



Ruthless Raiders

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, New Adult, Dark

Description: "Touch her again," the man growls, "and I'll rip your f#cking throat out."

I was supposed to die that night—not get kidnapped.

But the man dragging me off the porch didn't plan on Landon.

Didn't know he's been watching me for years.

Didn't expect him to tear through the dark like a demon.

Now I know the truth—

Landon's not a stranger.

He's the reason I'm alive.

My stalker. My nightmare. My only safety.

And now he's dragged me back to Haven University.

Back to the man I should run from—but can't.

Professor Conner Kilgore is a forensic legend with a voice that strips me bare.

He sees through everything—my lies, my defiance, my fear.

And when he tells me to prove myself, I whisper yes, sir.

Because when he says my name... I forget how to breathe.

Then there's Brooke.

The redhead with a devil's smile, a crop top that reads power bottom,

and the most dangerous hands I've ever wanted on me.

She laughed before I spoke. Looked at me like I was already hers.

And maybe...I was.

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PROLOGUE

Landon

They buried my sister in Potter's Field—the graveyard of the forgotten, where the world sends its nameless dead, as if no one ever loved them. My sister, the brightest light in my life since I was four, died alone on the side of a road two counties away. They laid her to rest as a Jane Doe, like she'd never mattered to anyone.

I stand at the edge of Potter's Field, rancid air thick with flies, smoking a joint as if I might somehow spot her in the emptiness.

The land stretches out, wide and unkind—dirt packed hard, grass sparse and brittle. Wooden stakes lean crooked under the sun, nameless markers rotting into the ground. No headstones. No flowers. Just row after row of the disappeared.

I scan each hollow dip in the soil like it might open up and give her back to me. But they all look the same. Hollow. Abandoned. Loveless.

“Been out here for hours, man,” Isaiah murmurs behind me. “We don't know when, or where they buried her.”

I turn around and narrow my eyes on Isaiah. His moss green hair covers his eyes as he stares off into the distance, not making eye contact with me.

He sighs, his shoulders concaving into his chest a bit. “It happens to the best of us.”

I suck in a sharp breath and lock my gaze on the silver piercings lining the curve of his ear like stars in a constellation. “I want out, Zay.”

“There is no out, Lan.” He doesn’t even look at me—just shifts his weight and shoves his fists deeper into his hoodie pockets like he’s digging himself into the ground.

Isaiah Cross. Best friends with Xavier—the next in line to head the Raiders—and his half-brother on their mother’s side. Isaiah was born into this shit the moment his father croaked and he turned up at the Raiders’ house at thirteen looking for his mother, who claimed Isaiah was a stillbirth. That whole scene was a shitshow. Let’s just say Mom’s no longer around, and Isaiah’s got the scars to prove he wasn’t exactly welcomed home. But none of that matters to the current head, Marcus, who is full blooded brothers with Xavier and would have killed Isaiah years ago if it wasn’t for Xavier constantly putting his neck on the line for him.

Regardless, all that means is if he says there’s no out, then there’s no out. Period.

But I snort anyway, more venom than humor in the sound.

“Bullshit,” I say, voice sharp as I pass him the joint and exhale a long stream of smoke into the bleeding orange sky. The Raiders are the largest motorcycle gang in the South, with their Texas chapter reigning as the nerve center of the entire operation. They’re not just muscle—they’re enforcers, executioners, and street-level kings with deep ties to the Italian Mafia.

If the Mafia is the brain, the Raiders are the fist. And when that fist swings, it breaks bones. Crossing them means crossing Italy—and no one’s reckless enough to do that.

No one, except the Cartel.

Zay smiles, just barely—his lips quirk crooked and cold. He flicks the ash, eyes

unreadable, and lifts the blunt to his mouth. “If you want out,” he murmurs, slow and deliberate, “I’ll give you out.”

“I thought you said there was no out.”

“There’s not.” He nods, lips curling around the words. “The out is death, Landon.” He holds the joint between his fingers like a loaded gun and points with his chin. “I’ll bury you right over there. Shallow grave. Save us both the trouble later.”

I snatch the blunt back, drag hard—burning it straight to the filter like it might burn this feeling out of me. My lungs rebel, cough ripping up my throat, but I ride it out. “I can’t follow Marcus after this,” I say, voice ragged. “This is his fault.”

Zay’s eyes narrow. “You knew what kind of man Marcus was when you swore in.”

“I joined for my sister.”

“And Kelly knew who Marcus was.” His voice doesn’t even waver. Just flat and brutal, like a blade pressed against my ribs. “We all knew. You don’t get to play the victim now.”

I want to hit him. Just once. Just enough to crack that fucking jaw he keeps clenching like the truth doesn’t even taste bitter to him.

“You chose to be a brother,” he says. “You think I can just let you walk?”

“I’m not asking.” I say, my voice more even than I expected it to be, because the minute I found out my sister was missing, and then dead, I have been spiraling. I feel like I can’t fucking breathe and the thought of pledging loyalty to the man who had my sister hooked on fucking meth for the past four years and then excommunicated from the only place she knew in this entire country is fucking mad and I won’t do it.

Zay's quiet. Then he lets out a low laugh and pulls a pack of gum from his pocket, sliding a piece between his teeth. "They didn't teach you loyalty across the pond?" he mocks. "Figures. You Brits fold like wet paper the second it gets personal."

I stare him down, blood thudding behind my eyes. He doesn't get it. None of them do. I didn't just lose my sister. I lost the one person who made this life feel bearable. The one who kept me tethered when everything else was chaos. Without her, it's like the world lost its sound, its color, its shape. Like I'm walking through smoke and glass, and every breath cuts going down.

I can't do this anymore. I can't sit at Marcus's table, call him brother, pretend I don't see her blood on his hands. If I stay a Raider, I'm going to kill him—maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually. And I won't regret it.

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But if I try and fail? He'll make me wish I was dead. Marcus King doesn't just bury traitors—he makes them suffer, that's what the Kings do, perpetuate suffering. And with every club in Texas under his thumb, there'd be nowhere to run.

And while I am from the United Kingdom. I can't go back to Bristol. My father would string me up by the throat the minute he heard I was back on British land.

So yeah—maybe the only future I've got is far from here. A shitty little farm in the middle of Montana. A place with silence and sky and no fucking ghosts. Somewhere Kelly would've wanted to grow old. Somewhere I can try to remember what peace feels like.

I swallow roughly. “Is this why Marcus made you come out here with me?”

Isaiah isn't an enemy but he sure as hell isn't my friend, and he nods turning to look at me with his black eyes. “I always said you were too smart to be a grunt, Lan.”

I snort, a nod looking over his body, knowing that Isaiah's favorite pistol is somewhere on him. “So what's the plan Zay?”

He takes a step forward, his eyes glittering with his signature feral need. “Well,” he says, voice smooth, almost playful, “I take you back to the house, and we tell Marcus you want to leave.”

I blink. “That easy?”

He chuckles—low, humorless. “Of course not. You gotta make it past the beating.”

“The what?—”

His fist slams into the side of my jaw before I even register him moving. White-hot pain explodes through my head. The world tilts sideways.

I stagger back, tasting blood. “Are you serious?—”

Another hit. This one drops me. My knees slam the dirt, the field spinning around me.

“You don’t just quit the Raiders,” Isaiah mutters, standing over me now. His voice sounds far away, distorted. “You get beat out. Or buried out.”

I try to push up, spit thick with iron. “You’re out of your goddamn?—”

Blackness cracks through my vision as his boot connects with my ribs.

“Welcome to the exit interview, brother.”

Then nothing.

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JASMINE

Six Months Later

“Ma’am, it’s 9:58 p.m. We close in two minutes, and no—we are not selling breakfast,” I deadpan, barely glancing up as I punch the register with just enough force to keep myself awake. Two more minutes and I’m free. Free from the fluorescent lights, the smell of burnt fryer oil, and the fake smiles carved into my cheeks like permanent scars.

“But your website says All Day Breakfast, and I—” she starts, all high-pitched indignation and entitled breathlessness.

I watch the clock tick to 9:59 like it’s crawling through molasses. I lean back against the grease-stained wall and let my head thunk against it. Hard. Today was hell. This week was worse. And the last two goddamn years? A spiral straight into oblivion since Willow disappeared. I might as well just call it, the greatness of high school is long gone and adulthood has been a never ending shit show of disappointment.

I had an early acceptance to MIT, got waitlisted at Princeton, and Yale let me in with a whopping \$800 scholarship—just enough to cover textbooks, maybe. NYU flat-out rejected me. And when the rest of the scholarship letters came pouring in, they all said the same thing: You are brilliant. Your story is sad, but no. Or worse—rejections from every loan company I could find. And the few that didn’t say no outright came back with a hollow maybe: With a cosigner, perhaps. I was up at 3 a.m. most nights, digging through sketchy loan sites and refreshing my inbox like it owed me money.

Eventually, the rejections stopped surprising me. They just started stacking—like proof I was never meant to get out. So I gave up on college. I gave up on the dream I’d built my whole life around. And I fell, fast, into the life I always feared: working dead-end shifts, watching the clock more than my future, stuck in the same town that never stops sucking the life out of me.

“Well, the service here is ridiculous!” The woman shrieks over the intercom and I jump up off the wall, realizing that I thankfully spaced out for most of her rant.

My eyes snap up to the clock, and I exhale like I’ve been holding my breath all day. “Ma’am, it is officially 10:02. We are now closed. Have a good night!” I chirp, already halfway checked out.

“I want to speak to your manager!” she shrieks, her voice so shrill and aggressive it

rattles through my headset like feedback. I wince, rip the earpiece out of my ear, and toss the mic on the windowsill like it's burning me. Rolling my eyes, I slide across the tile floor to where Derek is leaning against the back counter, sorting receipts.

“Yo, D-man. We got a screamer at the drive-thru,” I whistle, tugging off the polyester hat that's been itching my scalp for the past seven hours straight. I run my fingers through my hair—shoulder-length blonde waves with streaks of red dye that've faded to a soft, stubborn pink. The left side of my head is shaved down to a buzz, cool against my fingertips, a contrast to the mess of waves that tumble down the right.

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Derek glances up, unbothered. He's only three years older than me, give or take, and lives five trailers down from mine in Mason Park. He's got the build of a guy who could have played linebacker or maybe enlisted—buzzcut, square jaw, and that too-tight shirt that hints at military discipline. But he's never seen combat unless you count the two years he spent in juvie for a fight that turned bad.

People see the tattoos, the scowl, the low growl of his voice and assume he's a walking warning sign. But Derek? He's the biggest softie I know. Gruff, yeah—but solid. Loyal. And in a town that's built to swallow people like us whole, he's the only person other than Willow who really gets me.

“Jaz, I am not cleaning up your mess again!” He grumps, tapping the edges of the receipt against the counter.

I shrug, swiping a paper bag off of the counter. “Chill, I told her we're closed. That's not a mess—it's closure.”

Right then, the sharp bang-bang-bang of the drive-thru window echoes through the restaurant, followed by a furious shriek: “I will not be ignored!”

I shoot Derek a look and smirk. “Okay, maybe she's not quite ready for closure.”

He groans, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Jasmine...”

“What?” I grin, grabbing a fry from the warmer. “You know she'll leave eventually. Or combust. Either way, not our problem. We are closed.”

“You are the bane of my existence,” he huffs, dragging his large frame over to the window lazily as if his size would scare the woman off before he would have to deal with her.

“You love me!” I sing, grabbing a paper bag and stuffing it with two cheeseburgers and a shit ton of fries.

“No stealing!” he barks without turning around.

“This isn’t stealing. All this goes in the trash anyway. I’m just helping the environment. Think of me as the human garbage disposal.” I shrug, hopping over the counter and heading for the front doors.

“Also, you got clean-up, right?”

“Jasmine—”

“Thanks, bye!” I sing over my shoulder, slipping out the front door.

The thick, humid air slams into my chest the second I step outside. I almost shrink into the doorframe, debating whether it’s even worth walking through air that feels like soup.

I dig into my pocket, pulling out my cracked phone and the now slightly-squashed bag of stolen food. I balance both awkwardly as I make my way through the parking lot, the streetlamps buzzing overhead like drunk flies. I tap Willow’s name before I can talk myself out of it—like muscle memory.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Then that too-familiar ring and the sound that always hits too hard: Willow's voice, bright and sing-song:

"Hey, you've reached Willow! Can't chat now, but will chat later! Leave a message."

I freeze for a second, thumb hovering over the screen. I shouldn't. But my mouth opens anyway.

"Hey, Will," I say, my voice too small at first. I clear my throat, walking slower now. "So today sucked. Shocker, right?"

I step off the curb and start hopping over the railroad tracks, the pavement radiating heat even at night.

"I had some lady try to fight me over pancakes at ten o'clock at night. Screamed like I insulted her entire bloodline. Like lady, make the pancakes at home. Ours suck anyway!" I laugh, but it's thin. Hollow. My chest tightens as I make it to the sidewalk, the buzzing of insects filling in the silence.

"I keep thinking you'll answer one of these days," I say softly. "You'll pick up and ask if I made it home safe. You'll call me an idiot for walking alone again. You'll roll your eyes, and I'll pretend not to care that you worry about me."

The voicemail timer is ticking. I know it's almost up. I can feel the words pressing behind my teeth.

"I don't care if you're mad, or if you left for some reason I'm too stupid to get... I just?—."

Click.

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The line cuts out, and I'm left staring at my screen in the middle of the empty street, feeling the silence settle like ash in my throat. "I miss you, Will."

The walk home isn't long, just a few cracked sidewalks and flickering porch lights away. Mason Park sits tucked at the edge of town like a secret no one wants to claim. My trailer's wedged between two others, one with a pit bull that won't shut up and the other with wind chimes that sound like haunted silverware. The porch light's busted—again.

I juggle the bag of food as I reach for the door handle, but it doesn't budge. Locked.

"Seriously?" I mutter, pressing my forehead to the metal. I don't remember locking it. Hell, I don't even remember if we have ever had a working lock to our trailer. I take a step back and scream, "Mom! Mom!"

After a few moments, I step back, hands raised in frustration, an exasperated scream caught in my throat. Can this day get any fucking worse? If I walk into that trailer and find my mom on the floor again—OD'ing on whatever her new loser boyfriend handed her—I swear to God, I'll rip my own damn hair out from the roots.

I circle around the side, where the screen window to my room sticks just enough to piss me off but not enough to stop me. I wiggle my fingers through the crack, pop the latch, and hoist myself up. My foot slips once—graceful as ever—but I manage to haul myself inside and land on my mattress with a heavy thump.

The room smells like old incense and cherry lip balm. I left the fan running, but it's just blowing the heat around like a lazy hand. The low sound of grunting rises from

the next room and I gag at the mewling sounds of what I hope and pray is not my mother.

I spin around hoping I can slip on my massive over the head headphones when I notice my room looks empty, and not my mom-stole-a-few-shirts-again kind of empty. No, this is you're-moving-the-fuck-out empty.

My heart kicks up.

The bookshelves are bare, save for one knocked-over candle I thought I lost months ago. My Polaroids? Gone. The dreamcatcher that's hung above my window since I was thirteen? Ripped down. My desk drawers—wide open, hollow like they'd been looted. Even the little ceramic frog Willow made me in sixth grade is missing, and that thing has survived every shit storm in this house.

I turn in a slow circle, throat tightening, a rising pulse of disbelief hammering in my chest.

Then I see them.

Three black garbage bags slumped in the corner like body bags, sealed tight, full of my life shoved in without care. Like someone was cleaning up after a party that I didn't even know was over.

And just like that, the numbness burns off.

“Fuck no.” The words rip out of me raw.

I yank one open, hands shaking. My hoodie's inside—my hoodie, the one with the burn mark on the sleeve. My sketchbook, bent in half. My socks, my jeans, my makeup bag. All just... stuffed in like trash.

“What the fuck!” I yell, voice ripping through the stale air.

I rip open the second bag—more of the same. My old photo albums, crumpled notebooks, the mug I stole from Waffle House two years ago. The life I’ve been barely holding together, tied up in plastic like it didn’t mean shit.

My heart’s pounding so hard it hurts. My mouth tastes like smoke and betrayal.

I storm toward the hallway, every step heavier than the last. The closer I get, the louder the noises from her room—low, sloppy moaning, a bed creaking in rhythm.

I don’t knock.

I slam the door open and there she is—my mother, straddling Nick, tangled in bedsheets, hair a mess, eyes wide like I’m the one who ruined the moment.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” I shout, barely able to see straight as I shake the trash bags in my hands. “You packed my life into garbage bags before you were screwing this greasy discount jackass who will probably rob you next month for a pack of cigarettes?!”

She scrambles for the blanket. “Jasmine, how the fuck did you get in here. I changed the locks.”

People used to say I was the spitting image of my mother. Same gray eyes, same long wavy blonde hair, same sharp little smirk like we were both in on some private joke.

But now?

Now her hair hangs in limp, tangled waves. Her skin’s gone papery, pulled too tight over her bones, and scabs litter her arms and legs. She clutches the blanket to her

chest and flares her nostrils at me.

“I was going to let you know earlier but you came back late from work, but Bud wants to move in, so you have to move out.” My mom slurs, her words sticky in her mouth, like she can barely get them past her cracked lips.

I feel my lip curl in disgust as the trash bags drop to my side. "Bud? You're throwing me out for Bud?"

My mom's eyes dart to the man behind her like she needs backup. He just sits there, sprawled in the stained naked mattress like a king on a trash heap, scratching his chest with one hand, the other is bent behind his head. He watches me like this is entertainment, like my life getting torn apart is the best thing he's seen all week.

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“Bud wants to move in, and he has a son,” she repeats, rolling her eyes as if I was too slow to understand her the first time she said it. “So you have to move out.”

My chest caves and burns at the same time, like my heart just cracked in two. "Move out?" I choke on the words. “I pay the bills! The electricity, the water, the Wi-Fi, the fucking rent! I keep this shithole running while you pump what little money we have straight into your bloodstream! How the hell are you going to be able to afford to live without me.”

She flinches, then sneers, clutching the blanket tighter as if it could shield her from the truth. “Bud works, and he said he could cover it.”

“Oh that’s great,” I laugh humorlessly. “Your drug dealing boyfriend can pay the rent! Fucking fantastic decision making skills, Patricia! What about me?”

Mom rolls her eyes, and sighs pinching her nose between her thumb and ring finger. “What about you, Jasmine?”

Tears sting the back of my eyes, and my throat tightens painfully. “I am your fucking daughter!”

Bud chuckles, low and raspy. "Feisty little thing, ain't she?"

My glare shoots to him like a blade. “Shut the fuck up before you catch something worse than a felony.”

His smirk only widens, but before I can say another word, Patricia slams her palm

against the side table, rattling the empty pill bottles.

“Don’t you talk to him like that!” she shouts, nostrils flaring. “You are eighteen, and I don’t want you here anymore.”

“Mom-” I croak but she cuts me off.

““I’m not gonna let you take another man from me, Jasmine. I won’t.”

I freeze. For a second, I swear the whole room goes quiet except for the sickening thud of my heart in my chest. “What?”

Her eyes glisten, wild and desperate. “You always do this! Always!” she screams, pushing up to her feet, the blanket falling away, revealing bruises blooming over her legs like rotten fruit. “Every time I find someone good, you ruin it. You poison it!”

“Good? He’s a fucking dealer, Mom! He’s an abusive shit!” I shout back, my chest heaving, my vision swimming in red.

“You’re just jealous!” she screeches, her voice cracking under the weight of her rage and whatever high she’s barely clinging to. “You are such a selfish child. I am happy Jasmine. Do you not want your mother to be happy? I mean fuck! You have taken everything from me, at least give me this!”

That does it.

I lunge for the garbage bags, yanking them open, pulling my clothes out and throwing them across the room, my heart in my throat, my fury boiling over.

“You think this is better?!” I scream, tossing my ruined journal at her feet. “You think this is a life? Waking up on some loser’s lap, your veins full of poison, your

brain turned to mush?! You're fucking pathetic!"

Her face twists into an ugly snarl. Before I can brace myself, she lunges at me, nails catching my cheek, scraping deep. The sting blooms hot across my skin.

Reflex takes over—I shove her back, harder than I meant to, and she stumbles, crashing into the armchair. Bud scrambles to catch her, spilling the ashtray from the folded table next to the bed.

"Get the hell out!" she screeches, her voice ragged and raw. "Get out of my house!"

I stand there, chest heaving, fists clenched so tight my nails bite into my palms.

"Gladly," I rasp, my throat tight as hell, but my pride harder. I grab the nearest bag of my things, slinging it over my shoulder. My eyes burn, but I refuse to let them see me cry.

She slumps into Bud's lap like it's some twisted throne, glaring at me like I'm the villain in this story. Maybe I am. Nothing in my life feels like a happily ever after. I feel like I am only fit to destroy, might as well lean into it.

"Hope he keeps you warm at night," I snap, my voice like ice. "Because he'll never pay the fucking bills."

And with that, I turn, stomping through the hallway and out the front door, slamming the door behind me so hard the frame shudders.

I haul the garbage bag higher on my shoulder, its plastic digging into my skin, my cheek still burning from where her nails carved a warning into me. My chest is tight, throat raw from holding back the scream crawling up my windpipe. I swallow it down, bitter and jagged as glass.

My legs move on autopilot, carrying me out of Mason Park without even thinking. Past the pit bull barking its head off. Past the porch with the haunted silverware wind chimes clattering in the muggy breeze. I don't know where I'm going until my feet know for me.

Hot tears spill over my lashes, blurring my vision as I walk. My mind rushing with the spiral hate talk of how far I have fallen in life.

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I used to have dreams.

Big ones. Stupid ones. Ones that used to keep me up at night in the best way. I wanted to be an author—wanted to write stories that made people feel less alone. Words that wrapped around someone's ribs and held them tight like they mattered.

Now I'm eighteen with a garbage bag full of my life, walking the streets like a ghost, like every dream I ever had is just another thing my mother stuffed in a bag and threw to the curb.

My shoulders shake as a sob rips out of me, raw and ugly. I wipe at my face, but the tears keep coming, spilling down my cheeks in hot streaks.

God, what am I supposed to do now?

I drag myself up the walkway, my breath hitching as I reach Willow's front door. My knuckles curl tight, and before I even think about it I am knocking on the door shakily.

"Tommy!" I choke out, my voice splintering as the harsh scratch of unshed tears building in the back of my throat. "It's me Jasmine."

I wait a minute before knocking again, my knuckles burning at how hard my fist is pounding into the door. "Tommy, open the door! Please!"

No one answers, but I don't stop. I slam my fists against the wood until my skin stings, until my bones rattle from the impact. Tears blur my vision, drip hot off my

chin, but I don't care. I can't care. I need somewhere to be. Tommy once told me I could call him Dad. Once told me I was like a daughter to him, and now when I need him, he's not here.

"Tommy! Dad, please!" I cry again, hitting the door harder. "I don't have anywhere else to go!"

The silence is deafening, and the ball of dread in my chest grows like a budding hurricane, but I refuse to stop. I keep banging until the entire door frame shakes, until my shoulders ache, until the wild, desperate sob crawling out of my throat sounds more like an animal than a girl.

The porch light above me flickers, casting me in flashes of sickly yellow, and it feels like the whole universe is mocking me. I squeeze my eyes shut, slamming my fists against the door again and again, each hit dulling the pain in my chest for a second, but not enough.

"Please!" My voice breaks. Tears flood my cheeks as I drag in shallow, shaky breaths.

This was my last shot. My final hope.

This house, this man, this family that once felt like my second home.

I press my forehead to the door, my chest heaving, the tears falling freely now. "Please," I whisper, hoarse and broken. "Don't leave me too."

I slide down to my knees on the porch, tears streaking my cheeks, my chest hollow and aching like there's a hole carved clean through me.

"Willow?" a voice smooth with an accent that curls off his tongue like smoke. Italian,

unmistakably, startles me, and I turn around to see a man.

He's in a pressed black jacket, dark slacks, like he doesn't belong on this side of town, and I know if you hear an Italian accent in this town, it could only mean danger. His gaze sweeps me slowly, like he's checking a list in his mind and I tick too many boxes.

Willow.

The name scrapes across my raw throat.

For a heartbeat, I nearly corrected him. I nearly say, No. You've got the wrong girl.

But the slow click of his gun makes my mouth slam shut as flashes of Willow's smiles invade my mind. I dry swallow, what would a man like him want with a sweetheart like Willow, a girl who would never hurt a fly. Maybe this is why she ran, maybe if I take the fall, Willow will come home. I could be the one who saves her, for the first time I could pay her back for all the meals, sleepovers and safe spaces.

I can stop this man from chasing a girl with her whole life ahead of her, and he can take me instead, the girl with nothing.

No home. No future. No family.

A girl with a garbage bag stuffed full of broken dreams and no one left to care if she vanishes? No one but Willow, and she has three crazy guys who will help her mourn me. A dad who would memorialize me. I could take this bullet and be done with this failure of a life, come back rich, and pretty with the world at my feet.

I swallow sharply as I start to stand, my eyes trained on the shine of his penny loafers. This is my one chance to do something good—my last, defiant act of grace. A

sacrifice that might, just maybe, buy me a sliver of redemption. Maybe this is my only shot at heaven, my only escape from the hell I've been dragging behind me all these years.

My chest rises and falls, tight as a drum.

"Yes," I say, forcing the word past the lump in my throat. "I'm Willow."

His eyes narrow slightly, like he's satisfied with the answer, like the final puzzle piece just fell into place.

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Without warning, he moves.

His hand clamps around my arm, iron-strong. I jolt, panic crashing over me in a sick wave.

“What are you?—”

“Come quietly,” he murmurs, too calm, too certain. “Don’t make a scene.”

My heart jackknifes into my throat. No. No no no— I was supposed to die not be kidnapped, totally not the plan!

I thrash, but he tightens his grip like steel around bone. “Don’t fight,” he says lowly, dragging me off the porch toward a black car idling at the curb. “Trust me, it’s easier this way.”

“Let me go!” I scream, twisting hard, but my feet scrape uselessly against the concrete. I claw at his arm, desperation turning my veins to fire.

And then?—

A blur of motion.

A shadow peels out of the night, fast and vicious.

The man’s hold on me rips away as he’s slammed backward into the side of the car with a sickening crack.

I stumble, breathless, watching as my attacker crumples to the pavement, groaning.

My chest heaves. My vision spins.

I look up—and there he is.

A man stands between me and the stranger like a wall of fury. His broad shoulders block out the glare of the streetlamp, his fists clenched at his sides. His face is shadowed, as he hovers over the man.

“Touch her again,” the man growls, “and I’ll rip your fucking throat out.”

2

JASMINE

With his jawclenched and a pistol pressed under the chin of the Italian man who had been seconds away from kidnapping me on the worst day of my life, the most insanely attractive guy I’ve ever seen now stands between us. His lean, muscular frame moves with effortless confidence, and his head tilts slightly as he sizes the Italian up, an almost amused smirk tugging at his mouth.

The Italian man chuckles humorlessly, as he settles his chin comfortably on the barrel, “Stronzo idiota!”

“If anyone is a prick it’s you. Kidnapping an unsuspecting girl in the middle of suburbia.” The man clicks his tongue, his British accent rolling over me like honey and a warm summer sun, making my pulse spike for reasons that have nothing to do with fear.

Get it together girl! You are in the middle of a standoff.

The British man shrugs, a hint of humor in his tone. “That just doesn’t sit well with me.”

The Italian man steps in closer, eyes narrowed. “You don’t know what you’re interfering with.”

“Oh, I do,” the Brit says with a low chuckle, cocking the gun, his free hand dropping casually onto the Italian’s shoulder. “But I am Landon Hart. Ring a bell mate?”

The man’s eyes bulge slightly, and his hands shoot up in surrender, lips quaking into an apologetic smile. “Landon--”

“Yes?”

“I-I didn’t know.” The Italian stutters, knees shaking as he tries to bow to Landon as if he is his king, but the stiff barrel of the gun keeps him standing straight.

“No you didn’t, but I would hate to remind you who I am in front of this young lady,” he peaks over his shoulder, winking at me with the brightest ocean blue eyes I have ever seen in my life.

Jeez, how does anyone get anything done with him looking at them? I haven’t been attracted to a man ever again, since the night I learned just how easily a man can break me down — show me how small, how insignificant I can be.

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How easy it is to use and abuse and discard me like I'm nothing.

But that was the old Jasmine.

This Jasmine — the one currently eye-fucking the sexiest British gunman in all of Texas, most likely the entire South — doesn't feel small, and she sure as hell doesn't like men. But hot is hot, no matter the gender, and Landon is fucking smoldering.

The click of Landon's tongue snaps me back to the moment, and the man is nodding in agreement with the barrel lightly tapping his right temple. "Good boy, coglione! No go run off to yourwhore of a mob boss and tell him this pretty girl is under my protection."

"Y-yes Landon." He nods, taking one tentative step backwards.

Landon waves with just his four fingers, with what I imagine is a cocky-ass smile on his face that the Italian man runs like his pants are on fire, no looking back. I fold my arms across my chest and settle on my right hip as I look at the ripple of muscles along his back.

He sighs, turning around and stuffing his gun into the waistline of his jeans. "When I finally introduced myself to you, I was hoping it would've been more dashing."

My lips twitch into a smile against my will, and I shrug. "I don't know, threatening to kill my kidnapper is kind of heroic, in my opinion."

Landon smiles, one of those pearly white panty-dropping smiles that you only see in

the movies. He runs an open hand through his curly brown hair, while the other pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

“I can deal with heroic.” He slides a cigarette into his mouth and pulls a lighter out of his front pants pocket, right next to his gun.

“Great, well, I love that you love being the hero,” I say, grabbing one of the garbage bags stuffed with all my things, “but I just realized you said when I finally introduced myself—so, I’m guessing you’re a stalker.” I sigh, hoisting the bag. “So thanks for not murdering me, but I’m gonna bounce.”

I reach for the other bag as he lights a cigarette, a low chuckle rumbling in his throat as he shakes his head.

“Oh no, Peach—you’re coming with me.”

“Peach?” I snort, stepping to the side to pass him, but his hand wraps around my arm. “Uh... that’s my arm,” I deadpan.

“No, Peach.” He grins, tightening his hold just slightly. “This is my arm, because you’re coming with me.” He winks, pulling me in just enough that the scent of ocean air—clean, a little salty, with a hint of sage—hits me, and for a second, I almost gasp at how stupidly good he smells.

“And where exactly are you taking your arm?” I narrow my eyes, playing along, because well—I’m only human, and he’s, once again, the most gorgeous guy I’ve ever laid eyes on.

He takes a slow drag on his cigarette, and that’s when it hits me: there’s something diabolical about a man who knows exactly how attractive he is—and downright devilish about one so confident—I feel this sudden, burning urge to knock him down

about thirty pegs. Hell, it would be my crowning achievement if I could get a guy like Landon to fall for me. It would probably be my undoing if I actually could get Landon himself to worship me.

Fuck! I haven't thought like this in years! Where's Willow when you need to talk about one guy who makes you more bi-curious than gay?

"There is a man who asked me to keep an eye on you, and I think it is important for him to know that people are now trying tokillyou." Landon flicks the cigarette and shrugs as if he is doingmea favor.

I let out a sharp breath, folding my arms. "Oh, so you do other guys' stalking for them? That's cute."

Landon lets his smirk curl lazily at the corner of his mouth, that British drawl wrapping around the words like silk. "It's easy to stalk someone when they're this great to look at."

I snort, hoisting one of the garbage bags higher on my shoulder. "Well, too bad you're wasting your time—I'm batting for my team. Sorry babe."

His grin only deepens, a flicker of mischief in those ocean-colored eyes. He takes a step closer, cigarette dangling between his plush, pink lips. "You sure about that, love?"

I open my mouth, ready to fire back some snappy reply, but then his free hand lifts—slow, deliberate—and two fingers brush against the side of my neck, right where my pulse is hammering like it's trying to break free.

I stiffen, a flush creeping up my throat before I can stop it.Dammit.

His voice dips lower, velvet-smooth. “Because your eyes are dilated, your breathing’s shallow”—his fingers linger just a second too long on my neck right above the pulse of my heart—“and your heartbeat...”

He leans in slightly, his breath warm against my ear.

“...is beating out of control, love.”

I huff, jerking my head back just enough to glare up at him. “Congratulations, Sherlock. You’ve discovered the human fight-or-flight response.”

Landon chuckles under his breath, stepping back just enough to give me space—but not enough to stop that insufferable, gorgeous grin. “Oh, I don’t know. You don’t strike me as the ‘flight’ type.”

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He licks his lips, that flash of tongue catching the light just before he steps in again, close enough that the scent of salt and sage curls around me like a snare.

“But you do seem like the type that likes to fight.”

For a second, my heart stalls in my chest—not the flustered skip it did a moment ago, but a cold, steel-wire pull that yanks the heat right out of my veins. My smile falters, fingers tightening around the straps of my garbage bags.

“Oh, so you like your girls to fight you?” I murmur, my voice hard and low. “You like a struggle?”

His grin flickers—just slightly—and his eyes sharpen, a flicker of awareness slipping into that lazy, cocky face.

“Easy, love.” His voice softens, just enough to sand down the edge. “Didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh yeah?” I cock my head to the side, my nostrils flaring as I prepare to knee him and run. “In what way did youmeanit?”

Landon’s eyes narrow. With a flick of his fingers, he tosses the cigarette aside, the faint hiss of it dying on the pavement.

“I meant that you’re strong, Jasmine.”

The sound of my name on his lips lands like a slap and a caress all at once, freezing

me for a breathless second.

“You know my name?” I snap, forcing my voice to stay sharp even as fear curls uneasily in my gut.

“I wouldn’t be a very good stalker if I didn’t know my target, Peach.” Landon smirks, reaching down for one of my bags. Despite my death grip on the handle, he shimmies it easily out of my hand like I’m a child clinging to a toy.

My jaw tightens. “Landon, I fucking swear?—”

But his voice cuts clean through my warning, calm and sure. “I don’t fight women.” He lifts the bag over his shoulder without breaking eye contact. “We might play. Flirt. Argue. Hell, maybe even fuck the anger out if we’re both stubborn enough. But anything I do with a woman is consensual, mutual, and wanted.”

I swallow hard, the adrenaline still thick in my veins. “Congratulations,” I mutter. “Your bar for human decency is on the floor.”

His mouth curves, slow and amused. “I never said I was a decent human, Peach. I just said I don’t fight women.”

“Right, but you still kill people?” I shoot back, my chin tilting defiantly.

“I never said I killed people.” Landon winks, a lazy flicker of charm sliding across his face.

“Oh, so you just point guns at them and let them run home to tell the story?” I arch a brow, arms folding tight across my chest. “Very noble of you.”

Landon chuckles, a low rumble in his chest as he starts walking, tossing me a glance

over his shoulder. “I knew I was going to like you, Peach. You’ve got teeth.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get too close.” I scowl, trailing a few steps behind him. “I bite.”

I can sense his grin widen as he flirts back. “That’s what I’m counting on.”

I groan, throwing my hands up. “God, you’re insufferable.”

“That’s what they keep telling me.” He winks, opening the back seat of a slick black Rolls Royce and tossing my bag in the back. “Come on, we can’t keep the bossman waiting.”

And maybe you’re wondering why I’m even going with this stranger. The honest truth? I don’t know. But really, what the hell do I have left to lose—besides my life? And he’s already saved that once.

It’d be pretty stupid to go through all that just to kill me now, right? Right?

“Where are we even going?” I grumble, shooting him a sidelong glare. “And who are you taking me to see?”

Landon flashes me another one of those panty-dropper smiles that should honestly be illegal—no, like seriously, the world would be a safer place without it—and then swings the backseat door shut before taking a step closer to me.. “So many questions from the girl who’s about to climb into my passenger seat anyway.”

“I didn’t agree to go with you!” I snap, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Peach,” Landon purrs, his tone dipping dangerously low, “you’re either going to do this the easy way and get that pretty little ass in my car all by yourself, or we can do this the hard way—and I will haul you in there myself.”

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His eyes rake over me, molten and slow, like lava moving under the surface of a mountain just waiting to break. “And trust me, love—I want to do it the hard way.”

My pulse stutters, panic and a sharp flicker of electricity sparks down my spine.

“I thought you don’t fight women,” I manage, narrowing my eyes, trying to cling to my slowly withering irritation.

“I don’t,” Landon murmurs, stepping in close enough that the air between us thins. “But carrying you over my shoulder? That’s not fighting. That’s just a relocation strategy.”

My jaw drops slightly, and I let out a sharp laugh, part disbelief, part excitement to see if he would really do it. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, I would,” he says smoothly, flashing a wolfish grin as he turns around to pop open the passenger side door for me. “But lucky for you, I like watching you walk ahead of me better.”

I sputter for a second, before sliding into the passenger's seat, muttering curses under my breath, because as much as a part of me wants to walk away I could not withstand him touching me right now.

“That’s it, Peach,” Landon calls after me with a laugh. “March that cute little attitude right into my front seat.”

As I secure my seatbelt with a little more force than necessary, and then I glance up at

him. “You know, for someone supposedly trying to help, you’re awfully close to getting punched.”

Landon closes the door, and jogs over to slide into the driver’s seat, shooting me a grin that somehow manages to be both infuriating and stupidly attractive. “Baby, if that’s what it takes to keep you alive, I’ll take the hit.”

My cheeks flame and I slouch in my seat, arms crossed over my chest as the engine rumbles to life.

3

LANDON

Jasmine tucks her knees to her chest, head leaning against the window, the shorter strands of her blonde hair sticking to her cheeks thanks to the thick Texas heat. She hasn’t said a word in miles.

Probably still pissed at me for calling her beautiful instead of Jasmine—or Peaches, my personal favorite, on account of her ass being perfect like a ripe summer peach, but I won’t tell her that. Not yet. Girl already looks like she wants to run me over with a car—no need to hand her a reason with a bow on top.

My eyes flicker over her thick thighs, drawn up tight against her chest, and the cascade of wavy blonde hair spilling over her shoulder. There’s still a hint of pink in it, evidence that her hair used to be vibrant with streaks of cherry red, but all of that has faded over the past three months to a stubbornly cute pastel pink.

And fuck if she isn’t gorgeous—unapologetically, wildly so. The kind of gorgeous that gets under your skin and settles in like it belongs there.

When I was first assigned to trail her, I was pissed. Thought it was beneath me. A man like me—sharp, efficient, trained for much worse—should be blackmailed into better use. International weapons deals, corporate espionage, hell, even stealing classified intel off the back of a warlord's yacht. Not babysitting some girl with a garbage bag full of trauma and a habit of walking alone at night.

But then I laid eyes on her. Jasmine Rivera. And for the first time in a long-ass time, I didn't feel like I was wasting my life.

I couldn't help it—I thanked the heavens. Thanked Kelly, too, for probably making a deal with Jesus Christ, or more likely the devil himself just to make sure I saw something good every day.

In a different life, I would've told her she was mine the second my eyes landed on her. Would've walked up, no games, no cover story, and said it straight to her face. You. You're mine.

Because that's what it felt like. Like she was already tethered to something in me I didn't know existed until she looked up, squinted against the sun, and flipped me off for staring too long from across the gas station parking lot. She didn't know me then, and that was the closest to the sun I have ever been, until now and fuck does it burn.

We hit a red light in the middle of nowhere. No cars, no traffic. Just empty road and midnight sky. I drum my fingers against the wheel, humming along to some old Billy Ray Cyrus song from Kelly's cursed playlist—the one she labeled How to Be American.

Jasmine snorts, still staring out the window, as if the shadows offended her and not me. I want her to look at me.

“What have I done now?” I smirk, my eyes lazily looking over her small form. She

could fit perfectly curled up on my lap if she wanted. That thought only makes me smile more, because if she could read my mind, she'd punch me in the face.

"Billy Ray Cyrus?" she deadpans, eyes rolling as she rests her chin on her knees. "Seriously?"

I lick my lips—slow—fighting to keep my eyes on the road instead of her mouth or the way her thighs are pressed together like temptation wrapped in denim. I force myself to look ahead, knuckles tightening on the wheel.

Because the truth is, I want to reach across the seat. Grab her by the waist. Drag her across my lap. Lay her bare over my knee and see if she'd still have the nerve to roll those pretty eyes with her ass in the air and my hand wrapped around her throat.

I swallow the thought like poison. Because that's what it is. Because she's poison—sweet, lethal, and already in my bloodstream.

"You don't like Billy Ray Cyrus?" I ask, voice low, masking the tension with a smirk.

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She shrugs without looking at me. “I prefer his daughter.”

“I could’ve guessed that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Her head turns slightly, eyes narrowing.

“Miley Cyrus is a brat.” I glance over, catching the flick of her brow. “And you, Peach, are definitely a brat.”

“A what?” she says, her tone sharp, half-offended, half-curious—and damn if I don’t want to taste that edge on her tongue. The undercurrent of more, in the same breath that she can’t take anymore. I bet that’s the best thing in the world.

“A brat,” I repeat, letting the word roll slowly off my tongue. “Don’t tell me you don’t know what a brat is, Peaches.”

She stares at me for a beat, a look of annoyance on her face. Then her lips twitch. “I know what a brat is,” she says coolly, “but you don’t know me well enough to call me one.”

I pull into the side entrance of the building, where armed guards flank the gated entrance to the underground parking garage. Surveillance cameras track every license plate, every twitch of movement, and the faint buzz of security drones overhead cuts through the humid Texas night.

I smirk as we approach, slowing just enough to let the system scan my plates. Jasmine stiffens slightly in her seat when one of the guards starts walking toward the

car, hand resting on the holster at his hip.

“You forget,” I say casually, letting the words drip with amusement as I roll down the window, “I’m your stalker. I know everything about you.”

Jasmine scoffs, her eyes rolling again in a way that makes a growl grow in my chest. “If you know everything, you’d know to stop flirting because I am gay. You understand what that means, right Landon?”

“Oh, I know,” I say, flashing an identification card from the center console and holding it up for the guard to scan. The red light flickers green. “But who said flirting had to lead anywhere? I can just flirt with you because you, Peaches, are a pretty girl.”

“So you don’t care?” She questions, placing both feet on the floor as she pulls her long streaked hair into a high ponytail, the curve of her slender neck on display.

The gates swing open with a hydraulic hiss, and I guide the car down into the private garage. I ease the car into one of the reserved spots near a private elevator, kill the engine, and turn to her.

“Peach, if you ever want to explore,” I grin. “I will be the first guy in line, but I respect you and your sexuality.”

Jasmine unbuckles her seatbelt with a sharp click and leans in just a breath away from my lips. “Don’t worry,” she murmurs, voice sweet as honey. “I’d rather fall down the elevator shaft than ever explore with you.”

Jasmine snorts as she slides out the car.

I chuckle, pulling the keycard from the console and slipping it into my back pocket as

I step out. “Ouch, and here I thought we had sexual tension.”

Jasmine leans against the car, arms crossed over her chest, one brow arched. “No, that’s just my incessant need to be a little stabby.”

I lean in, close enough that my breath stirs the hair near her cheek, lips brushing the shell of her ear. “You can stab me anytime, love.”

She shivers—barely, but I feel it—and I laugh as I walk away, the sound echoing through the polished silence of the garage.

She follows me to the private elevator at the far end. I swipe the keycard, and the doors open with a soft chime. Jasmine steps in first, and I take my time stepping in after her—eyes shamelessly drinking in the way she moves.

Her tank top clings to every curve, the thin fabric dampened from the heat, nearly sheer. Her breasts rise and fall beneath it, nipples peaked against the cotton, tight and obvious. My gaze trails lower—those muscular thighs hugged by worn jeans, the kind that were molded to her body by time and sin. Her waist curves into hips that were made to be gripped.

And Jesus Christ, she’s stunning. Wild and soft, stubborn and unaware of the absolute havoc she wreaks just by standing still.

“Who are we going to see, again?” she asks, leaning casually back against the elevator wall, one leg crossing over the other. The move lifts her chest just slightly—and her perky breasts stretch the fabric of her tank top tight.

I grin. “I never said we were going to see anyone.”

Her glare sharpens. “You said there was a man who wanted to keep me alive.”

“True,” I nod, watching the numbers on the elevator tick upward. “But I never said who that would be. Cute for you to act like I did.”

She huffs, clearly annoyed, but I just wink, a smirk pinched into my cheek. Jasmine is a smart girl.

“Do you ever answer a question directly?” she mutters.

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“Only when I want to be boring,” I say, casually leaning against the wall, eyes still on her. “And I don’t think you’d like me boring.”

Jasmine turns to face me then, one eyebrow raised, the heat between us tightening like a drawn bowstring.

“I don’t think I like you at all.”

I peel off my jacket, offering it to her. “I think you like me just fine.”

“And why would you say that?”

“Because your nipples are staring right at me through that flimsy-ass tank top.” My grin is wicked, sharp. “And unless you’re cold, which I doubt in this sauna of a state, I’d say you’re a little worked up.”

Her cheeks flush a perfect shade of pink—one I’d like to see again, and lower—and she snatches the jacket from my hand with a hissed, “Asshole.”

But before she can throw it back at me, the elevator dings.

The doors slide open to reveal a bachelor pad penthouse fit for a king—or a criminal with a love for decadence.

Dark hardwood stretches across the open floor plan, offset by matte black finishes and marble columns. A sleek kitchen gleams in the corner, untouched. Floor-to-ceiling windows line the far wall, showing off a panoramic view of the Dallas

skyline, glittering in the dark like fallen stars.

Low leather furniture, clean lines, and the subtle smell of cedar and expensive cologne hang in the air like sex and secrets.

I step out first whistling, my hands stuffing into my front pockets.

“Esto más te vale que no sea una mamada, cabrón.” A voice growls from the corner of the room, just as I slide onto the couch.

“Cast?” Jasmine hisses from behind me, but I just swing my forearm over my eyes and slump into the buttery leather.

Juan “Cast” Castillo is the head of the Mexican Cartel—and one of the few men who laughed the first time he heard my name instead of pissing himself.

Can’t blame him, really. A trained killer named Landon Heart? It sounds like the punchline to a bad joke. Meanwhile, Cast is known across borders as La Parca. The Grim Reaper. The kind of name that makes people go quiet in a room.

Me? I never got a moniker that cool. The Brits don’t mythologize their monsters—they just hire them. But when people hear my name, they run. I guess that’s enough. Landon Heart. Trained killer with a knack for stealing hearts—literally.

And yeah, there’s something poetic about watching a heart still beating in your hand. Call it my thing.

“You brought her here?” Cast snarls, but I keep my eyes closed.

“The Italians want her dead,” I drone. “Actually they want Willow dead, and she just admitted that she was Willow.”

Cast groans, and I don't even have to look up to know he's probably staring at Jasmine like she's grown three bloody heads. That's his usual reaction to anything that doesn't fit neatly into his violent little kingdom of order and control.

Now, Willow? She's Cast's girl. Or more accurately, the Chessmen's girl—Cast, Damien Sterling, Vincent Beaumont. Powerhouses, the lot of them. Whatever went down to make them let her go... it had to be catastrophic. Fucking unthinkable.

Because me? If my girl ever ran, I'd be on her heels before she made it to the end of the street. No way I'd just let her go. No way in hell.

"That was foolish, Jasmine," Cast snaps, his voice a low snarl thick with contempt. "Didn't take you for a fucking idiot."

I sit up straight at that. Because La Parca or not, I don't give a damn who he is—he doesn't speak to her like that. Not while I'm breathing.

"Steady on, Cast," I say coolly, folding my hands in front of me as I hunch over my knees. "You don't have to like what she did, but you'll mind your bloody tone."

He turns to me, face a mask of stone. Only the slight twitch of his nose betrays the fact that I've poked the bear.

Good.

If Jasmine weren't here, he'd probably already be halfway across the room, blade in hand. But I'm banking on the fact that the Cartel prefers strategy over spectacle these days. And I need this arrangement to go off without a hitch. Can't afford to start a war before we've even had a drink. Not when everything is leveraging on me having a nice and easy relationship with the cartel. It's the only way I can get out of this alive.

Still—Cast can be the Reaper all he likes. But if he speaks to her like that again, we'll see just how much flesh Death's willing to lose.

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“Don’t worry, Landon,” Jasmine cuts in before the silence can curdle, her laugh dry, dangerous, and sharp enough to drawblood. Sexy as hell, if I’m honest—makes the blood rush straight to my cock. Inconvenient as that is.

“I didn’t take Castillo for the type to stalk his girlfriend’s bestie,” she goes on, smiling sharp enough to slice, “but hey—guess we’ve both misjudged each other.”

I snort, leaning back and watching the wide-eyed expression on Jasmine’s face. She looks like she is ready to shred Cast to pieces with her bare hands. FuckPeachhas teeth. Bloody hell—she’s apeach with teeth.Even better. Abloodypeach.

Cast tilts his head slightly, his eyes narrowing as he studies her like he’s trying to decide whether to be insulted or impressed.

“Careful, niña,” he says, his voice smoother now but no less threatening. “That mouth of yours is writing cheques your blood might not be able to cash.”

I move slightly, just enough that he knows I’ve noticed. Jasmine doesn’t flinch, instead she rolls her shoulders to the back and stands even fucking straighter.

Then she does something that makes my heart pound for all the wrong reasons.

She squats slightly, pinching her fingers together as she steps closer to Cast like she’s mocking his height, his power—his entire existence.

“Oh, I’mso sorry,” she purrs, all razor-edged sarcasm. “Are you going to kill me too? Is that where Willow is? Did she injure your ego, so you offed her?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” he growls, stepping forward once, just enough to make most people take a step back.

But Jasmine doesn’t move. If anything, she leans in, and Christ, I’m half hard and she hasn’t even touched me.

I laugh—low, moving across the room to be next to Jasmine and amused as hell. “Alright, everyone take a breath,” I say, raising a hand like I’m breaking up a pub brawl. “Nobody’s dying tonight, yeah? Let’s cool it before someone actually gets shot.”

Cast’s glare cuts to me, nostrils flaring—but then he exhales through his nose, slow and hard. He turns back to Jasmine, jaw still clenched.

“I would never hurt Willow,” he says through his teeth, eyes boring into hers.

“Then prove it,” Jasmine snaps. Her voice isn’t loud, but it’s sharp enough to crack glass. “Because until I see her breathing, I don’t believe a damn word you say.”

Cast maintains eye contact as he snaps his finger twice and snarls. “Laptop.”

