



Resurrect Me

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Hes dead so she thinks

Tacy Rountree, Registered Nurse, dedicated wife and mother, loses her husband under mysterious circumstances. Now Tacy suspects a medication used at the hospital where she works is poisoning people to death. She digs too deep and thrusts herself into a whirlwind of corruption and an elite secret society with nefarious plans. All the while, she's discovered the anonymous man sending her unsettling (yet sexy) text messages is also watching her every move...and she's starting to suspect her new stalker might be someone she knows or knew. When Tacy is kidnapped by a person from her dark past, she realizes the secrets she's uncovered might be the death of her.

Solomon Rountree had it all: a beautiful wife, children, a home, and a reputation for being a great man with visions of making the world a better place. In an instant, his dreams are brutally squashed the day he's elected Governor. Sol survives his own assassination attempt...unknown to his wife and family who believe he is dead.

Now, with a team of rebels backing him, he's lurking in the shadows and developing a plan to take down the same people who tried to kill him. The same people who are hellbent on controlling the population. There's just one thing getting in the way...his beautiful wife who seems to get herself into trouble around every corner.

Will Sol and Tacy reunite? And will they be able to withstand the wave of danger heading right at them?

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Tacy

1 Week Before Election Day

“You know we’re not going to be able to fuck in my office after the election,” he says and stares down at me with those dreamy green eyes.

“Why not, Sir?” I ask and bat my eyelashes at him. “Don’t you like having Princess for lunch?”

“Jesus, Tacy,” he grunts, stands, and zips up his black pinstripe pants. “Of course I love having you for lunch. But Governors have people up their asses constantly. I doubt I’ll have the privacy to...”

A knock interrupts his thought.

“Shit,” I say, grabbing my pants and shoes and bolting for the adjoining bathroom.

I hear Solomon laughing under his breath as I shut the bathroom door, and his new assistant walks in.

I’m beaming, flustered, and still reeling from our afternoon sex session. I have the day off work, and so I decided to surprise him during his lunch break. Well, it isn’t much of a surprise since I make it a point to visit him once a week. Every week.

I look in the mirror. My cherry coke hair has fallen out of a messy bun, my red lipstick is smeared across my cheek, and apparently, we popped a few buttons off my

lavender satin blouse in the heat of the moment. To sum it up, I'm a hot mess. But I don't mind. I'm in a happy marriage. Buttons are a small sacrifice.

I pull a brush from the vanity drawer, one that I've kept here for just this purpose, and smooth my hair back into the ponytail holder. I tuck my shirt into the top of my black jeans. Then dab a little water on a paper towel and clean the matte lip stain off my face.

I open the bathroom door slowly and peek out. Reggie, Solomon's assistant, is standing beside his desk with an iPad and stylus in hand. He hears me enter the room, glances at me, and cracks a smile.

"Oh, hi Mrs. Rountree," Reggie tilts his head and sticks his tongue in his cheek. He knows exactly what just happened. He can smell it all over us. The entire room smells like sex.

"Hi, Leo," I say and quickly think up a deflection. "I brought Sol's favorite dumplings." I point to the white and red take-out boxes at the corner of the desk.

Solomon leans back in his chair and smiles sheepishly. "They were absolutely delicious."

"Dumplings...right," Sol's assistant says and leans over to look. "They were delicious. You haven't even opened the box."

I blush wildly and turn to face the window. Can't Sol just send him away already? This is awkward. I mean, Reggie is gay so it's not like he's being creepy. It's just...embarrassing. I'm not one for airing out my dirty laundry.

"Alright, Reggie," Sol says. "You know why she's here. She's my wife. Give us a break, okay?"

Reggie laughs heartily and spins on one heel towards the door. “No problem, boss. Sorry for the intrusion. Everyone’s got to blow off some steam sometimes.”

Sol shoots me a look that says he’s not embarrassed, and I shouldn’t be either. I mouth a silent OH MY GOD and shut my mouth as Reggie turns the doorknob and opens the door.

“I’ll have the press reports on your desk by three,” he says and closes the door behind him.

I perch on a tufted white chair in front of Sol’s desk and exhale.

“I thought he’d never leave,” Sol says and chuckles. “You were so flustered, Tacy.”

“I’m not one for getting caught,” I say and cross my legs just as Sol’s cum slips out of my pussy and slides down my leg. I shiver from the coolness of it.

“Well, maybe not caught ...but you like being captured,” he says and leans forward in his roller chair, the metal squeaking under his weight. “Remember that weekend we had in Tahiti?”

“How could I forget?” I say and my mind flashes back to our second honeymoon. Sol had booked an Airbnb with padded walls and had special equipment brought in. Equipment with cuffs, chains, and cushions. Gags, leashes, and whips. Among other things. And we locked ourselves in for forty-eight hours. We didn’t leave the house, didn’t see the sunlight, and had no visitors until we were both running on fumes.

I rise from the chair and smooth out my wrinkled skirt. “Well, Honey, I’ve got to get home. The kids will be out of school soon.”

“Aww, so play time is over?” he says and sticks out his plump bottom lip. His mouth

is so kissable.

“Yes, sorry, Daddy,” I say and peck him on his cheek. “Plus, you’ve got to get back to work before Reginald decides to pop in again.”

Sol rolls his eyes. “He has a knack for that, I think.”

“Maybe he likes you,” I say as I sling my purse over my shoulder. “I mean, do you blame him?”

Another knock at the door just as I’m reaching for the handle. I open it.

“Ladies and Gents, I’m nearly a married man,” Reggie says and holds up his ring finger waving a shiny silver ring in the air. “Just because your man is attractive, successful, and an alpha male doesn’t mean I’m automatically in love with him. Besides, Mrs. Rountree, I don’t have your curves, Honey. So, I’m not his type.”

“Were you listening this entire time?” I giggle and shake my head. “You’re a snoop, Reggie.”

“Mr. Rountree left the intercom on,” he says matter-of-factly and clicks his tongue.

Sol slaps a button on the desktop phone. “Whoops, sorry.”

“All good, Boss.”

“I was just leaving. Love you and see you later Babe,” I say to Solomon.

“Love you to the ends of the earth.”

I follow Reggie out.

I push the round button and enter the elevator as Reggie returns to his desk just outside Sol's office.

"See you next week, Mrs. Rountree," he chides.

"Please...call me Tacy. Mrs. Rountree sounds so...official. Like a Governor's wife."

"Get used to it...it's going to happen," he says and grins.

I return his smile as the elevator doors close.

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Tacy

Election Day

“The votes came in,” Sol says over the phone. “We won! It’s Governor Rountree, now!”

“I knew you would win,” I say. “You’re the right guy for the job.”

Solomon Rountree, state governor. And now I’m the Governor’s wife. I don’t know whether I should be overwhelmed with excitement or anxiety. So, I focus on the culmination of my husband’s hard work – winning the election. Solomon has worked so hard for this day. What’s even better is that he’s a good person and wants to make solid, lasting changes in the government. Changes that will make our people healthier and happier, and overall improve our state.

“We should celebrate tonight!” Sol exclaims. “The whole family. Pick a spot. Any spot. And I’ll have my assistant set the reservation.”

“Sounds great,” I say. “My shift’s over at six. See you later. I’m so proud of you.”

An hour after returning home from my shift at the hospital, I still haven’t heard from Sol. The kids are antsy, complaining and running around the house like madmen, and my stomach is growling.

I dial his cell a second time, and it goes straight to voicemail . Damn it, Sol. You forgot to charge your phone again. And on election day, nonetheless. I dial the office

line and Reggie answers.

“Solomon Rountree’s office...ahem, Governor Rountree’s office, how may I help you?” There’s a hint of panic in his voice. No, perhaps it’s the sound of elatedness?

“Reggie, it’s Tacy,” I say. “You’re there late tonight. Can you put me through to Sol, please?”

“Oh, hi Mrs. Rountree. The Governor left after lunch. Before the votes were finalized, even. He said something about being with his people when the final count came in. I thought his people meant you and the kids.”

“What? No, Reggie. I was at work all day. I haven’t heard from him, and his cell is going straight to voicemail.”

“Oh, hmm,” he hums. “That’s...odd.”

“Okay...just...if you hear from him, please tell him to call me,” I say. “Did you make that reservation at Roux for us?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Set for eight pm. I’ll let him know if he calls or comes by.”

There’s a knot tangling in the pit of my stomach. If Sol had left his office after lunch, where did he go? He had a whole legion of colleagues and partners that would’ve wanted to meet with him after the polls were finalized. Surely, he met his partners out for lunch and would be coming home soon to celebrate with his family. I just wish his cell phone was on. I can’t shake the feeling that something serious has happened.

It’s close to midnight, and I’m pacing the front of the house. From the dining room to the kitchen and back again. I still haven’t heard from Sol, can’t get him on his cell, and he never showed to the restaurant. The kids are in bed, and I did my best to

pretend everything is okay, but this isn't like him.

Reggie left the office at seven and said Sol never returned. To say I'm worried sick is an understatement. I can't fathom a world in which Solomon Rountree is elected to office and disappears.

My phone rings from the kitchen counter. I bolt to pick it up. My heart is pulsing, and I'm praying it's Sol. It's not. The name Declan Harvey covers the screen. The man Sol ran against...and beat. You'd think they had bad blood, but the truth is Declan is a close friend of Sol's. They've known each other since college. Our whole family adores Declan.

"Tacy?" His plummy voice has a hint of worry cloaked over it.

"Hi, Declan. Have you heard from Solomon?"

"No, that's actually why I was calling you," Declan says. "We were supposed to meet at three. I wanted to congratulate him on his big win. But he never showed. I thought that was...rather unlike him. I've left two voicemails and texted him."

"I haven't heard from him since this morning," I say, as my heart threatens to burst from my chest. "I'm really fucking worried, Dee. This is weird. He's never done this before. And this is his big day, for Christ's sake. Why would he just leave and not say anything? Where the hell is he? He doesn't just disappear. Ever."

"I'm sure he'll turn up, Tacy. This is just all a big misunderstanding. Give it a little bit longer. He'll pull into the driveway soon, I'm sure of it."

Hours tick by, and no Solomon. His car never pulls into the driveway. He never returns my calls. And his cell goes straight to voicemail. It's three AM, and I'm freaking the fuck out. I call my teenage neighbor to come over and sit in the house

with the kids while they're asleep so I can go out and look for Sol. Luckily, she's still awake.

I back out of the driveway at warped speed, nearly knocking off a side mirror on the mailbox on the way out. I head to Sol's office first, by some off chance his car broke down somewhere in route and he's locked out. Maybe he fell asleep. He has been under significant stress lately with the election. Oh God, what if he had a medical emergency and no one knew about it? What if he's just sitting in his car and had a heart attack? My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears. My insides are twisted up in knots. And I can't seem to clear the lump in my throat. I feel like the world is closing in on me.

But when I pull into the parking garage attached to Sol's office building, the first thing I notice is his empty parking spot. I park my car and jump out. There are only two other vehicles on the first level, and neither are Sol's. I leap back into the car and speed up to the second level. Circle around twice, then repeat on the third, fourth, and fifth levels. There are a few cars left by employees, but no Solomon.

"FUCK!" I yell as I speed out of the garage.

What do I do? Do I report him missing or is it too early? Don't they have limitations on how fast you can report someone missing or is that just something they say in the movies? My head is spinning, almost as fast as my tires.

I drive downtown to the restaurants and bars Sol and his partners frequent. Maybe he broke down there. I mean, what else could have happened to stop him from coming home? If his car broke down, wouldn't he have called a cab? What about calling me to reassure me he's okay? Everyone has a cell phone these days and he knows my number by heart. Something is wrong.

I drive by Magnus, a high-end restaurant Sol typically takes his partners to for

meetings. No Sol. The restaurant is dark, and the parking lot is empty save for a random shopping cart and a cardboard box. I drive back to Roux, where he was supposed to meet me and the kids for dinner. But I'm met with the exact same unsettling scene.

It's four in the morning, and I've been driving around for hours, scanning alleys and parking lots, searching side streets I've never traveled before. Hoping I catch a glimpse of my husband. The love of my life. Our new Governor. Then the thought hits me, maybe he's home and the neighbor didn't tell me because she passed out on the couch. I don't want to call and wake her, so I return home.

The driveway is empty, and the porch light is on. Oh my God. Sol, where are you?

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Tacy

One month later

“Mom, please. I just need someone to pick up Cammy and Ben this afternoon. Are you able to?” Asking my mother to help with the kids is like getting the cops to search for my husband. Fucking difficult and nearly impossible. Her Country Club membership and her new boyfriend seem to take precedence over her family. Even amid a crisis.

“I’ll pick them up,” she says.

“Thank you.”

We hang up without saying goodbye. My mother has never been the affectionate kind. The most I got out of her as a child was a pat on the head. She always said hugs and kisses spoil the child. So, when I became a mother, I made it a point to show my children love in every form. Including hugs and kisses. You’d think my mother would have broken down and given me a hug when my husband went missing. But all I got out of her was a half-hearted “I’m sorry”.

It’s been a month since Sol’s disappearance, and I am forcing myself to go through the motions. Pretending that everything is normal, and that I don’t have a missing partner. Work, home, work, home. When my mind is occupied, I’m able to function. But on the weekends, I can hardly keep it together. I feel dead inside. And yet every ounce of my being is screaming. I want to wake from this nightmare. I want my husband back. The children want their dad back. They’re even more confused than I

am, and the worst part is I don't know how to properly comfort them. Or explain this to them. Because I can't explain it to myself.

The day after Sol's disappearance, I went to the police station and filed a missing person's report. The officer on duty seemed to think I was pulling a prank: how could the new Governor have gone missing the day of his election? He asked me. I don't fucking know. I thought that was your job to figure it out. I told him. Which probably started the whole investigation off on the wrong foot. But I was utterly distraught, and I couldn't hide it.

Every day I wake up and am reminded of Sol's absence. The bed next to me is empty. Our black cat, Boo, is sleeping in Sol's spot. Which is funny, because he always hated Sol. Now he seems to miss him.

The cops claim they're doing everything they can to find Solomon, but I don't think their definition of everything they can matches mine. They should be out scouring the streets, the city, the state, day and night in search of a missing Governor. Shouldn't they? They found Sol's phone, but his car is missing too. His cell was discovered in a trashcan three miles from his office at a city park. It had fallen to the bottom of the can. What's strange is Sol never goes to that park, unless he is with his family. We used to take the kids to the playground there, before Sol started working for the state. Before his personal time was overrun with work.

The news stations reported on Sol's disappearance for about a week, then seemed to forget that he was missing. I called three stations and begged them to air his case again, and they swore they would, but haven't yet.

It feels like me and the kids are the only ones who care that he's gone. Which is odd...you would think his coworkers, partners, and colleagues would be in just as big of a panic as we are. They cared for about two weeks. Declan is the only one who's still searching. He's been a lifesaver. Sol's Dad, who lives in a nursing home, swore

he was going to break out of the facility to look for his son. Unfortunately, he has dementia and can't help. Giving him updates, nearly every other day, kills me inside. Not just because I must tell him his only son is still missing, but because he remembers . That's how deeply Sol's absence hurts him.

I'm at work. I can hear the call bells ding from down the hall. Three or four are ringing, sounding like some sort of annoying holiday carol. I'm a charge nurse on a neuro-spine surgical unit. It's how I met Solomon. Ten years ago, before Solomon was a politician, he was an MMA fighter. One night, he had gotten into a particularly brutal fight, suffered a concussion and multiple contusions, and was held overnight for testing and monitoring. Because of concern for his brain, he was admitted to my unit. And I was lucky enough to have him as my patient. Sort of. Solomon is a great man, but he is a pain in the ass to care for. Mainly because he's stubborn and doesn't want to take help from anyone...let alone an attractive, headstrong woman like me. The moment he was discharged, he slid me his number. And, while you're not supposed to get involved with patients for obvious reasons, I was eager to call him. He was sexy as hell: muscular, tan, with dark wavy hair and green and gold speckled eyes. Tattoos of snakes and roses up one arm. How could I resist? We were married within a year and had our daughter, Cammy, within two.

I blink back the tears as the best memories of the past decade float around my consciousness. I shrug them off. I don't have time to think about Sol. Now I have to focus on my job and providing for my kids.

A new nurse named Cecilia approaches me in the hallway. "Tacy, I have a problem in room four-A. Mr. Parish is refusing his blood pressure medication. But his blood pressure is one-ninety over one hundred."

"Did you explain to him that he's here because of his blood pressure in the first place? That if he refuses the medication, he's welcoming a second stroke. Educate him on the consequences and be stern but gentle. Show him that you care," I instruct

her. “And if he still refuses, I’ll talk to him.”

“No, I didn’t think to explain it like that. I’ll give it a shot,” she says and rushes back down the hallway.

The phone in my pocket rings again. I sigh and answer it.

“Tacy?” It’s Declan.

“Yeah, hey Dee. What’s going on? Why are you calling me at work?” I know something’s off if Declan’s calling me at work. He only called me at work once before – to let me know when Sol had been in a car accident downtown two years ago. My heart skip, and I brace myself for the worst.

“I have news,” he says.

I can feel my pulse in my throat. “Okay...what? What is it? Did they find Sol?”

“Are you sitting down?”

“No, but I will,” I say and hurry into the nurses’ lounge. I grab the only chair that’s in there and sit. The world is already spinning, and I feel unsteady. Everything seems like a dream. Fuzzy and impermanent. “I’m sitting.”

He gulps. “Yes, they found Solomon.”

“Where is he? Is he okay?”

A long pause then, “No. I’m so sorry, Tacy. He’s dead.”

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Tacy

One year later

“Tacy, go easy on yourself. I know you still love Solomon. No one’s trying to take that away from you. But you should allow yourself some happiness, you know?” Declan says in a soft tone. He’s wearing a football t-shirt and jeans and his absurdly white teeth gleam in the porch light. “Come on. I’ve got your favorite. Kane’s spicy tuna rolls.”

The kids are asleep, and Declan shows up with take-out and a movie. I mean, sure, he’s a long-time friend, but lately it seems he has other intentions. This surprise visit confirms it. Yeah, he’s kind of attractive and sweet. But I’m not over Solomon. I don’t think I ever will be. And even if I’m lonely, and extremely horny, I don’t want anyone except Sol. Ever again.

I gulp, open the door wider, and quietly usher him inside.

He takes off his shoes by the door and sets the bag on the coffee table. His blue eyes meet mine and he grins. “We’re friends, right?”

I nod. “Of course. Why do you ask?”

“I just get the feeling you’re not completely comfortable with me being here. If that’s the case, I can leave.”

“No, don’t leave. Of course we’re friends,” I clear my throat and sit down on the

loveseat catty-corner to the couch. Hoping Declan sits on the sofa and gives me some space.

“Mind if I grab some plates and stuff for us?”

I nod then grab the remote and turn on the TV while Declan trudges off into the kitchen.

He returns seconds later with paper plates, ramekins, and a bottle of soy sauce. He sets them down on the table and plops down beside me. I recoil. Maybe I shouldn't have let him in. I suddenly feel exposed. Awkward. I bring my feet up underneath me and pull a throw blanket over my bare legs.

I click through ten, twenty, thirty channels in search of something that isn't romantic or scary. I don't want to give him the wrong impression...because it feels like I already have.

Declan leans forward and produces a white Styrofoam box from the brown bag. He hands it to me.

“See? Your favorite, right?”

I nod and force a grin. Maybe I'm being too hard on him. He's been there more for me than my own family since...

I pour soy in the wooden ramekin and dip my sushi roll in the dark sauce. It's been a year since I've had sushi. It was me and Sol's thing. Of course, a little rice and raw fish would invoke memories of Sol. I close my eyes and remind myself I'm not betraying my husband. That there's nothing wrong with eating sushi with our good friend.

Then again. My mind returns to his earlier question: we're friends, right? Would a friend make a move on a friend who's mourning their dead spouse? Would a friend put pressure on a friend to move on? I open my mouth to say something, when he places a hand on my knee. I don't think. I just react.

"Umm..." I stand abruptly, knocking my soy sauce all over my beautiful rug. "I...I can't do this, Declan. I'm sorry." I begin cleaning up the mess I made and avoid eye contact with him. Though I can almost hear him seething and feel his eyes on me.

He crouches to help me mop up the soy with a napkin. "No, no. I'm sorry, Tacy. You have nothing to apologize for. I shouldn't have done that. From now on, I'll sit on the sofa. Would that make you more comfortable?"

No, what would make me more comfortable would be for you to leave. But I can't be that rude to him, so instead I say, "sure. That'd be okay. Sorry again. I'm just not ready..."

We finish cleaning up the mess I made. Declan picks up his Styrofoam box and sits on the couch. "All good. Let's just be two friends who watch a movie together. Okay?"

I nod and return to my spot on the loveseat, pulling the blanket up off the floor and over my lap. "Okay."

I eat two or three sushi rolls, say I'm finished, and excuse myself to clean up and take out the trash.

It's warm and humid outside, as I plod down the porch steps with a heavy trash bag in hand. I open the bin and throw it inside. A dog barks somewhere in the neighborhood and a streetlamp flickers. For a second, I think I see the shadow of a man standing across the street. But I rub my eyes gently, telling myself it's a displaced contact lens.

I glance down at my watch. It's getting late, and I promised the kids we'd wake up early to go to the beach. Time for him to go home.

I trudge back inside and just as I step into the living room, Declan quickly sets my phone back on the coffee table. Then nonchalantly puts his hands in his pockets. I can't believe what I just saw.

"Uhh, I thought it was my phone for a second," he stammers.

Why the fuck is he looking at my phone?

"Uh huh," I reply and reach for the remote. I click off the television and motion to the door. "Declan, thank you for the sushi. That was kind of you, but I have an early morning. I promised the kids a beach day, and we like to get there before the crowds."

"Oh, but it's only midnight," he says as he pulls his phone from his pocket to check the time. "Can't we finish the movie?" He reaches for the remote on the coffee table, and I bristle at his brazenness. His phone was in his pocket the whole time.

I stroll to the door and open it. Then flash him a toxic smile. It's a get-the-fuck-out-of-my-house-before-I-kill-you type of grin. "I appreciate your generosity, but I'm tired. I worked a long shift today, Declan."

He leans back and turns the TV back on.

I'm confused. He's never been this blatantly obstinate before. He's acting like he lives here. Am I not being forward enough?

"I don't want to be rude..." I say.

“But you are being rude.”

My jaw tightens and my arm hairs stand straight up. My nervous system is warning of DANGER. I remind myself he is a friend, and maybe he’s having a bad day. Maybe I put out the wrong vibes. Gave him the wrong idea. I shouldn’t have let him in. Shouldn’t have eaten his fucking fish.

“I...I’m sorry?”

“I said, you’re being rude, Tacy. If Sol were here, he would agree.”

I grip the doorknob with one hand and put the other on my hip. Is he really challenging me in my own house? What is his problem?

“Well, Sol’s not here, Declan. And if you’d like to save the friendship that we have, I ask that you respect my wishes.”

He stands and grabs his keys off the table. An angry exhale escapes his lips. Fine. That’s okay if he’s disappointed. At least he’s leaving. And if he’s truly my friend, he’ll understand, and this will be a thing of the past in a few days.

He brushes by, leans over, and kisses my cheek. Then whispers in my ear, “You’re right, Tacy. Sol’s not here. He’s dead. And he’s never coming back. So, we all must move on.”

I grit my teeth and say nothing as I fight back the tears pooling in the corners of my eyes. How dare he? I stare straight ahead as Declan walks through the screen door and down the porch steps.

“Bye, Tacy. I’ll call you,” he says over his shoulder. Seconds later, a car door shuts and an engine revs.

I shut the front door and lock it. Then collapse on the floor and cry. I wish Sol were here. I wish he'd never gotten involved in politics. I wish our friend wasn't losing his God damn mind...

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Tacy

It's been a year, and the police still don't know shit about Sol's death. The last sighting of him was the day of the election. The cameras at his office catch him walking out the back door, presumably headed to the parking garage, then the footage cuts out. They never found his vehicle. Then, a month later, his body washes to shore twenty miles north of the city. No signs of a struggle. No foul play suspected.

The day they found his body is still a blur, but I recall screaming at the detective, "someone did this to him! This wasn't a fucking accident! He's elected Governor, disappears the same day, and you're telling me he simply left his office to go to the docks, and just fucking drowns? Sol was an excellent swimmer!"

It never made sense why they so quickly dismissed his case as an accidental drowning. One deputy had the audacity to mention suicide...as if Sol would throw himself into the ocean and end his beautiful life. Purposely erasing himself from the earth and abandoning his children and wife. No. I refuse to believe it. But there is nothing I could do to prove otherwise. I don't know anyone who would want Sol dead in the first place. People loved Sol. He was a good man. A genuinely good person who wanted to help people, which is why he got into politics in the first place. Sometimes I wish he was less of a selfless man, then maybe he wouldn't have run for Governor. And maybe he'd still be here with us.

I haven't seen Declan since the night he hit on me. Which is a good thing, because I'm still reeling from his actions. I know he looked at my phone while I was outside. Why would he do that? And the way he tried to play it off...then insulted me. But people do strange things when they're lonely and grieving. Maybe I ought to give

him some grace.

It's Saturday morning, and I'm brewing a pot of coffee and frying up some eggs when I hear Declan's voice on the television in the living room.

"Mom!" Cammy calls. "Uncle Declan's on the TV. Come see!"

A kitchen towel draped over my shoulder and greasy spatula in hand, I walk in and see Cammy laying on the couch. Her puppy slippers hanging off the side. Ben's rolling a neon green matchbox car back and forth on the coffee table.

I grab the remote and turn up the volume. A red news banner flashes at the bottom of the screen: Declan Smith, Governor. Then in white text under his name: "Signs bill to fund Capitol City's newest parks and rec." Interesting he's signing a bill that Sol fought so hard against. In fact, it seems Declan's taking the exact opposite stance on the matter. It seems like a good thing to fund a new recreation facility for the city. Encourage people to exercise and socialize. But it's not. The money will be taken from the children with disabilities' scholarship fund and re-routed to this project. A project that would also displace working class families from their homes downtown. Who does this new project actually benefit?

I'm scratching my head. I huff and flip the channel to cartoons, then hand the remote to my daughter. "Here, watch some kid shows for a bit. The news will rot your brain. Breakfast is almost ready."

"Okay, Mom," the kids reply in unison.

I return to the kitchen but can't shake the feeling that something's off with Declan's behavior. He and Sol agreed never to sign this bill, even though they were opposed on other issues. Why would Dee sign the bill now? Why would he undo everything Solomon worked for? I'm sure there's a payoff involved.

I serve breakfast and pour myself another cup of coffee when I hear my cell ring from the living room. Cammy picks it up. I walk in to see who it is, when I hear her say, “Yes, Daddy. I’m keeping an eye on Mom. Uh huh. And Ben.” Her voice is high-pitched, almost squealy.

“Cammy,” I say and rush to the phone. “Hand mommy the phone please.” Cammy hands it to me, then looks up at me with wide, teary eyes.

I lift the screen and see Sol’s picture and name. “Who is this?!” I demand. “This isn’t funny!”

“It’s Daddy! Let me talk to him!” Cammy squeaks and holds both hands out in front of her.

“It’s not Daddy, Honey,” I say.

Cammy cries and shoots out of the living room and down the hall. Then slams her bedroom door.

Click. Whoever it was ends the call, and I stare at the screen in disbelief.

“Was it really Dad?” Ben asks me from the couch. His matchbox car rolls out of his hand and onto the floor.

I shake my head. “I don’t think so, Buddy. Daddy’s gone.” Tears form in my eyes, and I am utterly confused. How did someone have Sol’s number? It had to be a mistake. A misunderstanding. A line crossed somewhere. Right?

“I’m going to finish cooking, Sweetie,” I mumble to Ben and head back to the kitchen. As soon as I hear the TV volume increase, I slip my phone out of my pocket and dial Sol’s number. But it just rings and rings. There’s no voicemail. Sol’s

voicemail is gone. Which tells me it was just a misunderstanding. Someone else must have his number now, somehow, and thought Cammy was their daughter. But how would he have known Ben's name? Maybe they asked if she was taking care of her brother, and she just offered his name up?

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Lazaris (Sol)

Present Day

It was always The Org's mission to get rid of me. From day one. From the day I walked into the capitol building. They didn't like someone who challenged the system; didn't like someone who questioned the process, the laws, the money being spent and why. When I announced I'd run for Governor, I received the first anonymous threat. I remember it clearly. I walked into my office, and there it was sitting on my desk in a navy-blue envelope tied up with red thread. A red wax seal with the letter O stamped on the back. I thought it was official mail from Washington, so I tore it open without a thought.

It read:

"Solomon Rountree: I run an organization that knows everything about you. And, while we are generous, we hold ourselves to a high standard. My organization has the public's best interests at heart and will do everything to protect those interests. Your time and effort would be best spent elsewhere. Return to your position in the elementary education system."

No signature, no stamp, no return address. Nothing to indicate who it came from or where it came from. What I did know is that someone delivered it to my office, although my administrative assistant swore, she hadn't seen anyone go in or out. When I checked the surveillance, two full days had been erased. I tore up the fucking letter and threw it away.

Eleven months later, when I announced my campaign for Governor, another one came. This time to my house. I opened my mailbox, and there it was. A blue envelope with red thread. And that presumptuous red seal.

It read:

“Solomon Rountree: My organization is aware of your campaign and of your insidious intentions. We vehemently demand you withdraw from the race. If you decide to proceed, we will proceed and remove you ourselves.”

No stamp, no return address, no signature.

I had no idea who it was coming from. I figured my policies were rubbing someone the wrong way. I wasn't worried about it until that envelope showed up at my house. Whoever I was pissing off knew where I lived, which meant my family was at risk. At the same time, the first threat went unfulfilled. And the state needed a new governor to shake things up. The last governor was corrupt. We all knew it. But no one wanted to do anything about it. A man who had sold his soul for money and power and a name. He worked for companies and other politicians. Not for the people. Enter me. Solomon Rountree. The local elementary school principal turned district superintendent. Three-year MMA champion. Father. Husband.

The day I was elected was the day my carefully built world came crashing down around me. The secret organization made good on their threats. Well...they tried. They thought they killed me and dumped my body in the bay. But I survived. And I decided at that moment the only thing I could do to keep my family, and myself, safe from the ORG was to let them think I was dead. Let the world think I was dead. Which, as painful as it was, also meant my family would think I was dead. It hit my wife, Tacy, the hardest. But if the ORG knew I was still alive, they would kill her and the kids to get to me.

I knew too much. I know too much.

I've been watching Tacy for weeks to ensure her safety. I saw Declan come to the house...MY house...at nine one night. He had a bag in his hand and a smug smile on his face. Which made me want to punch him in his fucking mouth. He's trying to make a move on my wife. But I'll kill him before he touches her. I plan to tell her that I'm still alive. I've just been waiting for the right time. It would be prudent and wise to kill all the mother fuckers who are a threat to my family before I reveal myself to Tacy. But that doesn't mean I can't play around a little bit. That doesn't mean I can't play a few of our old games...

I've been patiently waiting for months to do this. I pull my burner phone out of my back pocket, type in Tacy's number, and send a message:

"I've been watching you."

It takes about ten minutes, but I know this is Tacy's day off, so she'll have her phone by her side. A read receipt shows under my message. She starts typing.

"Who the fuck is this?!"

Hmm, what do I say? I would love nothing more than to tell her I'm still alive and I'll be with her again soon. But if I reveal my identity to her, I worry The Org will catch wind of it. Capture her, hurt her, maybe even kill her to get to me. Especially if Declan is a member of The Org, as I suspect. No, I'll keep it a secret for now.

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. I reply, "I'm an admirer."

She starts typing again. Then stops. Then starts again and finally replies with, "whoever you are, you need to stop. Or I will report you to the police."

“Why? Does a man in uniform turn you on?” I can’t help it. I’m beaming as the tension builds.

She immediately responds with, “fuck you. This is your last warning.”

“I’d love to fuck you. Is this text stream making you wet, Doll?”

Typing and then a long pause.

“You’re fucking sick. Whoever you are.”

I grin again and imagine Tacy in a pink lacey bra and panties. Imagine sliding the straps off her shoulders and unhooking the bra to reveal those luscious breasts. I can almost feel the soft skin in my palms, hear her cute little whimpers. My cock hardens and strains against the fabric of my joggers. I’m sitting in my car, two blocks from my old house, and there’s no one around. So, I reach down my pants and release my hard length.

I text her again, “if the thought of a man following you around and watching you didn’t excite you, you would’ve blocked me already.”

She’s replying again, and I envision her little nipples hardening with excitement over the mystery of who I am. Over the idea that someone could be stalking her. I’ve known her for almost thirteen years. She’s always enjoyed a little danger. It’s the source of her many kinks. Along with stalking. More than once, she and I would play risky games like this one. But she always knew she was safe and secure. But not anymore. So, the stakes are higher now. I bet her pussy is throbbing with the thought of it. I can’t help but stroke my cock with my hand, up and down. Slowly, at first.

My phone dings. Her message says, “it’s not sexy. It’s fucking creepy.”

I increase speed and rub my cock from the base to the head, spending extra time massaging the tip. If only I could feel Tacy's wet cunt around it, one more time...I stroke faster and harder.

“Creepy turns you on. Gets your little pussy nice and wet. Doesn't it, Princess?”

She types again, then answers with, “who is this? Seriously?”

I imagine slamming my hard cock into her tight little hole and stroke it harder and harder in rotating motion for another three minutes or so until...I explode and my cum shoots onto the steering wheel. It's been months since I've had a release. I'd been saving it up for this exact moment. The closest I've felt to my beautiful horny wife since the day I died.

I take a deep breath, wipe the mess up with a napkin from my glove compartment, and decide to reply to my darling girl with: “All will be revealed in good time. Just save that pussy for me.”

Tacy

Great. My life is in fucking shambles. My husband's dead. My kids are sad and confused. I'm working overtime just to pay the bills until Sol's life insurance policy pays out. And now I have a fucking stalker. How did this even happen? I don't talk to anyone except my co-workers, my patients, the kids' teachers, my mother, and Declan. Would Declan...no. It couldn't be him. He doesn't know about my stalker kink. Does he? Did Sol tell him some of our darkest secrets when he was still alive? They were best friends, after all, and guys like to brag. Declan has been acting weird, coming by the house and putting the moves on me. Sadly, I have no physical attraction to him. So, the idea of Declan being my stalker doesn't do much for me. Plus, Sol always said Declan was vanilla when it comes to sex. His last girlfriend, Alyssa Sampson, claimed they broke up because Declan got tired of her spending his

money on lingerie and high heels. I mean, what guy in their right mind would get tired of his sexy, bombshell girlfriend wearing skimpy teddies and pumps around the house? Boring milk toast, that's who. Declan Harvey, that's who.

I review the text thread between me and this creepy guy and decide to delete the whole thing. I don't need Cammy getting a hold of my phone and discovering it. And if he continues to text me, I'll report it to the police. Because, while I used to give into my kinks with Sol, I don't know who this person is. Or what he might do. Have you seen the documentary about people who are convicted stalkers? The stalking almost always starts out in an innocent friendship or partnership but turns malevolent. Most stalkers lose their shit and hurt their victims, sometimes even kill their victims, in the end. I can't play stupid games and put my life in danger. Even if the idea of a stalker is somewhat titillating.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

“Someone broke into my house!” I scream at the dispatcher. “There’s shit everywhere! I...I don’t know what to do. What do I do?”

Cammy, Ben, and I are standing on the sidewalk in front of the house. Our front door is wide open. We came home from school, walked in the front door, and noticed our house had been turned upside down. Papers scattered across the living room floor and down the hallway. The end table turned over. A lamp burst.

I ordered the kids outside and called the police. I don’t even know if the intruder is still in the house.

The lady on the other end assures me the police are on their way, after instructing me to get back in my vehicle and lock the doors until they show up. I screech to the kids to hop in the car, and I jump in too, locking the doors and turning the engine back on. Just in case we need to make a quick getaway.

My heart is thumping wildly, and my entire body is trembling. I’m terrified and my adrenaline is pumping, and I don’t know whether I want to cry, scream, or bolt back into the house and shoot the mother fucker who dares to intrude.

