consider calling someone. But Alexis is still at the party, and she doesn't have her phone. So I dial the number of someone I know will answer.

"Hey, Wyn," Lux's calming voice comes over the receiver. Since she and Roman have gotten together, and both resigned from the Burning Crown, they're always home, and they're usually doing one of three things: watching TV, cooking, or fucking.

My back is pressed against the front door, my free hand on the knob, ready to bolt if someone comes bursting out of that bathroom. “Hey, Lux, can you stay on the phone with me for a sec?”

Her cheerful tone switches to alarm. “Why? What’s wrong?”

I push out a breath. I’d have her come over, but she’s all the way across town, and there’s no way I’m standing out in the dark to wait. “I’ll explain in a second, just...be ready to call 911 if I scream.”

“Wait, what? Wyn, tell me what’s going on.”

But I’m already creeping forward. Fortunately, my apartment is the size of a cracker, so in just a few steps, I’m already standing in front of the bathroom. Placing my hand on the door handle, I suck in a deep breath, and twist, flinging the door open before I can chicken out.

“Wyn...” Lux’s voice is in my ear as I step into the bathroom, and open the shower curtain. The relief is instant. No one is there.

“Oh, my God,” I breathe into the phone, bending over to gather myself. “Shit. ”

“I swear to God, Wyn, if you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going over there.”

She’s pissed now, and I don’t blame her. After the year she’s had, the poor thing is on high alert at all times, and I basically call her up and tell her nothing, except that she might need to call 911. That would freak anyone out.

“Sorry,” I say, moving to the windows, and French doors to make sure they’re locked and they are. If someone got in, they must have come through the front door. In my rush to leave this evening, did I forget to lock it?

I explain everything to Lux, who is thoroughly freaked out on my behalf.

“Why don’t you come sleep here tonight? Roman won’t mind.”

Oh, right, like I’m going to invade their love nest? I’d rather sleep on the couch at Rush House, and with all the fluids that thing has seen, it’s practically a science experiment at this point. But even that would be preferable to sleeping over at their place and suffering through their PDA and cutesy remarks to each other. Gag.

“No, thanks, I’m okay,” I say. “There must be a logical explanation for it.”

“Like what?” she asks incredulously.

I shrug, even though she can’t see me. “I don’t know, what if the building manager had to come in and check for a gas leak or something?”

“Most building managers leave a note on your door, not a piece of fucking shrubbery on your bed.”

I yawn. “I’m okay, I swear. Thanks for being on standby.”

Lux blows out a breath. “Text me the second you wake up in the morning, so I know you’re okay.”

“I will, I promise.”

As soon as I hang up, I peel my dress off and fling it aside, then find my sweats and a t-shirt and tug them on. At last. There’s nothing better than putting comfy clothes on after a night out.

After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I walk over to my bed. The gardenia is

still sitting there, creepy-like. Picking it up quickly, I toss it in the trash under my sink, then turn the lights off and crawl into bed.

For a second, I just lay there, blinking up into the darkness, my thoughts swirling around the flower. Who could have left it? Not my parents. That's not something either one of them would do. But I don't know who else it could have been.

Eventually, my thoughts stray from the mysterious flower to Lucas West, king of the assholes. I can still see him in my mind's eye, looking down at me with fury in his eyes. As angry as I am with him, that look in his eyes turned me on a little. It's fucked up and confusing, but it's the truth.

Maybe I'm so sex-starved that just about anything is a turn-on right now. That could be it, right?

Reaching over to my nightstand, I open the drawer, fish out a razor blade, and my vibrator. The vibrator is big and girthy and exactly what I need to take the edge off. The razor blade is to deliver that sharp spark of pain that I now crave before I come. It's something I picked up after my initiation.

Flinging the covers off, I pull my sweats and panties down and imagine Lucas West fucking me with that thick cock I felt through his slacks. With one hand on the vibrator, and one hand on my breast, I pinch my own nipple as hard as I can.

With just a few strokes, my body tightens, and an orgasm slams into me, which just goes to show how on edge I've been. Electric heat ripples through me like lightning, and with Lucas' face in my mind's eye, I buck against the dildo that's buried in my pussy, prolonging the pleasure.

When it's all over, I'm panting and sagging against my pillows. It takes me a second to gather myself, but eventually, I get up to wash the dildo and then clean myself up.

By the time I climb back in bed, I'm completely spent, and this time when I close my eyes, sleep comes easy...

A delicate ping wakes me up from a dead sleep. Blinking, I glance at the clock on my nightstand. I have three precious minutes until my alarm goes off, so I roll over and adjust my pillow. But thirty seconds later, there's another ping, and I give up, throwing my covers off. Ugh. I might as well get up now. Sitting up, I reach for my phone. The ping was a text from Lux.

ARE YOU ALIVE?!?!

I laugh and text her back immediately, assuring her that I survived the night. Considering her past, I shouldn't have involved her last night, but in the moment, I didn't know who else to call. Now I'm going to pay the price, though. Now, Lux is going to be paranoid about me living alone, and I'll never hear the end of it.

I get all my bathroom stuff done, throw some makeup on, and a cute little summer dress I've been saving. It's finally warm enough to wear it. It's moss green with little white flowers, and it makes me feel beachy.

Grabbing my backpack, I lock my door, double-checking to make sure it's locked and then I head over to my building manager's apartment. She answers the door with a friendly smile, her graying hair pulled back in a ponytail. A tiny dog barks at me from behind her ankles.

I perk up with my own smile. "Oh, hey, um, I'm in 2A and something weird happened last night. When I got home, there was a flower on my bed. Do you know anything about that?"

She scrunches her nose and looks genuinely perplexed, assuring me that no one has been inside my apartment. She throws out a few theories, but ultimately, none of

them really sound plausible. Have I given my key to a neighbor? Have I had any work done inside the apartment? No, on all counts. So we end up chalking it up to a weird anomaly, and I promise to let her know if it happens again.

From there, I head over to my Communication Research class. I make my way to the back of the small lecture hall, to my usual seat. But as I weave through the isles, I see something sitting on my desk. It looks like a crumpled piece of paper, but as I get closer, I realize what it is, and my stomach drops.

It's a white flower.

I pause, mid-step, staring at it.

No.

This isn't possible.

Swallowing, I look around, scanning every face. But no one is looking at me, no one is even paying attention to me.

"Who put this on my desk?" I practically yell, pointing at it.

We don't have assigned desks, but I sit here every Tuesday and Thursday. Everyone knows that.

Several heads turn in my direction, and they look at me like I've lost my mind. They don't answer me. And eventually, they just go back to whatever they were doing.

Fuck this.

Turning on my heel, I rush out of the lecture hall, my breath coming in gasps. Once

I'm out in the hall, I glance around. No one is watching me. No one even looks remotely suspicious.

Who is fucking with me?

I can't explain this away as a weird anomaly now. Whoever this person is, they know where I live, and they know my class schedule. I'm thoroughly freaked out.

Putting my backpack down, I lean against the cold plaster wall and suck in several long breaths, trying to calm myself.

It's okay. Everything is okay. It's a fucking flower. You're fine.

Pulling out my phone, I immediately text Alexis. She replies within a few seconds, thank God, and tells me to meet her at the coffee shop after her class.

I book it to the coffee shop, even though I'll have to wait forty-five minutes for her class to be over. I just can't be in this building right now. It's making me feel claustrophobic.

I practically burst out of the building, into the bright morning, and instantly collided with a brick wall. A brick wall that smells like sand, ocean, and bright blue skies—if any of that had a smell. A pair of large hands curl around my upper arms, steadying me.

“Wyn,” the wall says, surprised.

Glancing up, I see Lucas' face, his brows pinched together in concern. “You good?”

I blink up at him. Why is he here of all places? It's suspicious, but then again, everything is suspicious right now. “Were you following me? Did you put that...” I

search for the word, but my brain is completely scrambled right now, “... thing on my desk?”

“I’m on my way to class.”

I pull myself out of his hold, stumbling back a little. Okay. It’s okay. Everything is fine. I struggle to pull in a full breath, but it feels like there’s an iron band tightly secured around my ribcage. I tilt my head up and pace.

Oh, Jesus.

I’m having a panic attack.

Yup. Perfect. And right in front of Lucas, too.

I rub my sternum, trying to catch my breath. My heart is beating too fast. Maybe I’m actually having a heart attack?

Lucas grabs me again, pulling me into the building I just left, and into a woman’s bathroom. He checks the three stalls quickly, then finding them empty, he locks the main door so no one can come in.

“Lucas...” I try to push past him, but he throws me against the wall, and the breath whooshes from my lungs.

“What the fuck is going on, Wyn?” he hisses, his knee pressing between my legs, causing a delicious sort of tension to throb in my core.

I swallow, struggling to get my bearings. With him so close, it’s hard to focus on my panic attack. Fucking rude.

“Breathe,” he whispers, leaning in, his breath hot against my cheek.

I fight against him, but it’s pointless. He’s too strong, and his hands and body prevent me from moving freely.

“Shhh,” he soothes, whispering in my ear. “Focus on me.”

Pulling in a gulp of air, I let my head fall against the tiled wall, and suddenly all the fight is drained from me. I close my eyes and try to focus on my breathing like he's telling me to do. What the hell do I have to lose, right?

His hand slips under the skirt of my dress, pushing past the hem of my panties. One long finger finds my slit, and without any warning, he pushes it inside me. I suck in a sharp breath and rise up onto the tips of my toes. Fuck. Yes. He moves inside me slowly, driving in deep. Then he adds more fingers until he’s pumping in and out of me quickly.

What the fuck is happening right now?

That thought flits across my mind for a brief second before I'm completely overtaken by sensation. It’s been so long since I’ve been touched. A vibrator is great, but it’s not the same. It’s not like this. And Lucas knows his way around a pussy, that’s for sure.

His handsome face is close to mine, his musky scent surrounding me as he fucks me with his hand, his thumb applying just the right amount of pressure to my clit.

Oh, damn, that feels good.

I’m gripping his shirt, pulling him closer, holding on for dear life as my leg comes up and wraps around his waist, giving him better access to my pussy.

“You like that, don’t you, filthy whore?” he whispers harshly in my ear.

His words are like a bucket of ice water being poured over me. I suddenly remember who has his fingers inside my pussy, and it jolts me back to reality. I shove at his chest, and he actually moves a little. But it’s not enough to get him to back off, so I pull my hand back and slap him across the face. His head whips to the side, and a red mark instantly blooms across that incredible jaw.

“Get the fuck off me,” I yell.

He’s still inside me when he straightens. His jaw is tight, and his nostrils are flared. He’s pissed, but he maintains control. He starts moving his fingers again, thrusting into me with so much force that my body awakens all over again.

Then it happens. My orgasm comes so fast, and so hard, I choke on it, sucking in gulps of air as an electric current rushes through my bloodstream. I’m about to scream out, but he shoves his hand over my mouth, muffling the sound.

And still, he doesn’t let up. He strums my clit until every last drop of pleasure is wrung from my body. When he finally removes his hand, I sag against the wall, eyes closed, all the energy completely wrung out of me. My legs are jelly.

My God.

“You’re a fucking bastard,” I say.

Fuck him for taking that orgasm without my permission. The fucking asshole. I didn’t want him to have that part of me.

He moves away from me, and I hear the tap turn on for a second before my heart finally slows down, and I’m brave enough to open my eyes. I regret it instantly,

though, because the look in his eyes is dark and angry.

“Touch me again, Lucas, and I swear to God...”

He grabs my face. “Don’t ever fucking tell me what to do again,” he says, squeezing my jaw so hard my eyes start to water. “You hear me?”

“I hate you,” I say through gritted teeth.

He smirks, and pushes my face, finally giving me the separation I crave. “Join the fucking club...”

I open my mouth to say something back, but he’s already unlocking the door, and stepping out into the hallway, and I’m left there, wondering what the fuck just happened...

CHAPTER FOUR

Wyn

It took me several long minutes before I was brave enough to leave that bathroom. What's weird is that Lucas gave me absolutely no explanation about why he finger fucked me. Was it just a game, to see if he could?

I'm so damn confused it's not even funny.

I meet Alexis for coffee a half-hour later, and of course, I tell her everything that just happened. She's just as confused as I am.

"Maybe he was trying to distract you?" she offers, holding her paper coffee cup with both hands. "Could that be it?"

I blow out a breath and lean against the backrest of my chair. "Yeah, I mean, I don't know. I thought he hated me. That's always the vibe I got from him."

And after his freak-out last night, what he did today is doubly confusing.

Alexis takes a sip from her coffee, and then sets the paper cup down in front of her, squinting against the sunlight. "Guys are fucking weird," she says. "They can completely divorce themselves from the act of sex. He probably just saw an opportunity and took it."

Yeah, I'm sure it meant nothing to him. He caught me when I was vulnerable, and

took advantage of that. I should hate him. I do hate him. He's a fucking hypocrite.

"You're right." I take a sip of my lukewarm latte. What just happened between us was a freak thing, and I should just forget about it. But, daymn , the way Lucas played my body like a four-string guitar...

Nope, not thinking about that.

"What you r eally need is a good fuck." Alexis smiles, and I have to refrain from rolling my eyes. We're back to this again. "A nice big cock to make you forget about Lucas-fucking-West."

"I tried that already."

She waves off my comment. "A couple of us are hitting the club tomorrow, you wanna join?"

"I have an article due on Thursday," I say. An article that I haven't even thought about yet. I don't even have a topic. That's how behind I am.

Alexis just blinks at me. "You're not ditching us for an article, Wyn. Get AI to write it or something."

"M'kay, that's unethical, " I say in a lecturing tone. "But..." Damn, my blood is still buzzing from Lucas finger fucking me. Maybe Alexis is right. I need some real dick. "Okay. Let's do it. Maybe it'll clear my head."

"Yes, girl. Yes! " she squeaks, clapping. "It'll make you feel better. You'll see."

The rest of the day is kinda chill. I try to forget about the flower on my desk, and Lucas, and the mind-blowing orgasm I had in the women's restroom this morning.

When I head back home, though, anxiety knots in my stomach. Will there be another flower waiting on my bed? Or a severed horse head this time? With the breath snagged in my lungs, I unlock my door and push it open.

My bed is empty, and a quick look around reveals nothing has been moved or disturbed inside my apartment. Pushing out a relieved breath, I set my backpack down, and step inside, shutting my door, and locking it behind me.

I immediately strip off my dress and get into leggings and an oversized shirt. I can't sit around in my outside clothes. Yeah, no. The literal second I step into my apartment, I'm getting my comfy clothes on.

Pulling my laptop out of my backpack, I toss it onto my bed and grab a bottle of iced tea from my fridge. I drink half of it as I crawl onto the mattress. If I'm clubbing tomorrow night, then I'd better start my article now.

Setting my tea down, I open my laptop and a new document, staring at the flashing cursor. What could I write about? I blink, and a sudden sense of tiredness comes over me. How weird. I've had a long day, I guess.

Shaking my head, I yawn, and open my browser to search relevant topics to write about. "Ten Tips for Snagging a Beach Boy," maybe? The subject is just lame enough to pass with minimal effort. I could bullshit 500 words on that.

I'm looking up a couple of sources when I start feeling dizzy. The words on the screen are blurred, and I blink again to clear my vision. Still blurred. Actually, it's a little worse now.

My body sways, moving of its own accord, and I might feel panicked about that, but whatever is happening is making me feel oddly calm, almost euphoric.

What...the...fuck?

In what feels like slow motion, I glance over at my iced tea. Was it sealed when I opened it? It's the only thing I've consumed since being home. Did someone put something in it? The thought drifts through my mind, like an abstract thing. Like a piece of lint floating into my line of vision before drifting off again.

My head feels heavy, and I lie back on the pile of pillows behind me. Yasss. That's nice. My eyelids drift closed, and my body relaxes.

Wow, that's some good tea. I like. Ten out of ten would absolutely recommend.

I'm floating like that for...I don't know how long, just enjoying the slight vibration in my veins. I'm not aware of time, really, but at some point, I realize someone is standing at the foot of my bed.

It occurs to me that I should be afraid, but I can't summon up the feeling. I blink down at the figure. He's tall, broad-shouldered, wearing a black mask that covers everything but his eyes.

How strange.

Why is he here?

I'm still so tired, I can barely keep my eyes open, but I manage to hold his gaze. The light in my apartment has been switched off, but there's still just enough light to see.

"You...shouldn't..." God, I can't get the words out. My tongue feels like a giant cotton ball.

Reaching out, he grabs my ankle and drags me down to the end of the bed. I jerk back

when he touches me, “fight or flight” kicking in, instinct muscling past the effects of the drug I’ve been given. I’m guessing it was added to my tea by this guy, whoever he is. Even my murky mind can work that little puzzle out.

The flowers.

I pull against his iron grip, but doesn’t do any good. My legs dangle off the edge of the mattress, and roughly, he pulls my leggings off, followed quickly by my panties.

I can’t even wrap my head around what’s happening. It almost feels like a dream, and if it weren’t for the very real feel of his warm hand on my skin, I might chalk it up to that. But his grip is hard, painful, and definitely not a dream.

The masked man kneels between my open thighs, one hand on each knee, spreading me wide. I’m completely open to him, my pussy exposed to a fucking stranger who just broke into my apartment.

This isn’t good.

I summon every scrap of energy I can, fighting through the drugs. It’s so hard, but I manage to twist my body, so I’m half on my stomach, trying to wriggle out of his grip.

I hear him laugh behind his mask like this is all a fucking joke. The fury that bubbles up inside me is instantaneous, and I whip around, swiping at his face. My movements are too slow, though, so he dodges me easily.

“What do you want?”

It’s a dumb question. Somewhere beyond the haze, I know exactly what he wants. He has me on my back again, my legs pulled as far apart as they’ll go. I’m not even sober

enough to feel embarrassed by that.

Fuck him.

I continue to pull against him, but he pins me down to the mattress with his large hands easily. The fucking cunt bastard. He drugged me, and for that reason—and that reason alone—he has the advantage. Otherwise, I'd be digging his eyes out with my thumbs right now.

Dipping his head between my thighs, he slides his mask up, exposing his mouth. I strain to see his face, but the lower half of my body is blocking my view. Then I feel it. His tongue snakes out and touches my core. I jolt again as he drags his tongue up the length of my pussy to my clit, and I can't help it, I suck in a sharp breath.

“You fucking bastard,” I try to yell, kicking at him. But none of my limbs are working the way they should. Everything feels heavy and sluggish.

That gets another laugh from him, the deep rumble vibrating against my pussy. Oh, that feels nice.

Shit.

No.

This is fucked up.

I continue to twist, and he continues his assault on my pussy. He sucks me as his tongue pushes into my channel. I moan, tormented by the feel of his mouth devouring me.

Holy shit. Is this really happening?

His hands move to the globes of my ass, pulling me into him, his nose pushing against my clit. My thighs close around his head, squeezing as his tongue takes me deep.

I should reach out and grab his hair or something, make him stop, but I can't seem to move. My arms fly out to my sides, though, and I grip the comforter for support, pulling weakly.

When he adds a finger, then another, to his onslaught, I actually come out of my physical body. My back arches and my head is thrust back like I'm possessed. Maybe I am. I do feel like I've been overtaken by some dark entity—a dark entity that currently has his tongue buried deep in my pussy.

The tension inside me builds, and the more I fight it, the more it intensifies. It's like my mind and my body are on completely different planets. My body is eating up this guy's attention like a greedy whore, and my mind is horrified.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I grip my comforter tighter, bunching it up, and pulling it over my face. My body is on fire, and I know there's only one way to put that fire out. Give in. Submit to this stranger's mouth.

But what would that say about me? That I'm willing to submit to a stranger's tongue? So, even with the drugs slithering through my system, I have to fight this. There's no other choice.

My heel finds his shoulder, and I push as hard as I possibly can, trying to dislodge him. He responds by sucking on my clit—hard—and I let out a scream.

His fingertips dig into my ass painfully as he holds me more securely, his face still buried between my thighs. Then he takes my clit between his teeth and bites down. That's all it takes. An orgasm slams into me so fast and so hard, stars explode behind

my eyelids and all the air is sucked right out of my lungs. I gasp for several long seconds, until finally, the grip of pleasure loosens, then releases me and I melt back onto the mattress.

I'm panting now, staring up at the ceiling, wondering what comes next, when I see the stranger rise from his position between my legs. He doesn't move to clean me up or cover me. Instead, he re-adjusts his mask and stares down at me. I can't see his face, but he's giving off some serious psycho-energy.

"You came on my tongue like a whore," he says, his harsh tone grating over each word.

He's the second guy to call me a whore today.

I open my mouth to spit out a reply, but with the drugs still snaking through my system, I can't quite get the words out. I managed to scream something at him earlier, but I wonder now if it was even intelligible.

When it's clear I'm trying to reply, but can't, he chuckles under his breath. "My pretty little whore, how I'll devour you."

A split second later, he's gone and a quiet stillness drifts over the room like a shroud. I lay there, blinking into the darkness, my body still vibrating from that insane orgasm.

That was the hardest I'd ever come in my life. It was so good. But even as that thought enters my mind, the specter of shame instantly follows.

I just came on a stranger's tongue, and what's worse, I enjoyed it...

CHAPTER FIVE

Lucas

It's four in the morning by the time everyone finally leaves Rush House, and not because they want to. They'd stay all damn weekend if we'd let them, but for the Sacred Sons, Rush House is home, and Jackson takes that shit very seriously. He likes having the place cleared out by three or four in the morning, even the chicks unless they're in one of our bedrooms with us.

I walk into the living room, where Jackson is playing a video game on the couch. "You're still up," I say. "Where are Ash and Christian?"

Jackson glances up at me briefly before returning his focus to his game. "Where the fuck have you been?"

"In my room," I answer. "Avoiding people."

Jackson snorts. "I heard about that shit with Kai last night. He's fucking pissed."

I snort. "You sure about that? When I pulled him off Wyn, he actually apologized to me."

Jackson laughs. "Of course, he's going to apologize to your face. You're a Sacred Son. But behind your back, he's saying you were out of line."

"Whatever. Kai is an idiot."

“Well, he’s not the only one pissed at you. Ava’s been trying to get a hold of you all night.”

Ava is my consort. At the start of every academic year, it’s tradition for each of the Sacred Sons to choose a chick for the year. Technically, any chick can be chosen, but we usually make our selections from within the Burning Crown. It’s a prized position in our world and comes with a fuck-ton of perks. For that reason, the competition is pretty cut-throat among the girls. Ava won my attention this year. Next year, it’ll be someone else, but a carbon copy, because they’re all the same.

I blow out a breath and drop onto the couch next to Jackson. “I don’t have Ava’s number programmed into my new phone, so her call probably went straight to voice mail.”

A few weeks ago, the police stormed into Rush House with a warrant, and took my phone, my computer, and all of my electronics. So I’ve had to buy all new shit. According to my lawyer and Jackson’s uncle, John McNight, the police think Gabriel’s death may not have been a suicide. I guess a witness stepped forward, and said Gabriel was pushed onto the tracks. No idea whether or not that person named me, specifically, because the police won’t say. But since I was the closest to Gabriel, I’m guessing that’s why I’m a suspect.

“Oh, yeah, how’s all that shit going? Any word from the police? When are they giving you your shit back?”

“Nope.” I pull a hand down my face and sigh. “They refuse to tell John anything. I assume they’re having my phone and computer analyzed, but God only knows how long that shit will take.”

“You don’t seem stressed about it.”

Oh, fuck, yeah, I'm stressed. For a multitude of reasons, and the investigation against me is just one of them. "Your uncle is the best of the best. He has shit under control."

Jackson pauses and flashes me a probing look. "Do you need the best?"

I tilt my head to the side. "Are you asking me if I shoved my cousin into the path of an oncoming train?"

Jackson raises a dark brow. "I'd say you don't have it in you, but we both know that's a lie."

I nod. That's fair, I guess. As Sacred Sons, we've all had to kill people. It's just a fact of fucking life when you're in a secret society like ours. It's something we all accept before we take those vows at initiation.

But rather than answering his question, I look at Jackson squarely, throwing a question back at him. "Why would I hurt my own cousin?"

Jackson's attention is back on his game, and he's stabbing the controller viciously. He glances at me for a split second. "I mean, do I have to say it?"

Leaning back against the couch cushions, I throw my arm over the backrest. "I'd love to hear it."

"We all know you've had a thing for Wyn."

"I've had a thing for Wyn," I repeat incredulously, my stomach clenching tight. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, man, ever since?—"

I cut him off by standing abruptly. “Whatever, dude. Wyn is just a chick. A piece of pussy. There’s nothing special about her. Certainly nothing worth killing my cousin over.”

He looks at me like, yeah, right, fucker . “Then why keep Kai away from her?”

Pushing out a breath, I head for the door. I don’t like where this conversation is headed, and I’m not about to justify myself to anyone. “I’m going to bed.”

Jackson’s laughter follows me out the door. “Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt, dude.”

Shaking my head, I move down the hallway, and up the main staircase, taking the treads two at a time. My bedroom door is ajar, and I pause at the threshold. I know I closed it, and the fact that someone is ballsy enough to enter without my permission grates on my nerves.

As I step into the room, I see a shock of blond hair fanned out on my white pillowcase, and a swath of creamy thigh peeking out from beneath the sheet. I know it’s impossible, but I imagine it’s Wyn lying in my bed, waiting for me to fuck her until her pussy is bruised and raw.

But as I approach, I notice the hair is a shade too dark and the flash of thigh isn’t quite thick enough. I pull the sheet back and see Ava lying naked and asleep.

“Fuck,” I whisper to myself.

I’ve really got to have a talk with this chick. She’s my consort, cool, but I told her from the start that I didn’t want anything serious. She’s been pushing to move in, and I’ve managed to stave off that conversation, but damn, a guy needs his space.

I consider waking her up and taking her home, but I know what that’s going to lead

to. Tears, questions about what I'm fucking feeling, and I just can't deal with that shit right now.

I grab a pillow and head downstairs to the study. The couch in the living room is more comfortable, but there are people in and out of that room constantly, so getting any sleep would be impossible. Not that I expect to sleep well tonight, anyway.

Once I'm in the study, I lock the door, strip down to my underwear, and then walk over to the desk where Christian keeps his stash of pot. I pull a blunt out of the drawer, and light it up, then drop down onto the cold leather sofa. I extend my six-foot-four frame, and take a pull from the blunt, drawing the smoke into my lungs, and then letting it back out slowly.

My thoughts stray to Wyn. Of course, they do. She's a fucking force of nature and filled with so much anger, it intrigues me. Maybe it speaks to my own anger, that dark specter that I hold tight to my chest. I don't know.

All I know for sure is one thing. If I'm not careful, my obsession with Wyn Barker will consume me...

Even more than it already has...

CHAPTER SIX

Wyn

I come awake slowly, blinking my eyes open, then I sit up and glance around. It's morning and I'm in my apartment, alone. My laptop is on the bed next to me. My phone is on the nightstand.

Did I dream about the stranger breaking in? Was it all inside my head?

If I was really drugged, then I'd have a headache or something, right? I touch my temple, trying to assess how I'm feeling. But I feel fine, maybe even a little too rested. Like I fell asleep early and slept too long.

I reach for the memories from last night, but they're elusive. My mind is filled with vague, wispy images. There's nothing solid or concrete. I can't even remember if the stranger spoke to me.

It was just a dream.

As soon as the thought flits across my mind, disappointment washes over me. I pause. Am I seriously disappointed that a stranger didn't break into my apartment and tongue-rape me?

Rubbing my eyes, I shake my head. "You're an idiot, Wyn."

Grabbing my phone, I scooch off the bed, and that's when I realize I'm completely

naked from the waist down. My shirt is oversized, and my comforter is tangled around my waist, so I didn't realize it right away. But there's no mistaking it. That shit with the stranger happened. He was here.

I fly to my front door and see that it's locked. Then spinning around, I glance at my nightstand. The tea bottle is still there, so I unscrew the top and smell the contents. It smells like tea.

Frowning, I screw the top back on and toss it into a large plastic baggie. I'm giving it to the police. I don't even bother taking a shower before throwing some clothes on and tossing my hair up into a messy bun. Then tossing my laptop and tea into my backpack, I head out.

I'm standing in the police station lobby at exactly eight in the morning. On the dot. The guy behind the reception desk barely even looks awake. Without waiting for him to ask, I tell him why I'm here, and with a yawn, he slides a form across the desk to me.

"Fill this out and someone will get back to you."

I blink at him in disbelief. "And how long will that take?"

He shakes his head and hands me a pen. "Not sure. We're understaffed, so it could take a few days."

"A few days?" I repeat, incredulous. "Dude, I'll be a Dateline episode by then."

He glances up at me dispassionately, like he sees this kind of thing every other day. "Is there someone who can stay with you? Or can you get a hotel room for the night?"

Un-fucking-believable. Shaking my head, I hold up the baggie with the tea bottle. “What should I do with this?”

He holds his hand out, and I give it to him, then he takes down my basic information. I fill the form out quickly, and hand that over, too.

“Someone will be in touch,” he says, already focused on his next task, which doesn’t involve me.

Perfect.

I feel so safe now.

As I head back out to my car, I consider calling Lux to ask if I can stay with her and Roman for a few nights. That’s how desperate I am. But if I do that, she’ll know something is wrong, and if I tell her what happened, I know for a fact she’ll freak out. And she’s finally happy. I can’t do that to her.

So, on my way to class, I text Alexis instead. I ask her if we can meet up for coffee between classes, but she doesn’t reply right away. Finally, about thirty minutes later, she texts me back.

Sure. I’ll be free in fifteen.

I reply quickly, then head straight over to the coffee shop, ordering lattes for both of us. She pops up twenty minutes later, smiling and cheerful.

“Oh, you got drinks already,” she says, giving me a side hug. “Thanks, babe.” She plops down in the chair and grabs her drink, taking a sip. “I literally woke up like, twenty minutes ago,” she laughs, then her gaze falls on me, and immediately, she notices something is wrong. She’s always been intuitive that way. “Everything

okay?”

I should probably ease her into what I’m about to say, but I don’t. Everything that happened last night just kind of comes out like a firehose of information. Well, everything I can remember. Then I told her about what happened at the police station. When I’m done, I sit back and wait for her assessment.

She just blinks for a second, like she can’t believe what she just heard. “Wow. Fuck. Are you sure it wasn’t a dream? I mean, you’ve been really sexually repressed lately.”

I don’t blame her for wanting to explain it away as a dream. That was my first instinct, too.

Leaning forward, I try to keep my voice down. “If it was a dream, then why was I completely naked from the waist down when I woke up?”