A guard moves quickly, almost nervously, crossing the room with a matte-black laptop held tight to his chest. Cast takes it without a word, flips it open, and begins typing with sharp, practiced keystrokes. The screen glows to life, cycling through encrypted feeds until he pauses on one. A surveillance camera, crystal clear and timestamped.

Jasmine stiffens beside me the moment she realizes what she’s seeing.

On-screen, Willow stands barefoot in front of a half-formed mound of clay, her shoulders tense and her face set in deep concentration. A cup of noodles is clutched in

one hand, steam curling from the rim. Her hair's twisted into a messy bun, claysmudges streaking her arms, and she's scowling at the sculpture like it personally offended her.

Jasmine lets out a soft, fractured gasp that cuts deeper than any scream could. Her hand jerks forward on instinct, reaching for the laptop as if proximity might make it more real.

"Willow..." Her voice catches, barely more than a whisper, full of disbelief.

"You fucking asshole," she breathes, voice gaining strength as her chest rises. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing," Cast replies flatly, eyes trained on Willow as he stares at her as if he is lost.

"I don't believe you," she chokes out, the words raw and heavy. Her eyes never leave the screen, locked on the living proof of her best friend.

"I don't expect you to," Cast says, his shrug careless, but the tone underneath it cuts—somewhere between indifference and a warning. "But she's safe. Untouched. Protected."

"Protected?" Jasmine lets out a brittle laugh, the sound tight in her throat, half-sob, half-scoff. "Byyou? Is that what you call this? Cameras in every corner? Locked doors? Probably a gun under her goddamn pillow just in case you change your mind?"

"I do what I must." Cast's voice sharpens, the polished control slipping just enough to reveal the crack beneath. "I don't care whether you understand—but you don't get to stand here and question what she means to me. You don't get to touch that." His next

words are barely above a whisper. “She is myeverything.”

Jasmine steps closer, jaw set, eyes glinting with fire through the shine of unshed tears. “She’s my best friend.”

Cast snorts, the sound dry and hollow. “That’s cute. But she’s breathing, isn’t she? So are you. You’re both alive—because ofme.”

Jasmine laughs again, but this time it’s laced with venom. “Right. Thanks, dude. I totally owe you for the stalker.”

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She turns and hits me with a look sharp enough to skin flesh, and I take it without flinching. She's not wrong. I was following her. Still am, technically.

"Look," Cast says, shifting his weight and running a hand over his jaw like he's already tired of the conversation. "There are people who want to get back at me. They can't touch me directly, so they go for what matters. That means Willow." He pauses, eyes narrowing on Jasmine. "And you, very stupidly, just told them you're her."

Silence drops like a stone between them.

Jasmine's breath catches. She opens her mouth like she wants to argue, but the truth of it is already sinking in. I can see it—can feel the weight settle across her shoulders.

"So now," Cast continues, stepping forward, "we need a new game plan."

She doesn't answer, just crosses her arms over her chest and waits—guarded, suspicious, but listening.

"For your safety, in case they realized your connection to Willow," Cast says, voice clipped and direct, "I've had someone following you."

Jasmine's eyes narrow. "Landon?"

Cast nods. "Among others."

"You've been having me watched?"

“Would you prefer dead?” Cast snaps, before reining it in. “It wasn’t personal. It was a precaution.”

“That’s real comforting.”

“I didn’t say it to comfort you. I said it to explain why you’re still here.”

She flinches at that—just slightly—and I can see the war behind her eyes. Pride and survival don’t mix easily, especially in someone like Jasmine. But she stays quiet.

“I’m offering you protection,” Cast continues, more controlled now.

“What, so I just allow you to continue to stalk me?” Jasmine snorts. “No dice.”

“You know I could easily wash my hands of you right now. Your death would work in my favor, you know that?” Cast whispers, his eyes glinting with danger.

I whistle lowly. “Come on now. Play nice, Cast.”

“I am,” Cast shrugs, stepping even closer to Jasmine. “Look, I have a proposition for you. You work a dead-end job and live with your shitty mom in a trailer. You wanted to go to college but couldn’t afford it, right?”

Jasmine’s jaw tightens, but she doesn’t speak.

“I’ll have you enrolled at Haven University by morning. It’s a couple hours out, which is for the best while I figure out how to convince the Italians not to kill you,” Cast says with a nod. “New apartment. Quiet area. Fenced grounds. Security. Full coverage.”

“And what do you get in return?” Jasmine asks, arms still crossed, voice steady.

“You let Landon keep tabs on you. You don’t cause me any more problems. And I make all your dreams come true while making sure my girl doesn’t hate me for you dying on my watch.”

“Wow,” she mutters. “You’re my fucking fairy godmother, and Willow has you whipped.”

“I do what I can, and you ever tell her that and I’ll gut you like a fucking fish and force her to forgive me regardless.” Cast replies, a half-smile tugging at his mouth. “We got a deal, Jas?”

“You sure you want to follow me around Lan?”

I smile, sliding up closer to her spicy, sweet scent invading my senses. Fuck, what is that? Cinnamon? Vanilla? A little dash of bourbon? Bloody hell, she’s delicious. “I’d watch your fine ass anywhere, love.”

Rolling her eyes, she shakes Cast’s hand, sealing her fate with mine, like she stood a fucking chance otherwise.

4

JASMINE

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:28 am

“I’m telling you, Jasmine,” Vincent sighs, knocking his hip into my bedroom door with a box full of my brand new valuables—courtesy of Cast and his shitty attitude. “I had nothing to do with the stalking.”

“I’ll believe that when pigs fly, Vinny boy,” I sing, slapping his cheek twice as I slide past him into the obnoxiously large living room.

The apartment Cast bought for my four-year sentence at Haven University is—unfortunately—stunning. Rich. Industrial. The kind of place that says I have money and I want you to know it, but also I might commit tax fraud in a leather jacket.

The walls are exposed red brick, aged and imperfect in that curated way that probably cost more than my mother’s trailer. Steel beams cut across the ceiling, matte black and dramatic. There’s a chandelier hanging over the living space—actual fucking crystal—like we’re in the kind of villain’s lair where someone pours whiskey into a glass they didn’t wash. The floors are dark concrete, polished to a mirror-sheen, and the whole place smells like sandalwood, leather, and secrets.

A massive leather sectional takes up half the living room, sunken around a low-slung coffee table made of black marble and brushed brass. Built-in shelves climb one wall, filled with books I didn’t ask for and art I’d probably roll my eyes at—if it wasn’t so damn perfect.

The kitchen is open-concept, all stainless steel and sharp edges, with a waterfall island that could double as a runway. A wine fridge I’ll never touch hums quietly beneath it, probably stocked with bottles more expensive than my entire wardrobe.

It's all harsh lines, heavy textures, and brutal luxury.

And I hate that I love it.

"You know I only let you call me Vinny because of Willow, right?" Vincent sighed, swiping his forearm across his forehead, that lazy, boyish smile tugging at his lips. "Anyone else would've been punched in the face by now."

"Physically harming an innocent girl like me?" I gasp in a flawless Southern belle accent, tossing a bag of decorative pillows onto the couch.

"There's nothing innocent about you, love." Landon's voice cuts in smoothly as he nudges into the living room, arms full of a box labeled Kitchen.

"I beg your pardon," I shoot back, still in character.

"Ooh, beg. I like that word when you say it." Landon winks as he sets the box on the counter, clearly pleased with himself.

I groan, rolling my eyes as I pull out a black faux fur pillow. This has been Landon and my relationship for the past week while I get adjusted to Haven University. I missed Freshman Week entirely and spent the last few days holed up in a hotel room—again, courtesy of Cast—while Landon went apartment shopping for us.

And no, that's not a typo. I mean us.

Despite my very vocal objections—and a full rant list detailing why Landon shouldn't live within my apartment, let alone my zip code—Cast made it clear: Landon stays, or I meet my maker at the hands of the Italian mob who thinks I'm Willow. So in the interest of keeping my life, Landon is staying with me in the smaller bedroom on the opposite side of the apartment, and not a step closer.

“Alright, love birds,” Vincent sighs, both hands on his hip as he looks around the apartment.

“We’re not lovebirds,” I snap.

Landon clutches his chest like I’ve driven a dagger through it, staggering back with dramatic flair. “Awe, Peach, you wound me.”

Vincent barks a laugh, folding his arms across his chest. “Yeah, Peach—don’t wound him. Poor lad’s already hanging on by a thread.”

“Nope!” I square my shoulders, popping the P with extra venom as I scowl at them both. “You don’t get to call me Peach. That nickname is retired.”

Landon’s smile curls wickedly as he strolls over, confidence oozing from every step like heat from asphalt. “That’s right, Vincent. Only I can call my Peach, Peach.”

“I’m not your anything,” I snarl, heat flooding my cheeks under his gaze, so I turn my attention to Vincent. “And you especially don’t get to call me that.”

“Oh, come on now.” Vincent tilts his head, his mouth tugging into a crooked smirk. “I still don’t get the Peach thing. She’s not exactly sunshine and soft fuzz.”

“She’s not your peach,” Landon says, his tone dipping lower. “That’s the difference.”

Before I can step back, his hand curls around the side of my neck—not choking, but firm. Commanding. His palm is warm, fingers pressing just enough to make my breath hitch. A low current of heat, and dangerous hums in the space between us.

My hands twitch at my sides, but I don’t move. I should. Every nerve is screaming at me to shove him off. To slap that smirk off his face. But all I do is stand there, pulse

racing beneath his thumb.

“You only know me because you’re my stalker,” I say, but it comes out too soft. Too breathless.

“Nah,” he breathes, fingers flexing just slightly—just enough for the pads of them to feel the tremble running down my spine. “Anyone can stalk. But me?” He tilts his head, that grin softening into a look of intimacy as if I am something precious . “I watch you.”

His thumb brushes the base of my throat, and I feel it—the way my body betrays me, the way the breath I swallow shudders against his skin. He feels it too. I see it in the way his smile deepens, slow and knowing.

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“I see how your lips twist when you lie. How your shoulders stiffen when you pretend you’re not scared. I know the exact second your bravado runs out and your panic kicks in, and I know—” His voice drops to a velvet murmur, “—that you tell yourself a lot of things that aren’t true.”

“Like what?” I ask, and my voice is barely there.

Landon goes to respond, but Vincent clears his throat loudly behind us, snapping the moment like a rubber band. “Alright, Shakespeare,” he drawls, folding his arms with the dramatic flair of a man long-suffering. “Save the tortured poetry for someone who’s not three seconds away from kicking you in the dick.”

Landon doesn’t even flinch. Doesn’t so much as glance in Vincent’s direction. His eyes stay locked on mine, steady and electric. “She’d have to stop staring first.”

And damn him—he’s right. My eyes are still on his, caught in that stupid, ocean-blue undertow that’s pulling me deeper with every breath. It takes effort—actual, physical effort—to drag my gaze away. To break the spell.

I look down, because if I keep looking at him, I’ll forget. Forget why this is a bad idea. Forget every scar that says men like him are danger dressed in charm. Forget that wanting him is reckless. Stupid. Bound to end with me bleeding on the floor and calling it love.

My breath catches, and I jump back like Landon’s touch has seared itself into my skin. I turn quickly, latching onto the first distraction I see—Vincent, arms crossed, smugness oozing from every sarcastic pore.

“I don’t mean to interrupt the little eye-fuckathon,” Vincent drawls, “but some of us have better things to do than third-wheel a frat party romance.”

“Awe,” I sneer, still breathless. “You must’ve burned out in high school.”

Vincent lifts a brow. “Keep talking, Jaz. ‘Cause I’m about ten seconds away from convincing admissions to drop your ass from Professor Kilgore’s class.”

Landon perks up. “Kilgore?”

I scowl. “You wouldn’t.”

I freeze. “You got me into Kilgore’s class?” My voice hits a pitch I didn’t even know I was capable of, and suddenly I’m bouncing on the balls of my feet. “You got me into Professor Conner freaking Kilgore’s class?!”

Vincent shrugs like it’s nothing. “Well I’m going to need you in my corner to get Willow back so...”

“Kilgore is the top forensic scientist in the entire state of Texas—maybe even the country!” I practically squeal. “He solved that triple-murder case in Houston just by analyzing pollen, and he is like my idol.”

Rumor has it the FBI has wanted him for years, but he loves his horse Jelly more than the city, and despite being an official detective, he works more as a resource for special crimes.

Vincent gives Landon a deadpan look. “And she says you’re the dramatic one.”

I smack his arm. “Shut up, you absolute angel. I could kiss you.”

“Absolutely not,” Landon growls. “To the class and to kissing Vincent.”

“Okay—first things first—I can kiss anyone I want,” I snap. “And two, I am taking Kilgore’s class. It is my dream to be a Forensic Psychologist, and a recommendation from him would be everything to me.”

Landon walks a little closer, his voice dropping a few octaves. “Peach, I don’t think--”

“Save it.”

“Fine.” Landon nods sharply, looking over to Vincent. “Send me her schedule. I gotta make a run.”

Vincent nods. “I’ll walk you out.”

Landon and Vincent are already on their way out the door when Landon turns on me, eyes narrowing. “Stay here.”

“Ruff,” I deadpan, but Landon smiles again so fucking smugly I don’t know if I want to slap him, or see that smirk with me dripping down his chin.

“Good girl, Peach.”

5

LANDON

“I’m sorry,” I squat down to the level of the convulsing man.

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He's on the floor, writhing like a fish out of water, his limbs twitching in jerky, uncontrolled spasms. Sweat pours down his face, mixing with the blood leaking from the corners of his mouth. His cheeks are already beginning to swell, grotesque and uneven, and his lips part in a strangled moan that barely sounds human.

His gums torn raw and bleeding, all of his molars ripped out like weeds—roots and all. Dark, clotted blood pools at the back of his throat, bubbling every time he tries to breathe. His tongue lolls to the side, stained crimson, trembling with every shallow inhale.

I chuckle at the sight of his shaky hands clawing at the floor, trying to drag himself away from me with the strength of a dying insect.

“Oh, come on now...” I drone, tilting my head. “Don't be a fucking bore, mate.”

He doesn't make it far.

I grab his leg and yank him back in one rough pull, the sound of his skin scraping against the concrete like sandpaper on raw meat. He screams, a hoarse, gurgled thing that dissolves into sobs when I crouch beside him again.

A part of me almost empathizes with the man, I remember how gut-wrenching pain shakes can be.. To hurt so deep it makes your vision blur, your stomach twist, your body betray you.

But this guy? This isn't some scared little kid who made a mistake. This is a predator. A fucking animal who bites children like he thinks he's starring in a horror flick.

I reach down and tap his chin lightly with two fingers, forcing his glossy eyes to meet mine.

“Don’t pass out yet,” I whisper, my tone almost gentle. “You’ve got three more teeth in the front. And I’m nothing if not thorough.”

His whimpers echo throughout the basement, bouncing off the concrete walls like a broken lullaby. I tilt my head, watching the way his lip trembles as he starts to hyperventilate—short, panicked gasps that rattle in his throat.

“Aww,” I coo, voice mock-soft, like I’m comforting a frightened pet. “Look at that. Poor thing’s shaking all over.”

I trail a blood-slicked finger just under his chin, forcing his face back up. “Breathe through it, yeah? Or don’t. Makes no difference to me.”

“It makes a difference to me,” the low timber of an Irish accent invades the tranquility of my torture chambers.

I don’t bother looking up. My knuckles graze the angry swell of the bastard’s jaw, still bubbling with blood and spit, while the scent of antiseptic and overpriced cologne seeps in—Conner Kilgore. “Do you have to make such a mess, every time?”

I hear him cough once—sharp, offended.

“Well, let’s see what the file says,” I mutter, finally standing. My boots squelch against the blood-soaked concrete. “Because I kill your prey only when I agree to hate the crime.”

Conner steps gingerly over a puddle, the bottom of his slacks stained now whether he likes it or not. “Yes, but killing and torture are two very different things, Landon. Most

of this blood is not coming out of these clothes.”

I flash him a grin as I wipe my hands on the front of my shirt. “You’re a forensic scientist, mate. Blood should be your playground, and you should know how to get it out.”

“I prefer a cleaner crime scene than you.” He gestures vaguely toward the twitching man. “And I don’t usually pull teeth with pliers, either.”

I walk past him, toward the file he left on the metal table by the wall. “You said he was a child predator who liked to bite.”

“Yes,” Conner says, arching a brow.

“So I took his teeth.”

Conner snorts, as he squats down next to the largest puddle of blood, spit, and possible piss, that has started to stain the concrete. “You’re a patient fuck, I’ll give you that, but please start using the plastic we have discussed.”

I flip open the file, eyes scanning the pages. “My father used to say that I am a stubborn fuck.” That’s why I needed to be beaten more. Because I could withstand more. For longer. Unlike Kelly, who broke faster than I did every time. She couldn’t withstand the torture.

Conner doesn’t say anything for a moment, and for the first time tonight, I take a breath. The sharp, coppery stench of blood is everywhere, coating the back of my tongue like I’ve been sucking on pennies. But underneath that—there’s more. Sour sweat. Rotting nerves. Spit thick with bile.

I blow the breath out through my nose and roll my shoulders.

“Christ,” Conner mutters, covering his nose with one sleeve. “You breathe this shit in like it’s fresh air.”

“If it wasn’t for the piss, you would be too, brother.”

Conner glances down at the pool spreading beneath the man’s ruined body, nostrils flaring with disgust.

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I should clarify—Conner's not my real brother. But when you grow up lost in the same foreign country, raised in the same underground gym, beaten into shape by the same heavyweight champion with fists like cinder blocks and a temper like fire... blood's just a technicality.

We took punches side by side before we could shave. We watched each other break ribs and bleed on mats and still showed up the next day like we owed someone our pain. So yeah. He's my brother.

And right now, my brother's doing his best not to vomit on his shoes while I stand over a man whose teeth I pulled out one by one.

Family bonding at its finest.

"That," I mutter, wiping my hands on the front of my shirt, "is the difference between you and me. I live for all the carnage. Isn't that right, Tyler?"

The man on the floor spasms violently, his spine bowing off the concrete like a wire's been pulled tight beneath him. Every muscle locks, his hands clawing at nothing, mouth frozen open in a soundless scream.

I watch, jaw tight, and I know. He's seconds from dying.

Fucking punk. I squat down beside him, gripping his chin one last time, prying it open to look at the mess I didn't finish. Three front teeth left. Intact.

"Four hours," I mutter, voice flat. "That's all you could take?"

His jaw sags in my hand, as his lips quiver from the shaky gasps of fleeting breath.

“Your victims took more from you for longer,” I snort, tossing his head back onto the floor. “You’re fucking pathetic.”

His body starts to rattle, legs kicking weakly, and blood bubbles from between his lips like he’s trying to drown in it. His eyes roll back, whites flickering. Chest jerks once. Then twice.

And just like that, I’ve lost him.

I slam it shut with a little more force than necessary, rising to my feet with a disgusted exhale.

“Waste of a file,” I spit, turning back toward Conner. “Could’ve at least died after I finished.”

“You know most of these criminals can’t withstand much, Lan,” Conner says quietly, pulling out his phone to log the time of death, and the method of killing. “But it doesn’t mean you’re not still a fucking psychopath.”

I grab and toss a towel over my shoulder. “Takes one to hire one.”

Conner doesn’t respond. Doesn’t have to. We’ve both made peace with what we are. The body lets out a final, gurgling rattle. I glance down. Eyes glazed. Chest still.

Conner walks into my line of sight, latex gloves snap tight around his wrists with that crisp, sterile sound that always seems louder in a room this silent. He lays out the tools like a surgeon—bleach spray, enzyme foam, absorbent granules, sterile cloths, a portable UV scanner to double-check his work. Everything’s arranged in neat little rows on a tarp he unrolls with military precision.

He starts with the largest puddle—Tyler’s final offering. Conner sprays the bio-foam first, watching it hiss and bubble as it eats through the blood pooled along the concrete seams. The stench rises again—iron, piss, and now meat—and he turns his face just slightly, jaw clenching.

“Whole room reeks like a slaughterhouse,” he mutters, reaching for a heavy-duty cloth.

He wipes in tight, circular motions, using pressure and patience instead of speed. Unlike me, he doesn’t rush. Every stroke is methodical, turning deep red to murky pink, to dull grey, until only the memory of blood remains.

He sprinkles the granules over a smear near the filing cabinet and kneels down to scrub it out with a small, stiff brush. “Arterial spray on vertical surfaces...” he mutters like he’s back in a lecture hall. “Always the worst.”

“Still talking to yourself while you work?” I ask, watching him from the edge of the table.

“Better than talking to corpses like you do,” he mutters, brushing up a dark crust that had started to congeal along the baseboards. “Besides, if I leave one trace, one stray drop of blood behind, this whole place becomes a crime scene. You’d be surprised how much DNA stays in porous concrete.”

I shrug. “Not my concern.”

“Exactly,” Conner says, rising to his feet and swapping out cloths. “And that’s why I’m the one in gloves while you’re over there smelling like a butcher’s apron.”

He kneels beside the body, now still and slack-jawed, and carefully slips a plastic sheet beneath it. The motion is practiced, clinical—he doesn’t even flinch when blood

drips onto his boot.

“Andthat,” he mutters, checking his UV wand for missed streaks, “is why we don’t torture people next to air vents.”

I snort, my eyes landing on the manila folder next to his disregarded leather jacket. My eyes light up, and fingers twitch with the need as I imagine the soon to be target. “This looks promising, Con.”

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I swipe the heavy folder off the table and thumb through the target's crimes.

A serial domestic violence offender. Fists for breakfast, bruises for dessert. He jumps states like flies on a pile of shit, always one step ahead of a system too soft and too slow to keep up. My favorite type of guy—because they always think they're the hunter.

And because he reminds me of Marcus.

Fucking Marcus. The roadman bastard who killed my sister and still breathes like the world owes him something. I hate him more than any man alive besides my father, and lucky me—I'm still indebt to him.

My stomach clenches at the thought.

When Zay dragged me back to the Raiders' hideout six months ago, they made it very clear where I stood. I wasn't family. I wasn't even property. I was an example. They beat me until I was swallowing my blood like air. My ribs cracked like cheap china under boots and knuckles.

And through all of it, I was silent, minus the few grunts, and sharp inhales.

It was the only beating I've ever taken in the States that came close to what my father used to do. And even then—my father wouldn't have stopped until I was seconds from brain dead. Those fuckers have nothing on Charlie Heart.

So yeah, this guy? This coward who leaves his wife and kids in splints when he gets

bored?

He's mine.

And he's not walking away with his jaw intact.

Conner joins me a second later, slipping off his gloves with a snap. "That one's newer," he says, tapping the top of the file with his knuckle. "Still under internal review. Quiet case. DPD won't move on it for at least three weeks."

"Plenty of time," I mutter, flipping it open. Inside: name, address, photos. Receipts. Patterns. A predator waiting to be caught.

"You keep feeding me scraps like this," I say, eyes scanning the pages, "and maybe I won't let the thing inside me out for anyone else."

Conner's gaze flicks to me—tired, knowing. "That's the arrangement."

It is.

While Conner spent his childhood studying anything with a pulse—watching how long it took before it stopped and became a corpse—I spent mine being carved into the soldier my older sister refused to become.

My father even did the demented, crack-head speech about how every dark corner of London was meant to be mine one day. All I had to do was survive long enough. Endure enough. Withstand enough to grab it with both hands.

As a kid, I believed him. And when the first shadow bloomed inside me, he nurtured it like it was his real son. More than I ever was. By the time I was fourteen, the beast within me had spent more time in the sun than I did. The beast was angry.

Murderous. A fucking terror. My own mother flinched when I walked into a room. That's something Conner and I share—mothers who didn't know what to do with the things they helped create.

My sister was the only one who saw any good in me, even when I didn't think good and me were compatible in the same sentence. She escaped to the States the minute she turned sixteen, after my father had set her up to marry Emil Smirnov, a fucking animal in the drug market of the East. She left the next day and told me to come find her when I was ready.,

I followed two years later, right after I failed to kill my father. Too afraid of what perpetual darkness would do to me, and too afraid of what the Butchers would do to me if I stayed in London any longer. But now the only person who allowed me to see any light is dead.

Now, this—this deal I made with Conner—is the only thing that calms the monster long enough to stop it from trying to kill me to be in the sun again. The deal is, he gives me the names. The ones that slip through the cracks. The ones with lawyers, money, connections, or shady dealings. The ones the cops “monitor” but never touch.

And I use them to feed my beast. I protect society—clean up the filth no one else will touch. I'm basically fucking Batman, just without the whole no killing philosophy.

Because unlike him, I actually have morals, and I don't just want to stroke my ego. And I don't get off fighting the same three villains in a revolving door of justice. I end them. Permanently.

Conner methodically disposes of the cleaning supplies and his gloves in a black plastic bag, as he reads over the files with me.

“This is the last one for a while.” Conner comments, tying a knot in the bag.

I look up at him, slow and calm. “You’re taking a break while you play college professor?”

Conner shakes out his blonde pin straight strands and snorts. “I am not pretending.”

I watch as Conner begins to methodically clean up his cleaningsupplies, and if it weren’t for the cold vacancy behind those pale green eyes, I might even admit he’s attractive.

Hell, tomorrow when Jasmine walks into her forensics class and sees him, I bet her pupils will blow wide and her thighs will clench in that telltale way she does when someone hot walks into a room.

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Conner's been attractive since we were kids. That hasn't changed. Loosely curled chestnut-brown hair that always falls too perfectly over his forehead, lean build that looks deceptively soft—until you see him shirtless. Then it's all sharp edges and carved muscle, like someone engineered him in a lab at 2% body fat.

Harder than a fucking wall of China.

And I'd know. Because once, when I was twelve, my father drop-kicked me into it.

I clear my throat, and place the folder onto the table. “Hey I need a favor.”

“No, you're an asshole.”

“Fuck off.” I snort, a small chuckle leaves my lips just as he ties the string around his tool sleeve.

“Gladly.”

“Kilgore,” I snarl. “Tomorrow Jasmine Rivera will be in your class.”

“I am not traumatizing someone because they will not fuck you, Lan.” He lazily drawls, giving me a bored look.

I roll my eyes. “It's not that. She's the girl I'm assigned to protect.”

Conner's eyebrows lift a millimeter.

“She’s the reason I’ve been running around on a leash. The Raiders are breaking off from the Italians, signing a deal with the Cartel. And I’m the babysitter until that deal is solidified.”

Conner lets out a slow, unimpressed breath and goes back to sorting his kit into his larger briefcase.

“She’s sharp. Smart mouth on her,” I mutter, more to myself than to him. “Pisses me off daily. You’d hate her.”

Conner finally looks up, eyes like polished glass. He doesn’t laugh. Doesn’t smirk.

“Fine,” he huffs. “I will watch her, if you leave. I need quiet to dismember this body, and your voice is fucking up the rhythm.”

I raise my hands in surrender. “Fine, just do me the favor.”

“Fine, now go. I’m not you,” he mutters, turning back to the table. “I don’t need an audience.”

I watch him for another second, then turn and head for the stairs.

“Burn those clothes,” he calls after me, just as the sound of a chainsaw rings through the room.

I nod, already knowing the drill. I slip out through the maintenance grate and emerge into a narrow alleyway off Midtown—rain-soaked, neon-lit, cluttered with late-night trash and the low murmur of a city that never gives a fuck.

My phone buzzes in my pocket the moment I hit the street.

Twelve missed messages.

Peach:Where are you

Peach:You said to wait for you, and I am BORED!

Peach:Are you dead or just being a dick?

Peach:Hello??? Earth to the worst stalker ever!

Peach:Landon, you suck!

Awe, my peach got bored without me around. I scroll down and spot the notification from the tracker.

[ALERT: Peach has exited the Haven Towers complex — 4 hours ago.]

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Fucking brilliant.

I drag a hand down my face, then pocket the phone with a dry chuckle and start moving—shoulders hunched, boots splashing through puddles.

Well what's better than feeding my beast blood. Feeding him a peach.

6

JASMINE

A couple of hours later, I've unpacked my entire life—which, turns out, doesn't take long when it fits into three garbage bags.

The closet looks like a sad showroom display. A few worn hoodies, some ripped jeans, a handful of crop tops that have survived every shitty laundromat in Mason Park, and one too-tight dress I never have the courage—or occasion—to wear. That's it. Spread across this walk-in closet like it's supposed to mean anything.

I have to see if Cast's financial kindness spreads to adding some more clothes into my closet, maybe some clothes from Macy's instead of Walmart.

I wander back into the bedroom. The sun is beginning to dip outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, flooding the whole space in golden light like I'm trapped in a perfume commercial.

I groan and flop onto the bed, arms stretched out, legs splayed like a starfish. The

mattress swallows me instantly, way too soft for its own good, and a traitorous moan slips out of my throat—low, involuntary, embarrassing.

“This bed is a crime,” I mutter. “It’s a trap. No one should sleep this well.”

Still. It doesn’t matter how soft it is. Or how expensive. Or how many thread counts the damn comforter has. The silence is louder.

No Willow. No Tommy. No Derek or stupid midnight-shift fryers. I’d even take Landon’s obnoxiously smooth London accent—the one that grates on my nerves and curls my toes at the same damn time.

Normally, around now, I’d be slipping into that itchy polyester uniform and heading out for my night shift at Lucy’s Chicken Swamp—home of over-salted fries and the greasiest burgers in Mason Park. Derek and I used to take turns betting on which customer would scream first, or which fryer would explode.

But I had to quit.

Two days after almost being kidnapped, the Italians showed up asking for me—pretending to be family, fake cousins with slick smiles and itchy intentions. Derek lied without blinking, told them he’s never met a Willow in his life, much less a blonde girl with pink streaks. He plays dumb like a pro, and I absolutely love him for it.

Now? I’m safe. I’m “taken care of.” Financially stable, with a fridge full of groceries I didn’t pay for, and none of my mother’s drug-addicted, or drug-selling boyfriends to wrestle out of the hallway at 2 a.m.

But fuck... happiness is kind of boring.

No drama. No chaos. No rats in the kitchen or bills taped to the fridge like threats.
Just... routine.

Eat. Sleep. School. Survive.

Repeat.

It's better. I know it's better. But it doesn't feel better.

At least back at the trailer park, I had people. Nights with friends huddled around a cracked fire pit, burning marshmallows and swapping gossip. Movie marathons with borrowed DVDs. Willow teaching me how to paint, both of us covered in more acrylic than the canvas. Playing Fuck, Marry, Kill until our sides hurt from laughing.

Now? Nothing.

No noise. No color. No mess.

Just me, this too-perfect apartment, and a silence that doesn't feel like peace—it feels like a padded cage.

I groan, burying my head into the pillow, because according to his Royal Highness Master Landon, I can't leave until he comes home.

I roll over, grab my phone off the nightstand, and hit his contact for like the tenth time today.

One ring. Two. Straight to voicemail.

Hey, it's Lan. Leave a message at the beep.

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“Bastard,” I hiss, sitting up in bed and letting my feet hang over the side as I hang up the phone. I stare at the hardwood floor for a beat, then rub my hands over my face like it’ll scrub off the boredom sinking into my skin.

This is college.College. I’m eighteen, technically alive, and probably sitting less than five miles away from bad decisions and lukewarm jungle juice.

There’sgotto be a party tonight. Somewhere. Always is.

And if there’s not? I’ll start one.

I stand, stretch, and pace toward the closet—eyeing the sad excuse for a wardrobe like maybe it’ll look different if I squint. It doesn’t. But I can work with it. I always have.

A party means people. Music. Making out with a hot girl that will push Landon so far out of my mind he cliff dives into the next universe.

An hour later, I’m freshly showered and tying up my black corset top. I’ve matched the corset with fishnets under baggy, horrendously ripped jeans and my hand-me-down black combat heels and some matching cheap silver chunky chains.

A little mascara. A quick fluff of my wavy hair into a slick high ponytail. Done.

I look hot.Ridiculouslyhot. The kind of hot that says I’m not just here to make out with a girl in the corner—I’m here to ruin someone’s whole life and walk away smiling.I fucking live!

The moment I step outside, the humid air wraps around me like a dare, thick and electric, but I don't even need to check a flyer or ask around. I just follow the distant thump of bass and the flicker of bad lighting until I'm standing in front of a three-story house lit up like someone gave a bunch of rich white boys access to a couple of keggers and zero adult supervision.

The flag out front says Beta Tau Delta.

The smell? Cheap beer, testosterone, and Axe body spray.

The vibe? Exactly the kind of chaos I'm in the mood for.

A guy in a backwards cap gives me a slow once-over from the porch steps, eyes dragging over my outfit like he's never seen fishnets outside of a Halloween costume. He nods like I've passed some unspoken dress code—hot girl privilege unlocked—and waves me in with a red solo cup like a blessing from the Pope of Bro Culture.

“Yo,” he slurs, already leaning too far into my space. “You know anyone here? Or are you just, like... destiny or something?”

I blink. “Seriously?”

He grins, swaying slightly. “I mean, I could be your destiny. Or at least your mistake?”

I smile sweetly. “I need, like, three more drinks before I make a mistake like you.”

He laughs, loud and sloppy, clearly not understanding sarcasm. One heavy arm drops over my shoulder like we've known each other for years, and he yells into the chaos of the house, “Yo! Someone get this girl, like, six shots—stat!”

“Whoa,” I giggle, tapping his chest twice with two fingers and sliding from underneath his sweaty ass arm. “Let’s start with two.”

Then I step around him without another glance, letting the throb of bass swallow his disappointed “Damn.”

A beat later, I hear him hoot like I just made his whole night and shout back into the house, “We got new blood!”

The door swings shut behind me, and I step into what can only be described as a live-action fever dream.

This party looks like it crawled straight out of a 2000s frat comedy and injected itself with twice the testosterone. Shirtless guys in cowboy hats and cut-off jeans are hanging from exposed wooden beams like monkeys on Red Bull. There’s a slip-and-slide running through the living room—lined with beer cans and what might be baby oil—and a girl in denim shorts and glittery cowboy boots is riding an inflatable bull in the middle of the hallway, screaming, “I am the storm!” like her life depends on it.

A terrible B-side remix of a pop song that should have stayed dead blasts through the speakers and everyone’s shrieking along off-key like it’s the national anthem.

A naked guy—completely naked—streaks past me with toilet paper tied around his head like a warband. I leap back instinctively and crash into some guy who smells like cinnamon schnapps and body spray. He leans in, way too close, and sniffs my neck like a bloodhound.

“You smell so good,” he slurs, eyes glassy and dilated. “Wanna make out?”

I blink. “Yeah, no.”

I shove past him before he can offer me anything else, weaving through a mass of tangled limbs and spilled drinks as I make my way deeper into the chaos.

Yeah. This is definitely the kind of college experience I'd be missing if it weren't for the Italian mob, my loyalty to Willow, and a British stalker who thinks he owns me.

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Luckyme.

I make my way into the kitchen, dodging a guy in a horse mask and a spilled beer waterfall, only to freeze at the doorway.

A guy is wedged between a girl's thighs as she sits on the kitchen counter, his hand clamped around her bare thigh like he's in pain—or like letting go might kill him. His fingers twitch like he's barely hanging on, face twisted in desperation..

The girl, though? Both hands buried in his hair, gripping tight, dragging him closer with the kind of force usually reserved for bar fights. She yanks his mouth to hers, devouring him like she's starving and he's the last meal on Earth.

They're not kissing. They're performing an exorcism—with tongue.

I just stand there, blinking, because I've heard the termsucking facebefore, but I neverunderstoodit—until now. This? This issuction-level intimacy. They might fuse if they're not lucky.

“I bet you ten bucks his hand doesn't make it under her skirt,” a voice drawls beside me—slow, sweet, and drenched in honey-soaked southern charm.

The words roll over me like warm sunlight, and I turn my head—and nearly forget how to breathe.

Because standing there, leaning casually against the fridge with a plastic cup in hand and the confidence of someone who knowsexactlyhow hot she is, is the most

beautiful girl I have ever witnessed in my entire fucking life.

Her red hair tumbles in loose waves around her shoulders, catching the flickering kitchen light like it's trying to set itself on fire. Her curves are the kind that make your hands twitch, soft in all the right places and framed perfectly by a cute jean mini skirt, black worn-in cowboy boots and a crop top that says power bottom --good thing I'm a top ain't it?

But worst of all, her golden hazel eyes are so vibrant I have to look away, even though she is smiling like I've already said something funny, despite the fact that I haven't even opened my mouth yet.

Holy shit.

I take a slow step forward, glancing down before looking back up at her with a lazy grin. "Sorry, you're gonna have to say that again."

She cocks her head, one brow raised, lips glossed and twisted in amusement. "Why's that?"

"Because you caught me off guard," I say with a low laugh, leaning back against the counter beside the fridge. "I didn't expect to turn around and see the love of my life."

Her snort is sharp and unapologetic. "Cute and corny?"

I place a hand dramatically over my heart, slumping just a little—just enough to play it cool while my brain is short-circuiting. Because now that I'm closer, I can see every perfect detail: the shimmer of her lip gloss, the dusting of freckles across her nose, the glint of mischief in her eyes. And of course, that smell—sweet and warm, like cinnamon sugar and the inside of a bakery.

“Wait,” I say, trying to keep my voice light. “Did you just call me cute?”

She rolls her eyes, but the corner of her mouth twitches. “Earlier, I said I bet that guy’s hand wouldn’t make it under her skirt.”

I follow her nod toward the human suction cups still attached at the mouth. The girl’s hands have moved to bunch the guy’s shirt at the collar, and his hand has crept dangerously close to the hem of her skirt—but it’s the other hand that’s interesting. It’s slipped up her side, fingers resting right under her bra strap.

I tilt my head. “He’s not going for under the skirt. He’s going for the boobs.”

“No way,” she says, turning back to me with narrowed eyes.

“Yes way,” I grin. “Watch. His hand's doing the classic slow creep. He’s gonna go for the?—”

She gasps. “Oh my God, heis.”

Right on cue, the guy’s hand slides up her side, inch by inch, until his fingers are boldly cupping her boob. She immediately pushes him back and smacks him firmly across the face.

“What the hell, Brad?” she snaps, wiping her mouth like he’s contaminated her.

Brad—because of course his name is Brad—looks confused, hand still hovering midair like he can’t quite process what just happened.

She hops off the counter, adjusting her skirt with one hand and flipping him off with the other as she storms off, muttering about boundaries and octopus hands.

Once she is out of earshot, I look back at the beautiful mystery girl next to me and smirk.

“Boom,” I say, like I just won a game show. “Welcome to Kiss and Grope 101, hosted by yours truly.”

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She laughs, full and real, the sound crackling straight through me like a match to a fuse.

“So...” she purrs, body angled into mine, her fingers lazily tracing down my arm. “I’m assuming you’re a boob girl?”

No, I’m a you girl.

I smirk. “Nah, I’m an everything girl.” I toss her a wink, and she snorts into her cup, nearly choking on her drink.

“What are you drinking, everything girl?” she teases, nodding toward my empty hand.

“Beer. Where’s the cooler?”

She jerks her chin to the corner of the kitchen. “Right there. Next to the microwave.”

I step over, pop the lid off a cheap Styrofoam cooler, and fish out a cold one. I crack it open with the edge of the counter and take a long sip before turning back to her with a grin.

“So,” I say, lifting the bottle slightly. “I won the bet. What do I get?”

She grins—slow, shameless, and dangerous—eyes dragging over me like she’s already decided what part of me to unwrap first.

“I don’t know,” she says, leaning in close. “What do you want?”

God help me, I might actually melt.

“Your name.”

She fans herself with one hand like a dramatic Southern belle, her hip cocking just enough to make my breath catch. “Well, what agentlemany you are.”

I shake my head, letting my eyes trail down her body and back up through my lashes. “Nah, not really...I’m a dog.”

“Oh, really?” she purrs, stepping in until there’s barely a breath between us.

I nod with an exaggerated pout and a crooked grin. “Oh yeah. Total horndog. I just like to know a girl’s name before I marry her.”

“And they say chivalry is dead.”

“I’m the last of a dying breed, girl,” I whisper, letting the words brush against her lips. “Now... what’s your name?”

Her eyes flick down to my mouth, then slowly back up. Her breath is shallow, warm against my skin. “I’m Brooke du Pont.”

“Jasmine,” I say softly, already curling a hand around her waist, dragging her flush against my chest. “Jasmine Rivera.”

Her cup drops somewhere to the floor with a quiet thud.

Brooke’s mouth crashes into mine, warm and hungry, her lips soft but commanding. I open for her instantly, letting her tongue slide against mine as the kiss deepens, wet and breathless. She tastes like cheap beer and cinnamon, and I can’t get enough.

Her hands grip the back of my head, pulling me closer, and I stumble a step forward, pinning her lightly against the counter. One of her legs slides between mine, thigh pressing up just enough to make my breath hitch.

I let one hand roam—fingertips skimming the curve of her waist, the dip of her lower back—while my other hand holds her jaw steady as we kiss harder, deeper. She moans into my mouth and I swear it shoots straight through me.

Her hand slides down, palm curving over my ass with a firm squeeze.

I pull back just enough to whisper, breath hot between us, “Maybe buy me dinner first?”

She grins, breathless. “I thought we were getting married.”

I smile and kiss her again—rougher this time.

“That’s right, babydoll.” I growl into her, my hands snaking around her sexy thighs and hoisting her on top of the kitchen counter. “Get used to being mine.”

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She giggles into my mouth, and I fucking lose it. She tastes just as sweet as she smells and kisses even better. Her teeth catch my bottom lip and she pulls on it teasingly.

“Fuck,” I groan, my hands roaming up the curve of her spine as she arches into me.

“Now, I lovethat my girl went out to play,” Landon’s voice cuts through the room like a blade wrapped in velvet, his teasing London accent thick and smug, “but I’m fairly certain I told you to stay home until I got back.”

I freeze mid-kiss, lips still parted, breath tangled with Brooke’s, and I want to scream.

“Fuck,” I hiss under my breath, slowly pulling away from Brooke’s mouth, her lip gloss still clinging to mine. My hands linger on her hips.

“How the fuck—” I start.

“Peach,” Landon says flatly, voice low and stern, “I’ve got a tracker on you.”

I spin around, jaw tight, eyes locked on his smug, infuriating face. He’s leaning against the doorframe like he doesn’t have a care in the world, sleeves rolled, expression dark with amusement. “Wouldn’t be a very good stalker if you didn’t,” I bite out.

He steps forward—lazy, predatory, eyes dragging over me and then flicking to Brooke like she’s a detail in the background. “You see, I do my job. But you, Peach... you don’t listen.” His voice drops an octave, velvet-wrapped steel. “You’ve

beenverynaughty.”

Before I can spit fire back, Brooke’s voice slides in behind me—cool and unfazed.

“I’m sorry,” she says, hopping down from the counter and pressing up against my back, her soft curves flush with mine. One arm slips casually around my waist. “Is this guy bothering you? Need me to call the police?”

“No,” I blurt—too fast, too defensive.

Landon’s smirk sharpens like a blade. “Didn’t know I needed to be arrested for doing my job.”

“He’s my... bodyguard,” I mumble, turning to face Brooke again.

“Bodyguard?” she snorts, one brow raised like she doesn’t buy it for a second.

“Yeah,” I say, forcing a small, tight smile. “I have to go.”

Brooke steps forward, slipping her hand beneath my chin and tugging my face gently to hers. She plants a slow kiss on my cheek, lips lingering just enough to make Landon’s jaw clench.

“Don’t worry, sugar,” she murmurs, voice honey-thick and wicked. “I’ll see you at the chapel.”

Fuck this girl --I think I might combust.

I don’t say a word as I shove past him and out the front door of the frat house, heels clacking hard against the pavement. My fists are clenched, my jaw locked. I can still taste Brooke on my lips.

Landon follows behind me like a shadow—quiet, steady, infuriatingly calm.

By the time we reach the building, I'm stomping ahead of him like I want the ground to feel my rage. I slap the elevator button with more force than necessary, eyes fixed straight ahead. My skin still burns with leftover adrenaline, and my chest feels too tight with everything I didn't get to finish.

The elevator doors slide open, and I step inside without looking back. Landon follows—of course he does—and as soon as the doors close behind us, he steps in close.

Too close.

He looms behind me, heat bleeding off his chest into my back. One hand lifts, knuckles brushing the wall beside my head. His voice is low and thick, words curling hot against my ear.

"You kiss her like that on purpose?" he murmurs, voice low and smooth. "Make me watch just to see if I'd do something about it?"

I say nothing. My jaw is too tight to risk opening my mouth.

He chuckles softly, breath curling against my skin. "See, that's the thing about me, Peach. I don't mind sharing."

His hand drags lightly down my arm leaving fireworks in his wake.

"I like watching you be bad," he whispers. "Because in the end? You still come home to me."

7

CONNER

“Take your seats. Phones away. Laptops out only if you are typing notes. If I see anyone texting under the desk, I will assume you are googling how to transfer to a different major.” I slide my briefcase on the desk, and listen to the ricochet of students running to their seats.

Every third semester, I teach two classes.

Forensic Biochemistry and this one: Crime Scene Reconstruction. Upper division electives. Packed with criminal justice majors, pre-med hopefuls, and the occasional misguided soul who thinks true crime podcasts are equivalent to academic rigor.

I wear a very clean, sharply tailored navy suit. No patterns. No distractions. My shirt is always white, my tie is always dark, and my shoes are shined to a mirror gloss. My thin-rimmed black square glasses are cleaned to a hospital grade, and I spend the first class going over the syllabus and thinning out the herd of students who think these classes will produce anything less than perfection.

Against my better judgement, and more of the recommendation of my psychiatrist I still mask the first day of class, as I do every day.

I smile when expected. Nod at the right moments. Laugh when the conversation dips and someone needs a cue to carry on. It's exhausting—keeping track of the expressions, the eye contact, the tone modulation. The pantomime of being normal.

I argue that I teach because it's one of the only roles that allows me to not pretend. I don't need to charm anyone. I don't need to make friends. Students expect cold. They expect distance. They expect answers delivered with authority, not warmth. I give them exactly what they come for, but Dr. Lynn said the first day is introductory and that meant students expect to be welcomed.

As I walk across the front of the class I snort at the thought. I didn't graduate from my undergrad at sixteen from being welcomed. I graduated summa cum laude by keeping my head in my books, and being correct --- every single time.

"This is Crime Scene Reconstruction. That means precision, deduction, and memory. If you cannot remember what you wore yesterday or where you parked your car, you do not belong in this class." I bark.

In both of my classes the males are mostly underdeveloped pricks—swaggering in with oversized egos and no discipline, too used to being loud and unchallenged. The females are more complex. Half of them blush when I call on them. The other half wear short skirts and sit with their legs wide open, as if the power of suggestion might buy them a grade curve.

They normally develop inconvenient crushes.

It never amounts to anything. I grade cleanly. I don't touch. I don't encourage. But I see it. In the stares. The body language. The way their voices shift. The infatuation always fades by midterms, when the curve kicks in and I start handing back D's, and share that I don't believe in extra credit.

And that's fine. I don't need admiration. I prefer to be ignored. I prefer silence. I prefer methodical practices, and those normally cannot include other people.

Except Landon.

He is the only chaos I can tolerate, though I do often wonder what it would feel like to hold his corpse.

Cold. Quiet. Still. Finally, he'd shut up. I smile as I turn back to the class.

"There are exactly sixty-three of you," I begin, eyes sweeping the room without expression. "By the end of this semester, fourteen of you will have dropped this class within the next two weeks. Three will become too overwhelmed to attend any longer. Twenty-one of you will get C's and convince yourselves that C's are perfectly fine. Twelve will scrape a B minus. Eight will wait too long and get a W, which will require a fifteen-page paper on the logistics of failure."

I pause, as I swipe a stack of syllabuses out of my briefcase.

"Three of you will get a B plus. One of you will drop out of university and blame me for your failure in life. And only one of you—" I hold up the stack before dropping it on a student's desks, "—will earn an A. Take one and pass it."

A girl in the front row raises her hand, the type that already has hearts doodled in her planner. Jet black hair, a glittery barrette that reads *Boss Bitch*, and a skirt that looks like it was cut from a belt. She licks at a cherry-red lollipop, with a heated look in her eyes.

I sigh. "Yes?"

"How do you know only one of us will get an A?" she asks, breathy and sugary, like an off-brand Marilyn Monroe singing *Happy Birthday* to the president.

I chuckle to myself, in a way that elicits an entire row of girls to flush in different shades of pink. "Because only one of you is actually smart enough to be in this class."

“If your success rate is only one out of sixty-three, doesn’t that prove you’re not as good of a professor as you claim to be?”

I don’t even look up from the syllabus. “Name.”

“Justin Davis.”

I glance at him. Letterman jacket, backward cap, arms crossed like he's auditioning for a frat house documentary. Muddy sneakers kicked up on the back of the chair in front of him. That puffed-up, performative smugness only testosterone and mediocrity can produce.

“Tell me, Mr. Davis,” I say, finally raising my eyes, “are you familiar with the Shepherd-Coleman case? The serial dismemberment murders in Manchester—cleanest crime scenes on record. Eight victims. Not a single viable DNA trace collected by the initial forensic team.”

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He shifts in his seat. “No.”

I nod slowly. “Not surprised.”

I close the syllabus with a soft snap and lean back against the corner of my desk.

“Do you at least know what type of cleaner the killer used? The one that rendered every standard forensic method useless and forced the department to bring in a specialist?”

Davis straightens, and the embarrassment crawls up his “No.”

The door slams open—loud enough to slice through my sentence.

The class turns. I don’t.

Not at first.

Because I don’t reward disruptions.

But when I do glance up, she’s already halfway down the aisle.

Blonde hair streaked with red, soaked and clinging to her jawline. Half-shaved scalp exposed like a threat. A white t-shirt molded to her frame, red bra vivid beneath. Combat boots. Baggy jeans hanging low on her hips. A jacket limp over her arm.

“Here class, you have two examples of my non-A students.” I announce, as my heart

ricochets irregularly in my chest. “An unintelligent jock, and a soaking wet late student on the first day of class.”

I watch the girl’s flushed strawberry cheeks as she ducks into a row three from the front. “Now, Miss...”

“Rivera.” She answers sharply, and my head shoots up with unnatural interest. So, this is the girl Landon asked me to watch. A flicker of static under my skin. Heat coils low in my spine. My hands still.

For a moment—just a second—I forget how to breathe. Then her eyes catch mine. And I know.

No one else in the room sees it—but she does. The real me. Not the person masking to be human, because I know the look she gives me. It feels like she knows the monster underneath, like she just stood in my abyss and screamed to be let out. The version no one should see before their last breath.