I glance at Cammy and Ben through the rearview mirror. Cammy’s openly sobbing, and Ben’s eyes are wide as bicycle wheels. He’s biting the nails of his left hand, while his right hand is clutching Cammy’s. They’re so sweet. Too sweet to be going through something this traumatic. Their father just died for Christ’s sake. Now we suffer a breaking and entering?

This must be the work of the stalker. I should have known better and reported it. Stupid of me.

A minute later, three police cars roll into the driveway, and another follows, parking in the street. Their lights are on as they all jump out of their vehicles, dash up the driveway, and enter my house with guns bared.

Seconds later, the four officers file out of the front door, and into my driveway. The Sheriff walks over to my car window and gives me a thumbs up. His gun is now in its holster, and there's a look on his face as if everything is okay.

I roll down my window and turn off the car. Three other police cars pull up.

"Is he gone? Is the intruder gone?" I ask, a noticeable wobble in my voice. I gulp.

The Sheriff nods and smiles at me. "Yes, Ma'am. He's gone. Can you step out the vehicle so we can talk?" He flicks his head at my kids in the back, indicating he wants to talk out of the children's earshot.

"Sure," I say and step into the driveway. I stare down at my hands, still quivering with fear.

I shut the car door and walk up the driveway, pausing beside my front porch next to the stocky Sheriff with light gray hair. There's a damp chill in the air. The kind that swoops in right before a storm.

I pull my sweater tightly around me and face the Sheriff. Three other officers are close by; one is on his phone and the other two are talking low to one another. Too low for me to hear.

"Well, this is a strange situation, isn't it?"

“Yes,” I reply. “Who do you think it was?”

“I have no clue who broke into your house, Mrs. Rountree. But the fact that they did is concerning. On more than one level.”

“I know what you mean,” I say. “Do you think whoever did this had something to do with Sol’s death?”

The Sheriff scratches his whiskered chin, readjusts his belt, and sighs. Saving himself some time while he thinks of how to answer my question.

“That is a concern, Mrs. Rountree.”

“You can call me Tacy,” I say. “We’re familiar with each other now. We should be on a first name basis.”

“In that case, call me Fred. As far as who broke in, it’s more likely it was some petty thief running through the area. We’ve had two other B and E cases this month. Seems they’re targeting homes they know are empty during the workday. So, while it’s scary to think about the Governor, we can’t jump to conclusions here. Recall, his death was ruled an accidental drowning, Tacy. I need you to go inside and tell me if anything is missing. These serial burglars like to steal gold chains, small electronic devices, and cash. Anything small and valuable they can get their hands on. They probably pocket the stuff and walk out of the house in regular street clothes. As not to alarm the neighbors in the middle of the day. If they wore all black with ski masks and carried out a bunch of televisions and such, they’d draw too much attention.”

I nod. “Okay, I can look. See if anything’s gone. Can you just tell my kids everything is okay? They’ll be happy to hear it coming from you, Sheriff...er, Fred, I mean.”

He nods and tips his hat. “Sure thing, Tacy.”

I still can't believe we were robbed in the middle of the day. At the same time, I'm relieved they didn't break in at night.

I walk up the front steps and enter the house. A blanket of ripped papers cover my living room and hallway floors. I crouch down and pick up a torn piece of paper. It appears to be a mortgage statement from last year. I lift another. Tax filings. I kneel and continue reading the papers. The intruder went through our personal files in the office.

I head for Sol's home office at the end of the hall. There's a scratchy lump in my throat that I can't clear, as my mind goes to the safe with our guns, a wad of cash, and a few other personal things. I enter the office, stepping on papers, and hurry to the fire safe in the corner of the room. I kneel and see the number code is still in there from the last time I accessed the safe. Unless the intruder knew the code. I open the safe and suck in a breath of air, expecting it to be empty. But everything is still in its place. The guns. The cash. Vibrators. Handcuffs. A couple other sex toys I don't care to mention.

My head is pounding. I get the worst headaches when I'm overcome with stress. I approach the filing cabinet next to Sol's desk. The papers crunch underfoot with each step I take. What a fucking mess. The filing cabinet's three drawers are wide open, and there's only a few papers left in the yellow filing folders. The rest are littered throughout the house. I'm so confused. Why would the intruder look through our files, but not take our guns or money?

I hear papers crinkling in the hallway. Then a man's voice. Sheriff Fred's.

"Tacy? What did they take?" He calls from the hallway.

"In here, Fred," I swallow hard and close the door to the safe. I'd rather not explain the BDSM collection within. "I'm in the office."

He leans in, hands on the doorframe, as if bracing himself for jarring news.

“They left my cash and guns,” I declare. “The safe was unlocked but nothing is missing from it.”

He tilts his head and presses his lips together.

“Really? What about your jewelry? Other small valuables?”

I stand and walk by him. “I’m not sure. Let me look.”

He nods and follows behind me quietly.

I walk throughout the house, examining the kitchen, dining area, bathrooms, and the kids’ rooms. But nothing looks out of place except for the files from the office. I check my jewelry box in my bedroom, and everything is in its place.

I turn to the Sheriff and sigh. “I don’t know, Sheriff. This is so weird. Everything is here. All my jewelry, cash, even my iPad on the nightstand. It doesn’t look like the intruder even robbed us. Just came inside and ripped through our filing cabinet.”

“Could be someone looking to steal identities, then,” he says and shrugs. “Weirder things do happen. And identity theft is highly common these days.”

I lick my lips and begin picking up the papers and stacking them together.

“I guess so.” I freeze in my tracks. The police haven’t collected fingerprints or any photos of the crime scene. I rise from the floor and look at the Sheriff. “Aren’t your men going to gather prints or something? Take photos?”

Fred clears his throat, and his eyes shift to the front door. “Oh, well...we don’t really

need to collect prints in this case. It's pretty cut and dry. Some vagrants, a petty identity thief or two, noticed you weren't home, break in. Seeks out any files with your personal information then leaves with the info he came for."

I bite my lip and nearly growl at the guy. But ground myself before I do something stupid. "What about the fact that my husband went missing and turned up dead? Now, a year later, someone breaks into my house and goes through my personal files, and you're not going to consider this a crime scene?"

Sheriff Fred nervously adjusts his hat and clears his throat again. "Tacy, we do consider this a crime scene. It's just a waste of time and energy to dust for prints in this case. I think this is a lot simpler than what you're thinking. I know it seems scary, but whoever did this isn't going to bother you again. Although I highly suggest calling the credit bureaus and putting it on hold. This way if someone tries to open an account in your name, they won't be able to."

I shake my head violently and clutch the arm of the loveseat. The room is starting to spin, and the bile in my stomach is burning my insides. Why doesn't he seem to care? Am I overdramatizing this? Saliva fills my mouth and my vision blurs.

"I...I need to sit down," I say and black out.

Seconds later, I wake up on my living room floor with a crowd of police officers, firemen, and paramedics leaning over me. At least I thought it was seconds later.

I sit up and rub my eyes. "What happened?"

"You passed out and hit your head on the coffee table, Tacy," the Sheriff says as a paramedic with blue gloves shines a flashlight into my eyes.

"Pupils are reactive," the young paramedic says as another takes my blood pressure

and oxygen levels.

“Vitals are stable,” an older female paramedic says.

There’s a knot on the side of my head that’s throbbing. I raise my hand to touch it, when the paramedic grabs my hand and says, “you’re bleeding, Ma’am. Don’t touch.”

I cut my eyes at him and jump to my feet. “I’m fine. Where’s my kids?”

The Sheriff smiles and reaches out to touch my arm gently. “They’re fine, Tacy. They’re outside with my Deputy.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Okay, good.”

The paramedics are cleaning up their equipment, when the woman looks at me and says, “we’re taking you to the hospital.”

“No, you’re not. I can’t leave my kids. I won’t leave my kids.”

“Tacy, you hit your head hard. We really need to get you checked out. I’m worried you’ll need stitches and maybe even have a concussion. Don’t you have someone to watch the kids while you’re being looked over?”

I groan, “Yes. My mother.”

“What’s her name and number, please?” Fred asks.

I answer then follow the paramedics out the front door, while the Sheriff calls my mother and explains what happened. Or...tries to explain. Because it sounds like my mother is giving him the fifth degree. Typical Judy Beckner. Instead of being worried

and agreeing to help, she has to ask a million questions before committing.

“Get the stretcher!” The young EMT calls.

“No!” I say. “I don’t need a stretcher. I can fucking walk.”

Whoops. I cursed in front of the kids. I kneel in front of Cammy and Ben, who are sitting in two rocking chairs on the front porch. Ben’s clutching his stuffed elephant and Cammy’s face is tear stained. My heart sinks seeing them this way.

“Hey, kiddos. Listen. I know things seem scary and weird right now, but everything’s going to be okay. Mommy got a little dizzy and passed out. So, they want to take me to work to get checked out, okay? You’ll stay with Grandma until they discharge me from the hospital.”

“Mom, are you okay?” Cammy asks as tears flow freely down her rosy little cheeks.

I nod and smile at her. “I swear, Cammy. I’m fine. I bumped my head and might need a couple stitches. No big deal.”

“Who broke in the house, Mommy?” Ben inquires. My smart little man always asking questions.

I shake my head, “I’m not sure, Bud. But don’t worry, we’re getting an alarm and cameras.”

Ben jumps up and throws his arms around my neck.

“And maybe a dog,” I say. And that one word elicits a cheer from both kids. Dog . We’ve always wanted one. “A big, ass-kicking canine.”

Cammy and Ben both wince.

“Mom, you said a bad word, again,” says Ben.

“You want a dog or not?”

Four stitches, an empty stomach, and a disgruntled mother. That’s all I have to show for my entire Tuesday. Oh, right. Add to the list a house that was burglarized which the police don’t seem to care to investigate. At least I don’t have a concussion.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Sol

“Where were you last night?” I text her again. But I’ve been patient. I’ve waited a week. I drove by the house and noticed Tacy’s car in the driveway. At seven PM. But there were no lights on. I peeked in the windows. No one was home. All night.

“Listen here, mother fucker. I will kill you if you come in my house again,” she texts rapidly. There’s fury pouring from her words. Not exactly the reply I was expecting.

I squint and read her message again. Did someone come into my house? I start typing out this exact question but pause before I hit send. She’ll know it’s me. I have to play this cool. Although inside I’m ready to go on a killing spree thinking that someone broke into my home and threatened my family’s lives.

Instead, I type out, “what happened last night, Tacy? Who came into the house?” then hit send.

She reads the text and responds within seconds.

“You did, you psychopath!” I can almost hear her screaming at me. I always hated when Tacy was mad. She’d go from sweet Princess Tacy to angry feral Tacy in seconds, and sometimes I had no idea what set her off.

“I didn’t come into the house. It wasn’t me.”

“I don’t believe you. What do you want from me? Please just leave my family alone.”

I really must be careful here, even though I wish I could just jump in my car and speed over there. Pull her in my arms and tell her everything is going to be all right. That I'm protecting her, and I won't let anyone ever come near her or the kids again.

"You don't have to believe me. But you should trust me. It wasn't me in the house last night. If I came into the house, you'd be the first to know."

Another painful pause.

"Who is this?"

"I can't tell you. Yet."

"Just leave me alone."

"You need to install cameras and an alarm."

"What?"

"Security. You need an alarm system at the very least. To deter people."

"Yeah, I know."

"The sooner the better."

Tacy

This whole time I've been thinking this mysterious texter had broken into my home. But if that was true, he wouldn't have said he didn't break in last night when the incident was in the middle of the day. And why would he encourage me to install an alarm? Was this a part of his sick game or am I going crazy?

I've scheduled a company to come out and install cameras and an alarm this week. I'm not fucking around with my family's safety anymore. The break-in has me feeling vulnerable. Weak. And I'm unable to protect my own children. So...no more.

I just worked a thirteen-hour shift and make it home with a box of pizza just as the sun goes down. My mother and her elderly boyfriend have been staying with us since the incident two days ago. It sounds sweet but trust me. It's anything but. I should be appreciative of her help with the kids, but it just feels intrusive. But maybe that's because my house was just broken in and now, I have people invading my space that aren't typically the do-gooder type. My mother acts like she cares, attending charity events and donating hundreds of thousands to various non-profits, but in the end...she only ever cares about herself. And the money she inherited from her rich parents.

Everyone chows down on the pepperoni and olive pie and mom surprisingly helps me put the kids to bed.

I crash on my couch, prop my feet up on the coffee table, and watch as my mother flips back and forth between the home improvement and cooking channels. Although, I'm not sure why. She never was a great decorator...or cook, for that matter. Growing up, my mother spent all her time at the country club. The woman had a glass of wine in her hands by ten in the morning, and hardly ever wielded a spatula. Still, it seems she's trying to do better. I should give her a chance.

"Thanks for the pizza, Tace," she says and sips from her wine glass.

"No problem," I say. "Hey, just so you know, I have the alarm company coming out tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh, that's a fabulous idea." She sets her wine glass down and turns to me. "Did the police figure out who broke in?"

I shush her gently. “I just don’t want the kids to hear any more about it. They’ve been through enough this year.”

She nods and pretends to zip her lips and throw away the key.

“No, they haven’t. It’s like they don’t care,” I whisper. “They didn’t even take fingerprints, Mom.”

She frowns. “What do you mean, they didn’t take prints?”

“Exactly what I said,” I sigh. “They said it was probably someone looking to steal identities. That’s all. Didn’t take photos of the scene either. I’m beginning to think the cops don’t like the Rountrees very much.”

She clears her throat and leans back on the couch. Then crosses her legs and bites her bottom lip.

Guy Fieri’s voice fills the air between us.

“Frank and I will be here when the alarm company comes tomorrow,” she says decidedly.

“Thank you, Mom. For everything.”

“I know we haven’t always had the best relationship, Tacy. But I want you to know, I love you very much. You and the kids. And I am truly sorry for what happened to Sol. And for what happened to the house. I just don’t understand why.”

I shake my head and snuggle up in a blanket. “I don’t either, Mom.”

“Neither do the police, obviously,” she says. “So, what did the intruder take,

exactly?”

“Some files,” I reply.

“Well...yes, we know that. But which ones?”

I had been so consumed with getting out of the ER the first night, then getting my house cleaned up and the kids readjusted that I’d totally forgotten to figure out the files the burglar had taken.

“That’s a great point,” I admit. “I don’t know which ones. But I can find out.”

Mom follows me into the office. I click on the corner lamp and sit cross-legged on the carpet next to the filing cabinet. Mom follows suit, grunting as she lowers herself to the floor. She situates herself, then leans in and bumps my shoulder playfully.

“Isn’t this fun? Solving mysteries together?”

My mouth drops open. Is she serious? Solving mysteries together? I’d better not even address this comment.

I open the bottom drawer and read the names on the yellow tabs of the folders. “Taxes 2022, Taxes 2023, Mortgage, Home Insurance”. I open each file, flipping through the papers speedily, searching to see if I notice anything glaringly obvious that’s missing. “Car, Life Insurance, 401K.” I continue looking, but everything seems to be in its place.

“Anything yet?” Mom asks.

“No.” I open the birth certificate file and stop. Then gasp when I notice what was taken.

“Sol’s certificates. They’re all gone,” I utter as a sob threatens to escape my throat. I swallow to prevent an outburst.

“His certificates?” Mom asks.

“His birth and death certificate,” I say, my voice wobbly. “His social security card. Even his degrees. Those bastards.”

Mom reaches for the file and thumbs through it. “They left your birth certificate though. That’s strange, don’t you think? Why would they take Sol’s but not yours?”

“An easy target, I guess?” I begin to cry. I’m tired of holding back. I’m exhausted and it’s too difficult to steel my emotions. “Maybe they figure he’s dead so who cares?”

I grab my knees and hug them to my chest. Then bury my face in them and let the tears flow. Mom reaches over and rubs my back. The most amount of affection the woman has ever shown me.

“It’s going to be okay,” she coos. “You’re a strong woman. You bring people back from the dead. Surely you can overcome this.”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever brought anyone back from the dead, Mom, but thank you,” I say and sniffle.

“Well, you know what I mean. People go into code blue, or whatever you call it, and you are there to save them. To pull them back from the brink,” she says and squeezes my shoulder gently.

That night, I lay down to sleep and can’t stop thinking about Solomon. I mean, I should be more worried about the house and the kids, and the fact that we were

burglarized less than a week ago. But I can't get Sol's face out of my head. Which is stupid. Because he's dead. I'll never see him again. Never feel his lips on mine. Feel his strong arms around me. Feel his cock inside of me. I can't help but pleasure myself thinking of the way we used to fuck each other. He satisfied every need I had. Emotionally, he was always there for me. Never judged me. Always encouraged me. Physically, he held me when I needed affection. Protected me from danger. And sexually, he explored every one of my kinks with me. Every nasty little desire, he made happen. And never thought twice about it. I'll never find another person like him. And honestly, I don't want to.

I give into sweet sexual release and go to sleep that night dreaming of the days when Solomon was alive. When we were happy and safe. I wake up in the morning and remember Sol is gone. And I'm a resident on a nightmare carousel that's spinning faster and faster. One that I'll be stuck on forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Solomon / Aris

It all started when I uncovered The Org's involvement in healthcare. I say involvement, but the truth is they own it. Dominate it. Control it. I used to read about an elite group of people who secretly control everything in this state, but I always dismissed it as conspiracy theory. Silly rhetoric for people online to acquire more clicks. More clicks mean more money. When I discovered the theories were true, I was mortified. But it also motivated me.

One day I started asking questions about the healthcare system, specifically when it comes to medications and how they're tested before being distributed. Well, I overturned a rock that was never intended to even be discovered. A heavy rock meant to hide the truth – that the pharmaceutical companies, owned by shareholders who are members of The Org, have been knowingly poisoning the public for five decades. Maybe more. They've been putting a barrage of heavy metals and toxic preservatives in our medications with detrimental effects. The effects include chronic and life-threatening illnesses, obesity, infertility and miscarriages. This is because The Org's goal is population control. And they will do whatever it takes to prevent overpopulation. Even if that means causing untimely deaths or sterilizing the nation's youth. But the good will agree that poisoning people without their knowledge to prevent the earth from becoming overpopulated is far from justifiable. Do you think the members of The Org take their own medicine? Absolutely not. Do they eat the food they feed us? No. They believe their kind should populate the earth. And the "lesser" should die off.

At first, I decided I would fight back in subtle ways. I would run for governor. Then I'd run for president, and once I'd made it to the top, I'd expose The Org's dirty

secrets to the masses. We'd usher in a new era, where people can trust their government to serve and protect them. Not poison and sterilize them. Sadly, not everyone agreed with my mission. Even my best friend and colleague, Declan Harvey, seemed to be in opposition. I could never prove it when I was still "alive", but I had the overwhelming feeling that Declan was recruited by The Org. He's a fucking sell-out. In tumultuous times, the real men are separated from the boys. The demons from the angels.

Now my house has been infiltrated. Someone broke in and was looking for something. Maybe The Org knows I survived. Maybe they suspect I've been in hiding. But what they don't know is I've been training, preparing, and waiting in the shadows. Building a militia to take them down. The first person on my list is the man who broke into my home. But I won't just punish him. I'll annihilate him.

It's Wednesday and I'm sitting a block away from the house, watching the alarm company install cameras on each corner of the roof. Even if there's a camera at each corner, if they don't install one near the back door, there will be a dead zone. A zone that's not covered by surveillance because of the way the house was built. The bedroom was an addition, so it extends off the back of the house. I watch to make sure they don't miss that spot, but they do. I text Tacy:

"Don't let them forget the back door," I type and hit send. It's Wednesday afternoon, and I know she's at work, but her mother is there.

It takes her fifteen minutes, but she texts me back with "??? I told you to leave me alone."

"The security company. Tell them to install a camera on the back western gable."

"That's it, I'm blocking you and notifying the police."

“Look. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. I’m trying to do the exact opposite and that is to protect you, Tacy.”

“You’re SPYING on my house! You’re stalking me! How is this protection?”

“Have I ever hurt you?”

“How am I supposed to know that if I don’t even know who you are?”

Good point. I change the subject.

“But you like being stalked. At least, that’s what you told me.”

A few minutes later...

“Who the FUCK is this?!”

“I told you, I’m an admirer and your guardian angel. And I’m telling you to call the house and tell them to install a camera at the back door. There’s a dead zone there, and if someone wants to break into the house again, they can go in through the back. An idiot would figure that out.”

Typing. Then a pause. Then typing again...I can almost see her cute little manicured nails feverishly clicking against the screen.

“Fine. I will. If only to protect myself from YOU. This sounds like you were the one who broke in. Like I said before.”

“I didn’t break in. I have no need.”

Here’s the thing. She sounds pissed off. Scared. But I know Tacy better than I know

anyone, and she would have already blocked me and reported this to the police if she wasn't enjoying this a little. She gets off on being scared. On the idea that someone might be following her, watching her undress in her bedroom window, stroking their cock to the thought of her. She thinks I'm dead. So clearly, she's also thinking that I'm someone else. I fucking hate the thought of Tacy thinking of other men.

I finish our text thread with, "Tacy, when I come for you, no cameras or alarm systems will be able to keep me away."

Tacy

“Declan, I know it seems benign, but I think that medicine is killing people.”

I finally pluck up the nerve to bring my concerns directly to him. So, I’m visiting him at his office downtown. Which, of course, happens to be the same office that Sol once occupied. I haven’t been back since...

But, I mean, Declan’s an old friend and the governor. Despite the recent awkward flirting, I know I can count on him to listen to me. So, I try not to let the memories of Solomon overwhelm me and deter me from my objective. Reggie, Sol’s assistant, no longer works for the Governor’s office. I don’t know where he went. We lost touch after Sol’s death. A young woman in tight tan pants and a pink low-cut sweater, who looks to be fresh out of college, now sits at Reggie’s old desk and assists the new Governor.

I saw another commercial advertising Duselizab, a medicine used for a wide range of diseases, and one that’s been on the market for two years. Recently, I’ve noticed a pattern with some of our repeat patients in the hospital. They’re all on this one medication. And twenty three out of the twenty-five have either miscarried or died this year. They were all under the age of forty. I put two and two together when my patient explained how the medicine made her feel “dizzy...like in a dream. Like turning into a ghost,” right before she coded in front of me. She was twenty-seven, pregnant, and a mother of two. The strange look in her eyes will haunt me until the day I die.

“Tacy, calm down,” Declan says and his eyes dart towards the open office door.

“Please have a seat.”

I hate it when someone tells me to calm down. He rises to close the door. I notice he’s wearing a brand-new suit that’s been tailored to fit him perfectly. A pair of gold cuff links gleam when the sunlight from the window hits them. He runs a hand through his wavy blonde hair and returns to his seat.

“Declan. Please don’t tell me to calm down. You know women hate that,” I say through tight lips and perch at the edge of the chair. “It’s hard to calm down when people are dying in front of me.”

I can smell the Killian Black Phantom cologne seeping off him. Memento mori. This is the most buttoned up I’ve ever seen him. He’s dripping with fresh money. He sits behind his desk directly across from me. A smirk spreads across his face. He removes his suit jacket, showing off his bulging biceps that are so evident through his fitted shirt. This is a new Declan.

“People die every day, Tacy,” he says. “You work in a hospital. Obviously, you’re going to see people at their worst.”

“No shit, Declan. But this is different. This medicine is killing people. I’m seeing it with my own two eyes. They need to pull it from the market and do more testing on it,” I plead.

“The testing’s been done. Richardson and Company know what they’re doing,” he says and folds his hands on his desk. He leans forward. “Come on, you know this isn’t my forte.”

“It’s not your forte, yet I just saw you on their commercial, Declan. The governor on a commercial for medicine. Don’t you think that comes off as...odd?” I ask, nearly stopping myself from pointing out the obvious. That politicians shouldn’t be

promoting pharmaceuticals.

He clears his throat and looks at me with hooded eyes. “I’m not sure what you’re implying, Tace. I mean, Good Lord, don’t you know me by now?”

I lean back in the chair and try to regain my composure. I can feel my face turning beet red, my pulse quickening. He knows exactly what I’m implying. I should choose my words carefully.

“That’s a nice new suit, Dee. Is it Kiton? Wool-cashmere blend?” I raise my brow.

He chuckles under his breath, rubs his chin, then answers with a subtle growl, “enough, Tacy. Did you come here to grill me on my wardrobe? Or do you have something else in mind?”

It takes all my might not to come across his desk and slap him. How dare he reprimand me?

“I came here to discuss the deaths I’m seeing that I believe are due to Duselizab. Like I said. There’s something not right with this medication, Governor . I wanted to inform you, because I trust you. I thought you could make some calls, do something to investigate this. Clearly, I was wrong,” I say and rise from the chair. I turn my back to him and glide towards the door. But halfway through the room, he closes the distance between us, grabs my wrist, and whips me around to face him.

“And if I get them to pull the med, what do I get in return?”

“Excuse me?” My nostrils flare. My face feels like it’s going to pop off my body. Who is he to demand something from me? The man I’ve known for a decade...Sol’s best friend? A man I’ve let into my house. Someone who’s played with my kids and sat at my dinner table during the holidays. This isn’t the same person. This is

someone else. Someone's taken his place. "What the fuck do you mean, what you get in return?" I try to wrench my wrist free from his grip, but he yanks it, and I stumble into him. He wraps his arms around me and cages me in. I grunt and try to tug free, but he clamps down. I can feel his cock harden against my stomach. I grimace.

"You know exactly what I mean, Tace," he murmurs in my ear. The slime slides from his mouth and floods my nervous system. "Stop being such a tease."

The new Declan releases me slightly, then grabs behind my ears and tilts my head up to face him. I can hardly move, think, or react. I'm frozen in a paralyzing concoction of disbelief, disgust, and rage.

"Sol's dead, Tacy. I'm the new Sol," he says as he stares directly into my eyes. "Look around you. I'm the Governor. I can take care of you now, and Cammy and Ben too."

He releases me, and I rush for the door. I gasp for breath and put my hand on the handle, then turn to address him one last time.

"You sure like to remind me that Sol's gone. I don't need the reminder. I'm fucking aware. We were friends. That's it. But you've destroyed our friendship in a matter of seconds. It doesn't matter to me that you're the fucking Governor. You'll never be Sol. I don't know what the fuck happened to you, Declan, but you're not acting like yourself. Do something good and pull this medication from the market," I walk out, heart pounding and lungs heaving. Before the door slams behind me, I utter one last word, "Please."

Tacy

My stalker has texted me every day for a week. And this is terrible to admit, but I've almost grown accustomed to reading his messages. Am I sick? Maybe a little. But I also know my alarm system is working, and I have cameras all around my house. Sol's life insurance money just came in, and I purchased the upgraded system. Twenty-four-seven surveillance and an alarm system that will trip if any window or door is even breathed on.

But back to my stalker. It's oddly comforting talking to him. I know I shouldn't return his texts. Any normal person would freak out and block the number. Possibly even report it to the police. But I'm not normal. I haven't been for a long time. I have abandonment issues because my father left when I was still in diapers. And I have kinks that reflect the physical and psychological trauma I went through as a teen. When I was sixteen, I joined a local cult. The High Priest was an eighteen-year-old who initiated me into his coven...through sex. I never told anyone what I endured during my time in the cult, but when my mom moved us across the country when I turned seventeen, I was able to escape. I suffered abuse at this man's hands. He forced me to do things most teens have never even heard of. Yes, it was terrifying and terrible and traumatizing. But when I turned twenty, I realized I had this deep, twisted desire to relive some of those moments and fuck my way through the pain. But to do it with someone I love. To do it with Sol. It was scary and perverted...but cathartic. Therapeutic, even. Judge me, if you want.

My traumatic experiences also inspired me to become a nurse. To help other people in pain. Maybe even help people out of bad situations. Once I helped a man escape a human trafficking ring. I will forever be grateful I had him as a patient and that he

confided in me. No one should be forced to do things they don't want to do...and especially not get paid for it.

It's Friday night, I've worked a long shift, the kids are in bed and I'm ready to relax. I am alone. My mother and her boyfriend went home a few days after the cameras were installed. She's checked on me every day, which is sweet of her. But still...when the house is quiet, I remember I'm by myself. One day the kids will be gone, and I'll truly be alone. I look at my phone, lying beside me on the couch. He hasn't texted me today. I pick it up and look over the text thread between me and "Unknown". Why hasn't he texted me yet? Usually, he's messaged by now. The guilt and shame of wanting my stalker to talk to me suddenly washes over me. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I flip through channels and land on a movie I've seen a million times. Somehow, it's comforting to me to watch it again. It was one of Sol's favorite movies – The Bourne Identity. I think secretly Sol thought he was a bad ass like Bourne.

An hour into the movie and my phone beeps. I pick it up and read the text:

“Hey, Princess. How are you today?”

Just casual as fuck. Like I'm his girlfriend and we're just catching up. This guy is fucking nuts. I fight back a smile, remind myself I should be angry or at least cautious, and reply.

“Why do you keep texting me?”

I'm deflecting. Obviously. I know why he's texting me. He's obsessed with me.

“Because I can't stop thinking about you. Your beautiful face, your long hair, that fat ass and sexy body.”

“If you can’t stop thinking about me and you know where I live, why don’t you come over?”

Holy shit. I can’t believe I just asked my stalker to swing by my house for a fucking booty call. My heart speeds up and there’s a buzz in my stomach. My upper thighs burn. It’s just a test anyway. He’s not going to come over. And if he did, he wouldn’t get past the security system...unless I let him in.

UNKNOWN doesn’t respond for a few minutes, and somehow, I’m disappointed. I should’ve known it was all a catfishing trick. Then a PING breaks the silence...

“I’m outside.”

My breath catches in my throat. I sit up on full alert. My senses heighten. I jump up from the couch and rush over to the alarm module on the wall. It’s blinking green, which means all cameras are on and the alarm is set. No one is getting in without being recorded. Without triggering the alarm.

I hurry to the front window and peek out the blinds. The sidewalk in front of the house is empty, a single streetlamp casts an eerie golden glow over the front yard and driveway. No one is there. I turn and head to the back of the house. I peer through the kitchen curtain and lean far over the sink to get a good look at the back porch. A sensor flood light turns on at that exact moment, and I yelp. I expected to see him standing there, but again...there is no one. I wonder what set off the light.

I return to the living room and text him. “No, you’re not. Don’t play games with me.”

“I see you in the living room. You’re wearing a white T-shirt and sweatpants. Scrunchie socks. Your hair is in a messy bun and you’re wearing pink lip gloss.”

What the fuck? He is here! But how can he see what I’m wearing? All the blinds are

closed and the curtains drawn. I spin around, looking for any window that might have a sliver of an opening for him to peek in. But everything seems locked up and covered.

I type furiously, “how the fuck do you know what I’m wearing? Where are you?”

“I’m out front. Come see,” he replies. So casual. So nonchalant. I’m sure he’s not even panting, or sweating, or panicking like I am. Although, he might be getting off to this. I can’t say that I’m not...

I pull my bun tighter at the top of my head, smooth out my shirt, and pull the cord to open the blinds. Scan the front yard from left to right and then...I freeze. There he is. A dark figure standing at the top of the driveway. Hidden in the shadows. But his silhouette is there. A large man, bulky in physique but obviously muscular, steps one foot into the light. I’m going to see my stalker’s face. But as soon as his entire body is bathed in yellow light and his face is illuminated...I draw back. He’s masked. The fucker won’t show me his face. He’s wearing a black hoodie, black sweatpants, black sneakers, and a fucking slasher mask. The hood is pulled up over his head, so I can’t even tell what color hair he has.

I grab my phone from my pocket.

“Hey, there. Fuck face. You said I could meet you.”

I keep my eyes glued to the masked villain out front. Who quickly recedes into the shadows and pulls his phone from his pocket. Now all I can see is his black silhouette and a lit-up phone screen. Fuck.

“I never said that,” he replies smugly.

“Yes, you did.”

“Look back at our conversation. You simply asked where I was. I told you outside.”

Fuck. He’s right. What do I say now?

“Why can’t you show me your face? And how did you know what I’m wearing?”

“In good time, Babydoll. And, as for what you’re wearing, I have my ways. If you want to find out, let’s play a little game.”

He wants to play a game. What’s new. He’s standing in my driveway, watching me, and wants to fuck around? Okay. Fine.

“What’s the game? Does it have to do with scary movies?” I snort as I type.

“This isn’t a scary movie. This is real life. I’ll answer every question you have, in exchange for one piece of clothing.”

“That’s easy,” I text back. “I have plenty of clothes in my closet I can give you.”

“No, no. You misunderstand. I don’t want your clothes. I want you to take off your clothes. In front of me. Right now.”

“In the window? My neighbors could be watching.”

“Maybe they are. Maybe they aren’t. Half the fun is not knowing.”

I’m admittedly wet by the prospect and want to get some real answers out of this guy. My mind flashes to Sol. He would tell me I’m crazy to trust this person. But he’s not here. So...

“Fine,” I text back. “What’s your name?”

“I can’t tell you until you strip,” he replies.

I huff and roll my eyes. Of course he would make me do it first. I look down at what I’m wearing. I pull the scrunchie out, allowing my chocolatey hair to fall gently on my shoulders.

“You can call me Aris.”

“What’s your last name?”

“I’m waiting…” he replies.

“For what?”

“For you to take something off.”

“That’s not fair! I asked you your name. You just told me your first name.”

“You didn’t specify. So, this is your second question. Stay dressed and get no answer.”

I peer down again and pull off my sock. Ha! He’s not getting me naked. I hold it up and press it against the window.

“King.”

What a strange name. Yet beautiful. Aris King.

“Have you ever stalked someone before, or am I your first victim, Aris?” I remove my other sock and dangle it in the window.

“You’re my first and my last.”

What does that mean? Does he have to be so damn cryptic?

“Why me?”

“Tsk. Tsk. You forgot something.”

Fuck. He caught me. I thought I’d get away with it. I’ve run out of discreet clothing to remove. I run my hand over the bracelet Sol gave me for our tenth wedding anniversary.

DING.

“Not the bracelet. Keep that on. Jewelry doesn’t count, Babydoll.”

I grab the hem of my t-shirt and slide it over my head. Exposing my pink mesh bra beneath. I drop my T-shirt on the floor and stand in the window. Bared to the world. Half naked in front of my stalker. Nipples hard and straining against the delicate fabric.

I see his screen light up again. See movement as he answers.

“Because you’re the only one I want.”

My heart skips a beat. My clit throbs. I’m suddenly embarrassed of my nakedness. And that I’ve fallen for this psycho’s perversions. But...the truth is...I like it. I want more. So, I ask him another question. I’m conflicted, but in the best way.

“Will I ever get to see your face?”

I hit send and start sliding my sweatpants over my hips, slowly, deliberately. Biting my lip, I shimmy them to the floor and look through the window at his silhouette.

“Yes, but not tonight.”

I take off my pink panties, and the cool air hits me. My soaking wet thong now lies on the floor. I unclasp my bra with one hand and let that fall to the floor. I step forward.

“That’s two items,” he messages and steps forward into the light. That build. I can see his shoulders and biceps outlined under his hoodie. He’s a big dude. As big as Sol. He could easily overtake me in an alley.

“That means I get two questions,” I type.

A light goes on in the house across the street and I’m aware of the ridiculous situation I’ve put myself in. I need to wrap this up quickly. “Are you hard right now? And do you plan on hurting me?”

I watch as Aris reaches into the front of his pants and pulls out his cock. It’s fully erect. And leaning to the left a bit. It’s thick and bulging, and I can see a vein running up the side. The sight of it welcomes a gush out of my depths, and I squeeze my legs together to keep the juice from sliding down my legs or dripping onto the floor. Only Sol has ever had this effect on me.

He takes his cock in his hand and starts stroking it, slowly and confidently. The pressure is building and I’m aching for him.

“This answers your first question,” he strokes it faster. “And secondly, only if you want me to.”

I imagine myself clamping around his hard length. I run my hand over my breast and down my stomach, then slide my fingers into the slit between my legs. I'm so wet for him and my clit is pulsing. The thrill of being watched by my stalker and by potential neighbors makes me yearn for him even more. I drop my phone and grab my breast with my other hand, squeezing and pinching my nipple. I moan as I dip a finger into my pussy and slowly slide it in and out.

I stare at him, my masked admirer, as he massages his dick faster and faster. I continue to rub my clit, moaning, dipping my fingers in every so often, and the pressure is building. Warm tingles rush over me from the crown of my head to the bottoms of my feet as I release and explode into my own hand. I lean against the window, bracing myself, imagining him cumming at the same time. I peek through slit eyes to see my stalker retreat into the shadows. Oh, come on!