“Um, I’ve done that before. Stripped down in the middle of the night, and rubbed one out.” She leans forward. “I’m not saying I don’t believe you. I’m just saying a spicy dream is plausible, too.”

“And the flowers that are popping in my room, on my desk...?” I ask, shaking my head. “How do they fit into this dream scenario?”

She shrugs. “Maybe you have an admirer and in the absence of answers, your subconscious conjured up a stalker who gives good head?”

I flash her a look. “That feels like a stretch.”

She pushes out a breath and shakes her head. I can tell she’s just trying to calm my frayed nerves, but it feels a lot like she doesn’t believe me.

To dispel the tension, I sigh and shrug. “Well, I guess we'll see when the tea comes back from the lab. I'm either right or I'm delusional. Assuming the police decide to test the bottle at all.”

“You're not delusional,” she says. “You've had a rough couple of months, and you just need to get out, and have some fun. Tonight you can let loose.”

“Oh, right, the club.” I scrunch my nose. “I did say I'd go, didn't I?”

She points at me. “Yes, you did. And a promise is a promise, so you can't back out.”

I desperately want to back out. Shaving my legs and shimmying into shape wear sounds exhausting. But what's the alternative? Sitting alone in my apartment, jumping at every shadow? Alexis is right. Getting out will be good for me.

We chat for a while longer, but eventually, she has to run off to class, so I'm on my own again. Normally, I'd head back home and relax before getting ready for tonight's festivities, but what if my stalker is waiting for me? And why, God, does that thought excite me a little? There's something seriously wrong with me.

On my way back home, I stop at the local hardware store and pick up one of those chain locks. It's not much, but it's easy to install and might deter someone from breaking in. Maybe.

Back home, I install the chain. It takes longer than it should, and it's crooked, but whatever. The door is a little more secure than it was before, which is something.

With that done, I turn on some music, so I can get ready for the club. I shaved my legs for the Founder's Day celebration the other night, but they already feel like high grit sandpaper. And I need to re-paint my toenails because I'm wearing open-toed heels tonight.

Stripping down, I sway to the music and step into the shower. By the time I dry my hair, straight-iron it, put my makeup on, and squeeze into my tight red dress, I have five minutes to spare.

Earlier, I'd scheduled a car to come pick me up, and within twenty minutes, I'm stepping into the club. Alexis texted me about ten minutes ago. She's already here with a couple of our sorority sisters.

Clutching my purse, I step up to the bar and order a Tom Collins. While I'm waiting for my drink, I text Alexis to tell her I'm here. It's so loud, and there are so many people here tonight, I wonder how I'm ever going to find my friends.

All the seats are taken at the bar. When I finally get my drink, I move to the back wall, so I can stand and watch the crowd. One great thing about Malibu is that there are hot surfer guys in every nook and cranny of this town. And I already see several fuck-buddy candidates as I wait for Alexis to text me back.

Ten minutes in, my phone pings. It's Alexis.

Oh, good, you're here. I have a present for you. Where are you?

Oh, a present! I perk up and text her back, telling her where I am. A couple of minutes later, she emerges from the crowd, teetering on her heels, drink in hand, a mischievous smile stretched across her face. A couple of sorority girls trail behind her.

"Giiirl," she says, pulling me into a hug. "Look what I got for you!"

Turning, she reaches for someone, pulling them forward to stand in front of me. Oh! It's Kai. And he looks even better than he did the other night. He's wearing dark jeans and a black, button-down shirt that's open at the collar, revealing a patch of

tanned skin.

Oh, yes. My insides purr.

“Well, look who it is,” I say with a smile.

My thoughts are cast back to the last time we saw each other, at the Founder’s Day thing, when he had his hand up my skirt...right before Lucas ruined the evening.

But Lucas isn’t here now, which means my prospects for getting dick are getting better and better by the second.

“I told him you’d be here,” Alexis says, sucking on her little red straw. She’s clearly a bit tipsy, so this obviously isn’t her first drink. She shoves him in my direction, but he manages to stop himself before colliding with me. “And look, here he is.”

I blow Alexis a kiss. “You’re my favorite.”

She shrugs one shoulder, the straw still in her mouth. “I know. Merry Christmas.” Then she gathers up the sorority girls and sashays back onto the dance floor, leaving Kai and me alone.

He signals the bartender and asks for a beer. Then he leans against the wall, his gaze traveling over my skimpy dress. “So,” he says with a devastating smile. “We were rudely interrupted the other day. Where were we?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wyn

Kai and I have been dancing for a couple of hours, and his hands are all over me, squeezing my breast, his thumb brushing my nipple over the fabric of my dress. And the kissing. Goddamn, the guy can kiss. His lips are all over me as I move my hips and lose myself in the music. Only because I'm aided by the alcohol, though. In real life, there's no way I'd be this open and free.

"Let's get out of here," he says, dragging his lips over my ear. When he gets to the lobe, he sucks it into his mouth and pinches it between his teeth.

"My place," I say loudly, struggling to be heard over the music that's vibrating the cement floor.

We could go back to his place, but generally, the guy's rooms are fucking disgusting. Wrappers and fast-food cups everywhere, a stained, uncovered mattress, and a bathroom that hasn't seen bleach in at least three semesters...

Yeah, no thanks.

His hand brushes down my arm, and he hooks his fingers with mine, pulling me off the dance floor. "Sounds great."

I shoot a quick text to Alexis, letting her know that I'm going to head home with Kai, and then I follow him out into the crisp night. He finished his last drink hours ago, so

I feel safe driving with him.

As we get into his car, I remember I have a possible stalker. I wonder for a second if I should warn Kai, but I ultimately decide against it. Kai is huge. His presence might just scare the stalker off, and encourage him to leave me alone.

As we pull up to my place, Kai parks in front. He follows me up the short walkway, slapping my ass as I dig into my purse and fumble around for my keys. I finally fish them out, find the correct key, and push the door open with a drunken flourish.

The apartment is dark, and I flip the light on, my breath held. My gaze immediately falls to my bed, and there, lying on top of the comforter is a white gardenia.

Fuck.

Tossing my purse aside, I slam the door shut behind Kai and slide the chain into place. My heart speeds up as Kai saunters around my small studio apartment, hands in his pockets, scrutinizing my decor.

“You have a nice place,” he says appreciatively.

I swallow. “Um, thanks.”

Feeling a bit braver with Kai here, I head straight to the bathroom, pulling the shower curtain aside. Empty. Then I go to the closet in the bedroom/living room area. It’s small, but someone could fit inside. Also empty.

“You okay?” Kai asks.

I walk over to the bed and pick up the flower. There’s a small folded piece of paper underneath, and I open it up. It’s a note, typewritten.

Miss me, Pretty Thing?

I blink down at the note and hold up the flower with my other hand. “Someone has been leaving these on my bed,” I say robotically, disconnected.

Kai frowns. “Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“So, they, what...break in?”

“Yeah,” I say. “And I have no idea how they’re getting in, but it’s happened a couple of times.” I stop short of telling him what happened last night because I’m afraid it might scare him off.

Walking over to me, Kai pulls me into his arms, his large hands cupping my ass. “Once he sees me, trust , he’ll leave you the fuck alone.”

“ Mmm .” I tilt my head to the side, signaling what I want from him. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

With a chuckle, he takes the hint and leans down to kiss my neck, pulling my thin dress straps down at the same time. I’m not wearing a bra, so once the top of my dress falls, my breasts are exposed. Cold air brushes over my nipples, making them harden.

“Lie down,” he says gruffly.

Excitement zips through me. It’s been so long since I’ve been properly fucked, so I’m more eager than I should be. What would people think if they knew how little it took for Kai to get me into bed?

Ugh. Pushing that thought away, I scramble onto the mattress. Kai finds the overhead light switch, and flips it, plunging the room into darkness. Then he walks over to my patio doors and opens them, letting in the briny ocean breeze.

I prop myself up onto my elbows. “What are you doing?”

He turns back to me with a cocky smile. “I want your basement dweller to see how a real man fucks,” he says. “Maybe he can take notes.”

Oooh, cocky. I like.

Kneeling on the bed next to me, he presses his lips to mine. His tongue pushes into my mouth as we fumble with each other's clothes—him pulling my dress and panties down my hips, and me clawing at his zipper like a rabid animal.

“Wait,” I say, pulling away. “Do you have a condom?”

“I never leave home without one,” he rasps, then leans back in, and we start tearing at each other again.

Somehow, I end up naked on the bed while he’s still fully clothed, which doesn’t seem fair, but I’m not complaining now. My clit is throbbing, and I’m so desperate for release, it’s a miracle I didn’t beg him to fuck me in the car.

Reaching down, he flips me over onto my stomach, then pulls my hips up, so I’m in downward dog, my ass in the air. Cold air brushes over my pussy as I bury my head in my pile of pillows and wait for Kai’s next move.

Seconds tick by, then I hear a grunt followed by silence. A few more seconds pass, and I get impatient, so I wiggle my ass playfully. I hear something tear and I wonder if it’s him putting the condom on.

Ugh, the agony of waiting.

I'm about ready to get up and help him, so we can get this ball rolling when I feel the mattress dip. He grabs my wrists and secures them together with zip-ties. The distinctive zip of plastic is loud in the silence of the room.

Wow, okayyy. Kai is more kinky than I thought. I don't have any zip ties, so he must have brought them with him. Talk about being prepared. A second later, he places something over my eyes, tying a soft length of fabric behind my head.

Now he really has me intrigued. Normally, I wouldn't go for something like this. Not openly, at least. I have secret fantasies like everyone else. Fantasies of pain and domination. But there's no way I'd tell anyone because I'm afraid of the judgment.

I learned a long time ago what's expected of me. Over the course of my life, my parents have made that quite clear. Being good and doing what was expected of me garnered their praise and attention. I was a reflection of them, as parents. Anything even slightly embarrassing to them would get me something worse than a tongue-lashing...

I was ignored.

And, hand to heart, I'm serious when I say, I would have rather been beaten. Because when you're ignored, you feel...like you're nothing like you're no one. You're not even worthy of the air you breathe.

So, yeah, the fear of judgment is a big thing for me.

But right now, I'm drunk as fuck, and if I'm being honest, I'm still revved up from my encounter with the stranger last night, so fuck it. If Kai tells anyone about the kinky shit we did, I'll just deny it.

His hand brushes over my pussy, then smooths over my ass cheek, coming down with a hard whack . The vibration ripples through my body, and my eyes roll back in my head. Oh, yes .

“Mmmm,” he moans, the deep reverberation making my pussy clench. I conjure up the image of Lucas and imagine he’s the one here with me right now, tying me up, smacking my ass.

His fingers brush over my pussy and it twitches. My body is so responsive, so eager, it’s embarrassing. Pulling against my restraints, I press my blindfolded face into the pillows to muffle the whimper that bubbles up from my throat. But I can’t breathe like that, so I twist my head to get a little air.

Dragging his fingers up the length of my slit, he pauses at my asshole, and every muscle in my body tenses instantly. I’ve never explored ass-play, and I don’t intend to do that now, and with Kai of all people. I’m cool with a quick fuck to take the edge off, but that’s where our little adventure ends.

He applies a little pressure, and I move my hips to the side in a silent show of protest. He grabs my hips and pulls me back, his low chuckle reverberating in the silence of my apartment. That voice. It’s deep and doesn’t sound like Kai at all. I’m drunk, though, and admittedly, I don’t know Kai very well.

But, if I’m being honest, Kai not sounding like himself is a plus, because it makes it that much easier for me to imagine he’s someone else—someone with cold blue eyes, and a cocky-as-fuck smile that makes my clit twitch.

He spreads me open and I feel something pressed lightly against my entrance. Is it his hand? His cock? Something else? It hovers there for a second, teasing. Maybe he’s waiting to see if I’ll pull away again.

What a fucking cock tease. Literally.

I wiggle my ass again and moan a little. I'll beg if I have to, but thankfully, a second later, he pushes into me slowly, and I'm relieved when I realize it's his cock.

Halfway in, he pauses, then pushes in the rest of the way quickly, with one violent thrust. The movement jolts me forward, and I moan again loudly, but thankfully, the sound is absorbed by the pillow. The sensation of being filled has me gasping. I groped him through his pants back at the club, but he was a lot bigger than he felt. He fills me to the brink of pain.

And if thought he would be gentle, then I was wrong. Gripping my hips tightly, he pulls me back while thrusting into me again. The pain of being stretched leaves me gasping, and I squeeze my eyes shut, burying my face deeper into the pillows. I can't breathe, but I couldn't breathe anyway. I'd rather have my face hidden, so Kai doesn't know how much pain I'm in, because then he might stop. And he can't stop.

He fucks me hard, unmercifully, jerking into me, his cock slamming against my cervix over and over . After a few minutes, my body accommodates him, fitting around his girth. It feels amazing, and I'm so damn wet, it's a wonder he's able to get any traction at all.

I whimper into the pillows, my body slowly coming alive under his assault. He slaps my ass, the sting rocking through me, adding to the chaos of pleasure.

And when he reaches around and touches my clit, I jerk and pull against the zip-ties, clenching my hands into fists. Dear God. I'm seconds away from losing it. Spots start to flicker behind my eyelids, and my entire body is vibrating like a goddamn tuning fork.

His fingers thread through my hair, and he tugs hard, pulling my head back. I can feel

him lean forward, his chest brushing against my hands, as he brings his mouth to my ear. “This cunt is mine. ”

My whole body stiffens instantly. That’s not Kai’s voice. I recognize that deep baritone. It’s the same one from last night, the voice from my waking dream. Or nightmare. Whatever you want to call it.

Swallowing, I try to twist away, but I’m tied up and blindfolded. He has complete control of my body. “What do you want from me?” I squeak out.

He pulls out of me, nearly all the way, then pushes back in again, groaning loudly. “This pussy,” he growls, and his tone is so dark and so primal, it sends a little zip of pleasure careening through my body.

I don’t want that, though. I want to be horrified. I want to hate what’s happening. I mean, that’s what I’m supposed to feel, right? But despite knowing I should hate this, I can feel my body opening up, welcoming this stranger’s brutal invasion.

Tears sting my eyes as his thrusts intensify. My channel tightens around him, and he groans in response. “Fuck, yeah. That sweet pussy is strangling my cock. You can’t hide that, can you?”

“Fuck you,” I choke out, tears streaming down my face.

“Oh, yeah, you like it. Your body doesn’t lie like you do.” He sounds amused like this is all fun and games to him. “I’ve been waiting a long time to come inside this pussy...” It sounds like he says again after that, but I can’t be sure. My heart is beating so hard and so fast, it’s hard to hear anything else.

I whimper, because I know whatever happens, I’m powerless to stop it. He’s in complete control of my body, and I’m not sure why that feels....freeing. Maybe it’s

because I have no choice but to let go and submit to this faceless stranger.

He applies just a fraction more pressure to my clit, and that's it. My body is so keyed up, that I climax with him buried deep inside me. He's still fingering my clit, pulling my head back as liquid heat ripples through me, electrifying my veins, and I cry out from the intense pleasure of it, " Oh, fuck! "

He thrusts a few more times, then stills inside me. With a deep growl, I feel his cock pulse as he comes, his hips moving just slightly as he draws out the pleasure, allowing my pussy to milk him dry—and it does. Jesus.

When it's all over, the reality of my situation rushes in. My thoughts are a jumble. I can't breathe. Where the fuck is Kai? How did the stranger manage to get inside my apartment, and displace Kai without me even knowing?

Slapping my ass again, he pulls out of me. The second I'm free, I flip over and scramble off the bed. And blindfolded with my hands tied behind me, that's quite a feat. I bump into my nightstand, though, and start to fall, when I feel a pair of strong hands curl round my arms, and haul me upright, steadying me.

"Don't move," he says, but not in a threatening tone.

I hear him on the other side of the room shuffling around, before coming back, and yanking me around, so my back is to him. Taking my wrists, he saws at the zip-ties with a knife until the plastic finally gives way, and my wrists are free. I immediately pull the blindfold off, so I can catch this psycho's face before he disappears back into the night.

In the darkness, silhouetted by the dim lights coming in through the French doors, is the stranger who just fucked me. He's wearing black boots, a black shirt, black pants, and a black mask that covers his face. He's still looking at me as he rights himself,

zipping his pants back up.

Kai is lying on the ground, unconscious. Or dead? Panic washes over me. Is he actually dead?

“Who are you?” It’s a dumb question, but it’s the first one my panicked brain comes up with.

He just laughs and shakes his head, nudging Kai’s lifeless body. Then he looks back up at me. “I warned you,” he says.

I need my phone. Where is my phone? It’s in my purse, which is on the floor by the door. I take a small step to my left, the stranger’s cum wetting my thighs. I’ll have to lunge for it, which will be difficult, considering I have to unzip my purse and fumble around for it. I’d be better off just sprinting for the door, and running to one of the neighbor’s apartment. All this goes through my head in the span of a millisecond.

I glance to my left, at the door, and he guesses the direction of my thoughts, because he steps forward, ready to chase me down.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“What do you want from me?” I ask again.

Maybe if I can figure out what he’s really after, then I can negotiate. I know he’s not here to hurt me, otherwise he would have done it last night while I was drugged and alone. So what then?

He just looks at me through that black ski mask, then he steps up to me. I retreat, my naked back hitting the cold plaster wall behind me. He reaches out to touch my face, but I flinch, so he catches my chin instead. “Be a good girl until I get back.”

And then...he walks to my front door, unchains the flimsy lock I installed, and walks right out my front door.

As soon as the door clicks shut, I rush to grab my phone, and I immediately call 911 while simultaneously rushing to Kai. He's breathing, thank God. But by the time the police and ambulance arrive, my stalker is long gone...

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ghost

My car is parked several streets away from Wyn's apartment, and by the time I reach it, I can hear the sirens screaming down the block. Inside the safety of my car, I rip the mask off and slam my fist into the steering wheel, screaming into the black void that is my life, "Fuuuck!"

I hadn't gone into Wyn's apartment intending to fuck her, but when I saw her with Kai, a dark cloud of jealousy came over me, and I reacted on instinct.

I'm fucking losing it. Already.

If I ever had a fucking plan, losing my mind wasn't a part of it.

I've been watching her for weeks. It started at a distance, in my car, parked out front. I'd watch her come and go from her apartment. An odd sort of comfort came from knowing where she was, and what she was doing. I told myself it was what needed to be done. I was keeping an eye on her. Waiting for her next move.

But eventually, that wasn't enough. She came out of her apartment sparingly. To grab groceries, or see a friend, usually Lux. And on those days I hadn't caught a glimpse of her, it felt like the skin was peeling off my bones. My obsession had festered into an addiction, and I knew the only cure was setting eyes on her.

So I broke in while she was sleeping, which was far too easy, and hid in her closet. I

didn't touch her that night, I just watched her sleep, hating her. Craving her. Imagining my hand around that delicate throat as I fucked her.

After a while, even that nearness wasn't enough. Addiction is like that. It gradually consumes from within and before you're even aware you're being eaten alive that shit escalates.

Tonight, I couldn't help but take her. I've never felt a pull like that in my fucking life. I've wanted things, sure. I've craved things. But this gnawing, all-consuming need I have for Wyn is something else.

It's predatory.

That should probably concern me, but if I'm being honest, I don't give a fuck. When I'm wearing the mask, I can shed the constraints of morality. I can silence the guilt and simply take what I want. And what I want is Wyn Barker. I want her pain. I want her fear. I want to use her, then leave her shattered.

She doesn't know it, but that's exactly what she did to me. I was once welcomed into the heaven of her body, and then she shut me out and left me broken...

CHAPTER NINE

Wyn

Later that night, I'm sitting in a hotel room with Alexis, my hair still dripping wet from the shower I just took. I've been at the police station all night, giving my statement, then at the hospital getting swabs and tests done.

Alexis is sitting on the bed opposite mine, staring at me like I'm going to shatter into a million pieces at any moment. "Any updates on Kai?"

I shrug one shoulder. "He's okay. He has a pretty gnarly head injury, but he keeps saying he just passed out. He doesn't remember anything about an intruder being at my place."

Alexis purses her lips, nodding. "And the police? Do they believe you?"

I swallow. "I don't know. They kept asking me questions like, 'How much have you had to drink tonight?' and 'Why didn't you scream?' or 'If you saw the flower on your bed, why didn't you leave immediately?'"

"What the fuck? So they're blaming you?"

I push out a breath, wrapping my arms around my body. "I'm not sure they even believed it happened."

"Well, the tests they did at the hospital will prove what you're saying is true."

I shrug again. “Yeah, I don’t know. This isn’t really being treated like a top priority.”

God, this is so fucked up.

“So did you...uh, recognize his voice or anything?” Alexis asks delicately. I know she doesn’t want to ask me to go back to that moment, but it’s a legit question.

I cast my mind back to the moment the stranger spoke in my ear. “I don’t know. His voice was muffled by the mask, plus, I was panicked, so...”

She nods slowly like she’s taking it in. Thank God for her, honestly. She dropped everything and rushed to my side the second I called her.

“There’s something I didn’t tell the police,” I say, looking at her. It’s been eating away at me since it happened, and I have to tell someone, even as shame settles like silt in my stomach.

She pulls her legs up to her chest and rests her head on her knees, turned toward me. “Yeah, what?”

“I—” I swallow down the bile that rises in the back of my throat. My heart is hammering against my chest. “I...liked it.”

Alexis lifts her head but doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t need to. Her eyes are wide like she can’t believe I said what I just said. This is exactly the reaction I was afraid of.

“Does that make me crazy?” I ask, terrified of her answer. But I need to ask, otherwise, the question is going to eat me alive.

Alexis’s expression softens and she clears her throat. “No, I mean...” She shakes her

head, thinking. “You thought it was Kai, so...”

It’s true. I did think it was Kai...at first. But when the stranger’s voice rasped in my ear, I knew, with cold certainty, it wasn’t Kai, and excitement rushed through me. The panic and everything else came later.

Maybe my body hadn’t caught up with my brain yet, or something? That seems plausible. A delayed reaction. Maybe that’s all it was...

I nod, comforted by that thought.

Alexis yawns. “So how long will you be staying at the hotel?”

It’s a good question. I have some money saved up. I can’t ask my parents for hotel money, because then they’ll want to know what happened. And if they know I’d brought a guy home, they’ll blame me for everything that happened. Then they’ll completely shut me out because that’s how they punish me.

This town is small, though, so they might find out anyway.

“A couple of days,” I say. “I’ll ask my building manager if they can have cameras installed, and new locks. Plus, the police said they’d do extra patrols in the area, though they might have been lying about that just to placate me.”

Alexis gets under her covers and lays down facing me, scrunching the hotel pillow under her head. “Well, I’m happy to stay while you’re here if you want. It’ll give me a break from the chaos at the sorority house.”

I lay down, too, pulling the covers over me. “Thanks,” I say, turning the light off. “G’night.”

“Night,” she mumbles, already half-asleep.

It’s been a long night. We were out clubbing for hours before all this happened. I glance at the clock. It’s nearly four in the morning.

Rolling onto my back, I close my eyes and try to sleep. My mind is whirling, though, and I already know sleep isn’t happening tonight. I keep going over every detail of what happened. And maybe I’m just imagining it, but something about the stranger felt...familiar.

You’re definitely imagining it, I tell myself.

Maybe it’s just easier to think it was someone I might know, rather than a complete stranger.

The memory of the stranger slapping my ass invades my mind, the sting that echoed through my body, driving my pleasure to new heights.

Ugh.

Pushing the thought away, I flip onto my side, and pull the pillow beneath my head, blinking at the darkness. I force my thoughts to something boring, like folding laundry. I’m mentally folding a t-shirt when I hear my phone vibrate against the nightstand. I have it on silent, so it doesn’t wake Alexis up.

Reaching over, I grab my phone and glance at the lock screen. It’s a text from an unknown number.

You’ve been very naughty...

My heart leaps into my throat, and I bolt upright. Who the fuck...? I quickly unlock

my screen so I can read the full message.

You've been very naughty. You went to the police. You'll need to be punished for that...

I read the words over and over, taking a screenshot to save to my phone. I'm betting the police can trace the number unless it's a burner phone or an app that conceals the user's information. If that's the case, then I have no idea if they can trace it or not.

I itch to respond, even though I know I shouldn't. I glance over at Alexis. It's too dark to see her face, but I can hear her slow, steady breaths, and I know she's fast asleep.

Settling back against the feather pillows, I reread the text several times, taking in every possible meaning. Finally, after the fifth reread, I type out a quick response, my thumbs flying over the keys before I can second guess myself.

Of course, I called the police. They know who you are, and it's only a matter of time before they arrest you.

It's a bluff, but I'm hoping he believes me. The police couldn't be any less interested in my case, so that statement is about as far away from the truth as I can get. But it's all I've got.

I wait, breath held, for his response. My blood is buzzing, and my heart is flopping around in my chest like crazy. Suddenly, something comes through. It's a voice memo.

A voice memo? Wow, ballsy.

Sitting up straight, I grab my earbuds from the nightstand and shove them into my

ears quickly. If I can place his voice, then maybe I can figure out who he is. If I already know him, that is.

Swallowing, my hand shaking, I press play. A deep baritone fills my ears, the smooth voice snaking down my spine.

Hello, my little whore. You think you're safe from me, but I will always find you. And the next time another man touches you, you'll both regret it.

When the message ends, I listen to it again, and again. The voice sounds familiar, but it's almost like he's purposefully lowered it a few octaves to disguise it. Either that, or he used an app that altered the depth and timbre of his voice.

Swallowing, I lean back against the headboard, letting my breath slowly leak from my parted lips. His voice. It commands attention, and my mind is cast back to him whispering in my ear as he fucked me.

I glance in Alexis' direction and I can hear she's still sound asleep. Creeping out of bed, I walk over to the bathroom. Switching the light on automatically activates a loud exhaust fan, so I leave it off. I don't want the noise to wake up Alexis.

Once inside the bathroom, I shut the door gently, locking it. In the darkness, I lean back against the sink, and press play on the stranger's message, setting it on repeat. As his deep baritone fills the small space, I spread my legs, and slip my hand into the waistband of my sweats and panties, touching my clit.

It's fucked up. I know it is. But as the stranger speaks, I touch myself, remembering how he felt inside me. By the third replay, my toes are curling, and my climax hits me so hard that the breath is torn from my lungs and I'm arching into my own hand.

As a wave of warm tingles washes over me, I pull my hand out of my sweats. Using

my phone as a light, I open the little hotel bar soap and wash my hands with it.

That's when the shame hits.

I'm afraid of this man—I have no fucking idea who he is—and for some reason that fear also feeds a weird sort of hunger inside me.

God, I'm so fucked up.

CHAPTER TEN

Wyn

Two days later, it's evening and I'm back in my apartment. I talked to the building manager and she had sturdier locks installed that same day. I think she was spooked by the police presence from a couple of days ago.

I also get a couple of cheap cameras, placing one above my front door, and a couple pointing out my windows, with very visible signs that say, "You're on camera."

"You doing okay?" Alexis asks, her soft voice traveling through the phone.

"Yeah, I'm hanging in there," I say.

I didn't end up telling her about the voice memo from the masked man, because...I don't know why, exactly. And I never reported it to the police, which I know will be a mistake in the end. If I bring it up later, there will be questions about why I didn't report it right away.

I guess I just want to pretend none of this ever happened. Just ignore it and move on. The last few months have been absolute shit, and this is just one more thing I have to deal with. So what if I just...don't?

"My professors gave me a couple of days off, but I think I'll go back to classes tomorrow," I tell Alexis.

Just bumbling around my apartment isn't good for my mental health. I've only taken a couple of days off school and already I'm feeling a bit of cabin fever. I'm used to being active. I'm used to being around people, and being alone with my thoughts isn't helping.

"I think that'll be good for you," she says. "You want me to pick you up in the morning?"

"Nah, thanks," I say. "I'm good. I'll see you on campus."

"Lunch tomorrow?"

I nod, even though she can't see it. "I could do lunch."

We're about to hang up, when she says, "Oh, shit, I almost forgot. There's an initiation tomorrow. Rush Beach. I think it's at eight. We can go together."

I pause at the mention of another Burning Crown event happening so soon. I hadn't prepared myself emotionally for that. But I'm dying to confront Kai. He told the police that he just drank too much and passed out, which is why I'm assuming they don't believe my version of the story. His is a lot more plausible. But it's also bullshit, and Kai knows it.

Would he look me in the eye and dare to say the same thing? He hasn't texted me since the incident, but if he's out of the hospital, then I know he'll be at the ceremony tomorrow.

"Ah, yeah, sounds good," I say.

When we hang up, I pull up my texts to Kai. I asked him how he was doing two days ago. No response. He's deliberately ignoring me. Is he embarrassed? Or...wild

thought, maybe he's working with my stalker, and that whole scene at my apartment was orchestrated? Why would he do that, though? What's in it for Kai?

Ugh, see, this is why I can't stay home alone. My thoughts start spiraling in all kinds of crazy directions.

Pulling out my laptop, I start watching something online, but eventually, I get bored with that. I could really use some coffee right now. But glancing up at my kitchen, I realize coffee isn't happening. I had to clear everything out of my cupboards the other day in case my food was laced. The tea was drugged, for sure, but what else had my stalker gotten into? Did he drug several things, and the tea is just what I happened to drink that night?

Ugh, I can't be here right now.

Blowing out a breath, I get up and throw on some leggings, then toss my long hair up into a messy bun. Sliding some flip-flops on, I grab my purse and my phone and head out the door.

I'm betting Rush House has coffee. Ever since Lucas' consort, Ava, took over as queen, there's been food in the cupboards. The girl knows what she wants, and I have to admit, I like her. Her relationship with Lucas is strange, though, and I'm not sure what to make of it. She's really into him, but every time I see him, he has a new chick crawling all over him. And the wild thing is that Ava knows. Open relationship, maybe?

I mean, everyone knows the Sacred Sons are man whores. Water is wet. The sky is blue. The Sacred Sons will fuck anything with tits. It's a fact of life. Maybe Ava has survived this long as queen consort because she's willing to accept that fact.

It's just getting dark when I pull up to Rush House. The gothic Victorian mansion is

all lit up, and there are several random Burning Crown members dancing drunkenly on the front lawn.

Oh, right. I'd almost forgotten. Shit always gets wild right before an initiation ritual. If it's a guy being initiated then there's usually an unofficial party the night before. I was told it's because initiation is so brutal for the guys that there's always a chance he could die in the process, so the night-before-revelry became a tradition.