It’s a lightning strike—sudden, electric, dangerous. My lungs tighten, chest burning like I’ve just come up from underwater. Her gaze slices through me, clean and sharp. My carefully crafted armor buckles without warning. The fear rushes across her features, the soft part of her lips. I want to consume her. I want to hunt her.

I force myself to look away. To move. To reset my tone.

“Miss Rivera, do you know the Shepard-Coleman case—” I don’t even finish the sentence before she cuts in, voice steady, clear, and maddeningly confident.

“The Manchester case,” she says. “You were brought in as a specialist.”

My brow lifts. Barely. But the smirk that tugs at the corner of my mouth betrays

me. She's a fan.

Most students Google me just enough to pad their opening emails with praise. They parrot articles, mention old cases like they've done more than skim headlines. But this was one of my earliest successes, not covered by the media and only known if you are a student of forensics.

I clear my throat and lean a hip against the desk.

"Correct," I say. "Eight victims. No viable DNA. The local forensics unit botched the scene, mistook phosphate-free cleaning agents for common industrial bleach. They scrubbed the walls and lost everything."

Jasmine crosses one leg over the other, unfazed. Her grey eyes meet mine like she's waiting for me to go on.

"The room was sterile," I continue, slow and deliberate. "Not an inch of DNA to be found, some would say an instant cold-case."

"But you recovered a mitochondrial trace embedded in the grout. Non-nuclear. Contaminated. But usable. That was enough to rebuild the blood spatter trajectory and prove the killer's angle of entry."

She hums the last part like it's just another fact. Like I didn't spend three weeks living inside that scene, sleeping four hours a night, methodically tearing through chemical residues and shadows.

"As I recall," she adds, flipping her screen open with wet fingers, "they called the reconstruction an eighth wonder of the world."

I smirk. Against my fucking will.

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My eyes lock on hers, burning. Grey. Steady. Unapologetic. She's a fucking know-it-all.

She says it all so casually, like she's reading a list of ingredients off the back of a cereal box. And maybe that's what throws me—this unsettling mix of competence and indifference. Like she's not trying to impress me. Like she already knows I'm watching.

And I am. Too much. What the fuck is this feeling? This—Desire.

It claws up my spine, hungry and sharp, dragging heat into places I've spent years locking down. I haven't felt it in ages—not like this. Not in a flashfire burst that leaves my throat dry and my hands tighter around the edge of the desk.

I blink. Look away. Reset.

“Correct,” I say, voice low, measured. “They did say that. Though the phrase was used by a tabloid that spelled my name wrong.”

A few students chuckle. I don't.

I turn toward the board. My chest is tight. My pulse is louder than it should be. She's still watching me. I feel it.

“Mr. Davis,” I say, redirecting as I turn on my introductory slide, “in case you were wondering—that's why one in sixty-three earns an A. Because only one of you can answer my questions.”

The rest of class continues without incident and I avoid Miss Rivera like she is the fucking plague. At the end of class, the projector clicks off with a faint hum, and the lights flicker brighter as the screen retracts as I speak.

“Your assignment,” I say, tone crisp, “is to select any closed forensic case and analyze where the investigation failed before it succeeded. I expect a three-page preliminary breakdown by next class. Proper citations. No Wikipedia.”

Chairs scrape back. Bags zip. The noise level rises as students start filing out in clusters—murmuring, already gossiping about who will drop out, why I am so cold, or how hot they think I am.

I begin to shut down my laptop, instinctively reaching to gather the folders on the edge of the desk, when?—

“Miss Rivera,” I hear myself say.

My voice cuts through the buzz. She stops halfway to the door. Turns. Those eyes again—storm-grey and drenched in the most delectable fear.

“Stay a moment.”

I adjust my cufflinks, slide on my jacket in one smooth motion, and reach for my black folio. I feel her before I hear her. That subtle shift in the air. That quiet, steady pressure against my spine that lets me know I'm being watched.

“I didn't mean to be late. I had some complications this morning, and look,” her voice wavers, and I hear her swallow as she takes a squeaky step forward. “I take your class seriously. I want to be a forensic psychologist, and I have dreamed of taking your class.”

I tighten my grip on my phone. My fingers twitch against the smooth surface of the case. I want to look at her again when she says I have dreamed of taking your class. Why does that sound so good? The idea of her dreaming about me.

“After today,” I say evenly, “I’ll be locking the door at the start of class. I do not accept tardiness.”

She tucks a damp strand of hair behind her ear, eyes flicking up to mine. “Yes, sir.”

I arch a brow. “Don’t call me that.”

She smirks. “Noted.”

A beat of silence rolls through us, and I know I should dismiss her. I should end this. Should tell her to go. But I don’t.

Instead, I tilt my head, and I let my gaze roam—just once.

Her clothes are still clinging in places the heat of the building hasn’t touched yet. That white shirt, no longer translucent but still hugging her chest. The red bra beneath, vivid in memory. Her jeans hang low, belt undone. Boots dripping faintly onto the tile. She looks like a punk chaos goddess, not as pristine and clean cut as my usual attractions.

“If you’re serious about this class...” I drawl, slower now, “then prove it.”

I step just slightly closer. The heady scent of bourbon and vanilla invades my senses, and I damn there close my eyes in appreciation.

“Be on time. In sunshine... rain...” My eyes lower, sweep across the slow curve of her shoulder, the flex of her jaw. “...snow.”

She doesn't look away. Not once. And her lips curve into her cheek as she speaks breathlessly. "Yes, Professor Kilgore."

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It shouldn't do anything to me. But it does. Fuck me.

I feel it—the shift.

The careful, clinical mask I wear every goddamn day fractures, and the darkness underneath begins to seep through the cracks. I don't stop it. I can't. Not with her staring at me like that—like she knows she's poking the beast and wants to see it move.

Her eyes widen, just slightly, when she catches the way my pupils dilate. The way the air grows heavier, sharper, like the moment before a blade sinks in.

She inhales softly—like instinct. Like her body's responding to the danger around her before her mind can make sense of it.

And now I'm thinking about her pulse—her heart—beating just beneath that red bra I can't unsee. Wondering how fast it's hammering now, how close she is to feeling what I'm fighting not to show.

My gaze drifts—slow, measured—down the column of her throat. I watch it flutter.

She knows. She fucking knows.

I step back, just enough to breathe again.

“Good,” I say, voice rougher than I intend. “Then we understand each other.”

She nods, but there's fire in her eyes now—curiosity, interest, something more dangerous.

And I know I should leave. I should say nothing else. I should forget the way her voice sounds when it dips low and submissive around my name.

But I don't. Instead, I reach past her—closer than I should be—and grab the syllabus from the other corner of my desk. The one she missed because she was late and I hand it to her without ceremony.

“You're dismissed, Jasmine.” It comes out rougher than I intend. A snarl, not a statement. My voice—usually cold and sharp—rolls low between us, coated in the dark growl of my natural voice.

Her fingers snatch the paper like it burns her, and for a second—just a second—I almost pounce.

“Thank you,” she breathes, and the moment she turns on her heel, I feel her absence like a vacuum. She practically bolts, boots echoing against tile as she races out the door like I might chase her down and pin her to the wall.

And the funnypart?

I had to grip the edge of my desk to stop myself from doing exactly that.

The bad part?

When the door finally swings shut behind her, sealing the air between us with a heavy thunk, I look down?—

And realize the desk is splintered in my hand.

JASMINE

The week of classes was as shitty as I expected.

It started off with Landon being pissy because he couldn't charm his way into my classes, or on campus for that matter given that he's not a student. Resulting in not only a tracking device in my phone, bags and for some reason the sole of my three pairs of shoes as he and Cast find a legitimate reason for him to be on campus other than the vague 'for my protection.' While I was ecstatic about getting some space from him, Landon has been on my ass every day about suspicious activity and being aware of my surroundings.

And I will never admit this, even under perjury or even death, but I kind of needed him this week. I thought redying the streaks in my hair to red last night would give me superpower or confidence, but I was dead wrong. I went to the wrong campus—like full-on wrong. Not just the wrong building. No, I pulled up to West Haven, which is apparently not the main campus, and wandered around like a lost freshman with a trust fund and no internal GPS. By the time I realized my English 101 class was in Drake Hall and not Drakos Hall (which, by the way, is the dormitory that holds the all male invite-only society, The August Order), it was already over.

Lunch was a cold tuna sandwich eaten in the corner of the Free Meal Hall because I showed up six minutes before they closed to prep for dinner. The bread was wet. The mayo was questionable. And the girl across from me asked if I was a commuter student in the tone people reserve for homeless cats.

But the real highlight? The absolute icing on my garbage fire cake?

I think Conner Kilgore—THE Conner Kilgore, my literal academic idol—wants to

eat me. And not in the fun, tongue-on-thigh, ruin-my-life kind of way. No, he wants to eat me in the "Let's turn Jasmine Rivera into jerky and hang her in the woods like a warning sign" kind of way.

The man looked at me like I was a problem he couldn't wait to solve. Like he was doing the math on my blood spatter pattern just for fun. And the worst part?

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I think I liked it.

God, what is wrong with me?

I sat in the back of my second class just vibrating with anxiety, half-expecting Kilgore to bust through the door and toss me a scalpel like, "Let's play autopsy, love."

And to really round out this dream day?

I lost my wallet.

Yup. Somewhere between making out with Brooke du Pont—who I haven't stopped thinking about for more than seven seconds at a time—and stomping out of that frat party like I was God's angriest bisexual, my wallet just poofed. Gone. With my cash, student ID, and the last ounce of dignity I was carrying in the zippered pouch.

So now I've spent my morning canceling credit cards that only worked half the time anyway, filing for a replacement license that won't arrive for three weeks, and calling the Haven University Lost & Found so many times I think I've traumatized the sophomore answering the phones.

I swear, if Landon makes one smug British comment when I get off campus, I'm going to dropkick him into the ornamental fountain outside the lobby.

And maybe drown myself in it after.

I finally leave my last class of the day, Introduction to Computer Science, in a daze,

mentally scraping my brain off the sidewalk like roadkill. My skull is pounding from too many acronyms, not enough air conditioning, and the soul-crushing realization that coding is not just dragging things into pretty boxes.

What I need—what my very soul demands—is a pound of sour gummies, an extra-large hot mocha latte with coconut milk, and at least seventeen uninterrupted minutes of silence so I can properly grieve the death of this absolute shitshow of a day.

My backpack thuds against my spine with every step, and I'm already fumbling with my phone to order coffee when I hear it?—

That voice.

That honey-glazed, sugar-tipped, lemonade-in-July voice that makes me forget I hate this school, this sun, and my entire bloodline.

“Well hey there, sugar.”

Brooke. I freeze like I've been caught mid-crime, turning my head before the rest of me remembers how to move. And there she is.

Painted-on jeans that hug her hips like sin. Tall brown boots with just enough scuff to make her look like she could stomp a man out and still get asked to prom. And a low-cut, ruffled crop top that definitely wasn't made for studying. No, this top is designed specifically to incite chaos and make me forget how zippers work.

She's leaning against a bench, twirling a straw in her iced drink, golden-brown eyes lit up as she smirks at me. One arm rests casually on the back of the bench, pulling her top even lower like a trap, while the other lifts her drink to her lips in slow motion.

I blink. Swallow. Blink again.

“Hey,” I croak out, and immediately hate myself. Hey? Really? That’s the best I’ve got?

Brooke grins, sliding her sunglasses up into her hair, and steps toward me with the kind of confidence that should be illegal on campus. “You look like you have either gotten beaten, or mugged today.”

I exhale sharply, a reluctant laugh bubbling in my throat. “Well I have been running around this campus like a lost duck. Got stuck in the rain twice and got raked over the coals by a demon in a professor’s suit. So yeah, pretty accurate.”

“Mmm. Poor thing,” she purrs, tipping her head as her gaze drags over me from backpack to boots. “Want me to kiss it better?”

I chuckle, and toss my bag next to her on the bench. “The way I want to kiss you, isn’t really PG-13, wifey.”

“Wifey?” She chuckles.

“I told you I was going to marry you,” I smirk, moving closer to her, the smell of warm cinnamon bakery treats invades all my senses and I feel drunk off of her. “You didn’t think I’d forget, did you babydoll?”

“Of course not,” she drawls, her hands loosely curving around my neck and drawing me even closer.

I swallow thickly. Her face is barely inches from mine now, eyes lidded, lips parted just enough to tempt sin.

“I don’t make empty promises,” I murmur, my hands sliding to her hips, thumbs slipping just under the hem of her ruffle top. “And I meant it when I said I was gonna marry you.”

Brooke grins slow and wicked, her southern accent thick like syrup as she leans in. “Then you better put a ring on it, sugar. Or at least buy me dinner before you start undressing me in public.”

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I laugh, the sound coming out softer than I expect—almost breathless. “No promises on the undressing. You shouldn’t wear things that make me question my entire sexuality in broad daylight.”

Her fingers tighten on the back of my neck, pulling me closer until our noses nearly touch. “And you shouldn’t look at me like you already own me.”

“Maybe I do,” I whisper, and fuck, the way she shivers just slightly in my grip almost sends me over the edge.

She smirks, one hand sliding down my shoulder before pulling away from me, and I shiver like a cold front just blew up my spine. “I have something for you.”

“Something for me?” I smirk. “You’re sweet as pie.”

“Mmmhmm.” She hums, sliding my wallet between us.

I let go of her and grab it. “Shit, where did you find it?”

“Before I tell you. Promise to get drinks with me next Saturday at The Bean.”

“Done deal,” I smirk, sliding the wallet into my back pocket.

She rises off the bench, leans in close—close enough that I catch another hit of that cinnamon-warm, trouble-soaked perfume—and murmurs against my ear:

“I stole it.”

My skin runs cold, and I take a step back like she just doused me in ice water. “Stole it?”

Brooke straightens, not backing down. Not even a blink of guilt in those honey eyes. “Yeah,” she says simply, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “But not like that. I didn’t take anything inside. Cards, cash, ID—everything’s still there. Swear on my mama’s horse.”

I blink, heart still doing an uncoordinated tap dance. “So you just... stole my wallet. Like a little souvenir?”

She sighs and sits back down on the bench, arms draped across the backrest. “Okay. Confession time, since you’re clearly two seconds away from tackling me.”

I raise a brow but don’t interrupt.

“I used to be a klepto,” she says.

“Used to be?” I snort.

“Still am... I’m in therapy, but look—I liked you, and I wanted something of yours. So, I took it while we were making out. Not a big deal.”

I snatch up my bag, anger rising fast and sharp in my chest. “Not a big deal? I just spent all morning canceling every card I own, ordering a new ID, and spiraling like a lunatic because I thought someone robbed me—and it was you? You stole my wallet while we were making out?”

Brooke’s smile flickers. Just for a second. “Okay—yeah, I see how that sounds.”

I gape at her. “Sounds? It is insane!”

She crosses her arms, jaw tightening as that confident, Southern charm comes out a little raw with irritation. “I didn’t take anything out of it, Jasmine.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Then what is the point?” she fires back, stepping toward me. “That I liked you so much I did something stupid?”

“Doing something stupid is biting my lip a little too hard!” I snap, throwing my hands in the air. “This—this—” My voice breaks, and I falter, heat crawling up my neck. “I don’t even have words to define this.”

“You don’t have to make me a monster.”

I stare at her. Hard. “You stole from me.”

“I didn’t do it to hurt you. I didn’t pawn your stuff or hack your cards. I just—” She stops. Drags a hand through her hair. “I don’t know, okay? I liked you. I panicked. I wanted a reason to see you again and I didn’t know how to ask for your number like a normal person.”

“I don’t know about dating someone who steals from me.” I say flatly, looking everywhere, but at her. My eyes land on a man leaning against the far gates, eyes locked on me.

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“Let me make it up to you,” she pleads, and I roll my eyes. “A date, sugar. Just a date. You were head over heels for me just moments ago.”

I fix my bag on my shoulder and watch as the man takes a picture of me, and then waves smugly. Shit.

Brooke turns to follow my gaze, but I quickly shake my head. “I have to go.”

“Jas—”

“I said I’ll think about it.”

I walk off before she can stop me. The knot in my stomach tightens with every step. I glance behind me.

The man starts walking. Oh fuck me, if it can get worse, it always will -- Murphy’s law.

I duck around a row of dorm buildings, pulling out my phone with shaking fingers, and hit the one number I probably shouldn’t have memorized, but do.

Landon picks up on the second ring. “Peach.”

“I’m being followed,” I say, low and fast. “Tall guy. Neat clothes. No backpack. Looks like he irons his socks.”

“How close?” Landon’s voice drops an octave.

“About a hundred feet back. Picking up speed.”

“Where are you?”

“Behind Briar Hall. Cutting toward West Commons.”

“Good. Turn right at the next maintenance shed. You’ll see an alley between the dumpster and the brick wall with the spray paint dicks. I’ll meet you there.”

“I swear to God, if this is a setup and you’re gonna murder me?—”

“Peach,” he growls. “Just move.”

I jump at his command and push my short legs to walk even faster than before. I almost slam into the wall as I turn into the alley, shadowed by the academic buildings, narrow and lined with broken glass and the stench of wet metal. My boots echo off the walls as I hurry down it, breath catching in my throat when I hear the man’s footsteps behind me picking up so much speed, I almost trip and fall over my own two feet trying to keep as much space between us as possible.

I glance over my shoulder.

He’s there, my stubby legs burning as I try to move faster than I am humanly capable of. My heart slams against my ribs as I stumble forward, nearly tripping over a loose bottle.

“Landon,” I hiss into the phone. “Where the hell are you?—”

I spin around again preparing to claw his fucking eyes out when my eyes lock onto the scariest, and possibly hottest scene I have ever seen in my life.

Landon has the man by the throat, slammed against the graffiti-tagged brick wall like a ragdoll. One hand locked tight around the man's windpipe, the other pressed flat against his chest like he's pinning a moth to a board. The guy's feet dangle, heels kicking against the wall with short, panicked jerks.

Landon's face is blank. Cold in a way I have never seen, and probably would shit my pants if that look was ever directed at me.

"Lan—" I start, but he doesn't look at me.

His voice is low, barely more than a growl. "You thought you could touch what is mine?"

The man wheezes, eyes bulging, lips turning a sick shade of gray.

"You thought I wouldn't find you? That I won't eradicate a wasteman like you?" Landon snarls, slamming him harder into the wall, brick dust puffing out behind his head. "That I wouldn't rip you apart in the middle of this alley and leave your body for the fucking raccoons?"

"Landon!" I rush forward, grabbing his arm. "Stop!"

He still doesn't look at me. His finger flexing along the man's windpipe as if this is nothing, as if attempted murder isn't a horrific thing.

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“Landon, please.” My voice cracks. “You’re gonna kill him.”

His eyes finally flick to mine—and for a second, I don’t recognize them. That ocean-blue is swallowed in darkness, and it feels like looking into the eye of a storm that wants to destroy something just to feel calm again.

But then... He blinks. Breathes. The pressure in his hand loosens slightly.

The man gasps, sucking in air like it’s the last thing he’ll ever taste.

Landon leans in, so close the guy flinches like a dog expecting a bullet. “You’re still breathing because she told me to stop,” Landon whispers in a dramatic manner, that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand, and the man below him quivers, eyes darting to me as if I am his only salvation. “Now do the smart thing.”

He shoves the man to the ground. “Thank her.”

The guy scrambles up on all fours, wheezing. “T-thank you,” he croaks at me, face twisted with terror, before bolting like the ground behind him might explode.

Landon watches him disappear. Then turns to me.

His chest is rising hard. His hands still flexing like they’re reluctant to be empty.

I don’t move. Don’t speak. I just stare at him—this man who smells like salt and smoke and violence, who holds people like they’re weapons and yet listens when I say stop. I stare at him like he holds the answers to life, because he holds more secrets to

the universe than I do.

“Peach...” His voice lowers, rough with adrenaline and need. “You did good. You called me.”

“I didn’t know who else to call.”

He steps closer. His hand grazes my jaw. Just once. Just long enough for the heat to replace the panic.

“You were a good girl for me,” he murmurs, voice gone dark and gravel-thick—like whiskey poured over fire. “You listened. You trusted me.”

“You’re supposed to protect me.” I say just above a whisper, as his hand curls around the back of my neck, rough and steady, pulling me into the space where his breath hits mine. He smells like smoke and rain and danger barely held together with skin.

“Well, then Peach, I am going to need you to do something else.” He whispers against my lips, stealing every ounce of oxygen from me.

“What?”

“Kiss me,” he breathes, his grip tightening in my hair. My heart jumps out of my chest as I look at the ocean in his lidded eyes. “To keep the monster quiet. He’s...loud tonight.”

“Landon—” I gasp, instinctively pulling back, but his hand is already at my waist, anchoring me in place.

“I would never hurt you,” he growls, low and deadly-soft, voice scraping against my jaw like a blade dragged over silk. “But you made me release my prey, Peach. How

am I supposed to feed him now?"

My breath catches as his mouth ghosts the edge of my skin. My body ignites, panic and want bleeding together into something molten.

"Just a kiss?" I whisper, catching his gaze—no longer oceanic, but nearly black.

His lips barely move. "Just a taste."

I blink. Once. Twice. And then I nod.

I don't mean to.

But it's already too late.

His mouth crashes into mine with no warning, no hesitation—all need. It's not soft. It's not sweet. It's devastation.

He crashes into me with a hunger that feels like war—like he's fighting something inside himself and I'm the only weapon that works. His mouth moves over mine like it belongs there, like he's claiming territory, tongue rough and deep, pulling breath after breath from me until I'm dizzy.

My fingers claw at the front of his shirt before I even realize I've moved, gripping him like I'll fall without him. He groans low in his chest, something primal and broken, and deepens the kiss until I swear the ground tips sideways.

His teeth catch my bottom lip—sharp enough to sting—and I gasp. He swallows the sound, pulling me tighter, pressing me into the wall like he wants to bury himself in me, and for one terrifying, electric second, I let him.

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I let it consume me.

I lethemconsume me.

I feed thefuckingbeast.

9

JASMINE

As a child,I never slept with the lights off.

I had glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling of my bedroom—cheap plastic things that peeled at the corners and lost their glow by midnight. When those faded, I kept a cigarette lighter under my pillow. I'd flick it on just to watch the flame, warm and alive, dancing like it could chase the monsters out from under my bed.

When I lost the lighter, all I had left was the blue light spilling in from the living room—the TV left on all night. That soft electric glow under the crack of the door, flickering with late-night talk shows and 'I Love Lucy' reruns. And when all else failed I had the moaning of my mother, her pain, love, anger flowed through the trailer as easy as air, and I swallowed it willingly, eagerly even.

If my mother had a boyfriend, I slid my toy box in front of my door and slept with my shoes on. Something my mother taught me at four.

Men are unpredictable,she'd say, lighting a cigarette with one hand, stirring boxed

mac and cheese with the other. They say they love you, and maybe they even mean it. But they always love something more.

Other people. Younger people. Hurting people. Money. Drugs. Control.

Men will always love something more than you, she'd murmur, eyes heavy with an incoming high, her voice thick with resignation. And all women want is to be loved, right?

She never said it bitterly. Just... truthfully. Like it was a fact as fixed as gravity. Like heartbreak was a birthright passed from mother to daughter in place of lullabies.

And maybe it was.

Her first couple of boyfriends were kind enough to me. Mean enough to her. The kind of men who opened jars and doors, but not their mouths when she cried. They came and went like bad weather—never staying long, always leaving for someone better, someplace better.

I mean not everyone left for better. My father left because he loved music more than he loved my mother. More than he loved me. At some point, he loved drugs more than music, when he came back home drugged out and desperate it was boyfriend #4 who got rid of him for good.

It was boyfriend number four who scared me so much I pissed in a bucket instead of walking past him to use the bathroom.

He used to fall asleep on the couch in just his boxers, the TV playing old WWE reruns on a low, endless loop. He never turned the volume down, just let the sounds of grunts, slams, and yelling fill the trailer until morning. He'd sit there half-awake, half-drunk, slouched deep into the cushions with his legs spread wide, like he ran the

place. Like he paid for anything.

There was something wrong about him.

Not loud wrong. Not obvious.

But the kind of wrong that made the air feel heavier when he walked into a room. Like everything got a little quieter. Tighter.

His eyes were the worst part.

They never stayed where they were supposed to. Always looking too long, too low. His stare felt thick, like it stuck to your skin. I'd catch him watching me and feel my stomach twist. Not because of what he said—he never said much—but because of what he didn't. Because of what I couldn't prove.

Just the way he looked at me made me feel like I needed a shower.

I avoided him as much as I could. Kept my door locked. Slept with my shoes on. Slept in layers, even when it was hot.

One night, I couldn't help it. I was twelve and thirsty, and the water jug in my room was empty. So I crept into the kitchen barefoot, careful not to let the floorboards squeak.

He was already there. Sitting at the table in the dark. No shirt. Just staring.

“You always this quiet, kid?” he said, voice low and wet-sounding, like something rotting in his throat.

I froze.

His eyes moved over me in a heavily slow motion, like it was difficult for his eyes to stay above my chin. I wore one of my old childhood tank tops, stretched thin at the straps and too loose around the chest. I crossed my arms, trying to shrink.

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“I’m trying not to wake anyone up,” I mumbled, trying not to let my voice shake as I moved to the cabinet, sliding an empty glass into my hand.

He walked up behind me, slow like a hunt, and brushed his hand along my arm. I flinched so hard I dropped the glass. It shattered across the floor.

He grabbed my shoulder—not hard, not soft. Just wrong.

“I have to tell your mom, that you’re growin’ up,” he said. “That top’s too small for you.”

Then he tugged the strap. Snapped it. Ripped it.

That sound—the soft rrrrip of cotton—cut louder than the glass.

I didn’t scream. Iran.

Out the front door, barefoot and breathless. The night air slammed into my lungs like a second skin. I didn’t stop running until I hit the edge of the trailer park. Then I collapsed into the faded lawn chair next to Old Man Greaves’ satellite dish, curled in on myself like a dying animal..

That was the mildest of the dreams that dragged me out of sleep in the dead of night. I don’t know what set them off—three weeks here without a single nightmare, and now suddenly, they won’t stop.

Lately, I just lie there for hours, staring at the ceiling, letting the flickering shadows

from the nightlife outside spill across my walls like ghosts I can't shake.

When my insomnia turned to hunger I found myself in the kitchen, elbow deep in my grandmother's parker house roll recipe. It was one of the things she taught me as a child, arguably the last piece of her legacy.

The smell of flour, butter, and yeast settles around me, and I focus on the task in front of me. Measuring. Mixing. Kneading. The motions are familiar—things I've done a hundred times before. There's comfort in the repetition, in doing something with my hands that has a clear beginning, middle, and end. It keeps my mind steady. Focused.

"Well, shit," Landon drawls from the doorway, arms crossed over his bare chest. "Tell me what I have to do to keep you looking like this every morning."

I glance up, my hands still sunk into the dough. He's leaning against the doorframe--- shirtless. Landon is fucking shirtless. A sprawl of black tattoos curves across his chest and crawls over his shoulder—bold strokes that look less like art and more like somethingspreading.

My eyes track the jagged edges, the sharp turns of ink that bite into his ribs, and then fall—against my better judgment—down to the grey sweatpants slungwaytoo low on his hips. His defined V almost makes me jump out of my skin. I drag my gaze back up—his hair hangs loose, messy around his face, and there's that smirk. That cocky, knowing,infuriatingsmirk.

"Maybe I should wake you up like this every morning," he says, voice thick with sleep and heat. "So you'll keep looking at me like that."

A flush rises fast across my neck, burning into my ears. I turn sharply back to the counter, pressing my palms into the dough like it insulted me.

“Do you ever announce yourself like a normal person?” I mutter, rolling the dough harder than necessary.

He smirks, his gaze lazily dragging down my flour-dusted tank top to the curve of my thighs. “Didn’t realize you baked when you couldn’t sleep. It’s...weirdly sexy.”

“Yeah, nothing says ‘take me now’ like flour, buttermilk and trauma,” I deadpan, brushing hair out of my face with my forearm.

Landon pushes off the frame and stalks towards me with lazy steps. “You think I’m kidding, Peach, but I’m watching you make bread with that bitey little scowl, and it’s doing things to me.”

“Are those things bakery-related or should I be concerned?”

He stops just short of the counter, palms braced on the edge. His eyes burn into mine, lower lip caught between his teeth. “Both.”

I swallow, suddenly aware of how small the kitchen is. How warm the air feels now. How close he is.

He leans in, dipping his head so his voice brushes my ear. “You know, if you ever need help with... kneading... I’m good with my hands.”

I roll my eyes so hard it nearly resets my brain. “Do you flirt like this with every girl covered in flour at three a.m., or am I just lucky?”

“Only the ones I lose sleep over.”

And fuck, the way he says it—half-teasing, half-raw—makes something stir low in my stomach.

I look away. Grab the rolling pin. Pretend I'm not flushed.

“You're not getting any if you keep talking.”

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He grins like I've already fed him. "Peach," he murmurs, stepping back with a wink, "I am getting some."

"Oh yeah?" I shoot back, one brow arched. "How exactly are you 'getting some'?"

Before I can blink, Landon steps forward, wraps his arms around my waist, and lifts me like I weigh nothing. I yelp, hands flying to his shoulders, the dough barely saved as I swipe it to the side a second before my ass hits the counter.

Right into the flour. A puff of white explodes into the air around us.

"Landon!" I cough, laughing despite myself. "You got floureeverywhere."

"I warned you," he says, grinning. "I told you I was getting some."

"Of the biscuits." I giggle. "I meant the biscuits."

"Oh, well, that too." He chuckles, looping his hands underneath my thighs and pulling me closer to him as he steps between my legs.

My core settles right against the hard line of his V, and a shiver rips through me—sharp and needy. Heat coils low in my belly, thick and aching. He stands there between my legs, solid and warm, like he knows exactly what he's doing to me.

He lowers his forehead to mine, breath brushing my lips, our mouths so close I can already feel the ghost of his kiss. My pulse stutters. My thighs tighten around his hips. I remember—too vividly—what a few hours ago felt like. How it feels to feed his

beast. To give in. To burn.

My eyes are locked on the pink plush of his lips, drunk on the nearness, the weight of his body between mine. He's not even kissing me yet, and I'm already unraveling.

He speaks, and I see the question form on his lips before I hear it.

"Why are you up so early, Peach?" he asks, voice low, heat curling in every syllable.

"Ever heard of midnight cravings?"

His hands slide up my thigh, fingertips brushing the hem of my sleep shorts. The touch is featherlight—but it shoots straight through me. I gasp, sharp and involuntary, like he's branded me.

"Yeah," he murmurs, tilting his head until his eyes catch mine—those darkened, ocean-blue eyes now heavy with desire...for me. "Just not the kind that come with tossing... turning... and sweat."

"Were you watching me?"

His jaw tightens just slightly, but he doesn't look away. "No, I heard you whimper," he says softly. "I only come into your room when I hear you scream."

"But...you don't wake me up."

"I don't want to scare you," he says, voice quiet but firm. "I don't want to be another shadow in the dark. I stay close enough to make sure you're safe... but not close enough to make it worse."

"Why?" I scoff, moving back but he leans in.

His lips ghosts over mine as he speaks.

“Because I know I’m one of the only men you let touch you,” he says, thumb brushing my inner-thigh. “And I don’t want to lose that privilege.”

My breath catches, chest rising just enough for my lips to brush his.

He’s so close I can feel the heat of his skin, the steady press of his thumb against the sensitive skin of my thigh, the quiet storm behind every word he’s just said.

I force a laugh—quiet, tight—and lean back just enough to blink the spell away.

“I like my secrets the same way you like your beast,” I say, voice cool despite the flush crawling up my neck. “Caged. Controlled. Only let out when absolutely necessary.”

His brow lifts. The smirk returns—slower this time. Darker. “You don’t know anything about my beast.”

“I know how to feed it,” I murmur, letting the tip of my tongue graze his bottom lip.

His breath stutters—just slightly—but he recovers fast, voice like velvet wrapped around a growl. “Nah,” he coos, gripping my thighs like it’s the only thing keeping him grounded. “That was a snack, Peach. Don’t flatter yourself.”

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My stomach flips, but before I can shoot something back, he leans in closer—eyes locked on mine.

“But don’t use my beast to distract from the point.” His voice dips low, rough and direct. “Why do you have night terrors?”

I lean back against the counter, elbows pressing into the cool marble, the distance between us suddenly feeling tighter. His hands move to my hips, settling there—heavy, and warm.

“None of your business, pretty boy,” I say, light and flippant.

Landon lowers his head and presses a kiss to the flat of my belly—gentle, infuriatingly tender.

“Awe,” he says, lips brushing my skin. “You say such nice things when you’re being evasive.”

I roll my eyes, but my fingers twitch against the counter. His touch shouldn’t feel like this. It shouldn’t make me want to lean in instead of push away.

What is wrong with me? What is it with me and wanting Landon to be near? His hands on me, his voice in my ear, the weight of his attention. Why do I want him? Why—how—in the course of three weeks have I been attracted to two different men, when I haven’t wanted a man in years?

Not since...my throat tightens. Not since him.

The memory claws up before I can stop it—uninvited, cold, sharp. Hands that weren't gentle. Words that weren't sweet. Eyes that looked through me like I was nothing but a body to fill a silence.

I push Landon back, and he doesn't fight me. My voice comes out harsher than I intend it to, and I avoid his eyes.

"You don't get to psychoanalyze me just because I kissed you once."

"I'm not psychoanalyzing you, but something is wrong, Peach." He takes another step forward. "And I know--"

"You don't know me just because you watch me," I snarl, my knees snapping shut, closing him out. "That doesn't mean anything. It doesn't make you special."

It's cruel. I know it before the words finish leaving my mouth.

He picks both of his hands up and nods. "Fine, Peach, don't tell me."

Without another word, he turns and walks to the other counter, picking up the pan of Parker House rolls I abandoned. He works in silence. No flour tossed in the air. No smirk. No jokes. Just his hands moving steadily through the dough like he's trying to ground himself in the only thing that won't push him away.

I stay where I am, perched on the counter, arms curled in close. My chest tightens. My fingertips dig into the cool surface behind me. I hate how loud it feels now—the quiet between us. I hate that he's not trying to break my walls down by force. I hate how far away he is from me.

And underneath all that anger I used to push him back...I feel guilt. Because I meant it when I said he's the only man, other than Tommy, that I let touch me.

And the terrifying part? He makes it feel okay.

Not just okay—safe.

It's not supposed to be like that. Men don't feel safe. They feel like risk. Like control. Like the weight of too many memories I've locked away in boxes I refuse to open.

But Landon...Landon slips past all that. He came into my life with this fierce need to protect and care for me, and something in me...something primal believes him.

He slides the tray into the oven and wipes his hands clean, still not looking at me.

"I can't talk about it," I whisper, my voice so low I barely recognize it. My eyes stay locked on the floor. "Just... next time I scream... wake me up."

His head lifts. Our eyes meet. "Are you sure?"

"I'd rather you touch me," I say, barely above a whisper. "I'd rather be awake with you... than asleep with him."

His body tenses, the minute I say it—like part of him wants to step forward, and the other part knows better. But he says nothing. Just watches me.

I slide off the counter, my feet hitting the tile with a quiet thud. Exhaustion starts to drag at me now, slow and sudden, like my body is catching up to everything I've been pretending I'm not feeling.

"The Parker rolls need thirty-five minutes in the oven," I mutter, brushing the flour off my hands. "And there's peach butter in the fridge."

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I freeze as soon as the words leave my mouth. Peach butter. I made peach butter. For him.

I didn't even think about it. Didn't register it until now. Somewhere between the flour and the insomnia, I'd made something sweet with his nickname in it. Without planning to. Without realizing it.

Fuck. Landon is in my subconscious.

10

LANDON

Jasmine's still asleep come noon. Meanwhile, I've been up since three. Haven't slept a damn minute. Not after what she said. Not after hearing her whisper that she'd rather be awake with me than asleep with him. Who the bloody hell is him?

It took every ounce of control I had to not let the beast in me take over. To not grab her face, kiss the fear off her lips, and demand the name of the man who haunts her sleep. It almost fucking killed me to not go out hunting before the sun even rose with no name, or face to go by.

I don't know who he is. But I know, without question, that putting him in the ground would be the easiest thing I've ever done. And his blood—his screams—would be the sweetest fucking sound I've ever heard.

Until I hear Jasmine moan my name. Until I taste her. Then that man will come in

second.

That thought alone is enough to make me punch harder.

I slam my fist into the heavy bag again, knuckles raw under the wraps. The chain rattles overhead, metal squealing, sweatdripping down my back and soaking through the waistband of my shorts.

This gym's quiet during the day—most people are too busy living their safe, normal lives. Most of the serious athletes came at the crack of dawn and won't return until way after four.

The only two people in this entire gym are me and my adoptive father Buggy. He's sitting on the bench, arms folded over his thick chest, watching me with that same wild grin he's had since the first time he found me swinging fists into the air—twelve years old, angry, and starving for something solid to hit.

"Whew!" he hollers, clapping his hands loud enough to echo off the high ceilings. The heavy bag shudders on its chain, still swinging from the last blow I threw. "Who the fuck pissed you off, Lanny?"

I chuckle. "Who hasn't?"

Buggy lets out a low laugh, deep and warm. "Fair enough."

Buggy's forty-three, built like a damn wall—six-four, solid muscle, skin the color of rich mahogany and a voice like gravel soaked in bourbon. Tattoos climb both arms, and the scar over his left eyebrow still splits wide when he smiles. He's got a presence that fills a room before he even speaks, but it's not just size—it's energy. Loud, protective, unshakable. The kind of man you either fear or trust completely.

He raised me and Conner both. Took us in when we had no one, fed us, trained us, kept us from killing each other in the same twin-sized room above the gym. Taught us discipline with one hand and how to knock a man's jaw loose with the other.

I place a gloved hand against the heavy bag, and slow its movements. "I don't know, Bugs. I'm trying to hold on, but--"

"Hey, I get it." He huffs, running an ashed hand over his short waved hair. "The world ain't really a place for good things."

I rip the velcro of my right glove open with my teeth and yank it off, letting it fall to the floor with a soft thud. My knuckles throb under the wraps, but I don't care.

"I have good things," I say quietly. "Jasmine... is a good thing."

Bugsy watches me for a beat, nodding slowly, but his jaw's tight. "No, Jasmine's a Raider thing."

I glance down. Swallow hard. "I think I really like her, Bugs. And last night... she shared some things with me. Personal shit. Deep shit. And the fucking beast, Bugs—he almost came out."

Bugsy's eyes narrow, his whole face sharpening. "You told me you had that guy under wraps."

I rub the back of my neck, teeth clenched. "I did."

His stare drills into me. "You sure?"

When I was younger, I fought in Bugsy's gym. Fought so much, he made me get my hands licensed as lethal weapons the day I turned eighteen. Said it was law and

insurance, but really, it was about the line I kept toeing.

The line I eventually crossed. One fight—that's all it took. One hit to the temple. One rush of red behind my eyes. I blacked out and when I came to, the kid I was fighting was on the floor, not moving. Paralyzed from the waist down. Buggy pulled me from the ring that night. Said I needed control—and until I found it, I had no business throwing punches.

I hated him for it. For taking away the only thing I was ever good at. I didn't speak to him for weeks. But time passed, and I got over it. He agreed to train me again. On the condition that I learned to think before I fought. That I'd never let the beast win again. He doesn't know what Conner does for me to keep the beast away, if he did, Buggy wouldn't know what to do. He would think he failed us, when he truly did save Conner and me from the worst parts of ourselves.

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“Bugs,” I mutter, looking up at him, my voice cracking just a little. “You know how my beast is, man. I’m trying.”

Bugsy sighs, rubbing his hand over his jaw like he’s heard this before. “Trying ain’t the same as choosing, Lanny. You can try all day and still lose to that thing. Especially when it wants blood.”

Before I can respond, a low, snake-like laugh coils through the gym. I stiffen immediately, and my eyes snap to the entrance.

“Come on now, Bugsy,” Marcus drawls, stepping fully into the room, his voice echoing off the walls like a gunshot. “You know we like him a little bloody.”

Marcus King stands in the middle of Bugsy’s gym, in all black everything. Combat boots, biker gloves, sleeveless shirt that shows off the full tapestry of ink winding up his muscled arms and neck. Black hair slicked back, brown eyes gleaming with that usual glint, and a smile on his face that looks deranged and unnatural.

“Marcus,” Bugsy says evenly. “You know I don’t like gang politics in my gym.”

Marcus just smirks, eyes sliding to me like he’s sizing me up for a coffin. “This ain’t politics,” he says. “It’s family business, right Landon?”

“You know, Marcus, you’re like the creepy uncle to me,” I snort, pulling off my other glove and tossing it to the floor. “Except worse. You know since instead of just weird comments, you send me on killing sprees.”

He laughs—loud and deep, like I just told the best joke of the year. “Damn, still got that bite, huh? I almost thought we beat that shit out of you.”

“Nah,” I shrug, talking a step forward. “But you beat it out my sister.”

Marcus stops laughing, snorting before spitting on Buggy's concrete floor. “She wasn’t funny, but you Lan, you’re fucking hilarious.” He turns toward Buggy, gesturing casually. “So, can I have a word with my nephew? Won’t be long.”

Buggy doesn’t answer right away. His eyes stay on me. “You good?” he asks.

I nod once. “Yeah. I’m good.”

Buggy glances back at Marcus. “I’ll be in my office. Right in back. So no funny business.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,Bugs,” Marcus sings, rocking on the heels of his boots like a kid waiting for recess. His hands are stuffed in the front pockets of his black jeans, shoulders loose, grin sharp enough to draw blood.

Buggy doesn’t even dignify him with a response—just grunts and heads for his office, boots thudding against the concrete as he retreats into his office, only fifty feet away from us.

Marcus whistles low and slow, before cocking his head to the side and narrowing his eyes at him.

“You’ve been radio silent Lan. I’ve been trying to get in contact with you.”

I grab a towel, rub it down my neck. “Must’ve missed your calls.”

He scoffs. “Cute. But what ain’t cute is you not keeping your side of the bargain,mate.You know how I feel about loyalty.”

“Is this about the job?” I ask, voice flat. Controlled. “I did what I was told. Moved the last shipment. Kept it clean. Got it done. I’m doing everything for Cast like I’m a fuckingdog.”

Marcus shrugs, stepping forward with a slow, lazy drag of his boots across the gym floor. “You know, if you had a problem with that...” He grins, sharp and empty. “We could’ve just killed you, Lan.”

I suck my teeth, head tilting slightly as I wipe sweat from my brow. “Kill me, Marcus. I know that’s your real specialty.”

Marcus shakes his head, only three steps away now. “You would know, wouldn’t you.”

And that’s it. My vision goes red. I’m on him in a second—fist tangled in the collar of his black sleeveless tee, slamming him back against the support pillar so hard it rattles the goddamn ceiling. My forearm pins his throat. My face is inches from his.

“You talking about Kelly?” I roar, my voice cracking as it echoes off the concrete walls. “You standing here smiling like you didn’t help bury her?”

Marcus’s grin fades, replaced with the darker—colder expression he is more infamously known for.

“Let me go,” he growls.

“Why?” I sneer. “You’re not so big and bad when you’re face-to-face with awoman,right? That’s the real trick, yeah? Loud in the dark, quiet in the light?”

Marcus laughs—loud and unhinged, chest vibrating against my arm. Then he slams his forehead into mine.

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Crack.

Stars burst in my vision. Pain rings out like a church bell behind my eyes. I stagger back, stumbling, blood already sliding warm down the bridge of my nose.

He steps away from the pillar, grinning through the blood now seeping from a gash just above his brow. It runs down the bridge of his nose in thick, steady rivulets, but he doesn't wipe it away. Doesn't even flinch.

That smile—twisted, gory, thrilled—stretches across his face like something freshly born out of a nightmare.

And for a second, he doesn't look human. He looks like what crawls out from under your bed when the light goes out. Like a deranged masochist who gets off on pain, who doesn't just survive the fight—he needs it.

That's the difference between me and Marcus.

I fight to keep my beast in check.

Marcus lets his beast wear the crown.

And that's what makes Marcus King so terrifying. It's not just the violence—not the scars, the muscle, the guns, or the bodies in his wake.

It's the way he invites pain. How he fractures himself just to prove he can crawl through worse than you've ever imagined. He'll let you land your best shot—hell,

he wants you to. Because when he keeps standing, when he's still smiling through the blood and bone...it breaks something in you.

He'll wear you down with his silence, his laughter, his lunatic patience—until you're the one gasping, and he's the one dragging you by the collar through your own blood.

That's why men follow him.

That's why the Raiders never say no.

Because Marcus doesn't bluff.

He outlasts.

And that's why I almost died the day I tried to walk away. That's how he broke me. Not with fists. But with the sick grin of a man who feels most alive when he's dying—just to make sure you go first.

"I don't appreciate your tone, Landon." He mocks, eyes blown wide and black as he falls to his demons. "I came here to invite you and your girl to family dinner."

"She's not a Raider," I cough.

"Nah, she's better." He whispers next to my ear. "She's my ticket into the cartel. She's more precious than a random Raider."

"I expect you there Friday evening, 6 pm sharp." He seethes, spit flying against my cheek as he speaks. "Don't be late, or I'll come drag you there myself."

JASMINE

A month into college and the only class I look forward to is Professor Kilgore's every Monday and Friday, with Wednesdays reserved for study hall—because, according to him, we're going to need it.

Landon has spent most nights silently watching me, and has insisted on following me to the majority of my classes ever since that guy tried to abduct me in broad daylight. Our conversations have been clipped and professional, which only stresses me out more—because that fundamentally goes against Landon's whole personality. I am approximately one day away from walking around in my underwear just to get a reaction out of him. Just so he can remember the privilege of touching me, and possibly do it. I feel like it was the wrong move to tell Landon about boyfriend #4, even if I didn't tell him much, it feels like too much. It feels like he can't take it.

Every week, I've found a new way to get lost on this campus. I walked away from Brooke twice when I saw her on the main lawn. Ignored five—no, probably seven—texts from her, despite me never giving her my number, she's been texting once a day since last Wednesday.

I pull out my phone and stare at the newest one:

Brooke: You know all marital couples fight, right?

I roll my eyes—and look up. Just in time to lock eyes with her.

She's leaning against the front doors of Thomas Hall, looking like she was carved straight out of a thirst trap and dropped into a college brochure. I want to turn in the opposite direction, but Kilgore's class starts in ten minutes, and I promised myself I wouldn't be late and soaking wet again. I guess I can only keep one of those promises to myself.

I narrow my eyes at her coke-bottle body because, frankly, it's not fair. She steals from me, and I'm still having wet dreams about her. Such a fucking pill.

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Her golden-red curls are twisted into a messy bun, and a plain white crop top hugs her tight. The low-rise jeans? Insult to injury. And then there's the butterfly navel piercing I hadn't noticed before, but now can't unsee. An assortment of delicate gold chains rest against her collarbone, and those wedge sandals make her look like an early-2000s country supermodel.

I swallow hard. Three times. Maybe four. And still have to remind myself twice why I'm mad at her when she licks her lips and looks at me like that.

"Well, don't you look as sweet as sin, sugar," she drawls, pushing off the wall and sauntering toward me with the lazy confidence of knowing that I'm about two sweet words from forgiving her.

"Nope," I shoot back, taking a step back. "You stay three feet away from me at all times, Miss du Pont."

"Miss du Pont? We being formal now?" she teases, cocking her head, hip jutting just slightly in challenge.

I grit my teeth. "We're being civil."

She grins. "Fine. Then let me be civil and ask—what do I have to do to get you to forgive me?" A pause, her voice softer now, more honest. "You already 'thought' through our first date. What about now?"

I blink. That's a lot of bold for before 2 p.m.

“Are you always this forward?” I ask, narrowing my gaze even as my stomach twists.

“Only when it feels right.” Her eyes scan mine. She means it. She feels this intense electricity between us too.

I sigh. “I told you I’d think about it, and I thought no.”

Brooke leans closer anyway, not quite crossing the invisible line I’ve drawn, but brushing up against it. She tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear—slow, allowing each of her fingertips to graze along my cheek and jaw.

“And what about now? It’s been three weeks, Jas. Don’t tell me you hold grudges.” She hums.

“No, but I believe you’re date shouldn’t steal from you.”

“Jasmine. I swear, it wasn’t like that, okay? Let me make it up to you. Saturday night,” She smiles in that way that makes my knees weak, but before I can answer, a shadow falls over us.

“She’ll be there,” Landon says coolly, stepping up beside me with both hands pushed into his front pockets, and a cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, he speaks,” I mock, crossing both hands over my chest. Landon had been enrolled as a biology student since yesterday with the help of Cast, and this is the first time he has said anything to me that wasn’t safety or school oriented.

“You know I do more than speak, Peach,” he drawls, voice dipped in gravel and smoke. He plucks the cigarette from his lips and exhales through his nose, twin curls of smoke drifting up like some devil just out of bed.

Then his gaze drops—and stays. His eyes sweep over me, darkening as his pupils bloom wide across the sharp blue, hunger barely leashed beneath the surface.

“What I didn’t know about you, Peach,” he murmurs, voice low and rough, “is that you wear dresses.”

I fight the heat that threatens to crawl up my neck and do a slow spin, just to spite him.

The dress hugs my waist before falling into a dark blue ripple of cotton and movement, a V-neck that dips just low enough to tease, sleeveless to show the tattoos curling along my right arm. The hem hits just below mid-thigh, brushing against the edge of a worn leather holster I use for my phone. My curves aren’t dramatic, but the dress knows what to emphasize. My chest—C cup, not that anyone’s counting—and the swell of my hips that sway as I shift weight between my worn black knockoff Doc Martens. Landon’s jaw ticks.

My half-unshaved hair is tousled from the wind, the dyed red streaks catching the late afternoon light like sparks in dry grass. My grey eyes don’t leave his.

“You like it?” I ask, tone neutral but my lips betraying the smallest smirk.

His eyes flicker—slow, dark, and dangerous. “I’d like it better off.”

Brooke clears her throat. Loudly.

“He is...” I look Landon over, my bottom lip sliding between my teeth as I take a moment to think.

Landon watches me through heavy-lidded eyes, the corner of his mouth twitching like he already knows what I’m thinking. His voice drops—low,

indulgent—wrapping around me like velvet laced in smoke.