"Hey, you saw me cum, but you didn't let me see you," I text as I pull my pants back on and slam the blinds closed. "That's not fair, Asshole."

"That's Daddy to you, Babydoll."

I pull my t-shirt on and peek through the blinds just in time to see his shadow fade out of sight. I don't even see his phone screen. He's gone.

Way to cum and run.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

“Tacy, your patient in one-forty-two just called and asked for another pitcher of water,” Malik says as he slips a small tube into the front pocket of his scrubs. “I just filled it for her like fifteen minutes ago. She’s got the thirst. Sorry, I’d get it for her but my patient in one-forty-five is having a fucking meltdown without her pain meds. So, I got to go handle that first.”

I smile at him, “it’s no problem, Mal. Thanks, Hun.”

Malik and I have worked together on the same hospital floor for the past five years. He’s a gem of a person and an even better nurse. He came to this country from Nigeria a decade ago with nothing but a little cash in his pocket and a dream to make a better life for himself. He’s highly dedicated to his job and to helping people. And always has my back on the floor.

I grab a bag of saline and an infusion line and head to room one-forty-two. I knock on the door and announce myself as I enter.

“Hey Miss Cindy, still thirsty?”

I sanitize my hands and approach the bed where a twenty-something woman is lying on her side, facing the window. Back towards me. She must be sleeping.

I check her IV pump. Her saline is almost gone, so I replace it with a new bag. I walk over to her bedside table and lift the pitcher. Empty. The cup beside it is empty too. Not even an ice cube left. Then I glance at Cindy’s face. Her eyes are wide open,

staring at the window.

“Cindy? Are you okay?”

Something’s not right. I walk over to her and gently shake her shoulder.

“Cindy?”

She doesn’t respond. I shake her harder. Nothing. I look for movement of her chest and place my hand in front of her mouth. She’s not fucking breathing. FUCK. I check her wrist for a pulse. Nothing. I press the code blue button on the wall and shout for help.

Within seconds, the code team files in and starts working on Cindy. Doctors, respiratory therapists, and residents enter the room. There’s shouting, equipment moving in and out, doctors ordering medications to be pushed through her IV, and someone brings in the defibrillator. The respiratory therapist intubates her and...although I’ve seen people code at least a couple of dozen times before, this one gets to me. The world around me gets blurry. It’s like I’m walking through a cloud and can barely hear or understand the words coming out of my co-workers’ mouths. The world goes dark.

I wake up on my ass in the hallway, just outside room one-forty-two. Malik is crouched beside me, a box of orange juice in his hand.

“Tacy, are you all right?”

I blink my eyes open and peer around.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I mumble and stand to my feet. Still a little hazy, I lean against the wall. “I’m fine.”

“Doesn’t seem like it,” Mal says and hands me the juice. “Drink up.”

“It’s not my blood sugar,” I retort. “I don’t...I don’t fucking know what’s wrong with me.”

“Isn’t this the second time you’ve passed out this month?”

I nod and drink the juice down despite my protests.

“Maybe stress?” He suggests.

“Maybe,” I shrug. The sugar hits my bloodstream, and I remember my patient. “Oh my god! What happened her? What happened to Cindy?”

I burst through her room, and notice the bed is gone along with my patient. Malik stands beside me.

“They got her back. She’s in ICU,” he says and touches my shoulder. “Looks like she has a chance to pull through.”

“That’s a relief to hear. But I did nothing to help her.”

“That’s not true. Don’t be down on yourself. You hit that code button and pushed the IV meds, didn’t you?”

I search my memory. Yes, I recall hitting the code button, but I don’t remember giving her any medications.

“I guess so,” I answer. “Did they say what happened to her? Why she went into respiratory arrest?”

Malik shakes his head and fiddles with his nursing badge. “No, I think they’re running tests right now as we speak. You know. You might want to get checked out too, Tace. I’m worried about you.”

I wince. “Nah, I’m fine. It’s just stress. No big deal. It won’t happen again.”

Malik opens his mouth to speak but is interrupted by a call light at the end of the hall. “Okay, but promise me if it happens a third time, you’ll see a doctor.”

“I promise,” I say and cross my heart with my finger.

My boss made me take a week off work after the last fainting incident. Said she was concerned for my health and my safety. I assured her there was nothing wrong. She rebutted with, you have plenty of leave, and you’re stressed out. So, take some time to relax, ground and center. I didn’t want to push back too hard, so I agreed. Although, I don’t know what I’ll do for a week at home with nothing to do. I’m one of those people who have to stay busy, or I’ll go nuts.

I run by the grocery store, then drive by the governor’s office building. I stop out front and gaze at the window that used to be his office. That is now where Declan Harvey sits. I pick at a dead piece of skin on my lip.

“What happened to you Sol?” I ask no one. I sit there for another minute, allowing the memories to wash over me. Like when we met and he was laid up in a hospital bed with multiple stitches on his face. He stood up to go to the bathroom and his ass peeked out of his gown, and I nearly spread my legs for him right then and there. The ass on that man. Round and muscular. The back muscles. I knew he could do some damage. So cute that he was embarrassed by it, immediately apologizing and re-fastening the gown. “They really want you to be stark-ass naked in here, don’t they?” He groaned.

And on our honeymoon, when I admitted to him, I have a daddy kink. And a BDSM kink. And that I enjoy lathering up in oil and fucking like bunny rabbits. And a whole myriad of other dirty secrets and fantasies. He fulfilled at least three of my fantasies that same night...all at once. It was then I knew he wasn't just the love of my life, but the man who could heal me. Not just with his mind, but with his body. With his touch. With his cock. He was the key to unlocking my catharsis.

And my mind flashes to the last day we were together. The morning of the election. I remember waking up lying next to him. He smiled and jumped up and said, "this is the day Daddy becomes big Daddy." He was always so cheesy. But he was a good man. A good husband. An amazing father. And he didn't deserve to be thrown into the bay like a fucking piece of trash. He was a king in my eyes. Always had been.

I give Sol's old window one last glance and say, "I miss you."

I cry as I drive back to the house. Cammy and Ben are in school and I'm supposed to spend the day relaxing, according to my boss. How the fuck am I supposed to do that? I have a dead husband, a friend who hit on me and is acting like someone entirely different now, a stalker who won't reveal his identity, and patients who keep dying on my watch.

I pull in the driveway and grab my mace from my glove box. I take it everywhere I go now. Aris, my stalker, claims he won't hurt me but I did just have a burglar break in so you can never be too safe. I bring the groceries in and shut the front door when my phone buzzes. It's Declan. I don't even know if I want to talk to him after what he tried in his office. I don't know what to say. Did he see my car outside the building or something?

Against my better judgment, I click accept.

"Hi, Declan."

“Tacy. I’m so sorry about the other week. I shouldn’t have come on that strong. I don’t know what came over me.”

“You’re right. You shouldn’t have.”

“It’s just. Well...I really like you. I’ve always liked you, but I could never do anything about it. You were Sol’s woman, and Sol was my best friend.”

I’m searching for the right thing to say. My mouth remains open with no words.

“It’s okay if you don’t feel the same. Maybe you will one day,” he suggests.

I nearly laugh. The nerve and arrogance of this guy. Then a thought hits me. It’s him. He’s the stalker. It’s got to be him. I can’t believe I took my fucking clothes off for him. I rubbed my pussy in front of him. Wait, no. Declan isn’t a stocky guy. The silhouette doesn’t match Declan’s physique...unless it was just hard to tell in the dark?

“Anyway. I heard your concern about Duselizab and filed a report with the bureau. They’ll have to at least investigate the deaths at the hospital.”

“Oh my God, thank you Declan,” I sigh. Maybe he isn’t so bad. Maybe the old Declan is still in there...somewhere behind the flashy clothes and Rolex watch. “We nearly lost another patient. And guess what she was taking?”

A sigh and then he answers, “Duselizab. I get it. But why do you think this is the cause? There are so many other factors behind a person’s death. Weight, diet, activity, genetics, other medications, co-morbidities.”

“Obviously I know that. But these patients, including my last patient who nearly died and is currently in the ICU, took Duselizab and started experiencing neurological

symptoms. Tremors, dizziness, eyesight wobbles, things like that. Then they all end up with internal hemorrhage and bleed out inside of themselves. My recent patient is lucky she didn't die. Well...she did briefly, but we were able to bring her back."

A pause as Declan takes in what I'm saying.

"All of them show internal bleeding?"

"Yes, twenty-three patients this year."

"Okay. Like I said. They're looking into it."

"So, they'll pull it off the market until more testing has been done?"

Silence.

"Dee?"

"I didn't say that. I don't have control over medications being pulled."

"Jesus Christ," I grumble. "This is urgent, Declan. I'm truly worried I'm going to lose more of my patients."

"I hear you, Tace. I've done my part. It's out of my hands now," he says. "I'll let you know as soon as I hear something. Okay?"

I set my keys on the counter and take a deep breath. "Okay. Thank you. Really."

We hang up, and I know exactly how I'll use my vacation time this week. Investigating.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

My routine this week is as follows: wake up, coffee, get the kids ready for school, more coffee, hug the kids goodbye, drop them off, come home and research until my fingers bleed and my eyes water. With more coffee. Copious amounts of coffee. I've taken it upon myself to research this drug that Declan has been so readily promoting. The same drug that my patients have taken.

I discovered a few things: one, that Duselizab was created by Richardson and Company, which is apparently one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the country and in the world. Two, that Duselizab was only tested on rats in two controlled studies before being approved by the FDA and going to market. And three, that a class action lawsuit is being filed against Richardson and Company due to the side effects of Duselizab. At least a hundred women across the country claim they miscarried after being prescribed the medicine by their OB-GYNs for various medical conditions. Of course, they were told the drug was totally safe for them and their unborn babies. But I need to know more. I need to cross-examine the patients' files from the hospital with other deaths to see if the symptoms match. The only problem is, I'm not a detective and snooping into patients' files is considered breaking the law – breaking HIPAA. Which could get me fired and my nursing license stripped away.

I'm sitting at my computer in the office devising a plan on accessing classified records, when the power goes out.

“What the Hell?” It's not storming, and I haven't seen any power trucks in the area. I check my phone. It's 10:32 am. I call the power company to report the outage. A

robotic machine says they're already aware of the outage and they're working on it. With an ETA of three hours. I exhale loudly and stand up, when I hear the alarm module chirping. The outage must have tripped it. I walk down the hallway, when a rustling noise emanates from the kitchen, and I freeze. Someone's in the house. I debate on turning around and grabbing the gun out of the safe, but my fight-flight-fright response has me momentarily paralyzed. Maybe if I don't move or breathe, they'll go away? Who the fuck am I kidding? They broke into my house, knowing there's cameras all around. It's the intruder...he's back to find something else. He probably thinks I'm at work. But my car's in the driveway. FUCK. He knows I'm here!

I am slowly turning to run down the hallway when someone in all black bursts through the kitchen and makes a mad dash towards me. I scream and take off running. I have to get to the safe. But before I make it halfway, the stranger overtakes me, and we crash to the floor. I scream as the intruder pushes me into the carpet and covers my mouth with his hand. His belt buckle digs into the small of my back.

He presses his mouth against my ear and grunts, "don't fucking move, bitch." I can smell bleach and cigarettes radiating from his pores. The combination makes me gag.

I struggle, wriggle, writhe underneath him. Kicking upwards and flailing, trying everything I can to get away. But he's got all his weight on me and produces a zip tie from his pocket which he uses to fasten my hands behind my back. He's kneeling on the back of my legs and yelling at me to shut the fuck up.

I scream again. "Fuck you, asshole! Let me go!"

I shimmy my shoulders from left to right and make one last effort to escape when something heavy knocks into the side of my head...and I black out.

I wake up with a pounding headache and heavy eyes. I squint and look around. I'm in

a dimly lit, dusty basement. The only light is pouring in from a tiny window on the far wall. There's a dryer, washing machine, and refrigerator to my right. Garbage bags filled with something soft to my left, next to stacked boxes that have "Yule" and "Ulfblot" written on them with black marker. I'm in someone's basement. Someone heathen. Most people don't celebrate Yule or Ulfblot. I know that because of my time in Washington. My time with the cult. It even seems like a family lives here. This is fucking bizarre. I have a gag in my mouth and my hands are tied behind my back. The zip tie is digging into the skin around my wrists. I could scream, or try to, but whoever put me down here is probably right above anyway.

Who fucking did this? Was it the stalker? He promised me he'd never hurt me. It must be the same fucker who broke into my house. How did he know the power had gone out? That he could break in and avoid the alarm? Then I remembered...the alarm system was supposed to have a back-up battery in case of power outages. It should have gone off and alarmed the police when he broke in. The cameras should have recorded the struggle. So, when I turn up missing, they can review the footage and go from there.

I search the basement for something...anything. A way out. A weapon. Something to cut through the tie. My mind goes to my kids. They're in school...or at least that's where I last left them. I have no idea what time it is. They'll be so scared when I don't show up to pick them up. It's still daytime, but who knows for how long.

"Mfff uhh kerrr!" I let out a muffled curse. I'll kill this psycho.

I notice a pair of rusty garden shears hanging from a wall next to an unfinished staircase made of wooden planks. Bingo.

I stand from the bucket he sat me on and give myself a mental high-five when I realize the dumbass didn't tie me down to anything. Ha! I shuffle quietly past the black bags and appliances, careful not to knock into anything. I'm struggling to get a

good breath with a plastic ball filling my mouth. My nose is stuffy from the trauma to my head. Or from the dust and mold in this basement. I pause and take a deep breath. Okay. I have to be quiet. I start my trek towards the garden shears again when a door above creaks open. Fuck! A heavy footstep hits the first stair, and someone descends the steps as I bolt for my original position next to the washing machine. I crash down on the blue bucket and close my eyes. Hoping my captor didn't see or hear me crossing the floor. But I'm sure he did.

I watch as a man wearing jeans, a jean jacket with a gray hood and a bald head plods onto the concrete floor and heads towards me. He's chuckling. Like someone just told him the funniest joke and he can't help but grab his stomach to keep from laughing hysterically.

I'm straining to make out his features, since there's barely any light down here and I don't have my contacts in. I must've lost them in the shuffle. I squint and, as he comes closer to me, his features turn from muddled to clear. He kneels and laughs again as he stares into my eyes. My heart is thumping and scraping against my ribcage, like a wild animal clawing its way out of captivity. I've seen this man before. His eyes. They're dark, almost as black as a shark's, and there's a scar above his right eye.

"Wow, they said it would be an interesting job, but I had no idea it would be this interesting," he says as he reaches up to check the strap on my gag. The same scent of tobacco and chemicals floats off him and invades my nose. I nearly gag again...but tell myself not to puke. If I did that, I would literally choke on my own vomit. I swallow hard and grunt at him. I look at him, and then the steps, debating whether I could outrun him. Could I escape? The problem is, I don't know who's at the top of those steps. And I'm not a fast runner. I tried to outrun him in my own house and was instantly taken down. And that was with my arms free.

"Tickk..ithh...outttt," I try to demand for him to remove the gag.

He understands me and says, “you have to promise not to scream, Tacy. You have to be quiet. You can do that, can’t you? That is, after all, what your name means, right? To be quiet?”

I nod. How the fuck does he know what my name means?

His clammy fingers work to unbuckle the strap, and as soon as it loosens, I spit the ball out of my mouth and inhale.

“Why the fuck am I here? And who the fuck are you?” I ask through grinding teeth.

He’s still kneeling in front of me, crotch exposed. I could kick him square in the balls and make a run for it. But before I can do that, his slimy words catch me.

“Don’t you remember me, Tacy?”

He sticks his tongue out. A tongue ring with a Celtic knot shines in the dim light. The symbol of the Belenos Coven...the cult I ran away from years ago.

My muscles tense and I open my mouth to scream, but he slams his hand over it and clamps another hand around my throat. A move I was once all too familiar with.

“Don’t fucking scream, I said,” he hisses as he pulls a knife from his pocket. The shiny steel glints as he moves it from side to side, threatening to cut me if I try anything.

It’s Orion. The High Priest. My ex-boyfriend. And likely my stalker. And burglar. The realization hits me, and I’m disgusted with myself. For believing my stalker might have been a good guy. Of course, stalkers aren’t good guys.

I straighten on the bucket and bear my weight down on my feet. Stabilizing myself.

Trying to gather my thoughts and think up a plan to escape.

Orion Starkey releases me, and I spit at him. “You’re a piece of shit.”

“And you’re fucked, Tacy Bear,” he bellows and holds the knife out in front of him. He stands and bends over, taking in a deep whiff of the top of my head. “Mmm. I don’t know who you pissed off, but they have plans for you.”

“Don’t call me that,” I growl. “It’s Tacy Rountree.”

“Oh, I know your new name. I saw you talking about your dead husband on the news. Too bad he was elected then offed the same day,” he smirks as he sheaths the knife. “Ain’t that about a bitch.”

“What do you want from me? And why are you here? I thought you lived in Washington.”

“I need you to be quiet for another twenty-four hours until I can deliver you to them. I move where the job requires me to move. There’s plenty of business here, so here I am.”

“What happened to the cult? Disbanded? Did you finally go to prison?”

He scratches the top of his head and smiles at me. I thought I’d forgotten his face. The way he moves. I thought I’d repressed those memories...shoved them down to the deepest depths of my consciousness never to see the light of day again. But when your abuser is standing right in front of you, it’s hard to ignore those memories.

“Got absorbed into something bigger,” he says. “Why would I go to jail? I didn’t do anything wrong, Tacy. You joined of your own free will. And pushed those men off the cliff out of self-defense. And it was a church group. Not a cult.”

“Ha,” I laugh defiantly. “I beg to differ. When you use brainwashing and mind control techniques to force your members to be entirely loyal to you, you’re not a church group. You’re a cult.”

My captor shuffles closer to me, and I recoil. I close my eyes and push my back into the wall behind me, hoping the wall will just envelope me and spit me out the other side. Instead, when I open my eyes again, I’m still sitting on the bucket. And Orion Starkey is leaning over me, smiling that big toothy grin. I shudder. What is he going to do to me? And who is he delivering me to?

“Didn’t we have some good times, Tacy? You and me? Out in the woods. Right on top of that altar. You gave yourself to me. To the Solar Lord. Entirely.” He licks his lips and bites his bottom lip. “And I loved every minute of being inside of you. Possessing you. It was like being in Heaven.”

“You’re fucking twisted!” I yell and my flight instinct kicks in as I rush past him. I’m caught in mid-air, but very near the bottom step. And pulled down onto the unfinished, cold basement floor. On top of Orion. He grunts and wraps his big arms around me again. A move that’s all too successful in keeping me subdued. I was so fucking close.

“Mother fucker!” I scream at the top of my lungs as I twist and turn. Trying desperately to free myself still. Every cell in my body is screaming at me to fight. To liberate myself from this nightmare. But Orion squeezes tighter and grunts out his demands.

“Stop fighting, Tacy! I swear to the gods, I will fucking slit your throat and spill your blood onto the ground. Then I’ll burn you in the name of Belenus. Don’t fucking try it again.”

I stop fighting and rip myself away from him. Stand and make my way back over to

the bucket with Orion's knife held to the small of my back.

"Fine," I rumble. "Fuck."

I sit and watch as he walks over to the garden shears on the wall and pulls them down. Walks up the steps with the shears in hand and then returns seconds later with a paper plate of what appears to be a pile of spaghetti. He sets it on top of the washing machine and looks at me. "You hungry?"

I seal my lips and stare past him. Ignore him entirely. God if I had my hands free, I'd steal his knife and gut him.

"You stop fighting me and screaming and shit, and you and I will get along just fine," he produces a solo cup from a cabinet above the dryer and fills it with water straight from the faucet of a dirty utility sink.

"Just like old times." He holds the cup up to my lips and allows me to drink. I sip it, because I know I'm dehydrated. Then he uses a spoon to twist a bunch of spaghetti noodles onto a fork and holds it up to my mouth. I pinch my lips shut even more, resembling a child who refuses to talk. I shake my head and turn away.

"Not hungry? Okay, Babydoll," he says and sets the plate of food on top of the dryer. "It's here if you change your mind."

The hairs on my arms stand on end. There's that nickname. It must be him. He followed me across the country, stalked me for a month, and broke and entered my home. Now he's captured me. God knows what he plans on doing to me. I don't believe this shit about delivering me to someone else. That's just a way for him to act like the good guy. Try to Stockholm syndrome me, mother fucker. I don't think so.

"Don't fucking call me that either," I snarl. "It's Tacy."

“Now, I’m going to go upstairs for a bit. But you stay down here and be a good little girl. Don’t try to run. There’s three of us upstairs, the door’s locked, and we all have guns. And the others? Well...they’re a whole lot meaner me. I don’t want you to get hurt. At least not until the delivery.”

“Delivery?” I ask. “Are you handing me over to someone else?”

“Well, now, I can’t tell you that,” he hums. “It’s a surprise.” He plods up the bottom three steps then bends over to deliver one last final threat. “And if you scream one more time, I’ll come down here and give you something to scream about. And it will be something I enjoy tremendously.”

“You piece of shit,” I spit at him again. The wad lands on the floor inches away from his boots. Orion Starkey snarls, then ascends the wooden stairs, slamming and locking the metal door at the top behind him.

I survey the room again. I walk over to the window that leads to the outside. There’s absolutely no way I’ll be able to fit my ass through it. It can’t be bigger than twelve inches wide and ten inches tall. I don’t even think my head would fit through. Scratch that. I scan the wall of tools. The fucker took the garden shears and there’s nothing left on the wall except for more zip ties and a rubber mallet. With my hands tied behind my back, a rubber mallet won’t do shit either.

My stomach hurts. But I’m not going to eat anything he gives me that I don’t see him make right in front of me. Why? Orion Starkey, High Priest of the Belenus Coven (a.k.a. cult), has drugged me in the past. More than once. I’m fucking sure he’d do it again. Then convince me I asked for it.

I walk over to the cup sitting on the dryer, lean down and grab the rim between my teeth. Then stand, and tip backwards, just enough to pour the water into my mouth. I choke on it as it hits the back of my throat. But the coolness of the water. The

freshness of it. Even if it did come from a dirty tap basement faucet.

I contemplate things I've seen on TV or read in books on how to escape a captor. The sun is going down, and I know at this point the kids are terrified that I'm not home. I hope my mother has already filed a missing person's report. Maybe they're out there looking for me already. How will they find me if I don't even know where I am? How far away from home am I? Am I still in the city?

Bingo. Most of the houses in the city were not built with basements. Which means I'm somewhere in the suburbs. Or possibly even farther away in the country. Fuck, we could be anywhere. All I know is, I have to get out of this. My kids can't lose another parent. Won't lose another parent.

Hours later, it's pitch-black outside, and I'm pacing. My feet are sore, my stomach is in knots, but I've been listening intently to what's going on above me. I heard Orion's voice once, but I haven't heard any others. Which means he was talking on the phone. I've only heard one set of footsteps. So, I pretty much figure out, there's only one person here with me – and it's Orion. He lied and told me there were other men up there to keep me quiet. He must think I'm still the dumbass teenager that he brainwashed and abused years ago. Maybe I play that persona up a bit. Act stupid. Innocent. Easy to manipulate. Then sneak by him when he's least expecting it. I don't have enough time for all of that, though.

I'm sitting on the bucket again when the heavy door opens and Orion returns. This time he's wearing a pair of sweatpants and a red hoodie with a football on the front.

"I didn't know you liked conventional sports," I chortle. "I thought you were just into blood sport."

Orion smirks as he pulls something out of his pocket and approaches me. "You always were the comedian, Tacy."

Standing in front of me, he holds a picture up for me to see. I grimace. My nostrils flare and my eyes dart away instinctively. Though I know I shouldn't be showing my disdain for this man. I should be acting like I like him. It's a polaroid from the early two-thousands. From high school. I'm sitting on a log in the woods, beside my best friend and coven-mate (or fellow cult member) and we are topless. Orion is standing behind us, a ritual knife in one hand and a metallic chalice in the other. He's cloaked in black. We aren't smiling. We have dead eyes. This is a picture of my initiation.

"I've kept this for years, Tacy," Orion lulls. There's a smooth, steady pace to his voice. As if he's singing a nursery rhyme to a child. Trying to get me to fall asleep. "Look at you. You were so beautiful. You still are."

"Thank you," I say through grinding teeth. What I want to say is fuck you. My body is trembling now. I can't control the adrenaline filling my veins. I can't believe he kept that picture after all this time. I had hoped he'd forgotten about me. Started a cult with new members. Or had been incarcerated.

"You were always my favorite, you know," he says and holds the picture into the light so that he can examine it closer. "Remember that day we discovered that creek in the woods? Behind the old cabin?"

I nod my head and watch as he pulls the ball gag from his pocket. Not again.

"I haven't screamed," I say as he moves towards me holding the rubber ball out in front of him.

"Oh, I know. You've been on your best behavior," he coos. "Unlike the old Tacy. She was a wild one. I kind of prefer her over this new Tacy."

"When is the guy coming to take me?" I ask and change the subject. I'm tired of revisiting the past with this sick prick. It's taken me years of bottling up my

memories and controlled BDSM with my husband to even start healing from the things this mother fucker forced me to do. I'd rather not relive them in this disgusting, trashy basement.

"Tomorrow. In the morning," he says and re-pockets the gag. "If you promise to stay quiet, I'll keep this out of your mouth."

I nod my head but say nothing. Orion approaches me slowly, his hand rising inch by inch, as if he was a lion tamer carefully making his way over to a lion. He stands right in front of me, crouches down so that we are nose to nose, and caresses my face with the side of his hand. I withdraw and nearly fall off the bucket.

"Next time you scream or try to run, I'll fuck you senseless."

He grabs my shirt and pulls me towards him, then shoves his tongue in my mouth. He tastes like beef and stale coffee, and I want to scream or bite off his tongue, but I can't do anything. I'm just comatose. If I fight him, he might do something worse. Flashes of the altar in the woods flood my mind. Jab at my brain like an ice pick. I cringe and allow him to rub his tongue over my palate, tastebuds, and teeth. Then a hand grabs my breast, and I pull back.

"Please don't," I beg him. But he squeezes my breast harder, grabs the back of my head, and covers my mouth with his again.

I realize I have a clear shot to his crotch. I could knee him and run for the stairs. If I hit him hard enough, he'll go down and I'll have enough time to outrun him. Make it up the steps and lock him out.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One! I jab my foot into the bulge between his legs, and just as I hoped, he falls over sideways, grabbing his balls and cursing me. I leap over him and sprint for the stairs, bounding, skipping every other step. I make it to the top and

realize my hands are still tied, so I have to turn around and feel for the knob with bound hands. I feel the metal in my hand and turn, just as Orion hits the bottom of the steps. FUCK. I jiggle the knob but it's not turning.

"Come on you son of a bitch, open!" I yell.

Orion's almost at the top when the knob turns and I fall through the door, with my captor once again falling on top of me and gaining control.

"FUCK!" I scream. Every ounce of me knows I can't win this fight, but I have to try anyway.

He's breathing in my face, sweating and panting, and threatening to end me. He withdraws his knife, and the serrated blade gleams in the dim light. We're in a hallway next to a dingy kitchen.

Orion takes his time showing me the size of the blade then he presses it to my throat. The tip of it digs in just enough to break the skin. I shriek.

"That's it, bitch. I'm sacrificing you to the gods. But not before I gut you like a fucking animal and eat your intestines in front of you. I'll bet their tasty, like every other sweet little part of you," he grunts.

My ribs crack under his weight, but I'm more focused on the steel entering my flesh. I beg him one last time, "please. Orion. For old times' sake. Don't do this."

"You had your chance, Tacy Bear," he whispers and slides the knife in a little further.

I cry out again and close my eyes, waiting for my throat to be cut. Everything starts to turn red and then black. It'll happen any second now...

Orion rolls off me. I open my eyes just as someone puts a bullet in Orion's forehead. Right between his eyes. The blood sprays out behind him, soaking the open basement door and the tan linoleum floor.

I sit up and scream. The sheer shock of what just happened overwhelms me, and I don't know if I want to puke or run. Whoever this masked man is, he just saved my life. Or was this the guy coming to pick me up?

I stare at this masked intruder, who's wearing a pair of black fitted joggers and a black henley with black boots. And, to top it off, a red devil's mask that covers his entire head. He's just standing there in the kitchen, next to the fridge, gun at his side, staring back at me.

I squint and barely make out his eyes. They're green. He's silent.

"Are you here to take me?"

The red mask nods up and down.

I pull my knees to my chest as the tears rush out of my eyes. They roll down my neck and sting the open wound there. "I don't understand. Why are you doing this?"

The devil just gawks at me and shakes his head. Then discovers a small white board on the fridge beside him and writes, "Trust me. You're safe. I'm going to take care of you."

He motions for me to get up and follow him. I don't know what to do, but I'd rather not stay here in this house with my ex whose brains were just turned into spray paint. I slowly stand and take a deep breath. Looking down at myself, I'm covered in dirt, debris, chunks of brain matter, and blood.

I turn and say, “please untie me. I promise I’ll follow you and I won’t run.”

The masked devil cuts the zip tie with a blade from his belt, and I exhale as my plastic bonds fall to the floor. He grabs my hand and leads me through the back door and out into the yard. I pull my hand loose but follow.

The night air is cool, and there is a sky full of stars. They’re not this bright where I live in the city. With this little light pollution, I bet we’re in Greensboro about forty minutes north. A small suburb that’s rural with corn farms and breweries on every corner. I could really go for a beer right now. Maybe even an entire bottle of jack. My whole body hurts. I rub the bruises on my wrists where the zip tie was. Then run a hand over the knots on my scalp.

Why won’t this guy say anything? Is he deaf? Should I even trust him? I debate on running from him but change my mind.

There’s a truck idling in the distance, next to a wooded area. At the edge of the property. I look back just once and see a nineteen-seventies rambler behind me. All the lights are still on, but only a dead man is home.

We cross the yard and close in on the Ford F150, and I’m wondering why he still hasn’t said a word to me. I reach for the handle to the back seat when he jumps to open it for me. Like a...gentleman?

I climb into the back seat and lay down, in the fetal position, shivering and sobbing. I release my tears and sobs just as the truck’s wheels roll out the long gravel driveway. The devil who saved my life stays quiet but turns up the heat and points the vents at me. The coldness that had invaded my bones dissipates, along with most of my fear. I decide to try to talk to him again.

“Where are you taking me?”

He points to a sign as we hit the highway. It says, “For Ranchera, Take H91 South”. He’s taking me home.

“Oh my God, thank you. Thank you so much.”

Now the tears are falling out of relief. I fucking survived a kidnapping and I’m going home. I’ll get to see my kids again. And, if it wasn’t for my masked hero, I wouldn’t be alive right now. And my kids would be orphaned.

I stare at his gnarled, scarlet face in the rearview. The bright red bumpy plastic, the black lined triangular eyes, and the double horns remind me of Tim Curry’s devil character in that old nineteen-eighties movie called Legend. For some reason, the devil in that movie turned me on. This one was starting to grab my attention too. I sit up and buckle my seat belt. I look down and notice the wound on my neck has bled onto my shirt.

He throws me a clean white rag, and I take it and press it against the wound.

“Thank you,” I mumble. “Are you my stalker?”

His eyes meet mine in the mirror for a second or two, and he nods.

Aris

It totally escaped my mind that Tacy would want to talk to me. I obviously can't speak to her. She'll know who I am with just one word. I'll have to remedy that with a voice changing device of some kind. For now, I'm getting her home safely and staking out the place until I know The Org isn't watching her. But for how long? Will they just keep sending people to abduct her? Will they forget about the whole thing, or will they have someone try to kill her? She's onto them...and they know it. They got word that she's been looking into Duselizab. One of the poisons The Org is using to sterilize and kill young people. To put an end to procreation before it's even begun. I knew my Tacy was smart, but I didn't know she was a fucking genius. All it took was a simple browser history search on the computer. I'm able to tap into our devices at home with ease. I simply use the technology we have at the warehouse to monitor her research and online activity.

I pull into the neighborhood and inch up to a stop sign two blocks from the house. Then peer around the corner. There are no lights on at the house and no cars in the driveway. Which means, Tacy's mother has our kids with her at her condominium downtown. What's alarming is there are no cops. No crime scene. No tape. Has anyone even come by the house to check on things? I want to scratch my head but can't. Still got the stupid fucking mask on. And I can't take it off until Tacy's far away from me. Even if she sees my hair or head, she'll know it's me.

"Power's back on," my beautiful girl mumbles from the back seat. "Streetlamps are on and looks like my neighbors Christmas lights are on. In September. Rednecks."

I almost laugh but swallow to stifle it. She always hated those neighbors. They're the

kind that let their big dogs shit in your yard and don't clean it up. And when they do clean it up, they throw it unbagged into your trash can. Real classy folks.

The door groans as it opens, and she slides out the back seat, still clutching the rag to the wound on her neck. "This is close enough," she says. "I'll be fine from here."

I bite my tongue and wish I could say something to her. Tell her who I am. That I am still in love with her. That I'm not dead and never truly left her. I wish I could hold her to my chest and feel her skin against mine. Instead, I stare straight ahead and grip the steering wheel. I reach for the radio volume and turn it up. The song Broken Belief by Bob Moses blares through the speakers.

"Well, whenever you feel like revealing your actual identity, I'm here for it," she says and pushes a bloody strand of hair out of her face.

I roll down my window as she passes by. She glances my way, and I point at the puncture wound on her neck. As if to say, are you going to be okay?

"Oh, this?" she says and forces a grin. "I'm a nurse, buddy. I can patch this one up myself, no problem."

I nod. Then point downwards as if to say, I'm staying right here for the night.

"You know, most women would call the cops and tell them their stalker is watching them. I guess I'm not most women. And you're not most stalkers. You saved my life tonight, and I'm forever indebted to you. Whoever you are."

I smile under the mask, even though she can't see it, and then I watch her walk down the sidewalk, barefooted, in a pair of bloody distressed jeans and a Poison t-shirt. My old T-shirt. My body and my heart yearn to be with her again.

Tacy

I call and report my kidnapping to the police, and once again, they file into my house. But this time they do actual police work, take pictures, and tape off the hallway, kitchen, and back porch. One detective yells at another to “keep the newbies off his crime scene”. I assume that means he doesn’t want cadets stomping through and disturbing any potential evidence. A female police officer throws a fuzzy orange blanket around my shoulders and leads me outside to talk.

She motions for me to sit on the rocking chair on the front porch. I oblige and collapse onto the fluffy cushion. She introduces herself, and I rock back and forth and try to answer her questions. I notice Sheriff Fred isn’t here this time.

“You say you were in the office, the back room, yesterday afternoon when you heard someone break in?”

“Yes. I was working in the office when the power went out. I got up to check the alarm in the hallway, and that’s when I heard something in my kitchen. Before I could check it out, a man was...he had forced me down to the ground and was binding my wrists together.”

She scribbles furiously on her iPad. “Okay, and then he put you in his vehicle and drove you out of the city?”

“I...I don’t know what happened after that. He knocked me out, and I don’t remember anything until I woke up in a basement.”

The female cop continues writing with her stylus, ignoring a call coming through on her walkie talkie.

“Right,” she says. “Do you know the man who kidnapped you? You know ninety

percent of kidnappings involve someone the victim knows personally. Like a family friend or acquaintance.”

Do I tell her that I know Orion Starkey? Knew Orion Starkey? That he manipulated me into joining his sick cult as a teenager, abused and used me for everything I was worth? Stole my money, sodomized me, and forced me to have sex with the other members of the cult? No, that would be too much for anyone to swallow. And if they knew that I knew Orion Starkey, wouldn't that expose the deeds I did in the past? Just keep that shit to yourself.

I shake my head, “No. No I don't know him.”

“And you say he nearly killed you and another man saved your life by shooting him?”

I nod. And rock nervously.

“Who is the man who saved you? Where is he now?”

I sigh and grip the arms of the rocking chair. “I don't know.”

“You don't know where he is?”

“I don't know who he is or where he is now. I'm sorry. He wore a mask the entire time.”

“Well, what did he say? He didn't tell you anything about who he was or why he was there in the first place?”