With a deep breath, I pop out of my car and walk past the gargoyles flanking the gate, and up the walkway to the huge house. It's at least a hundred years old, and it's on the edge of a cliff, overlooking the ocean. At night, the place looks creepy, haunted by the ghosts of dumb rich boys from centuries past.

Austin isn't at the door to collect our phones, because the party isn't an official Burning Crown event, though most members are encouraged to attend out of respect.

I walk in, and it's a fucking mad house. It's only seven in the evening, but already people are stumbling around drunk. Techno music is being pumped out from the ballroom, the heavy bass rattling the ancient windows. With this kind of treatment, it's a miracle this house has remained standing for the last hundred-plus years.

I don't see any of the Sacred Sons, or the man of the hour, Dominic, but he's probably in the ballroom, getting a blow job while he does vodka shots or something. You know, the usual.

Several people look me over with disgust as I make my way into the kitchen. Everyone is dressed up, and I'm in leggings, but whatever. Anyone judging me can suck my dick. For real.

There's pizza in the kitchen, and I consider taking a slice, but I've been so stressed out lately that I've lost my appetite. But coffee...I don't care how upset I am, coffee

is life. Pushing past a tight group of people, I open the cupboards and hunt for those magical beans.

“Wyn!” A voice from behind makes me whip around. It’s Ava. I smile and inwardly cringe. Okay, now I’m judging myself. Ava is so effortlessly beautiful. She’s thin, but busty with long brown hair, tanned skin, and almond-shaped eyes that sparkle. She always looks put together, no matter what.

“Hey, girl,” I say. “Do you have coffee here? I need some.”

She digs deep into the pantry, emerging with a small bag of coffee. She must have hidden it in the back. She hands it to me. “I have to keep it hidden or the guys drink it all, then there’s none left for our consort mastermind meetings on Tuesdays.”

Consort mastermind meetings? Oy. She might be taking this queen consort thing a little too seriously. Consorts were originally conceived as fuck toys for the Sacred Sons. Nowadays, the Sacred Sons just fuck anyone they want anyway, so the consort title is more of a status thing. But Ava is an idealist, and I’m sure she thinks she can do some good as queen. So...more power to her, I guess.

“Thanks, I owe you,” I say. “So, have you officially moved in yet?”

I know she was angling for that once she became queen consort.

She shrugs one shoulder. “Not officially. You know Lucas. He’s allergic to commitment. But I’m here most nights, anyway, so it’s kinda the same thing.”

With a nod, I shove the coffee into my purse. “Well, I’ve shown my face, so I’m out.”

“No, no, no.” She pulls my purse off my shoulder and slings it over hers, then hands me the drink in her hand. “You should stay a while. I’ll put this up in Lucas’

bedroom.”

She seems oddly insistent, and I wonder if she’s heard about the incident from a couple of days ago. Word gets around fast in the Burning Crown and if Kai said something to just one person, then the news has already spread like wildfire.

I shrug. “Maybe just a couple of drinks, but I have class tomorrow, so I can’t stay too late.”

“Perfect,” she chirps, grabbing a canned cocktail from the fridge and handing it to me. “You’ll be at the initiation tomorrow?”

“Yup, I’ll be there,” I say cheerfully, even though my stomach churns at the thought. I hate the initiations. They’re always so brutal. But members are required to attend, so there’s no way out of it.

“Have fun,” she says, disappearing up the back staircase to put my purse away.

Blowing out a breath, I open my can and take a sip, then glance at the label. It’s a mojito, and it’s strong. Thank God.

I wander out into the main part of the house, and the ballroom looks like a fucking nightclub, so I head to the living room, where I know it’ll be more chill.

The living room is a cloud of pot smoke, and I cough as I walk in, my lungs burning. Everyone is sitting around, smoking, drinking, playing pool. I see two of the three Sacred Sons as soon as I walk in—Christian and Jackson are standing at the pool table. Jackson sees me walk in and he flicks his chin at me, which is his way of saying hello, but in a low-key way. I shift my gaze away from him quickly without acknowledging the olive branch he’s throwing out—if that’s even what that was. Where was he when I needed him? I’m not interested in fake friends.

“Hey, girl,” Lindsay says. She’s another Deb, and she’s always been friendly to me. She scooches over on the couch, opening a square inch space for me to shimmy into. “Come, sit over here.”

I make my way over to her, stepping over a couple of people who are sitting on the floor. I shove my ass into the tiny sliver of space she opened up for me.

“Thanks,” I say, sucking my entire drink down in one, desperate gulp. Being around people is fucking with my head, and I need the alcohol to hit quickly .

Lindsay is sitting with a bunch of other people, and now I’m in the center of that group, wedged between her and some guy. I’ve seen him before, but I don’t know his name. The larger circle of the Burning Crown is far too big for me to remember everyone’s name.

Lindsay leans toward me. “We heard Kai passed out at your place and had to go to the hospital. Is he okay? Is he coming tonight?”

“Um, I’m not sure,” I answer, skirting the fact that I haven’t spoken to him since the incident. Not that it really matters, but I don’t want people reading into it. God knows they’ll twist anything I say into complete fiction, then pass it off as truth.

“Fuck, first Gabriel, and now this,” she says, and I can tell she’s just trying to be nice, but ugh. This is not a topic I want to tackle in front of a group of people.

“Yeah,” I say vaguely. “It’s a lot.”

Everyone in the group is focused on me, leaning in, hanging on my every word. They want all the dirty details of what happened, like whether or not I was choking Kai out during sex or something. I wish.

Oy, I suddenly regret sitting down. But I'm trapped now. Leaving would be a whole production. I'd have to pick my way back through at least a dozen who are sitting on the floor, around the couch.

"So, what happened, exactly?" she asks conspiratorially.

This is my chance to correct the narrative. I could tell everyone exactly what happened. But something stops me. Maybe it's embarrassment or fear of judgment, I don't know, but I find myself shrugging. "It was just a freak thing, I guess."

If I thought that was going to satisfy her, I'm an idiot. My vague response just encourages her to double down. "Kai said he drank too much, and things got heavy back at your place. When he passed out, you got pissed, called the police, and tried to pin some shit on him."

Wow. The blood drains from my face and my cheeks heat in embarrassment. Is this the bullshit he's telling people? And why? To spare his precious-fucking-ego? People already think I had something to do with Gabriel taking his own life, so I'm sure they're more than willing to believe this, too.

"That's not what happened," I say, stumbling over the words, because I'm floored that Kai, of all people, would be spreading lies like that. I thought he was cool. Jesus, can anyone be trusted in this fucking town?

The guy next to me puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against his chest awkwardly. A thick cloud of tequila breath hits me in the face. "How did it happen, baby?" He slurs his words, and his head flops forward, nearly colliding with mine. "Why don't we find a dark corner so you can tell me all about how you knocked that loser out? Or did you choke him? I might be into that."

Ugh, as if.

“No thanks, asshole.” I remove his arm and shove him away. We’re squished together on the couch, though, so shoving him only nets me about half an inch of space.

I’m about to stand up and excuse myself when the room suddenly erupts into cheers. Everyone’s attention is drawn to the center of the room and my gaze follows.

It’s Kai.

He waltzes into the room with a bandage on his head and a smirk on his face. He looks like a hero triumphantly returning from the battlefield. The asshole.

Standing abruptly, I trample over the dozen people surrounding the couch, so I can confront him about the shit he’s been saying about me. But just as I’m about to yell out, “Hey, asshole,” I feel a hand on my arm.

I don’t know where on earth he came from, but Lucas is standing next to me, his strong grip holding me in place. He gives me a dark look that silences me, then he turns his focus on Kai.

“Yo, Kai,” he calls out, releasing me so he can step forward. “Come with me.”

The cheers suddenly die, and the entire room goes silent.

Oh, shit. Being called out by a Sacred Son in front of everyone could either be good, or very, very bad...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lucas

Walking up to Kai, I slap my arm around his shoulders and pin him down with a fake-as-fuck smile. “You look nervous,” I say with a laugh. “Don’t worry, we just need to have a little chat.”

Kai licks his lips, and nervously glances around at everyone else, like he’s silently pleading for their help. But no one is going to help him. He thinks these people are his friends, but they’re not. They’re children of the Burning Crown, and like all good children, they listen to the voices that lead them. Most of the time.

But Kai didn’t listen and now I have to deal with that.

I slide my hand across his shoulders, so I’m holding the back of his neck, as I guide him out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen. People step aside as we pass, a question on each of their faces. But no one intervenes.

Once we’re in the kitchen, I stop at the basement door to unlock it.

“W-what’s this about?” he asks.

I turn to look him in the eye. “Oh, I think you can guess.”

He knows what he did. He knows he fucked up, royally .

“Lucas, I’m sorry, dude. Please let me make this right.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I say with a sardonic laugh. “We’re most definitely going to make this right.”

The lock gives way, and I tug the door open. Beyond the threshold, there’s nothing. Just a black void. The staircase leading down to the basement is there, but it’s been swallowed up by the darkness. Not a big deal for me. Christian and I have been coming to Rush House since we were in diapers and we know every inch of the place by heart.

Kai, however, has never been to the basement. Members don’t have access. Only Sacred Sons. So getting down the steps safely will be trickier for him. I could switch the light on, but I’m not going to. That would spoil all the fun.

“After you,” I say, shoving him forward. He yelps and throws his arms out, stumbling down the first couple of steps, then catching himself on the wall.

Hmmm. Wrist restraints next time.

I shut the basement door, which plunges us both into complete darkness, and that seems to freak him out even more. “Come on, man,” he pleads. “We don’t need to do this.”

I say nothing as I prod him down the staircase. At the bottom, I take his neck again, and in the pitch black, I lead him past the gym to the rooms in back.

The Panic Room is hidden behind a large mirror, and on touch alone, I manage to slide that out of the way. Beyond the mirror is a bank vault door that’s always left open, because unlocking it is a pain in the ass.

My footsteps echo on the cement floor as I step into the room and flip the light switch. Blinding fluorescent light floods the small space, and Kai shields his eyes from it. There's a metal chair in the center of the room, conveniently placed right above a drain. I gesture to it. "Sit down."

Kai shuffles forward and does as he's told. For once.

With his hands clasped in front of him and his spine curved forward, he looks up at me like a penitent child. "I'm an initiated member of the Burning Crown," he reminds me. "And you can't hurt me. That rule is in the bylaws."

God, this guy is fucking insufferable. He's not wrong, though. The bylaws state that no member can commit violence against another member. But the bylaws say a lot of shit that the Sacred Sons ignore on the daily. Hell, the men who wrote those rules ignored the fuck out of them. Those rules are for the boys who follow, not for the men who lead.

Without responding, I lean against a table that's positioned directly in front of Kai. "I hear you've been fucking around with Wyn."

Panic registers in his eyes. "No, listen. That's not what happened..."

My anger is rising. Just watching this cunt try to explain his way out of touching Wyn when I specifically told him she was off-limits, makes my blood pressure spike.

"People saw you at the club." I step forward and get right in his face, red seeping into my vision. "You touched her. You touched what wasn't yours."

He shakes his head. "No, I?—"

His words are cut off by my fist making contact with his face. His head whips back,

and he groans. Blood pours from his nose, coating his mouth. When he coughs, blood spurts everywhere.

He straightens his head, looking dazed. “What the fuck?”

“I told you to stay away from her, and you didn’t. Did you really think I’d let that shit slide?”

Christian and Ash come strolling into the room. Word must have gotten around that I’d brought Kai to the basement.

“Yo, bro.” Christian’s gaze falls to Kai, who looks like he’s about to piss himself. To be fair, he’s in a basement with three of the four Sacred Sons. I can appreciate how terrifying that might be. We’re not exactly known for having a soft, patient approach to outright disobedience. “What’s happening here?”

Ash leans against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, watching. By some miracle, he keeps his mouth shut. And thank God, because I really don’t have time for his social justice bullshit right now.

I flick my chin at Kai. “I’ve told this cunt to stay away from Wyn, and come to find out, he was at her place a few days ago, fucking around with her.”

“Oh, shit,” Christian says casually, looking the guy over. I haven’t filled my brother in on everything that’s happened with Wyn, but he’ll back me up regardless. “We can’t have willful disobedience, now can we?”

Kai’s hand flies to his chest, and he looks at Christian, eyes wide. “We just kissed, I swear to God. I was knocked out before anything happened.”

I walk over to the table that we have pressed against the wall, and brush my fingertips

over the various knives and implements we have lying there, the polished metal glinting underneath the harsh fluorescent lights.

Just knowing this guy touched Wyn makes me see red. He had no fucking right. Did she moan for him? Did she beg him to fuck her? The images flashing through my mind are making me feel very violent.

I grab a couple of zip ties off the table and walk back over to Kai. “Hands at your sides,” I command.

“Please,” he whispers as I secure each of his wrists to the sides of the chair. “It won’t happen again, I swear to God.”

Straightening, I throw a punch that catches him in the jaw. There’s a loud crack, and his head whips to the side again. Shit, that one fucked up my knuckles. I shake my hand out, then I grab his bloodied face, so I can force him to look at me.

“That’s right, it will never happen again,” I say it like he’s a goddamn toddler. “I don’t care if she’s naked and begging you to fuck her, you’re never touching Wyn Barker again, got that?”

He nods emphatically, blood still gushing from his nose.

“And when all this is over, you’re going to tell everyone that you came onto her and she knocked your ass out. None of this shit about her lying to the police to set you up.”

“Y-yes,” he stutters in response.

I shove his face away and land another blow, then another, and another, until his anguished moans fill the otherwise empty room. Blood is flung in all directions, but

the thick metallic smell only feeds the rage boiling over inside me.

It takes both Ash and Christian to pull me off him, and when they do, my fists are coated with blood, and Kai is slumped in the chair.

“Goddamn, dude,” Ash says, reaching over to make sure Kai is still breathing. He looks back at me. “Have you ever thought about therapy?”

“It’s been mentioned.” Grabbing a rag we have lying around, I wipe my hands off and work on catching my breath. “But who needs therapy when I have this asshole’s face?”

Christian claps a hand on my back as Ash works to free Kai’s wrists.

“Feel better?” Christian asks.

I glare at my brother. “I’ll feel better when he gets the message out that Wyn is off limits.”

With Kai’s hands now freed, Ashe straightens and turns to me. Kai is still passed out. “What’s all this shit with Wyn?” Ash asks. “I thought she was Gabriel’s chick. Are you fucking her now?”

Clenching my jaw, I ball my hands into fists and take a menacing step toward Ash. He and I have never really gotten along, not since he turned his back on my best friend, Roman, a few years ago. Roman and Ash have resolved their beef, apparently, but I’m a harder sell. I hold grudges, and I don’t like being reminded that I’m being possessive of my cousin’s chick.

Ash notices my aggressive stance and holds his hands up. “Whoa, sorry, hot button?”

Christian pulls me back with the hand that's still resting on my shoulder. "Lucas, why don't you go upstairs and get cleaned up? Maybe take a fucking horse tranquilizer. Ash and I will tidy this all up and get Kai on his way home." He takes another look at Kai. "Or to the hospital."

With one last lingering scowl at Ash, I nod and head upstairs. That shit with Kai may have been brutal, but it was necessary. It's how this place runs. It's why we're the most powerful guys on campus. Money, power, and blood are what make the world go 'round. I learned that when I was young.

And I'd warned Kai off Wyn at the Founders Day party. Hell, he whined about my intervention to anyone who would listen that night. Then he had the balls to try and fuck her two days later? There's no way I could let that bullshit go unanswered.

But if I'm being honest, his disrespect isn't what drove my fist into his face. It was the rage inside me. It was the fact that he dared touch Wyn. The fucking audacity. He's lucky he's walking out of here tonight.

As I emerge from the basement, I realize everyone in the kitchen is staring at me. Fuck, whatever. Kai's blood stains my skin and I'm sure they heard his anguished moans. The basement isn't soundproof. Maybe it should be, but our forefathers wanted to send a message to anyone listening— Don't fuck with the Sacred Sons.

Fortunately, no one tries to talk to me as I make my way up the back staircase and down the hall to my bedroom. I glance down at my hands. Blood has settled into the crevices of my skin, coating my knuckles and the beds of my nails, and a question occurs to me. Would I have reacted so violently if it was Ava that Kai had touched?

No. I'd be pissed on principle, but not because I have any real objection to anyone touching Ava. And that may sound heartless, but I've never been possessive of the girls I fuck. Why? Hot chicks are crawling all over ExU, and in my experience,

they're more than willing to fuck. So why be possessive of one chick in particular? They're all carbon-fucking-copies of each other, anyway.

Not Wyn, though. I'm not even sure how she's different, but there's something in her "fuck you" personality that snagged my attention a year ago. I'm like a shark caught in a net—thrashing around, but powerless to break free of her. The more I resist, the more hopelessly entangled I become. I'm powerless against her pull, and I'm never fucking powerless.

The door to my bedroom is open a crack and I push it open, stopping short when I see someone in my room. It's dark, and the person is turned away from me, but I can see it's a chick. My eyes trace the curve of her hips, and the generous swell of her ass. My cock swells in my jeans.

I've studied that ass. I could close my eyes and recreate those plump globes in my mind's eye, down to every last dimple and crease. I've masturbated to that image more than a dozen times in the past year.

"Wyn," I say, prompting her to turn around.

It's like she was conjured directly from my thoughts. Her eyes are wide and those pretty pink lips are parted in surprise. She clearly wasn't expecting to see me here.

In my own bedroom.

Well, well.

Stepping in, I close the door and lock it. I'm still bloody from the painful lesson I just taught Kai. Now I guess it's Wyn's turn...

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wyn

My heart crawls up into my throat as Lucas locks the door and steps farther into the room. He has blood all over his hands, his bracelets, and he looks crazed.

Shit.

I take a step back, bumping up against his nightstand as I mumble a half-hearted apology about being in his room. All I wanted was my purse, so I could get the fuck out of here and go home. But he doesn't respond to my apology. He doesn't stop advancing. His blue eyes are locked on me like a predator sizing up his prey.

And he has me cornered. In his bedroom. Alone.

"W-where's Kai?" I'm somehow brave enough to ask. I'm not Kai's biggest fan right now, but given the amount of blood on Lucas' hands, I'm afraid Kai might be in for another hospital stay, or worse. I know the Sacred Sons have killed people.

"You don't need to worry about Kai," he responds flatly.

My gaze falls to his bloody hands. "Why did you take him down to the basement?"

We all know what happens down there. The basement is where shit gets real for anyone dumb enough to make a move against the Sacred Sons. The tortured screams that rise from the bowels of this house are legendary. I've heard them. And when the

anguished sounds echo through the halls on the ground floor, it's terrifying.

Lucas' eyes are normally stunning ocean blue, but right now they're darkened by hatred. For me. And I don't even know why.

"Kai touched you," he says evenly. "And now he knows what a mistake that was."

This is insane. I lift my hands. "Why does it matter who touches me, Lucas?"

I've tried asking him this before, and he never really gives me an answer. Fuck, maybe he will this time.

"Gabriel has only been gone two fucking months ."

I summon every ounce of bravery I have and look him dead in the eye. "Isn't that a bit hypocritical? Saving me for your dead cousin, but finger fucking me in the bathroom?"

I shouldn't talk to him like this, not after he just beat the shit out of someone. The blood on his hands should remind me what he's capable of. But I'm so fucking tired of his vague answers and convoluted rationale.

He reaches out so fast I don't even see it coming, and I yelp when he grabs my elbow and pulls me roughly against his hard body. I can smell the blood on his hands. "Say it again, Wyn. Call me a fucking hypocrite."

I swallow back the fear that rises like bile in my throat. I don't want him to see me afraid, so I lift my chin and steady my voice. "Isn't that what you are?" I say. "You call me a whore, and then you make me one."

He releases me abruptly and steps back like he's just touched a live wire. There's an

unreadable look in his eyes, but if I had to guess, I'd say I hit a nerve.

"I'm not doing this with you, Wyn." He pulls his shirt off and shakes his head, exposing his tanned, muscled torso. Then he steps up to me and grabs my face, pulling it up, so I'm looking directly into his cruel eyes. "Let any of these guys touch you again..." he growls. "...and you'll be sorry, Wyn. No more warnings."

"Even if that guy is you?" I snap back.

"Especially if it's me," he says, pushing me, so I stumble back. Then he walks into the bathroom and slams the door behind him.

Back at my apartment, I park in front and make a beeline for my door. In my mind, I'm running through every detail of what just happened with Lucas, and I'm so distracted that I'm on autopilot. It's not until I step inside and turn my light on that I remember I should be on alert.

My muscles tense up as I scan my small apartment, looking for anything that could be out of place. There's nothing on my bed, and the bathroom door is open, exactly the way I left it. At first glance, everything looks fine, and I release the breath that was caught in my lungs.

Maybe all of my new security measures actually worked. Tell me why, then, as I start getting ready for bed, a sense of disappointment washes over me. It's not like I was looking forward to my stalker showing up, but now that I know he hasn't been here, I feel his absence.

Ugh, I'm so fucked in the head.

First thing in the morning, I'm looking up psychologists in the area. For real. I'm a pretty open-minded person, but even I know these thoughts about my stalker aren't

healthy or normal.

It's warm tonight, so I put on a fresh pair of panties, and one of Gabriel's old T-shirts, then brush my teeth, and crawl into bed. I grab my phone, so I can mindlessly scroll through social media until I get sleepy.

But every single time my mind wanders, I see Lucas' gaze locked on me. What the fuck is going on with him? There's an undeniable energy between us, and I get the sense that he wants me, but hates himself for it.

How is that any of that my fault, though? Why is he punishing me ?

Fucking psycho.

Turning my fan on high, I use an app to switch off my overhead light, then plug my phone in and place it on the nightstand. Closing my eyes, I try to relax, so I can get some sleep. Tomorrow is a busy day at school.

But thanks to Lucas, I'm all hot and bothered now. The blood on his hands, that frightening look in his eyes. He looked like a Viking fresh off the battlefield, and thinking about Lucas standing there like that, ready to either kill me or fuck me, makes my clit pulse.

Goddamn. If I'm getting any sleep tonight, then I'll have to rub one out.

Reaching into my nightstand, I find the razor blade and my vibrator, then I settle against my pillows and slide one hand beneath the waistband of my panties, touching the tip of my finger to my clit. I'd use my vibrator, but I just need a quick release.

With my legs spread wide, I'm just starting to find a rhythm when movement at the end of my bed catches my eye. My fan is loud—the white noise drowns out my noisy

ass neighbors—so I don't initially hear the French door open. But I do hear the click when it shuts, and my heart immediately kicks into red-alert territory.

Didn't I double-check to make sure the patio doors were locked? I'm sure I did. It's part of my bedtime routine now. But I was distracted, so maybe I didn't?

Slowly, I drop the small razor blade and pull my hand out of my panties. I'm frozen, not sure what to do. In the dark, I see a figure come into view, backlit by the light coming in from the French doors. His large frame is silhouetted by the street light streaming in through my semi-transparent curtains.

For several long seconds, he just stands at the end of my bed, watching me. In the dark, I'm almost certain he can't tell that I'm awake. I can't see him very well, so I'm sure he can't see me either. I take the opportunity to study what I can see, which, admittedly, isn't much. But his large frame and the way he's standing both feel familiar to me.

Silently, he moves around to the left side of my bed. The closer he gets, the faster my heart thumps against my ribs. It feels like every last drop of blood has been drained from my body, and I'm starting to feel lightheaded.

When he reaches out for me with his gloved hand, I can't help it, I flinch instinctively, which gives away the fact that I'm awake. Fuck.

"W-what do you want?" I ask, my lips trembling.

A low chuckle is the only response I get. He reaches for me again, catching me by the elbow this time. His grip is hard and tight, and I yelp as he hauls me out of bed. I trip over my own feet as he drags me over to my small, messy kitchenette.

I'm pulling against him, but he's too strong, and he yanks me around like a fucking

rag doll.

Gabriel had a mean streak, and he was selfish as fuck, but he never manhandled me or forced me to have sex with him. But, then again, he never had to force me, did he? I could see him doing it, though. He could be very controlling when he wasn't getting his way.

But then again, half the guys in the Burning Crown are the same way. Who's to say the masked man isn't one of them?

"I'm going to scream," I threaten. Only after the words leave my mouth do I regret them, though. Why am I giving him a heads-up on what I'm about to do? Fuck . I guess I'd hoped that if I made the threat, it would get him to back off.

Spoiler alert; it doesn't.

Instead, he just spins me around, and yanks me harshly against him, my back colliding with his rock-hard chest. Then he pulls his gloves off, shoving them into his pocket before clamping one hand over my mouth, making it impossible for me to scream now.

"Oh, you'll scream, but not until I let you," he whispers harshly against my ear, the soft fabric of his mask brushing across my cheek. "Do you understand?"

When I don't answer him, he tugs me against his chest again sharply. "Do. You. Understand?"

I can't speak, obviously, so I nod in response.

Satisfied, he removes his hand from my mouth. I'm still pinned against him, his arm encircled around my waist, making it impossible for me to get away. I push against

him anyway, though. Even though I know it's pointless.

"Tell me what you want," I say. "I don't have any money. I don't have anything valuable."

I don't know why I said that. Panic, maybe? If I had anything worth stealing— and I don't—he's had countless opportunities to break in and make off with it. He moves in and out of my apartment with ease, apparently. Even with my upgraded security measures.

"Nothing valuable," he laughs roughly. Do I know that laugh? Do I recognize it? One strong hand slides down my body, dipping between my thighs. He rubs my clit through the thin fabric of my panties. "This is what I'm here for."

Clenching my jaw, I try desperately to keep my body from responding to his touch. This is wrong. Me enjoying this depraved thing is wrong, so I force my thoughts to my business ethics class, which is quite possibly the most boring subject in human history.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I imagine my professor droning on about social norms and ethical decision-making, while the stranger pulls the crotch of my panties aside, and brushes my pussy lips lightly with the tips of his fingers.

Fucking hell.

"Get off me you fucking psycho," I grate out, using my elbow to try and create distance between our bodies. But the more I push, the tighter his arms clamp around my body. "I don't want this."

It's like he doesn't even hear me. After teasing me, his fingers push into my channel, which means he has to lean forward a little, pressing his masked cheek against my

temple, his warm breath penetrating the thin fabric and brushing over my skin.

I bite back a moan.

“You don’t want this, eh?” I can hear the amusement in his deep baritone. “Your cunt is soaking wet for me.”

“I was touching myself before you broke in.”

Gah! Why did I just say that? I don’t need to give this guy a visual of me masturbating. Goddamn, I’m an idiot.

He pulls his fingers out of my pussy briefly to stroke my clit. “No,” he says. “This sweet honey is for me.” Then he pushes his fingers back into me, and instinctively, I rise onto my tiptoes, my head tilting back against his chest.

“It’s not for you,” I say, my voice quivering under the force of his invasion. “I don’t even fucking know you.”

Removing his hand from my panties, he shoves me forward, and I stumble, using the refrigerator to catch myself. Spinning, I lift my hands, so I can protect myself if I have to. I know, without question, if this guy wanted to snap me in two, he could do it easily.

His hand juts out, and he grabs me by the throat, pushing me against the refrigerator, and lifting me back up onto the tips of my toes. I can breathe, but barely, and panic immediately sets in. I claw at his gloved hand, my head spinning, struggling to draw what little air I can into my lungs.

He holds me like that for a few seconds, then leans in. “Everything about you is for me, ” he growls. “When you breathe, it’s for me. When you cry out, it’s for me.

When you come— It's. For. Me.”

I just nod, but the movement is restricted by his hand around my throat. And oddly, I'm more angry than scared, though fear and panic are definitely still in the mix.

But I've always been defiant, even as a kid. Sometimes I would do shit just to prove I could, despite the consequences. It's why Gabriel and I fought so much, actually. I was always doing shit that pissed him off, but the more he told me not to do something, the more I did it, simply to defy him.

It must only be seconds, but it feels like years before he finally releases my throat, and I fall, sagging against the cold metal refrigerator. My hands fly to my throat, and I pull air into my lungs so quickly, I start to cough.

Once I've caught my breath, I straighten and glare at his shadow. If he's going to kill me, then he's going to kill me. I might as well get a few licks in before he takes me out...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Ghost

I'm beginning to enjoy rough play before fucking. It gets my blood going, and seeing the fear in Wyn's eyes, when they catch in the light, makes my cock hard.

But her defiance is a fucking problem. It always has been. And I've been kind. Kinder than she deserves. I've been watching her for weeks, from afar, secretly seething at the casual way she's been whoring herself, dancing at clubs, flaunting herself. I mean, damn, she nearly fucked Kai the other night.

The grieving girlfriend.

Fucking cunt.

It's time I snuff that flicker of defiance in her eyes.

It's time I force her to submit. That shit is long past due.

Her breathing is labored as she glares at me. She's waiting for me to make the next move. Either that, or she's planning her attack. She's just spicy enough to try something like that. But little does she know, it's the fight I crave.

"Get on the bed," I say harshly, careful to disguise my voice.

She just continues to stare at me, not moving, her lips pressed together in a frown. I

step forward, and she flinches like she's expecting me to grab her. I will if I have to, but I'd rather not, because once I touch her, I'm fucking her, and there's nothing either of us can do to stop that. My self-control around her has been non-fucking-existent lately.

"On the bed," I command. "Or it's one blow every time I have to say it."

There's a second of silence. "One blow? What does that mean?"

"Fuck around and find out," I answer, flexing my hands at my sides. I'm desperate to touch her, and holding myself back is like trying to hold back the tide.

Fuuuck.

In the end, she decides not to fuck around. She moves to the bed, crawling onto the mattress, but instead of lying down, she sits up on her knees, facing me. There's a streetlight right outside her window and the amber glow shines in through a crack in her curtains, illuminating one side of her face.

Goddamn , she's beautiful.

She looks up at me wide-eyed, her pink lips parted, her thick blond hair cascading in waves around her shoulders, messy and perfect. She's not wearing any makeup, so I can see the dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She looks better this way. Natural. Like she just stepped off the beach.

I flick my chin at her. "Take the shirt off."

Her hands are resting on her thighs, and I can see the indecision on her face. She naturally resists being told what to do. She's been that way as long as I've known her. That's what makes this so fun, though. Forcing the defiant cunt to comply.

I'm still standing in the kitchenette, so I lean against the counter. "Refuse all you want," I say. "The more I have to ask, the more punishment you receive, and the more fun this will be for me."

I watch as her jaw clenches, and her hands grip her thighs. That statement pissed her off. Good. A chuckle escapes my throat.

Her eyes flutter closed for a second, and just when I think she's going to reach up and take the shirt off, she launches off the bed and makes a run for the front door. It's a tiny studio apartment, so the door is only ten feet away from the bed, and she reaches it quickly, unlocking the door.