“Yeah, Peach, what am I?”

“A nuisance,” comes a voice sharp enough to slice clean through the tension.

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I jolt upright. Spine straight. Eyes wide as I turn around and look at him.

Professor ConnerfreakingKilgore is posted up five feet away like he's been there the whole damn time, wearing a bored expression. His eyes, an unsettling almost-clear green, drift lazily across the three of us as if we're a particularly uninteresting painting he's forced to critique.

He's dressed in a light grey suit that hugs him in all the right ways, crisp button-up undone at the collar with no tie, just a hint of throat and chest, accompanied with a thick silver chain around his neck.

"Miss Rivera," he says, dragging my name out like the slow pull of freshly made Laffy Taffy. "I trust you plan to attend class today. On time."

I blink. "Yes. Of course. Right now."

"Excellent," he murmurs, letting his gaze drift over to Landon with a brief, glacial pause. "Are you planning to attend as well, Landon?"

I almost choke on my own tongue. My head whips toward Landon, whose smug-ass smile could power the entire west coast.

"Yeah, Con," he says casually.

What in the sweet Mary barbecue hell is this? I knew Landon knew of Professor Kilgore. Knew they had some kind of mutual history. But I didn't know they were on nickname basis—like "grab a drink and commit felonies together" close. Why am I

the devil's favorite fucking toy to play with?

Professor Kilgore grunts, the faintest twitch of disapproval passing through his expression. "Class begins in three minutes. I will lock the door, Miss Rivera."

"Con, don't threaten my girl," Landon says, sliding his arm over my shoulder like it's a casual afterthought and not a live grenade tossed onto my ribcage.

"Your girl?" Brooke snaps, her voice sharp and hot and very much not amused.

"Oh yeah," Landon says easily, grin sharpening as he turns to her. "Before Buzzkill over there ruined the vibes, Peach was just about to tell us what I am to her."

My cheeks go nuclear. My body hums like a live wire. One wrong move and I might combust right here on the quad, in fact that may be the better option out of the two.

"I was going to say?—"

Nothing. Everything.

That he's a guy. The first guy I ever kissed willingly. The only guy I've let touch me and the only one who touches back like he knows how to make it mean something. My bodyguard, who I maybe definitely want to fuck.

But don't worry, Brooke—before him, it was strictly pussy. And that's still my preferred cuisine out of the two, well it is the only cuisine I have been comfortable with in my life.

"Do not stroke his ego any further, Miss Rivera," Professor Kilgore sighs as he turns, already making his way toward the building.

“Landon, give them a moment.”

“Well, only because you asked so nicely, Con,” Landon sings, obnoxiously delighted, before pressing a kiss—a kiss—to my cheek and finally heading toward the door.

Just as Professor Kilgore calls over his shoulder: “Ninety seconds. Not a millisecond more.”

I turn to Brooke, who looks like she’s two seconds from combusting—bright pink in the face and glaring daggers. “I’m sorry, have I been chasing after you, and you’re not even gay?”

“No! I—” I rake a hand through my hair, trying not to panic. “I am gay. Been gay since I was thirteen.”

She squints at me. “Then what’s with the whole my girl thing?”

I hesitate. “I might be... experiencing a sexual awakening. Of sorts.”

Brooke snorts. “So you’re trying out being straight now?”

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because it’s usually the other way around.” She laughs harder, shaking her head. “I just—I really thought you were playing me.”

“You?” I raise a brow. “You’re way too fine to be played with.”

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“You’d be surprised,” she says, the smile faltering just enough to feel real.

“Well, that last girl? She was an idiot. I’m not.”

Brooke tilts her head, the teasing returning. “So... you’re giving us a shot?”

I meet her gaze, heart stammering. “Yeah. I think I am.”

She takes a step forward, rocking on the balls of her feet as a dazzlingly pearly white smile spreads across her face.

“I can’t do anything exclusive right now,” I blurt, before I can overthink it. “I have this thing with Landon and I can’t call it off...he’s basically my roommate.”

“Roommate slash bodyguard?” Brooke raises an eyebrow.

“It’s complicated.” I shrug.

She nods, her grin spreading even wider. “That’s perfect.”

My brow furrows. “Perfect? Why?”

She leans in, brushing invisible lint off my sleeve like she hasn’t just short-circuited my entire nervous system. “We don’t have time for that conversation right now. You’ve got—what? Twenty seconds to make it to class?”

My eyes widen. “Oh shit!”

I surge forward and kiss her. Quick. Firm. Electric.

“I’ll pick you up at eight on Saturday!” I call over my shoulder as I sprint toward Thomas Hall like my life depends on it.

I reach the door just as Professor Kilgore starts up the steps and slide into the back row beside Landon, my chest heaving from the run—and, okay, maybe the kiss too.

Landon doesn’t look at me right away. He waits a beat, then tilts his head with that slow, maddening grin. “So,” he murmurs, voice low and full of amusement, “how’s the girlfriend doing?”

I give him a sidelong glance and tug my backpack into my lap. “Nothing the side dudes should worry about.”

He chuckles, deep and dangerous. “Damn. That mean I still get Tuesday nights?”

“Only if you bring snacks.”

“Peach,” he purrs, leaning just a little closer, “I am the snack.”

I roll my eyes, biting back a laugh—and that’s when Professor Kilgore clears his throat.

“Miss Rivera,” he says sharply, gaze flicking toward me like he’s already counted how many times I’ve blinked since entering the room. “Since you’re clearly wide awake, perhaps you can tell us what factor most often compromises the integrity of trace evidence at a crime scene?”

I don’t miss a beat. “Improper handling—usually by first responders or poor collection techniques. Fibers and residue can be lost with a single misstep.”

Kilgore's brow lifts, and for a second—just a second—I swear the corner of his mouth almost twitches. “Correct.”

I bask in that for all of three seconds before I feel a warm breath hit my ear.

“Think Kilgore likes you,” Landon whispers, low and teasing.

“Fuck off,” I mutter under my breath.

He grins wider. “You’ve got a dirty mouth, Peach.”

I keep my eyes on the front of the room. “And you’ve got a death wish.”

“I could prove it,” he says, and before I can fire back, his hand brushes the inside of my knee.

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I freeze.

His fingers trace slowly, teasing up the bare skin beneath my dress—light enough to drive me insane, heavy enough to be very,veryintentional.

“Landon,” I hiss, barely audible.

He hums like I just complimented him. “Shhh...I’m proving something.”

My legs clamp together instinctively, trapping Landon’s wandering hand between my thighs like a fucking vice. He chuckles—a deep, vibrating sound that travels straight to my clit—and nips at my earlobe.

“Careful, Peach. You’ll break my fingers before I even get to the good part.”

His thumb circles clockwise over the thin cotton of my underwear. The friction’s insufficient through the fabric, yet I feel my hips twitch forward. Landon makes a satisfied noiseagainst my neck that has me digging my fingernails into the scratched desktop.

“Miss Rivera, the Cole case,” Kilgore’s voice slices through the building tension between us.

I snap my gaze forward to find him staring right at our row. Thirty heads swivel in our direction. Landon’s finger drags upward through my dampening folds as he leans back in his chair, all casual innocence.

“Mr. Cole thought draining his wife of blood would help cover up the crime,” I whimper, as Landon’s finger slides across my clit.

“Very good,” Professor Kilgore hums, his eyes locked on me as he calls on another student and continues to discuss the case. His eyes burn into me like flames.

My eyelids flutter as his middle finger breaches the lace edge of my panties, calloused pad grazing the bundle of nerves. Jesus Christ. I force a cough into my fist while Landon murmurs, “You’re dripping through these already. Embarrassing.”

Kilgore clears his throat. “As I was saying—” The words blur as Landon’s knuckle brushes against my clit. A sharp jolt fires up my spine, every nerve ending flaring to life. “—the primary distinction between class and individual characteristics in forensic evidence,” Kilgore continues, voice maddeningly steady, “lies in the ability to match evidence to a single source. Thus forensic evidence is not all about the blood.”

My breath catches when Landon presses down harder, the heel of his palm grinding against the edge of the seat in just the right angle. The old metal desk chair creaks beneath me.

Two rows ahead, a blonde girl in thick glasses glances over her shoulder, frowning.

I meet her eyes and mouth, Don’t.

But my legs drift open another inch.

The air in the lecture hall is stifling—too warm, too still—and sweat beads beneath my breasts, sliding beneath the neckline of my dress like sin in slow motion. My hand curls around the edge of the desk as I try to keep my face neutral, normal, innocent, even as Landon drags the tip of his finger in one slow, deliberate circle around my

clit.

“You’re not even paying attention,” he whispers against my ear, smug and low.

“I know the difference between shoe tread patterns and semen stains,” I whisper back, jaw tight, “so you canfuck off.”

His breath grazes my neck. “God, you’ve got the filthiest mouth.”

My entire body trembles like a plucked guitar string. I fumble for the textbook, knocking pens to the floor in a clatter that makes half the class jump, and Kilgore’s eyes lock on my tense body. His voice trailing off mid-sentence. Landon seizes the distraction, hooking two fingers under my underwear’s waistband. The elastic snaps against my hip bone.

“Naughty fucking girl,” he breathes against my ear. The words send hot shivers cascading down my neck. “Getting all hot and bothered for your professor. Distracting him in class like the temptress you are.”

His fingertips dip lower, grazing the soaked lace between my legs. My vision blurs. Kilgore’s voice rings in my ears as he discusses the use of hair DNA to convict Mr. Cole back in 2008 for the murder of his wife.

“What do you think he’d do?” Landon’s teeth catch my earlobe, tugging. “If he knew his precious student was getting fingered in the back row? If he saw how pink you are right now?”

The pad of his middle finger finds my entrance. I choke on air.

“Eyes front,” Landon orders, low and rough. My gaze snaps to Kilgore’s back as he underlines something in red marker. Landon’s finger pushes in just past the first

knuckle. My inner muscles spasm, greedy.

“There she is,” he croons. “Fuck, you’re tight.” His thumb resumes its assault on my clit while his finger works shallowly in and out. The slick sounds would be audible without the droning lecture. Heat floods my cheeks.

Professor Kilgore turns, catching my glassy stare. His Adam’s apple bobs.

A cold wave of panic washes over the burning arousal. Landon crooks his finger, hitting that spongy spot that makes stars burst behind my eyes. My hips jerk upward, slamming the desk’s underside. A male student turns to look back at me.

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“Eyes up front, Mr. Jackson!” Kilgore snaps, voice like a whip.

Jackson whips his head forward like he’s been physically struck.

Kilgore lingers a beat longer, staring directly at me.

Then—sharper than usual—he pivots back to the board.

Beside me, Landon’s mouth curves into a smirk I can feel against my skin.

“Good girl,” he whispers into the shell of my ear, smug and slow. His fingers move deeper, sharper now, while the heel of his hand grinds with surgical precision. “Bet he’s imagining this. Bet he’s picturing you spread across his desk, skirt rucked up. Do you know what I would give to watch that, pretty girl?”

The image detonates in my brain—dark, brutal, shamefully hot.

My composure shatters.

My back arches. The front legs of the chair scrape and lift off the floor. I gasp, barely stifled—until Landon’s free hand clamps over my mouth. Kilgore turns back around with those empty eyes on me, the normal clear so dark I almost whimper like a kitten purring for forgiveness.

When he leans over the standing desk, licking his lips with a nod. It hits. Hard. Like my body was waiting for his approval.

The orgasm crests in slow, vicious waves, pulling a whimper from my throat that dies against Landon's palm. I bite down, tasting salt and metallic. He doesn't flinch—just keeps moving, guiding me through every last pulse, every twitch of overstimulated muscle until my thighs tremble from the effort of staying upright.

I sag back into the seat like a ghost in my own body.

Landon chuckles beside me, the sound low and satisfied. He stretches out, casually leaning back in his chair with one arm draped lazily over the back of mine, a smug look carved across his face.

“Well, will you look at that,” he hums, nodding toward the front of the classroom.

I follow his gaze—and freeze.

Professor Kilgore stands rigid behind the lectern, voice continuing like nothing's wrong, but his body tells a different story. His neck is flushed a soft pink, blooming just beneath his jawline and climbing toward his ears.

But that's not what stops me. His hand—gripping the edge of the standing desk—is bone-white, knuckles strained, tendons twitching beneath skin.

The rest of class drags like a fever dream. Landon scrolls through his phone with one hand while the other stays parked high on my inner thigh, fingers warm and possessive. I keep my head down, hiding the flush burning across my cheeks, pretending I'm taking diligent notes when all I'm doing is surviving minute to minute, because I was just fucking fingered in the back of my fucking forensic class like a goddamn hornied up teenager.

Besides, I think it's better that I keep my head down because, ever since I reached that magnificent O due to Landon's incredible fingers, Professor Kilgore's lecture has

been faster and way more aggressive than normal. He paces as he speaks, lecture spilling out of him with uncharacteristic intensity, like he's trying to outrun his own thoughts.

I don't dare look at him. Not really. Not when, every time I do, I'm met with those icy green eyes that pin me in place—empty but somehow too full with desire? Or disdain? Maybe a dash of rage? I can't tell, and frankly, I don't want to.

“Homework for Monday...” Professor Kilgore's voice cracks like a whip against the buzz of my nerves. “Chapters fivethrough eight. Two-page analysis on the ethical implications of compromised crime scenes. Don't copy-paste theory. I want you to think.”

The way he spits the last word has my stomach dropping. I flinch when Landon's hand squeezes my thigh—harder this time—like he wants me to squirm. Like he's proud of the chaos he's crafted.

The second he says, “Dismissed,” I shoot out of my chair. My notes are half-scribbled, bag barely zipped, but I need out. The air feels hot and thin, like it's burning me from the inside out. I shoulder past someone, my eyes locked on the door, heart racing.

I almost make it.

“Miss Rivera. A word?” He practically growls and I stay frozen, staring at the floor as the rest of the students escape into the hall.

“Professor Kilgore, I have my music theory class in like forty-five minutes,” I rush out, pulling the strap of my messenger bag up higher, and plastering on my brightest smile. “And I still need lunch, so...”

The last student slides out of the classroom and Professor Kilgore practically snarls, pulling a chair out in the front, middle of the room. “Sit down, Miss Rivera.”

I race down the steps almost automatically and sit down in my designated seat as Landon chuckles.

“I didn’t know you had her on such a short leash, Con?”

My body burns a cherry red, but I keep my eyes locked on the table, listening to the lazy steps of Landon. I don’t know why Conner Kilgore does this to me. He’s fucking terrifying and I feel like a trained animal, ready to roll over and show him my belly. Ready to be anything he wants, just to keep him from looking at me with those analytical eyes. It’s like he knows me down to the molecule.

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“Look at me,” Professor Kilgore demands, his voice that low rumble that makes me clench my thighs and heat build in my core.

I lock eyes with his and see what I saw on the first day of school. The overblown pupils, dark and dilated, swallowing the green whole. A tremor beneath the surface—one he’s barely containing. His mouth is tight, his jaw ticking like he’s biting back a growing hunger. “Tell me,” he says, low and sharp, “do you think I’m stupid, Miss Rivera?”

I blink. My lips part, but no sound comes out.

He leans forward, knuckles braced on the desk, the whites of his eyes brighter than they should be in the dim classroom light.

“I don’t think it is appropriate to make eye contact with your professor as you get fingered in the back row, do you?”

His mask cracks on that last word, a flash of something feral breaking through. Rage. Possessiveness. Shame. Maybe all three.

I swallow hard, but my voice still sounds too soft. “I wasn’t trying to?”

“You weren’t thinking.” He cuts me off like he’s dissecting a body. Clean. Precise. Brutal.

And then he pauses. Breathes. The glint in his eye dims just slightly, like he’s yanked the curtain back into place.

“You’re too smart to play dumb,” he says, quieter now, but no less intense. “Don’t let him make a fool of you.”

I feel the words slice deep. Shame and arousal knot in my chest, thick and cloying like honey turned sour. It coats my ribs, drips down my spine. I don’t know if I want to bolt for the door or drop to my knees and bare my throat. So I do the stupid thing—I dig my heels in.

“You’re right,” I hiss, leaning forward until our noses nearly touch. His breath is sharp with mint. “I am too smart. Because it’s not like you looked away.”

His eyes narrow, pupils blown, jaw flexing once.

Behind me, Landon chuckles, low and amused. “Come on, Con. Just admit it,” he says, dragging his fingers across the exposed skin of my collarbone.

“She is my student,” Kilgore snarls. It’s guttural, animalistic—but he still hasn’t looked away from me. If anything, he leans in.

“And she’s willing to get an A,” Landon teases, hand slipping beneath the neckline of my dress, his touch light, possessive, cruel.

“Landon.” The warning in Kilgore’s voice is pure steel.

“Conner,” Landon returns, mocking him by name.

“Professor,” I whisper, and his eyes lock on mine like I just pulled the pin from a grenade between us. “I don’t know what this is, but…”

“You’re scared of me, Jasmine,” Kilgore cuts in, his voice smooth and soft and terrifying.

I try to swallow. I can't.

He watches me like he's cataloging the flicker of every emotion across my face. His gaze dips to my throat, to the frantic flutter of my pulse.

"Do you know why?" he asks.

I shake my head, biting down on my lower lip until I taste blood. I feel like I'm about to fall apart molecule by molecule, and I want to. If it's for him, I feel like I need to.

"That's your body realizing the predator in the room," he says, voice dipping dangerously low, smooth as a scalpel sliding beneath skin. "You should listen to it. It'll save your life."

Silence wraps around us like smoke—thick, clinging, suffocating. My heart hammers like it's trying to shatter my ribs from the inside. Each breath feels smaller than the last, like the room is shrinking around me and only he gets to breathe fully.

Landon's hand ghosts over my chest, fingers catching the delicate chain that dips into my cleavage. He gives it a lazy tug, letting the pendant bounce once against my sternum before he exhales a low whistle.

"Come on, Con," he drawls, with that infuriating grin that never quite touches his eyes. "Stop playing with your food."

He tilts his head to the side, still smiling—but it's wrong. Cold. The kind of expression a cat might wear while toying with a dying bird. Detached amusement laced with cruelty. It's the kind of smile that doesn't blink.

"Normally," he murmurs, almost like an afterthought, "when my prey squirms, I punish it."

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He kneels down, his hands large and calloused on my knees. Without instruction, my thighs open for him, and I swallow hard. His touch isn't warm like Landon, and it doesn't feel meant to be there, it feels cold like electricity bringing the dead back to life. I jerk in my seat as he cocks an eyebrow at me.

“How should I punish you, Jasmine?”

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. All I can hear is blood rushing in my ears, the beat of my pulse slamming through my veins. I can't look away.

Kilgore moves slowly, like he's giving me time to run—and knows I won't.

His hands slide up my thighs, skin-on-skin, igniting a burn where he touches. His fingertips trace the curve above my knees, then higher, dragging the hem of my dress with him. His knuckles graze sensitive flesh, and I gasp despite myself.

“Be still,” he commands, barely above a whisper.

I freeze.

When his fingers hook the edge of my underwear, it feels like the air is sucked from the room.

“Lift up,” he whispers, eyes locked on mine, and I do.

He peels the lace down—slow, careful, reverent in a way that makes it worse. Like he's unwrapping something fragile. Like he wants to ruin it on purpose. They pool at

my ankles. He bends to catch them before they fall, holds them in his hand like a specimen—turning them over once, twice, as if studying a thread of evidence.

“You will get these back when you learn how to not make a mess of yourself in my class,” he says finally, his voice back to clinical and composed. But his pupils are still dilated, jaw tight. “We’ll start with that.”

Then he slips them into the breast pocket of his button-down like they belong there.

My breath stutters. My thighs clench instinctively, as if trying to hold onto something that’s already been taken. I don’t know what I’ve become in this room. All I know is that I can’t look away from him. And he—he hasn’t blinked once.

“Now, you’re dismissed, Miss Rivera.”

I jump like a live wire and scurry out of my seat. “Thank you, Professor.”

I don’t wait for a response. I don’t want one.

I shoulder past Landon—he whistles low and slow, like I’m some pretty little thing trotting off the auction block. But for once, he doesn’t touch me. Maybe even he knows Kilgore’s leash is shorter than it looks.

The hallway hits like a slap of cold air, but it does nothing to cool the heat crawling under my skin. My panties are gone. My pride’s in shreds. And my body doesn’t know whether to shake with shame or...crawl back for more.

I always thought six weeks into college I'd be the talk of the town—have at least three friends, dye my hair something cute like pastel blue, and learn how to shotgun a beer with my eyes closed. You know, normal college shit.

Instead, I have a live-in stalker with a smirk and accent that should be illegal, a situationship with the most beautiful girl in the world whose weirdly fine with sharing, and my professor has my panties somewhere, doing things to it that only should live in a nightmare, but my fucked up brain calls it fantasy.

College has been eventful...just eventful in all the wrong fucking ways.

My emotional support is a rapidly dying houseplant and a guy who kisses me like he owns my soul, but hey, English 101 is ridiculously easy, and Computer Science is less of a bore than I thought it would be. Three cheers for liberal arts education!

I'm about three pages into my five-page paper on Shakespeare's love sonnets, where I expertly and with entirely too much personal conviction, claim that Shakespeare was, in fact, emotionally cheating on his wife. The man wrote 126 poems to a beautiful young man with an easy going smile and the kind of bone structure that inspires ruin. You can't tell me that wasn't emotional adultery at the very least. I even built a whole paragraph around Sonnet 20 and annotated it like it's a crime scene, as an accompanying part of my essay.

I'm curled up in bed, laptop balanced on a pillow over my thighs, the glow of my desk lamp painting soft yellow light across the pages of the library book I borrowed and haven't opened once. There's a half-drunk iced coffee sweating on the nightstand, and the scent of coconut lotion and overpriced wax melts is the only thing keeping me sane.

I lean over to take a sip of my coffee, and glance up from the screen, blinking. Normally, I would scream, get pissed off and tell Landon to go fuck himself, but

finding him staring at me from a distance has become a normal occurrence now a days. I don't even flinch.

“Again,” I say, swallowing the overly sweet and still kind of bitter coffee. “Watching me like that only makes you more of a fucking creep, Lan.”

He chuckles, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest. Black shirt, grey sweats, tattooed forearms on full display like some kind of sinful exhibit.

“You need better instincts,” he sighs, moving deeper into my room, as if I fucking invited him.

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“Hey, mi casa es no tu casa!” I screech as he perches himself up on the edge of my bed.

“Tranquila, mami,” he says, voice dipped in that gravel-soft tone that sends goosebumps up my spine.

“Oh, so now you’re bilingual and uninvited?” I roll my eyes and close my laptop with a huff. “Impressive. Truly.”

“Tu cama me extrañaba,” he murmurs, running a lazy hand along the comforter. “And don’t lie—I know you missed me too.”

I throw a pillow at him. He catches it midair, like it’s a damn feather, and just smiles wider.

“You’re insufferable.”

“And you’re wearing my hoodie,” he points out, nodding toward the oversized black hoodie I forgot I stole from the laundry pile two days ago. “So I’d say we’re even.”

I glance down and groan. “Don’t read into it. Everything else was dirty.”

“Right...don’t worry,” he smirks, leans to the side on his right elbow. “I like you in my clothes...but sadly you need to change.”

“Why? Your girlfriend’s coming over?” I snort, moving my laptop to the side.

Landon slowly licks his lips, and it's only now—sitting here in the soft glow of my lamp, still wearing his hoodie, still pretending like we're not spiraling toward something dangerous—that I realize:

If he had a girlfriend back in Britain... I wouldn't just be heartbroken. I'd be furious.

Rage in my bones, claws-out, you-used-me kind of fury. Because no one, no one, gets to be the first guy I can breathe around—the first one I let touch me without my skin crawling—and then turn around and pretend it didn't mean a goddamn thing. I mean who does he think he is--

“Stop...” he coos, his voice low, warm, knowing. His fingertips wrap around my left ankle, gently. “I can see your mind running. There is no girlfriend, but we do have dinner.”

I sit up fast enough he has to release my ankle, and I cross my legs underneath me. “Dinner?”

“Yes,” he says, calm as ever. “You know—food, people, conversation. The works.”

I narrow my eyes. “What people? What food? What conversation?”

Landon sighs and runs a hand through his hair, standing up with that signature stretch that makes his shirt ride just high enough to show off his upsettingly sexy v-line.

“You're going to meet some... unsavory friends of mine,” he says. “People I don't get to say no to.”

My gut drops. “What?”

His eyes meet mine, steady and unblinking.

“We’ve been summoned,” he says. “By the Raiders.”

I almost choke on my own spit. “The Raiders?”

Landon just nods, like we’re talking about the weather and not the most violent, untouchable biker gang this side of the country. They’re what nightmares are made out of, and one of the reasons the Cartel isn’t as powerful as they could be is due to their alliance with the Italian Mafia. Crossing the Raiders is like crossing fucking Italy and I’ve seen enough of the Godfather to know you don’t cross fucking Italy.

I scramble off the bed. “Landon, the Raiders? Are you insane?”

“Sometimes,” he says, voice quiet. “But not right now. I don’t get to ignore them, Peach, and neither do you.”

My pulse spikes. “Why would they want me there?”

“I don’t know,” he says, tone clipped. “But you need to be dressed and ready. We leave in an hour.”

“An hour?” I snap. “Landon, are you serious?—”

“And don’t wear anything that’ll get me into a fight.”

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I blink. “Excuse me? First of all, I’ll wear whatever the hell I want. Second, that’s wildly misogynistic, and third?—”

He steps forward, cutting me off with the weight of his presence alone. His jaw is tight. His voice is low.

“And third,” he says, “if you show even an inch more skin than necessary, you might be dragging me out of there in a body bag.”

I go still. His eyes burn into mine—no teasing, no smirk.

“These guys, Jasmine, they’re entitled. They’re handsy. And I can’t take on an entire biker gang in one room just because one of them decides to touch what’s mine. But I will. You get that? I’ll go down swinging. But I think you’d rather take me home breathing than bleeding out on their marble floors.”

My mouth goes dry. The room feels colder somehow. I just nod.

He exhales, the tension in his shoulders tight as ever. His hand slides up the side of my head, gentle in a way that makes my chest ache. He pulls me in, presses a kiss to my forehead.

“Good,” he murmurs. “Be ready in an hour.”

And then he’s gone. I don’t speak. Not because of the threat he painted so vividly, but because he called me Jasmine. Not Peach. Jasmine.

And Landon never uses my real name, so that must mean shit is getting real.

After I finish up my paragraph on the cheating life of Shakespeare, I take the longest shower of my life—half because I need the heat to loosen the knot forming in my spine, half because I’m procrastinating like my life doesn’t literally depend on what I wear tonight.

When I step out, the mirror’s fogged and my nerves are worse. I try on three different outfits. A dress that’s too short. A top that clings too tight. Jeans that look like I’m trying too hard.

Eventually, I settle on a black off-the-shoulder romper. It’s fitted at the waist, loose around the sleeves, the shorts land mid-thigh and shows just enough skin to remind them I’m not weak—but not enough to invite attention I don’t want. I throw on my heeled combat boots, the ones that make me feel ten feet tall and like I could kick through a man’s rib cage if necessary. A little silver jewelry, and my hair pulled back into a high ponytail, the strands wavy from air drying from the shower.

I stare at myself in the mirror. Not a princess. Not bait, but still vulnerable to everything.

I crack open the door and poke my head out. “Hey.”

Landon’s lounging on the couch, scrolling through something on his phone, but he looks up the second he hears me.

His eyes rake over me in one slow, searing pass. He groans.

“Seriously?” he mutters. “You really want me dead tonight?”

I roll my eyes. “Stop being dramatic.”

“You’re the one coming to a Raider sit-down in a sexy little romper that will force me to break at least two pairs of hands before we see Marcus.”

“Then give me your jacket and you won’t have to break any hands,” I say, lifting a brow. “And who’s Marcus?”

“Marcus is a fucking twat, and the head of the Raiders.” He says with a low sigh, as he stands and shrugs off the black leather jacket he’s wearing—his favorite one, the one that smells like smoke and danger and him.

It’s only then I notice: he changed too.

Gone is the lazy gym wear. Now he’s in a tight black long-sleeve that clings to his chest and arms like it was sewn onto him. Baggy grey jeans hang low on his hips, and his black boots are scuffed just enough to look like they’ve been through hell.

He looks like a fallen god. Like the kind of man you don’t survive loving.

A smirk creeps onto his face as he catches me staring. “Stop drooling,” he says, tossing me the jacket.

I catch it and shrug it on, burying myself in the warmth of it—his warmth.

“I’m not drooling,” I lie, zipping it halfway.

Landon steps closer. Just enough to make my breath hitch.

“Good,” he murmurs. “Because we’re walking into hell tonight, Peach. And I need you sharp.”

13

JASMINE

The drive to the Raiders' hideout is mostly silent, minus the low twang of country music leaking from Landon's speakers, as he hums along under his breath.

Outside, the road grows darker with every passing mile. The trees get thicker, wilder. Civilization fades behind us like a bad dream. At some point, the pavement gives way to gravel, and then the gravel dissolves into dirt. We climb deeper into the woods, the tires crunching over dried leaves and scattered branches. My fingers tighten on the edge of Landon's jacket, pulling it closer around me like armor.

For a while, I'm convinced we're lost.

Until he makes a sharp turn—one I never would've noticed on my own—and we slip off the main path onto a narrow trail, barely wide enough for the car. The woods press in on both sides like the trees are watching us, judging us for trespassing.

And then the hidden road opens up into a wide clearing, and at the center of it stands the largest cabin I've ever seen. Except calling it a cabin feels wrong. This isn't some rustic getaway. It's a fortress.

Built from blackened timber and stone, it stretches wide and tall. The windows are tinted or covered altogether. Massive flood lights hang from the eaves, casting sharp beams into the clearing. Motorcycles line the front like a row of metallic teeth—chrome gleaming in the moonlight, leather saddlebags stamped with the

Raiders' insignia: a coiled serpent strangling a set of wings.

The air smells like gasoline and pine. Like smoke and steel.

Men are already outside—leaning against bikes, lighting cigarettes, tossing knives into a wooden target hammered into a tree. They don't smile when they see us. They just watch.

Landon pulls the car to a slow stop, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel once before killing the engine. He looks at me.

"Any snarky, rude or minorly sassy thing you want to say," Landon whispers. "Say it now, or forever hold your peace."

I glance at him, brows raised. "Are you saying I can't speak freely inside?"

"I'm saying," he murmurs, eyes locked on the cabin ahead, "that these people don't handle attitude the way I do. You mouth off to the wrong guy, and suddenly I'm cracking skulls in front of a charcuterie board."

"There's a charcuterie board?"

"There's probably not a charcuterie board, but if there is. Don't touch it."

I roll my eyes. "So no attitude, no meat and cheese. Got it."

Landon's lips twitch like he wants to smile, but he doesn't. He just exhales, slow and controlled. "Are you done?"

"I'm never done, but since you asked so nicely," I smile, leaning against the headrest. "I will only speak when spoken to, like this is the 1950s."

“Thank you for listening to the rules of this courtship,” he mocks, unbuckling his seatbelt.

I scoff, but I follow suit, only stepping out when he’s nodded to himself a couple times like he’s trying to convince himself it’ll be fine.

It won’t be.

The second my boots crunch on the dirt, the energy shifts. It’s subtle—just enough to raise the hairs on my arms. Every man outside pauses, stares. Not a single smile. No warm welcome. Just long, lingering looks that feel more like threat assessments than introductions.

Landon rounds the car and comes to my side, his stride calm but focused. He doesn’t touch me, but he angles his body ever so slightly between me and the men, like he’s already prepared to block the first one who steps too close.

We pass the line of bikes, engines still ticking from heat. There’s a smell in the air—leather, smoke, motor oil, and something sour underneath it, like sweat and spilled beer left to rot.

The porch creaks under our weight as we climb the steps. The wood is old, stained dark, maybe from varnish—or maybe not.

The door opens before either of us knocks.

A man I assume is Marcus stands there like he’s been waiting for this moment, like he enjoys it. He’s leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest in that casual way men use when they want you to know they’re dangerous without doing a damn thing. He’s dressed in all black—tight tank top, worn biker gloves, silver chains glinting at his throat—and when his brown eyes flick over me, slow and lingering, I

feel it in my spine.

Then he smiles. Not the kind that's warm or amused, but the kind that stretches too wide, too practiced, like it's been carved into his face over years of getting exactly what he wants. And something about that smile—about the arrogant tilt of his chin, the lazy way he shifts his weight, the heat in his stare—makes bile rise in my throat.

Because it's familiar. Too familiar.

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He smiles just like him. The man I tried to forget. The man who used to look at me like that, just before his hands would roam lower, just before the air in the room turned too thick to breathe. Marcus wears the same grin, the same shadow in his gaze, like hurting people is a game and I've already lost. And just like that, I'm not on the porch anymore—I'm thirteen again, bracing for impact.

“Well, well,” he drawls. “If it ain't Romeo and his pretty little plus one.”

Landon doesn't blink. “We're here.”

“I can see that.”

His gaze settles on me again, heavier now. “You clean up alright, sweetheart.”

I feel Landon tense beside me like a live wire.

Marcus notices it too, and his grin widens. “Relax, Lanny. You brought her here, didn't you? That makes her family.”

He steps aside, gesturing us in like it's his house and not the gateway to hell.

“Come on in. Everyone's dying to meet her.” Marcus crackles, stepping aside like the devil welcoming us into his parlor.

Landon doesn't wait—he laces our fingers together as he firmly pulls me in with him.

The inside is not what I expect. Less biker gang fortress, more country frat house from

hell.

The living room opens up wide, ceilings high and vaulted like an overdone hunting lodge. There's a massive TV mounted above a fireplace that looks barely used, its mantle littered with empty liquor bottles, poker chips, and one very real-looking rifle. Tapestries of the American flag, old band posters, and mounted animal heads decorate the walls in clashing chaos. There's a fish tank in one corner with no fish, just murky water and a floating beer can.

The furniture is oversized and mismatched—brown leather couches patched with duct tape, a recliner that looks like it's survived multiple bar fights, and a bean bag that definitely hasn't been cleaned since the 1990s. The scent of beer, barbecue, sweat, and smoke mixes into a single overpowering funk.

Red solo cups litter the floor. A country-rock remix thuds from unseen speakers. Someone's playing pool in the back near an old jukebox, and the walls shake every time they laugh.

Every guy we pass is dressed in some variation of “my dad owns land and a shotgun.” Boots. Leather. Ball caps. Tattoos. Silver chains over sleeveless shirts. Some of them nod at Landon. Most just stare at me like I'm the party favor no one expected but no one's mad about.

A few girls are here too—denim shorts, too much perfume, laughing too loud. One's perched on a guy's lap, taking a shot while he stares at her chest like it's on the menu.

“This way,” Landon mutters, steering me down a hall lined with crooked family photos and an array of decorated, but very clearly loaded guns.

“Dinner's this way!” Marcus yells behind us, his voice bouncing off the wood-paneled walls. “Hope she's hungry—we're serving rare.”

A chorus of snickers follows. One of the guys makes a barking noise. I keep my chin up, but my stomach twists.

Landon mutters a very annoyed, fuck off, but for the most part he's silent.

When we step into the open garage in the back of the house, the smell hits me first—thick, syrupy maple barbecue layered over smoke and meat. My stomach growls before I can help it, because of course my body doesn't care that we're at dinner with devils.

There aren't any cars inside, just a wide, echoing space that's been converted into a kind of biker banquet hall. Folding tables are lined up in rows, covered with red-checkered cloths and mismatched plates. Beer cans rattle in coolers shoved in the corners, and someone's already halfway through a tray of ribs licking their fingers like it's the best barbeque in Texas.

The fluorescent lights above cast a sterile yellow glow over everything, making the dried brownish-red stains on the concrete floor impossible to ignore. Landon tries to steer us toward a side table near the back, but we don't make it two steps before two heavy hands land on our shoulders.

Marcus leans in between us like he's parting the Red Sea, his breath a mix of nicotine and yeast from the beer.

"Nah," he says, his voice slick with amusement. "Y'all're sittin' at the grown-up table tonight." His laugh is sharp, phlegmy, and way too close to my ear. "We got business to discuss."

Landon stiffens beside me, his jaw ticking.

I roll my eyes, plastering on a tight smile I don't mean. "Wow, business and

barbecue. How official.”

Marcus cackles louder. “She’s a feisty one!”

Landon glares at me, as Marcus runs past us to the main table. I mouth an sorry, and keep my head down.

I can’t help it, Marcus is annoyingly country. And yeah, I was raised country. I know the difference between a good Southern boy and a man play acting like he’s a family-guy when he’s really running a criminal empire. He’s like a rejected extra from The Beverly Hillbillies, just with tattoos, a body count, and more rings than fingers.

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At the main table, Marcus lounges like it's a throne, his arm slung around the narrow shoulders of a black-haired girl with bright blue eyes—eyes that are too wide, too clean, too young to belong in a place like this.

She doesn't look at me when I sit across from her. In fact, she looks down, like making eye contact might cost her something. I frown.

Landon leans in, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. "She's Talia," he murmurs. "Marcus' girlfriend."

I jerk back, my spine stiffening. Girlfriend? She looks barely eighteen. And Marcus looks like an expired thirty-five year old.

I didn't like him before. But now? Now I'm personally planning his fucking funeral. Before I can speak, a voice breaks through the static of my disgust.

"Lanny Lan!" a too-cheerful guy calls out, sliding into the seat beside me with a grin and a plate stacked so high with barbecue it might collapse under its own weight. "What have you brought for dessert?"

"Nothing," Landon growls, clearly unimpressed. "You can get a bite of Zay."

I turn, a smile spreading across my face before I can stop it. Isaiah Cross, is the owner of Tat Attack in town, the place where I have gotten at least ten of my tattoos over the last year. I used to live for their thirty dollar Thursdays and holiday specials.

"Isaiah, don't tell me you tat so many asses, you don't remember mine?" I snort, and

his dark brown eyes flash with recognition.

Isaiah shakes out his moss-green hair and leans over his tattoo-covered knuckles grazing my arm. “I could never forget an ass like yours...”

“Jasmine?” I snort just as another girl—barely more than a teenager herself—glides past and drops two plates in front of us. Fuchsia hair braided tight to the side, deep brown eyes, and a low-cut tank top.

“Right, Jasmine.” He nods and I laugh because the guy fucks everything in town, so him not remembering me in A-Okay probably better than just okay.

Before I can come up with a response that includes teeth, a monotone voice cuts clean through the noise. “Isaiah.”

I glance up.

The man standing near the end of the table could be my biological brother if I squint hard enough. Same grey eyes. Same blonde hair.

He’s just tall, lean, and pale—but not sickly. More like carved from marble. His blonde hair is long and tied into a bun on top of his head, the sides of his scalp shaved into a low fade, and his eyes are a darker grey than mine, like he holds the clouds in them.

He doesn’t blink. Doesn’t smile. Just stares at Isaiah like he’s a fly buzzing too close to something sacred.

Isaiah rolls his eyes. “Come on, Asher. I’m being friendly.”

“Too-friendly,” he comments, sitting next to Talia and sliding her a smaller plate of

barbeque.

We fall into a strange, almost peaceful silence for a few minutes, and I decide—if I die tonight, it'll be fine as long as it's by this plate of barbecue.

The ribs slide right off the bone, the mac and cheese is gooey perfection, the yams are sweet without being cloying, and the green beans are seasoned just right. And the cornbread? Thick sliced, golden crust, with honey butter melting into every crevice. It's an actual crime how good this food is.

I take one bite of the ribs and moan, eyes fluttering shut. Because holy fuck. If this is what dinner with the Raiders is like, I might have to join.

Next to me, Landon clears his throat pointedly. I open my eyes to find him staring—hard.

Isaiah nearly chokes on his beer. “Shit,” he grins. “If she's gonna keep making noises like that, I'll go fix her another plate myself.”

“No.” Landon's voice is sharp. Final.

I pretend not to hear him and keep eating. Because honestly? He should be grateful I'm not moaning louder.

I'm about halfway through the best meal I've had in years when Marcus finally speaks again. “Where's my little brother?”

The table stills for a beat. Isaiah's smirk fades, his face going a little red. He's still holding a rib an inch from his mouth when he answers. “He's with Cassandra.”

Marcus leans back in his chair, drumming his fingers once on the table. “Still?”

Isaiah shrugs, not meeting his eyes. “She wanted company. He volunteered.”

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A few of the other guys chuckle low under their breath, and right on cue, a girl saunters into the garage. She has big, bouncy blonde curls, bruised lips, and a ring of hickeys around her neck that almost looks like a necklace. She's wearing daisy dukes and a flannel shirt tied around her waist.

Hot on her tail is a terrifying sex god on legs.

He's tall. Slender but built. His black hair falls in soft, deliberate waves, slightly damp like he just stepped out of a shower. Hazel eyes flick calmly around the garage, and he's covered in tattoos, not messy ones, but clean, sharp designs that stretch across his arms and peek from under the collar of his fitted black shirt.

"Thank you for joining us Xavier," Marcus snarls, but Xavier just shrugs.

"Sorry, for keeping him." The girl who I am assuming is Cassandra pouts, in an exaggerated southern belle accent. "I can be so distracting at times. You know that, Marcus."

"Mmmhmm," Marcus grumbles, just as Xavier steals some of his ribs off his plate and slides into the seat between Marcus and Isaiah.

Xavier leans back in his chair, Cassandra curled across his lap like a smug housecat, and nods at the table. "What's this about?"

Marcus smiles, slow and wide. The kind of smile that says he's been waiting for the curtain to rise.

“Well,” he says, dabbing his mouth with a crumpled napkin even though there’s no mess to clean, “Now we can get started since everyone’s here...”

His gaze slides over the table—lingering on me.

“You,” Marcus says, tapping his fork against the edge of his plate without breaking eye contact. “Are gonna help us out, sweetheart.”

I blink. “Me?”

“You,” he repeats with a nod, like he’s confirming my name on a list. “Jasmine Rivera. Late admission to Haven, lives in a pretty little apartment with our favorite runaway, and—if I’m hearing things right—currently warming up to one Brooke du Pont.”

My fork freezes halfway to my mouth. “Excuse me?”

Marcus grins. “Come on now. You didn’t think we invited you just for some grub?”

I glance at Landon, but he’s eyes are narrowed in on Marcus, jaw clicking like he’s grinding his teeth to the nub.

Marcus leans in, elbows braced on the table. “We’ve had guys trying to get close to the du Ponts for years. Problem is, no one’s cracked that circle. Everyone we’ve sent in tried to charm her or her brother, but failed. Some even tried to get in her bed. But nobody realized...”

His grin widens.

“She wasn’t into them, because she wasn’t into guys.”

I snort. “I’m sorry, gay never crossed your mind?”

The table goes quiet. Isaiah chokes softly on his beer.

“Nah, sweetheart,” Marcus smirks, leaning into the table. His hands hovering over his empty plate. “Foolish ain’t we.”

I nod, and clear my throat. “So let me get this straight,” I shift in my seat. “You want me to what? Seduce her?”

Marcus shrugs. “Call it what you want. But she likes you. You’ve got her attention. We want her money. Or more specifically...” He steeples his fingers. “Her father’s money.”

“And you think dating me is going to get her to open the family vault?”

“She’s a du Pont,” Asher cuts in, tone flat. “They don’t share bank access over brunch. But if you’re in, you’re in.”

“The du Ponts own seventy percent of Texas real estate.” Xavier looks at me for the first time, a look of corruption on his smiling face. “They’ve got more influence than the damn governor, and are more beloved given that Howard du Pont is one of the biggest pastors in the state. If we can get them on our side—or even one of them—we can finally cut ties with the Italians and move with the cartel.”

My heart hammers in my chest. I stare at Marcus. “You want me to manipulate her.”

“We want you to make her useful,” Marcus says simply. “And in exchange, we keep Tommy alive.”

I freeze. “What?”

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“Oops.” His grin doesn’t falter. “Forgot to mention—we picked him up. Sweet guy. Real loyal. But that kind of loyalty doesn’t mean much unless you play ball.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. Tommy, Willow’s Dad, the only parent I have ever truly known.

“Where is he?” I snap, chest tightening.

Landon shifts beside me, but Marcus lifts a hand, palm out like I’m a child throwing a tantrum. “Don’t. Let’s not turn this into some big rescue mission. Tommy’s not hurt... yet. But if you don’t hold up your end? Well, I’d hate for you to attend another funeral this year.”

My mouth goes dry. The buzzing in my ears gets louder.

First month of college and I’ve already got one foot in a criminal enterprise, a situationship with the most dangerous man I’ve ever met, another with the sweetest girl I don’t deserve—and now I’ve managed to get my semi-adoptive dad kidnapped by a biker gang.

Awesome. Just fucking stellar.

“You just want me to get close to Brooke?” I ask, voice flat, grinding the words out between clenched teeth.

Marcus leans back in his chair and nods, all fake charm and oily calm. “Real close. Close enough that she invites you to the du Pont Ball at the start of winter.”

I blink. “The Ball? That’s?—”

“A political summit in sequins,” he cuts in. “Old money, new money, cartel reps, mafia whispers, and every landowner with power south of Kansas. Her daddy throws it. You get in, we get eyes.”

“And then what?” I ask slowly.

Marcus just grins, tapping his temple. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about that. You leave the real mess to the professionals, darling.”

Around the table, the guys start laughing—hooting like this is a comedy set and not a criminal setup. Landon’s jaw is tight as he stares at Marcus with pure murder in his eyes.

And I tuck my chin in my chest. Fuck, I’m going to be sick.

About thirty minutes later, Marcus waves us off with a grin and a half-eaten rib, like he didn’t just blackmail me with the one person I love most in this world. I keep my head down, hold my breath, and walk in silence until we reach the edge of the Raiders’ property.

The second we’re past the bikes and off the porch, I turn on Landon like a dragon ready to burn him to a crisp.

“Did you know?” I hiss, shoving him hard in the chest. He barely stumbles, but his hands shoot up, defensive.

“Peach—”

“Did you fucking know?”

“Bloody hell?—”

“Don’t you dare deflect. Did you know they were going to whore me out for a goddamn land deal? Did you know they had Tommy?”

“No, I didn’t fucking know!” Landon barks back, voice rougher than I’ve ever heard it. “You think I would’ve walked you into that mess if I knew?”

“You brought me here!” I scream. “You brought me into their house. Sat me at their goddamn table like a piece of bait!”

“I brought you here to keep you safe!”

My breath hitches. “Safe? They’re using me.”

“I know,” he growls, stepping toward me, eyes blazing. “I didn’t know it was gonna be this. I thought Marcus just wanted to scare you. Prove a point. But I never—I would never have let them threaten Tommy, Jasmine.”

He scrubs a hand through his hair, pacing a few feet away like he can’t bear to be still.

“I’m on your side,” he mutters, quieter now. “Even when it’s fucked. Even when I don’t know how to fix it.”

My arms are shaking, adrenaline twisting through every limb. I want to punch something. Scream until my throat rips open.

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“You don’t get to say that,” I whisper. “You don’t get to be on my side when you dragged me into a goddamn snake pit.”

He steps in again, slow this time, like he’s approaching something feral. “Peach... I was trying to protect you. I’ve always been trying to protect you, and right now, you need to protect us because this is them being nice. If he brings us in here again you’ll leave in a fucking body bag.”

My body shakes, and I look away before he can see the tears spilling over.

“Then help me get Tommy back,” I whisper. “Help me get out. I can’t do this to Brooke.”

“I will,” he says, wrapping a hand around the back of my neck. “I swear to you, Jasmine. I will fix this, but right now, you have to play the game, until I can find a way out that doesn’t get us killed.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “Okay, but I don’t like this.”

He pulls me in close, placing a kiss on my forehead. “I know, Peach. I know.”

14

LANDON

Jasmine doesn’t fall asleep until three in the morning—not until I promise to wake her up early enough to finish her essay before her date with Brooke tomorrow. She makes

me swear on something stupid, like my passport, and something more fun like my future children. I tease her and say our future children which she agrees to because she's too tired to open up her eyes.

I tried to get some sleep but I can't sleep at all.

I feel too guilty to be in the same space as her, breathing the same air, letting her trust me like I didn't just sign her up for a life sentence with men who'd gut her before asking her name. I fucking dragged her into this mess. If it wasn't for me... Well, if it wasn't for me, she'd still have to deal with Isaiah, or worse—Xavier.

I'm no hero. Never claimed to be. But I'm her best bad option.

Unless you count her actual best option, the golden boy of clean records and the only other person I trust to keep her protected: Conner.

But outside of Conner, I am her best shot at making it out here alive, which means if I want to ensure she stays alive, I fucking need Conner.

It's five in the morning by the time I make it to his sterile-ass apartment on the other side of town. Everything about it screams overcompensation—white walls, untouched granite countertops, blinds that open automatically at sunrise. I know Conner's schedule like the back of my hand, partly because I've lived with him from the age of sixteen to twenty-four, and partly because he's the only person more predictable than a sunrise.

He wakes at 5:03. Not 5. Not 5:05. 5:03, because it gives him exactly seven minutes to stretch, wash his face, and put on those ugly grey running shoes he refuses to replace.

I light a cigarette on the stairwell. No point ringing the buzzer yet. In exactly five

minutes, he'll leave the building for his daily four-mile loop through the park—looping counter-clockwise because “it's more efficient for left turns.”

I take a drag.

I've got four and a half minutes to figure out how to convince the cleanest man I know to help me clean up a bloodstained fucking war.

By the time I'm on my last pull of the cigarette, the metal door to Conner's building slams open so hard it rattles the stairwell railing. He steps out like he's already mid-fight, hoodie half-zipped, jaw clenched, and when his eyes land on me—leaning against the wall, reeking of smoke and guilt—he growls. Like a fucking animal.

“Fuck off,” he snarls without breaking stride, already jogging toward the park like I'm a bad memory chasing his heels.

“Come on, Con,” I say, tossing the butt and falling into step beside him, the air cold and sharp in my lungs. “I didn't mean to?”

“Make her cum in the middle of my fucking class,” he snaps, turning the corner so hard I nearly get clipped by a Prius. “Yeah, you didn'tmeanto, but it happened anyway.”

“I mean, fuck, man. You want her,” I say, breath hitching as I match his pace. “You think I didn't notice? I would need to be fucking blind with the way you look at her.”

“You don't know what I want.”

“Bullshit. I know you better than that. You like your routine, your job, your alphabetized spice rack. But her?” I glance at him. “She wrecked you, and youlikedit.”