And now's the time for me to tell her I have a stalker, and that this man who saved my life is my stalker. And the only reason he was there is because he had followed

the man who had kidnapped me, and therefore followed me, in the first place. Why wouldn't I have placed a restraining order against him by now? Because I'm sick. And I love the idea of someone watching me. Admiring me from the shadows.

"He never spoke. Not a single word."

"Hmm. That's odd. So, he obviously doesn't want you to know who he is," she says and uses the tip of the stylus to scratch her hair. The clip gets stuck in her bun briefly, and she awkwardly reaches up to free it.

"Have you ever seen him before? The masked man?"

I shake my head, "Nope."

"Well, Tacy, that's all for now, but you'll have to go to the hospital to get checked out, have your injuries documented. That sort of thing."

Fuck me. Not the hospital...again. I don't need my job finding out about this and worrying about me. I've already fainted twice this month. Them knowing I was kidnapped and held at knifepoint will be the icing on the shit-frosted cake. They'll put me on permanent leave. I need my job to stay sane. And to feed my kids.

I check in with mom, who is elated to hear my voice. Even if it is three o' clock in the morning. I ask her why she never came by the house or called the police. She explains the school called to have her pick up the kids, and that there was a note left at the front desk that I had to go somewhere for an emergency, and I'd be home late that night. That I needed her to watch the kids for me, but that everything would be okay. Very fucking weird. I left no notes. I didn't know I was going to be pummeled and dragged from my home, so how would I have known to ask my mother to pick up the kids? Unless it was...

“I see the cops are there,” my stalker texts me.

I pull the stool over to the bay window, climb it, and stand on tiptoes to see over the stop sign down the street. His gray ford is still sitting there. That comforts me. Even with these cops in my house, I wouldn't feel safe if it weren't for my stalker sitting two blocks away.

“Yes,” I type back. “They'll be here awhile. I have to go to the hospital, apparently.”

“I'll follow you there.”

“You don't have to do that. You've done enough.”

“Tacy, the guy that kidnapped you yesterday was just a go-guy. A grunt, if you will. He works for someone else. Someone in a big position who wants to bring you in. Maybe even wants you dead.”

“It fucking figures. But why? And would you know that?”

“You're poking around in places where monsters hide.”

The medication. Who found out I've been researching Duselizab? I didn't tell anyone...except for Declan. That sleezy son of a bitch. He didn't file a report, he snitched on me. To whoever is the higher up who wants to keep this fucking toxin on the market.

“How do you know all of this?”

He types then erases. Then starts typing again, as if he's not sure what to tell me. Or how much to tell me.

Then finally...

“Because I’m in the middle of this shit storm and can’t get out of it. It’s not too late for you. But I’m in way over my head.”

I’m beyond confused. What is he talking about? Is this truly all connected...my stalker, my kidnapping, the medication at the hospital that’s killing my patients? Declan Harvey...the governor and my supposed friend? I’m beginning to feel like I need a couple cork boards, thumb tacks, and some red string to keep track of all of this.

“So...do you prefer the devil mask or the slasher mask?”

I smirk and answer with, “I’d prefer to see your face. Your real face.”

“Knowing me will only put you in more danger. I can’t have that. I would die before I’d put you in harm’s way.”

“You could’ve died rescuing me.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take. I’ll reveal myself to you when the time is right.”

Tacy

“I’m trying to understand how you made it home from Starkey’s house all the way out in Greensboro?” The detective asks as he hands me a cold coke in a can.

I’m sitting in the Sheriff’s office later that day, exhausted and in need of a hot shower. Since calling nine-one-one, I’ve had my house searched and taped off as a crime scene. I’ve been sent to the hospital for a medical examination and to report the injuries I incurred. While there, I managed to gain the attention of my floor manager and nursing supervisor, who not only questioned me about the kidnapping but also about my recent episodes of syncope. They extended my vacation by two weeks. And now I’m being grilled by the detective because, well, there’s a dead body in Greensboro and a woman who claims she was kidnapped then rescued by a masked assailant. The woman being me.

I take a sip of coke and clear my throat. “Well, Detective, the guy who saved me also hitched me a ride back to my house.”

“Yet you didn’t get a name or a description of this Avenger of yours?”

“That’s correct,” I reply. I’m tired of the third degree. I’ve already explained this at least ten times. Do they think I’m a suspect in Starkey’s murder now? I need to watch what I say...and get a lawyer.

“Did you happen to notice how tall the guy was? His build, maybe? Was he tall or short? Stocky or thin?”

“I’d say about six foot two. Stocky but muscular.” In fact, the guy didn’t have an ounce of fat on him, I don’t recall. A lot like Sol. Just my type.

“Okay. And what about his vehicle?”

“I mean, it was dark, but I think it was a gray Ford F150. Had a stripe down the side and a skull decal on the back window,” I lie. I mean, I didn’t lie about the make, model, and color, but I did lie about the decal. They don’t need to know everything. I don’t want him to get arrested. I want to see his face before that happens.

“Right, right,” the Detective sighs and leans forward in his roller seat. “I also found it interesting that you have a history with Orion Starkey...do you not?”

“Should we be in a mirrored room with cameras for all this questioning, Sir? Because I feel like I’m being interrogated. Need I remind you; I was kidnapped. Assaulted. And nearly killed. I’m the victim...not your suspect,” I say and cross my arms over my chest. “Maybe you should be looking into Mr. Starkey’s activity before he kidnapped me. And why he kidnapped me.”

“Should I be interrogating you, Mrs. Rountree? I have no problem securing a special room for said interrogation, as well as a set of handcuffs.”

This mother fucker has lost his mind. So, THIS is how victims are treated. Like criminals. This is utter bullshit. I’m fuming. My cheeks are flushed, and my heart is playing the beat of Another One Bites the Dust. I remind myself to stay calm. The angrier you get, the more riled up you get, the more ammunition you give them. The guiltier you look.

I take a deep breath. “No, there’s no need. Yes, we have a history. Orion and me. I met him in high school.”

I want to tell him the guy drugged me and used cult mind control methods he learned from Charles Manson, but I keep that to myself. I want to tell him the guy manipulated me into unspeakable acts, on occasion involving innocent people. But giving him that information makes me seem more suspicious. Why would I also confess to the crimes I committed in my teen years that I thought no one would ever find out about?

“And what was your relationship with Mr. Starkey?” He asks. His cold black eyes stare straight through me.

“Oh. A normal teenage boyfriend-girlfriend type thing, I guess.” I sip at the coke again. Trying to play it nonchalant.

“Mm hmm,” he peers down and lifts a sheet of paper from the table. Then pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Is it also true that Mr. Starkey ran a Satanic cult at that time? Oh, between the years two-thousand and two-thousand-three?”

“Cult? Hmm,” I say and take another sip of my coke. It’s time to lawyer up.

“Isn’t that the same time you were dating Mr. Starkey?” He sets down the paper and glares at me. His eyelid twitches.

I stand up, button my sweater, and turn for the door. “We are done here, Detective. It’s time for me to go home and get some rest.”

“I didn’t say we were done,” he exclaims and stands from his seat.

“Are you holding me here?” I ask him and reach for the doorknob.

“No, we can’t do that,” he says.

“Then I’m leaving.” I turn the knob and step out. But before I can shut the door the Detective says, “might want to stick around, Mrs. Rountree.”

I look at him. “I wouldn’t leave anyway Detective.”

I’m getting a lawyer. Because now, not only am I the victim and on someone’s hit list, but I’m a number one suspect in a murder case. Unless my stalker decides to unmask and turn himself in.

Tacy

Someone knocks on the door, and I open it to see Declan standing there with a bouquet of pink tulips and a concerned look on his face. The fucking slimeball. His brand-new red Porsche sits in my driveway, right behind my car. Blocking me in. That's okay, because my gun is loaded and stuffed into the back of my pants. A girl can't be too careful these days with all the kidnappers and evil people running around.

I squeeze a tight-lipped smile at him and wait for him to talk first.

"Tacy. I heard what happened. Are you okay?" He offers me the bouquet, and I take them reluctantly.

"Oh, I'm just peachy, Declan. Who told you?"

"Sheriff Bouchard. You know I'm friends with the entire department, being the governor and all," he says and flashes a fake smile at me. There's something lurking behind his eyes. A shadow. A lie. He steps one foot onto the porch.

"Right, the Sheriff. Of course," I say and place my hand on the doorframe. All the while thinking about the cold hard steel pressed against the skin of my back.

"May I come in?" He asks and steps up onto the porch with both feet. Then casually strolls towards me.

I step into the threshold and block him. "No, you may not." I clutch the stems of the

tulips with my other hand.

His brows furrow and he takes two steps back.

“Why not? What’s going on, Tacy? Is someone inside?” He cranes his neck to the right and peering over my shoulder and into the living room.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do. He’s big and mean and he’ll rip out your fucking throat with his teeth,” I say and fold my free arm behind me. I stroke the handle of the gun...

Declan’s mouth drops open, and he takes another step back, almost falling backward down the steps. He grabs the porch pillar and rights himself. “Why are you acting like this, Tace? What did I do to you?”

“You know exactly what you did,” I say and chuck the tulips at his head. Pastel petals fly all over the porch and blow away in the wind, fanning out over the front yard and driveway. “I trusted you. I thought you were a good person, Declan. But you’re a Benedict Arnold. A sellout. You’re corrupt. As far as we’re concerned, we are not friends. And I don’t ever want to see your fucking face again.”

I retreat inside, slamming and locking the door. Then hurry to the alarm module and press the button until the system says “armed”. The audacity of this asshole to come to my house after ratting me out. He said he heard about my kidnapping through the Sheriff. My wheels start spinning, as I realize Declan might have pull with the police. Might he even be driving the suspicion of me as Starkey’s murderer? Feeding information to the cops? I take a deep breath and peek out the blinds, just in time to see Declan Harvey squeal out of my driveway in reverse.

“I hope you total that fucking car, you piece of shit,” I mutter.

Aris

“We can’t wait any longer. We must move,” I say and pound my fist on the metal table. Clyde, Thor, Shawn, and Reggie circle the table. I’m at the head. “Word is out about Duselizab. People are starting to figure out the med’s being used as a weapon. My wife is one of them.”

“I know you’re concerned for your Tacy’s wellbeing, Sir, but we don’t have the manpower yet,” Reggie says and cracks his knuckles. He was my assistant when I was in politics and when my name was Solomon Rountree. Now he’s my assistant and lead weapons consultant here among The Rebellis.

“We have enough,” I state. “And it’s not just my wife I’m worried about.”

“We agreed on at least one hundred fifty for a full militia,” Thor chimes in. He and Reggie are rule followers. Sometimes to their own detriment. Which sounds hypocritical since they’re technically rebels against the system. Both ex-military who have recently gone rogue. Thing is, they’re not betraying their country. They’re trying to save their country. From the evil elite in power.

“We have seventy-two, currently,” Clyde adds.

A car alarm beeps in the distance. Maybe three blocks away. Which isn’t unusual, given that we’ve made our headquarters in an old manufacturing plant in the crime-ridden part of town. But honestly, it wasn’t that bad until we moved in. What do you call a good man who commits a crime in the name of justice? A criminal. Doesn’t matter the cause, in the eyes of the law. But at this point, we’ve all accepted we’re delinquents. Wanted men. And we don’t give a fuck.

“Seventy, actually,” Shawn speaks up. His left eye is black and blue and there are two stitches poking out from his bottom lip. “Two of the newbies ran their fucking

mouths and, unfortunately, my temper got the better of me.”

“Fuck, Shawn. Can’t you keep your fists to yourself for forty-eight hours?” I ask. “You’re fighting all the damn time, man. Like a god damn child. Go to anger management or something for fucks sake. Not to mention, we want as few people as possible to know about us. The more men we lose before the mission is complete, the more risk we take of the wrong people discovering our whereabouts. You know The Org has fucking moles in every neighborhood. Every business. Hell, they’re probably on every fucking street corner.”

“They won’t say shit, Aris. Trust me,” Shawn says. “Thor, how are we looking with the shipment from Harbor Towne?”

“Scheduled for Tuesday, four AM,” Thor replies.

“Good.”

“By the way Shawn, love the fucking Rambo bandana.” Thor lets out a rumble of a laugh and the entire table follows suit.

“Thanks, Asshole,” Shawn grumbles. “I’m losing my hair over this stressful shit. Just trying to look good for the ladies.” He lifts his bandana to reveal a receding hairline.

“It’s not the stress, Shawn,” I say amidst the guys’ laughter. “You’re getting old man. Just like the rest of us. Accept it and move on.”

“When the guns come in on Tuesday, who’s meeting the harbor master at the dock?” Reggie gets back to business.

“That’d be me and Clyde,” Thor says. “Along with three of the new recruits.”

“And these new recruits, are they vets? Ex-cops?” Reggie asks. “Felons?”

“One was a Navy Seal, the other two air force fighter pilots.”

“Perfect,” I say. “We’ll have the weapons. And majority of the manpower that we need. What are we waiting for?”

A strained silence falls over the dimly lit room. Reggie licks his lips. Clyde tilts back in his chair. Thor twists his face like he needs to take a shit. And Shawn repositions his bandana. A motley crew, this one. But the people I trust most in the world. They’re dangerous men but they have hearts of solid fucking gold.

“I mean, in all honesty Aris, I don’t think we’re ready yet,” Shawn says.

“I just listed the ways in which we are ready, so what’s the problem?” I ask and lay my hands on the table.

“What I mean is...ah fuck, I hate admitting this. We’re unsure if this is going to work,” Shawn answers.

“It has to work,” Reggie adds. “We have no other options. The government is corrupt. The pharmaceutical companies and healthcare corporations are killing people in cahoots with politicians like Declan Harvey. Our own fucking governor. They tried to kill Aris, for fucks sake. The Org has infiltrated every industry in this state, and likely the country, and bends everything to their will. Before long, our women will be barren, our sons will be killed off, and the elites will be in full power. And the rest of us will be their fucking slaves. There will be two classes – the elites and the peasants. Like a revived feudal system.”

“You mean, you’re fucking scared, Shawn,” I growl. “Admit it. You’re acting like a little bitch.”

Shawn scowls and rises from his chair. “I’m not a fucking coward, Lazaris. I’ve saved everyone at this table at least once.”

“Calm down. Take a seat. I’m just pushing you, man. Look. I get it, guys. This is big. Huge, in fact,” I address the entire team. “You read about militias rising and overthrowing governments in history books. At least, the ones who win. And the guys who don’t win? They’re erased from history. And the victors go right on leading the country and sucking the people dry. I know it’s fucking scary, but how many people must lose their dignity, their lives, to satisfy The Org’s bloodlust? They say they’re trying to control the population so that humanity survives as a species. The truth is, they want to replace anyone who isn’t like them. It’s called Eugenics. And we can’t fucking let it stand. So, we must take a stand. Sometimes it takes destruction to pave the way for a new creation. The Revolution was about a lot more than just taxes. And this rebellion? This isn’t about money or power. This is about standing up for what’s right and saving lives. Stomping out The Org and their disgusting fucking agenda.”

I gaze around the table at the men’s faces. The fear in their eyes is morphing into something else entirely – ferocity. Determination. Fury.

“And if we win, well...” I continue, “We’ll do things right. We’ll turn the corrupt in. Let them rot in jail. Get the right people back to the top.”

“Here, here,” Reggie, Clyde, Shawn, and Thor say in unison and pound the table with their fists.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

Another fucking week off work. I'm going out of my mind. Worrying about when the cops might arrest me. Worrying about my kids...what they are thinking and the trauma they've endured having their mother kidnapped and their house broken into. The list goes on. Losing their father. Worrying about who's going to come for me next, or if I might be shot while out running errands. Worrying about how many more people will die on this medication Duselizab. And why they haven't taken it off the market yet. To say I'm angry is an understatement. Ready to crawl out of my skin, shapeshift into a giant spider, spin these assholes up in their own webs and suck them dry is more like it.

I keep the alarm on and had the alarm company come out and install double back-up batteries. So even if the power goes out, the batteries will kick in. Odd, because I thought they had installed them already. My savior, Aris, a.k.a. my stalker, lurks two blocks away from my house every night. I see him drive past my house every day. I wonder what he does for a living and how he can just come and go at all hours of the day as he pleases. Does he have a job? A life? I can't worry about his life right now. I have to worry about mine. I'm the one in the hot seat. Next item on the list – hire an attorney.

“What are you doing?” that comforting notification sound erupts from my cell phone.

“Looking for an attorney. Because the cops think I killed Orion Starkey,” I press send.

“I won't let you go down for that, Tacy. I promise.”

“Good. Because the last thing I want to do is turn you in, but I can’t go to prison. I have two small children who rely on me. And their dad is dead.”

“I know.”

“How do you know me? I mean, you know everything about me and even had my phone number, but I have never heard your name in my life.”

“You took care of me a long time ago.”

I search my memory bank for patients with Aris’s build that might have flirted with me. There have been a few. But most of the folks I see are in bad shape. Since my floor handles mostly neuro-spine cases, we see lots of back pain patients in their older years and folks with neurological disorders. Too debilitating to allow them to follow a deranged nurse around and even save her ass from her former cult leader’s knife.

I mean, there was Sol, of course. My breath catches in my throat. Could this be Sol? No. Stop it, Tacy. Sol is dead. You saw his casket go into the ground...but you didn’t see his body. The funeral director assured me Sol’s body was too bloated to have a viewing or an open casket. But I identified his body initially. I think back to that moment at the morgue. The man had Sol’s tattoo on his upper right bicep, and he had Sol’s dark wavy hair, but was it him? I gave a positive ID. I was sure it was Sol. But now...I’m not so sure.

I can’t help but consider the uncanny similarities between my savior and Sol. Same height and pretty much the same build. Though Aris seems a bit bulkier. But that doesn’t mean Sol couldn’t have gained more muscle mass. His cock leans to the left, just like Sol’s. The fact that Aris seems to know everything about my life and knew there was a blind spot on the back porch. That phone call that Cammy took that I thought was a mistake. She swore it was her dad! Not to mention, Aris won’t show me his face or even let me hear his voice. How can I get him to admit it? If I can get

him to visit me...I'll just nonchalantly rip his fucking mask off. And if it is my dead husband, Solomon? I'll kick his ass for leaving us like he did.

"I want to see you again," I text back sweetly. "It's comforting when you're around."

"Well, I'm right down the street, Babydoll. Always watching you."

"That's not what I mean. I want to see you. Up close. Like that night in the driveway." Just the thought of it makes me wet, so I know it's getting him hard. I taunt him. "That was so fucking hot."

"You are so fucking sexy," he replies.

"Why don't you come over tonight?" I throw it out there. "You can keep the mask on. We can just talk outside."

Oh shit, I forgot he doesn't even want to talk to me. I need to rewind that.

"Or whatever." Or whatever? What am I a teenage girl? Jesus. I'm a flustered mess. Which is interesting, because it's the exact effect Solomon used to have on me. Even after a decade of marriage, he still made me nervous. I always wanted to impress him.

"Okay. I'll be there around ten. Make sure the kids are asleep."

Bingo. I got you, you death-defying bastard.

Aris

She wants to see me tonight. And talk to me. I'm installing a voice changer inside my mask. I'm beginning to wonder if she's onto me. It's still too early for her to know about me. I don't want anyone outside of The Rebellis to know I'm alive. Then

again...it's Tacy. My wife. My ride or die. She would take my secret to the grave, if I asked her to. Still...it's best to stay incognito.

I leave my truck in a parking lot on the other side of the woods beside the neighborhood. It's an abandoned lot that was once used for commuters who worked downtown. Now, half of those businesses have been shut down due to rising property taxes, and the city has purchased the buildings. The Org is behind every shady business venture.

I mask up and jump out the truck, quietly closing and locking the door. I pull my phone out and text her that I'm walking up. It's nine-fifty-nine pm. My stomach growls. Something it does when I'm nervous. This is the first time I'm coming face-to-face with Tacy and not during a struggle. It's probably a stupid idea. I should have told her no, but how can I say no to her, when all I want to do is slide my cock into her little wet cunt...I shake the thought of her naked body from my mind.

I stay in the shadows and sidle up to the garage door. Tacy plods down the porch steps in a pair of slippers I gave her for Christmas. Her diamond engagement ring gleams in the porch light, matching the red highlights in her hair and the twinkle in her eyes. She's gorgeous. Drop dead gorgeous. The woman could wear a fucking garbage bag and still give me an erection.

I tap on the voice changer behind my mask, turning it on, and greet her.

"Hi," I say and my stomach grumbles louder as she approaches me in the dark driveway.

"Hi...Aris," she says and beams. "Love the new look."

There's a chill in the air, and she shivers a bit then wraps her peacoat tighter around her curvy body. I wish I could get her out of those clothes.

“Thanks,” I say, and my voice comes out all warped. Low and gravelly like the slasher on that horror movie from the nineties. “And you look amazing.”

“It’s cold tonight,” she says, shiny white teeth chattering a bit. I don’t know why, but this is the most breathtaking she’s ever looked. Even more beautiful than on our wedding day. Maybe it’s because as bad as I want her, I can’t have her. Not yet at least.

“Why don’t you come inside?” She suggests.

I shake my head and suck in air, “No. That’s okay.”

“Let me rephrase that. It’s cold out here, Daddy. Come inside,” she says, every word dripping with sex. She sticks out her bottom lip and bats her eyelashes at me. Hearing my old bedroom pet name woke my cock right up.

“You got it, Babydoll,” I concede and follow her around the side of the house and into the back door. What am I doing? I shouldn’t go inside. Can’t go inside. But oh my God, I miss her body.

She pushes open the door and closes it gently behind us. Locking two deadbolts and the knob. Then she rushes over to the alarm system and enters the code to secure it again.

“I know you’re here, but you can never be too careful,” she says and takes her coat off. She lays it across a chair in the kitchen and comes over to me, swaying her hips and giving me those bedroom eyes.

“Follow me,” she says and walks me down the hallway to the bedroom. Fuck. I should leave. I can’t be here. But God it feels so good. So right.

We pass by the kids' rooms – Cammy's on the left; Ben's on the right. And I long to see my children's faces again. Hear their little voices. I missed so much this past year.

We enter the bedroom, and Tacy shuts the door behind us. She locks it. Then immediately unbuttons her blouse. It falls to the floor exposing her bare breasts. Her nipples are firm and pink.

“Whoa, whoa, what are you doing?” I ask and draw back. “We can't do this.”

I really should go.

She whips off her belt and unbuttons her jeans, stepping out of them and revealing her bare pussy. She went commando. She planned this.

“Come on, Daddy,” my wife coos. “Don't you want to fuck me?” Tacy runs her hand over her hip and then over the little knob between her legs. Just barely brushing it. Teasing me.

“Why, Tacy? Why are you doing this to me?” My cock is hard as a rock and straining against my jeans. Has she figured me out? Even with the mask and the voice changer? Maybe not...maybe she's just horny as fuck. It's been a long time since I technically died, after all.

She sways over and grabs my hand, then places it on her breast. “Isn't it nice and soft?”

I nod. Then oblige her by cupping her breast in my hand and gently pinching the nipple.

She takes my other hand, turns it downward, and rubs it up the center of her slit. She's dripping wet and her little clit is erect.

“Fuuuuck,” I moan into her ear.

“Yes, exactly,” she says and jumps on top of me, throwing me backwards onto the bed. She straddles me, grinding her pussy over my clothed crotch. I’m pulsating and ready to penetrate her little cunt. But I can’t. One look at my cock up close and she’ll know it’s me.

I sit up and plop her to the side of the mattress.

“No, Tacy. I can’t fuck you.”

She bounces off the bed, pouts, and folds her arms over her chest. “Why not, Aris King?”

She’s mocking me now. Not with her body, with her words. She fucking knows it’s me.

“Because I don’t want to take advantage of you,” I say and stand up. I fix my mask, which has nearly fallen off my head...probably part of her devious little plan. “You’re vulnerable right now. And I’d be a dick to take advantage of that.”

“You are a dick. What’s the difference in fucking me or not?” Her jaw shoots to the side and her eyes affix to mine.

“You’re being a little brat, you know that?”

Tacy turns around and bends over, touching her toes and lifting her ass in the air. “A little brat who needs to be punished.”

My head falls back, and I groan loudly. It comes out all warbled and weird. But God, I just want to kiss her. And slam my cock into her. Fill her with my cum. I’m aching

to be inside of her. To feel her pussy wrapped around me. Sweet release.

She backs her ass up into me, then slaps it. It jiggles, reminding me of what it looks like when I'd fuck her from the back. Bouncing and wiggling on my dick.

I grab her ass with one hand, then slap her other cheek. "I love that fat ass, Babydoll."

She's got me now. I'm sucked in. I can't fight it anymore...

Her ass rubs against my crotch, and I can't take anymore. I unzip my jeans and pull out my length. It hits the open air and Tacy whips around, immediately wrapping her lips around it. She sucks the head and strokes the length with both hands.

"Oh my God," I say as I stroke her hair. "You're good at that, aren't you?"

I look down at her and catch her staring up at me with those big doe eyes. I could cum right now watching her luscious mouth caressing my cock. I'm all worked up and sweating and the plastic mask isn't helping matters.

She continues sucking on me and lightly squeezing my balls for a few minutes before she pops up and crosses the room. She slides open the nightstand drawer and pulls out a pair of handcuffs. What the fuck does she think she's doing?

"Don't worry, they're not for you," she says and giggles as she clips one of the cuffs to her wrist. "They're for me."

"I'm not going to..." but before I could refuse, she slaps me in the face. Enough to catch me off guard and sting just slightly.

"You little brat," I say and try to grab her, but she vaults backwards out of my grasp.

“You’re really asking for it, aren’t you?” I chase her and pin her to the wall. It’s a good thing our kids have always been heavy sleepers because we’re making a lot of noise, and the fucking hasn’t even started.

I press her harder into the wall. She’s giggling and panting and stroking my cock. I’m breathing heavily and running my fingers up her wet center. We kiss...long and hard. Good thing there’s a large mouth hole in this stupid fucking mask. Now we’re both out of breath and ready to do some real damage to one another. This is what I always loved about Tacy in the bedroom...she’s just as unhinged as me. You close the bedroom door and release the freak inside of her.

She leads me to the bed, slips the cuff through the metal headboard, and clicks it onto her other wrist. She kneels on the bed and sticks her ass in the air. “Daddy, I’ve been a bad girl. I’m ready for my spanking now.”

“Are you sure you can handle it?” I say as I take my long, hard cock in one hand and gently slide it up the center of her, from clit to ass. The warmth and wetness of her pussy sends tingles up my spine. Then I smack her ass lightly. I repeat but smack her other ass cheek, this time a little harder. She’s whining, meowing, and whimpering like a cat in heat. She shifts her weight from one knee to the other, teasing me.

I bend over her, letting my tip enter her, and whisper in her ear, “should we have a safe word, Babydoll?”

“Yes,” she groans. “The safe word is Tahiti.”

Of course she would say that. It was one of our favorite places to go in the world. Also, a place where we tried anal for the first time. She knows it’s me. But I don’t care. I’m riding this disguise to the bitter fucking end. Especially because she thinks she’s figured me out. She thinks she’s smarter than me. I’ll teach her a lesson.

“Tahiti it is,” I say and bury my face in her ass. I drag my tongue from her clit up over her cunt, over and over, until she’s whimpering and trembling with desire. She tastes like heaven. Like strawberries and whipped cream. I dip my finger into her little pussy, evoking a squeal from her pouty red lips.

“Shhh,” I say. “You’ll wake the kids.”

I clamp my hand over her mouth, and she bites my finger. Not hard but enough to draw a yelp out of me. I smack her ass again, harder than before. She whines but sticks her ass back in the air, begging me for more.

“Fuck me, already,” she complains. “Fill me up.”

Her clit is hard, and her face is flushed. There are red handprints on each of her ass cheeks. My handprints. Tacy’s ass is in the air and waiting for my cock. I’ve dreamed of this moment for months. For a year. Since the day I died. I haven’t felt a woman’s touch since the last time we were together. I’ve felt dead inside. But she’s brought me back to life. She’s resurrected me.

I slip my rock-hard cock into her all the way to the hilt and let out a bellow. I sound like a charging bull. The mask and voice warbler are staying strong, even though I’m hot and dripping with sweat. But it doesn’t matter. Tacy’s never been one to mind a little sweat...under the right circumstances.

Her cunt feels like a warm, velvet pocket. It clamps around my cock like a Chinese finger trap, and she moans with delight.

“Yes, Daddy!” She screams. “Harder!”

I pull backwards then slam it back into her and smack her ass again as I do. She yelps and pushes backwards on me.

“Aren’t you a good little Princess?” I say and close my eyes. I can’t believe I’m finally getting to fuck my hot wife again. “I’ve missed this big ass. This tiny pussy.” Wait. Did I say that out loud? No. Keep going. Who cares.

I’m fucking her harder and harder, until her legs start to shake, and she bites down on the pillow. An orgasm engulfs her entire body, and she collapses on the bed.

“Did that feel good?” I ask her. “Get up here, I’m not done with you yet.” I say and reposition her into a kneeling position. I slide my cock back inside of her then reach forward and grab her ponytail. I move in and out of her, tilting my dick enough so that it massages her g-spot. At the same time, I’m pulling her hair as I ride her relentlessly.

“Oh, fuck yes!” She screams, moaning wildly. Pushing harder and harder into me. “God, I’ve wanted you for so long!”

“Well, you have me,” I grunt. I don’t know how many minutes go by, but I make her cum four or five more times. To the point she’s quaking underneath me and begging me to stop.

“Please, no more, Daddy! I can’t...take...anymore,” she pleads. Then moans again.

“You can always use the safe word,” I remind her.

“No,” she whimpers. “I can take it.”

It’s so fucking hot in this room and the mask is incredibly uncomfortable. I can hardly breathe. But I continue ravaging this sweet body of hers, paying special attention to the positions that make her tremble the most. I’ve been holding off but can’t tolerate it anymore. I’m ready to cum.

I lean over and ask, “where do you want me to cum, Babydoll?”

“Inside of me,” she squeaks.

I almost panic. But then remember, this is my fucking wife and she’s telling me to do it.

I grab her hips and pump my cock into her one last time. I let out a groan and release into her, as she’s screaming my name and peaking at the same time.

I collapse onto the bed beside her. She’s lying stomach down, still cuffed to the headboard. I survey my damage. Bruised ass, check. Red pussy, check. Messy hair, check. Panting and smiling wife, check.

She turns her face towards me and says, “hey, hotshot. Wanna uncuff me?”

I stand, nod silently, and reach into the cup on the dresser where we keep the cuff keys. Walk over to her and unlock the cuffs. She leaps up, jumps up onto the bed, puts her hands on her hips, stares into my eyes through the mask and says, “How did you know where the keys were, hmm? I fucking caught you, Solomon Rountree!”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

“How could you do that to me? To your kids?” I ask as I don a robe from the back of the bathroom door. The words just come pouring out. I can’t stop them. And I shouldn’t have to.

He’s not answering me. Just sitting on the bed, staring at me through that stupid fucking dead president’s mask.

“Sol?” I huff. “Or Aris or whatever the fuck your name is...are you going to answer me?”

He reaches for the back of his head, then pulls the mask off. And I want to cry and scream at the same time. It’s him. It’s my husband.

“I had to do it,” he says. “To keep you and the children safe.”

Just hearing his voice, the voice I thought I’d never hear again, I drown in a rainbow spectrum of emotions. I fall to the ground. I’ve cried more for this man than anyone else my entire life. And here I am, weeping again. I’m cycling between being furious and joyful.

He kneels beside me, gathers me into his arms, and pulls me close to him. I bury my face in his big shoulder and allow the grief to pour out of me.

“I’m sorry, Tacy,” he whispers in my ear and smooths the hair out of my face. “Truly. I never wanted to hurt you. Or Cammy. Or Ben. But I had to hide. There are bad men

who want to kill me. Who tried to kill me. And if they knew that I survived, they would come after you and the kids.”

Aris, my resurrected husband, rocks me back and forth, and I inhale his scent. Did he think he could get away with it? That I wouldn’t know who he is? Noone else could ever fuck me like that. Noone else knows how to play games with me, destroy me, and then love me even harder. No one except Sol...Aris.

We sit on the floor for what feels like an hour, until everything goes quiet. I pull back and wipe the tears from my face. I gaze deep in his emerald eyes and say, “welcome back from the dead, Baby.”

He chuckles, rises, and goes to the bathroom.

“So, what? You just think you’re going to move back in? Like nothing ever happened?” I say as I start cleaning up the room. We made quite a mess. There are covers twisted at the footboard, the sheets are covered in sweat and bodily fluids, and we even broke a glass figurine on the nightstand. Little shards of porcelain encircle the bed post. I bend to pick them up.

The toilet flushes and he returns. I survey him. I notice two things I hadn’t before (it’s hard to look at a man when he’s fucking you doggy style) – he has a new tattoo on his ribcage. It’s looks Ancient Egyptian, but I can’t quite tell. And there’s a gnarly scar across his chest that resembles a canyon with raised edges.

“Were you burned there?” I approach him and run my fingers over the edge of his scar.

He nods, “yes.”

“You wanna tell me about it?”

“No,” he replies. “Not yet.” He stares at me with those big, beautiful eyes. And I melt. Fucking Sol. Fucking ARIS. I always fall for him.

“You want to tell me what happened that day? The day of the election? Did you fake your own death and decide to keep the entire thing from me? Do you have any idea what I went through when you went missing? The pain your children endured.”

We’re sitting on the edge of the bed, facing one another. I take a deep breath and prepare for the worst.

“I think I liked it better when we had to trade clothing for secrets,” he says and runs a calloused hand through his hair.

I slap his arm playfully. “Yeah, I bet. But the game’s over. I figured you out. I win. Now come on. Spill it, Solomon.”

“First, it’s best if I remain undercover. I know you know me as Sol, but you can’t call me that anymore.”

“I’m supposed to call you Aris?”

“Yes.”

“How did you come up with the name Aris King, anyway?”

“It’s Lazaris King on paper. Aris, for short. I chose Lazaris, because it’s biblical. You know the story about the guy that Jesus raises from the dead? Yeah, that one. And King because...well...you used to call me your king.”

“And?”

“There’s a lot I can’t tell you, Tacy.”

“Stop right there. You don’t have the right to keep secrets from me anymore. You forfeited that right when you left your family behind. Your children and your ailing father, along with your colleagues and friends. Everyone thinks you’re dead. The world thinks you’re buried in the ground. Some of us have already moved through most of the five stages of grief...some of us have come out the other side. I’m not one of them. I refused to accept you were dead. And, well, looks like I was right.”

“I hear you,” he says. “And I know how crazy this all may seem. I’ll try to start from the beginning. But you have to promise you won’t tell another living soul any of what I’m about to divulge. If fallen into the wrong hands...well, we’d be fucked. Royally.”

I bite my lip. “Yeah, of course. I promise. I think we’ve been through enough shit together that you should be able to trust me at this point. Don’t you?”

He sighs, “here it is. The year leading up to the election was an eye-opening one. I honestly had no idea what I was getting myself into when I started a career in politics. You know I just wanted to help people and make a difference in our community. But the deeper I got into it, the more I realized how twisted our government is. And how the conspiracy theories of the elite members of society controlling everything were true. There are certain members of the elite that consider themselves the leaders of the pack, if you will, and they call themselves The Organization, or The Org for short. They’ve spent the last century infiltrating every industry in this country. I mean, everything from finance to construction. Information, chemicals, transportation, food, telecommunications, you name it. They’re at the top pulling all the puppet strings. Finally, the education and healthcare systems. You and I both know the entire reason I jumped into politics in the first place was because I sought an education reform. I’ve always felt the kids were being left behind, particularly kids with disabilities, and what I learned confirmed my fears. The reason kids with disabilities get left behind, discarded, is because they are viewed as useless to The

Org. The Org needs worker bees only. In addition, after going down that rabbit hole and realizing that I needed to become Governor to create any real change for the kids, I started questioning some of the healthcare bills being placed on my desk. One was to overturn an old law that held doctors and pharmacists responsible for prescribing dangerous drugs. This set off a red flag in my mind and that's where I should have stopped digging. But you know me Tacy, once I got that fucking shovel in my hand I don't stop until I've dug a tunnel straight to fucking Alaska."