Cursing under my breath, I go after her. She actually makes it outside, onto the walkway, before I catch up to her, encircling my arm around her waist and pulling her back inside. I shove her back into the apartment, slamming the door shut with my boot.

"Well, you've fucked around," I say slowly, anger spreading through my bloodstream. "And now you're going to find out."

She's standing by the bed, breath heaving from her lungs, looking at me with fear in her eyes. Yeah, she fucked up, and I'm going to make her pay for it.

I advance on her, but the bed is right behind her, so she can't retreat. She has no choice but to hold her ground. My hand darts out, and I grab her, my grip tight enough to make her wince.

I lean in, so my masked face is only half an inch from hers. I can feel her breath on my lips, and that simple thing stirs something to life inside me. "You've been a very bad girl."

I'm gripping her throat and under my palm, I can feel her swallow. A single, poetic tear rolls down her cheek, but I'm unmoved. "I—I'm sorry," she stutters.

"Oh, it's too late for that," I say, pulling a knife from my pocket. I flip it open, and remove my hand from her chin, replacing it with the tip of the blade. She sucks in a sharp intake of breath, and now I know I have her.

I slide the tip of the blade down to the pulse that's frantically beating at the base of her throat. "With just a little pressure, I could kill you right now," I say. "Your life is mine. Every breath you draw into your lungs is because I allow it. Remember that the next time you want to defy me."

She nods.

Lowering the blade, I use it to cut the neckline of the T-shirt she's wearing, and then I pull it open, ripping the fabric. Switching the blade closed, I shove the knife back into my pocket, then use both my hands to pull the T-shirt the rest of the way off her body.

God-fucking-damn.

She's standing in front of me in only her panties, her beautiful tits round and full. I only get a glimpse before her hands fly up to cover her chest.

"Get on the bed."

This time, she doesn't hesitate. She climbs onto the bed, again, on her knees, facing me. Glancing around, I notice her phone charger, and I yank the cord out of the wall.

"Turn around," I say. "Wrists behind your back."

Again, that hesitation, but in the end she does what I ask, turning on the mattress, placing her hands behind her. Grabbing her wrists, I tie them together with the cord, then shove her forward, so her face is pressed against the mattress, her plump ass jutting up in the air.

She whimpers. “ Please, just let me go, and I won’t say anything to anyone. I swear...”

I ignore her, my gaze fixed on her ass. It would feel so good to nestle my cock between those beautiful round cheeks. I lick my bottom lip, just imagining it.

Not yet.

I pull her pink, lacy panties down, exposing that perfect pussy. Despite her protests, she’s wet, practically dripping. Goddamn. My cock surges inside my pants. I could fuck her right now, bathe her channel in my cum and there isn’t a damn thing she could do about it.

I’m practically drooling when I brush my fingers over one smooth ass cheek, then I slap it with a hard whack that vibrates through my hand. She yelps and jerks forward, not expecting it. A red mark blooms across her ass cheek and I smile. Then I do it again, another whack. A whimper escapes her throat, but the sound is muffled by the mattress.

“That’s for making me ask twice,” I say, glancing around the room for something I can use to make my final point. My eyes settle on a knife block in the kitchen, and I slide the largest knife free, palming the handle.

She’s exactly where I left her, but her head is twisted to the side so she can watch me. When she sees the knife, her eyes go wide and she tries to sit up. I pin her down with one hand, forcing her chest back down onto the mattress.

“What are you going to do with that?” she asks with panic in her voice.

“I’m going to show you that pain and pleasure are one and the same.”

She pulls against her restraints and a whimper bubbles up from her throat. “Are you going to hurt me?”

I chuckle again. “Definitely. But you’ll enjoy it, I promise.”

“You’re sick fuck,” she spits out, which is brave of her, considering I’m holding a knife. But I’m not going to hurt her. Not permanently, anyway. I’m far more interested in watching her come.

With the tip of the knife, I lightly trace a pattern across her ass. The dull blade doesn’t cut her, but with just a little more pressure, it will. What I’m interested in now is the long wood handle. Flipping the knife in my hand, I press the handle against her moist entrance, coating it with her juices. Another whimper escapes from her lips, but she doesn’t move, doesn’t say anything.

Maybe she’s finally resigned to her fate. Smart girl.

Slowly, I push the handle in until the heel of the blade is pressed against her entrance. She groans into the mattress, and if I didn’t know better, I’d swear she was actually enjoying this. I pull the handle out, almost all the way, then shove it back into her greedy channel, which earns me another groan.

“You like that?” I ask, thrusting with the hilt, her pussy drenching the blade and my hand.

She mumbles something I can’t hear, so I grab a handful of hair with my free hand and yank her head back. Her mouth is open, just slightly, and she’s squeezing her

eyes shut.

“Say it again,” I command. She doesn’t repeat it, so I tug on her hair, pulling her head back a fraction more. Arching over her, I whisper in her ear. “Tell me, or I’ll spank you again. One strike for every time I have to ask.”

Her throat moves as she swallows. “No,” she says, licking her bottom lip. “I don’t like it.”

I’m still stroking her, burying the hilt in her soft, welcoming pussy while my finger flicks her clit. I can see the agony on her face, the torment of an unspent orgasm. Her body is betraying her, making her a liar.

I smile through the thin fabric of my mask. “You want me to stop?”

“Y-yes,” she says, her back arching as I pause to increase the pressure on her clit.

“New rule,” I whisper. “The more you lie, the harsher your punishment will be.”

She can say whatever she wants, but I can read her body like a fucking book, and she’s enjoying this shit. To prove my point, I release her hair and remove the hilt from her body, stepping back to watch her.

For several seconds, she remains on all fours, waiting. When it’s clear I’m not returning to her, she turns to look at me—and I swear to God, her eyes plead with me to continue.

“Should I finish you, or leave you wanting?” I ask. “Which would be more fun?”

She turns to face me, yanking the comforter roughly over her body. If I could see her face clearly, I’m sure she’d be glaring at me. “Get the fuck out,” she spits. “I can

have someone else finish me .”

She’s saying that to provoke me. She wants me to fuck her without having to admit she wants it. Because saying it would cost her that precious pride she holds onto with white knuckles.

I’m wearing black slacks, and I unzip them, pulling out my swollen cock. Her eyes follow my hand as I slowly begin to stroke, my fist moving from base to tip. I get pussy all the time, and I shouldn’t need to fuck right now, but when I’m in Wyn’s presence, my cock instantly stirs to life. Doesn’t matter how much pussy I’ve gotten, I want her. She’s that persistent itch that I need to scratch.

Still clutching the comforter to her chest, she licks her bottom lip, eating my cock up with her eyes. I’m not even sure she realizes she’s doing it. But I know her tells.

“You want this cock?” She opens her mouth to answer, but I interrupt before she can speak. “Lie to me and see what happens.”

She clamps her mouth shut, and I imagine that glare again. She wants to play the victim. She wants to pretend she’s not being given a choice. I’m cool with that. I can play that game.

With my cock still in hand, I reach over and rip the comforter out of her fist, exposing her. She’s kneeling on the mattress, one hand wedged between her thighs.

I shake my head. “See, that’s cheating.”

Leaning forward, one knee on the mattress, I continue stroking my cock. Her tongue darts out as she licks her bottom lip. Fuck. I’m three strokes in, and I can tell I’m not going to last long. The pressure in my balls is already building. It doesn’t help that Wyn is kneeling in front of me with the musky scent of her arousal filling my lungs,

feeding the frenzy of need rioting inside me.

With my free hand, I slide my fingers under her curtain of hair, and grip the back of her neck, pulling her forward. By some miracle, she lets me. I tug her head closer, my masked face brushing against her ear. “Do you want my cum, Pretty Thing?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Wyn

Pretty Thing.

I immediately stiffen when he calls me that. There's only one person who has ever called me Pretty Thing and that's Gabriel. He used to say my beauty was otherworldly, that I wasn't human. That's when he was being nice.

But Gabriel is dead.

I swallow and shake my head. "No," I say.

But even as I say the word, my body screams for his cock. My clit is tingling, pulsing, and it feels like I'm going to explode. But I can't tell him that because...what would it say about me? That I'm the whore Lucas claims I am?

He grabs my face with his free hand, squeezing, his masked face so close to mine, I can feel his warm breath through the thin fabric. "You're lying," he says harshly, shaking my face.

I'm trying to get away from him, scooching back, but to do that, I have to spread my thighs, so I can get some traction. I don't have much room, though, and in just a couple of inches, I'm hitting the back of my headboard.

He grabs my wrist, and pulls back, yanking me along with him. Shoving his cock

back into his pants, he perches his foot on the mattress and bends me over his thigh—then he whacks me hard with his open palm. My body jerks forward with the force of it and sharp needle-like pain blooms across my ass. I yelp, and I hate that I give him that, but I can't help it.

“Lie to the world, Wyn. But never fucking lie to me,” he says angrily, shoving me off his thigh and onto the bed. I watch over my shoulder as his silhouette moves in the near-darkness, removing his cock from his pants for the second time.

Grabbing a fist full of my hair again, he pushes into me. No prep, nothing. Thankfully, I'm already soaking wet, my body easing his harsh invasion.

And fuck, but it feels so damn good.

I should scream.

I should try to get away.

I should do anything but moan as his cock pushes into me balls deep. He's big, and he stretches me painfully. But mixed with the pain is a bone-deep pleasure that makes my eyes roll back. Thank God it's dark, and he can't see my face clearly.

Tightening his grip on my hair, his hips rock against me, his balls slapping against my clit. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to disassociate, thinking of something else. But electricity is snaking through my veins, and all I can focus on is the pain and the pleasure, and the way his cock fills me.

It only takes a few strokes before he lets go of my hair, and grips my hips, his blunt nails digging into my skin as he pulls me against him in a frantic rhythm. Finally, with one brutal stroke, he stills inside me, and I can feel his cock pulse as he pours himself into me.

When he's done, he doesn't immediately pull out. I'm on my knees, and he stays inside me for several seconds. I wait for him to say something, but there's just silence—our harsh breaths are the only sound in the room.

Slapping my ass, he shoves me forward, separating us. I flip around immediately, pulling a pillow over my naked body. Then without even cleaning himself off, he tucks his cock back into his pants.

“You came inside me again , you fucking asshole,” I say harshly.

“I did,” is his only reply.

“I'm not on birth control.”

It's a lie. I'm on the Depo shot, and I don't even think Gabriel knew that. He never asked, and I never shared it with him. We always used condoms.

The masked stranger doesn't respond. He probably doesn't give a fuck whether I'm on birth control or not. Selfish cunt.

“The hospital can get your DNA now,” I point out. It was dumb as fuck to come inside me. Now he can be identified.

“Let me know if they need a larger sample.” I can hear the smirk in his voice. “I'm happy to come inside you again.”

The flippant way he's talking about this makes me see fucking red. Grabbing the cheap elephant figurine I have on my nightstand, I chuck it at his head as hard as I possibly can. My aim is shit, though, and it flies right past him, hitting the refrigerator with a loud crash.

“You fucking cunt,” I yell.

But he’s laughing, already headed for my front door. He unlocks it, and just before he’s about to walk out, I catch a glimpse of something on his wrist. It’s a pink scar running up his wrist vertically, about three inches long. Gabriel had that exact scar.

Am I imagining that?

Just as he’s about to leave, he turns and says, “See you in your nightmares, Pretty Thing.”

And then he’s gone.

I stay on the bed for a couple of seconds, staring after him in disbelief, trying to process what I just saw. When I snap back to, I get up and lock the door—not that it matters. He seems to get in whenever the fuck he wants.

Should I call the police? Will they believe me?

After my heart rate slows down, I rush to take a shower. Despite my threats to run off to the hospital and get a swab done, I decide against it. I’ve already had one done and nothing came of it. Why do it again?

If I want to figure out what’s going on, it’s clear I’ll have to do it myself.

After the masked man leaves, I don’t sleep at all. I took a very quick shower, and now I’m just lying in bed and blinking up at the ceiling, replaying every detail of what happened. I analyze his voice, his mannerisms, the infection in his voice, everything.

I know him. I do. The way he moves is so familiar. And the scar...

Could it really be Gabriel?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wyn

“Ms. Barker?”

I look up from my phone, then stand and walk across the waiting room to the detective who just called my name. He’s middle-aged, his black hair just starting to gray around the temples. I recognize him from a of couple months ago. He was the detective who looked into Gabriel’s death.

“I’m Detective Nawar,” he says.

I shake his outstretched hand and smile politely. “I remember.”

“What can I help you with today?” he asks.

I glance around. Are we doing this in the Sheriff’s Station waiting room? Weird, but okay. “Um, yeah, you handled my boyfriend’s case a couple of months ago. Gabriel Martelle.”

He nods, indicating that he remembers.

“And, um, I was wondering if I could see his autopsy report?” I ask, anxious. I don’t know why. I guess it’s because seeing the report and the photos and everything that goes along with it will be confirmation that it’s all real.

But as painful as that might be, I need to know the truth.

He shakes his head. “Those files are part of an active investigation...”

“Please,” I say. “I just...need some closure. It’ll only take a few minutes.” I swallow and glance up at him, and whatever he sees in my eyes softens him, because he blows out a defeated breath.

“Okay,” he says. “Follow me.”

I’m sure he assumes I’m just a grieving girlfriend who needs closure. During our initial interview after Gabriel’s death, I told him the truth, though. We’d just broken up the day it happened, but I’d checked out emotionally months before that. It just wasn’t working between us.

And yeah, I’m sad. But honestly, Gabriel was unhinged toward the end. Something was bothering him, but he wouldn’t tell me what it was. Eventually, I just gave up asking. I know Lucas blames me for that. Or I suspect he does, anyway. He’s never said it to my face.

The detective leads me down the hallway, to the first door on the left. It’s a small room, cold, and swathed in various grays. The walls, table, chairs...everything is sterile and plain. “Water?” he asks me.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” I answer, taking a seat.

A few minutes later, maybe ten, he steps back into the room with a water bottle and a plain manilla file folder. He sets the water bottle down in front of me and then slaps the folder down on the table. “You have ten minutes. You can’t take any of the pages with you, and no taking photos,” he says sternly, then points to a camera mounted in the corner of the room. “You’re being recorded.”

I nod in response. “Okay.”

“And just a warning, the crime scene photos are pretty graphic. That train really did a number on him.”

I stare down at the folder like it’s about to jump up and bite me. “Thanks,” I say.

“I’ll just leave you to it,” he says. “If you need anything, just holler.”

I smile tightly. “Okay.”

When he leaves, I sit back in the plastic chair, pulling in several long breaths to gather my nerves. Then I reach out and flip the file open. On top is the actual autopsy report itself, thank God. Leaning forward, I read over all the basic facts. Presumed height, weight, hair and eye color, and so on. The “marks and wounds” section is basically a novel. He was ripped to pieces under that train with too many injuries to describe in detail on one sheet of paper.

There’s a sketch of a person, front and back, to show the locations of the injuries, and it’s a hot mess with scribbles everywhere. I swallow hard when I confront the fact that this was Gabriel. One second he was “fine” and a second later, he was this . An eviscerated mess of flesh scattered across the train tracks.

Behind the report is a witness account of what happened—but I’m only guessing because most of it’s redacted. And behind that are the accompanying photos. I suck in a sharp breath, then flip the page. The first photo is of his phone, the screen cracked and dark, lying in the gravel. It’s definitely his phone case. I recognize the black and white swirl design.

The second photo is the contents of his wallet. It’s untouched like maybe he tossed it aside before stepping in front of the train. It was found a few feet from Gabriel’s

body and inside was his driver's license, credit cards...and a note with just five words, written in his chicken scratch?—

Do you see me now?

I blink rapidly to stave off the tears that sting the backs of my eyes. I remember first seeing that note after everything had happened. The police asked me about it. Fuck, everyone asked me about it, and I told them I had no idea what it meant. But that was a lie—a lie that most people accepted. But not Lucas. He knows there's shit I'm not telling him.

Swallowing back the emotion, I consider whether or not I need to see the rest of the file. There are several more photos, probably of Gabriel's body, but do I really need to see them? Will I regret it if I don't look? Will I always wonder?

Sucking in another deep breath, I flip the page quickly, and I instantly regret it. It's a jumble of bloody flesh that hardly even looks human, and I quickly glance away, shutting the manila folder.

“Oh, fuck,” I breathe, standing up. I suddenly feel queasy, and I start pulling in deep breaths to keep from throwing up. If that was Gabriel, then there was no possible way to identify him physically. From what I saw, there was hardly anything left.

I grab the folder so I can give it back to the detective. On my way back up to the waiting room, I pass his office. The door is ajar, and I knock gently. He looks up from his desk. “Done already?”

“Um, yeah.” I step inside his small office and set the file on his desk. “Just a quick question, did you collect any DNA from him or anything? I mean, during the autopsy?”

He reaches for the file. "If it's not noted in the report, then no. We only collect DNA if the death is suspicious. And there was a witness, so it wasn't necessary."

I nod. "Who was the witness?"

"This is still an active investigation, so I can't disclose that information," he says matter-of-factly.

"Right, yeah," I say quickly, waving it off. "I was just wondering if they saw anything that could explain what happened. I mean, a train seems like a pretty brutal way to go, you know?"

"Happens more than you think," he says. "We're called down there at least once a week for the same thing."

"Once a week?" There's shock in my voice.

"More during the holidays. It's really unfortunate."

I nod slowly. God, that's tragic, and I can't help but feel a pang in my chest for those poor souls. "Um, anyway, thank you. I appreciate your help," I say.

"Yup," he says, dismissing me and going back to whatever he was doing.

When I get back home, I still feel queasy, but I feel like I know even less than I did before going to the Sheriff's Station. I was hoping there would be undeniable proof that Gabriel was gone. But what I got instead was a photo of Gabriel's driver's license, a note that I'd already seen, and a jumble of pulverized flesh.

Ugh.

I have to dart home and get ready for class. Just one class today, though, so there's that. But the whole time, all I can see in my mind's eye is that photo of Gabriel's body scattered across the train tracks.

Do you see me now?

I clench my jaw, and swallow, trying to focus on the lecture. I scribble down notes, but I'm only half-listening. My phone buzzes, and I glance at the screen. It's a text from Lux.

Coffee after class? I can meet you at the coffee shop on campus.

I smile down at my phone. Lux and I have gotten really close over the last few months, and we've made it a habit of checking in with each other a couple of times a week. I type out my response.

Sure, sounds good.

I'm zoned out, pen in hand, when someone's backpack comes flying at my face and snaps me out of my daze. It's the person next to me standing up, swinging their backpack over their shoulder. I glance around and everyone else is doing the same.

Shit, I was so out of it I didn't even notice class was over.

I hurriedly shove my laptop into my backpack, then book it across campus to the coffee shop. Lux is already at the head of the line, ordering. I take my place at the back of the line. It's early afternoon, so every single person on campus is getting their caffeine fix.

When Lux finishes ordering, she glances back and spots me. "Oh, Wyn! Hey! I ordered for us," she calls out, waving me over.

I leave the line and pull her into a hug. “Thanks, babe.”

“Let’s go find a seat.”

We go in search of a table, and as we approach, a group miraculously disburses, leaving a table open. It’s not a coincidence. Up until recently, Lux was Burning Crown royalty, and that never really goes away. Her boyfriend is Roman Rush, for God’s sake. And even though he left the society, he still has an insane amount of power and influence on campus.

Lux takes the seat across from me, leaning back in her chair.

“God, I hate you,” I laugh.

That makes her laugh, too. “Why? What’d I do?” she asks incredulously.

“You look so damn happy,” I tease. “It’s gross.”

She presses her lips together in a smile, and looks away briefly, before meeting my gaze again. “It’s pretty disgusting, right?” She laughs again. “Sorry, not sorry.”

We laugh about all the sex she’s getting and how Roman is still the controlling prick he’s always been, but now, with a softer edge. And I’m so happy for her, honestly. She’s been to hell and back. If anyone deserves peace and a fuck-ton of amazing sex, it’s Lux.

But, if I’m being honest, her happiness just highlights how royally fucked up my life has become.

Someone brings our coffee and pastries over. I grab the chocolate croissant and immediately devour it. Buttery flakes of pastry litter my side of the table. I haven’t

been eating very well lately, so I feel like I'm constantly hungry. I've been so stressed out that I'm usually too exhausted to grab or make anything to eat, so I just end up drinking tea or coffee instead.

"So how are you holding up?" Lux asks, sipping her coffee.

I know Lux pretty well by now, and I can tell she's studying me. After Gabriel's death, she's been by my side every step of the way. She's been dealing with her own grief, so she knows better than anyone what I'm going through.

I shrug one shoulder. "I'm okay."

There's one thing I can't tell her though—any mention of my stalker will have her enrolling me in the witness protection program. Honestly. She has her own past trauma and knowing there's some guy skulking around my apartment would be too much for her. She's so happy now, I can't risk sending her into a tailspin of anxiety all over again.

"You seem..." She pauses to scrutinize me. "...off. Something is off."

I take a sip of my coffee. "There's an initiation ceremony tonight," I say, deflecting.

Lux nods. She knows I hate attending the initiations. "Can you skip it?"

"I've already missed three official Burning Crown events. I went to the Founder's Day thing, but that's not enough to spare me from tonight."

"Ah." She sinks back against her chair, still watching me closely. "So what happened the other night, when you wanted me to call 911? We never really talked about it."

I shrug one shoulder and glance down at my coffee cup, twisting it. "Nothing

happened. I was just freaked out, I guess. I've never lived alone, so every little bump in the night is making me jump," I say with a laugh in my voice to set her at ease.

"Hmmm, okay." She narrows her eyes at me like she doesn't believe a word out of my mouth. "I'm also hearing through the grapevine that something went down between Kai and you a few nights ago. But I said that couldn't possibly be true, because you would have told me about it."

Oh, yikes. Her voice is soft but stern like she's confronting a small child about lying. She's clearly annoyed that I haven't been as open as I usually am with her.

I shift in the wooden chair and clear my throat, suddenly feeling like I've been pulled into the principal's office. "Um, yeah, that...I didn't want to worry you. And, honestly, it really wasn't a big deal anyway..."

"Someone said you called the police and accused him of raping you..." she says, but I can tell by her tone that she doesn't believe a word of it. "Apparently, Kai is confirming that, and taking full responsibility."

Yeah, I have a feeling that change of tune has something to do with his "meeting" with Lucas in the basement.

"... And I've heard things are getting weird with you and Lucas," she says. "Like, sexually weird."

"Sexually weird?" I laugh and shake my head. "You are surprisingly well informed for someone who quit the society."

She shrugs. "Is it true?"

I blow out a breath and sink back into my chair. If she's saying this, then other people

are talking about it, too, which is mortifying. But there are no secrets in the Burning Crown, so I shouldn't be surprised. "Yeah, there's definitely something between us, but he hates me, so...I don't think anything is really going to happen." Finger-fucking notwithstanding.

Lux nods slowly, absorbing the information with more chill than I would have guessed. "Just promise me you'll be careful. I've heard Lucas can be dangerous when he's provoked..."

Yeah, no lie. But how can I possibly be careful when Lucas is determined to punish me for God knows what?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lucas

I'm in the basement of Rush House when Roman comes down the staircase. "Yo, Lucas, there you are," he says when he spots me in the gym. The basement is huge. The Panic Room is in the back, but the rest is set up with weights, a punching bag, and a shit ton of expensive gym equipment. There's a full bathroom and a small sauna in the back.

I set my weights down, and straighten, wiping the sweat off my forehead with the back of my arm. "What's up?" I ask, out of breath.

"What are you doing down here?" he asks.

I lift my hands, exasperated by that question. "What the fuck does it look like I'm doing?"

"You never work out, so my guess is that you're hiding," he says, leaning against a beam, arms crossed over his chest.

Not true. For the past couple of months, I've come down to the gym every day, for at least an hour, sometimes more. All in an effort to sweat Wyn out of my system. It's clearly not working, but it takes the edge off my anger, so I've kept up with it. Some days, I come down here multiple times.

Shaking my head, I pick the weights back up and continue my workout. "You've had

your head buried so deep in Lux, you don't know shit about what's going on around here."

I'm low-key annoyed that he's been building castles in the sky with his fucking soulmate, while I've been handling everything around here, on top of grieving for my cousin.

"That's not fair," Roman says.

"Isn't it?" I say, curling the weights, already feeling the burn in my biceps. "You set up house and now we never even fucking see you."

Maybe he's right, and I'm not being fair. Roman has been through a fuck-ton of shit in the last few months and he deserves a slice of happiness. But at the cost of the guys that have been with him since the beginning?

Fuck that shit.

Roman pushes out a breath. "I came to grab something, and the guys wanted me to come down and tell you Ash just called a meeting with the Sacred Sons."

I set the weights down again and turn to face Roman more fully. "What the fuck?" I ask, trying to catch my breath. I grab my water bottle and squirt the cold liquid into my mouth. "Has anyone told Ash he's not the one in charge around here?"

For fuck's sake. The second that guy was initiated, he started in on his reform bullshit. The literal fucking second. And now he's calling meetings?

"It was mentioned," Roman answers, pushing off the post. "I don't think Ash gives a fuck."

I grab a hand towel off the bench and wipe off with it. Fuck, it's hot down here. Slapping the towel over my shoulder, I point at Roman. "This is your chick's fault that we have to deal with him."

Months ago, Lux tried to usurp the Sacred Sons and replace us with Ash, who's had an axe to grind with the Burning Crown for years. Some shit about the patriarchy, and how toxic the Sacred Sons have become. Whatever. Ever since he joined, he's been moaning about revisiting the bylaws. Bylaws that have been in place for over a hundred years.

He needs a vote from each Sacred Son to do anything, though, so we usually just ignore him. It pisses him off, and that's fun, so there's that. But he's become more and more insistent lately.

"You doing okay?" Roman asks, ignoring my comment about Lux.

"You already asked me that."

"No, I didn't," he replies.

Maybe it's because everyone asks me that all the fucking time. "I'm fine," I bite out, grabbing my shit so I can go upstairs and take a shower. I could shower down here, but I prefer my own bathroom.

"You look like you're on edge." Roman has always been observant, but right now, that trait is annoying as fuck. "Is it about Ava?"

I straighten and look at Roman like he's lost his mind. And maybe he has. Love does weird shit to a guy. I've seen it once or twice before. "Is what about Ava?"

Roman lifts his hand to indicate me. "This weird ass mood you're in. There's a rumor

that she's angling to move into Rush House and I know what an asshole you can be about your private space."

I scoff. "Ava doesn't bother me. She can angle for whatever the fuck she wants. It's not happening."

"Okay, then, is it?—"

"Don't say it," I interrupt. He's about to bring up my cousin, and the investigation, and I'm not going there with him right now. "Don't even fucking say it. I told you, I'm fine."

Roman sighs and moves to the staircase. "Fine, whatever, dude. I'm heading home. Text me if you need me." He's already halfway up when he calls down to me, "The meeting is in ten, in the study."

After a quick shower, and a change of clothes, I walk into the study ten minutes late—well, late if I gave a fuck about another guy's schedule. And I don't. I'm only here to tell Ash to go fuck himself.

When I walk into the study, the three other guys are here—Jackson, Christian, and Ash—along with an unexpected guest. I stiffen when I see her standing by the fireplace, trying not to look nervous and failing miserably.

The moment I walk in, her green eyes flick up to meet mine, and something inside my chest stutters to a halt. It's not my heart, because I don't have one. But it's some kind of vital organ because suddenly it feels like there's a tight band around my chest.

I glance over at my brother, who looks bored by this whole thing.

"What the fuck is she doing here?" I ask.

It's Ash who steps forward to answer my question. "We don't know yet." He crosses his arms over his chest, and leans against the arm of the leather sofa, facing Wyn. "Okay, we're all here. What's up?"

She's standing there, looking vulnerable, and tell me why that turns me the fuck on. I can't help but imagine her on her knees, wrists tied behind her back, mouth open, and choking on my cock. Tears streaming down that pretty face.

Goddamn. That's depraved, even for me.

Wyn clears her throat and focuses on Ash. "I, um...came to ask for your help."

Okay. That piques my interest. "For what?" I ask a little more harshly than I intend to.

"I think I have a...stalker." She stumbles over that last word like even she doesn't believe it.

"A stalker...?" Christian laughs. "For real?"

She lifts her hands, like what the fuck? "Yes. A stalker. Why is that so hard to believe?"

"How do you know?" Ash asks. "I mean, what's he been doing?"

She pushes a breath out and glances down at the carpet, like she'd rather not say. I'm on full alert now, though. Eventually, she glances back up and when she does, she looks resigned to telling us. "He, um, breaks into my apartment. And that shit with Kai....that was him. Kai didn't pass out. He was assaulted."

"If what you're saying is true, then why come to us?" I ask, drawing that emerald

gaze back to me. That's right, baby, look at me . "Why not just let the police deal with it?"

"I've been to the police, and they're not really taking it seriously," she says quietly.

"I fail to see how that's our problem," I say.

My words land with the force of an atomic bomb. I see it in her face the second it detonates. Her eyes narrow, and her lips tighten. Her hands ball into little delicate fists at her sides. If she could dive over the sofa and get to me, I have a feeling she'd try it.

I can't help but smile. It's a reflex when I'm taunting her.

"You're such an asshole," she bites back.

I shrug. "I won't deny that. But it doesn't change the facts."

Ash steps forward, in between us, so we're not openly glaring at each other. He turns to face Wyn. "Any ideas on who it might be?"

She pulls in a breath, and I can see whatever she's about to say, she's nervous about. Her gaze darts between each guy's face. "Yeah, um, that's the thing..." She swallows. "I think it might be Gabriel."

Silence falls over the room, and I know what everyone is thinking. This chick has lost her damn mind.

It's Ash who speaks first. "Uh, okay. So, um, what makes you think that?"

He doesn't want to call her out, and that's probably smart. Wyn isn't someone you

want to fuck with. I mean, damn, Lux and Wyn almost took the Sacred Sons down a couple months ago. I learned a powerful lesson back then—don't fuck with a chick who's hell-bent on revenge. For real.

Wyn shakes her head and shoves her hands into her pockets. "There are certain things that just don't add up."

"Like what, exactly?" Ash asks, shaking his head. "Help us out here."

I'm so focused on what she's about to say, I'm barely breathing.

She lifts her hands, exasperated by the question. "Like the fact that he's breaking into my fucking apartment." She pauses to collect herself. "Or...it's someone who's built exactly like him, who uses the nickname only Gabriel used. Someone who has the exact same scar on his wrist..."