He doesn't answer. Doesn't look at me. His fists clench tighter, knuckles paling as they pump at his sides. I let the silence stretch a second too long, then say what I came here to say.

"Just admit that you want her," I say, half a chuckle buried in a cough as the cold morning air scrapes my throat.

Conner grunts and veers left into the park, like the path might swallow the conversation if he walks fast enough.

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“Come on, Con,” I push, jogging to keep pace. “When’s the last time you?—”

“Landon.” He snaps, in that cold measured way, and it shuts me the fuck up.

I know better than to bring her up. The one Conner doesn’t talk about. The one who carved out pieces of him and never gave them back.

But that look in his eyes when he sees Jasmine? It’s the same damn look.

Like she’s gravity—his center of orbit—pulling every part of him closer whether he wants it or not. Like he’d burn himself alive just to keep her warm.

I see it. Clear as day.

The need.

The want.

It’s written all over him, in the way his jaw tightens when she laughs too loud, the way his eyes track her across a room like she’s the only goddamn thing in focus.

And for someone who’s built his whole life on control, Conner wanting Jasmine is the one thing he can’t fucking hide.

“What do you want?” he growls, breath puffing in little clouds as we hit the trailhead. “You don’t wake up before noon unless someone’s bleeding out or you’ve fucked up. So which is it this time? And why the fuck must you ruin my morning peace?”

I inhale, grounding myself.

“She’s in danger, Con.”

He slows for the first time, just slightly, like his body hasn’t caught up to his brain.

I push forward. “I don’t mean academic probation. I mean actual danger. Raider-level. Gun-to-the-head, body-in-the-trunk danger. And I can’t—” I pause, swallowing hard. “They have Tommy, her like pseudo-father.”

Conner stops jogging. Just dead stops in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Who has her Tommy?” he finally asks, voice raw, eyes already calculating the fallout before I can say a word.

Then he runs a hand through his hair, yanking hard at the roots like he’s trying to wake himself up from a nightmare.

“What the hell did you do, Landon?”

“This time?” I say, shaking my head. “It wasn’t me. They saw her with Brooke du Pont.”

His head snaps toward me so fast I hear his neck pop. “The girl she was flirting with outside of my class?” he snaps, like the words taste foul coming out of his mouth.

“Just the one,” I say dryly. “But do you know who the du Ponts are?”

Conner scoffs. “Everyone knows who the du Ponts are. Richest family in the South. Founders of New Orleans. They practically own seventy percent of the fucking real estate in Texas, but what does that have to do with--fuck.”

I nod, watching him as the pieces start to click in place. “They want Jasmine to help secure a slice of the du Pont pie.”

Conner’s mouth twitches like he’s trying not to bare his teeth. “And how is she going to do that?”

“Marriage, leverage, blackmail, I don’t know yet—but they’re circling,” I say, voice tight.

He exhales through his nose, sharp and mean. “So just another reason to kill Marcus.”

I nod, dragging a hand through my hair. “We can’t kill Marcus if they still have Tommy.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Conner snaps, hands clenched at his sides. “ We gotta get Tommy out of there first.”

I look at him, really look at him, and realize the gears are already turning. That same genius-level intellect he uses to crack forensics cases and teach spoiled undergrads? It’s now trained on one target: extraction.

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“Okay,” I say, grounding myself. “Jasmine’s supposed to spend the day with Brooke tomorrow. First date.”

“Tell Jasmine to take Brooke off the grid, somewhere where she can’t obviously be followed by the Raiders,” Conner mutters. “That may work in our favor.”

“So what’s the play?” I ask.

He’s already moving again, pacing in a tight circle like he’s building a war map in his head.

“First, we find where they’re keeping Tommy,” he says. “Then we get him out when the time is right, and vanish before Marcus even knows we were there.”

“We’re going to vanish?” I choke.

“No Jasmine is going to vanish,” he nods. “We’re going to kill the Raiders. Every last one.”

15

CONNER

Hours later—aftermy strictly timed 4.2-mile run, two boiled eggs, a bowl of unsweetened oatmeal, and exactly forty-five minutes of weight training—I find myself standing outside the Dallas State Police Department. The heat hasn’t kicked in yet, but the sun’s already baking the sidewalk, which I deemed the only time

appropriate to be in the police department.

The truth is, long before I found my calling in forensic science, I thought I'd wear a badge. Serve, protect, uphold justice. All that idealistic crap they feed you in school.

I learned quickly: there's only so much you can do from inside the system. And I meant it when I said I'd kill Marcus. I can't do that when I promised to protect and uphold all citizens, because that includes the scum, doesn't it?

I push through the front doors and make a beeline for the front desk, where a woman with pencil-thin eyebrows and a glossy smile looks up from her chipped acrylics. Her name tag reads "Trina," and her perfume hits me before her voice does—overly sweet, like candied fruit doused in rubbing alcohol.

She bats her lashes. "Can I help you, sir?"

I flash a smile I've practiced to perfection. Not too friendly. Just clinical enough to make people uneasy. "That depends. You think you can get me into the back without alerting your supervisor?"

She giggles. Giggles. "Depends what I'm getting in return."

Trina's tongue runs over her teeth in a manner that I am assuming is supposed to be flirtatious, but it only makes me want to continue to analyze her. Her left eyelash is starting to lift. Her piling foundation doesn't match her neck, and she's got lipstick and chocolate on her teeth. I inwardly sigh, because only one of those things can be used to my benefit.

I lean in slightly, lowering my voice. "Trina, do you still have a love of Parisian chocolate?"

She leans across the desk, an acrylic nail running aimlessly across my chest. It takes everything in me not to snap her finger cleanly at the bone. “You know it buttercup,” she sings in an almost nasal tone.

I slide a smirk onto my face—the one I perfected watching Landon work a room. My eyes skim down her body like I’m thinking about sex. Really, I’m thinking about how she hasn’t swallowed once since I walked in.

Her throat’s tight. Pulse ticking at the base of it. Pupils dilated just enough to give her away.

“Well, lucky for both of us. I still know your favorite shop.” I whisper, and she fuckingsqueals.

I inwardly groan trying to keep myself from clawing my own eardrums out as I slide a case of chocolates from the infamous Edward’s.

“Why are you buttering me up Conner Kilgore?” She coos.

“Because it is faster than wasting my time filing paperwork and waiting for approval I already know I’ll get.” I wink, the first truth of this entire interaction spilling out.

“You’re right about that,” she wiggles her eyebrows, digging into the box of truffles and moaning when one passes her lips. With a mouth full of chocolate she speaks behind her hand. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m consulting for SAC Kilroy,” I add, slipping my clearance pass across the counter. “I want access to the lace murders.”

“Consulting for SAC Kilroy doesn’t get you into the Lace murder files, or evidence.” She quirks an eyebrow.

“That’s why I brought chocolate.” I lean against the counter and smirk in a way that makes most people think I am letting them in on a dirty secret.

She hesitates for half a second too long—then buzzes the side door open with a mutter, “Fine, but if you get caught, you snuck in while I was in the ladies room.”

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“Of course,” I nod my thanks and walk past, not looking back.

I know this building like the back of my hand. Knew it even before they let me ghost in and out for crime scene consults. The labs are toward the back—sterile, humming with cold white light and the sound of machines too old to trust but too expensive to replace. Regardless, that doesn’t hinder me from my job.

I don the gloves waiting at the prep station and approach the workstation marked “ACTIVE — CASE 4087.” Serial killer. North Dallas.

She slips in and out of crime scenes without leaving a trace. No fingerprints. No DNA. No hair, skin cells, sweat—nothing. They call her Lace, named after the only clue that ever suggested she might be a woman: a single leather lace shooting glove found discarded miles from the nearest victim.

She must have been meticulous—wiping down everything, maybe even wearing a full barrier suit under street clothes. Not one usable print. Not even a partial. You’d think she was a ghost. If it weren’t for the fact that she gunned down most of the Cartel like it was nothing.

I’m almost impressed.

I slide open the lead tech’s notes and sigh at the fucking mess of scribbles. Sloppy. Barely legible. Basically unusable. What a waste.

What I need is pattern.

Something in Lace's movements, her method, her rhythm. Anything that tells me where she'll go next—and more importantly, how I can aim her. Because that's the plan: get Lace to kill Marcus.

It was a no brainer after I cleared my head on mile two of my morning jog. She's already carving her way through the Cartel. Wouldn't take much to pivot her toward the Raiders. Different syndicate, same rot. Same brutality. Same killer. No one would bat an eye.

I spend the next forty-five minutes combing through kill patterns. Locations. Time stamps. Ballistics. Calling cards. Eyewitness statements that don't line up. Detective suspicions that go ignored.

She's methodical, sure—but there's emotion here. Rage. Each hit is deliberate, but the spacing between them? That's not tactical. That's personal, and when things are personal, they get messy.

I scan over a single entry buried in a chain of supplemental DNA reports. A degraded sample pulled from under the fingernail of a cartel enforcer who bled out behind a club off Harry Hines.

It wasn't enough to build a full profile. But that's not the part that makes me lean in.

The real prize is buried deeper in the genome breakdown.

A corrupted blood trace, tagged and half-ignored—lifted from none other than Xavier King's Raider vest.

I double-check the chain of custody. Same crime scene. Same night.

My mouth tightens.

I grab the vial from the evidence filing tray and slide it into my inside jacket pocket like it's nothing.

Because Xavier King doesn't just know of Lace.

He knows who she is.

And now, all I have to do is make that connection worth my while.

16

BROOKE

I haven't been scared for a date in years.

Well—technically not since junior prom, when rumors started floating around that Ryan Doogley was going to ditch me for Tinsey Williams. That disaster only got avoided because I showed up with Timothy Keiths instead. The Timothy Keiths—hottest guy in all of fucking Austin, my go-to revenge ammunition back then and my very cooperative beard now.

He's been helping me hide my sexuality from my God-fearing parents since senior year of high school, and he's always down to play the part—charming smile, hand on the small of my back, the whole Southern gentleman act.

Which only made it worse for Ryan when Timothy went pro our freshman year of college and Ryan... yeah, he's still riding the bench, pretending JV glory means something past seventeen.

But that—that was the last time I felt nervous about a date.

Because with guys? I've always known I could do better.

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Better car. Better money. Better body. Bigger dick.

There was always more, and I never had to settle. It was like online shopping with a little more sweat and slightly worse lighting.

But women?

Women are a whole different goddamn universe.

I didn't even realize I was gay until that one sleepover at Taylor's. My best friend, my cheer captain, the girl with the perfect hair and a whole drawer of matching pajama sets. We were watching *Burlesque*, and I remember being obsessed with Christina Aguilera. Like... not in the "wow, I wish I had her waist" kind of way. More like, "holy shucks, I would ruin my life for that woman" kind of way.

I think I said something about her ass. Twice. Taylor noticed.

Two experimental makeout sessions and one fake ID later, we snuck into a lesbian bar in Dallas.

And let me tell you—everything made sense after that.

All the half-hearted boyfriends, the confusing hookups, the constant sense that I was faking it through my own love life.

Gone. And right when I decided I was going to live my life at Haven University just how I wanted, I see the coolest girl in my entire life.

Jasmine Rivera is...shoot. Are there even words that do her justice?

She matches me—word for word, beat for beat. Like we're fluent in the same secret language. She makes me laugh without even trying, and the way she looks at me...like I'm everything she's ever wanted in life. Like I am the center of her universe.

Even when she's mad—especially when she's mad—there's something in her eyes that sees me. The real me. Like she's dissecting all the layers I've spent years armoring myself with and still deciding,yeah, I want that one.

And don't even get me started on the way she looks. She's a rockstar-coded wet dream. Full stop. Those red highlights in her blonde hair catch the light like fire when she tilts her head just right. Subtle curves that she doesn't play up—but damn, does she own them. And that smile? That tiny, guarded, teasing little smirk she only ever gives me?

Yeah. I was a goner from day one.

And it doesn't help that I've changed my outfit six times like a lovesick teenager stuck in a sapphic fever dream. I've tried polished, chill, rich-girl casual, effortless-thirst-trap,I just threw this on but I totally didn't... and nothing feels good enough.

Because how the hell do you dress for someone who makes your heart beat like a bass drop and your brain forget how to form full sentences?

I glance down at my current outfit: skinny jeans, my trusty brown cowboy boots, and a slightly-too-cropped crop top. Totally not me. I want to scream. BecauseGod as my witness, this cannot be the look I go down in.

I mean, to go from stealing someone's wallet to being dumped for looking like

a country popsicle is not the way I'm getting kicked to the curb.

"Taylor," I groan into my phone speaker, flopping backward onto my bed, "please tell me this top makes me look hot and not like I should be selling beer at a rodeo."

On the other end of the call, Taylor snorts. "You look like a queer rodeo Barbie, and I mean that as a compliment. But no, you're not wearing that. Try the mesh top with the black jeans. And accessorize, slut."

I groan louder. "Why is dressing for girls harder than boys? I used to just flash a little cleavage and boom—done. Now I'm obsessing over neckline symmetry and whether or not my auras are coming off too needy."

"Because women see women," Taylor says. "And you're used to men who only see boobs."

"Um...what does that say about you, hetero?" I snap, sitting up sharply and pulling off my t-shirt.

"It says I am fine with sexual manipulation, because these bad girls," she says pulling up her boobs higher on her chest. "They could end wars and start revolutions."

I kick off my shoes as I start to unbutton my jeans. "I'm sorry, are you seriously comparing your country bumpkin self to Helen of Troy?"

"No comparison necessary," Taylor says with a smug grin, sliding her hands down her sides like she's on a runway. "Baby, look at me. I am delicious."

And, to be fair, she's not wrong.

Taylor looks like she time-traveled out of a '90s supermodel campaign—long legs,

lean build with just the right touch of curves, and an ass that older women in our neighborhood have definitely paid surgeons to replicate. Her naturally highlighted chestnut hair falls in those effortless waves influencers try to fake, and her big brown doe eyes? Deadly.

One trembling lip and I swear she could convince half of Texas to secede just to name the new nation after her.

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“Tay, not helping!” I groan, yanking my jeans down and kicking them off. I’m left standing in my favorite white lace bra and matching thong, trying not to spiral into full first date panic.

“Just go out likethat!” Taylor beams.

I march to the phone and jab my pointer finger at the screen. “If you’re going to bezerohelp, Iwillhang up on you.” Then I glance at the clock and shriek. “Tay, she’s going to be here inten minutes!”

“Okay, okay, real talk—the fuck-me slip.”

I freeze. Then gasp. “Itotallyforgot about that slip, but we are not calling it that. You know how I feel about cussing.”

“Sorry, princess.” Taylor drones with an overdramatic bow of her head. “We’ll call it the make himor hersweat slip, better?”

“Much better.” I nod making my way to the closet.

It’s a black-and-white floral slip dress that tailors at the waist, has a v-line so deep it stops below my sternum and little flair on the hem that ends mid-thigh. I bought it specifically to annihilate my ex, Gerald, after he cheated on me with Tinsley. Had him crawling back by halftime of the homecoming game. But I was already in Timothy Keith’s lap by then.

I yank the dress from the back of my closet, shimmy into it, and grab my brown over-

the-knee cowgirl boots. It's giving hot, feminine, Southern chaos.

Taylor gasps on FaceTime. "Now that's the look, and cussing or not, that is a fuck me slip dress."

I smirk at my reflection in the mirror, tugging my curls—now fallen into soft waves—into a high ponytail, leaving two loose strands to frame my face just right. A quick swipe of my trusty lip gloss, a warm brown smokey eye, and just like that, I'm ready to make someone's daughter question her life choices.

"Ten out of ten, would flirt shamelessly," Taylor adds, pretending to fan herself.

"You're literally married."

"Details."

Before I can roll my eyes again, there's a knock at the door. My breath catches.

I toss the phone face down on the bed, give myself one last once-over, and head to the door.

When I open it, Jasmine's standing there, slightly out of breath, her fist still half-raised like she was just about to knock again.

"Holyshit," she breathes, eyes dragging over me with such blatant appreciation I feel heat climb all the way up my neck. "You look like a fucking goddess."

I laugh, stepping aside to let her in, but not before giving her a once-over of my own.

She's in fitted black leather shorts, a ripped vintage tee knotted at the waist, and a cropped moto jacket that clings to her like sin. Her lips are glossed, her earrings small

silver hoops, and the necklace hanging low against her chest glints with every movement.

Total rockstar energy. Effortlessly cool. And dangerously pretty.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” I say, trying to sound casual even as my brain short-circuits.

She smirks. “Not bad, huh?”

I shut the door, and walk past her. “I said what I said.”

Jasmine leans in close so the scent of cinnamon and the spice of bourbon invades my senses. “Your blush is saying something different though.”

The smooth rumble of her whispering in my ear almost makes me miss a step. Jeez Louise tonight is going to be a tease.

“Alright, so let me get this straight,” Jasmine wheezes, half-choking on a laugh, pointing a limp fry at me like it’s a mic. “You are a pageant queen, an internationally ranked horseback rider from Austin, Texas, but draw the line at barbeque?”

“Why are you laughing?” I giggle, snatching a fry off her plate and tossing it at her. “I just don’t like it! It’s all sticky and smoky and smells like regret.”

Jasmine takes the hit like a champ, popping the fry into her mouth with a smirk. “I mean, I thought you were a Texas girl through and through. You don’t cuss, your daddy’s a pastor, you wear boots that could kick through drywall, and somehow—somehow—you’re anti-ribs?”

“I am a Texas girl!” I protest, grabbing my milkshake and clutching it to my chest like

it's a sacred text. "I even got the cowgirl boots to prove it."

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“Nah, I’m so sorry, babydoll,” she drawls, leaning in close across the vinyl diner booth, eyes sparkling. “I’m gonna have to take that Texan card. Gimme that badge.”

“Excuseme!” I shriek, eyes wide, scandalized in the most dramatic way possible.

“No true Texan hates barbeque.”

“No!” I shoot back. “No true Texan can’t ride a horse.”

“I beg your pardon, darlin’,” Jasmine says, tilting her head and lowering her voice into something wicked and smooth, “but I’m not the one whorides.”

I choke on my milkshake. “So what—you’re a pillow princess?”

She grins like the devil herself, slow and smug. “Nope.” She takes a bite of her fry, chews, swallows. “I’m atop.”

I blink. Once. Twice.

And then I burst into laughter, slapping the table hard enough to make our fries jump.

Jasmine leans back like she’s proud of herself, which—she should be. Because I’m flushed, grinning, and more than a little flustered.

“God help me,” I mutter, reaching for a napkin. “That’s some nasty talk for the dinner table.”

“Oh, then you donotwant to know what’s going on in my head,” Jasmine purrs, leaning even closer, her voice dripping with slow,teasing heat. Her gaze trails lazily down my body, and my knee knocks under the table like I’ve been physically struck.

She’s looking at me like I’m dessert.

And just when I’m convinced she’s about to lean across the table and kiss me—right here, in this godforsaken diner, in front of God and the ketchup bottles?—

Thebuggerbehind hersnorts.

And by bugger, I meanLandon, whoinsistedon tagging along for our date in the name of "Jasmine's protection."

Jasmine’s eyes close like a glitch in the system, her head dropping forward with a pained little sigh. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Baby,” I whisper, reaching across the table to tap her hand with mine, “I got a shotgun and access to at least three undisclosed backroads. We can make it look like a hunting accident.”

“Is it too early to say I love you?” Jasmine mutters, lips twitching.

“I believe that’s step one to a U-Haul?”

“No one’s moving in,” Landon drones from the booth behind us, not even bothering to turn around.

Jasmine leans back and glares in his direction, voice dropping into a growl. “So help me, Landon, if I hear your voice one more time, Iwillpull your larynx out and play jump rope with it.”

“Ouch, Peach,” he pouts, finally turning in the booth next to ours and placing a hand dramatically over his heart while the other hangs over the edge of the chair onto our date side. “You are so mean to your side piece.”

“Side piece?” I choke, blinking. “You proudly want to already take a backseat to me.”

“I mean,” Landon shrugs, “I was here first, but I can’t really compete with the red hair, hazel eyes coke-bottle body combo can I?”

“No you can’t, can you?” I smirk, flipping my hair to the back.

“I mean I do have a huge--”

Jasmine grabs a fry and flings it at his head. “I swear to God?—”

“It’s okay,” I say, laughing as I grab another fry from her plate. “He and his huge ears can be the flower girl at our shotgun wedding.”

Landon opens his mouth, but Jasmine is faster. “I think you’ll look pretty in a flowered dress, don’t you?”

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“I think I’d look better as the groom,” Landon murmurs low in Jasmine’s ear, and the way her neck flushes—slow and pink like a creeping blush—makes my lips part on instinct. I take a slow breath through my nose.

Oh.

She turns, pokes him on the nose without missing a beat, and winks at me over her shoulder like she didn’t just short-circuit my central nervous system.

“Nope,” she says, voice sweet and teasing.

I grip my milkshake and take a long, steady sip to cool myself down.

She’s right.

Every second Sunday, I go to church with Timothy Keiths, all pearls and fake smiles, just to keep my parents’ illusions intact. Three hours of scripture, southern guilt, and pretending I don’t dream of sin.

But a Landon-Jasmine sandwich?

That would be sinful.

I’d love to watch him toy with her, slow and cruel, while she fights not to give in. I’d like to watch her squirm, her lips parted in half-begged moans while he draws her out, while I edge myself watching her fall apart.

The thought alone makes me clench my thighs beneath the table.

“So...” I say carefully, pointing my straw at the two of them, “how long has this been going on?”

Jasmine smirks, flicking her eyes toward Landon with barely concealed amusement. “Yeah, Landon. How long have you been stalking me?”

“Stalking?” I choke, some of my milkshake spitting onto the table as I cough.

Landon snorts like a bastard while I scramble for napkins, trying to mop up the evidence with the leftover ones from our greasy cheeseburgers.

“About five months, then,” he shrugs, casually brushing a strand of hair off Jasmine’s shoulder like he owns it.

“I’m sorry, why is no one else alarmed by this?” I snap, looking between them like I’m the only one who hasn’t been handed a script.

Jasmine just chuckles, eyes glinting with that usual mischief.

“Trust me, I was pissed. Furious. But then...” She shrugs. “He kind of grew on me.”

“Aww,” Landon says mock-sweetly, “because you like me.”

“Nah,” she deadpans, not missing a beat. “Because you’re fucking fungus. And I can’t afford enough antibiotics to get rid of you.”

Landon clutches his chest like she shot him. “Peach, how dare you? I thought we were getting along.”

I sit back, watching them volley insults like foreplay and wondering how the hell I got lucky enough to land a front-row seat. Then Jasmine turns to me, brows furrowed in that way she does when she's trying to read between the lines.

"Why are you so comfortable with this?" she asks, leaning forward just enough that Landon can't reach her hair anymore. "You said my complicated situation was, and I quote--perfect. What gives?"

I take a massive gulp of my cookies and cream milkshake, stalling as my eyes flick around the diner—linoleum floors, too-bright lights, half-eaten burgers—before landing back on both of them. They're both staring at me now, suspicious.

"I'm not out of the closet." The words fall out before I can stop them.

Shame and anxiety crawl up my throat as Jasmine's eyes widen like I just told her something dangerous.

"You came on to me," she says slowly, like she's trying to piece the whole thing together—but her body reacts faster. She jerks away like she's done something wrong.

"And you two were making out in the middle of the quad," Landon adds dryly. "I think you're out, or sorry to tell you but the closet is transparent."

I try to laugh. It doesn't stick.

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“People on campus think I’m bi-curious, and most people in this state think I am straight,” I explain, brushing a fry crumb off my lap. “Because I’m publicly dating Timothy Keiths.”

“Wait—like NFL first draft, golden-boy, America’s darling Timothy Keiths?” Landon perks up, eyes narrowing.

“You fucking know him?!” Jasmine blurts, fully turned toward me now.

“Yup, he’s my beard,” I admit with a shrug. “Has been since I tried to come out to my parents and they rejected it.”

Jasmine’s smile fades. Her expression shifts to something sadder. “I’m sorry. What do you mean...rejected it?”

I shake my head. As much as Jasmine makes me feel like I could tell her anything, that day is still a wound that keeps expanding in my chest and if I think about it, I’ll crumple under the despair and never have hope that I can be who I want to be.

Right now, I need hope. I need to keep my head down and keep my relationship with Timothy in the press, but until then I am the All-star American sweetheart who wears promise rings to church, and is on her way to marriage with Timothy Keiths.

So I give her the version people can swallow.

“Let’s just say they ain’t too keen on me being gay.”

Jasmine looks down into her Coke. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” I say, more firmly this time. “I got it handled. But for now... I can’t be out and proud with anybody who ain’t Timothy. So I get it if this—” I gesture loosely between her and me “—can’t be more than what it is.”

“I can’t ask you to stay in the closet. That’d be selfish. And trust me—Iamselfish. Just not in ways that don’t make sense.”

What I don’t say is this: when I turn twenty-five, when the trust fund unlocks, when I can finally stop playing Southern Sweetheart for my father’s public image?—

I want her. I want this. And I want to be loud and proud about it. But that’s a conversation for another day. She can do what she wants for now. Have her fun. Live in the open, and I will be her secret until then. Sounds sad but it’s the truth for now.

I clear my throat and change the topic.

“I’m guessing you’re bisexual though?” I ask, tilting my head and pointing casually between the two of them.

Jasmine glances at Landon, her cherry-glossed lips parting before closing again. Then she nods. “Yeah. But I’ve only just started exploring the whole guy part of bisexual.”

“Lucky guy,” I murmur, smirking as I reach for another fry. “Any reason why he’s your first guy?”

Jasmine swallows, her gaze flicking down for a second before she glances out the window. “Let’s just say I wasn’t exactly thrilled with how men treated me and my mom.”

I nod slowly, watching her more carefully now. “So the best man you know is... a stalker?”

She laughs, light but sharp. “No. The best man I know is a construction worker—Tommy. My best friend’s dad. But yeah... my stalker’s a far second.”

“Why am I always second?” Landon whines from his seat, running his fingertips along the curve of her neck, leaving fire red beneath his touch.

“Hmm...” I eye him up and down, then smirk. “Because you can’t keep up, buttercup.”

He groans just as his phone buzzes on the table. One glance at the screen and his whole posture shifts. He stands with a sigh. “I’ll be back in two minutes. Don’t move.”

As he walks past me, I lean casually against the table—just enough for my hand to dip into the open fold of his coat pocket as he slides past the table. His key fob slides into my palm so smooth it’s like second nature.

“We’ll behave, promise,” Jasmine calls, sipping her soda with a sly grin. He grumbles something under his breath as he walks off toward the parking lot, phone pressed to his ear.

As soon as he rounds the corner, I lean in toward Jasmine, grinning like the devil. “Wanna ditch the guard dog?”

“Hell yes, babydoll,” she grins back. “Where are we going?”

“This cowgirl’s gonna teach you how to ride.”

Jasmine nearly spits out her drink laughing. “You’re out ofpocket!”

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“And you’re out of time. Let’s go.” We slide out of the booth and dart through the diner’s side exit, trying—and failing—not to giggle like teenage delinquents.

Right there in front of the diner is Landon’s matte black Rolls Royce, parked right where we left it when he drove us here.

“Don’t tell me you—” Jasmine starts.

I flash the key fob like a magic trick. “He shouldn’t walk that close to a pickpocket.”

“You’re insane.”

I shrug. “You like it.”

She snorts. “Unfortunately.”

We climb into the car—her into the passenger seat, me into the driver’s like I’ve done it a thousand times. The engine hums awake like it knows it’s in the hands of a chaos demon.

Just as we’re pulling out, Landon explodes out of the diner, still on the phone. He freezes when he sees his car in motion, then starts sprinting toward us. “JASMINE!”

Jasmine rolls down the window just enough to shout, “You got to learn how to keep up, sweetheart!” before flicking him a wink.

He nearly trips over the curb. “Jasmine when I get my hands on you! Your ass

ismine!”

But it’s too late. I hit the gas, laughing as we peel off down the road.

17

JASMINE

The drive is chaos in motion—windows down, music blasting, and Brooke singing Britney Spears like her life depends on it. I match her energy, yelling Paramore lyrics out the window and drumming my boots on the dashboard while she laughs and messes up every other lyric.

Every now and then, her fingers graze mine on the center console, light and teasing, like she’s not trying to set me on fire. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted someone this badly and wanted to know all their little favorite things. I want to know everything about Brooke from how my name sounds on her lips when I’m between her legs to her favorite cereal as a child.

By the time we hit a winding dirt road lined with towering oaks, the world gets quieter—less like we’re driving and more like we’re being led somewhere. Brooke’s practically vibrating with excitement, her giddiness spilling into the air like static.

We pull up to a wide, open ranch that looks like it was carved straight from a dream. Rolling fields of golden grass stretch out under a sky so wide it makes you feel small. The fences are old but strong, weathered wood bleached soft by the sun. A big red barn sits off to the side, flanked by pastures and a faded sign swinging gently in the breeze.

There’s dust in the air and sunlight everywhere, and for the first time, Brooke looks still. Like something inside her just clicked.

We roll up to a tan-brown house with a wraparound porch and hanging ferns, and she parks the car with a quiet exhale.

I lean forward, eyes wide. “Where are we?”

Brooke smiles, her voice soft. “Home.”

She’s practically glowing as we both hop out of the car, boots crunching over the gravel driveway, the air thick with the kind of late-summer heat that clings to your skin and smells like dry grass and open sky.

Brooke doesn’t wait for me to catch up—she spins in a slow, full circle with her arms stretched wide, head tipped back toward the fading sun like she’s soaking in every inch of it. For a second, she looks untouched by the world. Like this is the version of her no one else gets to see.

“This is where I spent every summer to train for horseback riding,” she says, glancing over her shoulder with that lopsided grin that’s starting to live rent-free in my chest. “Just me, the dirt, and the horses. This is my safe haven.”

I follow her toward the stables, drawn in like gravity’s realigned itself to center on her. The house behind us is still, quiet. The porch light flickers like it knows it’s not needed tonight—the moon already climbing high, casting silver shadows across the fields. Everything around us glows with that soft twilight haze, the kind that makes me feel like I’ve stumbled into a dream I forgot I had.

She walks ahead, hips swaying, confidence soft but steady. I trail behind her, smiling at the way her soft curls bounce behind her, at the faint dust on her boots that clearly never left.

“I should warn you,” she says as we pass a fenced paddock where two horses graze

lazily under the fading sun, “the horses here? They don’t take orders very well, but they’re sweethearts.”

“So... you,” I smirk.

She shoots me a look over her shoulder, all raised brow and hidden amusement.
“Excuse you—Icantake orders very well, thank youverymuch.”

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“Good to know, babydoll,” I murmur, stepping in just close enough for my breath to graze her ear. I don’t miss the subtle shiver that runs down her spine. “Promise to let me test that later?”

She laughs—real, unfiltered, and warm enough to melt every thought I had before she opened her mouth.

With one hand gripping the stable door, she lifts the other and forms a crooked peace sign—ring and middle fingers twisted in front of one eye like a makeshift vow.

“Promise.”

She tugs the stable doors open like muscle memory, and a wave of scent rolls out—fresh hay, sun-warmed leather, cedarwood, and something distinctly animal.

“Jesus,” I cough, swatting at the air. “That is...aggressive.”

Brooke grins as she steps inside, her silhouette lit by the glow slipping in through the slats of wood.

“Welcome to my kingdom,” she announces, sweeping an arm dramatically through the dust-swirled light. “Just don’t breathe too deeply.”

I follow her in, already gagging a little. “Too late,” I manage between coughs, though I’m still smiling.

Brooke whistles low, and from the far stall, a horse steps forward. He’s tall,

muscular, and coated in this stunning silver sheen that practically glows under the moonlight. His mane falls like silk, and his eyes are dark and sharp.

“That’s Osy,” she says softly. “And before you ask, no—you can’t ride him unless he lets you. He only listens to me.”

I blink. “He looks like a mythical creature. Like he should be guarding a treasure chest or a cursed sword.”

Brooke chuckles, moving past Osy to grab a saddle from the rack with the kind of practiced ease that makes her look carved from this place. “He’d be terrible at that job. He’s kind of lazy,” she says, throwing the saddle up over the edge of a stall. “But he’s mine.”

Osy lets out a soft, snorting breath and immediately noses her shoulder. She reaches up without even looking and strokes his muzzle. He leans into it like a dog and huffs out a sigh of relief.

“But you”—she turns and gestures me forward—“will be riding Josie.”

The horse she leads out next is smaller, older, and coated in a soft dappled gray that fades to near-white around her nose. Her ears flick when she sees me, and her eyes are deep and kind, as she rolls her head.

“She’s an absolute dream,” Brooke says, brushing Josie’s mane with the same affection she gave Osy, but gentler. “She’s slow, stubborn on hills, and obsessed with carrots. But she’ll take care of you.”

I step closer, and Josie noses at my palm like she’s already decided I’m harmless.

“Hi, pretty girl,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I don’t have any carrots.”

“She likes you,” Brooke says with a little smile. “Which means she’ll behave. Probably.”

She lifts a brow, hips cocked to the right, a smirk tugging at the corner of her glossed lips. “Mmm, I don’t know if that’s true.”

I step in behind her just as she finishes securing the saddle on Josie, the leather creaking softly beneath her hands. My palms find her waist like they were made for it, fingers brushing the soft curve of her hips, and she leans back into me like it’s instinct.

My lips ghost over the warm skin of her shoulder, just where the strap of her tank top falls, and I breathe her in—sun-warmed skin, sweat, and something sweet like honey and danger.

“Want me to fact check?” I murmur, the words barely more than breath against her skin.

“After I teach you how to ride,” she says, her voice tighter now, low and full of things unsaid.

Then she bends forward to adjust the stirrup, and her ass grazes against me—just enough to make my breath catch in my throat, and the girl fucking giggles at my demise. She’s doing this on purpose. This girl is trying to kill me.

I eye her, hands still on her waist. “This your idea of foreplay?”

She straightens up, face flushed but grinning. “Only if you behave.”

Then she tosses me a helmet over her shoulder, like the smug tease she is and I snort, securing the helmet onto my head. Brooke immediately helps me mount—her hands

at my waist, her body warm against mine for just a second longer than necessary. I steady myself in the saddle.

Surprisingly, I manage to hold my posture. I sit tall, reins in hand, boots snug against the stirrups just like she showed me.

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“Look at you,” Brooke calls, arms crossed as she watches me from against the gate. “Naturally hot and talented. I might start getting jealous.”

“Jealousy looks cute on you,” I toss back. “Adds to your whole tragic Southern debutante vibe.”

She flips me off over her shoulder, and I laugh—full, loud, and more at ease than I’ve felt in weeks.

Brooke grabs the reins and leads Josie and me out into the small field in front of the stables, bordered by a low wooden fence and dappled with moonlight. The grass glows silver, and everything feels soft and slowed down, like we’ve stepped into another version of the world where only we exist.

“Easy, girl,” Brooke murmurs, her voice gentle as she strokes Josie’s neck. “We’re just going on a little walk.”

Josie snorts quietly, flicking an ear back as if listening, then steps forward without hesitation, completely trusting.

Brooke glances up at me, hand still on the reins, eyes twinkling. “You ready?”

I shift in the saddle and smirk down at her. “As ready as I’ll ever be...but let me remind you I’m not much of a rider.”

She grins. “I’ll tell Landon to teach you. I’m sure, he’d love a spin.”

I'm sure he would, but I want a ride from you.

I roll my eyes at her, biting down a grin, and Brooke just smirks like she knows exactly what she's doing. With a click of her tongue and a low whistle to Josie, she starts walking us into the moonlit field.

For a few minutes, I actually feel it—that high, that freedom. Josie moves steady beneath me, her gait smooth and easy, and the saddle fits like it was made for me. The night air slips cool against my skin, and Brooke walks beside us, her hand brushing the reins, the other occasionally resting on Josie's flank like she's checking to see if I'm still breathing.

“Relax your grip,” she says softly, her voice like honey over gravel. “Let her lead a little. Don't fight the rhythm—feel it.”

I do. I let my body fall into the movement, hips swaying gently with each step, spine straight, boots secure in the stirrups.

I circle the paddock once, then again, growing bolder, more fluid. Brooke eventually lets go of the reins and leans against the fence, arms crossed under the soft rise of her chest, eyes glinting beneath the moonlight.

Brooke lets a slow smirk crawl across her lips. “See? You're a natural rider,” she purrs, voice low and teasing. “Knew you had it in you.”

My heartbeat stutters. I want to say something cocky, something flirty, but all the blood in my body has apparently migrated south. I turn Josie for one more lap, confidence blooming?—

And then she freezes. All tension. Ears forward. Legs locked.

“Uh... Brooke?” I say, voice tight.

Brooke straightens fast. “Don’t panic. She’s just spooked. Keep your body loose—don’t grip too hard?—”

Before she can finish, there’s a rustle in the tree line. Maybe a fox, maybe a raccoon—whatever it is, it’s loud and sharp. Josie bucks. It’s not violent, just sudden—an instinctual bolt forward and sideways—but it’s enough. The reins slip through my hands. My balance tilts, and the next minute I hit the groundhard.

The ground knocks the air from my lungs, my head snapping against the dirt with a jarringthudthat makes the stars above me blur.

“Jasmine!”

I hear her before I see her—Brooke, feet pounding across the field, voice breaking with panic.

She drops to her knees beside me, hands already on my shoulders, cradling my head like something fragile.

“Hey—hey, baby, talk to me,” she whispers, brushing dust off my face with shaking fingers. “Look at me. Are you okay?”

I blink up at her. Her hair's come loose around her face, lips parted, eyes wide and wild.

And suddenly I can’t feel anything but her.

“And that,” I rasp, wincing slightly. “Is why I don’t ride.”

Brooke lets out a breathless laugh, part-relief, part-‘I’m-going-to-strangle-you’.

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She slides a hand down my arm and pulls me into her lap, holding me close, her breath hitching as she presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“You’re insane,” she mutters. “You fall off a horse, hit your head, and you’re still trying to flirt.”

I grin weakly. Brooke exhales a shaky laugh. Her eyes glint in the moonlight—soft brown rimmed with something fierce—and she presses her hand gently to my cheek.

Her red hair falls wild and free around her face, catching silver where the moonlight touches. It halos her in soft firelight, like the sky itself decided to crown her. Her cheeks are flushed with adrenaline and worry, lips parted just slightly like she can’t decide whether to kiss me or lecture me.

There’s hay stuck to her jeans, dirt smeared across one thigh, and she’s never looked more unreal.

Her brows furrow as she searches my face, eyes flicking between mine like she’s trying to memorize every detail just in case I disappear.

“You’re glowing again,” I murmur, dazed and smiling.

Brooke shakes her head, torn between exasperated and enchanted. “God help me,” she mutters, voice low. “I really like you.”

Even with hay in my bra and dirt in my hair, I grin up at her. “I really like you too, babydoll.”

She leans in, just a breath away now. Her lips hover over mine, heat and moonlight curling around us like we're suspended in time.

And then she kisses me.

Not with urgency, not with desperation?—

But with something deeper. Slower. More certain.

Her hand curves around my jaw, fingers threading through my hair like I'm something precious. Her lips brush mine first like a question—featherlight, testing, savoring—and the moment they touch, the world stops spinning. Everything narrows to the space between us.

She doesn't devour me. She claims me. I feel as if I should never have a moment where my lips are not on hers.

The kiss builds slowly, a coaxing fire instead of a spark. Her mouth moves against mine with an ache that feels like both comfort and craving, her lips so soft I swear I could live inside this moment and never want for anything again. The warmth of her body seeps into me through every point of contact—her palm against my cheek, her chest brushing mine, her thighs tucked against the side of my hip as I lay half in her lap.

I kiss her back, dizzy but grounded, my hands sliding instinctively to her waist, pulling her just a little closer. Her breath hitches as I deepen it, my lips parting just enough to taste the hint of milkshake and adrenaline still lingering on her tongue.

And just when I think I'll let her kiss me until the stars burn out, she pauses.

Her hand stills in my hair. Her brow furrows.

She leans back, just an inch, eyes scanning my face. And then her gaze snags on something above my temple.

Her thumb brushes through a tangled curl—pauses. I see it in her eyes before I feel it: blood.

“Jas,” she whispers, voice tight with fear.

She shifts, her body curving over mine protectively as her fingers part the strands at my hairline. I wince—just slightly—and that’s all it takes. Her whole face falls, softness replaced by careful precision.

But she doesn’t pull away. She leans back in, her lips barely grazing mine—more breath than kiss now—as she whispers into my mouth, “You’re injured. Let me take care of you.”

I nod as she pulls away and helps me sit up slowly, hands steady on my back.

“You hit your head,” she says gently, brushing a smudge of dirt off my temple. “You’re gonna have a bruise, but I don’t think you need stitches.”

Brooke still looks concerned, even as she helps me to my feet. She loops an arm around my waist like she’s not entirely convinced I won’t pass out on the walk back.

“Let’s get you inside. I’ll put the horses up.”

“I can help?—”

“You’ll do no such thing,” she cuts in, her drawl firmer than usual. “You’re not dying on my ranch, Jasmine Rivera.”

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I don't argue as she leads me back to the house, past the porch and through the screen door, and I'm hit with a wave of warmth that smells like cedarwood, something citrusy, and the faintest trace of cinnamon.

The inside is pure Southern comfort—high wooden beams, cream-colored walls, and a mismatched mix of antique furniture that somehow works. A stone fireplace anchors the living room, and an old guitar leans against a leather armchair like someone just got done playing it. There are pictures tucked into the edges of the mirror—Brooke at a rodeo, Brooke holding a ribbon, Brooke hugging a woman who looks enough like her to be her mom.

She guides me to the couch with a touch that's both firm and careful, like I might break if she pushes too hard. The cushions dip beneath me as I sink into them.

She disappears for a minute, the soft click of the stable doors echoing faintly behind her. I hear Osy whine once in protest, low and drawn out like he's annoyed to be put away so soon. Then the creak of the front door swings back open.

She comes back with a first-aid kit, a bag of frozen peas, and a glass of water. Brooke kneels beside me focused on the cut in my hairline.

"Lay back," she says. Her hand presses against my shoulder, guiding me back onto the couch.

"You're a bossy nurse." I mutter, and admire the blush that explodes across her cheeks.

Her fingers thread through my waves, parting them with a tenderness that makes my breath catch. She inspects the cut at my hairline, her brow drawn tight in concentration. The pads of her fingers are warm and steady as she moves my hair out of the way. She grabs the first-aid kit and parses through until she pulls out the materials she needs.

She dabs the wound with antiseptic-soaked gauze, the sting immediate and sharp—but even that feels muted beneath her touch.

“Does it hurt?” she asks, her voice thick with concern.

“Only when you stop touching me,” I murmur, mouth tilting into a crooked grin.

She glances down into my eyes. Her hazel eyes are bright and alive as she looks at me. “Are you flirting or concussed?”

“Little bit of both,” I reply, propping myself up on one elbow to get a better look at her. The moonlight streaming in through the window casts her in silver, tracing her cheekbones, catching in her lashes.

“You’re impossible,” she mutters under her breath, reaching for a Band-aid and gently pressing it to my forehead. Brooke pulls back, her bottom on the heels of her feet. “I think you’ll live.”

I sit up slightly on my elbow, eyes never leaving her face. “Thank you,” I murmur, letting the words drip with something slower, thicker than gratitude. “For your life-saving service.”

Brooke lifts a brow, but the corner of her mouth tugs into a smile. She tries to play it off with a shrug, reaching for the used gauze and neatly folding it away. But I can see the flush creeping up her throat, just beneath the delicate skin, and the way her

fingers hesitate slightly.

I sit up fully so that Brooke is kneeling between my legs on the floor and she tilts her head up to look at me, “I feel like I should thank you properly.”

She freezes, breath catching. Her eyes flick down to where my hand is touching her, then back to my face. Her pupils dilate. Her hands are braced lightly on my knee, as I grip her chin between my pointer and thumb.

“Oh?” she says, trying to keep her voice even. “And what exactly does proper thanks entail, Rivera?”

Her eyes drop to where my fingers are barely brushing the hem of her dress, then flick back up to meet mine. I watch her pupils flare, her breath falter.

I lean in, slow and easy, so our faces are only inches apart. My voice drops to a husky whisper as I trace the edge of the collar of her dress with one lazy finger, along the curve of her breast. “I don’t know, babydoll. Maybe you let me show you.”

My lips barely graze her ear as my finger continues its slow, teasing path along the neckline of her dress. Brooke shivers, her breath hitching audibly, and I can feel the tremor that runs through her. Her hands tighten on my knee, nails digging in just enough to make me aware of her presence, her need.

“Jasmine,” she whispers, her voice trembling with both hesitation and desire. “We shouldn’t?—”

“Shouldn’t what?” I interrupt, pulling back just enough to look into her eyes. I can see the conflict there, the way she’s trying to rationalize this, to find some reason to stop. But I also see the heat, the undeniable hunger that’s burning beneath the surface. “You’re the one who said you wanted me to show you how to thank you properly.

I'm just offering to show you how."

Her lips part slightly, and I can see the moment she gives in, the way her body relaxes and her hands slide up my thighs. I grin, triumph and arousal mingling in my chest as I lean in again, this time capturing her lips with mine. The kiss is soft at first, exploratory, but quickly deepens as Brooke responds, her mouth opening to mine with a low moan.

I feel her hands grip my hips, pulling me closer, and I can't help but smile against her lips. "That's more like it," I murmur before breaking the kiss and leaning back slightly. My eyes drop to where her hands are clutching the hem of my shirt, and I reach down to the hem of her dress that has bunched up around her waist. "Why don't you let me take care of you, Brooke?"

She hesitates for a moment, then nods, her eyes locked on mine as I slowly pull the dress up her torso. I can see the way her chest rises and falls with each breath as I pull the fabric over her shoulders, revealing the soft curve of her breasts encased in a lacy white bra. I toss her dress to the side, my hands tracing the smooth skin of her stomach as I lean in to press a soft kiss to the tip of her nose.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper against her skin, my lips trailing down to her neck as my hands slide up to cup her breasts. I feel her shiver again, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps as I tease her nipples through the fabric of her bra. "And you were so good...taking care of me like such a good girl."

Her hands are in my hair now, gripping tightly as I lean down to take one of her nipples into my mouth through the lace. She moans, her hips bucking slightly as I suck and tease, my tongue flicking over the sensitive peak. I can feel her hands tugging at my hair, urging me on as I switch to the other breast, giving it the same attention.

I feel her hands move to my shoulders, pushing me back slightly, and I look up to see her flushed face, her eyes dark with desire. “Jasmine,” she breathes, her voice trembling with need. “I want?—”

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“Shh,” I interrupt, pressing a finger to her lips. “I know what you want.” I reach behind her to unhook her bra, letting it fall to the floor as I lean in to take one of her bare nipples into my mouth again. This time, I’m not as gentle, my teeth grazing the sensitive skin as I suck hard, eliciting a low moan from Brooke.

I slide my hands between her thighs. Her panties are soaked, the fabric clinging to her skin. “Are you soaked for me?”

She nods, the words stuck in her throat as I hook my fingers in the waistband of her panties, slowly pulling them down over her hips. She’s bare now, her skin flushed and hot, and I can’t resist the urge to press a soft kiss to her inner thigh, my tongue flicking out to taste her.

“Come sit on my face, babydoll.” I order, leaning back onto the couch. Like the perfect eager girl she is, she stands up and hesitates looking at me.

“Jas, I don’t think--”

“I didn’t ask you to think, babydoll.” I tsk, fully reclining onto the couch. “I told you to sit on my face.”

“But you have that cut, and I am pretty--”

I feel my skin chill as I narrow my eyes on her. “If you say you are too big to sit on my face, so help me Brooke, I will spank your ass fire-truck red. Now come ride my face.”

She slides her bottom lip between her teeth, a small nod as she walks over to me and sits on my salivating tongue.

“Jasmine,” she gasps, her hands tightening in my hair. “Please?—”

“Please what, Brooke?” I ask, my voice dropping to a husky whisper as I look up at her. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you,” she breathes, her eyes locked on mine. “I want you to?—”

I don’t let her finish, instead I lean in, and allow my tongue to trace the sensitive skin of her inner thigh as my right hand snakes around her thigh and lightly plays with her clit.

“Oh my, J-jasmine--” she shudders and I giggle into her pussy. I lean into her and press a soft kiss to her folds, my tongue flicking out to tease her. She moans, her hips bucking slightly as I continue to tease her, my hands gripping her thighs to hold her still.

She tastes like honeysuckle. Like fucking heaven. Like the first lick of a soft-serve cone on a hot summer’s day.

“Shit, you taste fucking delicious, Brookie.” I growl as I speed up the pace of my fingers on her clit.

Her body trembles above me, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps as I continue to tease her, my tongue flicking out to trace her sensitive skin. She’s so close, I can feel it in the way her body tenses, the way her hands clutch at my shoulders.

“Jasmine,” she gasps, her voice trembling with need. “Please?—”.

“You’re going to come all over my tongue,” I murmur against her skin, my tongue flicking out to trace her sensitive flesh. “Understand?”

“Y-yes,” She moans again, her hips bucking slightly as I suck on the ball of nerves between her thighs, my hands gripping her thighs to hold her still. I can feel her body trembling above me, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps as I continue to tease her, my tongue flicking out to trace the sensitive skin of her inner thigh.

“Jasmine,” she repeats, her voice trembling on the verge of release. “Please?—”

“You are so perfect,” I murmur against her skin, my tongue flicking out to trace her sensitive flesh. “My perfect good girl who’s going to fucking suffocate me between these perfect thighs.”

“Oh my god,” she heaves, her body grinding on my tongue faster and faster. “Jas...I’m going to...shit!”

Her body tenses, her breath hitching as she finally lets go, her hips bucking slightly as she comes, a low moan escaping her lips. I continue to tease her, my tongue flicking out to trace her sensitive flesh as she rides out her orgasm, her hands clutching at my shoulders.

She leans back on my chest with a sigh, and I look up at her from between her thighs. “Did I just hear you curse, babydoll?”

Her cheeks flush the prettiest shade of pink—soft and glowing in the low light—as she bites her lip and nods at me with a giddy little smile.

“Yes. Sorry,” she says breathlessly, voice all sugar and sin.

I shake my head, eyes glinting. My grip tightens slightly on her thighs as I dip my

mouth again.

“No sorry, baby. I just want to do it again.”