I shake my head, "I can't believe this is real. I mean, people have been saying it for years. Wait, so about the medications. Duselizab, specifically. I've had multiple patients, young men and women, die on my watch after they've taken it. I did some research, and it looks like a lawyer in San Fran is trying to draw up a class action lawsuit against Richardson and Company."

Aris snorts. "It'll never happen. Not until we take the whole fucking Organization down."

"Why are they so bent on pushing this drug out to the masses? They are even hiring people like Declan to promote it."

"Declan is one of them. I mean, he's not high up but he's been bought and paid for. Secondly, they're using medicine as a weapon, Tace. They want to sterilize the young. Their newest plan is to prevent overpopulation, and they'll do it by whatever means possible. Since they have their hands in literally everything, they're using the quickest, most effective means to destroy and kill the nation's youth. And prevent procreation. Which is medicine. Next, it'll be water and food."

"This is so fucked up. What happens when the human species starts to die out because they've pumped toxins into us for so many years? What then? Then they won't even have us little worker bees to do all the grunt work, will they?"

“Don’t worry, they’re not taking their own poisons. They have their own medicines, their own food and water. Separate, clean resources they use. Their goal is to annihilate the lesser of us and breed more of themselves to populate the earth. Eugenics. Remember that term from World History class?”

I don’t know what to say. “I’m having a hard time processing all of this. I think it’s just going to take some time. But you still haven’t explained what the fuck happened to you.”

“Once I dug too close to a leader in The Org, they caught wind of me. They sent me a couple anonymous threats, but I thought those threats were idle. From opposing candidates or something. Someone just trying to scare me out of running. But the day of the election, I walked out of the office and two men pulled me into a van. Put a bag over my head. Drove me out of the city. Beat the shit out of me. Then, when they thought I was pretty much dead, they tossed me into the bay.”

“How did you fake your death?”

“I was on the edge of death. Barely breathing. But I had a friend, and truly my own savior, who had followed the men and pulled me out of the water and saved my life.”

“Who?”

“Reggie.”

“Your administrative assistant?” I say and spit out a sip of water.

“Yes, him. He’s a bad ass. And I’m so grateful he was there. After he pulled me out, he took me to a warehouse in Harbor Towne. I met a group of men, soldiers, who were forming a militia. Reggie was one of them. They explained that everything I had learned about The Org they had already known for months. And they’d been planning

a rebellion. I had no other choice but to join them, and we hatched a plan to let the world think I was dead. It would be easy enough to let The Org go on thinking they'd completed the job."

"You fooled everyone. Including your wife. The love of your life. Your best friend," I list off all the things I was to him...am to him?

He pulls me close to him again, and I lay my head on his chest. I hear his heart beating, and I breathe in this moment. My world went from a Wes Craven nightmare to a floaty dream in just a few hours.

"I am sorry, Tacy," he says and looks into the eyes. "Please forgive me."

I squeeze him tighter and murmur, "don't ever play possum again. Or I'll kill you myself."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

My resurrected husband slept beside me last night. I still can't shake the idea that maybe this isn't real. That'll I'll wake up from this dream and he'll still be dead. In the ground over at Bantree Cemetery. That I'm alone and will have to fight off the men who tried to kill me a few days ago. But I stretch, sit up, and pinch myself. I'm not dreaming. And Sol...or Aris...is just opening his eyes. Sunlight pours into the room, lighting up the dark corners and casting a glow on his tan face. In the light, I can see even more scars than before. I met him when he was a fighter, so he already had quite a few...but now...

He reaches up and touches my cheek. "You're so beautiful. It killed me not being able to touch you. Talk to you. Wake up beside you every day. My body has been put through a lot, but that was the worst pain I've ever felt in my entire life. Like a fucking knife right to the heart, a twisting, searing pain I had to relive every damn day."

I smile at him as I climb out of bed. "Well, I hate to say you deserve it. But...you sort of deserve it."

"All right," he sighs. "You're probably right, Doll."

It's Saturday and even though the kids typically sleep in, I'm just realizing their supposedly deceased father is in bed with me and I don't know what I'm going to tell them. Hey, kids. Remember Daddy? Well, he's not dead after all. Surprise!

"Thank you for acknowledging it. But you can't be here. You know that, right?"

“The kids...”

“Yeah, the kids. They’re already confused as it is. They’ll probably need therapy for the rest of their lives after this.”

“I’ll leave. Let me get my stuff together, and I’m gone,” he says and pulls himself out of bed. “Like a thief in the night.”

“I don’t even want to think about thieves. Speaking of...was it you who came in and took your birth and death certificates?”

Aris is lacing up his black work boots but pauses and looks at me. “No, it wasn’t me. Was that what they took the first time?”

“Yes, that was all they took. I was really hoping it was you.”

“Unfortunately, it wasn’t,” he says and zips up his jacket.

I bend over and grab the JFK mask that had fallen behind the headboard. Aris smacks my ass as I’m standing up. I hand it to him, laughing. “Here you go, President.”

“Thank you.” He stuffs the mask in his hoodie pocket. “That’s Mister President to you.”

Aris turns towards the door, but I lunge towards him and throw my arms around him. “I know you have to go, but I don’t want you to. I don’t want this to end. I thought I’d lost you, and now that I have you back, I’m fucking terrified you’re going to walk out that door and I’ll lose you forever. You’re playing dangerous games, Aris. Maybe we should just back out of all this entirely. For our own sakes...for the kids. I’ve put myself at risk and the kids just by asking about this medication. Just by mentioning it to...”

“Declan?”

I nod.

“Yeah, don’t talk to him anymore, Tacy. You and I both know he’s fucking crooked. The Org is in his back pocket, and he’ll do whatever they tell him to. And now he has real pull, being the governor and all. That prick was always jealous of me. He always wanted everything I had. Including you. And if he can’t have you, I don’t know what he’ll do. In fact, it might’ve been him who put that skinhead Starkey up to the job.”

I glance at the clock. Eight-twenty-two. The kids usually sleep until nine, so we have a little time.

“Likely,” I agree. “There’s...something I need to tell you. I think the cops might try to pin Starkey’s death on me.”

“There’s no way that’ll ever work,” he says. “You were kidnapped. There will be evidence on the cameras, as well as evidence in the house.”

“Yeah...but the problem is, I sort of...knew Starkey.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “You knew him? From where?”

“Back in Washington. From high school,” I gaze out the window. How do I get out of this one? Should I just tell him? My pulse quickens.

“Was he in...the coven with you?”

I swallow and feel the tears well up. Damn it. I’m tired of crying.

“Was he... the guy? The guy who....?” He asks and smooths the hair back from my

face. Even though I want to lie and make this all go away, I know Aris won't judge me. Can't judge me.

"Yes," I say. "Which means they have motive. And if they dig deeper, they might even discover things about me that could put me in jail."

"I'll turn myself in before that happens. And anyway, whatever you did, Tacy, you were a child still. They can't convict you of that crime now. It's been over fifteen years," he says. "I doubt it was that bad. Was it, Sweetheart?"

I gaze into his eyes. I can see his love for me. Feel it in the air all around me. In his touch. He looks at me and sees a good human being. A nurse. A loving mother. A dedicated wife. No, I can't tell him. It would destroy his image of me forever.

It's not like I was born a killer. There weren't any signs. My parents didn't have to take me to a shrink because I was threatening other kids or harming animals for fun. I was a normal child and a normal teenager. But, when my dad left, never to speak to me again...something inside of me broke. I searched for something to fill the void. Because when a parent leaves you behind it doesn't just break your heart, tears your soul asunder. It leaves an opening for things to climb in. Dark things.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

Senior Year, 2003

“Shove him! There is no other way, Tacy,” Orion roars from somewhere behind me. “He’s going to fucking kill you! Do it now!”

I’m standing at the edge of the forest, my back pressed against the trunk of an evergreen. It’s dark. Probably midnight. A few yards ahead of me, there is a steep precipice. The ocean waves pound against the jagged rocks hundreds of feet below. Someone, of whom I assume is a man, is standing ten feet away from me. He’s wearing all black and has the head of a goat. Or maybe he’s wearing the head of a goat. Panic grips my insides. I have to attack now. This is the only way. This monstrous man chased us through the forest, now he’s cut us off at the pass. It’s me or him.

I lunge forward, and with all my might, I shove the man sending him stumbling backwards. There is a muffled cry in the goat’s throat as he tumbles to his death. My breath catches as I hear a sickening thump somewhere below.

My heart seizes. My lungs pulsate. What the fuck did I just do? Did I just kill a man?

Orion sidles up beside me, panting. I can smell pine and sweat all over him. “He was going to kill you, Tacy. Kill us. It was the only way. You did it for us. For the coven.”

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. I’m a murderer. The dark closes in around

me, and my insides twist. I vomit all over the ground. Heaving and sputtering, I can't stop puking.

Orion rubs my back and says, "his sacrifice was necessary. Belenus will bless you for this, Tacy."

My eyes fly open. It's the middle of the night, and I've soaked my sheets in a cold sweat. I'm having a recurrent nightmare. One that sadly isn't fiction, but a replay of events from my dark past. That cabin in Washington, deep in the woods. What should be a serene place to revisit in one's mind is the exact opposite. It's flashes of goats braying as they fall from great heights. Circles of doped up teenagers chanting something Gregorian yet guttural in an old, dead language. Orion standing over me, grunting and demanding things of me. Ungodly things.

I wipe the sweat from my brow. Then I sit up and take a deep breath, check my surroundings and reassure myself that I'm far from that abandoned house in the forest. I'm on the other side of the country, in my own home, safe and sound. And Orion Starkey is dead. But that lingering fear of him returning and ruining everything for me still wriggles and writhes inside of me. But I escaped him...escaped my past before, and I'll do it again.

Aris

"What do you mean, the guns were fucking gone?!"

"Exactly that, Aris," Thor replies. "The harbor master docked the boat. We boarded, and the hull was fucking empty. Nothing but boxes of produce. Oranges and shit. Guns were nowhere to be found."

"How the fuck did this happen?" My face feels like a furnace. My fists are aching to punch something. Instead of slamming them into the concrete block wall or one of

my friends' heads, I glue them to my sides. "Did they forget to send them?"

Clyde shakes his head. "No. I confirmed with my guy. He watched the boat leave their dock with the guns on board. It must've been intercepted on the way in."

"Fuck!" Thor shouts. His voice reverberates against the high ceiling and walls.

"Who did this? Who knew the guns were on board?" I ask, glaring at my men. "Besides us?"

Reggie, Clyde, Thor and Shawn stare at me and then at one another. Matching my ferocity and bewilderment. Shawn pounds a fist into his palm and paces from one side of the room to the other.

"It was one of the new men," Shawn exclaims. "It had to have been. No one else knew. And the rules about keeping our missions quiet are crystal fucking clear."

"You're saying there's a fucking mole? Weed him out!" I demand.

Reggie smirks and leans back against the wall, bending one leg in a casual, not-give-a-fuck stance.

"What's so funny, Reg?" Thor turns to Reggie. A fist fight is brewing. And, at this point, I can't say I blame them.

"I knew we couldn't keep this operation quiet," Reggie states. "Too many men. I was taught to keep your crew small. That minimizes the threat."

"We have less than a hundred. How the fuck did they do it back in the day? The Revolution saw militia of hundreds of men."

“They had to deal with fucking spies, too. Turncoats. Theft. All of it,” Shawn says. “It’s a part of the game.”

“It’s not a fucking game,” I say and lean against the long metal table. “It’s fucking life or death.”

“You know what I mean,” Shawn retorts. “I’m saying when you take down a giant, there will always be minions protecting the giant along the way. You must go through the smaller mother fuckers first before you get to the big man.”

“Clyde, do you think the inner circle can figure out who the mole is? You could have Christy or Jackson look into it.”

Clyde nods. “Abso-fucking-lutely. With pleasure.”

“Find them and bring them to council.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Tacy

“Have a great day, kids!” I call through the passenger window as Cammy and Ben skip up the steps to school. Cammy looks over her shoulder and smiles, says I love you, then hurries off. And Ben? Well, Ben never was the clingy type. More like his father than me. He waves a hand at me but doesn’t so much as sneak a peek at me before trudging up the stairs and meeting up with his best bud.

It’s the middle of the week, and I’ve heard from Aris every day since our night together. He still texts me from the unknown number, and I’ve kept myself from using any identifiers in our text messages to one another. I don’t want anyone to be able to trace him...or us, for that matter.

I have the day off, after working a grueling fourteen-hour shift yesterday, and losing two more patients. Both were prescribed Duselizab. I refused to administer the med to either of my patients, which pissed off my nursing supervisor royally. But I don’t care. I won’t be held responsible for these young women’s deaths. I refuse to have any more blood on my hands. And, as a nurse, I have the right to refuse. Not an hour after my supervisor administered the IV transfusion did my first patient go into grand mal seizures. And the other, I heard she went into respiratory arrest fifteen minutes after I walked out the door. I’ve submitted two reports to administrators about my concerns over the drug, but they were ignored. The Org has more control than even Aris realizes.

I will use my day off wisely...if stalking your anonymous dead husband is a wise decision. It’s killing me being in the dark about what he’s doing now that he’s not living with me, not working in politics, and basically living on the outskirts of

society. He's a vigilante and anonymous, and I'm sorry but I'm tired of waiting for him to let me into his new world. He's living a double life, and I have to know what his other life is like.

I pull around the back of the school, on a quiet residential road, and text him.

"I have the day off. I want to see you."

It takes a few minutes, but he texts back. As always. He may be unnamed, but he is reliable.

"I want to see you, Babydoll. But it'll have to wait until later. Something came up. Something big."

Something came up. Is he standing me up for a date that we never scheduled? What the fuck?

"Maybe I can help."

Three dots...then...

"I think it's best we keep you out of this," he messages. "I can't lose you again."

"It's me who lost YOU, remember? And I don't see the difference in what we've already been through together and what could possibly happen in the future."

"There's a huge difference. You put yourself in that situation, and I got you out of it. I can't knowingly bring you into the fold and be the one responsible for putting you back in harm's way."

"I put myself in that situation? Did I ask to be abducted? If it wasn't for you, they

would have never known about me in the first place.”

“Let’s meet up. We’ll continue this conversation face to face.”

Which means he’s worried about putting too much out there over text. Perfect. And I got my way.

“Meet me where we had our first date,” he types. “Oh...and can you bring some photos of the kids?”

I beam as I recall I have new school pictures of the kids on the kitchen counter. I head home, grab two wallet-sized photos, then head to the old Drive-in theater at the edge of town.

Fifteen minutes later, and I’m rolling into the parking lot of Dave’s Drive-in. The pavement is crumbling, and the giant screen is ripped in multiple places. Sad to see an iconic site like this one abandoned and forgotten. I park the car and get out, quietly close my door, and scan the parking lot for any sign of life. I don’t see Aris’s truck. Or Aris, for that matter.

Then I remember. We didn’t just have our first date at the Drive-in, we had it behind the screen. Sure, we watched most of the movie...I think it was *Scream 2*. But spent the latter half of it making out in the woods behind the projection. Aris, who was Solomon then, said it was the best place for privacy. Too many people we knew had parked all around us.

I wrap my arms around my body when a cold breeze blows by and then take my time walking to our spot. I get the sense that someone is watching, so I grip my keys between my fingers. I’m ready for anything.

Hoping it’s Aris, I peek around the corner of the screen and catch movement in the

shadows of the large oaks. I inch forward and tuck my hair behind my ear. I bring my keys up to punching level. I've had too many things jumping out at me from the shadows lately to ignore my instincts.

“Aris?”

He eases out from the shadows, and I exhale. I drop my fists to my sides and relax a little.

Aris is wearing all dark clothing...as usual. But this time, a hoodie isn't covering his body. I can see every line of his musculature. He wears a charcoal henley, which hugs his biceps and shoulders in all the right places. And a pair of fitted black jeans. And, most importantly, this time he dons no mask. He approaches me with outstretched arms.

“Hi, Babydoll,” he says, pulls me in, and lifts me in the air. Then squeezes me tightly against him. I inhale slowly, as the scent of moss and spruce envelope me. I can't tell if I'm smelling the forest we're standing beside or Aris. I bury my nose in the crease of his neck. Aris does the same. And I realize that warm, earthy aroma is him.

I land on my feet and peer around again. “Where's your truck?”

“It's hidden. In the woods,” he says. “Can't be too careful.”

“Why aren't you wearing a mask, if you're that concerned?”

He reaches into his back pocket and removes a black mask with a skeleton face. “I've got one. I'm not an idiot.”

“That's debatable,” I say and snort.

“Be nice,” he says and pinches my hip playfully.

I’m not sure if it’s the weather or his touch, but I get goosebumps from the top of my head that shoot down my legs.

We stare into each other’s eyes, allowing the world around us to fade away, allowing our hearts to speak in the silence. My frustration and anger towards him, for leaving me and the kids, for everything...just dissipates.

I reach up and touch the new gray streak in his ebony hair. “I didn’t notice this the other night.”

He grabs my hand and holds it to his chest.

“It was dark. And I had a mask on...for at least half of the night. Speaking of...did you know it was me the whole time?” He asks and tilts his head to the side.

I debate my answer to his question. If I say I didn’t know it was him, it might hurt him that I would fuck someone else. If I say that I did know...

“Yeah, I knew. You’re not the greatest at disguises.”

“Great. If you figured it out, I’m sure others will,” he says and pulls the skeleton mask over his head. His green eyes reflect the sunlight and draw me in further.

I frown. “I miss your face.”

“And I miss yours,” he says as he adjusts the mask at the back.

I can’t even see his hair with this thing over it. My frown turns to a scowl. I know he notices, but he ignores my mood.

“Any problems with the cops? You haven’t heard anything more about Starkey, have you?”

I shake my head. “No, not a peep.”

“That’s good. If you do, let’s lawyer up,” he says and sighs. “And I know just the guy.”

“Hopefully you’ve confirmed this attorney is not part of The Org or has zero relation to Declan.”

“None. He’s one of us. One of The Rebellis.”

I nod and shiver when another icy draft hits me.

“I lost two more patients,” I say.

I can’t see his facial expressions, but I can tell his jaw is flexing as the mask jiggles slightly.

“They were both on Duselizab, right?”

“Yes,” I reply. “I reported both cases. My manager and supervisor continue to sweep it under the rug. And the hospital administrators ignore me.”

“Yeah, that’s because they all work for The Org.”

“I doubt my supervisor is in on it, though. She’s a good woman. She wouldn’t knowingly feed these young people a medication that could kill them. At least...I don’t think she would.”

“Didn’t we used to think Declan was a good man? Didn’t we let him into our house...around our children? Didn’t he sit at our Christmas dinner table five years in a row? Good people can be turned. All it takes is a little extra money. Power. Sometimes a threat or two. Or maybe they were never truly good people to begin with. Maybe for some people, the goodness is all a facade.”

“I’m tired of this,” I say. “I want things to go back to normal. How they used to be. You, me, Cammy and Ben. Just a normal family with a white picket fence. You know?”

He nods but is distracted when his phone beeps. He quickly slides it from his back pocket to check the notification. Then he grunts and shoves it back in his pocket.

“We were never normal, Tacy. You know that. I have a monster in me that kept itself buried for decades. Now that it’s been released, it won’t ever go away. It’s ready to devour evil. It feeds on it. My mission in this life is simple: defend the innocent. And to do that, I must corral the corrupt. Dismantle The Org. I can’t ever go back. Not until they are no more.”

“I’m not normal either, Sol. I mean, Aris,” I blush after I say the wrong name. “I have a past. A dark past.”

“Tacy, whatever you did while you were in Washington was because you were in survival mode. People do whatever it takes to keep themselves going. You had no father, and your mother was never around. They abandoned you. And when that coven, or cult, accepted you with open arms, you felt loved. Seen. And they took advantage of that. You were vulnerable. You aren’t to blame. Starkey and his crew are to blame.”

“And we killed him.”

“The mother fucker deserved more than a quick death. He deserved to be hung up from the rafters, his guts ripped out of his navel and forced to eat his own excrement.”

“Brutal,” I say and chuckle. Nurses have a dark sense of humor. As do escaped cult members. And...stalkers.

“It’s true. Not just for working for The Org but for abducting you. And all the times he manipulated you and used you, when you needed a friend.”

Another ding escapes Aris’s jean pocket, and I withdraw from his embrace. I glance at my watch. Ten AM.

“I hate to do this, Tace, but I’ve got to go,” he says as he replies to a text message.

“Okay...but I really can’t be part of fight club?” I ask teasingly.

He snorts and caresses my face. “You know that’s a bad idea, Babydoll. You’re already too deep into this with the questions you’re asking about Duselizab. And if your abduction is any indication, we know you’re already on The Org’s list. And stay away from Declan.”

“I haven’t seen or heard from him in days. I think the last time I told him to fuck off was enough for him to steer clear. At least for a little while.”

“We still don’t know if he was involved in your abduction. But I suspect he has something to do with it, since you mentioned asking him about the medication beforehand. If you see or hear from him, let me know immediately. Call me on this number.”

My phone rings with a text from Aris. It’s yet another different phone number. I roll

my eyes.

“Okay. But what are you going to do...kill Declan? You’d just be repeating what they did to you.”

“Tried to do to me.”

“You know what I mean. Don’t worry. You’ll be the first to know if Dee shows up again,” I reassure him. “Dee for Dick...not Declan.”

Aris laughs at my joke. Then, “I’ll talk to our guy and get him on standby, in case the cops come your way again.”

“Sure thing,” I say and shrug. “Though this makes me feel like a walking, ticking time bomb. I don’t know how I haven’t lost my fucking mind yet. The cops are on my ass. Declan wants my ass. The Org wants to kill my ass.”

Aris smirks, then grabs the back of my neck and pulls me in. His lips meet mine, and we kiss deeply. I don’t want it to end.

But, as always, Aris pulls away and backs into the shadows again.

“Take care of yourself, Tace. Lay low. Don’t get into any trouble.”

My prodigal husband hurries off into the wooded area behind the big screen.

I make my way back to my car, then sit in the driver’s seat for a moment. Should I do it? Should I follow him? Or be a good girl and go home?

I’ve never been a good girl. So, I pull around the back of the Drive-in and onto a dirt road that leads to an abandoned lot. The lot Aris parked in, no doubt. He thinks he’s

so slick, but he's taken me to that lot before. Five years ago, when we had a wild date night...too many margaritas led us to scoping out a spot in which to fuck in public. I mean, we were tucked behind the trees and away from prying eyes...but we were still technically doing it in public. We are both voyeurs deep down.

I spot his gray truck, just rounding the bend. I slow down and follow behind him, about eight car lengths distance. I know the long driveway leads to the highway, so once we make it there, I just need to stay back so he doesn't notice me. Luckily, my car is black, so it's not too conspicuous. But, knowing his current occupation as an anonymous vigilante, I'm prepared for him to catch me. In fact, the idea of it excites me. Either way, I'm happy.

My stomach tightens and my heart quickens as I push on the gas and my tires hit the highway. Following him is giving me a bit of a rush. I always thought I preferred being the stalkee. Now I'm the stalker...and it's fucking thrilling.

Aris's truck weaves in and out of traffic. A large white van cuts me off and moves in front of me. Blocking my view of Aris. It's all I can do to keep up.

"Jesus, slow down, Aris," I mutter to no one.

After what feels like a high-speed chase on the interstate, Aris forgets to use his turn signal and exits the freeway. As do I.

"Harbor Towne. Of course," I say as I read the exit sign. Harbor Towne is a little suburb on the coast, known for its port. Not a lot of people live there anymore, though it used to be a bustling part of town in the late nineteenth century. Mostly filled with old manufacturing plants and warehouses from a bygone era, as well as marinas for commercial fishermen. The perfect place for a hideout.

I continue following him, but slow down and watch as he parks his truck on the side

of a strip mall behind an old green dumpster.

I flip down my visor and slap on a ballcap to play spy. Then I park across the street and behind an old sign, making double sure he hasn't noticed me. I watch as Aris, without his skeleton mask, hops out of his truck, glances around briefly, unlocks a blacked-out glass door of an old shop and disappears inside.

I step out of my car and stare across the road at the building I'm about to enter. Hoping The Rebellis's headquarters isn't heavily guarded. Maybe I can slip in the back. There's got to be another way in.

Aris

"Boss, your wife is here," Clyde says as he enters my office.

"That's hilarious, Clyde. Now get back to work," I say and shrug him off. They like playing bullshit pranks on me like this all the time. And I'm not falling for it.

"I'm dead serious. It's Tacy. Did you tell her about us? About the headquarters here?"

"Fuck," I say and jump up from my chair. It slams on the floor, and I rush out into the dim hallway on Clyde's heels.

He turns and looks at me wide-eyed. "Well...did you?"

"Sort of," I admit.

"Boss. What the fuck?"

"I know, I know. I shouldn't have. But she's already in this, Clyde. Deep. She was

fucking kidnapped last week after she questioned one of the meds. Declan Harvey is watching her. The Org is onto her. I think they're the ones who abducted her, and they planned to fucking kill her, Clyde. If I hadn't been following her that day, she would've died."

"You've been stalking your own wife, Boss?"

Our voices echo off the walls down the long corridor. "It sounds fucking crazy when you say it like that."

"It is fucking crazy, Aris. People don't stalk their partners."

"Most people don't have a wife like Tacy Rountree," I say and smile, as the night where we fucked in handcuffs covered in coconut oil flashes through my mind. My cock twitches.

Clyde leads me to the furthest room at the back of the warehouse. He slams open the heavy metal door and...lo and behold...there she is, seated at the council's table. She must've followed me from the Drive-in. Damn it, Tacy.

"I should have known," I say, shaking my head.

Clyde shoots me a look and exits quietly.

Tacy stares at me and smiles devilishly. "You should have known what?"

"That you'd follow me."

I take a seat next to her. She's sitting at the head of the table. My normal spot. The fluorescent lamps above us flicker. The chair squeaks as she leans back, getting way too comfortable in a place where cold blooded killers meet.

“Learned from the best,” she says, still grinning and nonchalantly surveying at her manicured fingernails.

“You’re not supposed to be here, Tace,” I remind her. Though, as the words slip out, I’m bracing for World War three.

“Why not?”

“This place is meant for The Rebellis only. It’s a building full of vigilantes. Delinquents. Anarchists...Killers.”

“What if I want to join you?” she asks sweetly. “I told you, there’s shit about me you don’t know, Aris. I’m not a sweet, innocent child.”

“You’re not a criminal, Babydoll. And I need you to be around for the kids. I can’t guarantee I’ll make it out of this alive. A war is coming.”

“It’s too late, Sol. Or Lazaris. Or whatever the fuck your name is now,” she crosses her arms over her chest. Her scarlet lipstick gleams in the yellow light. With every movement, her breasts bounce slightly. She’s not wearing a bra. God, she’s gorgeous when she’s pushing my buttons. I can’t have her here, but I want her here. I want to bend her over the table and fuck her tight little pussy.

“Why do you say that? It’s not too late,” I say and stroke her arm.

“I’m a killer, Aris.” The word hangs in the air around us. She’s said it before, but this time there’s an extra bite to it.

“You didn’t kill Starkey, Tace. I did,” I remind her. “And no one has come for you yet, right? If they do, I’ll come forward. I won’t let you take the fall.”

“I’m not talking about Starkey.”

My breath catches in my throat. A pipe creaks somewhere overhead. Water drips within the walls.

“Someone else, then?”

She nods and bites her bottom lip.

“Who?”

“The question you should be asking, Aris King, is how many?”

I clasp my hands in my lap and take a deep breath. My wife is a cold-blooded killer. Since when? And why? My mind is reeling, and I hear the guys stomping down the hallway, approaching the room. I glance at my watch. Almost lunch time. But food and the guys can wait. I need to understand who I married. The image I had of Tacy Rountree is quickly shapeshifting. Devolving. I swallow.

“Are you going to tell me, Tacy? Or are we going to sit here staring at each other until the fucking cows come home?”

She clicks her tongue and checks her watch. A nervous habit we both perpetuate. One of us picked it up off the other...as married couples do. Did my rebellious ways rub off on her? Or did hers rub off on me?

Tacy clears her throat and crosses her legs. “In high school.”

“Yeah? I’m assuming this has to do with the cult and Starkey, yes?”

She sighs. “The number is three.”

“You killed three people? Three fucking people, Tacy? Why?” The veins in my temples are pounding, and I breathe slowly to ward off tunnel vision. My wife...a killer. I stand and pace next to the table. I don’t know what to think. What to say.

“I had to,” she says. “It was out of self-defense. Or...at least he convinced me that it was out of self-defense. That if I didn’t do it...they would kill me first.”

“Were you on drugs at this point? Was this part of one of his sick rituals?” I ask and stop pacing long enough to catch her molars grinding and her muscles tensing. Good. I hope she’s anxious. Jesus Christ. I can’t believe she’s dumping this on me. Now, of all times. Right after our weapons are intercepted, and we discover we have a fucking rat in our midst.

“Yes, a heavy dose of hallucinogens,” she says. “A cocktail. And yes...part of the chastening ritual. Does it really matter, though? How or why I killed them? The point is, I did it. And I’m ready to do it again, but for the right reasons. For good, this time.”

“There’s never a good reason to kill, Tacy,” I say breathlessly.

There’s a knock on the door. Reggie sticks his head in, looks at me, then notices Tacy and winces. “Oops, sorry Boss. Didn’t know you were occupied.”

“Hi there, Reggie,” Tacy says, sneering. “Looking good.”

“Hi, Mrs. Rountree,” Reggie says and gives me a deer-in-the-headlights look.

“It’s Tacy,” she says.

“Right,” Reggie says. “Hi, Tacy.”

“What’s up Reg?” I ask him.

“Shawn has word from the sanction,” he replies, clasping the door in one hand. One foot in the room, one foot out.

“Give me until one, Reg. We’re almost done here.”

Tacy rolls her brown eyes, her lashes flutter like butterfly wings, and she stares at one of us then the other. “Barging in on us like old times, right...Reggie?”

Reggie’s mouth falls agape, and he squints at me. He throws his hands in the air as if to say, I don’t know what the fuck to do here. I shake my head and shrug. “I’ll meet you at the dock at one.”

Reggie confirms and the door clicks shut behind him. I turn to Tacy. This woman is my life...but she might be the death of me. The true death of me.

“Did you ever do time, Tacy? Or did the police ever question you while you lived in Washington?”

“No. Never. I sometimes wonder if the people I killed were already missing. Forgotten. Like they were runaways, and no one was looking for them, so no one found them. Know what I mean? At least, that’s what Starkey sort of...indicated.”

“Did anyone else see you...kill them?”

“Just Starkey.”

“What happened to the bodies? I mean, every kill leaves some sort of trail behind.”

“Rotting on the rocks...probably now at the bottom of the Pacific.”

I swallow the lump that's forming in my throat. "What about the one that wasn't self-defense?"

"Ritual," she says point-blank.

Jesus Christ. Who is this woman? Truly?

"Tacy, I think it's time for you to go," I hold my arms out, implying I want a hug goodbye. Killer or not, she's fucking adorable, and I still can't help myself around her.

She spins towards me in the chair and tucks a loose strand of her chocolatey hair behind her ear. She uncrosses her legs, rises from the chair, and presses herself against me. I can smell her makeup and the heady scent of perfume on her.

"Fine. But if I'm not allowed to join your club, at least show me around the clubhouse. Pretty please?" She asks and bats her eyelashes.

I hesitate. I mean, she's my wife. Even if she is a killer...how can I judge her? I've done some terrible things in my life too. And I know I can trust her over all these goons here. If I could fire everyone and make Tacy my sole partner in this mission, I would. But I have to think of her safety. And our family too.

"All right. But just a quick looksie, okay?"

She jumps and releases a little girlish squeal. Oh, Lord. What have I done? I'm married to a murderer with a manicure and Manolo's.

Tacy

“Is this the interrogation room?” I ask as Aris leads me down a dingy, musty hallway. It’s quiet and dark. We enter a small room with no windows, one door, and the entire room is lined in plastic sheets. There’s an aluminum chair in the center of the room. “Is this where you extract information out of people?”

He chuckles and says, “do you want it to be?”

He has that dangerous glimmer in his eyes. Like he’s about to murder someone...or something .

“It’s either that or the torture chamber,” I say then wonder why he brought me in here in the first place. Visions of men getting their fingers clipped off and teeth ripped out of their gums suddenly flood my mind, making my stomach churn but also revving up my heartbeat.

Aris laughs again and motions for me to sit down. The door closes behind us with a slam, blowing the plastic sheets in various directions. He seems deep in thought as he pulls something out from behind the vinyl curtain. A bottle of motor oil? No, it’s clear. He pops open the lid and rubs a transparent liquid all over his hands.

“Dry skin?” I ask.

“Something like that,” he says and approaches me. His eyes are glued to me. His jaw is tensing, the vein in his forehead bulging, as he peels off his shirt. I can’t help but stare. My husband was always fit, but this new version of Sol...Aris...I mean, his

fucking abs have their own set of abs. The V above his hips that point to his cock are sexy canyons that I'd love to explore with my tongue.

"Take off your dress," he commands as his pants drop to the floor.

"Aren't you going to lock the door?" I ask, heart fluttering.

"I thought you liked the idea of being caught in action?"

I stick out my bottom lip and wring my hands together. The voyeur in me says yes, but the practical mother in me says no. Why would I want Aris's vigilante buddies, scratch that, why would I want the guys who I want to work with to see me naked? A warm gush escapes me and soaks my panties.

"I don't know, Aris," I say and reluctantly kick off my heels. "It's not like at your office, you know?"

"It's exactly like my fucking office, now do as I say or I'll rip that dress off with my teeth," he bellows and inches towards me. He has a leather belt in one hand, the bottle of oil in the other.

I step backwards, the backs of my calves feel the cold metal of the chair legs behind me. I cut him a look that says he's not in control. I'm in control. And I slowly unzip my dress at the side, then let it fall to the floor around my feet. I step out of the dress and kick it to the side.

Aris's eyes rake over every inch of my body, pausing on my black lacey bra and panties.

"Now, the panties and bra," he says and sets the oil on the floor.

“But...” I try to protest but he cuts me off.

“I said now ,” he growls and smacks the belt against his free hand, startling me. I’m frightened, but in the best possible way.

“Fine,” I say, biting my lip, as I unhook my bra and slide off my thong. Goosebumps engulf my entire body. “Don’t be so damn bossy.” I know I’m pushing him, but it’s all a part of the game we like to play. And...I like being a brat. Because brats get punished.

“Don’t be such a pain in the ass,” Aris says and cracks the leather belt again. There’s a visible sparkle in his eyes, even in this windowless room. “Good. Now turn around and bend over the chair.”

“No,” I say and fold my arms over my chest. “I got naked. Now it’s my turn to boss you around.”

Aris chuckles, and I can tell my obstinance is turning him on as his cock goes from partially hard to a full-on erection. Standing straight and a little to the left. The vein in it throbbing in tune to the lustful demon singing in my head. I want to do the worst things to him. With him. I want him inside of me.

“I don’t think so, Sweetheart. You baited me at the Drive-in. Stalked me, then finagled your way into something you shouldn’t have. You’ve been a bad, bad girl. And now you’ll take your licks.”

My cheeks flush as blood rushes to my pussy. My heart was pounding a minute ago, but now all I notice is my clit pulsating.

“I said, turn around. I don’t have all day, Tacy,” he demands and walks towards me. His scars, tattoos, and chiseled body make my mouth water. I want to consume him.

I turn and slowly place my palms on the back of the chair. Then bend over, but just barely. It's freezing in this warehouse, but Aris comes up behind me, and I'm immediately overwhelmed with the heat of his body. Still...I'm not going to make this easy on him. Not after all he's put me through.

A heavy, calloused hand grabs my shoulder and gently pushes me forward. "Bend over. More."

I bend a little and yawn. Acting as if I'm bored.

"More," he grunts and smacks my ass with his open hand sending me reeling forward. I catch myself with my hands and knees.

"In fact, spread your legs. One on either side of the chair. And prepare yourself. This might hurt a bit."

"Jesus, do I at least get a safe word?" I ask as I obey him and spread my legs.

"What'll it be?" He asks.

"Tahiti," I say and as the word drips from my mouth, am whisked away to one of our wild getaways. The vacation we opened up to one another and learned about each other's kinks. Explored our secret desires together.

"Good, now brace yourself," he says, breathing heavy in my ear.