"That's hardly proof, Wyn. Nicknames can be overheard. Scars can be similar," Jackson says, shifting on his feet. "Gabriel died. We've all have to accept that."

"What about the body?" she asks quickly like she's aware she's losing her footing in this conversation. "We never saw one."

Christian pushes out a breath, bored by all this. "His wallet was found, there was a note..." He lifts his hands in frustration. "And now, apparently, a witness has popped up out of nowhere..."

He's referring to the random asshole who showed up and pinpointed me, apparently.

Ash walks up to Wyn and places his hands on her shoulders. I stiffen, pushing off the wall. Why the fuck is he touching her? For a split second, I consider crossing the room and forcibly removing his hands from her shoulders. But if I do that, then I play

my hand, and the guys will know there's something is up between Wyn and me. They already suspect as much because of the whole Kai thing, but if I confront Ash, they'll know for sure.

"We all want Gabriel here," Ash says. "But we have to face the fact that he's gone."

With a sigh of frustration, Wyn steps back, out of Ash's hold. Thank fucking God. "You don't get it," she practically yells. "I've seen him. He's been in my apartment!"

"Alright, let's just say for argument's sake that the ghost of Gabriel is stalking you," I say. "What do you want us to do about it?"

Wyn places her hands on her hips and blows out a breath. "We're a family, right? The members of the Burning Crown. I mean, that's what you guys are always spouting at those pointless meetings. So help me. Help me untangle this shit with Gabriel."

All of us guys glance at each other like none of us knows what to say.

"Tell you what," Jackson says. "One of us can shadow you for a minute, and see what you're talking about." He shrugs at the rest of us. "If anything, maybe we can figure out who this stalker dude is. At the very least, maybe seeing another guy around will scare the sick fuck off."

I'm tense now, every muscle in my body pulled so tight, I'm afraid I might snap. Is he suggesting that a Sacred Son shadow her? Goddamn. I already want to slit the throat of whoever gets assigned to follow her around.

"I'll call our security guys, and have them send someone over," I offer. Although, the idea of a former Navy SEAL having constant access to her makes me feel just as murderous. Maybe even a little more murderous.

“Nah,” Christian says, finally speaking up. “It should be one of us with her. Someone from the security team wouldn’t even know what they’re looking for.”

“Yeah, agreed,” Ash says, even though no one asked his dumb ass.

Christian looks directly at me. “You were closest to Gabriel, Lucas. You’d know if it was him, or a lookalike.” He flicks his chin at Wyn. “You should be the one to shadow her.”

Fuck. Obviously, I would have spoken up and volunteered myself if I didn’t think being around Wyn 24/7 was a disastrous idea. I’m so hard-up for this chick, I’ll be tearing her apart before the clock hits midnight.

“I can’t believe you guys are seriously entertaining this,” I say in response. “Gabriel is dead.” I can finally say that without choking up. It only took two months.

Jackson shrugs. “Well, someone is fucking with her. And she’s right, we look out for our own.”

“I’ll do it,” Ash says.

A spark of anger flares in my chest. “No, you won’t,” I snap. “Christian is right. It should be me.”

Goddamn.

“Great.” Ash claps once. “Now that that’s settled, I’ve gotta run.” He moves to the door but turns around to point at the room collectively. “I’ll see you guys at the initiation later tonight.”

I look over at Wyn, and she’s staring at me with those wide moss-green eyes. She

looks afraid. And she should be, because if I'm forced to be alone with her 24/7, there's no telling how long I can keep the devil inside at bay...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wyn

This was a bad idea.

When I came to Rush House to ask for help, the last thing I expected was for the Sacred Sons to appoint Lucas West as my personal bodyguard. All I wanted were resources, like a private investigator or a connection over at the Sheriff's Station. Something I could use to shake some information loose. I wasn't looking for a grouchy, sexy-as-fuck shadow who I hated me.

All the guys leave the room, except for Lucas. He walks up to me, and my only consolation is that he looks just as pissed about this arrangement as I feel. "I guess it's you and me for a while," he says.

He's a couple of feet away from me, and I step forward, so I can push my index finger into his rock-hard chest. "Let me make one thing absolutely clear," I whisper harshly. "There will be zero finger fucking."

He smirks at that.

"I'm serious," I say. "If you go anywhere near my pussy, I swear, I'll choke you out in your sleep."

He laughs under his breath and tilts his head to the side, his heated gaze gobbling me up. "That might be fun, actually."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

With a scoff, I turn on my heel and head toward the door. He doesn't follow, but he calls out after me. "Where do you think you're going?"

I pull my phone out of my back pocket and glance at the time, then up at him, annoyed that we're even having this conversation. But I was the one who came looking for help, right? "The initiation starts in three hours. I'm going home to get some homework done before I have to get ready and be back here. Happy?"

He walks over to me with that confident rich-boy swagger. Once he's a foot or two in front of me, he holds his hand out. "I need the key to your place."

I audibly scoff at that. Is he serious?

"Um, no."

He tilts his head to the side. "You're the one who wanted help, right?"

Damn. I just said that exact thing to myself, and I wish I could argue against it, but whatever. This arrangement is only temporary, right? And maybe while he's shadowing me, I can convince him to use his endless power and resources to look into the Gabriel thing more.

Right now, I get the feeling none of them believe me. They're offering me support, sure, but that's because it's a part of their creed. After a week of Lucas shadowing me, and finding nothing, they'll say they've done what they could, then go right back to treating me like a damn pariah.

With a huff, I take my keys out of my pocket and pull my extra apartment key off my keychain. I only have the extra one with me because I was going to give it to Lux,

just in case, but I never got around to doing it.

I hand him the key, and he takes it with a smirk. Goddamn, I want to slap that cocky smile right off his pretty-boy face so bad .

“I have some things to take care of, then I’ll be right over.”

Ugh. “The guy really only shows up at night, so I’m good for now.”

He just shrugs one shoulder, then walks past me to the door. Before he walks out, he holds the key up over his head but says nothing. I’m not exactly sure what that’s supposed to mean, but ugh, I’ve really managed to fuck myself now.

I head straight home, checking the cameras before I walk in. But everything is exactly the way I left it. No flowers waiting for me, no skulking stalkers. When I’m inside, I lock my door and double-check my windows and balcony doors before opening my fridge and grabbing some water. Then I watch something on my phone for a while, before getting up to take a shower.

But as the hot water pours over me, all I can think about is Lucas. When his mouth is shut, he’s so fucking hot—tanned skin, cut muscles, and a strikingly handsome face that could make a girl come on command.

Ughhh.

I’m so lost in thoughts about Lucas that I end up shampooing my hair twice. By the time I rinse the soap out for the second time, the water is starting to get cold, so I turn it off and grab a clean towel from the rack I have next to the shower.

I always keep my bathroom door open. It’s just me here, anyway. Well, me and the creep who breaks in occasionally, I guess. But it’s a habit I can’t seem to break and as

I'm toweling off, I catch a flash of movement in my periphery vision.

With a sharp intake of breath, I pull the towel against my body to cover it. My heart lurches, stops, and then speeds up as I step closer to the door and peer out into the apartment.

There's a guy sitting at the foot of my bed, his muscular forearms braced on his thighs. I can't see his face, because he's looking down at his phone, but the shock of blond hair escaping from the edges of his backward ball cap immediately gives him away.

Lucas.

"Shit," I say under my breath, my heart still thumping like a jackrabbit against my ribcage.

He hears my whispered curse and glances up. And I swear to God, when his electric blue eyes meet mine, I die real quick. Like, I can't feel my limbs and I'm not sure I'm breathing. The only evidence that I'm not actually dead is my heart. It's flopping around in my chest like a landed fish jumping around on a slab of cement.

And then he does something I didn't think was even possible. He smiles at me. It's just a split second suspended in time, like a reflex, and then it's gone again, replaced by that familiar scowl. But in that brief little moment, I saw something—a glimpse behind the mask that Lucas presents to the world. He was at ease, and there was a softness in his eyes that I'd never seen in him before.

Maybe Lucas West is actually human after all.

But none of that changes the fact that he just waltzed into my apartment without even giving me a heads-up. The audacity of this guy is unbelievable.

I pull the towel tighter around my body. “What the actual fuck, Lucas? I didn’t give you the key to my apartment so you could just waltz in here whenever!”

He purses his lips and allows his gaze to wander over me slowly like he’s eating up the sight of my barely clothed body. When finally replies, that familiar smirk is hovering on his lips. “Just forget I’m even here.”

That’s impossible and he knows it. Lucas fills up every square inch of my apartment with his presence. He’s like that. When he walks into a room, everyone is aware of him. And I’m just supposed to ignore that somehow? It’s like trying to ignore a snarling lion that’s taken up residence in my bedroom.

I narrow my gaze at him. “Maybe I should just find a hotel, and we can forget this whole thing.”

Never mind that I have zero dollars for a hotel.

With a heavy sigh, he leans back on my mattress and covers his eyes with the crook of his arm. “I’m not looking. Happy?”

He sneaks in here while I’m showering, then has the nerve to ask me if I’m happy? Jesus. This dude is unreal.

I’m still dripping wet, but I tip-toe over to my dresser, grab everything I need, and then scramble back to the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind me. I dress quickly, put on deodorant, and then do my wavy hair routine, which is a whole thing. I throw some light makeup on, and some perfume, then I’m done.

When I emerge from the bathroom twenty minutes later, Lucas is still exactly where I left him, leaning back and propped up on one elbow, watching me. “You done, finally?”

I shake my head and walk over to the small kitchen to make myself a cup of green tea. “Can we just not talk, hmmm? Can we do that?”

“You’re not wearing that,” he says from behind me.

I glance down at the short sundress I’d grabbed from my dresser. It’s a pretty blue-green color with spaghetti straps and a floppy tie in the middle of my back. Maybe it’s a little wrinkly, but I’ll be wearing a robe over it, so who cares? “Why? What’s wrong with my dress?”

Rising to his feet, he walks over to me, and without a word, he reaches under my dress easily and grabs a handful of my ass. His warm hand squeezes my cheek. I have panties on, but they’re already riding up. “This is why,” he says, practically growling the words.

I should be offended. I am offended. For sure. But even as I shove his hand away and take a step back, liquid fire is twisting through my veins. “You don’t get to dictate what I wear.”

“Change now ,” he replies, almost bored.

“Um, how about no ?” I say. My God.

Without even skipping a beat, he grabs my arm and yanks me forward. Our bodies collide—my soft breasts against his rock-hard torso—and I gasp, because I’m not expecting it.

His lips hover enticingly over mine. “Either you change this fucking dress or I’ll strip you down and do it for you.”

I narrow my eyes and set my jaw, even as a seed of excitement blooms in my chest.

What is it about his anger that makes me all kinds of horny? Shamefully, my clit is already sturring to life under that unforgiving glare.

Goddamn him. I know he'd follow through with his threat and God only knows where that would lead. I don't trust him and I definitely don't trust myself.

Glaring at him, I yank my arm out of his tight grip, back away, then turn and storm over to my tiny closet. I grab a black long-sleeved dress that falls to my ankles but shows a fair amount of cleavage. It's conservative, but still kinda sexy.

Taking the dress into the bathroom, I shut and lock the door, remove my cute sundress, and replace it with the drab evening dress that makes me look like a nun. A slutty nun with amazing tits, but still.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Lucas' gaze immediately falls to my cleavage. My breasts are front and center in this dress, but too fucking bad. It's the only dress I have that's even remotely modest.

His jaw clenches, but he doesn't say anything. He must know that saying anything at this point will push me over the absolute edge. "Ready?" he asks.

"Yeah," I push out with a sigh. "Let's get this shit over with."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lucas

As Wyn walks ahead of me to get into my car, I wonder what the fuck I was thinking volunteering to be her watchdog. Ten minutes into this, she steps out of the shower, her skin glistening, and I was ready to rip that towel off and fuck her against the kitchen counter.

Then she had the nerve to come out wearing that short-as-fuck sundress. When she turned around, I could see the underside of her ass. Not to mention the miles and miles of shapely legs that have been wrapped around my waist a thousand times in my imagination.

She's like Medusa with all that supple, dewy skin. One glimpse instantly turns my cock to stone. And if the sight of her barely clothed body has that effect on me, then other guys will react in kind. They may even try to make a move. And I'm really not in the mood to kill people today.

The dress she's wearing now isn't much better. Her legs and ass are covered, but those pretty little tits are boppin' around like molds of gelatin. I can't fucking win. She'll be wearing five pounds of fabric soon anyway, so whatever. Robes are required for every official Burning Crown event.

I drive us both in my car and when we get to Rush House, it's already packed with members. Wyn walks in front of me, and I watch that ass sway as we make our way to the study, then to the dressing room. I grab my robe and carry it out to the study,

where the rest of the Sacred Sons are hanging out, waiting to begin the procession down to the beach.

Slipping into my robe, I address the guys. “Has Dorian arrived yet?”

Christian is on the sofa, some random Deb straddling him, her hands buried deep in his robes, doing God knows what. “Yeah, a couple of the senior members already took him down to the beach.”

“Cool,” I say, securing my hood. “And one of you got the word out that no one should be on the beach past nightfall?”

Initiation rituals are technically against university policy. Scratch that, initiations are absolutely against policy. But we’re in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” arrangement with the administration. So when we say “Stay off the beach” everyone not associated with the Burning Crown knows what that means.

“This isn’t our first fucking rodeo,” Jackson says, annoyed.

“Whatever, dude,” I reply. “It’s my first damn rodeo as the leader of you damn fools.”

“Leader ?” Christian scoffs. “What, are we a fucking cult now?”

Some might argue that, actually.

Wyn is done putting her robe on and walks out of the dressing room with Alexis. Wyn is swimming in dark wool, the deep hood pulled over her long, wavy hair. Thank God. That lithe body is finally covered up. I wonder if I can convince her to wear that robe all the time.

My eyes follow her as she leaves the room with Alexis. She never looks up at me, never acknowledges me, and for some reason, that pisses me off. This is all a fucking game with her. Ignoring me. Pretending like I don't affect her. It only makes me want to prove her wrong in a dozen delicious ways.

“Alright,” I say, already wanting this night over with. “Let's do this thing.”

When the Sacred Sons leave, everyone follows us like a procession through the house, down the porch steps, around the front lawn to the sandy path that leads down to the private beach below Rush House.

The bonfire is already lit, the flames dancing, reaching for the neon moon that's hanging low in the night sky. Dorian is already standing with his back to the ocean, hands clasped in front of him, covering his dick and balls. We all file in around him, creating a half-circle, the fire in the center. I catch sight of Wyn as she settles into place, but her eyes are still averted like she's deliberately looking anywhere but at me.

Once we've all taken our places, I step forward and start speaking in the twisted tongue of our forefathers. The words are Latin and I memorized them a long time ago. I've attended a shit ton of these rituals, even as a kid.

Keeping with tradition, I drone on about why we're here, and what the commitments of a Burning Crown member are. They're old words, written by men over a hundred years ago, but they still ring true. “We come together as a family—to protect, to honor, to serve without question or hesitation.”

Waves pummel the sand just a few feet in front of us, and a sharp wind whips around us. The palm trees sway overhead, and the fire swells. I hold my hand out in a silent request for the brand, which has been buried in the hot embers since before the ritual started. Lindsay places the iron rod in my hand, and I approach Dorian. “Turn toward

our mother ocean and bow your head in humility.”

Dorian follows my command, the muscles in his back tense as he lowers his head and constricts his muscles, so he’s not shivering. None of the guys want to be seen shivering, but it’s so cold out here that it’s unavoidable.

I recite the words that welcome him into our fold as I bring the brand down and press it into his back, on the right side. His flesh sizzles, and he tucks his head tighter against his chest, fists clenching, muscles flexing, biting back a scream.

It’s fucking brutal, and for the millionth time, I thank the stars that the Sacred Sons aren’t branded when we’re initiated. When I asked my grandfather about that years ago, he simply said, “The Burning Crown is already branded in our blood.”

Really, I think our forefathers just didn’t want to do it. They felt like they were above having their sacred bodies marked. That’s for the lower echelons. For the sheep, not for the shepherds.

Turning back to Dorian, I recite the closing words of the ritual, and that’s the queue for a couple of members to haul Dorian up, and walk him out, into the water. About twenty feet out, there’s a giant rock, and drilled into it is a solid metal ring that male initiates are chained to overnight. If he’s alive in the morning, then he’ll emerge from the ocean as a member of our twisted, toxic family.

Most guys emerge.

As Dorian is hauled off, I turn my attention back to the circle, my eyes searching the faces for Wyn. She’s staring off into the distance, and there’s something wrong. Her skin looks drained of its color, her mouth parted slightly.

My feet are already in motion, as I make my way across the sand to get to her when

she starts to crumple. I sprint across those last couple of feet and manage to catch her in my arms before she hits the sand. She's limp, but I can see right away that she's breathing.

What the fuck?

Lying her down gently on the sand, I push two fingers against her neck to check her pulse. Her heart is beating hard and fast, and I feel a sharp stab of relief. She must have just passed out.

Wyn," I say. "Wake up."

She opens her eyes, blinking up at me. "What happened?"

"You fainted when Dorian was branded," someone replies.

I push her hood back to get a better look at her face, but she flinches and twists her head away from me. "I'm fine," she says.

I grab her chin and pull her head back, so she's looking at me. The fire is behind us, casting her features in a warm glow. Apart from looking a bit dazed, she looks okay.

Releasing her chin, I help her up, but as soon as she's on her feet, she sways. I'm not risking her passing out again, so I pick her up and toss her over my shoulder. She fights me at first, but eventually, she calms down. I'm sure she realizes by now that fighting me is a waste of energy.

My gaze finds my brother. "Yo, I'm taking Wyn home. Can a couple of you sit in tonight?"

There'll be a beach party immediately following the ritual. Everyone drinks, smokes,

and dances until the sun comes up. Then they'll welcome the initiate when he emerges from the ocean.

But according to the bylaws, a Sacred Son needs to be present all night. A few days ago, I said I'd do it, but circumstances have obviously changed.

"Yeah, no worries," Christian says. "I'd planned on hanging out anyway."

"Yup," Ash says. "I'll be here, too."

My arm tightens around Wyn's legs. "I'm not ready to go home," she says petulantly, dangling down my back.

I don't even bother responding to that. Instead, I carry her across the beach and up the sandy path. We don't even go inside. I set her down in front of my car, open it, then shove her inside. She falls into the low bucket seat with a huff of air and I walk around the front of the car to the driver's side.

We drive in silence, and we get to her place in five minutes. As I pull up to the front and park, she turns in her seat to face me. "You're not staying tonight."

Slinging my arm over the steering wheel, I shake my head and smile. "It's cute when you think you're in control." I reach out and touch her bottom lip with the pad of my thumb. "I think that's what I like most about you. That delusional brain of yours. It spices things up."

Her eyes narrow, though I notice she doesn't attempt to pull away. Am I making progress with her? But progress towards what? I don't have an answer to that.

She unbuckles her seatbelt and opens the car door. "You can check inside, and then be on your way."

I roll my eyes and step out of the car, walking around to meet her on the walkway that leads up to her studio. It's a straight shot from the street, and I can see ahead that the light above her front door is out, which casts her front step in shadow. And that shadow moves as we approach.

Wyn gasps, her hand darting out to grab my arm. "Did you just see that?"

"I did, actually," I say in a low tone. We're about thirty feet away from her front door, and this person obviously isn't expecting us to be here. The shadow is large, so I'm assuming it's a guy.

"Yo," I call out. I mean, fuck, maybe it's an innocent thing. Like a neighbor dropping off a package. But not gonna lie, this shadow looks suspicious as hell. "Who's there?"

The shadow moves again slightly, then darts off to the left, toward a hillside that leads up to more apartment buildings. I take off after him, but he has a lead on me and before I can get close, he jumps a fence and disappears. I didn't see his face, but he was wearing jeans a black sweatshirt, and a black beanie.

Cursing under my breath, I make my way back to Wyn.

"Was it Gabriel?" she asks eagerly.

My gaze is fixed on the fence line, looking for movement. But whoever it was is long gone. "I didn't see his face." I grab her hand and walk the rest of the way to her door. "Let's get you inside."

I use my key to open the door. When we left, it was still light outside, so the apartment is pitch black when we walk in. The apartment smells fresh, like flowers, and I inhale deeply as Wyn flicks the overhead light on.

“Does anything look messed with?” she asks, tiptoeing around the studio.

“I don’t think he made it in,” I say. We’re both still wearing our robes. They’re not supposed to leave Rush House, but I wanted to get her home quickly.

I remove my hood and robe, then start pulling the rest of my clothes off.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Wyn asks.

“I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, taking my shoes off,” I say in a bored tone.

“I already told you, you’re not staying tonight.”

I stop what I’m doing and glare up at her. “There was a strange dude on your doorstep a few minutes ago. Do you really want to find out what he’ll do when I leave?”

She purses her lips. “Do you think it was Gabriel?”

“No,” I snap. “Gabriel is dead.” I’m not even trying to sugar-coat it at this point. I need her to accept that he’s dead, so we can all move on.

When I stand, the palace is so small that I’m practically toe-to-toe with her. She takes a step back, watching as I unbutton my black dress shirt. I pull it off and toss it aside. Then I peel off my slacks and toss those aside, too.

“Hm.” She’s trying to appear unaffected, but I can see that spark of interest in her eyes. “Boxer briefs. How predictable.”

I tug on the clasp of her robe, so I can take it off her. She doesn’t fight me, which is a goddamn miracle. “Why did you faint during the ritual?” I ask pointedly.

Her gaze flicks up to meet mine, and I witness that spark of interest fade to fear. She blinks a few times, before looking away. “I guess I didn’t eat enough today.”

I pluck the hood off her head and let it fall to the floor, then I push the robe off her shoulders, allowing the fabric to pool at her feet. “I’ll tell you what,” I say, tracing the tip of my finger over the swell of her very generous cleavage. “You tell me the truth...” I lean in and whisper in her ear. “...and I won’t make the punishment hurt too bad...”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Wyn

I stare up at Lucas, my mind working through all the lies I could come up with about why I fainted. He didn't believe the not eating thing. A health condition? Exhaustion? In the end, I press my lips together, and opt for a fact, rather than the truth.

"I don't owe you an explanation," I say, lifting my chin defiantly.

Out there on the beach, during the ritual, I could have sworn I saw someone in the distance who looked exactly like Gabriel. It was dark, and he was wearing a hoodie, so I guess it could have been anyone, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it was him.

Then, right before he vanished into the fog, he lifted his hand, like he was signaling to me or something. That's when I must have passed out.

I know if I try to tell Lucas any of that, he'll just mock me and tell me I'm crazy...

Lucas shakes his head and laughs under his breath like I just told him a dirty joke. When he looks back down at me a second later, though, that laughter is gone. "Yeah, that's not going to fucking fly with me and I think you know that."

"Why do you even care, Lucas?" I ask, lifting my hands helplessly.

Christ, this guy is so unbelievably frustrating. One minute he's sending me death glares from across the room, then he's finger-fucking me in the bathroom, then he's

whisking me off the beach like my white knight because I fainted. What the actual fuck is wrong with this guy? His ever-shifting moods are giving me whiplash.

He shrugs one shoulder. “You were my cousin’s girl. I owe it to him to look out for you.”

Yeah, I don’t believe that bullshit answer for one second.

“But you hate me,” I say, voicing that for the first time since all this shit with Gabriel happened. “And the feeling is mutual, by the way.”

His eyes narrow, like he’s pissed that I’m stating the obvious. Why, though? We both know it. We both feel it. There’s no use skirting around the simple fact that he blames me for Gabriel’s death.

“I can hate you and still do right by Gabriel,” he says.

Perfect, so he doesn’t deny hating me. I should have seen that coming, but for some reason, his admission sends a shard of pain straight through my chest.

God, I’m just as fucked up as he is. This boy has me all mixed up. Why do I even care if he hates me? Because he’s hot as fuck? Am I that shallow?

I push out a breath and shimmy out from between him and the kitchen counter, so I can get ready for bed. It’s been a long night, and the last thing I want to do is stand here and argue with Lucas about why he thinks I’m to blame for Gabriel’s death.

I’m walking to the bathroom, when he reaches out and grabs my arm, turning me back around, so I’m facing him. He drops his hand. “We’re not done talking.”

I flare my fingers at my sides, just inching to slap that pretty boy face. He grabs my

arm one more time and I swear to God...

"I've told you everything I know about Gabriel's death, Lucas."

His eyes darken. "But you don't think he's dead..."

I shrug.

"...and I can only assume that means you know more about his motivations than you're admitting..." he says.

"Let me ask you something, Lucas. Do you think Gabriel is capable of faking his own death?" I ask.

He pauses, staring at me like this is the first time he's even considering that question. "Maybe, if he felt like he had to," he answers. "But I knew him better than anyone, and he had no reason to go off-grid like that. Besides, he'd tell me."

"There are things he didn't tell you," I say, aware that statement is going to open a whole new can of worms. It's the reason I haven't said anything before. Because I know it would wreck Lucas emotionally, not that he'd ever admit it. Heaven forbid he be vulnerable.

"Like what?"

Do I really want to get into all this with Lucas right now? But if I don't tell him at least some of this, then he's never going to understand why I think Gabriel could be alive. The dude harbored secrets, whether Lucas wants to believe that or not.

I lift my hands. "Well, for one, he was resentful about never being made a Sacred Son. Did you know that?"

Lucas shakes his head. “He never said that to me.”

“Of course, he didn’t. Why would he? He went to the Burning Crown senior counsel and lobbied to be a Sacred Son, and they denied his claim flat out. You know that.”

Gabriel was a West and Lucas’ cousin by blood, but not in name. Gabriel’s mom was Mr. West’s assistant, and they fucked around while Mr. West was still married. When she got pregnant, Mr. West said he’d pay for Gabriel’s upbringing, and even brought him to live in the West mansion for a while, but he never publicly claimed him—and for that reason, Gabriel could never be a Sacred Son. To the patriarchs of 1890 who founded the Burning Crown, it was all about legitimacy.

The senior counsel refused to alter the rules for Gabriel, and that really pissed him off. But the fact that his cousins weren’t beating down the counsel’s door demanding Gabriel’s acceptance into the Sacred Sons...? Yeah, that pissed him off even more.

“And second, Gabriel was doing a shit ton of drugs,” I say simply.

Lucas snorts at that. “Drugs,” he repeats, turning to pace. “You really want me to believe that? I saw him almost every day.”

I knew this would be hard for him to believe, which is why I never bothered to say anything before this. Why try to convince him? I know what’s what. I saw Gabriel take some pretty hard shit, and when he did, he would rant for hours about all the wrongs that had been done to him. It was crazy.

“Yeah, you saw him every day for what, an hour?” I say. “Less than that? He’d pop by Rush House, chill for a second, then head off to get high. That’s twenty-three full hours you weren’t with him, Lucas. But I was,” I say with so much passion, I’m shoving the tip of my finger into my own chest. “...and he was a fucking asshole in those twenty-three hours.”

He turns to face me, then shrugs, his pecs and biceps flexing with the motion. Ugh. You know what would be great? If he had a damn shirt on. It's hard having this conversation with him standing in the middle of my apartment with nothing but his underwear on. The guy looks like a goddamn buffet, and I haven't eaten in days. I'm sweating a little.

"If that were true, why didn't you say anything after he died?" It's a simple question, but it's chock-full of judgment and accusation.

"What did it matter back then? Like the rest of you, I thought he was dead." I push out a breath. "...until he started skulking around my fucking apartment, picking fights with my one-night stands!"

Lucas crosses his arms over his chest and glares at me. "This guy could be anyone, Wyn."

"He called me 'Pretty Thing,'" I say. "He had the same scar..."

Lucas glances down at his wrist, and adjusts his bracelets, like he's stalling for time to gather his patience. Then looks back at me. "Let's pretend for a second that it was Gabriel. Why would he have to break in? Why would he hide his face from you? Hm?"

I look at him like he's an idiot. "You think I know why the maybe-Gabriel-stalker is doing what he's doing? Toward the end, Gabriel became more and more unhinged. I couldn't explain half of what he did on a normal day, let alone something like this."

His eyes narrow, and I can tell he knows I'm holding information back. But whatever, I have my reasons for that. Fuck him. Hopefully, I've told him enough to at least get his help. But I'm not telling him more than I need to.

When he doesn't respond, I push out a breath, suddenly so tired. "Whatever. I'm going to bed," I say, walking over to my bed. I throw a pillow onto the floor and rip the comforter off my bed, throwing that down, too. "If you're staying, you can sleep on the floor."

With a cocky smirk, he grabs the pillow and the comforter and carries them both back to the bed. "Nah, I don't think so," he says, his large body falling onto my mattress. He makes a show of sorting the comforter out and tucking himself in.

I just stare down at him with a scowl. I have two options right now. I can either coax him out of the bed or sleep on the floor myself. Well, I guess I have three options. I could also climb into bed with him. It's a queen-sized mattress, so we could each have our own sides. I'd bought it right after I moved in, so Gabriel could sleep over if he wanted to. He never ended up doing that, though.

With a huff, I grab my pajamas from my dresser—sweats and a tank top—then disappear into the bathroom to change and brush my teeth. I usually wash my face, too, and put on my pimple patches, but with Lucas here, there's no way I'm walking out there like that.

Never show a man what you really look like, my mom would always say to me. Girls like us aren't naturally pretty.

She wasn't trying to mean. In fact, I'm convinced she genuinely thought advice like that was helpful. But to ten-year-old me, it meant I'd always have to hide behind makeup to be seen. I could never really be myself.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Lucas is standing at the stove—still in his underwear, mind you—frying something up in a pan. The entire studio is filled with smoke, and it smells like sausage. He must have gotten it from my freezer.

It's ten o'clock at night, and he's hungry now ?

He glances over his shoulder as I walk up, reaching across him to turn the vent hood on. "Trying to smoke us out?" I say, feeling snippy.

Shoveling the sausage onto a plate that already has a piece of toast on it, he turns the stove off and hands it to me. I look down at it, confused. "Why are giving this to me?"

"You need to eat something. I would have made eggs, too, but you're out."

I blink down at the plate, wondering why he's trying to feed me, and then I remember—I told him I'd fainted earlier because I hadn't eaten, which is true, but it's not why I passed out.

My eyes flick up to meet his. "Are you....actually doing something nice for me?"

He scoffs and turns to look through my drawers. When he finds my silverware, he pulls out a fork and hands it to me. "Eat, Wyn."