“Jasmine—” she squeals, voice cracking into a giggle as my tongue strokes over her slick center, and then?—

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BANG. BANG. BANG.

We both freeze. Jasmine looking at me with wide eyes.

The front door shakes under the force of the knock, followed by a familiar, exasperated yell that splits through the night like a gunshot. “Peach! You are in so much trouble, love!”

“Shit,” I mutter, pulling back and staring at the ceiling like it might spare me as Brooke jolts upright like she’s been electrocuted, scrambling backward off the couch, limbs flailing, curls wild.

“Shoot!” she gasps, grabbing her dress as she stumbles to her feet, eyes wide.

I groan, dragging a hand over my face, then sit up, wiping my mouth like I didn’t just have the best meal of my life.

Brooke is already halfway across the living room, trying to fix her bra and pull on her dress at the same time. “Oh my God, he’s going to think we were—well, I mean wewere, but?—”

Another knock. Louder this time.

“You have exactly ten seconds before I break this door down!” He growls.

I groan again and flop dramatically back onto the couch.

“Landon,” I hiss loud enough for him to hear. “You are a fucking pussy blocker.”

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JASMINE

Landon is beyond furious at me.

I mean, sure, he’s been mad before—I’ve seen the clenched jaw, the pinched brow, the brooding silence that usually ends with a half-sarcastic comment and a beer. But nothing, nothing, is scarier than when the guy who usually flirts and teases you like it’s a sport suddenly goes radio silent.

No jokes. No nicknames. No cocky smirks.

Just...silence. The kind that creeps into a room before he even walks in. And trust me—I’ve tried everything to break it. I even caved and told him I missed him. Told him that eating Brooke’s pussy had me so worked up I nearly begged him to finish the job. Thought that’d get a rise out of him—maybe a laugh, a smug smirk, something.

All I got was a growl. He looked me dead in the face and told me to go to bed and lock the door... “unless you want a punishment worse than you deserve.” His words. Not mine. And yeah—that didn’t help.

I was so keyed up after that I ended up fingering myself twice and rage-ordering a vibrator off Amazon at 2 a.m., because clearly my fingers aren’t cutting it—not when I know two dangerously hot people who could finish me off way better than I ever could alone, and especially when one of them is literally just one open floor away from me.

And yet here I am. Eating cereal. Miserable. And still ignored.

It's barely 9 a.m., and I've already stress-eaten half the Lucky Charms as I keep refreshing to see if my vibrator will be here like six hours earlier than predicted.

All in all, I am fucking pissed! The marshmallows are gone in my Lucky Charms. I can't work the coffee machine. I need a big O worse than I have ever needed in my entire life. Today has been the absolute worst. Like zero out of ten, and I am three minutes away from crawling to Landon's room and begging for mercy, or finishing Professor Kilgore's homework as I fantasize about all the things he's doing with my panties.

I hear his bedroom door open before I see him. His bare feet the floor like war drums. And when he appears in the kitchen, every molecule in the room rearranges itself around his mood.

He doesn't look at me. And fuck, I never thought I could mess up this bad with him.

He yanks open the fridge, grabs the orange juice, and drinks straight from the carton. Normally, I'd groan, toss a sarcastic jab, maybe even fake gag—but right now? I feel too guilty to be annoyed. Too twisted up inside to care about the hygiene violation.

Especially when he looks like that.

No shirt. Just low-rise grey sweats clinging to his hips like they were sewn there. His abs are cut so deep they catch the light from the window, every muscle in his torso tight and flexed with irritation. A trail of dark hair dips below the waistband, and I don't mean to stare—but I do. I can't not.

His shoulders roll once, tension rippling down his arms, and I finally get a good look at the ink stretched across his back. It's a masterpiece of brutality and beauty—two massive angel wings inked from shoulder blade to lower back, each feather shaded in charcoal blacks and smoky grays, the detail so sharp they almost look like they could

lift him off the ground. Barbed wire coils around the base of each wing, etched deep into the skin like it's strangling the divinity right out of him. And down the center, splitting the wings in half, is a single black blade—a combat knife inked from nape to spine, so precise it glints under the overhead light like it's real.

Broad, lean, powerful. He looks like someone sculpted him out of yearning and sexual tension. Landon Heart is a bad idea wrapped up in a good guy package, and bad for me I want him.

I shift on the stool, mouth suddenly dry, heart pounding in a way that has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with frustration—and need.

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“Morning,” I say, voice way too casual. I toss a piece of dry cereal into my mouth like we’re in anormalroommate situation, and he’s not on the verge of punishing me for something bad.

He places the orange juice back into the fridge and rolls his shoulders back, and I get nothing. Not even a grunt as he turns to the coffee maker and starts it up.

“Are you gonna murder me or just ice me out until I offer to choke myself with a spoon?”

He growls, the sound low and lethal as he rolls his shoulders back again. “How about we start with an ‘I’m sorry’?”

I drop my spoon into the bowl with a clink and narrow my eyes. “Sorry, for what?”

He turns around then—arms folded, chest bare, abs flexing as he leans back against the counter like the weight of holding back is physically painful. “For stealing my fucking car,” he snaps. “For disappearing for two hours while the mob’s still gunning for you. For waltzing back in with your new girlfriend’s pussy juice still on your lips. For driving me mad—bloody mad—since the day I fucking met you.”

I slide off the stool slowly, like I’m not already halfway to combusting. My feet hit the tile and I move toward him with the kind of calm that only exists to mask chaos. “Let me tell you what I am and amnotsorry for.”

I count on my fingers as I close the distance between us, inch by inch. “I’m sorry I stole your car. I’m sorry I disappeared.”

I pause right in front of him, tilting my head. “But I am not sorry for going down on the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen. I will eat Brooke out like a last meal any chance I get—and you can either deal with it, or don’t. That’s your choice. And as for driving you crazy?” I press my palm against his bare chest, feeling the heat of his skin. “That’s your problem. Not mine.”

His hand shoots out, grabbing my wrist—not rough, but tight enough to make me stop breathing.

“How the fuck is that my problem?” he growls, stepping closer until my back brushes the edge of the counter.

I laugh, breathless. The scent of him is all salt and heat and mint. “Because you keep coming back. You hate it? Walk away. No one’s stopping you.”

“Walk away?” he repeats, chuckling darkly in my face, the kind of laugh that makes every hair on my body rise. “You think if I could leave—I wouldn’t have left already?”

“Right,” I say quietly. “You can’t leave. You’re in too deep with the Raiders. Or maybe it’s the cartel. I don’t know which one owns you harder.”

“No, Peach.” His grip slides from my wrist to my waist, dragging me against him so suddenly my breath catches in my throat. “I can disappear whenever the fuck I want,” he says, voice like gravel and smoke. His forehead presses to mine. “It’s you.”

My heart stutters. “What?”

“It’s you,” he repeats, like the words hurt. “I want. I need. I breathe you.”

“Landon—”

“No.” He cuts me off with a lowtsk, his hands bracing the counter on either side of me, caging me in. “You don’t get to brush past this. Not after last night. Not after what you pulled.”

His breath fans hot across my cheek. “You are my only captor. The person that controls every fucking thought I have. Every fear. Every flash of rage. You disappear for two goddamn hours and I go insane. I can’t think. I can’t breathe. I didn’t know if you were dead. Hurt. Taken.”

He leans in, nose grazing my temple. “And when you walked back into this apartment? Smiling. Witherscent on your mouth...”

He exhales sharply, like just remembering it burns.

“I’ve killed for less,” he whispers. “Do you get that, Peach? I’ve done unforgivable things for people who never meant a quarter of what you mean to me.”

My heart hammers so hard I swear the sound fills the whole kitchen. My hands grip the edge of the counter behind me just to stay upright.

“And what do I mean to you?” I whisper, barely able to push the words out.

He pulls back just enough to look me in the eye.

“Everything,” he says. “You’re everything, Jasmine.”

“Landon, you and I... how can I be everything?” I gasp, my palms pressing against the edge of the counter like it’s the only thing keeping me upright. His body, his voice, his truth—it’s all too much. I can’t breathe.

“You are,” he murmurs. The words wrap around me, suffocates and saves me all at once.

My mind races. This man—this dark, volatile, broken man—he’s the person I trust most in the world. More than I trust myself. More than I trust the girl I used to be, or the girl I’m trying to become.

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Landon's been there in the shadows since day one, silently, fiercely watching over me. The first man to touch me without making me flinch. He stands with me during the nights when my nightmares have threatened to tear me apart and he promised that he would stitch me back together without asking for a thank you.

I can't imagine walking into a room without his presence trailing behind me like a second spine. I can't imagine not hearing his footsteps, his voice, his breath in the dead of night. And somehow, I've become his center of gravity. His oxygen. His obsession. It terrifies me. But it makes something ache inside me, too.

He leans closer, and the air shifts with him. I can feel the heat of his chest against mine, the barest brush of his lips as they move past my ear.

"I don't know how it happened," he whispers, voice hoarse and fraying at the edges. "But you've consumed me, Jasmine. You don't have to give me everything. I know you need more than I can be. I know you are so close to being obsessed with her, and you are intrigued by Conner. I know you're torn, and I would never make you choose."

He presses a kiss to the curve of my shoulder—soft, reverent, devastating. "I don't need all of you, Peach," he murmurs. "I can live with a piece. Just give me a piece. Please."

My throat tightens. My body's on fire. I should say something—anything. I should tell him no. Or yes. Or wait.

But instead?—

“Kiss me,” I whisper, voice cracked and soaked in want. “Landon... kiss me.”

His head lifts slowly. His eyes meet mine.

And everything breaks.

His lips crash into mine, hungry and possessive, and I gasp into his mouth. His hands grip my waist, pulling me closer until there's no space left between us. I can feel the heat of his body through the thin fabric of my tank top, the way his sweatpants cling to his hips, leaving little to the imagination. My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging just enough to make him growl, a low, feral sound that sends a shiver down my spine.

“You’ve been teasing me since the moment we met, Peach,” he murmurs against my lips, his breath hot and uneven. His hands slide down to my thighs, lifting me effortlessly onto the counter. The cool surface bites into my skin, a sharp contrast to the fire burning inside me. His lips trail down my neck, nipping and sucking, leaving marks I know I’ll feel tomorrow. “I’m done playing nice.”

I arch into him, my body already desperate for more. “Then stop being nice,” I dare him, my voice trembling with need.

His eyes darken, and he steps between my legs, his hands sliding up my thighs, pushing my sleep shorts down to my ankles. The air hits my bare skin, and I feel exposed, vulnerable, but it only makes me throb harder. His gaze locks onto mine as he kneels before me, his hands spreading my thighs wide.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he growls, his breath hot against my core. His tongue darts out, a slow, teasing lick that has me gasping, my hands gripping the edge of the counter for support. “You’ve been waiting for this, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” I whimper, my hips bucking as he laps at me again, his tongue firm and

relentless. My head falls back, a moan tearing from my throat as he devours me like a man starved. His hands grip my thighs, holding me open as he feasts on me, each lick sending sparks through my body. Oh god, he's so good at this.

He pulls back just enough to look up at me, his lips glistening, his eyes dark with desire. "Tell me how much you want this," he demands, his voice rough.

"Please, Landon," I beg, my voice breaking. "I need you. I need you to make me cum."

His grin is wicked as he dives back in, his tongue plunging into me with a ferocity that has my back arching off the counter. He's relentless, swirling and sucking, his fingers joining in, teasing my clit with just the right amount of pressure. My moans echo through the kitchen, loud and shameless, as I let myself fall apart under his touch.

"That's it," he murmurs, his words muffled against my skin. "Let me hear you. Let me taste how much you want me."

My thighs tremble as his fingers curl inside me, hitting that spot that makes me see stars. His tongue is relentless, driving me closer and closer to the edge. I'm so close, so fucking close, and then he sucks my clit into his mouth, and I shatter. My entire body convulses, a scream tearing from my throat as pleasure surges through me, wave after wave, until I'm gasping for air, my legs shaking uncontrollably.

Landon pulls back, his lips glistening, his eyes blazing with satisfaction. "You taste like fucking heaven," he says, his voice rough. He stands, towering over me, his cock straining against his sweatpants. "But I'm not done with you yet."

Before I can catch my breath, he's flipping me around, my chest pressing against the counter as he pushes me forward, my ass in the air. His hands grip my hips, and I feel

the fabric of his sweatpants brush against my thighs as he pulls them down. I look over my shoulder, because the temptation to see him, and I mean all of him, has me practically shaking.

His cock springs free, thick and hard, and I whimper at the sight of it.

“You’re going to take every inch of me,” he growls, his voice low and commanding. He slides the head of his cock through my slick folds, teasing me, driving me wild. “You’re going to scream my name again before I’m done with you.”

“Please,” I beg, my voice trembling. “I need you inside me.”

He doesn’t make me wait. He thrusts into me in one smooth motion, filling me completely, and I cry out, my nails digging into the counter. He’s so big, so fucking deep, and it’s overwhelming in the best way possible. His hands grip my hips as he sets a brutal pace, each thrust driving me closer to the edge again.

“You feel so fucking good,” he groans, his voice strained. “So tight, so fucking wet for me. Is this what you wanted, Peach? To be fucked like this?”

“Yes,” I gasp, my body trembling with each thrust. “Please, don’t stop. Please, Landon, don’t stop.”

He slaps my ass, the sting only heightening the pleasure coursing through me. “You take me so well,” he growls, his hands gripping my hips tighter as he fucks me harder, faster. “You’re mine, Peach. Mine to fuck, mine to use.”

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My moans grow louder, my body arching as he hits that spot inside me that makes me see stars. He's relentless, his cock slamming into me with a force that has me screaming his name, over and over again, until I'm trembling on the edge of another orgasm.

"Cum for me," he demands, his voice rough and commanding. "Cum on my cock, Peach. Let me feel you."

I can't hold back. My body convulses as I cum hard, my walls clenching around him, pulling him deeper. He growls, his pace faltering as he follows me over the edge, his cock pulsing inside me as he spills himself deep within.

He collapses against me, his breath hot against my back, his hands still gripping my hips. "Perfect Peach," he murmurs, his voice low and satisfied. "You took me so fucking well."

I'm still trembling, my body spent, but the way he says it, the possessive edge in his voice, sends a shiver down my spine. He pulls out slowly, and I whimper at the loss, my legs trembling as I try to stay upright.

He turns me around, his eyes dark with satisfaction as he looks down at me. "You're mine, Jasmine," he says, his voice firm. "And I'm not done with you yet."

My breath catches as he leans down, his lips brushing against my ear. "Next time," he growls, "I'm going to make you scream even louder."

He lifts me up like I weigh nothing, and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist.

My back hits the fridge with a soft thud as his hands grip my thighs, his mouth devouring the space between my jaw and shoulder with a hunger that makes my toes curl.

“Actually,” he mutters against my skin, “I’m going to do that right now.”

“Landon—” I gasp, half-laughing, half-melting. “I don’t think?—”

“No,” he growls, nipping the underside of my jaw. “You’re going to be a good girl for me and cum as many times as I want.”

The heat in his voice sends a spark of electricity across my skin. I whimper, caught somewhere between breathless and hysterical, my hands fisting the back of his messy hair just as he starts walking us toward his room like a man with a mission.

We don’t make it far. My phone rings.

It vibrates on the kitchen table—and we both pause. His lips are on my throat, kissing up the side like he has no intention of letting go, as he paces us backwards to where the phone sits.

I fumble for the phone, swiping it off the counter as Landon grumbles in my ear. “Whoever is calling better have a damn good reason, because I swear?—”

I answer without checking the caller ID, still giggling as Landon’s nose grazes the curve of my neck. “Hello?”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end.

Then: “Hey... it’s me.”

I blink, instantly sobering. “Cast?”

“Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Are you home right now?”

My brows pull together. “Yeah, why? You sound weird.”

Another pause. I hear something in the background—maybe a door closing, maybe nothing. He exhales hard, like he’s bracing himself.

“You’re gonna want to sit down for this.”

My blood turns to ice.

I pale instantly, heart kicking hard against my ribs as I slide out of Landon’s arms, my back hitting the fridge for support. “What’s wrong? Is Willow okay?”

“No—she’s fine,” Cast rushes to say. “It’s not Willow.”

“Then what is it?” My voice cracks. “Cast, what?—”

“There’s no easy way to say this,” he cuts in quietly.

A long silence.

Then: “Tommy’s dead.”

CONNER

Men are so predictable. Guess where a single, decent looking guy from the wrong side of the tracks is on a Saturday? Church? Nope. School? Funny. I'll tell you. A fucking club dirty enough to catch tetanus just breathing.

Neon lights bleeding against sticky walls, the smell of sweat and cheap perfume clinging to every surface like a second skin. And there he is — Xavier King.

I watch him from my corner, swirling the amber in my glass, letting the ice bite my knuckles. 23 years old. Twenty-fucking-three. And already sitting pretty close to the throne his brother's barely still holding onto. In another life, and by that I mean a couple of years ago, the itch to see how the brain of a guy like this works would've consumed me.

Even now, it claws at the back of my skull, that old hunger whispering. The scientist in me — or whatever twisted version of that I am — wants to peel him open, slow and deliberate. Wants to see if he even bleeds red like the rest of us. I don't think he does. A beast like him? Blood's probably black, congealed, an infection to the rest of society. I'd make the first incision just below the ribcage — neat, clinical. Let gravity do its work. Watch what spills out and take notes. See if something that cold and calculating can even feel pain.

But I don't move. I won't. I've worked too fucking hard to bury that part of me. I remind myself that I'm not that man anymore. I don't get my answers with a scalpel,

not these days. Not even for him.

A dancer's got her legs draped over his lap, laughing at something he said—though from where I sit, I doubt he's said much at all. Doesn't have to. Xavier's got that type of face. Smooth, sharp lines like a blade; black hair curling just enough to soften the edge, but not enough to make him safe. The hazel eyes, though — those are the real tell. Light enough to look warm, calculating enough to gut you while you're still smiling.

I look over at the small black-haired girl, tapping her fingers against the bar. She's too young to be at this bar, but this is Raider territory — cops don't come here. Not unless they want their cruisers torched and their bodies washing up in the canal two days later. I put two fingers in the air, and she comes running over like her tail is on fire.

While I wait for her to come to me, my eyes go back to assessing Xavier. He's not bulky like most of Marcus's enforcers. Slender, compact, but all muscle. Functional. Efficient. A blade, not a hammer. Which makes him dangerous. The Raiders don't usually breed finesse, but Xavier? He's got it. It's in how he sits — relaxed but never loose, always aware of where the exits are. It's in how he lets the dancer grind on him while his eyes scan the room every few minutes, like clockwork. He plays young and wild for the audience, but that mind's working overtime.

“Good evening,” I murmur, keeping my eyes on my target.

“How may I help you, sir?” Her voice squeaks. If I thought she looked young before, now I know it. Too young to be here, too scared to pretend otherwise.

“That gentleman over there,” I nod toward Xavier. “Send him a drink.”

She follows my line of sight, and I catch the small tremor that rolls across her bottom

lip as she lowers her voice. “You sure?”

“Top shelf. Whiskey neat.” My tone leaves no room for negotiation.

She nods quickly, the message clear. As she walks off, I watch the way her body moves — the stiff shoulders, the wince with every step, like she’s trying to make herself smaller. Her gaze keeps darting to the one-way glass office perched above the main floor, the one that watches the entire club like a goddamn executioner’s box.

She’s not afraid of Xavier. Not really.

No — from what I know of him, Xavier’s ruthless, but with reason. He calculates. He plays the long game. That’s why, with Marcus bleeding out alliances faster than he can replace them, half the room’s already whispering Xavier’s name like a prayer. Or a warning.

She walks over to Xavier who looks at her with weary eyes. A small interaction, before she points to me and he locks eyes with me. Come on Mr. Ruthless take the fucking bait.

He grabs the glass and lifts it to me with a stiff nod. I return the movement and watch him hiss as the liquid burns down his throat. Then I glance up to the office above the floor and raise my glass once more. I can’t see him, but I know Marcus is up there, watching, smoke practically pouring out of his ears.

Normally, I’d keep my distance from the Raiders — and they’d return the favor. I mean, if I tried to recruit a guy and he surgically sawed off one of my men’s arms, I’d steer clear too. Those were the good days. When lines were clean, violence was honest, and monsters like me knew exactly what role we played.

But those days are gone. Now? The power’s shifting, but I am the beast I have always

been.

I take another sip, eyes locked on him as the dancer leans in, whispering into his ear. He smiles — slow, charming, disarming — like he isn't a viper waiting for the strike.

Like I said, men are predictable. But boys like Xavier? They're something worse.

Because boys like him grew up swallowing their father's poison and their brother's failures like medicine. And it hardens them. Turns them into something else.

And it's that something else, I need right now.

He lifts his glass, toasts the girl in his lap like she's won something. She giggles like it means she matters. She doesn't. None of them do. They're ornaments for him to decorate his ascension. Temporary warmth while he plots how to gut the people who he thinks are in his way.

That's the thing people don't get about Xavier King — he doesn't crave power for the sake of it. Not like Marcus. He craves control. Quiet, absolute control. The kind that doesn't scream in your face. The kind that smiles while you put the noose around your own neck.

And when Marcus finally falls—and he will fall—the vultures will circle. But they won't realize Xavier's already poisoned the carcass. There won't be anything left for them to feast on.

After a few moments, Xavier smacks the ass of the girl dancing on him and makes his way out of the club.

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I finish my drink, set the glass down with a quiet click that barely echoes over the pulsing bass vibrating through the walls. The dancers keep moving, the men keep leering, and Xavier's already slipped out, cutting through the smoke-hazed room like a ghost who never belonged to the living in the first place.

I rise, rolling my shoulders once as I slide my coat back into place. The leather creaks faintly — an old, familiar sound — as I move through the floor. Eyes glance my way, but no one holds my gaze for long. Raiders know better than to look too long at someone like me.

The bouncer at the door — some overgrown kid trying to look tougher than he is — steps aside without a word as I approach. I can feel the weight of his nervous stare as I pass.

The door groans open on rusted hinges, and the music dulls behind me as I step into the night. Cold air cuts across my face like a blade, sharp and clean compared to the rot inside. The door thuds shut behind me, sealing the heat and noise away.

The alley stretches ahead, narrow and cracked, littered with broken glass and the stink of oil pooling under the static lights from the club. Xavier's there already, a thin line of smoke rising from his cigarette, his silhouette waiting like a promise.

I slip my hands into my coat pockets and step closer, the crunch of gravel under my boots the only announcement. He doesn't flinch, doesn't turn. Just exhales a stream of smoke and says, flat, "You follow all your marks this close, doc?"

"Cigarettes are bad for you." My voice is calm, dry as I slip a joint out of my coat

pocket and lean forward against the wall.

Xavier finally glances at me, hazel eyes cutting sharp under the shadows. He smirks around the cigarette. "So is serial killing."

I snort, can't help it. "Touché."

He flicks ash off the end of his smoke, studying me like a cat studies a mouse it hasn't decided whether to toy with or kill. After a moment, he slides his lighter out of his pocket and lights my joint for me.

"Why'd you send me gasoline?"

I meet his gaze, unblinking. "Whiskey's good for the spirit."

He huffs a soft, humorless laugh. "Good for the fire too."

"That depends on what you plan on burning." I smirk, taking a long pull, allowing the smoke to burn its way across my chest.

He watches me for a moment longer, smoke pooling in the cold air between us. The faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth—amusement or calculation, I can't tell. "How are you burning me this time?"

"Nothing like a slow one, ain't it?" The smoke bellows from my nostrils. "Your brother is fucking with a girl I am exceptionally fond of."

"Fond?" Xavier quirks a smile, teeth flashing under the streetlight. He takes a lazy drag off his cigarette, but his eyes stay sharp.

"You guys killed her pseudo-father," I drone, filling my lungs again, letting the

familiar high lace through my blood, steadying the rising pulse beneath my ribs. Beckoning me forward.

“I wouldn’t know who you’re talking about.”

“Do you understand that I will put your brother down like the dog he is?”

Xavier snarls — something primal flashing behind his pretty-boy mask. “Not before I do.”

The space between us tightens, the air heavier now, thick with everything unsaid. Our shoulders nearly brush as we step in closer, neither of us willing to blink first.

I can feel his breath now — sharp, clipped — as his hand flexes at his side. One movement too fast and this could go bad. Fast.

But I keep my voice low, steady. "I let you pass when they killed Kelly." My jaw tightens as I feel the name drop between us like weight. "But now someone is going to pay. You. Marcus. Asher. Isaiah — pick one."

At the sound of their names, Xavier’s lip twitches again, but this time, there’s less amusement in it. His voice drops to something darker.

"You must be more than fond of this girl."

I smile then — cold, mechanical, like the reflex of an old wound pulling tight. The kind of smile you wear when you're toeing the edge of something sharp, knowing full well you might slip. My mind lingers on his words for half a beat — more than fond. What would that even mean?

I turn it over like a specimen under glass, studying it from every angle. Am I capable

of it? Of that kind of softness? When did Jasmine go from a point of interest to a person of fondness? When did she become a person I want to protect?

My tongue runs over the curve of my lip, and I roll my shoulders back looking through his foggy gaze. I won't give Xavier the satisfaction of knowing the spiral he has just unlocked in me. Instead, I hold his gaze and say, flat and deliberate, "His name was Tommy. Ring a bell?"

Xavier's face hardens, and he takes a slow step back, the cigarette burning down between his fingers. "That wasn't us."

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“You want to lie a little better?”

“Nah, promise.” Xavier shrugs like it's nothing, like we're talking about the weather.

“It was a gift from the Italians.”

My jaw clicks, heat crawling just beneath the skin of my neck. I run a hand across my face, forcing my breath to stay steady. “Explain gift.”

“They had to teach us a lesson,” Xavier continues, voice casual, but his eyes never leave mine. “They got a whiff of Marcus’s plan for the Raiders and uniting with the Cartel. Tommy was their message. Remind us that they can still get into our camp.” He takes one last drag before tossing the cigarette to the ground, crushing it under his boot.

I shake my head, a humorless breath slipping out of me. “You’re all so fucking disorganized it’s pathetic.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“Or fucking what?” I growl, looking down at the animal in front of me.

Xavier’s jaw ticks now, his turn to feel the itch under his skin. “Look, I am sorry about your girl.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I shrug, tossing the joint onto the alley floor. “She’s going to get even.”

“Is that a threat?”

I step in close, close enough to feel his breath hit my cheek, my voice like steel wrapped in velvet. “Look me in the eye, Xavier.”

He does. And for a beat, neither of us blink.

“Do I look like a man who makes threats?”

“No.”

“So, I promise my girl is going to come and get what’s hers, and you are going to serve up Marcus on a silver fucking platter.”

“Or what?”

“Or.” I snarl. “I’ll be skinning you alive.”

20

JASMINE

I’ve never felt anything like this before—not even in the worst moments of my life. Not when my father left with nothing but a suitcase and a head full of lies, not when Willow vanished without a trace and left me in a silence too sharp to scream through, not even when I stood in the aftermath of what I did at thirteen, with blood drying on my hands and the weight of a secret I thought would crush me before morning.

But this... this is worse.

This is grief that doesn’t howl. It suffocates. I have been paralyzed in my bed for a

fucking week.

It spreads through my body like poison, slow and burning, thickening in my chest until I can't pull air into my lungs without feeling like I might choke on it. It is a scream stuck behind my teeth, aching to be released but so tangled with guilt and disbelief that I don't know if it'll ever come out. And maybe it shouldn't. Maybe I don't deserve to scream when Tommy can't even breathe anymore.

I've been sitting in the center of my bed like a broken doll someone tossed there—knees pulled tight to my chest, arms wrapped around my legs, chin pressed into the cotton fabric of Landon's t-shirt that still smells like his cologne and laundry detergent and the smoke of his cigarettes. I'm rocking slowly, without realizing it at first, like movement will stop the panic from setting in, as if swaying can somehow replace the things I've lost or rewind time back to when all of this hadn't yet fallen apart.

I want to peel my skin off. I want to crawl out of my body, claw my way free of this unbearable grief that has made a home in my ribcage, wrapping itself around every bone and nerve ending. I feel like if I screamed loud enough I could shake the foundation of this entire fucking apartment, like I could rip the sky open and demand Tommy back from whatever cruel force took him.

But I don't scream. I just sit there, vibrating with grief, caught somewhere between hyper aware and completely numb.

I don't see him, but I feel the bed dip next to me and the familiar smell of the ocean. Landon sighs heavily the same sound he made two hours ago when he made me put on his shirt and asked if I wanted a waffle. I opted for some coffee that has turned ice cold on my nightstand, and when he tried to talk to me after that, all I gave him was silence. I don't know what to say. There's nothing to say.

Tommy's dead, and I did everything to keep him alive, but none of that mattered.

I followed Marcus's orders like a pawn. I got close to Brooke—not just close, but intimate. I let myself slip into her space, into her bed, into her trust, with every intention of breaking her heart the minute she became easy prey. I was ready to be the villain in her story if it meant keeping Tommy alive, ready to bear the weight of her heartbreak, of her hatred, if it meant he would be safe.

“Peach,” he whispers, his voice rough at the edges, fingertips ghosting over my exposed knee like he's afraid I might flinch.

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“You have to eat something.”

I shake my head, too fast, too sharp, and bury my face deeper between my knees. The ache in my body has settled into something bone-deep. A numb, shaking kind of stillness. I feel like if I move too much, I’ll split open.

“Come on, baby,” he murmurs again, shifting across the bed. The mattress groans beneath him as his weight pulls toward me, and I can feel it—his warmth, his breath, the tension in him coiled tight like a spring. I shift away, instinctively curling tighter into myself.

“Say something.”

“I killed him,” I gasp, the words punching out of me like I’ve been holding them down for too long. They sear on the way up, fire behind my teeth. “I killed him, Landon.”

“No,” he says, soft but certain, shaking his head. “You didn’t kill him.”

But it doesn’t matter what he says. Not when the truth is already screaming inside me. I didn’t pull the trigger, but something I did—something I chose—led to this. Something I did led to this blood on my fucking hands, and I don’t know what it is. Some crack in the path I took let death seep through. Some misstep, some hesitation, some stupid fucking trust in Marcus—and now Tommy’s dead.

I look up at Landon, finally, and my eyes burn so hot they feel raw. My cheeks are wet again and I don’t remember when I started crying, but the tears are there, heavy

and hot and endless.

“So why is he dead, Lan?” My voice trembles as I speak, barely holding together. “If it’s not my fault...howdid he end up dead?”

His eyes lock with mine, and as soon as the concern erupts, Landon’s face twists. The muscle in his cheek jumps, and his hands curl into fists at his sides. I’ve never seen him look murderous and helpless at the same time.

I press on, voice rising, desperate. “The Raiders said—they said—if I did what they asked, if I manipulated Brooke, if I got close, they’d let Tommylive.That was the deal, right? That was the fucking deal.”

“I know,” he says, voice rough.

“And he’s dead.” My voice breaks on the word. I suck in a breath and it comes out wrong, sharp and uneven, like my lungs can’t hold the weight of it. “So what did I do wrong? What did I miss?”

He doesn’t answer right away, and it makes the silence heavier than anything he’s ever said. And I’m unraveling.

My body folds in on itself again, knees tucked to my chest, arms shaking as I try to breathe around the weight pressing into me. The pressure builds like I’m going to implode, like grief and guilt and rage are all clawing at my insides for a way out. But there’s no space to scream. No air to cry in.

“You didn’t miss anything, Peach,” he whispers, voice tight. His palm runs slowly up my thigh, grounding, steady, and he shifts closer, stretching out across the comforter like he’s trying to shield me from everything that hurts. “You did what you were told.”

“Maybe I wasn’t quick enough,” I mutter, but the words feel hollow, even to me.

“That can’t be it.” Landon’s voice stays low, careful. “Manipulation takes time. Marcus knows that. He gave you the order last week—he wouldn’t have expected a miracle overnight.”

But the way he says manipulation makes something sour coil in my gut. The word tastes dirty, violent. It echoes too loud inside me, because I haven’t even started unpacking what I’ve done to Brooke. What I was willing to do.

How do I look in the mirror now, knowing I was ready to weaponize her heart?

I was going to let her fall. Not just stumble—I was going to push.

I was going to let her fall in love with me. Completely. Without hesitation. I was going to smile when she called me hers, I was going to kiss her like I meant it, whisper things I’d already decided she wouldn’t get to keep. I was going to make her want me—need me—and then I was going to walk her straight into the lion’s den.

And all for what?

So the Raiders could rip open her family’s legacy, use her name, her access, her love for me, to rob them blind? To crawl into the cracks of the du Pont empire and pry it open from the inside?

I told myself it was for Tommy. That it was worth it. That this was war, and war meant sacrifice. That if I carried enough guilt, wore it like armor, I could survive the wreckage I caused.

I told myself Brooke would be fine.

That she'd hate me and heal and move on—because she could. Because she's bright and reckless and full of too much light to be ruined by someone like me.

But I? I wouldn't survive losing him. So I chose.

I made that choice a hundred times, quietly, in the dark.

And now he's dead anyway.

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So what the fuck was the point?

“Landon...” My voice cracks.

He lifts his head, his eyes on me already.

“I was going to fucking ruin her.”

It comes out hoarse. Heavy. Like a confession and a curse.

His brow furrows, his whole body stilling. But he doesn't pull away.

I almost want him to.

I almost want to see disgust on his face. Something that matches the rot in my chest.

But instead, he just breathes in through his nose, jaw clenched like he's biting back the pain for both of us.

“You didn't ruin her,” he says eventually. “You didn't finish the job.”

“No,” I whisper, eyes burning again. “But I started it. What can I say now? How can I look her in the eye now?”

Landon doesn't speak for a moment, but I can feel him staring at me—like he's trying to memorize this version of me too: curled up, hollowed out, barely holding shape. I wait for judgment. For distance. But what I get is warmth. Steady, pulsing warmth

from the hand still resting on my thigh and the body curled just inches from mine like he's trying to shoulder the weight of what I can't say.

He leans forward, pressing his forehead lightly against mine, and when he speaks, his voice is low and raw—something torn from deep inside his chest.

“You don't get to drown here, Jasmine.”

His words land heavy, but he doesn't stop. He pulls back just enough for me to see his face, and there's nothing soft left in him. Just fire and grief.

“I let you have the day. I didn't touch you, I didn't push, I didn't even try to drag you out of bed. I gave you silence, and space, and all the time you needed to fall apart.” His jaw flexes. His eyes burn. “But that ends now.”

I blink, barely breathing.

“Because I know what it's like,” he says, voice thickening. “To feel like you didn't do enough. Like if you'd been faster, or smarter, or more ruthless, maybe they wouldn't be dead. I've had that guilt in my fucking bones since I was seventeen.” He exhales hard through his nose, and when he speaks again, it's quieter. But it cuts deeper. “They killed my sister, Jasmine.”

That stops my heart, and I look at him again as the salt builds in the back of my throat. “What?”

“Kelly,” he says, voice like gravel. “They killed her. She was in love with Marcus, and strung out on drugs, and they...when she was too much for them to control, Marcus had her killed.” He swallows, hard. “And when I tried to leave they beat me halfway to death.”

Silence hums around us like static. He's not crying. But I can see the weight of it—the grief pressed so deep it's just become part of him. It makes me want to wrap myself around him, drag him into the dark spiral of my grief. Make him cry with me, but the look in his eyes tells me that the time to cry is over for him, and for me.

“So no,” he continues. His voice is a low gravel that makes me instinctively want to run and hide. “I’m not going to let you sit here and rot in the wreckage. I’m not going to let you give them one more fucking piece of yourself.”

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

“You didn’t,” he says, cutting through the air between us. “You did more than anyone should’ve asked of you. You lied, and you kissed someone you were falling for, and you walked straight into the lion’s den for a man you loved. That isn’t failure.” He moves closer, brushing his knuckles down the side of my face with a tenderness that makes my chest twist. “They don’t get your tears, Peach. They’re not worth them.”

He pulls back, just enough to stand. Just enough to tower over me in the low light of the room, broad and unyielding, anger rolling off him in steady waves.

“You’re going to get in the bath,” he says again, firmer now. “You’re going to wash off this day. You’re going to eat. And then you’re going to skip the part of grief where you cry on the floor and jump straight to the part where you cut their throats with your fucking teeth.” I stare at him, chest heaving, throat full of fire and I am enthralled with how much he makes me want to burn myself alive.

“Because they took Tommy. They took someone you love. And now?” He leans down, lips brushing the shell of my ear. “Now, baby, we make them pay.”

I stare at him, chest heaving, throat full of fire, and for a second—just a second—I

can't tell if I want to cry or scream or throw myself into him like he's the last solid thing left in the world.

"I can't," I whisper, my voice cracking. "Landon... I don't have anything left. I don't even know where to start."

His eyes soften—not weak, never weak—but with that kind of depth that makes you feel like you're being seen, completely and without judgment.

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“You are the girl who reminded me what it is to feel,” he whispers, and my heart is caught in my throat. “So now, I am going to teach you how to be numb, baby.”

Before I can protest, he leans down and lifts me effortlessly into his arms. I don’t fight him. I don’t flinch. My body folds against his instinctively, like it’s always known how to fit there.

His steps are slow but sure as he carries me down the hall and into the bathroom. The soft hum of the light flickers overhead. I hear the water turn on—hot, steady, soothing—and then his hands are back on me, gentle as they tug my shirt over my head, in a way that makes me feel precious when I’ve never felt anything but wrecked.

He helps me step into the bath, the water already steaming and laced with something that smells like lavender, salt and firewood—like him. I sink into it with a sigh that sounds too broken to be mine. Landon doesn’t leave. He kneels beside the tub, sleeves pushed up, and picks up the sponge with one hand, cupping water and pouring it over my shoulders like he’s washing something sacred. He washes me carefully, and I take my time being completely sad, feeling every emotion I can. Holding my breath when I realize that Willow may never forgive me for my crimes. That I have lost the man I considered my father, and my best friend, but that pain is held in my chest. I’ll unleash it later. I can’t do that now.

After, Landon is quiet. He offers me a towel without a word, wrapping it around my shoulders when I don’t reach for it fast enough. His fingers are careful, always careful, as he squeezes the water gently from my hair, pressing a kiss to the crown of my head like it’s a prayer.

He doesn't ask me to talk.

Doesn't expect anything.

He just stays around in a way no one has before. Most people leave, but I know he's not too far away from me. He can't handle the distance, and for some deranged reason it brings me comfort.

By the time I step out of the bathroom, skin flushed warm and clean for the first time in days, the apartment smells like butter and cheese. The kind of smell that makes your stomach turn with hunger even when your heart still feels hollow.

He's in the kitchen, barefoot, shirtless, one hand pressed to the skillet handle and the other holding a spatula like he's preparing for war. I watch him for a minute. Watch the way he moves. The way his hair hangs in his eyes, the way his tattoos flex every time he shifts his grip on the handle.

There's a single plate on the counter—grilled cheese, cut diagonally. A glass of cold water. A folded napkin.

He doesn't look at me when he speaks.

"Eat all of it," he says simply. "You need strength for murder."

I almost laugh. Almost.

Instead, I pad over, pick up the plate, and take a slow bite. The bread is perfectly crisp. The cheese is gooey and rich and slightly salty, and it melts on my tongue like it was made just for me.

I eat in silence while he cleans the pan, wipes the counter, dries his hands on a rag.

Then he disappears into the bedroom for a few minutes, and when I follow, still chewing the last bite, I find an outfit already laid out on the bed.

Black jeans. My combat boots. One of my cropped tanks. A leather jacket—his leather jacket.

Landon doesn't say anything when I step into the doorway.

He just nods toward the clothes.

“You're going to give them exactly what they deserve, Peach.”

21

JASMINE

The drive to the Raider's hangout feels different this time. I don't know what about this drive makes it harder for me. Maybe it's the weight in my chest, tight and unmoving, or the way my fingers can't stop picking at the frayed hem of Landon's leather jacket. The one he insisted I wear, as if it could shield me from what's coming. Maybe it's the silence in the car, thick and thoughtful—not heavy, not uncomfortable, but full of things we aren't saying out loud.

Or maybe it's because this time, I'm not just walking in as a girl pretending she belongs.

I'm walking in as a reckoning.

The trees blur past in the dark, tall shadows leaning in like they know something I don't. Gravel grinds under the tires as we turn onto that narrow, hidden road, and the cabin appears like it's been waiting for me. Like it's always been waiting.

And still—my stomach twists.

My mind spins with doubt, rage, grief, all of it layered and bleeding together. I think about Tommy. I think about the way Cast's voice cracked when he told me. The silence on the other end of the line when I couldn't respond. The way his death settled over everything like ash.

I should be on fire. I want to be. But beneath the fury, I'm still asking myself the same brutal question:

Can I actually do this?

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Can I look Marcus in the eye and not break? Or will I freeze the second his life is truly in my hands? I've never been a murder. Warrior? Sure. Savior? Definitely. But a murderer? I never thought I would be so certain about murdering a man. So certain in someone not deserving the right to live.

I press my palm to my thigh, trying to ground myself. My knee is bouncing, and Landon notices. His hand drifts over mine, anchoring me without a word. The warmth of it seeps into my skin and stays there.

"You're shaking," he says softly, keeping his eyes on the road.

"I'm thinking," I whisper.

"Don't overthink it."

"I'm not sure I'm built for revenge." I choke, pulling my thighs into my chest and placing my chin on my knees. I am not sure if I can kill again, especially on purpose.

"You're not built for it," he says quietly. "Because you were meant to be more. You are more."

I bite the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste metal, eyes fixed on the dark horizon as the woods thin and the clearing opens up before us.

The Raider's compound rises out of the trees like something out of a nightmare. Floodlights glare down on rows of bikes, the air thick with smoke and leather and oil. The cabin is still massive. Still looming. But this time the sound of music and

laughter does not engulf me. It is just silence and the heavy weight of the moon making a shadow out of the cabin.

The tires crunch to a halt over gravel, and the engine hums into silence.

I'm still hugging my knees, still fighting the war in my chest, when someone approaches the driver's side window.

Landon doesn't flinch. He just reaches for the door handle and mutters, "Showtime."

The door swings open with a groan, and a shadow leans into the light.

At first, I barely register the shape—tall, broad-shouldered, hands buried in the pockets of a black bomber jacket. But then the porch light hits his face, and my stomach does something violent.

Blonde hair, tousled like he ran a hand through it a hundred times in frustration. Sharp green eyes that never blink long enough like he's too meticulous to miss a thing. He's in all black: fitted tee that hugs the lean, muscled cut of his torso, slim tactical pants tucked into scuffed black boots, and the craziest thing is he is wearing a bomber jacket. A too casual, out of character, kind of hot bomber jacket. I have never seen him in something so casual.

I can't believe my fucking eyes. Because standing outside the car—here, in front of a fucking biker fortress like it's totally normal—is Professor Kilgore.

My mouth parts. "Wait—what the fuck?"

Landon's already out of the car, so I scramble after him, slamming the door shut and rounding toward the front. "Is that—are you serious right now is that...Professor Kilgore?"

Professor Kilgore turns around with a stoic expression and nods. “Just Conner tonight.”

My brain flatlines. Did he just—Conner? What? No. No. Absolutely not. I am going to have a fucking aneurysm. Or maybe I’ve hopped timelines. Yeah. That makes more sense. Grief’s finally cracked me open and tossed me into a parallel dimension where my forensic psych professor moonlights as a gun-toting antihero in biker gang drama.

Because there is no way that’s real life. “You teach forensic psychology. You wear loafers and assign reflection essays about guilt.”

“Still do,” Conner says dryly, arms crossed like this is just a regular office-hours chat and not a literal biker compound meeting. “Also, you’ve missed six classes, Miss Rivera. And your first lab analysis is due next Wednesday.”

“Um...great,” I squeak, mortified beyond measure, clutching Landon’s jacket tighter around me like it might somehow make me invisible.

I whirl on Landon, whose smug grin is doing absolutely nothing to help my rising blood pressure.

“Why is my professor here when I’m supposed to be getting revenge for Tommy?” I hiss, voice climbing an octave.

“Who do you think got you the chance at revenge?” Landon shrugs like he’s talking about picking up takeout. “Besides, Conner Kilgore is my best friend... who has also seen your face when you cum.”

I choke.

“Dude, what the fuck?” I snap, taking a step back like the sheer audacity of this man might be contagious.

“Dude?” Landon takes a slow, lazy step toward me, that same cocky glint in his eye as he leans in close—too close. “I think you mean thank you.”

“No, I mean this is the last motherfucking straw, Landon. I don’t want my professor to see me murder a guy! And yeah, Marcus is a piece of shit, but you—you are an asshole for just inviting him here!”

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“You really don’t have any manners, Peach.”

“Yeah? Well I’ll shove your manners up your stupid?—”

“Wow,” Conner cuts in, and I spin around so fast I almost give myself whiplash.

He’s smirking. Smirking. The color drains from my face so fast I might pass out right here on the gravel like a goddamn Victorian debutante.

“I—I’m so sorry, Professor?—”

He raises a hand. “Conner.”

“I—Conner—I just... I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to be here,” I stammer, words tumbling over themselves as I try to recover some level of dignity, which is laughable at this point.

Conner cocks his head, stepping just close enough that I feel the heat radiating off his all-black outfit, every inch of him giving off dangerous older man who’s too composed to panic and too smart to miss a thing vibes.

“I think we’re a little past appropriate, don’t you, Miss Rivera?” he murmurs, voice low and smooth.

My spine straightens like it’s been yanked by a string.

“W-What?” I stammer, blinking too hard, too fast.

Conner leans in—not enough to touch, but enough that I can smell him. Smoke. Clean soap. Gunmetal. Trouble.

“I mean I use your panties almost every night,” he says, low enough that only I can hear it. “Now I have organized a murder for you. I don’t think you should argue about what is or is not appropriate. I think you should just say thank you.”

My brain does this twitchy static thing like an old radio trying to find a station as I feel my pussy clench around the air, because holy shit he’s been...to my...fuck I can’t breathe. I think I black out for a second because when I blink again, he’s still standing there, too close, too calm, like he didn’t just casually drop that he jerks off with my underwear and arranges hits like it’s Wednesday brunch.

“This is—” I gasp, hands flailing as I try to find a sentence that will not get me immediately arrested or committed, “This is still—unacceptable behavior! There are rules! Boundaries! Ethical—things!”

Conner chuckles, slow and deep like he’s amused by a particularly feisty pet. “Say thank you.”

I blink again. “I—what?”

“You heard me.” He leans just a little closer, voice like silk-wrapped steel. “Say thank you.”

“For what?” I breathe, heart hammering.

“For cleaning up your messes, sunshine.” The nickname breaks something in me, and my knees almost give out.

My mouth opens, closes. Fires up again. “I—thank you,” I grit, because what else am

I supposed to say to a forensic scientist who apparently moonlights as my personal goddamn assassin?

His green eyes flick over my face, and for a moment they darken, satisfied. “Good girl.”

“Fuck,” Landon chuckles, sliding an arm across my shoulders. “If I knew all I had to do was steal your panties to make you behave. I would have done it a while ago.”

I growl, elbowing Landon hard in the ribs.

He grunts, grinning like an idiot as he stumbles half a step away, clearly enjoying himself far too much.

I roll my eyes and shift toward Conner, who’s far more composed—though the faint twitch in his jaw suggests he might be two seconds away from losing his patience with both of us.

“Okay, so how are we doing this?” I ask, licking my lips. My voice comes out steady, but my fingers twitch at my sides. The adrenaline is already crawling up my spine.

“I’ve arranged for Xavier to move up his plans,” Conner says calmly, like he’s reciting a grocery list and not outlining a coup. “He’s going to challenge Marcus tonight. Publicly. Loudly. When things start to unravel, you move in. You end it.”

I raise a brow. “So what—you want me to knock on the door and just put a bullet in the guy’s skull?”

“Preferably between the eyes,” he says with a shrug, then glances at Landon. “But I’m not picky.”

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Landon steps closer, sliding the cold and heavy gun into my palm.

He clicks the slide into place, that wicked grin spreading across his face like war paint. “Yeah,” he says, voice low and dangerous. “But, if you want, you can have fun with him first. A little payback. A little fear.”

I’ve killed by accident, not knowing truly what I was doing. But this is different, I have never killed on purpose, but the ghost of Tommy is standing somewhere behind me, whispering that I don’t need to knowhow. I just need todo.

“Let’s go,” I whisper, throat dry.

The three of us move like a unit—Conner calm and clinical, Landon humming with rage just under the surface, and me, somewhere in between grief and fury, because with each step the fear slips away and red replaces my gaze.

The front porch creaks under our boots as we step up to the door. There’s a dull thud of music inside, voices arguing over something I can’t make out.

Conner knocks once. Silence. Then the dooryanks open.

Xavier’s wild eyes meet mine, bloodshot and glassy, and for a second I think he might lunge at someone again. But he just stands there, chest heaving, jaw tight.

He doesn’t say anything—just steps aside and nods once. I watch the quiver in his jaw and the tense grip of his body, a part of me wants to run, hide and tell him nevermind but Conner is already walking deeper into the house.

Landon brushes his fingers along my spine as I pass through the doorway, grounding me with the touch, but it's Xavier who leads the way. He doesn't look back as he moves down the hallway, his boots thudding against the worn floorboards with purpose.

"Come on," he mutters.

We follow him through a narrow corridor past the living room, through a rusted metal door that groans when he shoves it open. Inside is a stairwell—cracked cement walls, flickering light bulb above, and a steep descent that smells like damp concrete and rot.

The moment I step inside, the temperature drops.

The air turns colder, heavier. It clings to my skin like damp cloth, seeping into my clothes. My footsteps echo too loud against the stairs as I follow Xavier down into the dark. Each creak and shift of wood behind me reminds me that Landon and Conner are still there, silent shadows at my back.

The basement is wide, unfinished. Exposed beams line the ceiling. The walls are made of old, pitted stone, and the ground is slick in places—dark stains I don't want to name are crusted into the floor. Chains hang loose from a support beam in the far corner, like a haunted prop from a horror set, and there's a metal table with what looks like old restraints bolted into the sides.

I stop in the middle of the room, shivering.

"What the fuck is this?" I murmur.

Xavier doesn't answer right away. He walks to the far wall and flips a switch. An overhead bulb crackles to life with a flickering buzz, casting everything in harsh

yellow light.

And then I see it. Marcus King.