I hear movement, and then a whoosh as the belt sings through the air and collides with my ass. It stings, but I know the first few hits are always the most painful. I grasp the back of the chair and close my eyes.

I squeal as he smacks the belt against my ass again and again. After about the seventh

or eighth hit, I go into the zone and don't feel much pain. Just an aching between my legs that can only be cured with his hard, smooth cock.

"You've been a little fucking brat, Tacy," that voice fills me with warmth. "Haven't you, Babydoll?"

I nod and bite down on my bottom lip as the belt collides, this time a little more gently, over my back and shoulders. The sensation of leather meeting skin is tantalizing. Enthralling. And I want more. More of this feeling of being alive. With my husband behind me.

"I'm your brat, Daddy," I whine. "I deserve to be punished...with your cock."

"Hmphh, not yet," he grunts. I watch as Aris gets on his knees and looks up. He now has full view of my bare pussy. I'm blushing. My back is on fire. The yearning within me is threatening to spill over.

"Please, Daddy?" I coo again and stick my ass out further. Begging to be taken. "I promise I'll be a good girl from now on."

Aris buries his face in my pussy, his tongue slurping at my clitoris, sending ripples of pleasure all through me. His nose grazes my ass, tickling me but arousing an otherworldly moan from my lips that sounds as if someone else has taken over my body.

I let go of the chair and Aris notices instantly. "Put your hands back on the chair. I want you in this same position until I tell you otherwise. Is that clear?"

I nod and grasp the chair with both hands. "Yes, Daddy."

Aris continues eating my pussy until I'm dripping my own juices and his saliva onto

the plastic sheets below us. He leans to the side and grabs the plastic bottle of oil.

“Does your back hurt?” He asks as he pops open the lid.

I look back at him, and he is a fucking sight. Tan, muscular body, salt and pepper hair, bright green eyes, and a hard, thick length. What more could a woman want?

“Yes, Daddy, it hurts so bad,” I say in a high-pitched voice. “Do I get a massage?”

A squirting sound commands my attention as Aris lathers his hands in oil. Then cold liquid hits the skin on my back and my ass. It feels amazing and in stark contrast to the white heat of pleasure that’s now overwhelming my body. I giggle in spite of myself. This was exactly what I wanted. I mean, at first, I thought I wanted to join Aris’s gang. But now I realize the entire time, I just wanted his attention. I want him to touch me. Kiss me. Fuck me.

Large hands rub the oil into my skin, starting at the base of my neck, working in circles down my back and over my ass. I shiver with delight. My pussy aches, and if it had a voice, it would be begging for Aris right now.

He squirts more oil into his hands and down the backs of my legs. Then rubs it all in and returns to the space between my legs. I’m still not allowed to move my hands or change positions. My legs are shaking, not only from anticipation but from holding myself in this position for so long.

Finally, Aris stands and tells me to stand too. I’m relieved. I wonder if any of Aris’s men are going to come in?

He comes up behind me again, pressing his body into mine. We’re both oily and slide against one another. My back is pressed to his chest, and his cock slides between my legs. He leans over and kisses my neck, then bites my ear lobe. “I’m going to fuck

you like this is our last time,” he says.

“Don’t you fucking say that, Sol.” I growl at him but open my mouth to accept his tongue. He kisses me violently, passionately, and reaches around to rub my clit with one hand as he cups my breast in the other.

There’s a shuffle and before I realize what’s happening, his leather belt is around my neck. As he fastens the belt, he hums our wedding song.

My fingers fly up to the belt and scrape at it anxiously. “What are you doing? We’ve never done...”

“Sol is dead,” he murmurs and pushes me down to the ground. “You’ll have to answer to Lazaris now.”

I slip on the plastic but manage to get into the doggy position, just as he grabs my hair in one hand and pulls backward. My neck is wrenched back, and now I don’t know if I’m having fun anymore. My entire body is screaming for Aris to take me, to be inside of me, but my mind is telling me this is getting dangerous. Do I let him choke me with his fucking belt? Does he even know what he’s doing? Tears form in the corner of my eyes and slip down my cheeks. I’m covered in baby oil, and I can hardly hold myself up on this god damn plastic. I’m scared, but so turned on, and don’t know if I want to scream or run.

Then...I forget everything I was thinking as his hard length enters me, and slowly but firmly, he buries himself to the hilt in me. So deep, I can feel his cock deep in my stomach. I whimper and then scream. But he clamps a hand over my mouth and snarls at me, “you can’t fucking scream, Tacy. They’ll hear you.”

I bite his finger hard, drawing blood, and he pulls it away and slams his hand against my ass-cheek. Sending me reeling forward and onto the floor. I’m slipping and

sliding and turn around to see Aris coming towards me. He's sliding too. I let a laugh slip out.

I back all the way against the wall behind me. The belt is still hanging from my neck. The lamp flickers on and off. On and off. Casting an eerie glow over Aris as he crawls slowly towards me. His knee slips and he nearly goes down.

"You look fucking ridiculous, you know that?" I blurt out.

"Come here, I'm not fucking done with you," he says and grabs me by the ankles. He pulls me down, and I slip onto my back.

I'm flat against the plastic, and the cold concrete floor, when Aris climbs on top of me, slick and oily, spreading my legs wide open with his hands. He leans forward and whispers in my ear, "be a good girl and let Daddy fucking destroy you."

Then he gets on his knees, pushing up with one hand and clutching the belt with the other.

Before I can scream, he pulls the belt ever-so-slightly and enters me again, this time slamming his cock into me full-force. I groan in pleasure, but I'm also on the brink of pain. My back is still burning from the whipping he gave me, and now my pussy is full of him. I can feel him throbbing within me.

He begins pumping into me, slowly at first, then faster and harder with each thrust. The belt tightens around my throat and a rush of adrenaline surges through me. I close my eyes and try to hold on for dear life. Everything is blurry, hot, and wet. And it's just me and Lazaris and the entire world can fuck off.

The belt clicks one more time as Aris's cock hits that spot in me. And I can't tell if I'm on the edge of an orgasm, or if I'm going to faint. Something inside of me tells

me this is risky. That I shouldn't be doing this. And that Aris is completely fucking unhinged.

I open my eyes and watch this god of a man fucking me like there's no tomorrow. Like he's never been inside of a woman before and never will be again. He rubs my clit with his thumb but still clutches the belt in his other hand. I'm at the mercy of his grip. And of his dick. He has control over me. Complete and utter dominance. Would the safe word even work right now, if I dared to utter it?

Finally, Aris groans and his body tenses. He lets go of the belt and I suck in a breath of air, just as a tsunami of tingles washes over me, starting at the crown of my head, rushing over my sore, oily body and down to the tips of my toes. My pussy clamps down around his cock as Aris releases into me. I moan at the same time, "Aris!"

"Fuck, Tacy," he grunts.

I don't know how long we laid there like that. With my resurrected husband laying on top of me, slipping ever-so-slightly in the oil, panting and catching our breath. In silence. Until...a barrage of footsteps pounds down the hallway...heading directly towards us.

The door slams open and Clyde barges in. His eyes are wide, his hair wild as if he just ran a mile, and he pays no attention to the fact that we're both naked and slick lying on the floor together.

"We found him!" Clyde shouts as he stands in the doorway.

"Jesus, Clyde, can't you fucking knock?" Aris complains and grabs his clothes. He sits on the chair and pulls on his jeans. "Found who?"

"Join us at the table after you see your wife off. We found the fucking mole, Boss.

The mother fucker who sold us out to The Org.”

Tacy

“Who’s the mole?” I ask as Aris ushers me out the back door and to my car across the street. We’re both still reeling from our rendezvous in the interrogation room. At least I got a few snuggles and atta-girls before being rushed out.

“Shhh,” Aris shushes me and leads me by my hand. “You have to keep all of this quiet, Tacy. Please, Babydoll.”

I clamp my mouth shut and squeeze his hand in return. “Come on. You know you can trust me. We’ve been through Hell together.”

We make it to my car and Aris opens the door for me. “We’ve been through Hell and now look at us. We climbed out and all the way up to fucking Heaven.”

I turn and look into his eyes. The wind whips a strand of my hair into my face, and I spit the oily lock out of my mouth. “I’ll need a shower and shampoo before I pick up the kids.” I say and laugh.

“You don’t like being sticky and red-faced in car circle?”

I throw my arms around him and bury my face in his shirt. I breathe in his scent. “I don’t feel like we’re in heaven. We’re not together. You’re here. And I’m not.”

“Very soon, we will be,” Aris says as he returns my embrace. “I promise. You, me, Cammy and Ben.”

I pull back and suck in a sob. “When? When will we be together again? I’m tired of being apart. I’ve done it long enough. So have Cammy and Ben. They miss their dad.”

“When this is all over,” he says and looks over my shoulder. Avoiding eye contact. He only does that when he’s hiding something. I remember that look all too well...it was almost always plastered to his face before he ran for governor and even the day he was elected. The aloof I don’t know what’s going on look.

“Okay.” I shrug. “I’ve got to go.”

He presses his warm lips against mine, one last time, before I flop down into the seat. Closing the door, he winks at me and says, “don’t come here unless I tell you to, okay? Too many people know who you are already. And I don’t want you leading anyone here either.”

I huff. “Like who?”

“Like Declan Harvey, for one.”

I fire up the engine. Then blast the heat and adjust the vents to point at my face. The heat from sex has worn off and the ice-cold weather is taking its toll.

“I don’t see him anymore.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s not seeing you, catch my drift?”

“Yeah, I get it. I’m pretty sure I would know if he was following me, though.”

Aris chuckles and glances at the ground. “Would you, Tacy? Because you didn’t know I was following you for a full nine months before I even started texting you.”

“Are you fucking serious? You stalked me for that long?”

He laughs again and leans into the window. “It was a blast. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“Fine. But Declan isn’t as smart as you.”

Aris reaches into the car and caresses my cheek. “He’s every bit as intelligent. And remember. He doesn’t just have his own brain to rely on. He has the entire organization to help him out.”

I sigh as I buckle my seatbelt. “But we have The Rebellis.”

Aris

“Don’t worry about Tacy, Clyde. I’ll take care of her,” I say and slide up to the council table. The usual suspects are present. Clyde, Thor, and Shawn. I notice one person is missing. My right-hand man. “Where’s Reg? Another training session?”

Clyde shakes his head. Thor clears his throat. Shawn stares silently at the wall.

“Clyde, where is he?”

“Down the hall. We had to restrain him, Boss,” Clyde’s eyes dart to Thor, then Shawn, and then back at me.

“What? Restrain him? Why?”

The room goes silent. As silent as a tomb. You could almost hear Shawn’s hair growing. Almost...except that he’s losing his hair not growing any.

Then it hits me. “It’s Reggie? He’s the rat?”

Thor nods and grasps the arms of his chair. There’s a shout down the hall and a scuffle of feet just outside the door.

“The men are ready to put him down. On your command, Boss,” Shawn grumbles and repositions his bandana.

“Put him...down? What the fuck are you talking about?” I say, incredulously. “You guys have it wrong. Really fucking wrong. I don’t know what happened, but it’s not Reggie.”

Silence around the table. Clyde shifts in his seat. Thor clears his throat. Shawn stares blankly at the wall.

“There must be some kind of mistake. It can’t be Reggie. He saved my fucking life, remember? He pulled me out of the bay, resuscitated me, and brought me here. To you guys. He introduced me to The Rebellis. Why would he do all of that if he was really working for The Org? Why wouldn’t he have just let me fucking drown that day? That’s what The Org wanted...right?”

The door slams open, smacking the wall behind it, as a recruit rushes in. He’s sweating through his black t-shirt and is flanked by a middle-aged woman wearing a gray jumpsuit. She looks familiar, but I can’t quite place her.

“Mr. King?”

I rise from my seat at the head of the table.

“Yes, what can I do for you, Sir? Ma’am?”

The young man nods his head and looks visibly nervous. His hands are shaking and a bead of sweat rolls off his forehead.

“Well, umm, I think you might want to come see this,” the man says. “The mole has some kind of device attached to him.”

“A device? What the fuck does that mean?” Clyde bellows.

“Like a tracker, Sir,” the woman chimes in. “Just under the skin at the back of his head.”

“How did you find it, Ma’am?” I ask.

“He passed out and Bran noticed a bump on the back of his head. Just above his spine. And the name is Jackie,” she says.

“He’s sleeping?”

She shakes her head, “not exactly. We had to knock him out. Every time someone went in there, he’d freak the fuck out. Cursing. Spitting. Even bit another recruit that brought him some water.”

I laugh despite the situation. Which garnered some rather dubious looks from my crew. “That’s Reggie. Well, thank you, Jackie and Bran. But we won’t be punching my best friend anymore. Suspected spy or not. I’ll go see him now.”

Clyde, Thor, Shawn, and I leave the council room and head towards the interrogation room. As we walk the hall, I can’t help but ruminate. I hate the idea that my best friend is being held on suspicion that he’s the fucking Org’s spy. A traitor. And being imprisoned in the room Tacy and I just made love in, no less. Well...fucked.

Tacy

It's the second week I've been on vacation from work, and I'm losing my fucking mind. The kids only keep me busy when they're not at school. All I can do is sit around and obsess over my husband being alive, how I'm supposed to keep that a secret, and how he's part of a secret militia that's formed to take out some elite group of criminals. And I'm supposed to just sit around and accept all of this and do nothing about it? When one of The Org's members had me kidnapped and nearly killed by my homicidal ex-boyfriend? I'm not one to sit idly by and do nothing. My mother used to say I didn't just get into trouble, that trouble found me. I'm starting to believe she might have been right.

I pour myself another cup of coffee and take a seat at the kitchen table. My laptop sits on the other side, taunting me with its knowledge. My fingers itch to do more research, but my brain is telling me to distance myself from it. Maybe keeping myself in the dark a little bit might be better than knowing everything. Because the more I know, the more I want to join Aris in wiping the earth clean of these sick mother fuckers in power. Although he wants me to stay out of it. I'm in too deep now, though. So, fuck it.

I slide the laptop over and open it. I type in my code and open the browser. Then I research someone I should've already known everything about: Declan Harvey. I scan Google, first perusing Dee's political website, one I've seen quite a few times, then scanning his social media pages for any clues. I don't really know what I'm looking for, just anything that stands out as fishy or linking him to pharmaceutical companies, big corporations with a dark history, et cetera. But all I find is a stream of cheesy photographs taken of Declan in front of the capital building downtown, in his

office, and shaking hands with the Senator. I've almost given up when something catches my eye. Well...someone. In a picture taken at a restaurant downtown, Declan stands next to the Senator, and just behind him and to the right, is one of the shareholders of the hospital chain I work for. "That mother fucker. I knew he was dirty. I fucking knew it."

I click on the photo and expand to get a better look at their faces. To see if I recognize anyone else in the photo. And my doorbell rings. Probably just a delivery. I stand up and peek out the front window. Yes, there's a box on the front step. I open the front door and bend down to retrieve it. I pick it up, easily, and it's almost as if the box itself is empty. I turn around to walk inside when the world around me grows fuzzy. Wavy. And then...it's lights out.

I come to and immediately realize I'm in my home...but I'm restrained. My hands are cuffed behind my back and attached to the kitchen chair, my vision is blurry, and my mouth is covered with duct tape. I peer down and see my legs tied to each of the chair legs.

"What the fuck?!" I push out a muffled scream. Who the fuck did this to me? Someone drugged me and tied me up...in my own kitchen. Was it Aris? No. He would never drug me like this.

I look around, but everything's still blurry. Everything seems the same in my kitchen, though. I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to focus my vision...until finally, the fog clears, and I see him. Standing in the hallway, staring at me, a serrated knife in one hand. A smirk on his smug face.

"Ahh, there you are," Declan sneers. "I thought you'd never wake up."

I try to lift myself in the chair and try to shake myself free. But all I manage to do is knock myself over on the floor, sending Declan into a fit of sickening laughter.

“Oh, Tacy, Tacy, my love,” he chides. “Always so rambunctious. So feral.”

Declan crouches beside me and runs a hand through my hair. I nearly gag on my own vomit rising in the back of my throat. I glance at the knife in his other hand and grit my teeth. Tears threaten to spill from my eyes, but I forbid myself from showing this dickhead any semblance of emotion. Is he going to kill me? He has enough reason to. For one, I rejected him. And second, he knows that I know about the Duselizab deaths. This little antic only solidifies my suspicions that he was the one who hired Starkey to abduct me in the first place. But this isn't the first time I've been tied up. And he should know by now, I'm fucking resilient. I ain't going down without a fight.

He sets his knife on my kitchen table with a clink and flips me up, chair and all, so that I'm upright again. Now I'm face to face with him. I growl as I imagine all the violent things I'd like to do to him. Knock that arrogant look off his face. Slit his throat with his own god damn knife. Push him off a fucking cliff.

“There's no need to fight me, Tacy,” Declan whispers. His breath is hot on my face. I pull back, but inevitably there's nowhere for me to go. I'm bound, gagged, and exactly where everyone knows I'm supposed to be. At home. I glance at the clock on the wall. It's almost time to pick up the kids. And...once again...I won't be there. What if my mom picks them up and comes here? Will they see my dead body lying in the kitchen?

Declan waves the knife around in the air, then brings it dangerously close to my face. The metal gleams in the kitchen light, matching his slimy yet shiny smile. Veneers. Probably got an upgrade when The Org placed him in office. I grunt and wiggle, fighting against the chair that's keeping me bound, and hoping I can free myself. Which is ridiculous, I know, but in the moment, you'll try anything to liberate yourself from your captor.

The knife inches closer, and Declan slides the flat part of the blade down my cheek. I scream again. Curse his name. I'm sure he knows what I'm saying, even from behind the tape. The icy cold metal glides over my jawline, and Declan's eyes focus in on mine as he holds the tip of the blade to my throat.

"See? This is fun, isn't it?"

In one swift motion, the mother fucker rips the duct tape from my mouth, peeling back my skin with it. I yelp in pain.

"You mother fucker!" I bellow. "Let me go! I swear to God, I will kill you."

"Kill me? Ha!" He shouts. "I will put a ball gag in your mouth, Tacy, if you don't shut the fuck up." There's a look in his eyes I've never seen before. Wild. Untethered. Homicidal. I grit my teeth and seal my lips.

"Fine," I stammer. "I just want to know...why are you doing this, Dee?"

He shakes his head as he paces in front of me. The knife gripped at his side. He's wearing a button-down shirt and slacks. But his shirt is untucked and there's a spatter of blood on the shoulder. Whose blood is it?

I'm panting and trying to catch my breath. My heart's beating a hundred fifty per minute. I'm calculating how I can get free from this chair. What I can use in the kitchen to knock him out. Can I get to my phone? No, it's in the bedroom. Can I get to the knives on the counter? I look over Declan's shoulder and realize the knife block is empty. The dickwad removed all the weapons in the vicinity. Of course he did.

"Many reasons, Tacy," he walks back and forth. Back and forth. Huffing and growling like a tied-up animal. "Let's start with the fact that you're a fucking cock

tease. Shall we? You've been throwing your ass around in front of me since Sol was alive. Flaunting yourself constantly. Letting your tits hang out, showing off your ass every chance you got. You and I both know we have sexual chemistry. You've wanted to fuck me since we met. And after Sol died, I thought for sure we'd get together. You were supposed to be my friend."

"So, which is it, Declan? Are we supposed to be friends or fuck buddies? Figure it the fuck out."

Declan freezes in his tracks and turns towards me. He bends over and his nose nearly touches mine. "Why not both?"

I flinch, then laugh, one of those deep belly laughs. The audacity of this asshole.

"Okay, you said there are multiple reasons, Declan. Why else have you tied me up in my own fucking house and flaunted your knife around in front of me as if it were your second dick?"

He leans close again and sniffs my hair. "Secondly, you're too meddlesome, Tacy. And someone needs to teach you a lesson."

"Meddlesome? Are you a fucking old lady?" Now I'm taunting him, but I don't care at this point.

If I can get him to engage physically with me, maybe I can wrestle the knife from his hand. It's a long shot, and Declan's much bigger and stronger than me. But it's worth a try. The more I rile him up, the more likely he'll be to attack. "You always were such a fucking twat. Spineless pussy."

He backhands me across the cheek. A burning pain blurs my vision again, and I taste blood. Okay, so it's working. But I need him to get even closer to me.

“You’ve dug yourself a grave. You’ve gotten yourself into things you have no idea how dangerous they are. I tried to keep you out of it, but you kept pushing. I tried to protect you, Tace, but you are just like him.”

“Like who?”

“Your dead husband,” he smirks. “And pretty soon, you’ll be even more like him. You’ll be in the grave next to him. Fucking worm food.”

“You’re not going to kill me, Declan. You and I both know that,” I swallow hard. “So, why are you actually here? You think this is a game or something? You know...I do enjoy being tied up. And I don’t mind being beaten either.”

A wave of violence flashes over Declan Harvey, the tension building to a fever pitch. I know he wants to kill me. But there’s probably other things he wants first. Well...he can try, but he’ll never get to fuck me. I’ll bite off his dick before he can put it in me.

“You’re fucking psychotic,” he says and chuckles wildly. He begins to pace again. This time he walks out of the kitchen and into the living room, briefly. But returns in seconds. Now his breathing is more rapid, the veins in his neck popping. His free fist is balled up at his side.

“Are you working up the balls to kill me or what? Get it over with, Dee!” I shout and brace for another strike. He growls at me, winds up, and his fist meets my temple and rocks me back in the chair, almost knocking me to the floor again. I don’t know if it’s the adrenaline or my hatred for him, but it doesn’t knock me out. My eye begins to swell, partially blocking my vision, and more of that metallic liquid floods my taste buds. My lip smarts and my entire face feels like it has its own heartbeat. I wonder how many times this mother fucker plans on hitting me before he finally does the deed.

“What did you use to knock me out, Dee? Was it Duselizab? Did you sprinkle a little bit on the box at the front door or what?” I laugh as I lick the blood off my top lip. This is fun. Riling up this psychopath. What he doesn’t realize is, I’m just as fucked up as he is. Just in a different way. And I’m not afraid to kill.

“Something like that,” he mutters and slides a phone out his back pocket. Nice. He has a phone. I can use that.

He types a text message then repockets it and glares at me. His jaw tenses as he looks at the clock on the wall. “I’m done answering your questions. Now, you’ll answer mine, or you’ll answer to my knife.”

He approaches me, leans over, and shines the knife in my face again. “Okay, I get it. You have a knife. Good for fucking you. You don’t need to threaten me with it, I’ll answer your questions.”

I smell expensive cologne on him...and the faint smell of chemicals. Or is that the smell of bleach? No. Medication? The aroma reminds me of the way the med room smells at the hospital. A sterile environment in which a medication was just spilled on the floor. I grit my teeth again and steel myself. Waiting for the first question.

I nod. “Go on. I’m waiting.”

He folds his arms over his chest, knife at his side, and says, “why not me? Instead, you chose Sol that night. Why?”

“Because I loved Sol the moment I laid eyes on him. I still love him,” I say. I want to tell him he’s a rancid mother fucker, but that would only incite him further. And something’s telling me I need to stay calm. I need to wait for the right moment to snatch that knife. “Next?”

“Love at first sight. Sounds like bullshit to me. But whatever. My next question is...why did you start digging into Duselizab?”

I clear my throat. “I put two and two together when multiple patients of mine started dying. It’s not hard to figure out a pattern...one of my patients was taking a medication and died with the same symptoms as another patient who also died. And then another. It only took a bit of research to see all my young, healthy patients were prescribed this drug and that their condition worsened afterward. They came to the hospital for help, and the doctors prescribed more of it. Eventually...killing them.”

“Why do you...of all people...care if people are dying?”

I swallow and glare at him. “What does that mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean, Tacy MacFee,” he drops my maiden name. I haven’t heard that name in years. Wanted to bury it. Keep it in the past forever.

“I’m sure I don’t, Declan Harvey.”

“You’re a murderer. Depraved. Blood thirsty. Just like Solomon.”

“Then I’m in good company, aren’t I?”

He huffs. Then pulls up a chair beside me. “I guess so.”

I glance down at his jeans pocket. There’s a long, cylindrical object within it. About three inches in length. Half an inch in diameter. Maybe it’s his tiny dick, but doubtful. It’s a syringe.

Declan rests his head on my shoulder. “I thought we were close, Tacy. Don’t you care about my wellbeing? My happiness? You always said you loved me.”

“I cared for you, sure,” I say through clenched teeth. The cuffs dig into my wrists as I try to free them. I’ve gotten out of cuffs before...a little game Sol and I used to play in the bedroom. I have unusually small hands and double-jointed fingers. And loads of practice. “But you lost that love, our friendship, when you had someone abduct me. When that psychopath tried to kill me.”

I shrug my shoulder and push him off me. He leans back in the chair, knife resting in his lap, one hand gripping the back of my neck. He’s displaying his dominance. Like I’m a dog and he’s the owner. Too bad for him, I bite back.

“You mean, your ex-boyfriend? I thought maybe you’d be happy to see him.”

Shit. He knows. “Happy? Why would I be fucking happy to see Orion Starkey? He’s a piece of shit. One of the worst dirtbags I’ve ever known in my life. The most disgusting, vile...”

“I was going to make you a deal, Tacy.” He runs his hand over the back of my head, his fingers getting stuck in a knot in my hair. To which he abruptly rips loose, making me squeal.

“Mother fucker!”

“What, Tacy? I thought you could take the abuse. Seems like you can’t. You’re just a scared little girl, aren’t you?”

“Enough of this bullshit, Declan. What’s the deal?”

“To join me, my cause, and reap all the rewards.”

“So, you were going to offer me a deal while I was strapped to a fucking bucket in Starkey’s disgusting ass basement? Covered in my own piss and blood and sweat?”

You think I would've accepted your fucking deal? You're an idiot, Declan. Dumber now than when I met you."

He hisses, stands, and slaps me again. This time so hard I see red stars. Warm fluid drips off my cheek and into my lap. I gulp and look at the time. It's two o'clock. Pick up time. My poor kids. And where is fucking Aris? Wasn't he supposedly stalking me? Watching me? Then I remember. The camera in the corner of the kitchen. I glance over. The tiny green light is flashing, which means...it's on. Wouldn't Declan have noticed that? He knew I had cameras put up, because Orion disabled them during the power outage that day he abducted me. Did Dee just forget?

"He was supposed to bring you to me. And then I would let you decide."

"Decide to join you? You sound like a fucking cliché villain straight out of a cheesy-ass movie, Declan. You must know that."

"Decide whether you'd want to live or die," he says and holds the knife to my throat. "You weren't supposed to get away. Starkey wasn't supposed to die. Nor was he supposed to treat you in such a manner. Speaking of...how did you get away, Tacy? Hmm? You didn't kill Starkey yourself. Someone helped you, right?"

I close my eyes and focus on the pain. In my body and in my mind. In my heart. It's the pain that drives me. It always has. So, instead of running from it, I lean into it.

"No one helped me. I killed the asshole myself," I growl. "He had it coming."

"I don't believe you," he whispers in my ear. His knife tip presses into the skin above my carotid artery. "You know what I think? You had a savior. A protector."

I stare blankly ahead. Remind myself to keep my countenance stale. Don't let him see me react.

“I save myself,” I say as I muster all my strength and fling myself against Declan, crashing down into his lap, my elbow smacking into the pocket with the syringe. In a clatter of metal and tile, I fall to the floor, taking Declan down with me. My face cracks into the porcelain, and I lie in a heap beside my mortal fucking enemy. His knee is in my ribs and his hand is on the back of my neck again. I peer around and notice he dropped the knife in the shuffle. It lies about three feet away.

“You bitch!” He yells, jumps up, and kicks me in the gut.

All the wind is knocked out of me, but the jolt of it somehow releases one of my hands from the cuffs. This is it! My chance!

I reach around and grab Declan’s ankle and pull with all my might. He stumbles over and reaches out to catch himself on the table but smacks his head on the chair on the way down. I reach out and pull myself forward with my free hand. Crawling towards the weapon.

“Fuck!” My captor shouts, and there’s a shuffle behind me as he gathers himself and stands.

Just as I close my fingers around the blade, Declan crouches over me and slips the knife from my hand, and the blade cuts through the flesh of my palm like scissors through tissue paper.

The next thing I know, I’m being lifted from the ground, chair and all, and shoved towards the corner of the kitchen. Directly in front of the security camera.

Declan pulls my free arm behind me, and secures the cuffs, tighter this time, then shoves me so hard into the countertop that my sternum cracks. I’m shocked I haven’t passed out from the pain encompassing my entire body, at this point.

“You’re going to die, Declan. I’m going to fucking kill you,” I spit at him.

He grabs the back of my hair and pulls my head back, exposing my throat to the recording camera. I mean, does this security company even do anything? Then he holds the blade to my neck and huffs into my ear. “Tell your husband I said hello when you see him in fucking Hell, you cunt.”

“Fuck...you!” I manage to get out, just as the metal digs into my skin again. Not enough to kill me, but enough to make my life flash before my eyes. I’ve become a human knife cushion.

“You can say hello now,” a third voice rings out from the back door. Sharp and ruddy. And oh so comforting.

“Who the fuck?” Declan releases his grip on me as he spins around. But before he can see who it is, a baseball bat strikes him in the face. Metal on bone makes a strange, clinking sound. Declan falls to the ground, and I wrench my head around to look.

“Get up, Harvey,” Aris says. He’s wearing a JFK mask. “Get up. And let’s fucking finish this.”

Moaning, Declan lurches himself up from the floor. Blood spills out of a slit below his right eye all over my white tile. He slips in his own blood as he stands up. The look in his eye has gone from vengeful to downright explosive.

“Solomon?” Dee asks and blinks. “I fucking knew it.”

“I’m not Solomon. Remember? You said it yourself. Solomon is fucking gone.”

Declan chuckles. “Then who the fuck are you?”

“Lazaris King.”

“Oh, right. I get it. Biblical. Nice touch. So, you’ve risen from the dead and now you seek vengeance on me? Well...I didn’t put the hit out on you,” Declan growls as he lunges with the blade.

Aris leaps backwards, avoiding the knife and laughing at the same time.

“You had plenty of enemies, Brother. No need to wear a mask. The stench of weakness gives you away.”

I press my feet against the floor and turn towards them, trying to free my hands again. I used to like handcuffs. Now...not so much. If I make it out of this alive, I’ll be pitching the damn things. Shibari is much prettier anyway.

Aris faces Declan. Declan faces Aris. They’re staring each other down. No doubt planning their next moves. Who’s going to deal out the death blow. Aris drops the bat. Declan lays the knife on the table beside him. Why the fuck did Aris drop the bat?

“You were my best friend, Declan. We were brothers. You betrayed me,” Aris says and lunges forward, slamming his fist into the side of Declan’s face. “You fucking Judas.”

Declan chuckles and spits blood at Aris. Maroon droplets spray over his black leather work boots. “You were always trying to save the fucking planet. Save humanity. But it wasn’t out of the goodness of your heart. It was so you could get the credit. The worship. So, people would love you for being so wonderful. Come on, Lazaris. You wanted to be the savior of the people for the fucking media coverage. To feed your covert narcissism. You don’t truly care about people, do you? And neither does your precious slut of a wife.”

“You leave her out of this. You’ve done enough to her,” Aris says, the JFK mask twitching with anger.

He bolts forward again, the back of his fist slamming into Declan’s ear. Declan stumbles sideways and catches himself on the kitchen wall. The clock falls off and crashes to the ground. It’s two-thirty. The kids. They’re probably being picked up by my mother again. Jesus, I hope they don’t come here. Not now. Not when I have a homicidal maniac in my kitchen fighting my deceased husband in a dead president’s mask. I’m still trying to pull my hands out of the cuffs.

Declan punches Aris in the face, then mumbles something and turns to me. “You don’t know about her, do you, Laz?”

“It’s fucking Aris to you, you piece of shit,” Aris growls, bends over, and picks up his bat.

“Ha! Okay, Aris, is it? Has your lovely wife, the nurse, told you about the people she murdered in Washington? When she was in a death cult?”

I look at Aris, who’s now looking at me. Yes, he fucking knows. I wriggle my hands back and forth and manage to slide a cuff over my thumb knuckle.

Aris slaps the bat against his free hand, threatening Declan. “We can do this all day, Brother. In fact, I’m having a fucking blast.”

“Fucking hit him, Aris!” I yell. Why monologues? Just take him out already.

Declan waves the blade in the air. “You have a blunt object. I have serrated metal. Who do you think will win this fight, Sol?”

Aris pulls back then swings the bat. With a whistling noise and a clang, smashes the

bat into Declan's ribs just as Dee thrusts the knife. Aris curses and whips backward, taking the bat with him. Declan falls to the floor, "fucking prick."

The knife is sticking out of Aris's shoulder. The bat clatters as it falls, and Aris frees the knife from his arm. He doesn't make a sound but secures both weapons.

I scan the kitchen for anything I can use as a weapon. Aris has the knife. And the bat. But I still want to help him take this mother fucker out. There, under the table, is a syringe. It has to be the same one from Dee's pocket. I slip my second hand from the cuff and reach down to free my legs.

Both men are panting, now encircling one another, hunched down like lions preparing for the attack. Aris's boots squeak on the bloody floor.

I rip the rope from one of my ankles, then quietly liberate my other leg. But I wait until Declan has his back turned towards me to get out of the chair. My heart beats violently, and I hold my breath as I bolt from the chair and slide under the table, my hand closing around the plastic tube. The syringe is still intact, even though I tried to break it before. The screw cap is easy enough to open, and I just need to get it into Declan's body somehow...

I jump up from the floor and watch as Declan lunges for the knife in Aris's left hand, and the bat in Aris's right pings off the side of Declan's head. He flies backwards and hits the wall with a thud. "Quick! Give me the knife!" I yell at Aris.

The man behind the JFK mask hesitates. And shakes his head slightly.

"Now!" I hold the syringe up to show him.

He slides the knife across the table towards me, I grab it, turn and slam it into Declan's hand, pinning his palm to the floor. Then I bite the cap off the syringe,

which is stupid in hindsight because I could've poisoned my fucking self and dump the contents onto the stab wound.

Declan screams, "You fucking bitch! You..." And passes the fuck out.

"I thought you wanted to kill him, Babydoll?"

"I refuse to give him the satisfaction. And...I guess I'm not a killer." I confess. "I never meant to hurt anyone."

In a way, I'm forgiving myself in this moment. Righting the wrongs I've done. "Anyway, it would be too merciful to kill him. He deserves to rot in a prison cell."

Aris

“Here’s the problem. We have yet another missing governor. And I’m supposed to be dead.”

“I mean, that’s two problems, Boss,” Shawn says as he hits the punching bag. We’re in the gym blowing off some steam. And, more importantly, trying to figure out what the hell we’re going to do with Declan Harvey. Not to mention, I’m still reeling from the fight I had with the god damn traitor and the fact that my old best friend beat my wife to a bloody pulp. “I can’t even visit my own wife, who’s currently in the hospital, because everyone thinks I drowned in the fucking bay. I want to fucking gut him, Shawn. I’m surprised I haven’t yet. I want to use his fucking intestines as shoestrings.”

“Do it,” Shawn says and smirks. “I’d be happy to help.”

I frown. “Tacy wants to turn him into the police. Show them the camera footage of him in the house,” I say and jam the heel of my foot into the pad on the wall. “Problem there is, they’ll see me...a masked guy, in the video.”

“I fail to see how that is a problem,” Shawn grunts as he punches again and again. Each hit grows louder and sends the bag swinging further backwards. “They don’t know who’s behind it, right? Tacy acts like she doesn’t know who you are in this case. Boom. Problem solved.”

“Sort of...but consider the fact that Tacy might be a potential suspect for the murder of Starkey. And so, she’ll say that a masked man saved her and shot Starkey. Then

another saves her from being killed in her own home?”

“Yeah, they’ll likely think you’re the same masked man and that she knows who you are,” Shawn says and cracks his knuckles. Sweat glistens on his forehead. His knuckles are raw and nearly broken. “I’m sure the police are wondering how she ended up in the ER with broken ribs, fractured cheek bones, and black eyes.”

“You going to take a break?” I ask and point to his hands. “You’ll need those fists next week when we invade the stronghold.”

“Ahh, bloody knuckles heal fast,” he huffs. “Where is the fucking creep now?”

“Declan? Well...tied up in building F,” I reply. “I didn’t want him anywhere near Reggie in the back room. Don’t want them together so they can help each other escape or exchange information or whatever.”