I glance down at the plate again. The sausage looks good, to be fair, but he made the entire package. "I can't eat all this. Are we sharing?"

"Eat what you can," he says.

With a huff, I walk over to the bed and tuck into the sausage. As I'm eating, Lucas heads to the bathroom. He's in there for a couple of minutes when I hear the shower turn on.

This is weird. I'm sitting on my bed, eating sausage that Lucas made for me while he strips down in my bathroom and takes a shower. He's probably lathering up that

insane body with my soap as we speak.

“You’re pathetic, Wyn,” I whisper to myself as I get up and put the plate of sausage by the sink. I ate three links and the toast. That’s all I can get down.

Fifteen minutes later, the bathroom door opens and Lucas emerges from a cloud of eucalyptus-scented steam. His hair is wet, his skin is glistening, and he looks so damn fuckable, I audibly whimper at the sight of him. I cover it with a cough. God help me.

I’ve learned something in the past couple of weeks. No matter how unappealing someone’s personality, if they’re hot, you’ll want to fuck them. Biology is going to win in the end. I was pretty shocked and appalled by that revelation. I really thought I was more evolved than that, but...here we are.

He saunters over to the sink to inspect my plate, then pops a couple of the leftover sausages into his mouth. Leaning against the counter, he watches me while slowly sucking the juice off his fingers.

The weight of his hungry gaze makes my stomach flip. We’re alone, and he’s already half-naked, staring at me like he’s a starving man eyeing his next meal. His legs are crossed casually in front of him, and my eyes drop to the erection that’s bulging in his underwear.

“Still hungry?” he says with a laugh. “My eyes are up here.”

My cheeks flush with embarrassment and I glance away quickly.

With another chuckle, he pushes off the counter and walks over to me. I’m sitting on the bed, and he’s standing, so his bulge is right at eye level. I try to keep my head turned away, but he grabs my face and forces me to look at him.

“You want a dirty bedtime story, baby? How about Hop on Pop?”

With a sound of disgust, I pull my face out of his hand. But my mouth is watering, and my nipples are so tight and painful, they could cut through steel. He’s so close I can feel the heat from his body, and smell the soap on his skin.

“Fuck you,” I say.

He just smirks at me, and I half-expect him to pull out his dick and force me to suck it. He’s shoved it in so deep that I’d be choking on it. Mmm. Why are my panties drenched just imagining that?

I scramble to my side of the bed, next to the wall, as he walks around to his side. My body is trembling, and my blood is buzzing as I settle on top of the covers as far away from him as I can manage.

“Turn the light off,” I say stiffly.

He reaches over and turns the light off, plunging the room into complete darkness. I release a slow breath, and close my eyes, folding my hands over my ribcage, my body stiff as a board. Now all I need to do is ignore the fact that an insanely hot asshole is sleeping in bed next to me, fully erect and half-naked.

No problem. No problem at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Ghost

Wyn is alone in the bed and I watch her as she sleeps. The room is swathed in darkness, but there's a little light peeking in from the curtains. Enough to cast a gentle glow on her sleeping face.

As I stare at her, I wonder how she's managed to twist me up inside. I've walked away from every other chick I've fucked and some of them were pretty damn incredible. But there's something about Wyn that keeps pulling me in, luring me back.

If I could just understand why, then maybe I could free myself of her. That's why I come here. Every time, I tell myself it'll be the last time. I'll finally get enough. This time, I'll be satisfied.

But after my visits, it's only a matter of hours before I start thinking about her again, imagining her soft skin brushing against mine, the curve of her breasts, the exact color of her nipples when she's aroused.

It's fucking torture.

I should stay away. This would be so much easier if I just stayed the fuck away from her. But I can't, and if I'm honest, it wasn't ever really an option.

Just one more taste.

But this can't continue. Shit is already getting too complicated. One of these days, I just know I'll slip up. I'll do something stupid, blinded by the frenzy of lust I feel whenever I'm around her, and she'll figure out who I am.

And if that happens, it's game over for me. I know Wyn better than she knows herself, and there's one thing I know for sure—if she ever finds out who I am, she'll rip my entire world apart...

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Wyn

It's either really late at night, or very early in the morning when I just randomly wake up. Blinking, I glance at the window and notice it's still dark out, a thin sliver of moonlight shining in from a crack in the curtains.

What woke me?

Ugh , I'm still tired, so with a groan, I roll over onto the other side of the bed, grabbing a pillow and pulling it under my head. I'm lying there for thirty seconds maybe, trying to go back to sleep when I remember abruptly that Lucas is supposed to be in bed with me.

Adrenaline jolts me to full wakefulness and I rise up onto my palms to glance around the room. It's dark, but I can see that the bathroom door is open, and unless he's chillin' out in the bathtub, Lucas isn't in there. One quick look around the apartment reveals he's gone. Maybe he went outside for a minute?

Sitting up, I glance at the nightstand and notice his phone is missing, and his clothes that were on a pile on the floor are missing, too.

I push out a relieved breath, but even as that feeling washes over me, a little bit of fear takes root, too, because it means I'm alone. And vulnerable. Without Lucas here, will my stalker show up?

Excitement, fear, and everything in between rushes through me all at once. And, damn, my body is already humming with the possibility that the dark stranger might show up.

“You’re really fucked in the head, Wyn,” I whisper to myself as I climb out of bed to go to the bathroom. But as I pass the French doors, something catches my eye. A shadow shifting in the darkness. I’m assuming it’s Lucas. He must have gone out to the patio to get some air or smoke or something.

I pause mid-step and turn toward the shadow. He’s leaning against the open door frame wearing all black—black slacks, a black shirt that hugs his massive biceps, and a black mask that covers everything but his eyes.

I should be afraid. I don’t know who this person is. I have my suspicions, but I don’t actually know. And there’s a chance I’m wrong. Like Lucas said, it could be anyone. “Lucas will be right back,” I say.

The masked man chuckles under his breath and steps forward. It’s so dark, all I can see is his silhouette. He pushes in on me and I take several steps back. If this is Gabriel, then I have to know. I have to find a way to pull that mask off and reveal whoever the fuck this is.

“You’ve had another guy in your bed,” he growls in disapproval.

“Not by choice,” I reply, though I immediately regret saying anything. I don’t owe him an explanation for anything I do.

With two long strides, he’s across the room, and he has me pushed up against the nightstand. I wish I could see more of his face, but even his eyes are hidden by the darkness. So I can’t read his expression, but I can feel the tension rolling off him.

“You want him to fuck you,” he says, the words gravely. It's not even a question. It's the same accusation Gabriel always made.

I hate Lucas and I generally don't fuck people I hate. He's hot, though. I can't deny that, even if I wanted to. Sometimes I imagine how his cock would feel stretching me. Or how his sun-kissed skin would taste on the tip of my tongue. But thinking about fucking him, and actually fucking him are two different things.

“I don't want anyone to fuck me,” I lie. “I just want to be left alone.”

He laughs under his breath and I cling to the sound of it. Do I recognize that laugh? I think I do, but I could also be imagining the familiarity. You'd think you'd know someone, even if they came to you in the darkness. Even if they disguised their voice. But without all the normal cues, it's so damn hard.

His hand darts out and he grabs my face, his fingertips digging into my jaw painfully. “You thought you could protect yourself from me.”

My head shakes a little. I want to deny it, but the words are caught in my throat.

With his free hand, he reaches into his pocket and flicks a knife blade open. I'm wearing a tank top, no bra. He slides the blade under the thin strap, and yanks it upward, cutting it. Then he does the same to the other strap. My breasts hold the top up, but I bought it a size or two larger than normal, so with just a slight movement, it's going to fall and expose my breasts. To prevent that from happening, I take shallow breaths.

In the end, it doesn't matter though. Pulling my face up a fraction more, I wince as he uses the tip of the blade to cut the rest of the tank top off, exposing my top half to the cold night air. My nipples tighten as the sharp blade scrapes downward, sending a quick flash of heat straight to my core.

My eyes flutter closed and I suck in a breath. I don't fight him, because I'm not sure what he'll do. He'll slip up at some point, though. I know he will. He's obviously very clever, but he's still a guy. I just have to play along until an opportunity presents itself to run.

His masked face is so close, I can feel his breath on my neck. "Maybe I should just carve you up. Then there'll be no question that you're taken," he says with a low, sinister chuckle. The tip of his blade digs into my ribcage.

"Taken by who, though?" It takes literally every ounce of courage for me to ask that. "I don't even know who the fuck you are."

He laughs again. Still holding my face, he guides me to the bed and pushes me down. He's looming over me in seconds, his blade pressed to that sensitive area right between my breasts.

"You may not know my name," he says, the blade digging in. "But you know the pleasure I give you. You know the feeling of my cock inside you."

I wince and try to move my body away from the sharp pain of his knife, but there's nowhere for me to go. I'm completely surrounded by him. Gripping one breast, he holds me still as he carves something into my skin. There's a twinge of coldness, but no real pain, which is disappointing. It's probably due to the sharpness of the blade, but I find myself craving that sting.

It only takes a second, but when he's done, he lowers his head and licks the spot he just cut, a long, tortured moan coming from somewhere deep in his chest. He must have lifted his mask at some point without me noticing.

Then releasing me, he tugs my sweatpants and panties off with quick, jerky movements. Once I'm naked, he grabs my hips, his fingertips digging into my skin

painfully.

I know I shouldn't want this, and I struggle to suppress the urge to open my thighs wider for him. Even if this is Gabriel, he doesn't have the right to just take whatever he wants, whenever he wants it.

His large body is hovering over mine, but with my arms free, I reach up and swipe at his face. I feel the softness of his mask, but I also catch skin, my blunt nails swiping across his jaw. That takes him by surprise, and he pulls back on instinct—not a ton, but enough for me to wriggle out from under him quickly.

I scramble off the end of the bed, standing by the window, in the darkness. Fear pumps through me because I know he's not going to let what jus

I watch as his shadow stalks toward me. Power. Confidence. Cruelty and malice. “Oh, you're going to be sorry you did that,” he growls.

As he advances on me, he steps into a sliver of light, but he's already pulling his mask down over his face, covering his mouth. I get a quick glimpse of those eyes, but before I can even register the color, he's back in the shadows.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” I ask, desperate now. There's nowhere for me to run. The bathroom is several feet to my right—he'd get to me if I darted for it—and the front door is clear across the room.

“I've already answered that,” he says, still moving forward slowly like I'm a rabbit in the forest and he hasn't tasted blood in a long, long time. I'm glad I can't see his face.

He must be able to see me a lot better than I can see him because when his hand darts out and grabs my throat, he doesn't miss. The air is instantly snatched from my lungs as he hauls me back over to the bed, and shoves me onto the mattress harshly.

An instant later, my wrists are tied over my head and he's using a piece of fabric to blindfold me. I fight against him, but it doesn't even seem to phase him. In fact, if I had to guess, I'd say my fighting just seems to turn him on more. The sound of his breathing is quicker now, more frenzied like he's struggling to hold himself back.

My hands are tied to the headboard, but I thrash around and try to make as much noise as possible. My neighbors are like, eighty, and usually have their television turned up so loud, a nuclear blast could go off and they wouldn't fucking hear it, but it's worth a shot. I open my mouth and scream.

His large hand clamps over my mouth, cutting off my scream. "Ah, ah," he tsk. "You'll need to stay quiet. No one can save you from me, anyway. They'd die trying."

I hear the click of the lamp on my nightstand and a sliver of light creeps in through the bottom of my blindfold.

Then I feel the mattress dip under his weight, maybe just his knee, so he can lean over me. "Scream again," he says, removing his hand. "Do it and I'll fill your mouth with my cock. And I'll pump my load so far down your throat, you'll be choking on it."

The cold blade returns to my skin, skimming over my ribcage. Then he digs in. I can feel the pressure, and a little sting as he pulls it in one long line diagonally across my torso. I hiss, and tilt my head back, reveling in the pain. I'd never admit that though—that I get off on this—because that would give him power over me. Still, my God, warmth washes over me, like a beautiful release of tension.

His tongue follows the same path as the blade. "Fuck yes," he hisses. "I'm going to eat you the fuck up."

Only then do I realize, he's licking up my blood. Another sharp sting crosses in the other direction, and again, his warm mouth follows the path, drinking me in.

What kind of sick fuck wants to lap up my blood? This is seriously giving me serial killer vibes, and that pleasure from a second ago quickly shifts back to fear. Tonight has been a whole rollercoaster of emotions—confusion, anger, fear, pleasure... It's all a fucking

If this is Gabriel, then this is a side of him I never saw. He was always pretty vanilla in the bedroom. A quick fuck, and very little foreplay, if any at all. Most of the time, I'd have to finish myself in the bathroom after he fell asleep.

His soft mouth works down my body, biting, making me yelp, then back up again, over my breasts, sucking my beaded nipple into his mouth, sucking painfully hard. It builds a frenzy inside me, and I thrash my head, pulling at the knot that's securing my wrists to the headboard. It loosens, just a tiny bit, but not enough.

"I want to devour you," he whispers against my skin. "I want every fucking part of you."

"You're a fucking freak," I say, twisting my body.

He chuckles a little. He thinks this is funny. "You're not wrong," he says against my neck, then brings his teeth down to bite me, his blunt teeth sinking into the column of my throat.

Then I feel it, his hand is between my thighs, but more than that, it feels like the hilt of his knife—or what I pray is the hilt. The cold handle brushes over my clit, then between my pussy lips, before he pushes it inside me. I freeze, every muscle in my body going stiff.

But as he slowly starts stroking me from the inside, his mouth on my body, kissing my breasts, swirling his tongue around my nipple, my muscles start to relax, and my skin prickles, my body coming alive under his rough touch.

“You know what I think?” he says gruffly. “I think you’re a fucking freak, too. I think we’re more alike than you want to admit.”

“No,” I say, automatically denying it. I’ve been denying it to myself for so long, it’s instinct.

“You don’t think I’ve noticed?” His tongue finds the faint scars on my hip. “You don’t think I’ve known, for a long time, that you crave pain?”

That statement makes my breath catch because I didn’t think anyone knew. I’ve always been careful to keep the cuts shallow, so they heal quickly. I also use various creams to minimize the scarring. But even with all that, a couple of the cuts have left faint white lines behind. They’re not noticeable, though, unless you know what you’re looking for.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes. I don’t like that this guy knows the most intimate part of me. That, more than anything, sends fear rushing through me. Because it means he’s seen how broken I am, and it’s humiliating.

“I fucking hate you,” I spit out, one tear falling before I can stop it. Thankfully, it’s absorbed by the blindfold, so he doesn’t see it.

“It’s okay, Pretty Thing,” he whispers softly against my skin. “I hate me, too. We’ll both just have to live with it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Ghost

I've been so driven by instinct and need, I haven't stopped to consider my end game with Wyn. Glut myself on her, maybe, then once I've gotten enough, move on. The only problem with that is that the more I give into this dark, gnawing need to have her, the deeper, more perverse my obsession grows.

I mean, fuck, I have her tied to the bed, blindfolded, and with every hitch of her breath, my cock grows harder. If I'm not careful, I'm going to rip her apart. That's how fucking keyed up I am. Rising from the bed, I strip my clothes off, but I leave the mask on. She's blindfolded, anyway, but it's not for her, it's for me. With the mask, I'm someone else. I slip into the role of a predator, and it's Wyn Barker I'm endlessly hunting...

When I get back onto the bed, her thighs are clamped closed, her ankles crossed.

"Open your legs," I command, impatience rushing through my blood. My balls are so damn tight, I have to grit my teeth. I'm ready to explode. I need to be inside her, now.

When she doesn't comply, I shove my hand between her thighs and pry them open forcefully. Her strength is nothing to mine, so it doesn't take much.

She whimpers as I hold her thighs open, positioning myself between them. I grab her face and squeeze. "When will you learn, you can't keep yourself from me?" I say harshly as I push my cock into her warm, tight pussy. I groan as her channel clenches

around me, holding me, drawing me in deeper. Fucking-A. I'm dizzy for a second, all the blood rushing from my head.

It's like taking that first, blissful hit of ecstasy. Once that drug hits your bloodstream, it curls its warm fingers around your soul. That's Wyn to me. Bliss. Joy. A warm feeling that makes everything else pale in comparison.

Slowly, I rock my hips forward, pushing in deeper, as deep as her body will take me. She moans and that desperate sound makes my cock swell even larger inside her. Her hips tilt upward, which allows her to take a fraction more of me.

“That's right, baby. Take my cock like a good girl.”

Her head is tilted back, her mouth open in a silent scream as I pound into her, my pelvic bone slamming against her clit. Her tits bounce and I grab one, squeezing, pinching her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. She sucks in a quick breath, and I know she likes it. That spike of pain. I know, because I crave the same thing.

Releasing her breast, I thread my fingers through her hair, grabbing a fistful, so I can pull her head back farther, her neck arching into the pillow beneath her head.

My heart is racing, and all I can focus on is the feel of her body beneath mine, pliant and desperate. With my free hand, I reach between us and swipe my thumb over her clit. She cries out, bucking her hips, but her movements are restricted by my body.

I'm not kind. I assault her clit, working in circles as I continue to pound into her pussy, slamming in as far as I possibly can before pulling back out, then lurching forward again.

After only a few seconds, I can feel the telltale signs of her orgasm mounting—her pussy clenches tighter, trying to suck me in and keep me there. Her body starts to

tense and her heels hook into my lower back.

It takes every ounce of control I have, but I remove my hand from her face and ease my cock out of her body. It's one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my fucking life, but I can't let her come yet—because once I come, God knows when I'll get to have her again. Shit is already getting too murky and complicated between us.

When I pull out of her, she deflates, whimpering. But she doesn't say anything, doesn't protest or get angry. She just lays there, panting, like she's trying to gather her strength.

“Let me see your face,” she says between each harsh breath.

“Shut the fuck up,” I bite out, sliding my hands under her ass to pull her towards me. My cock is like stone, painfully tight, and all I can think about is filling her with my cum.

Not yet.

Instead, I pull my mask up and bury my face in her wet cunt. But I'm not gentle. I suck and nip, twirl my tongue around the tight bundle of nerves, then take it between my teeth and bite down. She pulls against her restraints, and I revel in the sounds of her tormented cries. It's a beautiful melody. Those anguished moans sing to a part of my soul that's damaged and broken. It's a part of me I think Wyn recognizes in herself.

I've fucked so many girls, I couldn't even guess at a number. But the first time I tasted Wyn—fuck, I was lost. That was over a year ago, and I haven't stopped thinking about her since. Mild curiosity grew into an obsession, which then festered into a full-blown addiction.

Now I can't even go one fucking day without thinking about her.

I shove my face as far into her pussy as I can, my tongue reaching deep inside her soft channel, lapping her up. I could do this every day for the next hundred years and still want more.

She moans loudly, her thighs clenching around my head, and I can feel her climax building again. I abruptly pull away, moving off the bed. I have to physically distance myself from her or I know I'll rip her to shreds.

I'm so keyed up, my cock and balls feel like fucking boulders between my thighs. I feel lightheaded and my vision is starting to go hazy.

All I can see is her.

With a groan, she pulls against her restraints again, clenching her thighs tight. I know she wants to come. I've taken her to the brink twice, then pulled away both times. I know it's cruel, but I live to be cruel to her.

I take a few heavy breaths to steady my rioting heart, tilting my head back to stare up at the ceiling. As I listen to her whimpers and moans of protest, anger knots in my chest. This control she has over me is insane. It's a dark, infinite abyss of desire, and I can't help but wonder if I'll always be a slave to this feeling she gives me.

She's lying still now, her hands balled into fists, her thighs still clenched tight—like that could keep me away. If I want her, I take her. I'm standing over her and I reach down to fist my cock, stroking. Slowly at first, but as I stare at her delicate face, my rhythm quickens, my strokes becoming more violent.

She may be blindfolded, but she can hear my clenched palm slapping against my thigh, and her nostrils flare. She opens her mouth like she's going to say something,

but in the end, her pink tongue darts out to lick her bottom lip—and that's what does it. That's what sends me over the edge. I cum so damn hard, it erupts from the head of my cock like a goddamn geyser directly onto her chest.

Wyn sucks in a sharp breath as my hot cum coats those pretty little tits. When it's over, I take a step back and study her. The orgasm was weak and nothing compared to being inside her pussy—but that would have rewarded her, and I can't have that. Not when she still thinks she's the one in control here.

I study her face as I wipe up and slip back into my clothes. She's not moving, she's just lying there, hands hanging limply above her head, her chest rising and falling with each breath.

I pull my mask back over my face, then I walk over to her. "Keep your blindfold on until I leave," I say gruffly, untying her hands. I lean down and brush my mouth across her parted lips. "And don't clean yourself off," I whisper. "You'll wear my cum all day tomorrow like a badge of honor, my sweet little whore. Do you understand?"

She nods once, silently. But I wonder, will she do as she's told, or will she defy me yet again? My bet is on the latter, but maybe that's just hopeful thinking on my part, because defiance means punishment, and I live to see the fear in her eyes...

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Wyn

I'm beyond pissed.

The perverted fuck took me to the brink twice and denied me release both times. Then he had the audacity to finish himself on my chest. And now I have to wear it for a full day? Or what...face punishment?

If I'm being honest, I wish he would have just finished me, instead of pulling out. My entire body feels like it's on fire, my clit burning with the intense need for release.

If I hated him before, I fucking despise him now.

Two can play his twisted games.

My right hand moves to my chest and I touch the sticky pool of cum. I can feel with the tips of my fingers that it was a huge load and I coat my fingers with it, then bring it to my lips. My tongue darts out and I take a taste.

I hear a groan from across the room and I smile to myself. Boys. So damn predictable. I take another sample of his cum, then I spread my thighs wide, and touch my cum-coated fingers to my throbbing clit.

With my other hand, I reach up and grab my breast roughly, pinching my nipple between my fingers as I do it. Sharp pain spikes through me and I arch into it.

“Mmm,” I moan, my tongue darting out to lick my bottom lip. The taste of his cum still fills my mouth, driving the clawing need that’s gathering again in my pussy.

In three seconds flat, his cock will be inside me. Guaranteed. I’d put my last twenty dollars on it.

I can hear my floor creak as he paces, a low growl reverberates from somewhere across the room. He’s watching me. I have him exactly where I want him.

I’m no stranger to masturbation, and I can make myself come lightening quick. It’s like brushing my teeth. I’m a pro. But this time, I deliberately draw my pleasure out. My fingers apply just enough pressure, my circles slow and measured.

My knees fall apart and I use the blunt nails of my free hand to scrape over my breasts, leaving a pleasant little sting in their wake. “Ahhh,” I gasp. “Ohhh.”

The mattress dips at the foot of the bed, and I know I’ve got him.

“You fucking tease,” he mutters angrily, shoving my hand aside. He enters me with one forceful thrust, the fabric of his pants brushing against the backs of my thighs.

My legs curl around him as he pounds into me, shoving the headboard against the wall with each violent jerk of his hips. Holy shit . He’s angry and he’s so deep it’s painful, slamming against my cervix like he’s determined to get past it. But that pain opens me up and mingles with pleasure in a way that takes my breath away.

I gasp and tilt my head back, my eyes fluttering closed behind the blindfold. “ Oh, my God ,” I gasp, tears rolling down the side of my face.

“That’s it, baby. Take this cock like a good girl.” His face is close to mine, his words muffled, so I know he’s still wearing his mask. But his smug tone pissed me off, and I

reach up to slap him, but I manage to get a handful of soft fabric instead. I pull at it in a frenzy, trying to get to his face, trying to inflict damage.

With a low chuckle, he grabs my wrist and pulls it aside roughly while he's still pounding into me. He doesn't even skip a beat. "You can't hurt me, baby. I'm so much stronger than you."

Stronger maybe, but not smarter.

He releases me and my hands move to his back. I sink my nails in, pulling them down the muscles flexing as he pumps into me. I dig in as hard as I can, using him as an anchor.

"Fuck, yes, " he growls. "This tight pussy is going to make me come again."

Images of his milky white cum flood my mind and all of that building pressure inside me erupts instantly, drowning me in sensation. My channel grips his cock, strangling it, and he stiffens. I can feel his cock pulse inside me as he fills me with his cum. The sensations are so strong, so intense, my entire body trembles.

When it's all over, I melt into the mattress and suck in several long breaths to try and get my heart rate under control. My muscles are still shaking from the rush of adrenaline.

Goddamn, I don't think I've ever come that hard in my entire life.

He moves off me, and I can feel him stand up. The floorboards creak as he moves around doing God knows what. And I just lay there, trying desperately to catch my breath. My limbs feel boneless, like jelly.

I listen as he gathers his things. He's not saying anything, which is unusual. He's

usually barking orders or making outright demands, so this silence is weird. Uncomfortably weird.

I can hear him walk to the front door and pull it open. He pauses for a second and I wish I could see his face. Is he angry? Shocked? Disgusted? A second later, I hear his heavy footsteps as he walks out.

The door clicks shut, and darkness washes over me, almost like...emptiness. I tear the blindfold off and sink back against my pillows.

That orgasm was... incredible . But more importantly, it proved something to me. At the end of the day, my stalker is just a mere mortal, like the rest of us. And worse than that, he's a guy . And guys can be manipulated, for better or for worse.

For a second, I consider taking a shower, but the masked man's edict that I leave his cum on my body kinda kills that idea.

I could wash it off anyway, though. I mean, fuck him, right? But even as that defiance bubbles up inside me, I decide I'm too tired to get up. Readjusting the pillows under my head, I close my eyes and let the darkness envelop me...

The alarm on my phone wakes me abruptly.

With a yawn, I stretch and open my eyes, reaching over to grab my phone so I can turn the alarm off.

The room is flooded with bright light and I realize I must have opened the curtains at some point. When? I search my memory, remembering the masked man from last night. When he popped up, the curtains were closed. I know that for sure, because he was cast in shadow, except for a tiny sliver of light that was peeking in.

And I didn't touch the curtains after he left.

I sit up, blinking, and see Lucas sitting in a chair that he must have pulled in from the patio. It had to come from there because my place isn't even big enough for a little breakfast table. I usually just eat on my bed while I'm watching something on my computer.

He's leaning back in the chair, arms crossed over his chest, and he's glaring at me like he's pissed. His eyes drop from my face to my breasts, and that's when I realize I'm completely naked. I reach for a pillow to cover myself up. For a second I wonder how he got in, but then I remember I gave him a key.

"Where the fuck have you been?" I ask.

His electric blue eyes wander over me, and I don't know why, but it feels like a critique somehow. "I stepped out," he says like he's annoyed I'm even asking.

"Obviously," I say, narrowing my eyes. "And conveniently, I might add."

His mouth tightens, and he returns my glare. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

He must think I'm an idiot. He comes here to "guard" me, then suspiciously disappears right before the stalker shows up? Is he my stalker? The second that thought pops up, I dismiss it. He hates me. I can see the disdain in his eyes even now.

But...maybe he's helping my stalker? It would make sense. Why else would he agree to babysit me, unless he wanted to make it easier for this guy to come and go?

"Are you helping him?" I ask, purposely giving him no context whatsoever.

“Him who?” he asks, his brows pinched together in confusion.

I scoff. So it’s going to be like that. “Go ahead, deny it. Whatever.”

Grabbing for the comforter, I pull it around me and walk over to my dresser to grab some clothes—panties, a bra, short shorts, and a pink tank top—then lock myself in the bathroom.

My first instinct is to step into the shower and wash the previous night off my body, but the memory of the masked man’s words come flooding back...

You’ll wear my cum all day tomorrow like a badge of honor...Do you understand?

It galls me that he feels like he can dictate what I do, but honestly...I have enough shit going on, I don’t need to incite this asshole’s anger, too.

When I emerge from the bathroom a few minutes later, fully dressed, Lucas is leaning against my kitchen counter, arms crossed over his broad chest, scowling at me. There are two paper coffee cups and a couple of pastry bags on the counter next to him.

“You can leave,” I say, grabbing my phone and a water bottle from the fridge. “There’s really no point in you being here when you’re just going to fucking disappear in the middle of the night anyway.”

As I’m shutting the fridge, his hand darts out, and he grabs my wrist. “Where are you going?”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “I’m going to class,” I say, annoyed. “You know, that higher education thing we all pretend to do here? Some of us can’t afford to just fuck off.”

I mean, damn, half the buildings on campus were built by the West family, going back several generations. The newest building, in fact, sleek, beautiful made of steel and glass is named after Lucas' dad—the Jonathan West Building of Physics. Even one of the campus residence halls is theirs.

“I'll take you to campus,” he says stoically.

I pull my hand out of his grip and point at him. “No, you won't. I can make it on my own.”

The only reason I wanted him here was to prove I wasn't losing my mind. But he's already proven himself useless in that regard.

I don't fucking need him—especially since I suspect he's in on this Gabriel weirdness.

“There's a meeting at Rush House tonight for all active members,” he says.

“Fine,” I say, shoving my water bottle into my backpack before slinging it over my shoulder. “I'll stop by after my classes.”

And then maybe I can talk to the other Sacred Sons about the absolute absurdity of having this fool shadow me...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Wyn

I only have one class today, but I purposely allowed Lucas to believe I had a full schedule. He probably already knows, honestly. He's a Sacred Son, which means he has full access to all of my information, including my class schedule.

But whatever.

Once my morning class is out, I head over to Gabriel's mom's house. It's not far from campus, a beautiful little house nestled in the hills of Malibu. Gabriel lived in off-campus housing, but he was at his mom's place a lot. Mostly to watch the dog, Queenie, while she was away, which was pretty frequent.

I make my way up the long driveway. The house is only one story, and quite small, but elegant with trees that surround the property, and windows that bring in tons of natural light. I park in the driveway, behind a large white truck, and get out, my heart hammering like crazy.

As I approach the front door, I notice several moving boxes lined up along the pavement in front of the house. There's one guy in the truck, and a couple others coming out the front door with a desk.

What the...?

The front door is open, but I feel weird about just walking in, so I lean in and call out,

“Hello? Ms. Martelle?”

“Just a second,” she calls out from somewhere deep in the house. “Coming!”

A few seconds later, Gabriel’s mom appears with the chihuahua, Queenie, under her arm. She’s tall and thin, and wearing her workout clothes. She looks surprised to see me. Of course, she is. I haven’t seen her since the funeral.

“Oh, hey, honey,” she says, looking me over, and I wonder if she even remembers my name. “Come on in,” she says. “I’m just packing up the dining room.”

I follow her through the empty house to the dining room where a couple of movers are in the middle of packing up a bunch of tea cups from the china cabinet.

“Ah, careful with those,” Mrs. Martelle jumps in. “Those are really delicate. Wrap them twice with the bubble wrap.”