Strapped to a reinforced chair with duct tape and chains, shirtless, bloodied, but still breathing. His jaw is bruised, one eye swollen, and his lip split in two places—but his grin? His grin is still there. Crooked. Wild. Unapologetic.

“You’re fucking dead, Xavier,” Marcus spits, jerking against the restraints with a metallic rattle. “You hear me? You’re a fucking traitor. They’ll eat you alive Xav. Kill you for fucking dog food.”

“God, do you ever shut up?” Xavier snaps, pulling a cigarette out of his front pocket and sliding it between his lips.

Marcus throws his head back, laughing through blood-stained teeth. “You think you’re the first little bitch to try and take my seat? I’ve buried better men than you.”

In the corner, Asher stands shirtless under a heat lamp, long blonde hair tied back, his pale chest streaked with smudges of dried blood. His expression is blank—emotionless—as he carefully cleans off a gleaming, curved blade. Beside him, an assortment of tools glint on a steel tray: pliers, clamps, knives, things I can’t name but know aren’t for anything gentle.

He growls low, a sound more animal than human, as he tests the edge of a blade with his thumb.

Marcus keeps going, voice rising like arrogance alone will shield him. “What, gonna let this little slut do your dirty work?” His eyes cut to me and widen with feral delight. “Oh, you’re here? Perfect. You’re the cherry on top of this pathetic mutiny.”

“You killed Tommy,” I snap, stepping forward. The words feel like venom on my tongue. I raise the gun, my grip tightening until my knuckles ache.

Marcus rolls his eyes and spits blood to the side. “I didn’t fucking kill Tommy.”

My jaw clenches. My vision tunnels.

“It was the fucking Italians,” he adds, eyes burning. “They found out about the cartel talks—about us trying to split off. Tommy was a warning shot.”

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My hand trembles, but I don't lower the gun. "Yeah, I heard that," I bite out. "But if it weren't for you—if you hadn't dragged us into this psychotic turf war—he'd still be alive."

"Spare me the guilt trip, sweetheart," Marcus growls. "You think you're the only one who's lost something? This game doesn't care about blood. It doesn't care who raised you or who kissed you goodnight—it just takes. And if you're dumb enough to think you can stand on the board and not be sacrificed?—"

I fire. The bullet hits the wall just inches from his head.

Marcus laughs.

It's not loud. Not manic.

It's low—rotten—and it slips under my skin like a parasite.

The sound alone makes my stomach knot.

Because the way he laughs... it reminds me of him.

The one who used to smile just like that. With that same curling of the lip, like the cruelty was something private and sweet to him. The way he'd smirk right before his hand slid lower—right before he gripped tighter.

The man who haunts my nightmares. The man I killed when I was thirteen.

Marcus has his eyes. That same cold glint. That same hunger masked as power. He wears that same steel-edged exterior, the same ego made of blood and dominance and rot.

He's everything I've spent my whole life trying to claw away from. Everything I loathe in myself. Everything that turned me into someone who lies. Who manipulates. Who betrays.

He's the echo of the worst parts of me.

And suddenly I can't breathe.

"Shut up!" I scream, the gun shaking in my hand now—not with fear, but with a chaos I don't know how to name.

But Marcus only grins wider.

He leans forward, teeth bloodstained, eyes locked on mine with a terrible, knowing glint. "Be a good little pick-me, sweetheart," he hisses. "Pull the trigger. Prove you're one of us."

Conner steps forward sharply. "Shut your fucking mouth," he snaps, and it's the first time I've heard that sharp, razor-clean edge in his voice. "You've already said too much."

I can barely hear them. Because I'm still looking at Marcus. I'm still seeing him. My abuser. My shadow. The one whose light I watched die in his eyes. And I feel filthy. My soul feels filthy. Like no matter how many times I wash my hands, my skin will never be clean again.

"Peach," Landon murmurs, stepping behind me, his hands sliding up my arms,

anchoring me in his warmth. His voice is low, graveled with something soft and sacred. “You don’t have to do this.”

I freeze. Because I thought I did. I thought I had to be the one. That it was justice. That it was closure. That killing Marcus would erase something inside me. That it would bring something back. But all I feel now is weight. And I can’t.

I let the gun lower, slow.

“I would kill you, but I think Xavier would do a better job,” I look over at Xavier and watch the smoke bellow from his nostrils.

“Nah, its because you’re a fucking coward,” Marcus crackles.

I shrug, “Maybe, but you should be more concerned with those weapons over there. They look pointy.”

My hands shake, but I turn and practically run up the stairs taking a deep breath like I wasn’t breathing down there and for the first time in a while I feel those eyes on me again, and a part of me wants to scream.

22

CONNER

I never thought Jasmine would end up in my arms. Statistically speaking, it didn’t track. She’s volatile. Independent. Not the kind of person who lets others carry her weight—literally or otherwise. And yet, here she is. Pressed against my chest, eyes half-shut, body too tired to keep holding itself up. Her breathing is uneven. She’s not fully asleep, not fully awake. A gray area. I’m familiar with those.

There's a tremor in her fingers. Subtle, but consistent. She's not built for this. Or rather—she's not conditioned for it. Not the way Landon is. Not the way I am. The moral boundaries are still intact for her, even if they've started to erode. That makes her rare. Fragile in a way most people misunderstand. She doesn't enjoy the kill. She doesn't romanticize the blood. That's what makes her valuable.

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I adjust her weight carefully, shift her onto the mattress. She doesn't resist. Limbs loose. No defense mechanisms. That in itself is... noteworthy.

I pull the blanket over her and take a step back, watching as she curls slightly in on herself. Protective posture. Instinctual. Trauma does that—rewires the nervous system. Trains the body to expect pain in moments of stillness.

I don't touch her again. I just watch her for a few seconds longer.

In another world, she would be mine—uncomplicated, public, permanent. There'd be no secrets. No power imbalances. No ethical lines to toe. I would have carved Marcus open the moment he spoke Jasmine's name, sliced him end to end for what he did to Kelly. I still think about it. About the mess I'd make of him. But Landon—always the moral compass in wolves' clothing—asked me to let him handle it. So I did. I waited. Watched. Calculated.

But in this world, I have to play the long game. In this world, Jasmine's a student, and I'm the professor who's supposed to ignore the way her lips part when she's lost in thought. Who's supposed to grade her essays and not think about how she moans. I'm standing in a teenager's bedroom—pastel sheets, chipped furniture, some ridiculous candle burning on the nightstand that smells like vanilla and sex and safety.

And the girl sleeping in that bed is failing my class. Not because she's stupid. Because she's been too busy surviving. Too busy navigating death threats and secret missions and the tangle of violence we've all dragged her into.

The optics are catastrophic, but at least her apartment building is off campus even if it just five blocks away from my fucking office. I exhale hard through my nose, rub the heel of my palm against my jaw, and walk out before I do something irreversible.

The living room is dim, washed in blue from the TV screen still playing some muted sitcom. Landon's stretched out on the couch, boots off, a cigarette tucked between his fingers. The second he sees me, he lifts the pack and flicks it once.

"You want one?"

I hesitate. Then I nod. "Yeah. Fuck it."

I don't say thank you but I take the cigarette Landon offers and slide it between my lips. He holds his out, still lit, and I lean in, catching the flame with a clean inhale. Smoke fills my throat and sharply coats my lungs.

I drop down next to him on the couch without a word. The leather groans under my weight, the silence between us thick with the kind of history no one talks about out loud. The TV's still playing something muted and ridiculous—blue light flickering across the room like static, like ghosts. I don't look at it.

Landon leans his head back, cigarette trailing a thin ribbon of smoke toward the ceiling fan. "I guess pigs are flying."

I drag from mine, slow and deep. "What?"

He chuckles, that lazy, low sound that always makes me want to break his nose or buy him a drink. Sometimes both. "You're taking care of my girl."

"You could've carried her if you wanted."

“You bolted out of the car like your ass was on fire,” he mutters. “Wasn’t a damn thing I could do.”

I exhale through my nose, the smoke helping mask the heat crawling up my spine. I don’t say anything, but Landon chuckles to himself.

“You weren’t even this concerned about Kelly.”

I roll my shoulders back, the tension coiling up my arms as I flick the cigarette ash into the frog ashtray on the coffee table. Landon kicks his feet up.

“She was like a sister to you,” Landon goes on, his voice curling with humor. “But you never looked at her the way you look at Jasmine. Never chased after her when she was hurting.”

I grind my teeth, pulse thumping against the side of my neck. “I would fucking hope not, she was a sister.”

“Look, I’m just saying?—”

“Don’t, Landon.”

He flicks ash into the tray, sighs. “I’m not trying to fight. But fuck, man. The last time I saw you this invested in someone was...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence. Doesn’t have to.

Landon shifts beside me. “I didn’t mean to?—”

“Yeah, you did.” My voice slices through the room.

I flick my cigarette into the ashtray, sparks biting the rim, and stand up too fast. My nerves feel too close to the surface, hot and twitching. I move to the window without thinking, needing the glass, the dark, the distance from his voice and everything it drags out of me.

I plant my hands on the sill and stare out at the city—black, cold, indifferent. Lights buzz and blink like dying nerves. A thousand lives happening all at once. And here I am, still haunted by just one.

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Lindsay.

I see her when I close my eyes. The mess of her honey brown hair. The scar at her collarbone. The way she laughed when she killed someone she hated. The way I loved her for it. The way she made me believe that darkness could be art if you painted it right.

She made me a monster with a scalpel and a smile. Taught me how to gut a man with precision and sleep like a baby after. I didn't just follow her—I worshipped her. I let her hollow me out, scoop the softness from my ribs until all that was left was calculation and obedience. I let her love me like a weapon.

And when I wrapped my hands around her throat, I didn't hesitate. I watched her eyes widen, felt the tremble in her fingers as she reached for me. I held her down as she kicked, as her breath stuttered and stopped, and I didn't cry. I didn't scream. I counted the seconds it took—documented the pressure, the resistance, the sound of the final gasp that escaped her lips.

And then I ran. Not because I was afraid of what I'd done. But because I was young, and that was the first time I'd killed someone alone. And it felt—god help me—it felt like I'd finally earned something. When Landon found me, I could have peeled my own skin off from the pressure, and the onset of emotions that broke me down. Landon is right. There hasn't been anyone since Lindsay and I don't know what Jasmine did to catch my eye but she should rue the day she ever crossed paths with me.

“You should be more concerned about my attraction,” I say, voice low, eyes fixed on

the window—but I feel the weight of his presence behind me. “To your girl.”

Landon doesn’t flinch. “You won’t hurt her.”

I cough out a bitter laugh. “You know that’s not true.”

“She’s a strong girl.”

“That’s questionable,” I snap, turning slowly, the air between us crackling.

Landon stands now, back straight, reflection sharp in the glass. “You’re not going to hurt her.”

I whirl around fully, my chest tight, my hands clenched. “How do you fucking know?” I breathe. “I loved Lindsay, Landon. I loved her, and I still killed her. What do you think is going to happen if I love Jasmine?”

His jaw flexes. His voice drops, low and lethal. “If you love her,” he growls, stepping close enough that our foreheads nearly touch, “you will watch yourself. You will walk the fucking line. Or I will put you down.”

“You’re going to put me down?” I murmur, half a challenge, half a prayer. I step closer, close enough to smell the smoke on his breath. “You really think you can kill me? I taught you how to dismember a body.”

His eyes gleam, cold and bright. “And I taught you how to throw a punch, Con.” His fists tighten. “I don’t need a weapon for what I’ll do to you if you so much as make her cry.”

We stare at each other for a beat too long. No blinking. No backing down.

The second I hear the scream, something in my chest locks up. It's sharp. Rattling. Too real to be from a dream, and too familiar to ignore. I know fear when I hear it—I've caused enough of it. My hands curl at my sides, and for a breath, I just stand there, frozen in the living room with the sound echoing down the hall.

Then Landon bolts. He doesn't think. Doesn't hesitate. He moves like he's done this before—like she's his to protect.

I follow, slower. My legs feel stiff, heavy with something I don't want to name. Guilt, maybe. Dread. Hunger. I don't know.

By the time I make it to her door, it's open. Light spills out into the hallway like a throat of gold, and there he is—Landon—already on the bed, already got her wrapped in his arms. Jasmine's curled up in his lap like she was made to fit there. He's holding her like he's the last thing keeping her from breaking apart.

She's shaking, clutching at his shirt, tears streaking her cheeks. Her breath stutters in and out like it hurts her to keep going. I can't look away.

Her shaky voice shoots into me like a bullet. "H-he w-won't go away. I-I needed to get him to stop."

Landon's murmurs in a low, soft voice. "He stopped. I promise he stopped."

"Y-you stopped him," she whimpers into his chest.

"No Peach," Landon clicks his tongue. "You stopped him. You're so strong."

She shakes her head no. No words. No breath. Just that slow, fractured denial, and I know exactly what I'm looking at.

This isn't some random nightmare. This is memory wearing a mask. It's shame soaked in sweat, clawing its way up her throat until she can't breathe through it. I've lived that. I still do.

Whoever she is in that dream—whatever she did—she believes it defines her. I can see it in the tremble of her lip, the way she digs her fingers into the sheets like she's trying to anchor herself to something that isn't swallowing her whole. That's not just fear. That's self-damnation.

And fuck, I know that monster.

The one sinking its claws into her chest, pulling her down into some place darker than dreams. I know it too well. I've let it crawl up my spine and settle in my brain like smoke. I've listened to its lullabies. I've let it teach me how to breathe in agony and call it discipline.

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But watching it unravel her—watching Jasmine twist and writhe in silence, trapped in a nightmare that clings like wet smoke—does something to me. Not pity. Not compassion.

Hunger.

Something raw curls low in my gut as I watch her. Her chest jerks with each breath, like she's choking on air. Her hands clutch the sheets like they're the only thing anchoring her to this world. The delicate muscles in her jaw twitch as she grinds her teeth, and I can see tears slipping from the corners of her eyes, catching on the pillow like glass.

She looks beautiful.

Devastated and delicate in a way no one else sees. Stripped of all that fire she wields like armor. Just her, soft and open and real.

And that's what terrifies me.

Because I like it.

I like her like this. I like seeing her cracked down the center, emotions leaking through in flashes no one else would ever be allowed to witness. I like the sound of her breathless sobs.

Which means I am not safe.

Which means I could hurt her. Would, if I let myself.

Her eyes snap open.

Wide. Luminous. Soaked in panic and something softer, something worse—recognition. They lock on me like she expected me to be there. Like I'm part of the nightmare but she's still reaching anyway.

Her lips part, trembling. Her fingers twitch toward me.

Just the smallest movement—barely more than a plea. An instinct. A signal for comfort.

For me.

As if I could offer it.

As if I wouldn't break her in half just to see what she looks like ruined.

I should step forward. Should go to her, wrap my hands around her wrists, murmur something that'll ground her in the present.

But I don't.

Because I'm not Landon.

I'm not the one who soothes nightmares.

I'm the one who dissects them.

Who marks the blood patterns on the floor and notes the angle of the fracture, not

how it feels to be the one fractured.

So I stay frozen. Hands aching from restraint. Guilt boiling in my throat. I drink her in one more second—one more too-long beat—and then I turn on my heel.

Because if I stay, I'll want to touch her.

And if I touch her, I will hurt her.

23

BROOKE

Brooke: Okay so you rock my world and then disappear off the face of the earth -- rude.

Brooke: Hello? Your wife is worried about you.

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Brooke: Seriously Jaz, where are you?

I stare at the unanswered messages, jaw tight, thumb hovering over my phone like it might bring her back if I just tap it hard enough. It's been three weeks—three whole weeks—since that date that felt like it cracked something open in my chest, since the kind of kiss that makes you believe in second chances, and hands that made me feel wanted in a way I didn't know I needed.

And now? Nothing. Jasmine Rivera has up and vanished like a ghost—no texts, no replies, no trace of her in class or on campus. It's like she got what she wanted and dipped, and I'm left feeling like a damn fool for believing in anything else.

I'm no stranger to being let down. Hell, I've been ghosted by better liars and cheated on by boys who didn't even pretend to be careful. But this? This hits different. Because Jasmine didn't just flirt and leave—she saw me. She held the parts of me I usually hide. She kissed me like I was worth every breath. And then she left like none of it mattered. Like I didn't matter.

And I hate how much I still care. Hate that I keep checking my phone like a girl in a bad country song. Hate that I'm still hoping for something—anything. But the worst part? The part that makes me sick to my stomach in the quiet? If she walked through that door right now, with her soft grey eyes and that kiss-me mouth and that goddamn low voice that says my name like a secret—I'd still want her.

I'd still forgive her.

Maybe that makes me naive. Maybe it makes me a fool. But I was raised to ride out

storms, not run from them. And Jasmine? Jasmine's a hurricane. Wild, magnetic, devastating in ways I didn't know I could crave.

I'm not gonna lie to myself—I'm obsessed. Not in the scary way. Just in the "every time I laugh I wish she was there" kind of way. In the "I still hear her voice when I'm trying to pray" kind of way. I haven't felt so... myself with anyone before. Not Timothy. Not Taylor. Not even my best friends, who love me to pieces but don't always seeme.

Jasmine didn't need all the details to understand the parts I've never said out loud. She saw who I want to be—who I am when I'm not carrying everyone else's expectations.

And now she's gone.

I don't know if she's ghosting me or if something worse happened, but the ache in my chest doesn't care either way. I stare at our old messages, rereading her last emoji-laced flirt like it might crack open a portal.

Finally, I type what I've been too proud to say:

Brooke: At least send me an emoji so I know you're alive.

I tuck my phone back into the little white purse hanging off my wrist and take a deep breath. The bathroom smells like lavender soap and old church tile. I smooth my hands down the front of my dress, blink hard at my reflection, and step out of the stall. The sound of the choir rising from the sanctuary beyond echoes faintly through the hallway, and I brace myself.

It's the second Sunday of the month. Which means I've got a pew to sit in, a smile to fake, and a post-service dinner with my parents and Timothy—my beard boyfriend,

handpicked and parent-approved. The golden boy of our church circuit. The one every mom at Sunday brunch insists will be the next savior of Texas football.

Timothy, with his perfect smile and quarterback shoulders. Timothy, who says things like “you’re too pretty to be gay” and thinks quoting Corinthians counts as flirting. He’s sweet enough in that store-bought pie kind of way—bland, safe, easy to digest.

But the thought of sitting next to him in that pew, holding his hand under the hymnal while the preacher talks about sin, makes my skin itch.

Because all I want is to be somewhere else. With someone else. Someone who hasn’t texted me in three weeks.

The door slamming open startles me and I grip the sink roughly taking a sharp inhale.

“Brookie?” My mother’s smooth southern belle accent curls around me and I relax at the soothing tenor of her voice. “Oh there you are. Dad and I are going to run home to get the roast out the oven. Timmy is waiting for you in the lobby.”

“Alright mama,” I call out, slapping the water on and pushing my hands under the lukewarm water.

She walks up to the mirror, the soft click of her heels echoing through the empty church bathroom, and I catch her reflection before she speaks. My mother. Always impeccable. Always composed. Her honey-blond hair is curled just right, not a strand out of place, and even in the shaky fluorescent lighting, it glows like it was lit from within. She’s still wearing the pink silk church dress she’s had since I was in middle school—the one with the delicate buttons down the front and a matching belt cinched perfectly at her waist. It hugs her like it was tailored yesterday, not a decade ago, and somehow, she still looks exactly the same. Timeless. Untouchable.

She has my eyes—those golden hazel ones—but hers flash with specks of green and something sharper behind them. Judgment. Precision. A gaze that has always felt like an x-ray, like she’s looking for the fault line before I even open my mouth. And as I stand there in front of the mirror in my sensible kitten heels and this stupid soft-pink cardigan she insisted I wear over my sundress, I feel about two inches tall. Just like I did when I was twelve and she told me not to slouch because “good posture is a reflection of a good upbringing.”

Even now, she’s flawless. And I’m still the crooked picture on her perfect wall.

She tucks a strand behind her ear, and her eyes dart to mine in the mirror. “You alright, darling? You’ve been biting at the bit all day.”

I pull my hands from underneath the water and shake my hands slightly. “I’m alright.”

She hums—a soft, disbelieving sound that says more than words ever could—and pulls a paper towel from the dispenser with crisp, practiced grace. When she hands it to me, I snatch it from her so fast she tuts under her breath, that familiar sharptskthat used to meantry again, Brooke.

I keep my gaze fixed downward, pretending to blot my hands dry, hoping she’ll just walk away. But the second my eyes drop to my rose-gold heels, she moves—quick and precise—pinching my chin between two manicured fingers and tilting my face up until I have no choice but to meet her eyes.

“You want to tell me anything, you know, before your daddy can see through your lies.” Hers squint to a line and I swallow.

I shake my head slowly. “No Mama, I promise. It’s just midterm season. I really want an A in my political science class.”

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“Oh honey,” she drawls, her fingers sliding off of my chin as a smile spreads across her face. “You don’t need no politics when Timothy is good and ready to take care of you.” She looks at her reflection one more time and fluffs up her hair. “He’s going to be a rich man.”

I nod, tossing the paper towel into the trash. “I know, Mama. I keep him happy.”

She looks me up and down, before turning to the door with a small chuckle. “I know you do. Now hurry, future rich men don’t wait. No matter how pretty the girl is.”

The door clicks shut behind her, and I turn back to the mirror, swiping on a thin layer of lip gloss with hands steadier than I feel. I have to remind myself—every time I step into this place—that this isn’t really me. This is the version of Brooke du Pont that fits the frame.

The Brooke who recites Bible verses like lullabies, who plays piano at garden parties to make the ladies sigh and the men smile. The Brooke who once snuck cigarettes with her best friend Taylor behind the barn, and still knows how to slip a wallet from a jacket without making a sound. The Brooke who pretends to love Timothy Keiths, football, and God—always in that order.

This girl in the mirror, draped in ivory and pale pink, her dress reaching mid-calf, her red curls cascading perfectly down her back—she’s not me. She’s the du Ponts’ masterpiece. Their pride. Their polished doll.

I’m the one underneath. The one they don’t see. The one they wouldn’t want if they did.

I rub my lips together and paste on my Sunday best smile—the kind that stretches just wide enough to look polite, just soft enough to keep people from asking questions—and push open the bathroom door.

The foyer is humming with post-service chatter, the faint notes of organ music drifting through the air like smoke. My rose-gold heels click against the marble floor as I step into the light, spine straight, steps measured.

I spot him instantly.

Timothy's standing near the entrance to the sanctuary, shoulder propped against a column, that easy golden-boy grin plastered across his face. He's laughing at something Michael Richards just said, probably some outdated joke dressed up as Southern charm.

Timothy looks like every Southern mama's dream come to life. Broad shoulders, sandy-blond hair that sweeps across his forehead in just the right way, a jaw so sharp it could cut glass. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was carved in a lab to sell varsity letterman jackets and church marriage retreats.

He glances over his shoulder as I walk up, his eyes skimming over me like I'm the love of his life. He doesn't say anything, but the way his mouth tilts says enough to the onlookers -- it says I am irrevocably in love with Brooke du Pont. I smile back, the perfect little church girlfriend that loves him back.

"Mr. Richards," I say sweetly, stepping up beside Timothy like I've always belonged there. "It's been a while."

Michael's eyes rake over me, not even bothering to hide it. "Miss du Pont," he says, voice smooth like bourbon left out too long. "Looking like springtime itself."

I laugh softly. Not because he's funny—but because I was raised to laugh at men like him. Because it's easier than making a scene. I push slide a strand of my hair behind my ear and flash a smile that looks like heaven to a guy like Micheal Richards.

“I am so sorry to interrupt you two gentlemen, but you know Mama doesn't allow people to be late to her dinner table.”

They both chuckle politely, and Micheal grabs his belly with one hand as his hand points a pudgy finger at me. “You better get then. A du Pont woman is no joke.”

Timothy slides an arm around my shoulders and nods. “Don't I know it.”

We turn to walk away, as Micheal calls after us. “ I'll be betting on you boy! Go Tigers!”

Timothy puts a fist up as we cross the threshold to the church, yelling. “Go Tigers.”

The people loitering outside yell in approval, and my stomach drops at the attention. Timothy Keiths is this town's golden boy and I am the golden church girl. People are biting their nails in anticipation for our future wedding. I should be happy.

Timothy opens his car door for me and I slide in. The minute I buckle in he slides in, slams the door, and sighs out aloud.

“Your daddy is going to kill me if I don't propose soon,” Timothy mutters, tugging at the knot of his tie. His fingers work it loose with practiced ease, but he glances at me from the corner of his eye like he's only half-joking.

“I'll kill you if you do propose,” I grumble, kicking off one rose-gold heel and rubbing at the sore spot on the side of my foot. He slides a piece of gum between his teeth, grinning like the menace he is.

“You know back at UT, I’m hot stuff, du Pont. There’s a line of ladies just waiting for me to say yes.”

I roll my eyes so hard I’m surprised they don’t stick. “Please, you say that like you’re not hot stuff here.”

He smirks. “Yeah, but here I gotta behave. Over there, I’m king of the frat basement and the photography darkroom.”

“If I was straight,” I say, waving a hand like I’m setting up a dramatic monologue, “Timothy Keiths would be the dream. Nice country boy with a truck and a six-pack of morals, can tie a tie and make a mean apple pie. You’d be unstoppable.”

He chuckles. “Say it louder. Boost my ego, Brooke.”

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“You are hot stuff, Keiths,” I moan playfully, dragging my fingers up the back of his neck in mock seduction. “I mean just—ugh!” I fake-swoon against the seatbelt.

“Alright, alright. Cut the theatrics.” He groans, swatting my hand away.

“I’m just saying, in another life?” I drop my voice low and throaty, “You’d be mine. I’d make an honest man out of you.”

“You’d ruin me,” he says with a dry laugh, blowing a bubble and letting it pop loud. “And you know it.”

We giggle as his hand drifts to the gearshift as we make the final turn, and I brace myself.

Because here it comes. The gates swing open on their own—of course they do—and the gravel crunches under the wheels of his truck like the earth is wincing. The driveway curves in that way that’s meant to be elegant, but all it does is stall the moment before impact.

And then it’s there. The du Pont house.

All white brick and black iron. Columns tall enough to scrape the sky. Wraparound porch with hanging ferns that are watered more consistently than some of our relatives. The kind of house people write songs about. The kind of house that’s supposed to be a legacy.

To everyone else, it’s perfect. To me? It’s home, and my personal prison.

Timothy pulls up to the front steps, the truck easing to a stop like it knows we're about to step onto a stage. Before I can even unclasp my seatbelt, he leans over with that lopsided grin of his and murmurs, "Tuck in that bottom lip and smile, baby. We got three hours of pretending we're the poster children for Southern love."

I smirk, rolling my eyes but falling right into step like we always do. "We only gotta do it forty-seven more times."

He lets out a low whistle. "Forty-seven," he repeats, shaking his head like it's both a curse and a blessing. "Then we're home free."

I giggle, the familiar rhythm of our little pre-dinner mantra softening the tension in my chest—right up until the heavy front door creaks open and Henderson steps out, as poised as always in his pressed black jacket and polished shoes.

"Welcome home, little du Pont," he says, sweeping into a formal bow as he opens my door.

"No, Henny," I say quickly, sliding out of the truck and shaking my head with a soft laugh. "We've been over this." I pull him into a hug before he can protest. "You don't bow to family."

His body stiffens like always, but after a heartbeat, his arms wrap around me with quiet affection. Henderson might wear the uniform, might call me Miss du Pont like it's written into his bones, but outside of Mama, he's the one who raised me—brushed the tangles out of my hair, taught me how to make sweet tea, slipped me candy when I cried over scraped knees and high expectations.

Timothy drums his knuckles against the roof of the truck. "What's up, Henny!"

Henderson sighs, stepping back just enough to glance over my shoulder at Tim.

“Mister Keiths, must you make so much noise?”

“Henny,” Tim drawls, already hopping down from the driver’s seat with that cocky swagger, “I’ve been noisy since the womb. You’ll have to take that one up with my mama.”

A weary shake of the head. “Mister and Missus du Pont are waiting for you both in the dining room. But I’ll be seeing you later.”

“You better,” I smile—one of the rare, real ones that doesn’t feel carved out of obligation—and he presses a soft kiss to my forehead before slipping back up the stairs.

We follow him into the dining room, and he opens the door announcing our presence. “Timothy Keiths and Brooke du Pont.”

I walk into the room first and almost moan at the scent. The dining room smells like rosemary and butter—Mama’s roast glistening at the center of the long mahogany table, flanked by crystal dishes piled high with mashed potatoes, golden biscuits, and roasted carrots and parsnips. The silverware gleams beneath the chandelier, and the white linen napkins are folded into delicate swans—because of course they are.

Timothy helps me into my chair right next to Daddy before taking the seat beside me, ever the perfect Southern gentleman. I can feel the eyes on me, even before grace is said. My father, Howard du Pont, looks like a salt and pepper aged gentleman in a full three piece suit, but when he looks at us he smiles past me at Timothy.

“Now that’s a roast,” Timothy grins, trying to lighten the mood. “Mrs. du Pont, you’ve outdone yourself again.”

Mama beams, dabbing her lips with her napkin. “Well thank you, sweetheart. It’s an

old family recipe.”

Daddy hums in agreement, and after a quick grace, he carves into the roast with slow, deliberate movements. The silence stretches for a bit, save for the clink of silverware and the occasional polite comment on the weather. Eventually, Daddy glances toward Timothy, his voice calm and measured.

“So, how’s football treating you, son? Heard you’ve got scouts sniffing around UT’s spring game.”

Timothy straightens with that easy charm of his. “Yes, sir. Coach says I’ve got good chances if I keep my head down. Got a meeting with a recruiter next week.”

Daddy nods, clearly pleased. “Good. Discipline, focus—that’s how you win in this world.”

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The silence creeps back in like a thick fog, wrapping around my chest, pressing heavily.

I clear my throat and flash a smile, a little too wide, a little too bright. “Well, Daddy, college is going great for me too. Mr. Johnson said I’m basically a shoo-in for?—”

“I know how college has been for you,” he cuts in, not even looking at me as he passes the gravy boat to Mama.

The blood drains from my face. “You didn’t ask.”

He looks up now, and the room gets cold. “Didn’t need to. Word travels fast when my daughter’s out on the quad making out with other girls in broad daylight.”

Timothy chokes on his water.

“And don’t get me started on what the security cameras picked up at the ranch,” Daddy continues, cutting into the roast like it’s done something wrong. “You think we wouldn’t find out?”

Mama’s lips twitch in panic, but she keeps her tone soft. “Let’s not do this right now, darling?—”

“No, let’s,” he snaps, glaring at me like I’ve dragged mud into his cathedral. “You want to act grown? Let’s talk about grown consequences.”

Timothy sets his fork down. “Sir, I don’t think that’s fair?—”

“This doesn’t concern you, Timothy,” Daddy barks, voice sharp enough to slice the air. “You’re doing your part. It’s my daughter who can’t seem to remember where she comes from.”

I sit there, stiff in my pale pink dress, my fingernails biting into my napkin under the table.

“God didn’t make you this way,” he says, low and venomous. “You’re choosing to spit in the face of everything this family stands for.”

“Howard,” Mama warns again, voice breaking.

I lift my chin. “You’re wrong. God loves me, and he made who I love.”

“You have no right to speak on God!” Daddy roars, slamming his palm down so hard the silverware rattles. My body jolts like a bullet’s just been fired. The room shrinks, spins, then freezes—all while my hands stay tucked neatly in my lap, like a good little doll.

“I was made in His image,” I say, voice rising before I can stop it. “I am His child. I am yours.”

The silence breaks with the sharp, unforgiving crack of Daddy’s hand across my cheek.

The sound echoes louder than the cry that rips from Mama’s throat.

“Howard!” she gasps, flying to her feet, but I’m already stumbling backward, the sting spreading down my jaw like fire, my vision blurred by tears I won’t let fall here—not here.

Timothy stands, but he's too late. His chair screeches across the tile as I push mine back, napkin fluttering to the floor like a flag of surrender.

"You will never see that girl again. You hear me? Or I will cut you down where you stand, girl. You will not bring shame to this family!" He speaks through his teeth, spit flying out the corner of his mouth and I back away.

"I see that girl again and you will be dead to us." He snarls, and I turn before anyone can stop me.

My heels pound against the marble. My breath chokes in my throat. My skin itches with shame. I don't even hear what they shout after me—Mama's voice soft and broken, Timothy's loud and panicked. I don't stop.

Not until I'm in the foyer.

Not until I'm out the door.

Not until I'm alone behind the barn, sitting on the cold stone steps in the pink dress I used to love, clutching my sides like I'm trying to hold myself together.

The tears come hard now, full and ugly. I can't breathe through them. My face throbs. My ribs ache from holding everything in. I cry like I haven't cried in years, like I'm mourning someone—maybe I am. Maybe it's me.

I don't know how long I sit there, head against the siding, lip trembling, heart broken and pulsing in my throat.

And then my phone buzzes.

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I blink through the tears, hand fumbling into my purse.

Jasmine: Life's been hectic. But I miss you.

That's it. One line.

But it's the one I needed. Because somehow, that girl—the hurricane, the soft and sharp storm I haven't been able to stop loving—is still out there, and that is the one thing right now I can hold on to.

24

JASMINE

The last month has been a slow, gnawing kind of pain. The kind that doesn't announce itself with screaming or sobbing, just settles deep into your bones and makes a home there. I've been pushing Brooke away—not outright, not cruelly, just with silence. With distance. With excuses that sound thin even to me.

And outside of the occasional meme exchange that makes me exhale a little harder than usual, nothing's made me smile.

I know because Landon's been trying like it's his goddamn mission in life. Like if he stacks enough dumb jokes and soft touches on top of each other, they'll finally be enough to break through whatever shell I've grown around myself. He's been a walking disaster—shirtless dance routines, dramatic readings of cereal boxes, turning my darkest hours into his personal stand-up set—and still, it's not enough.

There's an emptiness inside me, and it's growing by the day. Expanding like a bruise that keeps getting hit. A silence that keeps getting louder. And Conner? He's a ghost. I haven't even tried to reach out. I don't know if I can see him again after he ran away from me. I reached for him, clouded by the darkness of the nightmare and he ran. I can't face him now, because I can barely face myself.

The nightmares have come back worse than ever. That night has become clearer than ever.

I am thirteen. My shorts are torn. My hands are shaking and red—red like rust, like ruin, like rage. Boyfriend number four is dead at my feet. His eyes are open, lips parted like he's about to crack one of his disgusting jokes, but nothing comes out except a slow, wet breath that never finishes. My fingers still clutch the handle of the kitchen knife, slick with blood, like I'm afraid to let go or maybe afraid of what I've become if I do.

I can't hear anything except the throb of my own pulse. The kitchen light flickers above me, casting everything in yellow. My mother's scream is just white noise—distant and sharp and useless. The whole trailer smells like metal and fear, and I just...stand there. Eyes empty. Face blank. I am hollow and wide-eyed and gone.

And then I'm screaming.

The dream fractures with the sound of it. My throat rips open with the force of the scream as I jolt upright, breath ragged and shallow. I don't know where I am at first, only that the sunlight peaks through the blinds and there's warmth all around me. I thrash before I register the weight holding me in place—strong arms, solid chest, the steady beat of a heart not my own.

"Peach," Landon whispers, groggy but urgent. "It's just a dream, you're here—you're

safe.”

He’s behind me, his chest pressed to my back, one of his arms coiled tightly around my waist, the other hooked under my neck like a makeshift cradle. My legs are tangled with his, our bodies molded together like we were built to fit this way. His breath is warm against the nape of my neck, his voice low and heavy with sleep.

“You’re safe,” he repeats, firmer now, as he presses a kiss to my temple and gently rocks us, like he can sway the memory out of me.

But I still feel the blood on my fingers. I still hear the knife clatter to the floor. I still see those lifeless eyes. I still wonder who that night has made me become.

Landon kisses my temple, the grip around my waist loosening as he whispers in my ear. “Peach, you can’t keep these nightmares up.”

“You don’t have to sleep in here with me.” I whisper, pulling his hand up to my mouth.

“I will stay here as long as you want,” he grumbles into the crook of my neck before placing a chaste kiss there. “And when you’re ready, you can tell me why you have nightmares.”

I shift slowly, carefully turning in his arms until I’m facing him. His ocean-blue eyes blink down at me through the low light, still heavy with sleep, but alert now—searching. My fingers graze the curve of his jaw, rough with stubble, and for a moment I just breathe him in. Salt and smoke. Something like pine. Like safety.

“I killed him,” I whisper, voice barely audible over the whirl of the ceiling fan. “When I was thirteen.”

His brows knit together, lips parting—but he doesn't interrupt.

“My mom's boyfriend,” I go on, the words scraping their way out of me. “He... he touched me. Hurt me. I told her. She didn't care. Or she didn't believe me. Or maybe she did and just... didn't want to deal with it.”

I pause, blinking back the tears that threaten to rise again. My fingers dig into the soft cotton of his shirt. “So one night, he cornered me in the kitchen. I got scared, grabbed a knife, and I stabbed him.”

Landon doesn't say anything. His whole body goes rigid—like every nerve inside him is on high alert. His arm tightens around my waist, protective and still.

“I didn't even cry. Not then. I just stood there while he bled out on the crappy carpet. And you know what the worst part is?” I shake my head, a bitter smile tugging at my lips. “I didn't feel bad. Not really. I felt... relief. Like I could breathe for the first time.”

I drop my gaze, ashamed, my breath catching in my throat.

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“I’m a monster, Landon.”

“No,” he says immediately, voice like a growl. He shifts, one hand cradling my face, forcing me to meet his eyes. “You are not a monster, Peach.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” he snaps, and there’s something raw behind it. “I know monsters, Jasmine. I see them in the mirror every goddamn day. I live with one inside me. A beast that wants blood and chaos and revenge. And the only time he’s quiet—the only time I can fucking breathe—is when I’m with you.”

His thumb traces the edge of my cheek, soft but grounding. “You were a child. You did what you had to do to survive. That doesn’t make you a monster. It makes you the bravest person I’ve ever met.”

My lips part, but nothing comes out. The breath I’ve been holding slips out in a shaky exhale, and I press my forehead to his. Landon doesn’t pull away. He just breathes with me, his hand still holding the back of my neck, his thumb tracing slow, soothing circles against my skin like he knows I need the world to slow down.

I relax into his grip. My limbs are heavy with the kind of exhaustion that doesn’t just come from lack of sleep—it comes from surviving. His warmth is the only thing anchoring me right now.

Then his phone buzzes once on the nightstand.

Neither of us move.

It buzzes again.

Landon exhales through his nose like he's considering ignoring it, but after the third buzz, he leans away just enough to grab the phone, still keeping one hand on my hip like he's afraid I'll vanish.

He answers, voice low and scratchy. "Yeah?"

There's a pause. Then a smile curves across his lips.

"Nooo," he says, dragging the word out. "She's with me now. Yeah, she's safe."

I blink up at him, confused, but the glow in his eyes makes my stomach flip.

He chuckles. "We'll be there in thirty. Tell her not to be dramatic."

My brows pull together. "Who?"

He doesn't answer—not right away. Just hangs up and sets the phone back on the nightstand. Then he shifts, tugging the blanket off my shoulders and easing me up into a sitting position.

"Come on," he says, that secret smile still lingering on his face. "Get dressed."

"Landon—what's going on?"

He leans in, brushing his nose against mine. "I have a surprise for you."

My pulse jumps. "What kind of surprise?"

“The best kind,” he winks, sliding out of the bed. “Meet me in the living room in five minutes.”

I slide into the elevator, eyes narrowed on Landon’s smug face. He has been humming “Old McDonald” and winking at me whenever he sees me looking at him. My irritation has been at an all-time high, which is saying something given that I have basically been giving him googly eyes and finding comfort in his presence more than normal. I fling my fishtail braid over my shoulder and look at his annoyingly cute face.

“So we’re back to you kidnapping me and dragging me to Cast’s penthouse in the city?” I mock, tucking my hands into his leather jacket—which I’ve now commandeered as my own—and leaning against the far wall.

He clicks his tongue and yawns. “I have never kidnapped you, Peach. You followed me here of your own free will.”

“Did I?” I snort, kicking one foot up. “Because if I remember correctly, you said if I didn’t get into your car, you would throw me over your shoulder and carry me. Isn’t that correct?”

“Mmm,” he hums, moving closer to me. “You really like me.”

“I thought I did,” I suck in air between my teeth and shrug. “But you just keep pissing me off.”

Landon’s in my space again, a smug look on his face. “I like you pissed off.”

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“I bet you do,” I lean in closer. “Now do you want me to knee you in the balls or just scratch your eyes out?”

“Both, baby,” he smiles so bright I want to punch him in his stupid face. “Besides, you won’t mess up your boyfriend’s face.”

“B-boyfriend?” I stutter, just as the elevator door dings open, and he slides out with a large grin—because not once has Landon ever asked, nor have I ever said, that Landon Heart is my fucking boyfriend. I don’t want that. I mean, yeah, we spend every day together, and he makes me feel safe, and I stole his jacket, and I love the way he smells, and—holy shit—Landon Heart is my boyfriend.

“What’s up, Casty?” Landon sings as I follow him out of the elevator.

Cast glares at him, nostrils flared in annoyance. “Don’t call me that, Landon, unless you want your teeth knocked in.”

Landon chuckles, looking around with a look of pure amusement. “Damn, does everyone have to be so touchy today?”

I twist up my face, trying to gather the little bit of anger I can muster. “I don’t care who the hell you think you are, Landon. You can’t just drag me wherever?—”

I hear a sharp inhale and my eyes dart up to the balcony—then my heart basically stops in my chest. My platonic soulmate. The love of my fucked-up life. The only person I wanted to call when Tommy died is staring at me with her big hazel eyes, already welling up with tears.

“Jasmine?” she whispers my name like it’s a prayer, and I answer it by smashing her body into mine.

We collide in the center of the room, arms wrapped around each other in a tangle of desperation and disbelief. Her fingers grip the lapels of Landon’s leather jacket. My arms crush her closer. A sob rips through my chest, raw and ugly, and she’s crying too—but it’s the kind of crying that’s so full of relief it makes you dizzy.

“God, I’m going to kick your ass,” I choke into her shoulder. “You—Willow, you can’t just disappear like that.”

“Don’t,” she whispers, voice breaking. “Please. Just let me have this.”

She nods against me, and we hold on tighter. It feels like home. It feels like a part of my soul that left when Tommy died—and I failed to kill Marcus—came back to me. I feel like I can breathe for the first time in a long fucking time, and it hurts. It feels like a collision.

When we finally pull apart, I drink her in like I’ve been drowning. She looks older, but not in a tired way. Like she’s earned every edge. Her curly hair is shorter, and she looks like she’s seen things. She doesn’t look like my innocent Willow who freaked out about a mini skirt just two years ago. She looks so strong, I can barely stand it.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” she whispers in a choked voice.

I take a step closer, my fingertips tracing the smooth curve of her jaw, as if I have to make sure she is real. “I didn’t think I’d see you either. But here you are. And that’s enough for me.”

She nods, pulling me in to bury her face in my hair, and I inhale sharply to get that purely Willow scent of coconuts during winter. After a moment, she pulls back and

analyzes my face. Her eyes take in my hair, the bags under my eyes—if I wasn't such a good liar, she would be able to smell the depression on me. But luckily for me, I don't want her to look too close. To see how her being gone broke me so much. So I arch a brow and try to suck in the tear curling around my eyelashes.

“What? Never seen a badass before?”

She snuffles out a laugh and shakes her head. “Not one who still dresses like she's about to fight the Devil and win.”

I push out a laugh and tug Landon's jacket tighter. “Damn right.”

Landon sighs, followed by his shitty little snort, and I turn around to growl at him. Because did he take care of me for the last month? Yes. But does that make me any less of a badass ready to win against the Devil? Fuck no.

I narrow my eyes on him. “Jackass. You are so on my shit list.”

A snort escapes Willow and I turn to see her rocking on the balls of her feet. “Um... so, life updates, yes?”

My eyes widen—because fuck, how do I tell my lifelong bestie, who knew I was a lesbian since middle school, that I'm not a lesbian anymore? More like bisexual, but that shouldn't matter. Sexuality is a spectrum—constantly changing and evolving—and Willow is my bestie, so I can tell her everything. Like how Landon is my new maybe-boyfriend, I'm having a minor affair with my cop professor Conner Kilgore, and oh yeah—I'm completely obsessed with Brooke du Pont, despite not seeing two out of three of my people in the last three weeks. I have no doubt they're mine. Even if we haven't talked about it yet, because it feels true. It feels right.

I take a deep breath and point to the smug British bastard. “Landon, meet my

runaway bestie, Willow. Willow, meet one of my partners, Landon.”

She blinks, smacking her lips twice before saying, “Excuse me?”

I roll my eyes at her dramatics, because this girl has three guys. Three guys who tormented her in high school. Three guys she tried to rob, and I am a hundred percent sure one of them—Damien—just hate-fucks her. So there should be, like, zero judgment.

“Don’t start?—”

“No, hold on.” She cuts me off, pointing between Landon and me. “He’s a guy. And last I checked, you were a lesbian. Like, from birth. You swore off men before we even knew how to spell compulsory heterosexuality.”

I snort, crossing my arms, because of course my bestie would never judge the poly thing—more they’re not gay thing, which would shock most people. “First of all, rude. Second of all, I was bi-curious—” I wiggle my fingers dramatically, “—which means I had a question, and I sought an answer.”

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She tilts her head, a small smirk of judgment on her lips. “And?”

I sigh. “And then your asshole of a man?—”

“Jasmine,” Cast growls, but I flip him off and continue while making eye contact.

“Asshole,” I repeat. “Assigned this guy to shadow me, like a bodyguard or some shit, which means I had to deal with him all the time. And one thing led to another... I tried it out, and surprise, surprise—I liked it.” I let out a rushed sigh and shrug, shooting a sideways glance at Landon, who just grins like the fucking smug bastard he is. “Well, him and Conner.”

Conner Kilgore, who is avoiding me like the plague, and who I have not fucked yet—but I’m pretty sure my underwear being his main jerking-off pal constitutes a sexual relationship. Right?

She blinks again, shaking her head. “So, no girls?”

I grip my chest and gasp. “Yes girls! Do you think I could ever abandon the fairer sex? The last and love of my life is Brooke.”

Landon raises a brow, his smug smile deepening. “Hey, I thought I was your favorite.”

“Not right now, Lan.” I hiss, narrowing my eyes on him and placing my hands on my hips. “You are ridiculous. And pushy.”

Landon just chuckles and reaches out, curling a hand around the nape of my neck, his fingers threading into the short undercut—which makes every spark of electricity there fire off like it’s the Fourth of July. He leans in, murmuring in my ear, “You weren’t saying that when you were begging me to fuck you deeper and harder against the kitchen table. I think I was your favorite then.”

The air catches in my throat and I jerk back, smacking him in the chest. “Company, Lan!”

He laughs, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “Right, right. Behaving now.” But the wink he gives me makes my thighs clench, because three weeks of depression means three weeks with no sex—and I am regretting that choice very much right now.

“See, this is why I need Brooke.” I turn back to Willow and roll my eyes. “Anyway, you need to tell me everything—like, I literally want to know every time you pissed. Everything.”

She giggles. “That may be TMI, but I’ll tell you just about everything.”

“Good enough.” I lace her fingers with mine and pull her in the direction of the stairs. “No boys allowed!”

We disappear up the stairs like we’re teenagers again, like nothing and everything has changed. And rush to her bedroom, which strangely looks like a copy of her childhood home, and I file that to ask about later.

We collapse onto my bed like we used to—legs tangled, hair messy, laughter still echoing in the bones of the room. I don’t even care that there are unfolded clothes on the duvet or that my bra is poking out from under a pillow. It’s just us, like always.

Willow lies back, arms flopped out like a starfish, and I follow suit, turning my head toward her on the pillow. The silence that settles now isn't awkward. It's familiar. A quiet only best friends understand. This feels like home.

Her eyes flick toward me, and I see it—the crack beneath the smile. The place where grief lives when you've shoved it too deep to speak aloud. It's like the giddy humor of seeing each other has faded and the reason why she is home, and I have been distraught is coming to a head between us.

I push up slowly, resting on one elbow. "I didn't know if they told you but—" I say softly.

"I know," she whispers. Her voice is so hollow it sounds like it's been rung out and hung up to dry.

Willow curls into herself in the middle of the bed and doesn't look at me. Just keeps staring at the ceiling like it might swallow her whole, or resurrect our father. I mean I know he's not my real father but he is as close as I will get.

"I'm sorry," I whisper back, trying to catch her eye.

I reach for her, slipping an arm beneath her neck and pulling her close until her temple is tucked against my collarbone. I hold her there, tight. A fierce, protective hold. My chin finds the top of her head and I don't realize how tightly my eyes are squeezed shut until my throat threatens to collapse.

"He was like—" I whisper ready to call him mine too, but the words die on my lips. "I'm sorry about Tommy."

"You can say it, you know?" She doesn't move from my embrace.

I shake my head no. “He was yours, and I-”

“You are his daughter as much as I am...was.” I let out a shaky breath as she quickly exhales.

God, my chest caves at that. Tommy will never know how much he means to me. I never told him that he was like a father to me. I never said I love you to him, like really said I love you to him.

Willow kisses my knuckles. “He loved you.”

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I inhale sharply, and Willow turns around, cooing as her arms wrap around my neck. “No more crying. You know Dad hated to see us cry, and I physically think I can’t cry anymore.”

“I don’t know how to stop,” I say, a light chuckle comes through the thick line of tears.. “It just... it won’t stop.”

I swallow against the lump rising fast in my throat and press my mouth to Willow’s hair.

“He would’ve been proud of you,” I whisper. “You hear me? Tommy would’ve been so fucking proud of you.”

Willow shudders in my arms, and I feel the breath stutter out of her. Not a sob. Just a fragile, broken kind of exhale. Like she’s been holding in something sharp for too long.

I hold her tighter, and for a long while we don’t cry, or talk. We just hold each other, two daughters mourning the death of their father. My father. God, I never thought I would say that -- my father.

25

CONNER

“Midterm season is rough for everyone,” I announce, voice flat, as students file into the lecture hall with the grace of the damned. “That said, there will be no extensions.

No exceptions. Unless you—or an immediate loved one—is actively dying, your paper is due in two days at 11:59 PM.”

A groan rolls through the classroom like thunder—expected, uninspired, and entirely unoriginal.