“Reggie’s not talking,” Shawn says. “Thor’s tried and so has Clyde. He just keeps saying we’ve got the wrong fucking guy. Either way, we ripped that tracking device out of his neck and trashed it on the other side of town.”

“Good job on the tracker. But...is it possible we’ve got the wrong guy?”

Shawn shakes his head and throws another punch. “Seemed clear to me that he’s the fucking guy. A whole string of texts between him and a known Org member’s number. I mean...they were in code, but we were able to decode them easily enough. Reggie notified them of the drop. There’s no doubt about it.”

I kick the pad harder, visualizing that it’s Declan’s throat. I have to keep my shoulders still, ever since the slimy mother fucker stabbed me in the bicep. Luckily, it wasn’t too deep, and my on-site doctor was able to stitch me up and treat it in-house.

“What are we going to do with Reggie? I can take care of him, if you want,” Shawn says and wipes the sweat from his face with an old towel. “Got a round ready to go.” He makes a gun with his fingers and points them at the door.

I pause and shake my head. “No. We’re not going to kill Reggie. If anything, we hold him until we complete the mission and turn him in same time as Declan. Yeah...I think that’s our best mode of action. Take down The Org, and we can turn in all these conniving bastards at the same fucking time.”

“Yeah, if the entire police force hasn’t been paid off already. We know Deputy Jackson has ties to Declan. Seen ‘em together downtown on more than one occasion.”

I take a slug of water. The injury on my arm smarts, and I wince slightly. “These dumb pieces of shit. They think we don’t see them have dinner together. Drinking fancy fucking wine and eating hors d’oeuvres and acting like everything is normal. Why would a deputy have dinner at Le Grande with the governor other than to do something shady? Don’t worry about the fucking cops. I’ll handle it. And don’t kill Reggie. Or Declan...as much as it pains me to say it, we need him alive. As collateral.”

Tacy

I'm in the hospital. Again. I should just rent a room here. I'm laid up with broken ribs and a fractured cheekbone. My lip has three stitches, as does my forehead. Declan really did a number on me this time. I'm just glad Aris was there. I'm going to need some serious training after all of this. I'm also thankful my children haven't been involved in the fucking mess that is my life.

I don't know when we're going to bring their father back around...and he claims this depends on when The Org is taken down. To me, it sounds like an impossible feat. Who knows how many people in power are part of The Org? How many minions they have in various industries and businesses throughout the city? The state? The country? What is Aris and The Rebellis going to do, blow up the capital? How far and wide is The Org's reach?

I sigh, moan at the searing pain in my side, and adjust my position in bed. I hate hospital beds. Whenever I have patients who complain about the discomfort, I never disagree with them or chastise them. Because they're right. Hospital beds fucking suck. You'd be more comfortable sleeping on a bed of rocks.

There's a knock on the door and my nurse strolls in, sanitizing her hands and smiling at the wall.

"So, what happened to you, Tacy?" Kayden asks as she checks the IV pump settings. She's purposely avoiding eye contact with me. We've never gotten along. Went through the same training class, graduated from the same nursing school, but could never hold a conversation without wanting to throw fists.

I sit up in bed, propping the flat pillow behind my lower back where there seems to be no cushion in the mattress whatsoever. “Fell down the steps.”

She logs onto the computer at the corner of the room and turns to look at me. Finally making eye contact. “Right. The old fallen down the stairs story.”

“What does that mean?”

“You and I both take the domestic violence class every year for our education credits, Tacy. We both know your injuries aren’t congruent to a staircase fall. Oh, pretty flowers. Who are they from?” She points to the tiger lilies on my bedside table. A bouquet sent by Aris with a note that says, wish I could be there by your side. I don’t know how much of this absent vigilante husband gig I can take.

I groan. I don’t know if it’s Kayden’s chipper demeanor or her punchable face that makes me hate her. Or the fact that she’s calling me out on my bullshit. “They’re from some guy I met on Tinder. Have you ever fallen down the steps?”

“No, I haven’t. My balance and coordination are impeccable,” she answers as her fingers click clack on the computer keys at an alarming speed. “Ten hours of yoga a week ensures I don’t have stupid accidents. But you didn’t fall, Tacy. And if it was the stairs, they must’ve grown a fist and punched you in the face multiple times. From different angles.”

I exhale sharply and reach for the remote. Kayden checks the catheter bag hanging from the bed, double-checks the IV pump, and listens to my heart and lung sounds before waltzing out the door. Just before she leaves, she turns and says, “an older woman called earlier for you. You were asleep. I told her to call back this afternoon. She seemed very concerned.”

I force a smile. “Thanks. It’s my mother.”

She closes the door behind her, and the phone on the wall rings. Fuck. I have to get out of bed and shuffle to the wall, pressing the heel of my hand to my ribcage. I barely make it to the phone when my catheter reminds me, I can only go so far. A sudden pinching in my bladder makes me squeal. The phone keeps ringing, and I stretch out enough to finally grab it.

I hit the green button and answer, “What?”

“Tacy? Oh, I’m so glad you’re up,” mom says. Her voice is shaky and strained. Blanketed in bad news.

“Yeah, I’m up. How’s Cammy and Ben? Are they freaking out? I’m sure they’re so frightened.”

“No,” she clears her throat. “They’re fine. They’ll be just fine.”

“Okay, that’s good. What did you tell them?”

“I told them what happened, Tacy. That they’re mother had a little fall and she’s in the hospital but she’s going to be okay.”

Silence. Then a man’s voice in the background. But it doesn’t sound like my mother’s boyfriend. It’s a younger man’s voice. Maybe middle-aged.

“Who’s there? That doesn’t sound like your boyfriend, Mom. Are you at home?”

There’s a shuffling sound and a clacking on the floor, like mom dropped the phone. She lifts it and says, “I’m sorry, what Honey?”

“I asked who’s there with you and the kids.”

“Oh, just the pool guy,” she says and laughs nervously.

“Okay...well, can I talk to Cammy?”

Another drop of the phone, the man’s voice thunders, and mom returns to the phone.

“I need you to do something for me, Tace.”

“What’s going on, Mom? Is everything okay? Who’s there?”

“I need you to stop all of this nonsense with the.... research you’re doing.”

“What? What are you talking about, Mom? Who’s with you?”

“Give me the phone, Judith,” the man says. “Mrs. Rountree?”

“Who the fuck is this?” I’m seething. But I must control my breath, because every time I breathe too heavily pain shoots through my chest like a lightning bolt. “Leave my mother alone.”

“I represent Mr. Harvey. I am a friend of his. And I’m also a friend of your mother’s. A close, intimate friend. So close, in fact, that I have access to her house. And... to your children.”

“You leave my family alone you mother fucker. I will kill you,” I growl. “I will fucking...”

“You aren’t in control here, Mrs. Rountree. I am. So, you will listen to what I have to say. Or I’ll pay your family another visit. But it won’t be a quiet one.”

“Fine...what do you want?”

“I want to know where you’re keeping Declan Harvey. And...he better be alive.”

I swallow the saliva pooling in my mouth. “He’s alive as far as I know.”

A nurse rushes by the door, and I freeze. I hope she’s not coming in. She doesn’t. I return to my phone conversation with the anonymous psycho. “But I have no problem giving the order to off the corrupt asshole.”

There’s a clicking on the phone and the man answers, “no, you won’t. You’ll return him to us. Tonight. At dock five-A, midnight.”

“Obviously I can’t return him to you. I’m in the god damn hospital...because of him.”

He chuckles. “I know that you’re a part of the rebellion. And I know that you know the men who are holding Declan hostage. So, make your fucking calls and set up the rendezvous. In addition, my people require that you end your research, and you reveal the identity of the masked man to us.”

I ball my fists and seriously consider punching the side rails on the bed. “I’ll set it up. But I can’t give you the masked man’s identity. I don’t know who he is.”

“No weapons. No cameras. Send two men only. Mr. Harvey must be unharmed.”

I laugh boisterously. My hands are shaking, and my palms are sweaty. “You think he’ll be returned completely unharmed? That’s a fucking joke. The mother fucker broke into my house and beat the shit out of a woman. The men who are holding him don’t take kindly to women beaters. He’s alive. And he’ll be returned tonight. But the slimeball will have injuries, Sir. That’s not my fucking problem.”

A certified nurse assistant walks in dragging a vital sign machine behind him, catches

my conversation, and immediately turns back around and out the door.

“Midnight. Dock five-A. You know my stipulations.”

I hang up on him. And the room starts spinning. I have to close my eyes to stop myself from vomiting. There’s a man in my mother’s house...between the same walls as my children. A man who could hurt them. Take them away for good. I pick the phone back up and go to dial a number. But realize...I don’t know Aris’s number. And I don’t have my fucking cell phone.

“Arghhh!” I scream and throw the white plastic phone across the room. It hits the corner of the sink and breaks into a hundred pieces. “Fuck!” I have to get out of here. I have to talk to Aris. Our kids’ lives are in danger. My mother’s life is in danger.

Lucky for me, my boss walks in at this exact moment. Clicking her white pumps against the hard floor. Her crisp white jacket flails backwards as she rushes to me.

“Sit down, Tacy! What in god’s name are you thinking?”

“I need to be discharged. Today,” I say as I rip the IV out of my arm and haphazardly slap a piece of gauze over the gushing vein.

“You have two broken ribs and a zygoma fracture. You need to rest. We don’t even know if you need surgery yet, Tacy. Please sit down.”

“Can you get me the syringe for the catheter, please? I’ll take it out myself,” I say, pointing to the bag of yellow fluid. “And when I come back to work, I’ll chart all of this in my own notes. No need to bother Kayden.”

“Tacy, that’s why I’m visiting today,” she sits at the end of the bed. There’s a clipboard in one of her hands that she holds tight to her chest. “I’m concerned...for

your wellbeing.”

I look her in the eye. My brow furrows. “What do you mean, you’re concerned? I’m fine.”

“No...clearly, you’re not. This is the third or fourth time you’ve been hospitalized in the past three months. Twice you passed out. A few weeks ago, you were involved in some sort of violent crime, and now this?”

I clip the IV line and let it fall to the floor. “Violent crime? No, Clara. That’s incorrect.”

“How so? You came in for an evaluation, with photos and a whole report that went to the police. Word has it that you...” she leans in and whispers, “...killed a man.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” I say and rip the heart monitor sticky pads off my chest and stomach. “I never killed the guy. And if you investigated further, you’d see that I was abducted by the fucking creep. I had to fight my way out before he killed me. I never asked to be kidnapped.”

“Regardless, we don’t feel you’re fit to be a nurse in this hospital any longer. Your recent behavior has been...well...erratic.”

“I can see how you’d be concerned for my physical wellbeing. But my erratic behavior? I’m one of the top nurses in the building, all of my patients request me as their nurse, and I won the nurse of the year award the last three years in a row. Explain to me how my behavior is concerning.”

Exhaling loudly, she smooths out her skirt and stands up. Checks her watch and says, “I don’t have time for this.”

“Well, you had enough time to walk in here and criticize me...amid a crisis. So, you should have plenty of time to explain to me why you’re firing me.” There it is. Angry Tacy’s out now and there’s no reining her back in.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Tacy. You know what I’m referring to. Your paranoia about the medication. It’s all in your head. I honestly think you could benefit from a psychological evaluation.”

I click my tongue when I realize what’s really going on. She’s been paid off. She knows about Duselizab. I flash her a sideways smile.

“Really? I’m paranoid. Got it. You know what I really think, Clara? I think you know exactly what that medicine does to people. You know how dangerous it is, but for some god damn reason you won’t do anything to stop it from being administered on your floor. Why is that? Hmm?” I stand and point to the catheter again.

“Sit down, Tacy. Last warning.”

“Give me the catheter kit, Clara. This is your last warning. I could give a fuck less what you think about me. Or what you think I need. Syringe, STAT.”

She spins on her heels and heads for the door. “Call your fucking nurse, Tacy. I never want to see your face in this building again. Next time someone abducts you or beats you up, go somewhere else. Just stop bringing your drama and bullshit to my front doorstep.”

She slams the door behind her, and I hear her heels clicking down the hallway. I scan the room and notice a blue bin beside the computer. BINGO. They were going to take out the catheter today anyway. I unlock the wheels on the bed and slowly make my way to the kit. Then I open the kit and remove my own catheter.

I discover my blood-stained clothing in a plastic bag in the closet along with my purse. I rip off the hospital gown and slowly climb back into my damp, dirty clothing. I slip on my white canvas shoes that have taken on a burgundy shade and shuffle to the bathroom to check the mirror. My eye is swollen shut and half of my face looks like an indigo punching bag. My hair, while in a high ponytail, is caked in brown, flaky blood. I touch my cheekbone and moan in pain. Fuck. I do need surgery. But I don't give a shit about that right now. I need to find Aris and we need to get our kids away from The Org.

I shoulder my purse and shuffle out the door, down the hallway, and almost make it to the elevator door when my supervisor stops me.

"Tacy, please. You're in no shape to leave the hospital," Clara says and gently grabs my wrist. "Come on back. We can get you some pain medication and you can just rest."

I rip my wrist free from her grasp. And stare her in the eyes. "What's the medication...Duselizab? No fucking thank you, Clara."

She pulls a yellow slip of paper from her jacket pocket and clicks a pen. "At least sign this AMA order."

"You can take your death drug and the AMA and shove them up your greedy ass. If there's any room left up there next to all the hush money you've accepted."

Her eyes widen, "I'm sure I don't know what you're referring to."

"Yes, you do. Just know, the reckoning is coming," I say as I waddle into the elevator. Clara stands there staring at me as the doors close. Fucking sell-out.

Aris

He's sitting in the chair, his back towards me, ankles tied to the legs. In the same chair that I fucked my wife in just a few days ago. The plastic sheets are slippery, but not with oil...with blood. There's a gash on the back of his head that is actively bleeding. I step over the threshold and shut the door behind me.

I clear my throat. "I never thought after all we've been through that it'd be you in here."

He looks at me. His eyes are bloodshot. There's another gash on his forehead above his right brow and his lip is so swollen and busted it looks like a mashed cocktail sausage.

"I shouldn't be in here," he grumbles. A gurgle escapes his throat, as if blood was pooling in there that he needed to clear. "That's why you don't feel right about it."

I pull up a chair directly in front of him and survey his bonds. His hands are in cuffs behind his back and chest also strapped to the chair. His white tank top is no longer white, but a mildewy pink color with splotches of brown. My stomach turns at the thought of the torture he's endured at the hands of people he once called friends.

"Explain to me how that is true, Reggie," I say and fold my arms across my chest. I sit tall and await his response.

Another gurgle and then, "I've infiltrated The Org. I've been going deep into that hole for the last year, since they tried to kill you. Pretended to be a henchman for the

high table.”

I pause and blink. Trying to gather my thoughts and make sense of what he’s saying. “You’re trying to tell me you’re a fucking double agent, Reg?”

He nods. The fluorescent light reflects off his dark pupils. I’ve never seen him this wounded. This downtrodden. This hopeless. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying, Lazaris.”

“Why wouldn’t you have let us in on your little side operation, then? How can I trust you’re on our side and not theirs?”

The light bulb buzzes above us matching the buzzing in my chest. Anger. No. Frustration. And sorrow. Mourning a friendship I once had. Mourning the trust I’ve lost.

“How can you even ask me that?” He asks and affixes his widening eyes on me. “Recall I’m the one who pulled you from the god damn bay and performed CPR on you. I’m the one who brought you back to life when you were basically dead. Why would I have saved you if I was one of them? I would’ve let you drown that day. They wanted you dead, Aris.” Tears form in the corners of his eyes. He seems so genuine. “They wanted your lungs filled with shit water, see your bloated body sunk to the bottom of the bay. I fucking saved you. If you’re Lazaris and you’re back from the dead, then I’m fucking Jesus. I’m your savior, Aris. I brought you back from the Underworld.”

“I know. I know, Reggie. It doesn’t make sense to me, Brother.” I inhale sharply and lean back in the seat. I want to believe him. I really do. “Here’s the fucking problem. You ratted us out to your men over there and we lost our shipment. And it wasn’t just any shipment...it was the biggest one to date. We needed those fucking weapons, Reggie. You knew that.”

“I had to give them the intel. They needed some kind of insurance that I was on their side too. Declan was onto me. He and his goons were sniffing around my house, the office, around my boyfriend. I had to gain their trust. And this seemed the most efficient and least risky move.”

“But you gave away our FUCKING GUNS, Reggie!” I stand and slam my fist into the wall behind me. My face is red hot and now my fist is on fire. “I don’t know when we’re going to get another deal like that. Even if you are on our side, which was a stupid fucking decision, and you know it.”

Reggie’s nostrils flare and he rocks against the seat of the chair, as if this small movement might free him. “I’m telling you; I’m fucking innocent. I’m a mole. And I’m on your team. I’m ready to take these mother fuckers down once and for all, but I can’t do it strapped to this chair.”

I growl and punch the wall again, this time hitting it so hard my knuckle cracks and a piece of concrete block falls to the floor behind the plastic sheet. “You know I can’t let you go. You know too much. And I can’t risk you returning to them and spilling the rest of the plan.”

“I won’t. I swear it.”

I turn to leave, but the look in his eyes stops me in my tracks. Is it honesty? Or simply desperation that I’m seeing? How could he do this to me after all we’ve been through? As friends...as brothers. As part of The Rebellis.

I clear my throat and wipe my bleeding knuckle on my shirt. “How do I know what you’re saying is true? How can I trust you after this?”

“Let me prove it to you.”

“Sure. But how? I won’t cut those ties until I have some sort of guarantee.”

“Easy. I’ll give you the CEO’s address.”

“That’s not a guarantee. We all fucking know where The Org’s stronghold is.”

“No,” he says and sighs. “The CEO’s home address.”

“You know who he is?”

Reggie nods and wipes his forehead on his shoulder. “Yes, I know who she is.”

“I’m...I’m sorry. Did you say she?” I ask.

“Yeah. Not sure why everyone around here thinks only men can be evil. We’re all equal, right? If we can be equally as good, we can all be equally as bad. Evil doesn’t discriminate. Once it takes hold of a person, it plants more seeds, festers and grows. The soil makes no difference.”

I swallow and lean against the wall, allowing the information to sink in. “What’s her name? Who is it?”

“That will have to wait.”

I push against the wall and head for the door again. I’m tired of his shit. “Goodbye, Reggie. Have a nice evening.”

Silence. I open the door and Reggie shrieks, “wait!”

I keep my hands on the cold metal latch but turn to give him one more chance.

“You know her, personally,” he screeches.

“I’m waiting. You have three seconds.”

“It’s Judy...Beckner,” he replies.

“My mother-in-law?”

Tacy

The Uber ride felt like the longest ride of my entire life. When it rolls to a stop in front of the warehouse, I gulp, thank the driver for putting up with my body odor since I hadn’t showered, then crawl out and sidle up to the front door. Do I knock? Should I try the back door instead? Surely, they’ll see it’s me through their surveillance and let me in? I pray I don’t get shot.

There is a camera in the corner of the building pointed right at me, and I reach a shaky fist out to knock. An obnoxious beeping noise emanates from behind the door, and a man’s gruff voice shouts something inaudible. There’s a scraping metallic noise, as if someone’s unlocking a dozen locks on the door, and finally the door opens and a pair of gray eyes peek through the crack. Gray eyes bordered by a bushy pair of gray eyebrows. An older gentleman.

“Who are you? We’re closed.” His voice cracks as he says closed .

“I’m here for Aris.”

“There’s no one here by that name. It’s just me and the shop is closed,” he repeats and steps slightly into the light. There’s a large scar across his nose and down one cheek. Like someone slashed him with a knife when he was a young man.

“Listen,” I lean in and lower my voice. “I’m on the inside. I’m with The Rebellis. I’m Aris’s wife and I need to speak to him.”

His eyes widen. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now, do you need a ride, Miss? I can call you a cab.”

I shake my head. My patience is thinning. The pain in my ribs is searing and almost renders me incapable of speaking. But the throbbing of my eye socket is almost more than I can bear. I’m seeing stars, but I must press on. “I don’t have a lot of time. Please, just get him. Get Aris.”

Another shake of the head, but then the man shuts the door abruptly and a familiar hand pulls the door open. He hurries me inside. The scent of gasoline and sweat permeates the air of the warehouse.

“What are you doing here, Babydoll? Jesus, are you okay?” Aris asks as he pulls me into his arms.

I wince when his chest presses against mine. “Ow.”

He pulls back and scans me from head to toe. “Why are you here?”

The doorkeeper is already down the hallway, leaving the two of us alone.

“It’s...the kids, Aris,” I say and double over in pain. “They’re...in...danger.”

“What? How? Who?”

I shrink to the floor and put my head in my hands to try to stop the dizziness.

“Tacy, where are the children?”

“They’re with my...mom,” I say shakily. I try to lift my head and look at him, but it feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. I just need to...rest. My eyes close, but Aris shakes me gently to snap me out of it.

“Tacy! Please just tell me what’s happening. The kids are with your mom. What’s the danger?”

“There’s a man...with them,” I say and try to muster all of the strength I have left in me. For the kids. For Aris. For our family. “He wants Declan.”

I lay flat on the cold ground, my body now supine on the hard floor of the warehouse. I hear voices and footsteps all around. They’re talking to Aris, asking questions. Aris lifts me from the floor.

My entire body is pounding. I’m nauseous and sweaty and just want to close my eyes. My soul is threatening to leave my body and escape the radiating, all-encompassing pain. Slipping...my eyes close...

Aris lays me on something cushiony and clean. I feel pillows and blankets around me. And Aris. I hear his voice. He never leaves me.

“Tacy, Babydoll. Can you hear me? I need to know who the man is.”

I open my eyes. “I don’t...know.”

“Did you meet him?”

“No. He was on the phone...at mom’s. Threatened them. The kids.”

“Yes, I got all of that, Honey,” he says and sits beside me. “I know this is hard, but I need you with me for a few more minutes. Then I promise you can rest.”

Tears stream from my eyes. I don't know how much longer I can stay awake. How much more I can give of myself. But I have to pull through for the kids. Fuck everyone else. Just. Save. The. Kids.

"Dock five-A. Midnight," I squeak and cough. "Give him back to them."

"Okay, Baby. You did good," Aris says and smooths the hair out of my face. He offers me water and covers me with a blanket, because now I can't stop shivering. "Just rest now."

I close my eyes and pray for the pain to go away. And for my kids to be saved.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 pm

Aris

“Why the FUCK did you let him go?” Clyde roars over the humming of the boat engine. “You fucking let him go!”

“Because, Clyde, he is on our side,” I say and turn the boat on. “Now, go down and make sure they’re ready for the exchange.”

“But you fucking let him go! Why, Boss?”

I turn to him and clutch the steering wheel to steady myself. “He knows the CEO. Where she lives.”

“But we’re fucking handing over Declan, the demon, Harvey. What do you think is going to happen next? They’re fucking coming after us. They’ll track each one of us down and kill us. Or our families. They know we exist now, especially since we’ve held Declan in the warehouse. And now Reggie is free...well...we are fucked!”

“Would you please calm the fuck down, Clyde?” I growl and turn on the radio. Orange Sector’s song Farben blasts through the speakers. I turn it up more. Maybe the music will drown out Clyde’s bitching.

“Wait...did you say the CEO is a woman?” His jaw tenses.

“Yeah. And it’s not just any woman,” I say and motion to the ropes. “Can you untie us and give the boat a push?”

Clyde follows my request. “Then who is it?” He yells over the industrial music.

“It’s my mother-in-law,” I reply and put the boat into gear.

Clyde stares at me, his mouth agape, hands clutching the leaning post next to me. “I’m...I’m sorry?”

“You heard me. I said it’s my fucking mother-in-law.” I turn the wheel starboard.

“But...how?” Clyde scratches his head and stares out into the distance.

“Clyde! Please go down and check on the guys. And make sure Declan still has the God damn bag over his head. I don’t need him seeing anything until we get to the docks. I don’t want him to know where he came from. Nothing about it. Got me? We’ll figure out the rest later.”

“But, what the fuck, Boss? I mean, Reggie. And Tacy’s mom?”

I’m losing my patience. And my kids’ lives are at stake. “I said fucking go! She has my kids, Brother. I need you to just listen to me. Reggie isn’t the enemy here. Okay?”

He pivots and disappears below deck. I clench my jaw and accelerate. The boat roars faster and faster as we glide over the dark water towards the inner docks. My mind is churning like the ocean. How did I not see this coming? With all the money Judy came from...her family’s claim to fortune in the oil industry. The way Tacy’s father mysteriously died on a vacation in Egypt. On and on, the pieces keep coming together. I breathe a little easy knowing that she is my children’s grandmother...and I hope that means she won’t do anything to harm them. But the fact that The Org is threatening my kids’ lives is enough for me to return Declan. Even though the urge to string him up by his feet and gut him like a deer swims around inside of me incessantly.

Reggie's voice rises over the sound of the engine and the water. "When we get there, who's delivering the cargo?"

I shout back, "me and Clyde."

Reggie stands beside me. I turn to look at him. His copper skin gleams in the haunting light of the city's skyscrapers. His facial expression tells me he's concerned. No. Downright frightened.

"I can do it," he offers.

"No, that's a bad idea, man. They know who you are, don't they? They'd take one look at you and kill you once Declan's in their possession."

"With everything I've put you and the boys through, it wouldn't be uncalled for."

I turn the wheel and head the bow into a marina flanked by empty warehouses, crumbling tackle shops, and old sailboats.

"That's bullshit," I say. "You were doing your job."

"I could've let you know what was going on sooner," he replies and points at a pair of headlights in the distance. "Watch it."

"I'm aware," I say. "But you don't deserve to die. If anything, you deserve a fucking metal, Reg."

He shakes his head and bites his lip. I don't think I've ever seen him this disturbed. Even when we had him tied to a chair in the coldest corner of the warehouse.

"For what it's worth, Reggie, I forgive you for not telling me," I say and grab his

shoulder and squeeze it.

Reggie smiles at me. “Thanks, Brother.”

A few minutes pass and we pull up to the docks deep in the historic part of Harbor Towne, known as the Inner Harbor. This place used to be a bustling port where fishermen brought their catch and sold it to distributors and restaurants. Now that the bay is overfished, there’s less fishermen and the Inner Harbor has pretty much been abandoned. Which makes it the perfect place for shady dealings and criminal organizations. The mob’s known to run drugs and traffic women out of the Inner Harbor. Which makes sense why The Org wanted us to meet here. It’s quiet. It’s dark. And, even if something goes down and there are witnesses, the witnesses likely have a warrant out for their own arrest and would never go to the cops and risk exposing themselves.

Reggie returns below deck and Clyde takes his place by my side. We tie off the boat, kill the engine, and survey the scene. There’s a car with its headlights on sitting just beyond the dock. I’m sure it’s The Org’s men.

I reach below the seat and locate my blade. Then secure it in my boot. They said no weapons, but Lord knows these slimy mother fuckers will have guns and who knows what else on them.

Clyde shoots me a look, as if to say it’s go-time, just as he pockets his own revolver. He disappears below deck, then reappears with Declan in front of him. He has his gun pressed to the small of Declan’s back. There’s a black cloth bag over our hostage’s head.

“You can take the bag off,” I say. Though I have no desire to see this Benedict Arnold’s face.

Clyde nods. As soon as the fabric slides off Declan's head, he looks at me like a shark ready to devour his prey. Which is funny, since he's the one who's bound and has a gun buried in the small of his back.

"I fucking knew it," he says and continues to smirk. "Solomon fucking Rountree is alive."

I'm seething. There's a voice inside of me telling me to blow his fucking face off. Fuck the consequences. But the logical voice tells me my mother-in-law still has my kids. And who knows who else is with her. What if she was forced to make this deal?

"Funny, since you seemed to harp on the fact that I was dead. You can't fucking kill me, Declan. I keep coming back."

"Like a fucking disease."

"Like a fucking nightmare."

"Get up there," Clyde growls at Declan. "It's midnight. Let's make this quick. I don't want to look at your ugly fucking face anymore."

We step onto the dock and slowly make our way towards the idling vehicle.

"I'm not handing him over until I have word my children are safe. Until I know they're safe and sound with my wife."

Declan chuckles under his breath. The snide piece of shit. I reach for Clyde's gun and motion for him to let me take over. Then I shove the barrel harder into Declan's spine. He flinches but continues laughing.

"What's so fucking funny?" I shove it harder into his spine.

“You’re delusional, Sol,” Declan declares. “You can only cheat death so many times until the reaper’s had enough of your shit.”

“Maybe the reaper and I are close and personal friends.”

“If death doesn’t come for you, it’ll come for Tacy.” The words drip from his mouth like toxic sludge. “Or perhaps Cammy...or Ben.”

I grab the back of Declan’s neck and move the gun from his back to his temple. “Keep their names out your filthy fucking mouth or I’ll splatter your brains all over the pavement.”

“Drop the gun!” Someone shouts. Three men exit the car and approach us with guns raised.

“Tell you what, I’ll drop the gun when you can ensure me my family is fucking safe. Until then, the gun’s home is right here.” I push the gun into Declan’s temple so hard I’m surprised it doesn’t break the skin. He grunts but keeps his mouth shut.

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” a man with sideburns and a black beanie roars. “We said no weapons. And the boss said nothing about collateral or an exchange of any kind.”

“You’ve got a gun, don’t you? I guess you better get your boss on the fucking phone. My children are to be returned to my wife. Or your sleazy governor here will be chewing metal.”

The bald man accompanying the beanie guy keeps his gun pointed at me but reaches in his jean pocket and slips out a phone. He dials and puts the receiver to his ear. “We’ve got a problem. They’re saying they won’t give us Harvey until the children are returned.”

Silence as the man listens. Then...

“I can’t do that.... fine...yeah, we can handle it.”

He pockets his phone and glares at me with a furrowed brow. “We’ll hand the kids over when you hand us the Governor.”

“No dice,” I say and move the gun to Declan’s other temple. Just so the imprint is symmetrical on each side of his face. “And, hey, listen. I can stand here all night. Or I can pull the trigger and...”

I cock the gun and Declan growls, “tell her to let them go. I know this man. He’ll fucking kill me if he doesn’t get his kids back. Call her. Now.”

I wonder if he’s talking about Judith. Or is it another woman high up in The Org?

The men talk amongst themselves and make another call, just out of earshot. They return with scowls on their faces. A car horn blares in the distance.

“The children are already at home,” the man in the beanie says. “Call your wife.”

I nod and motion to Clyde to take over holding Declan for me. He obliges, and I call Tacy. She answers, voice shaking, and tells me the kids are back in her arms. Safe at home. But then, I hear a voice. The voice of my mother-in-law, the CEO of The Org. Fuck. I have to warn her. But I can’t say it over the phone. I don’t want her to hear me.

“Your mother is in on the whole thing, Tacy,” I text. “She’s a member. Maybe even set up the whole thing.”

“No, you’re wrong, Aris,” she types back. “There’s no way.”

“Think about it, Tacy,” I reply. “She’s always there when things go wrong. Almost like she already knew about your abduction. The break-in. All of it. Just get her out of there, now. And watch your back.”

“Okay,” is all she sends back. “I’ll take care of it.”

I slide my phone back in my pocket and motion to Clyde. “Let him go.”

Clyde hesitates but lowers the gun to his side. Then shoves Declan forward, sending him toppling into the ground. Declan stands, then turns to us and says, “you’re on borrowed time, Solomon.”

“Solomon’s dead, Declan,” I retort. “My name is Lazaris.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” Clyde shouts at Declan and tosses the cuff keys to the man in the beanie. “And don’t fucking look back or I’ll change my mind and erase you from the fucking planet.”

The men laugh as they work to remove the cuffs. “Night, Boys.”

They hop in a black Benz and speed away, leaving Clyde and I in the dark. As we climb back into the boat, Thor and Reggie join us above deck.

“You know how we’ve been planning the takedown for next week? It goes down tomorrow.”

Tacy

I'm sitting beside my mother on the sofa. And I have a syringe of Duselizab in my pocket. Nurses often go home with medications in their scrubs that they meant to leave at work. In this case, I'm glad I have it.

My children have been returned to me without a single scratch. Without a single hair missing from their heads. But that's because they were with their grandmother the entire time they were supposedly kidnapped. And, while she seems innocent and like any other typical old white lady, now I know she's not. She's been hiding her identity from me my whole life. My mother's family called themselves "benefactors". And while I was growing up, I heard people say I came from "old money" at least a hundred times. But I never paid much attention to it. I've never been a person focused on money. Maybe that's because we had it growing up, I'm not sure, but now that I'm an adult I know the true meaning of hard work. And I never once asked my parents for money. Now I know where they got it. There were always rumors of my grandfather being an oil tycoon, but I never saw any evidence of that. My mother is a crime lord. And, despite the grin she's forcing at me, I don't put anything past her.

"Mom? I think the kids are tired, and so am I," I say and try to act nonchalant. "I truly appreciate everything you've done for us. And I'm so glad you're okay, too. We've all been through an ordeal."

"Are you kicking me out, Tacy?" Her smile slants to the right. And she tilts her head in the same direction. One hand reaches up and fiddles with a diamond pendant my father gave her decades ago. Right before he mysteriously fell from his hotel balcony in Egypt.

“No, of course not. I just think I need a little rest. I mean, until tomorrow when I see a specialist about my fractured face,” I say and force a laugh. “In case you didn’t notice, it’s busted.”

She reaches out and touches my knee. “It could have been so much worse though, don’t you think?”

It’s not the question but the creepy smile accompanying it that incites a nagging uneasiness within me. “I mean...yeah...I guess it could have been.”

“I mean...you could have died, Tacy,” she says. And grins even wider.

I exhale slowly. My fists roll into balls. I’m prepared for anything. I don’t want to hurt my own mother. But I’ll do what I must to protect myself and my children. “Yes, I know. But I didn’t, Mother.”

“I think you’re putting your trust in the wrong people, Tacy,” she says. “You’re vilifying the wrong crowd.”

“I’m...I’m sorry? What do you mean?” I know exactly what she means, but I want her to say it. Admit that she’s the bad guy. And, if she is a part of The Org, does that mean she orchestrated my children’s exchange? Does this mean Declan is one of her guys? Does this also mean she knew or potentially put the hit out on my husband? And knew about my abduction? Oh my God.

My mother rises from the couch and walks to the bay window, then stares out quietly. “Your father and I tried to raise you properly. But you always were so rebellious.”

I hear a bedroom door close. The kids are headed to bed. Good. They don’t need to know their grandmother is a monster. I hope they stay in their rooms.

“Technically, my father left us when I was a baby.”

“Well, your stepfather. You know what I mean, Tacy,” she says and cracks her knuckles. “You never wanted to listen to me. Never wanted to listen to your grandparents. You just wanted to run wild in the woods. Hang out with your insufferable friends.”

“As teenage girls do.” I shift in my seat uneasily and make a mental note that my phone is on the coffee table, inches away. Maybe I should message Aris, but he’s dealing with his own shit. Still...the exchange is complete, and we are safe. Or...are we? I’m not worried about this old woman trying to take me on. I’m a little worried about who she has at her disposal, though. Is someone waiting just outside the house to aid her in some sort of sick plan?

Mom twirls her necklace around her finger, then turns to me. A forlorn look on her aging face. “Then you got mixed up with that church group.”

“Mom, it was a cult. And I really don’t want to talk about that right now. It’s been a long day. A long year, in fact, and we could all use some rest.” I stand to usher her out the door. Feeling more and more like there’s a snake in my den. One that may need its head cut off.

“I think it warrants a discussion, Tacy,” she says and pulls something metallic from her purse. “Don’t you?”

It’s a knife. She has a fucking knife. My own mother is threatening to stab me?

“Jesus Christ, Mom! What are you doing?”

She points the knife at me and motions for me to sit. “I said, we’re going to have a little talk. So, sit the fuck down.”

“Just don’t do anything stupid, Mom, please.” I put my hands up in the air as if to say I surrender. I sit at the edge of the couch cushion and stare at her. I refuse to take my eyes off her. My mind goes to the syringe in my pocket.

She goes radio silent for a moment but keeps the blade pointed at me. Then she says, “tell me about the man you murdered in Forest Grove.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Tacy. The man you murdered out in the woods that night. In the middle of Winter. Remember? You must remember one of them...”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply and place my hand next to the pocket with the tranquilizer. Sure, it’s a medicine, but we know it has the power to knock people out. And kill them, if given too much. So...I’ll just give her a little bit, if she gets too close.