A set of French doors open up into the sunroom, which hasn’t been packed up yet, so I wander in there. “Are you leaving Malibu?” I ask.

That question pulls her attention back to me, and she walks over to the doorway. She tilts her head and frowns at me like she’s just now realizing that she’s forgotten to let me know about the move. “Uh, yeah, baby, I’m sorry. You know that Gabriel was my only child, and after everything that happened—” She pauses to wipe away tears that aren’t there. “I just thought it’d be easier to leave the memories behind.”

I nod slowly, then shrug, focusing my attention on the plant next to me so she doesn’t see the confusion on my face. I mean, damn, moving feels drastic, but then again, I’m not in her shoes. “No, yeah, I totally get it,” I say. “Where are you moving to?”

“I have some family in Brazil,” she says.

“Oh, yeah. Right.” I knew that and it makes sense. Her parents are gone, but she has a couple of siblings there. “Um, well, I’m sorry to bother you about this, but I had a quick question about that day a couple of months ago.”

She knows what day I mean. I don’t want to say it.

“Sure, what’s up?” she replies, her hip pressed against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest. She looks open to whatever I’m about to ask like she’s eager to put me at ease.

“The, um, autopsy report mentions a witness to what happened. Do you know who that was?” I ask, plucking at a leaf.

She tilts her head like she’s not sure why I’m asking. “Um, I think the police mentioned a young guy from the area. He just happened to be walking along the tracks and saw Gabriel,” she says.

“Do you know his name?” I ask pointedly.

She seems a little surprised by my question, and she stumbles over her words. “I don’t know, Pendleton, maybe? I’m sorry, I don’t remember.” She blinks at me, the emotion from a minute ago completely gone. “Why do you ask?”

I take a step back and shake my head. This room smells amazing, I realize randomly. It smells... familiar. “It’s okay. I guess I was just looking for some closure, that’s all,” I say. “It’s dumb.”

“We all miss him, but he’s in a better place,” she says, her tone softening. “Have you thought about talking to a therapist?”

“Um, yeah, actually. I think I will. Anyway, sorry to bother you.” I take another step

back and glance more closely at the plant I'd just been molesting. The thick white flowers look familiar. "Good luck with the move..." I say distractedly. "Hey, what kind of plant is this?"

"Gardenia jasminoides," she chirps proudly.

I drop the leaf so quickly, you'd think it was poison. My heart starts beating faster. "This is gardenia?"

"It's a really fussy plant when it's kept indoors, but I love the smell. I have several of them."

I glance around the sunroom, and now I see them. There are three or four pots, all lined up under the windows, except...there's one pot missing. I can see the outline of where it used to be on the tile floor.

"You're missing a pot," I say, pointing to the brown ring.

She shrugs and laughs, which is a strange response. "That one died," she says. "As I said, they're fussy plants."

M'kay.

She's droning on about how it took her a few months to find the right kind of potting soil, but I'm not really listening. I'm too busy staring at the white, waxy gardenia flowers like they're something out of the Alien franchise.

If Gabriel is my stalker—and I realize that's a big if—he could have gotten the flowers from here. It's the exact same type of flower that was placed on my bed and desk...

The only problem with that theory is that gardenia is a pretty common flower. And southern California has a pretty mild climate, so this whole area is practically exploding with gardenia.

“Everything okay?” Ms. Martell’s voice jolts me out of my daze.

Blinking, I glance up at her. “No, yeah. Sorry. I haven’t been sleeping well lately, so I’m just...” I make a face and motion to my head like it’s all jumbled. “Anyway, um, I have class in a bit, so I should run,” I lie.

Queenie is dancing around Ms. Martell’s feet, so she picks the small dog up and tucks her under her arm. “I’m glad you stopped by,” she says, walking me back to the front door. “Take care of yourself.”

I nod and head back to my car awkwardly. When I get inside, I release the pent-up breath I’d been holding. What the hell was that? That whole encounter was so bizarre. But there was one thing she said that might actually be helpful...

Pendleton.

At least I have somewhere to start. Maybe.

All I really want is to confirm that I’m seeing things. That Gabriel is really gone, and whoever is popping up in my room is someone else entirely. It wouldn’t be hard to mimic Gabriel, right? I mean, in theory.

When I get home, I open my door, breath held, wondering what I’m going to find. There’s no flower on my bed, but there’s a brown paper bag on my kitchen counter with a note attached. I pull it off the bag and read it. The handwriting is so chaotic, I can barely make out the words. It must be from Lucas.

Eat something.

Opening the bag, I realize it's a cheeseburger and fries from my favorite burger joint. And it's still warm, which means he must have just dropped it off. How did he know I'd be home? I told him I had class all day. It's near noon, though, and he probably guessed I'd come home for lunch.

My stomach growls when the smell of fresh fries wafts out of the bag. It'd be a shame to let this all go to waste, right?

Grabbing a canned soda from the fridge, I fall onto my bed and dig into my cheeseburger and fries with unrefined vigor while simultaneously looking up the name Pendleton on my phone.

It's a common last name, apparently, so I add an age range to my search. Ms. Martelle said the guy was "young," so I'm going to assume he's between eighteen and twenty-five-ish. He could be slightly older, and still be considered young, but it's a starting point.

As I'm searching, a text pops up on my screen from Lucas.

I knew you'd be hungry.

I freeze mid-bite and blink at the text. Is he watching me? Did he plant a camera in my apartment? Honestly, I wouldn't put it past him to do that and I feel a little dumb for not considering that possibility before this.

Come to Rush House.

I put my cheeseburger down and glare down at my phone. The fucking nerve.

You need to stop ordering me around like I'm your pet.

I mean, fuck, who the hell does he think he is?

Wyn. Come now, or I'll show up at your place, and drag you here myself. Your choice.

M'kay, first order of business—change my damnlocks. I was so dumb to give him a key. Second order of business, find the camera he obviously hid in my apartment.

Picking my burger up, I take a bite and text him back one-handed.

Why don't you just tell me what you want now and save us both the trouble?

The three little bubbles appear immediately, which means he was waiting for my response. Then a single word pops up on my screen.

Gwendolyn.

Shit.

It's just my name, but for some reason, I feel the threat in that one word, and I wonder how wise it is to fuck around with the most powerful guy on campus. I should probably just see what he wants and get it over with. I won't lie, though, it irks me that he has the power to make me jump to his beck and call.

Fine. Whatever. Give me a minute.

His reply comes immediately.

You can finish your fries on the way.

I'm just shoving a fry into my face and that statement makes me freeze again. Well, that's just confirmation that he's watching me. The sick fuck. Did he already have the camera up when the stranger came to my room last night? I wonder if I could get my hands on that footage. I could turn it over to the police, then they'd have to believe me, right? Let's forget for a second that I'd essentially be handing over a damn sex tape to complete strangers. Would they see how much I actually enjoyed it?

Ugh. It feels like I'm in a lose-lose situation. No matter what I do, I'm judged, ignored, or made to feel like I'm going crazy.

I throw the uneaten fry into the paper bag and change quickly into a short dress. The Burning Crown has a dress code when it comes to official meetings—no bathing suits, or casual clothes. Once I'm dressed, I find some strappy wedges and grab my purse, then head out.

When I pull up to the house, there are already people coming and going. It's always busy here, but because there's a meeting tonight, there are more people hanging around than usual.

The front door is already open, and I just walk in, heading straight for the living room. All the regulars are here—Jackson is playing video games, and Christian is making out with his consort. She's on his lap, practically fucking him in front of everyone. Nice. The only ones who aren't here are Ash and Lucas. They could be upstairs, though.

Ava sees me and pops up from the couch. "Oh, hey, girl. I wasn't expecting you until later."

I smile at her. She's so eager to fill the role of hostess.

Pushing out a breath, I lift my hands. "Lucas wanted to see me, so here I am."

“Oh!” I can tell she’s surprised by that like Lucas should have told her, but didn’t. Their dynamic is so weird. I think she’s aiming for trad wife energy, but given that it’s Lucas she’s dealing with, that’s obviously not going to fly. He’s far too bohemian for that Stepford wife shit.

“Cool, well, let me go grab him,” she says. “I think he’s in his room.”

I wonder if she knows Lucas has been assigned to shadow me. I’m guessing not. Lucas doesn’t seem like the type to share information unless it’s absolutely necessary. Why that is, I have no idea.

“Thanks,” I say. When she leaves the room, I look around. I have something to say to the Sacred Sons—namely that Lucas needs to be removed as my “shadow” asap, but with all these people in the room, now isn’t the time, I guess.

After only a couple of minutes, Ava returns. She looks unhappy, for some reason. “He said you can just go on up.”

“To his bedroom?” I ask, horrified. The last time I was alone in his room, I narrowly escaped with my vagina intact.

“Um, yeah.” She seems uncomfortable about it but resigned to it. Just like everyone else around here, if a Sacred Son wants something, she’s going to give it to him—even if she’s not exactly happy about it. But do I have room to criticize? I do the same fucking thing.

When I get to his room, I don’t even bother knocking. He’s sitting at his desk, books, and papers scattered across the polished surface. If I didn’t know better, I’d assume he was actually doing schoolwork.

I leave the door open and cross my arms over my chest. “What do you want?”

His room is so large, there's a recess on the left with built-in bookshelves, and his desk is in front of that, facing the middle of the room. When I walk in, he leans back in his chair, like a king deigning to acknowledge his lowly subject. He holds a pen to his mouth, tapping it against his perfectly white teeth as he assesses me.

"Took you long enough," he says in that infuriatingly assertive tone.

I don't even answer him, because why? He just gets off on this control thing. Instead, I shift my weight, and sigh, like get on with it.

"You went to see Gabriel's mom," he says.

I narrow my eyes at him. Is that what this is about? I'd ask how he knows about my visit, but Lucas is omnipresent. He knows everything that happens in this town.

"And?"

He pulls the pen away from his mouth and starts tapping it on the desk. "She said you were asking about witnesses and shit."

"Yeah, she said it was a young guy named Pendleton."

"The conversation upset her," he says, eyeing me in ways that make my channel clench.

I scrape my teeth along my bottom lip and glance down at the floor. "She didn't look upset." I glance back up at him. "She was busy moving. Did you know she was leaving?"

He shrugs one shoulder, and stands up, coming around to the front of the desk. "Of course, I did. And who could blame her?"

“You didn’t think to...I don’t know, mention that to me at some point?”

We’re several feet apart, but I swear, I can feel the anger coming off him. It’s like a blast of heat aimed directly at me. “Why the fuck would I do that? You don’t give a shit about Gabriel.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “Seriously, Lucas? Hypocrisy isn’t a good look on you.”

He steps closer, his blue eyes darkening. “What was that you said a couple of weeks back, ‘Gabriel’s dead, but we aren’t?’”

“I said I wasn’t,” I correct. “I can’t speak for you. You might very well be dead inside. I’d have that checked out if I were you.”

He laughs, but the sound is completely drained of amusement. “You like to pretend you’re so much better than all this. Like you’re above the dirty dealings of the Burning Crown. But the night you were initiated, you become one of us—” He grabs my face, and forces my head to the side so he can whisper in my ear, “And, that night, when my cock drove into your cunt so deep you bled, I realized something. You and me, we’re exactly the same. We both need pain to feel alive.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lucas

I study her face as my words land. I don't know why I told her I was the one who'd initiated her. Maybe I wanted to wipe that holier-than-thou look off her face. Or maybe it was me lashing out after that comment about me being dead inside. Either way, she knows now.

Disbelief registers in Wyn's wide green eyes and she pulls against me weakly, like my words have zapped the strength right out of her.

"No. That's not—" Her throat moves as she swallows. "You're fucking with me."

I'm still holding her face, and I drag my nose up the column of her neck, before burying it in her hair. Inhaling deeply, I take her sweet essence into my lungs. Then I sink my teeth into that sensitive skin just below her ear, exactly like I did that night.

She pushes against me and I release her. And, fuck me, but my dark soul feeds on the fear I see in her eyes. A spark of excitement ignites in my chest.

Her breath is coming in short little pants, and she takes a step back like she's about to run. I hope she does. Because then she'll know—there's nowhere she can run that I can't catch her. Nowhere.

Wyn's hand flies to her throat and I can tell she's trying to gather her composure. I know, because I've studied Wyn for so long I could apply for a fucking Ph.D. in the

subject of her. Every hitch in her breath, every micro-expression. It's all coded in my brain.

"But...you hate me," she says, clinging to that single fact like it's evidence that I couldn't be the faceless bastard who fucked her in front of everyone.

I move toward her. My door is still open, and she's only about twenty feet away from it, backing up slowly.

"You're right." That familiar anger coils tight in my gut and radiates out into my bloodstream. "Before you showed up a year ago, I fucked whoever I wanted, whenever I wanted, never knowing..." I've caught up to her, and her breathing is labored now like she's struggling to draw in each breath. "...Once I got that first taste of you, I'd be addicted. I fucking hate you for that."

She blinks at me like she's processing what I'm telling her. I wonder if she ever suspected it was me that night. "Did Gabriel know?" she asks, her tone hollow.

"Yes," I say, my voice equally void of emotion. "I told him I'd been chosen to initiate you."

We're not supposed to tell anyone outside of the Sacred Sons, but Gabriel and I were close, and honestly, there wasn't anything I wouldn't tell him. At that point, anyway.

"After that night, I couldn't stop thinking about you...and then you started dating Gabriel, so whatever I felt, I had to bury deep down. And do you know what happens to things that are buried?" My eyes meet hers. "They fester and rot."

"None of that is my fault," she answers.

The fuck it isn't.

Reaching out, I touch the tip of my finger to her smooth cheek. “I know you felt the pull between us, Wyn. You can lie to yourself, but I know what's what.”

She moves her head, dodging my touch. “Doesn’t matter now, does it?”

My gaze flicks over her. Her tits are lush and perky beneath her dress, and I can see the outline of her nipples. Saliva fills my mouth just remembering how those nipples taste.

She’s standing there, staring at me like I’m the monster from her nightmares. And I am. I know that for sure. But I’m also the instrument of her deepest, most secret desires. I know that shit, too.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I shift my weight and flick my chin up. “You can go downstairs and wait for the meeting to start. I’ll be down in a minute.”

She looks confused at my abrupt dismissal of her, and she hesitates like she wants to say something before she leaves. One last biting remark, most likely. In the end, though, she must think better of it. With a shallow nod, she turns around and leaves through the open door looking relieved.

I smile to myself. Good. I hope she enjoys that feeling because, in just a few minutes, she’ll know exactly why I let her go so easily...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Wyn

As I make my way down the hallway, and down the main staircase to the study, I try to steady my breathing. My entire body is trembling after that encounter with Lucas. I still have trouble wrapping my head around the fact that he was the one who initiated me.

But why do I suspect there's so much more to all this?

I know you felt the pull between us, Wyn.

Of course, I did. But even if I had known he was the guy who fucked me during my initiation—and I didn't know—I still wouldn't have approached him afterward. The Sacred Sons constantly have girls crawling all over them. They're the most sought-after commodities at ExU. Getting one of those guys alone is like plucking a star out of the night sky with your bare hands. It's physically impossible unless one of them singles you out first.

Whatever. It just proves out of touch Lucas really is.

I'm also shocked he let me go as easily as he did just now. But, whatever, I'll take it. It's like narrowly escaping the jaws of a lion—if you're lucky enough to do it, you don't ask questions.

I walk into the dressing room, grab my cloak and hood, and start putting them on.

“Oh, hey, Wyn.” It’s Ava’s voice, and I turn around to see her easy smile. She’s just putting her hood on, too. Her usual blond beach waves are curled, pulled over her shoulders, and she’s wearing the queen consort’s white cloak, which sets her apart from the sea of navy blue.

“Hey,” I reply with a tight smile. For the first time, I notice how much she looks like me. Same long, wavy blond hair, same green eyes, and slender frame.

Wow, fuck. Lucas really has a type.

I feel a little dumb for not putting all of this together before. But, again, the hate he exuded really threw me off. Why would I ever suspect he had a thing for me?

Ugh. What a fucking asshole.

“So, uh, how did it go with Lucas?” she asks. I can tell she’s probing for information about my conversation with him. “Everything okay?”

I’m tying the robe as I turn to face her. “Lucas is an asshole, Ava. He’s not faithful and I don’t know why you put up with his bullshit. You deserve so much better.”

For a second, she just stares at me, like she doesn’t know what to say. I know I caught her off guard, but fuck it. She needs to hear this and I’m done hiding behind politeness.

She laughs to cut the tension, then glances away uncomfortably. “Yeah, I mean, I know that. We’re not exclusive. He made that clear from the beginning, and I’m cool with it.”

I can tell she’s definitely not cool with it, but whatever. If she’s hoping for something more serious with Lucas West then she’s barking up the wrong psychopath. That’s

her business, though.

I shrug. “You do you girl. Just thought I’d mention it.”

The benefits of being a Sacred Sons’s consort are wild, so I don’t blame her one bit for playing the game. I just hope she isn’t crushed when she realizes Lucas is never going to come around, no matter how perfect she is. He’s a cunt like that and I wonder now if he even has emotions like the rest of us.

A few minutes later, we’re all called into the ballroom. Austin is at the door, collecting our phones. As we all file in, about a hundred people, we’re each handed a cut crystal flute filled to the gilded rim with champagne.

Holding the glass in my hand, I wonder why we’re being served champagne at a random meeting. That’s a bit weird. I’ll take it, though. Anything to file down the sharp edge of anger I’m feeling after Lucas’ confession.

The champagne is probably for a toast or something, but I down it in one gulp before even taking five steps into the room. I ditch the empty glass on a passing tray, then pull the hood over my head, and find a spot in the back of the room. I could try to find Alexis, but I’m not feeling very social right now. It’s already been a fucked up night, and I just want to get this shit over with so I can go home.

On the other side of the room, Mason brings everyone to attention with his stick. Thump, thump, thump. The room instantly quiets down, and someone coughs. Only when the room is completely silent does Mason announce the Sacred Sons.

I can hear them come in, but I’m so far back, I can only see the tops of their dark hoods. Not gonna lie, I’m glad I don’t have to see Lucas’ intense glare. I’m so pissed at him, I can hardly think straight. But my body hasn’t gotten that memo, apparently, because just knowing he’s in the same room with me sends a trickle of awareness

down my spine.

Ugh, disgusting.

One of the guys steps forward to address the room—Ash maybe—but I’m not even paying attention. I’m too busy replaying my entire initiation ceremony in my head, dissecting every word the masked guy— Lucas —and I exchanged. His tone, the way he moved, everything.

Now that I know it was Lucas, it makes sense, but could I have seen the signs before? Did I ignore all the evidence on some weird subconscious level, because I didn’t want to face the fact that it was him? Maybe it was just easier for me to believe it was someone else.

But the truth is, as much as I hate Lucas, he awakened something inside me that night. A darkness that I now crave. A depravity that feeds my own twisted, fucked-up desire. For the millionth time in the last year, I wonder what’s wrong with me.

I’m circling that thought when I suddenly hear my name echo off the wood-paneled walls. Glancing up, I blink and notice every person in the large room is turned to face me. Oh, shit. I feel like I’ve been caught daydreaming in class.

I’m considering what my response should be when the group of people in front of me part like the Red Sea, creating a direct path from me to someone standing across the room.

Lucas.

He’s standing expectantly, head lowered, looking like the devil in his dark cloak, the deep hood pulled over his blond hair. His gaze is fixed on me. “Wyn Barker,” he repeats. “Come stand before your Lord.”

My Lord? I assume he's referring to himself. Gross.

But, for real, what's happening? I'm so confused.

On second thought, I don't care to find out. I glance around in a panic looking for possible escape routes. But the door to my left is blocked by a crush of people. I could wade through them, but that would make an already awkward situation a million times worse.

With a resigned sigh, I take the only option open to me and start moving down the path toward Lucas.

I stop within a few feet of him. "What is this?" I ask quietly, embarrassment burning my cheeks. Why is he calling me out in front of everyone? Is this another one of his cruel games?

A vibrating field of toxic energy surrounds us both and it's on the verge of exploding. He lifts his head to address the room, but his gaze never leaves my face. "Esteemed members of the Burning Crown, I have chosen Wyn Barker to be my consort and queen."

Whoa, what?

I blink at him, like what the actual fuck? The Sacred Sons selected their consorts ages ago, at the Preference Ceremony, which is held at the beginning of the academic year. And back then, he chose Ava. Not me. Well, I was dating Gabriel, to be fair. But still, the choice was made.

"You can't have two consorts," I point out, and I know that for a fact because I read over the bylaws with a fine-tooth comb a few weeks ago when I was helping Lux. The bylaws specifically state that a Sacred Son may only have one consort at any

given time. Our forefathers were egomaniacs, but thankfully that egotism stopped just short of polyamory.

With a laugh that sounds more like a sneer, he walks over to Ava, who is standing a few feet away, and removes the pendant from around her neck. She gasps, but the sound is swallowed by the ripple of confused chatter that fills the room.

Ava's hand flies to the base of her throat, where the pendant sat just a few seconds ago. And just like that, she's been dethroned. Devastation washes over her face. She looks so shocked, she can't even hide it.

Lucas walks the pendant over to me, but before he gets too close, I hold my hand out. "I'm not accepting that."

It's so fucking ironic because just a few months ago, I convinced my friend Lux to take a Sacred Son's pendant. Being a consort is like winning the lottery. Only four girls from the entire campus are chosen—one for each Sacred Son—and for the entire academic year, they're treated like royalty. They're untouchable.

But I don't want it. Not if it means being tied to Lucas.

His jaw tightens, and with a glare, he reaches out and grabs my hand, using it to pull me forward. "I'm not giving you a choice," he bites out.

I glance around. After that initial burst of confused chatter, the room fell silent. Everyone is staring at me, waiting to see what I'll do next. Their leering faces blur together and I blink rapidly to try to clear my vision, but that only seems to make it worse. I suddenly feel really lightheaded and that's when panic grips me. I've felt like this once before, in my apartment, when I was drugged.

Was my champagne spiked? I drank it too fast to taste anything funny.

But, I don't feel right and I quickly realize I'm in trouble.

The truth is, I could scream. I could cry. I could plead. But none of it would matter. The people in this room would gawk at me like I was a center-ring circus attraction, but they wouldn't intervene. That's the fucked up thing about this place. Lucas and his crew own this entire fucking school and they rule the Burning Crown like gods. What they say goes, no questions asked.

I'm convinced Lucas could slit my throat right now and no one would say a damn thing about it. That's how deep these people's loyalty to the Sacred Sons runs.

They're all just spineless sheep.

Not me.

I yank my hand out of his death grip, the quick motion causing me to stumble back. He reaches forward and catches me before I fall. "Put that necklace on me, Lucas, and you'll be sorry you did..." Did that come out right? I can't tell. It feels like I'm slurring my words.

I know deep in my bones that this is Lucas' doing. I challenged him up in his room and now he's proving that he's the one in control.

Goddamn, I'm going to kill this motherfucker.

Honestly, he should have stuck with Ava. She's willing to serve him without question. But me? I'm more interested in slitting his throat while he sleeps...

He pulls me close, into his warm body, and there's a smile stretched across his cruel lips. "It's okay, baby. I've got you now."

My head lolls to the side. I feel so tired and yet anger still flares inside me. “I hate you,” I say.

“You keep saying that,” he laughs, then leans in to whisper, “but I think you’re lying again.”

I feel the weight of his cold pendant on my chest, so he must have put it on me at some point without me realizing—and that scares me more than anything because that means I’m officially his consort. And whether I like it or not, I belong to the devil now...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lucas

I declared her as my consort in front of everyone and now she wears my pendant. The rush I get from seeing my symbol around her neck is like hit straight to the vein. It's the most intense high I've ever felt.

I've denied myself this for so long—for Gabriel. I'd already taken so much from him, so when he made his move on Wyn, I just sat back and let him. Watching that shit was torture, but it's what I deserved, so I didn't say shit to anyone.

But Wyn was right about one thing. Gabriel is gone now.

I'm holding her in my arms when her head falls back and her eyes drift closed. She moans, then settles back into the warm slumber induced by the drugs I slipped into her champagne. It was a small dose, just enough to take the fight out of her for the next hour or so.

Dipping my head, I suck her bottom lip into my mouth and bite down hard, drawing a little blood. She stirs in my arms, her brows pinching together, but the drug has done its work, and she doesn't wake.

With a flick of my tongue, I clean the blood off her plump bottom lip, the metallic tang feeding that deep gnawing hunger inside me.

I pull back to look down at her face, her lashes resting on her curved cheek. The

whole room is listening, but I'm speaking only to her. "Now you're bound to me in blood."

My cock stirs to life, and I have the sudden urge to take her here, right now, solidifying my claim. But I'm not sharing her again. I had to fuck her in front of everyone at her initiation, but now she's mine, and no one but me will hear her little moans of pleasure when he comes. Not unless they have a death wish.

Silently, I lift her dead weight over my shoulder and turn to my brothers. They all look more annoyed than shocked by what just happened. I didn't give them a heads-up about any of it. "Close it out for me," I say to Christian.

He looks at me like, what the fuck?

Whatever. He'll do what needs to be done. Leaving the room, I move quickly up the main staircase, and head straight to my room, kicking the door open with my foot. She rouses a little as I lay her down on my mattress. Then I go back to shut and lock the door and set my camera up.

I've never recorded a girl before. I've never wanted to. I mean, once I come, who gives a fuck? But with Wyn, damn, I want to savor her.

When I'm done setting everything up, I look down at her, lying in a puddle of velvet created by her robe. She looks so innocent, vulnerable, and my cock twitches behind the zipper of my black slacks.

Her mouth is open slightly, her eyes closed, her cheeks flushed. I take my time removing her robe, opening it up like a package on Christmas day.

"Goddamn," I whisper, awestruck, my gaze settling on the pendant that has settled into the hollow between her collarbones. My pendant. "You are so fucking perfect."

What have you done to me?”

She’s wearing a short dress, and the skirt is pulled up slightly, revealing her white lacy underwear. Through the lace, I can see the trimmed patch of dark hair between her thighs and it makes my mouth water.

With the tip of my finger, I smooth the thin strap off her shoulder. She’s not wearing a bra, so when the bodice sags, it reveals the swell of her breast and one petal-pink nipple. It puckers under my scrutiny, and my cock twitches.

She’s laid out in front of me like a fucking buffet.

I can’t even wait until she’s fully undressed. Pushing her thighs wide, I tug the crotch of her panties aside and spread her pussy lips open, touching my tongue to her clit. She moans faintly and that sound fuels the sickness inside me. I push my face deeper and stroke her soft channel with my tongue. Her hips lift up a fraction like she’s fighting the drug, her body instinctively responding to me.

For the last year, I’ve jerked off to thoughts of her so many damn times, I can’t even count. Only after Gabriel’s death did I act on the fantasies of her that ran inside my head like a fucking film reel. And now that I have her, I’m making those fantasies a reality.

That’s where the drug comes in. I knew she’d fight me initially, so I gave her just enough to keep her pliant, but not enough to completely knock her out. I want her aware of whose cock is buried inside her, making her scream.

Wyn has convinced herself that she’s a good girl, someone who doesn’t enjoy the pain that comes with pleasure. But I wasn’t lying earlier when I told her we were one and the same. I saw it in her that first night I fucked her, at her initiation.

As I eat her out, devouring her sweet honey, she moans again, and the muscles in her thighs tense. I slide my hand under her ass to bring her closer to me, my face drenched in her juices.

If I could eat just one thing for the rest of my godforsaken life, it would be this pussy. But it's more than just wanting her body. It's a profound and confusing need to devour her spirit. To break her and hollow her out until there's no hatred left for me, only a hunger to be mine...

Squeezing her ass, I pull my tongue back and suck on her clit. Even drugged, she responds to that, her body twisting beneath me. Lifting myself up, my body curves over her as I replace my tongue with two fingers. Her pussy is so wet, I can barely get enough traction.

"You feel that, baby?" I whisper harshly in her ear as I finger-fuck her. She moans and moves her head from side to side. "I fucking own you. I own your body." Her brows scrunch like she's trying to claw her way back to lucidity. My little fighter. "Say my name," I coach, using my thumb to tease her clit. Her hips lift off the mattress, hungry for that release only I can give her. "Say it, baby..."

"Mmm," she moans, fighting through the drug. "Lucas, pl?—"

"That's it," I say, taking the lobe of her ear between my teeth and biting down. She needs a little pain with her orgasm, I know that about her now.

Pushing deeper into her pussy, I apply more pressure to her clit. Her back arches, pushing those beautiful tits into the air. Her channel clenches tightly around my fingers as she comes. The walls of her channel pulse as the orgasm takes over her body, and when it's over, she melts back into the mattress.

With my fingers still inside her, I pull back and look at her face—her flushed cheeks,

her pink lips, the dew-like sweat gathering on her temples. Her breathing is labored, but her eyes are still closed. And am I imagining it, or is there a faint smile on her lips?

Lifting off the mattress, I walk to the bathroom to clean up. I'm washing my face, the water running, when I hear a knock on my door. "Yo!" I call out. "Just a minute."

I dry my hands and toss a blanket over Wyn before pulling my bedroom door open. It's my brother. He's leaning against the doorframe, looking annoyed, as usual.

"Yo." His gaze flicks over my shoulder to Wyn on the bed. "The meeting is over. You're wanted downstairs."

"I'm busy," I say. "That should be fucking obvious."

He pushes off the doorframe and is already walking away when he says, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's what this shit is about. Come on, pussy, let's go."

Fucking asshole.

Turning off the camera, I grab my keys off my desk, my gaze lingering on Wyn a second before I shut the door, lock it, and then follow Lucas downstairs to the study. Jackson and Ash are waiting for us, and they've already removed their robes. They're the only ones in the room, which means they've kicked everyone else out.

Shit. This must be serious.

"What do you guys want?" I say, not even trying to keep the annoyance out of my tone. "I'm fucking busy."

Jackson pushes off the desk. "What the fuck was all that shit with Wyn?"

I widen my stance and cross my arms over my chest. “Does it matter? Wyn is my business.”

We’re five seconds into this fucking conversation, and I can already feel my anger rising. Not because I’m being questioned—I don’t give a fuck about that—but because the topic is Wyn. And when it comes to Wyn, I’m guarded as fuck, even with the guys I’d give my damn life for.

Ash steps forward, glancing between Jackson and me. “I have a question—can we just switch our consorts randomly like that?”

My gaze narrows at Ash. “You don’t even have a fucking consort yet,” I point out. He’s been a Sacred Son for several weeks now and still hasn’t chosen one.