“Excellent,” I murmur, brushing chalk dust from my palms. “A chorus of mediocrity. Just what I needed to start the day.”

The projector hums to life behind me, the title of today’s lecture glowing across the screen in stark serif text:

“Deviant Psychology: Understanding Compulsion, Control, and the Making of a Killer.”

I let it hang there for a moment, watching as a few heads pop up, eyes narrowing with interest. The rest still look mildly concussed from lack of sleep or too much caffeine. A boy in the back opens a Monster. He’s already lost.

“I trust you’ve all read the assigned profiles. Bundy, Dahmer, Gaskins, and the McDonald Triad framework. If you didn’t, pretend you did and try to keep up. I won’t slow down for you.”

Someone coughs nervously. Another student mutters something under his breath. I ignore it. My attention is already shifting toward the seating chart, mentally tracking who showed up today—and who has been steadily slipping. There’s an empty seat where Jasmine Rivera usually sits. She hasn’t sat there in about a month. Normally, she would be manually dropped from my class, and I wouldn’t entertain the idea of her passing, but for some ridiculous reason that I can’t seem to get rid of, I want to see her again.

I mean, she is still completing all the work online, and she is ridiculously brilliant in a way that makes me want to listen to her for hours. I am not holding on well with the distance, and it has only been a week since she reached for me—and like the cold animal I am, I turned my back on her. I am a fucking monster, and not for the reasons I am comfortable with. Killing men who I believe deserve to die. Hunting killers who are sloppy enough to warrant attention. Doing what I had to survive after the death of my mother. I am a monster for those things, yes.

But for what I did to Jasmine—well, even most monsters have a limit on what type of beast they will be.

I clear my throat and turn back to the room. “Today, we’re going to discuss what separates the fantasist from the actor. What turns obsession into action. What makes someone... break.”

I pause long enough for the silence to take root. This is the part of the semester most students are fighting to get to. What they think this class is really about -- serial killers. Such a romanticized idiotic thing. If anyone in this room was a true monster hunter they’d wonder about the killers we haven’t caught and not about the ones we have. They’d wonder about me.

“Despite what the public thinks, killers don’t wake up one day and snap. They build to it. Layer by layer. Thought by thought. Most of them don’t want blood. Not at first. They want control. And they find it, more often than not, by studying people who never see them coming.”

I clear my throat and turn to my first file on Ted Bundy. “Here is your trigger warning for the people who need it.” I announce, before turning to the class with a smile that feels as unnatural and unsettling as I bet it looks. “Now what is Bundy’s victim profile?”

Hands shoot up across the room, and just as I am about to call on a redhead who keeps flashing her bare pussy at me from underneath her desk, the door to the classroom creaks open, and I am staring at perfect storm grey eyes.

“Miss Rivera, late again.” I comment, quirking an eyebrow at her.

She looks better than she did the last time I saw her. The side of her head is freshly shaved, the red highlights in her hair have faded into a soft pink again, and she’s wearing knee-length jean shorts with an oversized black hoodie I’d bet all the money I have belongs to Landon. Her socks are thick, and her Birkenstock sandals look too new to be anything but recently purchased. She’s dressed to be inconspicuous—but to me, she rings like a breath of fresh air.

“Sorry, Professor Kilgore,” she calls out as she slides into the seat right by the door, like she’s planning to make a quick exit the moment the clock hits the end of class. “Traffic.”

I pause, lips pressed into a thin line. I can’t confront her the way I want to in a room full of students, but did my little sunshine just lie to me? Her apartment is a twenty-minute walk from campus. Traffic, my fucking ass.

“Well, most students know it’s proper to prepare for traffic,” I say, voice clipped as I move behind the podium. “I take it you’re also not prepared for class?”

I hear her bag thump to the floor and the soft, annoyed exhale that follows. The audacity.

“I never said that, Professor Kilgore,” she bites out, putting unnecessary emphasis on my title like it’s something vulgar. I grip the edges of the podium, lean forward just slightly, enough to angle past the projector’s glare and catch her face in the glow. She’s glaring at me. Good. I missed that fire.

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“Then tell me,” I say, folding my arms across my chest, my voice smooth but pointed, “what was Ted Bundy’s victim profile?”

The room stills instantly. A few students shift, a few murmur, but Jasmine doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t blink.

“White women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Brunette. Thin. Pretty. Often perceived as educated or ‘clean’—respectable enough to warrant headlines.”

I nod once. “Almost.”

Her jaw twitches, and I watch her process the information like she’s skimming through a mental file. She’s close. So fucking close.

“What’s the missing factor?” I push.

She narrows her eyes, lips curling into something between a smirk and a dare. Then she tilts her head, her smile going shark-sharp. “They all reminded him of a woman who rejected him. Sounds like most men, Professor.”

There’s a ripple of laughter across the classroom. The kind that’s nervous but entertained. My mouth parts—ready to retort, to assert control—but I find nothing waiting on my tongue.

She’s not just answering the question. She’s challenging me. And for the first time in this room, I feel cornered.

“Well,” I say finally, straightening and adjusting my cuff with deliberate calm, “I wouldn’t know about that, Miss Rivera, would I?”

She slumps back in her chair, arms crossed tight over her chest, exasperation written across her face like a red flag. That scowl—that searing contempt—it should put distance between us.

But instead, it does the opposite.

Because that flicker of rage. The spark of the girl who held Marcus King at gunpoint. The girl who bled fear and fury the night she reached for me—begged for comfort—and I turned my back. That’s the girl I want to pull out and lay bare in front of me.

And like the sick bastard I am, I want more of it.

I want the feral version of her. The version on the edge of a breakdown. I want to peel back every perfect layer until she bares her teeth at me. Until she snaps. The scowl she throws at me lights a hunger low in my gut. I want to dismiss this class. I want to bend her over this podium, fuck her until she is too cummed out that all she will be able to say is fucking “thank you.”

I clear my throat, slow and deliberate, letting the tension settle like dust in a room too tightly sealed. A few students shift uncomfortably in their seats. One coughs. Another pretends to jot something in their notebook just to avoid the heavy silence curling between me and the girl in the back row.

“Now,” I say, finally—quiet, but sharp enough to cut through the noise. “Miss Rivera brings up a compelling point.”

Jasmine doesn’t look up, inside she pulls out her laptop. The blue light illuminates the

cool contour of her face.

“Rejection,” I continue, folding my arms slowly behind the podium, eyes scanning the rows of exhausted, barely-holding-it-together undergrads. “Let’s discuss what it does to the human psyche—particularly when an individual is not taught to accept it as a normal, inevitable aspect of life. When they aren’t given the tools to process it.”

The rest of the hour passes in a slow, aching grind. Every second drips like sap from a wound. When the projector clicks off and the lights hum back to life, there’s a breath of relief that moves through the room.

“Don’t get too excited. I have your forensic lab reports.” I announce, eliciting a wave of anxiety throughout the room.

I pick up the stack of papers from the corner of my desk—lab reports from the midterm forensic lab rotation—and flip slowly through the top few. My pen’s already in my hand.

Then I see her name. Jasmine Rivera.

Top corner: A-. Tight margins. Annotated references. Surgical-level precision in her comparative analysis of wound patterns. It’s excellent. Of course it is. But I stare at it for a beat longer than I should.

I let myself imagine her writing it. Curled up somewhere late at night, hoodie sleeves pulled down to her knuckles, chewing on her pen while she tries to explain why a woman was carved from collar to hip like she was meat.

I imagine her biting her lip in concentration. I imagine her scent—cinnamon and vanilla bourbon—clinging to the pages.

And then I take the pen in my hand, and with one clean, deliberate stroke, I drag a D across the top of the paper. I press the report back into the stack and hand them to my TA.

“Make sure each one goes to the correct student,” I say, voice quiet but firm, barely more than a breath.

My TA nods and begins the pass-through. Row by row, the stack thins. The usual noise returns—backpacks unzipping, chairs scraping, a few half-hearted conversations. The classroom settles into its end-of-period hum.

Hands folded behind the podium. Spine straight. Eyes cast downward, but not blind. I don’t need to look to know where she is. I don’t need to breathe to feel the annoyed click of her pen as she awaits her grade.

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The moment she sees the grade. Not the A she earned. The D I gave her.

The sharp inhale she's going to take when she sees that grade—I can already feel it before it happens. The shift in her shoulders, the rigid set of her jaw, the way the fire she's been smothering beneath that oversized hoodie starts to flicker back to life. She thinks she's hiding it well, but I know better. That hoodie isn't just comfort—it's armor, and I just cracked it. Her eyes snap up to mine, but I don't return the look. Instead, I shift my gaze to the rest of the classroom, addressing the group with practiced ease.

"If you have an issue with your grade," I announce evenly, "please come to office hours next week."

I clap twice, sharp and final, and let my eyes linger on the grim expressions scattering across the room like bruises. I'm not thrilled by failure—this isn't about enjoyment. But I meant what I said on the first day: this course is not for the weak. And now the reality is settling in for most of them.

"Class dismissed."

The moment the words leave my mouth, chairs screech against the floor and backpacks are slung over shoulders in a frenzied exodus. Students spill out like a flood—eager, defeated, some murmuring complaints under their breath. My TA, Tyler, tosses me a lazy peace sign on his way out the side door, already halfway to his next class or maybe his next nap. The room empties fast.

Except for her.

Jasmine doesn't move. Doesn't flinch. She stays planted in her seat like a storm on pause, eyes narrowed into slits as they lock on me from across the room. Her foot taps relentlessly against the tile floor, a steady, violent rhythm that mirrors the tension radiating off her body.

I walk over to the desk and start to exchange my things for the next class, but the minute the last student slams the door, her voice roars across the classroom.

"What the fuck is your problem?"

I click my briefcase closed. "Miss Rivera, as I said if you have an issue with your grade we can speak during office hours next week."

"The fuck we will." She shoots out of her seat. "You changed my grade with a cheap red pen from an A to a D."

I slide my briefcase off the desk, and look up at her with the blindest face I can muster. "I rethought your grade, which is appropriate given your attendance."

"My attendance," she snaps, making her way down the stairs and closer to me. "You know what happened. You were fucking there!"

"I don't believe in special treatment, Miss Rivera."

"Oh, so you jerk off to all your students?" She tosses her arms up incredulously.

"Just the ones who cum in my class first," I counter, and the anger rolls off of her like steam.

Her eyes blaze. "You're unbelievable," she snarls, storming closer until the space between us is practically charged. "I am the best student in your fucking class, and

you know it.”

I keep my voice level, smooth despite the pounding in my chest. "I grade what's submitted, accurately. If you do not like it, that is not my problem."

"Bullshit," she spits, stepping into my space. "You're mad I didn't fall into your lap the way you wanted me to. You're punishing me because I made you feel something, and now you're playing God with my academic record. That's lowConner,fuckinglow."

I tilt my head, still not letting her see what she does to me. Not here. Not in front of anyone who might walk back in, but fucking hell if she keeps saying my name like that I might happily lose my job. "Careful, Miss Rivera. Accusations like that could get you in trouble."

She leans in, voice low and venomous. "You want trouble? I'll give you fucking trouble. Because the only reason I'm not on your desk right now getting my back blown by you is because I have self-respect, and you are an effing coward."

The words hit harder than they should. I clench my jaw, balling my hands at my side, trying not to reach for her when I don't think my grip will be as caring as she is used to.

"That's enough," I say, though my voice comes out more gravel than command.

She laughs without humor, stepping even closer, so close her breath skates across my throat. "What's wrong, Professor? Can't take it when a girl tells the truth? Can't take it when a girlknowsyou?"

"Sunshine—"

"No. You don't get to give me a fucking nickname, and you don't get to say it like that," she whispers. "You forfeited that when you turned your back on me."

We're eye to eye now, breath to breath, the tension pulling so tight between us it could snap.

I clear my throat and step back, breaking the invisible thread, even though it hurts like hell. "We're not doing this here," I say, voice stripped of anything but cold control. "We're going to talk about this. But not like this. Come to my office."

She crosses her arms. "Why? So you can humiliate me in private?"

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I take a step toward the door, not trusting myself to look at her. "So I don't lose my job for the way I want to make you choke on my fucking cock."

Her breath catches. I open the door, nod once, for her to exit. "I will meet you in my office after my class in exactly 83 minutes."

"And if I'm not there?" She counters, crossing her arms across her chest.

I laugh humorlessly, my eyes darkening as I let my mask slip. "Then I will hunt you down, Sunshine, and take you how I fucking please."

26

JASMINE

Against my better judgment, I'm pacing outside of Conner Kilgore's office like a woman with something to prove and nowhere to place the fire clawing at her throat. From the outside, I probably look like any other pissed-off student, too wired up over a grade, but this isn't about a fucking grade. This is about control. About him. About the sick, burning thing between us that neither of us can seem to walk away from.

He gave me a D. A D. After I aced that goddamn report with citations, tight logic, and a better thesis than half the PhD candidates in this building. And for what? For disappearing while I grieved? For getting too close? For letting him see the softest, ugliest pieces of me and then still wanting to touch him anyway?

Fail me? He wants me to fight him. He wants me pissed, loud, unhinged—and God, I

want to give it to him. I want to storm through that door and pin him to the wall with my words, make him admit he's punishing me because he can't stand the power I have over him. Because I got too close and now he doesn't know how to hold that without snapping it in half.

My feet won't stop moving. My hand clenches the strap of my bag so tightly it aches. I can feel the weight of everything we haven't said pressing down on my spine. He's in there, behind that heavy door, probably calm and cold and smug—probably waiting.

He wants this to end in fire. And I don't know what terrifies me more: that I might burn him down, or that I'll let him burn me. I spin on my heel to start pacing the other direction—because motion is the only thing keeping me from exploding—and that's when I see him.

Striding down the hallway like the problem he is, dressed in a black suit that fits him like sin. His black jacket hanging loosely around his crisp, tailored dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves, the top button undone as his long fingers work at the knot of his tie like it's personally offended him. His briefcase swings from his other hand, steady, measured, like he's not on his way to war but to church. Like he doesn't know he's about to be screamed at by the girl who is barely holding her bones together.

My breath hitches.

Because he looks unfair like this—too composed, too sharp, too cold. Green eyes locked ahead, jaw tight, the same way it was the night I told him my darkest truth and he couldn't even bring himself to stay in the room.

And still—still—my body reacts to him like it's instinct. My pulse surges. My hands itch. My skin tightens. He's a black hole in motion and I am so fucking tired of orbiting him.

He doesn't speak when he reaches me. Just stops, inches away, the scent of him hitting like a wave—clean linen and cool air and something darker underneath it, like smoke and heat. The tie is hanging loose now, collar gaping just enough to show the edge of that tattoo crawling up his collarbone. The one I asked about once and never got an answer.

He looks down at me, eyes unreadable.

I square my shoulders, jaw tight. If he thinks he can intimidate me into silence, he's got another thing coming. "Professor Kilgore, you wished to speak to me?"

"Office," he says flatly, voice low and clipped like a command. Then he brushes past me and unlocks the door. Doesn't look back.

I stand there for half a second—long enough to remember that I am not afraid of Conner Kilgore.

But maybe... I should be. I follow him in.

The door clicks shut behind me like the beginning of a countdown, and I swear I can feel the air tighten with it. His office is neat—sickeningly so. Every book lined up like a soldier. Desk clear, except for a laptop, a single pen, and a thick, manila folder sitting in the upper right corner.

He doesn't sit. Just drops his briefcase beside the desk and walks behind it, still undoing the last of his tie like it's strangling him. He meets my eyes like I'm already wasting his time.

"So?" I snap, arms folded across my chest like armor. "Am I here to watch you change my grade again in front of me this time? Or are we just playing this fun little power trip out in private?"

He leans back against the desk, arms crossed to match mine. “You’re here,” he says calmly, “because you made a scene.”

“You made a scene.” My voice lifts, sharp and vicious. “I got every question right on that report and you know it. You dropped my grade because you’re mad I didn’t beg you to stay that night.”

His jaw ticks. Just a fraction. But I see it, and I want to dig my teeth into the pulsing veins.

I take a step forward, not backing down. “You think you can punish me academically for your own emotional constipation? Get over yourself, Conner Kilgore.”

His eyes darken, just a flicker. But it’s there. “Watch your tone.”

“Or what?” I hiss, stepping closer and placing both palms on his desk. “You’ll flunk me again? Humiliate me in front of your whole damn class? You already did that. So what now, professor?”

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His full name in my mouth feels like a curse. He doesn't flinch—but his posture shifts. Subtly. Like a weapon being drawn.

“You are one inch from insubordination, Miss Rivera,” he says, low and deliberate as he circles around the desk invading my space.

“And you are one inch from violating every ethics code this school has,” I bite out. “You want to play God with my GPA? Fine. But don't pretend this is about academic integrity. This is about you. You couldn't stomach that something was happening between us, and it was great. It was glorious, and you ruined it.”

“I didn't ruin it,” he hisses, slowly peeling his jacket off of his broad shoulders. “You are my student.”

I let out an humorless laugh, fully throwing my head back like this was the joke of the century. “We are way past student and teacher, Conner.”

His name rolls off my tongue and I hope it burns but really it tickles like the best forbidden fruit. He chuckles lowly, yanking his tie from around his neck fully, as he leans back on his oakwood desk.

I can feel it building between us—the growing volatile energy that seems too big for this room. But I don't care. I'm done letting him hold all the cards. Done pretending I'm not furious. That I'm not hurt. That I didn't reach for him in the dark and get frostbite for it.

“I am not your little pawn,” I say, breath catching. “And if you think I'll let you ruin

everything I've worked for just because you're scared of how I make you feel, then you've really underestimated me."

His eyes flash—sharp and brilliant, like emeralds catching flame in the sun. "You think you scare me, sunshine?"

"I know I scare you."

He doesn't blink. Doesn't move back. Instead, he closes the distance between us like he's daring me to flinch. "No, baby girl," he murmurs, voice low and dangerous, the syllables curling around me like smoke. "I'm not scared of you. I'm scared of what I could do to you."

The words strike like thunder. I inhale sharply, the scent of him—mint and leather and something darker—flooding my senses. It's overwhelming. Familiar. Addictive. I hate it. I crave it.

I drop my gaze, refusing to meet his eyes even as I feel them burning into me. They're searching—for weakness, for want, for anything I'll give. And I won't. I can't.

"You don't scare me," I say, voice barely above a whisper.

"No?" His voice is all mockery and silk. He leans closer, breath ghosting across my cheek, and my eyes betray me, slipping to the hollow of his throat. To the slow shift of his Adam's apple when he swallows.

"I should scare you, little Sunshine," he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear. "Compared to me, your lover Landon is a kiddie meal."

I snort, trying to bite back the flutter in my chest. "You're so full of yourself, it's

amazing you don't float away."

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't blink. Just lifts one brow, and then—soft but edged—he says, "Give me your hands."

I freeze. "What?"

"If you're not saying stop... or red," he says evenly, tone flat and final, "then I don't want to hear another word from that mouth."

My breath hitches, and my eyes widen. I don't move. I don't lift my hands. The air between us crackles like it's been struck by lightning.

So he reaches out and he takes my wrists—not rough, not gentle, just enough to prove a point—and brings them forward between us. "Are you against being tied up?"

I swallow hard, my pulse racing as his fingers tighten around my wrists. "N-no," I stammer, the word barely audible.

"Good girl," he purrs, his voice dripping with approval. He releases one wrist to reach into his desk drawer, pulling out a length of soft black silk. My heart skips a beat as he begins to bind my hands together, the fabric cool and smooth against my skin. He ties the knot with practiced ease, testing the tightness before letting go.

"There," he says, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "Now you're mine."

I shiver at the words, my body betraying me as heat pools low in my belly. He circles me slowly, his gaze raking over me like a predator sizing up its prey. "You're trembling," he observes, his voice low and teasing. "Is it fear... or anticipation?"

I bite my lip, refusing to answer. He chuckles darkly, stopping behind me. His hands

settle on my shoulders, and I can feel the warmth of his body pressing against my back. “You’re going to learn to obey me, Jasmine,” he whispers, his breath hot against my neck. “Every word. Every command. And you’re going to love every second of it.”

His hands slide down my arms, sending a jolt of electricity through me. He grips my bound wrists and pulls them back, forcing me to arch against him. “Do you feel that?” he growls, his lips brushing against my ear. “That’s the power I have over you. The control. And you’re going to beg for more.”

I whimper, my body responding to his words despite my best efforts to resist. He releases my wrists and spins me around to face him, his eyes blazing with intensity. I hear the slow roll of his zipper as his eyes run over my face, focusing in on my mouth.

“Kneel,” he commands, his voice leaving no room for argument.

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My knees hit the floor before I even realize I've moved. He towers over me, his presence overwhelming. He reaches down and tilts my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze. "Look at me," he orders, his voice firm but not unkind. "You're mine now, Jasmine. And I'm going to take care of you."

His hand moves to the back of my head, fingers tangling in my hair. He pulls gently but firmly, guiding me closer to him. My breath quickens as I realize what he wants. "Open your mouth," he says, his voice a low rumble.

I obey without hesitation, parting my lips as he steps closer. He groans softly as he guides himself into my mouth, his grip on my hair tightening. "That's it," he murmurs, his voice thick with desire. "Take it all."

I moan around him, the sound muffled as he pushes deeper. His other hand cups my cheek, thumb brushing against my lips as he moves in and out of my mouth. "You're so good at this," he praises, his voice rough with need. "Such a perfect little submissive."

The words send a thrill through me, and I can feel myself growing wetter with every passing second. He pulls back slightly, allowing me to catch my breath before pushing in again. "You're going to make me come," he growls, his hips moving faster now. "And you're going to swallow every drop."

I whimper in response, the sound only encouraging him further. His grip on my hair tightens, and I can feel him throbbing in my mouth as he gets closer to the edge. "That's it," he groans, his voice strained. "Just like that."

With a final thrust, he comes hard, his release filling my mouth. I swallow obediently, savoring the taste of him as he pulls back with a satisfied sigh. He looks down at me, his eyes dark with lust. “Good girl,” he murmurs, stroking my cheek. “You did so well.”

He unties my hands and helps me to my feet, his touch surprisingly gentle. “Now,” he says, his voice low and commanding once more. “It’s your turn.” He leads me to his desk, pushing me down onto the surface with a firm hand on my back. “Spread your legs,” he orders, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I obey without hesitation, my body trembling with anticipation as he steps between my thighs. His hands slide up my legs, hooking his hands around my shorts and yanking them down my thighs. “You’re so wet for me already,” he observes, his fingers brushing against my soaked panties. “Such a needy little thing.”

He pulls the fabric aside, exposing me completely. His fingers tease my entrance, drawing a gasp from my lips. “Beg for it,” he demands, his voice rough with desire.

“Please,” I whimper, my hips bucking against his hand. “Please, Conner...”

“Please what?” he taunts, his fingers circling my clit with maddening slowness.

“Please fuck me,” I beg, my voice breaking with desperation.

He smirks, clearly enjoying the effect he has on me. “Since you asked so nicely...” He steps back long enough to pull me back up to my feet, quickly positioning himself at my entrance.

“Conner, but you just--ahhh! With one swift motion, he thrusts into me, filling me completely.

I cry out at the sudden intrusion, my nails digging into the desk as he begins to move. His pace is relentless, each thrust driving me closer to the edge. “You feel so good,” he groans, his hands gripping my hips tightly. “So tight... so perfect.”

His words only fuel my arousal, and I can feel myself spiraling out of control. He leans over me, his breath hot against my ear. “Come for me, Jasmine,” he commands, his voice low and urgent. “Let go.”

The command is all it takes to push me over the edge. My body convulses around him as I come hard, waves of pleasure crashing over me. He follows soon after, his release filling me as he groans my name.

He pulls out slowly, helping me sit up as we both catch our breath. His hands are gentle now as he brushes the hair from my face. “You did so well,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “But we’re not done yet.”

27

JASMINE

Conner Kilgore fucks like a god—no, a demon. No, a corrupted deity who has no business doing what he does to me. Every part of me still hums, sated and electrified, like I’ve been rewired. My legs are jelly. My brain is static. And my mouth? Useless, which is a first.

We walk in silence, the kind that says everything. Conner’s hand hovers near mine, not quite holding it, not quite letting me go. He walks like he always does—measured, precise, all black suit and cold composure like he didn’t just drag me across the edge of the universe with nothing but his hands and his mouth.

My hoodie is zipped halfway up, hiding the bruises blooming like dark fingerprints

along my collarbone. I'm not ashamed. I'm... unsettled. Addicted. I don't know what the hell I am.

We step into my building like nothing happened. Like he didn't just ruin me in every imaginable way. The lobby light flickers once, and I shift closer to him without thinking. He doesn't touch me, doesn't speak. Just walks with the same unhurried, calculated pace like I'm something delicate he could destroy with one wrong move—and maybe already has.

I press the elevator button harder than necessary, trying to steady my breathing, but the second the doors close, the silence tightens. The tension between us isn't awkward. It's electric. Heavy. Conner doesn't face me, but I feel him everywhere—like he's still inside me, beneath my skin, stitched into my bones.

"Someone could've seen you," I murmur, zipping up my hoodie halfway like it'll hide the flushed heat in my skin. "You're still my professor."

He hums like the idea barely registers. "Please. After the way you were screaming? I doubt any of my colleagues will be surprised."

My cheeks flare with heat. I look down, clutching my keys like they might anchor me to the floor. And still—under the humiliation, under the electric aftershock—there's this warm, dizzying flicker.

He called me his. He called me Mine. It wasn't just a growl. It wasn't just dirty talk. It was... something. My heart kicks hard in my chest and I hate myself for even wondering, even caring, but?—

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What did he mean by that? Did he mean it? I know there is this pull between us. I know he scares me in the same breath that brings me euphoria, but I also know people say crazy things during sex, and stress. Things like mine and I love you. Things that could make me believe that Conner Kilgore may really want me, despite the fact that I am practically married to his best friend and falling for Brooke. He may look at all those things and still want me. He may be fine sharing me, but I can't hope to want more than what I have right now.

"Jasmine." His voice cuts through my thoughts.

I glance up, startled, and find his green eyes locked on me, that look calmer than I have ever seen. A chillingly easy shade of clear green that reminds me of pictures of the Florida Everglades I've seen in textbooks. Fucking hell, Conner Kilgore could be the end of me, and it would be fitting.

"The answer's yes," he says, like he's been listening in on my thoughts the whole time. "To whatever you're thought is making your nose twitch like that. There is no uncertainty between us."

My breath catches. I don't even try to hide the way my lips part, or how my chest rises too fast at the sure tone of his speech. "You don't even know what I'm thinking," I whisper.

"I do," he replies, stepping closer—close enough that I feel the heat off his body. "I always do. I watch you."

My pulse jumps and I turn, exiting the elevator before he can see what that does to

me. I hate it. I love it. I don't know what the hell I'm doing anymore. He's hot on my tail, with a lazy swings of his legs as I make my way to my apartment door. My fingers shake as I dig my fob out of Landon's hoodie pocket.

Conner leans in, his breath feathering over the shell of my ear. "Don't be scared now, Sunshine. You like how I watch you."

I cough, flipping the fob over in my hand. "I've never said that."

"Mmhmm," his finger grazes over the pulse point in my neck, and for a second I don't breathe, completely lost in the way the heat of his fingertips burns into my flesh. "You don't have to. A lot of your body language gives it away."

I let out a shaky breath and swipe my fob across the handle. "You are ridiculous."

A soft chuckle escapes Conner—low and indulgent—as I swipe my fob over the door handle and push open the door. My voice is still caught in the haze of post-orgasm satisfaction, light and teasing. "I'm home with Mr. Grumpy, and today he is extra —"

The smell hits first. Copper. Wet. Thick.

My throat clamps shut. My body follows.

Landon is bound to one of my chairs, the rope digging deep into his wrists and ankles, his body slumped but still twitching with pain. His shirt is soaked through, clinging to him in torn patches. Blood leaks from his mouth in slow drips, trailing down to the floor in lazy splatters. His eye is nearly swollen shut. One of his shoes is missing. His chest heaves as he struggles to lift his head—panic flashing wild in what's left of his gaze.

"JASMINE—run! Get the fuck out!"

My heart lurches so violently I nearly drop my bag. A sound claws out of me, raw and animalistic.

Conner's already reacting, moving in front of me, his stance low and lethal, hand sliding toward the weapon tucked at his backside, but before he can reach it, a large figure tackles him to the ground.

"Conner," I screech.

"Jasmine run--" He growls and before I can turn around a chilling voice wraps around me.

"Don't you dare. I would hate to kill your men in my attempt to apprehend you." Footsteps echo down the hallway—slow, measured, purposeful.

Marcus emerges shirtless, a white cloth in one hand, lazily wiping a knife still red at the tip. His tattoos ripple across his chest like warpaint. The corners of his mouth curl in satisfaction, and the smile that meets me isn't joy. It reeks of psychotic energy.

"Well, well, well," Marcus drawls, stepping into the light of the living and dropping down onto the couch like he owns the fucking place. "What a happy reunion. Thanks for not killing me, sweetheart. Really. You gave me just enough time."

I stare at him, breath caught in my throat, rage crawling under my skin. "I thought your brother was going to finish your bitch ass off."

"Oof I would watch your mouth if I was you." He chuckles, motioning lazily toward Landon. "No one here is in the shape to save you, if you piss me off."

"I will skin you alive," Conner growls, trying to twist free, and Marcus sighs, nodding toward Asher.

“Keep fighting and he’ll crush your ribs, Kilgore. And I’d hate to ruin Jasmine’s little throw pillows.”

I look over at Conner, and try to communicate with my eyes to stop, as I continue to talk to Marcus. “Again who let your little dick ass free?”

“I love that wit, Jazzy Boo.” Marucs hums, kicking his feet up on my pink robot themed coffee table. “I’ll answer your cute little question. My loyalists broke me out two weeks ago. Turns out some people still remember who built the Raiders in the first place.”

“Well, congratulations.” I give him some jazz hands and a blank, very bitchy smile. “But if this is how you thank someone for saving your life you need some work on it.”

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Marcus chuckles. “Jazzy boo, I think you haven’t been honest with us.”

“What?” I snap, my voice shaking from fury. “ I don’t have anything for you. Just let my men fucking go and leave my goddamn house, Marcus.”

He laughs—low, guttural. “Still mouthy. Still beautiful. Still think you’ve got choices here.”

Landon groans behind him, coughing hard, and I can’t move. My body’s frozen. Not with fear. With hate. Pure, acidic hate. Because I almost killed this man. I had the shot. And now he’s standing in my living room, bleeding all over the floor I used to cry on, acting like he owns me again.

“Sit,” Marcus says with a lazy flick of his wrist, like I’m a dog he’s already housebroken. I don’t move fast enough, so the guy holding Conner down with his boot shoves me forward until I stumble into one of the couch chairs across from Landon.

Landon’s still bleeding, barely holding his head up. Every breath he takes is rough and uneven, and rage burns through me like wildfire. But I sit. Because if I don’t, I don’t know what the man will do next.

Marcus leans back against the back of the couch, arms spread across out, leaving his bare chest exposed, that knife balancing on his knee.

“I wasn’t gonna do this, you know,” he says finally, voice light, like we’re catching up over fucking coffee. “I was going to let Landon go. Wasn’t even gonna chase you.

Could've walked away, started fresh."

My eyes narrow, lips pressed into a tight line. "Then why didn't you?"

"Because, sweetheart," he says, pushing off the and strolling closer, "I found something. Did a little digging into our star girl. And imagine my surprise when I found out who your mother is."

My blood runs cold, but I bare my teeth and continue. "The trailer park whore? Not really special, Marcus."

He leans in, eyes glittering. "Yes, but her name is Betty Collins. Ain't that interesting, Josh?"

The man holding down Conner, who I am assuming is Josh calls back. "Yeah, so interesting."

Marcus leans in closer, his nicotine stench breath invades my nostrils and I recoil, but Marcus pinches my cheeks with one hand and drags me back to his wretched breath. "And guess what, baby? Betty was the last woman to fuck my daddy before he ended up dead in a ditch."

A laugh rasps out of him, humorless and jagged.

"So I went to go ask her some questions, and you know, she didn't even hold out that long. Just took thirty minutes, one lost pinky toe and a kilo of crack before she spilled every dark little secret."

I hiss out a growl, because my mother sucks so fucking much, but hey she lasted a fucking pinky toe and had the time to sweeten the deal with a kilo of crack, before giving me over to the fucking Raiders.

“And you know what she told me?” He mocks, spit flying out of his mouth as he searches my eyes with his tar black eyes. “How her little girl got angry. How her little girl stabbed my daddy dead in the middle of the goddamn woods.” His voice drops, venomous. “That’s what happened, right? One night you got pissed and stabbed my daddy down in the dead of the night, right after he feel asleep fucking your whore mother.”

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head, the words barely there. “I was a child, and he--”

The flashes of that night run across my mind. That man’s tar eyes, and calloused touch. The rip of my clothes. The way I screamed. And the knife--fucking hell the knife. Boyfriend number four was the leader of the Raiders.

“But you did it.” Marcus shrugs. “Child or not—you took his life. And do you know what that means, doll?”

Landon tries to move, but the ropes hold him too tight. “Marcus—don’t.”

“Recite it,” Marcus barks at him. “Come on, Romeo. You know it.”

Landon clenches his jaw. His swollen mouth opens anyway. “Raider Law, Section Four,” he grits out. “If you kill a Raider, you give your life to the Raiders... either in blood or in service.”

Marcus claps, slow and mocking. “Very good.”

He looks at me again, that twisted smile back on his face. “So, Jasmine. Here’s your choice. You give me his life,” he nods toward Landon, “or you give me yours. Service. To the Raiders.”

“No,” Landon growls. “You touch her, Marcus, and I swear?—”

“I’m not touching her,” Marcus cuts in smoothly. “I’m offering her a future. She belongs to me now. Either as a ghost or a soldier. It’s her decision.”

“No,” Conner growls, his voice sharp from where he’s restrained against the wall. “Don’t do this, Jasmine. Don’t give him anything.”

But the room fades. All I can hear is my own heartbeat. Loud. Violent. Thudding against my ribs like it’s trying to get out of me.

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I look at Landon.

At Conner.

At Marcus.

Then I lower my head, bite down the scream in my throat, and say, “I’m sorry.”

Landon flinches.

Conner curses.

And I raise my eyes to Marcus and whisper, “I’m yours.”

Marcus’s smile is slow and victorious, like a wolf sinking his teeth into its kill.

“Good girl,” he purrs. “Now let’s see what kind of Raider we can make out of a little murderer like you.”

Thankyou for reading Jasmine’s story, if you enjoyed it, please help me grow and write more stories by sharing it with your fellow readers and leaving a review now.

More coming soon. . .Valentina’s story followed by the conclusion of Jasmine’s story.

Follow me on Amazon so you don’t miss your next obsession.

If you haven't read Willow's story, you're in for a treat, she has three ruthless kings who vow to punish her, spoil her, and worship every inch of her, start will Lords of Ruin.

Here is a sneak peek...

Willow

Don't say you wouldn't do the same thing. If your father was drowning in debt from your hospital bills, I know you would also find yourself standing naked before three gloriously beautiful guys with a proposition and a check for one hundred thousand dollars.

Trust me, no one in my situation would turn that cash away, no matter how proud they are. But in this case, you're me, and your pride left you when you saw the foreclosure notice on your front door.

Your morals disappeared when you saw your giant teddy bear of a father crying as he held the only items you have left of your mother. You became fearlessly stupid when you heard him contemplate in hush whispers to your Aunt Nikki whether or not to sell your mother's engagement ring to cover a couple of nights in a motel.

When you're desperate to protect the only person in this world you love and have no other options, you'll do whatever it takes, even if it means selling your soul to three guys who despise you more than anything, just like I did.

Chapter1

Willow

"This is a stupid idea, Will," Jasmine mutters, fixing her mascara in the rearview

mirror.

“Never said this was a smart idea; I just said it was an idea.” I mess around with the faux septum ring in my nose.

Now that I’m eighteen, I want a real septum piercing, but Dad won’t let me in case I get an infection. I have had this new heart in my chest for sixteen months, and most heart transplants are considered a success after four months, but my body can reject this heart at any time.

I will never truly be out of the woods. This heart saved me, but it will haunt me for the rest of my life.

“You want to steal from the King, Willow.” Jasmine enunciates every syllable in my name, and I flinch, looking away from her and at my reflection.

My black hair with washed-out pink tips falls in loose curls around my shoulders, and my smokey eye makeup brings out the green in my hazel eyes. My skin has lost most of its vibrant complexion, and I am just getting some of my curves back after barely eating during my two years of hospitalization.

Jasmine’s voice breaks me out of the trance I’m in. She cocks her head at me as if to emphasize how stupid of an idea it is. “We’re going to get killed.”

I roll my eyes. “No, we won’t.”

“Okay, so what’s the plan, superstar? Are we just going to waltz up into the King of Thornhaven's place and enter like it’s nothing when we weren’t invited, and you're here to steal?”

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I shrug, “He won’t miss anything I take, and we look good. They aren’t going to turn away two hot girls.”

“Honey, there are like hundreds of hot girls walking up to the party right now.”

I turn to look out the window at all the partygoers strutting up the driveway and into the 800 acres of the Beaumont estate for Vincent Beaumont’s annual and last ABC party -- Anything But Clothes -- Birthday party.

There is a group of guys standing shirtless, displaying their toned and chiseled bodies. Some dressed in duct tape, plastic bags, and strategically placed cardboard pieces, while others have wrapped Saran Wrap around their torsos, leaving little to the imagination, or just some duct tape with a box covering their private areas, exposing the rest.

The girls, on the other hand, take it to the next level. Their outfits are works of art: newspaper dresses and bubble wrap that perfectly hug every curve. One girl confidently walks by in an ensemble made entirely of silk ribbons that barely hold together, leaving little to the imagination. Another boldly rocks a patchwork design of neon post-it notes, held together by body glue, revealing her long legs and smooth shoulders.

I am wearing four boxes of cereal cut up into a tube top stuck so close to my body the tape nips at me, a micro skirt that is so small my ass falls out of it, and my platform white leather boots.

I just hope the guard at the front, who is making sure everyone is following the strict

anything but clothes rule, doesn't make me take off my underwear. Jasmine doesn't want to be here and sports a pair of black Converse and a black trash bag with three holes: one for her head and two for her arms. Her blonde mohawk has red highlights today.

"Look, I'll walk confidently, and you'll walk in with that glare you have permanently on your face, and boom! No one will turn us away, okay?" I nod at her before taking a deep breath and pushing the car's passenger side door open. My sparkly silver purse is swinging on my arm.

Jasmine quickly follows me, pulling on my elbow to whisper in my ear. "Did I forget to mention that Damien Sterling hates your fucking guts? Wait, in fact, all of the Chessmen hate you: The King. The Knight, even the fucking Rook. They all hate you."

"I thought best friends were supposed to be supportive?" I roll my eyes, pulling her forward towards the giant golden doors.

Jasmine isn't wrong; they all hate me.

Vincent Beaumont, also known as the King of Thornhaven, is the heir to this massive estate and finance genius in his own right. He has black hair that is always styled perfectly, piercing blue eyes that see into my soul, and a tailored school uniform that fits him like a glove.

Juan "Cast" Castillo, the Rook, is said to have ties to the cartel, but you wouldn't know he was crazy unless you saw him like I did. To everyone else, he is the silly class clown with messy, curly brown hair and a lazy smile that soaks panties and makes hearts do backflips. To me, he is a sadist who would love nothing more than to break me and happily lick the tears off my face.

But the one that really hates me and would love to see me fucking dead is the Knight, Damien Sterling. He isn't as rich as the other two; in fact, his mother worked as a maid for the Beaumonts and the Castillos, and he met Juan and Vincent while he tagged along with his mother as she worked for them over the weekends.

He shares a bond with the Chessmen through their mutual affection for Rosemary Sterling. Despite their reputation for not caring about anyone or anything, I know they loved Rosemary dearly. It was evident in their actions when she was diagnosed with cancer; they spared no expense and visited her every day.

When my myocarditis was so bad I couldn't leave the hospital, and everyone said I was a heart attack away from death, I would hang out with Rosemary in the hospital garden. She would give me her cherry jello and hug me tightly when no one else would in fear of breaking me. Her heart overflowed with kindness, making it almost overwhelming to be around her.

Damien's mother was perfect and the center of the Chessmen's worlds. So when he found out she died for me, that was it; he hated me. I was the reason he was now alone in the world.

I am the reason the only mother they ever had is dead, and they have all rights to hate me. I hate me. If I knew it was hers, I would have never taken it, but I didn't know until after the transplant was finished that Rosemary Sterling donated her heart to me. I didn't even know she was being tested to see if we were compatible.

Jasmine doesn't know any of this; she just thinks they're cruel, and I guess it is better to assume they are evil than to know how kind they can genuinely be. It only makes the looks they give me even more painful. It only makes me take my punishments at school like I deserve them because I do.

As we approach the sprawling 800-acre estate, I can't help but feel a mix of awe and

anxiety wash over me. The Greek-inspired mansion looms before us, its towering white columns flashing different colors from the party lights, and intricate carvings decorate the sides.

The golden door at the entrance sparkles, invitingly like the gates of heaven—yet intimidating because I know nothing heavenly exists on the other side of that door.

A security guard, his muscular frame like a fortress, looms next to the golden doors, scanning the crowd of partygoers with hawkish intensity. He barely dodges a guy wrapped in a toga-like ensemble as he assesses the crowd. “Can’t let you in, man,” he declares, his voice cold and unyielding.

“What? Come on, man—these are not clothes; these are bed sheets!” the guy protests.

The guard shrugs dismissively. “Rules were changed: no bedsheets, curtains, or clothes-like fabric.”

“Seriously?!” The guy’s voice rises in disbelief, and I can sense the tension crackling in the air.

“Yeah, go change and come back,” the guard retorts, a glint of satisfaction in his eye as he watches the guy’s shoulders slump. With a groan, the rejected partygoer turns, stomping away, frustration radiating off him like heat waves.

I feel the weight of the guard’s gaze shift to us as if he can smell the uncertainty wafting off our skin. Jasmine and I exchange a quick look, and I swallow hard.

A smarmy smile curls his lips, and I can feel my stomach churn with disgust. “Spin,” he commands, and my heart races, a flash of anger igniting within me.

“What?” I snap, my eyebrows furrowing and fists balling up at my sides.

He leans in slightly, the smugness radiating off him like a foul odor. “No underwear allowed. It’s part of the rules because it’s technically clothes.”

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A pulse of heat surges through me, and I instinctively bristle, ready to tell him off. “Are you serious?” I demand. This guy must be a creep; there’s no way he can be serious.

But then, he looks off to the side, and I follow his gaze to the clear bin beside him—overflowing with an array of colorful panties from other partygoers. “Sorry, sweetheart. I don’t make the rules.” He smiles, leveling his obsidian eyes with mine.

“Don’t call me sweetheart.” I roll my eyes, my heart thundering in my chest and my gut twisting in annoyance -- only the Chessmen would want every girl at this party commando. With a slight shimmy, I tug my cute white satin underwear with a dainty bow in the front, the sexiest underwear I own, down my thighs and over my boots.

I feel ridiculous and angry as I drop the delicate fabric into the bin with an exaggerated sigh, shooting the guard with a sarcastic look of compliance.

“There, happy?” I snarl, trying to mask the wave of vulnerability threatening to wash over me.

The guard’s grin widens as he moves out of our way, “Enjoy, ladies.”

“You didn’t ask for my underwear,” Jasmine narrows her eyes on him and places both hands on her hips.

The guard shoots both eyebrows up in confusion and looks around him as if she isn’t talking to him. “Girl, I can tell by your face if anyone touches you, you will stab them.”

Jasmine's grin sharpens, transforming her delicate features into something fierce and predatory. She laces her fingers through mine, squeezing tightly. "And you'd be absolutely correct!" She shoots back, her voice laced with playful menace. "Aren't you observant?"

Jasmine tugs me forward, and we step into the chaotic whirlwind of the party; the air is heavy with laughter, alcohol, and music. The moment we cross the threshold, I'm hit by a wave of noise and color, overwhelming my senses.

A group of our peers swirls around us, their bodies glistening under the vibrant lights, some already stumbling under the weight of drinks in their hands.

A couple nearby is locked in a passionate kiss, oblivious to the world, with their trash bags ripped open, exposing both girls' breasts, while naked acrobats twist through the air above, defying gravity in their silks.

"Welcome to the jungle," Jasmine whispers in my ear as she scans the room, rocking back on the heels of her feet.

My mind races as I assess the opulence surrounding us. Gold-plated fixtures shine like beacons, and clusters of expensive bottles are lining tables draped in silk. Art pieces worth thousands hang on the walls, and the laughter and chatter of Thornhaven's elite fill the air.

But I can't focus on the luxury right now; I need to think strategically. My eyes dart around the room, searching for the perfect item to steal—something that would fetch at least twenty grand, enough to keep our house from foreclosing. Just one thing, and I can figure out the rest later.

"Let's do a lap and see what I can grab," I whisper to Jasmine, suddenly distracted by the two girls grinding on each other.

“Just don’t get caught,” she warns, her voice low. “The Chessmen are going to be around here somewhere, and if they catch you...”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get there,” I retort, trying to shake off the rising anxiety. I’m so close to saving my father and pulling us out of this mess. I just need to be smart about it.

Jasmine pulls me deeper into the crowd, and I can’t help but marvel at the sheer absurdity of the party. A group of girls flits by in elaborate dresses made of bubble wrap, giggling as they bounce on their heels. The pulsating music seeps into my bones, blending with the energy of the people around me, and for a brief moment, I almost forget why I’m here.

“Look at that,” Jasmine whispers, tilting her head to the right where an ornate silver vase is perched atop a marble pedestal near the entrance. It glimmers tantalizingly in the light, and I can already envision the price tag it must carry.

“That’s a steal-worthy piece. But it’s too exposed. Anyone could see us lift it.” I huff, continuing to survey the room. I need to go upstairs to the jewelry, something small like a watch that I will probably have to hide between my butt cheeks, but it’ll be worth it. Right when I am going to turn to Jasmine and tell her, that’s when I see the first Chessman, Juan “Cast” Castillo.

Cast stands across the room, a figure carved from shadows and light, his emerald-green eyes glinting like polished gemstones. The flickering party lights catch the glitter dusted across his bare chest, making him shimmer like an earth bound god. He moves with an effortless grace, his body coiling and uncoiling like a serpent ready to strike, each motion smooth and deliberate as he dances.

His tousled and wild brown hair frames his chiseled features, drawing attention to his high cheekbones and the mischievous glint in his eyes. A playful smirk dances on his

lips; one that looks inviting and sweet. He's dressed in a daring ensemble that barely conceals his toned physique—just a few strategically placed foil patches, duct tape, and an ornate belt hanging low on his hips.

The chaos of the party swirls around him--his presence demanding attention as if he's the sun and everyone else are mere planets caught in his orbit. I can feel myself drawn to him like prey to the colorful trance of their predator.

As soon as our gazes connect, everything else blurs out of focus. My heart races in my chest, and I can almost feel the electricity crackling between us. His intense stare bores into me, sparking a tingling sensation that runs through my body. He is no longer smiling, and my stomach drops, knowing that I am the reason he doesn't look so carefree anymore.

I pull my gaze away and whisper into Jasmine's ear. "I'll distract the crowd. You keep an eye out for the guards and the Chessmen. If anything goes sideways, bail."

Jasmine raises an eyebrow. "Don't get in trouble, Will, promise?"

"Trouble is just another word for opportunity," I smirk as I grab a shot off of a passing waiter's tray and down it, flashing her a huge grin. "Make sure Cast doesn't follow me."

Vincent

She locks eyes with Cast, but I saw her first. Willow Cater, in my house, wearing four cereal boxes that barely cover her breasts and definitely don't cover her ass. I must thank Cast for his no-underwear rule; it'll make what I want to do to her so much easier.

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I know we hate her, but there is a thin line between hate and lust, and fuck does she not teeter on the line of making me want to fuck her every day.

When we first met her, she had been sick for three years prior, and she looked hollow and broken, just like Rosemary looked the last time I saw her. She was a shell of a girl that I wanted to fill.

I wanted to make her our little slave for the rest of her life for taking away the only woman who has ever loved me, but Damien wouldn't have it.

Just looking at her made him sick, and since he was the one left alone in a broken-down apartment in the shitty part of town, he made the call on what we would do to Willow.

He decided we hated her, that we would make her wish she died instead of Rosemary, and while I think that's a waste of a perfect ass and hourglass figure, I wasn't the one who lost their biological mother.

I watch her from the balcony, shrouded in shadows, leaning forward on my throne with a joint hanging out of my mouth. I'm up here away from everyone because I'm not likable like Juan, or in love with the limelight like Damien.

I hate parties.

I only have this fucking party to reestablish what everyone knows: I am King of Thornhaven, and I keep my subject satiated. At every party I make a grand entrance, pick the girl I want in my bed tonight, fuck her and then go to sleep.

Willow whispers to her friend and then snakes her perfect ass through the crowd, looking cautiously over her shoulder when she reaches the grand staircase leading up to the private rooms upstairs. She slides past the velvet rope with a distinct ‘Do Not Enter’ sign hanging on it.

A low chuckle rumbles through my chest—naughty girlsneaking into forbidden areas. She will need to be punished, and I know the perfect way to do so.

I stamp the joint out on the railing and move through the dark hallways to the other side of the house, which is too fucking big for me, my stepmother, Angie, and her two children, both under the age of ten, both in boarding school.

My father and Angie are on their annual February trip to England on my birthday, and unless you count the silent servants, I live here alone most of the time.

I have twenty-five bedrooms, fifteen bathrooms, six half-bathrooms, three pools, a music room with a professional-grade recording studio, a tennis and basketball court, a mini-museum, Rosemary’s untouched art studio, a library, and, of course, a greenhouse all to myself.

I would like it if Damien also lived here, but he refuses to leave the apartment he lived in with his mother. Juan and I take turns paying the rent, and sometimes we stay there, too, because it feels more like home than either of our houses.

I keep walking until I see a tiny sliver of light flooding the hallway, and my lips quirk because the little devil found my room out of all the rooms in this house. How lucky am I?

I lightly push the door open, and she doesn’t notice. Her body is hunched over the glass case in the corner, filled with watches, cufflinks, diamond earrings, and a platinum, diamond-encrusted, Jesus-piece chain Cast got me as a joke. I may be old money, but ...