“I don’t,” I reply indignantly. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

She uses the knife to clean her fingernails like some sort of villain out of an action film. “You and your psychotic boyfriend took out two of my top men that night.”

“Your top men? What are you talking about? This is insane, Mother. Put down the knife!” I’m yelling in a hushed tone.

“Stop acting like you’re so innocent, Tacy. You’re a killer. And now, you’re on the wrong side of the court. You’re playing for the wrong team.” She hisses and walks closer, the knife at her side. “Our family is powerful. Your great grandfather started a club back in the early nineteen-hundreds. The club grew and grew, and our family profited. But it wasn’t without sacrifice.”

I gulp. “We can talk, Mom. Please just put down the knife. I’m your daughter, remember?”

Her eyes are wild but glued to me, like a predator homing in on its dinner. “I remember the look on my partner’s face when we found them, splattered all over the rocks below Hartman’s Cliff.” Her white eyebrows drop, and her look softens. She lays down the knife.

“Thank you.”

“It would be so much easier if you just listened to your mother for once,” she says, her voice quivering.

“Okay, what are you asking me to do?” I shift slightly, preparing to grab the syringe. My heart speeds up. My palms are slick with sweat. I hope the damn thing doesn’t slip out of my hand.

“Get out of the nursing field and join the company,” she says. “We could really use you.”

“I was just fired. So, perfect timing,” I reply and fake another smile. Is she buying this? Doesn’t really matter, because she and I both know even with that knife in her possession, I’m faster and stronger.

“Great,” she says, then picks up her purse and slides the knife inside. “Your medical knowledge coupled with your killer instinct will come in handy, my dear.”

My senses are heightened, and I’m prepared to lunge. But...I don’t have to, because she walks out the front door and closes it behind her. I lock the door and collapse on the floor.

As if by some kind of telepathic connection, my phone rings and I grab it.

“Tacy! Oh, thank God, are you okay, Babydoll?”

I’m panting and trying to gather my senses. “Yes. I’m fine. Now that her conniving ass is gone.”

Aris lets out a boisterous laugh. “Let me guess...”

“The crazy old bitch. She tried to recruit me.”

“I expected as much,” he says. “Declan’s back in The Org’s fold. And he knows I’m alive.”

“We’ve got to get out of here. I’ll start packing. We can’t let these people take our children. I just can’t believe my mother’s in on all of this.”

“She’s not just in on it, she’s the ringleader, according to Reggie. And they’re not going to take our children away. I won’t let them.”

“Still, Aris! If Declan knows you’re alive, and my mother is on the inside of this insane mafia bullshit, they’re going to kill us. Every last one of us! My mother wants me to follow in her footsteps. In my grandfather’s footsteps. And she knows more about my past than I even knew.”

A pause, then, “What do you mean, she knows more about your past than you?”

“She knows about them. The men I pushed from the cliff,” I say and gulp. “I could’ve kept running that night. I could’ve refused to do anything that night. Instead...I murdered two men. And apparently, they were my mother’s men.”

“Your mother’s men?”

“Yeah, she said I killed two of her men that night.”

“Well, that doesn’t make sense since Starkey helped you. Why would someone who’s a part of The Org kill two other members?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe it was a test. To see if I had it in me. To take a life. Maybe he wasn’t part of The Org back then?”

I can hear him breathing. He mumbles something to Reggie. Wait. Reggie?

“Is that Reggie’s voice?” I ask. “Did you say Reggie told you about my mother?”

“Yes, long story. We’ll get into that later,” Aris says. “Listen to me, Tace. You did what you had to do. I’ll never judge you for that. You have a good heart. You’re a good person, whether you believe it or not. And those two men who fell off the cliff that night? If they were truly part of The Org, they were bad men, and you saved innocent lives by erasing them. Forgive yourself.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Aris

“We invade The Org’s stronghold tonight,” I say to a room full of men and women. All a part of The Rebellis. “My identity’s been blown. Declan Harvey knows I’m alive. And The Org’s CEO is someone I know personally. We can’t wait any longer.”

I expected rebuttals. Refusals. Instead, the crowd of my peers and friends cheer and rush off to prepare for the coup.

I’m thinking about my family as I head down the hall to the weapons room. Tacy packed up and is taking the kids to a hotel outside of the city, in a little town most people don’t even know exists. An old mining town with a Bed and Breakfast run by Thor’s parents. They’ll be safe there. At least for a little while.

Shawn rushes up beside me.

“Why did you show yourself to him?” Shawn asks. This is about the thirtieth time he’s asked me this. “You should’ve kept a mask on, Boss.”

“I wanted him to see my face and know what he’s up against. I wanted him to know that I survived,” I say and light a cigarette. I don’t typically smoke. But the stress has me craving nicotine. “And I want him to be scared. I want him to be petrified.”

Reggie joins us.

“How do we know this mother fucker is truly one of us?” Shawn motions to Reggie.

“Because he is. He’s saved my life, more than once.”

“Could’ve all been an act,” Shawn mutters.

I pound my fist on the wall. “Enough! Reggie is one of the original Rebellis, like every single one of us. Probably more so. Tell Shawn what they did to you, Reggie. Then maybe he’ll believe.”

Reggie clears his throat. “When I was a kid, I knew I was different. Not just my race, or my sexuality, but also my learning disability. My father was on the city council. He didn’t know the people around him were all part of The Org. When he mentioned me to a coworker, they suggested sending me away to a camp. That they could fix me.”

“Like a Summer camp?” Shawn repeats.

“More like a concentration camp for children with disabilities. There was no therapy. No learning programs. Just three months of constant abuse. They tried to beat the dyslexia out of me. And, when they realized I was gay, the abuse got worse. I tried to tell my parents, but they wouldn’t let me talk to them except for under the supervision of a counselor.”

“Jesus,” Shawn says. “I had no idea. What happened when you got out?”

“I promised myself that I’d never let anyone hurt me again. Or hurt any kid who was different. Whether they were gay or disabled or whatever. I wouldn’t let these people have their way anymore. Later, in college, I realized the people my dad was working for were all working together. The mayor of the fucking city, for fuck’s sake, was a shareholder in the kids’ camp they’d sent me to. I got out of college and started working for the state. Worked my way up and into the Governor’s office. Which is when I met Lazaris. Well, he was Sol then.”

“That’s right,” I say and hold the door to the weapons room open for the guys.

“And when they tried to kill Sol, I knew I had to do something more than working in a government office.”

“Get to the part where you become a supposed double agent,” says Shawn as he grabs a black canvas bag off the wall.

“The day Sol disappeared, someone approached me. One of The Org’s lesser men. A minion. He offered me money to hand over the video surveillance of Sol’s abduction. But I refused. Then he threatened to kill me and my entire family. I handed over the video surveillance.”

“That’s fucking great, Reg,” Shawn snorts. “Now there’s no evidence as to who is responsible.”

“I handed over the video surveillance...after making a copy,” Reggie says and produces his phone from a leather satchel. “It’s all on here. Everything. The men scoping out the office in the month prior. And the actual abduction of the Governor. Of Sol.”

“Fuck yeah,” we say in unison.

“Leverage,” says Shawn.

“Once their stronghold is gone and we have them in cuffs, we hand over all of the evidence to the police and this whole thing will be over,” Reggie says.

“It’s never going to be over,” Shawn says and opens a locked box containing an array of guns and knives. “I say we destroy them. Fuck turning them into the cops. They probably have half the force paid off anyway.”

“No. We do the right thing, Shawn. Which is turning in the bad guys. Not killing them. If we kill them, we’re no better than them.”

“And how many Org members have you killed so far, Boss?” Shawn says.

“One.”

“One?” Shawn stares at me blankly. “Just one?”

I nod. “That’s correct.”

“I thought you were a vigilante,” he says and rubs the bridge of his nose. “I thought we were following behind a bad ass mother fucker. You’ve taken out one Org member? That’s it?”

“I didn’t come back to life just to kill people. I came back to save people. The Org is an evil group of elites who want nothing more than to take out the population. To repopulate the world with the people they think are superior. To get rid of anyone who is different or who opposes their agenda. If I go around killing folks, I’m only feeding their appetite for death.”

“Who was it, Boss?” Thor asks. He and two others sit on a bench, cleaning their guns. “Who was the lucky mother fucker who died at the hands of Aris King?”

“The guy had it coming,” I answer. “He abducted my wife. Almost killed her. I did what I had to do.”

“Doesn’t matter who the Boss has taken out. What matters is that we’re a united front against The Org. And that we have all the intel we need to break them. And safely turn them over to the people to judge. If we can prove The Org is a real establishment, and that they are corrupt, we will prevail,” Reggie says.

“No one wants to hear that their political officials and leaders, Hell sometimes even the higher ups in their companies, want to kill them. Are poisoning them through medicine and food. Are holding their children down and turning the youth infertile. As soon as this info gets out to the public, there will be an outcry. And things will change. It might get scary for a bit. But we’ll come out the other side as stronger people. A stronger city. And we’ll put the people behind bars who seek to destroy us,” I remind them.

“Let’s neutralize them,” Thor says and loads the clip of his gun.

Aris

“How many times will it come to this,” Declan hisses as he presses a gun to my temple. “One of us with a gun cocked on the other. I didn’t think you were still fucking alive.”

I put my hands in the air and clench my teeth. I’d hardly made it into the Org’s stronghold when Declan popped out of the shadows. I’d just pushed through the tunnel window, as planned, and was headed to meet up with Reggie in the east wing. How did he fucking know I was there? Did he run into me by accident?

“We saw each other last night, didn’t we?”

“I mean before last night, mother fucker,” he growls. “How does it feel to be on the receiving end?”

“You would know. Why are you asking me?”

“Always the fucking smart ass. You haven’t changed, Sol. I mean, besides the name...and the streak in your hair. But how? I saw them put you in the ground. I saw your wife mourn your death.”

I chuckle. “You didn’t attend a viewing, did you?”

“Is the casket empty?”

“Oh, no. Someone’s in there. It’s just not me.”

“That’s some sly shit right there,” Declan says. “Now, turn around and start walking. There are some people I’d like for you to meet before I put a bullet in your head.”

I freeze. Not knowing if I should run or try to take him out and continue the mission. If he takes me to The Org council, it’ll blow the whole plan. My men will get caught and executed. I can’t let that happen.

“I said, move!” He growls and slams the heel of the gun into the back of my head. I see stars for a moment and brace myself against the concrete wall to keep from passing out.

“Fine,” I grunt.

The corridor that leads upstairs is at least long enough to give me time to come up with plan B. If Shawn and Reggie were coming in through the east wing, and Thor and another to the west, perhaps my known presence would be a good thing. Could cause a distraction. I’ll roll with it. I don’t have much of a choice with a gun pressed to my head.

“Who’s with you?” Declan asks as he shoves me down the hallway and to the bottom of a set of spiral stairs. “I know you’re not here alone.”

“I came to kill you, Declan. I work alone.” I step up the first few stairs. He’s moved the gun from my head to my back.

“That’s a fucking lie, Solomon,” he says. “I know about your little operation. What do you call yourselves? The Delinquents? The Degenerates?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say and climb the last two steps. There’s no door at the top of the stairs and Declan nudges me to the left.

“Okay, play coy. That’s just fucking fine,” he mutters.

The stark contrast between the dark, musty basement we just left and the elaborate, elegant office we are entering grabs my attention. There are bookshelves that line the walls, from floor to ceiling, and chandeliers at either end of the room. Ornate, high piled red rugs cover half of the marble floors. And...there’s a desk in the center of the room. With a chair turned away from us. Someone’s sitting in it, facing the window.

“There you are, Solomon,” a woman’s serpentine voice coos. “I knew you’d come sooner or later.”

The chair spins around on its axis and she faces me. The CEO, the leader of The Org...my mother-in-law, Judith H. Beckner.

“It’s not Solomon anymore, Judith,” I hiss. “And you are no longer Judy.”

“I’m not?” She sticks out her bottom lip. “Why do you say that?”

“You’re not the person I thought you were.”

Declan still stands behind me, the gun wrenched into my spine.

“You can go, Governor,” she says. “I can handle him.”

Declan hesitates but lowers the gun and says, “I’ll stand right outside the door, Ma’am. Just call. And I’ll fucking end him.”

“Like you ended him before?” She releases a cold, harsh giggle that sounds straight from Hell. “Please, Declan. We both know you’re a pussy. And you don’t have the balls to kill...or the strength...to kill Solomon.”

“That’s not my name,” I growl. “How could you do this to your family, Judith? To your daughter? To your grandchildren?”

“Do what?” She snaps. Her feet plant on the floor and she rises from her leather tufted throne. “Give them a legacy? Protect them from annihilation? What exactly am I doing to them, Solomon?”

“That’s a fucking joke, Judith,” I chuckle snidely. “Your daughter wasn’t just abducted once, but twice. By your own men. I don’t call that protecting her.”

“She wasn’t abducted. Tacy went willingly, Sol. Didn’t you know your wife, your sweet little Tacy, is a cold-blooded killer? Hasn’t she told you about the men she killed when she was only seventeen? The blood bath she created?”

“I know about the incident, yes. But she’s not cold-blooded. And she most certainly didn’t go willingly into her captor’s basement. Tied to a fucking pole and made to piss in a bucket beneath her.”

“Well...that wasn’t supposed to happen,” Judith says and produces a key from the desk drawer. “You and I both know in this business, things can go awry in a hurry.”

“In this business?” I keep my hands at my sides. But I’m thinking of the blade I have hidden in my boot. “I’m not in any business the likes of yours.”

Judith chortles and dangles the key in front of her. “Do you know what this is, Solomon? This is the key to the city. No, the Mayor doesn’t have it. Neither does the Governor. I have it. I own this city. I own the state. And soon, I’ll own the country.”

“You plan on running for president, Judith? No one would vote in an old bag like you.”

“I don’t have to be in the spotlight to be in charge. It doesn’t work that way. I have others who are my face. Which is how it’s always been in this country. The president doesn’t run things, Solomon. The Org does.”

“So, Dickhead Declan has no real power, for instance?”

“Declan Harvey should have been Governor from the jump,” she hisses. “But you had to be the good guy and get in the fucking way.”

She’s dancing around my questions. The intense heat of anger threatens a dark metamorphosis within me. But I can’t let it overpower me. Too much anger and I’ll totally lose control. And I can’t lose control right now. I must stay as calm as possible and think of a way out of this. Where are my men? Where are The Rebellis?

“Are you going to kill me or what, Judith? Enough of the fucking games.”

“I’m not going to kill you...yet,” she says. “I need you to convince Tacy to join the family business. She is, after all, my successor.”

I let out a howl of laughter that nearly shakes the crystals dangling from the chandeliers. “Oh Judith, you never were a comedian but that was pretty funny.”

She scowls at me, throws the key back in the drawer, and I hear the click of a gun. She holds it at me and says, “I’ll bet you’re getting used to this, aren’t you, Solomon?”

“My life being threatened at every waking second? Sure, I’m used to it,” I reply. “Just still trying to get used to the fact that my mother-in-law is the CEO of the worst thing to ever happen to the city. Or the state. My own fucking mother-in-law. The snake. The woman who wants to kill off those she deems inferior.”

“It’s the inferior who are tearing down our ability to manifest utopia. This world would be a much better place without the likes of them. The lesser races, handicapped idiots, the gays.”

“You’re fucking sick, you know that? Just because people are different than you and your idea of perfection, you want to eradicate them. What makes you think you’re so damn perfect, you old fucking fart?”

She chuckles again and aims at my chest. “Shut up, Solomon. Or I’ll blow you away myself. And then I’ll kill your wife and children.”

“You’d kill your own flesh and blood? The child you gave birth to. Your own grandbabies? I find that hard to believe...”

“I’ll take out anyone who steps in the way of our vision. A new world. A superior race of people with no illness or sexual perversions. People with intelligence. Vitality. And the will to erase anyone who threatens it. That includes family. How do you think my father rose to the top? You have to bulldoze over the lesser, use them as steppingstones, on your way to the top of the fucking pyramid.”

Vomit rises in the back of my throat. The realization that I married into the Org’s founding family hits me. But that doesn’t matter now. I swallow it back down. I love Tacy and my children. They are my entire world, and if I don’t take out The Org, they’ll never know true peace and goodness. No one will.

My phone vibrates and Judith motions for me to answer it. “Go on. Let’s see who it is.”

“Hello?” I act as if I don’t know who’s calling.

“Are you in?” Shawn whispers. “We’re ready for phase two, Boss.”

“Oh no, I’m not looking to extend my car’s warranty,” I say and wait.

“Boss? Oh...oh,” Shawn says. “Where are you?”

“I already purchased the one year,” I say. I’m trying to keep him on the phone long enough for him to track my location.

“Okay, just keep talking Boss, we’re tracking you now.”

“I’ve had a few problems, yeah. Engine seems to backfire,” my way of warning him I have a gun pointed at me.

“Got you. We’re coming,” he says.

“Thanks for the offer,” I say and force a grin at Judith just to throw her off.

“Hang up the fucking phone, Sol,” she growls. “Now!”

Declan bursts into the office and points his gun at me immediately. Now I have two guns to worry about.

“Call the boys,” Judith barks at him. “Scan both wings and meet back here. Whoever you find, bring them to me.”

Declan glares at me with hooded eyes. All that time he spent coveting the position of Governor and now look at him. He has no real power. He’s a lowly henchman.

“Now!” Judith yells. “Fucking idiots!”

It takes all of two minutes, which feel like a lifetime, when ten Org guards burst into Judith’s office. One young man’s holding Shawn at gunpoint. A woman with red hair

has a knife to Thor's throat.

"That's it?" Judith barks at me. "That's all you brought?"

She paces the floor. Shawn and Thor are panting, eyes darting back and forth. At me, then at her, at Decan, at the guards surrounding us.

"Want us to kill them?" The woman asks.

"Not yet," Judith stills.

"What are we waiting for, Ma'am?" The young man asks.

"For the others," Judy remarks.

Fuck. She knows there's more than the three of us. It would be stupid for her to think less. She is the god damn CEO, after all.

"There are others, right, Solomon?" she asks as she walks up to me and stares into my eyes. Judith Beckner is a short woman. No bigger than five foot two. A leviathan in a mouse's body.

"It's just us, Judith." My jaw tenses and I try to keep a poker face. I don't want her reading any movement or facial expression I make. Where are Reggie and Clyde? And the others?

"Here's how this is going to go. I'm going to give you one more chance to tell me where the others are, and if you don't cooperate, you and your men here die. Then I'll kill the others when we find them, because we will, and then your family dies."

I roll my eyes. "You're a lot of talk without much walk, Judith."

Bang. A gun goes off and something sharp and cold rips through the top of my foot.

“FUCK!” I peer down and see a small scarlet geyser seeping through a hole in the top of my boot.

“I’m not fucking around, Sol!”

“Stop!” I shout at her and keel over. But Declan wrenches back my shoulders and jams his gun into my back again. I’m getting fucking sick of this. And now the pain in my foot is crippling.

Then, as all seems lost, the voice of an angel rings out behind me.

“Let him go, Mother,” Tacy demands. Oh my God! Why is she here?

All ten guards turn towards an opening in the wall, where the bookshelf used to be, and point their weapons at my beautiful wife. Even with a black and blue eye, stitched lip, and a limp, she is radiant. Full of life. She is clutching our gun from home, pointing it directly at her own mother.

“Jesus, Tacy, what the fuck are you doing here?” I ask.

“Lower your weapons!” Judith yells at the guards. “Declan keep yours on Sol. The two with the delinquents, stay poised. But everyone else stand the fuck down! This is my daughter!”

Guns, bats, and blades are lowered as Tacy steps further into the room. She’s dragging one of her feet and her breathing is labored. The poor woman needs medical care but hasn’t had much time to seek it.

“Mother, this is insane. Why are you doing this?”

“Drop your gun please, Tacy.”

Tacy obliges but keeps the gun at her right side. She is poised and ready.

“You know why I’m doing this, Tacy. This is our legacy. Your children’s legacy. We must continue your grandfather’s work and build a better world.”

Tacy glances at me. “I don’t give a fuck about grandfather’s twisted ass theories of eugenics. That shit is outdated. It went out of style after the World Wars. It’s crazy, racist, ableist bullshit.”

“Tacy, you know I want what’s best for you and the kids. That’s why when Solomon ran for Governor and started putting his nose into shit he shouldn’t have, I knew we needed to get rid of him. He would never be on our side. He would never understand our family’s work.”

“Because Solomon was a good man. He still is a good man. He cares about people...all people. That’s why he ran for Governor.”

“No, he ran for Governor to feed his own narcissistic ego.”

The guards shift their feet. I hear the click of weapons. Someone yawns.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Who in the back is bored by this little rendezvous?” Judith asks. She strolls to the back of the office, locates the bored guard, a young woman with tattoos and bleach blonde hair, and bam. Puts a bullet in the woman’s head without even thinking twice.

All the color drains out of Tacy’s face. We all figured her mother is a murderer. Now we see it all firsthand.

“Mom! What the fuck?” Tacy screams, as tears fall from her eyes. “How could you? To one of your own people?”

Judith rushes over to Tacy, pockets the gun, and reaches out to hug her. “I’m protecting us, Tacy. Now come to your mother.”

Tacy’s countenance changes drastically. Something dark swims in her eyes and I shake my head no at her.

Don’t do it, Tacy, I mouth at her.

As Judith’s arms meet Tacy’s shoulders, Tacy returns the embrace, then, as if in some sort of death dance, she turns and shoves Judith with such force the old woman flies backwards, breaking the single pane window and falling out. There is a shriek and then a thump.

I meet Tacy’s eyes. She’s breathing heavily and her pupils are dilated.

There’s a shuffle of feet and a cacophony of groans and shouts as the room erupts in violence. Shawn and Thor thrash, punch, and kick, and take out as many guards as they can.

Thor grabs a lamp and slams it down on a woman’s head, knocking her unconscious. He lowers her to the ground but rips the gun from her hand. I pull the blade from my sock and slash at Declan who’s dropped his gun on the floor. He jumps backward, just missing my blow and tumbles onto his back. I attack.

“Please! Wait!” He sticks out a hand and begs. “I’ll just leave. Please don’t kill me. I don’t want to die, Brother.”

I crouch down to his level and sheath my knife. “I’m not going to kill you, Declan.

But we are not brothers. We never were. Now, get on your feet and let's finish this."

Declan rises, gun in hand, but I quickly knock it back out of his hands. We throw fists at one another, landing punch after punch, until we're both dizzy and panting heavily.

"You always wanted to be like me," I growl and knock one of Declan's teeth out. The white nub shoots across the room and disappears. Declan grasps at his bleeding gums, then glares at me in pure fury. I hit him again and he falls to the floor.

"I never wanted to be like you, Solomon. I just wanted what you had," he says and spits blood on the marble floor. He pushes himself back up and we continue our fight.

There are a few guards left, but Thor and Shawn have nearly taken all of them down. Tacy and another young woman are going at it, but Tacy's hardly keeping it together. She's too injured to win this fight. I drop my guard for a minute, and Declan is on top of me with a knife to my throat.

"Now I think I just wanted two things. To fuck your wife and to see you die," Declan hisses through clenched teeth. He pushes the blade into my flesh and a shot rings out.

I look at Tacy. She's holding the gun in her hand. Blood pours from the side of Declan's face, and I push him off me. He rolls to the side, gurgling and choking on a bullet. I stand over top of him, press my foot to his chest and press my weight ever-so-slightly into him.

"Now you'll never accomplish either of your goals, will you?" I stomp as hard as I can, crushing Declan under my boot. His ribs crack and a fountain of red gushes from his mouth and nostrils. His eyes roll back in his head. "And...it's Lazaris. Not Solomon, you piece of shit."

The remaining guard, the only one still conscious, bolts out of the door, leaving my

men, Tacy, and I in the wake of the battle.

Tacy's eyes are wide, and she is trembling intensely as she makes her way to the gaping, broken window. A light rain is coming down outside, as Tacy climbs into the nook and peers down.

"Be careful," I say and join her. The rain pours harder as I lean over her shoulder. Judy's broken body lies on the ground, three stories down, with her legs and arms splayed out. She's lying in a puddle of crimson.

"She's dead," Tacy says with a shaky breath. "We're finally safe."

"Well, not exactly," Shawn says as he reaches into a guard's pocket for a gun. "The Org runs with or without a leader. The guards are sure to warn the rest. We need to do something. Now."

"We burn this place to the ground. Their records are here. Their research lab is in the east wing. With this place in ashes, they'll lose half their intel."

"Let's do it," I agree.

The four of us turn to run out the office, when sirens just outside the building draw our attention back to the window.

"What's going on?" Thor asks, runs over, and looks outside.

"We have the building surrounded," a voice booms through a megaphone. Rotating red and blue lights flood the office.

"The cops," Shawn says. Well, obviously.

“Come out with your hands up. No weapons. You have three minutes,” a cop shouts through a megaphone.

I count the cop cars. There are eight in total. And two SWAT vans.

“They’re going to think we’re part of The Org. Part of the fucking problem,” Thor observes. “We have to get out of here.”

“I mean, maybe we deserve to go to jail,” Tacy says with a shaky voice. “There’s a dead woman on the sidewalk below.”

I gently squeeze her shoulder. “Steady, Babydoll. Remember why you did what you did. It wasn’t out of malice. It was out of defense. To save us. It was noble.”

“The three of us have to turn ourselves in,” I say to Shawn and Thor.

No one disagrees with me, and we make our way out the office door, down a corridor and descend the spiral staircase. This place is opulent with enormous paintings of men in suits and women in dresses plastered all over the walls. And the initial B carved in stone on each pillar.

“Set down your guns,” I say. “And knives.”

I look at my wife, who’s still clutching the gun. “You too, Tace.”

“Oh. Right,” she says and drops the weapon with a clang.

We push our way through the heavy glass doors and enter the night. The police’s lights are blinding at first, and I blink rapidly until my eyes have adjusted.

There’s lots of yelling and the police making demands. I open my mouth, but the

words don't come out. I'm frozen.

And then a familiar voice rises above the din.

"They're with me! Stop! Don't shoot!" It's Reggie.

"They're not the ones you want," Clyde backs him up.

I look to my left and Reggie's standing next to a Deputy. "That's Lazaris...or...Solomon, as you all might remember him. His wife, Tacy Rountree, and our men Shawn and Thor."

"Drop your weapons!" A sheriff shouts and the group of officers obey.

I let out a long exhale and someone ushers me to the back of an ambulance. Tacy goes in a different direction. A paramedic throws a blanket around my shoulders, but I make a mad dash towards my wife, and it falls off me immediately.

"Tacy!" I sidle up beside her, just as a paramedic eases her onto a stretcher.

"Hi," she says and touches my face. "We did it. Didn't we?"

She is so beaten and tired, and yet strangely feral and otherworldly. Like a fairy queen who's just defeated her mortal enemy.

I nod and kiss her hand. "Yes, we did."

"But The Org's stronghold...it's still there," she points out.

"I know, but don't worry about that, Babydoll. We'll take care of it," I assure her.

"Just go to the hospital and focus on healing. Okay? Your face is swollen. I'm

worried about your cheekbone.”

As they load her in the back of the ambulance, a blast rings out and shakes me to my core. I turn to look at the building. A cloud of black smoke billows out the top floor’s windows as brilliant red flames lick the roof. Someone lit it on fire.

“Looks like someone took care of it,” Tacy says and the ambulance doors close.

There’s an air of fear and more sirens join the thrall as fire engines pull up. Men in navy blue and yellow jumpsuits rush to put out the flames.

But the explosion and the fire that broke out wasn’t easy to control. It was almost as if someone had set a chemical lab on fire. In the end...the stronghold was burnt to ashes and the CEO and Governor dead. The rest of The Org members who were in the building bolted but were immediately arrested. Reggie had given all our evidence to the FBI.

The Org’s revolting plans of population control were exposed to the public and things began feeling somewhat normal. Duselizab was pulled from the market and banned. There was a purging of the government in our region and state – anyone who had any dealings with the CEO or shareholders of The Org, or Declan Harvey, was fired. Some even went to jail.

I moved back home with my children and wife. Sure, my story was blasted all over national news. The man who came back from the dead. Lazaris King, vigilante. Rebel. Redeemer. And I felt my mission was complete...and the city and our state had found peace. At least...most of us had. Just not Tacy.

Tacy

“I don’t know how to live with myself,” I admit to Aris. “I can’t forgive myself for everything I’ve done.”

“Tacy, you’re not a bad person. You must know that by now,” I remind her. “Remember the research you did and how you tried to stop them from giving that toxic medication? How you lost your job to save your children and yourself? And others? Those are not things a bad person does.”

I shake my head as tears stream down my face. “I’ve made up my mind, Aris. I’m turning myself in.”

“For what?”

“For the murder of those men in Washington. For the murder of...of...my mother.”

Aris grabs my shoulders and spins me towards him. He looks down at me with so much love in his eyes. Love I don’t deserve.

“I understand your guilt. And your pain, Tacy,” he says. “What can I do to help you move on from this? Help you heal? Is there anything?”

“I think the best thing for me to do is go to jail. I deserve to be punished for what I’ve done,” I say and pull away from him. Then bury my face in my hands and cry freely.

“If that’s the case, then I should be in jail with you,” Aris says and sits beside me on

the floor. Our backs pressed against the wall. “I can’t let you go to jail for your transgressions but not pay for my own. You forget...I’ve killed men too.”

I wipe my eyes. “That’s not going to work. We can’t both be incarcerated. Our children need us.”

“Well, it’s both of us or neither,” Aris says sternly. “I won’t let you take the fall without your partner in crime.”

“Fuck, Aris,” I shake my head. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I love you too much, Tacy. Too much to see you beat yourself up anymore. And I refuse to let you take the fall for the sins of your family. If those men were your mother’s employees, it’s a guarantee they were bad men. If she hadn’t sent her men after you and Starkey, you never would’ve killed anyone, Tace.”

I breathe deeply. The feeling of something heavy being lifted off my chest overwhelms me, freeing my mind of the vice grip of shame. A shame so strong it had wrapped its tentacles around me and was slowly squeezing the life out of me.

“And if it wasn’t for me, you never would’ve killed anyone,” I remind him.

“Starkey had it coming. His number was up. It was only a matter of time,” Aris says and pulls me to his chest. I breathe in his scent – cedar and citrus. “Who knows. Maybe he even worked for your mother. He did end up working for The Org, didn’t he?”

“Good point,” I say and sniffle. “So, you’re saying...I don’t deserve to be imprisoned?”

Aris pulls back and stares down at me. A mischievous grin on his face. “I mean...unless you really want to. I can make that happen.”

“And I shouldn’t be punished?”

Aris stands, closes our bedroom door, and turns the music on. “Do you think you need to be punished? Last chance out of this, Tacy. Because I won’t go easy on you.”

“I’ve been really bad. And I deserve to be punished,” I say and open the closet to reveal a small kennel. With a lock. “Put me in jail.”

Aris nods, pulls our cuffs from the drawer, and dons a cheesy police officer mask. It looks like something made in the eighties. He strips his shirt then his pants off. I lift my wrists out to him.

“Remember, we have a safe word. Now, take those fucking clothes off,” he commands. I obey and slip out of my dress, leaving nothing on except my lacy socks and thong.

“Nope, the panties, too,” he says and instantly cuffs me when my thong falls to the floor. “Now...get in.” He says as he grabs my arms and lowers me to the floor.

I crawl on my hands and knees into the metal cage. And tremble knowing what game we’re about to play. It’s one I’ve never played before, and I never thought I’d want to play because of the trauma I’ve suffered at the hands of men like Starkey and Harvey. Yet, somehow, I feel the healing process can only begin when I’ve given myself over entirely to Aris. When he restores my trust in our species. And I know, somehow by playing the imprisoned, that I can work through my fears and my wounds. It’s hard to explain, but the way Aris and I take out our pain on each other is rejuvenating. Cathartic, even.

Aris clicks the lock in place. Then stares down at me through the holes in the kennel. “I think you need to prove yourself to me. Your loyalty. In return for your release.”

“How?” I ask and start feeling a bit claustrophobic. But I keep my mind on Aris and

the throbbing that's starting to grow more intense between my legs. "How can I prove myself to you, Daddy?"

"Bring your mouth up here," he says and lowers himself into a kneeling position. Then, carefully, he eases his rock-hard cock through one of the holes in the kennel. "Now wrap those pretty lips around me."

My face flushes and I obey. The warmth of his cock in my mouth and the taste of precum on my tongue has me yearning to be fucked.

"Use your tongue more, Babydoll," he groans. "Yeah, just like that."

He thrusts his cock harder and harder into my mouth, the head of it hitting the back of my throat. I wince but don't gag, because I don't really have a reflex. Never have. The salty taste of him makes me so wet. I want his cock inside of me. I'm yearning for him.

Then, suddenly, he withdraws and says, "that's enough for now, Babydoll."

"Okay, so let me out of here and fuck me," I bat my eyelashes at him. "Please?"

He stands up and peers down at me. "Absolutely not. You've been bad. You've done bad things. And you deserve to be punished. You'll stay in there until I say so. Now, turn around on your hands and knees and show Daddy what you've got."

I spin around in the tiny cage, fully aware of my wetness, and bare my pussy to him.

"Bend over," he says and begins to stroke his cock. "More."

"It's kind of hard to do that, Aris, since my hands are cuffed," I grumble.

"I said, bend over," he grunts. "Or you're never getting out of that cage."

I obey and lean forward, bearing more of myself to him. My wrists and hands are sore from bearing my weight. And I'm quickly regretting this decision. Maybe I don't want to be imprisoned. I start breathing hard. Panting, almost. Rethinking my request for him to hold me hostage.

"Aris, I think I want out of here," I say, whining. "Please."

"We're not done, Babydoll," he says. "You haven't spent nearly enough time in there to atone for your sins."

The walls feel like they're closing in on me. I'm lightheaded and my mouth is dry.

Aris kneels beside the cage and sticks his fingers through the holes. "Breathe, Angel. Just breathe. I'm right here, and even though I'm dealing out your punishment, just know that I'll never hurt you. Not without your permission, at least."

I take three deep breaths in and then out. I'm okay. I need this. Then I press my ass against the metal. "Here I am."

He licks his lips as he slides his fingers down the slit between my legs. Then up again, circling two fingers around my clit. He leans over and his warm tongue hits me. His mouth closes around my clit and sucks me lightly. Then harder and harder, until my body is engulfed in warm chills and my pussy is aching with need.

"Come on, Daddy, haven't I atoned? I've been a good girl, please let me out," I beg.

Aris ignores my begging and continues flicking my clit with his tongue, dragging it up and down. Up and down. Until I'm writhing with pleasure.

"I'm going to cum, Daddy," I breathe out. But before I can...

Aris pulls away, leaving me here. Slick and angry. "What? Why did you do that to

me?”

“You think I’m going to let you cum that fast? No, Babydoll. Not tonight. Tonight, you don’t cum until I say.”

I’m tired of waiting and yearning for his touch. And I watch helplessly as Lazaris, this great hero of a man, debases himself in front of me by stroking his length, up and down, then in circular motions. I whine and moan like a cat in heat. I press my ass against the cage, hoping to torment him enough that he’ll give in.

And finally, he grunts and kneels, commands me to press my pussy against the hole and slams into me. A wave of goosebumps covers me from head to toe, and I feel him inside so deep it almost hurts. But it’s the kind of pain that summons a need for more.

The cage rattles, and we moan and grind together, me rubbing my clit against the metal while Aris slams against it and me. There’s sweating, and cursing, and I can take no more.

“Daddy, can I cum now?”

“Yes, Princess. Cum all over my cock,” Aris growls.

In one tandem moment, we erupt in a gush of orgasms unlike we’ve ever had together. I’m shaking, and sopping wet, and I try to collapse in the cage but it’s too tiny in here.

I turn and look at him. He’s sitting on the floor beside me.

“Want to get out of there?”

I nod and give him big doe eyes. “Please?”

Aris stands, locates the key, then unlocks the cage door, freeing me. I crawl out and kiss him from his feet to his mouth. He's liberated me in more than one way. We've liberated each other. Healed each other. And we will until the bitter end. But in my heart, I know that even death can't keep us apart.