He flashes me a look. “Yeah, but when I do, can I just...swap her out?”

“No,” Christian quickly. “I mean, well, yes, technically. It’s not encouraged, because it ends up causing friction with the Debs.”

Jackson flicks his chin at me. “Which brings us back to the reason we’re here. Ava is pretty upset about what just went down. You should have given her a heads up at the very fuckin’ least.”

Tilting my head back, I sigh heavily. “When I chose Ava as my consort, I made it very clear to her that a) I won’t be faithful, and b) this consort shit is temporary. So whatever disappointment she’s feeling is on her.”

Jackson pushes out a breath. “I just don’t want shit getting complicated with the Debs. With the police following you around like a pack of wolves, we have enough to deal with.”

“Any updates on all that?” Ash asks.

I shake my head. “When I know something, you’ll know something.”

They’re just worried about me. I know that. We’re bros and what happens to one of us happens to all of us. But I can’t tell them what I don’t know, and I wish they’d stop asking.

“No news is good news, right?” Ash offers.

“I’ve tried to check in with my uncle at the Sheriff’s station,” Jackson says, “but I have a feeling Nawar is deliberately keeping him out of the loop. He must know my uncle has a connection to the Burning Crown.”

The Burning Crown is a secret society, but it’s not so underground that the police don’t know we exist. And it’s definitely no secret who the founding families are. We’ve been around for over a century, so keeping that shit under wraps would be nearly impossible. But by some miracle, we’ve been able to maintain secrecy surrounding our rituals and bylaws.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. All they’re going to find is a shit ton of porn on my computer, anyway, so it’s whatever.” I sigh, propping my asscheek on the back of the leather sofa. “While we’re on the topic, I do have a question for you guys, though. Wyn went to see Gabriel’s mom, and she said the witness was someone with the last name Pendleton. Does that name sound familiar to any of you?”

We might be in the middle of Southern California, but Malibu is small, and ExU is even smaller. Between the four of us, there’s no one we don’t know in this town. I’ve personally never encountered anyone with that last name, though.

Christian shakes his head but says nothing.

“I’ve never met anyone with that last name,” Jackson says. “But I can ask around.”

Hm. My gaze shifts to Ash, who hasn’t said anything.

“Ash? What’s good?” I ask, already mentally up in that bedroom with Wyn. As soon as I get back upstairs, I’m peeling that dress off her, and paying my respects to every dip and curve on her body. Saliva already coats my mouth, ready to worship.

Ash glances up at me, then looks around at the other guys, like he’s wondering if he should say anything.

Oh, shit. Here we go.

“Just spit it out,” I say. “I have a chick upstairs waiting for my cock.”

“ Ugh, dude,” Christian says, disgusted. “Why’d you have to go and mention your cock? No one in this room wants that.”

I roll my eyes at him, but my focus is on Ash, who’s acting a little too squirrely for my liking. He shifts and pulls in a deep breath. “Yeah, I’ve heard that name before.”

“Cool,” I say impatiently. “Then tell us who it is so we can all go on with our fucking day.”

Jesus.

He rubs a hand over his face, suddenly uncomfortable. “Fine, but listen, when I tell you, you’ve got to swear you guys won’t do anything rash.”

Rash? I flash him a look. “Dude, get the fuck on with it.”

“He’s from a rival secret society known as The Order of Shadow and Ash.”

I blink at him. “A rival secret society? Are you fucking with us?”

“Nah, that’s impossible,” Christian says. “We’re the only secret society in the area and it’s been that way for over a hundred years.”

“Has it, though?” Ash makes a face and lifts his hands. “Listen, I’m just telling you what I know. Some guy approached me last year about becoming a member. He didn’t tell me his name, but I took a photo of his license plate and had someone look into him. His name is August Pendleton.”

I’m so fucking confused, and the only thing that occurs to me is that Ash is indeed fucking with us. If there were a secret society around here, we’d know about it. No question.

“Why would he try to recruit you?” Jackson’s gaze is stoic. Out of all of us, he’s the hardest to read. I’m sure it has to do with his fucked-up childhood, but he’s always been that way.

Ash shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t know, he seemed to know who I was, and said something about my being rejected by the Burning Crown.”

“Rejected?” I laugh. That shit’s funny as hell.

“Yeah, I don’t know. I guess he thought I’d been cast out of the Sacred Sons or something. He mentioned Shadow and Ash as being formed from the Burning Crown’s cast-offs.”

“Wow,” Christian says, leaning against the desk. He pulls a blunt and a lighter from his pocket and lights up. “Another secret society. That shit is crazy.”

“How many members do they have?” I ask.

“No idea. I told him I wasn’t interested, and the conversation ended there,” Ash answers. “But while we were talking, I was getting vendetta vibes.”

I laugh. “A vendetta for what? Five minutes ago, we didn’t even know they fucking existed.”

Ash shrugs again. “Just the vibe I got.”

Jackson looks at me. “If they’re approaching people, you think we should be worried?”

“I’m not sure what to think...” The Burning Crown is incredibly powerful, and it wouldn’t be the first time some obscure group has tried to get a piece of that power. But every one of those attempts has failed.

I flick my chin at Jackson. “Can you ask our PI to check into August Pendleton, and see what he can find?”

Jackson nods once.

“And you guys,” I say to Ash and Christian. “Ask around— discreetly –and see if anyone has even heard of this Shadow and Ash shit.”

Christian solutes casually. “Aye, aye.”

I push off the sofa and head for the door. “I’m going upstairs,” I say without even turning around, “and the next person to disturb me gets his balls split open and roasted like fucking chestnuts.”

A collective groan follows me out the door, but I don't give a fuck. My thoughts are on Wyn, and all the fun ways I'm going to break her...

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Wyn

I'm floating, and my body is buzzing. I feel slow and sluggish, but every muscle in my body is relaxed, and in my dreams, Lucas has his mouth on my pussy, licking and nipping me to climax.

With my eyes closed, I drift in a semi-dream state. For the first time in a long time, I feel...safe, content, fulfilled. Is that ridiculous? God, that sounds fucked-up, even in the privacy of my own mind. Lucas is the devil incarnate. He's cruel and dangerous, and I should run as far and fast as I can from him...

But there's something about the way he touches me that makes me lose all sense. Like, all rational sense. And I'm smart. I mean, usually.

Time is really strange. Several times, I drift off, then come back to semi-consciousness, never really knowing how long I've been out. But this time, when I come back into my body, I feel strong, warm hands moving over my bare skin. I'm naked, lying on a cloud, and someone is touching me.

Lucas.

But even dazed, I know he's the one that did this to me.

Weighed down by the drug, I can only really move my head slightly and moan. My limbs are still too heavy, so I have no choice but to yield to his exploration of my

body.

Were I in my right mind, I'd shove Lucas away, and tell him to fuck off. It's what I'm supposed to do. It's what would be expected. I shouldn't enjoy being used, abused, and pleased by the hottest psycho on the planet.

His words from earlier circle inside my head.

You and me, we're exactly the same... We both need pain to feel alive.

Deep down, I'm afraid he's right. Giving up control excites me. Pain elevates pleasure. Fucking the devil makes me feel alive...

But I'd never admit that to anyone, especially Lucas.

I can't want any of this.

But right now, with the warmth of the drug coursing through my veins, I don't have to pretend. He's removed my obligation to fight back.

His large hand is on my breast, his thumb brushing over my nipple. My body comes alive under his expert hands, and I moan. He's saying something, but I can't quite make out the words. All I can hear is that deep, rumbling baritone followed by a low, sexy-as-fuck chuckle.

"Mmm," I mumble, arching into his hand. My entire body feels charged, like I have an excess of energy that's pushing to break free.

His lips fall to my throat as he whispers something against my skin. But it's not long before that softness turns to brutality and his lips move down my body, over my breasts and stomach, to my inner thigh. He sinks his teeth into the sensitive skin, and

I whimper. Pain jolts me, but it's quickly chased by the feeling of tension being released in my body—like a rubber band being snapped.

It feels so good.

I'm engulfed by sensation as his hands continue to explore my body, pinching and groping, his deep moans vibrating through me. And then I feel it, the head of his cock pressed to my entrance.

I struggle to open my eyes. I want to see him, see that beautiful face as he fucks me. At my initiation, he had a mask on. But as much as I want to look into his eyes, my eyelids feel like they're made out of cast iron and far too heavy for me to lift.

His fingers work through my hair and he takes a handful, then pulls my head back against the pillows, while at the same time, shoving his rock-hard cock into me. I gasp at the sharp pain his invasion causes, and he chuckles, tightening his hold on my hair. "That's it, baby. Take my cock like the good girl you think you are."

I moan again, still held down by the heaviness of the drug, but electrified by what Lucas is doing to my body. It's such a strange feeling, like being fucked on a cloud, in a dream, yet everything feels real and hyperintense.

His hips rock forward and he pushes into my channel as far as he possibly can. The pain of being stretched by his thick, girthy cock has me gasping, and I open my mouth to scream, but the sound is caught in my throat. I'm choking on that scream, tears streaming down my face.

His free hand moves to my breast and he squeezes hard as his hips move, his cock slamming into me over and over, my entire body jerking with the motion. "I'm going to pump my load into this sweet pussy," he says harshly in my ear. "And you're going to take it, Wyn. Every last fucking drop of my cum."

His dirty words make every cell in my body tingle. Images of his milky-white semen filling my channel dance in my mind. My walls clench as he fucks me roughly, slamming into me with so much force, his giant bed sways, and my tits bounce.

The intensity is everything I need. His frantic, possessed energy matches mine, and together we moan as we both come. Hot tingles engulf my body and sparks ignite behind my eyelids. I'm breathless, and lightheaded when it's all done, and he pulls out of me.

I don't know how long he's gone, but he returns with a warm washcloth and cleans me up. I'm exhausted, the drug still working through my veins, but I feel a little more awake now. That orgasm seems to be the electric charge my body needed, I guess.

I don't know what I'm expecting him to do, but to my surprise, he climbs onto the bed and settles in the spot next to me. We're both naked, lying on top of the bunched-up sheets, and comforter.

I roll my head to the side, facing him, and force my eyelids open. His face fills my vision. He's on his side, the pillow tucked under his head, watching me. "You terrify me, Wyn Barker," he whispers. The words are so faint, that I can almost convince myself I imagined it. Almost.

I swallow, wondering why he's telling me this. Lucas isn't someone who just opens up randomly and reveals his innermost secrets. He keeps everything pretty close to the chest, usually. But maybe he thinks I'll forget all this? Maybe he's assuming I'm so drugged up, I won't remember.

God, I'm so tired.

My eyes flutter closed. But even as I begin to drift back into the dark abyss of sleep, I hold on to his words as tightly as I can, so I don't forget...

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Wyn

It's dark, and I'm naked, those are the first two things I'm aware of. As I sit up, every muscle in my body screams in protest. The area between my legs is sore and my mouth feels like cotton.

Blinking, I realize it must be the middle of the night because the room is dark and the house is quiet. But the bathroom light is on, and it floods the room in a soft, warm glow.

It takes a second, but I suddenly realize I don't know where I am. With a jerk, I try to pull the comforter up to cover my body, but I can't. It's being weighed down by...my gaze travels to the large mound of muscle that's sleeping next to me.

"Oh!" I gasp, hopping off the bed. There's a throw crumpled at the foot of the bed, so I grab it and pull it around my body. I blink down at the guy in the bed and realize it's Lucas. He's lying on his stomach, his hands beneath the pillow that's tucked under his head, one leg pulled up, accentuating his tight ass.

Holy shit.

What happened? How did I get here?

I struggle to remember, but it's like a huge chunk of time has been scooped out of my memory. The last thing I remember is being in the ballroom, at the meeting, and

Lucas putting his necklace over my head. My hand flies to the heavy pendant resting at the base of my throat.

Oh, my God. It really happened. Lucas declared me his consort.

Flashes of memory start flickering in my mind. Lucas carrying me up to his room—then there's a huge chunk of missing time—then he's fucking me—and, then another chunk of missing time...

He drugged me.

The fucking asshole.

Rolling off the bed as quietly as I can, I grab a throw blanket and wrap it around my body, then I find my dress on the floor. My underwear is nowhere to be found, but that's the least of my problems at this point. I take my dress into the bathroom, so I can get dressed without waking him up.

The light is already on, and when I walk in, I catch a glimpse of myself in the large framed mirror that's positioned over two marble his-and-hers sinks. I gasp when I see myself.

With a trembling hand, I push my hair back, which is a tangled mass around my shoulders, and inspect a red streak that's just below my ear. I step closer to the mirror to see what it is. It looks like a bite mark. I vaguely remember Lucas biting me, then licking up my blood.

My gaze wanders to the rest of my body, and I choke back a sob, when I see the sheer amount of bite marks everywhere. A couple must have broken the skin, because there's blood coating the inside of both my thighs.

Grabbing a washcloth, I wet it quickly, then drop the blanket and start cleaning off the blood that's smeared across various parts of my body, scrubbing so hard that my skin is left red and inflamed.

“Getting clean, so I can dirty you up again?”

With a yelp of surprise, I drop the washcloth and spin around to see Lucas leaning against the doorframe, his muscular body on full display. He's not shy or embarrassed by the fact that he's standing in front of me without a stitch of clothing on. His cock hangs heavy between his toned thighs, already half-erect.

I reach down and grab the throw, then pull it up around my body.

He laughs. “It's too late for that, baby. I've already committed every inch of your body to memory.” He closes his eyes, and the corners of his lips curl up as he seemingly plays back the images of me.

I grab my dress off the counter, balling it up in my fist. I just need to get out of here. I'll figure everything else out later.

His arm darts out, blocking my exit. “Going somewhere?”

My heart stops. “You drugged me last night.”

I don't know why I'm stating the obvious. Maybe I'm hoping he'll deny it.

He looks amused by my statement. “I did.”

There isn't even a shred of remorse in those cold blue eyes. He's been invading my body, my mind, my space, and not even a sliver of regret for any of it. If anything, he looks pleased with himself.

I shake my head, tears threatening. “You had no fucking right, Lucas.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “It was either drug you or force you.” His gaze flicks over my face, a smirk on his lips. “But why do I think you would have preferred the latter?”

I clench my teeth and swallow. “You disgust me,” I spit out.

“Disgust you,” he repeats with a shake of his head. His hand moves quickly, grabbing my throat, just below my chin, moving me back, so I’m pressed up against the sink. “Why don’t I believe that?”

His grip isn’t painful, it’s just holding me immobile, a show of force that’s meant to intimidate. And it does. My heart is beating so fast, I feel like I’m about to pass out. Long seconds tick by before he finally releases me.

“Get back in bed,” he commands, moving aside so I can pass.

The last thing I want to do is piss him off, so I do as I’m told, walking barefoot across the cold bathroom tiles and into the bedroom. He’s following close behind as I climb onto his massive bed, and lean against the mountain of soft pillows, half-sitting, half-reclining.

Lucas walks around to the other side of the bed and settles into the spot next to me. He turns toward me, his head propped up on his hand. He’s so casual, you’d think we were on a Sunday picnic.

“Why are you like this?” I’m brave enough to ask somehow.

“Like what?”

I swallow. “I don’t know...evil.”

He laughs at that. “I’m not evil, Wyn. You just think I am, because you’re not willing to face certain parts of yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He lifts slightly and reaches for the blanket that I’m still gripping with white knuckles. He pries the soft fabric out of my hand, spreading it open to reveal my right breast.

One side of his mouth lifts into a smug smile. His warm hand cups my breast, and his thumb flicks over my nipple. It hardens instantly. But his gaze never leaves mine and it feels like he’s reaching into my soul. I know that sounds dumb and slightly dramatic, but it’s the truth.

“You work so hard to be the good girl...” He squeezes my breast, and the pain makes me wince, but it also sends a flash of electricity rushing through me. “But I know your secret, Wyn. I know there’s darkness inside you. Like recognizes like.”

I tear my gaze away from his and try to shift my body away. He’s said this before. He thinks I’m just like him, but I’m not. Lucas is greedy and selfish. And he’s completely unhinged.

“I’m nothing like you,” I say through gritted teeth.

He rises up more until his upper body is hovering over me. “Baby, we’re two halves of one whole, and now that I have you, I’m not letting you go.”

“You don’t have me, Lucas.”

He tilts his head to the side, so he can brush his lips across my earlobe, all the while his fingers are stroking the pendant that hangs around my neck. “Oh, no?” His blunt teeth nip at my skin. The little pinch sends a hot ember tripping down my spine. “Have you already forgotten how good my cock feels inside you?”

I bite back a scoff. Humble much?

But as hard as my mind is fighting him, my body is already melting like butter. I shove his muscular shoulder, and thankfully, he falls away easily. “Let me go home, Lucas.”

He ignores my request, of course. “I could fuck you for days, Wyn, and only want more,” he says. “I don’t think you realize how special that is. I’ve never felt that way about anyone before.”

I blink at him for several seconds.

Yeah, no . I’m not allowing him to make this about sex and sex alone. Any two people can fuck. If he’s claiming we have a connection beyond that, then he’ll have to give me more. He’ll have to open up and bare his black, rotting soul.

“I don’t even know you, Lucas.”

He falls back against the pillows. “That’s a lie. We’ve hung out for over a year now.”

I shake my head. “No, you hung out with Gabriel . Whenever I walked into the room, you wouldn’t even acknowledge I was there.”

Still, he’s not completely wrong. Even if Lucas and I never really spoke, that doesn’t mean I wasn’t watching him. I know he likes his scotch neat, and that he’s pretty brilliant at applied mathematics—when he goes to class. I know he used to be an

excellent surfer—so much so that he won a surf championship when he was sixteen. He hardly ever surfs now, though.

The point is, I know all the facts that makeup Lucas West on paper, but who he is as a person...yeah, that's the mystery.

He shrugs. "So what do you want to know?"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lucas

“Let’s start with your childhood.”

For fuck’s sake. The absolute last thing I want to do is dissect my entire-fucking-childhood, but Wyn isn’t someone who will accept a vague answer. She’s rolling up her sleeves, prepared to disembowel my entire fucking life, then pick it apart and study it under a microscope.

“My childhood was...whatever. My parents were too busy to deal with Christian or me, so they paid someone else to do it,” I say. “So, yeah, we were raised by nannies, mostly.”

The bathroom light doesn’t quite reach her face, so I can’t see her expression. “Well, I hope they were kind nannies, at least.”

I shrug and smooth the backs of my fingers against the soft skin of her arm. She’s so focused on what I’m saying, I don’t think she even realizes I’m doing it. That alone encourages me to keep talking. “Some were. Others weren’t. Doesn’t matter. It is what it is,” I answer.

She makes a scoffing sound. “God, I hate that fucking phrase— it is what it is . Yeah, what it is is shitty.”

“Listen, my brother and I weren’t angels. When we got old enough, we gave those

nannies hell.” I smile, remembering some of the shit we pulled. “One nanny was so fuckin’ horrible, we swapped out her vitamins for edibles. I guess she took two the next morning because she was so fuckin’ baked, she started freaking out about imaginary sounds coming from the attic. My parents ended up firing her later that day. We had a replacement within two hours, and that next one was even worse.”

She shakes her head. “So I’m guessing you’re not very close with your parents.”

I watch my own fingers as they trace a pattern on her arm. It occurs to me that whenever Wyn is near me, I need to be touching her. I’ll find any reason to draw her into my sphere—like the waves being pulled to the shore. It feels natural and necessary for some confusing-as-fuck reason.

“My parents are whatever,” I say dispassionately. “Christian and I see them when we need to see them. Weddings. Christmas. Events where they can parade us around, and pretend we’re a happy family. But they don’t know shit about my brother or me, nor do they really care.”

The silence stretches between us, and I swallow, a heavy feeling taking root in my chest. I’ve never admitted any of that to anyone. I’ve never even talked to Christian about it. Usually, we just play along with my parent’s narrative that we’re close and happy. But the truth is, our parents don’t really give a fuck about us. And the feeling is mutual.

“They support you financially, though, right?” Wyn says. “So they must care.”

She’s reaching, looking for evidence that my parents haven’t totally emotionally abandoned their sons.

“Christian and I have trust funds that were set up by our grandmother. We had access to them as soon as we turned eighteen.” I shrug again. “So, yeah, I don’t need shit

from them.”

My chest constricts remembering my grandmother. She was the only real maternal figure in my childhood, and I miss her warmth. She knew Christian and I had been cast aside, and she set that money aside so we’d be cared for after she was gone.

“Your grandmother sounds like a smart lady,” she says.

“She saw the writing on the wall. She knew Christian and I would be on our own,” I say, my voice catching. I clear my throat.

“Is that the grandmother you shared with Gabriel?” she asks, probing a little deeper. I can tell she’s being cautious.

“Yeah, but Gabriel was illegitimate, so my grandmother never really recognized him. She held tight to old ideals.” I lean forward, and brush my lips against Wyn’s arm, savoring her warmth. “Gabriel was always angry about that. He felt rejected, I think.”

“For sure.” She nods while looking down at her hands, pinching the edge of the comforter. “He was angry about a lot of things.”

I drag a hand down my face and sigh. “Yeah, I blame myself for that.”

Her brows pinch together. “Why, because you didn’t talk to the senior counsel for him?” She shakes her head. “He was angry at the world long before any of that happened.”

“Because...” I shift, taking her hand in mine, so I can toy with her fingers, rubbing the pad of my thumb over her trimmed nails. I look up at her, and she’s watching me. “When Gabriel and I were sixteen, we were training for this major competition in Hawaii, and uh, during a session, I was trying to push him off a wave. I got too close,

he had to ditch his board, and then...I don't know what happened. He was pulled under the massive wave, and my fin must have caught him in the chaos because when he finally resurfaced, his Achilles tendon was fucked. Cut straight through. It was gnarly." I shake my head. "He never surfed again after that."

"It was an accident, right? That kind of shit could happen in any sport. It's the risk you take."

"Nah, I was being reckless, cocky. And because of me, he lost the one thing that would have given him some recognition in this fucked up town." I shrug again. "It's all he ever really wanted, and I took it away from him."

Even now, the guilt over what happened that day suffocates me. It's ever-present. That's what makes this shit with Wyn so damn difficult. Deep down, I still feel like I'm taking something away from Gabriel, as irrational as that logic is.

We lapse into silence and then she says abruptly, "I need to use the restroom."

"Then use it," I reply.

She climbs off the bed, and my hungry gaze eats her up as she walks away. But for a split second, as I watch her leave, I feel real fear. She's the only person on this planet who's managed to crack open my shell and get a glimpse of the real me inside. The me that I hide away from everyone.

I should tell her the truth about how fucked in the head I really am, but I can't. She'd never forgive me for what I had to do.

Which is why she'll never find out...

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Wyn

I shut the bathroom door and sag against it. That conversation with Lucas was intense, and honestly, I just needed a second to gather my thoughts. Gabriel and Lucas' relationship makes so much more sense now, though. Why Gabriel was so angry, and why Lucas always seemed to let Gabriel have his way.

Gabriel was a master manipulator. He could turn anything into a personal affront, and I have no doubt that's what he did with Lucas, making him feel guilty for something that was a genuine accident.

Releasing a deep breath, I push off the door and walk over to the sink. I have a headache blooming, so I open the drawers in the vanity, looking for ibuprofen or something.

In the bottom drawer, I'm fishing around when I come across a brown bottle of liquid medication labeled "sodium oxybate." I blink at it down at it, rereading the label several times.

Is this...GHB?

It is. I looked up the first time my stalker drugged me, and I remember the generic name.

As I hold the bottle in my hand, an idea comes to me. Turning, I find Lucas' dark

navy bathrobe and shrug into it, slipping the bottle into the large pocket. Then I open the door and lean against the doorframe.

Lucas is lying naked on the bed, scrolling on his phone.

My heart feels like a jackhammer against my ribs. “Hey, um, do you have any booze around here?”

“There’s some whiskey in the liquor cabinet,” he answers.

The cabinet is on the far side of the room, next to the fireplace. I wander over there, opening the cabinet, making a show of deciding what to try. This guy has every kind of whiskey under the sun, all expensive bottles that must have cost him a small fortune.

Grabbing two glasses from the shelf inside, I pull the GHB from my pocket and add a generous dose to his glass, then I pour in the whiskey and stash the medication behind the other bottles.

My blood pressure is through the roof right now, and I feel dizzy, like I’m about to pass out. But I struggle to keep my cool as I carry the drinks over to the bed and hand him the one that’s been spiked with GHB. He tosses his phone aside and tips his head back, downing the entire drink in one swallow.

Oh. Wow, okay.

I take a sip from my drink, wincing at the strong smoky flavor, and then I set the glass down. “Ugh, that was horrible.”

With a chuckle, he reaches forward and tugs on the belt of my robe, pulling me toward him. He spreads the terrycloth open and brushes his thumb over my right nipple. I suck in a breath as a shock of electricity shoots straight to my core.

Dear, God, how long before the drug takes effect?

“Come here,” he says, falling back against the pillows. “Straddle me.”

I blink at him for a second, then shake my head slowly. “No.”

He laughs again but sobers quickly, a dark look crossing over his pretty rich-boy face. “I think we both know defiance isn’t going to fly with me.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to curse at him. Instead, I take a step back and bite my tongue. Soon the drug will work its magic and when it does, I’ll be the one in control. I just need to bide my time.

In the end, he doesn’t wait for me to comply. He reaches over and pulls me onto the bed, so I’m straddling his hips. The robe separates us, but I can still feel the bite of his rock-hard shaft pressed against my center.

Then he grabs my hips and forces me to rock back and forth in a slow, steady rhythm that simulates sex. He tilts his head back and releases a long hiss, his grip on me tightening. “Fuck, these hips will be my salvation.”

I don’t know what that means. I can’t even guess. I’m too distracted, waiting for any sign that the drug is working.

And then something shifts, and his eyes widen. He releases my hips and tries to get up, but his movements are slow like his limbs are being weighed down by cinderblocks.

“Wyn,” he says through gritted teeth. “What the fuck?”

Grabbing his face, I lean down and whisper, “How does being completely stripped of power feel?”

His eyes flare with anger, and he tries to shift his body again, but he can't. My hand lowers, so it's curled around his throat now, and I squeeze.

He's so much stronger than me, and I realize I'm only in control because of the drug, but still, it gives me a thrill to see this campus god at my mercy.

His head sinks deeper into the pillow as his muscles relax, his mouth open slightly. I'm squeezing his throat, not hard, but I can see the flash of fear in his eyes. He's used to getting his way through brute force. Now, he can't even defend himself. That feeling must suck.

I smile and shift off him. "Whose in control now, baby?"

His eyes narrow, and a tic pulses in his jaw, but that's the only movement he can manage. Thank God. Because I know he'd rip me to shreds right now if he could.

But with Lucas now at my mercy, I can't help but give into curiosity. You don't walk away from a tranquilized lion without reaching out a shaky hand to touch him first. You may never get the chance again.

Watching his face, I brush my fingers up his solid thigh to the patch of hair nestled between his thighs. His cock juts up, fully erect, and I run the tip of my finger along the underside of his thick, veiny shaft.

My clit pulses, and I swallow.

Inching my fingers higher, I explore his narrow hips, his navel, and the ropes of muscle that outline his torso. It's wild that anyone could be this hot in real life. Lucas might be an asshole, but his body is a work of art—all tanned skin and hard muscle, dusted with flecks of delicate blond hair. And I'm betting he has the same fat percentage as a slab of marble.

Biting my bottom lip, I continue my study of this exceptional specimen, my fingertips sliding over his skin, causing goosebumps to erupt in their wake. His nipples tighten, and his head moves a little, a faint moan escaping from his parted lips.

I pause, watching him. It's too early for the drug to have worn off, but then again, I just kinda guessed on the dosage. So I wait a few seconds, and when he doesn't move again, I carry on with my exploration.

My hand travels across his collarbone, over the swell of his muscular bicep, then down his arm to the mess of boho surfer bracelets he always wears. I'm looking at each one individually, wondering if they have some kind of special meaning when I notice something on the inside of his wrist, partially covered by the bracelets.

It's a scar—a single red line that starts at the base of his palm and runs upward about three inches. I've seen this scar before. On Gabriel. And on the masked man...

No.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I drop his hand like it's radioactive, scrambling off the bed. What the fuck...? I stand there staring at him, trying to make sense of what I just saw, but I can't.

How can two people have the exact same scar?

No, no, no.

I feel nauseous, and my mind fights against what I already suspect. Lucas is my stalker. I mean, it makes sense. He knew Gabriel's nickname for me, they have the same coloring, the same build, and now the scar...

With my mind a jumble, I do the only thing that makes sense—I look for irrefutable proof to confirm my suspicions.

In a frenzy, I search through everything in Lucas' room—his desk, his drawers, his cabinets. I finally find what I'm looking for in his huge walk-in closet. Shoved on a bottom shelf next to his shoes is a black gym bag.

Pulling the bag out into the middle of the closet, I unzip it carefully. Right off the bat, I see a knife, a leather lock-picking case, a black ski mask, and zip ties. Everything my stalker used to get into my apartment and subdue me...

Standing abruptly, I try to pull in a breath, but it feels like a ten-ton weight is sitting on my chest. I can't expand my lungs. It feels like a panic attack coming on.

Could Lucas really do something like this? Why?

My mind is swirling around that thought, trying to make sense of what I just saw, when I hear something out in the bedroom—a click like a window closing.

Oh, my God. Is awake? Already?

Ziping the bag quickly, I shove it back onto the shelf, then make my way back to the bedroom. It's dark and there's a gentle ocean breeze drifting in from the open patio door. That definitely wasn't open before. Maybe the wind blew it open?

From where I'm standing, I can see Lucas lying in the same position I left him in, so I move closer, swallowing past the knot of fear that's lodged in my throat. I'm terrified. This is so fucked up. But as I get closer, I can see Lucas is now unconscious. His head is turned toward me, eyes closed, mouth open slightly.

But on his chest is a white flower.

I stare at it, blinking, convinced I'm seeing things. Stepping closer, I reach out and pluck the fragrant bloom off his chest.

Gardenia.

The same flower my stalker left for me. But how ?

A million questions race through my mind, but before I can even isolate one, a warm puff of breath brushes across the shell of my ear. Ice-cold fear trickles down my spine, and I can't move. I'm trapped inside my own body.

"You still smell like gardenia," a voice whispers harshly, smoothing my hair over my shoulder. I feel cold steel pressed against my neck. "Did you miss me, Pretty Thing?"

Swallowing, I gather every last ounce of strength I have and turn my head, confirming what I already know. There's a dead man holding a knife to my throat...